



Kulsoom Nawaz (R), wife of Pakistan's deposed premier Nawaz Sharif addresses to party supporters in hometown Lahore Saturday. The 52-years-old Sharif is currently in prison after being convicted by a Karachi anti-terrorism court on the charges of hijacking and terrorism and was sentenced to life imprisonment. Kulsoom says the charges were concocted by the military regime. Sharif was arrested after a bloodless military coup on October 12 last year.

International

Lanka admits fall of key base

49 soldiers, 150 Tigers killed in fighting

COLOMBO, Apr 23: Sri Lanka today admitted that it has lost a key strategic military base to Tamil Tiger guerrillas amid heavy artillery and mortar bomb exchanges, reports AFP.

Government forces relocated their defences in the northern sector of the Elephant Pass base and "vacated the southern sector of Elephant Pass to make sure of the security of Jaffna," the defence ministry said in a statement.

It said 79 soldiers and 625 others were wounded Saturday's battles. The ministry on Saturday had said that 150 Tigers were killed in the counter attack.

Earlier, Sri Lanka appealed for blood today to treat hundreds of wounded soldiers as thousands of government troops retreated from a key northern garrison amid a ferocious rebel offensive, officials said.

The appeal was issued over state radio saying that blood banks in hospitals will be kept open on Sunday for longer

hours to receive donors. "Blood is needed urgently in view of the fighting in the north," a blood bank official said.

Official reports from the defence ministry say that nearly 400 soldiers were wounded during the fighting while another 49 had been killed. Among those killed were a brigadier and three colonels, officials said.

The ministry said that over 150 Tamil rebels had been killed.

The defence ministry declined to comment on claims by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that they captured the key Elephant Pass army garrison and the smaller Iyakachi camp on Saturday.

"I can't deny or accept that," defence ministry spokesman Brigadier Palitha Fernando said. However, he added that troops had "readjusted" their defence lines at Elephant Pass.

"How the readjustment has taken place, I can't say at this stage."

However, defence sources said that the military had

withdrew from the Elephant Pass garrison and destroyed the heavy equipment there to prevent them from falling into the hands of the Tigers.

The reports of casualties were sketchy because the main communication links between the north and the capital Colombo were down as retreating troops blasted a communications tower at Elephant Pass, army sources said.

The number of troops in Elephant Pass, located at the entrance to the northern peninsula of Jaffna, was not immediately clear, but it was believed to be about two divisions or about 15,000 troops.

The LTTE, in a statement from its London office, said it had overrun the Elephant Pass base on Saturday after killing over 1,000 government soldiers.

The LTTE said it first overran the Iyakachi army base and then moved to take the bigger Elephant Pass complex which had previously withstood major rebel assaults.

This is the first time in Sri Lanka's decades-old separatist

conflict that the Elephant Pass camp has fallen to rebel hands, official sources said.

The LTTE in its statement called it a "major military victory."

The fall of this crucial base at the gate of Jaffna will facilitate the LTTE to gain its strategic goal of liberating Jaffna," the statement said.

The latest military losses came as the government appointed two senior army generals to bring the situation in the Jaffna peninsula under control.

General Rohan Daluwatte was named chief of defence staff on Friday placing all army, navy, air force and police units under his command to beat back the rebel push.

The government also named Major General Janaka Perera as the top field commander in the peninsula following the escalation of the Tigers' attacks.

The Tigers mounted their latest wave of attacks on March 26 after one of their top leaders vowed to open the gates to Jaffna, "their former stronghold."

Jordan's King Abdullah in Israel

EILAT, Israel, Apr 23: Jordan's King Abdullah II said on his arrival in Israel today, in his first official visit as monarch, that he hoped for a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process this year, reports AFP.

"The Palestinian issue is a central one in the Arab-Israeli conflict and I am very hopeful that this year will witness a breakthrough that will give hope to the Palestinians in the justice they seek and to the Israeli people in the security that they desire," he said shortly after arriving in the Red Sea port of Eilat.

A new round of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations is due to take place in Eilat next Sunday.

Abdullah is due to hold a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak during the visit, scheduled to last just a few hours.

"I also hope that the Syrian and Lebanese tracks will be resumed in the near future in order to capitalise on this historic opportunity of achieving reconciliation and co-existence," he said.

India to run 'water trains' for drought-hit areas

BOMBAY, Apr 23: India's drought-hit western state of Gujarat today heaved a sigh of relief as Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee offered late Saturday to run "water trains" to a dry part of the country.

Gujarat Water Minister Narottam Patel told AFP on Sunday that "a great deal of pressure" on the local administration would be eased with this decision.

"Vajpayee's offer to dispatch trains to Gujarat carrying water is good news. It gives us an option if things get bad to worse," said Patel.

Vajpayee's offer came in the wake of Friday's riots in the worst affected districts of Jamnagar, Rajkot, Junagadh and Bhavnagar where tap water is available for just 15-20 minutes a day.

Patel said the Gujarat administration had stepped up relief activities.

"We have taken the help of private water suppliers as well as farmers who have deep wells on their plantations. Stern action will be taken against farmers if they do not co-operate with relief efforts to provide water," Patel warned.

"The government will buy the water from the farmers and supply it to the people," he added.

Last week, the Indian Express newspaper reported that three farmers were shot dead by police near Jamnagar when they blocked a highway in protest against plans to divert water from a local dam to the town.

A resident of Rajkot said that despite strict government warnings to private water suppliers not to exploit the situation they were still taking ad-

vantage of the crisis.

"A bucket of water is suddenly being sold by private water suppliers for 45 rupees (one US dollar) instead of 10 rupees," said housewife Nidhi Patel.

"Water tankers in our neighbourhood have to move around with the help of police protection lest they be looted by angry residents," she added.

State government official Amarendra Nath Rakesh told AFP by telephone that about 25 million people, out of Gujarat's population of 42 million, were affected by the crisis.

He said the government was supplying water by tanker trucks every two days to 438 out of the 866 villages which have been officially declared "scarcity affected."

More than 100 of the 143 dams and reservoirs in Saurashtra, Kutch and north Gujarat are reported to be bone dry and others have water for barely a fortnight. The region only received 45 percent of its average annual rainfall last year.

Meanwhile, drought-like conditions are also affecting Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra states.

Rajasthan state Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot and his cabinet colleagues supervised relief operations on Sunday in famine hit areas where some 20 million people are reeling under scarcity of drinking water and food.

"Famines in recent years in Rajasthan have assumed the form of triple famine which means an acute shortage of food, fodder and water. We can resolve the shortage of food more easily than water," a Rajasthan state official said.

US delegation in Taiwan to help defuse tensions with China

TAIPEI, Apr 23: A four-member US delegation began their whirlwind visit to Taiwan today before travelling to China to help cool the escalating tensions between the arch enemies, reports AFP.

The team, led by former US Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Winston Lord, held their first meeting here with former Taiwan provincial governor James Soong.

Soong narrowly lost to Chen Shui-bian as an independent candidate in the March 18 polls.

The visit is part of what has been called "track II" negotiations, after "track I" negotiations between Taiwan's quasi-official Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) and its Chinese counterpart Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) -- were called off by Beijing in 1995.

President Bill Clinton praised the action by Attorney General Janet Reno to intervene following what she said had been a night of fruitless negotiations with the Miami family.

"I believed that it was the right thing to do," the president told journalists.

"She made the decision, she managed this, but I fully support what she did."

And early Sunday, the Clinton administration dismissed as political posturing Republican criticism of the raid.

Reno said the Justice Department had no choice but to launch the raid after Elian's Miami relatives rejected all efforts to arrange a voluntary transfer of the boy to his father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez.

Republican leaders lost little time denouncing the pre-dawn raid, which lasted three minutes and in which there were no reported injuries.

"When I awoke in my hometown with my family today -- Easter weekend -- and learned of the tactics that had been used to seize Elian Gonzalez, my first thought was that this could only happen in Castro's Cuba," Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott said in a statement.

Senator Connie Mack of Florida called the operation "outrageous and horrifying" and said it had no place in "a free democracy which respects human rights and the rule of law."

Meanwhile, hundreds of outraged Cuban-Americans took to the streets here Saturday to denounce the seizing of Cuban boy Elian Gonzalez by armed US federal agents, leading to the arrest of some 290 protesters.

The protesters, inflamed by what they see as the Clinton administration's caving in to Cuban government pressure, were met by hundreds of police, many dressed in riot gear.

Honking car horns, burning US flags and shouting "Shame! Shame! Cowards! Cowards!" the protesters massed near the home of Elian's great uncle Lazaro Gonzalez where federal agents had seized the boy just hours before. At one point, protesters set fire to garbage and tires, blocking traffic.

Riot police fired tear gas to disperse a crowd of about 50 protesters.

38 killed in China chicken factory fire

BEIJING, Apr 23: A fire in a chicken processing factory in eastern China killed at least 38 workers and injured 20, the state-run Xinhua News Agency said, reports AP.

The fire broke out Saturday morning, when around 240 workers were in the factory in Qingzhou, in coastal Shandong province, Xinhua said in a report late Saturday.

The fire took nearly two hours to extinguish and its cause is now being investigated, Xinhua said. It gave no other details.

Putin promises Saddam to work for lifting ban

BAGHDAD, Apr 23: Russian President-elect Vladimir Putin has promised Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein to work to lift the embargo imposed on Iraq since its 1990 invasion of Kuwait, an official Iraqi paper said today, reports AFP.

"Russia will maintain its position of principle and work for the lifting of sanctions imposed on Iraq," Putin wrote in a message to Saddam, carried by Ath-Thawra, the mouthpiece of the ruling Baath Party.

"We will also work for the consolidation of friendly relations between Iraq and Russia," Putin said, in response to Saddam's message of congratulations on his presidential election win on March 28.

Russia, a member of the UN Security Council, has repeatedly called for lifting of sanctions against Iraq and condemned US and British bombing of Iraqi territory during patrols of "no-fly" zones in the north and south of the country.

Iraqi Defence Minister General Sultan Hashem Ahmad met secretly between April 14-16 with his Russian counterpart Igor Sergeev for talks.

Republicans, Cuban Americans lash out at Clinton, Reno

290 arrested in Miami to quell protest over Elian's seizure

WASHINGTON, Apr 23: Republican lawmakers and Cuban-American leaders lashed out Saturday at the Clinton administration following the seizure of Elian Gonzalez, denouncing it as a brutal and shameful home invasion, reports AFP.

Even Vice President Al Gore distanced himself from the decision to send armed federal agents to take Elian from the home of his Miami relatives and to reunite him with his father outside Washington.

"As I have said, I believe this issue should have been handled through family court and with the family coming together," Gore said in a statement just hours after the operation.

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MIAMI, Apr 23: Police officers arrested a young woman during a protest in the Little Havana district in Miami Saturday hours after Elian was forcibly removed from his Miami relative's home by federal INS officials in Miami. Hundreds of protesters have taken to the streets in response to the action taken by the federal agents.

— AFP photo

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— AFP photo

UNESCO hopes to ensure education for all by 2015

PARIS, Apr 23: Delegations from 150 member states will convene in Dakar Wednesday for UNESCO's World Education Forum, in the hopes of developing a plan to ensure basic education for all by the year 2015, reports AFP.

Ten years after the last world conference in Jontien, Thailand, there are still 880 million illiterate adults in the world, or 20 percent of the world's population, according to UNESCO figures.

"The Dakar Forum will not be a conference like all the others, but a determined call to action," said UNESCO Director General Koichiro Matsuura, who called education for all "the priority of priorities, the great challenge of the 21st century."

If adults are still affected by the education crisis, younger generations are no better off: 113 million children in 110 countries and 59 percent of whom are girls, do not go to school.

Even though the number of children receiving a basic education has risen in the past 10 years to 681 million children from 599 million, the increase merely reflects demographic change, not a true improvement, according to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

A dozen heads of state, as well as members of about 100 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), are expected to be among the 1,000 participants in the three-day Dakar forum, which has been two years in the making.

The conference, called "Taking Off in the New Millennium," will focus on several priorities: ensuring education for all



Six-year-old Cuban castaway Elian Gonzalez (C) is removed from his relative's home in a pre-dawn raid by US federal agents Saturday in Miami's Little Havana district.

— AFP photo

White farmer, black squatters pray for reconciliation

VIKING, Zimbabwe, Apr 23: A backdrop of escalating violence on Zimbabwe's farmlands, one white farmer decided to follow Christ's teaching this Easter weekend by extending the hand of friendship to the war veterans occupying his farm, reports AFP.

Eight Indian leaders, Andrew Pascoe marked the end of Holy Week by joining about 30 squatters camped out on his land in prayers for reconciliation between Zimbabwe's black and white populations.

His wife and other members of his family, whom he had earlier sent away as a precaution due to getting near the state of violence on the country's white-owned farms, also returned to join Pascoe, 38, and the squatters at the prayer meeting held in the village school.

Pascoe hopes that the prayers session will help a spirit of forgiveness between his family and the war veterans, as he explained to AFP.

"On my own behalf, I asked them to forgive all the bad things which the white people have done to them."

"They were hungry for reconciliation," observed his sister Margaret, who told AFP she was delighted to have had the opportunity to speak to the squatters in person.

However, the war veterans themselves declined to speak to the press about the prayer meeting.

Even so, Margaret was

Manila sees assault as final option to rescue hostages

MANILA, Apr 23: A large-scale military assault against Muslim extremists in the southern Philippines was the last option to rescue 27 hostages being held since last month, top security officials said today, reports AFP.

Defence Secretary Orlando Mercado said the assault which began Saturday against the rebel group Abu Sayyaf was ordered by a crisis management committee after peaceful negotiations broke down.

"It was the decision of the crisis management committee and we support it. I support their decision for an expanded military and police operation against the kidnapers," Mercado said.

"I believe they have exhausted all peaceful means. We will continue supporting whatever decision they take," he added.

The 27 hostages were among more than 50 students, teachers and a Catholic priest snatched by the Abu Sayyaf on March 20 after a failed raid on an army outpost in southern Basilan province.

The group had freed some of the hostages earlier in exchange for food and medicine and after the government gave in to a demand to include a Muslim actor in the government cabinet.

Twenty-nine other hostages remained, but last week the rebels said they beheaded two adult male captives after the government junked a demand for the release of three US-held militants, including Ramzi Yousef the mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing.

The military launched a massive rescue operation before dawn Saturday in a bid to free the remaining hostages amid rebel threats to behead more hostages.

At least four Abu Sayyaf guerrillas and three soldiers have died in the fighting, which was continuing to rage in the rebels' jungle hideout in Basilan, the military said.

Troops were under instructions to "ensure the safety of the hostages and to neutralize the kidnapers," Reyes said.

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The conference, called "Taking Off in the New Millennium," will focus on several priorities: ensuring education for all

young people while maintaining equal education opportunities for girls, as well as for religious and ethnic minorities, the handicapped and war victims; and the development of "second chance" programs for illiterate adults.

UNESCO also will insist upon increased financial assistance for international education initiatives.

Half of all developing countries set aside only two percent of their gross domestic product for education, with 10 percent of them saving only one percent of GDP for education.

Matsuura said this is not nearly enough.

"The elimination of poverty, the promotion of democracy and the respect of rights of men and women depend on progress in education," Matsuura said.

A separate NGO forum will take place in Dakar on Tuesday, one day before the UNESCO conference is set to begin, during which groups are expected to launch an urgent cry for help from the international community for education aid.

Among the events planned, Environment and Development in the Third World (ENDA) will sponsor a sound and light show Tuesday night in Dakar, with 500 children interpreting the history of Africa and calling for global equality.

A group of French NGOs will present a song entitled "The Right for All" recorded by French schoolchildren and expected to be sold in France to raise money for international education aid.

Education NGOs also are expected to ask for the total forgiveness of third world debt, calling upon the World Bank, a UNESCO partner at the Dakar forum, to intervene.

Baghdad fears new 'axis' of US-Saudi-Iran

BAGHDAD, Apr 23: Iranian Defence Minister Ali Shamkhani's visit to Saudi Arabia could signal a new US-Iranian-Saudi axis that would leave Baghdad out in the cold, an official Iraqi newspaper warned today, reports AFP.

"Several questions can be raised on the subject of this visit and the security accord Iran and Saudi Arabia intend to sign," said Babel, run by the eldest son of the Iraqi president, Uday Saddam Hussein.

"Firstly, could Saudi Arabia sign such an accord without the encouragement and approval of the United States?" Babel asked.

"The obvious answer is 'No,' and that leads us to ask: what terrorism do Saudi and Iran want to fight under the aegis of the United States? And what is the relation between the fight against terrorism and the visit by the Iranian minister to Saudi military bases?"

Babel highlighted the increased contacts and coordination between the United States and Iran have enjoyed during the past year.

"There have been the theatrical excuses of Madeleine Albright, the lifting of the embargo on pistachios and caviar, the fact that the United States considered the Mujahadeen as a terrorist organisation, and Iran's intensification of its fight against the so-called smuggling of contraband Iraq oil" in the Gulf, Babel said.

"All this, as well as secret and public visits, indicate the start of a new era of cooperation and coordination between the United States, Iran and Saudi Arabia."

Protests mark 500th anniversary of Europeans' landing in Brazil

PORTO SEGURO, Brazil, Apr 23: Hundreds of police officers violently broke up peaceful protests against Saturday's official celebrations marking the 500th anniversary of Europeans landing in Brazil, reports AFP.

Police dispersed some 2,000 Indians, blacks and students who were marching against the official celebrations with tear gas and rubber bullets at the height of the festivities.

Eight Indian leaders wearing feathers and body piercing were injured and taken to a nearby hospital by ambulance.

Police also arrested 140 students who were protesting the size of the police deployment.

Some 6,000 men had blocked the streets accessing Porto Seguro since dawn to keep protesters from getting near the official celebrations, that included the presidents of Brazil and Portugal.

Summit in Abuja to cut malaria deaths in half by 2010

ABUJA, Apr 23: African leaders, health ministers and the heads of international aid agencies meet in Abuja Tuesday for a one-day summit aimed at committing the continent to cut malaria deaths in half by 2010, reports AFP.

The summit, the idea of Nigeria's President Olusegun Obasanjo, is being co-organised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) under a programme launched in 1998 to Roll Back Malaria across the world.

More than one million people worldwide die from the mosquito-borne disease every year. Those most vulnerable are the poor, children and pregnant women.

While malaria-related deaths are on the retreat in most areas of the world, they are on the rise in Africa accounting for more than 90 percent of the total, according to summit organisers.

Partly this is because of rising poverty on the continent, and partly because of lax government attention.

"Malaria is now essentially an African disease," says the working paper prepared for the summit.

In practically every malaria-endemic country outside Africa the malaria situation has been steadily improving. By contrast, malaria has been treated with inexcusable neglect in Africa and ... (in Africa) the malaria situation is worsening," it said.

Health workers' frustration at the rise of malaria deaths in Africa is heightened by the ease of combatting the disease.