

King Hussein urges Israel to return all Arab land

AMMAN, Apr 5: Jordan's King Hussein said Saturday that Israel offer to withdraw its troops from southern Lebanon was a "positive step" and called on the Jewish state to return all occupied Arab land, reports AFP.

"I hope [the Israeli proposal] proves to be a positive step, not only for a withdrawal from Lebanon but also for the deadlocked peace process," the monarch told reporters on his return here from a visit to the United States.

"We have waited a very long time for Israel to accept" UN Resolution 425, which calls on Israel to pull its troops out of Lebanon, said the King.

Israel's inner "Security Cabinet" approved UN Resolution 425 this week and said it

was prepared to withdraw Israeli troops from Southern Lebanon if the Lebanese government ensures security in the border region.

The Israeli offer has been rejected by Lebanon and Syria, which has 35,000 troops in Lebanon and is the main powerbroker there.

King Hussein also called on Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights, which were captured from Syria in 1967, and for a resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks "in order to complete the circle of peace."

Jordan and Israel signed a peace treaty in 1994.

King Hussein met with US president Bill Clinton during his visit to the United States and underwent routine medical

examinations at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

Reuter from Jerusalem adds: Police said they wounded around 15 Israeli Bedouins on Saturday in northern Israel after residents tried to rebuild three homes destroyed by authorities earlier in the week.

"A police force went to the village, it was attacked by a hail of stones, the police charged, several people were arrested," a police statement said.

Israeli army radio reported the demonstrators near the Arab village of Shef'am also used clubs to fend off the police, who fired teargas in the clash.

Israel's 5.8 million people include about 850,000 Arabs, who complain of political, social and economic discrimination.



Jordan's King Hussein, right, hugging his daughter Princess Aicha on arrival in Amman on Saturday after a trip to the United States where he met with President Clinton to discuss ways to revive the peace process and to undergo a medical checkup in Mayo Clinic.

France demands int'l probe into massacres in Algeria

PARIS, Apr 5: Thousands of French people and Algerian immigrants marched through Paris and several other cities on Saturday to protest against violence in Algeria and demand an international probe into massacres, reports Reuters.

The marches, organised by human rights groups, intellectuals and entertainers, were the second such demonstration in six months. But the turnout appeared to be disappointing.

Police said 2,700 people marched in Paris. There were smaller demonstrations in Strasbourg and Toulouse.

Last November, a "Day for Algeria" gathered more than 10,000 demonstrators in the French capital.

HK activists launch democracy campaign for China

HONG KONG, Apr 5: Hong Kong activists launched a fresh round of activities Sunday to press for democracy in China ahead of the anniversary of the bloody 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, reports AP.

The activists erected a monument and a "Goddess of Democracy" statue — modeled after the Statue of Liberty — in a tourist district for Sunday's Ching Ming Festival, when Chinese traditionally visit their ancestors' graves.

About 50 members of political parties and religious and social groups laid wreaths in front of the monument to commemorate those killed in the army's June 4, 1989, attack on student-led demonstrators demanding democracy.

"Release dissidents. Reassess

the 1989 democratic movement," the activists chanted. Chinese authorities labeled the movement a "counter-revolutionary rebellion."

In the crackdown, soldiers killed hundreds of dissidents and authorities jailed thousands of others, including student leader Wang Dan.

Nearly one in four Hong Kong people protested at that time, and the issue remains very sensitive in the territory.

Demands for a reassessment of the 1989 student movement are included in the platforms of several candidates for the May 24 legislative election, the first since Hong Kong's return from British to Chinese rule last July 1.

"Hong Kong people have not forgotten the people who were

massacred. They have not died in vain," said Emily Lau, a legislative election front-runner.

After Sunday's service, activists planned a series of lectures, exhibitions, demonstrations and a kite-flying ceremony and annual candlelight vigil on June 4, said Cheung Man-kwong, vice chairman of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movement in China.

Alliance Chairman Szeto Wah said the group was awaiting government permission for the vigil, which attracted 50,000 supporters last year. Human rights advocates are watching the government's handling of the event for clues to how tolerant the post-handover government is.

Hewitt may go to court to get Di's letters back

LONDON, Apr 5: James Hewitt, former lover of Princess Diana, says he will go to court if necessary to get back the letters from her that allegedly were stolen from his home, a British newspaper reported Sunday, says AP.

"I will do everything in my power to get these letters back," Hewitt was quoted as telling The Sunday Telegraph. "They are my property. I have never attempted to sell them, show them off or use them at all."

Sixty-two letters that Hewitt had kept in a safe at his home were given to Kensington Palace after Hewitt's former fiancée Anna Ferretti allegedly tried to sell the letters to The Mirror, a daily tabloid.

"The Mirror may have handed the letters to Kensington Palace but I am sure they will have been photocopied.

Majority of Americans favour dismissal of Paula Jones' case

WASHINGTON, Apr 5: A majority of Americans said the perjury investigation of President Bill Clinton is unlikely to lead to charges against him and should be dropped, according to a Newsweek magazine poll issued on Saturday, reports Reuters.

With Clinton's approval rating still flying high, 57 per cent of those polled said special prosecutor Kenneth Starr should end his investigation of allegations that the president had sex with Monica Lewinsky, lied about it under oath and induced the former White House intern to lie about it in the Paula Jones sexual harassment case.

Clinton has adamantly denied the allegations.

Only 38 per cent want the probe to continue, Newsweek said in its April 13 issue.

The telephone poll of 755 adults was conducted on Thursday and Friday, after US District Court Judge Susan Webber Wright dismissed the Jones civil suit that alleged Clinton made a crude advance

to her while he was Arkansas governor in 1991.

Clinton has denied that accusation.

An overwhelming 81 per cent of respondents said it was unlikely that criminal charges or impeachment proceedings would be brought against Clinton while he was in the White House.

Even if there was strong evidence that Clinton lied under oath about an improper sexual relationship, 55 per cent would be satisfied with an apology from the president, or no punitive action at all, while 40 per cent said he should be removed from office, the poll showed.

But 49 per cent would want him removed if he encouraged others to lie under oath about matters not having anything to do with sex, it said.

Clinton's approval rating held at a strong 66 per cent, up from 62 per cent last month, but down slightly from its highest rating in the Newsweek poll of 70 per cent in late January.



Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair with the Prime Minister of Japan, Ryutaro Hashimoto, centre and from Thailand Chuan Leekpai, right, at a press conference at the end of the ASEM II Summit in London Saturday.

BRIEFLY

Indonesian troops arrest 16: Indonesian troops have arrested 16 people at a private meeting on suspicion of trying to establish an illegal political organisation, a report said Sunday, AFP says from Jakarta.

The 14 men and two women were detained at the meeting in Jakarta Friday at a private home, where authorities also seized some documents, the Sinar Pagi Daily said. Some 10 people managed to escape from the scene. Jakarta military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel D J Nachrowi said the investigation into the case was continuing. Neighbours became suspicious and called authorities when they heard speeches from the meeting which carried religious overtones, the report said.

Boat catches fire on Amazon: A river boat caught fire and exploded on an Amazon river tributary on Saturday, leaving dozens of people missing and more than 70 injured, officials said. Reuter reports from Sao Paulo.

Brazilian media said at least three people were dead and at least 50 missing out of 200 passengers on the river boat that was making its regular run on the Madeira river from Manaus to the Ronodonia, state capital of Porto Velho. Authorities could not confirm the reported deaths. Globo television said the fire erupted when passengers, trying to put out an electrical short circuit, knocked over a container of gasoline. It said a passing boat rescued some passengers, but gave no further details.

France, US to resume talks Monday: France and the United States will resume talks on Monday as they near a bilateral agreement on air transport, a spokesman for the French Transport Ministry said Saturday, AFP reports from Paris.

"We are getting close to an agreement," the spokesman said. This is the seventh round of negotiations aimed at easing access to the air routes between France and the United States. The two sides are trying to reach an agreement before the busy mid-year season. The ministry spokeswoman said some technical points still needed to be worked on but said the negotiators had made advances in talks on freight traffic.

Clash claims 1 more in Bolivia: One man died Saturday in a clash between workers and soldiers, bringing to four the number of dead in four days of protest over public sector wages and government payments to coca growers who eradicate their crops, AFP reports from La Paz.

Union officials who called a nationwide strike said the latest victim, Benito Mamani, was asphyxiated when soldiers used teargas to break up a roadblock set up by truck drivers in the central province of Cochabamba. Union sources say more than 100 people have been injured since the strike erupted Wednesday.

Bomb attacks on cafes in Kampala: Unidentified attackers bombed at least two cafes in central Kampala Saturday evening, killing at least three people and wounding at least six more, police and witnesses told, AFP says from Kampala.

The first attack — either a grenade or a thrown bomb — was against the open-air Fenice Cafe which operates on the terrace of the Speke Hotel. It seriously wounded four Burundians and an Asian and slightly wounded a white man, a police officer on the scene told the news agency.

Five killed as planes collide over Georgia

MARIETTA, Georgia, Apr 5: Flery debris rained down on a suburban neighborhood in Georgia after a private jet and single-engine plane collided, killing at least five people, reports AP.

Both pilots and three passengers on the jet were killed in the accident, Saturday, said Preston Hicks, a spokesman with the National Transportation Safety Board.

Although the jet's flight plan showed five people aboard, one of the passengers never boarded the plane, Cobb County police spokesman Robert Quigley said. The smaller plane did not file a flight plan.

Crews were searching for additional victims, but were hampered by leaking jet fuel and twisted wreckage.

The jet had just taken off from Peachtree-Dekalb County Airport near Atlanta en route to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, when it collided with the smaller plane at 3,000 to 4,000 feet (900 to 1200 metres), Hicks

said.

The smaller plane was registered out of Cumming, about 30 miles north of Atlanta.

The planes hit the ground near a sub-division of single-family homes north of Atlanta. No one on the ground was injured.

"I heard something that sounded like a crippled plane. Just as I got up and got to the back door, it hit that big maple tree out there," said JB Dalton, who found a mangled, single-engine Cessna 172-N burning in his backyard.

The second plane, a Cessna Citation jet, smashed into a deck behind a two-storey house. The bulk of the jet, which seats seven to 10 people, lay flattened and fractured in the back yard.

The rear of the jet was found in a backyard swimming pool a few blocks away.

The Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board were on the scene investigating.

Britain, Ireland closer to peace deal

BELFAST, Apr 5: British and Irish Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern on Saturday declared they were optimistic that a peace deal on Northern Ireland's future could be agreed by a deadline of Thursday, reports AFP.

The two leaders made clear that they were close to agreeing to compromise proposals for a body to link Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, that would be acceptable to both Catholics and Protestants.

The two governments, key players in the on going talks process had hoped to produce a framework for a peace deal last week.

They said Saturday they hoped one could be produced this weekend, enabling the talks chairman, former US Senator George Mitchell, to formally submit a draft agreement to the parties included in the talks.

Speaking after meeting Ahern in London Blair said the bid to reach a peace settlement ending more than 30 years of conflict in Northern Ireland reached a critical state.

The two governments have set a deadline of Thursday for an agreement so that the deal can be put to the people in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

"We are pressing on, we are absolutely determined to meet the deadline and we are determined to give people in Northern Ireland a peaceful and successful future and I think that is within our grasp if we have the courage to take it," Blair told reporters.

World's longest suspension bridge opens in Japan

TOKYO, Apr 5: Built to withstand an 8.5 magnitude earthquake, the world's longest suspension bridge opened in Japan on Sunday after ribbon-cutting ceremonies attended by government officials, imperial family members and a contingent of Buddhist priests, reports AP.

The 3,911-meter Akashi Kaikyo Bridge links Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's four main islands, with the biggest main island of Honshu.

The mid-section length between the bridge's two massive support towers measures 1,991 meters, making at 581 meters longer than a span on Britain's Humber Estuary Bridge, the previous record holder.

A decade in the making, construction of the six-lane bridge reportedly cost about 500 billion yen (3.8 billion dollars).

The opening ceremonies were held early Sunday morning and the bridge was scheduled to open to general traffic at 5:00 pm local time (0800 GMT).

The 1,300 guests in attendance included Japanese Crown Prince Naruhito and wife Princess Masako, Construction Minister Tsutomu Kawra and Kanezo Muraoka, chief spokesman of Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto's Cabinet. Buddhist priests were also on hand to bless the bridge, Japanese media reported.

It is located outside of the city of Kobe, site of a 1995 earthquake which killed more than 6,000 people and injured thousands of others.

KSA deploys thousands of security officers for Hajj

JIDDAH, Apr 5: Saudi Arabia has set up 10,000 fire-proof tents and is deploying thousands of security officers to direct traffic and provide first aid as the kingdom prepares to host the annual Islamic pilgrimage which begins Sunday, reports AP.

About two million pilgrims are expected in the holy cities of Makkah and Medina. Every able-bodied Muslim who can afford it is required to perform the Hajj once in their lifetime.

Tens of thousands of soldiers, police and national guardsmen have been dispatched to prepare for the visitors and provide assistance. The exact number of security forces deployed was not immediately available.

The main parts of the Hajj are performed in Makkah and most pilgrims stay near the city.

Authorities have set up the tents with water sprinklers at a cost of 600 million riyals (160 million dollars) to accommodate some 500,000 pilgrims. Last April, a fire apparently started

by pilgrims cooking in their tents killed at least 343 people and injured 1,500.

This year, the government has banned cooking in tents and butane gas cylinders will not be allowed inside Makkah. Caterers on contract from the Saudi government will use electric cookers to provide food.

Safety has been a key issue during the Hajj due to the massive crowding. The government has ordered that all foreigners coming from outside the country should be vaccinated against diseases such as cholera and meningitis.

In 1990, 1,426 pilgrims were killed in a stampede in an overcrowded pedestrian tunnel leading to the holy sites.

In 1987, Iranian pilgrims staging an illegal anti-US demonstration clashed with Saudi security forces leaving 402 people dead.

On Friday, more than 1.5 million pilgrims prayed at the Grand Mosque in Makkah and listened to a sermon blasting terrorism and violence.

Assad calls for closer Iraq-Syria relations

DAMASCUS, Apr 5: Syrian President Hafez al-Assad met Iraqi Justice Minister Shebib Lazem al-Malaki here Saturday, the president's spokesman said, reports AFP.

Syrian Justice Minister Hussein Hassan also attended the talks, spokesman Gebran Kurieh said, without elaborating on the subject of their discussions.

The official Iraqi News Agency INA, in a dispatch from Damascus, said Assad had called for closer ties between Iraq and Syria, which took part in the US-led multinational coalition which drove Iraqi troops from Kuwait in 1991.

Assad stressed his "desire to promote relations between the two sisterly countries and to seek to achieve Arab solidarity in a manner that meets the supreme Pan-Arab interests," INA said.

The Iraqi minister praised the "responsible Pan-Arab stand" of Syria during the recent crisis over UN weapons inspections in Iraq, and stressed the need for Arab solidarity to bring about an end to sanctions against Iraq, it said.

61 Ukrainian miners killed in methane gas blast

KIEV, Ukraine, Apr 5: At least 61 miners were killed by a powerful methane gas explosion and fire Saturday that tore through a deep coal mine in the eastern city of Donetsk, officials said Sunday, reports AFP.

Two other miners were missing and presumed dead, Emergency Ministry spokesman Valery Zhuravel said.

He said rescue workers, hindered by a fire that continued to burn inside the shaft, had recovered the bodies of 58 miners by Sunday morning.

The blast occurred at a depth of more than 1,100 metres (3,600 feet) in the Skachinskoho mine in the eastern city of Donetsk, according to Ivan Dunayev, another Emergency Ministry spokesman. There were 264 miners at work at the time of the blast.

He said it was Ukraine's worst coal mine accident since the former Soviet republic gained independence in 1991.

Television broadcast footage of rescuers Saturday night giving oxygen to injured miners on stretchers, all coated thickly with black coal dust. Lines of ambulances waited to take

them to nearby hospitals.

The Skachinskoho mine, located about 650 kilometres (390 miles) southeast of Kiev, was also the site of independent Ukraine's worst previous coal accident: Seventeen people, six miners and 11 rescue workers — died in a methane gas explosion in August 1992.

Vice Premier Mykola Biloblotskiy called for a national day of mourning on Monday. "This tragedy will go down in the bitter history of mining," he said.

Biloblotskiy Sunday was appointed to head a special commission to investigate the blast.

Emergency officials said they had not determined the cause of Saturday's blast. Zhuravel said it was possible that a mixture of methane gas and coal dust inside the shaft was ignited by a spark from machinery or by a careless smoker, "but that is only speculation."

Accidents have become endemic in Ukraine's coal industry, part of an overall pattern of post-Soviet deterioration.

'Drug can reduce incidence of breast cancer'

PHILADELPHIA, Apr 5: A drug used for years to treat breast cancer patients has been shown to prevent the disease from even occurring. The Philadelphia Inquirer reported in Sunday's editions, citing a study, reports AP.

The drug tamoxifen cut cancer rates by nearly half among women who were considered at risk of getting the disease, according to a six-year study by the National Cancer Institute, a federal agency that coordinates the nation's cancer programmes.

The institute recently mailed letters announcing the

breakthrough to the 13,000 women in the United States and Canada who participated in the study, the newspaper reported.

"This is now the first study in the world to show that a drug can reduce the incidence of breast cancer," the letter stated.

The results of the study — one of the largest cancer prevention trials ever undertaken — are to be made public Wednesday. Researchers would not discuss the results with the newspaper.

"I'm just thrilled. Wow!" Patricia Lorah, 45, of Reading, told the Inquirer on Saturday after receiving her letter.

Lanka likely to buy 4 helicopter gunships from Ukraine

COLOMBO, Apr 5: The Sri Lankan Air Force is expected to buy up to four Mi-24 helicopter gunships from Ukraine for its battle against Tamil Tiger guerillas, a state-run newspaper said today, reports AFP.

A Defence Ministry team had just returned after negotiations with Ukraine authorities on the purchase at an undisclosed price, the Sunday Observer said.

It said at least two should be delivered soon.

The air force began using Mi-24 gunships for the first time in November 1995.

Soldiers to help airlift rice to drought-hit areas in Philippines

MANILA, Apr 5: Soldiers will help airlift rice to three parched southern provinces suffering from one of the worst food shortages to hit the Philippines in years, an official said Sunday, reports AP.

The airlift will start Monday in several towns in Sarangani, South Cotabato and Sultan Kudarat provinces, where a prolonged drought has caused massive crop failures, said presidential aide Jesus Dureza.

At least 17 tribesmen have died after eating poisonous wild yams due to a lack of food in Maguindanao, another drought-stricken southern province, officials said.

Dureza said at least 97,000 families in the other three provinces have been affected by food shortages that started in January because of failed rice and corn harvests.

The drought, caused by the El Nino weather phenomenon, also has worsened forest fires in the Philippines this year.

"There is nothing that you

could get from the land. All is arid, all is dry because of the El Nino," Dureza said.

South Cotabato alone. Local officials have estimated that agricultural losses caused by the drought have reached 1.5 billion pesos (38.5 million dollars), he added.

He said most of those affected were inland farming families, including tribesmen in mountain villages, who could not grow anything on their land, including root crops.

Even if rains come in the next few weeks, Dureza said, the food shortages are expected to continue for the next three months, the time needed to grow and harvest rice and corn.

President Fidel Ramos has released 10 million pesos (256.4 million dollars) to buy an initial 15,000 sacks of rice from the National Food Authority, which has stocks of up to 200,000 sacks in warehouses in the affected provinces.

The rice will be given to affected farmers in exchange for

labour, including work on government reforestation projects and serving as forest guards, he said.



Curtis Hicks 3, one of many youngsters who participated in the Dr Martin Luther King Jr commemorative pilgrimage march, holds a portrait of the slain civil rights leader in Memphis, Tenn, Saturday. Dr King was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis 30 years ago on Saturday.