

International

Richardson announces in Afghanistan Opposition, Taliban agree to talks, truce

SHIBERGHAN, Afghanistan, Apr 18: The Afghan northern alliance and the headline Taliban Islamic militia have agreed to a truce and talks, which a top US envoy claimed as a major breakthrough in the 18-year war, reports AP.

The US Ambassador to the United Nations, Bill Richardson, the most senior western official to visit Afghanistan in 20 years, announced Friday he had secured a ceasefire and an agreement from the Afghan opposition forces and the Taliban to hold talks by April 27.

The talks would be held in Islamabad with a likely second round in Japan, Richardson said on arrival in Islamabad late Friday.

The talks would be held under the auspices of the United Nations and the Organisation of Islamic Conference.

He said the northern alliance had agreed to talks with the Taliban in Islamabad before April 27 and committed itself not to initiate any military action in the meantime.

They will also help UN aid workers undertaking humanitarian work in their area, he said.

Earlier in Kabul, Richardson said he had secured a ceasefire from the Taliban Islamic militia and their agreement to hold landmark talks with opposition forces by April 27, which is the anniversary of the first communist revolution in Afghanistan in 1978.

The meeting in Shiberghan was attended by former president Burhanuddin Rabbani, ethnic-Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostam and the leader of the Shi'ite Hezb-i-Wahdat faction, Karim Khalili.

Dostam told reporters he was ready to open talks with the Taliban and suspend fighting.

"We have opposed fighting in the past and we oppose it now," he said.

A planned visit by the US delegation to Faizabad, capital of northern Badakhshan province, for a meeting with Rabbani's top commander Ahmad Shah Masood was cancelled amid reports of clashes there.

Afghan sources there said the fighting was between local commanders of Rabbani and his former defence minister Masood.

Masood did not attend the talks here but he agreed to the ceasefire, Dostam said.

In Kabul, Richardson met for more than two hours with Taliban number-two Mullah Mohammad Rabbani and hailed the negotiations as a breakthrough for peace efforts.

Richardson said his "tough talks" with the Muslim militia has given the UN process a major boost.

The agreement to a ceasefire is the first for more than a year. Last spring the factions agreed to a truce to allow a UN polio vaccination campaign to go ahead unhindered, but the deal broke down within hours.

The Taliban's agreement to hold talks with the northern opposition would be the first since they seized the capital Kabul in September 1996.

Richardson said the Taliban also agreed to release a "significant number" of opposition prisoners in the next two days in a goodwill gesture to back the agreement.

"We had no specific quid pro quo," Richardson explained. "We just said there had to be a ceasefire, a change in behaviour and human rights and talks."

"Unless there is peace there will be no reconstruction of Afghanistan."

Richardson said he had proposed Japan as the site for the next meeting and said Tokyo also planned to host an international conference on reconstruction in war-torn Afghanistan.

During his talks with the Taliban the headline militia agreed in principle to lift a blockade of the central Bamiyan province, a stronghold of the Hezb-i-Wahdat faction representing Afghanistan's Shi'ite Muslim minority.

Richardson said implementing the agreement to end the blockade would be discussed in the Islamabad talks and was a "big priority" of his delegation during their day-long visit to Afghanistan.

He also said Iran, which backs the northern opposition alliance and recognises the ousted Rabbani government, had a role to play in bringing peace to Afghanistan.

The emerging situation would create "opportunities for Iran and the US to work together on important regional matters," he said without elaborating.

Richardson said the agreement between the Afghan adversaries opened the way for a negotiated settlement to the conflict, but emphasised that "we want to see deeds and not just words and promises."

A senior Taliban official, Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil, stressed the militia's commitment to a truce and said: "It was a matter of happiness for the leadership of the Emirate that after a very long delay such a senior delegation has come."

"From now until we reach an agreement on a ceasefire there should be no major, or big offensive."

Indian police kills Kashmiri separatist

SRINAGAR, India, Apr 18: A Kashmiri separatist leader was killed in a shootout with Indian police in the restive Jammu and Kashmir state, police said today, reports Reuters.

They said S. Hamid, chairman of one of the factions of the Jammu and Kashmir People's League, was killed late on Friday in a shootout with the Special Operations Group (SOG) at Soura area in Srinagar, the state's summer capital.

India, which controls two-thirds of Kashmir, accuses Pakistan of arming and training separatist guerrillas. Pakistan, which rules the remaining one-third, says it only provides the separatists with political and diplomatic support.

Police and hospital sources say more than 25,000 people have been killed in an eight-year-old rebellion in Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state.

Yeltsin, Hashimoto meet to talk peace treaty

ITO, JAPAN, Apr 18: Russian President Boris Yeltsin got off his helicopter for a meeting with the Japanese prime minister Saturday and immediately took off his tie, reports AP.

Yeltsin and Ryutaro Hashimoto are at a Japanese seaside resort through Sunday for what are being billed as casual heart-to-heart talks to work towards a formal peace treaty between the two nations by the year 2000.

The last time the two leaders went fishing together, in Siberia last November, they made a big catch — a wide-ranging agreement on expanded economic cooperation including steps to boost Japanese investments in Russia.

Another fishing cruise is being planned for this weekend. But this time, it is unclear how much will be achieved. Yeltsin's visit was delayed and shortened because of his political difficulties at home.

2 priests to die for genocide in Rwanda

KIGALI, Apr 18: Two Roman Catholic priests have been sentenced to death for their involvement in the 1994 genocide, state-run Radio Rwanda reported Saturday, reports AP.

A Rwandan court in Kibuye, 75 kilometres west of Kigali, on Thursday convicted the priests, Jean Francois Kaytranga and Edoard Nkurikiye, of genocide and of massacring 2,000 minority Tutsis during April 1994.

Cambodian military confirms death of Pol Pot

SIEM REAP, Cambodia, Apr 18: The Cambodian military today confirmed that notorious former Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot was dead although government officials were still doubtful.

"Pol Pot is definitely dead," deputy chief of general staff Meas Sophea told AFP. "We are satisfied that this is true."

However, chief government spokesman Khieu Kanharith said civilian authorities were still skeptical about the news and would remain so unless a full autopsy was conducted on the body.

"The Khmer Rouge are very tricky, we cannot be sure of anything, he said, "the government cannot confirm the death of Pol Pot."

Independent observers, including western journalists allowed to inspect the body, have already confirmed that the body is that of Pol Pot.

In addition, a Thai military team, which conducted a cursory medical examination on the body, has said the corpse is Pol Pot.

But Khieu Kanharith repeated the government's concern that Pol Pot's reported death on Wednesday of an apparent heart attack had been "too coincidental."

Koirala wins crucial vote of confidence

KATHMANDU, Apr 18: Nepal Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, heading a week-old minority government, won a crucial vote of confidence in the Lower House of Parliament today, officials said, reports Reuters.

They said Koirala gained 144 votes, 41 more than required to keep him in power. Only four votes were cast against the government.

An earlier reports says: Nepal Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, heading a week-old minority government, faces a parliamentary confidence vote today which he is expected to win, officials said, reports Reuters.

They said Koirala, appointed on Sunday as the Himalayan Kingdom's fifth Prime Minister in just over three years, would table a motion at the start of Saturday's sitting of the Lower House of parliament seeking the vote.

The 205-member Lower

House of representatives is scheduled to meet at 11 am.

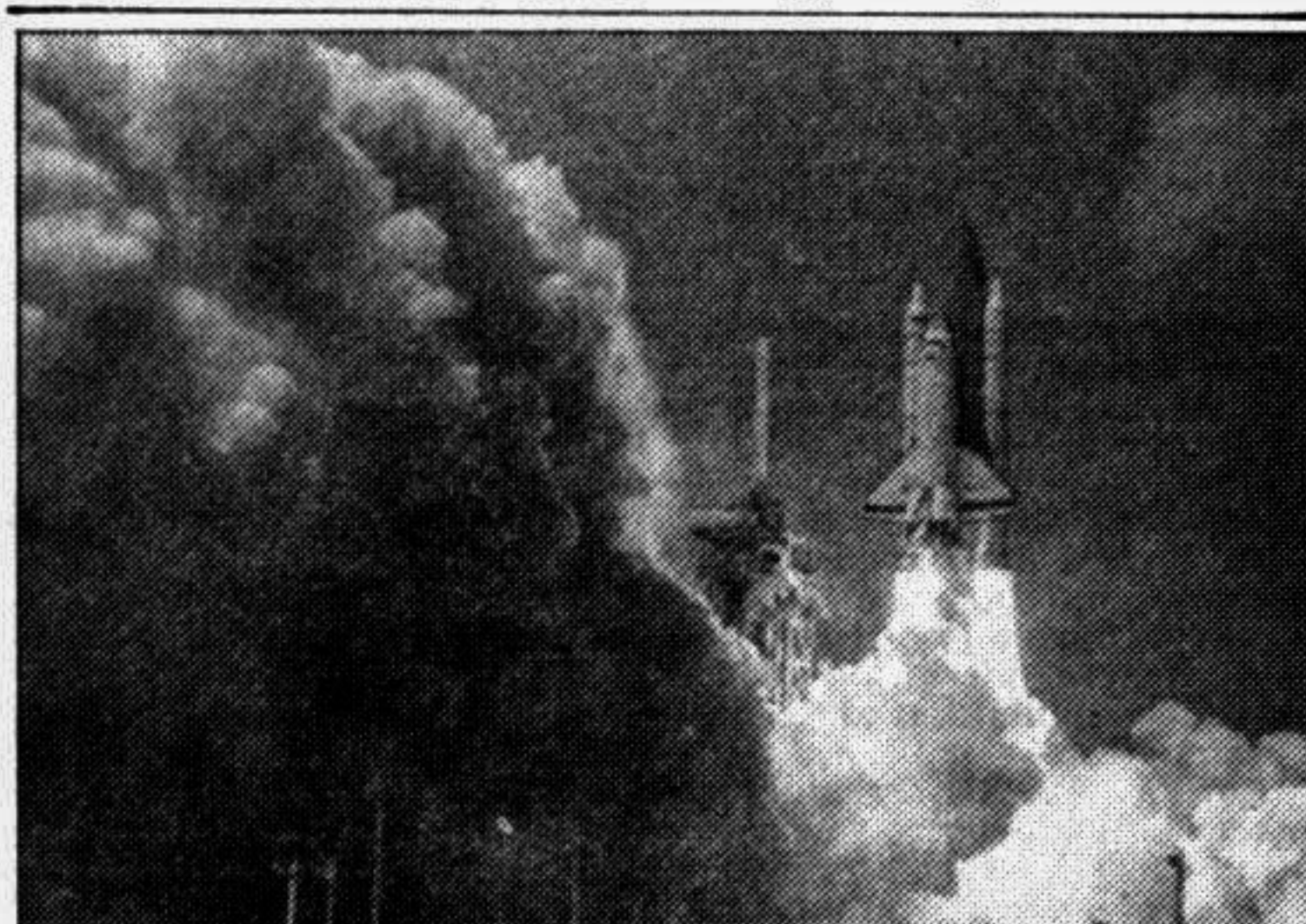
Koirala, head of the Centrist Nepali Congress Party, replaced Surya Bahadur Thapa of the Rashtriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) after Thapa resigned on April 10 under a power sharing agreement with Nepali Congress.

Nepal's King Birendra appointed Koirala to head the minority government after political parties failed to cobble alliances in the hung parliament.

Analysts said the vote would be just a legal formality as Koirala was expected to win. If he loses, King Birendra can dissolve the parliament and order fresh elections.

The constitution, drawn up in 1990, requires Koirala to win 103 votes to remain in power.

Koirala's Nepali Congress Party controls 88 votes. The opposition Communist United Marxist-Leninist party, commanding 49 deputies, has vowed to support the government.



The space shuttle Columbia lifts off the launch pad on Friday, with seven crew members on board, beginning a 16-day mission to study the body's nervous system.

— AP/UNB photo



US President Bill Clinton waves goodbye to the crowd gathered to see him in Casablanca, Chile, on Friday. Earlier, the president addressed members of both Houses of the Chilean Congress. Clinton will participate in the second Summit of the Americas which began on Saturday.

— AP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

Ukraine to dismantle 40 bombers: Ukraine has decided to dismantle 40 strategic bombers inherited from the Soviet Union. Vladimir Gorbulin, Secretary of Ukrainian State Committee on Security and Defense, told a news conference Friday. Xinhua says from Kiev.

Gorbulin said that four of them will be kept, two will be refurbished, and the others will be used as exhibits. The united states has pledged to provide financial and technical assistance for the dismantling, Gorbulin said.

UN extends mission in W Sahara: The UN Security Council on Friday extended its mission in the Western Sahara for an additional three months, AP reports from the United Nations.

The Western Sahara is a disputed area of North Africa claimed by Morocco and a rebel group known as the Polisario, which wants independence for the indigenous people. The mission, known as MINURSO, was to have expired on May 31, 1997.

4 die in Peru grenade blast: Four persons, including an eight-year-old boy, died Friday when a grenade blew up in an agricultural area in central Peru, police said. AFP reports from Lima.

Three others — a woman, her husband and a 40-year-old man — were seriously injured in the blast, they said.

Princess Nori turns 29: Japan's Princes Nori celebrated her 29th birthday on Saturday and said she had drawn inspiration from the strength of athletes at the Nagano Olympics and Paralympics. AP says from Tokyo.

Nori, the only daughter of Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, said in a written statement that she had been "encouraged by the human depth and strength of people who are independent and continue to challenge themselves" at the Nagano Games. She said her views on marriage had not changed since her last birthday, when she told reporters she was in no rush to tie the knot. "Since women are not allowed by law to assume the throne, Princess will lose her official title and her yearly stipend if she gets married."

One shot dead in Belfast: A catholic taxi driver was shot dead late Friday in Belfast, police sources said, in the first killing since a historic peace accord was concluded last week after two years of talks. AFP reports from Belfast.

The police said, however, that there did not appear to be a sectarian motive for the shooting. The man was shot several times in the chest and in both legs as he stood in front of a taxi firm's office in the Anderson's town district. He died later on his way to hospital. The identity of the man was not immediately given.

Unionists meet to debate N Ireland peace plan

BELFAST, Apr 18: David Trimble, leader of Northern Ireland's main Protestant political party, faced a major showdown today with critics of last week's peace deal, reports Reuter.

Many members of the Ulster Unionist Party feel the accord intended to end three decades of violence in Northern Ireland makes too many concessions to Irish nationalists who want to end rule from London.

The 800-strong UUP Council meets this morning in a Belfast hotel to debate the peace plan signed by Protestant and Catholic political parties and

the British and Irish governments.

Although he has faced fierce opposition to the deal from within his own party, Trimble predicted he would carry the day when the UUP Council votes on the package.

"I expect the actions of the leadership to be endorsed by a substantial majority," he told Independent Television News.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair sought to calm unionist fears over the peace accord.

Addressing a key concern of the province's pro-British majority, Blair stressed that Sinn Fein politicians could be excluded from office.



Bill Richardson US ambassador to UN, talks to reporters at US embassy in Kabul on Friday. Richardson said "We want to bring peace for the Afghanistan people. We are trying to make a ceasefire."

Cambodian govt says Talks with Khmer Rouge fail

SIEM REAP, Cambodia, Apr 18: The Cambodian government said Saturday the army would try to root out remaining Khmer Rouge guerrillas along the Thai border by force because efforts to negotiate a peace deal with them have failed, reports AP.

The government sent a military delegation to the area earlier this week to discuss the handover of Ta Mok's forces with one of the guerrilla chief's top aides but it "yielded no results," said Chea Saran, chief of military operations for the government.

Non Nou said the Khmer Rouge rebels might even register with the government as a political party.

However, he said guerrillas still considered their area of operations in northern Cambodia as an "autonomous zone" and were continuing to attack government forces using their traditional hit-and-run tactics.

The clashes follow the death of longtime Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot on Wednesday of an apparent heart attack. The cremation of the infamous architect of the Khmer Rouge reign of terror took place Saturday near where Non Nou spoke.

Pol Pot more useless than cow dung, says former comrades

ANLONG VENG, Cambodia, Apr 18: The onetime right-hand man of Pol Pot has described the deceased Khmer Rouge leader as more useless than cow dung and insisted he was not assassinated, reports AP.

One of the century's most notorious mass murderers, Pol Pot died Wednesday of an apparent heart attack at the age of 73. He was cremated Saturday at a simple ceremony just inside Cambodia's northern frontier with Thailand.

"It's like this, nobody killed or poisoned Pol Pot. Now he is finished. He has no power and no rights any longer," Khmer Rouge commander Ta Mok told Associated Press Television (APTV) Friday.

"He is nothing more than cow dung. Actually cow dung is more useful because it can be used as fertiliser," he said.

Ta Mok, a one-legged guerrilla dubbed "The Butcher" for his brutality, deposed Pol Pot as the head of the ultra-revolutionary Khmer Rouge movement last year and placed him under house arrest.

During the mid-1970s, Pol Pot presided over a reign of terror in which up to 2 million Cambodians lost their lives through mass executions, starvation and disease.

Ta Mok now leads the remnants of this once powerful force, hemmed in by Cambodian government troops and Khmer Rouge defectors in rugged enclaves along the Thai frontier.

What court and which country should try Khmer Rouge leaders, if caught, has been the subject of debate for years. China, which supported the Khmer Rouge until the early 1990s, has voiced opposition to any UN supervised trials.

Suspensions arising from the timing of Pol Pot's death are likely to last of a long time.

A Thai military team collected evidence Friday from his body to lay to rest doubts that he was truly dead. They clipped samples of his hair, photographed his teeth and brought out an inkpad to capture his fingerprints.

As television cameras recorded the scene in a jungle hut, plainclothes Thai military men from just across the border cut wisps of hair and took pictures and fingerprints. But they resisted pressure to perform an

autopsy.

Journalists and other independent observers here have little doubt that the body is that of Pol Pot. But skeptics pointed out that the death was fortuitously timed, coming just as it appeared that Pol Pot's comrades-turned-captors might be forced to turn him over for trial before an international genocide tribunal.

But Ta Mok denied any foul play.

Korean talks stalled

BELJING, Apr 18: High level talks between North and South Korea fell apart here today after the North unilaterally declared an end to the week-long negotiations, spokesmen for both sides said, reports AFP.

No date was set for a resumption of talks.

"It is meaningless to have further talks, we have no plan to take part in further meetings," North Korean delegate, Kim Sung-Rim, told AFP.

"The South has refused to budge an inch from its position and kept attaching conditions (to possible fertiliser aid to the North)."

Kim said he had called a South Korean delegate and informed him the North would not attend a planned meeting of the five-member negotiating panels to wrap up the week-long talks later on Saturday.

The chief South delegate Jeong Se-hung and his North Korean counterpart Jon Kum-Chol will hold separate press conferences on the breakdown, spokesmen said.

The collapse of the talks came with the North refusing a South demand to be specific about arranging reunion of families torn apart by the division of Korea in 1945 in return for fertiliser aid.

Despite an accord that the

issue of separated families be handled in Red Cross talks, the two sides failed to agree on Seoul's demand that they fix a date for opening a meeting centre for those families.

They also differed on the South's demand to set up a new channel of Red Cross talks to handle the issue of family reunions.

Red Cross officials from the two Koreas have been involved in talks for the past few years on details for the transportation of the South's private food donations to the North's starving.

Should the issue of separated families be added to the food aid agenda at the existing Red Cross talks, the North again would try to discuss food aid only, a South Korean delegate said late on Friday.

But the North's chief delegate Jon said it was not his decision whether to hold separate Red Cross talks.

If the South ships the fertiliser, talks on separated families would start immediately when Red Cross talks resume to discuss food aid in Beijing," he said.

On the issue of fertiliser aid, the South said Pyongyang had cut its earlier demand for half a million tonnes to 300,000 tonnes.

Off the Record

World record in serving breakfast

DUBAI: Thousands of people poured into the Dubai Creek Park Friday for a special breakfast — the biggest ever served, reports AP.

The previous record was set in 1993 in Wollongong, Australia when 8,000 people gathered for the meal.

By mid-afternoon Friday in Dubai, US-based Kellogg's had run out of breakfast cereal but surpassed its goal of 10,000 — more than 14,000 people participated in the event.

Some 250 volunteers handed out plastic bowls of cereal from behind a 100-metre table that was laid out with 1,500 boxes of the company's different brands. That came to about 15 million pieces of cereal, said Kellogg's public relations manager Tim Evans.

Fifteen-year-old Saeed Mohammad Saleh dragged his mother, three aunts and seven cousins to the show. "I wanted Dubai to be the place where the world record would be broken," he said.

Dubai, one of the seven emirates that makes up the United Arab Emirates, has also made the world's largest cake. The 69-ton date and banana delicacy was baked in celebration of the country's 25th anniversary in 1996.

Self-chilling drink can!

LONDON: A self-chilling drink can, attacked by environmentalists as a danger to the planet, has now gained green credentials and is to go into production later this year, The Times reported yesterday, says AFP.

The can, which can chill a fizzy drink in two minutes, was originally designed to use HFC 134a, a gas whose global warming effect was 3,400 times greater than carbon dioxide, the London daily newspaper said.

Britain's Environment Minister, Michael Meacher, said he would seek to have it banned in Europe.

But the new version, which uses carbon dioxide collected from waste industrial processes, has been applauded by the British government and has won approval from the Environmental Protection Agency in the United States, The Times said.

The can has been developed by the Joseph Company of California with BOC of Britain.

The device uses carbon dioxide, stored at low pressure, and simple heat exchangers which remove heat from the food or drink inside when the gas is released.

Buckingham Palace looking for new PR supremo

LONDON: Buckingham Palace is asking Britain's biggest companies to supply a public relations supremo to help overhaul the British Royal Family's out-of-touch image, The Guardian newspaper reported Saturday, says AFP.

A corporate head-hunter has written to the chairman of 100 leading companies to ask if they will provide a senior communications expert on secondment to the palace for at least three years, the London daily said.

The new communications director would have direct access to Queen Elizabeth II with a brief to advise her on presentation when dealing with the media, the newspaper added.