

BRIEFLY

Israel shells Hezbollah post:

Israeli warplanes fired four air-to-ground missiles at suspected Hezbollah targets in South Lebanon Thursday in the third aerial assault in 24 hours, security sources said. AFP reports from Rashaya, Lebanon.

Four phantom fighter bombers took part in the air attack with missiles fired at suspected targets of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah in forests in the Biket Jabbur and Jabal Abu Rashed area of the western district of the Bekka valley.

Lanka raises age of marriage:

Sri Lanka has raised the minimum age for marriage from 12 to 18 years to try to stop child marriages, a Justice Ministry spokesman said yesterday. AFP reports from Colombo.

The new law, passed in parliament Wednesday, bans marriage for both girls and boys below the age of 18, except in the case of the country's minority Muslims, the spokesman said. Child marriages are common in poor areas, where people have many children so they can help out.

India has 93 women for 100 men:

India has only 93 women for every 100 men while in most countries of the world there are 105 women for every 100 men, according to the data of the UN statistical office and population division, Xinhua reports from New Delhi.

There are 10 per cent fewer women in India than there should be. There are a large number of females who are missing from the demographic profile of the country either because they were not allowed to be born or because once born they experience such discrimination in terms of nutrition and health care that significant numbers do not survive, the UN sources in New Delhi said.

Int'l confce on AIDS in Asia ends:

The third international conference on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific ended Thursday with calls for governments of the region to get more involved in the desperate battle against AIDS, AFP reports from Chiang Mai, Thailand.

"The leaders of our countries are not taking AIDS seriously enough. We need more action," said former Thai Prime Minister Anand Payarachun in a speech delivered on the final day.

Sihanouk undergoes surgery:

King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia has undergone surgery in Beijing to remove a cataract from his left eye, the monarch's entourage announced Thursday. AFP reports from Beijing.

An official statement said the operation was a success. The 72-year-old monarch entered the Beijing hospital on Wednesday afternoon, and the operation was carried out by top Chinese specialists, the statement said.

Quake rocks Nevada:

A moderate earthquake centered beneath this Southern California desert town on Wednesday rocked an area from the Pacific Ocean to Nevada. There were no immediate reports of injury or damage. AP reports from Ridgecrest, California.

"The earth bucked. That's what it felt like," said Scott Farwell, managing editor of the Ridgecrest Daily Independent. "It shook for a good long while, maybe as long as 30 to 40 seconds."

European polls results published:

Sweden has published the final results of last weekend's European election, after completing the count of postal ballots received since Sunday, AFP reports from Stockholm.

The postal votes slightly raised turnout to 41.6 from the 41.3 per cent announced Sunday though the figure remains the lowest in Swedish history.

Colombia's drug cartel surrenders:

The reputed treasurer of Colombia's call drug cartel which allegedly helped Finance President Ernesto Samper's election campaign, has surrendered to US authorities, The State Department said on Wednesday, Reuter reports from Washington.

Colombian authorities said the suspect, Guillermo Pallomari, had turned himself in to drug enforcement administration agents in Washington.



A June 1993 file photo shows the Russian presidential envoy to Chechnya, Oleg Lobov, who survived Wednesday an assassination attempt in Grozny. Two leaders of the pro-Moscow Chechen government also survived the car bomb explosion as their motorcade was passing by. — AFP/UNB photo

42 Tigers killed in fighting Lanka imposes censorship on civil war reporting

COLOMBO, Sept 21: The Sri Lankan government Thursday clamped censorship on reporting the country's 12-year civil war and accused the media of "distortion and exaggeration," reports AP.

Journalists, for both local media and foreign papers and agencies, will have to report only what the military spokesman says and any other version has to be approved by the censor, Media Secretary Edmond Jayasinghe, an official said.

"We have not changed our media policy. Do not think this is the end of media freedom," said Dharmasiri Senanyake, minister of media, tourism and aviation. But he also accused the local newspapers of misreporting

the civil war.

The censorship, imposed under Sri Lanka's Emergency Regulations, will come into effect midnight Thursday, Senanyake told reporters. He did not say what the penalty for violation was.

The last time the government imposed press censorship was in 1987, when Indian troops were deployed in the north and the east to help the Sri Lankan army's war against Tamil rebels who are fighting for a separate homeland.

In recent months, many local newspapers have criticised the government's policies and President Chandrika Kumaratunga for leading an extravagant lifestyle.

Kumaratunga has retaliated by ordering police raids

on newspaper offices and interrogation of journalists.

She has also sued two newspaper editors for writing articles about her lifestyle.

Meanwhile, forty-two Tamil Tiger separatists and two navy sailors were killed in several attacks by the rebels in the north and east, the military said Thursday.

Most of the guerrillas died when troops repulsed two attacks on military defence lines in the northern peninsula of Jaffna on Wednesday, said Brig. Sarath Munasinghe, the military spokesman.

At least 30 rebels died at Ponniall-Kadduwan and Ellalai and four soldiers were wounded, Munasinghe said at a news conference.

The navy foiled another

attack Wednesday night by destroying four guerrilla boats off the peninsula, but two sailors were killed and four wounded in the fighting, Munasinghe said.

Guerrillas in eight boats attacked naval patrol vessels near the military-held harbour in Kankesanthurai, officials said.

"Intercepts of Tiger radio transmissions confirm 11 rebels were killed," said Munasinghe. There are usually four to five rebels on each boat. Jaffna peninsula is 320 kilometres (200 miles) north of the capital, Colombo.

One rebel was killed by troops on Wednesday in the eastern Batticaloa district after he threw a grenade at a military jeep.

Radicals take control of Hazratbal Mosque

SRINAGAR, Sept 21: Dissidents from a separatist group have taken over Jammu-Kashmir's holiest mosque and are planning to expel their leader because of his pro-India bias, the guerrillas said Wednesday, reports AP.

The occupation of the Hazratbal Mosque in Srinagar, summer capital of the state, raised fears of violence among rival members of the Jammu-Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), the main guerrilla group operating in the state, reports AP.

Two years ago, army soldiers laid siege to the mosque after militants were holed up there. The standoff ended after a month when the guerrillas surrendered.

Some members of the Front had rebelled and taken shelter in the mosque, said JKLF vice-president Javed

Mir. Witnesses said they saw 40 to 50 militants in the shrine.

The Front, which is led by Yasin Malik, is considered to be a moderate group among the dozen militant groups fighting for independence of Kashmir, the only state in India with a Muslim majority.

Unlike groups that want Kashmir to become independent or join with Pakistan, the Front wants the dispute settled through talks. The rebel groups say Muslims of Kashmir are denied their religious rights by the federal government of India, which controls the state.

At the Hazratbal Mosque, the leader of the radical group, Shabir Siddiqui, told reporters late Tuesday that they have decided to expel Malik from the JKLF because he is a moderate and has a pro-India bias.

Ciller begins search for a caretaker govt

ANKARA, Sept 21: Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller today begins the search for a caretaker government to replace a left right coalition that crumbled when she resigned, reports Reuter.

Ciller handed her resignation to President Suleyman Demirel late on Wednesday, terminating the struggling coalition of her conservative True Path Party (DYP) and the Social Democrats, under their new leader Deniz Baykal.

Demirel asked her to continue in a caretaker capacity until a new government could be formed.

Ciller who has in the past resisted calls both from within and without her party for an early general election indicated that she was not prepared to change her stance now.



Bosnian government soldiers wait to cross the makeshift bridge over the river Una after returning to Bosanski Krupa, east of Bihac, Wednesday. The town was occupied by Bosnian Serb forces for the past three years. — AFP/UNB photo

Murayama firm to stay in power until next year

TOKYO, Sept 21: Japan's Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama said today he was determined to remain in office until next year, reports Reuter.

"I am determined to fulfill my responsibility to enact the budget for the next fiscal year," Murayama said in a speech to a meeting of his Socialist Party convened to discuss the party's future.

"There is no diminution of our attention to Southeast Asia," Admiral William Owens, vice chairman of the US joint Chiefs of Staff, told Singapore's Straits Times newspaper after arriving here Wednesday as part of an Asian tour.

He said that despite concerns in Bosnia and the Gulf, "the view in Washington is that Southeast Asia and the Pacific are of enormous importance" and "we're committed to engagement in this

Washington fully committed to SE Asian security US hopes to resume military ties with China

SINGAPORE, Sept 21: The United States is fully committed to Southeast Asian security despite problems in other regions and hopes to resume military ties with China once bilateral ties normalize, it was reported here today, says AFP.

"We are always discussing the distribution of US forces," Owens said, "but it is certain the troop strength in the Asia-Pacific will not decrease."

"We have a commitment to stay the course because our military presence here is good for the US and for the countries in the region."

On the recent plunge in relations with China, which are now being repaired, Owens said "it is our very strong hope that we will get

back on track with our relationship with China, particularly our military-to-military ties."

Southeast Asian countries as well as Japan, fearing the rise of China as a new regional power, have urged US forces to stay as a stabilising force. The last US troops on Southeast Asian soil left the Philippines in 1992, but Washington maintains various forms of defence ties with the region.

Singapore elder statesman Lee Kuan Yew, addressing an international forum here late Wednesday, urged Washington to stabilise ties with China and accommodate Beijing despite their clashing values and cultures.

Aidid to set free remaining 14 aid workers

NAIROBI, Sept 21: Somali leader Mohamed Farah Aidid has agreed to set free 14 aid workers still held by his forces in the central city of Baidoa, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) announced today, reports Reuter.

The move came a day after Aidid released seven women aid workers and had them flown to the Kenyan capital Nairobi.

The statement said the deal was reached between Aidid, a powerful south Mogadishu warlord whose forces humbled US forces in 1993, and UNDP's representative in Somalia Erling Dessau during talks in Baidoa today



Liberal Democrat MP Simon Highes joins protesters outside the French Cultural Institute in Glasgow on Wednesday, demonstrating against France's nuclear tests amid calls from delegates at the Lib Dem conference for a boycott of French goods. — AFP/UNB photo

Strike paralyses Karachi: 2 killed

KARACHI, Sept 21: A strike called by the ethnic Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) paralysed Karachi today and police said two people were killed by gunmen, reports Reuter.

The two deaths occurred in separate hit-and-run attacks by gunmen in the eastern district of Korangi and Orangi town in western Karachi, police and ambulance workers said.

Fire brigade officials said no new arson attacks had been reported, but armed gangs burned at least seven vehicles on Wednesday night after the MQM announced the strike call.

Zaher Shah may play a key political role to halt Afghan war

ISLAMABAD, Sept 21: The authorities in Pakistan have radically changed their longstanding hostility to Afghanistan's royal family over border claims while Zaher Shah ruled.

Zaher Shah's attraction is that he is the only Afghan figure who is not discredited. His independence from all the faction fighting for control of the country is undoubted.

The former king's image has been strengthened, indirectly, by the general disdain now shown toward the traditional Mujahideen chiefs, who have proved themselves incapable of making any kind of agreement to end the civil war that has torn the country apart since the fall of the

communist government in 1992.

Zaher Shah ruled for 40 years until he was overthrown by a cousin, Sardar Daud, in 1973 and became an exile in Rome.

Top diplomatic sources said there was a Pakistani plan for the former king to play "the bridge" between southern Afghanistan, dominated by the Taliban Islamic militia. And the north, now controlled mainly by Rashid Dostam, a former communist general, and his ethnic Uzbek forces.

On top of his distance from the warring parties, Zaher Shah has the advantage

of being like most of the Taliban's religious students, a Pashtun and from Kandahar, the southern city is the former royal capital as well as the Taliban's headquarters.

Dostam has already shown his ideological flexibility by allying last year with the Muslim fundamentalist chief, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Dostam has said he would have no objection to an eventual return by the king, but diplomat commented, however, "Dostam would even accept Mickey Mouse as president if he thought he would get a share of power."

The main stumbling block of the plan that Pakistan is said to have prepared is the Afghan president and his mil-

itary right-hand man, Ahmed Shah Massoud.

Rabbani and Massoud, who have accused Pakistan of interfering in Afghan affairs, have not been included in the plan.

"Or the first time ever, there is unanimity of opinion in Pakistani bureaucracy to get Rabbani and Massoud out of Kabul," said a diplomat.

The plan could be financially costly, diplomats said. In spite of the ex-king's popularity in Kabul and the south of Afghanistan, the Pashtun tribal chiefs would have to be compensated for giving him the royal welcome he would demand.

One diplomatic source

said it could cost several million dollars and that Saudi Arabia had been lobbied, but he added: "The Saudis want accountability. If they pay for the return of Zaher Shah, they want a role."

Many observers are now waiting for signs of Zaher Shah's desire to return to political life. He was a constitutional monarch when in Afghanistan and has no just power for himself or any of his four sons, said one informed source.

As a symbol of national unity, the former king has also repeatedly said he would never return to Afghanistan unless asked by all the political players.

One diplomatic source

Hijacked Iranian plane lands in Tehran

TEHRAN, Sept 21: A hijacked Iranian passenger plane landed in Tehran today with 176 people who had spent over 30 hours at an Israeli airbase, state-run Tehran radio said, reports Reuter.

The hijacked aircraft has returned to the Islamic motherland and landed at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport, the radio reported.

The hijacker an Air Iranian steward stayed behind in Israel and asked for asylum in the United States.

The Boeing 707 aircraft was on an internal flight when it was hijacked on Tuesday.

Off the Record

Belongings of Hitler's wife on auction

TRENTO, (Italy): An auction house is putting on the block crocodile handbag, a woman's nightie and two suitcases full of other items said to be those of Adolf Hitler's mistress, and, later, wife, Eva Braun, reports AP.

Casa D'Aste Czerny, an auction house in the northern city of Trento, said Wednesday the objects come from a collector who claimed to have bought the bags and their items from Braun's heirs in Munich, where she had left them. Braun joined the German dictator in suicide in the waning days of World War II as Germany's defeat grew clearer.

Also on auction on October 14 will be a wicker chair and cutlery said to be owned by Hitler.

Inside the suitcases, besides the nightgown, were a pair of woman's shoes, two hats, a camera and a 1933 calendar. Opening bids are 1,200 dollars for one of the suitcases and its contents, which includes a silver fox fur piece, and 800 dollars for the other suitcase and contents. There is also a watercolor attributed to the dictator, which goes for a minimum of 13,000 dollars.

To make snake friendly

SINGAPORE: Snake charmer Mohd Yusof wants to spend two weeks in a cage with 300 poisonous snakes. Yusof said Wednesday he hoped to beat the world record set by his uncle in 1987 when he spent 10 days with 200 snakes in a cage in Kuala Lumpur Zoo.

"I want to show snakes are not so dangerous," Yusof, a professional snake charmer and magician, told Reuters. He is arranging a special 3-metre (10-ft) wide glass box in Singapore's World Trade Centre and has launched a national appeal to raise money for the attempt.

"I am looking for sponsors to buy more snakes," he said. "So far I have five."

Pathetic but rare

LONDON: Birdwatchers who had travelled from all over Britain to have a glimpse of a rare, migrating bird watched in horror as a giant fish gobbled it down, a newspaper reported, says Reuter.

The Sun newspaper quoted the "twitchers," as birdwatchers are known, saying the four-foot (1.2m) Pike gulped the red-necked Phalarope in one bite.

"It was like a scene from 'Jaws' one said. "One second the bird was swimming — the next there was a snap and a splash and it vanished."

Only a few brown and red feathers remained to prove that the exotic waterbird, which was evidently migrating from the north of Scotland to Africa, had visited the reservoir in Leicestershire, central England.