

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 deal 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.

NUS 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

IRA won't disarm as part of proposed peace accord

BELFAST, Northern Ireland, Apr 30: The Irish Republican Army announced Thursday it will not disarm as part of Northern Ireland's proposed peace accord — but cleared the way for its allied Sinn Féin party to accept the compromise agreement, reports AP.

In a statement the IRA reaffirmed its willingness to continue its July 1997 ceasefire. But the outlawed group dismissed the section of the April 10 agreement requiring rival paramilitary groups to 'decommission' weaponry, starting in June and finishing within two years.

Let us make it clear there will be no decommissioning by the IRA, the seven-member command said in the IRA-Sinn Féin movement's weekly newspaper, Republican News.

Pro-British Protestant leaders, united in anger, said the IRA and Sinn Féin are trying to have the benefits of peace without the obligations.

Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble, head of the biggest Protestant party, said Sinn Féin was ineligible to partici-

pate in the new Belfast administration until the IRA started disarming.

"Sinn Féin and the IRA are one and the same," said Trimble, who accepts the accord even though it has split his party. "You cannot say that there's a peace agreement if some party has a private army armed to the teeth ready for action."

Sinn Féin chairman Mitchell McLaughlin welcomed the statement.

The IRA commanders said the unsigned agreement reached by the British and Irish governments and eight parties, including Sinn Féin, represents a "significant development" but "clearly falls short of presenting a solid basis for a lasting settlement."

The agreement would create a new Northern Ireland administration that formally cooperates with the Irish Republic in policy-making committees. It also calls for a wider programme of reforms in this Protestant-majority British province which the IRA has sought to destroy.

The IRA offered no advice on

how to vote in a May 22 referendum on the agreement, saying supporters should follow "their own view and the advice of their political leaders."

Sinn Féin leaders, eager to sell the deal's merits as a stepping stone to a united Ireland, will seek endorsement of the accord from their party supporters May 10.

McLaughlin said the IRA probably would not disarm until Ireland was united — but Protestants shouldn't use the IRA's hidden arsenal as an "obstacle" to bar Sinn Féin from the new Northern Ireland administration.

Sinn Féin does not have control over those who have control over guns, he said, adding people should work for a society in which the IRA would be prepared to disarm.

The Rev. Ian Paisley, the hard-line Protestant evangelist campaigning for a no vote, warned Trimble's supporters: "You are voting for the IRA to keep their guns and to put them into government with their military machine intact."

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 "concrete 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

and a lakeside pavilion where some of the summit will be conducted.

The thrust of Clinton's letter was a desire to build on the momentum toward better ties that were established when Jiang visited Washington last October. He told the Chinese leader he wanted to see "new steps" taken to expand contacts between the two governments and their people.

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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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.



US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright hands a letter from President Bill Clinton to Chinese President Jiang Zemin in Beijing Thursday. — AP/UNB photo

' 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 realise 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.

Whitewater probe Hillary refuses to answer 2 questions

WASHINGTON, Apr 30: As a grand jury in Arkansas watched first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's videotaped testimony Wednesday, her lawyer confirmed she had refused to answer two questions in the Whitewater inquiry on grounds of marital privilege, reports AP.

Questions in Saturday's five-hour White House session that Mrs. Clinton declined to respond to dealt with "conversations that plainly fell under the long-standing common-law privilege for marital communications," attorney David Kendall said in a statement.



Former White House intern Monica Lewinsky arrives at her family home in Brentwood, Los Angeles, Wednesday. On Wednesday a federal judge ruled Lewinsky does not have immunity from prosecution in the investigation concerning her relationship with President Clinton. — AP/UNB photo

China executes "five tigers"

BEIJING, Apr 30: China has executed five criminals, who nicknamed themselves the "five tigers of the northeast," for a spree of murder, rape and robbery, the official Wen Hui Daily said Thursday, reports AP.

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

Zhou, from China's Inner Mongolia region, was sentenced in 1993 to 2 1/2 years imprisonment for robbery, but escaped and met up with the four others in northeast Liaoning province, the newspaper said.

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 (dollar 6,520) in four provinces and seven cities, it said. They were arrested last year.

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 pirate 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.

Torture and atrocities were

being committed against the people, "is this democracy?" she asked.

She said the governor gave a patient hearing and assured them of looking into their grievances.

The delegation included seven MPs of Trinamool Congress besides representatives of Samata Party, Lok Shakti and JJP and other constituents of the front.

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.

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.

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 Reuters.

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 abroad 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 Yugoslav 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

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, reports AFP.

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 Marino.

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 toys 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.

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 kilometres (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

road link to government-controlled Jaffna Peninsula.

There was no independent confirmation of the government claim since journalists are barred from entering the war zone. The rebels didn't react to the military statement.

Also Wednesday, a military patrol destroyed two rebel bunkers near Killinochchi, killing two guerrillas, said Munasinghe. The town is 275 kilometres (170 miles) north of Colombo.

Another rebel was killed by police commandos in neighbouring Ampara district.

The rebels are demanding a separate homeland, accusing the Sinhalese majority of widespread discrimination against minority Tamils. More than 52,000 have been killed since the fighting erupted in 1983.

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, a retired construction worker.

"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 clenching 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.

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 they would be able to return

quickly after an Arab victory. Along with four comrades, Abu Hamdan held out against the Jewish fighters for nine hours. "We fought with pride, we resisted, but we had no help," he said.

In 1966, after living in various parts of the West Bank and Jerusalem's Old City — at the time still under Jordanian control — Abu Hamdan and 500 other refugee families were moved by the Jordanian government to the newly created Anata Refugee Camp which straddles the line between Jerusalem and the West Bank.

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 Zoe Wannamaker, right, in conversation with Queen Elizabeth II, at a reception for the British Arts at Windsor Castle Wednesday. — AP/UNB photo