

Palestinians considering European request to delay declaration of statehood

CAIRO, Mar 9: The Palestinian Authority is "carefully" considering a request by European states to delay the planned May 4 declaration of a Palestinian state, Palestinian International Cooperation Minister Nabil Shaath said Monday, reports AFP.

"The Palestinians are continuing to carefully examine the European request to delay the proclamation of their state, but so far we haven't decided to postpone," Shaath said.

"May 4 remains the date," Shaath added after a Palestinian delegation led by President Yasser Arafat met Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa for more than three hours.

However, it was "useless to proclaim a state which would not be recognised by the major countries," such as the United States, Japan and European countries, he said.

The United States and the European Union, along with Egypt and Jordan, have all urged Arafat to delay declaring a state at least until after Israel's general elections on May 17.

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Mussa said he and Arafat were to discuss Monday night the proposed May 4 date, which is when the Palestinian-Israeli five-year interim period deriving from the Oslo peace process ends.

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"From there a message will be sent out to Europe," Italian Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini said this week.

KLA won't give up arms

JABLANICA, Yugoslavia, Mar 9: Sitting in his headquarters along the snow-capped mountains of the Albanian border, hard-line rebel commander Ramush Hajredinaj remains adamant that the Kosovo Liberation Army will never give up its guns, reports AP.

Disarmament has been one of the biggest barriers to getting the KLA to accept a US-backed peace agreement. And while KLA leaders told US envoy Christopher Hill on Monday that they had approved the deal and would sign it shortly, militants such as Hajredinaj could be hard to convince.

The deal envisions the KLA becoming a political party, with some rebels joining an ethnic Albanian-run police force. But after years of covert planning, of training in the woods and smuggling guns into Kosovo for the fight for independence, the KLA is reluctant to forsake the army it worked so hard to build up.

They also fear not having a defensive force against the Serbs.

"Not to have an army would be a big mistake," said Hajredinaj, one of five KLA commanders invited to visit Washington

in yet another diplomatic move to persuade rebels to adopt the deal for Kosovo self-rule. Without the rebels, ethnic Albanian politicians will not sign. And without full cooperation from all Albanian factions, NATO cannot follow through on military threats aimed at getting Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic to also agree.

The negotiations come after a year of bitter ethnic war in Kosovo, a southern province in the Serb republic that dominates Yugoslavia, where ethnic Albanians outnumber Serbs nine to one.

Hajredinaj (pronounced high-re-DEE-naj) is one of the toughest commanders in the rebel army, and some observers worry hard-liners might continue to fight even if politicians and rebel commanders accept peace.

His men already have a rousing reputation. They are suspected of carrying out the so-called Panda Cafe murders, when masked rebels opened fire in December on a restaurant in the city of Pec, killing six Serbian youths. His men also are suspected of shooting at US diplomatic monitors. And Hajredinaj himself is wanted by the Serb regime as a terrorist.

His territory, along the western flank of Kosovo, hums with a military spark and efficiency, with fierce loyalty to a leader almost worshipped for his fighting skill and strategic prowess. He rarely grants interviews, especially in his headquarters only a few kilometers (miles) from Serb police.

"When I mention his name, I feel like bowing. That's how much I respect him," said battalion leader Arzen Bytyqi, 23, wearing a red beret and a green camouflage uniform with KLA patches emblazoned with their emblem: the two-headed black eagle.

Now 30, Hajredinaj served one year in the Yugoslav army, during which he says he was learning to be a soldier to fight for Kosovo independence. Like many ethnic Albanians, he also lived in Switzerland and France, earning money for the cause before coming home in the early 1990s to take up arms.

"I've been thinking of independence since I was a child. It was my training from my parents," said the commander, whose soft voice and wiry frame belie his tough image.

His wife serves in the KLA as a

do his sister and five brothers.

For a hard-liner, this commander seems to have softened a bit on the KLA's ultimate goal of secession. The peace plan calls for broad autonomy within Serbia, enforced by 28,000 NATO peacekeepers, 4,000 of them from the United States. Ethnic Albanians are hopeful that after three years of autonomy they can gain independence by referendum.

"We can accept everything that doesn't destroy the way to independence," Hajredinaj said Monday, suggesting that he, like other commanders, are ready to accept autonomy as a first step.

That leaves the disarmament question, as well as ethnic Albanian reluctance to allow Russians — close friends of the Serbs — to participate in the peacekeeping force.

"If NATO comes, we won't have to be a liberation army any more. We'll change and become a regular army," the commander said, refusing to even acknowledge the question of becoming part of a mere police force.

"Washington knows what we want," he said with a smile. "We've been clear from the very beginning."

6 killed, arms dump unearthed in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, Mar 9: Six people, including five militants belonging to the banned Hizbul Mujahideen, were killed in separate incidents, while security forces unearthed an arms dump in Jammu and Kashmir since Sunday evening, reports PTI.

An army jawan was killed when a patrol was ambushed by militants at Waghmoula in Tangmarg area of Baramulla district Sunday night, an official spokesman said.

Four Hizbul militants were killed by army troops in an encounter at Nasu in Bandipora area of the same district in north Kashmir last night, he said.

Those killed were identified as Khurshid Ahmad Lone alias Bilal, self-styled battalion commander, Jalaludin Dar, self-styled company commander, Mohammad Aslam Mir and a suspected former national, the spokesman said, adding four AK assault rifles, one wireless set, five kilos of explosives and eight grenades were recovered from the site.

A hardcore militant, identified as Ilyas Kashmiri, was shot dead by security forces in an encounter at Noulrian-Chingas area of Rajouri district in Jammu yesterday.

King Fahd's wife dies

RIYADH, Mar 9: The wife of Saudi Arabia's King Fahd died on Monday after a "long illness," the royal court said in a statement, reports Reuters.

The brief statement, carried by the official Saudi press agency, said that Princess Al-Anoud bin Abdul-Aziz bint Musaed Al-Saud died following a long illness she had suffered from. It gave no further details.

She was the mother of five sons of King Fahd, including Prince Faisal. Princess Al-Anoud was King Fahd's first wife. The monarch has a second wife, Al-Jouhara Al-Ibrahim.

Author of a letter bribed to slander Anwar Ibrahim

KUALA LUMPUR, Mar 9: The author of a letter accusing Anwar Ibrahim of sodomy and adultery was given money to slander the ousted deputy prime minister, her brother testified in court Tuesday, reports AP.

Mohd. Azmi Ali, whose wife is accused by prosecutors of committing adultery with the jailed politician, testified at Anwar's sex and corruption trial that his sister told him she never wrote the letter that led to Anwar's eventual downfall.

Central to the prosecution's case against Anwar is a letter to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad signed by Azmi's sister, Umni Hafidha Ali. In it, she named Azmi's wife and several men as Anwar's secret sex partners.

"Umni stressed that she didn't write the letter," Azmi testified Tuesday. "As her brother, I advised her not to be embroiled in the political conspiracy, but she replied that it was too late for her to get out because she had committed and some money was paid to her."

Anwar, a devout Muslim and the father of six, insists that the allegations against him are false and were fabricated to quash his challenge to the 18-year leadership of Mahathir. Mahathir sacked Anwar in September, citing his alleged sexual misconduct. Anwar was arrested two weeks later and subsequently charged with sodomy which is illegal in this conservative, predominately Muslim country.

He is on trial on four counts of corruption for allegedly attempting to get police to cover up his sexual indiscretions. He faces another corruption charge and five counts of sodomy. Azmi, the former private secretary to Anwar who has insisted that his wife and Anwar never had sex, has described his sister as a "compulsive liar."

"I asked Umni why she was capable of hurling such malicious slander against me, my family and Anwar when she herself knew her allegations were baseless and could destroy our household," Azmi testified. "She then said that she didn't write the letter."

Khatami's visit to Italy will serve as a bridge between Iran and West

ROME, Mar 9: Making the first state visit to the West by an Iranian leader since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, President Mohammad Khatami comes to Italy with an agenda of immense importance, reports AP.

Khatami was hoping to open a new chapter in his country's relations with the West during the visit beginning Tuesday.

Both countries call it a visit of historical importance. Talks on trade and ending Iran's isolation are planned, as well as a meeting with Pope John Paul II.

Khatami, a moderate cleric pushing for social and democratic reforms at home, Khatami has ventured West just once before since his election in 1997 — to the United Nations in September.

In a groundbreaking address, Khatami called for a "dialogue among civilizations" instead of confrontation. His trip to Rome — and his meeting with the pope — is the beginning of that dialogue.

Iran's chairmanship of the 54-nation Islamic Conference

gives special weight to Thursday's papal audience. The meeting "is of capital importance to the Islamic-Christian dialogue," said the pope's ambassador to Iran, Archbishop Romeo Panciroli.

The Roman Catholic Church and Islam each claim some 1 billion faithful, making them the largest religious groups in the world.

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He also gives a speech Wednesday at the European University in Florence.

"From there a message will be sent out to Europe," Italian Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini said this week.

Dini is stressing the importance of the visit as a way of bolstering Khatami's attempts at reforming which are bitterly opposed by the conservative clerics who control Iran's parliament, security apparatus and judiciary.

Khmer Rouge army chief to face trial

PHNOM PENH, Mar 9: Notorious Khmer Rouge army chief Ta Mok will face trial in a Cambodian court under 1994 legislation that outlawed the guerrilla group, a military court prosecutor said Tuesday, reports AP.

After leaving the detention centre where the one-legged guerrilla chief is being held, chief prosecutor Gen Sao Sok said an initial interrogation of Ta Mok is finished and he will soon file charges that will include the crime of genocide.



Chinese President Jiang Zemin (L) and Premier Zhu Rongji go through some documents during the third session of the National People's Congress at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. Jiang warned that China's future depended on successful handling of radical state sector reforms. — AFP photo

Vajpayee govt completes one yr, more troubles speculated ahead

NEW DELHI, Mar 9: A week before its first anniversary, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was trying to recover his balance Tuesday from a humbling defeat in parliament, a sign that his 19-party coalition may have trouble completing a second year in office, reports AP.

Facing certain defeat in the legislature's upper house, Vajpayee chose Monday to reinstate the state government of Bihar which he had dismissed last month after an upsurge of rural violence between warring castes.

Reaffirmation of the dismissal in parliament was destined to fail after Sonia Gandhi, leader of the opposition Congress Party, refused to support his decision, even though she had earlier said the Bihar government had no moral right to stay in office.

Although the setback did not immediately threaten Vajpayee's government, it underscored its fragility and the need to tread cautiously on contentious issues.

"Before taking the fateful step, the Vajpayee government should have remembered its own vulnerability and made sure that it had enough support in parliament," said The Hindustan Times newspaper in an editorial Tuesday.

The Statesman, a Calcutta-based daily, chastised the government for dismissing the Bihar government in the first place, a move it said lacked respect for the law.

Vajpayee ousted the Bihar government for what was described as a breakdown of law and order. The state has been wracked by financial scandal and caste warfare between landless low-caste Hindus and upper caste feudal landlords.

The Bihar fiasco overshadowed Vajpayee's pathbreaking bus journey to Pakistan last month and the pledge by the two hostile neighbours to work toward reducing the risk of a nuclear war, settling the intractable Kashmir dispute and improve economic ties.

Rashtriya Janata Dal party re-elected her to head the reconstituted government.

Emboldened by its success, the fractious opposition groups came together Monday to further embarrass the Vajpayee government by pressing a censure motion over the firing of the naval chief, Vishnu Bhagwat, in December. It was not clear when a vote would be held.

Bhagwat was sacked for refusing to accept the appointment of a new deputy. The admiral claimed he had the authority to choose his principal officers, and was not required to accept the government's nominee. The government judged his stand to be insubordination of civilian authority.

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The low registration figure is because many Qatari men are members of the army and police, which makes them ineligible to vote. Also ineligible are those who have been "citizens for less than 15 years."

The candidacy of the six women is seen as a first step towards achieving a greater role for Qatari women.

Women candidates lose landmark Qatari polls

DOHA, Mar 9: Veiled women in black and men in white Arab robes voted Monday in landmark municipal elections that marked Qatar's first taste of democracy, reports AP.

The oil-rich emirate's election was closely watched throughout the Gulf, in part because women were allowed to run for office. Kuwait is the only Gulf Arab state that holds elections, and women are barred from running for office.

All six women were defeated in Monday's election in the ultra-conservative state where most women hide behind the traditional Muslim black veil.

Most of the winning candidates for the 29-member Municipality Council were well-known civil servants from prominent families. All 248 candidates ran as independents for the council, which will only have advisory powers.

"It seemed to me that it was a very orderly and civilized election, as though they had done it before," said Cheryl Gillan, a member of Britain's Parlia-

ment. Gillan was among dozens of foreign observers in Qatar to observe the elections.

Voters drove in luxury cars to polling stations — school buildings and white tents with multicoloured interiors. Free Arabic coffee was served.

"What struck me was the enthusiasm of the people who had never voted before. People of Qatar responded magnificently. Everyone was happy," said Ernie Ross, chairman of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy in Britain.

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BRIEFLY

US ME envoy to visit Turkey: US Assistant Secretary for the Middle East Martin Indyk will go to Turkey, then Jordan and Syria in the next few days, the State Department confirmed Monday, AFP reports from Washington.

The trip will primarily be linked to the Iraqi issue. Indyk will also discuss with Syrian authorities negotiations between Israel and Syria, which have been stalled for three years.

Kurds face Sydney court: Dozens of Kurdish protesters appeared in a Sydney court Tuesday to face charges stemming from an invasion of the Greek consulate last month. AP reports from Sydney.

The Feb 17 protest, which included a tense nine-hour siege with police after demonstrators raided the consulate, was part of a worldwide explosion of anger at the arrest of Kurdish separatist leader Abdullah Ocalan. Police arrested 65 protesters, including a 15-year-old boy. The demonstrators face a total of 63 charges.

Argentine novelist Casares dies: Argentine novelist Adolfo Bioy Casares, considered one of this century's greatest Spanish language writers, died Monday at the age of 84. AFP reports from Buenos Aires.

The high point of his career was the publication in 1940 of "The Invention of Morel," a novel hailed as Casares' masterpiece. Born on September 24, 1914 to Argentine aristocrats, Casares grew up on the family's estate in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. He wrote his first short story at 11, followed by his first police novel three years later.

3 kids die as wall falls in China: Three elementary school students attending their first day of classes in the spring term died when the recently repaired wall and gate of their school collapsed in a village in central China, the official newspaper China Consumer Journal reported Tuesday. AP reports from Beijing.

The report said four students were injured, three of them fatally, when they were playing around the gate to their school in Xudoutang village in Henan province on Feb 26. The wall surrounding the gate collapsed, bringing the gate down and crushing the children.

Time is right for UN foreign staff to return to Afghanistan

By Syed Talat Hussain

ISLAMABAD, Mar 9: The crucial issue of the return of United Nations foreign staff to Afghanistan hinges on the reports of the Special Assessment Teams which have investigated the murder of three UN workers and the disappearance of one, from Qandhar Area, and have sent their reports to New York, say UN officials in Islamabad.

If the reports give a positive assessment and give the recommendation that the environment in Afghanistan for UN foreign staff is conducive, then the staff will return. But even then it will not be a lock-stock-barrel return but a more incremental one in which foreign staff groups will perhaps rotate before reaching their full strength.

In the larger perspective, however, the issue of the return of the UN staff to Afghanistan which will fully re-engage the international body in Afghan affairs, speeding up the ongoing development and reconstruction work and bringing the UN closer to the ground, reality in the war-torn country depends also on how cooperative the Taliban are.

So far the UN experience with the Taliban has been somewhat disappointing. The detailed memorandum of understanding signed between the two in May 1998 and the supplementary protocol signed later, codifying the duties and responsibilities of the Taliban towards the UN and its staff, have both, at best, been paper agreements. These have not translated into the kind of security umbrella which the UN

staff believes it needs to work in Afghanistan.

The disappearance of Abdul Ghani Baloch, a United Nations Development Programme local officer, detained in July 1998 from Taliban custody has further aggravated the sense of insecurity for the foreign staff.

The big question which is being asked in UN circles is this: can the Taliban be trusted with their words that they will ensure complete safety to UN foreign staff? The answer, though difficult to give, is perhaps in the affirmative.

The phase in which the UN foreign staff faced problems at the hands of the Taliban was in many ways exceptional. The anger against US strikes had found an easy target in the shape of the UN as foreigners were generally identified with US cruise-missile diplomacy. Then the Osama bin Laden factor was also at work. The Taliban found themselves involved in a tussle between their guest and his hunters. This fuelled anti-west passions which came out through the acts of those groups upon whom the Taliban leadership does not necessarily have a complete control.

Now the aftermath of US attacks and the Osama bin Laden factor do not dominate the Afghanistan scene. The Taliban are in a better position to dispassionately evaluate the need for them to get engaged

with the international community, the most notable step towards which will be the return of the UN foreign staff to their soil.

Since May last year two other significant developments have taken place regarding Afghanistan which have had a sobering affect on the Taliban view of the world.

The first was the fourth meeting of the Afghanistan Support Group in Tokyo. During the course of the meeting it became clear that powerful capitals of the world such as Wash-

ington and London were simply not interested in supporting development and reconstruction work in Afghanistan as long as there was not a significant change in the policies of the Taliban. Then on December 8, 1998 the United Nations Security Council passed its significant resolution number 1214 which was the sharpest rebuke yet to the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. It deplored the "failure of the Taliban leadership to comply with the previous resolutions and expressed readiness to consider the imposition of measures in accordance with the Charter with the aim of achieving full implementation of those resolutions."

Since then attitude of the world community and Afghanistan's neighbours has made it further clear to the

News Analysis

Hopefully, UN policymakers in New York will make use of this opportunity to settle issues with the Taliban and send their foreign staff back to a country whose population is desperately in need of the world's full help for peace, stability and reconstruction of their country.

NATO's newest members face challenge to speak English

VIENNA, Mar 9: Europe's three ex-communist states set to join NATO this week face a range of huge challenges — but few more basic than the need to speak English, reports AP.

Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary have all launched intensive language training programmes as part of their multi-million dollar programmes to update their armed forces.

But much remains to be done experts agree, as they prepare to sign up to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation on Friday in a ceremony in Independence, Missouri.

"It's a serious problem," said William Hopkinson of the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London. If you can't speak English you can't take part in military planning structures.

The three countries all claim to have made significant progress on language skills since they joined NATO's partnership for peace programme some five years ago.

The Czech Republic took the matter in hand in 1996, ordering English classes for all officers, and making it a specific requirement for promotion to the highest ranks.

But results are not overly impressive. Of more than 4,000 tested, only 244 candidates could "understand precise details in a social and professional context," while only two scored full marks.

Poland's language skills are not much better. Some 5,000 soldiers can speak some English, but only 1,000 speak it well, according to army official figures.

Warsaw commentators warn that it will be difficult to find 35 officers who speak English well enough to fill Poland's new po-

RJDLP reelects Rabri Devi as its leader

PATNA, Mar 9: Rabri Devi was today unanimously re-elected leader of Rashtriya Janata Dal Legislature Party (RJDLP) for staking claim to form the government in Bihar, reports PTI.

Her name was proposed by senior RJD leader Ramal Ram and seconded by former speaker of state assembly Gulam Sarwar.

The RJDLP met here this morning to reelect Rabri following centre's revocation of president's rule yesterday.