

## Libya offers talks to US over chemical arms plant

CAIRO, Apr 12: In a surprising move, Libya offered Thursday to begin talks "without preconditions" over US suspicions it is building an underground chemical weapons plant, reports AP.

The United States has accused Libya of building a plant inside a mountain at Tarhunah, 60 kilometers (40 miles) southeast of the capital, Tripoli, to make nerve gas and other chemical weapons.

US Defence Secretary William Perry, on a visit to Egypt earlier this month, said Washington would not allow the plant to begin operation and suggested it was vulnerable to American military strikes.

Libya's foreign minister, Omar el-Muntasser, dismissed the allegations Thursday as "another lie by US intelligence."

"What I want to make clear is that nothing of what Perry said exists except in the imagination of US intelligence," el-Muntasser said at a news conference. "No chemical weapons factory exists in

Libya, whether above ground or below ground."

But he said Libya was willing to discuss the allegations with Washington, insisting it has not quarrel with the United States.

"We are ready to conduct dialogue without preconditions with any country who will agree to talk to us," he said.

El-Muntasser was in Cairo for the signing of a treaty making Africa a nuclear-free zone.

Libya says tunnels in the mountains at Tarhunah are part of construction to bring water from desert aquifers in the south of Libya to Tripoli and Benghazi on the coast.

The project eventually will supply the capital with 42,000 cubic metres (1.4 million cubic feet) of water a day, the official JANA news agency said.

The Tarhunah facility reportedly was designed to replace a plant at Rabta, 90 kilometers (55 miles) southwest of Tripoli. The Rabta plant was reopened last fall, five years after a suspicious fire that Libya blamed on US and Israeli agents.

## ROK ruling party loses parliamentary majority

SEOUL, Apr 12: President Kim Young-sam's governing party lost its parliamentary majority Friday, but the bigger loser was the key opposition party, which didn't win enough seats to open a corruption investigation against Kim, reports AP.

Election analysts agreed that recent North Korean military incursions into the neutral border zone helped the ruling party gain support among undecided voters worried about national security in Thursday's balloting, widely seen as a midterm referendum on Kim and his ruling party.

With vote-counting completed, Kim's New Korea Party won 139 seats in the 299 member unicameral National Assembly, 11 seats short of the one-seat majority of 150 it enjoyed going into the balloting.

But the margin of the setback was not as big as many observers had predicted, and the results were not expected to endanger political and economic reforms Kim has been

pushing. "I regard the election results as reflecting the people's aspiration to pursue reforms amid stability and break the shells of old politics," Kim said at a meeting with aides.

"To pay back the people's unchanging support, I will exert all my efforts to beef up national security and strengthen the economy," he said.

Kim's three years in office as the nation's first civilian president in 32 years have been highlighted by sweeping reforms. But the president also has come under fire for alleged involvement in corruption.

Young new faces led the ruling party's strong showing in the populous Seoul metropolitan area by toppling many opposition heavyweights.

That gave the party encouragement, ruling party spokesman Kim Chul said.

The governing party campaigned with a direct call for opposition leader Kim Dae-jung to retire. South Korean

politics have been dominated for decades by Kim Dae-jung and other old politicians.

Kim Dae-jung's No 1 opposition party, the National Congress for New Politics, suffered most, winning only 79 seats, far short of the one-third of the assembly it had hoped to secure.

The lackluster performances dwindled hopes of Kim running for President in 1997 elections, which would mark his fourth try at the nation's highest office.

Kim Dae-jung also had promised to open a legislative investigation into an alleged corruption involving the president if his party won one-third of the assembly seats.

The Kim Young-sam regime had the benefit of maximum abuse of its money power and the North's armed incursions in the demilitarized zone, the main opposition party said in a statement. "But we humbly accept the results."

## Nigerians banned from performing Hajj

DUBAI, Apr 11: Saudi Arabia has banned all Nigerians from entering the kingdom to perform the annual pilgrimage to the Islamic world's two holiest shrines, the Saudi Civil Aviation authority said today, reports Reuters.

Saudi Civil Aviation president Alia-Khalaf has issued a circular to airlines flying into the kingdom ordering them not to accept Nigerian passengers for health reasons.

Based on reports declared by the Nigerian Ministry of Health it has been decided to prevent Nigerian pilgrims from entering the Kingdom and performing the Hajj this year, said a copy of the circular obtained by Reuters.

Therefore it is required not to accept any Nigerian pilgrim from any destination or point in the world, it added.

Any airlines transporting Nigerian pilgrims to the kingdom will be instructed to return them back on the same flight the circular warned.

Nigerian diplomats in the Saudi capital Riyadh were unavailable for comment on the ban.

## Navy repulse Tigers' attack on Colombo port

COLOMBO, Apr 12: Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels launched a new year sea attack on Colombo port today but were repulsed by navy patrol craft which sank two boats, naval sources said, reports Reuters.

Two dawn explosions jolted the port and fort area of the city where Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels blew up the Central Bank in January killing nearly 100 people, witnesses said.

One blast, possibly from a rocket-propelled grenade, sent a plume of smoke up at the main road entrance to the port, the trans-shipment hub for South Asia, one witness said.

Shipping Minister M H M Ashraf went on television to say there had been no major damage to the port or ships and that the port was operating normally.

He said one rebel boat had been involved in the attack at about 0545 (0015 GMT) and had been sunk. A second rebel craft was spotted about two or three miles (three or four km)

out at sea and was also destroyed.

Three navy vessels were on patrol outside the harbour and one Israeli built Dvora fast attack craft was sent to engage the first vessel: a naval source said.

He put the rebel death toll at about five or six.

At least one diver was among the dead, another naval source said. The navy later dropped depth charges in the area as air force helicopters buzzed overhead up and down the coast.

Earlier AFP adds, the Colombo fire brigade said, they were alerted to an incident at the tightly-guarded port which was considered a target of the separatist Tamil Tiger guerrillas.

"We heard about a blast at the port but have not been asked to send any units yet because there are no fighting facilities within the port, a fire brigade spokesman said.

There were no other details and police said reports were still coming in.

## 40 nations declare Africa N-free zone

CAIRO, Apr 12: More than 40 African nations declared the continent a nuclear-free zone Thursday, pledging not to build, test or stockpile nuclear weapons, reports AP.

Representatives signed a treaty concluding 30 years of work that began as a response to French nuclear tests in the Sahara desert and ended last year with a draft treaty in Pelindaba, a nuclear site once at the heart of South Africa's now-dismantled weapons programme.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who opened the meeting, said the treaty marked the threshold of a new historic era.

The treaty itself was expected to have little practical effect since South Africa, the only country with a developed weapons programme announced in 1993 that it had destroyed its nuclear weapons.

But the signing came amid Egypt's efforts to create a simi-

lar nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. Israel is thought to be the only Middle East nation with nuclear weapons, although both Iraq and Iran are believed to have sought such capability.

"Unfortunately, despite this international will, no practical and tangible steps have been taken to reach this aim, which we all want," Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa said.

In all, 43 of Africa's 53 countries signed the treaty, which also bans the burial of imported nuclear waste in Africa.

Foreign ministers and delegates were ushered to the stage at Cairo's International Convention Centre to sign the treaty, which was bound in a black cover embossed in gold with a map of Africa.

Cameroon, Angola, Chad, Congo and the country of Sao Tome and Principe were expected to sign soon, Egypt's Foreign Ministry said.



Palestinian President Yasser Arafat (C) shakes hands with people upon his arrival in Bethlehem, in the West Bank, on Thursday. Arafat is on a tour visiting different West Bank towns. Arafat accused Jordan Wednesday of "igniting a fire of hatred" against the Palestinian Authority. — AFP/NB photo

## Ota seeks meet with Clinton US to give Japan back military base in Futenma

TOKYO, Apr 12: The United States has agreed in principle to give Japan back a key US military base in Futenma, Okinawa, over the next five years, the Nihon Keizai Shimbun said today, reports AFP.

The agreement was reached in the bilateral special committee aimed at cutting the size of US military bases in the southern island ahead of the arrival of US President Bill Clinton to Japan Tuesday, the newspaper said in a report from Washington.

Under the accord, some units at Futenma will be transferred to the Kadena Base, the largest in Okinawa, while others will be reassigned to another US base in Iwakuni, Yamaguchi prefecture, western Japan, Nihon Keizai said, quoting several sources from Japan and the United States.

AP adds, Gov. Masahide Ota, who is leading a push to evict tens of thousands of US troops from Okinawa, is reportedly seeking a summit of his own with President Clinton next week.

Clinton is to arrive in Japan next Tuesday for a three-day visit, and the recent uproar on Okinawa over the conduct of the US troops in expected to be a major topic on his agenda.

Kyodo News reported that Ota has unofficially requested a meeting with Clinton and has been invited to a banquet in Tokyo in Clinton's honour. Clinton is to have a summit with Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto on Wednesday.

## Fresh appeals to free 4 abducted Westerners

SRINAGAR, Apr 12: Relatives and friends of four Westerners abducted last year by Muslim guerrillas in Kashmir issued fresh appeals here Thursday for their release, officials said, reports AFP.

The appeal, the first since September last year, was sent by an unnamed Western diplomat based in New Delhi, the officials said in the state summer capital.

The statement, circulated here in Urdu language, urged the abductors to release the hostages. "We the family members of the four tourists are looking forward to their release as we are missing them," it said.

"We have personal experience that Kashmiris are warm-hearted and hospitable people and we have an impression that you share our sufferings," said the appeal, signed in the names of wives and girlfriends of the four hostages.

There was no immediate reaction from the hardline Al-Faran separatist group, widely believed to be holding the tourists since their abduction between July 4 and 8 from the Kashmir trekking resort of Pahalgam.

## Public support for UN still strong in US

UNITED NATIONS, Apr 12: Public support for the United Nations is strong in the United States, but Americans are split on how effective UN peacekeeping is, according to a poll released Thursday, reports AP.

Forty-nine per cent of respondents said they thought the UN was doing a good job in solving the problems it faces; 39 per cent said a poor job and 13 per cent were not committed.

The poll, conducted by telephone April 2-4 among 1,000 people nationwide, was commissioned by the United Nations Association of the USA, a nonprofit group whose goal is to strengthen the United Nations.

The survey, by the New York-based Wirthlin Group, had a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. Those polled were split 45-45 per cent on whether UN peacekeeping helps preserve peace at an affordable price or imposes burdens that contribute little to security.

Still, 75 per cent said peacekeeping should be a high priority for the United Nations.

## Hezbollah vows retaliatory attacks against Israeli raids

BEIRUT, Apr 12: Hizbollah appeared set on Friday for a prolonged and bloody showdown with Israel after threatening to hit back with an "astonishing" response to a Jewish state's attack on Beirut, reports Reuters.

Israel said it would continue for several days the air raids it launched on Thursday against guerrillas targets in Lebanon.

Hizbollah (Party of God) secretary general Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah said his pro Iranian movement would continue a policy of bombarding northern Israel with Katyusha rockets in response to the killing of Lebanese civilians by Israeli forces.

Four people were killed and 15 injured in the seven Israeli helicopter and jet attacks across Lebanon.

"We will shell the settlements in northern Palestine. I won't say when, whether tonight, tomorrow or any other time."

They have to wait, Nasrallah said in a televised statement but he promised a different response for the helicopter rocket attack on a Shiite Muslim suburb of Beirut — the first Israeli attack on the Lebanese capital since 1982.

Meanwhile, Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali on Thursday deplored the escalating hostilities in Lebanon, particularly Israel's "retaliatory attack" on Beirut, and urged all parties to exercise utmost restraint.

"The secretary general deplores the escalation in hos-

tilities in Lebanon, in particular the retaliatory attack of the Israeli defence forces of Beirut," a brief statement issued through a UN spokesman said.

AP adds from Washington: Secretary of State Warren Christopher on Thursday blamed Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon for the latest outbreak of fighting in the Middle East, and the White House spokesman said Israel was forced to strike back.

There was no hint of criticism of Israel for the way it retaliated: with its first bombing of Beirut in 14 years as well as air strikes against suspected guerrilla bases in Lebanon. There were two reported deaths and several injuries.



Jessica Dubroff, 7, stands next to a Cessna, April 2 at Half Moon Bay Airport in California. Jessica was on the second day of a cross-country flight when the plane she was flying crashed, on Wednesday, in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Officials report there are no survivors. — AFP/UNB photo

## Peacekeepers in Liberia join outlaws in thievery

MONROVIA, Apr 12: Fighting and looting are bringing the seaside capital of devastated Liberia to its knees, reports AP.

Warriors are battling beyond the control of their warlords, peacekeepers are joining outlaws in thievery, and there's not enough food and medicine, officials say.

"A serious humanitarian crisis is likely to erupt if fighting continues," said Tarek El Gundi, director of the UN World Food Programme in Liberia.

Monrovia's Majma Jones put it in simpler terms: "Lord, please help us out of this madness — your children are dying."

Dozens of corpses, mostly those of young men, lay by the roadside downtown amid burned-out vehicles and Lebanese-owned shops looted and vandalised after fighting between rebels and government troops

broke out in Monrovia on Saturday.

You Liberians have a good country that God has given to the wrong people," said Joseph Hage, 36, a Lebanese businessman, born in Liberia, who saw his electronics shop looted and destroyed.

Some of those eager to flee have been ferried out by US military helicopter, but the evacuation effort was expanding as street fighting down some US citizens trying to get to the embassy for the airlift out on Thursday.

With the arrival of a US Marine amphibious group expected in eight days, more than 4,000 US military personnel will be involved, US defence officials said.

As of late Thursday, the US had evacuated 712 people from its embassy compound, including 130 Americans and

nationals of at least 35 other countries, officials in Washington said.

The 7-year war involving seven rebel factions has killed more than 150,000 people in the West African nation, founded in 1847 by freed American slaves. It has also left at least half the country's 2.3 million people homeless.

A peace accord was supposed to clear the way for elections this year, but civil order collapsed amid renewed unrest. African peacekeepers have been unable to stem the strife.

Up to 20,000 civilians, including foreign diplomats, missionaries and Liberians, have sought refuge in the UN Embassy compound and UN offices since Saturday.

Liberia's only international airport has been destroyed. All seven radio stations have gone off the air because of fuel

shortages and food is being rationed at the plush Mamba Point Hotel, where 500 people are holed up. No one knows how many people have died.

Aid workers from Doctors Without Borders said they had treated dozens of people for bullet wounds and were running short of medical supplies because sniper fire prevented them from getting to the central hospital.

Mobs broke down the gates at the UN compound on Thursday morning, cutting communication with headquarters in New York, spokesman Sylvana Foa said. The staff was reported safe at the US Embassy compound.

Buildings used by UNICEF and the UN Development Programme were also looted, along with the motor pool of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, she said.

A few people jumped the wall at the US embassy compound but were quickly run off by US special forces, said US State Department spokesman Glyn Davies in Washington.

Reports from the UN mission spoke of a "frenzy of looting" and said it appeared that leaders of the warring factions had lost control of their own fighters, Foa said.

Some peacekeepers, particularly Nigerians, were reported to have joined in the looting, said UN sources, speaking on conditions of anonymity.

The fighting has shut down the harbour, the country's only port of entry for international humanitarian supplies.

About 23,000 tons of food are stored at the port but the fighting has halted distribution throughout the country, where the UN feeds about 1.5 million people.

## Off the Record

### Dragging children into polls campaign

MOSCOW: Ultra nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy tried to drag Russia's children into his election campaign on Thursday, launching a young falcons league to help his bid for the presidency, reports Reuters.

A couple of dozen youngsters aged around 12 were brought to Zhirinovskiy's parliamentary offices for the launch, some dressed up in specially made blue shirts, black ties and small versions of Zhirinovskiy's trademark cap.

"Have they handed out the sweets yet? ... What's next, tea and cakes?" said an ebullient Zhirinovskiy, just as at home with the children as with his usual motley band of diehard supporters.

Zhirinovskiy, who is lagging in opinion polls for the June 16 presidential election behind Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov and incumbent Boris Yeltsin, denied the league was a pre-election stunt.

"We won't use you in the streets for the battle against Zyuganov, or against the old men in the Kremlin," he told the group before handing around badges emblazoned with his face.

The children, who gathered excitedly in his offices without quite knowing why they were there, were told that the young falcons were based on the defunct communist pioneers but would be much better.

"You can do what you like, there are no teachers here," said Zhirinovskiy, urging them to tuck into the cake lying next to the campaign video they had each been given.

## China facing name crisis!

BEIJING: China does not have enough names to go around for its 1.2 billion population, a Chinese newspaper said Friday, reports Reuters.

Premier Li Peng has at least 3,000 namesakes across the country, and the capital of Beijing alone has 13,000 women called Liu Shuzhen, the Xinmin evening news said.

Supply is tightest among surnames — 87 per cent of people have one of just over 100 and more than half of the population are surnamed Zhang, Li, Wang, Liu, Chen, Yang, Zhou, Huang, Zhao, Wu, Sun, Xu, Lin, Hu or Zhu.

One infant school in Chongqing has four Li Yangs, five Zhang Xues and seven Wang Yongs, it said.



## Troops kill 34 Kurds in fresh fighting

ANKARA, Apr 12: Turkish security forces killed 34 rebel Kurds and lost three troops in fresh fighting with the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in southeastern Turkey, government officials said on Thursday, reports AFP.

In the Saggote area, 60 kilometers (40 miles) north of the regional centre of Diyarbakir, where government troops and rebel Kurds were involved in major fighting earlier this week, 11 PKK members and three soldiers were killed in clashes since Wednesday, officials told the semi-official Anatolia news agency.

The previous official death toll in the area was announced on Tuesday as 129, including 99 (PKK) members and 30 troops.

In other clashes in the southeastern provinces of Sirri, Hakkari and Elazig, 23 Kurdish rebels were killed in the last couple of days, Anatolia said.

Operations by security forces against the terrorists PKK fighters will continue without an interruption, Interior Minister Ulku Guney said here on Thursday.

The cabinet of Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz also convened to discuss the latest developments in the southeast.

Up to 10,000 Turkish troops poured into the rebel stronghold of Saggote mountains last Friday, marking this year's biggest campaign against the PKK.

Turkish security officials believe that nearly 1,800 PKK rebels are still in the area.