

BRIEFLY



Former French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe leaves the Elysée Palace Wednesday after being appointed as new Prime Minister by French President Jacques Chirac. Juppe, 49, was expected to name his government on Thursday. — AFP/UNB photo

Fire at Cannes festival venue: A small fire was reported overnight in Cannes, where the 48th International Film Festival opened on Wednesday, causing no injuries but damaging a commercial stand of pornographic films, AFP reports from Cannes.

The cause of the fire was unknown. It started during the night in the basement of the festival palace, which houses the film fair as well as several media organisations. A security officer said the basement area was closed off at the time.

Tudjman to visit NZ: Croatian president Franjo Tudjman will make a state visit to New Zealand at the end of next month, Prime Minister Jim Bolger said Thursday, AFP reports from Wellington.

He will also visit Australia and Malaysia, Bolger said with New Zealand having 250 defence personnel in the United Nations forces in the former Yugoslavia he welcomed the opportunity to meet with Tudjman.

Murayama loses support: The support rate for the cabinet of Japanese Prime Minister Tomichi Murayama fell steeply to a record low of 33.6 per cent in May, down from 39.7 per cent in March, a major daily said Thursday, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The disapproval rate stood at 49.7 per cent, up from 44.3 per cent, according to a Yomiuri newspaper survey conducted last weekend. The poll covered some 2,000 adults across the country.

13 die in Indonesian bus mishap: Twelve people died when an intercity bus collided with a truck on a busy road near Jakarta, and a 13th person died later at a hospital, the official Antara news agency said yesterday, AFP reports from Jakarta.

The Jakarta-bound bus tried to overtake a truck in Nanggwer some 50 kilometres (31 miles) southeast of Jakarta on Wednesday, but failed to avoid a truck coming from the opposite direction.

One more Aum leader held: Police yesterday arrested Takeshi Amtsumoto, one of the most wanted Aum supreme truth members, allegedly responsible for the abduction of a Tokyo Notary Public, police said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

Kyoshi Fariya, 68, was abducted on February 28 this year in front of his office. He is a brother of a wealthy woman who tried to quit the sect.

Iran will get 100 Polish tanks: Despite a US drive to cut off arms trade with Iran, Poland is going ahead with the delivery of about 100 tanks, the State Department said Wednesday, AP reports from Washington.

The Soviet-designed T-72s are the main battle tank of Russia and other former Soviet allies. Officials declined to make the precise number available or say how much they were worth. Polish Embassy officials did not respond to inquiries.

Maori activists' rally in NZ: Maori activists, shunning confrontation with New Zealand police, marched peacefully from the site of an 11-week land protest yesterday but vowed to continue their struggle, Reuters reports from Wanganui, New Zealand.

"We were forced to leave. We didn't want the state to have the pleasure of handcuffing us and locking us up," protest spokesman Ken Mair told a news conference.

UN arms inspector to visit Iraq: The chief UN weapons inspector will visit Baghdad later this month seeking to prod Iraq into coming clean on its biological and chemical warfare programme, AP reports from Manama.

Body to probe into political killings in SA

JOHANNESBURG, May 18: In a bill seen as vital to South Africa's young democracy, parliament has authorised a commission to dig up the truth about the country's recent bloody past and grant amnesties for purposes of national healing, reports AP.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was approved Wednesday with only seven no votes from the right-wing Freedom Front Party. Approval followed a 5 and a half an hour debate that culminated more than a year of wrangling within the country's national-unity government.

Lebanese power-struggle may derail post-war recovery

BEIRUT, May 18: When Elias Hrawi was elected to replace a slain president in 1989, he took a job few dared to seek, reports AP.

Now, five years into relative peace — Lebanon's longest period of calm in two decades — Hrawi's supporters want him to stay on longer than his term permits.

The campaign has divided the political establishment, crossing sectarian lines. It threatens to derail the country's fragile recovery from the 1975-90 civil war.

Hrawi's six-year term expires in November. Extension or reelection would require a constitutional amendment to be passed by Parliament, which convenes May 22.

OIC for bringing Kashmir issue before UNSC
Seshan firm to hold polls in Kashmir before July 18

NEW DELHI, May 18: India's poll panel chief has vowed to hold legislative elections in Kashmir before July 18, despite mounting tension in the state wracked by a Muslim separatist conflict, newspapers reported today, says AFP.

Chief Election Commissioner TN Seshan said in the northern city of Jaipur late Wednesday: "We are going to hold the elections in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. We should make every effort to conduct the elections."

"No power on earth can prevent us from holding elections there," the Times of India and other newspapers quoted him as saying.

Seshan whose autonomous election commission oversees all elections in India, said he had demanded a detailed report on the Kashmir situation

from the federal government. Seshan's assertion followed renewed demands by the Indian opposition to put off the proposed polls in view of the volatile situation in Kashmir in the wake of the burning of an Islamic shrine one week ago.

The Kashmir Valley has been gripped by violent protests since the 15th-century shrine in the town of Charar-i-Sharief was gutted in a fire. New Delhi and the militants blamed each other for the blaze.

Seshan said the thousands of Hindus who have fled their homes in Kashmir since the bloody Muslim separatist campaign began in 1989 would be able to vote from wherever they were now settled.

Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, has been ruled directly by New Delhi since 1990. The last elections

to the Kashmir Assembly were held in March 1987 amid widespread allegations of fraud.

Muslim separatist groups have vowed to sabotage or boycott the polls, saying they would settle for nothing less than an end to Indian rule.

The Kashmiri separatist drive has left more than 11,000 people dead. India accuses Pakistan of arming and training the guerrillas. Islamabad denies the charge but openly gives diplomatic support to the separatist campaign.

Meanwhile, growing tensions between India and Pakistan over the desecration of a Muslim shrine in Kashmir left UN leaders here grappling with the bitter debate.

Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali received a letter from the organisation of

the Islamic Conference urging him to recognise the "threat to the regional peace and security posed by the deteriorating situation in Kashmir" in particular by the desecration of the Charar-i-Sharief mosque earlier this month.

The letter from the 52-nation OIC also called for the Security Council to bring the matter before the top UN body "for appropriate action".

India responded by charging that Pakistani-backed terrorists were responsible for the destruction.

Joe Sills, spokesman for Boutros-Ghali, suggested that the Secretary General wanted to steer clear of the controversy, saying that while the appeal was addressed to the president of the Security Council, it was a "document of the council".

DPRK-US N-talks begin today

SEOUL, May 18: Amid a new warning by North Korea that war could break out at any time on the Korean Peninsula, the United States prepared to meet again with the hard-line communist country for crucial nuclear talks, reports AP.

The talks, scheduled to begin Friday in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, are aimed at salvaging an endangered accord designed to dismantle the North's nuclear programme suspected of weapons development.

North Korea has publicly said the talks will be the last opportunity for it to decide whether to honour the deal aimed at resolving nuclear tensions on the peninsula.

After nearly two years of haggling, the United States and North Korea signed the agreement last October 21.

Pak FM for UN air strike against Serbs

RABAT, May 18: Pakistani Foreign Minister Assef Ahmad Ali called on Western powers on Wednesday to launch air strikes against Serb forces in Bosnia and said failure to do so would prove the United Nations was no longer impartial in the conflict, reports Reuters.

"There are two things that the United Nations should do immediately: They should approve air strikes against the Serbs and all heavy military equipment which was removed from Sarajevo must be confiscated by the UN," he told a news conference.

Ali is Chairman of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) contact group on Bosnia. He and the foreign ministers of Senegal, Malaysia, Iran, Egypt, Indonesia and Turkey are to meet in Rabat on Thursday.

Russian chopper shells Chechen village

NAZRAN (Russia), May 18: Russian helicopter gunships fired rockets at Chechen rebels near the village of Bamut on Thursday amid reports that Moscow would launch a major offensive in the breakaway southern republic, says AP.

Russian forces shelled rebel positions near Bamut, about 35 kilometers (20 miles) southeast of the Chechen capital, Grozny, the Interfax news agency reported.

No heavy fighting was reported overnight in Grozny. The ITAR-Tass news agency that Russian preparations for a new offensive had been completed.

On Wednesday, Russian and Chechen leaders issued separate appeals for peace negotiations, but the Russian side quickly dismissed rebel statements as "insincere."

US loses status as honest broker by using veto: PLO

GAZA CITY, May 18: Palestinians on Thursday accused the United States of bias after it vetoed a UN Security Council resolution declaring Israel's confiscation of Arab land in Jerusalem invalid, reports AP.

"The United States has lost its status as an honest broker. It is like having a third man in the ring rooting for one of the fighters," said Marwan Kanafani, a spokesman for PLO chief Yasser Arafat.

Washington is co-sponsor of the Middle East peace talks, including the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

Wednesday's Security Council vote on the Jerusalem resolution was 14-1. It followed three days of debate in which Arab ambassadors warned the land confiscation threatened to disrupt the Middle East peace process.

The United States, casting its first Security Council veto in five years, argued that the explosive issue of Jerusalem must be addressed by Israel and the Palestinians, not the United Nations.

But Palestinians across the political spectrum accused the Americans of siding with Israel.

"It is really abandoning a very important responsibility, and doing it in the face of all the countries of the world," said Nabil Shaath, the chief PLO negotiator. "Every blow like this will affect the peace process."

The PLO-run Voice of Palestine radio said Arafat "expressed frustration" over the US veto.

Muslim militant leaders raised the possibility of violent responses.

America heads those coun-

tries who are hostile to Muslims and the oppressed and, by its veto, it is challenging the feelings of a billion Muslims and it is pushing them to move to stop this unjust policy," said Sheikh Nafez Assam of the Islamic Jihad group.

"We have to learn a lesson from this experience and not pin hopes on America and the West," said Mahmoud Zahar of the militant group Hamas.

Israel government spokesman Uri Dromi said the issue should never have been brought before the Security Council.

"This is not the way to solve

problems within the context of a peace process which is complicated enough," he said. "The only way to really strike a deal between Israelis and Arabs is with direct negotiations."

Dromi said he did not think the United States' position as an impartial broker had been compromised.

The future of Jerusalem is the most sensitive issue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel has said it will never relinquish sovereignty over all of the city, including the eastern sector it captured from Jordan in 1967. The Palestinians want east Jerusalem as their future capital.

US Senator terms Tibet as 'occupied country'

WASHINGTON, May 18: A US Senate committee on Wednesday began consideration of a major foreign affairs bill that included a statement that Tibet, ruled by China since 1951, "is an occupied sovereign country," reports Reuters.

The bill was before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and reflects the views of its chairman, Senator Jesse Helms, a North Carolina Republican, a longtime critic of what he calls "Red China."

Both the Senate bill and a companion measure adopted by the International Relations Committee of the House of Representatives this week, would require the naming of a special US envoy to Tibet.

But the Senate version went further by stating: "Tibet is an occupied sovereign country under international law and its true representatives are the

Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile."

It stated that the Tibetan people were entitled to the right of self-determination and there was credible evidence that they had suffered serious human rights abuses at the hands of the Chinese.

Under the bill, Chinese-made imports into the United States would require certification that they were not made by forced labour and fines were specified for importing banned articles. Imported "slave-made" products would be liable to seizure and destruction.

The bill is expected to win swift committee approval but undergo changes as it goes through the legislative process.

Senate Republican leader Bob Dole, in a letter to Helms, supported the bill and said he would seek consideration of it by the full Senate before July 4.

US actress and director Diane Keaton (R) and compatriot actress Andie McDowell, smile at their arrival at the Palais des Festivals on Wednesday in Cannes, for the opening show of the 48th film festival with French film "La Cite des Enfants Perdus". (City of the lost children) directed Marc Caro and Jean-Pierre Jeunet. — AFP/UNB photo

Off the Record



US actress and director Diane Keaton (R) and compatriot actress Andie McDowell, smile at their arrival at the Palais des Festivals on Wednesday in Cannes, for the opening show of the 48th film festival with French film "La Cite des Enfants Perdus". (City of the lost children) directed Marc Caro and Jean-Pierre Jeunet. — AFP/UNB photo

Money lured them to search for 'Big Foot'

BEIJING: Scientists are racing to defend China's fabled wildman from a potential rush of bounty hunters lured by a 500,000 yuan (60,000 dollars) price put on his head by tourist chiefs, Xinhua news agency said on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

"If 'Big Foot' is found it will be given top protection," the agency quoted scientist Wang Fangchen as saying.

Wang heads a team of scientists searching for the supposed two-metre tall (6.6 ft) wildman in the mountains of Shennongjia National Park in China's central Hubei province.

The scientists condemned rewards offered for the capture of a wildman, a human-like red-haired creature which the agency said was believed by some to be the missing evolutionary link between apes and humans.

National park inhabitants have recorded over 300 sightings of wildmen since the beginning of the century but none has been caught.

Shanghai's Wenhui Bao newspaper reported last month that park tourist officials had offered large rewards for the capture, dead or alive, of a wildman.

A live wildman would be worth 500,000 yuan while a dead one would net 50,000 yuan (6,000 dollars), the newspaper said.

Completely natural mummies!

SAN BERNARDO, Colombia: The mummies lie side by side in glass cases in the town cemetery, leathery limbs folded neatly across their sunken chests. One still has the wisp of a moustache. A woman in a shawl clutches a rose in her claw-like hands, reports AP.

They're one of Colombia's more bizarre tourist attractions, a macabre display of deceased towns' people whose remains are virtually intact despite the passage of time.

They're also a national mystery. Nobody knows why the bodies of so many citizens of San Bernardo, 40 miles (65 kilometres) southwest of Bogota, end up after death as mummies rather than piles of bones.

A dozen mummies, some neatly dressed and cleaned by a taxidermist, lie in the cemetery museum, or "pantheon." Their skin is shriveled and most are missing feet, but several still have hair, teeth and fingernails.

The San Bernardo mummies, however, are completely natural. Scientists have examined the mummies, but can't explain what produced the mummification.

AI slates US for aiding autocratic regimes

WASHINGTON, May 18: Amnesty International USA wants the Clinton administration to tighten efforts to seek human rights improvements in countries that receive US military aid, reports AP.

In a report Wednesday, the group singled out Indonesia, where President Clinton wants to resume aid despite a high-profile repression of dissidents last year.

Amnesty International USA said the administration is providing military aid to 19 countries with poor human rights records.

The State Department itself makes complaints against the same governments in its annual report on human rights, but says that is only one consideration in aid decisions. Human rights may be outweighed by regional concerns or cooperation on programmes such as anti-narcotics efforts.

Amnesty International USA, the US affiliate of the London-based human rights group, praised the Clinton administration for this year's first-ever inclusion in its budget proposal of yardsticks to evaluate effectiveness of foreign assistance. The yardsticks, different for each country, include things like progress on economic reforms, completion of military modernisation.

Human rights progress was cited as a criteria for some countries, including Indonesia.

But Amnesty International complained that no human rights yardstick was applied for Israel, Egypt or Turkey, all of whom the group Amnesty accused of illegal detentions and torture of detainees.



King Hassan II of Morocco (R) meets with the Secretary-General of Arab League, Esmat Abdel Meguid, at the royal palace in the capital Rabat on Wednesday to discuss the possibility of holding an mini Arab summit in Morocco over the confiscation of Arab land in East Jerusalem by Israel. King Hassan II is the president of OIC. — AFP/UNB photo

W African leaders meet to resolve Liberian crisis

ABUJA, May 18: West African leaders attending a summit meeting in Nigeria's capital Abuja early today to foster peace in Liberia but delegates said many issues remained unresolved, reports Reuters.

Nigerian army ruler General Sani Abacha and Ghanaian President Jerry Rawlings, the chief mediator in the crisis, who on Wednesday attacked Liberia's neighbours for allowing arms to warring factions there, met the Liberian factions one by one.

These are bilateral consultations and a full plenary will be called, may be in the morning if there is an agreement," a Nigerian official said.

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