

## Reagan lost ability to put his thoughts into words

WASHINGTON, Jan 24: Former US president Ronald Reagan has suffered a decline in his motor skills and has lost the ability to put his thoughts into words, his daughter Maureen Reagan wrote in today's Newsweek magazine, reports AFP.

Since Reagan, 88, was diagnosed in 1994 as having Alzheimer's disease, his condition has steadily declined, Maureen Reagan wrote.

"When people ask me how my dad is doing, my response is 'not so good'," she said, adding that "his motor skills are going."

The former president can no longer engage in even some simple pursuits.

"Earlier in the disease we did jigsaw puzzles... we started with 300-piece puzzles and worked our way down to 100," Reagan wrote.

## LTTE has spies in defence ministry

COLOMBO, Jan 24: Sri Lanka's separatist Tamil Tiger guerrillas had access to classified information through spies at the defence ministry and there had been two known recent leaks, a state-run daily said today, reports AFP.

The Sinhalese-language Dinamina daily said the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas who are fighting government forces in the island's north-east had access to information from the defence ministry.

The state-run paper in front-page banner headlines said a planned snap curfew in the capital Colombo and a suburb had leaked to a Tamil newspaper and another daily, helping suspected Tiger rebels to escape.

"Most of these officers who sabotage security measures taken by the government are also active supporters of the opposition," the Dinamina newspaper said.

## Megawati visits Spice Islands to halt strife

JAKARTA, Jan 24: Indonesian Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri Monday started a three-day visit to the Maluku Islands in a fresh bid to halt violence between Muslims and Christians, which has claimed at least 1,800 lives in the past year.

Megawati first visited Tual, the capital of Southeast Maluku district, now peaceful after waves of sectarian violence last year. As Tanga, a spokesman for the provincial governor's office in Ambon, told AFP.

On Tuesday she will meet Muslim and Christian religious leaders in Ambon, the capital of the Maluku, for talks on forging reconciliation between the two religious communities, Tanga said.

The day after tomorrow (Wednesday) she will visit Ternate, the capital of the newly established North Maluku province, he said.

## Iran ready to negotiate with US on ties

TEHRAN, Jan 24: Iran is "ready to negotiate" with the United States over resuming ties after a 20-year break but only "on the basis of mutual interest and equality," Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi said today, reports AFP.

In football, the two sides are equal but in politics they are not, Kharazi said in reference to the national teams' 1-1 draw in a landmark friendly in Pasadena, California, earlier this month.

## Aum guru's kidnapped son rescued

TOKYO, Jan 24: Japanese police said today they had safely rescued the seven-year-old son of the Aum Supreme Truth sect founder Shoko Asahara, two days after he was kidnapped, reports AFP.

The boy, whose name is withheld, was rescued late Sunday at a hotel in the hot spring resort of Hakone, some 80 km west of Tokyo, a police spokesman said.

Police arrested a 29-year-old Aum member, identified as Akira Tora, on suspicion he used a fictitious name to stay at the inn with the son of Asahara.

## Anjouan rebels claim victory in referendum

NAIROBI, Jan 24: Residents of Anjouan have voted against bringing the self-styled Indian Ocean island back into the fold of the Comoros federation, a senior separatist official told AFP by telephone today.

He said unofficial results of a referendum held Sunday on the island, which unilaterally seceded in 1997, showed that a vast majority of voters were not in favour of joining a proposed looser Comoran federation in which the constituent islands would enjoy a greater degree of autonomy.

The rejection of the An-tananarivo accord won 90 per cent of the vote, said the official, speaking by telephone from Anjouan's main town, Mutsumudu.



A Pakistan army soldier checks for explosive near their post which was attacked by Indian army troops in the Chamb sector Sunday. Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf has vowed to teach India a "lesson" if its troops cross the disputed border in Kashmir. The warning followed a serious clash between the two armies in the Chamb sector on the Line of Control (LoC) that divides Kashmir between the two countries. — AFP photo

## 'Indo-Pak fighting in Kashmir may escalate'

ISLAMABAD, Jan 24: New fighting between Pakistan and India in the disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir could escalate into a more serious conflict, Pakistani newspapers warned today, reports AFP.

In one of the worst confrontations in a year, 17 Pakistani and two Indian soldiers were killed late Friday on the Line of Control which divides Kashmir, according to New Delhi figures.

Islamabad said only two of its soldiers were killed and another five were missing, and blamed the attack on India.

"The shadows of war are lengthening in the wake of the latest violation of the Line of Control by Indian troops," The News daily said in an editorial. "At this moment a catastrophic confrontation seems a real possibility," the widely-respected newspaper said.

Rows over Kashmir have sparked two wars between the neighbours since they won independence from Britain in 1947.

Nearly every day brings shelling across the border, and last year the two sides came close to a third war in 10 weeks of heavy fighting around Kargil in Kashmir.

Tensions between the two countries represent even more of a threat since both tested nuclear weapons in 1998.

"The presence of nuclear weapons warrants prudence and restraint as this factor has changed altogether the degree and dimension of the danger the LoC represents," The News said.

Another major newspaper, The Nation, said Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf, who led the army during the Kargil clashes and then seized power in an October coup, had a major challenge on his hands.

"The fact that India has refused to de-escalate tension with Pakistan, despite repeated US advice to do so, is a danger signal that Pakistan can ill afford to overlook," The Nation said.

# India warns Pakistan to stop making threats 'CTBT in a coma'

NEW DELHI, Jan 24: Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes warned Pakistan's military rulers Monday to stop making threats and instead help build an atmosphere conducive to the resumption of bilateral talks, reports AFP.

"Instead of speaking in language of threats, (Pakistan) should make conditions for some talking," Fernandes was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India. "It is a pity there is no dialogue."

Fernandes' comments, after an address to a conference here on Asian security in the 21st century, follow weekend threats by Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf to teach India a "lesson" if its troops cross the disputed border in Kashmir, known as the Line of Control (LoC).

"Indians are not refraining from crossing the LoC out of any love for Pakistan," Musharraf said. "They would have done it long before if they could. We will teach them a lesson on the LoC or anywhere else."

Indian officials said 17

Pakistani and two Indian soldiers were killed late Friday along the LoC, Pakistan said only two of its soldiers had died.

The fighting was among the worst since a 10-week Kashmir border conflict erupted in May last year, claiming 1,000 lives on both sides.

Fernandes said Pakistan had yet to get over the military defeat Indian troops inflicted on Islamabad-backed Islamic separatists, whose incursion into Indian Kashmir triggered the fighting.

"It appears Pakistan is still smarting under (that) blow," the minister said. "It is time they got over this syndrome."

Indian and Pakistani troops routinely clash on the Kashmir frontier. Both countries dispute the ownership of Kashmir and control parts of the picturesque Himalayan province.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since their independence in 1947, two of them over Kashmir.

A Muslim separatist drive in the Indian zone has claimed more than 25,000 lives since

1989, India blames the unrest on Pakistan, which denies the charge but offers open support for the insurgency.

Meanwhile, Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes today described the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) as a moribund document, with little chance of short-term resuscitation.

Last year's vote by the US Senate against ratification of the CTBT "resulted in the treaty sliding into a coma," Fernandes said in the inaugural address to an international conference on Asian Security in the 21st Century.

"This has introduced serious uncertainties about the treaty coming into force in the foreseeable future," Fernandes said. India has been under intense US pressure to sign the CTBT since it conducted a series of underground nuclear tests in May 1998.

During his speech, Fernandes stressed India's nuclear policy was purely defensive, and "very close" in nature to that of its giant neighbour, China.

"We are committed not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. Our strategy, therefore, will be one of retaliation only," the defence minister said.

"This policy should reassure everyone who is not contemplating to pose a threat to India."

Fernandes also called for an "international" coalition to combat cross-border terrorism in Asia, which he warned was being driven by drug trafficking, money laundering and "religious extremism".

He specifically targeted Pakistan, which India has been seeking to have labelled a terrorist nation following the recent hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane that New Delhi charges Islamabad with terminating.

"What we are experiencing is the continuing tragedy, imposed on innocent people by Pakistan, through its transnational, transborder terrorism for over 15 years," Fernandes said.

"The level and viciousness of violence has been increasing."

## Senior Pak police official sacked over Karachi blast

KARACHI, Jan 24: A senior police official has been suspended following last week's bombing in Pakistan's troubled city of Karachi that killed eight people and injured 22, officials said today, reports AFP.

Ad Khwaja, a senior superintendent, was suspended after the bomb exploded in Karachi's downtown Arambagh Road, the Associated Press of Pakistan said.

The police official faced various charges of incompetency and irregularity, the agency said.

A spokesman for the governor of southern Sindh Province told the agency an investigation was underway.

## Arafat leaves Tunis for EU talks in Brussels

TUNIS, Jan 24: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat left Tunis late Sunday, following a brief visit here, to fly to Brussels for talks with European foreign ministers on the Middle East peace process, reports AFP.

Arafat, who had arrived here earlier Sunday, briefed Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali on his just-completed talks with US President Bill Clinton.

Arafat had sought "urgent intervention" in the peace process from Clinton.

# God's Army storms Thai hospital, takes 700 hostage 30 hostages bolt for freedom

RATCHABURI, Thailand, Jan 24: Around 30 people bolted for freedom today from buildings in the hospital complex seized by dissident Myanmar gunmen, witnesses said, reports AFP.

The group of mostly middle-aged hostages had been hiding in a building in the hospital undetected by the gunmen, television reports said.

They fled down an alley way as Thai police armed with rifles gave them cover, television reports said.

Police in pickup trucks then took them away from the hospital at high speed.

The gunmen earlier released 10 members of staff from the hospital where Thai officials say around 700 people are being held hostage.

Officials said ambulances were standing by in case more hostages were freed.

A middle-aged woman was later taken away from the hospital by plain clothes police but it was not clear if she had been held hostage.

Heavily armed guerrillas

from Myanmar dissident group God's Army today stormed a Thai hospital and took around 700 patients and staff hostage.

Up to 20 fighters from the ethnic Karen militia, which is led by two twin boys, stormed the hospital in the town of Ratchaburi, 123 km west of Bangkok in the early morning.

Seven hours into the drama, 10 elderly staff were released from the hospital and whisked away in a van.

A middle-aged woman was led away from the sprawling network of hospital buildings earlier but it was not clear if she had been a hostage.

Thai Army commander General Surayudh Chulanont told reporters the gunmen warned Thai forces to keep away from the hospital and to stop firing mortars at their group along the border.

"We have agreed to these two last conditions," he said.

The guerrillas also called on Thailand to pressure Myanmar to halt an offensive against them and asked for medical

treatment for injured comrades, officials said.

Paveena Moonbutr, 21, a nurse trapped inside the hospital told reporters on her mobile phone that the gunmen were armed with M-16 assault rifles and had rigged up remote control bombs around the building.

"I saw it with my own eyes. I saw a big blue public bus drive into the front of the hospital and three to four gunmen in uniform and some others jumped out," she said.

She said around 700 people were being held hostage in the hospital, a figure confirmed by the health ministry.

"The deputy permanent secretary of the health ministry said there are around seven hundred people in the hospital," a health ministry official told AFP.

Thai police volunteer Chantana Tiloakavichai told AFP the fighters had rigged up a bomb packed with ball bearings at the entrance to the hospital and had threatened to detonate it if Thai forces tried to oust them.



Thai police carry a woman (C) who is released from Ratchaburi hospital after being held by kidnappers yesterday. A group of 10 heavily armed ethnic Karen dissidents, known as God's Army and opposed to the government of neighbouring Myanmar, seized the hospital packed with some 700 patients and staff earlier in the day. — AFP photo

# 'American Beauty' wins Golden Globe for best picture

BEVERLY HILLS, California, Jan 24: "American Beauty" won best motion picture drama, director and screenwriting honors at Sunday's Golden Globe awards, but no acting accolades, reports AFP.

"Beauty's" stars, Annette Bening and Kevin Spacey, were overlooked by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association in favor of newcomer Hilary Swank and Denzel Washington, respectively.

Washington was named best dramatic actor for "The Hurricane," portraying boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, unjustly imprisoned for murder. Carter attended Sunday's ceremony.

"When I was a kid, we used to say grace, you know, to bless the table and... the short version was 'God is love,' which I thought was one word," Washington said.

"When we made this film, I really began to understand what 'God is love' means," he said. "This man right here (Carter) is love, he's all love. He lost about 7,300 days of his life and he's love, he's all love."

Swank was named best actress for her role as Brandon Teena, a sexually confused

young woman who was raped and murdered for trying to pass as a man in rural Nebraska, in the sleeper "Boys Don't Cry." Swank, 25, alluded to her better-known competitors Meryl Streep, Annette Bening, Sigourney Weaver and Julianne Moore, in her acceptance speech.

"To be mentioned in the same breath as the other nominees, it blows my mind," she said. "Meryl, you are my acting god."

"Toy Story 2," the animated Disney feature, was a surprise winner for best musical or comedy film.

The Golden Globes are widely seen as a preview for the Academy Awards, to be presented March 26 at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles.

Tom Cruise won best supporting actor for his role in "Magnolia," while "Girl Interrupted" star Angelina Jolie won for best supporting actress.

"Oh, God, I didn't expect this," said Cruise, 37, who played a millionaire male supremacist and motivational speaker in Paul Thomas Anderson's ensemble drama.

Cruise beat out Michael

Caine ("The Cider House Rules"), Michael Clarke Duncan ("The Green Mile"), Jude Law ("The Talented Mr. Ripley") and Haley Joel Osment ("The Sixth

Sense"). Jolie plays an outspoken mental patient in "Girl Interrupted." She edged out Cameron Diaz

and Catherine Keener (both nominated for "Being John Malkovich") and Samantha Morton ("Sweet and Lowdown") Natalie Portman ("Anywhere But Here")



The cast of "Sex and the City" (L-R) Kristin Davies, Sarah Jessica Parker, Chris Noth, Kim Cattrall and Cynthia Nixon celebrate their win for Best Television Series Comedy at the 57th Golden Globes in Beverly Hills Sunday. — AFP photo

## Indonesia defends crackdown on island near S'pore

SINGAPORE, Jan 24: Indonesia has defended its bloody crackdown on protestors seeking higher compensation for land on Bintan island, where Singaporeans hold the lion's share of investments, reports said today, says AFP.

"I am very sad by the turn of events. But if nothing was done, there will be problems for Bintan in the long run," the head of the Bintan District Assembly, Huzrin Hood, was quoted as saying by Singapore's Straits Times daily.

Bintan, about 50 km east of here, is a popular weekend resort for Singaporeans, who also hold the majority of the 1.35 billion-Singapore-dollar (808-million-US) in investments there.

In a pre-dawn operation Sunday, Indonesian troops moved in to quell nearly a week of protests outside the Bintan Beach International Resort by about 200 disgruntled villagers.

At least 13 people were injured, four of them seriously, and more than 70 people arrested in the 45-minute operation, according to the Straits Times.

Three of the injured were said to have gunshot wounds.

## BRIEFLY

**Voting gets underway in Croatia:** Croats went to the polls Monday to elect a successor to the late president Franjo Tudjman, in a ballot set to deal the final blow to years of authoritarian rule under his Croatian Democratic Union, AFP reports from Zagreb.

Polling booths opened at 7:00 a.m. (12:00 noon BST) and voting will continue to 7:00 p.m. (00:00 BST), with the first results expected at midday Tuesday. The latest polls put centrist Stipe Mesic, 65, in the lead with 35 per cent support in the presidential vote and aim to implement promised democratic changes in this former member of the Yugoslav federation.

**Catholic bishop held in China:** China has arrested an underground Catholic bishop and four other Catholic figures, a US-based human rights group said Monday, AFP reports from Beijing.

The Cardinal Kung Foundation said Bishop Han Dingxian, 63, was arrested around December 1 while leading a retreat in Shijiazhuang in the northern province of Hebei. The group said it had no knowledge of Han's current whereabouts, adding he has already spent around 20 years in jail.

**25 killed in S African bus crash:** Twenty-five people died and more than 52 were injured when a bus left the road and overturned in South Africa's Eastern Cape province late Sunday night, police said, AFP reports from Johannesburg.

The accident occurred when a car tried to overtake the bus in wet conditions, police spokesman Captain Mzoli Kopolo said. Kopolo said the roof of the bus was crushed when the vehicle rolled before coming to rest on its wheels in a field. Nineteen people, including four children, died on impact and another six in hospital later, public SABC radio said Monday.

## ROK civic groups declare war on corrupt politicians

SEOUL, Jan 24: Fed-up South Korean civic groups today declared war on "incompetent and corrupt" politicians -- including a former premier -- by revealing a list of leaders branded unfit to run for office, reports AFP.

A coalition of around 470 civic groups branded 67 political leaders as tainted and unworthy of office, saying they should not be allowed to run in crucial general elections scheduled for April 13.

Topping the list was ex-prime minister Kim Jong-Pil, who left office just last week to steer his United Liberal Democrats (ULD), a key constituent of the ruling coalition, through the upcoming polls.

The move shocked political circles, but was widely hailed by citizens as a first meaningful step towards democracy.

"The civic groups have taken a significant step towards democracy," Kim Jin-Kyun, a sociology professor of Seoul National University, told AFP. "A free democracy is now really beginning to take firm root here."

The unprecedented move

deals a major blow to Kim's decades-old political career and to government prospects in the parliamentary polls, seen as crucial to its future effectiveness, analysts said.

"We reached a consensus that Kim should retire from the political circles in an honourable way," said Park Won-Sun, one of the leaders of the alliance of the civic groups. In an announcement televised nationwide.

Kim deserved inclusion on the explosive list as he led a military coup in May 1960, was involved in a series of corruption scandals, and prompted regional rivalry in politics during past elections, the groups alleged.

Kim, founder and president of the splinter ULD, has been President Kim Dae-Jung's coalition partner since in February 1998.

The list of names also included National Assembly Speaker Park Jyun-Kyu, a ULD lawmaker, and Kwon Roh-Kap, a close aide to President Kim.

In a public action unheard of in the country's political history, the civic groups also

threatened to campaign against those "incompetent, corrupt and lazy" politicians if they insisted on running in the elections.

Han Lee-Hun, an independent lawmaker Monday became the first MP to pull out of the race for the upcoming polls when his name appeared on the list.

## S Korean MP quits politics

Meanwhile, An Independent South Korean lawmaker today said he would not run in upcoming general elections, as his name appeared on a list of politicians branded unfit for office by civic groups.

Representative Han Lee-Hun will not run for the April general polls, an official at Han's office told AFP.

He was the first incumbent National Assembly member to give up the race for the polls after civic groups launched a campaign against "incompetent, corrupt" politicians, revealing a list of 67 of them Monday.

## New Ecuador president announces Cabinet

QUITO, Jan 24: Ecuador's new president Gustavo Noboa named some of his Cabinet members Sunday following 48 hours of upheaval that saw the ouster of his predecessor, former president Jaime Mahuad, in a bloodless military coup, reports AFP.

However Noboa had yet to name the key figure of defense minister.

"Peace, progress and justice," Noboa said as he entered Carondelet presidential palace in Quito's historic centre.

The narrow streets leading to the presidential palace remained blocked off late Sunday by knots of soldiers in combat gear, standing guard behind giant rolls of razor wire.

In an emergency session Saturday, the Ecuadorian legislature approved Noboa as the country's new president.

The 61-year-old university professor had for almost a year and a half been vice president to Mahuad, who was ousted in a bloodless military coup, overnight Friday to Saturday.

Noboa earlier said that he would maintain a state of emergency throughout the country and keep in place Mahuad's controversial economic program that replaces the local

currency with the US dollar.

At 1 p.m. (00:00 BST) Sunday Noboa, flanked by the heads of the army, navy and air force, announced the first seven members of his new cabinet.

The most important job of minister of government -- the equivalent of prime minister -- was handed to Francisco Huerta, a doctor and former health minister.

Huerta unsuccessfully ran for the presidency twice as a member of Popular Democracy Party (DP). On becoming minister, he has resigned his job as assistant editor of the Expresso newspaper of Guayaquil, one of the country's leading newspapers.

Noboa also announced new ministers of tourism, health, social welfare, public administration, education and public works.

Noboa said seven more ministerial appointments, including the key positions of defense and foreign affairs, would be announced by Tuesday.

Huerta assured reporters that the new government enjoyed full support from the armed forces, and said that freedom of the press would be fully respected.