

Fresh Muslim-Christian violence grips Ambon

AMBON, Indonesia, Mar 10: Columns of smoke rose over this riot-torn Indonesian city today as 45 houses were torched in fresh outbreaks of Muslim-Christian violence, residents said, reports AFP.

There were no immediate reports of casualties in the clashes, which broke out despite the heavy presence of troops flown to Ambon last week.

The fires started around 6 am, burning 20 houses in Benteng Atas and 25 in neighbouring Air Salobar, a resident at a Muslim coordination centre told AFP by phone.

Residents in Benteng Atas and Air Salobar villages are mostly Muslims. They were attacked by Christian residents from the nearby Lathuhalat, Silaley and Amahusu villages, the source said.

"The fight is still going on and you can see thick smoke billowing up from the area," he said, adding the military haven't done much to remedy

the situation. Another house was destroyed by fire in the city but the military secured the area before the flames could spread to other property, he said.

Armed forces General Wiranto on Sunday sent a special task force of 19 Ambon-born officers, both Christian and Muslim, to the city on the heels of 3,000 marine and army reinforcements flown in last week.

He said he was trusting the officers to try to defuse the ethnic and religious tensions here and bring the situation under control.

But the Muslims coordination centre resident said the military were considered by many to be "partial" in their protection.

A man identified only as Nibu at the central Al-Fatah mosque said that at around 2 am he heard about 50 explosions and several hundred rounds of gunshots.

"The explosions and the shooting lasted for about an

hour and the people here could not sleep because we were afraid there might be an attack on us," Nibu said.

He added a large number of troops were guarding the mosque which was being used as a shelter by Muslims who have lost their homes in the riots.

Meanwhile, the chief of Laha village said four police officers were arrested on Tuesday by the military police for firing without cause.

"It is true that four police officers have been arrested because they fired shots when they were not supposed to, but I am not sure whether they shot at people," chief Frankie Mewar told AFP.

The arrests would take to 15 the number of security officials detained for interfering with the unrest since January 19.

Military officials and the special press centre set up by a new task force to clarify the Ambon situation were not available to confirm the reports of the fires, shooting or arrests.

Indian, Pakistani FMs to meet in Colombo next week

ISLAMABAD, Mar 10: Pakistan Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz has said he would meet his Indian counterpart Jaswant Singh in Colombo during the SAARC foreign ministers meet next week which would be followed by talks between the foreign secretaries of the two countries in April, according to a media report here yesterday, says PTI.

During the meet, the first since Indian Prime Minister A B Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif met at a summit in Lahore last month agreed to take confidence-building measures, the two leaders would also finalise the date for the meeting of the foreign secretaries. The News English daily quoted Aziz as saying.

"Most likely, the two foreign secretaries will meet in April this year," he said.

Aziz said during the discussions on the sidelines of the SAARC foreign ministers meet slated for March 18 and 19, he would discuss the follow up actions to the prime ministers' meeting at Lahore.

Sierra Leone's rebel leader for unilateral ceasefire

FREETOWN, Mar 10: Sierra Leone's charismatic rebel leader called on commanders of his guerilla army Tuesday to observe a unilateral cease-fire and to release any hostages they are holding, reports AP.

Today Sankoh, who has been sentenced to death for treason, was briefly released from prison to address reporters. It was the Revolutionary United Front leader's first public address since his conviction and sentencing in October.

Speaking outside the headquarters of the West African intervention force defending Sierra Leone's government, Sankoh called for an indefinite cease-fire across the country within the next three days.

"I therefore call on you my commanders anywhere you are in Sierra Leone to immediately release all innocent civilians and religious workers, including Catholic priests you have held as hostages," Sankoh said. He was also allowed to speak to his top aides by telephone, and repeated the cease-fire call to them.

Singapore govt still needs detention without trial law

SINGAPORE, Mar 10: A 50-year-old security law designed to combat communists by detaining them without trial is still necessary because other nations are plotting against Singapore, the government told Parliament Wednesday, reports AP.

"China doesn't present the same threat as before," Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong acknowledged in answering an opposition member's call to repeal the Internia "We are not in a position where everyone can be taken at face value. There is a certain amount of cloak and dagger and skulduggery" against Singapore, Lee said, even though the problem of the communist menace "is much less now."

Passed as a Singapore statute in the 1960s, the act allows the government to detain people indefinitely without trial and restrict their civil rights once they are released.

Chiam See Tong, of the opposition Singapore People's Party, called for repeal, or suspension, of the law. "It is a bla-

tant violation of human rights," said Chiam. Its very existence dissuades qualified people from joining the opposition, he said.

"Singapore shall forever be an authoritarian state," instead of a Western-style democracy, as long as the law gives the government such "draconian powers," Chiam said.

Lee, responding for the People's Action Party that has controlled Singapore for 40 years, did not comment on Chiam's reference to the effect of the law on the domestic opposition.

He said two people detained in 1997 and four in 1998 were involved in espionage. They have never been identified or tried.

"We have not published a lot of details on these espionage cases because we don't want to unnecessarily inflame relations or cause problems with these countries," Lee said.

He said the act was used in 1987 to detain four people he said were stockpiling weapons and planning a "riot."

"We can wait until we get

enough evidence in order to prove the case in court or we can act immediately before it got out of hand," Lee said. He described the law as "a precaution, a safeguard... accepted by Singaporeans as a necessary part of the political landscape."

Singapore's longest-held detainee was Chia Thye Poh, now 57, who was an opposition Parliament member when he was seized in 1966 and held for 23 years. After his release from prison in 1989, his movements, speech, writings and assembly with others were restricted, until last year.

"He was never formally tried or brought to court for trial," said Chiam. "There was only an allegation that he was a communist and called for the violent overthrow of the state, which he has consistently denied."

Lee said the government had been told by other communists that Chia "was their man," and that his speeches "implied" a call for violent overthrow of the government. He said Chia had never denied the allegations.

Ex-army chief says N-arms Pakistan's cheapest form of defence

ISLAMABAD, Mar 10: A former Pakistan army chief involved in Islamabad's nuclear programme said on Tuesday that nuclear weapons were the country's cheapest form of defence, reports Reuters.

Former chief of army staff General Mirza Aslam Beg said in a speech Pakistan had a number of nuclear weapons which he thought were sufficient to act as a deterrent against a nuclear rival India.

"The choice to retain that option is logical, it is the cheapest option," he said during a debate between political leaders and civilians organised by a local peace group.

Beg said that as a member of Pakistan's nuclear command authority between 1988-91 in his capacity as army chief, he found that the country's nuclear programme from 1975 to 1990 cost only 250 million US dollars — less than the cost of 10 US-made F-16 fighters.

But former Pakistan air force chief, retired Air Marshal Asghar Khan, slammed the country's nuclear programme and urged the government to sign the International Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) that is still being negotiated.

"It is national suicide," he said, referring to the nuclear tests carried out by Pakistan last May in response to similar tests by India.

Mandela blasts white S Africans for continuing privilege system

JOHANNESBURG, Mar 10: In the waning months of his presidency, Nelson Mandela has reprimanded white South Africans for perpetuating the system of white privilege, reports AP.

Mandela told the mostly white, upper-class crowd Monday that many whites refuse to share their resources with the previously disadvantaged majority.

"The masses are telling us that the white minority still wants to defend its privilege," Mandela said in a speech at a primary school in the Johannesburg suburb of Houghton, where he was a house.

He faulted whites for keeping the apartheid regime in power for 40 years, and now for "shunning" the African National Congress — "the only party that can bring peace to the country."

"Don't be a supporter of lost causes. White supremacy will never come back," he said to applause and cheers.

Mandela acknowledged failings by the African National Congress leadership. "It is a serious mistake for you to think that this government fell out of heaven and landed in South Africa," he said.

Protest marks Charles' visit to Argentina

BUENOS AIRES, Mar 10: Prince Charles bowed in tribute to Argentina's dead from a 1982 war with Britain, striking a conciliatory tone on a three-day tour intended to kindle new ties between the former foes, reports AP.

But while his visit here opened quietly Tuesday, at nightfall demonstrators clashed with police while trying to march to a hotel where the Prince of Wales was dining with President Carlos Menem.

Police fired tear gas to disperse the rock-throwing marchers and arrested 27 people, local news agency Diarios Noticias reported. Two police officers were reported injured.

Prince Charles is the most prominent British royal to visit Argentina since the war for the Falkland Islands.

Hours after he landed in Buenos Aires, he paid quiet tribute to the 750 Argentines lost in the 10-week war, laying a wreath at a monument in their honour.

Led by a member of Argentina's armed forces, Prince Charles bowed his head at the black granite wall inscribed with each Argentine soldier's name as a group of war veterans, among others, looked on.

There are very few eligible bachelors now because many youths have fled.

US envoy warns Y'slav govt might be on collision course with NATO

BELGRADE, Mar 10: US envoy Richard Holbrooke says the Yugoslav government could be on a "collision course" with NATO over an internationally-brokered peace plan for Kosovo, reports AP.

"We are very concerned," Holbrooke said ahead of Wednesday's meeting with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. "We are only a few days away from a tragedy of even greater dimensions."

More than 2,000 people have died and hundreds of thousands been displaced in a year of fighting between Yugoslav troops and ethnic Albanian rebels. Albanians make up the vast majority of the population in Kosovo, a province in the Yugoslav republic of Serbia.

The Serb-led Yugoslav government opposes the Kosovo peace plan, especially the provision for a deployment of some 28,000 NATO troops to police the deal.

NATO has threatened to

strike Serbian targets if Milosevic continues to reject the plan. Ethnic Albanians have indicated they may reluctantly sign the deal that gives them broad autonomy, but not the independence they seek.

"We might be on a collision course here between Yugoslav and the Western authorities, including NATO," said Holbrooke, who was instrumental in persuading Milosevic to back a peace agreement for Bosnia in 1995 and a Kosovo cease-fire in October.

In Washington, State Department spokesman James Rubin said: "Clearly the pressure is now focused on the Serbs."

In separate comments, NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana told Cable News Network that NATO military action will be required "if he remains the lone holdout."

"If the moment comes when I have to do it, I will do it," he said.

American diplomats remained hopeful that the rebel Kosovo Liberation Army would sign the peace plan before negotiations resume Monday outside Paris.

KLA spokesman Jakup Krasniqi told the Albanian-language newspaper Koha Ditore in remarks published Tuesday that the signing will take place once all rebel leaders are back in Kosovo.

But there was no evidence Milosevic's forces were easing up on their offensive to seize full control of a strategic region along Kosovo's southern border with Macedonia — just across from where more than 8,000 NATO troops have gathered in preparation for a peacekeeping mission.

Yugoslav tanks advanced southward Tuesday in the area where renewed fighting with ethnic Albanian rebels sent an estimated 400 refugees down the mountains on foot and on horseback.

BRIEFLY



Former French prime minister Laurent Fabius arrives at the International Conference Centre in Paris Tuesday. Fabius and his former social affairs minister Georgina Dufoix were acquitted Tuesday of manslaughter charges triggered by the distribution of AIDS-tainted blood.

— AFP photo
Three bombs explode in Colombo: Three bombs exploded in the Sri Lankan capital, killing one person and injuring 12 others, police said Wednesday, AP reports from Colombo.

Police blamed the Tamil Tiger rebel group for the blasts around midnight in the business district of Pettah and near the Maradana railroad station in central Colombo. The bomb was hidden in a tape recorder left on a bus with 22 passengers. It was bound for the southern port city of Galle when the bomb went off. Eleven people were injured, and one died later in hospital, police said. The second blast occurred near Maradana station, injuring two railroad workers. The third blast damaged an electricity transformer, also in the Pettah area, which disrupted electricity supply to parts of the business district.

Tibetans protest in Kathmandu: About 5,000 Tibetans demonstrated in the Nepalese capital Wednesday demanding the end of Chinese rule in Tibet. AP reports from Kathmandu.

Police prevented the protesters from leaving the premises of Boudhanath Temple, one of the biggest shrines in the country. Nepalese authorities, mindful of their relations with their huge Chinese neighbour, are wary of anti-China demonstrations by refugees who stay in transit camps after fleeing Tibet. We want free Tibet, Tibet for the Tibetans, Long Live Dalai Lama," chanted the protesters as they unsuccessfully tried to push through police lines.

China executes 2 traffickers: Two traffickers caught with 63 kg of heroin had been executed in Shanghai, state media said Wednesday, AP reports from Shanghai.

Ma Yuchuan and Tang Yagubai were arrested last June in the biggest drug trafficking case to date in Shanghai. Ma and Tang were described as leaders of a drug ring, and newspapers said other members had been convicted but the reports gave no details of their punishment.

Strong quake shakes Tibet: A strong earthquake shook sparsely populated high plains of northern Tibet, but was unlikely to have caused deaths or injuries, Chinese media and a government seismologist said Wednesday, AP reports from Beijing.

The preliminary magnitude-5.3 quake struck the Rola Kang area shortly after 6 PM (1000 GMT) Tuesday. There were no reports of casualties, said a seismologist with the Tibet seismology bureau in Lhasa.

Volcano warning issued in Japan: Japan's Meteorological Agency issued a volcano warning on the main southern island of Kyushu early Wednesday after massive tremors were registered in the area, AP report from Tokyo.

The agency said some 200 earthquakes were registered near the south side of Sakurajima, a volcanic island inside Kagoshima Bay. The 1,117-metre high Sakurajima has erupted 15 times since earlier in the year, the agency said. It warned local residents of further volcanic activity.

Dalai Lama for compromise with Beijing as Tibetans mark 40 years in exile

DHARMSALA, India, Mar 10: Thousands of Tibetans marched through India's capital Wednesday to mark the 40th anniversary of their exile, as the Dalai Lama sent a reassuring signal to Beijing that any compromise agreement would win acceptance from his people, reports AP.

An estimated 5,000 people, many in traditional Tibetan dress, strode behind the Tibetan flag toward the Indian parliament building, chanting slogans against what they call the Chinese occupation of the Himalayan homeland.

In the northern town of Dharmasala, the Dalai Lama told 4,000 Tibetans and international observers the Chinese government lacked the "political will and courage" to discuss the Tibet issue, and accused it of intensifying repression against his people.

Among his listeners were 600 refugees who reached

Dharmasala last month after making the dangerous trek across some of the highest mountain passes in the world in the dead of winter.

Tibetans are marking the 40th anniversary of the uprising against Chinese rule that resulted in the crackdown that forced the Dalai Lama to flee into exile. March 10 is known as Tibetan National Day in the Tibetan calendar.

The Dalai Lama has been facing increasing pressure from younger Tibetans to abandon his moderate approach and demand full independence. "This is a sign of Tibetan frustrations because the Chinese are not responding," said Thondup Tsering, 28.

But the Dalai Lama said in his speech he was confident he could control the radicals if China agreed to a "just and fair solution." He pledged to "use my moral authority to persuade the Tibetans not to seek separation."

Yeltsin asks Premakov to take charge of Chechnya crisis

MOSCOW, Mar 10: Coping with the abduction of Russia's top envoy to Chechnya, President Boris Yeltsin has turned to his prime minister to take charge of the latest crisis in the breakaway region, reports AP.

On orders from Yeltsin, Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov was to chair a meeting Wednesday on federal policy in the region, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported.

The kidnapping of police Maj. Gen. Gennady Shpigun in the Chechen capital Grozny last Friday has worsened already

tense relations between Moscow and Chechen leaders.

The two sides have never settled Chechnya's political status following a 1994-96 war in which the republic won de-facto independence.

Kidnappers dragged Shpigun off an airplane just before it was to take off last Friday from the Chechen capital Grozny. So far no one has claimed responsibility or made any demands.

Chechnya's president has called for a meeting with Russian leaders to coordinate efforts to find Shpigun.

State Department official says US may succeed to oust Saddam by 2001

WASHINGTON, Mar 10: US efforts to remove Iraqi President Saddam Hussein from office could bear fruit by January 2001, a top US State Department official told a Senate panel Tuesday, reports AP.

Under fire from Senators questioning whether such a change could come before President Bill Clinton leaves office, Elizabeth Jones, Principal Assistant Secretary of State of near east affairs, replied "it's entirely possible."

Jones was defending the Clinton administration's Iraq policy from tough criticism by two Republican Senators, who charged not enough was being done to bring about Saddam's ouster.

"We're wasting a tremendous opportunity here" by not pushing harder for the Iraqi leaders' removal at a time when there seems to be broad support for it, stressed, Republican Senator Sam Brownback.

Brownback, who chairs the panel to which Jones testified, also deplored limiting US action to striking Iraqi installations that target American and British jets patrolling "no-fly zones" in Iraq.

Any campaign to remove Saddam requires "aggressive US leadership" without which it "may take several years, it may take 10 years," added Brownback.

Republican Senator John Ashcroft meanwhile said the White House has "not spent a single dollar" to train and equip Iraqi opposition despite the 97 million dollars that could fund such an effort under a US budget provision.

Jones painted a different picture of American policy, saying Washington was "working actively and aggressively" to bring about Saddam's removal, but stressing the need to rally opposition groups before training and equipping them.

Arafat holds talks with Gaddafi

TRIPOLI, Mar 10: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat discussed his planned proclamation of an independent state with Libyan leader Moamer Gaddafi when the two men's paths crossed in Cairo Tuesday, Libyan television reported, reports AP.

Their talks dealt with the proclamation of a Palestinian state on May 4, the television said without indicating how Gaddafi had reacted.

The Libyan leader strongly opposes the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords between Israel and the Palestinians.

Arafat was accompanied in his meeting with Gaddafi by his International Cooperation Minister Nabil Shaath and Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat.

Earlier, Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Mousa said Arafat was sticking to May 4 as the date to proclaim a state.

Ocalan appoints two lawyers

ANKARA, Mar 10: Imprisoned Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan has formally appointed two lawyers for what will be his much-watched defence against charges of treason, according to a news agency report Tuesday, reports AP.

Turkey's Anatolia news agency, quoting police officials, said Ocalan named brothers Ahmet Zeki Okcuoglu and Selim Okcuoglu as his attorneys on Monday in the presence of a notary.

Ahmet Zeki Okcuoglu appealed to the prosecutor's office in Ankara on Tuesday, asking permission to see his client for what would be only the second time since Ocalan was captured Feb 15.

Jaffna unstable following control by army from LTTE rebels

JAFFNA, Mar 10: Finding a husband is almost as difficult in the city of Jaffna as finding a job. After years of warfare, both are in short supply, reports AP.

In the three years since the military wrested control of this wholly Tamil city from the Tamil rebels who controlled it, the government says it is gradually restoring normal life.

But Jaffna is still plagued by the side effects of war: divided families, high prices, sudden bursts of violence and assassination, and the unsettled feeling of being constantly watched and under guard.

Some 1,000 checkpoints have been erected across this town of half a million residents, manned by some of the 45,000 troops stationed in the Jaffna Peninsula. Nine of every 10 soldiers are Sinhalese, the ethnic group that dominates Sri Lanka. Few soldiers speak the

Tamil language, although the number is growing.

Tamil militants have been fighting for an independent homeland since 1983, claiming the Sinhalese majority has historically discriminated against them.

More than 57,000 people have been killed in the civil war. Suspected Tamil snipers shot and killed an army captain and two soldiers Wednesday near the northern town of Vavuniya, military officials said on condition of anonymity.

And in the capital, Colombo, three bombs exploded late Tuesday, killing one person and injuring 12 others, police said. They blamed Tamil rebels for the attack, the first in the capital that resulted in a fatality in more than a year.

Jaffna, a port city ruled by the Dutch, Portuguese and

British in turn, is the cultural centre of the Tamil people who occupy northern Sri Lanka and southern India. Most of its graceful colonial buildings, its elegant Christian churches and Hindu temples have been destroyed or scarred in the last 16 years.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE, who ruled Jaffna unchallenged for five years, still command respect and loyalty among some people. But Jaffna citizens acknowledge life has improved, though at a painfully slow pace, since the Tigers were expelled in December 1995.

"Business is much better after the military takeover," said T. Thillainathan, owner of the Munneswaram Hotel in the heart of the city. "Now we can get supplies easily, although prices are higher than those of (the

capital) Colombo."

When the Tigers ran Jaffna, shortages were common and business was dead, largely because the government choked off supplies through an army and naval blockade. "Only LTTE run shops functioned profitably," Thillainathan said.

Today, unemployment is still high. "We cannot find jobs because there are no industrial or economic activities," said Sathkunanathan Arulini, 19, who recently finished her studies and is job hunting. "All men, and some women too, are in agriculture, the only employment available in the peninsula."

Tamil women face another problem: competition for the few unmarried men in the area. "There are very few eligible bachelors now because many youths have fled."



New Miss Israel Rana Raslan (L), 21, from Haifa, the first Arab-Israeli woman to be elected as the beauty queen of Israel, poses with her predecessor and current Miss World Linor Abergil (R), in Tel Aviv Tuesday after being crowned.

— AFP photo

Off the Record

UN dog earns more than undersecretary-general!

UNITED NATIONS: How much is that doggie in the window? At the United Nations, he costs 150,000 dollars a year, reports AP.

And the United Nations said Tuesday he's worth every penny.

Costa Rica complained to the UN budget committee Monday that the world body was spending too much money on a high-security dog when it was so short of cash.

But Assistant Secretary-General Toshiyuki Niwa defended Jerry, the bomb-sniffing security pooch.

The costly canine is an effective security measure in light of the number of suspicious packages and letter bomb threats the United Nations receives, he told the UN budget committee.

Could be, but at the rate of 60 dollars an hour, 10 hours a day, 252 days a year, Jerry and his handler Tom were earning more than a UN undersecretary-general takes home in a year — about 140,000 dollars.

"It's a pretty high-ranking dog," one diplomat said of the black Labrador retriever.

Previously, the New York City Police and the US military supplied bomb-sniffing dogs only for the annual General Assembly debate, when heads of state from around the world gather for a few weeks of speechmaking.

The UN inspector-general recommended last year that the United Nations hire a full-time security dog after the twin US embassy bombings in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

The secret of youthful looks
LONDON: Couples who have sex at least three times a week look more than 10 years younger than the average adult, who has sex twice a week, the daily Telegraph reported yesterday, says AP.

Citing a 10-year academic study of 3,500 people aged 18 to 102 in Britain, Europe and the United States by the Royal Edinburgh Hospital in Scotland, the paper said 25 per cent of looks came from genetics and 75 per cent from behaviour.

Sexual activity was the most important factor after physical and mental exercise, the Telegraph said.

"Pleasure derived from sex is a crucial factor in preserving youth," consultant neuro-psychologist David Weeks told the paper.

"It makes us happy and produces chemicals telling us so. I would say that famous people with youthful good looks, such as Goldie Hawn, Helen Mirren and Joan Collins, all enjoy very active and healthy sex lives."

Weeks cautioned however that promiscuous sex did not have the same benefits.

"The quality of the relationship was an important factor in staying youthful."

The study also apparently found that younger looking people were more altruistic, confident and better educated.