

BRIEFLY



Opposition member of the Palestinian PNC Dr. Haider Abdel Shafi hugs President Yasser Arafat after the vote on the adoption of the modified Palestinian charter during the 21st session of the Palestine National Council meeting in Gaza City on Wednesday. 504 members voted "Yes" for the adoption and 54 against, cancelling anti-Israel clauses.

Coup rumours sweep Paraguay: The Paraguayan armed forces' Chief of Staff Gen. Rafael Noguera, denied rumours sweeping Asuncion late on Wednesday of an imminent army coup and appealed to the people to remain calm. Reuter says from Asuncion.

"Nothing is going on, there is no coup, there won't ever be one, not as long as I command the army," he told reporters. "I would like you to tell the population to stay calm."

EU aid for Laos flood victims: The European Union is providing 1.5 million dollars in emergency aid to thousands of victims of floods that ravaged farmlands, transport links and water, sources in Laos, a press release said Thursday. AP reports from Bangkok.

More than 3,000 tons of rice and other basic necessities were being distributed to some of the 400,000 people in five provinces affected by the floods. The EU said it would send a mission to Laos next month to develop a plan to rehabilitate agricultural infrastructure damaged by a series of tropical storms and flooding last year.

Reuter journalist awarded: Reuter journalist Susan Cornwell won the Merriman Smith Award for excellence in news reporting of President Bill Clinton in 1995, the White House Correspondents' Association announced on Wednesday. Reuter reports from Washington.

Cornwell won for an exclusive October 17 story headlined "Clinton says he thinks he raised taxes too much." The story was filed under deadline pressure from a Clinton speech in Houston, in which the president appeared to repudiate a major part of his 1993 tax and budget programme.

Egyptian weekly banned: The Egyptian government banned a weekly newspaper, on Wednesday, apparently for an article that blamed last week's massacre of 18 Greek tourists on lax security. AP reports from Cairo.

Canadian PM to visit Seoul next yr: Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien will lead a large economic delegation to South Korea next January to promote trade and investment, the presidential office said Thursday. AP reports from Seoul.

Violence claims 700 in Kashmir in 3 months

NEW DELHI, Apr 25: Violence linked to a Muslim secessionist drive in the troubled Indian state of Kashmir claimed nearly 700 lives between January and March, an official said Thursday, reports AFP.

The Press Trust of India news agency quoted a government spokesman in the state's winter capital, Jammu, as saying 310 rebels, 30 Indian troops and 329 civilians died in separatist violence in the first quarter of the year.

Thirty-two of the 310 Muslim militants killed were foreign nationals, mostly from Pakistan and Afghanistan, he said.

Cross-border attacks from Pakistan had increased, with 304 incidents reported on the Kashmir border in the first three months of this year, he added.

More than 12,000 people have died in Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, since 1989 when Muslim rebels stepped up a bloody drive against Indian rule.

Astronomers observe splitting nucleus of Hyakutake

BEIJING, Apr 25: Chinese astronomers have observed the splitting of the nucleus of the Hyakutake comet, which has divided into five pieces, the Xinhua news agency said on Wednesday, reports Reuter.

The Hyakutake comet, which is six times brighter than Halley's comet, was named after an amateur Japanese astronomer who discovered it on January 30.

Astronomers at the Purple Mountain Observatory in Nanjing in eastern Jiangsu province reported the splitting of the comet's nucleus, based on observations on April 6, 11, and 13, Xinhua said.

The position and shape of the pieces were changing rapidly, they said.

Astronomer Chen Daohai attributed the split to solar influences.

Yeltsin confident of China's joining in talks to sign CTBT

BEIJING, Apr 25: Russian President Boris Yeltsin said today that he was confident China would participate in talks agreed last week by the Group of Seven (G7) and Russia on imposing a complete ban on nuclear testing, reports AP.

"We are convinced that China will join the decision of the meeting... in Moscow on nuclear safety to hold talks this year and to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), Yeltsin told journalists after talks with Chinese President Jiang Zemin.

Previous negotiations on the CTBT have brought together only the five declared nuclear powers — Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States and focused on signing the treaty within this year.

White House to help probe into Iran's transfer of arms to Bosnia

WASHINGTON, Apr 25: The White House says it will cooperate with a congressional investigation into Iranian arms shipments to Bosnia that took place with tacit US approval, reports AP.

At the same time, however, White House spokesman Mike McCurry questioned the cost of the congressional efforts.

"Given that there are so many committees that the Republicans have unleashed on this issue, perhaps this will synchronize some of those efforts and save the taxpayer some money," McCurry said Wednesday following House Speaker Newt Gingrich's decision to establish a select panel to look into the 1994 arms transfers.

The House Intelligence Committee on Thursday was to hear from Anthony Herington, head of President Clinton's Intelligence Oversight Board, on the arms transfer.

DPRK to begin work to safeguard spent N-fuel rods

SEOUL, Apr 25: Under an accord with Washington, North Korea will begin work next week to safeguard 8,000 spent nuclear fuel rods that could yield weapons-grade plutonium, Foreign Ministry officials said Thursday, reports AP.

The safeguarding is a key part of the 1994 accord, under which the communist state agreed to freeze and eventually dismantle its suspect nuclear programme in exchange for two modern light-water reactors.

The fuel rods, removed from the North's only operational 5-megawatt nuclear reactor in May 1994, have been kept in a cooling pond where they have been corroding.

US officials have been coordinating efforts to put those rods in safer metal and concrete casings so they cannot be removed easily for reprocessing, the ministry officials said.

International

250,000 Tamil refugees begin Returning home

War for Eelam at crossroads as Tamils openly defying LTTE

COLOMBO, Apr 25: Sri Lanka's drawn out ethnic war has reached a crossroads with Tamils openly defying the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels whom they once regarded as freedom fighters, analysts say, reports AFP.

The separatist Tamil Tigers have watched helplessly as 250,000 Tamil refugees began returning to their homes Friday after the Sri Lankan military drove out the rebels and cleared a safe passage for civilians in the northern Peninsula of Jaffna.

This is probably the biggest setback to the Tigers ever, chief military spokesman Sarath Munasinghe said on Wednesday, referring to the return of thousands of people to areas now under army control.

Information Minister Dharmantri Senanayake was upbeat that ending the costly war which has claimed more than 50,000 lives since 1972 may become a reality.

There are hopeful signs that we will be able to bring this war to a logical conclusion before long, he told reporters on Wednesday.

Members of the LTTE once affectionately known as "the boys" by the minority Tamil community are fighting the Sinhalese dominated Sri Lankan army to establish an independent homeland in the northeast of the country.

Tens of thousands of Tamils who fled Jaffna and the Wailakam sector of peninsula have now begun to return home after the army launched another offensive last week to

clear a path for them to get back.

In a statement from its London office, the LTTE said on Wednesday that civilians were still coming over to their side because the rebels had stalled an army advance.

Because of this bonus the Tamil civilians are still fleeing across the Jaffna lagoon and are catching their boat to freedom, the LTTE said.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has confirmed that 250,000 people out of an estimated 500,000 inhabitants of the Wailakam sector have taken advantage of the army's latest drive and gone home.

This is a turning point, Munasinghe said. "Tamils turning their backs on the Tigers must be more stinging than any military onslaught."

Israeli attacks on Lebanon continue

Christopher holds talks with Assad on draft truce accord

DAMASCUS, Apr 25: US Secretary of State Warren Christopher resumed talks with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad in Damascus today on a draft ceasefire agreement to end fighting in Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah, reports Reuter.

Presidential spokesman Joubran Kourieh said Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara and members of the Syrian team negotiating peace with Israel were present at the meeting.

Earlier report from Beirut, Israel's air, sea and land bombardment of Lebanon enters a third week despite assurances from US Secretary of State Warren Christopher a ceasefire deal to end the Israel-Hezbollah fighting was drawing closer.

Security sources said firing went on late into the night, hours after Christopher left eastern Lebanon on Wednesday where he talked with Lebanese leaders on ways to end the violence on the Lebanon-Israel border.

Jets launched at least two night raids as artillery fired shells east of Tyre port and Iqlim al-Tofah, bringing the day's total to about 650. Warships off Lebanon also carried out sporadic nighttime shelling of the coast road from Beirut to South Lebanon, the sources said.

Pro-Iranian Hezbollah guerrillas responded to Wednesday's bombardments by firing some 56 Katyushas, injuring four people in northern Israel, the freshest of the salvos late at

night.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres said today after meeting US Secretary of State Warren Christopher that there were still serious problems in brokering a ceasefire in Lebanon.

"I think his efforts have produced important understandings but very serious issues remain unresolved," Peres said of Christopher's shuttle.

AP adds from United Nations: Rebuffed by the Security Council, Arab states on Wednesday called on the 185-member General Assembly to condemn Israel's shelling of Lebanon and demand an end to the fighting.

The call came as the General Assembly opened a second day of debate on the blitz,

Bahrain launches fresh bid to contain opposition

MANAMA, Bahrain, Apr 25: In an apparent bid to contain a Shiite Muslim-led opposition, the emir on Wednesday issued a decree establishing a council to screen mosque preachers and issue rulings on religious issues, reports AP.

The official Gulf News Agency said Sheikh Isa bin Salman al-Khalifa also wants the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs to work for "the protection of Islamic values and tolerant traditions... and to clear Islamic thought from distortions."

Since the plan surfaced a few weeks ago, it has been criticised by opposition groups in exile as a ploy to gain a say in the religious affairs of

Bahrain's Shiite community. Traditional Friday sermons in some of the island's mosques have in the past been used by opposition Shiite clerics to press demands for political and social reforms.

The decree listed bringing the gap between rival Muslim sects on the tiny Gulf state as one of the main tasks of the council, which will be headed by the justice minister and comprise eight senior Muslim clerics and judges, including Shiites.

Shiites comprise a slight majority among Bahrain's 500,000 strong population. The rest, including the ruling al-Khalifa family, belong to Islam's mainstream Sunni sect.

The Shiites' opposition campaign began in December 1994 and has continued on and off ever since to press for more freedoms and the restoration of a parliament dissolved in 1975.

The dissidents also demand the release of hundreds of activists detained during the political unrest and more job opportunities for Shiites, who form something of an underclass.

Twenty-seven people have been reported killed in the unrest in Bahrain, a financial hub and a key US Navy base. The authorities blame Shiite Iran across the Gulf for being behind the trouble. Iran denies that.

Off the Record



Shania Twain hold one of her two Academy of Country Music Awards on Wednesday at the 31 Annual Country Music Awards held at Universal City, California. Twain won "Top New Female Vocalist" and "Album of the Year."

50-50 chance

NEW YORK: An asteroid that scientists recently launched a space probe to study has about a 50-50 chance of smashing into Earth within 100 million to 1 billion years, a study by scientists in Italy and France says, reports AP.

The collision won't occur for at least the next 100,000 years, researchers concluded.

The potato-shaped Eros asteroid is about 25 miles (40 kilometres) long and nine miles (14.4 kilometres) wide and deep. That's bigger than the object that crashed into Earth about 65 million years ago and is suspected of causing the death of the dinosaurs.

NASA launched a space-probe in February to get a close-up look at Eros. The probe should get there in 1999.

In the new study, researchers used computer simulations to study what could happen to Eros orbit far into the future as it is altered by the gravitational pull of planets. The future of the orbit can't be predicted with confidence, so scientists made their analysis from studying eight possible scenarios.

A mom's wish

BOGOTA, Colombia: Pop diva Madonna was quoted on Wednesday as saying she hopes to raise her child as "a good Catholic" just like her, reports Reuter.

Madonna, who revealed that she was pregnant just last week, made the comment in a telephone interview from Budapest with Bogota's El Tiempo newspaper in which she discussed her sexual preferences and plans for the future among other topics.

In the interview, translated into Spanish, she said she had not yet decided whether to marry the father of her child, Cuban-born, aerobics instructor Juan Carlos Leon, 29.

"I don't know. I love Juan Carlos but that doesn't mean that I'm going to marry him," she said.

Asked why she had decided to have his baby, she said: "I have to work for someone in life. I needed something that's mine that I can be proud of."

She added that she hoped "my child will be a good Catholic like me."

Asked about rumours of her alleged lesbian love affairs, the flamboyant pop star said "The funny thing is I don't like women. What really drives me crazy are men."

Legal immigration to US will rise this yr

WASHINGTON, Apr 25: Legal immigration will rise dramatically this year, with 41 per cent more foreigners granted residency than in 1995, according to unreleased Immigration and Naturalisation Service projections, reports AP.

Advocates of reduced immigration are fuming over the projections, charging that INS must have been aware of them even as it was publicly emphasising last year's decrease.

The Clinton administration, which opposes congressional proposals to substantially cut legal immigration, has contended that it would drop under existing law.

Just last month, as the House wrestled with the question of whether to tackle legal immigration reform, INS Commissioner Doris Meissner was pointing to a 10.4 per cent drop from 1994 to 1995.

While Congress is expected to enact a new bill cracking down on illegal immigration, the chances for changes this year in legal immigration policy appear dim.

"We've all been duped,"

House immigration subcommittee chairman Lamar Smith, Republican of Texas, said Wednesday. "All along they knew what they were saying was not the whole truth. I take this as an intentional misrepresentation to the public and to Congress."

The projections show immigration rising from 593,000 last year to 835,000 in 1996. The numbers would peak in 1997, at nearly 854,000, then decline to the mid-700,000 level and hit 729,000 in 2003, according to the projections.

Those numbers don't reflect total legal immigration because they don't include refugees, asylum adjustments and a few other types of admissions. Those categories added up to 127,000 last year — bringing total legal immigration to 720,000 — and are conservatively expected to hover around 100,000 in coming years.

INS executive associate commissioner Robert Bach denied any attempt to mislead Congress or the public.



Chinese Foreign Minister and Vice Premier Qian Qichen (R) shows the way to his Russian counterpart Yevgeny Primakov prior to a working break fast meeting at Beijing's State Guesthouse on Thursday. Primakov and other senior Russian leaders are in Beijing with Russian President Boris Yeltsin who is meeting senior Chinese leaders for talks before the two countries sign trade and security agreements.

— AFP/UNB photo

Arafat, Peres are winners after 'no more violence' pledge

JERUSALEM, Apr 25: Peace partners Yasser Arafat and Shimon Peres emerged strengthened from a historic decision by the Palestinians' highest body to revoke clauses of the PLO founding charter calling for Israel's destruction, reports AP.

A month ahead of Israeli elections seen as a referendum on peacemaking, Peres can now tell voters that Arafat has met his promise: the Israelis will start negotiations on a final peace agreement with the Palestinians on May 4, as scheduled.

The two sides have three years to reach agreement on the future of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Jerusalem. The Palestinians hope the outcome of the talks will be a Palestinian state.

If Peres is re-elected on May 29, this may very well be the case. In signs of a softening, Peres' Labour Party prepared to vote Thursday on a new platform in which a clause opposing the establishment of a Palestinian state was scrapped.

Arafat himself presented that simple choice to PNC delegates earlier this week. Yelling at hardliners poised to

wreck peace. The PNC vote, which is tantamount to a formal recognition of the state of Israel, takes the Palestinians themselves a step closer to statehood.

Peres has said that if Arafat meets his promise, the Israelis will start negotiations on a final peace agreement with the Palestinians on May 4, as scheduled.

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Arafat himself presented that simple choice to PNC delegates earlier this week. Yelling at hardliners poised to

vote "no". Arafat said that if the charter was not amended, the Palestinians would miss their last real hope for independence.

Peres, meanwhile, faces several difficult decisions in the weeks before the elections. As a result of the PNC vote, he is under growing pressure from the Palestinians to ease the stifling two-month blockade of the West Bank and Gaza, which he had imposed in response to the suicide bombings.

The closure keeps 2 million Palestinians from Israel and has plunged the Palestinian economy into a deep crisis.

"Peace means we all feel good about it and see there is a change in our lives," said Nafez Nazzari, a professor at the Jerusalem Centre for Near Eastern Studies. "If there is no change in our lives, what is the meaning of peace?"

If Peres decides to lift some of the travel restrictions, it increases the probability that Is-

lamic militants will sneak into Israel and launch new attacks. Hamas vowed last week it would carry out five new attacks to avenge Israel's bombing in Lebanon.

Fresh violence ahead of the May 29 elections could wipe out the gains Peres has made over hardline challenger Benjamin Netanyahu of the opposition Likud Party in recent weeks.

The Palestinians also demand that Peres pull Israeli troops out of parts of Hebron, the last Palestinian city still under occupation. Redeployment in Hebron was to have been completed by March 28, but Peres postponed it indefinitely after the bombings. Hebron is home to 94,000 Palestinians and 450 Jewish settlers.

If Peres hands parts of Hebron to Palestinian control before the elections, Israeli hardliners are expected to converge on Hebron and stage street protests — another po-

tential for friction and violence Peres will want to avoid before the elections.

Despite the new dilemmas, the overall gains for Peres are enormous.

The Palestinians have sent a clear message that they are serious about peace. It represents a formal recognition of Israel and this is a very important milestone in having coexistence," said David Kimche, a former director general of Israel's Foreign Ministry.

Such a message may win over centrist swing voters who in principle favour peacemaking, but don't want security risks.

In a sign of how widely the PNC's decision was welcomed in Israel, Netanyahu, the opposition leader, called it a positive step. Netanyahu has moved steadily toward the political centre as the election draws near, saying for the first time this week he would consider meeting with Arafat.

Iranians chant 'death to Israel' defying Saudi ban

TEHRAN, Apr 25: Iranian state media said today pilgrims chanted slogans against Israel and the United States at Islam's holiest shrine in Saudi Arabia, defying a ban on political activities, reports Reuter.

The Iranian news agency IRNA said large numbers of pilgrims performing evening prayers on Wednesday night chanted "death to Israel" and "death to America" in Arabic and "Allahu Akbar" (God is greatest) in the grand mosque of Makkah, Islam's holiest shrine.

It said the worshippers were protesting against the US-supported crimes and atrocities of the Zionist regime (Israel) in Lebanon during the prayer attended by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims.

There was no independent confirmation of the report. Tehran radio said the chants rapidly spread to the whole Mosque.

According to pilgrims who were at the grand mosque, the

identity of those chanting slogans was not clear, but they had an Arabic accent, the radio said, apparently suggesting that the demonstrators were not Iranians.

More than 70,000 Iranians are among up to two million Muslims at the pilgrimage. Saudi Arabia has said it will not tolerate political rallies during the pilgrimage. The kingdom's grand mufti, Sheikh Abdul-Aziz bin Baz, has issued a fatwa, or religious edict, saying the rallies were a heresy and not part of Hajj rites.

Iran on Wednesday postponed a rally due to be held in Makkah today against the United States and Israel to avoid a confrontation with Saudi forces it said were deployed in front of the Iranian Hajj office.

Iran's senior Hajj official Mohammad Mohammadi Reyshahrani in a statement read by Tehran radio, described the Saudi action as irresponsible.