

Chinese HR activist Hu Jia jailed for 3 yrs

AFP, Beijing

Activist Hu Jia was yesterday jailed for three years and six months for subversion, his lawyer said, amid what rights groups charge is a campaign by China to silence dissent before the Olympics.

The United States and the European Union immediately spoke out in defence of Hu, who became the second Chinese dissident in less than two weeks to be jailed after using the Beijing Olympics to highlight human rights problems in China.

Hu, for many years one of China's highest-profile human rights campaigners, was found guilty at a Beijing court of "incitement to subvert state power" following a one-day trial last month, lawyer Li Fangping said.

Li said the subversion charge had related to the 34-year-old Hu posting articles on the Internet about human rights issues and speaking with foreign reporters.

China's official Xinhua news agency carried a small article saying that Hu had confessed to his crime.

Benazir's party woos Musharraf allies

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan's ruling party said yesterday it has buried its rivalry with a group of former supporters of President Pervez Musharraf, further isolating the US-backed president.

It was unclear, however, if the Mutahida Quami Movement would join the coalition government, which took office this week, or how far it will back plans to cut the president's powers.

Asif Ali Zardari, the widower and political successor of slain former prime minister Benazir Bhutto whose party leads the new government, met late Wednesday with leaders of the MQM.

Farhatullah Babar, a spokesman for Zardari's Pakistan People's Party, said the two sides "agreed to bury the bitter past in order to start a new era of friendship."

Asked whether the MQM could join the coalition government, Babar said only that the two parties had established an eight-member committee to "explore how to further enhance cooperation."

Nato keeps Georgia and Ukraine in the cold

Setback for Bush as request turned down at summit

AFP, Bucharest

European leaders kept Georgia and Ukraine waiting at Nato's doorstep yesterday in a major setback for US President George W. Bush at his last summit of the transatlantic alliance.

Inching deeper into what, during the Cold War, had been enemy territory, Nato extended formal invitations to once-communist Albania and Croatia to start negotiations to become the 27th and 28th members of the bloc.

If all goes well, those two Balkan states could be full-fledged members when Nato -- the world's most powerful military bloc -- celebrates its 60th anniversary next year.

But despite 11th-hour American arm-twisting, European leaders -- wary of upsetting an increasingly assertive Russia -- denied coveted pre-membership

status to Georgia and Ukraine, at least for this year.

Both former Soviet republics want in to the so-called Membership Action Plan, or MAP, which grooms erstwhile communist states in eastern Europe for Nato accession, as a counterfoil to Russian influence.

By way of consolation, Nato Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said Nato would offer Georgia and Ukraine "intensive engagement", along with a vague promise of membership sometime down the line.

"We agree today that these countries will become members of Nato," he told reporters as the heads of state and government broke for lunch. "That is quite something."

"The decision has been made to accept us moving toward Nato," Giorgi Baramidze, Georgia's minis-

ter for Euro-Atlantic integration, told AFP. "We think this is a historic achievement for Georgia."

The other hefty item on the Bucharest summit agenda -- getting more European Nato members to send more troops and material to fight the Taliban in Afghanistan -- was being tackled later Thursday.

France has pledged to send a battalion, comprising fewer than 1,000 men, to be deployed in eastern Afghanistan -- freeing up US troops to reinforce hard-pressed Canadians in the south.

In a separate but expected development, Greece foiled Macedonia's Nato ambitions when it blocked an invitation to Skopje to begin membership negotiations, due to a dispute over the name of the former Yugoslav republic.

Macedonia wants to be known as the Republic of Macedonia in

international forums, but Greece thinks doing so would imply a claim on its like-named northern province -- an argument driven mainly by domestic politics.

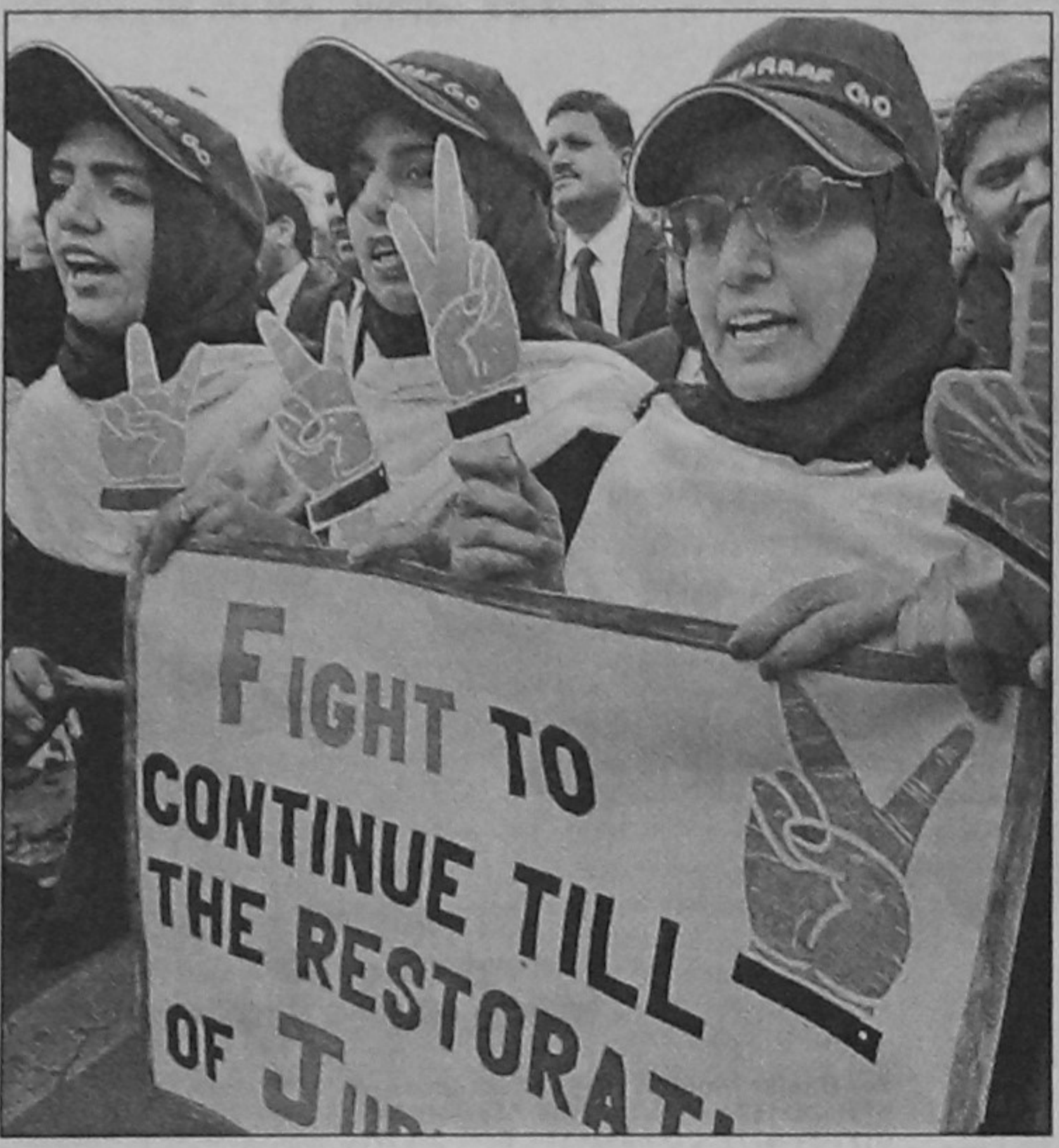
"An invitation will be extended as soon as a mutually acceptable solution is reached," a Nato official told reporters.

Bush, keen to put some gloss on his foreign policy legacy in the waning months of a presidency tarnished by Iraq, pushed hard at the summit for Georgia and Ukraine to be ushered into Nato's antechamber.

But in an alliance that takes decisions only by consensus, he was undermined by Europeans -- led by French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel -- fearful that such a move might destabilise an already volatile region on Russia's southern flank.



French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel stand during a moment of silence for the fallen soldiers killed in Afghanistan at the beginning of the first formal working session on the second day of the Nato summit at the Parliament Palace in Bucharest yesterday.



Pakistani lawyers march as they shout anti-Musharraf slogans during a protest rally in Lahore yesterday, asking for the reinstatement of judges sacked by President Pervez Musharraf. Musharraf sacked Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry and dozens of other judges under a state of emergency when it looked like the Supreme Court might overturn his October re-election as president.

Pakistan asks US to refrain from direct military action

THE DAWN, Islamabad

Pakistan on Wednesday advised the United States to refrain from creating an impression of 'divergences' on counter-terrorism and speaking about direct action in Pakistan's tribal areas.

The US government was also cautioned that any unilateral action could undermine and complicate the fight against terrorism.

"Such actions, as we have already stated, will be irresponsible and dangerous," said the Foreign Office Spokesman Mohammad Sadiq.

"For the success of our counter-terrorism efforts, it is important to focus on effective cooperation ... rather than talking about actions that would further complicate our ... efforts to fight al-Qaeda and other terrorists."

The spokesman said that Pakistan and the US remained partners in the international campaign against terrorism.

His remarks come in the wake of US government's doubts expressed

by some circles in the United States about the commitment of the new Pakistan government to the war against terrorism, especially after Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani's offer to hold talks with militants who renounce violence.

According to reports in the American media, the US has intensified direct strikes in tribal areas on terrorist targets because of apprehensions that the new government in Islamabad would not allow such attacks.

Sadiq said Pakistan remained deeply concerned about the possibility of any terrorist entity establishing sanctuary or regrouping in the Pakistani territory.

"We are combating terrorism in our own interest. We do not want our efforts to be undermined by any ill-conceived action from any quarter that is inconsistent with principles of international law. Such actions would be deeply resented in the tribal areas and generally in Pakistan," the spokesman said.

Tigers resisting Lanka military onslaught

Colombo defends itself against allegations of war crimes

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers said yesterday they were resisting a major military thrust into rebel-held territory and claimed to have killed at least 25 government troops in two days of fighting.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they pushed back security forces from the Catholic pilgrim area of Madhu in the coastal district of Mannar where heavy fighting has raged in recent weeks.

"The Sri Lanka army adamantly initiated several clashes within 1,500 meters of the church premises," a statement said. "The LTTE defenders successfully repelled the Sri Lanka army offenders."

The separatists added that more than 90 soldiers had been wounded and placed their own losses at one killed and three hurt

over the two days.

The LTTE statement came as the military said they killed 42 Tiger rebels for the loss of one soldier in the same area on Wednesday.

The latest defence ministry casualty claims bring to at least 2,562 the number of rebels said to have been killed by security forces since January.

The ministry has reported losing 152 soldiers in the same period.

The figures given by both sides in the decades-old ethnic conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives cannot be independently confirmed as journalists and rights groups are barred from front-line areas.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's government yesterday defended itself against fresh allegations it was involved in a cover-up over the massacre of ethnic-Tamil employees of a French charity.

The island's human rights minister, Mahinda Samarasinghe, said Colombo was determined to "show results" from its probe into the murders and a string of other cases, rejecting allegations the government wanted to bury the crimes.

"I am as desperate as anyone else to show results," he told reporters, adding that each case was "complex" but that the government still wanted to see that "the perpetrators of these crimes are identified and dealt with."

He did not say when he expected the cases to be concluded.

The comments came two days after a local rights group accused Colombo of a major cover-up of the August 2006 killing of Action Against Hunger (ACF) workers and for the first time named a list of suspects.

Mugabe's party ready for run-off to save president

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe's ruling party geared up for a final battle to save Robert Mugabe's 28-year presidency, saying Thursday it was ready for an election run-off with opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

While state media said a run-off was now the most likely outcome after no clear winner emerged from Saturday's election, a government spokesman said Mugabe's party was ready for a new battle in the second round.

Tsvangirai's opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) has already declared its leader passed the 50 percent threshold needed to avoid a run-off and took control of parliament in the early hours of the morning.

While diplomatic sources say

intense negotiations are under way to persuade Mugabe to exit gracefully after 28 years in power, Deputy Information Minister Bright Matonga indicated Mugabe was in no mood to step aside.

"ZANU-PF is ready for a run-off, we are ready for a resulting victory," said Matonga, who is also a leading ZANU-PF deputy.

Mugabe has not been seen in public since polling day but Matonga denied that he was in any mood for surrender.

"He is very much alive and kicking and is anxiously awaiting the results as well."

But while the parliamentary election has now been decided, there has still been no news on the outcome of the simultaneous presidential contest.

However results were expected to be announced at the very latest by the end of Friday, the sources said.

The commission is first due to announce the outcome of the contest for the largely toothless upper house of parliament, the senate.

Frustrated with the silence from the commission, the MDC pre-emptively released its own results on Wednesday indicating that Tsvangirai had won the presidency outright with 50.2 percent of votes against 43.8 percent for Mugabe.

However a report in Thursday's state-run Herald newspaper predicted that Tsvangirai would "fall far short" of the total needed for an outright victory and that "a run-off appears the most likely outcome".

Court defers hearing, Hasina falls sick

FROM PAGE 1

Judge Firoz Alam of Special Court-1 expressed annoyance at their wanting to have the charge-framing hearing rescheduled "continuously".

The proceeding had been adjourned seven times before the prosecution could complete its submission on March 9.

The judge rejected the defence prayer seeking more time after a one-and-a-half-hour long argument over the issue from 10:00am.

The defence lawyers submitted a discharge petition for Hasina, saying there are not enough "ingredients" in the documents submitted as evidence of her offences. But they could not complete the submission as the Awami League president fell ill in the dock around 11:45am.

The judge ordered the court adjourned.

The defence will make the rest of the submission on discharge petition when the court sits next on April 7.

Hasina looked calm and fragile when she was brought to court at 9:45am. The former prime minister made some remarks regarding the ongoing price spiralling and sufferings of the people.

"Only Allah knows how people are surviving a situation like this when prices of essentials have been the worst," said Hasina.

She said during her government's rule they produced surplus food--2.70 crore tonnes of rice

against a demand of 2.50 crore tonnes.

"The population has increased since then and the demand for rice now stands at around 3 crore tonnes but the government does not even bother to give the matter special importance," Hasina added.

On her health condition, she said she is suffering from glaucoma.

As soon as the court sat, the defence lawyers in a petition wanted to see the hospital discharge certificate for Hasina, saying they think there is some inconsistency between the discharge certificate and the doctors' opinion.

They argued that their client was discharged on request from the jail authorities although doctors wanted her to undergo more tests for her ear and eye troubles. They said the way their client was released from hospital is not in accordance with the order of the judge.

Judge Firoz said, "The accused was produced before the court without any report either from the jail authorities or the hospital. The judge has nothing to do with the hospital and what I need is to have the accused produced in front of me by the jail authorities."

The defence lawyers tried to talk about Hasina's health condition and her being prevented from contacting with relatives and lawyers. Hasina also sought permission to speak.

But the judge said, "The accused has been brought [to court] and I will not hear anything else." He asked the defence to begin its submission.

The defence lawyers argued if the hearing is held with their client remaining in such physical condition, she would not be able to even hear the charges brought against her and say "I am guilty" as she is having problem in hearing in her left ear.

At one stage Hasina said, "If you do not want to listen to me as an accused, then where to go to demand justice?"

She said, "Although I have been ill since December last year, they have not taken me to a doctor yet. I am also not allowed to meet my relatives and lawyers. Who I will turn to as an accused?"

Defence lawyer barrister Shafiq Ahmed then started his submission on the discharge petition. He said the first information report, charge sheet and other documents produced do not have any "ingredients" to charge her with offences like illegal gratification and criminal misconduct.

He also said the case cannot be brought under the Emergency Power Rules.

During the submission Hasina was often seen sipping water as the courtroom was hot and overcrowded. She splashed water on her neck. At one stage, she attracted her lawyers' attention who informed the court that their client was not feeling well.



File composite image shows the jet from a black hole at the centre of a galaxy striking the edge of another galaxy. The discovery of the smallest known black hole in the universe, which lies in our own galaxy, is a feather in the cap for Nasa.

Smallest black hole proves a giant find for science

AFP, Washington

The discovery in our own galaxy of the smallest black hole known in the universe is a feather in the cap for Nasa, but it will present new challenges to future space travellers who may venture too close.

Tiny but intense, with a mass 3.8 times that of the sun and a diameter of only 24km, this black hole in the Milky Way galaxy "is really pushing the

limits" of our understanding of the phenomenon, according to a Nasa scientist from Goddard Space Flight Centre in Maryland.

"For many years astronomers have wanted to know the smallest possible size of a black hole, and this little guy is a big step forward toward answering that question," said Nikolai Shaposhnikov in a statement by Nasa.

Sadr calls for massive anti-US march

Suicide bomber kills 7 in Iraq

AFP, AP, Baghdad

Radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr has called for millions of Iraqis to turn out next week in massive anti-US protests, his office announced yesterday.

The march would take place in major centers across the country on Wednesday, the fifth anniversary of the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime.

Iraq is tense after more than a week of clashes between security forces, in some cases backed by US troops, and Sadr's Mahdi Army militia.

A statement from Sadr's office in the central holy city of Najaf said all Iraqis, "Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds and Arabs, must express their

rejection and raise their voice against the tyrant occupier" in protests on April 9.

It urged the participation of "millions" of Iraqis.

"Express your rejection by participating in this demonstration. Carry Iraqi flags that show the unity of Iraq. Do not ignore this protest as it is for the glory of Islam and victory of the grieving Iraqi people," the statement said.

Meanwhile the Iraqi military says a suicide bomber has attacked a checkpoint near Mosul, killing seven people and wounding 12.

The US military confirms the Wednesday night attack but puts the toll at five dead and 19 wounded.

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