

International

Britain introduces tough measures to deter asylum-seekers

LONDON, Apr 3: Britain introduced today tough new measures aimed at deterring asylum-seekers, including giving them food vouchers instead of money, and imposing fines of 2,000 pounds (3,180 dollar) on truckers who smuggle illegal immigrants, reports AP.

Asylum-seekers — now concentrated in London and nearby south England ports — will also be compulsorily moved to centres around the country while their applications are considered.

In addition, customs officials are to install at some ports equipment capable of detecting people hidden in trucks, similar to advanced X-ray scanners used on the US-Mexico border, the British Broadcasting Corp. reported.

The Refugee Council said the voucher-system demeaned asy-

lum-seekers. Oxfam, a major charity which runs a network of shops selling used clothes and other goods, said it would boycott the vouchers.

The measures are the latest attempt by Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party government to curb the soaring number of asylum-seekers, most of whom, officials say, are simply seeking a better way of life, sometimes attracted by reports of generous welfare benefits.

Britain's Home Office says the number of asylum-seekers shot to a record 71,160 last year, mostly coming from the former Yugoslavia and Sri Lanka. The rise was a 50 per cent increase from 1998. The United Nations reported that Britain is second only to Germany as a would-be haven in

Europe.

Home Secretary Jack Straw denied that the voucher system and the forced dispersal of asylum seekers were demeaning or had racist overtones.

"We have a very significant problem of huge pressure which has fallen quite unfairly on some Kent districts and London boroughs," said Straw in a radio interview. "If people are genuinely fleeing from countries like Iraq, then they won't mind at all going to a perfectly civilised city like Glasgow."

Thousands of asylum-seekers have poured into Kent county in southeast England, mainly from the European continent through the English Channel port of Dover.

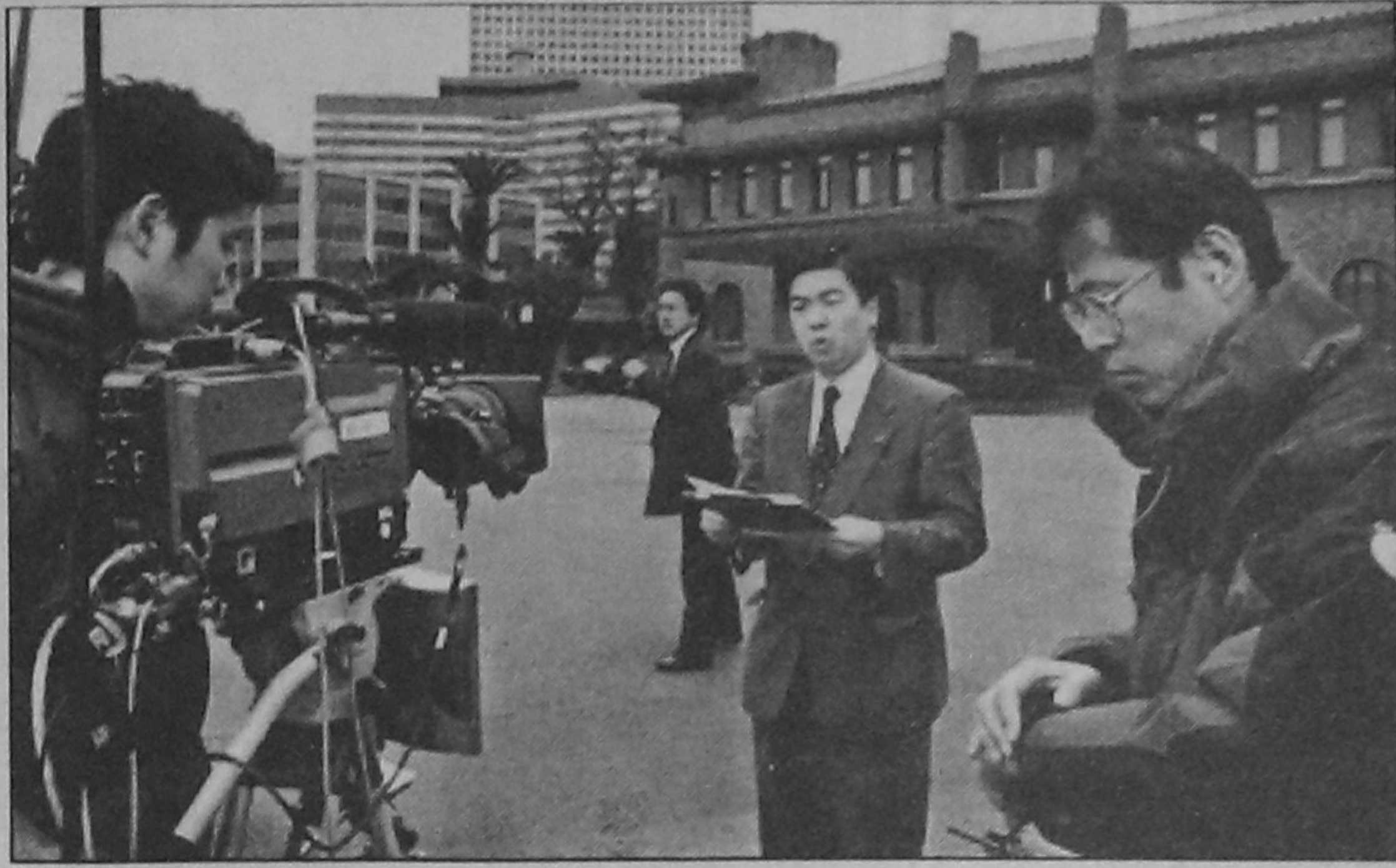
In future, asylum-seekers will get 10 pounds (15.90 dollars) cash a week, and vouchers

worth between 18.95 pounds (30.13 dollars) and 26.53 pounds (42.18 dollars) depending on age.

Refugee council chief executive Nick Harwick said the vouchers would "stigmatise and demean asylum-seekers and make one of society's most vulnerable groups even more exposed to potential hostility."

From Monday, truck drivers will be required to search their vehicles for stowaways before entering Britain. A 2,000 pounds fine will be imposed for every stowaway found.

Earlier, the Customs and Excise Department said it was installing new equipment in order to find smuggled alcohol and cigarettes, but acknowledged the equipment would also be able to detect humans.



A TV crew report in front of the Prime Minister's official residence in Tokyo yesterday, following the hospitalisation of Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi on Sunday. Mikio Aoki, Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary, was named as acting prime minister. — AFP photo

India to buy 320 Russian T-90 tanks

MOSCOW, Apr 3: Russia will sell India 320 of its T-90 tanks in a deal worth 700 million dollars to be signed later this month, the Russian daily newspaper Vedomosti said today, reports AFP.

Negotiations for the sale have been going on for more than a year, said the newspaper, quoting an unnamed official from the Russian arms sales company Rosvooruzheniye.

The signing of the deal was called off last year after field trials of the tanks saw two thirds of missiles fired missed target.

The Indian defence ministry hopes to receive delivery of the first 100 T-90's within the year of the deal, while the remaining 220 tanks will be built in India under licence, said Vedomosti.

The deal will allow the tank's Russian manufacturer, UralVagonZavod, to begin production of the T-95 tank.

India already has 2,200 Russian-built tanks, 700 T-55's and 1,500 T-72's, said Vedomosti.

India to release Hurriyat leaders

NEW DELHI, Apr 3: A couple of senior Hurriyat Conference leaders, who are in jail for the past six months, are likely to be released this week as a goodwill gesture by the centre, home ministry sources said yesterday, reports PTI.

The sources said Hurriyat Chairman Syed Ali Shah Geelani and Chief of the banned Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) Yassin Malik are likely to be released this week.

The sources said the release of the Hurriyat leaders would hopefully lend a helping hand in the efforts for restoration of peace in the state.

Besides Geelani and Malik, some other prominent Hurriyat leaders including Abdul Gani Bhat, Moulana Abbas Ansari, Javed Ahmed Mir and Mohammed Ashraf Seshai and lodged in Jodhpur jail in Rajasthan.

The sources said other leaders would also be released in a phased manner.

EU urges Lankan peace talks

COLOMBO, Apr 3: The European Union (EU) has proposed a tripartite initiative aimed at ending Sri Lanka's drawn out Tamil separatist war, diplomatic sources here said today, reports AFP.

The European Union has presented the plan to Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga and opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, outlining an initiative to build on Norway's facilitating role.

The EU has suggested widening the scope of ongoing efforts to open a dialogue with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In December last year, Kumaratunga announced that she had asked Norway to act as a facilitator to help bring the LTTE to the negotiating table.

Pakistan accuses India of violating train service agreement

ISLAMABAD, Apr 3: Pakistan Sunday warned it could stop train services to India in mid-April, accusing New Delhi of failing to honour an agreement governing rail transport, reports AP.

Pakistan Railways lodged a protest with New Delhi for "violating" the agreement under which India provides engine and coaches for the Samjtha Express from Wagha in Pakistan to Attari in India, the official Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) said.

"We are left with no option but to stop the service after April 15 if Indian Railways do not fulfil their responsibility," a Pakistan Railways official was quoted as telling the news agency.

The protest has been conveyed to the Indian government through the foreign office, it added.

APP said under the agreement Pakistan provides rolling stock for half of the year. For the rest, the responsibility lay with Indian Railways.

But for the last one and half years, India had failed to comply, it said. "Nothing has been done practically," it said.

The Samjtha Express is a twice weekly service between the two countries.

Congo goes to polls May 10

KINSHASA, Apr 3: The government has set May 10 as the date for the first elections since President Laurent Kabila seized power in war-torn Congo, reports AP.

Interior Minister Gaetan Kakudji announced the date at a ceremony to launch a five-member government office that will organise the vote for a transitional parliament in government-held territory.

"The mission is difficult but certainly noble," Kakudji said.

The major opposition parties, however, have said they want nothing to do with the new assembly. They say the move is an attempt to bypass a national dialogue on Congo's political future leading to general elections, which are included in a shaky cease-fire agreement.

Kabila, whose forces swept across the vast Central African nation in 1997, currently rules without a legislature. He has said the 300-member body will involve the Congolese people in the running of the country and its defense against aggressors, but has not specified its powers and functions.

The civil war in the country formerly called Zaire erupted in August 1998, a year after Kabila toppled the late dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. The rebels accuse Kabila of mismanagement, corruption and warmongering.

Rebels storm jail in Bogota, free 74 prisoners

BOGOTA, Apr 3: Seventy-four prisoners escaped when leftist rebels stormed a provincial jail, detonating a powerful carbomb to rip a hole in the prison wall, officials said Sunday, reports AP.

A combined force of guerrillas from the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the People's Liberation Army (EPL) unleashed a barrage of automatic fire against prison guards Saturday night at the Modelo jail in Cucuta, near the Venezuelan border, said regional police commander Col Rafael Casceda.

Prisoners inside the jail joined in the onslaught, throwing hand grenades at police reinforcements when they arrived, and fighting continued in the streets outside for more than an hour.

Amid the confusion, 74 inmates, including captured 52 rebels, escaped through a hole in the wall, taking a guard as a hostage.

Most of the escapees were militants of the ELN, EPL or the country's largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC.

Two prison guards were wounded in the fighting and four prisoners — including a FARC explosives expert — were killed as they tried to escape, said Gen Alfonso Arelano, Operations Director of the Colombian National Police.

Malaysia creates first HR Commission

KUALA LUMPUR, Apr 3: Malaysia announced on Monday the members of its first national Human Rights Commission, saying the panel headed by a ruling party politician reflected the nation's commitment to human rights, reports AP.

Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar said the 13-member panel of judges, politicians, academics and representatives from non-governmental groups was set up so the human rights of each citizen will be protected.

"They are independent of the government," he added, saying the roster had been approved by the King on Friday and the commission could begin its work immediately.

Human rights groups and

opposition politicians welcomed the commission as "an important step" but immediately challenged the panel to prove its independence from the government.

The commission, headed by former Deputy Prime Minister Musa Hitam, will investigate complaints and advise the government on new laws to protect rights abuses.

The government announced its plan to create the commission last year, at a time when international attention was focused on Malaysia because of its treatment of political dissidents and its curbs on press freedom.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's tight controls over political activity have been sharply criticised by rights

groups since the September 1998 sacking and jailing of his deputy Anwar Ibrahim.

The arrest sparked massive protests where hundreds of Anwar's supporters were detained and tried for participating in anti-government protests. Last month, the government banned public rallies in Kuala Lumpur and restricted sales of anti-government newspapers.

Malaysia's judiciary, the police force and government departments have come under criticism by rights groups for not investigating allegations of abuse.

Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang welcomed the rights panel, but said it might become a government tool to whitewash its abuses.

Experts warn of big explosion at erupting volcano

DATE, Japan, Apr 3: Japan's erupting Mount Usu volcano is threatening to explode violently or spew out a devastating pyroclastic flow, a top expert warned here today, reports AP.

"The volcano has entered the early stage of forming a large-scale magma dome," Hokkaido University volcanologist Hiromu Okada told a news conference on the northern island of Hokkaido.

"From now on, it is possible that we will see an explosive eruption or pyroclastic flow," he said, after flying over the 732-metre volcano in a helicopter.

"Overall, we are now at a critically important stage."

Since exploding back to life after more than 20 years of slumber, the mountain has erupted five times -- once on Friday, three times on Saturday and once Sunday.

Experts said magma had pushed through the mountain and made contact with an underground lake. The water turned to steam, creating enough pressure to punch through the rock.

The key fear is a big eruption from Mount Usu's main 200-metre by six-metre crater.

Asked when the volcano may erupt, Okada said: "I don't know. But it will not take several years. What I can say is that this is a decisive battle of brief duration."

"The possibility of an explosive eruption is rising," the expert said.

"But the authorities have taken measures on a premise of a bigger explosion. There is no need to expand evacuation areas further."

On his military helicopter flight, Okada said he found a fault near one of the craters that runs several hundreds of

metres and has many small cracks.

He spotted one crack with a one-metre difference in elevation.

Authorities banned all aircraft flights within a five-kilometre radius of the crater.

Superheated steam and ash has been billowing from more than eight craters on the shuddering mountain.

But so far there has been no lava or signs of pyroclastic flows, the devastating tides of volcanic debris that can engulf entire towns.

Thousands of people have fled their homes but no injuries have so far been reported.

By Monday morning, a total of 13,051 people were reported to have packed special shelters from three nearby towns -- 9,935 from Abuta, 2,696 from Date and 408 from Sobetsu, officials said.

Prosecutors question Suharto at home

JAKARTA, Apr 3: After defying repeated summons to appear at the attorney general's office in connection with a corruption scandal, state prosecutors visited ex-President Suharto at his home today and questioned him, reports AP.

The five-man team spent ninety minutes with the former dictator before state doctors stopped the interview after Suharto complained of exhaustion, one of the prosecutors said.

State attorney Purnama Munthe said that "Suharto understood the substance of the questions," despite claims by the former autocrat's lawyers that their client no longer had the mental ability to answer properly.

"The summons is going to have to be followed up by more questioning. We do not have enough yet," he told journalists outside the old autocrat's residence. "The interrogation was stopped... because Suharto's blood pressure went up and his heart started to beat irregularly."

Munthe said prosecutors questioned Suharto about his involvement in the misuse of millions of dollars belonging to several charitable foundations controlled by his family.

The former strongman, who has been formally named a suspect in the case, has denied any wrongdoing.

He defied three summons in the past month to appear for interrogation. His lawyers and children have repeatedly said he has been too sick, although the attorney general declared him fit following an independent examination by state doctors.

Suharto has appeared in public several times, most recently last month when he attended a wedding ceremony for one of his granddaughters.

President Abdurrahman Wahid has said on a number of occasions that he would pardon the former leader if he is found guilty.

Seven demonstrators shot dead in Kashmir

ANANTNAG, India, Apr 3: Indian security forces in Kashmir opened fire on a mass demonstration by Muslim protesters today, killing seven people and wounding two dozen others, police officials and witnesses said, reports AP.

A curfew was also clamped on Anantnag district, where the shootings occurred some 65 kilometres south of the Kashmir capital Srinagar.

Police opened fire on several thousand demonstrators calling for the release of the bodies of five Muslim youths who they claim were the innocent victims of a "fake" encounter engineered by the security forces 10 days ago.

The security forces said the five were Muslim separatist militants involved in the massacre of 36 Sikh villagers in Kashmir on March 20.

Five protesters were killed

on the spot at Bragapora, on the outskirts of Anantnag town, while two of the injured died on their way to hospital.

Witnesses told reporters that members of the police counter-insurgency Special Operations Group had offered no warning shots before firing on the protesters.

Kashmir police chief Grubachan Jagat and his deputy Ashok Bhan both left Srinagar for Anantnag following the shooting incident.

Police reinforcements, together with paramilitary forces and Indian troops were out in force on the streets of Anantnag town to enforce the curfew, as police vehicles with loud hailer told residents to stay indoors.

Earlier in the day police had arrested an influential separatist leader, Shabir Shah, and 20 of supporters in Anantnag.

UK may approve cloning of human embryos

LONDON, Apr 3: Britain is expected to approve the cloning of human embryos for medical research, which could allow scientists to create spare parts for the body, the Daily Telegraph reported today, says Reuters.

A panel of experts, led by the government's chief medical officer Dr Liam Donaldson, has decided that the potential benefits outweigh ethical objections, the newspaper said.

It said the panel had agreed to recommend changes to the law to allow the use of cloned embryos to create tissues to treat the sick.

The paper quoted unidentified government sources as saying ministers were almost certain to end the ban on the "therapeutic cloning" of embryos for research that could eventually cure kidney, liver or heart disease.

No immediate comment was available from government officials on the report.

The Daily Telegraph said the lifting of the ban would infuriate pro-life campaigners and reignite debate on how far scientists should interfere with nature.

Ministers want to launch a public debate to try to persuade people that cloning embryos for research was not the same as creating a carbon copy of a human being, the newspaper said.

It quoted one unidentified member of the panel as saying: "The potential is enormous. This could allow us to regrow a heart muscle or bone marrow and that is not a threat to humanity."

Cloning of human embryos for reproduction or research is forbidden under the 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act but a panel of medical and scientific experts has recommended restrictions be eased to allow research on embryos to create cloned tissue or organs.

BRIEFLY



Elton John (L) and friend David Furnish (R) pose for photographers as they arrive at the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) media awards ceremony on Sunday at the Hilton Hotel in New York City. John won the Vito Russo Entertainment award. — AFP photo

Arafat to meet Clinton this month

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat will meet with President Clinton in Washington this month, a PLO official said Sunday, shortly before a target date for Israel and the Palestinians to lay out an outline of their final peace agreement, AP reports from Gaza City.

Hasan Abdel Rahman, the PLO's Washington representative, told the Voice of Palestine radio that no official date has been set for the summit but that it is tentatively set for April 26. "The main issue on the agenda is where we are in the peace process," Abdel Rahman said.

Bus accident kills 15 in India

A passenger bus rammed into a truck in a village in southern India on Monday killing 15 people, a domestic news agency reported, AP reports from New Delhi.

Four others were injured in the accident in Obulapuram Metta village in the coastal state of Andhra Pradesh, Press Trust of India said. Both the drivers were among the dead.

Quake rocks Taiwan

An earthquake measuring 4.3 on the Richter Scale jolted central Taiwan on Monday but there were no reports of casualties or damage, seismologists said, AFP reports from Taipei.

The quake struck at 10:43 am (08:43 BST), with the epicentre 17.6 kilometres west of the scenic spot Sun Moon Lake. The tremor originated 7.5 kilometres below the earth's surface.

Gel prevents hair loss from chemotherapy

SAN FRANCISCO, Apr 3: A clear gel rubbed on the scalps of rats was able to prevent hair loss from chemotherapy, one of the most distressing side effects of cancer treatment, scientists said Sunday, reports Reuters.

A researcher for developer Glaxo Wellcome Inc. GLXO, said the company hopes to start human tests of the gel, which includes a drug known as GW8510, to see if it could help reduce the trauma of chemotherapy.

Stephen Davis, the researcher who led the studies, said the gel completely prevented hair loss in half of the rats that subsequently underwent chemotherapy. No side effects were detected and the drug did not interfere with the cancer-killing effects of the treatment, Davis said.

"We noticed a marked protection of the hair. It was just stunning," Davis told reporters attending the annual meeting of the American Association for

Cancer Research.

Each year about 1 million Americans are diagnosed with cancer and about 500,000 die from the disease. For those undergoing chemotherapy, hair loss is second only to nausea on the list of most bothersome side effects, scientists said.

"There is a tremendous unmet need to... eliminate this additional stress factor among patients already emotionally devastated by a cancer diagnosis," Davis said.

People fear hair loss so much that some even avoid cancer screening that could detect the disease in its early stages when it is easiest to treat, said Dr. William Hait, a cancer specialist who reviewed Glaxo's studies on GW8510.

A drug to prevent hair loss would have "an enormous impact not just on the patient receiving therapy but on the fear it generates," said Hait, who heads the Cancer Institute of New Jersey.

Russia blocks UN HR chief's visit to secret camps

GROZNY, Russia, Apr 3: Russian officials refused to take UN human rights chief Mary Robinson to any of the five detention centres she had asked to see during a brief trip to war-torn Chechnya, reports AP.

Instead the commissioner was taken to a military headquarters which had only two small cells, in one of which two women were being held on suspicion of theft.

"We had requested to see detention centres and pressed to see them. We wanted to see where people were held, where we knew from numerous reports they were being held," Robinson told journalists in neighbouring Dagestan.

"They could have had any selection they wished and that was what we were shown. I draw from that they were not open to us seeing a wider range of detention centres," said Robinson, the most senior international official to visit Chechnya since

Russia launched its assault in September.

"I found it ironic that the place that they took us to had two middle-aged women accused of looting, because looting is one of the serious allegations made by numerous witnesses against those in uniform," she said.

The delegation had asked to see the PAP-1 and PAP-5 detention centres in a car factory in the Leninsky district of Grozny. The facilities were revealed last week in a critical report by Amnesty International.

Robinson asked to see PAP-1 within moments of landing at Grozny's Severny (Sheikh Mansur) airport, a request that sparked sharp exchanges with a senior Russian army officer.

"It doesn't exist any more. Your information is out of date. It was operating in 1996," snapped General Vakha Ibragimov. "We are destroying terror-

ists," he added.

A deputy prosecutor at the airport, however, appeared to contradict the assertion by telling AFP that the delegation would indeed be taken to PAP-1.

Robinson responded to Ibragimov's outburst by expressing sympathy for soldiers killed and kidnapped in Chechnya, saying: "I'm aware of unacceptable violence and violations by the Chechen side."

"But I'm also hearing of very serious problems of human rights violations carried out by those in Russian military uniform, in special forces uniform. It's very important that these be fully investigated and that those who are responsible do not have impunity," she said.

"It's also very important for the Russian army and for the way in which modern Russia as an important member of the United Nations fulfils its obligations."

New pyramid discovered

CAIRO, Apr 2: French archaeologists say they have discovered the remains of a 4,000-year-old queen's pyramid, reports AP.

The French Egyptologists uncovered the foundation stones of the pyramid, which belonged to the wife of King Pepi I, on March 25 in Sakkara, an ancient royal cemetery about 32 kilometres south of Cairo, archaeologists announced this week.

The finding of the pyramid was one of several discoveries revealed at the Eighth International Congress of Egyptologists, which has drawn some 1,500 archaeologists to Cairo.

The French team, led by archaeologist Jean Leclant, quickly dug into the burial chamber of Queen Ankh-sen-Pepi and found a stone bearing pyramid texts, or special prayers to protect the dead and ensure sustenance in the afterlife.

Until this discovery, such

texts had been found only in the pyramids of kings. It is not yet known why they were in the queen's burial chamber.

"Who knows what else they may find?" said Gaballa Ali Gaballa, head of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities. The team will work at the site, now one of the country's largest, until the end of May.

In another discovery, Egyptian archaeologists said they have found a painted tomb in the Western Desert from a 600 BC culture that exported wine to the Nile valley.

Leading Egyptian archaeologist Zahi Hawass, who is chairing the congress, said that through a hole in a wall of the tomb he could see a burial chamber containing a 4-by-2 meter stone coffin.

"It may be intact, and inside there is likely a wooden sarcophagus and maybe even a mummy," Hawass said. "We will start excavating next week."



Pakistan peace activists protest against Indian border guards at Wagha checkpoint, some 30 kilometres east of Lahore, for not allowing them to cross the border on foot on Sunday. The activists were going to India to participate in a peace convention organised by Pakistan-India Peoples Forum in the Indian city of Bangalore, starting April 6. — AFP photo