

India's CEC forced to reschedule polls

NEW DELHI, May 25: India's tough Chief Election Commissioner, TN Seshan, was forced today to back off an order delaying six assembly by-elections to be held in northern Uttar Pradesh state, reports AFP.

The polls, originally scheduled for Thursday, were postponed by four months by Seshan on the grounds that the state's Chief Minister had violated an election code by using a government helicopter for campaigning.

But Seshan, under pressure from the Supreme Court, agreed Wednesday to hold the elections on May 31 instead of September 24.

Judges Yogeshwar Dayal and N Venkatachala told the Election Commission's counsel that they would rule the postponement to be invalid if Seshan did not himself set an earlier date.

Their intervention came on

a petition by the Samajwadi Party (Socialist Party), which leads an alliance governing Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state.

State attorney Soli Sorabjee said the postponement was "totally arbitrary," denying Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav had campaigned with the government-owned helicopter.

Sorabjee said the helicopter belonged to a cooperative society in which the state government had no financial stake.

He accused the election chief of committing a "gross violation of the principles of natural justice" by denying the state government enough time to reply.

Judge Venkatachala commented that any action taken by the Chief Election Commissioner should "satisfy the test of fairness".



Young Tajik women are seen receiving military training in a rebel Tajik refugee camp in Kunduz, Afghanistan, on May 24. The Tajik rebel forces continue to build up combat forces and gather military equipment in the Tajik-Afghan border area. — AFP photo

Benazir seeks Koirala's help to promote peace in S Asia

KATHMANDU, May 25: Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto Tuesday said that Nepal and Pakistan should join hands to strengthen the foundations and structures of peace in the region on the basis of sovereign equality, mutual respect, non-interference in internal affairs and establishment of tension-free and co-operative relations amongst neighbouring countries, reports AFP.

Speaking at the banquet hosted in her honour at the Majestic Singha Durbar by Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala here last night, Benazir shared with her counterpart the conviction that relations amongst nations should be governed in accordance with the universally recognised principles.

Speaking in the larger context of the region, she said

dialogue should be the key to resolve differences and disputes and the methods stipulated in the charter of the United Nations provide for a climate free from intimidation and coercion.

Benazir pointed out that international peace, security and well-being of mankind are predicated on peace, stability and progress in South Asia.

Recalling the struggle and sacrifice that both the countries went through to win political systems, Benazir said that the common experience in battling for the peoples' rights would help both the countries share its expertise in political, economic and cultural spheres. She expressed the desire to initiate a process of frequent exchanges between political leaders, members of parliament, and other influential individuals.

Such contacts, she said, would lead to expansion of cooperation both at the bilateral level and under the auspices of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Xinhua adds: Koirala said that Benazir's visit to Nepal would open a new era of friendship, understanding and cooperation between Nepal and Pakistan.

At the banquet hosted in honour of the visiting Pakistani Prime Minister on Tuesday evening, Koirala expressed the hope that the visit by Prime Minister Benazir would provide a better opportunity to exchange views on matters of cooperation for the mutual benefit of the peoples, and to strengthen the ties so happily existing between the two countries.

Sikkim CM firm to prove majority in House

GANGTOK, May 25: The Sikkim Chief Minister, Sanchaman Limboo today said that he was confident of proving his majority in the state assembly within thirty days.

He told PTI that Governor R H Tahliani's directive to prove his (Limboo's) majority within thirty days was "unnecessary" as his party, the Sikkim Sangram Parishad-S, had acquired a clean 16-14 majority in the House by defeating the former Chief Minister, N B Bhandari on May 17.

However, he said, his government did not wish to enter into any controversy with the governor on the issue and was ready to prove his majority time and again.

"But in no case would these trials brighten the prospects of Bhandari or that of his party, the Sikkim Sangram Parishad," he added.

A Confident Limboo said the SSP-S President had left for the union capital on Monday to discuss organisational matters and the date for the special session.

Russia, Ukraine fail to break deadlock

MOSCOW, May 25: Russia and Ukraine confirmed Tuesday an agreement on dividing up the disputed Black Sea Fleet, but failed to break a deadlock over where each side's ships should be stationed, a Russian delegate to talks here said, reports AFP.

Negotiators, who were locked here late Tuesday in a second day of top-level talks on splitting the fleet, confirmed the April 22 accord giving Kiev control over 164 ships and Moscow ownership of the remaining 669.

But the unnamed official said the delegations had thus far failed to decide which ships would go to which side, and where their home ports would be situated.

Moscow is seeking to retain the Crimean port of Sevastopol — the current headquarters of the fleet — as the home base for its vessels, and also wants the use of four other Crimean ports.

UN to lift ban on arms exported from SA

UNITED NATIONS, May 25: The United Nations is preparing to lift its 10-year-old ban on weapons exported from South Africa, unleashing a new and potentially major supplier on a continent where an excess of arms has led to war after war, reports AP.

The Security Council's expected decision Wednesday is a final vote of confidence in South Africa's new, multiracial government. The ban is the last of the apartheid-era UN embargoes to be scrapped.

US, Japan plan to eradicate polio worldwide

WASHINGTON, May 25: Japan and the United States have agreed to work together to eradicate polio worldwide by the end of the century, officials said Tuesday, reports AFP.

The two countries also unveiled an ambitious joint programme to develop a magic-bullet vaccine capable of protecting children from all preventable diseases.

The projects were agreed to as part of the framework of talks between Tokyo and Washington on trade and co-operation in solving a slate of global problems, ranging from population control to saving the environment.

The latest plans are: Polio eradication and vaccine development anti-narcotics, initiatives biodiversity protection study of global climate changes preservation of wetlands agreement on intellectual property rights and sharing of research.

Off the Record

Strawberry now 'bigger than a chicken egg'

BEIJING: China has developed a new strain of strawberry "bigger than a chicken egg" and is now promoting it nationwide, the official Xinhua news agency said Wednesday, reports Reuters.

The "number two Shimei" strawberry is both bigger and sweeter than those now imported from Japan, the news agency said, adding that one planted hectare could produce twice as many berries as the Japanese strain.

"Development of the new strain of strawberries took experts nine years," Xinhua quoted officials at the Shijiazhuang fruit growing research institute as saying.

Blame it on genes

PHILADELPHIA: People who habitually get into arguments and fights or throw temper tantrums can blame some of it on their genes, a study of twins suggests, reports AP.

Genes may account for 27 per cent to 40 per cent of a person's tendency toward irritability and several kinds of aggressiveness, according to the study. The rest comes from childhood and current experiences, researcher Dr Emil Coccaro said.

The genes believed responsible have not been identified yet, but they may act by reducing the brain's supply of serotonin, which acts as a brake on aggressive responses, he said.

If so, drugs that help the brain keep up its serotonin supply might help in treating people with aggressive tendencies, he said. Some preliminary evidence already suggests such drugs might work, he said.

Coccaro is director of the Clinical Neuroscience Research Unit at the Medical College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. He presented the work Tuesday at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association.

He and colleagues surveyed 182 identical twins and 119 fraternal twins, drawn from a registry of male twins who had served in the military. Their average age was 44, and nearly all were white.

Researchers often study twins to ferret out genetic influences. The reason is that identical twins share all their genes, while fraternal twins share only about half their genes on average. So when identical twins are more alike than fraternal twins in a certain characteristic, it can be taken as a sign of genetic influence. Researchers can use results to estimate the strength of the genetic influences.

Clinton calls her 'darlin' but never calls her 'love'

NEW YORK: The woman who says she used to be Bill Clinton's paramour held a news conference Tuesday to convince Americans to spend 19.95 dollars to hear 57 minutes of taped phone talk with the man who would be president, reports AP.

The conference was about as tacky as the tapes, in which Clinton calls her "darlin'" and "babe," but never calls her his love.

In one of the gatherings lower moments, shock radio humourist "Stuttering John" Meindenz shouted out: "What are the distinguishing features of Bill Clinton's penis? Will your sister be sleeping with Roger Clinton?"

Flowers also got pushed into a corner when a fight broke out among television crews trying to follow her.

Flowers is releasing "Setting the Record Straight," two cassette tapes and transcript of conversations with Clinton in 1990-91. She says she secretly recorded the calls to protect herself after reporters began asking about her alleged affair with Clinton, which she says began in the late 70's and ended in 1989.

In the two years since the publication of her story in a supermarket tabloid, Flowers said, "I have been vilified by the mainstream media," and "felt the burning frustration" of what she calls an attempt by Clinton supporters to cover up her story.

Americans, she said, "want to know exactly what did happen and whether their president is a liar.... The people of this nation have a right to expect the truth."

Still, she did have some kind words for the president. Asked about Paula Jones' claim that Clinton, as governor of Arkansas, sexually harassed her, Flowers said, "the Bill Clinton I know is not someone who would sexually harass a woman."

But she added that, given permission, the Clinton she knows would "eagerly participate" in an encounter with a woman.

Gay group seeks royal pardon for Oscar Wilde

LONDON: A gay rights group is seeking a posthumous royal pardon for 19th century playwright Oscar Wilde, who was jailed as a result of a homosexual relationship 99 years ago, reports AP.

Outrage said Tuesday that it had written to Queen Elizabeth II asking her to pardon Wilde, who wrote the novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray," and plays including "The Importance of Being Earnest" and "Lady Windermere's Fan."

"Wilde was the victim of unjust laws," said Outrage spokesman Peter Tatchell. "His imprisonment is a stain on the judicial system."

Tatchell said the cruel conditions of Victorian prisons led to Wilde's premature death at the age of 46, three years after he was released.

Wilde's experience of prison prompted his poem, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," and "De Profundis" was written in prison. Wilde's infatuation with the young Lord Alfred Douglas led to his imprisonment. Douglas's father, the 8th Marquess of Queensbury, accused Wilde of sodomy and goaded him into suing for libel. Wilde lost the case and was tried and convicted in 1895 of committing indecent acts with men. He was sentenced to two years' imprisonment at hard labour.

Homosexuality was a crime in Britain until 1967.



BRIEFLY

Italy to try 2 former PMs: Former Premiers Bettino Craxi and Arnaldo Forlani were among 32 political and business figures ordered Tuesday to stand trial on corruption charges, AP reports from Milan.

It was the second indictment this month for Craxi, who as Socialist premier was one of Italy's most powerful politicians in the 1980s.

Also indicted Tuesday were former foreign minister Gianni De Michelis and the former heads of three small parties which helped the Socialists and Christian Democrats govern for much to the last decade — Giorgio La Malfa of the Republicans, Renato Altissimo of the Liberals, and Carlo Vizzini of the Social Democrats. No trial dates were announced.

Quake hits Indonesian province: A major earthquake shook the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya on Wednesday, the Australian Seismological Centre said, AP reports from Canberra.

Principal scientist Kevin McCue said the quake occurred at 4:03 GMT with the epicentre located around 560 miles (900 kilometres) northeast of Darwin.

Road mishap claims 12 in Kanpur: Twelve persons, including a would-be-bride, were killed and two others seriously injured when a jeep and truck collided near Rania, about 35 kms from Kanpur early yesterday morning, PTI says from Kanpur.

Ramadhur, SP (Kanpur Rupal) told PTI that 10 persons died on spot and two succumbed to injuries on way to the hospital.

14 migrants to US drowned: An overloaded boat carrying migrants from the Dominican Republic to the United States capsized and sank before dawn Tuesday, killing at least 14 of the 97 people reported aboard, rescue officials said, AP reports from San Juan, Puerto Rico.

The boat people were among thousands of Dominicans who attempt to enter the United States illegally each year by crossing the turbulent Mona Passage between their Caribbean nation and the US commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

52 smugglers held in Russia: Authorities arrested 52 smugglers and seized more than 80 metric tons (nearly 90 short tons) of contraband steel and titanium alloys, a border guard spokesman said Wednesday, AP reports from St Petersburg.

Brunei-PLO diplomatic ties: Brunei and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) have set up ambassador-level diplomatic ties, the Borneo Bulletin reported yesterday, AFP reports from Bandar Seri Begawan.

The daily said a joint statement on the establishment of diplomatic links was signed at the Brunei high commission office in Kuala Lumpur Tuesday.

Truce violated in Rwanda

NAIROBI, May 25: Rebel and army gunners ignored a truce in Rwanda on Wednesday, pounding Kigali's centre with mortar fire that hit a Red Cross hospital and killed two people, reports AP.

Although both sides agreed to extend a shaky truce for a third day Wednesday, UN officials could not get them to hold fire long enough for the UN special envoy's convoy to leave the city for talks with the interim government.

One mortar round hit a Red Cross hospital in the city, killing two people, said UN spokesman Abdul Kabia in Kigali.

Red Cross spokeswoman Susan Matindi in Nairobi said five of about 300 patients were wounded when the shell hit the hospital in a converted building next to the Red Cross headquarters. She said the dead were Red Cross Rwandan staff.

Both of Wednesday's

scheduled relief flights were cancelled, because the Canadian Air Force C-130 that brought the special envoy to Kigali was hit by a bullet as it flew out of the city en route to Nairobi. There were no injuries.

It was not known who shot the plane.

UN officials requested a truce for Monday and Tuesday to allow Riza to meet with army and government officials about UN plans to take complete control of the airport and to send 5,500 new peacekeepers to Rwanda. There are about 450 peacekeepers in Rwanda.

Kabia said both sides agreed Tuesday to extend the truce for a day to allow Riza to go to Gitarama. He met with army leaders in Kigali on Tuesday.

The special envoy is scheduled to leave Thursday and go back to Mulindi, a rebel stronghold just south of the Uganda border, for follow up talks with rebel leaders.



Ed Smith (C), whose eight-month pregnant wife was killed in the World Trade Center bombing, is surrounded by family and friends while discussing his reaction to the sentencing of the four men convicted in the bombing on May 24 in New York. Smith, 31, of Long Island, New York, said of his unborn son, "I'll never get a chance to see him grow up". — AFP photo

Fresh debate over future of Quebec

OTTAWA, May 25: Prime Minister Jean Chretien said Tuesday the mainly French-speaking province of Quebec will remain part of Canada and that talks of it separating destabilises the economy, reports Reuters.

"I am convinced Quebec will remain Canadian," Chretien said in Parliament Tuesday.

Chretien was responding to questions from the opposition Bloc Quebecois, a federal party that urges Quebec separation.

The leader of the Bloc Quebecois Lucien Bouchard visited France last week, sparking fresh debate over the future of Quebec.

'Iraq used chemical arms against US forces during Gulf War'

WASHINGTON, May 25: Strong evidence exists that Iraq attacked US troops with chemical weapons during the Gulf War, spreading contaminants that have sickened thousands of Americans, according to a congressional report, says AP.

The 160-page report, released Wednesday by Sen. Donald Riegle, lists more than a dozen incidents where American troops appear to have been exposed to chemical agents, mainly from rocket attacks.

It disputes Pentagon contentions that there is no evidence of Iraqi chemical attacks during the 1991 war, and criticizes the Defence Department for not having the capability to confirm whether

troops were exposed to biological agents.

The report also says that, contrary to Pentagon claims that nerve agent levels detected by the Czechs and other allies during the war were not harmful, monitoring equipment only picks up nerve agents when levels are 1,000 times higher than what is deemed to be hazardous.

The report includes testimony from 30 Gulf War veterans who say that apparent Iraqi missile attacks were followed by the sounding of "chemical agent detectors," the air filling with fumes and burning sensations on their skin.

Almost all are now suffering from the debilitating symptoms of what has come to be

known as Persian Gulf syndrome.

"There are multiple witnesses to what appear to be best explained as chemical or mixed agent attacks," the report said. "Symptoms appeared simultaneously with alarms going off and Patriots intercepting Scuds."

Riegle said his yearlong investigation included interviews with 600 American troops, many of whom corroborated reports of chemical exposures.

One soldier stationed in Saudi Arabia reported a loud explosion early in the morning of January 17, 1991, followed by a sounding of alarms and a burning sensation on his face. Of the unit's 110 soldiers, 85

now suffer from medical problems.

Two days later, in another part of Saudi Arabia, witnesses reported a sharp odour of ammonia after a "real bad explosion" and more alarms going off.

At another location that day, a naval construction worker said his mouth, lips and face became numb after a loud explosion.

A soldier based near King Fahd International Airport on January 20 said he saw what he believed to be a Scud missile shot down by a Patriot missile. He experienced "a very strong raunchy taste, like very bitter burnt toast" in his mouth. He now suffers from bleeding, dizziness, hair loss, joint pain, insomnia and

blurred vision, symptoms common to many returning from the Gulf.

Despite the numerous chemical alerts, troops were told by their commanding officers that they explosions came from sonic booms.

The report said that in addition to direct attacks, there appear to be three other primary sources of exposure:

— Fallout from coalition bombing of Iraqi chemical and biological warfare plants. Visual and thermal satellite imagery confirms that fallout during the air and ground war moved to the southeast, toward American forces.

— The administration of nerve agent vaccines to troops, some which act in a manner

similar to the actual agent.

— Continuing contact with Iraqi prisoners of war.

The Pentagon and the Veterans Affairs Department have launched several programmes to register sick veterans, study their symptoms and search for treatment. But while they acknowledge that the illnesses are real, they say there is no evidence of a single cause.

Riegle's report recommends declassification of all information on Iraq's chemical and biological warfare programmes, a thorough epidemiological study of all Gulf War veterans, a study of the impact of nerve agent vaccines and a presumption of service-connection so sick veterans can receive medical treatment.

France plans to produce Cruise missile

PARIS, May 25: France plans to produce a long-range Cruise missile as part of efforts to correct weaknesses which affected French forces during the Gulf War, Defence Minister Francois Leotard said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

The conventional warhead weapon would enter service in 2001, Leotard told parliament. Paris set a 15,000 strong division to fight alongside allied forces in the 1991 conflict.

Such weapons were generally fired by vessels in the Gulf and aimed at specific targets such as headquarters buildings in Baghdad hundreds of kilometres (miles) away.