

# The crown passes on in Jordan, upheavals in ME may follow

JERUSALEM, Feb 8: The passing of the crown in Jordan may be followed by a series of changes and upheavals in the volatile Middle East, reports AP.

Jordan's new ruler is yet to be tested in a crisis. Israel's elections on May 17 will determine the future of Israel's peace with the Palestinians. Yasser Arafat has vowed to declare Palestinian statehood this year. Key Middle East countries, including Saudi Arabia and Syria, have aging and ailing leaders.

In Jordan, King Abdullah, Hussein's son and successor, will face the domestic challenges of unemployment, poverty and water shortages. He will also have to keep an eye on his neighbours. For years, Jordan has been the target of meddling and intimidation from abroad. In the 1970s and 80s, Syria threatened Jordan with invasion and Israel put its troops on the border ready to intervene. Jordan's large Palestinian population staged an uprising that ended in

massive bloodletting. Today, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis in Jordan provide a possible avenue for Iraq's Saddam Hussein to pressure Jordan's new leader.

Hussein's death is also the start of a generational shift in the Middle East. King Fahd of Saudi Arabia is close to 75. His health problems — a stroke, diabetes, gall bladder and arthritis — have left day-to-day government in the hands of Crown Prince Abdullah, himself in his 70s.

Syrian President Hafez Assad, 68, who has suffered repeated heart problems, is reportedly maneuvering to have his son Bashar, a colonel in the army, succeed him.

Future governments may set new tones for Saudi Arabia, among the region's wealthiest states, and Syria, a leader of anti-Israeli militancy.

For Israel, the change in the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan throws into question the stability of a key buffer state between the Jewish state and the Arab world.

It will likely be years before Jordan's new king wields the sort of clout that his father brought to bear in international affairs. The absence of Hussein-the-peacekeeper may be critical, especially at a time when the besieged Clinton administration is trying to keep the Israeli-Arab peace process from collapsing.

On May 17, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's hard-line approach to negotiations with the Palestinians will be tested in nationwide elections. His dovish Labour Party opponent, Ehud Barak, would likely go ahead with more West Bank withdrawals than Netanyahu, who has attached a series of conditions.

Arafat has vowed to declare a Palestinian state this year, possibly even May 4, when the interim peace agreement with Israel expires. That could set the stage for a major showdown with Israel, since Netanyahu has threatened to annex key parts of the West Bank in reprisal.

Also uncertain is the role of Islamic militants in the Israeli election and the future of Jordan. Senior Palestinian officials say they fear that radical Hamas and Iranian-backed militants could launch new suicide bombings in Israel, like those that marred Israel's last election campaign in 1996. Netanyahu came to power on a wave of Israeli anger against those attacks.

Hamas leaders say they would provoke unrest in Jordan as a step toward taking over Israel, but they denounce Jordan for refusing to let its territory be used for anti-Israeli attacks.

"Without an ally like the Hashemites, Jordan would have become a rallying point for Arab and Islamic armies" in support of the Palestinians, said an editorial Friday in the weekly Hamas magazine, Al Risala.

And in any period of regional turbulence, experts say, Islamic militants in Iran and Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq could try to exploit uncertainty for their own ends.



King Hussein's brothers, Prince Hassan (L) and Prince Mohammad, talk with the new King of Jordan, Prince Abdullah (R), during an emergency parliament session in Amman Sunday, some three hours after King Hussein died of cancer. The death of the 63-year-old monarch ended a tumultuous half-century reign and plunged his pivotal Middle Eastern country into mourning and uncertainty.

## Flood kills 20 in Philippines

BUTUAN, Philippines, Feb 8: Pounding rains flooded more than 300 farm villages in the southern Philippines, killing at least 20 people and forcing the evacuation of 19,000 others, officials said Monday, reports AP.

Four people were injured and four others were missing, including two children believed to have been buried in a landslide in Butuan City.

Rescuers on boats and helicopters searched flooded areas and delivered food and medicine to evacuation centres in four provinces as the weather improved Monday. Defence Secretary Orlando Mercado said.

Officials attributed the rains, which began last Thursday, to the La Nina weather phenomenon, in which water temperatures fall in the Pacific Ocean.

In Butuan, a logging centre of about 300,000 people in Agusan del Norte province, the floods triggered landslides, washed out a bridge and forced officials to cut electrical power as floodwaters reached the roofs of many houses.

## Serbia, Kosovo negotiators scrutinise peace plan

RAMBOUILLET, France, Feb 8: Serbian and ethnic Albanian negotiators on Monday pored over an international peace plan for Kosovo "line by line" as they entered their second day of talks on ending the bloody conflict in the troubled province, reports AP.

The bitter rivals summoned to the Chateau de Rambouillet under a threat of NATO airstrikes were huddled in separate rooms as they studied details of the peace plan masterminded by the six-nation Contact Group on ex-Yugoslavia.

We believe that from Monday there will be substantial line-by-line discussions of the issues," said Phil Reeker, spokesman for US mediator Christopher Hill who is representing the Contact Group and is largely behind the peace plan.

According to an Albanian source close to the negotiations,

the Kosovo delegation is insisting that before any substantial discussions get underway a ceasefire accord be signed by the two warring parties with international guarantees.

But Hill and his two co-mediators in the talks — Wolfgang Petritsch for the European Union and Boris Mayorsky representing Russia — have balked at the demands, pointing out that the ceasefire call was already part of the draft plan on the negotiating table.

The Albanian source said the Kosovo delegation is also seeking a national referendum on the status of Kosovo after a three-year interim period as well as a clear definition of the status of the province, whose autonomy was revoked by Belgrade in 1989.

In addition it wants NATO to sign any peace accord reached

at Rambouillet. These demands were reportedly rejected by the three mediators who are insisting on a step-by-step approach to reaching a settlement.

The Serb negotiators have so far adopted a cooperative attitude during the talks with their main concern being that the province remain part of Yugoslavia territory, a Serbian source close to the talks said.

"We are here with an open mind but we have made clear that these talks can only proceed if the basic demand of preserving the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia is guaranteed," the source said.

Sergei Bazdnikin, Mayorsky's spokesman, said both delegations had made numerous proposals as the talks got underway Sunday but the mediators have insisted they stick to the peace plan before them.

## Palestinian support for attacks against Israel drops

JERUSALEM, Feb 8: Palestinian support for attacks against Israel has dropped and support for the peace process has grown, according to a poll released Sunday, reports AP.

The survey of 1,318 Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip found that 41 per cent of the respondents said they were for attacks on Israeli targets, compared to 53 per cent in December. Four per cent of those questioned expressed no opinion. The question did not specify military or civilian targets.

The level of support for the peace process, even in its frozen stage, has risen to 73 per cent from 66 per cent in December just after Israel's hard-line government suspended implementation of the latest Mideast peace deal.

According to the poll conducted by the Centre for Palestine Research and Studies, an independent think tank in the West Bank city of Nablus, support for a unilateral declaration of statehood dropped by 5 per cent in January to 52 per cent.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has said he could declare statehood in May when the current Israeli-Palestinian peace accords are to be completed.

Khalil Shikaki, director of the research centre, attributed the shift in attitude regarding attacks and support for the peace process to developments in Israeli politics and a possible change in government in upcoming elections.

He suggested conflicting statements from Palestinian officials regarding statehood are the reason behind a drop in support for the unilateral declaration.

## Chechen lawmakers will resist move to introduce Islamic law

MOSCOW, Feb 8: Lawmakers in Chechnya said they would resist President Aslan Maskhadov's order to disband parliament and introduce Islamic law in the breakaway Russian republic, a news agency reported Monday, says AP.

Several Parliament members appeared on state television Sunday to blast Maskhadov's order as a direct breach of Chechnya's constitution, which calls for a secular state.

"President Maskhadov has removed the people from governing the state," Isa Idigov, the head of the foreign affairs committee, said, according to the ITAR-Tass news agency.

Maskhadov's action was seen as a victory for his hard-line foes, who have sought to establish Islamic law in Chechnya since the republic won de facto independence from Russia in a 1994-96 war.

The parliament was to convene Tuesday to continue debate on Maskhadov's decision. It said Saturday that it will not stop working despite the presidential order revoking its legislative powers.

Meanwhile, a prominent warlord who has called for Maskhadov's ouster, announced on Sunday that he was disbanding his Marshana Toba (Freedom Party) because of the introduction of Islamic law, or Shariah, made it irrelevant.

## Asian leaders eulogise King Hussein

SINGAPORE, Feb 8: Asian leaders eulogised the late King Hussein of Jordan today and hailed him for his contributions to world peace, reports Reuters.

Japan reaffirmed its role as Jordan's largest aid donor, as Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi and Crown Prince Naruhito prepared to leave Tokyo for Amman to attend the funeral of the king, who died on Sunday.

"I am going to praise afresh his (King Hussein's) great contributions to international peace and express my deep condolences," Obuchi told reporters.

"As Japan is the largest donor to Jordan and the stability of Jordan itself will lead to peace in the Middle East, I think it is important for Japan to play a major role (in helping the country)," Obuchi said.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said King Hussein's death was a loss to "peace-loving people throughout the world".

"King Hussein will especially be remembered for his vision and pivotal role in the launching and carrying forward of the Middle East peace process and for the all round development and progress achieved by Jordan," Indian President K.R. Narayanan said in a statement. India has sent Vice President Krishnan Kant to the funeral.

"He will long be remembered for his pivotal role in promoting peace and stability in the region and indeed in the whole world," echoed Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who was also to attend the funeral.

Cambodia's King Norodom Sihanouk said Hussein was a great king who in his 47 years on the throne had done an enormous amount to advance peace between nations.

The 1994 peace treaty between Jordan and Israel and King Hussein's role in the 1998 Wye River land-for-security accord were lasting testaments to his personal abilities and

standing, Australian Prime Minister John Howard said. "His role in the region's effort to come to terms with its deep problems is truly historic," Howard said.

Thailand said it was confident King Hussein's legacy would continue in his son and successor, King Abdullah. "I think the new Jordanian King will pursue the policy of peace maker laid down by his late father who did a great deal and contributed to peace in the Middle East," Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan told reporters.

Many leaders spoke of King Hussein's work in developing ties between the Middle East and Asia. The king had visited Japan four times and had also been to China a number of times.

"King Hussein was an old friend to the Chinese people and played an active role in advancing Sino-Jordanian friendship and cooperation," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Xiang Qiyue said.

## German ruling party loses majority in upper house

WIESBADEN, Germany, Feb 8: Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's Social Democrats have stumbled in their first electoral test since September's general election, losing control of the upper house of parliament in Bonn, reports Reuters.

The SPD and their ecologist Green allies — a carbon copy of the coalition ruling at national level — lost power in the central state of Hesse on Sunday in an election that turned on plans to ease citizenship laws for foreigners.

The defeat, billed by the opposition as a referendum on Schroeder's first four months in office, cost him a majority in the Bundesrat in Bonn giving the Conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) the power to block planned tax reforms.

A rejuvenated CDU jumped to 43.4 per cent from 39.2 per cent of the vote in Hesse, a prosperous central state that includes Frankfurt, Germany's financial capital. The CDU's coalition partners, the Liberal Free Democrats, scored 5.1 per cent, according to preliminary official results.

## 2 Christian teenagers killed in Orissa

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: Unidentified attackers killed two Christian teenagers and critically wounded another in a forest in south-east India. In another state in the north-east, rival tribal groups clashed with one another, burning down a church, newspapers reported Monday, says AP.

It was not immediately clear if Sunday's killings in Orissa state were related to the recent rape of a nun by two men dressed as women and the attack by suspected Hindu extremists who burned an Australian missionary and his two young sons.

Newspapers quoted Orissa state police as saying the attackers attempted to rape the girl before killing her in the forests of Kandamal district.

The girl and three boys were collecting firewood in the forest, the mass circulated Indian Express newspaper reported. It quoted police as saying that initial investigation pointed to only one assailant.

One of the boys was killed in the attack and another hospitalized in critical condition, the reports said.

In the northeastern state of Assam, thousands of kilometres away, a church was burned down following a clash between rival Bodo and Santhal tribals on Sunday.

Details of the incident in Kokrajhar district were not immediately available, but the area has witnessed clashes between the two groups for decades over control of the mineral-rich forests.

Both tribal groups traditionally are animists but in recent years many of them have become Christians.

## BRIEFLY



US First Lady Hillary Clinton (R) is welcomed by Nafis Sadik, former president of the Society for International Development, during Hillary's visit to the Non-Governmental Organisations Forum in The Hague Sunday.

**Lankan navy destroy LTTE boats:** Sri Lankan naval gunboats destroyed two Tamil Tiger rebel boats and damaged another four in a major sea battle off the northern Jaffna peninsula yesterday, navy officials said. Reuters reports from Colombo.

State-owned radio said 15 rebels were killed, but naval officials said they were unsure of the number of guerrilla casualties. Four sailors were wounded in the battle, they said.

**Wildfire rages in N Japan:** More than 600 firefighters and military personnel battled for a second day to contain a wildfire in northern Japan, police and local fire officials said Monday, AP reports from Tokyo.

The blaze already has destroyed 25 hectares of pine trees and other tracts of forest near the town of Nanai over the past 18 hours. No one has been injured by the fire, which broke out Sunday afternoon. The cause of the wildfire has yet to be determined.

**German hostages freed in Yemen:** Yemeni tribesmen on Sunday released a German mother and her son who were kidnapped last month, security officials said, AP reports from Sana'a.

The two were well after being freed by members of the Bakel tribe. The tribesmen abducted the mother with her son and daughter on Jan. 26 but released the daughter last Saturday to deliver a message to the German Embassy.

**13 die in Brazil prison riot:** Thirteen inmates were killed during a prison rebellion in the southern Brazilian state of Sao Paulo on Sunday, national Globo television reported, says Reuters from Sao Paulo.

The rebellion erupted during visiting hours at the jail in Pirajui. A relative of one of the inmates told Globo that a disturbance broke out during visiting hours, and there was a crush as visitors rushed to leave. The prisoners apparently took no hostages.

**Drug court opens in Australia:** Australia opened a US-style drug court yesterday in what officials called a turnaround in the justice system's treatment of criminal addicts, AP reports from Sydney.

The court in Sydney's west is modelled on a successful US experiment and will offer drug-addicted criminals a chance to head for rehabilitation and a better life instead of jail.

**1,523 snakes seized in Malaysia:** Wildlife authorities raided a warehouse in northern Malaysia, seizing 1,523 snakes, many of them poisonous, and arrested two men for smuggling the reptiles into the country, a news report said Monday, AP says from Kuala Lumpur.

Cobras and vipers were among the varieties authorities found slithering inside sacks at a warehouse on the border with Thailand in Perlis state.

## Police patrol inside Golden Temple Sikh authorities shut down HQ in protest

AMRITSAR, Feb 8: Members of a committee that controls the Sikh religious shrines said Monday they had shut down their administrative headquarters, the latest episode in a power struggle between moderate and hard-line Sikhs that some fear could erupt into violence, reports AP.

Five members of the 15-member committee said they closed the offices Saturday because plain clothes officers were patrolling inside the Golden Temple, Sikhism's holiest shrine. But state police chief Pooran Chand Dogra said Monday his officers were only working outside the temple, conducting surveillance to prevent any violence.

Politics in Punjab, where Sikhs are a majority, is heavily influenced by religious bodies like the committee that operates from the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar, 450 kilometres west of New Delhi. State Chief Minister Prakash Singh Badal, a moderate Sikh, is locked in a confrontation with the chief of the shrine committee, Gurcharan Singh Tohra.

The move by Tohra's five supporters on the committee to close the office could keep the other 10 members — supporters of Badal — from holding a meeting scheduled for Wednesday. The 10 Badal supporters were believed planning to try to remove the chief priest of the community, Bhajji Singh, Singh and Tohra are allies.

## Ethiopia launches fresh attacks on Eritrea

NAIROBI, Feb 8: Ethiopian troops backed by helicopter gunships and fighter aircraft were attacking Eritrean positions today, the Eritrean government announced, while saying its troops had killed more than 250 Ethiopian soldiers on Sunday.

Over 250 Ethiopian soldiers were killed while 18 were captured in the clashes along the (Western) Mereb Setit front yesterday, said an Eritrean foreign ministry communiqué faxed to AP's Nairobi bureau.

"This morning (Monday), the Ethiopian regime has yet again launched a fresh attack on the Mereb-Setit front employing helicopter gunships and fighter aircraft while simultaneously opening a new attack (farther east) on the Alitena-Mereb front in southern Eritrea," it said.

The communiqué stated that on Saturday, "two (Ethiopian) brigades were completely routed

and another two severely battered." In a communique issued Sunday evening, meanwhile, claimed to have repulsed Eritrean counter-attacks on the western front at the weekend and charged that Eritrean artillery had again bombarded the northern Ethiopian town of Adigrat, on the central front.

The shelling lasted half an hour, it said. "Early reports from Adigrat indicate that seven civilians were seriously injured," the communique said.

According to the Ethiopian communique, Eritrea had launched counter-offensives "in an attempt to recapture the important stronghold of Geza Geralese which Ethiopia won yesterday (Saturday)."

"The Ethiopian army has successfully repelled these attacks and continues to hold the post," the statement said.

## Defence begins its case Anwar takes witness stand

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 8: Ousted Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim suggested during the first day of his defence Monday that he was fired and charged with corruption because he had too much dirt on senior government officials, reports AP.

Carrying his own briefcase and wearing a light blue shirt and black trousers, Anwar took the stand when called by his lead defence attorney Raja Aziz Addruse. His defence team intended to prove that a high-level political conspiracy was behind the four corruption charges against him.

But this line of defence was immediately quashed by the judge, who said that evidence of a so-called conspiracy theory was "based on wrong reasoning."

Anwar was asked about his duties as chairman of the Cabinet Committee on Government management. Four Cabinet ministers, Attorney General

Mohar Abdullah and the director of the Anti-Corruption Agency sit on the committee. "This committee receives many appeals regarding government bankruptcies, corruption cases and allegations involving ministers, senior officials and even the prime minister," Anwar testified.

Anwar said he investigated "the waste of billions" by the Public Works Department and the Ministry of Defence. Anwar said there were some cases in which the ACA had to await direction from Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

"This happens because it involves political leaders or top government officials," Anwar said. "I don't know if the prime minister forwards all these cases to the attorney general, because frequently the director of the ACA tells me that there are obstructions against them from conducting investigations."

## Off the Record

### Unfunny valentine...

NEW YORK: Observing the 10th anniversary of the Iranian "Fatwa" condemning him for blasphemous writings, British author Salman Rushdie says the death threat has given him a stronger commitment to literary freedom and a new appreciation for love, reports AP.

A writer's injuries are his strengths, and from his wounds will flow his sweetest, most startling dreams, Rushdie writes in a brief essay in the Feb 15 issue of the New Yorker magazine. "The best defence of literary freedoms lies in their exercise, in continuing to make untrammelled, uncowed books. So, beyond grief, bewilderment and despair, I have rededicated myself to our high calling."

The title of the essay, "My Unfunny Valentine," refers to the date — Feb. 14, 1989 — on which Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini told Muslims worldwide it was their duty to kill Rushdie for having insulted Islam in his novel, "Satanic Verses." Feb. 14 is Valentine's Day in the United States, a holiday for celebrating love.

"Life can be harsh, and for a decade St Valentine's Day has reminded me of that harshness," he says. "But these dark anniversaries of the appalling valentine I was sent in 1989 have also been times to reflect on the countervailing value of love..."



Nigerian models showcase the beauty and richness in African fabrics at the yearly Silverbird Fashion Show in Lagos Sunday.

— AFP photo

## NASA launches comet-chasing Stardust

CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida, Feb 8: A comet-chasing spacecraft named Stardust rocketed away Sunday on a seven-year, 4.8 billion kms quest to bring back precious comet dust, reports AP.

Stardust began its formidable journey one day late, soaring into a clear afternoon sky aboard a Boeing Delta rocket. A last-minute radar problem on Saturday caused the delay.

NASA's Stardust mission is the first attempt to gather material from beyond the moon and return it to Earth.

It is also the first time the US space agency has sent a robot on an extraterrestrial pickup and delivery mission. The last time the agency went after samples in outer space was Apollo 17 in 1972, the last of the manned lunar landings.

"Not only do we have to get to where we're going... but then we've got to turn around and

come home again," said Carl Pilcher, NASA's science director for solar system exploration. "This certainly adds a new level of complexity and difficulty."

Scientists feel it's worth the extra effort and risk.

Comets are frozen time capsules; the icy, rocky bodies are thought to be pieces of the original building blocks of the solar system and may well contain compounds from which life formed. Abundant in water and carbon-based molecules, comets continually bombard Earth some 4 billion years ago.

"Comets can tell us about the history of the early solar system and the early history perhaps of our own Earth," explained the Jet Propulsion Laboratory's Martha Hanner, an astronomer taking part in the 210 million dollars Stardust mission.

Stardust is to meet up with Comet Wild-2 in January 2004,

passing within some 145 kms of the two and a 4 km diameter iceball. The comet is named for its discoverer, retired astronomer professor Paul Wild.

Who travelled from Switzerland for the launch.

Tiny comet fragments — no bigger than a grain of salt — hopefully will be trapped by a pop-up collector that's covered with a transparent, ultrathin glass foam called aerogel. The most vulnerable parts of the 385-kilogram spacecraft, about the size of a large refrigerator, are shielded to protect against the swirl of particles.

"We're going as close as we can without getting killed," said Stardust's chief scientist, Donald Brownlee, a University of Washington astronomer.

If all goes well, the comet samples — along with interstellar dust gathered en route to the comet — will reach Earth in January 2006.