

Israel seals off West Bank town

HEBRON, West Bank, Aug 4: Israel sealed off the flashpoint town of Hebron today after a gun attack against two Jewish settlers, the first such incident since the new Israeli government took office last month, reports AFP.

The measure prevents Palestinians from entering or leaving Hebron and follows a curfew introduced late Tuesday on the Israeli-controlled city centre, Israeli army officials said.

Unidentified gunmen opened fire on settlers as they drove through the centre, wounding two people from the Jewish enclave of Tel Rameida who were taken to hospital in Jerusalem.

The attack occurred near the Tomb of the Patriarchs, a site holy to both Jews and Muslims where 29 Palestinian worshippers were gunned down by an extremist settler in 1994 before he killed himself.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who took office in July, issued a statement condemning "this senseless attack."

"The struggle against terrorism takes top priority and we demand that the Palestinian Authority act with the greatest determination to capture and prosecute its perpetrators," he said.

West concerned at Saudi-Pak nuclear link

LONDON, Aug 4: Western governments are concerned that Saudi Arabia may be seeking to acquire a nuclear weapons capability after its defence minister visited Pakistan's secret nuclear facilities, a senior British official said yesterday, reports Reuters.

Saudi Defence Minister Prince Sultan toured the Kahuta uranium enrichment plant and missile factory with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in early May and was briefed by AQ Khan, the father of Pakistan's atom bomb, diplomatic sources said.

The visit, reported briefly in a Pakistani newspaper at the time, raised eyebrows in London and Washington.

The site is so sensitive that former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has said she was not able to visit the installations during her time in office.

US waives visa for 3 countries

WASHINGTON, Aug 4: Citizens of Portugal, Singapore and Uruguay will no longer need visas to travel to the United States from August 9, the State Department said yesterday, reports Reuters.

The countries are now among 29 states that are part of a visa waiver pilot programme that allows their citizens to travel to the United States for tourism or business for 90 days or less without going through the visa process.

Regulations explaining the change in policy were published in the US Federal Register yesterday and all airlines have been notified of the changes, the department said.

Russia slams attacks on Iraq's no-fly zones

UNITED NATIONS, Aug 4: Russia's Security Council representative criticised on Tuesday US and British attacks in no-fly zones over Iraq but the discussion that followed was inconclusive, council sources said, reports Reuters.

Russia often raises the issue during closed-door council consultations after Baghdad says such raids have caused civilian casualties, the sources said.

Russia argues the no-fly zones, established by the Western powers after the 1991 Gulf war, are illegal and the air strikes harm civilians and damage the Iraqi economy.

Iraq said nine people were killed and 23 wounded last Friday in raids on the country's northern and southern no-fly zones. The previous day it said eight civilians were killed by air attacks in southern Iraq.

Babies should not watch TV: US paediatricians

WASHINGTON, Aug 4: Children under the age of two should not watch television, the American Academy of Paediatrics announced as part of a series of recommendations released here, reports AFP.

The Academy also suggested that parents should not allow older children to have a television set or video games in their rooms, and to avoid using those items as a substitute for parental contact.

"While certain television programmes may be promoted to this age group, research on early brain development shows that babies and toddlers have a critical need for direct interactions with parents and other significant care givers for healthy brain growth and the development of appropriate social, emotional and cognitive skills," according to a report in the August edition of the magazine "Paediatrics."

The Academy also recommended paediatricians to ask parents about the electronic media environment of their children during routine medical check-ups.

Barak's efforts to kick-start ME peace process faltering

JERUSALEM, Aug 4: Almost a month after coming to power amid renewed hopes for peace in the Middle East, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's efforts to kick-start negotiations with both Palestinians and Syria are faltering, reports AFP.

Barak's plan for a delayed implementation of the Wye River peace agreement has foundered on Palestinian accusations of time-wasting, while talks with Syria have yet to be revived as Damascus is demanding a full Israeli withdrawal from the strategic Golan Heights.

In Israel's so-called "security zone" in southern Lebanon, guerrilla attacks continue, while Tuesday's shooting of two Jewish settlers in the West Bank town of Hebron further raised tensions.

"Instead of talk of reconcili-

ation, there is talk of separation... With such an approach, it is not certain that it will be possible to complete negotiations on the final status even in another 15 years," commentator Akiva Eldar wrote in Wednesday's Haaretz newspaper.

Haaretz said Barak, who had promised to restore a "climate of trust" after three years of deadlock under his hardline predecessor Benjamin Netanyahu, had only succeeded in reviving Palestinian unease.

The Palestinians accuse Barak of prevarication and not respecting October's US-brokered Wye accord, which laid out the phased withdrawal of Israel from 13 percent of the occupied West Bank.

Barak, who took office on July 6, has so far offered to carry out a key part of the accord -- a further Israeli troop

withdrawal from the West Bank -- in October, 10 months later than scheduled.

Last week he convinced a reluctant Yasser Arafat, head of the Palestinian Authority, to take two weeks to consider his proposal to delay the implementation and roll it into definitive "final-status" talks later on.

However, a joint Israeli-Palestinian committee set up to examine the proposal made no headway.

The Israeli government is leading the Middle East into the same atmosphere which reigned under the government of Mr. Netanyahu, Palestinian information minister Yasser Abdel Rabbo told Israeli radio.

He also said Barak's comments following Tuesday's attack on two Jewish settlers in Hebron, which Israel sealed off after the shooting, amounted to

a warning shot at the Palestinians.

"The fight against terrorism comes first and we call on the Palestinian Authority to act with the utmost firmness to capture the instigators of this attack and bring them to justice," Barak said.

Representatives of the hardline settlers accused the Palestinians of doing nothing to prevent the attack.

"If the Palestinians confiscated the illegal weapons, as they had pledged to do when they signed the Wye accord, such attacks would not take place," said the spokesman Yehudit Tayar.

However, the head of Israel's military intelligence service Amos Malka told parliament that the Palestinian Authority was "fighting against terrorism in a satisfactory manner."

Landslides, floods heighten storm misery for East Asia

Yangtze flooding death toll crosses 400

MANILA, Aug 4: Nearly 600 have died or are missing in flooding and landslides that have swept East Asia, the latest of which is a mudslide in the Philippines which killed 11 and left up to 47 unaccounted for, officials said Wednesday.

A fifth day of rains kept falling from the Philippines to South Korea on Wednesday.

In China, more than 400 people have been killed and 66 million affected by summer flooding along the Yangtze river, the Red Cross said as it announced an appeal for emergency aid.

"While our figures don't all always correspond with the national government, the official Red Cross figures show 281 dead in the worst affected areas and a (national) death toll of between 400 and 410," a spokesman for the International Committee

for the Red Cross in Beijing told AFP.

The Red Cross Society of China has launched an international appeal for food, clothing, sanitation materials, and quilts for 1.8 million people left homeless by floods.

Officials highlighted that it was still early days in China's flood season. Last year, more than 4,000 people died in floods in China.

In South Korea, at least 35 people were confirmed dead and another 28 missing as floodwaters started to ease following the passing of Typhoon Olga. Around 170,000 troops were mobilised in a nationwide salvage operation.

Chantaburi province in Thailand counted the cost of its worst flooding ever that left six dead and one missing.

Worst hit from the recent

storms have been China and India, but Vietnam, Bangladesh and Nepal have also been badly affected. Several hundred have been killed in recent weeks, but this week it has been the turn of the Korean peninsula and the Philippines.

Torrents of rain-loosened earth and boulders from a nearby hill came crashing down Cherry Hills housing development in the Philippines, burying homes and crumpling them like an "accordion", witnesses said.

Rescuers, armed with hydraulic jacks and crowbars, combed through debris of twisted metal and concrete at the middle-class enclave in Antipolo town outside Manila.

The search continued into the night amid incessant rains, which hampered operations. By evening, 11 bodies had been re-

covered, raising the death toll in the country to 53, officials said.

Up to 47 people remained missing in the Cherry Hills tragedy alone.

More than half a million people have been displaced in Manila and surrounding provinces, mainly due to rivers swollen by the heaviest rainfall levels in 25 years which began last weekend.

South Korea, which also saw severe flooding last year, mobilised a third of the national military to salvage homes, farmlands and roads damaged by four days of devastating floods.

The operation focused on northern South Korea where the plight of residents was worsened by Typhoon Olga that ripped up the west coast on Tuesday.

Scientists put genes in rice to boost nutrition

ST. LOUIS, Aug 4: By inserting genes from the daffodil and other plants into rice, scientists said on Tuesday they boosted the staple's nutritional value with the aim of preventing millions of cases of anaemia and blindness, reports Reuters.

Swiss scientists who developed the genetically modified rice in the laboratory said it increases the levels of iron and Vitamin A and counteracts and acid found in rice that inhibits the body's ability to absorb iron.

The new rice prototype is being tested and a variety could be freely available within two to four years to farmers, especially in poorer countries where rice is sometimes the only staple food, researcher Ingo Potrykus of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology said.

He said the rice was genetically modified solely to boost its nutritional value, unlike

other crops which have been bioengineered to ward off plant disease. Bioengineered crops have sparked health and environmental concerns and been vilified in Britain as "Frankenstein foods."

"There is no environmental argument in this case, because we have made an improvement in the nutritional character which does not give the plant any advantage in the environment," Potrykus said in a telephone interview.

With rice the dietary staple for an estimated 2.4 billion people, iron deficiencies afflict millions with mental and physical developmental problems, and shortages of Vitamin A lead to millions of cases of childhood blindness, he said. Populations at risk are unable to supplement their diets with iron- and vitamin-rich vegetables, fruits and meat.

A major problem with rice is

that it contains phytic acid, which inhibits the digestive system's ability to absorb iron.

The scientists obtained a gene from a French bean that boosts rice's iron content and another gene that produces an enzyme that counteracts the phytic acid.

"The beauty of this gene and the protein from the gene is that it is stable even after cooking," Potrykus said.

They also transferred two genes from the daffodil that produce beta-carotene -- a good source of Vitamin A -- which also creates the flower's yellow colour. Beta-carotene content was further enriched with the help of a gene from a bacterium.

"Our breakthrough was to engineer an entire pathway to Vitamin A. That has never been done before," said Peter Beyer, a cell biologist at the University of Freiburg in Germany who worked with Potrykus.



Residential houses are destroyed after a landslide in Cherry Hills in suburban Antipolo yesterday. At least 10 people were killed and up to 47 others were missing after several days of heavy monsoon rains triggered the deadly landslide. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Singapore's presidential polls Aug 28: Singapore will hold polls to choose a new president on August 28, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's office said Wednesday, AFP reports from Singapore.

President Ong Teng Cheong, 63, Singapore's first elected president announced last month that he would not stand for a second six-year term. So far no one has put his or her name forward, although reports say that six people have collected the forms which candidates need to fill in.

30 die as boat sinks in Sierra Leone: Around 30 people are feared dead after a crowded boat was caught in a storm and capsized off the coast of Sierra Leone, police said Wednesday, Reuters reports from Freetown.

Fifteen people, including the crew, survived in Monday's accident off the port of Pepel about 25 km (15 miles) northeast of the Sierra Leonean capital Freetown.

A senior police officer at Pepel said: "Only the body of a five-month-old baby has been found. The search for the other bodies continues."



Britain's Queen Mother waves to well-wishers outside her official London residence, Clarence House, yesterday as she celebrates her 99th birthday. — AFP photo

Gun battle in Kashmir: 10 killed, 3 injured

JAMMU, India, Aug 4: Ten people were killed and three wounded in a gun battle between security forces and armed militants in the restive north-Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, police said today, reports Reuters.

They said five foreign mercenaries, four army personnel and a civilian died on Tuesday in the battle in the border district of Rajouri, 176 km (110 miles) north of Jammu, the state's winter capital.

"The encounter is over, but combing operations in the adjoining areas are still on," K Rajinder Kumar, deputy inspector-general of police in the Rajouri and Poonch districts, told Reuters by phone.

Police said most of the foreign mercenaries were from the Lashkar-e-Taiba, a Pakistan-based guerrilla group that has refused to withdraw from Kashmir despite the official end of a recent border conflict between India and Pakistan.

Kumar said they recovered

six grenades and large amounts of ammunition in the operation conducted by the army and the state police.

The violence followed a gun fight between security forces and militants on Monday in the state's Surankote district, 480 km (298 miles) southwest of Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir's summer capital. Eight people were killed and six wounded.

On Sunday, there were two separate gun battles in the Kashmir region during which an Indian army officer and 10 separatist rebels were killed.

The violence highlights the lingering a two-month conflict in which Indian forces ousted militants from strategic peaks on India's side of the Line of Control dividing the disputed Himalayan region with Pakistan. Pakistan has said the infiltrators were freedom fighters against Indian rule and denied India's charge that Pakistani troops were involved in the incursion.

Campaign for Diana statue gains momentum in UK

LONDON, Aug 4: Almost 35,000 people have backed a campaign to build a statue commemorating Princess Diana — but Britain's royal family will not pay for it, reports Reuters.

The Daily Mirror newspaper launched the campaign, saying it was high time the government and Queen Elizabeth honoured the princess with a memorial, saving one of London's 286 official statues were devoted to Diana.

Their "statue crusade" was backed by Diana's brother, Earl Spencer, and Harrods department store boss Mohammed Al Fayed, whose son Dodi died in a Paris car crash with Diana two years ago.

The newspaper reported today that 34,450 readers had phoned to back their campaign. But Buckingham Palace told the paper: "The Royal family does not build statues. It has not

happened in the current reign or the last."

"Most statues are erected by public subscription, by public bodies or through government — and most are on property that does not belong to the Royal Family."

The paper said an announcement should come before the second anniversary of Diana's death, on August 31, in what would be a fitting tribute to her sons princes William and Harry.

"It's a great shame that nothing has been done," Al Fayed said. "A statue would be an appropriate way of commemorating a woman we all loved so much."

Earl Spencer, whose electrifying funeral oration for Diana berated the royal family, said: "There is no doubt there is public affection for my sister. I'm sure a memorial will come."

Indian train collision death toll nears 300 on 3rd day Sabotage not ruled out

GAISAL, India, Aug 4: The death toll from the tragic rail collisions in eastern India neared 300 today as the search through tangled wreckage went into its third day, reports Reuters.

As the last decomposing bodies were cut away from the jumble of engines and carriages in a remote corner of West Bengal state, attention switched to who or what was responsible for the country's most serious rail accident since 1995.

On Tuesday, Railway Minister Nitish Kumar resigned to take moral responsibility for the disaster, and spoke of "criminal negligence" by railway staff.

But commentators shrugged off Kumar's move and pointed to Indian Railways' management for failing to put right a record of some 300 accidents a year, about two-thirds of which are due to staff negligence.

The Awadh-Assam Express, heading for the tea and oil-rich

northeastern state of Assam, and the Delhi-bound Brahma-putra Mail collided head-on early on Monday.

With all hope gone of finding more survivors, weary rescue workers at Gaisal station, some 400 km (250 miles) north of Calcutta, took a four-hour break — their first in 48 hours.

As they resumed work at dawn, the death toll was 275 and the number of injured 297. Officials said the final body count was not likely to exceed 300.

The Chief Commissioner of Indian Railway Safety Dr M Mani today did not rule out sabotage in Monday's rail accident here but said the exact cause of the collision would be known only after the public inquiry which will start at Kishanganj tomorrow, reports PTI.

Dr Mani, who made an inspection of the accident site along with NFR General Manager Rajendra Nath, said

he had got reports of conflicting evidence that the two ill-fated trains were running on the same track for about 30 kms between Kishanganj and Gaisal. Asked whether this could be the result of a sabotage, he said, "I don't think so, but what exactly happened can be ascertained only after the inquiry."

On whether it was due to human error, he said, the accident was caused by a "series of errors but that has to be ascertained through the inquiry."

Dr Mani said the inquiry beginning from tomorrow will end on August 8.

A preliminary report can be expected between August 12 to 15 and the final report would be submitted in two months, Mani said.

Before leaving for Kishanganj, he asked the railway personnel involved in rescue operations to look for the Log Books, Loco Repair Books and speedometer boxes of the two trains.

Off the Record

It's only 20th for her

BUDAPEST: A Hungarian woman has given birth to her twentieth child and does not rule out having more, reports Reuters.

Magdolna Fuzi, 43, gave birth to a 3.7 kilogram (8.2 pounds) boy without any complications, Hungarian newspapers said on Wednesday.

The parents, whose oldest child is 26 and the second youngest three, said they had chosen to have so many children for religious reasons.

Asked about the financial cost of raising such a large family, Fuzi said her husband was unable to pay back a bank loan on their seven-room house. The family has no television and she washes clothes in a machine that is 20 years old.

Lion's day out

KUALA LUMPUR: A lion travelling with the Russian Circus escaped his cage for a brief taste of freedom, but ended up having to be ignobly rescued from a monsoon drain during a tour in Malaysia, news reports said Wednesday, reports AFP.

"Chomo," a one-year-old lion with the visiting Russian Circus, leapt from his cage during feeding time early Tuesday in the northern Malaysian state of Kedah.

After roaming through parking lot and a few backyards for a half hour, Chomo stumbled into a deep ditch intended to trap rainwater. Circus personnel eventually pulled the lion out, the Sun daily said.

"Luckyly there were not many people on the street when the lion escaped and no one was injured," one of the lion's keepers was quoted as saying.

President's pens stolen

JAKARTA: A palace employee with sticky fingers said lax security tempted him to steal 11 valuable pens from Indonesia's president, but unsympathetic prosecutors are demanding he spend more than a year in jail, local media reported Wednesday.

The repentant thief, Mulyadi Umar Jaya, confessed to nabbing the Mont Blanc pens, worth nearly 5,000 dollar, to finance his wedding party, according to The Jakarta Post.

President BJ Habibie had intended to present the pens to newly appointed ambassadors.

Beware of behaving with mother-in-law

RIYADH: A Saudi groom divorced his wife during the wedding celebrations after she dared to criticise his mother's joyful dancing, a newspaper reported on Wednesday, reports AFP.

The mother-in-law had got up to perform before the young couple installed on two thrones and surrounded by guests, Al-Riyadh daily said.

"Please I beg you, tell your mother to sit down, the way she is dancing is not appropriate," the Unnamed bride said.

Her husband of a few hours angrily divorced her on the spot in accordance with Islamic tradition.

500 m firearms on the flow around the globe

UNITED NATIONS, Aug 4: More than 500 million small arms are now estimated to be circulating around the globe, and large numbers continue to be produced legally and illegally, a panel of government experts has reported, says AP.

Approximately 200 million firearms are held by civilians in the United States alone, the National Rifle Association said Tuesday.

In a report to the UN General Assembly, the panel said small arms and light weapons are "the weapons of choice in many contemporary conflicts" because they are increasingly lethal, relatively cheap, easily portable and concealable, and in many cases require minimal maintenance.

These assault rifles, machine guns, pistols and grenade launchers kill millions of innocent civilians, especially children. After conflicts end, they often wind up in the hands of criminals, smugglers and terrorists.

Among the main factors contributing to the availability of small arms and light weapons are the increase in the number of legitimate producers and continuing illegitimate arms manufacturing, the panel's report said.

About 40 per cent of the worldwide flow of small arms comes from illicit trafficking, which serves warlords, drug traffickers, terrorists and other criminals, according to the UN Department for Disarmament Affairs.

The group of experts, which had 27 participants from two dozen countries, was chaired by Japanese Ambassador Mitsuro Donawaki, a special assistant to the foreign minister.

Its report outlined progress on implementing recommendations made in 1997, including ways to prevent and reduce the excessive accumulation and transfer of small arms.

It also proposed that an international conference on the illicit arms trade, which the General Assembly has decided to hold no later than 2001, fo-

cus on international efforts to prevent, combat and eradicate illegal transfers.

The conference should focus primarily on small arms manufactured to military specifications, the panel said.

The report, sent to the General Assembly by Secretary-General Kofi Annan, urged all states to exercise "utmost restraint" in transfers of small arms and ammunition to conflict areas.

In view of the theft of large numbers of weapons from storage facilities in a number of countries, including Albania in 1997, and the illicit transfer of many of these weapons to neighbouring areas, the panel recommended that all countries take measures to prevent loss of weapons through theft.

It also urged countries to adopt laws to control small arms production and exports in order to prevent unauthorised manufacture or illicit trafficking in such weapons.

The group noted that small arms can now be marked to reduce the possibility of criminals and arms traffickers remove identification. It recommended that the United Nations study the feasibility of establishing reliable and cost-effective ways of marking all such weapons.

The group said it also wants a study on the feasibility of restricting the manufacture and trade in small arms to manufacturers and dealers authorised by states to be completed before the UN conference on the illicit arms trade.