

BRIEFLY

69 Filipinos' bodies recovered: The death toll from the country's worst mining disaster rose to 69 Thursday, and investigators were looking into the possibility that negligence caused the underground explosion. AP reports from Malabang.

The Philippine National Oil Co. which operates the mine 800 kilometers (500 miles) south of Manila, said 69 bodies had been recovered after Monday night's blast.

Discovery launch may delay: The US space agency, NASA, struggled to resolve three shuttle equipment problems Wednesday that could delay the planned September launch of Discovery for a research and spacewalking mission. AP reports from Cape Canaveral.

Preparations remain on track for a September 9 liftoff, officials said.

Ghali starts tour today: UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali leaves Friday for a two-week tour which will take him to Egypt, Pakistan, India, Japan and China. AFP reports from United Nations.

Boutros-Ghali will be in Cairo on September 5 to open the UN world population conference and then goes on to the South Asian sub-continent.

Russian floating base on fire: Two fishermen were injured in a fierce blaze on a floating base with over 400 people on board in the Russian Far East, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported Thursday. AP says from Vladivostok Russia.

The base was moored in a Vladivostok port unloading the fruits of a crab fishing expedition when the fire broke out late Wednesday. Fifteen fire brigades and a rescue team from a nearby ship spent all night fighting the fire, extinguishing it by morning.

Floods claim 90 Chinese: Flooding has killed 90 people in northeast China's Liaoning province and caused nearly 1.5 billion dollars in damages, the official China Daily said Thursday. AP reports from Beijing.

Some 9.87 million people in 890 towns and villages were affected by heavy rains and typhoons that cause flooding in the province between mid-July and mid-August, the report said.

Kanto quake anniversary: A pair of earthquakes added to the reality of disaster drills held Thursday in commemoration of the Great Kanto Earthquake of September 1, 1923. AP reports from Tokyo.

The great quake, now estimated at 8 on the Richter scale, killed 140,000 people and almost levelled the Tokyo-Yokohama area. It anniversary is called National Disaster Prevention Day. On the eve of the anniversary, a strong tremor with a magnitude of 6.4 rocked Japan's northernmost main island of Hokkaido, but there were no reports of injuries or major damage.

Filipino escapes kidnappers: A prominent Filipino industrialist escaped from his kidnappers early Thursday after a nine-day ordeal that raised safety fears among the Philippine business community. AP reports from Manila.

Meneleo Carlos Jr, former vice president of the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry, told reporters he slipped out of a house near Lucena City, 96 kilometers (60 miles) south of Manila, when he saw two men guarding him fall asleep around 3 am (1800 GMT).

205 Kurds killed in air raid: Turkish warplanes killed 205 Kurdish rebels sheltering in northern Iraq in a recent air raid, military officials said Wednesday. AFP reports from Ankara.

The Kurds, all members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), died when 32 Turkish planes blasted their camp in the Badawan-Khidran valley in northeastern Iraq, not far from the Iraq-Iran border. The raid on August 23 was condemned by Jalal Talabani, leader of one of the main Kurdish factions in the region, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

NATO seminar next week: NATO is to host next week a research seminar on the long-term environmental and health effects of nuclear testing by China, Russia and the United States, the Atlantic alliance said Wednesday. AFP reports from Brussels.

The conference, the first of its kind to be attended by Chinese experts, will be held in Barnaul, in Russia's Siberian region, from September 5 to 9, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) said in a statement issued in Brussels.

Population to double in 20 yrs: The world's population will double in the next 20 years to 9.4 billion, according to a study released on Wednesday by the International Institute for the Analysis of Applied Systems (IIAAS). AFP reports from Vienna.

According to Professor Wolfgang Lutz who wrote the study, the IIAAS estimate is higher than the United Nations' estimate which put the world's population in 2030 at 8.7 billion.

Rwandans' exodus to Tanzania: Rwandan refugees have begun a renewed exodus to Tanzania, with some 12,000 people leaving weekly, a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spokesman said Wednesday. AFP reports from Bukavu.

Just three weeks ago there were only about 7,000 to 8,000 people leaving weekly. Kris Janawsky said. He also announced the discovery of the bodies of five 'murdered' Rwandans in the Akagera river separating Rwanda from Tanzania. He gave no other details about the killings.

UK director Anderson dead: British Director Lindsay Anderson, whose work included the cult film 'If ...', has died while on holiday in France, his agent announced in London Wednesday. He was 71. AFP reports from London.

Anderson died suddenly on Tuesday, said Paul Lyon-Marie, giving no further details of the cause of death, nor where he had died.

93 die in French Alps: Accidents in the French Alps killed 93 people and injured 726 in the three summer months of this year. AFP reports from Grenoble, France.

A further 11 people are missing, according to a toll based on reports from regional rescue centres.

NBC TV employee shot dead: An NBC television employee was shot and killed in front of the network's Today show studio window in midtown Manhattan's Rockefeller Centre shortly before the evening rush hour, police said Wednesday. Reuter reports from New York.

The employee, a stagehand identified as Theron Montgomery, 33, was shot in the back and taken to Bellevue Hospital where he died at 9:10 pm (0110 GMT Thursday), police spokesman John Clifford said.

Blast kills 4 in Tanzania: Four children were killed and 85 others injured Wednesday in northwest Tanzania by an exploding hand grenade that might have been brought in by Rwandan refugees, the press reported yesterday. AFP says from Dar Es Salaam.

One of the children in the town of Bukora was playing with the grenade when it went off. The reports quoted Regional Commissioner Philip Mangula as saying 10 of the injured pupils, including four girls, were in a critical condition.

Briton held at Manila Airport: A British national was arrested at the Manila Airport after he allegedly tried to smuggle 21 kilograms (46.2 pounds) of heroin out of the country. Airport police said yesterday. AFP reports from Manila.

Nigel Richard Gardward, 40, of southern London, could face the death penalty if convicted on smuggling charges, the police added.

Tamil parties urge rebels to open talks with Kumaratunga govt

COLOMBO, Sept 1: Sri Lanka's minority Tamil parties today urged separatist rebels to reciprocate the new Colombo government's peace gestures and open a political dialogue to end the guerilla war, reports AFP.

The government's partial lifting of a four-year-old economic blockade on Tamil Tiger guerrilla-held territory in northern Sri Lanka on Wednesday was welcomed by other Tamil groups as a first step towards ending the protracted bloodshed.

"The initiative by Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga is timely and augurs well for the launching of a meaningful peace initiative," the leftist Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) said.

The EPRLF, which is opposed to the dominant Tamil militant group, the Liberation

Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), called on all other pro-government armed groups to stop levying "taxes" on merchandise taken to north Sri Lanka.

"We also call on the LTTE to reciprocate (the government's gesture) by lifting all restrictions on the movement of people from the (northern) Jaffna peninsula."

"Let not this initiative of the Chandrika Kumaratunga government go waste," the EPRLF said in a statement, adding that the Tigers should open a safe passage for civilians travelling between the Jaffna peninsula and the mainland.

Analysts believe Kumaratunga's election following the August 16 parliamentary vote could be a "window of opportunity" to resolve the conflict which has claimed some 30,000 lives since 1972.

The premier, who as a member of the majority

Sinhalese ethnic community, urged "all armed groups" to desist from extorting money from truckers transporting essential commodities to Tamil regions.

Kumaratunga announced that only items that could be used in the manufacture of bombs and armaments will not be allowed into LTTE territory.

"We are doing all this to rebuild the trust and confidence between the government and the Tamil people of Jaffna," said Kumaratunga who is to meet field commanders from front line regions to assess the ground situation.

The Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), welcomed Kumaratunga's move and called for the greater involvement of Tamils in the bureaucracy.

"We believe that this beginning will bring confidence among the Tamil speaking

people who desire a political solution and the forces stressing for a political solution," EPDP leader Douglas Devananda said in a statement.

There was no immediate reaction from the Tigers to Colombo's peace overture but Kumaratunga said the LTTE had over the weekend agreed to a ceasefire following her initial offer of a "hand of friendship."

"We have lifted the embargo unconditionally and unilaterally. We expect the other side to act with equal goodwill. We want to show that our intentions are good," Kumaratunga told reporters Wednesday.

She said it was "too soon" to discuss the prospects for peace in Sri Lanka where a fifth of the national budget has been going to finance the military's war effort against the Tigers.

China has no national flower

BEIJING, Sept 1: Unlike more than 100 countries China has no national flower and its parliament has decided the choice must be delayed no longer, reports Reuter.

An official of the China Flower Association said today that China had been trying to decide on such a flower for more than 10 years.

He told Reuters his association had been entrusted by the National People's Congress with the job of choosing the flower and Beijing citizens would this month be able to express their preference.

The winning flower must have a long growing history, be popular with the public and respected abroad, reflect the fine traditions and special character of the Chinese race and have a high social, economic and environmental value, he said.

He said the Congress had set a deadline of the end of this year for a decision.

US group asks Rao for probe into newsmen's death

NEW DELHI, Sept 1: A US-based journalists' group has asked Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao for a judicial investigation into the recent killing of an Indian reporter who had claimed an army officer threatened his life, reports Reuter.

The committee to protect journalists, a New York watchdog group, said in a statement received in New Delhi that it condemned the "brutal slaying" on Monday of Ghulam Muhammad Lone and his seven-year-old son.

"We are concerned, moreover, that the lack of an impartial and thorough inquiry into the matter will have a chilling effect on independent journalism in Kashmir," it said.

Western hostages held by Khmers still alive

PHNOM PENH, Sept 1: Three Westerners held hostage by the Khmer Rouge for over a month are still alive although a deadline to meet their captive's demands has passed, a government official said Thursday, reports AP.

Khieu Kanharith, Information Ministry secretary, said the government had maintained contact with the guerilla group past Tuesday's deadline.

"We know the three hostages are still alive," he said.

The Khmer Rouge had said the governments of the hostages' countries must end military aid to Cambodia by Tuesday in return for the safe release of the hostages they seized July 26.

France won't join Haiti invasion

PARIS, Sept 1: France will not participate in an invasion of Haiti threatened by a US-led coalition but is willing to help train security forces once democracy is restored, Foreign Affairs Minister Alain Juppe said today, reports Reuter.

"France's position is very clear: We will not participate in the military phase, but we are always available to participate in phase two," Juppe told reporters.

In its second phase, the operation envisioned by the United Nations would deploy international troops to Haiti to help train security forces.

"We want to obtain the departure of this pseudo-government and of these soldiers who make their people unhappy and who violate the basic principles of democracy," Juppe added during a conference of ambassadors in the French capital.

Hekmatyar's faction bans Ariana planes

PESHAWAR, Sept 1: Afghan Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami faction has banned the National Airline Ariana from overflying Afghanistan and threatened to shoot down any of its aircraft that defies the ban from today, reports AFP.

In a statement issued here today the faction said it had "concrete evidence that Afghan Ariana Airlines is being used for military purposes utilising military airports, transporting counterfeit money, ammunition and military personnel from Moscow and New Delhi."

"Starting Friday September 2, no Afghan Ariana Airlines plane will be allowed to fly in Afghan airspace nor will it be allowed to land. We have instructed all our land and air forces to fire at any such plane that is not abiding by this warning whether in the air or on the ground," it said.

The statement was issued

by the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Afghanistan (SCCIRA) which groups Hekmatyar and his ally, Uzbek leader Rashid Dostam.

Hezb-i-Islami has accused Ariana for some time of flying military equipment from New Delhi to Bagram military base north of Kabul.

Hekmatyar recently claimed that his headquarters at Charasyab, 25 kilometers (15 miles) south of Kabul, had been bombed by Indian pilots operating for his rival, Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani.

Pakistan, which fears a possible alliance between Kabul and New Delhi, has intercepted at least two Ariana planes heading for New Delhi, according to Pakistani press reports.

Rabbani's faction which controls the centre and north of Kabul, has denied any links with India.

Off the Record

An embarrassing mistake!

MACAO: In an embarrassing mistake, officials in this Portuguese colony due to revert to Chinese rule in 1999 distributed a biography of Chinese Premier Li Peng describing him as arrogant and incompetent, reports AP.

The profile was intended as background for Macao's governor, Gen Vasco Rocha Vieira, but instead found its way into a press kit given to reporters accompanying him on an eight-day visit to China.

"Li Peng was known for his arrogance and arbitrariness," says the two-page biography, a copy of which was obtained Wednesday. It also said senior leader Deng Xiaoping was rumoured to have thought about ousting Li because of his "incompetence and bad reputation."

In Beijing, a Foreign Ministry spokesman said China was "astonished and offended," the Xinhua News Agency reported.

The Portuguese news agency Lusa reported that Rocha Vieira called the biography "sort of a gaffe." He said it did not represent his government's point of view.

Rocha Vieira left Tuesday for China and was to meet Li on Thursday.

Talks on skirts

WASHINGTON: The US and Indian governments have begun talks about skirts that American officials say are too dangerous to wear, reports AP.

About 2.50,000 chiffon skirts imported from India were pulled off US shelves three weeks ago in what the US Product Safety Commission described as the country's biggest-ever clothing recall.

The commission warned that the skirts were extremely flammable, capable of becoming engulfed in flames within three seconds of being lit by cigarette ashes or by brushing against a stove.

No such accidents have yet occurred, but Commission Chairman Ann Brown said, "We do not wait for a tragedy."

Officials of two Indian government bureaux met Wednesday with US Deputy Assistant Commerce Secretary Rita Hayes.

Talks are scheduled through Friday with other US officials, including those from the safety commission, and the US trade representative's office, said Meera Shankar, Commercial Minister of the Indian Embassy.

After that, D K Reddy, India's director of apparel promotion, and PK Kaullar, deputy director of development in the handicrafts commission, may issue a statement, Shankar said.

11-yr-old fugitive

CHICAGO: The boy has a tattoo on his arm that says "I love Mommy" and is nicknamed "Yummy" for his love of cookies. He stands about 4-foot-8 (1.3 meters) and weighs 68 pounds (30 kgs), reports AP.

Police say he is a veteran criminal. Now they suspect he is an 11-year-old killer.

The boy is being sought in connection with two shooting sprees Sunday that left one teenager dead and two injured.

But Cook County Public Guardian Patrick Murphy said Wednesday the boy is a almost as much a victim as those who took the bullets. "He has had a horrible, horrible life," Murphy said.

The sixth-grader has a thick file in the juvenile court system, where over nine years he has been both victim and accused, Murphy said.

According to Murphy's records, the boy was removed from his mother's home after investigators found cigarette burns on his neck, back and buttocks, scratches on his face and abdomen, and cord marks on his legs.

Bobbitt sentenced for hitting ex-fiancee

LAS VEGAS: John Wayne Bobbitt was sentenced to 60 days in jail Wednesday after a judge found him guilty of misdemeanor domestic battery for hitting his former fiancee after a night of drinking, reports AP.

The July 2 incident was the second time Bobbitt was charged with domestic battery against Kristina Elliott, a former exotic dancer he met here while on a personal appearance tour.

Elliott testified Tuesday, the first day of the trial, that Bobbitt struck her so hard she "felt dizzy and saw stars."

Justice of the Peace William Jansen suspended 45 days of the sentence and ordered Bobbitt to begin serving 15 days in the Clark County Detention Centre immediately. He was handcuffed and led from the courtroom by a bailiff.

Bobbitt did not testify during the trial, but appealed to the judge for leniency.

UN draft treaty on total N-test ban ready

GENEVA, Sept 1: A draft treaty on a total worldwide nuclear weapons test ban unveiled Wednesday could come into force within less than two years, a committee chairman at the UN disarmament conference here said, reports AFP.

The 123-page document on a comprehensive test ban was presented to the ongoing conference by Mexican Ambassador Miguel Marin Bosch, who heads the ad hoc committee which drafted the paper after eight months of multilateral talks.

"There is a long way to go," Marin Bosch said. "Now we need to focus on what it is exactly we are going to ban."

Barring a "minor miracle," the final version of the treaty would not be ready to be signed prior to the start of a

Nuclear tests in the atmosphere, in space and underwater were banned in 1963, and the NPT came into force in 1968.



A Russian officer receives a farewell kiss and a bunch of flowers from a Berlin resident as Russian soldiers march through the German capital during a ceremony to mark the withdrawal of all troops from Germany in Berlin on Wednesday. — AFP photo

Taiwan newsmen demonstrate for press freedom

TAIPEI, Sept 1: Some 200 Taiwan journalists took to the streets today calling on media owners to respect editorial freedom, reports AFP.

Editors and reporters from more than 30 news media, including the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) — run central daily news and public television company, marched through rain-lashed Taipei streets chanting "hands off, media owners," and "no more intervention in editorial departments."

The wave of press protests follows a recent incident when a business syndicate bought a liberal newspaper and tried to influence its editorial policy. The staff published the paper with half its front page blanked out.

US-DPRK high-level talks on Sept 10

SEOUL, Sept 1: The United States and North Korea agreed to hold high-level talks on September 10 as South Korea today voiced alarm that US President Bill Clinton was moving too fast in its talks with North Korea, reports AFP.

A state department announcement said twin meetings would be held simultaneously in Berlin and Pyongyang at which the two sides will discuss North Korea's nuclear reactors and establishing bilateral liaison offices.

The high-level Berlin talks will address the problem of reactors and safe storage of spent fuel rods from the North's five megawatt reactor, while the meeting in the North Korean capital will deal with the liaison issue.

The alarm bells first sounded in South Korea Wednesday, a day before the State Department announcement and barely three weeks after Washington and Pyongyang had said they wanted to move towards diplomatic ties.

Deputy Premier Lee Hong-Koo said: "They (liaison offices) cannot be overlooked because of their symbolic meaning, and the South Korean government will work out prudent measures in relation to the issue."

By Thursday it was clear that Seoul had dropped any pretence of a problem-free unified approach to the North Korean nuclear threat, which triggered the US-Pyongyang talks two years ago.

Iran won't boycott Cairo confce

TEHRAN, Sept 1: A senior clergyman, Mohammad Ali Tashkiri, is to head the Iranian delegation at the UN world population conference in Cairo next week, the Tehran Times announced today, reports AFP.

A conservative Shi'ite Muslim figure close to spiritual guide Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Tashkiri will head a nine-member delegation, including the deputy foreign and health ministers, the English-language daily said.

Tashkiri is fluent in Arabic and has taken part in many regional conferences on various topics.

Iran has decided to participate in the conference, to open in Cairo on Monday, de-

spite its opposition to certain resolutions in the draft action plan.

Health Minister Alireza Marandi said on Sunday that his country would take part to make its position known and put forward suggestions to alter parts of the plan.

Several radical newspapers and clergymen here have strongly criticised Tehran's decision to participate, saying it was a western plot to promote abortion, homosexuality and pre-marital sex in the Islamic world.

Jomhuri Islami, a daily close to Islamic hardliners, on Thursday rejected the conference's "illegitimate means" for controlling world population,

saying here were "immoral and anti-religion."

A Cairo report says: A huge face-lift is underway in Cairo to clean up the city in time for the world population conference, but the poorest quarters where residents live in squalor have been completely ignored.

Status have been washed down, bridges and streets repaved, even dusty trees have been hoisted to impress the thousands of delegates set to arrive on Monday.

But should any visitor stray off the beaten track into the labyrinth of alleys just metres (yards) from the main avenues, they will find a very different picture.



A starving elderly Rwandan Pygmy lies on the ground as other looks on at the Kumbuba refugee camp, some 15 kilometres from Goma on Wednesday. Some 500 Pygmies from the neighbouring Vuruga region are sharing the fate of some 250,000 Rwandan refugees. — AFP photo