



Indian Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda (R) welcomes the Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet who is on a three-day official visit to India, at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi Saturday. — AFP/UNB photo

Vietnam, India pledge to boost bilateral ties

NEW DELHI, Mar 9: Vietnam and India on Saturday pledged to strengthen bilateral relations. Officials here said following talks between visiting Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet and his Indian counterpart HD Deve Gowda, reports AFP.

The two leaders agreed to intensify political and cultural ties and said the two countries should try to bolster economic relations.

"It was emphasised during the talks that the continuity of our traditional friendship is the hallmark of India-Vietnamese relations," an Indian government statement said.

Kiet and Deve Gowda met twice for officials talks after the Vietnamese leader arrived here on the first leg of a four-day trip to India and Bangladesh.

LTTE leader from France in Lanka to pursue Prabhakaran to resume talks

COLOMBO, Mar 9: A Tamil Tiger rebel leader has secretly arrived in northern Sri Lanka from France to try to broker a deal to end the Indian Ocean island's ethnic war, two newspapers said on Sunday, reports Reuter.

Lawrence Thilaker, the Paris-based international spokesman for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), had come to brief LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran on possible moves to resume peace talks, the independent Sunday Times said.

"Thilaker has secretly come to Sri Lanka in what is seen as a move to broker a peace deal with international support," the newspaper said in its lead story, quoting political sources.

Sri Lankan government officials were not available to comment.

Diplomats said it was unlikely Sri Lanka would accept third party mediation to help end the rebels' war for an independent homeland for minority Tamils in the north and east as the government had rejected previous such offers.

Eclipse, comet give double delight to star gazers in China

BEIJING, Mar 9: Sky gazers in northeastern China got a double delight Sunday as the sun disappeared behind the moon in a total solar eclipse that coincided with a view of the bright Hale-Bopp comet, reports AP.

The sky went dark and temperatures dropped as the moon blocked the sun's rays for more than two minutes Sunday morning over Mohe country, at the Northern tip of Heilongjiang province on China's border with Russia, the state-run Xinhua News agency said.

In Beijing, about 1,800 kilometres (1,110 miles) to the south, a partial eclipse left just a smile-shaped slice of sun.

The eclipse coincided with the arrival of the comet named after amateur astronomers Alan Hale and Thomas Bopp, who first spotted it on July 22, 1995.

Chinese television broadcast the celestial show live, with the comet seen as a bright fleck of light in the eclipse-darkened sky.

UF govt faces challenge as BJP for removal of UP govt

NEW DELHI, Mar 9: India's ruling coalition faces a tough challenge this week over an opposition demand that the governor of Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state, be sacked for rising crime, reports AFP.

Home Minister Inderjit Gupta, who fuelled controversy last week by saying the state had plunged into "anarchy, chaos and destruction," is to make a statement on Uttar Pradesh in the upper house of parliament Monday.

The statement has already been dismissed by Mulayam Singh Yadav, who is a former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yadav is a senior leader of Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda's government.

Sources say Deve Gowda is close to state governor Romesh Bhandari because he believes Bhandari can keep the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party) at bay in the state.

The BJP had insisted Bhandari be recalled over lawlessness in the northern state of 140 million people. It has

threatened a parliamentary motion accusing him of flouting constitutional property by publicly refuting the home minister.

According to official figures, Uttar Pradesh under direct federal rule and administered by Bhandari, has had 928 murders, 175 rapes and 27 abductions in the first 45 days of this year.

The figures are higher than in previous years. In the whole of 1996 according to official figures, there were a total of 8,149 murders, 1,525 rapes and 191 kidnappings.

Bhandari has denied the allegation, sparking a war of the words with Gupta.

Uttar Pradesh police chief Haridas Rao, meanwhile, supported Bhandari in remarks published today.

"There is no crime wave, there is not the will wave, there is no doubt that there has been an increase in abductions and crimes against women but there is a perceptible fall in caste clashes and communal riots," he told the Indian Express daily.

Sources said Gupta would blame the BJP, which led an emotive campaign for the destruction of the Ayodhya Mosque in Uttar Pradesh in 1992 by whipping up Hindu sentiment, for causing the root of the problem.

The incident left more than 2,000 dead in Hindu-Muslim riots across the country and severely dented India's secular credentials.

Prakash Karat, a senior member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) — a backer of the United Front government, said the first priority would be to defeat the BJP motion.

He said his party would not blame individuals.

"We will talk about the crime rate, we would stress the need for greater coordination between the centre (New Delhi) and the state agencies and we would say that corrective step must be taken."

Indian state government are led by chief ministers, and the governor is the nominal head. But the governor rules the state when it comes under New Delhi's direct rule.

Dhaka reiterates full support to Bosnia

DOHA, Mar 9: Bangladesh has reiterated its full support and solidarity to the government and people of Bosnia-Herzegovina and renewed its commitment to extend all possible political, economic, technical, humanitarian and military training facilities to Bosnia, reports BSS.

This declaration was made by the leader of Bangladesh delegation Ambassador, Syed Muzammil Ali while addressing the OIC assistance mobilisation group meeting on Bosnia-Herzegovina which began in Doha (Qatar) on Saturday.

In his statement Ambassador Ali recalled that a high-level Bosnian military delegation had visited Dhaka recently and Bangladesh has already offered various training facilities to Bosnian armed forces officers.

He also mentioned that Bangladesh offered 10 to 15 scholarships to Bosnian students to pursue degree or diploma-level courses in various engineering and technical

fields at the Islamic Institute of Technology (IIT) in Bangladesh. Ambassador Ali also stated that Bangladesh was also actively considering to extend possible help and cooperation in various relief and rehabilitation projects in the war-ravaged Bosnia-Herzegovina. He recalled that Bangladesh had earlier offered legal assistance to Bosnia in the war crimes trial.

The 18-member OIC Group meeting was formally inaugurated by the Qatari State Minister, for Foreign Affairs Ahmad bin Abdullah Al-Mahmoud and the meeting is being attended by high political and military officials from Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Brunei, Darussalam, Egypt, Guinea, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Turkey and Yemen.

In addition, senior officials of the OIC Secretariat, Islamic Development Bank and the Islamic Chamber of Commerce and Industry also attended the meeting.

84 Tigers killed during attack on army camp

COLOMBO, Mar 9: At least 84 Tamil Tiger guerrillas were killed during a major attack on an army camp in eastern Sri Lanka, the rebels said on Saturday as both sides counted heavy losses, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said two of their senior leaders were among those killed during the pre-dawn attack against the Vavunatuva army camp in the Batticaloa district on Thursday.

The LTTE in a newspaper published in the island's northern Wanni region, which is still under their control, said the rebels captured 33 automatic assault rifles, 10 light machine guns and two mortar bombs from the camp.

The Eelantham newspaper said the LTTE's "special forces" commander of the districts of Batticaloa and Ampara and the region's top "tax collector" were killed by the security forces.

The Tigers claimed they killed 100 security force personnel during the fighting that lasted nearly five hours.

It also said that three Tiger suicide fighters died in a simultaneous attack on an air base where a Chinese-built transport plane was destroyed. Tiger radio had earlier said that seven suicide cadres were killed there.

For their part, security forces have claimed killing more than 200 rebels and admitted losing 65 men. However defence sources placed the military death toll at nearly 90.

The Defence Ministry said the rebels left behind three vehicles and their guns after the Vavunatuva attack which ended a two-month lull in major attacks in the eastern region.

Tiger guerrillas are leading a campaign for independence in the island's northern and eastern regions where the two million Tamil minority is concentrated.



NATO General Secretary Javier Solana (R) welcomes the US new State Secretary of Defence William Cohen (L) on Friday at the NATO headquarters in Brussels. Cohen currently is on an inaugural tour through various European countries. — AFP/UNB photo

Kabila ready to negotiate truce with Zaire govt

KISANGANI, Zaire, Mar 9: The leader of Zaire's rebels has agreed to enter negotiations to halt his offensive on the government, a mediator said. But it appeared unlikely any such talks would come soon enough to stop and assault on this strategic city, reports AP.

Dutch Development Minister Jan Pronk met rebel leader Laurent Kabila in the eastern city of Goma on Saturday and said he had agreed for the first time to accept a UN plan for a ceasefire.

Kabila's adviser on foreign affairs, Bizima Karha, announced after the meeting that the rebels also would allow aid and relief organisations access to more than 100,000 refugees caught in the fighting in eastern Zaire, Pronk said.

The Dutch minister said UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan had asked him to urge Kabila to accept a UN peace plan, which calls for an immediate ceasefire.

But with rebel fighters poised to launch a battle for control of Kisangani, it appeared unlikely an accord would be negotiated beforehand.

Kisangani, on the Zaire River, is one of the largest cities in the central African country and has an international airport, which has served as the army's local headquarters.

Rebel spokesman Nyembwe Kazadi, who spoke earlier by phone from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, said rebel troops already at the northern approaches to Kisangani were

awaiting the arrival of columns advancing from the south and the east.

Kabila says his goal is to topple president Mobutu Sese Seko, whose 31 years of corrupt and dictatorial rule have left most of Zaire's people impoverished and the country's infrastructure in shambles.

Mobutu announced earlier this week he was ready to embrace the UN's five-point plan and bring the warfare to a halt.

Pronk said Kabila was ready to begin negotiations on a cease-fire and that they had discussed how the rebel leader wants talks to be pursued.

In the capital, Kinshasa, Zairian Defense Minister spokesman Leon Kalima said Kabila appeared "ready to accept a ceasefire."

BRIEFLY

Nobel laureate Purcell dead:

Edward Mills Purcell, a physicist and Nobel laureate whose discovery of nuclear magnetic resonance in 1945 has yielded maps of distant galaxies and detailed medical images of the human body, died. He was 84, AP reports from Cambridge Massachusetts.

Purcell, a Harvard University physicist emeritus, died Friday at his Cambridge home. The cause of death was not immediately known. He shared the 1952 Nobel Prize with Felix Bloch of Stanford University for their independent discovery of magnetic fields in atomic nuclei.

Israeli jets bomb Hezbollah posts:

Israeli warplanes landed on Saturday suspected Hezbollah guerrilla targets in South Lebanon, security sources said. Reuter reports from Nabatieh, Lebanon.

They said two jets fired a total of four rockets into an area close to the village of Jbaa in the Iqlim al-Toufah Mountain ridge which is controlled by the pro-Iranian guerrillas and lies just north of Israel's South Lebanon occupation zone.

Liz Taylor leaves hospital:

Elizabeth Taylor left the hospital, a week after being admitted for a mild seizure, a hospital spokesman said, AP reports from Los Angeles.

Miss Taylor, 65, was released at about 3 pm, Saturday. "Whatever the problem was — there never was a repeat of the episode. And her condition remained good throughout her stay," said Ron Wise, a spokesman for Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre. Miss Taylor was admitted a week ago. Test results were negative but the actress chose to remain hospitalised.

Ex-minister jailed in Italy:

Former Italian health minister Francesco de Lorenzo, once famous for cracking down on hospital fraud, was jailed by a Naples court on Saturday for eight years and four months for corruption, AFP reports from Naples.

De Lorenzo, health minister from 1989 to 1993, was arrested in 1994 after an investigation that charges he paid by pharmaceutical companies to get permission from an interministerial body to raise drug prices. He is charged with having received seven billion lire (4.5 million dollars) from drug-makers and advertising agencies that were notably involved in the campaign against AIDS.

Chinese military team in Malaysia:

A 10-member high-level Chinese military delegation led by Gen Wang Ke, member of the Central Military Commission, arrived in Kuala Lumpur yesterday for a five-day friendly visit to Malaysia, Xinhua reports from Kuala Lumpur.

Upon his arrival at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Gen. Wang said in a written statement that the Chinese government and the Chinese armed forces attach great importance to the development of friendship between China and Malaysia.

Mandela's 10-day tour ends:

South African President Nelson Mandela returns home Monday after a 10-day Southeast Asian tour which plugged his country's economic reconstruction effort into some of the world's most dynamic economies, AFP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

The idea has been to strengthen relations between ourselves and these countries — economic, political and otherwise — and I think that this trip has been successful, he said.

journalists over the weekend.

Albanians flee as insurgents seize another town

Berisha offers to hold early polls in exchange for peace

TIRANA, Albania, Mar 9: Insurgents continued to put pressure on President Sali Berisha, who is trying to end weeks of chaos and violence by offering to hold early elections in exchange for peace, reports AP.

On Saturday, the insurgents captured another southern town, storming an army garrison and a military airport in conquests that put the region firmly in their hands.

Berisha said he would hold early elections, but there was no agreement on when the vote would take place.

The week-long insurgency in southern Albania is the latest and most serious wave of unrest sparked by the collapse of high-risk investment schemes in which generally wealthier southerners lost more than those living in the north.

Indian animal right activist vows to stop ritual of buffalo fights

GUWAHATI, India, Mar 9: An activist in far-eastern Indian state of Assam today vowed to stop a centuries-old ritual of buffalo fights, saying many animals died in the contest.

Sangita Goswami, convener of the People for Animals Group, told AFP in this Assam state capital that the body would live a case against organisers of the contests saying they were a manage to man and beast.

Goswami said the fights, stage during a regional harvesting festival since the 13th century, also claimed human lives.

"We have confirmed reports about the death of one villager last year in Nagaon district."

US veto fails to calm ME rhetoric, puts Washington at odds with allies

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 9: The US veto of a European resolution criticising Israel for its settlement policy is unlikely to achieve the stated US goal of cooling Middle East rhetoric at a time when compromise is needed, reports AP.

Instead, it has put Washington at odds with some of its closest allies and has widened the rift between Israel and the European Union, which is increasingly wary of deferring to Washington on Middle East issues and is anxious for a greater role in the peace process.

The US action appears unlikely to calm the international storm over Israel's plan to construct a 6,500-unit housing area, known as Har Homa, in parts of east Jerusalem the Palestinians want as a future capital.

Arab diplomats said they would ask for an emergency session of the UN General Assembly, during which speakers from throughout the world will lambaste Israel for its threats to single out Israel for threatening Middle East peace, reports AP.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who visited UN headquarters last Wednesday, said the US veto was "a completely wrong decision" because the international community needed to apply "strong discipline" against the Israelis.

US Ambassador Bill Richardson cast the only negative vote Friday night when the 15-member council considered a resolution, submitted by Britain, France, Portugal and Sweden.

The resolution called on Israel to "refrain from all actions or measures" that "alter the facts on the ground" or prejudice future talks on the status of Jerusalem. It also urged Israel to "abide scrupulously" by its obligations under international law.

Richardson said the Israel decision "undermines the trust and confidence so badly needed in creating the appropriate environment for successful negotiations."

"We should not be under the illusion that council action to lay blame on one party or the other... is the right way to go about" achieving peace, Richardson said.

Off the Record

Stalkers target Di's mom

LONDON: Princess Diana's mother says relentless media scrutiny helped destroy her second marriage and the fame of being related to a royal has made her the target of stalkers, reports AP.

But in an interview with The Mail on Sunday, Frances Shand Kydd said she has accepted that as the mother of one of the most famous women in the world, the media will always be interested in her.

"The media descended here 16 years ago and have never left me since," Mrs Shand Kydd said in an interview aboard a ferry near her home on the Scottish island of Seil. "I've now accepted they never will."

But, she said, "I think the pressure of it all was overwhelming and finally impossible for Peter Shand Kydd, a landowner and businessman, who left her in 1988 after 19 years of marriage. 'They didn't want him, they wanted me. I became Di's mum and not his wife.'"

"It's not self-pity or excuses, it is fact," Mrs Shand Kydd said. "I've seen exactly the same thing happen in other family marriages like Di's and Charles's. I do firmly believe that sort of pressure can't be sustained." Charles and Diana divorced last year.

Mrs Shand Kydd, 60, who now lives alone refuses to criticise her former son-in-law, or her first husband, the 8th Earl Spencer, Diana's father. "I do think there is room to support both former partners in broken marriages," she said.

Ex-Tory MP blasts Major for policy towards EU

LONDON, Mar 9: A British member of Parliament who quit the ruling Conservatives for the small Anti-European Referendum Party launched a vicious attack on Sunday on Prime Minister John Major, reports Reuter.

In a series of newspaper articles, Sir George Gardiner said he could no longer stand Major's "equivocation" over policy towards the European Union, particularly the proposed European single currency.

"We have witnessed an abdication of national leadership without parallel in the last 100 years of British political history," wrote Gardiner, whose defection gave the Referendum Party its first member of Parliament.

Britain was trapped on "an escalator to a European super-state", he said.

Gardiner accused the ruling party of being intolerant and showing "a nasty Stalinist

Izetbegovic hails results of Vienna confce on Brcko

SARAJEVO, Mar 9: Bosnia's Muslim President Alija Izetbegovic said Saturday he was pleased with the results of a Vienna conference on the future of the Bosnian town of Brcko which is claimed by both Muslims and Serbs, reports AFP.

The conference, on Friday, announced an international supervisor for the town, US diplomat Robert Farrand, to ensure that the Serb authorities who control the town comply with promises to allow Croat and Muslim refugees to return home.

Izetbegovic said: "It is good that the supervisory body is named and that he will start to implement all decisions of the Dayton peace accord."

His defection, which in theory pushed Major's government even further into a minority in the House of Commons, was shrugged off by Conservative leaders.

"I think it is regrettable but I don't think it will have any great national impact," said Social Security Secretary Peter Lilley.

The referendum party is scoring only around two per cent in opinion polls and few people expect it to win many seats in the general election due by May.

But Gardiner's defection once again underlined the bitter divisions over Europe within the ranks of the Conservative Party.

The Conservatives have ruled Britain for the past 18 years but opinion polls suggest they face defeat at the general election.