

BRIEFLY



Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen (R) and his wife Bun-rany greet well-wishers before departure from Pochentong 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 Zero 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:

Polish 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.

Police 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 Iene 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.

Indo-Pak bus service begins today

ISLAMABAD, Mar 15: Pakistan and India tomorrow launch the first cross-border bus service since independence in 1947 as part of efforts to promote contacts and build confidence between the hostile neighbours, reports AFP.

Officials describe the start of the regular service as a "significant event" after decades of tension or outright war.

The bus made its inaugural run when Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee travelled to Lahore on February 20 for landmark talks with Pak-

istani Premier Nawaz Sharif. The Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC) will run the commercial service from Lahore to New Delhi while the operator in the other direction will be the Delhi Transport Corporation.

Buses will leave simultaneously for Lahore and for Delhi early in the morning every Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday.

The Pakistanis will operate two 43-seater luxury buses with air conditioning, videos and reclining seats. They will carry 40

passengers, two security guards and one liaison officer.

Tourists from third countries can also travel with visas.

Sources in Lahore said more than 80 people had made tentative reservations but until late Sunday only 10 had obtained visas and confirmed their bookings.

PTDC chief Imtiaz Ali Syed said the bus would leave even with only 10 aboard, saying the service would "open doors for friendship and promote people-to-people contact."

Kosovo peace talks get back on track

Standoff over NATO troops in Yugoslavia continues

PARIS, Mar 15: Serbs and Ethnic Albanians traded Monday for fresh talks to end the war in Kosovo as a stubborn standoff crystallised between Belgrade and the Atlantic alliance over the thorny question of a NATO peacekeeping force on Yugoslav soil, reports AFP.

Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Ratko Markovic, the chief Serb negotiator at the talks opening today at a conference centre here, warned that any intervention force dispatched to Kosovo to police "a peace accord would be considered an enemy."

The international military

presence can only mean forcing Serbia to the political solution which it does not accept," Markovic said suggesting that NATO troops would in fact be buttressing Kosovo independence.

"If the political agreement is supported by all signatories, Serbia as a state can implement it by itself."

NATO Secretary General Javier Solanas alluding to allied airstrikes, warned that Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic knows what is going to happen to him if the Serb delegation fails to sign the agreement. The talks here represent his

"last opportunity to help resolve a problem that he created," Solanas told CNN from Washington adding, "We cannot allow another humanitarian catastrophe to happen in Kosovo."

Milosevic is stubbornly resisting a core part of the peace plan — the deployment of 26,000 heavily armed peacekeepers under NATO command.

NATO in turn has standing orders to bomb Serbian targets if Milosevic does not come around or if his security forces step up their fight against the estimated 15,000 strong KLA guerrillas.

Ocalan's group blamed for bomb attack on Istanbul store

ISTANBUL, Mar 15: Turkish newspapers on Sunday accused jailed Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan's guerrillas of carrying out a petrol bomb attack that killed 13 people in a crowded Istanbul department store, reports Reuters.

On Sunday evening, a bomb went off under a lorry in the Bahcelievler district of the city, injuring two people, one of them seriously, police said. Disposal experts also defused an explosive device in a branch of a fast food chain.

Saturday's department store attack was one of the worst in living memory in Turkey's biggest city.

There was no claim of responsibility from Ocalan's separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and a spokeswoman for the organisation's political wing denied any involvement.

The PKK has not claimed responsibility. If they had done it they would have owned up to it," Mizgin Sen told Reuters.

Istanbul has been hit by the wave of violence that has swept Turkey since the capture of Ocalan, now facing a treason trial and possible execution.

On Saturday, three people drew up in a car in the Goztepe district of the city, threw petrol bombs into the ground floor of the modern building and then fled the scene on foot.

Arrest of ETA members ignites violence in Spain

MADRID, Mar 15: Enraged by the arrest of Basque separatist leaders, assailants hurled Molotov cocktails and set off a homemade explosive in the worst weekend of street violence since the armed group ETA declared a ceasefire six months ago, news reports said Sunday, reports AP.

State radio reported 17 incidents across the Basque country of northern Spain. A spokesman for the regional police said four people were treated for smoke inhalation in San Sebastian and five were arrested for public disorder.

In Bilbao, a small explosive device went off overnight Saturday in the doorway of an apartment building where a socialist city councillor's parents live. No one was hurt. Assaults also threw Molotov cocktails through the front window of a Citroen dealership, damaging several cars.

In Pamplona, attackers set fire to a telephone booth, several trash bins and an automatic teller machine at a bank.

In the town of Bermeo, 10 hooded assailants armed with baseball bats stormed the local headquarters of the Socialist Party and smashed it up Saturday. Four people were inside at the time but no one was injured.

Incidents were also reported in half a dozen other Basque towns.

Deputy Prime Minister

Francisco Alvarez Cascos said the street violence showed ETA has not changed even though it called a cease-fire.

"A few months ago the violence was from guns and bombs and killings on the spot," he said during a visit to the southern city of Cordoba. "Now we are seeing slow-motion terror."

The latest violence followed Tuesday's arrest in Paris of a ETA member that Spanish police described as the leader of the group's commandos. Four other suspected ETA members were also arrested in Paris.

The next day, police who had been monitoring two senior ETA operatives in San Sebastian arrested them when it appeared the two were preparing to flee Spain. Seven other ETA suspects were also taken into custody.

Spanish government officials have insisted these arrests do not jeopardise the cease-fire ETA declared in September.

So-called low-level street violence by young supporters of ETA began several months ago as the peace process appeared to stall, with the government rejecting Basque demands for concessions ahead of negotiations on ending the 30-year conflict.

Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar has offered to hold talks with ETA, which stands for Basque Homeland and Freedom.

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 see the "proud moment" being recreated with "sound, light and crackers," 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 Khiram, 50 km south of the Kashmir 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 hide-outs.

Meanwhile, three police officers were killed when militants launched a surprise attack late Sunday on a police barrack 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.

US envoy talks ME peace with Syrian officials

DAMASCUS, Mar 15: A senior US envoy expressed hope Sunday that his talks with Syrian officials would help prepare the way for peace talks stalled since 1996 to resume after Israeli elections in May, reports AP.

Martin Indyk, assistant secretary of state for the Near East, met for three hours with Syrian President Hafez Assad in Damascus, where the two discussed the peace process and Indyk delivered a message from US President Bill Clinton about his desire to develop ties between the two countries, according to a statement from Syrian presidential spokesman Jubran Kourieh.

Details of the talks were not released. Before the meeting, Indyk briefed reporters about his talks earlier Sunday with Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa.

"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 PTI.

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 for her performance in the film. 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 has directed the English film Elizabeth which has been nominated for Oscars, was honoured with the Special Achievement Award in a star studded function.

— AFP photo

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 investigation, the majority of the travellers are innocent and should not be treated in such a way," he said. "It is also bad for

Hong Kong's tourism.

The officer said the policy applied to all first-time Thai female arrivals aged between 18 and 40.

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 incomers 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.

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 Shinri Kyo 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 itself.

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 reemergence 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 (dls 1.65 million) worth in real estate.

Authorities see the real estate deals as just one element in



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

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 (dls 57.5 million), nearly double from the year before.

And in the final four months of 1998, it earned at least 27 million yen (dls 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.

Off the Record

Hillary goes online on White House pets

WASHINGTON: With interest in her political and personal life soaring, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton will go online today to answer questions — about White House pets, her spokeswoman said on Sunday, reports Reuters.

Hillary is scheduled to appear in a live "chat" session on America Online today at 10 pm EST (0300 GMT Wednesday), answering questions about her recent book, "Dear Socks, Dear Buddy: Kids' Letters to the First Pets," said spokeswoman Marsha Berry.

"The topic is the book," Berry said ruling out any questions that have lately consumed Hillary-watchers, such as whether she will run for the US Senate in New York, or the state of her marriage in the wake of President Bill Clinton's sex-and-perjury impeachment scandal.

The book, published late last year, features photographs of White House pets Buddy the dog and socks the cat, copies of children's letters to the pets, and text by Hillary.

Internet bookseller Amazon Com ranks the Socks and Buddy book 9574th on its of current best-sellers, compared with the newly released memoirs "All Too Human" of former White House aide George Stephanopoulos, which headed the list.

But Berry said the White House pets were a favourite topic among children "whenever she goes to a school or something, it's always the question (topic) that brings kids out of their shyness," berry said.

She said the book's publisher, Simon and Schuster, had been collecting questions submitted to AOL and could present selections to Hillary today. The questions will be answered live through a moderator at the online service.

ROK launches fund-raising campaign for starving DPRK

SEOUL, Mar 15: South Korea today launched a campaign to raise funds to help feed starving North Korea amid reports famine have killed more than three million in the communist state, reports AFP.

"The campaign takes off starting today. We are hoping to come up with enough funds to send North Korea about 10,000 tonnes of fertilizer," a Red Cross official said.

South Korea's Red Cross last week announced plans to send the aid to North Korea, suffering from a severe famine since 1995 when a series of natural disasters and floods hit the country.

South Korean officials said North Korea's fertilizer production stood at 625,000 tonnes last year, with the population completely dependent on international food aid at least for this month.

The UN body has appealed

for 225 million dollars to provide 533,000 tonnes of food this year. So far, it has received 101 million dollars.

North Korea's highest official to defect from the country, Hwang Jang-Yop, recently said famine has killed more than three million people in the Stalinist state.

Hwang, the north's former chief ideologue and architect of its *juche* (self-reliance) philosophy, told the French daily Le Monde in South Korea that "at the end of last year, the famine has caused more than three million deaths."

Living in South Korea after defecting through Beijing in February 1997, Hwang said the total, based partly on the Communist Party's central committee's own figures, estimated 500,000 people died in 1995, plus about a million every year from 1996 to 1998.