

International

France isolated in crisis over Zaire

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 21. The spectacular success of Zairian rebels has left France diplomatically isolated and has raised questions about the diplomatic and political skills of Kofi Annan, the first sub-Saharan African to lead the United Nations, reports AP.

No other country in the 185-member United Nations has publicly endorsed France's call for a multinational force to intervene in Zaire to protect the tens of thousands of Hutu refugees.

Nor has the Security Council, of which France is a permanent member, gone beyond a statement urging rebel leader Laurent Kabila to accept a cease-fire and a five-point UN peace plan.

Even the African block has remained surprisingly silent since Kabila's forces seized the Zairian army and seized the city of Kisangani last weekend.

Western and African diplomats say there is the widespread feeling that the days of Mobutu rule in Zaire are numbered and it would be better

to allow events to play out on the ground than to push for an arrangement which would leave the future leadership of Zaire uncertain.

France's calls for a multinational force are widely seen as an attempt to prop up the current regime in Zaire, despite Paris claims that its motives are strictly humanitarian.

As long as Kabila can avoid an embarrassing — and well documented — incident of mass murder of Hutu refugees, it appears unlikely that this assessment will change.

Some Africans believe that what is really developing is a power-play by the United States and Britain for influence in francophone Africa, which France considers its traditional fiefdom.

They point out that the rebels are receiving covert support from English-speaking African countries such as Uganda and Rwanda. The United States denies any such plan and has repeatedly stated the commonality of views between Washington and Paris, even if that is not the case.

"After Rwanda and Burundi, it is today the immense Zaire that is sliding without a murmur into the American orbit," wrote Hechir ben Yahmed in the French-language news magazine, Jeune Afrique. "The Americans have maneuvered magnificently using anglophone countries bordering the Great Lakes and the prestige of (South African President Nelson) Mandela."

True or not, it is clear that France has been unable to muster strong support for intervention to overcome American and British opposition.

Annan has also displayed weakness and vacillation in coping with the crisis. The focal point for UN diplomacy is former Algerian diplomat Mohammed Sahnoun, who has been shuttling throughout the region for months trying to negotiate and sell the UN peace plan.

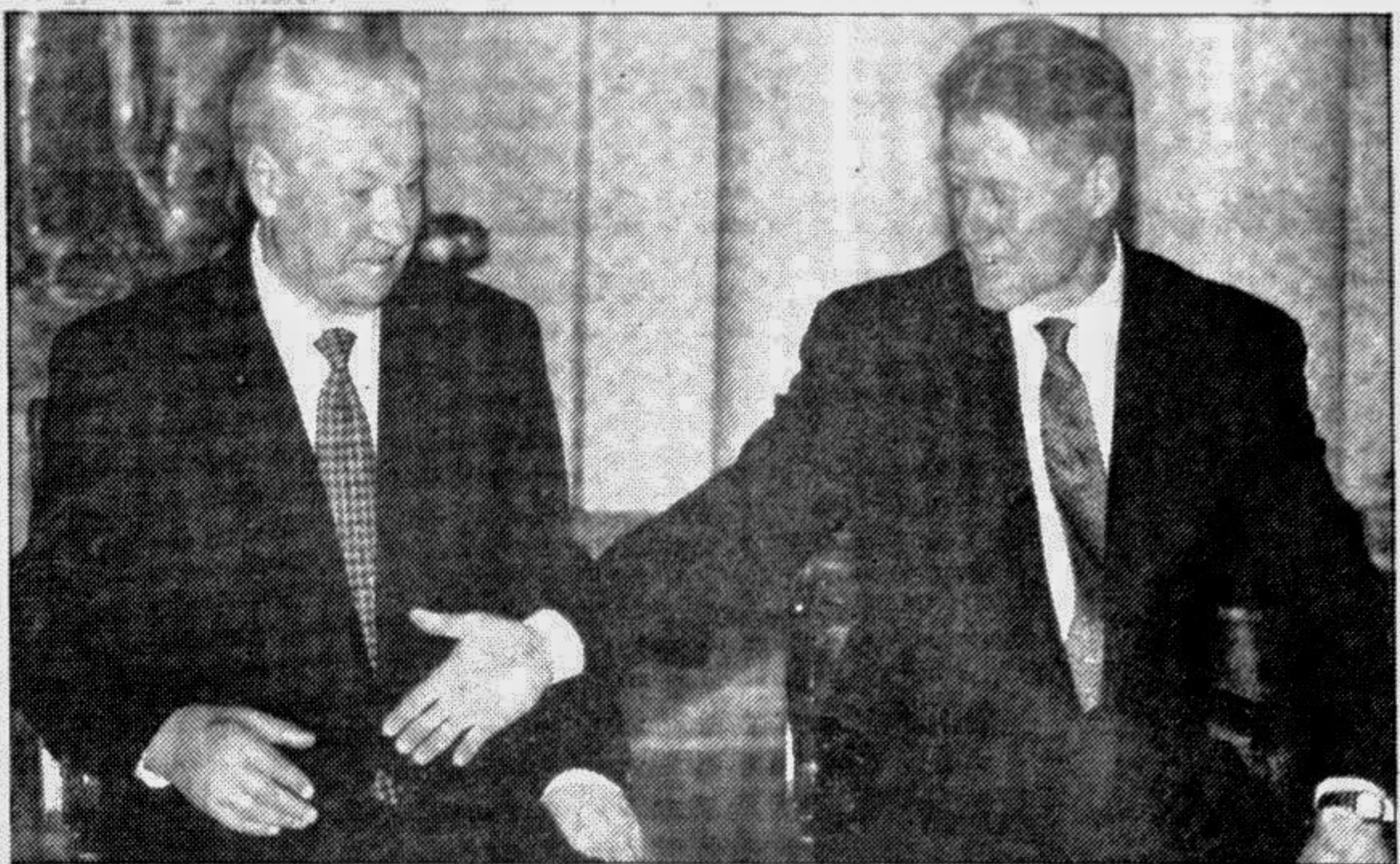
Annan himself has vacillated in approaching the problem. Last month in Paris, An-

Major permits minister to remain in post despite allegations

LONDON, Mar 21: British Prime Minister John Major allowed a government minister to remain in his post despite being told the minister had confessed to taking 25,000 pounds (40,000 dollars) to ask questions in parliament, it was reported today, says AFP.

The minister was also initially promoted to his position after his admission to conservative officials that he had taken the money to ask the questions on behalf of Harrods store owner Mohammed Al Fayed, the left-of-centre Guardian newspaper claimed.

The Guardian went on to publish five pages of evidence submitted to an inquiry into the "cash-for-questions" allegations and name five Tory members of parliament, including Neil Hamilton, which it implicated in secret cash payments for "parliamentary services."



Russian President Boris Yeltsin (L) shakes hands with his US counterpart Bill Clinton during a photo call before a dinner hosted by Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari at the Presidential Palace 20 March in Helsinki. Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin are scheduled to hold summit talks here 21 March. —AFP/UNB photo



Bill (Cosby) (R) keeps a straight face after throwing out a one-liner at his meeting with President Nelson Mandela at his Cape Town home, Gendendale on 20 March. His wife Camille takes the centre with a bouquet of flowers presented to her by the President. — AFP/UNB photo

US troops in Europe put on alert

WASHINGTON, Mar 21: US troops in Europe have been put on notice to get ready in case they are ordered to Africa to evacuate Americans from Zaire, a Pentagon official said Thursday, reports AFP.

Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said coup talk "is in the wind and we have to pay attention to the fact that there could be rapid change in Kinshasa."

The State Department has encouraged Americans to leave Zaire but they have not been ordered to do so and the US Ambassador has not requested the evacuation of the capital.

But the Pentagon already has moved a 30-man military team into the region to assess airports, roads and other infrastructure in the event US troops are called in to conduct an evacuation.

US troops in Europe are making preparations so that they will be ready to move quickly if an evacuation order is issued, said a Pentagon official, speaking on condition he not be identified.

1st UN food shipment arrives in Iraq

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 21: The first truckload of food under the United Nations oil-for-food programme has arrived in Iraq, UN officials said Thursday, reports AP.

Eight trucks carrying 16 metric tons of chickpeas and 109 metric tons of vegetable oil crossed Wednesday into Zakhu in northern Iraq from Turkey, said UN spokesman Hiro Ueki. The shipments were part of contracts for 2,000 metric tons of chickpeas and 10,000 metric tons of vegetable oil.

The shipments were to pass to a distribution site in central Iraq. Distribution will start "as soon as practical arrangements are completed," said UN spokesman Juan-Carlos Brandt. He said he did not know how long that would take.

The United Nations agreed in December to allow Iraq to sell up to 2 billion dollars in oil for an initial six-month period to buy food and medicine. The oil sales have begun.

The agreement came in response to deteriorating health and economic conditions in Iraq as result of UN sanctions imposed after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990.

Iraqi officials have complained about delays in food deliveries. They blame a cumbersome system set up to make sure the government does not divert supplies to groups loyal to it.

In an interview published Thursday, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz referred to the agreement as "oil for nothing."

"The Iraqi people have neither received one loaf of bread nor a tablet of aspirin," he said in an interview with the Arabic newspaper Ashraq Al-Awsat, which is based in London.

But Western officials have also blamed Iraq, which demands that it have 30 days of supplies before distribution begins. They say bureaucratic problems have mounted because Iraq will not ensure that UN observers can move around the country freely.

A shipment of rice from Thailand is heading to the southern port of Basra and is expected to arrive Sunday, Brandt said.

Off the Record

Yet another cause for appetite loss

WASHINGTON: In the latest glimpse into the basic biology of hunger, scientists have learned that a brain hormone identified less than a year ago can suppress the appetite without causing stress or similar side effects, reports Reuter.

The research, by scientists at the Salk Institute of Biological Studies and the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, California, will appear on Friday in the journal Science.

The experiments on the hormone, called urocortin, were performed on rats. Much more research needs to be done before scientists know whether the discovery can be harnessed to help control human obesity or treat eating disorders like anorexia.

Urocortin, discovered by Salk scientists last November, appears related to another hormone, Corticotropin Releasing Factor, or CRF, which plays a role in stress and in the relationship between stress and appetite loss.

But according to the new research, urocortin has a stronger effect on hunger and appetite than CRF does, without the stress factor.

In one experiment, lab rats were not fed for 24 hours. Then one group of rats was injected with urocortin. A control group was not the rats that had the injection ate much less than those that did not receive the hormone. And the bigger the dose of urocortin the bigger the drop in food consumption.

Warning against eating kangaroo meat

SYDNEY: Australian doctors have issued a warning un-deercoed kangaroo meat could carry a disease whose effects can range from mild influenza to spontaneous abortions and even be potentially fatal, reports Reuter.

The warning followed an outbreak of the toxoplasmosis disease in late 1994 after rare kangaroo meat was eaten by a group of people at a Christmas party in Brisbane, Queensland restaurant.

A study of the outbreak reported in the latest edition of the Communicable Diseases Intelligence Journal said the disease was evident in 12 people who attended the function including a pregnant woman who went into premature labour.

The study by a group of Queensland doctors could not confirm the source of the toxoplasmosis outbreak but said kangaroo meat was the most likely source.

BRIEFLY

Arafat leaves Egypt:

Palestinian President Yasser Arafat left Egypt at the end of a brief visit during which he discussed with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak Israel's settlement policies in disputed East Jerusalem, AFP reports from Cairo.

Arafat who was heading back to Gaza declined to make any statements on his departure. His one-day visit to Cairo on Thursday coincided with another by Dore Gold, the Advisor of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who carried proposals by the right-wing Israeli leader concerning negotiations with the Palestinians.

Protesters held in Belarus:

Police clubbed, beat and detained dozens of people who gathered Friday to protest the authoritarian rule of President Alexander Lukashenko in this former Soviet republic, AP reports from Minsk.

More than 100 people were arrested, according to the Belarusian Popular Front, which organised the protest. No injuries were reported. Among those arrested were at least five journalists, mostly from opposition newspapers. On the eve of the demonstration, police arrested the front's deputy chairman, Yuri Kaldyka, disrupting a Bible study group he was leading at BNF headquarters in Minsk, BNF spokesman Valery Buivol said. The police did not provide a reason for his arrest.

8 die in bldg collapse:

Eight people were killed and another five injured when a residential building collapsed in southern China's Guangdong province, it was reported today, AFP from Hong Kong reports.

The victims were asleep when the accident happened late Tuesday in Heyuan city, the Chinese-language daily Sing Tao said. Initial investigation showed that adjacent building works led to the collapse of the building's foundations.

Aussie troops placed on standby:

Australian troops have been placed on standby in case the crisis in neighbouring Papua New Guinea worsened, Prime Minister John Howard said today, Reuter reports from Canberra.

Howard told reporters the move, made late on Thursday, was sensible in view of the situation in the South Pacific nation, but did not mean Australia had decided to deploy troops. It was in response to a routine determination by the head of the Australian defence force.

Blast claims 3 children in Peru:

Three children were killed when a grenade they were playing with exploded Friday in a crowded market, police said. Ten others were injured, AP reports from Lima.

The grenade went off in a popular market in the middle-class Aarate neighbourhood of the San Juan de Lurigancho district of Lima Friday afternoon, police said. The three children killed were aged 12-14, police said. Two died at the scene and the third died en route to the hospital, police said.

The police spokesman did not know whether those who died were boys or girls, or where the children got the grenade.

6 crewmen still missing in China:

Six crewmen are still unaccounted for after a cargo ship sank following a collision in the mouth of China's Yangtze river, the China Daily reported yesterday, AFP says from Beijing.

Of 10 crewmen who fell in the river after the accident on Wednesday, four were saved during a two-hour search, the report said, adding that the others were never found.

Lankan chopper blasts in mid-air, falls into sea

COLOMBO, Mar 21: A Sri Lankan Air Force helicopter gun ship exploded in mid-air while on an anti-rebel mission in the island's north-eastern district of Mullaitivu, a Tamil rebel newspaper said today, reports AFP.

The Eelamadam newspaper run by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said civilians had seen the Russian-built Mi 24 attack aircraft exploding and falling into the sea on Wednesday afternoon.

Defence sources said there was a Russian pilot onboard the aircraft which had a total of seven security personnel. A joint navy and air force rescue has so far failed to find the wreckage.

Sri Lanka goes to local council polls

COLOMBO, Mar 21: Sri Lankans went to the polls today to elect members to 238 local councils in what is widely seen as the first political test of president Chandrika Kumaratunga's ruling people's alliance government, reports Reuter.

Polling began at 7:00 am (0100 GMT) and officials said early voting in the capital Colombo was brisk.

Some 10 million Sri Lankans are eligible to vote to elect 3,567 representatives to 238 local bodies.

Election Commissioner Dayananda Dissanayake said on Thursday that more than 100,000 public servants were manning 8,246 polling stations across the island, except in the northern and eastern provinces where government troops are fighting Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels.

Some 20,000 candidates from 12 political parties and 132 independent groups have joined the fray for seats on 12

ULFA insurgents threaten Assam govt

GUWAHATI, India, Mar 21: A separatist group today threatened to destroy oil and gas stations in the far-eastern Indian state of Assam unless the government calls off an army of offensive against it, reports AFP.

The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) accused the Indian army and para-military troops of unleashing terror on the people in the state rich in oil, tea and timber.

"If the killings, rape, atrocities and suppression of the Assamese people are not stopped immediately, we will... destroy all the oil-based industries of the state," the ULFA said in a statement.

Palestinians protest Jewish settlements in E Jerusalem

HEBRON, West Bank, Mar 21: Hundreds of Palestinians threw stones at Israeli soldiers in the West Bank town of Hebron today during protests against the building of a Jewish settlement in Arab east Jerusalem, reports Reuter.

Troops in full battle gear fired rubber bullets and teargas. Witnesses said up to four youths were lightly injured by rubber bullets.

Demonstrators also threw several firebombs, damaging an army jeep, witnesses said.

Jewish settlers, who are guarded by the army in the Israeli-controlled heart of Hebron, threw stones back at the Palestinians.

Soldiers charged demonstrators and briefly detained three, but the troops freed them when they came under a heavy barrage of stones.

Israeli security forces were on alert for protests in the West

Annan blames rebels for delay in Angolan unity govt

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 21: UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan says former rebels bear most of the blame for the latest delay in setting up a power-sharing government in Angola, reports AP.

The formation of a new government has already been postponed three times and the installation ceremony scheduled for Monday is expected to be postponed as well.

In a report to the Security Council, Annan said the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, or UNITA, has failed to send all of its representatives to Luanda, the capital, to take part in the new government and National Assembly. The government cannot be sworn in until all deputies and ministers are present.

It is a matter of very serious concern that the government's formation has again been postponed, owing primarily to the failure of UNITA to send all its officials to Luanda, as previously agreed," Annan said in the report, dated Wednesday and released Thursday.

Annan, who is traveling in Africa, plans to visit Angola from Saturday to Tuesday to push for the start of the new government.

The Angola government and UNITA signed a peace treaty in 1994, ending a two-decade civil war. The treaty called for a joint army and a unity government headed by President Jose Eduardo dos Santos.

Soldiers have been demobilized and most steps in the peace plan have been carried out, but still at issue is the future role of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi.

UNITA had said it would send all of its representatives to Luanda by last Monday. But as of Wednesday, only 43 of the 70 UNITA deputies had arrived only seven of the 11 ministers, Annan said.



A religious Taliban militia stands besides the unexploded grenades at police ammunition depot in the Afghan eastern city of Jalalabad, 20 March. An estimated 200 tonnes explosive went up in the world's biggest explosions on 19 March which left upto 50 people dead and hundreds injured. —AFP UNB photo

Triples as defender of nation

TOKYO: North Korea revealed on Friday what must be a record for any country's armed forces — 22 groups of triples serving in its army, navy or air force, reports Reuter.

A report on Friday by the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), said North Korean leader Kim Jong-il met the triples at a special function and honoured their service with gifts.

"Comrade Kim Jong-il warmly received the triples who are serving in the ground, naval or air forces, learned about their service and life and noted with great satisfaction that they all grew strong enough to defend the country," said KCNA, which was monitored in Tokyo.

"Present on the occasion were 22 groups of triples who have grown to be reliable soldiers under the warm care of the Workers' Party of Korea," it said.

Columbia to be put into orbit on April 3

CAPE CANAVERAL (Fla.), Mar 21: The US space agency said Thursday it had set April 3 for the launch of the space shuttle Columbia on a 16-day science mission, reports Reuter.

NASA managers, meeting at Florida's Kennedy Space Centre, declared the space shuttle and its seven astronauts ready for flight, said agency spokesman Bruce Buckingham.

Columbia, the oldest of NASA's four shuttles, was to carry into orbit a laboratory module housing a wide range of scientific experiments, including several to study the behaviour of fire in space.

Fujimori denies report on MRTA prisoners

LIMA, Mar 21: President Alberto Fujimori "emphatically" denied Thursday he was willing to release rebel prisoners to end a three-month-old hostage crisis, dampening hopes for a quick solution to the standoff, reports AFP.

"My government's position remains the same and there will be no release for even one of the MRTA prisoners," he said in the town of Huarura.

Japan's Kyodo news service reported Wednesday that Fujimori was willing to concede the release of some Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) rebels in exchange for the freedom of 72 hostages held at the home of the Japanese Ambassador since December 17.

"We are ready to make a certain compromise," Fujimori was quoted by Kyodo as telling Japan's Vice Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura Tuesday. "I think it would be an answer MRTA could agree with."

But Fujimori "emphatically, categorically and definitively," denied the report saying it was "totally false."

Lankan chopper blasts in mid-air, falls into sea

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UNGA president proposes Security Council expansion

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 21: He did not put forth any candidates for an expanded Security Council, but it is widely believed that Japan and Germany will be among the first to join as permanent members.

Razali proposed that the five new permanent members comprise one developing country each from Africa, Asia and Latin America/the Caribbean, and two industrialized states, while the four non-permanent members would be one each from Africa, Asia, eastern Europe and Latin America/the Caribbean.

The current permanent Security Council members, who have veto power over Council resolutions, are Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States. The new permanent members would not wield veto powers.

Critics have said the composition of the Council — established just after World War II and reflecting the world's nuclear powers at the time — is outdated, with economic powers Japan and Germany absent and with no permanent members from Africa and Latin America.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has expressed his views in the past that the Security Council is a creature of the politics of 1945, and it is his opinion that the Council needs to be expanded," UN spokesman Juan-Carlos Brandt said.

The proposal by Razali was the first to detail restructuring of the Security Council, which has been discussed in various forms for years. Developing countries make up the vast majority of the 185-nation world body, and are certain to welcome any reform that increases their influence in the Security Council.

Expanding the Security Council would require an amendment to the UN Charter, Razali, who is also Malaysia's ambassador to the UN, cannot unilaterally change the charter during his one-year term, but is an influential figure as head of the General Assembly, which must ratify any amendment by a two-thirds vote.

While no country can veto such a reform, support from Security Council permanent members is considered essential, UN officials say.

British Ambassador John Weston said Razali's proposal "reflects the wide support that has justifiably been given to the candidatures of Japan and Germany for permanent membership, and the need to ensure an enhanced representation for the developing world within the Security Council."

But Weston, addressing the Council, cautioned, "at least in our view, the size of the Council envisaged is too large."

US Representative for Special Political Affairs Karl Inderfurth was also critical of the proposed size, saying "we believe that an expansion to 20-21 members is the largest appropriate to preserve the Council's ability to respond effectively to what are urgent demands."

"We support an expansion, but only one which strengthens the Council's capacity while safeguarding its decision-making efficiency," Razali said the size was justified "because fresh perspectives are brought to Council deliberations and broader alliance created in decision-making."

Italian Ambassador Francesco Paolo Fulci was even more critical, likening the UN to a train, and the 175 countries eligible for non-permanent Security Council seats to passengers.

"All 175 of them would be crowded into what would be turned into third-class wagons, and fight over the 14 vacant elective seats, or else be left standing there, holding on for dear life. Now I ask, in all honesty, which of us wants to be left standing there in third class?"

Razali said he hopes his proposal will be adopted by the General Assembly by September, and that the Assembly will vote on the actual members of the expanded Security Council by next February.

Under the proposal, the Assembly would vote a week later to amend the UN charter, he said.

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