

International

Arabs urged to look for new ways to pressure Israel

Arafat welcomes US invitation to pursue peace talks in Washington

RABAT, May 6: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat after arriving Tuesday in Morocco, welcomed US President Bill Clinton's invitation to pursue peace negotiations next week in Washington, reports AP.

"We welcome the American idea to continue the negotiations in Washington, aimed at reviving the troubled Middle East peace talks," Arafat said after arriving in Rabat from London.

Talks would up in London earlier Tuesday after two days of frantic shuttle diplomacy by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright who met separately with Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu said he would take Clinton up on his invitation to continue the talks in Washington.

Arafat accused Netanyahu of refusing to respect previous Israeli commitments and agreements concluded with the

Palestinians.

"Peace is a strategic choice for our people and we cannot change it," the Palestinian leader said before briefing Morocco's King Hassan II about the talks in London.

"I came to hear advice from the Moroccan monarch especially because the Palestinian cause is going through difficult conditions," he said.

Albright said earlier that Clinton was offering to host the two leaders on May 11 but added the invitation was conditional on their accepting US proposals on the scope of Israeli troop withdrawals from the West Bank.

So far Netanyahu has strongly rejected the proposals, and he has returned to Israel to confer with his Cabinet on the issue.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Tuesday that he would go to Washington to attend peace talks, following an invitation

from US President Bill Clinton earlier in the day.

"I went to London and I will go to Washington and to any other place to find peace with security," said the Israeli leader on his return from two days of US-sponsored peace talks in London.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who mediated the London talks, said earlier Tuesday that Clinton was offering to host Netanyahu and Arafat on May 11.

But she also said the invitation to the leaders was conditional on them accepting US proposals on the scope of Israeli troop withdrawals from the West Bank.

So far Netanyahu has strongly rejected the proposals, and he has returned to Israel to confer with his Cabinet on the issue.

Another report from Cairo says, the Arab League on Tuesday predicted failure for Palestinian-Israeli meetings expected to take place in Washington to next week and urged Arab leaders to look for new ways to pressure Israel.

"The Washington meeting will not be successful because the reasons leading to the failure of the London talks have not been removed," Assistant Secretary General for political affairs, Mohammad Zakariya Ismail, told reporters.

"Arab leaders must think of alternatives, reconsider the situation and meet in order to discuss what can be done," Ismail said.

According to Ismail one of the alternatives is "to return to the UN Security Council since it is responsible for keeping the peace and security worldwide, and this is what is being threatened now in the Middle East."

Zakariya stressed, however, that "peace remains a strategic option for the Arab countries" which he said are not opposed to the May 11 meetings in Washington.

UK star charged with offenses against children

LONDON, May 6: Police said Tuesday they had charged Gary Glitter with five offenses against children, adding to the 50 charges relating to sexual offenses which the pop star already faces, reports AP.

Avon and Somerset police in western England said that Glitter, 54, was charged with four offenses of indecent assault, and one charge of sexual assault on two girls. One of the charges, police said, related to an incident in 1976. The other four related to charges between 1980 and 1983.

Glitter, who has sold 18 million records over a 25-year period, is best-known for the rousing song, "Rock 'n' Roll, Part 2," which is played at many sporting events.

After five hours of questioning, police charged Glitter in March with 50 offenses of making indecent computer images of children under the age of 16. Police initially questioned Glitter in November after indecent images of children were allegedly found on his personal computer by staff at a repair shop.

Glitter will appear in court on May 18.



Italian President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro sits next to Swedish Queen Silvia during the banquet given for the president at the Royal Palace in Stockholm, Sweden, Tuesday. Scalfaro is on a three days official visit to Sweden. In between them is an unidentified interpreter. — AP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

IRA prisoners taken to Irish jail: Six Irish Republican Army prisoners were transferred Tuesday from English prisons to Ireland's top-security Portlaoine jail as part of ongoing official efforts to reward the IRA cease-fire. AP says from Dublin.

Among the group were the longest-serving prisoners in the history of the Northern Ireland conflict, the so-called "Balcombe Street gang," who were arrested on that London street in 1975 after holding a family hostage for a week.

Man killed, son abducted in Peru: A Peruvian businessman was murdered and his son kidnapped here Tuesday, one day after President Alberto Fujimori said he would ask congress to pass severe measures aimed at ending a crime wave. AFP reports from Lima.

A dozen heavily armed men in three vehicles gunned down Luis Hotschild, 70, and abducted his 30-year-old son Hotschild, who came to Peru some 50 years ago from Germany, owned a mining technology company and held shares in several mining companies.

Lanka to punish unlicensed doctors: People practising medicine without licenses can be jailed up to six months in Sri Lanka under a new law voted by Parliament on Tuesday. AP reports from Colombo.

As against 6,000 registered doctors in Sri Lanka, an estimated 75,000 unlicensed people run clinics, mostly in villages, health ministry officials say. Under the new law, those found guilty can also be fined. If a person violates the law even after conviction, the fine and prison terms could be doubled.

Volcano erupts in Costa Rica: The El Arenal volcano spewed molten lava and sent columns of ash and smoke into the skies, prompting the government to declare an emergency and evacuate at least 400 people from the area. AP reports from San Jose, Costa Rica.

There were no immediate reports of injury. The Seismological Observatory reported three major eruptions from the 5,389-foot volcanic peak Tuesday afternoon. The region surrounding El Arenal, the country's tallest mountain, is a tourist mecca with the scenic village La Fortuna and some thermal baths and several hotels.

3 Cuban prisoners arrive in Canada: Three Cuban political prisoners arrived in Canada, a week after the Canadian prime minister lobbied for their release during a visit to the communist island. AP reports from Toronto.

The dissidents were released from prison on condition they leave Cuba, prompting the Canadian government to accept all three. One of the prisoners, Guillermo Sombra Ferrandez, was greeted at the airport Tuesday by his father, poet Cecilio Ismael Sombra, who has lived in exile in Canada since last year. Both were arrested in 1992 for urging Cubans to vote against President Fidel Castro's government.

Firefighters die in Mexico blaze: Nineteen volunteer firefighters died while battling a forest fire in southern Puebla state, governor Manuel Bartlett said Tuesday. AFP says from Mexico City.

The volunteers were engulfed in flames Monday when winds shifted as they tried to control the fire, Bartlett said.

Hun Sen in Bangkok for talks with Thai PM

Khmers still resisting as fighting continues

BANGKOK, May 6: Thai military observers reported heavy fighting near the Cambodian border today, as Phnom Penh forces shelled Khmer Rouge positions near the guerrillas former stronghold of Anlong Veng, reports AFP.

A senior Thai officer on the border said the fighting was heaviest near Sa Ngam Pass and further east at Samrong Pass, both on the border in Thailand's northeastern Si Sa Ket province.

"Although the fighting is heavy, the Khmer Rouge is still resisting," the officer told AFP in a telephone interview, adding that he could not confirm any casualties.

Khmer Rouge radio, monitored in Bangkok today, said

fighting between hardline guerrillas and government forces, whom the rebels regard as controlled by old-time rivals Vietnam, had intensified.

"Vietnamese Communists and (Second Prime Minister) Hun Sen are starting grandiose military operations to destroy all national forces in order to easily implement their dictatorial measures," the radio report said.

Reuters adds: Cambodian leader Hun Sen arrived in Bangkok today for a two-day visit during which he will hold talks with Thai Premier Chuan Leekpai on various issues including the fate of 87,000 Cambodian refugees in Thailand.

LTTE ceases fighting to facilitate UN official's visit

COLOMBO, May 6: Tamil Tiger rebels today ceased fighting in an unilateral two-day ceasefire to facilitate a top UN official's visit to Sri Lanka's war-torn areas, reports Reuters.

Military officials said there were no immediate reports of any fighting in the north and east where sporadic clashes between government troops and the rebels are a daily occurrence.

Defence Ministry officials have dismissed the rebel ceasefire as a propaganda ploy, but have said the military will not fight if the guerrillas do not.

Otunnu, special representative on children and army conflict, arrived in Sri Lanka last Sunday on a week-long visit.

Yanong blasts Delhi for false accusations

India keen on talks with China for settlement

NEW DELHI, May 6: Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes said today he was committed to dialogue with China and believed it would bring a "satisfactory settlement" between the two countries, domestic news agencies said, reports Reuters.

The agencies said Fernandes, whose comments at the weekend on the military threat posed by China provoked a sharp reaction from Beijing, issued a statement from India's Andaman and Nicobar islands, where he is on a visit.

Fernandes said in the lecture it would be a mistake to underplay the threat from China. He said China had built a surveillance base in Myanmar's Coco Islands and was upgrading airfields in Tibet to take fighter jets capable of striking at India's borders.

Meanwhile, Myanmar junta today blasted India's Defence Minister George Fernandes for accusing Yanong of allowing China the use of its territory to set up military installation.

"It is very regretful that India's Defence Minister chose to claim without substantial evidence that China is using Myanmar's Coco Islands for strategic defence measures," a top Junta official said in a statement received here.

The Myanmar official said Fernandes was scaremongering to use the threat of Chinese aggression as justification for regional nuclear expansion.

"A myth has been unprecedentedly created to serve as a pretext... to justify the nuclear and defence built-up in the region," he said.

Move to declare Iraq free of N-arms

US, Russia agree on UNSC draft statement

UNITED NATIONS, May 6: The United States and Russia have agreed that a UN Security Council draft statement will effectively declare Iraq to be free of nuclear arms, but not with immediate effect, Western diplomats said Tuesday, reports AP.

The two countries are involved in a delicate negotiations on a consensus draft text which could be completed by the end of the week. Other key issues need to be resolved before the draft is submitted to the 15-member Council for approval.

Following a positive report from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Russian Ambassador Sergei Lavrov on April 24 informally circulated proposals providing for the

Council to effectively declare Iraq free of nuclear weapons.

But US Ambassador Bill Richardson said that the proposals to shift the disarmament burden in the nuclear area to on-going monitoring were "premature."

A Western diplomat said Tuesday that Russia and the United States had agreed that the shift in focus "won't be immediate."

No further details were immediately available, and the bilateral discussions were continuing on other issues in the draft text.

Russia wanted the Council's formal reaction to the Iraqi cooperation in the nuclear field to deal only with nuclear issues. However, the United States

said that the draft statement which is still under negotiation should also deal with other Iraqi disarmament issues. A Western diplomat said that as it stood Tuesday, the draft text "is largely about nuclear" issues.

The proposed Council decision to acknowledge progress in accounting for Iraq's clandestine nuclear programme will not affect the sanctions regime in place since the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, but would provide an important psychological boost to Iraq.

The almost eight-year sanctions can only be lifted when UN weapons inspectors certify that Iraq has fully complied in dismantling its nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, and long-range missiles.

Muslim militants kill 13 in Kashmir

JAMMU, May 6: Suspected Muslim militants killed 13 Hindus in remote northern villages in India's Kashmir state over the last two days, police said Wednesday, reports AP.

The killings came barely two weeks after guerrillas massacred 25 Hindus in a mountainous village, prompting residents to demand better security in the area that borders Pakistan, India's hostile neighbour.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attacks, but police blamed guerrillas fighting for the independence of predominately Hindu India's only Muslim-majority state.

In another incident Tuesday, guerrillas sprayed villagers with automatic gun fire in Mangalotho, 225 kilometres northeast of Jammu, killing five people, all Hindus. The villagers were returning from a

hospital in district capital Doda with the bodies of four other Hindus who had been gunned down by guerrillas a day earlier.

Police said 10 Hindus from Mangalotho village were missing. It was not clear if the militants had kidnapped them or if they had run away, a police officer said on condition of anonymity.

State police chief Gurbachan Jagat said the attacks were aimed at forcing Hindus to move out of the districts, where Muslims are in a slight majority.

Since last month's attack near the border, local lawmakers have urged Defence Minister George Fernandes to post more federal troops in the area. Fernandes assured them his government was doing everything possible to restore peace.



Indian President K. R. Narayanan, left, exchanges the documents of bilateral agreements with Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, during their meeting in the Planalto Palace in Brasilia, Tuesday. The Indian president is on a six-day visit to Brazil. — AP/UNB photo



Italian architect Gaetano Pesce, who was moved to tears by Princess Diana's death, poses Tuesday in Paris above the Alma tunnel where her Mercedes slammed into a concrete pillar nine months ago. — AP/UNB photo

Off the Record

Snake man's bid to break Ripley's record

BANGKOK: A farmer who claims he can speak snake language says he plans to live a record-breaking week with 100 of the poisonous reptiles in a glass-encased room, reports AP.

"We are friends. We understand each other," said Boonruang Buachan, 29, when contacted by telephone inside his snake-infested chamber in a Bangkok shopping mall.

Used to the tough upcountry life, Boonruang said he was more worried about catching a cold from the air-conditioning than the fangs of deadly creatures that slither over him. They include two king cobras, 100 cobras, 30 centipedes and 20 scorpions.

Boonruang, who began his cohabitation Tuesday, said he would break a Ripley's "Believe It or Not" record if he managed to stay a full week.

Besides claiming he can easily communicate with the animals, Boonruang believes that in his previous life he was a "Prince of Snakes," a creature of Thai mythology.

Boonruang said he's been around snakes since his childhood in Sisaket, a poor northeastern province, and only been bitten once.

That's when he tried to stop a drunk man from a snake attack.

The only protective device he has donned are goggles to prevent some possibly poisonous saliva from accidentally entering his eyes when he curls the snakes around his neck and head.

The idea for the snake live-in came from Television Channel 7 which had earlier filmed Boonruang's remarkable relationship with snakes.

A room was arranged on the fourth floor of the Bang Khae Mall which has already attracted thousands of viewers. Boonruang performs two shows a day, playing with what he calls his "pets, like cats and dogs" and commanding them to "play dead."

It's rather obvious for Chelsea too

WASHINGTON: President Bill Clinton approves to the Stanford University swimmer who is dating first daughter Chelsea, the White House said — reluctantly — on Tuesday, reports AP.

"I think it was rather obvious," White House spokesman Mike McCurry said when asked what the president thought of Matthew Pierce, the 20-year-old Texan identified as Chelsea's beau.

McCurry was referring to the arm the president draped approvingly around Pierce last weekend as the young man joined the Clintons for lunch. McCurry would offer no further details.

"We've elected not to comment on her private life, and that will remain the case," McCurry said.

Pierce's father, Dale Pierce, told the Conroe (Texas) Courier that he approves of Chelsea, 18. "We've met her and she is a charming young lady," Pierce said.

Matthew Pierce was thrust into the media spotlight over the weekend after he attended church with Chelsea and her parents. The president and Mrs. Clinton were visiting Chelsea at Stanford University.

Dale Pierce said his son met Chelsea on the first day of school.

"It so happened that she lives in one of the dorms that some of the other swimmers live in. He started having breakfast with her and they just developed a relationship over time," Dale Pierce said.

Matthew and Chelsea have a lot in common, he said.

"I think they share an intellectual interest that is really hard to describe. They are both very intelligent people and they are quick and witty. They seem to get along very well together," he added.

Mr T in real trouble

LOS ANGELES: Mr T, the tough-guy actor with the Mohican haircut who is best known for his role as BA Baracus in the 1980s television series, "The A-team," has cancer and is almost broke, he said in a television interview, reports Reuters.

The 45-year-old actor, whose real name is Lawrence Tero, told the syndicated "Entertainment Tonight" show in an interview to be aired later on Tuesday that he had a form of lymphoma. He was receiving daily radiation treatments and injections at Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre.

"I try to be upbeat. When people watch this (show) I want them to be uplifted," said Tero, adding "Love, love, love. I can't help but get better. This is what gives me the strength to go to the hospital."

Tero, who also starred as Clubber Lang, Sylvester Stallone's adversary in "Rocky III," in 1982, said the hardest part about having cancer was "telling my mom."

His disclosure came on the same day that singer-songwriter Carly Simon told the New York daily news she was suffering from breast cancer.

Although he was a household name in the 1980s, his career faded with the end of "The A-Team" in 1987 after four seasons on the air. A syndicated follow-up, "T and T," lasted just one season, ending in 1989.

He (actor) said he was now almost broke, adding, "I've probably got 200 dollars in the bank."

Project launched for cloning panda in China

BEIJING, May 6: China scientists have launched ambitious research aimed at cloning the giant panda as a means of saving the extremely endangered species, a participating researcher said today, reports AP.

The prestigious Chinese Academy of Sciences last month granted 100,000 yuan (12,000 dollars) to fund a project at its institute of zoology, assistant researcher Duan Chongwen told AFP.

Chen, who was not available for comment, last week told the Beijing Youth daily that the group had successfully bred panda body cells as part of foundation-building preliminary research.

The group is preparing to set up an experimental model using more abundant test animals such as mice and rabbits, Chen said.

US placing hopes for ME peace on Israeli PM

LONDON, May 6: Frustrated and running out of options, the Clinton administration is placing its hopes for a Mideast peace on Benjamin Netanyahu, betting the Israeli prime minister will give up more of the West Bank than he has publicly indicated, reports AP.

It's a gamble. And the administration is giving the Israeli leader only six days to accept the US proposition that Israel's next pullback should be from 13 per cent of the territory.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has already accepted the proposal.

The White House has scheduled a ceremony Monday to launch talks on a final Israeli-Palestinian settlement. If Netanyahu and his Cabinet do not go along, the ceremony would be cancelled, and the long-running US campaign to get peace talks "back on track" will have failed.

During two days of meetings this week with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in London, Netanyahu stuck by his longstanding position that the 13 per cent withdrawal would jeopardise Israel's security. So why would he suddenly reverse himself?

A possible reason is that Netanyahu would get negotiations going on the toughest issues: The future of Jerusalem, Jewish settlers, the Palestinian demand for a state, final borders, and Palestinian refugees.

For months, he has insisted it was time to get those talks started. Then, he could declare the contested holy city of Jerusalem will remain intact and try to block a Palestinian state.

Arafat hopes to establish a state in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, with east Jerusalem as its capital.

Also, if talks on the "final-

status" issues open, it might be possible for Israel to avert a series of further West Bank withdrawals. Arafat already has full or partial control of 27 per cent of the West Bank.

Another incentive for the prime minister is maintaining good relations with the Clinton administration and averting public disclosure of an American blueprint for dealing with the West Bank.

That could put pressure on Netanyahu. When the tactic first surfaced recently, 81 senators wrote President Bill Clinton urging him to withdraw the threat to disclose the proposal, which could throw blame onto the prime minister. The threat was withdrawn but can be revived.

US officials have also threatened to halt their mediation between Israel and the Palestinians.

But in what looked like a

retraction, Albright said Tuesday: "We are not going to walk away from the peace process. It is too important to the United States, to Israel and to our friends."

Netanyahu has offered to pull back from an additional 9 per cent of the West Bank with the approval of the Israeli Cabinet, and signalled the figure could be expanded to 11 per cent.

Late Tuesday, Israel radio cited a US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, as saying Netanyahu conditioned a 13.1 per cent troop withdrawal on a deal over the next scheduled withdrawal. Netanyahu's spokesman, David Bar-Ilan, denied any such pact had been secured.

"We cannot give up land that would be a danger," Bar-Ilan said. "We have made an offer we can live with."

Netanyahu could pay a large

price at home for accepting the US plan, including the collapse of his hard-line government.

"I am prepared to be flexible where possible but on the issue of security for the citizens of Israel I am not flexible," Netanyahu said upon his return to Tel Aviv Tuesday night.

Addressing cheering crowds at a convention of his ruling Likud Party, Netanyahu said peace will not be easy. He added: "But we will reach peace."

Netanyahu's opponents at home praised him for not yielding in London. But, added Michael Kleiner, head of a group of right-wing legislators, if Netanyahu agrees to even a 9 per cent withdrawal "we will topple him."

Albright stressed at a news conference that the US "ideas" were on the table and that "watering them down is not in the works."

If Israel accepts the invita-

Gunmen kill 21 peasants in Colombia

BOGOTA, May 6: About 200 paramilitary gunmen killed at least 21 peasants and burned homes and businesses in remote south-central Colombia, a jungle region of traditional rebel control where most farmers grow the plant used to make cocaine, reports AP.

The armed men dressed in military fatigues entered the town of Puerto Alivera, 300 km southeast of Bogota, just afternoon Monday in four large trucks, said Alan Edmundo Jara, the governor of Meta state. They divided people into groups of men and women then read names of the condemned off list.

Some of those singled out were taken to a gas station, then shot in the back of the head, residents told reporters who visited the scene Tuesday who "We didn't resolve everything here," she said at the end of her talks. "There has been some progress across the board."