



Malaysian Foreign Minister Abdullah Ahmed Badawi (L) greets his visiting Egyptian counterpart Amre Moussa (R) at his office in Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday. Moussa, who arrived on Tuesday, is here on a two days official visit. — AFP/UNB photo

Appointment of judges Pak SC verdict embarrasses Benazir, sparks legal debate

ISLAMABAD, Mar 21: A Pakistani Supreme Court verdict curtailing the government's power to appoint key judges has embarrassed Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and sparked a legal debate, analysts said today, reports AFP.

The ruling, announced Wednesday, obliges the government to consult with chief justices and accept their advice while appointing judges to superior courts, and adds that appointments made without such consultations would be invalid and a violation of the Constitution.

Various prominent lawyers termed it a landmark decision, saying it would strengthen the independence of the judiciary in Pakistan.

Opposition leader, Nawaz Sharif, who has often accused the government of elevating favourites to judicial posts, said the "entire opposition and nation support the landmark judgement."

But the decision has sparked a controversy, with lawyers

arguing on whether the Supreme Court has gone beyond its constitutional role of interpreting the Constitution, the mass circulation Urdu-language Jang said.

A five-judge bench of the Supreme Court, headed by Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah, gave the verdict after some five months of hearings on a constitutional petition filed by a lawyer, Habib al-Wahab al-Khairi.

The top court announced a short order, saying it would give a detailed judgement later.

The petitioner had challenged the appointments of more than 20 judges recruited by the government since 1994 as well as the practice of appointing ad-hoc judges and acting chief justices in provinces.

The judges are appointed by the President on the advice of the government. The Constitution provides, for consultation with judicial chiefs in the capital or in the provinces over

judges' appointments.

A government spokesman, in a statement carried by the official Associated Press of Pakistan, scotched the idea that any judicial appointments might become void as a result of the Supreme Court verdict.

The government will wait for the detailed judgement before offering its comments, the spokesman said, stressing that it believes in upholding the Constitution and "will do so under all circumstances."

A day ahead of the Supreme Court's verdict, the President notified confirmation of 10 Lahore High Court and seven Sindh High Court judges on Tuesday.

The Supreme Court ruled that no ad-hoc judge could be appointed to top posts while permanent vacancies exist.

"The appointment of judges and the manner in which they are made have close nexus with the independence of judiciary," the verdict said, calling for confirmation of those serving on ad-hoc basis.

The Supreme Court ordered that the positions of three provincial acting chief justices in Punjab, Sindh and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) be "rectified" within 30 days.

Consultation with the Chief Justice for appointing judges "should be effective, meaningful, purposive, consensus oriented, leaving no room for arbitrariness or unfair play," the ruling said.

"Akram Sheikh, president of the Supreme Court Bar Association, said: "The judgement will ensure to a great extent independence of the judiciary and will help restore the image of this august institution which had been eroded over the past two years because of exclusively political appointments."

It is the most important constitutional judgement so far delivered in Pakistan, said Sharifuddin Pirzada, a leading lawyer and former secretary general of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.

Kuwaiti women fight for voting right

KUWAIT CITY, Mar 21: Kuwaiti women are stepping up their campaign for the right to vote in next parliamentary elections.

"For thirty years we have been fighting for our political rights in line with the constitution, but we have always run into electoral laws which exclude us," Lullua Al-Kutami, a member of the women's cultural association told AFP.

Kutami was among 10 women who on Wednesday visited the city hall in Al-Sharaya, just outside Kuwait City, to ask to register for the October 1996 election, but was refused.

Last week around 40 women staged a protest outside parliament to demand the right to vote, and women activists say they plan to lodge a complaint soon with the courts as well as organise other actions.

Shamiya mayor Suleiman Al-Othman said the law barred women but Kutami said under the Constitution "All citizens have equal rights and duties, without discrimination by sex, origin, language or religion."

Kuwait is the only Arab monarchy with an elected parliament, but women are nei-

ther allowed to vote or run for parliament. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman have appointed assemblies with only Advisory powers.

"We don't recognize this law which violates the Constitution and we plan to resort to the constitutional court to obtain our rights," Kutami added.

"The constitution gives us these rights. Why does the law take them away?" another woman said. After the 1991 Liberation from Iraqi occupation, "the authorities made promises to give us our rights."

"Their action is part of a series of initiatives that Kuwaiti women were going to make with the MPs and the authorities to obtain their political rights, Kutami said.

On March 12 around 40 women intellectuals protested in front of parliament carrying banners saying "No discrimination between men and women. Kuwaiti women know how to read and write."

They also planted a tree which they covered with a T-shirt with the slogan: "For women's rights."

BRIEFLY

Ireland plans embassy in Israel: Ireland plans to establish an embassy in Israel to strengthen relations between the countries, the government announced on Wednesday. AP reports from Dublin.

The location of the embassy had not yet been decided, it said. Ireland and Israel established diplomatic relations in 1974, and Israel opened a resident embassy in Ireland in 1994. Ireland is represented in Israel on a non-resident basis by the British Ambassador to Greece.

3 executed in China for theft: Authorities in Shanghai has executed three men for stealing freight from the railroad a widespread problem that China's government is attacking with harsh penalties, the official newspaper Liberation Daily said Thursday. AP reports from Beijing.

The railroad transport intermediate court in Shanghai sentenced Wu Weibao, Wu Zengrong and Li Yansheng to death Wednesday for stealing some 100,000 yuan (12,000 dollars) worth of colour televisions, lights, cigarettes and calendars in the fall of 1993 from freight cars at railway stations in Jiangxi province in south-central China, it said.

11 Filipinos missing as boat sinks: A fishing boat sank in high waves in central Philippine waters early Thursday and 11 of its crew members were missing, authorities said. AP reports from Manila.

The Francis Mervin capsized and broke apart in Balayan Bay off Kalatagan town in Batangas, 96 kilometres (60 miles) southwest of Manila, said Coast Guard duty officer Rolando Ramos.

3 killed in gunbattle in Nepal: At least three people were killed in a gunbattle between police and suspected Maoist guerrillas in northwest Nepal, reports said yesterday. AFP reports from Kathmandu.

Police fired back after they were shot at by attackers in Homa, Rolpa district, around 370 kilometres (230 miles) northwest of Kathmandu, the state-run RSS news agency quoted Home Ministry officials as saying.

2 US women held for smuggling: Police arrested two US women allegedly transporting 20 kilograms (more than 20 pounds) of cocaine from Guatemala to the United States, authorities in Mexico's Sinaloa State said Wednesday. AFP reports from Mexico City.

Linda West, 36, and Dawn Foreman, 36, detained in a highway search operation outside the city of Matland, Inzalua, with 10 packages of cocaine stashed in their gas tank.

Boat with US students sinks: A glass-bottomed boat carrying 103 passengers — mostly American students on spring break — sank in 12 feet (3.7 meters) of water just off New Providence Island, but no one was injured, rescue crews said. AP reports from Nassau, Bahamas.

Some of the students didn't want to leave the Junkanoo Showboat, and when they did, they took most of its liquor with them, first mate Leo Ferguson said.

To derail peace process Hamas, Jihad cooperating with Israeli groups : PLO

CAIRO, Mar 21: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said Palestinian extremists were cooperating with right-wing Israeli groups to subvert the peace process, according to an interview published in early Thursday editions of the Al-Ahram daily, reports AP.

Arafat also contends radical Palestinians are being supplied with weapons available only to Israeli soldiers, the paper said.

"There is no doubt that the Palestinian extremist groups are using arms used only by the Israeli army," he was quoted as saying.

Arafat cited LAW rocket launchers and other high-powered weapons, which he said were confiscated from radical Palestinians arrested inside the autonomous Palestinian areas under his control.

"These weapons can only be obtained from high sources with strong influence in the Israeli side," he was quoted as saying. The paper interviewed

3 m people died of TB in '95: WHO

LONDON, Mar 21: Three million people died of tuberculosis in the world in 1995, the highest number in history, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said here today, reports AFP.

The 1995 TB toll exceeded that of the worst years of the epidemic around the turn of the century, when some 2.1 million people a year were dying of the disease, WHO director-general Dr Hiroshi Nakajima said.

"Not only has TB returned, it has upstaged its own horrible legacy," he told a news conference.

The TB crisis will continue to grow unless immediate action is taken," said a WHO report.

Guatemalan army asked to suspend war against rebels

GUATEMALA CITY, Mar 21: President Alvaro Arzu late Wednesday ordered the army to suspend its bloody 35-year war against leftist rebels, who hours earlier in Mexico announced a temporary truce in lieu of peace negotiations, reports AFP.

Arzu, who vowed to end the ongoing civil war when he took office in January, welcomed the decision by the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (URNG) to lay down their weapons.

The government considers the ceasefire announcements a reaffirmation of mutual trust between the two sides, which characterises the current round of peace negotiations," he said in a statement.

MILF accuses Philippine govt of using nerve gas

MANILA, Mar 21: A Muslim guerrilla faction today accused Philippine government troops of using nerve gas to attack them in fierce gunbattles last week in several southern Philippine towns, reports AFP.

Mohagher Iqbal, spokesman of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), said in a communique published in the Manila Times newspaper that two residents "were almost left unconscious as a result of nerve gas bombs" dropped by two military helicopters and planes.

Iqbal was reacting to military reports that 2,000 MILF fighters attacked 10 village army outposts around the towns of Lambayong and Sultan Sa Barongis on Saturday, killing 23 people.

Verdict on Rabin's murder case Mar 27

JERUSALEM, Mar 21: A Tel Aviv court will issue a verdict on Wednesday in the case of Yigal Amir, the 35-year-old Israeli accused of murdering Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, reports Reuters.

The Justice Ministry said today the three-judge court would issue its ruling at 0530 GMT on March 27.

Amir said he shot Rabin in November to halt peace moves with Arabs.

If convicted of premeditated murder, he faces a maximum life sentence.



Palestinian women sit on their belongings, praying and crying, after Israeli police destroyed the house of their family on Wednesday the east Jerusalem neighbourhood of Beit Hanina East Jerusalem. The house belonged to Muhieddin Sharif, who was identified by Israel as the new master bomber for Hamas since the assassination by Israeli agents of Yehiya Ayash. — AFP/UNB photo

India successfully launches satellite into orbit

SRIHARIKOTA, India, Mar 21: An Indian-made rocket placed a remote sensing satellite into orbit after a flawless launch today, boosting India's claim to membership in an exclusive club of nations with similar achievements, reports AP.

The Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV), India's most powerful indigenous rocket, took off from this coastal launch site in the Bay of Bengal at 10:23 am (0433 GMT) and deployed the satellite into low orbit, officials said.

"This is a significant milestone in our space programme," Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) chairman Krishnaswami Kasurangan said to cheering in the control room here.

"Today we have witnessed a perfect flight and coming as it does in the wake of two major successes this is a very proud moment for India," he said.

The PSLV placed the 930-kilogram (2,046-pound) satellite in an orbit 822 kilometres (493 miles) above the earth after a 17 minute, 22 second trip aboard the PSLV, the ISRO chairman said.

Earth stations in India, Russia, Germany and Mauritius began tracking the satellite as it drifted in space seconds after delinking from the spent PSLV.

The satellite is to be steered into a pre-determine orbit of 817 kilometres (490 miles) within PSLV blasted off in a trial of vapour from this launch site off the southern state of Andhra Pradesh.

Today's launch confirms India alongside the United States, Russia, China, Japan, and the European Space Agency (ESA) as the only countries capable of putting one-tonne satellites into orbit.

The PSLV's scheduled launch on Monday was put off because of bad weather.

AFP adds, Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao hailed the flawless launch of India's most powerful satellite rocket today as testimony of the success of the country's indigenous space programme.



Russian President Boris Yeltsin shakes hands with the Supreme Mufti (the leader of the Muslims in Russia and the European countries of the CIS) Talgat Datzhudinov during their meeting in the Kremlin, on Wednesday. — AFP/UNB photo

China slams fresh US arms sales to Taiwan

BEIJING, Mar 21: China slammed fresh US arms sales to Taiwan as "irresponsible" today and blamed them for heightening tensions in the Taiwan Strait, reports AFP.

"The arms sales have intensified the tension in the Taiwan Straits area and complicated the situation," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Shen Quofang.

He was commenting on Washington's decision to authorise the sale of stinger anti-aircraft missiles, an advanced targeting and navigation system for fighter jets and electronic warfare devices to Taiwan.

"We are of the view that the United States side should bear the unshrinkable responsibility of heightening tension in the Taiwan Strait area," Shen said.

"It is very irresponsible for the US to sell advanced weapons systems to a sensitive area at a sensitive time," he

said, alleging that such sales had not only interfered in China's internal affairs but "affected the process of peaceful reunification."

He also slammed as "destable" the House of Representatives overwhelming approval Tuesday of a non-binding resolution urging US military intervention to defend Taiwan if China attack.

"The Chinese government and people hereby express our resolute opposition to and strong indignation at this destabilising act of the US side which constitutes a serious encroachment on China's sovereignty," he said.

"The United States should immediately stop its erroneous activities of encroaching on China's sovereignty and interfering in China's internal affairs," he said.

Washington confirmed Wednesday that it had approved Taiwan's request for arms,

Off the Record

Commentary on Clinton following football

LOS-ANGELES: A Secret Service agent sounded like a football play-by-play announcer trying to follow President Clinton's moves during a recent visit to the Malibu home of entertainment Mogul David Geffen, reports AP.

The commentary went like this, according to Wednesday's Los Angeles Times: "Ok, it looks like he (Clinton) is getting up to leave now. Oh, he's back down one the couch. Oh, no! (Director Steven) Spielberg's putting another video in. Looks like we're going to be here until midnight."

The unidentified agent was relaying the details to colleagues March 8 at a command center set up at Pepperdine University.

Dinosaur eggs on smuggling list

HONG KONG: Hong Kong customs have seized a record 78 fossilised dinosaur eggs being smuggled into the territory with other antiques from China, customs and Excise Department said today, reports AFP.

Three men were arrested when police discovered the antiques, worth an estimated 10 million dollars (1.3 million US), in a lorry about to enter Hong Kong on Tuesday with a declared cargo of 290 boxes of plastic toys.

Kwan Kwok-Cheung, Customs and Excise Department's assistant superintendent, said "this is the biggest seizure of eggs we have had so far — the previous highest was 45."

It was the third time dinosaur eggs from China have been smuggled into Hong Kong since last year, where there is a steady demand from collectors.

The price of a dinosaur egg fossil from the Jurassic period ranges from 7,000 dollars to 160,000 dollars, depending on the quality, said Kwan.

He to show his love thru' acting

ANKARA, Turkey: The story of a 13-year-old British girl who married a Turkish waiter has been turned into a four-part television film with the groom playing himself, reports AP.

Musa Komegas, 18, said he was paid dtrs 8,600 by the private ATV channel, which will broadcast the series next month.

"My only intention is to show everyone how much I love Sarah," he said by telephone this week from his family's home in southern Kahramanmaraş.

Sarah Cook of Braintree, Essex, met Komegas while vacationing at a Turkish Mediterranean resort last summer.

They were married in January in a religious ceremony, which is not legally recognised.

A few weeks later, Musa was jailed on charges of having sex with a minor. He was released pending trial April 18 and faces up to 10 months in prison if convicted.

Sex with persons under 15 is illegal.

Sarah returned last month to Britain, where a court has taken away the parenting rights of the Cooks. She will be played by a Turkish girl said to look like her.

Ex Indian police inspector held for cheating

NEW DELHI, Mar 21: A former New Delhi police inspector has been arrested for cheating people of thousands of dollars with counterfeit money, officials said today, reports AFP.

Former sub-inspector Balbir Singh and four accomplices were arrested on Wednesday after one of their victims complained he had lost 90,000 rupees (2,571 dollars) in dubious transactions with the five tricksters.

Balbir Singh's arrest is the third incident this week involving local policemen, a police spokesman said.

Iraqi would-be MPs call for an end to UN sanctions

BAGHDAD, Mar 21: Twenty-three hopefuls in the Iraqi elections on Sunday introduced themselves to voters here but their political programmes were almost identical as one after the other called for an end to UN sanctions, reports AFP.

Whether from the ruling Baath Party or running as independents, all the would-be MPs for Baghdad's sixth constituency said they wanted to improve living conditions for Iraqis hit by more than five years of crippling sanctions.

Each pledged to do their best to achieve this but gave few indications as to how as they addressed a school hall of 200 voters in the district of Yarmuk earlier this week.

"We must all work together, above all to get rid of the embargo," was a typical declaration, from 45-year-old candidate Ali al-Takriti an engineer.

The audience clapped automatically after each speech, none of the voters expecting any startling new policies to emerge in a campaign where the Pan Arab socialist Baath will be the only party running by name.

The candidates here were among 689 hopefuls vying for 270 parliamentary seats in Sunday's elections, the first since the 1990-1991 Gulf crisis.

The last to get up and

speak, Mustafa al-Mukhtar, was the only candidate to present some sort of a programme.

The 50-year-old writer and journalist said he would keep rationing even after the end of the oil and trade embargo, imposed when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, to make sure the poor could afford food.

He also vowed to crack down on corruption in the administration.

But the bulk of the speeches were taken up by rambling personal histories of the candidates as the audience chattered and fidgeted.

The best-known face, Saadun Haamad, prime minister between 1991 and 1993 and now an advisor to President Saddam Hussein, trotted out his past career achievements with out once mentioning his vision of the future.

Other, lesser-known candidates sought to impress the voters by describing their sacrifices during the wars against Israel, the 1980-1988 conflict against Iran and the 1991 Gulf War.

Zaki al-Fadawi said he lost his father and three brothers in 1980. Another candidate, teacher Abdelwahab al-Duri, said he gave his "money and gold to the party."

Hussein al-Naimi, a Labour Ministry employee, fought alongside the Egyptians and Syrians against Israel, while Alai al-Tamimi, 56, said he

gave "20 bottles of blood" during the Iran-Iraq war.

A 45-year-old police official, Qassem al-Duri, said he had received a "present from Saddam for taking part in the repression of the uprisings by Kurds in the north and Shi'ite Muslims in the south after the Gulf War.

The candidates included three women: Lamis Kasim, a Baath Party candidate and women's activist who was greeted with cheers, Fawzia Ala-Nuweimi, a member of Baghdad's Chamber of Commerce, and Raja al-Shawi who said she had been thrown out of China during the UN Women's Conference in Beijing

Charles' 'no' to Di's demand

LONDON, Mar 21: Prince Charles has refused to pay the 20,000 pound (30,000 dollars) first instalment of his estranged wife Diana's legal costs for the couple's divorce, The Sun reported today, says AFP.

The mass-circulation tabloid said that despite the fact that he has agreed to pay all Diana's divorce expenses, Charles flew into a rage when the bill from her lawyers landed on his desk, and he ordered it to be sent straight back.

A court note was attacked protesting at the "vast sum," the paper added.

Diana, separated from Charles since December 1992,