



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

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 erode 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 neighbors.

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 visitor 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 \$187 million in surplus US military equipment.

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.

"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" Iraq's (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.

Ramos Horta said the government raising the prospect of granting the troubled province independence was a sham aimed at the diplomatic community.

"No credibility, I don't place too much faith in it," Ramos Horta, who lives in Australia in self-imposed exile, told Australian Broadcasting Corp. radio.

"We are sick and tired of promises, statements coming out of Jakarta which are in contrast with the reality in East Timor, where people are being slaughtered, where women are

still raped, torture is rampant, there are more than 20,000 troops there."

Resolving the future of East Timor was not going to be a Cabinet or assembly decision, he said.

"Only a referendum under UN supervision where the people can vote freely without coercion, without Indonesian troops present, can be acceptable," Ramos Horta said.

He said the announcement came at the same time the government was investigating violence in East Timor and arming paramilitary groups.

"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..."

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 "vilification, 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 in its newspapers and issued two billion rupees worth of tax notices.

"It is not an issue of govern-

ment versus the press or of press freedom. It's an issue 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 officials and senior officials and keep surveillance of editorial staff, the group said.

Sri Lankan govt threatens to jail 3 journalists

COLOMBO, Jan 28: Sri Lanka's government Thursday threatened to jail three journalists who accused two cabinet ministers of rigging a key provincial election for the ruling party, reports AP.

Commerce Minister Kingsley Wickramaratne and Agriculture Minister DM Jayaratne were quoted as saying they will ask police to charge the journalists with criminal defamation.

The journalists are Waruna Karunatilake of Reuters Television, Sunanda Deshapriya of the Sinhalese-language tabloid Yuthiya, and political columnist Pakiasothy Saravanamuttu, head of the Center for Monitoring Election Violence, an umbrella organisation of human rights groups and journalists.

If convicted, they face up to five years in prison under a law often used to muzzle journalists.

A report by the independent monitors said voters had been intimidated during the election, opposition polling agents forcibly removed from ballot stations, and ballot boxes stuffed with votes for the government in full view of observers.

Earthquake in Colombia Slow pace of relief work triggers looting

ARMENIA, Colombia, Jan 28: Violence erupted on Wednesday in a Colombian city torn by an earthquake that killed at least 878 people as anger over the slow pace of relief efforts triggered a frenzy of looting, reports agencies.

Mobs driven by hunger broke into crumbling shops and supermarkets crashing through metal shutters to cart off armfuls of powdered milk bottled water, canned foods and even detergents.

More than 50 police officers watched helplessly as scores of desperate Colombians dashed into the Central Supermarket to loot it of all its contents.

People grabbed anything they could stuff it all into huge sacks. The officers' only option was safety: the cracked building that police had marked off with protective yellow tape shook with each passing truck or ambulance.

"Hurry up, let's go, old one!" an officer yelled to an elderly woman entering the rickety structure.

Throughout the city, police overwhelmed by the magnitude

of Monday's earthquake and a series of frightening aftershocks enabled residents short on food and water to sack stores.

"We're with them because the people are hungry," said one patrolman who identified himself as "Chiquito."

"The problem is that we don't have the equipment to control rioting. We tried to stop them, but they began to throw rocks at us," said police Lt Jorge Duque.

"You can't fight against hunger," Sacked items weren't limited to food. One shoeless man emerged from the supermarket carrying a sack of food and a dozen brooms. Teenagers waved their friends on inside; other looked warily at the ceiling of the unstable structure.

Jorge Hernandez, 35, and four friends trolled the devastated city centre, apparently in search of booty. "The people are taking things because the stores are destroyed," Hernandez explained.

Most of the rioting appeared to fizzle out ahead of a dusk to dawn curfew in the city which police vowed to vigorously enforce.

Iraqi parliament calls for uprising against Kuwait, KSA

BAGHDAD, Jan 28: Iraq's parliament called Wednesday for popular uprisings against Arab regimes which have supported US and British air strikes, namely Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, reports AFP.

The 250 MPs meeting in special session voted by a show of hands on a resolution calling on the Arab masses who protested against the strikes last month "to overthrow these regimes."

One of seven resolutions said "hired regimes who have directly or indirectly assisted in the aggression should be considered part of an imperialist plot against the Arab nation."

President Saddam Hussein called on January 5 for Arabs to overthrow their leaders, particularly in Saudi Arabia, which like Kuwait allows US and British forces to use their air bases.

A call was also made for Arab countries to lift the international embargo on Iraq, "unilaterally and immediately" and to condemn the US and British attacks and the "no-fly" zones they enforce over northern and southern Iraq.

The parliament blamed the United States, Britain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for "the human and material losses inflicted on Iraq" during the December 16-19 air strikes.

Indonesian parliament okays political laws

JAKARTA, Jan 28: After a prolonged debate, an Indonesian parliamentary committee Thursday approved new political laws paving the way for a general election on June 7, reports AP.

The committee, consisting of representatives of the ruling Golkar Party, the United Development Party and the Indonesian Democratic Party as well as the military, agreed to halve the military seats in parliament to 38 from 75.

It also agreed to ban state employees from being members or executives of political parties.

The committee forwarded the draft to the full Parliament, where lawmakers meeting in plenary session were expected to approve the laws later Thursday.

Proceedings for the session were delayed by several hours Thursday after one legislator died of heart attack.

Earlier the committee agreed that the size of the highest legislative body, the People's Consultative Assembly, which will elect a president later this year, be cut from 1,000 to 700 members. It will consist of 500 parliamentarians and 200 government appointees.

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 five 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 (dls 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 Mondulakiri 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.



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

Northern Ireland peace process badly shaken

BELFAST, Jan 28: The Northern Ireland peace process was badly shaken today after the murder of a prominent IRA informer and renewed criticism of the continuing release of convicted terrorists amid such ongoing violence, reports AP.

The rising tide of unrest which has been building all year in the British province finally led to the conclusion it threatened Wednesday when the body of Eamon Collins was discovered on a remote roadside.

An ex-member of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) who publicly turned against his former comrades, Collins had been stabbed, beaten and run over in his home town of Lewin, county down, close to the border with the Irish republic.

The 45-year-old was apparently painting over graffiti reading: "Collins, RUC tout" referring to the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the province's police force.

The death of the "supergrass" immediately prompted allegations of a paramilitary assassination by pro-United Ireland Republicans, even by the IRA itself.

Such suspicions damage the entire peace process; it was by virtue of its July 1997 ceasefire that the IRA's political wing Sinn Fein was allowed to join talks that led to the historic eastern 1998 peace agreement.

China closes monastery in Tibet

BEIJING, Jan 28: Chinese authorities have closed a 700-year-old Buddhist monastery and an 800-year-old nunnery in Tibet after the clergy refused orders to denounce the Dalai Lama, a monitoring group reported yesterday, reports AP.

All but three of 82 nuns at the Rakhor nunnery, one of Tibet's oldest, were ordered to leave on Nov. 20, 1997, and by last August all of the nunnery except its main assembly hall had been destroyed, the London-based Tibet Information Network said.

The Jonang Kumbum monastery, meanwhile, was closed and monks sent home in July 1997 after they refused to accept conditions laid down by teams of officials who ordered them to denounce the Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled spiritual leader, TIN said.

China has sent such "patriotic education" teams to many Tibetan monasteries to stamp out support for the Dalai Lama, whom many Tibetans still revere despite his flight into exile in India after a failed uprising against Chinese rule in 1959.

Monks at the monastery in Xigaze prefecture, southwest of the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, also were made to denounce a boy chosen by the Dalai Lama as a senior spiritual leader and to instead accept another boy chosen by China, TIN said.

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, reports AP.

The demonstration of support for Prince Abdullah — which included the king's brother, who was removed as crown prince Tuesday — underlined Jordanians' hopes that any transition of power will be smooth in the kingdom, a nation poor in resources and at the crossroads of a turbulent region.

The United States quickly signalled its support for the king's decision to appoint the 36-year-old heir to the throne. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright decided to stop in Jordan on Thursday to meet the new crown prince.

"We will stand by Jordan and hope this transition is one that does not create problems," she said in Cairo, Egypt.

Hussein had abruptly returned to the United States on Tuesday for medical treatment. The Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, announced Wednesday the king was in "stable condition" but had suf-

fered a relapse of lymphatic cancer after undergoing six months of chemotherapy.

"He is receiving treatment for a relapse of non-Hodgkins lymphoma. His majesty immediately began treatment upon arriving at Mayo clinic," said a statement issued on behalf of the king's doctors.

Sources in Jordan, speaking on customary conditions of anonymity, said Hussein might undergo a second stem cell transplant to try to fight the disease.

Hassan hugged and kissed Abdullah at the palace reception in Amman. Other well-wishers included military and government officials, members of parliament, businessmen, trade unionists, political party leaders, women activists and Bedouin tribesmen.

The heavy turnout underlined the support for Hussein's decision to remove Hassan, who lacks Hussein's charisma.

Prince Abdullah has so far tried to avoid any possible rift with his uncle. In a letter to his father, Abdullah hinted that he will maintain warm relations with Hassan.

"The Hashimites are my family and the source of my pride

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 al-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 5.8 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 Palestinian guerrillas was put down by the army, which is made up of Bedouin tribes loyal to the king.

But now, the Palestinian 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.

Meanwhile Israelis closely monitored reports on the health of the Jordanian king on Wednesday, anxious for news of their closest ally in the region.

"Hussein's health worsens," the mass daily Yediot Ahronot 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.

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