

BRIEFLY

Yeltsin to cut personal staff: Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed an order on Tuesday cutting his personal staff by a third to prevent duplication of work, Interfax news agency reported. Reuter says from Moscow.

It quoted Yeltsin's Chief of Staff Sergei Filatov as confirming there was such an order, but did not say how many jobs would be cut. Yeltsin's total staff, inside and outside the Kremlin is estimated to be more than 1,000.

Mahfouz's attackers to be tried: Fifteen suspected Islamic militants will be tried before a military court in connection with a stabbing attack on Nobel prize winning novelist Naguib Mahfouz, the government said on Tuesday, AFP reports from Cairo.

Mahfouz, 82, is still in a hospital recovering from the October 14 assault in which he was stabbed in the neck outside his home in Cairo. The accused mastermind of the attack was killed in a police raid days later.

4 die in German plant blast: Four workmen died and six were injured, two seriously, on Tuesday when a gas turbine exploded at a power plant in central Leipzig, eastern Germany, police said, AFP reports from Leipzig.

The explosion followed an outbreak of fire in the turbine shortly before 2:00 pm (1300 GMT) as the workmen employed by the local council and by the Siemens electronics group were making adjustments to the system.

US air exercises in Kuwait: US forces began air raid exercises in Kuwait on Tuesday, dropping 110 bombs from four strategic bombers, two B-1s and B-52s, Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said, AFP reports from Washington.

The aircraft took off from bases in North Dakota and South Dakota and made the bomb drops after uninterrupted flights, the spokesman said.

CNN convicted of contempt: Cable News Network (CNN) was convicted on Tuesday of criminal contempt for broadcasting phone conversations of imprisoned Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega in a ruling that could lead to a 100,000 dollar fine, AFP reports from Miami.

US District Judge William Hoeweler ruled that CNN violated his order prohibiting broadcast of the taped conversations between Noriega and his lawyers in 1990, while the ex-military leader was awaiting trial on drug smuggling charges.

Art expert Pope-Hennessy dies: British art historian Sir John Pope-Hennessy, one of the world's leading authorities on Italian Renaissance work, has died at his Florence home at the age of 80, Italian television reported on Tuesday, Reuter says from Rome.

Pope-Hennessy died Monday night, the report said. It did not give the cause of death.

Russian army chief meets Castro: The Russian head of the general staff, General Mikhail Kolesnikov, discussed Russian-Cuban military cooperation with President Fidel Castro during talks in Havana, the communist newspaper Granma reported on Tuesday, AFP says from Havana.

The newspaper said the talks, held on Monday, focussed on "the state of technical military relations" between Moscow and Havana.

Russian PM defers Poland visit: Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin on Tuesday postponed a visit to Poland because he was unhappy with Warsaw's response to an alleged attack on Russians in Poland, Itar-Tass news agency reported, Reuter says from Moscow.

It quoted the head of the government's press service Valentin Sergeev as saying the visit, planned for November 3-4, had been called off because Russia had not received an official assessment of last week's incident at Warsaw Station.

Colosio's killer gets 42 yrs: The confessed killer of Mexican presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio was sentenced on Monday to 42 years in prison for murder, the attorney General's office said, Reuter reports from Mexico City.

Mario Aburto Martinez, a 24-year old mechanic, shot ruling party candidate Colosio in the northern city of Tijuana March 23 after a campaign rally. His motive has never been made clear.

Smoking ban on flights: Smoking will be banned on airline flights between the United States, Canada and Australia under an agreement reached on Tuesday, AP reports from Washington.

The ban, covering non-stop flights, takes effect in 120 days, the U.S Department of Transportation said.

Local Ge gets intimate with one of the residents of the Mae Sa snake farm October 28, some 50 kilometres north of Chiang Mai in Thailand. The snake farm features various snake attractions including a 20-minute long "Cobra show".



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Prove into Dissanayake's killing Lanka to seek India's help

COLOMBO, Nov 2: Sri Lanka is seeking help from neighbouring India to probe the assassination of the island's opposition leader, Gamage Disanayake, Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar said here Tuesday, reports AFP.

India will be asked to send experts to join a local team of detectives probing last week's suicide bombing of Disanayake, Kadirgamar said, adding that New Delhi was being approached following a request from the bereaved family.

He said, however, that a request from widow Srma Disanayake to invite two Indian experts named by her had to be turned down, as Sri Lanka could not pressure India to nominate specific individuals.

"We should not put another government in a difficult position. It is not correct to ask another government to nominate named persons," Kadirgamar told reporters here after a meeting of the Colombo cabinet.

Dissanayake, in a letter to Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga, on Monday named forensic scientist professor P Chandrasekaran and Karthikayan, who is joint director of the Central Bureau of Investigations (CBI) and head of the Special Investigation Team (SIT) that probed the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991.

"I have every reason to believe that they could make a valuable contribution to the present investigation, especially in view of their extensive previous experience in matters such as this," Disanayake said.

Another report says: 23-member cabinet will be reshuffled shortly after this month's presidential elections. Information Minister Dharmasiri Senanayake said Tuesday.

Prime minister Kumaratunga will reconstitute her cabinet after the November 9 poll, Senanayake said, expressing confidence that she will win the crucial vote.

President Dingiri Banda



Miss India, Aishwarya Rai, prepares for the celebration of Diwali — the festival of light — at Sun City in South Africa, where she is preparing for the Miss world pageant, scheduled for November 19. The important Hindu festival begins today. — AFP photo

Rao to directly deal with Kashmir policy

NEW DELHI, Nov 2: Indian Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao has seized control of national policy on troubled Kashmir from two ministers who openly bickered about how to end rebellion that spawned the abduction of four Western tourists, reports Reuter.

Rao's move to quell dissent in his ranks came at a critical juncture for the northern state of Jammu and Kashmir, where over 17,000 people have been reported killed in a five-year-old rebellion.

The government is gearing up for the first elections in the state since 1987.

Home (Interior) Minister Shankar Rao Chavan recently chided his junior minister, Rajeev Pilot, for saying New Delhi should grant greater autonomy to the state before elections.

Chavan declined comment

"I feel that he (Pilot) should not say anything on policy matters without consulting me," said Chavan, who has advocated a tougher line than Pilot toward separatists.

Chavan said polls must first be held to choose representatives who could negotiate with New Delhi over an autonomy package that would satisfy separatists. Pilot wrote to Rao complaining that he had been publicly snubbed.

Keen to end a row that has confused foreign partners and threatened to upset election plans, Rao set up a special Kashmir cell under his authority, officials said today.

"The prime minister has taken direct charge of the policy-making, taking the portfolio away from the Home Ministry," a government official said.

Chavan declined comment

British House to debate conduct of Guardian editor

LONDON, Nov 2: The Speaker of the House on Tuesday ordered an emergency debate on the conduct of a newspaper editor who has admitted forging a letter on Parliamentary notepaper, reports AP.

Speaker Betty Boothroyd's announcement paves the way for a House of Commons committee to consider possible sanctions against Peter Preston, editor of The Guardian newspaper.

Preston has admitted fabricating a note in the name of Treasury Chief Secretary Jonathan Aitken to obtain a copy of Aitken's bill at the Ritz Hotel in Paris.

Zhirinovsky gets US visa

WASHINGTON, Nov 2: The United States granted a tourist visa on Tuesday to Russian ultranationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky, reports Reuter.

Our decision to issue Zhirinovsky a visa, neither endorses his views nor supports his ambitions," State Department spokesman David Johnson said in announcing the move. "The United States government finds his views anathema."

State Department officials said the visa was for one entry only. US tourist visas are customarily for six months.

However, the US Immigration and Naturalisation Service may decide to further limit how long Zhirinovsky stays in the country.

Zhirinovsky applied last month to visit the United States for 14 days beginning this Friday.

He has been invited to speak at the World Affairs Council in San Francisco and is also hoping to visit Los Angeles, New York and Washington.

81 Japanese MPs form group to free Suu Kyi

TOKYO, Nov 2: A total of 81 Japanese members of parliament formed a support league for the release of Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, now under house arrest, the group announced today, reports AFP.

The Japanese group, made up of ruling and opposition party legislators from both houses of parliament, included lower house Speaker Takako Doi and Deputy Speaker Hyosuke Kujiraoka.

Former Transport Minister Keiwa Okuda and upper house Deputy Speaker Misao Akagiri also joined the group.

The group will appeal to the concerned parties, both abroad and at home, for cooperation and consider sending legislators to Myanmar.

Expert fears outbreak of plague in China

BEIJING, Nov 2: China must step up plague prevention measures to avoid a similar epidemic to one that killed at least 60 people in India, a senior Chinese health expert was quoted as saying today, reports AP.

Although outbreaks of plague have generally been brought under control since the communist came to power in 1949, Professor Yu Dongzeng, Director of the China Plague Research Bureau said prevention work had been relaxed in recent years and the threat of an outbreak had increased significantly.

In poor, remote areas, where the threat is greatest, financing for plague prevention is limited and basic research work has been neglected, health news quoted Yu as saying.

With the onset of economic reforms, previously available funds have been redirected to other areas.

China should draw a strong lesson from the Indian outbreak which Yu blamed partly on a relaxation and general neglect of prevention work.

Five killed, 21 children missing in Pak feud

PESHAWAR, Nov 2: Five people were killed and 21 children were missing — apparently buried alive in the ruins of their homes — after a feud in northern Pakistan, the Associate Press of Pakistan (APP) reported today, says AFP.

It said a powerful landlord in the region, Abdul Ahad, attacked the village of Sheetak, in the district of Dir, at dawn Tuesday with a force of 200 mercenaries toting hand grenades and rocket-launchers.

Around 250 homes were damaged or destroyed, and the mercenaries stripped the villagers of their belongings, the report said.

The violence climaxed a years-long dispute over land rights, it said.

AP adds, rescue workers carried tents and supplies on Wednesday to residents of a mountain village attacked eight days ago by gunmen who destroyed as many as 250 homes and killed five people, a local government officer said.

Violence ups in US city schools

WASHINGTON, Nov 2: School violence increased significantly in 38 per cent of US cities over the past five years, according to a survey released on Tuesday, reports Xinhua.

The survey, by the National League of Cities, found school violence killed or seriously injured students in 41 per cent of large American cities in the past year.

Of 700 cities responding to the survey, the largest were the most likely to report increasing violence over the past five years 55 per cent, as compared with 46 per cent for middle-size cities and 31 per cent for smaller communities.

Off the Record

Charles's cleavage fixation

LONDON: Prince Charles may have been fixated by Joan Collins' cleavage, but his future subjects just don't seem to care, reports AP.

Maybe they had their fill of titillating details about the prince's loveless marriage to Princess Diana and dalliances with a mistress by the time a new authorised biography hit the shelves this week.

Major booksellers on Wednesday reported only a trickle of sales of "Prince of Wales," by journalist Jonathan Dimbleby, touted as the first in-depth look into the 45-year-old prince's private world.

Other juicy revelations included the prince forgetting to toast President Reagan at a glittering White House dinner, and his chronic discomfort at having to make small talk with the Sultan of Brunei.

In a speech replying to Reagan, he recalls, "I mumbled and fumbled my way through, talking unutterable nonsense and finally sat down in relief, only to find I had forgotten to drink a toast to the President! I got up again!"

The prince had a close encounter with Collins on the same trip when he danced with the actress at a ball in Palm Springs, California.

"She was very amusing and with an unbelievable cleavage (all raised up and presented as if on a tray!); so eye wander was a problem!" he wrote in a letter on the way back to London.

During an audience with the Pope six months earlier, the Prince records, the pontiff mistook Diana's question about the stomach injury he received from a would-be assassin as confirmation she was pregnant.

"While asking him she patted her tummy to indicate where he had been shot, but he did not seem to understand... and replied with a beatific smile that she was the creator of life and seemed to bless her tummy-presumably, Diana surmised, because he mistook her as saying she was pregnant", Charles wrote.

Meeting the Sultan for Brunei's 1984 independence celebrations, the prince found himself "twittering away, reproducing the most nonsensical rubbish while small gentlemen in white uniforms crawled about on their knees in front of us, pouring out cups of tea..."

When he signalled he had better go, wrote Charles, "Everyone rose to their feet with an audible sigh of relief."

Good news about growing old

CHICAGO: Finally some good news about growing old. Researchers reported Tuesday that high blood cholesterol levels do not seem to lead to heart disease in people over 70, reports Reuter.

"Our findings do not support cholesterol as a risk factor among very elderly subjects," said the Yale University study published in this week's journal of the American Medical Association. It was based on a sample of 997 people.

Possible explanations for the finding are that cholesterol levels of the elderly may not accurately reflect life-time exposure to dietary fats, or that those who live past the age of 70 may be relatively more resistant to the effects of fats.

The researchers said their findings were preliminary and needed to be tested in larger studies.

Expert fears outbreak of plague in China

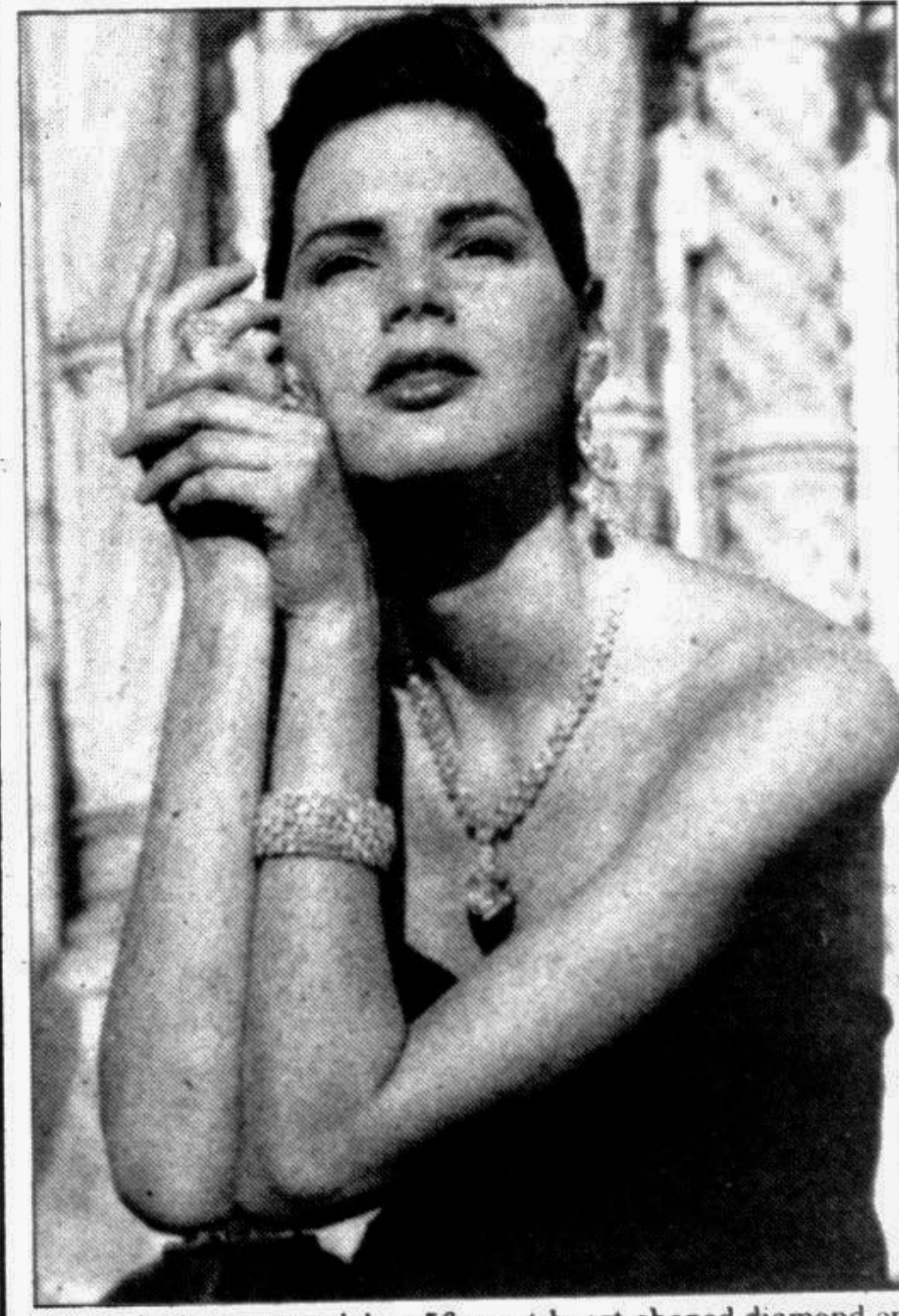
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Maria Rodriguez models a 56 carat heart-shaped diamond on a necklace (one of the largest of its kind in the world, estimated price 10 million US dollar) outside the Natural History Museum in London on November 1, at the launch of "Diamonds and Dinosaurs", a fundraising ball. Funds generated from the ball will benefit the rehousing of the museum's collection of 300,000 gemstones and minerals. — AFP photo

Five Algerian children killed in blast

ALGIERS, Nov 2: A bomb exploded on Tuesday at a cemetery amid a group of Muslim Scouts honouring combatants of the war of independence, killing five of the children and injuring 17, security forces said, AP reports.

A second blast at another cemetery injured a war veteran.

An exiled leader of the FIS predicted that violence would intensify.

The blast at the Mostaganem cemetery 280 kilometres (175 miles) west of Algiers, was one of at least two bombs that exploded at cemeteries in Algeria as citizens commemorated the start of the 1954-62 independence war against France.

E Europe struggles to recover from ordeal of communism

PRAGUE, Nov 2: Five years after the fall of communism, eastern Europe is still recovering from the ordeal, according to Czech Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus, reports Reuter.

Some countries are learning to adjust to the changes while others are still struggling to cope with a major social and economic upheaval.

Even the most stable and prosperous of the post-communist countries, such as the Czech Republic, remain very poor compared with their western neighbours, and many of their citizens feel increasingly frustrated and let down by their leaders.

Moves to excise the legacy of communism have inflicted in turn suffering in some of the former iron curtain states after the euphoria of late 1989 when one communist party after another collapsed and lost power.

Few people, if anybody, look back with any nostalgia to 40 years of communism and their accompanying secret police controls stifling conformity and economic decay.

But from the countries which have made the most radical reforms, such as Poland, to those which have changed relatively little, such as Bulgaria, governments are taking the blame for the loss of the one thing communism provided — social security.

"For me nothing has changed to make people live better," said 73-year-old Bulgarian Mladen Kamenov.

"Kindergartens are closed, crime is flourishing, our farms do not feed us any longer. We even import fruit from our neighbours," said Kamenov, a construction worker who said low pensions meant he could not afford to retire.

"These people (politicians) are plunderers. This is not democracy."

Things were always going to be tough for Bulgaria, one of the former east bloc's poorest members.

At the other end of the spectrum, East Germany seemed to have the best chance when the Berlin Wall opened in November 1989. While the rest of the post communist world had to fend for itself, Europe's richest and most powerful nation, West Germany, was ready to pour billions of dollars into the East.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl's centre-right government has indeed given the East a huge facelift.

But the destruction of large segments of East Germany's uncompetitive industry has cost two million people their jobs despite Kohl's promises of "flourishing landscapes."

"Kohl's a bum. He promised us everything, but it was nothing except empty promises. He fooled us all," complained former metalworker Wolfgang Lehmann, who lost his job and flat and now spends his days in a seedy Berlin railway station and his nights in a shelter for the homeless.

East German frustration with unification was translated into large gains in the October 16 general election for the reformed communist Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) which has made itself the mouthpiece of the downtrodden East.

Economic reform and social change always make some people rich. Bright, young people, whose talents and energy were stifled by communism, can now make a lot of money.

Not everybody has to work for wealth. For instance, the Czech republic's policy of "restitution" — under which property confiscated by the communists is returned to its original owners — has created millionaires overnight.

None wants to reverse reform but the pace may slow as left-wing governments hesitate over tough economic decision.

For instance, Polish President Lech Walesa has attacked the administration which took power after elections in September 1993, saying: "Poland is a horse cart stuck in the mud."

Former Cambodian minister held in Thailand

BANGKOK, Nov 2: Fugitive former Cambodian Interior Minister Sin Song, sentenced in absentia last week to 20-years jail for his role in an abortive coup in Cambodia in July, has been arrested in Thailand, police said today, reports AFP.

Sin Song, who was sentenced by a Phnom Penh military court, has been on the run since escaping house arrest in the Cambodian capital on September 3.

The former communist police chief is being held in prison in Bangkok, an immigration official told AFP.

He was among four Cambodians and nine Thais sentenced by the military court last week.