

Sri Lanka enforces tough law to fight LTTE

COLOMBO, May 4: Sri Lanka today handed sweeping new powers to the military and moved to restore diplomatic ties with Israel, a day after India ruled out aid for government troops facing a rout at the hands of Tamil Tiger rebels, reports AFP.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga promulgated regulations under the Public Security Act allowing the state to confiscate private property and impound vehicles to protect national security, officials said.

The regulations also outlawed strikes, demonstrations and public protests deemed to be a threat to national security and tightened censorship of the local media.

The extraordinary measures, giving sweeping powers to the armed forces and the police, came as the government said it was placing the country on a "war footing" in reaction to a series of military reversals at

the hands of the rebels.

The laws went into effect from midnight Wednesday, shortly after neighbouring India ruled out intervention to help government forces resisting the Tigers' advances on the Jaffna peninsula in the north of the country.

The rebels last week overran the Elephant Pass base which guarded the entrance to the peninsula and are now advancing on Jaffna town.

The Tigers lost control of the peninsula, which they had previously run as a mini-state, to security forces in 1995.

As well as announcing the new national security measures, President Kumaratunga has ordered ministers to cut back non-essential development work, officials said.

Money from such projects in the next three months will be diverted to finance the war against the Tigers, officials said.

In another surprise move, the foreign ministry announced that Colombo has decided to immediately re-establish diplomatic ties that were severed with Israel in the early 1970s.

State radio said the move will help Sri Lanka to benefit from the armaments industry of the Jewish state, which trained and advised local security forces between 1985 and 1990.

The Sri Lankan airforce and the navy are also using Israeli Kfir jets and Dvora class gunboats. There was no immediate reaction from Israel to the Sri Lankan announcement.

Officials said the new regulations banned "all activities designed to encourage terrorism and disrupt the normal activities of the people."

The new measures come on top of already tight legislation outlawing the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

(LTTE) and strict censorship of local media reports on the country's drawn out separatist conflict.

Trade unions and the main opposition United National Party (UNP) expressed opposition to the new regulations which they termed draconian and an unacceptable infringement on political freedoms in the country.

Sri Lanka is already under a nation-wide state of emergency which allows security forces to arrest and detain suspects for long periods of time and carry out searches without court orders.

The government announced Wednesday that it will "lead the country on a war footing" to meet the threat posed by the LTTE.

The move came after India ruled out sending troops and boats to help evacuate between 25,000 and 40,000 government troops from the peninsula.

Jiang Zemin to quit as party leader in 2002

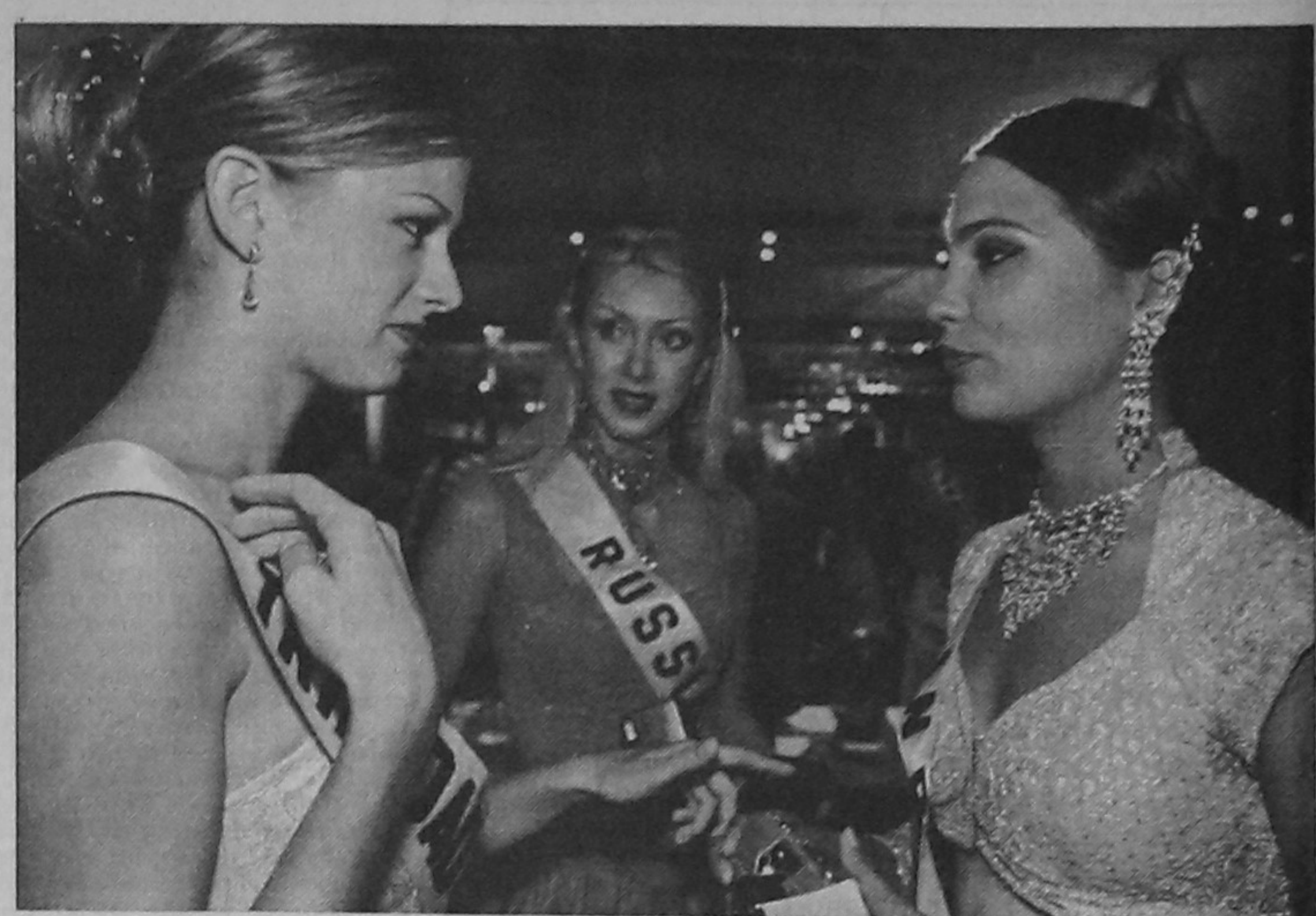
HONG KONG, May 4: Chinese President Jiang Zemin has indicated he will step down as Communist Party general secretary in 2002 and wants the top job to go to Vice President Hu Jintao, a newspaper reported today, says AP.

Jiang told members of the party's ruling Politburo that during the next party congress in 2002, only two of the current seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee should stay on, making room for younger politicians to help speed reforms in China, the South China Morning Post reported.

Jiang wants Hu and Li Rui-huan, chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, to remain on the Politburo, the English-language daily said.

After quitting as party leader, Jiang would stay on as state president until early 2003, the newspaper said.

Jiang, who sought his first term as general secretary in 1992 and his second in 1997, would remain state president until early 2003, the paper said.



Miss India Lara Dutta (R) chats with Miss Trinidad and Tobago Heidi Rostant (L) while Miss Russia Goreva Svetlana looks on during a National Gifts Auction in Nicosia late Tuesday. Each of the Miss Universe delegates contributed a "present" bearing the cultural mark of her country. The Miss Universe 2000 title will be decided on May 13. — AFP photo

Indian Air chief to visit Sri Lanka

NEW DELHI, May 4: India's air force chief will fly to war-torn Sri Lanka this weekend, but officials said today it was a routine, scheduled visit and not linked to calls for New Delhi to help Colombo's embattled troops, reports Reuters.

Air Chief Marshal A Y Tipnis will travel to Colombo on Sunday for three or four days, a defence ministry spokesman said.

"This is a visit that was scheduled months in advance. Actually it should have taken place last year," he said.

On Wednesday, India made clear it would not commit troops to Sri Lanka or help evacuate troops threatened by Tamil rebels advancing up the Jaffna peninsula in the north of the country.

Calls for Indian intervention have grown in Sri Lanka after last month's fall of Elephant Pass, a key military complex straddling the isthmus gateway to Jaffna.

Security experts said India's overstretched military was reluctant to be drawn into Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict after paying a heavy price during an intervention in 1987.

Tribal refugees in Assam threatened to take up arms

KOKRAJHAR, India, May 4: Hundreds of tribal refugees in India's northeastern state of Assam are threatening to take up arms unless the local government provides them with food, health care and security, reports AFP.

Hungry and facing an uncertain future, more than 150,000 refugees belonging to the Adivasi tribe are getting angrier by the day.

The Adivasis have been living in makeshift camps since having to flee their villages after ethnic clashes with the aboriginal Bodos, who are fighting for a separate tribal homeland in the region.

"There is a near starvation-like situation in almost all the relief camps, with no government rations or security being provided," Robin Hebron, a

young Adivasi refugee leader, told AFP on Thursday.

"We shall have no option other than taking up arms for survival."

The refugee camps are located in Kokrajhar district some 150 kilometres west of the state capital Guwahati. Some of them have been in existence for five years.

An estimated 500 Adivasi refugees have already formed two rebel outfits -- the Adivasi Cobra Force and the Bircha Commando Force.

Both groups have been involved in abducting people for ransom, looting food-laden trucks and holding up buses on national highways.

"Both Bodo and Adivasi militant groups have been involved in kidnapping and looting. Security measures have been

tightened", said Kokrajhar district magistrate John Ingti Kathar.

Refugee leaders say the government's monthly rations of rice and salt are only sufficient for 10 days at the most.

Kokrajhar member of parliament Sansuma Khungur Biswamthiary said the government had a duty to provide adequate relief and rehabilitation to the refugees.

"There could be turmoil if the refugees decide to pick up arms. To survive as human beings they can do anything, and out of frustration they may even take up arms which could prove disastrous", Biswamthiary said.

More than 10,000 people have died in the past decade in Assam in violence related to the Bodo campaign for a tribal homeland.

Astronomers find missing hydrogen in space

WASHINGTON, May 4: Astronomers using the Hubble Space Telescope said on Wednesday they had found much of the universe's missing hydrogen, ironically by finding oxygen, reports Reuters.

One of the most embarrassing mysteries facing astronomers is that they cannot find most of the matter in the universe. They know how much should be there by the behaviour of galaxies and other bodies.

But they cannot see it.

They believe about 90 per cent of the missing matter is called "dark matter", which is a special kind of matter not seen on Earth.

But a lot of the so-called baryonic matter -- the regular stuff made up of protons, neutrons and electrons -- also could not be accounted for. Astronomers think a lot of it is tied up in the form of highly ionised, or charged, hydrogen in between galaxies.

Todd Tripp of Princeton University, Blair Savage from the University of Wisconsin at Madison and colleagues used the orbiting Hubble Space Telescope to look for it -- not by looking directly, because hot hydrogen is hard to see, but by looking for ionised oxygen.

Writing in the Astrophysical Journal Letters, they described how they used the light of a distant quasar to peer through the invisible space between the galaxies, like shining a flashlight beam through a fog.

The Space Telescope Imaging Spectrograph aboard Hubble detected the spectral signature of oxygen superimposed on the quasar's light.

They said the oxygen tracer was probably created when exploding stars spewed the oxygen out into the space between galaxies. There it would have mixed with hydrogen.

Supercomputer models of the expanding and evolving universe show a web of gas filaments with hydrogen, the simplest and lightest element, concentrated along vast chain-like structures.

The models predict that vast hydrogen clouds flowing along the chains should collide and heat up, stopping the formation of galaxies in the hottest regions.

Jakarta to sign ceasefire with Aceh rebels

JAKARTA, May 4: Indonesia will sign a ceasefire with pro-independence guerrillas in troubled Aceh province next week, Human Rights Minister Hasbullah Saad said today, reports Reuters.

The move raises hopes of a peaceful solution to the long-running conflict which has disrupted the province's lucrative resources industries and raised fears of a domino-effect that could lead to the break-up of Indonesia.

Saad said the government and Free Aceh Movement rebels would sign a Memorandum of Understanding in Geneva on May 12.

"The main agreement is not to continue the violence and to put down the weapons," he told reporters.

"After that we will build a conducive situation to start economic rehabilitation and there will also be a political dialogue."

Pro-independence passions in Aceh have been fuelled by widespread human rights abuses by the military.

AFP adds: Four civilians were killed and 17 wounded in clashes between security forces and militant Muslim "Jihad warriors" in Indonesia's strife-torn eastern Maluku islands, the state Antara news agency said today.

The violence erupted on Wednesday night in Ternate, the main town in North Maluku province, when soldiers tried to block members of the militia "Jihad Force" from travelling to

neighbouring Halmahera island, Antara said.

The militants had earlier said here they would send volunteers to Maluku to wage a holy war against Christians. They held a 10-day training course for its volunteer force near the Indonesian capital last month.

Antara did not say whether the dead were members of the Jihad Force nor whether the soldiers had opened fire.

A policeman in Ternate, contacted by AFP, confirmed there had been violence involving security personnel and the Jihad force but refused to give further details.

The policeman said the situation was now under control.

UNITA claims to have killed 454 Angolan troops

LISBON, May 4: The UNITA rebels claimed Wednesday to have killed 454 Angolan government soldiers in fighting during the last few days of April, reports AFP.

UNITA, in a statement sent to AFP in Lisbon by Jonas Savimbi's movement, also claimed to have destroyed eight government tanks and seized a large quantity of munitions.

Savimbi's movement also claimed to have downed a government helicopter on April 27 and accused the government side of bombarding several villages in the central province of Bie the next day with napalm and phosphorus.

No figures were given for rebel casualties.

The United Nations in 1993 banned sales of arms, military equipment and fuel to UNITA, which has been at war with the Angolan government since independence in 1975.

The Angolan army launched an operation last September to drive out UNITA.

UNITA rebels have battled the ruling People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola with little respite since independence from Portugal despite the signing of a peace agreement in Lusaka in 1994.



An Indian UN peacekeeper passes the body of a Hezbollah fighter killed during a two-hour clash between the militant group and the Israeli-allied South Lebanon Army (SLA) militia yesterday. SLA said three Hezbollah guerrillas were killed in fighting late Wednesday, when a Hezbollah unit infiltrated the eastern sector of the Israeli-occupied zone of south Lebanon and clashed with SLA and Israeli forces near the village of Burghuz. — AFP photo

Two foreigners escape from Philippine Muslim rebels

JOLO, Philippines, May 4: Two white men among 21 mostly foreign hostages held by Philippine Muslim rebels escaped from their captors, local radio reported today, reports Reuters.

Defence Secretary Orlando Mercado told Reuters he could not immediately confirm the report on DZMM radio, which said the two hostages escaped on Wednesday before noon and guerrillas searching for the pair clashed with troops.

DZMM said it received word of the escape from "informants" but did not elaborate.

The identity of the hostages and their present whereabouts were not known.

The 21 hostages, brought to Jolo island after they were kidnapped on Easter Sunday from a Malaysia resort by Abu Sayyaf guerrillas, were 10 Malaysians, three Germans, two French nationals, two South Africans, two Finns, one Lebanese and a Filipina.

Military officers near the hostage site on Jolo island in

Two foreigners escape from Philippine Muslim rebels

the southern Philippines said troops returned guerrilla fire during the night, and one officer said the rebels moved their captives to another hideout to escape the shooting. They had no information on any escape.

A Reuters photographer in the area said troops fired mortars every 30 minutes throughout the night but a senior military officer said there was no danger to the hostages.

"We controlled our firing so that we won't hit the house where the hostages are," said a frontline colonel.

DZMM station is run by ABS-CBN TV network, which reported on Wednesday that two foreign hostages were dead. The government said however all 21 hostages were alive and its chief negotiator later said at least two hostages were wounded in clashes.

Jolo, 960 km (600 miles) south of Manila, is a stronghold of the Abu Sayyaf one of two groups fighting for an Islamic state in the mostly Catholic

country.

In a separate hostage drama on nearby Basilan, Philippine troops stepped up their search for about 10 Filipino hostages, including children, after Abu Sayyaf rebels holding a group of 27 for the past 45 days killed four of their captives a day earlier.

"About 10 are still unaccounted for... they were split into two groups," General Diomedio Villanueva, commanding officer for the southern military command, said on local radio.

"As of now there is no fighting, they're troops still searching the environment," Villanueva said.

Villanueva said a priest and three other Filipino hostages were killed and five, including children, were wounded on Wednesday when Philippine troops surprised the rebels.

Ten Filipino hostages, including seven children, from out of a group of at least 27, were rescued unhurt.

country.

In a separate hostage drama on nearby Basilan, Philippine troops stepped up their search for about 10 Filipino hostages, including children, after Abu Sayyaf rebels holding a group of 27 for the past 45 days killed four of their captives a day earlier.

"About 10 are still unaccounted for... they were split into two groups," General Diomedio Villanueva, commanding officer for the southern military command, said on local radio.

"As of now there is no fighting, they're troops still searching the environment," Villanueva said.

Villanueva said a priest and three other Filipino hostages were killed and five, including children, were wounded on Wednesday when Philippine troops surprised the rebels.

Ten Filipino hostages, including seven children, from out of a group of at least 27, were rescued unhurt.

Japanese bus hijack drama ends

TOKYO, May 4: A Japanese bus hijacking and hostage drama which left one woman dead and two others wounded ended early today after police arrested a 17-year-old boy and freed the 10 remaining passengers, reports AFP.

"We arrested the suspect, a 17-year-old boy, at 5:05 am (0205 BST)" said a spokesman from the Police Department in Hiroshima, 650 kilometres west of Tokyo.

"Currently we are investigating him," the spokesman said.

The boy, wearing a baseball cap and jeans, was "subdued," according to the state-run Japan Broadcasting Corp (NHK). Jiji Press news agency said he had been released from a mental hospital on Wednesday.

World press freedom heroes

BOSTON, Massachusetts, May 4: Fifty journalists from five continents were named "world press freedom heroes" by the International Press Institute (IPI) in a ceremony here Wednesday, reports AFP.

The 50 were chosen by the IPI for "significant contribution" to the defence or promotion of press freedom in their country or worldwide over the last 50 years, the IPI said in a statement.

Seventeen of those honoured are deceased. Of these, five were killed as a result of outspoken work on controversial topics, the IPI said.

They were: Guillermo Cano of Colombia, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro of Nicaragua, Veronica Guerin of Ireland, Tara Singh Hayer of Canada and Abdi Ipekci of Turkey.

Andre Sibomana of Rwanda, former editor of the newspaper Kinyamateka and one of the first to report and condemn the genocide there in 1994, died at age 43 because he was denied permission to travel abroad for medical treatment, the IPI said.

Nazar Nayouf of Syria, former editor-in-chief of the monthly newsletter Sawt al-Democratiya, is "currently imprisoned under deplorable conditions and near death after years of torture," it said.

Chinese journalist Gao Yu has been under house arrest since his release from prison in 1999 and Cuban Raoul Rivero is barred from leaving Cuba, both for their dissident views, it said.

Also named was Hubert Beuve-Mery of France, who founded the leading daily "Le Monde" after the liberation of France from German occupation in 1944.

Mugabe defiant of int'l pressure on land reforms

HARARE, May 4: Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe remains steadfastly defiant of international pressure to quickly end the ongoing land crisis in the country and has scoffed at British offers for aid to resolve the problem, reports AFP.

Ignoring mounting international concerns over the illegal occupation of white-owned farms by war veterans and supporters of his ruling ZANU-PF party, Mugabe repeated his refusal to end the land invasions which he launched his party's election manifesto Wednesday.

He said the invasions, which he has called "mere peaceful demonstrations" took him by surprise, but pleasantly so.

"We support the war veterans. The action they took was their own initiative, it all surprised us, but pleasantly," he said.

Britain, the former colonial master which has offered funding for the land reforms, wants an end to the illegal occupation of white-owned farms and is pressing Harare to end political violence and intimidation and stage free and fair legislative elections.

"Neither Britain nor any other donor is going to fund a programme of land reform unless it is conducted within the rule of law, it is based on a fair price to the farmer and it reduces poverty among the rural poor who have no land," said British foreign secretary Robin Cook.

But Mugabe reacted angrily: "We can't learn the rule of law from the British, because they never introduced it here. They cannot be our teachers of democracy because we introduced democracy in this country, there was never any democracy here, no law and order here."

Mugabe defiant of int'l pressure on land reforms

HARARE, May 4: Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe remains steadfastly defiant of international pressure to quickly end the ongoing land crisis in the country and has scoffed at British offers for aid to resolve the problem, reports AFP.

Ignoring mounting international concerns over the illegal occupation of white-owned farms by war veterans and supporters of his ruling ZANU-PF party, Mugabe repeated his refusal to end the land invasions which he launched his party's election manifesto Wednesday.

He said the invasions, which he has called "mere peaceful demonstrations" took him by surprise, but pleasantly so.

"We support the war veterans. The action they took was their own initiative, it all surprised us, but pleasantly," he said.

Britain, the former colonial master which has offered funding for the land reforms, wants an end to the illegal occupation of white-owned farms and is pressing Harare to end political violence and intimidation and stage free and fair legislative elections.

"Neither Britain nor any other donor is going to fund a programme of land reform unless it is conducted within the rule of law, it is based on a fair price to the farmer and it reduces poverty among the rural poor who have no land," said British foreign secretary Robin Cook.

But Mugabe reacted angrily: "We can't learn the rule of law from the British, because they never introduced it here. They cannot be our teachers of democracy because we introduced democracy in this country, there was never any democracy here, no law and order here."

Lockerbie trial resumes

CAMP ZEIST, Netherlands, May 4: The Lockerbie trial resumed for its second day today with witnesses expected to give harrowing accounts of the deadly air of debris from Pan Am Flight 103, reports AFP.

The Boeing 747 was blown apart by a bomb in the luggage hold early on the evening of December 21, 1988 killing all 259 passengers and crew on board.

As it broke up and plunged to the ground in pieces, the blazing wreckage destroyed a row of houses in the Scottish town of Lockerbie, killing another 11 people.

Much of the day's testimony was to come from witnesses in Lockerbie about the carnage caused by the falling debris.

Anwar's trial adjourned indefinitely

KUALA LUMPUR, May 4: The sex trial of jailed politician Anwar Ibrahim was adjourned indefinitely today to enable his lawyers to appeal against a High Court order exempting Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad from testifying, reports AP.

Anwar's attorney, Karpal Singh, told reporters that the 11-month-old trial would resume after the Court of Appeals decided the validity of an order by trial judge Ariffin Jaka that the 74-year-old prime minister was not required to testify.

Defence lawyers said appeal hearings were likely to last several weeks. The date for hearing the appeal has not been fixed.

Last month, Ariffin ended a six-month effort by defence lawyers to subpoena Mahathir. He ruled that there was no evidence to show that Mahathir masterminded a political conspiracy to crush his one-time protegee's political career.

The defence has accused the court of going out of its way to quash the subpoena against Mahathir while prosecutors said that Anwar's lawyers were intending to ridicule Malaysia's leader for 18 years by putting him in the witness stand.

Frustrated by what he considers a fruitless legal battle, Anwar had then told his lawyers to consider giving up his defence in the sodomy trial. But he later decided to fight on.

If Anwar, sacked by Mahathir in September 1998, is convicted of sodomy, he could receive up to 20 years in prison.

Anwar's sex trial began soon after his first conviction of four counts of abuse of power last April. In both trials, defence lawyers have repeatedly accused the judge of blocking their arguments and not allowing Anwar a fair defence.

US-Israel anti-missile laser passes 1st test

WASHINGTON, May 4: A US-Israeli laser weapon passed its first test by hitting a stationary target and will be used by Israel to protect its northern border from guerrilla rockets, the New York Times said today, reports AFP.

The Tactical High Energy Laser consisting of a laser and its tracking system were fired against stationary targets at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico last week, US military officials told the daily.

If it passes the next test, involving a moving Katyusha rocket, possibly later this month, the system may be shipped to Israel for more testing and deployment.

"To my knowledge, no nation has ever deployed an anti missile system based on a

Lockerbie trial resumes

CAMP ZEIST, Netherlands, May 4: The Lockerbie trial resumed for its second day today with witnesses expected to give harrowing accounts of the deadly air of debris from Pan Am Flight 103, reports AFP.

The Boeing 747 was blown apart by a bomb in the luggage hold early on the evening of December 21, 1988 killing all 259 passengers and crew on board.

As it broke up and plunged to the ground in pieces, the blazing wreckage destroyed a row of houses in the Scottish town of Lockerbie, killing another 11 people.

Much of the day's testimony was to come from witnesses in Lockerbie about the carnage caused by the falling debris.

Peacekeeper freed in Sierra Leone

KUALA LUMPUR, May 4: Former rebels in Sierra Leone who are holding dozens of UN peacekeeping troops hostage have freed one Malaysian but are still detaining two compatriots, Defence Minister Najib Razak said today, reports AFP.

Najib said Major Ganase Jagannathan was freed Wednesday night.

As of noon (1000 BST) Thursday, he said, members of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) were still holding army Lt Col Hamzah Bachik and naval Lt Cdr Aminuddin Rashid.

RUF leader Foday Sankoh promised late Wednesday "to take immediate measures" to free the hostages, national radio reported in Sierra Leone.

Most of the 49 hostages are UN peacekeepers. Seven Kenyan peacekeepers were killed during a clash this week with RUF fighters.

Malaysia has 10 military officers attached to the UN observer group in Sierra Leone.

Najib said authorities were sparing no efforts to secure the release of Hamzah and Aminuddin.

"We've been in contact with the Sierra Leone president and rebels who held Ganase captive," besides relying on UN negotiations," he said when asked how Ganase was freed.

Just over Malaysian security personnel are serving with seven UN missions worldwide including East Timor, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq and Sierra Leone. Of the total, 83 are armed forces officers while the rest are policemen.

Japanese PM in Canada

Japan's new Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori arrived in Ottawa late Wednesday to hold his first talks with Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien, an official said, AFP reports from Ottawa.

Mori flew in from London where he met British Prime Minister Tony Blair during his five-hour stopover after holding talks with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder in Berlin earlier in the day. The Japanese premier is making a whirlwind, nine-day trip to meet world leaders before he hosts this year's summit of the Group of Eight (G 8) major countries in the southern Japanese island of Okinawa.

Lightning kills 5 in Malaysia

Five inmates of a Malaysian drug rehabilitation centre have been killed and 17 injured by lightning, the official Bernama news agency said, AFP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

It said the lightning struck Wednesday afternoon at the Rawang Centre near Kuala Lumpur as the inmates were resting in the garden. Sazali Ismail, commandant of the centre, was quoted as saying there was no sign of an impending thunderstorm at the time.