

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, Reuter reports from Baghdad. Iraqs 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. Reuter 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 Temecula, 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.

The cause of the fire remained unclear. Firefighters extinguished the blaze after about an hour.

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.

Mud hampered efforts to rescue survivors, who were taken to hospital in the nearby town of Celendin, in the state of 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 throwing 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 heads or packing their cars.

Johnson leads one of seven rival groups in Liberia's civil war, which has persisted for six years, most recently in violation of an August 1995 cease-fire agreement. The war has killed 150,000 people, and forced half of the country's 2.6 million people from their homes.

Johnson was a member of the transitional government seated after the cease-fire agreement, but was later ousted.

He is wanted on murder charges stemming from clashes that killed several people in the capital last week, for which his ethnic Krahn group is blamed. Johnson has been held up in his house and refused to surrender.

On Saturday, his followers surrounded the house with mortars.

Zeroual 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 Reuter.

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), which seeks his overthrow, signalled a shift in Algeria since elections last November which confirmed Zeroual in power.

Zeroual feels strong with the popular support gained in the presidential elections.

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But the city's Muslims — about 10 per cent of Bombay's 13 million people — remain fearful. And the steps the government has taken to shield Hindu radicals from criminal prosecution has rankled moderates across India.

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