

Iraqi opposition for speedy ouster of Saddam

DAMASCUS, Oct 16: A gathering of Iraqi opposition figures Thursday called for the speedy ouster of President Saddam Hussein and the creation of a democratic government in their country, reports AP.

The participants issued a statement condemning the "dictatorial practices and policies of Saddam's regime" and calling for greater coordination among rebel groups.

The Iraqi opposition, splintered along ethnic, religious and political lines, has long struggled to present a united front to topple Saddam.

But the creation earlier this year of the Iraqi National Congress, a grouping of opposition movements, has helped

Saddam's opponents achieve somewhat more coherence.

Last month, they held the first-ever gathering inside Iraq of anti-Saddam organizations, which met in the Kurdish-controlled north.

The participants in the two-day Damascus meeting, which was organized by Syrian-based dissident members of Saddam's ruling Baath Arab Socialist Party, called for an end to the "ordeal of the Iraqi people."

Among the participants was Maj. Gen Hassan al Naqib, a former Iraqi deputy chief of staff who fled Baghdad in 1979 after clashing with Saddam.

He has some political clout, but no known military muscle.

'Its a setback for democracy, human rights' US decries long jail terms to Myanmar dissidents

WASHINGTON, Oct 16: The United States said on Thursday that long jail terms given to dissidents by Myanmar's military junta was a setback for democracy and human rights in that country, report Reuters.

State Department Spokesman Richard Boucher said eight students were sentenced to 10-year terms on September 23 by a military tribunal and there are more than 130 members of parliament that are facing election tribunals.

"We see it as a setback for democracy and human rights in Myanmar," he said. Boucher stressed that US

policy remained as stated by former Secretary of State James Baker at a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) last July.

"Our message to the Myanmar military authorities must be loud and clear. They should release all political prisoners immediately and begin a genuine dialogue aimed at rapidly transferring power to a democratically elected government," Boucher said.

Pressed on what other pressure the United States might bring on Myanmar beyond its public statements, he

said Washington had already restricted aid and trade.

"There's not a lot left that we do with the government of Myanmar these days. We've made our voice heard, we've made our voice heard with other governments at ASEAN meetings and elsewhere. We'll continue to do that," he said.

Diplomats in Yangon said the junta gave the dissidents long jail terms for producing anti-government leaflets, and was moving to strip more than 100 more opposition politicians of their parliamentary seats.

The sentences came four days before the junta lifted two

martial law decrees giving regional military commanders the right to dispense summary justice through military tribunals. It remains unclear if such tribunals still function in Yangon.

The junta, which came to power in 1988 by brutally suppressing a pro-democracy uprising, has succeeded in stamping out overt organized political activity.

Most of the Myanmar people, including government officials, are afraid to discuss politics in public, but anti-government sentiment remains strong and widespread.

6 opposition MPs to join Kuwaiti govt

KUWAIT CITY, Oct 16: Six opposition MPs have agreed to join the new Kuwaiti government that Prime Minister Sheikh Saad Al-Abdallah Al-Sabah is to form by Saturday, a Deputies Aid Thursday, reports AFP.

The Kuwaiti opposition won 32 of the 50 seats in the October 5 parliamentary elections, the first since 1985, and has demanded cabinet posts.

Among those who agreed to Sheikh Saad's offer was Abdallah Al-Hajeri, an independent MP backed by the Islamic Constitutional Movement who could become the future Oil Minister, said the Deputy who requested anonymity.

Ahmad Al-Rabi, an independent who has close ties to the liberal opposition, also accepted the offer and has been tipped as the next Information

Minister, he added.

Sheikh Saad has been instructed by the Kuwaiti Emir, Sheikh Jaber-Al Ahmad Al-Sabah, to form a new Cabinet by Saturday ahead of the new parliament's inauguration on Tuesday.

Earlier this week he offered MPs, 10 posts in his new government of up to 16 members but excluded the democratic forum — which groups nationalist Arabs — and the Shiite National Islamic coalition.

It would be the first time a large number of MPs had seats in the cabinet.

The previous administration, which was also led by Sheikh Saad included only two members of parliament while key portfolios were held by relatives of the Emir. Ministers automatically become members of parliament.



Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia poses with Italian President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro during their talks at the Presidential Quirinale Palace Thursday. (Story on Page 12) — AFP photo

Lebanese cabinet resigns

BEIRUT, Oct 16: The half-Christian, half-Muslim Cabinet of Prime Minister Rashid Solh resigned Thursday after five months in office, reports AP.

The resignation was constitutionally required after the completion of Lebanon's first parliamentary elections in 20 years, which produced a Parliament dominated by Syria's supporters.

Solh's Cabinet of 24 ministers had been plagued by resignations because of rightist Christian opposition to holding the elections with Syrian troops still controlling Lebanon's major cities.

That Cabinet, which took office May 13, was the third formed under Syrian-backed President Elias Hrawi's presidency since he was elected Nov 24, 1989.

Hrawi accepted the resignation.

Off the Record

I have fewer problems than Madonna

PARIS: British author Salman Rushdie, who has been living in hiding for the past four years under the threat of an Iranian death decree for his novel "Satanstoe Verses", compared his existence to that of a "small star" in an interview today with a French daily, reports AFP.

"In a way, I have fewer problems than Madonna," said in an interview in Helsinki with the Daily Liberation. "How many bodyguards does she need when she moves around?"

"Of course, Madonna is not the target of terrorists," he added, "but that aside, I lead the life of a very small star — I couldn't come to Madonna's or (Arnold) Schwarzenegger's ankle."

Rushdie said the worst periods for him had been the first year of hiding, which necessitated a move every two weeks, and during the Gulf war last year.

The author, interviewed after taking part in an international conference in the Finnish capital, said he would try to appear more often in public.

"It is symbolically very important to show to those who wanted me to spend the rest of my days in hiding like a rat that they have failed," he said.



Welfare payments for sexual relief

AMSTERDAM: Long-term patients in Dutch health care facilities may qualify for welfare payments to cover the services of a prostitute, the government said, reports AP.

Public Health Secretary Elske Ter Veld said she "could not rule out situations arising in which local authorities decide welfare payments are justified for 'professional sexual relief.'"

Her Wednesday statement in response to parliamentary question followed a recent interim ruling by the Council of State that a regional health board must pay a severely handicapped man 65 guilders (dfls 40) a month to cover regular visits by a prostitute.

But Ter Veld said she had no intention of allowing welfare sex to become an automatic entitlement.

Payment "must depend on the facts and circumstances of each concrete case involved," she said.

The man, who was not identified by name, submitted a psychiatric report claiming his mental health would be "substantially improved" by regular relief of his sexual frustrations.

He argued that since he was a welfare case, he could not afford to pay for sex himself, according to a spokesman for the council, the nation's highest legal body.

The religious-based political Reform Party had put Ter Veld on the spot by warning the council ruling could set a precedent and encourage "other categories of welfare recipients other than the handicapped" to claim state benefits to cover prostitution services.

BRIEFLY

CIA chief in Moscow: CIA director Robert Gates arrived in Moscow on Thursday on the first-ever trip to Russia by the US intelligence agency's chief, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported, says AP from Moscow.

The agency said that Gates met his Russian counterpart, Yevgeny Primakov, who is head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service and a former adviser to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev.

In a news conference last month, Russian lawmaker Sergei Stepashin said the CIA director would discuss cooperation between the CIA and the Foreign Intelligence Service during the visit.

The only cooperation between the CIA and the former Soviet KGB in the past was exchanging information about international terrorism and drug smuggling.

Kabul-Tashkent ties: Afghanistan and Uzbekistan have agreed to establish diplomatic relations and begin air services between their capitals of Kabul and Tashkent, the official Kabul Radio said on Thursday, reports Reuter from Islamabad.

The agreements were reached during talks between Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani now in Tashkent and his Uzbek counterpart Islam Karimov, said the broadcast monitored in Islamabad. Rabbani has been in Uzbekistan since Tuesday.

Quake hits Japan's island: An earthquake rocked Iriomote Island, in Japan's southern offshore prefecture of Okinawa, on Friday, but there were no reports of casualties or major damage, the meteorological agency said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The tremor struck at 6:23 am (21:23 GMT Thursday) and its epicentre was situated near Ishigaki Island, the agency said. Its strength as measured on the Richter scale was not immediately available.

US-Japan jet exercise from Nov 7: The Pentagon announced Thursday a joint field exercise November 7-16 comprising 5,000 US and 12,000 Japanese service personnel at military bases in Japan, says Reuter from Washington.

The exercises, aimed at improving combat readiness in air, ground and sea operations, will take place on the northern island of Hokkaido — at Eniwa, Shimamatsu, Yausubetsu and various air bases — and on the main island of Honshu, the Pentagon said.

11 killed in Indian bus explosion: A bus packed with people carrying materials for making fireworks exploded in the east Indian state of West Bengal, killing at least 11 people, police said Friday, Reuter says from Calcutta.

They said more than 40 people were injured in the explosion, probably set off by a local type of cigarette notorious for emitting sparks.

The blast blew the bus apart in West Bengal's Midnapur district, an area packed with small workshops that make fireworks widely used in the current Hindu festival season.

Kohl, Major agree to ratify Maastricht Treaty

BIRMINGHAM, England, Oct 16: German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and British Prime Minister John Major agreed Thursday to reject notions of a two-speed Europe and press ahead for a union with all 12 EC members, reports AFP.

The two leaders, whose countries became embroiled in a bitter row over the recent turmoil on European currency markets, had dinner here on the eve of an emergency EC summit, officials said.

British officials said Kohl and Major agreed on the need to work for ratification of the Maastricht Treaty on economic and political union by all 12 members of the European Community.

Newspaper reports sug-

gested that with the treaty rejected by Danis voters in June and facing a tough battle for ratification in Britain, Germany and France might try to create a mini-union with the stronger currencies.

But an official said that "talk of a two-speed or three-speed Europe was not something they (Kohl and Major) agreed with."

The meeting was the first between the two leaders since a diplomatic row blew up between Britain and Germany over responsibility for the pound's exit from the EC exchange rate mechanism last month.

The official said the two did not discuss British accusations

that the German Bundesbank had contributed to the pound's plunge since "all that is history." German and British officials both said their leaders' relations remained good.

Major, whose country currently holds the EC presidency, also met Prime Ministers Felipe Gonzales of Spain and Giuliano Amato of Italy as well as Jacques Delors, President of the EC's executive commission.

The talks came ahead of today's summit designed mainly to discuss means of making the community more open and democratic and easing fears of a powerful Brussels bureaucracy to mollify critics of the Maastricht Treaty.

Vanuatu rocked again

CANBERRA, Oct 16: The Pacific island nation of Vanuatu was hit early today by its second earthquake this week, one measuring 6.8 on the Richter scale, the Australian governments' seismological Centre reported, reports AFP.

Seismologist Ken Muirhead said the quake occurred at 2:37 GMT Thursday (9:37 am Friday) and that its epicentre was in the sea in the north of the archipelago.

There were no reports of casualties, he added. Officials in Port Vila said by telephone that they had no reports of damage.

The quake was the largest in the region since a tremor registering 7.3 on the Richter scale on December 21, 1985, Muirhead said.

Campbell soup is Mm Mm-good

BEIJING: Campbell's mm-mm-good soups have come to China, and the Chinese seem to like them just as much as the kids in the commercials, according to an official report Friday, says AP.

Campbell, the world's largest soup producing and marketing firm and one of America's best-known food companies, has begun selling 17 varieties of its soups, broths and juices in the southern province of Guangdong, China Daily reported.

They include alphabet soup, chicken broth and V-8 vegetable juice.

"Today China is the No 1 market to be developed in Asia by Campbell," said David J Wells, managing director of Campbell Soup Asia Ltd.

In the next six months, the company plans to spend 2.5 million yuan (dfls 460,000) in advertising and marketing in Guangdong. Later, they will move to Shanghai and the northern cities of Beijing and Tianjin, he said.

Campbell has been testing its products in the Guangzhou Friendship Store in the provincial capital and found it well-received by Chinese consumers, the paper said.

Wells said the firm is looking for partners for joint-venture soup factories in China.

Yeltsin dangerous: Gorbachev

PARIS, Oct 16: Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev harshly criticized Boris Yeltsin in interviews that appeared Thursday in two French weeklies, calling the Russian President dangerous, incompetent and authoritarian, reports AFP.

"Politically, this man (Yeltsin) is dangerous," Gorbachev told the magazine L'Evenement du Jeudi. "He is a destructor, not a builder. He knows neither how to use his power, nor how to delegate it."

"Yeltsin appears very strong when the wind is blowing his way, but when things get complicated and you need... wisdom and courage, he is not up to it," he told another weekly, Paris-Match.

More virulent in his interview with L'Evenement du Jeudi, Gorbachev said it was "useless" to try to "rationally explain" Yeltsin's actions

against him.

"It is pure improvisation" Gorbachev said. "The only thing I can see is that Yeltsin is trying to shut me up and hold on to power."

The Russian President, Gorbachev said, is

"incompetent", adding that the present government "is not a government but a sect." "By choosing the path of authoritarianism, Russia is heading toward dictatorship."

"Today, in Russia as in Europe, we need renovators, and this is a role he cannot assume," Gorbachev told Paris-Match.

Gorbachev said he would act with moderation and responsibility if the authorities do not give up their common sense.

"It is not my intention to prepare a pan-Russian or European coup d'etat" against Yeltsin, he said.

He criticized the Russian President's entourage, telling Paris-Match: "Look at all these new democrats around Yeltsin: many of them are thieves and looters — and they are not even good at their jobs."

"Soon we will have million

of jobless with no revenue," he warned in Evenement du Jeudi.

"Where will they go if the factories close down? To the streets and they will destroy everything in their path, including the so-called democrats now in power."

Palestinian prisoners end hunger strike

JERUSALEM, Oct 16: A hunger strike by Palestinian prisoners that triggered bloody clashes in the Israeli-occupied territories officially ended late on Thursday, Palestinian sources said, reports Reuter.

A two-week fast by thousands of Arab detainees fuelled widespread protests reminiscent of the early days of a Palestinian uprising.

Rate of mortality slows at oldest ages

WASHINGTON: There may be no precise maximum age for living creatures, a laboratory study on insects, suggests, reports AP.

Studies in California using medflies and in Minnesota using fruit flies have shown that, in these two species at least, the rate of mortality slows at the oldest ages and that the upper limits of survival may be unknown. The studies published Friday in the journal Science.

The pattern that is emerging is that there is no well-defined precise limit on life span, said James Curtisinger, a University of Minnesota researcher who is lead author on the fruit fly study. "There's not an alarm that goes off and then you drop dead."

What the studies suggest, said James R Carey of the University of California, Davis, is that "you can't say that there is an age out there that nobody can ever obtain. You can't draw a line."

Carey, first author of the study on Medflies, said the two insect studies refute the fixed-life span theory.

Whether or not the findings can be applied to humans is not known, said Curtisinger, but it does suggest that the standard ideas about aging and death may be wrong.

"The standard gerontology model is that there is a predetermined lifespan. When you reach that limit you are dead," he said. "For instance, if you're 80, you've got a certain probability of death and there is nothing that anybody can do about it."

The insect studies, he said, suggest that nature created no such firm upper limits to aging.

UN asks Baghdad to ensure safety of arms inspectors

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 16: On the eve of a UN mission to search for security missiles in Iraq, the Security Council warned Baghdad on Thursday to ensure the safety of the weapons inspectors, reports Reuter.

"The Security Council stressed its particular concern for the safety of the UN inspectors," said a statement read by French Ambassador Jean-Bernard Merimee, this month's council president.

Fearing the visit could turn into an "October surprise" in the US election campaign, Iraq had asked it be postponed so US President George Bush could not exploit it politically.

Russian troops put on combat alert in Tajikistan

MOSCOW, Oct 16: Russian military units in the Central Asian state of Tajikistan were put on combat alert Thursday after militants threatened to take Russian hostages if their opponents' weapons were not destroyed, a news agency reported, reports AP.

The Interfax news agency said Russian servicemen in Tajikistan were authorized to use arms if they were fired upon. Russian has about 10,000 men in the region, but has ordered them only to protect Russian bases and Russian-speakers.

Tajikistan, the poorest former Soviet republic, has been torn by civil and clan warfare since its ex-Communist president was

ousted last month. A Russian television report said former President Rakhmon Nabiyev was in Moscow trying to get weapons.

The combat alert was issued after Muslim militants presented an ultimatum to the Russian military command demanding that armored vehicles and a tank belonging to Nabiyev supporters be destroyed, Interfax reported.

The leader of the group, a Muslim clergy representative identified as Abdullo Gafar, said Russian-speakers would be taken hostage if the demands were not met, the agency said.

"Russian Col Svyatoslav Nabzdorov, commander of Russia's 201st division, told

the agency that Tajik militants stopped a bus near a market in the capital Dushanbe and started to take women from it. Some of the women ran into the nearby Russian military base. The report did not say what happened to the other women.

Ethnic Russians have been leaving their homes in Central Asia and other former regions of the Soviet Union for their native Russia as political instability in their adopted homelands grows.

In other troubled areas in the former Soviet Union: — The Tajik region of Kurgu-Tyube was reported quiet Thursday following a cease-fire agreement between

the warring factions.

— A Georgian official said possibilities for a political settlement of the Abkhazian conflict have been exhausted. In Russian and Georgian foreign ministers failed to agree on a document that could pave the way for peace negotiations.

— Sporadic fighting was reported Thursday in the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, the site of a four-year war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Gegam Bagdasarian, the spokesman for the Nagorno-Karabakh parliament, told the Armenian Snark news agency that Russian peace efforts have failed, and called for UN sanctions against Azerbaijan.

In the Georgian capital of

Tbilisi Vice Premier Alexander Kavazidze told reporters that "possibilities of a political settlement of the situation have been exhausted" in Abkhazia and called for the international community's intervention.

Georgian troops moved into Abkhazia, a rich province along the Black Sea, in mid-August to drive out guerrillas backing the ousted President Zviad Gamsakhurdia. But leaders of Abkhazia's Muslim minority viewed the step as an attempt to crush their independence campaign.

Backed by Muslim militants, they managed to establish control over most of Abkhazia apart from Sukhumi, which remains the last Georgian

Medellin drug cartel leader surrenders

BOGOTA, Oct 16: A leader of the Medellin cocaine cartel surrendered to authorities Thursday, raising expectations that drug boss Pablo Escobar would also give himself up soon, says AP.

Luis Carlos Agular, alias "The Dirty One," surrendered to the Public Prosecutor's Office in Medellin, Colombia's second largest city. The information was confirmed by a source in the Prosecutor's office who asked not to be identified.

Agular was the seventh cartel member to give himself up since Escobar, the cartel's billionaire leader,