

Israeli warplanes raid Hezbollah strongholds

NABATIYEH, Lebanon, Mar 2: Israeli warplanes raided suspected positions of the guerrilla group Hezbollah in southern Lebanon on Sunday, security officials said, reports AP.

Two Israeli fighter jets fired two air-to-surface missiles on the highlands of Iqlim al-Tuffah, or Apple province, a major stronghold of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah, the officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

There was no immediate word on casualties from the 8:40 am (0640 GMT) raid on the Jabal Safi area in Iqlim al-Tuffah. The target area is more than 20 kilometers (12 miles) north of the Israeli border.

Hezbollah, or the Party of God, maintains bases in Iqlim al-Tuffah, which faces an Israeli-occupied border enclave in south Lebanon.

Sunday's raid came two days after Israeli warplanes raided suspected Hezbollah positions in an area between Iqlim al-Tuffah and the market town of Nabatiyeh.

Security officials said the

targeted area is often used by Hezbollah guerrillas as a launching pad for operations against Israeli troops and for the transfer of weapons between the two areas.

The raids followed an escalation of hostilities in south Lebanon.

Lankan doctors, nurses threaten strike

COLOMBO, Mar 2: Doctors and nurses at Sri Lanka's government hospitals are threatening to strike next week to back demands for better pay and to protest against cuts in overtime payments, reports Reuter.

Nurses union head Muruthethuwa Ananda was quoted as saying today that its 14,000 members planned to stage an islandwide strike if the government failed to scrap the cuts in overtime payments by March 5.

Russia, Belarus agree to hold referendums on reunification

MOSCOW, Mar 2: Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko have agreed in principle to hold referendums in the two countries on their reunification, local press reported today, says Xinhua.

Yeltsin will announce the plan next Thursday in his address to parliament, Interfax news agency quoted Kremlin sources as saying.

The sources said that Yeltsin, in January letter to Lukashenko, proposed holding simultaneous national referendums, or something like it, on closer integration between the two ex-Soviet republics.

Lukashenko, an ardent supporter of reunification with Russia, reportedly agreed to the proposal, adding that 'supranational power' should be given to the committee in charge of integration.

The two leaders signed a deal last April to create a 'community' with closer political and economic links, and to set up a supranational governing body.

The move, if successfully carried out, would combine the two countries into a new state with one central government,

one currency and one budget, their economic systems fully merged.

The report said Yeltsin has been impatient with the slow paces towards a union and called for more resolute actions, saying a reunification would benefit both countries significantly.

Army captures MRTA rebel leader

LIMA, Mar 2: The Peruvian army has captured a leader of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) that is holding 72 hostages here, military sources said yesterday, reports AP.

Aurelio Leyva, alias "Comrade Jose," who is the policy chief of the movement, was caught near the town of Oxapampa, 398 kilometers (247 miles) east of the capital, the sources said.

In another incident, an MRTA rebel was killed in fighting between the guerrillas and army soldiers in the same region.

Violent political clashes escalating in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, Mar 2: Violent clashes between political parties are escalating in Sri Lanka despite a government crackdown on illegal guns ahead of key local council elections, police said today, reports AP.

Supporters of the ruling people's alliance and the main opposition United National Party were leading attacks against each other and sometimes fought among themselves, police said.

Police records show that nearly 500 complaints had been lodged on poll-related violence since nominations for the March 21 local government election closed three weeks ago.

"So far the main incidents are arson and destruction of property and physical violence," a police spokesman said.

The main incident was the murder of a government MP and a bodyguard.

The killing three weeks ago of ruling party legislator Nalanda Ellawela and a police

guard by gunmen alleged to be opposition UNP politicians has fueled political violence across the country, officials said.

UNP's General Secretary Gamini Athukorala escaped an assassination attempt on Thursday and he quickly blamed ruling party politicians for shooting at him.

The government responded the next day by announcing Fujimori to visit Dominican Republic

LIMA, Peru, Mar 2: President Alberto Fujimori will travel to the Dominican Republic on Sunday for a meeting with that country's president, who has indicated he would grant asylum to the rebels holding 72 hostages in Lima, reports AP.

Fujimori will leave early in the morning for the Caribbean country, said presidential spokesman Israel Mertz, who described the meeting as "very important."

that opposition UNP men were plotting to kill one of his legislators.

Opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe who has suspended two of his members implicated in the Ellawela murder said the forthcoming local poll was the "most violent" since independence in 1948.

Wickremesinghe who is a former prime minister and UNP chief called for the decommissioning of weapons held by all politicians and called on the police to act impartially.

Justice Minister GL Peiris said violence entered politics because of the large number of weapons in the hands of politicians.

A large number of automatic assault rifles issued to politicians during a violent uprising by leftist rebels between 1988 and 1990 had not been returned despite the insurrection being brought under control, Peiris said.

Deve Gowda to pay 3-day visit to Nepal

KATHMANDU, Mar 2: Indian Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda is to pay a three-day official visit to Nepal later this month, according to a local press report today, Xinhua reports from Kathmandu.

Gowda will lead a high-level delegation including the foreign and commerce minister during his Nepal visit starting on March 14, the Kathmandu Post daily reported.

It was disclosed by Indian Foreign Minister Inder K Gujral while meeting a visiting team of Nepali journalists Saturday in New Delhi, the newspaper said.

According to Gujral, although the agenda of talks between Gowda and his Nepali counterpart Sher Bahadur Deuba is yet to be finalised, the Indian side is expected to discuss any issue that will come up.

The Indian Prime Minister is expected to attend the inaugurating ceremony of an Indian trade fair in Kathmandu scheduled from the day of his arrival, the report said.

Di wins libel damages from The Express

LONDON, Mar 2: Princess Diana won record libel damages from a newspaper that alleged she would profit from a charity auction, another newspaper reported Sunday, reports AP.

The Express on Sunday paid at least 75,000 pounds (dls 122,000) to Diana, The Sunday Telegraph reported.

That would make it the largest-ever libel damages won by a royal, although Queen Elizabeth II once won 100,000 pounds (dls 163,000) in a breach of privacy suit.

Diana might have won more had she pressed on to court, The Sunday Telegraph said, but preferred to settle quickly. The lawyer who negotiated the settlement was Anthony Julius, who negotiated August's favourable divorce settlement from her to the throne Prince Charles.

The Express on Sunday apologised for last week's story in this week's edition, on its front page and in its editorial, saying it was the victim of forged documents its reporters were led to believe were Christie's auction house.

"The princess has proved to be a shining example of the good which contemporary icons like her can do in this chaotic world," the newspaper editorialised. "In maintaining such standards, Princess Diana can rely on our support."

The forged documents claimed that Diana would profit from auction of 20 of her best known gowns.

SLORC seems less successful to resolve minorities' challenges

YANGON, Mar 2: Myanmar's dry-season offensive has rolled over ethnic Karen strongholds but the ruling junta has been less successful in resolving the political challenge posed by the country's many minorities, reports AP.

Decades, ethnic-based guerrilla movements have fought the central government for the right to live without interference from the majority Burmese in their own areas around Myanmar's borders.

And for decades, the central government has opposed those demands as leading to unacceptable instability and tantamount to breaking up the nation.

Fifteen of the 16 big guerrilla groups have signed ceasefires in exchange for development assistance from the central government. The only holdout, the Karen National Union (KNU), is now the target of a military juggernaut.

Cessation of battlefield hostilities is only part of the story. The junta, officially known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), must also reach political agreement with the minorities if there is to be peace and political unity.

The junta "can neutralise the minorities militarily, but they still have to address their political grievances, and there is no sign they are prepared to do that if it means compromise," a foreign diplomat commented.

Negotiations on power-sharing are under way in the National Convention which is outlining a new constitution for Myanmar, SLORC officials say.

Minority leaders say there are no contacts now and talks are deadlocked.



A candidate for Miss Philippines straightens President Fidel Ramos' cap, who was visited by Filipina Beauty contestants, while playing golf at Malacanang Palace on Sunday. Doctors advised Ramos, who will turn 69 on March 18, to get more relaxation and exercise and refrain from overworking himself after undergoing surgery in December. — AFP/UNB photo

CIA drops over 1000 informants

WASHINGTON, Mar 2: The CIA has dropped over 1,000 secret informants after determining that many of them, especially in Latin America, were involved in human rights abuses, The Washington Post reported today, says AP.

Quoting unnamed sources, the post said that while the Central Intelligence Agency dropped many of the informants because they were deadwood, "a disproportionately high number of informants dropped for (human rights) abuses were employed in Latin America during the 1980s and early 1990s, but some were employed in the Middle East and Asia."

The paper said that "the magnitude of the cuts suggests the agency's clandestine service had a broader problem with informants than the CIA has publicly acknowledged."

When the "agent scrub" began two years ago, the number of discharged informants approached one-third of the total number of informants employed by the CIA.

Officials said the purge was prompted by a smaller review in 1994 of CIA informants in Latin America, which the post said "started agency managers by turning up abundant evidence that the agency employed many foreigners implicated in human rights abuses."

That review was sparked by the CIA's discovery that an informant in El Salvador "had human rights problems," a former official told the daily.

As a result, the CIA's Latin America division in early 1995 began dropping informants, including some in Guatemala "credibly alleged to have ordered, planned, or participated

in abuses, according to a June 1996 report.

While only about 10 per cent of the informants overall were dropped because of human rights abuses, about 50 per cent of those in Latin America were let go for that reason.

Under a policy implemented by former CIA Director John Deutch, CIA officers must now submit annual reports assessing the quality of their informants and generally are prohibited from recruiting new sources implicated in human rights abuses or criminal behaviour, the paper said.

The new policy has been controversial with some officers privately complaining to republican politicians that they can no longer hire disreputable informants who may nevertheless have valuable information.



A young girl searches Saturday through the rubble of her house destroyed by an earthquake in Killi Inder, a village some 180 kilometres from Quetta, Pakistan. The earthquake left at least 15 people dead and several injured in this small village of 60 families living in mud houses. — AFP/UNB photo

ARAFAT LEAVES FOR US

PALESTINIAN President Yasser Arafat left for the United States yesterday after a day of talks in Cairo on Israel's decision to build a new Jewish settlement in east Jerusalem, Reuter reports from Cairo.

Arafat told the Cairo-based Arab League on Saturday the Israeli plan was an attempt to destroy the peace process. Peace with settlements was impossible, he said. Arafat suggested he might retaliate by declaring a Palestinian state, a gesture likely to anger rightwing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The quake which hit 5.5 degrees on the Richter scale whose theoretical maximum is nine, killed 502 people and left more than 2,000 injured, according to the latest provisional toll given by the Iranian authorities. The quake which occurred at 16:31 local time Friday (1301 GMT) totally wiped out or seriously damaged 110 villages in the mountainous Ardebil region, according to the Iranian Red Crescent organisation.

Albanian PM's resignation accepted

ALBANIAN President Sali Berisha accepted Prime Minister Aleksander Meksi's resignation on Saturday, the state-run news agency ATA said, Reuter reports from Tirana.

It quoted a presidential office statement as saying Berisha had asked him to stay on in a caretaker role until a successor was named following consultations among political parties. Berisha had announced earlier that Meksi would quit.

Quake hits northern Japan

A moderate earthquake hit off Japan's northernmost main island Sunday morning. There were no immediate reports of damage or injuries, AP reports from Tokyo.

The quake with a preliminary magnitude of 5.0, was centred about 10 kilometres (6.2 miles) beneath the ocean off the eastern coast of the island of Hokkaido, the Meteorological Agency said. The quake struck at 10:04 am (0104 GMT).

8 Arab states due to meet in Cairo

EXPERTS from eight Arab nations are due to meet in Cairo next week to discuss a security protocol proposed by Saudi Arabia to bolster cooperation between them, officials said on Saturday, AFP reports from Cairo.

The meeting of the so-called Damascus Declaration countries, which group Egypt, Syria and the six-member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), will take place March 5 and 6 at the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, they said. Saudi Arabia, which proposed the protocol, has been hit by a series of terrorist attacks in recent months. In June 1996, a booby-trapped truck rammed into a US base in Dhahran killing 19 Americans.

Liz hospitalised after brain surgery

ELIZABETH Taylor has suffered a seizure and been hospitalised, nine days after surgeons carved a golfball-size tumor from her brain, her publicist said, AP reports from Los Angeles.

Miss Taylor, who turned 65 on Thursday, was stricken by the seizure about 4 pm Saturday (0000 GMT Sunday) at her Bel-Air home and was immediately taken to Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre, said Shirine Ann Coburn. "She's fine now."

Amsterdam confce condemns abusive forms of child labour

AMSTERDAM, Mar 2: The most abusive forms of child labour were unanimously condemned by delegates to the Amsterdam Child Labour Conference, which ended here February 27 with a call for solidarity on a global scale to meet the challenge of "eradicating child exploitation as a matter of paramount urgency," reports ILO News.

In a concluding statement to the plenary session, the conference chairman, Ad Melkert, Minister of Social Affairs and Employment of the Netherlands, urged participating countries and ILO and UN member states to "launch a time-bound programme of action to eliminate child labour and immediately put an end to its most intolerable forms — slavery and

slave-like practices, forced or compulsory labour, including debt bondage and serfdom, the use of children in prostitution, pornography, and the drugs trade, and their employment in any type of work that is dangerous, harmful or hazardous or that interferes with their education." He said that "there must be a total prohibition of work by the very young and special protection for girls," and warned to the increasing risks posed by criminality.

In his conclusions, the chairman called upon the ILO to expand the scope of its work and to regularly report on global trends in the number of children removed and rehabilitated from exploitative situations and provided with alternatives. He said: "This system-

atic world wide monitoring would be a mechanism to review periodically and identify best practices in combatting child labour." The Government of the Netherlands pledged the first US\$ 1 million for the operation of such a trend-reporting system, which will be implemented via the ILO's International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour, and urged other governments to consider other contributions.

The conference attended by over 250 delegates from 30 countries, was organised by the Government of the Netherlands in close cooperation with the International Labour Organisation. Its goal was to raise public awareness of the plight of hundreds of millions of chil-

dren working under intolerable conditions in activities that are physically, morally and intellectually debilitating for their health and well-being.

An ILO report prepared for the conference estimated that of the approximately 250 million working children between the ages of 5 and 14, nearly half work full time. The vast majority of child workers are involved in commercial agriculture and other rural activities putting them at risk of injury and poisoning from dangerous chemicals and pesticides. Many others work in small, often family-run businesses for little or no pay. Domestic service absorbs millions of girl workers, whose only reward is usually board and lodging in return for long hours of unpaid house-



President Jiang Zemin (L) listens to Premier Li Peng (R) on the presidium before the start of the second day of the National People's Congress (NPC), the parliament's annual plenum on Sunday in Beijing. China's top leadership signalled that business in the post-Deng Xiaoping era would proceed as normal by promising further economic reforms and pledging loyalty to Jiang. — AFP/UNB photo

China hikes defence spending by 12.7 pc

BEIJING, Mar 2: China announced a planned 12.7 per cent increase in annual defence spending Sunday, higher than inflation and despite a projected overall budget deficit, reports AP.

The announced increase in the military budget came after Chinese generals called for more high-tech arms and equipment to ensure that China can win regional conflicts.

The modernisation of the Chinese military, the world's largest with 2.9 million members, has made China's neighbours uneasy, several of whom have conflicting territorial claims with Beijing.

Finance Minister Liu Zhongli, speaking on the second day of the annual meeting of China's legislature, forecast spending of 80.57 billion yuan (9.7 billion dollars) on defence this year, compared to 71.50 billion (8.6 billion dollars) last year. The 12.7 per cent jump compares to plans to keep the inflation rate at 6 per cent this year.

Foreign analysts believe China spends much more on its army than appears in the annual budget. China says its military spending, which has grown steadily in recent years, remains low compared to the United States and other Western countries.

Liu did not explain this year's increase. But on Saturday, Premier Li Peng said China

needed to safeguard its territorial integrity and maritime rights.

China claims sovereignty over islands in the South China Sea the are also claimed by several of its neighbours. China also claims sovereignty over Taiwan and last year held threatening military exercises in waters around the island to weaken support for Taiwanese independence.

Gen. Zhang Wannian, part of a group of military leaders who met Saturday at the ongoing National People's Congress session, said China should have "the ability to win any regional warfare," the state-run Xinhua News Agency reported.

In his budget address, Liu said the state plans to spend 896.79 billion yuan (108 billion dollars) this year, an increase of 13.3 per cent compared to last year.

With projected revenues of 839.79 billion yuan (101 billion dollars), up 14 per cent over last year, the deficit is expected to be 57 billion yuan (6.8 billion dollars). That compares to a 54.77 billion yuan (6.5 billion dollars) deficit in 1996, Liu said.

Liu admitted China will have difficulty fulfilling its objective of balancing the budget by the year 2000. He blamed widespread tax evasion, ineffective controls on expenditure, waste and other factors.

Off the Record

Fab victory for Beatles

NEW YORK: Three decades after winning their last Grammy, the reconstituted Beatles picked up three more of the statues at this year's ceremony, and the three surviving lads agree the victory was fab, reports AP.

"What a great surprise!" George Harrison said Friday in a statement. "It's good to know that people still like the Beatles." His former bandmate Paul McCartney agreed: "It's great news, and it's great that we can get these awards so long after the records were made."

Harrison, McCartney and Ringo Starr reunited to work on the Beatles' "Anthology" music and video series. They also recorded a pair of new songs based on leftover demo tapes from the late John Lennon.

One of those songs, "Free As a Bird," won for best pop performance by a duo or group and for best short video. The anthology project won for best long video.

"Hey, three out of three can't be bad," said Ringo Starr. "I'm so excited. It's very good news — great news, in fact."

Targets of Combat 18

LONDON: Threats against Vanessa Redgrave have led Scotland Yard to secure her home, a newspaper reported, reports AP.

"I and a number of celebrities have been targeted by Combat 18, the British fascist group," the 60-year-old Academy Award-winning actress wrote in a letter to the Daily Mail. "Combat 18 published our home addresses."

In April, police wired her home with an alarm after her leftist politics put her on the group's "hit list." Last month, the group was tied to mail-bomb attempts against well-known mixed-race couples.

Redgrave's letter was prompted by a report that she had a black lover, actor David Harewood, her co-star in a New York production of Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra."

She denied it, saying that Harewood — like many other friends often stayed in her apartment as a guest. "Please help prevent further trouble for my family, friends and neighbours," she wrote.

Redgrave won the 1977 best supporting-actress Oscar for her role in "Julia."

Ban on same-sex marriage inhuman!

OLYMPIA, Washington: Washington Gov Gary Locke vetoed a ban on same-sex marriages, calling it discriminatory, divisive and unnecessary. Legislative leaders said they will put the issue before the voters, reports AP.

"I oppose any measure that would divide, disrespect or diminish our humanity," the Democratic governor said Friday, echoing a theme from his inaugural address a few weeks ago. In his message to the Republican-controlled legislature, Locke added: "Our overarching principle should be to promote civility, mutual respect and unity. This legislation fails to meet this test."

The measure passed the Washington state House 63-35, three votes shy of the two-thirds margin necessary to override Locke's veto.

Tornadoes claim 26 in US

LITTLE ROCK, Arkansas, Mar 2: Tornado and springlike thunderstorms swept across Arkansas on Saturday, flattening buildings, sweeping away mobile homes and flooding whole subdivisions. As many as 19 were killed and 200 injured, reports AP.

Storms also tore through Mississippi, Kentucky, and West Virginia, killing up to six people in Ohio, one person was killed and four others were missing as flood waters rose. A search suspended Saturday night because of darkness was expected to resume on Sunday.

"It's horrible. The whole downtown is gone," said Jeremy Cox, of hard-hit Arkadelphia in central Arkansas.

There's one mobile home left standing out of 11 don't know how many, maybe about 60," Arkadelphia Police Chief Bob Johnson said. "We lost count of the serious injuries at 19."

Neal Wright, 11, heard sirens and alerted his deaf grandfather by making swirling motions with his hands. The two escaped before a tree fell on their house, demolishing it, said Sharon Wright, the boy's mother.

Hundreds of homes in the Little Rock area were damaged, and two hospitals were treating 80 people.

Trailer park owner Bill Pruett, 53, said a twister crushed five trailers.

"It was like playing chess — it would take one house and then leave one, it would take another one and then leave one," he said.