

Iran reopens consulate in Herat

AFP, Tehran

Iran reopened its consulate in the western Afghan city of Herat on Monday, following last week's ouster of the hardline Taliban militia from the city, state radio reported.

"The consulate in Herat has taken up its activities in Herat again," Mohammad Alavizadeh, head of the consulate, told the radio.

"The consulate was closed since May 4 because of attacks by the Taliban," he said, adding however it would take two months before the mission could start to issue entry visas for Afghans.

Iran recalled its diplomats and closed the consulate in Herat after protesters attacked the mission following a bomb blast outside a mosque.

5 Ethiopians acquitted on genocide charges

AFP, Addis Ababa

A High Court here acquitted five Ethiopians accused of genocide and crimes against humanity for acts committed during the military-communist regime of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, a state-owned daily newspaper reported Monday.

The Addis Zemen newspaper said the five accused, Shumberga Mare, Degemu Arero, Lema Dode, Worku Kure and Sahle Negash were implicated in the 1978 murder of Imam Nasser Arebu, an elder from the town of Werer Ber, in the central province of Cho.

The court on Friday acquitted the men after the prosecution failed to provide sufficient evidence against them.

Ethiopia has since 1994 conducted trials of people accused of genocide and crimes against humanity, particularly during the 1977-78 Red Terror period, when tens of thousands of Ethiopians were killed or disappeared.

Belgian court summons Sharon

AFP, Brussels

A Belgian court has summoned Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to appear November 28 concerning civil suits over his role in the 1982 massacre of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, the daily Le Soir said Monday.

The civil complaint was brought by 23 victims of the massacres or their families under a 1993 Belgian law which allows war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide to be tried in Belgian courts, regardless of where they took place or the nationality or residence of the victims or the accused.

An estimated 800 to 1,500 Palestinian refugees died in the massacres in the Sabra and Shatila camps led by Christian militiamen after Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, when Sharon was Israeli defense minister.

Pak cleric arrested on return from Afghanistan

AP, Peshawar

A hardline Pakistani cleric who went to Afghanistan along with thousands of tribesmen to fight the United States was arrested Sunday with 30 companions as he returned to this country, police said.

Maulana Sufi Mohammed led more than 10,000 armed tribesmen to Afghanistan last month to help the Afghan Taliban wage what he called a jihad, or holy war, against the United States.

However, more than half his followers fled to Pakistan after the rapid collapse of the Taliban militia, which withdrew from most of the country under relentless US bombing and assaults by the northern-based opposition.

Most eligible bachelor

AP, St. Andrews

Prince William has only been in Scotland for two months, but he's already been named the country's most eligible bachelor.

The newspaper Scotland on Sunday gave the 19-year-old royal the honor Sunday.

"Excellent skier and keen on adventures," the paper said of William, who moved to Scotland in September to begin studying art history at the University of St. Andrews. "Not to mention the fact that he's handsome, wealthy and will, eventually, become one of the world's most powerful men."

No progress in govt formation

UN expects answers from Rabbani

AFP, Islamabad

Efforts to reach a political resolution to the Afghan problem have been left in the dust of the US-led military campaign with no visible progress a week after the fall of Kabul.

Afghan leaders touted as likely partners in the future "broad-based government" have so far failed to agree on who should participate, when discussions should begin or even where they should be held.

Anti-Taliban Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his loose coalition of armed ethnic groups hold most of the cards following the Taliban's dramatic collapse.

But three days after his triumphant entry into Kabul and almost a week since his Northern Alliance commanders marched into the capital behind a heavy curtain of US bombing, Rabbani is giving nothing away.

UN special envoy to Afghanistan Francesco Vendrell will be hoping for answers when he sits down with the 61-year-old Islamic scholar in the Afghan capital Monday.

Rabbani's Islamic State of Afghanistan ruled Kabul disastrously from 1992 to 1996, a time of brutal factional infighting. It was chased from power by the Taliban in 1996 but still holds Afghanistan's seat at the UN.

Pinning Rabbani down on any of the major questions facing the country has proven impossible since the Northern Alliance captured Kabul, fuelling

fears that the rag-tag opposition is planning to seize power for itself.

Vendrell, the deputy to UN special representative Lakhdar Brahimi, met Rabbani's foreign affairs spokesman Abdullah Abdullah in Kabul on Saturday but made no progress.

The key question is whether the alliance will honour agreements to cooperate with exiled former king Mohammed Zahir Shah, who has the ear of Washington and the UN, and share power in an interim administration.

Zahir Shah, of the dominant Pashtun ethnic group, is seen as the only credible force for unity in Afghanistan. His 40-year rule until 1973 is remembered as a time of relative stability, and he is the only Afghan leader without blood on his hands.

The UN is urging Rabbani's ethnic Tajik-dominated faction to join other groups in a neutral country to discuss a new government which would have the durable support of all Afghan people, including the Pashtuns.

US officials fear that Rabbani is planning to exclude the Pashtuns, whose support is crucial if Afghanistan is to find peace and end the constant unrest which has turned the country into a playground for terrorist groups.

The UN proposal envisages a broad range of tribal and ethnic leaders, representatives of the former king and parties backed by regional players Iran and Pakistan, getting together to agree on a new setup to ensure peace in a country that has known nothing but war for 22 years.

Opposition calls for legal action against Chandrika

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main opposition Monday called for legal action against President Chandrika Kumaratunga after she publicly urged ruling party supporters to murder those who try to kill them.

The opposition United National Party (UNP) charged that Kumaratunga was responsible for inciting violence and provoking people to commit murder in the run-up to the December 5 parliamentary polls.

The president said at a public meeting in the southern town of Tissamaharama that there was "nothing wrong in killing murderers" and warned the opposition that her party men could not be restrained as they had been in previous years.

"It is all right to kill murderers... I did not say such things in the past.

We have behaved like we had attained enlightenment, but there is no need to tolerate attacks against us," Kumaratunga said in a speech broadcast over national television late Sunday.

She said that supporters of her People's Alliance were becoming targets for opposition UNP men and called for retaliation.

Kumaratunga's former constitutional affairs and justice minister, G.L. Peiris, hurriedly summoned a press conference here Monday to denounce her remarks.

Peiris, who defected to the opposition last month, said Kumaratunga could be prosecuted for aiding and abetting murder after her immunity from prosecution ends with her six-year presidential term in December 2005.

India promises aid to rebuild Afghanistan

AFP, New Delhi

India promised Monday to add to the 100 million dollars it has already announced for relief and rehabilitation efforts in war-torn Afghanistan.

"India has pledged 100 million dollars towards the rehabilitation and reconstruction effort in post-conflict Afghanistan," Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said at a ceremony to honour United Nations Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson.

"This is only a beginning," he added. Besides the financial assistance, India last month sent 40 tonnes of emergency medical supplies including antibiotics and surgical equipment.

Recently, India also acknowledged officially for the first time that it was supplying weapons to the

Northern Alliance in its battle against the Taliban.

In his speech, Vajpayee said the restoration of infrastructure and the provision of basic amenities would become priorities in Afghanistan once the US-led strikes came to an end.

This would require "massive external assistance... consisting not only of funding but also of institution building and human resource development," he said.

"The four million Afghan refugees who have fled their country over the past two decades should be encouraged to return with some guarantee of physical and economic security," said Vajpayee.

"Otherwise the economic strains and social tensions can create fresh political instability in the region," he added.

Indian parliament calls for united global action against terrorism

AFP, New Delhi

India's parliament Monday condemned acts of terrorism across the world and urged the international community to unite in the fight against the menace.

The leaders of both houses of parliament, which began its five-week long winter session on Monday, condemned the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency reported.

Addressing members, G.M.C. Balayogi, the speaker of the lower house, said terrorism was the biggest challenge facing the world at the moment.

"It is imperative for the world community to stand together in the fight to destroy and defeat the global terror network, wherever it exists," Balayogi said.

In the upper house, Chairman Krishna Kant, expressed condolences to victims of the US attacks.

"Our hearts go out to the families of those victims who are still trying to come to terms with the tragedy," he said.

Kant also sent condolences for the deaths of those who died in a car

bomb attack by Islamic militant on Kashmir's legislature building on October 1.

Thirty-eight people were killed and more than 60 injured when three Islamic militants drove a car

packed with explosives to the tightly guarded building and set off a massive blast.

Soon after the speeches, both houses of parliament were adjourned for the day.



PHOTO:9 United Nation's High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson (C) chats with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (L) while Congress leader Natwar Singh looks on before Robinson was presented the Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace, Disarmament and Development during a ceremony at Presidential Palace in New Delhi on Monday.

Biggest meteor shower lights Asian skies

AP, Beijing

Cloudy skies disappointed many people hoping to see the biggest meteor shower for decades in Asia before dawn Monday. But Chinese who gathered on the roof of a 550-year-old Ming Dynasty stone observatory in downtown Beijing were overjoyed by their good fortune.

About 150 Chinese, many of them young people oohing and aahing in amazement, watched from the roof of the observatory set atop a remnant of Beijing's old city wall, as a capital famous for its smog suddenly cleared and the meteors easily outshone the bright city lights.

In many ways, it was an unusual mix of the past and present. Young couples gathered amid ancient and imposing bronze astronomical instruments used by stargazers of old called their friends on their cell phones, telling them to go outside and watch the display.

"There are many more shooting stars than I expected, and they're really clear," said Hou Lei, a 19-year-old construction engineering student.

"In China, we say that if you make a wish on a shooting star it will come true," said Hou's classmate, 20-year-old Huang Kefei. "That's why there are so many lovers here."

The annual Leonid shower announced itself in China with a first meteor at around midnight (1600 GMT). It tore across the sky, above

Beijing's main Avenue of Heavenly Peace, leaving an ephemeral fiery trail in its wake.

Slowly, the light show grew in intensity.

At the peak, around 2:30 am (1830 GMT), there was a meteor about every 10 seconds. Some left green trails, others a light blue. Some streaked across the sky in the blink of an eye, others were slower, bursting in a gentle blaze. Some looked like red balls of fire, others white. Some left short trails, others long gashes that stretched far across the sky.

Clear skies and a vivid meteor shower also awarded hundreds of South Koreans who watched under clear skies outside at a youth training center northeast of Seoul.

But many other people across the Asia-Pacific region who had given up a good night's sleep for the big show were disappointed by bad weather.

Skies in Tokyo and the nearby port city of Yokohama clouded over just after sunset following a beautiful clear day. Although some die-hard sky-watchers still turned out to seek even a glimpse, there was little to see.

Conditions in Sydney and Canberra, Australia, were even worse there were heavy rains throughout the day.

51 killed as troops clash with MNLF in Philippines

AFP, Zamboanga

Forty-eight armed followers of Muslim leader Nur Misuari and three soldiers were killed Monday in fierce clashes in the southern island of Jolo, military southern command chief Lieutenant General Roy Cimatu said here.

"Forty-eight (men) from the forces of Misuari were killed," Cimatu told reporters, adding the military was conducting air strikes in the rebel stronghold of Jolo and was in control of the situation.

A Misuari aide said his forces attacked the headquarters of an army brigade in Jolo and at least two other military and police camps on Monday to prevent the holding of elections in the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), which includes Jolo.

Misuari has been governor of the ARMM for the last five years but will lose his job soon.

In November 26 polls, president Gloria Arroyo is backing a candidate from Misuari's rival MNLF faction for the post.

Misuari, who is not contesting the election, founded the MNLF in 1971. The group waged a 24-year war for secession until he signed a peace treaty with the government in 1996.

Cimatu said 27 soldiers and 13 MNLF gunmen were also wounded, mostly from the artillery and mortar duel around the brigade headquarters but also in five other areas of the remote Jolo island.

Al Gore joins financial services firm

AFP, Los Angeles

Former US vice president Al Gore has joined Metropolitan West Financial, Inc., a diversified financial services firm with more than 50 billion dollars in assets under management, the company announced yesterday.

Gore, named vice chairman of the firm, will focus on developing private equity strategies in the biotechnology and information technology fields, and explore opportunities for MetWest Financial to expand its business in international markets.



PHOTO: AFP An Afghan passes by Soviet-made tanks abandoned by retreating Taliban troops in front of Shindand military airport at the last Northern Alliance checkpoint 130 km south of Herat on Sunday. The Taliban are said to control around 20 per cent of the country, mainly in the south.

Northern Alliance brings fear for Pashtuns in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

The arrival of the multi-ethnic Northern Alliance in Kabul has provided a security blanket for the Afghan capital's Tajik and Hazara minorities, but left majority Pashtuns feeling isolated and fearful.

"The situation has got a lot better in the past few days," said Mir Wahis, the Tajik owner of a photo studio in the city.

"Just before the Northern Alliance soldiers arrived, there was a spate of looting, but now we only see the odd isolated incident," Wahis told AFP.

The Northern Alliance -- a disparate mix of Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara and other minorities -- marched into

Kabul on Tuesday after the Taliban abandoned the city.

Their presence had sparked fears of a return to the factional feuding that marked the 1992-96 mujahedin rule of Kabul, claiming thousands of civilian lives and leaving the capital in ruins.

Many mujahedin leaders from that period are now part of the Northern Alliance, but residents say they appear to have learned from the mistakes of the past.

"The alliance soldiers have changed. They are more disciplined and they wear proper uniforms," Wahis said, adding that a strong police presence was still necessary to keep a lid on Kabul's volatile gun culture.

Between the flight of the Taliban

on the night of November 12 and the arrival of the first Northern Alliance forces the next morning, armed gangs roamed the streets, looking to take advantage of the sudden power vacuum.

"There was some looting and unrest before things improved," said Mohammad Alam who runs a pharmacy in eastern Kabul.

Half Tajik and half Pashtun, Alam said he had complained to the Northern Alliance unit in his district and order had been swiftly restored.

"It's good to see that the alliance is behaving itself better than before," he added.

Just two kilometers (1.2 miles) away, however, in a Pashtun district of Kabul, the attitude towards the city's "liberators" is very different.

Sharon unyielding with EU, Powell tough with Arafat

AFP, Jerusalem

A top-level EU delegation pushing for a breakthrough in the Middle East peace process crashed Sunday into Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's insistent demand for seven days' total calm before any return to the bargaining table.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell, due to set out Washington's vision for the region in a keynote address in Kentucky on Monday, appeared to side with Sharon, calling on Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to make "100 percent effort" to end the violence and pave the way for peace talks.

The European Union's foreign policy chief Javier Solana, however, called Sharon's demand a "stupidity," which he said played into the hands of extremists bent on scuppering peace efforts.

"We are demanding a complete ending of violence, not a declining of violence... seven days of testing, no less," before going forward with the internationally drafted and approved Mitchell plan, Sharon said.

The Mitchell plan provides for a halt to violence, a six-week cooling off period, a freeze on Jewish settlements in Palestinian territories and a series of confidence-

building measures.

Sharon, speaking at a news conference with Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, slammed Arafat, accusing his administration of using EU aid money to buy weapons to turn on Israel.

"I can only recommend you do not transfer your funds to the Palestinian Authority as your money will then be used to purchase weapons and fire-arms, weapons which will be directed against the state of Israel," Sharon said.

He accused Arafat of being the "source of this terror and incitement" in more than a year of unrest that has left close to 1,000 people dead, most of them Palestinians.

The Palestinians quickly condemned the statement, with chief negotiator Saeb Erakat saying Sharon "aims with this to destroy the Palestinian Authority and continue his aggression, and kill any international initiatives."

Sharon also said he would not release funds due to the Palestinian Authority from customs revenues which Israel has blocked since the start of the Palestinian uprising, or intifada, in September 2000.

Separated Siamese twins fly back home

NAZMUL ASHRAF, from Singapore

Nepalese twins Ganga and Jamuna, who were surgically separated at the Singapore General Hospital (SGH) about six months ago, flew back home with their parents on November 18.

The 18-month-old girls, born joined at the head, were separated by doctors at the SGH during a 97-hour operation in April. The successful operation made newspaper headlines across the world. The rare success in the surgical operation also earned the Singapore's leading hospital great credits in the world of medical science.

The twin girls are progressing well, but at different rates. "Jamuna has the social skills of a 15-month-old. She is cheeky and can identify her body parts when asked," said SGH's head of neonatology, Association Professor Ho Lai Yun.

"Ganga had a more stormy recovery after the operation and is a little behind Jamuna. She has the social skills of a six- to seven-month-old. We have seen a lot of improvement in the past month though and she is catching up fast," Dr. Yun was quoted as saying by The Straits Times on Saturday. Jamuna can sit without support. Ganga has some problems with her sight, but her hearing is fine.

The doctors are not clear yet about the extent of disability the girls might develop in the in the long term.

"Jamuna seems to have recovered to a near-normal state," Dr. Chumpon Chan, another of the neurosurgeons who operated on her, said.

"As far as Ganga is concerned, there is still a lot of potential for her to improve but it is difficult to pinpoint the improvements at this stage. The twins will need reconstructive surgery to reshape their heads in a year or two but for now, the home is the best place for them,"



PHOTO: AFP Bhushan K.C. (L) father of the Siamese twins hold one of his daughters, Ganga while his wife, Sandhya Shrestha (C) arranges the clothing on her as they prepare to return to Nepal with their twin daughters at the Singapore international airport on November 18. An unidentified woman (R) holds the other daughter Jamuna.

Prof Yun said. Dr. Basant Pant, chief of neurosurgery at Kathmandu Model Hospital in Nepal, takes over charge of the girls' treatment from the SGH doctors, but the Singapore team will remain in contact and be on hand if any help is needed. Dr. Pant said the hospital in Kathmandu is capable of caring the girls.

The twins' family lives in a village that is a 24-hour bus ride away from the hospital. They will move to Kathmandu until Ganga's health improves. The twins' father, Bhushan KC and mother Sandhya Shrestha expressed their deep gratitude to the doctors and people of Singapore before leaving the country they have made their home for more than a year now.

"My daughters may not look like normal children but they are very good inside," Bhushan told the Straits Times.

The residents of Singapore last year donated 660,000 (Singapore) dollars for the girls' surgery. The remaining money is being held in a trust for further medical care until they are five years old. After that, another review of the fund use will be made.

The brave girls have also become a part of the lives of the hospital staff who cared for them.