

BRIEFLY

6 Myanmar troops killed:

At least six Myanmar soldiers were killed in fighting over the weekend when they recaptured a former base from Karen ethnic minority forces, Thai military sources said today, Reuters reports Thailand.

The sources said 600 Myanmar soldiers launched an attack early on Saturday on Pong Lao camp in a remote area of Kayah state and retook it from the Karen after four hours of fighting.

Nine Myanmar porters pressed into service by the army fled across the border to Thailand during the battle.

The sources said the porters told them that they saw at least six soldiers killed in the fighting.

Mubarak opens tourism confce:

Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak opened a world tourism conference here Monday, saying it would "boost peace, security and stability in the region," AFP reports from Cairo.

The 62nd world travel congress is organized by the American Travel Agents' Association, and will last five days, bringing together more than 5,000 delegates from 125 countries.

Burdened by debt, Egypt depends on tourism — along with the Suez canal, oil exports and repatriated earnings — for its foreign currency earnings.

The 1991 Gulf war severely depressed tourism revenues, but over the past year the country has notched up a record three million visits and earned an estimated three billion dollars.

Tourism Minister Fuad Sultan took up Mubarak's theme, saying extremism and "deplorable incidents" might have held back economic development in the Middle East but that Egypt had adopted a firm stand against extremism.

Singapore govt bans novel:

The government has banned a novel written and published in Singapore after receiving complaints it was obscene, and the police have been asked to investigate its publication, AP reports from Singapore.

Copies of "Harlots: A Personal Sex History" have been confiscated, the Ministry of Information and the Arts announced Monday.

The ministry said in a statement its officers "have gone through the book and found it to be exploitative and objectionable. A book with similar contents published overseas would not have been allowed into Singapore."

Although locally published books are not required to obtain the ministry's prior approval, the publication, distribution or sale of obscene books is an offense under the law, it added.

Written by Straits Times News Editor Felix Soh under the pen name Y-Ming, it tells of the misadventures of a character who has sex with many women but finds only unhappiness.

18 killed in Colombia clashes:

Police on Monday said 15 guerrillas and three police officers were killed in weekend clashes around Colombia, Reuters reports from Colombia.

National Liberation Army guerrillas invaded the small village of Socota, 220 km (130 miles) northeast of Bogota in the early hours of Monday, killing three police and wounding four others.

Two guerrillas died in a police counterattack and the rest fled after kidnapping a doctor and two nurses.

Another 13 guerrillas were killed by security forces during the weekend in various clashes in the provinces of Antioquia, Cordoba, Cundinamarca and Meta, police said.

The clashes came in the wake of a government decision to suspend peace talks with the rebels until they stopped their attacks. A further round of talks had been planned for the end of October.

Black-White talks may resume shortly: Klerk

JHOANNESBURG, Sept 22: President F W de Klerk expressed optimism Monday that formal Black-White political talks could resume shortly, ending a three-month break, report AP.

Also a meeting between de Klerk and African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela could be announced soon, the independent South African Press Association reported.

A de Klerk-Mandela summit is seen as an important first step toward resuming the negotiations on ending apartheid and establishing a multiracial democracy.

De Klerk, speaking Monday in the capital of Pretoria, said a new round of negotiations was "hopefully just beyond the horizon."

Shortly after he spoke, Constitutional Minister Roelf Meyer and ANC Secretary General Cyril Ramaphosa met in Pretoria in a renewed bid to arrange a de Klerk-Mandela summit.

The two sides met into the night and were near agreement, SAPA reported.



LONDON: Police arrest demonstrators who had chained themselves to the doors of British Overseas Development Administration (ODA) building Monday. The protestors demanded that the World Bank, of which the ODA has contributed 183 million pounds, withdraw from the Sardar Sarovar dam project in India where 100,000 people will be evicted from their homes.

— AFP/UNB photo

Nahayan in Egypt for talks on disputed island

ALEXANDRIA (Egypt), Sept 22: United Arab Emirates President Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahayan arrived here Monday for talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on the UAE's dispute with Iran over the southern Gulf island of Abu Musa, reports AFP.

Mubarak greeted Sheikh Zayed at the airport.

The UAE President, whose country has mounted a diplomatic drive to drum up Arab support for its position on Abu Musa, is expected to travel later this week to Syria.

Mubarak charged earlier this month that the take-over of Abu Musa was proof of "Iran's expansionist aims" in the Gulf.

Delay in Syrian pullback may plunge Beirut into strife again

BEIRUT, Lebanon, Sept 22: Syria is dragging its feet over withdrawing its army from Beirut and other coastal cities, fueling a political crisis that many fear could rekindle sectarian hostilities, reports AP.

Under a 1989 Arab League-brokered peace treaty, in which the Syrians were given virtual stewardship of Lebanon in return for pacifying it, they were to withdraw to the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon two years after political reforms were ratified.

Those reforms, giving Muslims and equal share of power with the long-dominant Christians, were endorsed by Lebanon's parliament September 24, 1990.

But President Hafez Assad, despite US urging, is apparently reluctant to withdraw as agreed. Syria has had about 40,000 troops in Lebanon since 1976, when they moved in ostensibly as a peacekeeping force.

A Syrian failure to abide by the treaty could cause tension triggered by Lebanon's divisive parliamentary elections earlier this month to boil over into renewed sectarian violence.

Assad also risks a serious rift with the United States, which wants a Syrian pullback as soon as possible.

Arab diplomats and analysts believe Syria will withdraw from Beirut and the coast to the Bekaa by the end of the year. But the sources say Damascus will probably retain control of northern Lebanon and port of Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city, indefinitely.

The boundaries of a Syrian redeployment are poorly defined in the 1989 treaty and the Syrians stress that Tripoli and neighboring Akkar province are not covered by it.

Syria has a longstanding claim to Tripoli, where the

850,000 population is dominated by Sunni Muslims. Akkar is home to 50,000 Alawite Muslims who traditionally owe allegiance to Syria.

There are widespread fears that Syria's allies will carry out car bombings and kidnappings to demonstrate what will happen if the Syrians leave.

Lebanon's security forces, badly fractured during the civil war and still being restructured, are considered incapable of maintaining order on their own.

Sectarian tension has risen alarmingly since Damascus insisted President Elias Hrawi's Syrian-backed government in Beirut hold parliamentary elections.

Electoral districts were redrawn so that the new parliament would be packed with Syrian supporters, who would endorse a government that would be in Assad's pocket.

The balloting, the first in



MALI ZVORNIK (Serbia): Serbian women and children wait sobbing at a refugee centre in Mali Zvornik after arriving here Monday. Thousands of Serbs from the Gorazde region have fled from their homes in the last couple of days, heading for Serbia and Monte Negro.

— AFP/UNB photo

Floods may force Islamabad to cut spending

ISLAMABAD, Sept 22: Pakistan said on Monday it might be forced to cut its development plans because of the devastating floods that have battered the country, reports Reuters.

Environment Minister Anwar Saifullah said a high-level committee would assess the damage caused to the economy, which officials estimate could exceed 50 billion rupees (2.0 billion US dollar).

Pakistan had begun reconstruction without waiting for foreign aid, he told reporters.

Flooded rivers that have raged south through Pakistan for two weeks started to recede at the weekend.

Officials say at least 2,000 people were killed by the floods and landslides triggered by heavy rains in the north of the country.

Saifullah said the government had decided against a formal appeal for foreign aid in line with its policy of self-reliance, but he added, "This is subject to review."

The minister said Pakistan would have to reassess its development plans for 1992/93. "We will have to rehash our priorities. We will have to probably make cuts in our development budget," he said.

Saifullah ruled out a cut in the traditionally heavy defence budget because of the danger Pakistan perceives from arch foe India.

Flood damage to villages and towns, roads, railway lines

and vast areas of agricultural land would hit economic growth, projected at seven per cent for 1992/93, the minister said.

Asking for international help has become a controversial issue in Pakistan's highly polarised politics.

Opposition leader Benazir Bhutto says an appeal should be made.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif decided against an appeal despite reservations from some of his ministers, gov-

ernment sources said. Saifullah said the government would not make it an issue of prestige.

"Once we review the extent of the damage, we will review it," he said.

Foreign donations totalling less than 3.0 million US dollar have trickled in so far.

Saifullah said he had been told by officials that a donation of 50,000 dollar given by the United States was the maximum it could offer without a formal request.

Delhi rebuts Asia Watch report on police excesses

NEW DELHI, Sept 22: India has criticized a US human rights organization's report of police atrocities in a southern state, newspapers reported Tuesday, says AP.

In a rebuttal of the report, by Asia Watch, the Indian embassy in Washington said the organization's selective handling of a complicated socio-economic issue in Andhra Pradesh state would only encourage anarchy, the papers said.

Asia Watch last week accused police of systematically killing or torturing suspects under the guise of fighting political terrorism in the state.

The state government said each case was investigated by a magistrate, and none were

found to have violated peoples' rights, the reports said.

A decade-old communist movement in the state claims to fight feudalistic landlords suppressing poor farmers and has been blamed by the government for the killings of 360 people.

Asia Watch acknowledged that the rebels pose a security threat, but said the police colluded with the landlords to assault and murder peasants.

A government spokesman in New Delhi would not comment specifically on the report, but said Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao had set in motion the creation of a human rights commission to investigate all human rights abuses.

And in case, a child dies, the parents are paid to keep quiet. In one case, an agent was paid almost 8,000 dollars as compensation.

The parents only received half the amount.

There was consternation in Pakistan in 1987 when the body of an eight-year-old boy who died in a camel race was brought back for burial. Zafar Uqbal was sent to Abu Dhabi with his elder brother as a domestic servant. He was reportedly killed when he fell off a camel during a race, and was crushed under its feet.

Following public protests in Pakistan's big cities — the Karachi-based women's action forum was among those most active — the UAE banned children under 10 and those physically unfit from being recruited as camel jockeys.

The authorities threatened those breaching the ban with severe punishment. But human rights activists say nothing has changed.

Not one Pakistani child below 10 has been repatriated since the new rules were put into effect. Activists conclude that the children are still riding in camel races.

The Pakistani government has been playing

down the controversial issue. The UAE is one of the country's biggest donors in the Gulf. In addition, tens of thousands of Pakistanis are guest workers in the Gulf States, sending home the equivalent of millions of rupees in foreign exchange.

Economic considerations have even forced Pakistan to allow rich Arab Sheikhs to hunt threatened species of birds and animals in protected forests. Observers say, the Sheikhs enjoy a privileged status and are above the country's laws.

However, the insensitivity of the practice of recruiting camel jockeys from poor homes in South Asia has been exposed relentlessly by the press in the region.

Urging the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Amnesty International to intervene, they say the exploitation of young children is the worst kind of human rights violation.

But their protests have fallen on deaf ears. The region's governments guided only by economic motives refuse to offend generous and powerful donors.

The balloting, the first in

Thai Speaker elected

BANGKOK, Sept 22: The lower house of Parliament unanimously chose a veteran, pro-democracy politician as its speaker Tuesday and set the stage for the naming of a new coalition government, reports AP.

No other candidates were proposed for speaker besides Marut Bunnag, 67, of the leading Democrat Party. A prominent lawyer and respected political figure from Bangkok, Marut has held several portfolios including those of justice and public health in past cabinets.

He is expected to propose to the king Tuesday or Wednesday that the Democrat Party leader, Chuan Leekpai, be named prime minister in a five-party, pro-democracy alliance.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who must formally approve the new prime minister, opened parliament on Monday, eight days after the pro-democracy parties defeated pro-military rivals in a general election.

100 illegal workers held in Hong Kong

HONG KONG: More than 100 illegal labourers from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were rounded up by immigration officers here today in the largest ever such operation, an immigration department spokesman said, reports AFP.

A total of 105 South Asians were arrested for overstaying their three-month visas and working without permission from the immigration department, he said.

More than 140 immigration officers were involved in the operation.

Clinton takes 21 pt lead over Bush

WASHINGTON, Sept 22: Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton, expanding his margin over President Bush for the third straight week, took a 21-point lead in an ABC News-Washington Post poll released Monday, reports AP.

The survey, taken on Sunday, of 637 likely voters showed Clinton with 58 per cent support to Bush's 37 per cent. The sample had a margin of error of plus or minus 4.5 per cent.

The poll showed that voters were not concerned over new questions about Clinton's account of how he evaded the draft during the Vietnam War.

Bush ready to help bolster UN peacekeeping force

WASHINGTON, Sept 22: President George Bush is ready to help bolster United Nations peace-keeping power by giving UN "Blue Helmet" troops access to US military bases, training and logistical support, reports Reuters.

In an address to the UN General Assembly on Monday, Bush also suggested that American fighting forces might be assigned to international peace-keeping duties to a greater extent than they have been previously in the United Nations' 47-year history.

"Because of peace-keeping's growing importance as a mission for the United States military, we will emphasise training of combat, engineering and logistical units for the full range of peace-keeping and humanitarian activities," he said.

Bush's pledge that the United States would do its part to beef up the UN's peace-keeping role was a response to an ambitious "agenda for peace" that UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali laid out in June.

"I welcome the Secretary-General's call for a new agenda

to strengthen the United Nations' ability to prevent, contain and resolve conflict across the globe and today I call upon all UN members to join me in taking bold steps to advance that agenda," the President said.

Ramos annuls law banning parties

MANILA, Sept 22: President Fidel Ramos on Tuesday repealed the law that made membership in the Communist Party a crime — a move that could pave the way for the rebels to compete openly in elections, reports AP.

But human rights lawyers said the move was "a gimmick" because other laws punishing public dissent, including the statute against rebellion, remain on the books. Ramos also has asked Congress to increase the penalty for rebellion from life imprisonment to death.

"Today we repeal (the law), confident of our national stability and confirmed in the resilience of our democracy,"

Off the Record**Thieves play while Gorby away**

MOSCOW: Thieves stole one of Mikhail Gorbachev's cars while he was visiting Germany, said the former Soviet President's aides, reports AP.

A black Volga sedan was stolen over the weekend from the inner yard of his think tank, known as the Gorbachev Foundation, on Moscow's northwest side, aide Vladimir Tumarkin said Monday.

Police investigators found the car early Monday with one of its windows smashed but no other visible damage, he said.

The man who allegedly stole the car was detained by police, who declined to give his name, he said.

Tumarkin said the car was one of three recently purchased vehicles parked in the yard, but the only one with a license plate.

**Death relates to birthday week**

SAN DIEGO: A study of California death certificates found women were slightly more likely to die of natural causes in the week after their birthdays than any other week of the year, reports AP.

The study found a coinciding dip in deaths in the weeks before birthdays, according to a report published Monday in Psychosomatic Medicine, the Journal of the American Psychosomatic Society.

"Some dying patients are able to prolong life briefly until they have reached a positive symbolic occasion," said one of the authors, sociology Professor David P. Phillips of the University of California, San Diego.

In contrast, the study found men were more likely to die in the weeks before a birthday than during the rest of the year. That may be because men are more likely than women to dread birthdays, Phillips said.

Phillips focused on statistics involving women, and plans a more in-depth study of the effects of birthdays on men.

Phillips' findings appear to add to growing evidence of a psychological aspect to death, said Albert Marston, Professor emeritus in psychology and psychiatry at the University of San Diego.

Recession hits Diana too

LONDON: Princess Diana has given up her Mercedes and will drive one of the cars already leased by her household, Buckingham Palace said Monday, reports AP.

"Everybody is affected by the recession," a palace spokesman said. "The Prince and Princess of Wales do not have a bottomless pit from which to draw money, and she is tightening her belt like anybody else."

The Princess would be using the "less than half a dozen" British cars already leased by the Wales household, the spokesman said.

When Diana leased the Mercedes 500 SL convertible at the beginning of this year, she was criticized for using a German car and failing to support British car manufacturing.

**Camel race — brutal ordeal for South Asian boys**

ISLAMABAD, Sept 22: Rich Arab Sheikhs enjoy nothing more than a camel race. But for thousands of little boys from South Asia, the sport is a brutal ordeal, reports IPS.

Boys as young as three are smuggled to the Gulf from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh by agents who promise their destitute parents that the children will be employed as house workers.

However, most of them end up as camel jockeys at the hugely popular races in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The boys are strapped on to camels and lashed — their screams and tears are believed to spur the frightened animals to run faster and win laurels in the traditional sport.

A report compiled by the Defence of Children International Pakistan (DCIP) reveals an estimated 19,000 children were spirited to the UAE for camel racing in three years.

The report sparked off an uproar recently in the Pakistani Senate. Agitated members accused the government in Islamabad of turning a blind eye because it did not want to risk offending the oil-rich states.

Though Interior Minister Shujaat Hussain has promised to hold an inquiry, nothing more has been heard even two months later.

Winter is the season for camel racing in the UAE. However, the hunt for riders begins much earlier. Reports of children being whisked away for racing generally appear in south Asian newspapers in the summer.

In late August, the Telegraph, an Indian Daily, published a story from Calcutta about nine Bangladeshi children who are languishing in a remand home after they were rescued from child traffickers smuggling them to the Gulf for camel racing.

The children between four and seven years are imprisoned behind barred gates as the wheels of the official machinery moves slowly to clear legal formalities for their repatriation.

According to the DCIP report, the recruiting agents take the children away promising parents that they will be paid up to 250 dollars as monthly wages. Many of the parents never know what their children are actually doing in the Emirates.

And in case, a child dies, the parents are paid to keep quiet. In one case, an agent was paid almost 8,000 dollars as compensation.

The parents only received half the amount.

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10 to die in China for robbery

BEIJING, Sept 22: A Chinese court has sentenced 10 people to death for robberies amounting to more than 1.4 million yuan (255,000 US dollar), the Beijing daily said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

The 10 were sentenced on Monday by the Intermediate Court in Beijing for crimes committed both individually and in gangs.

China's courts usually order a flurry of executions in the days leading up to National Day on October 1.

On Friday, a court in the country's largest city, Shanghai, sentenced 12 people charged with robbery and murder to death at a public rally.