

BRIEFLY



Portuguese Socialist leader Antonio Guterres waves hand to supporters after his Socialist Party scored a convincing victory in legislative elections Sunday, taking 43.85 per cent of the vote and 109 parliamentary seats. — AFP/UNB photo

Qian Qichen arrives in London:

China's Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Qian Qichen has arrived in London for a three-day visit, the highest ranking trip by a Beijing official since 1992, the Xinhua news agency said yesterday. AFP reports from Beijing.

Qian who flew into London from New York where he attended the 50th anniversary meeting of the UN General Assembly is due to meet Prime Minister John Major and other top officials for talks, the dispatch monitored here said.

Prince Charles in Muscat:

Prince Charles, the heir to the British throne, arrived in Muscat Sunday on an official visit during which he will meet Omani officials including Sultan Qaboos, the Omani news agency reported. AFP says from Muscat.

He is also due to launch an exhibition at the British Cultural Centre in Muscat and attend a demonstration by the British Red Arrows air display team. After the official part of this visit, he will remain in the country for several days on a private stay.

Bahrain frees 43 prisoners:

Bahrain has freed 43 political prisoners over the last three days and talks are continuing with the government to release hundreds more, an opposition leader said Sunday. AFP reports from Nicosia.

The prisoners were accused of participating in civil unrest that broke out in the Gulf country last December, but they had not been tried. Abdel Amir al-Jamri, leader of the Bahraini Shiite Opposition Party, told AFP by telephone in Nicosia.

SEOUL, Oct 2: Despite its worsening economic plight, North Korea keeps strengthening its military, already the world's fifth largest, the latest South Korean defence white paper said Monday, reports AP.

The 1995-96 white paper, compiled by the Defence Ministry, said the communist North's military's concentrating on development of its intermediate-range missiles based on the Russian Scud.

The country is currently believed to be capable of producing 100 Scud-type missiles a year with an estimated range of 300 kilometres (190 miles) and 500 kilometres (310 miles), it said.

Earlier reports said the North's military has successfully tested new intermediate-range missiles which go more than three times as far and can hit any part of South Korea and western Japan.

The North's main effort is directed at lengthening the missile range with its own

technology, the paper said. The paper said that in the past year, the North increased its ground force to 1.04 million by adding one army division of 10,000 members.

The North also beefed up its navy and air force, bringing the total number of its troops to well over 1.2 million, the world's fifth largest, it said.

Citing the North's military buildup as a reason, South Korea is also seeking to drastically increase its military spending. In the 1996 government budget, the military is set to receive 16 billion dollars, or 16 per cent of the total.

The border between the two Koreas — still technically at war — is the world's most heavily fortified.

Despite its economic difficulties, North Korea reportedly spends more than 25 per cent of its gross national product a year on its military.

5 killed during strike in Karachi

KARACHI, Oct 2: Five people were killed during the general strike called in Karachi on Sunday by the main opposition group, officials said, reports AFP.

The dead included two civilian employees of the air force whose bodies, which had marks of torture were found in a taxi officials said. Two other people were killed by snipers and the fifth victim in a gunbattle in the centre of Pakistan's largest city.

The strike called by the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), paralysed Karachi, closing all schools, businesses and the Karachi Stock Exchange.

The MQM represents Mohajir Muslim immigrants from India since the sub-continent's partition in 1947, who are Urdu speakers. The predominant language in Sindh province, where Karachi is the main city, is Sindhi.

The MQM is at loggerheads with the government of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

76 people killed, LTTE-held town captured

Lankan troops launch major offensive against Tigers

COLOMBO, Oct 2: Fierce fighting raged in northern Sri Lanka today as troops backed by air and armoured vehicles launched a major offensive against Tamil rebels, leaving at least 76 people dead, defence officials said, reports AFP.

Nearly 7,500 soldiers moved from the Palaly military complex in the Jaffna Peninsula and launched operation "thunder strike" against positions of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the military said.

Military spokesman Sarath Munasinghe described the operation as a "major offensive." He said there was stiff resistance from the Tigers who fired a barrage of mortar bombs to slow down the military advance.

A Defence Ministry statement said 19 soldiers were killed and 68 soldiers wounded in the fighting which began Sunday. The military also claimed it killed

at least 51 Tamil Tigers and wounded an estimated 200.

"Troops supported by armour and artillery were able to overcome enemy resistance causing heavy casualties to the enemy," the ministry statement said adding that an area of 21 square kilometers was captured from the rebels.

For its part, the LTTE's clandestine radio admitted that heavy battles were raging in their northern Jaffna Peninsula but said they were resisting the military advance against them.

The LTTE's clandestine Voice of Tigers did not give its own casualties but said six civilians were killed by the army while another 53 civilians were wounded in long range attacks of the security forces.

The day's death toll was 76 — including 19 soldiers, 51 Tamil Tigers and six civilians — based on claims by the military as well as the Tigers.

The tigers placed the

army strength of the latest drive at 5,000 ground troops and said an equal number of civilians had fled the battle zone and sought refuge in the western part of the Peninsula.

"Aerial and artillery bombardments are being extensively used to pave the way for the ground troops to advance. LTTE fighters are giving stiff resistance in order to halt the military advance," the LTTE said in a separate statement issued from its London office today.

Reuter adds: Sri Lankan troops backed by tanks, artillery and aircraft have captured a town in the northern Tamil Tiger guerrilla stronghold of Jaffna, military sources said today.

"We advanced towards Atchuevely and the town is now under our control," the officer told Reuters.

Rebel radio on Sunday reported heavy fighting in Jaffna, saying army tanks and armoured vehicles were

moving from the Palaly Airbase towards rebel-held areas.

It said shells had been hitting the Atchuevely area since Sunday morning.

Chief defence spokesman Brigadier Sarath Munasinghe denied the movement of troops signalled the start of the planned major offensive against the LTTE which has been expected before monsoon rains start in mid-October.

The government has said it wants to crush the rebels after they unilaterally broke a truce in April and resumed hostilities, refusing to consider a government peace plan offering extensive autonomy to Tamils.

Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte was quoted by the state-owned Daily News Today as saying the government would not slow down or abandon the war but it would be fought to a finish within two or three months.



Sarajevo children run with a United Nations flag through the frontline suburb of Dobrinja Sunday as they enjoy a peaceful day. The threat of shelling and sniping has receded in the Bosnian capital since NATO launched airstrikes on Bosnian Serb positions overlooking the city. — AFP/UNB photo

DPRK beefs up military despite economic plight

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'Junta won't discuss political reform with Suu Kyi'

BANGKOK, Oct 2: Myanmar's military government will not discuss political reform with democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi as a military-appointed convention is the proper forum for such debate, Yangon's ambassador to Thailand said, reports Reuter.

Ambassador Tin Winn, in an interview with the Bangkok Post daily published today, said there was no need for debate elsewhere because the convention was progressing smoothly.

The national convention has met intermittently since January 1993 to draft the guidelines of a new constitution.

"As the process is going very smoothly we don't need dialogue with anybody," Tin Winn told The Post. The ambassador was not available for comment today.

Since her release last July after six years under house arrest, Suu Kyi has repeatedly called for talks with

Myanmar's ruling military body, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

But the SLORC has made no public response to her appeal except to tell a visit-

France sending warships towards Comoro Islands

MORONI, Comoro Islands, Oct 2: France flexed its muscles today sending warships towards the Comoro Islands' three days after the government of President said Mohamed Djohar was overthrown by French soldier of fortune Bob Denard, reports Reuter.

Foreign journalists in the seaside capital Moroni said one warship had already appeared off the coast but made no attempt to enter the port. French military officials in Paris said, Several more were trailing behind.

ing U.S. official last month that they were considering talking with the 49-year-old Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

The majority of the 700 delegates at the national convention, which is due to meet again later this month, were hand-picked by the military.

The convention has already agreed on clauses of a new charter which would exclude Suu Kyi from participating in politics because she is married to a foreigner.

The meeting has also agreed to the military's instructions to enshrine it with a "leading role" in future politics.

Exiled dissidents have dismissed the proceedings as an unrepresentative "sham" and Suu Kyi herself, in talks with a U.S. congressman in February 1994, said it was a "farce".

Highest state of security at US airports ordered

WASHINGTON, Oct 2: Airports across the United States have been ordered into the highest state of security since the Persian Gulf War as a defence against possible terrorist attacks, reports AP.

Secretary of Transportation Federico Pena didn't cite any specific threats in issuing the order Sunday, saying only, "Based on several current and future events, more security measures are now warranted."

But a department official said the increased security was related to several sensitive events — a group of militant Muslims being found guilty Sunday in a New York terrorism trial, the signing of a Mideast peace treaty last week, the visit this week by Pope John Paul II and United Nations' 50th anniversary celebration this month.

"There is a general level of possible threats that we're vulnerable to because of several things," said the official.

Off the Record

Miracle still happens

BTEGHRIN, Lebanon: The discovery of the perfectly preserved body of a mysterious priest, who some believe died two centuries ago, has topped a list of so-called divine signs which have swept Lebanon, reports AFP.

Experts and church officials say the wave of happenings illustrates the Lebanese craving for miracles, particularly among the Christian minority, in a bid to make sense of life and fill a void left by the 1975-1990 civil war.

When reports began trickling in from the village of Bteghrin in August that the intact body of a priest had been found side by side with remains of five other sin a tomb beneath St Georges Greek Orthodox Church, the pilgrimage started.

Young and old, sick and healthy all rushed to the Metn mountain northeast of Beirut with a prayer on their lips and hopes their wounds and fears will be handled.

The mother of 11-month-old Eliane Abdel Sater was among the first, hoping her daughter would be cured of a severe gastro-intestinal disorder.

And Nawal Abdel Sater said the priest performed a miracle on the night of August 6 as she proudly showed off her cheerful baby with a fine line across her chest and abdomen which she said was a holy cross.

During the war, there were repeated reports of a statue of the Virgin Mary, Harissa, weeping or turning towards Beirut where violence and ruin prevailed.

The church remains cautious without dismissing "divine signs."

But Bishop Georges Khodr, head of the Greek Orthodox Church for mount Lebanon, advocates caution, saying "miracles" can also draw people away from their faith.

Villagers believe he is Father Tarios Waked Sliba, who reportedly said on his deathbed he would return in 200 years.

Nicotine gum — a remedy for tobacco addiction

ROCKVILLE, Maryland: Habitual smokers may soon be able to chew their way out of addiction, trading cigarettes for nonprescription nicotine gum at about the same cost and without the hassle of seeing a doctor, reports AP.

A federal drug advisory panel recommended Thursday that Nicorette gum be sold over the counter to adults who want to kick the habit.

The Food and Drug Administration advisers spent nearly a day reviewing arguments, facts and figures before agreeing that nicotine-laced gum can work, has few adverse side effects and isn't very susceptible to abuse.

For one thing, it tastes like metal, said Jack Ziegler, an executive with SmithKline Beecham, the Philadelphia-based company that markets Nicorette in the United States.

"I would characterize its taste as palatable," he said. Using Nicorette correctly means you can't just chomp and crack away; Nicorette must be masticated slowly to work properly, and given short resting periods up inside the cheeks.

Nicorette would be aimed at the committed quitter, said Ziegler. SmithKline has earmarked "tens of millions of dollars" for advertising and marketing, and plans to set the gum price high enough to scare off impulse buyers, children and people who aren't sure they're ready to stop.

"A personal commitment on the part of the smoker is critical to success," he said "This is not a magic bullet."

Ziegler said SmithKline plans to sell the gum in two kits. The first would be an introductory package, retailing for about 40 dollars, that would include a six-week dosage of gum; a programme guide and a user tape. The packet would encourage users to call a toll-free telephone number to join a "committed quitters' programme", because research has shown a higher success rate for people who use the drug in a controlled programme.

Rift in JKLF threatens factional fighting

SRINAGAR, Oct 2: Still in his 20s, pencil-thin, weakened by a heart ailment and his years in Indian prisons, Yasin Malik was the unlikely hope of the people of Kashmir to lead them peacefully to independence, reports AP.

When he was released from jail 18 months ago, the former guerrilla leader called on his people to lay down their arms to allow talks with New Delhi, and he tried to unite the splintered separatist movement under his banner of moderation.

Hopes for unity faded, then virtually ended in mid-September when a militant faction broke away from Malik's Jammu-Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) and vowed to resume the war with India.

Now it seems possible that the two factions of the biggest Kashmiri rebel group (JKLF) will be fighting each other instead of Indian

troops.

"Our movement is on the verge of a civil war," Amanullah Khan, leader of the breakaway faction, warned this past week at a news conference in Islamabad, Pakistan.

About the same time, Malik's military commander, Rafiq Ahmed Dar, bundled an associated Press reporter and other journalists into cars and took them to a JKLF hideout in Kashmir.

Fifty guerrillas showed off machine guns and other weapons that had been hidden away after Malik was freed from prison in May 1994. Dar made clear the arsenal was being kept ready in case of fighting with Khan's faction.

The split in the JKLF was a setback for India's hopes of negotiating a settlement with Muslim militant groups that have been fighting for Kashmir's secession since 1989.

UK politicians for changes in Westminster system of govt

LONDON, Oct 2: Perhaps the greatest legacy Britain's former colonies have of centuries of imperial rule is their form of government, modelled on the "Mother of Parliaments" in London, reports Reuter.

But British politicians are now wondering whether the Westminster system of government, developed in the 19th century, is really suitable for Britain in the 21st century.

If the opposition Labour Party wins the next election, and especially if its victory is narrow, Britain could look to other countries' parliaments and electoral systems for ideas on updating its own.

An electoral system from Germany or Ireland; devolution the Spanish way; a Bill of Rights to match that of the United States; a parliamentary upper house, like those everywhere else, on merit not inheritance all are possible.

The conditions for reform are there now in a way

they have not been for a very long time," said Lindsay Cooke, communications chief of constitutional reform pressure group Charter 88.

On the most contentious issue, the electoral system, even many in the Labour Party who want to keep Britain's traditional system agree the time has come to decide the issue once and for all.

"There has been a debate challenging the legitimacy of first-past-the post for 30-40 years... It's time to bring that to a conclusion," said Jack Straw, Labour's home affairs spokesman who opposes proportional representation.

Labour has promised a referendum on proportional representation during its first term of office. If it shows signs of backsliding on this pledge, it is certain to be harried by the minority Liberal Democrats.

"Electoral reform is not an optional extra," Paddy Ashdown, leader of Liberal Democrats, who won 18 per cent of the vote but just 20

seats in the 651-member House of Commons at the last general election, told last month's party conference.

The conservatives have ruled for 16 years despite winning only 43 per cent of the vote at successive elections.

Reform would "guarantee Britain will never again return to the arrogance and abuse of minority Tory (Conservative) rule at Westminster," said Ashdown. His call for reform is also based on pure party interest.

If Labour fails to win an overall majority in Parliament in the next election, which must be held by May, 1997, it may seek the Liberals as a coalition partner. Ashdown believes his party would risk a haemorrhage of votes if it accepted an alliance with Labour.

Before supporting Labour, he wants an assurance that the following election would be conducted under a proportional system to guarantee his party's survival.

Under proportional rep-

resentation, political parties win seats in Parliament in proportion to the votes cast for them in the country.

Under Britain's first-past-the post system, the candidate receiving the most votes in each single member seat is elected.

In Germany, half the seats are filled as in Britain. The rest are distributed so that parties winning at least five per cent of the national vote have representation in Parliament proportional to their backing in the country.

This German system has some advocates in Britain. Labour and the Liberal Democrats recently agreed a form of it to elect a proposed 129-member Scottish Parliament to which both are committed.

Some 73 members would be elected in single seats and 56 others would come from party lists to ensure proportional representation.

The Liberal Democrats favour the Irish single transferable vote system under which electors number can-

didates in multi member seats in order of preference.

The two parties also want a Welsh Senate and are willing to see regional Parliaments in England if there is a demand for them.

This is referred to as "devolution Spanish style" after the way Madrid has allowed limited self-government for regions with strong identity such as Catalonia and the Basque country.

The two parties are also committed to a bill of rights to counteract what they say has been a whittling away of personal freedoms under the Conservatives.

Labour's first step towards this aim would be to incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights into British Law, meaning Britons could appeal against breaches in British courts.

Labour has also promised to abolish the right of hereditary peers to vote in the House of Lords. This would mean the historic Upper House of Parliament would be made up largely of people

created peers for life by successive prime ministers in reward for their achievements.

All this constitutional change would make a formidable legislative programme for a Labour government, which also plans to reverse many laws introduced during 16 years of Conservative rule.

The Conservatives oppose constitutional change, saying electoral reform could mean minority governments and devolution could lead to a break-up of Britain.

Prime Minister John Major told his party's Scottish conference he would fight a Parliament in Edinburgh "as long as I have heart and voice."

But Charter 88's Cooke is optimistic. "People used to say there is no real interest in this country in the way we are governed," she said.

"I think this has been disproved. The fact that the Labour Party has moved so far in a relatively short period of time is very significant."

China to accept summit meet in New York

BEIJING, Oct 2: China will accept a summit meeting in New York if the White House lacks the "political will" to give Chinese President Jiang Zemin a state welcome in Washington, official news reports said Monday, reports AP.

"If the U.S. side really has problems, then a meeting in New York is also all right," the Xinhua News Agency said, paraphrasing Foreign Minister Qian Qichen.

It said Qian spoke in an interview Saturday with Chinese reporters in New York.

After failing to resolve the matter during a meeting between Qian and U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher earlier in the week, the two governments were continuing discussions over whether and how a summit might take place.

Jiang plans to travel to New York in late October for celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations.