

BRIEFLY

Niger FM steps down: Niger Foreign Minister Mohamed Bazoum stepped down Sunday for personal reasons, the ruling military junta announced. AFP reports from Niamey.

He was replaced by Higher Education and Research Minister Andre Salifou, whose former post was given to a new entrant to the cabinet, Hamidou Harouna Sidikou. Government spokesman Inoussa Ousseini told state television that Bazoum wanted to become more involved in politics ahead of promised elections.

N Korean FM ends Libya tour: North Korean Foreign Minister Kim Young Nam left Libya on Sunday, ending a five day visit designed to strengthen bilateral relations the official Jana News Agency reported. AFP says from Tripoli.

Kim indicated before his departure that his talks had dealt with reinforcing ties between Pyongyang and Tripoli, which share antagonism towards the United States. He reassured North Korea's support for the Libyan people in their courageous struggle against all imperialist and colonial plots — a reference to international sanctions against Libya, imposed in 1992 for its alleged support of terrorism.

Sicily's top Mafia boss held: A reputed top Mafia boss, accused in the murder of a Communist Party official, was arrested Sunday after four years in hiding, authorities said, AP reports from Palermo.

Police arrested Salvatore Cucuzza, 49, in an apartment here. He did not resist. Mafia in formers have identified Cucuzza as the boss of downtown Palermo and a member of the high command structure of La Cosa Nostra, the ANSA news agency said.

2 tons of hashish seized in Russia: Customs agents in northeastern Russia seized nearly two tons of hashish being transported from Afghanistan to the Netherlands, officials said Sunday. AP reports from Moscow.

The state customs office told the ITAR-Tass news agency that 1,739 kilograms (3,833 pounds) of the drug were hidden in the double walls of a container filled with alfalfa seeds. The hashish was packed in plastic bags and labeled as shampoo, the report said.

Landslide kills 5 in Colombia: An overnight landslide caused by heavy rains destroyed homes and killed at least five people in Colombia's southwest, a rescue official said on Sunday. Reuter reports from Bogota.

A Red-Cross spokesman said the landslide had left about 110 people homeless in the isolated hamlet of Danubio, nestled in the country's western mountain range or Cordillera occidental. "The figures are preliminary because we have yet to reach the area," he said.

New cabinet formed in Spain: Spain's new Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar on Sunday announced a youthful new cabinet of 14 ministers most of them members of his Popular Party (PP), after taking his oath of office before King Juan Carlos. AFP reports from Madrid.

The cabinet has an average age of only 46, and includes four women — a record for Spain. Its aim will be Spanish participation in single European currency. Aznar's swearing-in ceremony at the Zarzuela Palace on Sunday marked the end of 13 years of socialist rule.

6 Russians die from gas poisoning: Six workers at a tractor factory in the Ural Mountains died of gas poisoning while repairing a sewer, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported Monday. AP says from Chelyabinsk, Russia.

Three rescuers also were hospitalized with gas poisoning while extricating the bodies from the sewer, located under the Chelyabinsk factory's central heating station.

Chandrika asks judge to help end doctors strike

Tigers kill 15 soldiers in Batticaloa district

COLOMBO, May 6: Rebel Tamil guerrillas wiped out an army patrol in eastern Sri Lanka today, killing 15 soldiers and seriously wounding at least four others, official sources here said, reports AFP.

Gunmen from the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fired a heavy barrage of small arms and rocket propelled grenades at the foot patrol in Punani, killing 12 soldiers on the spot, the sources said. Three others were killed when they attempted to rescue the patrol.

The Tigers fired rockets at army reinforcements, a defense source said. An officer and two soldiers were killed inside their armoured car which went to the aid of the troops under attack.

Judge OSN Seneviratne has been appointed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga to mediate. Health minister Mohammad Fowzie has so far refused to negotiate.

Lebanon, Syria reject US proposed 5-nation truce monitoring group

BEIRUT, May 6: Lebanon and Syria have rejected a US blueprint for a five-nation monitoring group to oversee a ceasefire that halted Israel's 16-day bombing offensive against Hezbollah guerrillas, government officials said Monday.

A Lebanese official said Assad and Hrawi feel Washington wanted the agreement to be structured in a way that could jeopardise a framework for other peace talks with Israel by Lebanon and Syria.

They both insist that the committee be formed of competent security officers from the five nations with headquarters at the Lebanese border town of Naqoura, the command base of a UN peacekeeping force in the region, the official said.

France, whose Foreign Minister Herve de Charette made parallel shuttles to Christopher to broker the Israel-Hezbollah truce, has proposed Geneva as a headquarters for the monitoring group, the official said.

The official said Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and Foreign Minister Faris Bweiz were to visit Damascus on Monday evening for talks with Syrian government leaders on how to structure the committee.

Hariri and Bweiz were leaving after talks in Beirut with Italian Foreign Minister Susanna Agnelli on European Union reconstruction aid to Lebanon in the wake of the Israeli onslaught.

Lebanon suffered more than 500 million dollars worth of destruction during the latest conflict, economists in Beirut estimate, although a government-appointed committee to survey the damage has not yet come up.

Over 1,000 LRA rebels enter Uganda

KAMPALA, May 6: More than 1,000 Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels entered Uganda from Sudan last week, reported the local newspaper the Monitor Today, says Xinhua.

Most of them are now encamped in Padwat area about 64 kilometres west of Kitgum, northern Uganda, the paper said.

A villager from the area was quoted as saying that the rebels are heavily armed and dressed in new battle fatigues, roaming their villages and addressing belligerent.

He said the rebels who favour the presidential candidate Paul Ssemogerere say they are awaiting the outcome of the May presidential elections.

International

8 more killed in polls violence, arms factories unearthed

Cong (I) issues stern warning against dissident minister

NEW DELHI, May 6: India's ruling Congress (I) Party rallied behind Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao ahead of the final crucial round of general elections Tuesday, issuing a stern warning to a minister who asked Rao to quit, reports AFP.

Eleven federal ministers and chief ministers of 10 Congress-ruled states said after a hurried closed-door meeting late Sunday that the 111-year-old party had no desire to dump Rao after the polls, irrespective of the outcome. In its long history, the Indian National Congress had never deserted its leader (Particularly) at a time of crisis, the loyalists said in a statement.

There is no question of a change in the leadership, added External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, a confidant of the 74-year-old premier.

Karunakaran, a key party man from the southern state of Kerala, said Rao was to blame for the Congress' poor health because he had been unable to devote time to building the party.

Rao, the Congress President, himself ruled out a succession struggle in the party after the elections.

"I am clear that I will be at the place where the party wants me," he told reporters on board his special aircraft while returning to the Indian capital today after campaigning in Kashmir.

"I do not see the possibility of any succession struggle as there is no conflict over the leadership," he added.

Rao's comments came a day after Industry Minister K Karunakaran stunned the ruling party by publicly demanding that the prime minister resign as Congress president after the balloting.

Karunakaran, a key party man from the southern state of Kerala, said Rao was to blame for the Congress' poor health because he had been unable to devote time to building the party.

Karunakaran's comments caused rejoicing in the opposition camp and fresh speculation that Rao might have to go if the Congress fares poorly as widely predicted in the staggered parliamentary polls which conclude on Tuesday.

Congress general secretary B P Maurya issued a stern warning to Karunakaran late Monday, saying he might face "disciplinary action" for his remarks on Rao.

Karunakaran will have to correct his ways before it is too late," Maurya told the United News of India (UNI) news agency here. "The rank and file of the party are solidly behind the Congress president."

Another AP report adds:

New violence hit India ahead of the last phase of a crucial election. At least eight people were killed in clashes between upper and lower castes, police firing and a bomb explosion.

officials and news reports said Monday.

Four people of a private army of upper-caste landlords in eastern Bihar state were shot and killed by suspected communist activists on Sunday. All the victims were from the Ranbir Sena, the army that landlords formed two years ago to fight low-caste people, who are backed by local communists.

The clash occurred in Bhopal district, an area where voting is scheduled to be held on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, police, have dismantled a string of illegal gun factories and arrested thousands in the run up to the final phase of federal elections in this crime-prone Indian state, police said Sunday.

A police spokesman said in this eastern state that at least 14 "underground" arms factories in Muzaffarpur district were raided in a special drive.

8 Nepali migrant workers shot dead in Kashmir

SRINAGAR (India), May 6: Unidentified militants shot dead eight Nepali migrant workers in the troubled northern state of Kashmir, Indian police said today.

Additional deputy Inspector-General of Police Ashok Kumar Suri told Reuters that 10 Nepalis working as stone crushers were abducted by militants at around midnight on Sunday near Srinagar, summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir state.

Eight of the migrant workers were found dead in a village near Lashkar, about 10 km southeast of Srinagar, on Monday morning, Suri said. The other two escaped, one suffering bullet wounds.

Three civilians were wounded in central Srinagar on Monday morning when a grenade thrown by suspected separatist militants exploded near a vehicle belonging to security forces, police said.

A second grenade exploded outside the local headquarters of the State Bank of India on Srinagar's crowded residency road, leaving a crater in the road, witnesses said.

80 drown as boat capsizes in Sierra Leone

FREETOWN, May 6: More than 80 people drowned off the coast of Sierra Leone today when a boat carrying market traders capsized, rescuers and survivors said, reports Reuters.

Hospital sources said at least 86 bodies had been recovered after the accident, which occurred near Lungi outside the capital Freetown.

Survivors said about 200 people were "crammed" on board the boat. Panic set in when the engine failed early in the morning.

Many of those on board were women. Survivors said they were travelling to Conakry, the capital of neighbouring Guinea.

Refugees from renewed civil war in neighbouring Liberia have been travelling to Sierra Leone by sea to escape fighting.

Specialy appalling was the recent trend towards unisex scents. "Woman should be like women and men like men," Cartland said.

Bailey described the scent as "classic, oriental, sophisticated and long-lasting."

The scent, priced at 9.95 pounds (drs 14.95) per 30 milliliters (one fluid ounce), will be available only through mail order. Cartland will direct her share of the profits to her favourite charities.

Off the Record



American pop singer Michael Jackson salutes fans as he arrives in Monte-Carlo on Sunday. Jackson will be given a World Music Award Wednesday in Monaco for his all-time best-selling album, "Thriller", and a second as "Best Singer of the Year".

Queen's austerity!

LONDON: In a fresh attempt to reduce costs, Queen Elizabeth II is cutting back on a valuable, centuries-old perk for royal staff, housing subsidised by the taxpayer, reports AP.

Some 45 of the 260 so-called "grace and favour" apartments scattered through several royal palaces will not be reallocated when the present incumbents leave their posts, Buckingham Palace confirmed Sunday.

For centuries, royal staff have been accommodated in homes at the royal palaces at low rents.

Most of these homes are in Buckingham Palace, Kensington Palace, St James's Palace and Hampton Court in London and at Windsor Castle, the queen's weekend home west of the capital.

Buckingham Palace has been stung by criticism that the taxpayer is funding a large entourage.

By virtue of their positions, most of those who receive accommodation need to be near at hand," said a palace spokesman. "Not all are private secretaries — there are drivers and police officers as well."

The spokesman said in line with civil service rules, royal employees pay 16.7 per cent of their salaries in rent. They pay all utility bills, he said.

Men would want to kiss you, nothing more

LONDON: It's the perfect scent for the wrists and neck. In fact, about all it's good for is the wrists and neck, reports AP.

"Any man would want to kiss a woman wearing this — but would go no further," promised Dame Barbara Cartland of a new scent created to mark her 95th birthday this July.

Cartland, once listed by the Guinness Book of Records as the best-selling writer ever, averages 23 romance novels a year. They exalt feminine virtue and manly ideals — but mainly feminine virtue.

Cartland, who is also step-grandmother to Princess Diana, commissioned "Scent of Romance" from John Bailey, a British perfumer.

"I asked John to create this for me because women today cannot buy a scent that smells like they used to," she said. "These days perfumes hardly smell at all and they are so expensive."

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Talks between Pakistan, Afghanistan begin

ISLAMABAD, May 6: Talks between two uneasy neighbours opened Monday in Islamabad almost nine months after a mob ransacked Pakistan's embassy in the Afghan capital of Kabul, killing one person and badly beating several others, including the ambassador, reports AP.

The talks between Pakistan and Afghanistan follow a formal apology from President Burhanuddin Rabbani's government in Kabul and a promise to compensate Pakistan.

Rabbani, whose soldiers control the capital of Kabul, accuse Pakistan of arming and training the Taliban. Pakistan has denied the charge although there are many in the administration who sympathise with them.

Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan, which is mired in a bitter civil war that has gone on for four years, soured shortly after the Taliban entered the fray in 1994.

Rabbani, whose soldiers control the capital of Kabul, accuse Pakistan of arming and training the Taliban. Pakistan has denied the charge although there are many in the administration who sympathise with them.

About 5000 Taliban soldiers are deployed on the outskirts of Kabul and daily they lob rockets into the city.



Former Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega (L) speaks to supporters at the Sandinista Congress on Sunday in Managua, Nicaragua, as his wife Rosario (R) listens. Ortega was nominated to be the National Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN) candidate for president in the 20 October general elections.

— AFP/UNB photo

Yeltsin may offer top posts to opponents for quitting race

MOSCOW, May 6: Amid mounting appeals for a compromise to avoid violence following Russia's presidential elections, President Boris Yeltsin might be planning to offer his opponents top government posts if they abandon the race, reports AP.

Yeltsin denies that he wants the vote postponed, yet the idea might be too tempting to ignore.

Independent polls show Yeltsin running neck-and-neck with his communist rival, Gennady Zyuganov, who is riding a wave of popular discontent with the painful market reforms and Russia's political and economic disarray. But reliable sources say secret Kremlin posts indicate Zyuganov's victory by a large margin.

The idea of postponing the vote, if it takes shape, will likely be based on recent Kozhakov-style warnings that elections in deeply polarized Russia could only bring civil war, regardless of the winner.

The first appeal was issued last month by 13 leading business men who urged Yeltsin and Zyuganov to seek "serious mutual concessions," followed by similar appeals from a group of three academics, the Cossacks' Union and one of Yeltsin's challengers, Alexander Lebed.

Kozhakov suggested that some deal was possible with the Communists, an indication that Yeltsin could offer them government posts.

Zyuganov wants a televised debate with Yeltsin to air their positions and agree on ways to ensure peace during and after the elections.

Yetisn's team or remove his own name from the ballot.

"I was asked what I want, and I answered that I want to win the elections," Yavlinsky said Sunday night on independent NTV's news programme "Izvestia".

The presidential press service, however, said they discussed a possible uniting of democratic-minded candidates to prevent a political and economic setback in Russia.

The respected daily Izvestia in Sunday's edition that Yeltsin planned to make "most serious proposals" to Yavlinsky. "The first and only idea that comes to mind is the prime minister's post in exchange for support from Yavlinsky