

NATO offensive intensifies in Yugoslavia

UNDATED, Mar 27: NATO carried its offensive in Yugoslavia closer to Belgrade in the heaviest of three nights of attacks around the capital, and state television Friday showed pictures of explosions and fires in the suburbs caused by "NATO criminals," reports AP.

State television said both military and civilian facilities were hit, but gave no details, and there were conflicting reports about toxic chemicals being released by explosions Friday night. Sketchy reports from Serbian media indicated that NATO again attacked targets all over Yugoslavia including around Pristina, the capital of Kosovo — the province at the root of the conflict.

"We are continuing to focus on ... the integrated air defence system throughout Yugoslavia and Kosovo," Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said in Washington. "But as we have made progress ... we are gradually increasing the emphasis on attacking targets in Kosovo itself."

The rebel Kosovo Liberation Army's press agency said fighting continued throughout the province Friday, with reports of more than 30 killed in "mass executions," including 20 slain in Orshovac and 10 in Podujevo. Serbian official said the KLA had stepped up attacks on Serbian forces in the province.

NATO fighters shot down two Yugoslav MIG jets which had crossed the border into Bosnia Friday. US State department spokesman James Rubin claimed the Yugoslav aircraft had intended to attack NATO forces there.

Allied leaders again stressed that President Slobodan Milosevic had the power to end the attacks, by signing up to an internationally supervised peace agreement with the ethnic Albanian majority in Kosovo.

In a broadcast Friday aimed at the people of Yugoslavia, Clinton said Milosevic "could have kept Kosovo and Serbia and given you peace. Right now, he's forcing your sons to keep fighting a senseless conflict

that you do not ask for and that he could have prevented."

Friday's targets around Belgrade included the military airport at Patanjica and five other locations, said Avram Israel of the Belgrade air raid center, speaking to Studio B radio.

The air raid center said explosions were heard in the direction of 11 suburbs. A big fire was reported raging south of the city toward Avala mountain, and a missile fuel depot was hit, the center said.

A photographer working from a rooftop in a southern suburb said he could feel the shocks of some explosions, and saw several fireballs lighting the sky.

It was the most intense action around Belgrade since the airstrikes began Wednesday. John Simpson of the British Broadcasting Corp. reported seeing an "enormous orange flash" from his hotel. He contrasted this to previous nights when attacks were further out.

There were conflicting reports of leaks of toxic substances because of bomb damage. The air raid center reported toxic discharges in two suburbs: Sremica to the south, and near the Galenika chemical plant to the northwest.

But Draganovic, a city council official, said there had been only one chemical leak, "of smaller intensity," in Sremica, which he said would be dispersed by winds.

There were large protest demonstrations in the capitals of Greece and Bulgaria Friday. Some 15,000 marched to the US embassy in Athens, chanting Clinton, fascist, murder. An estimated 10,000 people joined the protest in Sofia.

Closer to Yugoslavia, police blocked pro-Serbian groups from marching to the US embassy in Skopje, Macedonia, and arrested 60 people.

Clinton, responding to a larger violent demonstration on a day earlier, said Friday that he had sent "100 combat-equipped Marines" from the USS Nassau to protect the embassy.

In Washington, the Clinton administration is expanding its efforts to verify suspected Serbian war crimes against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, as NATO airstrikes take greater aim at Yugoslav forces to stop what the White House calls the "barbaric activity" of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

The US military, using satellite photos and real-time intelligence from unmanned surveillance aircraft flying over Yugoslavia, will try to document reports of increasing Serb assaults against Kosovars, the executions of civilians and looting and torching of ethnic Albanian-owned businesses in Kosovo's capital Pristina, officials said.

The information gathered will help direct ongoing NATO airstrikes, which began Wednesday and are expected to continue today against Serbian military targets.

Moreover, evidence of war crimes will be turned over to the UN Tribunal in The Hague for possible prosecution.



US President Bill Clinton, (L), meets with his National Security Team in the Oval Office of the White House on Friday over the NATO led US bombing on Yugoslavia. —AFP photo

UNSC rejects Russian resolution condemning NATO air strikes

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 27: The UN Security Council yesterday overwhelmingly rejected a Russian resolution condemning NATO air strikes on Yugoslavia, reports AFP.

Twelve of the 15 council members voted against the resolution which called for an immediate cessation of the use of force against the federal republic of Yugoslavia and urgent resumption of negotiations.

China and Namibia joined Russia in supporting the resolution but were outvoted by the council's five NATO members — Britain, Canada, France, the Netherlands and the United States — along with Argentina, Bahrain, Brazil, Gabon, Gambia, Malaysia and Slovenia.

Diplomats said that even if Russia had succeeded in winning the nine votes needed for approval, the resolution would have been blocked by the United States and Britain, who as permanent members have veto power.

Moscow is an outspoken critic of the US-led NATO action aimed at forcing Yugoslavia to agree to a peace deal for Kosovo.

The Russian resolution said NATO strikes were launched without UN authorisation and were thus "a flagrant violation of the United Nations charter."

UN chief Kofi Annan on Wednesday questioned the legality of the NATO mission, saying the Security Council should have been involved in any decision to resort to force.

AP adds: Russia's anger at the United States over the bombing in Yugoslavia apparently is muted when it comes to rescuing a uranium deal that could yield as much as 12 billion dollars to the financially beleaguered country.

Only hours after NATO forces began their attacks in Yugoslavia, prompting outrage from Moscow, Russia and the United States quietly signed an agreement aimed at salvaging the multibillion dollar uranium deal that ran into trouble in recent months.

US Energy Secretary Bill Richardson and Russia's minister of atomic energy, Yevgeny Adamov, toasted the agreement with champagne Wednesday night in a ceremony at the Energy Department, officials confirmed Friday.

Earlier that day NATO missiles and aircraft began attacking Yugoslavia over strong Russian protests. Only the day before, Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov cancelled his trip to Washington in mid-flight because of the impending NATO airstrikes.

The uranium deal is a key part of the Clinton's administration's nuclear nonproliferation efforts. To Russia, the agreement worth 12 billion dollars over 20 years means access to badly needed hard currency.

The agreement "will facilitate the conversion of highly enriched uranium from dismantled Russian nuclear weapons into fuel for US nuclear reactors," an Energy Department statement said.

The agreement is part of a complicated arrangement reached in 1993 between the United States and Russia for the sale of 550 tons of Russia's highly enriched uranium, used in nuclear weapons, to the United States.

About 40 tons of Russian weapons grade uranium, diluted so it can be used in civilian reactors, already has been shipped to the United States. But in recent months the programme has foundered with Russia threatening to stop further shipments.

Another democracy campaigner arrested

US to sponsor resolution against Chinese HR abuse

WASHINGTON, Mar 27: The United States will sponsor a resolution condemning Chinese human rights abuses at the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva, the State Department said Friday, reports AP.

The announcement, expected for several days, amounts to a stinging but largely symbolic slap on the wrist for Beijing since it has virtually no chance of passing.

It could also further complicate the visit here next month by Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, whose itinerary was formally announced by the White House on Friday.

His discussions are already certain to include a number of difficult topics, notably new allegations that China has stolen designs for advanced US nuclear warheads.

Human rights groups and legislators nonetheless welcomed the announcement, though they noted that making such a decision earlier might have bought enough time to win

support from US allies.

The United States will introduce a resolution on China's human rights practices at the United Nations Human Rights Commission, which is currently meeting in Geneva," State Department spokesman James Rubin said.

AP adds: Chinese police have detained another democracy campaigner, continuing a crackdown on dissent that prompted the United States to seek China's censure before a UN human rights panel.

Police in the eastern city of Hangzhou on Friday ordered Lai Jinbiao held for five days, the Hong Kong-based Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China reported today.

Lai is a member of the China Democracy Party, an opposition political party targeted in the crackdown that communist authorities began late last year. Despite the jailing of at least six other party members, activists in Hangzhou have tried to hold

at least four meetings over the past month.

Police ordered Lai's detention, his third since the crackdown began, for obstructing justice, apparently because he demanded police produce an arrest warrant when they tried to break up a party meeting.

Citing the clampdown on dissent, the US State Department said Friday human rights conditions in China have deteriorated sharply and announced it would call for Beijing's censure before the current UN Human Rights Commission session in Geneva.

The decision reverses the Clinton administration's stance a year ago when it abandoned a resolution of condemnation in favour of a quiet dialogue on human rights.

It marked the first time in nine years the United States did not support a critical resolution against Beijing. None of the resolutions have ever passed, mostly due to China's lobbying of developing nations.

27 feared dead in boat capsized in India

NEW DELHI, Mar 27: A boat carrying merry-makers during a Hindu festival overturned in a sudden storm on a reservoir in central India, drowning as many as 27 people, news agencies reported Saturday, reports AP.

Two bodies were recovered and 25 people were missing after the boat capsized Friday evening on the Tillya Dam reservoir in the state of Bihar, about 175 kilometers south of the state capital, Patna, the agencies quoted police as saying.

Thirteen people swam to the shore, and divers were searching for others who were missing. The people were celebrating the festival of Ramnavami, a national holiday in India.

Thai villagers occupy dam site demanding compensation

BANGKOK, Mar 27: Over 5,000 villagers have occupied a dam site in northeastern Thailand, demanding compensation for land lost to it and other projects, a protest organizer said today, reports AP.

The villagers, who occupied the site of the Pak Mun dam on Tuesday, said they will not leave until their demands are met.

"Villagers demand the World Bank take responsibility for the hardships confronting people caused by mega projects it supported," said Vattana Narkpradit of the Assembly of the Poor, and activist group.

"They also demand the World Bank stop supporting big development projects that affect local people's way of life, Vattana said.

Development projects such as dams and power plants have become controversial issues in Thailand.

Thai villagers occupy dam site demanding compensation

KUALA LUMPUR, Mar 27: The judge in the trial of jailed politician Anwar Ibrahim today threw out a motion by the defence calling for him to step down from the case on grounds he was biased against Anwar, reports AP.

"The application is wrong in law," ruled High Court Judge Augustine Paul, after saying that the only way the defence could challenge his rulings was to appeal the case to a higher court.

"I'm not saying I'm right. Anyone who says he's right all the time is a fool," Paul told Anwar's lawyers. But merely because (my rulings) operate against your client doesn't mean I have to disqualify myself."

Paul also granted the defence's request to conduct final arguments but said that the verdict on four charges in the sensational sex and corruption trial will still be announced on April 6.

The five-month trial of

Anwar's petition against judge rejected

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia, Mar 27: The director of a Russian university fired four American professors Friday, saying his action was motivated by outrage over NATO's bombings of Yugoslavia, reports AP.

The Americans worked at Baltic State University, an engineering college in St. Petersburg that specialises in nuclear rocket science and has close ties to the Russian military.

The professors, who taught business at an institute affiliated with Baltic State, said they have not yet received notice and hope the director will change his mind.

The university is already in conflict with the United States over allegedly selling missile technology to Iran. The US State Department introduced sanctions against the university in February.

Russian university fires 4 American professors

SEOUL, Mar 27: US negotiators will urge North Korea to suspend all missile tests when they visit the communist country next week, South Korean officials said today, reports AP.

Robert Einhorn, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for political and military affairs, with South Korean officials in Seoul before leading a US delegation to Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea.

The Pyongyang talks, to be held Monday and Tuesday, are aimed at curbing North Korea's development of missiles and their export.

In three previous rounds of talks since 1996, North Korea rebuffed US demands.

North Korea says self-defence is the inalienable right of any sovereign nation. It reportedly is demanding 1 billion dollars annually in economic compensation for three years in return for stopping its exports of missiles and missile technology to countries such as Iran

Two air force jets crash in India

Two Indian Air Force planes crashed in separate incidents in the northern Punjab and Rajasthan states Friday, killing one pilot, the Press Trust of India reported, AP says from New Delhi.

Flying Officer B Gupta died when his MiG-21 crashed during a routine flight in Rajasthan's Ganganagar district, PTI said. Details were not immediately available. Another air force plane caught fire and crashed in Punjab's Sangrur district. But the pilot bailed out safely, PTI said.

Romanian president hospitalised: Romanian Prime Minister Radu Vasile was hospitalised in intensive care unit Friday evening after suffering a heart attack, a hospital official said, AFP reports from Bucharest.

Vasile, who was at his office when he was struck with acute chest pains, was to remain at the hospital for at least 10 days.



Eighteen-year-old Brigitta Callens (C) from the Belgian town of Oudenarde receives congratulations from runners-up Alexandra Monteiro (L) and Valerie Van Gaster (R) after she was elected "Miss Belgium 1999," during a TV show in Londerzeel on Friday. —AFP photo

Myanmar opposition slams junta for denying visa to Aris

YANGON, Mar 27: As Myanmar's top generals retook a parade of 6,000 troops on Armed Forces day today, opposition groups denounced the military and its refusal to allow Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's dying husband to visit her in Myanmar, reports AP.

International human rights groups and several Western governments have sharply criticised the military government for refusing to grant Michael Aris, who is dying from cancer and living in Britain, a visa to Myanmar.

Suu Kyi, Myanmar's opposition leader, spurned an offer from the military on Friday to allow her to visit Aris in Britain. She does not trust the government to allow her to re-

turn to Myanmar.

Making no reference to the controversy, Gen Than Shwe, chairman of the military government, stressed the need for peace and unity during his speech marking the 54th Armed Forces Day. He called on insurgent groups to return to the legal fold.

The National League for Democracy, Suu Kyi's political party, issued a statement today calling for unity and the restoration of democracy in Myanmar. The country has been ruled by the military since 1962.

"Today's armed forces owe it to themselves to safeguard the spirit, principles, disciplines, policies and traditions practiced in the days of Gen. Aung

San, the father of the armed forces," the National League for Democracy statement said.

AP adds: Myanmar claimed today that Aung San Suu Kyi ordered a government envoy out of her house after an abrupt discussion about her cancer-stricken husband's request for a visa.

Military officer Colonel Than Tun visited the pro-democracy opposition leader on Friday at her Yangon home to offer assistance and to discuss an "alternative" to Aris plea, a government statement issued here said.

"Regretfully, she refused the government's offer and the discussion abruptly ended with the officer being indicated to leave her residence," said the statement.

Serbian forces burn down 3 villages, kill 20 Albanians

TIRANA, Mar 27: Serbian forces massacred 20 ethnic Albanian men, including several teachers, after burning down three villages in the Serbian province of Kosovo, the Albanian Interior Ministry said today, reports Reuters.

The ministry made no reference to a report earlier by Albania's ATA news agency that the men were killed in front of pupils in the incident on Thursday just inside Kosovo.

"Preliminary information shows the Serbian military forces have killed 20 men who lived in the villages of Goden, Prush and Zylfaj," Interior Ministry official Fatmir Hakani said in a statement.

"The men were intellectuals and a school headmaster and some teachers were among them," Hakani said. "The Serbs have destroyed and burned down these villages completely."

He said 174 ethnic Albanian refugees from the three villages, including 68 women, 96 children and 10 men, crossed into Albanian at Dobruna at 1530 GMT on Thursday after being taken to the border by a Serbian military unit.

The refugees entered Albania following NATO's initial bombing of Yugoslav military targets.

EU declares support for Palestinian state

BERLIN, Mar 27: European leaders on Friday issued their strongest support yet for Palestinian statehood, giving Israel a one-year deadline for fulfilling the "unqualified Palestinian right" to independence, reports AP.

The statement drew praise from Palestinian leaders, but was denounced by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who, raising the specter of the Holocaust, said it was regrettable Europe was trying to impose a solution that endangered Israel.

The declaration was intended to compensate Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat for his apparent willingness to postpone a unilateral declaration of statehood in the West Bank and Gaza Strip beyond May 4, the end of the five-year period of Palestinian autonomy.

In recent weeks, Arafat has been meeting with European and US officials. He reportedly has been trying to win assurances that if he held off on declaring independence in May, a Palestinian state would eventually win international recognition.

May 4 is also the deadline

for negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians on the final status of the West Bank and Gaza. Arafat has asked Europe and the United States to set a new deadline for completing the talks to forestall possible Israeli procrastination.

Earlier this week, Arafat met with US President Bill Clinton to discuss the statehood issue. The United States did not commit to a new deadline, but said that after Israel's May 17 election, it would press for speeding up final status talks. The negotiations would not be open-ended, US officials assured the Palestinians.

Martin Indyk, the assistant secretary of State for the Near East, plans to go to Israel for talks with government and opposition leaders in mid-April.

The statement adopted Friday by EU leaders at the end of a three-day summit urged Israel to wrap up talks with the Palestinians on their status within a year.

But pressuring Israel even further the 15-nation EU suggested it would be ready to recognise a Palestinian state unilaterally by saying Palestinian self-determination "is not subject to any veto."

Maist rebels kill 3 cops in India

Maist rebels have killed three Indian policemen and wounded seven others in an attack in the western state of Maharashtra, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said Friday, AFP reports from New Delhi.

A police spokesman said guerrillas of the outlawed People's War Group had triggered a landmine under a police vehicle in the state's Gadchiroli district last night, injuring five. Another police van that arrived at the site of the attack was also blown up, killing two officers.

Mubarak to visit S Korea: Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak will visit South Korea in April to discuss bilateral ties with his South Korean counterpart, Kim Dae-jung, officials here said Saturday, AP reports from Seoul.

South Korea has long sought to boost political and economic relations with Egypt, which had maintained close ties with North Korea. Seoul's communists rival.

Spanish judge adds 32 more charges against Pinochet

SANTIAGO, Mar 27: The remaining torture charge against Gen. Augusto Pinochet emanates from what was actually a simple robbery where the suspect committed suicide in police custody, Chilean authorities said Friday, reports AP.

But while Pinochet's supporters gathered evidence to gain his release from British custody, the Spanish judge seeking his extradition sought Friday to add 32 more torture charges against him.

In defence of Pinochet, police insisted Friday, that Marcos Quezada's arrest followed "a normal police procedure" and that he "was arrested under the accusation of robbery." The statement reiterated the official report filed on the case in 1989, which concluded that Quezada died in jail when he hung himself.

But a 1991 report by the government-sponsored National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation, which detailed the repression during Pinochet's 1973-1990 dictatorship, determined that Quezada was tortured to death. The report says 3,197 people were killed or disappeared during Pinochet's rule.

The details surrounding Quezada's death took on new importance when Britain's highest court ruled Wednesday that Pinochet can only be extradited for torture crimes committed after 1988, when Britain signed a law making the practice an international crime.

The House of Lords dropped 29 counts against Pinochet. The former Chilean dictator now only faces three counts of torture, conspiracy to torture and murder conspiracy.

To bolster his weakened case, Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzon on Friday sought to expand his existing extradition petition against Pinochet with 32 more cases of torture, according to Carlos Slepoy, an Argentine lawyer in Madrid, Spain, who has worked closely with Garzon.

Tunnel fire kills 30

LES HOUCHEs, France, Mar 27: The death toll from a fire which trapped trucks and cars in the Mont Blanc Tunnel between France and Italy rose to 30, the company running the tunnel said on Friday, reports Reuters.

The association of the Mont Blanc Tunnel (ATMB) said rescuers had found at least 30 charred vehicles in the 11 km (seven-mile) tunnel.

Mandela says farewell to parliament

CAPE TOWN, Mar 27: President Nelson Mandela said farewell to South Africa's Parliament yesterday, ending the first chapter of democratic rule and clearing the way for the country's second all-race election on June 2, reports Reuters.

"I count myself fortunate that ... history permitted me to take part in South Africa's transition from that period (apartheid) into the new era whose foundation we have been laying together," Mandela, 80, said in his farewell address.

"And so, in the spirit of that democracy we are today taking leave of one another so that our parties can once again submit themselves to the judgement of the people," he told a joint sitting of the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces.

Mandela, who was freed in 1990 after 27 years in jail for opposing white minority rule, will retire after the election, which his ruling African National Congress is sure to win, and hand over power to his deputy Thabo Mbeki.

During its five years in power, the government has passed more than 500 laws tearing down the apartheid edifice and establishing a foundation for racial equality and the rule of law.

Mandela is among many of the 490 members of the two houses of parliament who will retire and not return to carry on the work of entrenching democracy in South Africa.

US to urge DPRK to stop missile test

SEOUL, Mar 27: US negotiators will urge North Korea to suspend all missile tests when they visit the communist country next week, South Korean officials said today, reports AP.

Robert Einhorn, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for political and military affairs, with South Korean officials in Seoul before leading a US delegation to Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea.

The Pyongyang talks, to be held Monday and Tuesday, are aimed at curbing North Korea's development of missiles and their export.

In three previous rounds of talks since 1996, North Korea rebuffed US demands.

North Korea says self-defence is the inalienable right of any sovereign nation. It reportedly is demanding 1 billion dollars annually in economic compensation for three years in return for stopping its exports of missiles and missile technology to countries such as Iran

US to urge DPRK to stop missile test

Given North Korea's recalcitrance, Einhorn and Kwon Jong-rak, the Foreign Ministry's director general for North American affairs, concurred today that an early agreement was unlikely, ministry officials said.

But US negotiators will try to extract a promise in Pyongyang that North Korea will suspend further missile tests, the officials said.

Concern over North Korea's missile capabilities increased after the country launched a rocket that flew over Japan and crashed into the Pacific last summer.

North Korea insists that it launched a scientific satellite. But Japan believes North Korea was test firing a multistage, liquid-fuel Taepodong missile that could hit any target in Japan.

On Friday, Seoul's English-language daily Korea Herald reported North Korea has completed 10 missile launch sites

Spanish judge adds 32 more charges against Pinochet

The additional cases sent to the British Crown Prosecution Service in a 17 page document all date from after September 1988, Slepoy said. It was uncertain whether the new cases would be accepted by British Home Secretary Jack Straw, who must now decide whether Spain's request for Pinochet's extradition should go forward.

AFP adds: The Chilean government is considering appealing to British Home Secretary Jack Straw to free former dictator Augusto Pinochet on humanitarian grounds, official sources in Santiago said.

Hamis leader released: A spokesman for the Islamic resistance movement Hamis, Mahmoud Al-Zahhar, said on Friday he was released overnight after being jailed by the Palestinian Authority for 45 days, Reuters reports from Gaza.

Palestinian police had jailed Zahhar more than a month ago saying he had harboured a Hamas fugitive linked to the killing of a Palestinian policeman in February. "I was released overnight after being jailed for 45 days," Zahhar told Reuters.

Chinese PM to visit US

Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji will travel to the United States next month for high-level meetings with President Bill Clinton and visits to five other American cities, the White House announced Friday, AP reports from Washington.

Zhu's visit is coming at a time of heightened expectations that the United States and China may finally be able to reach agreement on a package of market-opening trade initiatives that will clear the way for China's entry into the World Trade Organisation.

For setting a record

KATHMANDU, Mar 27: A 15-year-old Nepali left for the Mt. Everest region Saturday, hoping to become the youngest person to scale the highest mountain, reports AP.

Arvin Timilsina, a ninth-grade student from the town of Pokhara, flew to Lukla, a dirt airstrip one week's trek away from the Everest base camp, with three Sherpa guides and a cargo of climbing gear and supplies.

Timilsina and his team plan to reach the base camp at 5,300 metres (17,500 feet) next weekend and pitch their camp at the foot of the 8,848-meter (29,028 feet) Mt. Everest. For the next two months, the climbers will acclimatise, gradually setting higher altitude camps to prepare for a mid-May final assault of Everest.

"I am confident of my success as long as I don't get nervous once I get to the mountain," Timilsina told the Associated Press before boarding a small twin-engine plane.

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