

'Cambodian royal family should shun politics'

PHNOM PENH, Feb 22: King Norodom Sihanouk said Sunday he fears Cambodia's monarchy will be at risk if members of the royal family — including his son, deposed co-premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh — continue in politics, reports AP.

The royal family should therefore shun politics, said Sihanouk in a statement faxed from Beijing. He stressed, however, that he would not impose his will on any of the princes.

"If the royal Cambodian family wants the monarchy to survive, it is necessary that its members abstain from politics and from competing with 'strongmen' who do not have princely blood," the king wrote.

The king often refers to Cambodian leader Hun Sen — who ousted Ranariddh as his co-premier in a July coup — as "strongman."

Sihanouk left Cambodia for Beijing on Jan 5. The 75-year-old monarch gave no reason for his sudden departure, but spends time in China for medical care. He also retreats to Beijing during times of political crises.

Before he left Hun Sen orchestrated a wave of criticism against him for saying he would pardon Ranariddh if convicted by a military court of smuggling weapons and conspiring with outlawed Khmer Rouge guerrillas.

The charges are generally seen as motivated by politics. Ranariddh, now in exile, wants to return to Phnom Penh to prepare for elections scheduled July 26. Ranariddh is seen as Hun Sen's most formidable opponent in the polls.

Hun Sen hinted earlier this month that as long as members of the royal family continue to engage in politics, the country's monarchy will be under threat.

"Personally, I don't desire that members of my family participate in politics," said the king, adding that since he was ousted as monarch in a March 1970 coup, "I have been pulled into the mud and humiliated."

The monarchy was restored in 1993, after a UN-supervised election brought Ranariddh and Hun Sen to power in a coalition government.

Sihanouk said that if the monarchy can be preserved, members of the royal family can look forward to possibly becoming named king, privy councillors and ambassadors.

"It is necessary that we accept our karma and that we be content with that," he said. He went on to say that if Cambodia's politicians wanted to keep members of his family out of politics they could ask the National Assembly to amend the constitution to prohibit it.

"I never opposed a law voted by our National Assembly," he said.

Annan holds two rounds of talks with Iraqi leaders

BAGHDAD, Feb 22: In a mission to avert a military strike, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan held two rounds of talks Saturday with Iraqi officials. He said he was "rather optimistic" he would win an agreement to open all suspected weapons sites, reports AP.

If Annan's visit fails, Iraqi government media said the fault will lie with Washington.

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Annan, who arrived in the Iraqi capital Friday, said he was hopeful he would meet President Saddam Hussein, likely on Sunday.

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"I expect to get a document," Annan said after the talks Saturday morning. "I am rather optimistic."

Annan began his official meetings at the Iraqi Foreign Ministry. Half of the three-hour session was devoted to a private meeting between Annan and Deputy Prime Minister Tariq

Aziz. Afterward, the full delegations — nine Iraqis and eight UN officials — met for another 90 minutes and then resumed their talks in the evening.

A joint statement said only that the two delegations held a "constructive dialogue."

A member of the UN delegation, former Algerian Foreign Minister Lakhdar Brahimi, said before the morning session that the situation was "extremely polarised."

Diplomatic sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the length of the private meeting between Annan and Aziz was unusual.

If the talks are successful,

Annan was expected to meet Saddam before his departure, tentatively set for Monday. UN officials said no meeting had been set as of Saturday.

Reuter adds, after three rounds of inconclusive talks on Saturday, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan is expected to meet Iraqi President Saddam Hussein Sunday in what could be the make or break day for peace.

Annan and Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz broke for the night early Sunday after more than eight hours of talks in the Iraqi capital.

The two were due to meet again Sunday at 0830 GMT to try to defuse a stand-off over access by United Nations teams to sites suspected of housing chemical or biological weapons and to avert a US military strike against Iraq.

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sites suspected of housing chemical or biological weapons and to avert a US military strike against Iraq.

"Ten Iraqis are working hard — they are looking at all the questions in their entirety. It is a tedious and long process."

Reactions of others close to the talks ranged from the pessimism of one UN source — who said he was "not confident," the United Nations could overcome obstacles to an agreement — to positive notes from an Iraqi official.

It's going well said Foreign Minister Mohamed Saeed Al-Saif. "We are working on it and we will continue."

Annan said he expects to meet Saddam today but gave no time.

In Washington, senior US officials said President Bill Clinton had approved a plan for air strikes if he was not satisfied that Annan had ensured Baghdad would give free access to UN weapons inspectors.

Washington urged all of its citizens to leave Iraq — just as it did before the 1991 Gulf War when a US-led force ended Iraq's occupation of Kuwait.

The Iraqi news agency described the talks as "difficult" in

the presidential sites.

Baghdad denies having nuclear biological or chemical weapons and triggered the latest stand-off by refusing to give UN teams unrestricted access to the

presidential sites.

Off the Record

King Edward VII's desk fetches \$415,000

NEW YORK: The desk on which British King Edward VII signed his abdication was sold at auction Saturday to anonymous American for 415,000 dollars, reports AFP.

The British monarch renounced his crown in December 1936 to marry American divorcee Wallis Simpson and become the Duke of Windsor.

The George II-Style mahogany desk with green leather top, dates back to around 1775, and its value was estimated at between 30,000 and 50,000 dollars.

The desk was sold by Sotheby's during the fifth session of an 18-stage auction to sell the 40,000 diverse objects amassed by the Windsors.

Many of the most valuable Windsor possessions were auctioned in Geneva in 1987. Fetching about 50 million dollars.

The auction was organised by Mohammed al-Fayed, father of Dodi Al-Fayed, who died with Diana, Princess of Wales, in a Paris car accident last summer.

Queen hires image-maker

LONDON: Britain's Queen Elizabeth is to recruit a media spin doctor in a bid to improve the image of the royal family a press report said Sunday, reports AFP.

The decision to hire a royal director of communications comes in the wake of alarming findings by pollsters commissioned by Buckingham Palace, the Sunday Times reported.

The move was sanctioned at last week's meeting of the family's way ahead group attended by the queen, her husband Prince Philip, Children the Prince of Wales, Prince Andrew and Princess Anne and senior aides.

They considered confidential results from Mori focus surveys commissioned after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales.

The surveys found the royal family to be remote, out of touch, wasteful lacking in understanding poor value for money and badly advised, the paper said.

A place spokesman refused to confirm or deny the contents of the surveys and said it was "speculative" to say a media guru was to be headhunted.

Pro-Iraq demonstrations erupt in ME states

MAAN, Jordan, Feb 22: Police fired bullets and tear gas Saturday to disperse about 1,000 pro-Iraq protesters, some of whom shot at police or threw stones. At least 20 people were injured in the daylong violence, including three policemen, reports AP.

The riot in the southern city of Maan was the worst violence in Jordan since unrest began over the US threat to attack Iraq. The government sent the army to put down the protest, one of many that have erupted across the Arab world.

About 50 journalists demonstrated in the Egyptian capital of Cairo, stomping on hand-drawn American and Israeli flag and setting them on fire.

In Washington, an estimated 3,000 people marched to the front gates of the White House.

"Do not bomb Iraq" said the banner leading them. The president did not acknowledge the crowd.

In Jordan, King Hussein said the demonstrators would be punished.

He called the unrest "shameful" and urged restraint at a time of mounting tension in the region. He criticised Jordanians for their support for Iraq and its repressive government.

"Do they (Jordanians) want us to treat them like some neighbours who have flattened cities on the heads of their people and hit at them with chemical weapons?" Hussein, dressed in a military uniform, asked in a speech on state-run Jordan Television.

Prime Minister Abdul-Salam Majali told the London-based Middle East Broadcast Corp. that a state of emergency might be announced if the trouble continued.

On Friday, police quelled a smaller pro-Iraq demonstration with gunfire, killing one person. Three people were injured.

Simmering anger against the fatal shooting, and a ban imposed 11 days ago on public demonstration blew up Saturday when about 200 people attacked a police station before dawn and set fire to parts of a state-run bank and an automatic teller machine in the Bedouin city.

A model wears a see-through knitted dress by British designer Elspeth Gibson at the start of London Fashion Week Saturday. — AP/UNB Photo



Jennifer Thangavelu, left, marches through Lafayette Park with other protesters to the White House Saturday in Washington. The march was to protest a possible military action against Iraq. The president, who was inside meeting with members of his national security team, did not acknowledge the crowd. US Park Police arrested six people for demonstrating without a permit, but said the crowd was otherwise orderly.

— AP/UNB photo

BJP suffers political setback as governor dismisses UP govt

NEW DELHI, Feb 22: India's main Hindu nationalist party Saturday suffered a major political setback when they lost control of the nation's largest state in the midst of a parliamentary election, reports AP.

The Bharatiya Janata Party government in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh was dismissed by the governor after two key allies withdrew their support.

The withdrawal of the Democratic Congress Party and another small group from the government left it 16 seats short of a majority in the 425-seat legislature.

The events in Uttar Pradesh, a state which has the 85 — the largest contingent — lawmakers in the federal parliament's powerful lower house of 545

members, came a day ahead of the second phase of voting in a general election.

Groups opposed to the Bharatiya Janata claimed that the desertion could translate into loss of votes for the party that many pre-election surveys had predicted could win the largest number of seats in Parliament. The Bharatiya Janata maintained that it would not affect their performance.

But the Bharatiya Janata's candidate for the prime minister's office, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, announced he was beginning a fast until death to protest against the dismissal of the government.

State Governor Romesh Bhandari installed Jagannath Prasad, leader of the Democratic Congress Party as

the new chief minister of the state. He would have to prove his majority in the legislature by Tuesday.

Prasad claimed support of 240 members in the legislature.

The deserting parties alleged that the Bharatiya Janata was trying to engineer a split in their ranks and of running the state government on the dictates of a Hindu fundamentalist group, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or the National Volunteer Corps.

The Bharatiya Janata Party has, in the run up to elections, tried to distance itself from Hindu fundamentalists and appear as a liberal party that was not against minorities, especially the Muslims, who form nearly 12 per cent of India's 930 million people.

Politicians playing on people's fears to win votes in the south

COIMBATORE, India, Feb 22: A week after bomb blasts roared through this southern mill town, killing 54 people and setting off Hindu-Muslim rioting, candidate C P Radhakrishnan grabs a microphone and plays on voters' fear, reports AP.

"If elected, I will crack down on terrorists," Radhakrishnan, running for parliament on the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ticket shouted from the back of a truck winding through a Hindu-dominated residential neighbourhood Saturday.

That their hometown would see the worst violence of the current campaign has baffled many in Coimbatore, 2,400 KM south of New Delhi.

Hindu-Muslim clashes are rare anywhere in southern India, where Muslims generally make up a smaller part of the population than in the north. Coimbatore residents say religious differences were recognised but meant little before politicians began meddling.

About 5 per cent of Coimbatore's 1.23 million people are Muslim, nationwide. Muslims are 11 per cent of nearly 1 billion Indians.

Radhakrishnan's BJP, the front runner in the election for parliament that will be seated next month in New Delhi, has worked to raise its profile in Tamil Nadu, long dominated by leftist parties.

He didn't refer directly to Muslims in his exhortations to women beating clothes clean against rocks in their front yards, or lining up for rice at

the dry goods stores. But since the 13 explosions the weekend before, the word "terrorists" has become synonymous with Muslim extremists.

Police investigating the bombings have arrested and questioned hundreds of people linked to Muslim fundamentalists groups, though it remains unclear who was behind the attacks that killed people seemingly at random — Hindus and Muslims, shoppers, school children store clerks. They took place on the day BJP president K. Advani was to have addressed supporters in Coimbatore; he was not yet in the city at the time.

Voting scheduled in Coimbatore Sunday was postponed to February 28 after the bombings. India's parliamentary elections were staggered over six days beginning February 16 to give security forces time to reinforce trouble spots.

Abdul Khaled Muthvalli, an Imam said Coimbatore's troubles began when the BJP held its first organisational meeting here in 1985.

From that time on, they twisted Hindus against Muslims," said Muthvalli. He is working with other imams to provide food and housing for Muslims whose businesses were destroyed in the post-bombing rioting and trace those who disappeared in the confusion that weekend. Many Muslim families have fled, locking up their homes in Koetailmebu, Coimbatore's mostly Muslim ghetto.

Koetailmebu's Muslims acknowledge extremists among them may be behind the blasts, the violence continues and investors begin to look for a safer place for their money.

For now, the town is booming. Surrounding fields provide cotton for factories spinning out everything from thread to finished shirts, much of it exported.

Two Iranian workers shot dead in Karachi

KARACHI, Feb 22: Two Iranian construction workers were gunned down on Saturday in southern Karachi, Pakistan's largest city wracked by relentless sectarian and ethnic killings, reports AP.

Several hours later a bomb exploded outside a Shi'ite Muslim mosque in the heart of the city, killing one person and injuring two other people.

No one took immediate responsibility for the daylight shooting or the bombing that occurred shortly before mid-night, police said.

There was no evidence to link the two incidents said police, except that both targeted Shi'ite Muslims.

About 200 people were attending a memorial service for a Shi'ite Muslim leader, who had died several weeks ago in an accident, when a bomb planted outside the mosque gate exploded, police said.

One person nearby the gate was killed and two others were injured, although it wasn't known how seriously.

Meanwhile police released few details about Saturday's shooting of two Iranian labourers in the posh Clifton area where they were working on an overpass.

In the last one year eight Iranians have been killed in Pakistan, all reportedly by militant Sunni Muslims who say Iran, a country of mostly Shi'ite Muslims, is financing radical Shi'ite groups in Pakistan.

Iran has denied the charge. Fellow workers said the two Iranians were taking a break

when a motorcycle, followed by a taxi, pulled up and several men opened fire.

AP adds, a powerful bomb exploded outside a Shi'ite mosque in Karachi early Sunday, injuring several people. hours after two Iranian engineers were murdered in the city, police and witnesses said.