

Women MPs to fight for 3rd seat in Indian parliament

NEW DELHI, Nov 19: Women members of parliament in India — where "may you be the mother of a hundred sons" is a traditional blessing — will resume a battle for a third of the seats in parliament when it reopens Wednesday, reports AFP.

Women MPs across the political spectrum say they will resurrect a bill to ensure greater representation in parliament and state assemblies after it failed to reach a vote in September, turning instead into a slanging match between the sexes.

"We have to force the issue. The male mentality and male dominance cannot go on forever," said Sushma Swaraj, spokeswoman of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Indian People's Party.

"Male-style politics, marked by corruption and inefficiency, must end," she said. "Women are more honest and better workers because they are god-fearing."

Swaraj, quoted heavily from the ancient Hindu text, the *Manusmriti*, to show that women in ancient India held the reins of society.

"We held the finance, education and defence portfolios," she said citing Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth, Saraswati — the goddess of learning and Durga, a militant goddess who saved the world from perdition by slaying a demon.

"Now we are given soft portfolios," said Swaraj, who

Indian court orders Miss World beauty contest to go ahead

BANGALORE, Nov 19: An Indian state court ruled here today the final stages of the Miss World beauty contest should go ahead as long as there was no "nudity or obscenity," reports AFP.

Two judges of the Karnataka high court made the ruling after a petition was brought against the pageant being held in India for the first time and which culminated at the weekend with judging and crowning ceremonies.

The petition, brought by Hindu feminist K N Shashikala who has threatened to burn herself to death in protest, argued the event was vulgar, a threat to Indian culture and would help transform women into commodities.

The court, however, said the event could not be declared illegal as long as Indian laws were obeyed, there was no nudity or

obscenity and no liquor was served.

The two judges also ruled that opponents to the event should not be stopped from "peaceful, democratic protest" and that "minimum force" should be used to police the pageant.

The 50-page judgement was hailed by both the organisers of the beauty contest and its opponents as a victory.

Many feminists and Hindu groups oppose the event on the grounds that it degrades women and is a threat to Indian values.

A spokesman for the Anitabah Bachchan Corporation Ltd. (ABC) said: "It's a good order. We are happy and relieved, although there will be tension until the thing is over."

"We have to be prepared to all contingencies, we have to protect the participants but also the audience."

Polls to be held on time Leghari denies involvement in Murtaza murder

ISLAMABAD, Nov 19: President Farooq Ahmed Leghari today dismissed as "baseless" former premier Benazir Bhutto's accusation of his involvement in the murder of her brother Murtaza Bhutto, reports AFP.

"I categorically reject it," Leghari told a news conference here, terming the allegation as "unfortunate."

Benazir, who was sacked by Leghari for alleged corruption and administrative irregularities on November 5, told reporters last week that the president was "directly or indirectly" involved in the murder conspiracy of her brother.

Murtaza and his seven colleagues were killed in a police shoot out in Karachi on September 20. The deposed premier claimed the bullet which killed Murtaza was meant to eliminate her politically.

Leghari said Benazir had made similar insinuations when she was prime minister.

He said the case was being tried and the court would decide who was responsible for Murtaza's death.

The interim government which succeeded Benazir has arrested several senior police officials including former intelligence chief Masood Sharif who were implicated by

Murtaza's party in the killings.

Lawyers of Murtaza's widow, Ghinwa Bhutto, appearing before a judicial tribunal last month claimed involvement of Benazir's detained husband Asif Ali Zardari, former chief minister of her home province Sindh, Abdullah Shah, and ex-interior minister Nasirullah Babar in the murder conspiracy.

Reuter adds: Pakistani President Farooq Leghari said today an interim cabinet that replaced the "incorrigible" government of Benazir Bhutto would fight corruption, pursue economic reform and hold elections on time.

He likened Benazir, 43, to France's Louis XIV, saying she could not differentiate between state and government.

Leghari, who has kept out of the public eye, partly because of kidney stone trouble, since sacking Benazir on November 5, said elections would be held as scheduled.

They will be held on

February 3," he said. "I feel it is absolutely vital to hold elections in 90 days."

Leghari, 56, said it was physically impossible to hold a long-overdue national census before the polls, but promised to strengthen the electoral commission and invite international observers to ensure the

elections were free and fair.

He said he had used presidential powers he had once condemned because he felt that Pakistan was foundering.

"I felt that he was in danger of collapse," he said. "There was a danger of Pakistan defaulting decisions in the cabinet were being made not on considerations of national security or interest, but were being taken for other reasons."

"We were in the vortex of crisis for some time, he said. "And I could foresee very clearly the economy collapsing which could have led to very grave security concerns and even, god forbid, to the collapse of the state."

Leghari said Benazir had rejected his advice and warnings that the government should stop what he called its attacks on the judicial system, tackle corruption and change its style.

"Within the prime minister's house there were two fountains of power," he said, referring to Benazir and her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, who was investment minister in her cabinet.

"Who does not know that federal secretaries of the economic ministries would go to pay homage to the spouse of the prime minister in the prime minister's house?"

Mockery of trial!

TEL AVIV, Nov 19: A military tribunal on Monday fined four soldiers a symbolic one Israeli cent each for mistakenly killing a Palestinian three years ago. The military prosecution said it would appeal the ruling, reports AP.

The soldiers, whose names were not given, are being charged in connection with the shooting death of Eyad Mohammed Ewad Awali, 18, near the West Bank town of Tulkarem on November 13, 1993, the army said.

An army statement said the military initially intended to charge the four with involuntary manslaughter, but its case was weakened during the trial, especially because key Palestinian witnesses failed to appear in court.

The sides then agreed to a plea-bargain in which the soldiers would plead guilty to violating open-fire regulations and would receive a substantial but suspended sentence.

But during closing arguments, defence attorneys violated that understanding and asked the judge for a symbolic punishment only, the statement said. The judge agreed, ruling that each should pay one Israeli cent equivalent to about a third of a penny.

Death toll now 56 Yeltsin declares Nat'l Mourning Day in Russia

MOSCOW, Nov 19: The death toll from the weekend explosion at a military block of flats in Russia's southern Dagestan region rose to 56 on Monday and president Boris Yeltsin declared today a day of national mourning, reports Reuter.

"As of 2100 (1800 GMT) 95 people had been pulled from the rubble. Of these 56 were dead, including 18 children," a spokesman for the Dagestan regional government told Reuter by telephone.

He said there were about 10 people still unaccounted for, adding that rescue work would continue into a third night.

Half of the nine-storey concrete building, housing mostly families of border guards, collapsed like a pack of cards in the blast early on Saturday morning.

The building was not connected to the gas mains and officials say they suspect sabotage.

News agencies, citing regional officials, said an earlier report that security services had detained a suspect in the explosion was untrue.

Tass news agency quoted official sources as saying the blast might have been gangland revenge for a regional crackdown on arms and caviar smuggling.

Chirac for closer ties with Japan

TOKYO, Nov 19: French President Jacques Chirac on Tuesday called for closer economic cooperation between Japan and France and praised Tokyo's recently announced efforts to reform its financial system, reports AP.

Chirac made the comments in a speech to leaders of the Keidanren, or the Japan Federation of Economic Organisations, Japan's top business lobby group.

"I would like to share with you my desire to reinforce relations between Japan and France," he said. "Strengthening our ties will be a factor for growth tomorrow and a source of prosperity for our two regions."

Chirac is on a weeklong visit that represents a significant thawing in relations between the two countries, which chilled earlier this year as Japan expressed bitter opposition to a series of French underground nuclear tests in the South Pacific.

Japan, the only nation to have been attacked with an atomic bomb, does not possess nuclear weapons and opposes nuclear testing. Several prominent Japanese politicians had travelled to the South Pacific to protest France's tests. France has since promised to suspend future nuclear testing.



Wislawa Szymborska, 1996 Nobel Prize Winner in literature, smiles during her only public appearance late Monday in Krakow before going to Stockholm December 10 to receive the award. The poet, who doesn't like publicity, refuses interviews and seldom gives autographs, but made a rare exception at a meeting in her native city of Krakow.

— AFP/UNB photo

Off the Record

Wonder toddler

KUALA LUMPUR: Without ever going to school, a 4-year-old Malaysian girl has learned to read and write and do school work that normally 12-year-olds do, a newspaper reported Monday.

Although her favorite book is the Bible, the bespectacled Grace Lim Eri Hui also likes to read what most kids her age curl up with: "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs."

Grace began reading when she was 17 months old, and was soon writing and doing math under the guidance of her father, Joshua Lim, a 33-year-old private tutor who earns a living teaching schoolchildren English and math, the newspaper Star said.

The girl's mother said Grace is so addicted to reading that she refuses to go to bed.

"She wants to keep awake and read and read. Sometimes I have to take the cane and threaten her to make her sleep," the mother, Chia Shock Cheng, told The Associated Press in a telephone interview from their home in Klang.

Grace, who has taught herself English, Mandarin and Malay, also agreed to a telephone interview, speaking in fluent English.

"Yes, I saw my picture ... and what they wrote about me in the newspaper. My father and mother showed it to me," said the pigtailed girl.

Asked what she would like to be when she grows up, she replied: "I don't know. Maybe an engineer."

Tit for tat

SAO PAULO: A woman cut off her husband's penis with a kitchen knife after learning that he had impregnated another woman, police said Monday, reports AP.

Raquel Nair Lucio, 33, attacked Luis Carlos Ferraz, 61, on Sunday, in the city of Tiete, 90 miles (150 km) west of Sao Paulo. She said she was inspired by news reports of similar attacks.

The two apparently got into a fight. A lot of things were broken, then she took a knife and said she was going to cut off his penis, just like she had read about in the news. Sao Paulo state policeman Jose Antonio Martins de Mello said by telephone from Tiete.

After the attack, Lucio called police, who arrested her and took her husband to the hospital. His penis was surgically reattached.

At least three similar attacks this month have received wide coverage in the Brazilian news media.

Crackdown on superstition

BEIJING: Authorities in the central Chinese province of Hubei have destroyed 1,600 pagan shrines, as part of a nationwide crackdown on superstition, a report said Tuesday, says AFP.

Nearly all the shrines, which worshipped an earth spirit, were located in the district of Ezhou, the Guangming Daily said.

The action in Hubei followed a similar crackdown in the southwestern province of Guizhou, where nine "illegal" temples were closed down earlier this month.

The crackdown is part of the central government's "spiritual civilisation" campaign, launched earlier this year in an apparent bid to boost flagging socialist values.

According to the newspaper, the shrines in Hubei had cost an estimated six million yuan (720,000 dollars) to construct and covered a total area of 14 hectares (35 acres).

The materials recovered from the destroyed shrines will be used to renovate local schools, while the land will be returned to the peasants, it said.

Adultery — main marriage wrecker

HONG KONG: Adultery has become the main marriage wrecker in Shanghai, a Hong Kong newspaper said Monday, reports AP.

Half of 9,740 couples in China's biggest city who filed for divorce in 1995 cited extramarital affairs as the reason, the Beijing-funded Ta Kung Pao said.

It did not give comparative figures for previous years, but said adultery is no longer confined to the city but is spreading to rural areas.

In one suburb alone, 201 divorce suits were filed between January and June, 59 per cent citing adultery, the paper said.

It said society was becoming more tolerant of extramarital affairs, and offensive terms for adulterers were going out of fashion, replaced by more neutral ones like "lovers."

5 Maoists shot dead in Nepal: Police shot dead five suspected Maoist insurgents in a remote western region of Nepal in the latest in a series of clashes, officials said yesterday. Reuter reports from Kathmandu.

The home (interior) Ministry said a police patrol fought with about 50 Maoists on Sunday in the jungles near Mirul village about 500 km (312 miles) west of the capital Kathmandu. One policeman was injured a ministry spokesman said. About 60 people have been killed in clashes between Maoist guerrillas and police since the militants launched a rebellion against parliamentary democracy 10 months ago.

10 feared drowned in US: A group of up to 10 illegal immigrants were believed to have drowned while trying to sneak into the United States from Mexico by crossing the Rio Grande police said yesterday. Reuter reports from Brownsville.

Castro to meet Pope in Vatican:

Arafat, Tito, Gorbachev, and now Castro sooner or later, revolutionaries and Communist leaders show up on the Pope's doorstep, AP reports from Vatican.

Pope John Paul II was to receive Cuban leader Fidel Castro on Tuesday in an historic encounter between the old men.

Landslide kills 6 in Brazil:

Six people were killed Monday, after a landslide caused by heavy rains destroyed two houses in Petropolis 60 kilometers (37.5 miles) from Rio de Janeiro, civil defence officials said Monday. AFP reports from Rio De Janeiro.

Five injured people were pulled from the ruins of their dwellings the officials said. Petropolis civil defense authorities ordered the evacuation of houses potentially threatened by more landslides the officials said.

Tajik children pull together to heal scars of hate

DUSHANBE, Nov 19: In School Number 91, in the drab concrete outskirts of Tajikistan's capital, a group of pupils are studying Russian literature, reports Gemini.

But this is not an ordinary lesson. The youngsters have been reading a fable by 19th century writer Ivan Krylov about three neighbours who inhabit a river: a pike, a crayfish and a swan.

The trio are trying to move a heavy bag containing their belongings. The swam flies upwards with a rope in its beak, the crayfish moves backwards tugging in another direction, while the pike swims to the bottom of the river, pulling downwards on the bag.

"Do you think they are really friends?" the teacher asks.

Sasha, a tousle-haired 12-year-old jumps to his feet. "No, they're not!" he cries. "Because if they were, they would help each other instead of pulling in opposite directions."

The moral of the tale — that

friendship, and ultimately peace, depend on the patient efforts of communities and nations — has become a familiar one to schoolchildren throughout Tajikistan over the past year.

It is one of the main messages of an innovative programme of peace studies run by the Education Ministry with support from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), for 50,000 youngsters across the country.

The scheme, which aims to help children overcome war-induced trauma and develop awareness about peace issues, is being hailed a success. Teachers have been worried about a high level of stress among pupils, affecting their behaviour in and out of school.

Tajikistan, in former Soviet Central Asia, was torn by civil war after independence in 1991. Up to 50,000 lives were lost and more than 500,000 people displaced.

Democratic and Islamic rebels briefly took control before being driven into armed opposition by Communist forces. Despite a ceasefire in November 1992 and UN-sponsored peace talks, sporadic clashes between government and opposition fighters, and ethnic hatred between Tajikistan's diverse peoples.

Thousands of children have been traumatised by the violence. Their behaviour