

International

BRIEFLY

Kurds greet Gaddafi: Libyan Leader Colonel Moammer Gaddafi has received messages of "thanks" from Kurds around the world for his courageous position backing their right to an independent homeland, the Libyan news agency JANA reported Wednesday. AFP reports from Tripoli.

The agency said messages had been handed in to Libyan embassies in several countries which it did not name. Gaddafi used the occasion of a visit here last week by Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan to criticise Ankara's policy towards the Kurds and called for the establishment of a Kurdish state in the region.

5 pro-Abidic men freed in Bosnia: Five people arrested by the Muslim authorities in the Bihać region of Bosnia and believed to be supporters of rebel Muslim leader Fikret Abidic were released on Wednesday, official radio reported. AFP reports from Sarajevo.

The five were arrested last weekend along with 13 others in a swoop on people identified as being pro-Abidic by the local Sarajevo based Muslim authorities. On the weekend, 13 were released uncharged but the remaining group was detained facing war crimes charges.

Iranian FM meets Tajik President: Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati met with Tajikistan's President Emomali Rakhmonov to discuss the conflict in Afghanistan that worries both of their countries. AP reports from Dushanbe.

Iran believes the only solution is for all sides in the Afghan conflict to hold negotiations with the participation of international organisations, Velayati told reporters after the meeting. Russian news agencies said. He said Rakhmonov shares the view. The successes of the Taliban, an Islamic religious army, in recent weeks in Afghanistan have alarmed neighbouring countries, including Iran, Tajikistan and the other former Soviet republics in Central Asia.

Armenian MPs released: All the Armenian lawmakers jailed after last month's opposition demonstrations are now free after the release of two parliament members Wednesday, the ITAR-Tass news agency said. AP reports from Yerevan.

The opposition took to the streets after President Levon Ter-Petrosian won a second term on September 22, accusing him of winning through fraud and demanding a recent. The demonstrations turned violent outside parliament headquarters in Yerevan, the Armenian capital, and 52 were reported injured in clashes with security forces.

Malaysian chopper crashes: A Malaysian air force helicopter with six crew on board crashed at sea off northern Penang island late Wednesday while airlifting an injured Thai sailor, a Defence Ministry spokesman said yesterday. AFP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

The spokesman could not provide details of casualties. The helicopter crashed five minutes after airlifting Gombak Manop, 43, who was scalded by hot oil while repairing an engine on the Thai-registered Jupiter II.

Gunmen kill 1 in Japan: A shotgun-wielding assailant accompanied by his two children opened fire on a house in Japan on Thursday, killing one man, then shot and injured a policeman, authorities said. AP reports from Tokyo.

The gunman, identified as 45-year-old taxi driver Takumi Yanagida, first shot and killed Makoto Hananaha, 59, at Hananaha's home in the town of Kitakata at 6:15 am (2115 GMT), police said. Yanagida then drove to a closed gas station nearby in Miyazaki prefecture (state) on the southern island of Kyushu and took refuge there, police said.

Taliban defy quit-or-else ultimatum, vow to fend off any assault on Kabul

KABUL, Oct 17: Afghanistan's new rulers, the radical Islamic Taliban, have defied a quit-or-else ultimatum from the ousted government and vowed to fend off any assault on the capital Kabul they seized nearly three weeks ago, reports Reuter.

Taliban, which controls some three-quarters of the country, rejected a demand from the military chief in the previous administration of President Burhanuddin Rabbani and bombed his forces north of Kabul.

Ex-Defence Minister Ahmad Shah Masood told the new power in Kabul to pull all its fighters out of the capital or face the consequences.

But Taliban, which has imposed strict Islamic rule in the capital, remained defiant, or-

dering warplanes to raid Masood's forces on plains north of Kabul on Wednesday.

Acting Information Minister Amir Khan Mutagi ruled out an evacuation of Kabul. "We have enough power to defend our government, our people in Kabul by the aid of god," he said.

Masood, whose forces have pushed Taliban out of two towns north of the capital, demanded the purist Islamic movement withdraw from the city it captured on September 27 or face bloodshed and destruction.

A similar call was heard at the United Nations Security Council in New York.

The ousted government's deputy foreign minister Abdul Rahim Ghafoorza urged Taliban to evacuate Kabul and proposed an international police

forces to ensure security before negotiations on an interim government of national unity.

Unless these proposals were accepted, the Afghan armed forces would "resort to action to end this catastrophic situation" in Kabul, Ghafoorza told the Security Council.

He spoke at the start of a debate requested by Russia and several Central Asian republics concerned by the upsurge of fighting near their southern borders.

Moscow's UN envoy Sergei Lavrov said Russia considered "the approach of the flames of war in neighbouring Afghanistan toward the borders of the Commonwealth of Independent States" as a direct threat to its national interests and security and to stability in the region.

The Security Council debate was adjourned without a decision late on Wednesday.

Reflecting the fears across the region, two neighbours of the Central Asian state, Iran and Pakistan, made separate moves for a negotiated peace.

Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati said in the Kazakh capital Almaty that the crisis in Afghanistan could not be resolved by force and called on all factions to negotiate.

Shi'ite Muslim Iran has criticised the Sunni Muslim Taliban, saying its attempts to impose a harsh version of Islamic Sharia law are giving Islam a bad name.

Pakistan sent Interior Minister Naseerullah Babar for peace talks between Taliban's Acting Foreign Minister Mullah Mohammad Ghaus and

powerful northern warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostum, Afghan sources said.

The four-hour meeting at Qala-i-Jangi Fort outside Mazar-i-Sharif decided to resume talks today on the proposed formation of a commission to settle the country's political future, a spokesman for Dostum said.

AFP adds: The United States on Wednesday said the political situation in Afghanistan was unstable and that Kabul could see another shift in power.

The immediate future is uncertain. Fighting continues and it is possible that Kabul itself may again be overrun said US ambassador Madeleine Albright.

Since September 27 the fundamentalist Taliban militia has controlled Kabul.

Off the Record

Mennonites' search for eternal odyssey

SPANISH LOOKOUT, Belize: The Mennonites have spent three centuries searching for a paradise on earth that is free of religious persecution, reports Reuter.

Belize is the latest stop on the eternal odyssey of this sect that seeks to be free of state interference and refuses to fight in any war.

"Jesus is the answer" says the sign leading into Spanish Lookout, the immaculately tended farming community they have carved out of the rolling hills of this Central American land nestled between Mexico and Guatemala.

Driving into the valley is like entering a time warp.

Freckle-faced blond children play in fields tended by polite and reserved farmers.

At the farmhouse, severely dressed women in ankle length frocks, long sleeves and black scarves prepare a simple lunch of black bean stew.

This is a tight-knit community with religion as its glue.

Belize may not be the paradise they were looking for but many of the elders realise that the children born and bred here want to put down roots.

The sect, whose origins date back to a 16th century Dutch priest called Menno Simons, started as an obscure anabaptist group in the reformation.

Their radical beliefs inspired persecution over the centuries.

The Mennonites, who today speak a gutteral form of German akin to Dutch, were driven from the Netherlands to Prussia in the 1600's.

Painting attributed to Hitler fetches \$3,700

BRIGG, England: A painting attributed to Adolf Hitler, found in 1945 by a young soldier in the ruins of a bomb-damaged apartment in the German city of Hamburg, sold for 2,500 pounds (3,700 dollars) at an auction here Wednesday, reports AFP.

The watercolour was found under a bed in a suitcase, which also contained other Nazi memorabilia including a funeral sash, swastika armband and books on the Third Reich.

All were sold as one lot and bought by a local woman for two-and-a-half times the 1,000-pound estimate in the sale in this northeastern town.

Robert Horner, salesroom manager, said the owner had kept them at home since the end of World War II.

Horner described the painting as "a bit of a slapdash dash."

Signed "A Hitler," it shows a square in Vienna and was dated 1911. It allegedly comes from a period when the Nazi dictator was trying to make a living as an artist in the Austrian capital.

Fight against astrology

BEIJING: Chinese scientists are being mobilized to counter an upsurge in superstitious practices, including astrology that has spread to China from abroad, an official newspaper said Thursday, reports AP.

Witchcraft, geomancy, fortunetelling, worshipping gods and other practices frowned upon by China's atheist Communist Party "have become rampant in some regions, especially rural areas," the China Daily quoted Guo Zhengyi as saying.

Guo is a researcher with the Chinese Association of Science and Technology, a non-governmental group of scientists that has set up a committee to combat superstition, the newspaper said.

From late 1988 to early 1989, millions of Chinese and foreign fortunetelling books were sold in China, the newspaper said. Many such books were later destroyed in a nationwide anti-pornography campaign in 1990, but have gone on sale again in the last two years, it said.

"Some foreign superstitious practices like astrology and fortunetelling using cards have also flooded into China," the newspaper said.

The scientists' association will hold seminars every two to three months to promote scientific learning over superstition and publicise cases of superstition and pseudoscience, the newspaper said.

Blasts rock French town of Nimes

NIMES, Oct 17: Two bombs exploded Wednesday night in the southern French town of Nimes damaging the courthouse and tax office but causing no injuries, police and local officials said, reports AFP.

One struck the local courthouse at 10:40 pm (2040 GMT), the other an income tax office at 11:00 pm (2100 GMT), causing property damage but no casualties, they said.

None has claimed responsibility for the attacks but officials suggested Corsican separatists or a militant union of self-employed workers the CDCA might be behind the blasts.

Windows were shattered at the tax office in the town centre but otherwise firefighters said damage there was limited.

There was more serious destruction at the courthouse where the explosion was centred in front of the main entrance.

Domestic issues dominate Clinton-Dole's final debate

SAN DIEGO, Oct 17: Determined to revive his White House hopes, an aggressive Bob Dole accused president Clinton in Wednesday night's debate of presiding over an administration with "scandals almost on a daily basis," reports AP.

Republican Dole challenged the Democratic president to pledge that he will not pardon anyone who might implicate him in a crime after his presidency.

Clinton did not respond to the ethical criticism directly, but in his opening statement of the candidates' final debate urged that they stick to issues important to individual Americans' futures.

With just 20 days left to turn around the polls, Dole criticised Clinton at every turn. On issue after issue, the Republican nominee painted his opponent as an unprincipled liberal who was hiding behind election-year conservative rhetoric.

Clinton, comfortably ahead in the latest polls, was restrained in his responses. He listened to Dole's attacks with skeptical looks and let several salvos go unanswered, including Dole's demand that Clinton rule out pardons for Arkansas associates targeted by the so-called Whitewater investigation.

"I don't want to respond in kind for all of these things," Clinton said. "I could, I could

answer to all these things till for

that. But I hope we can talk about... the future."

Dole said, "When I am president of the United States I will keep my word. My word is my bond." He repeated the pledge several times during the 90-minute debate.

Domestic issues dominated the debate, which was guided by questions from an audience of 113 San Diego residents. But one questioner asked whether the candidates would favour sending peace-keeping troops to the Middle East.

Clinton said that has not

been requested and the United States cannot impose peace in the area. Dole said the president should call for an unconditional end to violence in the region. But he said Mideast peace should not be a political issue.

Moderator Jim Lehrer had to

4,000 minor tremors

shake east Japan

Tokyo, Oct 17: More than

4,000 minor tremors

have shaken areas around the Izu

peninsula, in eastern Japan.

This week but there were no re-

ports of damage or casualties.

Japan's Meteorological Agency

said today, reports AFP.

By 10:00 am (0100 GMT)

Thursday the agency had regis-

tered 3,219 tremors, including a

moderate earthquake Wednes-

day measuring 4.3 on the

Richer-Coupe scale.

Clinton said his administra-

tion has been making progress,

citing the sale of US automo-

biles and rice in Japan. But he

said, "you just have to work on

this day in and day out, every

month, every year on every is-

sue to ensure not only free trade

but fair trade."

Dole said his administra-

tion would stop exporting jobs.

He said he has supported Clinton's trade policy, "but we've got to be more aggressive."

Dole bemoaned the fact there

weren't more foreign policy

questions, noting that in a re-

cent interview Secretary of

State Warren Christopher had

admitted to not understanding

how important US leadership is

early on in the administration.

Dole said this backed his asser-

tion in the first debate that Clinton has had no foreign poli-

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