

BRIEFLY

Sirima Bandaranaike turns 79 : Sri Lanka's matriarch Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike marks her 70th birthday Monday with two political world records in hand, despite never having made it to the elusive presidency. AFP reports from Colombo.

After a painful 17 years in the opposition, she rallied her faction-ridden party into a dramatic comeback in March 1994.

Hashish seized in Pakistan : The anti-narcotics task force and frontier corps of Pakistan seized a record 40 tons of hashish, destined for Europe and America, in the coastal area of Baluchistan province late Saturday night, officials said on Monday. Xinhua reports from Islamabad.

It was the second largest haul in the history of the province after the one in which 3,000 kilograms of heroin was seized in the same area.

Filipino Foreign Secy quits : Philippine President Fidel Ramos said on Monday he had accepted the resignation of Foreign Secretary Roberto Romulo. Reuter reports from Manila.

Romulo has been under intense pressure to resign since the execution of Filipino maid Flor Contemplacion in Singapore last month.

UP election violence claims 2 : Two persons were killed as an estimated 60 per cent of the 2.5 crore eligible voters cast their franchise during the third phase of the three tier Panchayat elections in Uttar Pradesh yesterday in 203 development blocks. PTI reports from Lucknow.

One person was killed in cross-firing between two rival groups in Wazirpur in Bulandshar district. In another incident a police constable was killed and several others injured when an election duty truck overturned in Deoria district yesterday, official reports said.

Flash flood kills 13 in Indonesia : A flash flood killed 13 youths near a popular waterfall on the Clapung river near Bogor, west Java on the weekend, a report in The Republik Daily said on Monday. AFP reports from Jakarta.

The flood, caused by sudden heavy rain, occurred on Sunday afternoon at the Curug Nangka Nature Park, where a number of teenagers were walking by and swimming in the river. It said.

20 hurt in Bosnian rocket attack : Twenty civilians were wounded on Sunday in a rocket attack on the centre of Teocak, a small town in northeast Bosnia. Sarajevo radio reported. AFP reports from Sarajevo.

The UN Protection Force was unable to confirm the attack on Sunday evening. The radio said three rockets were fired at the Teocak area near the confrontation lines some 40 kilometers (25 miles) northwest of Tuzla, with one falling on the town.

Chinese Speaker in Seoul : Chinese parliamentary speaker Qiao Shi arrived for a six-day visit at the invitation of his South Korean counterpart, Hwang Nak-jin. AP reports from Seoul.

Qiao will meet with President Kim Young-sam and other senior South Korean officials to discuss ways of promoting political exchanges between the two countries. Seoul officials said.

14 die in Lankan bus plunge : Fourteen Buddhist pilgrims died when their bus plunged off a cliff in Sri Lanka's central hills district, police said yesterday. Reuter reports from Colombo.

They said 36 others were being treated in hospital after the accident on Sunday evening in the Nuwara Eliya district, about 100 km (60 miles) east of Colombo.

Vietnamese leader in Tokyo : Vietnamese leader Do Muoi arrived in Tokyo on a five day visit for talks with Japanese government and business leaders. AFP reports from Tokyo.

It is the first visit in Tokyo by Do Muoi, who is also the general secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party. He was accompanied by Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam was scheduled to hold talks with Prime Minister Tomitichi Murayama on Tuesday and will meet Emperor Akihito on Wednesday.

11 die in Taiwan nightclub fire : A fire swept through a karaoke nightclub before dawn Monday, killing 11 people and injuring 13 others, police said. AP reports from Taipei.

One man was burned to death at the door of an elevator and ten others died in the hospital of smoke inhalation after escaping through a stairway, police said. Three of the injured were listed in critical condition, they said.

Freighter catches fire in HK : A freighter carrying fireworks collided with a Chinese vessel in Hong Kong waters touching off a fire aboard the cargo ship, a government information service official said on Monday. AFP reports from Hong Kong.

Firefighters were working to put out the blaze on the 41,000 tonne Panamanian registered freighter California Luna, which had been carrying 52,000 kilograms (114,400 pounds) of fireworks.

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Russia will ignore parts of CFE treaty, warns Grachev

MOSCOW, Apr 17: Russia has warned it will ignore parts of a key treaty, limiting its deployment of non nuclear arms, until the Chechen conflict is over, a move likely to plunge worsening relations with the west to a new low, reports Reuter.

Defence Minister Pavel Grachev said Moscow could not stick to all the terms of the cornerstone 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty because the agreement limited the number of troops Russia could station in its volatile southern regions.

Only when conditions are stable can Russia fulfil all the conditions in the CFE treaty, he told Interfax news agency.

"The amount of arms and military equipment which the treaty allows Russia to have in this region is insufficient," Grachev's comments will undoubtedly set off fresh

protests from Russia's western partners who have watched Moscow's actions in Chechnya with growing alarm.

They are also unlikely to be happy about Grachev's explanation that Moscow would try to persuade them that the leaders of the former Soviet Union made a mistake when they agreed to sign this document.

The CFE treaty, which includes 30 nations and covers an area from the Atlantic to the Urals, provides for the biggest cuts of conventional weapons in arms control history and stipulates the distribution of troops and armour.

But Moscow wants to move extra troops and tanks to Chechnya because more than four months after it set out to crush the region's independence bid, Kremlin forces have still not eliminated all

rebel resistance.

Russian forces maintained heavy shelling of the Chechen town of Bamut for most of Sunday but did not attempt to storm the last rebel bastion in the region's lowlands. Interfax news agency said.

Moscow's forces temporarily suspended their operations late in the day to prevent further losses but planned to liberate the area in the near future. Itar-Tass news agency said.

Russian troops tried to seize Bamut on Friday but rebel hidden among the nuclear proof bunkers at the base beat off the attack. Tass said around 10 Russians had been killed.

If Bamut is captured, the rebels will be reduced to fighting a guerrilla war from the mountains of southern Chechnya where they have already set up bases.

Turkish troops kill 23 Kurds

TUNCELI, Turkey, Apr 17: Turkish troops have killed 23 Kurdish guerrillas in a huge offensive against their mountain stronghold in the eastern province of Tunceli, military officials said today, reports Reuter.

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) fighters were killed on Sunday night near Alibogazi ravine, a virtually impenetrable rebel stronghold, the officials said.

About 25,000 Turkish troops backed by assault helicopters moved in on Alibogazi, a 30 km (20 mile) gash in the Munizor mountains, on Sunday as part of a push against the PKK in Tunceli running in parallel with Turkey's cross-border drive in Iraq.

Military officials said they believed PKK Regional Commander Semdin Sakik may have been killed or wounded.

He had not answered radio messages from other rebel units and PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan for the last three days, they said.

Adhikari in Beijing

Nepal to seek economic aid from China

BEIJING, Apr 17: Nepalese Prime Minister Man Mohan Adhikari arrived here today for a five-day official visit aimed at securing economic aid for the cash-strapped Himalayan country, reports AFP.

Adhikari's visit comes at the invitation of Chinese Premier Li Peng, who will hold talks with his Nepali counterpart on Tuesday following an official welcoming ceremony.

According to Nepali Foreign Ministry officials, the visit will focus on the presentation of a 15-point plan for aid to fund a range of projects in Nepal, and boosting two-way trade between the two nations.

Adhikari, who heads a five month-old communist government, is also scheduled to meet with Chinese President Jiang Zemin during his stay.

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Rabin defends peace accord with PLO

WASHINGTON, Apr 17: Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin said on Sunday there was no alternative to working with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to continue the Mideast peace process, reports Reuter.

"We have one alternative, to work with the partner which is ready for peace, which is headed by Chairman Arafat," Rabin said on ABC-TV's "This Week with David Brinkley."

Rabin was responding to criticism of his government's 1993 peace agreement with Arafat following militant attacks against Israel like last week's suicide bombing that killed seven Israelis and an American woman.

"The PLO stopped terror. Terror today is carried out only by the Hamas and the Islamic Jihad," Rabin said.

The Israeli leader said it was now up to Arafat, and the Palestinian authorities, to prove they are able to maintain law and order in the Gaza Strip and Jericho.

"I don't believe that he (Arafat) has tried seriously," he added.

Earlier Sunday, Israeli forces killed three members of the militant Hamas movement. Meanwhile, Arafat's Palestinian authority fought the guerrillas in court, jailing Hamas activists for the first time.

Rabin's comments were endorsed by Nabil Sha'ath, an aide to Arafat. "I agree 100 per cent with Prime Minister Rabin that this is an irreversible peace process. And our bottom line is to make it work," Sha'ath said on the same programme.

He said the Palestinians wanted Israeli settlements in Gaza and the West Bank removed.

Dennis Ross, the US State Department's special Mideast Coordinator, said on the same broadcast most of the Mideast parties remained determined to work toward peace. He said the United States would continue to help.

Exempt Hajj flights from UN air embargo, urges Gaddafi

TRIPOLI, Apr 17: Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and his country was ready to fight to enable Libyan pilgrims to fly directly to Makkah in Saudi Arabia, Islam's holiest shrine.

"They (the Christians) launched a crusade when they accused Muslims of preventing them from reaching Jerusalem. We are ready for a war to reach Makkah," Gaddafi told Reuters in an interview on Sunday night.

He added that the flights to Makkah must be seen as exempt from a UN Security Council air embargo imposed on his country over the Lockerbie affair.

The ban on flights to and from Libya is part of sanctions, including arms sales, imposed on the North African country in 1992 after it refused to hand over two Libyans wanted in connection with the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in which 270 people died.

The pilgrimage (hajj) season is in early May, and Libyan pilgrim flights are expected to take off from several Libyan airports later this week, travel sources said.

Since the air travel embargo, Libyan pilgrims have flown there from other countries after leaving Libya by land or sea. As a political statement, some Libyan pilgrims took a camel train through Egypt in 1994 and others went to Jerusalem in 1993.

Gaddafi said his country had run out of patience on the direct flights issue after three years of the ban.

"We gave them (Security Council members) an opportunity when our pilgrims went to Jerusalem and Makkah by camels, where we suffered and some pilgrims died en route, but that did not move their conscience. We are forced now to go to the pilgrimage and will do it each year directly through Libyan airspace whatever the price," Gaddafi said.

Wearing flowing, traditional Libyan robes and speaking on the green of the Azizia barracks in Tripoli, Gaddafi said he sees the pilgrims' flights as an exception which does not mean that Libya intends to violate the Security Council ban.

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MOSCOW, Apr 17: When Germany and Russia had a row about people caught smuggling radioactive material specialists agreed there was a need to boost controls but played down the more lurid aspects worthy of an action-packed political thriller, reports AFP.

In most cases the material intercepted is unenriched uranium, cesium 137 and cobalt 60, radioactive substances used in medicine or metalurgy.

They are a danger to the health of the person transporting them, but can in no way be used to make a bomb.

But tension rose appreciably last year when three men were

OSCE team arrives in Grozny

MOSCOW, Apr 17: Delegates of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe due to set up a permanent human rights mission in Chechnya, arrived this weekend in the capital Grozny, a television report said, reports AFP.

Upon arriving, the OSCE Special Envoy for Chechnya, Istvan Gyarmati, said he was outraged by Russian army tactics in the recent seizure of the village of Samashki in western Chechnya, the Russian television station NTV said.

Witnesses have accused the army of carrying out summary executions last week and setting fire to houses with their residents still in them. Samashki had held out for weeks against Russian attacks and was one of the last remaining pockets of resistance in the republic's western lowlands.

Yemeni to die for murder : A court in Aden has sentenced man to death for murdering a Yemeni journalist Awateh Saleh Ahmed, the official Saba news agency said on Sunday. AFP reports from Aden.

A police report said Mohammad Taber Othman shot dead Awateh a journalist for the Saba agency in Aden and a divorcee and mother of two, on December 9 because she refused to marry him.

7 die in Thai grenade attack : At least seven people were killed and 27 others injured when a hand grenade was thrown into a restaurant in Hua Hin, a tourist city in central Thailand, late Saturday night. Xinhua reports from Bangkok.

Local newspaper Bangkok Post on Monday quoted police as saying that most of those killed or wounded were clients of the Pakluay Restaurant and had been attending a birthday party there.

Japanese architect honoured : Japanese architect Tadao Ando, whose unconventional structures withstood the earthquake that toppled much of Kobe, won Sunday the prestigious Pritzker Architecture Prize. AFP reports from Los Angeles.

The 53-year-old self taught architect from Osaka said he was "bewildered" after he was selected by the international panel of judges for his buildings, marked by functional yet aesthetically appealing designs.

Khmers kill 3 cops, 8 civilians

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