### canal will leave by May

PANAMA CITY, Mar 21: US troops stationed along the Panama canal will be reduced significantly by the end of May, the spokesman for the US southern command said Saturday, reports AFP.

"By the end of May most of the contingent will be gone," US Lieutenant Colonel Byron Conover said.

Infantry military police and engineers will be the first to leave the Central American nation, while "logistical maintenance and security" personnel will remain in bases that have not yet been turned over to Panamanian authorities, Conover said.

Under the 1977 treaty between US president Jimmy Carter and his Panamanian counterpart Omar Torrujos, the United States is returning the canal to Panama by December 31, 1999. It has been withdrawing from military installations it built in 1917 to defend the wa-

There are currently some 3,500 US military personnel in Panama. The headquarters of the US southern command was moved from the Panama canal zone to Miami in 1998.

### S Africa to set up diplomatic mission in Libya

JOHANNESBURG, Mar 21: South Africa plans to soon set up a diplomatic mission in Libya, South African president Nelson Mandela said, reports

Mandela's comments came in the wake of a joint initiative by South Africa and Saudi Arabia to convince Libya to extradite two agents to stand trial for the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, which killed 270 people in the air and on the ground. Libya has officially informed the United Nations that it will turn over the two sus-

pects by April 6. "I am honoured and privileged to announce that South Africa will be establishing a resident mission in Tripoli (the Libyan capital) soon," Mandela said in a speech in Libya late Friday which was obtained by Reuters.

# Most US troops guarding Panama Airstrikes loom as fighting flares up in Kosovo

PRISTINA, Yugoslavia, Mar 21: The UN relief agency rushed supplies today to about 9,000 people displaced by a fierce Yugoslav offensive in Kosovo that prompted new warnings from the West that punitive airstrikes may be imminent, reports AP.

The offensive against Kosovo Albanian rebels, coinciding with the departure of international monitors, drove thousands of people from their homes Saturday and resulted in at least eight deaths.

The Yugoslav Army said it was responding to rebel attacks and accused the Kosovo Liberation Army of trying to provoke a wider conflict to prompt NATO intervention.

The intensified fighting drove Kosovo to the verge of the full-scale combat that last year devastated the separatist province.

A fleet of warships and attack planes stood ready today for possible strikes on strategic military targets in Yugoslavia, and the NATO Council called an emergency meeting.

Brittsh Foreign Secretary Robin Cook described the situation as "very grave" and warned Milosevic in a BBC radio interview Saturday night that NATO attacks could begin in "a matter

of days. Serb sources said the province was generally quiet on Sunday morning, and the main road morth of here remained closed for a second day because

of snir)er fire. During Saturday's offensive, fighting raged over dozens of kilometers from Podujevo to the central Drenica region, the heart of the ethnic Albanian rebelli on.

In Drenica, houses were reported ablaze and thousands of villagers were driven from their homes by troops in white jump suits and black ski masks, reporter's who visited the area said. Villages further north

were a lso reported attacked. Fernando del Mundo, spoke sman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. said the UN agency was sending nine truckloads of food, blankets and other supplies to about 9,000 refugees believed to be in

the area. In its account of Saturday's fighting, the government's Tanjug news agency said the army responded after ethnic "Albanian terrorist forces intensified attacks on convoys and units of Yugoslav army in a wide area"

of northern Kosovo. "The latest attempt for a massive provocation (to force) a wider conflict ... has the aim of creating an impression of humanitarian disaster and extorting a NATO intervention in Serbia after the political negotiations in France ended," Tanjug said.

Quoting the Yugoslav Army, Tanjug said troops responded "energetically" to rebel attacks, inflicted "heavy losses and seized a large quantity of

The Serb-run Media Centre reported that seven KLA fighters were killed and a policeman seriously wounded Saturday near Srebica. One policeman was killed in the Podujevo area and one seriously wounded, the same source said.



A municipal worker (R) under police protection uses a high pressure water hose to remove election campaign posters from a Colombo wall yesterday as part of a move to remove political propaganda from public places. Under local council election laws, no banners, posters or decorations are allowed in public places. Five regions in Sri Lanka go to the polls on April 6 amid fears of political violence. - AFP photo

### Vajpayee vows not to let 'others' capture Indian territory

CALCUTTA, Mar 21: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Saturday vowed not to let "others" capture Indian territory and said prospects for peace with arch-rival Pakistan increased after tit-for-tit nu-

clear tests, reports Reuters. "In the last 50 years India has been attacked three times, our territory is in possession of others. We won't let it happen again," Vajpayee told a rally in Calcutta to mark the first anniversary of his government.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since independence in 1947, two of them over the disputed Kashmir area. The neigbours conducted a series of nuclear tests last May,

raising fears of a nuclear arms race on the subcontinent. But Vajpayee saw gains from nuclear deterrence.

"(It was) good that everything came in the open ... Now both have similar weapons. The prospects of peace will increase. A nuclear weapon is not a weapon for fighting, it is a weapon for peace, deterrence," he said.

Earlier in the week, the two countries started a commercial bus service, linking Delhi with Lahore for the first time.

Vajpayee said his government had improved relations with all its neighbours since it came to power a year ago.

"Not just Pakistan, our relations with Bangladesh have been strengthened, our closeness with Nepal has increased with a transit treaty (and) a trade treaty with Sri Lanka is being signed," he said.

Vaijpayee said the government was also taking steps to strengthen ties with Bhutan and Myanmar.

"To further strengthen relations, our foreign minister is going to Bhutan. We have also had talks with Myanmar," he

"The number of our friends is rising, new doors of cooperation with our friends are being opened," he added.

Vajpayee, however, did not mention India's relations with China which have been chilly since the nuclear tests were conducted.

Shortly before the tests, Defence Minister George Fernandes described China as its top potential threat.

India also accused China of aiding Pakistan in developing nuclear-capable missiles, while Beijing accused India of seeking to dominate South Asia.

### Armed gangs destroying houses in Borneo Island

SAMBAS, Indonesia, Mar 21: Hundreds of euphoric warriors, some wearing shirts stained with victims' blood, pillaged and burned abandoned homes on Borneo Island today after ethnic slaughter that left at least 73 people dead, reports

A chunk of flesh dangled by a string from the spear of one fighter, who said it was the heart of a man he killed. A few men carried ears and pieces of scalp. On a main road, a severed head sat on an oil drum with a cigarette stuffed in its nostril.

Ritual savagery has consumed a coastal region of Indonesia near the Malaysian border since armed gangs of ethnic Malay, Dayak and Bugis men set upon immigrants from the island of Madura last week. For the most part, the military

Old customs of tribal war that were thriving when British and Dutch colonists ventured into the Borneo interior centuries ago have been played out in gruesome shows of public rejoicing.

has stayed clear of the conflict.

At street intersections, cheering crowds have assembled to view the heads of Madurese men that were sliced off. Their killers say they have cut open the bodies of some and eaten their hearts. On the outskirts of Sambas.

a village army of raucous young men paraded down a road with a wide assortment of weapons spears, sickles, pitchforks, curved daggers, sharpened bamboo staves, swords with serrated blades and catapults with arrows.

Some carried pistols and

Thousands of Iraqis return home

homemade rifles. Gunshots boomed as Malay and Dayak men battered down doors of empty Madurese homes with heavy wooden planks and splashed gasoline inside. Plumes of smoke gushed from flaming houses. More than 15,000 Madurese

have already fled in cars and boats or were evacuated in military trucks, so there are few potential victims around. Intent on extermination, the gangs were hunting for any pockets of survivors who didn't have time to get away.

"They're hiding in the forest," one fighter said. "When we find them, we are going to kill

The military has confirmed 73 people dead, but some news reports put the toll as high as

# BUILFIE

US ultralight expert killed: A 75-year-old ultralight pilot who won nationwide acclaim as a leading expert on the unconventional planes died when his ultralight crashed onto a golf course less than a kilometre away from his flight centre. AP reports from Lakewood.

Vincent Vitollo's ultralight nose-dived to the ground Saturday, killing him and critically injuring a passenger. Investigators do not know what caused the plane to crash, said Gregory Sakowicz, an executive assistant Ocean County prosecutor. Authorities said the weather was clear and the winds were low.

Leading British painter Heron dies:
Patrick Heron, Britain's foremost abstract painter, died Saturday at the age of 79, the director of London's Tate Gallery said, AP reports from London.

Heron died at his home near St Ives, Cornwall, in southwestern England, said Nicholas Serota, a longtime friend of the artist and director of the famous London art museum. No cause of death was announced immediately. "Heron was one of the most influential figures in post-war British art," Serota said. "He was an enormously engaging man who remained very young right to the end of his life and was passionate about painting."

Arrest of ETA men protested: More than 60,000 demonstrators marched in northern Spain on Saturday to protest the recent arrests of alleged members and supporters of an armed Basque separatist group, AP reports' from Bilbao, Spain

Led by members of the Herri Batasuna, the political wing of the ETA, protesters marched peacefully through downtown Bilbao, 350-km north of Madrid. "Leave the Basque country alone," read the Basque-language slogan on the banner at the front of the march. The demonstrators, many linked to pro-independence political parties and social groups, held placards displaying photos of prisoners.

Costa Rican president to visit Taiwan: Costa Rican President Miguel Angel Rodriguez will begin a visit to this island today that should help Taiwan strengthen relations with one of its few diplomatic allies, the Foreign Ministry said yesterday, AP reports from Taipei.

Rodriguez, accompanied by several members of his Cabinet will meet President Lee Teng-hui and government and business leaders during his five-day visit, the ministry said. The sides will sign a protocol protecting Taiwanese investments in the Central American country and an agreement on sports exchanges, it added.

Russia launches Chinese sat: Russia successfully launched a Chinese satellite yesterday from its rocket base in neighbouring Kazakstan, a news report said, AP says from Moscow.

The Asiasat satellite was launched at 3:09 am (0019 GMT) from the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakstan. It was carried into orbit by a Proton-K booster rocket. Asiasat, built by Hughes Space and Communications International of Los Angeles, is designed to provide a range of telecommunications services, including television broadcasts.

### Netanyahu warns against unilateral declaration of Palestinian state

Clinton orders stepping up

efforts to curb gun violence

said.

JERUSALEM, Mar 21: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netarryahu warned on Saturday that Israel would respond "sharply" to any unilateral declaration of a state by Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, reports Reuters.

Responding to comments by Arafat on Friday in which he said the PLO would fight anyone who tried to prevent the declaration of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, Netanyahu said such a move would be a "serious mistake."

"If Arafat should take such a step. Israel would respond most sharply and vigorously in a way that would result in the Palestinia n authority losing and not gaining anything," Netanyahu said in a statement without

WASHINGTON, Mar 21: US

President Bill Clinton ordered

senior administration officials

eral government's efforts to

curta gun violence and to study

local success stories in the fight

against illegal firearms, reports

that also took aim at Republi-

canss for opposing some crime-

fighting measures he has pro-

posed in his new budget, Clinton

hailed the decline in the

country's crime rate, but said

malevolence of crime," the

President said. "That is why

disarming criminals has been,

over all crime rate has fallen 20

per cent, while gun crimes are

down 25 per cent and gun mur-

and must continue to be, a top

Clinton said the country's

"Guns have magnified the

more needs to be done.

crime-fighting priority."

In a weekly radio address

Reuters.

on Slaturday to step up the fed-

elaborating.

In the past Netanyahu's hardline government has promised to impose Israeli law in still-occupied parts of the West Bank if Arafat unilaterally declares a state.

The right-wing Prime Minister, who suspended a US-brokered land-for-security deal last December over alleged Palestinian violations, opposes Palestinian statehood and has made the issue a plank of his campaign for a May 17 general

Arafat has said he is entitled to declare an independent state unilaterally on May 4, the date set in interim Palestinian-Israeli peace deals for the completion of a still-elusive treaty.

ders are down by one-third. But,

he said there were still 14,000

"While the numbers are de-

clining, any child caught in the

crossfire of a gangs shootout, or

a police officer struck down by a

criminal's bullet, or a store

clerk murdered in a robbery is

one tragedy too many," Clinton

Treasury Secretary Robert Ru-

bin, who oversees the Bureau of

Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms

(ATF) "to use every available

tool to increase the prosecution

"I've asking them to work

of gun, criminals and shut

closely with local, state and

federal law enforcement offi-

cials and to report back to me

with a plan to reduce gun vio-

lence by applying proven local

strategies to fight gun crime na-

tionwide," he added.

down illegal gun markets.

Clinton directed Reno and

murders by guns in 1997.

#### without performing Haji KARBALA, Mar 21: Thouwith visas and made all arrangements to house and transport, but they left without per-

sands of Iraqis returned Saturday from Saudi Arabia, many angry and hurt that political differences kept them from making the annual pilgrimage to Islam's holiest sites, reports

The Iraqi government or- the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. dered the would-be pilgrims, believed to number about 18,000, back from Makkah when the Kingdom refused its demand that frozen Iraqi funs and not Saudi charitŷ — be used to pay for the Hajj.

The order came a day after the group organised by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein barged into Saudi Arabia, most without money and many without passports, to try to join the

The Kingdom provided them

forming any rituals. About a dozen busloads of

Iraqis arrived late Saturday in Karbala, a city holy to Shiite Muslims that is 80-km south of The buses stopped at the

headquarters of Saddam's ruling Baath Party.

"First we cheered, danced and clapped," said Adnan Mohammed, remembering the Iraqis joy at getting into Saudi Arabia. He added that "In the end we cried" in frustration at not being able to perform the

Qahtan Kadum, a history teacher, said he was upset that "18,000 Muslims crossed hundred of kilometres to make the Hajj and then cannot make it because of political differ-

Rashid Abbas complained that Saudi police had cordoned off their camps. State-run Iraqi Television charged that Saudi security forces fired rubber bullets in the air to frighten the pilgrims. The Kingdom denied any ill-treatment.

Nadhem Hussein, 70, worried that he had lost his last chance to make a pilgrimage. saying "I am an old man and I may not be able to do it again."

Earlier, Saudi Arabia's Interior Minister, Prince Nayef, told reporters in Makkah that the Iraqis had refused to enter camps set up for them and turned back.

## Malaysia takes all-out steps to control encephalitis virus

SUGAI NIPAH, Malaysia. Mar 21: Malaysian soldiers covered from head-to-toe in plastic overalls and face masks slaughtered pigs with shotguns today in an all-out effort to control a virus that may have killed more than 50 people, reports AP.

The tranquillity of rural farms was shattered by the sound of gunfire and the squeals of frightened animals as soldiers carried out orders to exterminate hogs in villages worst affected by the outbreak of Japanese encephalitis.

Health authorities used tractors, bulldozers and backhoes to bury the carcasses. The operation began late Saturday, but was hampered by rainfall. About 1,600 pigs were killed on the first day, according to

newspaper reports from the state of Negri Sembilan, located 100-km southeast of the Malaysian capital, Kuala

More than 30 people have died in the area, which has a population of 11,000, bringing the nationwide death toll to 53 since October. Nearly all the victims have lived or worked near hog farms. No new deaths were reported

Hundreds of families have already abandoned the villages. Police said the few who remained in the prosperous pig-rearing district had been evacuated to enable soldiers and police to begin the slaughter.

Fire and rescue helicopters clattered over the villages Saturday to dump 9,000 liters of

insecticide on swamps where mosquitoes breed, The Star daily reported. "Our aim is to destroy the

mosquito larvae in the canals and ponds," said Soh Chai Hock, the region's fire chief. The state government said about 65,000 pigs would be shot

over two days. Farmers in the region say the pig population totals more than 300,000. There was no immediate explanation of the discrepancy.

The federal government ordered vaccinations for 300,000 people and 500,000 pigs nationwide in a bid to control the disease.

But there was no confirmation that all the reported deaths were from the Japanese encephalitis virus.

### Int'l War Crimes Tribunal report

### Croatian Army carried out 'ethnic cleansing' of Serbs then moved to Bosnia.

NEW YORK, Mar 21: International War Crimes Tribunal investigators in the Hague have concluded that the Croatian Army carried out "ethnic cleansing" of Serbs during a 1995 assault, Sunday's New York Times reported, says Reuters.

The Times, quoting unpub-lished tribunal documents, said investigators accuse Croatia of summary executions and indiscriminate shelling of civilian populations and have recommended that three Croatian generals be indicted. A US official said the in-

dictments could come within a few weeks, according to the pa-The indictments would be

the first of Croatian Army officers for actions in the Balkan wars of 1991 to 1995, which first pitted an independenceseeking Croatia against rebel Serbs and Serbia proper, and

The Times said a spokesman for the Croatian Ministry of Defence denied that any war crimes or other illegal acts were committed during the offensive, which the Croatians dubbed as

Operation Storm.

ton, Ohio.

In just four days of Operation Storm, the Croatian Army regained territory held by rebel Serbs for four years. The Croatian Army then linked up with Bosnian Croat forces and began to roll over Serbian units in neighbouring Bosnia. Those defeats, along with NATO bombing helped bring the Serbs to the negotiating table in Day-

The Croatian Army drove more than 100,000 Serbs from their ancestral homelands. A section of the tribunal's

150-page report quoted by the Times says: "During the course of the military offensive, the

cial police committed numerous violations of international humanitarian law, including but not limited to shelling of Knin and other cities. "During and in the 100 days

Croatian armed forces and spe-

following the military offensive, at least 150 Serb civilians were summarily executed, and many hundreds disappeared."

The report says investiga-tors gathered "sufficient material to establish that the three generals who commanded the military operation" - Mirko Morac, Ante Gotovina and the military governor of the Knin region, Ivan Cermak - could be held accountable under international law.

These men, the report charges were responsible for driving the Serbs out of the area, a process that became known as "ethnic cleansing."

### Osama Bin Laden located in Jalalabad

LONDON, Mar 21: Suspected international terrorist Osama Bin Laden, who vanished last month from his Afghanistan stronghold in Kandahar, is now living in the east of the country. the Sunday Telegraph reported,

says AFP. The British weekly which cited western intelligence reports said that he was moving between three camps near the city of Jalalabad on the border with Pakistan in an area controlled by the ruling Taliban militia.

Agents who located Bin Laden say he trusts no one and is concerned for his security. He has abandoned his distinctive convoy of 20 land cruisers for an inconspicuous white family saloon car, said the newspaper.

He is also said to have distanced himself from most of his former retinue and to have reduced his bodyguards to only two trusted lieutenants.

The US government has accused Bin Laden of masterminding the August bombing of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that left 224 dead and thousands wounded.

Washington recently heightened pressure on the Taliban to either hand over Bin Laden or expel him.

Earlier this month, the New York Times reported that Bin Laden had had a violent row with the Taliban who had kicked him out of his stronghold in Kandahar and taken away his satellite telephones.

It cited an unidentified US officials as saying that the Taliban had sent a clear signal that they were no longer eager to protect the suspected master

#### Coast Guard trying to prevent oil spill from reaching Manila Bay

MANILA, Mar 21: Coast Guard workers laid additional oil spill booms today to prevent a spill from a sunken oil tanker in Manila Bay from reaching the shore near an important tourist district, a Philippine official said, reports The tanker Sea Brothers I.

carrying 420,000 liters (109,200

gallons) of oil, crashed into the

breakwater in the bay, capsized and sank on Friday, spilling most of its cargo, Coast Guard Lt. Rommel Olarte said. Most of the seven crew members were injured in the acci-

dent, but none seriously, the Coast Guard said. The Coast Guard initially

reported that the oil slick covered about 35 hectares (79 acres) of the bay with an estimated 320,000 liters (83,200 gallons) of oil that spilled when the tanker capsized.

It later reported the oil slick covered a much smaller area. Olarte said about four drums of oil-fighting chemicals have been used to contain the slick.

### Troops clash with MILF rebels in Philippines

MANILA, Mar 21: Government troops clashed with fighters from a Muslim separatist group today as they continued an offensive against a different separatist group and bandits in southern island province, reports AP.

Military officials said there were no immediate reports of casualties or damage in the clashes in the remote villages of Baiwas and Pamatsakin in Basilan province. A Moro Islamic Liberation

Front leader, Ustadz Shariff Julabbi, said army troops attacked their positions in the two villages today, prompting them to retaliate with rocket and rifle fire, which destroyed two army troop carriers. · A southern Philippine mili-

tary spokesman, Rafael Romero, confirmed the fighting but said the army was unaware that the rebels it encountered in Sumisip were members of the MILF, which has been involved in on-and-off peace talks with the Manila government. He said the military was not

aware of an MILF camp in the villages where the MILF guerillas claimed they were attacked. About a 1,000 people fled the villages and nearby areas due to the fighting.

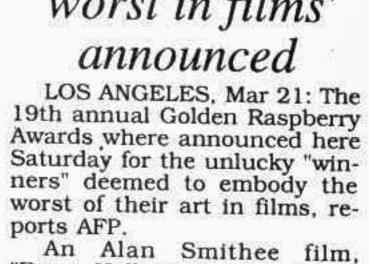
#### Jailed Chinese dissident seriously ill

BEIJING, Mar 21: A Chinese dissident given a 12 years jail term in December for attempting to organise an opposition party has become seriously ill with heart and stomach problems while serving his sentence in a labour camp, a rights group reported today, reports AP.

Qin Yongmin, one of three leading members of the banned China Democracy Party convicted of trying to subvert the rule of the Communist Party and given long prison terms. had a swollen face and complained of abdominal pain when his brother visited him on Saturday, the Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China reported.

Qin's family was allowed to give him medicine for the first time during the visit, the Hong Kong-based group said. In his four months in prison he has not been given medical care for his heart disease, high blood pressure and stomach ailments. it said.

Qin is being held in a labour camp in his home city of Wuhan where inmates make construction materials and plastic products, the Information Centre reported.



"Burn, Hollywood, Burn," won worst film for 1998 and its screenwriter, Joe Eszterhas, picked up a record four awards, including "worst supporting actor" for the role in which he played himself.

song, breaking the previous award held by Keving Costner and Sylvester Stallone, each of whom "won" three Razzies. The 'worst actor' award went to Bruce Willis for a trio of poor performances - "Armageddon," "Mercury Rising," and "The Siege." The Spice Girls got a



Eszterhas also "won" awards for worst new star, worst screenplay and worst original

collected "worst actress award", and there was a three-way tie for 'worst re-make or sequel' for "The Avengers," "Godzilla," and "Psycho."



Katherine Tramarin of New York City reads an entertainment magazine as she waits outside the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion Saturday to be one of the 350 fans admitted into the coveted Oscar blecher arrival area for the arrival of celebrities in the 71st Annual Academy Awards. — AFP photo