

BRIEFLY

Sino-US defence meet next week: US and Chinese defence officials will meet in Washington next week to discuss China's military strategy, force structure and budget, the Defence Department said on Thursday. Reuter reports from Washington.

It said the assistant chief of the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army, Lieutenant-General Xiong Guankai, will lead the Chinese delegation and will brief Defence Secretary William Perry on those subjects during a visit on Monday through Wednesday.

3 more executed in Singapore: The number of drug traffickers executed in Singapore surpassed 100 on Friday when two foreigners and a Singaporean were hanged for smuggling in heroin and cannabis, AP reports from Singapore.

The executions raised to 102 the number of people hanged in Singapore for drug trafficking, which attracts the mandatory death penalty. Hanging is also compulsory for murder and robberies involving firearms.

42 pilgrims drown in China: Some 42 Buddhist pilgrims drowned after their overloaded boat capsized on a reservoir in southern China, a report said on Friday. AFP reports from Beijing.

More than 70 pilgrims, on their way to a mountain temple in Jiangxi province on Sunday, had crowded onto the wooden ferry to get across the reservoir, the Wen Hui daily said.

13 die in Russian roof collapse: Thirteen people were killed and 14 injured when the roof of a workshop collapsed on Thursday at a steel plant in southern Russia, a Civil Defence spokeswoman said. Reuter reports from Moscow.

Two workers were still missing after the accident at the Taganrog plant near Rostov-On-Don.

Quake shakes Taiwan: An undersea earthquake measuring 5.7 on the open-ended Richter scale rocked Taiwan on Friday, but no damage or casualties were immediately reported, the Central Weather Bureau said. AFP reports from Taipei.

The tremor struck at 12:13 pm (0413 GMT) and shook high-rise buildings across the island, the bureau said.



Russian soldiers sit on the ground guarding the road on which refugees are returning to Grozny from the region of Urus-Martan on Wednesday. — AFP/UNB photo

Cholera claims 10,000: A cholera epidemic in Latin America has killed nearly 10,000 people and infected more than one million since its initial outbreak in 1991, the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported on Thursday. Reuter says from Atlanta.

The federal agency said the latest figures from the World Health Organisation (WHO) show that another cholera epidemic caused by a newly recognised strain of bacteria has now affected 11 Asian countries from Malaysia to India, afflicting more than 100,000 people.

Russia, Armenia to hold exercise: Russia and Armenia agreed on Friday to hold joint military exercises later this month, marking a new phase of defence cooperation between Russia and its traditional ally in the southwestern Caucasus, a news agency said. AP reports from Moscow.

Russian Defence Minister Pavel Grachev and Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosian were to inspect the area on Friday in the Armarir region in southwestern Armenia, 10 kilometres (six miles) from the border with Turkey.

Romania returns Red Army member: A left-wing Red Army extremist, arrested in Romania early this week, was returned to Japan on Friday after 18 years as a fugitive, police said. AFP reports from Tokyo.

Yukiko Ekita, 44, arrived at Narita Airport near Tokyo, and was immediately taken to the metropolitan police department for questioning. Jiji Press said she had entered Romania last September using a fake passport and had lived in an apartment in Bucharest.

C African FM's meet in Congo: Foreign ministers of 11 Central African countries met in Congo on Thursday to discuss conflict prevention in the region, where a spate of violence in Burundi has sparked fears of killings on the scale of Rwanda. Reuter reports from Brazzaville.

The Brazzaville talks are being held under the auspices of a United Nations permanent consultative committee on security in Central Africa established in 1993.

2 Russians held with uranium: Police have arrested two former Russian soldiers and seized six kilograms (13 pounds) of enriched uranium granules stashed in their apartment, an Interior Ministry spokesman said Wednesday. The uranium could not be used to make bombs, he said, AP reports from Kiev.

The two were taken into custody Thursday after police received a tip from a neighbour that they were acting suspiciously.

Yangon urged to free civilians: Human rights group Amnesty International called on Thursday for the release of some 1,000 civilians which it said the Yangon junta had rounded up to use as forced labour along the Thai-Myanmar border. AFP reports from Bangkok.

In an official statement obtained in Bangkok, the London-based Amnesty said that half of the porters were being used at Tchaleik, a border town where Shan guerrillas attacked a junta barrack and other installations on Monday.



Taslima Nasreen (R) is welcomed by French Government Minister President Lourette Qkelinx in Brussels prior to taking part in a women's conference at Brussels' Egmont Palace on Thursday. — AFP/UNB photo

Leaders call on Kashmiris to boycott elections

NEW DELHI, Mar 24: Two prominent Kashmiri Muslim leaders today denounced moves by the Indian authorities to hold elections in the troubled state and called on Kashmiris to boycott the polls, reports AFP.

"Elections and selections have yielded no results in Kashmir since 1947," when the Himalayan state acceded to India, said Shabir Shah, 42, one of the Kashmir valley's most popular leaders.

He said the Indian government's eagerness to hold elections in Kashmir to pick a local government was an attempt "to hoodwink the international community which has started pressuring India over human rights violations."

"I will fight moves to hold elections by giving a boycott call," said Shah, who was in New Delhi for meetings with Indian leaders and diplomats.

The only election we want is to determine the future of the state, whether it should join Pakistan or remain inde-

pendent.

Shah's comments came a day after India's Chief Election Commissioner T N Seshan said elections to pick a new local government in Kashmir would be held by July 18, when the existing federal rule over the state expires.

Seshan said he would begin work on polls in Kashmir — where a bloody Muslim separatist campaign has left more than 10,000 people dead since 1989 — after the conclusion of polling on March 28 in the eastern state of Bihar.

"The moment we finish (the) election process in Bihar, we will start it in Jammu and Kashmir since the voters (there) can no longer be deprived of voting rights," the official said.

It was the first announcement on Kashmir by Seshan, whose autonomous election commission holds elections to federal parliament and state assemblies.

Kashmir, where the last state assembly polls were held in 1987, has been under fed-

eral rule since January 1990. Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao said early this month that elections might be held in the state in June or July.

Shah said: "We will, however, participate in elections under UN supervision if it is not determine who will represent Kashmir in a dialogue between India and Pakistan."

Syed Ali Shah Geelani, chief of the Jamaat-i-Islami party which favours Kashmir's merger with Pakistan, echoed Shah's views.

"Have we Kashmiris sacrificed thousands of lives for participating in elections?" asked Geelani, who is also one of the leaders of the All Party Freedom Conference, an umbrella grouping of 30 Muslim separatist groups.

"Elections can never be a replacement for the rights of self-determination," he added. "We shall fight the government's moves to hold elections by all means at our disposal," said Geelani, now in New Delhi.

Pakistan backs Taliban?

KABUL, Mar 24: The president's top military commander claimed Pakistan was providing covert aid to the Taliban militia, the main opposition group in the civil war, reports AP.

Ahmad Shah Masood, credited with masterminding the government's recent military victories, said the Afghan war is likely to drag on if foreign countries such as Pakistan continue to meddle in the conflict.

"Taliban relations with the government of Pakistan... are something that have become obvious," Masood said in an interview Thursday.

Masood, considered the most powerful man in Afghanistan by many, did not provide proof to support his claim. But he said evidence gathered from positions lost by the Taliban had strengthened his belief of Pakistani involve-

ment.

"We found large quantities of money in the pockets of captured and killed Taliban, and with the money they were distributing in the area that they controlled, this created a question: What is the source of that money?" Masood said.

Masood is the de facto commander of President Burhanuddin Rabbani's forces, though he holds no formal title. He was in charge of the government's recent offensive that drove back the Taliban to their current positions, some 35 kilometers (21 miles) south of Kabul.

The president's forces now control all of Kabul and its suburbs for the first time since rival Islamic factions ousted a communist government in 1992 and began battling among themselves.

Many countries, including the United States, Iran, Saudi

Arabia and Pakistan, have supported various Afghan factions since they first took up arms against the communist government in 1979.

However, Pakistan says it is neutral and no longer supports any group. Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto says she wants peace in Afghanistan so the more than 2 million Afghan refugees in her country can go home.

But there has been widespread speculation that some elements in the Pakistan military and government have been assisting the Taliban, a previously unknown militia that suddenly materialised last year with a large supply of heavy weaponry.

Masood said he believed Pakistan's Interior Minister Nasrullah Babar is the Pakistani official in charge of aiding the Taliban.



Queen Elizabeth II leans on Thursday over a hospital bed in Soweto to get a better view of one of youngest South Africans that she has met during her six-day state visit to South Africa. Molly Mavunda and her four-day-old son, Casswell, were in the Baragwanath Hospital. — AFP/UNB photo

Kumaratunga arrives in Delhi today

NEW DELHI, Mar 24: Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga is arriving here tomorrow on a four-day state visit to India in a bid to further enhance bilateral relations and cooperation with this country, reports Xinhua.

India will be the first foreign country she has chosen to travel after assuming office of the president of Sri Lanka late last year. From here she will go on to visit Bangladesh.

During her stay here, the Sri Lankan leader is expected to meet Indian President S D Sharma, Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao and senior ministers and hold wide-range talks on bilateral relations and regional situation and cooperation, officials here said.

Chandrika Kumaratunga is also expected to brief Indian leaders about the peace process initiated by her government with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which is banned in India.

Tripura won't introduce TADA

AGARTALA, Mar 24: The Tripura Home Minister Samar Chaudhuri today said that the Terrorist and Disruptive Act (TADA) would not be introduced in the state, reports PTI.

Replying to a question asked by Ratimohan Jamatiya (Tujs) in the state assembly, Chaudhuri said that the left front had always fought for the repeal of TADA.

He alleged that the centre had enacted such acts only to deprive people of their judicial rights.

Chaudhuri said that 47 persons were arrested in the state in 1992 when the Congress (I)-Tujs combine was in power and all were freed when the left front government had repealed the act.

Rumour of murder plot against Saddam's son

AMMAN, Mar 24: Friends of Uday Hussein, son of the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, denied on Thursday he had been seriously wounded in an assassination bid, saying instead he had undertaken a whirl of social engagements, reports AFP.

Contacted from Jordan, they said Uday was in good health and continued to be seen in public in Baghdad and take part in festivities.

Rumours of a murder plot against Uday, who runs the Daily Babel, have abounded and on Wednesday he was said to have been transferred by helicopter to an Amman hospital, seriously wounded after an assassination attempt.

But the reports were categorically denied by official and hospital sources in the Jordanian capital.

However, they admitted that Uday, who is in his 30s, had been targeted in January along with his father in an attempted coup announced by the Iranian, official news agency IRNA.

Juvenile execution rate higher in US

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 24: A human rights group said that the United States has executed more minors than any other country except Iraq and possibly Iran, and called on America to end the death penalty for convicts under age 18, reports AP.

Human Rights Watch said in a report to the United Nations on Thursday that nine people whose crimes were committed when they were minors have been executed in the United States since 1976.

The group charged that the figure was higher than for any other country except Iraq, where at least 13 children had been executed since 1987, and Iran, where an undetermined number were legally put to death.

More juveniles sit on death row in the United States than in any other country in the world," the report said.

Human Rights Watch urged the United States to abolish capital punishment, saying that an immediate halt to the execution of minors should be a step toward that.

Tokyo police seize more chemicals

TOKYO, Mar 24: As police seized more chemicals from a secretive religious sect on Friday, the group's leader denied making the nerve gas that was used in this week's fatal attack on the Tokyo subway, reports AP.

Police in full-body chemical-protection gear raided compounds belonging to the apocalyptic Aum Shinri Kyo cult in the western city of Osaka Friday — the third straight day of nationwide raids that have turned up cash gold and chemicals linked to production of the nerve gas sarin.

Sarin that spread through the subway during Monday's morning rush hour killed 10 people and sickened more than 5,000. Aum Shinri Kyo, whose name means Sublime Truth, has denied any involvement.

Reports said Friday's raids netted more chemicals, including an agent used to neutralise nerve gas. The cult's missing leader, Shoko Asahara, said in a videotape sent to Japanese television that the chemicals were used for manufacturing plastic, ceramics and pesticides.

"I don't understand how sarin could be produced by using these materials," said the bearded, long haired Asahara, clad in a purple robe and speaking with his eyes squinted nearly shut. He accused authorities of "bashing" the sect.

NHK TV said it obtained the videotape from the group after submitting written questions. I did not say when or where the video was made.

Off the Record

One who never gets bored of eating

CAIRO: Mahrous Mohamed, 45 years old and 400 kg in weight, left his flat in Alexandria for the first time in seven years on Thursday — with the help of 10 firemen, three officers, two stretchers and the neighbours, reports Reuter.

The fire brigade in the Egyptian city had to widen the door to get Mohamed out so that he could go to hospital for treatment for elephantiasis, government newspapers said today.

Mohamad's wife Saban said he also had a large appetite. "A single meal is five loaves of bread, plus rice and pasta. He never gets bored of eating," she told the Daily Al-Gumhura.

Churchills separate

LONDON: Winston Churchill, grandson of Britain's wartime prime minister, has separated from his wife and a divorce is likely, attorneys for the couple say, reports AP.

Churchill and the former Mary Caroline d' Erlanger married in 1964, and have two sons and two daughters.

The couple "remain on good terms, but it is likely there will be divorce proceedings in due course," according to a statement issued Thursday by the law firm Walker Martineau.

Churchill, elected to Parliament in 1970, is the son of the late Randolph Churchill and Pamela Harriman, currently the US ambassador to France.

Moments after saying 'I do'

COLOMBO: In what could end up being one of the world's shortest marriages, a woman who had just said 'I do' at her wedding was kidnapped by a former boyfriend, reports AP.

Working with six accomplices, the man burst into the ceremony in a crowded hall, grabbed the 18-year-old newlywed, pushed her into his van and drove away Thursday, police said.

Even though the girl's mother managed to jump into the van, the jilted lover still tried to win back the bride's love. When that failed, he brought the two women back at the hall.

There, the bride and her mother discovered that all the guests had departed, including the outraged groom.

Police said Friday that the bride, whose name was withheld, had returned home, and her family was still trying to persuade the groom's family to take her back.

Protest through excrement

NEW DELHI: A young Indian prisoner smeared a judge with excreta at a crowded court room here, accusing him of deliberately keeping him in jail for two years, police said Friday, reports AFP.

Umesh Kumar, 22, who had been led to court Thursday by police, suddenly hurled a polythene bag filled with excreta at metropolitan magistrate Guiruvinder Pal Singh while he was busy reading files, police sources said.

The bag hit the stunned judge in the chest although he tried to duck, smearing him and his desk with faeces.

Three other judges who rushed into Singh's chamber on hearing his protests overpowered Kumar, who had been in prison since his March 1993 arrest for robbery. Kumar was later charged with contempt of court.

Kumar told the police that he was upset that Singh was "unnecessarily" holding him in jail.

The Times of India newspaper said the judge, determined to punish Kumar, refused to clean himself for 45 minutes until he was photographed for evidence.

Mandate for UN forces in Bosnia expires Mar 31

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 24: The Bosnian government threatened on Thursday to oppose a new mandate for the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) when it expires March 31 unless a major review is conducted, reports Reuter.

President Alija Izetbegovic, in a letter to UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, said that if there was no time for a review and tougher action by that date, the Security Council should extend the existing mandate for 30 days only.

Bosnia's UN Ambassador Muhamed Sacirbey told a press conference there was a "possibility we would come to a conclusion that the mandate, unless changed, should not be renewed at all but we are avoiding any direct threat."

"We are saying that we are not in agreement, at the moment for anything more than a 30 day extension," he said, adding that the current mandate had to be enforced and the Security Council needed to give clear direction to UNPROFOR.

Sacirbey said she had support from some Security Council members. But Council diplomats said none of the key members, including the United States, would support Bosnia's position for a 30-day rather than a six-month extension of the mandate.

UNPROFOR currently has nearly 40,000 troops in the former Yugoslav republics of Bosnia, Croatia and Macedonia. More than half or 22,000 troops — are in Bosnia.

The UNPROFOR mandate expires March 31 and the Council is current devising different mandates for all three countries following Croatia's threat to expel all UN troops, which was later rescinded providing major changes were made.

Mayor impeached for negligence in Taiwan

TAIPEI, Mar 24: Taiwan's top watchdog body, the Control Yuan, impeached a mayor today for negligence over the island's deadliest fire, which claimed 64 lives last month, reports Reuter.

Lin Po-Rung, mayor of the central city of Taichung, was impeached for his failure to inspect public safety standards, Lee Shen, an ombudsman, said on state radio.

India moving fast to high-tech information superhighway

NEW DELHI, Mar 24: India is moving fast and running alongside the United States in setting up a high-technology information super highway that would change the way the world works, a senior official said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

"We are running parallel to the United States in setting up the highway," said N Seshagiri, chief of the government's National Informatics Centre

(NIC), which is setting up computer networks that blend voice, data and pictures.

Seshagiri said in a lecture that NIC's Network (NICNET) set up an information highway last year, barely one year after the US framed a law to meet an election promise President Bill Clinton made.

Fifteen cities were already linked and the figure would rise to 70 soon, he said. NIC recently launched a

more sophisticated high-speed Superhighway, he said. "This has made India technologically contemporary with the US."

India was guided into the field by the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who was a computer buff. A radical free-market economic reform programme launched in 1991 increased the momentum.

Global computer majors making use of India's cost-efficient computer software ex-

perts, have set up shops in Bangalore in the southern state of Karnataka, often called India's silicon valley.

Seshagiri, who taught computers to Gandhi and was given a free hand to change things in return, said NICNET was now linked to 150 countries through the Ardenian Internet.

Remote corners of the nation spanning more than 500 districts were now connected

to NICNET, he said.

NIC's network would link every college, hospital and library in India by 1998, he said. "We are very confident we will achieve it."

India would soon set up a facility that could help make video films, available on demand at homes, through computers, Seshagiri said.

NIC has set up a pilot project to establish virtual reality

laboratories," he said. It was also seeking the cooperation of the American Time-Warner INC to catch up with a state-of-the-art multimedia project, he said.

NIC has already set up data broadcasting facilities. Some 15,000 journals with videographs and 1,000 journals with their full texts were in a centralised computer system, he said.

UN seeks help for refugees

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 24: The United Nations yesterday appealed for 118 million dollars to help refugees in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, three nations buffeted by turmoil since their establishment following the fall of the Soviet Union, reports AP.

The appeal, aimed at member nations, will fund UN humanitarian programmes in the three Caucasus nations for the next year.