

International

IRA casts shadow over effort to restore govt

BELFAST, Feb 16: The Irish Republican Army's retreat from disarmament talks cast a shadow today over efforts to restore power to a Catholic-Protestant administration for northern Ireland, reports AP.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair invited the Irish government and three key Northern Ireland parties in the suspended power-sharing cabinet to his London residence.

Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern was expected to be first through his door. The two premiers planned to talk into the evening with separate delegations from the major Protestant party, the Ulster Unionists; the major Catholic party, the Social Democratic and Labour party; and the IRA-linked Sinn Fein.

But hopes were running low that the Downing Street talks could get on. Irish Prime Minister Ahern said that the IRA's refusal to disarm is a major obstacle to the current crisis in the peace process, the IRA said.

Sinn Fein, which had two posts in the 12-member Cabinet until Britain stripped it of power Friday, blamed the British government and the Ulster Unionists for forcing the IRA's hand.

Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams said other parties were wrong to think he could get IRA commanders to change their

mind. The only way forward, he said, was to transfer power immediately back to the Cabinet in Belfast.

But that looks extremely unlikely, given that the Ulster Unionists — essential to the Cabinet's survival, but badly split over the merits of sharing power with Sinn Fein — have insisted that the IRA must first promise to disarm and specify how it will happen and when it will start. The British and Irish governments have backed this requirement.

But the IRA said the British and Ulster Unionists have no desire to deal with the issue of arms except on their own terms. Those who seek a military victory in this way need to understand that this cannot and will not happen.

Last week's setbacks unraveled a breakthrough deal struck in November by American mediator George Mitchell.

At that time the Ulster Unionists agreed to accept Sinn Fein as Cabinet colleagues, but in return expected the IRA to cooperate with the disarmament commission.

Sinn Fein did announce for the first time that disarmament was "essential," and after the Cabinet's formation, the IRA launched direct talks with the commission.

But its first detailed report Jan 31 found that the IRA had offered no commitments, triggering the current crisis.

A second report, noting that the IRA was now considering scenarios for putting its arsenal "beyond use," appeared hours after Britain resumed direct control of Northern Ireland.

But the IRA noted Tuesday that this offer — deemed too vague by the British government and Ulster Unionists, but welcomed by the Irish government — had been withdrawn.

Pakistan bans public display of weapons

ISLAMABAD, Feb 16: In a bid to curb violence, Pakistan's military-led government imposed a ban on the public display of weapons Tuesday, reports AP.

The ban is the first step toward restoring law and order in Pakistan. Interior Minister Moeenuddin Haider told a news conference. Until now people with a license to carry a weapon could openly display them.

At public gatherings in Pakistan it is commonplace to see people standing around with automatic rifles or pistols. Militant religious and ethnic groups deploy heavily armed guards to protect their leaders. But no more, says Haider.

There was no mention of what the penalty would be for those who defied the ban.

Pakistan is awash with weapons — the fallout of the 1980s war in neighbouring Afghanistan between western backed Islamic insurgents and invading Russian soldiers. Billions of dollars was spent to arm the insurgents.

In recent years, hundreds of people have been killed in Pakistan in religious and political violence.



Sinn Fein protestors stand outside a community centre in northern Belfast Tuesday where Peter Mandelson, Britain's Secretary of State responsible for Northern Ireland, was visiting. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) has broken off all contact with an international disarmament commission, the paramilitary group said in a statement. — AFP photo

Witness testifies

Sharif issued order to divert Gen Musharraf's plane

KARACHI, Feb 16: An air force officer testified Wednesday that ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif issued the orders to divert the passenger plane carrying Army Chief Gen. Pervez Musharraf to another country, reports AP.

Sharif ordered Amluddin Chaudhry, who was then the Civil Aviation chief, to make sure the passenger aircraft returning Musharraf and 200 other passengers and crew to Pakistan did not land in southern Karachi on October 12 — the day the army overthrew Sharif's government. Wing Commander Ahmed Farooq testified.

Sharif and his six codefendants are being tried on charges of hijacking, attempted murder, kidnapping and terrorism in connection with the incident in which they allegedly denied Musharraf's plane permission to land, endangering the lives of those on board.

When Musharraf's aircraft did land in southern Karachi, the army was in charge in Pakistan and Sharif was in custody

accused by the army of trying to kill the army chief.

Farooq, who was secretary to Chaudhry at the time, said his boss told him Sharif ordered Musharraf's plane diverted to any country in the Middle East.

Chaudhry then ordered the Karachi International Airport closed and told the Control Tower at the airport to inform the pilot that his aircraft was not being allowed to land and should be diverted to the Middle East "at his own risk," said Farooq.

'American Beauty' tops Oscar nominations

BEVERLY HILLS, California Feb 16: "American Beauty," a black comedy about suburbia run amok, came up roses in the Academy Award nominations on Tuesday, earning the most — eight — but "The Cider House Rules," "The Insider," and "The Sixth Sense" also blossomed as strong Oscar contenders, reports Reuters.

Among the nominations "American Beauty" earned were best picture, director for first-time helmsman Sam Mendes, actor for Kevin Spacey and actress for Annette Bening.

Tied for second in nominations with seven each were "The Cider House Rules," John Irving's tale of a saintly orphan, and "The Insider," a story of a tobacco industry whistleblower who almost brings down one of US television's major shows, "60 Minutes."

In fourth place with six nominations was last year's biggest box office hit, "The Sixth Sense," a ghost story about a young boy who talks to dead people — a film that audiences loved but many critics failed to include in their 10-best lists.

At age 79, veteran actor Richard Farnsworth became the oldest man ever nominated for best actor for his performance in "The Straight Story," while Haley Joel Osment, 11, became one of the youngest nominees ever, being tapped in the best supporting actor category for his role in "The Sixth Sense." Among the notable omissions was Jim Carrey for his portrayal of the late comic Andy Kaufman in "Man on the Moon."

Alan Ball, nominated for best original screenplay for "American Beauty," said the experience made him feel "very excited, very humbled, very gratified." Ball said he was afraid that his tale narrated by

a dead man of a family falling apart would have people telling him, "Get some therapy."

"American Beauty" rivals in the best picture category were "Cider house," "The Insider," "The Sixth Sense" and "The Green Mile," a death row drama starring Tom Hanks, who, in another surprise, failed to secure a best actor nomination.

Robert Rehme, president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences that picks the Oscars, called the list "eclectic and strong" and said of the bunched-up field of contenders: "There's no favourite among them."

Joining Spacey, who already has won one Oscar for best supporting actor for "The Usual Suspects" and Farnsworth among best actor nominees were Australian Russell Crowe for "The Insider."

Also nominated were Denzel Washington for his powerful portrayal of wrongly imprisoned boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter in "The Hurricane," and, in a surprise, Sean Penn, for Woody Allen's comedy about a not-so-nice jazz guitarist, "Sweet and Lowdown."

Farnsworth, a former stuntman who started acting at age 57, became the oldest actor ever nominated for an Academy Award.

He said the honour "gives old-timers a shot in the arm, by God... If you wait (a) long time, something happens to you."

But the 79-year-old is not the oldest person ever nominated for an Oscar. That distinction belonged to Gloria Stuart, who was nominated at age 87 for best supporting actress in "Titanic" in 1998.

One of the biggest surprises in the nominations was the omission of Carrey for his uncanny portrayal of Kaufman. It was the second straight year that a major performance by



Two-time Academy Award winner actor Dustin Hoffman (L) and Robert Rehme (R), President of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, announce the nominations for Best Supporting Actress category for the Academy Awards in Beverly Hills, Tuesday. From L to R are: Toni Collette ("The Sixth Sense"), Angelina Jolie ("Girl, Interrupted"), Catherine Keener ("Being John Malkovich"), Samantha Morton ("Sweet and Lowdown"), and Chloe Sevigny ("Boys Don't Cry"). — AFP photo

Carrey failed to win an Oscar nomination — and even Academy President Rehme said he was taken aback.

Also nearly shut out of the major categories was serial-killer drama "The Talented Mr Ripley," director Anthony Minghella's first major film since the Oscar-winning "The English Patient." "Ripley" claimed only one nomination in the top categories: Jude Law for best supporting actor.

In the best actress category,

"American Beauty's" Annette Bening was nominated along with critics' favourite Hilary Swank, whose role as a gender-confused woman who masquerades as a man in "Boys Don't Cry" has won her many awards so far this year, and British actress Janet McTeer for the little-known film, "Tumbleweeds."

Julianne Moore also grabbed a best actress nomination for portraying the heroin in Graham Greene's drama of ill-fated lovers, "The End of the Affair."

along with previous Oscar winner Meryl Streep in "Music of the Heart," a story of a New York City schoolteacher who brings music to disadvantaged students.

Among best director nominees were newcomer Spike Jonze for "Being John Malkovich," Lasse Hallstrom for "The Cider House Rules," Michael Mann for "The Insider," M Night Shyamalan for "The Sixth Sense," and Mendes for "American Beauty."

Norwegian FM in Lanka to broker peace

COLOMBO, Feb 16: Norwegian Foreign Minister Knut Vollebaek arrived today to follow up talks with a Tamil rebel leader in London in a bid to settle Sri Lanka's 17-year-old ethnic conflict, reports AP.

Vollebaek is scheduled to meet President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, said Ravinatha Arayasinha, a foreign ministry spokesman.

There was no letup in the fighting to ease his mission. On Tuesday, the rebels ambushed a police convoy in the eastern district of Batticaloa, killing 13 policemen with rocket propelled grenades. The civil war has killed more than 61,000 people and displaced nearly 1.2

million since 1983.

The Norwegian initiative is the most serious international peace effort in 13 years, after India's abortive attempt in the late 1980s. Some 1,200 Indian soldiers were killed trying to impose a peace accord.

Vollebaek met earlier with Anton Balasingham, the London-based representative of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam group, the TamilNet Website said Tuesday. The Website, which often represents the LTTE perspective, did not give the exact date of their meeting.

Tamil Tiger sources say the guerrillas are expected to demand a military pullout from Tamil-majority areas as a precondition for peace talks. They

also want travel restrictions eased and food and other supplies delivered to the area.

In the past, the government has said it wants the guerrillas to at least partially disarm before peace talks can begin, but President Kumaratunga has not repeated that demand in her recent speeches.

Kumaratunga proposes to amend the Constitution to provide wide autonomy to the eight provinces, including those in the north and east where most of Sri Lanka's 3 million Tamils live, hoping to satisfy Tamil demands for self rule.

The rebels reject the autonomy plan insisting on complete separation from the Sinhalese dominated government.

'Int'l court unnecessary for E Timor atrocities'

JAKARTA, Feb 16: As UN Secretary General Kofi Annan stressed it was up to Indonesia to punish those responsible for atrocities in East Timor, demonstrators called on the world body to intervene in Indonesia's strife-torn Aceh province, reports AP.

About 300 protesters said Indonesia's military had raped, tortured and killed thousands of people in Aceh in the past few years and the United Nations has a responsibility to stop it.

"The killing is going on," said Azam Syaife, one of the demonstrators. "There is no justice in Aceh, the United Nations must come and help us."

Police stood guard near the UN building, but did not intervene.

Aceh, an oil-rich province on the northern tip of Sumatra island, is one of several Indonesian regions where separatists

are fighting for independence.

Meanwhile, Annan stressed today there would be no need for an international court to try Indonesian military officers responsible for the violence in East Timor if Jakarta goes through with its commitment to bring the culprits to justice.

"Those who are responsible for the atrocities in East Timor must be held accountable," Annan said.

Annan arrived in Jakarta on Monday, a day after President Abdurrahman Wahid suspended his powerful security minister Gen Wiranto.

Earlier this month, an Indonesian human rights inquiry said Wiranto — who was armed forces chief when East Timor was gripped by violence in the aftermath of the independence vote on Aug. 30 — and 32 other officers were responsible for the carnage.

Arafat urges Islamic states to block Jerusalem's 'colonialisation'

MARRAKESH, Morocco, Feb 16: Palestinian President Yasser Arafat on Monday urged Islamic states to take a "coarse" stance against the "rampant spread of Judaism" in Jerusalem, reports AFP.

"The Islamic nation needs to take a courageous position to say 'no' to the expulsion of its residents, the extension of the settlements and the rampant spread of Judaism in Jerusalem and its holy sites," Arafat said.

"Jerusalem is the capital of the Palestinian state. It was occupied in 1967 and has been the subject of international resolutions including (UN Security Council) resolution 194 which guarantees the Palestinian refugees the right to return to their country," he added.

His comments came during a speech here to the administra-

tive council of the Al Quds (Jerusalem) Fund created in 1995 by the Al Quds Committee, part of the Organisation of Islamic Conference.

Commenting on the Middle East peace process, Arafat said the impasse in talks between the Palestinians and Israel was due to the actions of the Israeli government.

"This government has built 4,028 housing units in three months, more than (former Israeli prime minister) Benjamin Netanyahu did in three years," the Palestinian leader charged.

Arafat, who has repeatedly insisted that Jerusalem becomes the capital of a future Palestinian state, said: "Let those who do not agree go and drink from the waters of the Dead Sea."

He also stressed his backing

for Syria and Lebanon, saying: "We think that the liberation of their lands will greatly contribute to the strengthening of peace on the Palestinian front."

In his speech to the meeting, Morocco's King Mohammed VI said he backed the Palestinian people and the Palestinian Authority "for the construction of an independent state."

But "we should not be pessimistic, because (Israeli-Palestinian) dialogue will end in a just peace to which everyone has pledged themselves."

Meanwhile, Al Quds Fund director Ali Qassem, who is also the Palestinian ambassador in Rabat, on Monday said the fund's present projects needed some 42 million dollars.

The fund's aim is to preserve the religious, architectural and cultural heritage of Jerusalem.



An adjutant helps Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid (2nd L) shake hands with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (R) as Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri (2nd R) moves back at the presidential palace in Jakarta Wednesday. Annan is to leave for the devastated territory of East Timor today after a three-day official visit to Indonesia. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Two quakes rattle S Taiwan: Two earthquakes rattled southern Taiwan early Wednesday, seismologists said, but no damage or injuries were immediately reported. AP reports from Taipei.

The first tremor, with a magnitude of 5.6 struck about 20 kilometers south of Alishan, a popular mountain resort about 300 kilometers south of Taipei, the Central Weather Bureau said. A 5-magnitude quake can cause considerable damage. The epicenter of the second quake, which hit about three hours later, was near the same location as the first tremor, the Bureau said. The tremor's magnitude was 4.5, strong enough to cause moderate damage.

40 missing in Vietnam bus crash: Forty people were still missing and feared dead after a bus plunged into a river in northern Vietnam, killing at least 17 people, police said. Reuters reports from Hanoi.

Divers had stopped searching and authorities were waiting for bodies to surface. Police said 68 people, including many women and some college students, were on the bus when it ran off the road in Thanh Chuong district of Nghe An province on Monday.

23 die in Thailand bus crash: Some 23 people were killed and 37 injured yesterday when a bus and a truck crashed in northeastern Thailand, police said. AFP reports from Bangkok.

A police spokesman said the accident happened in the northeastern province of Nakhon Panom, 20 kilometers from the town of Kalasin. No details were immediately available of the identities of those killed or the condition of those injured.

New NZ PM to visit Australia: New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark announced Wednesday that she will visit Sydney next month, her first trip to Australia since winning power last November. AP reports from Wellington.

Peep at politicians' wallet

LONDON, Feb 16: Prime Minister Tony Blair is to get a pay raise this year, the government announced Tuesday, reports AP.

His salary will rise from 109,768 pounds (dls 175,628) to 112,951 pounds (180,300), which excludes the 45,707 pounds (dls 73,000) which he is entitled to but does not claim. The raise comes into effect on April 1.

Lawmakers and government ministers will also get a 2.9 per cent pay raise, Blair's office said.

Cabinet Ministers' pay will rise from 94,157 to 96,887 pounds (dls 150,000 to 154,600).

Members of parliament will see their pay go up to 48,371 from 47,008 pounds (dls 77,200 to 75,000), again a 2.9 per cent increase.

The salaries "are independent recommendations which are put to government, which the government has accepted in full because they feel they are affordable," a Downing Street spokesman said, speaking with customary anonymity.

The raises are above Britain's headline inflation

NASA hopeful of Endeavour's full mapping mission

CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida, Feb 16: A pocketful of nickel, dime and quarter solutions could be enough to keep the space shuttle Endeavour in orbit long enough to complete its ambitious but fuel-challenged Earth-mapping mission, a light official said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Endeavour has been using up precious onboard fuel supplies to compensate for a tiny gas thrust that fed early in the mission. NASA earlier estimated the fuel problem could trim as much as a day from the mapping operations.

But ground engineers brainstormed a list of 17 fuel-saving measures and by Tuesday afternoon had flight-tested and approved five of them.

"I'm optimistic that we're not going to fold our tent early," Mitt Hellin, a mission operations manager, told reporters.

He called the ideas "nickel, dime and quarter sort of savings. But if you do this over hours and days than you can build up to where you have mission completion."

Most of the savings were

(60-metres) radar mast jutting from the cargo bay had proved more stable than expected. As a result, Mission Control said Endeavour should not have to work as hard keeping it steady.

Mission managers also decided they could save fuel by simply flushing waste water into space several times a day rather than vaporising it.

At one point engineers even joked about making astronaut Gerhard Thiele Pedal and exercise bike for the duration of the mission. As he was exercising, they noticed it made the shuttle tilt in the right direction.

"It was a little tension breaker," Hellin said. He said there are other conservation measures on NASA's list but some may need ground simulation tests to see if they are workable.

The faulty thruster in a tiny gas valve at the end of the 20-story radar mast. Astronaut Janice Voss, in a broadcast interview, explained that the tiny puff of nitrogen gas emitted by the thruster is "about the weight of a penny if you had the

The control jets that compensate for it use 24 pounds of thrust. The difference is that the gas valve is in the right place to do the most good. The control jets are not, so they have to work harder."

Voss said ground controllers "think maybe there's some ice blocking the port" of the thruster.

"The mast is performing extremely well, and even without the thruster we're getting superb data," she said.

By Tuesday the shuttle had mapped an area of Earth equal to Africa, North America and South America at least once, NASA said. The mission aimed to map 80 per cent of the globe twice.

Endeavour and its six-astronaut crew was scheduled to land on February 22 at the Kennedy Space Centre.

The map is being generated for US defence and intelligence agencies and was expected to be 30 times better than existing topographical maps of Earth, according to NASA. A lower resolution map, still superior to existing charts, will be made public for use by scientists and



US Space Shuttle Endeavour Pilot US Dominic Gorie poses on the flightdeck Monday, with a model of the shuttle and the SRTM mast, which is being used to map the