

Letter warns of plot against embassies in Singapore, KL

THE NATION/ ANN, Bangkok

Police in Malaysia and Singapore were put on alert Monday after the Thai Embassy in Kuala Lumpur received a letter threatening "a plot of some sort" against Thailand's embassies and ambassadors in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Foreign Ministry Deputy Spokesman Itti Ditbanjong said the unsigned letter was written in English with some Malay words and was sent to the Thai Embassy in Kuala Lumpur from within Malaysia, arriving at the embassy about 10 days ago. Itti said the letter did not contain any demands, but informed the embassy that "there was a plot of some sort" by a group identified as the Pattani Liberation Front, a little-known separatist group that used to operate in the south of Thailand. "The letter contained a threat

that something bad would happen to the embassies and ambassadors in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, without elaborating," he said, adding that the government was taking the case seriously and had already consulted the security agencies and foreign ministries of both countries. However, Thai Ambassador Chaisiri Anamarn in Kuala Lumpur told The Associated Press that "no such threats" had been received. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, meanwhile, confirmed the existence of the letter. "It is a threat, nothing more. However we will not be careless about security measures," he said. Separately, four airlines received threats of attacks on their Bangkok offices, thought to have been issued by a group that has threatened a number of Asian embassies, airlines and tourist spots.

Saudis sound 'alert' over ties with US

AFP, New York

Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal warned that US-Saudi relations were being dangerously undermined by misconceptions about alleged Saudi support for militant groups. Separately in an interview published by The Wall Street Journal on Tuesday the prince also said the planned handover of power in Iraq will not work unless the country's new rulers have an army with real power. In a speech to the Foreign Policy Association in New York, Prince Saud said he wanted to "sound the alert that the harmony of our long and fruitful relationship is threatened." Blaming elements of the media for demonising his country, the foreign minister cited a recent clutch

of books that sought to portray Saudi Arabia's internal social and political makeup as one that nurtures extremism and feeds terrorism. "Nothing could be further from the truth," he said. "After last week's events in Riyadh, I don't think any reasonable person can cast doubts about our commitment to waging a relentless war on terrorism." A car bomb devastated a security forces building in the Saudi capital last Wednesday, leaving five people dead and 145 wounded. A radical Islamist group with links to al-Qaeda has claimed responsibility for the blast in a statement posted on Islamist websites. While al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was born in Saudi Arabia, Prince Saud stressed that his ideology and terrorist methodology had been developed in Afghanistan.

Saudi Arabia has been seeking to rehabilitate its name since it came out that 15 Saudi men were among the 19 hijackers involved in the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. Equating the actions and ideologies of the hijackers with those of the Saudi people as a whole was, Prince Saud argued, not only erroneous but also counter-productive in the war against terrorism. "It is ironic that those who most vociferously attack Saudi Arabia are unwittingly serving the purposes of al-Qaeda," he said. "The attacks lead to undermining a country that is probably most capable of not only waging the war against (al-Qaeda), but also in preventing (al-Qaeda) spreading their cultist ideology in the Islamic world."



A group of young Iraqi men, residents of the restive city of Fallujah wait for permission from US troops to enter the city yesterday. Relative calm returned to Fallujah following clashes on Monday that left one US soldier dead and eight others wounded in the worst fighting since a ceasefire was declared in the town more than two weeks ago. Eight Iraqi fighters were also killed and a mosque was damaged.

PHOTO: AFP

Jordan thwarts al-Qaeda chemical bomb plot

AFP, Amman

Jordan foiled an al-Qaeda chemical bomb plot against the intelligence services HQ using trucks packed with 20 tons of explosives that could have killed as many as 80,000 people, security officials said on Monday. Members of the network, who were arrested or killed, also planned attacks on the prime minister's office and the US embassy in Amman, the officials said on state television but did not give details on those targets. Several suspects, including Jordanian ringleader Azmi al-Jayussi who was recruited in Iraq, were shown on television which aired their confessions. Jordan's King Abdullah II said on April 13 that the security services had dismantled a 'terror network', thwarting plans by the group to commit 'a crime never before seen in the kingdom' which would have killed thousands. The television showed jerry cans said to contain chemicals, which officials did not name, and trucks that the terrorists planned to load with 20 tons of chemical explosives in a suicide attack against the General Intelligence Department.



Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi (L) walks with European commission chief, Romano Prodi prior to a bilateral meeting at the European Union headquarters in Brussels yesterday. It is the maverick leader's first official trip outside Africa or the Middle East since 1989 and marks the latest step of his country's return to international acceptability, which accelerated last December with an announcement that Libya was abandoning efforts to obtain weapons of mass destruction.

PHOTO: AFP

China widens Sars quarantine nets to sever infection chain

REUTERS, Beijing

China has isolated more than 600 people in Beijing as it races to sever a chain of infection that leaked from a laboratory and could spread as tens of millions travel the country for the annual May Day holidays. Four teams of World Health Organisation experts were due in China this week to help the government to investigate the laboratory accident, to track down people exposed, control infection in hospitals and monitor the situation in the eastern province of Anhui, where the woman died. The WHO lauded the widening quarantine, saying it showed the government was taking the right steps to check the spread of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome before the week-long public holiday starting on May 1 when millions will travel. "This is still not a significant public health threat," Beijing-based WHO spokesman Bob Dietz told Reuters. "We still feel we know the initial source of infection and we've been able to follow closely the chain of transmission." All the cases diagnosed in the most recent outbreak — two confirmed and six suspected — were traceable to the laboratory.

Indian Election

Can Sonia lead anti-BJP alliance?

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Will Sonia Gandhi, the Italy-born head of India's main opposition Congress Party, be able to lead an anti-BJP alliance in the event of regaining power in the parliamentary elections? The question is being debated afresh after Nationalist Congress Party, an ally of Congress in the current elections in western state of Maharashtra, made it clear on Monday that "wider acceptability" and not majority of a party would be the yardstick for determining the leader of an anti-BJP alliance. Pawar, who was expelled from Congress five years ago for raising the foreign origin issue of Sonia and later formed NCP, made the remarks which were apparently aimed at the settling the parameter for deciding the ticklish issue of leadership of the anti-BJP alliance. The remarks seem to have injected an element of uncertainty into Sonia's leadership of the anti-BJP alliance, political analysts say. With exit polls projecting handsome tally of parliamentary seats for NCP in his home state Maharashtra, Pawar, whose prime ministerial ambitions are no secret, along with

Samajwadi Party chief Mulayam Singh Yadav is likely to emerge as a kingmaker, if not the king, in a hung parliament scenario. In fact, Pawar and Yadav are likely to be the most courted politicians in the days to come by the two rival political alliances led by BJP and Congress which will be hunting for the number to swell their respective ranks in coalition government formation. It may be pointed out that BJP too had tried to clinch an alliance with Pawar for the parliamentary elections but objections from its other ally Shiv Sena and differences over seat-sharing in Maharashtra had botched that attempt. For BJP too, roping in Pawar in post-polls scenario can prove to be knotty as only yesterday Shiv Sena had made it clear that it would leave NDA if Pawar's party joins the alliance. Congress has chosen to react with extreme circumspection to Pawar's remarks Monday on the sensitive leadership issue. Congress spokesman S Jaipal Reddy told reporters here that "Pawar is a stable ally and the issue of leadership of the secular front will be decided in an amicable manner." Aware of reservations against Sonia's leadership in NCP and in

Samajwadi Party because of her foreign origin, Sonia herself did not insist on her leadership of an anti-BJP alliance say before firming up the alliance with NCP for parliamentary elections that the leadership issue of anti-BJP combine could be decided after the polls. It is in this backdrop that one has to interpret Pawar's emphasis on "wider acceptability" of the leader rather than numerical strength of a party. Congress cannot be oblivious of the fact that Mulayam Singh Yadav had refused to support Sonia Gandhi's bid to form an alternative government after the fall of Vajpayee ministry in April 1999 in a vote of confidence. Although relations between Congress and Samajwadi Party have improved since then with Yadav and Gandhi breaking bread at one-to-one meetings, the two failed to come firm up alliance in the current polls in Uttar Pradesh despite repeated pleas by Congress. It made little political sense for Yadav to strike an alliance with Congress because both would have vied for the same vote bank of backward castes and Muslims in Uttar Pradesh. The two parties also accused each other for the failure to sew up an alliance in the state.

Attack by ex-diplomats adds to Blair's woes

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair was pondering yesterday how best to respond to a withering and virtually unprecedented condemnation of his policies in Iraq and the wider Middle East by 52 former top diplomats. Departing utterly from the usual measured language of the Foreign Office, the British diplomats put their names to a joint letter urging Blair to use his influence on the United States to secure a change of tack. "We believe that the need for such influence is now a matter of the highest urgency," wrote the signatories, the vast majority of whom were ex-ambassadors, many with considerable experience in the Middle East. "If that is unacceptable or unwelcome there is no case for supporting policies which are doomed to failure," said the often extremely blunt letter, also released to the British

media. The diplomats said that their catalyst for action had been the seeming acquiescence of Blair to US President George W. Bush's backing for a unilateral Middle East peace plan instigated by the Israeli government. The British prime minister has insisted that this does not spell the end for the stalled internationally-brokered peace roadmap for the region, but the diplomats disagreed. "Our dismay at this backward step is heightened by the fact that you yourself seem to have endorsed it, abandoning the principles which for nearly four decades have guided international efforts to restore peace in the Holy Land..." the letter said. The diplomats had equally harsh words about the US and British roles in the occupation of Iraq, especially since widespread violence erupted in recent weeks.

Iraqi official blames US for Najaf standoff

AP, Baghdad

Iraq's current Governing Council president said Monday the United States has only itself to blame for the military deadlock at Najaf and Fallujah because it allowed its troops to change from "an army of liberation" to "an army of occupation." In an exclusive interview with The Associated Press, Massoud Barzani said the United States faces a dilemma: It must not be soft in the besieged cities and give insurgents "the impression that they have the upper hand," but it also must make sure civilians are not harmed if military force is used. The comments from a close US ally in Iraq signal the deepening dissatisfaction between the United States and top Iraqi politicians. Barzani supported the US war effort, and members of his militia fought alongside American soldiers in

northern Iraq. For more than a decade during Saddam Hussein's rule, Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party and another Kurdish party controlled an autonomous area protected by US warplanes. Barzani's forces continue to dominate parts of northern Iraq, a region that has been largely stable and quiet. Barzani, who holds the council's rotating presidency for April, spoke in one of the ornate marble-tiled rooms of a building once used by Saddam's Ministry of Military Industry, now the offices of the US-appointed Governing Council. Some members on the council seen by many Iraqis as tainted for their close association with the United States have complained that US commanders have been heavy handed in Fallujah and launched military action without consulting them.

Barzani meets with L. Paul Bremer, the top US official in Iraq, several times a week to exchange views. When asked whether Bremer consults the council or merely tell them of US decisions, Barzani said: "It depends on the nature ... of the subject." "The fact that should not be forgotten is that Iraq today is under occupation," Barzani said. "Iraq does not have sovereignty or independence today." It also is seeing its bloodiest month since the US invasion. At least 114 American soldiers and up to 1,200 Iraqis have died in April as US soldiers confronted Shia militiamen centered in the Shia holy city of Najaf and Sunni militiamen in the city of Fallujah. US soldiers still surround both cities, unable to force militants to disarm and fearful that assaulting the city would lead to many casualties on both sides.

Democrats propose new plan for 'war on terror'

REUTERS, Washington

If the United States is to win its "war on terror" it must overcome hostility abroad and halt the rise of militants with a new "Marshall Plan" for the Muslim world, two leading Democratic lawmakers say. A fight for the hearts and minds of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims has to go hand in hand with attacks against militants and security at home, the Democrats say in a plan to be formally introduced on Tuesday. As part of efforts to fight international terrorism, the United States also has to succeed in stabilizing and rebuilding Iraq and exert consistent, top-level efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The \$100 billion plan is being proposed by Jim Turner of Texas, the leading Democrat on the House Homeland Security Committee, and Jane Harman of California, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee.



Thabo Mbeki (R) is sworn in as South Africa's second black president by Chief Justice Arthur Chakalson at Union Buildings in Pretoria yesterday. Mbeki was reelected to a second term on April 14.

PHOTO: AFP

School bus collides with train in India: 4 pupils dead

AFP, Kolkata

At least four children were killed and 21 others injured yesterday when their school bus collided with a passenger train in West Bengal, police said. "There were 40 children in the bus. Of them, four are dead and 21 others are hospitalised," said Sidh Nath Gupta, police chief at Jalpaiguri, 600km north of Kolkata. The seriousness of the 21 children's injuries was not immediately known. Leena Sharma, spokeswoman for the Northern Frontier Railway, said the bus driver appeared to be at fault, rushing onto the path of the train. Sharma gave a toll of 30 children injured in the accident, which occurred at an unstaffed railway crossing near Jalpaiguri at about 10:45 am (0515 GMT).