

BRIEFLY

Britain softens terms: Britain on Tuesday seemed to soften conditions for all-party peace talks with the IRA's political wing, Sinn Fein, when its Northern Ireland minister said that only "some weapons" held by the IRA needed to be handed over. Reuter reports from Washington.

Sir Patrick Mayhew is in Washington for talks with US officials, including Secretary of State Warren Christopher, and made the comment to reporters.

17 die in Indian truck mishap: Seventeen people were killed when a truck loaded with acid overturned in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh on Monday, newspapers reported yesterday. AFP says from New Delhi.

Fifteen people were injured in the accident and nine of them were likely to lose their sight after suffering severe acid burns, the Indian Express and other dailies reported. The accident occurred near the town of Muzaffarnagar, they said.

Kuwait arrests 20 Iraqis: Kuwaiti coastguards have arrested 20 Iraqis who were trying to infiltrate the Emirate by sea, the Interior Ministry said on Tuesday. AFP reports from Kuwait City.

"The coastguards arrested 20 Iraqis — six children, eight women and six men — on board a boat off Kuwait," said a ministry statement carried by the official agency Kuna.

Deng meets with visitors: China's state-run news, which rarely reports news about senior leader Deng Xiaoping, said Deng met with visitors recently from his birthplace in Sichuan province. AP reports from Beijing.

Deng received visitors from rural Guang a county during the lunar New Year, over a month ago, and heard about higher incomes, more roads and other improvements in that part of Sichuan, the Xinhua News Agency reported on Tuesday.

UNICEF suspends 6 more: In a widening investigation of possible mismanagement and fraud, the UN Children's Fund suspended another six employees of its Kenya office, an official said on Tuesday. AP reports from United Nations.

The six were suspended last week and raised to 16 the number of staff members taken off their jobs as a result of the probe, said Karin Sham Poo, the deputy executive director of the New York-based organisation.

UN official shot dead in Algeria: Guamen on Tuesday killed a United Nations official who resisted their attempt to hijack his car, the UN and the victim's family said, AP reports from Algiers.

Oussini Lahraiche, an Algerian who was deputy head of the UN information centre in Algiers, was shot as he left home on his way to work. UN spokesman Joe Sillis said.

Inmates clash in US prison: Three prisoners were hospitalised on Tuesday after racial tensions erupted into a brawl between more than 400 black and Hispanic inmates at a medium-security prison, AP reports from Dilley, Texas.

State and local law enforcement officials used tear gas and riot batons to quell the disturbance on Monday night at the Dolph Briscoe state prison.

15 rebels held in Egypt: Fifteen members of the Muslim Brotherhood have been arrested in the troubled southern province of Minya, police said on Tuesday. AFP reports from Cairo.

The activists are accused of distributing Brotherhood pamphlets in the province and mounting a recruitment campaign in mosques controlled by the armed outlawed Jamaa Islamiyya (Islamic Group), they said.

UN Haiti mission to cost \$270m: The UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti will cost about 270 million dollars this year, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said in a report released on Tuesday. AP says from United Nations.

Peacekeepers are replacing the US-led mission that restored Haiti's elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power last October. The UN force of up to 6,000 peacekeepers and 900 civilian police is scheduled to be in place by March 31. The United Nations peacekeeping effort is due to end in February 1996.

Giscard won't run for presidency: Former French President Valery Giscard d'Estaing announced on Tuesday he will not be a candidate in presidential polls due in April-May. AFP reports from Paris.

Giscard d'Estaing, 69, who would have been the 13th candidate to declare, said on television he was not standing, "nothing with sadness" that his pro-Europe political views "were meeting with no response".

Nepali Cong meet ends: Nepal's major opposition party, the Nepali Congress (NC), concluded its three-day general committee meeting pledging to pull down the Communist government before it presents the country's next budget in July, a party source said on Wednesday. AFP reports from Kathmandu.

The closed-door meeting, which concluded Tuesday night at Pokhara, 225 kilometres (141 miles) west of Kathmandu, drew 4,000 rank and file activists and top brass of the pro-democratic NC.

US to host Defence Confce: The US Defence Department announced on Tuesday it will host an inter-American defence conference in July, bringing together all the countries of the hemisphere except Cuba. AFP reports from Washington.

The meeting of the 34 countries will be held July 24-26 in Williamsburg, Virginia, said Joseph Nye, Deputy Secretary of Defence for National Security Affairs.

Taiwanese women demonstrate: A crowd of women yelling slogans and performing satirical theatre petitioned Taiwan's parliament yesterday to change laws which they say "give everything" to men. Reuter reports from Taipei.

About 200 women, some displaying a 50 metre (yard) long banner bearing more than 30,000 signatures, gathered on a road in front of parliament's gates and listened to speeches by women's rights activists. "The people's law is not fair, it persecutes females," the women shouted toward parliament, the legislative Yuan.

Guerillas raid Israeli position

MARJAYOUN, Lebanon, Mar 8: Muslim guerrillas launched three raids on Israeli's militia allies in South Lebanon and Israeli forces retaliated with artillery fire, pro-Israeli militia sources said today, reports Reuter.

The clashes occurred hours before US Secretary of State Warren Christopher was due to arrive in the Middle East in a bid to restart stalled Arab-Israeli peace talks.

Sources with the South Lebanon Army said one SLA militiaman was wounded when guerrillas clashed overnight using machineguns and anti-tank rockets with a militia patrol in the area of Shihine in the Western sector of the Israel-held buffer zone.

This morning, guerrillas assaulted a fortified post at Toumat Niha in a finger of territory jutting north from the zone.

Taliban impose strict Islamic laws on Afghanistan

LASHKARGAH, Afghanistan, Mar 8: With a crowd of thousands watching, the Islamic judge announced that three young men had been convicted of robbing travelers, reports AP.

The convicts were brought forth. Two doctors promptly severed the right hand and left foot of each man, sending blood spurting in all directions.

The harsh punishments made clear that the Taliban, a powerful new militia, are serious about driving out warlords and imposing their version of strict Islamic law on this anarchic country.

The Taliban have notched a dramatic string of victories in the country's civil war, conquering most of southern and eastern Afghanistan. They are now at the outskirts of Kabul, the capital, and have vowed to

defeat rival Islamic factions, they consider power hungry, corrupt and un-Islamic.

"We are fighting against Muslims who have gone wrong," said Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Umar, based in the southern city of Kandahar. "How can we remain quiet when we see and hear crimes are being committed against the poor, against the women?"

In Taliban areas, soccer, volleyball and even chess have been banned because the sports caused youths to miss one or more of the five daily prayers. Government squads armed with scissiors provide mandatory haircuts to men whose locks are deemed too long.

Women have been ordered to wear a veil whenever they go out. Female doctors and nurses were kept from their

jobs until a British aid group provided door-to-door transport.

The Taliban, made up largely of militant theology students, have won support for bringing order to places that have had only chaos in recent years.

But the group has no experience in governing.

In Kandahar, four Muslim clerics with no legal training were serving as judges, sitting outdoors on carpets and listening to more than a dozen cases in a single day.

"People want shariah (Islamic law), people want these punishments," said Mullah Pasani, Chief of justice for the Taliban. "It's the only way we can establish a crime-free society."

Virtually all Afghans are Muslims who say they favour an Islamic government, but their

style of Islam has traditionally been moderate and they have a long history of rebellion against heavy handed authority.

The fiercely independent Afghans drove out British forces twice in the 19th century, pushed out the Soviet army in 1989 and routinely resist efforts by the central government in Kabul to impose its will on outlying regions.

In contrast, the Taliban have quickly stamped their authority on captured territory. They've sanctioned public executions of murders in Kandahar. In at least one case, a widow was allowed to execute her husband's killer.

The public amputations in Lashkargah were carried out "to uphold the Islamic character of the Taliban movement and to set an example," said Mullah Abdul Bari, head of the public hospital in Lashkargah.

Bari sent his doctors to perform the amputations. The thieves were given a local anesthetic before their limbs were severed and were brought to the hospital to recover.

The three men, all in their 20s, showed their wounds to an Associated Press reporter and professed their innocence. Bari was unimpressed.

"Have you ever heard any thief admit he committed a theft?" he asked.

Afghanistan's more established Islamic factions have lost their credibility by fighting among themselves for three years since they toppled an unpopular communist government in 1992.

President Burhanuddin Rabbani's nominal government in Kabul says it wants to create an Islamic state, but it has

barely functioned due to the war.

The Taliban have been far more effective. One of their most remarkable achievements has been to disarm Afghan men who consider carrying a weapon to be a birthright. At Taliban checkpoints, drivers are now greeted with smiles and don't have to worry about being robbed or paying bribes.

The Taliban have marched for hundreds of miles without facing much resistance, but it will be difficult to take control of Kabul, where Rabbani's troops are dug in.

The two sides are separated by only 100 meters (yards) on a road 10 kilometers (six miles) south of the capital. Neither side has attacked but fighting may be inevitable unless they can settle their differences under a United Nations peace plan.

Libya won't sign NPT in April

TUNIS, Mar 8: Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi on Tuesday said Libya will not sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty due for renewal at a UN conference in April, reports Reuter.

"We now reject signing the renewal until Israel's nuclear installations are not only inspected, but also Israel disarmed of the nuclear, chemical and biological weapons it has," the official Libyan news agency Jana quoted Gaddafi as saying.

"Otherwise, it is the Arabs' right to make nuclear, chemical and biological bombs," Gaddafi said. Jana said he was talking in an interview with the London-based Arabic newspaper Al-Arab.

Libya, suspected by Western countries of trying to make chemical weapons, declined in 1993 to sign a United Nations chemical weapons ban.

LTTE conditionally welcomes foreign mediation

COLOMBO, Mar 8: Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels today angrily accused the government of leaking secret correspondence and denied rejecting foreign mediation to end their separatist war, reports AFP.

Firing a fresh verbal salvo at Colombo, the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they conditionally welcomed mediation by foreign countries but were not agreeable to the suggestion of President Chandrika Kumaratunga to involve a retired French diplomat.

The LTTE, in a two-page statement sent here from its London office, said Kumaratunga suggested the diplomat, a man who had served in Ethiopia and Haiti and would not act on behalf of the French government.

He was a close friend of the president and his selection as a mediator was controversial. Again, this individual was not known to the Liberation Tigers," the LTTE said.

"The LTTE was responding to a hard-hitting seven-page statement by Kumaratunga Monday accusing the rebels of rejecting her offer to open substantive political talks via a neutral intermediary acting "with the patronage of a foreign government."

Kumaratunga said the suggestion was made because the LTTE failed to agree to direct political negotiations in the past three months and wanted

to discuss only day-to-day economic issues affecting territory under rebel control.

She also accused the LTTE of sabotaging the peace process that she initiated after taking office in August, with the promise of resolving a war that has claimed over 30,000 lives since 1972.

"It appears that the Chandrika government seeks to damage the LTTE in the international frame by spreading false information... The Sri Lankan government is trying to tarnish our image in a planned fashion."

"If the talks between us and the Sri Lankan government fail, we will welcome mediation by foreign countries," the LTTE said.

It also raised doubts about the government's integrity and said a letter sent by Kumaratunga to LTTE supreme Velupillai Prabhakaran had been leaked to reporters although the correspondence was marked "top secret."

"Having marked the letter secret, the fact that the government themselves are now talking about its contents raises grave doubts in our mind. How are we to believe what is being said?" The Tiger statement asked.

All previous political and military attempts have failed to resolve the conflict or subdue the LTTE, generally regarded as the most powerful guerilla group in the world.



Iraq's minister of health Dr Oumid Medhat Mubarak injects an Iraqi child with a poliomyelitis vaccine on Tuesday, starting a three-day nationwide campaign to vaccinate 3.5 million children under the age of five. — AFP/UNB photo

Benazir slams Muslim militants

SINGAPORE, Mar 8: Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto today slammed Muslim militants for giving Islam a bad name, saying her country would be a voice for moderation in the Islamic world, reports AFP.

Benazir did not directly refer to riots in Karachi pitting the minority Shi'ite sect against the majority Sunnis or the shooting there today of two US diplomats, she was led away by aides when asked to comment on the shootings. "Not now" a senior Pakistani official told reporters.

But she said that "every society has a handful of extremists although they don't reflect society at large."

China intends to buy 22 subs from Russia

WASHINGTON, Mar 8: China intends to buy 22 diesel-powered submarines from Russia over the next five years in a move that could dramatically alter the balance of naval power in Southeast Asia, the Washington Times reported yesterday, quoting Senate sources, reports PTL.

The submarines, the sources said, will enable China to pursue its claims to a vast swath of the South China Sea, extending closer to Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines than to mainland China.

Benazir on a three-day official visit, said there was a serious misconception in many parts of the world about the true message of Islam.

"This is a message of harmony, tolerance and brotherhood," she said.

She said militancy would not give Muslim nations any influence internationally.

"If you are seeking influence or clout in the new world, that influence and that clout... can only come through market opportunities," she said, adding that militancy in Algeria was destroying the Algerian market.

Earlier, declaring her country poised for economic take-off, Benazir invited businesses here to invest in energy and other major projects in her country.

"We are offering a package of an estimated five billion dollars in projects in power transmission, oil pipelines, oil terminals and railway track," she told business executives at a luncheon here.

She also invited businesses here to invest in the upgrading of two ports in Karachi and the construction of a deep sea port at Gawadar in Baluchistan.

The Pakistani Prime Minister said her country had lifted earlier limits on foreign ownership of equity, adding that foreigners could own 100 per cent of equity in any venture.

Benazir was earlier today accorded a ceremonial welcome at the Istana, or government house.

UN wants changes in mission to avert Serb-Croat war

ZAGREB, Croatia, Mar 8: The United Nations is offering to change its peacekeeping mission in Croatia to keep thousands of troops in place and avert a second Serb-Croat war, UN officials say, reports AP.

The changes might appease Croatia's government, which ordered the 12,000 peacekeepers out by March 31, but it's unlikely the rebel Serbs who hold nearly a third of the republic's territory will agree.

President Franjo Tudjman's order in January, blaming the peacekeepers for failing to restore government control over rebel areas, raised the specter of renewed war once the peacekeeping troops leave.

The Serbs and Croats fought a six-month war in 1991 after Croatia declared independence from Serb-dominated Yugoslavia.

If more fighting breaks out, it could quickly spread to Bosnia, where Croatia's government announced a military alliance Monday with Bosnian Croats and the Muslim-led government.

To prevent that, UN officials say they are trying to meet some of Tudjman's demands to change their mission.

According to officials who spoke on condition of anonymity, the United Nations is offering to replace peacekeeping troops on the 1,125-kilometre (700-mile) Serb-Croat front line with unarmed monitors. If the monitors and unarmed and limited only to reporting what they see, Croatian troops would have a freer hand to attack the Serbs.

In addition, UN troops are

offering to take up positions on Croatia's border, as Tudjman demands. But the Serbs control much of that border, and they're likely to reject UN control of cross-border traffic, which moves freely between Serbia and Serb-held eastern Croatia.

UN control of the border might let some of the 250,000 Croat refugees from Serb areas return to their homes, and reinforce Tudjman's insistence that the rebel-held border is Croatian, not Serb.

Michael Williams, UN spokesman in Zagreb, confirmed there is a proposal to revise the UN mission, but wouldn't give details.

In a surprise development Tuesday, European Union mediator David Owen said there was a chance to make some of the changes Tudjman wants. Owen arrived from talks in Belgrade with Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, a key figure in the region.

But Serb acceptance depends on the outcome of a power struggle in the Serb leadership. And Milosevic says he won't help any peace deal until the world lifts economic sanctions imposed on Serbia.

Chirac leading race for French presidency

PARIS, Mar 8: Two new polls released on Tuesday confirmed that Paris Mayor Jacques Chirac is leading the race for the French presidency first seven weeks ahead of the first round of voting, reports Reuter.

Chirac would defeat Conservative rival Prime Minister Edouard Balladur and Socialist contender Lionel Jospin in the initial voting round and go on to defeat either man in a second round run-off, according to a BVA Institute poll for the weekly Paris Match magazine to be published on Thursday.

'KSA not worried by Iran's missile deployment'

RIYADH, Mar 8: Saudi Arabia is not worried by Iran's reported deployment of anti-aircraft missiles at a strategic point in the Gulf, the defence minister was quoted on Tuesday as saying, reports AP.

"I think that there is no real escalation with respect to the missiles that Iran is said to have deployed on its shores," Prince Sultan was quoted as saying by the official Saudi Press Agency.

The Saudi defence minister commented on Monday during a visit to the northwestern Saudi military base at Tobuk.

Fighting erupts in Nagorny-Karabakh

YEREVAN, Armenia, Mar 8: Tensions flared this week along the front line between Armenian and Azerbaijani troops, upsetting a lull in the seven year war between the two former Soviet republics, reports AP.

Each side accused the other on Tuesday of violating a ceasefire agreement that has generally held since last summer.

At issue, in the war is the ethnically Armenian enclave of Nagorny-Karabakh, inside Azerbaijan.

Russians mine main road in Chechnya

MOSCOW, Mar 8: Russian warplanes have mined the main road in Chechnya to stop Chechen separatists using it, a Russian military official told the Interfax News Agency here on Tuesday, reports AFP.

"Mines have been laid along part of the strategic road from Grozny to Nazran," the capital of neighbouring Ingushetia to the west, an official of the Russian forces said in Mozdok, the town in north Ossetia the Russians are using as the base for their intervention in the breakaway Caucasus Republic.

The Russian announcement came after 10 people were killed and five injured when a bus carrying Chechen refugees hit a mine on Monday near Achkhoy-Martan, 40 kilometres (15 miles) southwest of Grozny, according to the International Migration Office in Geneva.

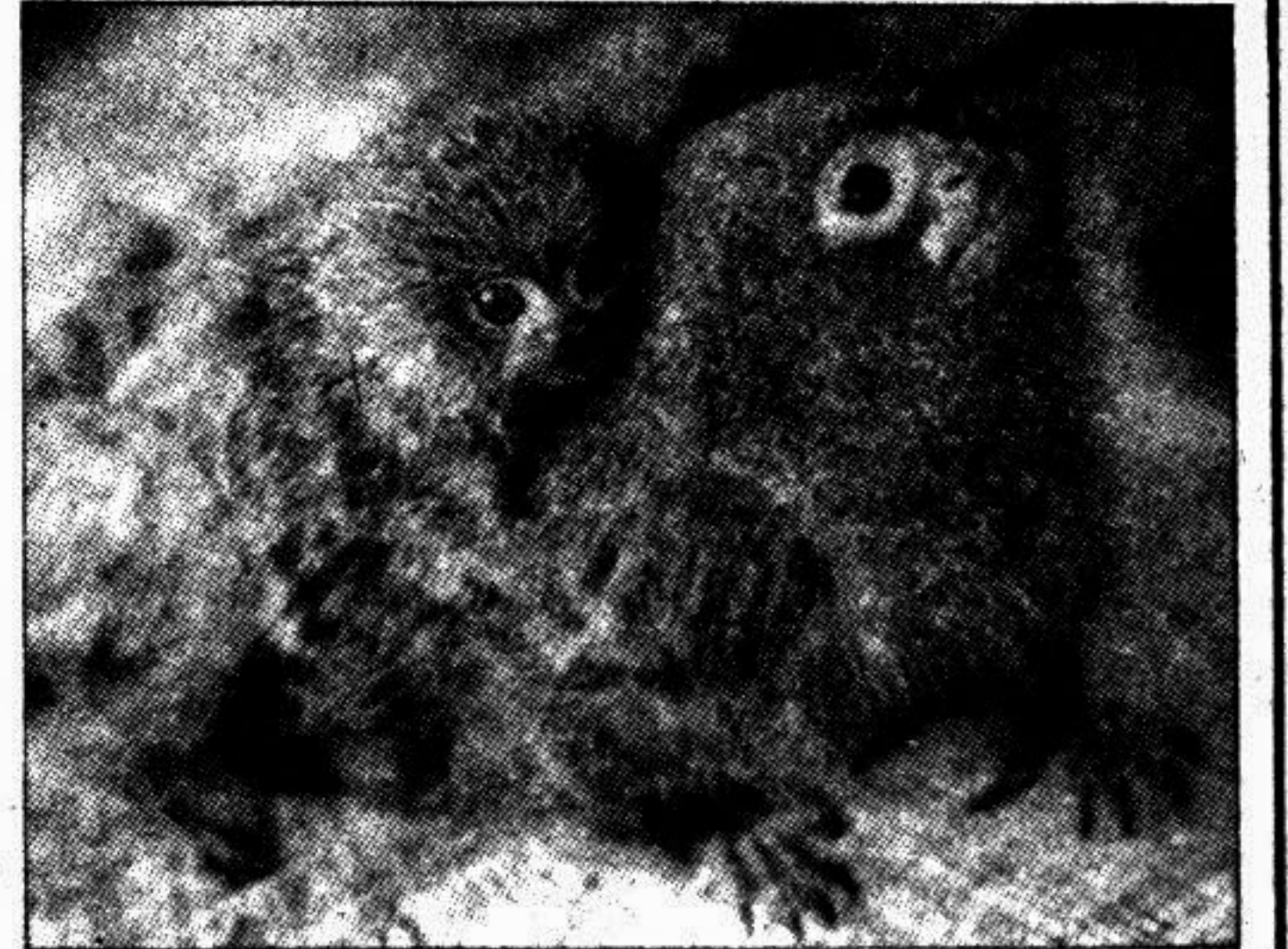
The bus taking refugees to Ingushetia, left the road in the area where the Russians now say they have laid mines.

But Colonel Vyacheslav Shimkov, commander of a Russian interior ministry forces regiment, told Interfax the bus had been travelling on a back road and not the main Grozny-Nazran highway.

The official who announced the mine-laying said the mines aimed to "stop all major movement by illegal armed gangs (official Russian parlance for the Chechen rebels) on the Grozny-Nazran road."

Planes have also mined woods south of the western Chechen village of Samashki, where separatist fighters have taken cover, according to the official, who was not named in the Interfax report.

Off the Record



Micro (L) a pigmy marmoset weighing 20 grams born on February 1 in the Safari Park of Peaugres in the Ardeche in eastern France, rests on his papa's back on Tuesday. Adults of the species reach no more than 100 grams. — AFP/UNB photo

Royal identification

LONDON: Queen Elizabeth's pet dogs have been fitted with identification microchips as part of a campaign by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), Buckingham Palace said on Tuesday, reports Reuter.

Royal cocker Spaniels Oxo and Bisto had the chips placed in the loose skin behind their necks in a quick, painless procedure, a spokesman said. A scanner can be used to read the information on the chips.

More than 125,000 animals have been tagged since 1992 by the RSPCA charity, which says it is vital for dealing with the problem of lost or stolen pets.

For one day only

EDINBURGH: The Scotsman Newspaper is to change its title on Wednesday for the first time in 179 years — but for one day only, to mark International Women's Day, reports AFP.

The Scotsman will become the Scotswoman and female staff will step into key editorial posts for 24 hours.

Lesley Riddoch, an assistant editor who will become editor for the special edition, said: "This is not tokenism but a serious contribution to international Women's Day."

... to prove as loyal Muslim

NEW YORK: A US government informant accused Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman on Tuesday of urging him to kill Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to prove that he was a loyal Muslim, reports AFP.

Enaid Salem, a 45-year-old former Egyptian army major, is the main witness against Abdel-Rahman and 10 followers charged with a plot to bomb New York landmarks and kill Mubarak.

Abdel-Rahman called Mubarak a tyrant and urged Salem could redeem himself for 17 years in Egypt's army by "turning your rifle's barrel to President Mubarak's chest and kill him," Salem testified.

"He is like a tail of the snake, he and Israel, they are following the United States," Salem quoted Abdel-Rahman as saying.

A defence lawyer for the Sheikh, Lynn Stewart, said that the government's start witness was a liar, "he's not going to survive cross examination," she said.

Salem said that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) asked him to infiltrate extremist Muslim groups after the 1990 assassination of Rabbi Meir Kahane in New York. He agreed in October 1991.

Salem said he earned 500 dollars per week from the FBI through July 1992, when he and the FBI parted company.

He was given a one million dollar contract after the bombing of the World Trade Center in February 1993. He has said that he has received 116,000 dollars thus far in addition to 7,000 dollars per month as part of the witness relocation programme.