



Reagan turns 90

AFP, Los Angeles

The man who was as adroit on the main stage of the free world as he was on the silver screen, former president Ronald Reagan, turns 90 today.

A Republican president from 1981 to 1989, Reagan has faded from the public spotlight since he announced in November 1994 he was suffering from Alzheimer's disease but continues to hold a special place in the hearts of US conservatives.

The Ronald Reagan Foundation has planned a number of special events for "the Gipper's" 90th birthday, including a parade of antique cars and presidential impersonators Sunday and a party at his presidential library in Simi Valley, north of here.

Also, admirers on Tuesday will be invited to sign a 27.5-metre (90-foot) birthday card decorated with photographs of events in Reagan's public life, on display at the museum.

In his honour, officials from Los Angeles, the city that gave him his cinematic start and helped propel him to national political prominence as California governor from 1960 to 1968, have designated February 6 as "Ronald Reagan Day."

China executes four for killing police officer

AP, Beijing

China executed six gang members on Monday, four of them for killing a police officer in a shoot out as they held a man and his 13-year-old son hostage for ransom, police and state media said.

The Higher People's Court in the southeastern city of Nanchang upheld death sentences issued by a lower court against the four and two other members of the same gang, said a court official who gave only his family name, Yao.

The executions were carried out immediately after by gunshot, he said. China's preferred method for judicial executions is a single bullet to the back of the head.

The shoot out came at noon on Dec. 31, hours after the four broke into a home in Nanchang and held a couple and their two sons at gunpoint, stealing cash and valuables worth about 20,000 yuan (dhs 2,500), the government's Xinhua News Agency said.

Taliban will hand over Laden if ...

AFP, London

Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia is ready to hand over indicted terrorist Osama bin Laden to a third country if it is assured of being recognised as the country's legitimate government, The Times reported Monday quoting the Taliban foreign minister.

"We hope that the new American administration will be more flexible and engage with us," said Abdel Wakil Muttawakil, who told the daily he had written to incoming US President George W. Bush.

The Saudi born millionaire Bin Laden is wanted for allegedly masterminding a series of anti-US terrorist acts including the twin bombings of US embassies in East Africa in 1998 which killed 224 people.

Pakistan ready for talks on Kashmir: Musharraf

AP, Muzaffarabad

Despite his commando uniform and praise for Kashmiri secessionists as "freedom fighters", Pakistan's military ruler Gen. Pervez Musharraf Monday offered early peace talks with uneasy neighbour India to settle the decades-old Kashmir dispute.

Addressing thousands of Indian Kashmiris living in a refugee camp on the outskirts of the capital of Pakistani Kashmir, Musharraf said he was ready to talk to India, but balked at the imposition of precondition to talks.

"We want to talk and without preconditions. If conditions are going to be set then we will also set conditions. We could demand, for example, that India first stop its repression," said Musharraf, who was on a tour of Pakistan Kashmir to mark Kashmir Solidarity Day, a national holiday in Pakistan.

"We ask Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to show his statesmanship and agree to take steps forward for peace and I promise that I, and the whole Pakistani nation, will move forward for peace and we can meet somewhere in the middle," said Musharraf.

India has refused to talk to Pakistan demanding Islamabad first put an end to cross-border incursions by militants waging a protracted secessionist uprising in Indian-ruled Kashmir. But Pakistan says its support is political and moral.

India says Pakistan is arming and training the militants, who freely cross the porous border that divides the Himalayan state between the two uneasy neighbours.

bours.

The flashpoint of two previous wars between the nuclear neighbors, Kashmir was divided between India and Pakistan after British rule of the region ended in 1947.

Secessionists in Indian Kashmir, the only Muslim-majority state in predominantly Hindu India, are demanding either outright independence or union with Muslim Pakistan.

As Musharraf spoke young men shouted slogans calling for a united Kashmir under the Pakistani flag.

Musharraf dismissed allegations that militant secessionists were terrorists calling them "freedom fighters."

"India is trying to say that the freedom movement is terrorism. It is trying to mislead the world," he said. "But this is an indigenous genuine freedom movement, not terrorism."

Most of the groups battling Indian soldiers are headquartered in Pakistan. Some have been declared terrorist organizations by the United States.

Throughout the refugee camp, where several thousand families who have fled Indian Kashmir for Pakistan live in tin-roof dwellings, giant banners fluttered in the crisp morning breeze. The banners praised the militants, called for an end to human rights abuses by Indian soldiers and called for union with Islamic Pakistan.

"Pakistan will continue to support the Kashmir freedom struggle," said Musharraf. "It is a just struggle."



Sikhs belonging to the National Akali Dal shout anti-Pakistan slogans during a demonstration near the Pakistan Embassy in New Delhi yesterday. The demonstrators are protesting the killing of six Sikhs in Kashmir by unidentified gunmen on February 3.

Elections today: Barak, Sharon make final appeal to voters

AFP, Jerusalem

On the eve of their leadership election, Israeli hardliner Ariel Sharon looked invincible Monday as the latest opinion polls showed incumbent Ehud Barak trailing his opponent by a huge margin.

Neither camp had scheduled any events for the final 24 hours, but Barak's campaign appeared to be scrambling desperately for votes.

Sharon has a commanding 18 to 19 point lead over Barak, according to the latest opinion polls published Monday in Israel's newspapers Yediot Aharonot and Maariv.

More damning for Barak was the fact that the number of undecided voters has dropped from a record high of 24 per cent last month to just eight or nine per cent Monday without cutting Sharon's lead, according to the polls.

The difference in the fortunes of the two campaigns could be seen in the candidates' last minute appeals to Israel's 4.1 million voters, who will elect their new prime minister on Tuesday.

Barak, who forced the special

election for prime minister with his resignation in December following months of deadly Israeli-Palestinian violence, warned in a dramatic front-page appeal in the Yediot Aharonot that ballot was a clear-cut choice between war and peace.

"We must decide if between us and peace there will be another bloody war, its outcome unknown,"



Ariel Sharon

Barak wrote. "A moment before you decide, remember: When a government makes such tragic mistakes, ultimately the boys are the ones buried - not the government."

Barak lashed out at Sharon's new image as a peacemaker and reminded voters of his rival's role as defence minister during the disastrous 1982 invasion of Lebanon.



Ehud Barak

"Tomorrow the roadside banners will come down, the bumper stickers will come off, and we will all have to deal with the truth behind the slogans," he added.

"We will discover who it was who called for peace because he knew it is the only way to save lives, and who used the word merely as a mask chosen for him by his PR staff."

In contrast, Sharon, who has conducted a low-key campaign, was confident of victory, calling for a unity government and vowing to bring an end to the unrest that has claimed the lives of almost 400 people.

"The day after I am elected, I will create a national unity government, as broad as possible, in an effort to heal the rifts in society, between right and left, religious and secular, immigrants and native citizens, Jews and Arabs," he wrote.

Sharon repeated his campaign theme that he will not negotiate a peace deal as long as the Palestinian uprising, that has seen around 50 Israelis killed, continues.

India to set up 'tent cities' in quake-hit states

REUTERS, Bhuj, India

Indian state officials, who have come under fire for responding too slowly to last month's devastating earthquake, promised yesterday to set up "tent cities" with their own markets, clinics and schools.

Gujarat authorities estimate that 30,000 people died in India's worst-ever earthquake, which tore apart towns and villages in a corner of the western state bordering Pakistan.

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes visited the ruins of Bhuj town yesterday, and said he doubted whether a final death toll would ever be known.

"I said if my worst fears came through, the number will go up. They are still clearing the debris and still discovering bodies. I don't think we will ever know the final figure," he told reporters.

Last week, Fernandes set off a controversy, saying the death toll from the quake, which measured 7.9 on the Richter scale, could touch 100,000.

Although a teenager was pulled

alive from a well at a village near the flattened town of Bachchau on Saturday, the relief effort is now focused on recovering rotting bodies from the rubble and providing shelter for the homeless.

"We are setting up tent cities for hundreds of thousands who are homeless because of the earthquake. They will have medical facilities, schools, shops, markets," Gujarat Home Minister Haren Pandya told Reuters in New Delhi by phone.

"We have distributed around 70,000 tents. We need 150,000 tents at least. We would like the whole world to help."

He said the tent cities would be set up in Bhuj and smaller towns of the Kutch district, such as Bachchau, Rapar and Anjar, which bore the brunt of the quake.

Officials say the government will be using cargo containers as offices as most government buildings have collapsed in the region. Around 50 were being moved into the region.

There have been fears that with access to safe drinking water cut off

across the dusty region, there could be an outbreak of diseases such as dysentery, typhoid and cholera as early as this week.

But Gemini Pandya, a spokeswoman for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, said there were no signs of developing epidemics yet.

"So far, in the work we have done, there is no sign of any epidemic," he said. "But if people are living outside in the open and there is no clean water, people's health will suffer."

In shattered towns like Bhuj, as life starts to revive, many survivors are still waiting for the bodies of relatives to be pulled out from mountains of rubble.

"I will wait here till the bodies are found," said Jayantilal Popat, who was squatting beside a collapsed high-rise building where his wife and sons lay buried. "Yes, I know they are dead." of the region had been cleared.

Pro-Wahid protesters torch Golkar party office

AFP, Jakarta

Hundreds of supporters of beleaguered Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid went on the rampage in an East Java town on Monday, setting fire to a local office of the former ruling Golkar party, police said.

The mob broke into the Golkar office in Situbondo, some 160 kilometres east of Indonesia's second largest city Surabaya, and set ablaze the party headquarters and its equipment, police said.

"Fortunately not the whole office was destroyed and its staff man-

aged to escape," Saryanto said.

But the chief of Situbondo military, Second Lieutenant Priyono, said the rioters only burned office equipment, not the building.

"We prevented them from burning the building because there are many houses nearby," Priyono said. "They took the equipment out and pulled down the doors and torched them."

He said the protestors also felled trees and blocked the roads with tree trunks, and that police and troops were clearing them off the roads.

In Surabaya thousands of pro-

Wahid protesters gathered outside the provincial parliament building, blocking the streets with trucks and cars, demanding the Golkar party be dissolved.

Golkar's politicians last week strongly supported a politically-damaging censure motion against Wahid over his alleged involvement in two financial scandals.

They also urged parliament to cancel the censure, which could lead to his eventual impeachment, and threatened to travel to Jakarta if their demands were not met.

HK workers uncover 45 bombs of World War II

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Workers reclaiming land for a planned Walt Disney Co DIS.N theme park in Hong Kong have uncovered about 45 bombs since October, mostly left over from World War Two, police said yesterday.

Two of the bombs were uncovered by workers last weekend.

"Hong Kong was a major battle zone. We have to expect a large number of shells on the seabed," Hong Kong Police Explosive Ordnance Disposal Bureau spokesman Alick McWhirter informed.

The munitions were discovered during dredging in the East Lamma Channel off the southwest coast of Hong Kong island. Sand from the dredging is being taken about 14 km (nine miles) to the west to Penny's Bay on Lantau Island.

The Disney amusement park, due to open in 2005, will be built on 310 acres (125 hectares) of reclaimed land in the bay.

McWhirter said the dredging area was a former munitions dumping ground for the British army.

Police said they have detonated all of the bombs found so far and that only a handful were considered highly dangerous.

Saudis arrest 3 westerners for blasts in November

AP, Riyadh

Three Westerners a Briton, a Canadian and a Belgian have been arrested in connection with two explosions that killed a British man and injured four other British subjects in Saudi Arabia last fall, Interior Minister Prince Nayef said.

On Nov. 17, Christopher Rodway, 48, a British citizen working in a Saudi hospital, died after a small explosion in the capital tore

through his car, which was believed to have been booby-trapped.

On Nov. 22, a bomb exploded in another car in Riyadh, wounding two men and a woman, all British workers at a company.

"The source of the explosives and many other relevant facts are known to us, but in the interest of the investigation we will not disclose them now," Prince Nayef said Sunday in a statement on state-run Saudi television. He did not say

when the three were arrested.

He also said nine others had been arrested "in connection with other crimes, and they are still under investigation." He did not reveal their nationalities, except to say none were Saudis. The statement was vague and it was not clear if those arrests were connected to the case of the three Westerners.

Prince Nayef said diplomats from the three countries have visited the men in custody.

'Some gifts meant for White House, not Clintons'

Reuters, Washington

Among the gifts that former President Bill Clinton kept as personal presents when he left the White House were \$28,000 worth of furnishings given to the National Park Service in 1993 as part of the permanent White House collection, the Washington Post reported yesterday.

The news follows an announcement by the Clintons on Friday that they would pay back \$86,000 for various gifts they received in 2000, less than half the value of the \$190,000 in gifts they kept when leaving the White House.

At issue in the latest case is whether the gifts were intended for the Clintons personally or the White House.

The Park Service serves as a steward for the White House and is the only unit with the legal authority to accept gifts for the White House, according to the Post. A gift meant for the current White House occupants, by contrast, is routed through the White House gifts office, a separate unit.

Two of the furniture makers whose donations Clinton took with him told the Post their gifts were part of a widely publicized, \$396,000 redecoration of the executive mansion and not meant for Clinton personally.

"When we've been asked to donate, it was always hyphenated with the words, 'White House,'" New York manufacturer Steve Mittman said of his family-owned business, which gave two sofas, an easy chair and an ottoman, worth \$19,900 and listed by Clinton as part of the gifts he took with him.

"To us, it was not a donation to a particular person," the Post quoted him as saying.