

BRIEFLY

Iraqi assembly meets on oil sale:

Iraq's newly-elected assembly met for the first time yesterday, opening a parliamentary term in which the dominant international issue before legislators will be oil sales. Reuters reports from Baghdad.

Iraqis under crippling UN trade sanctions for invading Kuwait in 1990. The embargo includes a ban on its oil exports.

Road mishap claims 7 in USA:

A stolen truck loaded with suspected illegal immigrants overturned and crashed on a southern California road on Saturday, killing seven passengers and injuring 18, officials said. Reuters reports from Los Angeles.

The pickup truck was being followed by US border patrol agents when the driver suddenly accelerated and lost control near the town of Temecual, about 60 miles (100 km) north of the US Mexican Border.

Bonino makes secret visit to Sudan:

European commissioner for European Affairs Emma Bonino made a secret visit to southern Sudan Saturday, and warned afterwards that fighting in Jonglei Province could lead to massive famine. AFP reports from Kenya.

Bonino is the first senior political figure to visit the south since Sudan's civil war started in 1983. The trip to the Labone displaced persons' camp 13 kilometers (eight miles) from Sudan's border with Uganda, was negotiated with the Khartoum government even though the area is held by the rebel Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA).

Fire claims four in Paris:

A fire gutted three stories of an eight-story apartment building, killing four people and seriously injuring on Saturday night, AP reports from Paris.

Five other residents of the building in north-central Paris suffered smoke inhalation, authorities said.

Peruvian bus mishap kills 18:

At least 18 people were killed and nine injured when a bus swerved in heavy rain and plunged 80 meters (yards) into a ravine in Peru's Andes Mountains, police said Saturday. AFP reports from Cajamarca.

Avalanche kills 6 in Ecuador:

An avalanche of snow Saturday buried at least 20 mountain climbers staying in a shelter on the volcano Cotopaxi, killing at least six of them, authorities said. AP reports from Quito.

Six bodies were found and rescue crews were digging through the snow, said Ligia Tapia, a civil defence worker in the province of Cotopaxi, 55 miles (90 kilometers) south of Quito.

Arafat leaves for KSA

PLO police foil 4 suicide bombings in Israel

GAZA CITY, Apr 7: Palestinian police have foiled four suicide bombings in Israel being prepared by the Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas, President Yasser Arafat said Saturday, reports AFP.

Arafat, quoted by the Palestinian news agency Wafa, told his Cabinet meeting in the West Bank town of Nablus that several people preparing the attacks were captured in the Gaza Strip.

Wafa gave no further details. Since a spate of Islamic suicide bombings in Israel that killed more than 60 people between February 25 and March 4, Palestinian police have arrested hundreds of suspected militants.

Israel has made hundreds more arrests and closed down 60,000 jobs in Israel out of work and paralysing businesses in the West Bank and Gaza.

On the economic front, Arafat announced in Nablus a plan to create 50,000 jobs over the next three months, 20,000 of them in April.

Civilians flee fearing all-out war

Fighting breaks out near

Liberian capital

MONROVIA, Liberia, Apr 7: Fearing all-out warfare, civilians fled by the thousands to escape violent clashes between government troops and members of an ethnic faction trying to prevent the arrest of their leader, reports AP.

Witnesses said they saw at least one body in the street, that of a girl apparently killed in crossfire.

Violence erupted before dawn Saturday as heavily armed government troops tried to force faction leader Roosevelt Johnson from his home in Sinkor, an eastern suburb of the capital, Monrovia.

"This city is no longer a safe haven. Everywhere is gunfire," one of the residents, Mercy Baxter, said as she fled with her three children. The streets were lined with civilians carrying bundles of clothes of clothes on their

Zeroal opens talks with top Algerian figures

PARIS, Apr 7: Algerian President Liamine Zeroual opened talks with leading figures on Saturday to try to end four years of political violence but radical Islamists were not invited, reports Reuters.

The talks, in the presidential palace in Algiers, are expected to last at least two weeks and involve bilateral meetings between Zeroual and more than 50 political leaders and former government figures and influential personalities.

Political analysts said Zeroual's decision to exclude fundamentalists, including the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), signalled a shift in Algeria's stance on last November which confirmed Zeroual in power.

"Zeroual feels strong with the popular support gained in the presidential elections,"

UN Command tries to talk with Pyongyang over violations

ROK military on red alert after DPRK's second incursion

SEOUL, Apr 7: South Korean frontline commanders were ordered to standby in case of emergency today after North Korea sent armed troops into the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) for the second straight day.

"All frontline commanders from division heads to platoon leaders were ordered to stay ready and on duty for an emergency," a Defence Ministry spokesman told AFP.

The order came two days after South Korea upgraded its vigilance status against North Korea by a grade from the current Watch Con three to Watch Con two, which entails a boosting of surveillance, he said.

For the second consecutive day on Saturday, North Korea sent armed troops into the security area around the truce village of Panmunjom in the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ), which divides the Korean Peninsula.

The incident was a violation of the rules governing the DMZ under the 1953 armistice agreement, which bans the carrying of all but side-arms in the Joint Security Area (JSA).

North Korea on Thursday said it would no longer observe the armistice rules governing the DMZ.

The weekend North Korean move prompted South Korea to issue a special alert on its side of the Joint Security Area (JSA), with the nearby first division to be ready for armed clashes.

Earlier Reuters says, US forces in South Korea maintained a higher level of surveillance on Saturday after two incursions by North Korean troops into the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) dividing North and South Korea, a Pentagon spokesman said.

The spokesman said the Pentagon's position on the brief North Korean incursions remained the same as Friday, when the Pentagon announced it was stepping up surveillance.

"That still stands," the spokesman said.

About 260 North Korean soldiers entered the sensitive buffer zone on Saturday and remained there for several hours, the South Korean Defence Ministry said. North Korean soldiers made a similar incursion on Friday.

The United States maintains about 37,000 troops in South Korea to defend against any attack from the North.

President Bill Clinton is scheduled to visit Cheju Island in South Korea on April 16 on his way to Japan for a state visit.

The White House has said Clinton will meet South Korean President Kim Young-Sam for talks on Pacific rim security.

Another AP report says, the US-led United Nations Command tried to contact North Korea Sunday to protest armistice violations in the buffer zone with South Korea.

Seven North Korean trucks loaded with 100 to 120 armed soldiers entered the northern side of the border village of Panmunjom on Saturday and occupied fighting positions, emplacing mortars, the command said.

It was the second time North Korea has violated the armistice with South Korea since announcing Thursday that it would no longer observe the agreement that ended their war in 1953. Northern troops staged a similar demonstration Friday.

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A South Korean army soldier stands guard as the South Korean forces repair their bunker near demilitarised zone, DMZ, which is some 60 kms from Seoul on Saturday after North Korea sent armed troops into the joint security area in violation of the Military Armistice Agreement.

— AFP/UNB photo

Off the Record

Andrew still Fergie's best friend

LONDON: The Duchess of York confided to the mother of actor Sylvester Stallone that she still slept with her estranged husband Prince Andrew and they had no intention of divorcing. The News of the World said Sunday, reports AFP.

The paper also quoted the former Sarah Ferguson, 36, as saying "The Queen can't stand me" and "I know they all hate me. But I don't give a damn. I'm just going to carry on being happy."

The confessions of the Duchess, who separated from her husband in 1992, reportedly came during a flight between London and Qatar two weeks ago after she asked Stallone, a fortune-teller, to read her palm.

"I still love Andrew but we have an open marriage. I sleep with who I want and so does he. And when we're together, we still make love," she was quoted as saying.

"We've agreed that we can both sleep with whoever we like. But that doesn't mean we don't still love each other..." "We still have the same house and we are both there, we sleep together, naturally."

The Duchess, who is reportedly having serious money troubles, also reportedly said she only split up with her husband because of his job as an officer in the royal navy.

"I never saw him. It was like seeing a stranger when he was home." But, she said, "Andrew's my best friends too. And he's funny."

It feels like bumpy, rough bicycle tire

ALBUQUERQUE, New Mexico: More than anything else, dinosaur skin feels like a thick bicycle tire — rough and bumpy, with somewhat symmetrical clumps of little crimped knobs, reports AP.

An extraordinary fossil discovery is letting scientists reach back 70 million years to touch an impression of the skin of one of the massive beasts.

"We've got the first dinosaur pitting zoo in North America here," Spencer Lucas said Wednesday. He is a paleontologist at the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science.

"I would feel real excited to touch that," 10-year-old museum visitor Nicholas Coleman-Watkin said when he heard about the discovery.

The fossilised skin of a duck-billed dinosaur was discovered five years ago by a graduate student who was studying rocks, not dinosaurs, near Deming in southern New Mexico.

It wasn't until last year that researchers began to suspect the 10-foot-long (3-meter-long), 2-foot-wide (60-centimeter-wide) textured rock was not just fossilised tree bark.

"This is really weird," said Lucas, cradling a chunk of the fossil in his lap during a museum news conference announcing the find. "It's so weird that as a trained paleontologist I didn't know what the hell it was for five years."

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Scuffle in Georgian parliament

TBILISI, Apr 7: Georgian parliamentarians came to blows as they discussed how to bring peace to the battle-weary Abkhazia province on Saturday, reports Reuters.

A deputy of the ruling Civic Union Party, which backs President Eduard Shevardnadze, set off the affray, by accusing opposition deputies of making inflammatory remarks.

The National Democrats are stirring up anti-Russian feeling in Georgia with their comments on the Russian role in the Abkhaz conflict, Nukzar Nugaideli declared during the second day of an emergency session on the conflict.

"That's not true that's not true" National Democrat Mamuka Georgadze declared, and the two deputies approached each other, shouting angrily as a grim-faced Shevardnadze looked on.

Georgadze, a former wrestler, hit his opponent in the face, Dwarid Nugaideli, whose retaliatory blows seemed to make little impact. Other deputies had to separate them.

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Iranian pilgrims' political rallies won't be tolerated : KSA

DUBAI, Apr 7: Saudi Arabia warned today that it would not tolerate political rallies by Iranian pilgrims at the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Makkah at the end of April, and the holding of such rallies will not be allowed, said a Saudi Interior Ministry official, quoted by the official Saudi press agency, reports Reuters.

The agency said the official was commenting on remarks by Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani that Iranian pilgrims were planning political rallies during the pilgrimage season.

The Saudi official said the holding of rallies contradicts the rites of Hajj and exposes the security and safety of pilgrims to dangers.

He added that Saudi Arabia will absolutely not tolerate those exceeding what God has prescribed... and will hold them fully responsible.

Saudi Arabia's conservative Sunni rulers say Hajj which brings together about a million Muslims from around the world and a similar number from Saudi Arabia for several days each year, is a purely religious exercise.

But the Shi'ite clerics ruling Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution say Muslims should air their political grievances during the pilgrimage, mainly through rallies against Israel and the United States.

Saudi security forces clashed in 1987 with demonstrators in an Iranian-led rally in the streets of Makkah near Islam's holiest shrine, killing about 400 people, mainly Iranians.

Iran boycotted the Hajj for the next three years. There has been no repeat of the bloodshed since the return of Iranian pilgrims in 1991 and their Hajj rallies have been low-key affairs confined to the Iranian compounds.

Rafsanjani on Saturday reiterated Iran's position that its pilgrims had a right to hold political rallies during Hajj.

Holding the rally of 'disavowal of disbelievers' during the Hajj season is not meant to disturb the law and order of the Muslim country of Saudi Arabia, but is part of our fundamental and religiously inalienable principles, Rafsanjani said.

The official Iranian news agency IRNA said he was addressing members of the coordination council in charge of Hajj affairs.

Saudi Arabia on Friday warned pilgrims for the second time in the vast month that they risked severe punishment.

The guards were on a routine patrol when their vehicle was ambushed near Panjgur in Baluchistan province and all nine were killed, the sources said.

Panjgur is about 50 kms from the border with Iran, and is on a long-time drug-trafficking route.

ISLAMABAD, Apr 7: Nine border guards were slain in an ambush by "traffickers" in southwest Pakistan, official sources were reported today as saying, reports AFP.

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Izetbegovic criticises Croatia Conference on Bosnia to proceed without Serbs

KUALA LUMPUR, Apr 7: A conference on raising money to reconstruct Bosnia-Herzegovina will proceed as scheduled next week, Brussels even without the Bosnian Serbs, a top peace negotiator said Sunday, reports AP.

The second donors' conference in Brussels will go ahead even though there is not much progress from the Bosnian Serbs, Carl Bildt, the top civilian administrator of the Bosnian peace agreement, told the National News Agency Bernama.

The Bosnian Serbs have failed to yield to international demands to release prisoners of war prior to the conference, which is scheduled to be held in the Belgian capital April 12-13.

The other two parties in the conflict, the Bosnian Croats and the Bosnian government, have complied with the demands by releasing prisoners who have not been accused of war crimes.

The European Union and Russia, the main organisers of the conference, had threatened to cancel it unless war prisoners held by Muslims, Croats and Serbs were released.

AFP adds from Sarajevo, Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic on Saturday criticised neighbouring Croatia for what he said was "interfering" in Bosnia's domestic affairs but predicted peace for his country.

"I am unhappy with Croatian policy because it is interfering in Bosnia's domestic affairs, Izetbegovic said, in his first interview with the state television since being hospitalised for heart problems in February.

Croatian Defence Minister Gojko Susak said last month the Croatian army would defend Croat interests in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Izetbegovic said. This is "indefensible" he said.

A Muslim-Croat Federation was formed in 1994 ending an 11-month war but relations between the two supposed allies against the Bosnian Serbs have remained strained.

"We recognize we have a problem with prisons being congested," Kagame said, "but that is a situation we inherited, that came from the fact there was a genocide in this country."

More than 69,000 people are jammed into Rwanda's prisons awaiting trial, most accused of genocide but none formally charged.

Kagame also said the government had done all it could to encourage refugees to return home.

The one million Hutu refugees from Rwanda living in

day's quiet is deceptive.

"The seeming peace of Mahatma exists under fear and intimidation," said Gandhi, a grandson of independence leader Mohandas Gandhi. "No one can pretend the Muslim minority feels secure or that it has equal rights with the others."