

International

BRIEFLY



Iraqi women demonstrate Wednesday in Baghdad brandishing portraits of President Saddam Hussein and a placard reading "food and medicine are a human right." A ship carrying rice from Thailand docked at the southern Iraqi port of Um Qasr and began unloading 13,000 tonnes of rice under a humanitarian deal with the United Nations.

Kuwaiti students burn Israeli flag: Kuwaiti students burned Israeli flags in Kuwait City on Wednesday during the first anti-Israeli demonstration in the Emirate in six years, witnesses said. AFP reports from Kuwait City.

Guatemalan road mishap kills 7: Seven people died and 47 others were taken to hospitals when a passenger bus packed with Easter week vacationers bound for the Pacific coast collided with a pickup truck on Wednesday, emergency workers said. Reuters reports from Guatemala City.

DPRK worker defects to ROK: A North Korean carpenter arrived in Seoul Thursday after seeking asylum through the South Korean Embassy in Kuwait, AP reports from Seoul.

Strong quake rocks Indonesia: An strong earthquake estimated at 5.6 on the Richter Scale jolted Indonesia yesterday, the Royal Hong Kong Observatory said. Reuters reports from Hong Kong.

Rebels kill 7 in Philippines: Suspected communist guerillas killed seven people, including five policemen rushing to the site of a reported shooting in the northern Philippines, police said Thursday. AP reports from Manila.

8 drug dealers jailed in Mexico: Eight gunmen who worked for the Tijuana-based Arellano Felix drug cartel were sentenced to prison terms up to 15 years on federal charges of arms possession and racketeering. AP reports from Guadalajara.

7 die of suffocation in China: Seven people died from smoke inhalation when their bakery caught on fire in Shanghai, the China Daily reported yesterday. AFP reports from Beijing.

Labours take 21 pts lead
LONDON, Mar 27: A poll published Wednesday night, the first taken since elections were called in Britain, showed the opposition Labour Party 21 points ahead of the governing Conservatives, reports AP.

Bldg collapse kills 35 in China
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Malaysia to freeze bilateral dealings with Singapore
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39 young men commit suicide in US
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Mobutu agrees to form team to negotiate with Zairean rebels
KINSHASA, Zaire, Mar 27: Opening the way for talks with rebels who control one-third of Zaire, President Mobutu Sese Seko has suggested that Parliament form a seven-member negotiating team to hold talks with them, reports AP.

PNG cabinet meets to select caretaker PM
PORT MORESBY, Papua New Guinea, Mar 27: The Cabinet met Thursday to select a caretaker prime minister and government to replace Sir Julius Chan, who resigned under intense public pressure over the hiring of foreign mercenaries to quash an island rebellion, reports AP.

Off the Record
Royal godfather for Koo Stark's baby!
LONDON: Koo Stark's newborn daughter is no blueblood, but could get a royal godfather, reports AP.

Fergie finds her new job
NEW YORK: The Duchess of York has still another job lined up: newspaper columnist. Still, don't expect her to dish any dirt on the royal family, reports AP.

Bush fulfils wartime promise
YUMA PROVING GROUND, Arizona: George Bush fulfilled wartime promise to himself, jumping from a plane over the Arizona desert under a rainbow-colored parachute, reports AP.

Govt, rebels consider deal to end Peru hostage crisis
LIMA, Peru, Mar 27: Both sides in Peru's hostage crisis are considering a deal in which rebels would free their captives in exchange for asylum in Cuba and the release of 17 jailed comrades, newspapers reported Tuesday, reports AP.

Bosnia will form int'l police to hunt down suspected war criminals
WASHINGTON, Mar 27: After meeting with President Clinton, Bosnia's president said he believes a special international force will be formed to hunt down suspected war criminals in his war-torn country, reports AP.

Govt, rebels consider deal to end Peru hostage crisis
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Albanians urged to lay down arms, give safe passage for aid convoy

TIRANA, Albania, Mar 27: Premier Bashkim Fino pleaded with Albanians to lay down their arms and give safe passage to European aid shipments to help stave off famine, reports AP.

European Union ministers have agreed to provide an initial 2.3 million dollars in food and other relief — but only if Albania safeguards the aid workers and shipments. Fino said in an address Wednesday carried on state television.

"We must organise to restore order and calm to our towns, because without guarantees, this aid can't reach its destination," Fino said.

An EU civilian and military delegation meanwhile, headed to Albania to offer guidance in ending a month-old insurgency that has killed more than 160 people and sent nearly 12,000

Albanians fleeing to Italy. Italy has set up a naval blockade to keep more Albanian vessels from reaching Italian ports, and is sending back what it calls undesirable among the refugees. Military flights carried 189 people back Wednesday.

President Sali Berisha and his Democratic Party reluctantly agreed this month to set up a caretaker government under Fino, a member of the opposition Socialist Party, after turmoil over failed high-risk investment schemes in January turned into armed insurrection.

The United Nations warned Wednesday that Albania faces food shortages after weeks of anarchy in which mobs looted state warehouses and disrupted commerce. Food supplies were already uncertain after a poor 1996 harvest, and the rioting

threatens to interrupt harvesting and planting this year, the Rome-based UN food agency said.

Although EU ministers assured Fino that Albania will receive humanitarian aid and help in reorganising its police and armed forces, they rejected sending a peacekeeping force to help quell the uprising.

Fino said individual EU members might guard the shipments of food they send, but told him they would not try to restore order.

Some aid has already arrived from France, Greece and Italy. The Red Cross also plans to practice a large-scale delivery with a 12-ton shipment across the Greek border on Thursday.

In Vienna, Austria, the 54-nation Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe

failed Wednesday to agree on the formation of an international force that could protect aid deliveries to Albania, according to Ambassador Lars Vissing, chairman of the OSCE's permanent council.

The OSCE, comprising all of Europe, the former Soviet Union, the United States and Canada, will dispatch a mission to aid in Albania's democratisation and to oversee elections, tentatively scheduled for June.

While there appears to be consensus on that mission, a final decision is dependent on all member states endorsing a volunteer multinational military force to secure aid deliveries and protect international missions.

Ross sent back to ME for talks with Arafat, Netanyahu

JERUSALEM, Mar 27: The United States sent its Middle East envoy back to the region for talks today with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat and later with Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu to try to defuse a growing crisis, reports Reuter.

"I am concerned about it. I think everybody in the world who has worked for peace in the Middle East is concerned about it. We're all going to put our heads together and do the best we can," US President Bill Clinton said on Wednesday.

A State Department spokesman said envoy Dennis Ross was carrying messages to both men from Clinton, who told reporters Washington would try to stop Israeli-Palestinian violence and restart peace talks.

Israel said Ross must press the Palestinian authority to crack down on militant Muslim groups in the wake of a Tel Aviv suicide bombing that killed three Israeli women on Friday.

"We expect and we would like to see the Palestinian Authority fight terrorism. This is the first order of the day. If we are going to salvage the peace process, Netanyahu said in a speech in central Israel.

AFP adds: Palestinian police turned out in force today to rein in a seventh straight day of protests over Israeli settlement policies, but there were still sporadic clashes with Israeli troops.



This trio of Nazarenos wearing the startling-looking "Klan-like" "Capirotes" provide an eerie element to the scene on Wednesday during the annual pre-Eastern religious enactments and processions through the streets of this Spanish regional capital. The processions feature images of Christ and saints.

Bldg collapse kills 35 in China

BEIJING, Mar 27: Thirty-five people were killed and more than 100 injured when a Hong Kong-owned factory dormitory collapsed in southeastern China, a Chinese Central Television (CCTV) spokesman said today, reports AFP.

He said authorities in Putian in Fujian province were still digging through the debris in search of bodies from the Tuesday night accident.

The four-storey dormitory — part of Jiangkou Xingwang Electronic Products Ltd., a fully owned Hong Kong venture — housed migrant workers, the spokesman said.

Such workers, brought in from poorer areas in China, are often made to live in tight housing conditions.

PNG cabinet meets to select caretaker PM

PORT MORESBY, Papua New Guinea, Mar 27: The Cabinet met Thursday to select a caretaker prime minister and government to replace Sir Julius Chan, who resigned under intense public pressure over the hiring of foreign mercenaries to quash an island rebellion, reports AP.

Lands Minister Sir Albert Kipalan, who served as acting prime minister when Chan travelled overseas, appeared to be a likely prospect. But he is not expected to hold the position for long because he lacks his own power base.

Opposition parties were pushing for the appointment of Foreign Minister Kilroy Gentia as caretaker prime minister.

Malaysia to freeze bilateral dealings with Singapore

KUALA LUMPUR: The Malaysian government today announced it was freezing all fresh bilateral dealings with Singapore following a diplomatic row with the city-state, Bernama news agency said, reports AFP.

The official news agency said the Malaysian cabinet decided at its weekly meeting to suspend government-to-government contacts and meetings between the ruling parties of the two neighbours.

The awarding of Malaysian contracts to Singapore companies would also be affected, it added.

Labours take 21 pts lead

LONDON, Mar 27: A poll published Wednesday night, the first taken since elections were called in Britain, showed the opposition Labour Party 21 points ahead of the governing Conservatives, reports AP.

The poll, published in Thursday's Times of London, put support for Labour at 50 per cent against 29 per cent for Prime Minister John Major's Conservative Party and 14 per cent for the small centrist Liberal Democratic Party in the race for elections on May 1.

The gap was the same as at the last MORI poll published a month ago, but both Labour and the Conservatives had dropped 2 points. Major called the elections on March 17.

The Liberal Democrats gained 3 points, and a new party that advocates reduced ties with Europe, the Referendum Party, demonstrated its first substantial showing, at 3 per cent.

Mobutu agrees to form team to negotiate with Zairean rebels

KINSHASA, Zaire, Mar 27: Opening the way for talks with rebels who control one-third of Zaire, President Mobutu Sese Seko has suggested that Parliament form a seven-member negotiating team to hold talks with them, reports AP.

The rebels had long insisted they would only negotiate directly with Mobutu, but have softened their stance in recent days.

A government source in South Africa, which has played a key role in trying to mediate an end to Zaire's insurgency, told The Associated Press on Tuesday that rebel leader Laurent Kabila has agreed to meet with a government delegation — but only once and in a foreign country.

Mobutu, too, has said for some time that he wants negotiations with the rebels. The stumbling block has been whether negotiations would take place before or after a ceasefire.

That issue was not raised in Tuesday's announcement on national television by presidential spokesman Kabuya Lumuna Sando.

"One is looking for a way to put an end to the hostilities and open negotiations," Kabuya said. He also said Mobutu would form a national council to advise the government on Zaire's

transition to democracy. He gave no details on either proposal.

39 young men commit suicide in US

RANCHO SANTA FE, California, Mar 27: The bodies of 39 young men, all dressed in dark pants and tennis shoes, were found inside a multi-million-dollar mansion in authorities called a mass suicide, reports AP.

The men, all white and between the ages of 18 and 24, were found lying prone with their hands at their sides Wednesday. There were no signs of trauma, said San Diego County Sheriff's Cmdr. Alan Fulmer.

Deputies were called to the scene of the palatial home about 3:15 pm. A deputy entered the home through a side door and found the first bodies.

Investigators believe it's a mass suicide "due to the number of people involved, no signs of struggle, no signs of trauma," sheriff's Lt. Gerald Lipscomb said.

The cause of death has not been determined, although deputies noticed a pungent odour, he said.



Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin (C) flanked by Vice-Premiers Anatoly Chubais (L) and Boris Nemtsov (R), gestures during a press conference in the Government House Wednesday during which he announced the full cabinet list and the government's response to a general strike called by the unions for Thursday to protect non-payment of wages and pensions.

Bosnia will form int'l police to hunt down suspected war criminals

"We have assurances and that's all that's important," added Mohammed Sacirbey, Bosnia's ambassador to the United Nations, who also attended the talks in the Oval Office.

The idea of a special international police force to include US troops not assigned to the NATO-led operation in Bosnia was raised by the White House in January.

Late last year, then-Defence Secretary William Perry discussed such a force with French, Dutch, Norwegian and Danish defence ministers. European nations generally agree then that a force was needed, but they disagreed over who should lead it or participate in it.

The problem of apprehending several dozen Bosnian Serbs and Croats, including the former political and military leaders of the Serb entity, has bedeviled the international force ever since it was first deployed to Bosnia in December 1995.

The peace accord signed in Dayton, Ohio, specified that all three warring parties would extradite suspects indicted by the international war crimes tribunal in The Hague, Netherlands. The Serbs, and to a lesser extent the Croats, have refused to comply.

American commanders of the peacekeeping force, now numbering 30,000 soldiers, have shied away from confronting the suspects, insisting their mandate was limited to separating the warring factions. Diplomatic efforts to secure the arrests also have failed.

More recently, however, there have been unconfirmed reports that an international commando unit outside the NATO chain of command might be formed and given the task of hunting down the suspects.

Izetbegovic also said that the peacekeeping force would be able to pull out of Bosnia as scheduled next year only if the civilian side of the peace accords is fully implemented. This includes the war crimes issue and the return of refugees, another problem where the peace force has been unhelpful. Defence Secretary William

Cohen has said repeatedly that US troops would pull out of Bosnia on schedule. NATO allies say they will all withdraw together.

Asked if the Bosnian peace process had reached an impasse, Clinton said: "The things we knew from the beginning would be difficult have been difficult."

"But I think it's important not to lose sight of what has been done and not to lose sight of the fact that there will be an international security presence there for quite some time yet, during which time we have to work hard to implement the Dayton agreement," he said. "That's going to be my commitment."

Govt, rebels consider deal to end Peru hostage crisis

LIMA, Peru, Mar 27: Both sides in Peru's hostage crisis are considering a deal in which rebels would free their captives in exchange for asylum in Cuba and the release of 17 jailed comrades, newspapers reported Tuesday, reports AP.

The agreement would require that both the government and leftist Tupac Amaru guerrillas cede ground on the key sticking point in negotiations.

Rebels have demanded that at least 300 jailed comrades be freed before they free their 72 hostages at the Japanese ambassador's mansion in Lima. They also have said they would prefer to return to Peru's central jungle than leave to another country. President Alberto Fu-

jimori meanwhile, has been adamant that Peru will not release imprisoned rebels.

The news reports on a possible deal came at a time of heightened activity by mediators in the 3-month-old standoff.

Several mediators met Tuesday for nearly two hours at a house across from the ambassador's compound that has been designated a negotiating site. A Red Cross car with tinted windows drove to the house from the compound, likely carrying rebel negotiators as it has done before.

The mediators included Canadian Ambassador Anthony Vincent, Red Cross representative Michel Mining,