

International

Fierce clashes begin in Hebron

Arafat urges Islamic leaders to rescue Jerusalem from Israel

ISLAMABAD, Mar 23: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat warned Sunday that the Middle East peace process was on the verge of collapse and issued a plea to Islamic leaders worldwide to "rescue" Jerusalem from Israel, report AP.

In a passionate 10-minute speech to the Organisation of Islamic Conference, Arafat accused Israel of reneging on the terms of the peace agreement and warned that time was running out to save the peace process.

"Very serious events and developments concerning the peace process... have led us almost to a dead end that threatens the whole process and could undermine the achievements and the hopes that were raised because of that process," said Arafat, referring to Israeli plans to construct Jewish settlements in Arab east Jerusalem.

Without saying what he ex-

pected from the Islamic world, Arafat said it was the "duty" of all Muslims "to rescue Jerusalem from the settlements, from the danger of Judaism... I urge you to act rapidly and seriously to save it."

Before Arafat spoke, Pakistan's President opened Sunday's summit of Islamic leaders with a plea for Islamic unity and a scathing attack on the construction of Jewish neighborhoods in east Jerusalem.

The meeting, which coincides with Pakistan's celebration of 50 years of independence from Britain, is intended to underline the nation's solidarity with the rest of the Muslim

world and to target problems facing Muslims as they move into the 21st century.

The fact that Islamic leaders have come is evidence that Pakistan has done a lot for the Islamic world," President Farooq Leghari said before a military parade marched through the capital's tree-lined streets.

Reuter adds, fierce clashes flared along an Israeli-Palestinian confrontation line in the West Bank town of Hebron on Saturday, putting more strain on the Middle East peace process a day after a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv.

Palestinian security forces in Gaza rearrested Ibrahim al-Makadmeh, a recently freed leader of the Islamic group Hamas that claimed responsibility for the Tel Aviv cafe attack on Friday that killed three Israeli women, a Hamas source said.

Israeli soldiers in Hebron fired live ammunition, rubber bullets and teargas at hundreds

of Arab protesters shouting the name of the Palestinian suicide bomber and throwing petrol bombs and rocks.

Hospital officials said at least 20 Palestinians were shot and another 80 treated for other injuries or teargas inhalation in some of the most serious Israeli-Palestinian violence in months. One protester lost an eye.

Yousef Sharawi, Director of Alia Hospital, said it was not yet clear how many of the gunshot wounds were caused by live bullets, which an Israeli military spokesman told Reuters troops fired on several occasions "when their lives were in danger."

The Israeli army said four soldiers and three paramilitary border policemen were lightly injured by rocks in the second day of street battles along what has become a battle line dividing the Palestinian and Israeli-controlled sections of the city.

India optimistic about talks with Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Mar 23: India's top leaders Saturday expressed optimism over forthcoming talks with Pakistan, in congratulatory messages sent to Pakistan on their Muslim neighbour's National Day, reports AP.

The messages were sent by Indian President Shankar Dayal Sharma and Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda to Pakistani President Farooq Ahmed Leghari and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Pakistan has hosted a special Islamic summit here Sunday to mark the 50th anniversary of its independence from Britain.

"We are hopeful that the two sides will be able to engage in efforts that yield useful results for the benefit of both our peoples," Sharma said in his message, released by the Indian Embassy here.

Gowda told Sharif he looked forward to a "relationship of trust and cooperation" with Pakistan.

Asians seek to buy influence in Washington!

NEW YORK, Mar 23: US President Bill Clinton remains popular even though half of Americans believe Asians led an organised effort to buy influence in Washington, the latest Newsweek magazine poll says, reports AP.

The survey of 750 adults said Clinton's approval rating was at 52 per cent — among the highest of his presidency — even though 50 per cent of Americans surveyed said Asians sought to buy influence.

Another 28 per cent said they were unsure and 20 per cent said there was no organised effort.

Since last year, Democrats have been plagued by charges that they illegally sought or obtained campaign donations from Asian sources.

The Newsweek poll revealed voters are split by party. Some 63 per cent of Republicans said they believe in the Asian campaign against 37 per cent of Democrats.

Belgian troops ready to evacuate aliens from Zaire

BRUSSELS, Mar 23: Belgian troops were preparing Sunday to leave for Central Africa to assist in a possible evacuation of foreigners from insurgency-troubled Zaire, reports AP.

The first of 35 commandos leave Sunday night for Brazzaville, the capital of Congo, which is across the Zaire River from the Zairian capital, Kinshasa.

Fifteen will move on to Kinshasa to be deployed at the Belgian Embassy. An additional 550 soldiers are to leave Belgium on Monday.

Rebels opposed to Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko control much of eastern Zaire and their leaders denounce talk of ceasefire.

Foreign Minister Erik Derycke has urged Belgians to leave Zaire, the former Belgian Congo.

There are an estimated 7,000 Europeans in Kinshasa, including 3,000 Belgians and 1,000 French nationals.



Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto makes a speech during a graduation ceremony at the National Defence Academy in Yokosuka on Sunday. Hashimoto praised the recent upgrading of Japan's military intelligence in face of tension in east Asia despite the end of the Cold War. — AFP/UNB photo

Police question mercenary chief in Papua New Guinea

PORT MORESBY, Mar 23: Released after days of military detention and police questioning, the leader of a controversial mercenary force was staying at the British High Commissioner's residence Sunday pending a court appearance, reports AP.

Tim Spicer, charged with possessing an unlicensed pistol and ammunition, is the last of the 60-odd mercenaries remaining in Papua New Guinea.

Although the charges carry only a small fine, the prosecution might force him to remain in Papua New Guinea long enough to testify at an inquiry into the hiring of the mercenaries provided by his London-based military consulting company, Sandline International.

The military deported the rest of his command on Friday, ignoring orders from Prime Minister Julius Ghan, who had hired them to end a rebellion on Bougainville, an island 600 miles (1,300 km) northeast of the capital.

Spicer refused to talk to reporters who gathered outside the diplomat's mansion, which has sweeping views of Port Moresby's expansive harbour.

A spokesman for Chan said the prime minister would address the country in a broadcast speech on Sunday night and condemn the actions of the military.



Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud (L) chats with the interpreter of the Afghan Taliban delegation on Saturday during a dinner at the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad. Some 24 heads of state or government or crown princes were due to arrive by the end of the day to attend the extraordinary summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to celebrate Pakistan's 50 years of independence. — AFP/UNB photo

Pakistan to return 38 Indian children after 3 yrs

KARACHI, Mar 23: Thirty-eight Indian children are to go home on Sunday after being detained in Pakistan for nearly three years for allegedly fishing in Pakistani-controlled waters off the coast of the southern port city of Karachi, reports AP.

The children, ranging in age from 11 to 13-year-old, have been living in a shelter in Karachi since their arrests in early 1995.

"The boys are so happy... finally they will go home," said Abdul Sadder Edhi, the founder of Pakistan's only privately run emergency relief organization.

"Throughout the night they didn't sleep," he said. "They were too busy celebrating."

The authorities turned the boys over to Edhi shortly after their arrests and ordered them detained in one of several shelters run by his organisation for homeless children.

The children, who were picked up while fishing in Pakistani waters, never went on Indian soil, they ever charged with anything.

Prime Minister Nawaz



Former prime minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto (L) with Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, before an informal meeting between them in Islamabad on Friday. — AFP/UNB photo

Junta sounds warning in the wake of racial unrest in Myanmar

YANGON, Mar 23: Myanmar's ruling military urged people not to fall prey to religious and racial conflict as reports circulated Sunday of attacks against Muslim sites in the capital, reports AP.

In an apparent reference to recent anti-Muslim riots in the country's second largest city, Mandalay, Lt. Gen. Tin Oo claimed "internal and external destructionists" were trying to incite religious conflict and sow disunity within the country.

Tin Oo, a senior member of the ruling junta, spoke Saturday as a group of Buddhist monks attacked a mosque in the northeastern Yangon suburb of Yankin, according to reports reaching Bangkok, Thailand.

The attack, and another in the nearby Kaba Aye area, could not be officially confirmed. The second incident involved either another mosque or the ransacking of a house owned by

Muslims. Although more military presence was evident on the streets of Yangon and other cities, observers said troop deployment was normally increased before the annual Armed Forces Day, which will be marked Thursday.

"Above-ground and underground subversive groups in collaboration with neo-colonialists are trying to cause disunity among nationals and incite religious conflict," Tin Oo said in a speech, reported in the official press Sunday.

A government official last week said that unspecified "elements" were believed to be exploiting the anti-Muslim tensions to derail Myanmar's expected entry into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Muslim-dominated Malaysia and Indonesia are key members.

According to the government and Mandalay residents, the

initial rioting was sparked last Sunday by the rape of a Buddhist girl by a Muslim man. Monks and others vandalised mosques and Muslim-owned homes and cars. A similar riot Tuesday was quelled when security forces fired over the heads of demonstrators.

Tight security was imposed on Mandalay but the city, located 700 kilometres (450 miles) north of Yangon, was reported quiet over the weekend.

Two monks were wounded by rioters in Tuesday's unrest, residents said. Diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity, told The Associated Press in Bangkok that at least one monk had died of gunshot wounds, though it was unclear when he had been shot.

Mandalay's 20,000 monks are notoriously militant and took part in the 1988 anti-government uprising. Troops killed thousands of protesters around the country.

Pakistanis roused to mark 50th anniversary

ISLAMABAD, Mar 23: A 31-gun salute roused Pakistanis Sunday to the dawn of another 50 years of independence, reports AP.

To mark its half century of independence from Britain, Pakistan invited Muslim leaders from the 54-nation Organisation of Islamic Conference to a summit to tackle problems facing the Muslim world as it marches into the 21st century.

But Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud was the only high level Arab leader to accept the invitation. Friction with Iran kept most other Arab leaders away from the one-day meeting.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who arrived late on Saturday, kept his participation at the summit a guarded secret until the final hour.

He is expected to ask the summit to discuss the construction of a Jewish neighbourhood

in Arab east Jerusalem as well as a Washington veto of a UN Security Council resolution criticising the construction.

Security for the one-day tribute to its independence was a major headache for Pakistan's new government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

In recent months bitter sectarian violence in Pakistan has pitted majority Sunni Muslims against their minority Shi'ite Muslim brethren. Clashes in recent months between militant members of the two sects has left more than 40 people dead — including one Iranian diplomat — dead.

Most Iranians are Shi'ite Muslims, while the majority of Pakistan's 140 million people are Sunni Muslims. While the two sects generally get along in Pakistan, militant groups, led by heavily armed thugs, have emerged in recent years.

Clumps of police and soldiers stood guard on major street corners in the tree-lined capital festooned with brightly coloured banners extolling Islamic brotherhood and unity among Muslims.

Outside the new convention centre, where the summit is being held, the army patrolled.

The aim of the summit is to underline the solidarity between Pakistan and the rest of the Muslim world, according to Inam-ul Haq, a conference spokesman.

Each of the delegates will be given seven minutes to speak, supposedly on the topic of the future of the Islamic world as it moves into the 21st century.

However, Pakistan is expected to bring up its perennial topic of the disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir, over which it has twice gone to war with its neighbour India.

UN confce on women's rights of inheritance concludes

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 23: Muslim and African delegates fighting over inheritance rights at a women's conference here agreed to a compromise after almost three days of heated debate, delegates said Saturday, reports AP.

The fierce dispute delayed Friday's closing session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, which wound up in the evening following agreement on the Egyptian-proposed compromise.

The commission session was called to review progress on a landmark 1995 Beijing Conference on Women's Rights and to chart the way ahead. The Beijing final document proposed strategies and actions to remove obstacles to women's advancement in key areas.

Twelve Muslim countries, led by male representatives from Egypt, Iran, Libya and Syria, on Wednesday opposed plans to toughen a hard-fought text agreed in Beijing only after four days of negotiations.

The original Beijing text

called for equal "access" for women to inheritance, while the commission here was discussing a proposal calling for full and equal "rights."

Sub-African countries, particularly those of the 12-nation Southern African Development Community (SADC) were insisting on the stronger reference.

The Egyptian compromise says that "in the process of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, women should be accorded full and equal rights to own land and other properties through inheritance."

One delegate told AFP that the compromise was a gesture to the African delegates, who were particularly concerned about the right to inherit land.

The closed-door commission session focused on four of the 12 areas designated by the Beijing Platform: Women and the environment, women in power and decision-making, women the economy, and education and training of women.

White House about the status of

"to lend some positive momentum to the relationship."

Speaking to reporters en route to Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska, where Air Force II refueled, Gore said he did not expect the campaign controversy to have a lasting adverse effect on US-Chinese ties.

But Gore was circumspect in discussing the subject with reporters — and suggested his approach will be much the same in meetings this week with Premier Li Peng and Jiang Zemin, the state president and Communist Party chief.

Gore noted the allegations, including that China tried to steer money to the Democratic Party to support President Clinton's re-election, are the subject of a federal investigation in the United States. Given that, the Justice Department is constrained in what it can tell the White House about the status of

the investigation. Also, Gore noted the Chinese have "vigorously denied" the allegations.

"In an appropriate and sensitive way, it will be discussed," Gore said. But, he added pointedly, "This is not what this trip is about."

Gore arrived Sunday in Tokyo and in a brief airport ceremony called Japan "America's key ally and closest partner in Asia. There is no more important bilateral relationship in the world than that between the United States and Japan."

On Monday, Gore meets with Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto and addresses a global environmental conference. En route home, he stops in Seoul for talks with President Kim Young Sam.

The four days in China, the trip's centerpiece, initially were to have emphasized the environment, helping China protect

its natural resources as it seeks to quadruple its energy supply over the next decade. But the visit has taken much greater significance because of developments in US-China relations.

Gore will be the highest-ranking US official in China since President Bush visited in February 1989. Four months later, relations were soured by the bloody crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in Tiananmen Square. Relations took a turn for the worse again in 1995, when the United States angered Beijing by allowing Taiwan's president to visit, and China drew US scorn for conducting military exercises near Taiwan.

Gore hinted he hopes for some progress in discussions about human rights and efforts to persuade North and South Korea to negotiate a formal

peace agreement. Also high on his agenda are US concerns about the transfer of Hong Kong from British to Chinese rule this July. Gore's talks also include laying ground for a state visit by Jiang to Washington this fall.

But beyond specific agreements, a major goal of the Gore visit is to demonstrate that the US-China relationship is reaching a level of understanding and trust that allows stability even in the face of disagreements over such matters as human rights and Chinese arms sales to Iran.

This atmosphere has been tested by the campaign controversy.

Another growing irritant, from the American viewpoint, is the mounting US trade imbalance with China, \$3.7 billion in January alone, up 41 per cent from the corresponding

month a year ago. Last year, the US trade shortfall with China was \$3.5 billion, second only to Japan.

Critics of the administration's engagement policy point to the worsening trade numbers and lack of demonstrable progress on human rights. Gore urged patience, pointing to progress in holding free elections at the local level and market economic reforms.

"It is more than reasonable to place a bet that as the free market expands dramatically, so will free ideas," Gore said.

The trip will include good news on the trade front: Gore attends a ceremony Monday at which China signs a 1 billion dollars order for Boeing 777s. And China's vice foreign trade minister, Sun Zhenyu, hinted that additional commercial contracts could be signed during Gore's visit.

Off the Record

Pigs are victims of govt reform programme

STRANESTI, Romania: They gnaw iron bars in hope of sustenance. Neither chubby nor pink, these young pigs are as thin as street cats, reports AP.

Tomania's 3 million pigs have become victims of economic reform.

Throughout this poor Balkan country, tens of thousands of pigs have died of starvation in recent weeks. And 400,000 more risk the same fate in the coming days, says government adviser Adrian Ionescu.

Farmers are increasingly unable to afford feed, which has doubled in price since January 1, when the new, reform-minded government ended farm subsidies. Nor can they get bank credits to buy feed because interest rates have climbed too high.

Authorities say they will open state granaries to supply 100,000 tons of feed to save the pigs — for now. Pig farmers say they cannot survive long-term without state subsidies.

Even well-organised, profitable farms have been hit. Sales of pork — Romania's staple meat — have plummeted since the government also lifted price controls on food January 1 and the price of pork went up.

The state plans to privatize its 48 large pig farms, auctioning 10 next week. Agriculture Minister Dinu Gavrilescu blames the pig famine on bad management and accuses the previous government of subsidising cronies in farming.

But Nicolae Dubuleac, head of the mainly state-owned company Compors SA, which has 60,000 pigs, argues subsidies were well-used. His firm was profitable — until now.

"If we don't get the financial resources to buy feed, it is possible for our pigs to disappear," he said.

Livestock farmers use cheaper feed and chickens don't eat as much so those animals haven't been affected, Dubuleac said in Ploiesti, 40 miles north of the capital Bucharest. "And our situation isn't bad compared to others."

Crocodile stoned to death!

TBILISI, Georgia: Dismayed officials at the cash-strapped Tbilisi zoo appealed Monday for help after one of their prize exhibits Gogi the crocodile, was stoned to death, reports AP.

Zoo director Georgy Zarkua said Monday that money was needed to build a shelter and provide a guard for two surviving crocodiles. The zoo has been short of money for years because of the government's economic crisis and conditions at the facility in the former Soviet Republic are very poor.

Zarkua said it appeared that a gang of hooligans got into the zoo Saturday and pelted Gogi with bricks and stones while he was sunning himself.

The two-meter (six-foot) animal had at least eight head wounds, but was still alive when zoo workers found him. Zarkua said. Efforts to save the animal failed, he said.

Al Gore confident of improving Sino-US ties

TOKYO, Mar 23: US Vice President Al Gore began a seeking Asia trip Saturday confident of improving US-China relations despite recent allegations that China tried to funnel money into last year's congressional and presidential elections, reports AP.

Gore is visiting Japan, China and Korea in a journey anchored on four days of meetings with Chinese leaders. In Beijing, he plans to discuss issues from human rights and nuclear proliferation to North Korea and how China may best balance its stunning economic growth with environmental protection.

"Both countries are clearly signaling to one another that we want to find a way to move forward in the relationship while being respectful of the disagreements that we have," Gore said. It's his goal, he said,