

Lankans go to polls as civil war continues

COLOMBO, May 11: While the civil war continued unabated, Sri Lankans went to the polls Saturday in local council elections widely seen as a referendum on the national government, reports AFP.

The early turnout was light among the 8.7 million eligible voters. Polls close at 4 pm (1130 GMT) after nine hours of voting, and results are expected to be announced over the state-owned radio and television after midnight, officials said.

The elections for 236 city and village councils are being held throughout the island except in the northern and eastern districts where Tamil rebels are waging a separatist war.

More than 20,000 policemen have been deployed at 7,500 polling stations, police said. The campaign has been peaceful, barring a few incidents.

Presidential security men asked photographers to leave a polling station shortly before President Ranasinghe Premadasa was to cast his ballot.

Eleven political parties have fielded 15,000 candidates for these polls. There are also 82 independent candidates.

It is the first local government election since 1983, and the first public voting since Premadasa took office two years ago.

Bush accuses Congress of encroaching his powers

PRINCETON (New Jersey), May 11: President George Bush, showing few ill effects from nearly a week of health troubles, accused Congress on Friday of trying to encroach on presidential powers, reports Reuter.

In a speech at Princeton University, the President started out sluggishly, stumbling over a few more words than normal, but he ended on a robust note in appealing for the power to veto individual spending items he deems wasteful without rejecting budgets as a whole.

The White House, anxious to curb spending by the democratically-controlled Congress, wants the power to reject individual items in bills sent for signature without having to reject the whole bill.

"Forty-three (state) governors have such a power. It works. The President ought to have that power too. Some believe that I already have that power under the constitution," he said.

The biggest news was the simple fact that Bush was off on a trip out of the Washington area since experiencing an abnormal heartbeat last Saturday while juggling at the camp David presidential retreat.

Drugs stabilised his bout of arterial fibrillation, an irregular rhythm of the upper chambers

of the heart, and his doctors gave him a dose of radioactive iodine on Thursday to treat what they diagnosed as the root cause of his heart ailment, a hyperactive thyroid gland.

The doctors said Bush has Graves disease, a non-contagious disorder that has also afflicted his wife since 1989. The radioactive iodine is to kill or destroy the thyroid, which produces a hormone that regulates metabolism.

He will ultimately take a pill a day to mimic the function of the thyroid.

White House Spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said Bush's heartbeat was still being monitored regularly and that he had not experienced heart flutters since a brief episode on Tuesday night.

Bush's Personal Physician Burton Lee ordered Bush on Thursday to lighten his workload, warning he might not have the same frenetic energy. Fitzwater said Bush had been a little tired the last couple of afternoons.

He has been told to stay away from his grand children

for a few days to avoid contaminating them with the radioactivity in the iodine he took.

The President was to go to Camp David for a relatively long weekend, not returning to the White House until Monday. Vice President Dan Quayle is to take his place on a day trip to Chicago on Monday.

Bush jokingly alluded to his health problems, thanking Princeton University President Harold Shapiro for the warm welcome. "Your words were so kind that my heart almost went back into fibrillation," he said.

110,000 Iraqis return home

GENEVA, May 11: Some 110,000 Iraqi refugees have now spontaneously left their country's northern border to begin the journey homeward, the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) announced Friday, reports AFP.

In a statement, the UNHCR said that 70,000 refugees were returning from along the Iranian border and 40,000 from the Turkish frontier. It did not specify if the refugees were Kurds.

The UNHCR also issued a report Friday detailing poor sanitary conditions in some 70 camps holding Iraqi refugees in Iraq, and warned of a possible cholera or typhoid epidemic.

Kennedy says he's not aware of rape case against nephew

BOSTON, May 11: U. S. Senator Edward Kennedy said on Friday he had not been aware that his nephew was implicated in an alleged rape when Palm Beach police sought to question him at the family's Florida estate on March 30, reports Reuter.

According to police documents, Kennedy, an influential Democrat, left the estate and drove his nephew, William Kennedy Smith, to the airport the day after the alleged rape, minutes after Palm Beach police detectives were turned away from

the door. The Senator, speaking to reporters after giving a speech at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said he was not informed by his security aide, who initially talked to police at the compound the day after the incident, that detectives were investigating a rape.

"I was not told, never, was told, that the Palm Beach police wanted to speak to me about an alleged incident of Willie Smith raping some girl," Kennedy said. "I was never, never, never told that."

Kennedy said that the aide, William Barry, told him that police were investigating some stolen items and a possible sexual harassment charge. The Senator said the first he heard anything about an alleged rape was when he returned to Washington on the Monday following the Easter weekend incident.

The day following the alleged rape, Barry told detectives who visited the mansion to interview Smith and Kennedy that neither man was at home, a police affidavit said.

Palm Beach police said Friday they were investigating the possibility of obstruction of justice in the case.

"We cannot dismiss the possibility that charges could be filed," police spokesman Craig Gunkel said in Palm Beach. "We still have an open investigation into the possibility that we were misled when we went to the Kennedy mansion."

Earlier Reuter erroneously reported that police said Kennedy and his nephew might face obstruction of justice charges. Police did not mention any names in connection with the obstruction of justice charges.

Kennedy Smith surrenders to police

PALM BEACH (Florida), May 11: William Kennedy Smith, accompanied by his mother, arrived at the Palm Beach police department Saturday to surrender on charges of rape, reports UNI.

"I'd like to make a statement, but I want to take care of this problem first," Smith said.

His mother, Jean Kennedy Smith, was at his side. They were mobbed by a crush of reporters who followed them up the stairs of the two-storey police department building.

Smith, 30-year-old nephew of Sen. Edward Kennedy, was charged Thursday with sexual battery — a charge tantamount to rape — and with battery in connection with an incident March 30 at the Kennedy family estate.

BRIEFLY

8 killed in Andhra: Eight people died and a dozen more suffered burns in an accidental fire in a shanty township in the Southern State of Andhra Pradesh the Press Trust of India (PTI) said Friday. AFP reports from New Delhi. Some 100 shanties were gutted in the fire at Buddayapally in Andhra Pradesh's Cuddapah district late Thursday, the news agency said.

Soviet FM to visit Lebanon: Soviet Foreign Minister Alexander Bessmertnykh will visit Lebanon next Tuesday as part of his current Middle East tour, government sources said, Reuter reports from Beirut.

The sources said the Soviet ambassador to Lebanon Guennady Litchev, informed Lebanese Foreign Ministry Secretary-General Suhel Chammas of the visit.

It would be the first visit by a Soviet Foreign Minister since the start of the civil war in 1975.

Soviet support to Hanoi: The Soviet Union expressed support for Vietnam's efforts to "normalize its relations with China and the United States" after a visit by Vietnamese Prime Minister Do Muoi, Tass news agency said Friday in Moscow, AFP reports.

In a statement, the government also backed Vietnamese "initiatives...to establish peace in Southeast Asia."

Talks between Soviet Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov and his Vietnamese counterpart focused mainly on their countries' future trade relations, Tass said.

Major in no hurry for polls: British Prime Minister John Major addressed a Scottish rally of his Conservative Party in Perth Scotland on Friday and said that he was in no hurry to take the country into a new election, AFP reports from Perth Scotland.

Major also took the offensive against the Opposition Labour Party, whose promises to the electorate he described as "breath-taking folly."

The speech came amid continued speculation that Major might still call a snap election in June this year.

Under Britain's electoral rules, he has until July next year to call an election.

8 killed in Cairo fire: At least eight people were killed and 35 injured on Friday when fire destroyed the top floors of a 14-storey Cairo apartment block, police said, Reuter reports from Cairo.

The dead included two children thrown by their mother from the 14th floor to escape the blaze which broke out before noon in the fashionable Maadi District.

The children, a 10-year-old boy and his eight-year-old sister, died the moment they hit the ground. The mother died trying to jump to safety.

Police said earlier they had reports of nine deaths.

Plea to appoint UN man for relief: West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher on Friday proposed that the United Nations appoint an under-secretary to coordinate disaster relief quickly, Reuter reports from United Nations.

The United Nations, which has gained in stature, should have a corps of people and donors ready to help in emergency situations," he said, speaking in German.

Speaking to reporters after seeing UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar, Genscher said the new post should be aimed at compiling a register of which states could help and make sure the various UN agencies move in one direction.

He said the Secretary-General had agreed to investigate his proposals.

Perez seeks aid for Africa: United Nations Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar called Friday for emergency aid for Africa to address widespread suffering and prevent the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, AFP reports from New York.

In 1991, an estimated 30 million Africans will be in need of emergency assistance in the form of food aid, medical supplies, clean drinking water, and additional nutritional aid for children, Perez de Cuellar said in his appeal.

A convergence of difficult conditions including crop failures, domestic discord, and vast numbers of refugees and displaced people has given rise to widespread suffering which can only be alleviated by assistance from the International Community, the Secretary General said.



PRINCETON, New Jersey: US President George Bush (C) receives an Honorary Doctor of Law degree from Princeton University President Harold Shapiro (R) at Princeton University May 10. Chief Marshal John Fleming (L) places the hood over the President Bush's head. — AFP photo

Rajiv blames Janata Dal, CPI for growth of BJP and communalism
Shekhar's motorcade meets with accident:
IGP among 4 officials injured

NEW DELHI, May 11: Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar's motorcade met with an accident Friday that left four officials, including a state police chief, seriously injured in the northern state of Rajasthan, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said, reports AFP.

Shekhar, who was on an election tour of the desert state when the accident occurred, was not hurt. India votes for a new Parliament later this month.

Rajasthan's Inspector-General of Police, S. P. Singh, was among the injured, as was Prahlad Mahishi, an officer on special duty in the Prime Minister's office," PTI said. The other two injured were not identified.

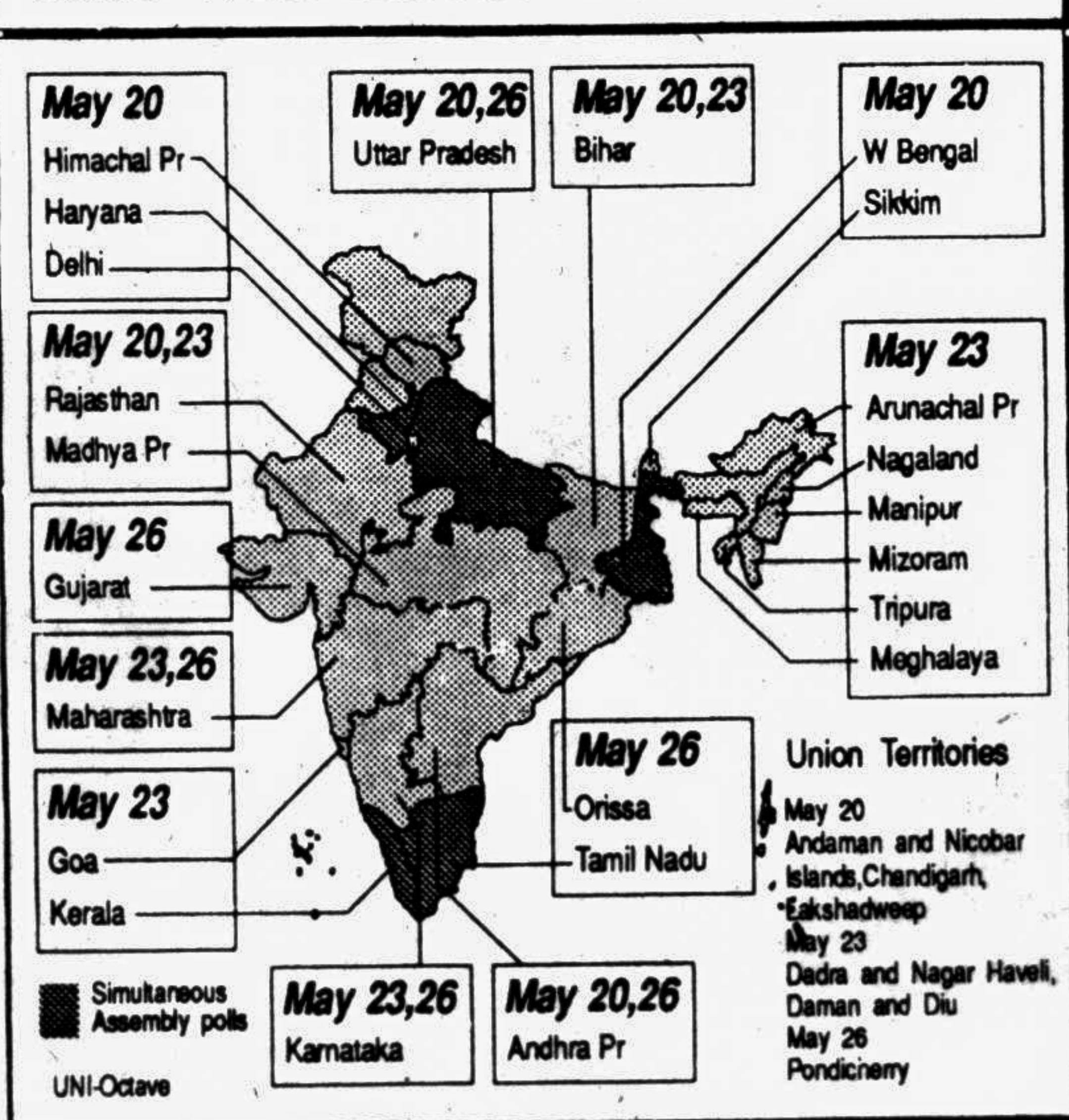
Mahishi was flown to New Delhi. It was the second incident involving Shekhar's motorcade within a week.

The accident occurred when a car in the motorcade swerved and hit a roadside tree in the town of Ajmer.

Last Saturday it was pelted stones by a crowd during a similar tour of the northern state of Uttar Pradesh at its Chaubepur area Saturday, in which the driver of one of the cars suffered minor head injuries.

The Police Chief, Singh, was taken to hospital in Jaipur, Rajasthan's capital, and

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PTI adds from Mangalore: The Congress (I) President Rajiv Gandhi Friday night held the Janata Dal, CPI, and CPI (M) responsible for the growth of BJP and communalism in the country and accused the V P Singh government of giving undue coverage in Doordarshan and Radio for the rath yatra taken out by the BJP leader, L K Advani in September 1990.

Speaking at a public meeting here, he said the BJP had won more seats in the 1989 elections due to seat adjustments made by the Janata Dal, CPI, CPI-M and other left parties.

He said for the past 15 months, the people were suffering heavily due to many reasons like price rise and inflation. The first task of his party if voted to power, would be to control the prices.

He said the Congress (I) was the only party having a time-bound programme, covering the needs of every section of society which was ready for implementation. Stressing the need for a strong government at the centre, he said it would be possible only if the Congress (I) came to power.

He appealed to the people to give one more chance to the last 15 months by the opposition parties.

Off the Record



LAS VEGAS: Tanja Viononen (L), the 1991 Miss Universe contestant from Finland, and her counterpart from Czechoslovakia, Renata Gorecka (R), pose for a photographer May 10. The 1991 Miss Universe contest is scheduled May 17. — AFP photo

Abdominal lump turns out to be a baby

SAN FRANCISCO: Sally Bellando didn't crave ice cream and pickles, and didn't have morning sickness. She did have abdominal swelling, but feared that was a sign her cancer had returned, reports AP.

Then she gave birth by Caesarean section to a 5-pound, 15-ounce (2.64-kilogram) baby girl, Shauna Christine Bellando.

"She's a special little baby, definitely meant to be born. She certainly is welcome," Mrs. Bellando said Friday in a telephone interview from Alta Bates-Herrick Hospital in Berkeley.

The pregnancy was discovered Monday after her internist, believing the cancer might have returned and spread, ordered a CAT scan of Mrs. Bellando's midsection. The baby was born the next day, four weeks premature.

The infant, Mrs. Bellando's first, will remain hospitalized several weeks for observation but so far hasn't shown any ill effects of her mother's cancer treatments, said hospital spokeswoman Carol Regalado.

The baby, however, does have a blood sugar problem possibly related to her mother's diabetes, Regalado said.

Mrs. Bellando, 39, believed she was left sterile by chemotherapy treatment she was receiving to treat breast cancer that was diagnosed in 1989.

A surprise encounter with Jackie

NEW YORK: A surprise encounter with Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis convinced Blair Brown she'd made a mistake playing the former first lady in the 1983 miniseries "Kennedy," reports AP.

"One day I was shopping in New York, and there was Jackie, and I just hid," Brown says in this Sunday's Parade magazine. "I didn't want to face her. Even now, I'm sorry I did that series."

"People deserve their privacy, and we ought to just leave them alone. Anyway, that's how I feel about it now — very protective of her," continues the star of "The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd."

Brown was nominated for a Golden Globe award for her portrayal of Jackie O.

Diana plays piano for Czech orphans

PRAGUE: Britain's Princess Diana was warmly applauded when she played the piano for orphaned children during her visit to Prague's House of Children on Thursday, reports Reuter.

The children put on their own show for the Princess dressed in a blackbuttoned with costume, then shyly asked her to play for them.

She took off her sapphire and diamond engagement ring, and turning down a request for chopsticks, played the classic "Greensleeves."

Her husband Prince Charles lunched with signatories of Charter — 77, the first human rights movement in Eastern Europe, and met Czechoslovakia's Foreign Minister Jiri Dienstbier, one of its first members.

The royal couple are on a four-day visit to Czechoslovakia.

Nepalis to battle snow to cast ballots

KATHMANDU, May 11: Nepalese voters will have to battle snow or sweltering heat or endure long treks or hours in a queue Sunday to cast their ballots in a multi-party general election for the first time in 32 years, reports AFP.

Nepal's land area of 150,000 square kilometers (60,000 square miles) — mostly mountains — is served by just 7,000 kms (4,425 miles) of road.

This and the fact that its population is 64 per cent illiterate made for a unique challenge facing the Election Commission as it organized the polls to the house of representatives.

Ten of the 14,789 polling stations are at 4,500 metres (15,000 feet) or more. And 36 can expect heavy snows and sub-freezing temperatures, meteorologists predict.

But in the Terai Region along the border with India, where the altitude is under 100 metres (330 feet), the mercury is expected to top 40 degrees Centigrade (104 degrees Fahrenheit).

Some eight million of the

11,148,258 people who registered to vote in the kingdom's 205 districts will have to go to the polls on foot in the absence of roads or a means of transport.

Election Commission Chief Surya Prasad Shrestha said the sites of the polling stations were chosen so that all citizens would be able to reach them on foot and return home the same day.

For the past year he has been working from eight in the morning to eight and sometimes ten at night to organize the polls for a total cost estimated at 110 million rupees (three million dollars).

Other boxes will travel by plane, helicopter, jeep or truck to one of 75 district centres for tallying.