

International

BRIEFLY



Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen (R) and his wife Bunrany greet well-wishers before departure from Phnom Penh International Airport in Phnom Penh yesterday for an official 3-day visit to Indonesia to seal an agreement on the promotion and protection of investment in Cambodia.

— AFP photo

Mine blast kills 31 in China:

Thirty-one people were killed and six others injured when miners deliberately set off explosions in a gold mine in northwest China so they could take it over, an official newspaper said. AP reports from Beijing.

Having found no gold in their own mine, the miners dug through to the adjacent Zeng Mine in Tianshui, Gansu province, and planned to seal its entrance to mine the load themselves. They set off explosives in the mine on March 2, killing four of their own number and 27 others, it said. The report provided no other details.

Death toll in Delhi slum fire now 28:

The death toll in a fire that raged through a slum district of Delhi has risen to 28 and those trapped have been rescued, fire brigade and police officials said yesterday.

"The toll is 28, no more bodies have been recovered," a fire brigade official told Reuters. A police official said those trapped in the fire had been rescued and the entire slum area had been cleared.

Polish president in Malaysia:

President Aleksander Kwasniewski was accorded an official welcome soon after he arrived in Kuala Lumpur yesterday for a three-day state visit to Malaysia. Xinhua reports from Kuala Lumpur.

An official welcoming ceremony was held at Parliament Square. Kwasniewski's visit at the invitation of Malaysia's King Tuanku Ja'afar is the first by a Polish head of state to Malaysia.

8 more killed in Colombia:

Right wing paramilitaries killed at least eight people in two separate attacks in northern and southwestern Colombia on Sunday, army and police said. AFP says from Bogota.

Poole said that eight heavily armed assailants entered a rural area of the southwestern Cauca province early Sunday, killing a farmer and abducting three other people, including a woman who were later found dead. Cauca authorities blamed the attack on a right-wing paramilitary group. Meanwhile three drivers and one passenger were killed when paramilitaries attacked a highway near the town of San Jacinto in Bolivar province.

Police raid Manila slums:

Police raided a slum area near an Islamic community in Manila on Monday where two policemen were killed by suspected drug dealers, and hauled in more than 170 people for questioning. AP says from Manila.

About 50 police, armed with assault rifles and shields, raided the slums in the congested downtown Quiapo district at dawn. Among those taken away for questioning were found to be wanted for robbery, homicide or theft, and were arrested.

Ex-Miss Universe runs for governor:

Three months after her failed campaign for president of Venezuela, former Miss Universe Irene Saez led in the polls ahead of Sunday's vote for governor on the tourist playground of Margarita Island. AP says from Caracas.

Saez, 37, an independent who won a reputation as an honest and efficient mayor in an affluent Caracas suburb, pledged to revive the sagging tourist trade, attract foreign investors and bring the Miss Universe pageant to Margarita.

Thai women tourists target of HK's anti-vice operation

HONG KONG, Mar 15: Every Thai woman arriving for the first time at Hong Kong International Airport is being asked by immigration officers if she is involved in prostitution, a report here said today, reports AFP.

The South China Morning Post quoted immigration officers as saying they had been ordered by bosses to stop Thai women tourists, whether arriving individually or with a tour group, for questioning and to search their bags.

One frontline immigration officer who expressed disgust with the year-long policy, code-named Operation Hoover, said it was intended to stop would-be prostitutes entering Hong Kong.

"It is totally unnecessary and we are lost for words every time innocent travellers query our actions," the officer told the newspaper.

Through a handful of cases to lead to deportation after interrogation, the majority of the travellers are innocent and should not be treated in such a way," he said. "It is also bad for

immigration officials

to be asked to do this," he said.

Immigration department

officials were unavailable for comment but the newspaper quoted one spokesman as refusing to confirm whether Operation Hoover existed.

"Every arriving visitor is subject to immigration examination and each case will be assessed on its own merits," he said.

The Thai Consulate General

was also unavailable for immediate comment when contacted by AFP. A spokesman, however, told the South China Morning Post the consulate had received several complaints from Thai tourists in recent months.

"I thought it was just a matter of routine checks on all incoming and I had no idea that we were being pinpointed," he was quoted as saying, adding that the Thai Consulate would be taking up the matter with immigration officials.

Soldiers stand guard as firemen check the fractured fuselage of a Korea Air (KAL) MD-81 jet at Pohang airport, 374 km southeast of Seoul, yesterday. The jet skidded off the runway upon landing, injuring at least 13 passengers, three seriously. Brake failure is the suspected cause of the accident, the eighth involving a Korean Air jet in seven months.

— AFP photo

Japanese doomsday cult rising from its ashes

KITAMIMAKI, Japan, Mar 15: As the fourth anniversary of the deadly nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway system approaches, the Aum Shinrikyo doomsday cult is coming back to life, reports AP.

The group has been buying up houses and other real estate across Japan to set up new offices and meeting centres in what authorities describe as an ominous effort to re-establish

Police say members are once again preparing for the Armageddon they have been promised will come this year by their jailed messiah — Shoko Asahara, who is on trial for murder in the March 21, 1995, subway gassing and other killings.

Aum's re-emergence has unnerved some Japanese, such as those who live near the group's recently purchased house in Kitamimaki, a village about 140 kms northwest of Tokyo.

The spacious two-story

house with white walls and black roof tiles has a parking lot for about a dozen cars and is ringed by steel fences installed by the cult.

It also is surrounded by villagers who have been keeping a 24-hour vigil for three months to make sure no one from the cult gets in.

"We will not let Aum come into our village," said Osamu Koyama, the town's mayor.

Aum was stripped of its legal status and tax privileges as a religious organisation, but the government concluded it was no longer a threat and stopped short of using an anti-subversion law to ban it. So members can still assemble, spread their ideas and raise money.

Using profits from sales of computers and computer parts, for instance, the cult last year bought at least 200 million (drs 1.65 million) worth in real estate.

Authorities see the real estate deals as just one element in

a broader and more disconcerting effort by Aum to expand in a year that is of special significance to Asahara's followers.

According to the guru's teachings, Judgment Day will come on either Sept. 2 or 3 and only cult members will survive.

Possibly in preparation, investigators say, the cult has set up several offices or meeting places around the Tokyo Detention Centre, where Asahara is being held while on trial.

According to a recent report compiled by the government's Public Security Investigation Agency, Aum followers have been instructed to worship the jail as a "holy place."

"We must keep a very close watch on the group," the report warned.

Aum has significantly increased its fundraising activities.

Last year, its computer sales

earned it more than 7 billion yen (drs 57.5 million), nearly double from the year before.

And in the final four months of 1998, it earned at least 27 million yen (drs 221,900) from 310 seminars attended by 7,000 people, the report said.

"I'm concerned about the situation," said Kenji Kawashima, a cult specialist who teaches at Tokyo's Keisen University. "Many young Japanese can be easily influenced by a cult with teachings that trigger fears about the turn-of-the-century catastrophe."

Aum says its recent activities are not a cause for concern.

"We are only looking for a place to live and practice," the group says on its World Wide Web page.

Police cracked down hard on Aum after the subway attack. A total of 428 cultists were arrested and the cult was stripped of its legal status as a religious group and declared bankrupt.

The cult is still a skeleton of its former self.

At its peak, Aum claimed

10,000 followers in Japan and tens of thousands more in Russia, Germany, the United States and several other countries. It now has a core of only about 500 cultists who remain at its communes, but hundreds more consider themselves members although they have not taken the final step of giving away all worldly possessions.

The trial of Asahara is expected to drag on for several more years, and most of the cult's other leaders are likely to be in prison for the foreseeable future.

But one of Asahara's closest and most charismatic disciples, Fumihiko Joyu, is expected to be freed as early as November after serving time for forgery and other minor charges from a 1990 land deal. His return could be a big boost to Aum.

While Asahara's teachings still dominate the cult's Web site, Joyu, who served as the cult's spokesman before his arrest, is also featured prominently.

BJP to mark first year in power by recreating Pokhran N-tests

NEW DELHI, Mar 15: India's Hindu nationalist-led government will celebrate its first year in power this week with a pyrotechnics display replicating New Delhi's 1998 nuclear tests, a report said today, says AFP.

Officials from the information ministry told The Statesman newspaper the function would also recall Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's historic bus trip to Pakistan, India's arch-rival for 50 years.

They said Friday's bash, marking the first anniversary of Hindu nationalist rule, would highlight the May nuclear explosions near the west-

ern town of Pokhran, which sparked a tit-for-tat riposte by Pakistan.

The venue — a fashionable New Delhi park centred around a medieval reservoir and a Muslim seminary — would set the "proud moment" being recreated with "sound, light and crackles," the statesman said.

If the mushroom cloud emanating from the mock Pokhran test is expected to make the Indians proud and aware of their nuclear muscle power, the bus to Pakistan would symbolise the government's efforts to bring peace to the sub-continent," it said.

An official said while the blast was aimed at portraying Vajpayee's "unflinching commitment to the nation's internal security," the bus would project him as "an apostle of peace."

India's state-run television network will also launch a sports channel on Friday to mark the anniversary.

The Hindu nationalist-led minority coalition has been hurtling from one crisis to another since taking power in March 1998, besieged by withdrawal threats from allies, a rout in state elections and political reverses in parliament.

Violence claims

13 in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Mar 15: Separatist-linked violence in the northern Indian state of Kashmir has left 13 people dead, police said today, reports AFP.

Two Indian army soldiers were killed late Sunday in a fierce gun battle with Muslim militants in the forests of Kharim, 50 km south of the Kashmiri capital, Srinagar.

Five militants were also killed in the clash, a police spokesman said, adding that army reinforcements had been rushed to the area to search for other suspected militant hideouts.

Meanwhile, three police officers were killed when militants launched a surprise attack late Sunday on a police barracks on the outskirts of Srinagar. Two officers were critically injured in the assault.

In separate clashes elsewhere in Kashmir, security personnel gunned down three militants.

Tipper Gore (R), wife of US Vice President Al Gore, smiles as she and a member of the NATO-led Stabilisation Force (SFOR) carry their lunch trays during Tipper's visit to the SFOR headquarters in Sarajevo Sunday. Tipper Gore is on a two-day trip to Bosnia to visit US NATO troops.

— AFP photo

US, British warplanes strike air defence sites in Iraq

ANKARA, Mar 15: US and British warplanes struck at several Iraqi air defence sites Sunday when they came under fire in the northern and southern "no-fly" zones. US military said, reports AP.

US Air Force F-15 Strike Eagles bombed several anti-aircraft sites northwest and west of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, 400 km north of Baghdad, after they came under artillery fire, said Copey.

In southern Iraq, US Air Force F-16CG Fighting Falcon and British Royal Air Force GR-1 Tornado aircraft, retaliated at a missile attack directed at them with precision-guided munitions, said Pentagon spokesman Brian R Kilgallen.

Kilgallen said the strikes in southern Iraq were conducted near As Samawah, some 240 km southeast of Baghdad, and near Ad Diwaniyah, approximately 160 km south of the Iraqi capital.

"We discussed the Middle East peace process and how to prepare for an effort to resume negotiations on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks after the Israeli elections," he said. Indyk did not address reporters after the evening meeting with Assad.

The US envoy arrived Saturday in the Syrian capital from neighbouring Jordan, where he met with King Abdullah.

Indyk said it was not realistic to expect peace talks to resume before Israel's national elections May 17.

Zee Lux Cine Awards

Kuch Kuch Hota Hai'

bags top awards

for Kajol, Shahrukh

MUMBAI, Mar 15: Hindi film Kuch Kuch Hota Hai' bagged four awards, including that of the Best Film, at the Zee Lux Cine Awards function here yesterday night, reports PTT.

Shah Rukh Khan bagged the Best Actor award for his role in the film, which revolves around a triangular love story, while Kajol got the Best Actress award.

"We discussed the Middle East peace process and how to prepare for an effort to resume negotiations on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks after the Israeli elections," he said. Indyk did not address reporters after the evening meeting with Assad.

The US envoy arrived Saturday in the Syrian capital from neighbouring Jordan, where he met with King Abdullah.

Indyk said it was not realistic to expect peace talks to resume before Israel's national elections May 17.

Zee Lux Cine Awards

Kuch Kuch Hota Hai'

bags top awards

for Kajol, Shahrukh

MUMBAI, Mar 15: Hindi film Kuch Kuch Hota Hai' bagged four awards, including that of the Best Film, at the Zee Lux Cine Awards function here yesterday night, reports PTT.

Shah Rukh Khan bagged the Best Actor award for his role in the film, which revolves around a triangular love story, while Kajol got the Best Actress award.

Shekhar Kapoor, who directed the English film Elizabeth which has been nominated for oscars, was honoured with the Special Achievement Award in a star studded function.

Karan Johar, the director of the film bagged the Best Director award.

The Life Time Achievement Awards were presented to veteran actor Shammi Kapoor and melody queen Lata Mangeshkar.

Shekhar Kapoor, who directed the English film Elizabeth which has been nominated for oscars, was honoured with the Special Achievement Award in a star studded function.

It said "candidates must be experienced in attracting and retaining creative people" and should "understand the impact of changing technology on broadcasting."

The advertisement did not give any details on the proposed

salary but Birt is said to be paid 400,000 pounds (660,000 dollars) a year.

The BBC Governor's Council, headed by Christopher Bland, hopes to select a candidate by next summer so the newcomer will be able to spend six months working alongside Birt in order to learn the ropes.

BBC looking for 'visionary' leader

LONDON, Mar 15: The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) advertised today for a "visionary" leader to replace the organisation's controversial director John Birt, reports AFP.