

Fresh riots in Indonesia claim 5

AMBON, Indonesia, Mar 1: Christian mobs burned two dozen Muslim-owned houses and hurled gasoline bombs at a mosque full of worshippers on Monday. At least five people were killed, four of them shot by police, community leaders said, reports AP.

In Jakarta, Indonesia's military chief warned that chronic unrest was endangering national unity and launched a rapid reaction force to curb riots in the world's fourth most populous nation.

"We have to handle this problem," Gen Wiranto said at a ceremony in the Indonesian capital. "If not, it could create disintegration and instability in the nation." In the latest violence, Christians attacked a mosque in the village of Ahuru on the outskirts of Ambon, the capital of Maluku province.

"We were attacked just after conducting our dawn prayer," said Husein Toisuta, a prayer leader, or imam.

One Christian man was killed in brawls with Muslims, Toisuta said.

Troops fatally shot at least four Muslims in the incident, said Munir, a Muslim official in Ambon. One victim was killed in front of the mosque.

Meanwhile, some 5,000 anti-riot troops, equipped with helmets, radios, tear gas canisters and M-16 rifles, paraded at the headquarters of the mobile brigade police on the outskirts of Jakarta. Armoured personnel carriers were parked nearby.

The so-called Anti-Massive Riot Troops will deploy anywhere in the archipelago nation to combat rioters, its commanders said. The military has been widely criticised both for its slow response to unrest as well as its willingness to use lethal force against mobs.

Taliban assure full safety for UN staff in Kabul

KABUL, Mar 1: Leaders of Afghanistan's Taliban militia Sunday assured full safety and security for United Nations staff if they returned to Kabul, UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi said after talks with the hardline Islamic militia, reports AFP.

"Today, they gave us very strong assurances" that the safety of UN staff will be fully guaranteed, he told reporters before leaving for Islamabad after the one-day visit.

The UN withdrew its international staff after an Italian officer, Colonel Carmine Calo, was shot dead in Kabul hours after the August 20 US cruise missile attacks on alleged Saudi terrorist Osama Bin Laden's suspected base in Afghanistan.

Algerian diplomat Brahimi held talks with the chairman of the militia's ruling council, Mohammed Rabbani, foreign minister Mohammad Hassan and other officials.

"We discussed the work of the UN and the necessity of close cooperation to solve the problems of the past," the UN envoy added.

Brahimi said he told Rabbani, considered number two in the Taliban hierarchy, that the security of the UN staff should be respected.

The most important thing was "to avoid the repetition" of the events which led to the exodus of UN staff, he added.

Ocalan's death penalty demanded

ANKARA, Mar 1: Some 2,000 relatives of slain soldiers rallied Sunday near the prison island holding Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan, demanding the death penalty for the man they say is responsible for the deaths of their loved ones, reports AP.

Ocalan, leader of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), has been charged with treason for leading a guerrilla war in southeastern Turkey. Although he could be sentenced to death, Turkey has not carried out any executions for more than a decade.

"I want Apo's execution," said Recep Vardar, the father of a slain soldier. Apo is short for Abdullah. "He should suffer in the same way he made us suffer," Turkey's Anatolia news agency quoted Vardar as saying.

Vardar is one of 2,000 people who rallied in Mudanya, the nearest port to Imrali Island, where Ocalan is the only prisoner. The island is some 30 kilometres from Mudanya.

Ocalan's PKK has been fighting for autonomy in Turkey's southeast since 1984. Some 37,000 people, mostly civilians and guerrillas, have died in the conflict.

On Sunday, unidentified assailants hurled a bomb at a cafe in a poor section of Istanbul, injuring 6 people, Anatolia said. Two of the injured were in serious condition.

It was not immediately clear if the attack was carried out by Ocalan supporters. On Thursday, suspected Kurdish rebels opened fire on a cafe in southeastern Turkey, killing three people.

Turkish helicopters dropped leaflets Sunday urging PKK guerrillas to surrender. Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit has promised lenient punishment for fighters who lay down their arms.

Southeastern Turkey is home to an estimated 12 million Kurds.

International

Israeli jets raid Hezbollah bases in Lebanon

Maintain calm : US

BEIJING, Mar 1: US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called on Israel and Lebanon today to maintain calm after a Hezbollah ambush killed an Israeli general in south Lebanon and Israel vowed to strike back hard, reports Reuters.

"Secretary Albright has sent an oral message through our embassies expressing deep concern and urging each side not to let the situation escalate," said Albright's spokesman James Rubin.

"We are going to try to convene the Israel-Lebanon monitoring group to discuss the situation and to try to help calm things down," he said in Beijing, where Albright arrived on Sunday night for a two-day visit.

AFP adds: Israeli warplanes staged a series of air strikes

Sunday against guerrilla sites near Beirut and in eastern and southern Lebanon, security in Beirut sources said.

There were no reports of casualties from the raids which came after the killing of a top Israeli General and three other Israelis in a Hezbollah guerrilla's bombing in the occupied border zone of southern Lebanon.

Israeli jets fired two missiles on bases of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine general command in Nahari, south of Beirut, the sources said.

Warplanes had earlier bombed positions of the Shiite Muslim Hezbollah in eastern and southern Lebanon they said.

The jets fired two missiles on a Hezbollah position near a government hospital in a residential neighborhood of Baalbek in eastern Lebanon, in the first such strike into the heart of the city since 1984.

AP from Jerusalem says, the killing Sunday of a brigadier general in south Lebanon puts Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the spot during an already tough election campaign issue.

Brig. Gen. Erez Gerstein, Israel's chief liaison with its south Lebanon militia, was among four Israelis, including a reporter, killed when Hezbollah guerrillas detonated a roadside bomb. He was the highest-ranking Israeli's 1982 invasion.

Some Israelis spoke Sunday of ending a pact to avoid hitting civilians at all costs; others mentioned striking Syria, seen in Israel as a key supporter of

the Iranian-backed Hezbollah; others said it was time to get out.

Hanging over the debate was the question of what solution would play best with the electorate, which goes to the polls May 17.

Certainly Israel cannot tolerate these kinds of repeated attacks on its territory, on its citizens, on its soldiers," Netanyahu said in Jordan, where he was meeting with King Abdullah.

But he did not offer any specific solutions — a reticence that increasingly frustrates Israelis across the political spectrum.

A poll conducted last week by the Israeli daily Maariv found that 63 per cent of Israelis think the government is not doing enough to solve the problem in Lebanon.

US airstrike: Iraq-Turkey oil pipeline severed

WASHINGTON, Mar 1: US Air Force F-15 fighters attacked Iraqi military installations Sunday with bombs and missiles after planes patrolling the northern no-fly zone came under anti-aircraft fire, a US military official said, reports AP.

Targets included an Iraqi air defence headquarters, a radio relay site and a surface-to-air missile site, said Air Force Capt Mike Blass, a Stuttgart, Germany-based spokesman for the US European Command, which oversees the northern zone.

An Iraqi Oil Ministry official later said the Iraq-Turkey oil pipeline was severed by an American airstrike, halting the flow of crude oil through Iraq's only operating pipeline. The pipeline, which carries more than half of Iraqi oil exports, runs from the northern Iraqi field of Kirkuk to the south

Turkish port of Ceyhan.

The Iraq ministry's director of planning, Fahel al-Khalaf, told a press conference that a deliberate attack by American aircraft hit a pumping station in northern Iraq, killing one Iraqi and wounding two others seriously. Al-Khalaf said the man killed was an observer, employed by the Iraqi government, who worked with the UN oil-for-food programme that monitors the flow through the pipeline.

A Turkish official at the Ceyhan oil terminal, speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed that the flow had stopped and said an attack had hit "energy transmission lines of a communications centre," which operates the pipeline, early Sunday evening.

It was not immediately clear whether that attack was related to the US military assaults announced earlier.

Blass, who spoke hours before the pipeline was hit, said the US fighters' action took place Sunday afternoon local time. There was no immediate response from the US military about a strike on the pipeline.

Meanwhile, the official Iraqi News Agency said three people were killed and "a number of people" injured by American airstrikes. It identified two of the dead as Mohsin Thiab Ibrahim, a 3-year-old boy, and Mohammed Khamis Hussein, a shepherd.

The agency quoted a spokesman for Iraq's air defence command as saying, "Our national skies were violated by 11 enemy formations coming from the Turkish skies. They carried out 21 sorties."

Abdullah, Netanyahu firm to go by '94 peace treaty

AMMAN, Mar 1: Jordanian and Israeli leaders reiterated their commitment to the 1994 peace treaty and pledged Sunday to work for a broader peace between Israel and Arabs, reports AFP.

The Arab League is following with great disquiet the continuing bombing of Iraq by American and British aircraft, which is resulting in loss of life, destruction of the infrastructure and an increase in tension in the region, said a League statement received by AFP.

It called on Washington and London to support a diplomatic solution, "dealing with Iraq in accordance with (UN) Security Council resolutions."

The League stressed the importance of uniting international efforts to come up with a formula "making possible a resumption of cooperation between Iraq and the United Nations ... and hence speed up the lifting of sanctions."

The statement expresses "solidarity with the Iraqi people and calls on countries to respect Iraqi sovereignty and not to interfere in its internal affairs."

Since December US and British planes have clashed almost daily with Iraqi air defence in the Northern and Southern no-fly zones over the country.

Local polls

Hardliners fail to win any seat in Tehran

TEHRAN, Mar 1: Hard-line opponents of moderate President Mohammad Khatami failed to win a single seat in the capital, the key district in the nation's first local elections, according to preliminary results published today, reports AP.

Khatami loyalists won 12 of the 15 seats contested in Tehran in Friday's vote. The other three went to independents, results showed.

Tehran — the intellectual, commercial and political centre of the country — is seen as a focus in the fierce struggle between hard-liners and moderates with in the Islamic government.

Women were front-runners in at least 20 cities, the results showed. Nearly all of them are supporters of Khatami, who has encouraged women to play a larger role in Iran's political life.

Election officials had counted nearly 10 million votes, or 40 per cent of the ballots, by Sunday night, Tehran radio reported, quoting the Interior Ministry which is supervising the poll.

The ministry says final results may not come before Friday, especially in larger cities like Tehran. In some towns and cities, the turnout was so high that polling stations ran out of ballots and voting hours had to be extended twice.

About 330,000 candidates ran for some 200,000 seats on municipal councils in the election, the first such vote since the 1979 revolution. Some seats were unopposed.

ROK defends policy towards DPRK

South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung said yesterday his gradual engagement approach towards North Korea, or "sunshine policy," was the best alternative the government could adopt to deal with North Korean affairs, Reuters reports from Seoul.

"Some people are suspicious of the 'sunshine policy' and worried about the effects," President Kim said in a televised address commemorating the 80th anniversary of an independence movement against Japanese colonial rule. "But the government's gradual engagement policy is the best alternative for now," Kim said.

No more restricted areas in Beijing

China has jettisoned all of the foreigner-restricted areas in Beijing that were introduced in the fifties to protect "state secrets," the China Daily reported yesterday, says AFP from Beijing.

"We can say that foreigners may travel freely in Beijing now," said Liu Chengsheng, from the Aliens Exit-Entry Administration of the capital's Public Security Bureau. Back in 1958, the Beijing authorities erected 188 checkpoints on various roads through the city which warned that foreigners could not enter the area without permission.

Clinton's go on skiing holiday

President Bill Clinton relaxed at a borrowed mountain-top home Sunday as his wife, Hillary, and daughter, Chelsea, went skiing on a brilliantly sunny day, AFP reports from Park City, Utah.

The first lady and Chelsea were spotted on the slopes by photographers and cameramen. The Clintons had a private dinner and a birthday cake Saturday night for Chelsea as she turned 19. The Clintons are staying at the posh home of Hollywood producer Jeffrey Katzenberg.

Wet Wet Wet singer hospitalised

Marti Pellow, lead singer of the British pop group Wet Wet Wet, was rushed to hospital during the weekend after becoming unconscious in his London hotel room, police disclosed yesterday. AFP reports from London.

The 33-year-old singer was admitted to the emergency wing of a hospital in the exclusive Chelsea district on Saturday evening. No information was available on his condition or how long he may be in hospital. Wet Wet Wet, a group formed more than 10 years ago, has been in London in recent weeks to record its latest record.

Gen Obasanjo set to return to power in Nigeria

Serious charges of rigging

ABUJA, Mar 1: Twenty years after walking away from power, retired Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo held a wide lead today in Nigeria's presidential vote and appeared set to win the elections, reports AP.

But allegations of vote-rigging cast a shadow on the final step in the West African nation's long-awaited return to civilian rule and aides to former finance minister Olu Falae, Obasanjo's opponent, said Falae will contest the results.

Final results of the balloting were expected to be released later today but election officials said Obasanjo, a former military ruler seeking a civilian comeback 20 years after giving up the presidency, had further widened his lead — leaving Falae almost no chance to make up the lost ground.

By Sunday evening, Obasanjo had captured 62 per cent of the vote with 31 of Nigeria's 36 states and the federal capital reporting. With 25.8

"Our delegation members and others witnessed serious irregularities and overt electoral fraud in a number of states," said former US President Jimmy Carter, who led a 60-person delegation of election observers.

However, Carter added that "a saving factor was that there was no nationwide pattern to favour any one party." The monitors were to release a detailed report on the elections later today.

Falae and top officials in his party, as well as the All Peoples Party, headed to the capital, Abuja, to meet with election officials, Durodola said.

Falae said Saturday that he would accept the results of the election if they were free and fair.

The controversy did not immediately spark public protests. No violence was reported on the streets of Lagos, often a hotbed of strife in times of political dissent.

The study, perhaps the first to look for evidence of Alzheimer's before it has been diagnosed, could offer ways to prevent the irreversible damage caused by the disease.

"To develop truly effective therapies, we must learn how to stop the brain lesions before they accumulate to the point where they interfere with mental function," Dr. John Morris, a neurologist at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, said in a statement.

Alzheimer's disease is marked by tangled brain cells matted by "plaques." It has no cure and is always fatal.

Doctors would like to find a way to diagnose Alzheimer's earlier so that they can try to use the few drugs available to slow down brain damage. Researchers are also seeking ways to prevent it.

Morris and neurobiologist Joseph Price had been monitoring both healthy older people and patients with Alzheimer's since 1984. Scientists at the university developed a test that they believe catches patients in the very early stages of Alzheimer's.



Indonesian Muslims crowd a staging area with their luggage before departing for the annual Hajj pilgrimage, in Surabaya on Sunday. The pilgrims are among the first of the 71,078 who signed up for this year's pilgrimage to the holy city of Makkah, a drop of 65 per cent compared to last year as fares soared following the country's financial crisis.

— AFP photo