

International

BRIEFLY

2 US hostages freed in Colombia: Marxist rebels on Saturday freed the last two of the four US bird-watchers held hostage in a war zone near Bogota, ending their 34-day kidnap ordeal, Reuters says from Los Alpes, Colombia.

Foreign and local reporters witnessed the release of Peter Shen and Todd Mark, who were set free by heavily-armed Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebels east of the capital. They were released in the same rugged, Andean mountains where the FARC freed Louise Augustine on Friday.

9 kids hurt in Algerian blast: Nine children were wounded when a bomb exploded Saturday in a school at Mahelma, 25 km west of Algiers, Algerian Radio reported, says AFP from Algiers.

The homemade device blew up in an empty classroom, and the injured children were in an adjacent classroom, the radio said.

Briton held for spying in Iran: A British national has been arrested in Iran's Kurdistan region suspected of spying, the Iranian newspaper Jomhuri-Islemi reported yesterday, AFP says from Tehran.

The paper citing an unidentified intelligence service official, said the arrest was made "recently." It said the Briton identified as Robert Gavin, was arrested while he was filming army installations in a military zone and had confessed to working for the British Secret Service M16.

Moderate quake hits Japan: A moderate earthquake Sunday with a preliminary magnitude of 4.9 hit a coastal resort southwest of Tokyo that has suffered thousands of minor quakes over the last week, AP reports from Tokyo.

The quake, which struck at 7:37 am (2237 GMT Saturday), was centered 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) beneath the seabed just off the coast of Ito City, the Meteorological Agency said. There were no reports of damage or injuries in Ito, said Shuji Ando of the local police department.

2 killed in Dagestan shooting: Unknown gunmen opened fire from a passing car at a police outpost in a restive Russian region near Chechnya, killing two people and wounding three others, officials said Sunday, AP reports from Moscow.

The attack occurred Saturday night in the Novolavskiy region of Dagestan, a violence-prone republic in southern Russia. Dagestan's Interior Ministry told The Associated Press that the post's commander and a villager were killed in the shooting. Three police officers were wounded, it said. The assailants escaped from the scene, and a search for them yielded no results, the ministry said.

5 killed in Polynesian storm: Five people were killed in mudslides triggered when a tropical storm swept through the French Polynesian islands of Tahaa and Raiatea, officials said Saturday, AFP reports from Pavete. On Tahaa, two people died when four houses were engulfed by three landslides.

On Raiatea, a mudslide killed three people and rescuers were searching for two others still missing.

29 die in Kashmir bus mishap: Police said yesterday 29 people were killed when a bus plunged into a river overnight in the Indian state of Kashmir, AFP reports from Jammu, India.

Three people seriously injured in the accident at Dharabshala, some 175 km east of Jammu, died early yesterday, a police spokesman said. Four others were in a critical condition. The bus, carrying around 45 people, was taking a turn on a mountain road when it slipped and rolled down into the Chenab river, an official said.

UK jails ex-KGB man for fraud: An ex-KGB officer who spied for Britain and helped to uncover an Iranian attempt to procure nuclear weapons has been jailed for three years for trying to defraud wealthy Russians, The Sunday Times reported, AP says from London.

The newspaper said that Mikhail Butkov, a former major, was sentenced at Isleworth Crown Court in southwest London earlier this month after pleading guilty to supplying false information. Butkov, his wife, and another Russian emigre persuaded nearly 700 Russian and Ukrainian companies to pay a total of 1.5 million pounds to enroll in a bogus California business school, the newspaper said.

Quake jolts Los Angeles: A moderate earthquake jolted residents throughout the greater Los Angeles area. There were no reports of serious injuries or damage, AP reports from Alhambra, California.

The magnitude-4.0 quake struck 3 km southeast of Alhambra at 6:32 pm Saturday, said seismologist Lucky Jones of the US Geological Survey. A magnitude-1.8 quake that hit the same area at about 2:30 pm was determined to be a foreshock of the larger tremor, Jones said.

17 Russians held in Belarus: Seventeen Russian anti-fascist demonstrators were arrested in the Belarus capital Minsk Saturday after taking part in a 5,000-strong peaceful protest against Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, one of their Russian colleagues said, AFP reports from Minsk.

The Russians were bundled into police buses with five Belarusians and three observers from the Helsinki Committee human rights group, the Russian protestor who was not arrested, Sergei Parchinsev, 21, said.

The Sunday Times reports

Rise of modern day 'slavery' in Britain

LONDON, Apr 26: Asian illegal immigrants are paying up to 5,000 pounds (8,000 dollars) each to be smuggled into Britain by a network of traffickers in London, Germany, Ukraine and New Delhi, the Sunday Times reported, reports AFP.

It said the immigrants were then "bought" for 7,000 pounds (11,600 dollars) by specific British employers who kept them on slave wages.

The paper, which carried out its own investigation into the modern day slave trade, said one network had smuggled more than 200 people out of India since January in deals worth an estimated two million pounds (3.3 million dollars).

One of its reporters, posing as an employer, was offered 10 Indian workers for 7,000 pounds each by an Asian middleman at secret meetings in London and Birmingham. Cen-

tral England. One Indian illegal immigrant told the reporter he had paid 5,000 pounds to the smugglers to work in Britain, his journey from India took six weeks, including stops in Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Germany and France.

He made the final crossing into Britain from Calais with another man in the boot of a car. Others went in a furniture van through the channel tunnel he is now employed at a London warehouse where this boss lets him keep only 30 pounds (50 dollars) from his 120 pounds (200 dollars) a week wage.

A spokesman for the National Criminal Intelligence Service set up to target the illegal trade told the paper, "we are deeply concerned about the number of organised crime groups moving into the smuggling of immigrants, use by companies and newspapers — Diana's photograph appeared on the front pages of three national papers Saturday — has moved him closer to the Earl.

Spencer has made no secret of his unhappiness at some of the fund-raising activities. These include promoting lottery scratch cards and approving the use of her official logo on tubs of margarine to raise money for charity, criticized by many as being "tacky" and for which the fund trustees admitted a "lapse of judgement."

One source said the prince was "angry and upset, Diana was his mother. He just wants to be able to mourn her."

Exploitation of Di's name upsets William

LONDON, Apr 26: Prince William is reported to be "angry and upset" over the continuing commercial exploitation of his mother Diana, Princess of Wales, British Press reports said today, reports AFP.

Diana's eldest son, 15, has given his backing to his uncle Earl Spencer who has suggested that her memorial fund should be set a date for being wound up, they said.

Prime Minister Tony Blair is also about to throw his weight behind the calls for the fund to be wound up, said the Sunday Express.

Buckingham Palace sources told the Sunday Times that William's irritation over her

Taliban, opposition talks begin in Islamabad

ISLAMABAD, Apr 26: The Taliban Islamic militia and the rival northern alliance opened their first direct peace talks here today in a bid to pave the way for peace in war-torn Afghanistan, reports AFP.

The first face-to-face meeting between the two sides is taking place under the auspices of the United Nations and the 54-nation Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

A five-member Taliban team and a nine-member delegation from the multi-faction northern alliance are attending the talks, being held within the framework of a steering committee.

The meeting started with a ceremony open to the press, which was to be followed by a closed working session.

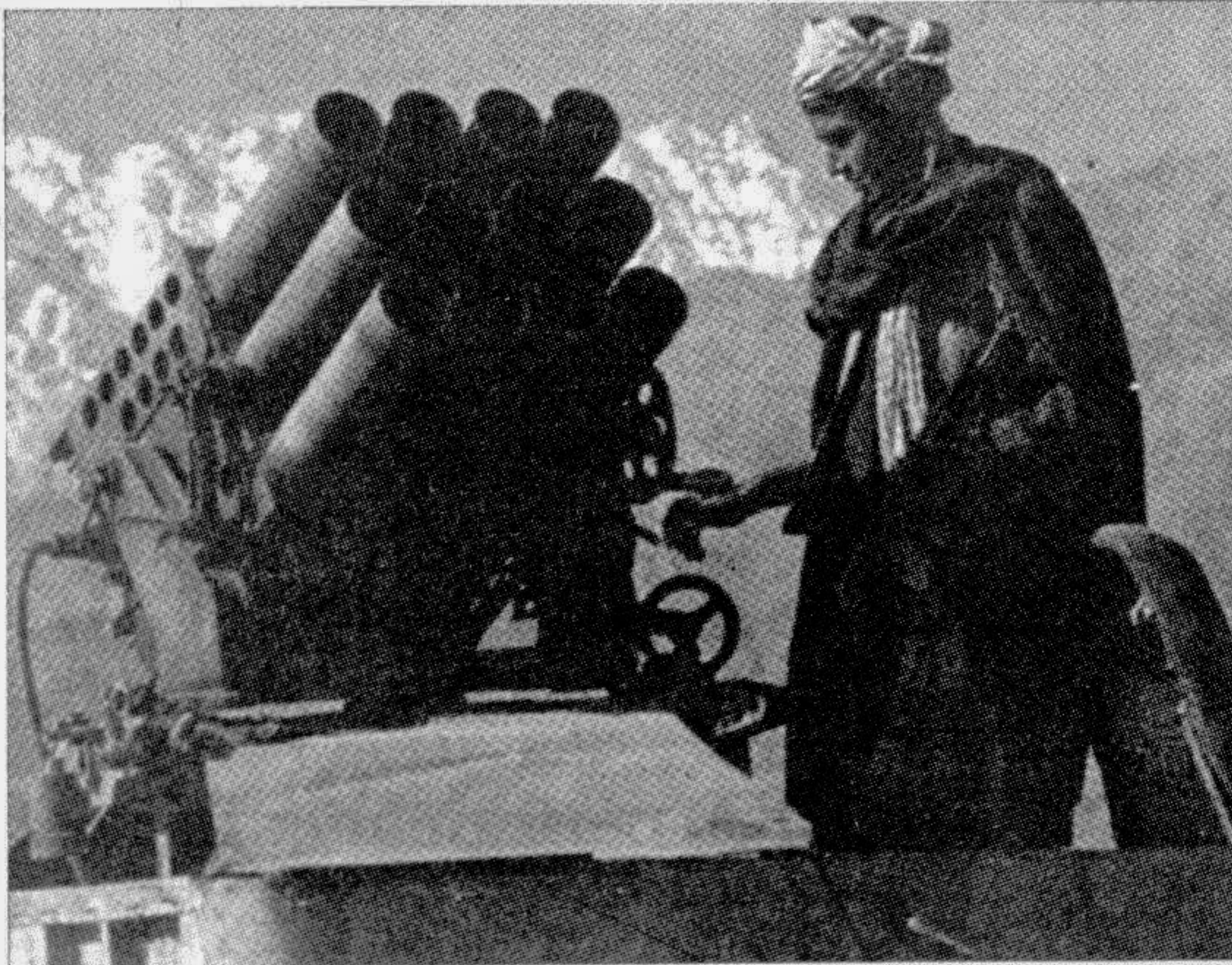
The delegates are to discuss an agenda including setting up a commission of ulama or religious scholars to tackle political issues, sources said.

Other issues on the agenda are a ceasefire, an exchange of prisoners and the flow of humanitarian aid in Afghanistan.

"This is a big event, it is taking place after months and months of shuttle diplomacy," said a senior Pakistani Foreign Ministry official, Iftikhar Mursheed, before the start of the meeting.

An agreement on talks between the combatants was announced by United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Bill Richardson, here on April 17 after his talks with Afghan leaders on Afghanistan.

As the talks opened, frontlines near the Afghan capital, Kabul, were reported calm Sunday morning after the most serious flare-up of fighting for several weeks on Saturday.



A sole Taliban fighter atop a military truck checks out a multiple rocket launcher in the front-line area, north of Kabul Saturday. Renewed fighting started Saturday morning while a Taliban delegation arrived in Islamabad for peace negotiations with the opposition. — AP/UNB photo

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Delhi's 'friendly concern' concerns Colombo

COLOMBO, Apr 26: In Sri Lanka, "friendly concern" can be construed as interference when it comes to the country's long-drawn ethnic crisis, reports Reuters.

And if it is neighbouring India showing undue concern, alarm bells ring much faster among the government and intelligentsia in Colombo, mostly due to a history of turbulent relations.

This was evident last week when a top foreign policy advisor to the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which heads a fledgling coalition in New Delhi, said there was likely to be a change in the Sri Lanka policy, and sparked a huge debate.

Trouble brewed after Nagendra Nath Jha, convener of the BJP's foreign policy cell, reportedly told Indian journalists in Colombo the new government would in no way change the earlier policy towards Sri Lanka or help LTTE.

The government of the former prime minister Inder Kumar Gujral had adopted a hands-off policy towards India's neighbours under the so-called "Gujral Doctrine," saying it was time for New Delhi to take a lead in improving relations with them.

Jha, who was earlier the High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, later denied his remarks

in a public speech where he said New Delhi might take a middle path in contrast to the previous extremes of full involvement or total disinterest. But he did manage to open a can of worms at a time when the two sides have taken pains to maintain that relations were at their best.

The independent Sunday Times quoted Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar as saying he had referred Jha's remarks to the Indian envoy in Colombo.

Foreign ministry officials were not immediately available for comment, but Indian officials in Colombo said they had informed Kadirgamar of Jha's denial.

Kadirgamar was the first foreign dignitary to meet Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee after he took power and seek clarification that the new Indian government would in no way change the earlier policy towards Sri Lanka or help LTTE.

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The LTTE, who are fighting

for a separate homeland for minority Tamils in Sri Lanka's north and east since 1983, were earlier helped by India and continue to have a support base in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

Sri Lanka's fears, say analysts, rise from the past when relations between the two neighbours plummeted after India sent its troops in.

"Sri Lanka and her people continue to suffer from the movement that was fed, financed and nurtured by the government of India and the state government of Tamil Nadu," the Sunday Times said.

The All India Anna Dravida Munethra Kazhagam (AIADMK) that ruled Tamil Nadu in the 1980s is a coalition partner in the BJP-led government.

"We very well know that a pro-LTTE man sits as India's defence minister and that the LTTE believes it can worm its way back into the confidence of the Indian establishment," the newspaper said.

Defence Minister George Fernandes has in the past openly supported the LTTE's cause, India banned the rebel group some years ago after blaming it for the brutal 1991 assassination of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in a suicide bomb blast.

French Speaker calls for int'l tribunal on slavery

PARIS, Apr 26: National Assembly Speaker Laurent Fabius called for an international tribunal on Saturday, commemorating the 150th anniversary of slavery's abolition in French colonies, reports AFP.

"We must strive to set up an international tribunal which could judge these crimes against humanity," Fabius told a press conference.

He said the west "still owes Africa for the suffering we inflicted on it," the consequences of which were still evident today.

He did not specify if the tribunal would deal with modern-day slavery, still evident in some Third World countries according to rights groups.

The former prime minister earlier spoke to more than 1,000 students from France and abroad at a ceremony to mark the abolition of slavery on French colonies, on April 27, 1848.

Slavery had been stopped in 1794, but was reinstated by Napoleon Bonaparte until outlawed by a government following the 1848 revolution.

Ross holds three hours of talks with Netanyahu

JERUSALEM, Apr 26: US special envoy Dennis Ross has held more than three hours of talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the start of a new mission to try to break a logjam in peace moves with the Palestinians, reports Reuters.

Neither man made any comment after their meeting, held on Saturday night at Netanyahu's residence in Jerusalem.

Israel radio said Ross and Netanyahu would hold more talks today when the US envoy is also expected to meet Palestinian President Yasser Arafat.

US officials have said Ross expects to pin down precisely how much West Bank land Israel is willing to cede to Palestinians in order to move the peace process forward.

Is Israel radio said Netanyahu had signalled that Israel could pull back its troops from more land than it has previously indicated though only if certain conditions were met.

New Russian PM works on forming his cabinet

MOSCOW, Apr 26: Russia's new Prime Minister Sergei Kiriyenko was busy on Sunday working on the formation of his new Cabinet, aides said, reports AP.

Kiriyenko won a tough confirmation battle with Russia's opposition-led parliament Friday, and President Boris Yeltsin told him to have his list of Cabinet ministers ready by Tuesday.

Yeltsin also told Kiriyenko to focus on economic growth, saying it was precisely such an understanding the previous government lacked.

Only a year ago, the president brought in a group of "young reformers," including Kiriyenko, to clean up Russia's economic mess.

But Yeltsin dismissed the entire Cabinet in late March, accusing it of failing to produce tangible results and throwing Russia into a month-long political disarray.

Rebels reject call for ceasefire in Philippines

MANILA, Apr 26: Philippine communists on Sunday rejected a government call for a joint ceasefire, saying it was not a genuine offer of lasting peace, reports AP.

"There is a big difference between pacification and a just and lasting peace," said Fidel Agcaoili, spokesman of the negotiating panel of the National Democratic Front, an umbrella organisation that includes the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People's Army.

The latter can be achieved only by addressing the social, economic, political and constitutional problems at the root of the civil war in the Philippines," Agcaoili added.

Last week, President Fidel Ramos approved a human rights accord with the communists but said it will be implemented only if armed hostilities are suspended for the duration of peace talks.

Howard Dee, chief of the government negotiating panel, said a ceasefire will create "a peaceful environment for the meaningful implementation of the human rights agreement" while talks continue on other issues.

Dee said an absence of hostilities would allow the government to carry out peace and development programmes and make social and economic reforms needed for a lasting peace.

But Agcaoili said the accord, called the Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law, has already been approved by NDF chairman Mariano Orosa.

As a sign of the government's sincerity on the human rights accord, the rebels have also demanded the release of 143 people they describe as political

prisoners, including two men serving life terms for the killing of US Army Col. James "Nick" Rowe in 1989. The government insists it has no political prisoners, saying most of the 143 people were arrested for committing common, not political, crimes.

Communist party founder Jose Maria Sison was to have come to the Philippines to exchange copies of the agreement in a special ceremony on April 27 arranged by government and rebel negotiators, but canceled the trip.

Low turnout in Nigerian polls

ABUJA, Apr 26: Nigeria's military rulers were disappointed by the low turnout for today's national assembly elections after the opposition called a boycott to protest at strongman General Sani Abacha, reports Reuters.

"I am disappointed in the low turnout of people," said Lieutenant-General Jeremiah Useni, Minister for the capital Abuja and one of Abacha's close aides and most enduring allies.

"I expected to see a large turnout from voters. I don't really know the reason for this turnout," he told reporters.

There were no official figures on the turnout but it was believed to have been one of the lowest ever in Nigeria.

Reporters said that at most of the polling stations they visited, with an average of more than 500 registered voters, less than 30 had cast ballots.

The opposition, angry at plans by the five registered parties to turn Abacha into a civilian president through an unopposed election.

Off the Record \$50,000 for 85-yr-old Titanic scrapbook

ELGIN, Illinois: A tattered, 85-year-old scrapbook featuring photos of Titanic survivors in lifeboats sold for 50,000 dollars Saturday, but it won't be the last time the momentos see the auction block, reports AP.

The buyer plans to separate the scrapbook and sell the pieces at another auction this summer.

"If one person had bought this whole thing privately, the public would never ever see this again," said Dan Knoll, who made the winning bid on behalf of Mastro Fine Sports Auction.

The 60-page, three-ring binder was assembled by a passenger of an ocean liner that came to rescue survivors of the doomed ship. It includes photos of survivors, two watercolour paintings of the shipwreck by another witness and three handwritten survivor accounts.

The 1912 tragedy, in which more than 1,500 people died, has gained renewed fame with the enormous success of the Oscar-winning movie "Titanic."

Dudu celebrates 36th birthday

BEIJING: Zoo keepers in central China's Wuhan city have held a birthday celebration for Dudu, the world's oldest giant panda at 36 years, the official Xinhua news agency reported yesterday, reports AFP.

The female, who remains "in good health," turned 36 on Friday and has spent the past 25 years at the Wuhan Zoo.

The report said of 117 pandas living in zoos worldwide, only three others are over the age of 25 all of them in their native China.

They include Shasha, 32, kept in northern Taiwan, Beijing's Lily, 29, and Qiangqiang, 30, in northeastern Shenyang. The animals have an average lifespan of 20 years.



Paula Jones attends a White House press gathering Saturday with her husband Steve in Washington. President Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary were also present at the dinner event at a Washington hotel. — AP/UNB photo

Buta Singh to launch party of his own

PHAGWARA, Punjab, Apr 26: Buta Singh, recently sacked from the central cabinet, today ruled out his rejoining the Congress immediately and said he would soon flat a new party and try to have floor coordination with Trinamul Congress, reports PTI.

I have no intention to rejoin Congress, at least during the current tenure of parliament. I will float a new party before May 15 and some MP's have supported my idea, the former communications minister told newsmen here tonight.

Stating that he would try for a floor coordination with Trinamul Congress chief Mamata

Banerjee on common issues in parliament, he said, "we will soon have a formal meeting about it."

Referring to his letter to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, a reply to which was still awaited by him Singh said, "I do not want to drag the Prime Minister's office into any controversy as it is a prestigious institution. For this reason I have been waiting for PM's reply to my letter of April 21 for filing an FIR against his (PM's) political advisor Pramod Mahajan."

It would be good if PM replies to my letter, he said.

Chronology of the 20-year old Afghan war

UNDATED, Apr 26: Chronology of the Afghan conflict, reports AP.

Apr 28, 1978 — First communist president takes control of Afghanistan, overthrowing the last Afghan royal Mohammed Daoud and launching the country on the road to war.

Dec 24, 1979 — Some 80,000 Soviet troops pour over Afghan border to oust Communist party leader Hafizullah Amin and replace him with the pro-Moscow Babrak Karmal. Invasion starts a mass exodus that eventually leads to an estimated 5 million Afghan refugees in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan.

1980s — A loose alliance of Islamic rebels groups, known as the mujahedeen, battles Soviet troops with the help of US weapons and training.

Feb 15, 1989 — The Soviet army withdraws from Afghanistan in disgrace.

Apr 15, 1992 — President

Najibullah relinquishes power. Mujahedeen leaders seize Kabul and then turn their guns on each other.

1992-1994 — Bitter factional fighting kills at least 50,000 people in the Afghan capital, most of them civilians and drives hundreds of thousands more fleeing for safety. Warring factions sign four separate peace agreements, including one that was ratified and signed in Mecca in Saudi Arabia, considered Islam's holiest city. But fighting eventually resumes.

Sept 1994 — The previously unheard of Taliban rebels enter the fray, swiftly capturing the southern province of Kandahar.

Sept 27, 1996 — The Taliban, an army of former Islamic seminarians, drive the government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani out of Kabul, capture the capital and hand Najibullah from a traffic post.

May 24, 1997 — Aided by Malik Pahlawan, the former deputy of Uzbek warlord Rashid

Dostum, the Taliban captures the northern provinces and drives Dostum into exile. The alliance between Pahlawan and the Taliban collapses violently within days, leaving hundreds of thousands more taken prisoner.

Mar 1998 — United Nations chief negotiator Lakhdar Brahimi shuttles between warring factions and neighbouring countries to try to get peace talks started. They agree to establish a committee of religious scholars.

Apr 17, 1998 — Washington's UN ambassador Bill Richardson visits both sides in the conflict and gets a promise of direct negotiations, the first in two years, aimed at getting a ceasefire.

Apr 26, 1998 — The Taliban and its opponents meet face to face for the first time to try to find a negotiated end to the bloody war that began almost 20 years ago to the day.

India to join Arab nations to combat terrorism

NEW DELHI, Apr 26: India is close to finalising several accords with various Arab nations that would include extradition of fugitives from the law and jointly combating terrorism, a top official told diplomats from the region yesterday, reports IANS.

Narshwar Dayal, Secretary (East), External Affairs Ministry, also assured the Arab envoys at a seminar on Indo-Arab ties, organised by the Council of Arab Ambassadors, that "current apprehensions about our policy" were unnecessary.

Pointing out that New Delhi

had always followed a policy of close friendship with the Arab world, he said, "the new (Indian) government is committed to carrying forward that policy." Asserting that the government was committed to "secularism", he added, "our foreign policy has always been bipartisan and cuts across party lines."

Dayal was reiterating what a Muslim minister in Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government had told the Arab diplomats Friday while inaugurating the two-day seminar. Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi,

BJP leader and Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting, had asked the diplomats to ignore the "negative propaganda" being spread against his party's government about its stand on minorities and ties with Arab nations.

The foreign ministry official disclosed that New Delhi saw the Arab world as its "extended neighbourhood" and was keen to step up official and people-to-people contact with it. This would see India "intensify" discussions with the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the 22-nation Arab League.