

International

Baghdad demands withdrawal of forces Turkish troops advance 40 km into Iraqi territory

BRIEFLY



Israeli police remove Knesset member Shaul Gutmann from the Jerusalem Old City mosque compound as he tries to hold a prayer on Wednesday at Al Aqsa Mosque. —AFP/UNB photo

7 escape from LTTE camp: Seven youth forced to join the Tamil Tiger guerilla group have escaped from their training camps in the jungles of eastern Sri Lanka, an official said on Thursday. AP reports from Colombo.

Six of them, aged between 10 and 17 years escaped and reported to the military, said army spokesman Brig. Nihal Jayakody.

3 beheaded in Saudia Arabia: Two Pakistanis and Chadian convicted of drug trafficking were beheaded in Saudi Arabia on Wednesday, bringing to 42 the number of people executed this year, AFP reports from Riyadh.

The Interior Ministry said the three had been found guilty of smuggling heroin into Saudi Arabia by hiding it in their intestines.

Sihanouk in China for check-up: Cambodian King Norodom Sihanouk has arrived in Beijing for a routine check-up on his cancer condition, the Xinhua news agency said. AFP reports from Beijing.

The king flew in late Wednesday by special plane from Phnom Penh and was greeted at Beijing airport by Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxun.

One convicted for bilking \$ 69m: A Texas socialite has been convicted of running an international pyramid scheme that bilked 69 million dollar from investors worldwide, AP reports from Houston.

Jurors deliberated for about three hours Wednesday before convicting Teresa Rodriguez on all 32 counts of mail fraud, wire fraud and money laundering. US District Judge Sim Lake denied bond and she was taken into custody.

Ex-first lady to pay \$3000: Former first lady Hema Premadasa has been ordered to pay 150,000 rupees (3,000 dollar) to a maid she employed for 15 years without wages, officials said on Thursday. AP reports from Colombo.

Kokmaduwage Kalkanthi worked for Premadasa since the age of seven on the assurance she would be sent to school.

Kerosene pollutes Kara Sea: About 1,800 tons of kerosene fuel has leaked into a frozen harbour on the Kara Sea in the arctic region of northern Russia and could cause serious pollution, a news agency reported on Thursday. AP reports from Moscow.

The Federal Ministry for Emergencies said the break occurred in a fuel pipeline at an aviation plant located (2,300 kilometres) 1,400 miles northeast of Moscow, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported.

UK urged to rejoin UNESCO: The man who led Britain out of UNESCO in 1985 said on Wednesday it was time to rejoin, AP reports from London.

"It was never intended to be a permanent step," Lord Howe said of Britain's decision to pull out of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

6 die in Egyptian train attack: Suspected Muslim militants killed five people and wounded three others on Wednesday after climbing aboard a passenger train to attack police guards. One of the attackers was slain in return fire by detectives, AP reports from Cairo.

The killing brought to nine the number of people shot dead on Wednesday in Egypt's troubled south. The others were suspected radicals who died during a police raid on their hideout.

Algerian forces kill 3 rebels: Three Islamic extremists who took refuge in a schoolhouse on Wednesday were killed in a clash with security forces that left six children injured, authorities said, AP reports from Algiers.

Security forces said the children were injured by the extremists. Two of the children were seriously hurt, according to an official communique that provided no information on the circumstances of the shootout or the children's ages.

2 Israelis held in Gaza: Palestinian police in the Gaza Strip, self-rule enclave, arrested two Israelis on Wednesday for trying to pass counterfeit money, Israeli radio stations, quoting Palestinian police sources said, Reuter reports from Jerusalem.

Palestinian police were not immediately available to comment. The Israeli army said it was checking the report.

Submarine-ship collision: A nuclear-powered US submarine collided with a freighter in Hong Kong waters but no radioactive material leaked, the US Consulate said on Thursday. AP reports from Hong Kong.

The incident, described by a Hong Kong spokesman as more a bump than a collision, happened a week ago. The Panamanian-registered container ship sustained a slight dent to its bow, while the submarine, the USS Drum, was undamaged, said Marine Department spokesman Patrick Wong. The submarine was not submerged at the time, he said.

Zhirinovsky's proposal creates uproar in Duma

MOSCOW, Mar 23: A proposal by ultra-nationalist leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky for ethnic origin to be used to choose between applicants for Russian citizenship caused uproar in the Russian parliament on Wednesday, reports AFP.

An amendment by Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party to a Russian Citizenship Bill proposed that all inhabitants of the former Soviet republics of Russian origin should immediately be granted Russian citizenship if they wished.

Others would have to wait for up to six months for their application to be processed, according to the amendment.

Pyramids have become centre of pilgrimage for mystics

CAIRO, Mar 23: Egypt's ancient pyramids have become a centre of pilgrimage for thousands of new age mystics who flock from around the world to seek the "energy" of the spirits of the Pharaohs, reports AFP.

The granite walls of the pyramids and temples echo to the sound of chanting as this new brand of tourists — mostly American and women — brave the threat of Islamic militant violence in the search for inspiration.

Eyes closed, hand-in-hand, around 20 Americans gathered in a circle in the heart of the 4,500-year-old great pyramid in the funeral chamber of Cheops.

"Breathe, concentrate your energy," barked a woman dressed in a huge blue tee-shirt. "Ask our ancestors to help us."

One woman cried as she prayed. Another adopted the lotus position and started up her video camera.

When the group emerged from the long corridor out of the pyramid their faces were flushed with pleasure. "It was a marvellous experience, spiritual as well as cultural," said Jane Cotton, a 63-year-old woman from Chicago.

Zahi Hawas, head of antiquities for the three pyramids of Cheops, Shephren and Mycerinos southwest of Cairo, said: "this sort of tourist is not put off by terrorism."

Mohammad Nazmy heads a tourism agency called Sphinx which specialises in spiritual trips. "Every year we deal with

1,500 to 2,000 people. Fifteen years ago there were only 20 to 30," he said.

He is already taking reservations for turn-of-the-century celebrations on December 31, 1999.

The great pyramid, the only one of the seven wonders of the world still surviving, attracts its band of followers at sunrise.

Among them are the Rosicrucians, a California sect whose temple in San Jose is shaped like an Egyptian temple.

The pyramids have a particular shape and were built according to the power of the spirit, they give certain vibrations, says the sect's representative in Egypt, Milad Zakhary.

Other groups such as "11/11" and "power places" organise gatherings of three to four hundred people at suitable times. Some dress entirely in white or in a tarboosh, a cap like a fez.

Andrew, a young Briton who came to Egypt with several friends, brought with him a "star gate", a copper structure which is supposed to create "a strong energy field."

Mystics must ask permission from the Egyptian antiquities office to visit the pyramids outside normal hours. They pay 35 dollars for a group of 15, and 15 dollars for each extra person.

"There are at least four to five groups a month, each one with around 20 people. Most are Americans and women,"

said Mohammad Hemeida, a local inspector of antiquities.

Egyptians themselves are rarely interested, but on Friday one of them waited in vain for Solomon, son of the Prophet David, for several hours on top of the 137-metre (440-foot) high Cheops pyramid.

The Imhotep Association, named after the architect of the Djoser and Saqqara pyramids, sees itself as more scientific than the new age sects and has been meeting regularly in Cairo for the last nine years.

"The pyramids represent an energy point and symbolise the way geometric forms can be used to create a vibrational power," said architect Ibrahim Karim, one of the group's leaders.

Antiquities chief Hawas

tried to explain the attraction. "The pyramids have something magical about them because nobody knows how they were built. Some think they are the work of extra-terrestrials."

He distinguishes between simple pyramid worshippers who he respects because "they have a dream," and the more dangerous fanatics such as an American who wanted to dig underneath the great pyramid to find documents he said would change the world.

Hawas himself is sceptical of repeated attempts to uncover the secrets of the pyramids.

"Some people sometimes say they hear Cheops talking to them at night. But it is only the rats making a noise," he said.

Off the Record

Baboon should not be blamed

CAPE TOWN, South Africa: A baboon that flung itself on electric cables to try to rescue its baby started a mountain fire and cut power to an area northeast of Cape Town, reports AP.

A witness said the baby baboon became trapped Wednesday in an electric substation and the mother, in a desperate rescue bid, leaped on cables and caught fire, then fell into brush that began to burn, the South African Press Association reported.

The fire spread up a mountain but was brought under control later Wednesday, while power to the area near Paarl, 50 kilometres (30 miles) from Cape Town, was out most of the day.

The fate of the baby baboon was unknown.



File picture of the Royal Sceptre featuring the priceless Great Star of Africa diamond. Black township leaders in South Africa on Wednesday called on Britain's Queen Elizabeth II, currently on state visit to South Africa, to give back the jewel which was presented to King Edward VII in 1907. —AFP/UNB photo

'King and Queen' to be repaired

BUMFRIES, Scotland: A bronze sculpture featuring the priceless Great Star of Africa diamond, Black township leaders in South Africa on Wednesday called on Britain's Queen Elizabeth II, currently on state visit to South Africa, to give back the jewel which was presented to King Edward VII in 1907. —AFP/UNB photo

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For nearly 40 years "King and Queen" held a commanding position among several sculptures on a hill overlooking Dumfries, southwest Scotland, until someone sawed off the heads of the two seated figures sometime over the weekend.

"It would have been easier to repair if we had the heads of the two figures but they are missing," said John Farnham, an expert in transporting and repairing sculptures, including many of Moore's bulky masterpieces.

"We might have to cast new heads," he said, noting that molds of the sculpture still existed but that divers would explore a nearby reservoir Saturday in search of the originals.

Farnham said he wasn't sure whether "King and Queen" would then be returned to the open-air art gallery outside Dumfries that contains works by Moore, Rodin and others.

The sculpture park, established by a local property developer, had never been seriously vandalised before, police said. They have not speculated on a motive.

New Russian plan to end Balkan crisis

WASHINGTON, Mar 23: Russia will present a plan worked out with Serbia for ending the Balkan conflicts, to the US Secretary of State Warren Christopher in Geneva today, the Washington Times reported, says Reuter.

Under the plan, the Serb Republic of President Slobodan Milosevic would recognise the other former Yugoslav states in exchange for an end to United Nations sanctions against his government, the newspaper said in its today's edition.

The Washington Times said it had obtained a copy of the peace plan which it described as having been worked out by Milosevic and Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev.

It said Kozyrev would present the proposal to Christopher in their second day of talks in Geneva.

The newspaper, citing an unidentified diplomat close to the US-Russian meetings in Geneva, said the plan had "won the approval" of Bosnian Muslims who are said to have sent an envoy to meet Serbian leaders in Belgrade.

The newspaper quoted its source as saying Belgrade's goal, in addition to ending the economic sanctions, was to "kill" the US brokered anti-Serb Federation of Bosnia's Muslim-led government and Bosnian Croats.

Bosnian Croat and Muslim forces fought in 1993 boosting the cause of their common enemy the separatist Serbs before a US mediated truce brought the two together last March.

As outlined by the Washington Times, the Russian-Serb plan calls for a summit before the end of this month.

Belgian FM resigns

BRUSSELS, Mar 23: Belgian Foreign Minister Franck Vandenbroucke resigned on Wednesday after being implicated in a bribery scandal, official sources said, reports AFP.

His decision to step down came after he admitted being aware of a secret bank account allegedly used by his Flemish socialist party to hoard cash generated by bribes.

Reuter adds. NATO Secretary-General Willy Claes faced increasing pressure to quit today over a corruption scandal following the resignation of Belgian Foreign Minister Frank Vandenbroucke.

Vandenbroucke, who was named foreign minister in October after Claes moved to NATO, and the alliance chief have both been linked to a scandal over alleged bribes connected to a helicopter deal involving the Italian firm Augusta.

Iran rejects Perry's charge as 'baseless'

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 23: Iran's UN mission on Wednesday rejected as "baseless" and "fictitious" a charge by US Defense Secretary William Perry that Tehran had deployed chemical weapons as part of a military buildup on islands at the mouth of the Gulf, reports Reuter.

It also said the claim that Iran's defensive actions in its territories might pose a threat to the stability of the Gulf or its littoral states was a "distortion of logic and simple facts."

The Iranian mission was commenting in a press release on statements by Perry during a visit to the United Arab Emirates that Iran had moved chemical weapons, about 6,000 troops and anti-ship missiles to the island in what he said was a potential threat to shipping.

Indonesia won't boycott talks on E Timor

JAKARTA, Mar 23: Indonesia said on Thursday it would not boycott United Nations sponsored talks on East Timor despite its protests over the UN secretary general's push to include key dissident figures from the territory, reports Reuter.

The official Antara news agency quoted Foreign Minister Ali Alatas as saying that he had officially expressed disappointment over the way the UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali invited participants without consulting Jakarta.



Twenty-two members of Arab League represented by Foreign Ministers begin a two-day session in Cairo on Wednesday, to call for limited renewal of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty until Israel joins. This 103rd session marks the 50th anniversary of Arab League. —AFP/UNB photo

Tokyo police nab Aum man

TOKYO, Mar 23: Police arrested a member of a shadowy cult following a dramatic car chase in western Japan, and military chemical specialists were called in when suspicious substances were found in the car, reports AP.

Amid an intensifying crackdown on the Aum Shinri Kyo cult, which is under a growing cloud of suspicion in the Tokyo subway nerve gas attack, authorities also launched a second round of searches at cult facilities.

The Japanese military dispatched 14 dangerous-chemicals specialists to the scene of the arrest, near Hikone in

western Japan. The military squad was treating the automobile with chemicals so it could be safely examined, officials said.

The driver was stopped for a traffic violation and then tried to evade police, running red lights and crashing into a truck.

Japanese TV showed footage of the chase. The police and military blocked off the area, and residents could be seen looking on anxiously.

Meanwhile, more than 500 police wearing protective gear and carrying caged canaries as gas detectors carried out new

searches and took soil samples Thursday at a rural religious commune near Mount Fuji where they found nerve-gas solvent the previous day.

Media reports said more unspecified chemicals were found at the site. Raids Wednesday on 25 of the group's properties across Japan also turned up nerve-gas solvent, 22 pounds of gold and 7.9 million dollars in cash.

Several members of the Aum Shinri Kyo group, whose name means Sublime Truth, were arrested Wednesday in a kidnapping case unrelated to the Tokyo subway attack.



US Republican Patricia Schroeder (C) speaks at a vigil to protest welfare reform on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC on Wednesday as former representative Bella Abzug (L), a women's rights advocate, looks on. The vigil, by women, churches and poor people's groups, was held during congressional debate on welfare reform. —AFP/UNB photo

Israel orders 4 WB mosques shut

JERUSALEM, Mar 23: Israel ordered four West Bank mosques shut for periods ranging from three to six months this week for "inciting" against Israel, the army said on Wednesday, reports Reuter.

It said the mosques, all in the area of the town of Ramallah, had received warnings they could be shut. Subsequent searches later uncovered material authorities considered "inciting" and the mosques were ordered closed.

Israel has cracked down on people it suspects of supporting militant Islamic groups in the occupied West Bank in the wake of bombings by Islamic guerillas opposed to the Israel-PLO peace deal that have killed scores of Israelis since last April.