

About 100 die of starvation in central Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD, May 2: About 100 people mostly women and children, are feared to have died of starvation in central Afghanistan's Hazarajat region isolated by a Taliban blockade, the UN food agency said on Friday, reports AFP.

Tens of thousands face starvation in Hazarajat, home to some 1.2 million people living in mountain clinging villages, the World Food Programme (WFP) said in a statement.

The region includes Bamiyan province and parts of Ghor, Wardak, Uruzgan and Ghazni provinces. It has been isolated to the south, west and east by a blockade imposed by the Taliban last year.

The route from the north, which is controlled by anti-Taliban forces, has been unsafe for food convoys due to factional

fighting and danger of looting and other risks.

The Taliban, who control much of the rest of Afghanistan, have not allowed food supplies to the opposition held Hazarajat because they claim these feed the troops of their enemies.

WFP missions scouring the region have reported pockets of severe hunger, dwindling food supplies empty marketplaces and as many as 108 unconfirmed deaths by starvation mostly of women and children, the agency said.

The toll includes 45 reported dead in Uruzgan, where some 3,000 families will be running out of food in a matter of days, it added.

The Taliban delegation has returned home for consultations with the leadership.

India will review culture, sports policy with Pakistan

BOMBAY, May 2: India's government will review whether to allow artists and athletes from rival Pakistan to perform in India, the Prime Minister said Friday, reports AP.

Atal Behari Vajpayee's comment came after activists of the Hindu right-wing Shiv Sena party disrupted a concert by a Pakistani singer last week.

The Shiv Sena, which is a coalition partner of Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party in the western Maharashtra state and in the federal government, are demanding that Pakistanis be banned from performing in the state capital Bombay.

The party said Pakistanis were not welcome in

Bombay as long as Pakistan supported Muslim militants in India's troubled northern Kashmir state.

"I do not approve of such bans," Vajpayee told reporters.

Pakistani performers do not face such problems in other Indian cities.

"What should be our cultural policy and policy with regard to sports with Pakistan," Vajpayee said. "I will have talks with other political parties and arrive at a consensus decision."

India and Pakistan have fought two wars over Kashmir, a territory they both claim.

Vajpayee said India was ready to talk with Pakistan as long as all bilateral issues were discussed and not just Kashmir.

BRIEFLY

Six die in south India blast:

Six people died and several more were injured when firecrackers stored in a house exploded in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the United News of India reported Saturday. AFP reports from New Delhi.

The victims were making firecrackers in a bungalow when they blew up late Friday night, it said. The explosion reduced the building in a coastal village to rubble, four victims were in hospital in critical condition.

Albright in Mongolia: US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, winding up her weeklong trip to Asia, preached the virtues of democracy and free markets to the leaders of a still mostly nomadic Mongolia struggling to modernise their country, AP says from Mongolia.

In a statement Friday, Albright reaffirmed the US commitment to close cooperation with Mongolia. She met with the new prime minister, Tsakhya Elbaggard, who is pursuing a painful economic programme in which prices for electricity and food are rising beyond most people's capacity to pay. The country's per capita income is about \$20 dollars per year.

Yeltsin's aide kidnapped: President Boris Yeltsin's representative in Chechnya was kidnapped yesterday.

Interfax News Agency said quoting the Interior ministry, AFP says from Moscow.

It said the envoy Valentin Vlassov, was in the Republic of Ingushetia just a few kilometres from the border with Chechnya when he was abducted. The circumstances of the kidnapping were not immediately known.

4 police officers shot dead in S Russia:

An unidentified assailant gunned down four traffic police officers on Friday in southern Russia's Adygei republic, ITAR-TASS said, AFP says from Moscow.

The attacker killed the officers with a pistol before stalling weapons from their post and escaping in a police vehicle. The car was found abandoned in a nearby village. An eyewitness claimed to have seen the assailant after being stopped by police at the post to have his documents checked.

German, Israel troops train together:

Officer cadets from the German Army are to train for the first time with Israeli troops, the defence ministry said late Friday, AFP reports from Bonn.

The 17 cadets will begin a three-week stint on Sunday with a visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial commemorating the genocide of Europe's Jews at the hands of the German Nazis during World War II.

Tremors shake east Turkey: A moderate earthquake shook the eastern Turkish city of Erzurum and its environs Friday, injuring two people and destroying 15 houses, AP says from Turkey.

The quake with a preliminary magnitude of 4.2, struck at 1345 GMT and caused 15 houses to collapse in the village of Koprucay, the Anatolian news agency said. The injured, a mother and her 5-year-old son, were reported in stable condition. Turkey's entire eastern region sits atop an earthquake-prone belt known as the Anatolian fault.

42 drowned in south China: Forty-two people drowned when a boat overcrowded with villagers overturned in southern China, a state-controlled newspaper reported from Beijing.

The boat set off with 109 people, 13 bicycles and three motorcycles at 6:20 am April 27 from a village in Boyang County in Jiangxi province and got only 40 metres (yards) from shore when it began to sink and then overturned when people panicked, the Yancheng Evening News reported Friday. It did not say if the boat sank on Boyang Lake or one of the many rivers in the area. The other 67 people were rescued.

Economic crisis straining edn system: Suharto

JAKARTA, May 2: As student protesters staged rallies to demand his ouster, President Suharto said Saturday that Indonesia's economic crisis was straining the education system, reports AP.

In a speech marking national education day, the 76-year-old leader urged the Education Ministry to take steps to allow cash-strapped students to continue their studies. Students have complained they cannot afford to buy books or pay tuition.

The monetary crisis has placed a bigger burden on the government and society and educational institutions in particular," Suharto told a gathering of dignitaries at a state palace.

Meanwhile, students gathered at campuses in Jakarta to demonstrate against the government's handling of the financial turmoil, which erupted last year with a plunge in the value of the rupiah.

"Trucks of anti-riot police parked outside at least two campuses where rallies were held."

EU calls for immediate truce in Sudan

LONDON, May 2: The European Union on Friday called for an immediate ceasefire in the Sudan ahead of peace talks, and urged the government to facilitate UN emergency aid to the south of the country where thousands face starvation, reports AP.

The EU is increasingly concerned about the worsening humanitarian crisis in Bahr al-Ghazal in southern Sudan," the EU said in a statement issued by Britain, the current president of the 15-nation group.

International

Iraq warns UN of 'grave consequences' if sanctions not lifted

BAGHDAD, May 2: Iraq has warned the UN Security Council of "grave consequences" if it does not lift sanctions, the Iraqi News Agency reported Friday, says AP.

The warning was sent in an open letter to the Security Council. It represented the Iraqi leadership's formal response to the Council's decision Monday to renew for another six months the sweeping trade embargo imposed after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

The letter came from Iraq's two top decision-making bodies, the Revolutionary Command Council and the Baath Party Command, which met Thursday under the chairmanship of President Saddam Hus-

sein.

In the letter, the leadership said Iraq has fulfilled all its obligations in terms of UN resolutions that require the elimination of its weapons of mass destruction.

Iraq will "wait and see how the Security Council behaves," it said. "The American injustice is still continuing in the crime of embargo."

"It is painful for the Iraqis that the Security Council remains the hostage of one member-nation," the letter said in a clear reference to the United States.

The letter recalled statements issued by Iraq shortly before the Security Council's meeting Monday when Baghdad threatened unspecified retaliation if there was no sanctions relief.

Council diplomats have said the embargo will not be lifted until Iraq has eliminated such weapons and fulfilled other obligations concerning the invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War.

Earlier this week, Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Shahna said the Council's decision was "very disappointing" and accused the United States of manipulating the world body.

UN weapons inspectors have repeatedly reported that Iraq has failed to account for all its mass-destruction armaments, and accused Baghdad of hiding important data.

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Israel attacks rebel base in south Lebanon

TYRE, Lebanon, May 2: An Israeli helicopter gunship blasted a suspected guerrilla base in south Lebanon Friday, hours after a militant attack, Lebanese security officials said, reports AP.

The helicopter fired two missiles at a position on the outskirts of the village of Mansouri, 13 kilometres south of the port of Tyre, at 1400 GMT, the officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Guerillas of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah earlier fired mortars and rockets at an outpost of the Israeli-allied south Lebanon Army militia in the Israeli-occupied zone, the officials said.

There was no report of casualties in either attack.

Friday's air strike was the second by Israeli helicopters this week.

On Monday, Israeli gunships attacked suspected guerrilla hideouts in south Lebanon after six Israeli soldiers and an Israeli-allied militia were wounded in Hezbollah attacks. In another incident Wednesday, five members of the SLA militia were wounded by Hezbollah militants.

Netanyahu has rejected US proposals for a withdrawal from 13 per cent of the West Bank and he insisted Friday that the Palestinians, who have reluctantly accepted the US compromise although it falls far short of their original demands, must make further concessions.

Not only Israel has to give but both sides have to find ways to address each other's needs if the Palestinians come in with a fixed position, saying Israel should budge, that's not a recipe for success," he said after lengthy talks with Gore.

Netanyahu repeated his position that Israel alone would decide the extent of the withdrawal. "These are complex issues which the US and Israel agree should be left in Israel's hands," he said.

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Press freedoms survey reveals

'Only 20pc global people enjoy free press'

Sao Tome and Principe rose to "free." Albania, the Central African Republic and Zambia rose to "partly free."

Leonard Sussman, the author of the report, noted that government restraints on the news media contributed to the recent Asian financial crisis.

"Pervasive and institutionalized press controls allowed corruption, cronyism and had economic policy to flourish while the Asian public remained ignorant of and unprepared for the impending collapse," added Sussman.

He noted that Japan and the Philippines, both in the "free" category, show signs of weathering the crisis while Malaysia and Indonesia, in the "not free" category, have suffered the most.

Economist Sam Khan does not agree with that analysis.

"Having freedom of the press, a democratic institution and free flow of information is important in its own right. It's also important for the well-functioning of an economic system," noted Khan.

"But the absence of freedom of the press doesn't automatically mean that you're going to have disasters and its presence doesn't automatically guarantee that no financial or economic problems will occur," he added.

Kahan cited as an example Australia, a democracy that has economic problems, and China, which is not a democracy but which has escaped devastating economic problems.

Jews, Christians hate Muslims : Gaddafi

N'DJAMENA, Chad, May 2:

In a prayer sermon that marked the first Friday of the Islamic New Year, Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi accused Jews and Christians of hating Muslims and insulting the Prophet Mohammed, reports AP.

Gaddafi arrived in Thursday in a 315-vehicle convoy for a three-day visit. It was his first trip to Libya's southern neighbour since Libyan troops occupied northern Chad in 1980-81.

Squatting on mats near the dais were presidents Idriss Deby of Chad, Gen. Sani Abacha of Nigeria, Yaya Jammeh of Gambia, Bakili Muluzi of Malawi, Omar el-Bashir of Sudan, Ahmed Tejan Kabbah of Sierra Leone, Omar Bongo of Gabon, Ibrahim Barre Mainassara of Niger and Mathieu Kerekou of Benin.

Gaddafi accused Christians and Jews of insulting the Prophet Mohammed and referred to the book "The Satanic Verses" by Salman Rushdie.

There were no casualties on the government side in the fighting, 250 kilometres north of the capital, Colombo.

Mankulam is the largest town along a strategic 77-kilometre road that the army has been trying to capture from the rebels for nearly a year in the longest and bloodiest offensive of its 15-year-old civil war.

But heavy casualties in the campaign have exhausted both sides. The military says it has lost more than 1,000 soldiers and has killed more than 3,000 guerrillas. The rebels have not given casualty figures for the entire offensive.

Fatal liquor kills 32 in India

NEW DELHI, May 2: At least 32 people have died after drinking bootleg liquor in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported today, reports AFP.

The Indian express newspaper said the toll was likely to pass 60 with more and more people being brought to hospital and was the worst such case reported in the state. The deaths took place at Benitojila village on Thursday, the news agency said. Twenty people were taken to hospital immediately afterwards.

State government officials said the victims, including women, bought the illicit liquor from a private store and died after a late night party.