

## Arafat rejects summit with Netanyahu

JERUSALEM, Mar. 18: Palestinian National Authority (PNA) President Yasser Arafat apparently nixed a summit Monday night with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, despite an appeal by Jordanian Crown Prince Hassan and efforts by the United States, reports Xinhua.

According to Israeli radio this morning, Hassan met with Arafat in Gaza Monday to deliver a message from his brother King Hussein that Netanyahu is ready for talks. Hassan then phoned Netanyahu and briefed him about the meeting.

Later in the evening, Netanyahu phoned Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and told him of efforts to hold a meeting with Arafat, but he said no date for a meeting had been set.

There will be no meeting unless Netanyahu agrees to freeze

building plans on Har Homa, on the southeastern outskirts of Jerusalem, PNA Justice Minister Fethi Abu Meddineh said.

However, Netanyahu Monday repeated his promise that work would start on Har Homa to build a new Jewish neighbourhood this week, warning if the Palestinians violate their obligation to refrain from violence, there will be no peace process.

Speaking to coalition members of the Knesset Netanyahu said Har Homa would be a test of the peace process. We are not looking for confrontations, but stand firm on our right to build there and we do not need anyone's permission.

He said "if Israel gave in on Har Homa and Jerusalem, there would be no end to the demands and pressures. Who knows where it would end, not even with the 1967 borders."

## Stop unfair trial of 59 Shiite militants, AI urges Bahrain

CAIRO, Mar 18: The human rights group Amnesty International called on Bahrain Monday to stop what it called unfair trial of 59 Shiite Muslim militants accused of trying to topple the ruling Al Khalifa family, reports AP.

A total of 81 men are accused in the plot. Fifty-nine of them have gone on trial at the State Security Court and another 22 are at large and will be tried in absentia.

"These trials have been grossly unfair at all stages, and none of the defendants will have the right to appeal before a higher court," said an Amnesty statement faxed to the Associated Press in Cairo.

The Bahraini authorities should act now to stop the unfair trials, Amnesty said. Six of the Shiite Muslim

suspects, who the government says intended to overthrow Bahrain's rulers and install Iranian-style Islamic rule, were shown on state television confessing in near-identical statements. They said they received arms and military training in Iran and had links to Bahraini opposition groups in exile.

Iran has denied the allegations. "The sister of one of the defendants and ex wife of another were allegedly brought before them in prison and threatened with rape if the defendants refused to participate in the televised confession," the Amnesty statement said.

Bahrain did not immediately comment on the report. The government, traditionally rejects any criticism of its human rights record.

The government has accused the suspects of being members of the military wing of Hezbollah-Bahrain. The government said the group was founded in Iran in 1993 and is backed by intelligence department of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Amnesty said all the defendants have been held incommunicado since their arrest and were denied access to relatives and defense lawyers. "We fear that their confessions may have been extracted under torture," the Amnesty statement added.

It said the justice minister summoned about 20 lawyers involved in the trial after they were interviewed by foreign media. They were warned that "dissemination of any information about the trials would not be tolerated and that they would

face consequences if they failed to comply with his directive," according to the Amnesty statement.

One of the lawyers said last month that charges against the men include spying, joining an illegal group and encouraging others to join the group. Conviction for espionage can carry the death penalty.

Amnesty International called on the Bahraini government to provide the organization with copies of all relevant records concerning the trials.

It said most of the session of the trials, which began at the beginning of this month, have been held at the Court Guard's base in al-Muharraq. The defendants have been divided into eight groups and are being tried separately rather than as one group.

## Off the Record

### Yanni's caution for Taj

NEW DELHI: Greek-born Yanni will be required to control the sound level at his concerts this week to avoid any damage to the Taj Mahal, the Supreme Court said Monday, reports AP. The court refused to ban or shift Yanni's concerts planned for 300 yards (meters) from the Taj Mahal on Thursday through Saturday. But Judges Saghir Ahmed and K Ramaswamy said the sound level should not exceed 40 decibels at the monument.

The court rejected claims by environmentalists that the lights, sound, construction and traffic would damage the Taj Mahal, about 180 kilometres (110 miles) south of New Delhi in Agra.

The court order will not affect Yanni's performance. In any case, the speakers will not be facing the Taj Mahal, Yanni spokesman Bhuvan Lal said.

Yanni, a movie-score composer who performs a blend of New Age and soft jazz, said his concerts would be part of India's 50th anniversary of independence celebrations.

### Charles, Parker Bowles planning honeymoon!

LONDON: Britain's Prince Charles and his long-time mistress Camilla Parker Bowles were planning their first holiday abroad together, The Daily Mail reported Monday, says AFP. The tabloid, quoting a friend of the couple's, said the plan was still in the "idea" stage and that the couple were wavering among Turkey, Tuscany, a French chateau or a cruise of the Greek Isles.

Although Charles and Camilla have been an on-and-off couple since before either of them was married, they have been discreet in public.

Charles and Princess Diana were divorced last summer, Parker Bowles and her husband, some two years ago.

Polls show the British are not ready to accept a 'Queen Camilla', should she and Charles marry, when he succeeds his mother, Queen Elizabeth II.

A semi-public holiday together was seen as one way of getting the public more used to Parker Bowles, 49-year-old mother of two grown children.

### Revenge indeed

ISLAMABAD: An enraged woman whose husband sold her to a policeman for sex shot dead her spouse and the officer in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar, it was reported here Tuesday, says AFP.

A court heard an insulted Hidayat Bibi, described as a faithful wife and loving mother, fired at the policeman her husband brought home Sunday to have sex with her, the news reported.

"I fired at him when he grabbed me and tore away my shirt," she was quoted as saying.

"Then I came out of the room and killed my husband."

"I did the right thing. I'm not worried about my future or the punishment but what scares me is what people will think of me."

The report added that while many police officials expressed sympathy for her, they were baffled as to how a meek woman fired perfectly-aimed killing shots to the men's foreheads.

The woman, who appeared in court today, confessed to the killings and has been remanded in custody pending further investigation.



South African President Nelson Mandela (L) and Princess Diana speak with the press after meeting in the Mandela's home, Genadendal, in Cape Town, South Africa Monday. It is Diana's first public appearance since her arrival in South Africa last week to visit her brother Charles Spencer. — AFP/UNB photo

## Sudanese rebels capture garrison near Juba

NAIROBI, Mar 18: Sudanese rebels said Monday they captured a garrison near the largest southern city still in government hands, and that they seized an assortment of weapons, reports AP.

The rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army said in a statement in Nairobi they had captured Kulippa garrison, about 56 kilometres (35 miles) southwest of Juba early Monday. It leaves only two small towns between the rebel positions and their goal of Juba, SPLA said.

SPLA said the weapons seized included mortars and ammunition.

SPLA spokesman Samson L. Kwaje said the group had seized seven towns, taken 1,000 government troops prisoner and captured 7,000 others in an offensive along Sudan's southern borders with Uganda and Zaire since March 3.

There was no independent confirmation of the rebel

claim. There was no immediate comment either from the Sudanese government, which in the past has denied rebel conquest claims.

Col John Garang, one of the founders of the insurgency, is commanding the forces, Kwaje said.

The capture of Juba, about 1,200 kilometres (744 miles) south of Khartoum, has been a major objective for the rebels and would give them military and morale booster.

The rebels took up arms in Sudan in 1983 to press for autonomy and development for the predominantly Christian and animist South, traditionally dominated by the Arab and Muslim North. More than 1.3 million people have died in fighting and ensuing famines.

Meanwhile, in Asmara, Eritrea, leaders of the National Democratic Alliance — Sudanese opposition group allied with Garang's SPLA — opened discussions in Khartoum.



Nearly one thousand desperate Albanians stand aboard an abandoned ship Monday at the Durres, waiting for a possible departure for Italy. The mafioso are openly organising trips across the Adriatic to Italy, ferrying small groups of Albanian to a fishing vessel moored out at sea. — AFP/UNB photo

## Malaysia bans cloning of human beings

KUALA LUMPUR, Mar 18: Malaysia has banned the cloning of human beings because it was "against nature," Health Minister Chua Jui Meng was quoted as saying by The Star Daily today, reports Reuter.

But it will allow animals to be cloned for scientific purposes.

Chua said the Malaysian cabinet made the decisions recently, with the cloning of humans seen as unethical and an interference with God's creation.

Although the issue touches on animal cloning, there is talk of doing it to human beings and scientists could achieve it. This act is going against nature," Chua was quoted as saying.

He said it would be unethical for any single individual to have double or multiple selves living in different places at the same time.

## Bhutanese refugees in Nepal begin hunger strike

KATHMANDU, Mar 18: Representatives of all the seven Bhutanese refugee camps in east Nepal began a relay hunger strike Monday to draw international attention to the Bhutanese refugee issue in Nepal, a report reaching here said today, reports Xinhua.

The relay fast in the eastern Nepal town of Damak, about 240 kilometres from here, is an effort to urge the ongoing session of the UN commission on human rights in Geneva to consider taking a resolution on the issue, the Bhutanese refugee group the Appeal Movement Coordinating Council (AMCC) said in a press release.

A delegation of hunger strike participants Monday also submitted a petition to the UN session through the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Damak. Stating that the United Nations is their last resort, the refugees in the petition appealed to the session of the UN Commission on Human Rights to adopt a resolution on the Bhutanese refugee problem in Nepal.

Nearly 100,000 Bhutanese refugees have been staying in east Nepal since 1990 when the Bhutanese authorities began to force those of Nepalese origin to leave the country.

## Pak govt suspends 22 customs officials

ISLAMABAD, Mar 18: The government has suspended 22 customs officials at two airport following the arrest of many Pakistani travellers in Saudi Arabia on heroin smuggling charges it was reported today, says AFP.

Two officers of Pakistan's airport security force have also been suspended, the news daily said.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif ordered the suspension of the officials on the grounds of "negligence" because of the large amount of heroin taken from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia. Department proceedings will be initiated against the officials who worked at the Karachi and Islamabad international airports, it added.

Saudi authorities recently provided Islamabad with a list of more than 30 Pakistanis who had been arrested on heroin charges on arrival in the kingdom over the past two months.

A total of more than 1,000 kilogramme of heroin was recovered, the report said.

## Britain goes to polls May 1

LONDON, Mar 18: Prime Minister John Major hit the campaign trail Monday after setting May 1 as the date for general elections widely expected to put him out of work and usher in Britain's first Labour government in almost two decades, reports AFP.

Within hours of announcing the election date Major summoned up memories of the 1992 campaign when he strode into the centre of Luton, near London and climbed up on his now-famous soap box to address the town's people.

Hekled by left-wingers, Major taunted them with the reminder that he had been heckled in the same town five years ago and had gone on to win.

There were no surprises in the long-expected May 1 date, which Major fixed on Monday morning with his Cabinet before getting into his green Daimler Limousine for a courtesy call at Buckingham Palace to tell Queen Elizabeth II.

Parliament, he said, would be dissolved the first week in April.

At a quick press briefing on the doorstep of 10 Downing Street, he brushed aside questions about polls forecasting a landslide victory for the opposition, saying, "In 1992 I was asked that, and I'm still here... I expect to be here after this election. I think we'll win."

## Labour takes 28-point lead over Tories

Another AFP report says: An opinion poll published today the day after Prime Minister John Major announced a date for the general election — gave the Labour Party an unprecedented 28-point lead over the ruling Tories.

The Gallup Poll for the Daily Telegraph showed Tony Blair's party has the backing of more than half the voters — 56.5 per cent — while the Conservatives were on 28.5 per cent.

The centrist Liberal Democrats were trailing badly in third place, down to 9.5 per cent and increasingly squeezed by Labour.

On the issue of leadership, 47 per cent of voters questioned said they believed Blair "would make the best prime minister," compared with only 25 per cent for Major.

His first stop showed the uphill battle he faces: He was almost drowned out by hecklers and demonstrators when he jumped on his wooden soap box and tried to speak to a crowd of more than 2,000.

This multiracial industrial town in suburban London is one of the key swing parliamentary districts that Major's Conservative Party needs to hold if it is to maintain its 18-years grip on power.

"The last time I came to Luton, we had a reception just like this — and we won both the Luton seat and the election," Major said, trying to be heard through a chorus of cheers, curses and catcalls. "I have not a shred of doubt that the five years that lie ahead will five more Conservative years."

But with the opposition Labour Party 28 points ahead in the latest Gallup poll in Tuesday's Daily Telegraph, Major would have to score the greatest upset in British political history. Bookmakers offered 4-1 odds against a Conservative victory.

The prime minister suffered another blow Tuesday when The Sun, Britain's largest daily with 3.6 million circulation, abandoned its long-time support of the Conservatives and announced it was backing Labour leader Tony Blair.



Top Palestinian official for Jerusalem, Faisal Hussein, speaks Monday on his mobile telephone outside a Palestinian protest tent set up near Beith Sahour, south of where Israeli soldiers have taken position around the disputed hill of Har Homa, known in Arabic as Jabel Abu Ghneim, in Arab East Jerusalem. Israeli forces are anticipating potential Palestinian violence since Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reaffirmed Sunday that work would begin this week on the project to build 6,500 homes for Jews on the hill. — AFP/UNB photo

## Election-related violence in Nigeria : Two killed

LAGOS, Nigeria, Mar 18: Two people were killed during election-related violence over the weekend, newspapers reported, tainting Nigeria's first multi-party elections in four years, reports AP.

Gen Sani Abacha's regime has said that the large turnout Saturday — no exact figures have been released — and lack of violent incidents show Nigerians have accepted his plan for a slow return to democracy.

But newspapers Monday reported that two people were killed in the southeastern state of Rivers in fighting that broke out after some people tried to prevent a man from casting his

ballot. Other clashes also have been reported.

Abacha has been accused of corruption and human rights abuses since he grabbed power in a 1993 coup. He had promised a civilian government by the end of 1996, but he said in 1995 that it would be necessary for him to remain in power another three years to ensure a smooth transition to democracy.

Voters across the country on Saturday chose politicians to run municipal governments in 774 towns and cities. Presidential elections are scheduled for next year, two years later than Abacha had promised.

## Israel to begin work on Jewish settlement despite warnings

JERUSALEM, Mar 18: Despite warnings that the West Bank could explode in violence, Israeli surveyors are to begin work on a new Jewish neighbourhood in disputed east Jerusalem, reports AP.

David Bar-Ilan, a top adviser to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, said surveyors would begin measurements at Har Homa, a hilltop Arabs call Jebel Abu Ghneim some time Tuesday.

" Bulldozers and tractors will probably come a day later," he said.

Heightening tension, Israeli authorities gave Faisal Hussein, the top PLO official in Jerusalem, until 7 am (0500 GMT) Tuesday to remove two tents that he set up Monday at the site, his aide Mohammed

Jadallah said. Hussein had said he and a dozen others would remain at the site all night and "the moment the Israeli bulldozers go to work, we will confront them, using peaceful means." He said the atmosphere was similar to the days leading up to the 1987-1993 Palestinian uprising.

The 6,500-home Har Homa project has become a test of both sides' resolve regarding Jerusalem, the most explosive issue on their agenda. Israel captured and annexed east Jerusalem in 1967, and says the entire city is its capital. The Palestinians want the eastern sector, location of Jewish, Muslim and Christian holy sites as well as a large Arab population, as the capital of a future state. Israeli intelligence has re-

portedly warned Netanyahu that the construction could spark riots similar to those that killed 80 people in September after Israel opened an archaeological tunnel near Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem.

Throughout the West Bank, hospitals have begun discharging patients to free beds in anticipation of unrest.

But Netanyahu said Monday he is determined to go ahead with the project this week. "When it comes to Jerusalem, we are ready to confront anyone... to assert our sovereignty," he said. "If we do not stand up to threats over Jerusalem, we will not stand up to threats over anything."

Pressured by the United

States and Jordan, officials from both sides laboured Monday to arrange a summit between Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Some reports said it might be held in secret Monday night.

Bar-Ilan said that "both sides are working on arranging it within the next few days."

Netanyahu apparently hopes to receive explicit promises from Arafat to prevent violence.

Palestinian officials have suggested that they might not be able to contain their people's anger should construction begin — but there is widespread belief in Israel that violence would only occur if Arafat gives his tacit approval.

In Gaza, Jordan's Crown Prince Hassan visited Arafat

Monday and urged him "not turn the area over to clashes" even if the construction begins. He also carried a message from King Hussein, who visited Israel Sunday and has been trying to mediate.

On Monday, after a meeting with Israeli officials, Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said the Palestinians were trying to solve the dispute peacefully.

"We want to settle our differences through negotiations, not... dictations or bulldozers," he said.

Efforts have apparently focused on finding a formula that would enable both sides to save face.

Netanyahu is under heavy pressure from hard-line allies

not to back down. His promise to go ahead with Har Homa enabled him to quell a rebellion in his ranks and survive an opposition no-confidence motion in parliament by a 54-46 vote Monday.

In a concession to Arafat, Israel agreed Monday to grant land rights to his aircraft at the Dahanuza airfield in the Gaza Strip even though overall security arrangements for cargo and passenger traffic have still not been finalised.

A poll in the Yediot Ahronot daily indicated Israelis were evenly divided over the project, with 49 per cent saying the government should delay construction and 47 per cent saying it should start immediately. It had a 4 per cent error margin.