

Lanka may set up coast guard to protect port from Tigers' attack

COLOMBO, Apr 18: The government is considering setting up a coast guard to protect Colombo's port, following last week's attack by Tamil Tiger guerrillas, a report said Thursday, says AP.

A rebel boat was destroyed after entering the port Friday. Four guerrilla divers trying to plant explosives on merchant ships blew themselves up after being spotted by naval sentries.

Three merchant ships, including a Singaporean vessel and a Liberian-registered one, were slightly damaged by rockets fired from the rebel boat in the pre-dawn attack.

A committee investigating the attack recommended that the new coast guard be manned by specially trained policemen. The island newspaper said, quoting an unidentified Shipping and Ports Ministry source.

The coast guard would patrol the 150 kilometre (90 miles) coastline between Colombo and the nearest guerrilla-held territory, the report said.

Naval officials believe the guerrillas launched the attack from a city suburb two kilometres (1 mile) away, despite a ban on vessels coming within four kilometres (2.5 miles) of the port without naval permission.

The guerrilla boat had slipped by the lone gunboat on guard outside the port, before being sunk by another gunboat inside.

A member of the investigating committee declined to comment on the contents of the confidential report, which apparently was given to shipping and ports minister Mohamed Ashraff on Tuesday.

The Tamil rebels have publicly praised the nine rebels who were killed in the attack as heroes. A video film of the attack was being shown to the public in rebel-held areas, the guerrillas said in a statement faxed from their London office Thursday.

The rebels are fighting for a homeland in northern and eastern Sri Lanka for minority Tamils, saying they suffer widespread discrimination by the powerful Sinhalese majority. More than 41,000 people have been killed since the war began in 1983.

Pyongyang carefully studying 4-nation peace talks DPRK plans more incursions to press demand for direct talks with US

SEOUL, Apr 18: North Korea is planning new military border incursions by mobilising 1,000 tanks and 10,000 troops to press its demand for direct peace negotiations with the United States, a report said Thursday, reports AP.

The South Korean newspaper Hankyoreh Shinmun said in a Beijing-dated report that an ethnic Korean scholar in China became aware of the North Korean plan during his recent visit to Pyongyang.

"I feel obliged to disclose this, because I think that the moves being pushed by some hard-liners in the party and military are dangerous and can hurt the future of the Korean people," the unidentified scholar said in an interview with Hankyoreh.

Hankyoreh, known for its criticism of the Seoul government and the United States, reportedly maintains good contact with North Korea and sources close to the hard-line communist country.

The paper said the ethnic Korean scholar in China, from whom it obtained the information, enjoys good relations with North Korean leaders in the government, ruling party and military.

North Korea caused alarm early this month by nullifying the armistice that ended the 1950-53 Korean War. It then marched heavily armed troops into the neutral border village of Panmunjom on three straight nights.

Each time, the troops withdrew without incident. But South Korea immediately put its 650,000-member army on heightened alert. There have since been no further communist incursions into the demilitarized zone that separates the two Koreas.

The North Korean moves were widely seen as an effort to force the United States to replace the 1953 Korean armistice with a peace treaty, snubbing rival South Korea.

Washington maintains that any peace measures must be discussed by the two Koreas.

The scholar told Hankyoreh that hard-liners in the North, especially those from the 1.2 million-member military, are angry at the US stance.

In the new planned incursion, he said North Korea would amass 1,000 tanks and 10,000 troops in a highly visible prairie inside the 4 kilometre (2.5 mile) wide DMZ on the central front-line, called "the iron triangle," the site of some of the fiercest fighting during the Korean conflict.

"Their plan to do this in a highly visible area is obvious," the paper quoted him as saying. Observers believe that the North apparently chose the border village of Panmunjom for its earlier incursions to attract world attention.

The scholar also said that there is a serious friction between moderates and hard-liners in the North Korean leadership over foreign policies.

Hard-liners, mostly from the military, clash often with moderates from the Foreign Ministry and other administration agencies, he said.

Reuters adds from Tokyo, the North Korean ambassador to Thailand said his country was carefully studying a proposal by Washington and Seoul for four-nation peace talks and that Pyongyang was ready to accept South Korea as an "observer."

Suu Kyi appeals for int'l action against junta to restore democracy

GENEVA, Apr 18: In a message delivered to the UN Human Rights Commission, Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi on Wednesday appealed for more pressure on the Myanmar government to restore democracy, reports AP.

She said hopes of lucrative business investments in the opening economy should not blind countries to the harsh political reality in her homeland.

"Our message to the international community is a simple one," Suu Kyi said. "We would simply like them to be aware of the fact that the situation in Myanmar is a threat not only to its own people, but to the region and to the world."

"Injustice and lack of peace in the country means injustice and lack of peace for the rest of the world," she said in a video message from her home in Myanmar.

"We would like to remind those who are simply looking at the economic benefits that they hope to reap from Myanmar today that they are working against their own long term interest and the long term interests of the international community in general," she said.

There was no immediate response from the Myanmar government which last year released Suu Kyi from house arrest and says she is free to leave the country — as long as she doesn't return.

Her address coincided with the launch in Geneva of an "international network" to promote democracy in Myanmar. The group is headed by former Norwegian foreign minister Kjell Magne Bondevik and includes US Congressman Bill Richardson and lawmakers from Europe and Asia.

The network said it aimed to get increased aid for Burmese opposition groups and to persuade Japan and other nations to step up pressure on the Burmese military.

Suu Kyi renewed demands that the Myanmar government should recognise the results of the 1990 elections, which were won by her National League for Democracy.

The Human Rights Commission is currently discussing the situation in countries considered to have the worst records — including Myanmar.

Special UN investigator Yoizo Yokota told the commission Tuesday that executions, torture and slave labour were still common despite cautions political reforms.

BRIEFLY

KSA to buy 20 Hawk missiles: Saudi Arabia is seeking to buy 20 Hawk surface-to-air missile batteries at a cost of 273 million dollars, the Pentagon said Wednesday, AFP reports from Washington.

The Pentagon notified Congress of the proposed sale, saying it was consistent with US policy and would not affect the basic military balance of the region.

Arnett wins NZ Press Club award: New Zealand-born CNN correspondent Peter Arnett is to receive the National Press Club's lifetime achievement award in journalism, AP reports from Wellington.

Arnett, who gained international fame for his live coverage of the Gulf War from Baghdad, will receive the award in Wellington on May 8. National Press Club president Peter Isaac said Thursday.

Sudanese wins int'l refugee award: An elementary teacher who fled bloodshed in her native Sudan 13 years ago will receive an international award for her efforts on behalf of fellow refugees, AP reports from Bloomington.

Julia Duany, who teaches at Arlington Elementary School, is one of four winners of the award from the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, to be presented May 16 in New York. Born and raised in southern Sudan, Duany and her family fled their native country and settled in Bloomington in 1984.

Mortar bombs kill 9 in Mogadishu: Two mortar bombs slammed into a crowded refugee camp in southern Mogadishu on Wednesday, killing nine people including three children and wounding 16, witnesses said, Reuters reports from Mogadishu.

Ahmed Jama, head of Shabelle refugee camp which borders on faction leader Mohamed Farah Aideed's headquarters, said the two 120 mm mortar bombs exploded in the camp for 200 families in the morning.

PLO factions' talks begin: PLO factions began three days of talks on Wednesday on changing the group's charter, which calls for the destruction of Israel, Reuters reports from Gaza.

More than 53 members of the Palestine National Council (PNC) representing various factions attended the meeting chaired by Palestinian President Yasser Arafat.

The radical popular front for the liberation of Palestine and the democratic front for the liberation of Palestine boycotted the talks.

2 peacekeepers killed in Tuzla: Two soldiers one Danish, the other from Lithuania, were killed in a landmine blast Wednesday while serving with IFOR in Bosnia, officials said, AFP reports from Tuzla.

An IFOR spokesman in Tuzla said the soldiers had been traveling in a convoy of three vehicles one of which hit what appeared to be an anti-tank mine. The blast occurred 20 kilometres (15 miles) from Doboj city, the spokesman said, adding that seven other soldiers in the convoy escaped injury.

Ghanaian mediators in Monrovia: A delegation of Ghanaian mediators has arrived in the Liberian capital, hoping to negotiate a new ceasefire to end fighting between rival factions that residents fear could flare again at any time, Reuters reports from Monrovia.

A spokesman for the West African peacekeeping force Ecomog said the delegation sent by Ghana's President Jerry Rawlings arrived on Wednesday night.

Car with explosives seized in KSA: Saudi customs officers seized a car packed with explosives at the border with Jordan and have made several arrests Saudi television reported yesterday morning, AFP reports from Riyadh.

The television quoting a senior security official said the car registered in Saudi Arabia and driven by a Saudi was intercepted on March 29 at the Al-Hudeitha checkpoint about 1,200 kilometres (750 miles) from Riyadh.

Four Iranian diplomats leave Turkey

ANKARA, Apr 18: Four Iranian diplomats who allegedly with a suspected Turkish Islamic terrorist have left Turkey, the Anatolia news agency said Wednesday, reports AP.

Ankara asked for the withdrawal of the diplomats after Irfan Cagirci, a leader of the illegal group Islamic Action who was arrested for the killing of a pro-western Turkish journalist, testified last month that the four Iranians were his contacts in Turkey.

Iran then accused four Turkish diplomats of spying, Turkey denied the charge but recalled the diplomats.

Kashmir should be protected at any cost, says Joshi

AMRAVATI, Apr 18: Maharashtra Chief Minister Manohar Joshi has urged for alertness to combat the divisive forces that were trying to infiltrate into the country, reports PTI.

Addressing a public meeting near here yesterday, Joshi said Kashmir, the paradise and crown of India, was "the property of our country and should be protected at any cost."

India had been partitioned once and today militants were trying to come into the country for this purpose, he said adding that we will not concede even one piece of our land to anybody.

Polls won't produce clear majority, predicts Dini

ROME, Apr 18: Premier Lamberto Dini predicted Wednesday the parliamentary elections probably will not produce a clear majority, reports AP.

The elections will change political alignments only marginally, the Italian news agency AGI quoted Dini as saying in Strasbourg, France, where he was addressing the European Parliament.

If neither the centre-left nor the centre-right, the two main political blocs, wins enough seats Sunday to form a strong government politicians say they will try to rewrite electoral laws.

In 1993 the Italian parliament partially reformed Italy's proportional electoral system.



US President Bill Clinton (R) smiles as US First Lady, Hillary, looks on, during Japanese Speaker of the House's address at the National diet on Thursday. A joint declaration on security has given Clinton formal backing from Japan for the US role as policeman of the Asia-Pacific region. — AFP/UNB photo

Arab League for an immediate end to bombardment Israeli attacks on S Lebanon continue amid US ceasefire call

BEIRUT, Apr 18: Israeli warplanes blasted an apartment building in a south Lebanon village Thursday, killing seven people, including four children, and injuring 10, military sources said, reports AP.

The attack was on the village of Nabatiyeh, Fayqah, which is adjacent to the main market town of Nabatiyeh in southern Lebanon.

Civil defence rescuers rushed to the scene to try to pull the wounded and dead from under the rubble. Bulldozers were called in and the sources said the casualty toll was expected to rise.

The building had been used by families who defied Israeli orders and stayed in the region following a week of intense fighting.

The three-story building took a direct air-to-surface missile hit, said the sources, speaking in south Lebanon on condition of anonymity.

The deaths occurred amid Israeli air and artillery attacks, which resumed in the morning as the United States issued what amounted to a call for a cease-fire in the 8-day-old hostilities.

US State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said that if Hezbollah made the first move by halting its rocket attacks on northern Israel, the Clinton administration believed Israel would stop its retaliatory attacks.

"Our objective is to as quickly as possible end the fighting," Burns told reporters traveling with President Clinton in Japan on Thursday.

In southern Lebanon, Israeli fighter jets began the day with a raid on suspected Hezbollah guerrilla targets in the market town of Nabatiyeh at 6:45 am (0345 GMT). Helicopter gunships and intermittent artillery fire soon followed.

One person was killed and nine wounded when a Nabatiyeh house took a direct air-to-surface missile hit, police said.

Helicopter gunships blasted Hezbollah positions on the edge of an Israeli-occupied border enclave in the country's southeast, firing six air-to-surface missiles.

Earlier report says, even as Israel raked Lebanon with new air attacks, the Lebanese government demanded changes Wednesday in a US plan to stop the fighting. Beirut said the proposal would perpetuate Israel's control of its southern region and violate the basic tenets of a Mideast peace settlement.

Earlier AFP says, the Arab League on Wednesday condemned Israel's week old bombardment of Lebanon and called on the UN Security Council to put an "immediate stop" to it. Lebanese Foreign Minister Fares Bweiz said.

An emergency session of the League foreign ministers "accepted a Lebanese proposal based on a condemnation of the Israeli aggression and holding Israel responsible for any resulting damages," Bweiz told journalists.

The final resolution also demands that "the UN Security Council put an immediate end to the Israeli aggression and implement resolution 425" calling for an Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon, he said.

Clinton to go ahead with arms transfer to Pakistan

WASHINGTON, Apr 18: US President Bill Clinton has decided to go ahead with the transfer to Pakistan of military equipment worth 368 million dollars, held up because of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme, it was disclosed on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

In a letter to Congress, US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott also said the administration had decided to return to the Islamabad government 120 million dollars owed for weapons for which it had paid for but which were never manufactured.

The decision "is based on a continuation of Pakistan's current restraint in its nuclear and missile activities," Talbott said in the April 12 letter, made available Wednesday.

The military equipment was blocked by a 1961 law that bars aid to countries seeking to make nuclear weapons. Also held up were 28 F-16 fighters for which Pakistan had paid 650 million dollar.

Congress, in a one-time waiver, relaxed the ban on delivery of the equipment, but not the F-16s. However, delivery continued to be held up because of concerns about China's sale to Pakistan of ring magnets that could be used to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons.

AP adds from Karachi: Pakistan's financial capital shut down Thursday as opposition activists called for a strike to protest a government move to strip the city's municipal council of its powers.

Shops and businesses were closed in Karachi's main market districts and traffic was reduced from its usual bustling pace to a trickle.

Armed police and paramilitary troops patrolled the streets to curb violence which is often associated with strikes in Karachi. Karachi has been wracked by ethnic violence for more than two years.

Beijing warns Tokyo against military buildup US, Japan seek to stabilise Asia without threatening others

BANGKOK, Apr 18: The United States and Japan, whose leaders have reaffirmed their strategic security partnership, seek to stabilise Asia without threatening other nations in the region, a senior US military chief said Thursday, reports AP.

Neither an increasingly assertive China nor Southeast Asians with bitter memories of Japanese military occupation have reason to fear close ties between the two powers, Adm. Joseph Prueher told reporters.

"The US-Japanese relationship is not oriented against any particular nation," said Prueher, the senior commander of US forces in the Asia-Pacific region. "It is dedicated as a plus for stability in the area."

As evidence of the US commitment to Asian security, Prueher stressed that the United States would continue for the foreseeable future to base about 100,000 troops in the region. Some 47,000 of them would be stationed in Japan.

Reuters adds: China warned Japan today against a military buildup but said it did not believe the US-Japan security agreement was targeted at Beijing.

If Japan did build up its military, the move was bound to cause concern among its neighbours, including China, Foreign Ministry spokesman Shen Guofang told a news briefing.

Shen added that Beijing did not think the US-Japan security agreement struck in Tokyo on Wednesday was aimed at China. China was willing to strengthen cooperation with both Japan and the United States on the basis of peaceful coexistence, he said.

Another AP reports says, standing before parliament, President Clinton hailed US-Japanese security ties Thursday as the cornerstone of stability in Asia. He warned that an American pullback from the region "could spark a costly arms race that could destabilise Northeast Asia."

The president said there are people in both the United States and Japan who believe America should withdraw from its global leadership role in the aftermath of the Cold War.

"I believe those views are wrong," he declared, saying the United States and Japan should continue to "lead and work together as allies and partners, and as friends."

Clinton was only the second American president ever to address the Japanese Diet. Ronald Reagan was the first in 1983. Japanese lawmakers gave the president a warm welcome and applauded heartily at the conclusion of his remarks.

The address, stressing security and economic themes, wrapped up a three-day state visit to Japan. Later in the day the president was flying to Russia for a four-day stay.

Clinton noted that the United States and Japan still have sharp trade frictions — aggravated by Tokyo's 59 billion dollar trade surplus with Washington.

"But the important part is that after years of frustration on both sides, for the first time we have actually established a way to work through our differences and to resolve them," the president said.

On the security front, Clinton said Japan's hospitality to American troops "was put to a terrible test in Okinawa" by the rape of a schoolgirl by three American servicemen, later convicted and imprisoned.

He said Americans "profoundly regret the horrible violence."



Palestinian prisoners' mothers shout slogans against Israel, during a sit-in held at the offices of the International Red Cross in Gaza City on Wednesday, as around 100 women demanded the release of male and female prisoners in Israeli jails. — AFP/UNB photo

Amid Saudi pressure UK lifts threat to deport Masari

LONDON, Apr 18: A Saudi dissident is to be allowed to stay in Britain, free to continue his human rights campaign against his country's royal family, according to a news report Thursday, reports AP.

The Daily Telegraph said the British government has lifted its threat to deport Mohammed Al-Masari. The London newspaper, which did not cite any source for its report, said Al-Masari is to be given exceptional leave to stay in Britain for at least two years but that his request for asylum has not been granted.

Saudi Arabia's Ambassador in London, Ghazi Algaibali, warned in a BBC radio interview on April 1 that unless Prime Minister John Major's government expelled Al-Masari, Saudi Arabia would cancel trade deals with Britain worth millions of dollars.

Al-Masari, a former physics professor, has been fighting a legal battle against an order by Major's government for him to be deported to the Caribbean island of Dominica, which has offered to accept him.

On March 5, a judge ordered the government to reconsider Al-Masari's asylum request, saying Dominica might not be able to resist Saudi pressures to expel Al-Masari if he were sent there.

Al-Masari, 49, was arrested in Saudi Arabia in 1993.

Off the Record

Fatigue is only thing showing on pregnant star

BUDAPEST: Fatigue, it appears, is the only thing showing on Madonna, reports AP.

Argentine actors working with the pop star on the set of the movie "Evita" said Wednesday they hadn't even noticed Madonna was four months pregnant.

"Although we have danced with her, we haven't noticed anything," said actor Alfredo Martin.

"She was always punctual and knew her lines, and, in case you were wondering, we never once noticed anything about her pregnancy," added Marcelo Aichel, who plays a photographer.

"All we could so far see on her was fatigue, but that was only after a long and tiring day's work," Aichel said.

Madonna's aides announced Tuesday that she was pregnant with her first child, saying in a statement: "This is the greatest and happiest surprise in her life." The father-to-be is her 29-year-old boyfriend and physical trainer, Carlos Leon. He is said to be back home in the States.

Madonna, 37, is in Hungary's capital filming a version of Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical on Eva Peron, the charismatic wife of Argentine strongman President Juan Peron.



Another planet discovered

SAN FRANCISCO: Two US astronomers have discovered a new planet outside our solar system, orbiting a star about 50 light years from earth, one of the researchers said on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

Geoffrey Marcy, Professor of Physics and Astronomy at San Francisco State University, said the unnamed planet, located in the last few weeks, was the fifth planet outside our solar system discovered in recent months.

Three of those have been discovered by Marcy and Paul Butler, also of San Francisco State University.

Marcy said the team found the latest planet using the Itek observatory near San Jose, California.

The planet is orbiting a star, known as HR 3522, that is about 50 light years away from the earth. "We're seeing light from the star as it was 50 years ago," Marcy told Reuters.

Marcy and Butler caused a stir in January when they announced they had discovered two new planets whose environments might be able to support life.

But Marcy said the latest planet would be "certainly inhospitable to life as we know it."

"It's much too hot, 500 degrees centigrade on the surface, scorching hot any water would be in vapour," he said.

The planet has a mass about 80 per cent as large as that of Jupiter and is about nine million miles from its star, Marcy said.

The researchers discovered the planet as part of a 10-year old research project "to make the initial reconnaissance of planets around other normal stars," Marcy said.

Danger of urinating in wrong place

BEIJING: A Chinese train guard has died after he urinated on goods in a cargo wagon and set off a chemical reaction that produced a highly toxic hydrogen phosphide gas, a report said Wednesday, reports AP.

The guard was discovered unconscious when the train pulled into the main station last week in the northern port city of Tianjin, the Xinhua Evening News reported.

He was rushed to hospital, but died soon afterwards.

Subsequent investigations showed that he had relieved himself over a package of chemicals that reacted with the urine to give off a cloud of the toxic gas.