

Provincial poll victory proves Mahathir's firm grip on power.

KUALA LUMPUR Mar 14: Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's triumph in a crucial provincial election suggests that the man who has run Malaysia for 18 years still has a firm grip on power, reports AP.

The victory in the eastern state of Sabah, six months after the sacking and arrest of his popular deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, also was a blow to opposition hopes of challenging Mahathir in the next general election.

"I'm ecstatic, we had a clear victory," Mahathir said after two days of voting ended Saturday. When reporters asked the beaming prime minister if the victory showed he was still popular, he said: "To a certain extent, yes."

The opposition was stunned when the Barisan Nasional, or National Front, a coalition led by Mahathir's United Malays National Party swept 31 of the 48 legislative seats in the north Borneo region — its most impressive electoral showing ever in 17 years, according to official results announced early Sunday.

political commentator and university professor. Mahathir's image has suffered since he sacked Anwar, who then went on a campaign for the premier's ouster. Anwar's subsequent arrest sparked widespread protests and calls for Mahathir to step down.

Anwar, 51, is in jail while his trial on four charges of abuse of power moves along slowly. Another six charges, including sodomy, are pending against him. He denies all the charges.

While Mahathir emphasised the victory measured his popularity, analysts said the Sabah results were guided primarily by local land by a 1,000-kilometre stretch of sea.

Mahathir, 73, gave people in Sabah — where many still live in bamboo huts and grow their own rice on hillsides — little choice. They were told that a vote against him could deny the state much-needed federal funds for schools, hospitals and roads.

Whatever the reasons for the outcome, opposition leaders in Kuala Lumpur agree that Sabah has struck a blow to their campaign against Mahathir.

Death toll in violence now 14 Military enforces security crackdown on Ambon

AMBON, Indonesia, Mar 14: Indonesia's military enforced a security crackdown on the riot-torn island of Ambon on Sunday to quell fighting among Christians and Muslims that has killed more than 200 people in less than two months, reports AP.

Military authorities also filed charges against a security officer accused of fomenting sectarian rioting in recent weeks.

Ambon's military police chief, Maj Djuhendi, said Sunday the unidentified officer would face trial this week.

More than a dozen other members of the security forces have also been questioned since Muslim leaders accused some of siding with Christians during the violence, which has continued since January.

Meanwhile, squads of soldiers with automatic rifles conducted body and luggage searches on passengers coming and going on inter-island ferries and ships at Ambon's main port. Thousands of people have already sailed away from Ambon fearing more bloodshed.

About one dozen men were arrested in one search exercise on Sunday morning when they

were found carrying knives and other weapons.

Soldiers also raided houses in the eastern end of the island's capital, also known as Ambon.

On Saturday, police arrested 37 Muslim men accused of planning a new wave of attacks against Christians. Four homemade bombs and other weapons such as spears, arrows and swords were confiscated.

Earlier, Christians burned two houses belonging to Muslims.

Also on Saturday, the mutilated body of a Christian man was found dumped across the street from the office of a Muslim opposition party in Ambon town.

His neck and back had been badly slashed. He was the 14th person to die since fighting flared again last Wednesday, when troops opened fire on rival mobs who battled each other with gasoline bombs and spears.

Christians prayed Sunday, their day of worship, some in the burned out wrecks of village churches that had been set on fire during the religious clashes. Many mosques were also burned along with thousands of homes, stores and

other buildings.

"Let's pray that this violence is over and that Christians and Muslims can live in peace again," said Father John Ruhlessin, an Ambonese Roman Catholic priest.

Military officials said government offices and schools would open Monday as usual. Thousands of state employees and school students have been staying at home because of last week's violence.

Fierce fighting first erupted on Ambon on Jan 19, and spread to five other islands in Maluku Province, which were known as the Spice Islands in Dutch colonial times.

About 90 per cent of Indonesia's 210 million people are Muslim, making it the world's most populous Islamic nation. However, just over half over Ambon's 311,000 people are Christian.

There are fears that sectarian violence could spread across the country ahead of a June 7 parliamentary election. The ballot, the first held since authoritarian President Suharto quit last May, is expected to be the most democratic poll conducted since 1955.

'Settlement of Kashmir issue only path to peace in S Asia'

ISLAMABAD, Mar 14: Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday said lasting peace in South Asia cannot be established without the solution of the Kashmir issue, reports PTI.

Sharif, during a meeting with a group of leaders from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), claimed that the Kashmir issue has once again captured the imagination of the world due to nuclearisation of South Asia and stressed that without the solution of this problem lasting peace in the region cannot be established, an official release said.

The Pakistani premier, who was holding his first meeting with POK leaders since meeting his Indian counterpart Atal Bihari Vajpayee at Lahore last month, underscored the recommitment of his government to the cause of the Kashmiris and affirmed that Kashmir always remained central to Pakistan's foreign policy, the statement said.

Sharif claimed that the Lahore Declaration had been widely appreciated by the world leaders, who have called for concrete progress on the commitments made by India in the declaration.

Sovereignty of Jerusalem Israel to launch campaign explaining its stance

JERUSALEM, Mar 14: Israel said on Saturday it was launching an international campaign to explain its stance on Jerusalem after the European Union rejected Israeli sovereignty over the city it calls its capital, reports Reuters.

Israeli missions in Europe and in the world will launch an information campaign on the subject of Israel's sovereignty in the united Jerusalem, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said.

It said the international campaign was essential in light of the emerging struggle over Jerusalem in the deliberations on the permanent status in the years to come.

Under the Oslo peace accord signed by Israel and the PLO in 1993, the thorny issue of Jerusalem will be resolved during talks on a final peace deal.

The United States has said it will try to set a time limit for the conclusion of the final status negotiations after Israel's May 17 general election.

Israel captured the eastern half of Jerusalem, a city holy to Christians, Jews and Muslims, in the 1967 Middle East war. Palestinians want East Jerusalem as capital of a future state.

Netanyahu's office said his cabinet would reaffirm its weekly meeting on Sunday the traditional Israeli position that Israel will not agree under any circumstances to the division or internationalisation of any part of Jerusalem.

Israel received a diplomatic slap in the face this month when the EU rejected an Israeli request to halt meetings in Arab East Jerusalem stating that Jerusalem is a "corpus separatum" (separate entity) from Israel.

The EU position was precipitated by a communication Israel's Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon issued last month to foreign diplomats urging them to refrain from meeting Palestinians at the Orot House, the PLO's Jerusalem Headquarters.

Israel refers to both East and West Jerusalem as its undivided capital. Most countries reject Israel's sovereignty over Jerusalem saying the city's status is unresolved.

Germany's Ambassador Theodor Wallau rejected Sharon's request in a letter he sent to the foreign minister this month saying "the European Union does not intend to change its existing practices over meetings in Jerusalem."

BRIFELY

9 shot dead in Colombia: Nine people were killed and an unknown number injured Saturday by a group of heavily armed men in a village in central Colombia, residents of the area said, AFP says from Bogota.

The gunmen arrived at Mata de Platano with a list of names and started shooting, a local resident told radio news. Government officials told the station the army and police units had been sent to the area. It was not immediately known whether the attack was the work of rightist paramilitaries, leftist rebels or criminals.

Abducted Lankan reporter found: A Sri Lankan journalist who usually writes about corruption in the country's armed forces, was abducted from his home Sunday and was found semiconscious and bleeding after several hours, his editor said, AP reports from Colombo.

Three men broke into the room of Sirilal Priyathna, 26, at a boarding house in the Mirihana district of Colombo before dawn Sunday and took him away, said Bandula Padmakumara, editor-in-chief of the Sinhala language "Lakbima" weekly newspaper. Sirilal was found bleeding and in a semiconscious stage five hours after his abduction in a small lane, about a km away from his home.

Tremors jolt Japanese Islands: A strong earthquake measuring 4.7 on the Richter Scale struck the outlying Japanese islands of Niijima and Kozushima yesterday morning causing minor structural damage, the meteorological agency said, Reuters says from Tokyo.

There were no immediate reports of injuries due to the quake, which struck the sparsely populated islands about 160 km south-west of Tokyo at 9:04 am (0004 GMT), the agency said.

Estrada leaves for US: President Joseph Estrada has left for New York to attend the funeral of his oldest brother, Emilio Ejercito, who died last week of leukaemia at age 70, officials said yesterday, AP reports from Manila.

Estrada left Saturday night aboard a commercial Philippine Airlines flight with a small entourage for New York, where he intends to stay for about five days, said presidential spokesman Jerry Barcan. Estrada's tentative itinerary did not include official meetings with US officials, Barcan said.



Reproduction of a painting by Picasso, a portrait of Dora Maar, value estimated at 42 million francs (8m US dollars) which was stolen recently from a Saudi yacht, the "Coral Island", in the port of Antibes, France, it was reported Saturday. — AFP photo

Myanmar junta will not hold on to power for long

YANGON, Mar 14: The Myanmar military government has no intention to hold on to power for a long time, said Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt, one of Myanmar's top leaders, reports Xinhua.

Khin Nyunt, first secretary of the Myanmar State Peace and Development Council, made the remarks here Saturday when meeting with a visiting delegation of the US-based young President's Organisation.

The Myanmar military government took over the power of state in September 1988. "We are in the process of drafting a new constitution. The National Convention to draft the guidelines for the constitution has completed more than 50 per cent of its work and once the constitution is promulgated, the armed forces will definitely transfer power to the constitutional government that will lead the country in the future," he said.

The Myanmar military government sponsored a multi-party democracy general election in May 1990, in which the National League for Democracy won a landslide victory with 396 parliamentary seats out of 485.

Later in January 1993, the military government started holding a national convention, aimed at drawing up a new state constitution. The NLD walked out of the convention in November 1995.

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7 killed in Kosovo bomb blasts Peace talks resume in Paris today

PARIS, Mar 14: Kosovo's ethnic Albanian delegation prepared for do-or-die peace talks opening in Paris tomorrow after flying out of a south Serbian province shaken by violence, reports Reuters.

European Union foreign ministers at a weekend meeting in the German Rhineland warned the contending sides in Kosovo to reach an accord to end the year-long violence or risk all-out war.

British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, who will reopen the Paris talks tomorrow with his French counterpart Hubert Vedrine, said no deadline had been set — "The trouble with deadlines is that nothing happens until the deadline."

The 19-member ethnic Albanian team flew to Paris aboard a French military aircraft, while their Serb foes were due in the French capital today.

Further violence on Saturday hit Kosovo, reeling from a year-long conflict in which an estimated 2,000 people have died.

Tens of thousands more have been driven from their homes by the fighting between Serb security forces and Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) separatists in the 90 per cent ethnic Albanian province.

NATO has threatened to bomb Yugoslav military sites unless Belgrade agrees to a 28,000-strong NATO peace implementing force to oversee an

autonomy package for Kosovo. But the KLA has also still to make clear whether it accepts autonomy within Yugoslavia in place of the independence it wants.

"The definitive answer will be given in Paris," said Hashim Thaqi, the unofficial head of the ethnic Albanian delegation.

An Italian diplomatic source in Rome has said the six-nation contact group on former Yugoslavia — comprising Italy, Russia, the United States, France, Britain and Germany —

Afghan warring factions meet in Turkmenistan

ASHGABAT, Mar 14: Afghanistan's warring parties agreed today at a shared government talks in the Turkmenistan capital to form a shared government, exchange prisoners and continue efforts to end years of bloody conflict, reports Reuters.

"Both sides agreed to release 20 prisoners each as soon as possible through the ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross," they said in a joint statement issued after four days of talks.

"Both sides agreed to form a shared executive, a shared legislature and a shared judiciary," added the statement.

were due to meet in Paris today ahead of tomorrow's peace talks.

At least seven people died and 58 were wounded as three bombs exploded in two towns on Saturday.

Four died in the crowded market at Mitrovica, 30 km northwest of the provincial capital of Pristina. Reporters saw the bodies of two women and a young girl carried away from amidst the palped wreckage of vegetable stalls.

Artillery fire thudded into the night north of Pristina in what appeared to be a Serb assault on KLA positions. Tracer up from burning ethnic Albanian villages.

Meanwhile, Albania refused on Saturday to participate in a proposed Balkan meeting over Kosovo because its leaders would not sit at the same table as Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

Albanian Foreign Minister Paskal Milo also said the meeting, expected to take place tomorrow in Romania prior to the resumption of peace talks in France, would rival the international negotiations on the troubled Serbian province.

"We cannot sit at the same table with Milosevic and the Yugoslav foreign minister who have not accepted (the Ramboulet accord) and who remain intransigent and do not show any sign of compromise," Milo told reporters.

UN official in Kabul to discuss security for returning staff

KABUL, Mar 14: A senior United Nations official arrived in the Afghan capital today to discuss security arrangements for the return of international staff to the war-torn nation, reports Reuters.

"The UN international personnel are back to Afghanistan from today," Michael Sackett, Country Director of the UN World Food Programme (WFP) for Afghanistan, told reporters on arrival at Kabul airport.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance for Afghanistan said on Saturday a limited number of staff would start returning from Tuesday after security assurances for the ruling Taliban militia.

Sackett said he was initially visiting for two days and would be briefed about the security arrangements made by the Taliban.

He said he would also assess the needs of the people in the capital, where the WFP runs a subsidised bakery project for thousands of its impoverished residents.

About 40 UN staff were evacuated from Afghanistan last August following a series of incidents, including a US missile strike against Saudi-born dissident Osama bin Laden's bases in eastern Afghanistan and the murder of a UN military adviser.

Skiers believed missing found safe in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, Mar 14: Military helicopters went to the rescue Sunday after authorities lost contact with a civilian chopper carrying a group of foreign tourists in India's troubled Kashmir state, but the alarm turned out to be unfounded, reports AP.

Military spokesman Maj P Purshottam said the 10 unidentified skiers from France, Switzerland and Germany were picked up unharmed by one of two military helicopters sent to search for them in the mountains near the state capital, Srinagar. While authorities feared they were missing, they had completed a spectacular ski run and were trekking as planned to a village.

A tourist helicopter had flown them to a nearly inaccessible spot at 4,800 metres for the ski run Saturday.

The tourist helicopter then lost contact with ground authorities, causing concern. Srinagar is the center of a Muslim uprising that erupted in 1989.

The government has said it has the uprising under control. As part of efforts to promote tourism in Kashmir, a government helicopter recently began flying skiers to Himalayan peaks.

Opposition group claims 23 senior Iraqi officers executed for coup plot

LONDON, Mar 14: More than 20 senior Iraqi officers, including an advisor to President Saddam Hussein, were executed earlier this month accused of plotting to overthrow the regime, an opposition group said Saturday, reports AFP.

The London-based Iraqi National Congress said the 23 included Lieutenant General Kamel Sajit, who commanded Iraqi forces in Kuwait during the Gulf War and was later a civilian governor before joining the presidential staff last year.

A spokesman said another was staff General Ghabban Al-Ghraihi, and that his funeral in the southern town of Kerbala provoked clashes with police in which a police captain was killed.

According to The Sunday Times, which said seven high ranking officers had been executed on March 2, including Sajit, the coup plot was one of the most serious against Saddam since the 1991 Gulf War.

It said Sajit recruited another officer, Lieutenant General Yalqechin Omar, who was

based in the northern city of Kirkuk and together they brought in at least five more.

They allegedly planned to exploit dissatisfaction among senior officers to gain control of Kirkuk and from there appeal to the rest of the army to join their revolt.

However, the plot was discovered last January, the paper added.

The Iraqi National Congress could not confirm Omar's reported execution.

Meanwhile, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has asked the United States to stop its relentless bombing raids against Iraq's air defences. Foreign Minister Amr Mousa said in Cairo on Saturday.

"We cannot accept these almost daily raids against Iraq, nor the UN Security Council's inaction on this issue," Mousa told journalists after meeting Arab League Secretary General Esmat Abdel Meguid.

The Security Council must move and study this issue, because maintaining this situation is dangerous," he added.

RSS dismisses atrocities against Christians

LUCKNOW, India, Mar 14: India's main right-wing Hindu group has dismissed a recent spate of atrocities against Christians in the country as a "non-existent issue," reports Reuters.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) wound up a three-day meeting on Saturday, saying it was not against Christians but opposed to what it called forced conversions of poor people.

The meet condemns the organised church in India for internationalising the non-existent issue of atrocities on Christians in India and thus bringing down the image of our nation in the eyes of the world," the RSS said.

RSS affiliated organisations and Christians have traded accusations over a series of brutal attacks on Christians and their religious buildings across India.

"We have nothing against the Christians brethren, but are totally against the vendors trading in wholesale evangelism," the RSS said after the meeting in the northern city of Lucknow.

The Hindu group, the ideological parent of India's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), said the church had misconstrued the Indian constitutional right to convert.

than three per cent of predominantly Hindu India's 950 million people, but Hindu activists say the church was seeking to enlarge its influence.

Christian community leaders accuse Hindu activists of fomenting a hate campaign since the BJP-led coalition came to power last year.

Hindu groups have denied involvement in the attacks.

Turkish lawmakers try to delay election date

ANKARA, Mar 14: In a bid to postpone national elections set for April 18, a group of Turkish deputies succeeded on Saturday in gathering enough support to reconvene parliament, reports AP.

The 116 deputies who petitioned parliament have been dubbed "the disgruntled" because many of them were dropped by their parties as candidates for re-election.

Deputies voted to reconvene parliament, in recess for more than a month to allow deputies to campaign for the elections, on Tuesday. The disgruntled are hoping to discuss the election date.

To open the new session, they rallied members of the pro-Islamic Virtue Party, the largest part in parliament.

China's new military satellites worry Taiwan

TAIPEI, Mar 14: Taiwan Defence Minister Tang Fei has warned Beijing will pose a growing military threat to the nationalist island when it puts six military satellites into orbit next year, reports AFP.

Four satellites would be able to provide the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with high-definition pictures and the remaining two would function as navigation craft, Tang told a military seminar Saturday, according to the United Daily News and China Times.

Tang said China could see its reconnaissance capability boosted once it acquired optical sensor and digital image transfer expertise — key technology to make sophisticated satellites.

When that happened, he said, "the Chinese communists would be able to sit at home and see exactly what we do in our backyards."

Jordan slates Israel's approach to peace with Palestinians

AMMAN, Mar 14: Jordan's new King Abdullah II on Saturday criticised Israel's approach to peace with the Palestinians during talks with US Assistant Secretary of State for Middle East Affairs Martin Indyk, reports AFP.

The two men meeting at the Red Sea resort of Agaba discussed the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks as well as the possibility of reviving negotiations between Syria, Lebanon and Israel, officials said.

Indyk said the United States understands that peace will see no progress before Israeli general elections in mid May, but added that he is preparing the ground for movement on the Israeli-Lebanese Syrian track after the vote, he told the official news agency Petra.

He said the Syrian track should run parallel to the Palestinian track and urged both the Israelis and Palestinians to fully implement the Wye

River peace deal they signed in October.

King Abdullah stressed the need to reactivate the process to achieve a just and lasting peace in the Middle East and said implementing the Wye accord was a pressing need and not an election choice.

The monarch, who took the throne after the death of his father King Hussein from cancer last month, also discussed with Indyk the situation in Iraq.

He called for the lifting of eight-year-old United Nations sanctions on Iraq and expressed disagreement with the US policy of changing the regime in Iraq, stressing that Jordan will never take any part in instigating any changes in Iraq.

Indyk, who arrived in Jordan from Turkey late Friday, met earlier in Amman with Prime Minister Abdel Rauf Rawabdeh and Foreign Minister Abdel Ilah Al-Khatib.



Designer Gilles Dufour walks down the catwalk to acknowledge the audience with supermodels Claudia Schiffer (L) and Audrey Marnay after his show for Balmain during the 1999/2000 Autumn-Winter ready-to-wear collections in Paris on Saturday. — AFP photo.