

NATO gets 3 new members

INDEPENDENCE, Missouri, Mar 12: Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic are completing their improbable transformation from communist dictatorships tied to the Soviet Union to full-fledged democratic members of the US-led NATO alliance, reports AP.

The accession of the former Warsaw Pact members into NATO was taking place at a ceremony Friday at the Harry S. Truman Library in this mid-western US town. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was founded during the Truman presidency nearly 50 years ago on April 4, 1949, to counter the communist threat.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was presiding at the ceremony, joined by the foreign minister of the three countries. The festivities carried special significance for Albright, who was born in Czechoslovakia and fled the country twice as a child, first to escape the Nazis and later the communists.

PRISTINA, Yugoslavia, Mar 12: Fighting has spread to other parts of Kosovo, further dimming prospects for a settlement when peace talks resume Monday in France, reports AP.

Both Yugoslav forces and ethnic Albanian rebels suffered casualties Thursday in the north of the Serbian province. Fighting also erupted in the southeast for the first time in months.

International mediation efforts to end the year-old war continued with talks by Russia's foreign minister and top Yugoslav officials, including a meeting set for Friday with President Slobodan Milosevic.

But a US-backed peace plan was stalled, with the Kosovo Liberation Army still balking at signing and Milosevic, backed by Moscow, refusing a major point in the peace plan insisted by world powers that 28,000 NATO troops police an agreement in Kosovo.

Over 2000 killed in Serbia, 300,000 driven from homes so far

Fighting spreads to other parts of Kosovo

"It has to be perfectly clear that a political solution must be found first," Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said in Belgrade, where he met Thursday with Yugoslav counterpart Zivadin Jovanovic.

Once a political settlement is achieved, we can talk about its implementation with participation of international factors," he said. "Russia is ready to contribute, to the extent to which Belgrade agrees" — a signal the Kremlin would not force its ally to accept foreign troops on its territory.

More than 2,000 people have been killed in the war in the southern province of Serbia, the main republic in Yugoslavia, and more than 300,000 have been driven from their homes.

Those numbers have since increased, with both sides provoking each other and jostling for position.

Kosovo Albanian rebel lead-

ers who joined in a pledge to sign the peace plan, which calls for autonomy for the Albanian-majority province, remain reluctant to do so because of the requirement that the KLA, which is fighting for independence, disarm.

Two negotiators, Veton Surroi and Bujar Bukoshi, blamed the head of their delegation on Thursday for the failure to sign the peace plan.

"His behaviour is irresponsible," said Surroi, referring to Hashim Thaci, who has spoken positively of the agreement but apparently withheld final support. "By signing it, we would allow the attention to be shifted to Milosevic."

NATO has threatened airstrikes against Yugoslav and Serb targets if Albanians sign the peace deal and Milosevic does not. But many have questioned Western nations' will to use military force against the

Serbs.

The US House of Representatives voted late Thursday in favour of a non-binding resolution supporting the Clinton administration's use of US troops, if necessary, as part of a NATO peacekeeping operation.

In Kosovo, Yugoslav troops pounded ethnic Albanian rebel positions near Kosovo's second-largest city, Prizren, Thursday sending hundreds of ethnic Albanians fleeing the buildup of firepower.

US House supports sending troops

AFP adds from Washington: The US House of Representatives late Thursday defeated a non-binding Republican initiative opposing sending US troops to Kosovo as part of a possible NATO peacekeeping force.

The 237-178 vote came as the House debated a resolution authorising President Bill Clinton

to lend US soldiers to such a force if separatist Kosovar Albanians and Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic reach a deal.

The defeated proposal was an amendment to that resolution by Republican representative Tillie Fowler.

Republicans pressed ahead with the debate on sending US forces to Kosovo over objections from the Clinton administration, which said the discussion would send the wrong signal to the warring parties.

Should a peace agreement be reached, Washington has said it wants to send some 4,000 US troops to take part in a 30,000-strong NATO peacekeeping force in the province, where the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) has been fighting for independence.

Meanwhile, another AFP report from Belgrade says, Russian Foreign Minister Igor

Ivanov said late Thursday that negotiations on the future of Kosovo must end in a political agreement.

Speaking as he arrived for talks with Yugoslav officials Ivanov said, "The negotiations must result in the signature of a political document providing for broad autonomy for Kosovo, while respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Yugoslavia."

Ivanov speaking after talks with his Yugoslav counterpart Zivadin Jovanovic, is to meet today with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic who has flatly rejected NATO troops in Kosovo to implement any accord.

Negotiations resume in Paris Monday between the two sides in Kosovo, a province of Serbia, the main component of federal Yugoslavia, which is mainly populated by ethnic Albanians seeking independence from Belgrade.

China to assist Sierra Leone govt to fight rebels

FREETOWN, Mar 12: China has agreed to give military assistance to President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah's government in Sierra Leone to help it fight against a rebel insurgency, state radio announced here, reports AFP.

The Beijing "government will not only support Sierra Leone militarily but will also assist all countries which have troops in Sierra Leone," China's Ambassador Wu Yun said, according to the radio, after talks with Kabbah on Thursday.

The radio report gave no details of when or in what form the military aid would be provided.

Nigerian soldiers make up the bulk of the West African ECOMOG military intervention force, which is fighting rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Ghana, Mali and Guinea are among other countries which have deployed contingents in the war ravaged nation.

Raja also said that China, which currently holds the rotating presidency of the UN Security Council, pledged to "use the opportunity to lobby support for Sierra Leone from a wider international community."

Mahathir won't be called as witness in Anwar's trial

KUALA LUMPUR, Mar 12: Lawyers for ousted Malaysian Minister Anwar Ibrahim told court today they would not call Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad as a witness, reports Reuter.

Lead counsel Raja Aziz said at Anwar's corruption trial that they had also decided against calling two ministers and a former police chief as defence witnesses.

Raja Aziz said he would not ask Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin, Domestic Trade Minister Megat Yunus Mefti Ayob and former Inspector-General of Police Abdul Rahim Noor to testify.

Raja Aziz told the court Mahathir declined to be interviewed by the defence team unless he knew in advance the questions they wanted to ask and the topics on which evidence was to be adduced.

Khatami rebukes European nations for supporting Salman Rushdie

TEHRAN, Mar 12: Iranian President Mohammad Khatami broke from his pro-western message in Italy to deliver a stinging rebuke to European nations which have supported author Salman Rushdie, reports AFP.

Khatami criticised European nations for backing "a person who has desecrated the feelings of more than one billion Muslims" around the world, the official news agency IRNA reported.

Muslim countries and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference have "condemned" the death sentence against Rushdie, ordered in 1979 by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, he said.

The late Imam Khomeini issued the verdict as a great religious leader of Muslims. Khatami said on Wednesday, but added that Iran had previously said it will not actively seek to see the sentence imposed.

The world had reached a stage of "dialogue amongst civilisations and cultures," he said.

Khomeini issued a religious decree or *fatwa* calling for the death of the Indian-born British writer for alleged blasphemy in his satiric novel "The Satanic Verses."

Rushdie was in the Italian city of Turin to receive an honorary doctorate on Wednesday as Khatami was making a high profile visit to Italy, in a trip marked by the Iranian leader's repeated calls for improved ties between Europe and the Islamic republic.

UK postpones Al Fayed's citizenship decision

LONDON, Mar 12: Britain announced Thursday that a decision on granting citizenship to Egyptian business tycoon Mohamed Al Fayed had been postponed, but that the application of his younger brother had been approved, reports AP.

The Home Office said it was seeking further information before ruling on Al Fayed's application, but did not elaborate.

Al Fayed's quest for British citizenship, which already has been denied him once, has become a sore point in his relations with the government.

It was especially a source of anger in the months following the death of his son, Dodi Fayed, in a 1997 car crash with princess Diana, when he felt he was treated insensitively.

But on Thursday, the owner of Harrods department store and the Paris Ritz Hotel said through his spokesman that he was pleased about Al Fayed's success and was confident he, too, eventually would gain citizenship.

In 1990, a report by the government Department of Trade and Industry on the Fayed brothers takeover of Harrods was highly critical, accusing them of lying and cheating. The brothers denied the findings and said the report was unfair.

But the Home Office said Thursday that Home Secretary Jack Straw had decided not to be influenced by the DTI report, which Fayed spokesman Laurie Mayer called the most significant part of the announcement.

Act as a public guide, Indian PM urges media

NEW DELHI, Mar 12: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee called on the media today to act as a public guide through the "chaos" of the modern information era, reports AFP.

Addressing a conference to mark the 50th anniversary of the national news agency, the Press Trust of India, Vajpayee said the new millennium would usher in a period when knowledge and information are thrown at the public as never before.

"This is where public broadcasters must step in to offer the necessary national and social orientation," Vajpayee said at the conference, which was attended by representatives from the global media.

"They should seek to bring order to the information chaos,"

Warning against the blind

pursuit of profit, Vajpayee said the media had the task of building community spirit to allow people to participate in the process of political, economic and social change.

There laudable objectives cannot be achieved if maximisation of commercial gain becomes the main motive," he said.

The Press Trust of India (PTI) began operations on February 1, 1949, shortly after the country became independent. The agency with a staff of more than 1,600 people including 400 journalists, is a cooperative owned by Indian newspapers.

The agency had its origins in the Associated Press of India, which was set up in 1910 during the era of British colonialism.

PTI serves 450 newspapers in India, as well as scores overseas.

UN report says Taliban's treatment of women tantamount to apartheid

GENEVA, Mar 12: The ruling Taliban in Afghanistan have set up an apartheid system of intolerance and discrimination with regard to women, a United Nations report said today, reports AP.

"It is tantamount to veritable apartheid against women, as women, and on the basis of specious interpretations of Islam," the UN special rapporteur on religious intolerance, Abdelfattah Amor, said.

The comparison between Taliban rule and the former South African system of racial segregation was included in a report for the UN Human Rights Commission which begins meeting in Geneva on March 22.

Amor referred to rules banning women from most work and education or travelling

with a man from outside the immediate family, as well as obliging them to wear all-concealing garments in public.

He accused the Taliban of obscurantism, the product of religious extremism combining religion and politics in the interests of power.

This "excludes women from society and consigns them to a grey area where they enjoy neither citizenship nor rights and where their submission to the all-powerful man in the name of Allah is the order of the day," he said.

"The special rapporteur believes that the maintenance, openly and publicly, of an apartheid policy of this nature is abnormal, from the standpoint of human rights," Amor said.

BRIEFLY

12 hurt as stand falls near Taj Mahal:

A wooden stand crammed with spectators during the open air filming of a hugely popular Indian television show collapsed near the historic Taj Mahal injuring 12 people, police said Friday, AP reports from New Delhi.

"The wooden stands built for viewers just sunk in," senior superintendent of police Suresh Kumar Singh said by telephone from Agra, where the medieval Mogul dynasty monument is located. Singh said 12 people were admitted to a local hospital with fractures in their legs after the accident late Thursday. Thousands had assembled to watch the late night filming of "Sa Re Ga Ma," an amateur singing contest.

1000 Tibetan women held:

About 1,000 Tibetan women exiled in India marched and shouted anti-China slogans Friday to mark the 40th anniversary of a failed uprising against Communist rule in their homeland, AP reports from Dharmasala.

Friday's 10-km march in Dharmasala, the northern Indian city where the Tibetan leader the Dalai Lama lives, was part of a series of commemorations of the uprising. "We are protesting for the women of Tibet," said Jampal Choeden of the Tibetan Women's Association, one of the march organisers.

Chinese cargo ship sinks killing 5:

Five crew were killed when a Chinese cargo vessel sank off Hong Kong yesterday, the government said, Reuters reports from Hong Kong.

Two were missing and another was rescued but remains unconscious. The Tin Shing reported flooding near the Ninipen group island, off Sai Kung. No further details were available.

3 die in Russian Navy ship fire:

A fire broke out aboard a Russian Navy ship in the Arctic port of Murmansk and killed three people, officials said Friday, AP reports from Moscow.

Faulty electrical wiring caused the late-night fire on the vessel, a hospital ship in the Navy's Northern Fleet. Three people died of carbon monoxide poisoning during the blaze, which took more than six hours to extinguish.

Strong quake rocks China:

A strong earthquake toppled houses but caused no deaths in a quake-prone county, north of the Great Wall, a Chinese government seismologist reported Friday, AP reports from Beijing.

The 5.6-preliminary magnitude quake hit farmland and villages in Zhangbei county around 9:15 pm (1315 GMT) Thursday and could be felt 200-km to the south in Beijing. Three people were injured, and six houses collapsed, said Li He, director of the seismology bureau in Zhangjiakou.

Giant panda rescued from tree:

One of China's rare giant pandas was rescued after spending the night up a pine tree and is now in critical condition in a treatment centre, reports said yesterday, AFP says from Beijing.

A highly "distressed" Liu Liu was discovered last Sunday by a farmer in the rural northern province of Shaanxi after being chased up a five-metre tall tree by three dogs. A team of veterinary surgeons said Liu Liu was in "a very poor state" after the ordeal.

Severe drought hits Texas:

Texas Governor George W Bush declared a state of emergency in two thirds of the state's counties Thursday due to the threat of wildfires caused by a severe drought, AFP reports from Austin.

Warning that Texas could face an even worse drought than last year, Bush asked the White House for financial aid to help the state prepare for potential fires.



US President Bill Clinton (L) shakes hands with Honduran President Carlos Flores (R) on Tuesday in Antigua, Guatemala, after a summit with Central American and Caribbean leaders. At centre is Nicaraguan President Arnoldo Aleman. — AFP photo

US asks Israel to fully implement Wye accord

TEL AVIV, Mar 12: US Defence Secretary William Cohen told Israeli leaders today to quickly and fully implement the stalled Wye river peace accord with the Palestinians or face a hold-up in 1.2 billion dollars in US aid linked to the land-for-security deal, reports AFP.

After talks today with Defence Minister Moshe Arens, Cohen also avoided giving any firm commitment that Washington would come up with additional funding for a new anti-missile defence system requested by Israel.

"We believe there must be full implementation of Wye and that must take place soon," Cohen said in a thinly veiled criticism of Israel's decision to suspend further West Bank withdrawals required by the October agreement.

Cohen went on to make clear that 1.2 billion dollars in additional US aid that Israel requested to meet what is says are security costs linked to the West Bank withdrawals would be forthcoming only once all the pullouts have been carried out.

"We aren't exploring any way to alter the time frame at which that money will be available," he said.

Under the US-brokered agreement, Israel promised to withdraw in three phases over 90 days from an additional 13 per cent of the West Bank and take other steps to expand Palestinian autonomy.

In exchange the Palestinians agreed to measures designed to halt anti-Israeli violence by Islamic and other militants.

The right-wing government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu carried out a first

pullout in November but then froze the process the following month, citing alleged Palestinian violation of the accord.

Seven candidates for Algerian presidency

ALGIERS, Mar 12: Seven candidates are set to run in Algeria's presidential elections, which appear certain to give the country its first civilian leader since 1965, reports AP.

Forty-eight people initially applied to run in the April 15 ballot, but only 11 gathered the necessary signatures and political backing to participate. Algeria's Constitutional Council on Thursday trimmed the list further by barring four out of those 11 candidates.



South African President Nelson Mandela and Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands smile, as they chat during a state banquet at the Royal Palace in Amsterdam on Thursday. Mandela is on a two-day official visit to the Netherlands. — AFP photo

E Timor to decide on autonomy through UN-sponsored ballot

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 12: The people of East Timor will decide in a UN-sponsored ballot whether they want wide-ranging autonomy within Indonesia, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced Thursday, reports AP.

The issue of how the 800,000 Timorese would give their opinion on an autonomy package being worked out in UN-sponsored talks has been a key sticking point in efforts to resolve the future status of the former Portuguese colony.

Annan made the announcement at the end of two days of UN-sponsored talks between the foreign ministers of Portugal and Indonesia.

Portuguese Foreign Minister Jaime Gama called the agreement "a turning point" that will offer the Timorese the equivalent of "free and fair elections in democratic countries."

"I have no doubt that a lot of

difficulties remain," said Annan's envoy Jansheed Marker, who has been trying to break the deadlock on East Timor for nearly two years. "But I believe that we've taken a very, very large step forward and one can really look with confidence toward a solution."

Indonesia favours autonomy for East Timor which it invaded in 1975 and annexed a year later as its 27th province. In a surprise announcement in January, Indonesia offered the Timorese independence if they reject autonomy — but it ruled out a referendum.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas on Thursday reiterated Indonesia's opposition to a "full-fledged referendum." He said it is fraught with the risk of violence, and so cumbersome that it would take weeks or months to organise and require UN peacekeeping troops and all voters to be in East Timor.

The agreement announced Thursday would be a direct vote organised and conducted under UN auspices, but not with all the official requirements of a referendum.

"What we have sought to do is to select the most democratic and direct means possible to consult the East Timorese," Annan said.

"Obviously there are logistical considerations to factor into any decision that we take, given the fact that the polls will not be held only in the territory of East Timor but in the diaspora where East Timorese live in large numbers — from Portugal to Australia to the United States and other parts of the world where there are large numbers of East Timorese," he said.

Alatas said a direct ballot was "just as democratic" as a referendum.

Washington Times reports Pakistan helping DPRK's N-weapons programme

WASHINGTON, Mar 12: Pakistan, alleged to have purchased

missiles and know-how for the Ghauri missile from North Korea, is actively helping Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme, Washington Times reported yesterday citing US intelligence reports, reports PTI.

The secret intelligence assessment sent recently to senior officials throughout the US government said North Korea's plan to set up a uranium enrichment capability for nuclear weapons is being helped by Pakistan, which has close ties to North Korea's missile programme," the paper said.

Stating that Islamabad "purchased uranium enrichment technology from China in 1996 when it bought 5,000 special ring magnets used as bearings

in gas centrifuges," the paper said, the sale violated China's international commitment not to sell weapons technology to non-nuclear weapons states.

According to intelligence reports, "the close ties between Pakistan and North Korea on missile development made it likely Pakistan is assisting the North Korean uranium enrichment programme," Washington Times said.

Pakistan believed to have purchased both missiles and missile know-how for the Ghauri missile, described as closely resembling the North Korean Nodong missile, from North Korea.

Citing intelligence reports, the paper said North Korea would get enough enriched uranium for a bomb in six years if it has a viable centrifuge.

Iraq hit no US, British warplane: Pentagon

WASHINGTON, Mar 12: The Pentagon denied Iraqi reports Thursday that a US or British warplane may have been hit in engagements over Iraq, reports AFP.

An Iraqi military spokesman quoted by the official Iraqi news agency said coalition warplanes were beaten back by Iraqi artillery and missile fire and one of the "enemy" aircraft could have been hit.

Pentagon spokesman Michael Doubleday said allied air patrols over Iraq skies had proceeded without incident Thursday and another spokesman, Bryan Salas, said he had no knowledge of clashes.

Major Joe Lamacara, a spokesman for the US central command in Florida that controls operations over Iraq's southern "no-fly" zone, said there was "no basis" for the Iraqi report.

US and British planes have waged almost daily air strikes over the "no-fly" zones they patrol in southern and northern Iraq.

Baghdad has never recognised the exclusion zones which were imposed after the 1912 Gulf War to protect Iraq's Kurdish and Shiite Muslim minorities.

Reuters adds: Lawmakers from oil-producing US States urged President Bill Clinton Thursday to suspend or reduce the amount of oil that Iraq is allowed to export under a special humanitarian deal with the United Nations.

"We acknowledge the good intentions of the programme, but growing evidence indicates that it is not serving its intended purpose and may actually be undermining US policy toward Iraq," the 40 members of the US House of Representatives said in a letter to the president.

Ranariddh seeks int'l help to try Ta Mok at home

PHNOM PENH, Mar 12: Cambodia's Prince Norodom Ranariddh on Friday supported trying captured Khmer Rouge army chief Ta Mok at home rather than abroad, but he called for international help, reports AP.

The prince, president of the National Assembly, acknowledged the shortcomings of Cambodia's court system, saying he hoped the international community would assist with the trial of the one-legged guerrilla commander.

"If the government wants a trial inside the country, I would not mind, but I would like to have cooperation" from the United Nations, for example in sending a judge from outside the country," he said.

Ta Mok, captured last Saturday by the Cambodian army, faces 20 years to life in prison if convicted under 1994 legislation that outlawed the Khmer Rouge. He is called "The Butcher" for his alleged brutality.

Legal experts from the

United Nations have recommended an international court handle the trials of senior Khmer Rouge guerrillas blamed for the deaths of as many as 2 million people during the group's 1975-79 regime.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has already publicly ruled out an international tribunal, saying that the option was doomed from the start because the UN Security Council is divided on the issue.

If he is tried inside Cambodia, Ta Mok will face the same military court that sentenced Ranariddh last year in absentia to 30 years in prison following his ouster from power by his co-prime minister Hun Sen in a 1997 coup.

Prosecutors argued that Ranariddh had entered illegal negotiations with the guerrilla group in an attempt to overthrow the government — the same reasoning Hun Sen used to justify his violent power grab.

The prince maintained he was merely attempting to negotiate rebel defections.

NASA spacecraft takes 'smiling' picture of Mars

PASADENA, California, Mar 12: Mars seemed to be smiling for the camera when a NASA spacecraft began mapping the Red Planet this week, reports AP.

The "Happy Face Crater" was captured in a wide-angle image recorded Monday by the camera on the US space agency's Mars Global Surveyor.

The feature, which has a much more mirthful appearance than the better known but decidedly grim "Face on Mars," is really the 216-kilometer-wide Gale Crater on the eastern side of a basin called Argyre Planitia.

Features within the circular crater form the eyes and smiling mouth.

In colour, the picture has a bluish-white tone caused by wintertime frost, according to Malin Space Science Systems Inc, which operates Surveyor's camera from San Diego and re-

leased the images Thursday. The "Happy Face" was first noticed in images sent back to Earth during the Viking 1 mission to Mars in 1976.

NASA's Viking missions also returned images of the not-so-happy "Mars Face," a feature that looked like a skull with empty eye sockets. That spawned theories that the mile-long feature was the creation of some intelligence.

But when Mars Global Surveyor's modern camera took a look at the same area a year ago, the gape-mouth visage vanished as sharp detail revealed a natural feature, perhaps a butte or mesa.

Mars Global Surveyor, managed by NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, was launched in 1996 and reached the planet in September 1997. It finally began its main science mission this week after a long delay in achieving the proper orbit for mapping.