

BRIEFLY

Asian on Booker Prize list: A first time novel by an Asian-born author was short-listed on Monday for the Booker Prize, the prestigious literary prize for fiction, the judges said. Reuter reports from London.

"Reef," by Romesh Gunsekera is the story of an 11-year-old boy who goes to work as a houseboy for a marine biologist, Gunsekera, who grew up in Sri Lanka and the Philippines, lives in London. He has written a collection of short stories, but "Reef" is his first novel.

Encephalitis claims 60 Nepalese: Sixty people have died of encephalitis in Biratnagar, mid-western Nepal and Nepalgunj, eastern Nepal, local press reported yesterday. Xinhua says from Kathmandu.

In Nepalgunj, encephalitis claimed 35 people until Monday evening, chief of Bheri Zonal Hospital, Dr Durga Pradhan said.

Network for elderly in China: A social security network for the elderly has taken shape in China, which has more than 100 million people at or over the age of 60. Xinhua reports from Shenyang.

This was revealed by sources at a national meeting on the welfare of old people in China, who make up eight per cent of the whole population. The meeting was held in this capital of northeast China's Liaoning Province early this month.

Papuan soldier shot dead: A Papua New Guinean soldier has been shot dead on the island of Bougainville two days after the government and secessionist rebels there signed a peace agreement, a government spokesman said yesterday. Reuter reports from Port Moresby.

The spokesman told Reuters the soldier was killed on Monday near the Panguna copper mine in the centre of the island, which lies 800 km (491 miles) northeast of Port Moresby.

4 died in US plane crash: A light aircraft crashed inflames killing all four persons on board on Monday shortly after taking off from a California airport, officials said. Reuter reports from Truckee.

The Cessna C-172 aircraft took off from Truckee-Tahoe Airport, near Truckee in central California's Sierra Nevada mountains, on Monday morning, said Chau Gass, a dispatcher with the Nevada county sheriff's department.

Italian party expels chief: The Northern League, a key partner in Italy's coalition government, has dismissed its president after he criticised movement secretary Umberto Bossi for his repeated attacks on Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. AFP reports from Milan.

A league press spokesman said Franco Rocchetta, whose post was largely honorific, and two other members were expelled during a meeting of the movement's Federal Council on Monday.

Singapore frees HK boy: A Hong Kong youth, convicted and caned for spray-painting cars in a vandalism spree with American teen Michael Fay, was released on Tuesday after six months in prison. AP reports from Singapore.

Wearing a cap and red T-shirt, Shiu Chi Ho walked briskly out of Queenstown prison along with his smiling parents. They did not speak with reporters and drove away in their Mercedes car.

Peasant unrest in Mexico: Thousands of peasants blocked roads and bridges in the southern state of Chiapas on Monday, demanding the resignation of the ruling party's governor-elect. AP reports from Mexico.

The 20,000 protesters claimed that Eduardo Robledo Rincon of the Institutional Revolutionary Party was elected August 21 through fraud, intimidation and bribery. He defeated Amado Avendano Figueroa of the leftist Democratic Revolutionary Party.

Anaemia epidemic in Uganda: An outbreak of anaemia was reported to have killed hundreds of kids in Mbale district, southeastern Uganda, in the last three months. Xinhua reports from Kampala.

Records available at the children's wards in Mbale Hospital show anaemia causes an average of seven deaths a week, the local tri-weekly "The Monitor" said in its latest issue.

Deng still follows HK issues: Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, who recently celebrated his 90th birthday, still follows Hong Kong issues closely, according to his son Deng Pufang. AFP reports from Beijing.

He is still interested in Hong Kong affairs, said Deng Pufang, a paraplegic and president of the Chinese Association for the Handicapped, cited on Tuesday by China News Service.

Filipino newsman Beltran dies: Veteran Filipino journalist Louie Beltran died of a heart attack yesterday morning on his way to broadcast his regular radio programme. Manila radio station DZRH said. Reuter reports from Manila.

Beltran, 58, was among scores of journalists detained when President Ferdinand Marcos imposed martial law in 1972 and remained a critic of the government even after Marcos' downfall in 1986.

Forest fire in Sumatra: Fires have destroyed at least 1,210 hectares (2,990 acres) of palm oil and rubber plantations in Indonesia's central Sumatran province of Riau, the official Antara News Agency said yesterday. Reuter reports from Jakarta.

Riau is north of Lampung Province, where official sources said fires had razed about 5,000 hectares (12,355 acres) of forest during a long dry summer and before annual rains.

8 extremists jailed in France: France's leading anti-terrorism judge on Monday charged eight suspected Muslim fundamentalists of ties to a terrorist group as part of an investigation into a network of terrorists in Morocco. AP reports from Paris.

Judge Jean-Louis Brugiere charged the eight with association with a terrorist enterprise, and ordered them jailed.

Zemin leaves for Ukraine: Chinese President Jiang Zemin left Ekaterineburg yesterday for Ukraine, the second leg of his three-nation European tour, after winding up a four-day official visit to Russia. Xinhua reports from Russia.

During his visit to Russia, Jiang met with Russian President Boris Yeltsin, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and other senior Russian officials.

Hanoi's appeal to UN: Vietnam said today it had asked the United Nations to help protect the rights of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia after a new immigration law was passed. Reuter reports from Hanoi.

Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam wrote to UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata, saying ethnic Vietnamese had lived in Cambodia legally, obeyed the law and contributed to Cambodia's development.

Kirghiz govt resigns: The Kirghiz government resigned on Monday, the Itar-Tass news agency reported. Xinhua says from Moscow.

President Akayev has accepted the government's resignation and ordered new parliamentary elections later this year, the agency said. But the government, led by Prime Minister Apas Dzhumagulov, will serve until a new cabinet is formed.

5 killed in ROK fire: Five workers were killed yesterday by a fire in the basement of a garment factory in Seoul, South Korean police said. Reuter reports from Seoul.

Most were suffocated by fumes from the blaze, which appeared to have been caused by a short-circuit.

Attack on Burundi church, 9 die: At least nine people have been killed and 17 wounded in an attack on a catholic church in Burundi's northeastern province of Muyinga, security officials said yesterday. Reuter reports from Bujumbura.

Ghali in Pakistan to discuss Afghan, Kashmir issues

ISLAMABAD, Sept 6: If United Nations Chief Boutros Boutros-Ghali wanted to visit a region with seemingly unsolvable problems, then he's coming to the right place, reports AP.

Boutros-Ghali arrives here Tuesday, and if he looks west he'll find war shattered Afghanistan, where rival Islamic factions have smashed the capital to pieces and repeatedly rebuffed UN "peace efforts."

If he heads east, he'll encounter Kashmir, the divided Himalayan state that has made Pakistan and India the best of enemies for almost 50 years.

The UN secretary general plans to spend three days in Pakistan and three more in India in what's seen largely as a courtesy call on South Asia

rather than a new attempt to end longstanding feuds.

In Afghanistan, where nine Islamic factions are battling for power, Boutros-Ghali's special representative threw up his hands in frustration last week and said it was impossible to bring the warring groups to the same negotiating table.

"The commitment to peace is not yet sufficiently strong and widespread to overcome inevitable obstacles," said the UN representative, Mahmood Mestiri.

Boutros-Ghali is expected to meet with some Afghan leaders, but no one expects him to achieve a breakthrough after the futile effort by Mestiri, who spent months trying to arrange peace talks.

Peace prospects aren't much brighter for Kashmir,

the disputed Himalayan state that both India and Pakistan have claimed as their own since they gained independence in 1947. Two wars over the territory have solved nothing.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto will urge Boutros-Ghali and the UN to take a more active role in Kashmir, which is split into Indian and Pakistani sectors.

But the UN, its resources already overburdened by other regional conflicts, is not expected to heed such a call.

The UN has had several hundred peacekeeping troops monitoring the "line of control" for decades, but Indian and Pakistani troops fire at each other across the line almost daily.

21 members of Jihad group held in Gaza

GAZA CITY, Sept 6: Responding to growing pressure from Israel, Palestinian police on Tuesday arrested at least 21 Muslim militants wanted in a shooting attack on Israeli troops, reports AP.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had threatened to suspend negotiations on expanding Palestinian self-rule until Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat cracked down on the militants.

Arafat had been reluctant to confront the extremists, fearing a showdown could weaken his control in the autonomy areas.

In an early morning sweep Tuesday, Palestinian security forces arrested at least 21 members of the Islamic Jihad group which has claimed responsibility for a Sunday road-side ambush that left one Israeli soldier dead and two wounded.

Jakarta meet successful, says Moro leader

JAKARTA, Sept 6: The Philippine government and Muslim rebels have ended a second round of peace talks in Indonesia on a positive note, reports AP.

Nur Misuari, who headed a delegation from the Moro National Liberation Front, described the September 1-5 meetings as successful, and said he was hopeful that remaining disputes between the two sides can be solved in a third round of talks scheduled for next year.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas and Ambassador Manuel T. Yan, who led the Philippine government delegation, said they shared the hope that ending the current rebellion would bring peace to be chaotic southern Philippines.

The meeting produced some agreements on the powers of a proposed autonomous government the rebels have been fighting for and its educational, judicial and Islamic legal system, the participants said.

The sharing of revenue and resources, and defence arrangements are among those still to be resolved. Both sides agreed to resolve the remaining issues before the end of the third round of the formal talks, which is sponsored by an Islamic group.

Indonesia was chosen to host the peace talks because about 90 per cent of its 185 million people are Muslim.

MP shot dead in Australia

SYDNEY, Sept 6: A state legislator who crusaded against rising gang violence among Asian immigrants in his suburban district was shot dead in front of his home on Monday night as his fiancée looked on, authorities said, reports AP.

Government officials described the slaying of John Newman, 47, as a political assassination.



John Newman

New South Wales Assistant Police Commissioner Doug Kelly said he had regularly received death threats.

Newman, a member of the New South Wales Parliament from the opposition Labour Party, had just returned from a party meeting when he was hit by two bullets fired from a dark car with tinted windows. He slumped on the veranda of his home and died in front of his Chinese born fiancée, Xiao Jing (Lucky) Wang, 28, authorities said. The couple had planned to marry next year.



Indonesian First Lady Tien Suharto poses for a photograph with the winners of the ASEAN traditional costume festival at her residence on Monday. From R to L, winner Surachaya Naksewee of Thailand, Tien Suharto, runner-up Vicky Supit of Indonesia and second runner-up Gladys Duenas of the Philippines. —AFP photo

Delhi to revive political process in Kashmir

DUBAI, Sept 6: Pressure on Kashmiri separatists has increased now that India has decided to revive political talks on troubled Muslim-dominated northern state, an Indian minister said, reports AP.

Salman Khurshid, Minister of State for External Affairs, spoke to reporters while transiting through Dubai late Sunday on his way to attend the UN Population Conference in Cairo.

"Since we have now decided to take steps to revive the political process in Kashmir... the pressure on the militants is mounting and their demoralisation is high," Khurshid said.

But he cautioned that "we have to be constantly vigilant in Kashmir because of the continuing infiltration of militant supporters, including mercenaries, into the Kashmir valley and Doda from a neighbouring country."

He did not identify the country. The issue of Kashmir, a province divided between India and Pakistan, is prominent in the Muslim world.

Militants in the only Muslim majority state in predominantly Hindu India are battling for independence. Their struggle has cost at least 9,500 lives since late 1989.

Indian charges of support from the Muslim state of Pakistan for the Kashmir rebels is threatening a third war between the two Asian neighbours.

"Kashmir has constantly been used as an alibi by Pakistan to express its hostility towards us," Khurshid said.

Flood inundates 100 Pak villages

KARACHI, Sept 6: Waters from a rain-swollen lake burst through an embankment in southern Pakistan, flooding some 100 villages and driving up to 50,000 people from their homes, officials said Tuesday, reports AP.

The Dawn newspaper also said that six people were believed killed when the waters from Lake Manchar began inundating villages Monday near the town of Schwab, about 200 kilometers (125 miles) north of Karachi.

Many of the villagers are farmers, and the waters ruined thousands of acres of crops. Relief efforts were underway to reach those stranded by the floods, officials said.

South Asia has received heavy rains during the summer monsoon season causing sporadic flooding throughout Pakistan.

"We are still willing to extend a hand of friendship," he added. "We hope that the bilateral dialogue between us continues and also that a solution to this problem can be found within the purview of the (1972) Simla Agreement between India and Pakistan."

The Indian minister urged the 51-member Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), umbrella for the world's Islamic nations, to show a greater understanding of the Indian position on Kashmir at its upcoming foreign ministers meeting in Islamabad.

He described the OIC meeting as an attempt to "foreclose the debate" at the UN General Assembly beginning in New York, later this month.

He said this "intrusive diplomacy" should be a matter of concern for all countries.

Khurshid said steps are being taken to normalise the situation in Kashmir. "We are building a rail link between Srinagar and Jammu, many new roads, schools, and bridges as well as promoting the cottage industries and carpet weaving."

He added that a number of education and employment schemes have also been started "and our feedback is that these moves have been widely welcomed."

WHO chief calls for a truce on abortion issue

CAIRO, Sept 6: The head of the World Health Organisation called Tuesday for a truce on the abortion issue that has polarised a UN population conference, reports AP.

"It would be a sad irony if our efforts to empower women were to be reduced to a debate on abortion," Dr Hiroshi Nakajima, WHO's director-general, said in a speech.

In another effort to find common ground, US Vice President Al Gore met Tuesday with the head of the Vatican delegation. Gore acknowledged they have yet to reach a compromise on abortion, which is threatening agreement on a 20-year plan to slow the world's explosive population growth.

"I think they're finally understanding what we've said all along," Gore told The Associated Press after meeting with Archbishop Antonio Martino. "The misunderstandings they've had before have been significantly dispelled."

Gore described the meeting as very cordial, in contrast to the Vatican's stinging attacks on the vice president. But he said the two sides would inevitably remain divided.

"Of course, there's never going to be full agreement on contraception and an American woman's right to choose," he said.

The Vatican said that wording in Nakajima's speech could help resolve a major part of its objections.

Conference delegates have already agreed in three preliminary meetings on more than 90 per cent of the action plan. But the most contentious issues must still be resolved — reproductive health and family planning services, reproductive rights, adolescent sex education and abortion.

On abortion, the disputes center on minute changes in wording that opponents think are code words for abortion, the Vatican, for example, objects to phrases like "reproductive health" and "fertility regulation."

Nakajima spoke of the concept of "reproductive health," but dropped any reference to "fertility regulation," replacing it with the phrase "culturally appropriate family planning services."

"Maybe we can agree with that," said papal spokesman Joaquin Navarro, a member of the Holy See delegation.

Gore says the United States does not advocate an "international right" to abortion but believes it is up to each country to decide the matter. The pro-choice Clinton administration and many other Western countries see legalised abortion as necessary to avoid deaths of women who otherwise might seek illegal and unsafe abortions.

The Vatican, however, wants to eliminate all references to permitting women to freely terminate their pregnancies. Conservative Muslims say abortion also violates the principles of Islam. Some see it as part of an attempt to impose decadent Western values

NATO yet to name new leader

BRUSSELS, Sept 6: NATO allies are stepping up efforts to find a new leader to guide the military alliance as it prepares to admit former Warsaw Pact foes as members in the coming years, reports AP.

With the start of the fall session this week, the allies are turning their attention to selecting a replacement for Secretary-General Manfred Wornier, who died August 13 after a long battle with cancer.

No candidates have been officially nominated for the high-profile job of leading the 16-nation North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

But names making the rounds include British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd and Hans van den Broek, foreign affairs chief of the European Union and former foreign

minister of the Netherlands. Also under consideration are Belgian Foreign Minister Willy Claes and United Nations peace envoy Thorvald Stoltenberg, a former Norwegian defence minister.

Traditionally, the top political job is held by a European since an American general, currently George Joulwan, is commander of its military wing.

Wornier, a former German defence minister, will be a hard act to follow.

During his six years on the job, he was instrumental in remoulding the Western alliance after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. He played a pivotal role in efforts to draw former Warsaw Pact adversaries closer.

Thais starve hundreds of Myanmar refugees

BANGKOK, Sept 6: Authorities have starved hundreds of Myanmar refugees out of Thailand and back to their war-torn homeland by seizing their rice supply, an activist charged Monday, reports AP.

"They could not tolerate it any longer," said Kasauh Mon of the Mon National Relief Committee. "They want to stay on the Thai side... but they have no choice."

An aid worker, who demanded anonymity, said the remaining 6,000 refugees of the Mon ethnic minority who have been seeking sanctuary in Thailand would follow suit within days when the remaining food runs out.

The Mon fled into Thailand July 22, when Myanmar soldiers torched their camp. Thai authorities — who maintain good relations with Myanmar's junta — have said the refugees must return home. But the Mon have so far refused, insisting that the area remains unsafe.

Several weeks ago, the Thais blocked access to the refugees camp, cutting the Mon off from medicine and other international aid. On Wednesday last, they stepped up the pressure and cut the refugees off from about 70,000 kilograms (15,400 pounds) in rice supplies along the border.

The Mon appealed to the Thai government in a statement this weekend to lift its blockade and stop pressuring the refugees to return home.

Poldej Worachatr, acting di-

rector of the foreign ministry's press division, said Thailand had agreed to let the refugees stay and never would have resorted to such pressure tactics to force them out. He insisted authorities must have a good reason for cutting the refugees off from their rice supplies but did not know what that reason might be. The authorities along the border could not be reached for comment.

Myanmar has been at war with the country's ethnic minorities since gaining independence from Britain in 1948. The rebels have demanded independence or greater autonomy from the central government.

Wijetunga leaves hospital

COLOMBO, Sept 6: Sri Lankan President Dingiri Banda Wijetunga was discharged from hospital here today after a series of medical tests following "Fatigue" and "depression," a party spokesman said, reports AP.

Wijetunga, 72, left the privately-run Nawaloka hospital where he spent the night after a bout of depression due to his party's electoral debacle last month, a party spokesman said.

"He was feeling a little depressed after the defeat. At his age, this is within the normal range," said Gnanin Wijesekera, the general secretary of Wijetunga's UNP.

Off the Record

Merits of Deng's songs to be judged

BEIJING: Senior Chinese officials will soon face the tricky political task of having to judge the merits of a revolutionary song written by 90-year-old paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, reports Reuter.

China's Culture Ministry announced today that "an official contest of revolutionary songs" will be held in honour of the 45th anniversary of the people's republic, to be celebrated on October 1.

The contest is aimed at "carrying on the glorious tradition and promoting greater glory," according to the ministry. Xinhua news agency said.

"Songs entered will include those created by veteran revolutionaries, such as the late Premier Zhou Enlai and senior leader Deng Xiaoping," it explained.

A consultative committee, formed by senior leaders from the central government, together with a group of veteran revolutionaries, will be set up to guide the competition.

Mandatory AIDS test for long-haul truck drivers

NEW DELHI: India plans to introduce mandatory AIDS tests for long-haul truck drivers whose licences come up for renewal, Transport Minister Jagdish Tytler said on Tuesday, reports AP.

"Every truck driver must pass an AIDS test before he gets his licence renewed," the minister told a news conference.

Truck drivers are thought to be at high risk of catching the fatal disease through contact with prostitutes during long stints away from home on the road. They need to renew their licences to ply commercial vehicles every five years.

"AIDS is destroying whole families," Tytler said. "We are getting many complaints of truck drivers catching AIDS, then passing it on to their wives and unborn babies."

"You cannot imagine how they are suffering. He catches it while having fun with a girl, then it spreads. It has become a very, very sad situation."

Bulgarian govt resigns

SOFIA, Sept 6: The government of Prime Minister Lyuben Berov formally tendered its resignation in a written notice to Bulgaria's parliament on Monday, reports AP.

The resignation must be confirmed or rejected by parliament, which returns from summer process on Wednesday.

Most parties are seen as favouring the resignation and the holding of early elections.

Berov's government offered to resign on Friday after just 21 months in power. It was paralysed by conflicts between former Communists and Berov's anti-Communist Union of Democratic Forces.