

Ross will meet Netanyahu, Arafat to finalise US ideas

WASHINGTON, Mar 24: The United States dismissed Monday an Israeli threat to use Congress to get more White House support in its disputes with Arab neighbours, reports AFP.

But in a conciliatory move, US officials also opted to send the US envoy to the Middle East, Dennis Ross, to the region this week for consultations on getting peace talks going, a State Department official said Monday.

Ross will leave late Wednesday and meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to finalise US ideas on getting Middle East peace talks moving after a year of stagnation, said State Department spokesman James Foley.

Foley said that there were "no formal or final US ideas," adding, "the US does not want to impose its will on either of the parties."

Ross' last trip was in January and accomplished little. Ross will also try to put a stop to pressure from Netanyahu aimed at dissuading Washington from publicising its proposals.

If President Bill Clinton decides to recommend publicly that Israel withdraw from an additional 13 per cent of the West Bank — considerably higher than the nine per cent that Israeli press reports have

said that Netanyahu is prepared to go — the Israeli Prime Minister will find himself in a difficult position.

But European diplomats say that the fact that the US proposals are being described as "ideas" means that Washington is looking for some breathing room.

"That would seem to confirm that the White House has no real desire to pressure" Netanyahu, a diplomat said.

The Israeli government threatened on Monday to use the US congress to pressure the White House but the State Department dismissed the threat, with one official saying, "It is nothing new."

"I cannot imagine that at a time of difficulties, they (the Israelis) would not go to their friends in Congress," a State Department official told AFP, but the official communication is between governments.

He denied that Clinton was looking to force Israel's hand in indicating that the White House planned to unveil its proposal. Reuters adds: Palestinian journalists complained in a letter to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on Monday that Israeli troops were harassing them and preventing them from doing their work.

The Palestinian journalists syndicate said in a letter to Annan that Israeli soldiers regularly shot at its members, ar-

rested them and confiscated their cameras and film.

Israeli officials denied soldiers targeted Palestinian journalists.

The group said Israeli authorities deny government press cards to Palestinian journalists and prevent them from travelling freely between Gaza and the West Bank.

"We need your urgent intervention to stop the suffering of... journalists who work in very dangerous and severe circumstances," it said.

Israeli troops wounded nine Palestinian journalists with rubber bullets, including two working for Reuters, during a riot in Hebron earlier this month.

The journalists said they clearly identified themselves as members of the media but the Israeli Army said soldiers confused them with Palestinian stone-throwers.

The spokesman for Israel's coordinator of activities in the West Bank and Gaza said in response to the complaints on Monday that both Israeli and Palestinian journalists had been wounded covering clashes in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"Journalists are on the front line and Israeli soldiers can't always distinguish between them and the stone-throwers," said spokesman Shlomo Dror.

Fresh violence kills 19 in Karachi

KARACHI, Mar 24: At least 19 people were killed as today's greatest violence continued for a second day in several parts of the Pakistani port city of Karachi, police and residents said, reports AFP.

Police trying to contain the renewed unrest, blamed the bloodshed on clashes between rival political groups.

Seventeen people were shot dead overnight in eastern districts of Malir, Sadaudabad, Khokrapar and adjoining areas, Shah Faisal colony, Korangi and Landhi districts. Another two were gunned down in central Liaquatabad area.

The Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), Karachi's dominant political party representing the Urdu-speaking settler community alleged the victims included 10 of its activists and supporters.

MQM blamed its breakaway faction, MQM-Haqiqi, for the killings.

A Haqiqi spokesman claimed 10 of its workers were killed by MQM hitmen.

But police and other sources put the number of dead at 19. Paramilitary troops and police were called out in areas where residents reports sporadic gunbattles. Four people, including two policemen and a woman, were injured in crossfire in Korangi district.

16 Tigers killed in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, Mar 24: Sri Lankan security forces shot dead at least 16 Tamil Tiger guerrillas in fresh clashes in the north of the country, the defence ministry said today, reports AFP.

Army patrols shot dead 15 guerrillas of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) near the rebel-held town of Mankulam in three gun battles on Monday, the ministry said.

It said another rebel was shot dead in the northern peninsula of Jaffna. The ministry did not say if security forces suffer any casualties during the confrontation.

The clashes came as the clandestine voice of Tigers admitted that the LTTE lost 1,165 of its fighters while resisting the military's biggest ground offensive aimed at capturing a strategic highway.

The LTTE described the country's A-9 road as being soaked in blood from the resistance to the government offensive launched last May 13.

The Vice of Tigers Radio said the 1,165 rebels were killed in the past eight months and gave no figures for those wounded in the military's operation sure victory.

The army is seeking to take a 46-mile (75-kilometer) stretch of highway through jungle terrain dominated by the rebels and open a vital land access to the northern peninsula of Jaffna.

70th Academy Awards: A night to remember for 'Titanic'

LOS ANGELES, Mar 24: The greatest ship that ever sank found a berth in Hollywood history on Monday night as "Titanic" sailed off with 11 Oscars, trying the record for most Academy Awards won by a single film, reports Reuters.

That plus the record-breaking one billion it has grossed since opening 14 weeks ago, assures it a place as one of Hollywood's greatest success stories — after its record-breaking 200 million cost threatened to make it one of the screen's biggest failures.

"You've made this a night to remember, let's party until dawn," crowed James Cameron, the film's co-producer, screenwriter, co-editor and director as he picked his third award of the night — the prize for best picture.

Cameron also added a serious touch to the night glitzy black-tie proceedings as he asked for a moment of silence for the 1,500 people who died on the "ship that could not sink" on its maiden voyage in 1912.

Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt, the odd couple in "As Good As It Gets," asked off with the top acting awards at the 70th Academy Awards, with Nicholson joying he had "this sinking feeling all night," until he won. It was Nicholson's third Oscar.

Titanic won Oscars for best picture, best director, cinematography, sound, sound effects, visual effects, editing, art direction, original score, song and costumes.

It went into the Oscars with 14 nominations and left with 11 gold statues, trying the record for most Academy Awards set in 1959 by "Ben-Hur," another epic.

Hunt, a popular TV actress, best actresses to win the award, Dame Judi Dench, Kate Winslet, Julie Christie and Helena Bonham Carter, whose family includes a British prime minister, and she paid tribute to all of them when she accepted the award.

"The first time I saw Mrs. Brown" (Dench's film) I learned over to my beloved and said, "she is going to win an Academy Award," and in my mind she has, and so have all the others," she said, adding, "I am honoured to work in a year when there were so many magnificent performances."

Hunt, a popular TV actress, cemented her career as a film star with her first Oscar and the victory came on the same day she signed a one-year contract for her hit TV series, "Mad About You," which will pay her about one million an episode. With Hunt winning best actress and Kim Basinger of "L A

Confidential" taking the best supporting actress award, "Titanic" was shut out of the only two acting awards it was up for.

But it won for its widely applauded score and song, the international hit, "My heart will go on," by James Horner and Will Jennings.

The Dutch film "Character" was named the year's best foreign film and its director Mike Van Dinne told the Oscar audience, "It opens Friday and this probably has to tell you that it has some damn stunning subtitles."

Hollywood began giving out its top prizes with Basinger winning for her performance as the glamorous call girl in "L.A. Confidential." She beat out sentimental favourite 87-year-old "Titanic" star Gloria Stuart for best supporting actress.

Robing Williams won the award for best supporting actor for his role in "Good Will Hunting." "Thank you, this may be the one time I am speechless," the popular comedian said.

Williams, who has been nominated three other times said he had not expected to win in those races, and he was surprised at winning. "I didn't think I had a chance, but when they said it, I was shocked. This is a wild night, it's just insane. I'll have to change pants, but you'll understand that."

Oscars show host Billy Crystal quickly set the tone of the evening when he declared, "Good evening and welcome to the Titanic. We're just like the Titanic. It are huge, we are expensive and everybody wants us to go faster."



Helen Hunt holds her award for Best Actress at the 70th annual Academy Awards at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, Monday. Hunt won for her role in the movie "As Good as It Gets." — AP/UNB photo



Ghana's President Jerry Rawlings, US President Bill Clinton, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, both wearing the Kente traditional Ghanaian dress, and Ghana's first lady Nana Rawlings, left to right, greet a crowd of over 200,000 people assembled in Independence Square in Accra Monday. — AP/UNB photo

New Nat'l Front launched to give support to BJP-led govt

JAMMU, Mar 24: In a significant development, National Conference president and Jammu and Kashmir chief Minister Farooq Abdullah yesterday announced the launch of a new National Front comprising Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) and his party and said it would give issue-based support to the BJP-led government at the centre, reports PTI.

Announcing this at a news conference here, Abdullah said TDP chief N Chandrababu Naidu, AGP president Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and himself had decided to get together to form the separate front.

On the issue of support to the Atal Behari Vajpayee government, he said he did not believe in dislodging any government and will extend issue-based support to any government at the centre.

"I will however, discuss the issue (of support) with the Working Committee of the National Conference," he said.

Meanwhile, the newly formed National Front comprising National Conference (NC), Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) and TDP yesterday said it would soon formulate a joint strategy to be adopted during the confidence vote to be sought

by BJP-led government later this week.

TDP president N Chandrababu Naidu told a hurriedly-called press conference here he was in touch with National Conference president Farooq Abdullah and a date for the new front's meeting would be decided soon.

He said the new front would serve as a common platform for all secular and anti-Congress forces and there would be no compromise on secularism.

Soft peddling BJP, Naidu said the party has "diluted" what he termed its 'communal' agenda due to political compulsions.

BJP govt sworn in in Himachal Pradesh

SHIMLA, Mar 24: A nine-member BJP-led ministry headed by Prem Kumar Dhumal was today sworn in Himachal Pradesh, ending a two-week-long deadlock, reports PTI.

Besides Dhumal, the two-tier ministry has seven cabinet ministers and one minister of state.

Governor Rama Devi administered the oaths of office and secrecy to the ministers.

BJP has learned to play politics

NEW DELHI, Mar 24: The right-wing party that won India's national elections is no longer a political outsider, as it proved with shrewd deal-making before vote for a parliamentary Speaker, reports AP.

The Bharatiya Janata Party backed a southern regional power's nominee for Speaker, ensuring that the southerners will help the BJP win a vote of confidence scheduled Friday.

Two years ago, a BJP government was toppled after only 13 days because it didn't have enough friends in parliament. This year, the party dispensed favours and promises to build a 20-party minority coalition seeking out leftists with which it has little in common ideologically, allying even with scandal-tainted groups who undermined its claims to offering voters the integrity seen as lacking in other parties.

As a result, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee is expected to easily win the confidence vote. He needs a simple majority of 271 of the 540 seats that have been filled in the 545-member lower house of parliament, and was believed to have the backing of 276 lawmakers.

The number of Vajpayee's supporters could change in the next few days. His BJP and the opposition alliance of the United Front and the Congress Party were both still lobbying for votes.

Votes for Speaker, the top presiding officer, are generally smooth affairs in India, with the governing party's candidate's usually running unopposed. But in the vote scheduled late Tuesday, incumbent Speaker P A Sangma of the Congress Party faces Telugu Desam Party nominee G M C Balaogoy, who is supported by BJP.

Monday, TDP leader Chandrababu Naidu put up his Speaker candidate and abandoned the opposition United Front, of which he has been chairman, saying other members of the coalition had insulted him by meeting without his permission over the weekend and agreeing to back Sangma for Speaker.

The TDP's 12 lawmakers are expected to abstain from the vote of confidence or support the BJP — either move would likely result in a BJP victory. BJP leaders were believed trying to persuade the TDP and another party that left the United Front Monday.

BRIEFLY

Arafat arrives in Cairo: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat arrived yesterday to address the Cairo-based Arab League on the state of the peace process with Israel and to hold talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, AFP says from Cairo.

Arafat will give Arab League foreign ministers a "detailed explanation of the situation on the ground and Palestinian moves to re-launch the peace process," Palestinian delegate to the Arab League Mohammed Sobehi said.

Charles, 2 sons visit Canada: Even princes get to go on vacation. Prince Charles planned a full day of public events around this Western Canada city Vancouver Tuesday before taking his two sons to British Columbia's world famous Whistler ski resort for a private vacation, AP says from Vancouver.

For William, 15, and brother Harry, 13, it's their first ski trip without their mother, Diana, Princess of Wales, who was killed in a car crash in August. The Vancouver leg of the trip also marks one of the few public appearances by William, second-in-line to the British throne behind his father.

Clinton to visit China in June: President Bill Clinton will visit China in late June and early July, five months earlier than originally planned, the White House announced Monday, AP says from Accra.

The president looks to the visit as an opportunity to expand areas of cooperation in our improving relationship with China and to discuss, frankly, areas of difference," press secretary Mike McCurry said. Clinton's visit would be the first by an American president since the disruption in US-China ties following the massacre of civilians in Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

Pope returns to Rome: Pope John Paul II returned to Rome late Monday after a three-day pastoral visit to military-ruled Nigeria in which he called repeatedly for respect for human rights and national reconciliation, AFP says from Rome.

The Pope's plane landed at 10:50 pm (2150 GMT) at Ciampino airport near Rome after a flight from Nigeria, airport officials said.

Cabin fire claims 11 in US: They headed north to the wild beauty of a cabin in the mountains, 11 young people, all friends looking forward to a weekend of cards, cooking and laughter. By daybreak Sunday, all of them were dead, caught in their beds by a swift fire, AP says from Herndon.

Little remained Monday of the two-story cabin on Madisonburg Mountain except a tin roof, bent in the middle and draped like a tent over the stubs of charred supports. The cause of the blaze was under investigation.

7 die as dam collapses in China: A dam constructed poorly and without permission in central China collapsed, releasing a torrent of water that killed seven people and swept away three houses, an official newspaper said Tuesday, AP says from Beijing.

The dam in Hubei province's Gaokou village had been running less than 60 days when it collapsed March 8, releasing nearly 300 million liters (78.5 million gallons) of water that swept away three houses with people inside, the Farmers' Daily said. Seven people were killed, the newspaper said. The dam was designed incorrectly, built shoddily and had not been officially approved, it said.

US blames DPRK for breakdown of 4-party peace talks

WASHINGTON, Mar 24: The United States said Monday that North Korea's refusal to consider "pragmatic steps" was the reason for the breakdown of four-party Korean peace talks last week in Geneva, reports AFP.

Rejecting Pyongyang's effort to blame Washington for the impasse, State Department spokesman James Foley said the reason was North Korea's insistence on US troop withdrawal from the Korean Peninsula, which he said was non-negotiable.

"Unfortunately, the North Koreans were not prepared to consider pragmatic steps forward," Foley said.

The North Koreans insisted that the negotiations on the withdrawal of US forces from Korea and a separate peace treaty be placed on the agenda.

North Korea earlier Monday blamed the United States for the breakdown of Korean peace talks in Geneva last week, citing the US refusal to discuss "essential and basic matters," such as troop withdrawals.

Foley said Washington "is willing to exchange views on any subject, including that subject" but said the 37,000 US troops on the peninsula "are not in fact a cause of tension, on the

contrary, they have helped maintain peace and stability for 45 years."

He said the presence of US troops is determined by a security alliance with Seoul and "is not a subject for negotiation with any other nation."

Foley said the latest breakdown was not surprising and that Washington expects the peace process to be a long road.

"We always expected the search for a permanent peace to be long and difficult," he said, adding, while being realistic about the short run, we're not pessimistic about the long run."

Four-nation talks in Geneva, including both Korea, the United States and China, broke down on Saturday with no date set for a resumption.

Clinton arrives in Uganda



Pakistani President Rafiq Tarar, left, confers Nishan-i-Intiaz, Pakistan's highest civil award, to Pakistan-born Indian actor Dilip Kumar for his outstanding performance in performing arts in South Asia Monday, at a Presidential palace in Islamabad, Kumar, whose real name is Yousuf Khan born in Peshawar, Pakistan, migrated to India in 1947. He is legendary actor worked in 150 films. — AP/UNB photo

ENTEBBE, Uganda, Mar 24: US President Bill Clinton arrived in Uganda early Tuesday from Ghana on the second leg of his six-nation tour of Africa, reports AFP.

Air Force one touched down at Entebbe, 40 kilometres (24 miles) west of Kampala at 1:21 am (1021 GMT Monday).

This would enable both the nations to enter the 21st century as real strategic partners, he added.

Yeltsin expressed satisfaction at the stable nation-wide consensus in both the countries on importance of expanding Indo-Russian bilateral ties.

The two countries have initiated the process to activate relations between the two governments at various levels, a hectic schedule for the exchange of bilateral visits is being worked out by New Delhi and Moscow, which would pave the ground for Yeltsin's India visit this autumn.

US begins deploying 45 jets, 12,000 airmen to Bahrain

WASHINGTON, Mar 24: As many as 45 US warplanes and 1,200 airmen begin deploying to Bahrain this week in the first major rotation of US Air Forces in the Gulf since the US buildup against Iraq began last year, air force officials said Monday, reports AFP.

The force, which includes at least 39 fighters and bombers, will replace a similarly sized force that has been stationed in Bahrain since November, the officials said.

The first of the main body of airmen were scheduled to depart Monday evening for Southwest Asia from Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho, home of the 366th Air Expeditionary Wing, they said.

"This is just a routine rotation," said air force Lieutenant Staven Rolenc, a spokesman for the base. "It's the 366th's turn to go over there and do that mission."

Going to Bahrain, air force sources said, were 12 F-15C fighters, 12 F-15E fighter bombers 12 F-16CJ fighters, three B-1 bombers, and four KC-135 air refuelling aircraft.

Air force source said the deployment was scheduled to be completed by March 27.

They will replace a force of two dozen F-16s, 12 F-15Cs, three B-1 bombers and four KC-135 tanker planes from the 347th Air Expeditionary Wing, which was deployed to Bahrain in November.

The main difference in that this time the force will include F-15Es, the only fighter capable of dropping 5,000 pound bunker busting bombs.

The air force also has sent in fresh pilots and ground crews to Kuwait to man the six F-117 Stealth fighters stationed there. About 200 airmen were involved in that deployment from Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico.

The US Navy also has been rotating its warship in the Gulf, recently replacing the aircraft carrier USS George Washington with the USS Stennis.

Iraq arrests its father of germ weapons

NEW YORK, Mar 24: Iraq has arrested the scientist widely considered the father of Baghdad's germ weapons programme as he was preparing to flee the country, the New York Times reported today, says AFP.

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Govt shakeup is Yeltsin's classic tactic

MOSCOW, Mar 24: Boris Yeltsin is notorious for impulsive and bewildering behaviour that leaves Russians and others wondering if he should laugh or cry at the antics of one of the world's most powerful men, reports AP.

Yeltsin's bizarre behaviour has included erroneous announcements about nuclear disarmament and elbowing aside the conductor of a military band to take over the task. Such erratic actions have raised questions about Yeltsin's state of mind and whether he is capable of doing his job.

But the president's unexpected dismissal of his government Monday was something very different — a classic example of Yeltsin's politician at work.

Yeltsin insists on taking enormous power and delighting in dramatic interventions to show he's in charge, while displaying little appetite for making government policies work and shifting blame if things go wrong.

During more than six years in the Kremlin, Yeltsin the politician has followed two rules: The blame for whatever goes wrong must be laid on others and no one can rise above him or encroach upon his power or position.

As president, Yeltsin sees his role as setting general policy for the government. He then expects his ministers and subordinates to achieve his aims.

If a policy is not realised, or if it encounters too much opposition, Yeltsin will blame his subordinates, scolding them in public and eventually dismissing them. If popular opposition doesn't abate, Yeltsin often will change course or co-opt critics into the government.

Yeltsin does appear to believe that democratic reforms are the only cure for Russia's problems. He said Monday that

he dismissed the Cabinet because their failure to improve the lives of ordinary people was throwing the future of reform into doubt — something that worries many democrats.

But he has neither the inclination or the determination to drive those policies through. His subordinates rarely have the power or the will to do it in his place and ministers who become powerful quickly are axed.

The enormous task of transforming Russia after the collapse of the Soviet system often has stalled as a result.

Time and again, Yeltsin has fired those around him, trying to divert blame for his government's failures. He claims that he is not to blame for the government's shortcomings.

Yeltsin may only be deceiving himself with his tactics of shifting blame and endangering the very reforms he claims to be defending.

ter, was considered an oddity because he had lasted an unprecedented five years.

Yeltsin also has been quick to remove ministers and subordinates if they become too ambitious. He dismissed Alexander Lebed as national security chief in 1996, just a few months after appointing him, because the ex-general tried to assert his own authority.

The net effect, some insiders says, has been to turn the Kremlin into the court of a medieval king, where rival factions compete for the ear of the ruler and the government ends up with no firm direction.

But few Russians, including those who support reform, are likely to buy Yeltsin's claims that he is not to blame for the government's shortcomings.