

Protest march against conservatives-Nat'l Front alliance in France

PARIS, Mar 29: Some 20,000 people marched through Paris on Saturday as part of a nationwide protest against political alliances between far-right racist National Front (NF) and main stream conservatives, reports AFP.

The procession snaked its way through the capital under the banner of "Together for Liberty, Equality and Fraternity," the rallying cry of the French left dating back to the country's 1789 revolution.

While police estimate that 20,000 turned out in Paris, protest organisers put the figure at between 50,000 and 80,000.

Turn-out was slightly lower in similar demonstrations in major cities such as Grenoble, Nice, Bordeaux, Toulouse, Strasbourg and Lille.

The protests were in response to a decision by five members of the centre-right Union for French Democracy (UDF) to accept help from the front in March 16 regional elections to stay in office and keep the left out.

To government ministers took part in Saturday's demonstrations, which Prime Minister Lionel Jospin said should be

left to citizens and to leaders of political parties."

Robert Hue, leader of the Communist Party which has several government ministers, described the movement as "a defence of the values of democracy and citizenship."

In Grenoble, in the big Rhone-Alps region, at least 8,000 people poured into the streets to demand the resignation of Charles Millon, one of those who benefited from NF votes to become the president of the regions' council.

Millon, a former right-wing defence minister, has refused to resign despite pressure from party leaders.

Over 3,000 people turned out in the clear sunshine in Strasbourg, in the north-east, according to organisers, brandishing banners reading "F for Fascist, N for Nazi."

President Jacques Chirac earlier this week denounced the NF as "racist and xenophobic."

He will Monday begin talks with leaders of the so-called "republican" right — a term excluding the far — right to propose reforms of the French political system

Communists to oppose Yeltsin's choice for PM

MOSCOW, Mar 29: Moving towards confrontation with President Boris Yeltsin, the head of Russia's Communist Party said Sunday that his faction will oppose the president's nominee for prime minister, reports AP.

After firing his entire Cabinet last week, Yeltsin nominated a talented but youthful former oil executive, Sergei Kiriyenko, to be the country's next premier. He threatened to disband parliament if they fail to approve him.

But in an interview with the Interfax news agency, Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, who heads parliament's largest faction, said he was not convinced of Kiriyenko's abilities or swayed by the president's threat.

"We cannot confirm just anyone as the country's No. 2 leader," Zyuganov said, according to Interfax.

"If the president becomes seriously ill, then it will be the premier who takes responsibility for the nuclear briefcase," he said. "And to trust such an unknown and immature person would be the highest form of irresponsibility, even if those who are pushing Kiriyenko for prime minister don't want to recognise it."



Pro-secular Turks arrive at the mausoleum of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of modern Turkey, in Ankara on Saturday, to pay their respects. A day after the military and civilian government agreed to continue their fight against radical Islam, some 3,000 people gathered in the capital for a rally in support of the nation's secular system. — AP/UNB photo

3rd Int'l Documentary Films Festival opens in Brazil

RIO DE JANEIRO, Mar 29: The third International Documentary films festival opened here on Saturday, reports Xinhua.

Highlighting that "everything is true," the event features three documentaries, including two to enter into national and international contests.

Eighteen documentaries from Brazil and other countries are listed in the international category, and nine other local films in the national category.

"The man of vision," from Australia, "Amsterdam Global Village" from Holland, and "But in the End, who is Juliette?" from Mexico stand out among the foreign entries.

Film makers from the United States, Mexico, Ireland, Sweden, Argentina, Germany, France, the Czech Republic and Macao were at the event scheduled to end on April 2.

Chernomyrdin to run for presidency

MOSCOW, Mar 29: Sacked Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin announced Saturday he would enter the fray for presidential elections to succeed Boris Yeltsin in the year 2000, reports AP.

Chernomyrdin, who was sacked by Yeltsin on Monday, said in an exclusive interview or Russian television channel that he would run even if Yeltsin did not support his bid.

"I have taken the decision to run in the presidential election," he said. "It is my decision to run, and I will not back down."

Chernomyrdin said he had Yeltsin's support in his run for the presidency, but admitted that the President had not clearly designated him as his successor.

"It was my decision to take

on this task, but I understand that it was Boris Yeltsin's as well." Russia's former premier said, referring to a meeting with Yeltsin earlier this week.

Chernomyrdin said he had nonetheless been upset by Yeltsin's decision to fire him.

"If I said that it has not upset me, no one would believe me," he added.

The President praised Chernomyrdin's qualities this week after he dismissed the entire government, saying he had told the premier to "concentrate on the political preparation of the presidential election."

Vladimir Ryjkov, vice-speaker of parliament's lower house and a Chernomyrdin intimate, claimed this week that Yeltsin saw Chernomyrdin as his successor.

But some political analysts

here take the opposite view that Yeltsin fired his Prime Minister to prevent him garnering too much power during Yeltsin's frequent absence due to ill health.

Doubts over his candidacy had been raised by Chernomyrdin himself when, after his dismissal, he kept the pundits guessing over whether he would stand.

Chernomyrdin's announcement was greeted with caution Saturday by most of Russia's political class, with the exception of his close allies.

The former prime minister could secure strong business backing for his bid, but his gray technocratic image and lack of rhetorical powers are a handicap, analysts say. Current opinion polls give him only about two or three per cent support.

'Mistrust between US-Iran remains'

TEHRAN, Mar 29: US-Iranian relations are thawing, but a "thick wall of mistrust" has yet to be broken, an Iranian Cabinet minister said, reports AP.

Culture Minister Ataollah Mohajerani also said that the United States had asked his government for permission to open an office in the Swiss Embassy in Tehran.

Iran was considering the request, Mohajerani told the hard-line Iranian newspaper, Jomhuri Islami, in France, where he is on a private visit. His remarks were published Saturday.

He gave no other details and the United States denied the report.

"The report is false. We have not asked the Iranian government for their agreement to open an interests section," said White House spokesman Eric Rubin.

The Swiss Embassy already represents the United States in Iran. The United States severed ties with Iran after Muslim militants loyal to the revolutionary government stormed the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and took 52 Americans hostage for 444 days.

"Relations with the United States will be relaxed at the time when the thick wall of mistrust is cracked through confidence-building measures," Mohajerani said.

The United States accuses Iran of sponsoring terrorism and trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction. It has banned large investments in the country and frozen billions of dollars of Iranian funds.

Malaysia to speed up deportation of illegal immigrants to Indonesia

KUALA LUMPUR, Mar 29: In the wake of violent clashes in local detention camps, Malaysia said it will speed up efforts to repatriate more than 8,000 illegal immigrants to Indonesia, reports AP.

In the largest repatriation exercise so far, Malaysian police deported 1,133 illegal aliens on Saturday in two boatloads which departed from Malaysia's Klang port and were bound for Tanjung Balai on Indonesia's Sumatra island.

Malaysian Police Chief Rahim Noor was quoted in Sunday's Star newspaper as saying that the remaining illegal immigrants in detention camps would be shipped back home from Sunday to make space for detaining more illegal aliens.

Other newspapers reported that 1,000 Indonesian illegal immigrants would be deported Sunday.

Immigration officials at Klang port, however, said the deportation exercise would resume Monday morning.

Meanwhile, Malaysia's Home Ministry said that security at the country's eight de-

tention camps would be stepped up immediately to ensure no repeat of a bloody riot at the Semeniyh detention camp.

On Thursday, riots broke out at three of the country's detention camps. The worst outbreak was at Semeniyh, 40 kilometres (25 miles) south of the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. Official reports said eight illegal Indonesians and one Malaysian police officer were killed. Human rights groups estimate the death toll at more than 20.

Deputy Home Minister Tajol Rosli Ghazali said security officers at the detention camps would be instructed to stop treating the illegal immigrants 'softly'.

"After the incident at Semeniyh, we will now treat them like criminals, and there will be no exception even though they are only immigrants," Tajol was quoted as saying in Sunday's Star newspaper.

We did not want to be rough with them, Tajol was quoted as saying. But now they leave us no choice and we are going to be really serious with them.

Ross meets Netanyahu in effort to reach agreement on pullback

JERUSALEM, Mar 29: US envoy Denis Ross met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the second time in two days late Saturday in an effort to reach agreement on an Israeli pullback from the West Bank, reports AP.

Ross and Netanyahu again held their talks at the prime minister's residence in Jerusalem.

Before the two men met, six Palestinians, including PLO executive committee member Yasser Khaled, were wounded in Asira Al-Qubilya, West Bank, when Israeli soldiers opened fire with rubber-coated bullets at demonstrators protesting a settler land seizure outside Nablus.

However, Ross continued his quest to find an acceptable for-

mula for both sides on an Israeli pullback, heading to Gaza city for late night talks with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, whom he also met Friday night in the West Bank town of Ramallah.

Ross said that he was presenting to both leaders the "refined" US proposal for the long-promised troop withdrawal. "I will listen to both sides' reaction to our ideas and pass on my report to President Bill Clinton, who will make a final decision," Ross said.

Netanyahu opposes the US plan, which the media say calls for an Israeli withdrawal from 13.1 per cent of the West Bank.

Arafat's self-rule authority already partially or totally controls 27 per cent of the West Bank.

Off the Record

Tattoos are taboo for minors

RIO DE JANEIRO: Tattoos are taboo for minors, the government decreed. So are tongue studs, nose pins and belly button rings, reports AP.

Rio de Janeiro state Gov. Marcello Alencar has signed a law making most body art and piercings for the under-18 set illegal without written parental permission.

The restriction spares the earlobe. Pierced ears and earrings are still allowed. The penalty for violators will be set in another law within 90 days.

Many tattooers consulted by the Rio daily O Globo called the law innocuous because they already refuse clients under 18. But some complained that it was discriminatory.

5300-yr-old Bronze Age hunter goes on display

BOLZANO, Italy: A 5,300-year-old Bronze Age hunter went on display Saturday at a museum created in his honour in the northern city of Bolzano, reports AP.

Hundreds of people lined up for the museum opening and their first glimpse of the Iceman in his special, refrigerated case.

Among them were the two German tourists who found the Iceman in an Alpine glacier in 1991, surrounded by tools, including a copper ax and a stone dagger. He is one of the best-preserved frozen mummies in the world.

The Iceman was taken to Innsbruck, Austria, after his discovery, on the assumption that his resting place was on the Austrian side of the border.

Lucky gamblers

HONG KONG: Two gamblers won a record 133,576,963 Hong Kong dollars (17.25 million US) for a mere 10 dollars (1.30 US) after picking the first three horses in each of three horse races, the Jockey Club said Sunday, reports AP.

The club said there had been two winners at Shatin Saturday, each holding a five dollar unit to share the 133.6 million dollar dividend. It topped the previous record of 70.8 million dollars paid out on May 31, 1995.

The club had been predicting a pay out of more than 100 million dollars after punters rushed to place bets in the 48 hours leading up to the gold cup meeting at Shatin, track turnout was up 30 per cent on Saturday.

BRIEFLY

11 killed in Pak road mishap: At least 11 people were killed and 29 others sustained injuries Saturday when a passenger bus fell into ravine off a small bridge, near Sara-i-Alamgir, about 120 kilometers southeast of Islamabad, Xinhua says from Islamabad.

The Associated Press of Pakistan quoted police sources in Sara-i-Alamgir as saying that the accident happened when a passenger bus averted collision with an incoming car near Sara-i-Alamgir, Pakistan TV and Radio Pakistan put the number of those killed in the accident at 14 while police sources confirmed only 11 dead.

6 hurt in blast in Moldova: Six people were injured Saturday when a radio-controlled mine exploded on the top floor of an apartment building in a suburb of the Moldovan capital Chisinau, Itar-TASS news agency reported, AFP reports from Chisinau.

Blair to visit Egypt next week: British Prime Minister Tony Blair is to visit Egypt next week in a move reflecting a fresh European interest in reviving the stalled Middle East peace process, Egypt's Middle East news agency reported Saturday, Xinhua says from Cairo.

The agency quoted British ambassador to Egypt David Blatherwick as saying Saturday that Blair will hold discussions with Egyptian leaders on the Middle East peace procession his country's capacity as European Union's rotating six-month chairman.

Australian kidnapped in Thailand: An Australian has been kidnapped at gunpoint by ethnic Karen fighters on the border between Thailand and Myanmar, a report said yesterday, AFP reports from Sydney.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio said the 40-year-old man was a teacher of English but only his first name, Nick, was immediately known. It said he was ordered to wade across the shallow Moei river separating the two countries by members of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), which supports the Myanmar government.

Chinese dissident detained: Chinese police have detained a democracy campaigner who issued appeals for reforms, including a call to abolish labour camps, a human rights group said, AP reports from Beijing.

Police in Wuhan, in central China, lead away Qin Yongmin early Saturday to an unknown destination, the Hong Kong-based Information Center for Human Rights and Democracy Movement in China said in a statement issued late Saturday. Qin, who served a two-year labour camp sentence in 1994-95 for advocating nonviolent political reform, wrote in a letter to the Chinese legislature that labor camps had been used to suppress dissent.

Argentine president in Australia: Argentine President Carlos Menem arrived in Sydney with a political and business delegation Sunday for a three-day tour, AP says from Sydney.

Menem was accompanied by his daughter and first lady Zulema Eva Maria. Foreign Minister Guido di Tella, government officials and business leaders. He was met at the airport by a delegation including New South Wales Governor Gordon Samuels and Federal Sport and Tourism Minister Andrew Thomson before being whisked off to the Inter-Continental Hotel in Sydney's central business district.

Clashes leave 9 dead in Guinea: Nine people were killed and around 40 were seriously hurt in clashes Monday between security forces and local people in the Kaporo district of northern Conakry, the government said Saturday, AFP reports from Conakry.

Government spokesman Ibrahim Mongo Diallo gave the toll in a televised speech in which he also said two police stations had been ransacked, a Gendarmerie post torched and several vehicles damaged. Since Monday, police have arrested around 30 people implicated in the incidents which broke out after thousands of residents of a slum town refused to vacate their homes earmarked for destruction under a redevelopment project.

Hutu rebels free 2 Spanish nuns: Two Spanish nuns kidnapped in Rwanda five days ago by suspected Hutu rebels were freed Saturday "in perfect health" in the town of Goma, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Spanish foreign ministry in Madrid announced, AFP says from Madrid.

The women, who had apparently been held to treat wounded guerrillas, had been abducted Monday near the border of the two countries along with a group of five Rwandan nuns, who were released hours later. The Spanish ambassador to the Democratic Republic of Congo was to travel to Goma to organise the repatriation of the nuns, Sagratia Larralde, a 62-year-old nurse, and Rosa Munoz, a 33 year-old doctor, according to a ministry spokesman.

Road mishap kills 6 in Peru: A speeding bus plunged off the Pan American highway in northern Peru Saturday, killing six people and injuring 24, police told AFP in Lima.

The bus left the town of Sullana in northern Piura state and was headed to Lima when the driver lost control of the vehicle, which veered off the road, spun around and fell 30 metres, police said. Authorities blamed excessive speed for the crash.

3 ex-officials jailed in Vietnam: Three former officials have been sentenced to life in jail for their involvement in a major corruption case at a Vietnamese state-owned textile firm, a report said yesterday, AFP reports from Hanoi.

Two former general directors of Nam Dinh Textile firm, Nguyen Duy Kiem and Nguyen Van Tuven, and its chief accountant Tran Ngoc Vinh were sentenced after being convicted of embezzlement on Saturday, the official Nhan Dan daily said. The major defendant Kiem, who was also a former general director of Vietnam Garment and Textile Corporation, was accused of embezzling socialist properties, contravening regulations, making false reports in economic management and a lack of responsibility which led to serious consequences.

Customs worth \$8.4m seized in UK: Customs officials said Saturday they had seized 5 million pounds (dollars 8.4 million) worth of cocaine on a light aircraft from Germany that landed at Birmingham Airport, AP says from London.

The pilot and passenger were arrested after the twin-engine plane from Duesseldorf landed Friday night at the airport in central England, the Customs and Excise Department said in a statement. Fifty kilos of the drug were allegedly discovered in suitcases. No further details were available immediately.

Ukrainians vote for new parliament

KIEV, Ukraine, Mar 29: Eager to break the country's political and economic paralysis, Ukrainians voted Sunday in the nation's second parliamentary election since the 1991 Soviet collapse, reports AP.

"I'm an optimist and I'd like to think things will get better, fast, but it's hard to believe," said Tetyana Pustovoitova, 51, a food store clerk who cast her ballot at a Kiev high school.

Ukrainians had high hopes for their country when it gained independence in 1991, but seven years later the nation of 50 million is still waiting for an economic upturn and a stronger sense of identity.

"Restructuring and reforms have given us freedom, but materially and spiritually they have given us nothing," said Stepan Sternina, 70, who voted at the same school shortly after sunrise.

The government conquered hyperinflation and introduced a relatively stable new currency in 1996, but structural reforms have been stymied by a deadlock between parliament and the president.

Forecasters say the economy may grow slightly this year for the first time since independence, and President Leonid Kuchma insisted in an election eve address that the worst is over.

But millions of pensioners and workers owed months of wages are lined up waiting. They are expected to vote for the Communist Party and other parties who promise a return to a Soviet-style social safety net.



About 400 Palestinian demonstrators march, Saturday, with banners to a hilltop near the West Bank town of Nablus, which is claimed both by Palestinian villagers from the nearby village of Assira and settlers from the Jewish settlement of Yitzhar. US envoy Dennis Ross is shuttling between Israeli and Palestinian leaders as he tries to promote a US plan aimed at advancing the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. — AP/UNB photo

Vajpayee govt survives, but real test begins now

NEW DELHI, Mar 29: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's ruling alliance cleared its first major hurdle by winning the confidence vote today, but faced roadblocks and pitfalls ahead as it prepared to get down to the serious business of governance, reports IANS.

The 13-party ruling coalition led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the vote of confidence in the 545-member Lok Sabha, lower house of Parliament, by 274 votes to 261. The house had an effective voting strength of 539. The 11 lawmakers of the southern regional Telugu Desam Party (TDP) which walked out of the former ruling United Front (UF) coalition, voted for the Vajpayee government.

Saddled with media descriptions of "wobbly winner", "strange bedfellows" and opposition charges of "double-speak", the government has a tough job on its hands, political analysts noted.

Not only does Vajpayee have to placate his temperamental allies, but he and his partners have to keep their foes in good humour with the minority government's survival depending on tacit support from outside the coalition ranks.

Vajpayee emphasised his

commitment to govern by consensus. "Even if a party has two-thirds majority (in the House), a vast and diverse nation like India can be governed only by consensus," he told the Lok Sabha.

The BJP is confident of its coalition management ability. "I don't see why we should have any major problems with our alliance partners. Small ego problems may arise, but our basic interests are not in conflict anywhere," said BJP general secretary Pramod Mahajan.

"No one wants another election in a hurry," he was quoted as saying. Analysts agreed that it was the dread of another snap poll, together with the main opposition Congress party's unwillingness to team up again with the UF alliance, which had ensured the installation and survival of the BJP-led government.

The Congress and the UF had joined hands after the unclear verdict of the 1996 general election to keep the BJP out of office, but some UF partners, especially the TDP now see the Congress as the bigger enemy and have since walked out of the UF.

"The defeat of this government will result in the entry of the Congress through the back

door which is not acceptable to us," Yerran Naidu of the TDP told the house, speaking in support of Vajpayee's confidence motion.

But the opposition is determined not to let the government breathe easy. This became evident during the debate when the BJP ran into flak for its "hidden agenda". Joining hands, opposition parties cautioned the BJP's allies that the BJP's radical Hindu affiliates would call the shots in the government and try to sneak in controversial sections of its agenda into the common governance programme.

Leader of the Opposition Sharad Pawar asked Defence Minister George Fernandes of the Samata Party and Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress "what they would do" when the BJP "unleashes its secret agenda". He and other opposition leaders said they doubted the BJP's sincerity in dropping its contentious goals — the building of a Hindu temple at the site of the demolished Babri mosque, replacing personal laws with a uniform civil code and scrapping the constitutionally guaranteed special status to Kashmir.

Vajpayee and senior BJP

leaders, however, denied the charge. "We are committed to the national agenda and I can assure that as long as I am Prime Minister, we will govern by this agenda," the Prime Minister asserted. He added that his government would not be "driven by remote control", referring to opposition charges that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) would meddle in governance.

"All our decisions will be our decisions and not be foisted on us by anyone. There should be no doubt about this," Vajpayee declared.

BJP president and Home Minister L.K. Advani too said, "The BJP manifesto is not applicable to the functioning of the government."

Vajpayee's government, however, would have to reassure not only the house. The eyes of the world are focused on India. India's neighbours — and to know what kind of economic policies he will follow, what his foreign policy will be and what precisely his party means by the expression "exercise the option to induct nuclear weapons," said The Times of India newspaper.

According to the daily, the ruling alliance's governance

agenda contains "much that is disquieting to foreign investors and governments alike." But it added, "the BJP is far too pragmatic to let ideology and sentiment rule the roost on economic matters." And the same is true of defence.

The Prime Minister reassured India's neighbours that there would be no change in New Delhi's friendship policies towards them. "There will be no change in international relations because of a change in government," Vajpayee said.

Although Vajpayee and the Defence Minister have clarified that India would go nuclear only if found necessary after a comprehensive national security review, the government's emphasis on "swadeshi" (economic nationalism) has caused some disquiet.

Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha of the BJP has, however, set at rest speculation about the government's commitment to the seven-year-old economic reforms when he declared while announcing his interim budget this week that the reforms would be "deepened, broadened and accelerated."

Human Resource Development Minister Joshi, who is said to be the strongest advocate

of the economic nationalism philosophy, also allayed fears that this could slow down economic liberalisation. "The opposition thinks that swadeshi means we want to cut India off from the rest of the world. All we are saying is that India must be built by Indians," he told the house.

"Finance Minister Sinha is anxious to send a message to the whole world that he does not intend to reverse the reform process nor turn inward-looking. Multinational corporations and foreign portfolio investors will find some comfort in that," said Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyer, consulting editor of the leading business daily, The Economic Times, and a strong proponent of free market reforms.

Reversing an economic slide and arresting disarray in government finances would be one of the biggest challenges facing the Vajpayee government. Former Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram admitted during the confidence vote debate that economic growth had slumped during his tenure in office. The fiscal deficit is estimated to be 6.1 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) against the targeted 4.5 per cent.