

BRIEFLY



US veteran actor Jack Lemmon flashes his best smile while holding the 'Golden Bear' trophy he was awarded late on Friday at the Berlin International Film Festival. Lemmon, 71, was awarded the trophy for his lifetime work and achievements.

— AFP/UNB photo

Russian troops kill 3 in Chechnya: Russian forces delivered airstrikes on villages in Chechnya and neighbouring Ingushetia on Friday, Ingush officials claimed, amid increasing fears the war may spread outside Chechen borders. AP reports from Grozny.

Ingush Vice President Boris Agapov said three civilians were killed and four wounded when Russian troops also opened fire near the village of Arshy. Troops in about 40 armored vehicles and as many trucks blocked off the border villages of Arshy and Dattikh, the Interfax news agency said.

Quake shakes Japanese island: An earthquake registering 4.5 on the Richter Scale shook Amami Islands in southern Japan early Saturday, but there was no immediate report of damage or injury, the meteorological agency said. AFP says from Japan.

The epicentre of the quake, which occurred at 1:35 am (1635 GMT Friday) was located some 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) under the seabed near Amami Oshima island of Kagoshima prefecture, the agency said.

Royal Navy jet crash kills 2 in UK: A Royal Navy Harrier jet crashed Friday, killing the two crewmen on board, AP reports from London.

The plane crashed in the Black Down Hills, 160 miles (260 kms) southwest of London, during a routine training mission from Royal Naval Air Station Yeovilton, the Ministry of Defence said. It was the seventh Sea Harrier to crash since 1992, a spokesman said, requesting customary anonymity. Defence officials were not aware of link between the accidents.

Ghali to visit Brazil, Mexico: Saying that the United Nations needs the support of Latin America, Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali will visit Mexico and Brazil, AP reports from United Nations.

Boutros-Ghali leaves Monday for Brazil, his eighth visit to Latin America, the United Nations announced Friday.

The visit is to 'show the importance of Latin America for the United Nations and to obtain more support from these countries,' Boutros Ghali said. 'We need the support of Latin America.'

Lien Chan reappointed Taiwan's PM: The legislature Friday confirmed Lien Chan's reappointment as premier following last December's parliamentary elections. AP reports from Taipei.

After nearly eight hours of debate, the 164-seat parliament voted 85 to 77 with two invalid votes to extend Lien's term until May 20, by which time he is likely to become vice President.

Lien, 59, is President Lee Teng-hui's running mate in the March 23 presidential poll.

64 Chinese charged with crimes:

Authorities charged 64 Chinese nationals with crimes ranging from murder to robbery and kidnapping in a major crackdown on a Chinese gang called 'the flying dragons,' prosecutors said Friday. AP reports from New York.

So far 35 men have been arrested in New York, New Jersey, Virginia and Colorado in a sweep that followed a year long investigation by federal, state and local law enforcement officials, prosecutors said.

Russia, Cuba sign accord: Russia and Cuba signed an accord in Havana Friday pledging to set up a consortium to complete a nuclear plant east of Havana, Russian sources said. AFP reports from Havana.

Russian Atomic Energy Minister Victor Mikhailov and Marcos Porta, Cuban minister for basic industries, signed a memorandum of understanding on the completion of the Juragua plant east of Havana.

Gas explosion kills 19 in China: A coal gas explosion in China's eastern Jiangsu province killed 19 people, including three from Hong Kong as they prepared for Lunar new year, a Beijing controlled Hong Kong newspaper reported on Saturday. Reuter says from Beijing.

The explosion destroyed eight apartments in 35-flat complex in Yangzhou city on Sunday evening, lunar new year's eve, as Chinese families were eating and drinking to usher in the year of the rat, the Ta Kung Bao reported on Saturday.

Taliban rocket Kabul: 3 killed

KABUL, Feb 24: Three civilians were killed and six injured when rockets fired by the Taliban Islamic militia struck the Afghan capital Saturday, hospital staff and witnesses said.

The three died when two Soviet-built BM 21 rockets hit a road alongside a military installation near the centre of the capital, witnesses told AFP.

No independent confirmation was immediately available as to who was responsible for the attack.

The mangled remains of one of the victims, barely recognisable as a human being, was still lying next to a rocket crater after 15 minutes after the volley struck.

The street was fairly crowded, with civilians going about their routine business when the Taliban fired the rockets," witness Hamid Matin said.

— AFP/UNB photo

International

Opposition asks Rao to quit for fresh elections

NEW DELHI, Feb 24: The Indian opposition asked Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao to quit today, after a court asked detectives to investigate charges that he took bribes from the chief suspect in a raging corruption scandal, reports AFP.

The Communist Party of India (CPI) said Rao should resign immediately and order fresh elections to parliament in view of the snowballing scandal that has led to resignations by an unprecedented seven federal ministers.

'With a view to upholding parliamentary conventions and values, the prime minister should step down from office,' the CPI said in a statement. 'We demand that election dates be announced without further delay.'

The CPI's call came close on the heels of similar demands by its ally, the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

and the country's main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Indian People's Party.

The latest call for Rao's resignation followed an order by the Delhi High Court Friday to federal detectives to investigate charges that the premier used tainted money to bribe an opposition MP to save his government.

The court asked the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to file a report on the allegation by an activist that Rao paid bribes to the MP to vote for the ruling Congress (I) Party in parliament in September 1993.

The activist, Ravinder Kumar, alleged the MP, Suraj Mandal, switched his support to the Congress and helped it win a crucial no-confidence motion in parliament by a narrow margin after receiving the bribe money.

The money had reportedly come from Surendra Jain, a New Delhi businessman at the heart of the bribery scandal that has jolted Indian politics and virtually paralysed the government.

Seven ministers have resigned from Rao's government after being accused of taking bribes from Jain between 1988 and 1991 and doing out of favour in return. A total of 24 politicians are facing corruption charges in court.

The scandal has sullied the image of virtually every political party, including the main opposition BJP, whose President Lal Krishna Advani has quit parliament and whose Chief Minister of New Delhi bowed out Thursday.

Two centrist opposition MPs linked to the scandal have also quit parliament.

Friday's court order to the CBI followed an admission by Jain to the CBI that Rao took

money from him to force the defection of opposition deputies the activist said a part of the money was deposited in Mandal's bank account.

The government and the Congress have denied Jain's allegations. The 21-million-dollar scandal erupted four years ago when a raid on Jain's plush country retreat on New Delhi's outskirts unearthed coded payments made to 115 top politicians and bureaucrats between 1988 and 1991.

The raid followed the arrest of a Kashmiri separatist here who confessed to links with half-a-dozen moneybags specialising in illegal transfer of funds from abroad to India.

The opposition has been accusing Rao of stage-managing the probe to force the resignations of his rivals within the Congress and to shore up his sagging image. Congress sources said Friday's court order had put Rao in a spot.

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US, Japan decide to give top priority to Okinawa issue

SANTA MONICA, California, Feb 24: President Bill Clinton and Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto on Friday agreed that their biggest bilateral issue was streamlining US bases on Okinawa, Japanese officials said, reports Reuter.

'President Clinton and Prime Minister Hashimoto agreed to give top priority to deal with the Okinawa issue in order to strengthen bilateral ties based on the US-Japan security treaty,' said one Japanese official who took part in the meeting.

Japan's southern island of Okinawa became a political issue between the two countries last September when Okinawans, angry at the rape of a 12-year-old Okinawan schoolgirl, allegedly by US servicemen, staged a huge anti-base rally.

A Japanese court was expected to hand down a verdict on the three US servicemen on March 7.

More than 75 per cent of all US military facilities in Japan

are located on Okinawa, a small island strategically located in the East China Sea.

The issue has jeopardised both country's attempt to reaffirm the 1960 security treaty, which was expected to be the main subject of Clinton's state visit to Japan in April.

Clinton also welcomed Japan's decision to foot 19 million dollar to buy crude oil for North Korea, part of a US-North Korea agreement to build nuclear reactors for the Pyongyang government, the officials said.

The two leaders also called on China and Taiwan to settle between them an escalating war on words in a peaceful manner.

China has stepped up threats to invade Taiwan should the Taipei government declare independence. China regards Taiwan as a renegade province.

Clinton also welcomed the Hashimoto government's attempts to clear up a nasty housing loan firms affair.



Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto (L) meets with US President Bill Clinton on Friday at the Miramar Sheraton in Santa Monica, California. Hashimoto and Clinton met to discuss trade and security matters between the US and Japan.

— AFP/UNB photo

Anti-govt demonstration in Moscow Yeltsin for making reforms easier on society

MOSCOW, Feb 24: President Boris Yeltsin, confronting a strong communist challenge for his Kremlin post, has told his government that if it wants to stay in power it must make reforms easier on society, reporters Reuter.

'We called on people for a long time to tighten their belts, and people did this, but their patience is exhausted,' Yeltsin said in Friday's 'state of the nation' address to parliament for months before his presidential term runs out.

If we do not guarantee the social and economic rights of the people, if political instability starts, everything may be lost and we will be thrown back.'

Yeltsin has sharpened his rhetoric since a parliamentary

election in December showed mass discontent with Russia's chaotic and crime-ridden economic transition and loss of superpower status.

On Friday night his office said he had issued a decree unilaterally suspending sanctions against the Bosnian Serbs, a move clearly calculated to appeal to those who feel Russia should play a more decisive role on the world stage.

NATO and the United States favoured delaying the suspension, which should be agreed by the UN Security Council, until they saw more evidence of Bosnian Serb cooperation with the peace agreement sealed in Dayton, Ohio.

The United States welcomed Yeltsin's speech, saying

Fighting leaves 8 dead in Lanka

COLOMBO, Feb 24: Sporadic clashes between Tamil Tiger guerrillas and government forces claimed the lives of at least eight people across Sri Lanka's embattled northeast, officials said today, reports AP.

Gunmen from the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) shot dead a soldier and wounded two others at Kiran in the eastern district of Batticaloa today, officials said.

They said the ambush came a few hours after soldiers attacked a rebel tractor and killed five Tigers and recovered the weapons of the victims in the neighbouring district of Trincomalee.

Two more civilians were killed by gunmen in the town of Trincomalee Saturday, raising the toll to eight, officials said.

Nearly 50 people have died in the bitter clashes in the region in the past four days.



A Chechen oldtimer punches a fist in determination while addressing a rally in the village of Kurchaloy on Thursday as Chechens commemorate the deportation of their nation, carried out on Stalin's orders in 1944.

— AFP/UNB photo

UNSC urges Croatia to grant amnesty to rebel Serbs

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 24: The Security Council called Friday on Croatia to expedite the return of Croatian Serbs who want to go home and urged the Croatian government to consider granting amnesty to rebel Serbs, reports AP.

The council also reminded Croatia of its responsibility to cooperate with the international tribunal formed to prosecute war crimes arising from the conflict in the former Yugoslavia.

But the statement, which carries less weight than a resolution, also noted that the number of human rights violations reported in Croatia had declined since the Croatian army last summer recaptured most of its territory lost to rebel Serbs in 1991.

An estimated 200,000 Serbs fled Croatia during the summer offensive.

Off the Record

Encounter with former critic

BUENOS AIRES: Madonna met on Friday with President Carlos Menem, one of the most outspoken critics of her portrayal of former first lady Evita Peron in an upcoming Alan Parker film, reports AP.

The 90-minute encounter at the presidential villa in suburban Buenos Aires, was also attended by Parker and co-stars Jonathan Pryce and Antonio Banderas.

'We think certain assurances were made by the cast that there would be no offensive scenes,' a presidential spokesperson told The Associated Press.

Shooting of the film, based on Andrew Lloyd Webber's controversial Broadway musical, which painted Evita as a power-hungry populist, began earlier this month and will end in March.

Parker has said that he hopes Menem will allow him to film on the balcony of Government House where Evita used to give speeches.

Menem, sensitive to how many members of his Peronist Party are appalled at the idea of Madonna playing Evita, has so far refused.

He has branded Madonna 'totally unsuitable' and dismissed the musical as 'an utter disgrace ... a libelous interpretation.'



Dolphins, sea lions hostage in legal dispute

LIMA: A pair of dolphins and two sea lions are being held hostage in a hotel swimming pool by a legal dispute between their owner and an entertainment promoter, officials said Friday, reports AP.

The animals, which are living in an Olympic-size hotel swimming pool, came to Peru last year from Mexico as part of the Acapulco Dolphin, Seal and Divers Show and entertained spectators in Lima and three other Peruvian cities.

'They are here in the hotel as lodgers, rather original guests,' said Luciano Coche-lla, manager of El Pueblo Hotel on the outskirts of Lima. 'It was a question of charity.'

The health of the beasts began deteriorating after a court order on December 21 kept them from leaving the country when they were already in protective containers at the Lima airport.

The show was scheduled to go to Chile, but the animals, dolphins named Tana and Neptuno and sea lions named Bondy and Toto, are caught in the midst of a dispute between their owner, Convimar of Mexico, and a local promoter, according to the Lima daily El Mundo. There was no word on when the dispute might be settled.

Cochella said the hotel had an extra swimming pool it filled it with salt water for the animals, which are under constant watch by one of three trainers who stayed with them.

Greece wins European backing for settlement of dispute with Turkey

PARIS, Feb 24: Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis said Friday he had won European backing for a legal settlement of his country's sovereignty dispute with Turkey over islets in the Aegean Sea, reports AP.

Simitis was speaking here after meeting French President Jacques Chirac on the last leg of a tour of European capital aimed at drumming up support from Greece's European Union partners which included Brussels and Bonn.

France will be more disposed to show its support to Greece if it does not create new difficulties in cooperation between the EU and Turkey's presidential spokesman Catherine Colonna said.

Meanwhile in London the British government called on both Greece and Turkey to step up talks to resolve the dispute. There is a need for them to intensify their dialogue on all aspects of bilateral relations, a foreign office spokesman said.

British troops resume patrol in Belfast

BELFAST, Feb 24: Their green-camouflaged uniforms clashing with the red brick of west Belfast, armed British troops resumed foot patrols here Friday in anticipation of an Irish Republican Army attack, reports AP.

An eight-member patrol of Scottish soldiers flanked two policemen walking down west Belfast's Springfield Road at midday, trailed by a gaggle of TV crews and photographers.

Elsewhere, olive-drab Land Rovers shuttled troops from one base to another as troops totting SA-80 automatic rifles hit Belfast's streets for the first time in 11 months — another sign of rising tensions since the outlawed IRA broke its cease-fire February 9.

Police requested the military backup for patrols in Catholic parts of Belfast, where several joint army