

France, India to hold joint naval exercises

NEW DELHI, Feb 19: India and France will hold two days of joint naval exercises at the end of the month off the western Indian coast, the French Embassy here announced Friday, reports AFP.

A French naval group led by the Foch aircraft carrier is due to dock in Bombay between February 24 and 28, and conduct exercises with the Indian navy on February 28 and 29, according to a statement from the embassy, which called the move a major step forward in military cooperation.

The French naval group will also include the anti-aircraft frigate *Duquesne*, the anti-submarine frigate *Tourville*, and a maintenance ship, the *Jules Verne*.

The vessels, left Toulon in the south of France on January 15 and will be out to sea in the Indian Ocean and the South Atlantic until April 30, the statement said.

The joint exercises were announced in conjunction with a visit Thursday and Friday to New Delhi by French Foreign Affairs Minister Hubert Vedrine, who has contributed to a boosting of bilateral ties, according to both parties.

An Indian government spokesman said defence issues were a topic of discussion during the visit.

Early results show notable gains for reformers

Leading Khatami critic defeated

TEHRAN, Feb 19: First returns today in Iran's parliamentary polls showed some notable gains for reformers at the expense of conservatives, amid a big turnout, reports Reuters.

But results in the key urban centres from Friday's vote, including the highly politicised capital Tehran, were not expected for some time.

Election officials at the interior ministry announced the defeat of two conservative incumbents, including a leading critic of President Mohammad Khatami and his liberal cultural policies.

Ali Zadsar, the headline incumbent from Jiroft, in southern Kerman province, was defeated by the reformist candidate backed by Iran's leading student movement, officials said.

Zadsar had been a prominent critic of the president and one of the driving forces in the failed impeachment last year of Culture Minister Ataollah Mohajerani.

In Khatami's hometown of Ardakan, in Iran's central desert, reformist Mohammad Reza Tabesh defeated the conservative incumbent in a large field.

But the early results did not go all the reformers' way. A cent-right candidate in the city of Yazd, seen as a Khatami stronghold near Ardakan, defeated the pro-reform incumbent.

Whatever the results, the most immediate gain from this is a wonderful victory for the great nation, which with its presence added another golden page to the book of its destiny," President Khatami said in a message to voters.

"You cultured people showed that you are still moving toward strengthening the system, whose pillars remain Islam and spirituality, independence, freedom and progress."

Earlier, officials of the main reformist coalition, the Islamic Iran, Participation Front, said their own rough exit polls in

Tehran had found strong support for their slate.

They said they had similar reports from the provinces after the close of the poll, widely seen as a referendum on Khatami's liberal reforms which have been stymied by entrenched conservatives in the current parliament.

There was no immediate reaction from the main conservative coalition, which had predicted before the elections that it would retain control of the 250-seat parliament.

Officials, who extended voting by two hours because of the large turnout said the final tally from Tehran, with 3,200 voting stations, could take about 10 days.

Mohammad Reza Abbasi-fard, a member of the Guardian Council which supervised the elections, said he estimated that 70 to 80 per cent of the 38.7 million eligible voters had cast ballots. Iran's news agency IRNA reported late on Friday.



Iranian President Mohammad Khatami chats with Iranian women after casting his ballot at the house of late founder of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Tehran Friday. Iran's reformers are claiming a certain win in the sixth parliamentary elections since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, predicting they would capture more than 60 per cent of the vote to wrest control of the parliament from the conservatives.

- AFP photo

Violence in Colombia: 28 dead

BOGOTA, Feb 19: At least 28 people were killed Friday by raids involving right-wing paramilitary units and Marxist rebels in different parts of Colombia, regional officials said, reports AFP.

A unit of paramilitary fighters from the far-right United Self-Defence units of Colombia (AUC) killed at least 20 peasant farmers in a community in the municipality of Obejas, some 800 kilometers north of Bogota, said Alejandro De la Rosa, a local official.

De la Rosa told Radionet radio network that he feared that the number of farmers killed could be much larger.

The gunmen accused their victims of being rebel supporters and also torched several small farms, he added.

At least four people died in separate clashes between paramilitaries and Marxist rebels in the community of Carmen de Bolivar, near Obejas, officials said.

Also, two soldiers died fighting AUC paramilitaries in a rural area some 430 kilometers (267 miles) south-east of Bogota in the department of Valle, the army said in a statement.

Authorities in the town of Sevilla, also in Valle, said that two police officers were killed and one injured in an attack by Marxist rebels from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country's largest rebel group.

Israeli minister defends right to hit Hizbollah

JERUSALEM, Feb 19: One of the three Israeli ministers empowered to order retaliatory strikes on Lebanon defended on Friday Israel's right to pound Hizbollah guerrillas, reports Reuters.

The Syrians should "make their positions more flexible, they need to show us all that they really want peace," Transport Minister Yitzhak Mordechai said in an interview on Israel's Channel 2 television.

Speaking of Lebanon, Mordechai said it was legitimate for Israel to defend its forces that are active there to attack Hizbollah and the targets agreed upon by the cabinet.

Syria is the main power broker in Lebanon where Israel occupies a 15-km (nine-mile) deep "security zone" and is fighting Hizbollah guerrillas. Israel says it patrols the area in South Lebanon to prevent guerrilla attacks against its northern communities.

'Life begins at 40'

LONDON, Feb 19: Prince Andrew, who celebrates his 40th birthday today, says he is convinced that life really does begin at 40, reports AP.

Having survived a divorce from the Duchess of York, the former Sarah Ferguson, Andrew juggles a career in the Royal Navy, with official royal engagements and his family life.

"Life is a series of successes and failures," said Andrew, the second son of Queen Elizabeth II, in an interview published on a royal website Friday. "One must learn from the failures and build on the successes."

"I am becoming increasingly convinced that life does, indeed, begin at 40," he said.

The golf-loving Duke of York also revealed that he would like to reduce his golf handicap, enabling him to qualify for national amateur events.

"We shall see," he said. "As well as that there are a number of organisations and projects... with which I have recently become involved and I want them to be as successful as I can possibly make them."

Andrew has a career in the Royal Navy — he is a commander based at the Ministry of Defence in London where he works in the diplomacy section of the naval staff — as well as fulfilling official engagements as a member of the royal family. He is also patron of several organisations.

He undertook 108 royal engagements in 1999.

"There is a great deal happening in my life at present which suggests to me that achieving 40 is a wonderful rung on the ladder of life," he said.



Chen Shui-bian (front), the presidential candidate from the island's main opposition Democratic Progressive Party, waves to supporters from a jeep during campaigning for the Presidential election Saturday. Taiwanese will elect their 10th president on March 18.

Nepal marks 50th 'Democracy Day' amid anti-Maoist drive

KATHMANDU, Feb 19: Nepal celebrated its 50th National Democracy Day with strong campaigns against Maoist insurgents across the country today, officials said, reports AFP.

The ruling Nepali Congress (NC) launched the anti-Maoist campaign to bolster morale in rural areas and fight against the anti-democratic elements which erupted four years ago, they said.

"The anti-Maoist campaign was launched Saturday after the two week tour of the Nepali Congress President and MP Girija Prasad Koirala in the Maoist dominated districts in the country's far north west and west regions," NC publicity Chief RK Pokharel said.

Home Ministry Spokesman GB Pandey said in four years of the Maoist People's War, more than 1,176 people had been killed.

Two-thirds were Maoists while another 192 policemen were also among the dead.

To mark the day, 185 political detainees and criminals, were released or had their sentences reduced or commuted.

"As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the ushering in of democracy in Nepal we should not forget that the people's faith and confidence in a democratic policy can be sustained only if their aspiration to live in a life of dignity can be fulfilled," King

Birendra said in a message to the Nation.

"For this atmosphere of freedom is to be ensured through governance and effective development of our institutions, while enhancing the glory of the nation," he said.

"It is, therefore, essential that institutions established under the Constitution and all others carry out their responsibilities impartially and effectively so that every Nepali gets the feel of good governance," the King said.

Political observers said the King's message was significant given the democratic and constitutional problems which has resulted in government instability.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister KP Bhattarai — who is facing a leadership challenge — reminded the Nepalese people of their duty to strengthen democracy through joint efforts by the King and the people.

"Rights and duties of the people are guaranteed only in a democracy and democracy is the basis of national unity for all Nepalese regardless of their castes, creeds, language and culture," Bhattarai added.

"The day would inspire us all to build a cultural and prosperous Nepal by putting an end to violence, murder and anarchy," he said.

China to clamp down on internet news media cos

HONG KONG, Feb 19: Beijing will clamp down on Internet news media companies that operate in China by putting them under the supervision of censorship authorities, a newspaper reported Saturday, reports AP.

Companies with new commercial Web sites providing news services must get approval from the government's information office before they can apply for business licenses from the Ministry of Information Industry, the Hong Kong Standard quoted a senior official in the State Council, or cabinet, as saying.

Companies that already operate news services of their Web sites must also apply to their local government's information office, Wang Qingchu, a deputy director at the Information Office of the State Council, was quoted as saying.

The rules would apply to both Internet content providers and Internet service providers including both joint-ventures and wholly foreign-invested companies, he was quoted as saying.

The commercial Web sites providing news services are in fact operating out of their licensed business domain," the newspaper quoted Wang as saying.

Wang declined to say whether violators would be punished, the report said.

Clinton, Ivanov discuss Chechnya, arms control

WASHINGTON, Feb 19: President Bill Clinton urged Moscow on Friday to find a political solution in Chechnya as he met a top Russian official to discuss non-proliferation, arms control and Russia's economic reform, a US official said, reports Reuters.

Clinton spent about 20 minutes with Sergei Ivanov, the head of Russia's advisory and influential Security Council, who has spent the past two days meeting top US officials at the request of Russian Acting President Vladimir Putin.

The president raised his concerns about the situation in Chechnya, particularly the humanitarian impact of the conflict, and the need for meaningful steps towards a political solution. A US official said after the meeting.

Repeated US appeals for Russia to halt its brutal campaign against Chechen separatists in the breakaway region have been ignored by Moscow, which has insisted that the war in Chechnya is an internal matter that does not concern Washington.

While Washington and Moscow have both taken public steps recently to improve their ties, Moscow reacted on Friday with anger to a State Department comment on reports by human rights groups that Russian forces had beaten, raped and summarily executed civilians in Chechnya. The department called such reports "credible."

Russian officials denounced that comment on Friday even as they promised to look into the allegations and announced plans to crush rebel resistance in Chechnya finally within a month.

In one sign of Moscow's desire to continue working with the United States despite the disagreement over Chechnya, Ivanov brought Clinton a letter from Putin calling for warm ties.

"The message... notes that relations with the United States are one of the priorities of Russian foreign policy," Russia's Foreign Ministry said in a statement released in Moscow.

"Unfortunately, in recent times irritants and mutual pretensions have appeared in Russian-American relations."

At the meeting, Clinton said he wanted the two countries to make progress on non-proliferation, an issue that has vexed US Russian relations for years because of charges that Russian entities have transferred missile technology to Iran.

US National Security adviser Sandy Berger raised the issue in detail, as well as the Russian Duma's long-delayed ratification of the START II arms control treaty, during his meetings with Ivanov, which included a working lunch.

BRIEFLY

Accident claims 10 in West Bengal: Ten persons were killed and 30 others injured in a head-on collision between two vehicles near Tajpur village in the Habibpur police station area of Malda district on Friday, PTI reports from Malda, West Bengal.

The district administrator, a Bardhan, said here that a Maldabound Maxi-taxi collided head on with a private bus going towards Nalagola. All those killed were the passengers of the Maxi-taxi. Four persons, including the driver of the Maxi-taxi, were killed on the spot. Later six more, including an infant, died in a local hospital.

Mesic new Croatian president: Stipe Mesic was sworn into office as Croatia's president Friday, vowing to open a new road toward genuine democracy for his country after a decade of authoritarian rule, AP reports from Zagreb.

The strong international presence at the inauguration — about 70 dignitaries including heads of state and foreign ministers — reflected the vast improvement in Croatia's relations with the outside world after its people chose to discard the nationalist policies of the late president, Franjo Tudjman. Mesic said he was "honoured" to greet so many foreign officials "as yet another gesture of the broad international support for (Croatia's) policy of democratic changes."

Yeltsin refuses Latvian medal: Former Russian President Boris Yeltsin spurned Latvia's highest medal on Friday after the Baltic state jailed an elderly Soviet partisan for World War Two killings, Reuters reports from Moscow.

Yeltsin said Latvia had "insulted the memory of millions of victims of fascism" by sentencing the former Communist guerrilla war crimes committed while offering comparatively liberal treatment to ex-Nazis.

Paula Jones sues White House demanding documents

WASHINGTON, Feb 19: Paula Jones, whose sexual harassment lawsuit against President Bill Clinton led to Monica Lewinsky scandal, has sued the White House to obtain documents that concern her, her lawyer said on Friday, reports Reuters.

Jones filed a lawsuit in the US District Court on Thursday demanding that the White House release all documents, including FBI or other government files, concerning her. She also sought damages of at least \$1,000 plus costs and attorney's fees.

Larry Klayman, Jones' lawyer and head of Judicial Watch — a conservative legal group that has launched several lawsuits against the Clinton White House — said Jones filed suit after being stonewalled by the White House when asked for her files.

"She filed the request one month ago and the White House rejected it. They play games, they claim they're not covered by the Privacy Act," Klayman said.

The White House had no comment on the lawsuit.

Meredith Cabe, associate counsel to the president, sent Klayman a letter saying the Freedom of Information Act and the Privacy Act apply only to records maintained by "agencies" within the executive branch of the government.

She said the acts do not establish a statutory right to the records Jones has requested.

Jones sued Clinton in 1994 claiming he pressured her for sex at an Arkansas hotel and she was a state employee. Clinton denied the allegation but settled with Jones after more than four years of litigation.

Jones' case was eventually dismissed in April 1998 by a Federal district judge who said Jones had failed to demonstrate any damages from Clinton's alleged conduct but the suit brought his affair with Monica Lewinsky to light.

Clinton was impeached in December 1998 on charges of perjury and obstruction of justice stemming from his affair with Lewinsky. The Senate acquitted Clinton in February 1999.

Eating chocolate may be good for heart

WASHINGTON, Feb 19: New research shows that eating chocolate may not only lift your spirits, it may also be good for your heart, reports Reuters.

Providing good news to chocoholics, researchers at a major scientific conference said on Friday that a preliminary study had shown chocolate to have a positive impact on cardiovascular health.

"I think the message here is that our data suggests that one should view chocolate as part of a healthy diet," Carl Keen, professor of nutrition at the University of California, Davis, told a news briefing.

Keen said that his study had looked at moderate chocolate usage and that the side effects of 'acute' consumption were not known. White chocolate did not have the same apparent beneficial effect on the heart as regular chocolate did.

Keen, who is to present his findings to a meeting in Washington of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, said chocolate appeared to improve blood and

platelet function, which were important for general cardiovascular health. Platelets are small blood particles that play a major role in clotting.

Chocolate is believed to contain a high level of flavonoids, naturally occurring plant compounds that inhibit platelet activity, boosting blood flow, Keen said.

Chocolate worked much like aspirin in promoting a healthy heart, the study found. "But the effects were seen as not as robust as aspirin, and so I'm not saying people should throw away their bottles of aspirin," Keen said.

In his preliminary study, participants were given a strong cup of cocoa — about one tablespoon of cocoa powder with warm water and sugar. For up to six hours after drinking the cocoa, platelet activation and aggregation decreased, he said.

Keen said the early study looked at about 40 people, all of them healthy adults between 25 and 45. Men and women responded the same way.



Republican presidential hopeful John McCain is surrounded by confetti at the end of a rally at the College of Charleston Friday in Charleston, South Carolina. McCain is campaigning in the southern state against Texas Governor George W. Bush for Saturday's Republican primary.

— AFP photo

Thousands of children languishing in Pak jails for flawed justice system

ISLAMABAD, Feb 19: Pakistan's flawed juvenile justice system is responsible for thousands of children languishing in the country's crowded jails as ordinary criminals, says a hard-hitting new book by a child rights lawyer, reports IPS.

Most children are in detention for minor crimes and face tremendous hardship in jail, where they are abused by adult inmates, prison guards and others, says the author Anees Jilani in "Cries Unheard: Juvenile Justice System in Pakistan."

Despite Pakistan's commitment to international laws particularly the CRC or Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990, young delinquents are denied justice under Pakistani laws.

Over 607 pages, Jilani describes in detail the inadequacies of the system which views children above seven years as adults, and permits the imposition of death penalty and life imprisonment without the possibility of release on them.

"Cries unheard will certainly put the spotlight on an issue that needs urgent government and public attention," says Zarghon Shah, a former consultant with the UN children's agency, UNICEF.

Jilani is clear that the government has failed to recognise the rights of young children who run foul of the law, usually for petty offences like stealing an apple or sleeping on the street at night, which is viewed as vagrancy and a punishable offence.

"One seldom sees a rich person in prison since these children are poor and have no votes, they are completely disregarded and are considered not to exist at all," he says.

Jilani has been running (SPARC) the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child, for the last eight years. It has been striving to eliminate child labour, improve the juvenile justice system, and implement the CRC.

He estimates there are more than 4,000 child prisoners in Pakistan. Most of them are in

jails for adults since the only two special prisons for children — one in Karachi and the other in the southern Punjab town of Bahawalpur — are not sufficient to keep up with the increasing number of Young offenders.

And although child prisoners are kept in separate juvenile cells, these "do not effectively separate children from adults, and young prisoners are often subject to exploitation or sexual abuse," an official at Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail is quoted saying.

As many as 90 per cent of children are undertrials, and have been in prison for periods that exceed the punishment for the crimes they committed. There are also instances of children being found not guilty by the courts after being interned for years.

In 1997, only 8 per cent of all juvenile prisoners were convicted. "Keeping a person under trial is one of the most unjust and unfair treatment given to a human being. The reason could

be that because of the high rate of prisoners, the courts are unable to process the cases in time," Jilani argues.

Also he says that instead of reforming prisoners, Pakistan's notorious prisons are churning out criminals. Although Jail Rules provide for education, skill development and sports facilities for prisoners, these are seldom implemented.

"Like all prisoners in Pakistan, the juvenile detainees lack information concerning the rules in force in their prisons and their rights, which leaves them at the mercy of jail authorities," Jilani states.

Severe overcrowding in Pakistani jails means that prisoners are just herded like cattle into wards.

"Sanitary and washing facilities are poor and lack privacy; access to medical and dental treatment is difficult; educational and vocational training opportunities are poor or non-existent," the book lists the inadequacies of the prison system.