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Power to PM, concedes Musharraf



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Grim death in dog mauling case detailed



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Jayalalitha fights to regain power



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England bite back to stay alive



THURSDAY
Free with this edition

Lesser MORTALS?



373 killed in burning train



DESTRUCTION: The view of the interior carriage of a train which caught fire yesterday showing bodies piled up together at the far end, where they had apparently tried to escape. — Reuters

AL AYATT (Egypt) — Some 373 people died yesterday when fire engulfed a night train packed with Egyptians heading south from Cairo for the year's biggest Muslim holiday, a senior official said. Most of the people who died in the worst rail disaster in Egyptian history were burned to death as they tried to escape through jammed doors and barred windows, while the rest were killed after jumping from the moving train.

Prime Minister Atef Ebeid told reporters at the scene that portable stoves used by passengers to heat food on the long trip south set off the blaze, which gutted seven of the 16 carriages of the train.

However, several survivors interviewed by AFP said they saw nobody using the stoves because the carriages were too crowded to set them up.

The blaze broke out at 2:00am in the rear part of the train, but it was several miles before it was brought to a halt near Al Ayatt, 45 miles south of the capital.

HM condoles with Mubarak

MUSCAT — His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said has sent a cable of condolences to President Mohammed Hosni Mubarak of Egypt on the death of people in the train tragedy.

In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere condolences and sympathy to the Egyptian president, people and the families of the bereaved, praying to God to rest the departed souls in eternal peace. — OVA

Police praised the driver for separating the burning carriages from the rest of the train, saying

Millions begin pilgrimage

MAKKAH — Millions of Muslims from around the world flowed into the Mina valley outside this holy city yesterday as the annual Haj pilgrimage began in earnest.

"Here I am, Allah, answering your call," they chanted, making the trek in one of 20,000 buses, in private cars or on foot, retracing Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) steps from Makkah to Mina. The official Saudi news agency SPA said the mass movement toward Mina, an uninhabited valley circled by arid mountains, was taking place without incident. Some pilgrims were riding on bus roofs while traffic jammed the 16 highways

FM English Service to broadcast Haj live from Arafat at 3pm

linking Makkah with Mina. As midday shade temperatures hit 33 degrees Celsius (91 Fahrenheit), many on foot carried white umbrellas to shield themselves from the heat. Others sought respite in the warden of tunnels leading to Mina. Enormous signs lining the roads urged pilgrims to avoid bottlenecks, also informing them they were forbidden to sleep outside the camp area, especially on pavements or bridges.

Pilgrims spend the night under 44,000 fire-proof tents in a campsite with space for 1.5 million people, including 60,000 toilets, hundreds of telephone boxes, running water and electricity.

In line with tradition, the Custodian of Two Holy Mosques King Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia who maintains a palace in Mina, and Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz were to travel to the valley to supervise the arrangements, newspapers reported. — AFP

HOLIDAY

THE editorial offices of the Times of Oman will remain closed from February 21 to 24 on account of Eid Al Adha holidays. Therefore, the next edition of the paper will appear on February 26. — Editor

it had saved hundreds more lives. Those who were trapped died in what General Ali Abdel Aal, head of the rescue operations, likened to a "burning prison". Rabia Al Metenawi, a senior municipal official in the town of Al Ayatt, gave what he called a final toll of 373 people killed.

Well over 100 bodies, most of them charred, were laid out by the side of the tracks, as fire-fighters searched the carriages for more victims and retrieved those who had jumped for their lives from further up the line.

An AFP reporter saw many small charred figures, which may have been children. The acrid odor of burned flesh hung in the air. Fire officials said 54 people were injured in the accident. Train number 832 from Cairo to Aswan, 480 miles to the south, was packed with Egyptians heading home for the Eid Al Adha holiday, which celebrates the Haj to Makkah in Saudi Arabia.

Continued on Page 4



The chairman and editor-in-chief and the staff of the Times of Oman wish His Majesty the Sultan a very happy Eid Al Adha

Al Harthy, Qatabi, Badr, Ma'awali greet His Majesty

MUSCAT — His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said has received a cable of greetings from Sheikh Hamoud bin Abdullah Al Harthy, president of the Council of State, on the blessed Eid Al Adha.

In his cable, Al Harthy extended in his name and on behalf of the council's personnel, heartfelt greetings and best wishes to His Majesty the Sultan.

He prayed to God to bestow His graces upon His Majesty.

His Majesty the Sultan has also received a cable of greetings from Sheikh Abdullah bin Ali Al Qatabi, president of Majlis Al Shura.

Qatabi extended his own greetings and best wishes and those of the Majlis members and the secretariat-general personnel to His Majesty on the happy occasion.

He concluded his cable by praying to God to grant His Majesty happiness, good health and a long life.

His Majesty the Sultan, supreme commander of the armed forces, has also received a cable of greetings from Sayyid Badr bin Saud bin Hareb Al Busaidi, minister responsible for defence affairs, on Eid Al Adha.

Sayyid Badr extended his own greetings and those of the Sultan's Armed Forces, the Firq forces and Ministry of Defence staff, wishing His Majesty a happy life and the Sultanate continuous security and peace.

His Majesty the Sultan, supreme commander of the Royal Oman Police, has also received a cable of greetings from Lt-General Hilal bin Khalid Al Ma'awali, inspector-general of police and customs, on Eid Al Adha. — OVA

9 Palestinian cops killed in Israel clashes

NABLUS (West Bank) — At least nine Palestinian policemen were killed in clashes yesterday with Israeli tanks in Nablus on the West Bank, while helicopter gunships fired six missiles near where Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has been confined, Palestinian security sources said.

A top aide to Arafat said the Palestinian leadership yesterday called for an emergency session of the UN Security Council to address the massive surge in the conflict with Israel.

Israeli tanks bombarded Palestinian checkpoints at the entrances of Nablus on the eastern and southern borders, killing the nine policemen, Palestinian security sources said, updating an earlier toll.

Continued on Page 4

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Prayer Timings

Dhuhr	12:26
Asr	03:44
Maghrib	06:11
Isha	07:36
Fajr	05:16

Weather

MUSCAT	Maximum 25°C
	Minimum 16°C
	Humidity 40-80pc
Sunset	6:06pm
Sunrise (tomorrow)	6:35am
SALALAH	Maximum 29°C
	Minimum 20°C
	Humidity 20-60pc
Sunset	6:29pm
Sunrise (tomorrow)	6:46am

CRUDE PRICES

MUSCAT — Oil prices per barrel in the world markets yesterday:		
Type	Delivery	Price
Oman Crude	April	\$19.44
Dubai Crude	April	\$19.00
Merban Crude	April	\$20.27
Arabian Light	April	\$19.87
Arabian Heavy	April	\$18.82
North Sea Brent	April	\$20.25
W. Texas Int. (Cushion)	March	\$20.74

7 dead in Romania train accident

BUCHAREST — At least seven people died and eight were seriously injured yesterday when a train hit a coach on a level crossing in eastern Romania, a local railway official said. — AFP

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Sayyid Badr is back from India



BACK HOME: Sayyid Badr bin Saud bin Hareb Al Busaidi returning home from India.

MUSCAT — Sayyid Badr bin Saud bin Hareb Al Busaidi, minister responsible for defence affairs, and his accompanying military delegation returned home from India after taking part in the second defence exhibition for land and naval systems in New Delhi.

Sayyid Badr discussed with his Indian counterpart aspects of the existing cooperation between the two countries' ministries of defence and issues of common interest.

He was received on arrival by Mohammed bin Nassir Al Rasibi, undersecretary of the Ministry of Defence, the Indian ambassador to the Sultanate and senior Sultan's Armed Forces officers. — *ONA*

Light arms firing contest ends

MUSCAT — Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdullah bin Zahir Al Hinai, minister of justice, presided over the conclusion of the seventh annual light arms firing competition for 2002, organised by the Sultan's Armed Forces Chief of Staff (COSSAF) office.

The purpose of the annual competition is to upgrade the skills of SAF officers, NOCs and soldiers in handling light arms and to help select qualified marksmen to join national shooting teams.

Participants in the competition included teams representing COSSAF office, Royal Army of Oman (RAFO), Royal Navy of Oman (RNO), Royal Guard of Oman (RGO), Royal Oman Police (ROP) and Ministry of Defence Engineering Service (Modes).

The chief guest and senior commanders listened to a brief presented by the international shooting unit commander on the events and results of the competition. The minister also attended the final stage of the falling plate competition in which shooters displayed skillful performance in their quest to win His Majesty the Sultan's medal which is awarded annually to the best rifle and pistol shooters in addition to other prizes.

In the rifle firing for the individuals, Sergeant Ali bin Mubarak Al Khatri, from RAO won the first position and received His Majesty the Sultan's medal for the best rifle shooters and warrant officer Said bin Musallam Al Hamr, from RAO also won the first position in the pistol firing competition and was awarded His Majesty the Sultan's medal for the best pistol shooter.

In other competitions, Corporal Hamad bin Mohammed Al Hinai, from RAO, came first in the rifle firing at the individual level for



WELL DONE: Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdullah bin Zahir Al Hinai, minister of justice, giving a trophy to a winner of the firing competition.

reserves and warrant officer Hamad bin Saif Al Barashdi, from ROP, won the pistol shooting at the same level.

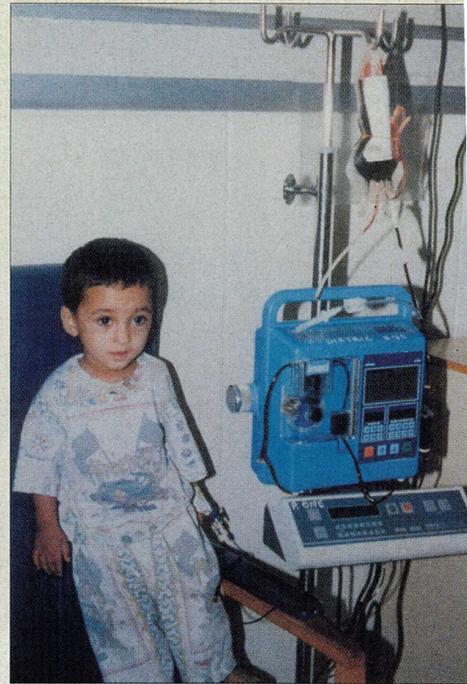
Captain Sulaiman bin Said Al Kalbani, from RAO, won the officers pistol shooting competition and at the rifle firing team level competition, the first position went to RAO team. RAO team also won the pistol shooting competition, as well as the falling plate competition for both officers and soldiers.

He praised the considerable development witnessed by SAF in various fields and the great care being accorded by His Majesty the Sultan to the armed forces in all aspects and particularly shooting activities.

The event was attended by Lieutenant-General Hilal bin Khalid Al Ma'awali, inspector-general of police and customs; Lieutenant-General Khamis bin Humaid Al Kalbani, chief of staff of the Sultan's Armed

Forces and president of the Omani Shooting Union; Major-General Ahmed bin Harith Al Nabhani, commander of the Royal Army of Oman; Air Vice-Marshal Mohammed bin Mahfoudh Al Ardhi, commander of the Royal Air Force of Oman; Rear Admiral Sayyid Shihab bin Tariq Al Said, RNO commander; Major-General Mohammed bin Abdullah Al Riyami, assistant inspector general of police and customs for operations; Abdullah bin Saleh Al Yarubi, deputy president of the General Organisation for Youth, Sports and Cultural Activities; and Sheikh Fahd bin Majid Al Ma'amari, vice-president of Majlis Al Shura.

The event was also attended by senior officers from SAF, RGO, ROP and other security apparatuses, military attaches of brotherly and friendly countries, officers, NOCs and soldiers from SAF, RGO, ROP and Modes. — *ONA*



APPEAL: The Ministry of Health appeals volunteers to donate blood on the occasion of Eid.

OCCI discusses bank issues



MEETING: The OCCI's economic committee members at the meeting.

MUSCAT — The Economic Committee of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) held its first meeting of the year 2002 yesterday under the chairmanship of Jameel bin Ali Sultan, OCCI vice-president.

The committee approved the programme for the proposed topics for discussion this year. It focused on topics including bank interests, commercial banks issues, fees and taxes imposed on the private sector and the incentives to be given to industrial companies which intend to merge.

The committee emphasised the necessity to

facilitate its role by establishing effective mechanisms to follow up and implement the recommendations and decisions it reaches in collaboration with the public and private sectors. It also called for addition to seeking to benefit from the expertise of the public and private sector.

The committee also stressed the importance of transparency in the committee's discussions and enabling those interested to follow them through the media has been discussed via media means. The meeting also touched on other topics related to national economy, including ways of achieving economic growth in the country. — *ONA*

Agreement signed to recruit overseas English teachers



FACT: Juma bin Ali bin Juma and International Education and Training Services Company board chairman signing the agreement.

MUSCAT — The Sultanate's government yesterday signed an agreement with the International Education and Training Services Company to provide English language teaching staff to the Muscat Higher Technical College and technical colleges in Musana'ah, Ibbi, Nizwa and Salalah.

The agreement was signed by Juma bin Ali bin Juma, min-

ister of manpower and by the board chairman of the contract executing company, Dr Munir bin Mohammed Al Maskari, undersecretary for vocational training attended the signing ceremony.

The one-year agreement allows the recruiting of overseas lecturers and will serve the purpose of strengthening the colleges' training and teaching staff

to meet the rise in the intake capacity.

Around 850 students were enrolled for various courses in the colleges in the second semester of the current year. The signing of the agreement also translates the government's keenness to boost technical and vocational training to meet the Omani labour market requirements. — *ONA*



PRIZE DISTRIBUTION: Sheikh Gusn Al Abri, wali of Al Qabi, giving away prizes and certificates to the winning schools and students. North Al Sharqiya's health services yesterday organised a ceremony to honour the winners of the competition on "The Facts for Life Book 2000-2001".



BLAZE: Fire fighting personnel putting out a blaze that broke out on top of a two-storey building near Stars Cinema area yesterday evening. No one was hurt in this fire which seemed to be centered in a semi-storehouse atop this building. — *Photo by Rodolfo Alfonso*

Dance debut today

By A Staff Reporters

MUSCAT — Sruthy R. Bhadrans, a young dancer, is staging her *arangattam* today. Sruthy's classical dance programme, named *Pranaamam*, will be held at the Sree Krishna temple hall, Darsait, from 8pm. She will be presenting *Bharatanatyam*, *Kuchippudi* and *Mohiniyattam*.

Sruthy, who has been learning dance for the past six years, has won many prizes in local dance competitions.

The young dancer has been the first prize winner in *Bharatanatyam* for the last five consecutive years in the annual cultural competitions organised by the Malayalam wing of the Indian Social Club.

In the recent Keralaotsavam, organised by the Kerala wing of the ISC, she participated in nine and won many prizes, including first prizes in eight categories.

In another event, Sea Pearls dancemania.com — an open dance competition organised by the ISC — Sruthy's group stood first among 33 groups,



SRUTHY: Talented

which is proof to the fact that she is not just a solo dance artiste but one capable of group work also.

Sruthy, a seventh standard student of Indian School Darsait, is also good at her studies. She has been winning a number of prizes in the school for both music and dance. She was selected for the Best Dancer Award for 2001-2002 from the school.

Eid Al Adha Celebration

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Omani novelist wins third prize

MUSCAT — Mohammed bin Saif Al Rahbi, an Omani novelist, has won the third prize at the fifth Arab literary creativity competition in the field of novel writing organised in Sharjah recently.

Oman newspaper said yesterday that Al Rahbi, the first-ever Omani writer to win a prize in that competition, received the third prize for his novel *Rihlat Abu-Zaid Al Omani* (The journey of Abu Zaid the Omani).

The first and second prizes went to Iraqi and Saudi writers respectively. More than 480 poets, short story writers and novelists participated in the competition. — *ONA*

Rainfall in many wilayats

MUSCAT — Moderate to light rains fell in a number of the Sultanate's regions and wilayats yesterday morning.

Light rains fell in the wilayat of Barka (Azaiba district), wilayats of Seeb, Manah, Suwaiq, Musann'a, Barka, Ibbi, Bahla and Diba. The wilayat of Khasab received moderate rain which caused wadis to flow. — *ONA*

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OMAN

Dancemania winners receive prizes

By A Staff Reporter

MUSCAT — The prize giving ceremony conducted recently crowned the conclusion of dancemania.com (with Sea pearls).

This totally filmi, Bollywood-style dance competition, organised by the Indian Social Club (ISC), had caught the imagination of the dance-crazy public here and seems to have clearly outshone other events of this season, so far. In fact, on the entertainment scene, no other event has managed to draw such enthusiastic participation and an equally zealous crowd.

"While the participation to the event was amazing, the audience that thronged the scene was mind boggling," enthused an elated Babu Rajendran, the cultural secretary, Indian Social Club (ISC) who is credited to be the brain behind this unique event.

On the prize-giving day, even Indian Ambassador K. M. Meena poured plaudits on dancemania.com, noting that he has not witnessed an event of this magnitude, which also managed to evoke such a great response.

Sheikh Salim bin Said Al Aaraimi, Galfar Group of Companies board chairman, and Poonam Meena, wife of the Indian ambassador, Ajith Kumar, the executive director of Sea Pearls, agents for Chemannur Jewellers were present among other dignitaries, host of parents and other dance enthusiasts at the prize giving ceremony, held at the ISC multipurpose hall.

A giant TV screen proved to be a blessing for those who were unable to get into the hall, and the TV screen at the ISC premises also helped many other outside viewers to have a closer look at the event.

Dancers, both individuals and groups, who were randomly selected from the participants did the last dance of the event, which became the talk of the town in a matter of days from the time it took off, early this month. Smoke and other psychedelic lights added to the glamour and glitz on the prize giving day.

The competition saw participants coming even from the interior, Rajendran said. He noted that some of them even came not just for the eight-day



ALL SMILES: The winners with their prizes; below, Indian Ambassador K.M. Meena, ISC Chairman Dr Satish Nambiar, left, and ISC Cultural Secretary Babu Rajendran, right, during the prize-presentation ceremony.



event, but even on the prize distribution day.

Arsha Subbi (individual five to eight years), Divya Khatter (individual nine to 13 years), Natasha Nagpal (individual 14 years and above) in the individual category, Tharangam (group 5 to 13 years) and Fantabulous Girls (group 14 years and above) in the group category were crowned the winners in the different categories.

In the individual five to eight years, Annanya Venkatesh was the runner up, while Madhuri Babu, Urvashi Sharma, Karishma Manek, Farhana Reza, Janhavi Vartak were given consolation prizes.

In the individual nine to 13 years, Shruthi Nair was the runner up, while Niveditha Venkat, Annu Vishnu, Tejal Sampat, Upasana Viswanathan, Rishna Ravindran, Seetha Kunhikannan and Jalormi Vaishnav were awarded consolation prizes.

In the 14 years and above, Krupa M. Sampat was the runner up; group 5 to 13 years, Dhoolna was the runner up while Bright Stars won the consolation prize and in the group 14 years and above category, Thundering Drizzlers was the runner up.

All the participants would be given certificates of partici-

pation by the organisers. Rajendran noted that while some have run away with the prizes, it was important to understand that participation itself was a reward in such events. "We are giving away the certificates as a humble thanks from our side," he said, adding that without them the event would not have been a success.

He also lavished praise on their sponsors, Sea Pearls, stressing that it was their support for the event and their confidence that the competition would be a great success that prompted the organisers to go all out for it.

EVENTS

- The 12TH Annual Day of Indian School Wadi Kabir at 7.15pm today. Abdullah bin Saif Al Mahroqi, wali of Muttrah, will be the chief guest.
- Lecture by Bhoopathy, physiotherapist, on 'Physiotherapy after Open Heart Surgery', at 8am, at Al Amal Medical Centre Hall, today. Information on 686298/685052.
- Lecture by Dr K.M. Johny, general practitioner, on 'The illness I had', at 8am, at Al Amal Medical Centre Hall, on February 28. Information on 686298/685052.
- Oman-Japan joint neuro-surgery conference from March 6 to 9; inauguration at Hotel Crowne Plaza on March 6 at 6.30pm and scientific activities at Institute of Health Sciences, Wattayah, on March 7 and 8, and a live demo at Khoula Hospital on March 9.
- Workshop on 'Selling Skills', organised by Ideas Management Consultants, from March 16-19. Information on 798881/787349.
- Workshop on 'Public Relations', organised by Ideas Management Consultants, on March 30 & 31. Information on 798881/787349.
- Trainex 2002, technical training and vocational education exhibition, from April 15 to 17.
- Ghedex 2002, Gulf higher education exhibition, from April 15 to 17.
- Conference on human resources development at Hotel Crowne Plaza on April 16 and 17.
- Comex 2002, IT and telecommunications exhibition, in April 2002.

Movies in Town

- Al Shatti Plaza**
Film Information: Tel: 607360
Tele bookings: 692656
- Plaza 1**
 From Hell (Suspense Thriller & Horror)
 3:30, 7:30, 9:45 & 11:55pm
 Cast: Johnny Depp and Heather Graham
 Censor Permit No: 43
- Plaza 2**
 Atlantis The Lost Empire (Cartoon)
 3:00, 4:30 & 6:00pm
 Censor Permit No: 13
- Plaza 3**
 The Glass House (Thriller)
 7:30, 9:30 & 11:30pm
 Cast: Leelee Sobieski and Diane Lane
 Censor Permit No: 35
- Plaza 4**
 Two Moons and Olive (Arabic)
 5:00 & 7:30pm
 Cast: Asat Fada
 Censor Permit No: 27
- Plaza 5**
 The Princess Diaries (Comedy)
 3:00 & 10:00pm
 Cast: Anne Hathaway and Julie Andrews
 Censor Permit No: 39
- Al Nasr Cinema 1**
 Yeh Mohabbat Hai (Hindi)
 3:30, 6:30 & 9:30pm
 Cast: Rahul Bhatt, Aakanksha, Danny and Shakti Kapoor
 Censor Permit No: 53

From Eid Day (Friday 22nd)
 Haan Maine Bhi Pyaar Kiya (Hindi)
 1:00, 3:45, 6:45 & 9:45pm
 Cast: Akshay Kumar, Abhishek Bachchan and Karisma Kapoor
 Censor Permit No: 51

Al Nasr 2
 Film Information: 7731809/7731358

Film City
Today's Release
 Koi Mere Dil Se Poochhe, C. P. No: 98

New Video Releases
 Octopus, C. P. No: 148
 Tere Liye, C. P. No: 3
 Ghatok, C. P. No: 413
 Vedham, C. P. No: 74

Rental
 The Fast And The Furious, C. P. No: 42
 Beethoven's 4th, C. P. No: 38

Star Cinema
Star Main
 Praja (Mal)
 3:00, 6:00 & 9:30pm
 Cast: Mohanlal, Biju Menon, Aiswarya and Anupam Kher
 Censor Permit No: 36

Star Mini 1
 Brotherhood Of The Wolf (Eng.)
 3:30, 6:30 & 9:30pm
 Cast: Samuelle Bihan and Monica Bellucci
 Censor Permit No: 472

Star Mini 2
 Evil Woman (Eng.)
 3:30, 6:30 & 9:30pm
 Cast: Jason Biggs, Steve Zahn and Jack Black
 Censor Permit No: 33

Star Mini 3
 The Glass House (Eng.)
 3:30, 6:30 & 9:30pm
 Cast: Leelee Sobieski and Diane Lane
 Censor Permit No: 35

Star Mini 4
 From Hell (Eng.)
 3:30, 6:30 & 9:30pm
 Cast: Johnny Depp and Heather Graham
 Censor Permit No: 43

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Golden Cinema
Cinema 1
 Atlantis The Lost Empire (Eng.)
 Walt Disney Film
 3:30, 6:30 & 10:00pm
 Censor Permit No: 27

Cinema 2
 Pammal K. Sambandham (Tamil)
 3:30, 6:30 & 10:00pm
 Cast: Kamal Haasan, Simran and Manasi
 Censor Permit No: 47

Ruwi Cinema 1
 Yeh Mohabbat Hai (Hindi)
 3:00, 6:00 & 9:00pm
 Cast: Rahul Bhatt, Aakanksha, Johnny Lever and Shakti Kapoor
 Censor Permit No: 53

From Eid Day Hindi Movie
 Haan Maine Bhi Pyaar Kiya (Hindi)
 Cast: Abhishek Bachchan and Karisma Kapoor

Ruwi Cinema 2
 Lord Of The Rings (Eng.)
 12:00, 3:30, 7:00 & 10:30pm
 Cast: Elijah Wood, Ian McKellen and Cate Blanchett
 Censor Permit No: 48

Ruwi Cinema 3
 Harry Potter (Eng.)
 1:00 & 6:00pm
 Cast: Daniel Radcliffe and Fiona Shaw
 Censor Permit No: 11

Ruwi Cinema 4
 Moulouin Rogue (Eng.)
 11:00pm
 Cast: Ewan McGregor and Nicole Kidman
 Censor Permit No: 7

Ruwi Cinema 5
 Vanilla Sky (Eng.)
 3:30 & 8:30pm
 Cast: Tom Cruise, Penelope Cruz, Kurt Russell, Jason Lee, Noah Taylor and Cameron Diaz
 Censor Permit No: 40

Ruwi Cinema 6
 Lord Of The Rings (Eng.)
 12:30, 4:00, 7:30 & 11:00pm
 Cast: Elijah Wood, Ian McKellen and Cate Blanchett
 Censor Permit No: 48

Programme for Eid (Friday 22nd)

Ruwi Cinema 1
 Harry Potter (Eng.)
 1:00 & 6:00pm
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 Censor Permit No: 11

Ruwi Cinema 2
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 Cast: Elijah Wood, Ian McKellen and Cate Blanchett
 Censor Permit No: 48

Ruwi Cinema 3
 Haan Maine Bhi Pyaar Kiya (Hindi)
 12:30, 3:30, 6:30 & 9:30pm
 Cast: Abhishek Bachchan, Akshay Kumar and Karisma Kapoor
 Censor Permit No: 51

Ruwi Cinema 4
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 12:30, 4:00, 7:30 & 11:00pm
 Cast: Elijah Wood, Ian McKellen and Cate Blanchett
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 Censor Permit No: 48

Visit us at www.ruwicinema.com

Strategy forum on Omani woman

MUSCAT — The Ministry of Social Development will organise in cooperation with the Unicef office, an advisory forum to prepare a national strategy for the Omani woman. It will basically focus on preparing an initial blueprint for the national strategy and will discuss themes such as the woman and economy, health, education and training, the rural woman and the woman and social work. Experts from various UN organisations will participate in the event. — *ONA*

Shikaili inaugurates students' activities

SAHAM — Sheikh Saqr bin Sultan Al Shikaili, wali of Saham, opened the second gathering for students activities and talents at Atika Secondary School here yesterday. The opening ceremony included poetry readings, songs, folk games, plays and cultural competitions that highlighted the message of the school hygiene competition. The wali honoured the best performing girls from the wilayat secondary schools and toured students activities halls and exhibitions. — *ONA*

Dawoud concludes visit

KHASAB — Engineer Abdullah bin Ali bin Dawoud, housing, electricity and water undersecretary, concluded yesterday his field visit to the Governorate of Musandam which began on Saturday. While there, he met Sheikh Said bin Mohammed Al Braiki, governor of Musandam and visited the sites where the electricity grid will be linked with the United Arab Emirates. He was briefed by specialists on the steps taken to ensure the success of this important project.

Salmi receives Tunisian delegation

MUSCAT — Dr Hamad bin Sulaiman Al Salmi, vice-president of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), received in his office yesterday the Tunisian delegation which comprises Abdul Hamid Buhawalal, head and director-general of the Tunisian cooperation agencies for technical cooperation and Mohammed Karu, director-general of basic education at the Tunisian Ministry of Education.

During the meeting, cooperation between the two brotherly countries related to aspects of academic ties were reviewed. The meeting was attended by Dr Samirah bint Mohammed Moosa, assistant vice-president for art colleges at the university. — *ONA*

Condolence meeting at Pak school

NIZWA — Pakistan School Nizwa has held a meeting expressing condolences at the sad demise of Dr Hassan Rizvi, noted educationist, journalist, poet, critic, and professor of the Urdu language and literature at FC College Lahore. School Principal Farrukh Zahra Gillani presided over the function, which was attended by the staff and students. The principal and teachers paid tribute to the deceased for his appreciable services in the field of education, literature and journalism.

Bangla Martyrs' Day

MUSCAT — The embassy of the People's Republic of Bangladesh in Muscat will observe the golden jubilee of Mohan Shaheed Dibash (Great Martyrs Day) and International Mother Language Day 2002 today as per the following programmes.

The national flag will be flown at half-mast. There will be laying of floral wreath at the make-shift Shaheed Minar at the chancery by his excellency the Bangladesh ambassador. There will be a recitation from the Holy *Quran* and reading out messages of the president and the prime minister of Bangladesh. A one-minute silence for the martyrs of language movement will be observed. Also special prayers will be offered.

Besides, an inter-school art competition titled 'My motherland and her language' was organised by Bangladesh School Muscat, in the chancery hall yesterday and an English debate competition on the theme 'Mother tongue is the best medium of instruction' will be organised at 9am on February 28. On the significance of the day, a multilingual colorful cultural programme will be organised by the students of Bangladesh School Muscat at BSM ground — Al Ghobra today 21 at 7pm. All Bangladeshis living in the Sultanate of Oman are invited to attend the programme.

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WEATHER

Clear to partly cloudy skies over northern parts of the Sultanate with chance of isolated rain showers and clear to partly cloudy skies over the rest of the Sultanate.

Winds: Over the Sultanate winds will be northerly light to moderate occasionally fresh.

Sea State: Moderate to rough with a maximum wave height of 2-3 metres along coastal areas of Gulf of Oman and slight with a maximum wave height of 1.25 metres rest of Oman coasts.

TEMP	MAX	MIN
Seeb	25	16
Khasab	25	18
Mad'ha	25	20
Buraimi	26	15
Ibri	26	15
Fahud	25	15
Sohar	25	15
Suwaik	24	15
Rustaq	28	15
Sumail	29	15
Nizwa	29	13
Saiq	18	06
Jabal Shams	27	01
Bahla	25	13
Adam	28	16
Mudhaibi	29	16
Ibra	27	15
Sur	30	19
Masirah	28	19
Haima	28	10
Marmul	29	13
Thumrait	31	12
Salalah	29	20
Qatroun Hairit	20	20
Al Halaniyat	27	14
Jabal Samhan	22	15
Jabal Qamar	23	15

Temperatures recorded in other cities: Muscat 25, Abu Dhabi 24, Dubai 26, Sharjah 27, Ras Al Khaimah 28, Doha 21, Manama 19, Riyadh 19, Makkah 35, Madinah 22, Jeddah 29, Kuwait 18, Sanaa 26, Aden 27, Mukalla 28, Baghdad 16, Beirut 18, Amman 16, Damascus 17, Cairo 23, Tehran 08, Karachi 29, Mumbai 28, Ankara 12, Geneva 05, Brussels 09, Frankfurt 07, Paris 11, London 11, New York 06, Tokyo 03, Rome 12, Amsterdam 09.

Pharmacies

- Muscat Region**
Night Duty
 Al Waleed, Ruwi, Al Fursan Street, Tel. 707746
 Al Athaiba, Ruwi, Baldiya Street, Tel. 7734560
 Muscat Shatti Al Qurum, near Al Aaraimi Mosque, Tel. 561942
 Al Salam, Ma'abala Tel. 537331
- Dhofar Region**
Night Duty
 National, Al Salem Street, near traffic signal Salalah, Tel. 291161

OMAN/LATE NEWS

The worst serial killers in France's recent history

TOULOUSE (France) — Patrice Alege, on trial in France after confessing to the murder and rape of five women and the rape of one woman between 1989 and 1997, would be one of the country's worst serial killers in modern times if convicted.

Here is a list of France's most notorious multiple murderers since the beginning of the 20th century:

- Guy Georges, the "Beast of the Bastille", was sentenced to life in prison in April 2001 for raping and cutting the throats of seven young women in eastern Paris between 1991 and 1997.
- Francis Heaulme, a 33-year-old vagabond, has been sentenced to two life sentences and several other lengthy terms since 1994 for the murders of six people in France. He made, but later retracted, a confession for more than a dozen other murders which are being investigated.
- Sid Ahmed Rezala, the "train killer", committed suicide in a Portuguese jail cell in June 2000 before he was to be extradited to France to face trial for the 1999 murders of three young women.
- Thierry Paulin, the "old lady killer", died of Aids in a prison hospital in 1989 before being tried for 18 of the 21 elderly women he said he murdered in Paris between 1984 and 1987.
- Marcel Barbeault, the "Oise madman" was arrested in 1976 and sent to prison for life for the murder of eight people dating back to 1969.
- Dr Marcel Petitot, "Dr Satan", was executed by guillotine in 1946 for the murder of 27 people — many of them wealthy Jews he robbed — trying to flee the Nazi wartime occupation of Paris. He claimed he killed 63 victims, most of whom he incinerated.

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Hotels offer programmes to make Eid more special

By A Staff Reporter

MUSCAT — Lavish food buffets, kid's parties, fitness regimes and loads of entertainment. So if you are not already thinking of wadi bashing or dune bashing or taking off to the interiors, these are enough reasons to stay in town during Eid. Here is a roundup of the special happenings at various hotels and restaurants in Oman.

Sheraton Oman Hotel
There are special events and activities at different outlets. There is tempting cuisine to suit different taste buds.

Green Mountain Restaurant
The restaurant will host a sumptuous Eid buffet lunch on the second day of Eid featuring a selection of hot and cold mezzeh, a delectable selection of main courses including the traditional *ouzi*.

Le Tarbouche
The speciality Lebanese restaurant will offer a special set menu for Eid, which includes a selection of hot and cold mezzeh, lentil soup, mixed grills and lamb chop with Oriental rice and *Umm Ali* as dessert. Enjoy live entertainment by belly dancer Nadine, Lebanese singers Hala and Charbel and tabla player Raad

Saba Disco
There is a non-stop Eid party on the second and third day of Eid. The ASTA showdancers and special Eid disco with DJ Prince are the highlights of the party. There is also a special 'Discover Oman Package' for visitors with special accommodation rates valid during the Eid holidays.

Hotel Inter-Continental Muscat

Special things are happening on the health front at the Muscat Inter-Continental Hotel during Eid. Get back right into shape with scuba diving or relax with some fine massage by expert masseuse Koi at the Palm Beach Club. For kids there is a special programme whereby they can enjoy the pools, tennis, squash or join in a game of football, all in an action-packed day and time to make some good friends. For those bitten by the travel bug, the in-house travel agent Zubair Tours will offer pre-arranged outings or organise packages to suit your needs.

Radisson SAS

It's a big celebration alright! And special theme nights to suit your interest, your mood and your taste buds.

Olivos Coffee Shop

It will feature a daily lunch buffet with international cuisine. The buffet features a variety of dishes for every member of the family; guests can enjoy dining at the elegant Mediterranean restaurant or in the cool surroundings of the Olivos Coffee Shop Terrace. There are also special theme nights on different days. Spice up your holiday with *Mirch 'n' Masala*, an authentic Indian style buffet on Saturday. On Sunday, it's Fresh From the Nets, the freshest choice of seafood. Take a retro trip into the '50s Night' on Monday evening with your favourites from the past. On Tuesday, try a 'Fusion of Arabia and Asia', and get the best of the East. Alternatively, you can dine at the Al Tajin Grill and savour a selection of the finest seafood and steaks. There will be live music at The Cellar with 'Counterpoint' the four-piece band,

while Skipp Pollard entertains at The Coral with a cocktail of jazz and blues.

Crowne Plaza Muscat

If you are looking forward for fun and gaiety with family during Eid, then the Crowne Plaza Hotel is the best place to visit. There are theme nights happening at the Tropicana Restaurant, the Duke's Bar and Come Prima restaurants. At Come Prima, you can enjoy a special meal featuring favourites old and new. At Shiraz, the Persian restaurant, there is a special menu for Eid. There is also lots of fun during the Friday Brunch. And for Arabic show lovers, the in-house Lebanese band will provide all the entertainment.

Holiday Inn Muscat

For mystical music and a sumptuous buffet of traditional Eid dishes, make Holiday Inn Muscat a must-visit during Eid. Celebrate the second day of Eid at the Sur Ballroom with some thrilling entertainment by live band Islanders. There is also a special lunch and dinner buffet at the Coffee Shop on all the three days of Eid. There is an Arabic band and an African band playing at the Loyalina and Hakuna Matata respectively on all days.

Novotel Seeb

Enjoy an African surprise with a famous African band on all three days at the Novotel Seeb. The band promises an exciting repertoire including east and western music. There are also special dinner and dance offers on the first two days. Special Eid package on rooms is also available.

Mercurie Al Falaj Hotel

The African singing sensations Twanga Pepeta are here

for Eid. Enjoy them live and in action at the Mercurie Al Falaj on the second and third day of Eid. The programme is being organised by Golden Tunes.

Sohar Beach Hotel

If you are planning a quick getaway to the beaches of Sohar, then the Sohar Beach Hotel has some interesting surprises in store. There is a special Arabic buffet dinner for Eid at the Al Sallan which includes various food specials of the region. There are also other promotions happening at the hotel's different outlets.

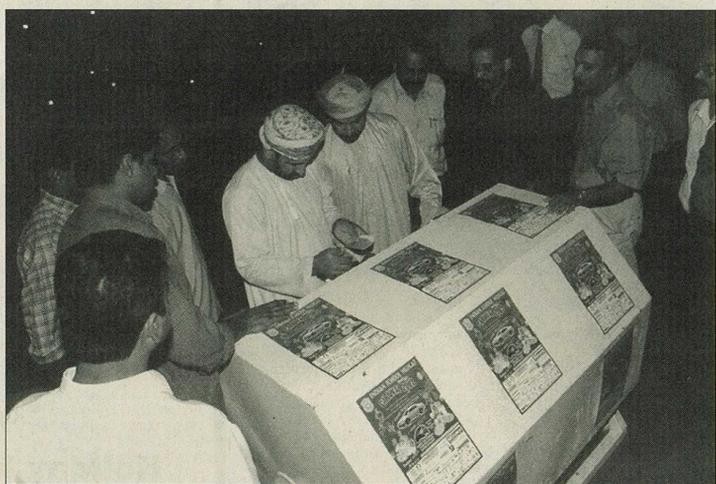
Spicy Village Restaurant

Spicy offers are here once again from Spicy Village. There is a 25pc discount for all those who are dining at Spicy Village outlets. There is also a 20pc discount for takeaways and 10pc discount for home deliveries. Another innovative scheme is the 'eat for three and pay for two' promotion for buffet lunch at all three outlets, Ruwi, Rusayl and Nizwa. Lunch packets will now offer a complimentary mineral water and a soft drink. Valuable gifts are in for everyone whose bills reach RO30 and above. Gifts include watches, cameras, cabin leather bags, kettles and recliners for the first 15 customers everyday. And the best part is, the offer is on till March 31.

Oasis By The Sea Restaurant

They claim to be throwing the 'biggest party of the year'. And it is on at The Lounge. So mark February 22 for the important event and make sure you are a part of it. The all night party also offers free snacks.

ISM parent wins Lexus in raffle draw



RAFFLE DRAW: Officials during the raffle draw at Majan Hotel yesterday.

By A Staff Reporter

MUSCAT — A proud parent of students studying at the Indian School Muscat (ISM) was the ecstatic winner of a brand new Lexus in the raffle draw held as part of the ISM carnival, which was held recently.

Shah Ilyas's (ticket no.13323) ecstasy knew no bounds when he was declared the winner of the Lexus ES-300.

The grand 2002 carnival of ISM culminated in this raffle draw, which was held at the Majan Hotel, yesterday.

The other prizes include Daewoo Matiz car model 2002 (ticket number 42773), air ticket Muscat-Amsterdam (17316), computer Pentium III (1037), silver napkin rings (6270), Muscat-Cochin-Muscat air ticket (30172), Muscat-Cochin-Muscat air ticket (4136), Muscat-Cochin-Muscat air ticket (26521) and 35gm gold (57425).

Burning train kills 373

Continued from Page 1

Ebeid ruled out a technical fault for the tragedy or an error by the train crew, despite the long distance travelled by the burning carriages before coming to a halt. "The fire was started by cookers used by passengers during the journey," Ebeid told reporters on the scene.

But several survivors interviewed in hospital said they saw no stoves used. "There was no room to put out the stoves," according to Sami Zoheir Hanna, who managed to escape through a door and suffered only bruises.

The driver was not immediately aware of the fire because it erupted in the rear carriages, but reacted well when he realised, the top rescue official said.

"The driver had an excellent reaction when he quickly separated the burning carriages from the others before the flames could reach them," Abdel Aal said.

"His reaction probably saved hundreds of people from a horrible and certain death, as he drove the remainder of the train further on," he added.

Rescue officials said doors were difficult to open and windows hard to escape through because they had metal bars. "It's like a cage, which turned into a burning prison," Abdel Aal said.

The injured were transported to several hospitals in the area as well as one in Cairo, Egypt's official Mena news agency said.

Mena said that 20 firefighting vehicles and 30 ambulances were sent to the scene, while the Interior Ministry said the fire took several hours to extinguish.

Rescue vehicles had trouble reaching the site of the disaster in this farming but heavily populated region, because a canal separates the railroad from the main road.

President Hosni Mubarak said he was "deeply distressed and saddened" by the deaths, according to a statement attributed to him and read on state television. — AFP

Hijacked plane lands on highway in Colombia

BOGOTA — Rebels hijacked a commercial plane yesterday and forced it to land on a highway in southern Colombia, in an apparent kidnapping of a senator, authorities said.

The Bogota-bound, Colombian-owned Aires plane with 37 people on board was landed near the Huila department town of Hobo in southern Colombia.

"It appears that the rebels took three passengers and left the rest" after landing, Air Force Chief of Operations Gonzalo Morales said.

"The air force is reacting," Morales said.

"We are headed for the scene with combat planes and helicopters."

Military officials said opposition Senator Jorge Eduardo Gechen had been kidnapped, and that they were trying to determine if any of the other passengers had been kidnapped as well.

Gechen represents Huila department in the Senate and is up for re-election in legislative elections March 10. — AFP

Nigerian makes pepper soup with human body parts

LAGOS — A Nigerian man who confessed to killing his boss and making pepper soup with her body parts was arrested yesterday, police said.

Salifu Ojo, a 23-year-old farm labourer in southwest Ondo state killed Christiana Elijah, a 40-year-old mother of four, after a dispute over his pay.

He chopped off her head, hands and legs, then removed her internal organs which he used as ingredients for his soup, police said.

"Ojo macheted the woman after they disagreed over payment," Paul Ochonou, Ondo state commissioner of police, said.

"He severed her parts, made pepper soup and ate it — all on the farm." Ojo confessed to other labourers after the soup made him vomit, police said.

"We recovered the trunk of the woman's body and some uncooked parts on the farm," Ochonou said. He said the man would be charged to court as soon as police completed investigations. — Reuters

Queen left in the dark on Jamaica trip

KINGSTON (Jamaica) — Britain's Queen Elizabeth was left powerless last night when an electricity failure plunged into darkness a dinner she hosted for Jamaica business leaders.

The queen, who is on a three-day visit to the former British colony as part of her Golden Jubilee marking 50 years on the throne, threw the party at King's House, the official residence of her representative in the Caribbean nation.

The dinner was first disrupted as guests enjoyed cocktails but power was restored about 10 minutes later. Staff hustled for candles as the power went out again a half-hour later and stayed off for an hour and 7 minutes. The queen and her husband, Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, were moved to the living room while technicians tried to fix the problem, which the governor-general's secretary, Geoff Madden, blamed on a malfunctioning electrical breaker. Jamaica suffers frequent power outages. A standby generator failed to trip in.

After a 25-minute wait for power to return, officials decided to continue the programme and the royal couple was ushered to the main dining area, escorted by a queue of candle-bearing Jamaican and British security officials. Government officials, some of whom were frantically making calls on cellular phones, managed to arrange battery-powered lamps for the dining area. Power was restored by the time guests had finished the main course. The Duke was later heard to remark as he left the dinner table that "we can see the staircase this time". The queen and Prince Philip left the capital early yesterday for the second city of Montego Bay, Jamaica's tourism hub. They were scheduled to leave Jamaica in the night for New Zealand. — Reuters

4 Moroccans held in Rome with cyanide

ROME — Italian police said yesterday they had foiled a planned chemical attack on the United States embassy in Rome and arrested four Moroccans armed with a cyanide-based chemical and maps of the city's water supply network.

The arrests appeared to confirm repeated warnings by the US State Department of the possibility of a new attack on US targets at home or abroad from members of Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organisation.

Italy's Justice Minister Roberto Castelli said the swoop demonstrated that Italy "is in the front line in the war against international terrorism. We are taking this battle forward with great determination."

However, police and prosecutors imposed a news black-out on the case as furious anti-terrorist magistrate Salvatore Vecchione criticised the leaking of information about the arrests to the media, saying it had done untold damage to the investigation.

Vecchione was speaking after a meeting of top-level anti-terrorist prosecutors and police in Rome to discuss developments in the case.

Franco Frattini, minister with responsibility for Italy's secret

service, said "the extraordinary delicacy of this investigation dictates that we can't say another word about it."

The US embassy in Rome, which was highlighted in a map found on the men, issued a statement in which it confirmed it was a target in the attack, thanking the police "for their excellent work concerning the most recent security threat against the embassy".

It said that it would be premature to comment further on "an ongoing investigation".

The US embassy was evacuated in January last year following intelligence reports that it could be the target of a terrorist attack.

Italian press reports said the British embassy had also been highlighted among other buildings.

The four men, aged between 30 and 40, were detained in a dawn raid on Tuesday on an apartment in the Tor Bella Monaca area in the south of the Italian capital, where a search also uncovered a hoard of false documents.

Police said the men had been under surveillance for several days and moved in to arrest them once they had sufficient evidence they were in possession of the

cyanide-based substance, which they have not publicly identified.

The men had 4kg of the white powdery substance, poison deadly enough to cause what one newspaper feared would be "dozens of deaths" in Rome, whose historical sites make it one of the world's most visited cities.

The *Corriere della Sera* daily said at least two of the men had false identity papers, and at least one of them was linked with suspected terrorists arrested in northern Italy in recent months.

Three other Moroccans were arrested in the Italian capital last week on suspicion of forging papers, as part of an investigation by Italian authorities into Muslim communities in Italy.

Those suspects were found in possession of official stamps from various Italian and foreign institutions.

Interior Minister Claudio Scajola stressed Italy's intensified efforts to combat terrorism after September 11 in a press conference on late Tuesday, hours before news of the latest arrests leaked.

Scajola said Italian police had arrested 20 people suspected of links with terrorism and frozen 82 suspicious bank accounts worth 345 million euros. — AFP

No sex could be best bet for saving endangered species

PARIS — The survival of certain endangered species could depend on temporarily keeping the dominant males from mating, according to a team of researchers from California's San Diego Zoo.

Allison Alberts and her colleagues have found that in some species, a few males monopolise the females, preventing subordinate males from reproducing, journal *New Scientist* reports in its next issue, due out on Saturday.

While such behaviour can transfer desirable qualities like strength to future generations, it limits genetic variety within the animal population, making it susceptible to sudden changes in environment or new diseases, experts say.

"With just 200 individuals, you're really starting to worry about genetic diversity," said Peter Tolson from the Toledo Zoo in the midwestern US state of Ohio.

Alberts and her team proposed removing the dominant males from the group for a limited period of time, allowing the lesser males to reproduce and thereby increase its genetic diversity.

When they took the five most powerful males out of the mating pool for six weeks, other males quickly took advantage of their absence and began breeding, forcing the dominant males to fight for mating partners when they returned.

"This is very much an emergency measure," warned Alberts, citing concerns about cost and labour. — AFP

WHO launches traveller guide to fight disease

LONDON — The World Health Organisation yesterday launched a beefed-up version of its annual travel and health guide to help globe-trotters avoid bringing home anything nastier than a sunburn.

"Disease has no borders," WHO director David Heymann said. "I can be in London today and Kinshasa tomorrow. And I can take any disease there or bring any disease back with me."

The International Travel and Health book aims to be the "gold standard" health bible for millions of long-haul business and leisure travellers around the world.

Accidents, stomach bugs, colds and sexually transmitted diseases rank high as the greatest threats to international travellers, communicable diseases consultant Gil Lea said.

Road and drowning accidents are responsible for most travellers' deaths, but number one on the WHO's hit-list of diseases is malaria.

"Malaria remains the single biggest disease threat to international travellers," guide author Dr Lindsay Martinez said. "And there is still confusion about which tablets to take or how long to take them for."

16 people died of malaria in Britain in 2000, Lea said. And several incidents of airport malaria — where an insect gets into a plane and infects someone at the other end — have occurred in otherwise malaria-free countries, including France and Belgium.

With Africa at the top of many travellers' wish-lists this year, getting information to people about the existence of last-minute prevention was paramount, Martinez said.

The guide also includes a new chapter on air travel following last year's furore over its link with deep vein thrombosis (DVT). Preventative measures, such as pressure stockings, are discussed but DVT specialist Dr William Toff warned that other defences such as aspirin may be causing more harm than good.

— Reuters

Half the world's languages under threat: Study

PARIS — Half of the 6,000 or so languages spoken in the world are under threat and a wealth of human knowledge could be lost with them, according to a new study.

The *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing* says pressures from dominant languages such as English, French, Spanish, Russian and mainstream Chinese are drowning out minority tongues at an accelerating pace.

"The dying and disappearance of languages has been going on for thousands of years as a natural event in human society, but at a slow rate," says the study, funded by the United Nations cultural agency Unesco and due to be published today.

"However, the past 300 years or so have seen a dramatic increase in the death or disappearance of languages...leading to a situation today in which 3,000 or more languages that are still spoken are endangered, seriously endangered or dying."

The study, updated and expanded from a first edition that appeared in 1996, pinpoints

threatened languages in "crisis areas" on a series of maps on a scale that ranges from "potentially endangered" to "extinct".

"The loss of any one language means a contraction, reduction and impoverishment of the sum total of the reservoir of human thought and knowledge as expressible through language," the study notes.

"To give just a few examples, many highly effective medicinal plants are known only to people in traditional cultures..."

"When their languages and cultures are lost, the knowledge about the plants and their healing properties is lost too."

The study cites the Americas and Australia as having the worst record over the past 100 years, with hundreds of Aboriginal languages now extinct in Australia as a result of harsh assimilation policies that persisted until around 1970.

But it also lists around 50 languages that are at risk in Europe, including the Celtic languages of Britain, several of the Saami or Lappish tongues spoken in Scandinavia and northern Russia

and the varieties of Romani spoken by Gypsies.

In Asia, the study says, the situation for minority languages is uncertain in many parts of China while in Africa, between 500 and 600 of the 1,400 or so local languages are on the decline, with 250 of those under immediate threat.

The study was edited by the late Professor Stephen Wurm, an Australian linguist of Hungarian origin who spoke some 50 languages. Wurm recently died.

The Atlas cites several reasons for the disappearance of languages, ranging from repressive government policies and assimilation to economic pressures, migratory trends, disease and natural disasters.

While sounding the alarm, it notes that a determined multilingual approach can rescue even the most threatened tongues.

In Japan, only eight elderly people spoke Ainu on Hokkaido Island by the late 1980s after decades of official neglect, but promotional policies have since revived the language.

— Reuters

Nine Palestinian cops killed in Israel clashes

Continued from Page 1

A Palestinian man also died of his wounds after Israel rocketed a security building in Ramallah, while in a nearby village a Palestinian policeman was killed in clashes with the army, Palestinian security sources said.

Clashes continued as Palestinian police and fighters took to the streets to battle the Israeli tanks posted outside the town. In the nearby self-rule village of Tell, Israeli tanks besieged a Palestinian police station, demanding policemen hand themselves over, security sources said, while a Hamas fighter was arrested in an army raid on the nearby village of Salbit.

Israeli helicopter gunships fired six rockets at Palestinian

targets, two near the office where Arafat has been confined in Ramallah, causing no injuries, Palestinian security sources said

PAKISTAN/ASIA

Over 60 Pak pilgrims die in Saudi Arabia

ISLAMABAD — Sixty-three Pakistanis have died in Saudi Arabia while making the annual Muslim Haj to the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah, official media reported yesterday.

The state APP news agency, quoting unnamed official sources, said most of the people were aged over 60 and had died of heart attacks.

Another 37 Pakistanis were among 40 people killed last week when a bus carrying pilgrims collided with a truck in Saudi Arabia, the official Saudi Press Agency reported.

The Haj is one of the five pillars of Islam. Every able-bodied Muslim is required to perform it at least once in a lifetime if he or she can afford it.

50 killed as bus plunges off a bridge in Nepal

KATHMANDU — At least 50 people were killed in an overnight accident in western Nepal when a bus plunged off a bridge, police said yesterday.

The accident happened on late Tuesday when the bus dived 100 metres down into a stream while crossing the bridge at Chandibhanjyang in Mugling, 90km west of the capital, police said.

"The night passenger bus carrying over 50 passengers dashed against the fence of the steel bridge and fell down the river, landing on a big boulder," a senior police official said.

"This accident killed 50 people and injured seven others including a child, whose condition is serious," he said.

Police said 26 bodies had been recovered and rescue efforts were continuing.

Teenager kills siblings to prevent them from starving

PHNOM PENH — Cambodian police have arrested a teenager after an inability to feed his family led to the mercy killing of his brother and sister, officials said yesterday.

They said 18-year-old Romam Twin had been found weeping over his dead siblings after he told them to say a prayer. He then shot his nine-year-old brother Romam Hlin and seven-year-old sister Romam Phlin.

The killings took place in north east Ratanakiri province. Ratanakiri police commissioner Yeoung Vanloun said the three children were orphaned last year and the eldest brother had been left begging for food to feed his younger brother and sister.

He said Romam Twin had confessed saying he couldn't bare to watch his family starve to death and he had made several attempts to commit suicide since last Thursday when the killings took place.

"He tried many times to hang himself in police detention, but we calmed him down," Vanloun said. "This is very sad and a very difficult case to deal with, the children were starving to death."

Romam Twin belonged to the Jarai hill tribe in Cambodia's remote north. The tribe is fiercely independent and begging is frowned upon.

Thai woman to appeal conviction for royal murder

BANGKOK — A former Thai housemaid, whose fairy-tale marriage to a prince captivated the nation, will appeal a six-year jail sentence for killing him with coffee laced with insecticide, her lawyer said yesterday.

A Bangkok court this week found Chalasai Yugala guilty of fatally poisoning Prince Thitipan Yugala in August 1995.

The court accepted police evidence, based on a lie detector test, that Chalasai had inadvertently killed her husband when trying to hospitalise him so she could sneak off to see a younger lover — a Bangkok chestnut seller.

Chalasai's lawyer said his client had been convicted on circumstantial evidence and said police had tricked her into making the confession, which Chalasai later disowned in court.

"I believe in her innocence and we will definitely appeal against the sentence," Sereew Suwannapanond said.

"She did not kill him."

— AFP, Reuters



AWARD WINNER: Children's Jury has awarded Norwegian photographer Aleksander Nordahl of the daily 'Dagbladet' for this colour picture of three Afghan sisters handed out yesterday. The seven-year-old little sister smiles to the photographer while her older sisters hide behind a doorway. Teenage girls are not allowed to show themselves to men, their parents decide when they have to start wearing the burkah. The picture was taken in October last year in Khwaja Bahawudin in northern Afghanistan, an area then controlled by the Northern Alliance. — Reuters

Authority belongs to elected PM: Musharraf

LAHORE — Rejecting future military intervention in politics, Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf has agreed to accept checks on the office of the president as well despite emphasising his role as an arbiter in the future set-up.

He has also conceded, the first time he has done so publicly, the sovereign democratic right of the prime minister to represent the people and govern on their behalf in Pakistan, English daily The News reported yesterday.

Addressing an elite gathering of intellectuals, experts, writers and journalists, Musharraf hastened to add that he would like checks and balances on all the three power centres — prime minister, president and army chief — "to avoid any future

intervention by the army and prevent misuse of power by the elected leaders."

He revealed that "due to the past experiences, we decided in the first army commanders meeting after the October 12 coup not to impose martial law since I am against army's intervention in politics."

While agreeing to open a general debate on the desirability of more provinces in Pakistan and the need to develop more water reservoirs, Musharraf was cautious about sensitivity to these subjects by Pakistan's four provinces.

On the likelihood of vacating the office of army chief to become an elected president, Musharraf did not show his cards saying he did not want to "become a politician, or form a

party or indulge in political controversies."

He declined to be drawn into a debate when suggested that he could easily get elected without tampering with the electoral process and no mainstream party would reverse his reforms if he allowed them the space they deserve in a truly democratic set-up.

He, however, informed that the proposal for political restructuring would be announced for a public debate without taking the politicians into confidence.

Musharraf reiterated his government's resolve to eradicate extremism and sectarianism, he warned clerics who use mosques to spread hatred to put them behind bars if they failed to comply with the prescribed rules.

— Internews

Govt mulling banning smaller parties from polls

ISLAMABAD — Pakistan is considering a proposal to bar political parties from fielding candidates in elections that were unable to secure at least 10 per cent votes in the last general elections.

Official sources say that the federal Law Ministry was preparing the draft of a law to bar the political parties which could not secure 10 per cent votes in the 1997 elections from contesting the polls.

An official confirmed that the proposal was under consideration, but added that it was at an early stage.

"Yes a proposal is under consideration and we are working out whether performance in the National Assembly or the provincial assembly elections should be the basis for the restriction," the official said.

— Internews

India asks to restart trains

Pakistan says offer not enough

ISLAMABAD — India has asked Pakistan for a resumption of freight traffic between the two countries which was halted by New Delhi almost two months ago, but Islamabad will refuse the offer, Pakistan's railways minister said yesterday.

The minister, Javed Ashraf, said Pakistan finds it more important to resume passenger train services, which have also been at a standstill since January 1. He said Indian officials asked the Pakistani high commission in New Delhi to start preparations for a resumption in freight trains. "If they do not allow Samjhota Express," the main passenger train link between the two countries, "we will not allow freight," Ashraf said.

"Hundreds of thousands of families are divided between the two countries. It's more impor-

tant to restore people traffic than goods traffic," he said.

India ended train, bus and air links between the two countries after a December 13 attack on its parliament it blames on militants based in Pakistan. New Delhi also recalled its ambassador from Islamabad and prohibited Pakistan International Airlines from flying over Indian airspace, as part of measures not taken between the arch-rivals since their last full-blown war in 1971. The newly nuclear powers have also massed an estimated 800,000 troops at their border.

Pakistan has denied involvement in the parliament attack and detained about 2,000 alleged rebels, but India says Pakistan has not done enough to warrant a de-escalation.

Indian officials in particular accuse Pakistan of training and

funding rebels in disputed Kashmir who have been fighting since 1989 to end New Delhi's control over its zone of the Himalayan territory.

Pakistan denies charges it is fomenting the insurgency in Kashmir but acknowledges giving moral and diplomatic support to what it calls a legitimate self-determination movement in the Muslim-majority region.

Since the parliament attack, US Secretary of State Colin Powell has conducted exhaustive telephone diplomacy with Indian and Pakistani leaders and visited the region last month hoping to prevent an outbreak of war. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said on Tuesday that with US help, de-escalation in tension between his country and India could take place by May or June. — AFP

Musharraf meets US senators on aid, Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD — Five US senators met here yesterday with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to discuss US aid to his country and Washington's "war on terrorism," officials said.

The delegation, headed by Daniel Inouye, chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Defence, "expressed great appreciation for Pakistan's support to the international coalition in its fight against terrorism," a Musharraf spokesman said.

Musharraf and the senators also discussed bilateral economic issues and "regional security," the spokesman said.

The visit comes a week after Musharraf visited Washington and received warm praise from President George W. Bush and members of Congress for his support of the US war effort in Afghanistan.

Speaking to his cabinet yesterday, Musharraf said the perception of Pakistan has dramatically changed in the United States — which in the late 1990s drew closer to arch-rival India.

"In the United States today Pakistan (is) being increasingly perceived as a country steadily moving towards progress, economic and political stability, moderation and democracy," Musharraf said, according to a cabinet statement. "This change in perception is noticeable (during his visit) as much in the US administration as in the Congress, the media and the American people," he said. — AFP

Bangladeshis on the move ahead of Eid

DHAKA — Tens of thousands of Bangladeshis flocked to the capital's train, bus and ferry terminals yesterday, ahead of the annual exodus to their family villages for the weekend Muslim religious festival of Eid Al Adha.

Ferry and bus operators said they were struggling to cope with the rush and tickets had been sold out for most destinations from Thursday onwards.

With tomorrow being a holiday, many residents of the capital sought to get out early and take advantage of the long weekend. Last year nearly three million of Dhaka's 10 million people left for their homes during the Eid holidays.

Eid Al Adha coincides with the Haj pilgrimage to Makkah, which Muslims are required to undertake at least once in their lifetime. — AFP

Sri Lanka's former minister held over murder charges

COLOMBO — A former Sri Lankan defence minister was yesterday arrested in connection with a mass murder probe and remained in custody to a high security prison.

Anuruddha Ratwatte, who is President Chandrika Kumaratunga's uncle, and his two sons have been implicated in the murder of 10 Muslim men belonging to the rival United National Party, which won December's general election.

A magistrate in the central town of Teldeniya ordered that Ratwatte be remanded in custody till March 4 at a prison in the capital Colombo. But local officials said he claimed he was ill and was taken to a hospital after spending only a few minutes at a high security prison.

The 10 young men were shot dead inside their van in Ratwatte's home constituency in the Kandy district shortly after polling closed on December 5 in the worst single case of violence during the blood-soaked elec-

tion. Police have already arrested 32 army soldiers who provided security to Ratwatte during the election campaign period.

"A police team was at his house overnight recording a statement and he was arrested this morning," a police official said shortly before he was taken to Teldeniya in an airforce helicopter to appear in court.

Shortly after the hearing Ratwatte was taken to a state hospital. "The former minister was brought to the National Hospital and we can't divulge details due to security considerations," hospital director Hector Weerasinghe said.

A court has already ordered the arrest of Ratwatte's two sons who have absconded.

Ratwatte, who was once a leading minister in Chandrika's People's Alliance (PA) government, is now an opposition member of parliament. He was also the main campaign manager for the PA at the last election. — AFP

Sri Lanka to extend truce if accord is delayed

COLOMBO — Sri Lanka said yesterday it would extend a month-long unilateral truce if a Norwegian-brokered peace process failed to produce a formal ceasefire pact with Tamil Tiger rebels this weekend.

The government and the rebels are preparing for talks to end nearly two decades of ethnic conflict and both sides say they want to sign an indefinite truce before two unilateral ceasefires expire on Sunday.

"The Norwegians are working on the signing but even if it is not signed we will extend the ceasefire unilaterally," Foreign Minister Tyrone Fernando told a news conference.

The government is on the verge of its first negotiations in seven years with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, fighting for a separate state for minority Tamils in the north and east.

Fernando said the new government, elected in December on a promise of peace, was keen to get to the substance of a conflict that has claimed more than 64,000 lives. — Reuters

Asian women fall for the Net

SINGAPORE — Asian women were full of festive cheer on the Internet in December with a huge surge in the use of e-mail and electronic greeting cards, NetValue said yesterday.

The proportion of Hong Kong women who used e-mail doubled between October and December to top the survey of four Asian markets, the Internet measurement firm said in a statement.

South Korea saw a 72.9 per cent jump in the number of female e-mail users over the same period, followed by Singapore at 58.9 per cent and Taiwan at 35 per cent.

Hong Kong women also topped their Asian neighbours with a 79.1 per cent rise in the number of women sending out e-greeting cards between November and December.

The proportion of South Korean women using e-cards rose by 64.9 per cent. Taiwan racked up a 56.4 per cent jump and Singapore trailed with 36.9 per cent increase.

"Towards the end of 2001, women were definitely interested in keeping touch with people over the Internet," Jack Loo, president of NetValue, said in a statement.

"The Internet became a global coffee house, more than ever, as a means of people talking to friends, family and even strangers about what was happening around them and how they were coping."

Korean women dominated the Internet chat and Internet Relay Chat scene among the four Asian markets with close to 55 per cent of all female Internet users heading to such sites.

But Singaporean women are fast catching up in chat rooms with a more than fourfold jump in the proportion of female users in the last quarter of 2001, NetValue said. — Reuters

Taiwan bans human cloning

TAIPEI — Taiwan's health authorities said yesterday they have decided against human cloning in embryonic stem cell research due to ethical considerations.

"We had held three public hearings to discuss the issue because we need to listen to different ideas before coming up with a consensus," Chen I-an, section chief at the Department of Health (DOH), said by telephone.

"We decided to ban human cloning, and it's effective immediately," Chen said.

Embryonic stem cells are derived from embryos and have the ability to transform themselves into virtually any type of cell in the body, allowing scientists to regenerate damaged organs or tissue.

However, the research is highly controversial because obtaining the cells requires destroying the embryo.

A decision by US President George W. Bush to allow limited federally funded research on embryonic stem cells has given extensive coverage in Taiwan and triggered heated debate on whether the island should support research using stem cells from human embryos.

DOH had said it was inclined to allow limited embryonic stem cell research as an overall ban on the research could stymie the development of Taiwan's nascent biotechnology sector. — Reuters

Celebrate Eid at LA BOUTAZZA RESTAURANT On Saturday the 23rd

Live Music
Lebanese Singers *
Belly Dance *
Welcome Drink on arrival
Assorted hot appetizers *
(Mini Pizza, Wings Pane, Indian Pakora, Fried Shrimps)
Combination of Lebanese Salads *
Onion soup
Assorted pasta in Italian sauces or
Chicken breast *
in Provencal sauce
Fruit Salad, Cake,
Tea, Coffee & Water

R.O. 6.000 Nett (per person)

KIDS MEAL
Combination of Snacks
(Cheese, Beef Burger, Chicken Burger, Falafel, French Fries)
Cake
Soft Drink

R.O. 2.000 Nett (per kid)

Reservations
571126, 571127



BREAKTHROUGH: A male calf inheriting genetic information from two aged cows that had been transplanted into a three-year-old cow's ovum was born on late Tuesday at a farm operated by Iwate University's agricultural department in Shizukuishi, northern Japan, paving the way for what scientists hope could be similar treatment of fertility among women past their child-bearing prime, local reports said. — Reuters

Bush offers talks with N. Korea

DORASAN (South Korea) — US President George W. Bush said yesterday that the "despotic regime" in North Korea must change its ways but renewed an offer for talks despite concerns over its weapons programme.

After a summit that focused on the North's missile sales and weapons of mass destruction, Bush and South Korea's President Kim Dae-jung went to the edge of the demilitarised zone (DMZ) dividing the Korean peninsula to offer resumed dialogue.

The Pyongyang government and the tightly controlled media that it uses to communicate with the outside world remained silent about the summit.

The two leaders extended their one-to-one summit in Seoul from one hour to almost two in a sign of the importance now being given to North Korea during Bush's three-nation Asian tour.

Bush has repeatedly attacked North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in recent weeks, saying his country was part of "an axis of evil" with Iran and Iraq that was proliferating weapons.

"I will not change my opinion of Kim Jong-il until he frees his people and accepts genuine

proposals (for peace) from countries like South Korea," Bush told a press conference after the summit.

"The burden of proof is on the North Korean leader to prove that he does truly care about people and that he is not going to threaten our neighbours."

"We are peaceful people. We have no intention of invading North Korea. South Korea has no intention of invading North Korea," Bush said.

While anti-riot forces clashed with thousands of anti-US demonstrators in Seoul, Bush and Kim then went to the demilitarised zone that has acted as the unofficial frontier since the 1950-53 Korean War.

"We hope for dialogue with the North despite our concerns about the regime," Bush said in a speech at Dorasan, a station close to the frontier built as part of a proposed cross-border railway that North Korea will not finish. But in again highlighting his doubts about a government that he has previously said was part of an "axis of evil," Bush also said:

"We must not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most dangerous weapons."

Kim Dae-jung also seized upon the summit and the visit to Dorasan to nudge his rival leader.

"I earnestly hope that the North Korean authorities will soon respond to our sincere proposal for dialogue," Kim in his speech at the railway station, while emphasising that he considered South Korea to be "blood allies" with the United States, which still has 37,000 troops in the country.

Bush said the United States would continue to give substantial food aid to the North. The United States is the largest single contributor to North Korea where more than a million people have died from starvation and related disease since 1995.

"So obviously, my comments about evil was toward the regime, toward the government, not toward North Korean people," Bush said.

"Any people that live under a despotic regime has our sympathy," he added. President Kim only expressed satisfaction at the outcome of the summit. But he said Bush had agreed to tackle North Korea's missile programme and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) through dialogue. — AFP

NOTICE

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OPINION

TIMES OF OMAN

ESTABLISHED: 1975

Israel haunted by Lebanese pullout

By Megan Goldin

IT is like a bad case of *deja vu* for many Israelis as a wave of Palestinian ambushes, roadside bombs and rocket strikes brings back memories of tactics that forced Israel to end its costly 22-year occupation of southern Lebanon.

Israeli military analysts say Israel has three options in its conflict with the Palestinians: change tactics, resign itself to a war of attrition or do what the army eventually did under the guns of fighters in Lebanon — quit occupied areas. A group of 1,000 high-ranking generals and security officers have thrown their weight behind a burgeoning domestic call for Israel to withdraw unilaterally from the Gaza Strip and part of the West Bank, lands captured in the 1967 Middle East war.

Their position reflects a growing trend among many Israelis, including some peace activists, who simply want to wash their hands of the occupation. "You build a wall so high that even the birds can't fly over it and then you get out," Israeli military historian Martin Van Crevel said.

Part of Israel's dilemma, military experts say, is that it is impossible to achieve a decisive victory in warfare against fighters. Attempts to do so, they argue, would carry too heavy a human and political price. Large numbers of Palestinian casualties in an Israeli offensive could lead to international outrage and also cost the lives of many Israeli soldiers.

Israel has already come under international criticism for its use of tanks, warplanes and helicopter gunships against Palestinian targets. Israel's retaliatory attacks have frequently killed or wounded Palestinian civilians in the West Bank and Gaza, including many children. At least 861 Palestinians and 273 Israelis have been killed since a Palestinian uprising began in September 2000 after peace talks stalled.

Palestinian fighters have increasingly adopted tactics used by Hezbollah fighters against Israeli forces in Lebanon. Israeli security officials say some Palestinians have been armed and trained by Hezbollah. In an attack last week reminiscent of Israel's experience in Lebanon, Palestinian fighters fired an anti-tank rocket at a bus as a diversionary tactic to lure an Israeli tank down a field where a bomb filled with high-grade explosives had been buried. The blast killed three soldiers and blew the turret off a heavily armoured Merkava tank, an Israeli-built weapon many in Israel viewed as the pride of the armoured corps and invulnerable to such attacks.

The Hamas group has recently fired home-made rockets, called the Qassam-2, into southern Israel. The attacks, which caused no casualties, reminded many Israelis of the Katyusha rockets that Hezbollah used to lob into the Galilee.

The tank incident was just one in a recent series of high profile embarrassments for Israel's army and prompted strategists to suggest it was time to change tactics.

Israeli forces, protected by tanks and armoured personnel carriers, came away empty-handed when they raided Beit Hanoun in the Gaza Strip last week in a sweep for fighters. By the time the lumbering vehicles reached Beit Hanoun, the fighters had long gone. A raid by Israeli armour into the West Bank village of Tamouna a week earlier produced the same results — the fighters fled the moment they saw a build-up of tanks.

Imaginary homelands

THE anxiety is palpable. This week, as a few dozen writers congregate to discuss Indian literature in official New Delhi and a secluded fort just beyond its periphery, the expected celebration is giving way to pangs of worry. The lit fest may have been grandiloquently titled "At Home in the World", but initial vibes betray nothing of the certainty it seems to imply. Instead, there is apprehensive questioning — questioning that must be taken note of in the week ahead, and ever more thereafter.

Is Indian writing in English really an evolving genre? How Indian is this writing, after all, as its scope is generously expanded to include work by members of the sprawling Indian diaspora? Will it survive beyond a burst of literary discoveries? Oh, are we being fair in beaming so much of the spotlight on them? What about those writing in other Indian languages? Must their regional, and by extension rooted, narratives be condemned to polite notices? Old questions crying for decidedly fresher, less politically correct debates.

The date of birth of this hazy thing called Indian writing in English is often deemed to coincide with the release of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. It is a familiar tale told time and again. Rushdie unshackled the Indian imagination, he set the pace for the quick *chutneyfication* of the English language, he tropicalised the novel. He won the Booker for his feat, and all else followed... Vikram Seth's merry depictions of San Francisco and Brahmputr, Arundhati Roy's dazzling experiments with punctuation, Amitav Ghosh's grand narratives from Egypt to Burma. But this time the no longer droopy eyed paterfamilias is not present to take attendance among his legatees. Instead that thus far reluctant father figure is gently leading the pack. Fresh from the Nobel ceremony in Stockholm, having made tenuous peace with the land of his forefathers, the India that shattered him upon first acquaintance four decades ago, V.S. Naipaul is setting the agenda. And it's not a mere lit fest but a Rushdie's famous dismissal of all Indian writing in languages other than English.

Over the last 20-30 years Indian writing in English, he said on Monday, has given India a truer sense of itself than it has ever had before. The fact that books are being written, bought and critiqued, he noted, is a sign of a modern society on the move. Indian writing in other languages, on the other hand, he suggested, has no audience and is thus beyond immediate rescue. It is a cruel assessment. But it demands appraisal and debate. Bhasha writers do need support — in translation, in commercial support. They, however, also must be released for imaginary ghettos condescending critics trap them in. They must be critiqued as stringently as the seemingly undeserving young debutant auctioning his or her book in Frankfurt. That is, if Indian literature is really at home in the world, at last.

Black death in the snow

WHY is it that a fatal disease which disappeared in Europe long ago is coming back to India with such rapid frequency?

The reappearance of plague in parts of Himachal Pradesh reflects a retrograde journey for the country's civil and medical establishment. Despite the panic, so great was the confusion that experts were unable to diagnose the nature of the disease. Is it plague or some mysterious epidemic? Till last year, this debate was on in the Indian Council of Medical Research, with the medical community divided on the question whether it was really bubonic plague which struck Surat or some other epidemic. Now that the National Institute of Communicable Diseases seems sure that it is a case of plague in Himachal Pradesh — though 'confirmatory tests' are still on — one only hopes the authorities' claim that the epidemic is under control is not proved wrong.

The Union Health Ministry says that the disease will not be allowed to spread. But some disconcerting queries remain. Why is it that this 'black death' is resurfacing in India when it has been wiped out almost all over the world? Medieval medicine failed against it when this deadly pestilence, spread by rodents and fleas, after destroying China, killed 25 million people in Europe between 1347 and 1352, and continued to strike till the early 17th century. This is how Italian writer Boccaccio described the mass tragedy: "... the ordeal had so withered the hearts of men and women that brother abandoned brother... and the sister her brother... wives abandoned their husbands, and, what is even more incredible and cruel, mothers and fathers abandoned their children..." So devastating was the epidemic that the western civic and medical infrastructure worked on war footing to eliminate this evil once and for all, and they did it.

But India still seems to be stuck in a medieval time warp. Why only plague, hundreds of people continue to die of diarrhoea, cerebral encephalitis, cholera and malaria in rural India, where the primary health centres often don't even store that cheap but life-saving drug, Quinine. Surat learnt its lesson fast. From being a filthy city, it has now transformed itself into a hygienic urban zone. But other cities still allow open drains and public urination while persisting with archaic sanitation systems. When the paranoia of plague struck Delhi in the early nineties, sanitation workers were asked to clean up huge piles of rotten garbage with their bare hands. With such primitive infrastructure and administrative apathy, not only 'black death', but other deadly diseases are simply waiting to strike. Thank Heaven for the snow-fall. Or else, Himachal's story would have been an even more tragic one. — *The Hindustan Times*



PEACE HOPES: A soldier standing guard over a crowd in Kinshasa. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo there are hopes that peace talks set to begin in Sun City, South Africa on February 25, will bring an end to three-and-a-half years of war in the central African country. — Reuters

Violence scalds Sharon

By Timothy Heritage

A SURGE in Israeli-Palestinian violence that has pushed up the Israeli death toll has increased pressure on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon from both the political left and right over his inability to end the violence.

The bloodshed has also undermined Palestinian President Yasser Arafat's failure to rein in the fighters. But Israeli and Palestinian political analysts say his political standing may be improving in spite of the rising Palestinian death toll.

Eleven Palestinians, including two who were carrying out attacks, and four Israelis were killed on Monday and on Tuesday. The bloodshed followed a rise in violence in the past week of the nearly 17-month-old Palestinian uprising against occupation.

"The violence puts some pressure on both Arafat and Sharon, but there's much more on Sharon," said Gerald Steinberg, head of a conflict management programme at Israel's Bar-Ilan University.

"Internal criticism has risen in the past week or so from both the left and the right. Sharon is

aware that he can't afford to let it get out of hand but he's also aware that this is still a fringe movement."

The political left wants Sharon to do more to make peace but the right wants him to strike back harder at the Palestinians to avenge attacks.

He faces calls in some quarters to reoccupy areas of Palestinian-ruled land and calls from others to withdraw entirely from the occupied territories. But both the left and right say he has failed to carry out election promises. "His problem is he was elected on a promise to provide security but he has not been able to do so," said Israeli political scientist Mark Heller.

"The violence has left Sharon caught between those who want him to act even more vigorously and those who are arguing that this single-track approach that he represents, which is reliant mostly on force, has proved to be futile and needs a fundamental re-think of policy." Despite the increasingly vocal calls from the right to get tougher, and signs that the left is reawakening after laying dormant for many months, Sharon's multi-party coalition government is widely consid-

ered to be under no immediate threat.

Most analysts rule out a major change of policy by the former army general, but some suggest he will face increasing problems if the Israeli death toll keeps rising quickly. "If this is going to continue for another month or a couple of months, I think he could be in deep trouble," said Palestinian political scientist Ali Jarbawi.

Arafat, who is confined by Israeli tanks to the West Bank city of Ramallah, has vowed to rein in fighters behind a wave of Palestinian suicide bombings and other attacks on Israelis.

Some political analysts say each new attack underlines his failure to control the fighters. "The suicide bombings show Arafat can't turn them on and off, which says something about his credibility and his ability to control them," Steinberg said.

But other analysts say international criticism of the Palestinian leader will be limited if the victims of the attacks — as on Monday and Tuesday — are limited to Jewish settlers and soldiers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, not people inside Israel itself.

"You're not talking about

attacks on restaurants or weddings at the moment, but on soldiers and settlers. If they continue not hitting Israeli civilians inside Israel, I don't think it will create more pressure on Arafat," Jarbawi said.

"An explosion in Haifa, or Tel Aviv, or Jerusalem that killed 10 or 15 Israelis passing by would be a different story. Then Arafat would have to do something and outside pressure would grow on him to do something."

Although Israel has tried to isolate Arafat by placing him under what he calls a siege in Ramallah, he meets regularly with international visitors and with delegations of Palestinians.

The Israeli government has even gone so far as to declare Arafat "irrelevant", yet the European Union has kept up active diplomacy with the Palestinian leader and the United States has refused to sever its ties. Arafat's options for action are severely limited. But Jarbawi said that while cracks had started to appear in Sharon's support, the Palestinian leader's internal position strengthened over the past two months because of sympathy for his plight.

A piece of home in the Afghan desert

By Charles Hoskinson

SMALL comforts are a big deal for a soldier thousands of miles from home — hot showers to wash off the dust settling on everything, hot meals to break the monotony of military rations, even the chance to buy a candy bar or send an e-mail.

In the past month, more than 4,300 troops from the United States, Canada, Norway, Jordan and other countries have worked to make Kandahar's dilapidated airport more hospitable, even as they remain alert for constant threats of attack by Al Qaeda and Taliban

remnants.

A sprawling tent city has emerged in the airport — which Soviet troops once also used as an airbase.

The airport's bomb-damaged terminal houses a chapel, a post office and a check-cashing service. A field kitchen serves hot meals and troops can get a hot shower in a nearby tent.

Another tent houses a military exchange where troops can buy sodas, snacks, candy, cigarettes, toiletries and clean undergarments.

"I walk around now and soldiers are walking around with big smiles on their faces,"

Command Sergeant Major Iuniasolua Savusa said.

As the top-ranking enlisted soldier for the US-led task force, it's Savusa's job to make sure the troops are well cared for. Sometimes it isn't easy — everything here must arrive by air, and priority is given to supplies needed for military operations.

For example, hundreds of portable toilets have sat idle here while the troops share cramped latrines because the trucks needed to empty them weren't scheduled to arrive until yesterday.

Savusa said he hoped to have them in place by Friday,

sparing troops the unpopular daily task of burning barrels of human waste with a mixture of gasoline and diesel fuel.

Meanwhile, the task of improving the base continues. Military engineers clean out hundreds of land mines, wrecked Soviet MiG fighters and other debris from more than two decades of war, and spread gravel on roads to keep down the choking clouds of dust that follow each passing vehicle.

Contract labourers are fixing plumbing and bombed-out windows in the terminal building and doing landscaping work around the base.

READERS' FORUM

If there's a will...

THE recurring incidents of negligent driving and haywire movement of children near the schools, causing fatality, could be changed if there is a will and, as the old and mundane phrase goes, 'where there is a will there is a way' ('Will there be a change?' by Swarna S., *Readers' Forum*, February 19). Now, the question is how to build this 'will' in everyone, i.e. the schools, the parents, the teachers, the students and, most importantly, the drivers. Condolence circulars and sympathetic letters will not help much, but concerted efforts are needed for a permanent solution. When an established and powerful institution finds it impossible to control the rash drivers (including the parent-drivers), how individual parents could do this is anyone's guess. So, this method cannot bring in any change. It is a point being pondered by several parents that ISM should take initiative in convening a meeting of all the parents, in the same manner they conduct the management committee meetings with the parents, but this time with a single agenda of 'transportation'. Such a meeting could produce positive results and the management committee would be in a position to take an effective, final decision on this sensitive issue. All of us can see the remarkable job being done daily by the ISM staff in front of the school during the mornings and afternoons in controlling the traffic. (Though this is not happening at the back-gate of the school, where also the traffic goes haywire). The principal and whoever else are party to this humanitarian gesture will always be thankfully remembered by the parent community. Nevertheless, it is not enough. Either this system should be slightly extended (even at an increased financial cost) or some other system should be thought of permanently. Even though the school authorities always maintain that introducing school's own transport system is just not possible, it is the belief of the parents at large that reintroduction of transport system by the school could go a long way in averting tragic happenings on the road to the schools. Let's open our eyes and extend our mite towards this cause. All barriers could then be removed.

P. Viswanathan
Muscat

Wonderful evenings

I AM sure 99 per cent of the Keralites living in and around the capital must have had wonderful evenings on February 13, 14 and 15 at

Qurum Natural Park, which reminded one of Kerala's rich arts, culture and heritage. Congratulations to the Kerala wing of the Indian Social Club on their splendid organisational skills in bringing such a mega event to Oman, which no other linguistic wing of the ISC had done yet. Nor have we witnessed such a mammoth crowd at any other Indian programmes organised by ISC's linguistic wings to date. This festival had brought our rich past to Oman and it was a great opportunity for other communities, Omanis in particular, to learn more about our art, culture and heritage. Keralotsavam recaptured the spirit of temple festivals in Kerala. Malayalees living outside Kerala, irrespective of cast or creed used to travel back to the state during such festive seasons.

T.C.A. Rahim
Ruwi

Not all are corrupt

KERALA government's attitude towards the striking employees is ridiculous. It is wrong to think that all government employees are corrupt. Only a bare minimum of them are corrupt. As per my experience, a majority of the employees are dedicated to their work and accessible to the public. Like any sane person, I do not think that the Kerala government can get rid of its financial problems just by taking away the benefits of its employees. No one will agree with Antony's argument that, since the farmers and other labourers of the state were suffering, government employees also have to suffer. It means, Antony's policy makes Kerala a 100 per cent poor state. The chief minister should know that millions of other people, directly or indirectly, are affected by the present strike provoked by the government. Who will be responsible for the inconvenience and losses already suffered by the common people? Instead of cutting the benefits, Antony's government has to take strict measures to discipline the whole government machinery, including ministers, and make them work for the progress of the state. He has to prove that he is committed to cutting down the extravagance of the government and implementing a financial policy based on it. As a first step, he has to show political courage to ask Sankaranarayanan, who is accused of corruption, to step down and face inquiry. Let him also declare moratorium to industrial strikes for five years.

Aloysius Panakkal
Muscat

Saudi floats peace ideas to spur US

By Miral Fahmy

FED up with reminding the United States of its duty towards Middle East peace, Saudi Arabia has taken the initiative by resurrounding an offer to trade ties with Israel for occupied Arab land.

The proposal, dusted off by Crown Prince Abdullah in a *New York Times* interview this week, has been a longstanding demand of the Arab peace camp since Middle East peace negotiations began in 1991.

But analysts said that by reviving it at a time when spilling Palestinian-Israeli violence has snuffed out peace hopes, Saudi Arabia was publicly advising Washington to take up its Middle East mediator role or jeopardise regional support.

"By restating the position we all started from, the crown prince is putting the focus on the earlier US role under George Bush senior," a London-based diplomat familiar with the kingdom said. Arab-Israeli peace talks launched in 1991 under Bush senior's presidency.

"He's basically telling Washington: 'You need us and we need you but we can only help you if you do something about the violence,'" the diplomat said.

Abdullah's proposal is significant in coming from a leader who is respected in the region for his pro-Palestinian stance.

In the *New York Times* interview, the prince said he had been poised to urge next month's Arab summit to recognise Israel if it withdrew from areas seized in a 1967 war — but had changed his mind because of the headline policies of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon against the Palestinians.

"I wanted to find a way to make clear to the Israeli people that the Arab's don't reject or despise them. But the Arab people do reject what their leadership is now doing to the Palestinians, which is inhumane and oppressive," he explained.

Most Arabs are furious at the

United States because of its perceived support for Israel, and the backlash against Muslims and Arabs after the September 11 attacks on US cities has only fuelled their rage.

This public fury has put governments such as Saudi Arabia in the awkward position of trying to maintain ties with Washington without appearing to support it blindly.

Analysts said Abdullah had managed to do both.

"On the one hand, he's saying that he is willing to make peace with Israel — what Washington wants — and yet it will be a peace on Arab terms — what the Arab people want," said Moghazy Al Badrawy, a Gulf-based analyst.

Saudi Arabia has long played a part in peace efforts, upholding Arab demands as well as lobbying the region's governments on behalf of Washington.

But it has always preferred covert diplomacy until now, and diplomats said Prince Abdullah's very public comments had backed Washington into a corner.

"Saudi Arabia has thrown the ball into the court of Israel and the United States," said Mohammed Subeih, Palestinian ambassador to the Cairo-based Arab League.

"He's plainly told the United States that peace will be impossible as long as Sharon is in power — so if you really want peace as you say you do, then don't pressure the Arabs any more, start working on your friends," he said.

Many Arab states and the Palestinian leadership have given a warm welcome to Abdullah's comments, which analysts said filled a vacuum left by the United States' failed peace efforts.

"This is a concrete Arab proposal for peace at a time when there are none about," a Saudi official said. "It clearly states what we want and what we will give in return. It puts Arabs in a position of power, which is why it is well received."

Hungary solves mystery of 'impossible' economy

By Eszter Szamado

A MISTAKE that let the Hungarian economy "achieve the impossible" has been revealed, justifying analysts' doubts that Prime Minister Viktor Orban's trumpeted "Hungarian economic model" was working.

The Hungarian National Bank (HNB) doubled the country's current account deficit for 2001 on Monday after finding that previous figures were incorrect — solving the mystery of Hungary's high growth rate, according to analysts.

Hungary, among the leading European Union candidates, boasted a growth rate of around four per cent last year — almost double the EU average — and cut its annual inflation rate from 10.1 per cent in December 2000 to 6.8 per cent in December 2001. The HNB correction hiked Hungary's final current account deficit figure for 2001 to 1.248 billion euros (\$1.089 billion) from the 618 million-euro which had been predicted two weeks earlier.

"The economic policy that we call the Hungarian economic model exists and is working. Last year, Hungary's economy was able to achieve goals that economy textbooks describe as impossible to achieve simultaneously," Orban had told the Hungarian Chamber of Industry and Commerce last week.

"Growth was high while inflation and the number of jobless decreased, but consumption grew and the financial balance of the economy also improved. This allegedly is impossible, but in Hungary, it has become possible recently," said Orban, who is standing for re-election in ballots in April.

"Analysts have generally

been baffled over how it is possible to maintain, for months, a relatively high export dynamism while imports are decreasing, in an unfavourable international economic environment," said Pal Belyo of the Ecostat economic research institute.

"We found it difficult to explain the very low monthly current account deficit figures published over the past four months," he added.

The discrepancy in Hungary's current account deficit was the result of using figures from companies' financial reports to calculate current account figures, central bank Governor Zsigmond Jari explained. European Union members and the International Monetary Fund use customs statistics to draw up their data.

"The bank revised data submitted by companies and found that one big multinational had submitted faulty data, and there were several other minor corrections as well," bank spokesman Gabor Missura told state radio.

The bank has "started a probe into the matter, and not only inside the bank," he added. "The big mystery has been solved — that is the most positive characteristic of the bank's correction," said Peter Duronelly, an analyst with Budapest Alapkezeloe, a subsidiary of GE Capital.

"There is no Hungarian model. It is not that Hungary has achieved outstanding economic results because it is doing something outstanding," said the head of the independent GKI analyst institute, Miklos Hegedues. But analysts agreed that the 1.248 billion euro current account deficit for 2001, down from 1.434 billion euros (\$1.252 billion) in 2000, was still "favourable".

From Our Archives

February 1987

Development Council meets

MUSCAT — The State Development Council met to discuss allocations for projects to be carried out by a number of ministries during the current five-year plan.

Presiding over the meeting was Qais bin Abdulmunim Al Zawawi, deputy prime minister for financial and economic affairs. Dr Sherif Lutfi, adviser to His Majesty the Sultan and council secretary-general said allocations for seven ministries were discussed in meetings during the past two days, brining to 23 the number of ministries and departments covered.

In making allocations, the council followed His Majesty's instructions to cover all development projects, particularly those considered priority items, Dr Lutfi said.

Shares end weak on MSM

MUSCAT — The market ended on a weak note prior to the Eid Al Adha holidays. The MSM index was pulled down to its lowest level of the week as the banking sector sub-index closed below the 180-point level. Overall trading volume at RO651,000 was boosted by a transfer of 566,000 shares in the third market in a deal valued at a quarter million rials. Shell Oman found favour with investors and moved up to RO6.650 driven by its current dividend yield of nine per cent. With one year deposits fetching a low two per cent, investors have tended to flock to well-managed dividend paying companies in a bid to profitably deploy surplus cash. BankMuscat Loan Notes hit a high of RO2.870 yesterday. In the banking sector, Oman International Bank hit a new low for the year falling to RO1.130 while BankMuscat dropped to RO1.950. In corporate news, Bank Dhofar yesterday



officially declared a profit after loan loss provisions and before income tax of RO6.73 million as compared to RO6.212 million last year. The net profit for the year stood higher at RO6.133 million compared with RO5.528 million. Net operating profit was higher by 25 per cent at RO9.79 million with gross loans and advances showing a healthy increase of 22 per cent to RO272 million. Loan loss provisions increased by three times to RO3 million. Cash dividends declared today included 10 per cent by Oman Fibre Optics Co., five per cent by Oman Orix Leasing Co. and 40 per cent by National Gas Company. — BankMuscat

CBO deadline to obtain audited accounts extended

By Palazhi Ashok Kumar

MUSCAT — The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) yesterday announced that it has extended the deadline for banks to obtain the audited financial statements for the year 2001 from their customers, who have been provided with credit facilities, such as fund-based and non-fund based to April 30, 2002. Accordingly, every year, April 30 will be the deadline for banks to obtain the audited accounts from their customers for the just concluded year. However, if the financial year of a customer closes on any date other than December 31, banks are directed to obtain the audited financials within four months of the closing date. *Times Business*, on February 4, underlined the genuine hardships for the business community and banks to comply with the deadline of March 31 announced by the CBO on February 28. In fact, some banks believed that the March 31 deadline was for the year 2000, some interpreted the deadline for the year 2001, and some believed that the accounts for the year 2001 can be obtained by March 31, 2002. The CBO further highlighted that banks have to put their customers who

fail to submit their audited accounts, on notice, stipulating that April 30, 2002, is the deadline for compliance. More significantly, non-compliance will result in the suspension of credit facilities from May 1, 2002, and the suspension will continue till the customer submits the stipulated audited financials. In accordance with the Capital Market Authority (CMA) guidelines, corporate entities have to submit their audited accounts to the former for the just concluded year before April 30 of the new-year. Yet, looking through the audited accounts of listed companies, only a few have submitted their accounts before April 30. The apex bank had warned banks that failure to comply with the directive will attract penalties, and any other measures that the board of governors of the CBO may decide upon in terms of the powers incorporated in Article 14 (g) of the Banking Law 2000. In this regard, the board of governors has decided to forfeit all the interest income accrued on account of loan approved by the banks or credit extended to the existing borrowers without obtaining audited financials from them. The CBO has also said that the circular is the last opportunity for banks to avoid stern

regulatory action by the CBO. It was on January 28, the apex bank asked banks (as a reminder to its earlier directives) to obtain audited financials from customers, corporate or individual, who have been provided with credit limits covering both fund-based and non-fund based facilities aggregating RO250,000 or more, and RO500,000 and above (if availed from more than one financial institution) before March 31, 2002. According to the new circular (BED/2002/BKUP-122/banks/172) issued yesterday, banks have to obtain the audited financial statements for the just concluded year from their customers within four months after the closure of the financial year. Banks have to suspend all the credit facilities of the customers, who fail to submit their audited accounts, with effect from May 1, 2002 and cannot be restored until the stipulated audited financials and submitted. The apex bank, on September 13, 2000 had extended the deadline for obtaining the audited accounts for the year 2000 to March 31, 2001 and thereafter annually for the year closed, before March 31, of the succeeding year.

Subsequently, on October 24, the CBO asked banks to extend a grace period up to December-end 2001 to customers, whose facilities, both direct and indirect, aggregating to RO500,000 or more. Most of the businessmen are admitting to the fact that the said regulation is aimed at enhancing the soundness of the country's entire business sector and the banking system. Banks admit to the fact that certain customers took advantage out of the aggressive competition among banks by dictating terms and have not been submitting their audited accounts for a long time. Banks and companies felt that the move indeed was welcoming provided that a comfortable timeframe is allowed. Some customers have been refraining from submitting audited accounts to banks because a few other banks give facilities without audited accounts. Banks have to review the compliance position (account-wise) as at April 30, 2002 and act on the notice given to the defaulter customers by suspending the sanctioned credit facilities of defaulted customers with effect from May 1, 2002. Further, banks have to forward a list of bank credit users to the CBO, whose credit facilities have been

suspended, certifying that all other customers have complied with the stipulated requirements. Banks should realise the fact that their customers' audited financials can be used as one of the key tools for assessing the credit needs and monitoring of credit utilisation, the apex bank advised. Some of the licenced banks had informed the CBO that some limited liability companies, whose entire or major shareholdings are held by the government refused to submit their audited financials. The CBO made it clear that no limited liability company or any bank-credit user entity, as laid down in the CBO regulations, irrespective of its ownership is exempted from the submission of the stipulated financials. *Times Business* had a second round of discussions with the heads of credits of various banks and financial controllers of companies. Majority of bankers opined: "If banks can be asked to obtain the audited financial statements of the year 2001 by June-end 2002 and for 2002 and the coming years strictly before the end of June every year, it will work comfortably and banks will get genuine and competent audited accounts."

Stocks

	INDEX	CHANGE
MSM	157.29	0.37
NIKKEI	9834.13	-13.03
HANG SENG	10749.06	-91.43
BSE	3558.21	-39.40

Bullion

Gold	\$293.7500 (p/ounce)	RO per tola	43.594 per tola
Silver	\$4.5100 (p/ounce)		

Indicative interest rates

FCY	1MTH	3MTHS	6MTHS	9MTHS	12MTHS
USD	1.5200	1.5700	1.7000	1.8700	2.1200
GBP	3.6400	3.7000	3.8600	4.0500	4.2400
EUR	2.9900	3.0200	3.1300	3.2200	3.3300

Information supplied by HSBC

Exchange rates

Foreign Currency	FCY vs USD	FCY vs OMR	OMR vs FCY
US Dollar	-	0.3850000	2.60
Euro	0.8810	0.3408809	2.93
British Pound	1.4349	0.5551987	1.80
Bangladesh Taka	57.25	0.0067585	147.96
Japanese Yen	133.20	0.0029048	344.25
Indian Rupee	48.487	0.0079800	125.31
Pakistan Rupee	59.93	0.0064563	154.89
Sri Lankan Rupee	93.32	0.0041462	241.18
Philippine Peso	51.131	0.0075673	132.15
Egyptian Pound	4.6175	0.0837953	11.93

Information supplied by BankMuscat

StanChart profits plunge on bad debts

LONDON — British-based bank Standard Chartered announced yesterday a 20-per cent fall in pre-tax profits for 2001 to \$1.15 billion (1.3 billion euros) as bad debts soared. Provisions for bad debts climbed by 56 per cent to \$731 million, mainly from exposure to the economic crisis in Argentina, wholesale banking in Malaysia and personal bankruptcies in Hong Kong, the bank said in a statement.

Standard Chartered, which operates mainly in Asia, said that 2001 had been a challenging year both because of the worldwide economic slowdown and the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States. "These developments added to uncertainty throughout the emerging markets, not least in Asia, where the region was still recovering from the crisis of the late 1990s," said chairman Patrick Gillam. Growth had slowed across Asia and Malaysia, while Singapore and Taiwan were in recession, he said. "Consumer confidence was badly affected," he added. "This was particularly noticeable in Hong Kong, where deflationary pressures saw many people suffer from negative home equity for the first time." But Gillam said there were also bright spots in Asia, including healthy trade surpluses and modest inflation, which had allowed central

Mideast, S. Asia region posts 63pc growth in trading profit

By Our Special Correspondent

MUSCAT — Contrary to a sharp fall in its pre-tax profit worldwide for the year 2001, Standard Chartered's business in the Middle East South Asia (MESA) region has recorded a growth of over 60 per cent. The bank's regional operations registered a 63 per cent jump in trading profit at \$196 million for the year compared with \$120 million in the previous year. The net revenue recorded in the region for the year stood higher at \$442 million, official sources told *Times Business*. "The bank has made considerable progress with the integration of Grindlays, probably the largest acquisition of its kind in the region. In fact, the benefits of the acquisition are starting to see through to our performance and provide us with outstanding opportunities for substantial growth," John Filmeridis, StanChart's regional general manager for the MESA region pointed out. The MESA region comprises the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Iran, the Jordan group, the Lebanon, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The group's businesses in the region employ around 3,000 people with a network of more than 80 branches and 95 Automated Teller Machines (ATMs). Banks to keep interest rates low in most countries. The recent entry of China into the World Trade Organisation would also help fuel economic growth across Asia, he added. The pretax figure was below analyst forecasts of \$1.25-1.4 billion, but the bank's share price nevertheless rose 1.5 per cent to 745 pence in early deals. "The underlying operating profitability wasn't too bad actually," said Commerzbank analyst Michael O'Sullivan. "What worried people was the bad debts," he said. "Also

it's one of these perennial takeover targets so in a sense any sense of weakness leads to a bit of buying on bid speculation." Investors are keeping a close eye on banking results to gauge the impact of the economic slowdown and exposure to financial hot spots such as Argentina. British bank Lloyds TSB and Barclays also revealed rising provisions this week, while HSBC shares have suffered from speculation it might follow suit. Standard Chartered also reiterated its commitment to a secondary stock exchange listing in Hong Kong, which it delayed last year because of volatile markets. "We always said we fully intend to list (in Hong Kong) and yes, a listing in the second half is likely" assuming markets recover, finance director Nigel Kenny said AFP's financial newswire AFX. Regarding the bad debts, Kenny said: "The provisions are higher than we expected, but we are cautiously optimistic about the development of provisions in 2002." — AFP

State ownership no obstacle to expansion, says SingTel chief

SINGAPORE — Singapore Telecommunications Ltd (SingTel) said yesterday the government's majority stake in the group has not affected its regional expansion plans. Instead, being labelled a government-linked company (GLC) had been a bonus for the island's dominant carrier with plans to spread outside of the domestic market of four million, SingTel president and chief executive Lee Hsien Yang said. "Being a GLC may in some markets be unhelpful but I think in other markets there are actually considerable cachet to the Singapore brand name," he said at a seminar organised by local think tank, the Singapore Institute of International Affairs. Lee said the GLC name tag gave the "perception that we are straight forward people, that we deal directly, that we don't have hidden agendas and hidden requirements." "If you look at what we have achieved despite being a GLC, I would say that it has not been a hindrance," said Lee. The government holds a 67.5 per cent stake in the telecoms carrier through its investment vehicle Temasek Holdings. SingTel has embarked on an expansion spree well in advance

of the opening of the local telecom market in 2000 and now has a presence in key Asia-Pacific economies including Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, Taiwan, India and Indonesia. To date, it has almost 20 million mobile phone subscribers, which Lee says is going to be a "key business" for the group. But the group failed in two highly-publicised bids to acquire Malaysian outfit Time dotCom and Hong Kong's Cable and Wireless HKT. Analysts said both deals fell through because of fears strategic telecom assets would come under the ownership of the Singaporean government due to its majority stake in SingTel. Even the telecom carrier's successful nine billion US dollar bid for Australia's second largest telecom group Cable and Wireless Optus Ltd faced stiff opposition from prominent Australians. They were worried the Singapore government would get access to sensitive military data to be transmitted by an Optus satellite. The Singapore group followed its Australian success with a \$5602 million purchase for a 22.3-per cent stake in PT Telekomunikasi, Indonesia's largest mobile carrier. — AFP

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Sharing for working lady (Opp. Al Nahda). Contact 9011284.

Single room separate bath for Keralite executive bachelor non-cooking near ISM. Contact 9120936, 782285.

Single room near al Nahda Hospital. Contact Mr. Jolly 7737658

Sharing for exe. bachelors near al Khuwair R/A. Contact 697234.

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Alliance invited from parents of Tamil Christian Staff Nurse working with MOH. 32 yrs. slim, 5'6" looking for a working match preferably in Oman. Reply C/o Derrick, P.B.No. 175, P.V. 411, Sultanate of Oman Email: davidjissacs@hotmail.com

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Two bedroom flat in Ruwi. Contact 7733634/9737562.

Villas in Al Ghubra. Contact 501508/9057348.

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Toyota Corolla 1.3, 93., Contact 786011.

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Ford Taurus & Ford Escort 1998 model. Contact 9724783.

Daewoo Matiz'99, Mazda 323, 1984. Contact 9313632.

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Transport. Contact 9736581

Transportation available. Contact 9383709, 9024616

Transportation available. Contact 7713944, 9063061

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Door to Door computer services. Contact 9201472.

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Web Developer in Java, Application Programming in Visual Basic 6.0 + Oracle 8 with MBA (Marketing) with 3 years experience in Software Development and 1 year in marketing seeks suitable placement. Abraham 9230683.

Accountant, can handle upto finalisation, 6 years experience, computer literate seeks employment. Contact Binu 7715831, 7716973.

Accountant, 8 years Oman experienced familiar with accounting packages having Omani D/L seeks suitable placement. Contact 9024045.

Office Assistant/Sales D/Licence, knowledge in computer, building materials, 5 years exp. in Oman. Purchaser cum storekeeper in carpentry & Decoration co. Contact Satheesh 9450228.

Muslim Housemaid. Contact 9066141/9749317.

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Rack Sets (Steel shelve) Chevrolet spare parts (heavy). Contact 9442878, 9013578.

Used household item for sale A/C General, bed with mattress Queen size, Cupboard double floor, dressing table. Contact 9463983, 7753138

Hotel for sale, Ruwi Plaza. Contact 9743731.

Expat leaving furnitures & electronics. Contact 9203939

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Plumbing, Painting, Shifting. Contact 9343843.

Carpet & Sofa Shampooing, Marble polishing, Ocean Center 707833.

Digital & Analog Satellite installation & maintenance work Orbit, Showtime, Pehla. Contact 9434088 Pushpan

SIT. WANTED

M.Sc Physics, M.Tech (N.D.T) female with computer knowledge seeks placement. Contact 9450438.

Coordinator/Secretary, computer literate, D/Licence. Contact 9061180.

Web Developer in JSP, Applets, Servlets, HTML, MySQL, MS SQL, VB Script, Java Script, having 2 yrs exp. seeks suitable placement. Contact 9379076.

8 years experience Male Steno/Secretary available for employment with Release. Typing, Shorthand & MS-Office, Self Correspondence, knowledge in Export/Import & trading activities. ☎922070.

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Carpet, sofa shampooing marble & mosaic floor polishing, pest control, termite control & general cleaning Contact71460, 9322093.

BUSINESS

ATPC offers special prices for IT products

MUSCAT — ATPC has announced special prices on Optical Mouse, Monster's Worlds Fastest Internet Cable and 17" monitor. ATPC showroom is located at Al Arami Complex in Qurum. ATPC is also providing PCS systems with a three-year warranty that covers installation and support that can be extended to India and the UAE.

ATPC recently tied up with Global Telephony Solutions for products like AccuDial for in depth call accounting and UltraVox for unified messaging solutions. It also joined hands with Maximizer (CRM) and ToBit Faxware for software based solutions and NetFax Inc. NetShare and NetMail for Internet based products. ATPC also offers reliable low-cost VPN and Internet Firewall solutions of Sonic Wall.



IT PRODUCTS: Computers on display at the ATPC showroom

Muscat Securities Market share price bulletin for Wednesday, February 20

52 wk high	52 wk low	Company Name	Last Closing	Traded Shares	Value Traded	Exec.	H Price	L Price	Closing Price	DIFF.	Last Bid	Last Offer
Regular Market												
2.8	1.2	NATIONAL BANK OF OMAN	1.38	6800	9384	8	1.38	1.38	1.38	---	1.35	1.39
1.23	0.97	OMAN HOLDING INTERNATIONAL	1.14	66597	81835	21	1.23	1.2	1.23	0.090 +	1.2	---
3.15	1.35	OMINVEST	1.85	14162	26419	12	1.88	1.86	1.87	0.020 +	1.86	1.9
3.3	1.61	BANK MUSCAT	2	500	975	1	1.95	1.95	1.95	0.050 -	1.91	2
2.09	1.09	OMAN INTERNATIONAL BANK	1.14	17700	20001	16	1.13	1.13	1.13	0.010 -	1.13	1.14
1.7	1.11	DHOFAR INT. DEV. & INV. HOLD.	1.48	12000	17640	13	1.47	1.47	1.47	0.010 -	1.46	1.48
8	7.19	OMAN REFRESHMENT	8	3033	24256	4	8	8	8	---	7.75	---
1.03	0.37	OMAN TEXTILE MILLS	0.38	4100	1558	6	0.38	0.38	0.38	---	0.37	0.39
0.65	0.47	OMAN FISHERIES	0.61	200	122	1	0.61	0.61	0.61	---	0.6	0.62
1.9	1.5	UNITED POWER	1.7	2400	4080	3	1.7	1.7	1.7	---	1.7	1.73
4	2.65	BP OMAN	3.8	1553	5930	11	3.82	3.82	3.82	0.020 +	3.82	3.87
0.56	0.31	TOPAZ ENERGY & MARINE	0.48	7000	3360	5	0.48	0.48	0.48	---	0.47	0.48
6.85	5.4	SHELL OMAN MARKETING	6.64	22000	146288	9	6.65	6.64	6.65	0.010 +	6.6	6.65
... Totals ...				158045	341848	110						
Parallel Market												
0.91	0.6	AL SHARQIA INV. HOLDING	0.85	10577	9442	14	0.91	0.88	0.89	0.040 +	0.91	0.92
1.93	0.95	UNITED FINANCE	1.78	15900	28211	12	1.78	1.76	1.77	0.010 -	1.77	---
0.42	0.27	THE ORYX JOINT INV. FUND.	0.3	2100	630	3	0.3	0.3	0.3	---	0.3	0.31
0.45	0.28	MAJAN JOINT INV. ACCOUNT	0.44	14600	6424	19	0.44	0.44	0.44	---	0.44	0.45
0.44	0.23	OMAN & EMIRATES INV. (OM)	0.23	21600	4969	11	0.24	0.23	0.23	---	0.22	0.24
0.42	0.17	MUSCAT NATIONAL HOLDING	0.22	15200	3496	12	0.23	0.23	0.23	0.010 +	0.23	0.24
0.83	0.26	AL ANWAR IND. & TRADING	0.47	17	7	1	---	---	---	---	0.45	0.47
3.4	1.1	OMAN FIBER OPTIC	1.97	29	55	1	---	---	---	---	1.9	---
0.75	0.4	NAT. ALUMINIUM PRODUCTS	0.71	100	71	1	0.71	0.71	0.71	---	0.71	0.72
0.28	0.16	RENAISSANCE HOLDING	0.17	200	34	1	0.17	0.17	0.17	---	0.16	0.18
... Totals ...				80323	53340	75						
Third Market				566,143	254,764				5			2
Bonds Market												
BANK MUSCAT BONDS			2.38		700	2009	1	2.87	2.87	2.87	0.020 +	
Totals				Tot. Traded Shrs.	Tot. Bonds	Tot. Value		Total Exec.			No. Comps.	
				804,511	700	651,961		191			26	
Indices												
52 wk high	52 wk low	Sector Name	Index	Prev. Index	DIFF.	Change						
258.8	166.17	Banks and Investment Sector	179.87	181.19	-1.32	0.73%						
130.93	115.82	Industry Sector	122.91	122.93	-0.02	0.01%						
115.53	97.5	Services Sector	113.95	113.85	0.1	0.08%						
197.16	146.34	General Index	157.29	157.88	-0.59	0.37%						

ADVANCE-DECLINE RATIO	
Advances	6
Declines	4
Unchanged	13
Not Traded	70

VOLUME LEADERS		Price	No. of Shares
Oman Holding Intl.	1.230	66,597	
Shell Oman Marketing	6.650	22,000	
Oman & Emir (Oman)	0.230	21,600	
Oman International Bank	1.130	17,700	
United Finance	1.770	15,900	

TOP GAINERS				Price	Increase	% Increase
Oman Holding Intl.	1.230	0.090	7.89			
Al Sharqiya Invst. Holding	0.910	0.060	7.06			
Muscat National Holding	0.230	0.010	4.55			
Ominvest	1.870	0.020	1.08			
BP Oman	3.820	0.020	0.53			

TOP LOSERS				Price	Decrease	% Decrease
BankMuscat	1.950	-0.050	-2.50			
Oman International Bank	1.130	-0.010	-0.88			
Didic	1.470	-0.010	-0.68			
United Finance	1.770	-0.010	-0.56			

Microsoft quest to master video-games likely to hit trouble in Japan market

TOKYO — It could be game-over for Microsoft Corporation after it launches the Xbox console in Japan tomorrow, as strong Japanese rivals crush the US computer giant's quest to conquer the video-game industry, analysts said.

"The foray into the gaming business is the biggest challenge for Microsoft in the 21st century and Microsoft has the financial power to meet such a challenge," said Hirohisa Oura, local managing director of the firm's Japanese arm. "We will make this year the year of the Xbox."

Xbox will compete directly against Sony Corp.'s PlayStation2 and Nintendo Co. Ltd.'s GameCube on their home turf — a near-impossible challenge, according to analysts. "It seems there is almost no chance of Xbox becoming a major player in Japan," said Marusan Securities analyst Junji Nakachi. "The domestic market will be where Nintendo and Sony engage in head-to-head battle."

Microsoft surprised sceptics when it sold 1.5 million Xboxes after launching the console in the United States last November, while Nintendo has only shipped around 1.4 million GameCube (GC) machines there.

But in December alone, Sony sold around 2.5 million PlayStation2 (PS2) consoles in North America and five million worldwide.

"Judging by the available information, Xbox is unlikely to become an immediate threat to

the PS2 or GC in Japan," said Tokyo Mitsubishi Securities senior analyst Nobumasa Morimoto.

"We should not be too euphoric about the start-up of Xbox in Japan, and we should not make hasty decisions on the likelihood of success in making inroads into the Japanese games market just because of the initial sales," he said.

Analysts estimate Microsoft will ship around 300,000 Xbox consoles to Japan for the launch, compared with the 980,000 machines released at the debut of PlayStation2 in 2000, and 450,000 for GameCube.

"In Japan it will be difficult for Microsoft at the start," said BNP Paribas game and media analyst Takeshi Tajima.

"The price-tag for Xbox is too expensive, it's pricing itself out of the market, also it does not have enough title games," he said.

The Xbox will cost \$34,800 (\$262) compared with \$29,800 for PlayStation2 and \$24,800 for GameCube. But you pay for an array of special functions, including a built-in hard-drive to download games faster, and Internet access, said Microsoft's Oura.

"Although the price sounds higher than others, Xbox has pre-installed online functions... and the most advanced graphic technology," he said.

"We would like to create an online game world like Jurassic Park."

But Microsoft's machine will have a mere 12 games titles

at first — against over 400 on PlayStation2 — with only three exclusive to Xbox, analysts said. "Most are just remoulded versions of games for other consoles," said Mizuho Investors Securities analyst Satoshi Kurihara. "Overall, I see almost no 'killer' title to attract consumers."

Microsoft may also lose out because — at about 30 centimetres (12 inches) wide, 30 centimetres deep and 10 centimetres high — Xbox dwarfs rival consoles and would be harder to fit in the small apartments of typical young games players in Japan, analysts said.

News of Xbox's imminent arrival failed to ruffle the feathers of the competition.

"We are not worried at all," said Koichiro Katsurayama, a spokesman for Sony Computer Entertainment. "We shall keep developing our product by introducing new software."

Nintendo was equally calm. "It won't be a problem," said a spokeswoman. Microsoft must slash its prices fast for Xbox to stand a chance at wrestling market share from PlayStation2 and GameCube, said BNP Paribas' Tajima.

But despite the negative speculation, the US firm remained adamant its debut in Japan — the world's second-largest video-game market — would be a success.

"(It) is the key milestone for the overall Xbox business worldwide," the firm said. Xbox will hit European shores on March 14. — AFP

Ferrari officials visit Shanfari office

MUSCAT — Mike Weston, sales director and Mark Ebbage, officials representing Ferrari and Maserati in the Middle East, have visited the Shanfari Automotive office recently. They provided professional tips and helped in the evaluation and assessment of the technical aspects of the brand. A brief preview of the technical facilities and set-up of equipment at Al Khuwair service centre of Shanfari Automotive were presented. It also was an opportunity for them to meet owners and enthusiasts of these reputed brands in Oman. Mike Weston appreciated the achievement in the steady increase of Ferrari sales done by Shanfari Automotive.

The Maserati has continuously reaffirmed the brand identity that comes along with each model having a greater balance between performance, technology and comfort.

Snowwhite special offer

MUSCAT — Snowwhite, Oman's No. 1 choice for laundry and dry cleaning services, has come out with some attractive promotion schemes for Eid Al Adha by offering "free" laundry coupon plus surprise gifts. According to its new general manager, James Prenter, the company is planning to introduce a unique cleaning service under the Snowwhite brand name. The recently introduced two-hour service facility at Bausher was a major success. Customers can contact Snowwhite on 592377 for more details.

Hyat Furniture special offer

MUSCAT — Hyat Furniture, the new name in furniture, has announced a special offer on different range of home and office furniture, electronics, carpets and curtains. A wide selection of world-class sofa sets, exquisite wall units, computer tables, TV racks, A/Cs, cookers, electronics and electric appliances, blankets and bedcovers, safe boxes and rugs are displayed now at Hyat Furniture showroom. Hyat Furniture is offering a special offer on sofa sets, curtains and carpets. The special offer is available on the recently arrived models of sofa sets, curtains and carpets. A wide selection of exquisite sofa sets, solid dining tables and stylish steel furniture are available with IGF showrooms in Muscat and Salalah.

IGF special offer on Eid

MUSCAT — International Golden Furniture (IGF), leaders in home and office furniture, has announced a special Eid offer on sofa sets, curtains and carpets. The special offer is available on the recently arrived models of sofa sets, curtains and carpets. A wide selection of exquisite sofa sets, solid dining tables and stylish steel furniture are available with IGF showrooms in Muscat and Salalah.

Singapore, HK mull trade pact

SINGAPORE — Top Asian rivals Singapore and Hong Kong are exploring the idea of a bilateral free-trade agreement, the Trade Ministry said here yesterday. In a statement, the ministry said Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Hong Kong Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa had discussed the issue on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific leaders' summit last year in Shanghai. — AFP

Irish bank AIB says 'rogue trades' date back to 1997

DUBLIN — Allied Irish Bank (AIB) said yesterday that the rogue trading at its US subsidiary which sparked a furore earlier this month had been going on undetected since 1997.

AIB said in a statement that the final loss from rogue trader scandal was \$691 million. (789 million euros), less than the \$750 million first announced.

But the losses meant that 2001 pre-tax profits had almost halved to 612 million euros after the cost of the rogue trades, which stood at \$13 million euros after tax.

Ireland's biggest bank shocked its customers and financial markets when it revealed earlier this month that John Rusnak, a foreign exchange trader at Allfirst Financial, had disappeared after allegedly running up massive losses. "The suspected fraud has been a substantial blow to all AIB stakeholders," said AIB chief executive Michael Buckley.

But he added: "AIB remains a well-capitalised profitable company with a thriving retail and commercial banking business. I am determined to spare no effort in repairing the damage we have suffered."

But the bank is under pressure from shareholders to explain why alarm bells had not starting ringing earlier. "One of the material facts that has come out of the investigation so far is that the losses that this trader was covering up in this incredibly devious way actually began as far back as 1997," Buckley later said. — AFP

Wall Street casts pall over Asian markets

SINGAPORE — Steep US stock losses on fresh concerns over American corporate debt and accounting woes dampened sentiment in much of Asia and drove down share prices in the region's key markets yesterday.

Wall Street's dark shadow hung over trade in Hong Kong, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur as they headed south. Asia's biggest market, Tokyo, finished nearly flat with the benchmark Nikkei index down 13.03 points or 0.13 per cent at 9,834.13, while the broader Topix index fell 3.05 points or 0.32 per cent to 956.91.

Defensive issues, such as drug makers and utilities, balanced falls in several high-tech issues including Matsushita Electric Industrial Co Ltd after the tech-heavy US Nasdaq's tumble.

Matsushita Electric Industrial, the most actively traded issue by value, fell 2.45 per cent to ¥1,512.

"The market had risen on policy hopes in the run-up to his (US President George W. Bush's) arrival," said Kuniaki Fujimoto, managing director at Japan Investment Trust Management.

"Now that the event is over, the Nikkei is likely to enter a correction phase in which it moves in a range of between 9,500 and 10,000." Bush completed a visit to Tokyo on Tuesday. The yen was stuck in a tight range as the market awaited new word from the Japanese government on whether it would help bail out the country's ailing banks.

A government spokesman had said a late-night meeting between Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and BOJ Governor Hayami did not focus on aid for the banks.

The yen was quoted at ¥133.28/33 per dollar at 0641GMT after hitting a high of ¥133.12.

In New York, the blue-chip Dow Jones Industrial Average lost 157.90 points, or 1.59 per cent, to 9,745.14 and the broader Standard & Poor's 500 Index fell 20.84 points, or 1.89 per cent, to 1,083.34, its worst decline in two weeks.

The technology-laced Nasdaq Composite Index sank 54.59 points, or 3.02 per cent, to 1,750.61 after scraping a new session low of 1,745.05, its lowest level since early November and down 10 per cent year to date.

International Business Machines Corp slid to a four-month low after a Wall Street investment firm said worries about the company's complex accounting practices would weigh on the shares. US telecommunications shares tumbled on jitters a credit crunch could drag more firms into bankruptcy.

In Singapore, the benchmark Straits Times Index was down 1.14 per cent or 19.82 points at 1,722.91 in afternoon trade. "It's the blue chips that are getting the battering ... due to Wall Street's losses and worries over bank earnings after DBS Bank's disappointing results, but selling pressure is mild," said a director of institutional sales at a bank-backed brokerage.

DBS, southeast Asia's largest bank, on Monday posted a 28 per cent fall in 2001 net profit to \$599 million (\$546 million) due to sharply higher provisions for bad loans and a large goodwill write-down. — Reuters

VESSEL MOVEMENT AT SALALAH PORT

VESSELS ALONGSIDE				
B/NO	VESSEL NAME	FLAG	DISCHARGING/LOADING	LAST/NEXT PORT
03	M/V MSC CLORINDA	PANAMA	CONTAINERS	MUMBAI/JEDDAH
04	M/V MARGRETHEMAERSK	DENMARK	CONTAINERS	MUMBAI/SUEZ
23	M/V YATHREB	EGYPT	L- FLOUR	BOSASO/MUKALA
23	M/V AL WASIMI	UAE	SUPPLY VESSEL	FUJAIRAH/TBA
24	M/V SEA FLOWER	DENMARK	FOR CLASS SURVEY	PORT SUDAN/MUKALLAH
26	M/V ALLAH RASAN	BOLIVIA	NIL	BOSASO/TBA
O/J	M/T MORMACASTAR	USA	D-BULK FUEL	JEBEL ALL/TBA
30	M/V LIDAN	CYPRUS	L-BULK CEMENT	MUKKALLAH/MUKKALLA
31	FUEL BARGE-I	CAYMAN IS	BULK FUEL	FUJAIRAH/TBA
31	FUEL BARGE-II	CAYMAN IS	BULK FUEL	FUJAIRAH/TBA
ARRIVALS				
VESSEL NAME	FLAG	CARGO	LAST/NEXT PORT	ARRIVE
M/V MARSTAL MAERSK	DENMARK	CONTAINERS	JEDDAH/JEBEL ALI	21.02.02
M/V LEXA MAERSK	DENMARK	CONTAINERS	SUEZ/JEBEL ALI	21.02.02
M/V SEA LAND INTERPID	SINGAPORE	CONTAINERS	JEBEL ALO/COLOMBO	21.02.02
M/V JULIA 54	GEORGIA	D. WHEAT BRAN	TBA/TBA	21.02.02
M/V PHONICIA	SYRIA	L. CEMENT	MUKKALLAH/BOSASO	21.02.02
M/V MAERSK VANCOUVER	DENMARK	CONTAINERS	DURBAN/P. LOUIS	22.02.02
M/V CAPE SCOTT	CYPRUS	CONTAINERS	PORT SUDAN/ZANZIBAR	23.02.02
M/T WADBANNAQA	PANAMA	D. BULK FUEL	MINA FAHL/ MINA FAHAL	23.02.02
M/V OPTIMA ACE	PANAMA	D. STEEL PIPES	MUSCAT/TBA	23.02.02
M/V MAERSK ATLANTIC	SINGAPORE	CONTAINERS	COCHIN/ COLOMBO	24.02.02
M/V LICA MAERSK	DENMARK	CONTAINERS	MUMBAI/ JEDDAH	24.02.02
M/V MAERSK SAN JOSE	CYPRUS	CONTAINERS	MOMBASA/ADEN	24.02.02
M/V DAGMAR MAERSK	GERMAN	CONTAINERS	T. PELEPAS/ SUEZ	24.02.02
M/T MONA	HONGKONG	D.FUEL OIL	FUJAIRAH/TBA	24.02.02
M/V FRANCISCA SCHULTE	CYPRUS	CONTAINERS	P. QASIM/ P. QASIM	25.02.02
M/V CENTRADER	ST. VINCENT	L-BULK CEMENT	MUSCAT/ MUSCAT	26.02.02
M/V AL WAKRAH	QATAR	L/ CEMENT	DOHA/ TBA	26.02.02
M/V SIELTOR	CYPRUS	CONTAINERS	DIBOUTI/ HODEDAHI	27.02.02

AMERICAS/PHILIPPINES

Suspected Al Qaeda bomber won't get off hook

MANILA — An Indonesian suspected of being an explosives expert for the Al Qaeda network in southeast Asia will not get off the hook despite the dropping of a key charge against him, a Philippine official said yesterday.

Citing lack of evidence, prosecutors on Tuesday dismissed a charge of illegal possession of explosives and firearms against Fathur Rohman Al Ghazi.

"The charge was dismissed without prejudice to refiling (of the charge) because there was a need for additional evidence," Justice Undersecretary Manuel Teehankee said.

However, "this is only in the investigations stage and you cannot say the case has been dropped," Teehankee said. "There is no danger of him being released. He is detained and will continue to be detained."

Al Ghazi, 30, is accused of being a key figure in Jemaah Islamiyah, an alleged network active in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia with links to Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda terror network.

The Al Qaeda is blamed for the September 11 terror attacks in the United States.

Dubbed the "demolition man" for the Al Qaeda, Al Ghazi was arrested last month in Manila and quickly charged with possession of explosives and firearms, and violation of Philippine immigration laws.

The junking of the explosives and firearms charge came as a surprise to diplomats from neighbouring southeast Asian nations.

The law enforcement authorities "merely presented photographs of the alleged explosive components and failed to present the physical evidence," according to a report by prosecutors.

"The Philippines had said so much about this man and the dangerous things he allegedly did and he planned to do and I don't think it is going to fizzle out just like that," a diplomat said.

Several police officers in the region had reportedly visited Manila recently to seek more information about Al Ghazi who still faces charges of violating immigration laws.

His arrest in mid-January led to the seizure of a tonne of explosives, capable of levelling a block of buildings, as well as 300 detonators and 17 assault rifles.

The explosives, found buried behind a house he had built in southern General Santos city, were believed meant for attacks in southeast Asia. Chief Superintendent Crescencio Maralit of the Philippine National Police said they would refile the charge possibly next week against Al Ghazi — this time with the backing of full evidence.

"It's either we bring back a sample of the explosives to Manila or we ask justice officials to go there so they could see the explosives for themselves," he said. — AFP

San Francisco lawyer Marjorie Knoller, who was in charge of the two Canary Island fighting dogs when they savaged her neighbour Whipple, faces second-degree murder and manslaughter charges in the former star athlete's grim death. If jurors find the 46-year-old attorney guilty, she be the first person convicted in California of murder for her dog's actions.

Knoller's husband, Robert Noel, 60, was not home during the attack, but faces involuntary manslaughter charges because, prosecutors say, he should have known that the dogs — named Bane and Hera — were vicious and dangerously aggressive.

The case generated an avalanche of press coverage in San Francisco after lurid allegations surfaced about the defendants' links to the racist Aryan Nation prison gang.

Hammer said Noel and Knoller were not only aware of the dogs' violent behaviour but revelled in it while training them as aggressive guard dogs for a white supremacist prison inmate, Paul "Cornfed" Schneider, whom they adopted as their son as part of a bizarre three-way relationship.

The prosecutor said the attack on Whipple came after the couple callously ignored repeated warnings that Bane and Hera were dangerous and after the dogs attacked or tried to attack people or animals some two dozen times.

"The defendants repeatedly ignored all of those warnings and Diane Whipple is dead as a result of that," Hammer said.

Hammer said Knoller was nowhere to be found in the hallway when police arrived, having stepped over or around Whipple to retrieve her house keys from inside the dying woman's foyer. He said this amounted to acting with "implied malice" and fit the definition of second degree murder with which Knoller is charged.

He added that Noel personally knew how dangerous the dogs were because one had almost bitten off his finger. During a sometimes tearful opening statement, Knoller's attorney Nedra Ruiz said her client made a desperate attempt to save Whipple's life, throwing herself on the woman's body as Bane tore at her neck, throat and clothes.

She vowed that Knoller will testify in her own behalf. During the opening statement, Knoller at one point appeared to break into tears. Ruiz, who flung herself repeatedly on the floor to act out the attack in front of jurors, said Knoller was dragged bodily down the hallway by Bane, unable to stop him, after the dog became "interested" in Whipple or her bags of groceries. She dismissed Hammer's suggestion that Knoller was more interested in finding her keys than in helping the dying, naked woman who was lying a pool of blood outside her apartment and suggested that the police were at fault for not staunching the flow of blood quickly enough.

— Reuters

Prosecutors detail grim death in dog mauling case

LOS ANGELES — A prosecutor told jurors on Tuesday that the owner of two giant attack dogs was guilty of murder for letting them rip the throat out of a 33-year-old woman in a blood frenzy, but a defence lawyer said her client heroically risked her own life trying to stop the attack.

Delivering his opening statement to a seven-man, five-woman jury in the sensational trial over the dog mauling death of popular lacrosse coach Diane Whipple, Deputy District Attorney James Hammer said police officers stumbled on a horrifying scene when they answered a distress call on Jan. 26, 2001.

"The first officer came up the stairs and what she saw in the hallway was a naked woman, with no clothes on her whatsoever, covered in blood and crawling toward her apartment," Hammer told the jurors as he showed them gruesome autopsy and crime scene photos on a large projection screen.

"Every shred of clothing had been ripped off her body by the dogs," Hammer said as trial in the case opened in Los Angeles, where it was moved by the judge following extensive pre-trial publicity in northern California. "She was pushing herself up with her throat ripped out."



EVIDENCE: An evidence photograph displayed during opening statements in Los Angeles criminal court by Nedra Ruiz, attorney for Marjorie Knoller, showing a picture of the hand of defendant Knoller after the deadly dog attack. — Reuters

US troops fan out across Philippine rebel stronghold

ISABELA (Philippines) — Five Abu Sayyaf gunmen were captured yesterday as elite US forces fanned out across their southern Philippine island stronghold in a joint operation to neutralise the bandits notorious for beheading their captives.

About 80 US Special Forces commandos are already on Basilan, a jungle-clad volcanic island where the Abu Sayyaf are holding hostage a US Christian missionary couple and a Filipina nurse, officials said.

Eighty other commandos are expected to arrive in the next two days.

The latest batch of US troops landed in Basilan aboard huge MH-47 Chinook helicopters in total darkness overnight, using only night-vision devices.

American servicemen unloaded their supplies at a rustic base inside a rubber plantation while their superiors conferred with Philippine officials.

"This is a building process," said Lieutenant-Colonel David Maxwell, head of the US contingent on Basilan.

The Green Berets have already begun deploying to various military posts, with some staying at the army's infantry brigade headquarters and others joining hardened Filipino Marines in Maluso town, some 18 miles from Basilan's capital of Isabela.

On a tiny island off the coast of Maluso Filipino troops captured four Abu Sayyaf guerrillas yesterday, while a fifth was arrested in a raid on a rebel lair in Tuburan town, said military southern command spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Danilo Servando.

Two soldiers were on Tuesday wounded in clashes with the rebels on Tingulan island off Basilan in the first eruption of violence since US troops began arriving on Sunday.

Colonel Renato Miranda, commander of the 2nd Marine brigade in Maluso, said the rebels were apparently trying to escape from Basilan, an indication that the US presence was affecting the Abu Sayyaf's confidence.

"We are trying to cordon the area," Miranda said, but added that no American soldiers joined the pursuit operation.

"The rebels are looking for a way out, but it was fortunate we caught up with them."

About 18 US soldiers were welcomed at the Marine camp with a meal of rice, sardines, fish and beef stew before they were escorted to visit a jungle outpost accessible only by military trucks along unpaved roads and muddy river beds.

"They are familiarising themselves and assessing the situation in the area where they are deployed," Miranda said.

In Manila, President Gloria Arroyo defended her decision to screen television footages of Abu Sayyaf gunmen beheading captured Filipino soldiers that has triggered public debate in the Catholic country.

The Abu Sayyaf's brutality, she said, should be exposed for the public to rally behind the joint operations, which have been vigorously opposed by some groups.

"We will wipe out these bandits who have held the entire nation hostage with their cruelty, their evil," the president said.

Other US soldiers were seen demonstrating to their Filipino counterparts in an army camp in Tabiawan how to use their M4 carbines, an improved version of the 20-year-old M16 rifles that most of the Philippine soldiers still use.

Officials stressed the Americans would only observe and train local troops and would not directly engage the Abu Sayyaf, although they could fire back if attacked.

Asked if he anticipated a clash with the Abu Sayyaf, Washington native, Sergeant Peter Baziotis said "I don't think anybody in his right mind would look forward to something like that."

"We're here to help train them in the use of some equipment... that our government may supply them later, but I'm not here to go on an operation to hit the Abu Sayyaf," he said. — AFP

Brown happy after getting clean slate

LOS ANGELES — US "Godfather of Soul," James Brown was on Tuesday cleared of sexually harassing a former employee, but a jury ruled that the woman was wrongfully sacked by the musician's company.

The decision all but concluded a weeks-long legal battle fought in a Los Angeles court during which the world-famous singer insisted the \$2 million lawsuit was "frivolous" and aimed at extracting cash from him.

"We won!" Brown's attorney Debra Opri said. "He is delighted and overcome with emotion. He feels real good," she said of her client — the singer of such megahits as *I Feel Good* — who was not in court to hear the verdict.

"I am very pleased that the jury agreed with our position that this was a frivolous lawsuit and the only course of action for wrongful termination was against a company that was not originally a defendant," Opri said.

She added that Brown would appeal the jury's decision that Brown's company James Brown Enterprises had unlawfully sacked former model Lisa Agbalaya, 36, who worked in the firm's California office between 1992 and 1999.

The 68-year-old Brown had vowed at the start of the trial that he would fight back in court against a growing trend of lawsuits against celebrities.

"I will not allow individuals to file these kinds of lawsuits with the belief that it would be cheaper to settle than to defend them publicly and at great cost to the celebrity," he said in January. — AFP

Depression changed gentle Texas mom, says mother-in-law

HOUSTON — Andrea Yates went from loving, gentle mother to non-responsive zombie who scratched the hair off her head and walked endlessly around in circles as she fell into a depression so dark that she killed her five children, mother-in-law Dora Yates testified on Tuesday.

In a trial that could send Andrea Yates to the Texas death chamber, Dora Yates blasted prosecutors for seeking the death penalty and said Andrea had not been properly treated for severe depression that flared up after the birth of her last child.

Yates, 37, pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity to two charges of capital murder in a case that has raised questions about mental health and stress on mothers. Women's groups, including the National Organisation for Women, have denounced the trial, saying Yates needs treatment, not punishment.

"Andrea is a very gentle person and a very loving person and she is very creative with the children, or was," Dora Yates said. "She would hold the children, rock them, put her arms around them."

But on June 20, 2001, Yates called police to her suburban Houston home to tell them she had drowned the children in the family bathtub.

Officers found John, 5, Paul, 3, Luke, 2, and Mary, six months, wrapped in a sheet on the bed, while Noah, 7, was floating face down in the bathtub. Autopsies found bruises indicating they struggled to escape their mother's grasp, prosecutor Joe Omwby said.

Omwby showed the jury the clothes the children wore that day in a display that Yates' attorneys dismissed as an attempt to inflame sentiment against their client.

Five small sets of pajamas and T-shirts were paraded in front of the 12-member panel in what Omwby said was the only evidence to accurately depict the size of the young children killed by their much-larger mother.

So strenuous were defence objections that Yates' attorney George Parnham shouted out in court what he previously had said only in carefully couched words: "We will stipulate to the fact that on June 20 Andrea Yates drowned her five children. ... There's no question that this woman killed her children."

Dora Yates said that in the months leading up to the tragedy, Andrea Yates was hospitalised twice for depression that left her in a state of near-catatonia. She seldom spoke or ate and could not care for her family.

For hours she would scratch her hair off her head, sit staring blankly at walls and walk around in circles, said her mother-in-law who came down from her home in Tennessee to help care for the children. — AFP

Bodies found in crematory case reach 155

NOBLE (Georgia) — The number of corpses uncovered in and around a crematory here where bodies were dumped instead of cremated has risen to 155, authorities said on Tuesday.

Officials say the final count in the grisly case could exceed 200. Five bodies were uncovered on Tuesday in a mound of dirt in crematory operator Brent Ray Marsh's backyard.

Authorities anticipate finding 15 to 20-year-old remains in the grounds of the family-run Tri-State Crematory's 12-acre site, some 150 miles northwest of Atlanta.

Marsh, 28, remains jailed on 16 counts of theft while the entire community deals with the shock in the case, which came to light at the weekend after a man walking his dog stumbled over a skull.

On Tuesday, authorities dragged a white coffin containing a body out of tall weeds some 20 metres behind Marsh's home, while just behind the house search crews were busy combing a small lake for more bodies.

Marsh lives 200 metres from the crematory managed until 1996 by his now bedridden father Rhames Marsh who has not been charged in the case. Marsh is accused of accepting bodies from funeral homes and then failing to cremate them. Authorities said Marsh told them the crematorium was "broken and didn't work". Georgia Bureau of Investigation director Milton "Buddy" Nix, who said the case was "horrendous beyond description, noted that crews were using underwater cameras to look for disposed corpses. — AFP

Lawsuit against Sept. 11 terrorists

WASHINGTON — Six widows and a mother whose son was killed in the September 11 attacks named Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, the Taleban, Iran and Iraq in a lawsuit on Tuesday whose aim is to dry up the terrorists' finances.

"I will do whatever I can to bankrupt terrorists, those who harbour terrorists and those who support terrorism," said Fiona Havish during a press conference in Washington. Her husband Don died in the attacks on the twin towers in New York.

The class action lawsuit was brought before a federal court in Washington, establishing a new front against the terrorists.

"The plaintiffs have asked the court to award an amount of damages sufficient to ensure that the terrorists are never again able to commit such acts," said one of the lawyers representing the seven families, Thomas Mellon.

In addition to Bin Laden, suspected of having financed the attacks in New York and Washington that killed more than 3,000, the complaint names ousted Taleban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, the 19 hijackers, and 141 organisations, institutions or people identified by the US Treasury and State Department as having financed terrorism.

Frenchman Zacarias Moussaoui, the first to be accused in the United States in connection with the September 11 attacks, is also named in the lawsuit. Iran and Iraq are named in the suit as having "provided material support to the terrorists" behind the attacks. — AFP

Washington, Spears top US box office

LOS ANGELES — Wrenching hospital hostage drama *John Q.*, starring Oscar nominee Denzel Washington, and teen queen Britney Spears' new film led the North American box office last weekend, figures showed on Tuesday. But the real box office performers were hot Academy Awards favourites *Lord of the Rings* and *A Beautiful Mind*, which saw their receipts skyrocket by 57 and 49 per cent respectively following their nominations sweeps.

John Q. came in poll position over the US long weekend with \$23.6 million, while Spears offering *Crossroads* took second place with \$17 million in its debut weekend, Exhibitor Relations Co. Inc. said. The figures gave a fresh boost to Washington, who was already riding high after being nominated last week for a best actor Academy Award for his role as a crooked cop in *Training Day*. His new picture, the story of a distraught father who takes an emergency room

hostage to get a kidney transplant for his ailing son, co-stars James Woods, Robert Duvall and Anne Heche.

While teenage pop idol Spears film has been panned by reviewers, its first weekend was an undoubted commercial success. In third place last weekend was *Return to Never Land* — a new perspective on Disney's 1953 classic *Peter Pan* — opened in third place earning \$5.6 million, the box office tracker's final figures showed. T

teenage Hollywood adventure *Big Fat Liar* came in fourth with \$1.4 million, while action hero Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Collateral Damage* dropped to fifth place, from first a week earlier, with \$9.6 million. But while Arnie's fortunes waned, those of multiple Oscar nominees *Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring* — which won 13 nods, the most of any film this year — and *A Beautiful Mind* were strongly buoyed. — AFP



SEARCH: A Bolivian man trying to look for people inside a car after a hailstorm in La Paz. Forty-eight people died in the unusual hailstorm. — Reuters

48 killed after fierce storm hits Bolivia

LA PAZ — A violent storm in Bolivia's capital claimed 48 lives, police commander General Walter Carrasco said early yesterday.

The government placed the city under a state of emergency and declared yesterday a national day of mourning after the worst rain and hailstorm ever seen in La Paz triggered floods and mudslides a day earlier.

President Jorge Quiroga late on Tuesday visited first hand the affected areas, mostly on the banks of the Choqueyapu River, which crossed the city in a raging torrent sweeping everything in its path.

The storm dumped 39.4 millimetres (1 1/2 inches) of water in an hour, making it the worst rainstorm in the 500-year history of La Paz, which sits in the midst of the Andes mountains at an altitude of 3,500 metres. — AFP

INDIA

50 injured as train derails in Surat

BOMBAY — At least 50 people were injured yesterday when a passenger train derailed in the western Indian state of Maharashtra, officials said.

Private television networks reported that one person had died in the accident, but there was no official confirmation. Seven carriages of the Sayajinagari Express from Bombay jumped off the rails near the industrial city of Surat in Maharashtra, PTI said.

Private television networks said up to four of the carriages had overturned completely when the crowded train derailed at 7.15pm.

Other coaches fell into a nearby drain. One survivor told the Aaj Tak television station the number of injured could be as high as 150.

The train was travelling at around 80 kilometres per hour when it went off the tracks. Officials from India's state-owned railways said a large rescue team had been rushed to the site of the crash to bring out many of those still feared trapped in the mangled carriages.

Zee TV said a search and rescue operation was being hampered because of darkness but added that local residents were lending a hand in the operations. — AFP

Submarine deal with France on cards

NEW DELHI — France and India are at a crucial stage in their negotiations over the sale of six French-built *Scorpene* submarines, officials said here yesterday.

The two sides are currently discussing costs and possible technology transfers by the manufacturers of the *Scorpene* for the Indian Navy, which is looking beyond its traditional arms supplier Russia for SSK class submarines.

The *Scorpene* is jointly built by DCN of France and Izar of Spain and each of the submarines are expected to cost around Rs15 billion (\$320 million).

"We are expecting some tangible results by the end of March and maybe then a formal agreement can be signed," a highly placed naval source said.

India and the French-led consortium began negotiations for the *Scorpene* package some two years ago with New Delhi insisting on technology transfers to build four of the six submarines here.

"The costs and the package are still on the negotiating table but we are quite confident of a quick result," the source said.

India was reportedly unhappy with DCN for the outright sale of one *Augusta* submarine to Pakistan and the transfer of technology for two more such vessels.

"But we are not putting any pressure on the French firm to walk out of the deal as its agreement with Pakistan has already been finalised," the source said, adding that two of the *Augustas* are being currently built at Pakistani shipyards while the first one was already operational.

Suspected Maoists derail train

RANCHI — A passenger train derailed in Jharkhand yesterday after suspected rebels placed a sleeper on the tracks, a senior police official said. There were no reports of any casualties or injuries.

Jharkhand police chief R.R. Prasad said that the derailment occurred at around 2am yesterday in Jharkhand's Giridih district, northwest of Ranchi.

"Preliminary investigations show that rebels had laid a sleeper across the track, causing three compartments of the train to derail," Prasad said.

"Initial reports were of a goods train, but it turns out that it was a passenger express."

The attack appeared to be part of a 24-hour strike called by the outlawed Maoist Communist Centre in protest against a recent federal government ban on the organisation.

Prasad said two civilians were shot dead by suspected MCC gunmen yesterday morning in Hazaribagh, not far from the site of the train derailment.

The gunmen had fired on some passing trucks, killing one driver and another civilian. The organisation had distributed pamphlets in Ranchi and adjoining areas declaring plans to observe a protest strike against the ban and against alleged police atrocities. — AFP

Uttar Pradesh — a study in electoral contrasts

RAJHAUA-KHURD — Illiterate women in grubby saris and plimsolls "sign" the electoral register with a purple thumbprint and then hover uncertainly over the newly introduced electronic voting machine.

A peasant woman in the village of Rajhaua-Khurd says she voted for the upper caste-dominated ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) because "whatever they say, you have to do".

This is polling in the biggest state of the world's biggest democracy, a myriad of contradictions like the thumbprint and hi-tech machine, where the 5,000-year-old caste system plays a bigger role than its status as a modern nuclear power.

Uttar Pradesh completes voting for a new assembly today in a poll so big it had to be split into three stages, for the west, centre and east of the

region which with 166 million people has a bigger population than Pakistan.

Across the state, political parties are holding outdoor rallies for crowds of up to 100,000, their party flags strung everywhere on trees and rooftops, their messages blaring from loudspeakers on jeeps, trucks, buses and even cycle-rickshaws.

The vote is seen as a test of the popularity of the BJP, which leads the national ruling coalition and controlled the outgoing state assembly.

And yet for all the sound and fury of the campaign, the lingering impression is one of an odd sense of irrelevance.

"I always cast my vote but nobody does anything," says a woman on her way to vote in Roza, a squalid and chaotic town of 15,000 clustered around a muddy main square.

Talk of corruption is everywhere. "Earlier members of parliament were concerned about the development of the nation," complains 72-year-old Ram Chandra Misra. "Now they are concerned about their own development."

Analysts say the single paralysing factor in the UP elections, whose results are due on Sunday along with three other states, Uttaranchal, Punjab and Manipur, is caste.

Far from dissipating since independence in 1947, caste divisions have intensified as political parties divided down caste lines to win votes, drowning out debate on actual issues.

The BJP, led by Chief Minister Rajnath Singh, represents the upper caste, land-owning classes, while its main challenger in the state, the populist regional Samajwadi Party led by Mulayam Singh Yadav, represents the masses, or backward

castes. Then there is the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which represents the Dalits, or "untouchables" as they were once known.

The BSP is tipped to come in third, and its leader, Mayawati, may find herself propelled into the chief minister's job by post-poll coalition haggling if neither of two leading parties win enough seats to form a government on their own.

While many vote for the party which represents their caste, others especially the rural poor, will go along with what the village elders say even if they are from a different caste.

All parties have been offering seats to people of different castes to win voters — ensuring the caste factor remains strong.

They also assiduously court Muslims, who make up more than 20 per cent of voters, in

turn accentuating communal divisions. The Samajwadi Party stresses the BJP's Hindu nationalist roots to court the Muslim vote. The BJP in turn tries to play it both ways, insisting it is the only party which can keep law and order — it introduced a post-September 11 ban on an Islamic students' movement.

But it has also courted Muslims, organising direct flights from Lucknow for Haj pilgrims.

The end result of caste and communal politics has left many commentators asking if this is the kind of democracy the leaders of the past dreamed of. "The state flaunts the most embarrassing clichés: caste politics, communal tension, rioting cities, dying institutions," *The Indian Express* editor Shekar Gupta wrote.

"India deserves better than to suffer this atrocity of a state

which overwhelm its politics through the sheer weight of its pauperising, exploding population," he said.

Despite the cynicism deeply ingrained in the state's nearly 100 million voters, the turnout in the first stage in UP last week was more than 50 per cent.

The result is a kind of organised chaos, overseen by the state's massive civil service and some 200,000 security forces, and blending an odd mix of ancient and modern.

In the magistrates office in Lucknow hundreds of government workers work feverishly to prepare the electronic voting machines, made in Bangalore.

But they work at old wooden trestle tables and use cheap white candles to heat the wax seals to prevent tampering.

And though the machines can compute votes per polling

booth, they cannot be hooked into a mainframe. Instead, the total votes for each will be laboriously recorded manually in paper ledgers.

In the village of Rajhaua-Khurd, voters queue outside the local school. One-by-one they file in. As a goat bleats outside, one man checks off their names on the electoral roll.

The next man has them "sign" their names in a pink book with a thumbprint of purple ink; a third man marks their nails with indelible ink and a fourth sets the electronic voting machine.

The "polling booth" is a piece of orange cloth tied up with string in one corner, with each party to choose from marked both by name and by symbol — a lotus for the BJP, a bicycle for the Samajwadi Party and elephant for the BSP.

— Reuters

BJP in danger of losing race in UP

LUCKNOW (India) — India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party looked in danger of losing its dominance of the politically crucial state of Uttar Pradesh as voters geared up for today's final round of local assembly elections.

Counting begins on Sunday and results should be clear within hours, but exit polls from two earlier rounds show Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) running neck-and-neck with the regional socialist Samajwadi Party.

This could turn the third-placed Bahujan Samaj Party which represents the Dalits, once known as "untouchables" at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy, into the potential kingmaker.

Analysts said it seemed unlikely either front-runner could capture enough seats in the third round, in eastern Uttar Pradesh, to form a government alone in the country's biggest

state, with 166 million people. Three other states are also holding elections.

The polls are seen as a test of the BJP's popularity amid India's military standoff with Pakistan over New Delhi's demands that Islamabad crush anti-Indian militants and give up 20 alleged terrorists and crime dons.

The nuclear rivals have massed a million men along their border.

A BJP defeat in its Uttar Pradesh heartland would not stop it dominating the national coalition government, but it could undermine Vajpayee's credibility and fuel unrest in the fractious 20-member national coalition, political analysts say.

They say a loss for the BJP could also damage Vajpayee's credibility in the high-stakes standoff with Pakistan.

The BJP sought to use the standoff to rally support but most voters are more concerned about economic development

and graft in a state notorious for crime and caste and communal violence.

Counting was also due to start on Sunday for elections in Punjab, Uttaranchal and Manipur, where opinion polls also pointed to the BJP losing ground.

Manipur holds its second and final round of voting today. Voting in Punjab, which borders Pakistan, and the small state of Uttaranchal, at the foot of the Himalayas, has finished.

Police said tensions were high in Manipur, in the remote northeast, where heavily-armed rebels are seeking independence. The rebels accuse New Delhi of neglecting the economy and have been trying to derail the election.

The tiny state of 2.6 million bordering Myanmar has been under federal control since rioting last year. It is racked by high unemployment, widespread drug addiction and an AIDS epidemic. — Reuters



IN QUEUE: Women wait in line to register their vote in Rajhaua-Khurd in Uttar Pradesh. — Reuters

US team arrives to sell radar systems

NEW DELHI — A high-powered US defence team headed by a top military commander was in the Indian capital yesterday to negotiate the sale of a radar system which locates enemy battlefield weapons.

US Army Major-General Bruce Scott and his team were discussing the possible sale to the Indian government of "Fire-Finders", or weapons-locating radar, US embassy officials told reporters at an international defence exhibition in New Delhi.

"The agreement will be, for the Indian Army, the first major government-to-government purchase of military equipment from the United States," a US embassy spokesman added.

The United States only recently lifted military and economic sanctions which were imposed after India conducted a string of nuclear tests in May 1998.

US Ambassador Robert Blackwill said the possible sale of Fire-Finders would mark the opening of India's doors to the American defence industry.

"We are interested in (selling) the Fire-Finder and it is up to the Indian government to decide," Blackwill said.

"US defence sales to India marks a transformation of our relationship as there is joint recognition in both governments that in the war against terrorism we are together."

Scott, the commanding general of the US Army Security Assistance Command, said negotiations were underway with the Indian Defence Ministry over the sale of the fire-finder radar. — AFP

Controversial 'amma' fights to regain power

ANDIPATTI (Tamil Nadu) — The electoral spotlight may be on the teeming northern Hindi heartland, but for the country's most controversial woman politician a byelection in a southern farming town holds the key to her return to office.

Former movie star Jayaram Jayalalitha, seeking to regain the chief minister's job she was forced from by a court ruling last year, has been on a campaign blitz, promising voters good times ahead if she wins the vote to be held today.

The leader of the regional All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) party, which romped to power in southern Tamil Nadu state last summer, stepped down in September after the Supreme Court annulled her appointment, citing graft convictions.

But in December, an appeal court overturned the convictions, clearing the way for Jayalalitha — known as "amma" or mother to her followers — to seek election to the state legislature.

Normally her bid to return to office would have drawn wide national attention. But it has been overshadowed by elections in India's most populous state Uttar Pradesh, seen as a popularity test of the Bharatiya Janata Party which leads the national ruling coalition, and several other states.

The consummate actress-turned-politician who entered the hurly-burly of the state's male-dominated politics in the 1980s, played the wronged woman to the hilt on Tuesday as she appealed to farmhands lining the road to "right an injustice".

"First they (opposition leaders) tried to implicate me in



WOONG VOTERS: Former Tamil Nadu chief minister and movie star Jayaram Jayalalitha speaks from inside electoral vehicle. — Reuters

those foisted cases and then they got me removed from office."

"But now that the icon of justice has smiled on me, I appeal to you to help me complete the various development tasks our government has initiated," she said in a high-pitched voice. More than 200,000 voters are eligible to take part in the poll in this remote drought-hit southern constituency, some 500km southwest of the state capital Chennai.

"We back our stomachs and not any party, for it makes little difference to us who wins..." said a wizened old farmer Pandi, a wry smile creasing his fiercely mustachioed face.

Most local analysts, however, say beating Jayalalitha who occasionally stops her open jeep to cradle a newborn thrust into her arms by delirious women fans, will take some doing.

"Andipatti has been a AIADMK pocket borough from the days of the party founder MGR (Jayalalitha's film-and-political mentor, the late M.G. Ramachandran) who won an election while lying in bed in a US hospital," said social activist Jothi Selvam.

The results of the vote will be announced on Sunday which happens to be Jayalalitha's 54th birthday. But for the feisty former movie star, the political roller-coaster ride she has been on since being voted out of office in 1996 at the end of a five-year controversy-ridden rule, may still be some way off from its end. The Supreme Court is still to rule on a clutch of petitions filed by opposition politicians challenging the court decision to allow her appeal against her conviction as being "bad in law". — Reuters

Police fear clashes ahead of elections in Manipur

GUWAHATI — Security agencies fear clashes among scores of separatists in Manipur, ahead of the final phase of provincial elections, officials said yesterday.

"We are worried about the various underground groups, who are supporting one candidate or the other in the elections, clashing with rival outfits," Manipur police chief A.A. Siddiqui said by telephone from the provincial capital of Imphal.

Polling for 20 constituencies, spread in the remote hill districts of Manipur, begins today. The first phase for the 40 assembly seats was completed on February 14.

"In certain pockets of Churhandpur and Chandel districts, rebel groups are backing candidates directly and so there

could be some violence on the polling day," the police chief said.

Meanwhile, at least 30,000 army, police and paramilitary troops have taken positions across the 20 constituencies to prevent poll violence.

"Some areas are so remote and inaccessible that troop deployment has become a real challenge and the underground groups might try and take advantage of the situation," Siddiqui added, but said he expects the polls to pass off peacefully excepting in some sensitive areas.

During the past fortnight, rebel groups have attacked the homes of at least a dozen former ministers, among them some former chief ministers, and killed at least six people, including three paramilitary soldiers.

The majority of the 368 candidates contesting the vote in Manipur have received extortion notices from the state's 19-odd separatist groups, the police chief said.

"Most of the candidates have received demands ranging from Rs500,000 (\$10,638) to Rs2 million (\$42,553), and according to unofficial reports some of them have even paid the militants to get support from them during the polls," Siddiqui said.

The assembly elections are also the first in which no rebel group has called for a boycott of the vote, with most of the front-line rebel outfits either supporting or opposing one or more candidates contesting the polls. — AFP

Russian, Swedish arms sellers stay unfazed by competition

NEW DELHI — Russian and Swedish weapons exporters denied yesterday being overly concerned by the increased foreign competition for defence contracts from traditional client India.

Russia's state-run Rosoboronexport State Corp, however, admitted some "complications" in clinching a deal to sell an aged Russian aircraft carrier to India in an estimated two billion-dollar package that also includes the cost of its refit and a fleet of MiG-29 maritime fighter jets.

"India's purpose is to choose the best equipment, and if you look around ours are no less," said Rosoboronexport deputy chairman Viktor Komardin.

Komardin is heading a team of Russian military delegates to an international defence exhibition in New Delhi where some 100 global manufacturers have put new generation hardware on display.

Komardin said Rosoboronexport, which posted global sales of four billion dollars last year, had gone beyond selling hardware to India, which is currently windowshopping in at least 13 international arms bazaars.

"Practically all major Russian equipment is under licensed production in India and new contracts would keep in mind the size of the Indian industry for production here." Komardin said Russia had proposed the sale

of its *Amur* class submarines to India, which is currently negotiating with France for its *Scorpene* submarines.

"The project for the upgrading of India's T-72 tanks is also on," he said, adding that the two countries were currently engaged in 20 major joint ventures in the defence sector.

"These joint programmes are playing a very major role now and so we are not afraid of competition," Komardin said, pointing to the recent joint testing of a Russian-built missile system in India as a barometer of bilateral trust.

The Soviet Union supplied more than 70 per cent of India's military needs, but after its collapse in the 1991 India began scouring other

markets to overcome a massive spare parts crunch. Komardin said despite years of delay, the negotiations for the handing over of the Russian aircraft carrier, Admiral Gorshkov, was going on satisfactorily.

"It is such a big programme and it contains all sorts of agreements and that is why the negotiations are going on for such a while. It is a complicated and complex negotiation," he said.

Swedish firms attending the Delhi exhibition said long-lasting ties with the Indian sector would help them an edge over rival manufacturers. Bofors' AB, involved in a massive arms bribery scandal with India in the 1980s, said its local operations — now named Swedish

Weapons Systems — were focused on future partnerships here. "We are looking for production and we are looking for joint venture partnerships and our goal is to have a substantial presence in India," said SWS chairman Haken Kangert.

— AFP

INDIA

Two killed, four hurt in series of explosions in Kashmir

SRINAGAR — Two people were killed and four others wounded yesterday when suspected separatists set off a series of explosions in India's revolt-racked Kashmir, police said.

The scenic Himalayan region remains at the centre of a military faceoff between India and Pakistan.

A paramilitary soldier and a civilian were killed when a landmine went off in Udhampur district, 230km southeast of Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir.

Later yesterday, two army soldiers and two civilians were wounded in two explosions in Baramulla north of Srinagar, police said.

They said bomb disposal squads also defused two powerful landmines in the troubled Valley.

No rebel group has claimed responsibility for the explosions yet.

Elsewhere, four people including two Pakistani rebels were killed in separate shootouts across the region, police said.

Rebels have been fighting New Delhi's rule in Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, since late 1989.

Authorities say about 33,000 people have been killed in the rebellion, while separatists put the toll closer to 80,000.

India controls 45 per cent of the disputed region and accuses Pakistan of arming and training the rebels.

Pakistan, which controls a third of the region, denies the charge and says it only offers moral support to Kashmiri separatists.

The two nuclear rivals have been locked in a tense military standoff after an attack on India's parliament last December, which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based rebels. Close to a million troops have been mobilised on the border. The arch rivals have fought three wars since their independence from Britain in 1947, two of them over Kashmir. — Reuters

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Christians condemn recent spate of attacks

NEW DELHI — Leaders of India's tiny Christian community yesterday condemned a recent spate of attacks on its members and institutions and appealed to the federal government to intervene.

An official statement by the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) said it had received news of four attacks in the past one month, including one on a church in the southern state of Karnataka last Sunday and an attack on a priest in Chattisgarh state in January.

"We unequivocally condemn the attacks ... We thought the attacks on Church institutions and its personnel had become a thing of the past," Archbishop Oswald Gracias, secretary-general of the CBCI, said in the statement.

"We urge the competent authorities to nab the culprits immediately and take lawful action against them," Gracias said.

The CBCI said it would take up the matter with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani.

"We feel embarrassed when acts of intolerance such as these appear to raise their head again and when the country gets a bad name internationally," Archbishop Vincent Concessao, vice-president of the CBCI said.

Christians account for just two per cent of the population of overwhelmingly Hindu India. — AFP

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Families lay siege to Kerala government secretariat

From Our Correspondent

KOZHIKODE — Hundreds of families of agitating Kerala government employees laid siege to the government secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram yesterday demanding the government take necessary steps to end the 15-day-old strike as early as possible. The siege started in the morning continued till noon.

Due to the siege, several employees who came for reporting for duty could not enter the secretariat. Several women and children participated in the sit-in strike.

The Kerala opposition leader, V.S. Achuthanandan, inaugurated the sit-in strike

of the employees' families in front of the secretariat. He said that it was unwise on the part of the state government to curtail the benefits of the state government employees and to curtail their number in expectation of foreign aid.

"The chief minister had stated that nothing would happen if the government offices are closed for a month. Should we wait for another 15 days to prove his statement?" Achuthanandan asked.

The government had failed in collecting taxes and other arrears from the public. In addition to this, it had also imposed heavy taxes on the people. It was after this, the government had turned against the employees, he said.

Achuthanandan demanded that the government should restore all the denied benefits to the employees. He also said that it was not right on the part of the government to ask the employees to call off the strike for holding talks with them.

Kerala Chief Minister A.K. Antony reiterated his stand that the government would not withdraw its decision to curtail the benefits of the government employees.

The agitating employees are adamant in their stand that they would not withdraw their strike until the denied benefits are restored. No end of the strike is in sight as the state government and the agitating employees continued to stick to their stands. The agitating employ-

ees' held protest marches in front of the government offices yesterday also.

The hunger strike organised by the confederation of employees' and teachers' organisations, CETO, organised in front of the government secretariat demanding the government to end the strike as early as possible entered the third day yesterday.

The government offices and schools in the state remained closed yesterday also. Only temporary employees reported for duty in offices. In several places, employees on probation did not turn up. The agitating employees had prevented the employees from reporting for duty in several places. The police arrested eight more

employees under the provisions of the Essential Services Maintenance Act (Esma), 1994. With this, the number of employees arrested under Esma rose to 122 in the state. Though the government continue to arrest the agitating employees under Esma, the employees continued to be determined to face the consequences. The attendance in government offices became thinner.

In Thiruvananthapuram, nearly 20 organisations, including the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and Yuva Morcha held protest marches in solidarity with the agitating employees.

The government doctors in the state began their 'work to

rule' strike from yesterday in support of the agitating government employees and teachers. The Government Ayurveda College teachers announced that they would enter into strike if the government did not take necessary steps to end the strike immediately.

At Kerala House in New Delhi, the employees went for an innovative form of protest. They organised a sit-in strike in front of the Kerala House lighting candles at noon. They said that the Kerala government led by A.K. Antony had lost its sight and that was why they lit the candles even at noon.

Meanwhile, the leaders of traders' organisation Vyapari Vyavasayi Ekopana Samithi M.A. Rahim and P.K. Girish

urged the state government employees that they should exclude the Samithi from boycott of traders.

At a press conference held in Thiruvananthapuram yesterday, the leaders said that the government employees had announced their decision to boycott the traders who were against the agitating employees.

They said that it was the Vyapari Vyavasayi Ekopana Samithi (Traders' coordination council) alone that went against the state government employees' strike. And they are a group of traders who did not remit the taxes they collected from people to the state exchequer. The leaders supported the strike and urged the government to end the strike as early as possible.



ANOTHER HONOUR: Veteran Indian actor Amitabh Bachchan holds the CII (Confederation of Indian Industry) trophy in Mumbai. The actor was awarded the prize for his contribution to Indian cinema. — Reuters

IAS officer caught red-handed

BHOPAL — In perhaps the first case of its kind, a senior Madhya Pradesh IAS officer has been caught red-handed while accepting Rs100,000 bribe. The official, Ramesh Thete — posted as director, employment and training — is a colourful figure, whose past exploits have included a high-profile public scuffle, a crackdown on the Jabalpur land mafia and recording several albums of Marathi songs.

Thete, a member of the 1993 batch, was trapped by the Lokayukta's Special Police Establishment at a posh Bhopal hotel in a sting operation in which he was allegedly accepting a bribe from the principal of ITI Baitul. A search produced an additional Rs145,000 from his briefcase. Thete was produced on Tuesday before a local court, which sent him to 24 hours' judicial custody. Whatever the fate of the bribery charges, Thete's

suspension appears imminent; a government official indicated that the centre would take the decision on a report from the chief secretary. This is not the first time Thete has made news for reasons other than the strictly professional.

Before joining the IAS, Thete was with the state service in Maharashtra where he faced irregularity charges in connection with the teak-cutting scam in Yavatmal. Shortly after his transfer to Amravati, he was selected in the MP IAS cadre and was posted at Jabalpur.

In 1999, while Municipal Commissioner of Jabalpur, he was involved in a scuffle with BJP MLA Anchal Sonkar and a war of words with Mayor Vishwanath Dubey, of the Congress.

Thete claimed this was the price for his honesty in work. Politicians were against him, he

said, because he had initiated a serious anti-encroachment drive that affecting their vested interests. Thete was subsequently removed as municipal commissioner but managed to stay in Jabalpur as director, employment and training.

He also made waves as a singer, floating a company called Lyrical Cassette and Films Pvt Ltd in the name of his wife. In the first two cassettes — released on T-Series — he sang with Anuradha Paudwal to Lalit Sen's lyrics. Thete's musical company, headquartered in Nagpur with his wife, Mandia, as the director, entered the market in the midst of a lavish publicity blitz, with several artistes, including Suresh Wadkar (with whom he subsequently made four duet albums), participating in the inaugural function.

— By arrangement with The Indian Express

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Health officials on alert after 'contained' plague outbreak

NEW DELHI — The health officials remained on high alert yesterday after confirming a "contained" outbreak of pneumonic plague in Himachal Pradesh.

Since the first case detected on February 4, four people have died, sparking memories of a virulent plague outbreak in Gujarat in 1994 that killed at least 50 people and struck a powerful body blow to the tourist industry.

"This unfortunate thing has really turned out to be plague, but the good thing is it has been contained," federal Health Minister C.P. Thakur told a news conference on Tuesday.

A total of 16 cases have been uncovered, but health officials were swift to point out that no fresh cases had been identified for 11 days, suggesting that the outbreak had been restricted.

The incubation period for plague is two to seven days.

"Even though no more cases have been reported, we have to be on our toes," Himachal Pradesh Health Minister J.P. Nadda said yesterday.

Scientists conducted the final tests on blood and sputum samples of the victims at the New Delhi-based National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) late on Monday.

"Smear examinations showed bipolar, short thin bacilli resembling Yersinia Pestis, the bacteria that causes plague," Thakur said.

"Scientists who conducted a fluorescent anti-body test also found the cultures tested positive for the same plague bacteria," he added.

The origin of the infection was traced to a single cluster of three houses in a remote village called Hat Koi in Himachal Pradesh.

Health officials say a large number of people have been quarantined and villagers have

been asked to remain indoors for at least a week. Schools and colleges in the area were closed, but officials stressed that these were merely precautionary measures.

"There is no cause for panic as there have been no fresh cases of people struck by the illness," Thakur said.

"But we have advised the state administrations of Himachal Pradesh and Uttaranchal to be on alert," he added.

Javed Choudhury, secretary of the Health Ministry, said that the government had distributed broad spectrum antibiotics among 8,000 people living close to Hat Koi village.

"We are running a door-to-door campaign for dispensing antibiotics among the population we think may be at risk. This campaign will be stepped up over the next few days," Choudhury said.

New Delhi has also informed the World Health Organisation

(WHO) about the plague outbreak. "There has been total openness. The federal government has made a commendable effort in the containment of the disease. There have been no additional deaths. That speaks for itself," said Kim Farley, the chief of WHO's operations in India.

"We have the antibiotics, we have the methods to contain plague and they are in place. Plague is a disease which evokes such an emotional reaction. But there is no cause for worry here."

Farley added that India was a safe travel destination as the pneumonic plague had been battled effectively.

"We will not be issuing any health warning to travellers heading out to India. It should not affect tourism in any way," he said.

"It should not be treated as big news to scare away foreign tourists." — AFP

Pakistan has something to hide: Rao

NEW DELHI — India said yesterday Pakistan's refusal to share information from a rebel in its custody showed that Islamabad had "something to hide."

"If it is true that Pakistan is not willing to share information with us based on a perfectly reasonable request that we have made, we would only be forced to conclude that Pakistan has something to hide," Indian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Nirupama Rao told reporters.

A senior Pakistani government official said on Tuesday Islamabad had rejected an Indian request to share information from Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, arrested in connection with the kidnapping of US reporter Daniel Pearl.

India made the request because New Delhi believes Omar had information on the hijacking of an Indian plane in 1999, as well as, last year's bloody attacks on the Jammu and Kashmir state legislature and the Indian parliament, Rao said. Nuclear-armed foes India and Pakistan have been locked in a tense military standoff since the December attack on the Indian parliament. New Delhi blamed the attack on two Pakistan-based rebel groups.

Rao said Pakistan continued to be "the vortex of terrorism directed against India" and action was required in response to New Delhi's demands.

"These are not frivolous demands being made of Pakistan," Rao said. "Everytime we have sought information ... we have not received any meaningful, tangible answers. That is unfortunate." Rao also said reports of Pakistan disbanding two major units of its intelligence service that had close links to rebels in Afghanistan and Kashmir did not mean much until it was translated into a fall in separatist violence in Kashmir.

"We really have to see how it translates into action on the ground," Rao said referring to a report in The New York Times yesterday.

The detained rebel Omar has claimed responsibility for kidnapping Wall Street Journal reporter Pearl, who disappeared as he attempted to contact groups in Karachi on January 23. Pakistan's English-language daily, The News, said this week Omar had also claimed involvement in a series of violent attacks in India.

But police were sceptical, saying Omar was trying to portray himself as a hero of the insurgency in disputed Kashmir, which is at the core of the animosity between India and Pakistan. British-born Omar spent five years jailed in India for his alleged role in the 1994 kidnapping of three Britons and an American who were lured from the capital, New Delhi. — Reuters

Pak 'yet to cut off' support to rebels

SRINAGAR — A top intelligence chief in Kashmir, Rajinder Singh Bhullar, shuffled his documents and statistics with care as he laid out charge that Pakistan has done nothing so far to curb "cross-border terrorism".

Seated in his office in heavily fortified barracks of the Border Security Force (BSF) in Srinagar, Bhullar argued that Islamabad has yet to cut off military support to armed rebel groups, despite the pledges of President Pervez Musharraf.

Pakistan's ISI intelligence service "has not acted as they are supposed to," said Bhullar.

"There is no change at this juncture ... there is nothing visible of this nature," said the jovial, 56-year-old Sikh, whose full title is BSF deputy inspector-general in charge of intelligence in Kashmir.

Bhullar readily confirmed reports that the number of rebel attacks has declined in the past six months.

But he insisted that is due to the "constant pressure" of

Indian security forces, and not the result of measures announced by Musharraf against extremist groups in a landmark speech on January 12.

"Since September, we are dominating. They (militants) are on the run," Bhullar said, brandishing a sheaf of statistics.

The figures showed the number of incidents related to the separatist militancy steadily dropped from 107 in September, to 87 in October, 70 in November, 63 in December, 57 in January and 34 in the first half of February. "The decrease is because of our pressure and is not yet connected to Musharraf," Bhullar said.

"When the passes open in mid-April, then we will come to know," he added, referring to the snow-clogged Himalayan heights separating Indian- and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. "The real test will come in May and June."

Defence Minister George Fernandes ruled out on Tuesday any immediate reduction in the number of troops massed in a

tense military face-off on the border with Pakistan.

"We laid down certain conditions. These conditions have not been met, so the forces will remain there until a final decision is taken."

India has called on Pakistan to curb all rebel infiltration across the Line of Control — the de facto border dividing Kashmir between the two nuclear rivals — and demanded the extradition of 20 criminals and alleged militants it says are sheltering in Pakistan.

Bhullar went on to argue that there would be no "Kashmir problem" if Pakistan cut off support to the militancy.

Of the 609 militants killed since September, he stressed 243 have been identified as Pakistani citizens. The eloquent and persuasive Bhullar is something of an insurgency veteran, having served "in the same field" during much of the 13-year long Sikh secessionist campaign in Punjab which claimed tens of thousands of lives in the 1980s. — AFP

Report clears senior cop in suicide case

MUMBAI — The investigation into the suicide of Police Inspector Iqbal Abdul Qadir Bargir of the Jogeshwari police station has given a clean chit to a senior police officer accused of compelling the deceased to register a false case in which an innocent person was convicted to life imprisonment.

A report prepared by a special cell constituted by the Bombay High Court was submitted to a division bench of Chief Justice C.K. Thakker and Justice S. Radhakrishnan on February 6, 2002. The matter has been adjourned to February 20.

An earlier division bench of the then chief justice B. P. Singh and Justice Ranjana Desai had suo motu converted a report that appeared in The Indian Express, which had quoted a suicide note written by Bargir, who had killed himself

on January 24, 2001. The note had said that when he was posted at the Oshiwara police station, the then senior inspector (currently assistant commissioner of police) Nandkumar Chaugule had caused him to wrongly arrest Arumhang Kounder on charges of kidnapping, raping and murdering a six-year-old. The Sessions Court had sentenced Kounder to life imprisonment in December 2000.

Bargir had also said that Chaugule, to enhance the performance of the Oshiwara police station's record, had compelled him to make wrong arrests and prepare false documents including dying declarations. Bargir, who was on night petrol on January 24, 2001, had asked to be driven to his house at Millat Nagar, Jogeshwari. He then jumped from the terrace of his building. The report, dated

January 1, 2002, was prepared by the 1st Additional Principal Judge A.J. Dholakia, who headed the special cell. The scope of the cell was to find out whether Bargir had left a suicide note at the time of committing suicide and also whether he committed suicide for the reasons and under the circumstances cited in the note.

The report says the suicide note is a page torn from the diary of the deceased and was recovered from the terrace of his building.

It also says that Bargir, while urging that detailed investigations be conducted and innocent persons be released, does not say that he was committing suicide because of these circumstances. There is also a mention that his son Irfan should be employed as a clerk. "I am unable to come to a conclusion that Chaugule com-

pelled Bargir to implicate an innocent person in the crime in question as alleged," said Dholakia.

The cell examined 17 witnesses apart from Chaugule and all denied they were forced to offer a false deposition during the trial. The report said that while Bargir's suicide took place five years after the incident, the accused was arrested within a day and Bargir himself deposed in court in support of the case registered against Kounder. The report also says a witness who is a doctor had said that Kounder had confessed his crime to him and described how he managed to rape and kill the girl.

Judge Dholakia said as the case is in appeal, the falsity or truth of the deposition will be thus known.

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SPORTS

Parra highlights day of American celebrations

SALT LAKE CITY — Derek Parra highlighted a day of American celebrations at the Winter Games on Tuesday with a startling burst of sustained speed to win the men's 1,500 speedskating gold medal in world record time.

The compact Californian reduced the world record to one minute 43.95 seconds after Dutchman Jochem Uytendaele had become the first man to break 1:45 with a short-lived mark of 1:44.57.

There was further excitement at Park City where Jill Bakken drove the United States to their first Olympic bobsleigh title for 54 years in the debut event for women.

The day ended with the women's figure skating free programme and first place to American world champion Michelle Kwan ahead of Russian Irina Slutskaya.

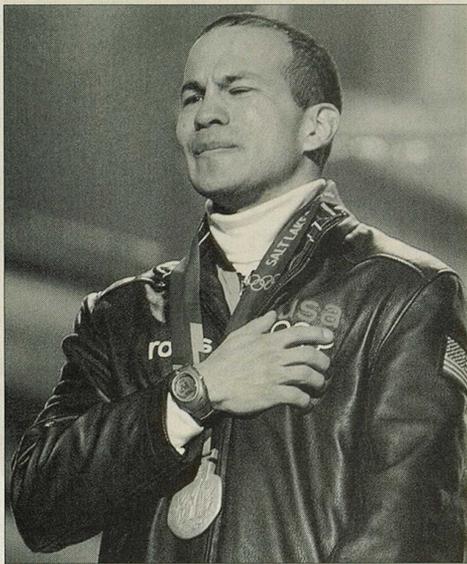
The only disappointment for the United States came in the men's freestyle aerials where Eric Bergoust came to earth with a crash.

Bergoust had no option but to go for broke at Deer Valley after Czech Ales Valenta successfully executed the first triple back flip with five twists in the history of the Games.

As the crowd celebrated prematurely, Bergoust essayed a quadruple twisting triple back flip which went horribly wrong as he crashed on landing.

"I went for first or last," he said. "I got last."

Parra, a surprise silver medalist last Saturday in the 5,000 after briefly holding the world record, produced some-



TRIUMPHANT: Olympic men's 1,500m speedskating champion Derek Parra of the US fights back tears during medal ceremonies. — Reuters

thing special on Tuesday.

Leaning low over the ice and hugging the corners he was an astounding 1.40 seconds under Uytendaele's mark with 400 metres to go and although he inevitably slowed over the final lap, the gold medal was already secure.

"It's an incredible feeling, just

incredible," said Parra, who was watched from the stands by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

"The crowd empowered me. Winning gold is just fantastic but to be a Mexican-American winner is something else."

Similar sentiments were expressed by Vonetta Flowers

after she had combined with Bakken to win the bob.

The pair set the fastest time over both runs in US II to take the gold ahead of Germany.

Flowers, the first black woman to win a gold medal in the history of the Games, said she hoped her performance would prove inspirational.

"I hope it encourages African-Americans to give winter sports a try," she said. "This is a dream come true. To win a gold medal for your country is awesome."

The cross-country track at Soldiers Hollow featured sprint races over 1.5km for the first time. Norway's Tor Arne Hetland — the reigning world champion — pipped Germany's Peter Schlickerrieder by just 0.1 seconds to win the men's gold, while Russian Yulia Chepalova won the first women's title by leading the firm from start to finish.

Medals table	G	S	B	T
1. Norway	9	6	2	17
2. Germany	8	13	7	28
3. U.S.	6	8	7	21
4. Russia	5	5	3	13
5. France	3	3	1	7
6. Italy	3	2	4	9
7. Finland	3	2	1	6
8. Switzerland	3	1	2	6
9. Netherlands	2	3	0	5
10. Canada	2	1	4	7
11. Australia	2	0	0	2
11. Spain	2	0	0	2
13. Austria	1	3	9	13
14. Croatia	1	0	0	2
14. South Korea	1	0	0	2
16. China	1	0	2	3
17. Czech Republic	1	0	1	2
17. Estonia	1	0	1	2
19. Bulgaria	0	1	2	3
19. Sweden	0	1	2	3
21. Japan	0	1	1	2
21. Poland	0	1	1	2
23. Belarus	0	0	1	1
23. Slovenia	0	0	1	1

— Reuters

Ferrero, Rusedski crash out

ROTTERDAM — France's Nicolas Escude stunned Spanish top seed Juan Carlos Ferrero 5-7, 6-1, 6-0 yesterday while fellow Frenchman Arnaud Clement ended Greg Rusedski's World Indoor Tournament hopes in the first round.

Clement, runner-up at the 2001 Australian Open, ousted Rusedski 6-3 7-6.

Defending champion Escude, losing finalist in Marseille last week, raced into a 5-2 lead in the first set as Ferrero struggled to come to terms with the indoor surface.

But the Spanish claycourter, dictating terms from the baseline, clawed his way back to take the opener after winning five games in a row.

However, the world number three's hold on the match was short-lived as from 1-1 in the second, an increasingly frustrated Ferrero failed to win another game as Escude powered his way to victory.

The loss was Ferrero's second successive first round defeat in Rotterdam and he joins Wimbledon champion Goran Ivanisevic as the only seeds to have been knocked out of the tournament so far.

Earlier, both Clement and Rusedski struggled with their serves in early exchanges and had to save several break points in the opening games.

But Clement, ranked 45th, made the breakthrough in the fourth game to take a 3-1 lead as he left Rusedski stranded at the net with his stinging passing shots.

In the second set, the 28-year-old Briton failed to convert the only break point in the second game when his service return clipped the top of the net and rolled back to his side of the court.

Nerves kicked in during the tiebreak as both players gifted away points but Clement clinched the match after Rusedski netted a volley.

"I went for my shots but must have missed about 10 or 15 big points by about an inch today and that was the key," said Rusedski, who was suffering from flu.

Clement will meet Australian Open champion Thomas Johansson in the second round. — Reuters



WORLD CUP FEVER: Fireworks are launched as a giant lamp shaped like a soccer ball is lit at a celebration in front of Seoul City. — Reuters

South Korea mark 100 days to World Cup in great style

SEOUL — South Korea got into the World Cup spirit with festivities, fireworks and the unveiling of a new team shirt yesterday, as the country marked 100 days to go before the soccer finals kick off on May 31.

A day earlier President Kim Dae-jung, who is in the last year of his single five-year presidential term, had expressed concern about a lack of World Cup enthusiasm, calling for concerted efforts to ensure the event is a success.

South Korea took his words to heart yesterday and despite tight security in Seoul for visiting US President George W. Bush, organisers in the capital and South Korea's nine other host cities held festivities.

South Korea, like co-host Japan, held parades, cultural performances and concerts to boost football fever ahead of the biggest finals in sport.

"Korean people are very interested in the World Cup games," Chung Mong-joon, South Korea's top soccer official, said after Nike unveiled its ultra-light "Cool Motion" jersey the national team will wear for the matches.

"They are not good at the moment in letting it out," Chung said. "But things will improve dramatically from now, with many events, such as friendly matches, lined up."

Fireworks were launched yesterday as a giant lamp shaped like a soccer ball was lit in front of Seoul's City Hall as a crowd of about 1,000 cheered.

YTN television, a Korean news channel, even spared time to show life-like computer-simulated matches between South Korea and its rivals in Group D — Poland, the United States and Portugal. South Korea's scores were less than impressive, rather like the real team, who may struggle to reach the second round.

The events were held as security forces were on alert in Seoul to discourage protests during a visit by

Bush, who discussed the World Cup with Kim, although the prime focus was North Korea.

"We exchanged views about the World Cup issue and there were good opinions about cooperation," Kim told a joint news conference.

He did not elaborate, but the remark was seen as a reference to some 37,000 US troops stationed in South Korea, who are expected to help support security operations during the May 31-June 30 event. The US team is among 32 taking part.

Chung, also a Fifa vice-president and the head of the Korea Football Association, presented both presidents with navy blue World Cup jackets with hoods and with their names on the back, during an evening reception for Bush.

While some critics say organisers have not done enough to fan the flames of World Cup fever, they said the task was complicated by the national team's recent weak performances.

"South Korea's poor performances in recent friendly matches and scepticism about the team joining the 16 finalists (reaching the second stage) are also to blame," said Shin Moon-sun, a soccer TV commentator.

Failure to capitalise on scoring chances meant a disappointing fourth place finish in the Concaf Gold Cup in California in early February, where Korea managed only three goals in five games.

Last week they lost 2-1 in a friendly match against Uruguay.

Co-hosts Japan also held events to mark the 100-day countdown while its organisers acknowledged they too had much to do before the finals kick off.

"We know we still have a mountain of work to do, all across the board, just as they do in South Korea," Japanese World Cup Organising Committee's (JAWOC) public relations manager Hisao Shuto said this week. "We are not counting our chickens yet." — Reuters

Teams aim to beat the heat at Hockey World Cup

KUALA LUMPUR — Sixteen nations will defy soaring temperatures and stifling humidity at the 10th Hockey World Cup, which will be more closely contested than previously when it begins on Sunday.

"The teams are closer this time than ever before. Previously the Netherlands were out in front on their own but Germany is the team to beat this time judging by their form and results," said England team manager David Whittle.

World and Olympic champions the Netherlands are one of only two sides to beat Germany since the Sydney Olympics in 2000, as the European Champions ran up 34 wins from 36 matches under coach Bernhard Peters.

"Naturally, I am very pleased the way the team has played over the last 12 months but one thing is certain — the going will be very tough in Kuala Lumpur," yesterday's *New Straits Times* quoted the German coach as saying.

"While we will be able to match the other teams in terms of skills, tactics and strategies, I am more concerned with how my players will cope with the hot and humid weather," he added.

To prevent heat exhaustion in temperatures above 30 degrees Celsius (86 F) and 100 per cent humidity levels, coaches will be allowed to use to their full 18-player squad in each game instead of a nominated five substitutes as in previous tournaments.

Matches are scheduled only for early morning and late afternoon or evenings to avoid the toughest conditions.

Germany, who lost in a practice match to the Dutch on Monday, start their campaign against Argentina, while the Netherlands take on New Zealand.

Tipped for a strong run are four-times World Cup winners Pakistan. Coach Hanif Khan will be hoping to emulate Abdul Rasheed Junior's achievement of winning the World Cup as a player and as a coach.

Rivals India had their only World Cup success in the last Kuala Lumpur final in 1975, but they could be contenders this year after beating Germany and Argentina in the Junior World Cup.

Of the other contestants Cuba make their debut having won the Pan American Championship while Japan came through last year's qualifying tournament in Edinburgh for a first appearance since 1973.

England meet Poland in their first match while Australia, champions in 1986, play hosts Malaysia, whose coach Cedric D'souza has controversially left Junior World Cup skipper Gagan Ajit Singh out of his his squad.

Contesting Pool A are Argentina, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa and Spain. Pool B is made up of Australia, Cuba, England, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia and Poland. — Reuters

Minnesota close in on Dallas

DALLAS — The battle for the top of the Midwest Division heated up as the Minnesota Timberwolves thrashed the Dallas Mavericks 117-100 in NBA action on Tuesday.

The win put the Wolves half a game behind Dallas for bragging rights in the Midwest Conference.

The Wolves cruised to victory despite being without All-Star forward Kevin Garnett, who was attending his grandfather's funeral.

In his absence Chauncey Billups scored a career-high 36 points — 24 in the third quarter. Wally Szczerbiak scored 13 of his 31 in the fourth.

Dallas led 58-46 early in the third quarter, but Billups nailed 11 consecutive points in 71 seconds to cut the lead.

All-Star point guard Steve Nash led Dallas with 24 points while Dirk Nowitzki was held to nine points and 12 rebounds.

It was the Wolves second win in its last eight games against Dallas.

In East Rutherford, New Jersey, Jason Kidd scored an NBA leading sixth triple-double of the season as the New Jersey Nets trampled the Golden State Warriors 123-115.

Kidd had 26 points, 12 rebounds and 12 assists for his 44th career triple double.

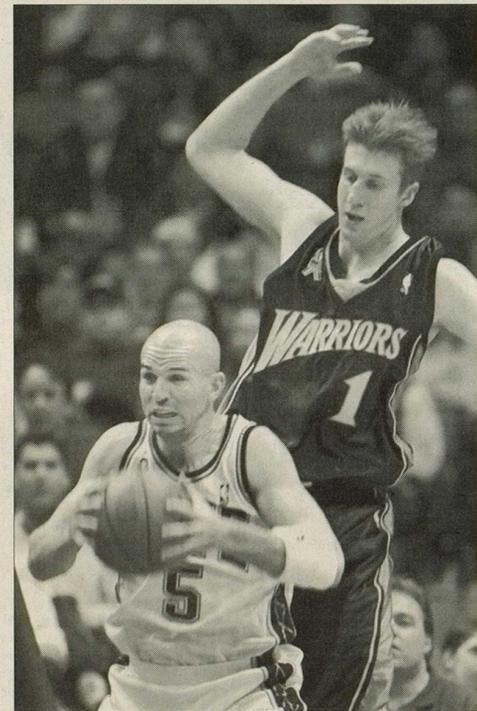
Sparked by the talented point guard, the Nets shot 60 per cent (27-of-45) and opened a 75-51 advantage in the first half.

The Warriors rallied in the second half and came within three points, 116-113, with just over a minute left in play before New Jersey eased away again.

New Jersey's Lucious Harris scored 19 points, Kerry Kittles added 18.

The Nets had seven players in double figures.

Jason Richardson and Antawn Jamison each had 25 points for Golden State, which



HAVING A BALL: New Jersey Nets' guard Jason Kidd grabs the rebound and looks to pass in front of Golden State Warriors' forward Troy Murphy (1) in the second quarter of their NBA game in East Rutherford, New Jersey. — Reuters

lost for the eighth time in its last nine games.

In San Antonio, California, a Tim Duncan basket with 36.3 seconds left in overtime led the San Antonio Spurs to a 99-93 victory and their 17th straight win over the Memphis Grizzlies.

The Spurs did not score a single point in the final 6:20 minutes in regulation to drop an eight point lead.

The Grizzlies tied the game with just under 25 seconds left on a basket by rookie Shane Battier. Duncan scored 23 points, leading four Spurs in double figures. — Reuters

Middlesbrough advance

LONDON — Slovakian striker Szilard Nemeth came off the bench on Tuesday to score the winner in Middlesbrough's 2-1 English Premiership victory at home to Fulham.

The former Inter Bratislava frontman struck 13 minutes from time to send the north-east club into 11th place, six points clear of the relegation zone. Earlier, Croatia striker Alen Boksic's calm finish had given Middlesbrough a 27th-minute lead but when Frenchman Steve Marlet equalised 11 minutes after the break for the Londoners, the game was up for grabs.

Middlesbrough's win might have been more clear-cut had not England centre-back Ugo Ehiogu's 72nd-minute header rebounded off the crossbar. But he then had to produce a superb injury-time tackle on Marlet to deny Jean Tigana's side a second equaliser.

It was 12 minutes before either keeper was called upon to make a save, Mark Schwarzer clutching Steed Malbranque's long-range effort into his midriff, but neither he nor Edwin van der Sar were unduly troubled for much of the opening period.

Middlesbrough took the lead after some neat build-up play. Former Manchester United duo Jonathan Greening and Paul Ince combined to give Italian striker Benito Carbone the time to pick out Boksic's forward run, and although he seemed offside, he kept his composure to draw van der Sar and chip the ball over the Holland keeper for his seventh goal of the season. But they almost threw away their advantage in injury time when Marlet was allowed to chase down a harmless looking long ball to round Schwarzer, although he lifted his shot from a tight angle wide of the mark.

However, he had better luck in the 56th minute. Former Scotland midfielder John Collins curled a corner into the near post where Alain Goma flicked it on for the unopposed Marlet to head home. In a last-ditch bid for greater goal threat up front, Middlesbrough manager Steve McClaren sent on Nemeth and Dean Windass to replace fading forward duo Noel Whelan and Carbone with 20 minutes remaining.

Before Nemeth netted Ehiogu saw his header from Greening's corner rattle the woodwork. — AFP

Leeds face Dutch test in Uefa Cup

MADRID — Leeds United will have both recent history and current form against them today as they limp back into UEFA Cup action in one of two fourth-round first-leg clashes between Dutch and British opposition.

Leeds, England's last remaining representatives in the competition, have slipped from top of the Premier League table to sixth on a run of three defeats and two draws in their last five games.

PSV, by contrast, will be buoyed by a thumping 4-0 win over NEC Nijmegen at the weekend, a result that took them to third in the Dutch League, within three points off leaders Ajax.

That impressive display should leave PSV confident of a successful follow-up to their 8-3 aggregate victory over Leeds in the UEFA Cup in 1995.

The Dutch side will be hit by injuries to key players, however. Goalkeeper Ronald Waterreus (elbow) and Jan Heintze (knee) are both out, while defender Kevin Hofland is

also expected to miss the game after suffering a concussion.

Leeds have hardly been impressive in the early rounds of the UEFA Cup, making hard work of Marítimo, Troyes and Grasshoppers.

They have not played since February 9, though, and midfielder Eirik Bakke thinks the squad will have benefited from the break.

"PSV away will be one of the hardest games of the season but we've had a good break now and are looking forward to it," said the Norwegian.

The prize for victory over the two legs is a quarterfinal against either Feyenoord or Rangers, who play their first leg in Glasgow.

Rangers are involved in post-Christmas European action for the first time in nine years after scraping through on a penalty shoot-out following two goalless draws against Paris St Germain.

Since then Alex McLeish has become manager with Dick Advocaat moving into a director of football role and they are

unbeaten in two months under the new regime.

Ronald de Boer has a foot injury and is doubtful, while free-scoring Shota Arveladze is ineligible. Feyenoord lost the Dutch League leadership over the weekend, as they went down 2-1 to Vitesse Arnhem.

Coach Bert van Marwijk will be without defender Ferry de Haan (groin), while defender Christian Gyan will have a late test on his knee injury.

The third Dutch side in the competition Roda JC Kerkrade went down 1-0 at home to AC Milan in one of two matches brought forward to on Tuesday.

Inter Milan, three times UEFA Cup winners in the 1990s, and Parma, who won the competition in 1995 and 1999, will both look for similarly positive results in their matches today.

Inter will again be without Brazil forward Ronaldo for their match against AEK Athens at the San Siro.

Former Olympiakos defender Grigoris Georgatos may be rest-

ed against his fellow countryman Nelson Vivas taking over.

The winners of that tie look set to face Spain's only representative in the competition Valencia, after they beat Servette of Switzerland 3-0 at Mestalla on Tuesday.

Parma arrive in Israel on Wednesday night for their game against Hapoel Tel Aviv after UEFA said the match could go ahead despite security fears. The Italians will receive a secure passage directly from their aircraft to the hotel.

Hapoel, the first Israeli side to reach the fourth round of a major European competition, are at full strength and expect a sell-out crowd in excess of 17,000 at their Bloomfield Stadium.

Parma are set to rest first-choice strikers Marco Di Vaio and Hakan Sukur, with Emiliano Bonazzoli and Marco Macionni likely to stand in.

The winners of that tie will take on AC Milan or Roda in the last eight. The two French sides in the

competition, Olympique Lyon and Lille, will meet in the quarter-finals if they come through their fourth round ties.

Lyon president Jean-Michel Aulas, boosted by his team's 3-0 win over PSG on Sunday, is confident his team, who take on Slovan Liberec of the Czech Republic, can lift the UEFA Cup.

"If I had to chose, I'd rather win the UEFA Cup than the French League," he said. "Let's face it, this year we can win the UEFA Cup."

Lyon's recent home form has been impressive — four wins and 14 goals scored — but they could be without Eric Carriere because of a foot injury.

Lille scored their first victory in 2002 at Nantes on Saturday but have looked too weak in recent weeks to be a real threat to German League leaders Borussia Dortmund.

They have been depleted by injuries since the end of the winter break while coach Vahid Halilhodzic has been rumoured to be on the way out. — Reuters

SPORTS

English cricket club coming to Sultanate

By Our Sports Reporter

MUSCAT — A private cricket club from England will be visiting Oman on a sight-seeing-cum-cricket tour next week. The club known as I. Zingari Cricket Club would play a couple of 35-over games under the auspices of the Oman Cricket Club on February 26 and 28 at the OAC II ground.

I. Zingari (IZ) Cricket Club was conceived by three enthusiastic cricketers on July 4, 1845. The proposal was to form a club that should have no grounds of its own, but whose members should seek to promote the game of cricket far and wide.

Such was the beginning of the oldest wandering club in the world, distinguished by their colours, black, red and gold — 'out of darkness, through fire into light'.

IZ reached its zenith in the middle of the 1860s. In 1863 there was a fixture list of twenty-nine matches, most of them two-day games, and the club was in high demand not only for country house cricket but also for matches overseas.

Such was the strength of IZ in its heyday that matches were played against England representative sides and international touring teams. The three great principles upon which the club was built were — keep your promise, keep your temper, keep your wicket up.

In the course of its 155-year history, IZ included among its

members more than a dozen captains of England — from F.A. Jackson and D.R. Jardine to Peter May and Colin Cowdrey.

The Zingaros 'and their ladies' most of whom are now seasoned IZ tourists have 'all round' skills. Apart from playing cricket, the team boasts of fine horsemen and women, excellent shots, keen golfers, flamboyant tennis players and very competitive skiers. All 'very IZ' activities.

The team was practising at Lords for their tour to Rajasthan (India) in February 2001 when their host Rajsingh Durgapur introduced the club captain Peter Carroll to Pankaj Khmiji.

"Come to Oman," said Pankaj, "You will have a marvellous time."

The IZ had hardly been anywhere for a hundred years and now were contemplating another tour this time to Gulf before even their tour to Rajasthan materialised.

The tremendous fun and cricket they enjoyed in the land of the Maharajas soon led them towards Pankaj's kind invitation. The IZ team are coming to Oman with Rajsingh Durgapur as the manager of the side and Pankaj Khmiji of Khmiji Ramdas as the host.

In addition it was being contemplated that Tiger Pataudi might have made himself available to be their umpire and match referee to make sure the manager, captain and the team were on their best behaviour, says captain Peter Carol, who

is himself a right-hand batsman and 'help yourself' medium pace bowler.

That Tiger was not available does not mean the team would be a set of bad boys as the team comprises most 'gentlemen cricketers' which is the IZ trend.

The other members of the team are James Boughey (right-hand batsman and slip fielder), David Gibbs (right hand middle order batsman and off-spinner), The Earl Fortescue (right-hand batsman and slip fielder), Richard Gubbins (genuine all-rounder), Andrew Hussey (right-arm medium pace bowler and middle order batsman), Andre Martin Smith (Tour treasurer, right-hand opening batsman and agile fielder), James Roundell (Tour secretary, fast bowler and breezy tail-ender), Lord Stafford (right-hand batsman and teasing off-spinner), Nigel Wilkinson (right-hand batsman, off-spinner), Rajsingh Durgapur (Tour manager, a fast bowler who has uniquely scored 999 runs for Rajasthan in Ranji Trophy — he has played for Rajasthan for 16 years with four of these years as captain).

IZ would play two 35-over games at the OAC II ground. The first game would be on February 26 against a British team comprising British residents in Oman.

Lankan players' visit ruled out

By Our Sports Reporter

MUSCAT — Sri Lankan cricketers Muthiah Muralitharan and Chaminda Vaas's expected visit to Oman has been ruled out as they were not released by their country's cricket board.

Oman's cricket fans were looking forward to the big occasion soon after the Eid Al Adha holidays when they were expecting to have a close glimpse of Sri Lanka's top cricketers.

But there is a big disappointment for them as the Lankan duo has decided to skip the function organised by the Sri Lankan Community Social Club this month end. It is learnt that the Sri Lankan Cricket Board refused to release the two players for their visit to the Sultanate. This is following the recent agreement by the board to play Pakistan in the Asian Test Championship final from March 6.

Cricket ties postponed

By Our Sports Reporter

MUSCAT — The Oman Cricket Club has decided to postpone all the league matches scheduled for tomorrow, according to a communiqué received here. The OCC has stated that the new dates for the postponed matches will be announced shortly.

However, it was also stated that the match between Pakistan School and Indian School Muscat will be played at the OAC I ground today and is slated for an afternoon start.

England nominate Denness as referee

LONDON — English cricket bosses have insisted they do not want to spark a row with their Indian counterparts after nominating Mike Denness as a Test match referee.

Former England captain Denness imposed penalties on six Indian players, including national hero Sachin Tendulkar, following an India Test in South Africa last year.

The ensuing controversy almost led to the cancellation of England's subsequent tour of India.

"We have nominated Mike Denness, among others," England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) spokesman John Read was reported by the Sun newspaper yesterday as saying. "This is for no other reason

than that we believe he is a good match referee who will do a good job," Read added.

"We are not trying to precipitate a stand-off with India or any other country. And we certainly won't get precious about this — we'll abide by any referee nominated by the ICC (International Cricket Council)."

"I accept some people might regard the nomination of Mike Denness as inflammatory — but that's not why we nominated him. We think he is a good match referee. I'm sure India will be nominating referees of their own."

Former Sri Lanka captain Ranjan Madugalle is in charge of selecting the slimmed-down five-man panel who are due to

oversee all Tests in future. But Scotsman Denness, 63, may be left out on age grounds alone.

On Tuesday ICC announced that next month's first meeting of its referees commission, set up to investigate Denness' actions, had been postponed following India-inspired protests over its composition.

In a statement issued from its Lord's headquarters here on Tuesday ICC president Malcolm Gray made clear his displeasure at the decision forced upon him by five — Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and South Africa — of the 10 Test-playing nations that make up the ICC's executive board.

"It is extremely disappointing that the work of a properly

constituted commission, established after extensive consultation with the BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India), has to be halted because of pressure from within the executive board," said Australian Gray. He added: "However, as a matter of proper corporate governance the ICC president has a duty to reflect the wishes of board members. Postponing the commission will further delay the formal review of important parts of the match referees' role."

"With the new five-man panel taking up its duties in April this is a matter that required immediate resolution at the board, rather than further debate about the composition of the commission." — AFP

Venus sinks Kournikova to reach quarters

DUBAI — Soon to be crowned world number one Venus Williams advanced to the quarter-finals of the Dubai Tennis Championships yesterday after beating Anna Kournikova for the second time in two weeks.

Williams defeated the Russian 6-2, 7-6, but the Wimbledon and US champion said she is putting all thoughts of replacing Jennifer Capriati as world number one to the back of her mind.

"It is a good feeling to know that next week I'll be number one, but it's about this week right now and finishing strong on my first part of the year," Williams told reporters after her 6-2, 7-6 victory.

"After this I'll have a few



POWER-PACKED: Venus Williams in action against Anna Kournikova in Dubai. — Reuters

weeks off. The first two weeks I'll be in a coma at home, dead. I'm just looking forward to getting home and driving my car, but I'm definitely going to make the most of this week and do as much as I can."

The Women's Tennis Association (WTA) has confirmed that the 21-year-old American Williams will become world number one for the first time next Monday.

She will overtake compatriot Capriati on points, as the Australian Open champion is not playing this week.

Williams said she has not so far treated herself to a reward for reaching number one, but she admitted to shopping in the cities she has visited in the past

few weeks. "I've been picking up a few things along the way, on my travels, and shipping them home," she said. "Such as baskets and all kinds of things for my house from pretty much every city I've been in."

Windy conditions played their part in what was a disappointing and scrappy match, with both players committing a stream of errors. But Kournikova continued to show signs that she is re-discovering her game after an eight month injury break last year.

The Russian's speed around the court and a powerful forehand often put her on equal terms, but she still lacks the consistency to maintain her challenge. — Reuters

Nikita blanks Daisy in Inter-Con Tennis

By Our Sports Reporter

MUSCAT — Nikita Chengappa proved to be in good form as she blanked Daisy Browns 6-0, 6-0 in the girls' under-12 singles of the 19th Hotel Inter-Continental Muscat Annual Tennis Championship at the Palm Beach Club courts.

Meanwhile, in the men's singles plate event, Chris Muellen beat Hilmy 9-4, Ahmed Al Shanfari eased past Joe Vartan Melkonian 9-2 and Vinod Bala defeated Paul Bagshaw 9-5.

In the mixed double, Rajesh Kumar and Vlada Norris breezed past Majeed Al Asfoor and Kerry Garrod 6-0, 6-4, while Adalat Khan and Sahara steamrollered Johnny Agapie and Ratna Cook 6-1, 6-2.

Imran Khan and Harsh Munjal survived a first set scare to beat Rohan Parambi and Fahaad Mohammed 7-6, 6-3 in the men's doubles, while Mohammed Al Balushi and Barakat Al Sharji had it easy against Krishna Gopal and Mundhir Al Barwani 6-2, 6-3. In another match Zaheer Ali and Faez Iqbal beat Susumu Yasuri and Hiroto Harata 6-0, 6-1.

Australia seek to keep Test crown

JOHANNESBURG — With South African captain Shaun Pollock a doubtful starter because of a side strain, Australia will be favourites to continue their domination over South Africa in the first of three Tests starting at the Wanderers Stadium here tomorrow.

The Australians moved to Johannesburg yesterday after an impressive warm-up match against South Africa A in Potchefstroom.

Opening bowler Glenn McGrath, one of the stars of Australia's 3-0 clean sweep when the two sides met in Australia earlier in the season, tuned up by taking five wickets against the South African second string.

The Australians were buoyed by centuries by Test captain Steve Waugh and new One-day captain Ricky Ponting, two batsmen who performed moderately in the home series.

Although Australia won the series in Australia in overwhelming fashion, the official World Test Championship will again be at stake, with South Africa, because of their superior record against other countries, needing only to share the series to take the title.

Australia cannot improve their points position because they are defending the championship points they gained when they beat South Africa by two Tests to one in a series in South Africa five seasons ago.

The 1996/97 triumph included an innings win in Johannesburg when Steve Waugh and Greg Blewett shared a fifth wicket record stand of 385.

The tourists can expect the Wanderers pitch to be different to the lifeless surface they played on five years ago. Former South African player Alan Kourie, director of cricket at the Gauteng Cricket Board, which hosts the game, said it would be more like a "traditional" Wanderers pitch.

"There will be good pace and bounce, with a bit of early life on the first two days, and some help for the spinners by about the fourth afternoon," said Kourie.

South Africa's pace bowlers were surprisingly ineffective in Australia, where the pitches gave them virtually no assistance.

Pollock is a key member of the South African attack and if he fails a fitness Test today it will leave a big gap in the South African team.

Allan Donald, South Africa's all-time leading wicket-taker, will carry a big responsibility although at the age of 35 he has struggled to produce his best in recent seasons. He had a disappointing series in Australia, where he was recovering from injuries.

The recalled Makhaya Ntini was dropped during the series in Australia but made a strong comeback in helping South Africa win the subsequent triangular One-day tournament.

Ntini confirmed his form by taking six for 37 in a provincial match last weekend, including a hat-trick.

The fiery Andre Nel, who bowled impressively without taking any wickets for South Africa A in Potchefstroom, is on standby for Pollock, while wicketkeeper Mark Boucher would take over as captain.

Australia's prolific opening batsmen, Justin Langer and Matthew Hayden, will look to continue the form they showed in Australia where they had first innings stands of 80, 202 and 219.

By contrast, the South African openers, Gary Kirsten and Herschelle Gibbs, struggled against Australia's high-quality bowlers and will need to be in top form to establish a platform for a largely inexperienced middle order.

A key player for South Africa is likely to be world-class all-rounder Jacques Kallis.

Teams
South Africa: Shaun Pollock (captain), Herschelle Gibbs, Gary Kirsten, Jacques Kallis, Neil McKenzie, Boeta Dippenaar, Justin Ontong, Mark Boucher, Nicky Boje, Allan Donald, Makhaya Ntini, Graeme Smith (12th man).

Australia (likely team): Steve Waugh (captain), Justin Langer, Matthew Hayden, Ricky Ponting, Mark Waugh, Damien Martyn, Adam Gilchrist, Shane Warne, Brett Lee, Jason Gillespie, Glenn McGrath.

Umpires: Steve Bucknor (WIs), Rudi Koertzen (Rsa).
TV umpire: Ian Howell (Rsa).
Match referee: Cammie Smith (WIs). — AFP




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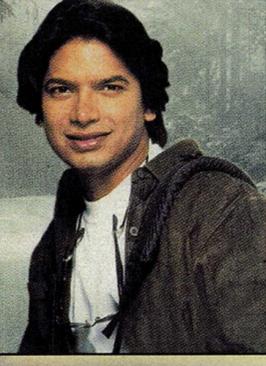
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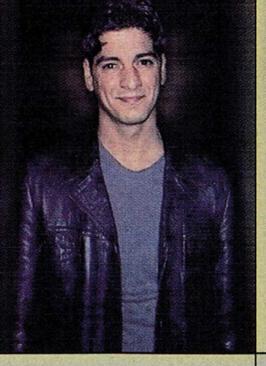


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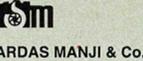
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Rain ends Victoria's Cup final hopes

MELBOURNE — Rain delays yesterday ended Victoria's Sheffield Shield cricket season and also dampened Tasmania's hopes of making next month's Cup final. Tasmania were 110 for four in their second innings when play was abandoned 90 minutes late at 7:30pm, with Daniel Marsh unbeaten on 40 and Scott Kremerskothen not out 21. Victoria were left equal-bottom with two matches remaining, on 12 points, eight points behind second-placed South Australia.

TIMES SPORT

Romanian goalkeeper dies after injury

BUCHAREST — Leading Romanian goalkeeper Cristian Neamtu died yesterday after a collision with a teammate caused a brain haemorrhage and sent him into a coma. The 22-year-old Universitatea Craiova player died in a hospital in Cyprus, where he had been kept alive artificially for six days, the club's main shareholder Gigi Netoiu said. "Neamtu did not resist and his heart stopped this morning," Netoiu said by telephone from Nicosia. — Reuters

Thursday, February 21, 2002

Zimbabwe shrug off Ganguly remarks

NAGPUR — Skipper Saurav Ganguly's prediction that Zimbabwe batsmen may not be a "sweeping" success against his Indian spinners has sparked a row ahead of the two-Test series starting today.

Zimbabwe batsmen have talked of reverse sweeping leg-spinner Anil Kumble and off-spin bowler Harbhajan Singh after the tactic proved largely successful for England during their recent One-day series in India.

But the Indian captain suggested in a newspaper article that Zimbabwe's prolific Andy Flower may not find it easy playing the stroke against Kumble's fast leg-breaks.

Asked for his response to Ganguly's view, Zimbabwe skipper Stuart Carlisle told a news conference yesterday that his opposite number should keep the advice to himself.

"Saurav is trying to tell Andy how to bat basically. We'll wait and see," he said.

Ganguly then sought to play down the issue, saying: "I have only said it will be difficult reverse sweeping Kumble."

Left-hander Flower, Zimbabwe's leading Test run-getter, was prolific during his side's last tour of India late in 2000. In the absence of the injured Kumble he amassed 540 runs in four innings at an incredible average of 270. — Reuters

England bite back to stay alive

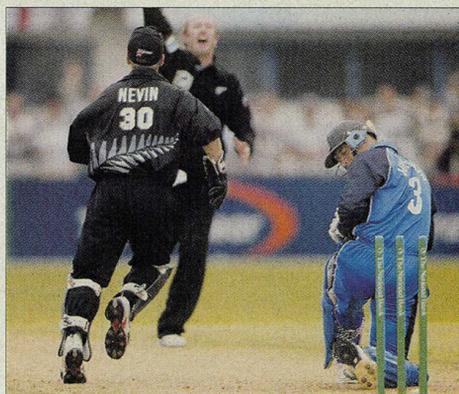
NAPIER (New Zealand) — Stephen Fleming had said he would be stupid not to expect England to bite back after their humiliation in Wellington, and his caution proved well founded after a 43-run victory for Nasser Hussain's men in Napier yesterday.

New Zealand still hold a 2-1 advantage in the five match series, but their hopes of wrapping up the rubber here were ended by a far more determined England side than had been on show in the previous two encounters.

Durham all-rounder Paul Collingwood proved to be an unlikely hero taking 4-38 as New Zealand collapsed from 140-4 to 201 all out. Fleming made an unbeaten 76 in vain as England coasted to a comfortable victory that belied their form going into the game and kept the One-day series alive.

Earlier, Nick Knight scored 80 and Graham Thorpe 52 as England posted 244-5 from their 50 overs to erase the nightmare of their 89 all out on Saturday evening.

Knight, who needed three stitches on his chin after top edging a pull off Ian Butler into his face, compiled a patient knock to anchor his side's innings. The left-hander hit four boundaries during his 129 ball stay and shared two vital partnerships, a characteristic that had been missing from England's game during the first two matches.



BOWLED: England captain Nasser Hussain, right, looks around to his stumps after being bowled by New Zealand's Chris Harris, centre, as wicketkeeper Chris Nevin runs in at McLean Park in Napier. — Reuters

England got off to a good start with Knight and Marcus Trescothick adding 71 for the first wicket before Chris Cairns made a breakthrough in the 13th over.

Trescothick cut to point to end an innings of 41 and a 20-minute stoppage for rain ensued. The interruption seemed to put a dampener on the England innings with Knight and Nasser Hussain getting stuck in a rut. However, Knight persevered and, after Hussain's removal,

put on 65 for the third wicket with Thorpe.

It was a partnership that ensured England would set New Zealand a competitive target for the first time in the series.

England made two breakthroughs with the new ball dismissing openers Nathan Astle and Chris Nevin with 31 runs on the board. Astle was unlucky to have been adjudged caught behind by umpire Billy Bowden for two, with the ball passing between bat and pad.

New Zealand then lost Craig McMillan for 14 but Lou Vincent and Fleming gave their side hope with a 58 run fourth wicket partnership.

Hussain turned to Collingwood as his sixth bowler and it proved to be a master-stroke as New Zealand slumped from 128-4 to 168-7 with dangermen Vincent and Cairns falling to the medium pacer.

Andre Adams failed to stretch his golden run with the bat as he fell to Collingwood for two before Ashley Giles took two wickets and Darren Gough ended the match by bowling Ian Butler with 27 balls to spare.

England captain Nasser Hussain warned his side yesterday that they still need to improve if they are to have any

chance of snatching the One-day series from New Zealand.

"We spoke openly after Saturday and put things right today," Hussain said.

"Good sides are built over weeks and years and just because we have won we are not suddenly a great side again. We are just a side who have put things right from the last game." Hussain expects New Zealand to come back at his side even stronger now they have tasted defeat when the series resumes at Eden Park in Auckland on Saturday.

"We have been average in New Zealand and we have got to keep performing because they will up their standards by 20 per cent, so if we stay at this level we will be beaten again."

SCOREBOARD

England	New Zealand
M. Trescothick c Harris b Cairns...41	C. McMillan c Collingwood b Hoggard...14
N. Knight c Nevin b Cairns...80	L. Vincent c White b Collingwood...29
N. Hussain b Harris...24	C. Cairns c Flintoff b Collingwood...7
G. Thorpe c Astle b Cairns...52	C. Harris lbw b Collingwood...3
A. Flintoff c Vincent b Adams...19	A. Adams c Shah b Collingwood...2
P. Collingwood not out...9	D. Vettori lbw b Giles...9
O. Shah not out...9	D. Tuffey b Giles...1
Extras: (lb, 5lb, 5w, 8nb)...10	I. Butler b Gough...3
Total: (for 5 wks)...244	Extras: (lb, 16lb, 15w, 2nb)...34
Fall of wickets: 1-71, 2-127, 3-192, 4-231, 5-240	Total: (All out in 46.3 overs)...201
Bowling: Butler 4-0-21-0 (5nb), Tuffey 10-0-39-0 (3w, 2nb), Cairns 10-1-51-3 (1nb), Adams 9-1-49-1 (2w), Vettori 10-0-49-0, Harris 7-0-29-1	Fall of wickets: 1-10, 2-31, 3-70, 4-128, 5-140, 6-152, 7-168, 8-180, 9-186
New Zealand	Bowling: Gough 8.3-0-21-2 (3w), Hoggard 10-0-44-2 (3w, 2nb), Flintoff 7-0-34-0 (3w), White 3-0-15-0, Giles 10-0-32-2, Collingwood 8-0-38-4 (3w)
C. Nevin c sub b Hoggard...21	Result: England won by 43 runs; New Zealand lead series 2-1. — AFP
N. Astle c Trescothick b Gough...2	
S. Fleming not out...76	

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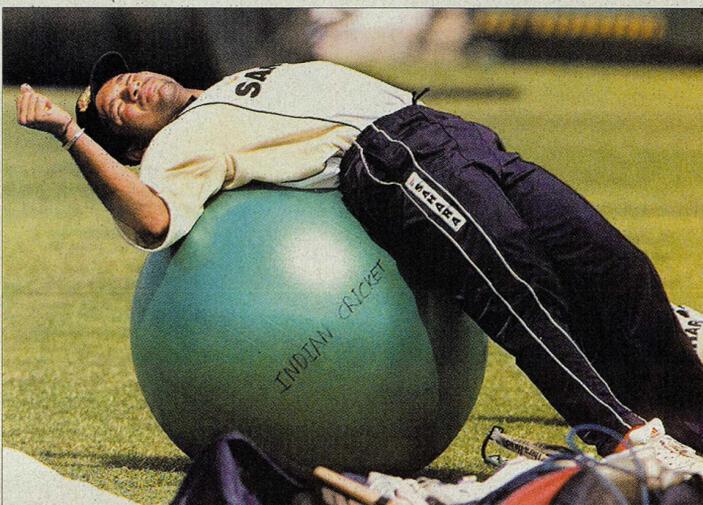
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FINE-TUNING: India's Sachin Tendulkar stretches on a medicine ball during a practice session at the V.C.A. Stadium in Nagpur. — Reuters

Flower hopes to bloom again on Indian soil

NAGPUR — Top Zimbabwean batsman Andy Flower sounded a warning to India ahead of today's first Test here, saying he was hopeful of returning to big-scoring ways.

The left-hander troubled the Indian bowlers on Zimbabwe's last tour in 2000, performing the dual roles of batsman and wicket-keeper remarkably well to make 540 runs in two Tests with the help of a double-century and a century.

Flower, however, could not do justice to his stature on the recent tour of Sri Lanka, making just 80 in six Test innings.

"I hope to regain my batting form in India," Flower said. "The tracks here are good for batting, even though spin and reverse-swing might make things tricky."

Zimbabwean skipper Stuart Carlisle said Tatenda Taibu would keep wicket in the two-Test series this time.

"It will be a good test for him (Taibu) on this tour as Flower will not be keeping wickets in Tests," Carlisle said, adding he hoped Flower would be among the runs again.

"He played very well last time and I hope he will do the same this time as well," said Carlisle. A dry and barren pitch in Nagpur is expected to break in the later stages and visiting skipper Stuart Carlisle wants his top-order batsmen to contribute more consistently if Zimbabwe are to compete against the Indian spin duo.

"I only hope our top-order batsmen get runs so that we can put pressure on the Indian batsmen. The pitch looks good for batting and we would like to bat first."

Flower struck form in his very first match of the current tour, scoring 94 on Sunday in a drawn warm-up game at Vijayawada in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

"It was important for me score a few runs, since I did not have a very good tour of Sri Lanka," said Flower, the top run-getter in the Zimbabwean side with 4,552 runs in 59 Tests with 12 centuries.

"I relish batting on Indian wickets. It encourages me to experiment and hence I was prompted to try the reverse-sweep," said Flower.

Saurav Ganguly, under pressure as India captain because of his poor batting form, said Flower would not find it easy.

"It will not be easy for Flower and company to reverse-sweep spinners Anil Kumble and Harbhajan Singh as they have been bowling well," said Ganguly, who has scored just three half-centuries in his last 27 Test innings.

"We now have a stronger side than the one that played Zimbabwe last time," said the Indian skipper, whose team won the two-Test series 1-0 two years ago.

Leg-spinner Anil Kumble



DANGER MAN: Zimbabwe's Andy Flower hits a ball during a net practice session. — Reuters

missed that series due to a shoulder-injury, while off-spinner Harbhajan was replaced with Sarandeep Singh.

"We have to play positively and try to win the two Tests," Ganguly said. Ganguly is pinning his hopes on Kumble and Harbhajan but his two slow bowlers could again be hampered by the poor glove-work of Deep Dasgupta, who has been retained as wicketkeeper despite a series of errors against England.

The hosts expect to include 28-year-old all-rounder Sanjay Bangar for his second Test in place of middle-order batsman Virender Sehwag and provide a third seamer alongside Javagal Srinath and Zaheer Khan.

Ganguly himself is under pressure to rediscover his form with the bat after managing just 68 runs in four innings against England.

The Indian media recently slammed his re-appointment as skipper, comparing it to the axing of Steve Waugh as Australia's One-day captain after the world champions lost a tri-series at home.

Vangipurappu Laxman is also struggling to live up to expectations after his record innings of 281 sparked an Indian comeback 2-1 home series win over Australia early last year.

India (from): Saurav Ganguly (capt), Rahul Dravid, Sachin Tendulkar, Venkatesh Laxman, Shiv Sunder Das, Virender Sehwag, Anil Kumble, Harbhajan Singh, Javagal Srinath, Zaheer Khan, Tinu Yohannan, Deep Dasgupta, Sanjay Bangar and Sarandeep Singh.

Zimbabwe (from): Stuart Carlisle (capt), Heath Streak, Alistair Campbell, Dion Ebrahim, Andy Flower, Grant Flower, Travis Friend, Trevor Gripper, Mpumeliso Mbangwa, Raymond Price, Gavin Rennie, Tatenda Taibu, Brighton Watambwa and Craig Wishart.

Umpires: David Shepherd (Eng) and Srinivas Venkataraghavan (Ind).

Match-referee: John Reid (Nz). — AFP

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