

Kuwait's parliament dissolved

KUWAIT, May 5: Kuwait's Emir dissolved the country's elected parliament late on Tuesday after MPs clashed with the government over the distribution of copies of the Holy Quran, containing misprints, reports Reuters.

In his dissolution decree, Emir Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah accused parliament of abusing constitutional rights and violating morals and ethics of the conservative Gulf Arab state.

Official decrees also invited Kuwait's 115,000 male-only voters to elect a new 50-man house on Saturday, July 3. The constitution stipulates that elections must be held within 60 days of a constitutional dissolution.

The abrupt dissolution followed heated questioning in parliament of a cabinet minister for five hours on Tuesday about his department's printing and distribution of copies of the Quran which included missing verses and blank pages.

While a recording of the grilling was being broadcast on one of the channels of Kuwait state television on Tuesday night, another state channel announced the decrees.



The decision followed repeated crises between parliament and Kuwaiti governments. MPs have repeatedly accused ministers of misusing public funds.

Including the latest clash, the dissolved parliament had grilled three ministers since it was elected in 1996, in one instance over the alleged squandering of public funds and in the other over the display of banned books seen to be un-Islamic.

Kuwait's is the only elected Gulf Arab parliament. It has often probed the country's arms deals with Western allies and investigated alleged financial scandals.

The full term of the current parliament, elected in October 1996, would have expired late next year. Kuwaiti women, about half of Kuwait's almost 800,000 citizens, are not allowed to vote or stand for public office.

Signs of possible dissolution emerged on Tuesday when First Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah condemned the language used and accusations made against the cabinet during the questioning of Minister of Justice, Endowment and Islamic Affairs Ahmad al-Kulaib.

Congolese army seizes main rival base

MBANDZA-NDOUNGA, Congo, May 5: The Congolese army has taken control of Mbandza-Ndounga, the main base of the rival Ninja militia backing former prime minister Bernard Kolelas, an officer told AFP today, reports AFP.

The army took the base, some 50 kilometres southwest of Brazzaville, last Saturday without a fight, said the officer, who requested anonymity.

He said government forces had also taken, on Sunday, the city of Kinkala, capital of the Pool region, some 75 kilometres west of Brazzaville.

No sign of clashes was visible in Mbandza-Ndounga, where the Ninjas, who have been fighting government forces since December, had their main base.

However, on the road to the camp seven burned tanks were abandoned from earlier fighting, along with about a dozen rotting corpses.

NATO's air campaign commander tells Clinton Belgrade's security forces vulnerable to collapse

BRUSSELS, May 5: The commander of NATO's air campaign against Yugoslavia on Wednesday told US President Bill Clinton that Belgrade's security forces and infrastructure were "vulnerable to collapse," alliance spokesman Jamie Shea said, reports AFP.

The spokesman was speaking after US General Wesley Clark briefed Clinton on progress in the campaign at NATO headquarters here.

Clark told Clinton that because NATO had been able to avoid losses on its side Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic must understand that he can never win.

"We are winning," he quoted Clark as telling the US president. "The Yugoslav leadership and its military security force and support structure is vulnerable to collapse."

Another top NATO officer, General Klaus Naumann, the chairman of the alliance's military committee told Clinton the allies "can and will continue to intensify" the airstrikes.

Clinton replied to the generals' briefing by emphasizing that NATO had to be ready to act quickly, once "we have achieved our goals," to ensure that refugees could return to Kosovo.

The NATO spokesman said Clinton had brought a two-fold message on his visit to Europe: the importance of encouraging diplomatic efforts to secure a settlement of the conflict and continuing determination to keep stepping up the bombing until Milosevic accepts the demands of the international community.

Earlier, Clinton briefed NATO Secretary General Javier Solana on his talks with Russian envoy Viktor Chernenyrdin, who has been engaged in a peace mission.

After three hours at the NATO headquarters, Clinton was holding a brief meeting with Belgian Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene. He then flew to Germany at the US Air Force base in Spangdahlem, near Koblenz, to visit aircrews.

Clinton was to head later Wednesday to Ramstein, another US base in western Germany where he was to meet the three US servicemen released by Belgrade on Sunday after a month in captivity.

On Thursday, Clinton is to hold talks in Bonn with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder.

Tornadoes in USA Death toll rises to 43

OKLAHOMA CITY, May 5: Rescue crews looking for signs of life picked through shattered homes, twisted trees and mangled cars after a swarm of astonishingly powerful tornadoes chewed up entire neighbourhoods in Oklahoma and Kansas and killed at least 43 people, reports AP.

Even in an area accustomed to twisters and strong thunderstorms — this is, after all, the region known as Tornado Alley, and spring is an especially dangerous time of year — the twisters' wrath was extraordinary.

One monstrous funnel cloud skipped across the ground for four hours and was classified F-5, the most powerful tornado type, with winds of more than 410 kph. It cut a path 1.6 kilometres (1 mile) wide, and along with the other twisters tore up 97 kilometres of the flat countryside.

"This is crazy," said Eric Peterson of Haysville, Kansas a suburb of Wichita, after a twister pushed a tree into his bedroom. "I have been in typhoons in the South Pacific and in hurricanes, but this tops it."

The death toll in Kansas, including a month-old baby in Haysville. And the same system produced a tornado in north-east Texas on Tuesday. One person was killed.

This was the nation's deadliest tornado outbreak since 42 people were killed last year in Florida.

Everest team sends tissue sample from Mallory's body

SEATTLE, May 5: Climbers who discovered the body of George Mallory on Mount Everest have sent a tissue sample for testing to prove conclusively the remains were those of the British explorer lost in 1924, an expedition official said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Erin C. Cook, a spokeswoman for the Mallory and Irvine Research Expedition in Ashford, Washington, also said other artifacts were taken from the body, including "written materials" and a broken rope that strongly suggests Mallory plunged to his death in the ill-fated summit attempt.

The expedition stunned the climbing world over the weekend with news they had found Mallory's body at 27,000 feet (8,230 metres), about 2,000 vertical feet (610 metres) below Everest's summit.

The discovery instantly renewed debate over whether Mallory — and possibly his younger, less experienced climbing partner, Andrew Irvine, who also died on the mountain — might have been the first to reach the summit.

Lankan army to recruit Tamil soldiers

COLOMBO, May 5: For the first time in a decade, Sri Lanka's army opened 15 recruitment centers in the country's northeast Wednesday to recruit Tamil soldiers in the region where militants have been fighting for an independent homeland, reports AP.

Stung by charges that the army was not recruiting enough Tamils, recruitment centers were set up exclusively for the Tamils and will run until May 22.

Military spokesman Nishantha Wadugapitiya said advertisements on state-run radio and television have urged Tamils to sign up.

Tamil recruits, including some officers, are found in the ranks of the 100,000 strong army but there have been very few new recruitments from the community since 1983, when the violent campaign for a Tamil homeland started.

The army is dominated by Sinhalese, who make up 76 per cent of Sri Lanka's 18.5 million people. Tamils are 18 per cent of the population.

The militants among Tamils say that they can prosper away from the Sinhalese domination in their proposed homeland in the north and the east, where most Tamils live. They accuse the government of discriminating against the minority community.

Indian HC stays warrant against Fida Hussain

MUMBAI, May 5: The Mumbai High Court yesterday stayed the process and non-bailable warrant issued against renowned artist Maqbool Fida Hussain by the first class judicial magistrate in Chiplun for painting Goddess Saraswati in the nude, reports PTI.

Admitting a petition filed by Hussain, Mr Justice PS Patankar stayed the process and non-bailable warrant against the painter.

On a complaint filed by Balachandra Vasudev Diwakar, the Chiplun judicial magistrate had issued process and warrant against Hussain after his controversial painting appeared in two newspapers published from Mumbai on October 20, 1996.

He had directed the artist to appear before the court on or before April 29 last.

Hussain pleaded that he had not painted the goddess in the nude with an intention to hurt sentiments of persons belonging to a particular religion. He claimed that he had done the painting way back in 1972 and when it appeared in newspapers three years ago he was in London from where he had apologised to the people of the country.

May 4 peace deadline expires Arafat blames Israel for continuing ME tension

GAZA, May 5: President Yasser Arafat, addressing Palestinians on the day a peace deadline with Israel expired, accused the Israeli government of keeping the Middle East mired in tension, reports Reuters.

"This day, instead of being a source of comfort for all countries to close this site of tension in the Middle East... has become a source of worry about the dangers surrounding the peace process," Arafat said on Palestinian television and radio late on Tuesday.

He lashed out at the "policies of the current Israeli government which aim to destroy the credibility of the peace process by moving away from implementing its obligations through settlement building and expansion and 'Judaising' Jerusalem."

Earlier, Israel's right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu proclaimed victory for thwarting Arafat's long-standing

pledge to declare statehood on May 4, the date set by the Oslo interim accords for forging a final agreement.

In his speech, Arafat assured Palestinians they were on track for statehood despite a decision by the PLO last week to delay a declaration of independence.

"A vow is a vow and a promise is a promise — until a Palestinian child holds the Palestinian flag on the walls, minarets and churches of Jerusalem," he said.

"This is Palestine, this is Palestine, this is Palestine being formed as a state," Arafat said, his voice rising. "Its brave people are moving forward towards the moment of its declaration on its own land."

AP adds from Washington: As the target date for an overall accord between Israel and the Palestinians passed Tuesday with disclosure that President Bill Clinton has encouraged Yasser Arafat's aspirations for his "own land."

Romania bans sale of booze during Pope's visit

BUCHAREST, May 5: Bucharest city fathers have declared a ban on the sale of alcohol in parts of the city due to be visited by Pope John Paul II this weekend, officials said, reports AFP.

Shopkeepers will face fines of 500,000 lei (about \$3 dollars) or up to three months in prison if they breach the booze ban, to remain in place from Friday until Sunday in the Romanian capital.

Tens of thousands of Romanians are expected to descend on the city for the papal trip. Security is tight, with some 7,000 police and 700 elite security agents deployed to prevent any incidents.

Preparations for John Paul's visit have been clouded by protests over fees levied on media covering it.

Newsmen are paying some 30 dollars for access to the airport when the Holy Father arrives Friday, and an ally-turned-foe in a confidence motion last month, accuse India's most famous widow, heir to the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty, of being a devout "foreign agent."

Sonia Gandhi's nationality becoming burning issue ahead of Indian polls

NEW DELHI, May 5: Main opposition leader Sonia Gandhi's nationality has become a burning issue ahead of India's upcoming elections, with enemies calling her a power-hungry foreigner and admirers branding her a saviour, reports AFP.

The Italian-born Gandhi, 52, a top prime ministerial candidate, is almost defied in the slogan "Bring Sonia and redeem India" of her Congress party, which was led by her husband's family for most of this century.

But the Hindu nationalist party of ousted Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who was toppled by Gandhi and an ally-turned-foe in a confidence motion last month, accuse India's most famous widow, heir to the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty, of being a devout "foreign agent."

India's 600-million-plus voters appear to be sharply divided over the question of exactly who the "real" Gandhi is.

A recent survey conducted by Outlook magazine revealed that 61.5 per cent of the 1,010 voters interviewed in 11 towns and villages felt Sonia was a dyed-in-the-wool Indian. But 47 per cent said her foreign birth disqualified her from the top job while 45 per cent said it was not an impediment.

Fifty-three per cent said another Congress leader should be made prime minister if the party won the next elections.

The formerly reclusive Sonia has been compared by the Indian media to La Gioconda or Mona Lisa, the enigmatic Italian noblewoman.

Hindu-right wingers claim that Sonia, who took Indian nationality 18 years after her 1968 marriage to former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, is set to promote Christianity in Hindu-dominated India and promote Italian interests.

Vajpayee, a moderate in his party, has not gone that far but clearly stated in an interview that she had no place in national politics.

Violence in Indonesia Death toll rises to 31

LHOKSEUMAWE, Indonesia, May 5: The death toll in the military shooting of villagers in a northwestern Indonesian village has risen to 31, officials said Wednesday, reports AP.

Violence broke out Monday in Aceh province when soldiers fired on civilians during a search for a kidnapped soldier. The shooting in Pulo Rungkom village was one of the deadliest events in recent years in Aceh, where rebels fighting for an Islamic state have operated for years.

Doctors had said 23 people died, but a member of a fact-finding team set up by the local government said at least eight others died but had not been taken to hospitals.

"We can confirm that at least 31 people died in the shootings on Monday," said Basri Ganu, member of a team that has been investigating military atrocities in Aceh. The team includes community leaders, local government officials and members of non-governmental organizations.

76 succumbs to heatwave Temperature falls in parts of India

NEW DELHI, May 5: Mercury dipped in parts of India giving respite to people groaning under torrid heat for the past fortnight even as four more succumbed to the blazing sun raising the country-wide toll from the scorch to 76, reports PTI.

Two people died each in Orissa and Uttar Pradesh as the temperature plummeted to 43.2 degrees Celsius in the national capital after a week of record-breaking ascent.

Hissar in Haryana, which sweated at 47.3 degrees Celsius on Monday, yesterday recorded 46.7 with the met office forecasting light rains in Punjab, Haryana and Chandigarh in the next two days.

Marginal drop in mercury was reported in most parts of Rajasthan reeling under a stifling heatwave for nearly a month.

Mercury fell in Jaipur, Barmer, Ajmer, Jodhpur and Dabok with Ganganagar the hottest place in the state registering 45 degrees Celsius.

However, the temperature soared to 47 degrees in Jhansi in Uttar Pradesh, which continued to reel under unrelenting heat forcing authorities to shut down all schools in Lucknow.

Mercury hovered four to five degrees above normal in Jhansi, Garhwal, Agra, Bareilly, Varanasi, Faizabad and Allahabad, officials in Lucknow said.

Two people died of sunstroke in interior Dhenkanal district of Orissa on Monday pushing the toll in the state to 41.

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BRIEFLY

Mandela begins China visit:

South African President Nelson Mandela arrived in Beijing yesterday to start a landmark visit aimed at improving economic ties and meeting with Chinese leaders, the official Xinhua news agency reported, AFP reports from Beijing.

Tigers kill 2 Germans in Spain:

A German couple vacationing in Spain were killed by tigers when they ventured out of their car in a safari park near this southeastern seaside resort yesterday, rescue services said, AFP says from Alicante.

3 sentenced to death in Yemen:

A Yemeni court yesterday condemned three Islamic militants to death for a kidnapping in which four Western tourists were killed in December, AFP says from Zinjibar.

Cartoonist detained in India:

Police here yesterday detained a cartoonist working with a prominent Assamese Daily and searched his house for his suspected links with ULFA, PTI reports from Guwahati.

Reagan's grandson jailed:

Former president Ronald Reagan's 20-year-old grandson was sentenced to six months jail on Tuesday for stealing from cars after being thrown out of home by his parents, Reuters says from California.

Chopper crash claims 2 US pilots:

Two US Army pilots were killed yesterday after an Apache helicopter crashed on a training mission in Albania, US military sources said, Xinhua reports from Brussels.



AFP file picture dated 11 November 1988 shows Umma Hafida Mohamad Ali leaving the court during lunch break. Umma, who accused ousted Malaysian premier Anwar Ibrahim of sexual misconduct, said Wednesday that she was currently writing a book on the saga leading to Anwar's conviction last month.



John Kennedy Jr (R), son of late US president John F Kennedy, arrives with his wife Caroline (L), for a party celebrating the opening of a new store of US fashion designer Ralph Lauren in London Tuesday.

Sudan urges US to lift ban

KHARTOUM, May 5: Sudan asked the United States on Tuesday to compensate everyone affected by an American attack that destroyed a pharmaceutical plant in August and urged the lifting of sanctions imposed on this African country, reports AP.

The Sudanese reaction came a day after the US Justice and Treasury departments decided to unfreeze the assets of the owner of Sudan's El Shifa factory, Saudi-Sudanese businessman Salah Idris.

Washington bombed the factory in August 1998, maintaining it was producing chemical weapons agents. The United States also alleges that Osama bin Laden, a Saudi billionaire accused of bankrolling last year's deadly bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, had links to the factory.

Ali Nimir, a minister of state for foreign affairs, said the decision to lift the freeze on Idris' assets was "proof against the allegations" that El Shifa was producing chemical weapons. It also "showed the mistake of the aggression," he said.

The official Sudan News Agency, SUNA, quoted Nimir as expressing hope that President Bill Clinton's administration would "go ahead and compensate all these affected, as well as assist Sudan with realizing

peace in the country." "We hope that America would reconsider all the measures it has taken against Sudan, annulling all forms of political, trade and economic sanctions," SUNA quoted Nimir as saying.

The report did not say how much compensation Sudan would like to receive. The United States has not backed away from its assertion that the plant produced chemical weapons.

Washington considers Sudan a sponsor of terrorism and has imposed trade and other economic sanctions. It has withdrawn its diplomats from Khartoum for security reasons, but maintains diplomatic contacts from Kenya and Egypt.

The US decision to release the freeze on Idris' US bank accounts came the day the government was scheduled to answer a civil suit filed by Idris on Feb. 26. The suit demanded the release of more than \$24 million in bank deposits at the Bank of America, which were frozen because US officials suspected Idris was involved in terrorism.

US Justice Department officials said the government lifted the freeze after deciding it was unwise to reveal the sources of their information during a trial in open court.