

### Prodi wins confidence votes in parliament

ROME, Oct 17: Prime Minister Romano Prodi won confidence votes in both houses of Italy's parliament on Thursday. Restoring his government to full power exactly a week after a revolt by his hard-left allies forced him to resign, reports Reuter.

Communist Refoundation Party, which signed a last gasp compromise deal on Tuesday over the contested 1998 budget, returned to the government fold and ensured Prodi carried the two motions with ease.

Prodi told parliament that the formal conclusion to the political crisis, which at one time looked like jeopardising Italy's hopes of becoming a founder member of Europe's planned single currency, would usher in a new period for the country.

"This crisis has left us more mature and stronger," Prodi said in a speech to the Upper House (Senate).

"Now we start on a new phase, a second phase which will see the economic overhaul as an absolute priority. The problem is no longer getting into Europe, but staying there, and staying there as a leading player," he said.

However, peace on the political front has come at a heavy cost to government relations with both employers' federation, Confindustria, and the major trades unions.

To win back communist support, Prodi promised to introduce a law in January to cut the working week to 35 hours from 40 by the year 2001. Unions and industrialists slammed the decision and will meet next week to decide how to fight the plan.

"It must be said that without the agreement of unions and employers a draft bill regarding industrial relations cannot be drawn up," Confindustria chairman Giorgio Fossa said.

In an address to the Lower House before Thursday's vote, Prodi appealed to the so-called social partners to keep an open mind and not block the plan out of hand.

"It doesn't make much sense for the social partners to take a prejudiced position," Prodi said.

Confindustria estimates the proposed cut to the working week will increase labour costs by about 10 per cent. Unionists said the plan was unconsidered and would add to labour tensions.

## UN condemns intervention by foreign troops Former Marxist ruler proclaims victory in Congo's civil war

BRAZZAVILLE, Oct 17: Former Marxist ruler Denis Sassou Nguesso proclaimed victory in Congo's civil war on Thursday and workers began clearing bodies from the streets of the capital Brazzaville and the port of Pointe Noire, reports Reuter.

But as his Cobra militia began consolidating its gains from four months of warfare, looting was running out of control in the central African nation's two main cities, residents said.

Commanders of the Cobras and their Angola army allies who on Wednesday seized Pointe Noire, Congo's oil hub on the Atlantic, decreed a night curfew from 9 pm.

Red Cross workers said they collected 22 bodies in and around Pointe Noire on Thursday and reported shooting.

"We have picked up 22 bodies today but we suspect there are many more," a Red Cross official told Reuters. "We only go to get the bodies when someone notifies us there is a body."

AP adds from Kinshasa: From his secret hideout, the president of the Republic of Congo insisted he still ruled the country, despite the rival militiamen who had taken control of the capital and the country's second-largest city.

Much of the world community appeared to accept that Gen. Denis Sassou-Nguesso's Cobra militia had overthrown President Pascal Lissouba's government.

But Lissouba remained defiant.

"I cannot but consider myself president since I do not yet have

before me a successor democratically elected as I was," Lissouba said Thursday in a telephone interview with Radio France Internationale (RFI).

Many reports on the conflict in the Republic of Congo were coming from just across the river in Kinshasa, capital of the similarly named Congo. The US Embassy in Kinshasa confirmed Sassou-Nguesso's conquest of Brazzaville.

The French ambassador in Brazzaville, Raymond Cesaire, said Sassou-Nguesso's men controlled the city and were encountering "fewer and fewer pockets of resistance."

"We're not far from the conclusion of the war," Cesaire said by telephone.

Meanwhile, the UN Security Council on Thursday condemned the military intervention by foreign troops in Congo and demanded "democratic and free elections."

Issuing its first formal reaction since the seizure of Brazzaville on Tuesday by ex-president Denis Sassou-Nguesso, the 15-member council in a statement called for the "immediate withdrawal" of foreign forces.

But the council refrained from naming any state which has taken part in the Congo fighting, and declined to threaten any sanctions.

Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as mercenaries, were involved in the fighting.

But the council statement failed to condemn Sassou-Nguesso's military victory over the democratically elected government of President Pascal Lissouba.

### Taliban agree to talk with opponents

ISLAMABAD, Oct 17: Afghanistan's Taliban religious army agreed Friday to hold talks with their opponents, but only if the talks are held in Pakistan and only if all the factions that make up the anti-Taliban alliance participate, reports AP.

The Taliban's offer of talks, without the usual condition that the opposition first hand over all its prisoners of war, is seen as a major breakthrough.

Mullah Mohammed Rabbani, one of Afghanistan's senior leaders, issued the offer in a statement released in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad following an early Friday morning meeting with Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

It's not clear what brought Mullah Rabbani to Pakistan for the meeting, but it comes just one day after Sharif returned from Turkmenistan where he had been negotiating an oil and gas pipeline deal.

This pipeline to energy-starved Pakistan would have to be built through Afghanistan.

Unocal, the US firm which has been given the rights by the Turkmenistan government to move the oil and gas, says construction on the pipeline will have to wait until peace comes to Afghanistan.

While Pakistan has denied giving the Taliban any military or monetary assistance, Islamabad was the first to recognize the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan and is widely seen as promoting the religious army.

Pakistan has tried before to push the Taliban toward peace talks.

The Taliban swept into the Afghan capital in September 1996, ousting President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his military chief Ahmed Shah Massoud.

Since then the Taliban has been trying to consolidate its hold on the country, but the northern one-third presently controlled by the opposition has resisted.

Rabbani and Massoud formed an alliance with several smaller parties to fight the Taliban. Their allies, mostly from the country's minorities, include ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, Shites and Ismailis.

However, the factions that make up the opposition routinely squabble and it's not certain that all of the groups would be prepared to talk to the Taliban.

There was no immediate comment from the opposition alliance, which is the past has agreed to talks with the Taliban.

## BRIEFLY

**Ramos ends Myanmar visit:** Philippines President Fidel Ramos wound up a three-day visit Friday to Myanmar, where he told the ruling generals that law and order comes through a more democratic government, AP reports from Yangon.

A joint communique released as Ramos travelled onward to Laos showed that Myanmar's military regime emphasised political stability, an indication they did not share the Philippines leader's views. Ramos is the first head of state of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to visit Myanmar since the country was admitted in July despite objections over its human-rights record.

**Muslim procession attacked in India:** A Hindu mob attacked a Muslim religious procession in southern India, injuring at least 20 people including two policemen, police official said Friday, AP reports from Hyderabad.

The attack took place in the city of Hyderabad Thursday night during and annual procession to mark the death of a Muslim saint, Hussain Shah Wali.

**Prodi to visit Jakarta, Manila:** Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi is to have talks with President Suharto on economic and trade issues during an official visit next week, reports AP from Jakarta.

State Secretariat Minister Murolo said Friday Prodi would stay in Jakarta for two days before proceeding to Manila on Tuesday afternoon as part of an Asian tour.

**China launches satellite:** China successfully launched a US-made telecommunications satellite aboard a Long March 3B rocket early Friday, the state-run Xinhua News Agency reported, AP reports from Beijing.

The 3:13 am (19:13 GMT Thursday) launch from the Xichang space centre, in southwestern Sichuan province, "pierced the sky like a fiery dragon," the report said. The ApStar-2R telecoms satellite, belonging to Hong Kong's Asia-Pacific Satellite Telecommunications, successfully entered orbit 30 minutes later, the report added.

**21 die of sleeping sickness:** Twenty-one people have died of sleeping sickness in the last few months in the northern Angolan region of Uije, state radio said Thursday, AFP reports from Luanda.

The disease has also affected an unknown number of people in Kwanza-Norte, Bengo and other areas of the North, the radio added. The health authorities are facing a shortage of specialists and technical means to tackle the sickness.

**Tamils continue hunger strike:** A hunger strike by 10 Tamil asylum-seekers held in a detention centre entered its fifth day Friday as the group maintained its vow to starve to death if they are not freed, AP reports from Melbourne.

They are seeking refuge in Australia from the conflict between the government and Tamils in Sri Lanka. "We are very worried about them and they seem most defiant," Australian Council for Tamil Refugees Victorian President Naga Remanan said.

**CNN to open 4 new bureaus:** CNN announced Thursday it will open new bureaus in Boston, Denver, Seattle and Frankfurt, Germany, giving the network 36 bureaus worldwide, AP reports from New York.

The network has already opened new bureaus in Havana and Beirut this year. CNN has 12 bureaus in the United States, including its headquarters in Atlanta.

**4 French tourists freed in Yemen:** Four French tourists were freed Thursday after being kidnapped and held for 24 hours by armed Yemeni tribesmen in the north of the country, officials said, AFP reports from Sanaa.

Hamid Al-Ahmar, the owner of the travel agency, said the four French tourists, three men and a woman, were kidnapped on Wednesday near Sahar in the province of Saada, some 270 kilometres (167 miles) from the capital Sanaa.

**Novelist James Michener dies:** Prize-winning novelist James Michener, died Thursday at age 90, local radio and television stations reported, AFP says from Austin.

Michener, who penned books on subjects ranging from sports in America to apartheid in South Africa, had recently ended kidney dialysis that had prolonged his life.



President Clinton, accompanied by Argentine President Carlos Menem, (right), waves to the crowd Thursday in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Clinton placed a wreath at a monument to Argentine national hero Gen. Jose de San Martin at Buenos Aires's Plaza San Martin. — AP/UNB photo

### 12 killed in clash in N Colombia

BOGOTA, Oct 17: Eight police officers and four leftist guerrillas were killed in a fierce clash in northern Colombia; national chief of police general Boeso Jose Serrano said Thursday, reports AP.

Another eight police officers were seriously wounded, Serrano said, after some 300 rebels of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) attacked the small community of Caicedo during the night.

A preliminary report had said earlier that seven other members of the security forces were captured.

### 'Russia plans to cut its ground forces in half'

WASHINGTON, Oct 17: Russia plans to cut its ground forces in half by 2005 and increase its reliance on nuclear weapons for future conflicts, The Washington Times reported today quoting a "top secret" intelligence report, reports Reuter.

The newspaper said it had obtained from US Defence Department sources a copy of a report on the Russian military prepared by the joint intelligence committee a forum comprising intelligence officials from the United States, Britain, Canada and Australia.

The report said Russia new military strategy — to be approved later this year — forces changes already under way by placing increased weight on nuclear weapons to deter aggression, according to the newspaper.

It said Russia was expected to "maintain a credible strategic deterrent to compensate for the weaknesses in its conventional forces."

Pentagon officials were not available to comment on the report.



Jenan Ali, 38 years-old, a female Iraqi census-taker, performs her duty by gathering information to fill in a form Thursday. She has to ensure that all the questions (about 80) on the form are answered properly as Iraq conducts its first census in ten years. — AP/UNB photo

### Kumaratunga offers talks 'even with devil'

COLOMBO, Oct 17: President Chandrika Kumaratunga today offered talks "even with the devil" to end Sri Lanka's Tamil separatist war and said she would halt a military drive if rebels agreed to negotiate, reports AP.

Kumaratunga told reporters she was determined to push through political reforms aimed at ending the conflict despite Wednesday's huge bombing in the capital Colombo.

"We will stop the military campaign if they agree to discuss the political package," Kumaratunga said in her first press conference since the truck devastated the financial centre, killing 20 people and wounding 105.

### Suu Kyi, 300 party members hold religious ceremony

YANGON, Oct 17: Myanmar's military government permitted democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and more than 300 members of her political party to hold a religious ceremony at her Yangon home Friday, reports AP.

Party faithful dressed in their customary peach-colored jackets paid respects to 60 senior politicians, including some of Burma's independence fighters, during the traditional ceremony of obeisance to elders that marks the end of the three-month Buddhist lent.

Those who attended said the service contained no political overtones. It was the second large gathering the military government permitted at Suu Kyi's home within a month.

### First US baby born from frozen eggs

ATLANTA, Oct 17: In what may be the first such case in the United States, a Georgia woman gave birth after being implanted with eggs that had been frozen, reports AP.

Up to now, US doctors have been able to produce pregnancies from frozen embryos — that is eggs fertilized with sperm and then frozen — but eggs alone were considered too fragile to freeze.

The latest feat, which has been achieved only sporadically elsewhere around the world, could give women some new reproductive options and sidestep some of the ethical objections to test-tube fertilization.

"This stretches the reproductive field as far as you can envision it right now," said Dr Joe Massey, co-founder of Reproductive Biology Associates, the Atlanta clinic that accomplished the feat. The same clinic in 1993 produced the first US baby using sperm injected directly into a woman's egg.

In 1986, a doctor in Australia was able to produce the first known births from frozen eggs. A year later, a team of German doctors also produced frozen-egg pregnancies.

### Rajiv murder Congress suspects involvement of foreign agencies

NEW DELHI, Oct 17: Congress Party yesterday told the Jain Commission that circumstances and statements of several key witnesses raised suspicion about involvement of foreign agencies in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, reports PTI.

Arguing before the one-man panel probing the conspiracy case, AICC counsel, RN Mittal, said the deposition of some key witnesses pointed the needle of suspicion towards foreign agencies like CIA and Mossad.

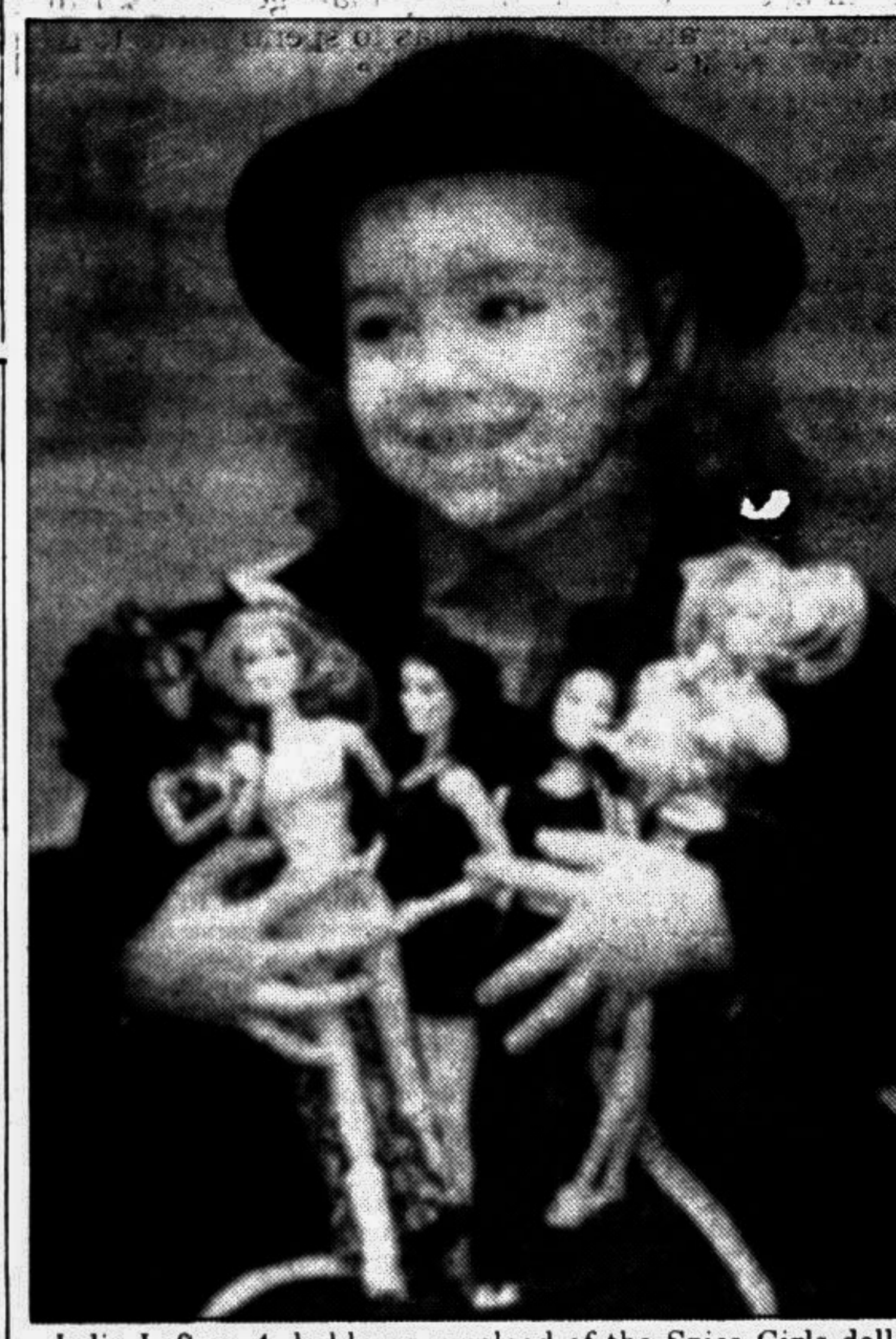
Mittal claimed that TN Seshan, who had served as cabinet secretary and secretary (security) in the Rajiv Gandhi government, was allegedly aware of the threats to the life of late premier but did not disclose the truth.

In addition, deposition of former prime ministers Chandra Shekhar and VP Singh also indicated certain circumstances which pointed towards the conspiracy and suspected involvement of foreign agencies, he said.

Mittal said circumstances indicated that besides LTTE, Punjab militants were also after Rajiv Gandhi.

Leaders of various militant outfits had met in London in December 1990, he said, adding that statements made before the commission by some witnesses indicated a larger conspiracy to eliminate Rajiv Gandhi.

Mittal said attempts on the life of Rajiv Gandhi had allegedly been made in Faridabad and at Sahadara in the capital itself.



Jodie Loftus, 4, holds an armload of the Spice Girls dolls when they were first unveiled at a fair of Christmas toys in London Thursday. From left to right the dolls are Scary Spice, Ginger Spice, Posh Spice, Sporty Spice and Baby Spice. — AP/UNB photo

### UN weapons inspection Iraq threatens to halt cooperation

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 17: Iraq is threatening to ban UN weapons inspections and cease cooperation with the Security Council if additional sanctions are imposed on Baghdad, a UN official said Thursday, reports AP.

In jeopardy if Iraq were to follow through on its threat are an oil-for-food deal that was agreed upon after much negotiation, and "no fly zones" over northern Iraq; both measures were approved by the council.

The United States wants the council to add travel restrictions to the list of sanctions slapped on Iraq since President Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, touching off the Persian Gulf War.

During a closed-door meeting, chief weapons inspector Richard Butler told council members that Iraq's UN ambassador informed him that Baghdad "will cease all further cooperation... if the council adopted a resolution which included additional sanctions." The Associated Press obtained a copy of

### 'UK's Labour Party has hidden agenda to create independent Kashmir'

NEW DELHI, Oct 17: Queen Elizabeth's tour of India slid deeper into controversy on Thursday with sources close to the Indian government charging that Britain's ruling Labour Party had a hidden agenda to create an independent Kashmir region, reports Reuter.

Even as British officials scrambled to salvage the Queen's week-long trip which has turned in to a public relations fiasco, the sources, who spoke to Reuters on condition that they not be identified said Labour's Kashmir position dated back to 1947.

The sources said British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, who visited India last year as a member of the shadow Labour cabinet, had told Indian authorities the Kashmir issue was an 'article of faith' with the Labour Party.

"The hidden agenda was ultimately to obtain an independent state of Jammu and Kashmir," the sources said.

"Cook genuinely believes that there is an unfinished business of partition, they

he had made.

Conservative politicians have used the tour to attack Cook, saying his handling of the visit was unforgivable but Cook told his cabinet colleagues on Thursday the tour had been an outstanding success despite local and British media reports.

The Indian sources speaking to Reuters noted that the subcontinent's partition into India and Pakistan had taken place in 1947 under a Labour government headed by Clement Attlee.

They said the Attlee government in power from 1945 to 1951 had pushed through key United Nations Security Council Resolutions in August 1948 and January 1949 that called for a plebiscite that would grant self-determination to Kashmir.

The Hindu ruler of Muslim dominated Kashmir Maharajah Hari Singh acceded to India but the move triggered the first war between the newly-created India and Pakistan.

The Indian sources said both Cook and Foreign Office minister Derek Fatchett had pushed the Kashmir plebiscite issue at the Labour party's conference in Brighton early this month.

### Russia's political system now stable: Yeltsin

MOSCOW, Oct 17: This week's showdown between the president and the parliament, which ended in compromise, showed that Russia's political system has become stable, President Boris Yeltsin said Friday, reports AP.

"Over many long years people became accustomed to the fact that those in power did whatever they wanted, that the constitution was just a decoration," Yeltsin said in his weekly radio address. "Those times are past. And I emphasise: They are gone forever."

"Today we can say that we have a stable system of political power," he added.

Yeltsin's remarks came two days after he reached an 11th-hour compromise with Russia's feisty lower house of parliament, the State Duma, averting a non-confidence vote in his government.

Many in the Duma oppose Yeltsin's economic policies and proposed 1998 budget, which calls for strict spending limits. Many deputies are pushing to maintain large government subsidies for the military, agriculture and social programmes.

Duma leaders — led by communists and other hardliners — intend to take up the no-confidence motion again next week, but have agreed in the mean time to negotiate a compromise budget with the president and his top aides.

"Everything is staying within the bounds of a civilised political struggle," Yeltsin said. "There has been no disaster. Normal everyday life continues."

"Quietly but fundamentally, our life has changed," Yeltsin continued. "And although political passions may boil and seethe, they boil and seethe within the strict bounds of the law."

Duma speaker Gennady Seleznyov also sounded a conciliatory tone Friday, saying "there is no confrontation between the State Duma and the Russian government and no one wants an active confrontation."

On a visit to the southern city of Krasnodar, Seleznyov told the ITAR-Tass news agency that deputies had no real quarrel with Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin but wanted to oust reformist first deputy prime ministers Anatoly Chubais and Boris Nemtsov.