

International

Japan, N Korea begin talks

BEIJING, Mar 13: The Red Cross associations of Japan and North Korea began talks in Beijing today to help lay the groundwork for establishing diplomatic ties between the two countries, reports AFP.

Japan was expected to formally inform North Korea at the scheduled one-day meeting of its decision to give 100,000 tonnes of rice, its first food aid to the isolated Stalinist country in three years.

The talks are expected to focus on food aid and the return of Japanese citizens, an official with the Japanese Embassy in Beijing said.

Although the talks are being held under the auspices of the countries' Red Cross organisations, the inclusion in the team of government officials will allow them to plan for a bilateral meeting scheduled next month in Pyongyang.

China detains 16 Christians

HONG KONG, Mar 13: Chinese police have detained 16 members of an underground church as part of the authorities' attempts to include Christians in a clampdown on "evil cults," a rights group said today, reports AFP.

The 500,000-member China Evangelistic Fellowship has called on China's annual parliament session to end repression of their group after police in central Henan province broke up one of their house meetings, the Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China said.

The Hong Kong-based centre said it had received information that some of those detained in Xinyang city on March 2 will be sent to labour camps, a fate it said had already been shared by leaders of other underground churches.

Among those picked up was Jiang Qinggang, a church leader released last year after two separate stints in labour camps, the Hong Kong-based centre said in a fax sent to AFP.

Top Serb military official goes on trial for genocide

THE HAGUE, Mar 13: Gen Radislav Krstic, the highest ranking Bosnian Serb in UN custody, stands accused of leading the July 1995 slaughter of Muslims at Srebrenica in the worst European bloodbath since the Holocaust, reports AP.

Krstic goes on trial for genocide Monday at the Yugoslav war crimes tribunal. Prosecutors say he ordered the "ethnic cleansing" operation, which virtually wiped out the local Muslim population of the enclave through systematic execution and deportation.

In addition to genocide, Krstic has been charged with crimes against humanity, violations of the laws or customs of war. If found guilty of any single charge, he could face life imprisonment.

The military commander pleaded innocent to the charges following his transfer to the Netherlands in December 1998.

Krstic is reportedly a close associate of former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic and his wartime military leader, Gen. Ratko Mladic, who have also been indicted by the tribunal and remain at large.

Lagos proposes reforming Chilean constitution

SANTIAGO, Mar 13: Chilean President Ricardo Lagos announced Sunday a proposal to reform the constitution instituted by former strongman Augusto Pinochet to eliminate "authoritarian enclaves" and expand democracy, reports AP.

"This country, which was proud of its democracy, must be able to take a step and have a constitution that will make all of us proud," Lagos told a crowd of over 100,000 in Santiago, at the end of his second day in office.

The proposal to eliminate the constitution's "authoritarian enclaves," dictated by General Pinochet 20 years ago, would allow the restoration of Chilean institutions that existed before the 1973-1990 military dictatorship.

Mozambique death toll rises to 492

MAPUTO, Mar 13: Retreating flood waters have revealed corpses that had been submerged for up to two weeks, and the government has raised the confirmed death toll to 492, reports AP.

International aid groups have said they fear that last month's floods may have killed thousands. But accurate casualty numbers probably won't be available until the Limpopo and Save rivers return to normal, and refugees begin heading home.

Families were separated as they fled the rising waters, and with refugees scattered over nearly 100 refugee camps, many flood victims still do not know the fate of all their relatives.

India to table all issues during Clinton's visit

Indians want closer ties with US: Poll

NEW DELHI, Mar 13: All issues will be on the table during US President Bill Clinton's visit next week, despite strong differences over matters like Kashmir, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said today, reports AFP.

The Press Trust of India quoted Vajpayee as telling reporters on board a special plane returning from a state visit to Mauritius that all aspects of the Indo-US relationship would figure in his talks with Clinton.

"All issues will be discussed", Vajpayee said, when asked if the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which India refuses to sign despite US pressure, would be on the agenda.

Vajpayee also underlined the fundamental gulf in the Indian and US stances on Kashmir — administered in parts by India and Pakistan and the cause of two wars between the South Asian rivals.

"The US position is well known. They consider it a disputed territory. We don't accept

this," he said. Clinton on Friday described the Kashmir border as the "most dangerous place in the world." He had earlier offered to broker a solution to the dispute, provided India and Pakistan agreed to mediation.

India has consistently opposed any outside intervention in Kashmir, arguing it is a purely bilateral matter, based on issues of national sovereignty.

Vajpayee reiterated concerns that Clinton's last-minute decision to include Pakistan on his South Asian tour could send the wrong signals to the military regime which ousted former premier Nawaz Sharif late last year.

"While the US is a sovereign nation (able) to take its own decision, our worry is that the visit would lead to claims from the military regime that its legitimacy has been accepted," Vajpayee said.

Another report adds: The

vast majority of Indians believe US President Bill Clinton's upcoming visit will boost ties and want New Delhi to have closer links with Washington than traditional ally Moscow.

A poll in the latest issue of Outlook magazine revealed that 66 per cent felt India should have closer relations with the United States than with Russia or China.

The survey, released at the weekend, covered 476 people in six major Indian cities.

Seventy per cent said Clinton's March 21-25 visit would improve bilateral ties — clouded by India's proximity to the Soviet Union during the Cold War era — against 18 per cent who felt it would not make a difference.

Sixty per cent of respondents were against Clinton's last minute decision to visit India's arch rival Pakistan, with 46 per cent believing Washington backed Islamabad in Indo-Pakistan matters.

US Defence Secy arrives in Vietnam

HANOI, Mar 13: A quarter century after the end of the Vietnam War, at the start of a new era of US military commitment to Asia's future, US Defence Secretary William Cohen arrived in Vietnam early today to push the pace of reconciliation, reports AP.

After his Air Force jet landed at the Hanoi airport in a heavy haze, Cohen was greeted by a small group of Vietnamese military officers and Pete Peterson, the US ambassador to Vietnam.

Cohen told reporters on the flight from Hong Kong that he intended to thank Vietnamese officials for their cooperation in searching for missing US servicemen and suggest ways to improve the overall relationship.

"I look forward with some anticipation that I can help put in place the foundation that is slowly being built for normalization of relations and improvement for the future," he said.

'Warcrimes committed in Chechnya'

MOSCOW, Mar 13: Warcrimes have been committed in Chechnya by both Russian soldiers and separatist rebels, Council of Europe human rights chief Lord Judd said today after a two-day tour of the region, reports AFP.

"The delegation believes that serious human rights violations and warcrimes have taken place in Chechnya on both sides," Frank Judd said in Moscow after a tour of the rebel capital Grozny, several so-called "filtration camps" and tent cities for refugees.

"Eye witnesses gave accounts of arbitrary killings and harassment by Russian forces as well as unacceptable acts of violence by Chechen fighters, the implementation of Sharia law and its consequences, and hostage-taking," he said.

Judd noted that acting President Vladimir Putin, mastermind of the five-month offensive, has recently mentioned abuses of human rights in Chechnya.

Rocket missing after Pacific Ocean launch

AUCKLAND, Mar 13: A commercial rocket was lost today after being fired off a floating platform in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, company officials said, reports AFP.

But neither the launch company nor the British company which owned the payload would say what actually happened to the rocket and where it came down.

Sea Launch Limited Partnership, a joint US-Ukrainian-Norwegian owned company, fired the Ukrainian-Russian Zenit-3SL off a former oil platform, carrying a Hughes HS-601 communications satellite for a British company.

But Sea Launch spokesman Javier Mendoza said in a statement the rocket "suffered an anomaly" after lift off and communications were lost.

Richard Greco, Chief Executive Officer of the London company ICO Global Communications Ltd which owned the satellite said the loss "posed no known safety threat to the population."



An unidentified woman lawyer (C) weeps during a protest against the killing of Iqbal Radh, lawyer of Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif, in southern port city of Karachi yesterday. Lawyers in the protest said that it was too dangerous for them to be in Karachi and demanded arms licences for their own protection. Sharif's lawyer Radh was shot dead by unidentified gunmen in his office on March 10. — AFP photo

UK rejects call for troop cut in N Ireland

BELFAST, Mar 13: Britain rejected on Sunday Dublin's call for a troop reduction in Northern Ireland, saying its forces could not be scaled back until the threat of guerrilla violence ebbed, reports Reuters.

"Security cannot be reduced unless the threat falls away," Northern Ireland secretary Peter Mandelson said in a statement. "I said this in Dublin last week, and the need for proper security is well understood."

Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern said in Australia on Sunday there was a need for Britain to scale down its military bases in Northern Ireland.

The British presence was "a source of harassment and annoyance" in border areas like South Armagh, an Irish republican stronghold, Ahern said.

The Northern Ireland peace process has been stalled since Mandelson suspended the home-rule government of pro-

British Protestants and Roman Catholic republicans last month over the failure of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to hand in its weapons.

About 2,000 republicans marched in Belfast on Sunday to protest against the freezing of the fledgling coalition government.

Gerry Adams, president of the IRA's political ally Sinn Fein, was blunt in his address to crowds outside Davis Tower in West Belfast, which has a British military post on top of it.

"The process is at its most critical state thus far," he said. "Sinn Fein want the institutions put back in place."

Mandelson said in Dublin last Friday that "with good will and good faith on both sides" the home-rule government could be restored next month, possibly before Easter.

But that optimism was not

evident after talks last week between Adams and pro-British Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble which ended amid gloomy indications of a yawning gap between them.

Continued ceasefires by the IRA and other major guerrilla groups had raised hopes of a lasting peace that would draw a line under 30 years of "The Troubles" that claimed 3,600 lives.

But the political vacuum left by the coalition government's suspension has caused fears that splinter groups could step up attacks to try to wreck the peace accord they implacably oppose.

The London and Dublin governments will seek compromise from the squabbling Northern Ireland parties in Washington when political leaders fly to the United States for the March 17 celebrations of St Patrick's Day, Ireland's national day.



Local artistes from Bangladesh namely Sayeeda Rahman, Partha Pratim Majumdar, Recta Arham, Ferdausi Hena, Rahim Khan, Suresh Narma and Anuvab Barua presented four Bangla patriotic songs at the launching ceremony of the International Mother Language Day at the UNESCO Headquarters on February 21. The ceremony was launched by UNESCO Director General Koichiro Matsuura.



Saudi sappers from the Hajj special forces parade during a ceremony attended by Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef Bin Abdel Aziz in Mecca on Sunday. Prince Nayef said "the Saudi police are ready to handle any action that would disturb the flow of the pilgrimage" but added that he hoped no such action would take place. — AFP photo

China calls for timetable for reunification with Taiwan

BEIJING, Mar 13: China today kept up the pressure on Taiwan as it prepares for elections this week by warning that reunification could not be put off for ever and calling for the setting of a timetable, reports AP.

From political and strategic considerations, solving the Taiwan problem requires a timetable, and it cannot be put back indefinitely, said an editorial in the People's Daily, the Communist Party's mouthpiece.

"Whatever the Taiwan authorities are doing, they are scheming to oppose unification over a long time to achieve independence," it said.

"The authorities under (President) Lee Teng-hui are moving further and further down the path of splittism."

China has kept up a constant barrage of warnings to Taiwan in the run-up to Saturday's polls, saying time and again that if the island makes any move towards independence it will trigger a war.

Beijing has also said that if Taiwan, which it considers a rebel province even though the island has been ruled separately for 50 years, continues to stall on reunification talks it will launch an invasion.

The People's Daily also launched another broadside at US arms sales to Taiwan, a constant theme of Chinese anger in recent weeks.

"The United States' strategic intent to use the Taiwan problem to restrain China will not change," said the editorial, call-

ing for an end to US military assistance.

"We are resolutely opposed to Taiwan entering a US missile defence system, and of the US supplying or helping Taiwan to build advanced weapons with large destructive capability."

US Defence Secretary William Cohen said on Friday Washington will not be intimidated by China, despite Beijing's repeated warnings during the past few weeks that US weapons sales to China are damaging bilateral ties and heightening cross-strait tension.

The United States, which last week approved sales of 162 upgraded Hawk anti-aircraft missiles to Taiwan, has called on Beijing to show restraint in its comments before the elections in Taiwan.

Israeli jets raid Hezbollah position:

Israeli warplanes on Monday raided strongholds of the Shiite Muslim Hezbollah and Amal movements in southern Lebanon following a series of guerrilla attacks, the police said, AFP reports from Sidon, Lebanon.

Fighter-bombers fired six missiles in two raids on a suspected position of the pro-Syrian Amal movement near the village of Yater, east of the southern port city of Tyre. The raid came after Amal guerrillas attacked Israeli positions in Radar and Blat, at the edge of the western sector of the Israeli-occupied border zone in southern Lebanon. Amal statements said the attacks "scored direct hits." Independent sources could not confirm casualties or damage.

99 immigrants held in Turkey:

Turkish security forces in the northwestern province of Edirne have detained 99 illegal immigrants bound for Greece in the past three days, Anatolia news agency reported Monday, AFP reports from Ankara.

The detainees included 98 illegal immigrants from Afghanistan, Albania, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Nigeria, the Palestinian territories, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Syria and Tunisia, the agency said. Security forces also caught a Briton, who said he planned to pass the Turco-Greek border illegally because he had lost his passport, according to Anatolia.

Tokyo train mishap death toll rises:

The death toll from last week's derailment of a Tokyo commuter train rose to five after a 32-year-old woman who had been in critical condition died at a hospital, police said Monday, AP reports from Tokyo.

Yoko Yokoyama, a company employee, died at the Tokyo Medical College hospital late Sunday, said a Tokyo police spokesman who demanded anonymity. Of the 33 injured from the March 8 morning rush hour accident, Yokoyama was among a list of three victims who had remained in critical condition. Yokoyama had been on her way to work when the accident occurred, the police spokesman said.

Lankan Marxists oppose Norwegian peace bid

COLOMBO, Mar 13: Sri Lanka's leftist party warned today against Norwegian involvement in a bid to end the island's drawn out Tamil separatist conflict, reports AFP.

The Marxist JVP said it was opposed to a government invitation for Norway to act as a facilitator in bringing the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to the negotiating table.

"No agreement made in Norway has succeeded in bringing peace to other countries," JVP Secretary Tilvin Silva told reporters here. "Norway wants to get involved in the process with imperialistic intentions."

It said it was launching an "agitation" campaign to force

Iranian officials tried to steal US military assets'

WASHINGTON, Mar 13: Eight Iranian Defence Ministry officials tried to smuggle millions of dollars worth of classified "military assets" from the United States and are being sought by US federal agents, according to a Montana newspaper report, says AFP.

The officials were almost captured during a sting operation but failed to show up for a final meeting with an undercover agent, Montana's Great Falls Tribune reported Friday, citing US Customs Special Agent Brian Buschini.

Buschini would not identify the "assets" in question but told the Tribune they were worth millions of dollars and would have significantly enhanced Iran's military capacity to the detriment of US interests in the Middle East.

The Iranians have been charged with criminal conspiracy and violations of the US Arms Control Export Act, and indicted by a US federal court. One of them, Houshang Amir Bagheri, will be added to the Customs Service's "Ten Most Wanted" list starting March 25, Buschini said.

Bagheri's position in the Iranian military is not known, but he obviously had some stature," the Tribune quoted Buschini as saying adding that at least one general and two colonels were among the eight.

Prediction of post pullout violence in Lebanon

JERUSALEM, Mar 13: Predictions by Lebanese and Syrian leaders of an escalation of violence if Israel leaves Lebanon without an agreement drew warnings Sunday that any post-pullout attacks on Israel's northern border would invite heavy retaliation, reports AP.

The predictions, timed for an Arab League summit staged in Lebanon, also increased skepticism about the prospects for peace with Syria, the main power in Lebanon.

Israel deploys on the international border." Haim Ramon, a Cabinet minister close to Barak, said that Israel would retaliate against any attacks by either Syria or Lebanon.

The army has already presented Barak with a number of withdrawal plans, an Israeli official said Sunday, including one in which Israel retains about five border outposts located as far as 400 metres (436 yards) inside Lebanon, to protect border towns. Barak has instructed the army to be prepared for both a unilateral pullout and a pullout through an agreement with Syria, the official added, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Landslide victory for Spanish ruling party

MADRID, Mar 13: Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar swept to victory in Sunday's general election, crushing the opposition Socialists to capture absolute majority in parliament for the first time, reports Reuters.

In a vote Aznar had been predicted to win by only the narrowest of margins, his centre-right Popular Party claimed 183 seats, seven more than needed to govern alone in the 350-seat legislature.

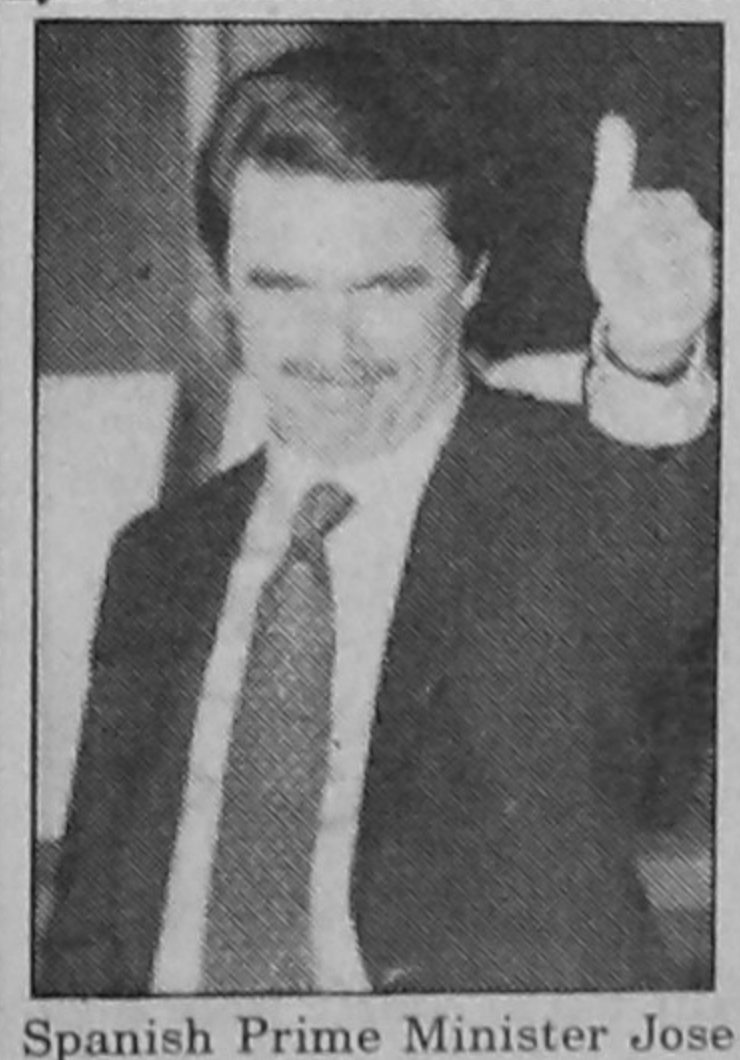
Thousands of Aznar supporters massed outside party headquarters, waving flags and chanting "Champions, champions!"

"The Spanish people have renewed and greatly broadened their trust in us," a smiling Aznar told jubilant party members.

Aznar's win marked the first time conservatives have taken full control of parliament since Spain returned to democracy after the death of right-wing dictator Francisco Franco in 1975.

Socialist candidate Joaquin Almunia, who had hoped to return his party to government after their narrow loss to Aznar in 1996, conceded defeat and announced his immediate resignation.

Aznar, who ran on a record of robust economic growth, returns to power with a strengthened hand now that he no longer has to rely on the backing of regional nationalists who propped up his minority government during his first term.



Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar gives the thumbs up to the crowd in front of his conservative Popular Party headquarters in Madrid as his party won a majority in parliament in general elections held on Sunday. — AFP photo