

The World

Cambodia firm to try Khmer leaders in local courts

PHNOM PENH, Mar 18: The Cambodian government remained firm today in its decision to try Khmer Rouge leaders in its own courts, despite UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's call for an international genocide trial, reports AP.

Prime Minister Hun Sen ruled out an international trial this week during a visit to Indonesia, and Annan's recommendation Wednesday to the Security Council and General Assembly is unlikely to sway that decision, government officials said.

"I think it is too late to recommend an international trial because we would like a trial for the Khmer Rouge this year," said Om Yentneng, a top aide to the prime minister.

The time needed to set up an international tribunal has been one of Hun Sen's many arguments against it. He has also said that a split in the Security Council — where permanent member China would be expected to veto a trial of its former allies — precludes that option.

The Khmer Rouge seized power in Cambodia in 1975 and forced the population into crude farming collectives in an attempt to create an agrarian utopia. As many as 2 million people died from the harsh conditions or systematic executions before a 1979 Vietnamese invasion ousted the radical communist regime.

Rioting in N Ireland clouds Clinton's peace appeal

BELFAST, Mar 18: Rioting in a northern Ireland town and the killing of a former Protestant guerilla group posed a new threat to the peace process when US President Bill Clinton and British and Irish politicians, reports Reuters.

In the latest blow to efforts to bring peace to the British ruled province, sectarian tension erupted into violence in Portadown on Wednesday on the eve of the funeral of Roman Catholic human rights lawyer Rosamary Nelson who was killed by Protestant extremists in a nearby town on Monday.

Petrol bombs were thrown at police when they tried to break up a clash between stone-throwing Catholic and Protestant crowds, a police spokesman said. Police fired three plastic baton rounds at rioters and one person was arrested, he added.

Several people were injured including a police officer who was hit in the neck by a paving stone, media reports said.

Earlier, a Protestant Protestant guerilla group posed a new threat to the peace process when it threatened retaliation for the killing of former guerilla Frankie Curry.

Curry who had been released from prison on Monday was shot dead when he was approached by three men in Belfast's Shankill district, a stronghold of pro-British Protestant loyalists.

Southwestern part of India to face absolute water scarcity by 2025

WASHINGTON, Mar 18: India's western and southern parts would be in the absolute water scarcity group by 2025 while rest of the country would have to increase water development by five per cent to keep up with the rising demands, a study has warned, reports PTI.

Many countries, including India, China, Pakistan, Mexico and nearly all of the countries of the Middle East and North Africa have literally been having a free ride over the past two or three decades by rapidly depleting their ground water resources, a report of a Sri Lanka-based research centre of the consultative group on international agricultural research said.

This would have catastrophic results in terms of limiting their ability to produce enough food to feed their populations... water scarcity is now the single greatest threat to human health, the environment, and the global food supply. David Seckler, Director General of the Water Institute and co-author of the study with Randolph Baker and Upali Amarasinghe, said.

Of particular concern is overlooked problem of declining water tables in the semi-arid regions of Asia and the Middle East containing some of the major breadbaskets of the world such as the Punjab and the north China plain, he said.

Indo-Pak FMs likely to talk pullout from Siachen today

ISLAMABAD, Mar 18: India and Pakistan are likely to discuss troop pullout from Siachen Glacier when their foreign ministers meet at Sri Lanka's Nuwara Eliya hill resort on the sidelines of SAARC Foreign Ministers' Conference tomorrow (Friday), a leading local daily reported, reports PTI.

Both the ministers will mainly discuss the idea to withdraw forces from Siachen besides following up the Lahore declaration signed by Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Indian counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee in Lahore last month. "The Nation" quoted a senior official as saying on Tuesday.

Boistered by the recent success of the bus diplomacy between the two countries, India's External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh and his Pakistani counterpart Sartaj Aziz will strive for the withdrawal of troops from the 26,000 ft high glacier, the daily said.

Incidentally this report comes barely a week after the "Los Angeles Times" had claimed that both the Indian and Pakistani governments have signalled their willingness to pull out from the world's highest battlefield and had agreed to negotiate the future of Siachen.

The US had been pressing the two countries following their May nuclear tests to continue bilateral talks to reach a negotiated settlement for all outstanding issues including Kashmir to avoid any nuclear flare-up in the region.

AP adds: Indian and Pakistani officials wrangled today ahead of a meeting of their foreign ministers, showing how far apart the nuclear rivals are even as they talk about narrowing their differences.

The discord was touched off Wednesday when Nihal Rodrigo of Sri Lanka, the Secretary General of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, praised last month's

summit between Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in the Pakistani border city of Lahore.

Rodrigo, speaking at the conclusion of a preparatory meeting for the SAARC conference, said that the step "was a very positive one, with a tremendous impact for the entire region." But India objected to any remarks on its relations with Pakistan, saying bilateral issues should not be taken up by the regional forum.

"If we can not even refer to the Lahore spirit at the regional meeting, how can we expect any progress when we take up bilateral issues?" Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Shamsheer Ahmed told reporters today.

Ahmed said his Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz and Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh will meet on Friday as scheduled on the sidelines of the SAARC conference, but the

"Indian stand hurts."

An Indian official denied that India had made any formal protest, but reiterated New Delhi's stand that SAARC was not the forum for bilateral issues.

The Indian and Pakistani foreign ministers are expected to try to build on agreements struck by their prime ministers in February. To reduce the risk of an accidental nuclear war, Vajpayee and Sharif pledged to take such steps as giving each other advance warning of ballistic missile tests.

Both Pakistan and India have missiles capable of carrying nuclear warhead and capable of hitting populated areas in both countries.

Vajpayee and Sharif also agreed to look for ways to make it easier for their citizens to visit each other, and Vajpayee's trip to Lahore was quickly followed by the start of passenger bus service between his capital and the Pakistani city.

US house takes up missile defence bill

WASHINGTON, Mar 18: The chief sponsor of an American missile-defence bill says there "won't be any wiggle room" for Democrats as the US House of Representatives takes up the legislation after a modified version sailed to Senate passage, reports AP.

"We're going to force people to make a decision about the president's policy," Rep. Curt Weldon, a Pennsylvania Republican, said in an interview.

The House takes up Weldon's bill Thursday, a day after the overwhelming 97-3 Senate passage.

Senate supporters said reports of missile tests by North Korea and Iran and of possible espionage by China at a US nuclear laboratory helped solidify support among Democrats and the Clinton administration for the measure, long a top priority

for congressional Republicans. President Bill Clinton has opposed legislation to commit the military to deploying a national missile defence. He vetoed and earlier version in 1995, and Senate Democrats had kept the measure from coming to a floor vote since. But Democrats and the president re-elected this time.

Clinton issued a statement applauding Wednesday's Senate vote. "We are committed to meeting the growing danger that outlaw nations will develop and deploy long-range missiles that could deliver weapons of mass destruction against us," he said.

Senate Democrats flocked to support a Senate version earlier this week after two amendments supported by the administration were adopted and the White House withdrew a veto

threat.

One amendment, by Sens Mary Landrieu, Democrat of Louisiana, and Olympia Snowe, a Maine Republican, asserts that the United States would continue to seek reductions in nuclear missiles in talks with Russia even as it prepares to field a system to shoot down ballistic missiles.

The other, by Sens Thad Cochran, Republican of Mississippi, and Bob Kerrey, a Nebraska Democrat, says funds for such a system would be decided on a year-to-year basis, through the routine congressional appropriations process.

The White House and Senate Democrats said the amendments made the bill acceptable. Republicans ridiculed the abrupt turnaround while welcoming their support.

But there won't be a chance

to offer similar amendments when the House takes up the bill, according to ground rules set by the House Rules Committee.

"There will be no amendments. There will be no attempt to allow people to have cover," said Weldon, who co-sponsored the House bill with Democratic Rep. John Spratt of South Carolina.

In advance of the debate, the House goes into a rare secret session to hear from former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other members of a commission he headed that looked into potential missile threats. The commission reported last year that such threats, either from an accidental firing or from a rogue regime, were a lot closer than the US intelligence community had estimated.

Talks on handover of Macau to China today

MACAU, Mar 18: Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio arrived in Macau Thursday for talks about giving the centuries-old Asian enclave back to China and was immediately greeted with reminders of troubles in another former corner of Portugal's old empire, East Timor, reports AP.

Sampaio meets Friday with Chinese Vice Premier Qian Qichen to discuss the handover of Macau on December 20, which will end more than 400 years of Portuguese rule. Their summit will be the first and the last top-level Sino-Portuguese meeting to be held in Macau.

Sampaio inspected the Macau honor guards at the airport before his entourage was stopped by about 15 Macau-based East Timorese demonstrators demanding that UN troops come to East Timor to

guarantee fair voting in a ballot later this year to determine the future of the territory that was seized by Indonesia in 1975.

Portugal and Indonesia agreed to the balloting last week during UN-sponsored talks in New York.

"We need international force or we cannot vote freely," said Manuel Tirim, a secretary for the National Council for East Timorese Resistance, a grouping for pro-independence movements. Tilman will meet with Sampaio on Monday.

Portuguese and Chinese officials were staying tight-lipped about what Sampaio and Qian will discuss on Friday, though Macau government spokesman Afonso Camoes said the topics will include Sino-Portuguese relations as well as the future of Macau, which is about 40 miles (64 kms) west of Hong Kong.

DPRK gives US team free access to N-site

BEIJING, Mar 18: China on Thursday welcomed an agreement between the United States and North Korea allowing a US inspection of a suspected nuclear weapons site in North Korea, reports AP.

China believes the agreement is conducive to the relaxation of the tensions on the Korean Peninsula and to the improvement of bilateral relations. Foreign Ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi said at a regular briefing on Thursday.

North Korea on Tuesday agreed to allow US inspectors to visit the suspected site in May with follow-up visits to be arranged if necessary. In return, the United States will help North Korea increase potato yields.

North Korea dropped its earlier demand that the United States pay \$300 million for

access.

The dispute over the suspected site had threatened a 1994 accord under which North Korea agreed to freeze what the United States believed was a nuclear weapons programme, in exchange for energy supplies and help from the United States, South Korea and Japan.

In the deal reached Tuesday, the United States agreed that in return for the right to inspect the Kumchang-ni underground site, it would help North Korea increase potato yields as a step to improve political and economic relations between the two countries.

Food shortages and famine-related illnesses have killed up to 2 million of North Korea's 23 million people during the past three years, according to US congressional estimates.

Iraq, Iran exchange POWs

BAGHDAD, Mar 18: Iraq and Iran exchanged prisoners of war on Tuesday, amid signs of warming ties between the two former foes, reports AFP.

Iraq said Iran handed over 450 Iraqis, held since the end of the eight year war between them, while Iraq handed back 54 Iranians. Tehran said 56 of its citizens had been returned.

News of the release came as the official Iraqi news agency reported that President Saddam Hussein had received a message from his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Khatami expressing a desire that Iran "strengthen and deepens its relations with Iraq."

The agency said Khatami was replying to a message sent by Saddam on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Iran's Islamic revolution in February.

Since the end of the 1980-88 war more than 90,000 prisoners have been exchanged but the issue is one of the main bones of contention between the two sides which have yet to sign a peace treaty.

According to Tehran, at least 5,000 Iranian soldiers are still held in Iraq.

Baghdad says it has freed all Iranian POWs, but that 20,000 Iraqi POWs remain in Iranian jails.

Rebels agree to free Filipino general, his aide

MANILA, Mar 18: Philippine Communist rebels said today they will free an army general, his aide and a police officer captured last month, reports AP.

The Communist New People's Army will release the captives between March 22 and April 19. Luis Jalandoni, a leader of the Marxist umbrella group the National Democratic Front, said in a TV interview.

The rebels seized Brig Gen Victor Obillo, commander of the Army's 55th Engineering Brigade, and his aide, Capt Eduardo Montealton, on February 17 outside Davao City. Several days later, they seized police Inspector Robert Bernal in the northern Bicol region.

The decision to release the captives came after a meeting between a group of Catholic priests and rebel leaders living in exile in the city of Utrecht, including Jose Maria Sison, founder of the communist party of the Philippines.

Iraq cancels 3rd Hajj flight

BAGHDAD, Mar 18: Iraq cancelled a flight to carry a third group of pilgrims to Saudi Arabia for the holy trip to Mecca. An air force pilot said today that the plane was not fit to fly, reports AP.

The Russian-made IL-76 cargo plane made two journeys to Saudi Arabia, transporting 221 pilgrims in the annual pilgrimage, or Hajj.

On Tuesday's trip, the plane returned to Baghdad immediately after landing in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, a main drop off point for Muslims.

On Wednesday, its return was delayed more 12 hours for what the official Iraqi News Agency said were "unknown reasons." It was not clear who had held up the plane or whether it remained in Jeddah during the delay. The US Defense Department on Wednesday said it knew nothing about the plane's failure to return as expected.

Russia to expand nuclear cooperation with Iran

MOSCOW, Mar 18: Russian Atomic Energy Minister Yevgeny Adamov said Wednesday that his country will expand its cooperation with Iran in nuclear energy programmes, reports Xinhua.

Adamov said that Moscow will honour its commitments to Tehran in such programmes and that the activities are consistent with guidelines on nuclear non-proliferation, Interfax reported.

The minister said Russia will step up the construction of the first power unit in the Buzher Nuclear Power Station where over 1,000 nuclear and construction engineers are working.

Iran wants Russia to build three more power units in Buzher and such offer creates

jobs and keeps factories running in Russia, the minister said.

Adamov said that during his visit to the United States next week he will "patiently explain to Iran in the development of nuclear weapons."

Specifically, the minister said, he will tell the Americans that the research and design institute of power engineering and the Mendeleev Institute of Chemical Technology do not work on nuclear weapons and do not cooperate with Iran in that field.

The two facilities were among a number of Russian institutions that the United States accused of cooperation with Iran in weapons programmes, a charge denied by Moscow.

Serbs continue to block talks on Kosovo in Paris

PRISTINA, Yugoslavia, Mar 18: The massacre that triggered the Kosovo peace talks was "a crime against humanity," European forensic experts said Wednesday, as Serbs continued to block talks in Paris, reports AFP.

The United States hinted that NATO air strikes against Serb positions could come very quickly if Belgrade, as expected, refuses to sign a Kosovo peace deal.

Russia also urged Belgrade to adopt a "constructive approach" so that the Kosovo peace talks in Paris could reach an agreement.

Two months after the January massacre in Kosovo, Finnish forensic scientists avoided speculating on the precise circumstances surrounding the killing of 45 ethnic Albanians at the Srebrenica village.

Five days passed before the Finns were able to examine the

crops who were removed from the scene by Serbian authorities, said team leader Helena Ranta at a press conference.

What may or may not have happened to the bodies during that time is difficult to establish, she said, adding "I can say it is a crime against humanity, most likely, they were unarmed civilians."

The talks are sponsored by the six-power Contact Group on the former Yugoslavia — Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Russia and the United States. But there was no sign Wednesday that Milosevic's envoys would accept a draft accord that ethnic Albanian negotiators had pledged Monday to accept.

"Unfortunately and sadly for peace in Kosovo, the Serb side is not negotiating seriously," said US State Department spokesman James Rubin.

Debate on expanding US-Japan military ties begins

TOKYO, Mar 18: Lawmakers began debating today a set of bills that could significantly expand Japan's military alliance with the United States and its role in a regional security crisis, reports AP.

Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi has put the revised defence guidelines at the top of his agenda, calling on lawmakers to approve them before he visits Washington in May.

"I urge passage of the guidelines at the earliest possible date," he said during the first day of discussion in a special parliamentary committee hearing.

The bills would allow Japan's armed forces to provide increased logistical support for US troops, join in search and rescue operations and use civilian harbours and airports during military emergencies. They update a 1978 bilateral defence pact.

The guidelines were submitted to parliament almost a year ago after the United States and Japan reached a basic accord in 1997.

But the bills took a back seat to bailing out the banking industry and jump-starting the economy.

A budget aimed at doing that cleared parliament on Wednesday, freeing the way for the security debate.

Washington and Tokyo also

have agreed to jointly research a missile defence system and streamline the US presence on the southern Japanese island of Okinawa, home to two-thirds of the 47,000 American troops in the country.

But the bills have provoked controversy in Japan, where pacifist sentiment remains strong in the wake of its defeat in World War II.

A key concern is the government's refusal to specify geographic area and security criteria for possible military operations Japan would be expected to cooperate in.

It remains unclear, for example, what role Japan would play if hostilities broke out in Taiwan, which the US is committed to aid but which China regards as a renegade province.

Beijing has grown increasingly wary of the strengthened defence relationship between the US and Japan, seeing it as a ploy to contain China's rise as a regional power.

In parliament today, Takahiro Yokomichi of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan demanded a clarification of the boundaries, but was unable to illicit anything more specific than "areas surrounding Japan" from Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura.

Another thorny issue involves parliamentary oversight.

Off the Record

Letter from dead sisters!

ATTLEBORO : When Florence Forget checked through her mail, she didn't expect to find a postcard from her two sisters in Florida. That's because the trip was in 1952, reports AP.

"It was such a shock," said Forget, 87. "I looked at it and I burst out crying."

Forget said the card brought with it the aura of a message from beyond.

She said that in the old days, her sisters Alice Thibault and Doris Taylor, both of whom are now dead, travelled together frequently.

The card, which shows a painting of a public garden in St. Petersburg, Florida, tells Forget the two were "seeing all the sights."

It bears a 2-cent stamp and 1952 postmark, as well as a new 11-cent stamp and March 8, 1999, Jacksonville, Florida, postmark.

Postal Service spokeswoman Christine Dugas said it's unlikely the card was found in a post office, because it would then have been delivered in a special envelope with a letter explaining why it was late.

"It could've been in somebody's attic for 47 years," Dugas said. "Someone found it, put a stamp on it and mailed it."

Vajpayee trumpets three Bs as he completes 1st yr in office

NEW DELHI, Mar 18: Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee is trumpeting three Bs — bomb, bus and budget — as he completes his first turbulent year in office Friday, reports AP.

Whether he can hold on another year is in question because of strains on his fragile 19-party governing coalition, in which socialists and rightists, Hindu nationalists and secularists uneasily share the same platform.

The government could not even escape controversy over its birthday bash Friday — the first anniversary of the day Vajpayee was sworn in as India's 13th prime minister. Celebrations are planned near a 15th-century ruin, prompting criticism because government archaeologists rarely allow public

shows near monuments.

A year was longer than many observers had predicted Vajpayee would be able to hold on. After taking office in 1996, Vajpayee's first government crumbled after less than two weeks because it could not make allies of other parties suspicious of his Bhartiya Janata Party's Hindu nationalist reputation.

The second time he gained office, Vajpayee and other BJP leaders retreated from issues they had long been associated with, such as building a temple at the site where their supporters tore down a mosque in 1992.

"The Vajpayee government has a mixed record in the first year. Very impressive innovations in foreign policy, especially the initiative to improve relations with Pakistan. On the

flip side, the poorest performance in dealing with the minorities, particularly Christians," said Bhambhani Sengupta, a political analyst.

Christians say they have faced more harassment because of their religion than in any other year of India's history. The worst attack came on January 23, when an Australian Baptist missionary and his two young sons were burned to death by a mob in eastern India. Vajpayee has condemned the attacks and called for religious tolerance.

Rightists Hindu groups that are ideological affiliates of the BJP have been accused of fanning anti-Christian violence.

Just three weeks after assuming power, the government ordered a series of nuclear tests, saying India needed a nuclear

defence against neighbours China and Pakistan. Pakistan responded with its own tests, and nations around the world with punitive economic sanctions. Both India and Pakistan suffered economic difficulties, but they continue to trumpet their nuclear tests as a major achievement.

With pressure mounting from Western powers to avoid a nuclear confrontation, Vajpayee travelled to Pakistan last month in a bus to discuss peace with Pakistani counterpart. That launched the first regular bus service between the two countries.

In its first full budget presented last month, the Vajpayee government focused on boosting the agriculture sector, fiscal discipline, indirect tax reform and sops to housing and pharmaceutical sectors. It also pledged to be more welcoming to foreign investors.

In the past year, Vajpayee faced opposition from radical nationalists within his BJP on the question of pursuing economic reforms, especially selling off state enterprises and opening up to more foreign investment. Leftists within his party have also objected to tough fiscal measures such as cuts in federal subsidies that had kept food and fuel prices low.

Vajpayee acted tough and tamed them. "I believe in reforms... We have streamlined subsidies even while protecting the poor. We have started the process of disinvestment," he said in an interview with India Today magazine, which called his first

year "the year of living dangerously."

Vajpayee also has to contend with two powerful allies, both leaders of regional parties. Jayaram Jayalalitha and Mamta Banerjee have repeatedly threatened to withdraw support, which would topple the government. But the fear of midterm elections and the main opposition Congress party coming to power has so far kept the fractious coalition together.

The future will hinge on the outcome of important state elections in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat and Maharashtra at the end of this year and early next year.

If congress does well, its leader Sonia Gandhi could be emboldened to engineer the BJP-led government's collapse and force midterm elections.