



US warplanes wait on the bow of the USS Enterprise on Saturday. With NATO air strikes possible in the Yugoslavian province of Kosovo, Enterprise cut short its regular scheduled visit to Cannes, France, and returned to sea. — AFP photo

Old foes turn new friends

LAHORE, Feb 22: At the end of a two-day visit to Pakistan by Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the leaders of the world's newest nuclear powers may not have made history. But they did seem to make friends — with each other, reports AP.

That, say some, is history making in itself. Friendship is rare between leaders of Pakistan and India, adversaries in three wars since gaining independence from Britain 51 years ago.

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif smiled easily during Vajpayee's speech that went down well with the Pakistani audience. The Indian Prime Minister called for good neighbourliness and an end to the endless and often petty bickering.

"We've broken the ice," Sharif said during a joint news conference, describing the new relationships.

Before leaving the lush Punjab capital of Lahore, Vajpayee signed a joint declaration with Sharif promising to try to reduce the risk of nuclear war and

India, Pakistan break the ice

promote peace and stability in the two historically volatile regions.

The men didn't say how they hope to reduce the risk, or more importantly, whether they would renounce the next step in their nuclear development — the deployment of nuclear weapons.

The two neighbours each carried out nuclear tests last year, prompting criticism from throughout the world. Although the two countries have rejected international calls to denounce nuclear weapons, they both say they do not want a nuclear arms race on the Asian subcontinent.

"We have not developed nuclear weapons and we have not tested nuclear devices to attack anyone, just to protect ourselves," Vajpayee said Sunday.

The two prime ministers also addressed the thorny issue of Kashmir, a border dispute that has been a cause of tension

for decades. The men, however, agreed only to keep talking and to "intensify their efforts."

Both Sharif and Vajpayee face pressure from extremists who will try to scuttle any agreements between their countries.

Despite such difficulties and the vagueness of Sunday's agreement, the Pakistani leader insisted their meetings had been significant. In fact, just signing an agreement at all may have been significant.

The last time an Indian and Pakistani prime minister signed a bilateral document was 28 years ago in Simla, India.

In that agreement, India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Pakistan's Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto promised to settle their disputes peacefully through dialogue.

The big dispute, then as now, was Kashmir.

The worry for many is that 28 years from now Pakistan and India will still be struggling to resolve that conflict, only at that time, as states with full-fledged nuclear arsenals.

Contact Group deadline for Kosovo ends today

RAMBOUILLET, France, Feb 22: Kosovo peace talks hung in the balance today with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright waiting to hear whether ethnic Albanians were finally ready to accept a political accord, reports Reuters.

After 15 days of negotiations, the Albanian delegation was still holding out for a referendum on secession from Serbia and the Serbs were steadfastly refusing to endorse the deployment of NATO troops to enforce any deal.

Albright spent more than three hours with the Albanians on Sunday seeking to cajole them into embracing autonomy for a three-year interim period and to abandon their demand for an explicit reference to the referendum.

Both sides have until 1400

GMT on Tuesday to reach an agreement, but the United States hopes to get a "yes" from the Albanians ahead of the deadline so it can pile pressure on Belgrade to drop objections to a peacekeeping force.

Hundreds of NATO warplanes were on standby to launch punitive strikes against Yugoslav targets if the Serbians were held solely responsible for the failure of the Rambouillet talks.

One adviser to the Albanians told Reuters his delegation planned to work through the night and that it might be ready to give a reply to Albright by early today.

Diplomats expressed mild optimism that the Albanians would be persuaded to sign the political accord, although Albright said she recognised it

was a tough moment for them.

AP says from Belgrade: Ruling out compromise, Serbia's president said he would reject "any kind of" foreign troops in the province of Kosovo and called this his government's "final stand," the state-run Tanjug news agency said Sunday.

Politika and other state-run media quoted Milan Milutinovic as saying the Serb delegation "Managed to salvage" the political part of the agreement, which provides Kosovo with autonomy but not independence from Serbia.

"That is our final stand," Milutinovic added. He predicted the talks — now extended until Tuesday at 3 pm (1400 GMT) — will lead to the conclusion of a political agreement.

Allied warplanes attack Iraqi missile base

BAGHDAD, Feb 22: US and British warplanes attacked an Iraqi missile base and two military communication sites Sunday after Iraqi jets violated the no-fly zone, the US military said, reports AP.

There was no immediate word on damage or casualties from the strikes near al-Amarah and Tallil, about 270 kilometers (170 miles) southeast of Baghdad. All the planes returned to their base, a statement from the US Central Command said.

The statement said the strikes were launched after two Iraqi jets violated the zone in southern Iraq. There was no immediate comment from Iraqi officials on the attack.

American and British planes patrolling the no-fly zones over southern and northern Iraq have regularly clashed with Iraqi defense and aircraft. Iraq has said it does not recognize the zones.

Earlier Sunday, the official Iraqi News Agency said Iraqi air defenses may have shot down a Western military plane in southern Iraq. But the United States and Britain denied any planes were lost.

Iraq has made several claims in the past about shoot-

ing down Western planes, but none of them has proved to be correct.

The zones were set up after the 1991 Gulf War to protect rebel Shiite Muslim groups in the south and Kurdish guerrillas in the north from Iraqi government forces.

The Western planes patrolling the two zones are based in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in the south and Turkey in the north.

Also Sunday, the govern-

ROK cabinet okays amnesty for 8,800 people

SEOUL, Feb 22: South Korea's cabinet today approved an amnesty for 8,800 people, including the man believed to be the world's longest-serving political prisoner and 16 other long-term detainees, Yonhap news agency said, reports AFP.

Woo Yong-gak, 71, jailed since 1958 on charges of spying for North Korea, and his 16 comrades will walk free from four jails across the country on Thursday to mark the first year in office of President Kim Dae-jung, it said.

ment announced that President Saddam Hussein had sent a letter to Arab League Secretary-General Esmat Abdel-Meguid urging "a new page" in relations with the Arab world.

The appeal followed a fence-mending trip by Foreign Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf to eight Arab countries from North Africa to Syria and the Persian Gulf.

"Iraqis ready to open a new page in Arab relations on condition that Arab countries come out with a united stance against the aggression and sanctions imposed on Iraq," Saddam said in the letter, state-run Iraqi radio reported.

Saddam called for the league to delay a March 14 meeting of a committee created to study the Iraq situation until there is Arab reconciliation. He said such a meeting must "come out with a united position, with no doubts from any party," the broadcast said.

The committee was set up last month after Arab League foreign ministers refused Iraqi demands to condemn UN trade sanctions and the mid-December airstrikes by the United States and Britain on Iraq. Iraq's delegation walked out of the session in anger.

Iraqi security forces shoot 20 people dead

AMMAN, Feb 22: Iraqi security forces shot at least 20 people dead and wounded dozens more as they brutally crushed Shiite protests but unrest continued Sunday in the southern town of Nassirya, opposition groups said.

There was "utter carnage" in the Baghdad suburb of Saddam city, witnesses told AFP here, but order appeared to have been restored in the capital and in the southern Shiite holy town of Najaf, both sites of violent clashes Saturday.

The wave of unrest was sparked by the assassination of Iraq's top Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Mohammad Sadek Al-Sadr, and two of his sons in Najaf on Friday.

"Hundreds of thousands of people protested in Saddam city, carrying black flags and chanting slogans against the regime," of President Saddam

Hussein, the opposition Organisation for Islamic Action (OIA) said in a statement from Damascus.

The regime deployed divisions of Republican Guard troops which fired on the protesters, killing at least 20 and leaving dozens wounded, it said, adding that "hundreds of people" were arrested.

Uday al-Tai, director of Iraq's official in a news agency, on Saturday had branded the reports of clashes in Saddam city as "baseless," he made no mention of riots across southern Iraq.

Witnesses said the violence in Najaf pitted Shiite clerics and religious students against security forces, "the crackdown was very severe," said one.

But INA said Sunday that everything was "normal" in Najaf and that "people are going about their regular business."

Off the Record

The Queen gives in to an artist's whims ...

LONDON: British Artist Lucian Freud has agreed to paint a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II. But has set his own terms. The independent reported, says AFP.

Freud, 76, says the Queen, 72, must come to his own studio West of London, and pose as many times as he wishes. Usually painters go to Buckingham Palace, for a maximum of five sittings, the report said.

Freud, grandson of the founder of psychiatry, Sigmund Freud, has previously turned down invitations to paint leading figures, including Pope John Paul II and the late Princess Diana.

The independent said it required six years of negotiations by the monarch's private secretary Sir Robert Fellowes for the artist to agree to paint the queen.

Freud holds an auction record for a living painter, since his "large interior, W11" fetched 5.6 million dollars in New York last May.

Estrada's new daughter

MANILA: Philippine President Joseph Estrada said he is willing to act as the father of a teenage beauty queen who claims she is his daughter, reports AFP.

Speaking on his weekly radio show, the 61-year-old Estrada said he would take responsibility for the girl although he declined to confirm whether she was his real daughter.

"If she has no father, then I am willing to act as her father so that this matter will be finished," Estrada said.

In a message to the girl, he said: "Come to me and I will adopt you and if you are really my child, I will assist you seriously."

The girl's mother has been quoted in local newspapers this week as saying that Estrada, a former movie star, was the father of the girl.

A palace spokesman originally denied the statement but Estrada, who admits to fathering several children out of wedlock, later admitted that he did not know if the girl, 18-year-old Joseph in Rose Ejercito, was his child.

BRIEFLY

PDP wins Nigeria polls:

The center-left Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) of former military ruler Olusegun Obasanjo won an overall majority in both houses of the new Nigerian parliament, according to results compiled today by AFP in Lagos.

The PDP held 56 seats in the 109-seat senate with some states still to return results and 181 seats in the 360-seat house of representatives, with last results still due.

3 shot dead in Helsinki:

An unidentified woman shot dead three men and seriously wounded a fourth at a shooting club in central Helsinki on Sunday, police said, AFP says from Helsinki.

They said the three dead were shot in the head and the woman fled the building immediately after the incident which took place at 4:00 pm (1400 GMT).

Road accident kills 20 in India:

An overloaded lorry carrying bananas and a large group of farm workers to a marketplace in southern India collapsed, killing 20 people and injuring 15 others, domestic news agencies reported yesterday, AP says from New Delhi.

The accident happened Sunday night near the coastal town of Tuticorin, 2,175 kilometres south of the national capital, New Delhi. Most of the victims were crushed to death, the Press Trust of India reported. Police said the death toll was likely to go up.

15 Chinese die in mutiny on ship:

Fifteen Chinese crewmen on board a Taiwan-registered fishing vessel died in a mutiny in the Indian ocean, Mauritius police said yesterday, Reuters said from Port Louis.

They said they had arrested the Taiwanese captain, Keng Tai Yang, and the nine other survivors when the ship, the Ching Ching 12 docked in Port Louis on Saturday. The captain told police that members of the crew mutinied on February 16 while the Ching Ching 12 was fishing 1,000 miles northeast of Mauritius.

Kabila dissolves cabinet:

Congolese President Laurent Kabila has dissolved his Cabinet, a government official said in a television broadcast Sunday, AP reports from Kinshasa.

Kabila's decree, dated Saturday, did not give a date for a new government to be installed and said the current administration would continue to perform day-to-day duties.

Gift package blast kills 1 in China:

A man was killed in southwestern China when a package that appeared to be a Lunar New Year gift to his wife exploded as he tried to open it, a newspaper said yesterday, AP says from Shanghai.

The couple found the package addressed to the wife at their home in the city of Chengdu when they returned from a New Year party at 3 am last Wednesday, the Youth Daily said.

Nepal to boycott Hindi films for 4 months

KATHMANDU, Feb 22: Nepal's National Mass Movement Coordination Committee has decided to boycott Hindi films in the Kathmandu valley initially for four months from March 15 to July 15, the Kathmandu Post said today, reports Xinhua.

The daily said the decision was made after several rounds of interaction programmes with cine-artists, directors, producers and cinema-hall entrepreneurs.

It said that cine-artists and directors welcomed the committee's commitment to promote Nepali films and culture.

"The decision is aimed at the promotion and protection of Nepali films and culture," the daily said, quoting a press release issued by the committee.

"Nepali film industry can also play an important role to promote and develop Nepali art and culture," the press release said. "But due to massive influx of Hindi films inside the country, this industry is facing a severe crisis. If the present situation continues to remain, our budding film industry will collapse."

Indian Muslim leaders ask govt to revoke visa for Rushdie

NEW DELHI, Feb 22: Muslim leaders determined to keep novelist Salman Rushdie from visiting India said Monday they would meet with the country's president and ask him to revoke the prominent British writer's visa, reports AP.

The top two clerics of New Delhi's Jama Masjid, one of the country's largest mosques, decided to go to President K R Narayanan after meeting with the Kurds' spokesman at Jama Masjid on Sunday, mosque spokesman Amanullah said.

Amanullah, who uses one name only, said a resolution opposing any visit by Rushdie was passed at Sunday's meeting. He said the resolution would be made public after the meeting with Narayanan later Monday.

Some Muslims have been offended by Rushdie's fictional portrayal of the prophet Mohammed in his novel "The Satanic Verses." Rushdie spent nearly a decade in hiding after the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the late Iranian religious leader, called for his death in 1989 because of "The Satanic Verses." Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi in September distanced his government from the death decree, making Rushdie feel freer to travel even though some Muslim groups continue to call for his death.

Indian government officials have called the Bombay-born Rushdie a great writer and said he was welcome to visit his homeland, India, a country with a sizable Muslim minority and the first to ban "The Satanic Verses." Last month granted him a visa for the first time since the 1980s.



German actors Michael Gwisdek (L) and Maria Schrader (C) watch Lilly Wust (R) taking the "Silver Bear" Award of the 49th "Berlinale" International Film Festival in Berlin during the award giving ceremony on Sunday, marking the end of the festival. Wust, whose story was the background for the German movie "Aimee & Jaguar," received the prize on behalf of actress Julia Koehler. Maria Schrader tied the award with Koehler in the category of Best Actress. Gwisdek received the award as Best Actor in "Nachgestalten" (Night Shapes). — AFP photo

Iraqi Kurds want to return home

PEER DAWOOD, Iraq, Feb 22: When Turkish commandos grabbed Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan a week ago, the yearnings for freedom of Turkey's ethnic Kurds exploded into the headlines, reports AP.

But in another corner of the ancient Kurdish homeland, nearly 1 million Iraqi Kurds have a simpler aspiration: to go back and live in their own villages.

Between 1974 and 1991, Iraq's army evicted 780,000 people from nearly all 4,460 villages in the Kurdish region. The picture-postcard villages were razed and the people herded off to live in cities, virtual urban prisoners, their plight largely ignored.

Now, after decades of desolation, Iraq's Kurdish countryside is again coming alive as the Kurds trickle back to their old lands to rebuild villages and farms.

Since April 1997, more than 50 villages with 2,000 houses have risen from the ruins with the help of a UN programme that consolidated eight years of haphazard efforts of other aid groups to rebuild communities.

Last spring, Shakur Omar Kadiri rebuilt his home in Peer Dawood at the same spot where his old mud-and-brick house was destroyed along with 160 other homes.

Under the programme, Kadiri and other villagers each received 1.5 tons of cement, 2,500 bricks, gypsum, four steel doors, four windows and wooden beams and straw for the roofs.

Kadiri, a 39-year-old farmer, said people were happy to leave

the cities, where they had lost their feeling of sharing.

"We have come back to where our grandfathers, our fathers lived. Here we are all brothers," he said.

Located near the city of Irbil and about a kilometre from a main road Peer Dawood now has neat rows of mud-brick houses, a primary school, a clinic and community water taps along unpaved roads.

The eviction of the Kurds was one of the largest forced migrations in modern history, and one of the least known, because Iraq's government maintained tight secrecy.

Kurdish leaders say President Saddam Hussein's aim was to wipe out the safe havens of Kurdish guerrillas fighting for autonomy. The government also suspected the Kurds' loyalty during the 1980-88 war with Iran.

Many Kurds say thousands of people, mostly young men suspected as guerrillas or sympathisers, were taken away and never seen again. Iraq's government refuses to comment on the claims.

The plight of the Kurds got international attention only after a Kurdish uprising after the Gulf War temporarily drove Saddam's forces from the northern provinces of Dohuk, Irbil and Sulaimaniya. When Iraqi troops counterattacked, a US-led intervention created an autonomous Kurdish zone.

Peer Dawood had been a memory since April 7, 1987. Iraqi soldiers arrived and ordered the village's 1,000 inhabitants to leave, then bulldozed the houses and dynamited the

mosque, school and every concrete structure, Kadiri said.

Brownwen Lewis, a British aid worker who visited some of the destroyed hamlets in 1994 and later worked on rebuilding villages, recalls the shock of seeing a countryside devoid of any trace of human settlement.

"You only knew it was a village because there would be more stone than in a normal field," Lewis said in a telephone interview from London.

The United Nations has spent 45 million dollars on resettlement. The money was given by Iraq — reluctantly, some UN officials say — from the 9 billion dollars it has earned since 1996.

Iraq's regular oil sales are banned by UN trade sanctions imposed after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Saddam's government says the Kurds were moved from rural areas to provide them modern amenities like electricity, sanitation, schools and hospitals.

But the Kurds note that they were given no choice, and most were left jobless. With their fields untended, agriculture all but died. That mattered little at the time since Iraq's oil wealth allowed the import of as much food as needed.

The residents lived on the dole until the 1991 uprising, when they were forced to fend for themselves.

"That is a humanitarian aim — give those who want to go back, a chance to go back," said Victor Wahlroos, a senior official in the UN resettlement programme.

If men can bear children...

LONDON, Feb 22: Advances in medical technology mean men could now bear children, according to one of Britain's leading fertility experts, the Sunday Times reported, says AFP.

The paper, citing a forthcoming book by Lord Winston, says doctors could use modern techniques to implant an embryo into a man's abdomen, allowing him to carry it to full term and give birth by caesarean section.

Professor Robert Winston, who was ennobled three years ago, is head of the fertility clinic at a leading London hospital.

"Male pregnancy would certainly be possible, and would be the same as when a woman has an ectopic pregnancy — outside the uterus — although to sustain it, you'd have to give the man lots of female hormones," the paper quoted him as saying.

He outlines the concept in a book due to be published in April.

Winston said such foetuses could be implanted inside the abdomen with the placenta, through which the baby is fed, attached to an internal organ, such as the bowel.

He acknowledges it would be dangerous because of the risk of bleeding from the placenta, and hormone treatment could leave the man with larger breasts.

The idea of a man giving birth was the plot of the Hollywood film "Junior" starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, as the parent-to-be, and Danny DeVito.

If it did indeed prove possi-

ble, it could benefit homosexual couples and heterosexual couples where the woman could not physically carry a baby, the paper added.

The Sunday Times cited a recent case of a woman in England who carried a baby outside the womb. The embryo made its way into her abdomen and attached itself to her bowel, but she was able to continue with the pregnancy without any mishap.

Other fertility experts quoted by the paper agreed male pregnancies were, in theory, possible, but warned of ethical problems.

Sonia launches scathing attack on BJP-led coalition govt

LUCKNOW, Feb 22: Congress president Sonia Gandhi today launched a scathing attack on the BJP-led coalition government, charging it with playing the communal card to stay in power at the cost of the country's development, reports PTI.

They are only indulging in the politics of caste and religion to stay in power and have no time left for the problems of the masses and the development of the country, she said addressing a largely attended public meeting at the historic Begum Hazrat Mahal Park here.

The union government was using its entire energy in projecting itself from attacks from its allies and somehow stay in power, she said.



Serb forces stand on alert on Sunday in the village of Studencane near Suva Reka, in southern Kosovo, one day after the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) retreated from the town. Inhabitants fled the village, taking refuge in nearby communities while the security forces moved on. Studencane, home to 300 to 400 people, is four kilometres from Budakovo village, where a police helicopter was hit by KLA gunfire February 19. — AFP Photo