

BRIEFLY

Iraqi MPs reject UN proposal: Iraqi parliamentarians joined their government on Tuesday in rejecting a UN plan for Baghdad to sell limited amounts of oil to meet urgent humanitarian needs, the Iraqi News Agency, INA reported, Reuters says from Baghdad.

Members of the Environment Committee at the national assembly (parliament) have expressed their categorical rejection of the American UN resolution, INA said.

Rafsanjani denies N-plans: Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani said yesterday that Tehran had no plans to build atomic weapons. Reuter reports from New Delhi.

Rafsanjani told a news conference in the Indian capital that he expected Russia to provide a controversial nuclear reactor to Iran despite US objections.

Peres for more talks with Syria: To break the deadlock in Israel-Syria peace talks, the two countries should discuss all aspects of an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights which it captured in 1967, until security arrangements are worked out in talks between military experts.

8 die in Rwanda refugee camp: Panic erupted at a Rwandan refugee camp on Tuesday when soldiers tried to close it down, and eight people died, the United Nations said, AP reports from United Nations.

As refugees in the center of the Kibeho camp fled their huts and tents, government troops fired in the air and panic ensued, UN spokesman Joe Sills said.

New CIS army chief in Tajikistan: General Valentin Bobryshev was named yesterday as head of Commonwealth of Independent States forces in the turbulent state of Tajikistan, Interfax news agency reported, AFP says from Moscow.

Bobryshev replaced General Valeri Patrikeeva, whose mandate had expired.

Cairo for terrorism on confce agenda: Egypt wants to add terrorism to the agenda of an international crime conference that will open later this month in Cairo, AP reports from Cairo.

Interior Minister Hassan el-Alfy told reporters at a special pre-conference seminar Tuesday that terrorism — whether linked to religious or cult fanatics or political radicals — has become an international threat that should be handled under UN auspices.

Kurds for talks to end conflict: The Kurdish parliament in exile said on Tuesday it had held its first sitting and appealed for political dialogue with Turkey to end the Kurdish conflict, reports Reuter.

We think the only solution to the Kurdish problem is through dialogue... we want to resolve this through democratic means, Zubeyir Aydar, head of the parliament's executive council told a news conference in Brussels.

We are not separatists. Our desire is to speak to the government in Ankara, he added.

Chechens kill 1,500 Russians: More than 1,500 Russian servicemen have been killed in Chechnya and Moscow puts rebel fighters' losses at up to 9,500, the commander of Russia's campaign in the breakaway region said yesterday, Reuter reports from Moscow.

General Anatoly Kulikov, the head of the joint army and interior ministry operation, said 1,518 servicemen had been killed since Moscow sent troops to end Chechnya's independence drive on December 11.

2491 die of meningitis in Niger: An epidemic of meningitis sweeping the West African state of Niger has now killed 2,491 people but its spread seems to be slowing, the Health Ministry said on Tuesday, Reuter reports from Niamey.

The ministry said 26,736 cases had been reported. Last week, the death toll was 2,344, and the week before 1,965.

Bolivian labour leaders held: The government declared a state of siege on Wednesday morning and arrested dozens of labour leaders to try to end a six-week teachers' strike marked by violent street confrontations, AP reports from La Paz.

President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada's government issued the declaration hours after elite police units raided the headquarters of the Bolivian Workers Confederation and arrested scores of labour leaders. They were meeting to reject an agreement with the government that would have ended the strike and protests.

Hamas, Arafat deadlocked in reconciliation talks

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip, Apr 19: Yasser Arafat and the Muslim militant group Hamas have failed to settle their dispute, with Arafat sticking to demands that the group disarm and accept the Israel-PLO accord, a Hamas spokesman said Wednesday, reports AP.

Hamas rejected those demands and vowed Abu Musameh, a Hamas leader who has been meeting with officials from Arafat's government over the weekend.

Arafat's security forces meanwhile released 25 followers of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad group late Tuesday, but rounded up eight new Hamas activists, Palestinian police officials said.

About 100 suspected Islamic militants remain in detention, down from 200 arrested in a sweep after back-to-back suicide bombings carried out by Hamas and Islamic Jihad on April 9. Seven Israelis and an American were killed in the attacks.

Myanmar junta frees 278 more from work camps

BANGKOK, Apr 19: Myanmar's military government has released another 278 convicts from work camps as part of a plan marking the 50th anniversary of the armed forces, Myanmar's state-run television reported, says Reuter.

Altogether 278 convicts were released from various work camps where they had been contributing labour in nation building tasks and regional development, said the television report, monitored in Bangkok late on Tuesday.

US feels isolated over Iranian N-deals with Russia, China

WASHINGTON, Apr 19: Once again, the United States looks isolated in an uncooperative world as Russia and China rebuff arguments against selling nuclear reactors to Iran, reports AP.

Unmoved by US intelligence assessments that Iran is determined to acquire nuclear weapons, Moscow and Beijing responded that their deals with Tehran are legal under the nuclear treaty the Clinton administration wants renewed.

A striking aspect of the US campaign against the Iran projects was how public it seemed. Whatever happened to private diplomacy, to secret talks where ranking diplomats worked out differences far

from the glare of publicity? "It's hard for this country to conduct quiet diplomacy given our political process," said Richard Haass, a national security aide in former President George Bush's White House. "There is a need at times not only to be doing things, but to be seen as doing things."

This time, public US appeals led to public rejections. The latest came Monday in New York, where US Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen held a news conference after a two-hour meeting.

"We feel no nation ought to go forward with nuclear cooperation with Iran. It is too dangerous to do so," Christopher said, knowing what Qian's response would be.

There is no international law or international regulation or international agreement that prohibits such cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy," the Chinese foreign minister said.

Blasts sink 2 navy ships, 16 killed

LTTE calls off peace talks

COLOMBO, Apr 19: Tamil separatists fighting for a homeland said they are pulling out of the peace process completely, hours before explosions sank two naval vessels in northeastern Sri Lanka and killed 16 people on Wednesday, reports AP.

But after a meeting with her cabinet ministers and military officials, President Chandrika Kumaratunga appeared determined to pursue talks with the guerillas to end the 11 year war that has left 34,000 people dead, a government spokesman said.

"You have failed to fulfill the stipulated demands by April 19. So, as we informed earlier, we are withdrawing from the peace process and the cessation of hostilities agreement," said rebel commander

Velupillai Prabhakaran in a letter to Ms Kumaratunga. The letter was published in Tamil language newspapers in the rebel-held areas in the north.

Civilians reached by telephone in the northern city of Jaffna quoted Prabhakaran as saying: "We are compelled to take this painful decision since we have no other alternative."

Twelve sailors and four rebels — including two women — were killed when explosions believed to be caused by underwater mines ripped apart the vessels at anchor in the northeastern port of Trincomalee.

The explosions occurred shortly after midnight, at the expiry of a deadline the rebels set for the government to

meet their demands. Two other gunboats were slightly damaged and at least 22 others were injured in the attack at the port, 230 kilometres (160 miles) northeast of the capital, Colombo.

The military chiefs supported the President on her decision, the spokesman said. The government is expected to issue a statement later.

"Four bodies believed to be those of Tigers have been recovered from the wreckage," said Cmdr Terrence Sundaram, the navy spokesman.

Other military officials said the discovery of the rebel bodies indicated that the rebels may have carried out the attack.

Initial reports indicated the simultaneous explosions came from underwater mines. Rear

Adm. Cecil Tissera, the naval chief of staff, said in an interview.

The vessels which were sunk while at anchor, were identified as the 40-metre Chinese-made SLNS Sooraya and the SLNS Ranasuru, he said.

After a fourth round of peace talks with the rebels last week, the government allowed unimpeded fuel supplies into the Jaffna Peninsula for the first time in four years and lifted some restrictions on fishing for Jaffna residents.

But it has rejected guerilla demands to remove a military base that blocks free access to the peninsula, and has accused the rebels of bad faith for refusing to begin substantive talks on a political settlement.



This photo, provided by Columbia University, is part of the Pulitzer Prize-Winning portfolio of Washington Post photographer Carol Guzy. Published in September 30, 1994, it shows two US soldiers protecting a Haitian man who was suspected of a grenade attack, in Port-au-Prince. The 1995 Pulitzer Prize announcements were made on Tuesday. — AFP/UNB photo

Tehran offers mediation to resolve Kashmir crisis

NEW DELHI, Apr 19: Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani today expressed "dissatisfaction" with the situation in Kashmir and offered Tehran's mediation to find a solution to it as he welcomed the "serious will" shown by India in resolving this issue, reports PTI.

Addressing a crowded press conference at the end of his three-day state visit, Rafsanjani said Iran favoured a consensus on the Kashmir issue between India, Pakistan and the people of the border state. "We are not satisfied and

happy with what is happening in Kashmir," Rafsanjani said, and added that this Iranian assessment was conveyed to the prime minister, PV Narasimha Rao, during the official talks.

Asked whether the proposed elections in Jammu and Kashmir would be a satisfactory solution, Rafsanjani said, "It will be difficult to resolve the problem without the satisfaction of the people."

In reply to another question, the Iranian president saw increased American attempts

to interfere in Kashmir and cautioned India against such efforts.

Rafsanjani answered wide ranging questions relating to Iran-US relations, Russian sale of nuclear reactors to Iran and the Salman Rushdie issue.

Asked whether Iran wanted reconstruction of the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya, Rafsanjani merely said he had discussed this with the officials concerned during his visit to Lucknow yesterday. "There is no need for further propaganda to be made in this regard," he added.



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat smiles as Tunisian Deputy Foreign Minister Gaid Ben Mustafa (R) talks to him while Tunisian diplomat Mohammad al-Munji al-Halafi looks on Tuesday in Gaza City. Ben Mustafa, the first official envoy from Tunis to visit the autonomous Gaza, announced after talks with Arafat that his government would be opening in Gaza City a representative office which would be run by al-Halafi. — AFP/UNB photo

AP bags two Pulitzers

NEW YORK, Apr 19: Much of last year's carnage in Rwanda made its way onto the front pages of newspapers around the world through the eyes of Associated Press reporter Mark Fritz who wrote in vivid detail of a slaughter few could comprehend, reports AP.

On Tuesday, Fritz won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting, which took him across the central African country.

Four AP photographers — Jacqueline Arz, Javier Bauluz, Jean-March Bouju and Karsten Thielker, also won journalism's highest award for their coverage of the conflict between the Hutus and minority Tutsis.

The Pulitzer prizes are the most prestigious US awards for journalism. Each carries a dirr 3,000 award, except for the newspaper that wins in public service, which gets a gold medal. Prizes are administered by Columbia University.

Fritz's Pulitzer was the news service's 19th for writing and first by an AP reporter since 1982, when Saul Pett won for a story about the growth of the federal bureaucracy.

'Quebeckers want independence'

TORONTO, Apr 19: A majority in the French speaking province of Quebec wants independence from Canada but only if they can maintain an economic association with Canada, a new poll showed on Tuesday, reports AP.

But according to the environmental poll carried out for the Toronto Star newspaper 55 per cent of Quebeckers are opposed to independence if the links with Canada cannot be maintained.

If economic association with the rest of Canada can be maintained 51 per cent of voters would favour sovereignty, the poll showed.

But there is no guarantee that the economic association would be forthcoming.

China to build wall for victims of Japanese massacre

BEIJING, Apr 19: The southern city of Nanking plans to build a wall to list the names of the 300,000 people killed in a massacre by Japanese troops there in December 1937, an official newspaper reported Wednesday, says AP.

Authorities are seeking help from relatives of the dead in compiling a list of names, sexes and the places where people were killed, the China Daily said.

The massacre remains a sore point between Japan and China almost 60 years after it occurred. In recent weeks, Chinese officials have urged Japan to reflect on its actions during the war, when the Imperial Japanese Army invaded an occupied vast parts of the country.

The construction of the wall may be intended to put to rest claims by some Japanese politicians that the massacre never occurred, or that a much smaller number of people died.

Off the Record



Pop superstar Michael Jackson holding hands with his wife Lisa Marie Presley, walks with children at his Neverland Ranch in Los Olivos, California as he welcomes them for a three day World Children's Congress. This is one of the rare occasions that Jackson has allowed the media into his exclusive ranch, 150 miles north of Los Angeles. — AFP/UNB photo

Sperm tender!

TAIPEI: A 29-year-old Taiwanese woman is offering two million Taiwan dollars (76,000 US) for sperm from an intelligent man, an offer that has attracted 500, "qualified" applicants, a report said Wednesday, reports AP.

The applicants who claim to be qualified, and must be ethnic Chinese for starters, sent in offers from Taiwan, the United States, Japan, Hong Kong, Europe and China, the United Daily News said.

They included a Taiwanese college president, local psychics and an expert in the Chinese martial art of inner strength from China, the paper said.

The New York sperm bank has also recommended some selected donors, offering to sell sperm for 175 US dollars per cubic centimetre, the paper said.

A Taiwanese psyche insists that he and the woman were a couple in a previous life-making himself the ideal candidate for the job. A college president says his sperm is the best, pointing to his children, who are all enrolled in universities, as proof.

A local woman says her husband has the best product on offer, and has agreed to share the "good stuff" with the woman provided no sexual contact took place.

The Happiness Social Work centre in the city of Chungli south of Taipei, which helped the woman handle the applications, said she had selected ten applicants, all unmarried, and six with doctorate degrees.

The woman began her search for the sperm of intelligent men last month after telling doctors her husband had been unable to impregnate her due to a low sperm count.

Males to take off crossdress

HONG KONG: Male crossdressers in northern China will have to take off their makeup and brassieres under a new official ban on transvestite shows, a Hong Kong newspaper reported Wednesday, says AP.

Officials in Shenyang Liaoning province, imposed the ban after discovering that crossdressers were performing in nightclubs in the city, Wen Wei Po, China-controlled daily, said.

The performers are mostly men aged around 20, often teamed in threes, who wear brassieres and women's fashion to do shows in some 600 dance halls and eateries in the city, the newspaper said, quoting a Chinese news agency report.

It did not state why the Shenyang city government banned the shows but said the performances are exaggerated and loud, and the performers also earn more than female models.

Benazir renews offer of talks with India

ISLAMABAD, Apr 19: Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto renewed Tuesday an offer of dialogue with India, saying "substantive" talks could take place during the Pakistani president's coming visit to New Delhi for a South Asian summit, reports AP.

President Farooq Ahmed Leghari is to attend the annual conference of the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which is scheduled to begin on May 2.

"Our doors for substantive talks remain open... our President travels to New Delhi next month for the SAARC conference," (Benazir) was quoted as saying by the official Associated Press of Pakistan (APP).

However, she reiterated that Pakistan would continue its moral, political and diplomatic support to the Muslim separatist campaign in the

GCC states vow to fight 'extremism'

MANAMA, Apr 19: The six Gulf monarchies on Tuesday vowed to fight "extremism and terrorism" and appealed for increased public vigilance to foil attempts at sedition in the region, reports AP.

Interior ministers from the six states also pledged their "total support to measures taken by Bahrain to ensure security and stability."

Bahrain has been shaken by violent anti-government demonstrations and attacks on policemen since last December. Bahrain authorities have tacitly accused Iran of exerting its influence on part of the majority Bahraini Shi'ites.

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