

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.

José 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 hailstones 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.

RTÉ 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 subways. 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 salvos of rockets on N Israel

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

Israeli security sources confirmed an Israel 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.

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In South Lebanon, witnesses said Israeli planes

launched raids near villages south 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 refugees 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.

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