

Ranariddh, allies threaten to boycott election

PHNOM PENH, Apr 30: An alliance of Cambodian opposition parties, including the royalist party of deposed Co-Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh, said Thursday they will boycott July's elections unless conditions assuring they will be free and fair are in place by May 18, reports AP.

The National United Front, an umbrella group of four opposition parties, said in a statement signed by Ranariddh and his allies that so far "no appropriate preparations have been made to ensure that the next elections will be even remotely free, fair and credible."

The group, which consists of Ranariddh's Funcinpec Party, the Sam Rainsy Party, the Son Sann Party and the Cambodia Neutral Party, chose May 18 as the deadline because that is when voter registration is scheduled to begin.

Last week Ranariddh said his father, Cambodia's constitutional monarch King Norodom Sihanouk, was appealing to the international community to send as many observers as soon as possible to see that the elections would be clean.

Cambodian leader Hun Sen called for the elections in an

attempt to win back international legitimacy and foreign aid cut after he ousted Ranariddh in a coup d'etat last July.

Ranariddh's return to Cambodia and participation in the polls was won after hard-fought negotiations supervised by Japanese diplomats.

Critics have said, however, that the deck is stacked in Hun Sen's favour because of his control of the election process and machinery, and rampant violence and intimidation against his opponents.

NUF said it was "eager to participate in the elections," provided certain requirements were met by May 18.

The alliance called for an amendment to the election law to move ballot-counting from the village to the district or provincial levels to reduce the likelihood of intimidation or tampering.

It also demanded equal access to the media now controlled by Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party; the formation and effective functioning of the Constitutional Council; and for a new makeup of the National Electoral Commission, now filled with Hun Sen supporters.



Afghan warriors belonging to the Taliban militia in jubilant mood with their leader, Maulvi Ahmed Wakil Mutawakil, second from right, after a major breakthrough in marathon peace talks among warring factions in Islamabad on Wednesday. Representatives of the Taliban and northern alliance against Taliban militia agreed after a four-day meeting to the makeup of a commission of religious scholars to decide the fate of war-shattered Afghanistan.

— AP/UNB photo

International

Hamas won't cede single inch of Palestinian land'

TEHRAN, Apr 30: The spiritual guide of the hardline Shi'ite fundamentalist Palestinian group Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, held talks here on Wednesday with the Iranian Foreign Minister, the official IRNA news agency reported, says AFP.

Sheikh Yassin told Kamal Kharazi that Hamas would "not cede a single inch of Palestinian land to the enemy" — a reference to Israel IRNA said.

The main purpose of Hamas is to fight Israel until all the occupied Palestinian lands are liberated," he was quoted as saying, adding that this task for "patience, perseverance and sacrifice."

He said the current deadlock in the Middle East peace process "has helped Palestinians to realize that fighting against the Zionist regime's occupation and oppression is the only way to liberate Jerusalem".

Sheikh Yassin praised what he called the "exceptional stand taken by Iran and its spiritual support for the struggle of the Palestinian people."

Sheikh Yassin is currently on a tour of Gulf states, which has already taken him to Qatar, he is due to go on to Kuwait.

Torture and atrocities were

Mamata threatens to demand president's rule in West Bengal

CALCUTTA, Apr 30: Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee yesterday threatened to demand imposition of president's rule in West Bengal if "atrocities against her partymen continued unabated prior to next month's panchayat polls, reports PTI.

"We are not demanding imposition of president's rule, but the Left Front government should not compel us to do it," the firebrand MP who led a delegation of her "Save Bengal Front" to newly-appointed governor AR Kidwai at Raj Bhavan here, told newsmen.

Banerjee who sought the intervention of the governor for holding the May 28 panchayat election in a free and fair manner, alleged that 11 Trinamool Congress workers were killed by "Marxist" cadres in different districts in the past few days.

Alleging that her party candidates were not allowed to file nominations for the panchayat polls by ruling party cadres, Banerjee said this could not be tolerated any longer.

Men and women of the Bougainville revolutionary army dressed in traditional garb sang and danced as their leaders presented spears and bows and arrows to the assembled dignitaries.

Civil war ends in PNG's Bougainville

ARAWA, Bougainville, Apr 30: The 10-year civil war on Papua New Guinea's (PNG) Bougainville island was officially declared ended here today, with a formal peace ceremony signing and a dramatic laying down of arms, reports AFP.

Albania and Macedonia.

The contact group — the United States, Russia, France, Britain, Germany and Italy — called on both Belgrade and Kosovo's ethnic Albanian leadership to open "unconditional dialogue" immediately to end an "unacceptable status quo."

43 Italian senators call to lift embargo against Libya

ROME, Apr 30: A group of 43 Italian senators have signed a motion calling for an end to the embargo against Libya and urging the government to resume ties with Tripoli, parliamentary sources said Wednesday.

Among the 43 signatories calling for "full resumption of Libya's relations with the international community and with the European Union in particular," were the leaders of the Senate groups of the majority democratic left, Cesare Salvi and of the reformed Communist Party, Luigi Marini.

US, Europe impose new sanctions on Belgrade

ROME, Apr 30: The United States and Europe have slapped new sanctions on Belgrade and given it 10 days to open dialogue with ethnic Albanian leaders in Kosovo or risk tougher penalties after warning of an explosive new Balkan conflict, reports Reuter.

The six-nation contact group, which met in Rome on Wednesday amid the prospect of an escalating Kosovo crisis, said in a statement that, with the exception of Russia, its members had decided to freeze Yugoslavia's assets aboard and would stiffen the sanctions if the situation was still stalled by May 9.

"We think the package is a good one and it offers Yugoslavia President Slobodan Milosevic a stark choice," US State Department spokesman James Foley told reporters in Washington.

While Russia declined to back the economic sanctions, it joined the other five nations of the contact group to condemn excessive use of force by the Yugoslav army in Kosovo and warn that the conflict risked spreading outside Kosovo into neighbouring countries, such as

Off the Record

'Titanic' breaks yet another record!

NEWARK, New Jersey: The top-grossing film of all time is also No. 1 on the US black market, reports AP.

"Titanic," the ocean liner disaster movie that picked up eleven Academy Awards, has become the most-wanted pirate video on the streets across the United States.

The Motion Picture Association of America's video piracy unit has seized 1,500 videos from street vendors in New York City since January, and dozens more in sweeps in Newark, Philadelphia, Chicago and Cleveland.

The video, two tapes selling for about 10 dollars, comes in a professional-looking sleeve with photography of scenes from the film, said Bill Shannon, who heads the association's East Coast anti-piracy unit.

The illegal tapes are believed to be copies of the videotapes sent to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' 5,400 voters. Paramount mailed out copies to each voter in its Academy Award campaign. Other "Titanic" videos are poor-quality versions made by people who smuggle camcorders into theatres, Shannon said — with grainy film, background noise and the occasional audience member walking in front of the camera.

"Titanic" has grossed 560.6 million dollars in the United States and more than 1 billion dollars globally, making it the best selling movie of all time.

The secret of wisdom in old age...

WASHINGTON: The secret to wisdom in old age may be as simple as keeping stimulated and interested in life, researchers said on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

They said that aging mice who were kept in a stimulating environment — with tunnels, toys and an exercise wheel — grew more new brain cells than bored mice.

Fred Gage and colleagues at The Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, were working with "senior citizen" mice that were 18 months old.

Half lived in "standard" cages with just food and water supplied, while half were put in a large cage with tunnels and a little wheel to run on.

The fund ran out for the aged mice, who were killed after 68 days and their brains examined.

Those in the "enriched" cage had three times as many new cells in the hippocampus, a part of the brain important to learning and memory, the researchers reported in The Journal of Neuroscience.

3 killed in Tajikistan clash:

Government and opposition forces clashed Thursday near the Tajikistan capital and officials said at least three soldiers were killed and eight wounded, AP reports from Dushanbe.

The fighting outside Dushanbe — plus clashes further east on Wednesday — were the latest setbacks to a fragile 1997 peace agreement that formally ended a five-year civil war in Tajikistan. The Interior Ministry said fighting near Rokhaty, 10 km east of Dushanbe, began when opposition troops attacked a government security outpost and tried to seize a ministry building. The Defense Ministry said three soldiers were killed and eight wounded.

Dalai Lama begins US visit: The Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled spiritual leader, arrived in New York on Wednesday to begin a two-week US visit. Reuters reports from New York.

His New York office said that during his tour, he would reiterate his goal of entering into unconditional negotiations with China and state that he is prepared to set aside full sovereignty for Tibet in exchange for self-rule. China, which has controlled Tibet since 1950, has rejected talks with the Dalai Lama.

3 die in Malaysian car chase: A car chase and shootout in the Malaysian capital Thursday killed three people suspected to be illegal migrants, the domestic news agency said, AP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

A police patrol followed a stolen car with the three men in it and was fired upon when police asked the driver to pull over. Kuala Lumpur Police Chief Kamaruddin Ali was quoted as saying by the Bernama news agency. The absence of any identification papers on the dead have led the police to believe that the three were illegal migrants trying to avoid the law.

Hiroshima Museum to expand: The peace museum in Hiroshima has completed a thorough cataloging of objects related to the atomic bomb attack during World War II and will soon expand its public display, officials said Thursday, AP reports from Tokyo.

The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum has just completed a three-year effort to catalog about 12,000 objects — mostly roof tiles in its collection, much of which had been left unsorted in storage.

54 Canadian troops exonerated: A military review board has exonerated 54 of the 60 Canadian soldiers who were accused of misconduct in 1994 while on peacekeeping duty from Toronto.

The troops under command of Lt Col. David Moore were accused of alcohol abuse, sexual misconduct, black marketeering and violence against patients at a mental hospital in Bakovici, Bosnia. Gen. Maurice Baril, Canada's chief of staff confirmed Wednesday that most of the allegations proved to be unfounded. Military officials had no comment on the cases of the six soldiers found to have committed offenses.

1 held for Russian newsman's death: A third suspect has been arrested in the killing of a Russian investigative journalist and was charged with premeditated murder, authorities said Thursday. The Prosecutor General's office refused to release any information about the suspect, AP reports from Moscow.

Dmitry Kholodov, a 27-year-old reporter with the popular daily Moskovsky Komsomolets, died in October 1994 when a briefcase supposedly provided by an informant exploded in his hands at the newspaper's office. At the time, Kholodov was investigating corruption in the military. In February, authorities arrested retired Col. Pavel Popovskikh, former chief of intelligence in the Russian paratroop forces, and paratroop Maj. Vladimir Morozov, and charged both with being involved in the killing.

5 hurt in Lebanese shelling: Five members of an Israeli-allied militia were injured Wednesday when Muslim guerrillas shelled their position in south Lebanon, security officials said, AP reports from Marjayoun.

Three of the injured militiamen of the South Lebanon Army were in serious condition, said the officials, speaking on the customary condition of anonymity. SLA and Israeli positions in the area retaliated with shells on suspected guerrilla positions, but no casualties were reported, the officials said.

Students protest in Jakarta: Student protesters lobbed stones Thursday at anti-riot police who tried to block their attempt to march off a Jakarta campus and into the street, AP reports from Jakarta.

The violence broke out after demonstrators gathered at the Islamic Teaching Institute in the southern part of the capital to demand economic reform and the ouster of President Suharto.

Lankan troops destroy 2 rebel bunkers, 10 killed

COLOMBO, Apr 30: Government forces destroyed two rebel bunkers and attacked two reconnaissance posts in northern Sri Lanka, killing at least 10 guerrillas, the military said Thursday, reports AP.

The military targeted the forward rebel posts on Wednesday near Nankulam, the biggest town along a strategic rebel-controlled road that it has been trying to capture for nearly a year. The town is located 245 kilometers (150 miles) north of Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital.

Eight guerrillas were killed but there were no casualties on the government side, said Brigadier Sarath Munasinghe, the military spokesman.

Government troops so far have captured about two-thirds of the 77-kilometre (48-mile) highway that would provide a

US urges China to curb arms export, improve HR

BEIJING, Apr 30: US President Bill Clinton urged Chinese President Jiang Zemin on Thursday to move forward on human rights and religious freedom while curbing exports of weapons technology. Clinton also gave assurances his long-term vision was one of "constructive cooperation" between their two countries, reports AP.

Clinton's views were contained in a message that US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright delivered to Jiang as they made preparations for Clinton's state visit in June. The Chinese leader, in a good mood, took Albright on a tour of his 600-year old compound

Along Clinton's suggestions were exchanges of scientists and health and education specialists.

But he did not gloss over "specific areas of concern," ac-

cording to James P. Rubin, the State Department spokesman. These included a need to conclude arrangements for China to join the World Trade Organization, the international rule-setting body for trade, and coping with energy and environmental problems, the US official said.

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"I bring you very warm personal greetings from President Clinton, and he is very much looking forward to his visit in June," Albright said.

When she handed Jiang a large envelope with Clinton's letter the Chinese president laughed and gave her one of his own. "I have a reply, but not to this one," he said.

Jiang conversed with Albright in English and showed her renovations being made for the summit. "I am sure he will like it," Jiang said of the pavilion in which he will talk to Clinton.

Earlier, Albright suggested the administration was prepared to ease some US sanctions imposed on China after the 1989 crackdown on democracy demonstrators at Tiananmen Square.

She made the offer at a meeting with American business executives, whose opportunities for profit in the burgeoning Chinese market are impeded by the suspension in arms trade, export licenses for satellites and restrictions on insuring investments here.

In less than two years, the group murdered 18 people, injured two others, raped three women and stole cash and goods worth 54,000 yuan (US \$6,520) in four provinces and seven cities, it said. They were arrested last year.

Zhou Gang, Jiang Zhenlong, Bu Long, Liu Baohua, and Zhang Yuxun were executed by gunshot recently in Xiangfan city, in central Hunan province, the Shanghai-based newspaper reported.

Abu Hamdan's birthplace, the village of Al Walaja with orchards of figs, grapes and almonds just south of Jerusalem, was razed during the 1948 war. A gleaming Israeli shopping mall and a zoo now stand in its place.

Abu Hamdan said by the time Jewish militiamen approached in 1948, most of the villagers had fled, believing his large hand tightly clutching blue worry beads.

"Over there, the celebrations, and over here, the dirty camps," Abu Hamdan, wearing a long grey robe and a white prayer cap, said bitterly Wednesday, his large hand tightly clutching blue worry beads.

During the 1948 Middle East war that followed Israel's cre-

ation about 700,000 Palestinians fled or were driven out by Israel. Today, the refugees and their descendants number 3.4 million and live in camps scattered throughout the Middle East.

The fate of the refugees is to be addressed in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians on a final peace agreement. Although Palestinians demand the right to return to their homes in what is now Israel, it is likely the best they can hope for is compensation.

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Abu Hamdan said by the time Jewish militiamen approached in 1948, most of the villagers had fled, believing they would be able to return.

On Wednesday evening, he watched the Palestinian Authority's official Palestine TV in his living room while waiting for the jubilee fireworks to start. Old black-and-white film footage of Palestinian refugees lining up for UN rations of flour and sugar in the 1950s flashed across the screen.

British actress Helena Bonham Carter, left, filmmaker Kenneth Branagh and actress Zoë Wanamaker, right, in conversation with Queen Elizabeth II, at a reception for the British Arts at Windsor Castle Wednesday.

— AP/UNB photo

Israel's 50th birthday bash eludes the Palestinians

ANATA REFUGEE CAMP, West Bank, Apr 30: From the roof of his home, Ali Abu Hamdan craned his neck to catch a glimpse of the fireworks lighting up the Jerusalem skyline in the distance, reports AP.

Israel was celebrating its 50th birthday with a boisterous bash. But in the Anata Refugee Camp, Israel's joy caused only pain and bitter memories.

"I guess they (the Israelis) have a right to do this. They did conquer us. But at the same time, I will not forget that this celebration comes ... at the expense of a better future for my children," said Abu Hamdan 70.