

Rafsanjani certain of second term

TEHRAN, June 11: Iranians went to the polls today Friday in an election expected to return President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani for a second four-year term, reports Reuters.

Polling stations at mosques, schools and public buildings opened at 7 am (0230 GMT) on a bright and mild morning but there were few people about at this early hour.

Iran's Islamic leaders have called on the 29 million eligible voters for a massive turnout to give the winner credibility at home and abroad.

Few people questioned in the streets over the past two days said they would vote for any of Rafsanjani's three challengers — university president Abdullah Jashi, right-wing economist

Ahmad Tavakkoli or former member of parliament Rajabali Taheri.

Most said they would vote for Rafsanjani, a cleric who has won a reputation as a wily pragmatist and has begun pushing through western-style economic reforms.

But a significant number of voters indicated they were not planning to vote or would cast a blank ballot paper.

Polls are due to close at 6 pm (1330 GMT) but may stay open longer to attract a higher turnout, as in last year's general elections when the turnout was more than 60 per cent.

First results are not expected before Saturday and the final count is due to be announced early on Sunday.

US plans more N-tests

WASHINGTON, June 11: The White House has come up with a plan for nine more nuclear weapons tests — including three using British devices — before banning them completely in 1996, the Washington Post said today, reports AFP.

Unidentified senior administration officials told the daily that consultations with Congress on the plan would begin next week.

three of the proposed tests would involve a redesigned US warhead, another three existing US warheads and the remaining three a redesigned British warhead, the official said.

Lacking their own testing facilities, the British have been conducting one nuclear weapons test a year at the United States test site in Nevada.

Proponents of the tests argue that they are needed to improve the safety and reliability of existing nuclear warheads, while detractors fear the move may reignite testing in countries such as France and Russia and send the wrong signal to Third World countries vying for nuclear weapons of their own.

The officials said the proposal had not been formally approved by Clinton and would likely be dropped if it fails to get enough backing in Congress.

The United States suspended nuclear weapons tests in September, just ahead of a nine-month moratorium imposed by Congress in October.

For the past three months, the administration of President Bill Clinton has tried to allow the resumption of such tests while fulfilling the President's pledge to work a comprehensive test ban treaty with other nuclear powers.

According to the proposal,

Dispute over signing of NPT Indo-US diplomatic ties at stake

NEW DELHI, June 11: The United States will not allow India to reprocess US-supplied spent fuel at the Tarapur Atomic Plant if it does not sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a US diplomat said Thursday, reports AFP.

The United States would act "very sharply" if New Delhi defied Washington and went ahead with reprocessing the spent fuel, the Press Trust of India (PTI) quoted the unnamed diplomat as saying.

Indian scientists have said the Tarapur plant could be run for another 15 years with a mixture of plutonium oxide and natural uranium oxide prepared from plutonium obtained by re-processing the spent fuel.

The US official said India had no right to reprocess without US permission. "Such permission is not possible under the US Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act of 1978," he was quoted as saying.

The re-processing was likely to snowball into "a major diplomatic problem" if it was not resolved through bilateral talks, the diplomat added.

The twin 210-MW reactors, in operation since 1969, were

built by a US company under a 1963 inter-governmental agreement which expires October 25 this year.

Indian officials say the expiry of the agreement "automatically lifts Tarapur from international safeguards and gives India the freedom to reprocess the spent fuel that is Indian property under the terms" of the 1963 pact.

The diplomat challenged the view, saying the agreement had specified that reprocessing would be allowed only with US permission. "Such consent was not given and is not likely to be given under the existing US domestic law."

Tarapur is the only Indian nuclear plant which requires enriched uranium. The US

regularly supplied fuel to the Tarapur plant, the oldest nuclear power station in India until New Delhi exploded a nuclear device in 1974.

US supplied then became erratic before stopping in 1981.

France replaced the United States in 1983, but informed India six months ago that it would not provide fuel beyond 1993, but unless New Delhi opens all its nuclear facilities to international inspection, India has rejected the demand.

India has adamantly refused to sign the NPT, saying the treaty discriminates between the nuclear haves and have-nots. It claims it is following a strictly peaceful atomic programme.



A Serbian military patrol breaks into a house Wednesday in the village of Bilje in the self-proclaimed Republic of Krajina, east of Croatian town of Osijek. — AFP/UNB photo

Sino-CIS talks on troops reduction conclude

BEIJING, June 11: China and four republics from the former Soviet Union reported some progress on reducing the military presence on their long common border as they ended talks today, the official Xinhua news agency said, reports Reuters.

"In a friendly and realistic atmosphere, the two delegations continued exchanging views on issues concerned and the talks made some new progress," Xinhua said, adding that the next round would be held in Moscow.

The tenth round of talks between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan and Tajikistan had begun on May 21.

Beijing began the troops reduction talks with Moscow after former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev visited China in 1989, putting an end to three decades of deep Sino-Soviet hostility.

ROK blast claims 19

The death toll has risen to 19 in a blast at a South Korean artillery firing range, as officials said Friday cigarette butts thrown into a powder keg may have been to blame for the disaster, report AFP from Seoul.

The 19 dead included three active service soldiers and 16 reservists mobilized for training at an army artillery firing range near Yoncheon in Kyonggi province, 60 kilometres (40 miles) northeast of Seoul, the defence ministry officials said.

Six were seriously injured in the explosion Thursday, they said.

The defence ministry is still investigating the cause of the accident, but the officials said they suspected cigarette butts discarded by reservists may have ignited a powder keg and caused the blast.

UN extends peace mission in Cyprus

Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali called Thursday for a six-month extension of the UN peacekeeping mission in Cyprus, saying it was essential to keep tensions from boiling over, AFP reports from United Nations.

In a report to the Security Council, the UN Chief called for the mission, which has been in place since 1964, to be extended at least through December 15 while negotiations between Greek and Turkish Cypriots take place.

49 more die in S African violence: South Africa's endemic political violence claimed another 49 lives in the week that ended Tuesday, the left-leading Human Rights Commission (HRC) reported Thursday, says AFP from Johannesburg.

Of those, 18 died in the black townships east of Johannesburg, while 27 deaths were recorded in Natal province, the heart of the conflict between the African National Congress (ANC) and its smaller black rival the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP).

King Hussein's son marries

Jordan's Prince Abdullah, King Hussein's eldest son, on Thursday married a commoner in a place ceremony followed by a reception attended by 2,000 dignitaries and royals, AFP reports from Amman.

The 31-year-old groom and Rania Yassine, of Palestinian origin nine years his junior, threw a reception attended by Queen Sofia of Spain, Moroccan Crown Prince Sid Mohamed, and Prince Mashaal Ibn Hamad Al-Thani of Qatar.

The couple were driven in a convertible through streets filled with bedouin folk dancers, musicians and well-wishers.

Prince Abdullah is the son of King Hussein's second wife, English-Born Tony Gardner who was known as Princess Mona. The King has married four times and has 11 children.

17 killed in Indian road mishap

At least 17 people were killed and eight others were injured in a road crash Friday while they were on a pilgrimage to one of India's holiest Hindu temples in the Kashmiri Himalayas, AFP reports from New Delhi.

The Press Trust of India said the pilgrims were travelling in a van to the Hindu temple of goddess Durga, the deity of power, when the packed vehicle rammed into a truck in the northern state's mountainous terrain.

The injured have been hospitalised in critical condition, the news agency added.

Major plunges into new crisis

LONDON, June 11: British conservative politicians pledged solid support for Prime Minister John Major after he plunged into a new crisis following a barbed attack by his former finance minister, reports Reuters.

The powerful 1922 Committee of all Conservative backbench Members of Parliament left little doubt on Thursday where its loyalties lay after former Chancellor of the Exchequer Norman Lamont savaged Major in a parliamentary speech.

"They were unanimously agreed Major would receive our 100 per cent support in the future," Sir Marcus Fox, chairman of the committee, told reporters.

The comments without exception supported the Prime Minister, he said after the meeting of about 150 Members of Parliament, including Lamont.

It was necessary to say that because of all the stories in the media that there were deep divisions within the party. He (Major) will remain our Prime Minister without any question, Fox added.

Lamont, bitter over his sackings as finance minister two

weeks ago just as Britain is emerging from recession, on Wednesday accused Major of weak leadership. He said the government gave the impression of being in office but not in power. It was a devastating blow for the Prime Minister from a former close associate. Major brushed off the criticism but the unanimous support from his party's rank and file

parliamentarians will undoubtedly boost his spirits when tries to rally support with a crucial speech to a Conservative conference in Wales on Friday.

We have a little local difficulty, Major told Parliament on Thursday, quoting a 1958 remark by Conservative premier Harold MacMillan when his finance minister resigned.

"We'll get over it and I am going on with the work in hand, he added before dismissing demands by opposition Labour Party leader John Smith for an election.

But just as Major seemed to overcome one crisis he faced another after leaked documents revealed the government was considering new medical tests to limit the number of people claiming invalidity benefits.

The controversial plans stirred up an immediate storm of criticism from opposition politicians and health groups.

The cabinet reshuffle in which Lamont was sacked was meant to bolster support for Major, the least popular Prime Minister in more than 50 years, and for the Conservative Party.

Major's popularity has suffered because of U-turns on key

policies, a split in the Conservative Party over closer union with the European Community, a two-year recession and a costly currency crisis.

Fox described the 1922 Committee's support as "momentous" but he told Channel Four television news that there was still a need for more changes in the government.

In terms of presentation, in terms of perhaps a little more firmness and confidence, then we've got to have a change of style," he said.

"If that means that one or two people have to be changed about or, may be different instructions are given, I would welcome that," he added.

The Conservative Party faces its next challenge, and a possible defeat, in a local by-election for what should be a safe seat, after a similar failure last month.

No date for the by-election has been set. It had been expected to be held next month, but after the latest upheavals political insiders are now betting on late summer.

Fergie UNHCR roving envoy

GENEVA, June 11: The United Nations refugee agency UNHCR said, Friday it was appointing Britain's Duchess of York as a roving Ambassador to raise funds for millions of women and children refugees around the world, reports Reuters.

A spokeswoman said, the 33-year-old Duchess, popularly known as "Fergie" after her maiden name Sarah Ferguson, had already done a great deal of work for British-based refugee groups. She separated last year from her husband Prince Andrew.

Indo-Pak troops trade fire

SRINAGAR, June 11: The army was called in to maintain peace in a town in India's insurgency-torn Kashmir region on Thursday after police killed one person and then two more at his funeral, officials said, reports Reuters.

An indefinite curfew has been clamped on Banihal town in South Kashmir to prevent further trouble, a government spokesman said in Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir State.

Paramilitary policemen were fired on by Muslim rebels near Banihal on Wednesday and two troops were injured, the official said. One person was killed in the fire, he said.

Officials said the man the troops were a

civilian caught in indiscriminate firing after the attack.

At his funeral later on Wednesday, mourners attacked policemen, officials said. Two people were killed and 10 injured when police opened fire to disperse the rioters, they said.

Five other people were killed in Kashmir on Thursday in separate incidents, the government spokesman said. The dead included two suspected rebels, he said.

PTI adds from Jammu: Indian and Pakistani troops exchanged fire at Dharat area of Mardhar in Poonch sector when a group of militants made an attempt to sneak into India from across the Line Of Control (LOC), last night.

Official sources said Indian jawans spotted movement of some militants and challenged them.

The militants, believed to be over 40 in number opened fire at the Indian troops who retaliated, killing one militant and wounding two others. They were later captured along with arms and ammunition.

The killed militant was identified as Bashir Ahmed. The identity of the two others captured has not been disclosed.

Other militants escaped into Pakistan occupied Kashmir under the cover of firing provided by Pakistan troops. Indian troops also exchanged fire during the period.

It was the third attempt by Pakistani troops.

Nigerian court orders govt not to hold polls

ABUJA, June 12: A Nigerian High Court on Thursday ordered the National Electoral Commission (NEC) not to hold Saturday's Presidential election pending its hearing of a suit filed by a group calling for extended military rule, reports Reuters.

I hereby issue an order restraining NEC from conducting the Presidential election of June 12 pending the determination of the substantive suit," Justice Bassey Ikpeke told the court in Abuja.

Justice Ikpeke gave the ruling before a packed court after hearing an application for an interim injunction from the Association for Better Nigeria.

Off the Record

Stalin plotted Tito's murder

MOSCOW: Stalin plotted Tito's murder down to the last detail and the founder of Yugoslavia was only spared because Stalin died before the assassination could be carried out, a senior Russian General has told the Daily Izvestia citing KGB files, reports AFP.

According to General Dmitri Volkogonov, a military adviser to President Boris Yeltsin, the plan was devised after Tito fell out with Stalin in 1948.

Joseph Stalin ordered his political Police Chief and Interior Minister Lavrenti Briia to arrange for Josip Broz Tito to be eliminated, Izvestia quoted Volkogonov as saying in its Thursday edition.

A secret KGB report sent to Stalin personally in 1952 described in detail the plot code named "Scavenger." The killer was to be a secret agent named Yossif Romualdovich Griculievich who had taken part in an attempt to kill Leon Trotsky in Mexico in May 1940.

There were three versions of the murder plot, according to Volkogonov. In the first, Griculievich alias "Max" was supposed to seek a meeting with Tito during which he was to inoculate him with the germs of bubonic plague.



Low-tar cigarette does no help

LONDON: Smoking low-tar cigarette does not reduce a persons risk of heart attacks a report published on Friday said, according to Reuters.

Eva Negri of the Institute of Pharmacological Research in Milan studied 2,000 people in 80 hospitals across Italy in 1988 and 1989.

In a report published in the British Medical Journal, she said studies clearly showed that smokers have more heart attacks than non-smokers.

"Patients with acute myocardial infarction (heart attacks) were more often smokers and among smokers they tended to smoke more cigarettes," the report said.

The patients were questioned about their smoking habits, and about what kind of cigarettes they smoked. Cigarettes were put in to four categories according to tar content — below 10 mg, 10 to 15 mg, 20 mg or over 20 mg.

Negri said the risk of heart attacks did not increase noticeably with an increase in tar content.

"Shifting to lower-yield cigarettes is not an effective means of reducing tobacco related morbidity (death) from myocardial infarction (heart attacks)," the report concluded.

Rats have feeling too

LONDON: A woman who left her pet rat alone to die without water was fined by a British court on Thursday, reports Reuters.

Lisa Chapman, 23, was fined 80 pounds (120 dollar) and ordered to pay 50 pounds (75 dollar) in court costs for leaving Ziggy for six days without water and only a tiny piece of cheese to eat.

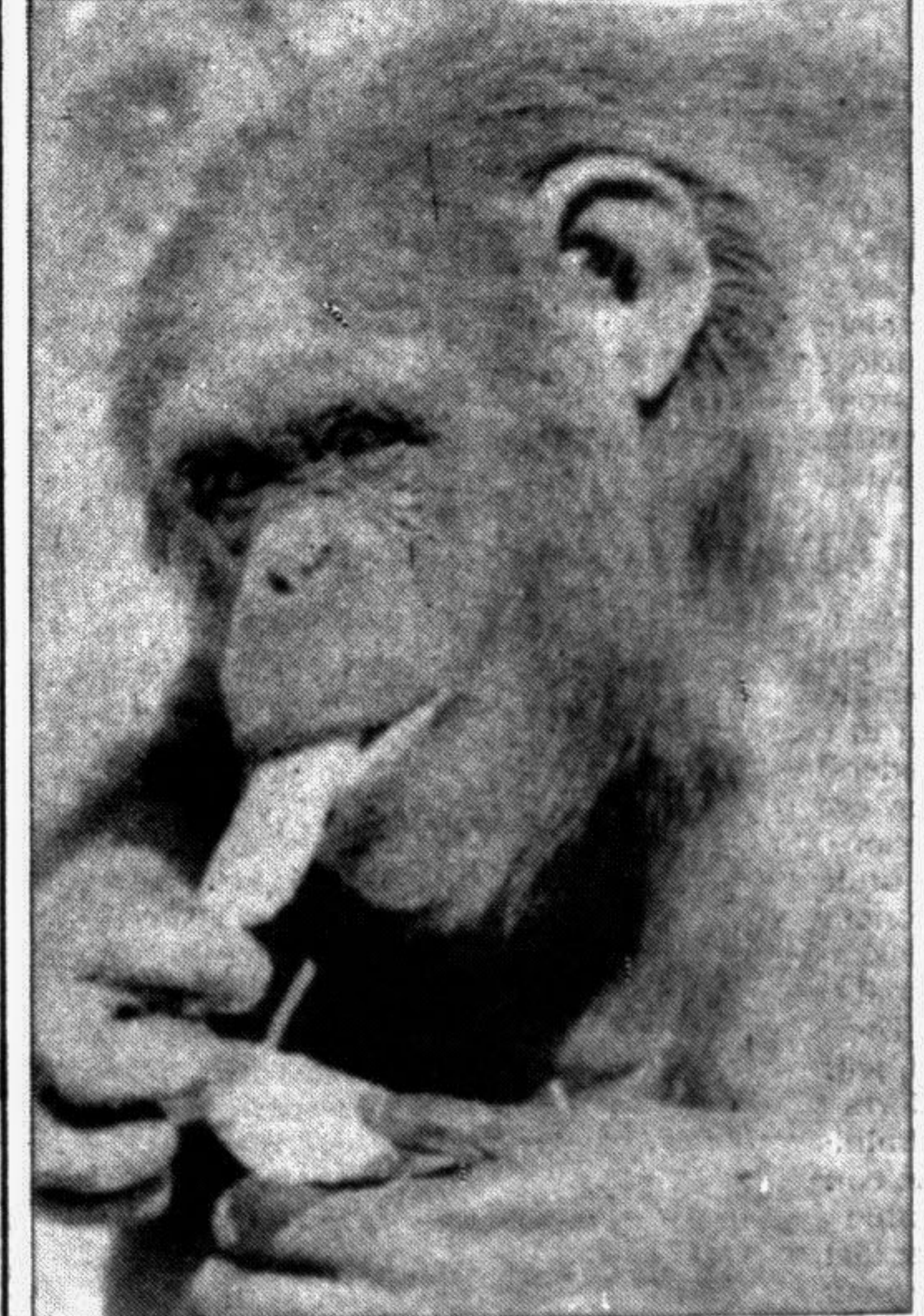
"I didn't actually abandon him," Chapman told the court, saying she was homeless and unemployed. "I had no choice."

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) afterwards defended its decision to prosecute the woman, saying rats have feelings too.

"That was a warm-blooded animal that can suffer pain and starvation, just like any human being, and we will not apologise for bringing it to the court's attention," said John Paul, a Chief Inspector with the RSPCA.

In a separate case, a man who left his tropical fish when he moved home was cleared of a charge of abandoning them.

David Sharod embarrassed the RSPCA by producing a book written by one of its own experts that said, it was safe to leave fish home alone for up to two weeks.



Female gorilla "Jeany" at the Hanover Zoo finds relief from the high temperatures which have settled over Germany, by eating an ice cream Wednesday. — AFP/UNB photo

Liberia massacre: Death toll rises to 400

MONROVIA, June 11: Liberia's interim government Thursday raised the death toll from a massacre at a refugee camp to more than 400, and ordered a probe into the role in the incident of the victims supposed protectors, reports AFP.

In a communique on the June 5 massacre, in which the death toll was initially put at 300, interim President Amos Sawyer accused the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) of alleged contributory negligence in the attack. The AFL, which comprises soldiers loyal to slain former President Samuel Doe, was suspected of being negligent in protecting the camp.

Plan to turn Semipalatinsk N-site into a research centre

ALMA-ATA (Kazakhstan), June 11: Two years after researchers moved into the formerly top secret Soviet nuclear test site Semipalatinsk, the toll of the 467 tests carried out from the mid-1940s is finally being measured, reports AFP.

Leukaemia, cancer, genetic illness and collective fear are some of the problems encountered by people living near Semipalatinsk, situated 1,100 kilometres (687 miles) from the Kazakhstan capital Alma-ata.

Several thousand mainly Russian scientists, experts and technicians are working at the site which has been surrounded by barbed wire and under armed guard since Semipalatinsk was officially closed. A cooperation agreement is being developed to turn the test site into an international civil nuclear research centre. Contracts have been made with the United States, Japan and India and financial help is being sought from the European Community.

Though slightly bigger than the US test site in Nevada, at 18,000 square kilometres (7,200

square miles), Semipalatinsk never featured on any map.

Terrified inhabitants of the region — 350,000 in the town of Semipalatinsk alone — kept quiet about explosions they saw or underground blasts they felt, because of pressure brought by fear and the presence of police spies.

At Semipalatinsk, where the first Soviet atom bomb was exploded in mid-air on August 29, 1949, the Red Army carried out 87 atmospheric explosions, 26 ground tests and 354 underground tests — of which the strongest blast could be felt 250 kilometres (155 miles) away.

Rumours of children regularly falling victim to a strange form of jaundice were rife in the vicinity of the test centre, while liver cancer and leukaemia were also unusually common.

"For 40 years, we said nothing though hundreds of thousands of lives were at risk from radioactive fall-out from the test blasts," said the Chairman of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk anti-

Nuclear Pressure Group, Orazalin Marat. Marat, who is also Vice-Rector of the Alma-ata Institute of Medicine added: "We know that some tests took place as little as five kilometres from herders' encampments. Several hours later soldiers in protective suits would come and take measurements."

"Years later, people are dying of cancer or immunodeficiencies, and babies are born handicapped. But we can't prove with any certainty yet that this has been directly caused by the tests."

The April 26, 1986 Chernobyl disaster sent shock waves through the region alerting people for the first time to the dangers of radiation, says Marat.

The Kazakhstan government passed a law in December 1992, agreeing to compensate local residents. Russia has paid nothing in compensation since the central Asian republic declared its independence in December 1991.

Individual compensation is expected to

amount to tens of thousands of roubles (a few score dollars), while retirement age would be lowered depending on local people's proximity to the site.

To start decontaminating Semipalatinsk and other test sites around Kazakhstan, the government has appealed for a major international cooperation programme to be set up.

The Deputy Prime Minister in charge of science and technology, Galym Abysetov called on all nuclear researchers to work with us to find out the true extent of pollution, and thus fight this scourge.

A joint programme has also been set up to decide how to find a means of burying the waste including that from Kazakhstan's many uranium mines.

The French construction company Spie Batignolles has offered to construct two giant concrete silos to hold millions of cubic metres of waste for up to 300 years.

US asked to persuade Mobutu to step down

WASHINGTON, June 11: Zairean opposition leader Frederic Kibassa-Maliba called on the United States here Thursday to send an envoy to Kinshasa to persuade President Mobutu Sese Seko to step down, reports AFP.

"We ask the United States to send without delay a high-ranking emissary to Zaire to notify Mobutu he should leave power now... And allow the Transitional government to function," said Kibassa-Maliba, co-founder of the Opposition Union for Democracy and Progress.