

BRIEFLY



Spanish Navy Bell-Agusta 212 helicopters fly past a refueling ship on their way to the Spanish aircraft carrier Principe de Asturias participating in NATO's Strong Resolve 98 exercises off the coast of Malaga, southern Spain, Friday. — AP/UNB photo

Violence claims 3 in Tripura: Three persons including a major died in an ambush by suspected militants of the banned All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) at Radhabari area under disturbed Sidhai police station in west Tripura district Friday night. PTI reports from Agartala.

Assam forces said that two army men including a major Prabhakar of 14 Meerath Light Regiment died on way to hospital. Among the 4, deceased was a militant who fell to army bullets. Additional forces of the army launched massive combing operation in the areas. One AK 47 rifle was recovered from the spot.

Blair to begin ME tour Apr 17: British Prime Minister Tony Blair will pay a visit to the Middle East from April 17 to 21 as of joint European-US efforts to revise the peace process. The EU envoy said in Washington Friday. AFP reports from Washington.

EU envoy Miguel Moratinos told AFP he informed US officials of Blair's traveling plans, which would follow upon a visit made earlier this week to the region by Foreign Secretary Robin Cook.

Italian police seize uranium: Italian police seized a bar of enriched uranium in Rome and arrested 14 people allegedly part of a smuggling ring run by the Sicilian Mafia, authorities said Friday. AP reports from Rome.

Arrest warrants were issued against Italians from Catania, Sicily, to Ponte Chiasso, near the Swiss border, on charges of criminal association and arms trafficking, Italian news agencies reported. Investigators learned about the alleged smuggling ring by tapping the phones of mobsters in Catania. The ANSA agency reported. An undercover agent posed as a potential buyer of the uranium, which was reportedly illegally imported from Zaire in May. ANSA reported.

School children hit by food poison in Japan: School children across Japan were stricken with food poisoning by tainted layer cake served with school lunches, a national daily reported yesterday. Reuter reports from Tokyo.

A total of 1,142 junior high school students contracted food poisoning from layer cake tainted with salmonella bacteria served at schools on March 12 and 13, the Mainichi Shimbun newspaper reported. The cake was prepared by a confectionery manufacturer in Osaka, which was ordered to shut down in order to investigate what caused the cake to be tainted. It said.

31 poachers held in Philippines: Navy patrol has seized 10 foreign-registered trawlers carrying about 500 kilograms (about 1,000 pounds) of illegally caught fish, the Philippine military said Saturday. Thirty-one poachers were arrested, AP reports from Manila.

The trawlers were fishing near Taganak and Baguan Islands in the Philippines' southernmost province of Tawi-Tawi Friday, when they were stopped by the patrol, said Navy spokesman Cmdr. Simplicio Ledesma.

Poaching is rampant in Southeast Asia, where many countries share sea borders teeming with fish and marine resources. The arrests of fishermen have at times strained diplomatic ties.

Peruvian plane crashes in Amazon: A Peruvian air force Antonov transportation airplane crashed late Friday in the Amazon jungle, local radio reports indicated, citing eyewitnesses. AFP says from Lima.

The first unofficial reports indicated that one person who was close to the scene of the accident died. The fate of the airplane crew members is unknown. Neither local authorities nor Peruvian Air Force (FAF) officials were able to confirm the crash, or the number of passengers and crew aboard the plane.

Yeltsin meets Chernomyrdin: President Boris Yeltsin, on the mend from a respiratory illness, met Saturday with Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and other officials at his suburban residence, the Kremlin press service said. AP reports from Moscow.

Chernomyrdin briefed the president on his meeting with the leaders of Ukraine and Moldova Friday on resolving the problem of Moldova's breakaway region of Trans-Dniester, the other senior officials also met with his chief of staff and other officials at his Gorky-9 residence, where he is recuperating from a cold and sore throat, the press service said.

Tornado claims 12 in US: Twelve people were killed and more than 85 were injured early Friday when a tornado ripped through northern Georgia, local officials said. AFP reports from Washington.

Four children were among those killed in the twister that touched down in Hall and White Counties about 100 kilometers (60 miles) north of Atlanta, said Katiel Thilenius, spokeswoman for mayor of Gainesville. At least 85 people suffered injuries in the freak storm and two were in serious condition late Friday, Thilenius said.

Japanese FM in Seoul: Japanese Foreign Minister Keizo Obuchi met South Korean President Kim Dae-jung in Seoul yesterday to discuss pending issues and matters of mutual concern, a presidential spokesman said. AFP reports from Seoul.

Details of the meeting at the presidential Blue House were not immediately known. Obuchi arrived in Seoul earlier on Saturday on a two-day visit to meet South Korea's new government and to ease strained ties between the two neighbors, officials said.

Turkish govt won't resign despite army's warning: Ankara, Mar 21: Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz early today said his government would not resign after the army issued a tough statement, clearly aimed at him, stressing its determination to fight Muslim fundamentalism, reports AFP.

In its statement issued after a five-hour meeting of the commanders of the armed forces on Friday, the general staff reaffirmed its determination to fight fundamentalism, after Yilmaz on Tuesday publicly told the army to back off and mind its own business.

Yilmaz declared in a live interview on the private ATV television channel, after some observers had predicted early general elections, "the government will go ahead with its task."

He said, "I am the Prime Minister of a democratic coun-

'Cracks surface in India's new coalition govt'

Ally accuses defence minister of backing Lankan rebels

NEW DELHI, Mar 21: Cracks in India's new coalition government surfaced today with an ally accusing Defence Minister George Fernandes of backing Tamil rebels in Sri Lanka, a daily said, reports AFP.

The Asian Age daily said Subramaniam Swamy, president of the Janata (people's) Party and a leader from the southern state of Tamil Nadu, said Fernandes supported the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), rebel group and its fight for a Tamil homeland in the island nation.

"The government must come out with its stand on the LTTE since it has Fernandes in the cabinet," Swamy, a former professor at Harvard and an ally of the Hindu Nationalist-led coalition government, said.

The lingering Tamil separatist movement has claimed

some 55,000 lives. Fernandes, the Asian Age, said had organised the "first-ever international convention for solidarity with the Eelam Tamils of Sri Lanka" in New Delhi three months ago.

He had said in a passionate speech: "We shall be meeting again and again because it is going to be a long fight. We hope those fighting for the rights of the Eelam people in Sri Lanka win their battle."

The firebrand socialist had stated that Tamils in Sri Lanka were seen as "second-class citizens" and they "took to weapons in response."

But after taking office on Thursday, Fernandes adopted a milder stance, saying India should have kept its hands out of the "civil war" in Sri Lanka.

"We should now make all ef-

forts to bring back peace in Sri Lanka as is possible. We should also put all moral pressure to prevent human rights violations in this civil war," he said.

Clinton greets Vajpayee

WASHINGTON, Mar 21: US President Bill Clinton on Friday congratulated India's new Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and told him he planned to visit India later this year, reports Reuters.

Vajpayee took power on Thursday, heading a minority government. Clinton had cancelled plans for a February trip to India and Pakistan because of political turmoil in both countries.



President Clinton joined by Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Strom Thurmond of SC, left, and Sen Chuck Robb, D-Va, walk to the East Room of the White House Friday, where the president renewed his pitch for the Senate to approve NATO's expansion next year into Central Europe. — AP/UNB photo

African, Arab states for lifting of UN sanctions on Libya

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 21: African and Arab states lined up behind Libya on Friday to call for the suspension of six-year-old sanctions imposed after the Lockerbie bombing of a Pan Am jet, reports AFP.

But Britain and the United States remained unmoved by their demand and insisted that the UN air and arms embargo be lifted only after Libya surrendered two suspects to Scotland or the United States for trial, in line with UN resolutions.

At Friday's UN Security Council debate, relatives of the victims of the 1988 bombing came face-to-face for the first time with Libyan Foreign Minister Omar Mustapha Al Mont-

aser, as they watched proceedings from the Council chamber's public gallery.

Al Montaser said that a decision last month by the International Court of Justice rendered the six-year-old sanctions against Tripoli irrelevant and moot.

"We urge the Council to embark on a drastic review of decision it took at very critical circumstances against my country," Al Montaser said.

As an interim measure, he said, the Security Council should suspend the sanctions in the light of the February 27 ruling by the top UN court in the Hague.

Libya has been under a UN arms and air embargo since 1992 for refusing to hand over the two Libyans wanted in connection with the bombing.

But Tripoli received a boost when the UN court said that it had jurisdiction to hear Tripoli's suit claiming that it was right to refuse to extradite the pair to Britain or the United States.

Representatives of the Arab League, Organisation of African Unity and Oremence, on Friday urged the Security Council to suspend the Libya sanctions pending a final ruling on the merits of the case by the UN court.

4 Sunni Muslims die in Shi'ite attack in Peshawar

PESHAWAR, Pakistan, Mar 21: Militant Sunni Muslims attacked their Shi'ite brethren Saturday as they celebrated the Persian new year in northwestern Pakistan, killing four people and seriously wounding another 14, police said, reports AP.

Many Shi'ite Muslims in Pakistan follow the traditional Persian calendar, like Iran, which begins on the first day of spring.

Militants belonging to the Sunni extremist group Sipah-e-Sahabah opened fire on the revelers who were singing songs, firing their guns in the air and setting off fire crackers.

Four people died immediately, said police and the others were in critical condition in a nearby hospital.

US eases 3 sanctions on Cuba

WASHINGTON, Mar 21: President Bill Clinton decided Friday to ease three US sanctions on Cuba, the White House announced, reports AFP.

According to White House spokesman Michael McCurry, Clinton has decided:

- to resume the licensing of direct humanitarian chartered flights.
- to allow a new licensing arrangement to permit Cuban-Americans and Cubans living in the United States to send humanitarian remittances to families in Cuba at the level of 300 dollars every three months — the level permitted until 1994 and
- to streamline and expedite

the issuance of licenses for the sale of medical supplies.

Reuter adds: Cuba's state media on Friday greeted US moves to relax some sanctions against the island as "a drop of water in the desert" and urged Washington to completely lift its economic embargo against Cuba.

An analysis carried by the Cuban news agency Prensa Latina and state-run radio Rebelde commented on a decision by the US government on Friday to permit renewed direct charter flights from the US to Havana and the sending of cash remittances from Cuban exiles to family members on the communist-ruled island.



Policemen try to take an anti-nuclear protestor away, who had his legs under the railway in Ahaus, Friday, waiting for the transport of spent nuclear fuel to a temporary storage facility in Ahaus. — AP/UNB photo

Thai PM survives no-confidence vote

BANGKOK, Mar 21: Thailand's Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai easily beat back a censure motion Saturday morning, winning the vote in Parliament 208-177 after two days of attacks by the opposition, reports AP.

Chuan, who captured the premiership in November for the second time, was widely expected to survive the no-confidence vote. He has been praised by economists and international leaders for taking the right steps to turn Thailand's faltering economy around.

Sihanouk refuses to pardon Ranariddh

PHNOM PENH, Mar 21: Cambodia's King Norodom Sihanouk refused Saturday to pardon his son, deposed Co-Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh, convicted in absentia this week of conspiring to overthrow the government and sentenced to 30 years in jail, reports AP.

"Papa has no possibility to help you in this case," Sihanouk said in a letter to Ranariddh seen by The Associated Press on Saturday.

Sihanouk's refusal to pardon Ranariddh derails a complex Japanese-brokered plan that would have allowed Ranariddh to return to Cambodia and compete in elections scheduled for July.

Ranariddh was ousted as co-premier by his counterpart Hun Sen in a bloody coup d'etat last July 5-6. He is currently living in exile in Bangkok, Thailand.

Hun Sen contends he was forced to launch the coup because Ranariddh was planning to do the same with the help of

outlawed Khmer Rouge guerillas.

After ousting Ranariddh, Hun Sen had him prosecuted by a military court on charges of smuggling weapons and conspiring with the Khmer Rouge to grab power.

He was convicted of the first charge on March 4 and sentenced to five years in prison. He was found guilty of the second on Wednesday and given 30 years in jail and a 54 million dollars fine.

Convicted along with Ranariddh were three of his aides, one of whom is already dead, killed by Hun Sen's troops during the coup.

The charges were widely viewed as politically motivated, and conviction in the Hun Sen controlled courts assured.

The trials, however, were more about politics than prison.

Most Western countries cut off aid to the cash-strapped Hun Sen government in protest over the coup.

Korean peace talks enter final session

GENEVA, Mar 21: Four-party Korean peace talks entered their final session here today, following a delay to allow the North Korean delegation time to consult with Pyongyang, reports AFP.

"The worst that can happen is we should break up today without a definite idea of when we should meet," the head of the Chinese delegation, Chen Jian, said as he arrived for the final discussions.

Chen has acted as chairperson during the five-day talks, which grouped the two Koreas, China and the United States.

'Oscar' turns seventy

LOS ANGELES, Mar 21: The gold prize the world knows as Oscar, officially named the Academy Award of Merit, turns 70 years old this year — a history steeped in American cinema, reports AFP.

Oscar is the child of the Academy of Motion Picture, Arts and Sciences, which was created in May 1927 to promote films. The academy began with 36 members with the actor Douglas Fairbanks as its first president.

The academy created the golden trophy to honour performances by the industry's leading actors, actresses and directors, eventually expanding to categories not even envisioned in 1927.

George Stanley was selected to design the statuette — the figure of a knight standing on a reel of film, hands gripping a sword.

Since the first awards ceremony on May 16, 1929, 2,242 of the trophies have been handed out.

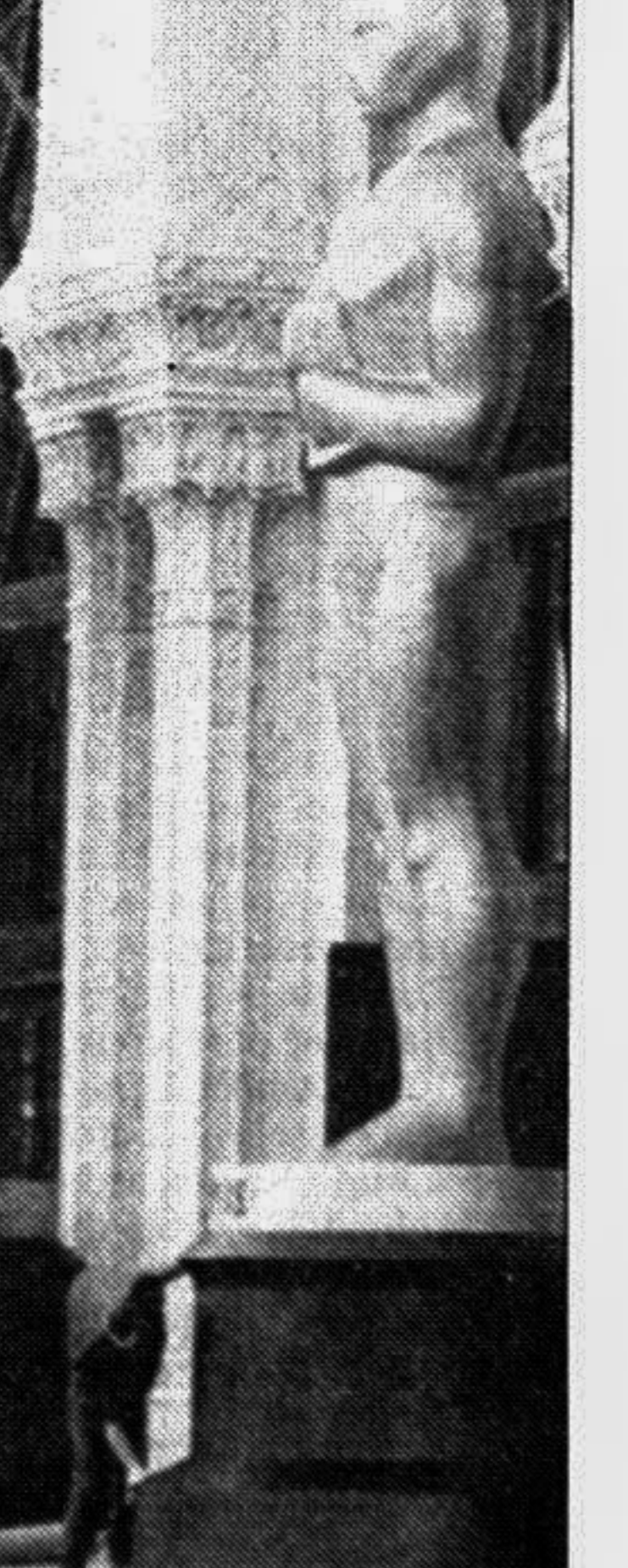
The early editions of the statues were bronze, but during the World War II metal shortage, the trophies were made of plaster. Those were later redeemed for the now gold-plated ones.

The trophy wasn't always called an Oscar, nor was it al-

ways so tall or heavy. The knight now stands 34 centimeters tall and weighs 3.85 kilos.

The origin of the statuette's name is unclear, legend has it that academy librarian and eventual executive director Margaret Herrick thought it resembled her uncle Oscar and said so. Her staff began referring to it as Oscar.

Hollywood columnist Sidney Skolsky used the name in a 1934 column in referring to Katharine Hepburn's first best actress win. The academy itself didn't use the nickname officially until 1939.



A production crew member polishes the stand on a giant Oscar outside the Shrine Auditorium Thursday, in Los Angeles. The 70th Academy Awards will take place Monday. — AP/UNB photo

Clinton's lawyer asks court to dismiss Paula Jones lawsuit

WASHINGTON, Mar 21: In a fierce legal counterattack, President Bill Clinton's lawyer declared that Paula Jones' evidence of sexual harassment was "garbage" unworthy of a trial and suggested to a court that her key witnesses lacked credibility, reports AP.

With a 200-page filing in federal court in Little Rock, Arkansas, attorney Robert S Bennett submitted testimony Friday that Jones was looking for a "movie business" job, and members of Clinton's Arkansas security detail — who had accused him of womanising — could not be believed.

Bennett also argued that Kathleen Willey's sensational claim last week of an unwanted sexual advance was irrelevant to Jones' case.

His pleadings with the court asked that Jones' lawsuit be dismissed before it goes to trial in late May. "One would scour these materials in vain for a shred of admissible evidence," he wrote. And at a news conference here, he repeatedly used disparaging words to describe the 700 pages of arguments and documents the Jones lawyers submitted last week.

Bennett said Jones' lawyers had used "their last thing to dump into the media every piece of garbage they could get before the court."

John Whitehead of the Rutherford Institute, the conservative organisation paying Jones' legal bills, insisted the case will go to trial.

He said Bennett's response was simply evidence that "he and his client do not truly uphold the standards and goals of the Violence Against Women Act of 1994, signed into law by defendant Clinton himself to fully protect female victims of sexual misconduct by men."

Jones' lawyers contended in their filing a week ago that Clinton engineered a "vast enterprise" to obstruct the case by using job offers and even payoffs to keep witnesses quiet about alleged sexual indiscretions. It also identified several women it claimed had improper sexual contact with Clinton.

Directly responding to Jones' claim that she was sexually harassed by Clinton in an Arkansas hotel room in 1991 and then suffered adversely in her Arkansas state job, Bennett

said: "There is not an iota of evidence to support those claims."

As for new claims by Jones' last week that she has suffered mental and physical anguish and sexual aversion, Bennett said that until now she had raised "no medical bills, not even an aspirin. I would say it was a big joke."

Bennett also struck at the credibility of Jones' witnesses, from an Arkansas state trooper who was among the earliest to allege womanising by Clinton, to Willey, whose nationally televised allegation of an unwanted White House sexual advance garnered headlines just last week.

"We've been hearing for a long time about how great their witnesses are and things of that kind," Bennett said. "Read the cross-examinations. Read them with a view of what do these people really know."

In the federal court filing, Bennett included a previously undisclosed excerpt from Willey's deposition in which she acknowledged that her alleged 1993 episode with Clinton did not affect her job opportunities.

BJP may continue its predecessor's good-neighbour policies

COLOMBO, Mar 21: Leading South Asian academics and foreign policy analysts here felt that India's new government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would continue the neighbour-friendly policies begun by its predecessor regime, reports India Abroad News Service.

They also felt there is no reason to have apprehensions about the BJP's stand on India's nuclear programme and the party's Hindu nationalist views. However, some Pakistani experts said that the new Indian government's declarations on exercising the nuclear option may give a handle to extreme right wing elements in Pakistan to strengthen their anti-India campaign.

Some 30 delegates from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka took part in the seminar on "Sources of Conflict in South Asia" held at

Hikkaduwa in southern Sri Lanka. It was organised by the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies in Colombo. The participants included eminent scholars Eqbal Ahmed, Partha Ghosh, Ashis Nandy, Asha Hans, Betram Bastianpilla, V. Suryanarayana, Iftekhar Zaman and John Goonaratne.

Zaffarullah Khan of Green Press of Pakistan said there was some concern in Islamabad over the BJP's nuclear policy. Together with the BJP's perceived anti-Muslim attitude, this could fuel the anti-India campaigns of groups such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, he said. "That would not promote good bilateral relations," he warned.

However, Khan expressed confidence that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee would be able to keep the headline elements in the BJP in check. Moreover, he pointed out that

the BJP would have to behave responsibly in office.

"Our experience in the past showed that Indian political parties show a much more secular outlook when in power than while in opposition," he said, adding "in any event, rhetorics are limited to election campaigns and when they get down to business, they show their sobriety and levelheadedness."

Khan added Vajpayee, who has established a fair image in Pakistan, would be able to win the confidence of Islamabad.

"Vajpayee visited Pakistan several times when he was Minister of External Affairs and Pakistanis liked him," said Nandy of the Centre for Study of Developing Societies in New Delhi. "He will definitely be a very moderate and liberal Prime Minister and nobody needs to have apprehensions on that account," he said.

Nandy said that Vajpayee is in a position to show magnanimity towards Pakistan. "Even the smallest concession from BJP leaders would go a long way as they have already been labelled as hardliners," he observed.

He, however, said that it was not fair to expect overnight results as there are serious suspicions between the two countries. "Those suspicions could be erased only when democracy is well established in Pakistan. No Indian government can take a political risk by compromising on major issues with regard to Pakistan in a situation where policy is directed by the army," he said.

"No Indian politician is ready to commit political suicide by giving major concessions to Islamabad." But he added that nobody should believe there would be a Pakistan-

India war just because the BJP is in power in New Delhi. "Nobody is beating war drums and both sides would maintain status quo at the worse," Nandy said.

Lok Raj Baral of the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Studies was of the opinion that the BJP government would maintain a good neighbourly policy viz-a-viz rest of the South Asian countries.

"They will concentrate on nationalist economic policy and block large scale foreign entry into the Indian market," he said. "But when it comes to the foreign policy, it will not deviate from the Panchasheela policy of peaceful coexistence and cooperation." The Nepali diplomat-turned-academic said, a view that was shared by most of the other participants.