

International

PA slaps ban on pro-Iraq demonstration
Saddam's showdown with US whips up fury among Palestinians

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Feb 13: Yasser Arafat got badly burned once over Iraq. This time, he's struggling to escape the fire, reports AP. Saddam Hussein's showdown with the United States over weapons inspections has whipped up fury among Palestinians, already angry about the near-total breakdown of the Middle East peace process and the deprivations they suffer as a result.

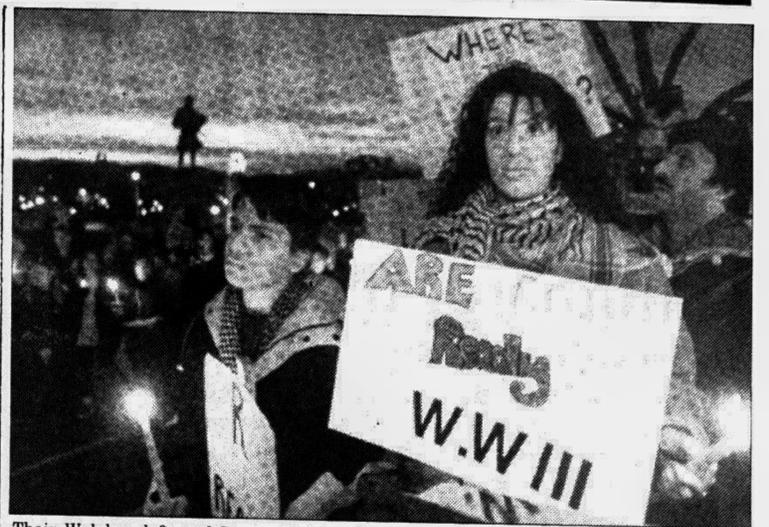
The ban didn't stop hundreds of demonstrators from taking to the tough streets of the West Bank towns of Nablus and Hebron on Thursday to burn US flags, scream slogans of support for Saddam and throw stones at Israeli soldiers. "Beloved Saddam, hit Tel Aviv!" demonstrators shouted, a reference to the 1991 Gulf War when Saddam fired 39 Scud missiles at Israel. Even some Palestinian police joined in the chanting.

States — both over the stalled peace process and the Iraq standoff — appears genuine. On Wednesday, and old Palestinian man in a refugee camp in Gaza City chatted amicably with a reporter until he asked her nationality. When she replied she was American, he spat on the ground and stalked away. Arafat, who hates nothing more to be at odds with popular sentiment, appeared Thursday to be trying to channel public anger at the United States toward a more acceptable target: Israel.

Using some of his toughest rhetoric in months, the Palestinian leader threatened in a speech to renew the Intifadah, or uprising. He said of the peace process: "If we need to, we will cross it out and begin all over." Underscoring that Arafat didn't even wait for a briefing from his negotiating team, who returned from Washington on Thursday, before he declared their trip a failure.

Kurdish groups in N Iraq agree to maintain truce

CAIRO, Feb 13: Two rival Kurdish groups met in northern Iraq Thursday for the first time since a December ceasefire and agreed to keep the truce intact, reports AP. Representatives of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party also agreed to an unconditional release of all prisoners to consolidate their peace. There is no exact number of prisoners being held by either side.



Thair Wahdan, left, and Reema Wahdan listen Thursday evening, as an anti-war activist in Denver criticises the increased US deployment of troops and military equipment in the Persian Gulf in preparation for a possible air campaign against Iraq. About 125 people marched and held a candlelight vigil at the Colorado Capitol Building to protest US military policy.

India goes to polls Monday

NEW DELHI, Feb 13: India, the world's largest democracy, goes to the polls from Monday in a fiercely-contested election expected to produce a hung parliament for the second time in as many years, analysts said today, reports AP. Around 600 million people are eligible to cast their votes during the election, staggered over four days during the coming weeks and ending on March 7.

the beleaguered 113-year-old Congress with an emotive campaign which she launched a month ago from the 1991 site of her decision not to stand as a candidate. She has drawn mammoth crowds, snatching the BJP which earlier looked set to take power. The business standard daily credited Gandhi with changing the election agenda.

On Monday, the first day of the four-phase polling, 22 of 545 parliament constituencies will go to the hustings, another 186 constituencies will see polling on February 22 and 132 on February 28. Elections will be held in three of six constituencies in Kashmir on March 7, counting will start on March 2, with the final results expected within a week.

'30,000 Afghan quake victims in desperate need' of aid

ROME, Feb 13: The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) said Thursday that 30,000 Afghans in the quake-stricken north of the country were "in desperate need" of emergency help, as its first aid convoy reached the area, reports AP. In a statement received here, the WFP said it has stepped up measures to get food and supplies to the Takhar province of Afghanistan, where around 4,500 people were killed by a huge earthquake on February 4 and subsequent aftershocks.

Australians favour severing ties with monarchy

CANBERRA, Feb 13: Delegates to a constitutional convention on Friday overwhelmingly supported Australia becoming a republic and cutting its remaining ties to the British monarchy, reports AP. Spontaneous applause broke out in the Chamber and public galleries as the crucial vote in favour of a republic passed 89-52. Eleven delegates abstained from voting.

Constitutional convention votes for republic

public referendum by the end of 1999. "I want a referendum," Howard said Friday. "The Australian people are owed the opportunity of expressing an opinion on this." Even in his own Cabinet, Howard is becoming increasingly isolated with his monarchist stance. Treasurer Peter Costello, Environment Minister Robert Hill and Attorney General Daryl Williams all voted to support the republic Friday.

Monarchists hope to defeat the republic at the referendum. "Well may we say God save the Queen, for nothing will save the republic," outraged monarchist delegate David Mitchell said. "The idea of a republic will fall to dust through the grace of almighty God." Pro-republicans hope to have an Australian president by the opening of the 2000 Olympics and the 100th anniversary of Australian federation.

US Senate urged to ratify N-test ban treaty

Earl Spencer slams speculation over Diana's death

LONDON, Feb 13: Princess Diana's brother has criticised Mohamed Al-Fayed for claiming that the Paris car crash that killed the princess was not an accident, reports AP. Earl Spencer, quoted in The Sun newspaper, said that speculation about his sister's death caused "harm" and asked that her family be allowed to grieve in peace.

Strike to protest polls in Assam

GAUHATI, Feb 13: A one-day strike called by a students' union to protest elections closed shops and cleared roads in Assam Friday, heightening tension in the northeastern Indian state where separatists have stepped up attacks with the approach of nationwide parliamentary polling, reports AP.

Dostum is being treated in Uzbekistan for head wounds

ISLAMABAD, Feb 13: General Abdul Rashid Dostum, a military head of Afghanistan's anti-Taliban opposition alliance, is being treated in Uzbekistan for head wounds received in recent fighting, an Afghan news agency said today, reports Reuters. The Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press said Dostum was injured when a mortar exploded near him in Faryab province in northwest Afghanistan. The extent of his wounds was not immediately known.

Factfile of Indian governments

Factfile of Indian governments since independence. 1947-1964: Jawaharlal Nehru rules India as its first prime minister at the head of a Congress government. Gulzari Lal Nanda stands in as caretaker prime minister for 14 days following his death.

Two Congress members criticise US policy on Israel

WASHINGTON, Feb 13: Two members of Congress assailed the Clinton administration Thursday for urging Israel to make territorial concessions while Palestinians stage rallies in support of Iraq and permit terrorist suspects to go free, reports AP.

Queensland PM signals reshuffle

QUEENSLAND, Feb 13: Queensland state Premier Rob Borbidge on Friday forecast a Cabinet reshuffle following allegations two of his ministers had love affairs with female staff members at taxpayers' expense, AP reports from Brisbane.

Farrakhan visits Indonesia

JAKARTA, Feb 13: Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan prayed with thousands of Indonesian Muslims Friday and called for peace and reconciliation, reports AP. Farrakhan arrived in Indonesia, the world's most populous Islamic nation, Thursday as part of a world tour.

Mishap claims 13 pilgrims in India

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, Feb 13: Thirteen pilgrims including seven women were killed and seven others injured when a tourist van collided head-on with a government corporation bus on the by-pass road Virudhunagar on Thursday, PTI reports from Virudhunagar.

US to check report whether Russia helping Iraq to develop biological weapons

WASHINGTON, Feb 13: Apparently surprised by a report Russia is helping Iraq develop biological weapons, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright assured Congress "we'll certainly follow this up," reports AP. Over breakfast with members of the House International Affairs Committee and then testifying, Albright gave no indication Thursday she had heard of the possible delivery of a fermentation vessel for biological agents until she read about it in The Washington Post.

Congolese leader arrested

CONGO, Feb 13: Congo's main opposition leader was arrested Thursday night at his home, aides said, not long after his party had distributed pamphlets calling for freedom for imprisoned colleagues, AP reports from Kinshasa. Etienne Tshisekedi was "brutally thrown into a jeep and taken to an unknown destination," said Mukendiwa Mulumba, his top aide. Government officials had no comment on the arrest. This was the second time that Tshisekedi has been arrested since President Laurent Kabila came to power last May. He was only held for a few hours after his first arrest.

US sending more jets to Gulf

WASHINGTON, Feb 13: The US Air Force dispatched six F-16 fighters, six B-52 bombers and one B-1 bomber to the Gulf region on Thursday as part of a previously announced addition to the fleet of American warplanes facing off with Iraq, AP reports from Washington. The F-16s took off from Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina, the B-52s from Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, and the B-1 from Ellsworth Air Force Base, South Dakota, Pentagon spokesman Capt Michael Doubleday said.

Sihanouk could be country's last monarch, warns Hun Sen

PHNOM PENH, Feb 13: Cambodian leader Hun Sen warned that King Norodom Sihanouk could be the country's last monarch if members of the royal family continue to engage in politics, reports AP. Although Hun Sen attributed that analysts to others, many observers interpreted it as another of the Cambodian leader's threats against the monarchy. His comments came from an interview in the January 12 edition of the French newspaper Le Figaro which was reproduced and appeared for the first time in Cambodia in Hun Sen's monthly bulletin published on Friday.

BRIEFLY

Two Congress members criticise US policy on Israel. WASHINGTON, Feb 13: Two members of Congress assailed the Clinton administration Thursday for urging Israel to make territorial concessions while Palestinians stage rallies in support of Iraq and permit terrorist suspects to go free, reports AP. Rep Matt Salmon, a Republican from Arizona, told Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, testifying before the House International Relations Committee, that "your administration, in its noble quest for securing a lasting peace in the Middle East, may be facilitating the emergence of yet another despotic regime." The regime I'm talking about is the Palestinian Authority controlled by Yasser Arafat. Questioning Albright later, Rep Brad Sherman, a Democrat from California, accused the administration of intending to break the law by refusing to establish the US Embassy in Jerusalem, which Israel considers its capital, rather than Tel Aviv. Sihanouk could be country's last monarch, warns Hun Sen. PHNOM PENH, Feb 13: Cambodian leader Hun Sen warned that King Norodom Sihanouk could be the country's last monarch if members of the royal family continue to engage in politics, reports AP. Although Hun Sen attributed that analysts to others, many observers interpreted it as another of the Cambodian leader's threats against the monarchy. His comments came from an interview in the January 12 edition of the French newspaper Le Figaro which was reproduced and appeared for the first time in Cambodia in Hun Sen's monthly bulletin published on Friday.



Monica Lewinsky leaves her family's home in the Brentwood section of Los Angeles, Thursday. Lewinsky, who is at the centre of the White House sex scandal, was on her way to the airport headed for Washington DC.