

US trying to blackmail: Assad

Syria on final list of govts sponsoring 'terrorism'

DAMASCUS, Feb 17: President Hafez Al-Assad has indirectly accused the United States of trying to blackmail Syria by including it in a list of countries alleged to sponsor terrorism, reports Reuters.

Talking to religious leaders at an iftar (break of fast) banquet in Damascus on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan, Assad said on Friday without referring to the US by name.

"Some are using glittering slogans such as democracy and human rights to blackmail others and to pressure them. Syria could never be led to submission by the word of terrorism or by scaring it with the charge of terrorism."

US officials said earlier on Friday that Syria had again been included on the annual State Department list of countries alleged to sponsor terrorism.

This was despite the fact that Syria was taking part in US-sponsored peace talks with Israel, which Assad made clear on Friday Damascus would continue to attend.

US officials say Syria is on the list because it allows radical Palestinian guerrilla groups opposed to the Palestinian-Israeli peace deals to maintain offices in Damascus and to operate in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley in Lebanon.

They say these groups include the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) led by Ahmed Jibril.

"We are against terrorism when it is a crime. But when they want terrorism to mean that one could not defend his occupied land, that is not the meaning of terrorism," Assad said.

"We terrorize the criminal but we could never terrorise a citizen who defends his own homeland," the Syrian President said.

US officials say Syria is not considered a "rogue state" in the same sense as the other countries included in the terrorism list — Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea and Sudan.

"We have a much more regular set of contacts with the Syrian government," State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said.

Earlier AFP says, Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad said Friday that his country wanted peace with Israel but would not bow to pressure and particularly accusations of terrorism.

He said "no progress" had been achieved so far in peace talks with Israel.

UN for creating standby force for Burundi

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 17: Fearing an explosion of ethnic violence in Burundi, the UN chief has called for creation of a standby force of up to 25,000 troops to intervene in the African country to prevent a repeat of the massacres in Rwanda two years ago, reports AP.

Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali made the recommendation in a report to be presented next week to the Security Council. A copy was obtained on Friday by the Associated Press.

The Burundi government has rejected any UN military force, saying its presence is unnecessary despite increasing violence between ethnic Hutus and Tutsis, the same groups which live in Rwanda.

UN officials said a standby force could move rapidly into Burundi to avoid a repeat of the 1994 disaster in neighbouring Rwanda, where the world organisations was criticised for not intervening fast enough to prevent the slaughter of up to 500,000 people in ethnic violence in 1994.

Cong won't press Sonia to enter politics: Tiwari

MADRAS, Feb 17: The Congress (Tiwari) president, ND Tiwari, today said the party would not demand that Sonia Gandhi, widow of late Rajiv Gandhi, should enter politics and take over the Congress leadership, reports PTI.

He told a press conference here that it was basically for Sonia Gandhi to decide whether she should enter the political arena or not, and the party would not put any pressure on her or make any demand in this regard.

Asked if the party would withdraw its stand that she should enter politics, in order to appease the National Front-Left Front combine and enter into an alliance with them, Tiwari said the question of the party expressing opposition to Sonia Gandhi did not arise as it had not formally discussed the matter of an electoral alliance with the NF-LF.

To a question, he said he had never stated that Sonia Gandhi should take over the post of Congress president as

pre-condition for unity. The Congress (Tiwari)'s parliamentary board would meet shortly to discuss the matter of political alliances with like-minded parties, he said. There had been no formal approach from the NF, though some individuals were in touch with the party, he added.

Tiwari said the party would consider foreign ties with secular and democratic forces. He denied any meeting with Arjun Singh and the former union minister, Madhavara Scindia, after the latter's resignation recently.

Tiwari pulled out resignations of Arjun Singh and himself in the wake of the Jain Hawala case.

BRIEFLY

Fire kills 17 in Taiwan: Fire swept through a four storey sauna in Taiwan's central city of Taichung yesterday killing 17 people, state-funded radio reported. Reuter reports from Taipei. Seventeen people are dead, a reporter for the state-funded Broadcasting Corporation of China said.

Fighter plane crashes in UP: An IAF Jaguar fighter plane crashed in a field in Kurmol village, about 15 kms from Gorakhpur Friday after it caught fire in the air due to some mechanical trouble, police said. PTI reports from UP.

The pilot escaped unhurt and batted out safely, police said. The aircraft was damaged completely. The inhabitants of Kurmol village under Khorabar police station were not affected in the incident, police said.

China issues portrait of Jiang: China has issued an official portrait of President Jiang Zemin, the third in a series that elevates Deng Xiaoping's chosen successor to the status of the aged patriarch and his predecessor Mao Zedong, AFP says from Beijing.

The Farmers Daily said today that the watercolour portrait had been created recently by Li Qi, noting that the master painter had previously produced similar pictures of communist China's first and second generation of leaders — referring to Mao and Deng.

1st session of PLO council on Mar 7: The first session of the newly-elected Palestinian self-rule council will start on March 7, one of its members told AFP on Friday, AFP says from Gaza City.

The first meeting of the autonomy council will take place between March 7 to 10. It will be chaired by Faraj el-Saraf a Christian elected from Gaza who at 81 is the oldest member of the chamber, he said asking to remain anonymous.

Beirut bldg collapse toll rises to 13: Rescuers retrieved five more bodies from the rubble of a four-story building Friday in downtown Beirut, raising the death toll to 13, then called off the search after two days, AP reports from Beirut.

Fourteen other people were injured when the battle-scarred building caved in Thursday in the old Jewish quarter of Wadi Abu Jmeil. One person was missing and presumed dead. The dead included brothers aged three months and three years, their mother and their grandmother.

Israel bombs Hezbollah posts: Two Israeli helicopters blasted suspected guerrilla positions late Friday after the Hezbollah launched large scale attacks on Israeli troops and allies in south Lebanon wounding six, security sources said, AFP says from Beirut.

Earthquake rocks Japan: A moderate earthquake measuring 6.6 on the Richter scale shook northern and eastern Japan early yesterday leaving two people injured and spreading fears of tidal waves along Japan's Pacific coast, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The state Meteorological Agency issued a tidal wave warning when the quake occurred at 00:23 am (1523 GMT), rising many people from bed and alerting fire station and media crews to midnight vigilance on shorelines.

'M-A-S-H' actor Stevenson dies: McLean Stevenson, who played the fumbling commanding officer and chief surgeon of the popular American television series "M-A-S-H", has died, his agent said Friday. He was 66, AP reports from Los Angeles.

Stevenson died of a heart attack late Thursday at a hospital, agent Robert Malcolm said.

Nigeria releases BBC newsmen: Nigerian authorities released an American journalist working for the British Broadcasting Corp. on Friday, after detaining her for 24 hours with no explanation, AP reports from London.

A BBC statement issued in London said Hilary Anderson was released in Lagos without charge at around 1830 GMT. She appeared to have been well-treated, but no reason for her detention had yet been received, said the statement.

Zambian commerce minister resigns: Commerce and Industry Minister Dipak Patel resigned on Friday because his own career could be hurt by a constitutional amendment aimed at a political opponent, AP reports from Lusaka.

Patel said he quit the Cabinet and the national executive committee of the ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy on "matters of principle."

British writer Bob Shaw dead: Bob Shaw, a popular and prolific British science fiction writer, died aged 64 this week, AP reports from London.

Shaw died in Warrington, north of London, on Feb. 11. The Guardian and Independent newspapers reported Saturday. He had been suffering from cancer. Shaw's books, which often first appeared in the United States, were character-driven and marked by a dry, deadpan humor. His language was studiously neutral and at first many thought the Belfast-born writer was American.

Repatriation of Serbs to Croatia slow, says UN

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 17: Despite a decrease in human rights abuses in Croatia, few Croatian Serb refugees have been able to return home because of a lack of cooperation from Croatian authorities, the UN chief said in a report on Friday, says AP.

Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in a report to the Security Council, said that as of January 31, only about 200 Serb refugees had been able to return to their homes in Croatia with the help of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Several hundreds others were believed to have returned on their own, the report said. But 14,000 refugees living in Serb-dominated Yugoslavia have registered with Croatian authorities to return, the report added.

"Disturbing reports continue to be received that (Croatian) government officials responsible for expediting this procedure are conducting their work in an uncooperative and obstructive manner," the report said.

An estimated 200,000 Serbs fled Croatia last summer when the Croat army recaptured most of the territory seized by rebel Serbs in 1991.

Boutros-Ghali said, however, that incidents of killing, arson and looting had declined since November in recaptured areas of Croatia. He cited a warning of the "initial emotion and quest for vengeance" that followed Croatia's victory over the self-proclaimed Serb republic in Croatia.

He also said the Zagreb government had responded favourably to international pressure following reports of widespread abuses against the minority Serb population.

Boutros-Ghali applauded Croatia's moves to prosecute about 1,000 people for crimes committed in connection with the summer offensive against the Serbs. Of that figure, 868 suspects or defendants are Croats, 39 are Serb and the rest of various other nationalities.

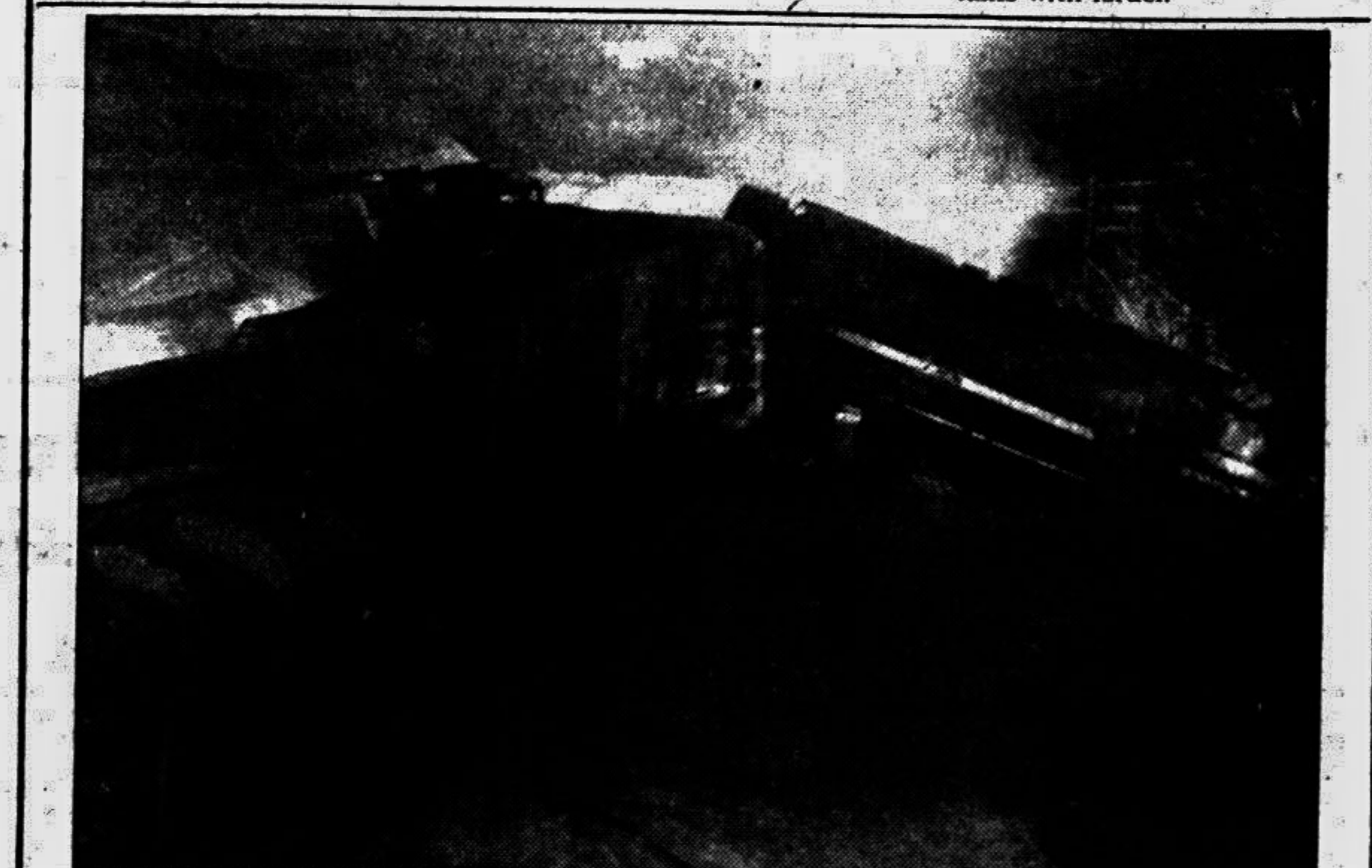
Boutros-Ghali said he had prepared a letter to be sent to him to determine the facts, said Justice Department spokesman John Russell.

Russell declined to comment on whether the letter could pave the way for a full investigation of Farrakhan's visits to countries such as Iraq, Iran and Libya which are on the US List of nations supporting terrorism.

But in Congress, one legislator maintains that Farrakhan has violated at least five US laws by staging his world friendship tour, which also saw him get the red carpet treatment from the military regime in Nigeria.

"Louis Farrakhan has been paying courtesy calls to the face of the earth," Republican representative Peter King charged this week.

The State Department has at least twice lashed out at Farrakhan over his meetings with Libyan leader Moamer Gaddafi



Cars from an Amtrak train lie off the tracks on Friday in Silver Spring, MD after a collision between an Amtrak train and a Marc commuter train. Six people are reported killed and 14 injured in the accident that happened just north of Washington, DC. — AFP/UNB photo

Asian-Americans move to fight changes in US immigration law

WASHINGTON, Feb 17: Angered by what many view as immigrant-bashing, Asian-Americans are mobilising as never before to fight drastic changes in immigration law that would keep family members from joining them in the United States, reports AP.

"Asian-Americans across the country are really riled up," said Daphne Kwok, executive director of the Organisation of Chinese-Americans. They are finally realising that we need to speak out.

Galvanising this historically a political community of 8.8 million people — roughly three per cent of the US population — there are bills in both Houses of Congress that would cut legal immigration by 30 to 43 per cent.

Since the middle of last year, Asian-American groups have organised forum, bought print advertisements, and

orchestrated letter-writing campaigns urging members of Congress to oppose the legislation.

Asian-Americans, mostly immigrants themselves, are especially alarmed by provisions in both bills that would eliminate virtually all immigration by siblings and adult children of US citizens and permanent residents.

Asians account for about two-thirds of the 250,000 married children and 1.6 million siblings currently waiting to immigrate, according to US government statistics. Some have languished in the backlog for decades.

Mobilizing against the proposed changes, a coalition of 18 Asian-American groups plans a three-day protest and lobbying effort here from February 28 as a key Senate panel begins reviewing the legislation.

The El Monte, California-based Asian-American association, a new non-profit group, plan to send out 350,000 letters in six languages over the next few days urging Asian-Americans fight the proposed cuts, chairman Marty Shin told AP.

"Will Congress separate you from your family?" reads an English version of the letter, which is also being sent out in Chinese, Korean, Tagalog, Vietnamese, and Japanese.

Immigration resonates strongly among Asian-American because of the unique and specific discrimination against them here in the past, experts and community leaders say.

"A lot of discrimination against Asians has been through immigration and naturalisation laws," said Karen Narasaki, executive director of the National Asia-Pacific American Legal Consortium.

Russian border guards kill 40 Tajik rebels

MOSCOW, Feb 17: About 40 Muslim guerrillas were killed on Friday in a fierce clash with Russian border guards in Tajikistan, which also claimed the life of one Russian serviceman, the border guards' command said, reports AP.

The guerrillas, who arrived from Afghanistan, had crossed the Pyandzh River into Tajikistan, setting off a warning system.

"As a result of pursuit the border guards began an unequal fight with the (untimbered) guerrillas, who took up defence positions in the reeds. They continued to engage the guerrillas until the arrival of reinforcements from nearby border posts and three helicopter gunships," the guards' command said.

The opposition unit was "fully eliminated," said the report, carried by the Interfax news agency.

2m Muslims offer prayers at Makkah on Jumatul Wida

MAKKAH, Saudi Arabia, Feb 17: Nearly 2 million worshippers thronged the Grand Mosque, Islam's holiest site, to offer prayers Friday as the fasting month of Ramadan drew to a close, reports AP.

About half the celebrants were foreigners, the rest Saudis, the government-run Saudi Press agency said. Another million worshippers prayed in Medina, the second-holiest city.

The traditional chant of "Allah Akbar," God is great, echoed from minarets in the huge mosque complex, its arches glowing golden under the sunlight in live images shown on state-run television.

White-robed men and women, clad in traditional head-to-toe dress prostrated themselves and mouthed prayers.

They all faced the Kaaba, the cubical black shrine toward which the world's 1 billion Muslims face in prayer wherever they are. To Muslims, the Kaaba is the house of God.

Strike disrupts life in Karachi

KARACHI, Feb 17: A strike called by the ethnic Mohajir National Movement (MQM) in protest at alleged extra-judicial killings of its supporters disrupted normal activity in the Pakistan city of Karachi today, reports Reuter.

Witnesses said main shopping and business centres remained shut and traffic was thin in most parts of the city. A senior police officer said no violence had been reported, though ambulance workers said one man had been shot and wounded in the eastern Quidabad area overnight.

Streets were virtually deserted in district central and parts of districts east and west, considered as MQM strongholds. Normally, government offices and institutions such as the Karachi stock exchange that have a two-day weekend are closed on Saturday, but private businesses and schools are open.

For representative King, said Farrakhan would be asked to testify at Congressional hearings next month.

A spokeswoman at the Chicago-based Nation of Islam headquarters said Farrakhan was to return to the United States next week ahead of an address to a black Muslim conference on February 25.

In a separate but related development, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Nassau county police in New York state launched an investigation after King received a death threat on Thursday that was linked to his criticism of Farrakhan.

Nassau county police Lieutenant Matthew Brady said King, who was in his home state on Friday, was under po-

Off the Record

Exploiting women thru' ads no more

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras: Sex sells, but not for long. Beginning Monday, alcohol and cigarette ads featuring women will be illegal in Honduras, reports AP.

The legislature passed a law in November prohibiting the use of female images — what it called exploitation of women to sell products hazardous to the health.

Advocates praised the measure, and said the time was right. The government gave businessman from both industries and national ad agencies three months to remove ads from newspapers, radio and television in which women suggestively invite (men) to consume these kind of products," said Dagoberto Espinoza, director of the Honduran Institute Against Alcohol and Tobacco Consumption.

Comic performer

LONDON: If you want Joan Armatrading to show some emotion, comic books might help, reports AP.

The only time the notoriously reclusive singer opened up in an interview with the Guardian newspaper was when the reporter brought up her comic book collection. "I am not a serious collector like some who only buy first editions in mint condition," she said in the interview published Saturday. "I just buy a lot of them to read and then keep them."

Her tastes in the genre are eclectic: the magic-realist Love and Rockets; the graphic 1950s horror-fest, Tales from the Crypt; costumed superheroes like Superman, Batman and the Fantastic Four; and one called Hate.

Otherwise, Armatrading, born in 1950 on the Caribbean island of St. Kitts and brought up in England, maintained her reputation as the "Garbo of Rock," saying "People have very funny ways about them, don't you think?" and not elaborating further on her personal life.

"Armatrading's often-fired love ballads, include love and Affection," "Show some Emotion" and "Drop the Pilot."

LTTE ship sunk by troops originated from Thailand

COLOMBO, Feb 17: The Tamil Tiger arms ship which was attacked and sunk by the Sri Lankan navy originated from Phuket in Thailand, a state-run newspaper said today, reports AP.

The vessel left the Thai port under the name "Comex-Joux 3" but later changed its name to "Horizon" when it entered Sri Lankan territorial waters on Wednesday, the Daily News said.

Navy gunboats contacted the skipper of the craft who said he was going to Mauritius but checked down with ports in neighbouring countries showed no record of such a ship, the paper said.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who in a statement Friday admitted that the ship belonged to them, charged that the Indian navy was involved in the destruction of their arms shipment.

The LTTE said two Indian navy craft "played an important role" in attacking their ship off Sri Lanka's north-eastern district of Trincomalee, and

added that five Tigers were killed in the attack. The Indian navy categorically denied that were involved in attacking the ship.

Sri Lankan military officials also denied the navy of neighbouring India was involved in the attack.

The Sri Lankan military deployed six gun ships and ground attack air craft to sink the Tiger shipment. They said that the Tiger guerrillas were unloading arms and ammunition on to five smaller boats to be taken to LTTE-held territory when they attacked.

According to the LTTE statement, the Tiger flotilla was on its way to attack Sri Lankan naval vessels at the port of Trincomalee.

The guerrillas are known to operate a fleet of ships registered in the names of bogus companies. Fourteen months ago, there were reports here that the LTTE had arranged the purchase of 30 tonnes of military supplies, including plastic explosives known as RDX, which it was trying to smuggle it in-

Hundreds of bodies found in Rwandan massacre site

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 17: An international forensic team has uncovered nearly 500 bodies, mostly women and children, from a mass grave near a Rwandan church where thousands were believed massacred in 1994, the American leader of the group said Friday, reports AP.

Dr Robert H. Kirschner of Chicago said nearly all the victims had been budgeoned or hacked to death with machetes. Their wounds indicated few offered resistance, he said.

Kirschner, director of the international forensic programme of Physicians For Human Rights, cast doubt on early reports.

US to confront Farrakhan for meeting sponsors of terrorism

WASHINGTON, Feb 17: US authorities are preparing to confront black activist Louis Farrakhan when he returns here next week from a tour that saw him shake hands with the leaders of several nations, accused of terrorism, reports AP.

Farrakhan, the controversial leader of the Nation of Islam movement, was to face questions from the US Justice Department about his month-long trip to 23 countries in the Middle East, Africa and the Gulf, a spokesman said.

"We have prepared a letter to be sent to him to determine the facts," said Justice Department spokesman John Russell.

Russell declined to comment on whether the letter

could pave the way for a full investigation of Farrakhan's visits to countries such as Iraq, Iran and Libya which are on the US List of nations supporting terrorism.

But in Congress, one legislator maintains that Farrakhan has violated at least five US laws by staging his world friendship tour, which also saw him get the red carpet treatment from the military regime in Nigeria.

"Louis Farrakhan has been paying courtesy calls to the face of the earth," Republican representative Peter King charged this week.

The State Department has at least twice lashed out at Farrakhan over his meetings with Libyan leader Moamer Gaddafi

last month and this week for calling the United States "great Satan" in Iran.

"The blood of Americans is on Gaddafi's hands, and it's on the Iranian hands," State Department spokesman Nick Burns said.

Farrakhan grabbed headlines in the United States in October when he spearheaded the organisation of the "million man march," a rally of African American men that was billed as a consciousness-raising event.

But his meetings with the leaders of the hardline regimes including a stopover this week in Iraq where he met with President Saddam Hussein has underscored to many his extremist views about race

relations. King maintains that Farrakhan's trip was in violation of the foreign agent registration act, which calls on US citizens to declare if they are paid to lobby in the United States on behalf of a foreign country.

The accusation resulted from a January 26 report from the Libyan news agency Janis that Gaddafi had agreed to contribute one billion dollars to support Farrakhan's political goals.

King has also cited the Logan Act which prevents private citizens from conducting their own foreign policy, but Russel said that law had never been invoked because of questions concerning its constitutionality.

Dan Michaels, a spokesman



Thousands of people gather for a peace rally in Belfast on Friday. Irish officials were meanwhile meeting with the IRA's Sinn Fein political wing in efforts to rescue the crippled Northern Ireland peace process after a second IRA bomb was defused in London. — AFP/UNB photo

US senator warns China against invading Taiwan

TAIPEI, Feb 17: AUS senator on Saturday warned China against invading Taiwan, saying Congress was ready to respond with "appropriate actions," reports AP.

Alaska Republican Frank Murkowski would not say what the actions may be. But he said China's leaders would be making "a great mistake" if they believed that attacking Taiwan would pay off.

Tensions flared last summer when China staged war games and tested missiles near Taiwan in response to Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hua's visit to the United States. China is reported to be again preparing large-scale war games on its southeast coast facing Taiwan.