

BRIEFLY

Spain's PM takes oath

Spain's new Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar yesterday took the oath of office before King Juan Carlos at the Zarzuela Palace, AFP reports from Madrid.

The 43-year-old leader of the Popular Party on Saturday was sworn in as premier, ending 13 years of socialist rule and making him Spain's first Conservative leader since the country emerged from the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco in 1975.

6 die as boat capsizes in Philippines

Six people were confirmed dead after a motorboat, carrying a cargo of seaweed, capsized in a freak storm off the waters of nearby Culasian Town, the coast guard said yesterday, AFP reports from Cebu, Philippines.

The wooden-hulled boat was carrying 15 passengers and a load of seaweed, which is grown commercially in the central Philippines, when a freak storm broke out on May 3 causing the vessel to capsize.

Six bodies have been recovered so far while nine survivors were picked up by rescuers, the coast guard said in a report.

Polls in Algeria by June '97

Algerian President Liamine Zeroual said yesterday that legislative elections would be held by June 1997, AFP reports from Algiers.

He told a press conference that the ballot would be preceded by national conference this summer grouping "all the forces of the nation" and a referendum on amending the constitution, the official APS news agency reported.

UN-Iraq talks resume today

Negotiations between Iraq and the United Nations on implementing an oil for food deal resumes today in New York, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz said Sunday, AFP reports from Baghdad.

"We have given instructions for our delegation to go to New York" to resume the negotiations today following an agreement with UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali, Aziz told the official Iraqi news agency INA.

9 Emmy winner Bill Byers dead

Emmy-winning arranger and musician Bill Byers, who worked with such greats as Duke Ellington, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra and Barbra Streisand, died of cancer on Wednesday, on his 69th birthday, AP reports from Malibu, California.

Byers, who won nine Emmys for his work on TV programmes, began playing piano at age 6 and trombone shortly after with the Hollywood Canteen Kids Band. He was scoring films by the time he was 14. He played in jazz bands and the Benny Goodman Orchestra and began his long association with television as arranger for Sid Caesar's "Your Show of Shows".

16th century Indian pottery found

A team of Argentine archaeologists has discovered 16th century Indian pottery in the basement of one of Buenos Aires' oldest buildings, the scientists said Saturday, AFP reports from Buenos Aires.

Ceramics of the Guarani tribe were found in the basement of a restaurant in the colourful and folkloric neighbourhood of San Telmo. "History forgets that in the beginning, the population of Buenos Aires was 30 per cent Indian and 40 per cent black," said Daniel Shavelzon, Director of the Centre for Urban Archaeology of the University of Buenos Aires.

Inner Mongolia quake toll now 18

The death toll from a major earthquake Friday in the industrial city of Baotou, Inner Mongolia has climbed to 18, but life was beginning to return to normal, state television reported Sunday, AP says from Beijing.

The region Sunday was jolted by an aftershock with a 4.3 preliminary magnitude, China Central Television reported, the largest of the more than 400 aftershocks since Friday's 6.4 magnitude quake.

Blast kills 2 in Algiers

A bomb exploded in a bus outside the capital, killing two people in the latest violence in Muslim militants' 4-year drive to overthrow the government, AP reports from Algiers.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for Saturday's attack in Tizi Ouzou, a key city in the Kabylie region outside the capital, Algiers. Europe 1 radio reported.

Bulgarian minister resigns

Bulgarian Interior Minister Lubomir Nachev has resigned in the wake of the murder of three policemen. Prime Minister Jean Videnov announced Saturday, AFP reports from Sofia.

Videnov said on state radio that he would be asking parliament next week to name the current Chairman of the Parliamentary National Security Commission, Nikolai Dobrev, to succeed Nachev. Videnov called Friday's killings "an insolent challenge to the whole of society, whose heavy responsibility must be shouldered."

PKK to gear up its activity

The leader of the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Ocalan, has said his organisation would intensify its activity in Turkey, but he pledged it would carry out suicide attacks in Germany, AFP reports from Bonn.

Ocalan was speaking in an interview with German Television Network, ZDF, recorded in his headquarters in the Middle East and scheduled to be broadcast yesterday.

Pak PM urges Indians to elect 'a man of courage and vision'

ISLAMABAD, May 5: Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto said on Saturday she would like India to elect "a man of courage and vision" who could solve the bitter dispute between the two rival neighbours over the Himalayan region of Kashmir, reports Reuters.

She told foreign reporters she had no favourites among parties contesting India's general election, adding her country would do business with whoever formed the next government in New Delhi.

But she said Pakistan was concerned about the possibility of the elections producing a weak coalition government that would lack the will to defuse tension between the two countries.

"I have no favourites at all," Benazir said when asked whom

she would like to win the elections.

But she added: "If you ask me who is my favourite, I would say a man of courage and vision who would have the strength to sit down and say that if there could be a solution to apartheid in South Africa and to the bitter Israeli-Palestinian feud in the Middle East, there could be a solution to the Kashmir dispute."

"Unfortunately, none of the leaders in India has come up with such a statement so far," she said.

Benazir acknowledged that the Kashmir dispute — the cause of two of the three wars between the two countries since their independence from Britain in 1947 — could not be solved overnight.

But she said Pakistan wanted the issue to be put as

separate item on the agenda future India-Pakistan peace talks.

"I am sure that progress will slowly but surely be made if only the Indians will recognise that it is a dispute that needs to be resolved and will not go away."

But Benazir rejected a suggestion that Pakistan take unilateral steps such as offering a no-war pact to the next Indian government or sign the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty without the condition that India must do the same.

"I think any unilateral measure will send a wrong signal to India and it will embolden India further," she said, accusing New Delhi of aggression against Pakistan in all the three wars between the two countries.



Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic (R) shakes hands with residents of Gorazde on Saturday as he visits this Bosnian enclave for the first time after four years. Gorazde was cut from the outside world for years and experienced one of the worst fightings in the four-year long war in Bosnia. — AFP/UNB photo

Times of India opinion poll shows Cong (I) may get 169, BJP 165 seats in Lok Sabha polls

NEW DELHI, May 5: An 11th-hour opinion poll Sunday gave India's ruling Congress (I) a surprise edge in parliamentary elections as the nationwide campaign entered the final and crucial lap, reports AFP.

News agencies said campaigning reached a feverish peak across 183 federal constituencies in 12 states which will go to the hustings on Tuesday, including troubled Kashmir where elections are being held for the first time since 1989.

Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao on Sunday touted the 11-year-old party as India's only possible saviour, the United News of India said.

"An unstable government will only be preoccupied with day-to-day survival and not spare any time on development aimed at improving the socio-economic condition of

the people Rao said on the campaign trail in the eastern state of Orissa.

Rao was later Sunday scheduled to visit the trouble state of Kashmir to muster support for his party in the first elections in the province in seven years. Muslim rebels have vowed to sabotage the Kashmir polls ending May 30.

An opinion poll published by the Times of India daily on Sunday gave the Congress 169 seats in the 545-seat Lok Sabha, or upper house of parliament. The figures would make the Congress the single largest party but not allow it to independently state a claim to power.

The poll said the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, BJP) would bag 165 seats while the National Front, an amalgam of centrist and left parties would get 145 seats.

The Times of India daily today published a poll, based on two nationwide surveys involving 5,000 voters in 25 constituencies.

A string of opinion polls have predicted that the elections to India's 11th parliament would result in a fractured House, with the BJP emerging as the single largest party but not with enough seats to form a government by itself.

The latest Times of India poll now gives the Congress a slight edge in a neck-and-neck race but without a clear majority to claim an independent stake for power.

The Times survey was a shot in the arm from the 11-year-old Congress, which has fared badly in opinion polls in the wake of a giant corruption scandal, factionalism and a leadership challenge to Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao.

Rocket attack damages Iranian embassy in Kabul

NICOSIA, Cyprus, May 5: A rocket attack heavily damaged the Iranian Embassy in Kabul and slightly wounded two staff members during fighting between government and rebel forces, the Islamic Republic News Agency reported, says AP.

The state-run agency, monitored in Cyprus, said late Saturday that the two wounded employees were in "satisfactory" condition following the attack earlier in the day.

The agency attributed its report to Iranian Ambassador Gholamreza Haddadi, who also was quoted as condemning any attacks on residential neighbourhoods.

Despite rekindled hopes for peace talks in Afghanistan, government jets Saturday pounded rebel positions south of Kabul. The rebels responded with a series of rocket attacks on the capital, one of which damaged the embassy.

Tigers attack army road block, kill one

COLOMBO, May 5: Tamil Tiger guerrillas attacked an army road block in northern Sri Lanka, killing one soldier and wounding two others, the defence ministry here said today, reports AFP.

Guns from the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) carried out the attack at Kodikamam in the Jaffna peninsula Saturday after sneaking into the area the army captured from them last month, the ministry said.

It said troops retaliated causing casualties among the guerrillas but no details were given.

The attack came hours after Tiger guerrillas blasted power pylons in north-eastern Sri Lanka, cutting off electricity and stepped up attacks in the region.

The LTTE used explosives to bring down two pylons at Thampalamam in the district of Trincomalee where they also shot dead two policemen, officials said.

Shark livers may help fight brain tumours

WASHINGTON, May 5: A substance in shark livers may help fight certain brain tumours, John Hopkins University scientists has reported, says Reuters.

The substance, squalamine, vastly slows the growth of new blood vessels that nourish solid brain tumours. Without the blood vessels, tumours cannot grow or spread.

Squalamine, a hormone like chemical found in the liver of the dogfish shark, may find a role in chemotherapy, radiation and surgery in treating brain and possibly other solid tumours.

The tests were performed on cells from human, rabbit and rat solid brain tumours, but the substance has not been tested yet on any live animals, the researchers said.

Preliminary clinical trials could start next year on malignant gliomas, the most common and deadly brain tumours, said Dr Michael Zaslloff, executive vice president of Magainin pharmaceuticals, which funded the studies.

Fighting on in Liberia

MONROVIA, Liberia, May 5: Liberia's rebels, many of them teen-agers armed with machine guns, fought furious street battles as hopes for peace faded despite the evacuation of warlord Roosevelt Johnson, reports AP.

The fresh violence came one day after US Marines airlifted Johnson to Ghana for peace talks. But archrival Charles Taylor vowed not to abandon his forces to attend the talks. And Johnson's men continued to fight without him.

The warfare was the worst since a 10-day ceasefire crumbled on Monday. Two main bridges leading into the West African city were under heavy fire. Taylor's forces repeatedly shelled the military barracks that Johnson had seized and occupied for the last month.

Taylor said he had no intention of joining Johnson in Accra, Ghana, for talks to begin Wednesday on ending the six-year old Liberian war. "I welcome the process to have General Johnson evacuated and hope that the electoral process will go on as planned in August this year," he said.

Benazir for resumption of talks with MQM

ISLAMABAD, May 5: Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto called on Saturday for the resumption of talks with a militant ethnic group to end a conflict which has taken thousands of lives in Pakistan's biggest city Karachi, reports Reuters.

She told foreign reporters the gap between her government and the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) of Urdu-speaking immigrants had narrowed.

She would ask the top government negotiator, Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Nabi Dad Khan, to try for a resumption of the talks, she said.

Benazir said the government had taken a series of steps to meet some MQM demands. There had also been "some positive developments" in policy explanations by the ethnic party led Altaf Hussain, who lives in self-imposed exile in Britain.

"I think the gulf between the government and the Altaf group is not that great as it was, say, two years ago," she said.

Benazir said the rate of violence in Karachi had slowed in recent months and the authorities had also shown restraint against the militants.

"There has been some slow but tangible progress," she said.

The government blames the MQM for much of the ethnic and political strife in Karachi, where at least 216 people have been killed this year and more than 2,000 last year.

The MQM wants greater political and economic rights for the Mohajirs Muslims who migrated from other parts of former British India at partition in 1947, and their descendants.

EU ready to help resume Arab-Israeli talks

CAIRO, May 5: Italy's Foreign Minister Susanna Agnelli, whose country holds the rotating presidency of the European Union, said Saturday the EU was ready to help breathe new life into the faltering Arab-Israeli peace process, reports AFP.

"We feel the peace process will be complete only when there is a durable peace for all countries. We assure you that whatever the EU can do to help the peace process, we will do gladly," she said.

Speaking after talks with her Egyptian counterpart Amr Moussa, she said the EU mission had come about because of its "worry about the peace process and what has been happening in the past weeks."

She arrived earlier Saturday at the start of a three-day tour which will also take her to Beirut and Amman.

The EU mission was to "express our feelings and do whatever we can to help," she said, adding "we are not here to say our role is more important than the Americans or French."

After a ceasefire reached in Israel's 16-day war on Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon went into effect on April 27, the European Union stressed the importance of giving fresh impetus to the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Israel suspended its talks with Syria at the start of a wave of Islamic militant suicide bombings in which around 60 people were killed in the Jewish state.

Moussa said they discussed "the future of the peace process and the dangerous situation now present" in their talks Saturday.

Agnelli is accompanied by the deputy foreign ministers of Ireland and Italy, two of the members of the EU troika which also includes Spain.

She is due to meet today with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak as well as with the head of the Arab League, Esmat Abdel Meguid.

Off the Record

Di couldn't make it

ALICANTE, Spain: The Princess of Wales cut short a trip to Spain's southern coast Saturday and caught a flight back to Britain, reports AP.

Diana, traveling with a female friend, arrived at Alicante's airport Friday night and was expected to stay at the five-star Hotel Sidi San Juan on San Juan Beach until Monday at the earliest.

But the hotel said the princess had checked out in time to make an Iberian Airlines flight to Britain.

The princess may have returned home earlier than scheduled because she was receiving too much local and media attention.

"She came here to rest and she couldn't even leave the hotel because of all the media," Josefinia Reina of the Hotel Sidi San Juan said.

As a companion dog is better than man

NEW YORK: Soon-to-be-divorced Halle Berry is licking her emotional wounds with the help of her two devoted Maltese dogs, Pety and Bumper, reports AP.

"Why can't all men be like dogs?" she told People magazine, which interviewed her at the two tiny white pooches snoozed with her on the couch. "They are the only men in my life, because they have unconditional love."

As Berry sat alone in the 1.6 million dollar California home she bought with baseball star David Justice, she wondered what went wrong with their storied romance.

"Every day wasn't bliss, but I didn't see that our problems were so great we'd be divorcing," Berry said.

Justice, an Atlanta Braves outfielder, sees it differently. "She wasn't the same person I was with before we got married," Justice said. "She'd get mad when I watched ESPN," sports television, he said. "And every time she saw a picture of me with a woman, any woman who might have been standing by my side, she thought I was cheating. I've never known a girl who could throw a tantrum like she does."

Berry, whose credits include "Jungle Fever," "The Flintstones" and "Executive Decision," said she's not going to resume dating any time soon.

"After something as dramatic as a divorce, you have to step back and take a look at things," she said. "I hope I'll do things differently next time."

Women march for restrooms

TAIPEI: Women marched into men's rooms at a train station Saturday, protesting what they said was a shortage of women's restrooms in public buildings, reports AP.

The 30 demonstrators, mostly college students, started the men in the men's rooms at bustling Taipei Railway Station.

They cited an Education Ministry survey of elementary schools that found that for every 100 students, boys have access to 9.75 toilets, while girls have 3.1 toilets.

The protesters put up signs on the doors of the women's washrooms that said, "When women's restrooms are full, go to the men's."

Organisers complained that some consider it shameful even to talk about women's using restrooms.

"Women never dare to speak aloud of their basic needs," Sun Rei-shui, a march organiser, wrote in the China Times.

ANC warned of fresh bloodshed in Kwazulu-Natal

DURBAN, South Africa, May 5: South Africa's ruling ANC warned of fresh bloodshed in volatile Kwazulu-Natal province after eight people including three policemen, were shot and wounded during a Zulu protest march, reports Reuters.

We need the serious intervention of the national government in this province. We are definitely seeing the province going to ashes, provincial African National Congress (ANC) spokesman Bekhi Cele told state radio.

Police said three policemen and five Zulu protesters were wounded in clashes on Saturday during a march of 7,000 Zulus protesting against a ban by President Nelson Mandela's government on the carrying of dangerous weapons

Some Kashmiri militants change their course of independence move

SRINAGAR, May 5: Some Kashmiri militants are changing the course of a six-year war in their northern Indian state by abandoning the independence movement and begun fighting their former allies, reports AP.

Working side by side with Indian forces, these gangs have targeted the most powerful separatist groups — the ones that want Kashmir to become part of neighbouring Pakistan and espouse Islamic fundamentalism.

The Indians call them counterinsurgents. Many Kashmiris brand them as renegades. International human rights organisations say they are mercenaries who employ the tactics of terrorism, kidnapping and assassination.

Knowing the local language and people, some of them

work as spies who provide Indian soldiers with inside information about the militant groups and their supply routes.

Brig PSS Bindra, the Indian army commander in Kashmir Valley, said a crackdown by his forces and the counterinsurgency has forced the militant groups to change their strategy.

In the last seven months, he said, the militants have all but stopped attacking military bases, outposts and convoys, and mostly limited themselves to less risky attacks with remote-control mines aimed at military units walking through towns and villages.

Even Syed Ali Geelani, 66, the chairman of Jamaat-e-Islami, the influential pro-militant political group, said the counterinsurgency has reduced the strength of the two

most powerful rebel groups, Hizbul Mujahideen and Harkatul-Ansar.

"This is the toughest weapon the Indian armed forces have ever come up with against our movement," Geelani said. "These people who are helping the security forces know every inch of the valley, including the hideouts of the militants."

Geelani's eyes brimmed with tears as he acknowledged, "This is the first time the Indian military has won over Kashmiris."

But Geelani, jailed many times by India, also vowed: "These renegades will not crush our mass movement because the public is beginning to understand who these people are."

Some of the counterinsurgent groups have launched political parties that are now campaigning in a parliamentary election that will be held later this month in Kashmir.

It will be the first balloting in the region since the insurrection erupted in late 1989, and India sees it as evidence that the separatist revolt is being contained and normalcy is returning to Kashmir.

The militants have urged Kashmiris to stay home on Election Day. But heavily armed counterinsurgents of the Ikhan-ul-Muslimeen group have been seen guarding candidates they support and ordering people to defy the rebels' election boycott.

The insurgents are fighting for independence because they believe India occupied Kashmir illegally in 1947, when British colonialists left South Asia and made a section of India the Islamic nation of Pakistan.

India and Pakistan have fought two wars over Kashmir, which is divided between them by a ceasefire line. India's portion, Jammu-Kashmir, is the only state in the predominantly Hindu nation with a Muslim majority.

More than 13,000 people have died in the fighting between dozens of rebel groups and hundreds of thousands of Indian forces deployed in Jammu-Kashmir.

The counterinsurgency movement sprang up after Indian forces began in 1995 to free captured militants who renounced the insurrection.

Paying those who surrendered 5,000 rupees (dus 150) for every weapon they turned in, India offered rehabilitation programmes, training them in jobs such as television repair and auto mechanics. They

were allowed to live in military camps or military-protected residential areas.

Those who returned to their villages were licensed to take up arms again to protect themselves against threats or attacks by their former militant groups, said Ram Mohan Rao, the spokesman of the federally controlled government in Jammu-Kashmir.

Javed Ahmad Shaw, a former militant running for Parliament in Srinagar, says the counterinsurgents give a voice to Kashmiris tired of the protracted war with India.

Rights activists contend the counterinsurgents were responsible for the kidnapping and murder in March of Jallil Andrabi, a respected Kashmiri human rights activist and lawyer.

Chechen rebel commander vows to take revenge

SOUTH EASTERN CHECHENIA, Russia May 5: Chechen rebel commander Shamil Basayev vowed today to take revenge before the June presidential elections in Russia for the killing of independence leader Dzhokhar Dudayev and Russian "terrorism," reports AFP.

"Of course I am planning to go as long as Russian troops have not left," said Basayev, who led a spectacular and bloody hostage-taking in the southern Russian town of Budennovsk last June.

"I have a big choice, because Chechnya is small and Russia is big," he said when asked about what sort of action he planned to take.