

BRIEFLY



Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov (left) and speaker of the Duma Gennady Seleznyov (2nd left) are at a meeting with parliament leaders in the Duma, Russian parliament's lower house, in Moscow Wednesday. Primakov met with leaders of parliament factions to discuss a political truce among President Boris Yeltsin's administration, parliament and the Cabinet. — AFP photo

Assad to serve fifth term in office: Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad won 99.98 per cent of the votes cast in yesterday's referendum on whether he should serve a fifth seven-year term in office, Interior Minister Mohammad Harba announced today, reports AFP from Damascus.

Millions of Syrians went to the polls yesterday in a referendum in which the 69-year-old Assad was the sole candidate.

Iraq vows to support Jordan: Iraq vowed yesterday to keep up its support for neighbouring Jordan, although Baghdad's reaction to the death of King Hussein has been muted, AFP says from Baghdad.

Baath will "continue to cooperate with Jordan in line with its vision which consists of putting Arab interests above all other considerations", said Babel newspaper, a daily owned by Saddam's son Uday.

Fire in Russia claims 18 lives: At least 18 people were killed and dozens more were injured and missing yesterday after one of the deadliest fires in Russia's post-Soviet history swept through a police station in the Volga city of Samara, reports AFP from Samara.

The blaze broke out early Wednesday evening and quickly engulfed the five-storey interior ministry building in the central Russian city, sending several people jumping to their deaths and landing scores more in hospital. The fire raged for almost 12 hours before finally being doused early yesterday by firefighters. Interior ministry officials put the initial toll at 18, with around 50 others hospitalised.

Strike observed in Kashmir: Separatist groups in India's northern Jammu and Kashmir state held a day-long strike yesterday in memory of the 1984 hanging of a leader who was the first to call for an independent Kashmir, AP says from Srinagar.

Political leaders and common people filed into the headquarters of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front to pay tribute to Mohammad Maqbool Bhat, the founder of the party. Crowds outside shouted independence slogans, drawing police who fired tear gas to disperse the protesters.

Myanmar destroys opium fields: Myanmar's military government has eradicated 8,2472 hectares of opium poppies during the last three months, the state-run New Light of Myanmar reported yesterday, AP says from Bangkok.

Myanmar, also known as Burma, is the world's largest producer of opium, the raw material for heroin. Much of the crop destruction took place in Shan State, where most of the opium in Myanmar is grown, and the military is conducting an offensive against ethnic rebels.

3 resign from the Bangkok Post: The Bangkok Post newspaper announced Thursday that three of its journalists have resigned in connection with a pair of alleged bribery cases, AP says from Bangkok.

Allegations that two reporters for the English-language daily had taken bribes or were involved in "inappropriate action" surfaced in another newspaper and in a recent parliamentary no-confidence motion against the government. In a front-page statement published Thursday, the newspaper said that the allegations "were taken very seriously" and had been probed by senior management. None of the journalists was identified.

China sentences 13 to death: The Beijing Intermediate People's Court has sentenced 13 people to death, including a teenager accused of murdering his mother, the official newspaper Beijing Morning Post reported yesterday. AP reports from Beijing.

Zhu Yu, now 19, didn't get along with his mother and along with a high school friend Cui Nan plotted her March 26, 1998, murder, the report said. The Intermediate Court on Wednesday sentenced both Zhu and Cui to death, citing the heinous nature of their crime, the report said. The court also sentenced 11 others convicted of murder and armed robbery to death Wednesday, it said.

153 more quit Suu Kyi's party: Another 153 members of Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's political party have resigned, the state-run New Light of Myanmar reported yesterday, AP says from Bangkok.

The paper said 125 members in the southern city of Myeik, also known as Mergui, and 28 members from the South Okkakalap district of Yangon quit "because they no longer wished to participate in party politics."

Encephalitis claims 8 in Vietnam: Eight children have died from encephalitis in the southern province of Kien Giang, hospital officials said yesterday, AFP says from Hanoi.

The eight children, aged from one to four years old, died within days of being admitted to the hospital, experiencing high fever and convulsions and falling into a coma. An official from Kien Giang provincial hospital said four more children had been hospitalised one of whom is in critical condition.

4 killed in Manila landslide: Four people were killed and 10 others are still missing after landslides hit the southern province of Bukidnon yesterday, the National Disaster Coordinating Council said, reports AFP from Manila.

Heavy rains in the area triggered the landslides in San Fernando town as rocks and mud crushed several houses, instantly killing four people including an eight-year-old boy, the agency said. The defence department has ordered search and rescue operations in case there are still survivors under the rubble.

Clinton admn asserts authority to send US ground troops to Kosovo

WASHINGTON: Feb 11: The Clinton administration, risking a blow up with Capitol Hill, says it has the Constitutional power to send American ground troops to Kosovo in a NATO peacekeeping force without Congress' approval, reports AP.

Citing Bosnia as a precedent, Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering told a skeptical House committee on Wednesday "there is ample Constitutional precedent for this type of action."

But Rep Tom Campbell, one of several International Relations Committee members who were cool to the idea, challenged the senior State Department official. "Previous Constitutional violations do not justify subsequent ones."

Meanwhile, Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott told reporters that President Clinton was pondering whether a civilian European force — backed by US air and naval power "over the horizon" might be the way to monitor a settle-

ment of the Kosovo conflict.

However, Talbott said "there is a high degree of skepticism that this is sufficient" and some kind of ground force would be necessary.

Serb and ethnic Albanians are in negotiations at Ramboillet, some 40 miles from Paris, on a formula to end a yearlong war in Kosovo that has claimed more than 2,000 lives.

The peacekeeping force would assist local police in monitoring a settlement. Talbott said Serb troops must be withdrawn except along the border.

Clinton also sent US ground troops to Bosnia after an ethnic war in the former Yugoslav republic was settled in November 1995.

There were 22,000 Americans on duty at one point. The number has been reduced to about 6,900.

Several Republicans on the House committee told Pickering that Clinton needed Congress

Iraq retains capability to produce N-arms: IAEA

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 10: Calling for unannounced inspections to detect any signs of a renewed Iraqi nuclear programme, the International Atomic Energy Agency says it assumes Baghdad retains the capability to produce atomic weapons, reports AP.

In a report to a panel being created by the UN Security Council to assess Iraq's disarmament, the IAEA said nuclear inspectors have found no indication that Baghdad has retained prohibited nuclear material or equipment to make weapons.

But the report, which was obtained Wednesday, stressed that "it is not the same as a statement of their non-existence."

In drafting a long-term nuclear monitoring programme, the IAEA said it is prudent to

assume "that Iraq has retained documents of its clandestine nuclear programme, specimens of important components and possibly amounts of non-enriched uranium."

It is similarly assumed that Iraq retains the capability to exploit, for nuclear weapons purposes, any relevant materials or technology to which it may gain access in the future," the IAEA said.

Inspectors from the IAEA and the UN Special Commission, which is charged with eliminating Iraq's chemical and biological weapons and long-range missiles, were pulled out of Iraq just before the United States and Britain launched airstrikes in mid-December.

The Iraqi government has banned the Special Commission, known as UNSCOM, from returning, but has not ruled out a return of the IAEA.

The report submitted to the council Monday by the IAEA's Director General Mohamed El-Baradei said "it is essential that the IAEA return to Iraq as soon as possible."

It is impossible to say at the moment whether Iraq remains in compliance with UN resolutions calling for the elimination of its nuclear programme because inspectors have not been there for nearly two months, the report said.

As a first step towards a new Iraq policy, the Security Council agreed on Jan. 30 to establish three panels to assess Iraq's relations with the United Nations. The disarmament panel is to make recommendations by April 15 on re-establishing an effective disarmament programme in Iraq.

The IAEA report called for continued comprehensive monitoring in the future, including unfettered access to any site and unannounced inspections, in order to provide "a significant probability of detecting prohibited equipment, materials or activities."

The agency pointed to three areas where questions remain about Iraq's nuclear programme which add to the need for intrusive monitoring.

The IAEA estimated the cost of implementing a long-term monitoring and verification programme at about \$10 million, not including the logistical support and other assistance which had been provided by UNSCOM.

11 low-caste Hindus shot dead in Bihar

PATNA, India, Feb 11: Gunmen who fight for landlords shot dead 11 members of India's lowest class Thursday and injured five others in the eastern state of Bihar, police said, reports AP.

The victims were sleeping when they were attacked by 100 heavily armed men early in the morning in Narainpur, a village 90 kilometres east of the state capital, Patna.

Bihar Police Chief K A Jacob said the attackers were members of the Ranvir Sena, an army employed by feudal landlords, Press Trust of India reported.

Narainpur is located in the district of Jehanabad in rural Bihar where there have been a series of fatal clashes between the Ranvir Sena and communist-backed militias supporting landless workers, mostly Dalits — Indians considered the lowest class because they are without caste. Dalit means "oppressed one."

Sacking of spiritual leader
Tension prevails in Punjab

NEW DELHI, Feb 11: Tensions were running high today in the Indian Sikh-majority state of Punjab, amid the escalation of a bitter row between Sikhs' top political and spiritual leaders, reports AFP.

The dispute has pitted moderate loyal to Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal, against hardline supporters of Bhai Ranji Singh, who heads the spiritual body overseeing the management of Sikh shrines, including the famed Golden Temple.

Today, Ranji Singh was fighting a rearguard action, having been sacked by a majority vote of his own executive committee.

They are doing it at Badal's bidding simply because I did not tow the line of the chief minister," Ranji Singh was quoted as saying by the Times of India daily.

Qatari women first in Arab monarchy to run for office

DOHA, Feb 11: Whether as candidates or just voters, Qatari women will for the first time in a Gulf Arab monarchy take part in a real election on March 8, reports AFP.

Six women have already come forward as candidates along with almost 200 men to contest the polls for a new 29-member municipal council for Doha and the surrounding area, reports AFP.

These elections will underline the right to take part for almost half of society," said Juhaifa Saif Al-Issa, Dean of the Sociology Faculty at Qatar University.

The women candidates, mostly university academics, said their immediate family or tribe had not raised objections, although some friends had mocked or criticised their decision to run for office.

Hundreds of Jordanian men who could not get to see King Abdullah Wednesday due to the snaking queues decided to spend the night outside the Raghada palace gates to be

Relatives of ethnic Albanians killed in a January 15 massacre, cry as the coffins of the dead are being brought in Racak, southern Kosovo Wednesday. The 40 coffins were taken today to the southern Kosovo town for burial, from Pristina aboard four trucks under diplomatic escort provided by the Kosovo Verification Mission. —AFP photo

Talbott voices optimism India, Pakistan working to ease fear of N-arms race

WASHINGTON, Feb 11: India and Pakistan's leaders are working to build support in their countries for steps that would ease concerns about a regional nuclear arms race, US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott said on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

After a 10-day trip to South Asia, he said he had "a clearer sense now of not only what the two prime ministers want to achieve, working with their parliaments, but also a rough calendar on when they might be able to achieve it."

Talbott, addressing the Overseas Writers Group, refused to be specific, but he said his latest trip to New Delhi and Islamabad had achieved enough progress to warrant planning for a ninth round of talks.

The United States has been leading an international effort to persuade India and Pakistan to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and take other steps to reduce the risk of a nuclear arms race since the two South Asian states conducted tit-for-tat nuclear tests last May.

After years of deriding the CTBT, the prime ministers of India and Pakistan, under international pressure, indicated last September they would sign the pact by September 1999.

But Washington has pressed for quicker, more definitive action and US officials in recent days said India told Talbott it would sign "in the springtime."

The United States has said it would ease economic sanctions on both countries if they signed the treaty and took other steps, like forswearing deployment of nuclear arms.

Because both countries are democracies, Talbott said: "We

have to be sensitive to the need that both prime minister have to work with their parliaments and their parliamentary oppositions."

"I am convinced that both prime ministers are doing so."

That means they are trying to build up the requisite political support for a progress of the kind that we believe is very much in their interest as well as ours," he said.

Talbott has been pressing India and Pakistan to define what they mean when they say their goal is a nuclear programme that affords them minimal deterrence."

He also said he did not expect further nuclear tests by India, something Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif recently expressed concern about.

Jordanians flock to console Abdullah, Noor

AMMAN, Feb 11: Nearly half the Jordanian population will have streamed through Amman's palaces to offer their condolences to King Abdullah II, the late King Hussein's eldest son, and Queen Noor, his widow, by the end of Thursday, reports AFP.

Some two million Jordanians, almost half of the country's 4.6 million people, are expected to have passed through the palace gates by the end of the evening, according to unofficial estimates.

Raghada and Zahran palaces opened their doors for the third and final day Thursday to welcome thousands of mourners from across Jordan who continue to flock to express their sympathy for the royal family.

The period of official mourning will end Thursday evening but government offices and most shops will only re-open Saturday, Friday being a holy day.

An extended 40-day period of national mourning will continue until mid-March while the royal palaces will mourn

first in line on Thursday.

Meanwhile, thousands of women who were still queuing Wednesday night outside the Zahran palace where Queen Noor has been receiving female mourners were turned away when the gates closed at 7:00 p.m. (1700 GMT).

King Abdullah and Queen Noor, along with Jordan's full complement of princes and princesses, have embraced and shaken the hands of hundreds of thousands of ordinary Jordanians since the Raghada and Zahran palaces opened their doors on Tuesday, the day after Hussein's funeral.

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King Hussein, died on Sunday after losing a seven month battle against cancer. He named Abdullah heir to the throne in a surprise move just two weeks before his death after dismissing his younger brother Hassan ibn Talal from the post he had held for 34 years.

That will allow the anniversary of Abdullah's accession to the throne to be celebrated on a different date from the anniversary of his father's death," the official said.

He did not rule out the possibility that Abdullah would also then proclaim his wife, Princess Rania, Queen of Jordan.

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