

BRIEFLY



Pope John Paul II (L) holds a hand of Mother Teresa as they meet at the Vatican, Tuesday. Mother Teresa was received during a private audience for the first time since stepping down as leader of the religious order she founded, the Missionaries of Charity. — AFP/UNB photo

2 French men killed in Zaire:

Two French nationals were shot dead by men in uniform in the Zairean capital on Tuesday evening a French diplomat said, Reuters reports from Kinshasa.

The two long-term residents of Zaire, Michel Tournaire and Herve Rigaud, were leaving a factory in the Western Kintete district of the sprawling capital around 7.00 pm (1800 GMT) when they were killed. The identity of the uniformed killers was not immediately clear.

Violence claims 63 in Burundi:

Police clashed in Bujumbura Monday with students protesting government negotiations with Hutu rebels as national radio reported that 63 people were killed in rebel violence in northeast Burundi. AFP reports from Bujumbura.

Major Pierre Buyoya, a member of the Tutsi minority who came to power in a coup last July, disclosed last week that negotiations were being held in Rome with the aim of a cease-fire. Meanwhile Radio Burundi reported that 63 people were killed and 12 injured Sunday at two "regroupment" camps at Murwi and Buganda, in northeast Burundi's Cibitoke province.

Polish president in Ukraine:

Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski arrived Tuesday on a state visit aimed at putting more than half a century of bad blood between Poland and Ukraine to rest, AP reports from Kiev.

Kwasniewski and his Ukrainian counterpart, President Leonid Kuchma, plan to sign a reconciliation declaration calling on their citizens to end the lingering distrust spawned by painful memories of World War II and its aftermath.

Indian deputy army chief to visit China:

India's deputy army chief, Lieutenant General VP Malik, will visit China for 11 days beginning Thursday, newspapers reported yesterday AFP says from Delhi.

The trip "is part of the ongoing confidence building measures agreed upon by India and China," the Pioneer said. Lt. Gen. Malik will meet the Chinese defence minister, the deputy chief of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and other Chinese military commanders, the newspaper said.

Sino-Pak team fails to climb Everest:

A joint China-Pakistan expedition has failed in its attempt to climb Mount Everest, China's official Xinhua news agency said Tuesday, AFP reports from Beijing.

In a dispatch from Lhasa, in Tibet, the agency said the team of 10 Pakistanis and five Tibetans had to turn back after reaching 7,700 metres (25,400 feet). The mountain's summit stands at 8,848 metres (29,198 feet).

Yeltsin to sign Russia-NATO accord in Paris May 27

MOSCOW, May 21: Russia's new agreement with NATO is open to interpretation but President Boris Yeltsin will proceed with plans to sign it in Paris on May 27, the president's spokesman said Tuesday, reports AP.

"The signing of the agreement is not the end, but the beginning of its life: it begins the struggle over its interpretation," Yeltsin spokesman Sergei Yastrzembsky told reporters.

The Russia-NATO agreement reached last week is designed to alleviate Moscow's opposition to Western alliance's plan to invite several ex-Soviet allies in Eastern Europe to join its ranks. Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic are expected to receive invitations this summer.

NATO says the agreement gives Russia a consultative voice — but not a vote — in NATO affairs and offers Moscow some assurances on limiting military operations on the territories of new members of the alliance.

However, the accord, whose text has not been released, appears to have few firm guarantees and is being interpreted differently by Moscow and NATO.

For instance, Yeltsin has said it contains a promise from NATO not to deploy nuclear weapons and other forces on the territory of new members.

However, NATO says the accord only restates its existing position: The alliance has "no intention, no reason and no plan" to deploy such forces, but the agreement does not preclude such a move.

US urges Pakistan, India to reduce risk of conflict

WASHINGTON, May 21: The United States has urged India and Pakistan to take steps to reduce the risk of conflict and to bring their nuclear and missile programmes into conformity with international standards, reports PTI.

President Bill Clinton in a new report to the Congress yesterday said South Asia has experienced an important expansion of democracy and economic reform. Our strategy is designed to help the people of that region enjoy the fruits of democracy and greater stability by helping resolve longstanding conflict and implementing confidence-building measures.

Stressing the need for enhancing the quality of governance in the region and improving its dismal human rights record, Clinton also said that he would place the US relationships with India and Pakistan on their own individual merits.

TULF for end to troops offensive against Tigers

COLOMBO, May 21: A Sri Lankan Tamil party Tuesday demanded an end to the military's biggest offensive against Tiger rebels and urged President Chandrika Kumaratunga to pursue a British-brokered deal, reports AFP.

The moderate Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) said peace hopes raised by the British-initiated deal were smashed by the army's latest offensive which entered its second week Tuesday.

The British government brokered a deal between Kumaratunga and opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe on April 2 to adopt a common approach to the drawn-out conflict and set the stage for talks with the rebels.

"I earnestly request Your Excellency to stop the fight and seek all strategies to start negotiations," the TULF leader M Sivasthamparam said in a statement.

Zairean authority will ask Europeans, US to freeze Mobutu's assets

GENEVA, May 21: Justice authorities in the newly-named Democratic Republic of Congo will ask the United States and five European countries to freeze all assets belonging to ousted Zairean president Mobutu Sese Seko, a spokesman announced Tuesday, reports AFP.

Mukono Mumba, public prosecutor in Lubumbashi in the south of the country, will present a legal request next week to the United States, Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, and Liechtenstein, said an alliance representative for Europe, Ghislain Demokine.

Mumba presented Switzerland with the same request last week, the Swiss government on Saturday froze the assets of Mobutu's family while on Friday authorities in Bern impounded his 5.6-million dollar villa near Lausanne.

US defends Ross against Palestinian criticism

WASHINGTON, May 20: The US State Department on Monday defended US Middle East peace envoy Dennis Ross against Palestinian criticism of his handling of Israeli-PLO peace talks, reports Reuters.

"It's just totally inappropriate for the Palestinians to take shots at Dennis Ross, because they need him and they know that they need a mediator and Israel does too," spokesman Nicholas Burns told reporters.

Ross failed after a nine-day mission that ended last week to revive the talks between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation, which have been frozen since Israel launched construction on a new Jewish settlement in east Jerusalem in March.

Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, disappointed with Ross's performance during the nine-day mission, asked President Bill Clinton in a letter sent on Thursday to get involved personally in efforts to break the impasse.

Sonia under pressure to take charge of Cong (I)

NEW DELHI, May 21: Her in-scrutability prompts comparison to the Mona Lisa. She seldom speaks in public. When she does, every word is carefully analysed, reports AP.

So when it was announced last week that Sonia Gandhi had renewed her lapsed membership in the Congress Party, few politicians could explain.

Six years after her husband was assassinated, the widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi is widely seen as the sole person who can revitalise the once powerful Congress Party, now smitten by rivalries, shamed by scandals and yet to recover from its worst electoral performance.

The announcement of Mrs Gandhi's decision to pay her one rupee (3 cent) membership fee revived a call among disheartened party workers for her to become its president, hoping she would breathe life into a movement that appears to be slipping into political oblivion.

In keeping with her enigmatic image, Mrs Gandhi, 50, has not revealed her political plans to the public.

She will be particularly watched on Wednesday, the anniversary of the 1991 suicide bomb that killed her husband and 17 others during an election rally in southern India.

It could be an occasion to test political sympathies, though few people think she will take up the challenge of party leadership just yet.

The Gandhi name is still magic across India. Three generations — Rajiv, his mother Indira and his grandfather Jawaharlal Nehru, were prime ministers for 37 of India's 50 years of independence. None are related to Mohandas Gandhi, the man who led India's struggle for freedom.

The Italian-born Sonia, is the silent celebrity. Her photograph is often on magazine covers or newspaper front pages, though she has not granted an interview in years. Always impeccably dressed in expensive saris, her taste in fashion is closely watched by Indian socialites.

The magazines have been known, however, to poke fun at her mysterious side. The latest issue of the newsmagazine "Outlook" superimposed Mrs Gandhi's face on the Mona Lisa painting, creating a photograph almost indiscernible from Leonardo da Vinci's famous portrait with the faint smile.

She seldom hid her aversion for politics when her husband was alive. When he was murdered, she rejected an offer to take his place as party leader.

Since then, she has refused any political role, devoting herself to a charitable foundation created in her husband's name.

Although she holds no office, her influence is enormous. Prime ministers regularly consult her, foreign dignitaries routinely call on her, and she is the sounding board for all Congress leaders.

The Sonia-for-president chorus grew louder last month when the Congress chief, Sitarama Kesri, suddenly withdrew support from the governing coalition, plunging the nation into political turmoil for weeks.

Widow Sonia Gandhi (L) and her daughter Priyanka stand at prayer before the altar-like cremation site and memorial to her husband Rajiv Gandhi on the sixth death anniversary of the slain former prime minister Wednesday in New Delhi. Sonia's recent decision to enroll as a primary member of the Congress (I) political party put to an end to six years of suspense on whether she would join active politics. Her move is bound to change equations in the volatile Congress. — AFP/UNB photo

Indian minister wants to dismantle his own ministry

Rupa Chatterjee writes from New Delhi

India's new Information Minister says his mission is to dismantle the very ministry he was heading as information control was inconsistent with the ideals of a free society.

S. Jaipal Reddy, the only new minister appointed by Prime Minister I.K. Gujral in a cabinet which is virtually unchanged from the that of his predecessor H.D. Deve Gowda, is a multifaceted man who, besides being Information and Broadcasting Minister also is the spokesman of the ruling United Front coalition and the leader of the Rajya Sabha, Parliament's Upper House.

Expressing somewhat radical views, Reddy envisioned the "withering away" of his important ministry, saying his goal would be to "liberate the ministry from the minister and the media from the ministry".

Reddy says the existence of an Information and Broadcasting Ministry was a throwback to controlled regimes, like in former socialist countries, and he wanted the government-owned radio and television to "run free of interference" through a bill he has introduced in Parliament.

He says the new bill will "take note of the reality of foreign television channels in India" who have come "not because you liked them but because of invasive technology".

Unlike many developing country leaders, Reddy is also not afraid of "cultural invasion" from foreign television channels and feels Indian cinema is no less "progressive" than explicit Western programmes.

Reddy conceded there was probably more cultural perversion in the vulgarity depicted in Indian films than in any foreign programmes. He said sarcastically, "Our own cinema is no less progressive than so-called Western programmes."

"I believe there is nothing Western in the programmes that are beamed today (to countries like India). We are mistaking the post-modern for the Western. I am not opposed to the post-modern, but only its negative features," he told India Abroad News Service in an interview.

High Commissioner for Bangladesh to South Africa Ahmad Tariq Karim presenting his credentials to President Nelson R Mandela at a ceremony at Cape Town recently. Mrs Karim is standing at left.

50 NLD members held in Myanmar

BANGKOK, May 21: Myanmar military government has arrested at least 50 senior members of Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), a senior NLD official said today.

"Our members of parliament and some of our members are being arrested ahead of the (May) 27th election anniversary," the NLD official told Reuters from Yangon in a telephone interview.

He said the NLD had heard that at least 50 elected MPs or NLD organisers had been detained as they headed to the capital to participate in a celebration commemorating the 1990 electoral victory of the party.

The NLD won a landslide victory in 1990 elections but the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) never recognised the result of the poll.

Last year hundreds of elected MPs and senior members of the NLD were detained by the government on their way to attend a similar commemoration ceremony at Suu Kyi's house.

The NLD official said about 200 MPs had been invited to the celebration on May 27, and about 100 senior NLD members were also due to attend. He said he expected to hear of more arrests in the next few days.

Albright plans to visit India, Pakistan

WASHINGTON, May 21: US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said Tuesday she could travel to India and Pakistan before the end of the year, reports AFP.

"I am considering a trip to the region," she said on welcoming Pakistani Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan in Washington.

Albright noted that the "50th anniversary of independence would be an appropriate time for a trip." India gained independence from Britain in August 1947 and then was partitioned into India and Pakistan.

Taliban launch fresh offensive

KABUL, May 21: Afghanistan's powerful Taliban militia launched a major offensive Tuesday making key gains in central and northern Afghanistan after a pro-Taliban uprising dealt a bruising blow to its opponents, officials said, reports AFP.

The northwestern provinces of Badghis, Faryab and Sar-e-Pol fell into Taliban hands after the defection of an opposition commander, and the purist-Muslim militia have secured the areas, a militia spokesman said.

"Faryab and Sar-e-Pol provinces have been totally captured, and all the force of Dostam in Badghis and Faryab have been disbanded," the Taliban's acting Minister of Information and Culture Amir Khan Muttaqi told journalists.

Uzbek General Abdul Rashid Dostam and force loyal to ousted president Burhanuddin Rabbani and the Shiite Hazb-I-Wahdat Mujahadeen faction had been locked in a stalemate with the Taliban in northern Afghanistan for the past six months.

The revolt within the opposition alliance, led by Abdul Malik, also resulted in the Taliban capturing a key opposition ally, former Herat city governor Ismael Khan who commanded a force of 2,000 fighters.

Khan was grabbed by advancing Taliban fighters between the northwest frontlines and the opposition's northern Afghan base during the revolt.

AFP adds Afghanistan's Taliban militia have captured a key opposition alliance commander after a revolt in the north of the country, an alliance spokesman conceded Tuesday.

The commander, Ismael Khan, was grabbed by advancing Taliban fighters after his escape was cut off by a pro-Taliban revolt by senior alliance commanders.

Khan, the former governor of Herat City, was taken prisoner between the northwest frontlines and the opposition's northern Afghan base.

Pakistan may sue to get US F-16 fighter-bombers

WASHINGTON, May 21: Pakistan's foreign minister, raising the possibility of going to court over a fleet of undelivered F-16 fighter-bombers, said Tuesday the planes are parked in an Arizona desert and may have to be overhauled if they are not sent somewhere soon, reports AP.

The jet engines have to be turned over every six months or the planes must be overhauled, making them "second-rate," Gohar Ayub Khan said at a joint news conference with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

Delivery of the 71 warplanes Pakistan purchased from General Dynamics was blocked in 1990 under a 1984 law that cut off US weapons to Pakistan because of a US judgment that the South Asian country possessed a nuclear device.

The deadline for filing suit is 1999, the foreign minister said, in outlining options to resolve the lengthy standoff. He listed them as delivering the paid-for planes to Pakistan, having them taken over by the United States, selling them to a third country, or litigation.

Albright said the administration of US President Bill Clinton was making a "good-faith effort" to find a solution, and had returned 150 million dollars of the 650 million dollars Pakistan paid for the jets.

"We remain committed to following through on this," she said.

US State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said a sale to Indonesia remained under consideration.

Israel's army chief warns Standoff with PA may lead to fresh violence

JERUSALEM, May 21: Israeli Army Chief of Staff General Amnon Shahak warned on Tuesday that the deadlock in the peace talks with Palestinians could lead to a return to deadly violence, reports AFP.

"The current situation cannot go on for long. It will inevitably lead to an eruption of violence if dialogue with the Palestinians is not re-established," he told Israel's parliamentary foreign affairs and defence committee.

Israeli-Palestinian peace talks ground to a halt over Israel's decision in March to start building a controversial new Jewish settlement known as Har Homa in occupied East Jerusalem.

The Palestinians want East Jerusalem, which Israel annexed in 1967, to be the capital of any future independent state.

"The Palestinian Authority is not currently interested in a confrontation with Tsaah (the Israeli army) and prefers to try and score diplomatic points in the international arena," Shahak added.

The UN General Assembly has condemned Israel's settlement policy in East Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Another report says: Israel and the Palestinians must make "tough decisions" if peace talks are to resume US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said in Washington Tuesday.

Five days left for 1st round of Voting France will meet its Euro commitments: Chirac

PARIS, May 21: President Jacques Chirac weighed into France's tight parliamentary election race on Tuesday five days before the first round of voting with a veiled warning to voters against left-right "cohabitation" power-sharing, reports Reuters.

Chirac said in a solemn statement before meeting German Chancellor Helmut Kohl that France would only defend its interests in Europe if it spoke with a single voice.

The Conservative President said he would personally ensure France would meet its European commitment, a clear reference to fulfilling terms for a single European currency.

"How can one imagine that everything that has been built for the last 40 years could be cast into doubt or put on hold without causing irreparable damage for our country," he said.

"Let us not forget that (France) will only be able to defend its interest if it is capable of speaking with a single voice, a strong voice," Chirac said.

His statement, broadcast in full by television stations, echoed charges by centre-right Prime Minister Alain Juppe that a left-wing victory in the May 25-June 1 poll could endanger France's place in European economic and monetary union.

"It would be a shambles in Europe, firstly because the socialists and communists don't agree among themselves ... and also because the socialists' economic policy, with extra spending and deficits, would push us off track for European (Monetary) Union," Juppe told RTL radio.

He warned in another interview that a left-wing victory would "spark a crisis in Europe."

Solution to Kashmir issue vital for progress on Indo-Pak talks

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan said here that despite a promising beginning to the revived Indo-Pak dialogue, little would be achieved without a solution to the Kashmir issue.

He also maintained that the US should "play a role" to get this issue settled.

Khan, making his first visit here after Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government took power in February, asserted that Islamabad would never forsake the "core issue" of Kashmir and that this simmering imbroglio had to be resolved before there could be any chance of normalising relations with New Delhi or even conducting a meaningful dialogue on other issues.

In a luncheon address organised by the Henry Stimson Centre here, a think tank that has an exclusive confidence building measures programme on South Asia, Khan continued to adopt his extremely hawkish position on Kashmir that was evident during the South Asian

Association for Regional Cooperation's (SAARC) conference recently in the Maldives and later at the press briefing at the end of the parley.

Sources here said that this apparently was a double-pronged strategy that Islamabad was deploying -- Sharif adopting a reconciliatory posture while Mr Khan and Pakistani ambassadors around the world, especially its envoy to Washington Riaz Khokhar, would keep hammering away at the Kashmir issue.

Khan, who is scheduled to meet Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, National Security Adviser Sandy Berger and Defence Secretary William Cohen, both in his prepared remarks and the question and answer session that followed, was unyielding in his contention that there was no way the Kashmir issue could be pushed to the backburner or swept under the carpet.

He said the people of Pakistan had full confidence that Sharif's Muslim League, despite its decision to have dialogue with India, would not sell the Kashmiris down the river.

He said India kept saying that Kashmir was "part and parcel of India" and this was enshrined in the Constitution. Big deal, he implied, and even suggested that India should then amend its Constitution as Pakistan had done recently in repealing the eighth amendment and effectively curtailing the powers of the Presidency.

He said the debate on this issue took only two hours and the voting was completed in half an hour, and said India, if serious about a relationship with Pakistan, should discuss the Kashmir issue head-on without trying to relegate it in its list of priorities, because to Islamabad this was "the core issue."

"For 50 years," he said, "the people of this disputed territory have been deprived of their inalienable right to self-determination. This is a right accorded to them by history, by both Pakistan and India and by the international community through several resolutions of the United Nations Security Council."

Kashmir, he declared, "is a flashpoint where the largest concentration of troops are deployed eyeball to eyeball along the Line of Control."

"India maintains a force of approximately 700,000 in Kashmir," he added, and noted that Pakistan also had close to 500,000 troops along the Line of Control.

Consequently, Khan told several senior State Department officials, Congressional leaders, academics and media, who attended the luncheon, that it was in Washington's interest to get involved and try to defuse the situation.

"I am particularly confident that the United States," Khan said, "with its demonstrated commitment to human rights, will do its utmost to ensure that the fundamental rights of the people of occupied Jammu and Kashmir are restored who are facing gang rape, extrajudicial killings, house burning, arrest and detention on a very large scale."

Acknowledging that the resurrection of the Foreign Secretary talks between the two countries and the Sharif-Gujral discussions are a good beginning, Mr Khan however noted that "it is still premature to conclude that a solution to the core issue of Jammu and Kashmir will be reached."

Khan conceded that "it will take time and we will with patience go step by step for a peaceful settlement" and emphasised that as long as he remains Foreign Minister, he would not give up on trying to bring about a rapprochement between Islamabad and New Delhi on Kashmir.

While reiterating that the "the US can play a role to encourage our talks," he said this did not mean that "we want them sitting across the table," but use their good office, which over the past few years has been Islamabad's way of ostensibly urging Washington to pressure India to yield on its contention that Kashmir is an integral part of India.

Khan said it was the Kashmir issue that stood between India and Pakistan being able to eschew its massive defence spending and use their scarce resources for the betterment of the peoples of both countries.

Saying India and Pakistan, which should have been tigers by themselves, today lagged so far behind the countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and we are not able to give the benefit to our people for what we achieved independence."

India Abroad News Service

Aziz Haniffa writes from Washington

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