

Political storm appears to be brewing in Israel

JERUSALEM, Feb 23: A political storm appears to be brewing in Israel amid a report that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu was questioned under caution on a political scandal, reports Xinhua.

Netanyahu was questioned about Roni Bar-On's appointment as Attorney General by Police Commander Sando Mazor, his deputy Lt-Commander, Ya'acov Grossman and Lt-Commander Ramzi Zotler at his office for four hours Tuesday night.

Channel one of the state-run Israel television reported Friday night that Netanyahu told the investigators that he could not recall many of the details relating to Bar-On appointment.

After 45 minutes, according to the report, the three police officers issued a caution. Under Israeli law, remarks made when a person questioned under caution can be used against the person in criminal proceedings.

If the report proves true, this was the first time that police had ever questioned an Israeli

Prime Minister under caution. The investigation began after channel one reported last month that Bar-On's appointment was part of a deal in which Shas party leader Aryeh Deri was promised a plea bargain by Bar-On, in exchange for Shas support for the approval of the Hebron agreement. Deri, according to the story, threatened to quit the Likud-led coalition unless Bar-On was appointed.

According to channel one, Netanyahu was pressured, and perhaps even blackmailed, into appointing Bar-On, despite his advisers' opposition to the appointment.

Bar-On, a member of the Likud Central Committee and a Jerusalem criminal lawyer, resigned as Attorney General within 48 hours as a result of almost unanimous opposition from the country's legal circle.

The Prime Minister's office today declined to respond any aspects of the investigation concerning Netanyahu, said Israel television this evening.

In its Friday night report,

channel one also claimed that Justice Minister Tzahi Hanegbi had misled the government on at least five occasions regarding the Bar-On's appointment, however, Hanegbi angrily denied the report and demanded an open apology from the TV.

Following the latest revelations in the Bar-On affair, coalition chairman Michael Eitan expressed shock over the report that Netanyahu was questioned under caution. However, he said, he was astonished that such a thing was broadcast without being verified.

Overjoyed over the dramatic development, the opposition labour party said today that it was creating a special committee to prepare for early elections, party Secretary General Nissim Zvilli said that the decision was taken as it now seems increasingly likely that Netanyahu might eventually be forced out of office due to the scandal.

In such an event, Zvilli said, the law states that a new election could be held within 60 days, leaving little time for parties to prepare for the vote.

Russia to open new space centre in Far East

MOSCOW, Feb 23: Russia is to inaugurate its new Svobodny Space Centre in the country's Far Eastern region with a military satellite launch on March 4, ITAR-Tass news agency reported yesterday, reports AFP.

The former strategic missile site located less than 200 kilometres (120 miles) from the Chinese border is Russia's third cosmodrome, after Plesetsk in the northwest and Baikonour in Kazakhstan.

Baikonour is the only centre capable of launching manned space flights, but the choice of Svobodny was highly controversial when it was announced in March last year by President Boris Yeltsin.

Critics said it was located in an earthquake zone, while the proximity of inhabited areas of Yakutia and Khabarovsk made them vulnerable to rocket first stages falling back to earth.

Russia's space programme is becoming increasingly hampered by financial difficulties which are jeopardising Moscow's contribution to the multinational Alpha Space Station.



US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright (L) shakes hands with her Japanese counterpart Yukihiro Ikeda prior to their talks at the Foreign Ministry's Likura guesthouse in Tokyo on Sunday. Albright arrived in Tokyo Sunday on her second leg of a three-nation Asian tour aimed at coordination efforts for the regional stability.

Pak govt asked to provide security for cultural centres of Iran

ISLAMABAD, Feb 23: Iran's embassy here Saturday asked the Pakistan government to arrange "complete" security for its cultural centres, following an attack on one facility which killed seven people, reports AFP.

"We request the government of Pakistan that it should provide complete security to the cultural centres of the Islamic Republic of Iran," the embassy said in a statement.

Thursday's attack by gunmen on the Iranian centre in Multan city in Punjab province claimed the lives of Iranian director, Mohammad Ali Rahimi, and six Pakistanis.

The embassy statement said the Multan incident was the work of "elements trying to create a split and weaken brotherly cultural relations" between Pakistan and Iran.

The Iranian government had accused the Pakistani police of "negligence" in protecting its interests.

The police said Friday they had arrested three suspects in the incident and recovered arms and ammunition from their possession.

BRRIFFLY

Suharto ends Myanmar trip: Indonesian President Suharto, one of the staunchest backers of Myanmar's military regime, departed Yangon on Sunday after a three-day visit aimed at strengthening economic ties, AP reports from Yangon.

He was the sixth Southeast Asian head of state to visit Myanmar, a country shunned by many Western governments, since 1994. During the visit, Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alates said Burma was well on its way to joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations but did not give a fixed date for its entry.

Boat mishap claims 15 in India: At least 15 people, including three children, were feared drowned in a boat tragedy in the Ganges in India's Bihar state yesterday, Press Trust of India said, Xinhua reports from New Delhi.

Police sources said the ill-fated boat was carrying 55 passengers when it sank. The bodies of the children belonging to the age group of three to four years have so far been fished out of the waters and search was on to locate others with the help of local divers.

Taliban detains 4 in Kabul: The Taliban Islamic militia has detained two Frenchmen working with the French-based humanitarian group Action Contra La Faim (ACF Action Against Hunger) in Kabul, the staff said Saturday, AFP reports from Kabul.

Two Afghan males working for the organisation were also held. The reason for their detention was not immediately made known. The four were held after a farewell lunch on Friday for ACF's local female employees hosted by the two female expatriate members of the aid organisation who have completed their tenure here. The names of the French aid workers were not released.

40,000 drug addicts in Nepal: There are now about 40,000 drug addicts in Nepal and the number could reach 200,000 by the year 2000, according to a local researcher, Xinhua reports from Kathmandu.

Professor Kapil Shrestha told a symposium on drug addiction here Saturday that the drug addicts in Nepal are mainly the youths for the age group of 14-40, which accounts for 27 per cent of the country's total population of 20 million. He cited media advertising on alcohol and cigarettes and unemployment as main reasons for the rise in drug addiction in the country.

Colombian druglord jailed for 22 yrs: A judge has sentenced Cali cartel drug boss Miguel Rodriguez Orjuela to 22 years in person for drug trafficking and conspiracy, the radio network RCN reported, AP reports from Bogota.

In the past, Rodriguez has confessed to smuggling hundreds of tons of cocaine to the United States and other countries, for which he was sentenced last month to nine years in person. Under Colombian law, jail sentences run concurrently. The nine-year term, and a 10 1/2-year sentence given to Rodriguez's brother Gilberto, increased US officials. Justice Minister Carlos Medellin also expressed regret, calling them jail terms "that a car thief would receive in any other country."

Liz leaves ICU after surgery: Showing quick recovery from brain surgery, Elizabeth Taylor has been moved from the intensive care unit to a private hospital room, her publicist said, AP reports from Los Angeles.

"She's doing exceptionally well. She's in great spirits," said Shirine Ann Coburn, Miss Taylor's children and some of her grandchildren have been visiting her at Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre, Coburn said Saturday.

Albright arrives in Japan: US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright arrived in Tokyo yesterday for a 24-hour visit likely to be dominated by talks about the future of US military bases in Japan, Reuter reports from Tokyo.

Albright's visit coincides with leadership turmoil in North Korea, one of the main strategic reasons for the large United States military presence in Japan.

Eruption ruins 10 houses in Trinidad: Ten houses were buried by a volcano eruption in a village on Saturday, but Agriculture Minister Rezaa Mohammed said there were no fatalities, Reuter reports from Port of Spain.

The lava and mud eruption in Piparo, about 60 miles (100 km) south of here, covered more than one square mile (2.5 square km) and left 31 families homeless, Mohammed said. Those families were provided shelter by the government.

"Evacuation of residents is necessary in the light of more eruptions predicted by the seismic research unit of the University of the West Indies," Mohammed said. However, he gave no details of the planned evacuation and did not specify the number of people involved.

Canadian minister in Kuwait: Canadian Defense Minister Douglas Young arrived in Kuwait City yesterday on a three-day official visit mainly for boosting bilateral military cooperation, Xinhua reports from Kuwait City.

Canadian embassy sources in Kuwait said that Young was expected to discuss means of strengthening military relations between the two countries during his stay here. Kuwait ambassador to Canada Abdel Muhsin al-Duaij was reportedly saying earlier yesterday that Young's visit to Kuwait comes within a series of visits paid by Canadian ministers to Kuwait as a sign of support to both countries' excellent relations.

End of hostage crisis may be weeks away: Fujimori

LIMA, Feb 23: Talks to end Peru's 2 and half month-old hostage standoff are still in the early stages and it may be weeks before the 72 men held captive by leftist rebels are free, President Alberto Fujimori said Saturday, reports AP.

In his first comments since a government negotiator met rebel leader Nestor Cerpa last week, Fujimori said he was hopeful but cautioned that the two sides are not close to an agreement.

"We cannot predict how many more weeks these talks will take," he told reporters as he was leaving a reception for Japanese officials.

"We are still at the level of preliminary conversations. We still do not have an agenda and we have not reached final negotiations. We are simply preparing, doing the groundwork."

Tupac Amaru rebels seized the Japanese ambassador's residence on December 17, demanding the government free hundreds of jailed guerrillas. Seventy-two men, mostly prominent Peruvians and Japanese businessmen, are hostages.

Cerpa left the mansion for the first time on Thursday to talk with mediators and government emissary Domingo Palermo. The government did not release details of the talks.

Fujimori said that during the three-hour session, Cerpa spoke for more than an hour "expounding on his points of view, his proposals, his criticisms of the government."

Still, his direct participation was seen as a positive step that has sped up the pace of the negotiations, Fujimori said.

I sometimes contemplate suicide: Phoolan Devi

NEW DELHI, Feb 23: India's "bandit queen" Phoolan Devi, facing charges of killing 20 high-caste Hindus, has considered suicide, saying she is being victimised because of her caste, a newspaper said today, reports AFP.

"I sometimes contemplate suicide," said Devi, a lower-caste Hindu who has allegedly gone underground after an Indian court ordered her arrest in connection with the 1981 massacre.

And she denied she was running from the courts telling the Times of India she would comply with a court summons to appear on March 20.

"Am I to spend the rest of my life running? Am I being harassed because I am a lower caste? I might as well be dead if this is how society wants me to spend the rest of my life," she said.

"According to the law, even the biggest criminal is entitled to justice."

A court in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh ordered her to surrender before March 3 in connection with the 1981 murders, but later extended the deadline to March 20.

"I was not running away from appearing in court. I was in (New Delhi's) All India Institute of Medical Sciences the day the warrant was issued. I then went to Bombay for medical treatment."

"I will appear in court on March 20," she said.

Devi, who is now a deputy, said she would appear in parliament Monday to highlight her plight and the cause of detainees whose trials have been delayed in the courts.

Palestinian cabinet warns Israel to bear consequences of new Jewish settlements

GAZA CITY, Feb 23: The Palestinian cabinet on Saturday again warned Israel about the dangerous consequences of building new Jewish settlements in disputed east Jerusalem, reports AFP.

"The settlement of Jerusalem represents a red line which puts the entire peace process in danger," the cabinet said in a statement carried by the Wafa news agency.

"The Israeli government will bear full responsibility for the consequences of this settlement, which makes peace between the two people impossible," it said, describing the construction as a violation of the autonomy accords, of international law and the guarantees given by the United States.

The right-wing Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week announced the construction of a new Jewish neighbourhood in the now undeveloped Har Homa area on the southern edge of annexed east Jerusalem.

The project involves building 6,500 homes for about 25,000 people.

The Palestinian cabinet called on Palestinian people to act to ensure the failure of "settlers and Israeli enterprises involved in the construction of settlements in Palestinian territories."

"The Israelis want to 'Judaise' Jerusalem by changing the demographic, historic and geographic situation, threatening the holy sites of Islam and Christianity," the cabinet said.

Palestinian officials have warned that the construction could ignite riots similar to those that followed the September opening by Netanyahu of a new entrance to an archaeological tunnel near east Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque. That unrest left more than 80 Palestinians and Israelis dead.

The Palestinians hope to make east Jerusalem, which Israel occupied and annexed in 1967, the capital of a future state. Israel insists the united city will remain its "eternal capital."

Some 150,000 Palestinians live in east Jerusalem, near some 160,000 Jews living in homes built for them by Israel since the occupation.

NATO, Russia work out details of new ties

BRUSSELS, Feb 23: NATO and Russia return to the negotiating table Sunday to try to get in writing the terms of their relationship after the Western alliance begins expanding eastward, reports AP.

NATO Secretary General Javier Solana will spend several hours talking with Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov at Solana's official residence on the fringe of a forested Brussels park.

Moscow opposes the 16-nation alliance's plans to take in new members, including at least some of Russia's former allies in the now-defunct Warsaw Pact. Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic are believed to head the list.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who visited Moscow on Thursday and Friday, was unable to convince the Russians that NATO enlargement would not be a threat.

NATO says it will go ahead with its plans whether Russia likes it or not. The Russians know that and appear to be trying to extract as many concessions as possible from the alliance before the expansion starts.

The first candidates for membership will be designated at a NATO summit in Spain in July, and NATO hopes to negotiate and sign a new charter on its relations with Russia before then.

Solana has been getting feedback from Albright's meetings in Moscow as well as reports from two other foreign ministers recently in Russia — Klaus Kinkel of Germany and Lamberto Dini of Italy.

Troops kill 41 KNU rebels in Myanmar

YANGON, Feb 23: Breaking a silence on its military operations along the Thai-Myanmar border, the government announced Sunday its troops had killed 41 ethnic Karen rebels in a continuing offensive which began Feb 11, reports AP.

State radio said government forces had clashed 53 times with the Karen National Union in three areas of southeastern Myanmar since the push began against the country's last major insurgency.

"Mopping up operations" were continuing and more Karen fighters were expected to surrender to the government side, the broadcast said.

The offensive has displaced thousands of Karen civilians and led to artillery exchanges between Thai and Myanmar troops along the frontier. The report made no mention of the escalation of tensions with Thailand.

State radio said the offensive was launched after leaders of the Karen National Union unilaterally broke off peace talks with Yangon.

The rebels, who have been fighting since 1947, demand autonomy from the central government and have refused any compromise that excludes Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's Nobel Peace prize laureate and pro-democracy leader.

The broadcast claimed that 41 rebel bodies had been counted and 293 weapons along with 270,000 rounds of ammunition were seized. Another 243 weapons and 70,000 rounds of ammunition were brought in by 511 officers and soldiers who surrendered following disagreements with the "extremist leadership" of the rebel movement, the broadcast said.

Off the Record

Plan to trek thru deepest canyon

BEIJING: A Chinese expedition team plans to hike for the first time through the world's longest and deepest canyon in April, state-run media said Saturday, reports AP.

The team, set up by the China Association of Scientific Expeditions, is expected to spend a month trekking through the Yarlung Zangbo River Canyon in south Tibet, Xinhua News Agency said.

The canyon is 494 kilometres (330 miles) long, with an average depth of 5,000 metres (16,500 feet), Chinese scientists say. The canyon forms an arc around the Himalayas.

The expedition team is also expected to attempt to boat down the swift Yarlung Zangbo, more than 2,100 kilometers (1,400 miles) southwest of Beijing, the association said.

According to measurements taken by the Chinese in 1994, the canyon is more than three times as deep as the Grand Canyon in the United States, which is 1,600 metres (5,280 feet) deep and 349 kilometres (217 miles) long.

In daytime she keeps gun, at night she hides man

AMMAN: In daytime, she keeps a gun under the seat. At night, she often hides a male friend in the trunk of her yellow cab, just in case, reports AP.

Being the first woman among Jordan's 100,000 taxi drivers is proving quite an adventure for Myassar Abul-Hawa. Female cabbies may be commonplace in many countries, but not in this male-dominated Arab nation where women's work still usually means raising kids.

"At first, bystanders rub their eyes. Then they clap, whistle and cheer me," Abul-Hawa said. "They can't believe a woman is driving a cab."

Abul-Hawa, 52, has a degree in English literature and worked as a tutor in Beirut. But since fleeing Lebanon's civil war in 1975, she hasn't found similar work. She took the driver's job because she needed money, in part to help support eight children.

After a month on the job, she says she relishes it, especially because it's made her something of a celebrity in Amman. Children run after her car, and women try to get her to stop and chat.

"She is a unique example that women are capable of carrying out traditionally male-dominated jobs," said Nadia Shamloukh, acting director of the Jordanian Women Federation.

Women make up only 14 per cent of Jordan's 1 million-member work force. Laws on marriage, divorce and inheritance still favour men, and women are banned from jobs deemed dangerous and from working after dark.

Happily for Abul-Hawa, the law on night work is rarely enforced. She says she has not encountered serious problems at night, except for getting pulled over by bewildered policemen.

Manila plans to privatise certain services of jails

MANILA, Feb 23: The department of interior and local governments of the Philippines are studying the privatisation of certain aspects of jail operations in the country, the local press reported today, says Xinhua.

Philippine Interior Secretary Robert Barbers was quoted as saying that he was "receptive" to a Senate proposal to privatise certain services of city, municipal and district jails.

Barbers said the idea of privatising jail services was recommended by Senator Orlando Mercado and is patterned after the jail system and management in Australia.

Barbers explained that the privatisation of local jails will benefit the Philippine national police as officials and personnel of the jail bureau can be absorbed and utilised for police work to enhance the campaign against criminality.

Barbers said plans are now underway for him and other jail management officials to visit Australia and observe how the system works and if it could be adopted in the Philippines.

Iraq detains 722 POWs, recently freed by Iran

TEHRAN, Feb 23: Iraqi authorities have detained 722 Iraqi Prisoners of War recently freed and repatriated by Iran, an Iraqi opposition group charged Saturday, reports AFP.

The Iran-based Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI) said the prisoners released unilaterally by Iran in late December were being kept in a detention centre near Baghdad.

"They are being held under intense interrogation without any justification and their families are told it's for security reasons," it said, quoted by Kayhan newspaper.

Iran freed the prisoners, 700 of them Muslims and the rest Christian, on December 28 to encourage Baghdad to release its own POWs kept in Iraqi jails.

But Iraq says it has released all Iranian POWs, and claims 20,000 of its citizens are being held in Iran.

Iran says it has documents to prove that Iranian POWs are still in Iraqi camps.



Labour's deputy leader John Prescott after his news conference at the Birmingham Repertory theatre on Saturday where he 'exposed the two faces' of John Major. Britain's opposition Labour Party is applying sophisticated marketing skills in a bid to snatch a crucial by-election from the ruling Tories in what is being viewed as a curtain-raiser to the upcoming general election.

Zairean rebels vow to keep fighting to force Mobutu out

BUKAVU, Zaire, Feb 23: More than 25,000 Hutu refugees vanished within hours from a makeshift camp in eastern Zaire, fleeing ahead of an approaching swarm of rebel soldiers, reports AP.

A UN relief flight arrived mid-morning Saturday to set up operations in Kalima, 170 miles (275 kilometers) west of Bukavu. But when a second plane landed an hour later, the site, which had held 25,000 refugees, was deserted.

Either the rebels had advanced to Kalima or the refugees are fleeing because they heard the rebels were in the area," said Brenda Barton, a UN World Food Programme spokeswoman in Nairobi, Kenya.

Barton said the refugees had a five-day food ration each and were believed to be walking southwest toward Kindu, 60 miles (100 kilometers) away.

The exodus occurred as leader of the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire and a government official exchanged conflicting reports about battle fronts.

Leon Kalima, a spokesman for Zaire's defense ministry, said the rebels had attacked Bafwasende on Thursday and Friday.

Bafwasende, about 200 miles (320 kilometers) northeast of Bukavu — the largest town under rebel control — has become the headquarters for the Zairian Armed Forces during the five-month civil war.

But rebel leader Laurent Kabila said his troops have controlled Bafwasende for more than a week. He added that his fighters were within 60 miles (100 kilometers) of the important northern city of Kisangani.

In Kisangani, displaced Zairians have been arriving by foot from Bafwasende for several weeks, but hundreds appeared to be coming in the last few days.

"It's only a trickle, but if it's a trickle that goes on for 24 hours a day, then it becomes a lot," said Ariane Quentier, a spokeswoman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Kisangani.

Kabila, whose fighters have captured a 900-mile (1,450-

kilometer) strip in eastern Zaire, had threatened a new westward offensive if the government hadn't begun peace talks by midnight Friday. But on Thursday, he said he would hold off on a major new offensive, saying the government had made some movement from its hard-line position.

Kabila said his fighters were "continuously advancing, but...slowly," and only on established fronts.

The military advance is needed to force the hesitant Zairian so-called authorities to come to negotiate their relinquishing of power," Kabila said in Bukavu during an interview with the Associated Press.

But Kalima, the defense min-

Rwandan army rejects AI charges

KIGALI, Feb 23: The Rwandan army has rejected charges by Amnesty International that an upsurge in killings since the recent return of more than a million Hutu refugees included an increase in unlawful executions by the Rwandese Patriotic Army, reports AFP.

"If people are being killed it's because they're getting caught in crossfire between the army and evildoers who want to sabotage and destabilise the country," army spokesman Emmanuel Nhadiro said Friday.

Major Nhadiro added that the guerrillas' hideout had been located, and that the problem was about to be settled "definitively."

"But," he said, "We have to go carefully so that the neutrali-

Arafat condoles Deng's death

BEIJING, Feb 23: Palestinian President Yasser Arafat went to the Chinese office to the Palestinian National Authority in Gaza Strip to condole on the death of Wednesday of Deng Xiaoping yesterday, reports Xinhua.