

International

Musharraf promises rights for women, children & minorities

ISLAMABAD, Apr 21: Pakistani army ruler, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, promised today to tackle the nation's grim human rights record. He vowed to end child labour, promote women's rights and try to end abuses of a controversial blasphemy laws, reports AP. In Pakistan, where women routinely are killed in the name of honour, millions of children, some as young as five years old, are put to work and members of minority religions are in jail accused of defaming Islam. Musharraf's promise is considered a major leap forward. Musharraf, who is considered a moderate on domestic policies, gave his promise at the start of a two-day convention on human rights and human dignity. He also declared 2000 the Year of Human Rights in Pakistan. Local and international human rights groups have sharply criticized Pakistan's human rights record. Last month the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan issued its 1999 report which was a scathing attack on the nation's record. According to the report the hardest hit were women, children and minorities. The practice of killing women in the name of honour, for the faintest of reasons like talking to a man other than a male relative, has prompted human rights groups here to take to the streets. In many cases police either refuse to investigate reports of honour killings, or courts acquit the accused saying he had cause. Musharraf said his military-led administration would have no more of that. "So-called honour killings... don't find any place in our religion or our law. Killing in the name of honour is murder and will be treated as such," he told the convention. But a big problem in Pakistan is lack of awareness. Musharraf said the vast majority of people, particularly women, do not know their rights under existing laws. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan agrees. According to a survey conducted last year almost half of 1,500 women interviewed had never seen their marriage contract. More than 75 per cent of the women did not know that they could insist a marriage contract include a woman's right to seek a divorce.



Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf (R) shakes hands with Abdus Sattar Edhi (L), the head of Pakistan's leading humanitarian group Edhi Welfare Trust, after receiving his books during a seminar on Human Rights in Pakistan yesterday. Musharraf vowed tough action to curb the widespread problem of 'honour killings' of women by close relations. — AFP photo

All 24 aboard killed in DRC plane crash

KIGALI, Apr 21: All 24 people aboard an Antonov-8 airplane were killed when it exploded shortly after takeoff in the rebel-controlled southeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a Rwandan army spokesman told AFP here Thursday. The crash happened Wednesday shortly after the plane took off from Pepa Airport in the south of Katanga province. Accident investigators blamed the crash on a bird which flew into one of the engines, according to the spokesman, Major Emmanuel Nadiro, whose army is supporting the rebel effort to topple President Laurent Kabila. "When it was taking off, a bird hit one of the engines, the pilot tried to come back but couldn't manage to maintain it. The plane fell on the strip and blew up with all the fuel," Nadiro said.

BRIEF

16 die as bus crashes in Bhopal: A bus ran off a mountain road in central India yesterday killing 16 people and injuring 62, police said. Reuters reports from Bhopal.

3 die in blast in Ukraine: A bomb attack Thursday in the Ukrainian town of Brovary, near Kiev, killed at least three people and injured five, the emergency situations ministry told AFP in Brovary.

Ghana bus fire kills 17: At least 17 members of a Ghanaian church group were killed on Thursday when a bus taking them to an Easter convention collided with a pick-up truck and caught fire, police said. Reuters reports from Accra.

Mahathir won't have to testify at Anwar's trial

KUALA LUMPUR, Apr 21: The High Court ruled today that Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad is not required to testify in the sex trial of his sacked deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, reports AP. Anwar, the jailed politician and defendant, responded by saying that he may abandon his defence. "His confidence in the administration of justice has been completely eroded," Anwar's lawyer, Christopher Fernando, told the court. "His immediate reaction now is to abandon this trial because he feels his chances of succeeding... are next to zero." Shortly after Judge Ariffin Jaka rejected a defence plea for Mahathir to testify at the sodomy trial, Ariffin adjourned the hearing until Wednesday to give the defence time to decide its next move. "After careful consideration, I find there is not an iota of evidence to show that Dr. Mahathir Mohammad is involved in a political conspiracy to fabricate evidence of sodomy to topple Anwar Ibrahim," Ariffin said in his ruling. Anwar, who was sacked by Mahathir in September 1998 and has been in jail ever since, jumped up and shook his fist at the judge. "Where is justice in this court?" He shouted, pounding the wooden guard rail of the dock with his fist. "You should not allow him to hide behind his executive privilege." The judge's decision ended a six-month effort by defence lawyers to subpoena Mahathir and have him answer questions regarding the alleged political conspiracy against Anwar. After the ruling, Fernando told the court that he had advised his client to rethink his idea of abandoning his defence and facing whatever punishment is meted out. With the issue of Mahathir's testimony resolved, the sodomy trial could end soon because the defence has very few witnesses left to call. After the witness list is exhausted, defence lawyers and prosecutors are expected to make their concluding arguments.



Rabha tribal youths perform a traditional dance to celebrate their New Year which coincides with the harvest period on Thursday some 60 kms from Guwahati in Assam state. The north-eastern state of Assam is home to some 20 different tribes who celebrate their New Year in April. — AFP photo

Russia approves tough new military doctrine

MOSCOW, Apr 21: Russia's powerful security council today approved a tough new military doctrine which reserves the country's right to be the first to deliver a nuclear strike, reports AFP. President-elect Vladimir Putin said he would sign the document into law later today. The doctrine, according to the Kremlin, states that "the Russian federation envisages... the possibility of using all forces and means at its disposal, including nuclear weapons, where all other means to settle the crisis have been exhausted or have proven ineffective." Interfax quoted Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov as saying that "the text of the doctrine answers the national interests of Russia." The revised version of the original 1993 document had been tentatively approved in February and Putin told a meeting of the powerful security council that the final draft could no longer wait. "Today we are presenting to you the definitive document which stands for final ratification," Putin said in televised remarks before the document had been signed. "In the past several weeks, this conceptual document on military security had been polished in the various ministries -- first of all in the defence ministry," he said. "Today we have to put a final period to this work." Precise details of all amendments to the document, which was also revised in 1997, were not immediately clear. Reports said that it has identified 12 international and six internal threats to the nation's security. It also clearly reserves the right for Russia to strike first, but only if there is clear-cut danger to the country's very existence -- a similar position to one taken by the United States. Reports said that the new doctrine had also noted that NATO did not seek approval from the UN Security Council, where Moscow has a right of veto, before launching air strikes against Russian ally Yugoslavia last year. Putin further addressed Russia's military concerns on the country's volatile southern rim, where federal troops are waging their second deadly military campaign in the rebel republic of Chechnya. The West reacted with concern to February reports that the new version is tougher than the original and relies more heavily on the threat of using nuclear arms. Putin at the time said that Russia "cannot but notice changes in NATO's strategy" and must respond accordingly. However Ivanov later added that "Russia is not threatening anyone and does not intend to use its nuclear force to bring on pressure."



Amato proposed as next Italian premier

ROME, Apr 21: Italy's center-left coalition today formally proposed Giuliano Amato as next prime minister in a meeting with President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, said Fabio Mussi, leader of the center-left's main party, reports AFP. Parties represented in the outgoing center-left alliance had unanimously agreed on Amato, who could be asked by the president to form a new government and seek approval in both houses of parliament, said Mussi. Italy's opposition meanwhile insisted fresh elections must be held to settle the five-day government crisis. "We must return to democratic rule," said Silvio Berlusconi, the main opposition leader, after meeting with Ciampi earlier Friday. "This is a serious affirmation but I repeat it," he added. Berlusconi also reiterated a statement made Thursday that Amato, the treasury minister in outgoing premier Massimo D'Alema's government, was the next "useful idiot" who would ultimately lose the confidence of the center-left bloc.

Corpse comes back to life

BANGKOK, Apr 21: A Thai man sparked panic when his body twitched as it was loaded into cold storage a day after he was pronounced dead, forensic experts said today, reports AFP. Aroon Chansawan, 75, collapsed at a nursing home near Bangkok late Tuesday and was declared dead after police officials failed to detect a pulse. His body was taken for an autopsy the following day but as it was being put into a refrigerated mortuary a policeman detected a movement in his abdomen. When police at the Institute of Forensic Medicine recovered from the shock, Aroon was rushed to hospital, institute officials who asked not to be named said. Doctors at the Police General Hospital refused to comment on his condition on Friday.

Indian President ends France tour

MARSEILLE, France, Apr 21: Indian President K.R. Narayanan left France today at the end of a five-day official visit, the first ever by an Indian head of state, reports AFP. Narayanan flew out of Marseille airport bound for India. During his trip, he held talks with President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, and viewed the manufacture of Airbus aircraft at Toulouse in southern France.

Heart drug causes serious blood problems

BOSTON, Apr 21: Doctors said on Thursday the drug clopidogrel, given to people to prevent chest pain and stroke, can cause a life-threatening blood condition in as little as two weeks, reports Reuters. The doctors, led by Charles Bennett of the Veterans Affairs Chicago Healthcare System, said they had identified 11 patients who developed the condition -- thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura -- as a side effect when treated with clopidogrel. Their report was originally scheduled to be published in the June 15 issue of the New England Journal of Medicine. The journal's editors decided to release it early, saying it was important for doctors to know about the potential problem immediately. "Physicians should be aware of the possibility of thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura among patients who are receiving clopidogrel," the Bennett team said. Clopidogrel is sold under the brand name plavix by Sanofi Pharmaceuticals SAS, PA and Bristol-Myers Squibb BMY, NY. It was approved by the Food and Drug Administration on Nov. 17, 1997 designed to prevent stroke and chest pain by inhibiting the clumping of blood particles known as platelets, a vital component of blood clotting. Bristol-Myers Squibb declined to comment directly on the report but said it and Sanofi had been in discussions with the FDA about clopidogrel for several months.

Diet eggs' reaches sub-continent

BANGALORE, India, Apr 21: "Diet eggs" that claim to lower the risk of coronary heart ailments, enhance immunity and block the ageing of skin, reached the sub-continent today with their launch in the southern Indian city of Bangalore, reports AFP. The eggs will eventually be sold throughout India, as well as Pakistan and Sri Lanka, by Kool Komestibles Ltd., a local company that has invested 100 million rupees (two million dollars) in marketing the product. "This city's daily consumption of eggs is about three million, but we will target a niche market of 30,000 to 100,000 eggs," Kool Komestibles managing partner Syed Fathallah Naveed told reporters. "We hold the licence to produce and market these eggs in neighboring territories such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka." The low-cholesterol eggs were "designed" by Korean-born Jeong Sim, a professor of poultry nutrition and product technology at the University of Alberta in Canada.

S African leaders open meet in Zimbabwe over land crisis

VICTORIA FALLS, Zimbabwe, Apr 21: A mini-summit of Southern African leaders opened here today aimed at ending "cease-fire" violations, before the deployment of UN troops in the war-ravaged Democratic Republic of Congo, reports AFP. The talks will also look at Zimbabwe's bloody land crisis which has prompted mounting international concern. South African leader Thabo Mbeki, Mozambique's Joaquim Chissano, Zambia's Frederick Chiluba and Namibia's Sam Nujoma are attending the talks in this tourist resort with Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe. Tensions in Zimbabwe have been mounting with the killings in recent days of two white farmers and two opposition members. Earlier report says, "These reports were approached by the British government and asked whether they could help stabilize the relationship between the two countries and find the way forward on the land issue," said George Chibaramba, spokesman for Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe. Britain the former colonial power in Zimbabwe, the European Union and the United States have expressed concern over the deteriorating situation in Zimbabwe, calling for the restoration of law and order, and an orderly land reform programme. The discussions will take place in the country's prime resort town of Victoria Falls, the same day as the funeral of a member of the leading opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), at a village in Buhera, hundreds of kilometres (miles) away. US President Bill Clinton has conferred with British Prime Minister Tony Blair on the deadly violence in Zimbabwe, the White House said Thursday. "The president had a discussion yesterday with Prime Minister Blair, who is obviously taking a leadership role in condemning what's going on in Zimbabwe," spokesman Joe Lockhart said. MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai on Thursday said he had asked Britain to tone down its attack on Zimbabwe and assist in the land reform process. A Zimbabwean ministerial delegation is due to meet British government officials in London next week to discuss the escalating conflict surrounding plans to redistribute white-owned land in Zimbabwe. Most of the land owners are descendants of British colonialists. "We certainly hope that other leaders would share our concern about the climate that has been created," US State Department spokesman James Rubin said of the summit.

Clinton promises 'intensified' US role in ME peace talks

WASHINGTON, Apr 21: US President Bill Clinton promised Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat Thursday that the United States would play a more active role in the stalled Middle East peace talks and was encouraged by signs of progress, reports AFP. "We are prepared to play a more intensified role at the request of both parties," a senior administration official said after the nearly three hours of talks on the Israeli-Palestinian track between the two leaders. According to the official, who declined to be named, US mediators will ratchet up their involvement in the negotiations and the Palestinian and Israeli leaders will eventually enter into the talks themselves. "We have begun a new phase in this process," the official said, noting that Clinton had met with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak at the White House 10 days ago. "They understand that they are facing a very imposing deadline that they have put in place and if they are going to move through these very difficult issues... they will look to us as they have in the past for help," the official said. Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, who have been meeting at Bolling Air Base here, are due to hold their third session of talks later this month. Clinton himself will be ready to intervene at the appropriate time, according to the official, who cautioned, however, that "it remains for the parties to make the tough decisions." The two leaders discussed all the issues needed to reach a framework accord on the final status agreement by May and for finalizing the definitive agreement by September 13, the official said without elaborating on specifics. And the official said of Arafat and Barak: "They are focussed on the right issues. We are encouraged by that."

Kremlin confirms peace offer from Maskhadov

MOSCOW, Apr 21: President-elect Vladimir Putin confirmed today that he had received a peace offer from separatist Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov about one month ago via an intermediary, ITAR-TASS reported, says AFP. Putin said he had submitted the document to Russia's powerful Security Council, which had made its own revisions to the peace plan. The report said Putin had then sent back the offer to Maskhadov and has heard no reply since. President-elect Vladimir Putin said Friday that separatist Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov could receive an amnesty should he hand himself over to federal authorities, Interfax reported. "To Russia, Aslan Maskhadov is a criminal," Interfax quoted Putin as saying. "The amnesty law works in his case, which he (Maskhadov) could use," Putin added. The Kremlin said it would amnesty all Chechen leaders and fighters who do not have "the blood of Russian soldiers on their hands." Meanwhile, pro-independence fighters in Chechnya claimed early today to have killed some 40 Russian soldiers in a counter-offensive against a Russian armoured column. Chechen spokesman Movladi Udugov told AFP in a telephone conversation that his men had slain around 40 Russian federal troops on Thursday in southeast Chechnya. He said the rebels, holed up in the suburbs of Khochi-Ara, had repulsed an attack by a Russian armoured column on Thursday afternoon. The Russian command, which had sent in reinforcements to the region, denied any soldiers had died.

Japanese PM to unveil election date next week

TOKYO, Apr 21: Japan's Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori is set next week to unveil the date of snap elections after meeting his coalition partners, officials and news reports said today, says AFP. Mori will hold a meeting on Wednesday with his coalition partners -- Komeito party leader Takenori Kanzaki and Conservative Party leader Chikage Ogi -- at the prime minister's office, coalition officials said. "We are now planning to hold a meeting of the leaders of the three coalition parties on Wednesday," an official with the Buddhist-backed Komeito party said. Mori, who is also president of the powerful Liberal Democratic Party, plans to inform the two partners of his plan to dissolve parliament's lower house for early polls, said Japan Broadcasting Corp. and Jiji Press news agency.

Lanka appoints new field commander as fighting on

COLOMBO, Apr 21: A top Sri Lanka army officer has been sent to the island's embattled northern Jaffna peninsula to take charge of government forces engaged in escalating clashes with Tamil Tiger rebels, reports AFP. Major general Janaka Perera was sent to the peninsula Thursday, a defence ministry official said. "Very heavy fighting is continuing and major general Perera will be overall operations commander in the area," the official said. The ministry said Thursday they had deployed aircraft to bomb rebel positions in Jaffna and admitted that the military had to pull back from several defence lines amid heavy rebel fire. The ministry said at least 56 combatants had been killed in the clashes -- 21 government troops and 35 rebels. For their part, the Tigers said they mounted a multi-pronged assault and "overran several mini-camps" near the strategic military base of Iyakachi in the Jaffna peninsula. "Having pounded the base complex with artillery and mortar bombardments for several hours, LTTE commando units stormed into the peripheral camps this evening," the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said in a statement Thursday from their London office.

Hijack threat delays Lankan airlines flight

COLOMBO, Apr 21: A Sri Lanka Airlines flight from London to Colombo was delayed by four hours following two security alerts including a hoax hijack threat, the airline said today, reports AFP. Sri Lanka Airlines received the hijack threat from a telephone caller on Thursday, just before the aircraft was due to leave Heathrow airport in London, but later it proved to be a hoax, the airline said. It said another security problem at the airport caused the flight to be delayed. "A security alert at Heathrow airport occurring at the same time but wholly unrelated to the Sri Lanka Airlines flight resulted in our passengers having to wait while the aircraft was searched," the airline said in a statement.

Taipei ready for talks on confederation with China

TAIPEI, Apr 21: Taiwan president-elect Chen Shui-bian said today he is open for discussions on forming a confederation with China, reports AFP. "A confederation system (for China and Taiwan) is a breakthrough option. There is plenty of room for discussions -- whether it is feasible or whether a consensus can be reached here," Chen said. "As the country's new leader, I have no right to do things my way. I have to listen to different views," he said when visiting senior presidential advisor Sun Yun-suan who brought up the confederation option earlier this week. A visiting Chinese expert on Taiwan, however, immediately dismissed the new proposal. "It does not comply with our 'one country, two systems' policy. Our principle is there is only one China (and Taiwan is part of it)," said Yu Keli, deputy director of the Institute of Taiwan Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. "I'm not optimistic on the development of bilateral ties if he (Chen) doesn't accept the one China principle," Yu said Thursday. "As Taiwan's new leader, he first has to say publicly that he is a Chinese. So far I haven't heard the new leader say he is," Yu added. Yu reportedly helped draft the White Paper, which Beijing issued on February 21 warning the island of military invasion if it keeps rejecting reunification talks. Chen from the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) had been an advocate of Taiwan independence before his surprise presidential victory on March 18. But to avoid offending Beijing, which considers Taiwan a rebel province awaiting reunification, Chen had pledged not to declare independence. Chen said he would make efforts to upgrade cross-strait ties "but Beijing's military threat and vitriolic attacks would only slow down the improvement." "The thick ice wall can be thawed only by the warmth from sunshine, not by hoaxes and shovels," he said, urging mainland leaders to show friendliness and goodwill to Taiwanese people. Chen, the island's first opposition president, had stressed Taipei's sovereignty and flatly rejected the "one country, two systems" mechanism, which Beijing has insisted on to reunify the two territories separated in 1949 at the end of a civil war. He had also said he would hold dialogue with Beijing as long as "one China" is not a prerequisite to talks but an issue to be discussed.