

BRIEFLY



Cuban President Fidel Castro (R) and Chinese President Jiang Zemin (L) during official welcoming ceremonies on Thursday for the Cuban leader at the Great Hall of the People. President Castro is on a nine-day first-ever visit to China. —AFP/UNB photo

DPRK army captain defects to ROK: A North Korean army captain has defected to South Korea via an unidentified third country, South Korea's intelligence agency said yesterday. AFP reports from Seoul. The agency for National Security Planning (NSP) identified the defector as Ahn Yong-Gil, 38, an engineering staff officer at the General Rear Services Bureau of the North Korean People's Army.

Bus collision kills 13 in Mexico: Two buses slammed into each other in northwestern Mexico, killing 13 people and injuring 14 others, a police spokesman said on Wednesday. Reuter reports from Mexico City. The spokesman said one bus drove head-on into the other as it was passing a truck around a blind curve. Both drivers were among the dead, state news agency Notimex said.

Palestinian shot dead in WB: Three gunmen shot dead a Palestinian man on Wednesday and left his body riddled with 30 bullets in a field on the outskirts of this West Bank town, witnesses said, AFP reports from Nablus. Sabi Aysheh, 40, was declared dead on arrival at hospital after witnesses heard the shots and went to his aid. His body was found about four kilometres (2.5 miles) from his home in the old district of Nablus.

1 sentenced to death in Algeria: An Algerian court sentenced a Muslim militant to death on Wednesday and jailed eight for between one and 10 years for belonging to armed militant groups, and financing and harbouring militants, the Algerian official news agency APS said, Reuter reports from Paris. The militant sentenced to death by Tizi Ouzou criminal court in northeastern Algeria was tried in his absence and was still on the run, APS said.

Violence claims 3 in Tripura: Three persons were killed and 14 others injured in different incidents of violence in Tripura on Wednesday while two persons were killed and 13 others injured when underground insurgents of the National Liberation Front of Tripura looted a branch of the United Bank of India, one constable was killed and another injured when suspected insurgents ambushed a police party, PTI reports from Agartala.

US embassy transfer may hinder ME peace: Arafat

UNITED NATIONS, Nov 30: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said on Wednesday a vote by the US Congress to transfer the American Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem could undermine the Middle East peace process, reports Reuter.

Arafat's comment came in a message to the UN committee on the exercise of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people as it marked the UN Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian.

The day marks the anniversary of the 1947 General Assembly resolution to partition Palestine into Arab and Jewish states.

Arafat's message, read by the Palestine Liberation Organisation's UN observer, Nasser al-Kidwa said: "We have to protect the peace process from anything that might jeopardise it, like the crime of assassinating the late prime minister, Yitzhak

Rabin of Israel, or any other attempt similar to the decision taken by the American Congress to transfer the American Embassy to Jerusalem."

He was referring to a vote by Congress last month to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem by May 1999.

Arafat said this was a "serious precedent that threatens to undermine the peace process because it runs counter with the stance of the current American administration for which we thanked it, and all the other previous administrations.

He said it also went against an agreement to deal with Jerusalem and other so-called final status issues in talks due to begin next year and ran counter to "international legality" and resolutions barring annexation of Jerusalem and treating it as part of the occupied territories.

LTTE hands over 6 soldiers to ICRC, strike paralyses Tamil Nadu Army consolidating positions after capturing Jaffna Town

COLOMBO, Nov 30: Sri Lankan troops today began consolidating their positions after capturing most of Jaffna Town in the island's north and were poised to overwhelm the Tamil rebel bastion soon, the military said, reports AFP. Soldiers were setting up sandbag bunkers and road blocks inside the heavily built-up area before storming the town centre to seize control of key government buildings, a military spokesman said. "A process of clearing mines and booby traps laid by the Tigers is in progress," the spokesman said, adding that the army had not wanted to attempt an advance in the past two days because they wanted to strengthen defences before going in.

The main civil administration building in Jaffna, the district secretariat, was yet to be brought under army control, the military spokesman said. A senior minister told Parliament on Wednesday that troops have wrested more than 55 per cent of Jaffna from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte, a relative of President Chandrika Kumaratunga leading the military drive launched on October 17, said security forces were under orders to move slowly to minimise casualties to themselves and reduce damage to public and private property in Jaffna. "In a few days, we will

capture Jaffna," he told parliament during a debate on the defence budget, hours after military officials said that the LTTE was putting up fierce resistance. Meanwhile, Tamil Tiger guerrillas have handed over six capture Sri Lankan soldier to the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC), officials said today. The men arrived at the government-held northeastern port of Trincomalee on an ICRC escorted ship coming from the rebel-held port of Point Pedro, in the northern peninsula of Jaffna, the officials said. It was not immediately clear when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), captured the six soldiers. The

LTTE is known to be holding dozens of security personnel. Another reports from New Delhi adds, a 12-hour strike called to protest the Sri Lankan military offensive against Tamil Tiger guerrillas paralysed the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, today the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported. State-owned buses were off the roads in the Tamil Nadu capital Madras and other towns and most shops were closed, the news agency said. Train services were halted in parts of the state. The dawn-to-dusk shutdown was called by more than half-a-dozen political parties and Tamil groups in the Indian coastal state separated from Sri Lanka by a narrow strip of sea.

Syria releases hundreds of prisoners

NICOSIA, Nov 30: Syria has released hundreds of political prisoners under an amnesty decree by President Hafez al-Assad earlier this month, the human rights group Amnesty International said Wednesday, reports AFP. The group said possibly more than 1,000 prisoners, the majority imprisoned for membership of the Muslim Brotherhood, had been released in a gesture to mark the 25th anniversary of Assad's coming to power on November 16. Foreign nationals held in various prisons were also freed, it said "by releasing those prisoners the Syrian government has taken a positive step towards improving its human rights situation," Amnesty International said.

Kashmiris protest against killing

SRINAGAR, Nov 30: Several hundred Kashmiri Muslims took to the streets of a town north of here today to denounce the alleged killing of two Kashmiri men picked up by Indian troops on Tuesday, reports AFP. Witnesses said an incensed crowd of several hundred people marched through Tral town, 35 kilometers (21 miles) north of this summer capital, with the bodies of the two men who they alleged were killed while in custody. The crowd shouted slogans such as "we want freedom" and "punish the killers" before staging a sit-in.

Syria intervenes to stop Hezbollah attacks on Israel

WASHINGTON, Nov 30: Syria has intervened to stop rocket attacks on Israeli territory by the Shi'ite Lebanese group Hezbollah, the State Department said on Wednesday, reports AFP. "Both Israel and Syria have acted to stop the violence," said State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns. "We are glad the Katyusha rocket attacks have stopped." Secretary of State Warren Christopher had two more telephone conversations with his Syrian counterparts Farouk el Chareh on Wednesday and also had talked to Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, he said. On Tuesday, Christopher called Chareh to ask Syria to intervene with Hezbollah to end the attacks. "We believe Syria has some influence on the Hezbollah," Burns said. Christopher did not speak directly with members of the Lebanese government, but the US Embassy in Beirut did, he said.



Britain's Queen Elizabeth and Duke of Edinburgh (L) with Bill Clinton (R) and Hillary as they arrived at Buckingham Palace, on Wednesday during his three-day visit to Britain, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. —AFP/UNB photo

Feud in West Bengal Congress (I) takes new turn for worse

CALCUTTA, Nov 30: The battle for supremacy in the West Bengal Congress (I) which apparently remained confined for some days to backstage maneuvering by the Somen Mitra and Mamata Banerjee camps, has again taken a turn for the worse, reports PTI. The latest round of factional squabbles, political observers here feel, was sparked off when the PCC chief, Mitra, faced hostile protest by a section of Congress workers during a public meeting at Udayanarayanpur in Howrah district on Saturday, the workers questioned Mitra why

he did not attend the Mamata Banerjee's sit-in dharna. Talking to PTI here on Wednesday Mitra said that those, who were trying to use the party's frontal organisations as the "parallel pradesh Congress would not be tolerated and firm action would be taken against them." Warning against any attempt to run parallel outfits, Mitra said, "I have no quarrel with any Congress leader. Nor do I have any difference with the Youth Congress. But those Congress leaders who have not got berths

in the PCC set-ups are out to exploit the Youth Congress platform for their personal gains." Meanwhile, the West Bengal Congress-I president, Somen Mitra, yesterday said that any move by the Indian ambassador in USA, Siddhartha Shankar Ray to return to West Bengal politics would not be welcome. He was reacting to a report in a section of the press here suggesting that Ray was trying to stage a comeback in West Bengal politics before the forthcoming state assembly and Lok Sabha elections.



Egyptians celebrate on Wednesday in front of the TV building in Cairo after voting in the legislative elections. Nearly 20 millions Egyptians voted to elect 444 deputies. —AFP/UNB photo

4 killed in violence Manipulations alleged in Egyptian polls

CAIRO, Nov 30: Vote-counting in Egypt's parliamentary elections has led to more complaints by opposition candidates who had already alleged widespread abuses by police and the ruling party during polling, reports Reuter. Agents for candidates in two Cairo constituencies said only representatives of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) were able to witness the count in many centres. An agent for Islamist candidates in the working-class areas of Sharabia and Al-Zawiya Al-Hamra said police moved ballot boxes to a local police station when it became clear that NDP candidates were losing. Meanwhile, four people were killed, including two elderly women, and scores were injured as Egyptians voted for a new parliament on Wednesday, security sources said.

Indian newspapers blast govt for corruption

NEW DELHI, Nov 30: Indian newspapers launched a fresh assault on the government on Wednesday over corruption following charges that a minister had allotted patrol pump dealerships meant for the poor to friends and contacts, reports AFP. "Politicians in power, having monopolised wholesale corruption, have moved into retail corruption," screamed the mass-circulation Hindustan Times Daily. "Favouritism and nepotism are necessary accessories." Minister of State for Oil and Natural Gas Satish Sharma, the target of the accusations, has denied any wrong doing. But the Delhi High Court, in response to public interest litigation, has directed Sharma and the state-run agencies involved in the distribution of petrol pump and natural gas dealerships to explain in the situation.

In an editorial, the Pioneer newspaper urged the government of Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao to conduct its own probe into the charges. "Given the fact that the judicial process in India moves at a rather sedate pace, it would behoove the government to carry out its own investigations into the allegations," The Pioneer said. "If they are proved true, it would be unfortunate if the minister were allowed to continue in his job till the court reaches that conclusion," it added. The Hindustan Times alleged that Sharma had used the distribution of the coveted dealerships to repay political favours. He is considered close to Rajiv Gandhi's Italian-born widow, Sonia Gandhi, who wields formidable clout in the Congress.

Off the Record

Brown dwarf a missing link between stars, planets

WASHINGTON: More than a planet but less than a star, the celestial body known as a "brown dwarf" had been a cold, dark mystery until Wednesday when astronomers showed evidence this dwarf is real, reports Reuter. The brown dwarf in question, called GL229B is located 18 light-years from earth - 108 trillion miles (173.8 trillion km) - in the constellation Iepus, not far from Orion, scientists said at a news conference at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Headquarters. Astronomers had long believed brown dwarfs exist but as they are much darker and cooler than stars, they are hard to spot. And since they are smaller and dimmer than many stars, they could be mistaken for big planets. But evidence provided by an image made by NASA's orbiting hubble space telescope and the ground-based telescope on Mount Palomar in California is conclusive, the scientists said. "Brown dwarfs have been for years hypothetical objects... there have been a lot of false alarms," NASA scientist Steven Maran said. "Now we have what is probably the definitive observation of a brown dwarf." Shrinivas Kulkarni of the California Institute of Technology, who was on the team of astronomers that discovered GL229B in October 1994, called brown dwarfs the "missing link" between stars and planets. In fact, GL229B looks a lot like the planet Jupiter and even has Jupiter-like quantity of methane in its atmosphere, a common trait for giant gaseous planets.

Tale of a misidentified tomb

JERUSALEM: Archaeologists said on Wednesday they had misidentified a tomb recently uncovered in central Israel as that of the Maccabees, Jewish rebels who inspired the Hanukkah holiday, reports Reuter. In a terse statement, the Israel antiquities authority said a "laboratory analysis showed archaeologists had misread an ancient Hebrew inscription on the tomb." Discovery of the burial site, during road-widening work, touched off protests by ultra-orthodox Jews who charged the archaeologists were defiling Jewish graves. On Sunday, tens of thousands of devout Jews chanted prayers in a Jerusalem square in a demonstration against the excavations. The antiquities authority said that instead of the Hebrew letters chet, shin, mem - which archaeologists had taken as the beginning of the world Hasmonean, the rebels' family name - the inscription read chet, nun, yud, or han.

Tight security in Belfast amid Clinton's visit

BELFAST, Nov 30: Northern Ireland mounts its biggest security operation in 25 years today when the first US president ever to visit the province flies in to celebrate a fragile 15-month peace, reports Reuter. Bill Clinton's visit to a land scarred by centuries of sectarian hatred puts Washington's stamp of approval on Anglo-Irish efforts to find a formula to draft a political settlement on to a guerilla ceasefire. The security alert went into top gear on Wednesday night when police found two suspected bombs, one only a few minutes' walk from the hotel where Clinton is to stay. Police said the devices appeared amateurish and no claim of responsibility was made from either of the rival guerrilla groups who fought each other for 25 years. Police took no chances. One device was blown up in a controlled explosion while the city centre was cordoned off in scenes reminiscent of the height of Northern Ireland's 25-year "troubles." But no political or sectarian link was made. About 3,000 police have been mobilised for Clinton's momentous trip to the British province where 3,000 people died in a bitter conflict that halted in 1994 with the Irish Republican Army and its Protestant foes declaring truces. Clinton, hailing what he called "the global march for peace" from Bosnia to Northern Ireland, flies into a province where one of the most potent symbols of the conflict will not be on view - 17,000 British troops are to stay confined to barracks. They have been stationed there for a year since the twin ceasefires gave Britain and Ireland a chance to build a peace process aimed at reconciling a Protestant majority which wants to stay British and Catholics who identify with Ireland. Clinton's arrival spurred the British and Irish prime ministers into adding another brick to their "peace wall" on Tuesday night.

8 killed in Kabul rocket attack

KABUL, Nov 30: Three rockets slammed into central Kabul this morning, killing at least eight people, hospital sources said, reports Reuter. They said one rocket landed near the Jami-Masjed market at about 9.30 am 1100 bet, killing two people on the spot. Six of those wounded died later in hospital. A second rocket crashed near the landmark Pul-i-Khisti Blue Mosque and a third nearby. It was not immediately clear if the rockets had been fired by the Islamic Taliban militia besieging Kabul since September. Official Kabul radio said on Tuesday that government forces had gained ground against the Taliban.

5 m Indians will be infected with HIV by 2000: UNDP

NEW DELHI, Nov 30: India, the world's second most populous nation, will have the largest number of AIDS sufferers by the turn of the century and ignorance about the disease remains rampant, experts say reports AFP. According to a UNDP report, 3,900 of every 100,000 Indian adults will be HIV positive (Human Immune Deficiency Virus positive) and 830 of every 100,000 will suffer from full-blown AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) by the year 2000, taking the number of infected Indians to some five million. "It's a guessing game," a top health expert said on condition of anonymity. The number could even swell to 10 million or above.

The National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO), India's premier anti-AIDS body set up by the health Ministry in 1989, says the main constraints are not lack of funds but their poor utilisation and a tendency to sweep the disease under the carpet. "Only 30 to 40 per cent of the 100 million dollars AIDS budget has been utilised," said Durgadas Sengupta, a NACO consultant. "The World Bank has released 85 million dollars for use till 1997 but the funding may stop if we cannot use the money." Godwin said only two to three per cent of the estimated three million HIV positive people in India knew they were infected. Three million people are going to

die by 2000," he said. The National Family Health Survey 1995 found that only 36 per cent of women interviewed in New Delhi had heard of the disease despite relatively high literacy rates and an extensive media campaign in the Indian capital. Experts say testing facilities are restricted to the major cities of New Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay and Madras and some other bigger towns but almost totally lacking in India's hundreds of thousands of villages. "The key point was 1992 when NACO declared HIV cases in all (25) Indian states," Godwin said. Former health minister B Shankarand had gone on record in 1994, however, claiming that

AIDS was not a serious threat in India. New Delhi has become increasingly aware of the economic and human impact of the disease which is estimated to cost the economy 11 billion dollars by 2000 and upset the demographic balance with sizeable annual adult deaths. Ishwar Gilada, founder-head of the 10-year-old Indian health organisation based in Bombay, the country's AIDS hospital, said there would be between 6,000 and 10,000 AIDS-related deaths daily in India from 2000 onwards. "The pandemic has reached the third stage - it is spreading among housewives and children," he said, adding that more than 50 per cent of the blood supply

in India was not tested for seropositivity. A United Nations survey found that six per cent of the estimated 1.6 million people employed by the state-run railways, one of the world's largest networks, will be HIV positive by the end of the decade. India's anti-AIDS campaigns have recently swerved from alarmist slogans about the "killer disease" which boomeranged in Thailand exacerbating social ostracism and discrimination, to messages of tolerance and acceptance. "Any one of us could be HIV positive. Let us accept it, don't deny it," says a new government sponsored poster. "Love your neighbour - especially those with AIDS."

Ex-Indian minister Dinesh Singh dead

NEW DELHI, Nov 30: Dinesh Singh, a veteran Indian politician who served in the cabinets of three prime ministers, died here today following a prolonged illness, hospital officials said, he was 70, reports AFP. Singh, who was a minister without portfolio in the government at the time of his death, died early today at New Delhi's Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital, where he had been admitted several weeks ago. Born on July 19, 1925 Singh was a graduate of the prestigious Doon school in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh and Lucknow University. A former private secretary to India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Singh was elected to the Lok Sabha.