

BRIEFLY

508 drug traders held in Myanmar: The Myanmar authorities arrested 508 persons trading heroin in January this year, a local press report said on Sunday. Xinhua reports from Yangon.

A total of 12.2 kilograms of narcotics including 2.43 kilos of heroin were seized by police and army, the report said.

Robbers kill Pak army officer: Highway robbers hiding in a forest ambushed a paramilitary force in the southern province of Sindh on Saturday, killing an army captain, police said. Reuter reports from Hyderabad.

They said Captain Abdullah, the commander of the force, died instantly after the robbers opened fire on the patrol in Rajori forest in the district of Dadu.

22 die in Angolan mine blast: Twenty-two people died on Saturday when their truck drove over an anti tank mine between the towns of Lumege Pinto and Luena, in Angola's Moxico Province, Lusa news agency reported. AFP says from Lisbon.

Fourteen other people were seriously injured in the blast, Lusa said, quoted Angolan radio.

Bus mishap claims 22 in China: Twenty-two people died when a bus crashed into a chasm in Hubei province, a newspaper reported on Sunday, AP says from Beijing.

The bus was carrying 45 people when the accident occurred on Saturday afternoon in central China, the Guangming Daily reported. Rescuers were trying to save the lives of an undisclosed number of people who were injured, the brief report said.

Quake hits southern Philippines: A moderate earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of 5.5 jolted the southeastern Philippines on Sunday, the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology said. No damage was reported, AP says from Manila.

The quake, which occurred at 8:17 a.m. (0017GMT), was centered in the Celebes Sea about 257 kilometers (159 miles) southeast of Davao Oriental province, said institute spokeswoman Melba Banganan.

18 to face trial in Egypt: Eighteen suspected extremists will stand trial for allegedly killing 15 police officers and civilians as part of a campaign by radical Muslims to overthrow the Egyptian government, AP reports from Cairo.

Attorney General Hisham Saraya announced Saturday that 15 defendants, including four still at large, will be tried by a state security court for four attacks in southern Egypt in 1993 and 1994.

Three minors will be tried on the same charges by a different court. No date has been set for either trial.

Singapore launches 12 warships: Singapore's navy yesterday launched the first of 12 warships that have been designed and are being built locally, Reuter reports from Singapore.

The new class of 55-metre (180 foot) patrol vessels will replace 12 smaller and less well equipped coastal patrol craft the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) has operated since the early 1980s. Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said.

Moderate quakes jolt Japan: Two moderate earthquakes with preliminary magnitudes of 5.4 and 4.0 struck Japan on Sunday, the Central Meteorological Agency said. There were no immediate reports of damage or injuries, AP says from Tokyo.

The stronger quake occurred about 60 kilometers (36 miles) beneath the sea floor just southeast of Nemuro, 900 kilometers (540 miles) north of Tokyo at 1.46 p.m. (0446 GMT).

270,000 Indonesians are blind: Some 270,000 Indonesians have become totally blind because of various diseases of the cornea, a university professor has said, Antara reports from Surabaya.

Dr. Wisnu, professor in eye diseases at the Airlangga University in Surabaya, said Thursday that the diseases included Trachoma, a highly contagious and viral disease of the eyes.

ICRC to spend \$212m in Africa: The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) will spend 212 million U.S. dollars in Africa, out of the 483 million set aside for its activities in 1995, Xinhua reports from Lagos.

In a news conference held here Friday ICRC's deputy chief in Nigeria Erb Jacquelyn said that Africa takes the largest share of the ICRC budget.

Serbs threaten to close Sarajevo airport

SARAJEVO, Feb 19: Tensions rose around Sarajevo with Bosnian Serbs threatening to close the airport, vital for supplying the city, after two Serbs were killed by rifle fire attributed to the government side, reports AP.

The two — a civilian and a policeman — were killed Saturday in the Serb-held Sarajevo suburb of Grica. UN spokesman Li Col Sary Coward said the fire was attributed to Bosnian government troops.

Serbs protested to the United Nations. Later, two mortar shells hit the government-held suburb of Hrasnica. There was no word on casualties.

A Bosnian Serb official, Nikola Koljivic, threatened that Serbs would close the airport and a recently opened route linking central Sarajevo with outlying areas, the Bosnian Serb news agency SRNA reported.

In Belgrade, the Serbian capital, Russia's foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, held private talks with President Slobodan Milosevic, but denied he had come to present the allies' latest strategy. The talks are expected to end Sunday.

In an effort to broaden the peace initiative, the United States, Russia and three European partners are trying to draw in Milosevic, considered the region's key power-broker.

The five countries propose easing punishing trade sanctions against Serbia if Milosevic agrees to recognise Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia and two other former Yugoslav republics.

Acceptance by Milosevic would damage efforts by Croatian and Bosnian Serbs to gain international acceptance and ultimately unite with Serbia, the main component of what remains of Yugoslavia.

Decision to resume US, ROK jt exercise this month

SEOUL, Feb 19: South Korea and the United States will soon make a decision whether to resume joint military exercises which North Korea fiercely opposes, South Korean Defence Minister Le Yang Ho said today, reports Reuter.

A decision on team spirit exercises will be made within this month after consultations with the United States, Lee said in an interview with state KBS television.

But Lee hinted the exercise could be scrapped again this year to encourage North Korean cooperation in implementing a landmark nuclear deal

PLO, Israel fail to overcome obstacles to peace process

PARIS, Feb 19: Israel and the PLO failed here early today to overcome obstacles blocking expanded Palestinian autonomy despite a warning from PLO chief Yasser Arafat that the stalemate threatened the entire Middle East peace process, reports AFP.

Arafat met Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres for less than an hour at a Paris hotel but made no comment to reporters following the talks.

The meeting had been arranged on the fringes of a UNESCO organised conference of peace prospects in the Mediterranean region.

The problems remain, Peres told reporters before leaving for Israel.

Arafat, Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation had earlier accused Israel of breaching its peace deal with the Palestinians, citing practices such as collective punishment, land confiscation and closing off the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The Palestinian problem lies at the heart of the (Middle East) conflict, he told the conference.

We reaffirm that peace is an irrevocable strategic choice for the Palestinian people but this peace needs to have the support of everyone if it is going to be turned into reality.

The peace process is entering a delicate and dangerous phase, any slowdown in putting the second phase into practice — on the extension of autonomy particularly the organisation of elections and Israeli redeployment — could have fatal consequences and create a dangerous situation for the whole peace process.

The second phase in the implementation of a historic 1993 autonomy accord between the PLO and Israel is now seven months behind schedule. It calls for an Israeli military withdrawal from around urban centres on the West Bank and the deployment there of a Palestinian police force.

There are also to be elections on the West Bank and Gaza Strip to establish a Palestinian self rule council.

In the first phase limited autonomy was extended to Gaza and the West Bank town of Jericho.

"I repeated to Yasser Arafat that if he took visible steps to prevent acts of terrorism it would help us speed up negotiations and to advance, Peres said following discussions with Arafat early today also attended by Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Musa.

"We will judge by actions we are not asking for miracles."

Peres refused to disclose a date for an Israeli redeployment on the West Bank and the organisation of Palestinian elections.

But he added "we are holding intense negotiations to try to find a solution."

Israel sealed its border with the West Bank and Gaza after a bomb attack by an extremist Palestinian killed 21 Israelis on January 22. The closure prevented some 50,000 Arabs from the territories holders of legal work papers from going to their jobs in Israel.

French Prime Minister Edouard Balladur (C), Arafat (L) and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres at the inaugural session of a symposium on the future of the Middle-East peace talks, held at the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) headquarters in Paris on Saturday.

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Another Afghan province falls to Taliban forces

ISLAMABAD, Feb 19: Taliban religious fighters strengthened their grip on Afghanistan today, capturing without resistance another province to the cheers of local residents, Afghan sources said, reports AFP.

Riding on tanks and armoured vehicles, Taliban troops drove into Paktika, southeast of Kabul, at dawn to a rousing welcome by the residents, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) said.

There was no resistance, it said, adding that the Islamic student-led army entered the provincial capital Sharan without any arms fire. The city's fall was announced earlier by the Pakistani press but had not been confirmed.

There are no major military installations in the captured area, but it is politically significant as its Chief Commander was Arsalah Rehmani, deputy Prime Minister in the Afghan

cabinet headed by President Burhanuddin Rabbani.

Afghan observers said the takeover of Paktika has made vulnerable an important garrison city, Gardez, capital of nearby Paktika province. Paktika's key city of Khost is already held by Taliban supporters.

The takeover may also give the Taliban control of an important road leading to the northwestern Pakistani border town of Wana and nearby Angoor Adda Market, hub of commercial activity in the region, they said.

The province was jointly controlled by commanders of Rabbani's Jamiat-I-Islamic, moderate leader Mohammed Bani Mohammedi Harkat Inqilab Islamic and fundamentalist leader Yunus Khales.

The Taliban, emerging six months ago from religious schools in Pakistan, have already overrun several Afghan provinces in their march to

wards Kabul, already holding one-third of the country.

The movement has delayed a United Nations peace plan scheduled for the weekend to transfer power in the capital to a neutral governing body to end the more than five years of factional fighting in Afghanistan.

The Taliban's most significant victory was the fall Tuesday of the Charasyab headquarter of former Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, 25 kilometres (15 miles) south of the Afghan capital.

Determined to enter the Afghan capital, the Taliban are just 15 kilometres (nine miles) from central Kabul.

The Taliban want to disarm all groups in Kabul and enforce a strict Islamic way of life on the country. The religious army is increasingly drawing support from the people of Afghanistan, tired of the fighting and their miserable living conditions.

Nepal celebrates Democracy Day

KATHMANDU, Feb 19: Nepal celebrated its 45th national Democracy Day today by releasing 200 prisoners and holding various cultural events, the Nepalese Home Ministry said, reports AFP.

The pardoned prisoners included female drug traffickers, gold smugglers and other criminals, it said.

A special programme of events was also held at the royal army pavilion in the Nepalese capital, involving over 10,000 Nepalese youths, students, civil servants, soldiers, policemen and various cultural groups.

King Birendra, Queen Aishwarya and other members of the royal family attended the celebrations, which were organised by a high-level committee under the chairmanship of Prime Minister Man Mohan Adhikari.

The festival marked the overthrow 45 years ago to the day of the 104-year-old pro-British Rana regime in Nepal, which banned all political activity.

The attack was apparently in retaliation for the slaying of four brothers in their home on Saturday by sectarian activists, all four brothers, one of whom was a police officer, were bound hand and foot, tortured and then shot dead.

The militant Shi'ite Muslim Group, Tehrik-e-Jafria Pakistan (TJP), described the four brothers as "TJP sympathisers". The family of the victims accused eight members of the rival Sunni Muslim Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan of the murder.

The death toll since Saturday morning rose to 11 as 2 people injured earlier in the week died in hospital.

Gunmen attack mosque in Karachi

KARACHI, Feb 19: Violence continued in Karachi, commercial capital of Pakistan, as gunmen attacked a mosque shortly after dawn prayers today, killing one and injuring four others, officials said, reports AFP.

The attack was apparently in retaliation for the slaying of four brothers in their home on Saturday by sectarian activists, all four brothers, one of whom was a police officer, were bound hand and foot, tortured and then shot dead.

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Tamil body accuses govt of stalling peace move

COLOMBO, Feb 19: A Tamil organisation today urged President Chandrika Kumaratunga to speed up the peace process and accused her government of stalling moves to resolve the island's protracted ethnic conflict, reports AFP.

The Federation of Public Organisation (FPO) based in the northern Tamil rebel stronghold of Jaffna said they had presented a memorandum to Kumaratunga aimed at contributing towards speeding up current peace efforts.

Despite being given a mandate to peacefully end the conflict at recent elections, "unfortunately, we detect in recent times, a hesitation on your part in resolving the many problems that affect the Tamil people," the FPO said.

The FPO memorandum, presented to a government representative at a massive peace rally in Jaffna on Saturday, questioned Kumaratunga's ability to boost the peace process at a time Tamils were beset by growing economic problems.

"At the same time we also realise your continuing faith in non peaceful means of achieving a settlement. Any hesitation on your part is bound to bring more impediment at this juncture," the FPO memorandum said.

Kumaratunga initiated peace talks with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) just after leading her People's Alliance to victory at August parliament polls.

UN calls for truce in Guatemala by Aug

GUATEMALA CITY, Feb 19: The United Nations is calling on Guatemalan guerrillas and the government to sign a definitive peace accord by August in order to proceed with a timetable for UN-sponsored elections in November, according to documents released here on Saturday, reports AFP.

A letter from UN Under Secretary Marrack Goulding said peace talks should resume in March and a ceasefire should be implemented by June 15 in order for the timetable to proceed.

The umbrella group representing guerilla forces, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (UNRG), signed a framework agreement with the government last year to end a long civil war, but peace talks have bogged down since then.

A truce that came into effect in the northeast on January 8 after a second round of negotiations, was still holding today.

However, the negotiations are currently deadlocked because the rebels refuse to discuss political issues until the government had fulfilled an agreement to implement a reconstruction and rehabilitation programme for war-torn Jaffna.

The FPO memorandum observed that Kumaratunga's statements at the beginning of her term as President had given the country's two million minority Tamils "tremendous hope."

But now "There is even a fear that the Tamil people could be cheated again after all," the FPO said.

Off the Record

Civil marriages satanic!

ATHENS: A Greek mayor is refusing to allow civil marriages in his village because he regards them as satanic, Greek newspapers reported Saturday, says AFP.

Theodore Kaffes, mayor of a small village near Larissa in central Greece, said the law authorising civil marriage shocked the foundations of the country's moral code. "Civil marriage pushes married couples directly into the hands of satan," he said.

More than 20 villagers have been forced to make false declarations in neighbouring villages because Kaffes refused to give them the necessary documents for a marriage, according to Georges Sakalakis, a member of the municipal council.

Councillors opposed to the mayor have asked the public prosecutor to intervene and make him respect the law, which was introduced by the socialist government at the start of the 1980s.

Nomination of a 'sexist' envoy sparks controversy

JERUSALEM: The appointment of an Arab-Israeli mayor as ambassador to Finland was called into question Sunday after he admitted hitting his wife, reports AFP.

"I slapped my wife from time to time. So what," Rafik Hajj Yihye told the Haaretz newspaper.

The Labour party stalwart and mayor of the Arab-Israeli town of Taibe has been pre-selected for Helsinki by a Foreign Ministry committee.

He would become the first Arab with Israeli citizenship appointed as an Israeli ambassador.

Labour Minister Ora Namir called Sunday for him to be barred.

"A man who beats his wife cannot claim to represent the state of Israel in Helsinki or elsewhere," she told the army radio station.

Ora Friedman, chairwoman of the women's section of the powerful Histadrut Trade Union Confederation, branded the mayor "sexist."

Learn 2nd language before puberty

ATLANTA: Learn a second language after age 12 and you'll almost certainly speak it with an accent, a study shows. But pick one up before age 8 and you may forget your native tongue, reports AP.

Experts theorize that age 2 until puberty is the ideal period to learn languages. After that, it becomes an increasingly frustrating, imperfect process.

Certainly many parents who have tried to learn a new language with their children have witnessed the dismaying ease with which youngsters can master the complexities of syntax and vocabulary.

Several studies, which were presented Saturday at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, delved into the conflicts between first and second languages.

Grace H Yeni-Komshian of the University of Maryland presented research on 220 Korean immigrants who learned English as children and young adults. Despite having lived in the United States an average of 15 years, some still spoke with an accent.

She found that no one had much trouble with their consonants, but vowels were a different matter. Those who learned English by age 10 or 11 got 90 per cent of their vowels right, children. They are trapped. Those I talk to go through anything from weeks to 30 years of it. They just stay in there trying," he said.

Malcolm Singer, a semi-retired doctor, is as frustrated with the authorities as he is angry with his former wife.

Singer's 25-friendship exploded into violence straight after the wedding.

"She beat me every single day of that marriage, hitting me with shoes about my face, fists about the body, throwing chairs, using anything that was available," he said.

After six weeks of marriage, it ended when for no reason she charged at me with a kitchen knife going right for my heart.

Clinton okays policy on arms sales to allies

WASHINGTON, Feb 19: President Bill Clinton has approved a policy that allows continued conventional arms sales to US friends and allies while restraining sales when regional security is threatened, the White House said Friday, reports Reuter.

"The United States continues to view transfers of conventional arms as a legitimate instrument of US foreign policy," White House Press Secretary Mike McCurry said in a statement.

He said such sales were "deserving of US government support when they enable us to help friends and allies

British men suffer domestic violence by wives, female partners

LONDON, Feb 19: It was after the bayonet attack — and the promise of more strikes to come — that Michael finally decided to end his marriage, reports Reuter.

"That's 14 years ago and without doubt I still love her," he said. "But I intend to remain solitary for the rest of my life."

Michael is one of a growing number of men speaking out about the physical abuse endured at the hands of their partners.

While husband beating defies conventional wisdom, studies suggest a silent army of men is suffering, shattering long-held stereotypes of women as helpless victims and men as aggressors.

According to a recent survey, one in five British men has suffered domestic violence by a wife or female partner and men are more likely to be abused than women.

"You're confronting here two taboos. One is that women can be violent and the second is that men can be beaten up by their wives. And that is something that nobody wants to take on board," said Dr Malcolm George of the University of London.

The survey conducted for BBC Television found 18 per cent of men have suffered abuse by their partners, compared with 13 per cent of women.

Michael's case, according to counsellors is typical

There would be scratching at the eyes and the punching became directed more and more frequently towards the genitalia, said the soft-spoken academic. "This happened almost daily. There were never explanations."

Michael — who no longer works, has few friends and rarely leaves the house — says his battle with epilepsy also became a source of friction in the marriage.

"I wasn't man enough. So as time passed, she became more violent and I developed violent convulsions. I would find her standing over me, despising me, throwing contempt at

me that I could suffer such fits," said Michael.

The crescendo came after six years of non-stop physical and mental abuse, as Michael washed dishes at the kitchen sink.

"I heard footsteps behind me. Then all of a sudden she was screaming incoherently and waving this antique bayonet around my face. I managed to disarm her otherwise I would have been impaled through the kidney."

There were threats of further attempts with other implements — a milk bottle, boiling water, whatever. I told her that if this were to continue, the only prospect for both of us was a prolonged spell in a mental hospital."

Two days later she vanished. What became of her since, I have no idea."

Les Davidson runs a London helpline for men like Michael, whose case is typical of the 350 clients he has counselled since opening his telephone service last April.

"Initially, she may throw something or slap him. There is remorse. These type of men do not retaliate, but the perpetrator then uses this lack of retaliation. The violence escalates and the remorse stops," said Davidson.

"The tragedy is that it doesn't go away and the men won't leave because they love the partners and fear for the children. They are trapped. Those I talk to go through anything from weeks to 30 years of it. They just stay in there trying," he said.

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US President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton wave to reporters Saturday as they walk to the Marine One helicopter on the South Lawn of the White House. —AFP photo