

Peace talks begin after 8 months

Arafat, Netanyahu vow to overcome crisis

EREZ CROSSING, Gaza Strip, Oct 8: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat met for the first time in eight months early Wednesday, signalling a possible thaw in a crisis that nearly destroyed the peace process, reports AP.

US envoy Dennis Ross, who arranged the 2 and half hour meeting and participated in it, said afterward that the two leaders had a "very good meeting" which they viewed as a "new beginning".

Both of them reaffirmed their commitment to work together to overcome all problems. Ross told reporters after Netanyahu and Arafat left the Erez Crossing on the Israel-Gaza border, where the meeting was held, around 5 AM (0300 GMT).

They reaffirmed their commitment to achieve peace with security and agreed to the resumption of contacts at all levels, including between the leaders, he said.

Ross' upbeat comments seemed somewhat at odds with the unusual cloak of secrecy that shrouded the meeting. The fact that the meeting was going on was only confirmed after it began by a Palestinian official who refused to be identified.

Israel Radio said Arafat asked Netanyahu for a freeze in settlement building and for a speeding up of Israel's promised further pullouts from West Bank land. The radio did not give Netanyahu's response.

The two leaders last met February 9, just after Netanyahu withdrew Israeli troops from Hebron — and a month before Israel sparked the current crisis by beginning construction on a new Jewish neighborhood in the disputed part of Jerusalem.

Since the breakdown in talks the region has been beset by crises, including three suicide bombings that killed 30 people in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The Palestinians have suffered a prolonged and economically crippling Israeli blockade.

Under US pressure, Israel and the Palestinians agreed to try to resume peace talks during meetings held at the United Nations last week.

Ross arrived in Israel on Monday and the talks began

earlier Tuesday, with Israeli and Palestinian negotiators discussing unimplemented civilian aspects of previous accords.

These included the establishment of road links between the West Bank and Gaza — an idea put off for years before of Israel's security concerns. Negotiators are also to meet this week on opening Palestinian air and seaports in the Gaza Strip, the release of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel and other issues.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said the Palestinians were seeking a three-month deadline for resolving such issues which were left over from previous accords.

In his comments early Wednesday, Ross said the new positive momentum was the result of last month's trip to the region by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, which introduced a new dynamic. Still, he added, there's a lot of work to be done.

Ross said a high-level round of negotiations in Washington, which had been expected next week, will be moved to the end of the month to accommodate

Benazir meets Leghari

ISLAMABAD, Oct 8: Pakistan's main opposition leader Benazir Bhutto Tuesday met President Farooq Ahmed Leghari for the first time since he sacked her last year, at a banquet for Queen Elizabeth.

Bhutto said she went to the president's house here as a mark of respect for Queen Elizabeth and her husband Prince Philip.

Leghari dismissed Bhutto's three-year-old government last November for administrative corruption and misrule, charges she vehemently denies.

Bhutto told reporters she decided to attend the banquet because she extended the invitation to the British Queen when she was Prime Minister.

After shaking hands with the Queen, the opposition leader, wearing a pink dress, came across Leghari, saying "Hello" to the president.

Former caretaker Prime Minister Malik Meraj Khalid, who replaced Bhutto before snap polls in February, also attended the banquet which brought together the country's rival politicians.

Mandela seeks Gujral's help to shape new world order

CAPE TOWN, Oct 8: President Nelson Mandela urged Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral on Tuesday to join South Africa in pushing for a world order that would spread money and clout more evenly, reports Reuter.

"Our bilateral relationship provides a firm foundation for joint efforts to influence world developments towards our shared goals," Mandela said in remarks prepared for delivery at a state banquet in honour of the visiting Indian leader.

"As old power blocs disintegrate, we have a unique opportunity to help shape a new world order based on a more equitable distribution of economic and political power, including in the UN Security Council."

Mandela said South Africa and India, both of whom have been mooted as possible members of an expanded Security Council, could focus world attention on the gap between rich and poor.

"Together with our friends in the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the Non-Aligned Movement, we have the potential to become instrumental in the formation of this new global order," Mandela said.

Earlier, Gujral said in a speech to South Africa's parliament that the country was led by one of the greatest men in history.

The values for which India fought its freedom struggle ... found fulfillment only on February 11, 1990, when one of the greatest human beings in the annals of mankind stepped out to freedom — Nelson Mandela. Gujral told legislators, who gave him a standing ovation.

Mandela spent 27 years in jail for his attempts to overthrow apartheid, a struggle which was strongly backed by India.

Gujral, the first Indian prime minister to visit South Africa, said Mahatma Gandhi — who led India to independence in a campaign against British colonialism — had his political birth as a young lawyer in South Africa.

"It was on South African soil that he was transformed into a revolutionary leader, a Mahatma," Gujral said. "It was on this soil that he forged his tools of peace and non-violence."

Gujral, who signed cooperation agreements with South Africa's ministers of tourism and of mineral affairs, told parliamentarians that the two countries should build "a rapidly growing superstructure of cooperation on the foundations of our deep and abiding commonalities."

He said bilateral trade, worth only 80 million US dollars in 1993 on the eve of South Africa's first all-race elections, was expected to reach 1.0 billion US dollars this year.



South African President Nelson Mandela, left, and Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral talk to journalists after their meeting at Mandela's Cape Town office, Tuesday. The Indian Prime Minister is on a six day official visit to South Africa.

— AP/UNB photo

Pathfinder's main transmitter talks to Earth

LOS ANGELES, Oct 8: Scientists on the Mars Pathfinder got their first signal in more than a week from the spacecraft's main transmitter, reports AP.

"We had very good news this morning," said Brian Muirhead, the Pathfinder project manager at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena. "We got the signal right when we expected it."

That was the first signal from the main transmitter since September 27-Pathfinder's 83rd day on the surface of the red planet — when communications hit a snag.

"We were nine days in kind of limbo. We'd gotten signals from the auxiliary transmitter, but we weren't consistently getting them," Muirhead said Tuesday.

On Wednesday, controllers expect to get some new engineering data from the spacecraft. On Thursday, they'll do a full run of engineering data to check all the onboard instruments. Gathering new scientific data and images remains a few days off.

The principal difficulty stems from aging batteries, which had provided backup power when energy demands got high.

Fahd holds talks with Algerian president

DUBAI, Oct 8: Saudi Arabia's King Fahd has held talks with Algerian President Liamine Zeroual who is on a three-day visit to the kingdom, the official Saudi press agency reported, says Reuter.

It said the king and Zeroual met in Jeddah on Tuesday night and discussed "mutual relations ... and developments on the Arab, Islamic and international arenas."

Zeroual is heading a delegation of six senior government officials on the visit.

The Saudi agency did not mention reports of Saudi help in brokering a ceasefire by Algeria's Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), one of two main guerrilla groups locked in nearly six years of conflict with the Algerian government.

Ranariddh's polls participation 'non-negotiable'

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 8: Ousted Cambodian Co-Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh said Tuesday that his ability to participate freely in next May's national election was a "non-negotiable" demand for a peaceful resolution of the crisis in his country, reports AP.

Ranariddh laid down that condition in a statement released in his name by the Cambodian mission to the United Nations on the final day of the two-week General Assembly debate.

Hun Sen returns home to face political challenge

PHNOM PENH, Oct 8: After a failed attempt at the United Nations to win recognition for his government, Cambodian Leader Hun Sen returns home on Thursday to face a host of political, economic and military challenges, reports Reuter.

On the political front Hun Sen must respond to King Sihanouk's latest offer, on Tuesday, to abdicate.

Hun Sen, who ousted his co-premier, the king's son Prince Norodom Ranariddh, in a bloody early July takeover, has long had an ambivalent relationship with the 47-year-old monarch.

But Hun Sen was not expected to accept Sihanouk's offer to abdicate partly because the powerful premier feared the highly respected king might enter politics and challenge him for power political analysts said.

The king returned to Cambodia in August from the Chinese capital where he was receiving medical treatment and offered to mediate between Hun Sen and the deposed Ranariddh. Hun Sen declined the offer.

"I think it's primarily a sense of frustration. He's made an offer to assist in the recon-

stitution process and it's been rebuffed," said another diplomat.

"He's made it patently obvious he's not yet willing to accept the new regime and there's maybe an element of putting pressure on Hun Sen," the diplomat said.

"Hun Sen must respond (to the king's offer to step down). It will be very difficult for him to respond at a blanket no. He must give reasons why he waits the king to stay on the throne and that might give the king an opening to negotiate," he said.

Hun Sen left Cambodia two weeks ago for a visit to France and a subsequent trip to the UN General Assembly session in New York where he lobbied unsuccessfully to reverse a UN decision to leave Cambodia's contested seat at the world body vacant.

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) postponed Cambodia's entry to the group after Hun Sen's takeover and the grouping has taken a lead role in trying to ensure that free and fair elections we held next year as promised by Hun Sen.

Yeltsin may seek third term

MOSCOW, Oct 8: Boris Yeltsin's top spokesman hinted Tuesday that the Russian president may seek a third term in office even though the constitution allows only two, reports AP.

In an interview with the Belgian newspaper Le Soir, spokesman Sergei Yastrzhembsky said that Yeltsin's first term as Russian president may not count toward the constitutional limit because he was elected in Soviet times.

"Being a lawyer, I think the previous mandate was given to Yeltsin by the constitution of the Soviet Union," Yastrzhembsky said, according to Russian news reports. "In other words, his current mandate is the first as president of Russia, thus a second mandate in 2000 would be constitutional."

This line of thinking has been raised by several government officials in recent months, especially as the 66-year-old Yeltsin has rebounded from heart surgery and appeared more energetic than he has in years.

Russia's next presidential elections are scheduled for 2000. Yeltsin himself hinted last week that he may consider seeking a third term.

In contrast to previous categorical denials, Yeltsin told reporters during a visit to the city of Nizhny Novgorod only that the elections "are three years away and it's too early to discuss this matter."

A top election official said Tuesday it was unclear whether Yeltsin had a right to seek another term. Alexander Veshnyakov, secretary of Russia's Central Election Commission, said in an interview on NTV television that the decision would have to be made by the country's Constitutional Court.

Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, who lost to Yeltsin in last year's presidential race, said Russians could not be convinced that the president has only served one term. "I don't think the country has such a poor memory," he told NTV.

BRIEFLY



See-through style at the Byblos's Spring/Summer 1998 fashion collection, presented in Milan Tuesday.

Clashes leave 2 dead in E Timor: A group flying a pro-independence rebel flag has disrupted a Catholic pilgrimage in the former Portuguese colony of East Timor, setting off a clash that killed two people and seriously injured eight people, an official said Wednesday, AP reports from Dili.

Thousands of Catholic followers were celebrating a mountain in Ermera district, about 50 kilometres (30 miles) southwest of the provincial capital Dili, Tuesday when the group provoked the fight, military commander of East Timor Col. Slamet Sidabutar said.

The group was flying the flag of the Fretilin, the Movement for the Independence of East Timor, which has been fighting Indonesian troops for independence of their homeland, he said.

Robin Cook meets Gohar Ayub: Visiting British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook Tuesday held formal talks with Pakistani Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan on bilateral relations and regional and international issues, officials said, AP reports from Islamabad.

The talks focused on the situation in war ravaged Afghanistan and on India-Pakistan relation which have been marred by a 50-year dispute over the ownership of Kashmir state, they said.

105 Afghan smugglers held in Iran: Iranian police have arrested 105 Afghan belonging to three gangs involved in smuggling drugs to Europe through Iran, the official news agency IRNA said on Tuesday, Reuter reports from Tehran.

It quoted brigadier-general Bahram Nowrouzi chief of police in northeastern Khorasani province as also saying agents seized 1,070 kg (2,350 lb) of morphine and opium in raids on Monday.

50 killed as PKK ambushes KDP convoy in Iraq

ANKARA, Oct 8: Turkish Kurd separatists ambushed a convoy of an Iraqi Kurd faction allied with Turkey in northern Iraq and killed nearly 50 of its fighters, an Iraqi opposition group said Tuesday, reports AP.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) convoy was ambushed south of Arbil Tuesday and the bodies of nearly 50 KDP fighters were brought to Arbil, a London spokesman for the Iraqi National Congress (INC) told AP by telephone.

The KDP is allied with the 10,000 Turkish troops who have been fighting the separatist Turkish Kurds of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in northern Iraq since September 23.

Arbil located 100 kilometres (60 miles) south of the Turkish border is the largest Kurdish town in northern Iraq and is controlled by the KDP.

The INC is an umbrella organisation of Arab Kurd and Turkoman opposition groups struggling against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's regime.

A KDP office in Ankara

Iraqi jets violating 'no fly' zone: US

WASHINGTON, Oct 8: Iraqi aircraft are continuing to violate the US-enforced "no fly" zone in southern and northern Iraq, but American warplanes patrolling those areas have not responded, Defence Department officials said Tuesday, reports AP.

Navy Capt. Michael Doubleday, a Pentagon spokesman, said there had been "several" Iraqi violations in recent days, but he would not be more specific, except to say the Iraqis were "skirting" the zone, mostly during daylight.

Other defence officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said two Iraqi fighters had entered the southern no-fly zone on Tuesday without drawing fire from US planes.

The United States "continues to enforce the no-fly zone," Doubleday said, "and we will do so in the future." He said US Air Force planes flying from Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have stepped up the number of patrol flights in recent days.

He declined to explain why US enforcement of the zone had failed to top the violations. He would not say, for example, whether the US planes had not been in position to fire on the Iraqis or whether they had deliberately refrained from firing.

British and French fighters also are patrolling the southern zone.

Doubleday said the Clinton administration had signaled to Iraq its seriousness about enforcing the no-fly zone when Defence Secretary William Cohen last week ordered the Nimble carrier battle group to skip a port call in Singapore in order to arrive on station in the Persian Gulf ahead of schedule.

Scientists discover universe's biggest, brightest star

LOS ANGELES, Oct 8: Scientists on Tuesday announced that they had identified what might be the biggest and brightest star in the universe — one that is 10 million times more powerful than the sun, reports Reuter.

The celestial mammoth, named the "Pistol Star," was identified by astronomers at the University of California, Los Angeles, using NASA's Hubble Space Telescope.

"This star may have been more massive than any other star when it was formed and now it is still without question among the most massive," said Don Figer, the principal investigator in the study.

Despite its brightness, the "Pistol Star" cannot be seen from earth with the naked eye because of interstellar dust between the earth and the centre of the Milky Way, where it is located.

But the UCLA scientists were able to study the star using Hubble's recently installed near-infrared camera and multi-object spectrometre.

What they found was that the "Pistol Star" has a radius of between 93 million miles (149.5 million km) and 139.5 million miles (224.5 million km).

"At the high end of that range, if placed at the centre of our solar system, the star would easily engulf our sun as well as the orbits of Mercury, Venus, Earth and Mars," Figer and his team said in a statement.

The scientists named the star after the pistol-shaped nebula, or gas cloud, that surrounds it.

The nebula is so vast that scientists measure it in light years, estimating it diameter at four light years — or the distance from the sun to Alpha Centauri, the nearest star to our solar system.

The "Pistol Star" was first noted in the early 1990s by astronomers in South Africa and Japan but its true significance was not detected until the recent study, the scientists said.

They estimated that the star was born between 1 million and 3 million years ago and may have started life as the most massive star ever known, with a mass 200 times that of the sun.

But the scientists said the giant galactic youngster will have a relatively short lifespan. It is unleashing as much energy in six seconds as the sun does in a year, they said.

"Burning at such a rate, the 'Pistol Star' is destined to have a short life and an abrupt end. The star is most likely destined for death in a brilliant supernova in 1 million to 3 million years," they said.

By contrast the sun, classified as an average star with a radius of about 430,000 miles (692,000 km) will continue giving off energy at the current rate for another 5 billion years, according to the scientists.

"Massive stars (such as the 'Pistol Star') are burning their candles at both ends, they are so luminous that they consume their fuel at an outrageous rate, burning out quickly and often creating dramatic events, such as exploding as supernovas," said Mark Morris, one of the co-investigators.

The "Pistol Star" also brings into question the current thinking about how stars are formed, the scientists said.

The current view is that stars form within large dust clouds that contract under their own gravity, eventually forming hot clumps that ignite the hydrogen-burning process. The newly formed star then radiate enough energy to halt the inward fall of material, thus limiting its maximum mass.



Benazir Bhutto, right, former Pakistani Prime Minister meets Britain's Queen Elizabeth II, Tuesday, at a banquet given by President Farooq Leghari in her honour at the Presidential Palace in Islamabad. Queen Elizabeth is on a six-day official visit to Pakistan. People at centre are unidentified guests.

— AP/UNB photo

2 military camps destroyed, over 100 troops killed, claims LTTE

COLOMBO, Oct 8: Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger guerrillas said today they overran two military camps in the latest wave of fighting in the country's north after killing "over 100" government soldiers, reports AP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said in a statement sent here that they destroyed the two bases which supplied troops at a location on the Mankulam-Mullaitivu road on Sunday.

"LTTE forces in this attack captured huge amounts of arms and ammunition and a number of military vehicles," the statement said.

"Seventy-two LTTE fighters lost their lives ... heavy fighting is continuing in the area."

The Defence Ministry here has confirmed that ferocious battles were raging in the region but placed their own losses at much lower than claimed by the rebels and gave a much higher toll for Tiger casualties.

At least 450 rebels have been killed, according to Defence Ministry figures, which place army losses at 64 killed and nearly 150 seriously wounded.

Another eight security personnel and 10 Tamil rebels were killed in a battle in the east of the country on Monday, raising to 532 the death toll for both sides since the latest violence erupted on Sunday, officials said.

A ministry statement Tuesday said that security forces have effectively cut off the main routes to the LTTE's key stronghold of Mullaitivu on the north-eastern coast with the latest military action.

"Blocking of Puliyankulam-Mullaitivu road and the Mankulam-Mullaitivu road has prevented the terrorists from evacuating their casualties and also replenishment of food, medicine and other essentials from Mullaitivu," the ministry said.

The fighting in the north is linked to attempts by security forces to open a key land route to the northern peninsula of Jaffna which the military captured from Tiger guerrillas in December 1995.

Official figures show more than 2,000 people from both sides have been killed since security forces launched the ground offensive code-named sure victory on May 13.

Troops are battling to open the 75 kilometre (45 mile) stretch of road to Jaffna from the northern region of Vavuniya, 254 kilometres (160 miles) north of Colombo.

UN backs bans on Seirra Leone

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 8: The Security Council reached agreement to impose an oil, weapons and travel embargo on Sierra Leone to pressure the military junta into restoring the African country's elected government, reports AP.

Council President Juan Somavia of Chile said Tuesday that the 15 members would meet Wednesday to ratify the ban formally.

During a speech to the General Assembly last week, Kabbah appealed to the international community to help restore democracy in his country.