

BRIEFLY

Peres to meet Hassan today: Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres will hold talks with Jordanian Crown Prince Hassan in Amman on Monday as part of the follow up to the peace treaty signed last October, a ministry spokesman said. AFP reports from Jerusalem.

Peres will also address the opening session of a joint Israel-Jordanian committee to develop the Jordan Valley. The

Arafat joins Easter mass in Gaza: PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat visited the Roman Orthodox Church yesterday and joined Christians in Easter mass in Palestinian-ruled Gaza. Reuter reports from Gaza.

Arafat, a Muslim, was greeted at the Church by Father George Awad who offered the leader an Easter egg upon his arrival.

7 die in Indian road mishap: At least seven people died and 15 others were injured when a crowded van collided yesterday with a speeding bus near the southern Indian town of Kochi, the Press Trust of India reported. AFP says from New Delhi.

The victims were returning from a family wedding when their van collided head-on with the passenger bus on a bridge near Kochi, it said, adding that the injured have been hospitalised in a critical state.

10 Hamas activists held: Soldiers arrested 10 suspected activists from the Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas overnight in the Hebron area, Palestinian sources said today. AFP reports from Hebron.

The army has stepped up the hunt for Palestinian militants wanted for murdering Jews since soldiers ambushed and killed three Hamas militants in Hebron a week ago.

10 burnt to death in Philippines: Ten people burned to death early on Sunday when they were trapped in their bedrooms during a fire in a Manila apartment building, police said. Reuter reports from Manila.

Three other occupants of the two-storey building were injured in the 90-minute blaze. The fatalities included several members of a Filipino-Chinese family, police said.

Tony Award-winner O'Shea dies: Tessie O'Shea, a spirited Tony Award-winner who began her career on the British music hall stage, has died at age 82, AP reports from Leesburg, Florida.

O'Shea died on Friday at a nursing home in Leesburg after suffering from congestive heart and kidney failure, said Kathleen Wannop, the wife of her business manager and musical director. O'Shea lived in East Lake Weir, Florida.

Algerian varsity teacher killed: Gunmen killed an Algerian university professor and wounded her husband near the capital Algiers on Saturday, the Algerian news agency APS said. Reuter reports from Tunis.

APS, monitored in Tunis, also quoted an official statement as saying Algerian security forces killed 23 alleged fundamentalist gunmen and arrested one in operations this week in various parts of the country. Ratiba Hadji, 38, professor at the Polytechnic in El Harrach near Algiers, was shot dead and her husband wounded when they were leaving their home, APS said, quoting a statement by security forces.

Palestinian killed in WB: Israeli troops opened fire on Palestinians throwing stones in the occupied West Bank on Saturday, killing one, witnesses said. Reuter reports from Jerusalem.

Residents of Kalandia Refugee Camp north of Jerusalem said they were gathering to commemorate the death of Palestinian guerrilla leader Khalil al-Wazir, known as Abu Jihad, who was killed in Tunis seven years ago.

Clintons interviewed by Starr: President Bill Clinton and his wife were interviewed under oath on Saturday by special Whitewater investigator Kenneth Starr, the White House announced. Reuter reports from Washington.

The Clintons were interviewed at the White House by Starr, an independent counsel conducting a broad investigation of their financial dealings in their home state, Arkansas.

Gray Panther founder Kuhn dies: Maggie Kuhn, a founder of the Gray Panthers, a political movement mobilising elderly Americans around a variety of causes, died in Philadelphia on Saturday. She was 89, AFP reports from Philadelphia.

Kuhn, who suffered from arthritis and osteoporosis for several years, died at home, her personal secretary Sue Leary said. She was one of five women who founded the Gray Panthers 25 years ago to oppose the US involvement in the Vietnam war.

9 more Tajik rebels killed: Russian borderguards killed nine Tajik rebels who entered Tajikistan from Afghanistan across the river Pyanj on Sunday. ITAR-Tass news agency reported, quoting Russian military officials. AFP reports from Moscow.

Nine of the Mujahideen were killed and one managed to return to the other side of the Pyanj, ITAR-Tass said. No other major border violations were reported in the past 24 hours, the agency added.

Israeli daily's editor held: Police arrested the publisher and editor-in-chief of Israel's second-largest newspaper Saturday on suspicion of illegal wiretapping. AP reports from Jerusalem.

The arrest was part of year-old wiretapping investigation involving Maariv and the leading Israeli newspaper Yedioth Aharonoth. Legislators have demanded tighter regulations on wiretapping by state and private organisations. Maariv publisher Ofer Nimrodi, son of the well-known arms dealer Yaakov Nimrodi, was arrested at Ben Gurion International Airport outside Tel Aviv as he prepared to go to Zurich, Switzerland, Israel television reported.

Ex-Chinese vice-premier dies: Kang Shien, a former vice-premier who played a key role in developing China's petroleum industry, has died at the age of 80, AP reports from Beijing.

State-run media announced Saturday that Kang had died in Beijing of an unspecified illness. Kang was little known outside of China, but he served in top posts of the petroleum industry for more than 20 years, and was hailed in the state-run media as a pioneer in the field.

PLO-Israeli talks shifted: GAZA CITY, Apr 23: Nabil Shaath, chief negotiator for the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), said on Saturday that planned talks with Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres had been postponed for seven days, reports AFP.

He said the meeting in Cairo would be held on May 7 instead of April 30 as he had announced on Wednesday.

Shaath gave no reason for the delay in the talks on extending self-rule to the occupied West Bank, in particular redeploying Israeli troops away from Palestinian population centres so that self-rule elections may take place.

"I hope that this meeting, which will take place after a long break, will lead to a breakthrough," he said.

WASHINGTON, Apr 23: In the midst of a demanding information revolution, American popular culture has been extolling the virtues and rewards of stupidity, reports AP.

Society's fascination with dumbness is reflected in a string of popular movies and in rising concerns about anti-intellectualism.

Some social commentators see it all as a backlash against an increasingly complex, competitive and computerised world.

In the entertainment media, it's the season of "Forrest Gump," "Dumb and Dumber," "Beavis and Butthead," and a run of other movies and TV shows celebrating stupidity.

Forrest Gump, a mildly retarded fictional character who stumbles through mid-century

Indo-Pak talks on Kashmir outside SAARC meet likely

NEW DELHI, Apr 23: India and Pakistan will meet during next month's summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), but talks on Kashmir are likely to be held outside the meet, diplomats said today, reports AFP.

Heads of government from India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan and the Maldives are expected to participate in the eighth SAARC summit scheduled to begin here from May 2, Indian officials said.

Pakistani President Farooq Ahmed Leghari will paroc Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto at the seven-nation summit, the officials and diplomats said without elaborating on the reasons for her absence.

The three-day summit was initially scheduled for April 15 to 17, but was postponed at Pakistan's request, because Benazir was on a trip to the United States.

Asian diplomats said the two rivals are likely to open talks on the thorny issue of Kashmir, which has been the cause of two of the three wars between India and Pakistan since the subcontinent's independence from Britain in 1947.

"It is likely they will open talks", a diplomat said of Pakistani Foreign Minister Asif Ali's recent statement that Islamabad was ready to consider New Delhi's request for bilateral talks on Kashmir outside the SAARC summit.

Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee made a similar offer to Pakistan on Kashmir where some 10,000 people have died in a Muslim separatist campaign since 1989.

Since the SAARC forum prohibits discussion on contentious bilateral issues, leaders from the two South Asian countries are likely to hold possible talks on Kashmir after the summit ends on May 4, the diplomats said.

Between the two rivals have hit a low over Kashmir following India's accusations that Pakistan arms and trains the Muslim guerrillas. Islamabad denies the charge but extends diplomatic struggle to the anti-Indian rebellion.

Western countries including the United States have voiced concern that Kashmir could become the cause of a nuclear flare-up in the Asian theatre, and have asked India and Pakistan to resolve the powderkeg issue peacefully.

SAARC, founded in Dhaka in 1985 to promote economic cooperation, has run into trouble because of regional frictions and disputes interstate tariff barriers and other trade restrictions.

The Press Trust of India (PTI) said the summit is likely to finally implement the South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement which aims to strengthen regional economic cooperation through virtually zero-tariff barriers.

India has accused Pakistan of scuttling the planned arrangement on previous occasions.

TUNCELI (Turkey), Apr 23: At least 36 rebel Kurds and three Turkish soldiers were killed as fighting raged at the weekend in mountainous Tunceli province, military sources said today, reports Reuter.

They said guerrillas from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) attacked a military base on the main road between the towns of Tunceli and Pulur late on Saturday.

The military sources said super cobra helicopters were bombing the mountains and gorges in the remote eastern area, and the highway leading from Tunceli town to Erzincan was closed.

At least 20 rebels were killed in the clashes around the military base, where fighting continued.

Security sources said clear skies after four days of rain and fog helped the operation. Sixteen guerrillas were killed in military sweeps through other parts of the province, they said.

JALALABAD, Afghanistan, Apr 23: Nestled away at the rear of a citrus orchard in the former army corps headquarters here is the new political base of former Afghan Premier Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, reports AFP.

Since rival forces pushed his Hezb-i-Islami faction out of its base at Charasyab, south of Kabul, Hekmatyar receives journalists here in this tranquil setting where his personal security detail no longer frisks visitors.

Hekmatyar has sought refuge in this eastern city, which is packed with about a quarter of a million Afghans displaced by three years of factional fighting in the capital between Hezb and forces loyal to President Burhanuddin Rabbani.

Talking to AFP here last week, fingering prayer beads and dressed in his traditional black turban, Hekmatyar looked particularly relaxed as he described the Hezb's current military and political strategy.

Following the evacuation of our forces from Charasyab and the intensification of fighting around Kabul and Herat, Hezb and its allies decided to take a waiting position for some time," Hekmatyar said.

He said the Hezb did not want to take part in clashes between pro-Rabbani forces and the Taliban student militia, preferring to let "new development" decide a course of action.

Hekmatyar added that it would be "premature to say anything more in this connection" but one of his aides later said that the Hezb strategy was to consolidate its strength as Taliban and government forces weakened each other.

The Taliban has managed to seize control of nine provincial Afghan capitals since last fall and reached the capital in February before being pushed out by government forces in fierce fighting.

When asked about the Taliban, Hekmatyar was very evasive, saying that his forces evacuated Charasyab because "we did not want fighting to take place there" but refused to explain why.

His aide, added, "Hekmatyar did not want to defend Rabbani by fighting the Taliban in Charasyab".

US President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary talk to children, at the White House on Saturday, after delivering a joint radio address about the tragedy of the bombing in Oklahoma. Clintons sought to reassure children made fearful by the Oklahoma bombing in their radio address as 40 federal workers and their children gathered with them.

French UN soldiers, digging a trench at Sarajevo airport on Saturday, wave as the plane with UN special envoy Yasushi Akashi and western diplomats leave for Zagreb, Bosnian-Serbs refused to allow the diplomats to enter Sarajevo.

COLOMBO, Apr 23: Tamil rebels claimed they killed 55 soldiers in Friday's attack on two jungle army bases in eastern Sri Lanka, residents in the rebel-controlled north said on Sunday, reports Reuter.

The army said only one base was attacked and put the death toll at 29.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said 14 of its troops were killed in the seven-hour battle near Batticaloa, the residents quoted rebel newspapers in the Jaffna Peninsula as saying.

Government forces used two bombers, two ground-attack pucara aircraft and a helicopter to repulse the Tiger attack, the papers said. The rebels attacked the aircraft but the damage was unknown.

HANOI, Apr 23: A United States cargo plane piloted by two US Vietnam war veterans touched down in Hanoi today carrying the largest private humanitarian shipment to Vietnam since the end of the war in 1975, reports Reuter.

The aircraft, an MD-11 cargo plane owned by US transportation firm Federal Express, delivered 50 tonnes of medicines and medical supplies worth 7 million dollars for Vietnam's poorly equipped hospitals and clinics.

The airlift, organised by Heart to Heart International, a non-profit organisation based in Kansas City, comes one week before the 20th anniversary of the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, that marked the end of the war.

US history to become a mill-lionaire, is the latest embodiment of the American Dream.

At a Washington dinner, President Clinton played Gump in a White House-produced spoof with first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, both exuding the innocence and simple virtues of the popular film.

Other current movies with sometimes less charmingly stupid heroes include "Billy Madison," "Tommy Boy" and Walt Disney's "A Goofy Movie." Titles on the horizon: "The Magnificent Idiot," "Dummies," and "The Stupids."

The popular TV show "Beavis and Butthead" features two cartoon adolescents who emit a variety of brainless utterances that have seeped into the lexicon of a generation of American teen-agers and sub-

teens.

Many youngsters claim they are turned off by the phenomenon, and still struggle to excel. And there is no serious concern that the dumbness fad has actually lowered test scores or reduced college admissions.

Some social critics cite the explosion of radio and television talk shows that provide a forum for every radical, erratic or demented thought as part of the phenomenon.

The debate centres on whether Hollywood, TV and radio are encouraging or reflecting a national trend.

Whatever the answer, the decline of intellectualism in American has been the topic of serious newspaper columns and TV news shows since "Forrest Gump" last summer.

In an era in which the ability to acquire and properly process information has become profoundly important, America insists on being, to a large extent, a nation of nitwits," New York Times columnist Bob Herbert wrote recently.

Herbert cited a Gallup Poll last month that showed 60 per cent of respondents unable to name the US president who ordered nuclear bombs dropped on Japan and other polls showing that Americans erroneously think welfare and foreign aid account for most federal spending.

Times movie reviewer Caryn James said movies like "Forrest Gump" suggest a virtual anti-intellectualism in the air.

One of the Times' own ad campaigns has tapped into the mood, running radio ads featuring a woman who reads the paper for its travel section rather than its more weighty foreign affairs coverage.

"The only countries I'm interested in," she says, are ones where it's always warm "and you can get there on a big boat."

Some critics have suggested the efforts in the Republican-controlled Congress to delete funding from National Public Radio, which appeals to a more intellectual — some say elitist — audience, are part of the phenomenon.

One part of the media that has the support of many Republican legislators — talk radio — has been criticised by liberal commentator Michael Knisley as a major source of publicly aired stupidity.

"It's not just that Americans are scandalously ignorant," Knisley wrote in a New Yorker magazine article. "It's that they seem to believe they have a democratic right to their ignorance."

A Times Mirror Centre for the People and Press survey found only 45 per cent of adults surveyed said they had read a newspaper the previous day, compared to 58 per cent in a similar survey a year ago.

"The larger question that concerns me," said Reese Cleghorn, dean of the University of Maryland's journalism school, is that the decline is "part of the dumbing down of the American public, which I think is taking place."

SEOUL, Apr 23: The Korean Peninsula could be headed for an unpleasant summer of tension and confrontation over North Korea's suspect nuclear programme, reports AP.

Negotiations on implementing an accord designed to dismantle the programme have broken down. The communist North has been raising the pitch of its rhetoric and threatening to restart a reactor that already is believed to have produced enough plutonium for at least one bomb.

It said on Saturday that after analysing US intentions, it will take "a necessary decisive measure ... (that) will be an entirely just and reasonable one for defending our sovereignty."

A top South Korean official said that could mean the North may go so far as to refuel the reactor, which has been moth-

balled in line with the nuclear accord, but not actually start it up again.

"North Korea ... insists this is not a violation of the Geneva accord which is serious enough to invite international sanctions," said Yoo Chong-ha, a top presidential adviser on foreign affairs and national security.

It's unclear whether this is all part of a master plan to squeeze more concessions from the United States and its allies.

When it comes to playing high-stakes diplomatic poker, North Korea uses a well-honed "strategy of brinkmanship and crisis. It did so last year, as former President Jimmy Carter went to North Korea in June and elicited a promise that Pyongyang would freeze its nuclear programme.

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Lankan military moves operational HQs

COLOMBO, Apr 23: The military moved its operational headquarters to north central Sri Lanka, a day after Tamil rebels attacked a jungle army base, killing 42 people, officials said, reports AP.

The shifting of the camp from the capital, Colombo, to Anuradhapura town could indicate a major offensive against the rebels, who unilaterally called off a truce and pulled out of the peace process Wednesday, an official said on condition of anonymity.

The government, however, did not give any reason for shifting the camp. The camp will be headed by Maj Gen A M U Seneviratne.

The government which said it is committed to the peace process, has permitted field commanders to carry out limited operations against the rebels who over-ran an army base in the eastern Batticaloa

district and killed 28 soldiers. On Sunday, soldiers began moving from military bases in Colombo to the front lines. Police in the capital questioned more than 500 Tamil civilians living in cheap boarding houses.

Military officials said 45 soldiers were wounded in Saturday's attack on the Kadamuruvikulam camp, 210 kilometres (130 miles) east of Colombo. No soldier was missing.

At least 14 guerrillas were killed, the rebels said in broadcast Sunday over their clandestine radio, according to civilians reached by telephone in the northern Jaffna Peninsula.

Hundreds of rebels fired guns and hurled grenades at the jungle camp manned by 120 soldiers. Part of the camp was destroyed in the six-hour long attack.

Off the Record

Parts of Hitler in a cardboard box!

LONDON: A British newspaper said Sunday Germany is trying to retrieve some of Adolf Hitler's relics, including his last will and testament which is said to be in a London strongroom, reports Reuter.

The Sunday Telegraph said the relics also included Hitler's jawbone and part of his skull which it reported were in a cardboard box in Moscow.

As the 50th anniversary of Hitler's suicide approached this weekend, a tussle had broken out over who owned the relics of the Third Reich, the newspaper said.

It said the British government decided long ago that key Nazi documents and artefacts should be kept in Britain but bit by bit many were being returned at Germany's request.

"The transfer of documents back to Germany is a continuous process," Stephen Walton, curator at Britain's Imperial War Museum, was quoted as saying by the newspaper.

Early Beatles recordings found in attic

LONDON: A Liverpool welder has found one of the Beatles' earliest recordings, which could fetch up to 200,000 pounds (320,000 dollars) at auction, the Sunday Times reported, says Reuter.

Peter Hodgson, 30, whose grandfather lent the group a reel-to-reel tape recorder for a session in 1959, found the recording when he cleared out his dead grandfather's attic.

The tape's 16 songs include "Hello Little Girl" a Lennon-McCartney composition which later became a hit for the 1960s band Fourmost, but was never recorded by the Beatles. There is also a Ray Charles song "Hallelujah, I love her so."

"I could hardly believe it. I thought it was someone copying them but I listened again and decided I would call McCartney," Hodgson said.

McCartney told Hodgson the tape was authentic and Sotheby's has expressed an interest in auctioning it, the paper said. Last year a tape of Lennon singing two songs at Church Fete in 1957 was bought by Emi for 70,000 pounds (112,200 dollars).

An enormous tumour

JAKARTA: Indonesian doctors have removed a 40 kg (88 lb) tumour from the womb of a woman in Borneo's East Kalimantan province, the Antara news agency said Sunday, reports Reuter.

Doctors with a navy humanitarian project in Tarakan, north of Balikpapan, took three hours to remove the tumour from the 5-year-old woman, Fatimah, the agency said.

Fatimah, who had the tumour for one year, was reported in good condition after the operation on April 2.

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Banda goes on trial for murder today

BLANTYRE, Apr 23: Malawi's autocratic former President Kamuzu Banda is due to go on trial amid tight security on Monday for the murder of three cabinet ministers and a member of parliament 12 years ago, reports Reuter.

It was not clear today if the frail Banda, now in his mid-90s, would personally appear in the Blantyre High Court along with his five co-accused.

The six are accused of murdering cabinet ministers Aaron Gadama, Dick Materenje and Tawibu Sangala and member of parliament David Chwaha.

Banda ruled Malawi from independence until he was ousted in last year's first multiparty elections.