

BRIEFLY

Arab FMs meet tomorrow: The foreign ministers of Egypt, Syria and six Gulf Arab monarchies will meet in Cairo on Tuesday for talks on the Middle East peace process and on ways to boost cooperation in line with the Damascus declaration they signed after the 1991 Gulf War. AFP reports from Cairo.

Under the accord, which has not yet been implemented, Syria and Egypt are to provide the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) with military aid in return for some 10 billion dollar worth of economic assistance.

Endeavour lands in California: Dismal weather forced seven astronauts to make a detour to California on Saturday after postponing their scheduled landing in Florida and establishing a record time of nearly 17 days in space. Reuter reports from Cape Canaveral, Florida.

Chased from the Kennedy Space Centre by thunderstorms for the second day in a row, Endeavour swooped out of mostly sunny skies to touch down on a breeze-swept runway at Edwards Air Force Base at 1:47 pm. The shuttle landed in the Mojave Desert, some 3,000 miles west of where ground crews had planned to receive it and its crew at the conclusion of a marathon science journey.

Queen in South Africa: Queen Elizabeth II flew from London to South Africa on Saturday night to begin her historic visit, AP reports from London.

The queen and Prince Phillip, who already is in South Africa, will be the guests of President Nelson Mandela for the visit marking South Africa's return to the Commonwealth following the end of apartheid.

Serbs detain UN observer: Bosnian Serb forces detained a UN military observer on Saturday in a Sarajevo suburb where a rash of Serb hijackings of UN vehicles has occurred over the past week, a United Nations spokesman said, Reuter reports from Sarajevo.

The observer, a Russian who was unarmed and was carrying a diplomatic passport, was taken to a police station after being picked up around midday, the spokesman, Alexander Ivanko, said.

3 Bosnian soldiers held: Three Muslim Bosnian army soldiers in the government-held Bihac enclave have been arrested on suspicion of murdering a Bosnian Croat army officer who disappeared more than a week ago, state television reported on Saturday night, Reuter says from Sarajevo.

A military court judge ordered the arrests on Wednesday, according to the evening news bulletin on TV in Sarajevo.

21 militants killed in Algeria: Algerian security forces killed 21 fundamentalists over the past four days, including one shot by troops hunting men who slit the throats of two teenage sisters, Algerian security officers said on Saturday, Reuter reports from Tunis.

Algeria's official news agency APS, received in Tunis and quoting an Algerian security force statement, said 20 armed militants were killed during search operations between Tuesday and Friday in nine villages and cities, including the Algerian capital.

Perry in Saudi Arabia: US Defence Secretary William Perry, on a tour of Gulf region, said he hoped the release of two Americans held in Iraq would be resolved this weekend, AP reports from Jeddah.

Perry, who arrived in Saudi Arabia on Saturday, said the two men are in no danger and that they are employed by McDonnell Douglas Corp. to service aircraft for Kuwait. Perry is on his second visit to the oil-rich kingdom in five months.

Manila admits maid's crime: A Filipino maid who became a national heroine when hanged for murder in Singapore angrily admitted she committed the crime, a Filipino diplomat was quoted Sunday as saying, AP reports from Manila.

Thousands of mourners lined the streets, many of them throwing flowers, as a hearse passed by Saturday with the body of Flor Contemplacion, 42, who was executed Friday for the 1991 murder of another Filipino maid and that woman's 4-year-old charge.

Polls in Zimbabwe next month: Zimbabwe will hold parliamentary elections April 8-9, the third since independence, but Mugabe has entrenched power by crushing dissent and creating laws favouring his ruling party, AP reports from Harare.

The only leader since white-ruled Rhodesia became Zimbabwe in 1980, Mugabe also has toned down the theme of reconciliation with economically powerful whites that he preached in the early years. Three weeks before the election, the outcome is certain. Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front, which holds all but three seats in the current parliament, already has won 52 of the 120 seats.

Vatican for defence spending cut: The Vatican has urged all nations to slash spending on defence and weapons as part of efforts to improve the lives of women, Reuter reports from Vatican City.

It also denounced domestic violence in a statement released on Saturday. The statement was originally read out last week in New York at a preparatory meeting for a major UN sponsored conference on women scheduled for Beijing in September.

US artist Slim dead: Sunnyland Slim, a legendary blues pianist who helped power the raucous Chicago sound, died on Friday at age 87, AP reports from Chicago.

Slim, also a singer and composer, was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1988 and was lauded as one of America's great traditional artists.

Finns go to polls: Finland's voters appear certain to change their government in general elections taking place Sunday after four turbulent years marked by economic depression and dramatic foreign policy developments, Reuter reports from Helsinki.

Opinion polls predict that the opposition Social Democrats will win about 28 per cent of the vote and will lead the next government as Finland's most powerful party.

Karen C-in-C resigns

BANGKOK, Mar 19: The commander-in-chief of one of the world's oldest rebel groups, the Karen National Union (KNU), has stepped down following setbacks for the ethnic minority, including the loss of their headquarters to Myanmar army, reports Reuter.

KNU rebels and Thai sources said General Bo Mya will continue to hold the largely ceremonial position of KNU president until the next party congress, when a major reshuffle is expected.

The change was made late on Saturday at an emergency meeting called to discuss strategy and a possible reshuffle.

That intelligence sources said the meeting ended abruptly on reports that thousands of Myanmar government troops were advancing on the Karens' makeshift temporary headquarters in southwest Myanmar.

General Bo Mya has

Afghan forces capture Taliban Charasyab base

ISLAMABAD, Mar 19: Afghan government forces have captured the Taliban student militia's strategic Charasyab base near the capital Kabul, the Afghan embassy in Islamabad said today, reports Reuter.

An embassy statement said forces loyal to President Burhanuddin Rabbani had also captured the Khairabad hills and Rishkhor garrison near Kabul.

There was no immediate independent confirmation of the report. It came only a day after a spokesman for Rabbani in Pakistan said that government forces would try to oust the Taliban from Charasyab which it captured last month

from the Hezb-I-Islami of former prime minister and main opposition leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

"In continuation of the recent victories scored by the Afghan Islamic army, the last pockets of the so-called Taliban groups around Kabul were cleared and government forces seized the strategic points of Charasyab, the Khairabad hills and the Rishkhor garrison," the embassy said.

"Mohammad Agha area of the (eastern) Logar province was also captured by the government forces as a result of successful operations."

It said the government forces inflicted heavy losses

and damage on the Taliban and captured heavy and light weapons.

Meanwhile, Thousands of followers of an Afghan Shi'ite faction leader killed this week have started a long march through central Afghanistan with his body which they want to bury in the north, a spokesman said on Saturday.

Mourners carried the body of opposition Hezb-I-Wahdat leader Abdul Ali Mazari on their shoulders as they marched, a faction spokesman said in Pakistan.

He said it would take days for the procession to reach Mazar-I-Sharif, capital of Balkh province 380 km (240 miles)

from Ghazni, where Mazari was reported killed on Monday while held captive by the Taliban student militia.

Wahdat on Saturday named Mohammad Karim Khalili to be its acting head after Mazari's death.

Wahdat spokesman Mohammad Rasul Taleb told Reuters by telephone from the northwestern Pakistani town of Peshawar that people were weeping as they marched in the huge funeral procession.

"It is very natural, we lost a great leader. They are in sorrow," he said.

Accounts of Mazari's death differ.



Police constable Nandana Samansiri (L), one of 16 security personnel freed by Tamil Tiger rebels, is helped by his mother and sister to board an ambulance shortly after he was flown in Colombo on Saturday, from a military base in northern Jaffna peninsula. — AFP/UNB photo

Developments over Spratly concern ASEAN

SINGAPORE, Mar 19: On the eve of talks between the Philippines and China over the disputed Spratly Islands, neighbouring nations, expressed concern over recent developments and called for a peaceful solution, reports AP.

In a statement Saturday, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations urged all parties to "remain faithful to the letter and spirit of the Manila Declaration on the South China Sea," which was issued three years ago.

Foreign affairs specialists from ASEAN's six members, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Brunei, met in closed sessions Friday and Saturday to discuss regional security.

"We urge countries in the region to undertake coopera-

tive activities," their joint statement said.

In the latest flare up last month, Beijing said it built what it described as shelters for fishermen at Mischief Reef, 135 nautical miles west of the Philippines.

Philippine President Fidel Ramos has strengthened his country's forces in the area in reaction to what Manila perceives as a Chinese naval build-up.

Neither the United States, which has a mutual defence treaty with the Philippines, nor its ASEAN partners have publicly supported the Philippine position.

Admiral Richard C. Macke, US commander in the Pacific, said during a recent visit to Singapore that Washington does not support any territo-

rial claim to the Spratlys.

ASEAN works by consensus and is slow to formulate a unified stance on touchy issues.

However, an ASEAN diplomat, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the joint statement "reflected ASEAN solidarity" even though it identified none of the claimants by name.

The hundreds of small islands and shoals are claimed in their entirety by China, Vietnam and Taiwan and in part by the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei.

The Manila Declaration referred to in the joint statement called on the Spratly claimants to exercise restraint and settle their disputes without resorting to force.

Crimea seeks Russian help to end row with Ukraine

UKRAINE, Mar 19: Ukraine's pro-Russian Crimea peninsula has sought Russian help to resolve a constitutional row with Ukrainian authorities determined to crack down on any separatist sentiments there, reports Reuter.

Deputies in the autonomous region approved a declaration on Saturday urging Russian president Boris Yeltsin and the Russian parliament not to sign a friendship pact with Ukraine "without taking account of the interests of Crimea and its citizens."

But they took no action aimed at contesting the Ukrainian parliament's decision on Friday to abolish their constitution.

Instead they asked Ukraine to work with them to conclude

a treaty on future relations and said they were ready to hold a referendum on the region's future, with Russia, Ukraine and international bodies overseeing the vote.

"After such a contemptuous act (by Ukraine) it was impossible simply to do nothing in reply," said deputy Mikhail Akhyrev. "The reaction of the Russian federation is very important for us."

Parliamentary chairman Sergei Tsekov said Russia was "waiting for our decision."

But in Moscow, the deputy chairman of the lower house of Russia's parliament, Mikhail Mityukov, said Ukraine's row with Crimea was an internal matter.

There can be no denying that Russia has a whole series

of interests in Crimea," Interfax news agency said he told the Ukrainian ambassador. "But we respect and will continue to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity and existing borders."

Russia has been most reluctant to become involved in the Crimea dispute, one of several issues which have delayed the signing of a friendship treaty between Moscow and Kiev.

The two countries have now initialled the pact and are due to sign it when Yeltsin visits Kiev, possibly next month.

Interfax quoted a source close to Crimean President Yuri Meshkov as saying elite Ukrainian troops, escorted by 20 armoured vehicles, were moving towards Simferopol, a Crimean city of 450,000 people.

CIA promoted Abdel-Rahman!

NEW YORK, Mar 19: The CIA brought the blind cleric accused of masterminding a terror campaign against the US government, into the country to rally support for Islamic fundamentalists fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan, New York magazine reports, reports AP.

The CIA sponsored Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman's visits to "jihad offices" around the United States starting in 1986, the magazine says in its March 27 issue, without specifying its sources.

The "jihad," or holy war, offices were American outposts for the CIA-funded Mujahideen fighting the occupying Soviets. The war ended in 1989.

Speculation about the Egyptian cleric's relationship with the US government has abounded for years, despite denials by the CIA and other US agencies that they have any connection with him.

Between 1986 and 1990, he received at least three visas to enter the United States. Eventually he received permanent resident status.

In 1990, a CIA officer serving at the US Embassy in Sudan unwittingly approved Abdel-Rahman's tourist visa, the State Department determined in 1993.

Ahmad Khomeini laid to rest

TEHRAN, Mar 19: Hundreds of thousands of mourners turned out for the funeral of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's last surviving son Ahmad who was buried next to the Founder of the Islamic Republic Saturday amid chaotic scenes, reports AFP.

A huge crowd of people hitting their heads and chest in a sign of grief followed the body of Ahmad Khomeini for hours through Tehran to the mausoleum of his father in the capital's southern suburbs.

Khomeini, 50, a staunch defender of his father's anti-western legacy, died Friday after suffering a heart attack five days earlier.

He was buried to the right of Ayatollah Khomeini in the huge black-and-white marble mausoleum topped with a dome and four golden minarets.

UK-Sinn Fein talks in 2 weeks

PHILADELPHIA, Mar 19: IRA political leader Gerry Adams said Saturday he would like to see top-level talks with Britain begin within two weeks of his scheduled return to Northern Ireland, reports AP.

Winding down an unprecedented, week-long trip to the United States scheduled to end Sunday, the head of the Sinn Fein party commended President Clinton for pushing ahead the peace process by granting the visa that allowed a first diplomatic visit in 20 years.

While still mild compared to levels in many Western nations, crime has risen sharply in recent years. More and more people have bought metal doors for their homes and alarms for their cars, and some even are hiring bodyguards.

Reports of major crimes rose 15.6 per cent last year, with fraud up 26.3 per cent and theft up 17.7 per cent, official figures show.

Many city people blame rising crime on the millions of migrant workers and peasants who are flocking to cities for jobs.

Kashmiri leader Shabir Shah rejects polls

NEW DELHI, Mar 19: Kashmiri separatist leader Shabir Shah said yesterday he had no plans to take part in elections in India's Jammu and Kashmir state, reports Reuter.

Shah told supporters in New Delhi that the time for elections in Kashmir had passed.

"It is time to work out a lasting and a permanent solution to the Kashmir problem," the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency quoted Shah as saying.

New Delhi has been fighting against separatist rebellion in Jammu and Kashmir -- India's only Muslim-majority state -- in which police and hospital sources estimate 17,000 people have been killed in four years.

In February the Indian parliament extended federal rule over the state for six months. Home (Interior) Minister S B Chavan said the government would summon political representatives to discuss the possibility of holding elections in the state for the first time since 1990, when the uprising began.

Large crowds of supporters greeted Shah, leader of the People's League, as he arrived in Delhi on his first visit to the capital after being freed from jail, PTI said.

Shah, 40, who was released in October 1994, has spent 14 of the past 20 years in prison.

He was last jailed under tough anti-terrorist legislation in 1989, accused of heading to Pakistan to buy arms.

Cong (I) meet in Apr to assess polls defeat

NEW DELHI, Mar 19: Members of India's ruling Congress Party, faced with a mixed bag of results in state elections, will meet in April to assess the party's poll performance, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said on Saturday, reports Reuter.

The news agency said the party, headed by Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao, has decided to hold a meeting of members of the All India Congress Committee (AICC), a pivotal body within the party, in New Delhi.

Congress was trounced by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the fast-industrialising Western state of Gujarat and lost power in neighbouring Maharashtra, India's richest state in elections held in February.

A saving grace for Congress was an unexpected victory in eastern Orissa.

The party lost power in three of the four states that voted late last year and has managed to clearly hold on to just two of the six states that voted in the past two months.

Several party dissidents, backing expelled leadership challenger Arjun Singh, had threatened to formally request an AICC session if the party failed to call a meeting to discuss issues raised by Arjun Singh, PTI said.

Arjun Singh, a former Cabinet minister, was expelled from the party in February for campaigning against the prime minister.

Many dissidents feel Congress' poor showing was due to Rao's economic reforms and say the best way to improve the party's standing is to focus more on the needs of the poor.

Off the Record

Charles a dutiful father

LONDON: Prince Charles flew from Morocco to Seville for the Spanish royal wedding on Saturday, then jetted home just in time to see the curtain rise at his son's school play, reports AP.

"Prince Charles was in Morocco in the morning at the end of his trip to Egypt and North Africa," Buckingham Palace said. Then he flew to Spain for the wedding of Princess Elena, eldest daughter of King Juan Carlos, to banker Jaime de Marichale Saez de Tejada.

"But he was only dropping in quickly for the reception afterwards so he could get back in time," the palace spokesman said.

Charles flew into London's Heathrow Airport at 5:20 pm and was driven the 30 miles to Ludgrove school at Wokingham, in time for the start of Prince Harry's student play.

Both Harry, 10, and Prince William, 12 are pupils and Ludgrove, but only Harry had a role.

Prince William had earlier attended a Wales-Ireland rugby match in Cardiff, Wales with the Princess of Wales.

Bill allowing women access to abortion in SC

DUBLIN: Ireland's president on Saturday referred to the Supreme Court a controversial bill allowing women access to abortion information for the first time, reports AP.

The Irish parliament, or Dail, already passed the bill, which is bitterly opposed by the Roman Catholic church and pro-life groups.

All that is needed is for President Mary Robinson to sign it into law. But, in a widely expected move, she indicated Saturday she wants the Supreme Court to decide if it conflicts with Ireland's constitution, which bans abortion.

The bill, which enables doctor and other professionals to give women the names and addresses of abortion clinics abroad, provides the first loophole in Ireland's blanket abortion ban.

Some 4,000 Irish women go to Britain for abortions each year. Five Supreme Court judges have 60 days to give a ruling. If they decide it is constitutional, it cannot be challenged again in the courts.



A group of 350 soldiers arrive by plane from Pakistan for the United Nations mission in Haiti. The UN will officially assume control of peacekeeping in Haiti from the multinational forces on March 31 during visit of US President Clinton and UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. — AFP/UNB photo

Over 70pc feel unsafe in Beijing

BEIJING, Mar 19: In a reflection of China's growing crime problem, a survey published today showed that more than 70 per cent of those responding feel unsafe in the Chinese capital, reports AP.

While still mild compared to levels in many Western nations, crime has risen sharply in recent years. More and more people have bought metal doors for their homes and alarms for their cars, and some even are hiring bodyguards.

Reports of major crimes rose 15.6 per cent last year, with fraud up 26.3 per cent and theft up 17.7 per cent, official figures show.

Many city people blame rising crime on the millions of migrant workers and peasants who are flocking to cities for jobs.

Philippines postpones Singapore PM's visit

MANILA, Mar 19: The government today announced the postponement of next month's visit by Singapore's prime minister following the public outcry here over the execution of a Filipino maid in the island city-state, reports AP.

Foreign Affairs Secretary Robert Romulo also told reporters the government was recalling envoys to Singapore and six other countries to discuss measures to protect Filipinos working abroad.

He said a presidential commission would be formed to investigate the conduct of the Philippine Embassy in the case of Flor Contemplacion, 42, who was hanged last Friday for a double murder despite appeals by President Fidel Ramos and others.

The execution capped a week of protest, accusations

that she was tortured into confessing, and attempts by lawyers to have the execution postponed. It also has led to a crisis in relations between the Philippines and Singapore, both members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Thousands of mourners lined the streets, many of them throwing flowers, as a hearse passed by Saturday with Elor Contemplacion's body.

The officials visit scheduled for next month of His Excellency Goh Chok Tong, prime minister of the Republic of Singapore, has been postponed to a more propitious time. Romulo told reporters without elaboration. "This postponement was reached by mutual agreement between the Philippine and Singaporean governments."