

Taiwanese plane crash Real cause yet to be ascertained

TAIPEI, Feb 17: Grieving relatives gathered at an orange-and-blue tent near Taipei's airport Tuesday to identify victims of a China Airlines jet that crashed and exploded, killing more than 200 people, reports AP.

Officials were trying to piece together the final moments of flight CI676, which was returning to Taipei on a foggy, rainy night from the resort island of Bali. One report suggested the pilots may have mistaken a nearby road for the runway.

The crash and explosion destroyed several houses located along the roads in a semi-rural area.

On Tuesday, hundreds of police, soldiers and firefighters still were searching the crash site along a road that runs parallel to the runway for more human remains and personal items that may help identify the victims.

Rescue teams had to pull bodies and body parts off of the second floor of houses blackened by the explosion. Other charred and dismembered bodies lay in the road.

An official on the scene said all 196 people on board were dead. The official news agency

had said nine people on the ground were killed, but police later reduced that number to seven. Among the dead was a 2-month-old baby. Two others were injured on the ground.

Even though the weather was bad, it was far from clear what caused the crash.

Airport officials said the flight data recorder had been recovered and sent to the United States for analysis.

On Monday, a China Airlines official said the plane had asked to make a second approach due to poor visibility. But airport officials said Tuesday there was no evidence to determine whether the plane actually tried a second approach, or simply veered off course.

A released recording of conversations with the control tower showed that the pilot asked to land when the plane was on course. But then lost touch and did not answer a question about whether he would try a second approach. Two beeps were then heard, which Chang Kuo-cheng, Taiwan's deputy director of civil aeronautics said could have been from the plane's warning system.

Indian polls Low turnout marks first day of voting

NEW DELHI, Feb 17: Poll-weary India, the world's largest democracy, took time out today after the first stage of staggered national elections, with the media focusing on the mystery of the missing voters, reports AFP.

Estimates by the Election Commission showed only around half of the 250 million voters eligible to take part in Monday's vote bothered to cast their ballots as the country began electing its fifth government within two years.

The turnout in Indian elections, now involving more than 600 million voters, has been steadily declining from an all-time high of 64 per cent in 1984.

Violence which left at least 26 people dead Monday in remote strife-torn areas in the east of the country where separatist guerrillas and extremists "banned" the polling was highlighted by some newspapers.

But for the respected Hindu newspaper, the central issue was expressed by its banner headline, "Moderate voter turnout."

Monday's polling was for 222 out of 545 parliamentary

seats. Further balloting takes place on February 22, 28 and March 7. The results are due in the first week of March.

India's political instability since 1996 elections — and the likelihood of another hung parliament and a multi-party coalition almost identical to the outgoing administration — was blamed by some voters for Monday's apathy.

The Asian Age, meanwhile, blamed the lack of real election issues and mud-slinging between the dominant right-wing Hindu Nationalist BJP and their main opponents, the Congress.

It said the "wild charges" between parties, "exaggerated promises" and "sheer vitriol" in the current campaign were unprecedented.

Many reports highlighted the low turnouts in Assam (42 per cent), Tamil Nadu (45) and Bihar (50-55).

About 23 of the deaths — most caused by Maoist revolutionaries opposed to democracy — occurred in the eastern state of Bihar.

The region's chief election officer, AK Basu, said there were

complaints of "irregularities", including armed attacks and ballot-box fraud, at almost 500 voting booths.

Separatist guerrillas in Assam, meanwhile, warned of reprisals if voters ignored their polls boycott while Tamil Nadu witnessed a series of explosions at a weekend political rally.

But in the capital New Delhi, the 50 per cent turnout was the second-lowest ever recorded despite a total lack of violence.

Most analysts and opinion polls say India's 200-million-dollar, month-long elections will end with an almost identical government returning to power.

The outgoing United Front minority coalition and its former ally, the Congress, are expected to mend their fences after a rift between them just three months ago sparked the polls.

Both are bitter opponents of the Hindu Nationalists, who they accuse of sectarianism. That shared dislike is likely to lead to a reconciliation between the two sides, who first teamed up after 1996 to keep the nationalists out of power.

Indonesian riots enter 4th day

JAKARTA, Feb 17: A new Indonesian military chief took over Monday, stepping into his job on the fourth straight day of rioting sparked by the worst economic crisis in three decades, reports AP.

Mobs ransacked shops owned by ethnic Chinese in two cities.

Anger has been building in recent weeks among the millions of poor Indonesians struggling with rising food prices and unemployment.

After being sworn in as commander of the 465,000-member military, Gen. Wiranto, a former personal aide to Suharto, told reporters that the armed forces stood ready to protect national stability. Thousands of police and soldiers have been patrolling riot-torn communities.

Rioters have trashed and torched stores and houses in more than 20 towns on four islands since Friday. Five people have been killed, including at least two men shot by security officers.

On Monday, hundreds of people, including schoolchildren, damaged three Chinese shops in Pagar Alam on the island of Sumatra. In Pengalengan, on the island of Java, 500 people ransacked Chinese stores and threw stones. No injuries were reported in either town.

Iraq warns Kuwait against letting US forces launch attacks from its soil

BAGHDAD, Feb 17: Iraq warned Kuwait on Monday it will "bear the consequences" if it allows US forces to stage attacks from its soil. Arab envoys tried to get Iraq to back down in the confrontation over UN weapons inspections, reports AP.

Meanwhile, a team of three UN cartographers worked for a second day to map out President Saddam Hussein's palaces, which are at the centre of Iraq's dispute with the United Nations and the United States.

The experts later held meetings at the headquarters of UN arms inspectors. Iraq has prevented the inspectors from searching presidential sites for weapons of mass destruction, leading the United States to threaten military strikes.

Also Monday, the foreign minister from the Gulf state of Qatar, Hamad Bin Jassim al-Thani, arrived in Baghdad, and a delegation of Arab parliament members met with the speaker of Iraq's National Assembly, Sadoun Hammadi.

The lawmakers, from Egypt and Libya, later joined in a march to a UN office in downtown Baghdad, shouting "We are with you Saddam."

To show the importance Iraq attaches to Arab backing in the conflict, Deputy Prime Minister

Tariq Aziz met Qatar's al-Thani on arrival, and said he hoped their talks would lead to the Middle East being "spared any evil."

Saddam also received a telephone call from King Hassan II of Morocco, who told him that Morocco is against "aggression against Iraq," INA said.

In Paris, French President Jacques Chirac said a peaceful solution to the standoff is close at hand.

"Technically, we are close," Chirac was quoted as saying by his spokeswoman, Catherine Colonna. "We must now make a decisive effort," he was quoted as saying.

But judging by Iraqi officials' words there was little evidence that Iraq was prepared to give UN inspectors unfettered access to the presidential sites, which it calls symbols of national sovereignty.

In a further escalation of the saber-rattling, Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf said Kuwait should not offer US forces its territory to attack Iraq.

"We call on our (Arab) brothers, including the Kuwaitis, not to serve as a foothold for weapons which kill Iraqis," he told reporters in Beirut, Lebanon.

BRIEFLY

15 labourers killed in India: Fifteen labourers, including 12 women were killed and nine others injured when mounds of earth gave way in two separate incidents in Gujarat during the last 48 hours, PTI says from Surat.

Police said Monday that 12 women, who were engaged in digging work at Kathana village under And police station in central Gujarat on Saturday last, were crushed to death after they were trapped under the debris. The rescue workers extricated seven others, police said. In the second incident, three labourers were killed and two others seriously injured at Bhen-sali village under Vagra Taluka of Broach district on February 15.

Bosnian Serb army chief sacked: President Biljana Plavsic on Monday sacked Bosnian Serb army chief Pero Colic, the presidency said in a statement, AFP reports from Banja Luka.

Colic, seen by Plavsic's staff as too close to nationalist hardliners, was replaced by General Momir Talic, the statement said. Talic, commander of the Bosnian Serb army first Corps, showed support for Plavsic last year during a power struggle between the president and hardliners loyal to wartime leader Radovan Karadzic.

Myanmar leader in Philippines: Myanmar's senior leader was to arrive Tuesday for a state visit to the Philippines, the first by a leader of the military-run country since it joined a regional grouping last year, AP reports from Manila.

Gen. Than Shwe is scheduled to meet with Philippine President Fidel Ramos and sign several accords, including an agreement to a Philippine scholarship programme for 60 Myanmar students, officials said. Than Shwe is accompanied by a 47-member delegation comprised of businessmen and senior Myanmar officials.

Congo opposition leader held: Etienne Tshisekedi, opposition leader in the Democratic Republic of Congo, is under house arrest in his native village in Kasai province, the independent daily Le Potentiel reported yesterday, AFP says from Kinshasa.

Le Potentiel said it had sent one of its reporters to Kabeya-Kamwanga, where Tshisekedi was taken on Saturday after his arrest here on Thursday. The paper said Tshisekedi arrived at the family home on Saturday evening, escorted by about 30 soldiers and accompanied by the deputy interior minister for security, major Faustin Munene.

Farrakhan arrives in Cuba: Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the militant US Nation of Islam group, arrived in Cuba Monday on an unofficial three-day visit to the communist-led Caribbean island nation, officials said, AFP reports from Havana.

Farrakhan, who is on an extensive world tour, was due to meet with government officials and hold a press conference Tuesday, the officials said.



A US Army M1A1 Abrams battle tank of a Fort Benning unit moves forward during a live fire exercise in the Kuwaiti desert, near the Iraqi border, Monday. Iraq's foreign minister cautioned Kuwait against allowing US and British forces to attack Iraq from Kuwaiti soil.

5 UNSC members yet to agree on Annan's mission to Baghdad

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 17: Secretary-General Kofi Annan failed Monday to win agreement among the five permanent Security Council members to endorse a personal mission to Baghdad to negotiate an end to the Iraq crisis, reports AP.

Following an hour-long meeting, Annan said the permanent members told him they "need a little more time to arrive at a conclusion." He said he would meet the envoys again Tuesday and then address the full council on Wednesday.

Diplomatic sources said Annan was looking for a sign from Washington on Monday that it is ready for him to negotiate an agreement with the Iraqis.

Emerging from the meeting, however, US Ambassador Bill Richardson held firm to the American position that Iraq

must grant the UN Special Commission or UNSCOM, full and unfettered access to all sites.

Various proposals to end the crisis have included what US officials consider compromises on the commission's integrity.

"It's our view that any solution to this problem centres around the two core principles," Richardson said. "First, clear unfettered access to all sites by UNSCOM inspectors and secondly the full integrity and professionalism of UNSCOM needs to be maintained."

Asked if he would accept any reduction of UNSCOM's role, Richardson replied: "The United States is not for any deals or compromises."

Before the meeting, Annan said he was "getting close" to a decision to go to Baghdad to negotiate an end to the crisis be-

tween the United Nations and Iraq.

British Ambassador John Weston indicated his government would not object to such a visit. Britain has been Washington's strongest ally on the Security Council in demanding that Iraq grant unrestricted access to all suspected weapons sites.

But Weston said after the meeting that "we are not talking about compromises. There are no compromises between what is right and what is wrong."

"What is right here has been written down by the Security Council of the United Nations and has the force of international law, and the duty of all member states including Iraq is to comply with that," Weston said.

Court sentences Kim's son to 3 yrs in prison

SEOUL, Feb 17: An appeals court on Tuesday upheld a three-year prison sentence given to a son of President Kim Young-sam for bribery and tax evasion, reports AP.

Kim Hyun-chul, 38, was also ordered to pay 2.1 million dollar in fines, about what he was convicted of taking in bribes and avoiding in taxes.

The prosecution has sought a seven-year sentence for Hyun-chul. It said he accepted 7.3 million dollars in bribes from six businessmen seeking government favours, far more than he was convicted of taking.

Hyun-chul admitted receiving the money but claimed it came as gifts with no strings attached.

Sinn Fein faces expulsion from peace talks

DUBLIN, Feb 17: The Irish Republican Army's political allies were facing expulsion today from peace talks aimed at ending three decades of bloodshed in British-ruled northern Ireland, reports Reuters.

The British and Irish governments said they would decide Sinn Fein's fate after delegates expressed their views on a British accusation that the IRA was behind two murders last week.

Sinn Fein earned its seat at the talks in July when the IRA, fighting to end British rule, announced a ceasefire which it says is still in place.

Sinn Fein vowed to stay in the talks after Britain's northern Ireland secretary Mo Mowlam backed her police chief's assessment that the IRA was responsible for the killings.

Britain vows to fight for Rushdie

LONDON, Feb 17: The British government promised Monday to keep fighting Iran's death sentence against Salman Rushdie, reports AP.

"Iran should be in no doubt that this issue is an obstacle to better relations with the United Kingdom," Foreign Secretary Robin Cook told reporters after a meeting with the author. "It is appalling that the threat to his life remains after all this time."

Rushdie has been in hiding since 1989, when the late Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini declared that he had blasphemed Islam in "The Satanic Verses."

Britain will mobilise support in the 15-nation European Union, Cook said.

Iran renewed the *fatwa* Friday and the bounty on Rushdie's head stands at 2.5 million dollars.

Rushdie, who has been more visible in recent months, called the death threat "a colossal pressure," adding: "It is a very unpleasant thing that someone is offering money for my death."

Off the Record

Diana's gowns begin charity tour

ATHENS, Georgia: Sis Budd was surprised at how she felt when looking at 14 of Princess Diana's ball gowns, which are on display in Athens before beginning a worldwide charity tour, says AP.

"Just knowing what she had been through and that she wore those it was more emotional than I expected," the Athens resident said Monday. "The whole feeling when you go into the room — it wasn't sadness, it was almost a reverence to me."

The gowns, owned by business executive Maureen Rorech of Tampa, Florida, will be at the Classic Centre in Athens through March 1. Rorech bought 13 of them for 670,000 dollars last June during the Christie's auction in New York and the 14th for 200,000 dollars at a benefit auction in September.

They include the gown Diana wore at a White House dinner where she danced with actor John Travolta and the dress in which her royal portrait was painted. Each dress is displayed in a glass case with information about where the princess wore it and when.

Rorech never knew the princess, who died Aug. 31 in a car crash in Paris, but "thought she was a great humanitarian," said Kim Palmese of Ganz Production Inc., which is organizing publicity for the tour. "She just wanted to have a collection of them."

She decided to put them on to raise money for charities because that was the reason Diana sold them in the first place, Palmese said.

Proceeds from the two-year world tour, which begins in Washington in June, will go to benefit charities in the cities where the dresses appear. Rorech hopes the tour will raise 100 dollars million.

The tour's stops have not been decided but probably will include Chicago, New York, Hong Kong and Paris, with a final stop in London in the summer of 2000, Palmese said. Rorech hopes the owners of other Diana dresses will add theirs to the tour.

Born after 9 yrs!

TARZANA, California: A 44-year-old California woman gave birth by caesarian section Monday to a boy originally conceived in 1989, according to a doctor at the Encino-Tarzana Regional Medical Centre, reports AFP.

The child was conceived in 1989 during fertility treatment and the embryo was frozen while another embryo, also a boy, was implanted, said Dr Michael Vermesh of the medical centre in suburban Los Angeles.

Seven years after the first boy was born, the fertility centre wrote to the woman and her husband, 54, to ask what they wanted done with three other fertilized eggs. The couple then decided to have another child.

"We thawed the zygotes or the pre-embryos and placed them in an incubator overnight," said Vermesh. "The next day they became embryos, they divided — all three, which showed us that all three were alive. And therefore, we placed them all three back in her womb."

Int'l HR group to probe situation in Chiapas

MEXICO CITY, Feb 17: Some 200 international human rights observers will head to strife-torn Chiapas on Tuesday despite local opposition to the presence of foreigners in the southern Mexican state, reports AP.

The observers — from Europe, Canada and Nicaragua — plan to interview both top officials and leaders of the rebel Zapatista National Liberation Army which rose up in arms in 1994 demanding increased rights for Mexico's Indians and poor.

"We have no interest in interfering in Mexican politics," Ignacio Garcia Garcia, a Spanish representative of the commission said Monday. "Our purpose is to investigate the situation objectively... and to bring us closer to the truth and a solution to the conflict."

Since peace talks between the government and rebels stalled in 1996, tensions have run high in Chiapas where at

least 300 people have died in related political violence, human rights workers say.

One of the observers' first stops is the highland village of Acteal, where 45 people were massacred by pro-government gunmen December 22.

Mexican officials have arrested more than 60 suspects in the massacre.

An Interior Department said on television Sunday that he would "not hesitate" to expel any foreigner caught participating in Mexican politics.

Garcia spent much of Monday's press conference giving assurances the observers had gone through proper government channels, got special visas and were not allied with any Mexican political parties or civic groups.

While not an official mission of the European Commission, the observers' final report will be filed there and made public internationally.

Srebrenican women demand int'l effort to locate 6,000 missing men

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Feb 17: Three thousand desperate women and children from Srebrenica gathered Monday in Sarajevo to demand stronger international efforts to locate 6,000 men missing since Bosnian Serbs overran the Muslim enclave in 1995, reports AP.

"I lost two sons, husband, brother and many relatives," said Sabra Mujicic, 50. "There are thousands of mothers like me and we will never give up."

International forensic experts have found more than 1,000 bodies near Srebrenica since Bosnian Serb forces captured the eastern enclave, once one of six UN-protected "safe areas."

Some 6,000 Srebrenica residents, mostly men, are unaccounted for and are presumed

dead. About 27,000 Bosnians are still missing.

For almost a year, women from Srebrenica have been protesting across Bosnia, demanding information about their missing relatives.

Amor Masovic, the head of the Muslim commission for missing people, said remains are deteriorating.

At Monday's protest, the women urged Alija Izetbegovic, the Muslim president of the joint Bosnian presidency, to request help from Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, who still wields great influence in the Bosnian Serb republic.

Despite official denials and inconclusive international investigations, some Srebrenica survivors believe that some of their relatives are still alive and being kept in prisons or mines in Serbia.

Clash leaves 87 dead in Angola

KINSHASA, Congo, Feb 17: Fighting between Angolan troops and rebels seeking independence in a small petroleum-rich coastal region has left 87 people — including 57 civilians — dead, guerrilla officials said Monday, reports AP.

The guerrilla army known as FLEC-FAC said that its fighters were "hunting down" an estimated 5,000 Angolan military troops in Cabinda — a coastal territory tucked in between Congo and the Republic of Congo, according to a statement released in the Congolese capital, Kinshasa.

The statement did not say how many rebels or soldiers were killed in the fighting.

Fighting began earlier this month over Cabinda, killing an unknown number of the people, the rebels said.

Politicians' promises have no impact on India's fight against poverty

SUKINDA, India, Feb 17: "May all live happily. May all enjoy good health. May all see auspiciousness. May none experience distress. May peace prevail everywhere," reports Reuters.

If India's Hindu nationalist party makes good on the vision of its election manifesto, it will have its work cut out for it in the vast poverty-stricken hinterlands of Orissa.

Millions of Indians will enter polling booths for national elections which started on Monday. But for residents of Orissa, as well as many other parts of the country, the high-profile promises of politicians have little or no impact on their daily struggle against intractable poverty.

Just one narrow, potholed road leads to Orissa's Sukinda Valley, home to 80 per cent of

the country's chromite mines. Cars are a rarity in a district where most people get around on their bare feet, bullock carts or rickety bicycles.

Though this eastern state is rich in minerals, almost half of Orissa's 32 million people get less than 2,400 calories of food per day, the Indian Planning Commission's poverty line.

Living standards have stood still for 20 years "elections or no elections, we still struggle for two square meals every day," says Gopinath Mundu, one of thousands of miners in the Sukinda Valley.

He says living conditions have stood still here for the last two decades.

"We have to work very hard the whole day, but the daily wages are extremely low," says Ramchandra Hembram, who

has toiled in mines for 15 years.

"The wages have increased over the years, but prices have increased much more. Our conditions in the earlier days were better, even with lower pay."

Mine workers take home some 80 rupees (2.05 dollars) a day.

Pramila, the wife of a miner in a separate settlement of mud huts and primitive buildings near Sukinda, says elections and electoral promises have come and gone for the past 30 years — but still nothing has changed.

"At every election, we are promised that something better might happen, but it's always the same," she says, "I am struggling to feed my family."

Electoral promises keep coming. Promises are again coming thick and fast from po-

litical parties in the run-up to India's second election in less than two years.

The Congress Party, which has traditionally enjoyed wide support in Orissa, says its agenda is "the elimination of poverty as we have known it for centuries."

Few take the rhetoric seriously. Many do not know who is standing for election in their constituency, some are not even aware that a poll is coming.

"When are the elections? What elections? Asks a middle-aged labourer in a village outside the valley, though with no excitement in his voice.

Officials at the mining firms in Sukinda say they are doing their best to improve the lot of their workers.

"We are giving them all the benefits we can," said one. "We are providing them medical fa-

cilities. They are definitely leading a better life here than in many parts of the state."

State government officials say a lack of funds and cumbersome red tape make it difficult to tackle Orissa's poverty.

For example, the announcement of elections has put a break on the implementation of some World Bank poverty alleviation programmes.

"For the last two months, the development activities, the real implementation part of some poverty alleviation projects, have slowed down," SB Mishra, the state's Chief Secretary, told Reuters in an interview.

Mishra said about 40 per cent of the state's population comprised lower castes and tribals.

Unless their condition improves, the overall condition of

the state's economy cannot improve," he said.

Opponents say they have the answer. Major Opposition parties in the Congress-ruled state, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and Janata Dal, blame the state government for not taking poverty alleviation programmes seriously.

"In a poor state like ours, food for all should be the first target of the government. That has not happened in our state," says state Janata Dal General Secretary Krishna Chandra Patra.

Senior state BJP leader RB Pani joins the chorus.

"The government is not serious about our poor people. People in the government have used power only for their personal gain."

Clerides reelected Cypriot president

NICOSIA, Cyprus, Feb 17: President Glafcos Clerides got down to forming a national unity government Monday, a day after he was returned to office in an election that disappointed the Turkish Cypriot leadership, reports AP.

The right-wing Clerides won a second five-year term Sunday with 50.8 per cent of the vote compared to 49.2 for former Foreign Minister George Iacovou, who was backed by a centrist-communist alliance.

The polls were held only in the Greek Cypriot part of Cyprus, which is separated from the breakaway northern Turkish Cypriot state by a UN buffer zone. It was set up after Turkey invaded the island in 1974 and occupied Turkish districts.