

## International

Benazir tells tribunal of inquiry

## Zardari had no enmity towards Murtaza

KARACHI, Mar 4: Pakistan's ousted Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto said on Monday her jailed husband Asif Ali Zardari had no enmity towards her younger brother Murtaza Bhutto, killed by police in Karachi in September, reports Reuter.

"My husband never issued any statement against Murtaza. He had no animosity against Murtaza," Benazir told a three-judge tribunal of inquiry in this southern port city.

Murtaza's supporters accuse police of murdering him in a plot involving Zardari and several senior members of Benazir's former government. Police say Murtaza's bodyguards shot first.

Former investment minister Zardari, who has been in jail since his wife was sacked as prime minister on November 5,

faces a charge of conspiring to kill Murtaza. He denies the charge.

"My husband and Murtaza exchanged pleasantries when he (Murtaza) came to meet me," Benazir said.

"I could not suffer my flesh and blood to lose in the elections. I wanted to help him (Murtaza) in his political career. But he was in a fix," Benazir said in a choked voice.

She said her brother's emotions were divided between herself and bodyguards who had stayed with him during the 16 years he spent in exile from Pakistan.

Ghina Bhutto, Murtaza's Lebanese-born wife, has said Benazir had tried to victimise and intimidate Murtaza for speaking out against the former premier and Zardari.

Murtaza openly criticised Benazir and Zardari who plun-

dered the national wealth," Ghina told the tribunal last week.

She said her husband had died as a result of a conspiracy, but did not say who was behind it.

Benazir, however, said an element within Murtaza's breakaway faction of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) had tried to cause obstacles in her relationship with her brother.

In the last four months, the tribunal has taken evidence from about 125 witnesses in the case, the latest development in a long-running feud within the Bhutto family, until recently Pakistan's most powerful political dynasty.

Benazir led the PPP to a crushing defeat at the hands of Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League in February's elections.

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Death toll rises to 135  
Inquiry ordered into Pak train crash

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, Mar 4: An inquiry has been ordered into a horrific train crash that killed as many as 135 people, although hospital officials Tuesday feared the death toll would rise, reports AP.

A runaway passenger train slammed into a sand dune and jumped its tracks in eastern Punjab province on Monday, injuring at least 175 people, dozens of them critically.

Initial investigation reports say the brakes failed on the express train about a kilometre (mile) outside of Kharial, 400 kilometres (240 miles) southeast of Islamabad.

State-run Radio Pakistan said it's possible that the air brakes were tampered with, but Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said it was premature to blame sabotage.

The operator of the train, who escaped unhurt, said he noticed the air pressure was dangerously low when he was ordered to stop the train to avoid a collision.

make way for a second locomotive also heading toward the southern port city of Karachi, said the railway authorities.

He pulled on to a track for runaway trains. The train slammed into a pile of sand at the end of the tracks causing the first five cars to overturn, they said.

The conductor and engineer were both taken into custody, although there is no indication that they played any role in the accident.

Just one week ago Sharif promised to upgrade Pakistan's antiquated railway system, which has been plagued by deadly wrecks.

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## Iraq admits producing deadly nerve gas: UN

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 4: Iraq has admitted producing large amounts of one of the world's deadliest nerve agents but has failed to convince UN experts it destroyed them as claimed after the Gulf War, a UN official said Monday, reports AP.

Chief UN weapons inspector Rolf Ekeus briefed the Security Council on Monday about the status of his team's efforts to determine whether Iraq has complied with UN orders to scrap its high-tech weapons programmes.

The council has refused to lift crippling economic sanctions imposed on Iraq after the 1990 invasion of Kuwait until it is satisfied with Iraqi compliance. Following Ekeus' briefing, the council agreed to extend the sanctions for another 60 days.

"Getting Iraq to comply (with UN orders) is like pulling teeth from somebody who doesn't want to open his mouth," US Ambassador Bill Richardson said.

Ekeus said the Iraqis had

admitted having produced about 3,800 kilograms (1,727 pounds) of the deadly VX nerve agent in 1990 but claimed they destroyed the supply secretly after the 1991 Gulf War.

He said UN inspectors had been taken to sites in the desert where the destructions was said to have taken place but they could not verify Baghdad's claims.

Ekeus said that as early as 1995, Iraq acknowledged having produced small quantities of the nerve agent. Iraq said the quality was so low it was not worth much," Ekeus said.

But Ekeus said his team suspected the figure was too low. The Iraqis then admitted to having produced up to 3,800 kilograms (1,727 pounds) of the agent, considered far deadlier than sarin.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohammed Saeed Al-Sabah has been in New York since last week trying to convince diplomats that Baghdad is complying with UN inspectors.

## Myanmar junta considers KNU still a threat

YANGON, Mar 4: Myanmar's military government said today the Karen National Union (KNU) guerrilla organisation was still a threat and it planned to keep troops at the Thai-Myanmar border as long as necessary, reports Reuter.

The KNU can still be a threat to the government," senior intelligence official Colonel Kyaw Thein told a news conference.

He said troops which have been involved in more than 100 border battles since February will remain as long as necessary to fight the last major ethnic group yet to sign a ceasefire agreement with Yangon.

Myanmar troops sacked KNU mobile bases in the eastern part of the country last month in attacks which sent thousands of refugees and guerrillas scurrying for shelter into Thailand.

Thailand and Myanmar have reached agreements about the border action, and the movement of the troops should not harm bilateral relations.

"There shall not be any effect on the continuing bilateral relations between Myanmar and Thailand," Foreign Minister Ohn Gyaw said. "Before any action was taken we kept the Thai authorities informed ... of the intended action. We have not intended to hurt the bilateral relations and the Thai government understands it very well."

The KNU, formed in 1948, has rejected several peace overtures from the ruling junta. Kyaw Thein said the latest series of attacks in February came following the failure of a fourth round of peace talks between the two sides in December.

Xinhua adds: Myanmar State Law and Order Restoration Council has enacted the

national food law containing 12 chapters, according to today's official paper the New Light of Myanmar.

The law is meant to enable the public to consume food of genuine quality, free from danger and hygienic problems, and to control and regulate the production, import, export, storage, distribution and sale of food systematically, it is reported.

The law, which was enacted yesterday, calls for formation of a food and drug authority to carry out the functions and duties.

**ICM poll**  
Labour maintains its lead over Conservatives

LONDON, Mar 4: The opposition Labour Party is maintaining its strong lead over the Prime Minister John Major's Conservative government, according to a poll published Tuesday, reports AP.

The ICM poll published in the Guardian newspaper shows the gap between the two parties at 18 per cent, consistent with Labour's lead in polls conducted before its landslide victory last Thursday in a special election in a constituency once known as true-blue Conservative.

Major has yet to call elections, but by law they must be held by May 22 at the latest.

Labour garnered 48 per cent of the support of those polled. Conservatives 30 per cent, Liberal Democrats 16 per cent and others 6 per cent — numbers hardly different from last month, when Labour polled 48 per cent and the Tories 32 per cent.

**ROK, DPRK to hold peace talks in New York today**

WASHINGTON, Mar 4: Hostile North Korea and South Korea will meet Wednesday in New York to hold their first direct talks about peace since the shaky truce that ended their 1950-1953 war, reports AP.

Foreign ministry delegations from both sides were due to attend the US-South Korean joint briefing of Pyongyong on a proposal for four-party peace talks aimed at officially bringing peace to the divided Korean Peninsula.

The on-again, off-again briefing was postponed twice — in late January and early February — by Pyongyong over concerns about its severe food shortages.

A senior State Department official said that the North Koreans, who until last December had refused to meet face-to-face with Seoul about their armistice, was "probably more positive about it today than they were a month ago."

## 'Sino-US ties increasingly pivotal'

BEIJING, Mar 4: Ties between the United States and China are increasingly pivotal, and Taiwan remains the key issue in the relationship, Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen was quoted Tuesday as saying, reports AFP.

"Under the new circumstances, the need for pushing forward Sino-US relations is increasing instead of decreasing, and the potential for strengthening cooperation between the two countries is expanding instead of shrinking," Qian was quoted by Xinhua as telling a seminar in Beijing.

The US acknowledged in the agreements that both countries territorial sovereignty should be respected and that there is only one China.

The Taipei government, founded by defeated nationalist forces that fled China at the end of a civil war in 1949, styles itself as the Republic of China, in contrast to Beijing's People's Republic of China.

Beijing views Taiwan as part of its territory.

The US has indicated that it opposes any use of force by Beijing to reclaim the island province, however.

It dispatched two aircraft carrier groups to seas around Taiwan in March last year — a low point in Sino-US ties — in response to a series of military exercises that China was conducting to intimidate pro-independence sentiment.

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GOVINDPUR, India, Mar 4: Starving villagers across eastern India are "mortgaging" their children in return for food, villagers here say, reports AFP.

For up to 500 kilogrammes (1,100 pounds) of grain a year, boys as young as 10 years old labour for the rich, doing a variety of chores at their homes and farms.

During this period, the children may get to see their families but are forbidden to return home without the permission of those who have given them jobs in a region where work is scarce.

Although no official statistics are available, villagers and political activists say hundreds of children may have been "mortgaged" by poor families desperate to beat starvation.

Ten-year-old Maheshwar Tandy is one such case.

Tandy, dressed in shabby shorts, told AFP he worked for Senapati Banchor, also a resi-

dent of Govindpur village in Bolangir district, some 550 kilometres (343 miles) southwest of Calcutta.

Tandy said he looked after Banchor's cattle and did odd jobs. But, unlike many other children similarly "pawned," Tandy lives with his parents in this tiny village of 870 people.

Dixon Chura, 38, is, however not that lucky.

He said he had "mortgaged" one of his three sons, 12-year-old Pitam Chura, to a village nearly 10 kilometres (six miles) away, some 18 months ago in return for food.

"Yes, I feel bad about what I have done," Chura said, ringed by a group of equally emaciated villagers. "But what could I do? We don't have money to pay for our family's food or children's education."

Asked when he would take back his son, whom he gets to see once in nearly three

months, he answered: "When my condition becomes okay."

Most villagers said that may never happen.

Bolangir, a sprawling district in the state of Orissa, is facing near-famine conditions after flash floods coupled with a poor monsoon battered crops in the region and left thousands of farm workers without work.

Tens of thousands have migrated all over India in search of employment. Many eke out an existence doing odd and irregular jobs, which fetch them 25 rupees (75 cents) a day — if they are lucky.

An AFP correspondent who toured some villages heard about dozens of starvation deaths. Vinod Kumar, Bolangir's chief administrator, has admitted to receiving 107 death

deaths.

But KV Singh Deo, a Hindu nationalist legislator, claimed the number of fatalities could

as high as 200 or 300.

"Mortgaging children is a very common occurrence," said social worker Chura Bhanubra.

"When the administration is not bothered about the poor, do you expect them to sit and starve?"

Besides, poverty and hunger, the region also faces an acute shortage of drinkable water. Large tracts of land have gone dry and in many villages' hand pumps do not function.

"There is no pure water, no food, no irrigation water," signed Romancha Banchar, 25, an arts graduate at Parasava village who is searching for work. "There is drought. What future do we have?"

Another villager added: "The government is not bothered, the politicians are not bothered about us."

"There has never been a situation like this before," said Hindu politician Singh Deo.

## Indian villagers 'mortgaging' their children to beat starvation

ARKADELPHIA, Arkansas, Mar 4: The death toll rose to 44 following a weekend of tornadoes and violent weather that pounded a wide area from Texas to Ohio, officials said Monday, reports AFP.

President Bill Clinton declared nine Arkansas counties disaster areas, making them eligible for federal funds after tornadoes caused at least 24 deaths in the state, with more than 200 others injured.

Clinton, who served as Arkansas governor, planned to review the damage Tuesday.

"I'm very concerned about it," he said, adding that he had recognised people in the television footage of the disaster.

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dent of Govindpur village in Bolangir district, some 550 kilometres (343 miles) southwest of Calcutta.

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