

BRIEFLY



US actor Tom Hanks holds his award for outstanding performance in a leading role for his part in the movie 'Forrest Gump' during the inaugural Screen Actors Guild Awards Show on Saturday in Los Angeles.

Yemen, S Arabia sign MOU: Yemen and Saudi Arabia signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on early Sunday morning to resolve their 60-year-old border dispute. Sanaa television reported. Reuter says from Sanaa.

The television broadcast live coverage of the signing ceremony between Yemeni and Saudi delegations in the Saudi holy city of Mecca.

Naruhito, Masako visit Kobe: Japan's Crown Prince Naruhito and Princess Masako made their first visit to earthquake-devastated Kobe Sunday, consoling victims still homeless more than a month after the quake. AP reports from Kobe, Japan.

The royal couple had gone to the Middle East on a previously scheduled visit Jan. 20, just three days after the Jan. 17 quake. That caused some criticism of the Foreign Ministry and the Imperial Household Agency and the trip was cut short after a week.

60pc Irish back peace plan: More than 60 of Ireland's people support the British-Irish peace plan for Northern Ireland and are prepared to change the country's constitution to help, according to a poll published by the Sunday Press newspaper. AP reports from Dublin.

Earlier polls in Northern Ireland and Britain also showed strong support for the proposals announced Wednesday by Prime Minister John Bruton and British leader John Major.

Kim Jong's tribute to Marshall O: North Korea's heir apparent Kim Jong-il paid his last respects to the country's second-ranking leader, Marshall O Jin-U as he lay in state in Pyongyang, an official report said on Sunday. AFP reports from Tokyo.

Reclusive Kim, 53, visited the bier of O on Saturday after the 78-year-old armed forces minister died of cancer earlier in the day. The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said in a dispatch monitored here.

Basque rebels clash with cops: Basque militants and police clashed repeatedly overnight after a demonstration against a Spanish group blamed for the killings of 25 people in France's Basque region in the 1980s, authorities said on Sunday. AP reports from Bayonne.

Militants threw gasoline bombs and burned crowd barriers, while police responded with tear gas. No injuries were reported, but the windows of two banks were smashed and one car set on fire by one of the Molotov cocktails.

US actor Vincent Gazzo dies: Actor and playwright Michael Vincent Gazzo, best known for his role as a Mafia lieutenant in the film 'The Godfather, Part II,' has died from complications of a stroke, a family spokeswoman said on Saturday. Gazzo was 71. Reuter reports from Los Angeles.

The spokeswoman said Gazzo, who was nominated for an Academy Award for his portrayal of Frank Pentageli in the 1974 movie, died in a Los Angeles hospital on February 14.

Zhirinovskiy heads for Baghdad: Russian ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy led a 50-man delegation on board two battered Iraqi buses on Saturday and headed for Baghdad to underline opposition to economic sanctions on Iraq. Reuter reports from Amman.

'We are for eliminating all sanctions from Baghdad, from Iraq,' Zhirinovskiy said as he led the group, largely parliamentarians, from Jordan's main airport.

Tremor shakes S Guatemala: An earth tremor measuring 5 on the Richter scale shook southern Guatemala on Saturday but there were no reports of damage or injuries, the National Seismology and Volcanology Institute said. Reuter reports from Guatemala City.

The epicentre of the tremor was in the southern province of Santa Rosa, 88 miles (142 kms) south of Guatemala City. Institute director Eddy Sanchez said.

Polls begin in Tajikistan

DUSHANBE, Feb 26: Voters in Tajikistan had only one choice today as polls opened for parliamentary elections amid fears of political violence to cast a ballot for a supporter of neo-communist president Emomally Rakhmonov or to stay at home, report AFP.

The Tajik Peoples Unity Party (PUP), the only legal opposition party, which had only been authorised to register five candidates said Saturday it would not take part in the poll because of anti-democratic practices by Rakhmonov's regime.

In the wake of a rocket attack her Thursday on a bus carrying doctors and nurses of the Russian border-guards which killed one person and wounded six.

Rajiv's assassination still haunts Indian politics

NEW DELHI, Feb 26: Unanswered questions about the Rajiv Gandhi assassination still haunt his family and Indian politics, reports AP.

Four years after the gruesome death of the former prime minister, his quarrelling successors in the Congress Party have made the assassination a political issue that could affect the fate of Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao and his shaky government.

Tamil guerrillas fighting for independence in neighbouring Sri Lanka have been blamed for the suicide bomb that killed Gandhi and 17 other people at a campaign rally near Madras in southern India on May 21, 1991.

Explosion kills 25 Russian servicemen near Grozny

MOSCOW, Feb 26: An explosion killed at least 25 Russian servicemen near the Chechen capital of Grozny, casting a further pall over Moscow's beleaguered campaign to crush the separatist region's independence bid, reports Reuter.

The shelling sent a black cloud of oily smoke soaring into the air above Grozny, suggesting the city's major oil refinery had been hit.

AP adds: An electrical short circuit triggered the explosion in Chechnya's capital on Saturday that killed at least 25 Russian servicemen, Russian army officials said Sunday.

The Russian government, which portrays the fighting in Grozny as being in the mop-up stage despite continued battles, said First Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Soskovets would visit Grozny and Mozdok early in the week. The visit is connected with plans to rebuild war-battered Chechnya and restore its economy, an unidentified government spokesman told the Interfax news agency.

Pakistan against India's permanent seat at UNSC

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 26: Jamsheed Marker, who has just completed his tenure as Pakistan's Ambassador to the United Nations, has said that Islamabad is opposed to India getting a permanent seat at the Security Council as New Delhi has "violated" the United Nations resolutions on Kashmir, reports PTI.

Implementing the resolutions should be the minimum requirement for the purpose, he added.

Besides, he said, aspects like other claimants for the seat from Asia would also have to be taken into consideration.

Talking to newsmen recently, he said Indonesia and Pakistan could be among the other claimants.

But he did not respond to a remark by a newsmen that applying the criteria strictly would disqualify even some present permanent members.

Tamil Tigers accuse govt of delaying peace talks

COLOMBO, Feb 26: Tamil rebels have accused the government of delaying the next round of peace talks aimed at ending the ethnic war, a newspaper reported on Sunday, says AP.

The deliberate delay on your part to resume the fourth round of talks has impeded the formation of peace committees," the Island newspaper quoted rebel negotiator Tamil Chelvam as saying.

Both sides have traded accusations that each is delaying the start of talks aimed at finding a political solution to the 11-year-old war that has killed over 34,000.

The talks, which began in October, have so far focussed on economic issues and the seven-week-old ceasefire.

Six committees were to be set up to monitor the ceasefire. The panels are to be headed by officials from Norway, Canada and the Netherlands, who came here six weeks ago.

The government has said the next round is likely to be held next week.

The latest charge by the rebels was in a letter to Kusumsiri Balapatabendi, the head of the government negotiating team.

The rebel negotiator also denied government accusations that the guerrillas have violated the ceasefire by plotting to assassinate President Chandrika Kumaratunga, constructing new camps and carrying out a massive recruitment campaign.

The guerillas are fighting for a homeland in the north and east for minority Tamils who, they say, suffer discrimination from the Sinhalese majority, which controls the government and the military.

Meanwhile, the government ended a four-year-ban on using a road linking the northern rebel-stronghold of Jaffna and the mainland, the military said Sunday.

The new government had pledged to end the sufferings of the minority Tamils, most of whom live in the north and were locked in because of a war between separatist rebels and army soldiers.

During the ban, Tiger guerillas operated an illegal ferry service across a lagoon to help civilians cross into the mainland.

Thai PM offers mediation in govt-Karen dispute

BANGKOK, Feb 26: Thailand has offered to act as mediator between the Myanmar military government and minority rebel groups to try and end fighting in its neighbour, the Bangkok Post reported today, reports Reuter.

That prime Minister Chuan Leekpai said it was always Thailand's intention to see the warring parties hold talks to restore peace, the Post reported. He made his offer at a political rally in southern Thailand late on Saturday.

The Post also said Deputy Foreign Minister Surin Pittsupawan gave Thailand's full support to Karen refugees fleeing the fighting on humanitarian grounds. He said the refugees would return home only when the situation there had returned to normal and they had decided to go of their own free will.

A Myanmar army offensive against the rebel Karen National Union (KNU) has sent up to 10,000 ethnic Karen to Thailand as refugees since December. They joined some 60,000 Karen already in Thai camps along the Thai Myanmar border.

Normally cordial relations between Thailand and Myanmar have been strained after Rangoon launched the offensive against the autonomy-seeking Karen guerillas in southeastern Myanmar.

Karen guerillas on Tuesday withdrew under fire from Kawmoora, their last defensive base on the border. Thai army officers monitoring the fighting said about 3,000 troops plus an extensive battery of heavy weapons were deployed against the 1,000 defenders of Kawmoora.

Heavy artillery duels in Kabul defying truce

KABUL, Feb 26: Forces loyal to Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani and the Shiite Hezbi-Wahdat faction exchanged intense rocket and artillery fire here overnight Saturday, breaching a UN-sponsored ceasefire, reports AP.

From the sound of the explosions, the attacks appeared centered in areas controlled by Abdul Ali Mazari, head of the pro-Iranian Wahdat, in the southwestern part of the capital.

Rocket and mortar fire also struck the northwest districts of the city, Khair Khana and Karte Parwan, which are controlled by Rabbani.

The centre of Kabul where part of the president's artillery is positioned was also hammered.

It was unclear today whether these attacks, which lasted more than an hour, were accompanied by troop movements or caused casualties.

Peace process alive: Israel

JERUSALEM, Feb 26: After a week of dire Palestinian warnings that the peace process was moribund, Israel insisted it was very much alive and even making slow progress despite months of delay, reports AFP.

As Chairman Yasser Arafat fought to rally his increasingly sceptical troops at a tense meeting of the PLO executive committee in Cairo on Tuesday, just across the city Israeli and Palestinian negotiators struck another small deal.

It was the second mini accord in a week as the two sides stumble towards agreement to hold the first Palestinian elections on the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The process with the

Palestinians is not dead, on the contrary it's alive, government spokesman Uri Dromi told AFP.

'We are still making progress, there are never-ending contacts,' he said after an unprecedented series of summits and meetings in the Middle East, Europe and the United States to keep the process on track.

There are setbacks once in a while, but it's an on-going process,' Dromi said.

'We have a common goal, to implement the declaration of principles. We differ how to do it and at what pace, but basically we are moving forward to an accepted goal.'

Israel's refusal to redeploy outside built-up Palestinian ar-

ea on the West Bank or even negotiate the redeployment until it considers that security has improved lies at the root of the PLO's anger.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin repeats over and over again that Israel will finally implement the second phase of autonomy — redeployment and elections which were scheduled to take place by last July 13.

'There is no other alternative and the government of Israel is determined to continue the peace process,' Foreign Minister Shimon Peres vowed Thursday.

Despite the obstacles, there are signs that Israel is readying for a gradual pullback.



From left to right, French actress Jeanne Moreau (honorary Cesar), French actor Alain Delon who accepted the award for Isabelle Adjani (not present) for best actress, British movie director Mike Newell — the Cesar for best foreign movie 'Four Weddings and a Funeral,' US movie director Steven Spielberg (honorary Cesar) and US star Gregory Peck (honorary Cesar) pose for photographers during the 20th Cesar awards ceremony at the Palais des Congress on Saturday.

Off the Record

Virgin Mary in politics

NEW DELHI: Christians in a southern state are enraged by posters and cut-outs depicting a powerful politician as Virgin Mary, newspapers reported Sunday, reports AP.

Thousands of posters were plastered on the walls of houses in Madras city showing Tamil Nadu state Chief Minister Jayalalitha Jayaram as Virgin Mary on the politician's 47th birthday Friday.

'The Christian community is most pained at it... We could never imagine that such an act could ever be done,' said Madras Archbishop, the Most Rev. Arul Das James, in a statement.

State politician V Gopalaswamy said the posters especially hurt the sentiments of Christians because 'the chief minister is heading a corrupt government which has perpetrated atrocities against women.'

The birthday bash of Ms Jayaram, who heads a regional party known by its acronym AIADMK, highlighted the eagerness of her supporters to please her who, critics say, are rewarded with lucrative government contracts and jobs.

Dozens of Ms Jayaram's fans walked on burning coal to show her their loyalty and one politician gifted 47 pairs of earrings to school girls.

Many lawmakers took out ads in newspapers in which they described Ms Jayaram as a 'living deity.' Some printed pictures depicting her as a Hindu goddess, but one by a Christian supporter drew the protests.

Million dollar compensation for bacterial burger

SEATTLE: A girl who lapsed into a 42-day coma after eating a hamburger tainted with the E coli bacteria will receive a 15.6 million dollar settlement, her family said, reports AP.

The settlement with the Foodmaker Inc, parent company of the Jack in The Box restaurant chain, awaits a judge's approval.

'I'm pleased with it,' said Rex Kiner, whose daughter Brienne was 9 when she fell ill in 1993. 'I think the family's happy too, for what we've been through.'

Brienne, now 12, suffered a stroke and damage to almost every organ system in her body and is now undergoing rehabilitation. She awoke from her coma two years ago Friday.

Company spokeswoman Karen Bachmann declined to discuss details of the settlement.

More than 500 people were fell ill after eating undercooked Jack in the Box hamburgers contaminated with E coli. Three children died. Their parents reached settlements with Foodmaker, including one worth 1.3 million dollar. After filing a class action suit last year, four other families split a 533,523 dollar settlement.

Troops put down police mutiny in S Africa

UMTATA, South Africa, Feb 26: Troops were sent into an eastern South African province to put down a police mutiny on Saturday, sparking a gun battle that left one officer dead, reports AP.

The South African Press Association said the shooting broke out near the Umtata airport, and two protesting police officers were hit. One of the injured later died.

Soon afterward, about 500 officers who had been protesting their pay began removing vehicles used to block roads in Umtata, a former homeland capital about 700 kilometres (about 400 miles) southeast of Johannesburg.

National Police Commissioner George Fivaz said in a statement from Pretoria that army troops and police reinforcements would work together, and would continue to patrol Umtata until he was satisfied order was restored. Police officials refused to say how many troops and officers had

being deployed.

'The time has come to act decisively against indiscipline elements within police ranks. Not to do so will mean that the people will be at the mercy of increasing crime and violence,' said Fivaz, who was appointed in January to reform a chaotic force.

The protest began on Friday after Eastern Cape Premier Raymond Mkhabela, saying he feared he would be taken hostage, refused to meet with them to discuss a pay dispute.

The protesting officers said they had not received raises promised in April. But Mkhabela said officials had uncovered an attempt by police to grant themselves unauthorised increases of up to 159 per cent by manipulating government computers.

In addition to the police crisis, Mkhabela was negotiating on Saturday for the release of a guard taken hostage by inmates at an Eastern Cape prison.

China terms US reports on HR as fabrication

BEIJING, Feb 26: Beijing issued a scathing rebuttal on Sunday of the US State Department's recent report on human rights abuses in China, labelling the document a mishmash of "hearsay and fabrication," reports AFP.

The highly critical US report, published on February 1, "distorts facts and confuses right and wrong," the State Council's information office said in a lengthy commentary carried by the official Xinhua news agency.

The cases listed in the annual State Department report, which highlighted arbitrary arrests, detentions without trial and torture of prisoners, "could not stand up to close scrutiny," the commentary said.