

## International

# 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 Mideast 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-Israel 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 peacemaker may be critical, especially at a time when the bested 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 won't 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 Mohamad, 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.

— AFP photo

## 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 AFP.

The bitter rivals summoned to the Chateau of Ramboillet under a threat of NATO airstrikes were huddled in separate rooms as they studied details of the peace plan master-minded 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 Kosovar 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 Kosovar 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 Ramboillet.

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's 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 Bazdikin, 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 who supported such attacks.

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

of the 15-member committee that controls 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 operate from the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar, 450 kilome-

tres 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, Gurbachan 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, Bhai Ranjit Singh. Singh and Tohra are allies.

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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

## 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 Niña 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.

## Jakarta hopes to settle status of E Timor by April

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 8: Indonesia's Foreign Minister Ali Alatas said on Sunday he hoped to have a "model" by April on the future status of troubled East Timor, a former Portuguese colony his country controls, reports Reuters.

But he rejected again proposals for a referendum for the territory and said Timorese leaders could decide on autonomy or independence but not autonomy leading to independence as many prefer.

Alatas and his Portuguese counterpart, Jaime Gama, are holding two days of talks at the United Nations mediated by UN envoy Jamsheed Marker, with Indonesia explaining its new position on independence for Timor after decades of refusing to consider it.

The two ministers met briefly with Secretary General Kofi Annan before he left for the funeral of Jordan's King Hussein.

## 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.

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Mohter 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, 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

## 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 untrammeled, uncensored books. So, from 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..."

**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-km journey to bring back precious comet dust, reports AP.

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 was announced on Sunday that he was disbanding his Marshana Toba (Freedom Party) because the introduction of Islamic law, or Shariah, made it irrelevant.

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

and another two severely battered."

The Ethiopian government, in a communiqué 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 communiqué said.

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

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

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 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 \$120 million dollars Stardust mission.

"We're going as close as we can without getting killed," said Stardust's chief scientists, 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.

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

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

— AFP photo