

BRIEFLY

112 die in Chinese landslides:

Landslides and floods caused by heavy summer rains have killed at least 112 people and injured more than 119 others in three southern provinces, state media reported, AP says from Beijing.

More than 60 others people were still missing following the landslides Monday in Jiangxi and Zhejiang, and the severe flooding in Fujian, the reports said.

Chirac begins Africa tour:

President Jacques Chirac left Paris late Wednesday for a southern Africa tour taking in Namibia, South Africa, Mozambique and Angola, AFP reports from Paris.

3 executed in China:

Three men convicted of killing an American engineer have been executed in southern China, according to a report seen Thursday in Beijing, AP reports from Beijing.

Shi Zhaodong, Shi Shanfu, and Liu Huansen were executed after the Guangdong province Higher Court rejected appeals of their convictions in the March 23 killing of 42-year old Leonard Phillips of Athens, Tennessee, the Yangcheng Evening News reported Wednesday.

2 soldiers killed in Lebanon:

Two Israeli soldiers were killed and four more were wounded early yesterday in a dawn attack by pro-Iranian Hezbollah fighters near the border in southern Lebanon, Lebanese Security officials said, AFP reports from Tyre.

Earlier Hezbollah announced in a communique issued in Sidon that it had carried out a series of attacks on an Israeli position in the so-called "security zone" occupied by Israel. The attack targeted an Israeli patrol near Tallousa, in the central part of the zone, it said.

Colombian president in Cuba:

Making a rare visit by a Latin American leader to Cuba, Colombian President Ernesto Samper arrived in Havana Thursday to inaugurate a meeting of health ministers of non-aligned nations as well as meet with President Fidel Castro, AP reports from Mexico City.

The Cuban news agency Prensa Latina said the two leaders would discuss environmental protection, bilateral cooperation and calls to bring Cuba into more Latin American organisations.

Sheikh Yassain back in Gaza:

Sheikh Ahmed Yassain, the spiritual leader of Hamas arrived back in the Gaza strip Wednesday after a four-month trip to Arab capitals to collect money for the radical group, Hamas said, AFP reports from Gaza City.



Parents join their children, mostly female students, during a protest rally in downtown Ankara Wednesday. Some 5,000 demonstrators took to the streets to protest a government ban on Islamic head scarves in schools and state offices. — AP/UNB photo

Palestinians warn Explosion of violence may occur if deadlock persists

JERUSALEM, June 25: The Palestinians are sounding the alarm with growing urgency over the stalled peace process, warning that an explosion of violence may occur, if the deadlock persists, reports AFP.

By continuing to destroy Palestinian houses, confiscate land, and increase its hold over Jerusalem the Israeli government risks driving the Palestinian population to extremes, Palestinian leaders have warned.

"The latest actions of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu constitute a declaration of war," the chief Palestinian official in East Jerusalem, Raisal Hussein, told AFP.

He said "political methods" were "not enough" to stop the Israeli actions.

"The peace process is dead in the hands of Netanyahu. The Palestinians must prepare Arab and international public opinion for the explosion to which this could lead and, at the same time, they must prepare themselves."

The deputies urged Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to "take another close look at the status of negotiations with the Israeli government."



Young Palestinians block the entrance of the Palestinian refugee camp of Ein el-Hilweh east of the southern city of Sidon Wednesday. Their action was against Andrew Robinson, special coordinator for the Middle East peace process at Canada's Foreign Affairs Department, who did not visit their camp, during his tour of refugee camps in Lebanon. — AP/UNB photo



President Clinton, Hillary Rodham Clinton and daughter Chelsea wave from Air Force One at Andrews Air Force Base Wednesday as they begin a ten-day trip to China. Clinton insists his visit will advance American's interests but he has faced a rough sendoff from some in Congress. — AP/UNB photo

Clinton-Jiang summit begins tomorrow

BEIJING, June 25: President Bill Clinton and Jiang Zemin will hold the first China-US summit in Beijing for more than nine years Saturday, but their views differ on what issues should be at the top of the agenda, reports AFP.

The key subjects for discussion according to Beijing: Taiwan: China is asking Clinton to publicly re-state the United States' commitment not to support Taiwan's independence. It hopes that Washington will also take concrete measures. Such as setting a deadline for the end of all US arms sales to the island and explicitly excluding Taiwan from US-Japanese defence cooperation.

Lifting of sanctions: Beijing is calling for Washington to lift all its remaining sanctions dating from the aftermath of the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen massacre. Restrictions barring trade loan guarantees from the US trade and development agency and insurance from the overseas private investment corporation are top among these.

Washington also maintains a complete embargo on sales of military equipment and technology to China, as well as a partial ban on Chinese launches of US satellites.

WTO accession: Beijing hopes Washington will support China's entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) under less strenuous conditions. US negotiators currently insist that China must first fully open its markets to foreign competitors, but the Chinese side says it has already made great strides in reducing its trade barriers.

Permanent MFN: China wants the US to end its policy of annually reviewing the country's Most Favoured Nation (MFN) trading status and instead extend the status permanently.

MFN allows China to enjoy the same low tariffs that apply to all but a handful of US trading partners.

The key subjects for discussion according to Washington: Non-proliferation: The United States, which suspects Chinese technology played a vital role in recent Pakistani nuclear tests, hopes to obtain firm guarantees against future leaks of weapon and missile technology to other countries, such as Iran or Myanmar.

Human rights: In order to "sell" his China policy of constructive engagement back home, Clinton badly needs positive gestures from Beijing on basic freedoms or tolerance of political dissidents.

Jiang recently promised China will sign the UN's international covenant on civil and political rights later this year, following his landmark visit to

the US last year, prominent political prisoners Wei Jingsheng and Wang Dan were released into US exile.

Clinton may attempt to meet with dissidents during his visit to make up for the impact of his symbolic appearance at an official welcome adjacent to Tiananmen Square, the site of a army's brutal crackdown on 1989 pro-democracy demonstrations.

Trade deficit: The US has asked China to take measures to reduce its growing trade deficit with the latter, which reached 49.7 billion dollars last year, Chinese trade figures, which do not include exports, Transshipped through Hong Kong, show a gap of only 16.39 billion dollars.

China has raised the possibility of commercial deals in the aviation, telecommunications and power infrastructure sectors.

Clinton in March lifted an embargo on sales of peaceful nuclear technology to China, but the move has yet to yield any contracts.

Currency stability: The US, which had to intervene in foreign currency markets last week to bolster the plummeting Japanese Yen, hopes China will reaffirm it will not devalue its Yuan, which could possibly unleash further financial turmoil in Asia.

Benazir Bhutto says Pak achievement of nuclear parity with India creates scope for talks

ISLAMABAD, June 25: Former Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has said Pakistan's achievement of nuclear parity with India created scope for negotiating all bilateral irritants, including the Kashmir dispute, reports UNB.

"Now there is an equilibrium... now both countries can talk on the disputing issues," she said Wednesday talking to newsmen accompanying Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina during her one-day trip to the Pakistan capital.

She said the "nuclear parity" has given the two countries a new vision, the detonations have hastened the process of thinking anew.

"Now the two countries can talk on all issues. And talks must be started soon to defuse tension," Benazir added.

The Pakistan People's Party chief met with Hasina at Punjab House, where the latter was staying, and discussed with her bilateral, regional and international issues of common concern.

Speaking to the Bangladeshi newsmen after that meeting, Benazir praised Hasina for undertaking the visits to India and Pakistan in the wake of last month's nuclear tests conducted by the two countries.

During the one-day trips, the Bangladesh Prime Minister discussed the post-nuclear test scenario with her Indian counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee on June 16 and Pakistan counterpart Nawaz Sharif on June 24.

Benazir described Hasina's visits to New Delhi and Islamabad as "important" for promoting peace and understanding in South Asia.

Referring to the planned SAARC Summit in Colombo next month, she suggested that the Bangladesh Prime Minister take the leadership to promote understanding among the member-states.

Ban on India, Pakistan

US House votes to exempt food credits

WASHINGTON, June 25: The US House, acting with President Bill Clinton's encouragement, voted Wednesday to keep US food credits available to India and Pakistan despite their recent nuclear arms tests, reports Reuters.

The exemption from sanctions imposed under a US nuclear non-proliferation law was speeding through Congress, similar language was awaiting debate in the Senate.

Representatives included the exemption in a \$6.1 billion dollar bill to fund the agriculture department and related agencies for fiscal 1999 that was passed 373-48 and sent to the Senate. Most agencies would see little or no increase in funding under the bill.

Pakistan was the No 3 customer for US wheat buying 350 million dollar worth last year and 162 million dollar so far this fiscal, with the aid of 250 million dollar in US credit guarantees.

India has not used any of its 20 million dollar credit line.

During a bill-signing ceremony on Tuesday, Clinton urged action on an exemption saying it is important it be done immediately.

Representative George Nethercutt a Washington State Republican and sponsor of the exemption, said it was "insane" to include agriculture export credits in the nuclear arms sanctions.

3 rockets hit Kabul airport

KABUL, June 25: Three rockets slammed into the airport in Afghanistan's war-shattered capital early Thursday, while the United Nations aircraft was parked on the tarmac nearby, say eyewitnesses, report AP.

There were no reports of injuries.

One rocket landed about 100 metres from the civilian terminal. Passengers were preparing to board the UN aircraft, which was returning to neighbouring Pakistan, when the rockets hit, said UN officials, who didn't want to be quoted.

The other two rockets landed on the western edge of the airport compound where military aircraft are located, they said.

People on the road leading to the airport scurried for cover. Shops quickly shuttered and dozens of people sought shelter.

The rockets came from north of the capital where opposition soldiers are fighting Taliban troops, eyewitnesses said. This was the first attack on the airport in two weeks.

It followed heavy fighting in Tagab area Wednesday some 60 km northeast of the capital.

The Taliban said it repulsed a powerful assault by the opposition in that area. They reported heavy casualties on the opposition side, but that could not immediately be confirmed.

Marcos' burial postponed

MANILA, June 25: Bowing to widespread opposition, former first lady Imelda Marcos postponed indefinitely Thursday the burial of her husband, former dictator Ferdinand Marcos, in a heroes' cemetery, reports AP.

In the spirit of national interest, our family is prepared to wait," Imelda Marcos said in a statement. "The burial of the late President Marcos will be deferred to a more appropriate time."

The emotion-charged dispute over whether Marcos should be buried at Heroes' Cemetery in metropolitan Manila nearly nine years after dying in exile in 1989 has divided Filipinos. President Fidel Ramos, who steps down June 30, ordered a halt Tuesday to construction of Marcos' grave at the cemetery during the remainder of his term.

President-elect Joseph Estrada, a former Marcos supporter, had agreed, however, to allow Marcos' burial on July 11, saying it was time to put the issue to rest.

A suspicious embassy of official had asked police to check the documents submitted earlier with visa applications. Police were waiting when the men returned hoping to pick up visas Tuesday.

The US embassy, contacted by the Associated Press, confirmed the incident but refused further comment.

After their arrests Tuesday, they were charged with cheating and forgery and appeared in a city court Wednesday. The Asian Age reported. A judge ordered they be held 14 days while police continue their investigation.

The Pioneer reported the scheme had been concocted by a travel agent in the northern Indian town of Karnal who was to be paid rupees 400,000 (US \$9,500) for each visa issued. Police were looking for the agent.

US expresses concern Military intervention may fan conflict in Kosovo

WASHINGTON, June 25: An NATO edges closer to action in Kosovo, US defence officials here are concerned that military intervention may fan the conflict in Serbia's southernmost province rather than stop it, reports AFP.

NATO ambassadors in Brussels Wednesday instructed the alliance's military to flesh out options for military action in Kosovo, where Serbian security forces have turned tanks and artillery on civilians in a bid to crush a separatist rebellion.

But the absence of clearly defined political goals has fostered doubts within the US military about the actual use of force.

The military option is a two-edged sword because you're either going to encourage the UCK (Kosovo Liberation Army) or you're going to encourage (Yugoslav President Slobodan) Milosevic," said a Pentagon official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The risks are that we are going to undermine our own policy of maintaining the integrity of Kosovo proper," the official said.

Washington wants to compel Milosevic to restore autonomy to Kosovo's ethnic Albanians, but it does not support independence for the province or the rebel forces fighting for it.

So a major dilemma is how force can be used without further inflaming the insurgency, which the official said may cause Belgrade to send even more troops to the province and increase the danger of the wider war that NATO is intent on averting.

US officials fear that the Kosovo Liberation Army, or UCK by its Albanian acronym, will use air strikes as cover to step up attacks on Serbian forces and press its campaign for independence.

Even if NATO attempts to deal even handedly with Serbian and rebel forces, the Yugoslav forces will be easier to identify and therefore easier to track, target and hit in airstrikes, officials say.

UNSC extends sanctions against Iraq for 60 days

UNITED NATIONS, June 25: The Security Council has agreed to maintain sanctions against Iraq for 60 more days after the chief weapons inspector said US Army tests left "no doubt" that Iraq placed deadly VX nerve gas in missile warheads, reports AP.

Earlier Wednesday, Iraq threatened unspecified actions against UN weapons inspectors if the sanctions were not lifted immediately. The threat marked a worsening in Baghdad's latest dispute with the inspectors.

The council's decision was made without a vote after the 15 members concluded that Iraq had not met the conditions to lift the eight-year embargo, council President Antonio Monteiro said.

Chief inspector Richard Butler had briefed the council on a report by the Army laboratory in Aberdeen, Maryland, that found traces of VX on pieces of Iraq warheads.

Butler agreed to send the materials to laboratories in France and Switzerland for further analysis, as Iraq has demanded. But he said the tests were conducted by one of the world's premier chemical weapons laboratories.

"I made clear there is no doubt VX was present in some of those weapons warheads," Butler said.

VX is a colourless, odorless liquid that turns into a gas when it comes into contact with oxygen. A few drops can kill in minutes.

The warhead fragments were taken from Taji, a military camp 13 miles (20 kms) north of the capital Baghdad, in 1995 and sent to the United States earlier this year.

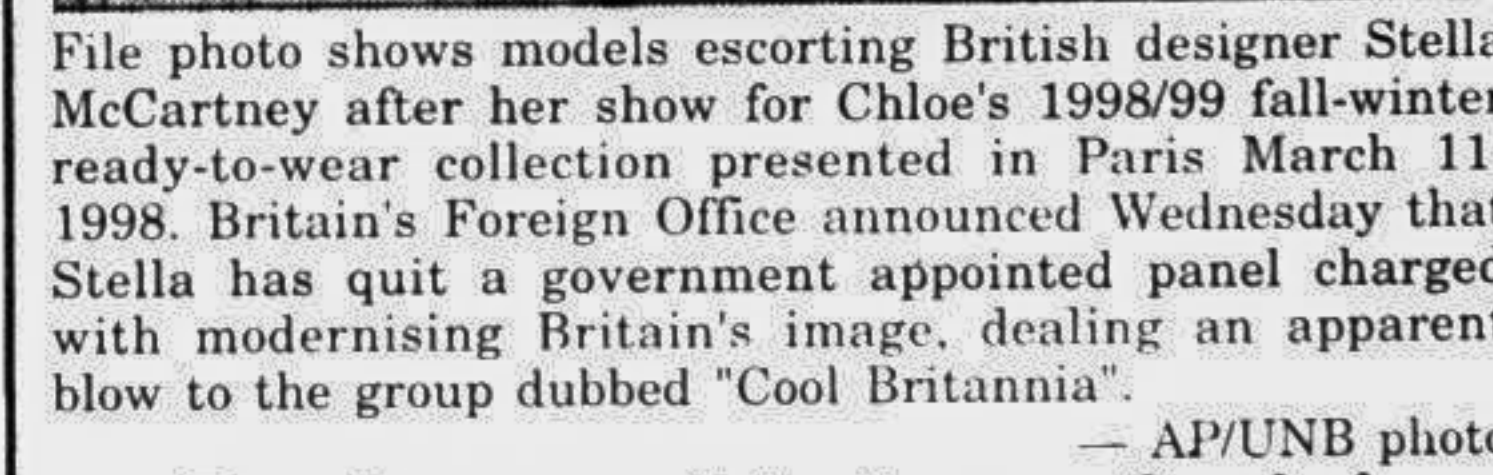
Iraq claims that only seven fragments of the 44 samples taken out were examined and VX was detected in only one of them — a sample too small to provide conclusive evidence.

Iraq has admitted having maintained VX supplies but claims it was never able to develop the technology to place the deadly nerve agents in a weapons system.

Iraq's ambassador to the United Nations, Nizar Hamdoun, denied on Wednesday that Iraq had any prohibited weapons and said a new crisis could be brewing.

"I can not get into any timeframe but I am saying that if it looks like the sanctions are not going to be lifted this year then Iraq may well consider a different policy," he said in a television interview Wednesday evening.

His comments echoed those in a statement published earlier Wednesday in Baghdad. President Saddam Hussein and other Iraq leaders had demanded the sanctions be lifted immediately and warned that if they were not Iraq would reconsider relations with UN weapons inspectors.



File photo shows models escorting British designer Stella McCartney after her show for Chloe's 1998/99 fall-winter ready-to-wear collection presented in Paris March 11, 1998. Britain's Foreign Office announced Wednesday that Stella has quit a government appointed panel charged with modernising Britain's image, dealing an apparent blow to the group dubbed "Cool Britannia". — AP/UNB photo

Donkeys wed in hope of rain!

NEW DELHI: The people of Gajendragad, a district in the southern state of Karnataka, are at their wits' end report IANS.

With the rains — on which their harvest depends heavily due to lack of proper irrigation — having completely bypassed them for two years now, they are willing to appease the rain gods in any possible manner in the hope of succour.

The annual seasons of rains — the monsoon — has arrived in India, especially most southern and eastern areas of the country. But Gajendragad has not been lucky.

The villagers in the area recently performed a mass wedding of donkeys. The Indian Express newspaper reported. "All traditional rites were observed and festivities followed in the hope that rain would come in the area," the paper said.

During the mass marriage of donkeys, members of a local agricultural corporation played the part of the grooms' families while those from Rajur village became the brides' families.

Every other attempt by the people of Gajendragad to bring rain appears to have failed to please Indra, the Hindu god of rain. Last year, the paper said, the residents of the area performed mass weddings of frogs with similar rituals and festivities.

But whatever the rituals, nothing appears yet to have worked for the rain-starved people of Gajendragad.

Rumours of a ghost

YANGON: Myanmar's military government has practice keeping the political opposition in check, but its security forces, recently have been forced to confront a more elusive target — rumours of a ghost, reports AP.

Rumours have spread like wildfire in the capital since last Friday that a ghost has been terrorising an apartment near a busy road junction, reportedly smashing glasses, cups and light bulbs.

Every day, hundreds of curious observers have been assembling in front of the so-called haunted house at Myeinngone ward in Sanchaung township, about 4 km from Yangon. On Saturday, about 1,000 people gathered there.

The area is also swarming with security officials, in numbers which are usually reserved for keeping a close eye on the country's pro-democracy activists, whose activities are tightly controlled.

In a strange coincidence that has fuelled rumours about the apparition, the intersection near the house was the scene of violence 0 years ago this month during massive anti-government protests.