

Russian soldiers prepare one of the tents in their camp as a polling station in Grozny, Chechnya on Sunday. Russian authorities are going through preparations to start the pre-presidential elections voting in Chechnya in the coming days. The sign says polling station. —AFP/UNB photo

Phoolan rejects offer to head Home Ministry

NEW DELHI, June 10: India's bandit queen, Phoolan Devi, says she has rejected an offer to head the powerful Home Ministry in the new government, explaining that she cannot read or write, reports AFP.

"I fear to become minister because I am illiterate and this may be taken advantage of by some people who want to tarnish my reputation," the former bandit, now in her mid-30s, told the Pioneer newspaper in remarks published today.

She said she was offered the ministry in the 13 party United Front coalition government which took office on June 1, but declined it as she was "aware of my limitations."

Devi, who wore a bullet for the ballot and won an astounding victory from the carpet-weaving district of Mirzapur in the April-May elections on a socialist party ticket, said her mission was to fight injustice.

China, ASEAN for dialogue to lessen tension

BUKITTINGGI, Indonesia, June 10: China and the seven-member association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) agreed on the need for dialogue to lessen tensions in the region, officials said here today, reports AP.

"It must be acknowledged that tensions exist in the region due to long-standing disputes," Indonesia's Izhar Ibrahim said. Ibrahim, the foreign ministry's director general of political affairs and co-chair of the two-day meeting, was addressing the opening session of this second consultation between China and ASEAN.

He warned that these disputes, if not properly managed, could erupt into open conflict threatening regional peace and security and said dialogue on political and security matters should be fostered in the region.

The head of the Chinese delegation, vice foreign minister Tang Jia Xuan, called on China and ASEAN "to discuss our common concerns with sincerity and open-mindedness."

Tigers kill 5 troopers

COLOMBO, June 10: Tamil Tiger guerrillas attacked an army outpost in north central Sri Lanka today, killing five troopers and wounding three others, the Defence Ministry said, reports AP.

Gunmen of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) surprised the soldiers at Paymadu, but army reinforcements were able to beat off the attack, the ministry said.

It said Tiger gunmen also shot dead a police sub-inspector in the northeastern district of Trincomalee.

The latest attacks came a day after Tigers wiped out an entire army patrol, killing 17 soldiers at Jayanthiyaya in the northeastern part of the country.

There has been an escalation of Tiger attacks in the eastern regions following the loss of the rebels' northern citadel of Jaffna to government forces earlier last month.

Yeltsin wants 1st-round victory in June 16 polls

MOSCOW, June 10: President Boris Yeltsin claimed Sunday he's about to achieve something the polls say is impossible: A first-round victory in next week's presidential election, reports AP.

Most reputable polls say a third or so of the voters back Yeltsin and about a quarter are for his main rival, Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov.

But in an interview aired Sunday on independent NTV, Yeltsin said his "intuition" tells him he'll get the 50 per cent plus one he needs on June 16 to avoid a runoff.

What Yeltsin calls intuition, the Communists are already branding election fraud, and they have promised a campaign of protests. The president's team, in turn, says the Communists are actually cooking up riots and a coup.

Gowda govt expected to win confidence vote

NEW DELHI, June 10: H D Deve Gowda went to Parliament for the first time as prime minister Monday, needing a vote of confidence to launch his 13-party minority government, reports AP.

Gowda's centre-left United Front government is expected to win easily the vote with the backing of the Congress party, which lost power in elections in May.

The confidence debate will begin Tuesday, with Parliament scheduled to hold only a brief memorial session Monday for former president Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy, who died June 1.

Voting will take place either Tuesday or Wednesday, depending on how long the debate on it lasts.

Gowda is India's second prime minister since the in-

conclusive election. He was named June 1, the same day a right-wing Hindu nationalist government resigned rather than face a confidence vote that it was certain to lose.

Meanwhile, financial scandals continued to rock the Congress party, moving closer to former Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao. Federal investigators summoned Rao's son, PV Prabhakara Rao, for questioning Sunday in a case involving alleged kickbacks from a Turkish company that sold fertilisers to a state-owned Indian company.

Similar scandals during Rao's five-year tenure contributed to his party's humiliating election defeat.

Although the scandal would not directly affect Gowda, turmoil in the Congress — whose support is essential for the

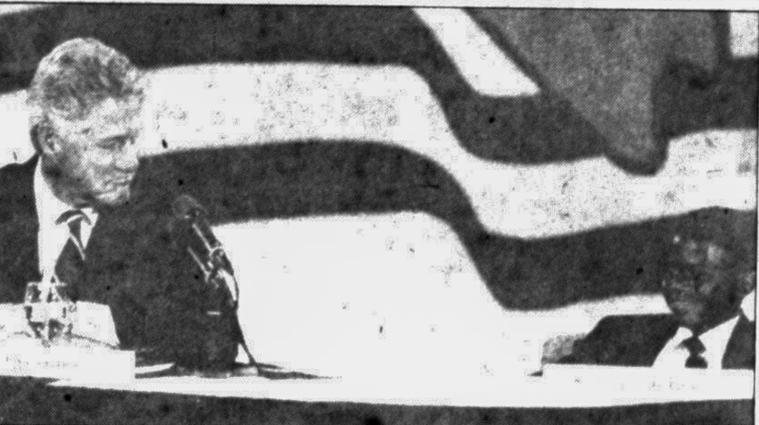
government's survival — can only increase the risk of its collapse.

The younger Rao and the son of another Cabinet minister were alleged to have received 4 m dollars from the Turkish company contracted to supply urea worth 1.3 billion rupees (dhrs 38 million) to National Fertiliser Ltd. news reports said.

Prabhakara Rao denied the charges, saying it was another attempt to malign his father.

In the election, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party won the most seats, but could not win enough allies for a coalition because of its perceived anti-Muslim stance.

Gowda's alliance has 190 seats, far short of a majority in the 545-member lower house of parliament.



President Bill Clinton talks to Stanley Johnson, a participant in the alternative juvenile pilot programme, "New Directions", which targets 10 to 13-year olds teens. Clinton visited Las Vegas meeting the public and campaign contributors during a one day stopover en route to California. —AFP/UNB photo

Communist victory in Russia would shock the West

WASHINGTON, June 10: A communist elected president of Russia. The very thought makes Western government and business leaders nervous. The end of reform and a return of the Cold War — grim images for a world that celebrated the collapse of Soviet communism five years ago, reports AP.

A victory by Gennady Zyuganov in the Russian election on Sunday would shock Westerners, add a new element to the US presidential debate and give ammunition to those already skeptical of the benefits of American assistance to Russia.

But after the initial shock, what happens if Zyuganov defeats Boris Yeltsin?

"A certain reality check is going to have to take hold," said Sen. Dick Lugar of Indiana, an influential voice on foreign policy within the

Republican Party. A strong supporter of continued aid to Russia, particularly to help dismantle nuclear weapons, Lugar conceded that "we're already at a point at which a large number of members of Congress-I think unwisely have decided they really are not in favour of programmes of cooperation of any sort."

"They've come to a clear thought: Not a dime for Russia." Angela Stent, a professor of government at Georgetown University, predicted a Zyuganov victory would "speed up the move in the United States to expand NATO." But European members of the alliance may not be as eager to move ahead with expansion, she said.

And, she said, there also would certainly be a big move in Congress to say, "Let's cut

off all other assistance to Russia, let's forget everything. Let's go back and spend more money on defence."

No one need doubt that the Clinton administration and the governments of all the major industrial nations are rooting for Yeltsin. So are most corporations trying to do business in the already chaotic conditions in Russia.

"What we're reacting to is a great unknown," said Eugene Lawson, president of the US Russia Business Council. "No one knows what Zyuganov would do. I don't think he knows."

One reason for the confusion is that Zyuganov tends to tell western audiences what they want to hear. His message to Russians is far different, blaming the West for Russia's decline and talking about restoring the benefits of the communist system.



A group of models and main sponsors pose for the photographers in front Red Square's St Basil's Cathedral as part of the advertising campaign of a model competition on Sunday. The competition organised worldwide by the New York-based model agency, Elite is recruiting young girls for a final event scheduled this year in Nice. Sixteen-year-old Olga Otrokhova (centre dressed in black) won the event and will represent Russia at the final. —AFP/UNB photo

Centrist govt can solve political crisis: Ciller

ANKARA, June 10: Former Premier Tansu Ciller insisted on Sunday that Turkey could only overcome its political crisis through a broad-based centrist government excluding the islamists, reports AP.

This crisis can be overcome only if the four centre-right and centre-left parties unite to form a government," Ciller told reporters.

She was referring to a possible alliance among her True Path Party, acting Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz's right-wing Motherlands Party, the democratic left and the left-leaning Republican People's Party.

Earlier Sunday, Prime Minister-designate Necmettin Erbakan, leader of the pro-Islamic Welfare Party who has been asked to form a new government, said he was seeking a coalition with right-wing parties.

A conservative coalition set up by Yilmaz and Ciller in

March collapsed last week after a power struggle between the two leaders.

Ciller ruled out a coalition headed by Yilmaz, but said her premiership was not important either, implying she would accept a third person as premier.

Asked about a coalition with Welfare, she repeated: "Our alternative is a centrist government."

Welfare leader Erbakan was asked by President Demirel to form a new cabinet Friday after Yilmaz announced his government's resignation the previous day.

Erbakan will meet leaders of all political parties represented in parliament this week, seeking the support at least Motherland or True Path.

Welfare came top in general elections in December, but failed to secure an absolute majority in parliament to be able to rule on its own.

Off the Record

Bag boy bad boy

MOSCOW: A gang of thieves which included a boy in a bag tried to rob a check room at a clothes market in Perm but were foiled when the child was discovered, reports AP.

The ITAR-Tass news agency said Sunday the entire gang was arrested when they showed up to collect the boy the next morning.

It said the plot unraveled after a shopkeeper saw something moving inside a bag, opened it and found the boy. The child was numb from his confinement, but refused to squeal, the report said.

"He said with pride he wouldn't have moved if the shopkeeper hadn't put a very heavy bag on top of him."

It said the boy was supposed to spend the night rifling bags left in the check room, hid the valuables in his own bag, then wait for the gang to pick him up.

"Satan's Children"

BOLOGNA: Three members of a satanic sect have been arrested following allegations that a toddler had been sexually abused and been put in a coffin with a skeleton during a rite, reports AP.

"Satan's Children" draws some 300 followers in the Bologna area in northcentral Italy. Italian newspapers Sunday quoted authorities as saying,

Bologna Prosecutor Lucia Musti said the men, who were arrested on Saturday, have been charged with sexual abuse of a minor and grave-robbing.

The newspapers reported that the parents of the toddler, 3, became alarmed when he wouldn't eat and had other behavioural problems. When the boy described what happened when in the care of an adult cousin, a sect member the parents went to police, the accounts said.

Police said the sect holds satanic rites in abandoned chapels and cemeteries in the countryside.

In January, the same three members, including the sect's leader, were arrested after a 16-year-old girl, a member, alleged that she was raped during the rites, but the three were let go after a couple weeks in jail, RAI state TV said Sunday.

Italian authorities in the past have looked into other devil-worship groups. Long under investigation, for example, have been groups conducting Black Masses in the "Castelli," an area of hilltowns southeast of Rome known for the site of the papal summer palace.

Cat's kidney transplant!

ORCHARD PARK, New York: Smokey the cat needed a kidney. The donor cat needed a home, reports AP.

They both got what they needed, thanks to a veterinarian and a cat-loving couple.

Dr Ross Litzman of the Orchard Park Veterinary Medical Centre agreed to the four and half hour operation on one condition: That Smokey's owners adopt the stray.

The donor cat, taken in by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, faced being put to sleep if no one adopted him.

BRIEFLY

Polls in Singapore this year:

Singapore's prime minister has said he is ready to hold a general election, expected to be seen as a referendum of his housing and transportation policies, AP reports from Singapore.

The election will be held sometime after the national day on August 9. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong told Singaporean reporters accompanying him on an official visit to Norway, news reports said Monday.

He did not give a date. Poll are not due until April 1997, but were expected to be held this year.

Train derails in Canada:

All 350 residents of the town of Foley were forced out of their homes for several hours after a freight train carrying toxic chemicals derailed, police said, AP reports from Foley, Ontario.

The town was evacuated Sunday after two cars carrying ammonia hydroxide and one full of isopropanol went off the tracks.

Ammonia hydroxide is extremely poisonous and can be fatal if inhaled or absorbed through the skin. Isopropanol is highly flammable and poisonous, said police.

China smashes flesh trade ring:

Chinese police have smashed a kidnapping ring which sold women into slavery in the booming southern town of Shenzhen, a newspaper said yesterday. Reuter reports from Hong Kong.

Shenzhen police recently arrested 30 people involved in the flesh trade and rescued more than 20 abducted young women, the Daily Ming Pao said.

Most of 1,000 women who went missing last year were kidnapped by the group and sold for up to 2,000 yuan (US 250 dollar) a head, it said.

Chopper crashes in Japan:

At least one person was feared dead yesterday after a helicopter crashed near the southern Japanese city of Kagoshima, police and news reports said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

A spokesman for the local fire department said the helicopter was "completely destroyed" in the accident.

It was not clear how many people were travelling in the helicopter but Jiji Press said on body had been pulled from the wreckage.

Clinton begins West Coast tour:

Emphasising law and order and family values, President Bill Clinton began a three-day campaign trip to the West Coast on Sunday by touring a juvenile crime centre in Las Vegas, Reuter reports from Las Vegas.

Visiting Nevada to bolster his election hopes in a traditionally conservative state, Clinton watched juvenile offenders paint over graffiti on a concrete wall before joining in a roundtable discussion on youth crime.

2 found dead in Israel:

Two persons were found shot to death in a car in a rural area of Central Israel on Sunday in a possible guerrilla attack, Israel radio said, Reuter reports from Jerusalem.

"Between Zacharia village and Gefen a car was found containing two bodies apparently we are speaking of a terrorist attack," radio said.

Deadliest violence in 2 months Hezbollah kills 5 Israeli troops in South Lebanon

MARJAYOUN, Lebanon, June 10: Hezbollah guerrillas killed five Israeli soldiers and wounded six in a daybreak ambush in occupied south Lebanon on Monday, the deadliest violence in the area in two months, security sources said, reports AP.

Israeli forces retaliated by shelling Shiite Muslim villages and guerrilla trails near the market town of Nabatiyeh, killing a Lebanese soldier and wounding a civilian man, police in Nabatiyeh said.

The Iranian-backed Hezbollah, or Party of God, claimed responsibility for the hit-and-run ambush between the villages of Dabshé and Ali Taher in the central sector of the south Lebanon border enclave occupied by Israel.

"Our (holy warriors) ambushed and raked an Israeli patrol with rocket and machine-gun fire at Dabshé area, killing and wounding all enemy

Arab countries welcome planned summit

CAIRO, June 10: Arab countries on Sunday welcomed their planned summit as a long-awaited step toward healing rifts that have made a mockery of Arab unity since the 1991 Persian Gulf War, reports AP.

But Iraq will not be invited to next week's meeting in Cairo, and some disputes that recently have brought Arab countries to the brink of war may not be resolved over three days of cordial meetings.

Many view their Arab neighbours as a bigger menace than Israel — a fact that President Hosni Mubarak alluded to after returning from a summit Saturday with the leaders of Saudi Arabia and Syria.

"We should have a gathering and unite to solve our differences instead of attacking each other", the Egyptian leader said.

Mubarak said in an interview with the government-owned newspaper Mayo that

he planned to invite Sudanese President Omar el-Bashir to the summit, despite the tension between the two countries.

Relations deteriorated sharply after Mubarak blamed the Sudanese regime of mass-murdering an assassination attempt against him in June 1995. Sudan is under UN sanctions for refusing to turn over three suspects in the attempt. The summit will open June 21, bringing together the largest number of Arab leaders since a meeting in Cairo days after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 that tried to avert the Gulf War.

That summit failed to forge a united stand. After a stormy meeting, some Arab states appeared to side with Iraq, while Egypt, Syria and others agreed to send troops to fight for Kuwait as part of a US-led coalition.

Next week's meeting comes amid another watershed event in the region — Benjamin Netanyahu's victory in Israel's elections for prime minister.

The Likud party leader's support for more Jewish settlements, opposition to a Palestinian state and rejection of major territorial concessions as part of a peace treaty with Syria have alarmed many in the Arab world, particularly those who had pinned their hopes for an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict on a land-for-peace formula.

UN honours 21 with environmental awards

ISTANBUL, Turkey, June 10: For twin sisters Noo and Zina, the United Nations Environment award given to their executed father Ken Saro-Wiwa on Sunday was recognition that he tried to make a difference in a continent riddled with corruption, reports AP.

"All you see as African men are despotic rulers," Zina Saro-Wiwa, 20, said. "It is important to have a symbol of an African man who has led a fight for the environment of his country."

Ken Saro-Wiwa was one of 21 individuals and organisations honoured by the United Nations for their efforts to clean up the environment.

He and eight other activists were executed by the Nigerian government seven months ago. Saro-Wiwa, who campaigned to get the homeland of the minority Ogoni people cleaned up from oil spills, had been convicted of murder but insisted he was innocent.

There are so many multinational oil companies in the

world which take advantage of the defenseless poor minorities who are governed by corrupt leaders. And that's what my father brought to the attention of the whole world," Zina Saro-Wiwa told The Associated Press.

Thirteen-year-old Wahn Lee from South Korea was the youngest winner of the UN award.

Five years ago he realised the frogs in the creek near his house were dying because the water was polluted. He started to write stories about the environment and collected 18 in a book which was published last year. One story is about a fictional president who gives up his limousine and starts to ride a bicycle to keep the air clean.

Another laureate was a former journalist from India. Lalita Balakrishnan, now on the board of India's Renewable Energy Development Agency, gave up her job as a fashion writer for the women's magazine Femina 11 years ago after

attending the UN women's conference in Nairobi, Kenya in 1985.

"The conference declaration said the women should be given more freedom and that they should have their own jobs and spend more time with their children," Balakrishnan said.

So, she launched a project to train women to build and maintain wood stoves. The stoves can save three to six hours daily for women, who no longer have to collect fuel wood.

The project, which is being carried out in 3,000 villages, helps the prevention of smoke-related lung diseases such as bronchitis and asthma.

"The people, whom we have gathered to honour today, are neither rich nor powerful," said Elizabeth Dowdeswell, executive director of the UN Environment Programme. "These people are our quiet revolutionaries. They can change the course of history."

A Russian engineer, Tatyana Fyodorovna Stepanenko, launched a campaign 20 years ago to get the country's military and industrial sectors to stop polluting rivers and seas.

Soviet authorities were unresponsive, but the Russian government adopted her proposals in 1993.

Paul J. Crutzen, Nobel prize winning Dutch chemist, and the British Earth Love Fund were also among the winners. Crutzen did not attend the ceremony.

Each winner had a special story to tell.

Fatih Yilmaz, a 17-year-old Turk whose village got caught in a war between Kurdish rebels and the army, led a campaign which planted more than 10,000 trees in three years in his village to prevent landslides.

His grandfather, uncle and two cousins were killed when Kurdish rebels raided his house in the town of Yukekova in 1993.