

Republicans for restoring benefits for legal US immigrants

WASHINGTON, May 3: In a stunning turnaround, congressional Republicans on Friday agreed partially to restore federal benefits to hundreds of thousands of legal immigrants who faced a cutoff of aid this summer under a new US welfare law, reports Reuters.

A five-year balanced budget deal worked out between President Bill Clinton and the Republicans also funds a package of new initiatives and mitigates some food stamps cuts in the controversial statute, signed only last summer.

Overall the budget includes 15 billion in new welfare spending, administration officials said. Clinton had originally asked for about 22 billion dollars.

Republicans had vowed to oppose Clinton's proposal, which restores a large share of the spending cuts made by the welfare law. Under pressure from governors and advocates for immigrants, and eager to get a budget deal, they compromised.

In the most significant change, the budget continues

medicine and supplemental security income (SSI) aid to disabled legal immigrants now on the rolls, administration officials said.

Nearly 500,000 legal immigrants were to be cut off the SSI programme this summer. Assuming Congress passes legislation to implement the deal, benefits for most but not all of those recipients would continue, administration officials said.

Elderly poor legal immigrants who receive SSI are not protected under the deal, congressional sources said.

Further, some legal immigrants currently in the country but not now receiving benefits may be able to qualify for aid if they became disabled, officials said.

The budget deal does not continue food stamps, however. Federal officials estimate nearly one million legal immigrants will lose nutrition aid this August under the law.

The agreement also protects Medicaid, healthcare benefits for the children of poor legal immigrants.

World leaders welcome Blair

BRUSSELS, May 3: World leaders welcomed the change in Britain's leadership Friday, but Europeans wondered if Tony Blair would be any more eager than his Conservative predecessor to move closer to the Continent, report AP.

"There is a whole atmosphere of taking new roads," said Foreign Minister Hans van Mierlo of the Netherlands, which currently holds the EU presidency. "Perhaps one of those roads from the United Kingdom leads a bit more directly to Europe. I do not preclude that."

John Major's Conservative Party went down to resounding defeat in Thursday's election. While his Conservatives been wary of losing autonomy to the 15-nation European Union, Labour has also opposed ceding significant power to the EU. Most analysts expected that any change in relations would be in tone rather than substance.

Labour's leaving its working-class, socialistic roots to focus firmly on the middle class won the attention of French Foreign Minister Hervé de Charette.

In order to win, Labour had to renounce all of the traditional socialist dogma and take the Conservatives' reforms as a given," he said.

Labour's victory was an inspiration for Social Democrats throughout Europe, Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson said.

"EU cooperation on the five against unemployment will develop in a positive and constructive direction," he said. "There is no doubt that Labour's electoral victory was caused by the devastating social consequences that Conservative Thatcher politics created for large groups of citizens."

On matters of security, Blair will face the problem of Northern Ireland as well as relations with the Irish Republic. Irish Prime Minister John Bruton said he looked forward to working with him.

Leaders in the United States and Japan saw continuity in Blair's victory.

US President Bill Clinton called to offer his congratulations shortly before midnight, Press Secretary Mike McCurry said.

"The president looks forward to working with Prime



Britain's new Prime Minister, Labour Leader Tony Blair, is greeted by fans upon arriving Friday at 10 Downing Street, after Britain returned a labour government in an historic landslide.

Cherie Booth Blair: A profile

LONDON, May 3: Cherie Booth Blair, wife of Britain's new prime minister, has all the attributes of Hillary Rodham Clinton: A high-flying lawyer and a mother, strong-minded, stylish and loyal, reports AP.

Cherie Blair, 42, an image-maker's dream for a top politician's wife, also has another trait: Keeping quiet about politics.

Through the six-week election campaign, she sat alongside Labour Party leader Tony Blair at meetings, laughed at the jokes, applauded the big speech once more, made small talk with voters, and uttered not one public word.

The strategy of adoring looks and anodyne chat irritated feminists.

But it worked for a woman who risks being called the power-behind-the-throne of the man who trounced the Conservatives in national elections on Thursday by pushing Labour toward the centre.

"It seemed perfectly natural for her not to say anything... Whatever she said would be misconstrued," Blair said.

Mrs Blair was Labour activist at 16. And if fate — or a parliamentary nomination — had gone the other way, the Blairs could have been celebrating her victory early Friday.

She ran for Parliament and lost in 1983, the year Blair won in Sedgefield, a solidly Labour district in north England.

The Blairs, or so the legend goes, made a pact soon after marrying in 1980: Whoever got into Parliament first would be the politician with big ambitions, the other one the lawyer with big earnings.

As Cherie Booth, she has a highly successful career at the Bar, specialising in employment cases and plans to return to work soon after the campaign break.

In 1995, she became a Queen's Counsel. That status is reserved for the most successful lawyers and boosted her earnings to a reported 250,000 pounds (dhs 408,000) a year — comfortably more than treble his as opposition leader.

Cherie Booth took a first class degree at the London School of Economics and met Blair when they were both trainee lawyers. They have three children — Euan, 13; Nicholas, 11, and Kathryn, 9.

Unlike her husband, who has the easy manner of the well-polished politician, Mrs Blair can appear tense and on edge with a wide-eyed look caricatured by cartoonists. Her clothes and hair are a favourite tabloid topic.

BRRIEFLY

Knife attack on French minister: An apparently unstable man wielding a knife stabbed France's culture minister in the back during a campaign tour Friday of Lourdes, where he is mayor, officials said, AP reports from Paris.

Philippe Douste-Blazy, 44, was hospitalised in Lourdes, the southwestern town at the foot of the Pyrenees where the minister was born. The top aide at the Hauts-Pyrenees prefecture, or administrative district, Daniel Siguy, told France-Info radio that the wound between the shoulder blades was serious, but that no vital organs were affected by the stabbing.

Map mathematician Snyder dies: John P Snyder, who developed the mathematical equations needed to convert images of the Earth taken from space into accurate maps, has died at 71, AP reports from Olney, Maryland.

Snyder, who died Monday, was a chemical engineer and was never formally trained in the methods cartographers use to draw the Earth on a flat surface. But his series of 82 equations, worked out on a calculator, solved a problem that had vexed experts. The equations accounted for the distortion in satellite images caused by the double motion of orbiting spacecraft and the rotation of the Earth.

Nobel winner scientist dies: Sir John Carew Eccles, an Australian scientist who won the Nobel prize for medicine for his research into the brain, died Friday at the age of 94, AP reports from Tenero Contra.

Authorities in Tenero-Contra said he died peacefully. No cause of death was given. Eccles was awarded the Nobel prize in 1963 for his work showing how nerve endings could either allow the transmission of nervous impulses to other nerves or could prevent their passage.

Cyclone claims 7 in Vietnam: A cyclone that swept inland from the South China Sea killed seven people and destroyed dozens of homes in the central Vietnamese province of Nghe An, official media reported Saturday, AP reports from Hanoi.

Rice and corn crops were heavily damaged by strong winds accompanying the storm, the English-language Vietnam news reported. The cyclone battered the coastal province last week, causing more than dhs 180,000 in damage to the predominantly rural area. News of the storm was only made public Saturday in Vietnam's state-controlled media.

Izetbegovic-Tudjman meet postponed: A meeting planned for the beginning of May between Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic and Franjo Tudjman of Croatia was postponed Friday by Common agreement, an official statement said, AFP reports from Sarajevo.

The Bosnian presidency said that Izetbegovic had telephoned his Croatian counterpart suggesting that their talks be put off to give time for further preparation, and Tudjman had agreed. "The preparations for this important meeting of which the inhabitants of both countries expect much are not complete and a further delay is necessary," the statement quoted Izetbegovic as saying.

US, DPRK officials to meet in NY: US and North Korean officials will meet on Sunday in New York to discuss further joint efforts to account for missing US servicemen from the Korean war, the Pentagon said on Friday, Reuters reports from Washington.

The discussions are separate from stalled negotiations which broke off in New York last month in which the United States and South Korea urged the north to take part in four-way peace talks with China to formally end the 1950-53 war.

Sandstorm kills 8 in Egypt: A sandstorm swept across Egypt Friday, turning the sky from gray to red to eerie white and reducing visibility to zero in many places. At least eight people were killed and nine injured by falling debris and in traffic accidents caused by the storm, AP reports from Cairo.

Ten other people were rushed to hospitals with breathing problems and 10 homes were destroyed when a palm tree fell on power lines, touching off fires. The storm packed winds of 100 kilometres (60 miles) per hour, blinding drivers, blowing down trees and billboards, and briefly shutting Cairo's airport.

Irish ambassador visits Cyprus: The sweeping election victory by Britain's Labour Party puts new Prime Minister Tony Blair in a position to push for peace in Northern Ireland, Irish Ambassador Dermot Gallagher said Friday, AP reports from Syracuse.

Minister Blair, but our agenda is one of common purpose — has been and will continue to be," McCurry said.

Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto and his chief spokesman Seiuro Kajiyama, said they expected no upsets.

"My understanding is that the Labour Party mapped out some fairly moderate policies, no major changes are probably going to happen soon," said Kajiyama.

Reaction was subdued in Hong Kong, which Britain will give back to China in just eight weeks.

Tung Chee-hwa, who will become head of a semi-autonomous Hong Kong on July 1, welcomed Blair's "willingness to work with the Chinese government to ensure Hong Kong was a bridge and not a barrier between London and Beijing."

Perhaps more significant was the attitude of Leo Chan, 32, who works for a Hong Kong investment company.

"England is very far away," he said. "Anyway, it's what

China says, and not Britain, that matters now."

India, Pakistan warmly welcome new British PM

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan today warmly welcomed new British Prime Minister Tony Blair, noting the Labour Party's consistent 'keen' interest in resolving issues affecting peace in South Asia, reports AFP.

Indian leaders on Friday also hailed the win, while officials in New Delhi, quoted by the Press Trust of India news agency, underlined that India would not accept any mediation in Disputed Kashmir.

A Foreign Minister spokesman said Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had sent a congratulatory message to Blair and a extending to him a "most cordial invitation" to visit Pakistan.

He said the Labour Party had "always taken a keen interest in issues affecting peace and stability in South Asia and had advocated resolution of all is-

suues on the basis of justice and equity."

Pakistan has favoured mediation by Britain in its dispute with India over Kashmir.

But India has rejected any third party, saying the two countries should resolve all outstanding problems through bilateral negotiations.

Some Kashmiri leaders in Pakistan, welcoming the Labour Party's landslide victory in Thursday's elections, have expressed the hope that Britain would now take more interest to help solve the Kashmir issue.

Pakistan and India opened a dialogue in March after a gap of more than three years in a bid to improve strained relations marred by 50 years of hostility and three wars since their independence from Britain in 1947.

Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral and Sharif are due to meet in Male, Maldives, during the May 12-14 South Asian Summit, which will be the first summit talks between the two countries in eight years.

Tories get some comfort as they win 7 seats in local county polls

LONDON, May 3: Britain's Conservatives dramatically ousted from national power by a Labour landslide, got some comfort Friday when they won control of seven local authorities in English county elections held on the same day as the national poll, reports AFP.

The figure represents a significant gain on the last local English elections in 1993 when the party lost all but one county authority, Buckinghamshire, to the northwest of London.

The result was seen as the first key step toward rebuilding the Tories local government base in England shattered during their 18 years in national government.

5 more shot dead in Pakistan

LAHORE, May 3: Five people were shot dead early today in Pakistan's central province plagued by Muslim sectarian unrest, raising the death toll to 16 in a week, police said, reports AFP.

Around 70 people from the minority Shi'ite and majority Sunni Muslim communities have so far died in sectarian attacks at different places in Punjab over the past four months, according to police count.

In the latest incidents unidentified gunmen attacked shop belonging to a Shi'ite Muslim in the industrial city of Faisalabad, killing its owner, Shafat Hussain, his younger brother, and an employee.

Four assailants riding two motorcycles were involved in the attack and they escaped after the shooting.

3,000 Algerians missing since '92, says HR body

PAIRS, May 3: The International Federation for Human Rights said Friday that 2,000 to 3,000 Algerians have disappeared since the start of the 1992 Muslim insurgency and security crackdown in the North African nation, reports AP.

The federation also said there were some 10 detention centres in the capital Algiers and its suburbs where detainees are held by security forces and sometimes tortured.

The assessment came after a five-day trip to Algeria where an Islamic insurgency and a brutal crackdown by government forces have left at least 60,000 dead.

Algerian officials who met

with the Paris-based team conceded there had been "excesses," but said such excesses were now limited and those responsible for them were being punished, according to federation president Patrick Baudouin.

But arbitrary arrest and detentions continues in centres operating outside the official prison system, Baudouin said.

Algerian authorities contend such centres are no longer operational.

We met people who were in them," Baudouin said in a telephone interview. "We have a list of about 10 centres in Algeria and its suburbs."

Baudouin said his figure of 2,000-3,000 disappeared was a conservative estimate.

Security stepped up on board ship Mandela to make fresh bid to bring Mobutu, Kabila together

ABOARD SAS OUTENIQUA, Congo, May 3: South African President Nelson Mandela, host to on-off Zaire peace talks at sea, will make a fresh attempt today to bring ailing President Mobutu Sese Seko and rebel leader Laurent Kabila together, reports Reuters.

We optimistically hope that sometime tomorrow it will start," South African Deputy Foreign Minister Aziz Pahad told reporters on board the converted icebreaker as Outeniqua after Kabila failed to show for the talks on Friday.

He said Mandela, who sailed into international waters with Mobutu for the talks Rendezvous, would probably spend the night on the South African naval ship and was willing to stay on in the hope of the talks getting under way today. "He

feels he has to stay," Pahad said.

Kabila shunned the seaborne summit on Friday, remaining in Angola's capital Launda.

"I will go to the ship tomorrow if I receive adequate assurances from the South Africans tomorrow that security arrangements are in place," he told a news conference.

AFP adds: South African officials today stepped up security on board the ship on which Zairean peace talks were due to take place after aides of President Mobutu Sese Seko apparently boarded posing as journalists.

The planned face-to-face encounter between Mobutu and rebel leader Laurent Kabila failed to materialise Friday after Kabila, citing security concerns, refused to board.

Gujral talks to Sharif by phone

NEW DELHI, May 3: Indian Prime Minister I K Gujral Friday had a warm and cordial telephone conversation with his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif when both of them exchanged good wishes, reports PTI.

The primary purpose of Gujral's initiative was to set up a direct line of communication with Sharif, an external affairs release said in the evening.

The ten-minute conversation between the two prime ministers was very warm and cordial. They exchanged good wishes and recalled with pleasure their past meetings when neither of them had been in office.

The release said they looked forward to their forthcoming meeting in Male during the SAARC summit.

Iran opposed to Taliban brand of Islam

HYDERABAD, May 3: Iran was opposed to the Taliban brand of Islam being practiced in Afghanistan since it went against the basic tenets of the religion, the Iranian Ambassador Ali Reza Shaik Attar said here Friday, reports PTI.

"Their (Taliban) principles amount to damaging human rights and are contrary to Islam," Shaik Attar, who was in the city to participate in the All India Sufi Conference, told reporters.

On Indo-Iranian relations, he said the bilateral trade had doubled from 400 million dollars during the last four year period which also witnessed all-round cooperation on political and cultural front.

The two nations have a long history of close relations besides several common areas of interest, the ambassador said.

Blair traded diverse experiences to revamp Labour Party

LONDON, May 3: Tony Blair, Britain's New Prime Minister, traded on some diverse experiences to revamp the Labour Party and lead it to power, reports Reuters.

Born to working-class parents on May 6, 1953, Blair profited from his father's hard work and was sent to private school and to Oxford University where he studied law. He was a lawyer before entering Parliament in 1983.

As he told the Labour Party conference last October: "I wasn't born Labour, I became Labour."

In an unscripted departure from that conference speech, he told how his world's "fell apart" when he awoke one morning just after his 11th birthday to be told his father, Leo, had suffered a severe stroke at the age of 40.

"It taught me something: It taught me the value of the family, because my mother worked for three years to help him talk and walk again," Blair said. "My father was a very-ambitious man, he was successful, he was a go-getter," said Blair, describing the same attributes which have propelled him to 10 Downing Street, the prime minister's residence.

Blair's father abandoned his socialist roots and stood as a Conservative for Parliament. Only when Blair scrapped the Labour Party constitution's clause four, which specified that the state should own the means of production, did he rejoin Labour.

If his parents taught him the virtues of hard work, Blair occasionally strayed from the path. At Oxford University he drifted, lacking purpose and direction, until he met Peter Thomson, then a 36-year-old Australian theology student.

"Beyond getting a degree, I don't think he really knew what he was doing at Oxford," Thomson said.

Blair's mother Hazel died of cancer when he was 21, the young student realised that life was tenuous and he had to channel his energies if he was

to achieve anything.

Thomson introduced him to his own radical brand of Christianity. During late night conversations in Thomson's room, "the down-to-earth Australian opened his eyes to a religious faith he could relate to."

Thomson's influence has left its mark on Blair's politics. As a mutual friend commented: "You can hear Thomson in Blair's speeches."

Blair met his wife Cherie when they were both trainee lawyers working for Labour Grandee Lord Irvine and developed a relaxed professional relationship.

There was no hint of romance until they played a game at an office Christmas party in 1977 which involved passing a balloon to one another through their legs.

I began to see her differently, "said Blair "I was immensely attracted to her, not just her looks but her personality."

The relationship blossomed and it became harder for them to conceal their emotions at

work. Finally at a clients' meeting they could not keep their eyes off each other and Irvine grew irritated until, Blair said, he snapped at him: "For goodness sake take girl to the pub or something."

The Blairs celebrated their 17th wedding anniversary on March 29, a testament to the success of a relationship built on friendship and team-work.

Blair's romantic streak is intact. "I'm still excited by Cherie," he said. "I adore her still and am deeply in love with her."

The Blairs have managed to juggle the demands of their dynamic careers with the domestic pressures of bringing up a young family. They have three children, Euan, 13, Nicky, 11, and Kathryn, 9.

"My family is the most important thing in my life," said Blair, adding that one of the greatest sadnesses of his life that his mother never met Cherie or saw her grand children.

Off the Record

Evil city — the 1st choice

BANGKOK, Thailand: Despite being branded as Thailand's "greatest source of evil," most Bangkok residents rated the resort city of Pattaya as their first choice for a holiday, according to a survey released Saturday, reports AP.

Of 976 Bangkok residents surveyed by Thai Farmer's Bank Research Center, 62 per cent named Pattaya, 110 kilometres (68 miles) south of the capital, as their favourite destination for a beach vacation.

The city is known as much for sin, however, as sea and sand. Go-go bars, drugs, sex for sale and child prostitution still thrive, despite attempts by city fathers to clean up the town's image.

Violent crime is also rampant. More than 40 foreigners have been murdered there in the past year, some by a gang of prostitutes who smeared a drug on their breasts that knocked out their customers who were then robbed and sometimes killed by accomplices.

Prime Minister Chavalit Yonchaiyudh said in April that he had made a secret trip to Pattaya and was shocked at the degree of drug dealing, crime and prostitution he found.

He called it a "dirty city," and said it was Thailand's "greatest source of evil."

He ordered local police to launch a crackdown and sent hundreds of reinforcements from other provinces.

The vice blitz backfired at least twice last week, however. One policeman had his gun, car, wallet and mobile phone stolen by a prostitute he spent the night with instead of arresting.

In another incident, several people, including children, were injured when a drunken police officer rammed his patrol car into the back of a truck.

Now it's Eddie Murphy

WEST HOLLYWOOD, California: Entertainer Eddie Murphy was pulled over by police, and a cross-dressing male prostitute he had picked up was arrested on a prior warrant, authorities said, reports AP.

No charges were brought against the "Beverly Hills Cop" star, and Murphy said Friday he did nothing wrong.

"It wasn't like we drove to some dark spot to do something," Murphy told television's "Entertainment Tonight."

"It was like they pulled me over. That's a hooker. She has warrants. You be careful, Eddie. Go on home." That's what it was.

Murphy's attorney told the El cable channel that the actor stopped to help the prostitute, who seemed "disoriented" as he walked along Santa Monica Boulevard at about 4:45 am Friday.

After Murphy stopped his car, the prostitute asked for a lift home, said attorney Marty Singer.

"Eddie was shocked to hear he was a transvestite. He thought he was doing someone a favour," Singer said.

Lt. Mike Ford, a sheriff's spokesman said, "No illegal activity had occurred. However, the passenger had a warrant for prostitution."

Atisone Seault, 20, of Los Angeles was jailed on dhs 15,000 bail.

Murphy is not the only star to be stopped by police with a prostitute in his car. In 1995, actor Hugh Grant pleaded no contest to lewd conduct with prostitute Estelle Thompson, also known as Divine Brown. Grant was fined dhs 1,180 and placed on two years' probation.

Murphy vaulted into stardom in the 1980s with a series of hit films, including "48 Hours" and the first two "Beverly Hills Cop" movies in which he played a wise-cracking detective.

Murphy's star began to lose its luster in the early 1990s, but the success of last year's "The Nutty Professor" returned Murphy to star status and he's receiving a reported dhs 17 million for an upcoming remake of "Dr Doolittle."



US pop megastar Michael Jackson holds a small city-limits sign of Munich, given by the town, upon his arrival at Munich airport, on Friday. Jackson is due to attend a press conference and maybe also visit his friend, jailed promoter Marcel Avram, at the Stadelheim prison. — AFP/UNB photo

White House heads to SC to keep Whitewater notes secret

WASHINGTON, May 3: In a battle fought in secret for the last year, the White House has refused to provide Whitewater investigators with nine sets of notes from conversations between Hillary Rodham Clinton and White House attorneys, according to a court ruling unsealed on Friday, reports AP.

The battle is heading quickly to the Supreme Court.

President Clinton authorized the release of executive privilege attorney-client records after a federal appeals court ordered the White House to surrender two sets of the notes, White House counsel Charles F C Ruff announced.

The two sets involve Mrs Clinton's conversations with White House lawyers concerning her actions following the death of former deputy counsel Vincent Foster and the mysterious disappearance and reappearance of Mrs. Clinton's law firm billion records.

Both issues have become key focuses of Whitewater prosecutor Kenneth Starr whose investigation has moved beyond decade-old Arkansas financial transactions to questions of obstruction, perjury and wit-

ness tampering since the Clintons took the White House.

Whitewater is the name of an unsuccessful Arkansas land deal, into which the Clintons had invested during his governorship in the 1980s. Two of the president's former business partners have been convicted of fraud in securing federally-backed loans for the deal.

In denying the notes to Starr, the White House made claims of executive privilege, attorney-client privilege and attorney work product protections. The denials came even as the White House was publicly declaring its full cooperation with the special prosecutor.

The records had been subpoenaed by a grand jury. Starr immediately challenged the claims on two of the notes. A federal judge sided with the White House and Mrs Clinton.

The judges voted 2-1 to reverse the lower-court order and reject the claims that Mrs Clinton's conversations with presidential lawyers were protected by the same confidences afforded clients with their private attorneys.