



Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, left, meets US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in Cairo Wednesday to discuss the Iraq crisis and the stalled mideast peace process.

— AP/UNB photo

Journalists union sues Pak govt for 'harassment'

ISLAMABAD, Jan 28: Pakistan's largest newspaper group and a journalist organisation filed two separate constitutional petitions Wednesday against the government, accusing it of muzzling the press through a campaign of "silification, intimidation and harassment," reports AP.

The Jang group of newspaper and the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) blamed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government for curbing press freedom through a series of harsh steps, including a demand for the sacking of senior journalists.

The government has been locked in a bitter dispute with the Jang group for the last even months, saying it is involved in massive evasion of taxes and customs duties.

In recent months, Sharif's government has been jolted by a series of stories accusing the ruling family of graft, tax evasion and loan defaults.

Sharif denies these accusations.

Earlier, the government froze Jang group's bank accounts, stopped government advertisements to its newspapers and issued two billion rupees worth of tax notices.

"It is not an issue of govern-

ment versus the press or of tax evasion," Senator Saifur Rehman, the chief of government's accountability cell told reporters Monday.

The government is seriously pursuing tax defaulters... We have proofs of tax evasion against the Jang group, which has launched a campaign against us because the net is being tightened against it."

In its petitions to the Supreme Court, the group said it is being victimised because the management refused to accept "unjustified demands to tailor their news, views and editorial policy as well as the coverage and display of news" according to the wishes of the government.

Opposition parties and human rights groups also have condemned the government's moves.

The Jang group is carrying out an advertisement campaign against the government in its Urdu and English language newspapers under the heading "press under siege."

The government has ordered the spy agencies to tap telephones of Jang offices and senior officials and keep surveillance of editorial staff, the group said.

BRIEFLY

Tremors shake Japan: An earthquake measuring 4.7 on the Richter Scale jolted Nagano and nearby areas in central Japan yesterday, the meteorological agency said. AFP reports from Tokyo.

There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage. The epicentre of the quake, which struck at 10:25 am (0125 GMT), was located in central Nagano, some 150 km northwest of Tokyo, the agency said.

Pope John Paul II ends US visit: Pope John Paul II flew home Wednesday after winding up a 31-hour visit here on the second and last leg of his 85th pastoral journey since he assumed the papacy more than 20 years ago, AFP says from St-Louis.

The 78-year-old pontiff, who arrived here Tuesday following a four-day visit to Mexico, was seen off by Vice President Al Gore, his wife Tipper and St. Louis Archbishop Justin Rigali.

Blasts rock gas factory in Canada: Two explosions rocked a Canadian gas plant Wednesday, injuring about a dozen workers and prompting police to evacuate 1,000 residents from their homes, AP says from Taylor.

British Columbia's energy minister, Dan Miller, said at least 12 people were injured in the explosions and a fire at the Solex Gas Liquids plant in Taylor. The injured, reportedly suffering from burns and smoke inhalation, were taken to a hospital in nearby Fort St. John.

Moderate quake rattles Taiwan: Briefly an Earthquake measuring 4.3 on the Richter Scale rocked southern Taiwan yesterday but there were no immediate reports of damages or casualties, the Central Weather Bureau said. AFP says from Taipei.

The tremor struck at 9:19 am (0119 GMT) with its epicentre located 18.3 km east of southern Chiayi county. It originated 26.6 km under the earth's surface.

US sailor held in ROK: An American navy sailor has been arrested for questioning in the murder of his wife and 4-year-old son, South Korean police said yesterday. AP says from Seoul.

Petty Officer 1st Class James W. Fuhrman, 36, was arrested Wednesday after the bodies of his wife, Lee Choon-ja, 42, and their adopted son, Bobby, were found burned beyond recognition at a riverside construction site in southwestern Seoul earlier in the day.

Blast kills 8 in China: An explosion near a farmers market in a town in central China's Hunan province killed eight people and injured 65, the Yangcheng Evening News said a report seen Thursday in Beijing. AP reports Beijing.

The explosion occurred at 11:15 am Monday in the street that runs past the county government office of Yizhang, near the city of Chenzhou, the newspaper reported Wednesday. Police were investigating to determine the cause of the explosion.

Thai army chopper crashes: An army helicopter crashed into two houses yesterday in northeastern Thailand, leaving the two-man crew seriously injured, AP says from Bangkok.

The houses in the town of Surin, 340 kilometres northeast of Bangkok, were unoccupied.

ROK ship sinking off Lanka coast: A South Korean cargo ship was sinking in the Indian Ocean yesterday after it sprang a leak in the hull, rescue officials said, AP says from Colombo.

Tugboats from Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital, rushed to the 50,000 ton MV Peace and rescued the 20-member Indian crew, but were unlikely to be able to save the ship.

6 teenagers convicted of murder in HK: Six teenagers were convicted of murder in the sadistic torture-slaying of a 15-year-old schoolboy that apparently was inspired by a popular local street gang comic book, newspapers reported yesterday. AP says from Hong Kong.

Luk Chi-wai died after being beaten for hours, hung upside down and force-fed cigarette butts by a group of youths who had been his childhood friends in a public housing project where crimes were common, prosecutors said. The band of young killers then systematically destroyed Luk's corpse, dousing it with sulphuric acid and burning what was left to eliminate evidence of the brutal murder, according to the Chinese-language daily Ming Pao. Just a few bone fragments were recovered by police.

Albright seeks Saudi support to topple Saddam

Riyadh, Jan 28: Secretary of State Madeleine Albright sought Saudi Arabia's support Wednesday for US efforts to topple Iraqi President Saddam Hussein by assisting opposition groups, reports AP.

Albright's spokesman, James P. Rubin, candidly acknowledged the secretary's intention to try to enlist the backing of this conservative monarchy in a growing US campaign to oust Saddam.

As Albright's Air Force jet touched down in Riyadh after a flight from Egypt, Rubin told reporters that "regime changes" in Baghdad were on the agenda for her talks, along with ways to try to contain Iraq to protect its neighbours.

Albright began her visit with a courtesy call on King Fahd, then had a dinner meeting with Prince Saud, the foreign minister, and a long session, well past midnight, with Crown Prince Abdullah.

The Saudis prefer late-night meetings, but to travel-weary visitors it is a challenge to their staying power.

The plea for Saudi support follows a US decision to provide selective opposition groups in Iraq with some \$78 million in surplus US military equipment, reports AP.

Administration officials long have claimed the Saudis quietly supported the joint US-British bombings of Iraq in a dispute over UN weapons inspections.

But the Saudis have been discreet, while also registering anxiety about the plight of Iraqi people under Saddam's rule and under UN economic sanctions.

Rubin also announced that Albright would make a stop in Amman, Jordan, on Thursday to confer with Crown Prince Abdullah to express "our friendship for him and for the Jordanian people."

US relations with Jordan and regional issues, including the stalled Arab-Israeli peace process, were on the agenda.

She spoke with reporters after talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Foreign Minister Amr Moussa.

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"We regret the stray missile in Basra that killed some civilians, but we believe that it is essential for the no-fly zones to be protected and for our pilots to be able to defend themselves when they are attacked," Albright said.

The Pentagon acknowledged Tuesday that a US missile missed its target Monday during strikes near the southern Iraqi city of Basra. Iraqi officials said that errant US missiles killed at least 11 people and injured 59 in and around the city.

"Using force is not our preferred mechanism," Albright said of current tensions with Saddam over northern and southern no-fly zones set up after the 1991 Gulf War to protect Iraqi dissidents from their government.

Albright stressed that the United States intends to "contain his (Saddam's) potential aggression" but also work to improve the condition of Iraqi civilians by expanding the UN-approved oil-for-food program.

Timor independence announcement a lie'

CANBERRA, Jan 28: Any suggestion the Indonesian government would move to grant East Timor independence was just lies, independence leader Jose Ramos Horta said Thursday, reports AP.

The Indonesian government said it may grant independence this year to the troubled territory, ending two decades of quasi-military rule, if a majority of the people there reject an offer of autonomy.

Australia's and New Zealand's foreign ministers cautiously welcomed the Indonesian proposal.

"It is intimately related. On one hand they arm groups in East Timor to slaughter each other then blame the East Timorese for the violence there, as they are doing, saying that the East Timorese cannot govern themselves, so it

Justifies their presence there," Ramos Horta said.

At the same time they make promises, statements in Jakarta about autonomy and possible independence.

"We know them for 24 years. We are dealing with a gang of liars, of pathological killers...

Off the Record

Pope John the pop star?

ROME: Pope John Paul II is about to star in a music video, reports AP.

Sony Classical and Vatican Radio announced plans this week for the video, saying it will be a spin-off of their joint release of a music CD entitled "Abba Pater."

"Abba Pater" will combine "original compositions and arrangements of contemporary musical forms with live recordings of Pope John Paul II delivering prayers, homilies and chants in live languages," Sony said.

The CD is scheduled for release in March, ahead of Holy Week and Easter, according to the Vatican.

The papal recordings — in Latin, Italian, French, English and Spanish — were chosen from Vatican Radio's exhaustive archives of John Paul's 20-year papacy.

One of the 11 tracks, which features the pope chanting the Pater Noster (Our Father), will also be produced as a music video. The video will be featured on the Vatican Web site and Sony Classical's Web site.

The CD cover will be adorned with pictures of the pope, according to Sony. It will come with a booklet that includes the papal texts and more pictures of the pope.

Royalties from the sale of "Abba Pater" will go to Vatican Radio and to Audiovisivi San Paolo, co-producer of the CD and one of the world's largest publishers of religious books and periodicals.

And now, computerised marriage cards

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 28: Muslim couples married in the Malaysian capital will be issued cards with computer chips embedded in them so Islamic police can instantly verify their vows, a news report said Thursday, reports AP.

Under Islamic law, unmarried couples can be charged with "Khalwat" or "close proximity" if caught in a room together.

Islamic police often raid rooms suspected of sheltering an unwed pair. Islamic law prohibits sex outside marriage. Offenders are tried in Islamic courts and can face up to two months in jail and a fine if convicted.

Abdul Hamid Othman, a minister in the prime minister's department, said Wednesday the new cards, to take the place of old-fashioned marriage certificates on Feb. 1, would come in handy if a couple was mistakenly pounced on.

The government hopes to equip Islamic police with portable card-readers to check the cards, Abdul Hamid said.

"In the past, the whole village would know if a couple was married but not anymore. So, this card can prove a couple's status should there be a problem," Abdul Hamid was quoted as saying Thursday in the Sun newspaper.

Malaysia is predominantly Muslim. Islamic law is not applied to minority Christians, Buddhists or Hindus.

Couples married in Kuala Lumpur will be issued a set of two cards, for 28 ringgit (dirs 7), immediately after their marriage is solemnized.

Abdul Hamid said other religious authorities in other states had expressed interest in the marriage-card system for their areas.

Landmines to kill tigers!

PHNOM PENH: Villagers and soldiers in remote forests in northeastern Cambodia are using home-made landmines to catch and kill tigers, whose body parts are sold on the black market, a government official said yesterday, reports Reuters.

The governor of Ratanakiri province said he was trying to stop the illegal killing of the extremely rare big cats.

Villagers and soldiers are laying down home-made mines to catch tigers," Kep Youtema told Reuters by telephone from Ratanakiri.

"They can't get them with guns so they put down mines instead," he said.

Businessmen who buy dead animals for their body parts are supplying soldiers and villagers in Vonsai district with gunpowder for the mines, the governor said. Tigers are a protected species in Cambodia and Kep Youtema said he had ordered district officials to stop the killing.

"It's illegal. They have to find out who's doing it and stop it immediately because tigers are very rare," he said.

Tiger parts are still used in traditional medicines in the region in the belief they have special invigorating powers.

Jordanians worry about their future as they welcome new heir to the throne

AMMAN, Jan 28: Hundreds of Jordanians crowded into a hilltop palace to pay respect to their new crown prince Wednesday as anxiety grew over the health of King Hussein, who has suffered a relapse of cancer which is aggravating one of Colombia's worst disasters.

— AP/UNB photo

Survivors from Monday's earthquake carry away goods after looting a supermarket in downtown Armenia, Colombia Wednesday. Hungry and desperate, many are complaining of acute shortages of everything from antibiotics to coffins which are aggravating one of Colombia's worst disasters.

— AP/UNB photo

and I intend to keep love, mercy, selflessness ... amongst us," he said.

While Wednesday's show of loyalty to Abdullah was reassuring to Jordanians, the king's illness was bewildering to many.

"The country is like an awakened volcano that is ready to erupt," said Shadia Tabari, 52, a homemaker. "I'm very worried about our beloved king without whom Jordan will never be the same."

Making it worse were rumors suggesting that Hussein had died already. Even the usual calls for Muslim prayers on radio and television brought tense moments, since some interpreted them as the Quranic verses broadcast to signal death.

Apprehension was also reflected on the Amman stock market, where share prices dropped by 2.27 per cent. US dollars, which Jordanians hoard at times of insecurity, also became scarce.

The nervousness is understandable. Jordan is a small nation surrounded by Israel, Iraq and Syria.

But Jamal Shaer, a former cabinet minister, said he expected a smooth transition

should Hussein die, with little opposition from Palestinians who make up roughly two-thirds of Jordan's 3.8 million people.

"Prince Abdullah is an army general who has a strong power base in the army and he has the support of the tribes because he is Hussein's son," he said.

Palestinians and members of Jordan's indigenous tribes have clashed in the past. In 1970, a rebellion by Palestinians guerrillas was put down by the army, which is made up of Bedouin tribes loyal to the king.

But now, the Palestinians who poured into Jordan with the founding of Israel in 1948, and again after the 1967 Mideast war, have become part of the country's fabric. Many are part of the merchant class and will support Abdullah.

"The Palestinians will enthusiastically accept him as ruler because of his wife's origin," he said referring to Princess Rania, a Palestinian from the West Bank town of Tulkarem.

Jordanian newspapers were adorned with pictures of Hussein and Abdullah — kissing, hugging, shaking hands — and with advertisements congratulating the new crown prince.

"This cub is from the lion king," said one full-page ad.

The Royal Palace said another ceremony was scheduled Thursday because of a flood of calls from Jordanians wishing to congratulate the prince.

"Hussein's health worsens," the mass daily Yediot Achronot said in a front-page headline: "Hussein critical" said its competitor, Maariv.

Newspapers, radio and television broadcasts were filled with analysis of what a change in Amman would mean in Jerusalem. Israel has closer relations with Jordan than any other Arab nation.

"Can the inexperienced crown prince maintain peace and stability in the kingdom?" a Maariv column said.

"The relations between Israel and Jordan have strategic importance to the two countries," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Tuesday night, adding that he did not expect that to change.

But by Wednesday night he appeared worried about the monarch.