US House panel approves visa bill

WASHINGTON, Apr 13: A US House of representatives subcommittee on Wednesday approved legislation that would lift the cap on the number of temporary visas that can be issued for skilled workers, reports Reuters.

The bill approved by the House Judiciary Immigration Subcommittee on a voice vote would allow an unlimited number of three-year H-1B visas to be issued through 2002, but would set a number of conditions on companies seeking to hire temporary foreign workers.

Companies have to show that they have increased their American work force and have raised their workers' compensation.

Companies that are laying off large numbers of American employees or slashing their salaries would not be able to bring in foreign workers using the H-1B visa, said the bill's sponsor Representative Lamar Smith, a Texas Republican who heads the subcommittee.

The bill would only allow visas for foreign workers who will be paid more than $40,000 a ear and require companies to report publicly on the skilled temporary foreign workers they have hired.

'Pakistan holds four Laden men on suspicion

CAIRO, Apr 13: Pakistan has arrested four men on suspicion of having links with Saudi-born Islamic militant Osama bin Laden, a London-based Islamist pressure group said today, reports Reuters.

Yasser el-Serri, who runs the Islamic Observation Centre pressure group, said the men were detained in Peshawar last month ahead of US President Bill Clinton's visit to Pakistan.

He said one of the men was an Egyptian-born Dane who obtained a Danish passport after being granted political asylum.

Serri urged the Danish government to intervene before the man was handed over to Egypt, where Serri himself faces a death sentence handed down by a military court when he was convicted for the attempted murder of former Prime Minister Atef Sedki in 1993.

The others detained were an Algerian, an Afghan and a Pakistani.

Troops called out to beef up security in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Apr 13: The Pakistan army has been called out to ensure peace during religious rituals in the Muslim holy month of Moharram as sectarian violence claimed more than a dozen lives this week, officials said today, reports AFP.

Troops have been deployed around sensitive areas in key cities and towns to assist the civil administration maintain law and order, they said.

Police commandos and armed plain-clothes police had also been put in "ready to fire" positions, said Tariq Dogar, a police official in Lahore, capital of the country's largest province of Punjab.

"We have reinforced security and vigilance after the recent killings in the country.

"We have sought the assistance from the military because there are too many flashpoints in the country and police cannot man all the sensitive areas."

The religious rituals culminate with the observance of Ashura, or the 10th day of Moharram, on Sunday.

Soldiers were seen riding in jeeps and trucks in nearby Rawalpindi and other Pakistani cities ahead of Ashura which commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (SM).

Hussain, his family and associates died in a battle with Ummayed dynasty ruler Yazid in 680 AD at Kerbala in Iraq.

The majority Sunni and the minority Shiite communities equally respect the Muslim saint but they differ on some religious rites.

Shiites, mostly clad in black, stage large processions on Ashura, reciting hymns and beating their chests with open palms in a display of grief. Sunnis hold indoor commemorations and observe the day by fasting and distributing food to the poor.

Shiites are about 20 per cent in the Sunni-dominated Pakistan's 140 million population.

officials said police and paramilitary troops would use sniper dogs to detect any explosive devices hidden during the Ashura processions.

At least 16 people have died in terrorist attacks ahead of Ashura, officials said, including 13 killed in a grenade attack on a Shiite gathering in the northwestern town of Malhowali on Tuesday.

As spokesman for the Shiite party Tehreek-i-Jafria (TJP) put the grenade attack toll at 15 dead and 20 injured.

He blamed the attack on an extremist Sunni group, Sipah-i-Shahaba Pakistan (SSP) which denied involvement.

Three people including a Shiite lawyer and a central TJP leader Wiqar Naqvi were gunned down in Karachi at the start of Moharram on Friday.

Political and religious leaders have condemned the killings.

Former premier Benazir Bhutto in a statement from her London exile denounced the Malhowali massacre saying the "gruesome incident is a matter of concern" as it indicates that religious sites are not safe in the Islamic state of Pakistan.

She called upon the military regime to discharge its duty towards the people and curb the violence.

The Malhowali killings were the worst since General Pervez Musharraf seized power after the overthrow of prime minister Nawaz Sharif's government in a military coup in October last year.

Weeks before the coup some 50 people were killed in suspected sect motivated attacks. The violence involving militants from rival Muslim sects has claimed at least 300 lives across the country over the past two years.

Yasser Arafat, President of the Palestinian Authority, Abdurrahman Wahid, President of Indonesia, Sheikh Abdullah Bin Khalifa, Prime Minister of Qatar, and Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf wave as they pose for photograph along with other participants of the G-77 Summit in Havana on Wednesday. Bangladesh Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad is also seen. —AFP photo

Israel ends freeze on Golan Heights development

JERUSALEM, April 13: The Israeli government has ended a freeze on development on the occupied Golan Heights following the collapse of negotiations on returning the strategic plateau to Syria, Prime Minister Ehud Barak's chief of Staff Yossi Kuchik, said today, reports AFP.

"We have decided to unfreeze the plans for developments on the Golan," Kuchik told Israeli public radio, referring to a number of economic and tourist projects frozen for several months because of the talks with Syria, which have now apparently reached a dead end.

Israel approved Tuesday the building of 200 new houses on the Golan, which it captured from Syria in the 1967 Middle East war, sparking an angry reaction from Damascus and the Arab League.

The chairman of the settlers' council for the Golan, Yehuda Wolman, told reporters after speaking with Kuchik: "The state is going to release construction permits and allocate the land needed for a series of projects."

He said the projects include building a hotel near the northern bank of the fresh-water Sea of Galilee and the expansion of a spa at the Hamat Gader settlement in the southern Golan.

Settlers' spokesman Uri Eitner said "we welcome these decisions and call for the government to expand Jewish settlements on the Golan until they reach the point of no return."

He said he regretted that the "government has still not renounced its plans to withdraw from the Golan" in exchange for peace with Syria and said he feared that the settlers were mere "bargaining chips" in the now-blocked talks.

Some 18,000 Jewish settlers live on the Golan, which Israel annexed in 1981, alongside a similar number of Druze who have kept their Syrian nationality.

The difference between the two countries' positions is a question of several hundred metres (yards), which, if they went to Damascus, would bring the Syrians to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, Israel's main source of fresh water.

Israel wants to maintain its control over the lake.

Meanwhile, Syria warned Israel Thursday that the "few metres" of the occupied Golan Heights in dispute would cost it dearly.

"These few metres of Syrian territory that the Barak government refuses to give back will cost it dear, and that government will pay the price for that and for the (demise) of the peace process," the ruling party newspaper al-Baath said.

14-yr-old boy wants to conquer Everest

KATHMANDU, Apr 13: A 14-year-old Sherpa boy flew to the scale the world's highest mountain, reports AP.

Temba Tsheri, the seventh-grade student who will be accompanied by his uncle and elder brother, plans to scale the 8,850 metres (29,035 feet) summit on May 18, Buddha's birthday.

Tsheri is trying to break a record set by another Nepalese climber Shambu Tamang in 1973 when he climbed the Everest at the age of 17. Tamang still holds the record.

"I want to place a bronze idol of Lord Buddha on the summit and pray for peace in the world," Tsheri told the Associated Press before boarding a small twin-engine plane to Lukla, a dirt airstrip one week's trek away from the Everest base camps.

Buddha was born in Nepal over 2500 years ago. Like most people living in the Himalayas, the Sherpas too are followers of the Buddha.

"I am confident that I will be successful in my mission. I have trained hard for this and I will accomplish my goal," said Tsheri, who has so far trained only on much smaller peaks.

Sherpas, who live at the foot of the Himalayas, are renowned for their mountaineering skills. They were mostly yak herders and traders until Nepal opened its borders to tourism in 1950. Their stamina and knowledge of the mountains make them expert guides and porters.

Apart from his brother and uncle, Tsheri's team will have four other members who will guide and help with a cargo of climbing gear and supplies.

Last year, a 15-year-old Nepal boy tried to break the record. However, snow blindness and low supply of bottled oxygen forced Arvin Timilsina to quit the expedition and make a hasty retreat to lower camps.

28 electrocuted in Bihar

PATNA, India, Apr 13: At least 28 people were electrocuted and dozens of others injured when a high voltage cable fell on a Hindu religious procession in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, police said today, reports Reuters.

Director General of Police KA Jacob said the tragedy had occurred late on Wednesday in south Bihar's Palamu district, about 300 km from state capital Patna.

Police said the 11,000-volt overhead cable fell on a Ram Navami procession, in which hundreds of people were participating to mark the birth of Hindu God Rama.

More than 5,000 people were marching through the streets of Daltongunj town as processions from several neighbourhoods converged behind a large colourful chariot with a glittering statue of Lord Rama.

Rama's birthday was celebrated across India on Wednesday. In Daltongunj, thousands danced and sang as music blared from loudspeakers and blinking lights lit up the dark town square, police official Sardev Rai said in a telephone interview.

One devotee was carrying a thick bamboo flagstaff carrying a saffron Hindu flag, and it snapped the high tension wire at the town's main square, he said. The thick wire fell on the crowd and there was a stampede as shrieking devotees ran to save themselves.

"The chariot started burning, and people were running all over," Rai said citing eyewitness accounts. "There were bodies on the road, and people were shouting and crying."

Hundreds of grieving relatives rushed to the site and the bodies of most of the dead had been handed over to their families, police said. Doctors in ambulances gave first aid treatment to several others.

Blast at concert in Lanka: Six killed

COLOMBO, Apr 13: At least six people were killed and more than 50 wounded in a suspected grenade blast at a musical concert in eastern Sri Lanka as the country began celebrating its traditional new year holiday, reports Reuters.

Police said the explosion occurred late on Wednesday in a stadium in the town of Trincomalee where hundreds of people had gathered to watch a holiday concert.

Hospital sources said at least 10 of the wounded were in serious condition.

Police said it was not immediately clear who was responsible for the attack but authorities have in the past blamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels for similar attacks.

The guerillas, who have been fighting for a separate homeland for minority Tamils in Sri Lanka's north and east since 1983, have stepped up attacks in the Trincomalee area in recent weeks, hitting police posts and a naval convoy.

The latest violence came as President Chandrika Kumaratunga issued a fresh call for an end to the ethnic war.

Kumaratunga said in a message that the traditional Sinhala and Tamil new year came as the country was at the most decisive crossroads of its history.

Land mine blast kills seven in Nepal

KATHMANDU, Apr 13: Seven people, including six police personnel, were killed when a land mine placed by suspected Maoist rebels exploded in western Nepal, police said today.

Six other policemen were also injured in the blast on Wednesday at Sangrai Khola, in Sallyan district, 550 km west of Kathmandu, police spokesman Rajendra Bahadur Singh told Reuters.

"A mine blew up the motor vehicle which was carrying the police team yesterday," Singh said.

Singh said the mine was placed by suspected members of an extreme left group, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), that took up arms against the constitutional monarchy in early 1996.

There was no immediate comment from the rebel group about the incident.

The Maoist group is campaigning to set up a communist republic in the world's only Hindu kingdom.

It says that parliamentary democracy established in 1990 has failed to improve the living standards of the people of Nepal, among the poorest in the world.

Palestinians reject Canadian offer to take in refugees

JERUSALEM, Apr 13: An offer by Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien to take in 15,000 Palestinian refugees in an effort to help resolve the refugee problem got an instant thumbs down from the Palestinians Wednesday, reports AFP.

Chretien made the proposal during his meeting Sunday with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak in Jerusalem, but it was only revealed Wednesday by a senior Israeli official travelling with Barak from Washington, where he held a summit with US President Bill Clinton.

A top official of the Palestinian Authority responded by making it clear the Palestinians were not interested.

"The Palestinian Authority, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the refugees themselves reject this offer," Palestinian government secretary Ahmed Abdel Rahman told AFP.

"Palestinian refugees still insist on the implementation of UN Resolution 194 on their right of return to their homeland," he said.

"They will not accept any alternative. We reject any kind of settlement of refugees in Arab countries, or in Canada," he added.

Resolution 194 was passed in 1948, a few months after the establishment of the state of Israel.

There was no immediate comment from Chretien, who is currently in Egypt after his visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories. He met Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo Wednesday to discuss the Middle East peace process with him, and is expected in Lebanon on Thursday.

More than three million Palestinians fled their homes on the creation of Israel in 1948 and in subsequent wars and occupation of Palestinian territory.

Some 367,000 Palestinian refugees live in Lebanon, at least half of them in 12 refugee camps, according to UN statistics.

Lebanon wants to see them resettled elsewhere as part of a regional peace accord.

Israel views Canada as taking a leading role in an international effort to resolve the Palestinian refugee problem since it chairs a committee on the issue in the multilateral Mideast peace talks, which are boycotted by Syria and Lebanon.

The question of the refugees in Lebanon is becoming acute for Israel ahead of its withdrawal from occupied southern Lebanon in July.

South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung (L), and First Lady Lee Hee-ho cast their votes in the parliamentary elections yesterday in Seoul. Opinion polls predict neither the ruling Millennium Democratic Party nor the opposition Grand National Party will win a majority of seats. — AFP photo

Musharraf explains democracy plans to Annan

HAVANA, Apr 13: Pakistan's military leader, General Pervez Musharraf, briefed United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan on Wednesday about his plans to restore democracy in his country, reports Reuters.

The two met in Havana during a summit of Third World leaders being held in communist-ruled Cuba.

"The discussion had two focuses: firstly, the general's plans for democratisation of Pakistan and secondly, regional security issues," Annan's spokesman, Fred Eckard, told Reuters.

Musharraf, who came to power in October when he overthrew prime minister Nawaz Sharif in a bloodless coup, said after the meeting he wanted to return Pakistan to democracy "not to please the international community", but because "it is in our own interests".

"The people of Pakistan want it and I certainly want it. There is no problem there," the Pakistani leader told Reuters. The issue of whether Pakistan would sign a nuclear test ban treaty was also raised at the talks, Musharraf said.

He said he had explained to Annan Pakistan's position that it wanted to develop a national consensus on whether to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) before making a decision.

Musharraf also repeated Pakistan's desire to see third-party mediation, either from the United Nations or the United States, in its long-running tensions with nuclear rival India over the disputed territory of Kashmir.

"Whether it is mediation, or facilitation, or bilateral dialogue, we need to initiate a dialogue," he said.

India is opposed to the idea of involving the UN or making Kashmir an international problem.

India and Pakistan came to the brink of war over Kashmir last summer. Kashmir was the cause of two of the three wars the neighbours have fought since independence from Britain in 1947.

Trial of 13 Iranian Jews adjourned till May 1

SHIRAZ, Iran, Apr 13: The trial of 13 Iranian Jews charged with spying for Israel began behind closed doors before a Revolutionary Court Today, in a case that has alarmed Jewish groups and Western governments, reports Reuters.

But the judge cut short the proceedings and approved a defence motion for a postponement until May 1, lead attorney Esmail Naseri told reporters after the hearing.

Judge Sadeq Nourani was also considering a plea to release the 10 held in custody for the Jewish holiday of Passover, which begins on April 20, Naseri said.

"We asked for a postponement and it was granted until May 1," he added.

Only four of 10 defendants held in custody were present at the hearing, which began more than a year after the accused were arrested. Three other defendants, free on bail, were summoned separately to the court.

Relatives of the accused, foreign diplomats and corespondents were barred from the court, as were representatives of Shiraz's 6,000-strong Jewish community who had hoped to be admitted.

Navi Balazadeh, who was arrested last year aged 16 but released on bail, denied he was involved in spying and said he was deeply committed to his homeland.

"We all love our country. We belong to Iran just as Iran belongs to us," he said outside the courthouse before the hearing.

Balazadeh, from the central city of Isfahan, said he had been a member of the volunteer Islamic Basij militia while in school. "I am deeply linked to Iran this way."

The case has set off alarm bells among overseas Jewish groups and Western governments fearful that the defendants may not receive a fair trial in the Islamic Republic.

4,600 Iraqi POWs unwilling to back home

BAGHDAD, Apr 13: More than 4,600 Iraqis captured by Iran during the 1980-88 Iraq-Iran war are unwilling to return home, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said today, reports Reuters.

"ICRC delegates have interviewed more than 4,600 Iraqi POWs living in Iran who stated that they did not wish to be repatriated," an ICRC statement handed to reporters in Baghdad said.

It was the first time that the ICRC had reported the unwillingness of Iraqi prisoners to return home. No further details were available.

Beat Schweitzer, the ICRC representative in Iraq, told Reuters on Wednesday some Iraqi POWs had managed to travel outside Iran but had not returned to Iraq.

BRIEFLY

Late King Hussein to be honoured: Jordan's late king will be honored at an international summit to be held in the Hashemite kingdom this November, organizers said Thursday, AP reports for Singapore.

The Global Summit on Peace Through Tourism will honor the late King Hussein's legacy as a peacemaker in the Middle East, said Louis D Amore, President of the International Institute for Peace Through Tourism. "He consistently worked behind the scenes trying to broker peace between Israel and the Palestinians," D'Amore said. Hussein died Feb. 7, 1999, of cancer at the age of 63.

7 shot dead in S Africa: Seven people in a mini-bus taxi were shot dead by unknown gunmen late on Wednesday in the latest killings in South Africa's mafia-like "taxi wars", police said, Reuters reports from Johannesburg.

The taxi was driving down a rural road near the town of Kranskop in Kwazulu-Natal province when gunmen jumped in front of it and opened fire with automatic weapons and pistols. A women and six men died at the scene, police said.

Dalai Lama in Japan: The Dalai Lama arrived in Tokyo on Thursday for a week-long visit in Japan, where he was expected to meet with local officials and give lectures around Tokyo and in the ancient capital of Kyoto, AP reports from Tokyo.

The exiled spiritual leader of Tibet and the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize winner last visited Japan in 1998.

Forest fire kills 2 in S Korea: Some 10,000 South Korean firefighters and volunteers have been mobilised to combat forest blazes that have killed two people, closed a nuclear power plant and destroyed about 350 houses, officials said Thursday, Reuters reports from Seoul.

Helicopters braved thick smoke clouds to water-bomb the fires. The fires, which started on Friday, have swept forests along the northeast coast, consuming about 4,000 hectares and making more than 800 people homeless, a forestry ministry official said.

Falun Gong asks UN to slate China on HR records

BEIJING, Apr 13: Defiant members of the outlawed Falun Gong spiritual group protested in Beijing's Tiananmen Square today to urge the United Nations to censure China on its human rights record, a Hong Kong-based rights group said, reports Reuters.

Chinese police detained more than 2000 Falun Gong members, at least 60 of whom raised banners, at various points on and around the square early in the morning, the Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China said in a statement.

Some protesters were beaten as they were taken away, it said.

An hour later there were no signs of a disturbance, but hundreds of plainclothes and uniformed police patrolled the vast plaza, questioning visitors and checking identification.

Several police vans and cars moved slowly among the crowds.

The Falun Gong adherents wanted to protest against a brutal government crackdown on the group, to show their determination to defend their movement, and to attract the attention of the UN Commission on Human Rights meeting in Geneva, the Centre said.

Adherents said authorities had escalated their campaign this month ahead of the first anniversary of a demonstration on April 25 last year, when 10,000 Falun Gong members gathered outside Beijing's Zhongnanhai leadership compound, the Centre reported.

China banned Falun Gong, which combines elements of Buddhism, Taoism and meditation, after members demanded official recognition for their faith in a series of protests. In October the government declared it an illegal cult.

But the group has defied the crackdown and kept up sporadic protests for almost an entire year.

Spokesmen for Falun Gong, which claims between 70 million and 100 million adherents, have accused China of arresting more than 35,000 people since the Communist Party banned the movement last July.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi declined to comment on the reported protest, but said Falun Gong had caused the deaths of more than 1,000 people.

"The Chinese government's legal ban on Falun Gong is precisely to protect human rights to a greater extent," he told a news conference.

Anwar condemns police for banning rally

KUALA LUMPUR, Apr 13: Former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim on Thursday accused Malaysian police of muzzling his supporters and using threats to thwart a protest march planned to mark the first anniversary of his conviction, reports AP.

Over the past week, Malaysian authorities have repeatedly threatened to arrest and prosecute people who joined Saturday's planned anti-government rally, which authorities have banned.

"The police must act professionally and not behave arrogantly as political agents or tools for the corrupt ruling clique," said Anwar in a statement which he wrote in the courtroom where his sodomy trial is currently being conducted.

"Why deny the rights of the people to organized peaceful meetings?" said Anwar, who described the police ban as "most deplorable."

Anwar is serving a six-year jail term for corruption. Saturday marks the first anniversary of that conviction.

He is now being tried on charges of sodomy, a crime in the predominately Muslim nation. If convicted, he could be jailed for 20 years.

Anwar has denied the charges and accused Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad of masterminding them to crush his threat to Malaysia's ruler for 18 years.

Mahathir sacked Anwar in September 1998. He was arrested soon after and has been in jail since than.

Last week, the home ministry rejected an application from the National Justice Party headed by Anwar's wife, Azizah Ismail, to hold the protest march.

The ministry said the organizers had failed to assure the authorities that the gathering would be peaceful.

Tian Chua, vice president of the Justice Party, said the rally would not be canceled despite threats from authorities.

"To defend our basic freedom to assemble, people should defy the intimidation by the authorities," he said in a statement.

After gathering at Kuala Lumpur's National Mosque on Saturday afternoon, the crowd was expected to march to the King's palace to submit a memorandum calling on the constitutional monarch to use his powers to end Mahathir's rule.

Ethiopia to ease food crisis

ADDIS ABABA, Apr 13: Ethiopia's government will use all means at its disposal to tackle the looming famine in the southeast of the country that is threatening an estimated eight million people, the ruling coalition said today, reports AFP.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) said it would send 100,000 tonnes of aid to the regions affected by three years of drought, state media reported.

"The government has launched extensive endeavours to distribute the food grain," declared the coalition, which was stung by comments Sunday from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who attacked the government for failing to distributed aid "properly."

New appeals to the international community for food aid will also be made, the government added, while chastising "the attempt of certain parties to politicize the drought."