

Amendment to edn bill Opposition defeats Tory govt by single vote

LONDON, Jan 28: The opposition defeated British Prime Minister John Major's government by a single vote on an amendment to a bill on Monday, underscoring the possibility of a national election before its May deadline, reports AP.

The vote, on a government-moved amendment to an education bill which would have increased government aid to privately-run schools, came the same day that unsecured television and radio reports said Major told his cabinet he was opting for May 1 as the date for the national election.

By law, the next election must be held by May 22 at the very latest but constitutional rules say the prime minister can call one before that any time he wishes during the government's five-year term. The government can also have an early election forced on it by

Locals helping Taliban to fight opposition

GHORBAND, Afghanistan, Jan 28: Thousands of armed locals here are helping the Taliban militia to force a new route into opposition territory after anti-Taliban troops cut the main artery to northern Afghanistan, locals said today, reports AFP.

Villagers in this key valley gave their backing to fundamentalist fighters — who share the same ethnic origin as them — as opposition forces Sunday blew up the strategic Salang Highway to stop the Taliban advance.

More than 1,000 armed people in Shinwari and another 1,000 in Siyad districts, who have joined the Taliban are fighting against the other side," locals and international aid workers in the Ghorband Valley said.

The villagers have already gone into battle with their new allies and were today fighting opposition alliance troops around Chardchi, at the end of this valley which spans 80 kilometres (50 miles) northwest of the capital Kabul.

The Ghorband Valley, which the Taliban seized much of last week after seizing two strategic towns near here from the opposition, is a "back door" to the northern warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostam, analysts say.

Berisha rules out imposing state of emergency in Albania

TIRANA, Jan 28: Albanian President Sali Berisha on Monday ruled out imposing a state of emergency in his Balkan republic, which has been rocked by a series of protests over collapsed investment schemes, reports AP.

Berisha will not proclaim a "total or partial" state of emergency and has "refused all suggestions" from leaders of the ruling rightist democratic party that he should do so, the president said in a statement issued here.

The Albanian opposition earlier on Monday accused the democratic party of instituting a de facto state of emergency in Albania after parliament granted Berisha special powers to quell the recent violent protests.

Countering the charge, the presidency statement said "parliament's decision on Sunday

BRIEFLY

Arafat to meet King Hussein: Palestinian President Yasser Arafat left for a one day visit to Amman yesterday for talks with King Hussein and Crown Prince Hassan officials said. AFP reports from Gaza City.

Arafat and the king were to discuss the latest developments in the peace process following the January 15 Israeli-Palestinian agreement extending self-rule to the West Bank city of Hebron, officials in Amman said. The visit had originally been scheduled for Monday but was delayed after bad weather grounded Arafat's helicopter.

Bombay cine owners to reopen trade: Cinema owners in and around Bombay will reopen for business in the next couple of days after a month-long strike film distributors said in Bombay yesterday, AFP reports from Bombay.

"The strike should be over in a day or two, we will call it off after the Chief Minister assures us our demands will be met movie producer and distributor NN Sippy said after government opened talks to settle the dispute.

Chinese sunken warship raised: A Chinese warship sunk in the Yangtze river 59 years ago by Japanese planes was raised yesterday following 77 days of salvage work and earlier failed attempts, Chinese state media reported, AFP reports from Beijing.

Chinese central television showed a section of hull projecting about two metres (six feet) above the water's surface between two barges. State Councillor Li Tieying was shown proclaiming as "a success" the effort to raise the cruiser Chungshan, which was named after the revolutionary founder of post-imperial China, Sun Yat-Sen. Chungshan is a Chinese variation of Yatsen.

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There were no injuries during the incident, but the tension prompted a call for calm from Peru's Roman Catholic bishop and raised concern with Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto.

"I'm worried whether irritation among the terrorists would intensify due to moves by the special police unit," Hashimoto told reporters in Tokyo today.

"I'm calling the Peruvian government's attention to such moves," he added.

Earlier, as military music blared, one tank, three armoured troop carriers, a pickup and about 100 heavily armed police from a special operations unit marched around the compound for about two hours late Monday afternoon.

Martial Music poured from speakers piled three metres (10 feet) high that had been installed around the white-walled compound around midday. A helicopter buzzed overhead.

Pashtoons to exercise voting rights for first time in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Jan 28: Ethnic Pashtoon tribals in Pakistan are to get a first taste of democracy in next week's national polls using voting rights only just granted to residents of the rugged North West Frontier Province (NWFP), reports AP.

The door of democracy had previously been shut for the federally-administered tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. But Pakistan's current caretaker government decided to usher in change after it was formed in November.

None of the previous popular governments elected since the lifting of a decade of martial law in 1985 though it fit to let the tribals take part directly in the electoral process.

Instead, a limited number of tribal chieftains formed an electoral college and chose eight deputies to the Federal National Assembly.

The recent dissolution of the National Assembly and change of government proved a blessing in disguise for the tribals," said Iftikhar Ali, a prominent Pashtoon journalist in Peshawar, capital of NWFP.

President Farooq Ahmed Leghari, on the advice of Interior Prime Minister Malik Meraj Khalid, announced universal adult suffrage for the semi-autonomous region last month.

The move should have special significance for tribal women, who, observers say, are widely living in ways reminiscent of the Middle Ages. But female suffrage is strongly opposed by the clearly who have warned women not to vote.

Election officials said a total of 1,563,000 tribals were registered to vote in the February 3 elections called by Leghari after he sacked prime minister Benazir Bhutto and dissolved the assembly on November 5, alleging corruption and misuse.

A mere 20,000 of the enrolled voters are women.

People familiar with the customs of the area say it is unlikely many women would be able to vote.

In Khyber Agency, near Peshawar, capital of NWFP, an organisation of tribal religious leaders known as Tanzeem-i-Ittehad-i-Ulema Bara this week repeated a threat to destroy the house of any woman who ventured out to vote.

But administration officials posted in the region vowed that women willing to exercise their right would be fully protected, with their homes.

Separate polling stations staffed only with female officials have been set up.

Fervish canvassing is under way in the tribal areas, with candidates busy addressing public meetings, residents say. Hundreds of candidates are in the fray for eight seats reserved for the tribals in the 217-member assembly.

The tribals are mostly illiterate and many openly carry arms, but no incident has been reported so far.

Pakistan's established political parties have been forbidden from extending their activities to the territory, for fear that their presence might stir up trouble.

Foreigners need a special permit to enter the region, where authorities representing the federal government look after the administration in concert with "Jirgas" or tribal councils.



US Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (C), of Mississippi, introduces Senators Orrin Hatch (L), of Utah, Strom Thurmond (2nd R) of South Carolina, and Larry Craig (R), of Idaho, Monday in Washington prior to their announcement of the Republican's proposed Balanced Budget Amendment, which would constitutionally require a balanced budget. — AFP/UNB photo

Teen-agers run risk of heart disease by smoking later in life

WASHINGTON, Jan 28: Teen-agers may increase their risk of heart disease later in life by smoking or eating fatty foods, according to a study published in the January issue of *Arteriosclerosis, Thrombosis and Vascular Biology*.

Although studies based on autopsies of American soldiers killed during the Korean and Vietnam wars found similar results, this is first large sample of data from young women, said Dr. Basil Rifkind, of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, which sponsored the research.

The researchers said their study disproves the notion that women, who generally have heart attacks 10 years later than men, do not have to alter their diets as early in life as men.

"It pretty firmly adds another large piece to the jigsaw puzzle and says the problems of diet and heart diseases is something that starts of early in life," Rifkind said.

A childhood diet rich in fatty foods can begin the progression toward heart disease later in life, the researchers concluded.

Children who eat a lot of cheeseburgers and milkshakes increase their risk of heart attack.

"The saturated fat intake and the calories a single meal of that sort provides is tremendous and make you use up your daily rations in one meal," Rifkind said.

The heart institute's National Cholesterol Education Programme recommends that all children over the age of 2 keep fat consumption under 30 per cent of daily calories and saturated fat under 10 per cent.



A man and his son settle in during a protest staged outside Thailand's Government House Sunday. About 10,000 villagers from 43 provinces gathered Monday have vowed to stay on for months or until the administration takes concrete action on their 123 specific grievances. The villagers are protesting issues ranging from land confiscations associated with dam and development projects, to workers' compensation and slum dwellers problems. — AFP/UNB photo

Saudi Arabia taking tough action to stamp out begging rackets

DUBAI, Jan 28: Saudi Arabia is taking tough action to stamp out begging rackets exploiting children, many of them handicapped girls as young as five found barefoot and hungry on the streets of the oil-rich kingdom, reports AP.

In the first two weeks of the month of Ramadan — a particularly lucrative time for beggars, Saudi authorities have arrested more than 120 Indian children suspected of being the victims of well-organised trafficking rings.

Two weeks ago, Saudi Arabia deported 76 Indian child beggars aged between five and 15, all girls except for one boy. Nearly all had deformed limbs.

The Indian Embassy in Riyadh said another 46 children who have been rounded up and held in a deportation centre in the Red Sea port of Jeddah are expected to be expelled in the next few days.

According to the Indian press, the 76 youngsters, now housed in a state-run orphanage in Bombay, were victims of traffickers who send children to Saudi Arabia to beg during pilgrimages to Makkah, site of Islam's holiest shrines.

Begging, a phenomenon foreign to our society, multiplies during the month of Ramadan, considered a period of mutual help," said Ihsan Saleh Taleb, social affairs director in the western region of Saudi Arabia.

"However, professional beggars organised in gangs have over the past few years been exploiting handicapped children to arouse pity among citizens," Taleb added.

Indian police have launched an investigation into allegations that children from the state of West Bengal are being forced to beg in Saudi Arabia, and have already arrested two Indians.

The authorities are also taking steps to identify Saudi Arabian contacts of the child-runners of West Bengal," Calcutta Police Inspector-General H.A. Safwi said on Sunday.

Safwi said police had established that touts bought children from poor families in Murshidabad, a Muslim-majority district of West Bengal.

Other sources say touts in West Bengal and Saudi Arabia prey on Indian Muslims in the Gulf nation, offering them money to use their children for begging during the annual Hajj pilgrimage and Ramadan.

"It is extreme poverty that drives this racket. Most of the time the parents know what their children are being taken away for. They get some money and keep quiet," said Sarfaraz Arzoo, a Bombay journalist.

He said India has been exporting child beggars to Middle East countries for several years, picking them up from impoverished Muslim families.

"The gangs usually send three or four children with one adult, so that immigration officers in the receiving country do not suspect," he said. "The younger children are, more money they bring in for the gangs."

Faced with this latest outbreak, Saudi Arabia has beefed

Shakur, Twain, Braxton claim American Music Awards

LOS ANGELES, Jan 28: Four months after he was gunned down in a still unsolved Las Vegas attack, Tupac Shakur was named favourite rap-hop artist at the American Music Awards, reports AP.

Shania Twain, Brooks and Dunn, Toni Braxton and New Edition also won major honours at the 24th annual fan-selected awards ceremony on Monday night.

Actress and singer Brandy accepted the award on behalf of Shakur, who also lives on in "Gridlock" a film starring the rapper and Tim Roth that premiered this month at the Sundance Film Festival.

Twain was America's favourite female artist on a night when the American Music Awards saluted "The Year of the Woman."

"If anybody ever tells you this gets old — it never does," said Twain, who was the AMA's favourite new artist last year.

With frequent winner Alabama not in the running this year, Brooks and Dunn were honored as America's top band duo or group.

Braxton, who sang the show's opening number and wore three different outfits in about 15 minutes, won favourite female soul/R&B artist, her fourth career AMA trophy.

New Edition returned to the winners' podium for the first time in 10 years, claiming the favourite soul/R&B honour.

Young Newcomer Jewel beat Donna Lewis and No Doubt for favourite new pop-rock artist.

Backstage, Jewel explained that she and her mother for a time lived in their cars when Jewel was laid off from a job in San Diego. "I decided I couldn't face consciousness every day anymore, you know, stealing food and toilet paper and putting all your money into rent," she said.

LeAnn Rimes, a teen-ager already singing beyond her years, was rewarded as country's favourite new artist.

Metallica picked up its second trophy for hard rock-heavy metal artist. Presenter Pat Boone stole the show, appearing in an open leather vest, tattoos and sunglasses to pitch his new album of hard rock classic covers.

"Alice, they're laughing at you," the 62-year-old Boone — host of a Christian radio show — deadpanned to co-presenter and hard rock godfather Alice Cooper as the Shrine audience howled.

The soundtrack award went to "Waiting to Exhale", topping "The Nutty Professor" and "The Crow: City of Angels."

The Bee Gees received the International Artist honorary award, which recognises those artists whose popularity and impact cross national boundaries. Previous recipients include Michael Jackson, Led Zeppelin and Rod Stewart.



Singer Toni Braxton smiles after receiving an award for favourite female artist in the Soul/Rhythm and Blues category during the 24th Annual American Music Awards Monday in Los Angeles, California. Braxton also won an award for favourite album "Secrets" in the same category. — AFP/UNB photo

Off the Record

Old paintings show liberated women of Iran

WASHINGTON: These days, Iran has a reputation as an austere country of Islamic religious practice so strict that women must cover their heads with black veils, reports AP.

But a collection of small, precise paintings now drawing crowds to the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery shows the luxurious past of its Persian court. Among the exhibits: a shyly kissing couple and a king riding a horse with a red parasol overhead.

There was a kind of gentleness about old Persia. Its warring princes loved poetry so much that some used it for their diplomatic correspondence. Although they occasionally cut off the head — or even the head — of messengers bearing bad news, their women apparently led a freer life than some Iranian women today.

"At least in those court circles, the women were educated and comparatively liberated — they wrote poetry, too," said Massumeh Farhad, who organised the exhibition.

Today's Iranian women are often educated and enjoy some business, professional and physical freedom, even under strict segregation from men.

The gallery has thoughtfully hung a supply of strong magnifying glasses to bring out expressive features, otherwise almost invisible, on the tiny images.

Visitors may be fascinated by a painting, a little over 4 inches (10 cms) wide, of a shyly kissing couple. They can use a glass to get a close look at the fine embroidery on the boy's collar.

Several other paintings also show women without veils. In contrast to such tiny images, the show opens with two huge and beautifully written pages from the Quran, the Muslim holy book. Each page is more than 4 feet (120 cms) long and 3 feet (90 cms) wide.

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These five star beggars frequent luxury hotels, chic restaurants or shopping centres," said Mohammed al-Muayyed, a journalist with Saudi Arabia's Okaz newspaper.