

Chatichai freed, retires from active politics

BANGKOK, Mar 9: Ousted Thai Premier Chatichai Chongavan was released from military custody today and said he was giving up politics, reports Reuter.

Chatichai told reporters at air force headquarters: "I tried to sort out the country's problems through democratic means. May be this government can sort it another way".

He was overthrown in a military coup two weeks ago by the Armed Forces high command, which accused him of tolerating rampant corruption among politicians and officials.

Chatichai was flanked by the head of the military junta, General Sunthorn Kongsompong, and the new caretaker Premier Anand Panyarachun when he spoke to reporters.

He then went back inside the building to prepare to go home. "I'm going home to rest as for my future, I am giving up my political career and washing my hands of politics," he said.

Chatichai has been held at the Air Force Headquarters since he was taken off a plane at gunpoint on February 23 as he was about to fly to northern Chiang Mai for an audience with the King.

Chatichai appeared to be in good health he said he had gone jogging everyday and was treated well.

He spoke to reporters after breakfasting with the coup leaders and Anand.

He said he had no definite plans yet but might go to Switzerland, where he has a home.

Chatichai, a former cavalry commander and diplomat, has amassed a fortune through varied business interests.

The military junta has ordered his assets frozen pending an investigation into whether any were dishonestly acquired.

Chatichai praised the new government set up by the junta as "good and capable".

Saddam using planes to crush Iraqis: Syria Rebel committees govern five Iraqi towns

DAMASCUS (Syria), Mar 9: A top Syrian official says Iraq President Saddam Hussein is waging war on his own people with the planes he hid from the allied coalition, reports AP.

"We wondered why the Iraqi warplanes were banned from defending the Iraqi airspace and were sent outside Iraq during the war," Syrian Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam said in a speech Friday. "They are now bombing Iraq and the Iraqis."

An Iraqi opposition leader, Jawad al-Maliki of the Al-Dawa party, also claimed in Damascus that Saddam has used helicopter gunships to crush the popular uprising in Baghdad.

Neither claim could be independently verified. Khaddam contended that

Saddam's supporters in the Gulf war were as much "to blame for the blood of the thousands of Iraqis that was shed in this criminal adventure" as Saddam himself. He spoke at a rally marking the 28th anniversary of the ruling Baath Arab Socialist Party.

"The remark was seen as an indirect reference to King Hussein of Jordan and Yasser Arafat, the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization."

Syria condemned Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and sent 19,000 troops to defend Saudi Arabia as part of the multinational coalition.

Syria and Iraq are ruled by rival wings of the Baath party, which was fractured in 1965.

Syria President Hafez Assad and Saddam have been bitter

foes for more than 10 years. Saddam has accused Assad of masterminding a plot to assassinate him.

Khaddam said the Iraqi regime has "torn into pieces" the party slogans, which are unity, freedom and socialism.

"This tyrant, who turned into a meek, peaceful lamb and stopped the fighting and made all those concessions...has once again turned into a tyrant to achieve the mother of all battles...in Iraq and against the Iraqi people," added Khaddam.

"The Iraqis have been killed twice: once by the decision of the regime to drag them into the war and a second time because the Iraqis rejected the consequences of the war," said Khaddam.

Reuter adds from London: Iraqi rebel groups bases in

London claimed their supporters controlled five Iraqi cities but said the government of President Saddam Hussein was besieging two rebel centres.

The Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in London (SCIRI) said in a statement that the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala were under siege by forces loyal to Saddam.

"The army has sent a message that all kinds of weapons will be used to destroy the popular uprising there. This is a clear message for the use of chemical and mass destruction weapons," the statement said.

SCIRI called on "Islamic and world communities to interfere to stop this barbaric move."

It also said an army officer, Major Khaled Abed Ibrahim had joined the rebels and

ordered his troops to do the same.

The SCIRI said rebels controlled the southern port of Basra, Najaf, Amara, Sulaymaniyah and Khanakeen. It said locally-elected committees were governing the towns.

Jalal Talabani of the Iraqi Kurdistan Front said Kurdish rebels controlled the entire province of Sulaymaniyah in northeast Iraq. "The headquarters of the 32nd Army Division has been captured in the province," he added.

"Large numbers of Iraqi Armed Forces have joined the ranks of the resistance," Talabani said.

Talabani said other Iraqi troops were responding in force.

"On certain occasions the security forces have opened fire, even using helicopter gunships to suppress the growing public unrest," he said. "No exact details as to the number of casualties among the demonstrators is available as yet."

Previous statements from Kurdish rebel groups in London about Iraq have proved accurate.

The SCIRI, which groups several Iraqi rebel groups, said its information came from its Tehran office.

Its statement also said several Baghdad suburbs where it said large demonstrations had been going on for two days.

term implications for Saddam are serious.

A report from Langley Air Force Base (Virginia) says: The United States may leave combat aircraft permanently based in Saudi Arabia or other Gulf nations, the Air Force's top civilian official said Friday.

Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait last August, Saudi Arabia, with Iraqi troops poised at its border, welcomed the deployment to the region of hundreds of thousands of allied troops and more than 1,000 planes. But permanent peacetime basing would be unprecedented in a region that has traditionally been highly suspicious of outside interference.

BRIEFLY

Baker holds talks with Fahd: US Secretary of State James Baker held talks in Riyadh late Friday with King Fahd, the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) reported but gave no details on the subjects discussed, reports AFP.

The agency said several senior Saudi officials, including Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz, attended the meeting.

Mr Baker, who arrived earlier at the start of a 10-day exploratory peace mission to the Middle East, had met separately with the Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, along with the Saudi Ambassador to Washington, prince Bandar bin Sultan, SPA said.

Ethiopian rebels kill 124 troops: Ethiopian rebels of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) claimed Friday they had killed 124 government troops and wounded 37 in an ambush in the western Wollega region rebel radio in Nairobi said, reports AFP.

The clandestine OLF radio, monitored here, said the fighting occurred on Monday between Gimbi and Nekemt towns, the towns are 80 kilometers (50 miles) apart.

Another rebel group, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) claimed to have captured Debre-Markos, the capital of Gojam province, 180 kilometers (112 miles) to the northeast of Nekemt on February 27.

US-Euratom N-agreement extended: President George Bush Friday signed an agreement extending US Nuclear Cooperation with the European Euratom Agency, reports AFP.

Cooperation between the United States and Euratom, begun 30 years ago, was to end March 10, 1990. Since then it has been renewed every year by presidential decree for twelve-month periods.

In a statement to Congress, Bush stressed that a lack of cooperation between the United States and Europe on nuclear technology "would be seriously prejudicial to the achievement of US non-proliferation objectives or otherwise jeopardize the common defence and security."

China to build 2nd N-Plant: China is looking for a site to build a second nuclear power plant in southern Guangdong province, the official Xinhua News Agency reported Friday, says AFP.

It quoted Guangdong's Governor Ye Xuanping as saying that provincial authorities were "selecting a suitable site" for the facility.

Speaking during a meeting of his province's legislature, Mr. Ye added that Hong Kong and Macau representatives would be asked to give their opinions before a final site decision is made, Xinhua said.

3,34,215 AIDS cases worldwide: Officially reported cases of AIDS rose by nearly 11,000 in February to reach 3,34,215 worldwide, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said in Geneva on Friday, reports Reuter.

The highest rate remained that of the United States where the number of cases increased to 161,288 from 154, 791 in December 1990 when the Geneva based World Health body received the last US update.

The figures for 159 countries include those who have died of AIDS - Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome - for which there is no cure.

Major suffers election defeat: British Prime Minister John Major suffered a stunning election defeat on his 100th day in office, despite a high rating in opinion polls and popular acclaim over the Allied victory in the Gulf war, reports Reuter.

Voters in the prosperous Ribblesdale valley in northern England voted out the ruling Conservatives, dimming speculation about an early general election.

Analysts saw the result as a protest over the poll tax for local services imposed in England last year.

CRPF officer's daughters freed: Militants Friday freed the daughters of Centre Reserve Police Force (CRPF) Assistant Commandant after nearly 50 hours of captivity, reports PTI.

The girls - Paramjit Kaur (23) and Palwinderjit Kaur (17) - reached home safely around 1.45 am, SSP Jalandhar Suresh Arora said.

Militants abducted both the daughters and wife of the Assistant Commandant from their house near Maksoodan here on March six.

They, however, released the CRPF officer's wife later.

Babbar Khalsa outfit claimed responsibility for the abduction which it said was done to secure the release of its Jalandhar Area Commander Raminderjit Singh alias Tehni arrested recently.

France spends \$ 1.7b in war: French military operations in the Gulf have cost a total of 8.5 billion francs (1.7 billion dollars) since August 1990, reliable sources said in Paris Friday, reports AFP.

The total may reach nine billion francs (1.8 billion dollars) if the repatriation of French troops and equipment continues until the end of the summer, the sources said.

France has received one billion dollars in aid from Kuwait and 300 million Deutsch marks (200 million dollars) from Germany, for a total of 1.3 billion dollars to help offset the costs.

Negotiations are also being held for France to receive part of the nine-billion dollar Japanese contribution to the Gulf war effort.

Saddam-Perez dialogue UN Chief 'not embarrassed' by transcript of talks

NEW YORK Mar 9: United Nations Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar is 'not embarrassed' by the contents of the transcript of his January 13 conversation with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, according to aides to the UN chief, reports IPS.

A document purporting to be the entire transcript of the conversation was published on February 9 by Ad Dour, a Jordanian daily.

Mr Francois Gduliani, the UN secretary-general's spokesman, told reporters that the release of the transcript was self-serving but that the United Nations had no comment on the matter.

A UN official said the secretariat did not intend to publish the transcript as a UN document, since to do so would represent a dangerous precedent which could under mine the diplomatic process.

The official added that "nothing in the transcript embarrasses the Secretary-General or shows that he is trying to cut a deal which goes wide of the resolution."

He conceded, however, that some things were said which were not intended for public consumption.

It is believed that the Iraqi authorities wanted the document published either to embarrass Mr Perez de Cuellar in his relations with American authorities or to show that Mr Saddam Hussein was genuinely in favour



FLASHBACK - The UN chief Perez de Cuellar with Iraqi Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz before meeting President Saddam Hossain in Baghdad -AFP/UNB photo

of a peaceful solution to the Gulf crisis.

The published version of the transcript shows Mr Perez de Cuellar agreeing with Mr Saddam Hussein that the 12 Security Council resolutions which followed the August 2 invasion of Kuwait were American resolutions, that this is an American age and that what the United States wants at present is what is passed by the Council.

Statements attributed to Mr Saddam Hussein suggest his

willingness to compromise at various stages of the crisis.

He is quoted as reminding the Secretary-General that although it rejected the first Security Council resolution requiring a withdrawal from Kuwait, Iraq had nonetheless started withdrawing its forces.

But when the American escalation continued and US forces continued arriving in increasing numbers, "we stopped the pullout of the

force", he is quoted as saying.

According to the transcript, the annexation of Kuwait was hastened for the same reason, since Iraqis would not fight for Kuwait when it is headed by a provisional government.

Had the US not acted the way it did, the union would have perhaps taken a longer time allowing everyone to get acquainted with the legalistic steps of the process, Mr Saddam Hussein is reported as saying.

Fragile political honeymoon at the root of Indian crisis



NEW DELHI, Mar 9: India's latest political crisis has its roots in a personality clash between two unlikely partners, who came together in a marriage of convenience destined to break up from day one, reports AFP.

Chandra Shekhar and Rajiv Gandhi had little in common when they joined hands to provide a bizarre experiment in government - a minority administration riding piggy back on a party that commanded four times as many MPs.

Mr. Gandhi, 47, a scion of the Nehru-Gandhi family, is the product of western education who entered politics reluctantly at the behest of his mother Indira Gandhi, whom he succeeded as Prime Minister after her 1984 assassination.

A modernist, the former airline pilot in his five years as premier spoke of taking India into the 21st century, ushered in the computer era, set India's economy on the road to liberalisation and kept a high international profile.

Mr. Shekhar, 63, is the son of a middle-class family born in a small village who walked several kilometers daily to the nearest town which had a school. He spoke out against dynastic rule represented by the Nehru-Gandhi family.

A career politician, Mr. Shekhar is a self-proclaimed socialist with a deep distrust of multinational companies, emphasising the need for austerity and self-reliance and

frankly concession that he had little flair for foreign affairs.

When they formed for an alliance in November 1990, Mr. Gandhi and Mr. Shekhar were motivated as much by a desire to put off elections neither of them wanted as their intense dislike of incumbent Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh.

Mr. Shekhar split the People's party of Mr. Singh, a Gandhi aide-turned-bitter for who was voted out by Parliament after losing his majority, to be replaced by Mr. Shekhar.

Mr. Gandhi's Congress (I) propped him up until their alliance ended in bitterness Wednesday when Mr. Shekhar resigned in a huff.

"It was a problem of chemistry, not logic at all," said Subramaniam Swamy, Mr. Shekhar's Commerce Minister, who instrumental in bringing them together and unsuccessfully tried to avert the recent split.

Mr. Shekhar quit and accused Congress (I) of betrayal after the arty boycotted Parliament to protest alleged police surveillance on Mr. Gandhi's house. The boycott robbed him of the numbers he needed to control Parliament.

Mr. Gandhi wanted Mr. Shekhar to dismiss a close aide whom he suspected had ordered the surveillance. Mr. Shekhar felt that to oblige would be a loss of self-respect, Mr. Swamy said, adding that neither of them was willing to budge.

Off the Record

Poor girls!

PARIS: An African woman was sentenced Friday to five years in prison for cutting out parts of the genitals of six little African girls - a practice common in their native Mali but forbidden in France, reports AFP.

In four previous excision cases, including one in which a month-old girl died, the parents were given suspended sentences.

Riday's sentence marked the first time actual jail time was ordered and the first time the person who performed the operation was tried.

In Friday's case, the parents of the six girls also were sentenced to three years in jail, but the sentences were suspended. However, they were put under political surveillance for an additional two years.

Aramata Keita, a 47-year-old woman from the arid West African state of Mali, was found guilty of performing the operations in 1982 and 1983 in Paris.

In the two-day trial, the prosecutor, Dominique Commaret, had urged the jury to "stamp out these archaic practices," arguing that excision - cutting all or part of the clitoris, which renders women largely frigid - was a "premeditated crime that must be firmly punished."

"You are not anthropologists," she continued. "Your mission is to judge. To acquit would be to accept the unacceptable in the name of exoticism."

None spared in Lanka

COLOMBO: Nearly all Sri Lankan women are sexually harassed at work, according to a trade union study published International Women's Day, reports Reuter.

The study, carried out by the Conference of Public Service Independent Trade Unions among 100 working women between the ages of 20 and 39, found that sexual harassment was greater in the private sector than in the public sector.

All the women working in the private sector and 97 per cent in the public sector complained of sexual harassment.

"The majority of women in both sectors were subject to remarks, jokes and abuse on their appearance and mode of dress," the study said.

The study said most women would rather face this situation than risk losing their jobs by complaining.

The Sri Lankan workforce is 56.6 per cent female.

Beast outbeasted

PERTH, (Australia): An Australian man, angry at his brother for persistently coughing, locked him in the boot of his car and set fire to it, reports Reuter.

A court sentenced Joseph Taylor, 22, to life imprisonment on Thursday for murdering his 16-year-old brother Dale when high on amphetamines.

"I could hear my brother yelling and screaming but he'd just coughed one time too many," Taylor told police. "It was a nice day for a barbecue."

Taylor, a drug addict, pleaded guilty to murder.