

International

Coal mine blast kills 89 in China

BEIJING, Mar 11: An explosion at a private coal mine in Central China left 89 people dead and another nine injured, according to latest figures released today by a local official, reports AFP.

All mines in Lushan county have closed down temporarily pending the results of an investigation into the causes of the disaster.

The three owners of the mine, in Henan province, have been detained following the explosion, said Yuan Zhoukan of the country's emergency services, a report in Hong Kong earlier said the owners had fled, fearing reprisals.

There was a single explosion in one of the three small tunnels within the mine, but two other tunnels immediately collapsed as well, Yuan told AFP by telephone.

The March 4 disaster in the village of Liangwa follows a long series of Chinese mine tragedies.

Yuan said the latest casualty figures dated from Sunday. Early reports following the disaster put the toll at 86 dead and 12 injured.

Lushan county has around 100 mines and coal production is Liangwa village's main economic activity.

In January, 31 people were killed and four seriously injured in an explosion in a coal mine near Yima in Henan.

In November, 114 people were killed in a coal mine explosion in the northern province of Shanxi.

Yeltsin orders full reorganisation of Russian govt

MOSCOW, Mar 11: Russian President Boris Yeltsin today ordered a full reorganisation of the Russian government, leaving only Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and a first deputy premier in place, Interfax news agency said, reports Reuters.

"Only the prime minister and the first deputy prime minister will stay, all other members of the cabinet resign. The bulk of the new government will be formed within one week," Interfax said. It did not give the first deputy prime minister's name but it was clear that Anatoly Chubais, appointed only last Friday, would remain in his new post.

Deaths of 25,000 Rwandan refugees UNHCR dismisses Zairean govt's allegations

GENEVA, Mar 11: The UN refugee agency Monday dismissed as "groundless" allegations by the Zairean government that its withdrawal from central, eastern Zaire had led to thousands of deaths, reports AFP.

In a communique issued March 4, the Zairean Government alleged that the departure of aid workers from the Tengi-Tengi camp and Kisangani led to the deaths of 25,000 Rwandan refugees and displaced Zaireans.

"I don't know what made them say it, but they did, it's obviously untrue," a UN official told AFP.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata said in Hong Kong Monday that the allegations linking the refugee agency to 25,000 deaths were "simply groundless."

The UNHCR was unaware of any credible reports that could substantiate the alleged deaths in the first days of March, the agency said in a statement.

Ogata said the Zairean government's order to expel a number of UN and other aid agency workers from the country last week was "unfair and unjustified."

The expulsion order followed the departure of UNHCR and other aid agency staff from Kisangani, the capital of Haut Zaire province, and a government stronghold which is bracing itself for attack.

The Zairean government's assertion that relief workers left the town for "no good reason" was flatly rejected by the UN refugee body.

Just prior to the UNHCR withdrawal, two staff members were interrogated at gun point at Kisangani Airport and told that their lives would be at risk if they returned.

"They were being intimidated by the Zairean military," the UN official said.

UNHCR local staff returned to Kisangani over the weekend to assess what food stocks remained and move the aid to Ubundu, which is overflowing with refugees on the run from the rebel alliance. Ubundi is 150 kilometres (90 miles) from Kisangani.

UNHCR expatriate workers are also planning to return soon to the Tingi-Tingi camp, where the security situation appears to be "much better. They could arrive as soon as tomorrow. The area is accessible," the UN official said, adding that an aid aircraft landed there Sunday.

"We have reports that hundreds of people are merging from the forests and surrounding areas and settling around the camp."

Tingi-Tingi housed around 170,000 refugees before a mass exodus prompted by the arrival of rebel forces.

Meanwhile, another report from Nairobi says, relief workers who visited the virtually abandoned Tingi-Tingi refugee camp in eastern Zaire at the weekend found about 1,000 refugees there and at the nearby Amisi site in pretty bad shape, a UN spokesman said Monday.

Taliban send protest note to UN

RIVAL Afghan factions set up military base in Tajikistan

KABUL, Mar 11: Afghanistan's Taliban Islamic militia has sent a protest note to the UN saying rival Afghan factions have set up military bases in neighbouring Tajikistan, Kabul officials said Monday, reports AFP.

"The Republic of Tajikistan in harmony with the Russian federation has put a military base at the disposal of the ousted 'afghan government,'" the Afghan Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

The ministry said an airbase in Kulyab province of Tajikistan had been made available to the anti-Taliban forces.

"This base is used for airlifting arms and ammunition, escalating the war and acts of subversion against the Islamic state of Afghanistan," the statement added.

The military base at Kulyab, located due north of Afghanistan's Takhar province, has been reportedly established by Ahmad Shah Masoud, military topgun for ex-president Burhanddin Rabbani who was ousted from Kabul by the Taliban in September 27, 1996.

Thailand pushes 3500 Karens back into Myanmar

BANGKOK, Mar 11: Thailand has pushed about 3,500 Karen refugees back into Myanmar but apparently without cutting of relief assistance, aid workers said today, reports AFP.

The Thai Ninth Army told Karen in two temporary camps in Kanchanaburi province that they had the option of moving back to sites just across the border, or to a larger holding centre in Tak province to the north.

BRIEFLY

Talks on DPRK defector nearing end: Negotiations with China over the defection of a high-ranking North Korean official in Beijing may be concluded as early as this week, a Seoul government official said Tuesday, AP reports from Seoul.

But no decision has been made yet on whether Hwang Jang Yop, 74, will come directly to Seoul or via a third country, said Ryu Kwang-sok, head of the Foreign Ministry's Asia-Pacific Affairs Bureau.

Hwang, a member of the North's highest decision-making body, the Central Committee of the ruling Workers' Party, sought asylum at the South Korean consulate in Beijing on February 12, with an aide. They were on their way home from Japan.

Hashimoto's popularity declines: Public support for the Cabinet of Japan's Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto has plunged to 36.1 per cent, the lowest since he took office in January last year, according to a newspaper poll published yesterday, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The figure was down 11.0 percentage points from the previous poll in January, the Nihon Keizai Shimbun said.

Meanwhile, the disapproval rating for the cabinet rose to 37.5 per cent, up 8.0 per cent from January, making it higher than the approval rating for the first time since March last year.

PLO, Israel fail in crisis talks to ease tensions

JERUSALEM, Mar 11: Israel's defence chief and a Palestinian Cabinet minister failed in crisis talks to ease tensions heightened by an Israeli troop redeployment plan that the PLO rejected, reports Reuters.

"There is a crisis and the crisis is becoming worse and worse," a visibly angry Palestinian Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo said late on Monday after meeting Israeli Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai at a Tel Aviv hotel.

Hours earlier, at least 10 Palestinians were injured by Israeli soldiers who used clubs and guns to beat back about 100 Arabs trying to stop workers from opening a road for Jewish settlers near the West Bank town of Hebron, witnesses said.

The clash was the first serious outbreak of Israeli-Arab violence since Palestinian President Yasser Arafat spurned an Israeli decision on Friday to hand over another nine per cent of the west bank to Palestine Liberation Organisation rule.



Israeli soldiers scuffle with Palestinians outside the Jewish settlement of Kiryat Arba, east of Hebron, Monday. Five Palestinians were injured by Israeli soldiers after they tried to stop Jewish settlers from bulldozing nearby land. — AFP/UNB photo

Brunei Sultan seeks dismissal of lawsuit by ex-miss USA

LOS ANGELES, Mar 11: The Sultan of Brunei filed a motion to dismiss a lawsuit accusing him of forcing a former Miss USA into sexual slavery, reports AP.

Shannon Marketic's federal lawsuit is "frivolous," Alan Capper, a spokesman for the sultan, said in a statement Monday.

Marketic's lawyer could not be reached for comment after business hours Monday.

Marketic, 26, sued the sultan, claiming she was drugged sexually abused and held captive for 32 days last year in his 1,788-room palace, the New York Post reported earlier this month.

Crowned Miss California in 1992 and Miss USA in 1993-94, Marketic claimed she accepted a deal to do promotional work for one of the sultan's businesses, the Post reported.

Rebels dismiss Berisha's deal to end conflict Insurgents take control of 4 more towns in Albania

TIRANA, Mar 11: Rebels in southern Albania controlled four more towns Monday as the government awaited the insurgents' response to a plan to end a chaotic 10-day uprising against President Sali Berisha, reports AFP.

Violence flared again just a day after Berisha moved to avert outright civil war with a proposal for early elections and a coalition government including the opposition, ten people were shot in the town of Berat, hospital officials said.

Rioters took control of Berat on Sunday after seizing arms from three army depots as soldiers looked on and are blocking all roads leading into town, witnesses there told AFP.

Insurgents also commandeered weapons as they took over nearby Skrapari, an opposition Socialist stronghold that was loyal to dictator Enver Hoxha in Albania's days of Orthodox Communism.

Sources also confirmed that five people were killed Sunday in Permeti, 30 (20 miles) kilometres from the city of Gjirokastra, also held by rebels. In Permeti, residents torched the police station, armed rioters also took over a Polican located between Berat and Skrapari and which has a munitions factory.

Under intense pressure from the West, Berisha and 10 opposition parties reached an agreement Sunday.

Earlier Reuters report says, rebels dismissing President Berisha's political deal to end Albania's conflict have made big gains in southern regions, but Italy brokered a deal to end confrontation in the port serving as the revolt's focal point.

Insurgents insisting they would down no arms until Berisha resigned took over a string of towns in the volatile south, frequently encountering no resistance from army troops.

The latest areas to fall into their hands included the ancient town of Berat, nearby Kucove, site of one of two big Albanian air force bases, and Permet, a remote mountain town.

70 pc supply water of Delhi unfit for human consumption

NEW DELHI, Mar 11: A leading environmentalist today said 70 per cent of New Delhi's drinking water supplies were so polluted that they could cause cancer, reports AFP.

Anil Aggarwal, director of the Centre for Science and Environment, said nothing was being done to clean up the Yamuna River, which runs through the northern state of Haryana to New Delhi and the adjoining province of Uttar Pradesh.

"The Yamuna supplies about 70 per cent of New Delhi's water," he said. "A whopping 71.5 million litres of industrial waste are added to the water in Haryana."

The New Delhi High Court, meanwhile, issued notices to the government of Haryana and New Delhi Monday following a public petition which alleged New Delhi's water was unfit for human consumption.

The authorities have been asked to answer the charge and explain what is being done to tackle the situation.

Aggarwal said pesticides were traced in the water and added they could lead to cancer.

He said minute particles of heavy metals like cadmium, chromium, copper, iron and zinc were detected during laboratory tests on drinking water, supplied to New Delhi's 10 million residents.

But Aggarwal said the court order would amount to little.

"Remedial measures would mean that industrial pollution must be stopped in Haryana and organic farming introduced. Organic farming is very expensive and checks on industrial pollution difficult due to various reasons."

"I know what has to be done but whether it can be enforced or whether it is feasible is another thing."



US President Bill Clinton (R) speaks privately with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during a joint press conference after their meetings at the White House in Washington Monday. Clinton and Mubarak have agreed to seek ways to revive Syrian-Israeli Middle East peace talks. — AFP/UNB photo

Vatican sets up diplomatic ties with Libya

VATICAN CITY, Mar 11: Despite US reservations, the Vatican on Monday established diplomatic relations with Libya and expressed hope the move would be viewed favourably, reports AP.

The Vatican said it was satisfied that the North African country, led by Moammar Gaddafi, had taken steps to safeguard religious freedom. The new ties could help the Holy See play a role in bringing peace and stability to the Mediterranean region, the Vatican added.

The Holy See expects positive international reactions, considering that the diplomatic ties have been made both to favour the life of the local Church and to contribute to international détente, said Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls.



Diana, Princess of Wales chats with Dave and Portia, during a visit on Monday to Centrepoint's Cold Weather Project, in King's Cross, which provides food, beds and respite for 47 homeless young people. — AFP/UNB photo

Off the Record

James Bond faces new enemy

LONDON: James Bond has a new enemy, and he's a true 21st century man — a power-crazed media mogul who controls an empire of newspapers and satellite TV, reports AP.

British actor Jonathan Pryce will play the latest Bond bad guy in the 18th Bond adventure, to be called "Tomorrow Never Dies," filmmakers Eon Productions announced Monday.

Filming has already begun on the \$5 million-plus (dhs 56 million) movie at Pinewood Studios west of London, the company said. In a style typical of Bond baddies, Pryce's character maniacally manipulates his media interests to start a third world war — in hopes of boosting his portfolio of stocks and shares. The character has yet to be named.

Filmmakers spent a year searching for the right actor before choosing Pryce, who appeared as Juan Peron at Madonna's "Evita."

Desmond Llewelyn returns for his 16th appearance as the inventive Q and Dame Judi Dench reprises her role as head of operations of the British intelligence agency, MI6.

Michelle Yeoh, a product of London's Royal Academy of Dance, plays the beautiful female sidekick to Pierce Brosnan's Bond.

The film, which will be released at Christmas, is directed by Briton Roger Spottiswoode, who made "Turner and Hooch" with Tom Hanks and "Air America" with Mel Gibson.

"Tomorrow Never Dies" begins with Bond on a routine assignment in the Khyber pass, northern Pakistan, and climaxes with a sea battle off Hong Kong.

Baffling statue of ancient Egyptian woman

CAIRO: A Villager working his land has unearthed an ancient sculpture that archaeologists hailed Monday as a remarkable but baffling object from the age of Egypt's pharaohs, reports AP.

The metre-high (three-foot-high) limestone statue, discovered March 2 near the Nile Delta town of Zagazig, portrays a seated woman with three small children standing against her chest and a girl on her lap.

The statue is in surprisingly good shape, and archaeologists said the workmanship and detail are unprecedented. The woman's fingernails, bracelets and braided hair are visible, and her eyes and eyebrows are inlaid with ivory and black quartz. Experts were stunned to find semi-precious stones still in place in the figures of the three children.

"This is something in the field of archaeology and sculpture that is unique," said Ali Hassan, chairman of the government's Egyptian Antiquities Organization, who unveiled the mud-stained statue at a news conference Monday.

"It sounds like a masterpiece of Egyptian art. I haven't heard of anything similar," said Kent Weeks, an American archaeologist who has discovered what is believed to be the tomb of more than 100 sons of Pharaoh Ramses II.

Weeks cautioned, however, that the statue could only be appreciated as a work of art until more is learned about it.

The statue bears no inscriptions. The main, female figure sits in a high-backed chair. Against her chest stands a small boy, believed to be a prince. Two headless girls stand on either side of him.

Seated on the woman's lap is a girl, though only her lower half has survived the centuries.

Govt calls off negotiating session with Peruvian rebels

LIMA, Mar 11: In a surprise move, Peru's government Monday called off a negotiating session with leftist rebels holding 72 hostages here just minutes before it was due to begin, reports AFP.

The conditions to resume the preliminary talks are not yet defined enough, government negotiator Domingo Palermo said, reading from a brief statement shortly after the decision was announced.

Palermo said he called off the session because of "the profound concern that under pretexts for the talks by the rebels they may have tried to back-track on the valuable progress made until then."

Rebel leader Nestor Cerpa called off talks last week after he charged the government of stalling in negotiations while government forces tried to dig their way into the Japanese ambassador's residence where they have been held up for 83 days.

Government officials have neither confirmed nor denied reports of the tunnel's existence.

On Saturday rebels agreed to resume talks and scheduled a meeting with Palermo and mediators for Monday.

Palermo did not indicate when talks might resume.

Ayacucho Archbishop Juan Luis Cipriani, one of the mediators in the talks, said he hoped "that both sides meet as soon as possible taking into account that the hostages remain inside the residence."

New Nepali PM faces uphill task ahead of confidence motion in 30 days

KATHMANDU, Mar 11: New Nepal Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand faces an uphill task as he attempts to muster popular support ahead of a confidence motion in 30 days, reports AFP.

Chand, who turns 58 on Saturday, takes over a country riddled with rampant administrative corruption, questionable law and order controls and escalating prices.

For his third spell as prime minister, the rebel rightist faction leader of the National Democratic Party (NDP), appointed premier by King Birendra on Monday, has joined forces with the Communists.

"Chand will have to overcome many hurdles in the days ahead," political observer Dwarka Manandhar said.

The prime minister's most pressing concern is to win the support of the house in the confidence motion to be taken within 30 days of forming a new government.

It is a constitutional requirement in Nepal that a newly formed government must win a vote of confidence in the lower house of parliament within 30 days of its formation.

To that end, the law graduate, author and former editor must prepare convincing arguments to back his plans to turn the country around.

NDP Vice Chairman and former agriculture minister, Padma Sundar Lawati, said the cabinet would be deliberately kept small at first with between seven and 10 ministers.

"The NDP will hold the balance and foreign portfolios," Lawati said, making it clear the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML), the dominant player in the new coalition government, will be kept away from the sensitive areas.

A boyant Lawati, positive, the confidence motion would be won, said the Chand government "will definitely expand" after the vote.

But within hours of Chand going to the king on Monday claiming to have the support of a majority 103 MPs in the 205 seat legislature, people were questioning how long a rightist-leftist coalition government could last.

The communists have given and assurance the new coalition will complete the remaining two-and-a-half-year term of the present house of representatives, but political analyst Sharda Man Baidya said the promise counts for nothing.

"Very few people are ready to believe the leftist assurance as the party exceeded its bounds by pulling down the former tripartite coalition led by Sher Bahadur Deuba of the Nepali Congress (NC)," Baidya said.

The political turmoil in Nepal surfaced when former premier Deuba failed to win the confidence motion he himself tables on Thursday. Two NC legislators deliberately boycotted the debate and Deuba lost by two votes.

An NC source said the two MPs, Dipak Jung Shah and Chakra Bahadur Shahi, held grudges against Deuba because they were not included in the cabinet.

For their "rash irresponsible behaviour and for deceiving the party at a very crucial moment despite the party whip to vote for Deuba," the two have been expelled from the NC, the source said.

Baidya sees the downfall of Deuba as something that could also happen to Chand.

"As long as the country fails to pass anti-defection laws, no coalition government is safe in Nepal. Everyone will go the same way as Deuba," Baidya said.

"Rampant horse-trading during occasions like a no-trust motion or a confidence motion is bound to occur due to an absence of anti-defection laws."

Although this is Chand's third term as Prime Minister it is the first time he has led Nepal as a multi-party democracy.

His previous terms as prime minister, from 1981-1983 and brief two-week tenure in 1990, were in the days of Nepal's panchayat government where the king held executive power.

The NCP-UML, with 90 lawmakers in the new coalition which also includes 10 of the 19 LDP MPs and the pro-India Nepal Sadbhavana Party (NSP) with two.

The sole Nepal Workers and Peasants Party (NWPP) MP has vowed to support the government but will not be a formal member of the coalition.