

Kohl's party defeated in municipal polls

BERLIN, Dec 6: Chancellor Helmut Kohl's Christian Democrats suffered a stinging setback Sunday trailing well behind the Social Democrats and running virtually neck and neck with the ex-communists in municipal elections in former East Germany's largest state, reports AFP.

Latest estimates put Kohl's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) only one point ahead of the neo-communist Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and 11 points behind the Social Democratic (SPD) Party in Brandenburg state.

The SPD was in the lead with 33.5 of the vote with the CDU trailing at 22.5 per cent tagged closely by the PDS with 21.3 per cent.

Earlier estimates had the CDU two points behind the PDS — the revamped SED which ruled East Germany under Stalinist leader Erich Honecker.

The CDU lost nearly 10 points since the last elections in Eastern Germany three years ago when it emerged as the dominant force. The SPD which polled 28.1 per cent last time has benefited most from the

discontent caused by Kohl's failure to keep a promise to bring prosperity to Eastern Germany.

However, the PDS, which was viewed as virtually defunct when the communist regime collapsed, saw its core shoot up from 16.5 to 21.3 per cent amid crippling unemployment generated by the switch to a market economy.

PDS leader Lothar Bisky called the result "fantastic" for his party while CDU Secretary-General Peter Mintze said he found it "shocking" that the ex-communists should "benefit from the problems they left us."

The neo-communists' comeback was particularly strong in large towns. In Potsdam the state capital, PDS candidate for mayor Rolf Kutzmutz romped home with 43.5 per cent though he failed to win the 50 per cent needed for outright victory.

The liberal FDP party was credited with 6.6 per cent, the Greens gained 2.2 per cent to reach 6 per cent.

The only real loser on Sunday was the extreme right which fielded only a handful of candidates.



Paramilitary police stand before seated sadhus (Hindu holy men) during a ceremony yesterday at Ayodhya marking the first anniversary of the destruction by Hindu militants of the 16th century Moghul Babri Mosque. Security was tight amid the crowd of 5,000 Hindus and the event passed without incident. — AFP photo

Ethnic groups may start peace talks with Yangon

BANGKOK, Dec 6: Ethnic insurgent and pro-democracy groups are considering peace talks with Myanmar's military government to end more than 40 years of conflict, a spokesman for the rebel front said Monday, reports AP.

Em Marta of the Democratic Alliance of Myanmar said in Bangkok that the insurgent groups would contact the junta to discuss the possibility of talks on ending one of the world's longest running wars.

"We are considering talks because the country as well as the people are suffering a lot," he said.

The alliance is an umbrella group for more than a dozen ethnic insurgent and pro-democracy organisations fighting the junta. Some of the groups have been battling the Yangon government since Myanmar gained independence from Britain in 1948.

Marta declined to discuss conditions for the talks. "It has always been the policy of the alliance to solve the political problems by peaceful means," he said.

The anti Yangon coalition

previously has set the abolition of military dictatorship and the release of all political prisoners as conditions for ending the conflict.

The most prominent prisoner is Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, in her fifth year of house arrest in the Myanmar capital.

The rebel front also has insisted on collective negotiations with the junta.

The junta took power in a 1988 coup after brutally suppressing pro-democracy demonstrations. It has been condemned by many Western governments for widespread human rights abuses.

The London-based human rights group Amnesty International said last week that the military is continuing severe human rights violations, including detentions, torture and murder.

Marta said he did not know long it would take to stop the fighting.

"It has taken us 45 years already. Personally, I want it to end tomorrow," he said.

Marta said the alliance was 'slightly encouraged' by conciliatory statements in recent weeks by Lt. Gen. Kyin Nyunt, secretary general of the junta.

He said the general has avoided calling the rebel groups 'terrorists', using more moderate terms instead.

In speeches in Kayah, Mon and Karen states in November, the general invited rebel groups to hold peace talks individually with the government.

Khin Nyunt promised safe passage for rebel leaders who take part in talks.

Since 1989, several ethnic rebel groups, including insurgent organisations of the Kokang, Wa, Pao, Palaung and Shans, have reconciled with the junta.

The most powerful rebel group, the ethnic Kachin insurgents, began formal talks with the junta early this year.

The Kachin Independence Organisation, which controls about 8,000 guerrillas in northern Myanmar is reportedly close to agreement on reconciliation.

The Kachin, who began a struggle for autonomy in 1961, have been pressing for a nationwide ceasefire among all the warring sides.

France to protect its nationals in Algeria

PARIS, Dec 6: France announced steps on Sunday to protect its nationals in Algeria, hours after a Russian woman was killed in the wake of an anti-foreigner ultimatum by Muslim militants, reports Reuter.

Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said France was acting following a spate of attacks on foreigners by suspected Muslim fundamentalists.

Radio communications between the French embassy and the French community had been stepped up. Paris had urged French companies to take extra security steps and asked Algerian authorities to reinforce protection of French facilities.

A Russian woman was fatally wounded in an Algiers market on Sunday, the second foreigner killed since a deadline issued by Muslim militants for them to leave expired five days ago.

Juppe said in a radio interview France had started cutting back the number of its government employees in the north African country and encouraged French residents to bring their children back to France.

Gorbachev predicts short-lived parliament

ABERDEEN, Scotland, Dec 6: Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev predicted here Sunday that a "very fragmented" and short-lived parliament would emerge from next week's elections in Russia, reports AP.

"I believe we are going to have a parliament in which many deputies behave in a very independent way and a very fragmented parliament as a result of that," Gorbachev said as he arrived to begin a six-day tour of Britain.

"I would also predict this parliament will probably not have a very long history," he told journalists at Aberdeen Airport.

The Russian elections take place on December 12.

Gorbachev, who is accompanied by his wife Raisa, will address a conference in Aberdeen in eastern Scotland before going on to Edinburgh, London, Bristol and Oxford.

In the capital, he will lunch on Tuesday with lady Thatcher, the former prime minister and will meet Prime Minister John Major on Wednesday at 10 Downing Street.

Honecker hospitalised

SANTIAGO, Chile, Dec 6: Former East German ruler Erich Honecker, who suffers from terminal liver cancer, was hospitalised here late Sunday, the hospital and the state television reported Monday, reports AP.

The National Television said Honecker was hospitalised "in an emergency," but the private Clinica las Condes, where the 81-year-old former Communist leader was admitted shortly before midnight, refused to comment.

A hospital official, who asked not to be identified, would only confirm that "Mr Honecker is a patient of the clinic at this moment."

She said doctors will issue an official statement this morning.

Honecker "looked pale and tired" as he entered the clinic with his wife, Margot, and daughter, Sonja, television reported.

Honecker came to Chile early this year after a Berlin court, citing health reasons, halted his trial on manslaughter charges in the deaths of East Germans killed trying to escape to the West during his Communist rule.

Since coming here 11 months ago, he has been hospitalised at least three times for brief periods.

Off the Record

Call volunteers to help whales

AUCKLAND: A large pod of mainly young pilot whales stranded itself Monday on an island near here, prompting authorities to issue a call for volunteers to help them, reports AP.

It is already the fourth big whale stranding on the New Zealand coast in the summer season which has barely started. Department of Conservation (DOC) spokesman Ian Bradley said around 30 pilot whales have beached themselves on the western shores of Rangitoto island in Hauraki Gulf.

Many of the stranded whales were young and 20 were already feared dead, he said.

The whales were from a pod of 80 and were stranded on a rocky beach at coastguard bay.

"There is an awful lot among the rocks. There are about 20 injured or dead on the rocks. We have got the survivors ones in the water and moving," he said.

"The problem they have at the moment is of survivors going back on to the beach to be with the injured ones."

"That is what whales do," he said. "They try to go back to look after the injured ones, so we are trying to keep them moving."

It was "not a very attractive sight" and if the injured whales were too badly hurt they would be put down by DOC staff.

Bradley said it was unusual for the whales to have stranded on a rocky beach because their natural sonar system usually told them when they were close to rocks.

"It may be because there are a lot of young with the females and they are apparently confused," he said.

Whales often get stranded on shelving sandy beaches because they cannot detect the beach.



Russian film director Nikita Mishalkov holds up his 'Felix Award' on Friday after winning best film for his movie 'Urga'. The director filmed in Mongolia about a Russian workman and a Mongolian herdsman. — AFP photo

French smokers prefer 'Bridge'

PARIS: The state-run tobacco company is betting that French smokers are willing to buy the Brooklyn Bridge - or at least a brand of cigarettes called "Brooklyn," with a logo depicting the bridge, reports AP.

The brand went on sale nationwide Monday after test-marketing in northern France that the company, SEITA, termed successful.

A 25-cigarette pack of Brooklyns will sell for 14 francs 2.37 dollar.

Known worldwide for its pungent Gauloise cigarettes, SEITA lately has turned to English-language brand names and American-style cigarettes. The brand it introduced before Brooklyns is called News.

Yellow person with black skin

BEIJING: A shocked Chinese couple has given birth to a "black baby," confounding doctors and genetic experts, a newspaper reported, says AP.

The "black as ink" boy was born January 12, 1992 to a couple in a village of Anyi County in China's Southeastern Jiangxi province, the Zhuhai special zone daily said.

"According to the parents (who are both yellow), there was nothing about the newborn that was different from a normal child," it said. "They did not imagine that a month later, the child would start to gradually turn black."

Except for reddish hair and yellow palms and feet, the boy's body is totally black, making him a "yellow person with black skin," the paper said.

The parents, who were not identified, took their child to a hospital in the provincial capital Nanchang for extensive tests, but nothing unusual was found, it said.

"The 'black child' was normal like any other child. His mental responses were normal, his four limbs moved naturally and he ate, walked and spoke in a normal way," the paper said.

Blacks are regarded by many Chinese as inferior, and some Chinese still believe that Africans live in trees. Violent clashes between African exchange students and Chinese have occurred many times.

"In this world of yellow people, it goes without saying that this 'black child' will meet pressure and obstacles," the paper said.

Angolan peace talks end without accord

LUANDA, Dec 6: Angola's two warring parties had not agreed on a ceasefire, contrary to weekend reports, the government's principal negotiator, at the peace talks in the Zambian capital Lusaka said Sunday, reports AP.

The denial by Faustino Muteka was reported by the official news agency Angop.

The leader of the government delegation returned to the Angolan capital "without anything concrete," according to the agency. "There is no agreement," he was quoted as saying, denying the reports that an accord had been reached and would be announced shortly.

The Angolan press, quoting sources close to the negotiators, reported that the two parties had not reached an agreement on the practical implications of a ceasefire, although certain aspects had been approved.

The sources were quoted as saying that points relating to political questions, including a national reconciliation, sharing of power and government structures, both national and local, must be addressed when the discussions, adjourned for the weekend, are resumed Tuesday.

In Lusaka, a rebel UNITA official had indicated that the parties were on the point of proclaiming a ceasefire.

He added that if the talks on military aspects of an agreement had taken three weeks, it was, at the moment, impossible to state how long it would take to resolve the outstanding problems.

A meeting of the UN Security Council on December 15 will be crucial, because it will define a new mandate for the United Nations in Angola. It will examine the make-up of the UN troop presence for verifying the ceasefire.

Woman mistakenly shot

TOKYO, Dec 6: A Japanese hunter allegedly mistook a woman for a deer and fired a fatal shot on a mountain slope in western Japan, police said Monday, reports AP.

Police identified the victim as Yoshiko Tokura, 52, a homemaker who was collecting bamboo for New Year's decorations Sunday afternoon, when she was shot in the abdomen.

Bosnia blames UN forces for aiding secessionists

SARAJEVO, Dec 6: The Bosnian government accused the United Nations Protection Force (Unprofor) Sunday of aiding force loyal to Fikret Abdic, the Maverick Muslim leader who is demanding autonomy for the enclave of Bihaq, in northwest Bosnia-Herzegovina, reports AP.

The Bosnian Minister responsible for Bihaq, Mirsad Veladzic, said in a letter to the Unprofor commander in Bosnia, General Francis Briquemont, that he had information "that Unprofor is participating actively in the transport of secessionists passing through Krajina."

A Unprofor spokesman said earlier that Abdic's forces were carrying out attacks on government forces via Krajina, Serb-held territory in Croatia, and were probably receiving artillery support from the Serbs.

Unprofor aid to the secessionists "is a flagrant violation of UN Security Council 836", setting up six "safe areas" in Bosnia, including Bihaq, Veladzic said in the letter broadcast on Sarajevo radio, accusing Unprofor of supporting the secessionists.

"The violation is being carried out by the very people who are supposed to apply the resolutions," he wrote.



A masked Arab youth hangs Palestinian flags on Sunday on the house of Talal el Bakri, 54, killed by Jewish settlers in the West Bank town of Hebron on Saturday. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

37 die in Pak bus plunge: A passenger bus plunged into a river early Sunday, killing 37 people, including 11 members of a family who were on their way to attend the funeral of a relative, AP reports from Islamabad.

The bus driver apparently lost control, smashed through a cement barrier and plunged into the Jhelum River about 115 kilometers (90 miles) east of the capital Islamabad, the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan reported.

The bus, from a village in the central Punjab province, was headed to Islamabad. All 37 victims drowned in the river.

14 killed in Mexico bus mishap: A bus ran into a crowd taking part in a religious procession Sunday, killing 14 people and injuring another 50, AFP reports from Mexico City.

Authorities said the bus apparently suffered brake failure, hitting a truck and a cyclist before slamming into the worshippers in the town of Puerto Del Aire in the southern state of Veracruz.

Body to probe deaths in Japan: Health authorities said Monday they are investigating a newspaper report that 20 patients have died from a new anticancer drug in clinical tests, AP reports from Tokyo.

The report in the Asahi Shimbun newspaper said the drug has yet to be made available for sale. But in clinical testing of 477 cancer patients, 20, or 4.2 per cent, died within a month after taking the medication, called Irinotecan Hydrochloride, the newspaper said.

Two shot dead in Belfast: Gunmen shot and killed two men at a taxi rank in north Belfast on Sunday night, police said. A Protestant extremist group claimed responsibility, AP reports from Belfast.

One man was slain on the street and the man standing beside him was fatally wounded and died at a hospital. Police said they understood the gunmen opened fire from a passing car.

Democrats win HK local polls

HONG KONG, Dec 6: Hong Kong's leading pro-democracy party has won a solid local election victory, gaining a boost at a time when Britain and China are locked in dispute over how democratic the colony should be, reports AP.

The dispute did not figure heavily in Sunday's election to fill a vacant District Board seat. But the vote showed that although China views the United Democrats with hostility, they remain Hong Kong's favorite party.

Wong Yiu-sang won 1,014 of 1,866 votes cast in Sha Tin district, against 750 for Leung Chi-wai of the conservative, business-oriented Liberal Party, making its electoral debut.

Turnout was 31 per cent, up from 27.5 per cent in 1991.

Slaying of Escobar brightens Colombia's int'l image

BOGOTA, Dec 6: The slaying of Pablo Escobar, once the World's principal — and most violent — cocaine supplier, has brightened Colombia's tarnished international image, reports AP.

Escobar's death in a shootout with police and soldiers Thursday put to rest doubts about the government's will to capture and prosecute major drug traffickers.

His death may end the dramatic attacks that have terrorised this South American nation since the early 1980s: political assassinations, shopping center bombings, the downing of a jetliner.

But drug trafficking and violence will continue in Colombia, where murder is the leading cause of death for people ages 15 to 60, and where an average of 20 people are murdered daily

in the capital. "The violence doesn't end with the death of Pablo Escobar," said Clara Lopez, a human rights activist and former Bogota City Council president.

"We have one of the most violent societies in the world," Even President Cesar Gaviria admits as much.

"The death alone of Pablo Escobar ... will by no means end the violence," Gaviria said Saturday in a ceremony honoring the men who killed the drug chieftain at his Medellin hide-out.

For years, the international community had questioned the governments will to capture Escobar. Eyewitnesses were raised when the drug lord was allowed to transform his luxury jail cell into a command center for his Medellin drug cartel. He

escaped in July 1992, setting off a 16-month manhunt.

"I believe the blow against Escobar has strengthened the image of the president and the government both inside and outside the country," said Rodrigo Losada, a political scientist specialising in the study of high crime rates.

President Clinton congratulated Gaviria and Colombian officials for the "courageous and effective work" and pledged continued cooperation in the drug war.

With the slaying of Escobar, "we Colombians have proved

that there was no criminal organisation capable of challenging our state," Gaviria bragged Sunday.

But while the Medellin cartel was responsible for some of Colombia's more spectacular attacks, it committed only a small portion of the country's violence. Even before, Escobar's

death, the Medellin cartel had been eclipsed by Colombia's Cali cartel, its leaders jailed or slain.

"There is drug trafficking throughout the country and the Medellin cartel is just one of many groups," said Lopez. "Colombia also has a lot of political violence and social violence." The country's murder rate is

81 per 100,000 inhabitants — eight times higher than in the United States.

About half the 29,000 homicides committed in Colombia each year are drug-related. Only a small portion could be directly attributed to Escobar and his gang, Losada said.

"The violence will continue," he said. "I think in several months well see that is true."

Colombia's violence has more to do with history and politics than with drug trafficking, Lopez said.

In a period known as "La Violencia," or "The Violence", several hundred thousand people died in the countryside during the 1940s and '50s as the Liberal and Conservative parties battled over land and political power.

Drug traffickers often fi-

Tamil Nadu cyclone death toll rises to 61

MADRAS, Dec 6: The official death toll of a tropical cyclone in southern India rose to 61 on Monday, and Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao said he would soon visit the area, reports AP.

Packing winds up to 75 miles per hour, the storm destroyed at least 13,000 mud huts, forced thousands of people into relief camps, and disrupted dozens of trains over the weekend.

The storm swept across 10 coastal districts of Tamil Nadu during the state's winter cyclone season. Some people were buried in collapsed huts, many others drowned or were electrocuted.

On Monday, flooded roads were still preventing relief workers from reaching the 100,000 people of Karaikal.

News Analysis

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