

Suicide bomb attack on army Convoy in Lanka

COLOMBO, Mar 2: A senior army officer in Sri Lanka's eastern Trincomalee town escaped an assassination bid today when a suspected Tamil Tiger woman suicide bomber hit the wrong vehicle in a military convoy, army officials said, reports Reuters.

One soldier was killed and two wounded in the attack, hospital officials said by phone from Trincomalee, 240 km northeast of the capital Colombo.

Military officials said the suspected Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) bomber tried to jump on the fast-moving jeep of Brigadier Piyal Abyskera, but had triggered the explosion just as the following jeep passed her.

Military spokesman Brigadier Palitha Fernando told Reuters by phone the suicide bomber had arrived on the scene on a bicycle.

The LTTE is fighting for a separate homeland for minority Tamils in the country's north and east since 1983.

The group has been accused of several suicide attacks against the country's political elite and military officials, for none of which they have claimed responsibility.

Libya changes PM in cabinet reshuffle

TUNIS, Mar 2: Libya launched a sweeping overhaul of the government on Wednesday, replacing the prime minister and foreign minister and scrapping most ministries, reports Reuters.

The move reflected Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's dissatisfaction with the outgoing cabinet's economic policies.

Mubarak Abdallah al-Shamikh, Minister of Public Works and Housing in the outgoing government, was appointed the new prime minister in place of Mohammed Ahmed al-Mangoush.

Mohamed Abderrahmane Chalbak, a former ambassador to Germany, was named as the new Foreign Liaison and International Cooperation Minister in replacement of Omar Mustafa al-Montasser, who had been in the post for more than ten years.

Mohamed Beit al-Mal remained finance minister and Mohamed Belgacem Zwai kept the Justice and Public Order ministry. Fawzia Bashir Chalabi, the only woman in the government, retained the information, culture and tourism portfolio.

The new appointments were contained in a statement issued by the General People's Congress, Libya's top legislative and executive body, at the end of a four-day meeting in the coastal city of Sirte.

Britain allows eight Afghans to stay

LONDON, Mar 2: Britain announced Wednesday that it was allowing eight of the passengers on board the hijacked Afghan airplane that landed at a London airport last month to stay in the country, reports AFP.

Home Secretary Jack Straw said he was granting "refugee status" to two of the former hostages, one of the men's wives, and their five children, on the basis that they had reason to fear for their lives.

However he turned down asylum requests from a further 27 people and their five dependents, saying he was "not satisfied that they have a well-founded fear of persecution."

The fate of the other passengers asking for asylum has yet to be decided. The 14 people charged with taking part in the hijacking are to be prosecuted before their asylum applications are dealt with.

The families do, however, have a legal right of appeal, and will be able to remain in Britain pending a final ruling.

They were among 79 people from the 164 on board the plane who are seeking to remain in Britain, claiming that they would face persecution if returned to Afghanistan.

US House okays modified Iran sanctions bill

WASHINGTON, Mar 2: The US House of Representatives on Wednesday unanimously approved modified legislation giving President Bill Clinton the discretion to impose sanctions on Russia or any other country that helps Iran develop nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, reports Reuters.

The House vote of 420-0 follows Senate approval of the bill last week by a vote of 98-0.

The bill grants the president authority to impose a range of penalties, including sanctions, on countries that supply technology, equipment or material to Iran for use in its weapons programme. The Senate had modified the bill to make the imposition of sanctions discretionary instead of mandatory.

The move reflects US concern that, despite the recent victory of reformists in Iran's parliamentary elections, Tehran seems unlikely to abandon its quest to develop long-range missiles capable of carrying nuclear and chemical warheads.

Delhi building 'fortress India'

Pakistani press warns

ISLAMABAD, Mar 2: Pakistani press warned today that New Delhi was building a "fortress India" with its record hike in defence spending, reports AFP.

Islamabad would now be under intense pressure to push up its own defence budget after the 28 per cent rise in Indian defence spending, the papers said.

The effort, it appears, is to create a "fortress India", sheltered by layers of modern defence systems, capable of posing a mortal danger to the less secure nations in the neighbourhood and confronting bigger competitors like China.

Pakistan and India have had a confrontational relationship since the end of British colonial rule, fighting three wars in the past 53 years.

Tensions have increased in recent weeks in the disputed

Himalayan state of Kashmir, which both countries claim, where shelling across the ceasefire line claims lives every day.

"Not without reason India's defence increase will put the Pakistani defence establishment under enormous pressure to take appropriate measures," The News said.

"There will be an irresistible demand for better defence preparedness, which, even if not met with an increase in spending, will still require ploughing of more resources towards defence."

Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf announced a five-per cent cut in defence spending, a saving of 140 million dollars, shortly after taking power in a coup in October.

India's spending hike is larger than Pakistan's overall

defence budget, set at 142 billion rupees (2.8 billion dollars) for the current financial year.

Other papers said a developing country like India should pour its money into tackling poverty, not building up military might.

"India has yet to overcome its appalling poverty and much larger funds than are presently being allocated need to be diverted towards social development and the health and education sectors," The Nation daily said.

Again the paper warned Islamabad would be forced to build up its own defence capability in response.

Building up our nuclear deterrent is probably the most cost-effective option at present, with the resultant lowering of regional stability an acceptable price," The Nation said.



Demonstrators protest outside the temporary home at Wentworth in Surrey of former Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet yesterday. Britain's Home Secretary Jack Straw has ruled that General Augusto Pinochet, who has been held in Britain for the last 16 months, should not be extradited to Spain for alleged human rights crimes. — AFP photo

Sharif's brother shifted to hospital from jail

KARACHI, Mar 2: Deposed Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif's brother Shahbaz was taken to hospital from his Karachi prison after complaining of chest pain, a lawyer said today, reports AFP.

Shahbaz Sharif has been under treatment at the coronary care unit of PNS Shifa, a naval hospital, since late Wednesday, defence lawyer Salm Zia said.

"He is feeling much better. He is all right and will be shifted again to the prison this evening or tomorrow," Zia said. "There is nothing to worry about."

Shahbaz, the former chief minister of central Pakistani Punjab province, is on trial for his life with the former premier and five senior officials at a Karachi anti-terrorism court.

The men have been charged with hijacking, abduction, attempted murder and terrorism in a case based on the night of the military coup on October 12.

All the accused have pleaded not guilty but face the death penalty if convicted.



Mozambican peasants on rooftop of their house awaiting rescue in the flooded village of Mundial some 150 km north of Maputo after the Limpopo river burst its banks on Wednesday. An estimated 100,000 people are still trapped in trees and on rooftops after three weeks of flooding in central Mozambique. — AFP photo

Syria warns against Israeli pullout from Lebanon

BEIRUT, Mar 2: Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara has told Israel it would be a suicide to withdraw from southern Lebanon without making peace with Syria first, reports Reuters.

"If they want to pull out unilaterally let them do that. They will bear the consequences and should never use this possibility as a means of pressure against us," Shara told the London-based al-Hayat newspaper in an interview published today.

Likud party head Ariel Sharon is calling for a unilateral withdrawal. I do not think he would follow such a policy if he was in the position of Prime Minister Ehud Barak," Shara said.

"It is a course he would ad-

opt, in reality he is pushing the Israelis to commit suicide," Shara said in an interview with Patrick Seale, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad's biographer.

Barak has promised to withdraw Israeli troops from a self-declared 15-km (nine mile) security zone in southern Lebanon by a July 7 deadline but has said he would prefer to do so after a peace deal with Syria.

Lebanese Hizbollah guerrillas, supported by Syria and Iran, have stepped up activity against Israeli troops in recent weeks, killing seven Israeli soldiers so far this year in the occupation zone.

Israel retaliated last month by bombing three Lebanese power plants, wounding 20

civilians. Even Sharon, who as defence minister orchestrated Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, urged a speedier timetable for withdrawal.

Diplomats say that if Israel withdrew unilaterally Syria, which tacitly supports Hizbollah, would lose leverage in negotiating the return of the Golan Heights from Israel.

Syrian-Israeli peace talks resumed in Washington in January after more than four years of stalemate. But differences over the substance of the talks led to a third round being postponed.

Shara said Israel refused to discuss withdrawal from the Golan Heights it captured on June 4, 1967, Israel accused Syria of imposing preconditions on the talks.

Chinese more vulnerable to AIDS

BEIJING, Mar 2: Ethnic Chinese could be more vulnerable to the AIDS virus because they lack a genetic mutation that helps fight off the virus, state media reported today, reports AFP.

Researchers at the Beijing Institute of Infectious Disease examined a mutation known as CCR5 that has been linked with tougher resistance to the R-5 strain of the HIV virus, the precursor to AIDS, the China Daily said.

The mutation appears in about one of every 10 people in the United States, but was found in only one out of every 1,000 Chinese tested by a team led by Professor Wang Fusheng, vice-director of the institute.

They found in just 0.119 per cent of the 1,300 people sampled.

But a Western expert said he did not believe the research showed that Chinese were any more likely to get AIDS because of the many factors involved in transmission and he questioned the accuracy of the paper's report.

Rebels attack govt office, oil depots in Philippine

MANILA, Mar 2: Communist rebels protesting oil price increases attacked the Department of Energy office in Manila and two gasoline depots in the central Philippines with grenades and automatic weapons fire, causing damage but no injuries, police said, reports AFP.

The attacks in the capital and the Pilipinas Shell Petroleum Corp. and Petron Corp. facilities in the town of Amlan on Negros island were carried out within a six-hour interval before dawn today.

The Revolutionary Proletarian Army-Alex Boncayao Brigade (RPA-ABB), a break-away faction of the mainstream communist movement, owned responsibility for the attacks, calling them "direct expressions of the intense disgust of the people over the series of oil price increases in recent months."

In a statement to news agencies, it accused the government of "kow-towing to the demands and interests of the greedy oil

cartel," in apparent reference to foreign oil firms dominating the industry.

It alleged Energy Secretary Mario Tiaoqui "has not only coddled the cartel but has barred legitimate efforts to control or check the oil prices increases."

Car-riding gunmen fired on the Department of Energy office at 3:15 a.m. (0115 BST) in suburban Manila with a rocket-propelled grenade and assault rifles, police said.

The grenade struck the fourth floor where Tiaoqui's office is located, smashing a hole in the window and tearing down a ceiling. The bullets hit offices on the second and third floors.

Manila Chief Superintendent Edgardo Aglipay said the rebels fired from a car and a taxi as they sped past the office on the edge of the army headquarters and the Makati financial district.

Police immediately ordered increased security around an oil depot in central Manila near

the presidential palace and around the offices of oil companies.

"This is a cowardly act. They should talk to us peacefully to resolve any problem without resorting to these useless terrorist acts," Tiaoqui said in a radio interview.

Presidential executive secretary Ronaldo Zamora said: "The agenda seems to be political, maybe to show that they can destabilise the government."

"We hope they realise the implication of their actions. If they have a political statement, they can announce it instead of doing something that can harm not only the government but also the people."

Manila is set to hold peace negotiations with the break-away group in two weeks after talks with exiled leadership of the main communist movement broke down.

Thursday's incident was similar to the bombing of the Shell headquarters in Makati last December.

'Palestine must gain UN membership by Sept 2000'

HANOI, Mar 2: The United Nations was told today that Palestine must gain full membership by September this year otherwise the Middle East peace process would become "a sick joke", reports AFP.

"Now clearly we have to respect this final time limit, otherwise we will jeopardise the legitimate rights of our people," Nasser al-Kidwa, permanent UN observer of Palestine, told a conference on the peace process being held here.

"We want full rights at the Millennium summit — otherwise it will all become a sick joke," he told AFP outside the UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

2 Palestinians killed in Israeli police operation

JERUSALEM, Mar 2: Two Palestinians were killed today when police stormed an apartment in an Arab town near Tel Aviv which the suspects were using to stock bombs to use in terrorist attacks, police said, reports AFP.

A third Palestinian who was in the apartment was arrested in the operation in the town of Taibeh, north of Tel Aviv, police said.

A police official described the Palestinians as "terrorists" but did not specify to which group they might belong.

They had rented the apartment in central Taibeh and used it to prepare bombs they planned to use in attacks on a "big city" in Israel, police said.

Maskhadov calls for talks with Putin

MOSCOW, Mar 2: Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov called today for talks with acting Russian President Vladimir Putin to end the war in Chechnya, in a telephone interview with Moscow Echo radio, reports AFP.

Maskhadov said Russian generals waging war in Chechnya were deceiving Putin, and that only through negotiations could the five-month conflict be resolved.

"I think that when the Russian generals stop deceiving acting president Putin, when we sit down at the negotiation table and come to the conclusion that this is a dirty war and we didn't need to do it, then all this will end," Maskhadov told the radio station.

The Kremlin would not give an immediate reaction to the proposal.

Maskhadov has proposed peace talks before, only to be rebuffed by Moscow. Russia says the Chechen president is no longer legitimate because of the war and has issued an order for his arrest.

The Kremlin has said it would enlist the help of Interpol in the quest to arrest Maskhadov, belying its fears that the Chechen leader could slip through Russian lines and escape abroad.

Maskhadov's whereabouts have long since remained unclear, but the Chechen leader told Moscow Echo that he "has not fled anywhere," and was "still at home."

A top Russian general said Thursday that the chances of Maskhadov escaping with his top field commanders such as Shamil Basayev and Khattab were slim.

BRIEFLY

Polish envoy kidnapped: Armed tribesmen have kidnapped the Polish ambassador in Yemen in a bid to free a jailed comrade, a tribal leader and police sources said on Thursday, AFP reports from Sanaa.

The ambassador, Kristof Suprowic, was captured Wednesday evening outside a medical clinic in the capital Sanaa, where he had taken his daughter, said the tribal leader, who refused to be named. Gunmen of the Khawlan tribe had taken the envoy to the mountainous al-Yamaniat region, 50 km east of Sanaa, the tribal leader said.

Club fire kills 4 in Japan: Four men died and six others were injured in suspected arson attacks on two telephone dating clubs in the western Japan city of Kobe Thursday, police said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The fire broke out at the "Ring Ring House" in downtown Kobe at around 5:20 a.m. (0220 BST), killing four customers and seriously injuring another, a police spokesman in the city said. Five minutes later, another Ring Ring House branch nearby was set on fire when a petrol bomb was thrown at the club, leaving three -- two employees and a customer -- slightly injured, the spokesman said.

BJP coalition threatened by row over RSS

NEW DELHI, Mar 2: India's Hindu nationalists are facing mounting pressure from their ruling coalition allies and the opposition over the lifting of a ban on state employees joining a powerful right-wing Hindu group, reports AFP.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party was caught in the eye of a storm today over its attempts to hush up the controversy, which has virtually paralysed parliament since it opened for the budget session last week.

The furor arose after the local BJP government in the western Indian state of Gujarat issued a directive permitting civil servants to join the RSS, or National Volunteer Corps, a Hindu fundamentalist organi-

sation closely linked to the BJP.

An incensed opposition, which perceives the RSS as a sectarian outfit, has clamoured without success for a parliamentary debate on the Gujarat government's decision.

The lower house of parliament was adjourned yet again today, following a daily trend since the budget session began last week.

The government has made it crystal clear that we are not allowing its employees to take part in RSS activity and that [New Delhi] has no role to play in the Gujarat government's decision," Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pramod Mahajan told the house in a vain attempt to quell opposition protests.

Vajpayee has come under

pressure from five regional allies who have warned that if the issue were put to the vote in parliament, they would find it almost impossible to back the government.

Another thorn in the government's flesh is a bill mooted by the BJP government of the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, requiring official permission to construct religious buildings.

The bill is widely seen to be an attempt to undermine the freedom of Muslims, India's largest religious minority.

Syed Ahmed Bukhari, deputy priest of India's best-known mosque -- the Jama Masjid in New Delhi -- said thousands of Muslims would take part in a protest in the capital on Friday to denounce

the proposed legislation.

The main opposition Congress party, meanwhile, believes it has Vajpayee and the BJP cornered on the Gujarat legislation.

"If it is put to the test, all secular parties including the partners in the ruling coalition, will either vote against the government or abstain," Congress leader Girija Vyas told AFP.

"We will fight the battle in the streets and in parliament. We are organising a big protest march in New Delhi on Sunday. As far as parliament is concerned, we may go in for a boycott but that will be a last resort," Vyas said.

Political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan said the controversy was building into a dan-

gerous threat to the government's stability.

"Its consequences in the medium term could be very serious as it marks the beginning of a wedge between the BJP and its allies," he said.

Rangarajan said the problem assumed greater significance since the BJP fared poorly in last month's state elections, which were dominated by regional parties, including allies of the central coalition.

"The allies have won leading position in their home states. It is fairly clear they want to maintain their distinctive identities and secular credentials. They also know that the RSS can undercut their own power on home turf."



A model presents a purple and black mini with matching purple shirt and black gloves by Alexander McQueen for Givenchy during the Autumn-Winter 2000/2001 ready-to-wear collections in Paris on Wednesday. — AFP photo