

International

# Ruling party sweeps opposition in Lankan local govt polls

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka, Mar 22: President Chandrika Kumaratunga's governing party swept the opposition in nationwide local government polls in a test seen as a referendum on the popularity of her government, reports AP.

With results known in 236 of 238 councils on Saturday, the Peoples' Alliance had won a majority in 193 of the councils up for elections, while the opposition United National Party was left with 43, state television said.

Kumaratunga waged the campaign for Friday's elections on national issues, focusing on the costly war effort against Tamil separatist rebels and her peace plan to end the war which has claimed nearly 50,000 lives.

She also campaigned on the government's record of restoring human rights, curbing bribery and corruption, and continuing welfare programs despite spiraling defense spending.

The final result was to be known later Saturday.

"This is the people's endorsement of the government's policies," minister of Trade and Commerce Kinsley Wickremaratne told The Associated Press.

He said the victory would encourage Kumaratunga's plan to shift power from the national government to the provinces, including the Tamil-dominated north and east, in an effort to satisfy Tamil demands for self-rule.

The last two years have witnessed some of the biggest battles, but Kumaratunga has vowed to end the war through a policy of reconciliation with Tamils who claim discrimination by the majority Sinhalese.

The Defense Ministry extended an overnight nationwide curfew until noon Saturday (0600 GMT) to avoid trouble during vote counting.

Sporadic clashes during polling left at least 10 people injured.

# US vetoes UN resolution criticising Israeli settlement plan in Jerusalem

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 22: The United States has again vetoed a Security Council resolution criticising Israel for plans to build a Jewish neighbourhood in east Jerusalem, reports AP.

The vote Friday reinforced American isolation on the contentious issue and also underscored the desire of European and Arab governments for the United Nations to play a stronger role.

The resolution, pushed by Arab ambassadors despite the threat of a US veto, demanded that Israel stop building the 6,500-unit Har Homa housing area in east Jerusalem, where the Palestinians want to establish a future capital.

The United States, while saying that the project interferes with the Middle East peace process, repeatedly has urged that the Israelis and Palestinians work out their problems outside of the United Nations.

The housing controversy will not be resolved by interference from this council, the (UN) General Assembly, or any other outside party. It can only be resolved by the parties themselves," US Ambassador Bill Richardson told council members before casting his veto.

Friday's vote came the same day as a suicide bomber set off explosives at a Tel Aviv cafe, killing at least three other people and wounding 47. The Muslim group Hamas has claimed responsibility for the bombing.

The vote was 13-1 with one abstention - Costa Rica. The Central American country maintains close relations with Israel and its among the few countries with an embassy in Jerusalem. Most countries station their diplomats in Tel Aviv because of Jerusalem's contested status.

Israel's acting UN ambassador David Peleg, speaking to the council after the vote, called it a "one-sided draft resolution which singles out Israel" and thanked the members who did not vote for it. Palestinians, though, blasted the United States veto.

"The bitter reality is that this veto has been cast to shield Israel from the will of the international community and to

exempt Israel from the provisions of international law and the charter of the United Nations," Palestinian UN observer Nasser al-Kidwa told the council after the vote.

Al-Kidwa also condemned the bombing, but added, "We will not believe that the occurrence of such acts could be isolated from the tense circumstances which were created by the government of Israel."

On March 7, the United States broke with its closest allies and vetoed a European-sponsored resolution against Israel's plan to build the housing development at the site that Israelis call Har Homa and the Arabs refer to as Jabal Abu Ghneim.

That earlier veto was only the third time since the end of the Cold War that the United States had used its council veto.

Following the latest veto, the Arabs referred the issue to the 185-member UN General Assembly, which approved a resolution criticising Israel by a vote of 130-2, with the United States and Israel alone in their opposition.

There is no veto in the General Assembly, whose resolutions lack force under international law.

Kidwa said Friday that Arab ambassadors would again approach the General Assembly to "try to redress some of our grievances."

Peleg said UN discussions on Israel - he said the Jewish state has been "lambasted" helped lead to attacks against Israel.

Peleg said such talk "contributed to an atmosphere which was further interpreted by terrorist organisations as conducive to operations against Israel."

But al-Kidwa took the opposite line, saying earlier in the day that "had the council reacted earlier as it should have, maybe, and only maybe, we shouldn't have had this incident today."

Responding to Peleg's statement, Egyptian Ambassador Nabil Elaraby said the Security Council had an obligation to deal with issues threatening international peace and the Middle East was no exception.



Iranian opposition National Liberation Army (NLA) President Maryam Rajavi (2nd L) and her husband, Iranian opposition leader Massud Rajavi (L) attend the celebration of the Iranian New Year at an army camp on the Iraq-Iran border Thursday. Rajavi called for young Iranians to join the NLA to "overthrow the Mullah's regime." The exiled Iranian opposition counts some 30,000 members. — AFP/UNB photo

# BRIEFLY

**Egyptians call for war against Israel:** Hundreds of Muslim worshippers joined political leaders and activists Friday to call for a holy war against Israel over its building of a Jewish neighbourhood in historically Arab east Jerusalem, AP reports from Cairo.

The protest at al-Zahar, Egypt's most prestigious mosque, was organized by the country's main opposition parties, which have long criticized the government of President Hosni Mubarak for what they see as its lenient stance toward Israel. The protest ended before Friday's bombing of a cafe in Tel Aviv, Israel, that killed four people.

**Blast claims 3 cops in Russia:** Three policemen were killed and two seriously injured when their armoured personnel carrier was hit by an explosion in the southern Russian Republic of North Ossetia, Russia's Interfax News Agency reported yesterday. Reuter reports from London.

The agency, monitored by the British Broadcasting Corporation, quoted North Ossetian interior ministry officials as saying the blast occurred on Friday near the border with another Russian republic, Ingushetia. The blast believed to have been caused by an anti-tank mine, the officials said.

**Mobutu returns home:** Cancer-stricken Zairean President Mobutu Sese Seko, who returned home Friday amid confusion, was to resume normal activities yesterday, Zairean television reported quoting an official communiqué, AFP reports from Kinshasa.

The long-serving president's return, greeted with indifference by the man in the street, was seen as a desperate last effort to save his dying regime from collapse, but rebel leaders rejected his calls for a ceasefire. Meanwhile several hundred US troops were ordered to West Africa to support an evacuation of Americans from Zaire should it become necessary, the Pentagon said.

**Chopper crash kills 2 in S Korea:** Two South Korean army officers were killed after their helicopter crashed into a cattle shed in Yongin, south of Seoul, a defence ministry spokesman said yesterday, Reuter reports from Seoul.

The UH-60 helicopter crashed in heavy fog with four officers on board while returning to its base late on Friday following training, he said. The two survivors were not seriously injured. "We suspect thick fog caused the crash, but we are still investigating why the helicopter crashed," the spokesman added.

**Clinton arrives in Washington:** President Bill Clinton arrived in Washington early yesterday morning after his two-day summit with Russian President Boris Yeltsin in Helsinki, Finland, Reuter reports from Washington.

Clinton, wheelchair-bound after an accident last week, flew into Andrews Air Force base aboard his Air Force One, jumbo jet and was lowered on a platform elevator to a specially equipped van for the trip to the White House.

# Albanian rebels vow to oust Berisha

TEPELENA, Albania, Mar 22: Rebel leaders controlling southern Albania backed down from many of their demands Friday but remained adamant about one: That president Sali Berisha be sacked, reports AP.

Leaders of the 12 rebel-held regions called on Premier Bashkim Fino to appoint a special multiparty presidential committee to replace Berisha before elections due by June.

But they backed away from earlier threats to withdraw their support from Fino's caretaker government and did not insist on a seat on the committee naming a new president.

Albania has been in turmoil since January over the collapse of shady investment schemes that cost many people their life savings. What began as anti-government protests has since grown into an armed uprising centered in the south.

The statement issued by rebel leaders Friday after a meeting in Tepelena, 160 kilometres (100 miles) south of Tirana, contained one new demand - that Fino control the secret and regular police forces. Rebel leaders apparently fear persecution should Berisha remain in power or if he - or others in his party - retain control of the police.

Throughout the crisis, Berisha has refused demands to step down, instead agreeing to early elections by June and appointing a new interim government that includes members of the opposition, such as Fino, a Socialist.

Fino has also refused to force Berisha out, and has been trying to consolidate his power in the face of obstruction from Parliament, which is dominated by Berisha's Democratic Party.

In addition, a shadowy group, the Committee for National Salvation, thought to be controlled by pro-Berisha militants, has warned it would mobilise thousands of supporters to fight anyone who seeks the president's removal.

# US sending troops to Zaire for evacuation of Americans

WASHINGTON, Mar 22: The Clinton administration is sending "several hundred" US troops into western Africa to prepare for a possible evacuation of Americans from Zaire, the Pentagon said, reports AP.

The move Friday came as the State Department warned US citizens to defer all travel to that country because of the potential for unrest.

No order has been issued for an evacuation from Zaire, officials stressed. The Pentagon order to move up to 250 men and women as part of a "joint task force" is strictly a precautionary measure, Pentagon sources said.

The troops primarily are coming from an Army airborne unit based in Italy. Forces from other services are included, as well as members of the US Air Force Transportation Command, which is based in the United States.

"The Department of Defence has directed the US European Command to deploy enabling forces, consisting of several hundred personnel, as part of contingency planning for a possible future evacuation from Zaire," a Pentagon statement said.

"This deployment does not represent a US commitment to any particular course of action," the statement said.

"This new force will augment a 30-member US military team that has been in Zaire this week, helping determine what action might be necessary to evacuate Americans."

The new units will deploy to Brazzaville, in the Republic of the Congo, and Libreville, in the Republic of Gabon, and some may go to Zaire "if that becomes necessary as part of the planning process," the Pentagon said.

The task force will be commanded by Maj. Gen. Edwin P. Smith.

Gabon and the Congo are located to the north and west of Zaire, and could be used as staging points for any kind of evacuation. Zaire's capital of Kinshasa is located across a river from Brazzaville, and travel by boat is still possible, administration officials have said.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, Pentagon sources said the forces had begun their movement towards Africa.

They will be taking some communications and transportation equipment with them, including some helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, the sources said.

# AI urges China to refrain from using death penalty

BEIJING, Mar 22: Amnesty International today called for restraint from China as it puts down a spate of racial rioting and bomb attacks in the troubled Muslim-majority region of Xinjiang, reports AFP.

"We call on the Chinese authorities to refrain from using the death penalty against anybody tried in connection with the recent ethnic unrest in the northwest region of Xinjiang," the London-based organisation said in a fax received in Beijing.

The authorities should disclose the names and charges against all detainees, ensure they are not subject to torture and provide a public and fair trial.

Long-standing racial tension in Xinjiang exploded into violence in early February when around 1,000 ethnic Uighurs took to the streets in a town bordering Kazakhstan and called for independence from China.

Official sources say nine people were killed and 300 initially detained, but unofficial sources put the death toll as high as 70, with more than 1,000 detained.

Three weeks later, three bombs exploded on public buses in the regional capital of Urumqi, and killed nine, according to official figures.

Chinese authorities have only admitted to 15 arrests, nine involving the bus bombings and six involving the riots.

But the United Revolutionary National Front (URNF), a Uighur separatist organisation in exile in Kazakhstan, said Chinese authorities were set to execute 10 young Uighur sympathisers on March 20 in Urumqi.

# Dalai Lama arrives in Taiwan

KAOHSIUNG, Taiwan, Mar 22: Waving Tibet's snow lion flag and portraits of the Dalai Lama, followers cheered the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader as he arrived on his first visit to Taiwan Saturday, in a trip condemned by China as a convention of "splittists," reports AP.

The Dalai Lama told a brief news conference at the airport in this southern port city that he would promote "basic human values" and religious harmony during his six-day visit.

"I'm looking forward to seeing your President Lee Teng-hui (but)... always keep in my mind that any activities of mine should not bring any embarrassment to anybody," said a smiling Dalai Lama.

China, which has occupied Tibet since 1950 and also claims sovereignty over Taiwan, says the visit amounts to a meeting of two "splittists," its term for those it accuses of trying to break away from China.

Taiwan authorities and the Dalai Lama clique are colluding and using each other, consorting with evil doers, going further and further down the road of splitting the motherland," China's People's Daily newspaper quoted unnamed Tibet specialists as saying Saturday.

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# Taliban to attend OIC spl summit in Pakistan today

ISLAMABAD, Mar 22: The fundamentalist Taliban movement of Afghanistan is attending Sunday's special summit of the Islamic Conference (OIC), hosted by Pakistan, as an observer while the Afghanistan seat remains empty, reports AFP.

"We don't think that this would be of any assistance to the problem in Afghanistan," Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Al Adin Boroujerdi said when asked if he welcomed the Taliban's attendance.

But the deputy foreign minister told AFP through a translator that the issue was something that "is related to the host" Pakistan.

# Myanmar junta blames internal religious clashes

YANGON, Mar 22: A senior Myanmar military official today accused traitors at home and "neo colonialists" abroad of orchestrating recent racial and religious clashes, reports Reuter.

Above ground internal traitors, contracting with the neo-colonialists, are instigating and inciting to cause racial and religious conflicts and mar already-restored community peace and tranquillity, official media quoted lieutenant General Tin Co as saying at a ceremony opening a dam.

He added that racial and religious conflicts could lead to disintegration of the country.

Analysts in Yangon said he was referring to the recent unrest in the city of Mandalay, where Buddhist monks demonstrated.

The city remains under an 8 PM to 4 AM curfew, residents and official sources said.

# Gunmen kill 7 Hindus in Kashmir

NEW DELHI, Mar 22: Unidentified gunmen shot dead seven Hindus near a village in Kashmir's Badgam district, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said today, reports Reuter.

The news agency, quoting police, said the incident took place on Friday night at Sangrampur-Beerwah in the district forming part of India's Jammu and Kashmir state. Where Muslim separatists have been waging a seven-year-old rebellion.



Two seriously injured Israeli women get first-aid in the street outside the bombed "A Propo" cafe in Tel Aviv Friday. Four Israelis were killed and 48 wounded in the suicide attack claimed by the Islamic Hamas movement. — AFP/UNB photo

# Off the Record

**Grenade fishing!**

SARANDA, Albania: The sea here was full of fish. No more. The reason: grenade fishing, reports AP.

Thousands of impoverished Albanians have taken it up - some for just a splash of fun, others to soothe their hunger pains.

"It is an easy way to get free food," said Kastriot Lola. "All it takes is a toss of a grenade and scores of fish rise afloat on the surface."

Since Saranda fell to the hands of armed anti-government rebels this month, food supplies have been scarce.

Bread, flour and sugar have nearly doubled in price, and bandits have stolen what little is left on shopowners' shelves.

Still, Saranda's outdoor market always seemed full of bream, octopus and other seafood.

Now, however, "So much grenade fishing took place at the start of the revolt that the fish have been wiped out," said Lola, a taxi driver who joined in to bring free fish home to his family.

"Now, it's just teen-agers entertaining themselves with splashing sea explosions."

# Rare quadruplets

NEW YORK: Four identical baby girls were born on Friday afternoon to a young New York couple in an event so rare it is believed to happen only once in 11 million births, hospital officials said, reports Reuter.

The infants, born over four minutes beginning at 3 pm est (2000 GMT), were delivered by caesarean section by two obstetricians, Drs Gary Steinman and Adiel Fleischer, chief of high risk obstetrics at Long Island Jewish Hospital in New Hyde park.

Steinman said what made the births unusual was having quadruplets without fertility drugs and that the infants are identical.

"This is so rare we can hardly begin to estimate the odds of this happening. You probably have a better chance of winning the lottery," Steinman said.

A hospital spokeswoman said identical quadruplets are born only once every 11 million births. She said they have searched medical literature and have been unable to find record of any identical quadruplets born over the last 40 years.

The infants, delivered seven weeks prematurely, weighed between 2 pounds and one ounce and 3 pounds, 3 ounces (1.5 kg).

The mother, Iris Borgis, 30, of Astoria in the Queens Borough of New York, is a store manager at Macy's Department Store. The father, Martin, works for the telephone company.

Both the mother and infants are in good condition, the hospital said. It was the mother's first pregnancy, and there was no known history of multiple births in the family, the spokeswoman said.

The babies have no yet been named and are known as a, b, c and d for the moment. They will be kept in the hospital about a month, doctors said, and the mother was expected to go home in about a week.

# US, Russia differ over NATO

HELSINKI, Mar 22: US President Bill Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin sealed their partnership with deals on everything from nuclear missiles to economic aid at their summit on Friday, but differences remained over NATO, reports Reuter.

Hailing their summit as a success, they continued to disagree on NATO enlargement into Eastern Europe but promised to cut tensions over the issue to the minimum by building stronger ties between Russia and the 16-nation alliance.

"Great," Clinton said enthusiastically at the end of the presidents' joint news conference. "I can tell he (Yeltsin) feels great... and I feel fine."

Yeltsin, having given reforms a decisive push this week with his cabinet reshuffle, joined forces with Clinton to boost Russia's fledgling market economy, foreign investment and trade - all to try to bring tangible benefits to the Russian people.

The two men held out the prospect of even deeper cuts in long-range nuclear weapons, to around one-fifth of the level at the height of the Cold War. They also reached other agreements on arms control.

The point, Clinton said, was to combine all these factors in "building an undivided and democratic Europe for the first time in history."

Friday's summit talks, held at the official residence of Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari overlooking a partly-frozen Baltic Sea, lasted a total of just over four hours.

Both Clinton and Yeltsin have said they were willing to seek compromises in difficult areas and seemed determined to confound predictions that the summit would fail on differences over NATO.

# 3 killed as militant blown himself up

Netanyahu blames Arafat for suicide bombing

TEL AVIV, Israel, Mar 22: A deadly bomb shattered a serene afternoon as Israelis strolled the city in costumes worn to mark the joyous festival of Purim. An Islamic militant carrying nail-studded explosives in a shopping bag had blown himself up in a quiet cafe, killing himself and three Israelis, reports AP.

Israel clamped a closure on the West Bank and Gaza and was expected to take other severe measures: Blowing up the home of the suicide bomber, putting his village under curfew, barring travel between Palestinian villages and blockading Palestinian-ruled cities in the West Bank.

But the critical question Saturday was whether Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will continue implementing the

Israel-PLO peace accords - or end the peacemaking that he opposed in the past, when he was opposition leader.

The deadly blast came only two days after Netanyahu alleged that Arafat had given Muslim militants a green light for such attacks as part of a campaign against the construction of a new Jewish neighbourhood in disputed east Jerusalem.

But Netanyahu has also proposed a six-month crash effort to reach a final peace accord that would resolve the big outstanding issues: A Palestinian state, borders, refugees and the future of Jerusalem.

After the blast Friday, the hope for such progress seemed remote; Netanyahu was resolute in pinning blame on Arafat.

# Ex-US servicemen filling key roles at S Arabian Nat'l Guard

KASHIM AL-AN, Saudi Arabia, Mar 22: In a low-profile operation, hundreds of former US servicemen have been filling key roles at the Saudi Arabian National Guard, the loyalist force that defends the monarchy against internal unrest, reports AP.

The enterprise, little known outside Saudi Arabia, has another quite side to it: It is a multimillion-dollar business linked to major figures in Washington.

The ex-soldiers work for Vinnell Corp, a small Fairfax, Virginia, company that is controlled, through a web of interlocking ownership, by a partnership that includes James A. Baker III and Frank Carlucci, former US secretaries of state and defense.

Vinnell first came to Saudi Arabia 22 years ago on a "one-time" training mission. Today, under a Pentagon-supervised contract, its military specialists are permanent on-scene consultants throughout the National Guard.

Three hundred Vinnell experts, almost all US military veterans, many recently discharged, instruct Saudi guardsmen in the latest weaponry, supervise supply operations, teach brigade-level tactics, help operate a hospital and are updating the Guard's data processing, among other functions.

"They are continuously advising, working side by side with the managers... working on long-range planning and medium-range planning," said Col. Nasser al-Otaibi, a battalion commander at the sprawling National Guard base here on the outskirts of Riyadh, the Saudi capital.

The ex-soldiers' presence illustrates the critical - if often unpublicised - role Americans play in supporting and protecting the oil kingdom's ruling House of Saud.

Americans are even attached to the personal bodyguard unit for Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz, National Guard commander and heir apparent to the ailing King Fahd.

The Vinnell deal also illustrates the Saudi way of doing business. Under the latest contract with the Saudi government, for three years and 163 million dollars, Vinnell for the first time must share the proceeds, taking on a brother-in-law of the crown prince as a joint-venture partner. Saudi Arabia's princes often make government contracts a family affair.

This arrangement was formalised about the time Carlucci, a Vinnell director, visited Riyadh in 1995 to discuss business opportunities with Saudi leaders.

Those opportunities reach far beyond Vinnell: The Carlyle Group, the holding company where Carlucci is chairman and Baker senior counselor, has a burgeoning business relationship with the Saudi royals, who worked closely with the two Americans when they were members of the Reagan and Bush cabinets, helping foster the US-Saudi alliance.

The Baker-Carlyle partnership has been retained as the monarchy's official adviser in the Economic Offset Program, which pairs foreign companies with Saudi partners in joint ventures.

Carlyle also has acted as investment banker for House of Saud wealth. One prince alone, Alwaleed bin Talal, has invested at least \$1 billion via the Washington-based firm.

Carlucci is also chairman of BDM International, a McLean, Virginia, defence contractor that bought Vinnell in 1992. Carlyle holds 28 per cent of the stock of BDM International, which controls 100 per cent of Vinnell.

Here in the desert hills overlooking Riyadh, Americans with yellow "Vinnell Arabia" patches on their khaki-and-olive-drab uniforms are training young Saudis in the operation of new General Motors light armoured vehicles, which give the National Guard more hard-hitting mobility.

The Vinnell specialists, under the oversight of US Army advisers, are also active at four other National Guard bases across the Saudi heartland. The Vinnell operation has 550 non-American employees as well, many of them Saudi interpreters.

It's a big mission, Maj. Gen. Larry G. Smith, chief of the Army advisers, said in an interview. "We have responsibilities and tasks in every functional area there is to run an organization... everything from management training to logistics to medical." But the Americans do not "run" the Guard, he said.

A former US ambassador to Riyadh, discussing the operation on condition he not be further identified, described Vinnell's job as "reorganising" the National Guard. "It has an important role," he said.

"Their attitude is, 'Tell me what to do and I'll do it,'" an ex-US Army major and Vinnell supervisor said of the Saudis. "They don't have that initiative that American soldiers have."

Saudi officers seem to accept the permanent presence. "They've become part of the National Guard," one lieutenant colonel said of the Americans.

The Saudi Arabian National Guard - full-time strength an estimated 75,000 - is descended from the Bedouin warriors who helped the Saud clan impose control on the peninsula early in this century.