International =

Polls result in Kosovo | Yeltsin sacks government likely to back demands for independence

PRISTINA, Serbia, Mar 23: Results from elections held by Kosovo's ethnic Albanians in defiance of Belgrade and the outside world seemed certain to back demands by their political leaders for independence from Serbia, reports Reuter. Ethnic Albanian spokesmen

said the turnout in Sunday's voting was as high as 95 per cent in some areas of the southern Serbian province where Albanians outnumber Serbs by nine to one.

The first polling station to complete its court said all 508 votes were for unopposed presi-dential candidate Ibrahim Rugova, who heads the largest Albanian Party, the Democratic

League of Kosovo (LDK). The Albanians were also electing a parliament but Serbia denounced the polls as illegal and foreign countries many of which are sympathetic to autonomy for Kosovo's Albanians but hostile to independence said they would not recognise

The LDKs main rivals refused to take part fearing that a renewed vote in favour of independence would complicate western efforts to coax Yugoslav President Slobodan

Milosevic towards compromise. A six-power international contact group comprising the United States, Russia, France, Germany, Italy and Britain is due to decide on Wednesday whether to impose stricter sanctions on Yugoslavia over

the Kosovo crisis. The group appears increas-ingly divided with Moscow, cool from the outset to the idea of tough action against a fellow Slav nation, and growing disagreement between the United States and West European government about what to do.

The foreign ministers of France and Germany said after visiting Belgrade on Thursday that Milosevic had mostly met the conditions set by the contact group to avoid sanctions.

US officials who have taken a consistently stronger line against the Serbs dismissed as a propaganda exercise an offer by Belgrade to discuss increased Kosovo Albanian autonomy with Rugova.

MOSCOW, Mar 23: President Boris Yeltsin dismissed the entire Russian government in a shock announcement today and said he was taking over temporarily as prime minister, reports Reuter.

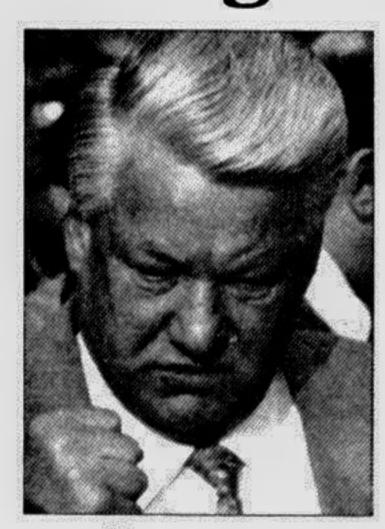
The press service said Yeltsin, back at the Kremlin after illness, had signed a decree removing the cabinet. It gave no reasons, but Yeltsin had criticised the government on Saturday for huge delays in paying wages to state sector workers.

"In accordance with Articles 83 and 177 of the constitution of the Russian Federation, I announce the dismissal of the government," Yeltsin said in a presidential decree quoted by Itar-Tass news agency.

"I ask the members of the government to carry out their duties until the formation of a new government. I temporarily assume the duties of the chairman of the government (prime minister)."

The press service announced the decision after Yeltsin, 67, met Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin in the Kremlin. He awarded Chernomyrdin a medal — the Order for Services to the Fatherland, Second

The fate of the government's key reformers, first deputy



Boris Yeltsin

prime ministers Anatoly Chubais and Boris Nemtsov. was not immediately clear. The Kremlin said Chubais was moving to another job but it was not clear whether this would be in the government.

AFP adds: Russian President Boris Yeltsin said he fired Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin to enable the Russian premier to concentrate on the 2000 presidential elections.

"I have instructed Cher-

nomyrdin to concentrate on political preparations for these elections," Yeltsin said in an announcement broadcast on NTV television.

"For us the 2000 elections are very important. One can say that this is the future destiny of Russia," Yeltsin said.

Chernomyrdin is widely seen as a strong potential can-didate in the 2000 elections, although he has refused to say whether he will run for the

presidency. "We have worked together for more than five years. He has done a lot for the country," Yeltsin said.

"I value his solid character, his reliability. I never doubted his devotion and loyalty to the reforms." But Yeltsin said Russia

"needs a new team which can get real results." "Members of the cabinet should devote themselves to solving concrete economic and

Chernomyrdin who has proved more resilient than many thought since becoming prime minister in December 1992, currently scores only a two-to-three per cent popularity rating among Russian voters in opinion polls.

social problems."



Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, left, meets with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in Damascus Sunday. Annan held a series of meetings in Damascus to seek a resumption of talks between Syria and Israel on the withdrawal of Israeli troops from south Lebanon.

- AP/UNB photo

Turkish PM firm to fight religious extremism

ANKARA, Mar 23: Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz Sunday bowed to heavy pressure by Turkey's powerful pro-secular army generals pledging his government's full commitment to the fight against Islamic fundamentalism, reports AFP.

"Our government is the most determined one in fighting against religious extremism. and will continue to be so, Yilmaz told a news conference here after a meeting with his coalition partners.

His remarks came two days after top army generals issued a tough warning against Yilmaz, stressing their determination to fight fundamentalism and accusing the cabinet of "inefficiency" in fighting Islamic extremism.

Yilmaz who only on Tuesday told the army generals to back off and mind their own business this time said "our coalition government understanding is that there is no deference between the cabinet and the military on fighting fundamentalism.

"Our view is that the struggle against religious extremism should be carried out in cooperation between all state

institutions, he said. Yilmaz had said on Tuesday "The battle against religious extremism is up to my government and not to the military whose main responsibility is to protect Turkey from foreign threats."

The army generals exasperated by these remarks stressed in a harshly worded statement on Friday it is our constitutional duty to fight religious extremism.

political party to challenge PML, PPP

ISLAMABAD, Mar 23: Former Pakistani president Farooq Leghari would form a political party to challenge those led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, reports Reuters.

It will be a party with a difference, he told reporters yesterday saying its formation would be announced within two to three months.

Leghari, who resigned as president in early December after losing a constitutional tussle with Sharif, accused both him and Benazir, whom he sacked as prime minister in November 1996, of wrongdoing and said his party would have an agenda different from theirs.

He said Sharif was leading Pakistan to disaster because of wrong economic and other po-

members to declare their assets

NEW DELHI, Mar 23: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has asked members of his cabinet to declare their assets to reinforce the new government's pledge for "clean" governance, a daily said today, reports AFP.

The Economic Times said Vajpayee ordered senior ministers to declare their wealth and that of close relatives at a meeting here Sunday, in the eve of the new parliamentary session.

Vajpayee was sworn in last week at the head of a Hindu nationalist-led coalition government which topped deadlocked national elections. The alliance has to prove its legislative majority this week.

Vajpayee's nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP. Indian people's party) - the

fifth government to take office in two years — has vowed to give India "stability" and a "clean administration.

Political corruption in India became a key issue during the elections after several top politicians were arrested on various charges.

P V Narasimha Rao, premier between 1991-96, currently faces two trials.

He stands accused of bribing opposition members of parliament to vote for his government in 1993 and is also charged with involvement in accepting a 100,000-dollar business bribe. He denies all allegations.

Sukh Ram, the telecommunications minister in Rao's government, is also on bail pending trial for corruption.

Leghari to form Vajpayee asks cabinet Israel rejects key element of new US peace initiative for ME nied" Israel assumes that the

JERUSALEM, Mar 23: Israel rejected Sunday a key element of a new US peace initiative intended to break a stalemate in Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, reports AP.

At Sunday's cabinet meeting. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his ministers unanimously opposed a reported American proposal calling for an Israeli withdrawal from 13 per cent of the West Bank, Cabinet Secretary Danny Naveh said.

"This figure which has been mentioned in the news media. 13 per cent, is unacceptable, and ... damaging to the security interests of the State of Israel, Naveh told reporters.

Netanyahu's adviser David Bar-Illan said Washington has not yet submitted the proposal to Israel, but "because it has been advertised from American sources and has not been dereports are true.

Netanyahu telephoned US President Bill Clinton on Thursday and Saturday and told him the imposition of any percentage would be a breach of a written promise made by the Clinton administration that Israel alone would decide the extent of the withdrawals, Bar-Illan told The Associated Press.

The American promise was made in a letter from Secretary of state Warren Christopher that accompanied the 1996 agreement on Israeli withdrawal in Hebron, Bar-Illan

Netanyahu also asked Clinton to delay publicising its peace initiative, the daily Yediot Ahronot reported.

The two leaders agreed that the United States would not publish the initiative before US envoy Dennis Ross visits the region later this week, the report said. Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat said Ross would arrive Thursday.

Both the Palestinians and Israelis have expressed reservations with the US plan, which calls for Israel to withdraw troops in phases from about 13 per cent of the West Bank in exchange for a Palestinian crackdown on Islamic militants.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat on Saturday to discuss the stalled talks, Palestinian Planning Minister Nabil Shaath said he was not sure if the Palestinians would accept the US initiative but acknowledged that it will be "the last chance to put this peace process back on track".

BRIFFIY

Karen refugee camp burned down: Nine ethnic Karen relugees were injured, three seriously, when armed attackers who had crossed the border from Myanmar into Thailand burned down part of their camp yesterday. border sources said, AFP reports from Bangkok.

Some 40 houses were destroyed in the early morning raid by unidentified attackers who crossed into Thai territory at around 3:30 am, local officials and aid workers said.

Cyclone hits Vanuatu islands: Tropical cyclone Yali caused severe damage when it battered some of Vanuatu's southern islands but no one has been reported killed or injured, officials said yesterday, AFP reports

National Disaster Management Office director Job Esau told AFP that Yali hit the southern islands overnight. He said three were reports of heavy crop damage and an unspecified number of houses blown down in the western part of Tanna island.

50 protesters held in Belarus: Some 50 people, including journalists, were arrested in Minsk Sunday after a massive demonstration against president Alexander Lukashenko, the opposition Belarus Popular Front said, AFP reports from Minsk. The opposition accused Lukashenko of giving himself dictatorial powers in a constitution he introduced in 1996.

4 policemen shot dead in Egypt:
Suspected Islamic militants on Sunday shot dead four policemen and wounded 13 people in southern Egypt in their

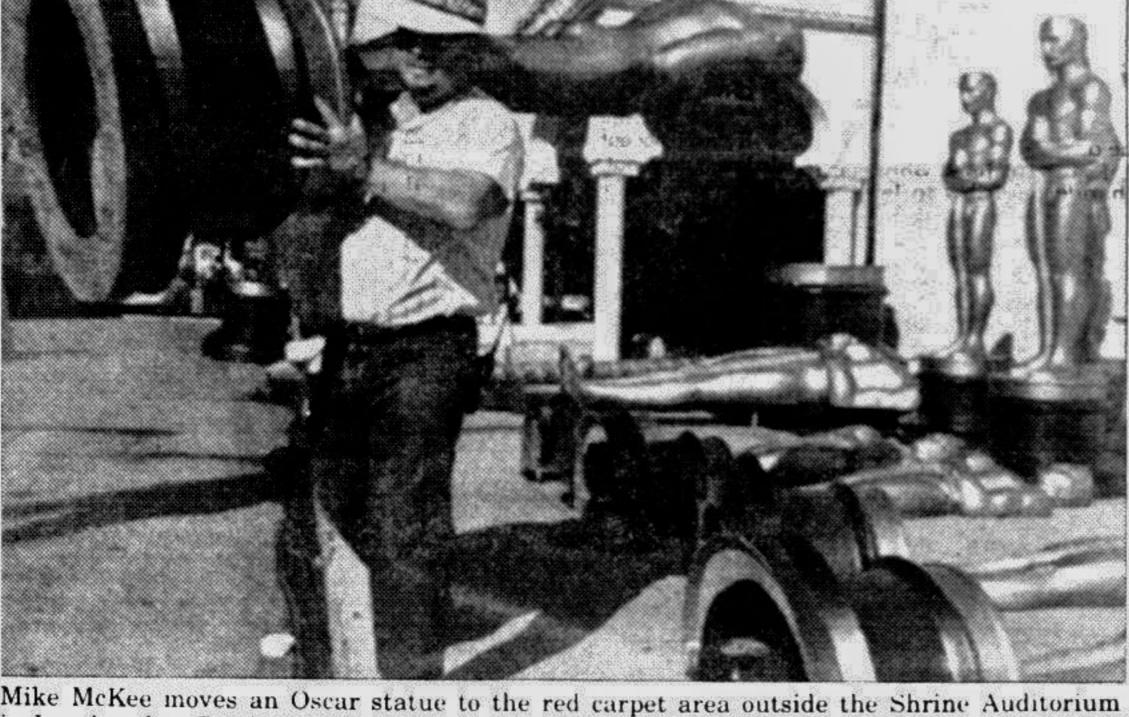
first major attack since a massacre of tourists in November. police said, AFP reports from Minya. A police lieutenant and three police conscripts were killed and four other policemen were among 13 people wounded by the militants.

8 tourists freed in Chad: Six French and two Italian tourists kidnapped in northern Chad have been freed just hours later, Radio France International reported early yesterday morning quoting a source at the Chadian Embassy in Paris, AFP reports from Paris.

The European tourists were kidnapped in the Emissi Koussi mountains of northern Chad Sunday afternoon in the Bourkou Enedi Tibesti region,



Some 15,000 people seat at a five-km table set on Lisbon's new Vasco da Gama bridge Sunday to enjoy a bean stew in an attempt to set a new record for the world's longest dining table. The feat was organised by Procter and Gamble which claimed would wash the 15,000 dirty dishes with one litre of their Fairy detergent. The formal opening of the 1 billion dollar bridge will be held on March 29. - AP/UNB photo



Mike McKee moves an Oscar statue to the red carpet area outside the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, Sunday, in preparation for yesterday's 70th annual Academy Awards. - AP/UNB photo

Fear over human 'mad cow disease'

SYDNEY, Mar 23: From cannibals in the highlands of Papua New Guinea to European beef eaters, thousands of people have been exposed to an undetectable disease that could slowly eat holes in their brains before killing them, reports Reuters.

A new book and a British inquiry have set out to find the true extent of a disease once regarded as a tragic pathological oddity but which has killed thousands around the world.

Creutzfeldt-Jackob Disease (CJD) is the human equivalent of mad cow disease and, like its bovine equivalent, it kills relentlessly and is largely unde-tectable until after death.

The book "Cannibals, Cows and the CJD Catastrophe", tells a story its author says begins and ends in mortuaries and suggests the disease might be spread far wider than was ever imagined.

"Speculation on how many people will succumb to the disease from a variety of accidental means of transmission is fairly useless at this stage." Jennifer Cooke, the book's author, told Reuters.

game because CJD can incubate without displaying symptoms for more than four decades," she

"It will be a long waiting

last week was set up after scien-

British inquiry that started

tists in 1996 linked mad cow disease - bovine spongiform encephalopathy or BSE — to a new variant of CJD (NVCJD). So far 24 NVCJD cases have

been confirmed in Britain and France but the long incubation period makes it impossible to predict how many more will be affected. The biggest known outbreak

of the disease was among a tribe practising cannibalism in the remote highlands of Papua New Guinea in the 1950s.

A World Health Organisation (WHO) meeting in Geneva last month was told that the possibility of an epidemic of CJD over the next 10 to 15 years could not be dismissed.

Muslims to cooperate with Christians where the population is rough ABUJA, Mar 23: Pope John

'Fragile ceasefire in

Cambodia may collapse'

Pope appeals to Nigerian

Paul II late Sunday appealed to Muslims in Nigeria and the whole of Africa to work together with Christians for a new "era of solidarity," reports

The 77-year-old pontiff, who had returned to Abuja on the second day of a three-day pastoral visit to Nigeria after conducting a three-hour religious ceremony in stifling heat at Onitsha in the south-east, seemed to have recovered from earlier tiredness.

Thirty-four Muslim dignitaries headed by Nigeria's top Islamic authority, Sultan Muhammadu Maccido of Sokoto who is close to head of State general Sani Abacha, accepted John Paul's invitation to meet him at the apostolic Nuncio's headquarters in Abuja. In a country like Nigeria

BANGKOK, Mar 23: The

commander of forces loyal to

Prince Norodom Ranariddh

said today he expected a fragile

Cambodian ceasefire to col-

lapse and a new push against

his besieged stronghold O's-

said strongman Hun Sen, who

ousted coalition partner Ra-

nariddh last July, was sending

thousands of fresh troops to

strife-torn areas in northwest

about 100 metres away from

each other and Hun Sen keeps

"Troops from both sides are

General Nhiek Bun Chhay

mach, reports Reuter.

Cambodia.

divided between Christians and Muslims — 45 per cent of each cooperation between the two faiths is especially necessary in many fields, the pope said. "From this place in the heart

of West Africa, I appeal to all Muslims just as I have appealed to my brother bishops and all Catholics," let friendship and cooperation be our inspiration let us work together for a new era of solidarity and joint service in facing the enormous challenge of building a better, more just and more human world," John Paul declared. Referring to Christian-Mus-

lim relations, which have sometimes been marked by conflicts, the pope said: "When problems arise, whether at the local, regional or national levels, solutions must be sought through dialogue. Is not this the way of African tradition?"

sending reinforcements to O's-

mach. This clearly shows that

he wants to continue fighting,"

Nhiek Bun Chhay told Reuters

during a visit to Bangkok to

February 27 as the first step in a

Japanese-sponsored peace plan

aimed at ending the conflict

and ensuring Ranariddh can re-

turn to Cambodia for elections

The rival forces have traded

accusations of truce violations

and there have been intermit-

tent clashed, but the ceasefire

has remained in effect.

The ceasefire began on

meet Ranariddh.

in July.

to help Iran build missiles WASHINGTON, Mar 23: Rus-

Russian scientists

sia's top intelligence agency has been recruiting Russian scientists to travel to Iran and teach Iranians how to build long-distance missiles that can carry high explosives, the Washington Post reported today, says The Russian Federal Secu-

rity Service, the successor to the KGB, has been quietly recruiting Russian scientists to work in Iran over "the past several years," according to the Post, which cites Russian and diplomatic sources in Moscow.

Once the scientists arrive in Iran they negotiate contracts with their hosts to cover up any direct involvement of the Russian government, according to the newspaper.

3 killed, 114 hurt in Filipino plane crash

MANILA, Mar 23: At least 114 people were injured in addition to the three killed when a Philippine Airlines (PAL) jet overshot the runway and ploughed into homes in the central Philippines, officials said

Monday, reports AFP. All of those killed were on the ground in Bacolod on the island of Negors.

It was not yet clear how many of the 121 passengers and six crew were injured in the crash and how many of those

hurt were on the ground. The airbus a 320 tore through a squatter area, its wings slicing through about 20 houses, after overshooting the runway on landing on Sunday night on a domestic flight from

Manila.

Polls in Hong Kong in May HONG KONG, Mar 23: Hong

Kong goes to the polls in May for the first legislative council elections since its reversion to China and the world's democrats will be watching, re-

ports AFP. US. European and Asian visitors are expected to be on hand to "observe" Hong Kong's first post-colonial elections despite the authorities rejection of official foreign monitors.

Taliban execute two accused of sodomy

KABUL, Mar 23: Two Afghans accused of sodomy were publicly executed by the puritanical Taliban militia by being buried under a mud and brick wall pushed on top of them, official sources said today, reports AFP.

The militia-controlled radio

Shariat said the two men were sentenced by the Taliban court in western Herat after their confession. It said Abdul Sami, 18 and

Bismillah, 22, both residents of Herat province were detained four months ago accused of bug-

'Pakistan should take measures to counter any N-plans of India's BJP-led govt' by Muhammad Najeeb, India Abroad News Service ISLAMABAD, Mar. 23: Pak-Imran said that the people of coming local bodies poll despite departments," Imran said.

istan's cricket hero-turnedpolitician Imran Khan has said that Islamabad should take immediate measures to counter any nuclear plans of the newly installed Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government in India, reports India Abroad News Service.

"If the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government goes ahead with its (nuclear) plan. Islamabad should follow the step," he told IANS in an interview. He said his party was all out for establishing good neighbourly relations with India but "we cannot afford putting our security at risk.'

Imran said normalisation of relations with India was not possible until resolution of the long-standing Kashmir dispute. He favoured continuation of the India-Pakistan talks but said Islamabad should stick to the United Nations resolutions on Kashmir.

Kashmir should be given a right to decide their future. He was of the view that both New Delhi and Islamabad should include Kashmiris in the talks. "They (Kashmiris) can best plead their case and any talks without them would be a futile exercise." he said. Imran said regional security was threatened by the tension between the two countries which should now come to an'end. The cricket celebrity, who

joined politics prior to Pakistan's last general election in 1997, appeared to be a man far removed from his earlier flamboyance and boastfulness. Imran's party, Tehrik-e-Insaaf, lost all the national and provincial assembly seats in the elections. "Now I have learnt...how to speak and how to contest elections..," he admit-He was sure that his party

will make a clean sweep in the

the fact that several of his top leaders who contested the last elections have parted ways with the party. "The ruling party (Pakistan Muslim League) would be shocked to see the response of people," he claimed. Imran was in a relaxed mood in his newly established party

office in a prime Islamabad neighbourhood." The biggest problem being faced by Pakistan is the poverty...and distribution of wealth," he said. Imran said his party had decided to change the existing disparity in the country because of which the gap between rich and poor was increasing day by day. He said the widening gap was because the governments resorted to indirect taxation which led to suffering of the poorer class. "Another problem is revenue

collection and our party intends to create a tax culture in the country and reform the revenue

He said his party believed in reducing the size of the tax department and raising the salaries of staff to eliminate corruption. Imran said direct taxation was progressive and it directly affected the rich class which could afford to pay the same. "By this I don't say more taxes but improvement in the taxation and widening of the tax net," he added. Imran refused to join the re-

cently formed 15-party alliance against the government led by a religious leader and chief of Awami Tehrik, Maulana Tahirul-Qadri, which includes opposition leaders Benazir Bhutto and Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan. He said it was a crime to "sit

with criminals" which would amount to becoming an "accomplice of the criminal" as per well recognized principles of



husband, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, during an interview in her Gaza home with the Associated Press. - AP/UNB photo