International ___

World reaction to Baghdad-UN deal: Relief and cautious optimism

TOKYO, Feb 23: Governments around the world reacted with a mixture of cautious optimism and relief on Monday that the United Nations and Baghdad had reached an agreement that could avert a US-led

attack against Iraq, reports AP.
UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan reached the accord with Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein on Sunday on the last major obstacle for opening presiden-tial palaces to UN arms inspec-tors. UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said.

Annan and Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz planned to sign the agreement

Monday morning.

"Japan highly appreciates
Annan's diplomatic effort," a Foreign Ministry spokesman said in Tokyo.

But until the UN Security Council official announces that a deal has been brokered, the spokesman said on condition of anonymity, the Japanese government cannot comment fur-

with "a sigh of relief," according to a report on Dutch television. Eckhard said Annan believes the agreement will be ac-There was no immediate receptable to all 15 members of action from most countries in

the Security Council, including the United States. Asia, where it was early Monday morning when the agree-

But the Clinton administrament was reached. tion said it still has "serious questions" about the accord and optimistic that a US-led milithat it will await Saddam's actary strike on Iraq could be tions. Washington also did not averted, some also said they begin to reduce the military won't accept an agreement that forces it and other nations have amassed in the Gulf.

stops short of opening Iraq completely to UN arms inspec-On Sunday, France hailed the agreement and took some Britain, a key US ally, said credit for its role in pushing for Annan's negotiations were "encouraging." But Foreign Secre-tary Robin Cook, emphasized that Saddam must allow UN ina peaceful settlement.

"France welcomes the announcement made in Baghdad and hopes that the accord will spectors "full and unrestricted respond to expectations," the access to all the sites in Iraq Foreign Ministry said. they want to inspect."

Australian Foreign Minister France had "called for a

mission by the secretary gen-eral in search of such a solu-Alexander Downer said on Monday that any deal had to be consistent with UN Security tion, did everything so that it could be realised, and gave him Council resolutions and had to its complete support," the min-istry said. preserve the integrity of the UN Special Commission's weapons inspection process. Elsewhere in Europe, the foreign secretary of the Nether-

"If those two criteria are met then it's likely to be an acceptable agreement, but it remains to be seen whether in every detail those criteria are going to be met," Downer said.

The United States had vowed

While many countries were

to hit Iraq with its military might if Annan failed to persuade Saddam to open all sites without conditions. The US military has deployed 25,000

troops in the Persian Gulf region. In Arab countries, where opposition to any US strike against Iraq has been strongest, many people were relieved that

an agreement seemed immi-

nent.
"Nobody wants to see a war in which American soldiers are killed or see Iraqi women and children suffer," said Khalid Ramadan, an Egyptian man-ager at a late night cafe in Bahrain.

It appeared that major hurdles to Annan's mission had included Iraq's demand for a time limit on UN inspections of the eight presidential compounds, which the Iraqis have placed off-limits, citing national sovereignty.

tional sovereignty.
UN Security Council diplomats had said they would not lift the sweeping economic sanctions imposed after Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait until Iraq fully cooperates with the inspectors.

Armed men take over police hqs, free 35 detainees in Albania

TIRANA, Feb 23: A dozen armed men attacked and took over the police headquarters in the northern Albanian town of Shkoder on Sunday, freeing 35 detainees held there, the interior ministry here said, reports

The assailants entered the building after an hour-long shootout in which three policemen were wounded, according to local hospital sources.
They escaped with weapons after holding the station for sev-

eral hours. Interior minister Neritan Ceka appeared on television to denounce the "terrorist act" which he said was carried out

by "foreign intelligence services trying to destabilise Albania." He claimed that the group which attacked the headquarters with grenades and anti-tank missiles included people who had come from neighbouring Montenegro.

Ceka said the assailants had freed 35 "most wanted criminals" and torched the police sta-

Special police left Tirana for Shkoder, ministry official Ilir Cani said.

70 killed in fighting

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (left) and Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz

signing an agreement between the UN and Iraq yesterday regarding the current standoff.

It is hoped that the agreement will end the impasse over weapons inspections and prevent

Tigers launch suicide attack on Lankan navy, destroy 2 ships

COLOMBO, Feb 23: Tamil rebel gunboats attacked a 12ship convoy carrying soldiers to northern Sri Lanka, sinking two ships. Up to 70 people were killed in the sea battle, military officials said Monday, reports

a US military strike against Iraq.

Separatist rebels in about 25 boats clashed with navy war ships escorting the convoy a few miles (kilometres) off the northern coast and about 320 kms (200 miles) north of Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital military officials said.

Two ships carrying 110 soldiers and crew were sunk in the hour-long battle Sunday night. Seventy survivors were picked up by other ships. The rest of the 12-ship convoy made it safely to a nearby military port.

Navy ships destroyed at least six of the attacking boats, which normally carry five fighters each, officials said, estimating 30 rebel casualties.

Warships and air force planes were hunting for more survivors, the officials said, speaking on condition of

Two battle tanks being

The rebels, who maintain information offices in Europe. released no immediate statement on the fighting.

In previous sea battles, rebels have sunk navy ships by carrying out suicide attacks. smashing their explosive-laden smaller boats into the larger

The Tamil rebels are fighting for a separate homeland for minority Tamils in northern Sri Lanka. More than 51,000 people have been killed since fighting erupted in 1983.

The ships were attempting to reinforce troops on the Jaffna Peninsula, a region controlled by the government but isolated from the rest of the country. The peninsula is accessible only by sea and air because the rebels control the only link through the mainland.

Since May, government forces have recaptured about two-thirds of the 77-kms (50mile) highway. The military says more than 1,000 soldiers and 3,200 rebels have been killed in the battle to capture the road

transported on the ships were AFP adds, the rebel Libera-

tion Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) used eight boats filled with explosives to ram two craft transporting just over 100 soldiers and sailors to the country's war-torn north, officials

-AP/UNB photo

The two boats, the Pabbatha and Vaalampuri, were bound for the northern peninsula of Jaffna when they came under attack, officials said adding that 58 security personnel have so far been rescued.

Naval officers estimated that each of the eight rebel boats would have carried at least two suicide cadres and therefore at least 16 guerrillas from the elite Black Sea Tiger Unit may have perished in the attack.

A fleet of Dvora-class gun boats was sent to the area to rescue survivors and navy divers were also sent, a navy of-

He said the two boats attacked were part of convoy taking troops to the Jaffna peninsula which security forces wrested from rebel control in December 1995.

Sonia joined politics to uphold Indian traditions

AHMEDABAD, Feb 23: Congress star campaigner Sonia Gandhi yesterday said she never had any interest in politics but has now joined it to uphold the 5,000 year old tradition of India, reports PTI.

"I could not remain a silent spectator when I found that the tradition and principles for which my husband and my mother-in-law worked day and night and laid down their lives were being destroyed by some political parties," she said drawing applause from a sizable crowd at Bapunagar stadium here.

In an obvious reference to BJP, Sonia said "for the sake of power some political party had entered into unprincipled alliance with others. It had raised the issue of stability. The people of Gujarat gave this party two-third majority

but it could not rule the state for more than one and a half year. In the 45 years of Congress rule the country had only five prime ministers but in the five years rule by non-Congress parties the country has had seven prime ministers, she

Sonia said she had seen how Rajiv and Indira worked tirelessly without seeking any personal comfort for the uplift of the poor and downtrodden.

Your happiness was their happiness and both considered your pains as theirs," she said.

lands, Hans van Mierlo, said he

received the news from Baghdad

Rajiv, she said, introduced one-third reservation of seats in panchayats and municipal corporations to give more responsibility to women but today women were being subjected to harassment.

Unemployment was growing, industries were affected and prices were rising. Sonia

The Congress had the experience of leading the country on the right path, she said and appealed to the people to vote overwhelmingly for the party to return it to power with a "thumping majority".

"My family tradition has influenced me to care for the 5000-year old tradition of this country. tradition of the Sabarmati Ashram of Mahatma Gandhi who preached that one cannot get the bless-ings of the Almighty by afflicting pain on others and committing murders," Sonia said.

I am worried over the future of the next generation and to fulfil the dream of my husband and great leaders I have decided to join politics," she said in her brief speech. Sonia; who was accompa-

nied by son Rahul, later left for



Sonia Gandhi is joined by her son Rahul Gandhi (C), and Sitaram Kesri (L), president of the Congress Party, as they wave to the crowd in Bombay Sunday. More than 100,000 people attended the election campaign rally and podon bias someon AP/UNB photo

COLOMBO, Feb 23: A Sri

Lankan man who hijacked an

Italian plane in a bid to get a

New ROK PM named: South Korean president-elect Kim Dae-Jung yesterday said he had decided to name his ally Kim Jong-Pil as the new prime minister despite objections from the majority opposition, his aide said, AFP reports

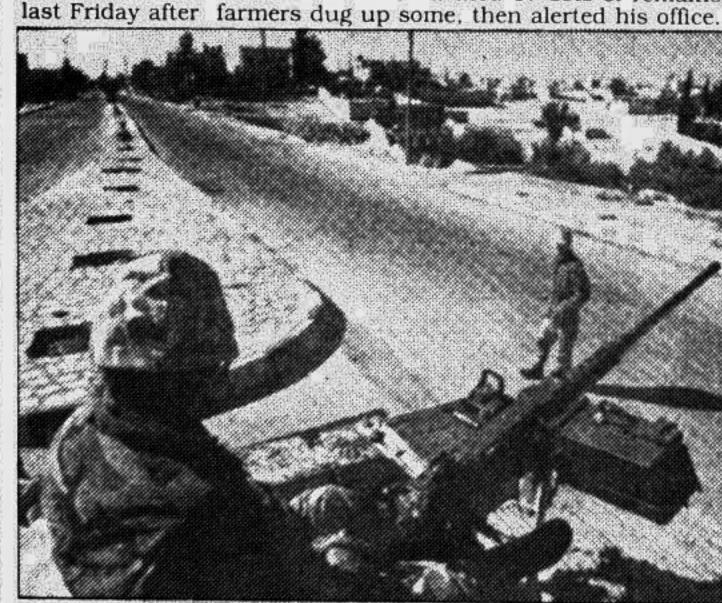
from Seoul. Quoting the president elect, the aide said on television: "as promised in the presidential election, Kim Jong-Pil was to become Prime Minister if I was elected.

Uzbek soldiers killed: An Uzbekistan army private shot dead eight fellow servicemen with an assault rifle in a dispute over food in the Central Asian nation, a news report said Monday, AP reports from Moscow.

The soldier, identified only as Pvt Madaminov, fired on his colleagues Sunday at a border post with the neighbouring state of Turkmenistan, the Interfax news agency reported, citing Uzbekistan's National Security Service. The report said only that the shooting was prompted by an argument over food.

Mass grave discovered in Vietnam: A mass grave of Vietnamese soldiers who fought against the USbacked government in the former Saigon has been recovered in the central highland province of Kon Tum, officials said Mon-

day, AP reports from Hanoi Lt. Col. Le Ngoc son, chief of the Sa Thay district military command, said local authorities excavated 17 sets of remains



Jordanian soldiers patrol the entrance of Maan, 250 km south of Amman, Sunday. The city came under curfew and the army began disarming its inhabitants Sunday following two days of violent riots related to a possible US strike on Iraq. One person was killed and 23 others, mostly policemen, were injured in the unrest.

- AP/UNB photo

6 killed in Philippines road mishap: Six people were killed when a bus collided with a truck carrying cattle in the southern Philippine province of Davao Del Sur, the

national police said yesterday. AFP reports from Manila. The commuter bus swerved to dodge an open manhole in the town of Santa Cruz late Sunday, causing it to hit the truck. Two men in the truck and four people in the bus were killed instantly, while 18 other passengers were seriously injured, the police added.

China to launch 24-hr AIDS hotline: China plans to launch its first 24-hour AIDS hotline, offering recorded information on the disease, AP reports from Beijing.

Most of China's provinces and big cities already have AIDS hotlines that operate a few hours a day. The new hotline is run by the China Association for the Control of AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases, the official Xinhua News Agency said Sunday. The system will let callers receive information from a list of topics picked using a touch-tone phone. The report did not say when the new system would begin operation.

Death toll in 2nd phase of polls now 29

Sacking of UP govt: BJP challenges ruling in court

NEW DELHI, Feb 23: India's top prime ministerial candidate Atal Behari Vajpayee continued a hunger strike for the second day today to protest against the dismissal of a Hindu nationalist state administration, officials said, reports

An aide said Vajpayee. 71. had been without food since late Saturday and had no plans to give up the fast.

"He is under medical examination," the aide said. Vajpayee, whose rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) hopes to win ongoing national elections, began the protest after a BJP government in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh was sacked after losing its majority.

An alternative government was then sworn in by Uttar Pradesh governor Romesh Bhandari.

Vajpayee branded the government sacking "unconstitutional and undemocratic" and said the state administration should have been given the chance to prove its majority in

The BJP, which has made a legal challenge to the ruling, has called on the Indian president to sack the governor and reinstall the state government. Political rivals have branded the hunger strike a "political gimmick."

The Hindu nationalists, who are tipped to win most seats in the Feb 16-Mar 7 national polls but fall short of a majority. have launched street protests across the country over the Ut-

tar Pradesh affair. Uttar Pradesh, a sprawling state of 140 million people, is the political heartland of India. It elects 85 of India's 545 parliament members. In recent years it has become a bastion of Hindu nationalists.

AP adds: Leftist guerillas battled Indian forces deployed for election security in southern India Monday, as electionrelated violence climbed to 29 in the last two days. A land mine killed five sol-

diers and injured 37 others as they were travelling in buses through the forests of Andhra Pradesh to redeploy at polling stations where voting in the staggered parliamentary election continues next Saturday. Police suspect the outlawed Peoples War Group, who have called for a boycott of the polls, are behind the blast.

In a separate incident in the same state Sunday night, the Maoist guerillas triggered another land mine that killed four election officers and two policemen bringing ballot boxes to central collection stations. where they will be held until counting begins March 2. Another political activist was fatally stabbed overnight, United

News of Indian reported. In Nagaland and Mizoram, two remote northeastern states where balloting continued Monday, two men were shot and killed, one of them an election supervisor. Tribal guerillas seeking autonomy called for a boycott, supported by opposition parties and student groups.

Three men were killed in clashes overnight after voting ended in the eastern state of West Bengal. One of the victims was hacked to death, police said according to the Press Trust of

In Sunday's voting in nine states and the small federallyadministered territory of Pondicherry, 12 people were killed in clashes between rival activists, and more than 40 people were injured. Most of the deaths were in the violenceprone northern state of Bihar.

Attention was deflected from the voting by the fast-developing upheaval in the state Uttar Pradesh. On Monday, nearly 500 ac-

tivists of the BJP tried to force their way towards the prime minister's office in New Delhi to demand the removal of the state governor who sacked the local government. Police fired tear gas shells and used water cannons to disperse the sloganshouting protesters.

UK, Irish govts resume talks on N-Ireland

BELFAST, Northern Ireland Feb 23: Northern Ireland's peace talks are resuming with the IRA-allied Sinn Fein party serving a two-week suspension because of killings blamed on the Irish Republican Army, reports AP.

The British and Irish governments originally barred Sinn Fein when the talks involving nine other parties began in June 1996, then admitted the party last September after the IRA stopped bombing and shooting.

The governments ruled last week that the IRA was responsible for killing two Belfast men earlier this month, an unacknowledged violation of the 7-month-old ceasefire that is required for Sinn Fein to participate.

Botha pleads not guilty

GEORGE, South Africa, Feb 23: Former president PW Botha today pleaded not guilty in the magistrate's court here to ignoring a subpoena to appear before the truth and reconciliation commission, reports AFP. The 82-year-old Botha failed

to appear before a TRC hearing on December 19 into his leadership of the now-defunct state security council which brutally enforced apartheid.

visa to join his Italian wife and only son has been reunited with the boy 16 years later, press re-

ports here said Monday, reports Sepala Ekanayake took 261 passengers of an Alitalia jet hostage and threatened to blow up the aircraft in June 1982 at the Bangkok airport unless

Italian authorities granted him a visa and paid 300,000 dollars, The boy, Free, now 19, arrived at Colombo International Airport Saturday for an emotional reunion with his father with both breaking into tears, newspapers here said. They both took a minute to

recognise each other after 16 years apart, the Sinhalese-language Divaina daily said. "They looked at each other for a moment and then went rushing to embrace," the Divaina said.

Free is due to spend a threemonth holiday with his father, the paper said. Ékanayake who was per-

suaded to end the hostage drama was returned to the Sri Lankan capital where he was immediately arrested and the ransom money of 300,000 dollars taken away from him.

His Italian wife and son returned to Sri Lanka while Ekanayake was kept in remand custody. He won a court order preventing his wife taking Free back to Italy but by the time the order was issued. Free had al-

ready been taken off the island. Ekanayake is now married for a second time and has two other children.

Father, son reunited 16 yrs

after hijacking episode

The Sri Lankan government drafted anti-hijacking laws with retrospective effect to try Ekanayake who was given a life sentence. Later the sentence was reduced to five years.

Rais vows to lead movement to unseat Suharto

SYDNEY, Feb 23: Indonesian Islamic leader Amien Rais has vowed to lead a mass people's movement to unseat President Suharto unless his government can solve the nation's crisis within a year, it was reported here today, says AFP.

Doctor Rais who leads Indonesia's second biggest Muslim grouping, the Muhammadiyah, announced what was described as an unprecedented ultimatum in an interview with the Australian financial review in his Jakarta headquarters.

"The Indonesian people will give President Suharto one last chance when he is formally installed for another term of office next month after 32 years in power," said Rais, who is widely respected for his leadership of the moderate 28-million strong movement.

"But if, one year later, he can't deliver, the people will find their own solution.

Asians oppose proposed NY law banning nose piercing

NEW YORK, Feb 23: A new law proposed by a New York state legislator to ban nose piercing for those under 18 has raised opposition from South Asians, who say it is a centuries-old tradition in the subcontinent, reports India Abroad News Service.

Citing health concerns, a state senator, Frank Padavan, has introduced a law that would make nose piercing illegal in New York for those under 18. The move could also mar the present fad amongst the young to get various parts of their bodies - ranging from navels, eyebrows, lips to tongues - pierced. The law, which was introduced in January, would fine merchants for piercing any part of the body, except the ears, of a minor. Merchants who pierce a minor would face a 500 US dollar fine or three months in jail. The law would also make it a misdemeanour to pierce or apply a tattoo to anyone who is

Padavan said in announc-

ing the legislation: "Since the

intoxicated.

health care practitioners, the dians. There shouldn't be a law risk of bacterial infection. hepatitis B and AIDS has been recognised by the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) AIDS/HIV division." Many South Asians said that nose piercing is a important tradition among them that should remain legal for those under 18. personally don't like it." Sunita Kanwar, manager of Krishna Jewellers, told IANS. "There's no way they would pass

it. That would be kind of silly." "In India, nose piercing has been done since the beginning of time and I don't think it has anything to do with health concerns," she said. Kanwar said her store preforms nose piercing but that it requires minors who want piercing to have their parents present. "When we tell them we need their parents' consent, they don't come back," she said. Shelly Khan, 18, and a stu-

dent at Borough of Manhattan

Community College, said law to

restrict nose piercing for those

majority of tattooists and body under 18 is not a good idea. against that," she said. A spokesperson for the CDC

told IANS that there is no known case of HIV being transmitted through body piercing, but it recommends tattooists and those offering body piercing follow the same guidelines as health professionals. Padavan said that public health concerns outweigh the cultural significance nose piercing may have for some. "While culture is important, we are talking about health and welfare of children here," he told IANS. In the New York law, there is no provision for parental consent for body piercing, something which exists in laws in other states. Padavan said he "would consider" agreeing to a parental consent clause in the New York law should that be proposed in

later negotiations on the bill. Bills to limit access of minors to body piercing have been sprouting up in legislatures across the country re-

cently, as the popularity of piercers are not trained as "That's a cultural thing for In- body piercing has grown among teenagers. On January 1, a law went into effect in California that forbade those under 18 to get pierced (except the ears) or tattooed without parental approval. A similar bill was signed in Delaware recently. But in New Jersey, Government Christie Todd Whitman vetoed a bill last month that would have severely restricted access of minors to body piercing and tattoos. Padavan would not say whether he expected the New York bill to pass. Another sponsor of the

New York bill, Assemblyman Anthony Seminerio, a Democrat from Queens, said that cultural traditions in South Asia should not determine law in New York State. "In South Asia that's fine, but you're in America," he said. Young girls, he said, should wait until they are older before getting their nose pierced. "They should at least understand that they are in a new country and they should try to conform to customs here," he said.

Regional disarmament meet opens in Kathmandu KATHMANDU, Feb 23: A re- role by responding to the signif-

gional disarmament meeting organised by the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and disarmament in Asia and the Pacific opened here Sunday, reports Xinhua.

The meeting falls on the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the regional centre. often referred to as "The Kathmandu Process.

Attending the three-day meeting are 38 diplomats, government officials scholars and experts from 22 countries and five non-governmental organisations in the region.

In his opening statement, Javantha Dhanapala, UN Under Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, noted that the annual gathering in Kathmandu has become an increasingly important means to assist in identifying and addressing disarmament and security is-

He said that through its tenyear existence, the regional centre has tried to meet new challenges and to play a distinctive

icant changes in the international situation. First of all, he said, the cen-

tre has tried to develop a regionoriented approach for disarmament taking into account the specific conditions prevailing in the Asia-Pacific region.

The centre, a non-governmental security dialogue mechanism, intends to further encourage states within the region to elaborate and employ measures for increasing transparency in military matters, he added.

Secondly, it provided the Asia-Pacific states with an additional forum for them to narrow down differences and search for a common position in disarmament negotiations and deliberations, the senior UN official said.

Thirdly, it has helped introduce principles or guidelines for the region. And fourthly, in addition to disarmament, dealing with region-specific issues is another characteristic of the Kathmandu process, he noted.