

BRIEFLY

Call to form Asian parliament:

The Confederation of Asian Journalists Unions (CAJU) has urged the governments to form an Asian parliament to unite the people of the continent for ending exploitation, preventing arms race and accelerating growth rate. PTI reports from New Delhi.

The five-day session of the confederation, held here and in an initial from March 17, also suggested the setting up of a continent-level committee to fight for free flow of information, protect journalists' right to inform and the people's right to know.

UK-SA sign defence accord:

South Africa and Britain signed an agreement in Pretoria on Friday providing for the exchange and joint production of military equipment and armaments. AFP reports from Pretoria.

The memorandum of understanding will enable South Africa to replace its obsolete army navy and aircraft equipment. South African Defence Minister Joe Modise said at signing ceremony with British High Commissioner Anthony Reeve.

Plane crash kills US astronaut:

The pilot who commanded the last successful flight of the space shuttle Challenger died when the small test plane he was flying crashed. AP reports from Duluth.

Col. Robert Overmyer was flying alone in the small-engine plane when it went down near Duluth International Airport on Friday afternoon.

10 die after eating beef in Senegal:

Ten villagers in southwest Senegal have died after eating the meat of a cow which was butchered after giving birth to a stillborn calf; the national press reported Friday. AFP reports from Dakar.

The owner of the beast butchered it when he saw that it was dying and gave meat to the villagers the following day, the reports said. Some of the people who ate it died after suffering diarrhoea attacks.

UK, France, Italy sign accords:

The Defence Ministers of Britain, France and Italy signed a series of agreements on Friday for the joint development of a new frigate to come into service in the early years of the next century. The French Defence Ministry said. AFP reports from Paris.

8 die as wall collapses in Lima:

A wall in the historic district of downtown Lima came crumbling down on a lunch-hour crowd Friday, killing eight and injuring 15, police said. AFP reports from Lima.

Two of the victims were children who died as they were being taken to a hospital, police said.

The two-metre (8.25 feet) wall fell on an outdoor restaurant and destroyed 10 outdoor vendor sites.

WW II bomb found in Munich:

Police evacuated around 8,000 people from their homes in Munich on Friday after the discovery of a 500 kg (1,000 lb) World War II bomb. Reuter reports from Munich.

Construction workers found the bomb during the afternoon in the Moosach area of the city. Bomb disposal experts defused the device five hours later, after the evacuation was complete and the area had been sealed off.

Poisoned turtle meat kills 24:

Poisoned turtle meat has killed 24 people on the Indian Ocean island of Pemba this week. Tanzanian newspapers said on Friday. Reuter reports from Dar es Salaam.

The latest victim was a 14-year-old boy who died at a government clinic in Pemba's Chake Chake district.

More than 200 people have been treated for poisoning after eating the sea turtle meat caught and eaten last Friday.

Al-Azhar to open branch in US:

Egypt's leading Sunni Muslim authority, the Al-Azhar University, is to open its first branch in the United States, the institution's director announced on Friday. AFP reports from Cairo.

The decision was made by the former imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Gad al-Haq Ali al-Haq, who died after a heart attack last week in Cairo, director Ahmed Omar Hashem said.

The aim was to "respond to the wishes of the Muslims in the United States," he added, quoted by the daily Al-Azhar.

US soldier killed in Bosnia:

A US soldier was killed and another injured in a highway accident in Bosnia. Pentagon officials said last Friday. AFP reports from Washington.

The two troops were in a vehicle that collided with a 10-tonne truck near the town of Grondje Babine at 9:30 pm local time (20:30 GMT Saturday), said Pentagon spokesman Commander Joe March.

Rebels resume talks in Mexico:

Rebels resumed peace talks to end a two-year Indian uprising in Chiapas on Friday, after briefly suspending them following a deadly gun battle between peasant squatters and police. AP reports from Nicolas Ruiz.

Negotiators opened the day's talks at San Cristobal de Las Cases with a moment of silence, acknowledging the three peasants and two officers killed in the battle at the town of Nicolas Ruiz, southeast of the site of the peace talks.

US House votes to lift ban on assault-style arms

WASHINGTON, Mar 23: The US House of Representatives defied a veto threat from President Clinton and voted to lift America's ban on assault-style weapons. reports AP.

The measure — approved by a 239-173 vote — would lift the two-year-old ban on selling firearms such as AK-47s, Uzis and other semi-automatic firearms. Polls indicated strong public support for the ban, and in a last-minute manoeuvre to minimise political fallout, Republican leaders on Friday added provisions to the repeal bill mandating stiffer prison terms for crimes committed with firearms.

Clinton's veto threat was underscored by Vice President Al Gore during the day. But a veto probably won't be necessary.

Sen Bob Dole, Clinton's likely Republican opponent in the November election, told reporters Friday he doesn't think the bill will get a vote this year on the Senate floor — which Dole controls as his party's leader.

But the House vote served as a political flash point, as Democrats mounted a withering attack on Republicans and their leader, Speaker Newt Gingrich, for bringing the National Rifle Association's top legislative priority to a vote.

Ex-rebels slam govt plan for polls

Strike paralyses Kashmir

SRINAGAR, Mar 23: A general strike paralysed Kashmir today as Muslim leaders condemned talks between a senior Indian government team and former rebels on holding early state elections. reports AFP.

Shops, offices and businesses were closed across the Kashmir Valley and traffic stayed off the roads in response to the protest called by the People's League outfit, police and witnesses said.

Security was stepped up in this state summer capital where women separatists raised Pakistani flags on roofs and electricity poles to denounce the visit of the three-member delegation headed by V K Jain, secretary of India's Minister P V Narasimha Rao.

Witnesses said the activists also shouted anti-Indian slogans.

Jain, an official in the prime minister's office, arrived here late Friday and held talks with state officials on the prospects of holding legislative polls in the state, under direct federal rule since 1990.

Earlier report says two Kashmiri Muslim separatist leaders who opened talks with New Delhi slammed the Indian government on Friday for planning to hold parliamentary polls in the troubled state.

"Elections are futile and cannot help resolve the complex Kashmir problem," said one of the leaders.

Afghan jets bomb Taliban positions

ISLAMABAD, Mar 23:

Afghan government jets bombed rebel positions and the two sides fought artillery duels south of the capital Kabul on Friday, the state radio reported, says Reuter.

The broadcast, monitored in Islamabad, said planes carried out three bombing raids in retaliation against rocketing at the besieged city by the rebel Taliban Islamic militia that killed at least one civilian and wounded four others.

There was also exchange of heavy artillery fire between the government and Taliban forces in the south of Kabul, it said.

There were no immediate reports of casualties from the bombing and artillery battles.

Lee elected Taiwanese president

TAIPEI, Mar 23: Taiwan's ruling Nationalist Party claimed a victory for President Lee Teng-hui today in this island's first direct presidential election.

"We have won the election," Nationalist Party spokesman Hansheng Chien told Reuters.

The spokeswoman for the opposition Democratic Progressive Party, Chen Wen-chien, told journalists that the party's candidate Peng Ming-min has lost to Lee.

The Lee ticket has won. He has lost," Chien said.

With 40 per cent of the vote counted, Lee had about 53.8 per cent of the vote and Peng had about 21.7 per cent. Two other independent candidates who had advocated reconciliation with China were trailing.

China, which regards Taiwan as its own province, has accused Lee of seeking independence. Beijing says it would attack this island rather than see it become independent.

Earlier the secretary-general of Taiwan's ruling Nationalist Party said today that president Lee Teng-hui will win the island's first direct presidential election with about 47 to 48 per cent of the vote.

"We will probably have no problem in getting 47 to 48 per cent of the vote," Nationalist Party boss Hsu Shui-teh told the news agency.

Polling booths in Taiwan's first direct presidential elections today closed their doors at 4 pm (0800 GMT), after what appears to have been a

large turnout.

Ballot counting now begins and results are expected to come out gradually until an official preliminary result is available at around 10.30 pm (1430 GMT).

Earlier AP report says: Voting under China's brandished fist, Taiwanese set about freely electing a president for the first time Saturday, crowning the island's transformation from dictatorship to democracy.

President Lee Teng-hui, architect of Taiwan's democratic miracle, was leading in opinion polls before a pre-election ban took effect 10 days ago. But he faced the daunting challenge of defusing a confrontation that has shaken Asia and drawn US warships to the region.

China, convinced that Lee is courting independence for Taiwan, has waged menacing war games in an effort to scare voters away from their 73-year-old president.

But polls, analysts, and financial markets were nearly unanimous in predicting victory for Lee, who boasts of having created the first all-Chinese democracy in history.

The big question was whether he could win by a big enough margin to claim a strong mandate for the policies that have brought him into collision with China.

Before opinion polls were suspended, Lee had under 40 per cent of the vote — far ahead of his three challengers.

Russia, Belarus to sign accord on union Apr 2

MOSCOW, Mar 23:

Russia and Belarus will sign an accord on union, including a council made up of both presidents and prime ministers. Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko said today. Interfax reported, says AFP.

The accord will be signed on April 2, he said. Of all the ex-Soviet republics, Belarus has remained closest to Russia, since the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991.

The powers of the council of presidents, prime ministers and parliamentary leaders, will "be very wide," Lukashenko was quoted as saying, without giving details.

He said there would be a common budget, but again gave no details on what budget the two neighbours would share.

There would also be an inter-parliamentary Congress, with equal representation from both countries, Lukashenko said.

Harry Wu slates Clinton's China policy as unclear

WASHINGTON, Mar 23:

Human rights activist Harry Wu on Friday criticised President Clinton's China policy as an unclear, piecemeal approach that has failed to influence Beijing's behaviour and could lead to a new Cold War. reports AP.

"The only thing clear about US China policy is that it is not good," the outspoken Chinese-American told an audience of scientists concerned about human rights.

"President Clinton calls his policy strategic comprehensive engagement," Wu said. But it is "too strung out on many fronts so no single issue dominates the relationship, and the piecemeal approach has been easy for the Chinese to shrug off."

Gen Omar al-Beshir wins presidential polls in Sudan

KHARTOUM, Mar 23:

General Omar al-Beshir won Sudan's presidential election by 75 per cent of the vote to stay in office, the Elections Commission announced on Friday. reports AFP.

Beshir won 4,181,784 out of 5,625,280 votes, the commission's Chairman Abdul Monem al-Zein al-Nahas told a press conference. He said 8,110,650 voters were registered.

The incumbent president's nearest rival was Abdul Majid Kaajab with 133,000 votes.

Beshir, who seized power in a military coup in June 1989, fared spine 40 rivals, most of the unknowns, in the March 6-17 polls. A new parliament was also elected.

The parliament will hold its first session on April 1, after the elections in which Islamic fundamentalists strengthened their grip power.

US, China fail to end dispute over N-tech sale to Pakistan

MOSCOW, Mar 23:

The United States and China have failed to resolve a dispute over the sale of sensitive nuclear-related technology to Pakistan that has halted US financing for nearly 10 billion dollars worth of American business deals, senior US officials said on Friday.

The officials told Reuters that the US negotiator on the issue, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Robert Einhorn, an arms expert, had left Beijing today without agreement and would return to Washington on Sunday.

"It didn't go well," one official said of the talks. Einhorn is expected to meet with US Secretary of State Warren Christopher and top aides on Monday so next steps can be decided, they said. It could mean that Washington would impose sanctions on Beijing.

Einhorn's week-long negotiations with Chinese officials were an attempt to settle a major irritant in a relationship that has come under persistent strain over arms, sales, human rights, Taiwan and trade.

He was discussing what American officials view as a disturbing pattern of Chinese sales to states with unsafe-guarded nuclear facilities.

The focus of recent attention has been the sale to Pakistan of ring magnets that experts say are crucial to making high-speed centrifuges, which enrich uranium for use in nuclear weapons.

But officials say their concerns go beyond that specific incident to a "pattern of nuclear cooperation" in which China has provided nuclear experts and help in plutonium related activities.

At Christopher's request, the US Export-Import Bank last month agreed to delay for 30 days decisions on financing some 10 billion dollar worth of business deals in China.

That hold is understood to be over as of March 23 so the administration was hoping to resolve the issue this week.

The 1994 US nuclear non-proliferation act requires a cutoff of Export-Import Bank assistance in the case of such transfers as ring magnets, enrichment technology, and plutonium processing technology.

But this is a case of US domestic law. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which China signed, does not explicitly ban the sale of ring magnets and US officials say this is part of the dispute.

While they are keen to ensure that China, one of the five nuclear powers, pursues a non-proliferation policy, many US officials are concerned about the impact such sanctions could have on the shaky bilateral relationship and on American businesses.

In Beijing, Einhorn was expected to try and negotiate with China a "common understanding" about what it means to meet obligations under the NPT. US officials say they were looking for "firm com-



Newly weds Wu Fu-Ching (L) and Chen Chun-hsiang place their vote in Taiwan's first direct presidential election Saturday. The couple who were married early on election day said making the choice of the new president is as important as that of choice a spouse. — AFP/UNB photo



British actor Sir Anthony Hopkins (C) arrives with actresses Jane Seymour (L) and Brook Shields (R) at the 33rd Annual Publicists Guild of America Awards on Friday in Beverly Hills, California. Hopkins is nominated for best actor for his lead role in the film "Nixon" at the 68th Annual Academy Awards to be held March 25. — AFP/UNB photo

Pakistan ready to meet any threat from India: Leghari

ISLAMABAD, Mar 23:

Amid heightened tensions with arch-enemy India, Pakistan put its military might on parade Saturday as President Farooq Leghari vowed to defend the nation's borders against "evil designs," reports AP.

Leghari said Pakistan did not want to enter into an arms race with India, but was prepared to meet any threat from its South Asian rival.

"Pakistan is a peace-loving country and does not believe in adventurism against anyone, but in the face of evil designs from the enemy it has every right to fortify its defenses," he said during a speech to mark Pakistan Day.

Following the president's comments, the military showed off its forces along Jinnah Avenue, the capital Islamabad's main thoroughfare.

Rows of T-85 tanks and armored personnel carriers rumbled past Leghari and Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto as they watched from a reviewing platform.

Columns of quick-stepping commandos, assault rifles and shoulder-held missile launchers in hand, marched by thousands of spectators and dignitaries.

Pakistan's domestically built HATF-1 short-range ballistic missile was also on display. Overhead: formations of F-16 fighter jets screamed past with a deafening roar.

"Despite facing economic constraints, the government attaches top priority to defending itself and is making all efforts to make it impregnable," Leghari said.

Pakistan, in a seemingly endless arms race with India, spends close to one-third of its annual budget on the military.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since they won independence from British rule in 1948. And the contested border in Kashmir, the flashpoint of two previous wars, continues to destabilize the region.



Irish poet Seamus Heaney (L), is made Commandeur des Arts et Lettres, France's highest cultural honour, by French Culture Minister Philippe Doust-Blazy on Friday at the ministry. Heaney, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995 will remain in the French capital to attend the Paris book fair. — AFP/UNB photo

World's rarest owl in cooking pot!

LONDON: One of the world's rarest owls has ended up in the cooking pot of Nigerian villagers, reports Reuter.

All that was left of the owl was its head, some feathers and a few bones, ornithologist Philip Hall told the African bird club in a forlorn fax sent after his vain chase.

Only about 30 sightings of the owl have ever been reported.

Hall, who spotted the bird near the river Niger in Edo state last year, returned this year to try again.

"Inquiries were made of local villagers to ascertain if they knew of the existence of the owl," he told the club in his fax carried on the front page of the Times newspaper.

"It transpired immediately that not only were they familiar with the owl but one had been killed the previous evening and eaten that very morning," he said. "Unfortunately very little was left."

Off the Record

Twins boom!

OMAHA, Nebraska:

One by one, the women went into the delivery rooms. Two by two, their babies came out, reports AP.

Twins, five sets, were born on the same day.

"They were delivered them pretty fast, but there weren't any problems," said Rita Wolbach, a nurse who attended four of the five deliveries Tuesday. "The stress level was pretty high."

The twins were delivered within 7 and half hours at Bergan Mercy Medical Centre.

"We'll go months without having any twins at all, then we'll have a couple, three in a month," said Joan Krieger, a nursing supervisor of the maternity ward.

"Occasionally, maybe once a year, we'll have a couple of sets of twins in a day."

Ms. Krieger, who has been a nurse for about 15 years, can't recall having more than two twin deliveries in a day at Bergan, where about 200 to 250 babies are born each month.

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Sextuplet

ALBANY, New York:

Sextuplets have been born to a New York couple and doctors said the four boys and two girls were healthy and doing well, reports Reuter.

The smallest of the babies, delivered by caesarean section, weighed just over 2 lb (0.9 kg), and the biggest 2 lb 9.8 oz (1.2 kg), said a spokesman for St Peter's Hospital in Albany.

The babies' names are Christian, Ryan, Mary Ellen, Joshua, Breanna and Austin. Their parents are Norman and Michelle Haner of Chatham, New York.

The 28-year-old mother is a nurse's assistant and the father works for the State Department of Corrections.

It can make listener as deaf as Beethoven

PARIS: Now that modern technology has reduced the size of a personal stereo to that of a packet of cigarettes, a new French law will make it compulsory for the walkman too to carry a health warning, reports AFP.

A notice on all new personal stereos sold in France will warn consumers that prolonged use at high volume can make the listener as deaf as Beethoven.

An amendment passed in the French national assembly Thursday will make it an offence to sell personal stereos capable of a volume output above 100 decibels.

"We are in the process of making a generation of deaf people without worrying about it," said Conservative Deputy Jean Francois Mattei, one of instigators of the new law.

He added that irreversible hearing damage can be caused by just a few minutes exposure to sound levels above 100 decibels.

Tension mounts as Russia seals Abkhazian port

MOSCOW, Mar 23:

Tensions rose Friday along Russia's border with Georgia's tiny separatist province of Abkhazia after Russian border guards tried to enforce an embargo on the area, a news agency reported, reports AP.

Russian Border Guard ships blocked the Abkhazian port of Sukhumi in an effort to force a visiting Turkish ship to undergo inspection at a nearby Georgian port.

The Russian ships fired warning shots Friday, according to Nuri Gezerdava of Abkhazia's secessionist government, who spoke with the Interfax news agency.

Abkhazian coastal artillery responded with warning volleys, he said. And in an apparent retaliatory measure, Abkhazian authorities banned two trucks carrying food and medicine for Russian border guards from crossing into Abkhazia.

The Black Sea province broke from Georgia in 1993 after 13 months of war that left 250,000 ethnic Georgians as refugees. Russian peacekeepers — acting under the aegis of the Commonwealth of Independent States — were deployed there after a truce was signed in 1994.

Commonwealth leaders declared Abkhazia an "undeniable part of Georgia" and vowed to stop all trade, economic and financial contacts with the separatists. Humanitarian shipments are allowed with Georgia's permission.

Mandela sees no immediate end to violence

DURBAN, South Africa, Mar 23:

President Nelson Mandela said he saw no immediate end to the politically charged violence in KwaZulu Natal province, where the latest massacre claimed 11 victims. reports AP.

"I don't think we should be alarmed if we find massacres in the months to come," Mandela said Friday, the same day his government announced new restrictions on weapons to try to stem the violence.

The slayings Thursday night followed a sickeningly familiar pattern in a region notorious for warfare between Mandela's African National Congress and the Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party.

Just hours earlier, Mandela had opened the ANC's campaign for local government elections in KwaZulu-Natal, which includes the traditional Zulu homeland.

First, the bodies of seven victims were found in a house in Donnybrook, an ANC stronghold 450 kilometers (270 miles) southeast of Johannesburg.

Four other bodies, including an infant who apparently suffocated under the weight of its slain mother, were then found in other spots within a kilometer (half-mile) of the house, said police Superintendent Henry Budhran.

The victims were believed to be ANC supporters, but one of their neighbours said they had no political affiliation.

Daniels Schembe, 38, said he hid his family in a field when the shooting by six to eight attackers with assault rifles, pistols and shotguns began. He described his murdered neighbours as "totally innocent."