

International



President Clinton laughs with US Senate candidate Blanche Lincoln, left, and Arkansas State Treasurer Jimmie Lou Fisher, right, at a gathering of Arkansas Democrats in Little Rock on Saturday. The three were laughing at jokes cracked by Democrat candidate for governor Bill Bristow.

Formation of International Criminal Court hailed

ROME, July 19: UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan hailed the creation on Saturday of an international court to try war crimes as a 'gift of hope' even though it was rejected by the United States and branded as meaningless by India, reports Reuters.

Annan interrupted a tour of Latin America to fly to Rome for a celebratory ceremony after a UN conference bulldozed last-minute objections and voted overwhelmingly to fulfill the half-century dream of an International Criminal Court (ICC).

"No doubt many of us would have liked a court vested with even more far-reaching powers, but that should not lead us to minimise the breakthrough you have achieved," he told ministers and delegates at Rome's city hall, site of the ancient capitol.

"The establishment of the court is still a gift of hope to future generations and a giant step forward in the march towards universal human rights and the rule of law," he added.

As a poignant counterpoint, a fresco behind him showed a Roman soldier at war, stabbing an opponent in the neck.

Philippe Kirsch, the Canadian committee chairman who drafted a compromise text that won over formerly sceptical powers France and Russia, hailed the decision as a sign the world community would not stand silently by and allow genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and aggression to go unpunished. "The world has decided enough is enough," he said.

As the conference would up in the early hours of Saturday, 127 states signed the final act and 10 signed the ICC statute. Other signatures followed at the ceremony.

But the United States rejected the ICC and warned it would have to remain vigilant about its commitments on the world stage for fear its soldiers could be hauled up before a politicised court on frivolous charges.

But tributes poured in from Europe to Australia, a leading human rights investigator in Cambodia said members of the Khmer Rouge should be the first to be tried before the new court.

Human Rights pressure groups who had lobbied for a powerful court free from political influence, gave the statute a bittersweet endorsement, saying it was full of flaws that could still offer impunity to the Pol Pots of the world, but ultimately better than nothing.

In a cliffhanger finale, Chief US delegate David Scheffer made a last-ditch attempt to rewrite the statute — a move that could have scuppered the whole project if it had succeeded. The bid backfired spectacularly, leaving Washington isolated and in the company of some of its worst enemies while its key democratic allies endorsed the court with glee.

The conference voted by 120 votes to seven, with 21 abstentions, to establish the ICC.

Off the Record

Baywatch star celebrates birthday in style

LOS ANGELES: "Baywatch" star David Hasselhoff celebrated his 46th birthday in TV hero style — by plummeting from an airplane, reports AP.

The actor made his first parachute jump on his birthday Friday. He became one of the few civilians to jump with the Army's elite parachute team, the Golden Knights.

Wearing a gold-coloured jumpsuit, Hasselhoff's jump included a 60-second free fall before his chute opened and he landed at Van Nuys Airport.

During the tandem jump his instructor, US Army Sgt. Shane Hollar, was fastened to the actor's back and they shared a parachute.

He was met later by his wife, two daughters and his father, all holding handmade "Happy Birthday" signs.

Hasselhoff, also a singer, said the jump wasn't too scary.

"I was more terrified at the Princess Diana benefit concert because I didn't know all the words to my song," Hasselhoff said.

Elephants lead charity for Thai slum children

BANGKOK: With two Thai elephants lending a helping trunk, workers at an American car rental company washed cars Saturday to raise funds for Bangkok's slum children, reports AP.

The two trained jumbos were a big attraction as Bangkok drivers dished out a total of 28,000 baht (dhrs 682) during the three-hour charity car wash.

The money will go to projects run by the Rev. Joseph H. Maier, an American Catholic priest who has worked among Bangkok's slum dwellers for nearly three decades.

The elephants sprayed water through their trunks, while employees of the Budget Car and Truck Rental used more conventional methods to clean vehicles.

Free food and drinks were served to slum children and customers while clowns added to the festive atmosphere.

Maier, 59, of Longview, Washington, has lived in Thailand since 1967 and provides educational help for 4,800 children from 32 Bangkok slums. Other projects help prostitutes, AIDS victims and drug addicts. The outspoken priest has frequently criticized Thais for not supporting charitable causes, including his own. Most of his funding comes from foreign sources.

Allan Davidson, general manager of Budget's Thailand operation, said the car wash would encourage others to contribute to charities.

Rodents reign at new Malaysian airport

KUALA LUMPUR: Eateries at Malaysia's new multimillion-dollar airport have been urged to keep their garbage cans closed to help exterminators sweep the site of 600 rats, news reports said Sunday, reports AP.

Reports of rats scurrying around the dhrs 2.3 billion Kuala Lumpur International Airport surfaced last week after a flight was delayed 15 hours because a rat was discovered on board.

Transport Minister Ling Liong Sik said exterminators already had caught 291 of the rodents but estimated that 600 remained, the Star newspaper reported.

An hour's drive from downtown Kuala Lumpur, the sleek new airport sprawls across 10,000 hectares (24,700 acres) of former palm oil plantations, which Ling said were riddled with rat burrows.

The minister said exterminators were trying not only to rid the facility of rodents but to trace them back to their breeding grounds. In the meantime, Ling asked that airport food outlets cooperate by keeping a lid on garbage and cutting off food supplies to the pests.

Rats are the latest in a string of troubles that have gripped the KLIA since it opened last month. Most computer-related problems, including lost baggage and flight delays, have begun to ease.



Pope John Paul II stops to greet an unidentified woman as he returns to Lorenzago di Cadore after a short trip in the mountains nearby Saturday. The Pope, who is spending a short period of vacation in this Northern Italian mountain resort, will be back in Castelgandolfo next week.

Nuclear global test ban treaty India to sign if N-weapons state status given

NEW DELHI, July 19: India is willing to sign a nuclear global test ban treaty if it is granted the status of a nuclear weapons state and a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, reports said today, reports AFP.

The issue would be raised during Monday's talks between US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and Jaiswanti Singh, a close aide of Indian Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee, the Asian Age newspaper said.

"Our ultimate goal is to be recognised as a nuclear weapons state and a Security Council seat," Foreign Affairs Ministry sources told the daily.

"We are willing to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and even the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) if we get this."

But they said Monday's talks, the third such negotiations between the two sides since New Delhi's nuclear tests in May, may not achieve a "breakthrough" in this regard.

"The meeting will at best give shape to some contours of an agreement, but we are not expecting any breakthroughs in this meeting. It is a long-drawn process," the sources said.

India conducted its nuclear tests on May 11 and 13, sparking tit-for-tat blasts by arch-rival Pakistan. India has traditionally opposed the 1996 CTBT, branding it discriminatory and an attempt by the five declared nuclear powers — Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States — to retain their nuclear dominance.

It refused to ratify the treaty last year. The 1996 NPT, also opposed by India, restricts the transfer of dual-use technology — which could have weaponry applications — to non-nuclear weapons states which are not signatories to the treaty.

Pakistan has also refused to sign the two pacts. Following the explosions there have been several diplomatic visits abroad to try to explain India's position.

India says its security concerns — it has fought border wars with Pakistan and China since its independence — have not been understood.

Senior Indian officials have held talks with French President Jacques Chirac, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov and Talbott.

Talbott, arrives here late today with the State Department's Deputy Assistant Secretary for non-proliferation, Bruce Riedel, a senior adviser to the national security council and other top officials.

The first two rounds of talks between Talbott and Singh were held in Washington and Frankfurt. A fourth meeting is scheduled to take place during the Asian regional forum meeting in Manila later this month.

The Indian express said officials from both nations "will roll up their sleeves and get down Monday to the business of dealing — and saving face — on what is intended to be a grand bargain."

"The stakes in Monday talks are enormous... New Delhi is unlikely to settle only for the waiver of sanctions. What it really wants is access to high technology, especially in nuclear power sector."

BRIEFLY

32 prisoners freed in Chechnya: Guards at a prison in Chechnya freed 32 prisoners overnight Friday sparking a manhunt to recapture them, the Russian media reported. AFP says from Moscow.

By the middle of the day 15 of the prisoners had either given themselves up or been recaptured, and were back in their cells in the capital Grozny, the Interfax agency quoted Chechen Public Prosecutor Khavaj Serbiyev as saying.

China launches satellite: China on Saturday launched the Sinosat-1 telecommunications satellite built by France's STE Nationale Industrielle Aeropspatiale (AERP-CN), the Xinhua news agency said. Reuters reports from Beijing.

A long march 3B rocket had carried the orbiter into space from the Xichang satellite launch centre in the southwestern province of Sichuan, Xinhua said.

Death toll in Philippines landslide 5: Rescuers, armed only with spades and hammers by rains, have recovered two more bodies from a landslide in the southern Philippines, bringing the death toll to five, police said yesterday. AP reports from Philippines.

The bodies were recovered late Saturday, police said. At least two others were still missing and presumed to have died in the landslide in Zamboanga del Norte province.

30 infants die daily in Sudan: Up to 30 people, many of them infants, are dying each day in famine-struck southern Sudan, a newspaper reported yesterday. AFP says from Khartoum.

The Al Rai Al Aam daily reported that the health situation in Wau, the regional capital of Sudan's west Bahr El-Ghazal state, had deteriorated beyond the control of government and aid agencies in the area. On Friday, the aid agency Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) doctors without borders warned that the famine was comparable to the disaster in Ethiopia in 1984 and that in Somalia in 1992 and was spreading rapidly.

Another editor quits in Malaysia: The chief editor of Malaysia's largest newspaper has resigned just days after the sudden departure of another top editor, apparently over conflicts with the country's leadership, AP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

Ahmad Nazri Abdullah resigned as group editor of the Malay-language daily Berita Harian with "immediate effect," according to a statement from its owner, Malaysian Resources Corp., that was published in local newspapers Saturday. Nazri's resignation came four days after Johan Jaafar, the editor-in-chief of another leading Malay-language daily, Utusan Malaysia, handed in his resignation to Mahathir.

Israeli-Palestinians hold first direct talks in months

JERUSALEM, July 19: Israelis and Palestinians held their first direct talks in months on Sunday but both sides say they do not expect to strike a deal straight off on the transfer of more West Bank land to the Palestinians, reports Reuters.

"Nobody thinks they are going to wrap this up in one meeting. I think it's a matter of trying to narrow the gaps, said an Israeli official who refused to be identified.

Israel's Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai will meet senior Palestinian negotiator Mahmoud Abbas at 7 pm (1600 GMT) in Tel Aviv after a 16-month impasse.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, who will participate in the talks said progress could be achieved only if Mordechai came prepared to cede another 13 per cent of the West Bank under the terms of an American initiative.

If he doesn't, I think it's going to be extremely difficult, Erekat told Reuters.

Saudi Prince dedicates new mosque in US

CULVER CITY, California, July 19: Prince Abdul Aziz gave thanks to the religious freedom in the United States as he helped dedicate an 8.1 million dollars mosque, the first Islamic centre in North America fully funded by the Saudi Arabian royal family, reports AP.

The prince spoke Friday to about 400 people who attended the dedication ceremony for the King Fahd Mosque in Culver City.

Nobel laureate warns Civil unrest to grip Nigeria unless military quits

ATLANTA, Georgia, July 19: Nigerian Nobel prize winner Wole Soyinka warned here Saturday that a violent wave of civil unrest will hit Nigeria if the military regime does not let go of power, reports AFP.

Soyinka, one of Nigeria's most prominent political exiles, also charged the generals in the oil-rich west African country with being in thrall to a elite minority safeguarding their wealth.

"The military is not acting alone," said Soyinka, a playwright and novelist who teaches literature at Emory University here.

"There is a section of people, a (northern) clique, that is whispering in the ear of the military: 'don't let go, don't let go.'"

"But if they don't let go, there will be civil unrest. It will be very forceful. The rest of the country is this sectional domination."

Soyinka said he had been invited to attend a secret meeting of opposition leaders this weekend in west Africa, but the meeting was cancelled to give Nigeria's new ruler, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, a chance to take steps toward civilian rule.

Top leader of extremist Islamic party shot dead in Karachi

KARACHI, July 19: Gunmen shot dead a top leader of an extremist Islamic party in the violence-plagued Pakistani city of Karachi, police said today, reports AFP.

Police said gunmen on a motorbike opened fire on Abdul Wahid Qadri, a faction leader in the Sunni Tehrik Pakistan (STP) outside his home in the Korangi district late Saturday.

STP sources said Qadri, 35, had formed his group after a recent split in the Sunni Tehrik Movement.

No group claimed the responsibility for the murder which came two days after the slaying of Salim Reza, Vice President of the main Sunni Tehrik.

Charles takes Camilla to dinner on her birthday eve

LONDON, July 19: Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles dined with friends at an exclusive club Friday, on the eve of her 51st birthday, reports AP.

The meal with 10 friends was to celebrate the birthday of the host, travel company boss Geoffrey Kent, a polo-playing friend of the prince, according to a spokesman for Charles, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

According to the Daily Mail, the prince and Parker Bowles arrived separately, but left together at 10:30 pm.

After spending the night at St James's Palace, Parker Bowles returned to her home, the paper said. The prince went to Buckingham Palace.

Fighting intensifies in Kosovo: 90 killed

PRISTINA, Yugoslavia, July 19: Fighting overnight between hundreds of ethnic Albanian rebels and Serbian security forces in Kosovo, near the border with Albania, left at least 90 people dead, well-informed sources said today.

Serbian sources said they had begun a counter-offensive to prevent guerrillas of the separatist Kosovo Liberation Army from capturing their first major town, and they denied the KLA insurgents, reports Reuters.

Neighbouring Albania meanwhile denounced Serbia for what it said was a gross violation of sovereignty, alleging that Serb forces fired shells into Albania during an operation to ambush a large infiltration by ethnic Albanian guerrillas.

Major powers trying to broker peace talks fear the conflict could widen, engulfing Albania and Macedonia in war.

Serbs and ethnic Albanians both reported heavy fighting on Saturday as fighters of the Kosovo Liberation Army tried to storm the police station in the centre of Orahovac, a mainly ethnic Albanian town 60 km southeast of Pristina.

Serbian military sources said on Saturday night that they had begun a counter-offensive to dislodge the guerrillas. They denied a media report that 20 Serbian policemen had surrendered.

Candidates for Japan's PM pledge tax cuts

TOKYO, July 19: The three candidates to succeed Japan's outgoing prime minister squared off for the first time Sunday, pledging on live television to curb sick banks and trim taxes in an effort to stimulate Japan's anemic economy, reports AP.

Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto was forced to resign last week after his ruling Liberal Democratic Party suffered a surprise defeat in elections for the upper house of Parliament.

The vote was seen as a sign of broad discontent with Japan's slide into recession earlier this year. All three contenders to replace Hashimoto reiterated their support Sunday for tax cuts on corporate and personal incomes as a way to revive economic demand.

Foreign Minister Keizo Obuchi, head of the LDP's largest faction and campaign front-runner, indicated that banks overburdened with unrecoverable loans should not expect the government to pay to save them.

"It can't be helped," he said of the possibility that some banks would fail. Obuchi, 61, spoke on national broadcaster NHK's "Sunday Debate" programme.

Health Minister Junichiro Koizumi, 56, who declared his candidacy on Saturday, suggested that weaker banks should be allowed to collapse in order to strengthen Japan's distressed banking sector. Rival candidate Seiroku Kajiyama, 72, a former chief Cabinet secretary, has also expressed this view.

Kajiyama declared he would target an annual growth rate of 3 to 4 per cent, while Obuchi pledged to seek growth of 2 to 3 per cent, on TV Asahi's "Sunday Project" debate programme.

Japan's gross domestic product for the fiscal year that ended in March shrank by 0.7 per cent, the first full year of economic contraction since 1974.

Indian soldier, 2 militants killed in Kashmir

JAMMU, India, July 19: An Indian soldier and two militants were killed in a gunbattle in the troubled region of Kashmir today, an army spokesman said, reports AP.

He said militants opened fire on a border security force patrol in the north-east district of Rajouri, 170 kilometres (105 miles) from Jammu, killing the soldier.

Indian soldiers retaliated killing two militants, the spokesman said.

India accuses Pakistan of fomenting a Muslim insurgency in its part of the territory which has cost more than 20,000 lives since 1989.

Islamabad denies the charge but says the Kashmir unrest is a legitimate struggle for self-rule.

On Saturday an Indian army officer and six villagers were killed when Pakistan troops shelled villages in Indian Kashmir.

India and Pakistan regularly trade fire across their heavily-militarised border in Kashmir.

New railroad to push poverty out of Yunnan province

LOUPOING COUNTY, China, July 19: Medieval living conditions in Nishida, Yunnan province, are not unlike those in many other south-west Chinese mountain villages, where nearly one third of the country's absolute poor live, reports AFP.

Inhabitants — mostly clad in torn, filthy clothes — can only manage subsistence farming on the steep, rock-strewn slopes and have no electricity or motorised vehicles.

But out of sight, just a few kms down a precipitous dirt track, is the recently completed Nanning-Kunming railroad, which officials say is the key to pulling such villagers out of poverty over the next decade.

Touting the railroad as the country's number-one poverty alleviation project, Beijing built it through some of the most mountainous terrain in China at a cost of more than 20 billion yuan (2.4 billion dollars) from 1991 to 1997. Bridges and tunnels account for 30.5 per cent of its length, making its construction the most expensive per kilometre in Chinese history.

The engineering heroics allowed the line to cut across one of the country's poorest and most isolated populations — giving the latter unprecedented access to opportunities by linking it to the rest of the national economy and southern sea ports.

Train services on the all-electric line only began in December, but dramatic effects are already visible in villages close to the train stations.

The 159 residents of Xinzhai have seen their annual per-capita income shoot up 50 per cent to 1,200 yuan (144 dollars) since the railroad's construction, said village chief Wang Zhenggu.

With government encouragement, the village has been replacing traditional staples with cash crops such as watermelons, which can be marketed in cities, such as Kunming and Xingyi, suddenly brought within reach by the railroad.

"We planned to begin planting fruits and vegetables before the railroad was finished, but we were afraid the idea would fail," said Wang, 23.

"Now that it has proved a success, we aim to expand the field space growing them," he said before biting into a slice of watermelon.

Profits have allowed residents to improve the mountain road to the village, pave muddy paths and install a plumbing system.

But a poor peasant in Nishida, higher up in the mountains, complained that to her, the railroad might as well be in another country.

"It hasn't helped us," said Wu Jufen, standing outside the gaping doorway of her mud-brick home.

The entire corn crop her family raised last year went to keeping hunger at bay, she said, adding the total income before the three people was just 700 yuan (84.3 dollars). With a laugh, the middle-aged woman said she would "love to" plant cash crops for sale in far-flung markets.

"But we have no money to invest," she said.

Even if seeds and other inputs could be obtained, transporting the harvest would be impossible without any vehicles or horses — the railroad is a 30-minute mountain trek away, and there is no station nearby, she said.

But according to the head of the county government, Wang Baode, the economic boom the rail line is bringing to the area as a whole will before long trickle down to villagers like Wu.

For Louping County, known in nearby Kunming city for its scenic mountains and waterfalls, the railroad's biggest impact is development of tourism," he said.

The number of visitors to the area in the six months after the trains began running exceeded 210,000 equal to the total for all of 1997, he said.

"Poor peasants can cater to this growing market of visitors," Wang Baode said. The railroad has also opened up new possibilities for exporting local resources such as coal, phosphates and iron, he said.

The county's economic growth is projected at 10.9 per cent for the next few years — three to five percentage points of which is attributable directly to the railroad, he added.

Jobs in the fast-growing county seat — where construction is visible along nearly every street — will help relieve poverty in the surrounding countryside, he said.

Increased revenue will also allow the county government to extend microcredit to the poorest farmers and improve infrastructure in the mountain areas, the official added.

Of 58 million Chinese Beijing says are still living below the absolute poverty line, 15 million live along the 899-kilometre railroad in Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi provinces.

Frustrated by a lack of progress, militant Mohajirs turned to violence to press demands for equal access to government jobs and places at universities and other state schools. They soon built up an arsenal of heavy weapons that often are better than those of Karachi's police force.

Several years ago the militants split over power and political goals. Rivals began to openly clash, taking over entire neighbourhoods of Karachi, a sweltering city of 14 million people.

Young gunmen took up positions on rooftops, shooting at policemen, residents and rivals alike. Lilaqatabad turned into one of the worst battle zones, one so dangerous even the police are afraid to enter.

Gunmen roaming eastern neighbourhoods killed three people Saturday, set vehicles on fire and shut down shops, according to witnesses and police.