

International

Arafat pledges to help prevent suicide bombings

JERUSALEM, Apr 11: Now that Palestinian police have helped Israel crack a cell of the Islamic militant group Hamas and Yasser Arafat has promised to help block suicide bombings, hopes have been raised for an end to the daily clashes between Palestinians and Israeli forces, reports AP.

But tensions remain high, and in the town of Hebron on Thursday, hundreds of Palestinians threw stones and firebombs at Israeli troops who responded with rubber bullets, injuring seven people.

News of the arrest of the Hamas cell came as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu credited the Palestinians for their cooperation in locating the body of 20-year-old Sgt. Sharon Edri. It followed weeks of frozen ties between the two sides.

Palestinian and Israeli officials also confirmed Thursday that Yasser Arafat had met with the head of Israel's Shin Bet security agency and agreed to help

prevent suicide attacks by Islamic militants.

The meeting, held at US prodding, was the first high-level meeting between Israeli and the Palestinians since Israel broke ground three weeks ago for a new Jewish neighbourhood in the part of Jerusalem claimed by the Palestinians.

Ahmed Abdul Rahman, secretary of the Palestinian Cabinet, said the meeting was held because of Arafat's concern about the deteriorating security situation. There have been almost daily clashes in the West Bank since last month's ground-breaking, and three Palestinians were killed this week in Hebron.

The body of the Israeli sergeant was found Thursday in the West Bank village of Zurif, outside Hebron. The army said the Hamas cell that killed the soldier was also responsible for the March 21 suicide bombing in a Tel Aviv cafe that killed three Israeli women and the

bomber, as well as the deaths of nine other Israelis.

Residents said Israeli troops arrested more than 20 people in the village Thursday.

The bomber apparently had not intended to kill himself in that attack, the army said.

Maj. Gen. Uzi Dayan, head of Israel's Central Command, said it appeared that the deadly device went off by mistake. Clues found at the bomb site helped crack the Hamas cell, he said.

Edri was last seen Sept. 9 at a hitchhiking post near his army base in central Israel. The army said Edri got into a car with Israeli licence plates and was shot and killed a few moments later.

Netanyahu, speaking from The Hague, said the Palestinians' arrest of two members of the Hamas cell had led to the locating of Edri's body.

But he said the Palestinians have yet to show "full cooperation."

Arafat spokesman Marwan Kanafani said the cooperation

in locating Edri's body was not a sign that political or security cooperation had resumed.

"It was a purely humanitarian concern," he said. "Yes, the information was passed to the Israelis, but it has no security or political connotations."

Three top Palestinian officials were meeting Thursday and Friday with senior US officials in Washington, following a meeting between Netanyahu and US President Clinton earlier this week that failed to produce tangible movement toward restarting the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

The Palestinians want an American assurance that Israel will stop building settlements in Jerusalem and the West Bank pending a final peace agreement, something Netanyahu has refused to consider.

"What we need is intervention," one of the officials Hanan Ashrawi, said Thursday. "The US government must intervene in these illegal acts."

Britain closes its last naval base in Far East

HONG KONG, Apr 11: Britain today closed its last naval base in the Far East, putting an end to a 156-year-old presence dating back to the very founding of Hong Kong as a British colony, reports AFP.

A band of the royal marines, dressed in dazzling white tropical uniform and pith helmets, played an anthem of retreat as the white ensign, the flag of the royal navy, was gently lowered.

The shore base, called HMS Tamar, was once home to three Armadas — Britain's Far East fleet, the East India Fleet and the Hong Kong Fleet that boasted scores of battleships, cruisers, submarines, frigates and destroyers.

But at its decommissioning ceremony on Friday, the navy's only ships were the three vessels of the Hong Kong Squadron, which in recent years has been mainly on patrol for smugglers and illegal immigrants.

"It is a ceremony of great emotion, of great sadness, as we haul down the white ensign in

Hong Kong for the last time. It marks the end of an era for their royal navy," the navy's head, admiral Sir Jock Slater, said.

"I very much hope that the legacy that we have left behind and the standards we have set will be with Hong Kong. We shall remember our friends in Hong Kong for many years ahead."

Governor Chris Patten paid tribute to the "quiet dignity" of the British and Chinese seamen of the royal navy in Hong Kong, saying they had ensured freedom for the territory and been a key influence in shaping its future.

The base lies on Stonecutters island, lying on the western approaches to Hong Kong harbour.

The facility, which has been modernised and expanded to accommodate larger vessels, will be handed over to China's armed forces, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), when Beijing resumes sovereignty over Hong Kong on midnight June 30.

BRIEFLY



Israeli author Amos Oz (R), winner of the prestigious German Bookellers Peace Prize Literature Award, toasts to the guests at a reception hosted by Hessian's Minister President Hans Eichel (L) in Wiesbaden Thursday. Oz is on a lecturing tour in Germany. — AFP/UNB photo

Italian PM survives no-confidence: Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi on Thursday comfortably survived a vote of confidence called in the Senate (upper house) after a hard-left ally broke ranks and defied the government on a security force for Albania, Reuter reports from Rome.

The centre-left government won the do-or-die vote by 162 votes to 81 with one abstention. Prodi was forced into the test after needing opposition support to approve the Albanian mission.

'Pete' 1st US envoy to Hanoi: The US Senate unanimously confirmed former congressman Douglas 'Pete' Peterson as the first US ambassador to Vietnam since 1975 and the first ever in Hanoi, AFP reports from Washington.

Sensors approved Peterson on a voice vote after an eleventh-hour compromise with a Republican Senator, Bob Smith of New Hampshire, opposed to any upgrading of US relations with Washington former foe.

Lankan jets kill 3 civilians: Sri Lankan Air Force jets carried out bombing attacks against a fishing village, killed three civilians, the Tamil Tiger guerrillas said over their clandestine radio yesterday, AFP reports from Colombo.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said that three jet fighters bombed the village of Nachchkuda in the district of Mannar on Thursday.

The air force attack came after the rebels sank a navy boat in the same district and killed nine security personnel, the LTTE's Voice of Tigers radio said.

Fujimori meets Cipriani in Lima: President Alberto Fujimori met Thursday with the lead mediator in the hostage crisis in Lima, Archbishop Juan Luis Cipriani, after the cleric called for both sides to make concessions, AFP reports from Lima.

Fujimori met for two hours with Cipriani, a conservative friend of the president who is one of three mediators trying to facilitate a settlement in the standoff in which Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement rebels have been holding 72 elite hostages since December 17.

Japan okays bill to continue lease of lands for US bases in Okinawa

TOKYO, Apr 11: Japan's lower house passed landmark legislation today allowing the US military to continue using land in Okinawa even if local landowners refuse to renew leases expiring next month, officials said, reports AP.

The House of Representatives approved an amendment to existing legislation at a plenary session following a deal last week between the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the opposition New Frontier Party.

Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto told members of parliament shortly before the vote that the legislation would help stabilise relations between Tokyo and Washington, while fostering the development of the southern Japanese island.

The outcome will lead to the smooth handling of relations with the United States and plans for Okinawa's development," said Hashimoto, who has headed a minority government since failing to win a majority in October elections.

In addition to overwhelming support from the LDP and the New Frontier Party, the bill was also supported by the Democratic Party.



Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto (R) talks to his Cabinet members Chief Cabinet Secretary Seiroku Kajiyama (C) and Finance Minister Hiroshi Mitsuzuka following the passage of the government land-lease bill Friday during the Lower House Plenary session. The Lower House endorsed the bill, allowing the US forces to continue use of the land owned by 3,000 land owners without official procedures to extend their lease contract after May 14. — AFP/UNB photo

Clinton admin says China may continue arms sales to Iran

WASHINGTON, Apr 11: China is likely to ignore US complaints and continue selling conventional weapons to Iran, the Clinton administration said, but administration experts say the sales, which include cruise missiles, so far do not violate US law, reports AP.

Even material that can be used for chemical weapons do not violate US bans against Iran unless the United States can prove the exporter knew it was to be put to military use, the US State Department's top official for preventing spread of mass-destruction weapons told a US Senate subcommittee on Thursday.

Chinese officials say such so-called dual-use materials which include missile components sold to Pakistan and Iran, are exported for civilian applications.

Both Democratic and Republican senators saw in Robert J. Einhorn's testimony evidence of a misguided and naive interpretation of China's actions.

"If the government in Beijing doesn't know, then Chinese officials must be wearing huge blinders," said Sen. Ted Stevens. "It seems these dangerous missiles are going to Iran, but we're doing nothing about

it. "Yes, these materials are getting to Iran. But no, we are doing something about it," Einhorn, a deputy assistant secretary of state, responded.

Asked by Sen. Max Cleland whether US pressure would slow down future shipments, Einhorn said: "It's hard to predict the future, but China has become the largest seller of conventional arms to Iran. We have information of discussions between Iran and China about additional conventional weapons sales. We expect there will be more."

There just has to be better enforcement," panel member Sen. Carl Levin told a reporter after sharp questioning of Einhorn about why sanctions have not been imposed for Chinese shipment of dual-use chemicals to Iran.

Shipments to Iran, one of seven countries on the State Department's list of terror-exporting countries, were the main theme of the hearing by the Senate Governmental Affairs subcommittee dealing with weapons proliferation.

Einhorn said a major consideration on the dual-use question is that China's controls over many exports are surprisingly lax.

Australia to axe 8000 defence jobs

CANBERRA, Apr 11: Australia's defence ministry will fire 8,000 employees and sell off some bases and military-owned real estate as part of a plan announced Friday to use the savings for combat readiness, reports AP.

Defence Minister Ian McLachlan said the government will save up to 1 billion Australian dollars (780 million US dollars) a year from the major restructuring.

The sale over the next five years of some small bases and property, including valuable ones on the Sydney harbor front, will generate a one-off income of more than 500 million dollars (390 million).

"There is no enemy on the horizon," McLachlan said. "But there was no enemy on the horizon in the late 1930s. We have to be ready for what happens. And you don't get a lot of time when things pop up," he said.

The plan calls for cutting some 3,100 civilian jobs in the Defence Ministry and some 4,700 military jobs from administration and support ar-

'Polish citizens need guns'

WARSAW, Poland, Apr 11: Acknowledging the rise of violent crime in Poland — and the limitations of his police — Interior Minister Leszek Miller says citizens need guns in their homes to protect their lives and property, reports AP.

The leftist government proposed Wednesday (April 9) a law that makes it easier for ordinary Poles to own guns. Any adult with not criminal record, who passes an exam on gun use and gets a doctor's certificate of physical and mental health, will be able to own a gun.

If parliament passes the law when it comes up for consideration in June, it will end the current system under which gun permits are handed out at the whim of local police chiefs.

According to Miller, who oversees national and local police forces, easier access to guns will make Poles feel safer. "One needs a gun at home in case of robbery or physical assault," he said.

Since democratic reforms began in 1989, the crime rate has risen from 547,589 offenses last year's total of 897,751. Of those, 1,040 were committed with weapons.

'DPRK remains dangerous military threat despite its looming famine'

TOKYO, Apr 11: Despite its looming famine and its latest political compromises, communist North Korea remains a dangerous military threat, the US Joint Chiefs of staff said Friday, reports AP.

North Korea is expected to disclose next week whether it will agree to a longstanding US-South Korean proposal for four-party talks aimed at achieving a permanent piece on the peninsula.

And some people see it is bound to say yes, given the steps it has taken in the last two years. In that time, it has signed a nuclear accord with the United States, apologized to South Korea for sending a submarine into its waters, and reached out to other countries for financial assistance to fight widespread starvation.

"Gen John Shalikashvili, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Friday that if all those issues lead to dialogue "that's positive." But he also said there has been no de-

cline in North Korea's formidable military capability.

"On the military side, the North Koreans have just completed an extensive winter training cycle," he told reporters. "If they are in such great difficulty as they claim they are, and if they are in need of assistance, why are they spending their resources on this kind of military exercising?"

Shalikashvili said he did not want to fuel any kind of war talk here. "But he said that US and South Korean forces remain "very vigilant and very ready for the unexpected" as they wait to see if the talks take place and reduce tensions in Korea.

The border between North and South Korea is the world's most heavily guarded. It forces include 37,000 US troops.

Earlier this week, Shalikashvili visited South Korea for three days to reaffirm America's military alliance with the South.

North Korea has 1.2 million

men under arms, the vast majority of whom are poised along the demilitarized zone, which lies only 50 kilometers (30 miles) north of Seoul, the South Korean capital.

Earlier this week, US congressman Tony Hall returned from North Korea with vivid details of the widespread starvation that has resulted from two years of flooding there.

Watching families eating bark, grass and weeds to supplement their meager daily rations, Hall agreed with international relief agencies that have predicted a famine in the North by this summer.

Shalikashvili said the food and fuel shortages across the North don't appear to have seriously affected its military.

Despite these problems, he said, the North conducted the extensive winter exercise and its air force has been flying more flights in the last two or three years.

"We need to stay ready and watchful," Shalikashvili said.

Off the Record

'Dracula molester'

SINGAPORE: A 22-year-old waiter dubbed the "Dracula molester" for assaulting and leaving bite marks on schoolgirls has been arrested in Singapore, police said today, reports AP.

The man was caught in an ambush at his home after the parents of a nine-year-old schoolgirl who was kissed, hugged and then bitten by the suspect reported the incident, a police spokesman said.

The Strait Times newspaper said police investigators called the suspect, who could not be named publicly until formally charged, the "Dracula molester" because he bit his victims on the neck or lips, leaving some of them bleeding.

The suspect was believed to have preyed on at least nine girls, ranging in age for six to 16 years, since December by waiting for them in public housing estates and then stalking them before pouncing in lobbies or stairways.

Sick man's Internet plea

LONDON: A woman in the United States was playing scrabble on the internet with a man in Britain when he messaged her: "Fall on the floor and I can't move or see. Please get help," reports AP.

John Elliott, 24, has cerebral palsy. Alone at home at Didcot, a village 50 miles (80 kilometres) west of London, he had a spasm as he sat in his wheelchair playing the spelling game with Dee Dobyne, 4,000 miles (6,400 kilometres) away in Maywood, Chicago, Ill.

It happened in the early hours of Wednesday. Mrs. Dobyne messaged him back: "I'm not going to leave you. I don't know what to do but I'm going to find a way to help you."

She heard no more from him. He'd passed out. She thought he lived near a town called Cheltenham, which was right, but she had no phone number or postal address for him.



US President Bill Clinton high fives a "clone" of him played by actor Darrell Hammond at the 53rd Annual Dinner of the Radio and Television Correspondents on Thursday in Washington. President Clinton, along with his wife first Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, attended the event honouring correspondents. — AFP/UNB photo

Taliban likely to launch new offensive to capture rest 25 pc land

KABUL, Apr 11: With the advent of spring and the failure of UN-sponsored peace talks, the purist Islamic Taliban seems increasingly likely to launch a new offensive to capture the 25 per cent of Afghanistan they do not control, reports Reuter.

As warmer weather thaws the snow that froze the front lines between the Taliban and the opposition in the Mountain Passes of the Hindu Kush, many observers are looking beyond the possible resumption of fighting and asking what will happen if the Taliban take the opposition held northern provinces.

The United Nations' special representative to Afghanistan, Norbert Holl, recently warned that a military solution runs the risk of widening the conflict.

"A military solution... may just change the dimension of the political problem from a domestic issue to an international issue," said Holl.

One analyst in Kabul sees two major problems if the Taliban to manage to take the northern province.

"If the Taliban defeat the opposition, it is going to push large numbers of disgruntled and heavily-armed opposition fighters over the border into the Central Asian Republics. They are unlikely to go into a quiet retirement," the analyst said.

"The Central Asian Re-

publics north of here are still fragile, and the last thing they need is another destabilising factor," said the analyst, who asked to remain anonymous.

He said the Central Asian states are also nervous about having a radical Islamic movement on their southern border.

"Islam has been blamed for much of the instability that has plagued the region since the break up of the former Soviet Union, including the civil war in Tajikistan and riots in Uzbekistan."

The Central Asians are frightened that the Taliban will further encourage Islamic radicals inside their borders, and may even try to continue their crusade northwards — Bukhara (in Uzbekistan) used to be major site of Islamic pilgrimage," he said.

The Taliban have denied they have any ambitions outside of Afghanistan's borders.

Last Saturday, foreign ministers of four Central Asian Republics — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan — and the Russian first deputy foreign minister met in the Tajik capital Dushanbe to discuss the issue of Afghanistan.

In a joint communiqué released after the meeting, the foreign ministers expressed their anxiety at the continuation of armed hostilities in

Afghanistan and stated their readiness for "close joint action," in protecting their common borders. The communiqué did not define what form this action would be.

The analyst believes a Taliban victory in Afghanistan at the cost of possibly expanding the conflict and destabilising Central Asia could defeat the objective of improving trade and regional prosperity.

"It is a question of trade. The Afghan conflict has held up economic development in the whole region by blocking natural trade routes from Central Asia to the Sub-Continent and the Indian Ocean. But if you get a unified government in Afghanistan at the cost of a broader conflict involving Central Asia itself, economically very little is gained," he said.

Differences over Afghanistan have already led to an estrangement between Pakistan and Iran.

The prospects of the United Nations being able to persuade the warring factions to come to a peaceful settlement, always dim.

In a recent interview, Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar told a Pakistan-based newspaper that he believes a military solution was more likely.

"The time for a negotiated solution is fast running out as

the Taliban are marching victoriously into northern Afghanistan. We feel a military solution has better prospects right now after numerous failed attempts to reach a peaceful negotiated settlement," Omar was reported as telling the News on Sunday.

Maintaining the status quo, with the Taliban in most of the country and the opposition holding most of the provinces that border Central Asia, is unlikely to provide a stable solution in the long term.

Both sides in the Afghan conflict have said they are committed to a unified Afghanistan.

As long as the conflict continues, plans to build a pipeline between Central Asia's gas fields and the Sub-Continent through Afghanistan will remain on hold, notwithstanding the desire of the Central Asian states to break the stranglehold of Russia on their economies.

Iran, which has already developed strong trade ties with the republics, has suggested an alternative route for the pipeline through its territory.

Although the possibility of a unified Afghanistan appears closer, it will not necessarily lead to development of a regional economy. The splits that have torn Afghanistan for the past five years could be exported to the region as a whole.

7 die as quake jolts China

BEIJING, Apr 11: An earthquake measuring 6.6 on the Richter scale hit the northwest Chinese region of Xinjiang today, killing at least seven people, a local government official said, reports AP.

The State Seismological Bureau (SSB) said the quake struck Jiashi county of Jiashi in western Xinjiang at 1.34 p.m. (0534 GMT).

"We now have seven people confirmed dead and 20 injured," a Jiashi county government official said by telephone, adding many buildings had collapsed and the death toll was expected to rise.

Cloud of magnetic matter heads toward earth

WASHINGTON, Apr 11: A huge cloud of magnetised matter that spewed from an eruption on the sun is headed toward earth, where it could disrupt telecommunications, NASA said yesterday, reports AP.

The solar cloud does not pose any danger to people, but could knock satellites and high-voltage power lines out of service, said Jim Sahli, a spokesman for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

The "very large" solar cloud occurred Monday around 1400 GMT and became an immense "coronal mass ejection," he added.