

UN starts paying US \$144m compensation to Gulf War affected workers

GENEVA, Mar 13: A UN committee has started paying out 144 million US dollars Wednesday to thousands of individuals claiming damages from the Gulf War in the first disbursement under an 'oil-for-food' deal with Iraq, the UN said, reports AFP.

Bangladeshi workers who left Iraq and Kuwait and were affected during the Gulf War will also get the compensation. The UN Compensation Committee (UNCC) said 57,636 claimants represented by 63 governments and one international organisation would receive an initial payment of 2,500 dollars each.

The committee is funding the payouts from its 30 per cent share of Iraqi oil exports over six months, totalling two billion dollars. UN resolution 986 gave the UNCC its funding authority, earmarking the rest of the money from Iraqi oil sales, which restarted in December, for food and medicine for Iraqi civilians hurt by continuing international sanctions. The sanctions were imposed after the defeat of Iraq, which

invaded tiny Kuwait in the summer of 1990, by a US-led coalition.

Nearly 134 million dollars of the initial payout will go to category "A" claimants — individuals forced to leave Iraq and Kuwait — and about seven million dollars to category "C" claimants — individuals who suffered losses of less than 100,000 dollars.

Governments have submitted the documents on behalf of their citizens. Egyptians are receiving the biggest single chunk of initial compensation money, with 23,334 claims totalling more than 58 million dollars. They are followed by Sri Lankans, Indians and Bangladeshis.

Some 13.45 million dollars has already been awarded to category "B" cases which cover serious personal injuries or deaths of spouses, parents or children caused by the war.

The next payment for "A" and "C" claims is expected to be made in August 1997. If UN 986 resolution is extended, about 575 million dollars is needed to cover 230,000 successful claims, the UNCC said.

Settlement process in East Jerusalem to begin next week

JERUSALEM, Mar 13: Defying warnings of violence and a torrent of world criticism, Israel intends to break ground next week on a disputed Jewish settlement in Arab east Jerusalem, a cabinet minister said, reports Reuters.

The settlement plan is at the heart of what former prime minister and peacemaker Shimon Peres called on Wednesday the "biggest crisis in Israel's ties with the PLO and the Arab world" since its landmark 1993 peace deal with the Palestinians.

Jordan's King Hussein warned there was a "very strong chance of violence" if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pushed ahead with plans to build 6,500 homes for Jews on the wooded hilltop called Jabal Abu Ghneim by Palestinians and Har Homa by Israel.

Internal Security Minister Avigdor Kahalani told army radio he discussed the plan with Netanyahu on the prime minister's return Wednesday night from a visit to Russia: "We agreed, between US that next

week the work will begin on Har Homa."

Kahalani's statement coincided with a UN debate in which the PLO urged the General Assembly to denounce the plan and other Israeli policies it said violated the peace process.

Earlier in Gaza, Palestinian President Yasser Arafat voiced hope a meeting of US, European and Arab envoys on Saturday would rescue Middle East peace from the deepening crisis.

AP adds, an Israeli peace group is going to court to stop construction of a 6,500-unit Jewish housing project in disputed east Jerusalem, arguing it is part of an illegal pattern of discrimination against Palestinian residents.

Although Israel confiscated both Arab and Jewish land for the Har Homa project, it plans to build housing only for Jews, Danny Seidemann, attorney for the group Ir Shalem, said Wednesday.

That constitutes illegal discrimination against Arab residents, he said.

The group's appeal was to be heard Wednesday by the Supreme Court.

The government has said it will build badly needed infrastructure and grant building permits in Arab neighbourhoods of east Jerusalem, which it said would lead to construction of more than 3,000 homes. But that promise was met with skepticism by Palestinians, and Seidemann said he did not expect the houses to actually be built.

Israel has made similar promises in the past but never followed through, he said. "It's a public relations ploy."

Palestinians were outraged by Israel's decision to go ahead with the Har Homa project, saying it completes a ring of Jewish neighbourhoods that cuts off Arab parts of east Jerusalem from the West Bank.

Past challenges to the Har Homa project were based on appeals of land confiscations and were rejected by the Supreme Court.

Seidemann said Ir Shalem

first raised its current challenge in 1994, but the court ruled that the suit was premature until the Har Homa project received final approval, which it did earlier this month.

Har Homa, like other planned neighbourhoods in the city, will be built with synagogues and Jewish schools, and will be unaffordable to most Palestinians, Seidemann said.

In addition, because most Palestinian residents of Jerusalem do not accept Israeli citizenship, they are not eligible to buy land there, he said.

The suit also says Israel's building laws are discriminatory because they will allow 3.2 housing units per dunam (one-quarter acre) in Har Homa, but only 0.69 units per dunam in adjacent Palestinian villages.

Israel captured east Jerusalem in the 1967 Middle East War and later annexed it. Palestinians hope to establish a capital in the eastern part of the city, which Israel says must remain undivided under Israeli sovereignty.

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Israel won't join in int'l confce to be held in Gaza tomorrow

JERUSALEM, Mar 13: Israel yesterday angrily announced that it will not participate in the Palestinian-sponsored international conference to be held in Gaza Saturday, the state-run Israel radio reported, says Xinhua.

Acting Prime Minister and Foreign Minister David Levy made the announcement in a strongly-worded statement during a Knesset (parliament) plenum session yesterday afternoon.

Levy declared that Israel will not agree to go to such a tribunal to face an accusation finger. He warned that such a move could put the peace process into a deep abyss.

Palestinian National Authority (PNA) President Yasser Arafat Tuesday invited the US, Russia, the European Union, Norway and Japan to attend an international conference in Gaza on March 15 to discuss the current crisis in the peace process stemming from recent Israeli decisions on building settlement in east Jerusalem and redeployment.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu now on an official constitutes a violation of the Oslo accords between the two sides.

However, the US has responded positively and announced to send US Consul-General in Jerusalem Edward Abington to the meeting.

Sister Nirmala to succeed Mother Teresa

CALCUTTA, India, Mar 13: Sister Nirmala, a Hindu convert to Roman Catholicism, has been elected to succeed Mother Teresa as the leader of the Missionaries of Charity Order, the office of the Archbishop of Calcutta said today, reports Reuters.

"Sister Nirmala has been elected as the successor of Mother Teresa," Archbishop Henry D'Souza's office said in a statement released to Reuters in the eastern Indian city.

The renowned missionary, suffering from heart, kidney and lung ailments, had said she did not want to continue to lead the Order she founded in 1948.

The election of Mother Teresa's successor has been postponed twice since September. It was first set for September 8, but put off because Mother Teresa was ill.

More than 100 nuns from around the world then went into retreat on January 16 and had planned to vote in a secret ballot on February 2. But the Order's electoral college, apparently unable to find a clear-cut successor, decided instead to hold closed-door deliberation before taking a vote.

Lankan forces launch attacks on LTTE base

COLOMBO, Mar 13: Sri Lankan forces launched air, naval and artillery attacks on a key base of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels in the jungles of the northeast early today, military officials said.

Air force pilots have reported direct hits on targets, an official told Reuters. Ground troops monitoring rebel radio transmissions say the rebels are asking for reinforcements.

The attacks were centred around the so-called "14 Base" complex of the LTTE in the jungles of the northeastern Mullaitivu district, 280 km (175 miles) from Colombo, the officials said.

Several camps in the base complex and others on the coast have been destroyed in the combined air-land-sea offensive, they said. Aircraft were taking on rebel targets while navy gunboats were shelling rebel positions, they added.

The LTTE is believed to have suffered heavy casualties in the attack.

Indo-Pak PMs to meet in May, hopes Gujral

NEW DELHI, Mar 13: India's foreign minister said today he was "very optimistic" that the prime ministers of India and Pakistan would meet in May after a series of clear-the-air talks between the two South Asian arch-rivals.

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The two nations' relationship has been blighted by a dispute over the Himalayan territory of Kashmir.

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