

First Taliban-Opposition direct dialogue

Afghan peace talks begin in Islamabad Saturday

ISLAMABAD, Apr 22: Afghanistan's Taliban Islamic militia and their rival northern alliance will open their first direct peace talks in Islamabad on Saturday, UN sources told AFP today.

The five-member Taliban delegation will be led by the Islamic militia's senior spokesman Mulla Wakil Ahmed Mutawakkil while the nine-member northern alliance team will nominate its leader on arrival here later, they said.

The warring factions are expected to discuss a ceasefire, exchange of prisoners and the provision of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, ravaged by 18 years of war.

The talks will be jointly chaired by the officials of the United Nations Special Mission

on Afghanistan and the 54-nation Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the sources said.

The decision to launch the maiden session of their steering committee was reached Tuesday at a meeting between the coordinator Mullah Abdul Hakeem Mujahid, Taliban Ambassador in Islamabad and Engineer Abdul Raheem of the opposition alliance, the sources said.

Factional fighting erupted in the Central Asian Muslim state after former Soviet Union forces ended their 10-year military occupation in 1989 amid a western backed stiff Muslim resistance that left more than one million dead and many more maimed.

Thousands more have died in the subsequent interecine

fighting since the Soviet pull-out.

The Taliban militia seized Kabul in September 1996 ousting former President Burhanuddin Rabbani's government.

The opposition alliance includes forces of ex-president Rabbani, former defence minister Ahmed Shah Masood, ethnic Uzbek general Abdul Rashid Dostam and pro-Iran Shiite Muslim action, Hezb-i-Wahdat of Karim Khalili.

The two sides agreed to direct talks and observe a truce until the start of the negotiations in Islamabad after US Presidential Envoy Bill Richardson met with Taliban officials in Kabul and the opposition leaders in northern Afghan city of Shiberghan last Friday.

Richardson said the Taliban

also agreed to release some opposition prisoners as a goodwill gesture to back the agreement.

"It depends on deeds and not just words," he said hoping the accord would give a major boost to the UN initiated peace process.

The Taliban-run radio Shariat said 10 political prisoners were released over the weekend but accused the opposition forces of breaking the truce in attacks on the militia positions northeast of the capital.

The Taliban were holding an estimated 3,000 opposition prisoners, while the agenda was yet to be announced for the talks to be hosted by Pakistan, sources here said the opposition wanted discussions on the formation of a multi-ethnic broad-based government.

US to sell missiles to KSA, Israel

WASHINGTON, Apr 22: The US Defence Department announced plans on Tuesday to sell Saudi Arabia upgrades of AIM air-to-air missiles for use on US-built F 15 Eagle Aircraft, reports Reuters.

In a notification to Congress, the Pentagon said the proposed upgrade of 1,500 missiles to a newer configuration would not affect the "basic military balance in the region."

Together with the intended sale of five sets of advanced navigation and targeting equipment, the estimated cost of the package was 115 million, dollars the department said in a statement.

At the same time, the Pentagon notified Congress of a proposed sale to Israel of 64 AIM-120B advanced medium range air-to-air missiles, or AMRAAM, and associated hardware and support. It put the cost at 28 million dollars.

Both proposed sales would contribute to US national security by boosting the security of a friendly country that "continues to be an important force for political stability."



A Palestinian delegation headed by Fattima Rabah, centre, carrying Iraqi and Palestinian flags on Tuesday upon their arrival in Baghdad. The plane, in rear, carried 5 tons of medicine, milk and clothes in the first Palestinian aid package to sanctions hit Iraq. — AP/UNB photo

Mediterranean FMs charge Israel with taking unilateral actions

PALMA DE MAJORCA, Apr 22: Mediterranean foreign ministers charged Israel on Tuesday with taking unilateral action "contrary to the peace process" and they backed plans for a new round of US-sponsored Middle East talks in London, reports Reuters.

Ending two days of meetings on the Spanish island of Majorca, leaders from 11 European and African countries sent a tough message to Israel, urging withdrawal of troops from the Palestinian West Bank and a halt to Jewish settlement building on Arab land.

The group issued a final communique in which they reaffirmed Israel's right to exist. But also expressed support for the creation of a Palestinian state, a move the right-wing Israeli government has vowed never to allow.

The ministers said they were deeply concerned about the "prolonged stagnation" of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and warned it could destabilise the region.

"The situation is very serious but the moment of truth is also very near," Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa told a closing news conference.

The Majorca meeting of the Mediterranean forum coincided

with invitations to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat to hold separate talks in London to revive the peace process.

Most ministers gave a guarded welcome to the new initiative end said they hoped it would help advance peace-making efforts.

Moussa expressed pessimism about the prospects for its success but said he was willing to give the London talks the "benefit of the doubt."

He warned, however, that "if London talks fail, the threat of the peace process being considered expired would be great."

The Middle East overshadowed discussion at the regional forum, which links Spain, Italy, Portugal, France, Greece, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Turkey and Malta.

But ministers meeting at a luxury hilltop hotel also took time to discuss violence by Islamic militants in Algeria and Egypt and agreed to cooperate more closely in extraditing militants and sharing information.

Spanish Foreign Minister Abel Matutes said the group made progress toward improving political and economic ties between the northern and

southern shores of the Mediterranean.

But he said the forum agreed the deadlock in Middle East peace-making has cast a cloud over regional security.

Talks ground to a halt in March 1997 after Israel started building a settlement in Arab east Jerusalem. Palestinian suicide bombings and disputed over Israeli troop withdrawals further deepened the crisis.

The Mediterranean forum, in its final communique, pressed Israel to comply with the agreements it signed with the Palestinians at the 1993 Oslo meeting.

The ministers called on Israel to "avoid unilateral actions contrary to the peace process, in particular settlements in the occupied territories, including east Jerusalem."

The group said it decided to join efforts to contribute to a credible, satisfactory and adequate redeployment of Israel from Palestinian territories.

"The ministers have reaffirmed their commitment to the peace process. The respect of the principle land-for-each, the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, including the establishment of a Palestinian state," the communique stated.

Ranariddh in Cambodia

SIEM REAP, Cambodia, Apr 22: Deposed Cambodian co-Premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh returned home today for the second time since his violent ouster last year to meet his father King Norodom Sihanouk, ahead of July's scheduled elections, reports AFP.

The exiled Prince, his wife and a small delegation arrived in this historic Northern town, home of the famed 12th-century Angkor Wat Temple complex, on a direct flight from Bangkok where they have spent much of the last 10 months.

Five youngmen infected with HIV every minute

MOSCOW, Apr 22: In a report released here Wednesday a consortium of five United Nations agencies estimated that every minute worldwide, five people aged 10-24 are being infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, reports AP.

The UNAIDS report also warned that Eastern Europe is set to become "one of the next epicenters" of the world AIDS crisis, with HIV infection rates having increased at least six fold since 1994.

It said that some 190,000 people in the region are infected, with the crisis being driven by a sharp rise in the use of injected drugs.

With the report, the joint UN programme on HIV/AIDS launched a year-long campaign called "Force for Change: World AIDS Campaign with Young People." The report was released in Moscow to draw attention to the threat facing Eastern Europe.

"In Russia where injecting drug use and unsafe sex are fueling the HIV/AIDS epidemic, it is time for young people to engage in HIV/AIDS prevention efforts and make their voices heard," said Gianni Murzi, UNICEF's Moscow representative, in a statement.

Tigers ambush police jeep, kill 7

COLOMBO, Apr 22: Separatist Tamil Tiger guerrillas ambushed a police jeep in eastern Sri Lanka, killing seven constables, officials here said today, reports AFP.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas attacked the police vehicle as it was returning from a local hospital in Kalmunai after getting medicine for a sick policeman on Tuesday night, officials said.

"The Tigers shot dead all seven policemen and escaped with the weapons, ammunition and a radio set," a local official said.

The attack came a day after heavy fighting raged in the north of the country where at least 50 government soldiers and over 60 rebels were reported killed.

Nigerian presidential election Polls will be simple 'yes' or 'no' vote

LAGOS, Apr 22: Nigeria's presidential election will be a simple "yes" or "no" vote for military ruler General Sani Abacha after no party put forward a rival candidate, a senior government official said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Hassan Yusuf Khatifa of the Transition Implementation Committee (TIC), overseeing Nigeria's much-criticised plan to restore democracy, said Abacha would still need to face a ballot even after securing the backing of all five parties.

"As a consensus candidate there is still a need for him to face election according to the draft constitution," he told Reuters by telephone from Abuja. "People should be given the chance to vote 'yes' or 'no'."

Abacha, who seized power in 1993, on Monday became the only candidate for August 1 presidential elections after winning the nomination of all five registered parties.

His victory has already been condemned by local opposition and democracy groups, which dismiss the transition plan for restoring democracy to the oil-producing country of at least 104 million people.

The United States and Britain quickly attacked the election walkover.

"There's nothing about Nigeria's political evolution in the last few months that strikes me as very democratic at all," State Department spokesman James Rubin told reporters in Washington.

"It appears that the government of Nigeria is manipulating the transition in order to secure the nomination of General Abacha as the sole candidate in the presidential election," he said.

Britain, the former colonial power, asked how the move fitted in with Nigeria's promise to restore democratic rule.

"An election with one candidate is not a free and fair election. Democracy requires a choice and a free and open choice" said Foreign Secretary Robin Cook.

Nigeria's main opposition group, the United Action for Democracy, called on Nigerians on Sunday to boycott all elections under the transition programme, starting with April 25 national assembly polls.

BRIEFLY



Pakistani President Rafiq Tarar, right, confers the Nishan-i-Imtiaz (military) award, an honour of distinction, on Gen Dennis J Reimer, chief of staff, US Army, at an investiture ceremony held at Presidential Palace in Islamabad on Monday. — AP/UNB photo

Clinton considering Ireland visit: President Bill Clinton is still considering a May trip to Northern Ireland to campaign for a peace accord, despite opposition by some political leaders there, the White House said on Tuesday, Reuters reports from Washington.

"We are continuing to hold open that possibility," White House spokesman Mike McCurry said. A Clinton trip to Belfast would fall just days before a May 22 referendum in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland on whether to accept a US brokered peace agreement reached in Belfast on April 10.

Shining Path rebel caught in Lima: Police have captured the second-highest ranking Shining Path rebel in a Lima restaurant, raising expectations that Peru could catch the guerrilla group's de facto commander, authorities said yesterday, Reuters says from Lima.

President Alberto Fujimori announced the arrest on Monday of Pedro Domingo Quinto, "the right-hand man" of Shining Path's current leader in the field, Oscar Ramirez Durand, alias Feliciano. "We have amputated the right hand of Shining Path's Feliciano," Fujimori told reporters in Lima's government palace.

Catholic man killed in N Ireland: A 29-year-old Roman Catholic man died after being shot by a lone gunman in the largely Protestant town of Portadown on Tuesday, Northern Irish police said, Reuters says from Belfast.

Security sources said it was too early to say if the attack was part of sectarian warfare that has raged in the British province for many years. No group claimed the attack but BBC radio reported "local speculation" that a pro-British Protestant militia, the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF), may have been involved.

Netanyahu to meet Mubarak: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will meet Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo next week to discuss stalled Middle East peace-making, Netanyahu's adviser said on Tuesday, reports from Jerusalem.

The meeting next Tuesday at Mubarak's invitation, is intended to exchange views on the peace process before Netanyahu goes to London, David Bar-Illan told Reuters.

5 smugglers killed in Tajikistan: Russian border guards stationed in Tajikistan killed five armed drug smugglers who crossed into the restive Central Asian republic from Afghanistan, officials said Wednesday, AP reports from Moscow.

A group of helicopter-borne border guards landed near the infiltration area Tuesday. The drug smugglers offered fierce resistance during an attempt to capture them, the guards' command said. The guards, who suffered no casualties, found some 50 kg of unspecified narcotics, two submachine guns and a large quantity of ammunition at the site of the clash.

Black box of crashed plane found Rescue workers brave fog, cold to recover bodies

BOGOTA, Apr 22: Rescue workers on Tuesday struggled with fog and intense cold to recover the bodies of 53 people who died when a Boeing 727 crashed into a mountain side right after take-off from the Colombian capital, reports AFP.

"It's a tragic scene, human remains are lying amid the vegetation and twisted pieces of fuselage are scattered everywhere, luggage, clothing and all kinds of debris are spread through a radius of more than four kilometres," said Major Javier Riverera, head of the fire fighting unit.

The three-engine Boeing 727-200, owned by Ecuador's TAME airline, was chartered by Air France to cover the last leg of the Paris-Bogota-Quito route. Air France flight 422 had 43 passengers and a crew of 10 when it crashed Monday with no survivors.

The plane slammed into the ground about 50 metres below

12 Indian govt officials fired for accepting bribes from job-seekers

NEW DELHI, Apr 22: Three weeks ago, seven officials of the state-run Railroad Ministry boarded a train in a northwestern city after interviewing hundreds of jobseekers, reports AP.

They were accused by federal investigators in the moving train near Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan state, and were found carrying unexplained rupees 800,000 (dls 20,500) in cash.

The seven were among 12 officials fired this week for accepting bribes from job-seekers. Railways Minister Nitish Kumar told reporters in New Delhi Wednesday.

They included Kailash Prasad, chairman of the Railway Recruitment Board in Rajasthan state. Investigators found another unaccounted rupees 400,000 (dls 10,000) during a search of Prasad's New Delhi home. The Week magazine said.

Indian Railways, with a huge network, employs 1.6 million people. Many poor people sell their homes and land to bribe recruitment officers in the hope of landing jobs.

On Tuesday, income-tax officials raided the homes of several politicians and bureaucrats in 15 cities across India for their alleged involvement in siphoning off dls 138 million from a state fund meant to buy fodder for cattle.

AI launches campaign for S Asian children

ISLAMABAD, Apr 22: While recounting horrific stories about abuses against children in South Asia, Amnesty International on Wednesday launched a campaign to press for the rights of children of the region, reports AP.

"South Asian children face litany of human rights abuses at the hands of the state, armed opposition groups as sex workers, bonded labourers and in brothels," says a release issued by Amnesty International in Pakistan.

The stories are horrific. The Pakistan, children are being sent from religious schools to Afghanistan to fight along side the Taliban religious army, the release says. Nine thousand girls are brought from Nepal and Bangladesh each year to "live of sexual slavery" in Pakistan and India. In Sri Lanka six children were among 42 unarmed civilians deliberated killed by Tamil rebels.

In India, Amnesty International quoted a high court in-litigation committee that found that children picked up by police were subject to "shockingly savage and barbarous treatment."

In Bangladesh a 12-year-old boy spent 12 years in prison, held in leg irons for most of the time, the release said. It was later discovered that the boy was wrongly accused.

"Armed groups in the region have deliberately killed, tortured, raped and intimidated children and recruited them to fight as soldiers, despite the safeguards in international humanitarian law which forbid these activities," the release said.

Across South Asia children work in factories, mines, brick kilns and brothels, the international human rights group said.

"They find themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty growing up illiterate, unskilled and prone to involvement in crime," the release said.

According to an Amnesty International statistics more than 40 per cent of the 1.1 billion people in South Asia are children. One-quarter of all the world's children live in this region.

"They are the adults of tomorrow and their childhood must be protected," the release said.

The international human rights organisation will be pushing governments, international agencies and companies doing business in the region to defend the rights of the children in South Asia.

The organisation is advocating new legislations in line with international standards, clear signals to law enforcement officials to protect children and allocate money to provide a judicial process for children.

Hardwork, optimism and charm: Blair looks set to win the world

LONDON, Apr 22: With a disarming blend of doggedness and boyish optimism, Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair is rapidly becoming the man world leaders find it hard to say 'no' to, reports Reuters.

Less than two weeks after brokering a deal on Northern Ireland, Blair completed a whistle-stop Middle East tour on Tuesday which helped clinch the agreement of Israeli and Palestinian leaders to come to London for talks with the United States on May 4.

It is too soon to say whether Blair really did secure a breakthrough, but his stature on both the world stage and the home front has been greatly enhanced by the trip.

The trip won Blair, a relative novice in the Middle East, a rare honour, the trust of both Arabs and Israelis.

"He engendered trust from both sides. That's why they have taken up his offer of a

London venue for the US-led talks," said an Israeli government source.

"For our part, we feel this is a man that understands us and is acting responsibly," he added.

Israel was particularly pleased that Blair did not stake out a British or European position on the problems of the Middle East, unlike other European prime ministers and his own Foreign Secretary Robin Cook last month.

Cook was roundly ennobled by Netanyahu when he declined an invitation to visit the holocaust museum, Yad Vashem, and instead toured a controversial Jewish settlement in Arab East Jerusalem.

But this made Cook a hero for the Palestinians, and Blair a hero for supporting him.

"We thank you Mr Blair for supporting your Foreign Secretary on his visit to Jabal Abu Ghanim," said a pupil at the Bashir Er Rayssah school in Gaza

in a welcoming address. The settlement "is known in Hebrew as Har Homa."

Blair also won points by not overestimating the role Britain would play in the Middle East peace process. He repeated time and time against that it was a United States show, and he was just a facilitator.

Blair's close friendship with US president Bill Clinton was invaluable.

It strengthened his hand in talks with Israel, while the Arab nations surprised him by intimating the relationship as a useful conduit for them to Washington. And Blair knew exactly when to exploit his position as President of the European Union. He banded it about in Egypt, Jordan and Gaza, and barely mentioned it in Israel.

"During talks with US the European Union rarely came up and when it did it was only on the technical issues," said one Israeli insider. "And if you ask

Annan in Hollywood 'Current impasse at ME talks worrying'

LOS ANGELES, Apr 22: UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said on Tuesday there was concern that the current impasse in the peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians could lead to further violence in the region, reports Reuters.

He said there was "considerable frustration" among Arab leaders at the lack of progress in the peace process, adding, "there are those who are concerned that if we do not make progress... desperate people will resort to violence again."

Annan made his remarks in Los Angeles, where he wooed Hollywood, courting celebrities, producers and directors to boost the UN's image and stressed the important role the world body has to play in the lives of everyone.

Addressing 2,200 members of the Los Angeles World Affairs Council and the Town

Hall of Los Angeles' two public forums that include entertainment industry leaders among their members, Annan said he had appealed to Palestinian leaders, "not to embrace violence."

Fresh from a diplomatic triumph in Baghdad that averted threatened US bombing of Iraq, Annan said the United Nations was now getting better cooperation from the Iraqis.

As he addressed the audience in the Westin Bonaventure hotel in downtown Los Angeles, six Tibetans who have been on a hunger fast for a week sat outside while their supporters carried placards and chanted "free Tibet now."

Annan said as far as the United Nations was concerned Tibet was a part of China, but stressed that human rights applied to all people including Tibetans.