

**BRIEFLY**

**Armed group kill 15 in Algeria:** Fifteen people travelling aboard three vehicles were killed Monday by an armed Islamic group at Ainjdjed, near Tlemcen in western Algeria, security services announced, AFP says from Algiers.

A "search and pursuit" operation was launched in the region immediately, they said in a statement. No details were released regarding the 15 dead, whose vehicles believed to have stopped at a false roadblock.

**Strong quake shakes Mexico:** A strong earthquake shook the Pacific Coast of Mexico. Immediate reports cited minor damage but no injuries from the offshore quake, AP reports from Mexico City.

The tremor on Monday was felt strongly in Oaxaca state, with a preliminary reading of 6.4, according to the National Seismological service in Mexico City. The US Geological Survey in Golden, Colorado, put the preliminary magnitude at 6.1. A quake of that size is capable of causing severe damage.

**Malaria claims 33 in Nairobi:** A n outbreak of acute highland malaria has killed 33 people in the past three days in Kisii, about 250 kilometres southwest of Nairobi, the Daily Nation reported Monday, Xinhua says from Nairobi.

Andrew Nymweya, district medical officer of health, told the daily newspaper that more people could be dying in their homes as the El Nino rains washed away many roads in Kisii, Nyamira and Gucha districts.

**Ex-governor jailed in Arizona:** Former Gov. Fife Symington was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison Monday for lying to get millions of dollars in loans to shore up his collapsing real estate empire, AP says from Phoenix.

The prison term, which is to be followed by five years on probation, completed a fall from grace that drove the two-term Republican from office. US District Judge Roger Strand said he opted for a lighter sentence than prosecutors requested because prosecutors "seriously overstated" how much Symington's crimes contributed to the lenders' losses. Strand said a large portion of the losses were caused by the depression in the Phoenix real estate market.

**5 killed in Colombia violence:** Five kidnap victims died and three others were wounded in a shoot-out between their leftist rebel captors and soldiers at an army roadblock in a remote region of eastern Colombia, authorities said on Monday, Reuters reports from Bogota.

Two guerrillas of the National Liberation Army (ELN) also died in the firefight on Sunday night on a highway near the town of La Primavera, in Vichada province, said Gen. Jaime Humberto Cortes, commander of the army's fourth division. The shooting occurred after the army received a tip-off that ELN guerrillas would be travelling through La Primavera with 14 people they had abducted elsewhere in the province earlier in the day.

**Blast in factory kills 1 in US:** A powerful explosion at a factory flung employees across rooms and knocked down walls, leaving what appeared to be a chemical plume above the wreckage. One worker was killed, AP says from York.

The blast at York International Corp shortly before midnight Monday seriously injured at least seven people, authorities said. Dozens more were also hurt. "It just blew us the hell across the room," said Dennis Wolfe, who was working in the factory area where the explosion happened.

**Mahathir to visit E Asia:** Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad will travel to Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore this week to discuss Asia's financial crisis, a government official said yesterday, Reuters reports from Kuala Lumpur.

Mahathir will begin his three-day trip on Thursday in Thailand and then travel to Manila and Singapore, the official said. Mahathir's trip follows meetings last month with Indonesian President Suharto and Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong on the region's financial troubles.

**4 poets detained in China:** Chinese security authorities have detained four liberal poets in southwest China for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government, a source familiar with the case said Monday, Reuters reports from Beijing.

Ma Zhe, 38 Wu Ruohai, 35, Xiong Jinren, 32 and Ma Qiawang, 28, were detained in Guiyang capital of China's southwestern Guizhou province last Monday and Tuesday, said the source who asked not to be identified.

**Govt decides to close down France's fast-breeder N-reactor**

PARIS, Feb 3: France's leftist government decided Monday to close down the world's largest fast-breeder nuclear reactor that has cost the nation billions of dollars but furnished electricity for only six months in a dozen years, reports AP.

A handful of key ministers, meeting under Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, formally agreed at an evening meeting to shut down the Superphenix reactor, plagued from the start by excessive costs and technical problems that have fed a campaign by ecologist parties.

The "deconstruction" of the reactor in eastern France will begin in 2005 and will cost 10.6 billion francs (1.76 billion dollars), Economy Minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn said at the close of the meeting.

A programme aimed at softening the economic loss to the region of Creys-Malville-Morestel is to be put into place, notably through the creation of a development fund of 50 million francs (8.3 million dollars) over five years.

Some 200 companies depend for their livelihood on the reactor, which opened in 1985 and alone provides employment for 735 people.

Residents in Creys-Malville have staged protests in recent months, concerned over losing about 1,300 Superphenix-related jobs in a town of 12,000.

While deciding to close down the Superphenix, the govern-

ment agreed to restart its so-called "little brother," the Phenix, using it as a research tool to study the transformation of nuclear waste into stable elements or endow it with a short lifespan.

The government gave itself until mid-year to decide where to locate subterranean laboratories for testing the stockpile of nuclear waste.

Jospin, a Socialist, had announced soon after taking office last June his plans to shut down the Superphenix.

A 1996 report by the Cour des Comptes, a watchdog office that oversees government spending, said the Superphenix has cost the state some 60 billion francs (10 billion dollars) and questioned the "usefulness.... of this equipment."

France's huge nuclear power industry generates 80 per cent of the country's electricity and is a powerful lobby. While some local groups fight the presence of nuclear facilities, others battle for them as a source of employment.

On Sunday, Environment Minister Dominique Voynet of the Greens Party, said the Superphenix would be shut down but that the process "will probably take dozens of years."

France must "convert the site to maintain the jobs and to respond to worries by localities that fear families will leave," Voynet told France 2 television before the meeting, which she attended.

**BJP to exercise option to induct N-arms if elected**

NEW DELHI, Feb 3: BJP today declared that if voted to power it would exercise the option to "induct" nuclear weapons, expedite the development of "agni" missiles and would not be dictated by anybody in matters of security, reports PTI.

Rejecting the notion of nuclear apartheid, BJP in its manifesto said the party would actively oppose attempts to impose a hegemonistic nuclear regime by means of CTBT, FMCR and MTCR.

Asserting that BJP was committed to "re-evaluate the country's nuclear policy and exercise the option to induct nuclear weapons," the manifesto said it would not be cowed down by anybody in the exercise of nuclear option.

BJP pledged to establish a national security council to constantly analyse security, political and economic threats and render continuous advice to the government. The proposed council will undertake India's first-ever strategic defence review to make appropriate recommendations to cover all aspects of defence requirements.

Regarding its policy towards Pakistan, the BJP would take active steps to persuade Islamabad to abandon its "present policy" of hostile interference in India's internal affairs by supporting insurgent and terrorist groups, the manifesto said.



Atal Behari Vajpayee, Prime Ministerial candidate of Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, is garlanded at a public meeting in New Delhi Monday. The meeting was attended by over 10,000 people. — AP/UNB photo

**Over 300 troops killed, claims LTTE Lankan forces on maximum alert amid tight security**

COLOMBO, Feb 3: Sri Lankan forces and police were placed on maximum alert amid extraordinary security measures as the government prepared for the arrival today of Britain's Prince Charles, officials said, reports AFP.

The capital Colombo was virtually sealed off to trucks and other heavy vehicles to prevent a suicide vehicle bombing during the ceremonies to mark the country's independence golden jubilee, a police official said.

"All arrangements are now in place and this is bound to create some difficulties for motorists and other road users."

A police spokesman said, "But we have to do these things in the interest of security." Prince Charles is due to arrive at 0700 GMT at the Bandaranaike International Airport where security duties were taken over by the air force last week as part of new measures.

The heir to the British throne will be the main guest at tomorrow's freedom day ceremonies. But a civil reception by the Colombo city in his honour

has been cancelled due to fears of rebel attacks, organisers said.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger guerrillas said today

they had lost 150 cadres in a major attack against government forces in the north of the country, but claimed killing more than 300 troops.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said over its clandestine radio that their losses included 19 suicide cadres known as black Tigers in two simultaneous attacks in the district of Kilinochchi on Sunday.

The Voice of Tigers radio, monitored in the northern town of Vavuniya, close to the battle zone, said they captured an unspecified amount of weapons from security forces together with the bodies of some 50 government soldiers.

The LTTE claim came as the government said it had asked the International Committee of the Red Cross to return the bodies of 218 Tigers killed when troops repulsed the attacks.

The military has said that they lost 35 soldiers and claimed killing more than 360 Tigers in the ferocious battle on Sunday at the small town of Paranthan and Elephant pass.

**US fails to reach deal with KSA on air bases**

RIYADH, Feb 3: Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said on Monday Saudi Arabia sees "eye to eye" with the US position on inspecting Iraq's weapon sites, but apparently hasn't agreed to allow American warplanes to use Saudi air bases if US military action is taken, reports AP.

Reiterating US demands that Iraq rid itself of chemical and biological weapons, Albright said Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region are in danger of attacks from Iraq.

But after talks with Saudi officials in a desert retreat, she sidestepped whether the Saudis had approved use of air bases here for American warplanes.

"If we had gotten a yes, she would have said so," said a senior US official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Saudi leaders will weigh the issue of US use of air bases here while Albright is in Bahrain Monday night before going to Egypt then home on Tuesday.

In Moscow, a Russian news agency reported Monday that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is ready to receive the chief UN weapons inspector and name up to eight presidential sites for inspection.

A spokesman for President Boris Yeltsin said Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov called Yeltsin to tell him of Saddam's offer, ITAR-Tass reported.

**Strike partially paralyses W Bengal**

CALCUTTA, Feb 3: Normal life was partially affected in some districts particularly in south 24 Parganas in the 24-hour "Bangla Bandh" called by Suci today, reports PTI.

The bandh has been called by Suci to press the demand for reintroduction of English in primary classes withdrawal of proposed higher fees in schools and adequate opportunities for admission in schools party sources said.

The bandh, however, had little impact in the metropolis and adjoining Howrah district where trams and state transport buses plied since morning. However, private, mini buses and taxis were seen in fewer numbers, police said.

Shops, bazars and other establishments remained closed, except in central areas in the city and the districts.

**3 US religious leaders to visit China**

WASHINGTON, Feb 3: With President Bill Clinton's blessing, three prominent American religious leaders said Monday they were heading for China this weekend to discuss religious freedom. They will meet with high level government officials and representatives of their own faiths and other denominations, reports AP.

The leaders said Clinton dropped in on their meeting with National Security Adviser Sandy Berger to offer encouragement and stress the importance of what they described as an unprecedented mission that was not a US government-sponsored trip.

Taking part in the talks were Rabbi Arthur Schneier, president of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, head of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Newark and Rev. Don Argue, president of the National Association of Evangelicals.

**Diana stamps go on sale**

LONDON, Feb 3: Stamps commemorating Princess Diana went on sale Tuesday, with the Post Office predicting they would be the biggest-selling set in history, reports AP.

The five first-class stamps, which cost 26 pence (40 cents) each, will be the only set issued in Britain with the princess's image on them.

Bordered in purple and carrying the dates of her life, 1961-97, they show formal and informal shots of Diana by photographers Lord Snowdon, Terence Donovan, Tim Graham and John Stillwell.

"Further stamps of the issue have already been reprinted — the first time this has ever happened for a special issue," said John Roberts, the Post Office's chief executive. "More than six times the normal number of special stamps have been distributed to all 19,000 post offices to meet the expected initial demand."

**Annan proposes UNSC to double Iraqi oil sale**

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 3: Secretary-General Kofi Annan asked the Security Council on Monday to double the amount of oil Iraq can sell despite Baghdad's refusal to allow UN inspectors unrestricted access to all suspected weapons sites, reports AP.

The United States and Britain, Iraq's two strongest critics on the 15-member council, indicated they would go along with an increase for humanitarian reasons.

Most of the revenue goes to buy food and medicine for Iraq's 22 million people. It was unclear, however, when the council would act on the recommendation.

After briefing the council, Annan told reporters he was optimistic it would approve the increase. That would allow Iraq to boost exports from 2.14 billion dollars to 5.2 billion dollars over six months.

Annan said that since the oil-for-food programme went into effect, "it has become increasingly apparent" that the 2.14 billion dollars ceiling "is inadequate to prevent further deterioration in humanitarian conditions" in Iraq.

UN agencies warned last year that the 2.14 dollars ceiling every six months was insufficient to alleviate Iraqi suffering. UNICEF estimated that about 900,000 Iraqi children were threatened with malnutri-

tion. Annan's proposal includes a one-time expenditure of 1 billion dollars to repair Iraqi infrastructure damaged during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

"I was able to explain to members of the council why we have recommended such an expansion," Annan said. "I also pleaded with them that there should be no linkage between the discussion of the humanitarian issues and the crisis that we are trying to contain," referring to the standoff over access by UN arms inspectors.

Annan's recommendation comes as the United States is considering military action to force Iraq to comply with UN orders to grant weapons inspectors unrestricted access to all suspected weapons sites.

Britain's acting UN ambassador, Stephen Gomersall, said his government "warmly welcomes" Annan's proposal. In Lisbon, Portugal, US Ambassador Bill Richardson said, "In principle, we're ready to support an expansion of the programme on humanitarian grounds."

US and British diplomats have said expansion of the humanitarian programme will stave off criticism from Arab and Muslim countries that the sanctions impose an unacceptable burden on Iraq's 22 million people.



An Iraqi Army officer shows to a student of Baghdad's university how to dismantle an AK-47 during a training session for civilians in Baghdad Monday. Amid threats of a US military intervention and while diplomatic efforts are still ongoing to try and put an end to the crisis, the Iraqi authorities have mobilised about 1 million people to face an eventual attack. — AP/UNB photo

**Raul Castro takes on higher profile as brother grows older**

HAVANA, Feb 3: Cubans awaiting a speech by Fidel Castro in the city of Santiago were surprised recently when a substitute appeared on stage — the president's younger brother, Raul, reports AP.

Even the announcer on state television was caught off guard when the younger Castro strode to the podium last week and addressed the tens of thousands gathered.

Not that Raul's speech differed markedly from what his brother would have said about the 145th anniversary of the birth of independence hero Jose Marti. Raul dutifully reminded Cubans they're "a fighting people."

Lately, however, the 71-year-old president has been giving Raul, five years his junior, a more public role in running Cuba's government.

"It's reasonable to speculate that Fidel at this point is now beginning to think about stepping down," said Philip Bren-

ner, a Cuban scholar at American University in Washington. "It could be he's feeling his mortality," Brenner said. "It could be that he's tired after 40 years."

In recent months, Raul Castro has made high-profile visits to China and Italy as well as more public appearances.

Dressed in a business suit, he greeted Pope John Paul II at the airport when the pontiff arrived in Santiago and sat in the front row when John Paul celebrated Mass in the eastern city.

As the government's No. 2 man and head of Cuba's defense forces, Raul Castro always has been considered his older brother's successor.

According to University of New Mexico professor Nelson Valdes, Fidel Castro mentioned his brother as heir apparent at least as far back as 1959, the first year of the revolution, when popular revolutionary hero Camilo Cienfuegos was killed in plane crash.

**Over 1200 to sue govt Australia favours migrants from 6 countries**

SYDNEY, Feb 3: More than 1,200 people are suing the Australian government for allegedly favouring visa applicants from six countries, lawyers for the group said Tuesday, reports AP.

The plaintiffs claim Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock breached Australia's Racial Discrimination Act by introducing a special visa category for people from Sri Lanka, Kuwait, Lebanon, Iraq, China and the former Yugoslavia.

The claimants, including visa applicants from those countries named, lawyer Michael Jones said. "The Racial Discrimination Act prohibits giving a benefit to people on the basis of their national origin — it has to be extended to people of every origin," said Jones, from Sydney legal firm Parish Patten.

The special visas became available in Oct 1997 for people from those countries specified who arrived in Australia before Nov 1, 1993.

Macabenta had given evidence to the Refugee Review Tribunal that she was raped by a guerrilla leader in the southern Philippines, Jones said.

**Terrorists kill 15 civilians in Algeria**

PARIS, Feb 3: Algerian security forces said terrorists killed 15 civilians on Monday on a road in Ain Djedje area in the western province of Tlemcen, reports Reuters.

The security forces, in a statement issued late on Monday night on the official Algerian news agency APS, said a "terrorist group" the term used by the authorities for Muslim rebels — killed the 15 civilians as they were travelling in three vehicles. It gave no more details.

**Wreckage of Philippine airliner found, 15 survivors reported**

CLAVERIA, Philippines, Feb 3: Rescuers found the wreckage Tuesday of a passenger plane that disappeared with 104 people aboard in the southern Philippines. Unconfirmed reports said there were at least 15 survivors, reports AP.

The twin-engine Cebu Pacific Air DC-9 aircraft was declared missing after it failed to land Monday morning in the southern Philippine city of Cagayan de Oro.

The plane's scattered wreckage was found on a steep slope on Mount Sumagaya, about 45 kilometres (28 miles) northeast of the plane's destination.

Radio station Bombo quoted a local mayor as saying 15 people were still alive and 30 people were confirmed dead. However, views of the crash site from a rescue helicopter showed no signs of people near the wreckage.

Parts of the plane appeared to have slipped down the mountainside.

Air transportation officials said Tuesday the airplane was making a visual, not instrument, landing approach when it disappeared because it had made an unscheduled stop at another airport and therefore was not on a normal flight path.

The plane's route took it over an area of high mountains and deep ravines with thick clouds covering some slopes.

The plane was carrying 99 passengers, including five chil-

dren, and five crew when it disappeared. Two of the passengers were tentatively identified as Japanese and Austrian.

Its last radio contact was with the Cagayan de Oro airport tower at 10:48 am (0248 GMT) Monday, 15 minutes before it was due to land.

In that radio call, the pilot said he was 68 kilometres (42 miles) from the airport at an altitude of 3,500 metres (11,500 feet) and starting to descend. There was no report that the

plane was in trouble.

Air transport officials said the plane's path from that point to the airport would have taken it over an area with mountain peaks ranging from 2,220 meters (7,300 feet) to 2,425 metres (8,000 feet).

A local religious group and an army detachment reported hearing an explosion near the 2,200-metre (7,260-foot) Mount Sumagaya at about the time the plane disappeared.

**US, allies urge Muslims to reopen Sarajevo to others**

SARAJEVO, Feb 3: The United States and its allies on Tuesday turned the heat away from Bosnia's Serbs and onto its Muslims, at a conference meant to force them to reopen Sarajevo to the return of other ethnic groups, reports AP.

A draft declaration of the Sarajevo Returns Conference made available in advance to The Associated Press shows organisers insisting that at least 20,000 Serb and Croat refugees be allowed to resettle in the city this year.

"Sarajevo must be... truly multi-ethnic," the draft stated. "Sarajevo should lead the country" in permitting the hundreds of thousands of people

who fled during the 1992-1995 war to return home, it added.

The draft said that a Sarajevo Return Commission of local and international officials would be created later this month to oversee the process.

The draft's blunt language reflected frustration at what the international community sees as Muslim foot-dragging on refugee returns more than two years after the war's end.

Before the war, Sarajevo was considered a model of tolerance in the former Yugoslavia. While Muslims made up 49 per cent of Sarajevo's pre-war population of more than 500,000, hundreds of thousands of Serbs and Croats also lived in the city.

**New therapy combining anti-HIV drugs for combatting deadly AIDS disease**

CHICAGO, Feb 3: A new therapy combining four potent anti-HIV drugs offers great promise in combating the deadly AIDS disease, researchers at a conference here on infectious diseases said Monday, reports AFP.

Amid dire predictions that an AIDS vaccine is still years away, researchers are encouraged by results achieved using treatments combining four more drugs.

Particularly heartening are results obtained by combining four powerful anti-HIV drugs — zidovudine, zalcitabine, zalcitabine, and either AZT or D4T, researchers said.

The drugs used together appear to produce a significant reduction in the amount of HIV in the blood of patients, HIV, the Human Immune deficiency Virus, leads to the fatal disease AIDS, short for acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

"This four-drug regimen is one of the most encouraging HIV-1 treatment regimens currently available," said Richard Beach, a professor at Stratogen Health of Miami Beach, who conducted a 24-week trial study of 57 HIV-infected patients.

Beach said that this quadruple drug therapy reduced the amount of HIV in the blood

below detectable levels in 94 per cent of first-time patients and 86 per cent of patients who had received prior treatment.

Scientists said the results of the tests using the treatment encouraging, but called for even accelerated efforts to develop a vaccine.

"Right now the virus is a couple of steps ahead of us," said David Baltimore, an AIDS vaccine researcher at the California Institute of Technology.

On Sunday, volunteers testing a weakened live AIDS vaccine announced here that three major drug companies had agreed to provide them with

free lifetime care if they contract the disease.

Joe Zuniga, Deputy Director of the Chicago-based International Association of Physicians in AIDS Care, said his group had received a pledge from Abbott, Bristol-Myers Squibb and Hoffmann-La Roche to donate anti-viral drugs.

"It's been heartening to see the number of volunteers (in the proposed trial) increase from the initial core of 50 to over 275," headed, roughly 25 per cent of the volunteers are physicians.

**Dramatic decline in US AIDS deaths**

CHICAGO, Feb 3: AIDS deaths across the United States dropped a stunning 44 per cent in the first half of last year, showing the power of new treatments to control the disease, reports AP.

Doctors have known almost since they began widely prescribing potent three-drug combinations two years ago that fewer people with AIDS were dying, but even the experts seem surprised by the scope of their success.

"We can't see the end of the epidemic, but it's the beginning of a new era," said Dr Kevin De Cock of the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

in Atlanta. The latest evidence of this change came Monday when CDC officials presented new data at the Fifth Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections.

Deaths from AIDS peaked in 1994 and 1995, then nosed downward in 1996. Last year, that fall accelerated.

"Treatment is having a marked, dramatic impact on AIDS mortality," said the CDC's Dr. Patricia Fleming.

According to the CDC, 12,040 Americans died of AIDS in the first half of 1997, compared with 21,460 in the first half of 1996.