

BRIEFLY



PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat (L) talks with United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali on Thursday upon his arrival at the United Nations. Arafat is expected to urge the UN to step up its involvement in the Middle East peace process, according to Palestinian sources. —AFP/UNB photo

France sends aid to Beirut: Two French navy ships sailed into Beirut harbor Friday carrying 710 tons of power transformers and spare parts to help rebuild power stations destroyed by Israeli air raids. AP reports from Beirut.

The 168-metre (551-foot) transport ship *Foudre* and an 80-metre (262-foot) escort gunboat, the *Fremer Maitre Her*, arrived at the seaport after a six-day journey from the Mediterranean port of Toulon in southeast France.

Chechen rebels free 7 cops: Chechen rebels freed seven policemen from the Russian republic of Dagestan overnight after holding them hostage for a day. Interfax news agency reported yesterday. AFP reports from Moscow.

In a routine car check on the border between Dagestan and Chechnya the police had found a handgun on one of three Chechen residents of Dagestan, the agency cited the Dagestan Interior Ministry as saying. While the men were detained, the two others left but returned to the border post an hour later with a group of men who overpowered all seven border guards and said they would only be released if their companion was freed.

Serbs free 4 Bosnian Croats: Bosnian Serbs released four war crimes suspects Thursday after the UN war crimes tribunal showed no interest in them, AP reports from Sarajevo.

The release of the four Bosnian Croats followed the freeing Wednesday of two Muslim war crimes suspects. The peace accord required that all three factions who fought over the former Yugoslavia for 3 and half years release their prisoners of war by January 19, but some still are held. The pact also permits the detention and investigation of war crimes suspects, pending a final decision by the Hague tribunal on Yugoslavia on whether it wants to try them.

Chinese police seize 27kg heroin: Chinese police arrested eight people after they found 27 kilograms (59 pounds) of heroin during a routine inspection of a Taiwan fishing ship docked at a port in Fujian province, official reports said Friday. AP reports from Beijing.

The heroin was found April 18 while the ship was anchored in Jinjiang, the official Xinhua News Agency reported. It said one of those arrested was from Hong Kong and three were from Taiwan.

Clinton pays tribute to Billy Graham: President Clinton paid glowing tribute to evangelist Billy Graham and his wife Ruth, saying they have "practiced the religion of good citizenship," AP reports from Washington.

Clinton spoke at a fundraising dinner Thursday night for the Ruth and Billy Graham Children's Health Center in Asheville, North Carolina, just hours after the couple was presented with a Congressional Gold Medal in ceremonies in the Rotunda of the Capitol. Graham, 77, who offered a prayer at Clinton's inaugural three years ago, has said he told Clinton he disagreed with his veto of a bill that would have outlawed certain late-term abortions.

Chinese army chief in Moscow: The Chinese army chief of staff, General Fu Quanyou, arrived in Moscow Thursday for a week-long visit and with Defence Minister Pavel Grachev. Moscow NTV said in a report monitored by the BBC. AFP reports from London.

Fu told NTV the aim of his visit was to strengthen friendship and attain mutual benefits. He is also to meet his Russian counterpart, General Mikhail Kolesnikov, visit air and naval bases, a naval academy in Saint Petersburg and a military training centre in the north Caucasus.

Russia, Armenia sign security deal: Russia and Armenia signed documents setting up a military "coalition" Thursday during a visit in Yerevan by Russian Defence Minister Pavel Grachev. AFP reports from Yerevan.

"We have no external enemy. This coalition is directed against none in particular. Its only purpose is to strengthen the security of both countries," Grachev said after he and counterpart Vazgen Sarkissian had signed the protocol. He did not explain further what the coalition implied.

Meningitis kills 3,941 in Burkina Faso: A meningitis epidemic which has swept across Western Africa since January has claimed 3,941 lives in Burkina Faso, health officials said Thursday. AFP reports from Ouagadougou.

The national office for preventive medicine said a total of 38,821 cases had been registered, an increase of 6,000 on statistics given out two weeks ago. The number of deaths recorded has increased by 600 in the same period.

Chinese dissident gets asylum in US

BEIJING, May 3: Chinese dissident Liu Gang, jailed for six years as a leader of pro-democracy student protests in 1989, has fled to the United States and been given political asylum, a US-based human rights group said on Friday, reports Reuters.

Liu, 34, escaped from China on April 27 with the help of unidentified international organisations, the New York-based human rights in China pressure group said in a news release faxed to international news organisations in Beijing.

Liu had been granted political asylum in the United States and arrived in a US west coast city on May 1, the group said.

It gave no details of how Liu escaped from China, where he had been the object of a police manhunt since he defied a travel ban and slipped away from his hometown of Lingyuan, 700 km (420 miles) northeast of Beijing, last month.

4 killed in Karachi violence

KARACHI, May 3: Gunmen killed four people and wounded four in Karachi today in a drive-by attack apparently aimed at a rival political group, police said, reports Reuters.

The assailants fired from a car at a roadside restaurant in the Garden Area of the southern Pakistani city after midnight. Three of the dead and all the wounded belonged to the Haqqi faction of the ethnic Mohajir National Movement (MQM).

Police blamed the mainstream MQM led by London-based Aftab Hussain for the attack. An MQM spokesman denied the charge.

More than 100 MQM-Haqqi members were killed in factional fighting in the city last year, compared with 67 in 1994.

The government says the MQM is at the root of much of the ethnic and political strife in Karachi, where at least 216 people have been killed this year. Last year's death toll exceeded 2,000.

Iran denies US report on building tunnels along Gulf coast

TEHRAN, May 3: Iran on Thursday denied a US report that Tehran was building tunnels on its Gulf coast which could be used to launch or store long range missiles, calling it an American plot to sell more arms to Israel, reports Reuters.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Mahmoud Mohammadi, quoted by Tehran Radio, said the report was a simple-minded justification to sell advanced American arms to the Zionist Regime (Israel).

Washington officials have confirmed a magazine report about the tunnels and quoting a senior US military official as saying Iran had recently attempted to buy ballistic missiles from North Korea, which experts say could reach Israel.

Taiwan to produce 130 home made jets by 2000

TAIPEI, Taiwan, May 3: Taiwan's air force plans to take delivery of 130 home-made warplanes by 2000, ending speculation about further reductions in orders, a newspaper said Friday, reports AP.

The decision was prompted by the satisfactory performance of the overhauled Indigenous Defense Fighters, the United Daily News reported.

Air Force officials had asked to reduce the order to 60 planes, citing poor performance and the subsequent purchase of superior US and French aircraft.

Production was suspended entirely after an IDF crashed into the ocean last July, and the Defense Ministry ordered an overhaul of those planes already in service.

Fifty of the IDF planes have already been delivered, with the 70th now on the assembly line, the newspaper reported.

Development of the IDF began in the 1980s when the US and other western nations were refusing to sell Taiwan advanced military equipment due to objections from rival Beijing.

Russia to form special peacekeeping force

MOSCOW, May 3: Russia will form a special peacekeeping force numbering up to 22,000 troops "for maintaining or restoring international peace and security," President Boris Yeltsin said Friday, reports AP.

A decree released by his office said the force will be drawn from existing units of the armed forces, and consist of 17 motorized rifle and four paratroop battalions.

Yeltsin ordered Russia's Defense Ministry to come up with a detailed list of those units within a month. He said the government had three months to work out other details, such as providing funds for forming the force, training it, and creating a budget for its activities in 1997.

Arafat demands effective UN role in peace process

UNITED NATIONS, May 3: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat visited the United Nations amid extraordinary security Thursday and urged the world body to help push along the Middle East peace process, reports AP.

More than 100 New York City police and 25 US State Department agents surrounded Arafat or guarded his motorcade as he arrived.

Arafat's black limousine was trailed by a van filled with police carrying loaded assault rifles. A blue police patrol boat cruised in the East River behind the building.

UN employees crowded in front of windows on the ground floor of the building and journalists who approached Arafat had to pass through metal detectors.

Arafat, wearing his custom-

ary uniform and checkered headress, was immediately ushered to the top floor of the building to meet with UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

"We demand a more effective role by the United Nations in the peace process," Arafat told reporters later.

The United Nations has long been a source of support for Palestinians. UN agencies have been active in helping Palestinian refugees and during the Cold War the General Assembly routinely passed resolutions critical of Israel.

Israel has regarded the United Nations as biased and has long sought to keep the world organization out of the peace process.

"We are looking from his excellency to continue to push the peace process in all the

tracks," Arafat said as he sat down to meet with Boutros-Ghali.

At a news conference later, Arafat was asked whether Israelis and Arabs could live peacefully together.

"As neighbors. As neighbors," he replied. "Now there will be two states. A Palestinian state beside its neighbors, the Israelis."

Arafat refused to comment on the upcoming Israeli elections, which pit Shimon Peres, Arafat's partner in peace talks, against the more hawkish Benjamin Netanyahu.

"It is not my business," Arafat said.

When asked about terror attacks against Israel, Arafat said Palestinians firmly stand against any effort from any quarter that would undermine the peace process.



British Prime Minister John Major shakes hands with King Hussein of Jordan (R) as he welcomes him to 10 Downing Street Thursday in London. The King is in London on an official visit. — AFP/UNB photo

Thousands of Chechens poised to flee Shali

GROZNY, May 3: Thousands of people in the Chechen town of Shali were hoping for a chance to run for their lives if Russian troops poised on the outskirts launched an all out attack, reports AP.

Russian troops have been outside Shali for days, threatening an assault unless the hundreds of rebels they say are holed up in the town lay down their arms and surrender.

Reports vary on the size of the guerrilla force inside Shali, a large town east of Grozny already badly battered by the war.

Local officials had earlier said only a handful of guerrillas were in the town. The Russian military, however, insisted it was a large force numbering between 100 and 300 fighters.

On Thursday, Shali Mayor Musa Dakaev said rebel reinforcements had arrived in Shali. Dakaev, who was in Grozny, the Chechen capital, went on television to plead with the rebels to surrender.

Top officials of the Moscow-backed government, meanwhile, were trying to negotiate an end to the potentially bloody standoff with Russian troops, the ITAR-Tass news agency said.

Dakaev said he was asking Russian commanders to let him evacuate the town's 15,000 residents before launching an assault. Shali's residents are ready to run for their lives, he told ITAR-Tass.

Some people have already started to abandon the town. According to the Interfax

news agency, the Russian command said it would allow civilians to leave before attacking. The military has issued, then extended, several ultimatums to the rebels in the past few days.

In the past, Russian troops have sometimes sealed off Chechen towns and villages before they attacked. The resulting civilian casualties have been internationally condemned. Most of the estimated 30,000 dead in the war have been civilians.

In Moscow, President Boris Yeltsin said he hopes his visit to Chechnya in mid-May would help get peace talks going.

"I have to thank our soldiers," he told reporters, "and I must meet with the Chechen elders and try to give talks a new impulse."



India's first voters line up outside a polling booth Thursday, one hour before the polls opened in Madras. India's electoral race entered the politically crucial northern heartland as millions trooped at the polls amid heavy security in the second round of national elections. — AFP/UNB photo

I am not desperate for power: Vajpayee

NEW DELHI, May 3: Hindu nationalist leader and potential prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee said in remarks published today that his party was prepared to sit in the opposition rather than "buy MPs" to come to power, reports AP.

"Don't think I am so desperate for power," said Vajpayee, who is being projected by his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party) as the "prime minister-in-waiting."

He told the Pioneer newspaper, "If the BJP does not get the sufficient numbers to form a government, we will sit in the opposition. So what?"

Opinion polls say the BJP would emerge on top of a hung parliament winning more seats in the 545-member Lok Sabha, or lower house, in the current general elections than the ruling Congress (I) Party.

But no party is capable of winning the 273 seats needed for a simple majority, the polls predict.

The Congress, the BJP and a centrist-left alliance are all forecast to win less than 200

seats each. The outcome of the staggered elections will be known by May 10, three days after the third phase of polling.

"If we get 215 seats or above, there should be no problem in forming a government with the help of our electoral allies and possibly some regional parties," the 63-year-old Vajpayee was quoted as saying.

If it did not win that many, the BJP was prepared to wait for its turn to come to power but would not engage in "horse trading" to lure away elected members from other parties, he said.

"There is no question of buying MPs," the BJP leader, who enjoys a spotless record in public life, told the Pioneer. "I am determined to come to power without compromising my principles."

But some "Honest Congressmen" would voluntarily come forward to help the BJP form a government, Vajpayee said.

He conceded that BJP supporters would be greatly disap-

pointed if it failed to form a government even after emerging as the biggest single party in parliament.

Meanwhile, India's main opposition party blasted Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao on Thursday for repeatedly alleging that an opposition victory in general elections would disintegrate the country.

"These are signs of frustration of a prime minister about to lose elections," Krishan Lal Sharma, spokesman for the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party), told reporters here.

"A man fighting his last battle with his back to the wall can only be expected to lose sight of reason and logic," Sharma said. "The time has come to expose him and relegate the Congress to a footnote of Indian history."

"The BJP is confident this task will be fulfilled by the people," he added. "In another eight days, the country will be freed from the corrupt and uncaring regime headed by... Rao."

US Senate approves bill to clamp down on illegal immigration

WASHINGTON, May 3: The US Senate on Thursday overwhelmingly approved a bill to clamp down on illegal immigration, curb the spread of fake work papers and deny social welfare benefits to legal immigrants, reports AP.

The bill, which passed 97-3, would nearly double the US border patrol by adding 4,700 officers raise standards for proving work eligibility and increase penalties for immigrant smuggling.

Lawmakers must now reconcile the bill with a competing version that passed the House of Representatives before sending a legislation to President Bill Clinton.

Among the key differences is an explosives provision

passed by the house that would deny free education benefits to the children of illegal immigrants.

The White House criticised the provision when it passed in March but had cautions praise for Thursday's Senate action.

President Bill Clinton called the Senate Bill a step toward restoring the rule of law in our immigration system. But he said bill "goes too far in denying legal immigrants access to vital safety net programme which could jeopardise public health and safety net."

Immigration has emerged as a red hot political issue in this presidential election year, particularly in the vote rich state of California, which borders Mexico.

Tigers hijack civilian bus Blast kills 6 in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, May 3: A bomb exploded on a tiny island off Sri Lanka's east coast this morning, killing at least six people, including some air force personnel, defence sources said, reports Reuters.

The explosion occurred on the pier of Manthivu Island as about 15 air force personnel arrived on a goodwill mission with gifts for inmates of a leprosy hospital, the sources said.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, fighting for independence in the island's north and east, were suspected in the bomb attack, the sources said.

They said air force personnel made an annual visit to the hospital on Vesak Day, the Buddhist festival of lanterns, carrying hot meals and gifts for patients.

The rebels would have been expecting air force personnel, since this was an annual visit, one source said.

AFP adds: Tamil Tiger guerrillas hijacked a civilian bus in eastern Sri Lanka and shot

dead an off-duty policeman and kidnapped two others, the Defence Ministry said today.

Gunmen of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) later set fire to the bus in the district of Ampara on Thursday, the ministry said adding that the body of the victim had been found.

In another incident in the east, security forces ambushed a group of Tamil Tigers, killing three rebels. Troops recovered two automatic assault rifles and radio communication equipment from the victims, the ministry said.

The sporadic clashes in the east of the country came as security forces consolidated their gains in the Jaffna Peninsula in northern Sri Lanka after driving out the Tigers who had once ruled the region.

Following the army's latest drive launched on April 19, some 250,000 Tamil civilians who fled the area have returned to their homes forcing the government to call for international help to resettle the refugees.

Off the Record

Duchess of York decides to brush up her image

LONDON: Her reputation tarnished by a mountain of news stories about ruinous spending, sexual shenanigans and outright vulgarity, the Duchess of York has decided to brush up her image, reports AP.

The Daily Mail on Friday quoted an unidentified colleague of New York publicist Howard Rubenstein as saying the duchess, who began divorce proceedings with her husband Prince Andrew on April 17, has told Rubenstein: "She wants (her image) softening and, most important, wants her work with children highlighted."

"She is also in the process of evolving from a duchess into what she herself calls a working mother, paying her own way in life," the London tabloid quoted the colleague as saying.

Describing Rubenstein as one of America's top public relations fixers, the paper said the former Sarah Ferguson, called Fergie by tabloids, has hired him to sell a new softer image of herself.

"I understand the duchess has told Howard that publicity about her had reached an all-time low and that she needed professional guidance on how to make herself more acceptable to the public both in America and Britain," it quoted the colleague as saying.

It said Rubenstein's clients have included Mike Tyson, Donald Trump and his ex-wife Ivana, and Michael Jackson's sister LaToya.

The duchess and Andrew are both aged 36. He is the second eldest son of Queen Elizabeth II. They separated in March 1992.

Last month in Oklahoma City, the duchess presented a check for \$150,000 on behalf of her charity Chances for Children to the Children's Hospital of Oklahoma to help create a center at the hospital in honor of those killed in last year's bombing.

Gays' gain

CANBERRA, Australia: The inheritance rights of homosexual partners have been recognised by Australian Capital Territory probate law, a first for gay couples in Australia, reports AP.

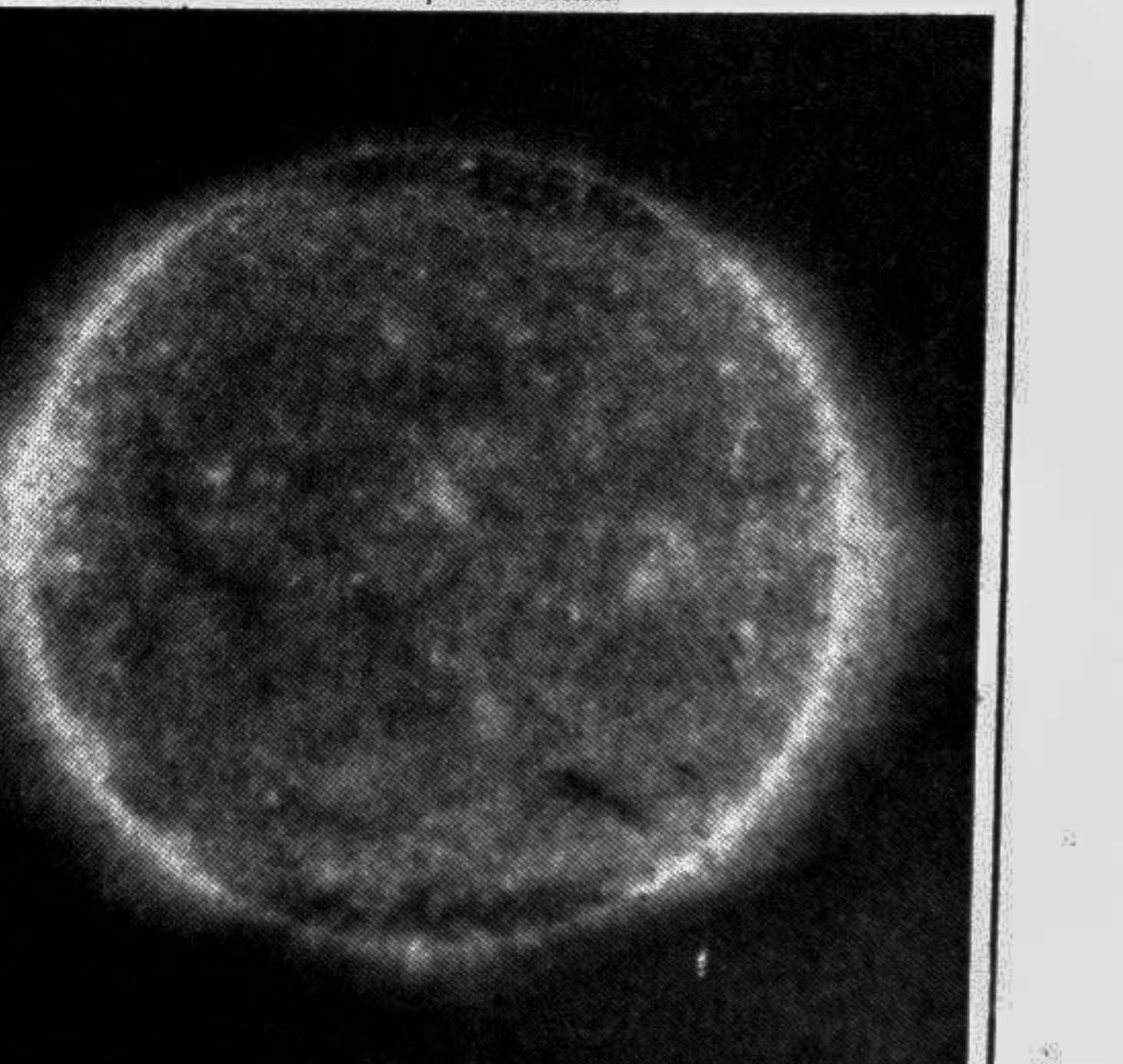
From May 1, unmarried partners of either gender will be eligible to share in the estate of his or her partner who dies without leaving a valid will, ACT Attorney-General Gary Humphries said Monday.

The government believes that any loving relationship should be recognised for the purposes of distribution after death, irrespective of the marital status or sexuality of the parties," Humphries said.

Currently only legally married spouses receive part of the estate, but not unmarried heterosexual or gay couples, no matter how long the couple had lived together.

The territory's Legislative Assembly has amended the Administration and Probate Act to correct the anomaly.

"It was necessary to do this because there have been cases in the Australian Capital Territory of people who had been in long-term relationships receiving nothing from the estate when the partner died," Humphries said.



This 13 March photo released on Thursday by NASA shows the 1.5 million degree Celsius gas in the sun's thin, outer atmosphere (corona). The photo, taken by the Extreme Ultraviolet Imaging Telescope (SOHO) spacecraft, can see more subtle and detailed magnetic features than ever before. —AFP/UNB photo

US to provide additional \$4m to help organise Bosnian post-war elections

WASHINGTON, May 3: The United States announced Thursday it will provide an additional four million dollars to help organise Bosnia's post-war elections, bringing its total support for the vote to about 11 million dollars, reports AP.

The funds will be handed to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which will supervise elections expected to be held some time in September, said State Department spokesman Glyn Davies.

The US aid includes funds to support new political parties, voter education, the administration of the elections and other initiatives under OSCE auspices.

In announcing the additional aid, Davies stressed that

Washington was urging other governments to follow suit to help cover the cost of the elections, which are viewed here as the litmus test of the Bosnia peace accord.

Under an agreement reached in November, voters in Bosnia will elect members to a national parliament and to the two assemblies of the Bosnian Serb republic Srpska and the Muslim-Croat Federation, the entities that make up Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Voters in the Republika Srpska will elect a representative to the Bosnia presidential council who will sit at the table with two elected leaders from the Muslim-Croat Federation — one Bosnian and one Croat.

There will also be municipal and local elections throughout the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina.