

BRIEFLY

Arafat in Mauritania: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat arrived in Mauritania late Saturday on a world tour seeking support for the proposed declaration of a Palestinian state on May 4. AFP reports from Nouakchott.

"It is our right to proclaim on that date the birth of our independent state with Jerusalem as its capital," Arafat said after being welcomed by Mauritanian President Maayoufa Ould Taya.

Black box of Korean jet found: Chinese police have recovered the "black box" of a Korean Air cargo plane that crashed on Thursday into a construction site in Shanghai, state media said yesterday. Reuters reports from Beijing.

A team of US aviation experts was also due to have arrived late on Saturday to help investigate the cause of the crash, which killed at least eight people, including the three crew members, the Beijing Morning Post said.

Women AIDS victims on rise: Twenty per cent of AIDS victims in Germany are women, against 12 per cent ten years ago, a specialist said Saturday. AFP reports from Munich.

Dr Thomas Grubert, of the university clinic for women in Munich, told a conference that the number of AIDS sufferers in Germany now stood at 50,000 with 3,000 to 4,000 new cases every year.

Lanka to buy more arms from Israel: Sri Lanka is sending a team to Israel to inspect a fast attack craft and is set to make more military purchases from the country, a press report said Sunday. AFP reports from Colombo.

NATO blitz to continue until Milosevic mends his ways

BELGRADE, Apr 18: NATO jets pounded a major refinery and targets around Belgrade early Sunday, delivering the punishment the alliance said it would mete out until President Slobodan Milosevic changes his policies on Kosovo, report AP Reuters, AFP.

In London, NATO is laying plans for a ground invasion of Kosovo which could take place as early as the end of May, Britain's Observer newspaper said today.

The paper said 80,000 troops had been earmarked for the operation and that some American troops had already started training in Colorado.

It quoted senior sources in London and Washington as saying that the accelerated timetable followed insistence by NATO's political leaders that the bombing campaign against Yugoslavia must be over within three months.

The official NATO line is that the air campaign will continue until Yugoslav troops withdraw from Kosovo, an international security force goes in and the people of Kosovo are allowed to return home.

Ethnic Albanians in Kosovo are being forcibly recruited into an army of workers to dig mass graves and clear up evidence of atrocities, according to a British press report today.

Citing sources in NATO and the British government, the Independent today said the labourers were made to wear red to make them easily identifiable.

It added that they were thought to be made up of Kosovo Liberation Army members and other ethnic Albanian men taken prisoner by Yugoslavia's Serbian forces.

Meanwhile, a vehicle carrying ethnic Albanians out of Kosovo reportedly struck a land mine at the Albanian border, killing five people.

The accident came as ethnic Albanians continued to pour out of the turbulent Serbian province in what international officials describe as the start of a second huge wave of refugees forced out by Milosevic's forces, Gen. Wesley Clark, NATO supreme commander in Europe, said his pilots were reporting scenes of ethnic cleansing on a staggering scale inside Kosovo.

Lashed by rain and exhaustion, some 30,000 Kosovo Albanians arrived in neighbouring Albania and Macedonia on Saturday and another 1,200 entered Albania early Sunday at the Morini border post before the 1.45 am mine explosion.

Serb forces overseeing the expulsions promptly stopped all crossings, said Andrea Angeli of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

NATO struck hard on its 25th night of attacks aimed at forcing Milosevic to accept a political solution for Kosovo, Serbian media said bombs hit a major oil refinery in Yugoslavia's second-largest city, Novi Sad, and a nitrogen fertiliser plant and oil storage depot in Pancevo, outside the capital Belgrade.

The official news agency Tanjug warned of a huge cloud of thick smoke moving from Pancevo toward Belgrade, 20 km to the southeast, and urged residents to cover their mouths with handkerchiefs.

Another huge cloud of thick smoke emerged from the immense fire ignited by the six NATO missiles that hit the Novi Sad oil refinery, illuminating the night sky in what Serb tele-

vision described as the strongest attack so far of the air campaign. There, too, residents were advised to breathe through handkerchiefs as a precaution, although Tanjug said the smoke contained no poisonous materials.

Serb authorities said a 3-year-old girl was killed and five people were injured in an attack in Batujnica, northwest of Belgrade, where a military airfield is located.

At least three other towns in western and central Serbia came under attack, with serious damage inflicted on both military and civilian facilities, local media said.

The all-clear alert sounded in Belgrade, indicating that the night's NATO attacks had apparently ended.

Bulgarian state radio reported that NATO had asked on Sunday to use Bulgarian airspace for the bombing campaign against neighbouring Yugoslavia. The government agreed in principle to such a move last October, but Parliament must approve it.

During an early visit to troops in Macedonia on Saturday, Clark bluntly warned the strikes would persist until Milosevic changed his policies.

"It's going to be a steadily increasing and intensifying air campaign that's going to continue... and if he doesn't change his policies, we're going to destroy... those things that President Milosevic values," he said.

In a cold spring downpour, 23,000 refugees arrived in Albania on Saturday, international monitors said, and another 6,000 to 7,000 crossed or tried to cross into Macedonia, said UN refugee agency spokesman Paula Ghedini.

The surge in the number of refugees came as Serb forces appeared to be making a final push to clear Kosovo of its ethnic Albanian population.

"We do know from the refugees that the situation is very bad," Ghedini said. "Many people are hiding in the woods for several days without food."

Macedonians, meanwhile, started to show signs of agitation with the growing numbers of exiles in their midst. Farmers tromped across the muddy fields around the Brazda refugee camp, the largest with more

than 20,000 inhabitants, to protest its expansion to accommodate the growing numbers of refugees.

In other developments: About 100 Kosovo Liberation Army recruits arrived in the Albanian capital, Tirana, from the United States on Saturday, joining up with 10,000 recruits from ethnic Albanian communities in western Europe.

In Macedonia, authorities warned the KLA against doing anything to destabilise the former Yugoslav republic. In the past several days, Macedonian police have confiscated more than four tons of weapons from the KLA, Macedonia's interior minister said Saturday.

NATO disclosed what it said was more proof of atrocities by Serb forces in Kosovo, showing aerial photos of what it claimed may be up to 150 fresh graves near the Kosovo town of Izbica.

US defence officials in Washington said a Yugoslav army officer captured inside Yugoslavia by the KLA was delivered into American custody on Friday.

Fall of Vajpayee govt may demoralise BJP activists

NEW DELHI, Apr 18: India's Hindu nationalists were left pondering an uncertain future today, after their multi-party government was ousted in a parliamentary vote of confidence, reports AFP.

The single-vote defeat triggered the resignation of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and brought to an end the first viable government the nationalists had formed in the country since independence in 1947.

Vajpayee's BJP had pledged to give an "able leader" and "stable government" when it assumed power in March 1998, but was unable to survive the infighting endemic to India's coalition politics.

Asked for his reaction to the government's defeat, Vajpayee hinted at the strains of the past 13 months.

"I feel free," he told reporters. BJP officials admitted the collapse of their coalition could demoralise the party's millions of members, especially as its leaders had repeatedly insisted the government would survive.

Vajpayee's ouster could also encourage Hindu fundamentalists in the BJP, and thus alienate the many voters the party has wooed in recent years by presenting a more moderate and secular face.

But the prospects are not entirely gloomy. "Many factors will shape our immediate future," a BJP MP said. "On the one hand, what happened is bad for us, on the other it can help us generate public sympathy."

Independent analysts agreed that the fact the BJP-led coalition was pushed out by a single vote could provoke a positive backlash.

"Going by the public mood there could be some sympathy for the BJP," said political analyst G V L Narasimha Rao. "The party can easily project the verdict as a conspiracy by opposi-

tion parties and blame them for promoting instability."

Some politicians have already seized onto that view. The opposition has scored an immoral victory," said MP Yarran Naidu, a nationalist supporter. "The people are not going to spare the Congress or other opposition parties for bringing down the government."

But analysts said the BJP protests would fall on deaf ears if the main opposition Congress Party managed to form an alternative administration that gave India the stability it craves.

Communist leader Prakash Karat said one of the new government's first priorities would be to review the appointment of Hindu nationalist supporters in scores of influential government institutions across the country.

The BJP rose to power on a wave of Hindu-nationalist sentiment, fanned by powerful fundamentalist groups seeking to establish a Hindu theocracy in India.

The party won just two seats in 1984 elections, but grabbed 89 five years later by increasingly appealing to communal prejudices Hindu community.

It continued to advance, winning 120 seats in 1991, 162 in 1996-becoming the single largest party in parliament for the first time and 180 seats in last year's ballot.

A BJP-led coalition which took office in 1996 under Vajpayee's leadership lasted just 13 days before it was brought down by a confidence vote in parliament. Within two years it was back in office.

And Vajpayee on Saturday said if history might repeat it self if the next government was unable to cope with India's heavily regionalised political system.

"The BJP's future will be very bright, he said after submitting his resignation to India's president.



Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (L) receives a traditional sword wrapped in a cloth from an unidentified Indian national Sikh devotee in Lahore Saturday. During a meeting with Sikh devotees, Sharif said Islamabad did not want to enter into an arms race with India and want to resolve their disputes through dialogue. Hundreds of Sikh devotees from India and throughout the world visit Pakistan every year to perform religious rites in the country. — AFP photo

Sharif looks increasingly strong, secure

ISLAMABAD, Apr 18: Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is riding high — his main critic has been convicted of graft, the economy is off the critical list and arch-enemy India is without a government, reports Reuters.

He was due to leave for Moscow tonight on a four-day trip which highlighted the contrasting fortunes of toppled Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Sharif, elected more than two years ago with a huge mandate.

Western diplomats said Sharif looked increasingly strong and secure, especially after a court last week sentenced opposition leader Benazir Bhutto to five years jail for taking kickbacks from a Swiss

company hired to stamp out customs fraud.

The verdict capped 18 months in which Sharif saw the resignations of key critics, including former President Farooq Leghari, Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah and Chief of Army Staff, Jehangir Karamat.

Karamat, in particular, was highly critical of what he called "insecurity-driven" politics in Pakistan marked by charges and counter-charges of corruption and wrongdoing.

Soon after she was convicted in absentia, Benazir repeated charges that Sharif and his family had looted the nation, cheated on taxes and plundered banks, charges it denies.

The conviction did not silence Benazir, twice elected prime minister and twice

sacked for corruption, but it left her facing a lengthy legal battle on return from a European tour to clear her name and seize the initiative from Sharif, they said.

Benazir said in a weekend television interview that she would travel from London to Dubai, where her children live, and would wait there while her lawyers seek a stay of the sentence at the Supreme Court to avoid the chance of arrest on return.

Her conviction, with husband Asif Zardari, for graft capped a two-year investigation by Sharif associate Saifur Rehman into government charges that Benazir and Zardari plundered state coffers while in office, charges Benazir says are fabricated.

Selfish lawmakers hurt democracy Only elections can clear up the mess, say Indians

NEW DELHI, Apr 18: Indian voters shook their heads in disgust today at the fall of yet another national government and said only elections could clear up the mess, reports Reuters.

In impromptu street-side polls by Reuters, food vendors to business executives blamed what they called selfish, small-time politicians for the government's downfall yesterday.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's 13-month coalition lost a confidence vote in parliament by just one vote, raising the spectre of a general election, India's third since 1996.

This is really horrible... there does not seem to be any respect for governments, ministries and the prime minister," said Dinesh Rai, who works for a manufacturer in the southern city of Bengaluru.

"Politicians, for their self interest, are holding the country to ransom. It's bad for the morale of the country and bad for the economy," Rai said. "It is better to have fresh

elections now than go in for another coalition government because even if one member withdraws from the new coalition it will fall."

India has staggered from one minority government to another, with five administrations falling in the last three years alone. Elections in 1996 and 1998 both returned hung parliaments.

"I think democracy is a failure in India. It will happen again and again as the regional parties get stronger. What we need is a presidential form of government," said Pyush Patel, a businessman in the western city of Gandhinagar.

Rajiv Grewal, a transport agent in New Delhi, said a coalition of disparate parties hurriedly cobbled together would not work.

"Things like unity in diversity don't work. Look at Yugoslavia, look at Russia — they also had unity in diversity, and what happened?"

The main opposition Congress Party, which is 127 members short of a majority in the 545-member lower house, will have to woo a raft of smaller parties to form a new government.

Ultimately it's a game of money. He, who has more money, can buy more people and win the vote. It's a question of how much money you can pay — and that is really sad," said Mimit Dogra, a student at New Delhi's Industrial Training Institute.

Smriti Arora, an executive with an international firm, said there was no legitimate reason behind the opposition's move.

"This whole thing is so terrible. There was no genuine reason for the Congress to topple the government — for one mad woman's crazy whims, the whole nation has to suffer."

But some said a year of uncertainty had come to an end. There were some who thought it was time for their voices to be heard once again.

Taliban, its opponents wage fierce battles in north

KABUL, Apr 18: The Taliban religious army and their opponents waged fierce battles on several fronts in northern Afghanistan Sunday, reports AP.

Both sides in the bitter and protracted conflict were reporting gains. Because of the remoteness of the region it was impossible to verify.

According to opposition spokesman, who identifies himself only as Abdullah, fighting has been heavy in northern Faryab province, where they are claiming to have made gains.

Abdullah says that a key supply route of the Taliban's has been cut to Faryab province, most of which is under the control of the Taliban

religious army.

Also heavy fighting was reported at Khinjan in Baghlan province, some 150 km north of Kabul. There the Taliban claimed to have pushed the opposition out of the region and deeper into the Panjshir Valley, the stronghold of opposition leader Ahmed Shah Massoud.

Both the Taliban and the opposition accused the other of firing the first bullet.

The United Nations, which has been trying unsuccessfully to broker a peace agreement, has urged restraint from both sides.

However with the onset of warm spring weather it seems that both sides have embarked on a new season of fighting.

'Majority does not support Anwar Ibrahim'

BANGKOK, Apr 18: Ousted leader Anwar Ibrahim has pockets of support but the majority of Malaysians do not back him, Malaysia's foreign minister was quoted as saying in Thai papers Sunday, reports AP.

Foreign Minister Syed Hamid reportedly said it was only natural that some people support Anwar, the former deputy prime minister who was convicted of corruption charges last week and sentenced to six years in prison.

But they do not represent the majority of the Malaysian people. The Nation newspaper quoted the minister as saying at the end of a three-day visit to Thailand.

94 detained as pro-Anwar protests turn violent

KUALA LUMPUR, Apr 18: More than 90 demonstrators were under detention today and their weapons seized after protests against the jailing of former Malaysian deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim turned violent, police said, reports AFP.

The official news agency Bernama said the demonstrators were being held for rioting, joining illegal assemblies and possession of weapons in several incidents Saturday, when protests rocked parts of the capital.

Kuala Lumpur police chief Kamarudin Mohamed Ali said more than a third of the 94 suspects were secondary school and university students, and

that two lecturers from higher learning institutions were also taken in.

A pre-emptive police crackdown Saturday failed to deter illegal marches and rallies in support of Anwar.

Reuters adds: The Malaysian government has criticised supporters of jailed former finance minister Anwar Ibrahim and urged his wife's new party to keep protesters off the capital's streets.

The rioters brought along Keadilan's flag here and there, Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was quoted as saying in The Star newspaper on Sunday, referring to the newly-formed Patri Keadilan Rakyat headed by Anwar's wife.

48 hurt as crude bomb rips thru London market

LONDON, Apr 18: A crude nail bomb ripped through a busy south London shopping market on Saturday afternoon, injuring at least 48 people, reports Reuters.

Witnesses spoke of an "almighty explosion" and a huge pall of smoke rising into the sky as the blast rocked the poor, inner-city district of Brixton around 5:30 pm (1630 GMT).

Police said no advance warning was received and there was no immediate claim of responsibility. Brixton is home to a large black population and one rights activist speculated about a racial motive, but there was no official confirmation.

Photographer David Trainer was in Brixton when the bomb went off. "There was smoke and debris falling down. There was blood everywhere and a lot of people sitting on the floor holding their heads in their hands," he told Reuters.

9 Bin Laden followers to die in Egypt

HUCKSTEP, Egypt, Apr 18: Nine Egyptian Islamic militant supporters of suspected international terrorist Osama bin Laden were sentenced to death here today, but all were still at large, reports AFP.

Of the 107 tried at the military court north of Cairo, 78 were given prison sentences, including 1 condemned to hard labour for life, and the remaining 20 were acquitted.

Three of those condemned to hard labour were in police custody after they were handed over from Albania and Azerbaijan, but the other eight were among a total of 60 people who were tried in their absence.

The 47 present for the trial shouted anti-American and anti-Israeli slogans after the verdicts were pronounced. The verdicts cap a watershed case which helped authorities deliver a heavy blow to Islamic Jihad operations in Egypt, understand for the first time how the group was set up overseas, and arrest members infiltrating from abroad.

But Egyptian officials say the armed Islamic movement can still pose a threat as its leader and many other militants still operate from their main overseas base in Afghanistan.

The government now expects to start the trial of an undisclosed number of Jihad militants extradited from Yemen and Kuwait in the last few months.

Almost all of those tried belong Islamic Jihad, which surged to attention when it assassinated Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat in 1981.

Lankan troops kill 19 Tigers in fighting

COLOMBO, Apr 18: At least 19 Tamil Tiger rebels have been killed in fresh clashes in Sri Lanka's war-torn north, the Defence Ministry said today, reports Reuters.

It said in a statement that troops operating ahead of their defence lines had shot some 15 guerrillas at Paranthan, in the northern Jaffna district. In two separate incidents on Saturday, troops had also killed three Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas hiding inside a bunker in a rebel safe house in Jaffna on Saturday.

A female rebel was also killed by government soldiers in an ambush on the same day in the northern Wanni region, the statement added.

'Pakistan has no aggressive designs against any country'

KARUL (Abbottabad), Apr 18: Pakistan Saturday declared it had no aggressive designs against any country but warned it had to be perpetually prepared to strike against any aggressor with evil designs in order to zealously guard its independence, reports PPI.

"We are peace loving but cherish our hard earned freedom and shall not brook an evil eye cast against our sovereignty and territorial integrity. Our efforts to acquire a viable defence force both in the conventional mode and also, by the grace of Allah in the nuclear and missile mode is to guarantee peace and security through this field is visible — let no one have wrong notions."

Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee and Chief of Army Staff General Pervez Musharraf said while addressing 98th PMA long course/Graduate-8 here at Pakistan Military Academy.

He said Pakistan Army on its part remained aware and fully conscious of its responsibilities towards security and well being of the motherland.

He said the art of warfare had become complex, highly sophisticated and more lethal. He said with induction of nuclear weapons and missiles in South Asian region, the complexion of future war had registered a quantum change.

Sonia, Mayawati, Jayalalitha behind fall of BJP-led govt

NEW DELHI, Apr 18: A former at pair, an ex-schoolteacher and a one-time screen siren formed the unlikely trio that ended the 13-month rule of India's fractious coalition government at the weekend, reports AFP.

For Italian-born opposition leader Sonia Gandhi, and regional party leaders Mayawati and Jayalalitha Jayaram, their alliance must have been as unexpected as it was to outside observers.

"Three women have sealed the destiny of India," said Subramanian Swamy, a confidant of Jayalalitha, whose decision to pull her party's 18 MPs out of the coalition last week triggered the confidence motion Saturday that proved the government's downfall.

"This demonstration of women power augurs well for the 21st century," Swamy said. Jayalalitha's withdrawal put the ruling coalition in a minority and led India's president to order Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to prove his majority on the floor of the house.

Prior to the vote of confidence, the former film star from the southern state of Tamil Nadu held a series of meetings with Gandhi, leader of the main opposition Congress Party, to map out a strategy for defeating the government.

Jayalalitha and Gandhi — a one-time au pair who married into India's Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty in 1968 — are like chalk and cheese.

Jayalalitha is worshipped by adoring fans in Tamil Nadu, where many homes boast an iconic portrait of her in a Madonna-and-child pose. But

critics prefer to compare her with Philippine former first lady Imelda Marcos, citing her material extravagance and allegations of corruption.

Sonia, 52, was born to a middle-class home in the Italian industrial town of Orbassano and worked as an au pair in Britain where she was studying English at Cambridge University.

Jayalalitha came from a rich Brahmin family and had a film star for a mother. Her father squandered away the family fortune, forcing his daughter to enter films and become the top Tamil actress of her day.

Fame for Sonia, however, came after a chance meeting at Cambridge with future husband Rajiv Gandhi, who like his grandfather and mother would become prime minister of India.



Bangladesh High Commissioner Ashfaqur Rahman (2nd from left) and Dilshad Rahman receiving Sidek Saniff, senior minister of state of environment and the dean of diplomatic corp Ambassador Carlos Tudela at the Bangladesh Independence Day reception in Singapore recently.

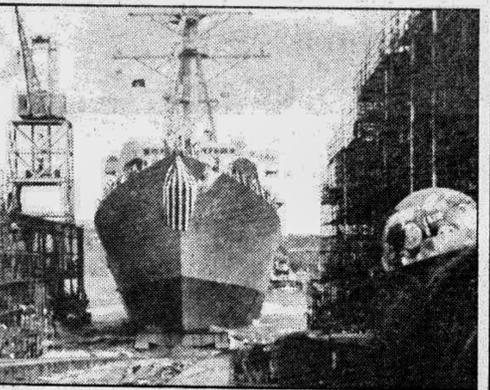


Photo released by the US Navy Saturday shows the newly christened guided missile destroyer Sir Winston Churchill, being launched from Bath Iron Works in Bath, Maine. USS Winston Churchill is only the second US Navy ship in history to be named after a foreign dignitary. — AFP photo