

Palestinian security officer shot dead

AFP, Gaza City

A Palestinian security officer was shot dead by Israeli army gunfire yesterday in Deir al-Balah in the southern Gaza Strip near the Jewish settlement of Kfar Darom, Palestinian medical sources said.

Osama Hassan Selim, a 25-year-old rank and file officer, was shot while posted at a Palestinian security checkpoint near the Jewish settlement, the source said, citing witnesses.

Witnesses told AFP there had been an exchange of fire between the Israeli army and unidentified armed Palestinians not far from the scene half an hour before the incident, but that this did not involve Palestinian security.

Animation legend William Hanna dead

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Animation legend William Hanna, who with partner Joseph Barbera turned television into their own personal cartoon world, creating such characters as Huckleberry Hound, Yogi Bear and the Flintstones, died on Thursday, a spokesman for Warner Brothers said.

Hanna, the co-chairman and co-founder of Hanna Barbera Studios, died at his home in North Hollywood, Warner Bros spokesman Scott Rowe said. He was 90 years old. The cause of death was not immediately released.

Hanna and Barbera, who used to do five five-minute Tom and Jerry film cartoons a year for MGM, were doing up to 11 half-hour shows on TV a week at the height of their fame.

Ultimately they produced 3,000 half-hour shows creating such characters as Huckleberry Hound, Scooby-Doo, Ogi Bear, the Jetsons, Atom Ant, Jonny Quest, Quick Draw McGraw, Top Cat, Magilla Gorilla, Pixie and Dixie, Josie and the Pussycats and, of course, Boo Boo, he sidekick and conscience of Yogi Bear who warned, "Mr Ranger is not going to like that."

Among their most famous shows was "The Flintstones" a "modern stone age family" whose head of the house, Fred Flintstone, a character with Jackie Gleason girth and overtones, was famed for the shout of "Yabba-dabba-doo."

Hanna is survived by wife, Violet, two children, and seven grandchildren.

Bush orders CIA to end role in ME security cooperation

REUTERS, Washington

President George W Bush has ordered the CIA to stop brokering security cooperation between the Palestinians and Israel in an effort to encourage the parties deal directly, the White House said on Thursday.

The decision is the latest in a series of signs the Bush administration will take a more hands-off approach to Middle East peace-making, after years of intense and direct US involvement under former President Bill Clinton.

"The move is in keeping with this administration's approach of encouraging the parties to talk and coordinate directly on security," said National Security Council spokesman Mary Ellen Countryman, who declined to elaborate.

Under the Clinton administration, the CIA began a new role of encouraging communication between the Israelis and Palestinians on security issues.

Its effort took on great urgency following the latest Palestinian uprising against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, in which more than 400 people have died during the past six months.

The Israeli-Palestinian clashes began after the Sept. 28 visit by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to a Jerusalem shrine holy to both Jews and Muslims. Sharon, a right-wing politician and former general, was

not prime minister at the time. The new CIA role began after the Wye River land-for-peace agreement in October 1998, when the Clinton administration, the Israelis and Palestinians asked the spy agency to aid communication between the two sides on security issues.

The goal was to get the Israelis and Palestinians talking to each other to work together to try to stop the violence and improve the security situation on the ground.

A US intelligence official who asked not to be named said the CIA was not troubled by the move to end its special role.

"The agency has no problem whatsoever with this," the US intelligence official said "the agency played the role it did at the request of the parties and the intent was to enhance security cooperation."

CIA Director George Tenet took on a higher-profile role in the effort after the latest round of violence began, joining Secretary of State Madeleine Albright at talks between the Israelis and Palestinians in early October.

The spy agency's chief also met his Israeli, Palestinian and Egyptian counterparts in Cairo on Jan 7 to discuss security issues and combating violence in the region.

The Washington Post first reported the decision to end the CIA's special role, which it said included pressing for closer coordination and arbitrating disputes over how to address specific threats.

UK to open embassy in N Korea

AFP, London

Britain announced Thursday it will open an embassy in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang later this year, following its decision last year to open diplomatic relations with the secretive communist state.

Foreign Minister Robin Cook said the new embassy would allow Britain to "engage fully" with North Korea, "improving our capacity to analyse political, economic and social developments" in the country.

He said it would also "help support recent positive developments in inter-Korean relations."

North Korea and Britain signed an accord normalising relations on December 12. They have yet to exchange ambassadors, but both sides have named provisional charges d'affaires.

Britain has led other European nations in improving relations with the communist North. Greece last week became the 13th European Union state to normalise relations with Pyongyang.

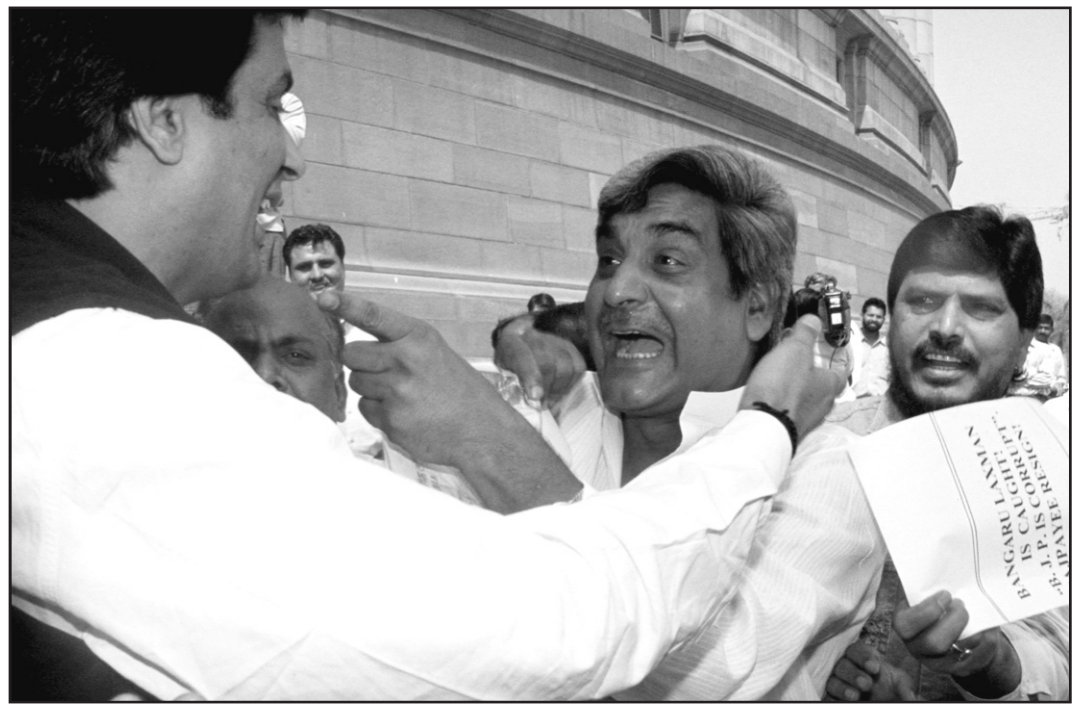


PHOTO: AFP

A BJP MP (L) shouts it out with a Congress MP outside parliament in New Delhi yesterday after both Houses were adjourned amid pandemonium, as opposition MPs made a final assault to put the government on the mat over a damaging arms bribery scandal. Yesterday was the last day of the budget session of parliament which has been paralysed since the scandal broke out on March 13.

Indian parliament adjourned for 3 weeks amid uproar

AP, New Delhi

Government and opposition lawmakers demanded the resignations of one another's leaders over corruption allegations on Friday as Parliament was adjourned for a three-week recess.

Both the upper and lower houses adjourned for the scheduled budget break after angry lawmakers traded charges over separate corruption cases.

The opposition has shut down

Parliament for the last eight days, demanding the government quit over a bribery scandal provoked by Internet journalists with hidden cameras. Ruling coalition lawmakers have struck back, demanding the resignation of main opposition leader Sonia Gandhi of the Congress party after her powerful secretary Vincent George was charged by federal police in a corruption case.

The government refused to resign.

"We feel that the government is chosen by the people. It can be changed either in an election or through voting in the house," said Pramod Mahajan, the minister for parliamentary affairs.

The ruling BJP-led coalition controls 292 seats in the 545-member lower house of Parliament, 20 seats more than a simple majority. The main opposition Congress party has 112 seats and the two communist parties together command 35.

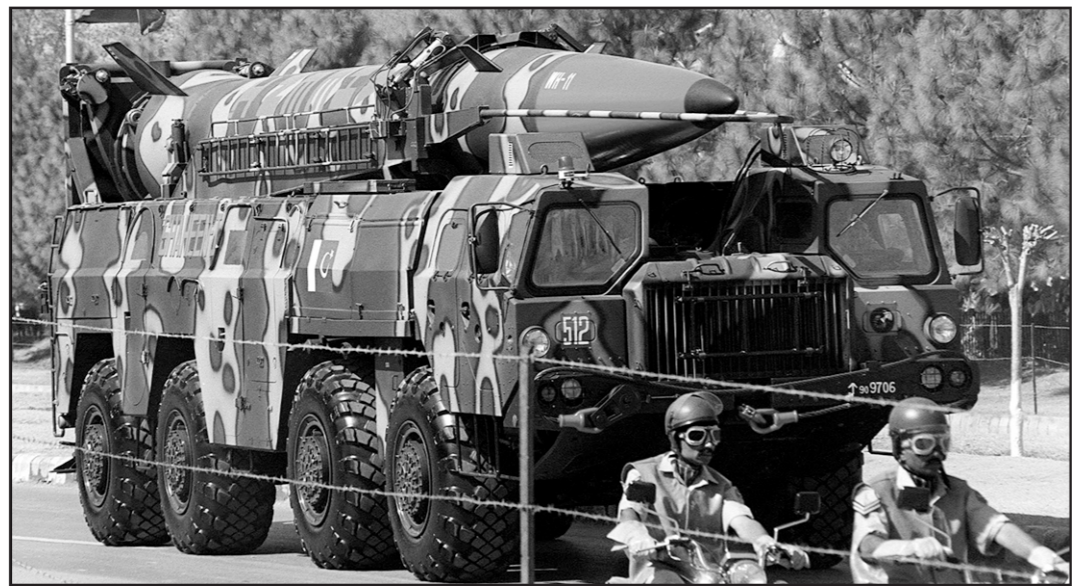


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan's intermediate-range ballistic missile Shaheen II passes during the country's National Day military parade in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan observed its 61st national day in which President Rafiq Tarar called for peace in divided Kashmir.

Pakistan calls for peace in Kashmir

AFP, Islamabad

President Mohammad Rafiq Tarar called for peace in divided Kashmir yesterday as Pakistan's military hardware rumbled through the capital in the traditional national day parade.

"Pakistan has taken a number of steps for regional peace, including a partial withdrawal of forces" from Kashmir but it had received "no positive response" from India, Tarar said in his Pakistan Day speech.

He said that despite Pakistan's efforts to resolve its 54-year-old dispute with India over Kashmir, "atrocities" continued in the Indian-held zone of the divided Himalayan state.

"The international community should take notice of the killings in Kashmir and help the Kashmiri people in securing their right to self-determination," he said.

"Pakistan will continue to extend its moral, political and diplomatic support to the Kashmiri people's

struggle." Contingents of the Pakistan army, navy and air force marched down Islamabad's main boulevard to celebrate the start of the movement to create a separate homeland for the subcontinent's Muslims in 1940.

The mechanised columns this year included Al-Zarrar tanks, or T-59s which have been updated at the Chinese-aided Heavy Mechanical Complex near Islamabad.

EU summit opens

AFP, Stockholm

European leaders yesterday opened a two-day summit in Stockholm dedicated to economic reforms, relations with Russia and the crisis in Macedonia.

Taking part were the prime ministers from all 15 EU member states, plus French and Finnish presidents Jacques Chirac and Tarja Halonen and European Commission President Romano Prodi.

They were to be joined at lunch by Russian President Vladimir Putin and later in the day by Macedonia's head of state Boris Trajkovski.

The summit, organised by the Swedish EU presidency, was supposed to focus on speeding up economic reforms, a year after a summit in Lisbon set a deadline of 2010 for Europe to become the world's top knowledge-based economy.

Tragic!

AFP, New Delhi

A 13-year-old Indian girl was flogged to death by her father in Bombay after her teenage love affair was discovered, the Press Trust of India reported Thursday.

The news agency quoted police as saying that the angry father tied up his daughter's hands and feet before beating her to death with a wooden club.

Police have arrested the father.

200 civilians hurt in Macedonian bombardment

AFP, Tetovo, Macedonia

Between 150 and 200 civilians were injured overnight in a Macedonian artillery barrage against rebel-held villages near the Kosovo border, a spokesman for the KFOR peace-keeping force said Friday.

"The civilians, from villages north of here, crossed the border into Kosovo this morning seeking medical attention," Captain Hans Guenter Bender told reporters in front of the KFOR military base in Tetovo.

Bender said that Macedonian government forces had used machine guns, mortars and 105 millimetre and 120 millimetre artillery in the bombardment. The rebels responded in some areas

with small arms fire, he said. Ethnic Albanian rebels calling themselves the National Liberation Army took control of several villages north of Tetovo nine days ago.

On Thursday the Macedonian government warned that army and special police commanders had been given authority to launch an "uncompromising" campaign to drive the rebels from their positions.

Tracer fire from heavy machine guns was visible from central Tetovo until the early hours of Friday and shell detonations were occasionally heard in the hills above.

Bender was unable to say whether or not the Macedonians had advanced thanks to their offensive, or whether they had suffered any casualties.

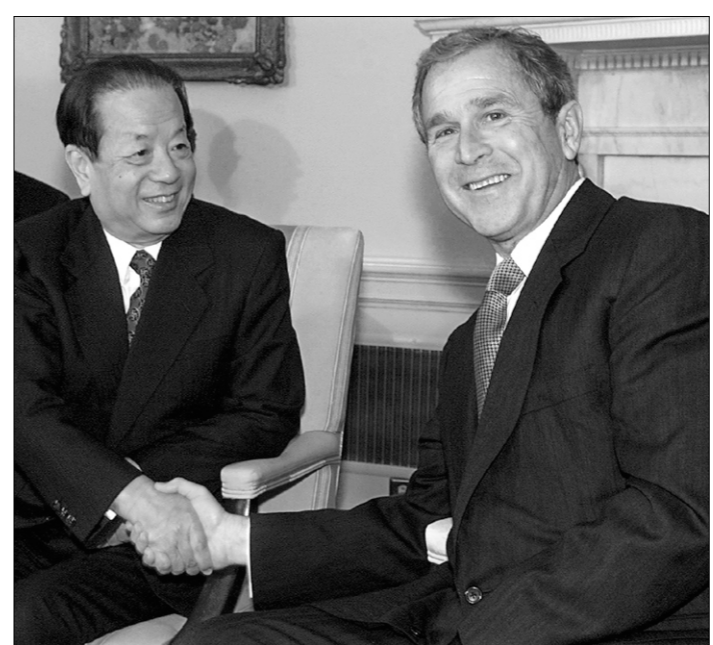


PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush (R) meets with Vice Premier of China Qian Qichen (C) in the Oval Office of the White House on Thursday in Washington, DC. Qian's mission is seen 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.

'Lower alcohol consumption boosts Russian life expectancy'

AFP, Paris

Life expectancy in Russia has improved from a catastrophically low point, partly because of a change in binge drinking, according to a study published in next Saturday's issue of The Lancet.

Average life expectancy at birth in 1998 was 61.3 years for men and 72.9 years for women, say British and Russian researchers, from the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Germany and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

The figures mark an improvement from 1994, when life expectancy plummeted to 57.6 years for men and 71.0 years for women, mainly because of chronic alcohol abuse.

However, they still remain far below those for 1991, the year of the fall of the Soviet Union, when the rates were 63.8 years for men and 74.4 years for women.

The study is based on analysis of official Russian statistics for deaths of people aged 15-74.

The improvement between 1994 and 1998 is mainly due to a fall in deaths from causes linked to heavy drinking, such as acute alcohol poisoning, cirrhosis, suicide and homicide, it said.

"Changes in acute alcohol poisoning can be regarded as a good estimation of changes in the frequency of excessive drinking," it said.

But deaths among young adults aged 15-24 remained high because of violence hitting this age group.

"Alcohol has played an important part in the fluctuations in life expectancy in Russia in the 1990s, although there remains a need for a much better understanding of the factors underlying these continuing changes," said London-based researcher Martin McKee.

The study noted an increase in deaths from tuberculosis and breast and prostate cancer.

It did not refer to the HIV-AIDS epidemic that has taken root in Russia.

Fresh fighting in Borneo: 17 killed

REUTERS, Jakarta

Extra Indonesian troops have been sent to the latest ethnic battleground in Borneo, where fresh fighting has killed up to 17 people in a grim reminder of massacres last month that left hundreds dead.

Syaiful Maltha, chief of police in the Central Kalimantan town of Kuala Kapuas, said yesterday 400 extra troops had arrived in the area, which was now calm after clashes the previous day between indigenous Dayaks and settlers from Madura island.

The official Antara news agency yesterday said based on information it had collected from four locations in the Kuala Kapuas area up to 17 people had been killed and five badly wounded in fighting between machetes-wielding mobs.

Maltha said only four people had been killed in violence that underscores tensions racking the multi-ethnic country and the woes besetting embattled President Abdurrahman Wahid, struggling to hang on to power after a rocky 16

months in office. It was not clear what caused the fighting between the Dayaks and the Madurese settlers around Kuala Kapuas, some 930 km (550 miles) northeast of Jakarta. The area has been tens in recent days officials have said.

"Additional troops from Palangkaraya and Balikpapan have arrived," Maltha told Reuters, referring to two Borneo cities.

"The situation in Kuala Kapuas is now under control."

Central Kalimantan is the site of one of troubled Indonesia's worst bouts of ethnic violence in recent years when nearly 500 people, mostly Madurese, were butchered by rampaging Dayaks last month in other parts of the province.

Many Madurese were beheaded and 50,000 forced to flee.

Tension between Dayaks and Madurese often over land disputes and job opportunities have flared periodically and up to 1,000 people have been killed in clashes in recent years. Madura is an island just off East Java.