

1,000 immigrants detained in Malaysia

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian police detained more than 1,000 immigrants in a mass operation to wipe out crime in the eastern state of Sabah on Borneo island, a report said yesterday.

The arrests were made after police in the Tawau coastal town in Sabah raided two squatter settlements and screened nearly 5,000 people, according to The Sun newspaper.

Police also seized various items including equipment to make fake identity cards, contraband cigarettes, beer, darts and catapults. Tawau police chief Kuik Harris was quoted as saying.

The detainees would be sent to a detention centre for further investigation, he added.

The newspaper said mainly Indonesian and Filipino immigrants live in the two settlements, but did not give details on those arrested.

Bush nominates Blackwill as US envoy to India

REUTERS, Washington

President George W. Bush nominated career diplomat Robert Blackwill to be US ambassador to India, the White House announced on Wednesday.

Currently lecturing on international security at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, Blackwill served as a special assistant for national security affairs in the administration of Bush's father, former President George Bush, from 1989 to 1990.

Among other posts he held were US ambassador and chief negotiator at the talks with the former Warsaw Pact on conventional forces in Europe and principal deputy assistant secretary of state for European affairs.

IAF chopper crash kills 5

PTI, Bangalore

Five Indian air force personnel, including the pilot, were killed when a Mi-8 IAF helicopter crashed near Chikajala in Bangalore rural district yesterday evening IAF and police sources said.

One Russian-made helicopter, which was on a routine sortie, gave an emergency call and minutes later burst into flames after hitting the ground, IAF sources told PTI.

All the five, including the pilot Sgt Ldr A K Singh and Co-pilot Flt Lt Heblekar, were charred beyond recognition, Bangalore police said.

\$ 1.43m car for Queen Elizabeth

REUTERS, London

Britain's Queen Elizabeth will be given a one million pound (\$1.43 million) Bentley car as a gift to mark her golden jubilee as monarch in 2002, the Sun tabloid reported yesterday.

The car, based on the 149,000 pound Bentley Arnage Red Label model, will be capable of speeds of 155 miles an hour and will be equipped with state-of-the-art defence systems against bullets and bombs, the paper said.

The 20-foot long car will be a gift from the Society of British Motor Manufacturers to mark the queen's 50th year on the throne.

China puts pressure on US over arms sales to Taiwan

'Any transfer of weapons will violate accords'

AFP, Washington

China heaped pressure on the United States late Wednesday over arms sales to Taiwan, insisting any transfer of advanced weapons to the nationalist island would violate accords underpinning Washington-Beijing relations.

The warning came after Chinese Vice Premier Qian Qichen met US Secretary of State Colin Powell, on the eve of his talks with US President George W. Bush at the White House.

Qian's mission is seen here as the culmination of a campaign by China to head off the sale of ships equipped with the advanced Aegis battle management system to Taiwan, which Beijing views as a renegade province.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue said any such sales would violate the August 17 communique, the last of three documents signed between the two sides between 1972 and 1982 laying the foundation of their diplomatic relations.

"The US side has already made a very serious and solemn commitment in that joint communique. It has been one of the bases of our relationship," said Zhang at a late night news conference.

"I think it is quite obvious that the sale of advanced weapons to Taiwan is in violation of the joint communique."

Under the accord, the United States affirmed the 'One China' policy and said it did not intend to carry out a long term strategy of arms sales to Taiwan.

It also pledges to gradually reduce arms sales to Taiwan until a resolution of the issue is reached -- but significantly no time frame is given.

On Tuesday, in a meeting with US media executives widely reported in the American press, Qian was asked if China would take military action against Taiwan if Washington decided to provide Aegis systems.

"It all depends on the circumstances," he is reported to have replied.

The US administration is required by domestic law to provide Taiwan with the means to defend itself, and the nationalist island's slick lobbying machine has amassed strong support in the US Congress -- particularly inside Bush's Republican party.

Bush is expected to decide by April on the scope of the arms package Washington will sell to Taiwan.

Pak police beef up security ahead of opposition rally

AFP, Islamabad

Police beefed up their presence in the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore yesterday after a major crackdown on political groups to foil an opposition rally for the restoration of democracy.

Officials said police intensified patrols and set up new checkpoints to control the movement of party workers ahead of a public "meeting" scheduled for Friday, Pakistan's national day.

"We will not allow anyone to violate the ban on outdoor political activities," Lahore police chief Javed Noor said.

Police have sealed the historic Mochi Gate park in the heart of the city, where the multi-party Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy

(ARD) is planning to hold the peaceful protest.

More than a dozen ARD leaders were arrested during a private indoor meeting in Lahore late Wednesday, adding to the hundreds of other party members and political figures rounded up from their homes this week.

"This is first time that police entered into a house to disrupt an indoor meeting of political leaders," said ARD president Nawabzada Nasrullah, who was also briefly detained.

Nasrullah said "thousands" of politicians and their supporters had been arrested throughout Punjab province, but police said "less than 200" were in custody.

It is not known how many remained in detention or for how

long they would be held. Other senior political figures were simply told to get out of Lahore.

"These actions belie the regime's claim that it has not suspended the fundamental rights of the people," Nasrullah said.

"We were not planning a guerrilla war or any subversive activity. We are calling for the restoration of democracy and our right to assembly."

Military ruler General Pervez Musharraf seized power in a coup in 1999, banning outdoor political gatherings and suspending parliament and the constitution.

He has also launched a tough campaign to wipe out corruption and destroy the former ruling elites which he blames for stealing billions of dollars from public accounts.

One billion drink unsafe water everyday: UN

AFP, United Nations

More than one billion people worldwide drink unsafe water everyday and 2.4 billion are without adequate sanitation, the United Nations said Wednesday in messages marking World Day for Water.

The president of the UN General Assembly, Harri Holkeri of Finland, noted that "where fresh water resources are scarce and at the point of being depleted, there is a possibility of conflict arising."

He also drew attention to the need to combat water-related diseases such as trachoma, the leading cause of preventable blindness.

In a separate statement, Koichiro Matsuura, director general of UNESCO, the UN's educational, scientific and cultural organisation, said it was fitting that this year the theme was human health.

Macedonian forces open fire on rebels after deadline expires

AFP, Tetovo, Macedonia

Macedonian security forces opened up with mortar fire on Albanian rebel positions in the hills above the northwestern town of Tetovo Thursday, ending Skopje's self-imposed 24-hour ceasefire aimed at giving the guerrillas a chance to surrender or withdraw.

The offer was rejected by rebels Wednesday who in turn declared their own ceasefire and offered talks with the Macedonian government.

But Skopje has insisted on its own terms and said it will not talk to "terrorists."

Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski told his army to "establish order on the borders" and troops began firing at 10:00 am (1500 BST).

There was no immediate response from rebels in the self-proclaimed National Liberation Army (NLA).

Tetovo and its outskirts have been under a dusk-to-dawn curfew since Sunday, enforced by armoured vehicles and tanks patrolling the streets of the predominantly-Albanian town.

Macedonian state radio quoting police sources said many rebels had begun leaving positions on the

outskirts of Tetovo and concentrating in the village of Vesala, three kilometres from the border with UN-run Kosovo, northwest of the town.

It also said seven rebels had been arrested, but gave no other details.

The rebels, politically isolated and since Tuesday facing both special police and the army's heavy weaponry moved into Tetovo, have named Ali Ahmeti as their political leader.

He told Kosovo's RTK television: "We want to stop the bloodshed and find a better solution."

"Today we are declaring a ceasefire, but if one of our positions is threatened by the other side, all our forces will mobilise and the consequences will be even more serious."

The rebels also offered to start talks with the Macedonian government. But this has been turned down.

Trajkovski, who is also commander in chief of the armed forces, said: "Terrorism must be eliminated and we condemn the use of arms for political motives."

Commander Hoxha, the NLA's military leader, said his men would never bow to the Macedonian ultimatum and would not be dislodged from hills above the town.

Mir's destruction: Final countdown begins

AFP, Moscow

Russia was poised yesterday to destroy the doomed Mir space station and crash 20 tonnes of debris into the South Pacific Ocean, as governments in the region worried about its missing its target.

Just over 15 years and one month since the Soviet Union launched the pioneering craft, Mir is expected to splash down into the Pacific, roughly half-way between Chile and New Zealand, at around 1220 BST Friday.

Russian mission control chief Vladimir Solovyov launched the final countdown, with 24 hours to go, saying that Mir had reached the point of no return on the way to its fiery descent to Earth.

An operation conducted early Thursday proved that all of Mir's systems were working, and the ageing station had now stopped rotating and was oriented toward the sun to provide it with energy, space officials told AFP.

"The procedure is very important, and experts are glad that it went this smoothly. It means Mir is obeying mission control's orders very well," an official at mission control said.

Mir's successful descent to 220 kilometres Wednesday marked the beginning of a complex set of manoeuvres that will see Mir fly over Russia, China, the Korean peninsula and Japan before re-entering the Earth's atmosphere.

Re-entry would cause the 137-tonne space station to ignite, but experts calculate that around 20 tonnes of debris will make it into the Pacific.

While Russia has assured that Mir will not land anywhere near inhabited land, it has taken out 200 million dollars' insurance in case any of the estimated 1,500 pieces of debris, some of them as big as a



IMAGE: BBC WEBSITE

car, go astray.

Governments across the world have expressed concern, noting the long series of technical problems on board Mir in the past few months.

In the final run-up to Mir's destruction, a Progress supply ship will fire three short bursts from its rocket boosters, knocking Mir out of the 220-kilometre orbit.

The first two thrusts, at 0633 BST and 0802 BST Friday will be followed by a final and more powerful impulse between 1109 and 1132 BST that should send the 137-tonne craft hurtling towards the Earth.

Most of Mir is expected to break up around 50 to 85 kilometres above the Earth and then to burn up as it plummets through the atmosphere.

The fragments are expected to be scattered across the South Pacific in an area 200 kilometres wide and 6,000 kilometres long between New Zealand and Chile.

Five international flights due to pass over the area at the critical

time have been delayed.

But at least 27 fishing boats are spread out across the area where the remains of Mir are due to crash into the sea, New Zealand Foreign Minister Phil Goff revealed on Thursday.

A small number of merchant ships are also travelling through the zone.

The boats have been warned they are risking disaster but New Zealand authorities could not say whether they would move out of the line of fire in time.

Australia would have just one hour's warning if anything went wrong, an emergency official Richard Templeton, said.

But he voiced confidence everything would be okay. "This is a controlled event."

The Soviet space station, launched on February 20, 1986, is being ditched because Russia has found that it cannot fund its commitment to the 16-nation International Space Station at the same time as paying to keep Mir in orbit.

Sharon warns Annan against sending UN observers

REUTERS, United Nations

Israel's new leader Ariel Sharon bluntly warned the United Nations on Wednesday that sending any observer force to protect Palestinians could escalate violence in the West Bank and Gaza.

But UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, during his hour of talks with the Israeli prime minister, urged Sharon to ease restrictions on Palestinians and questioned plans to expand a Jewish settlement, known as Har Homa, UN officials said.

The UN chief also said it would be dangerous to let the Palestinian Authority collapse during the uprising that began in late September, sources close to the talks said.

Israeli spokesman Raanan Gissin quoted Sharon as saying he

was prepared to ease the restrictions, including those that prevent Palestinians from working in Israel proper.

"We would even like to do more. But I have a problem here. We will continue with easing the restrictions but at the same time we will use a heavier hand towards terrorists, those who send them and those who abate them," Gissin quoted Sharon as saying.

When Annan raised the issue of a proposed UN force, Sharon said he would "oppose any UN observers in the Palestinian territories," UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said.

In rejecting the force, Sharon said "terrorists" could find shelter by hiding behind them and Israeli soldiers could then clash with observers, Israeli and UN sources said.

The UN Security Council is

weighing a Palestinian proposal to send an observer force to the West Bank and Gaza. Europeans are searching for a compromise that the United States, Israel's close ally, would not veto.

The vote is expected before an Arab summit next week, which Annan will address. Sharon asked Annan to use his influence towards moderation at the summit, the sources said.

Under tight security, Sharon, a 73-year-old former general who has long championed Jewish West Bank settlements, was taken in and out of UN headquarters through a basement garage.

Sharon, in his first session with Annan since becoming prime minister two weeks ago, arrived in New York from Washington where he saw President George W. Bush and top US officials.

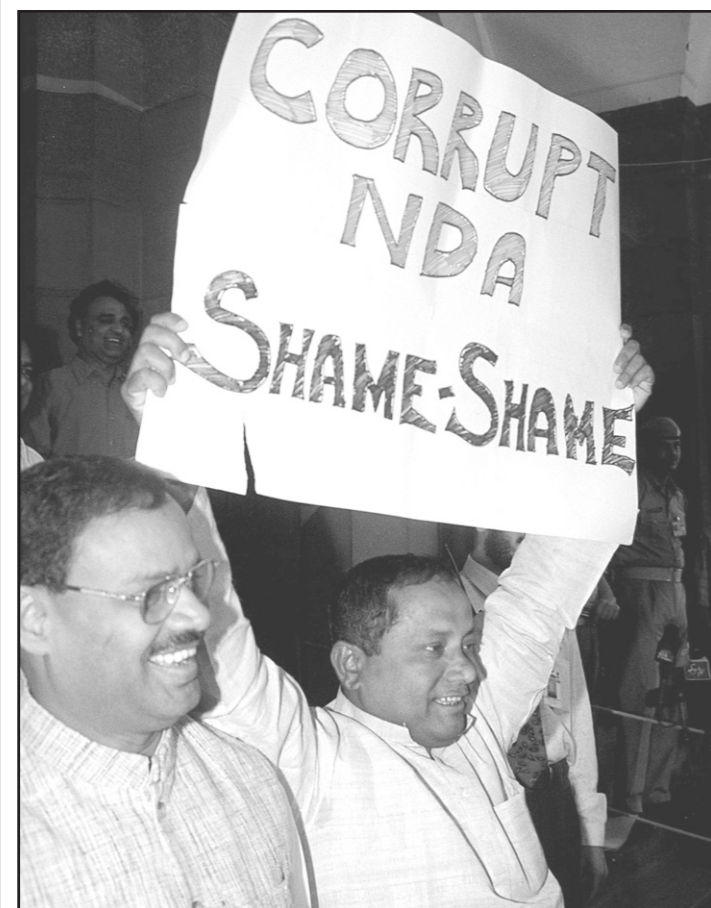


PHOTO: AFP

Indian Opposition MPs display a banner condemning the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA), as they walk out of parliament in New Delhi yesterday. Both Houses of parliament were adjourned within minutes for the seventh consecutive day as MPs traded insults over the arms bribery scandal rocking the government.

Iraqi archaeologists uncover 4,700-yr-old Sumerian town

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi archaeologists have uncovered the remains of a Sumerian town dating back to 2,700 B.C., including what the head of the excavation team said could be the oldest cemetery known to mankind.

"Remains show that the town stretched over six square kilometres and excavations started in 1999 have uncovered many houses, a palace, a temple and a huge cemetery," said Haidar Abdulwahad, head of the archaeology team.

"The cemetery has thousands of tombs dating between 2,300 and 2,600 B.C., which is the oldest cemetery in the history of mankind," Abdulwahad told AFP.

"We found curled-up skeletons of men, women and children," he said. "The team has also found pottery, figurines, jars, glasses and jewellery as well as other items such as knives and axes."

Abdulwahad said the palace covered 2,500 square metres and was surrounded by a wall 2.5 metres thick.

But the head archaeologist said that the site had been pillaged in 1991 in the thick of the Gulf War in which Iraqi occupation troops were expelled from neighbouring Kuwait.

"Around 4,000 archaeological pieces were stolen, with antiques traffickers smuggling some of their booty into Turkey."

Despite the looting, the head of Iraq's department of archaeology and heritage, Donni George, dubbed the discovery as "an important event because it will throw light on the Sumerian era."

"The town, whose name is not known, was probably an administrative and religious centre, given it had a temple, palace ziggurat and cemetery," he said.

The town lies in the desert region of Um al-Aqareb, or "mother of the scorpions", almost 300 kilometres (190 miles) south of Baghdad and so called because of its large number of scorpions.

It is just 120 kilometres north of Ur, the most splendid of all the ancient Sumerian cities of Mesopotamia, witnessing its peak in about 4,000 B.C.

Ur, which contains the remains of the famous ziggurat -- a three-tiered edifice standing more than 17 metres high -- spreads out over nine square kilometres and houses a mass of temples, palaces and royal tombs.

Ur, the Biblical birthplace of Abraham, has been linked to Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, who is one of the main figures in Assyrian and Babylonian mythology.

Iraq, and especially the northern province of Kurdistan, contains more than 10,000 archaeological sites, most of which have still not yet been uncovered, according to official statistics.