

BRIEFLY

US may sell 'Amraam' to Bahrain:

The United States said on Monday it had formally offered to sell 26 sophisticated 'Amraam' air-to-air missiles along with associated equipment and training to Bahrain for 110 million dollars, Reuter reports from Washington.

The package was offered to Bahrain by Defence Secretary William Cohen last week during a visit to the Gulf but no specifics were given at the time.

Japan to give Indonesia \$31m:

Japan said yesterday it will give 31 million dollars to help Indonesia conduct parliamentary elections this summer in the first poll since former President Suharto resigned amid rioting last May, AP reports from Tokyo.

African ministers' meet in US:

In a statement, the Foreign Affairs Ministry said the elections "have an important meaning as the basis for realising political stability and economic recovery." The money will go to a UN group overseeing the elections, which are scheduled for June 7, the ministry said.

Cambodia seeks Indonesia's help:

Cambodia wants help from Indonesia in two fields where it had plenty of experience: Riot control and temple restoration, AP reports from Jakarta.

19 bodies recovered in E Java:

Search teams have found 19 bodies following the sinking of a wooden boat in a reservoir in Ngawi, East Java, a report said yesterday, AFP says from Jakarta.

Quake hits Japan:

A fairly strong earthquake jolted central Japan on Tuesday, but there were no immediate reports of damage or injuries, AP reports from Tokyo.

The quake, with a preliminary magnitude of 5.1, hit the city of Suzuka and its neighboring areas at 4:43 pm (07:43 GMT), the Central Meteorological Agency said. The quake was centered at about 10 kilometers (6 miles) underground near Suzuka, 310 kilometers (186 miles) southwest of Tokyo.

NATO air strike threatened Pressure mounts on Milosevic as Albanians agree to sign accord

PARIS, Mar 16: Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic faced renewed international pressure today after ethnic Albanian delegates to Kosovo peace talks agreed to sign an autonomy deal for the embattled Serbian province, reports Reuter.

Milosevic's representatives at the renewed talks, apparently taken back by the Albanian move, showed no sign they were softening their opposition to the deal despite stern warnings from leaders of the big nation Contact Group.

But as allied officials hailed the first breakthrough in the negotiations and warned Yugoslavia that time was running out, fighting raged on the ground in Kosovo.

Serb security forces poured rocket and mortar fire onto suspected rebel positions along a 15-km front in northern Kosovo in the latest outbreak of

clashes that have been flaring sporadically for about three weeks.

French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine, chairing the talks with his British counterpart Robin Cook, said in Paris that Belgrade now had to choose between isolation and peace.

The Yugoslav representatives now have their backs to the wall, Vedrine warned at a news conference.

The United States and Germany threatened that NATO jets were ready to strike Serbian targets if Milosevic refused to make peace in Kosovo and allow a 28,000-strong NATO-led force into the province — something he has consistently rejected.

"The handwriting is very much on the wall for him," US Defence Secretary William Cohen said in Washington after talks with German Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping.

"I hope there is no illusion about NATO's ability and readiness to act if necessary," Scharping said.

The Western military alliance has more than 400 attack and support aircraft within striking distance of Yugoslav targets.

US President Bill Clinton said NATO will have little choice but to launch airstrikes if Milosevic fails to back the deal endorsed by the ethnic Albanians.

"If he shows intransigence and aggression, from my point of view we would have little option," Clinton told reporters before a meeting with NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana.

Russia, the only members of the Contact Group that has opposed airstrikes, repeated its rejection of the use of force.

Clinton said the peace talks should be given some time to bring the Serbs on board, another US official played down

Catholic HR lawyer killed in N Ireland

LURGAN, Northern Ireland, Mar 16: Pro-British extremists have killed a leading Catholic human rights lawyer in Northern Ireland, sending shock waves through the province's faltering peace process, reports Reuter.

The car bomb killing of Rosemary Nelson was the third by the Red Hand Defenders, and outlawed group formed since mainstream Protestant guerrillas and their Irish Republican Army (IRA) enemies backed their political allies in signing a peace accord on April 10.

The blast 50 km southwest of Belfast came as politicians struggle to meet a deadline for implementing the deal and draw a line under more than 3,600 deaths in 30 years.

The White House and leaders of Britain and Ireland, and signatories of the deal from most shades of Northern Irish politics who are in the United States to mark St Patrick's Day, condemned the killing, saying it would harden their resolve in the run-up to the deadline of the week of March 29.

UAE threatens to pull out of deal for 80 US F-16s

ABU DHABI, Mar 16: The United Arab Emirates says it may pull out of an 8 billion dollar deal to buy 80 F-16s from Lockheed Martin Corp because it wants the jet fighters equipped with technology that is restricted by Washington, reports AP.

The Emirates want software codes for the F-16 Fighting Falcons' electronic warfare systems that would enable the planes to discern whether other aircraft are friendly or hostile. The United States does not allow release of the full codes.

However, a Lockheed Martin spokeswoman said Monday the United Arab Emirates has not requested the restricted software codes.

"Both Lockheed and the UAE remain committed to bringing the F-16 contract to completion," said Katherine Hayden at Lockheed Martin Tactical Aircraft Systems in Fort Worth.

Lankan dist liberated from Tamil rebels

COLOMBO, Mar 16: Sri Lanka's Vavuniya district in the north of the country has been liberated from the Tamil rebels and life there has returned to normal, the official Daily News reported today, says Xinhua.

Military sources said all four divisions of Vavuniya and most of the northern Wannai area have been liberated after government troops eliminated or drove away the rebels there in Operation Rana Gosa (the sound of the war).

Earlier, this month, Sri Lankan government troops launched the operation to expand the security force-controlled territory in the northern area.

Asked about Zhu's denials, Clinton's spokesman Joe Lockhart said, "Well, that's his view." He said the issue would come up during Zhu's visit to Washington in April.



US Vice President Al Gore greets Democratic supporters at the New Hampshire Institute of Art in Manchester Monday. Gore is making his first campaign trip for the 2000 presidential race and is currently the Democratic front runner. — AFP photo

Iraq sends Hajj pilgrims defying UN sanctions

BAGHDAD, Mar 16: An Iraqi Airways aircraft flew to Saudi Arabia today carrying 110 Iraqi pilgrims, the officials Iraqi News Agency reported — an apparent violation of UN sanctions that bar flights to and from Iraq, reports AP.

The Russian-made IL-76 took off from Al-Rashid military air base 15 km south of Baghdad, INA said.

Iraq apparently did not seek UN permission for the flight, which is of a humanitarian nature.

"We have not contacted anybody for approvals," Rabi Mohammed Saleh, the Director-General of Iraqi Airways, was quoted as saying by INA.

This would be Iraq's second violation of the air sanctions, which are part of the economic embargo imposed in 1990 following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

The sanctions also prevent the sale of oil, except under a UN oil-for-food programme.

In April 1997, an Iraqi Airways jet flew 104 pilgrims to Saudi Arabia, angering the United States, the most vocal advocate of the sanctions.

However, the UN Security Council failed to take action against Iraq. Instead, a mild statement was issued, saying Baghdad should have waited for permission.

The plane that flew today will make two more trips to ferry pilgrims, Saleh said, adding that it is the only air-worthy commercial plane in Iraq.

The airline's remaining aircraft are parked in other countries. Saleh said he hoped that Saudi authorities will "cooperate with us by facilitating services needed for the plane," INA reported.

The pilgrims, who are being led by Religious Affairs Minister Abdel Munim Ahmed Saleh, are mostly elderly people and women, INA said.

Iraq argues that the air embargo is a violation of its people's religious rights. Islam requires all able-bodied Muslims to make a pilgrimage, or Hajj, to Makkah at least once in a lifetime, if they can afford it.

The Security Council has said the sanctions will not be lifted until Iraq eliminates all its weapons of mass destruction.

Iraq's defiance of the air sanctions is similar to that of Libya, which is also under a UN air embargo. Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi has regularly sent passenger jets from Libya to Saudi Arabia.

Independent panel to assess US damage from Chinese N-spying

WASHINGTON, Mar 16: The CIA said on Monday an independent panel would assess damage from Chinese nuclear spying, which has caused a political firestorm in Washington and strained Sino-US relations, reports Reuters.

George Tenet, the Director of Central Intelligence, said this would provide an outside review of damage assessment which is now being completed by analysts from across the US intelligence community.

He named retired Admiral David Jeremiah, a former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who left the service in 1994, to head the independent panel and said other members would be appointed later.

The investigation was called after press reports in the last

Taliban rule out coalition govt

ISLAMABAD, Mar 16: Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia on Monday ruled out a coalition government emerging from its weekend's power-sharing deal with its opponents, reports Reuter.

The two warring sides announced on Sunday they had agreed to share power and try to hammer out a permanent ceasefire.

But Taliban negotiator Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil arriving home from three days of UN-mediated talks in Turkmenistan told the militia's Voice of Shariah radio that "the agreement does not mean that a coalition government will be formed in the futures."

"We have agreed to have a shared executive and a shared legislative and a shared judiciary," Muttawakil said through an interpreter in the Turkmen capital Ashgabat on Sunday.

The Taliban radio quoted him as telling reporters that representatives from the country's provinces would take part in future peace talks to be held within Afghanistan.

AP adds: The first UN international staff member has returned to Afghanistan after a seven-month absence that was sparked by the slaying of three UN staffers last summer, a UN spokesman said Monday.

Mike Sackett, the World Food Programme director in Afghanistan, arrived back in Afghanistan on Sunday, two days after the United Nations announced it would begin the gradual return of international staff.

The top UN humanitarian coordinator, Sergio Vieira de Mello, cited "satisfactory" progress with the investigation of the killings by Afghanistan's Taliban militia as well as evidence of Taliban efforts to address UN security concerns.

UN spokesman Fred Eckhard, who announced Sackett's return, said Friday the United Nations will continue to monitor the situation in Afghanistan closely as a basis for its continued presence in the country.

Anwar aide will form new party to face Mahathir

KUALA LUMPUR, Mar 16: A key aide of sacked Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, just back from self-imposed political exile, intends to form a multiracial party to challenge Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, reports AP.

Mohamed Ezam, Mahamad Nor, Anwar's former political secretary, said he had met many top Malaysian politicians and intellectuals during his six-month exile. He said he was overwhelmed by the demand for a broad political front comprised of all races and religions to put an end to Mahathir's 18-year leadership.

They all want Anwar to lead the political party," Mohamed Ezam told the Associated Press on Monday, one day after he returned to the Malaysian capital.

Mohamed Ezam fled the country soon after Anwar's arrest last September, fearing he would also be jailed and tortured. He spent six months in Indonesia, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Thailand canvassing for Anwar among Islamic groups in these countries and meeting with Malaysian politicians.

On Tuesday, he planned to meet Anwar in prison for the first time since the ousted Minister's arrest to brief him on his travels and the political support that he claims the jailed leader enjoys in Southeast and East Asia.

Anwar, 51, was fired on September 2 and arrested 18 days later for organising mammoth public rallies demanding Mahathir's resignation.

Mahathir also expelled Anwar from the ruling United Malays National Organisation. In his speeches before his arrest, Anwar spoke about the need for a new political culture in Malaysia, one that turned away from the tradition of cultivating religious and ethnic voting banks to maintain power.

Mahathir's JUMNO, sustained by the majority Malay-Muslim vote, has ruled since independence in 1957 in an unequal partnership with parties that claim to be the sole representatives of the Chinese and Indian minorities.

Although he never spelled out how he would bring about a change, Anwar has said that Malays should tear down the political walls separating them from the economically prosperous ethnic Chinese and the poorer Indian minorities.

"Only a political party can do that. And that's what I want to discuss with Anwar," Mohamed Ezam said. "I am conveying to Anwar that people want him to lead."

Nigeria won't pull out troops from Sierra Leone now

CAIRO, Mar 16: Nigeria will keep its troops in Sierra Leone until peace is restored, arrangements are in place for their withdrawal, Nigerian President elect Olusegun Obasanjo said Monday, reports AP.

Obasanjo addressed reporters before meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak for talks on African issues, including Sierra Leone, investment ties and border clashes between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Earlier, Monday in Nairobi, Kenya, Obasanjo made similar comments about Nigeria's role in the turbulent West African nation of Sierra Leone.

"We are in Sierra Leone, and we will not abandon Sierra Leone without ensuring there is peace and security," Obasanjo told a gathering of Kenyan and Nigerian business leaders in Nairobi.

Nigeria is leading a West African intervention force that backs the government of Sierra Leone's President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah in its drawn-out battle against rebel forces.

Arafat yet to decide on independence declaration

OSLO, Mar 16: Yasser Arafat said Monday it was still undecided whether an independent Palestinian state would be declared on May 4, even when key players in the Middle East peace process warn that such a step could be a grave threat to peace, reports AP.

"This decision cannot be made until we have completed our consultations. This is a very important and basic issue for the Palestinian people," Arafat said at a news conference in Norway's capital, where the Oslo Accords that paved the way for the Middle East peace process were worked out.

Arafat claims the accords allow declaration of a Palestinian state after a five-year interim period that ends on May 4.

He is on a wide-ranging tour to assess support for his view.

In Oslo, he met Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik and Foreign Minister Knut Volleback in the same Government House room where the Oslo accords between Palestinians and Israel were finalised in August 1993 after months of secret talks.

Even though Bondevik was not part of that effort, Norway has remained active in the peace process.

Bondevik said he urged Arafat to postpone his date for independence. He said he made an announcement just ahead of Israel's May 17 national elections could strengthen opponents of the peace process in Israel.

Nonetheless, Bondevik said he supports eventual independence.

"The Palestinians should be the full masters on their own land. We hope negotiations will result in an agreement that results in an independent Palestinian state," said Bondevik.

Bondevik also announced that Norway would recognise an independent Palestinian state.

The peace process has bogged down under the right-wing government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Confidence motion Janata Dal to vote against Rabri Devi

NEW DELHI, Mar 16: Janata Dal will vote against motion of confidence to be moved by Bihar Chief Minister Rabri Devi in the State Assembly on Wednesday.

The decision was taken at a meeting of the party here. Dal president Sharad Yadav told PTI.

Senior Dal leader Ram Vilas Paswan criticised the central leadership for its attitude towards Bihar and said the state unit of the party will question the senior leaders in this regard especially on their stand on imposition of central rule.

The Bihar unit of the party with 17 MLAs in the 324-member house, will oppose the confidence motion, he told reporters here.

Paswan, who had voted in favour of central rule in the Lok Sabha, said it was unfortunate that several senior party leaders who demanded dismissal of Rabri government, had voted against the presidential promulgation.

Many of them even met President K Narayanan twice to demand imposition of central rule, he said. The attitude of other leaders like JK Gujral, S R Bommai and Jaipal Reddy was known as they were soft to Laloo Prasad Yadav since beginning, Paswan said.

US Senate debates deployment of missile defence system

WASHINGTON, Mar 16: The US senate opened debate on Monday on committing the United States to deployment of a national missile defence system as Democrats dropped efforts to block consideration of the bill, reports Reuter.

The House of Representatives was expected later in the week to approve a similar but weaker version of the proposal, which has been identified by congressional Republicans as one of their top legislative priorities in the new Congress.

Recent missile tests by North Korea and Iran, along with reports of Chinese espionage at a US nuclear weapons plant, have melted some resistance to the measures as even Democratic opponents and the Clinton administration admit the existence of a growing missile threat.

The Senate bill would commit the United States to deploy as soon as technologically possible a national missile defence that would resist a limited attack it does not specify a time frame the costs or specifics of the system.

There are no other ulterior motives, no hidden goals. There

India, Pakistan start first bus service in 51 years

NEW DELHI, Mar 16: He fled Pakistan to India just before it was created more than five decades ago. Early today, RC Modi boarded the first commercial bus to travel to Pakistan in the hope that it would demolish the walls of distrust between the two hostile neighbours, reports AP.

"It's a great experience," said 71-year-old Modi as he was offered a red rose and warm hand shakes by government officials who saw off 29 passengers on the 11-hour journey to the Pakistani border city of Lahore.

At about the same time, government officials threw rose petals and handed out flowers as another bus left Lahore for the Indian capital carrying 20 passengers.

"I have to say I am grateful to the prime minister for starting this bus service," said Abdul Majeed, a retired Pakistani banker who was going to visit an ailing brother in New Delhi.

Three weeks ago, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee inaugurated the service

by riding the bus to Lahore for peace talks with his Pakistani counterpart. The bus service is part of an attempt to improve relations between the two countries who have gone to war three times since they won independence in both countries over the British colonialists in 1947.

The main dispute over control of the Himalayan territory of Kashmir continues to defy a solution. But after both India and Pakistan carried out nuclear weapons tests in May last year, world powers have pressed them to ease tension through dialogue.

Though both Vajpayee and Sharif faced opposition from rightists in both countries over their peacemaking efforts, there was little protest over the bus service. Nonetheless, two police officers rode along with passengers from New Delhi and other officers escorted the bus in a jeep. Pakistani officials took similar precautions.

Train and plane service is available between India and Pakistan.

But the train takes more than twice as long as the bus, in part because of the customs checks at the border, which separates the uneasy neighbours. Officials streamlined customs and immigration procedures for the bus trips.

At about 140 dollars air fare is out of reach for many. A one-way bus ticket from Lahore to the Indian capital of New Delhi is 950 Pakistan rupees (19 dollars) per person.



People board the first commercial run of the Delhi-Lahore passenger bus service from New Delhi yesterday. Indian Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee travelled on the inaugural bus to Lahore February for landmark talks with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a bid to improve people-to-people ties after three wars, rival nuclear tests and a 50-year-old dispute over Kashmir. — AFP photo