

BRIEFLY

Blast claims 3 Russian children: Three children were killed and seven were injured when a hand grenade exploded at a school for mentally handicapped children. Interfax news agency said yesterday. Reuter reports from Moscow.

Authorities were investigating the explosion which occurred on Sunday in Nizhny Novgorod, central Russia, the agency said.

2 Croat girls run over: Two young girls were run over and killed on Sunday by a New Zealand UN armoured vehicle near Vitez, central Bosnia. UN Protection Force spokesman Major Herve Gourmelon said. AFP reports from Sarajevo.

Local sources said the girls killed were Bosnian Croats, age three and two. The accident happened as the UN vehicle tried to avoid a car.

6 N Koreans defect to South: Six North Koreans, led by a man who said he had been lured from Japan three decades ago by propaganda, have defected to South Korea to escape hunger in the cash-strapped Stalinist state, officials announced. AFP reports from Seoul.

The defectors, led by Oh Soo-Young, 61, supervisor of an iron products warehouse in Sineuiju, northwest of Pyongyang, asked for political asylum after arriving in Seoul through an unidentified country, the National Security Planning Board (NSPB) said.

W W II Nazi oil barrel found: A barrel of oil from a Nazi warship which sunk during World War II washed onto an Israeli beach on Sunday, Israeli radio reported. AFP says from Nahariya, Israel.

Inhabitants from the northern seaside town of Kfar Lee-man alerted police to what they feared was a bomb but the authorities found the inscriptions "1942 - Wehrmacht" (Nazi Army) and "200 liters" (two gallons), the radio said.

109 die in Ghana clashes: Ghana admitted on Saturday that more than 100 people died in tribal clashes nearly two weeks ago in the northeast of the country. AFP reports from Accra.

But a new official toll of 109 dead made public in Accra on Saturday said the tally included only bodies "found and buried" by security forces in Nuanumba district since March 13, the day the clashes broke out.

Keys to seek nomination: Former White House aide Alan Keyes announced his bid on Sunday for the 1996 Republican presidential nomination, becoming the first black candidate in the race. AFP reports from San Diego, California.

A foreign policy adviser to former President Ronald Reagan, Keyes said his top issue would be abortion, which he called morally wrong and a symbol of the disintegration of family values.

Russian author dies in France: Russian author Vladimir Maximov a long time Soviet dissident died in Paris on Sunday of cancer at the age of 64, his family announced. AFP reports from Paris.

Maximov, whose real name was Samsonov, began his writing career in 1952 after years in Soviet prisons and detention camps where his parents had been detained. He became famous in the early 1960s when he joined the dissident Tarusa Pages publication.

62 feared drowned in Angola: An Angolan river ferry sank with the feared loss of 62 lives, the state news agency Angop reported on Monday. Reuter says from Luanda.

It said the vessel sank on the Lucala river in the northern province of Cuanza on Thursday, three bodies had been recovered, it said.

Huge cocaine seized in Mexico: Mexican authorities confiscated a total of 2.79 tonnes of cocaine in separate operations in three states on Sunday, arresting 12 suspected drug traffickers, the attorney general's office said. AFP reports from Mexico City.

Authorities also confiscated some 2,000 rounds of ammunition and handguns, vehicles and communications equipment in the operations in the northern states of Michoacan, Baja Californian and Sonora, the office said.

4 killed in Guatemalan blast: Four people died and at least a dozen were seriously injured on Sunday when a Guatemalan army munitions warehouse exploded at the capital's main airport, fire officials said. Reuter reports from Guatemala City.

Two firemen and two soldiers died from severe burns after the explosion of hundreds of grenades, mines, dynamite and bullets caused a huge fire in army installations at the airport, spokesman for the city fire department said.

12 Salvadorans die in bus plunge: Twelve Salvadoran tourists died and 15 were injured when a mini bus plunged into a ravine outside Guatemala City on Sunday, fire officials said. Reuter reports from Guatemala City.

The tourists were on their way to visit the colonial town of Antigua when the bus driver lost control of the vehicle on a notoriously dangerous bend about 25 miles (40 km) west of the Guatemalan capital. Antigua fireman Julio Cesar Max said.

8 shot dead in Egypt: Security forces shot dead eight militants from the outlawed Jamaa Islamiya group on Sunday and yesterday in the southern Egyptian provinces of Assut and Minya, police said. AFP reports from Cairo.

Jamaa gunmen also killed a suspected police informer in Minya on Sunday. The latest deaths raised to more than 700 the number of people killed in the three-year confrontation between the state and Islamic hardliners.

Quake kills 2 in Ecuador: An earthquake reaching 5.2 on the Richter scale left two Ecuadorean soccer fans dead and 500 others injured on Sunday, after part of the stadium collapsed, a local radio station said. Reuter reports from Quito.

The victims were watching a soccer match in the city of Quevedo, at 146 miles (235 km) southwest of Quito, when the quake hit the city, causing part of ceiling of the poorly maintained stadium to collapse. Radio Quito said.

Myanmar's senior general seeks cooperation

YANGON, Mar 27: Myanmar leader senior General than Shwe urged the people to cooperate with the armed forces as a national duty of the emergence of modern and prosperous nation, reports Xinhua.

Than Shwe, chairman of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and commander-in-chief of the defence services, made the remarks when he delivered an address on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Myanmar armed forces today.

He said, the armed forces is laying down firm objectives in political, economic and social sectors and implementing them systematically.

The armed forces since the SLORC took over power in 1988, has been giving priority to implementing the tasks to bring peace and stability.

Anti-liquor movement led by women takes rural India by storm

SAHARANPUR, India, Mar 27: Rampal Singh did not take his first swig of arrack till he was 25. But two years later, he was hopelessly hooked. Instead of providing for his family, Rampal was drinking away his meagre earnings as a farm hand, reports IPS.

He beat his wife Shanti whenever she demanded money for running the home and looking after their two children in their little village on the outskirts of this north Indian town.

But Shanti was not about to just weep in one corner while her husband turned into an alcoholic. Two years ago, as Rampal staggered home from a drinking binge, Rampal got a shock when he opened the door to his hut to find himself among almost all the village women — including Shanti. They wanted help in getting the local liquor shop shut down.

Intrigued, he followed the women to the liquor kiosk where the wives raised slogans and sang songs against alcohol. They continued unfazed even when the liquor contractor's men threatened to beat them up.

Rampal was impressed by their valour and enthusiasm. He began accompanying them to their protest meetings and soon became an active participant.

The movement helped me give up the bottle and save my life from ruin," says Rampal, who has not touched a drop of liquor for more than a year now.

A grassroots anti-liquor movement, usually led by women, has taken rural India by storm over the past two decades.

In the central state of Andhra Pradesh, a women-led



US First Lady Hillary Clinton (L) smiles with Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto at a luncheon in her honour at Prime Minister house in Islamabad on Sunday. Benazir described Hillary as a "symbol for women throughout the world." — AFP/UNB photo

Leghari opens OIC confce on science

ISLAMABAD, Mar 27: Pakistani President Farooq Ahmed Leghari today opened an international Islamic conference on science, calling for the Muslim world to pool its resources to achieve technological progress, reports AFP.

He lamented that Muslim countries had frittered away "bounties like oil" in "meaningless wars" within the Islamic world instead of using the resources for collective elevation.

Delegates from different member states of the 51-nation Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) are participating in the five-day conference, which is to discuss "science in the Islamic polity in the 21st century."

The meeting has been organised by the OIC Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation (COMSTEC).

Taliban still holding strategic high ground

KABUL, Mar 27: Forces loyal to Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani on Sunday advanced on Taliban student militia rivals who were holding strategic high ground west of the capital Kabul, Defence Ministry sources said, reports Reuter.

At around mid-day government units fired rockets and artillery at Taliban trenches in the Chawk-i-Arghandi hills, about 20 km (12 miles) outside the city, witnesses said. Taliban responded with artillery.

Local frontline government fighters said they had advanced about 1.5 km (one mile) by mid-afternoon.

"We've taken a key ridge, but we had to fight all the way," said a gunman pointing at a hill dominating the skyline and valley floor.

"I don't know how long Taliban can hold out, but their morale is pretty low. If God wills, they should be retreating to (to the eastern town of) Ghazni by the end of the day."

The government's objective is to capture the strategically important town of Maidan Shahr, about 30 km (20 miles) west of Kabul, a Defence Ministry source said.

But witnesses said the offensive appeared to be faltering by late afternoon in the face of a stiff resistance from Islamic student warriors, who have suffered reverses around Kabul in the past two weeks after a string of victories last month.

Reporters watching the battle from nearby hills saw Taliban artillery shells explode within metres (yards) of a government armoured vehicle trying to re-supply frontline infantrymen.

Stalemate in US-DPRK N-talks

SEOUL, Mar 27: Talks between the United States and North Korea to break a deadlock over the future of Pyongyang's nuclear programme are at a stalemate, South Korean media said today, reports Reuter.

South Korean state radio said the two sides failed during talks in Berlin on Sunday to agree on the thorny issue of what type of nuclear reactor should be supplied to North Korea under a deal the two countries signed last October.

Neither side would officially comment on the three hours of Sunday talks beyond saying they would meet again at 10:00 am (0800 GMT) today at the US mission in eastern Berlin.

The southern radio report said the fate of the landmark nuclear deal now hung on the outcome of that session.

Diplomatic sources predicted that if no particular progress was made at (Monday's) talks, they will end earlier than expected, the radio report said.

Yonhap news agency said communist North Korea continued to balk at accepting South Korean-made nuclear reactors, a key condition for survival of the deal.

The agency, quoting sources involved with the talks, said North Korea demanded US-made reactors and a US firm in charge of the whole project, including design, construction and eventual operation of the reactors. This was emphatically rejected by the US negotiators, Yonhap said.

The US side firmly conveyed that a South Korean firm should be selected as the primary contractor and assume the central role of designing,

manufacturing and constructing the reactors," Yonhap quoted the sources as saying.

The Berlin talks stem from an accord signed last October under which Pyongyang pledged to freeze its nuclear programme and stop building two new graphite-moderated reactors.

In exchange, the communist state was promised safer light-water plants paid for by a consortium of the United States, South Korea and Japan in a 4.5 billion dollar package.

Graphite reactors produce more of the plutonium that can be used for making nuclear arms.

The agreement averted a serious crisis over North Korea's atomic industry, which the west suspected was a cover for a secret nuclear arms programme.



The corpses of three Burundian Hutus lay in a street of the capital Bujumbura on Sunday following fierce armed clashes between the Tutsi-dominated army and ethnic Hutus on Friday. — AFP/UNB photo

India wants extradition of Prabhakaran

NEW DELHI, Mar 27: The extradition of a Tamil rebel leader was among topics discussed by Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao and visiting Sri Lankan President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Indian press reports said on Sunday, says Reuter.

India has alleged that Velupillai Prabhakaran, chief of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was behind the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and wants him extradited for trial.

Rajiv Gandhi was killed by a woman suicide bomber at a 1991 election meeting near the southern Indian city of Madras.

The Hindu said Rao raised the issue with Kumaratunga during their meeting on Saturday, which lasted longer than scheduled delaying an official luncheon.

It said Rao told opposition Janata Party leader Subramaniam Swamy, who has been demanding Prabhakaran's extradition, that he was the cause for the delay.

"He (Swamy) is articulating the strong feelings in India," Hindu quoted Rao as telling Kumaratunga before the lunch.

Indian officials chose to keep quiet on the subject and there was no official word about Rao raising the issue with Kumaratunga at the official briefing on Saturday.

The Asian Age said India's Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee had asked Rao to raise Prabhakaran's extradition with Kumaratunga when the two met.

Rao is under pressure from his Congress Party dissidents to proceed quickly with investigations into Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. Congress leaders, close to Rajiv Gandhi's widow Sonia, are expected to gain political mileage if the government fails to talk of Prabhakaran's extradition.

Kumaratunga is also scheduled to meet Sonia Gandhi, but it is not known whether her husband's killing will be discussed.

Kumaratunga's government is in the midst of crucial peace talks with the LTTE, who are fighting a 13-year-old war with for a separate homeland in the island's north and east, and Colombo is unlikely to welcome any suggestion that could jeopardise them.

Zemin orders crackdown on labour group

HONG KONG, Mar 27: Chinese President Jiang Zemin has ordered crackdown on a small, unofficial labour union to stop it from becoming a Chinese version of Poland's Solidarity movement, a Hong Kong newspaper said today, reports AP.

Jiang ordered the crackdown against the League for the Protection of the Rights of Working People, a dissident labour group whose leaders are mostly in jail, the South China Morning Post said.

In a meeting with security officials, Jiang described the league as China's most counter-revolutionary, or anti-Communist, organisation, the newspaper said, quoting unidentified sources.

It said Jiang was alarmed at the group's links with Chinese Christian activists and ordered it crushed "to prevent it from growing into a force similar to the Solidarity movement."

8 Cong (I) members killed in blast

NEW DELHI, Mar 27: Eight members of India's ruling Congress (I) Party died and two others were injured in a landmine blast on Sunday in the southeastern state of Andhra Pradesh, the Press Trust of India reported, says AFP.

Among those killed in the state's Anantapur district was a local Congress leader, his three sons and four party activists, it said adding that they were travelling in a vehicle which blew up after hitting the landmine.

No one has claimed responsibility for the ambush in Andhra Pradesh, the home state of Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao.

Rao's ruling Congress Party was ousted from power in Andhra Pradesh in state elections last December.

Calm prevails in Burundi

BUJUMBURA, Mar 27: The Burundi capital was calm this morning after the worst week of ethnic violence in a year left dozens — possibly hundreds — dead and forced more than 20,000 to flee their homes, reports AP.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees said the flow of refugees had slowed after 23,500 arrived in nearby Uvira, Zaire, over the weekend. About half were Burundians and half Zairians who work in Burundi.

As is common in Burundi, death toll estimates varied widely, ranging from 100 to 500.

France may ask the UN Security Council to address the ethnic violence. French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said in a television interview Sunday.

Off the Record

Catherine's love letters to be put up for sale

LONDON: Ten love letters written by Catherine the Great of Russia to one of her lovers, and which were believed to be lost, will be put up for sale here at the end of June. The Times reported Monday, says AFP.

The letters were written by Empress Catherine II to Ivan Nikolayevich Rimsky-Korsakov, a captain of her guards, between 1778 and October 1779.

The empress was then in her 50s and her lover about 20 years younger.

The Times said "the letters confirm Catherine's reputation for having a voracious sexual appetite."

In one of the "billets-doux" she talks about "a little scrap of snipped-off underwear" were bought recently in Europe by a dealer in letters and manuscripts who refused to name the person he bought them from.

They will be sold as part of an antique book fair due to take place in London on June 29 and July 1 at Grosvenor House. The letters, described by historians as "very exciting" are valued at 38,000 pounds (57,000 dollars).

Now Joan Chen

HONG KONG: Joan Chen, star of Oscar award-winning film "The Last Emperor" has become the latest Hollywood star to try her luck in the perfume business, a report said Monday, says AFP.

Her perfume is called "Xiao Hua" (little flower) the title of the first movie, made in China in 1978, in which she had a starring role.

But the Chinese actress told the semi-official China News Service, that her first business venture, launched at the weekend in Beijing, was "still a long way from being profitable."

Chen, who recently won Taipei's Golden Horse Award for best actress in the film "Red Rose, White Rose," was on hand for the first sales at a Beijing department store.

The Hollywood perfume market has become crowded over the years. Elizabeth Taylor, Joan Collins, Sophia Loren and Cher have all launched their own scents.

Alien creature to be shown at UFO confce

LONDON: A previously top secret film purporting to show US scientists doing an autopsy on an alien creature nearly 50 years ago will be shown in August at a UFO conference, sponsors of the event said Sunday, reports AFP.

US air force officials shot the 91-Nubyte Fukn UB 1947 in the New Mexico desert after a flying saucer crashed, said Philip Mantle of the British UFO (unidentified flying object) Research Association.

A former US military photographer, now 82, made a copy of the film and gave it to a British documentary filmmaker he met in the United States. Mantle said.

Ramzi has link with Iranian blast?

KARACHI Mar 27: Ramzi Yousef, suspected in terrorist attacks from New York to the Philippines, may also be linked to a bomb blast in Iran that killed 25 people last year, a newspaper reported today, reports AP.

Yousef, a Sunni Muslim, hates Shiite Muslims and this led him to take part in last June's bombing of a Shiite shrine in Mashhad, Iran, said The News an English-language daily.

The newspaper said the information came from Abdul Shakoore, one of more than 10 men arrested in Pakistan this month for alleged connections to Yousef.

None of the men has been charged with a serious crime, but Pakistani investigators say the suspects have shed light on Yousef's wide-ranging terrorism network.

Shakoore told police that he spoke to Yousef's brother, Abdul Muqem, who said that Yousef was behind the bombing in Iran, according to The News.

Pakistani authorities have made few official comments about the investigations into Yousef's activities. However, government officials and police have been leaking information on an almost daily basis.

Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's government faces pressure at home and abroad to act against suspected terrorists.

Tibetans' march for independence ends in New Delhi

NEW DELHI, Mar 27: More than 500 Tibetan activists arrived here on Monday after a 17-day protest march from northern India to demand that China grant Tibet independence, reports AP.

The marchers had been blessed by the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader, on March 10 as they left Dharamsala, the town where he maintains a government-in-exile.

The Dalai Lama, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, had persuaded the protesters to drop a plan to march from Dharamsala to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, fearing India, Nepal or China would stop them.

The Dalai Lama, who insists that protests remain nonviolent, sometimes faces opposition from younger Tibetan refugees who believe they must challenge China more aggressively.