

International

Russia calls for an end to Baghdad's arms monitoring

'Iraq to violate sanctions this year if not lifted'

BAGHDAD, Apr 25: Iraq will break UN sanctions this year if the Security Council does not lift the embargo, imposed after Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait in 1990, an official newspaper said today, reports Reuter.

The government daily Al-Jumhuriya also said in a front-page editorial that the Security Council would face a "hard test" on Monday when it discussed a bi-annual report on UN weapons inspections in Iraq carried out in the last six months.

"We are adamant on breaking the embargo this year if it is not lifted by the Security Council," the newspaper said in the editorial by its Editor Salah al-Moukhtar.

"America and others have to choose between lifting the embargo or storms that are impossible to control. Like past events have proven, which will

get rid of all the putrid symbols," it added.

On Wednesday, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz urged Arab states to break the embargo collectively.

"It is not acceptable to say that America practises blackmail in the Security Council, so the members are forced to be silent, because the price of this silence is paid by the Iraqi people, of whom 20,000 people die a month as a result of this embargo," Al-Jumhuriya said.

"We are not threatening anyone but we are cautioning about the grave dangers that will face the whole world. Not just Iraq, if the Security Council members do not undertake their required role and if United Nations Secretary-General (Kofi Annan) does not move to say his required say, especially as he is part of a finding deal," it added.

AP adds: Russia is calling for an end to wide-ranging inspections of Iraq's suspected nuclear facilities but decided against pushing for vote on the proposal when the Security Council reviews Iraqi sanctions next week.

Diplomats said the Russians apparently want time to win over the United States and Britain, who have taken the hardest line against Iraq on the issue of sanctions and Baghdad's suspected illegal weapons programmes.

Russian Ambassador Sergey Lavrov confirmed Friday he had circulated a proposal among the 15 council members to shift from "intrusive" inspections to long-term monitoring and surveillance of Iraq's nuclear programme.

He cited a report this month by the International Atomic

Energy Agency that says it found no indication that Iraq was still trying to construct nuclear arms.

The Security Council meets Monday to review the status of the 7-year economic sanctions on Iraq.

"I'm sure we are not going to table it," Lavrov said of the proposal. "We submitted it only yesterday, and... we want others to have time to react."

Lavrov said "It is time for the council to recognise" the findings of the latest IAEA report. Lavrov said he would make this argument during Monday's council meeting even if he did not submit a formal resolution.

If approved, the Russian proposal would not end all international surveillance of Iraq's nuclear research programmes. But it would shift to "passive monitoring" of known Iraqi research facilities.

Algerian rebels storm army post, kill 30 soldiers

PARIS, Apr 25: Muslim rebels stormed a military post and killed 30 Algerian soldiers south of Algiers on Tuesday, an Algerian pro-government newspaper said today, reports Reuter.

It was the bloodiest reported rebel attack on soldiers since February when Muslim guerrillas shot dead 27 soldiers and seized their weapons in an ambush in northeastern Algeria.

The pro-government Arab language daily Al-Achad said Muslim rebels, throwing bombs and firing automatic rifles, killed 30 soldiers guarding a military station in Larbaa area, 25 km south of Algiers. The station building was collapsed under the intensity of the rebel bombings, the paper said.

"Several army trucks were seen heading to the attack site to recover the bodies of the dead soldiers," Al-Achad said.

The newspaper El Watan, giving similar details of the

attack, said six soldiers died and 12 were wounded and six rebels were killed.

In a daring attack on February 20, rebels ambushed a military truck in the mountainous area of Boghni in Tizi-ouzou province, 90 km east of Algiers, killing at least 27 soldiers.

Rebels, deployed on both sides of the road, fired at the soldiers as they scrambled to get out of the truck, according to Algerian reports at the time.

In the neighbouring Medea region, four pro-government militiamen were killed on Thursday when their vehicle ran over a mine planted by rebels, Al-Achad said.

In Algiers, rebels shot dead a policeman in the city's main train station on Thursday, the newspaper said.

Algerian officials had no comment on the incidents, the latest in bloodshed gripping Algeria.

BRIEFLY

Chirac arrives in Japan: French President Jacques Chirac arrived in Tokyo on Saturday to mark the start of the Year of France celebrations and hold talks with Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto and other Japanese leaders, AP reports from Tokyo.

Chirac will talk with Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto on Monday about the Asian financial crisis and other issues which could come up during the May 15-17 Birmingham summit of the Group of Seven major powers.

Chinese storms claim 15: A powerful wind storm tore through China's remote northwest, killing six people, injuring 256 others and leaving another 44 people missing, the state-run Xinhua news agency reported, AP says from Beijing.

The wind and sandstorm last Sunday in the Xinjiang region, much of which is desert, affected 1.56 million people, damaged 38,000 homes and ripped up phone and electrical lines, Xinhua said late Friday. Meanwhile, another nine people were killed in a hailstorm in southern China Thursday that demolished houses, flattened crops, forced firms to close and disrupted transport and communications links, Xinhua said.

Colombian rebels kill 9 soldiers: Marxist rebels killed at least nine soldiers and wounded six others on Friday in heavy fighting in a remote jungle-covered area of eastern Colombia, security sources said, Reuters says from Bogota.

Army spokesmen said the combat occurred in thinly-populated Vichada province. They said four Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas were also killed.

14 executed in China: Authorities in south China executed 14 people for murder, kidnapping and other crimes, a Hong Kong newspaper reported on Saturday, AP says from Hong Kong.

Luo Bangzuo, Liu Yongqiang, Qin Hongmin and 11 others executed were among 40 people sentenced at a mass anti-crime rally in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen.

14-year-old kills teacher in US: A 14-year-old boy shot and killed a teacher, and wounded two students while at a dance in a Pennsylvania town late Friday, CNN reported, AFP says from Washington.

Police said the boy bolted immediately after firing the shots, but was chased down by the dance hall owner and disarmed, according to Cable News Network. The teen, whose name was not released, was identified as an eighth-grade student at the JW Parker Middle School in northwest Pennsylvania. He is currently in custody and will face murder charges, CNN reported.

10 Lankan postal union leaders held: Police arrested 10 leaders of postal workers' union in an attempt to break their 45-day-old protest at state-run central mail exchange where more than five million letters have piled up, officials said Saturday, AP reports from Colombo.

Government used emergency powers to stop the escalating work to rule by more than 2,000 workers, said an official at the government's postal ministry.

China frees ailing dissident: China freed an ailing political prisoner Saturday at the end of his two-year sentence, but his brother remained behind bars despite an appeal for his release on medical grounds, a dissident monitoring group said, AP reports from Beijing.

Yao Zhenxian, released from a labour camp in eastern Jiangsu province, said his health was poor and that his first act of freedom would be to check into a hospital.

6 Indonesian student rioters hurt: Police with clubs and riot shields battled rock-throwing student protesters on a campus in eastern Indonesia on Saturday, AP reports from Jakarta.

At least six students were injured during the fight in Mataram, capital of the island of Lombok.

Blast in Rolls-Royce plant kills 1: An American man died in an explosion at a Rolls-Royce engine plant and four other people were injured, police said Saturday, AP reports from London.

The blast occurred in the heat treatment shop at Rolls-Royce's main aero engine manufacturing plant in Derby in central England on Friday evening, Derbyshire police said.

Troops on alert as poppy farmers cancel accord with Pak govt

ISLAMABAD, Apr 25: Troops were put on alert in a remote province of Northwest Pakistan after poppy cultivators cancelled an agreement with the government to allow the destruction of their crop, reports AP.

The soldiers, backed by artillery and armoured vehicles, were in position around the mouth of the Nagel valley in Dir District, 200-km from Islamabad. Most of the opium in Pakistan is produced in the area.

According to some reports armed tribesmen had taken up positions in the hills around the valley. The situation was described as very tense.

Local government officials said that negotiations with tribal elders are continuing while the operation to destroy the poppies, which started last week, has been suspended.

Fresh fighting in Somalia: 30 killed

MOGADISHU, Apr 25: Around 30 militiamen were killed in heavy fighting between rival subclans close to the southern Somali port of Kismayu overnight, a militia spokesman said, reports Reuter.

Sources in the region said militia from the Majerten subclan launched an attack on Thursday on rival Marehan militia in the village of Gobwein, 15 km north of Kismayu.

A spokesman for the rival Marehan group, which has long contested Moredgan's control of Kismayu, said 13 militia members from his faction had been killed, along with 17 from the rival subclan.

Indian police ask 6 Tibetans to end hunger strike

NEW DELHI, Apr 25: Police on Saturday asked six Tibetan hunger strikers in the Indian capital to end their 47-day-old fast or else they would be hospitalised by force, reports AP.

Four police officers met with the protesters after they showed signs of chronic starvation and government doctors suggested they should be hospitalised immediately, said Tseten Norbu, the president of the Tibetan Youth Congress, which organised the protest.

The hunger strikers say they will fast until the United Nations intervenes to resolve the dispute over Tibet, which was occupied by China in 1950.

Cambodian polls to go ahead as scheduled

PHNOM PENH, Apr 25: Despite delays in voter registration, Cambodia's national election can still be held on July 26 as planned, the president of the National Election Commission said Saturday, reports AP.

The NEC will suggest the 28-day voter registration period, originally slated to begin April 20, be postponed to May 18 because of the late arrival of 1,700 registration kits from the European Union, said Cheng Phon, NEC president.

Earl Spencer for closing Diana memorial fund

LONDON, Apr 25: Earl Spencer wants the memorial fund set up to honour his sister, Diana, Princess of Wales, wound up, because he believes it is tasteless and degrading to her memory, a report said today, reports AP.

He has written to all nine trustees of the fund telling them to set a date to stop taking donations and to hand out all the money it has collected so far, said The Times of London, which quotes an unnamed close aide of the Earl.

Earl Spencer suggested to his sister, Lady Sarah McCorquodale who is president of the fund, that one possible date to call a halt would be August 31, 2000, the third anniversary of the Princess's death.

Chernobyl N-power plant still ticking

CHERNOBYL, Ukraine Apr 25: Twelve years after the world's worst nuclear accident, Ukraine is still looking to the Chernobyl power plant for its electricity needs, and a planned closure date of 2000 remains in doubt, reports AP.

As the deadline draws near, president Leonid Kuchma has repeatedly said Ukraine is hurting for energy supplies and may not honor the closure date because the West has not delivered 3.1 billion dollar in promised aid.

The world's leading industrialised nations, known as the Group of Seven or simply G-7 promised in 1995 to help Ukraine if it would shut down the notorious plant by the turn of the century.

"Ukraine reserves the right to change that decision based on the economic situation," First Deputy Energy Minister Hennady Yaroslavtsev said this week.

Ukraine depends on Russia for nearly all of its oil and gas, and says it cannot close Chernobyl without completing two new reactors that would compensate for the loss of Chernobyl's capacity.

The G-7 said in 1996 that the West was likely to put up cash for the two unfinished reactors at existing plants in western Ukraine.

But the European Bank for Reconstruction and Develop-



Guerillas from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia relax on the side of a road after releasing Louise Agustine, 63, an American hostage, near Los Alpes, a remote town 60 miles southeast of Bogota Friday. The rebels freed the ailing woman after holding her hostage for a month in a rugged jungle but still held two of the other Americans abducted with her while on a bird-watching tour. — AP/UNB photo

Chernobyl N-power plant still ticking

ment is not expected to make a decision until late this year at the earliest, and the reactors cannot be ready by 2000.

Meanwhile, Ukrainians say they are prepared to keep Chernobyl's only functioning reactor, No. 3, open well into the 21st century. The reactor, which has been under repair since last July, is scheduled to resume producing electricity in May.

Some critics say the government is ignoring safety concerns, given Chernobyl's terrible history.

On April 26, 1986, the No. 4 reactor exploded and caught fire during a test, killing at least 32 people in the immediate aftermath and sending a deadly cloud of radiation across parts of Europe.

Ukraine's Health Ministry says at least 3,576 workers who took part in the cleanup effort have died as a result of radiation exposure. Private groups say the death toll, including civilians, is at least twice as high.

The sarcophagus that was hastily built over the No. 4 reactor after the explosion could collapse and unleash a cloud of radioactive dust, its caretakers warn.

"Inside the shelter, collapses are occurring, and they will continue," Valentin Kupny, the official in charge of the sarcophagus, told reporters visiting the Chernobyl plant.

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Newlyweds dance in front of a portrait of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in the Hunter Club, Baghdad, Friday. Two hundred and eighty-eight couples took part in a mass wedding in the Iraqi capital, organised by the National Union of Iraqi Students. — AP/UNB photo

Taliban accused of launching attack on opposition lines Afghan talks in Islamabad rescheduled for today

ISLAMABAD, Apr 25: A five-member delegation from Afghanistan's Taliban militia arrived here today for peace talks with representatives of a rival northern alliance, officials said, reports AP.

The team, arriving after a day's delay, was led by the militant Islamic militia's senior spokesman, Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil.

The Foreign Office here said the first face-to-face talks, jointly sponsored by the United Nations and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference had now been rescheduled to start tomorrow.

The intra-Afghan dialogue was originally planned for today.

A nine-member delegation of the multi-faction Afghan Northern Alliance, who arrived in Pakistan Thursday for the talks, have said they would like to discuss political issues, besides cease-fire and prisoners' exchange.

The opposition's intention to bring up the issue of a power sharing deal apparently upset the Taliban, sources said.

The alliance includes former president Burhanuddin Rabbani and his military strongman Ahmad Shah Masood, ethnic Uzbek forces led by ex-communist General Abdul Rashid Dostam and the Hezb-i-Wahdat Party representing Afghanistan's Shi'ite Hazara community.

Reuters adds: A Pakistani Foreign Ministry spokesman said a steering committee charged with laying the groundwork for the negotiations would start work tomorrow morning (0500 GMT).

He said there would be a ceremonial opening followed by statements from the Taliban, the opposition, host Pakistan, and the United Nations and Organisation of Islamic Conference.

The spokesman played down reported differences between the two sides on an agenda. He said a draft agenda had been agreed which representatives of both sides would have to adopt.

The Taliban wants the steering committee to draw up a list of Ulema, or religious scholars, for substantive negotiations.

Diplomats are wary of predicting a breakthrough in the negotiations, which will represent only the second time the two sides have come together since the Taliban swept to power in September 1996.

A previous round of talks in 1996 broke down and fighting resumed shortly afterwards.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan's opposition accused the dominant Taliban militia of launching a major attack today, on the eve of preparatory talks in Islamabad.

A spokesman for the anti-Taliban alliance said the Islamic movement, which controls much of Afghanistan, launched a dawn assault on opposition lines some 25-km north of the Taliban-held capital, Kabul, with more than a thousand fighters.

"This will have certainly a negative effect on the peace talks for which we are waiting, this is a complete violation of the agreement," said Dr Abdullah, an opposition spokesman.

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Nigerian polls begin amid opposition boycott

ABUJA, Nigeria, Apr 25: Amid the threat of boycotts and the fear of violence, few voters turned out early to cast ballots in Saturday's legislative elections, reports AP.

Although 50 million people are registered to vote, elections officials expected an opposition boycott and fears of violent clashes between the ruling military junta and its opponents to keep voters away.

The elections were touted as the first significant step in Nigeria's democratic transition, through which Gen Sani Abacha's military leadership was to yield power to a new civilian government.

Abacha seized power in a bloodless coup in 1993. That year, he cancelled presidential elections and jailed Moshood Abiola, the apparent winner.

Abacha's earlier nomination for president by all five of Nigeria's political parties, however, has outraged opponents. Opposition politicians and pro-democracy groups now say the military regime has engineered the polls to ensure its continued

rule.

Nine party candidates from the Democratic Grassroots Movement resigned as a group Friday to protest what they called election tampering by the military regime.

"I humbly state that with the fear of my god, there can be no companionship between light and darkness," former candidate Aliu Abisade Rhodes said of his country's struggle against military rule. "The time has come for these two forces to part ways."

Pro-democracy groups have urged Nigerians to boycott Saturday's election for Senate and the House of Representatives as well as the presidential polls in August.

The nomination of Abacha as a sole presidential candidate by all the parties was a sell-out, said business executive Nike Osunde. "I'll have nothing to do with the elections."

Candidates for the 109 senatorial or 360 House seats must come from one of five government-sanctioned political parties.

New Russian PM sets straight to work

MOSCOW, Apr 25: Russia's youthful new prime minister is plunging straight into his job, devising a new Cabinet lineup to help shake Russia out of its economic doldrums, reports AP.

Sergei Kiriyenko, 35, who was confirmed as prime minister Friday after a long, hard fight between parliament and the president, immediately started work by meeting with miners and pledging to do his best to end the economic crisis.

The first step, he told them, is formulating a new Cabinet.

"I have to give (the president) an outline of the government by Tuesday night, including new personnel recommendations," Kiriyenko told miners attending a national conference in Moscow.

"That means I have a lot of hard work to do this weekend."

After a month of confrontation, Russian lawmakers caved in Friday to President Boris Yeltsin, approving Kiriyenko as premier despite doubts about his youth and inexperience.

Reuters adds: President Bill Clinton on Friday welcomed the appointment of Sergei Kiriyenko as Russia's new prime minister and urged

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Moscow to ratify the START-2 arms control treaty.

Meanwhile, Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto sent a congratulatory note to Russian President Boris Yeltsin on the appointment of Sergei Kiriyenko.

Off the Record

Material Mom gets black eye from bouncing baby

NEW YORK: Madonna's pride and joy apparently gave her a hook and jab, reports AP.

The pop star showed up at a movie premiere party with a bruised left eye she got last week while playing with daughter Lourdes, the Daily News reported Friday.

It seems the Material Mom was bouncing the 18-month-old tyke on her lap when the child's head smacked into the bone under her eye.

In a black off-the-shoulder top and tight pants, the battered Madonna was still the belle of the ball, smooching with former boyfriend Warren Beatty at Wednesday night's party for the new Robert Downey Jr film, "Two Girls and a Guy."

Madonna, made aware of photographic evidence, quipped: "The National Enquirer will probably try to make this out to be a fight in a restaurant."

Lourdes Maria Ciccone Leon is Madonna's child by ex-personal trainer and TV's "Nash Bridges" regular Carlos Leon.



\$70,000 temple offering

NEW DELHI: An Indian devotee presented a gold parrot studded with diamonds worth more than 70,000 dollars to a temple in Southern India, a newspaper said yesterday, reports AP.

The Asian Age daily quoting temple authorities said the 76,923-dollar offering would be placed on the deity's chest for all important religious occasions in Tirupati Temple in Tamil Nadu.

The unnamed devotee had donated 5 kg of gold to the temple two months ago, it said.

Albania accused of provoking crisis in Kosovo US seeks new sanctions against Belgrade

WASHINGTON, Apr 25: The United States on Friday said it was seeking new sanctions against Belgrade after Yugoslav Army's military action in Kosovo stocked an "extremely dangerous" situation in the province, reports Reuter.

"The situation in Kosovo is quite troubling, extremely dangerous," State Department spokesman James Rubin said.

"We believe the Yugoslav National Army has been engaged in a firefight along the Albanian border with myriad deaths involved," he told reporters.

Asked about new sanctions on Yugoslavia and its President Slobodan Milosevic, Rubin said Milosevic "has clearly not complied" with international demands that he withdraw special police units and enter into a political dialogue with ethnic Albanians in the Serbian province.

Beyond that, the Yugoslav president now is upping the ante with the involvement of the Yugoslav National Army in Kosovo, he said.

The United States and its allies are working on "a package of additional measures designed to ensure that President Milosevic understands that his current course of action can only lead to further and further

isolation for the people of the former Yugoslavia," the spokesman said.

He refused to discuss details, raising speculation that the United States may again be having a difficult time persuading France and Russia to go along with tough measures.

AP adds: Albania is providing assistance to extremists in the ethnic Albanian-dominated Yugoslav province of Kosovo in an attempt to wrest that region away, Yugoslavia's UN ambassador said Friday.

Yugoslav Ambassador Vladimir Jovanovic urged the international community to "hold Albania accountable" for its actions.

He said Albania's government was providing shelter and support to armed Albanian extremists who stage attacks across the border in Kosovo a province of the Yugoslav state of Serbia.

He said the goal was to provoke the Yugoslav Army into the Kosovo crisis to justify foreign military intervention as part of a campaign to break the province away from Serbia.

"Those objections are very visible and very dangerous," Jovanovic said. "We expect from the United Nations... to hold Albania accountable for

the violation of those basic principles" of international law.

Jovanovic's allegations came amid a new escalation in tensions between the two Balkan nations over the ethnic crisis in Kosovo, where Albanians form 90 per cent of the population.

On Friday, Albanian officials said the country's Defence Minister Sabit Brokaj resigned Thursday night and accused Prime Minister Fatos Nano of failing to prepare the country for a crisis with its Yugoslav neighbour.

Yugoslavia has deployed troops along its border with Albania since unrest began in the region. This week, forces in the Serb-dominated Yugoslav Army killed 23 pro-independence ethnic Albanians trying to return to Kosovo, according to Serb officials.

An Albanian Interior Ministry official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that in the last two days hundreds of Kosovo Albanians have entered Albania and are staying in different northern villages along the border.

Jovanovic said Kosovo Albanian extremists use bases in Albania for training.