

BRIEFLY

DPRK awards ROK student: North Korea awarded an honorary degree Saturday to a "martyr" South Korean activist student who mysteriously disappeared six years ago. AP reports from Seoul.

Lee Rae-chang had "devotedly fought against the colonial military fascist rule of the US imperialists and for independence and democracy of South Korean society," the North's official Korea Central News Agency said.

Female judge in HK High Court: Hong Kong is getting a female High Court judge, after more than 150 years of British rule, the government said yesterday. AFP reports from Hong Kong.

Doreen Le Pichon, 49, deputy chief counsel at the Securities and Futures Commission, the stock exchange watchdog, will take up her new post on October 3. Le Pichon was recommended by the Judicial Services Commission, chaired by chief justice Sir Ti Liang Yang.

Crime challenge for Philippines: Violent crime has become "a serious challenge" for the Philippines and is undermining the country's economic recovery, President Fidel Ramos said yesterday. AFP reports from Manila.

"Criminality has become a serious challenge ... of grave concern to our people and the government," Ramos said at a meeting on crime at the presidential palace.

Afghan airliner crew released: The crew of a hijacked Afghan airliner was released unharmed Saturday, a government spokesman said. AP reports from Kabul.

The Boeing 727, belonging to Afghanistan's national Ariana airlines, was intercepted on Thursday by jet fighters belonging to the opposition Taliban forces and forced to land in the southern city of Kandahar, their stronghold.

Patten for HK men's residency in UK: Governor Chris Patten said in a radio broadcast Saturday that Britain should grant residency rights to Hong Kong people contradicting British government policy on the issue. AP reports from Hong Kong.

A British law passed in 1962 removed the right of abode for Hong Kong citizens. Pressure on London to reverse the decision increased after Britain signed a treaty in 1984 to return Hong Kong to Chinese rule in 1997. More than 3 million people in Hong Kong are eligible for a type of British passport which serves as a travel document but does not grant residency rights.

Malaria kills 50 in Arunachal: At least 50 people have died of malaria in the Yazall-Pistola circle of the lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh recently, an official release said Friday. PTI reports from Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, India.

It said that most of the deaths were reported from the Koyam and Poru Anchal Samities.

Policeman gets life-term in China: A police chief in southern China was sentenced to life imprisonment for pocketing public funds and amassing wealth from unexplained sources, it was reported yesterday. AFP reports from Hong Kong.

The intermediary court in Zhanjiang city, a port in the southern province of Guangdong, sentenced Wen Shuidi, a traffic police chief from the Zhanjiang Public Security Bureau on Friday, the pro-Beijing Wen Wei Po newspaper reported.

Volcano erupts in New Zealand: Skiers were evacuated Saturday from Mount Ruapehu after the volcano erupted, shooting ash, rocks and steam thousands of meters (yards) into the air. AP reports from Wellington.

The late afternoon eruption sent three volcanic mud flows from the mountain's crater, police said.

4 die in Venezuela prison riot: At least four inmates died during a brief riot in one of this South American nation's most notorious prisons, authorities said. AP reports from Caracas, Venezuela.

The Friday riot in Caracas' Catia jail left 24 inmates, one security guard and one police officer injured.

Rajiv's dream remains unfulfilled : Sonia

PORAYAR, Tamil Nadu, Sept 23: Sonia Gandhi yesterday said the dream of her late husband, Rajiv Gandhi, of building a strong, secular, democratic and progressive India still remained unfulfilled, and called upon people to strive for realising this dream in the true spirit of love and brotherhood, reports PTI.

Unveiling a 13-foot bronze statue of Rajiv Gandhi and laying the foundation stone for Rajivpuram, a housing colony for workers of an NRI-sponsored petroleum refinery project in this backward town in Tamil Nadu's Nagapattinam Qaid-Millet district, Sonia said the most enduring monument that would have gladdened the spirit of her late husband would have been building the India of his dreams.

As part of his dream to take India into the 21st century, Rajiv Gandhi wanted to give power to the people through Panchayat Raj, she said.

Underscoring the significance of Panchayat Raj, she said the Rajiv Foundation had been collaborating with a voluntary organisation in Mayiladuthurai Lok Sabha constituency, which returned Mani Shankar Aiyer, in conducting training camps in every block to spread the message of Panchayat Raj to the grassroots.

In her emotional speech which lasted barely 20 minutes, including the duration of translation, Sonia said Rajiv Gandhi's vision of India in the 21st century was "all-embracing".

Gingrich invited to observe Iraq's referendum

BAGHDAD, Sept 23: Iraq has invited US House of Representatives Speaker Newt Gingrich and other politicians from around the world to observe a referendum on renewing President Saddam Hussein's mandate, reports AFP.

Gingrich is among 300 politicians from all nations except Kuwait and Israel invited to watch the October 15 referendum, Mohammad Muzaffar Al-Adhami, Vice Chairman of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, said today.

Adhami told Baghdad newspaper: "among those invited are the speakers of the US Senate and the House of Representatives, as well as speakers of the World Parliamentary Union, the EU, and the Arab and African Parliaments".

Deities milk-drinking — 'a psychological epidemic': Expert

NEW DELHI, Sept 23: Incidents of mass hysteria, such as Thursday's instance when people across the country believed deities were drinking milk offered to them, represent a "psychological epidemic" that will soon die down, says an expert, reports PTI.

Mass hysteria is basically a group behaviour that conforms to cultural norms or religious beliefs in a particular society. Dr D Mohan, head of the psychiatry department at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) here, explained.

It involves temporary suspension of all logic, reasoning and judgement, and can occur in any society, irrespective of the religion or culture to which a person belongs.

The best course of action is to "let things simmer down after some time", Dr Mohan said.

All such "epidemics" are temporary, mostly harmless and of varying duration.

The more strongly one tries to oppose an improbable belief with reasoning and logic, as some scientists and rationalists are doing, the stronger will be the tendency to fuel the belief Dr Mohan advised.

Such mass hysteria epidemics have been documented in literature for a fairly long time.

All it takes is to start a rumour of a miracle that conforms to particular faith or cultural practice. It spreads rapidly by word of mouth, psyching people into accepting it and believing in it.

In such cases, even if some persons are not sure if they have seen a miracle, they would rather agree than disagree with the rest in the surcharged atmosphere.

Dr Mohan said all persons have a "belief system" ingrained in them that makes them have blind faith in some cultural and religious practice.

But most of the time, the belief system remains "submerged under a cover of rationality, education and scientific temper."

The belief system is slowly imbibed through covert learning, where one sees family members and society observing a cultural or religious practice and begins to believe in it, unlike logic or science that is actively taught and imposed on a person.

In societies where the belief system is weaker than scientific orientation and logic, there are fewer chances of such mass hysteria epidemics occurring. But where the belief system is strong, logic and reason are "more likely not to stand the test of time."

An early AFP report adds: Scientists and Hindu devotees squared off Friday to explain the phenomenon of "milk-drinking" idols that has gripped India and spilled over into Hindu communities abroad.

"A divine event, a miracle," proclaimed the Hindu fundamentalist Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the World Hindu Council.

"Mass hysteria," countered the Indian rationalists' association, advancing scientific explanations for the vanishing milk, such as "surface tension" and "capillarity".

Whatever the reasons, Hindus continued to flock to temples yesterday to offer milk to Lord Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction, or his son Ganesha, the partly elephant-headed god of prosperity, wisdom and good luck.

Thousands across the country reported that when they held a spoonful of milk to the lips of Shiva or to the trunk of Ganesha, the liquid disappeared into the statue.

Their testimonies sparked an unprecedented religious frenzy which spread to Britain, Hong Kong, Nepal, Singapore and the United States as Hindus headed to their local temples to give Shiva and Ganesha some sustenance.

In New Delhi, the number of worshippers was far fewer today than on Thursday, when the city ground to a virtual halt and temples were jammed with people carrying cartons, bowls and cups of milk to the nearest temple.

The right-wing Hindu party which governs the Indian capital was taking no chances, however, and ordered an extra 100,000 litres (26,455 gallons) of milk to be on hand after stores were virtually drained on Thursday.

The offering of milk, fruit, sweets or money to the gods is an established practice in Hinduism. Milk is poured over busts of Shiva, or his phallic symbol known as a "lingam," while Ganesha is doused with milk during festivals.

But the offering of a "drink" of milk by pressing a spoon or a cup against an idol is unusual, and there were conflicting reports as to what inspired the first worshippers to do so on Thursday or where it all began.

A number of Hindu priests in the capital reported receiving telephone calls from Calcutta after midnight on Thursday telling them that idols would "drink" milk.

The news spread like wildfire until it engulfed the entire country.

'US efforts make peace possible for Bosnia' Bosnian govt spells out ceasefire terms

WASHINGTON, Sept 23: Laying out the Bosnian government's terms for a possible ceasefire, Foreign Minister Muhamed Sacirbey says the Serbs must lift their sieges of Sarajevo and the eastern enclave of Gorazde and demilitarise the city of Banja Luka, reports AP.

"These are the basis on which we can negotiate a ceasefire," he declared Friday.

Sacirbey is to meet on Tuesday in New York with the foreign ministers of Croatia and Serb-dominated Yugoslavia, which is negotiating on behalf of Bosnia's Serb rebels. The talks could pave the way for an international peace conference on Bosnia.

The New York talks will be the first high-level meeting of the parties to Bosnia's war since they agreed in principle September 8 to a US-sponsored peace plan.

A top Bosnian official predicted on Friday that the issue of a formal ceasefire will top the agenda of next week's meeting.

"Hostilities must cease before all sides can get down to negotiating a peace settlement without the constant pressure of events on the ground," said Mirko Pejanovic, a Serb who serves on Bosnia's collective presidency.

In a week-long ground offensive that partially coincided with NATO air attacks against rebel Serb targets earlier this month, the Muslim-led Bosnian government army and its Croatian allies liberated large chunks of central and western Bosnia. This brought them within artillery range of the rebel Serb stronghold of Banja Luka, some 130 kilometres (80 miles) northwest of Sarajevo.

"We have emphasised over the past few days that political dialogue should replace military action," said Sacirbey. "This must be done in the context of a truly free, safe Sarajevo, one whose access to the outside world is open and whose utilities and other essentials have been restored."

He met with journalists after talks with US Secretary of State Warren Christopher and senior Treasury and Defence Department officials.

A road also would have to be opened to the government-held pocket of Gorazde, he said.

For any peace settlement to work, ethnic Croats and Muslims expelled by the Serbs from Banja Luka would have to return to their homes, a move that would require disarming all Serb forces in the region, Sacirbey said.

Another report from San Diego, California adds: President Bill Clinton said Saturday that US "military muscle and diplomatic determination" made permanent peace possible for Bosnia, but he again warned of renewed NATO airstrikes if the Bosnian Serbs hit Sarajevo or other safe areas.

"There is now a real chance for peace in Bosnia. We must seize it," Clinton said, vowing to spare no effort in helping the Bosnia's warring Serbs, Croats and Muslims reach a negotiated settlement.

Clinton credited recent NATO bombing attacks and persistent US diplomacy in the Balkans with bringing all sides closer to accepting a peace agreement long advocated by the United States.



Bosnian Prime Minister Siladze (C) welcomes a young boy as he visits Bosnian refugees from all over the country in Bihac on Friday. Several hundred Muslims were expelled from the Serb-held town of Doboj and forced to walk across frontlines to reach government territory on September 22.

China accepts new US envoy to mark turning point in ties

BEIJING, Sept 23: China appeared to endorse today the US view that Beijing's acceptance of a new US ambassador marked a turning point in ties that are said to have plunged to a 16-year low, reports Reuter.

Senior Foreign Ministry officials took the unusual step of privately notifying the foreign media of Beijing's agreement to accept James Sasser as the next US Ambassador to China, thus enabling President Bill Clinton to nominate the former Tennessee senator on Friday.

Western diplomats said the move showed Beijing now felt it was ready to clear the way for Chinese Communist Party chief and state President Jiang Zemin to accept a US invitation to visit without loss of face.

"They want to create as many positive vibes as possible to make a Jiang Zemin visit happen," one diplomat said.

Clinton moved within hours of the Chinese notification to nominate the 58-year-old Democrat, an 18-year veteran of the Senate who served as chairman of its budget committee.

"This is a normal approval," Foreign Ministry spokesman Shen Quofang said of Beijing's agreement to Sasser's nomination.

He denied Beijing had delayed its decision, which allowed Washington to fill a key diplomatic post that has been vacant since former envoy Stapleton Roy ended a four-year assignment in Beijing three months ago.

However, Shen repeated Chinese demands for concrete US action to normalise ties between the two nuclear powers that Beijing has said have plunged to their lowest point since they were established 16 years ago amid disputes over Taiwan, human rights and other issues.

Expelled Afghan diplomats leave for home

ISLAMABAD, Sept 23: Thirteen Afghan diplomats declared persona non grata by Pakistan, left for home today, Afghan embassy officials here said, reports AFP.

Pakistan Thursday ordered the diplomats to leave the country within 48 hours following a nose-dive in relations between Islamabad and the Kabul government headed by President Burhanuddin Rabbani.

"All of them left" before the expiry of the deadline, an Afghan embassy official told AFP.

SC will hear Sanjay Dutt's petition soon

NEW DELHI, Sept 23: The Supreme Court will shortly hear a petition by film star Sanjay Dutt, an accused in the Bombay bomb blast case challenging an order of Bombay TADA Court denying him bail, reports PTI.

The petition on behalf of the film star was filed by his lawyers yesterday who later made a mention before the chief justice seeking an early hearing of the petition.

In his petition, Sanjay Dutt has challenged the TADA Court order of September 11, 1995 as being erroneous and arbitrary.

An early letter petition by the film star appealing to the Supreme Court to direct the TADA Court to consider his bail application was closed by the apex court after the TADA Court order denied him bail.

Nigeria promises not to execute coup plotters

LAGOS, Nigeria, Sept 23: Nigeria's military ruler, seeking British support for his plan to shift power to civilian rule, has promised not to execute any of the 40 people convicted of plotting to overthrow the government, news reports said Friday, says AP.

A Nigerian delegation sent by Gen Sani Abacha met with British Prime Minister John Major in London on Thursday.

Nigeria has been deluged with pleas for clemency for the group. The United States and Britain have threatened economic sanctions if any of them are executed.

Lagos newspapers reported that Abacha has offered not to execute any of the 40 convicts if Major will support the junta's programme for a transition to civilian rule.

Abacha, who took power in a bloodless coup in November 1993 is expected to announce a timetable October 1 for presidential and legislative elections. The timetable, however, remains unknown, and there are suspicions Abacha is hoping to drag out his time in power.

The British Foreign Office on Friday would not disclose details of Abacha's message. A spokesman said that during the brief meeting, Major stressed the need for clemency and a speedy transition to democracy.

The junta announced July 14 that 40 of 51 suspects, including former military leader Gen Olusegun Obasanjo and his right-hand man, had been found guilty by a secret military tribunal in an alleged plot to overthrow the government in March.

Another report from San Diego, California adds: President Bill Clinton said Saturday that US "military muscle and diplomatic determination" made permanent peace possible for Bosnia, but he again warned of renewed NATO airstrikes if the Bosnian Serbs hit Sarajevo or other safe areas.

"There is now a real chance for peace in Bosnia. We must seize it," Clinton said, vowing to spare no effort in helping the Bosnia's warring Serbs, Croats and Muslims reach a negotiated settlement.

Clinton credited recent NATO bombing attacks and persistent US diplomacy in the Balkans with bringing all sides closer to accepting a peace agreement long advocated by the United States.

Off the Record

Tricky twist of time

FRANKFURT: The Germans, along with most Europeans outside of Britain and Ireland, set clocks back an hour Sunday morning as daylight-saving time ends for 1995, reports AP.

The change back to middle European time puts Germany and much of west-central Europe one hour ahead of Greenwich mean time in England, which is used as the basis for standard time throughout most of the world.

This year is the last in which Germany returns to its standard time in September, the federal Interior Ministry reminded.

Next year all 15 member-countries of the European Union will standardise daylight-saving time, which will begin March 31 and end on October 27.

Britain and Ireland turn back their clocks an hour this year on October 22, making them the same as Greenwich mean time.

Viewers to run BBC!

LONDON: Television viewers will be able to construct their own news bulletins and call up pictures from BBC archives within five years, the BBC predicted Thursday, reports AFP.

BBC News and Current Affairs Director Tony Hall said development of interactive news services would make available BBC correspondents' reports archive material at the touch of a key.

Speaking at the images of the future conference here, Hall said viewers would be able to shape their own running order and, using a personal computer and modem, dip into their own news bulletins when they wanted.

Stinking solution to save water

LEEDS, England, A British water executive advised his drought-hit customers on Tuesday to save water by staying out of the bath, reports Reuter.

Yorkshire water PLC (YWL) Chief Executive Trevor Newton said he had not taken a bath or a shower for three months and advised other Britons to follow his example.

"Avoid using a bath or a shower," he said, estimating that his own thrifty measures had saved more than 1,000 gallons (4,500 litres) of water over the past three months.

Newton did say he washed regularly using water and sponge.

"It wasn't something we knew anything about," admitted Yorkshire water spokeswoman Tracy Wood.

A poll taken by the bathroom appliance industry in August found that one third of Britons bathed at least once a day, with another 35 per cent taking a regular shower.

Earlier on Tuesday Yorkshire water said it had applied for a drought order from the government, seeking the right to cut off customers' water for several hours a day to conserve reservoir stocks depleted by a scorching summer.

Russia, China to sign accord for stable Asia

LONDON, Sept 23: Russia and China are to sign more than 10 agreements on cooperation in particular a major accord aimed at ensuring stability in Asia, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev was quoted as saying Friday, reports AFP.

Kozyrev, who was due to meet Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen in Moscow today said the agreements were "expected to reflect the current state of and prospects for political cooperation between the two states," ITAR-Tass news agency reported.

The agency monitored here by the BBC said Kozyrev was speaking following a meeting between Qian and Russian President Boris Yeltsin in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi Friday.

Neither country was striving to create military alliances or blocs in Asia, Kozyrev said. They deem it important to work on a basis of constructive partnership, aiming to create a community of security in Asia.

A document on confidence building measures was being drafted for the coming Sino-Russian summit in Beijing whose importance transcended more bilateral relations Kozyrev said.

It will be very important for stabilising the situation not just along the vast Russia-Chinese border but also in Asia as a whole including the Commonwealth of Independent States, Kozyrev said.

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Aid frees all aid workers

NAIROBI, Kenya, Sept 23: Somalia militia leader Mohamed Farrah Aidid has released 14 remaining foreign hostages, six days after taking them captive during the capture of a southern city, reports AP.

The 13 relief workers and one journalist, all men, flew out of the city of Baldoia late Friday afternoon on two evacuation planes sent from Kenya by the United Nations and the European Union.

Seven women freed Wednesday after lengthy negotiations met them at Nairobi's airport, holding a banner that read "Free at Last".

"The 14 men are all in good health and spirits. Sigurd Iling, chairman of the umbrella Somalia Aid Coordination Body said in a statement.