

BRIEFLY

Les Aspin dies: Former US Defence Secretary Les Aspin died on Sunday evening after suffering a massive stroke on Saturday, a hospital spokesman said. He was 56. Reuter reports from Washington.

Michael Tabo, spokesman for Georgetown University Hospital, said Aspin had been awake, lucid and speaking when he was admitted on Saturday, but his condition continued to deteriorate steadily despite intensive medical therapy. He died at 7:55 pm (2355 gm) with several family members present.

Governor of Punjab province dead: The Governor of the Pakistani Province of Punjab, Chaudhry Altaf Hussain, died late Sunday in the provincial capital, Lahore, after suffering a heart attack, the official Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) said. AFP reports from Islamabad.

An official spokesman said Hussain will be buried in his home village Ladhar, Jehlum district, Punjab on Monday. Provincial government offices will be closed Monday and the national flag will be lowered to half mast on government buildings in the province for the day.

Iranian team in Iraq: An Iranian political mission went to Baghdad Sunday for talks with Iraqi leaders in the hope of normalising relations between the two countries, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati revealed today. AFP reports from Tehran.

Velayati was quoted by Radio Tehran as saying, "the need for ties between the two neighbours is felt more than ever and we hope that the talks the Iranian delegation has in Baghdad could remove the obstacles to normalisation."

2 gunned down in Philippines: An election official and his son who were killed Sunday by unidentified gunmen in the latest violent incident related to the May 8 national election, police said Monday. AP reports from Manila.

Conrado Concepcion, a municipal registrar, and his son Mark Joseph, 24, were gunned down Sunday in front of their house in Mojon village about 32 kilometres (20 miles) north of Manila. About 50 killings have been reported from May 7 to 9. The balloting was held May 8.

US to allow Lee Teng's visit: The US administration will allow Taiwanese President Lee Teng-Hui to pay a private visit to the United States in June, a Taiwanese representative in Washington said Sunday. AFP reports from Washington.

The move would end a 16-year-old ban on visits from leaders of Taiwan, and would certainly anger Beijing, which considers Taiwan a breakaway province.

Do Muoi to visit Australia, NZ: Vietnam's highest-ranking Communist plans to visit former wartime enemies Australia and New Zealand this summer, official media reported Monday. AP reports from Hanoi.

Party Secretary-General Do Muoi is scheduled to make the unprecedented trip in late July and early August, the state-run Vietnam News reported.

NZ returns land to Maori tribe: Members of the largest Maori tribe broke into a war like dance of thanksgiving Monday when they finally got back a silver of the 480,000 hectares seized by British colonialists in the 19th century. AP reports from Turangawaewae, Marae, New Zealand.

The New Zealand government's transfer to the Tainui tribe represents only about three per cent of their lost land. But it was the biggest chunk to be returned to the country's indigenous people as part of a controversial 1 billion dollar (700 million US dollars) government plan to end hundreds of Maori land disputes dating back to colonial times.

New Sindh governor named: Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto named a new governor for her troubled province of Sindh on Sunday, the state television said. Reuter reports from Islamabad.

Senate (upper house) member Kamal Azfar, a member of Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), will replace elderly non-partyman Mahmood Haroon, who has resigned because of ill health, the television said.

Australian FM in Lanka: Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans arrived in Colombo yesterday as part of a tour of eight Indian Ocean states and was expected to renew his offer to mediate in the island's ethnic conflict. AFP reports from Colombo.

During his one-day visit, Evans is expected to hold talks with President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadir Gamar and Justice and Constitutional Affairs Minister G L Peiris, diplomats said.

Sarajevo archbishop blasts UN: The Archbishop of Sarajevo Vinko Puljic launched an angry attack against the UN Sunday, accusing it of maintaining the status quo in Bosnia-Herzegovina and describing Sarajevo as "the biggest open air prison in Europe. AFP reports from Paris.

Speaking at a press conference the cleric said the UN should "adopt clearer and firmer resolutions on protecting human rights in Bosnia."

Tajik talks postponed: United Nations-brokered reconciliation talks between the government of Tajikistan and the exiled opposition, due to begin yesterday have been postponed to Wednesday, a Kazakhstan Foreign Ministry spokesman said. Reuter reports from Alma-Ata.

Spokesman Farkhad Abdu Khalikov told Reuters yesterday the talks had been put off because the opposition delegation had not yet arrived in Alma-Ata.

Gaddafi slates US veto: Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi told Arab leaders the United States veto of a UN resolution ordering Israel to stop land seizures in east Jerusalem was an insult to the Arab people. Reuter reports from Tunis.

"I believe that from now you are in no need for proof from me to confirm America's disdain for the Arab nation," Gaddafi said in a message carried on Sunday by the official Libyan News Agency JANA.

Afghan forces capture 20 Taleban: Afghan government forces captured several more positions held by the Islamic Taleban militia in the Maidan Shahr area southwest of Kabul yesterday government-controlled Kabul radio reported. Reuter says from Islamabad.

The radio, monitored by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), quoted an army source as saying 20 Taleban fighters had been captured and several others killed or wounded.

Chinese team arrives in Hanoi: A Chinese delegation arrived in Hanoi yesterday for the fifth round of negotiations on a lingering Chinese-Vietnamese border dispute, an official source said in Hanoi. AFP reports from Hanoi.

The dispute centers on 1,130 kilometres (706 miles) of common border, set during Vietnam's French colonial era. Hanoi accuses Beijing of moving frontier markets during a Chinese army offensive against Vietnam in February 1979.

Quake kills 1 in Indonesia: An earthquake on Flores island in eastern Indonesia killed a two-year-old girl and injured six other people, a meteorology official said Monday. AP reports from Jakarta.

The quake, with a preliminary magnitude of 4.7, struck at 2:13 pm local time Sunday (0613 GMT), said Supriyono of the local meteorology and geophysics agency.

8 die as building collapses: Eight people died and 11 others were injured when two buildings collapsed in a village in the Nile Delta on Sunday, Egyptian newspapers said. AFP reports from Cairo.

The disaster happened in the village of Salamun al-Qimash, near Mansura, 130 kilometres (80 miles) north of Cairo.

PLO warns of reviewing entire peace process

GAZA CITY, May 22: If Israel breaks a July 1 deadline for the second phase of autonomy and upholds Jerusalem land confiscations the PLO will review the entire peace process, Palestinian officials warned today. reports AFP.

"Everything is tied to the July 1st deadline," said Nabil Abu Rudeina, PLO Chief Yasser Arafat's advisor.

Israel and the PLO have agreed a July 1 target date for an accord to redeploy the Israeli army on the West Bank and hold elections to an autonomy council.

"If the deadline is not met, and if by then Israel has not cancelled its expropriation orders, the Palestinian leadership will reassess the whole peace process," Abu Rudeina told AFP.

Arafat's spokesman Marwan Kanafani also gave the same message.

The first of July is sacred ... otherwise we are all going to be responsible for the collapse of this peace process," he told reporters.

"I just wanted to say this on the occasion of the visit of Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to President Arafat this afternoon, and I hope he will have some good news with him."

The warnings came shortly before Peres was to meet Arafat in Gaza in a bid to calm Arab anger over Israel's confiscation of Arab land in East Jerusalem.

Abu Rudeina said the PLO Executive Committee, the Palestinian National Council or parliament-in-exile and the

mainstream Fatah faction's central committee would be the bodies entrusted with re-assessing the situation.

The PLO Executive Committee would meet in Tunis on June 1 to discuss the Jerusalem issue and Palestinian-Israeli relations, he said.

"All of this comes as part of a series of measures to halt the confiscation of land in Jerusalem," he said.

Abu Rudeina also said Arafat was to travel Tuesday to meet with King Hussein in Amman ahead of talks in Cairo with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on Wednesday.

The Arab World has been infuriated by the land confiscations and an Arab summit is expected to be held in Rabat, Morocco, on Saturday to raise the issue.

Protests rock Srinagar Thousands Kashmiris leave for Charar-e-Sharif

SRINAGAR, India, May 22: Defying orders from Indian troops, several thousand Kashmiri Muslims left here today in a convoy of buses, trucks and cars for the devastated holy town of Charar-e-Sharif, witnesses said, reports AFP.

Anti-Indian protests rocked this Kashmir summer capital meanwhile and the Muslim-majority Kashmir valley remained crippled by a strike for a 12th day to protest the destruction of an Islamic shrine in Charar-e-Sharif.

Indian troops clashed with stone-throwing demonstrators at several places in Srinagar as a fleet of more than 70 vehi-

cles carrying some 5,000 people left for Charar-e-Sharif, 37 kilometres (22 miles) from here, witnesses said.

Indian troops did not try to prevent the protesters, who were held by three prominent leaders of Kashmir's Muslim separatist movement, from leaving here for Charar-e-Sharif but there was speculation they may be stopped en route.

Youths seated atop packed buses and vans shouted "we want freedom" and "we will avenge the shrine destruction" as the convoy left Srinagar in the rain.

Riot police manned the

streets but paramilitary troops stayed inside the mud and cinder-block bunkers which dot intersection and buildings in this lakeside city of one million people, the urban hub of the Muslim separatist movement.

Umer Farooq, the chief priest of Srinagar's main mosque and chairman of the Huriyat, vowed that the protesters would reach Charar-e-Sharif come what may.

"Nobody can stop us," said Farooq, chairman of the all-party Kashmir freedom conference, an umbrella organisation of 27 Muslim separatist groups known as the Huriyat.

KSA to establish military city next year

KUWAIT CITY, May 22: Saudi Arabia is to establish a military city in Jazan region, in the south of the kingdom next year, second Deputy Premier, Defence and Aviation Minister Prince Sultan bin Abdel-Aziz said Sunday. reports Xinhua.

The official Saudi press agency quoted Prince Sultan as saying in Jazan that the temporary buildings already established in the city have the capacity for "nearly 2,000 fighters."

He said in a speech before the Saudi armed forces that his country is keen to provide the Saudi naval forces with the necessary equipment, aircraft and frigates.

He stressed on the role of the Saudi naval forces to protect their country's borders.

MNLF accuses Manila of sabotaging peace talks

ZAMBOANGA, Philippines, May 22: Exiled Muslim guerilla leader Nur Misuari has accused the government of sabotaging ongoing peace talks, a Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) spokesman said today, reports AFP.

"For the first time, Misuari sounded pessimistic on the process of peace talks. MNLF information officer Mohammad Salih Apostol told reporters after speaking by telephone to the Saudi Arabia-based Misuari.

He said Misuari said the government and its hand-picked Christian and Muslim leaders in the peace panel had tried to derail the peace process by recommending their own economic projects without consulting the MNLF.

Misuari also accused the government of blaming the

MNLF for the recent outbreak of violence in the southern Philippines, particularly the April 4 pillaging of Ipl town in which more than 50 people were killed, Apostol added.

The MNLF, which waged a separatist rebellion in the south in the early 1970s, is negotiating for limited autonomy under a Muslim-led regional government for Muslim-populated areas in the Mindanao region.

Misuari alleged that a peace conference held here over the weekend attended by President Fidel Ramos and sectarian representatives had recommended outdated economic and political reforms which the MNLF had demanded long ago to solve the two-decade old conflict, Apostol said.

Rao plans to reshuffle cabinet

NEW DELHI, May 22: India's embattled Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao is planning a cabinet reshuffle to ward off a challenge to his leadership of the Congress (I) party, newspaper reported today, says AFP.

Rao, who has been facing increasing pressure to resign as leader of the ruling party ahead of general elections, plans to reshuffle his cabinet in mid-June, the Times of India and other newspapers said.

The Times said nearly a dozen ministers would be shifted to party work ahead of the parliamentary polls while a number of "political heavyweights" would be brought into the cabinet as part of an "election-oriented action plan."

"The intention is to make the party units 'battle ready' for the coming (parliamentary) polls, which are expected any time after September of this year," the Times said.

Lankan troops kill 3 Tigers

COLOMBO, May 22: Sri Lankan troops shot dead three Tamil guerillas in the eastern Trincomalee district in a fire fight on Sunday, a military spokesman said today, reports Reuter.

"Our patrol which went out of our camp guarding a fishing village saw a group of terrorists (rebels) and opened fire," he told Reuters. "Ground troops said three terrorists were killed. One soldier was wounded in the fight."

The rebels, fighting for an independent Tamil homeland in the north and east, have stepped up attacks on security forces since they scuttled a ceasefire last month by sinking two navy gunboats in the eastern Trincomalee port.

The military, which is preparing to launch major offensives against the rebels, has begun raiding rebel jungle bases in the east and bombing guerilla positions around army outposts in the rebel-held north.

US threatens to cancel flights from Manila

MANILA, May 22: The US government has threatened to cancel all US-bound flights from the Philippines unless authorities improve security at Manila's airport, it was reported Monday, reports AP.

The Business Daily Newspaper said the warning was issued this month by the Federal Aviation Administration, which gave Filipino authorities three months to make the required improvements.

US embassy officials declined immediate comment on the report but said a statement would be issued later. American sources familiar with the issue speaking on condition of anonymity, said The Business Daily story was generally accurate.

10 Chinese dissidents picked up

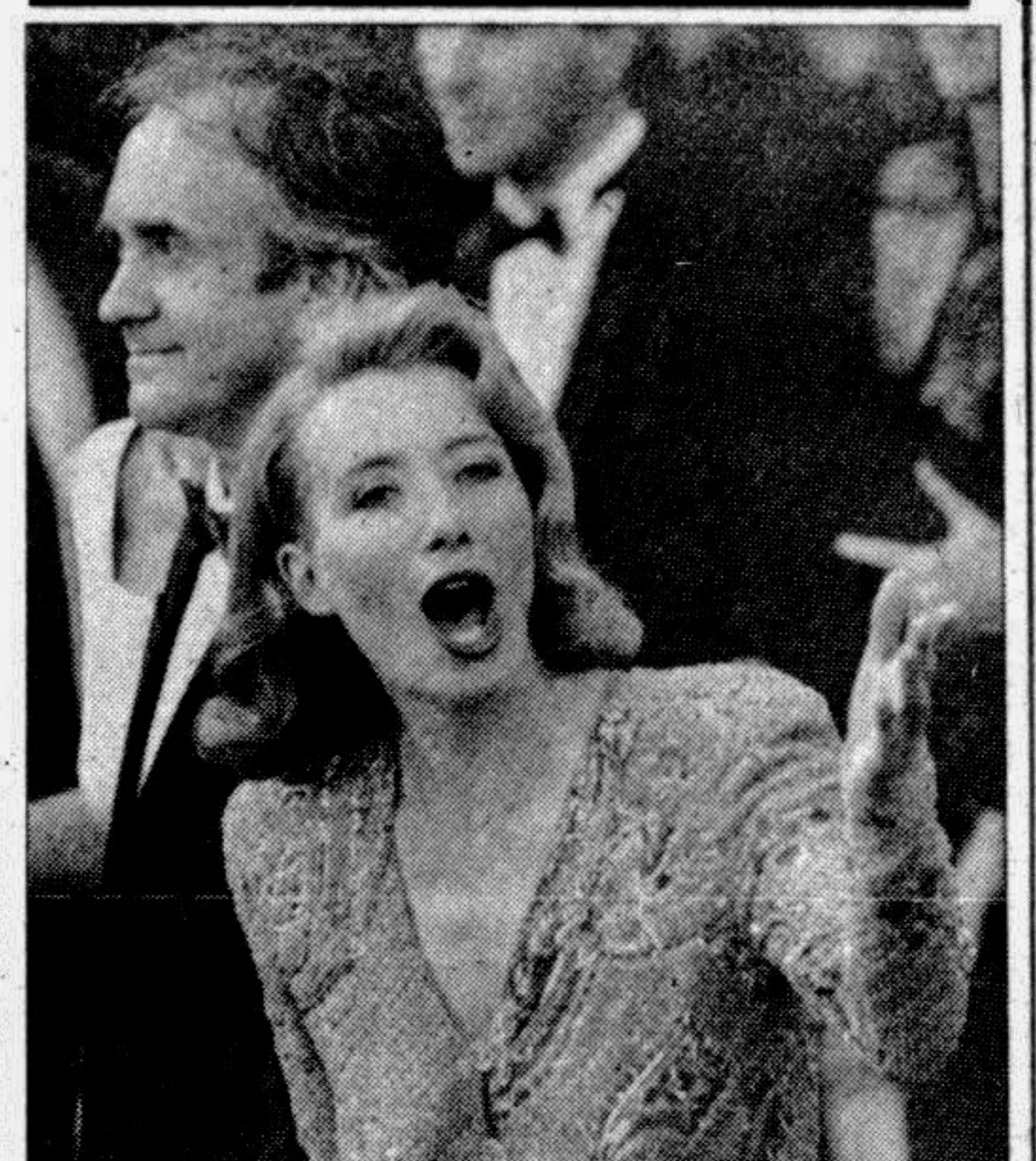
BEIJING, May 22: At least 10 Chinese dissidents have been picked up by police or are missing amid rising tension in the run-up to the sixth anniversary of the Tiananmen square crackdown, dissident sources said today, reports AFP.

The authorities have also stepped up surveillance on the homes of leading opponents of the regime during the seasonal crackdown, they added.

Three activists were detained in the Chinese capital on Sunday, including Wang Dan — the 26-year-old figurehead of the 1989 pro-democracy movement — veteran dissident Liu Nianchun, 47, and former university of Shandong student leader Wang Kuanxing, 25.

Three others — Wang Xizhe, 45, Liu Xiaobo, 36, and Huang Xiang — were all detained last week.

Off the Record



British movie star Emma Thomson salutes the public Sunday as compatriot actor Jonathan Pryce looks on, before climbing the famous staircase to the Palais des Festivals for the screening of Jonathan Hampton's film "Carrington" in competition at Cannes International Film Festival. — AFP/UNB photo

True equality!

BEIJING, May 22: The age-old rule of giving Chinese children their fathers' last names should be relaxed to help discourage excessive concern about producing boy babies, a report said Monday, says AP.

If children could adopt either their mothers' or fathers' last names, families might not be so insistent on having male children to carry on the family line, the official Xinhua News Agency reported.

Despite almost 50 years of Communist rule, female infanticide and deliberate abortions of female fetuses are still common in China's rural areas because of the traditional desire for male children.

Efforts to limit most families to only one child to slow population growth have worsened the trend, leading to substantial imbalances in the ratio of boy to girl babies — a problem that eventually will lead to a shortage of marriageable women.

The report, which quoted the newspaper China Population News, suggested that children be given whatever last name their parents wanted: the mother's name, the father's or a combination of both — adding that it might bring about "true equality" between the sexes.

Neatness fanatic

LONDON, Is Hugh Grant like the slob he played in "Four Weddings and A Funeral"? Hardly, says model girlfriend Elizabeth Hurley try serial neatness fanatic, reports AP.

"That causes most of the domestic disagreements," she tells the British Woman's Own magazine in an interview published this week. "It gets on my nerves — he even tidies up before going to bed."

Grant's hero in last year's British blockbuster is a habitual latecomer, and lives out of a perpetually unmade bed. Hurley, an aspiring actress besides being a successful model, said her time in Hollywood propping up Grant's elbow at awards ceremonies offended her British sensibilities.

"I thought 70 per cent of the people I met were idiots. Half of those were fools and the other half were vile. They'll take phone calls while you're in the room and are just horrendous," she said.

"The other 30 per cent are nice, though."

US-DPRK N-talks

N Korea still unwilling to reach compromise

KUALA LUMPUR, May 22: The United States resumed talks Monday with North Korea on its feared nuclear programme amid signs that the communist nation is unwilling to compromise, reports AP.

US negotiator Thomas Hubbard went to the North Korean Embassy for a second day of negotiations to salvage an accord, signed last October, that is aimed at freezing Pyongyang's suspected nuclear weapons development.

The accord is in danger of falling apart over the issue of the type of light-water reactors that are supposed to replace North Korean reactors, which produce a by-product of weapons-grade plutonium.

The United States wants to provide South Korean reactors, which are unacceptable to Pyongyang ostensibly for security concerns. However, national pride is believed to be the real reason.

That position apparently

hadn't changed Monday. "We do not recognise Korean-style reactors," North Korean Embassy Counsellor Choi Song-Ho said. "What is a Korean-style reactor? Nobody knows that South Korea can make reactors. It is not known in the world."

South Korea has a history of nuclear power generation, with nine reactors in operation and six others under construction. The new model it is offering is the same design as one nearing completion at the Ulsin nuclear complex, where two similar reactors are working now.

A senior South Korean diplomat said he wasn't surprised at North Korea's intransigence.

"We didn't expect North Korean position to change after one day's negotiations," said Jang Jai-Ryong, minister at the South Korean Embassy in Washington who is in Kuala Lumpur to monitor the talks.

Arabic, passage to Arab world for the Jewish state

HAIFA, Israel, May 22: Arabic, long shunned by Israelis as the language of their enemy, is fast becoming a crying need as the Jewish state enters an era of emerging Middle East peace, reports Reuter.

Educators and diplomats say treaties with Egypt and Jordan and a peace deal with the Palestinians have created opportunities for Israelis to speak with Arab neighbours long off limits.

Yet language barriers remain. Seen from a satellite, Israel is an island of five million Hebrew speakers surrounded by some 200 million Arabic speakers.

In Haifa, northern Israel, students at the Technion — the Israel Institute of

Technology — spend a morning each week studying Arabic. They are Israel's future businessmen, doctors and engineers.

Arabic can open possibilities for work opportunities in the economic sphere, especially now in the era of peace, said Ezra, a major in Economics. His friends nodded in agreement.

Arabic is an official language in Israel alongside Hebrew, but has enjoyed little status.

"Very few Israelis speak Arabic," said Gershon Baskin, of the Israel-Palestine Centre for Research and Information and long an activist for Jewish-Arab coexistence.

"I think it is indicative of the negotiative attitude Israelis have had towards Arabs. They

see Arabic as the language of the enemy. It is very important for the emergence of peace that we learn each other's languages and cultures," he said.

Just over half of Israeli schoolchildren take Arabic at the beginner's level. Yet most drop the course as they go from grade to grade. By the end of high school, less than five per cent take matriculation exams in Arabic.

That is slowly changing. In 1994, the first full year after Israel's peace deal with the PLO, some 1,200 students passed Arabic at the highest level, twice as many as in 1991.

But by comparison, all Israeli students study English at all levels.

Some believe Israeli law-

makers are to blame.

"For reasons unclear to me Israeli society has not made Arabic a compulsory subject," Shlomo Alon in charge of Arabic language study at Israel's Ministry of Education, said.

He said the government was now considering making a third language compulsory in school in which case he predicted 70 per cent of students would choose Arabic.

Israeli Arabs — about a fifth of Israel's population — acquire Arabic, Hebrew and English. They believe Jews should make more of an effort too.

"If the Jewish people want to be part of the Middle East, if they want to open their state to the Arab world, they should learn Arabic like they are

learning English," said Michail Fanous, a prominent Israeli Arab.

Avraham Robinson, director of a translation service, recently complained that growing Israeli needs for Arabic translation were not being met.

At the Foreign Ministry, spokesman Danny Shek said there were currently enough Arabic-speaking diplomats for Israel's three missions in Arab countries, Egypt, Jordan and Morocco.

But he added: "If there are 15 embassies requiring 100 people we will have a problem."

Experts agree the problem is not only a lack of motivation. Arabic is also a difficult language to master.

It has at least two distinct forms: literary Arabic, the written language of intellectual, religious and official discourse, and the spoken language, which varies greatly from one Arab country to another, and from one region to another.

Arabic lessons are usually given in either the literary language or the spoken, but not both at the same time. Many Israelis who immigrated from Arab countries speak a dialect but few are fluent in the higher literary language.

Another problem is that as an immigrant society, for many new Israelis Hebrew itself is a foreign language.

Walk the streets of Jerusalem of Tel Aviv for an hour and you are likely to see or hear half a dozen languages.