



Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein chairs a meeting of his Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) and senior Baath party officials at an undisclosed location Sunday. Iraq criticised the UN Security Council's decision to create study panels to assess Iraqi disarmament. — AP/UNB photo

US, British warplanes launch fresh assault on Iraq

BAGHDAD, Feb 1: US and British warplanes launched a new wave of attacks on Iraqi air defences on Sunday, as Baghdad dismissed a UN security council initiative to review the eight-year embargo as "procrastination," reports AFP.

Air defences in southern Iraq were targeted by seven missiles and bombs while one missile was fired at an anti-aircraft battery in the north, the official INA news agency quoted a spokesman as saying.

It was the second attack launched in as many days by allied planes as part of an intense military campaign unleashed on "no-fly" zones in northern and southern Iraq since the end of December's Operation Desert Fox.

"Our brave anti-aircraft defences managed to resist the enemy planes in the northern and southern sectors, forcing them to flee back to the evil dens they came from," the Iraqi spokesman said.

"Enemy formations" firing from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait carried out the raids on the south while the warplanes involved in the northern raid came from Turkey, the spokesman said.

The United States said US and British planes monitoring the southern "no-fly" zone had struck two military sites, while a US fighter jet from Turkey's Inlikir base fired a missile at a radar site in the northern zone.

months US and British air strikes — agreed to convene three review panels on disarmament and long-term weapons monitoring, humanitarian concerns, and issues stemming from the 1991 Gulf War over Kuwait.

But a leadership meeting chaired by President Saddam Hussein was followed by an announcement that Baghdad "was not consulted on the formation of these panels and that's why this measure does not concern us."

The work of the United Nations would "take several months," said a statement carried in the INA, dismissing the move as "nothing more than procrastination and a prolongation of the unjust embargo."

DPRK closes 14 overseas missions

SEOUL, Feb 1: Amid acute economic difficulties, North Korea closed 14 overseas diplomatic missions, or 21 per cent of its foreign operations, in 1998, South Korean officials said Monday, reports AP.

The North Korean missions closed include eight in Africa, four in Europe, and one each in Asia and the Middle East, said officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

That left North Korea with only 54 overseas diplomatic missions in the 130 countries with which the communist country maintains diplomatic relations.

With its economy in shambles, North Korea announced plans last year to cut 30 per cent of its overseas diplomatic operations.

Three years of bad weather, combined with decades of economic mismanagement, have caused a near collapse of North's farming system, leaving the country's 22 million people largely dependent on foreign charity.

Troops kill 6 LTTE rebels

COLOMBO, Feb 1: Government soldiers shot dead at least six Tamil Tiger guerrillas in fresh fighting in northeast Sri Lanka, the defence ministry here said today, reports AFP.

Soldiers ambushed a group of fighters from the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Pulmodai and killed five of them on Sunday, the ministry said in a statement.

It said another rebel was killed near the northern town of Paranthan, also on Sunday.

The latest clashes came a day after fighting left nearly 50 Tamil rebels dead or wounded in the northeast of the country.

There had been a spate of skirmishes in recent weeks since the military suspended its biggest and bloodiest offensive against the Tigers in December.

Independence rally in E Timor

DILI, Feb 1: About 300 separatist protesters demonstrated Monday in East Timor following an offer from Indonesia to give up control of the former Portuguese colony, reports AP.

Last week, Indonesia said it would consider granting independence to East Timor if its inhabitants reject a plan for greater autonomy now being discussed at UN-sponsored talks.

Pro-Indonesian activists have warned of the possibility of civil war among rival East Timorese factions if Indonesia suddenly withdraws its administration and thousands of troops.

But separatists who drove in a convoy of cars and trucks through Dili, the seaside capital of East Timor, said they would settle for nothing less than independence.

"We strongly reject any kind of autonomy," activist Gil Fernando said.

Demonstrators waved separatist rebel flags and unfurled a banner that read "Free Xanana," in a reference to Xanana Gusmao, the East Timorese guerrilla chief who is being held in a Jakarta jail.

The protest was peaceful. Indonesia invaded the half-island territory of 800,000 people in 1975 and annexed it a year later, unleashing a guerrilla war and widespread human rights abuses.

DRC repeals ban on political activities

KINSHASA, Feb 1: The Democratic Republic of Congo government on Sunday repealed a ban on political activities in force since president Laurent Kabila took power in May 1997, reports AFP.

The government laid down stringent requirements for the registration of parties in a vast and impoverished country currently ravaged by civil war.

First, according to official television, parties now must create a forum of at least 300 delegates coming from all of Dr Congo's 11 provinces.

Secondly, each party must but down a non-refundable deposit of 30,000 Congolese francs (10,000 dollars, 8,772 euros).

Kabila banned all political activities when he came to power, provoking an international outcry. It promised he would lift the ban before holding multiparty general elections.

India will sign CTBT if int'l freeze on lending lifted

NEW DELHI, Feb 1: India will sign the nuclear test ban treaty in exchange for the unfreezing of international lending, senior US and Indian officials said Monday, reports AP.

The officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, stopped short of declaring a breakthrough after eight months of nuclear negotiations, but applauded significant progress.

The senior US administration official said US nuclear negotiator Strobe Talbott was to meet later Monday with the ambassadors of the world's seven other leading industrialised nations to discuss progress in talks with India and propose lifting the economic sanctions.

In response to India's nuclear tests last May, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the United States — known collectively as the G-8 — in June froze

development loans to India as well as Pakistan. Pakistan had responded to India's tests with its own tests.

The Indian official, who also spoke on condition of anonymity Monday, said India had long made it clear it could not sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty while under sanctions. Now, he said, there was movement toward the resolution outlined by the US official.

Jasjit Singh, director of New Delhi's independent Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, said signs did appear to point to a clearer-than-ever Indian pledge to sign the CTBT, which successive Indian governments have said unfavourably favours the major nuclear powers. Singh said he was concerned that India appeared ready to sign without an assurance it would have access to nuclear technology for its energy programmes that it has been

denied because the systems also have military uses.

"What is the incentive for India to do all this? I think the (leaders of the) government of India should also make sure the people of India feel good about this. Otherwise, they can't get elected," Singh said.

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee last September, fall has been predicted repeatedly since it took power last March. US negotiators appear to be preparing for any possible change in government — Talbott has met with opposition leaders such as Congress party president Sonia Gandhi during his visits to India.

The CTBT-for-sanctions formula recalled a breakthrough last September, Vajpayee declared then at the United Nations that he wanted to see the CTBT come into force by this September, and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz

Sharif said he would sign the treaty when India did. Weeks after the UN statements, US President Bill Clinton lifted some unilateral economic sanctions against both India and Pakistan.

Last month, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other global donor agencies resumed fresh lending to Pakistan, whose already struggling economy had been much harder hit by the nuclear sanctions than had India's.

Talbott heads late Monday to Pakistan, where officials have reportedly promised new, tough legislation to control the spread of sensitive nuclear technology.

In his comments Monday, neither the US nor the India source cited say exactly when India would sign the CTBT or when the sanctions would be lifted. But the US official said it could be as early mid-1999.

Pakistan pledges new law to control nuclear technology

ISLAMABAD, Feb 1: Pakistan made several positive overtures on the nuclear issue Monday, prior to the start of talks between Pakistan and a top US official, reports AP.

Pakistan promised a tough new law to guarantee that sensitive nuclear technology doesn't become available to the highest bidder.

Pakistan also reiterated an earlier statement by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif that it was ready to adhere to the global nuclear test ban treaty, something Washington has been pushing and something India also promised to do.

The announcements came ahead of a visit later Monday by US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, who arrives in

Pakistan from India where he negotiated the signing of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty with New Delhi.

India agreed to sign the treaty in exchange for an end to economic sanctions.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's promised law to protect its nuclear technology is aimed at allaying fears that the country's nuclear knowledge could be sold to other countries.

A story carried by the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan quoted unnamed government officials saying the government will open talks with Talbott with a "positive attitude toward international (nuclear) non-proliferation concerns."

However, the news agency said Islamabad will be mindful

of "its vital national interests and the need to maintain credible nuclear deterrence against Indian aggression or blackmail."

While Pakistan has said it is willing to sign the test ban treaty, it has refused outright to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty unless neighboring India also signs. New Delhi has refused.

International concern focused on South Asia last May after India and Pakistan conducted underground nuclear tests.

Both countries possess medium and long-range missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads and capable of hitting major cities on the Asian subcontinent.

Visiting US team calls on Vajpayee

NEW DELHI, Feb 1: The visiting United States delegation led by Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott today called on Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee here, reports BSS.

The meeting held at the Prime Minister's official residence lasted about 30 minutes. External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh was also present during the meeting.

Earlier, Talbott also met Defence Minister George Fernandes at his office in South Block.

At the end of their extended three-day 8th round of talks yesterday, India and the US decided to carry forward their dialogue on key nuclear non-proliferation issues later this year with New Delhi sticking to its position that post-Pokhran coercive measures including economic sanctions be lifted to create a positive atmosphere for advancing their relations.

Corruption scandal rocks judicial ROK gov't fires 6 prosecutors

SEOUL, Feb 1: The government fired six prosecutors and reprimanded 19 others Monday in a major corruption scandal rocking South Korea's judicial system, reports AP.

Five judges also faced investigation and possible punishment for alleged involvement in the scandal. They were suspected of receiving payoffs in return for introducing clients to a lawyer.

Apologising for the scandal, Prosecutor General Kim Tae-jung said his office will launch a massive anti-corruption campaign in the nation's prosecution system. The scandal came to light in early January when a disgruntled aide to lawyer in the central city of Taejeon passed to the press a list of hundreds of prosecutors, judges, police and court officials

who allegedly received bribes.

The lawyer, Lee Jong-ki, was arrested on charges of corruption. Prosecutors say he admitted that he had paid 1.18 million won (dls 98,000) in payoffs to about 100 government, court and prison officials who introduced 202 clients to him between 1994 and 1997.

Also arrested were six low-ranking prosecution officials, charged with receiving more the 3 million won (dls 2,500) each from the lawyer in payoffs.

Most of those on the list received small amounts and their cases were dismissed. The 25 prosecutors sacked or reprimanded Monday were found to have received more than 1 million won (dls 833) each from the lawyer.



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, left, and United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan prior to their meeting at a hotel in Davos, Switzerland, Sunday. — AP/UNB photo

Palestinian statehood declaration May date agreed under int'l accord: Arafat

DAVOS, Switzerland, Feb 1: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said Sunday that the May target for a declaration of statehood was a "sacred date," since it was agreed under an international accord, reports AP.

He was speaking at the start of a five-day trip to Europe and the United States to try to protect the option of declaring an independent state in May despite Israeli elections that month.

"It is a sacred date, it is not a Palestinian date, it is an international date," he told reporters on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum (WEF) annual meeting in the Swiss ski resort of Davos.

"You remember it has been agreed upon and signed by Russia, the United States, the European Union, Norway, Jordan, Egypt, in the presence of the Japanese foreign minister and the representative of Kofi Annan," he said.

"So it is not a bilateral agreement, it is an international agreement."

Arafat's trip is seen by analysts as part of a continuing campaign to drum up support for the possible announcement of a Palestinian state on May 4 when the interim period, as set out in the Oslo peace accords, comes to an end.

Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet has insisted Arafat's Palestinian Authority renounce its intention to unilaterally declare an independent state in May, in particular because Israeli elections are to be held later that month.

Arafat was speaking shortly before meeting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on the sidelines of the WEF meeting.

Mubarak told AFP before their talks at a Davos hotel, "I hope that they could delay it (the proclamation of a state) for some time," as this could help avoid other extremists creating problems."

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan also met here with Mubarak and later had a half-hour meeting with Arafat, but none of the leaders had any comment to make on their talks.

HIV virus transmitted from African chimpanzees

CHICAGO, Feb 1: The HIV virus that causes AIDS was transmitted to humans from African chimpanzees, a team of US researchers from Alabama said here Sunday, citing evidence based on years of research, reports AP.

Beatrice Hahn of the University of Alabama at Birmingham told the opening session of a conference that brings together 3,200 AIDS researchers from around the world that her team had found evidence of transmission of sivex (the HIV virus found in chimpanzees) to humans in at least three occasions.

The team had confirmed the connection by analysing the blood and frozen tissue samples from a chimpanzee called Marilyn who had died from childhood complications at a US private center at the age of 26 in 1984.

The Sivep Virus — prevalent among chimpanzees living in Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Congo — was found to closely resemble the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which causes the deadly Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

The chimpanzees are believed to have been carrying the virus for hundreds of thousands of years but do not get sick from it.

"This is an important finding with significant potential," said Anthony Fauci, a researcher at the US National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases, which helped bankroll the study.

Studying why the chimpanzees do not get sick might hasten the search for a cure, experts said.

Hahn said cross-species transmission of the virus probably occurred when a human ate chimpanzee bush meat, or a human was bitten by the animal.

"We speculate that this might be a route for infection," Hahn told the conference on retroviruses and opportunistic infections, which ends Thursday.

Central Africans depend on bush meat as a source of food. And there has been an increasing commercialisation of the bush meat trade as a result of logging, Hahn said. This may have contributed to the spread of the epidemic, she said.

Anwar's trial Mahathir ready to stand as witness

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 1: Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said he was ready to take the stand as a witness in the politically charged trial of his ousted deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, news reports said Monday, reports AP.

Anwar's lawyers plan to take statements from Mahathir and several of his Cabinet members in hopes of proving their testimonies would be relevant to the four corruption charges against Anwar.

The defence has said it will call Anwar as its first witness in the trial, which resumes February 8.

Mahathir said he would be available as a witness in the trial "if it is within their right to question me," the Star newspaper quoted him as saying.

The High Court gave Anwar's lawyers permission to interview Mahathir and other high-profile potential witnesses, including Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin.

Foreign rescue groups search for survivors in Colombia

ARMENIA, Feb 1: They came from around the world — Russia, Mexico, Venezuela, Japan. For a week they have been searching the vast ruins of this coffee-growing town, looking, listening, smelling for signs of life, reports AP.

But now, their clothes covered with dust and their faces red from sunburn, some are beginning to lose hope.

"There's always a chance, but without water, without air, it's tough," said Pavelcz Laszlo, a doctor who heads a rescue squad from Hungary.

On Sunday, hundreds of rescuers worked from dawn to dusk — bands of robbers make their work too dangerous after dark — but found only two victims: a woman and a 5-year-old girl, both of them dead.

The only triumph was the recovery of a pair of kittens in the ruins of what had been the 11-story Gran Colombia buildings. There was no sign of their mother, or their owner.

General strike called in Sikkim: A 24-hour statewide general strike called by the ruling Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF), to protest price hike, began at 0600 hours yesterday, PTI reports from Gangtok.

The strike was called to protest the centre's unilateral decision to hike the prices of essential commodities, including rice, wheat and sugar supplied through the public distribution system.

UN mission to visit Afghanistan: A UN mission will visit Afghanistan in a couple of days for talks with Taliban officials on security issues and conditions for the return of UN staff to the country, the United Nations said Sunday. Xinhua reports from Islamabad.

The visit will be a follow-up to the talks between senior Taliban leaders and Erick de Mule, the Islamabad-based coordinator for Afghanistan, in Kandahar on January 25.

Bus plunge in SA kills 31: A bus plunged off a bridge on a major highway on Sunday, killing 31 passengers, AP reports from Warden, South Africa.

The bus was travelling from Kokstad in the southeastern KwaZulu-Natal Province when it went off the bridge and landed upside down in a dry river bed about 161 km south of its destination, Johannesburg. Two passengers on the privately owned bus survived but were in serious condition, police said.

German, French FM's meet: German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer and his French counterpart Hubert Vedrine, whose countries form a power political alliance, held private talks Sunday at Frankfurt-am-Main, the German Foreign Ministry said, AFP reports from Frankfurt.

Neither the exact location nor the agenda for the talks were disclosed, and no statement was made after the talks.



A Monica Lewinsky look-alike, Celeste Wisniewski of Herndon, Virginia, drives past waiting photographers Sunday outside the Mayflower Hotel in Washington where the real Monica is staying. — AP/UNB photo

KLA hints at opposition to peace talks in France

PRISTINA, Feb 1: Ethnic Albanian rebels are indicating opposition to international peace talks in France this week, saying that negotiations "organised in a rush" cannot resolve the Kosovo conflict, reports AP.

Meanwhile, violence erupted again Sunday, despite international demands to halt the fighting. Police sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said three Serb policemen were wounded late Sunday when ethnic Albanian rebels fired a grenade at their van in the village of Istic, 70 kilometres southwest of Kosovo's capital, Pristina.

The victims were returning from the funeral of another officer killed Friday during an attack on the village of Rogovo in which 23 ethnic Albanians also died.

The Serb Media Centre also reported three ethnic Albanians were wounded Sunday when armed gunmen broke into their

home in a village near Stimlje, 30 km southwest of Pristina.

Neither Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic nor the Kosovo Liberation Army has announced whether they will accept the demand by the United States and five European powers to attend a conference this week in France to end the 11-month conflict and establish self-rule in this Serbian province.

Both Milosevic and KLA political representative Adem Demaci told British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook they would reply to the demand within a few days.

In the rebels' first public statement since the demand was issued last week, a senior KLA official, Jakup Krasniqi, was quoted by Albanian state television Sunday as saying "negotiations organised in a rush do not guarantee success for the solving of the Kosovo problem."

Monuments of Shah's rule becoming part of Iran's national heritage

TEHRAN, Feb 1: Twenty years after the overthrow of the Shah, the remaining monuments of his rule are becoming just another part of Iran's national heritage as the fury that brought millions of demonstrators onto the streets fades into history, reports AFP.

The principal palaces where the Shah lived and entertained his guests are now museums where schoolchildren are taken on outings and ordinary people go for a day out.

And while the new regime's original intention in opening the palaces to the public may have been to expose the wealth of the hated imperial family, these days they are to all intents and purposes just ordinary historical showcases.

The array of imperial portraits and mementos, and wealth of largely imported antiques are generally left to speak for themselves without the addition of critical commentary.

"Everything has gone back to normal now," said one of the caretakers at the Niavaran Palace, in the far north of the capital, which the Shah made his principal private residence in his later years.

"No one is after anyone else any more — everyone is entitled to their own opinion regarding the Shah," he said, asking not to be named.

"People say all sorts of things about him. Some curse him, some say 'May he rest in peace,' and say good things about him."

With the passage of time, fewer Iranians now visit the palaces a few hundred on weekdays and a few thousand on holidays, according to staff — but their motives are still largely the same.

All sorts of people come — many are curious to know how the Shah lived," said a curator at the Niavaran.

The arrangement of the exhibits inside the palaces is clearly designed to satisfy the desire to gawp.

At the Niavaran a sign proudly announces the "chamber for make-up" of the Shah's third wife Farah, while at the nearby Saadabad Palace a display case presents the "personal equipment" of his father Reza Shah and visitors can even peer into an imperial toilet.

At the Niavaran the personal wardrobes of both the Shah and his wife are exposed to the critical gaze of the whims of fashion — with the change of tastes in their beloved West. Their imported French clothes and shoes now seem rather gawdy.



CM Shafi Sami, Bangladesh High Commissioner to India, speaking at a seminar organised by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) in Mumbai recently. Sami informed the attending businessmen and entrepreneurs about investment opportunities in Bangladesh and Bangla-Indo trade relations. Left to right are: CM Koyes Sami, country manager and chief executive officer, Arab Bangladesh Bank Ltd, Mumbai, AS Kalsiwal, vice president, SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and Ashok Kadakia of FICCI.