

BRIEFLY



Russian President Boris Yeltsin (L) and his US counterpart Bill Clinton (R) embrace during a reception at the Kremlin on Friday. Leaders of the Group of Seven most industrialised nations (G7) and Russia are gathering in Moscow for a two-day summit on nuclear safety and security. — AFP/UNB Photo

Pavel Grachev ready to resign: Russia's hawkish defence Minister Pavel Grachev told parliament Friday he was ready to step down if deputies blamed him for the loss of at least 53 servicemen in an ambush by Chechen rebels. Reuter reports from Moscow.

I am ready to resign if deputies consider that I am to blame for what has happened, Grachev told the State Duma lower house of parliament. But the chamber did not take any decision on his remark, according to the constitution, only President Boris Yeltsin can appoint or sack the Defence Minister.

Colombian drug lord held: Police arrested a Colombian who heads the Cali drug cartel's Panama operation, dealing a major blow to the organisation's trafficking network, authorities said. AP reports from Panama City.

Jose Castrillon Henao was arrested along with two Panamanians, Rosendo Miranda, Panama's top drug prosecutor, said Friday. It was not immediately known if authorities would seek to extradite the suspect Castrillon Henao to the United States, where he is under indictment, or to Colombia.

Thunderstorms kill 6 in China: Thunderstorms and hailstorms the size of chicken eggs killed six people and seriously injured 164 in South China, a Hong Kong newspaper reported yesterday. Reuter reports from Hong Kong.

The storm, which hit China's southern Maoming city in Guangdong province on Friday morning, left five people missing and destroyed homes and plantations, the Wei Pao reported. The paper quoted witnesses as saying the huge hailstones destroyed some houses in farming villages.

IRA responsible for London blast: The Irish Republican Army has claimed responsibility for a bomb explosion in London on Wednesday night, the Irish national radio station RTE reported late Friday. AP says from London.

RTE said the claim was made in a telephone call to the station in Dublin. The bomb exploded in an uninhabited house in a posh west London neighbourhood, The Boltons, and caused no injuries.

Blast kills 2 in Russia: Two people were killed, one wounded and two more were missing after an underground oil storage tank exploded in central Russia, ITAR-Tass news agency said Saturday. Reuter reports from Moscow.

Tass said the incident took place on Friday at the Ryazan oil refinery some 200 km (120 miles) to the south of Moscow. The capacity of the storage was 10,000 cubic metres, Tass said. It did not say what caused the blast.

300 Vietnamese return home: More than 300 Vietnamese refugees taken from Malaysian camps and shipped home arrived at a southern port city early Saturday after a 30-hour sea voyage, AP reports from Hanoi.

The 317 refugees, the largest group of Vietnamese "boat people" ever repatriated, were moored offshore at Vung Tau while Vietnamese authorities arranged their immigration papers, a Malaysian diplomat said.

Asahara to go on trial: First he will have to listen to the names prosecutors plan an uncharacteristically dramatic gesture when doomsday cult leader Shoko Asahara, finally goes on trial Wednesday for murder in last year's nerve-gas attack on the Tokyo subway, AP reports from Tokyo.

Even before the 41-year-old guru is asked to make his plea, his accusers will recite a grim litany: a list of about 3,300 people who were sickened or killed in the attack.

US refuses to condemn Israeli attacks Hezbollah fires salvoes of rockets on N Israel

JERUSALEM, Apr 20: Pro-Iranian Hezbollah guerrillas fired salvoes of Katyusha rockets on northern Israel today, residents and Israeli security sources said, reports Reuter.

Israeli security sources confirmed an Israeli radio report that there had been a barrage on the western Galilee. The radio said the rockets caused no damage or casualties.

It said Israel's air force was "continuing to operate" over Lebanon on tenth day of the Jewish state's blitz against the guerrillas.

Residents in the Galilee Panhandle said shortly after that rockets began falling in their area. They said Israeli artillery could be heard firing into Lebanon. There were no initial reports of casualties or damage in the Galilee Panhandle.

In South Lebanon, witnesses said Israeli planes launched raids near villages southeast of the southern port of Tyre.

AFP adds: The United States refused Friday to condemn Israel for its deadly attack on refugees in South Lebanon saying it would not help restore a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah guerrillas.

State Department spokesman Glyn Davies rejected suggestions that the United States was maintaining a pro-Israeli stance despite the Israeli shelling on Thursday of a UN refugee compound, that left 97 dead and more than 100 wounded.

The objective now is not to inflame the situation if you will further by condemning Israel or engaging in that sort of rhetoric at all, Davies said.

President Bill Clinton called for an immediate ceasefire in the hours that followed the tragedy on Thursday.

Troops kill 50 Tigers in fresh offensive in Jaffna

COLOMBO, Apr 20: Sri Lankan armed forces killed at least 50 Tamil Tiger guerrillas and wounded 80 on the first day of a new offensive in the northern Jaffna Peninsula, a military statement said today, reports Reuter.

Government forces who launched operation Riviresa Two on Friday against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had so far lost two soldiers with eight wounded, the defence ministry statement said.

The troops launched a land, air and sea assault on rebel positions in the Vadamarachchi and Tenmaradchi divisions of the peninsula, which are controlled by the LTTE fighting for a homeland for minority Tamils in the island's north and east.

In last year's first Riviresa operation, the army cleared the rebels' long-time stronghold of Jaffna town and the adjacent Valikamam district.

The military statement said troops had advanced about

eight km (five miles) after taking the rebels by surprise, without specifying the exact location. Troops had recovered 32 rebel bodies, it added.

The air force attacked LTTE bases in Vadamarachchi on Friday morning with support from naval gunfire.

Civilians who had gathered at places of worship welcomed the arrival of troops by ringing bells of Hindu temples. They appealed to the army to remain in the newly liberated areas, the statement said.

It said there had been no civilian casualties so far because of maximum precautions taken to ensure their safety.

Action has also been taken to provide urgently needed humanitarian assistance such as food and medicine to the civilians, it added.

The rebels' clandestine radio said at least 10 civilians had been killed by military shelling and a further 80 wounded on Friday and today.

AP adds: Government soldiers moved forward into

Tamil Tiger rebel-held territory at first light Saturday, the second day of an offensive aimed at driving the guerrillas out of the northern Jaffna Peninsula, military officials said.

The troops had stopped for the night after advancing through minefields and other rebel defences on Friday. They were backed by battle tanks and aircraft, and preceded by an artillery barrage, said Major Dunuwille, a military spokesman.

It was not clear how far the soldiers advanced Saturday. Details of any casualties were not immediately available. But in Friday's battle, at least 16 soldiers were injured, a military official said on condition of anonymity.

News about the battle has been sketchy because the military has imposed a total blackout on news and on Friday began censoring local media reporting of the war.

Media reports of the foreign media, including the Associated

Press, have not been censored so far. However, under emergency laws on the media introduced on Friday, reports of foreign newspapers and news agencies can also be censored by a government official.

During the last offensive in 1995, the government censored military news, photographs and video clippings for nearly two months.

An indefinite curfew declared on Friday in two northern districts also continued. The military has ordered civilians to gather at schools, Hindu temples and churches, which have been designated as safe areas.

At least three soldiers were wounded by rebel mines on Friday, as thousands of troops began moving on a broad front on several roads towards Vadamarachchi and Tenmaradchi regions in the eastern half of the peninsula in the offensive, code named "Sun Rays 2."

Brother of Muslim candidate killed in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, Apr 20: Muslim separatists shot dead the brother of a Muslim candidate in upcoming general elections in Kashmir after failing to find the candidate at home, police said Saturday, reports AFP.

An unspecified number of gunmen stormed into the house of Wali Mohammed Wani, a nominee of the Awami Gehrqi Party, late Friday at Baramulla town, about 65 kms north of here.

They asked for him, and not finding him there opened indiscriminate fire killing his brother, a police spokesman said in this summer capital of Kashmir state. The victim was identified as Shabir Wani.

The Awami Gehrqi is a new political party founded by former Muslim militants and is contesting all three parliamentary seats in the Kashmir valley.

One of its activists was shot dead by suspected guerrillas in Srinagar two days earlier while distributing campaign literature.

'Rao's relatives got official favours'

NEW DELHI, Apr 20: Five relatives of Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao were allotted lucrative agencies for cooking gas by a government minister in violation of rules, newspapers reported Saturday, says AP.

The disclosure by a bureaucrat was made Friday before the Supreme Court, which is hearing a public interest lawsuit that Petroleum Minister Satish Sharma handed out thousands of contracts to friends and political contacts for selling government — subsidised cooking gas.

The beneficiaries included a nephew and a niece of Rao, newspapers reported quoting Petroleum Ministry official Dev Dayal as saying.

The disclosure was made after the court asked the federal government to comment on newspaper reports last month that Rao's relatives were among those who had been allotted the agencies.

US won't rule out any options to deal with chemical arms plant of Libya

WASHINGTON, Apr 20: The United States will not rule out any options to deal with the potential threat of a chemical weapons facility believed under construction in Libya, the State Department said Friday, reports AP.

The department, in a statement, was responding to questions about The New York Times column Friday reporting that the United States is developing a "small" nuclear weapon that could destroy the estimated 100 million people in the facility without exterior radioactive fallout.

Use of such a weapon "as a last resort" has not been dismissed, columnist AM Rosenthal wrote. But more likely to be used, he wrote, is a non-nuclear bomb that would penetrate the mountain reported housing the complex and detonate a second bomb, "spreading fire."



Palestinians from the fundamentalist movement Hamas protest on Friday in Ramallah against the Israeli military operation in Lebanon, a day after the killing of 97 civilians by Israeli artillery fire on a UN compound in Cana. They also protest against the Palestinian authority for arresting Hamas activists. — AFP/UNB photo

Cong (I) election office set ablaze in Agartala Security to be tightened for peaceful holding of polls

CHANDIGARH, Apr 20: The Election Commissioner, G V G Krishnamurthy today said that 1,000 companies of paramilitary forces would be deployed in Punjab in addition to the state police.

Speaking to newsmen here, Krishnamurthy said considerable security measures were being taken, especially in the border areas, adding that former policemen and army personnel would act as buffer personnel.

Citing reasons for delaying elections in Jammu and Kashmir, the Election Commissioner said that it would take at least 15 days to move paramilitary forces from south, east and west to the state.

Referring to Punjab, he said a polling of about 60 per cent,

against 23.96 during 1992 assembly elections, was expected on April 27.

Krishnamurthy said that 40 companies of paramilitary forces would be deployed in Punjab in addition to the state police.

He added that the states demand for 100 companies could not be met due to elections in other parts of the country where heavy security was required at a number of places including Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

Meanwhile the Congress (I) candidate for Udaiguri assembly constituency, Jaman Singh Brahma has decided to stop campaigning and stay in Guwahati after he received a threat to his life by supporters

of some opposition parties.

Brahma has said that he will like to stay in Guwahati and let his supporters do the campaigning for him as his life was being threatened, the party's General Secretary, Dhruva Narayan Baruah, said today.

Another PTI reports says, unidentified miscreants set ablaze the election office of Congress (I), a market complex and a sub-post office at Mohorcherra under Kalyanpur police station last night.

The police said in Agartala today that about 15 shops, nearby post office and the Congress office were completely gutted in the fire.

The total loss of property was not yet known and no arrests have been made so far in this connection.

New warning against distribution of political pamphlets during Hajj

RIYADH, Apr 20: Saudi Arabia issued a new warning on Friday against the distribution of political pamphlets during the annual pilgrimage and won the support of its religious leaders for a ban on rallies called for by Iran, reports AFP.

The country's mufti, or top religious authority, Sheikh Abdel Aziz ibn Baz, said such rallies during the pilgrimage amounted to "heresy" and the government had a "duty" to stop them to ensure the safety of pilgrims.

The Saudi Interior Ministry said the "introduction" of books, photos or pamphlets of a political, ideological or propagandistic nature is strictly forbidden.

The ministry said in a statement to the Saudi press agency said it noticed that some worshippers had such documents either in "good faith or with the aim of using them during the pilgrimage," it warned, they could face

punishment in line with the kingdom's strict laws.

The authorities warned Tehran on April 7 that any political activity during the Hajj was "strictly forbidden."

Iran plans to send around 17,000 pilgrims to the hajj which begins next week.

In Tehran on March 14, Mohammad Mohammadi Reyshahri, head of Iran's Pilgrimage Affairs, said the "disavowal of pagans" rally was a "tenet" of the annual pilgrimage and would be held in "anyway possible."

Shiite Muslims traditionally hold a rally to denounce pagans, but after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran the protests have become directed against the United States, Israel and sometime Saudi Arabia.

There have been several violent incidents in the past at such rallies. In 1987 more than 400 pilgrims, mostly Iranian, were killed in clashes

Governor killed in fighting Taliban recapture most of Ghor province

PESHAWAR, Pakistan, Apr 20: Afghanistan's rebel Taliban Islamic militia said on Friday it had recaptured most of the central province of Ghor, including its capital Chaghchannan and killed the provincial governor in fighting.

The Taliban Governor in Herat in the west, Maulvi Yar Mohammad told Reuters by telephone that the Taliban captured Chaghchannan on Friday after several days of fighting, leaving only the

Pasaband district in the south-east of the province in government hands.

He said the Ghor Governor whom he identified only as Khalili, was wounded in fighting and died while being flown to Herat.

There was no immediate independent confirmation of the fall of the mountainous province, which was captured

from Taliban by forces loyal to President Burhanuddin Rabbani earlier this month in an apparent move to use it for an assault on the adjoining strategic Herat province they lost to Taliban last year.

Year Mohammad said 80 government troops had been killed and 100 capture in the Ghor fighting and put Taliban casualties at only five wounded.

Gorots reported recapture came as a senior US official arrived in the Afghan capital Kabul as part of renewed international efforts to halt civil war in the country.

Assistant secretary of State for South Asia Robin Raphael met Rabbani and some of his close aides in Kabul after arriving there from Pakistan and told them that Washington was interested in a peaceful settlement, the official Kabul radio said.

China wants ROK, DPRK to talk peace without help

THE HAGUE, Apr 20: China wants to let North and South Korea try to resolve their tensions on their own before either Beijing or the United States steps in to help, reports AP.

That message emerged from talks here Friday between US Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, but the two men's meeting was overshadowed by Christopher's attempts to forge a truce between Israel and Hezbollah.

At a press briefing after talks between Christopher and Qian, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Yun-Xiang declined to say whether the Chinese gave Christopher any firm commitment to participate in the Korean peace talks.

But Assistant Secretary of State Winston Lord confirmed that China was keen to let North Korea make an effort.

It is fair to say they are

waiting to see what Pyongyang is going to say and they are anxious not to get out in front of North Korea, Lord told reporters.

US President Bill Clinton and South Korean President Kim Young-sam suggested earlier in the week that the United States and China mediate in peace talks between South and North Korea.

Referring to that suggestion, Christopher said he "had a good discussion and the foreign minister (Qian) indicated he thought the proposal the United States made was a reasonable one but he feels the primary responsibility is between the North and South."

AFP adds: Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen regards four sided negotiations over Korea proposed by the United States and South Korea is reasonable, US Secretary of State Warren Christopher said in the Hague late Friday.

Off the Record

They wish they were boys!

BEIJING: More than 40 per cent of middle-school girls in China wish they were boys, saying boys enjoy greater freedom and have a brighter future, a survey published Friday found, reports Reuter.

A 1995 survey by the Beijing Jinglun Family Centre of 700 middle school students — ranging in age from 13 to 18 — and their parents found that 44.2 per cent of girl students wished they were boys, the China Youth Daily said.

Asked why, respondents said boys were freer, did not have as many restrictions placed on them, teachers paid more attention to boys and boys had better prospects, the survey said. The status of women in China has greatly improved since the communist revolution in 1949 but Chinese have traditionally preferred boys to girls.

A surgeon's mistake

ROME: A surgeon who bungled an operation to sterilise a young Italian mother, has been ordered to pay for the upkeep of a child she conceived after the operation, the Italian news agency Ansa reported, says AFP.

The woman who already had two children, had the operation two years ago at Dolo Hospital near Venice. The purpose of the operation was to seal up the woman's fallopian tubes by the injection of strong glue.

She paid a million lira (640 dollars) for the operation. A court ruled that the surgeon had not fulfilled his obligations to the patient who is seeking 250,000 dollars in damages.

NATO troops seize anti-aircraft missiles from Serbs

SARAJEVO, Apr 20: NATO troops confiscated banned anti-aircraft missiles from Serbs but said Friday that a major pullback of troops and weapons was progressing well despite delays, reports AP.

Civilian officials involved in implementing Bosnia's peace accords were less pleased with how some non-military provisions of the Dayton agreement — like freedom of movement — were being implemented.

Randolph Ryan, spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, said many refugees who want to return home are being blocked by those belonging to different ethnic groups.

WASHINGTON, Apr 20: The global environment is deteriorating in nearly every category — air, water, oceans and forests — according to a new book compiled by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), reports AFP.

The book, set for release to mark Earth Day on Monday, said tropical forests are disappearing 50 per cent faster than a decade ago and that five to 20 per cent of plant and animal species are threatened with extinction.

Air pollution, acid rain and fresh water shortages are also on the rise in many parts of the world, the organisation said.

"Air pollution levels are increasing worldwide, even though it has decreased over the past two decades in industrialised countries," the UN agency said. More than 125

Global environment deteriorating

million people live in cities with unacceptable levels of suspended particulate matter, which can cause decreased lung capacity.

More than half of 54 cities monitored by the UN agency, including Paris, Madrid, Rio De Janeiro, Bangkok and Tehran, had "unacceptable" air pollution levels.

UNEP executive director Elizabeth Dowdeswell said both industrialised and developing countries must take responsibility for the global environment.

"No one can be let off the hook," Dowdeswell said in an interview in Washington. "It's quite understandable to say the industrialised world has used

the world as its sink... but action needs to be held in both places."

The report said the United States is the largest source of global air pollution, but that the top six countries, including Brazil and India in the developing world, were responsible for 55.8 per cent of emissions.

The UN agency noted that scientists estimate between 150 and 200 plant and animal species become extinct every 24 hours, and that many of the estimated 100 million species are disappearing before being identified.

On drinking water, the report said 1.2 billion people lack safe water supplies and that 1.4 billion have no sanitary

waste treatment, numbers that are likely to expand.

More than 40 fish species in the world's oceans are over exploited or depleted, threatening a major food source for 1.4 billion people, the agency said.

The world's forests "are being destroyed at an alarming rate," according to the UN agency. Tropical forests that cover 23 per cent of the earth's land surface are disappearing at the rate of 4.6 million hectares (5.4 million acres) followed by Latin America and the Caribbean and Africa.

The problem of environmental degradation is linked to poverty, according to the

study, which noted that 40 per cent of the world population, or two billion people, live in poverty.

"Environmental degradation and poverty are strongly intertwined, resulting in a vicious cycle in which poverty causes environmental stress, that in turn perpetuates poverty," the UN book said. "The only way out of this vicious cycle is along the path of sustainable economic development and the efficient use of modern technologies."

Dowdeswell said the book, "taking action: an environmental guide for you and your community," sought to show areas of improvement as well as problems.

"You can find success stories all over and you need to let those success stories be known so that people know they don't need to be paralysed."

In the United States, Secretary of State Christopher announced plans this month to raise environmental issues as part of foreign policy.

It is for the first time a Secretary of State has made ecology part of foreign policy and is rooted in fears that environmental problems can create security risks for the United States as well as heighten regional tensions.

Later this month, Vice President Al Gore will launch an initiative that will expand US-China Cooperation on sustainable development, including energy policy and agriculture.

US reiterates commitment to one-China policy

THE HAGUE, Apr 20: US Secretary of State Warren Christopher emerged from talks here Friday with Chinese counterpart Qian Qichen saying he had renewed the US commitment to a one-China policy, reports AFP.

He was referring to US recognition of Beijing as the representative of all-China, a concept that includes Taiwan.

Christopher was critical, however, of China's failure to improve human rights. "We are disappointed in the lack of progress and look forward to exploring with the minister ways that it can be improved."