

International

Shelling damages mosque, home in S Lebanon

TYRE, Lebanon, Apr 24 : Shelling from the Israeli-occupied zone of southern Lebanon damaged a mosque and a house near the port city of Tyre early today, police said, reports AFP.

Two shells struck the Hadatha mosque and a neighbouring house, the police said, adding that there were no casualties.

The police said some 20 shells in all were fired at areas on the edge of the western sector of the occupied zone, following attacks on two Israeli positions, Blata and Shamaa, which were claimed by the Shiite Moslem Hezbollah movement.

In northern Israel a military source said an Israeli army post in south Lebanon and four positions of the allied South Lebanon Army (SLA) militia came under mortar attack early Monday.

There were no reports of casualties in the attack.

Gunmen kill Afghan leader in Peshawar

PESHAWAR, Apr 24 : Three unidentified gunmen shot dead a former Afghan guerrilla commander in Pakistan's northern border city of Peshawar, police said Monday, reports AP.

Mohammed Siddique, 50, died on the spot when gunmen opened fire with automatic weapons in the Lalazar neighborhood late Sunday. The gunmen fled.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack. No other details were immediately available.

Siddique was a commander of Hizb-e-Islami, an Afghan guerrilla group, which was in the forefront during the armed struggle against Afghanistan's ousted communist regime and former Soviet Union troops.

Jakarta to make decision on Suharto probe

JAKARTA, Apr 24 : The Indonesian government will make a decision in August on the case of former president Suharto, currently under a graft probe, Attorney General Marzuki Darusman said today, reports AFP.

In August, there will be a political decision on the Suharto case, Darusman was quoted by the Detikcom online news service as telling journalists on the sidelines of a private seminar here.

Darusman said that with the political side of the case settled by the expected statement, the legal process against the former president could then proceed as it should.

But without explaining what would constitute a "political decision," he added that the case against Suharto could not only be settled socio-politically, but that it had also to go through a legal process.

Trial of troops for murder in Aceh should continue

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia, Apr 24 : A state prosecutor today said the trial of 24 Indonesian soldiers accused of murdering 58 civilians in Aceh province should continue, as the charges were valid and the court had the necessary authority, reports AFP.

Prosecutor AS Nuraini argued at the Banda Aceh state court against defence lawyers' arguments on Saturday that the charges in what has become known as the Bantaiqah massacre were incomplete.

Reading the prosecution's comment on the defence plea, Nuraini said that the charges had been prepared "in a careful and concise manner" and were all legally justified.

Estrada pledges to campaign against corruption

MANILA, Apr 24 : Philippine President Joseph Estrada said today that he plans to mount a campaign against graft to refute allegations that his government is fostering corruption, reports AFP.

"Our economic fundamentals are now in place," he said in a speech to finance department employees.

"So we will focus on fighting graft and corruption this year. We will charge all corrupt officials, big and small, but especially the big ones."

Vajpayee appeals for aid

Scattered rains bring some relief to drought-hit India

NEW DELHI, Apr 24 : Scattered overnight showers eased drought conditions affecting 50 million people in northwest and central India today, a day after Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee appealed for public relief funds, reports AFP.

Narottam Patel, water resources minister in the western state of Gujarat -- where more than half the total population of 42 million have been affected by the crisis -- said the situation had improved.

There has been some relief with between 30-35 centimetres (12-14 inches) of rain in the Ambaji region since yesterday, Patel told AFP over telephone from the state capital Gandhinagar.

"This little change in the atmosphere has had a tremendous psychological effect ... people think there will be rain soon. Even I am praying for that."

Rain was also reported in the adjoining desert state of Ra-

asthan on Sunday. Showers fell near Pokhran, the site of India's 1998 nuclear tests, for the first time in eight months.

Vajpayee, in an address to the nation on state-run television and radio networks late Sunday, called for public donations to help tide over the worst-affected regions.

Large areas of Gujarat and Rajasthan, and some other parts of the country, are in the grip of a severe drought. Crops have withered away, water resources have dried up, there is no fodder for cattle.

"In village after village, hunger stalks men, women and children," Vajpayee said, adding that the federal aid package offered so far was not enough to tackle the spreading crisis.

"Given the severity of the drought and the large number of people and cattle who need to be provided with food and fodder, these funds are inadequate."

Patel said the state's water requirement was 20 litres (42 pints) per capita daily. Sixteen of Gujarat's 27 districts have been affected by the drought.

"We are currently able to supply 20 litres of water per person every day in the villages."



Women villagers walk past the carcass of a dead cow on their way to fetch water from a well, Saturday in Babute Ki Dhani, Rajasthan. Large areas of India's western states of Gujarat and Rajasthan have been affected by a severe drought, with already scant water resources drying up, leaving no fodder for cattle.

— AFP photo



Buddhist monks queue yesterday at the National Blood Bank in the Sri Lankan capital to donate blood to treat hundreds of government soldiers wounded in the ongoing fighting in the island's northern peninsula of Jaffna. The government has appealed for blood to treat heavy casualties as troops pulled out of a strategic army garrison that guarded the entrance to the Jaffna peninsula.

— AFP photo

Miami relatives seek court order to meet with Elian

WASHINGTON, Apr 24 : Elian Gonzalez's Miami relatives are preparing to seek a court order to grant them a visit with the six-year-old boy, after being rebuffed in their efforts to see him, the Washington Post reported today, says AFP.

An attorney for the relatives told the daily that the court order would allow Elian's great-uncle Lazaro, cousin Marisley and a sympathetic doctor to meet with the boy over the weekend.

Greg Craig, the attorney for Elian's father, did not rule out an eventual meeting with the Miami family members, but said the youngster and his therapist needed some time alone for now.

The Florida relatives are also appealing a US federal court ruling in March which upheld an earlier INS decision

to reunite Elian with his father. The family is asking that Elian be granted an asylum hearing. An appeals court in Atlanta, Georgia, will hear arguments on the issue on May 11.

Castro strikes muted note on Elian's return to father

Meanwhile, President Fidel Castro said Sunday that the reuniting of six-year-old Elian Gonzalez with his father in Washington was a "success" rather than a "victory," and should not be greeted with triumphalism.

"I don't wish to speak of a victory," Castro told reporters. Cubans should not be "triumphant with these events which could give arguments to be used by the 'mafia' in Miami."

10 hostage-takers killed in Philippines' rescue effort

BALAMO told radio station DZMM.

Southern Philippines military commander Major General Diomedio Villanueva said the military used artillery against the rebel camp in the rugged Basilan hinterlands to flush the well-entrenched guerrillas out.

"Our objective now is to get the bunkers and position of the Abu Sayyaf rebels," Villanueva said. "Artillery is now directed towards enemy positions to dislodge them from their present hideout."

Three MG-520 rocket-firing helicopters were also pounding bunkers surrounding the Abu Sayyaf's four square-kilometer (1.6 square-mile) main camp, where the hostages are being held.

Soldiers were under instructions to consider the "safety of the hostages and give them the best chance to survive," Villanueva said.

The troops' advance has been bogged down by the rough jungle terrain, where the Abu Sayyaf are believed to have scattered landmines.

"The boys are slow the past few days because of the terrain and the on-going search for explosives or mines," Villanueva said.

Casualties on the government side since the operation began Saturday remained at three dead and three wounded. A ground force of about 500 soldiers were tasked to capture the camp and free the hostages.

"According to reports we received from our security force, the rebels have at least 10 dead."



Philippine Army troops prepare to load ammunition on a 105mm howitzer canon yesterday as government troops continue to pound the mountain hideout of Abu Sayyaf, a Muslim extremist group in the jungles of Basilan to free the 27 hostages. At least 10 Muslim rebels have been killed in the offensive, officials said.

— AFP photo

Gunmen seize 20 hostages from Malaysian island

KOTA KINABALU, Malaysia, Apr 24 : Heavily armed gunmen have abducted at least 20 people, including foreign tourists, from a resort island off Malaysia's eastern Sabah state and fled by boat, police said today, reports AFP.

Abdullah was quoted by the official Bernama news agency as saying that Malaysian police were in close contact with their counterparts in the southern Philippines, which is close to Sabah.

Six of the gunmen were believed to be Filipinos, added Abdullah who is also home minister in charge of police.

Philippine Defense Secretary Orlando Mercado told CNN television in Manila that the hostages including two French nationals, three Germans, two South Africans, one Lebanese, two Finns and two Filipinos.

Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad

Malaysian police said police sent a special team to rescue the hostages who were taken away to sea in vessels by armed men he described as "pirates."

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A resort employee in Sipadan told AFP that security forces had taken over the island and that all civilians had been evacuated to nearby Mabul island.

Sipadan is being used by police to mount the rescue operation, a police source said.

US foreign policy makers fail to draw the right lessons from Vietnam War: Kissinger

WASHINGTON, Apr 24 : Those who currently make US foreign policy have failed to draw the right lessons from the Vietnam War, says former secretary of state Henry Kissinger in Newsweek magazine's current edition, reports AFP.

In the Newsweek essay, timed to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the US pullout from Vietnam -- also marked ahead of next month's controversial US congressional vote on whether to grant permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) to China -- Kissinger takes swipes at current US foreign policies.

He worries that other leaders will be "tempted by the Clintonian concept of riskless global gratification and the belief that

It will take years to resolve fate of Jerusalem: Israel

JERUSALEM, Apr 24 : Israel warned today that the future of Jerusalem, the Holy City fought over for centuries, would not be settled by a September deadline for a peace accord with the Palestinians and could take years to resolve, reports AFP.

"If we don't achieve a full accord on the question of Jerusalem, it is possible to reach an understanding on certain aspects and to declare that the others will be re-examined in a few years," said Oded Etan, the country's chief negotiator with the Palestinians.

"This time lapse could enable us to reach a formal accord more easily because the issue would prove less sensitive for the two sides," Etan told Israeli radio.

His comments sparked a

7 Serbs on trial for plot to kill Milosevic

NIS, Yugoslavia, Apr 24 : Seven Serbs went on trial here today charged with forming a terrorist group called the Serb Liberation Army and plotting to assassinate Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, reports AFP.

The seven, from the southern Serbian town of Krusevac, were also indicted by the military court on charges of plotting to kill General Nebojsa Pavkovic, now the army chief of staff, and opposition leader Vuk Draskovic.

They were accused of "forming a terrorist group and participating in enemy activities against the state," a charge often laid against Kosovo Albanians alleged to belong to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

If convicted, the defendants -- one army lieutenant and six civilians -- could face jail sentences of up to 20 years.

Ranging in age from 26 to 64 years, the seven were arrested in December and detained pending trial in a military court in the southern town, Nis.

Authorities said the group collected arms, equipment and propaganda material for an all-out Serb uprising against Milosevic.

Newspapermen to observe All India Action Day May 8

NEW DELHI, Apr 24 : Journalists and non-journalists belonging to newspapers and news agencies will observe May 8 as All India Action Day against the Indian Newspaper Society (INS) and newspaper management's alleged sabotage of the Mani Singh Wage Board's functioning, reports PTI.

Both journalists and non-journalists will undertake strikes, dharnas and demonstrations on May 8 to protest against an alleged conspiracy of newspaper management particularly INS, to sabotage the Wage Board right at the moment when it is in the process of finalising its recommendations.

Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan army's setback at the hands of Tamil Tiger rebels has dimmed the prospects of Norwegian-backed peace talks getting off the ground soon, political analysts here said today.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) captured the strategic base of Elephant Pass over the weekend after a month of heavy fighting and have escalated attacks against government forces in the Jaffna peninsula.

The committee said that agitational programme was drawn in a meeting of the representatives of newspapers and news agencies' employees' unions in a statement said here yesterday.

The committee said that agitational programme was drawn in a meeting of the representatives of newspapers and news agencies' employees' unions on April 22 night.

The unions also decided to hold demonstrations in front of INS office here on April 28 and May four, the statement said.

5 die as plane crashes in Auckland

Five people were killed and another seriously injured when a light airplane crashed in New Zealand's Southern Alps yesterday, police said, AFP reports from Auckland.

The area is a tourist attraction and this weekend has been the scene of a Warbirds airshow at Wanaka. Dunedin police spokeswoman Jo Galer said the six-seater plane crashed into a hill on the northwest side of a pass at the southern end of the Dunstan Range in Central Otago.

Three leaders of the outlawed Falungong spiritual group have been arrested for taking protection money from practitioners in eastern China's Shandong province, according to a report Monday, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

Tan Weijun, Li Weihua and his wife Li Fang were arrested in Weifang, the China-backed Ta Kung Pao newspaper said. The "trio" were alleged to have spread rumours and collected money from believers in several towns in Shandong, promising "Heavenly protection" from Tan.

Publication of 12 reformist journals suspended in Iran

TEHRAN, Apr 24 : Iran has suspended the publication of eight newspapers and four political magazines close to reformist President Mohammad Khatami "until further notice," the official news agency IRNA reported today, reports AFP.

The press court late Sunday announced the suspension of two newspapers and a bi-monthly close to the liberal reformist movement.

But on Monday the court decided to muzzle a total of eight dailies, three weeklies and a bi-monthly, all also close to Khatami's government.

It said "enemy elements" had infiltrated the journals where "they formed bases ... and are attacking the values of the revolution."

These journals are suspended until further notice to prevent them from committing new offences, from affecting society's opinions and arousing concern among the people," the court communiqué said.

Falungong followers held

Three leaders of the outlawed Falungong spiritual group have been arrested for taking protection money from practitioners in eastern China's Shandong province, according to a report Monday, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

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Briefly

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