

Leaders begin summit amid hope

Euro-Asia summit to help build new economic and strategic ties

BANGKOK, Mar 1: Asian and European leaders began an unprecedented summit today, the first step in building what they hope will be a profoundly new economic and strategic relationship between two regions with a long, colonial history, reports Reuters.

Both sides say they have high hopes of success at the unusually informal summit, with contentious issues such as Asian labour standards and human rights abuses and issues in places like East Timor pushed firmly to the sidelines in favour of a "feel good" atmosphere.

"We are assembled here with one common purpose, to create a dynamic new linkage and form a new partnership between Asia and Europe," Thai Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-archa said as he opened the summit.

He stressed the core summit issue - constructing a new business relationship between Europe, the world's oldest economic powerhouse and East Asia, its newest...

"If we can create a model of cooperation at a level similar to APEC's, it would bring about a new balance among the world's three centres of economic growth," he said.

Banharn was referring to the 18-member Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, whose commitment to removing trade barriers by 2020 was one of the magnets that drew the 15 European Union (EU) nations to Bangkok.

They are not part of APEC. All 10 Asian participants in the Bangkok summit -- the seven members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, China and South Korea, are in APEC. So is

the United States. Asian leaders who pushed for the Bangkok summit say they want to strengthen what they see as the weak link in the North America-Europe-East Asia economic triangle they regard as crucial to global stability.

Asia and Europe have a long way to go in forging the new relationship they seek.

The Bangkok summit is not expected to produce concrete results, but, officials say, is aimed at sweeping away old perceptions as the leaders meet with only translators present, an unusual way of conducting business at this high

level. Many Asians see Europe as an arrogant but increasingly decrepit region overly fond of lecturing others on how to live.

Many Europeans see Asia as a cheap workshop exploiting labour and ignoring human rights to steal jobs from Europe.

Europe puts only one per cent of its investment in Asia, the world's fastest growing economic region. Asia invests almost nothing in Europe. Each shows obvious signs of distrust in the other.

But Europe's intention to raise deeply contentious issues like human rights abuses and

Asian labour standards fell by the wayside as the summit approached.

Such issues were thrust, at Asian insistence, into the sidelines to ensure the "feel good" factor - in one senior Asian official's words - predominated in the talks.

But even key bilateral issues seemed to lose their bitter edge in the relaxed informality of the summit.

For instance, the passion of Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Guterres for human rights in Lisbon's former colony of East Timor, now ruled unapologetically by Jakarta, had threatened to sour the summit atmosphere.



Leaders of the Asia-Europe summit pose for a group photograph in their Thai silk shirts before an informal dinner on Thursday. The leaders from 10 Asian and 15 European Nations begin two days of meetings from Friday. — AFP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY



A file photo taken July 28, 1993 shows a Somali woman having her child vaccinated against meningitis. The French humanitarian organisation Medecin Sans Frontieres (MSF) has launched a major operation to stem a meningitis epidemic which it said has claimed 1,650 lives in northern Nigeria. In a statement issued on Thursday, MSF said that it planned to care for 15,000 sick people in health centers and vaccinate some 2 million others in Nigeria. — AFP/UNB photo

Bombay blast accused faces trial:

Mohammad Ahmed Mansoor alias Sohal, an accused in the serial blast case who was taken to New Delhi to face trial in the designated TADA Court there for a brief period early this year, was yesterday produced before the designated TADA judge, JN Patel, in Bombay. FTI says from Bombay.

He had been lodged in the Bombay central prison along with other accused in the blast case. Mansoor was charged with receiving four co-accused in Dubai when they were on their way to Pakistan for arms training in the serial blast conspiracy.

Legwaila new UNSC president:

Botswana's ambassador, Legwaila Joseph Legwaila on Friday takes over the rotating presidency of the UN Security Council from US Ambassador Madeleine Albright, Reuter says from United Nations.

The Council presidency rotates monthly among its 15 members according to the English alphabet. In an unusually public handover after the Council voted to extend Haiti peacekeepers late on Thursday, Albright handed Legwaila the gavel which he brandished in his right hand.

AI secy gen condemns EU:

The Secretary-general of Amnesty International condemned the European union yesterday for its declared intention not to confront Asian countries over human rights at their Bangkok summit. AFP reports from Bonn.

In an article published in the Express Daily, Volkmar Deite said that statements to this effect by senior EU leaders -- notably European Commission President Jacques Santer -- were an admission of bankruptcy. He called in particular on the German government to speak out on the growing number of executions in most countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Latvia for not exposing KGB agents:

Latvian lawmakers on Thursday decided against exposing the names found in KGB agent files, saying this was not necessarily proof of collaboration with the Soviet Secret police, news reports said. AP says from Riga, Latvia.

Iraq defuses 335,237 bombs:

Iraq said on Thursday it had defused hundreds of thousands of bombs, mines and missiles the US led coalition forces dropped over Iraq during their 1991 campaign to eject Iraqi troops from Kuwait, Reuter says from Baghdad.

Since the beginning of the US Zionist (Iraq's name for Israel) military aggression, Iraq's civil defence teams defused 335,237 mines, bombs and missiles dropped against Iraqi residential quarters, villages and farms all over the country, the official Iraqi news agency INA said.

Blast hurts 2 Lankan soldiers:

A grenade exploded inside an army ambulance in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo Thursday, wounding two soldiers, police in Colombo said. AFP reports from Colombo.

The explosion, believed to be an accident, occurred at Colombo's slave island area where the military headquarters and the army hospital are located, a police spokesman said. The blast came amid a city wide alert for attacks by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which has been accused of the suicide bombing of the Central Bank last month, killing 90 and wounding 1,400.

Anti-US protest in S Korea:

Anti US protests erupted in Seoul and in Kwanju yesterday over proof that the United States had condoned the use of troops to put down a 1980 civilian uprising in Kwanju that left 200 dead, AFP reports from Seoul.

In Kwanju riot police fired volleys of teargas shells to quell a march by 500 angry, slogan-souting students on the American center. Yonhap news agency said. Souting "US apologist" and "US masterminds of Kwanju massacre," the students fought the police with iron bars and rocks for two hours before being driven back, Yonhap said.

Talks on Turkey's coalition govt concludes

ANKARA, Mar 1: Turkey's rival conservative parties wrapped up a marathon round of coalition talks early today, laying the ground for a meeting between their leaders to set up a right wing alliance that would deny islamists power, reports Reuter.

Motherland Party (ANAP) and True Path Party (DYP) officials ended 12 hours of "technical talks" after 4 am (0200 GMT), Anatolian News Agency said.

ANAP leader Mesut Yilmaz and DYP head Tansu Ciller, the caretaker prime minister, were scheduled to meet later in the day.

The pair, bitter personal rivals, have agreed on the outlines of a coalition but the issues of who should go first in a rotating premiership and how to overcome the lack of an absolute majority in parliament remain unresolved.

Intelligence war heats up between govt, Tamil Tigers

COLOMBO, Mar 1: To his colleagues, he was a quiet, unremarkable bureaucrat in the labour department. To the Tamil Tiger guerrillas, police say, he was the highest ranking mole in the Sri Lankan government, reports AP.

For 10 years, police say, he directed Tamil rebel terrorist strikes in the capital from a 5-a-month rented room in a Buddhist monastery.

On February 9 -- nine days after a suicide bomber drove a truckload of explosives into the Central Bank, killing 88 people and wounded 1,400 -- police arrested Ramalingam Dharmalingam, a 30-year veteran of the civil service.

If the charges against him are proved, it would be the first time officials had discovered a Tamil rebel infiltrating deep into the Sri Lankan government.

Dharmalingam's arrest was kept secret for nine days, but since then Sri Lankan newspapers have touted him as the most important rebel to fall into the government's hands.

"Many eyebrows were raised at the heights from which the Tiger support comes," the state-controlled Daily News wrote in an editorial. "If there is one lesson from the incident, it is that we should report to the authorities any strangers who have come to lodge with us."

Police have released little information about Dharmalingam's alleged activities. But the Daily News quoted Bandula Wickremasinghe, a high-ranking investigator, as saying that incriminating documents found in two suitcases in Dharmalingam's room prove he was involved with the Tigers.

Detectives are scrambling to see if other senior Tamil officials also spy for the Tigers, who have been fighting since 1983 for a homeland for the Tamil minority. More 40,000 people have died in the war.

Although Tamils say the Sinhalese majority discrimi-

nates against them, many Tamils work in government and are fully integrated into Sri Lankan society.

Many Tamils in Colombo say the harassment has increased recently as police and intelligence services sweep Tamil neighbourhood hoods for guerrillas. The government says rounding up and questioning Tamils is essential to counter the threat of terrorism.

Sri Lanka's intelligence agencies have long been regarded as a joke. In the days when domestic politics outweighed the Tamil uprising in national importance, agents reportedly spent much of their time tapping the telephones of opposition politicians and journalists.

But the role of counterintelligence grew more important after peace talks broke down last April and the Tigers launched a succession of terrorist raids in the heart of the capital.

A Buddhist monk, Shantha

Shobana, was the first to grow suspicious of Dharmalingam.

Shobana recognised a newspaper picture of a Tamil guerrilla who detonated explosives concealed in a handcart piled high with coconuts in downtown Colombo last August, killing 21 people. The guerrilla had been a frequent visitor to his temple, where Dharmalingam lived.

The monk tipped off police, but they showed no interest. Why would Dharmalingam, an assistant labour commissioner, be friend of a suicide bomber?

Six months later, a Tiger suspect told stunned police during interrogation that Dharmalingam was the top Tiger in Colombo.

He was the brother-in-law of the former commander of Jaffna City, the guerrillas' long-time stronghold, and had been directing operations in the capital for 10 years, she said.

Police describe Dharmalingam, 56, as a reserved, "pretty ordinary" bureaucrat

Off the Record

Erotic boxing

YEKATERINBURG, Russia: Despite an advertising blitz promising "striptease" boxing matches between Hollywood actresses, promoters sold only 20 tickets to the off beat event in the Ural city of Yekaterinburg, reports AP.

Yekaterinburg residents are probably already fed up with the massive flow of Western sex movies, striptease shows and other erotic amusements into the former Soviet Union, the ITAR Tass news agency said Wednesday.

It said organisers of the event promised "exciting fights with striptease" by former Hollywood actresses. Ticket prices started at 20,000 rubles 4 dollars, which the news agency noted "is quite affordable, even for low income people."

Unique unity

BRUSSELS: The European Union is taking unity to new lengths -- 17 centimeters 6 4/5 inches, to be exact. That's the new minimum length condoms must be to earn the EU stamp of approval, reports AP.

"It's not long enough, you can endanger the health of the consumer," Suzanne Larque, of the European Committee for Standardization, said Wednesday after the EU set the new size standard for condoms sold in 18 European countries.

No maximum length was set, she said by telephone from her office in Cambridge, England.

Ms. Larque said the Committee's working group on condoms found no indication that size requirements varied for the different member nations.

Testing will be standardized to ensure the safety of condoms, used to prevent fertilization and transmission of the HIV virus that causes AIDS.

"This new European Standard... sets one of the most stringent quality levels in world," the Standardization Committee said in a statement. To get onto the EU market, condoms must be filled with water to check for holes, and be mechanically stretched and inflated to test strength.

Tourists don't bother royal tell tales

LONDON: The guard was about to change Thursday morning, and tourists who were running late huffed and puffed past the trotting horses, as they always do, rushing for a glimpse of the pomp at Buckingham palace, reports AP.

Police in their tall black helmets politely posed between couples from America, as they always do, while friends with cameras snapped away.

No matter that the morning papers were filled with headlines of the pending divorce between Prince Charles, heir to the throne, and his estranged wife, Princess Diana.

"That's their business," said Bruce Mills. "That doesn't bother me at all."

The British Tourist Authority says "royalty and pageantry are central to Britain's image as a tourist destination and the way it is promoted to visitors." But with the specter of royal divorce hanging over Britain, and raising questions about how long the monarchy can survive, is the tourism trade -- a big source of Britain's income -- likely to suffer?

Bosnia govt declares siege of Sarajevo over

SARAJEVO, Mar 1: The long siege of Sarajevo was declared formally at an end as Muslim-Croat police took over a strategically-located suburb, deserted by most of the Serbs who controlled it during Bosnia's 3 and half-year war, reports Reuters.

On Wednesday, UN spokeswoman Sylvana Poa said that 39 states were so far in arrears that under the UN Charter they lost their voting rights in the General Assembly.

The Charter stipulates that a member "in arrears in the payment of its financial contributions to the organisation shall have no vote in the General Assembly if the amount of its arrears equals or exceeds the amount of the contributions due from it for the preceding two full years."

The Charter allows states to retain their vote however if they can show that their failure to pay is due to conditions beyond their control.

Leaders of Cong (I) compared to King Midas

NEW DELHI, March 1: A top Indian politician has compared leaders of the ruling Congress (I) Party -- dogged by several corruption scandals -- to the legendary King Midas saying anything they touched turns to gold for their own profit, reports AFP.

The government has a Midas touch," opposition MP Syed Shanabuddin told parliament her late Thursday during an acrimonious debate over the country's worst bribery scandal, which allegedly involves 115 top public figures.

"Whatever they touched, they turned to gold. They touched sugar and out came gold, they touched defence equipment and it turned to gold. I dare not say what happened when they touched telecom equipment," he said.

The 110-year-old Congress, India's oldest political party, has been plagued by a series of corruption scandals since the late 1980s.

An alleged payoff by Swedish arms manufacturer Bofors for a howitzer gun deal led to the fall of slain Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's government in 1989.

been expelled nearly four years ago.

"There have been some incidents where Muslims returned to find their belongings being carried away by Serbs and ofcourse we will stop that," the federation police chief in Iljias, Muzaffer Begic, told Reuters.

The Muslim-led Bosnian government marks March 1, 1992, as its date of independence, when the results of a referendum breaking with Serbian-led Yugoslavia were announced.

Muslims and Croats, forming a two-thirds majority, voted for independence while most Serbs boycotted the ballot. The next day, Serb barricades went up around Sarajevo.

Sarajevo state radio broadcast a letter from US President Bill Clinton honouring Bosnia's independence.

"The world knows the terrifying prices that your country paid for its independence," it said. "Despite all of that, Bosnia-Herzegovina remained faithful to a tolerant multi-ethnic society. By implementing the Dayton agreement that ideal may become a reality for all people in Bosnia."

Bildi, head of reconstruction efforts aimed at preventing war erupting again once NATO forces leave, met Serb authorities in Brcko, the main town in the corridor linking Serb-held areas of northwest Bosnia to those in the east and to Serbia.

The Brcko region was the only land dispute left unresolved by the Dayton agreement. Its future will be decided by international arbitration within a year.

Brcko Mayor Miodrag Pajic told Bildi the arbitrator's ruling would affect only ceasefire lines. But Bildi said the town -- and control over the corridor -- would be at stake.

Once a Muslim-majority town, Brcko was "ethnically cleansed" of Muslims and Croats by the Serbs in 1992.



A young Catalan holds up a large fan with the portrait of Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez at an election rally campaign in Barcelona on Thursday. — AFP/UNB photo

Cuba rejects US bid to tighten sanctions

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 1: Brushing aside the threat of tightened US sanctions for the downing of two American civilian planes, Cuba says it is engaged in a "fatherland or death struggle" with Washington, reports AP.

In a letter to the UN Security Council, Cuba's Foreign Ministry dismissed as "contradictory and absurd" President Clinton's moves to restrict travel to the island and toughen the US economic embargo.

The statement, dated Tuesday, was released to the council on Thursday.

"For the information of United States leaders, and for the information of the miserable traitors from our country who are trying to collaborate with them, this is a fatherland or death struggle," the Foreign Ministry statement said.

"The fighting and victorious spirit of our people is impervious to any threat."

Clinton ended charter flights between the United States and Cuba on Monday and vowed to support legislation strengthening the embargo against Cuba. On Wednesday, a hard-hitting sanctions bill aimed at driving foreign investors from Cuba was approved by the president and Congress. The so-called "Liberty" bill allows Cuban-Americans to sue foreign companies that use commercial property confiscated by the Cuban government.

The Cuban statement was drafted before the sanctions bill was announced Wednesday, and did not address it.

The two unnamed Cuban-Americans when they were shot down off Cuba's coast on Saturday. They belonged to Brothers to the Rescue, a Miami-based group that has rescued Cuban refugees from the waters around Cuba and dropped leaflets over the country criticizing Fidel Castro's Communist government.

Israel rules out talks with Hamas over ceasefire

JERUSALEM, Mar 1: Israel on Friday ruled out negotiations with the Islamic Hamas group which offered the Jewish state a conditional ceasefire after killing 25 people in suicide bombings this week, reports Reuter.

"There's no room for negotiations with terror cells inside the area of the Palestinian authority because we then exempt the Palestinian authority from its main responsibility in the agreement," said Israeli Foreign Minister Ehud Barak.

The important element in our agreement with them is that they have to do the work," he told Israel radio.

Hamas and its Qassam military wing issued a statement on Thursday offering to halt attacks against Israeli civilians in exchange for a prisoner release and other conditions.

Qassam Brigades announce to the Israeli government an important proposal to stop the military activities against the

civilian Jews under the following conditions:

"Stop the organised Israeli terrorism against Hamas and the Qassam Brigades, halt any aggression against Palestinian civilians in the occupied lands and release all Hamas movement prisoners from Israeli jails."

The statement was signed by Qassam Brigades, Hamas movement in Palestine, and gave Israel until March 8 to respond.

Hamas, which opposes Israel's PLO peace deal, has issued similar proposals in the past but Palestinian sources said this was the first time that both the political wing of the group and its military branch had made a joint offer.

Earlier report says, Hamas has offered Israel a conditional ceasefire, drawing an initial cautious response to what the militant Islamic group called a "golden opportunity" to end a cycle of bloodshed.

'Movement for separate Bodoland soon'

GUWAHATI, Mar 1: The Bodoland Peoples Party will soon launch a mass movement for a separate "Bodoland" state for alleged non-implementation of the Bodoland accord and non inclusion of the 10 km area of international boundary within the Bodoland Autonomous Council, reports PTI.

The decision was taken here Thursday at the meeting of the central working committee of the party which was presided over by the President, Prem Singh Brahma, who is also the BAC chief.

The meeting also decided to withdraw its membership of the coordination committee of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (I) and hoped that the demands would be solved in the interest of peace and prosperity of the people of the state.

The government also had received advanced warning that the Tigers were planning a massive operation against commercial target. But lacking details, the warning failed to prevent the January 31 suicide attack on the Central bank, the most devastating strike of the war.

The arrest of two Tigers who escaped death on that mission may yield another intelligence bonanza. Rarely have commandos of the Black Tiger unit, trained in suicide attacks, been captured. When threatened with capture, most consume cyanide capsules that they wear around their necks

Police believe he used his government position to cultivate friendships with defence officials and learn military secrets.

At first, Dharmalingam denied everything. But a week after his arrest, police dug up two large plastic dolls buried in the Dharmadhutha temple, where he shared a room with three unsuspecting Sinhalese. Hidden inside the toys were 16 grenades and the detonators for two rockets that were found close by.

The case was among several others that indicate the intelligence agencies are boosting