

'Shakespeare in Love' wins seven Oscars

LOS ANGELES, Mar 22: In a night of surprises and upsets, the romantic comedy "Shakespeare in Love" won seven Academy Awards, including best picture and best actress for Gwyneth Paltrow. Steven Spielberg's bloody World War II epic "Saving Private Ryan" won the prize for directing and four other Oscars, reports AP.

Roberto Benigni, as an Italian Jew shielding his son from the horrors of the Holocaust in "Life is Beautiful," pulled off a stunning first — winning as best actor in a foreign film. The tragicomic film, which Benigni also wrote and directed, won additional Oscars for foreign film and dramatic score Sunday.

"This is a terrible mistake because I used up all my English," he said, as he leapt to the stage for the second time. Paltrow, never before nominated, was honoured for her role as the object of a young Bard's affections.

"I don't feel very deserving of this in your presence," she said.

sobbing, as she named her fellow nominees. Judi Dench, who played the imperious but fair-minded Queen Elizabeth I in "Shakespeare in Love," and James Coburn, the alcoholic, abusive father in "Affliction," won best supporting Oscars.

"Shakespeare in Love," which led all contenders with 13 nominations, also picked up Oscars for original screenplay, art direction, costume design and musical or comedy score.

"Elizabeth," another best picture nominee, won just one award, for makeup, while the fifth contender, "The Thin Red Line," Terrence Malick's come-back movie about WW II in the Pacific, was shut out.

"Saving Private Ryan" also took prizes for cinematography, editing, sound and sound effects editing.

"Am I allowed to say I really wanted this? Spielberg joked as he accepted his second directing Oscar. His first was for "Schindler's List" in 1993. Spielberg expressed grati-

tude to all families who lost sons in World War II, and addressing his father, a veteran, said: "Dad, this is for you."

The unflinchingly realistic "Private Ryan" had looked as if it might become a runaway favourite early in the evening when it picked up the editing and cinematography awards, which are often precursors of best picture.

But "Shakespeare in Love," with its clever dialogue and showbusiness anachronisms, obviously entranced the Academy's voters.

Besides Benigni, the only performer in a foreign language film to win an Oscar was Sophia Loren for "Two Women" in 1961.

Fittingly, it was Miss Loren who presented him with his first award of the night. The perpetually ebullient Benigni clambered over the backs of seats and hopped onto the stage after Loren openly rooted for her fellow Italian and announced his foreign film victory.

"I want to kiss everybody," said Benigni.

Another Holocaust film, "The Last Days," won the documentary award.

Dench, who made an indelible impression despite her brief screen time in the romantic comedy, held up her gold statuette and said with a smile: "I feel for eight minutes on the screen I should only get a little bit of him."

It was the first Oscar for the 64-year-old British stage actress, who had been nominated last year for playing a different queen, Victoria, in "Mrs. Brown."

Coburn, 70, had never been nominated.

"I've been doing this work for like over half my life, and I finally got one right, I guess," said the veteran actor, whose dozens of films include "Our Man Flint" and "The Magnificent Seven."

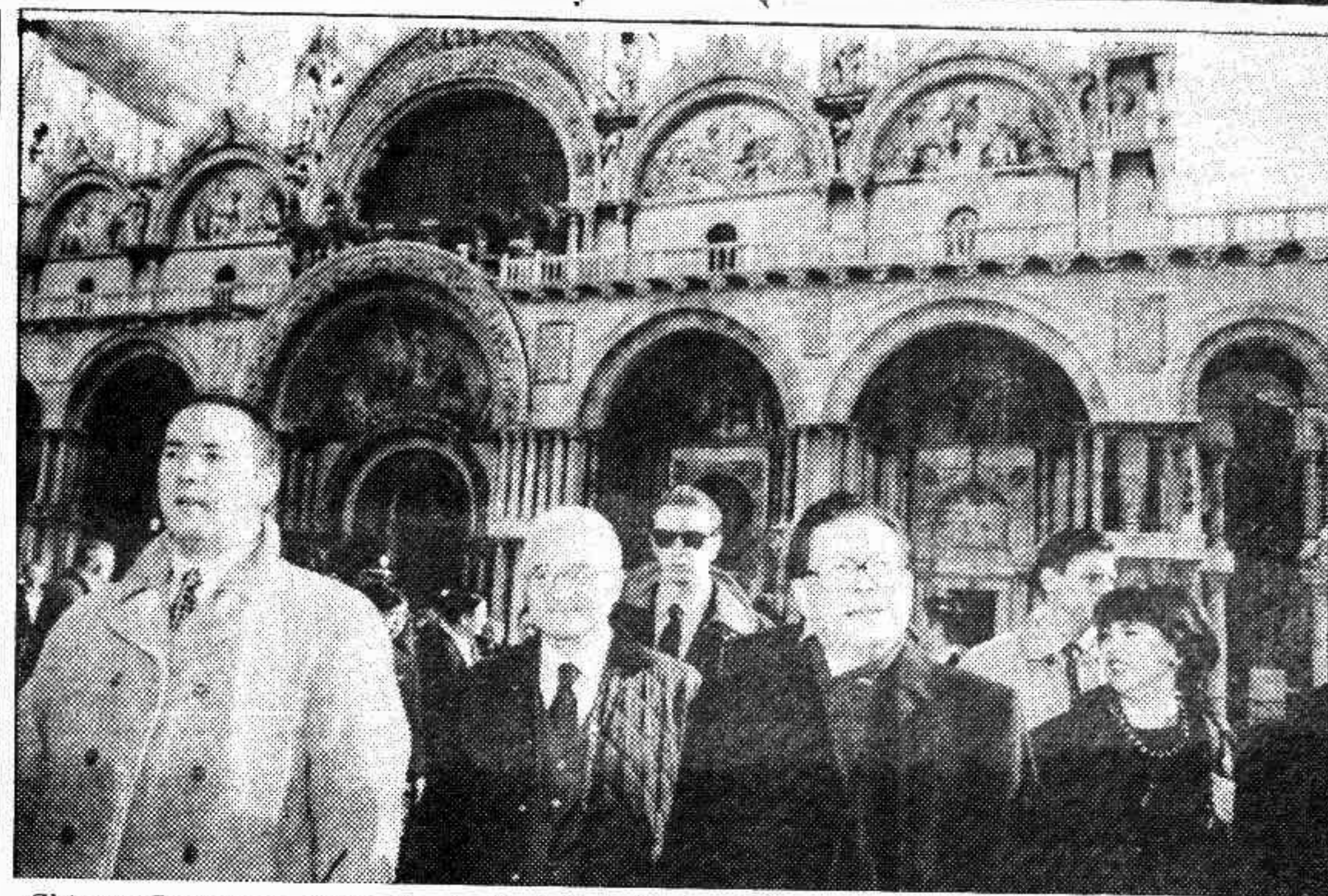
"Some of them you do for money, some of them you do for love. This is a love child," Coburn said.

Host Whoopi Goldberg, who changed costumes repeatedly to mimic film characters, got the show off to a rousing start when she came out in full regalia as Elizabeth — who figured in two of this year's contenders — getting a rousing ovation, then a laugh when she announced with an accent that was more Bette Davis than British, "I am the African Queen."

She joked about being the last master of ceremonies of the century and millennium, saying: "I am the last 20th century fox."

This year's awards returned to the small but classy Dorothy Chandler Pavilion of the Los Angeles Music Centre after several years at the larger, but less glamorous Shrine Auditorium.

The ceremony was one of the last in a borrowed hall. If all goes well, the academy will present the awards in its own theater in a brand-new complex on Hollywood Boulevard in 2001. It will mark Oscar's first appearance in the Hollywood district of the city since 1960.



Chinese President Jiang Zemin (2nd R) is flanked by unidentified officials during his visit to S Marco Square during a sightseeing trip in Venice Sunday before the start of an official ten-day European tour. — AFP photo

Last-ditch attempt to avoid airstrikes on Serb positions

PRISTINA, Mar 22: A special US envoy is making a final effort to persuade Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic to accept a peace plan for Kosovo, where violence is sweeping rural rebel strongholds and the heavily guarded provincial capital, reports AP.

As NATO airstrikes loom, Richard Holbrooke, who negotiated a failed cease-fire last year, meets late Monday with Milosevic.

US National Security Adviser Sandy Berger said Holbrooke will be delivering a stark message: "Move to the path of peace or face the punishment of NATO."

In Washington, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright dispatched veteran Balkans troubleshooter Holbrooke to warn Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic he faces NATO airstrikes unless he halts aggression in Kosovo.

"We will make clear that Milosevic faces a stark choice to halt aggression against the

Kosovar Albanians and accept an interim settlement with a NATO-led implementation force or bear the full responsibility for the consequences of NATO military action, Albright vowed in a statement.

However, the last-ditch attempt to find a diplomatic solution in Kosovo won't delay preparations for NATO airstrikes against Yugoslavia if the peace effort fails, Clinton administration officials say.

Whatever the outcome of the mission by special US envoy Richard Holbrooke, the administration is feeling heat from members of Congress to Holbrooke's effort on one hand and to the bombing plans on the other.

"I don't think this will delay the preparations that are going on in NATO," White House national security adviser Sandy Berger said on CBS television's "Face the Nation."

President Bill Clinton spoke Sunday about the situation

with French President Jacques Chirac, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. The White House said he was reaffirming NATO unity against Milosevic's continuing military campaign.

Criticism of the administration's activities began even before Albright announced the planned Holbrooke-Milosevic meeting.

In Kosovo, the Serb-led Yugoslav army struck again Sunday at Kosovo Liberation Army strongholds in the north and north-central parts of the province, driving several thousand ethnic Albanians from their homes.

In the provincial capital, Pristina, late Sunday gunfire from a speeding car killed four Serb police and wounded another in a primarily ethnic Albanian neighborhood.

Meanwhile, Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov

warned Monday that Russia is totally opposed to possible NATO air attacks against Yugoslavia and said efforts to find a political solution must not be abandoned.

"We are categorically against the use of force against Yugoslavia. We believe that political levers to influence the situation are far from being exhausted yet," Primakov told reporters after meeting with visiting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

China's Foreign Minister has also warned that military action against Yugoslavia over Kosovo would be unacceptable, official media reported Monday.

"Resorting to a military action against Yugoslavia without the authorisation of the United Nations Security Council seriously violates the UN charter... and therefore cannot be accepted by the international community," Foreign Ministry Spokesman Sun Yexi told the China Daily.

Israeli warplanes attack Hezbollah bases in Lebanon

SIDON (Lebanon), Mar 22: Israeli warplanes fired two missiles Monday at suspected guerrilla bases in southern Lebanon, Lebanese security officials said, reports AP.

The attack targeted the deserted village of Mitla in the highlands of Iqlim al-Tuffah, a stronghold of the Hezbollah guerrilla group that faces an Israeli-occupied enclave in South Lebanon.

An Israeli army spokesman in Jerusalem confirmed the raid, saying all pilots returned safely to their bases.

There was no immediate word of casualties from the morning attack on Mitla, some 20 kilometres (12 miles) southeast of Sidon, provincial capital of southern Lebanon.

Late Sunday, the Israeli army said its jets had attacked suspected guerrilla bases in the mountains around Sojod, also in Iqlim al-Tuffah. There were no reports of damage or casualties.

Iranian-backed Hezbollah guerrillas are leading the fight to oust 1,500 Israeli soldiers and 2,500 allied militiamen from the Israeli-occupied zone, which Israel carved out in 1985 to protect against cross-border guerrilla attacks.

Clinton offers to help N Ireland peace process

LONDON, Mar 22: US President Bill Clinton offered in a telephone conversation with British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Sunday to help the Northern Ireland peace process in any way he could. Blair's office said, reports Reuters.

A spokeswoman said the two leaders touched on northern Ireland during a discussion on the Kosovo crisis.

Clinton briefed Blair on meetings he had with rival Northern Ireland politicians during St Patrick's Day celebrations in Washington last week.

Clinton said "as ever he stood ready to help in any way he could in the next phase of the peace process" in the British province, the spokeswoman said.

Northern Ireland was rocked last week by a series of violent incidents, including the killings of Roman Catholic human rights lawyer Rosemary Nelson and former Protestant guerrilla Frankie Curry.

The United States, Britain and Ireland are pressing Protestant and Catholic parties in the Northern Ireland peace talks to reach a compromise that would allow the creation of a power sharing provincial government at the end of this month.

Seven Lankan troops killed in mine blast

VAVUNIYA (Sri Lanka), Mar 22: At least seven government soldiers were killed and three wounded when their vehicle was blown up by mines planted by Tamil Tiger rebels, military officials said Monday, reports AP.

Sunday's attack was the first in an area which was captured by Sri Lankan military from the rebels earlier this month, said the officials speaking on condition of anonymity.

The soldiers were returning to their camps from duty posts when the blast occurred.

The rebels want a separate homeland for Sri Lanka's 3.3 million Tamils, accusing the 14-million strong Sinhalese majority of discrimination, a charge the government denies. Over 57,000 people have died in the insurrection since 1983 in the country off India's southern coast.

In a swift operation beginning March 6, Sri Lankan troops seized more than 500 square kilometres (200 square miles) from the rebels in their stronghold in the northern jungles.

More than 3,000 soldiers carried out the offensive, codenamed "Operation Battle Cry." The rebels offered no resistance, and the troops suffered no casualties.

It was the first offensive by government forces since they called off of a bruising campaign last December to take control of the highway linking the northern Jaffna Peninsula with the south. The 19-month campaign cost thousands of lives on both sides before it was abandoned.

Congress launches campaign to topple Vajpayee govt

NEW DELHI, Mar 22: India's main opposition party has launched a campaign to topple the Hindu nationalist-led government, reversing a year-long resolve not to destabilise it, officials said today, reports AP.

In a sudden reversal of tactics, the Congress Party has taken to disrupting Parliament's budget session and launched a war of words aimed at undermining the fragile multi-party government.

Congress leaders say the new aggression is following the orders of party president Sonia Gandhi, who had earlier promised not to destabilise Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

But with Vajpayee celebrating one year in office, the Congress seems to have realised that its "we are not-crazy-for-power" attitude is not taking it anywhere, analysts say.

And Vajpayee, otherwise a soft-spoken man, is hitting back.

On Sunday, the prime minister told supporters in southern India that Congress, which has ruled India for most years since

its independence in 1947, was itching to return to power.

"If congressmen want power, they should wait for elections, fight them and win a majority in Parliament," he said.

The next elections are due in 2003, but the Congress feels that is far away.

The Times of India newspaper reported today that Congress chief Sonia Gandhi "is said to have finally made up her mind to try and pull down the coalition government" led by Vajpayee's BJP party.

A Congress strategist said the party would try to see if the budget session can be turned into the government's last Parliament session.

The BJP agreed it was facing a determined Congress onslaught.

"The conflict between the BJP and Congress is going to intensify in the coming days because of the latter's aggressive attempt to get back to power," BJP vice-president JP Mathur said.

Vajpayee's coalition has a wafery-thin majority in Parlia-

ment. Voting on a key issue last month showed that the Congress was separated from the treasury benches by just 30 votes.

Congress strategists believe the numbers can increase from disaffected members of the ruling coalition. Vajpayee's meeting Sunday were boycotted by a key southern regional ally.

Another government ally also hit out at the BJP on Sunday.

Differences also plague the BJP. Last week's celebrations here to mark one year of Vajpayee in power were boycotted by several party stalwarts.

Congress chief Sonia Gandhi reportedly wants to press home the advantage.

"The party at this hour needs street fighters like us," said Kamal Nath, one of "young turks," in Congress who are critical of old-timers for not taking an aggressive line against the nationalists.

"The battle on the streets cannot be kept out of Parliament," he said.

Mahathir accuses US of backing demonstrations

ALOR SETAR (Malaysia), Mar 22: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad on Monday accused the United States of backing street demonstrations in a bid to topple him and control the country, reports AP.

Speaking to some 1,000 people at a rally here, Mahathir said certain people were being used by foreign elements for this purpose.

"They hate the government and me. They want to make us weak and conquer us again. This is not fiction, it is not just made up by me," the 73-year-old Prime Minister said.

Mahathir said he was not "power hungry" but it was his responsibility to warn the people about the possibility of the country being recolonised.

"I see my people lying on the railway tracks and the train is approaching. I just can't walk away. I have to warn the people," he added.

The premier has late Sunday singled out US Vice-President Al Gore for inciting street demonstrations.

Four months after Gore visited Kuala Lumpur during the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit where he praised street protestors here, Mahathir described the US leader as "rude."

"Al Gore does not love Malaysia nor its people, Al Gore and his government only wants to manipulate and control our country," the premier told 20,000 people at Sunday rally in northern Kedah state.

Hillary begins tour of North Africa

CAIRO, Mar 22: First, the Stars and Stripes. Now, the Mosque of Salah Talai.

Hillary Rodham Clinton's campaign for historic preservation swept across 5,800 miles Sunday to the heart of the Islamic Cairo, where she and the wide-eyed daughter, Chelsea, visited treasures that the United States is helping to restore, reports AP.

The American first lady, beginning a 12-day tour of North Africa, added a foreign flavour to the drive she began last year at home with the restoration of the original Star-Spangled Banner: to rally public and private funds for the preservation of historic landmarks and artifacts.

"I am here on behalf of my husband and of the American people to strengthen the bonds of friendship and partnership between our two countries, deepen our dialogue and see firsthand how Egyptians are moving toward the future while preserving their extraordinary culture and heritage," Hillary said in a statement distributed as she and Chelsea, 19, disembarked from their 13-hour flight from Washington.

Struggling against the wind to team a gauzy beige scarf over her hair, Hillary indulged Egyptian news photographers clamouring for a pose at the hilltop Citadel and then entered the Mosque of Muhammad Ali in her stocking feet, as is required by Islamic tradition.



Sicilians of Corleone, historical home of the Sicilian Mafia, attend an anti-Mafia celebration Sunday. Some 1,000 youths from across Italy marked a day of remembrance of the victims of Mafia violence, with the backing of Italian President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Greek PM reelected as party leader:

Premier Costas Simitis was reelected Sunday as leader of the governing Socialists, but more than a third of the party delegates snubbed the vote in dissent, AP reports from Athens.

Simitis, who was not challenged, received 3,723 votes from the 5,800 delegates at a four-day party congress. Remaining delegates abstained or cast blank or invalid ballots.

Asiasat launches its 4th sat:

Asia Satellite Telecommunications Co. Ltd. (Asiasat) said yesterday that it had successfully launched its fourth satellite, Asiasat 3SM, in Russia, NTV reports from Hong Kong.

The satellite was successfully launched into space on a Russian Proton rocket from Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan at 0009 GMT on Sunday, a spokesman for the firm said.

Blast in Siberian mine:

Six coal miners were seriously injured yesterday when a methane gas explosion ripped through their pit at Prokopyevsk, in the Kuzbass region of central Siberia, NTV television reported, AFP says from Moscow.

Moscow Echo radio said that 16 people were working in the area at the time of the blast shortly after midnight (1730 GMT Sunday). All work in the mine had been stopped and an investigation opened, the reports said.

Independence declaration on May 4 under discussion with EU, US: Arafat

VIENNA, Mar 22: Yasser Arafat told reporters Sunday that no decision has yet been made on whether to declare an independent Palestinian state on May 4, when interim peace accords expire, reports AP.

The Palestinian leader spoke during a trip to Vienna where he met Sunday with Prime Minister Viktor Klima as part of his tour to gain international support for eventual independence.

"It is according to the Oslo agreement... we have the right to declare (independence)," Arafat told reporters. But he added that whether or not it would be on May 4 "is under discussion with all our friends in the European Union and the United States... for this very important and very sensitive

matter."

Arafat, who arrived from Greece, has made several European stops before talks Tuesday with US President Bill Clinton in Washington on the statehood issue. He headed next to Sweden, where he met with the country's Deputy Prime Minister, Lena Hjelm-Wallen, and Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Pierre Schori.

Rather, Arafat asked for understanding for his countrymen's point of view.

Borneo death toll rises to 137

PONTIANAK, Indonesia, Mar 22: As the death toll from ethnic violence in Borneo rose as high as 137 today, many people left homeless by the fighting took refuge in a sports stadium here, reports AP.

Sleeping on mats made of palm leaves, the Madurese people said they were too frightened to return to their villages, given how brutally they were destroyed by other ethnic groups.

"I am so scared by the attacks on our people, and I lost my husband in the chaos," said Nimah, 35, a mother of four children, including a son she gave birth to during the fighting.

Holding her 2-day-old boy, and surrounded by her three other children, Nimah said she last saw her husband, Mahari, moments before troops evicted him from their village, Seungian.

suffers from serious health problems, smoke softly and looked tired. His lower lip quivered involuntarily.

Arafat apparently didn't ask for unequivocal support in the event that Palestinian leaders unilaterally declare statehood on May 4. He knows what the limits are: How far he can go, and how far he can not go, Schori said.

Later, Arafat asked for understanding for his countrymen's point of view.

Last week, Clinton warned the Palestinians that a declaration of independence without support from Israel would deeply endanger the Middle East peace process. The US president also criticized Israel for allowing Jews to settle on the West Bank.

Pakistan, India swap civilian prisoners

WAGHA, Pakistan, Mar 22: In a bid to improve their thorny relations, Pakistan and India exchanged 43 Pakistani prisoners, many of whom said they were farmers tending land that borders India and were picked up on Pakistani soil.

Jaffar Hussein said he farmed land in Nariwal, which borders India. He was arrested in 1995 from his fields in Pakistan.

"I wasn't doing anything, but farming," he said.

He also accused the Indian authorities of mistreating him in prison and accusing him of working for Pakistani intelligence agencies. He denied the charge.

For Abdul Rashid Ansari, 59, who came to Pakistan in 1981 in search of work, his stay here turned into a nightmare.

In 1990, police in the southern port city of Karachi arrested him and threw him in a hospital for the mentally handicapped.

UK presses for deep reform of EU executive body

BRUSSELS, Mar 22: Britain on Sunday pressed for deep reform of the European Union's Executive Commission, toppled in a fraud and nepotism scandal, and Sweden called for greater openness at EU institutions, reports Reuters.

Britain circulated a discussion document at an EU foreign ministers meeting, calling for the next president of the commission to be personally committed to reform.

A commission president Jacques Santer and his 19 member team resigned on Tuesday after an independent investigation accused the body of turning a blind eye to fraud and cronyism in the EU civil service.

The British document said one of the new commission's vice-presidents should be responsible for reforming management, personnel and bud-

gets.

It said the commission's management structure should be more transparent and effective. The promotion system should be based on proven ability and the numbers of senior staff should be cut, it said.

There should be a wide ranging external audit to modernise financial management systems and improve financial control, the document said personnel and pay policy should be reformed with more rewards for good performers and a fair but effective system for removing under performers it said.

A new system for awarding contracts should be introduced and there should be a code of practice on hiring contracts and consultants, the document said.

It called for a genuinely independent fraud investigation office run by a senior director

Fresh fighting near Kabul Afghan factions hope to settle dispute thru' talks

KABUL, Mar 22: Despite blistering artillery duels north of the beleaguered capital, Afghanistan's warring factions said today they still hoped to settle their differences at the negotiation table, reports AP.

"The opposition wants peace and it is really ironic that the Taliban are blaming us for fighting," an opposition spokesman identified only as Abdullah said today.

The Taliban said the opposition attacked its positions north of Kabul, but they did not retaliate because they too wanted peace through negotiations.

Claims by both sides in Afghanistan's bitter and protracted conflict are difficult to

confirm and the two sides routinely exchange accusations.

In recent days fighting in Afghanistan has escalated with reports of battled raging on several fronts. This fresh fighting comes just one week after the two sides agreed in Turkmenistan at a United Nations brokered meeting to find a peaceful end to their conflict.

They agreed to a shared legislature, executive and judiciary.

But since then they have intensified their fighting. The Taliban rule 90 per cent of the country, including Kabul, while the opposition alliance, led by ousted military chief Ahmed Shah Massoud, controls the rest.



I prefer to be a boy in my next birth: Lata

NEW DELHI, Mar 22: Melody queen Lata Mangeshkar has said that she has no plans to retire and wanted to concentrate more on classical singing, reports PTI.

I had thought of taking retirement from film music few years back, but my religious guru advised me not to do so. He wants me to sing for some more time, she told Ru-Ba-Ru, a programme telecast by a private TV channel.

Regretting for not paying enough attention to classical singing in her vast career, she said, "In my career this is the only vacuum which bothers me. Had I started it earlier, it would have been better as it is very tough now. But I will try my level best."

Asked about her differences with some music directors and singers, she said, "I had many quarrels. People used to call me a brawler. Of course, there were many reasons for these fights, but I used to lose my cool and say something unpleasant. Now I do not get angry anymore."

Talking about these differences, she said, "There are several difficulties of being Lata. Sometimes I pray to God that in my next birth I should not be Lata Mangeshkar. I prefer to be a boy born in any family of Maharashtra."

According to a 'Ru-Ba-Ru' release, when asked about her decision not to marry, she said, "I was so busy with my work that it never occurred to me. I had to take care of my nine-member family. I am happy the way I am... who knows if I would have been married, there would have been divorce."

Turkish govt faces censure motion in parliament

ANKARA, Mar 22: Turkey's government faced a censure motion, with the largest party in Parliament, the Islamic Virtue Party, leading opposition to the Cabinet, reports AP.

Parliament was also set today to debate whether to cancel the national elections scheduled for April 18.

The backing of Virtue's 144 seats greatly increases the chances of those opposed to the government and the polls. But many believe they will fall short of an absolute majority in the 550-member Parliament needed to oust the Cabinet.