

International

Troops reinforced for possible riots
Arabs to oppose new Jewish settlement in E Jerusalem

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 26: Arab states were Tuesday lobbying the UN Security Council to oppose the construction of a new Jewish settlement in east Jerusalem.

"Everybody understands the Arab position," Nasser Al-Kidwa, the permanent observer of Palestine to the United Nations, told AFP Tuesday.

He made the comments just before a planned meeting with the new US ambassador to the United Nations, Bill Richardson.

Accompanied the ambassadors from Jordan, Morocco, Oman and Qatar, Al-Kidwa said the Arab group was not prepared to tolerate any Israeli policies to develop a Jewish settlement in Jabal Abu Ghneim a hilly suburb of east Jerusalem.

AP adds: Soldiers braced for trouble Wednesday before an expected Israeli government decision to build a housing project in Jerusalem's disputed eastern sector.

Israel army radio said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government had warned Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat that if there was a violent reaction to the 6,500-

Blast kills 5 in China's main Muslim region

BEIJING, Feb 26: Time-bombs planted on buses killed at least four to five people in the capital of China's mainly Muslim region of Xinjiang on the day of memorials for paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, an official said today, reports Reuter.

Officials and residents in the city of Urumqi said at least 60 people were wounded by three blasts on Tuesday which shattered the calm prevailing in China since the death of paramount leader Deng a week ago.

I think at least four to five people were killed, including one child who died instantly, said a television station official, who declined to be identified.

The blasts came within five minutes of each other in separate parts of the city, he said.

People are full of fear, and the city is on high alert, he said.

It was the first violence reported in restive Xinjiang since anti-Chinese riots in the re-

BRIEFLY

18 hacked to death in Algeria:

An armed group set up a fake military checkpoint, then shot and hacked to death 18 people in the mountains of northwestern Algeria, a newspaper reported Tuesday, AP reports from Algeria.

The slayings, which took place overnight Sunday, lasted over a four-hour period at the checkpoint set up near the town of Saida, 400 kms (240 miles) southwest of Algiers, the independent daily El Khabar. There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but suspicion fell on the Armed Islamic Group.

India develops AIDS detecting kit: India has developed a new kit for detecting AIDS virus, Xinhua reports from New Delhi.

A team of micro-biologists at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in New Delhi, capital of India, developed the kit to detect the deadly Human Immune-Deficiency Virus (HIV), causative agent of AIDS, official source said here yesterday. Dr Pradeep Seth, head of the department of micro-biology and his research associate Dr Mohammed Najeeb Siddiqi developed the kit after two years' hard work.

Iran's presidential polls May 23: Iran's presidential elections will be held on May 23, Interior Minister Ali Mohammad Besharati announced Tuesday on state television, AFP reports from Tehran.

Besharati made the announcement during a governors meeting in Tehran, the television said. Several candidates are in the running for the seventh presidential elections since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Clinton meets Saudi defence minister: President Bill Clinton and Saudi Arabia's defence minister discussed security issues in the Gulf region amid concerns about US warplane sales to the kingdom and the safety of Americans living there, AFP reports from Washington.

The visit by Prince Sultan ibn Abdul Aziz, who is also Saudi Arabia's second Deputy Prime Minister, came as the US embassy in Riyadh warned Tuesday of threats from Islamic militants against US military and American civilians. The embassy said it has also received more reports that US military and government facilities might be under surveillance, suggesting that planning for terrorist action against US interests in Saudi Arabia continues unabated.

Zairean leader flies to SA: Zairean rebel leader Laurent Kabila secretly flew to South Africa and met with US officials trying to restart the Zaire peace process, AP reports from Johannesburg.

Kabila flew in a chartered South African plane Tuesday afternoon from Kigali, Rwanda, to Lanseria, about 40 kilometres (25 miles) north of Johannesburg. A small air field serviced by charter companies, Lanseria is known as a haven for smuggling and other clandestine activity. The out-of-the-way destination and statements by his underlings that Kabila was in the bush rallying his troops indicated the rebel leader wanted his trip to be kept secret.

Currency rates in Afghanistan fluctuate with advance of Taliban rulers

MARZAR-E-SHARIF, Afghanistan, Feb 26: In the dusty bazaars and squalid money markets of Marz-e-Sharif, hope and currency rates fluctuate with each advance of the army of Afghanistan's new Taliban rulers, reports AP.

The warlord who has made this poverty-stricken northern town his stronghold pledges it will never fall to the Islamic Taliban army, which already has overrun two-thirds of the country.

But townspersons and shopkeepers are fearful.

"I am not happy about the Taliban coming here," said Mohammed Akbar, a shop owner, who came from the capital of Kabul soon after the Taliban took power there last September. If they come here, I will leave for Pakistan.

Battles with the Taliban fighters are raging all around.

For the alliance arrayed against the Taliban, losing Marz-e-Sharif would mean losing Afghanistan, leaving its leaders little choice but to flee the country.

The Taliban are fighting to extend their strict form of Islamic rule throughout Afghanistan, an impoverished nation of 16 million people battered by 18 years of civil war.

In late January, they seized several strategic towns held by former government troops — Dostum's partners in the fight against the Taliban.

Steadily, the religious army marched northward through the provinces of Parwan and Bamyan — falsely claiming this week to have reached Sheber Pass, considered the gateway to Dostum's northern empire. In truth, the advance stalled at Ghorband Valley.

Many dread the prospect of having to live under the Taliban's rigorous brand of Islam, which banishes women from the workplace and schools, and forces men to grow beards and pray five times a day.

But even more worrisome is the ethnic divisions between the Taliban, who belong to the majority Pashtun ethnic group,

and the minority ethnic groups of the north — Uzbeks like Dostum, Tajiks, Turkmen and Shiite Muslims.

"There is a real fear of the Taliban among the ethnic groups," said Mehamat Samsar, Taliban's consul general in Marz-e-Sharif.

Uncertainty reigns in the squallid money markets of Marz-e-Sharif, where money sellers clutching millions of Afghans wad through a mob of bearded men hollering exchange rates.

The local currency has fluctuated wildly, from a January high of 150,000 Afghans per US dollar to 25,000 Afghans to the dollar in mid-February.

Yar Mohammed, a money merchant with millions of Afghans stacked on a rickety wooden table, says the Afghans plummets every time the Taliban push northward.

But a modicum of stability has returned after the northern alliance halted the Taliban advance recently.

Diplomats here say Dostum is getting plane loads of money from both Iran and Russia. And the warlord is reportedly pumping tens of thousands of dollars daily into the local economy.

At Marz-e-Sharif's only liquor store, where canned Dutch whiskey can be bought for 4 drls and an oversized tin of British-made beer sells for 2 drls the owner says his only customers are soldiers.

They're the only ones who can afford the brew, which is strictly prohibited in Taliban areas.

It seems most residents are merely trying to survive.

In a filthy parking lot, Suleiman sought to hide from the bitter wind beneath a tattered blanket. Laid out in a

US citizens warned against terrorist acts in S Arabia

WASHINGTON, Feb 26: Concerned about threats issued by a "well known terrorist," the State Department is warning the 40,000 Americans living in Saudi Arabia to maintain a low profile and reduce travel within the country, reports AP.

The warning came as Saudi Deputy Prime Minister Prince Sultan met with President Clinton to discuss security and other issues, and the top US Air Force general told Congress he strongly opposes punishing anyone under his command for last June's terrorist bombing in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 US airmen.

State Department officials said there was concern that the terrorists could stage a strike this week as the high-level Saudi delegation led by Prince Sultan holds meetings in Washington.

Poor turnout
Congress Party defeated badly in local polls

NEW DELHI, Feb 26: The Congress party got a drubbing by right-wing Hindu nationalists in local elections held in the Indian capital after a gap of 14 years, reports AP.

The Bharatiya Janata Party won 80 of 133 seats announced late Tuesday. Congress won 36 in the elections held over the weekend. The remaining districts were won by smaller groups and one seat was left to be determined.

Only 40 per cent of New Delhi's residents came out to vote in the city. Voters had been expected to turn out to express frustration over chronic electricity and water shortages in New Delhi, but their faith in politics has been battered by corruption scandals at the national level and by what was seen as political maneuvering in New Delhi.

In 1983, the Congress Party won a majority in New Delhi's city council for what should have been a four-year term. But in 1987, Congress Party federal lawmakers enacted a constitutional clause allowing them to extend the term by one year. It proceeded to order one extension after another.

Palestinian killed as Israeli troops open fire on crowd in WB

HIZMEH, West Bank, Feb 26: A Palestinian was killed and three others wounded, one critically, when Israeli soldiers opened fire on a crowd in this West Bank village Tuesday, an Israeli military source said, reports AFP.

Mohammed Abdul Aziz Abu Halui, 55, died shortly after he arrived at Hadassah hospital in the Jerusalem area, the military source said.

Another Palestinian was seriously wounded and two others were more lightly wounded. Two of those wounded have been identified as Ali Abdallah Mubarak, 43, and Hamza Mayel Mubarak, 22.

The soldiers were carrying out an operation in the area, near the autonomous town of Ramallah, when they came under a hail of stones thrown by local inhabitants and reacted by opening fire, said an Israeli army spokesman.

DPRK defector in Beijing may not fly to Seoul soon

SEOUL, Feb 26: A prominent North Korean defector held up in South Korea's embassy in Beijing is unlikely to be allowed to fly to Seoul soon, South Korean officials said Wednesday, reports AP.

"We think that China is unlikely to send him back to North Korea and that it also has not decided on his flight to Seoul," Ryu Kwang-suk, a senior Foreign Ministry official, told reporters.

Ryu, who heads the ministry's Asia-Pacific Bureau, said China needs time to smooth North Korea's ruffled feathers over the defection of Hwang Jang Yop, the highest ranking official ever to flee the communist nation.

National security adviser Ban Ki-moon, speaking at a meeting with presidential secretaries, also said Hwang's trip to Seoul would take time.

Off the Record



Lord Charles Hindlip, chairman of Christie's International, answers a question at a press conference Tuesday in New York to announce the auction of dresses from the Princess of Wales' collection. Some 80 dresses dating from the years the Princess was travelling on official visits will go under the gavel June 25 in New York at a gala charity auction.

Miracle of Jesus

BETHLEHEM, West Bank: Christians in Bethlehem are claiming a miracle after witnesses said a fresco painting of Jesus Christ in the town's nativity church shed tears and winched.

"I was in the process of cleaning dust off the painting when I noticed that Christ had tears in his eyes," church employee Issa Ghattas told AFP.

Father Anastasios a Greek Orthodox minister said he had seen the Jesus figure in the 12th century painting "open one eye and close the other."

Asked by journalists why there was now no sign of movement on the face of Jesus, Anastasios replied that it only happens early in the morning. "You cannot always be there at the exact moment."

The Jerusalem-based patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, which controls the Bethlehem Church built over Christ's birthplace, insisted that something extraordinary is currently happening in Bethlehem.

However, the Vatican has remained conspicuous by its silence and many inhabitants of Bethlehem believe the Greek Orthodox authorities may be milking the miracle story to attract more tourists in the run-up to Christmas.

The church is built over the stables where Christian tradition says Jesus Christ was born, and is the town's main tourist attraction.

Tourism has dropped off steeply since the violent clashes between Israelis and Palestinians in September which left 85 people dead.

Lazy mail

NEW DELHI: A post card written by an Indian professor in 1949 informing his favourite student about a job prospect reached its destination in 1997, a newspaper reported on Friday, reports AP.

The then-student, now a retired 71-year-old T M Mahadevan, was stunned to get the letter from T N Muthuswamy of Madras University on January 9, the Indian Express said.

The card was posted in the southern city of Madras. The Express failed to solve why it took half a century to reach Ernakulam, only 550 kilometres (343 miles) away on India's southwest coast.

Indian govt urged to spend more on defence

NEW DELHI, Feb 26: Indian defence experts today urged the federal government to spend more on the military in the annual federal budget to be announced Friday, reports AP.

Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda's government has pledged to grant more funds to the military in its 1997-98 budget but experts said the increase must keep pace with inflation and the needs of the services.

Jasjit Singh, director of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA), an independent think-tank, said: "In terms of the rupee's current value, an increase is inevitable in the upcoming budget."

"But in real terms the hike in allocations would have to be at least seven per cent of GDP."

Singh said a 16-per cent increase over the previous year's defence spending would be "realistic."

New Delhi increased defence spending by 270 million dollars

to 7.94 billion dollars in the last annual budget, one of the lowest increases in decades.

Experts said India spent 2.36 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defence in the current fiscal year to March, compared to 6.88 by Pakistan and 5.63 by China.

Singh said there had been no modernisation of India's army, the fourth largest in the world with more than a million troops, the navy or the air force during the past 10 years.

There would be some very tough choices to make because a large chunk of the allocations would now go into increased salaries. Will India go for modernisation? That is the million-dollar question?"

Major-General D. Banerjee, of the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, added: "Given our defence requirements, the allocation does not even meet 75 per cent of the total demand."

Myanmar, Thailand fighting against Karen for economic benefit

BANGKOK, Feb 26: Karen rebels fighting Myanmar's government said Wednesday that Myanmar and Thailand are working together to defeat them so both countries can profit by building new trade routes and public works projects, reports AP.

"Their plan is to wipe out all the Karen so that we can get our natural resources," said Saw Kenneth, commander of the Karen National Union's 10th Battalion.

"They want to build highways and a gas pipeline through our area and a harbour," he added.

On February 11, Myanman's military launched a massive offensive against the KNU, which has been fighting for Karen autonomy since 1949.

More than 100,000 Burmese troops are involved in the campaign against 2,500 KNU guerrillas, rebels and aid workers said. About 15,000 refugees have fled to Thailand since fighting broke out, joining the 90,000 Karen and other refugees already there.

But rebels and aid workers said that Thai Border Patrol Police, while granting women and children refuge, have been refusing to allow unarmed Karen men to cross the border.

"They are sending them back so they will be wiped out," said one aid worker, who witnessed several incidents but demanded anonymity. "The Thais are definitely working with the Burmese."