

Chinese PM begins Nepal visit today

AFP, Kathmandu

Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji's three-day official visit starting here Monday will help boost relations between the neighbours, Nepal's Foreign Minister Chakra Prasad Bastola told AFP.

"Premier Zhu's visit to Nepal in the present global political scenario is very important," Bastola said. "Nepal's relation with China is without any strings attached."

Zhu will be the third Chinese prime minister to officially visit Nepal since diplomatic relations were established in 1955.

The first Chinese leader to visit Nepal was Zhou Enlai in the late 1950s, while Li-Peng was the second in 1996. Several Chinese presidents have also visited.

"(Zhu's) visit will increase the frequency of visits by Chinese officials in the future which will further consolidate the bilateral relations," Bastola said.

Estonia wins Eurovision song contest

AFP, Copenhagen

Estonia took home the top prize late Saturday at the 46th Annual Eurovision Song Contest held in the Danish capital.

The white-black duo of Tanel Padar and Dave Benton impressed judges with the song "Everybody", its infectious mix of rhythm and blues and cheesy Europop captivating the some 38,000 fans at Copenhagen's Parken stadium.

It was Estonia's first Eurovision win.

"I love you, mom," was the young spiky-haired Padar's reaction.

Carribean-born and Estonia-resident Dave Benton, who has performed in the past with musicians including Tom Jones and Bill Ocean, said the victory was a tribute to the small Baltic country's enthusiasm for the contest.

Australia backs US missile defence

AFP, Sydney

Australia qualified its support for a US missile defence system yesterday by urging Washington to ratify a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said Australia understood US concerns over the possibility of attack by so-called rogue states such as North Korea and Iraq, but called for progress in arms control talks.

Downer also said the joint Australian-US military installation at Pine Gap would be a vital component of any future missile defence system.

New drug, genome decoding ignite hopes in cancer fight

AFP, San Francisco

The success of a drug targeting a rare form of leukaemia and the human genome project have given scientists the tools to cure every known form of cancer, the man who led the discovery team said Saturday.

The end of cancer could take about 40 years, incredible effort and a lot of funding, Dr. Brian Druker said at a Leukaemia and Lymphoma Society panel here.

Druker has achieved near celebrity status in the wake of the US Food and Drug Administration's speedy approval Thursday of Gleevec, proven to cure chronic myeloid leukaemia (CML) by thwarting the malfunctioning enzyme that causes the rare form of blood cancer.

Druker expects an announcement as early as Sunday that clinical trials have also proven Gleevec remarkably effective at treating gastrointestinal Stromal tumours.

"If we can do it with Gleevec and CML, we can do it with every form of cancer," Druker said. "It is not going to be tomorrow, but we are on the right track."

The mapping of the human genome provides researchers with a guide of where to look for cancer-causing defects in genes and enzymes, Druker said.

The genome map could also help tell when something is awry in a patient's body.

"Leukaemia treatments have always led the way in all cancer treatment," said Druker, a hematology program leader at the Oregon Cancer Center and a professor of medicine at Oregon Health Sciences University. "Leukaemia will lead the way once again, this time in molecular target therapy."

Druker expects researchers to take 10 to 20 years to identify the right targets for cancers, including more prevalent forms such as lung, breast, skin and prostate.

He believes an array of smart drugs will be needed, which should become available during the next 10 to 40 years.

"We are going to cure cancer, but it is not going to be one cure," he said. "We are at an incredible point with the Genome Project. We have the chart or what the parts are, now we have to figure out what is broken."

Druker thanked the Leukaemia and Lymphoma Society for providing grants over the past two decades when other funding had all but dried up. The grants enabled him to continue until Novartis Pharmaceuticals agreed to help fund the research in 1993.

"We had a big drug company and a small disease," Druker said of the effort to convince a major firm to fund research into a fatal cancer that afflicts one in 100,000 people.

"It wasn't an easy go. Novartis went for it."

Gleevec proved itself so quickly, even Druker and his research team were surprised.

Dressed in a black suit hanging loosely on his lanky frame, he spoke of CML test patients who went from planning funerals to returning to normal lives after a few days of treatment.

"We in the medical community have to take our hats off to them," said Dr. James Griffin of the leukaemia program at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. "Gleevec is amazing."

Polls outcome won't affect coalition: BJP

AFP, New Delhi

Unfazed by a resounding defeat of an ally in southern India, the ruling Hindu nationalist BJP party yesterday claimed results from regional elections would pose no threat to the government.

"Absolutely not," BJP president Jana Krishnamurthy told AFP when asked whether the poll results could threaten the government led by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

"Vajpayee is as safe as he is ever," Krishnamurthy said.

A key ally of the federal coalition, the DMK party, has been routed in the southern state of Tamil Nadu and another ally, the Asom Gana Parishad, was facing defeat in the northeastern state of Assam as

results of last Thursday's elections to five states came in.

"We are very sorry that our ally has lost but this in no way affects our numbers in parliament," said Krishnamurthy said. "These elections were fought on local issues. They do not affect our government at the national level."

Besides Assam, the main opposition Congress party led by Italian-born Sonia Gandhi was set to take the southern state of Kerala.

More than 85 million people took part in the polls to choose among 5,000 odd candidates for 823 assembly seats in West Bengal, Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry.

Analysts and opponents of the BJP see the elections as a clear indication of the direction Indian

politics would take.

"Ultimately, this (the election results) will have a direct bearing on the ruling federal coalition," said political analyst Anand Ojha.

Communist leader Sitaram Yechury, whose party is poised to retain power in the eastern state of West Bengal, said he was confident Vajpayee's days as premier were numbered.

"It (the outcome) is definitely an indication of a realignment of forces at the national level. It will lead to a deep contradiction among Vajpayee's allies who will now have to rethink about their support to him. They will now have to choose and this will be the catalyst for change," Yechury told AFP.

"The ball is already rolling and it is gaining momentum," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Two election officials open a postal ballot box at the Queen Mary College counting centre in Madras on Sunday. Counting for the general assembly elections in Tamil Nadu along with four other Indian states began last morning. According to an exit poll survey the All India Dravid Munetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) led by former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalita Jayaram is expected to come to power in the state.

Norway seeks truce in Lankan ahead of talks

AFP, Colombo

Norway was to launch a fresh attempt to secure a ceasefire in Sri Lanka ahead of arranging a face-to-face meeting between the Colombo government and Tamil Tiger rebels, diplomatic sources said yesterday.

Oslo's special envoy, Erik Solheim, was expected here shortly for talks with President Chandrika Kumaratunga after his meeting last week with the London-based chief negotiator of the Tiger rebels, Anton Balasingham.

Peace hopes dimmed last week when Sri Lanka's separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Solheim denied a Colombo government statement that the parties to the conflict had reached agreement on opening talks.

Diplomats said Solheim would face a challenging task

to get both parties to agree to a truce before opening negotiations to end decades of fighting that has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

However, the moderate Tamil party here, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), appealed to both sides to de-escalate the conflict and rapidly move towards negotiations.

"The TULF considers it most regrettable that smooth progress towards the commencement of negotiations has been impeded by certain events," the TULF said in a statement, referring to the costly military offensive last month.

The TULF said they wanted a ceasefire as talks could not take place while both sides were engaged in a ferocious war.



PHOTO: AFP

Juan Jose Ibarretxe, candidate of PNV-EA coalition moderate Basque nationalist parties, and his wife Begoa Arregi, votes in his natal village of Llodio, northern Basque country, during the regional elections, for the Basque Government on Sunday.

Blair outlines his vision for Britain

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair was outlining his vision for Britain yesterday as he attempted to get his push for re-election back on track after a torrid first week on the campaign trail.

But if pundits said the ruling Labour Party has so far come off second best to the opposition Conservatives, the general public seems not to have noticed, with weekend polls showing Blair's commanding lead hardly affected.

Blair was due to make his first keynote speech of the campaign in his constituency of Sedgfield, in northeast England.

Aides said he would use the speech to set out his desire for a truly meritocratic society where all people have the same opportunities and ambition is rewarded.

"We believe in aspiration, we

believe in ambition, for individuals and for our country," he will say, according to advance briefings. "We should celebrate not just those who are born well, but those who do well."

"We insist on two imperatives - everyone should have the chance to do it, and success is not judged solely in terms of money."

The speech is part of a media blitz leading up to the publication on Wednesday of the party's manifesto, an event which it hopes will form the cornerstone of its campaign effort.

Polling day is set for Thursday, June 7.

Blair started off the day with a wide-ranging, live television interview in which he acknowledged that Labour's campaign had not got off to the start he had hoped for.

China calls for peace in S Asia

AFP, Islamabad

Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji left for the eastern city of Lahore yesterday after calling for peace and amity in South Asia and promising new steps to promote economic cooperation with Pakistan.

Zhu renewed Chinese support to Pakistan in building a strategically important deep sea port at Gawadar, bordering Iran, and Mekran coastal highway.

"These projects are very important for the development of Pakistan. We will fully support these projects and provide help in this regard," he told Radio Pakistan.

He expressed confidence that his visit would further strengthen the friendly ties and cooperation between the two countries.

"I am very happy with this visit. We have been accorded a very warm welcome here. It shows the depth of our relationship."

Zhu said he held "very useful and nice talks" with President Muhammad Rafiq Tarar and military ruler General Pervez Musharraf during his stay in Islamabad.

Pakistan and China have signed several agreements aimed at boosting their cooperation in economic and commercial fields, he said.

During his visit Zhu invited South Asian cooperation in establishing a new international political and economic order.

"We are all developing countries shouldering the historic mission of promoting the establishment of a new international political and economic order," he said at a banquet hosted by President Tarar.

"China sincerely hopes that in the new century, countries in South Asia will live together in peace and amity and resolve their differences appropriately," he said.

Grenade attack kills 4 in Philippines

AFP, Cotabato

Four supporters of a mayoral candidate in a southern Philippine town were killed and 30 were wounded in a grenade attack during a campaign rally, the military said yesterday.

Mayoral candidate Malumpel Uto was addressing a crowd of about 2,000 in Sultan sa Barongis town in Maguindanao province late Saturday when a grenade was thrown, local army spokesman Major Julieta Ando said.

Uto survived unharmed but four people were killed instantly, he said.

Of the 30 people wounded, about 12 were in critical condition, Ando said.

Ando said the attack was "politically motivated" although he declined to name suspects. Uto is running for mayor under the opposition party of jailed ex-president Joseph Estrada.

Tintin intrudes into China

AFP, Beijing

Tintin and Snowy, cartoon characters of world renown, are set to make their first legal entry into China 65 years after they were transported to the Middle Kingdom by the imagination of their creator.

That was in "The Blue Lotus," the 1936 opus by Belgian artist Herge, in which the tiny reporter with the distinct hairdo saved China from evil opium traffickers.

Now, China Children Publishing House will start publishing all 22 volumes in the Tintin series, replacing pirated black-and-white editions that have so far been the only ones available to a Chinese audience.

"Our books are identical with the original, same size, same paper quality," said Xiao Liyuan, an executive with the Chinese company, which was picked from 16 candidates by Belgian publisher Casterman.

"Only the language is different."

Lanka arrests 31 Indian fishermen

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's navy has arrested 31 Indian fishermen allegedly poaching in the island's territorial waters over the weekend, defence officials said yesterday.

The fishermen in six boats were found close to the northern Jaffna peninsula on Friday and Saturday, officials said adding they have been handed over to local police for investigation.

Sri Lanka's navy has been regularly reporting the citing of hundreds of fishermen from India poaching in waters off the island which are out of bounds for local fishermen.

Okinawa governor seeks US troops cut

REUTERS, Tokyo

The governor of Japan's Okinawa prefecture left for the United States on Sunday to ask US officials to reduce the number of its forces on the southern island.

Residents of Okinawa, angered by a series of crimes committed by US servicemen, have long called for a reduced US presence on their island, home to more than half of the US military personnel in Japan.

Governor Keiichi Inamine left Okinawa's capital of Naha for Washington, the first leg of his 14-day US visit.

Inamine will meet US Deputy Secretary of state Richard Armitage and military officials to discuss his request for a cut in US forces.

Filipinos vote today in make-or-break polls

AP, Manila

After months of corruption scandals, political violence and economic decay, Filipinos face midterms elections today that may galvanize the fledgling government or undermine it.

About 34 million voters are to choose 17,600 municipal and provincial posts, more than half the Senate and the entire House of Representatives.

But the stakes go all the way to the top.

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo is the head of a coalition that was swept to power Jan. 20 after President Joseph Estrada was overthrown amid huge protests over allegations of massive corruption. However, the coalition has extremely divided goals.

Now, Arroyo needs wins by government candidates to claim a mandate in a nation fiercely proud of its 15-year-old democracy but still tinkering with how it works.

Calling South Asia an "important component of the world" with a big market catering to 1.3 billion people, Zhu said regional countries should expand cooperation to realise common development.

Zhu who flew into Islamabad on Friday, held wide-ranging talks with Musharraf who said China and Pakistan have "commonality of views on all issues."

Musharraf Saturday backed China in opposing a US missile defence shield, saying that "we are against any action that re-initiates nuclear and missile race."

Chinese foreign ministry official Zhang Qiyue later told reporters that US delegations visiting various capitals to explain Washington's position on the proposed missile defence shield were facing a barrage of questions.

"I think there are many, many questions in people's minds," she added.

She rejected claims that China was aspiring to become a superpower or trying to seek any sphere of influence.

"China is a developing country. We are not a superpower and we are not even a strong power in the world. But even if we are more developed we will not be superpower or hegemonic power," she said.

She said China's relationship with Pakistan was not directed against any other country. "We have all-weather relations which have withstood the changes of time," she said and hailed improvement in ties with India.

"Over the years we have improved relations with India and we are ready to develop further our relationship with India."

On the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan she said China hoped for "a peaceful, just and reasonable" solution.



R.K. Narayan

Eminent Indian novelist RK Narayan dead

AFP, Madras

Renowned Indian novelist R.K. Narayan died in hospital at the age of 94 early yesterday, friends and family announced.

N. Ram, one of Narayan's close friends and editor of Frontline magazine, told reporters here that Narayan died of cardio-vascular problems.

"Although he was under heavy sedation my friend was conscious before the end," said Ram. "I will miss him."

Narayan was admitted to a hospital in the southern city of Madras on April 27. He was on a ventilator and had been semi-conscious over the past week.

Ram said Narayan told him only a week earlier that he was "raring to leave the hospital" to write his 16th novel with the protagonist inspired by his maternal grandfather.

"He narrated the plot, telling us it would be a short novel -- about 35,000 words, part-biography, part-fiction," said Ram. "He had the habit of jotting things down in old diaries and he asked me for one."

Narayan's grandchildren said his body was to be cremated later Sunday.

'Easy listening' star Perry Como dies in US

AFP, Washington

International recording star Perry Como has died at home after a lengthy illness, US media reported yesterday.

CNN television reported that Como died in his sleep at home in Jupiter, Florida early Saturday afternoon.

Como's daughter, Terry, had seen her father the day before his death, and told The Palm Beach Post: "We spent two beautiful hours together with dad, me and my grandson, Holden. We shared ice cream. It was a wonderful moment for us."

Como recorded dozens of hit albums beginning in the 1950's, in a lengthy recording career that spanned at several decades and became the very embodiment of the "easy listening" music genre.



PHOTO: AFP

From 2nd L) French actress Elodie Bouchez, US director Roman Coppola, US actress Angela Lindvall, French actors Gerard Depardieu and his companion Carole Bouquet arrive at the Palais des Festivals, for the screening of "CQ", on Saturday in Cannes. "CQ", the first movie of Roman Coppola, is presented on Saturday out of competition for the 54th Cannes Film Festival.