

BRIEFLY

China to promote journalism: China has for the first time selected the 100 top journalists across the country as a step to promote the healthy development of the nation's journalism. Xinhua reports from Beijing.

Speaking at a ceremony to honour them at the Great Hall of the People yesterday, Wu Lengxi, President of the All-China Journalists Association, said that Chinese journalists should work hard and go deep into the realities of life so as to turn them into a competent reporting contingent.

\$7m Japanese aid for Y'slavia: Japan will provide financial aid totalling some 700 million yen (7.8 million dollars) to help people in the war-ravaged areas of the former Yugoslavia, the Foreign Ministry said Friday. AFP reports from Tokyo.

The aid will be extended through international organisations, including 500 million yen through the World Food Programme (WFP), and one million dollar each through the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the UN Children's Fund, the ministry said.

Iraq blames US for instability: Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz on Friday said US policy towards his country was creating instability in the Gulf and helping Iran, AFP reports from Baghdad.

In an interview with Vatican radio, Aziz said: "The current American policy of confrontation with Iraq (is creating) a situation even more dangerous than that which existed before the (1991 Gulf) war."

Kuwaiti paper raps Singapore: A newspaper in Kuwait, where 50,000 Philippine nationals work, rapped Singapore yesterday for executing a Filipino maid convicted of murder and said the island state should have responded to appeals for mercy. Reuter reports from Kuwait.

"Viva Ramos. Viva Contemplacion," the English-language Arab Times said in a front-page editorial. It was referring to Philippines President Fidel Ramos, who has downgraded relations with Singapore over the execution earlier this month of mother-of-four Flor Contemplacion.

3 killed in HK fire: Three people were killed and another three injured yesterday in a fire which broke out in a six-storey residential and commercial building, a government spokesman said, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

Firemen found the charred body of a man on the fourth floor of the building in Tsuen Wan district in Hong Kong where the fire broke out, while the other two men died after jumping from the building in an attempt to escape the blaze, he said.

Paratyphoid spreads in DPRK: Paratyphoid has been spreading in the northern part of North Korea for more than a month. The Sankae Shinbun daily said yesterday, quoting sources, AFP reports from Tokyo.

People in Rajin and its vicinity, near the border with Russia, have been asked not to travel to Pyongyang, where an international sports and cultural festival is to be held in late April, the unspecified sources said.

Six more executed in China: Authorities in China's northwestern Shanxi province have executed five people convicted of slavery and one found guilty of rape, the Legal Daily said yesterday. Reuter reports from Beijing.

The six were executed after simultaneous public sentencing rallies in Yuanping, Yanggao, Shouzhou and other places, it said.

Uzbek referendum today: Some 11 million Uzbeks will vote in a referendum on Sunday to extend the current mandate of President Islam Karimov to the year 2000, AFP reports from Tashkent.

Less than two years before Karimov's current mandate is due to run out, voters will be asked Sunday to answer the question: "are you in favour of extending the president's mandate from 1997 to 2000?"

5000 Vietnamese die in mishaps: The number of traffic accidents in Vietnam rose alarmingly last year, leaving nearly 5,000 people dead and more than 14,000 injured, press reports quoting official statistics said yesterday, AFP reports from Hanoi.

The figures of 4,997 people killed and 14,174 seriously injured were significantly higher than in 1993 when 4,150 people died and 6,000 were seriously hurt, the Vietnam News said.

7 die in Chinese air crash: An aircraft of China's civil aviation administration crashed into a mountain on a training flight near the northern city of Ninan, killing all seven people on board, the China Youth daily said on Saturday, Reuter reports from Beijing.

It said the Xiyuan-type training plane from the Sichuan Civil Aviation Flight Academy was flying at an altitude of about 600 metres (1,800 feet) when it clipped Huhayu mountain, southwest of Jinan, capital of Shandong province, at noon on Thursday.



US President Bill Clinton (C) prepares to enter Bethesda Naval Medical Centre in Bethesda, Maryland on Friday to receive his annual medical examination. — AFP/UNB photo

Clinton supports Lankan peace move:

WASHINGTON, Mar 25: President Clinton has reiterated US support for Sri Lanka's efforts for a peaceful resolution of the civil strife, reports PIT.

Receiving credentials of new Sri Lankan Ambassador Jayantha Dhanapala here yesterday, Clinton said the United States supports the Lankan government's efforts to resolve peacefully the civil strife, affecting the country for over a decade.

"We welcome the announcement in January of cessation of hostilities between the government and Tamil separatists. We hope the current truce will lead to a comprehensive and lasting resolution of the ethnic conflict."

Shabir Shah seeks BJP's help to end Kashmir crisis

NEW DELHI, Mar 25: Kashmiri separatist leader Shabir Shah said on Friday he would meet the head of India's rightwing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to seek an end to a bloody separatist uprising in the Himalayan region, reports Reuter.

But a spokesman for BJP President Lal Krishan Advani denied any plans by the hardline nationalist leader to meet Shah.

"I will be meeting the leaders of the opposition during my next few days in New Delhi," Shah told Reuters.

"I have a meeting with Advani and others," he said. Shah, a populist separatist leader fighting Indian rule in the Jammu and Kashmir state, said he had met several western diplomats, including US Ambassador Frank Wisner.

He said he had discussed a proposal with Wisner to hold tripartite talks on Kashmir involving India, Pakistan and representatives of Kashmir's Hurriyat (Independence) group, of which he is a member.

Hurriyat leader Abdul Ghanilone told a news conference that his group was ready to hold the tripartite talks as

an alternative to a plebiscite in Indian-ruled Kashmir, first promised but later disowned by New Delhi.

India's Chief Election Commissioner T N Seshan was quoted on Thursday as saying he expected state elections by July in Kashmir, where 17,000 people have died in a five-year-old Muslim separatist uprising.

Hurriyat Chairman Moulvi Omar Farooq, addressing the news conference, his first in New Delhi, accused Indian troops of laying a siege on a Muslim holy shrine in Charar-e-Sharif, near the state capital of Srinagar.

Farooq said the Hurriyat Party would call a mass protest against the alleged army action at the shrine before next Friday if the troops were not withdrawn by then.

The BJP opposes elections in Kashmir, saying there was no security for the voters against Muslim guerillas who oppose any proposals for polls in the region under Indian rule.

The Hurriyat will boycott the polls if New Delhi forces them on Kashmir, Farooq said.



King Hussein of Jordan (C) listens to applause after being presented with the Museum of Tolerance Peace Award on Friday symbolised by the ram's horn (shofar). On the left is Rabbi Marvin Hier, the dean and founder of the Simon Weirenthal Centre, on the right is the King's Wife, Queen Noor. — AFP/UNB photo

Pak businessmen observe strike

KARACHI, Mar 25: Pakistani businessmen outraged by violence in Karachi staged a strike today ahead of a visit by US President Bill Clinton's wife Hillary Clinton, reports Reuter.

Witnesses said business activity was at a near standstill in Karachi and reduced in the big cities of Lahore and Rawalpindi.

Police and paramilitary rangers were out in force in Karachi, where two people were killed overnight, but there were no reports of major disturbances this morning.

"The city is calm," a police spokesman said.

In Lahore traffic was near normal, but most factories and businesses were shut. In Rawalpindi, near Islamabad, only a few shops opened and

we believe the government must serve its tenure," he said.

Government officials are reported to have threatened to remove Muneer and other FPCCI officials and to break the leading business organisation into two new bodies.

Muneer said he had received no official notification of such actions which would require formal proceedings.

The latest turmoil is likely to embarrass Benazir, 41, who does not want displays of public discontent during the visit by Hillary Clinton due in Islamabad late today.

Clinton, who is not scheduled to go to Karachi, will spend Sunday in Islamabad and fly to Lahore on Monday before leaving for India.

Benazir Bhutto has said her opponents want to derail her planned visit to the United States, which starts on April 5, and wreck her efforts to lure foreign investment to Pakistan.

Businessmen say investment projects cannot be implemented unless peace and security is restored in Karachi, Pakistan's biggest city and its commercial hub.

Ambulance workers found two bullet-riddled bodies in the early hours, bringing this month's death toll to 119, two of them US consular officials ambushed and killed on March 8.

At least 362 people have died in ethnic and sectarian violence in Karachi this year. About 800 were killed in 1994.

Most shops and factories stayed shut and few buses plied the nearly deserted streets in the port city today.

First liver transplant in S Asia

KUALA LUMPUR, Mar 25: Malaysian surgeons have carried out a historic liver transplant from a mother to her child, the first such operation involving a live donor in Southeast Asia, Bernama news agency reported Friday, says AFP.

British-trained Tan Kai Chah led a team of three other local surgeons, two paediatricians and two consultants from London during the 12-hour operation to transplant part of a woman's liver into her four-year-old daughter.

The identities of both the mother and child were withheld.

The girl, who was born with a deformed liver, had been waiting two years for the operation performed at the Subang Jaya Medical Centre, doctors said.

Tan, who currently works in Singapore's Mount Elizabeth Hospital, said he had performed eight similar operations during his spell in Britain.

About 300 liver transplant operations have been carried out globally, half of them in Japan.

Mahathir launches election campaign

KUALA LUMPUR, Mar 25: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad launched his ruling coalition's election campaign today with a call for a big win at the polls to ensure the country's continued development, reports Reuter.

"We need more than two-thirds majority to ensure progress and development," Mahathir told the National Front convention in Kuala Lumpur.

The country is preparing for a general election expected to be held in April.

Mahathir said the coalition should be retained for the next 25 years to enable it to fulfil its pledge of making Malaysia a developed country by 2020.

The coalition, formed in 1974, comprises 14 parties but is dominated by Mahathir's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). It is the successor to the alliance coalition which brought independence to Malaysia from Britain in 1957.

While Mahathir addressed the 4,000 coalition members

Religious scholars ask Iraqis to defer Hajj

BAGHDAD, Mar 25: Iraqi religious scholars have ruled that the country's Muslims could defer making a pilgrimage to Makkah and spend the money on the Iraq's poor instead, reports Reuter.

Religious scholars have issued a call based on the Sharia (Islamic law) making it possible to defer the Hajj (pilgrimage) for the Iraqi pilgrims, the ruling Baath Party newspaper said on Friday.

It said the call was made "due to the unfair conditions of the (United Nations) embargo imposed on our steadfast country."

The scholars stressed that what is supposed to be spent on the Hajj should be given to the poor and the needy in this country, said Thawra, another newspaper.

Last month, the Iraqi cabinet said it would not allow Muslims to make the pilgrimage to Makkah this year if there is a continued shortage of foreign exchange caused by UN sanctions, imposed in 1990 after Iraq invaded Kuwait.

Iraq also unsuccessfully appealed to Islamic countries to urge Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates to release 25 million dollar of Iraqi assets to cover the expenses of this year's pilgrimage.

Off the Record



This undated photo shows US actor Tom Hanks in his role as "Forrest Gump." Gump has captured 13 Oscar nominations, including best actor, best director and best picture. — AFP/UNB photo

What a way to show school's punishment methods!

PHOENIX: A private school headmaster forced a prospective student to undress and kneel while he spanked the 15-year-old girl with a paddle to demonstrate the school's corporal punishment methods, police say, reports AP.

Michael William Wetton was jailed without bond on suspicion of child abuse, kidnapping and aggravated assault. He already faces trial next month for allegedly bruising a 9-year-old student during a paddling.

Police said a woman brought her 15-year-old daughter to The Connach Academy Christian School on February 24 because she was considering enrolling her there.

According to the account they gave police, Wetton took the girl into a room alone, had her strip to her underwear and paddled her once, explaining he wanted her to understand corporal punishment before she enrolled.

She cried and tried to get away, and Wetton forced her to strip naked and hit her twice more, police reports indicated. He also ordered her to bow down and recite the Lord's Prayer, police said.

The girl's mother heard her daughter crying and went to her, witnessing part of the beating, but was too frightened to stop it, said detective Brent Vermeer. She contacted police after getting photos developed of her daughter's bruises.

Wetton, 41, and his wife are the only teachers at the school, which promises strict discipline and high academic standards. Parents must sign a release from allowing paddling as discipline.

'Priest' is an insult to Roman Catholics

NEW YORK: The movie "Priest" is an insult to Roman Catholics, and releasing it on Good Friday is like rubbing salt into wounds, says the head of a Catholic group. The studio says it is considering changing the release date, reports AP.

The Catholic League called Thursday for such a change. The 200,000-member independent lay group also urged Walt Disney, Miramax's parent company, to disassociate itself from the film-for-fear-a campaign to tarnish its "family" image.

The movie portrays several clergymen in England, including an uncaring bishop, a gay priest torn over how to stop a member of the congregation from sexually abusing his daughter and a priest who is sleeping with his female housekeeper.

The film's general release date is April 14, which is Good Friday, the day Christians commemorate the death of Jesus. It was to open this Friday in Los Angeles and New York.

A witch indeed

LUSAKA: A woman who reportedly admitted murdering seven of her children and eating parts of their flesh was sentenced Friday to six months in jail for illegal witchcraft practices, reports AP.

Magistrate Kenny Mwanangumbi said that the 60-year-old woman Filita Mashilpa, may be tried later for murder depending on police investigations at her village in remote western Zambia.

Police have said that Mashilpa confessed to killing seven of her nine children. They seized devices that she said enabled her to fly, and said that she claims the power to turn people into midgits.

Economic hardship in the region has been blamed for an apparent resurgence in superstition and witchcraft.

1000 kidneys removed without donors' knowledge in India

BOMBAY, Mar 25: A cook in the western Indian city of Pune first learned he was missing a kidney after a routine check-up for persistent abdominal pain, reports Reuter.

The doctor asked why he hadn't told him he had donated a kidney, Suresh Chakolekar said.

"I was stunned, I didn't know anything about it."

Police have discovered dozens of cases like that of Chakolekar, 34, in investigating a kidney transplant racket exposed after the arrest of a doctor in a Bombay suburb.

India has had a thriving underground kidney transplant market since the early 1980s because of the relative ease with which the organs can be purchased from the poor.

In the southern city of Bangalore, the police last month claimed to have traced nearly 1,000 people whose kidneys were removed without their knowledge by doctors who initially asked them to donate blood.

The police arrested two doctors, one a state government employee, who were alleged to be at the centre of the racket.

Police said people who needed kidney transplants came to the Bombay Clinic from Italy, Germany, Yemen, Syria and Turkey. They typically paid rates of 250,000 rupees (8,000 US dollar) to

450,000 rupees (14,350 US dollar) for the procedure. Seven doctors were arrested for their involvement in the racket.

"They seemed to be in the wholesale business," said a police official investigating the case.

"We seized a fax message from a Turkish organisation saying the expenses of procuring 22 kidneys had been paid, but a total of 30 transplants were required."

In February, new laws came into force in three Indian states, including the wealthy western state of Maharashtra, to plug loopholes in existing laws on organ transplants.

But officials say it will be three months before the regulations can be properly implemented.

The new legislation provides for doctors violating the rules to be struck off the rolls for two years. Their licences will be taken away after a second offence, said Dr PV Sallu of the state health department.

Under the new rules, a regulatory committee must vet all procedures using organs from donors unrelated to the patient.

Rajesh Shah, a handcart-puller in Bombay's business district, sold a kidney last April to a German patient for 40,000 rupees (1,270 US dollar). He wanted the money for his sister's wedding back home in Nepal.

The 24-year-old, who was ill for a month after the operation, said at least 20 of his neighbours had sold their kidneys.

"The money went on liquor," Shah said.

Public health experts and social welfare workers who helped draft the new legislation hope it will end the organ trade and wipe out the flourishing community of "dalals" or middlemen, who put buyers in touch with prospective donors.

Unlike Shah and other donors who agreed to the removal and sale of their kidneys, Chakolekar, the cook, did not know his left kidney had been removed in 1989 by

Street protests banned in ROK

SEOUL, Mar 25: South Korean Prime Minister Lee Hong Koo banned street protests as students and handicapped peddlers clashed with police today over the body of a vendor who burnt himself in anger over a crackdown on push-carts, witnesses said, reports AFP.

Some 150 protesters scuffled with riot police in front of Kangnam police station in southern Seoul, where police impounded a truck with the body of the peddler, 37-year-old Choi Jung-hwan.

Choi, a disabled peddler, died on Tuesday of severe burns 12 days after he committed self-immolation to protest crackdowns on push-cart vendors.