

Mandela iterates intention to retire from politics

KUALA LUMPUR, Mar 8: South African President Nelson Mandela assured Malaysian investors here today that his country's future will remain secure under a new leadership after he steps down, reports AFP.

The 78-year-old Mandela, reiterating his intention to retire from politics and hand over power to a new team, said "We have extraordinary, capable leaders who have all the qualities and virtues far beyond mine."

"If I step down, it will be for the better," Mandela told a forum of Malaysian and South African businessmen.

Mandela became president in 1994 and the next election is due in 1999.

Taliban ask news agencies, TV crew not to photograph 'living bodies'

KABUL, Mar 8: Afghanistan's purist Islamic Taliban have told news agencies and television crew that they cannot photograph or film "living bodies," reports Reuters.

The Foreign Ministry sent a letter to news organisations in Kabul detailing "an order from the high authorities."

"...photography and filming of living bodies is forbidden and is against the Sharia (the Islamic legal code) of the Islamic state of Afghanistan," it says.

Since the Taliban first appeared in Afghanistan more than two years ago, they have taken a strong line on television and photography, symbolically hanging television sets in their southern Afghan stronghold of Kandahar, and in one case smashing a television crew's equipment.

New Jewish settlement in E Jerusalem

US vetoes UN resolution against Israeli plan

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 8: The United States on Friday vetoed a European-sponsored resolution against Israel's plan to build Jewish housing in east Jerusalem after the Arabs pressed for a Security Council vote despite US opposition, reports AP.

The vote was 14-1 on the resolution sponsored by Britain, France, Sweden and Portugal. But the United States as a permanent member holds veto power, along with Britain, France, Russia, and China.

US Ambassador Bill Richardson told the council that the United States regrets that Israel decided to build the 6,500-unit Har Homa housing area in parts of east Jerusalem which the Palestinians want as a future capital.

But he said the United States believes the resolution "would not have helped" the peace process.

US diplomats argued that the council should allow the parties themselves to resolve the dispute.

But European, Arab and Asian members of the council felt strongly that the United Nations should play a role and not leave the issue to the Palestinians, Israel and the Americans.

"Our view is this is a serious matter," British Ambassador John Weston told reporters. "The council has a responsibility to pronounce itself on this matter."

Earlier, diplomats sought to reach a compromise, such as a non-binding statement of views. But UN sources said Egyptian Ambassador Nabil Elaraby insisted that the European resolution be put to a vote regardless of US opposition.

An Arab diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity, said they decided to push for a council vote in part because of Palestinian disappointment with the scale of the Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank.

Israel's Cabinet agreed early Friday to pull out of 9 per cent of the West Bank, but the Palestinians said they expected the Israelis to vacate 30 per cent.

The diplomat said the Cabinet decision convinced the Arabs that the Americans were unable to pressure Israel into concessions and removed any incentive for deferring to the United States in the council.

Egypt's insistence on a vote also reflects broad-based international outrage over Har Homa and with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's handling of the peace process.

Earlier AFP report says, the United States yesterday remained firmly opposed to a UN resolution criticising Israel for planning new Jewish housing developments in east Jerusalem.

"We'd like to see a presidential statement" instead of a resolution, US Ambassador Bill Richardson said as he arrived at a Security Council meeting on Friday.

On Thursday, US diplomats privately threatened to veto any draft resolution on the issue. Resolutions are considered stronger than statements.

The draft resolution sponsored by the four current European members of the council — France, Portugal, Sweden and Britain — calls the proposed Har Homa settlement "illegal" and "a major obstacle" to peace.



Hundreds of Palestinians and Israeli peace activists demonstrate on the east Jerusalem site where Israel plans to build thousands of Jewish homes on disputed land Friday in Jebel Abu Ghoneim (Har Homa). "We want to live in freedom," Netanyahu go away" chanted the protesters during this peaceful demonstration. — AFP/UNB photo

Tajik govt, Islamic opposition sign accord

MOSCOW, Mar 8: The Tajik government and Islamic opposition signed an accord here today aimed at merging rebel units with government troops to form a new national army, the UN special envoy to Tajikistan, Gerd-Dietrich Merrem, told reporters, says AFP.

The accord was signed by Tajik Foreign Minister Talbek Nazarov and Akbar Turajonzadeh, the number two in the Islamic opposition leadership.

Both sides began a new round of peace talks in Moscow on February 26.

Agreement on military issues was an important precondition for progress toward a political settlement to end the conflict in the former Soviet Central Asian republic.

Opposition leader said Abdullah Bari and Tajik President Emomali Rakhmonov signed a peace accord in Moscow on December 23 envisaging the creation of a reconciliation commission and a post-war government.

Bucaram indicted on charges of embezzlement

QUITO, Mar 8: The Supreme Court yesterday indicted deposed and self-exiled President Abdala Bucaram and some of his aides on charges of embezzling tens of millions of dollars in state funds, reports AFP.

Ecuadoran authorities are investigating reports of corruption and embezzlement levied against Bucaram since Congress, citing his mental incompetence, booted him out of office on February 6.

Finance Minister Carlos Davalos has charged that Bucaram helped himself to 28 million dollars in federal funds and international loans in the weeks before his ouster.

And a senior legislator has claimed that Bucaram and some of his closest aides had grabbed nearly 58 million dollars in "special funds."

Supreme Court President Carlos Solorzano said yesterday indictments were issued against Bucaram and four of his closest aides including former minister in the presidency Miguel Salem.

Algerian president calls for massive turnout in polls

ALGIERS, Mar 8: Algerian President Liamine Zeroual called late Friday for a massive turnout in general elections on June 5 to end "institutional instability" more than five years after the cancellation of the last elections sparked a vicious civil war, reports AFP.

Speaking on television he pledged to respect the choice of voters, which has been circumscribed by new laws on political parties since Zeroual came to power with the backing of the military.

Zeroual said a large turnout would re-establish confidence and hope, inaugurating a new stage in pluralist democracy.

The banned radical Islamic Salvation Front (FIST), which was poised to win the 1992 polls before the authorities stepped in and cancelled them, will not be allowed to contest June's election.

Pakistan, Philippines sign nuclear energy accord

ISLAMABAD Mar 8: Philippine President Fidel Ramos held wide-ranging talks with Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif today after which the two countries signed an agreement on nuclear energy, reports Reuters.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan and Philippine Foreign Secretary Domingo Siazon signed a memorandum of understanding between the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission and the Philippine Nuclear Research Institute in the field of peaceful uses of atomic energy, the APP news agency said.

It gave no details but quoted Sharif as saying the two countries could share their experiences in economic scientific and technical fields.

Pakistan says it can make nuclear weapons but has decided not to do so, maintaining its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes only. Western

governments believe Pakistan, like its arch-rival India, could quickly assemble nuclear weapons.

APP said Ramos and Sharif held wide-ranging talks and agreed to set up a business council that will explore ways to boost their commercial ties.

Ramos said his country would back Pakistan's bid to become a full dialogue partner in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Ramos also asked Sharif to send a business delegation to Manila to seek ways to promote trade between the two countries, and official sources said the delegation was expected to visit Manila shortly.

Sharif, meanwhile, briefed Ramos on the current situation in Pakistan-held Kashmir on neighbouring Afghanistan and the forthcoming foreign secretary level talks between India and Pakistan.

OSCE envoy begins talks with Albanian opposition

TIRANA, Mar 8: OSCE envoy Franz Vranitzky began talks with Albanian opposition leaders here today in a bid to seek a peaceful solution to a seven-week crisis in the country touched off by the collapse of fraudulent investment schemes, reports AFP.

Vranitzky, a former Austrian Chancellor, heads a delegation from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, following up on a Council of Europe mission on Friday and another from the European Union.

Vranitzky was to have talks with embattled President Sali Berisha later today.

Friday marked the start of a 48-hour halt to military operations in the south, decreed by Berisha after an unprecedented

agreement with his political opposition in Tirana the day before.

But gun-toting inhabitants of six southern towns — defying a state of emergency in force since Sunday — balked at his request to surrender arms stolen in raids last weekend on military depots, in return for a promise of amnesty.

On his one-day mission, Vranitzky is accompanied by OSCE representatives from Denmark, Poland and Switzerland.

The US ambassador in Tirana, Marisa Lino, and the European Union's Elio Germano also attended the talks with the opposition leaders.

General elections, held in May last year, had been tainted by reports of vote-rigging.

BRIEFLY

80 held in Pakistan: Pakistan police have arrested 80 people in connection with last month's arson and looting by a mob in a Christian village, official sources said yesterday, AFP reports from Islamabad.

More than 250 houses, 80 shops, four churches and a school were destroyed in the February six attack on Shantinagar, a village near the city of Khanewal in Punjab province.

Japanese writer Ikeda dies: Japanese writer, woodblock printer and movie director Masuo Ikeda died of a heart attack at a hospital in Shizuoka prefecture in central Japan early yesterday, his family said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

Ikeda, who was born in Shenyang, China in 1934, collapsed at his home in the hot spring resort city of Atami and was taken into the hospital shortly before he died, he was 63.

Jackson to stage concerts in Italy: US singer Michael Jackson will stage his first concerts in Italy for some five years in June, his agent said Friday, AFP reports from Rome.

He will perform in Milan on June 18 and Naples on June 20. Jackson's last appearance in Italy was when he defended himself against accusations of plagiarism in a Rome court on February 3.

Armenian PM offers resignation: Armenian Prime Minister Armen Sarkisyan, who is receiving medical treatment in London, offered his resignation Friday, Xinhua reports from Moscow.

Sarkisyan announced his decision in a telephone interview with Armenian journalists, ITAR-Tass news agency reported. Sarkisyan, 44, was appointed prime minister on November 4, last year.



Uday Hussein, son of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, gestures Friday during an interview with CNN in Baghdad. Hussein said he was optimistic of making a full recovery after an operation by French and Iraqi doctors. Uday, 33, said he was shot several times in the December 12 assassination bid in central Baghdad, including in both legs. — AFP/UNB photo

Indian troops kill 3 top militants

Indo-Pak troops exchange fires along Kashmir border

ISLAMABAD, Mar 8: A Pakistani paramilitary ranger was killed and a civilian woman badly wounded in a clash between Indian and Pakistani troops near the city of Sialkot about 200 km (125 miles) southeast of Islamabad, a military source said today, reports Reuters.

The firing which began on Friday, occurred one day after India and Pakistan agreed that their top Foreign Ministry officials should meet in New Delhi on March 28-31 to resume peace talks that broke down over Kashmir in early 1994.

The source said Indian troops had opened fire across the so-called working border between Pakistan and the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir at 10:30 am (0530 GMT) on Friday.

One member of the Chenab ranges had been killed and woman, Khurshid Bibi, seriously wounded. Several other civilians had been wounded in the shooting, he added.

Pakistani soldiers retaliated, but the source said he could not say if they had inflicted any casualties on the Indian side.

"Pakistani rangers are firing in self-defence. It is the Indians who are carrying out unprovoked firing, they want to spread it, said the source, who asked not to be named."

He said clashes, involving automatic weapons and rocket propelled grenades, were still going on in the Charwa, Jhammat, Pookhlian and Shakargarth sectors of the border.

AFP says earlier: Indian troops shot dead three top militants in a gunbattle in the troubled state of Kashmir overnight, the police said today.

A police spokesman said two separatists belonging to the Hizbul Mujahideen and another militant of Shore-a-Jehad were killed in a firefight in Rawalpindi, in the central district of Islamabad.

"It is a major success, automatic rifles, grenades and am-

munition were recovered from these militants," the spokesman said.

On Friday, Indian troops shot dead six most-wanted Muslim separatists including a guerrilla leader in Kashmir.

Five guerrillas of the Lashkar-e-Toiba separatist force were killed by Indian soldiers in Kashmir's frontier Poonch sector.

The troops also shot dead Saifullah, a "divisional commander" of the powerful Hizbul Mujahideen in the southern Kashmir town of Anantnag.

Saifullah carried a reward of 300,000 rupees (3,570 dollars) on his head. He had been evading arrest since 1990.

More than 17,000 people have been killed in the separatist drive since 1989. India accuses Pakistan of arming and training the rebels. Islamabad rejects the charge but gives diplomatic support to the unrest.

Reservation of one third seats in parliament Women's groups urge Indian president to revive bill

NEW DELHI, Mar 8: Women's organisations here Friday appealed to the Indian president over the delay of a controversial bill reserving one third of parliamentary seats for women, reports AFP.

Seven women's groups called for the bill, which was blocked in parliament last year, to be revived.

Their statement addressed to Shankar Dayal Sharma, on the eve of the 87th anniversary of International Women's Day, said: "It is a matter of grave concern that the government has not moved for passage of the bill."

They said that joint committees of both Houses of parliament had recommended the quota.

Leading women's activist Brinda Karat, of the All India Democratic Women's Association, said after a 20-minute

meeting with the president: "We are fed up with the hypocrisy of political parties. Let the bill be brought in parliament — then we would see the real face of political parties."

"We don't want any more rhetoric and let there be a vote. We cannot allow political parties to take women for a ride."

A bill to give women a third of the seats in parliament and in state assemblies founded in September despite all parties and the Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda saying they supported it.

The bill was blocked and referred to a working committee.

All of India's major national political parties have publicly supported the bill in their election manifestos but, Karat said, it was not listed among business due to be considered during this session of parliament.

Cleophas Kamitatu, who was imprisoned under Mobutu in the 1960s and now is an opposition leader.

Kabila, the rebel leader, has been wise to stress that he does not want to split the country into armed factions, as happened in Liberia and Somalia.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has tried to build support for a multinational force to monitor a UN ceasefire plan, which Mobutu agreed to this week, and to help return 200,000 Rwandan refugees in Zaire to their homeland.

But France is reluctant to lead a force in Zaire after criticism of its 1994 intervention in Rwanda. The United States also has shied away from high-profile participation, hoping the parties will agree to a negotiated settlement leading to Mobutu's long-promised transition to democracy. That seems unlikely.

Ngefa, the human rights

lawyer, cringed at what he calls the misguided faith placed in Kabila by Zairians desperate for a change — any change.

"Zaire is now like a hooker: If somebody comes and gives you money, then you take it. It's just desperation because we are suffering so," he said.

Ngefa, despite his criticism of the government, has found himself supporting many of its recent accusations against Kabila's rebels.

His group Sunday issued a report based on four months of investigation. It claimed thousands of refugees have been massacred by the rebels and buried in mass graves.

Most of the refugees are Rwandan Hutus who fled after that country's civil war and who fear reprisals by the Tutsi-led government for the 1994 slaughter of a half-million people, mostly Tutsis. Ngefa's group believes Kabila is quietly carrying out those reprisals.

Deforestation rate in Asian states was 1.1 pc during '90-'95

BANGKOK, Mar 8: Forests in the tropical Asian countries were destroyed at an average rate of 1.1 per cent each year during the 1990-1995 period, remaining the highest among the tropical regions in the world, reports Xinhua.

According to a report released by the United Nations here yesterday, during the 1980-1990 period, about 3.9 million hectares of forests were destroyed each year in the tropical countries of Asia, or a rate of 1.2 per cent, even higher than the first half of the 1990s.

The report, entitled "The State of the World's Forests-1997", was issued by the regional office for Asia and the Pacific of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) before the FAO committee on forestry to hold a meeting on March 10-13.

The report attributed the deforestation in Asia to two direct

reasons — farming activities and excessive timber cutting.

It also pointed out that fuelwood harvesting, mining, irrigation and hydroelectric projects and urban expansion are responsible for the destruction of tropical forests.

In addition to destruction, forest degradation is also a serious problem in the region; the 200-page biennial report said.

Commercial harvesting has been more widespread and intensive the tropical Asia and the Pacific than in any other tropical region.

"High population densities have also led to widespread forest degradation from fuelwood and fodder harvesting, cattle grazing, shifting cultivation, and timber cutting for local construction."

"Fire continuously threatens many of the forests of the re-

gion," the report said, noting more than 3 million hectares of temperate forests burned in Mongolia.

However, the report said that many countries in the Asia-Pacific region are reducing their reliance on natural forests to provide industrial roundwood and are shifting to other sources.

Thailand, Sri Lanka and New Zealand have restricted most timber harvesting in natural forests and now depend almost exclusively on plantations, agroforestry, farm forests and, in the case of Thailand, imports," the report said.

The Asia-Pacific region produced about one-third of the world's roundwood in 1994, about 74 per cent of which was used as fuelwood or wood for charcoal, according to the report.



Wooden eggs showing unidentified portraits by Russian painter Wassa Rosina (background) are shown as part of an Easter Egg art collection at the Dresdner Culture Palace, Friday. According to the artist, copying a historic masterpiece onto one of the eggs in general takes about five days of concentrated work. The works of more than 30 artists from six nations are exhibited in Dresden, Germany until March 9. — AFP/UNB photo

Fall of Kisangani may herald an end to Mobutu-era

KINSHASA, Zaire, Mar 8: President Mobutu Sese Seko once said he never would be called "ex-president". After 31 years as dictator, bowed by prostate cancer and humiliated by a rebel force, he has never been so close, reports AP.

If rebels seize the northeastern city of Kisangani — as it appears they are close to doing — many in Zaire's Capital believe Mobutu's era could end.

They see the potential for riots, political executions and an exodus of thousands from Kinshasa.

"There will be great panic here," said Guillaume Ngefa Atondoko, president of the Zairian Association for the Defence of Human Rights. "It will be the end of the regime. Kisangani is like the last hope for the government and the regime."

Some Zairians believe Mobutu still could hang on. They see him as the only conceivable unifying force behind this colossal Central African

country of measureless mineral wealth and many nationalistic-minded people who don't want to see their country implode.

When Mobutu, 66, returned to Zaire in December after four months of prostate cancer treatment in Europe, he was greeted as a saviour. But the president, who came home to rally the troops, did little more than change the army chief before heading back to France.

While the Belgians, Moroccans, French, British and other Cold War allies came to his defence during earlier incursions by rebel leader Laurent Kabila, they appear to have deserted Mobutu this time around.

Without their help, and because Mobutu has allowed the army to collapse, he is fighting this war with foreign mercenaries, according to David Shearer of London's International Institute for Strategic Studies.

The rebels may be getting even more foreign help than the army. The United States, re-

ceiving reports that Ugandan, Burundian and Rwandan troops are helping Kabila, has called on all foreign forces to get out and stay out.

The rebels are advancing fast. For the most part, they have met with little resistance from the poorly paid and demoralised army.

While villagers in the rebels' path have welcomed them, Mobutu retains support elsewhere, in part because of the rebels' foreign backing and the nationalist sentiments of Zairians who feel betrayed by their neighbours.

While most Zairians now detest Mobutu, accusing him of stealing their nation's wealth, many want him to survive long enough to keep the country together and hold elections that have been promised since 1990.

"No Zairian wants the division of this country, and since he's the defender of the unity of this country, he still has power," said political scientist