

# Netanyahu offers olive branch to Arafat

JERUSALEM, Mar 6: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Thursday he has invited Palestinian President Yasser Arafat to hold a summit, which would be the first meeting between the two leaders for five months, reports AFP.

"I recently sent an invitation to Arafat to meet him but I don't know what his response will be," Netanyahu, who is currently in Madrid, told Israeli television.

"The problem is not so much if Arafat wants to meet me or not but whether he is ready to conduct negotiations through to their conclusion," he said.

Netanyahu also said he believed the Palestinians were wrong to count on international pressure to break the year-long deadlock in the peace process, referring to Palestinian demands for US or European intervention.

Arafat's spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina said the Palestinian leader "had not received any official invitation" to meet Netanyahu.

Palestinian officials said the possibility of such a meeting was raised by Netanyahu during a meeting around two weeks ago with Palestinian number two Mahmud Abbas.

AP adds: Israel said Thursday it had uncovered a large cell of the militant Islamic group Hamas that was run out of Jordan and carried out several deadly attacks in Israel.

Five Palestinians suspected of being members of the cell, including a Palestinian policeman, have been arrested by the Shin Bet internal security agency in recent weeks, the army said in a statement.

The cell is suspected of involvement in at least 10 attacks on Israeli targets, including two deadly suicide bombings in Jerusalem last year that killed 21 Israelis, the army said.

Palestinian police have also made arrests recently in connection with the attacks, television reports said.

Hamas, which violently opposes peace with Israel, has carried out more than a dozen suicide bombings in Israel since 1994.

According to television reports, the cell had branches in east Jerusalem and the West Bank cities of Ramallah and Nablus, and got its orders from Hamas officials in Jordan.

# BJP to stake formal claim soon to form govt

NEW DELHI, Mar 6: Leaders of India's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party said Friday that voters had given them the mandate, indicating they would soon stake a formal claim to forming the government, reports AP.

BJP leaders have been sounding increasingly confident in the days since the bulk of vote counting in the federal parliamentary election ended. No party won the 273-seat majority needed to control the 545-member lower house of parliament, but the BJP was both the single largest party and, with its allies, the biggest bloc.

"We have a decisive mandate," BJP spokeswoman Sushma Swaraj told reporters after a meeting of the party's top leaders.

She said the leaders had agreed on a resolution declaring voters had turned to the BJP over the scandal-plagued Congress Party and over an incumbent United Front seen as ineffective.

Jaswant Singh, another BJP leader, said his party would soon open talks with allies to shape a common governing platform. That will likely mean the BJP will have to compromise on the Hindu-nationalist, protectionist agenda it drafted before the elections.

Saturday, newly elected BJP parliamentarians will meet to formally elect Atal Bihari Vajpayee as their candidate for prime minister. Vajpayee is seen as a moderate within the party.

The BJP has yet to formally announce its intention to lead the next government, something it cannot do until it is sure it has the 273 votes to win a vote of confidence. After the last elections in 1996, Vajpayee was sworn in as prime minister as leader of the party with the most seats, but his government lost a vote of confidence after just two weeks.

Once the contenders have made their bids, President KR Narayanan will formally grant one of them chance to form the federal government.

Narayanan is not expected to act before next week. One example of how he might proceed came Friday, when Congress was chosen to lead the state government in northern Himachal Pradesh.

Congress controlled 31 of the state legislature's 64 contested seats and the BJP and a local ally 32 seats. But Congress was the single largest party and hence entitled to the first chance at government, state Governor VS Rama Devi was quoted as saying by Press Trust of India news agency.

The BJP's state leader PK Dhumal described the governor's action as "unconstitutional and totally unjustified," Press Trust said. But where no party has a clear majority, the governors in the states and the president at the national level usually call the largest party in the House.

According to tallies after national voting held in stages over the last two and a half weeks, the BJP and its allies won 251 seats; the Congress party and its allies 166; and the ousted United Front of Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral 96. Congress and United Front leaders have vowed to join forces to form a government.

Congress and the Front together are 11 seats short of a majority, and the BJP 22 short.

# Mamata to claim nat'l party status for Trinamool Cong

CALCUTTA, Mar 6: Mamata Banerjee has decided to move the Election Commission to claim national party status for her Trinamool Congress, reports PTI.

Trinamool sources said yesterday that the party had polled 3.56 per cent of the total votes on all-India basis "which is .56 per cent more than what is required to attain the national party status."

Banerjee leaves for Delhi on Monday with all the seven elected Trinamool Congress Lok Sabha members to formally meet the chief election commissioner and place the demand.

Meanwhile, sources said Mamata Banerjee would move the Calcutta High Court Monday challenging results in Diamond Harbour, Hoogly, Barrackpore and Asansol parliamentary constituencies.

# Fighting in Rwanda: 135 die in 5 days

KIGALI, Mar 6: At least 135 people have died in five days of fighting between the Rwandan army and Hutu rebels in the central Gitarama region, an army spokesman said on Thursday, reports Reuters.

Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA) chief of staff Colonel Kayumba Nyamwasa told reporters that 120 rebels were killed in clashes in three communes in Gitarama between last Saturday and Wednesday.

Colonel Karenzi Karake, army spokesman in Gitarama, said eight soldiers were also killed in the fighting and 12 others injured. He added that rebels had killed seven community leaders during the fighting.

The morning was quiet. But in the afternoon we have heard sporadic gunfire," said Karake, adding that he had no casualty figures for fighting on Thursday.

# US troops not leaving Gulf soon

WASHINGTON, Mar 6: The 38,000 US troops in the Gulf region will not be going home anytime soon, the Pentagon's spokesman said Thursday, reports AP.

"We are going to maintain our forces in the region for the foreseeable future," said spokesman Kenneth Bacon, adding, "There's no decision yet made to reduce the forces."

Bacon said the troops would remain until Iraqi compliance with the UN Security Council agreement over weapons inspections had been tested.

The US military force in the Gulf region includes 18,000 sailors and Marines, 9,000 Air Force servicemen and women, 7,800 Army soldiers and 2,600 other personnel assigned to headquarters staffs, officials said.

Bacon, asked about the disposition of Iraqi forces, said some of Saddam Hussein's troops appear to be stabilising their positions.

"They are going back to more normal operations," Bacon said.

# Water found on moon

NASA's Lunar Prospector spent the last month mapping the moon. Its data shows water in the form of ice scattered in small pockets across thousands of square miles of the lunar poles. Finding water would help plans to establish a permanent lunar base and would ease the need of sending a supply from Earth.

**HOW WATER WAS FOUND**

The neutron spectrometer detected ice in the moon's crust. A look at how it works:

- 1 Cosmic rays collide with atoms in crust
- 2 Particles of atoms bounce off into space
- 3 Neutron spectrometer collects these particles and determines if ice is present

Labels in diagram: Gamma ray spectrometer maps the surface of the moon; Magnetometer maps the moon's magnetic field; Omni antenna receives commands from Earth; Boom holds instruments away from craft.

Source: NASA

# Blair wants Sinn Fein to back into peace talks

BELFAST, Mar 6: British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Thursday signalled his intention to get the Irish Republican Army's political wing back into talks on Northern Ireland and expressed optimism about the prospects for peace in the province, reports Reuters.

Blair's chief press spokesman said a letter would be sent to Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams asking him to come to the prime minister's London office for the meeting.

Sinn Fein was temporarily expelled from Northern Ireland's peace talks after police blamed IRA guerrillas for two murders.

Although the party is free to return to the talks next Monday, it has said it will not do so until Blair grants its leaders a face-to-face meeting.

"The prime minister is likely to respond soon to Gerry Adams's request for a meeting. We don't expect the meeting to take place before the second half of next week," Blair's spokesman said.

Leaders of Northern Ireland's Protestant majority accused the prime minister of "foolishness" in agreeing to the meeting with Sinn Fein, which want a united Ireland.

"I'm afraid there is still a degree of wishful thinking as far as the administration and indeed the prime minister is concerned," said Ken Maginnis, a member of parliament for the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP).

Ian Paisley, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party and a hardline supporter of British rule of Northern Ireland, accused Blair of "obscene haste."



People doing rescue work near by a demolished houses in Turbat, 600 kilometres south of Karachi on Thursday. Flash floods swept away hundreds of houses in a remote corner of southern Pakistan, killing more than 100 people.

# Tight security prevails in Lanka: Blast death toll rises

COLOMBO, Mar 6: Police on Friday questioned three people, including the owner of the bus packed with explosives, the day after a bombing blamed on separatist guerrillas killed 36 people in the Sri Lankan capital, reports AP.

The three were arrested in Batticaloa district, 210 kilometers (130 miles) east of Colombo hours after Thursday's blast in front of a railway station. Police officials gave few details and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Four of the 305 wounded died in hospital overnight, bringing the death toll to 36, a hospital official said. The dead included two policemen and three children. More than a hundred patients were still hospitalised Friday, 10 in critical condition.

Some Sri Lankan soldiers on the streets of the capital Friday were armed with grenade launchers, a sign that security has been stepped up drastically. Grenade launchers are not normally seen in Colombo.

"Even in the best of days, we try to keep security as tight as possible in Colombo. But now it is going to be absolute," said Defence Ministry spokesman Brig Sarath Munasinghe.

The intersection where the bomb exploded was jammed with traffic as usual after police reopened the roads early Friday. City workers were busy sweeping up glass and chunks of metal. The 34 vehicles destroyed by the blast were removed by detectives overnight.

State-run radio carried police appeals asking residents to be vigilant and cooperate with the security forces in maintaining security.

# Thousands of Afghans risk starvation

WASHINGTON, Mar 6: The famine in central Afghanistan has grown worse and tens of thousands of people will starve to death within weeks if food does not reach them, a US congressman said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Dana Rohrabacher, a California Republican with a special interest in Afghanistan, said he had just received reports on the famine from doctors returning from the area.

"The doctors came back just several days ago and reported... that 40,000 women and children will starve to death unless something is done within the next two weeks, and that 400,000 people are at risk," Rohrabacher told the Asia-Pacific subcommittee in the US House of Representatives.

The United Nations called off airlifts of food to the area at the end of December after the conservative Taliban movement bombed Bamiani airport, since then few people have visited the area to monitor the famine.

Two charities, Americares and Knightsbridge International, arranged for six planes to carry medicines and clothing from Europe to the Bamiani area this week, said Al Santoli, a foreign policy adviser to Rohrabacher. The congressman's office had encouraged people to contribute to the airlift operation.

The planes came back with reports that the situation was very serious, mainly because of a long blockade imposed by the Taliban, who control the capital Kabul, 130 km to the south-east. Santoli told Reuters.

"A lot of refugees are living in caves around the Buddha statues, without heat or anything. What's needed most is food."

"The villages have absolutely nothing," he added.

The third-century statues, close to the town of Bamiani, are the best known features of the area. Before the long series of wars in Afghanistan, they were a big tourist attraction.

Rohrabacher blamed the Taliban for the plight of the people there and criticised inaction by the US government.

"The Taliban have not permitted any humanitarian supplies going in those areas which are not controlled by the Taliban."

There are four million women and children, civilians and unarmed people on the verge of death and starvation," he said.

"I went with this report to the State Department and the State Department said their analysis was that it was chronic need but not a critical need. So we ended up with the situation where there was no help from the State Department for four million human beings," he added.

# Annun to begin ME tour Mar 19

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annun will travel to four Middle East nations and the Palestinian territories on March 19-26, his spokesman said Thursday, AFP reports from United Nations.

# BBC to make documentary on Di

The BBC announced Thursday that it has commissioned a "definitive" documentary on the life of Princess Diana, AP reports from London.

The two-part series, tentatively called "Looking for Diana," is the latest in a string of television documentaries and docudramas about the princess's life and death. But it will be the first by the BBC, which aired the controversial November 1995 interview in which Diana admitted adultery and suggested Prince Charles was not suited to be king. The interview was widely considered to have precipitated the couple's August 1996 divorce.

# New FM named in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev on Thursday named Tofig Zulfugarov as Foreign Minister, replacing Hasan Hasanov, whom Aliyev sacked last month for alleged corruption, the Interfax agency reported, AFP says from Moscow.

The new minister, aged 37, is a career diplomat most recently dealing with Nagorno-Karabakh, the ethnic Albanian enclave in Azerbaijan which has been seeking independence since 1991.

# Newsman jailed in Turkey

In the latest move by Turkish authorities to crack down on religious extremism, a court on Thursday sentenced a journalist of a pro-Islamic newspaper to nearly two years in prison and ordered a two-week shut down of the paper, AP reports from Istanbul.

The court ruled that an article by Aydin Koral on Israeli-Turkish relations, published in the small, pro-Islamic newspaper Selam, was a threat to national security. Ever-growing Turkish-Israeli ties, which culminated in joint naval exercises by the two and the United States in January, drew criticism from the Arab world.

# Blast hurts 31 in China

At least 31 people were injured in central Xian city after a bungled attempt to repair a leak at a liquefied natural gas facility caused a huge explosion, local officials said yesterday, AFP reports from Beijing.

A total of 31 gas workers and firefighters were injured in the fireball late on Thursday, a public security bureau spokesman told AFP by telephone.

# Taiwan to build 4 missile frigates

Taiwan plans to build four missile frigates in the next 10 years to counter plans by rival China to buy two missile warships from Russia local media reported yesterday, Reuters reports from Taipei.

"We have plans to build four US Aegis class missile frigates in the next 10 years to tackle possible readjustment of military balance brought by the Chinese communist in the Taiwan Strait, the Liberty Times quoted an unidentified admiral as saying.



Iraq's President Saddam Hussein, seated right, during a meeting with French Deputy Foreign Minister Bertrand Dufourcq in an undisclosed location in Baghdad Wednesday.

# Iraqi army units returning to their bases, resuming normal operations

WASHINGTON, Mar 6: Iraqi Army units are returning to their bases and resuming normal operations after being dispersed under threat of US military attack, the Pentagon said on Thursday, reports Reuters.

"They are beginning to regroup," US Defence Department spokesman Ken Bacon told reporters "they are going back to more normal operations."

Bacon said air force units remained dispersed defensively at airfields around Iraq, but that the Iraqis had begun regrouping their air defence missile systems.

The return to more routine operations followed the Feb 23 agreement by Baghdad to allow full and unconditional UN weapons inspections, that agreement has reduced tensions in the Gulf. But a major US military force remains in the region to police compliance by Iraq's President Saddam Hussein.

Asked if the movements were a sign that Iraq intended to keep its agreement and was no longer anticipating a possible US strike, Bacon said he could not tell.

"I think that it's very difficult to psychoanalyse what is in the minds of Saddam Hussein and his military commanders. If I had to guess, he sees the tensions as declining," Bacon said in response to questions on the new military movements.

AFP adds from Baghdad: Former US Marine Scott Ritter's arms inspection team returned to UN headquarters here early today from what was thought to be their first inspection after returning to Iraq.

Witnesses were convinced that Ritter, whose team was pulled out of Baghdad after Iraq ended its cooperation with it in January, was among the inspectors.

"They drew up in a fleet of 15 vehicles at 7:15 am (0415 GMT) and unloaded equipments returning from an inspection."

Asked if they had been out on an inspection, one of the team shouted "no comment."

The inspection would have been Ritter's first since he returned to Iraq Thursday with his UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) team searching for weapons of mass destruction.

# 'Moon may be the first outpost beyond earth in a decade'

WASHINGTON, Mar 6: Because of the discovery of water on the moon, Americans could be living in a permanent lunar base — the first outpost beyond the Earth — in as little as a decade, a NASA scientist says, reports AP.

The US space agency announced Thursday that an orbiting robot craft has discovered there may be enough water on the moon to one day support a human colony there and to use the lunar base as a rocket fueling station for exploration into deep space.

"This means that human life could expand to the moon," said a jubilant Alan Binder, lead scientist for the Lunar Prospector spacecraft.

With water available, he said, it would be possible to start building a moon base in eight to 10 years and have a partially self-supporting colony within 15 years.

"We could do it even faster if we pushed it," Binder said. The water is now available and the technology can be developed, he said, but there would have to be a national decision to tackle the project.

Binder and other scientists said Lunar Prospector had found evidence of frozen underground pools in the dark, cold shade of deep craters at the lunar poles.

"We are certain there is water there," said Binder. "We think we are seeing between 10 million and 100 million tons of water."

Although the water is frozen and mixed with lunar soil, Binder said it would be easy to convert it to liquid water that could be used to make rocket propellant and breathing oxygen.

"For the first time, we may be able to go to another space body and fuel up," said Binder.

Preliminary estimates indicate that the moon holds enough water, in widely separated deposits, to fill a lake 2 miles square (5 sq kilometres) and 35 feet (11 meters) deep, Binder said. But he cautioned that the amount of water still was just a rough estimate.

The Lunar Prospector, a 65 million dollar robot craft, was launched in January and has spent the past seven weeks orbiting the moon and taking readings of the moon's surface with radar and other instruments.

Water was discovered by an instrument that measures the speed at which neutrons, a type of subatomic particle, bounce off materials on and near the lunar surface. The neutrons come from natural cosmic rays that constantly smash into the moon. They are slowed when they strike atoms of hydrogen, the chemical that combines with oxygen to make water.

Slowing of the neutrons leaves a "water signature" in the neutron-measuring instrument.

William Feldman, an Energy Department scientist and one of the original inventors of spacefaring neutron detectors, said the conclusion about water were based on a month's worth of data and should be called "preliminary."

But he said it was quite clear there were dense deposits of hydrogen atoms at the lunar poles. From this, he believed "the evidence of water ice is quite strong."

There are a bunch of craters filled up with water ice," said Feldman. "This is a significant resource that will allow a modest amount of colonisation" for many years.

Scientists will get a better idea of how much water is on the moon and where it is deposited as the Lunar Prospector continues its orbital exploration. The spacecraft will collect data for at least another year. Toward the end of its mission, it will be lowered from its current 60-mile (100 kms) orbit to about 6 miles (10 kms), giving scientists a close-up look at possible water deposits.

But scientists will not be able to confirm that the hydrogen atoms detected by the spacecraft are actually locked in water, and not in some exotic ice or rock deposit, until a sample of the material is scooped up and analysed.

# UNSC to hold public debate on sanctions against Libya

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 6: The UN Security Council is set to renew sanctions against Libya today, but agreed to hold a public debate on the issue later this month, Western diplomats said, reports AFP.

The compromise agreement was reached after lengthy discussions here during which the United States and Britain on Thursday rejected calls for a UN Security Council public debate on the sanctions on the same date as the four-monthly embargo review.

The diplomats said that the public debate would be scheduled on March 20, while the council's regular Libya sanctions review is to take place as scheduled today.

Following a heated discussion on Thursday morning, Britain and the United States later in the day accepted the compromise proposed by Gabon, backed by Costa Rica, France and Portugal, for a formal debate to be scheduled at a later date.

'Chileans must accept Pinochet as senator'

SANTIAGO, Chile, Mar 6: Chileans must accept former dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet as a senator for life because the constitution permits him to take that seat, Chile's president said Thursday, reports AP.

"We oppose the existence of non-elected senators," President Eduardo Frei said.