

Israel likely to attack Iranian N-sites

LONDON, May 25: Israel is considering to attack on Iranian nuclear facilities to prevent Tehran acquiring a bomb, Israel press reported saying the aim would be to repeat Tel Aviv's success in 1981 in bombing Iraq's Osirak reactor, reports PTL.

So far there has been no official denial which said Tel Aviv has also learnt that India is co-operating with Iran in producing nuclear power, according to Israeli press report.

The Israeli media has taken advantage of a report by London-based 'Jane's' intelligence review which said Israel has increased the resources it devotes to check the progress of Iranian nuclear programme and was sharing intelligence about Tehran with Oman, strategically situated at the mouth of the Gulf.

According to a western commentator, a further motive for raiding Iran would be to revive the chances of the Prime Minister, Itzhak Rabin, and the Labour Party winning next year's elections.

Israel's concern about the

Iranian programme has been growing since last year but it has hitherto looked to the United States to put pressure on Iran to prevent it developing a nuclear device. Officials in Israel said earlier in the year that the might consider a repeat performance of the attack on Iraq if diplomacy failed.

AFP from Tel Aviv adds, Israel has successfully test flown the first Soviet-made Mig 21 to be upgraded with state-of-the-art Avionics as part of a contract with an Asian client, it was announced today.

Lahav, a subsidiary of Israel Aircraft Industries has replaced the entire Avionics of the 1960's jet fighter.

Shraga Bar Nissan, Director General of Lahav, announced that the upgrading was not only the first of its kind carried out in the West but also in the East.

He refused to name the Asian country for which the work is being carried out or reveal the amount of the contract, but media reports suggested it was China.

US, Russia divided over changes in UN mission in Bosnia

UNITED NATIONS, May 25: The United States is urging the Security Council to back changes in the UN mission in Bosnia, including greater use of force, an approach that Russia opposes, reports AP.

UN officials in Bosnia warned the Muslim-led government and besieging Serbs on Wednesday to stop fighting around Sarajevo or face NATO air strikes. There was no immediate reaction among Security Council members.

UN peacekeepers in Bosnia have been under increased attack recently, and Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali is expected to present a report later this week outlining options for reforming the mission.

Boutros-Ghali has recommended reducing and redeploying the force, while the United States has been lobbying for a change in the UN mandate that would authorise and increase use of force in response to attacks against peacekeepers and UN-protected areas.

"We don't understand why airpower is not appropriate at this time," US Ambassador Madeleine Albright said Wednesday. She said UN force "would in fact be safer if there were airpower used."

Albright spoke after Lt. Gen. Bernard Janvier, the commander of UN forces in former Yugoslavia, briefed the council.

Russian Ambassador Sergey Lavrov, however, said the United Nations "cannot pretend that this is a situation where whenever you decide to be robust against the Serbs you solve the problem."

Albright also questioned whether a redeployment of forces would leave UN "safe areas" unprotected.

"We are looking at ways to make sure that the civilian population in the enclaves is not just left," Albright asked. The six "safe areas" are mainly Muslim towns surrounded by Serb forces.

But Janvier said the areas are "systematically used by the

government forces for launching attacks and provoking Serbs," Lavrov said.

Janvier also said peacekeepers did not have the means to prevent attacks against the "safe areas" and suggested that the number of troops in the safe areas could be cut, Lavrov said.

France and Britain have the largest contingents in the 22,000-member force and have been threatening to withdraw their peacekeepers.

France and Britain have also advocated changing the UN mandate.

Reuters adds: The United States and Britain late on Wednesday voiced support for UN warnings to combatants in Sarajevo to stop using heavy weapons or face NATO air strikes.

"If they do not, they would face the consequences which could be severe," he said.

US Ambassador Madeleine Albright said she agreed with the ultimatum imposed by commanders on the ground,

according to her spokesman. "We believe they will and should face serious consequences if they fail to comply with the ultimatum," she said.

In Sarajevo, British Lieutenant-General Rupert Smith ordered both sides to cease firing all heavy weapons by noon today (1000 GMT). He set the same deadline for the return of four heavy weapons removed from UN collection depots by Bosnian Serbs.

Smith, the UN commander for 22,000 troops in Bosnia, issued the ultimatum after a day of heavy fighting around the Bosnian capital, which left at least six people dead and 31 wounded, including two French peacekeepers.

The ultimatum by Smith came as the security council began discussions on the future of UN troops in Bosnia with the United States demanding regular use of air strikes around Sarajevo.

But other countries were more cautious, with diplomats saying

Off the Record



US actress Sharon Stone arrives Wednesday at Cannes airport. Stone is in Cannes to promote her film "The Quick and the Dead," competing for the International Film Festival and to take part in the AIDS gala evening on Sunday. — AFP/UNB photo

Kiss-and-tell policy

MOSCOW: Love, long spurned, is legal at last. The US Embassy has lifted its Cold War ban on romance with Russians, reports AP.

The news came this week in a directive to embassy employees blessing "intimate or romantic relationships" with Russians. But there's a catch. The new policy is kiss-and-tell.

The directive says any employee who "cohabits or develops a romantic or, sexually intimate" relationship with a Russian must report it to the embassy security office.

Even with this caveat, the end of the ban on romance was welcomed. "I think everybody thought it was a silly policy and that it was about time it got changed," said embassy spokesman Mike McClellan.

Not everyone at the embassy, however, is free to love. The directive does not apply, for instance, to spies or soldiers. The embassy's US Marine guards — many of them young, single men — are still off-limits.

Risky chewing gum

COLOMBO: A Sri Lankan judge sentenced a defence witness to two weeks of hard labour for chewing gum in a courtroom, court officials said Thursday, reports AP.

Tyronne Wijesinghe was jailed Wednesday after he told court that he was unable to pay the 500-Rupees (dhs 10) fine imposed by magistrate Priyantha Fernando in the capital, Colombo for contempt of court. The judge held that gum chewing amounted to contempt of his court and since Wijesinghe was unable to pay the fine he should serve the prison sentence.

Wijesinghe had pleaded guilty to the charge for committing the offense while he had been in the witness box giving evidence in a robbery case.

Speculations proved wrong

NEW YORK: When Michael Jackson married Lisa Marie Presley, they all said it would never last — the gossip columnists, the tabloids, the fans, reports AP.

So far, they were wrong. On Friday, the Jacksons celebrate their first wedding anniversary.

While quiet about their anniversary plans, the couple has periodically surfaced to assert that all is well in Neverland, his estate, and Graceland, hers, inherited from her father, Elvis Presley. Next month, they'll sit for a joint interview with journalist Diane Sawyer.

"The happy couple," sniffs Michael Jackson biographer Christopher Anderson. "You wait and see."

Anderson predicts the marriage hinges on the success of Michael's next album, due in stores June 20. If the record bombs, Anderson says, so will the marriage.

Through a spokesman, the pair declined comment on their first 365 days.

Pressler offers solution to Pak-US dispute over F-16s

WASHINGTON, May 25: An influential US senator has proposed a solution to a dispute over US jet fighter sales to Pakistan, reports AP.

The US administration yesterday said it was considering this along with many other proposals.

Senator Larry Pressler proposed that 28 F-16s ordered and paid for by Pakistan but never delivered be sent instead to Taiwan and the Philippines, with proceeds from the sale used to reimburse Pakistan.

We would certainly consider the proposal but it takes two to Tango. State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said.

It's going to be up to Taiwan and the government of the Philippines to decide that they want to do this, he said, adding that so far, neither of them had shown any interest in the proposal.

Burns said the United States had been seeking a buyer for the 28 F-16 for Pakistan but that indications are that the sale of the planes are no likely to generate, unfortunately, sufficient funds to cover the original purchase price.

Pressler is the author of a law bearing his name, the Pressler amendment, that has barred all US military and economic assistance to Pakistan since then-President George Bush notified Congress in 1990 he could not certify that Pakistan had not developed nuclear weapons.

They are looking for ways of fostering unity, and nationalism is a glue. So they respond to challenges from abroad in a tough way," says Platt, the Asian affairs expert.

In many areas — trade, Taiwan, Tibet, nuclear testing — this has put Beijing and Washington at odds, and disturbed China's neighbours.

"It is my opinion that it would be wrong to drive this people of 60 million into a corner," Kinkel said.

President Bill Clinton barred US businesses from having dealings with Iran earlier this month to protest what the administration claims is Tehran's support of radical Muslim terrorists.

BRIEFLY

Murayama welcomes Keating: Visiting Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating attended a welcoming ceremony hosted by Prime Minister Tomichi Murayama on Thursday morning, AFP reports from Tokyo.

National anthems of the two countries were exchanged at the ceremony held in the Gelnhinkan government guest house in Akasaka, central Tokyo, with Murayama attending.

12 die in UK plane crash: A small executive passenger plane crashed Wednesday in bad weather near Leeds in northern England, killing all 12 people aboard, police and rescue officials said, AFP reports from Harewood, England.

The 21-seater propeller-driven aircraft had just taken off from nearby Leeds-Bradford Airport for Aberdeen, Scotland, with nine passengers and three crew on board when it came down in the early evening in a field in west Yorkshire.

Iran to hold polls in Mar '96: Iran is to hold parliamentary elections, which take place every four years, on March 8 next year, the Iranian News Agency IRNA reported on Wednesday, Reuter says from Nicosia.

It said Iran's Guardian Council approved the date proposed by Interior Minister Ali Mohammad Besharati to elect the 270 members of parliament.

6 die in Kashmir border clash: Six civilians were killed and 16 injured last week in incidents of cross-border firing by Indian troops in Kashmir, the official Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) said yesterday, AFP reports from Islamabad.

The agency said the incidents occurred in the sectors of Muzaffarabad, Rawalakot, Chakothi, Kot Katera, Pandu, Saiwal and Shakhoh.

Colombian rebels agree to talk: Colombia's second largest Marxist guerrilla group has agreed to preliminary peace talks with the government, but only when it complies with certain conditions like dismantling right-wing paramilitary groups, a local television news programme reported on Wednesday, Reuter says from Bogota.

The programme Noticias de la Siete said the leader of the National Liberation Army (ELN) was prepared to talk about making the conflict more humane, but only when the government had met his group's conditions.

4 die in Peruvian car bomb blast: Suspected Maoist Shining Path guerrillas exploded a car bomb in front of a luxury hotel in Peru's capital on Wednesday, killing four people and wounding at least 25, authorities and witnesses said, Reuter reports from Lima.

The bomb packed with about 176 pounds (80 kg) of explosives went off in the early morning at the hotel Maria Angula in the Miraflores district of Lima, where about 30 people were inside a casino on the ground floor.

20 dissidents held so far in China: Chinese police detained a doctor Thursday as the number of Chinese dissidents arrested or taken in for questioning ahead of the anniversary of the 1989 crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests climbed to about 20, AP reports from Beijing.

Police have taken people from their beds late at night, from hotel rooms and from the street as the authorities clamp down on a resurgence in political dissent. Most of those detained have petitioned the government recently for greater tolerance and for the release of pro-democracy activists still imprisoned six years after the Tiananmen demonstrations.

Russia launches military sat: The Russian military launched a Molnia-M booster rocket Thursday, bringing the number of satellites launched since the beginning of the Soviet space programme close, to the 3,000 mark, AP says from Moscow.

The rocket was carrying a satellite of the Kosmos series and was the 15th spacecraft launched from Plesetsk, a facility some 1,200 kilometers (800 miles) north of Moscow, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported.

Canada won't pull out from Bosnia: Prime Minister Jean Chretien said Wednesday that Canada was not considering pulling its troops assigned as United Nations peacekeepers out of Bosnia, AFP reports from Ottawa.

Although the conditions for the peacekeepers were "quite difficult," Chretien maintained that they were not much worse than six months ago.

IRA-UK talks begin

WASHINGTON, May 25: Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams began talks here Wednesday with British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Patrick Mayhew, the highest level meeting between the two sides in more than 20 years, reports AP.

Adams, leader of the political wing of the Irish Republican Army, was to discuss with Mayhew efforts to launch formal peace talks between all parties involved in the northern Ireland conflict.

The meeting was held on the sidelines of a White House conference on investment in British-ruled northern Ireland and neighbouring counties.

Pakistan parties vow to resist blasphemy law amendment

ISLAMABAD, May 25: The Pakistan religious parties behind a planned national protest in support of the country's blasphemy law, today vowed to resist any government move to amend the legislation, reports AP.

The Milli Yekhehti Council (MYC), a multi-party religious forum, has called a general strike on Saturday. The forum leader threatened "violent" action against any lawmaker who supports amendments to the blasphemy law.

Religious groups reacted angrily to a statement by the government's adviser on human rights, Kamran Rizvi, that proposals were ready to amend the law to introduce safeguards

against its abuse.

The law raised an international controversy earlier this year when a 14-year-old Christian, Salman Masih, and his uncle were sentenced to death for blaspheming the Islamic Prophet Mohammed (SM). The sentence was overturned on appeal. But the two have since left Pakistan, fearing for their lives.

Christians and other minorities citing the Masih case, have since demanded the law be revised to prevent what they call its misuse by extremists to harass non-Muslim Pakistan.

Rizvi made it clear the death penalty for blaspheming Islam's prophet would remain

and the proposals only sought to minimise the chance of registering a false case.

The regional assembly in Punjab, the country's most populous province, joined the anti-amendment lobby through a unanimous vote.

Though the government has not shown itself keen to pursue proposed amendments, and some authorities even denied there was any such move, the religious alliance has intensified protests.

Jamaat Ahle Sunnat (JAS), one of the forum groups, announced after meeting federal officials here that MYC would call off Saturday's protest only if the government makes a clear commitment not to change the law.



US First Lady Hillary Clinton (2nd L), Spanish King Juan Carlos (L) and Queen Sofia (R) listen to US President Bill Clinton during the royal couple's visit to the White House in Washington on Wednesday. The King and Queen are in Washington to see their son, Prince Felipe de Bourbon, receive his graduate degree from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. — AFP/UNB photo

Israeli PM offers 'symbolic withdrawal' from Golan

JERUSALEM, May 25: Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin offered today a "symbolic withdrawal" from the Golan Heights, saying Syria had dropped conditions for the resumption of peace talks in late June, reports AP.

Israel's right-wing angrily called for a debate in parliament next week after US Secretary of State Warren Christopher announced a return to the negotiating table.

The opposition Likud Party accused the government of having secretly pledged a total withdrawal from the strategic plateau and renewed demands for immediate elections.

"The government will not be able to force Israel to quit the Golan," warned Moshe Katzav,

leader of the Likud's parliamentary party. He called for a halt to peace talks until a new government was in place. Elections are not due until November 1996.

"We will dismantle this government before it manage to dismantle our settlements," said Yehuda Harel, a leader of the 13,000 Jews who have settled on the Golan since Israel captured it in 1967.

Rabin told state radio: "We propose a symbolic Israeli withdrawal followed by normalisation of relations between our two countries over three years, which would test Syria's intentions."

During the three years Israel would pull armed forces back

behind a "peace border." He did not say where the border would fall.

Rabin also renewed Israel's insistence that a withdrawal from the Golan Heights take place in stages, to "test" Syria's commitment to peace.

"Syria was demanding that Israel accept geographic symmetry in the security arrangements before resuming talks," he said. Syria has now agreed that each side shall put forward its position.

Israel wants Syria to demilitarize a large zone than the Jewish state, which is much smaller. Damascus demanded that the zones be the same size — geographic symmetry.

Russia-Chechnya peace talks begin

GROZNY, May 25: Russian and Chechen rebel leaders today began peace talks in the devastated, regional capital Grozny in the first serious attempt at a settlement of their five-month conflict, reports Reuter.

Usman Imayev, representing rebel leader Dzhokhar Dudayev, was the first to arrive for the talks, held under the auspices of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). He was followed into the OSCE headquarters in Grozny by Nikolai Semyonov, Moscow's chief administrator in Chechnya, and Lecha Magomadov, representing the Moscow-backed Chechen administration.

Imayev, who arrived with only a light guard in a Russian jeep flying the Chechen independence flag, voiced optimism when he arrived at the single-storey OSCE building, set in grounds surrounded by walnut trees.

Russia plans to sell more arms in world market

MOSCOW, May 25: Russia plans to sell more weapons and military hardware on the lucrative world arms market, seeing its technology as giving it an edge over competitors, first Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Soskovets said today, reports Reuter.

"Many of our projects are way ahead of their foreign equivalents," Soskovets said, adding that Russia faced strong competition. Interfax News Agency reported.

The state company Rosvooruzhenie says Russian sales of arms and military equipment will be worth about 2.5 billion dollar this year, compared with 1.7 billion dollars in 1994.

Russia's traditional partners in the arms sector are India, China and Arab countries but it is also developing contacts with Thailand and the Philippines.

Territorial sea accord on Andamans ratified

YANGON, May 25: Myanmar, Thailand and India have ratified an agreement establishing a junction point delineating their territorial waters in the Andaman Sea, Myanmar state-run media reported today, reports Reuter.

Representatives from the three exchanged instruments of ratification of a 1993 agreement establishing the offshore junction point in Yangon on Wednesday, the reports said.

The exchange will further strengthen relations between the three countries.

China struggles to ensure economic-political stability

BEIJING, May 25: Revolutionary leader Mao Tse-tung liked nothing better than to stir things up. His successor Deng Xiaoping urged the nation to be bold as it embarked on unprecedented economic reforms, reports AP.

Their heir, President Jiang Zemin, is doing all he can to ensure that the times remain as uneventful as possible, maneuvering to enforce stability — in both politics and the economy.

Jiang's strategy also involves an assertive foreign policy that fortifies his credentials as a nationalist leader but has spooked China's neighbours and added to friction with other nations.

At home, Jiang has moved to improve his standing among his

two most important constituencies: the public and the Communist Party old guard, whose support he needs to stay in power.

"The demands of the situation require that the government be seen as doing something," says Nicholas Platt, an Asian affairs expert and president of the Asia Society.

Thousand of officials have been caught up in the Chinese political tactic of "killing the chicken to scare the monkey."

Among them, Beijing party chief Chen Xitong, who resigned to take responsibility for the suicide of a deputy mayor being investigated for economic crimes. He was the highest ranking official to be toppled in

Communist Party history specifically in connection with corruption.

In his place, the Politburo installed Wei Jianxing, the head of the party's chief anti-corruption agency.

"Fighting corruption isn't just swatting flies. You have to fight the tigers," the official magazine Outlook (Liaowang) said in its most recent issue.

New regulations were announced last week to help prevent nepotism and favouritism in official appointments and to require government officials to report the gifts they receive.

While Mao sent the nation reeling with nationwide political campaigns, Jiang's ultimate goal is stability.

Having vanquished his most prominent rival, he appears to have put a lid on investigations into allegations of bribery and kickbacks among other senior Beijing officials. Indications are that the purge has reached its limits.

Jiang is treading a fine line. Do too little, and public anger over corruption could explode. But going too far carries the same risks. The last time the public openly protested corruption, up to 1 million people took to Beijing's streets in the mass pro-democracy demonstrations of 1989 that eventually were crushed by troops.

This time, Jiang is taking no chances. Dissidents who submitted

petitions this spring demanding more freedom and tolerance have been rounded up. Security in the Chinese capital has been reinforced.

On the economic front, the government has slowed its re-vamping of the debt-laden state sector, fearing that more drastic action could lead to mass labour unrest.

It also has cut back on foreign borrowing and sought to impose controls on foreign investment — perhaps hoping to neutralise inflationary loans to the state sector by cutting back in other areas.

In place of boldness, officials like central bank governor Zhu Rongji are urging caution. The

signs point to a slower, more manageable pace of growth.

At the same time, China has adopted a more assertive stance on key foreign policy issues — one likely to bolster nationalism and win Jiang favour with powerful factions inside the military.

In many areas — trade, Taiwan, Tibet, nuclear testing — this has put Beijing and Washington at odds, and disturbed China's neighbours.

"They are looking for ways of fostering unity, and nationalism is a glue. So they respond to challenges from abroad in a tough way," says Platt, the Asian affairs expert.

President Bill Clinton barred US businesses from having dealings with Iran earlier this month to protest what the administration claims is Tehran's support of radical Muslim terrorists.

Germany won't join US ban on Iran

WASHINGTON, May 25: German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel said here Wednesday that his country would not follow the US lead and impose an embargo on trade with Iran, reports AP.

"We have different views here," Kinkel told a group of US lawmakers.

"It is my opinion that it would be wrong to drive this people of 60 million into a corner," Kinkel said.

President Bill Clinton barred US businesses from having dealings with Iran earlier this month to protest what the administration claims is Tehran's support of radical Muslim terrorists.