

Rafsanjani for resolution of Indo-Pak tensions

NICOSIA, Aug 26: Iranian President Akbar Hashem Rafsanjani on Thursday called for a resolution of tensions between India and Pakistan to promote cooperation among Asian Powers, Tehran Radio said, reports Reuter.

"Ending the tension between India and Pakistan is in the interests of the region and the world," it quoted Rafsanjani as telling India's visiting Commerce Minister Pranab Mukherjee.

"Extensive political, economic and trade links among powerful Asian countries is possible only in an atmosphere of peace and stability," added Rafsanjani, who is due to visit India either in September or October.

The report made no reference to the increased tension between India and Pakistan

since former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said this week that Pakistan had nuclear weapons.

Pakistan is one of the closest friends of neighbouring, fellow Muslim Iran, but Tehran has said this does not preclude equally good relations with New Delhi.

Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao visited Iran last September. In November Iran and India signed an agreement to build a live billion pipeline to carry Iranian gas to India.

Rafsanjani said that apart from politics and trade, Iran was interested in India because of its large Muslim minority.

Iran and other Islamic countries often complain about sectarian violence in India directed against Muslims.

Pakistan to raise Kashmir issue at UNGA session

ISLAMABAD, Aug 26: Pakistan is to raise the issue of Kashmir at the United Nations General Assembly session in September, Foreign Minister Sardar Asif Ali said Thursday, reports AFP.

Speaking in parliament, he said the government would continue its efforts to mobilise international opinion against "grave human rights violations" by Indian forces in Kashmir.

"We will spare no effort to highlight the grave situation in Kashmir," Ali said, adding that Pakistan "will not fail the people of Jammu and Kashmir in their struggle against Indian occupation and repression."

Around 10,000 people have died in the Indian controlled southern two thirds of

Kashmir since 1989 in violence linked to a separatist campaign by the Muslim majority. Pakistan controls northern third of the disputed region.

Pakistan pledged moral and political support for the Kashmiri uprising, calling it a legitimate struggle for self-determination. But, it denies Indian charges that it has been training and arming Kashmiri militants.

The Kashmir dispute has been a catalyst for two of the three wars between the South Asian neighbours since their independence in 1947 and continues to bedevil their relations.

Another report from Washington adds: Human rights

abuses in Kashmir have escalated in recent months, partly because international pressure on New Delhi to halt the violations has eased, a human rights group said Friday.

"India seems to have been largely successful in a campaign to counter international criticism of its human rights record in Kashmir, despite the fact that it has done little to end the abuses," human rights Watch Asia said in a report on Kashmir.

Kashmir straddles India and Pakistan and the two sides have fought two wars over it since independence in 1947. Indian-controlled Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, has been rent by a violent Muslim-led separatists

drive. "Indian troops continue to execute detainees in custody, kill civilians in reprisal attacks and burn down neighborhoods and villages as collective punishment for those suspected of supporting the militants," the report said.

The report accused the US government of backing of criticism of India's human rights record in Kashmir early in the administration of President Bill Clinton, in the face of criticism that Washington was favouring Pakistan and potentially damaging Indo-US relations.

The report said human rights groups in Kashmir recorded more than 200 deaths in custody

Benazir puts off Gaza trip

ISLAMABAD, Aug 26: Pakistani Premier Benazir Bhutto has indefinitely postponed a planned official visit next month to the autonomous Gaza Strip, a Foreign Ministry spokesman said today, reports AFP.

The visit, which was to take place September 4, has been put off because of "scheduling problems," and not because of rumored obstacles put up by Israeli authorities to the visit, spokesman Munir Akran said.

Bhutto, who has to be in Cairo in the evening of September 4 to participate in a UN conference on population and development, cannot meet Yasser Arafat on that date because the Palestine Liberation Organisation chief will be in Jericho for a visit by US vice president Al Gore, he said.

Russia joins debate over Jerusalem

JERUSALEM, Aug 26: Russia joined the debate over Jerusalem today, demanding through its Middle East envoy that it have some say over the future of the holy city, reports Reuter.

"We have all rights in our opinion to take part in all the efforts, when the time comes, in all the efforts related to Jerusalem, the holy city," Victor Posuvaluk, in Israel on a peace mission, said in remarks broadcast by Israel radio.

The Palestinians, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Vatican are among those making demands on the future of Jerusalem which Israel declares as its eternal capital.

Posuvaluk, who began a four-day visit on Thursday, said Russia had several claims to the holy city.

"Russia possesses the biggest orthodox Christian community in the world," he said. "We have a considerable, very large, Muslim community in Russia, and we have a historic tradition with the holy land."

Arafat welcomes Hamas' call for dialogue

GAZA, Aug 26: PLO leader Yasser Arafat welcomed today a call by his leading opponents, the Islamic resistance movement Hamas, for a dialogue with his Palestinian authority running self-rule in Gaza and Jericho, reports Reuter.

Arafat's spokesman Nabil Abu Rdeina said today: "We welcome the invitation from Hamas to open a quiet dialogue."

Hamas, whose guerilla attacks have led to Israeli pressure on Palestinian police to crack down on the group, said on Thursday it wanted guarantees of freedom of speech from the authority before any talks could begin.

It was the first time Hamas, an opponent of the Israel-PLO peace deal, called for a dialogue



Sri Lankan Premier Chandrika Kumaratunga offering a traditional greeting to A N Varma, a special envoy of Indian Premier P V Narasimha Rao in Colombo yesterday. Varma was carrying a "goodwill message" to Kumaratunga who was elected last week. — AFP photo

Belgrade still supplying arms to Bosnian Serbs, says UN envoy

UNITED NATIONS, Aug 26: Bosnia's UN envoy charged Thursday that Serbia was continuing to deliver military supplies to the Bosnian Serbs despite claims by Belgrade that it had sealed the border with Bosnia, reports AFP.

"We have information (...) that indicate that the border continues to be the sources of transfer of war material from Serbia and Montenegro to the republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina," Mohamed Sacirbey told journalists.

Sacirbey said that he presented a written report on the border violations to then UN Security Council.

Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic announced on August 4 that his country was vowing to all ties with the Bosnian Serbs in retaliation for their rejection of an international

peace plan. But the Serbian leader has refused to allow international monitoring of the border, stating that such a move would be a violation of state sovereignty.

Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev was to travel to Belgrade Sunday to attempt to convince Milosevic to allow observers on the border, holding out the prospect of lifting economic sanctions as a possible reward for his cooperation.

Sacirbey raised concern that the so-called contact group that helped draft the peace plan has not taken measures to push Bosnian Serbs towards accepting the settlement.

The contact group comprises representatives of the United States, Russia, Germany, France and Britain.



Nurse Terrie Suarez (R) checks the pulse of hunger striker Stannie Fernandez on Thursday in Miami's Little Havana. Fernandez and six other Cuban-Americans are on the sixth day of a hunger strike and say they will fast until US calls for a total naval blockade of Cuba. — AFP photo

Political tensions subsiding: Yeltsin

MOECOW, Aug 26: President Boris Yeltsin said in an interview published Friday that Russia's political tensions are subsiding and that the danger of regions peeling away from Moscow is over, reports AP.

"We are not the most quiet society by far but the situation is clearly calming down," Yeltsin told the newspaper Trud in an interview published Friday.

Meanwhile, new economic figures indicated things might be improving for the average Russian, and a poll showed Yeltsin's own popularity, though low, rebounding slightly.

Yeltsin told Trud that his observations were made on trips this summer around rural Russia. His comments come during the waning days of a quiet summer, and the fractured opposition to his free-market reforms has been vowing to regroup in the fall.

Last October, Yeltsin used tanks and troops against armed hard-liners who resisted his order to disband the old parliament. The clash, which left more than 140 dead, followed months of political deadlock.

But in December, a referendum on Russia's new constitution strengthened Yeltsin's power. And although nationalists and communists made gains in that month's parliamentary elections, the new parliament has proven less confrontational than its predecessor.

Yeltsin said he is optimistic about relations between Moscow and Russia's 89 regions. Many regions have demanded more economic autonomy, and last year endorsed a federation treaty giving them wider legislative and economic powers.

But only one — the volatile southern region of Chechnya — has declared independence.

"The time of the so-called struggle of the regions with the center has passed," Yeltsin told the newspaper.

"The danger of Russia's breakup is in the past," he acknowledged many difficulties remain and pledged to work with the regions, but added, "The situation in the provinces has stabilized and become much more businesslike and efficient."

"The regions are beginning to rely on themselves, instead of looking back to Moscow too often," he said.

Figures released Thursday by the State Statistics Committee might reflect a creeping sense of economic calm, showing that Russians have more money to spend and are putting more of it into savings. Real disposable income was

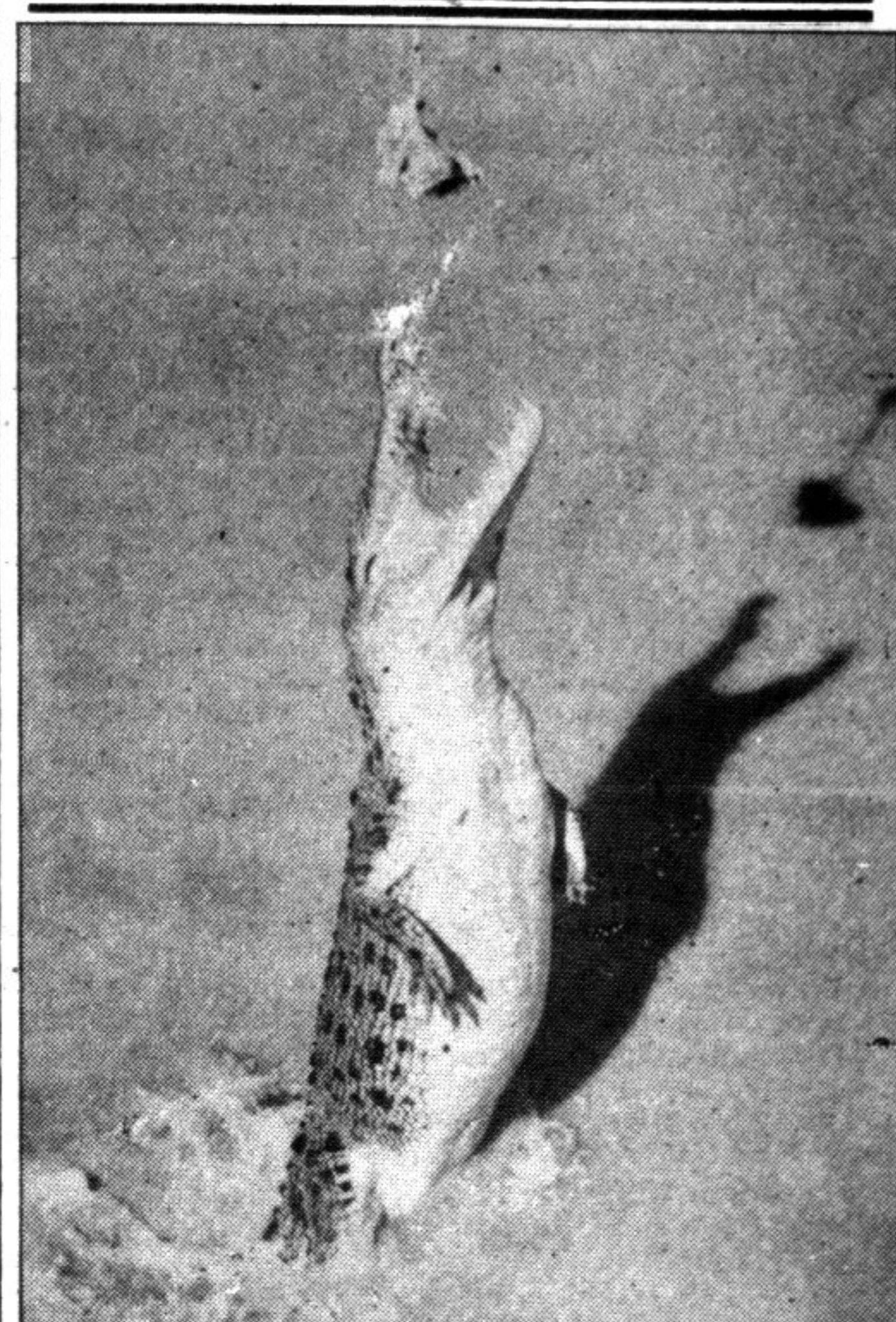
11 per cent higher at the end of July than a year earlier, even with inflation running at 5 per cent a month and production falling, the figures said.

They also said Russians invested more of their July incomes in securities and bank deposits, spending less on goods and services. About 9 per cent went to bank deposits and securities, compared to 5 per cent a year earlier. Spending on goods and services was down from 71 per cent of income to 61 per cent over the same period.

Salaries, meanwhile, rose 8 per cent from June to July, to an average 224,000 rubles (US\$110), the report said.

There is still plenty of struggling, the figures show 23 per cent of Russians, or 34 million people, below the poverty line in the first seven months of 1994.

Off the Record



A crocodile jumps to snatch a piece of meat to entertain tourists during the so-called 'Jumping crocodile cruises' east of Darwin on August 20. — AFP photo

Interferon can help turn infertile men into fathers

LONDON: Japanese researchers said on Friday that interferon, a recognised treatment for cancers and multiple sclerosis, could help turn infertile men into fathers, reports Reuter.

In letter to the British medical journal Lancet, the researchers said they treated four infertile men for two months with interferon-alfa.

Interferons are highly active glyco-proteins which cause a cell to produce proteins which then protects it against viruses.

Three of the men, who had extremely low sperm counts, showed significant improvements in sperm density and two of them went on to impregnate their wives.

The fourth man, who could not produce sperm before treatment, began to produce "mobile" sperm, they said.

However, the researchers from Nagoya University school of medicine said the results should be treated with caution as the treatment was the first of its kind.

They also noted that interferon could have serious side-effects such as deafness, blindness and impotence. The four in the test did not suffer any side effects, they said.

Married 'by habit and repute'

EDINBURGH: An Edinburgh car dealer who lives alone and says he does not believe in marriage has been proclaimed married by a judge against his will, reports Reuter.

In a court hearing on Thursday, Lord Abernethy ruled that Ian Dewar was married to Maureen Dewar, his teenage sweetheart and mother of his three children, even if he did not like the idea.

The judge said that under Scottish law the couple had been married "by habit and repute" since they began to live together in 1975. They separated eight years later but continued to meet and had a third child in 1987.

"He tried to have the best of both worlds," the judge said after ruling on the case brought by Maureen, who wanted to be publicly acknowledged as his wife for financial reasons.

In Scotland couples can marry in a formal ceremony or by "habit and repute" — slipping into the ways of married life, calling themselves "Mr and Mrs" and sometimes even exchanging rings.

Govt declares Al Arqam a danger to public order

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 26: The Malaysian government today declared the mystic Islamic sect, Al Arqam, a danger to public order, the national news agency, Bernama, said, reports Reuter.

The Ministry of Home Affairs, declaring the movement "unlawful, advised the public not to associate with Al Arqam in any way, Bernama said.

The declaration clears the way for police to begin closing forcibly the movement's 257 schools and 48 communal Islamic villages in Malaysia.

Religious authorities on August 5 banned Al Arqam, which boasts 100,000 sympathisers in Malaysia and claims assets of more than 115 million dollar, saying it preached a deviant brand of Islam.

Bernama quoted the Home Ministry's Secretary General

Abdul Rahim Din as saying that "the activities of the Al Arqam are contrary and detrimental to public order in the country."

He said the movement had the potential to create disunity among Malays, the majority group in Malaysia, through its communal lifestyle.

Five activists arrested

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 26: Five members of Malaysia's outlawed Al Arqam Islamic sect were arrested today when they tried to file a report against the national police chief, police said.

"They were brought in under armed escort in a black maria (police van)," a police spokesman told Reuters.

Santos sees no quick end to talks with UNITA

LUANDA, Aug 26: Angolan President Jose Eduardo Dos Santos warned Thursday of no quick end to nine-month-old talks between his government and UNITA, saying continued military pressure on the rebels was the only way to bring a negotiated peace, reports AFP.

Speaking to Angolan diplomats and government members at a meeting of a consultative body on foreign affairs, Dos Santos accused UNITA of playing for time in the peace negotiations that began in Lusaka in November last year.

He also accused "certain countries" in the region of continuing to provide logistic and military support for UNITA.

The reference was seen here as a clear indication that his summit meeting last month with Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko, mediated

by South African President Nelson Mandela, was a failure.

Dos Santos accused UNITA of trying to involve the South African government in a new series of peace negotiations in order to gain time and avoid the threat of further United Nations sanctions.

But he said the rebels who resumed the 13-year-old civil war in September 1992 after losing elections to Dos Santos Angolan People's Liberation Movement, still intended to take power by force.

A former member of the government, Kundy Pathama, now an adviser to the general staff, also said Thursday that military pressure should be kept up.

He also told the national news agency ANGOP that while an agreement might be signed at Lusaka its implementation would still be a problem.

BRIEFLY

3 Chinese dissidents jailed:

Three of the 14 dissidents tried on 'counterrevolutionary' charges in July after being held for more than two years have received sentences ranging from six to more than 10 years, sources said today. AFP reports from Beijing.

Mexico to accept Cuban immigrants:

The Mexican government decided on Thursday to accept some Cuban immigrants who have family in Mexico, the Foreign Ministry said in a statement. AFP reports from Mexico.

The Foreign Ministry said the measure was to "help reduce the number of Cubans who are risking their lives by fleeing the country by sea."

US Senate okays crime bill:

The Senate passed President Clinton's 30 billion dollar crime bill on Thursday night, sending the controversial legislation to the White House for his signature. Reuter reports from Washington.

The final 61-38 vote came a few hours after a Republican point of order against the bill was overturned, 61-39. Six Republicans joined 55 Democrats in the crucial vote, which needed 60 Senators to succeed, while 30 Republicans and one Democrat opposed it.

2 killed by mines in Kigali daily:

At least two people are killed and on average five severely injured daily by landmines in the Rwandan capital, the United Nations and local hospitals said on Thursday. AFP reports from Kigali.

Canadian and British UN troops who are clearing the mines and other explosives said they had detonated 400 pieces of explosives in the last few weeks in and around Kigali.

Uruguay extradites 3 ETA rebels:

Three suspected members of the Basque separatist group ETA arrived in Spain under tight security on Thursday, extradited from Uruguay amid protests in the capital of Montevideo. AP reports from Madrid.

The three, who have been on a 15-day hunger strike and are wanted for several killings in ETA's name in Spain, were taken away in ambulances surrounded by a large police escort after landing at the Torrejon air base outside Madrid.

Picasso's painting recovered:

Pablo Picasso's famous painting 'La Femme Aux Yeux Noirs' (Black-Eyed Girl) that was stolen from the Stockholm Modern Museum last year was recovered in Brussels, capital of Belgium, on Tuesday. Xinhua reports from Stockholm.

According to the Swedish news agency, three Swedes tried to sell the painting to a Belgian for 10 million Swedish krona (about 1.33 million US dollars), but the Belgian reported the matter to the police, who subsequently arrested the Swedes when they met the Belgian in a hotel to conclude the deal.

Chinese food queen Chen dies:

Chinese food queen Joyce Chen, who popularised Mandarin cuisine in the United States with her restaurants, cookbooks and television programme, has died at age 76. AFP reports from Lexington, Massachusetts.

Chen died on Tuesday in a nursing home of Alzheimer's disease.

Born in Beijing, Chen fled to the United States in 1949 and opened the first branch of a restaurant chain nine years later in Cambridge, New England.

Russian envoy visits Gaza:

Russian envoy Victor Posuvaluk visited the autonomous Gaza Strip Thursday for two hours of talks with PLO leader Yasser Arafat, AFP reports from Gaza City.

"We raised all issues linked to the global peace process in the Middle East, as well as the situation in Gaza and special ties of friendship between Palestinians and Russia," Arafat said after the meeting.

Young Spanish killed in Egypt:

Suspected Muslim militants opened fire on a tourist bus in the southern Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi yesterday killing a young Spanish child and injuring two other people, security sources said, Reuter reports from Assiut, Egypt.

The sources said no more information about the shooting was immediately available.

4 die in Indian plane crash:

At least four people were killed when a state-owned plane crashed in a flooded field in the northern Indian state of Rajasthan, officials said yesterday. AFP reports from New Delhi.

The Environment and Forest Ministry said one of its aircraft, on a routine trip, crashed late Thursday in the desert state's Sawai Madhopur town, some 250 kilometres (156 miles) south of here.

30 killed in Turkish bus mishap:

Thirty people were killed and 25 were injured when a packed passenger bus slammed into the back of a military vehicle and exploded in southeastern Turkey, Anatolian news agency said yesterday. Reuter reports from Ankara.

Anatolian said the bus struck the other vehicle on Thursday night near Silvan, 100 km (60 miles) east of the provincial capital of Diyarbakir. Most of the victims were women and children.

US soldiers leave Zaire:

The last of 300 American soldiers sent to Zaire to bring humanitarian aid to Rwandan refugees in the "Support Hope" operation left Goma on Thursday. AFP reports from Goma.

Some US troops have stayed behind for a few more days to act as liaison officers, a spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees said.

Quake shakes western Japan

An earthquake registering 4.1 on the Richter scale shook parts of Tokushima prefecture in western Japan yesterday, but there were no immediate reports of damage or injury. The Meteorological agency said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

No tidal wave is expected, an agency official added. The epicenter of the quake, which occurred at 11:13 am (02:13 GMT) was 10 kilometres (6.2 miles) under the earth in the eastern part of Tokushima.