

**BRIEFLY**



Members of the Solidarity trade union from military factories demonstrate on Friday in front of Warsaw's government buildings, demanding a restructuring and certain guarantees like the maintenance of production in military factories. — AFP/UNB photo

**Japan launches rocket:** After weeks of postponements due to mechanical problems, Japan on Saturday launched a rocket carrying two satellites, AP reports from Tokyo.

It was the third launch of an HII rocket, the first major space vehicle developed and built entirely by Japan. The launch had originally been scheduled for February 1.

**US okays chicken pox vaccine:** The US Food and Drug Administration approved a long-awaited chicken pox vaccine on Friday, the nation's first protection for the 4 million Americans who get the disease every year, AP reports from Washington.

Merck and Co says its Varivax vaccine is 70 per cent to 80 per cent effective at keeping children from getting chicken pox lesions.

**29 die in Mexican bus mishap:** A tourist bus carrying foreigners crashed north of this central Mexican city on Friday, killing 29 people and injuring 31 others, AP reports from Cuernavaca, Mexico.

The accident took place at about 9:30 am between Cuernavaca and Xochimilco in an area between Cuernavaca and the nation's capital, Mexico City, the government news agency Notimex said.

**HR body's appeal to Suharto:** The National Commission on Human Rights has appealed for the reduction of jail terms of political prisoners on the occasion of the country's 50th independence anniversary, a report said Saturday, according to AP from Jakarta.

Chairman of the state-sponsored commission Ali Said has sent a letter of appeal to President Suharto, along with a list of the prisoners, said the official Antara news agency.

**Campaigns against polio:** The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) announced on Friday it would hold day-long mass vaccination campaigns against polio twice this year in former Soviet republics, the Middle East and Asia. Reuter reports from Geneva.

UNICEF said the campaigns, involving 18 countries, would aim to ensure 70 million children take the oral vaccine OPV as part of the United Nations' overall target of eradicating polio, a disease that causes paralysis, by the year 2000.

**Journalist shot dead in Baku:** A cameraman for Reuters TV was fatally shot in a firefight between government troops and mutinous police in the Azerbaijani capital, AP reports from Baku.

Aydi Buriyotov, 36, of Baku, died Friday, a Reuters producer in Moscow said. Details were sketchy, but his family said he was hit by a single bullet, she said.

**Iranians mourn death of Khomeini's son**

NICOSIA, Mar 18: Iranians poured into the streets of Tehran today weeping and beating their chests in mourning for Ahmad Khomeini, son of the Islamic revolution's patriarch, reports AP.

Khomeini was pronounced dead Friday, two days after he turned 50, according to the official Islamic Republic News Agency. He had suffered a massive heart attack on Sunday.

He was the younger son of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who led the Islamic revolution that toppled the pro-Western Iranian monarchy in 1979. The father died of cancer June 3, 1989.

The state-run Iranian television carried live coverage of the funeral procession at Tehran University Saturday. Prayers were led by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the country's supreme leader.

The broadcast, monitored in Cyprus, showed a four-lane highway near the university packed with mourners.

The throng stretched for miles (kilometres). Mourners were wiping tears away with their sleeves and thumping their chests with clenched fists, a traditional sign of grief.

Black ribbons and portraits of Ahmad Khomeini and his father hung from lamp posts in the streets.

The younger Khomeini was buried next to his father, whose tomb has been built into a massive gold-domed shrine.

Saturday and Sunday were proclaimed days of mourning

**Call to eliminate arms of mass destruction in ME**

CAIRO, Mar 18: Egypt and Jordan called here Friday for the elimination of weapons of mass destruction in all countries of the Middle East, including Israel, reports AFP.

They said at the end of a two-day meeting of their Joint Higher Committee, chaired by the Prime Ministers, that such weapons must be destroyed "in order to ensure a balanced security" throughout the region.

**Women, minorities underrepresented in US upper management**

WASHINGTON, Mar 18: Women and minorities have made little progress up the career ladder despite the view among corporate executives that discrimination is a thing of the past, according to a report published in the Washington Post yesterday.

The fact is large numbers of minorities and women of all races and ethnicities are nowhere near the front door of corporate America," it said.

But though women and minorities are still vastly underrepresented in upper management, the report found that most top executives believed the problem had been solved.

"The overwhelming majority of the interviewed... think of the glass ceiling as something that used to affect women — think and non-white — but that is no longer a real problem for them," said the report.

The findings come as the republican majority is on the offensive against the federal anti-discrimination programmes and women's groups are warning President Bill Clinton he had better protect those policies for face a backlash in the 1996 presidential election.

Republican leader Bob Dole openly attacked the programmes known as affirmative action as an outdated quota system which penalizes white men.

"The American people sense all too clearly that the race-counting games have gone too far," Dole said on the senate floor Wednesday.

He added he will introduce a bill this year to prohibit the government from "granting preferential treatment to any individual simply because of his or her membership in a certain favoured group."

But also on Wednesday, a coalition of the top women's group marched on Washington in support of the anti-discrimination hiring policies and met with Clinton advisors to warn them of the consequences should he ignore their demands.

Clinton has called for a review of affirmative action to see if there were ways to prevent unqualified candidates from receiving preferential treatment in hiring.

But Attorney General Janet Reno gave the programme unqualified support Thursday.

"I think affirmative action has been an extraordinarily important tool in correcting discrimination in this country," she said. "I've seen it work."

**Lankan peace talks run into new complications**

COLOMBO, Mar 18: Negotiations between the government and Tamil rebels have run into new complications with the guerillas putting conditions before they take part in peace talks, news reports said Saturday, according to AP.

The guerillas' clandestine radio on Friday quoted rebel chief Velupillai Prabhakaran as saying that the government must first remove a strategic military base, lift an economic embargo on rebel-held areas and scrap restrictions on fishing off the northern coast before any peace talks.

However, in an unexpected development on Saturday, the rebels released 14 government servicemen held captive for five years who had refused to end their 16-day-old hunger strike.

The 13 policemen and a soldier were released to the International Committee of the Red Cross because of deteriorating health, an ICRC official said.

Two other captive policemen had been released on Thursday.

The guerillas said earlier that they wouldn't free any of the captives until the government lifts a five-year economic embargo on rebel-held areas.

Kenneth Fernando, the Anglican bishop of Colombo, and two civilians visited the insurgents' stronghold of Jaffna this week to plead that the captives be freed.

Since peace talks between the government and the rebels began in October, the rebels have freed 31 of the policemen and soldiers they had taken into custody. A cease-fire has held since Jan 8.

No comment was immediately available on Tamil rebels condition for resuming peace talks.

Rebel leader Prabhakaran had said that if the government did not meet the demands, the guerillas would have to take a "regrettable decision."



A little girl watches a Turkish soldier patrolling the streets of Istanbul's district of Gaziosmanpaşa on Friday. Turkish authorities lifted a curfew from one of the districts where sectarian violence has left at least 28 dead this week, the Anatolia news agency said. — AFP/UNB photo

**Rabbani to transfer power within 15 days: UN envoy**

KABUL, Mar 18: Afghan government troops claimed advances on positions held by the militant Taliban student movement today as a UN special envoy here said a transfer of power would take place within 15 days, reports AFP.

In an interview published today, the Pakistani daily Dawn quoted UN peace envoy Mahmood Mestiri as saying the government under President Burhanuddin Rabbani would transfer power to an 80-member "National Council" within 15 days.

The United Nations had to put off an initial peace plan in February with the arrival of the Taliban — a militant Muslim student movement — at the gates of the city.

Rabbani, whose mandate was to have ended last December at the time said the transfer of power would occur March 21.

He has delayed the exercise, saying he would only step down if a credible mechanism could replace his administration.

"The UN is ready with its plan but we have a very difficult task — to wrest power from Rabbani," Mestiri said.

A new UN-sponsored peace plan envisages Rabbani handing over power to a national council made up of two representatives from each of the country's 30 provinces, plus 15 to 20 neutral personalities chosen by the United Nations.

Fighting continued in the hills surrounding the Afghan capital, with radio Kabul reporting late Friday that presidential forces had taken positions south of the city formerly held by the Taliban.

More than 40 Taliban fighters were killed in the fighting, the radio controlled by Rabbani loyalists said. No independent confirmation was available.

The Taliban, who have imposed strict Islamic laws in areas they control throughout the embattled country, have quickly risen to power over the past several months with spectacular victories over other Mujahedeen factions.

They suffered their first defeat March 11-12 when they were forced to abandon several positions around Kabul by forces under the command of Rabbani ally Ahmed Shah Masood.

Another government offensive against Taliban strongholds in the direction of Maidan Shahr, southwest of the capital, was also reported.

**Iraq detains 2 Americans**

KUWAIT, Mar 18: Iraq detained two Americans who crossed into its territory from Kuwait by mistake and efforts are under way to ensure their safety, UN military observers said on Friday, reports Reuter.

A spokesman for the United Nations Iraq Kuwait Observer Mission (UNIKOM) told Reuters the two were detained by Iraqi police on Monday evening after crossing the desert border and entering the southern Iraqi town of Ummi Qasr.

The force commander of UNIKOM is in contact with the Iraqi authorities in order to confirm their whereabouts and to ensure their safety and to ensure their return to their respective countries.

AP adds: White House press secretary Mike McCurry said Friday that President Clinton was briefed on the situation by National Security Adviser Anthony Lake.

"Obviously we are doing what we should be doing to secure the expeditious release of the two missing Americans," McCurry said.

One of the men is David Daliberti of Jacksonville, Florida, his wife told The Florida Times-Union.

McCurry said the two were employees of a private American company. He added the US government couldn't release their identities or provide more information on their activities because of the restrictions of US privacy laws.

UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said the two were US civilian employees under contract to the UN observer mission on the Kuwait border.

**Ukraine troops disarm Crimean parliament guards**

KIEV, Mar 18: Ukrainian troops late Friday surrounded the Crimean parliament in Simferopol and disarmed guards assigned to Crimean President Yuri Meshkov after his post had been abolished by Ukrainian MPs, a presidential spokesman reported.

Alexander Spakhov told AFP here by telephone that 200 troops commanded by Ukrainian Deputy Interior Minister General Valery Chernyshov had encircled the parliament building, which also houses the office of the president, as well as the television headquarters.

He said the presidential guard had acceded to a demand that it surrender its weapons and disclosed that telephone lines to Meshkov's office and to that of parliamentary Speaker Sergei Tsekov had been cut.

The Ukrainian parliament in Kiev on Friday abolished Crimea's presidency and constitution and ordered that Meshkov be charged with abuse of office.

**Hillary starts S Asia tour on Mar 24**

WASHINGTON, Mar 18: Hillary Rodham Clinton, the wife of President Bill Clinton, will make a five-nation tour of South Asia March 24-April 6, the White House announced on Friday, reports Reuter.

In her first extended foreign trip without the president, Hillary Clinton will visit Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, a White House statement said.

It said the tour would be part of the administration's efforts to develop and strengthen US relationships in the South Asia region.

Hillary will meet with female representatives from the governments of each country she visits, as well as from organisations outside government, the statement said.

She will also meet with representatives of religious institutions, education, business and the arts, and visit communities to look at services that assist families and children.

"As an advocate of children, families and communities, the First Lady is the best imaginable emissary to deliver a message to South Asia that this administration's concern for those countries is deeper than traditional geopolitics, that there is truly a human dimension to politics, policy and diplomacy," President Clinton said in the statement.

**Endeavour delays return for bad weather**

HUSTON, SPACE CENTRE, Texas, Mar 18: Bad weather forced Endeavour to cancel its attempt to return to earth Friday leaving the seven-member crew to extend their record-long space shuttle mission, space agency officials said, reports AFP.

Stormy conditions in Florida prompted the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to reschedule the landing for Saturday either at Cape Canaveral, Florida, or Edwards air force base, California.

Weather conditions were expected to be uncertain in Florida Saturday, but ideal at the California site, officials said. But NASA officials prefer to land in Florida to avoid transporting the spacecraft on a jumbo jet across the United States at a cost of one million dollars.

Thursday, Endeavour set a record for the longest US space shuttle flight.

**Financial scandal in Vietnam**

HANOI, Mar 18: In one of the biggest scandals to hit Vietnam in recent years, criminal charges were announced on Saturday against three officials for allowing construction on a dike that shields the capital from floods, reports AP.

The three are the first to be charged in the illegal construction of more than 1,100 homes, small hotels and restaurants, which experts say has increased the danger of floods to Hanoi's residents.

**Kukis torch 60 houses in Manipur**

IMPHAL, Mar 18: Suspected Kuki militants set ablaze at least sixty houses of the Toupokpi Anal Naga village under Chakpikarong police station in Manipur's Chandel district early this morning, reports PTI.

About 20 armed Kuki militants surrounded the village and torched all the houses besides opening fire, official sources said.

Army personnel belonging to the 18th Maratha regiment had rushed to the spot.

No casualty was reported so far.

This follows last night's assassination of the president of the Kuki National Organisation (KNO), Shogkhulen alias Hanglien, by suspected Naga militants in the state's Moreh area under Moreh police station in the same district, an official report reaching here this morning said.

The KNO has been demanding formation of a "Kukiland" by carving out the Kuki-inhabited areas of Myanmar.

The Naga village which was torched at about 0400 hours today was reported at 1000 hours at Chakpikarong police station.

Sources said it was in retaliation against Naga's torching of 71 houses of the Teithang Kuki village under Chakpikarong police station four days back.

This attack on the Kuki village by about 30 armed Nagas had claimed three villagers including the village chief.

All police and security posts in Chandel district have been put on alert.

**Two Americans, Canadian held in Thailand**

BANGKOK, Mar 18: Two Americans and a Canadian have been arrested in Thailand for allegedly forging promissory notes worth scores of millions of dollars, the National newspaper reported today, says Reuter.

**Off the Record**

**Alcohol in outer space**

LONDON: Astronomers have discovered huge quantities of alcohol in outer space that would be enough to make 400 trillion trillion pints of beer, a British newspaper reported Saturday, says Reuter.

Geoff MacDonald and Rolf Habing of the University of Kent in southern England and Tom Miller of the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology stumbled on the alcohol cloud while studying star formation using a powerful telescope in Hawaii.

The alcohol in thinly spread over huge area. Dr MacDonald estimates that in the could as a whole, there is enough to make 400 trillion trillion pints of beers," the times newspaper said.

The cloud is around a newly-formed star called G34.3 in the constellation of Aquila but it is 10,000 light years away from potential drinkers on earth.

**5th anniversary of biggest art heist in history**

BOSTON: Five years ago Saturday, two thieves pulled off the biggest art heist in history. When the clock strikes midnight Saturday night, they may have gotten away with it, reports AP.

Midnight is the deadline for prosecuting the 1990 theft of 12 artworks worth 200 million dollar — including paintings by Rembrandt, Vermeer and Manet — from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

Although the thieves' trail is cold, authorities say they haven't given up on tracking the artworks. And while the statute of limitations is about to run out on the theft, the robbers could be charged with other crimes, such as selling the works or transporting them across state lines.

The theft occurred early on Sunday morning, when the thieves, posing as police officers, overpowered two museum guards.

The made off with two paintings and an etching by Rembrandt, three prints and two charcoal drawings by Edgar Degas, one painting each by Edouard Manet, Vermeer and Govaert Flink, and a Chinese bronze beaker dating from 1200 to 1000 BC.

The thieves told the guards they would seek a ransom for the artworks within a year, but no ransom demand was ever received. The theft was featured on the television show "America's Most Wanted" and a one million dollar award was offered.

**Ban on Betel leaves in Yangon townships**

YANGON, Mar 18: The government is offering rewards to anyone who turns in those bucking Myanmar culture by teaching Western-style dance, organising rowdy birthday bashes with live bands, and going wild in sing-along music lounges, reports AP.

The official New Light of Myanmar said today that some people were ignoring the government's past warnings against partaking in "decadent alien culture" and faced severe action.

The government urged the public to report violators to authorities to get rewards. It did not say what action would be taken against the violators or what rewards awaited informers.

The newspaper also reported that authorities had banned the sale of the betel stimulant in six townships in downtown Yangon starting April 1.

Betel leaves are chewed throughout Asia with lime and betel nuts to induce a natural high. The users often spit the red juice created by the mixture on the ground, which the government said had stained the roads, sidewalks and offices.

The government urged betel chewers throughout the country to spit the red juice in spittoons.

**British-Sinn Fien talks soon**

LONDON, Mar 18: The British government is to announce that it will hold face-to-face talks with Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), in days, "not weeks," according to today's Times, reports AFP.

There were "encouraging signs" from the backstage contacts with Sinn Fein. "Quite soon we should be at a stage to say we hope to meet with Sinn Fein at ministerial level and probably fix a date," a British source was quoted as saying.