

Sudanese, Somali factions urged to make compromise

NAIROBI, May 5: United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan Monday called on conflicting parties in Sudan and Somalia to expedite their search for a peaceful settlement of their conflicts by making compromise, reports Xinhua.

At a press conference held here at the headquarters of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the UN chief expressed his support to the peace efforts made by the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD) in settling these conflicts.

"I am pleased to learn that the IGAD mediators and the parties to the conflict in southern Sudan are reconvening their talks in Nairobi during my stay here," said Annan.

He told reporters that he was briefed Monday morning by the managers of Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) which is striving to avert a catastrophe in southern Sudan.

The World Food Programme (WFP) warned last month that the food situation in Bahr el Ghazal region in southern Sudan has reached a critical level and the threat of thousands of people dying from lack of food and disease was becoming reality.

"I am pleased to note the flight approvals given yesterday (Sunday) in Khartoum by the government of Sudan which will allow us to increase nearly three fold our deliveries of assistance in the coming four months," Annan said.

It is essential that this humanitarian access be maintained in the months to come regardless of the outcome of the on-going peace talks held in Nairobi, he added.

According to the OLS, following the flight approval by Khartoum, OLS is able to deliver about 6,000 tons of relief food per month to southern Sudan.

"This will greatly assist OLS to meet the food needs of 380,000 people in both government and rebel-held areas of Bahr el Ghazal and an additional 410,000 people facing severe hunger in other parts of southern Sudan," John Luk Jok, spokesman of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), said in Nairobi Monday.

Pak scientist denies offering nuclear bomb plans to Iraq

ISLAMABAD, May 5: Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan, the man the Iraqis say offered to sell them plans for nuclear weapons, called the allegations "totally false, unfounded and baseless," reports AP.

"I have never put my foot on Iraqi soil... we have no contact whatsoever," he told The Associated Press in an interview Tuesday in the Pakistani capital. "I honestly don't even know who was the chief of Iraq's nuclear programme. I don't know."

Khan, a top scientist revered here as the architect of Pakistan's nuclear programme, was identified in a Newsweek report as possibly offering to provide Iraq with designs for a nuclear bomb.

The document was apparently turned over by Iraq after the 1995 defection of Saddam Hussein's son-in-law Lt Gen Hussein Kamel, who ran Iraq's secret weapons programme through the 1980s, Newsweek said.

The International Atomic Energy Agency is investigating the affair.

"We will wait for reaction from the person they named in the story," IAEA spokesman David Kyd said in Vienna.

Khan told the AT that no offer was ever made to Iraq.

"All these accusations are totally false, unfounded and baseless... how could a person in my position indulge in such things?" he said.

In a telephone interview, Khan said that he suspected Iraq wouldn't have the technology to put a bomb together even if it was given a design.

"As a scientist and engineer I know very well that the technical competence (in Iraq) is just not good enough to absorb such technology," said Khan.

But the man credited with giving Pakistan the capability to make a nuclear bomb told AP that it's not unusual for him to be at the centre of allegations.

He is accused of stealing the centrifugal design used by Pakistan in its nuclear programme from Holland where he once worked.

"First they accuse me of stealing secrets from Holland... I usually don't respond to the accusations... it's really very unfair," he said.

Pakistan is the target of US sanctions because of its nuclear programme. In 1990 all military and economic aid from the United States was cut off after the US administration decided Pakistan had crossed the nuclear threshold.

Since then Pakistan has been accused of acquiring nuclear technology from China, a close ally and the architect of a 300 megawatt nuclear power plant.

Last year there was a controversy over the Chinese sale of ring magnets, used in the development of nuclear weapons, to Pakistan. Both countries denied breaking any international laws.

Khan said the Chinese and Pakistani nuclear systems are different.



Taliban troops adjust their artillery in the frontline area north of Kabul on Monday. The Taliban accused the opposition forces for the renewed fighting in the north of Afghanistan Monday. — AP/UNB photo



Shi'ite (Shia) Muslim mourners beat their chest during a procession in old Srinagar, India, Monday in remembrance of Prophet Mohammad's grandson Imam Hussain and his followers, who were killed by forces of 'Yazeed' some 1,400 years back at Sham in west Asia. — AP/UNB photo

No breakthrough yet in ME peace talks

LONDON, May 5: Holding another round of back-to-back talks with Israeli and Palestinian leaders, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright is risking breakdown and seeking a breakthrough in the stalled Mideast peace process, reports AP.

Albright's aim is persuading Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to better his offer of a 10 per cent pullback from the West Bank.

She set up a Tuesday breakfast meeting with Netanyahu, their third session in less than 24 hours, and arranged a second meeting with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

"Clearly the timetable has been extended," US State Department spokesman James P. Rubin said. "We are ever so slightly more hopeful." But he told reporters that "we do not have compelling evidence the meetings will yield a breakthrough" and spoke of "grave risks of disillusionment and violence in the Middle East."

Whatever was said privately Monday, Israeli and Palestinian officials fought a public, rhetorical duel.

Senior Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat claimed Monday that Netanyahu "presented nothing whatsoever" in his talks with Albright and was simply drawing out the process.

Netanyahu said the next move was up to Arafat, and the US government continued to play down expectations. At the end of a first round of talks Monday, Rubin said there was no sign that mediators could "bridge the gaps."

Xinhua adds: King Hussein of Jordan, Saudi Arabian King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on Monday expressed hope that the Palestinian and Israeli leaders will come out of the London meeting with a breakthrough in the stalled Mideast peace process.

In his separate telephone calls to Fahd and Mubarak, Hussein hoped that the London meeting will be successful and the peace process see some new lights, particularly on the Palestinian-Israeli track.

Nurses on strike in New Delhi

NEW DELHI, May 5: Hospitals were paralysed and emergency services thrown out of gear here today as thousands of nurses joined an indefinite strike to demand higher wages and perks, officials said, reports AP.

Federal Health Ministry officials said the Indian capital's 28 state-run hospitals and emergency services were "severely affected by the strike by the paramedics."

A spokeswoman from the Delhi Nurses Union said some 11,000 nurses walked out of wards early Tuesday and joined sit-ins outside their hospitals.

She said some of the nurses also started a hunger strike outside the Health Ministry to demand higher wages and perks such as washing allowances, house rent, quicker promotion and better training facilities.

Russia, China open telephone hotline

BEIJING, May 5: Presidents Jiang Zemin of China and Boris Yeltsin of Russia have officially opened a telephone hotline link between them, the Foreign Ministry said today, reports AP.

This is the first hotline telephone between the Chinese leader and the leader of a foreign country. Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao told a press briefing.

Last week China said it would also set up a hotline with the United States. US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and China's Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan signed a "hotline accord" last Wednesday.

China lashes out at Indian defence minister Vajpayee upset with Fernandes' comment describing China as enemy

NEW DELHI, May 5: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is upset with his outspoken Defence Minister George Fernandes, who described China as India's number one enemy, a newspaper said today, reports AP.

The Times of India said Vajpayee, who also holds the external affairs portfolio, plans to advise his Cabinet colleagues holding "sensitive" ministries against making strong remarks.

The prime minister is learnt to be perturbed over his defence minister's comments as India and China are in the process of strengthening their ties, the daily said of George Fernandes.

Fernandes, a firebrand socialist in the Hindu nationalist-led coalition, told a private TV network Sunday that India faced a bigger threat from China than arch-rival Pakistan.

He also said India, which fought a brief but bitter war with China in 1962, would make nuclear weapons if it ran out of options.

"China is potential threat number one," Fernandes said.

"The potential threat from China is greater than that from Pakistan, and any person who is concerned about India's security must agree with that fact."

He said China had stockpiled nuclear weapons in Tibet along India's northern borders and military airfields in Tibet had been extended in the last six months.

He also said China was training Myanmar's Army and had set up a "massive electronic surveillance establishment" on Myanmar's Coco Islands on the northern tip of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Sino-Indian tensions eased following a series of high-level contacts which began after a visit by then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to Beijing in 1988.

Fernandes is a long-time critic of China and a supporter of Tibet's independence. Last month he alleged that China had illegally built a heliport on Indian territory.

Fernandes' comments followed the first-ever visit to India by a chief of the Chinese Army, General Fu Quanyou.

India says China still holds 40,000 square km of its territory in Kashmir, China lays claim to a swathe of Indian territory in the far eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh.

On Monday, the Indian External Affairs Ministry, headed by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, declined to comment on Fernandes' remarks.

Indian newspapers also attacked Fernandes today for his comments with some describing them as "verbal ballistic" which could harm Sino-Indian ties.

The Indian Express said verbal ballistic are a notoriously poor substitute for well thought out defence strategies...

The Pioneer said Fernandes ran the risk of creating a diplomatic row. "The government will have to expend a substantial amount of political energy to diffuse the situation."

The Times in an editorial titled "George and the Dragon" cautioned the defence minister and said he needed to learn "prudence."

"It is one thing to feel someone is an enemy and another to tell the enemy precisely what you think of him. The former leads to effective defence preparedness and the latter to dynamic instability in which your enemy begins to alter his strategy."

The mass-circulated Hindustan Times urged Fernandes to be more diplomatic.

"Fernandes would have done well to keep to himself the righteous indignation over China's hegemonistic zeal in this part of the globe as there is very little room in international diplomacy for shooting from the hip."

AP adds: China lashed out Tuesday at India's defence minister for describing Beijing as his country's biggest military threat, and said the comment could hurt chances of improved diplomatic ties.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao said China always worked for friendly relations with its neighbors, including India and Pakistan, and "does not pose any threat to any countries."

Debate over vote counting continues Ranariddh, Hun Sen talk directly for 1st time in 10 months

PHNOM PENH, May 5: Cambodian strongman Hun Sen and deposed co-premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh talked directly for the first time in 10 months today when they discussed by telephone a possible compromise to overcome hurdles to July's scheduled elections, reports AP.

Prince Ranariddh, who only returned to Cambodia permanently from exile on Monday, interrupted a meeting with supporters to take a call from Hun Sen in which the powerful second Prime Minister suggested breaking the impasse which could have led to an opposition boycott of the July 26 polls.

"They discussed compromise," said a top aide to the Prince. Neither Prince Ranariddh nor Hun Sen made any comment on the substance of the call, but immediately afterwards parliament began meeting to discuss amendments to the electoral law.

Parliament was to discuss three items including a delay in the start of voter registration from May 18 to May 23, the appointment of members to the constitutional council and a change in vote-counting locations.

The change in vote counting locations has been the biggest bone of contention.

The opposition wants votes to be counted at the district or provincial level rather than at individual polling stations as currently called for by the law.

Supporters of the prince have said counting the votes at individual polling stations could subject voters to intimidation and harassment as it would allow political parties to identify specific areas in which they lost.

Rioting escalates in Indonesia

JAKARTA, May 5: Thousands of rioters burned cars in a Sumatran city and police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at rock-throwing students in Jakarta on Tuesday as sharp hikes in the cost of fuel and transport kicked in, reports AP.

The violence came as the government pushed through reforms geared to lift Indonesia's drifting economy, but sure to deepen the economic pain of millions of Indonesians.

"Everybody is now complaining about the prices," said Yayah Syamsiah, a 40-year-old noodle vendor in Jakarta who has six children. "Who will listen to us? Ordinary people are crying."

In the second day of violence in the city of Medan, mobs swarmed on to a main highway, torched nine cars and attacked shops owned by Chinese shopkeepers, police said. The ethnic Chinese minority, which dominates commerce in the nation of 200 million, was targeted in deadly riots over price increases in February.

It was not clear if the Medan rioters were reacting to a 71 per cent hike in the price of gasoline Tuesday as well as increases in the cost of kerosene and bus, train and ferry tickets. A day earlier, police battled students during an anti-government protest.

There are thousands of angry people trying to burn houses. They are burning tires and turning over cars," police Lt Col Amrin Karim said. At least 20 anti-riot officers were injured and 59 people arrested.

Campus unrest broke out in Jakarta, where police lobbed tear gas canisters and fired rubber bullets at student protesters demanding the ouster of President Suharto. At least 14 students were injured in two clashes.

Officers also fired warning shots. They often use blanks to disperse protesters.

The news that aid had been resumed did little to soothe student activists in Jakarta. Besides the violence, about 200 protesters held a rare protest outside Parliament, shouting "Fight Suharto" and demanded the lowering of fuel prices.

Tracks of anti-riot police parked nearby, but did not move to enforce a military ban on street rallies. Gen Wiranto, the military chief, has ordered commanders nationwide to get tough with unruly protesters.

Students chanting for democratic reform also marched off the campus at the National Science and Technology Institute in Jakarta. Hundreds of protesters also gathered at a campus in the Java island city of Yogyakarta.

Angry over the fuel price hike, bus drivers refused to drive high school and university students to classes in Kupang, 1,875 km east of the capital. Thousands of students marched in protest to the governor's office.

National prize in honour of Hosni Mubarak's birthday

CAIRO, May 5: The Egyptian parliament created an annual national prize Monday, in honour of President Hosni Mubarak's 70th birthday, to reward Egyptians for creative work in five fields, reports AP.

The parliament unanimously adopted the bill to create the Mubarak prize, which beginning this year will disburse a total of 500,000 pounds to reward creativity in literature and high technology," parliamentary officials said.

The Mubarak prize was proposed by businessman Mohamed Abdul Einem, one of 10 parliamentarians appointed by the President.

Mubarak became President after Anwar El-Sadat was assassinated in 1981 and is the longest-serving president since Egypt became a republic in 1953. He is also its oldest president.

No nepotism, cronyism in Malaysia: Mahathir

KUALA LUMPUR, May 5: Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad Tuesday denied Malaysia was suffering from cronyism and nepotism, charges often cited as reasons for the economic crisis that struck Southeast Asia, reports AP.

"No nepotism, no cronyism in Malaysia," Mahathir told reporters after a meeting with women activists of his party, the United Malays National Organisation.

Everyone is eligible to receive help from the government," he said.

Unlike President Suharto in Indonesia, Mahathir has faced no accusations of directly using his position to benefit his family. But eyebrows were raised when the national oil company Petronas, through the state-controlled Malaysian International Shipping Co, bought shipping assets from a debt-laden shipping company owned by Mahathir's son.

Western commentators have often cited close links between top politicians and businessmen as one of the fatal weaknesses of Southeast Asian economies.

Mahathir said many of his relatives were poor and didn't get help from him. His relatives still live in his hometown in rural northern Malaysia, he said.

Mahathir also criticised US-based ratings agency Standard and Poor's for its assessment of the Malaysian economy.

On April 17, the agency lowered its long-term foreign currency rating on Malaysia to single-A-minus from single-A and its long-term local currency rating to double-A-minus from double-A.

22 drown in China: A Chinese bus plunged off a bridge into the Yellow river, killing 22 people on board the Legal Daily reported today. AFP says from Beijing.

The bus, which was travelling to Zhengzhou in central Henan Province, plunged 12.3 metres off the bridge into the mighty Yellow river early Monday morning.

New ROK envoys for 16 countries: South Korea on Tuesday appointed former presidential aide Ban Ki-moon as its new ambassador to Austria in a major diplomatic reshuffle that also affected France and 15 other countries, AP says from Seoul.

The reshuffle was the most extensive since President Kim Dae-jung's government was inaugurated in February. South Korea earlier had named former Prime Minister Lee Hong-woo as its new envoy to the United States.

Another quake jolts Japan: A moderate earthquake measuring 4.3 on the Richter scale shook the southern Japanese islands of Okinawa yesterday, but there was no likelihood of tidal waves, the meteorological agency said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The epicenter of the quake, which occurred at 11:53 am, was located in the East China sea off Okinawa's main island, the agency said.

Forest fire kills 15 in Mexico: A forest fire in the mountains of southern Puebla state has killed 15 people and injured 11, a state government spokesman said, AP reports from Mexico City.

Four people also were reported missing, the spokesman, Alejandro Perez, said Monday. Hot, dry weather blamed on the EL Nino phenomenon has contributed to a rash of fires that have burned more than 110,000 hectares in Mexico this year.



The leader of rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army, Nhial Deng Nhial, left, at the opening session of peace talks in Nairobi with rebel spokesman John Luke Jok, listen to the opening remarks by Kenyan Foreign Minister Bonyo Godana Monday. Foreign Minister Godana said the rebels and the Islamic government of President Omar el-Bashir have failed to modify their stand on the most contentious issues. — AP/UNB photo

King Birendra urged to fire Indian priest

KATMANDU, May 5: Religious leaders, lawyers and legislators have asked King Birendra to fire Nepal's most important Hindu priest, whom they accuse of corruption, news reports said Tuesday, reports AP.

About 30 people submitted a petition to the king Monday with signatures of 128 members of parliament asking for the removal of Subramanyam Shastri as head priest at Pashupati, Nepal's biggest temple. They also asked that Shastri be replaced with a Nepalese priest — Pashupati priests are traditionally from India's southern Karnataka state.

Shastri has refused to comment on the allegations. The king had no immediate response to the petition.

Though he is not directly responsible for appointing Pashupati priests, who are considered royal priests, King Birendra has great influence over the panel of priests that does.

This Himalayan constitutional monarchy is the world's only Hindu kingdom. Some 90 per cent of Nepal's 21 million people are Hindu.

Shastri's critics accuse him of taking for his personal use millions of rupees in cash and jewelry donated to the temple.

Iran defends its right to attack Iraq-based rebels

TEHRAN, May 5: Iran said Monday it reserved the right to track down and hit armed rebels launching cross-border attacks from neighbouring Iraq, criticising a US report defining such moves as acts of terrorism, reports AP.

The US State Department's Report has interpreted our legitimate right to attack Iraq-based rebels as acts of terrorism," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Mahmud Mohammadi.

"Defending our border dwellers and tracking down terrorist elements along the border is the Islamic Republic's legitimate right."

"We have even informed the United Nations of this," he said, quoted by Iran's official news agency IRNA.

The US State Department, in its annual report released Thursday, said Iran was "the most active state sponsor of terrorism" in 1997 despite the election of moderate president Mohammad Khatami.

Iranian security agents conducted at least 13 assassinations in 1997, the majority of which targeted Iranian dissidents based in northern Iraq, the state department added.

But Mohammadi charged that the United State's "opposition to terrorism is superficial."

"It not only supports Israel's state terrorism but also (places)

Lanka may resort to conscription

COLOMBO, May 5: As an amnesty for deserters began Tuesday, Sri Lanka's top general was quoted as saying an all-volunteer army may not be enough to combat separatist guerrillas, reports AP.

General Anurauddha Ratwatte told Sri Lankan newspaper editors Monday that he may have to resort to conscription if campaigns to recruit 15,000 new soldiers and bring back another 12,000 deserters fails.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the main rebel group, say the minority Tamils can prosper only in their own homeland in the north and east of Sri Lanka. More than 52,000 people have died in the insurrection since 1983.

The military's offensive against the rebels has stalled several times in the past years while the army struggles to replace casualties. Sri Lanka, a nation of 18 million people, has a military force of 114,000.