

## Cuban diplomat shot dead in Mexico City

Reuters, Mexico City

A Cuban diplomat died of gunshot wounds yesterday after being shot by unidentified assailants as he drove through a wealthy Mexico City neighbourhood, the Cuban Embassy in the Mexican capital said.

Boris Valdes Lopez, 36, died in a hospital from wounds sustained in the attack, said Cuban Embassy spokesman Alejandro Nunez.

Valdes, who was on a temporary assignment at the embassy, was accompanied in the car by an unidentified diplomatic official, Nunez added.

Radio and television reports said two gunmen apparently shot Valdes in the upscale Polanco neighborhood in the northwest of the capital after he resisted an attempted robbery, but Nunez did not rule out other motives.

A spokesman for Mexico City's police said a preliminary investigation indicated that there had been three attackers.

## Labor favoured to win polls in Australia

AFP, Sydney

Opposition leader Kim Beazley has been installed as the bookmakers favourite to replace Prime Minister John Howard ahead of an election due this year.

Polls published this week showed Beazley's Labor party holding a lead of at least eight per centage points in a two-horse race with the government, whose support has plummeted.

The lead has prompted the bookies to install Labor as favourites to win an election which Howard must call by the end of the year and which is expected to break betting turnover records.

Alice Springs-based betting agency Centrebet said it had already taken 25,000 (14,000 US) in bets on the federal poll just 24 hours after opening betting.

## Opposition in Malaysia wins right to bring out magazine

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

A Malaysian opposition party said yesterday that it has won approval to publish a party newspaper after threatening to take the government to court.

The Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM), or Malaysian People's Party, said in a statement that the home affairs ministry had granted a publishing permit for Suara PRM (PRM Voice).

It said it was thankful for the permit but expressed regret that such a permit had to be obtained through threats of taking legal action against the ministry.

# Barak and Sharon to form national unity government

AFP, Jerusalem

Outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and his right-wing successor-elect Ariel Sharon agreed late Thursday to form a national unity government as violence continued to spiral in the Palestinian territories.

"The outgoing prime minister and his successor-elect agreed Thursday night to form a national unity government," an official from Barak's office told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"The creation of this cabinet will depend on the setting up of a joint government programme, and on the differences which still need to be bridged on that issue," the source added.

"Prime Minister Ehud Barak said he hoped he could announce this decision to his Labour party's leadership early next week," the source said.

According to the source, during their meeting late Thursday at the defence ministry in Tel Aviv, Barak and Sharon "agreed that the defence and foreign affairs portfolios would be given to Labour."

The same source did not say whether Barak had personally accepted the defence portfolio he had been in charge of in his outgoing cabinet.

Sharon had offered Barak the post of defence minister after his electoral triumph on February 6.

The Israeli media, quoting sources close to Barak's office, had said earlier that the caretaker prime minister had accepted the portfolio.

But the move has already sparked tensions within the Labour party, since Barak announced on the night of his crushing electoral defeat that he would resign both his seat in parliament and his leadership of the Labour party.

"Barak does not have the authority to decide" on the formation of a national unity government, said outgoing Interior Minister Haim Ramon, one of the main candidates for Labour leadership.

"Over the past year and a half, this has been his way of solving problems within the Labour party, and the result is for all to see," Ramon told Israeli television, in reference to Barak, who has often been accused of making decisions alone.

Dalia Yitzik, the environment minister and a close ally of Barak's, approved the outgoing prime minister's decision, in a statement made late Thursday on Israeli television.

"If he accepts the defence portfolio, it will be a real sacrifice, because what he has ahead of him is not a piece of cake, and he will have to act on both Israel's domestic and foreign policy," she added.

Meanwhile the Israeli press yesterday the decision by outgoing premier Ehud Barak's to become defence minister in a national unity government with Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon only days after announcing he was retiring from politics.

The reaction came only hours after a source close to Barak said Thursday night the two men had agreed to form a unity government in which leading dove and former Labour premier Shimon Peres is expected to be given the job of foreign minister.



Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon (R) meets with outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Barak in Tel Aviv February 15. Barak has agreed to serve as a defence minister in a government being formed by Sharon.



A composite from the files show British rocker Rod Stewart (L) and model Penny Lancaster (R) who Stewart reportedly proposed to on Valentine's Day to marry as new reports emerged yesterday. The singer is said to have popped the question despite having vowed only days earlier that he would never wed again, according to newspaper reports.

## Indian quake toll estimate lowered to 25,000

AFP, New Delhi

Authorities in the western Indian state of Gujarat said yesterday that they now believed that around 25,000 people were killed in last month's earthquake, fewer than originally thought.

A spokesman for the Gujarat state government said the confirmed body count from the January 26 quake stood at 18,602 on Friday.

The figure was corroborated by Gujarat home minister Haren Pandya.

He said earlier projections that more than 30,000 people had been killed by the quake measuring 7.9 on the Richter Scale appeared now

to be too high.

"The estimated toll is about 25,000 dead. We hope it will not cross that figure," Pandya told AFP from the provincial capital Gandhinagar.

He said although the administration was working around the clock, there were still tonnes of debris to be cleared and bodies to be recovered.

But he added: "Even after this process is complete, we do not expect the toll to cross 25,000 and given the situation today we do not think it will."

The number of injured stood at 166,836 on Friday, said the Gujarat government spokesman.

## Students stage anti-Wahid protests in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

Thousands of students took to the streets of three cities yesterday, calling on President Abdurrahman Wahid to resign, police and witnesses said.

Some 1,000 Muslim students rallied outside the state Gajah Mada University in the central Java city of Yogyakarta, where the beleaguered Wahid is on an official visit, a local journalist said.

Police turned water cannons on the students to stop them breaking through a police cordon around the campus. No casualties were reported in the stand-off.

In another anti-Wahid protest, some 3,000 students rallied outside

the parliament office in Makassar, also calling on Wahid to resign, police commissioner Damiin told AFP.

"Students from almost all universities in Makassar are protesting," he said.

Also in Makassar, an estimated 100 student protesters stripped Wahid's pictures off the walls of government offices, the Satnet news website reported.

The protesters, who urged Wahid to resign or be impeached, then handed the pictures to the local parliament.

In Surabaya, the capital of East Java province, some 2,000 Muslim youths marched through the streets of the country's second largest city,

toward the provincial government office, condemning riots which occurred during a week of pro-Wahid protests earlier this month.

They were mostly members of the Muhammadiyah, the country's second largest Islamic organisation.

Wahid's fanatical supporters in East Java, the president's political heartland, vandalised several schools affiliated to the Muhammadiyah during a week of often-violent protests earlier in February.

The NU has denied its members were behind the rampages in East Java, during which offices of the opposition Golkar party were torched or ransacked.

## Half a million women die in pregnancy a year

AFP, United Nations

An estimated 514,000 women, mostly in developing nations, die every year in pregnancy and 20 million suffer acute complications the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) reported Thursday.

In its Maternal Mortality Update 1998-1999, the fund said conservative estimates showed 300 million women, or about one quarter of the developing world's adult female population, suffered infection or long-term injury as a result of pregnancy.

"Such is the neglect of women's health and the shame evoked by these conditions, they typically go untreated, compounding the woman's suffering and humiliation, and leading to isolation and exclusion from the family and community," the report said.

"Children, too, die from factors

that cause the death or disability of their mother and those who survive their mothers are at greater risk of malnutrition and death," it added.

Nearly eight million infants die each year, the report said, with two-thirds of the fatalities occurring in the first month of life. Some 3.4 million newborns don't make it past their first week.

Most neonatal and prenatal deaths result from poor maternal health and inadequate care during pregnancy, delivery and the critical immediate postpartum period, the report said.

A million or more children are left motherless each year, UNFPA said, and they are three to 10 times more likely to die within two years than children who live with both parents.

More than 90 per cent of maternal deaths occur in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

## Bahrain says "yes" to democracy charter

AFP, Manama

A referendum on setting up democratic reforms in Bahrain was approved by more than 95 per cent of voters, sources close to the electoral authorities said yesterday.

Turnout in the referendum to restore parliament and install a constitutional democracy was 88 per cent, said the sources quoted by the authoritative daily Al-Ayam.

The electoral committee refused to divulge the official results to AFP, saying they would be handed over to Emir Sheikh Hamad

bin Issa al-Khalifa later Friday before being made public.

A charter to restore parliament, which was dissolved two years after it opened in 1973 for "obstructing" the government, was published in December as the key element of the liberalisation process the emir launched after the death of his father in March 1999.

Political debate has also been encouraged after years of oppression, which saw at least 38 people killed during anti-government unrest between 1994 and 1999.

## Tel Aviv bus attack driver says he acted in revenge

AFP, Jerusalem

The Palestinian who killed eight people after smashing his bus into a crowd of Israelis waiting at a bus stop in Tel Aviv this week acted on his own, avenging a relative killed by the Israeli army, the press reported yesterday.

"I do not belong to any organisation, and I carried out the attack to avenge the death of one of my relatives, killed by the Israeli army two weeks ago in (the) Gaza Strip, the Yediot Aharonot daily quoted Ala Khalil Abu Olba as telling police.

The newspaper said Abu Olba's relative was Abdullah Abu Krish, 28, who was killed in clashes with the army at the beginning of the month.

According to the same source, Abu Olba, 35, decided in advance to carry out the attack on Wednesday, which also left 21 people injured. However, he did not decide on his target until the last moment, as he was entering Israel, where he worked as a bus driver.

Abu Olba was shot and wounded in a high-speed chase following the attack and arrested after the bus struck a truck.

## Valentine's Day nightmare for 200 Malaysian couples

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

St Valentine's Day turned into a nightmare for some 200 Malaysian Muslim couples when Islamic officials detained them on suspicion of getting too close to each other, reports said yesterday.

Enforcement officers in the central state of Selangor visited parks, budget hotels and secluded spots favoured by lovers in raids which started Wednesday evening

and ended the next morning, the Sun and Star newspapers said.

Some 100 couples who produced marriage certificates were freed, 60 others who were found merely kissing and cuddling were ordered to undergo counselling, and 44 will be charged in an Islamic court with the offence of khalwat (close proximity).

The offence is punishable by a maximum fine of 3,000 ringgit (789 dollars) or up to two years' jail or

both. Islamic courts to regulate the behaviour of Muslims operate alongside secular courts in much of Malaysia.

Among those nabbed were a senior education ministry official found having sex with a suspected prostitute. One youth was found hiding in the ceiling of his hotel room while another -- clad only in his underwear -- jumped from the first floor of his hotel but was detained.