

BRIEFLY



President of the National Assembly of Cuba, M Ricardo Alarcon, shows the press on Thursday in Montreal the kind of plane Cuba shot down February 24 belonging to the Cuban American group, Brothers to the Rescue. Alarcon said that the two planes were flying in Cuban airspace. — AFP/UNB photo

Niger to resume ties with France
The Niger government said Thursday it was resuming normal relations with France, which was suspended following a military coup on January 27, and Paris confirmed it was resuming civilian aid. AP reports from Niamey.
Paris asked 85 French doctors and teachers working in the West African country to resume their duties at the end of February, officials said.

Firecrackers kill 76 in China
Firecrackers killed 76 people, injured another 61 and caused damage worth 32 million yuan (3.9 million dollars) during the February 18-25 Lunar New Year period, China Daily reported yesterday. AFP says from Beijing.
Of the 4,540 fires recorded in the country's cities during the festival period, more than 2,250 were caused by firecrackers, a slightly lower figure than last year, it said.
Firecrackers, traditionally set off to scare off bad spirits, have been outlawed in 130 Chinese cities.

45,000 newborns die in Nepal
At least 4,000 women and more than 45,000 newborns die during childbirth every year in Nepal, the state-run English language Rising Nepal Daily reported on Thursday. AFP reports from Kathmandu.

The newspaper also announced a nation-wide "clean delivery awareness day" to be held today to try to bring the infant death rate down.
The event, to be held in more than 20,000 localities throughout the Himalayan nation, will include entertainment and education campaigns by trained birth attendants, it said. Kits to help maintain sanitary conditions during birth will also be demonstrated and distributed.

Taki wins Comoros polls
Mohamed Taki Abdulkarim has won the first round of the presidential election in the Comoros, according to official results released in Moroni yesterday. AFP reports from Moroni.
Abbas Djoussouf came in second and will face Taki in a run-off on March 16.

The Electoral Commission said Taki had won 21.28 of the vote against 15.71 per cent for Abbas. Omar Tamou came in third with 13.26 per cent.

Nigeria seals border with Benin
The military government has closed Nigeria's border with Benin, stranding traders and travellers along a 370-mile (600-km) stretch of frontier, news reports said Thursday. AP reports from Lagos.
The action was an apparent retaliation for Benin's decision to close its border last week before presidential elections, without consulting Nigeria.

As a result, Nigeria's ambassador to Benin was not allowed through the Benin side a week ago when he wanted to return to Lagos for routine consultations, the News Agency of Nigeria reported.

16 die in Malawi police custody
Sixteen people have died while in police custody in the Malawi capital Lilongwe, apparently because of overcrowding, Reuters reports from Blantyre.
Malawi Police Inspector-General Patrick Chikapa said on Thursday that the 16 perished in police cells on Tuesday. Chikapa did not say how the victims died, but a diplomat told Reuters: "It seems they died in overcrowded conditions."

Peres' popularity falls
Israeli Premier Shimon Peres has fallen behind his right-wing rival for the first time in opinion polls for general elections in May, hurt politically by Muslim suicide bombings threatening the peace process. Reuters reports from Jerusalem.
A Smith Research Centre survey released on Thursday showed that if the elections due on May 29 were held now, right-wing Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu would win 48 per cent of the vote compared with 46 per cent for Peres. The poll commissioned by Israel television underlined how the bombing campaign has flattened the wave of public sympathy Peres had been riding since the November killing of his predecessor Yitzhak Rabin, who launched the Middle East process.

WHO favours special fund for ebola
The World Health Organisation (WHO) favours setting up a special Africa fund to carry out research into ebola fever and other new viruses, its director-general said. AFP reports from Kinshasa.
Emerging diseases were a "priority" for WHO Dr Hiroshi Nakajima said as the first international conference on ebola fever wound up Thursday in Kinshasa.

Gingrich for sharply increasing defence spending
WASHINGTON, Mar 8: The United States must sharply increase weapons spending and expand its spy capabilities or face increasing security risks in the age of terrorism, House Speaker Newt Gingrich said Thursday, reports AP.
In a speech at a conference on NATO, Gingrich accused the Clinton administration of sending troops around the world while refusing to provide them with ample equipment.
"We are, in fact, entering the age of terrorism," Gingrich said. "We've had this fantasy since the fall of the Berlin Wall that the age of freedom has arrived."

'Arafat to choose between Palestinian unity and peace'

JERUSALEM, Mar 8: Yasser Arafat, who has lived most of his political life in the crossfires of wars and crosshairs of would-be assassins, is a difficult man to pin down, reports AP.
The Palestinian leader sent his police to arrest the leaders of the Islamic movement Hamas, which has tried to wreck the peace process with a devastating series of suicide attacks.
But he attended the funeral of assassinated Hamas bomb maker Yehiya Ayyash, calling him a "struggler and martyr" for the Palestinian cause.
Arafat also laces his speech with references to "jihad," an ambiguous term that can mean "holy war" in some contexts or political struggle in others.
Israelis are demanding that the real Arafat stand up and show he is committed to the peace process.
Some of Prime Minister Shimon Peres' Cabinet members are saying Israel should no longer rely on Arafat to keep order and instead do the job with its own security forces.
"The question is, what is the alternative to Arafat?" said Shmuel Goren, who ran Israel's military government in the West Bank and Gaza Strip until the advent of Palestinian autonomy in 1994.
The only option to relying on Arafat, he said, was to send the army back to the West Bank and Gaza Strip towns. But

in 27 years of occupation, Israel's army didn't halt violence there, and practices such as house demolitions, midnight raids and mass arrests only bred more hatred.
Instead, Goren, a retired major general, believes Arafat will respond if Israel and the West keep up the pressure.
Part of that pressure is demonstrating that Israel still has the power to affect day-to-day life in a major way. The government has imposed a total ban on work in Israel, halted travel between Palestinian cities and raided Hamas centers.
"Arafat is doing something, but not enough," Goren said in an interview. "He has his own difficulties, but I'm sure that if he's pushed he can do more."
For more than 30 years, however, Arafat's style has been to mix a little force with a lot of political maneuvering and pursue a seemingly contradictory policy.
Tel Aviv University political scientist Meir Litvak calls it Arafat's "yes-and-no policy."
Arafat wants the peace process to continue because it will advance his goal of getting an independent state, Litvak said. For that, he needs Israel and talks peace.
But he also wants to maintain Palestinian unity — so he hints that he agrees with some of the aspirations of Hamas, which seeks to establish an Islamic state in all of former Palestine, and replace the

Jewish state that exists in what is now Israel.
Because he needs Hamas to consolidate power, Arafat has apparently tolerated a certain number of attacks on Israeli civilians — as long as they were not launched from PLO-controlled areas.
"I don't think that for him peace is a value in itself," said Litvak. "Peace is a price he has to pay."
Arafat also has blamed his troubles on conspiracies and the meddling of outside powers such as Iran.
On Thursday, he told the inaugural session of the newly elected Palestinian legislative council that the top of their agenda "is to keep the peace and make it stronger."
But he then went on to suggest the recent violence in which 58 innocents died was the result of a bizarre conspiracy between Israeli right-wing radicals and Palestinian extremists.
"He's trying to evade responsibility, and blame it on Israel," said Barry Rubin, a political scientist at Bar-Ilan University.
But Rubin said Arafat had changed his rhetoric dramatically since the Israel-PLO peace agreement in September 1993, dropping all claims to Israeli territory and ending talk of armed struggle. Arafat's Fatah faction has also halted attacks against Israel for the past three years, he added.

Rebels of Sierra Leone amputate hands of dozens
FREETOWN, Sierra Leone, Mar 8: Rebels amputated the hands of dozens of Sierra Leoneans who voted in last month's presidential election, and threatened more amputations if voters defy their order to boycott a run off on March 18, reports AP.
Photographs of voters whose hands were amputated during and after the first round of balloting on February 26-27 appeared in the Concord Times For Di People, and other newspapers Thursday with the new warning from Revolutionary United Front rebels.

China begins missile tests near Taiwan amid criticism

TAIPEI, Mar 8: China fired three guided missiles into waters near Taiwan's two main ports Friday, the Defence Ministry said, signalling the start of tests rattling the island ahead of presidential elections, reports AP.
The ground-to-ground M-9 missiles were lobbed into mid-sea target areas previously announced by the China, the ministry said without saying where China launched them from.
Two landed about 80 kilometres (48 miles) west of southern Kaohsiung port, and another near the northern port of Keelung, a ministry statement said.
China had announced Tuesday it would conduct missile tests near Taiwan until March 15, in an effort to intimidate the island province before its first-ever direct presidential elections on March 23.
Reuters adds from Hong Kong, world governments swiftly criticised China's firing of missiles off Taiwan today with the US branding the tests "provocative and reckless."
Other countries said the act could threaten Asian stability.
Taiwan's Defence Ministry said China had fired three surface-to-surface missiles which had landed in two areas of its coast.
Washington condemned the tests in the Taiwan Strait, which China said on Thursday were designed to curb a separatist movement on the island but posed no real danger to its people.
State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns reiterated the US warning of unspecified "consequences" if the launches

go wrong, saying: "There is shipping of all kinds ... in the area and people in the area."
US House of Representatives Speaker Newt Gingrich, speaking on Thursday before the tests began, said the missile exercise was a "terrorist act" that would become more common in the post-Cold War world.
"We are entering the age of terrorism," he told the Hudson Institute think-tank.
In Japan, Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto said Beijing's actions had taken an "unfortunate direction."
Respond quickly to the missile firings, Hashimoto said he regretted the Chinese move.
He added that he had urged Beijing to exercise self-restraint in its policy toward Taiwan at a meeting with Chinese Premier Li Peng at the Asia-Europe summit in Bangkok earlier this month.
Britain said the tests would heighten tension in the region and expressed concern they had been fired so close to Taiwan.
An Indonesian official source said the issue was a sensitive one, nothing that Jakarta maintains its one China policy.
New Zealand Prime Minister Jim Bolger, speaking before the tests began, said he was concerned the tests could disrupt regional stability.
"Leaving aside the possible impact on our trade, the tests are a cause for concern because they pose a threat to peace and stability in the region to which New Zealand belongs," Bolger said in a statement.



In this file photo which was released by Chinese news agency, Xinhua, July 31, '95, PLA second artillery troops participate in a missile drill. Chinese Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Qian Qichen said yesterday the people of Taiwan "don't have to panic" over China's missile exercises which began early Friday off Taiwan's coast. — AFP/UNB photo

Yeltsin agrees on steps to end war in Chechnya
GROZNY, Mar 8: Pressured by the fiercest fighting in the Chechen capital in a year President Boris Yeltsin said Thursday that he and his Security Council had agreed on steps to end the war, reports AP.
His announcement came as hundreds of troops and a column of tanks rolled into Grozny to reinforce Russian forces under fierce attack from Chechen rebels trying to retake the city.
Hundreds were reported killed, and bodies were left lying in the streets. A pall of smoke hung over the city, which shook with the roar of tank cannons, mortar grenades and gunfire.
The fighting was the heaviest in the capital since it was seized by the Russians last year in the early weeks of the 15-month-old war, which has profoundly damaged Yeltsin's popularity as he seeks a second term in June elections. He has been promising for weeks to bring it to an end.
But even as he announced Thursday that he and the powerful Security Council had agreed on an outline of a plan to bring the fighting to an end, Yeltsin refused to disclose any details, saying only that it provides for the "peaceful stabilization" of Chechnya.
He said the plan has a "military aspect" and calls for Russian forces to "complete the fighting."

Cuba may ban US flights thru' its air corridors

HAVANA, Mar 8: Cuba may ban US airline flights through its airspace in response to US sanctions for downing two small civilian planes, the communist island nation said on Thursday, reports AP.
"One of the options we are considering is a prohibition for US planes that use the air corridors crossing Cuban territory," foreign ministry spokeswoman Mariana Ferrer said, asserting that the tough new sanctions would have little or no effect.
"The island will not double over, it will not destroy the revolution, nor affect growth in the Cuban economy," she said. Officials did not say when

they might close their airspace but Foreign Minister Roberto Robaina said in Mexico City that it could happen at any time, noting that Cuban craft are already banned from US airspace.
Richardo Alarcon, president of the Cuban parliament, raised the possibility in Montreal on Wednesday at a meeting of the International Civil Aviation Organisation, which is looking into Cuba's shootdown of two planes flown by the anti-Castro exile group Brothers to the Rescue on February 24.
Cuba has accused Brothers of routinely violating Cuban airspace to drop subversive leaflets over the country. The

United States says Cuba violated international law by downing the planes in international airspace.
Alarcon told the government's Radio Rebelde on Thursday that the country could restrict its air corridors "if the United States continues to tolerate the use of planes against Cuba."
President Clinton is expected to sign into law a bill lightening the US embargo on Cuba.
Many US commercial flights pass over Cuba. Closure would force airlines to divert around a 750-mile long (1,200 km) swath of the Caribbean just south of US shores.

UNSC retains ban against Baghdad
The Security Council on Thursday decided to retain sanctions against Iraq in a session overshadowed by forthcoming talks between United Nations and Baghdad officials on a possible oil-for-food deal.
The embargoes are reviewed every two months behind closed doors without a vote. No member so far has moved to lift them.
Thursday's meeting was the 30th since trade bans were imposed shortly after Baghdad's troops invaded Kuwait in August 1990. The council's decision was expected.

Jordan intercepts jets' 'spare parts' bound for Iraq
AMMAN, Mar 8: Jordan has intercepted a consignment of combat aircraft "spare parts," headed for Iraq, the government said Thursday. It was the third shipment of Baghdad-bound military-related material seized here in three months, reports AP.
Baghdad, which denied it was involved in the earlier shipment seized by Jordan, said the spare parts were for Russian-built Mi-2 helicopters used for crop-spraying in northern Iraq and were not banned under any UN resolution.
The Iraqis of the Foreign Ministry spokesman as saying that spares of this type have been imported before with the approval of the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organisation, a UN agency.
The spare parts were imported under correct procedures and have UN approval to be supplied for agricultural purposes," INA quoted the spokesman as saying.
At the United Nations, spokesman Ahmed Fawzi said the UN sanctions committee had not yet approved a request from the FAO to import the equipment, but approval is usually granted and the crop dusting equipment is shipped directly to the FAO in Baghdad.
Jordan's announcement was made as the UN Security Council met to discuss its 5 and a half year economic em-

Jordan to help Israel fight extremism
LONDON, Mar 8: Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan called today in a letter to the Times newspaper for a conference of Israel and its neighbours to stamp out terrorism, and promised to help Israel fight extremism, reports AP.
"There must be a co-operative effort to resolve the problem of terrorism among the countries of our region who seek peace," he wrote.
The White House said late Thursday that the United States and Egypt were close to an agreement on the details of a terrorism summit that would be held Wednesday in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, with the participation of President Bill Clinton.
The US president also envisions going to Jerusalem during the trip, added White House spokesman Michael McCurry.
Crown Prince Hassan said in his letter today that "in a telephone conversation with President Mubarak of Egypt last Monday, and on Radio Israel,

Huge arms seized in Colombo, 35 Tamils taken into custody

COLOMBO, Mar 8: Soldiers and policemen hunting for Tamil Tiger rebels in the capital discovered a cache of guns and grenades in a house early Friday, military officials said, reports AP.
At least 35 Tamils in the city's central Pettah neighbourhood were taken into custody for questioning, an official said on condition of anonymity.
The stock of arms included 32 grenades, two Chinese T-56 assault rifles, a T-81 light machine gun, a pistol, 14 magazines, and 524 rounds of ammunition, said Maj. Tilak Dunuwille, a military spokes-

man.
Police also found dozens of forged passports, stamps that the police department uses to give Tamils from the North permission to visit Colombo, and embassy visa stamps during the raid, which began shortly after midnight Thursday.
Government troops have intensified searches of Tamil neighbourhoods in Colombo since a suspected Tamil suicide bomber rammed a truck packed with explosives into the Central Bank in downtown Colombo on January 31, killing 88 people, injuring more than 1,400, and devastating the

business district.
The bombing, the deadliest ever in Colombo, has created an unprecedented sense of fear and suspicion among its residents. Ruinours, abound of more possible attacks by the rebels.
Troops guarding the capital have built bunkers and put up sandbags and barbed wire in the streets.
Since the Central Bank explosion, police have discovered another truck with 150 kilograms (330 pounds) of explosives concealed in its fuel tank, and two rockets and 16 hand grenades packed in two large plastic dolls.



A stretch of land in a village near Antalya (Turkey) on Thursday is broken up into jigsaw-like pieces following a huge landslide which hit and cleared two thirds of the village wiping out some 50 houses and killed at least five people. — AFP/UNB photo

Off the Record

For beauty's sake
HONG KONG: An accountant was jailed for over two years for stealing HK dollar 2.6 million (US 338,000 dollar) from her Hong Kong employers in order to enlarge her breasts, adjust her eyelids and reshape her eyebrows, a report said Friday, reports Reuters.
The court heard on Thursday that 24-year-old Ivy Lai Ching-Yi stole the cash from the company and used some of it for intensive cosmetic surgery, the South China Morning Post newspaper said.
Lai pleaded guilty to theft and the judge jailed her for two years and four months. The defendant had expressed remorse and returned some of the money after she was found out.

Internet problem
SINGAPORE: The free flow of information brings problems as well as opportunities and the Internet is a good example, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said Thursday, reports AP.
"In cyberspace, pornography is easily available to youngsters. The expertise to make bombs and other weapons of mass destruction and terrorism are easily obtained," Goh said.
"Concern over pornography and Nazi propaganda on the Net recently prompted the German government to take action. As a result, CompuServe, an American online server, temporarily removed some 200 sex-related newsgroups from their global service.
"Similarly, Japan, American, Britain and France have also acted against those who publish objectionable material on the Internet. The experience of these and other countries shows that governments are not entirely helpless in their ability to curb the excesses in cyberspace," Goh added.
He did not mention Singapore's move to compel Internet access providers to censor material on sex, religion and politics.

Because she wasn't a man
READING, England: Webster's Dictionary defines baritone as the range of a male voice between tenor and bass. Joan McDonough is a baritone but she's not a man, reports AP.
And that's why she's lost her case against the queen's Windsor Castle chapel choir at a jobs disputes court at Reading 35 miles (56 km) west of London.
Dr McDonough, 38, the wife of a Church of England vicar, is a member of the choir at Leeds University in northern England where she's a theology student. Her voice is so deep she sometimes stands in as a bass voice in the choir and — high honour — she's been invited on occasions to sing with the Royal Choral Society.
"Last year, she saw an ad in the church newspaper the Church Times for the post of baritone chorister at St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle. Queen Elizabeth II's weekend home near Reading.

UNSC retains ban against Baghdad Jordan intercepts jets' 'spare parts' bound for Iraq

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Jordan's announcement was made as the UN Security Council met to discuss its 5 and a half year economic em-

Security across Kashmir stepped up

SRINAGAR, India, Mar 8: Security was stepped up across the troubled Indian state of Kashmir today ahead of a protest called by Muslim rebels to denounce alleged atrocities by the Indian authorities, police said, reports AP.
Hundreds of policemen and paramilitary troops were deployed in Srinagar, the urban hub of Muslim secessionist drive, to thwart a sit-in by a top Muslim separatist leader in the heart of the Kashmir summer capital, police said.
Public gatherings have been banned across the Himalayan state and witnesses said riot squads and armed troops were patrolling Srinagar's downtown Lal Chowk Quarter, the proposed venue of the protest.

"(I Lal Chowk) looks like a heavily-guarded fortress," a witness said.
Top Kashmiri rebel leader Shabir Ahmed Shah had planned a sit-in today at Lal Chowk to protest alleged human rights violations by the Indian security forces in Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state.
The 43-year-old Shah, who was declared a "prisoner of conscience" by Amnesty International, has spent a total of some 20 years in jail. He was released two years ago after a five-year prison term.
Shah escaped an assassination attempt Wednesday in the town of Pampore, 15 kilometers (nine miles) south of Srinagar.