

International

Troops seal off Colombo to search for LTTE members

COLOMBO, Oct 25: Sri Lankan troops sealed off the capital early Saturday and thousands of policemen and soldiers searched the entire city for Tamil Tiger rebel infiltrators, reports AP.

A military official, who asked not to be named, said more than 350 Tamils who weren't carrying proper identification were detained for questioning.

Hundreds of tourists and other foreigners who arrived on flights during the operation were stranded in massive traffic jams at the city's dozen entrances.

All roads leading to Colombo were closed and the search operation began at 2 am state radio announced.

Residents were ordered not to leave their homes, and to have identification handy to show the searchers. The search ended after six hours.

Bus and train services were suspended, and road blocks as far as 25 km away stopped vehi-

cles from getting to Colombo.

The massive search came on the heels of the first rebel attack in Colombo in 15 months, in which a truck bomb shattered the business district.

The Oct 15 blast and 10-hour shootout between rebels and elite commandos in the city centre killed 18 and wounded 105. The blast severely damaged the 39-floor World Trade Centre, the Hilton and Galadari hotels.

It was the first time in the entire capital, in which more than a million people live, was searched. The area covered was more than 80 square km.

The rebels are fighting for a homeland for the minority Tamils, citing discrimination by the majority Sinhalese in jobs and education. Tamils are 18 per cent of the Indian Ocean island's 18 million people. More than 50,000 have been killed in the war so far.

AFT adds, in a pre-dawn attack on an army bunker line in

Off the Record

It was a blessing gone bad

TAVARES, Florida: A Florida couple who won dollar 5.4 million in the state lottery agreed on how to divide their jackpot this week and were promptly granted a divorce, reports Reuter.

Herbert Savell, 51, and Suzanne Savell, 52, of Mount Dora, Florida had been scheduled to begin a divorce trial on Thursday, ending an acrimonious five months since they drove to the state capital in June to claim their new fortune.

Instead, Mrs Savell agreed to take 38 per cent of the winnings and leave her husband 62 per cent as part of a divorce settlement signed before circuit judge Mark Hill, the Orlando Sentinel reported Friday.

As she signed the agreement, Mrs Savell said winning the lottery had been bad luck for the couple, they bought a new dollar 275,000 house, but within a month were arguing over who owned it. Mrs Savell obtained an injunction for protection from her husband of three years.

"It was like a blessing gone bad," she told the newspaper.

... to marry in style

MESSINA, Sicily: A 64-year-old Italian peasant who saved for 40 years for a fairy-tale wedding complete with caviar, champagne and a horse drawn carriage finally saw her dream come true on Friday, reports Reuter.

Vittoria Chillemi, a farm worker, saved more than 50 million lire and hired a 19th century coach drawn by two white horses so she could marry in style.

The mayor of Antillo, a village in eastern Sicily, said he had cordoned off the main street and most of the 800 residents turned out to watch Chillemi wed 68-year-old Sebastiano Maccaroni, to whom she had become engaged at the age of 24.

The happy couple celebrated with a wedding banquet of caviar and champagne and were serenaded by violinists.

Beauty queen's marriage woe

HONG KONG: Marriage has brought some bad news to a Hong Kong beauty queen, reports Reuter.

Janice Chu Yin-Chun, 25, was stripped of her Miss Asia Crown because she concealed her marriage in violation of the rules, the South China Morning Post reported Friday.

"After in-depth investigation, the organiser found that Chu had concealed information in the contest and is not suitable for executing the mission of Miss Asia," organisers, ATV television of Hong Kong, were quoted as saying.

Chu was awarded HK dollar 2 million (US dollar 260,000) in cash, other prizes and contracts after winning the pageant last Saturday. The title now passes to the runner-up.

Women atop men-only mountain?

TOKYO: A Japanese temple gearing up for the 700th anniversary of its founding is considering something it has banned since the Middle Ages: letting women climb up its sacred mountain, reports AP.

Ominesanji, a temple atop the 1,719-metre (5,640-foot) Omine mountain near the western city of Nara, has not allowed female climbers to reach the summit since 1300.

The temple, one of only two hilltop shrines banning women in Japan, worships the mountain and practices Shugendo, a men-only religious sect that mixes Buddhism, the Japanese native religion of Shinto and Taoism.

But temple officials are thinking of celebrating its 700th anniversary in 2000 by repealing the ban after a series of requests from female climbers, said chief priest Koshu Hayashi.

Not all 300 parishioners have approved the idea, he said. "They want to keep the old ritual," Hayashi said.

Under current rules, worshippers use four routes posted with "No Women allowed" signs. Women are allowed to use other trails, but these stop halfway up the mountain. About 60,000 people visit the mountain each year.



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh stand with their eldest son Prince Charles during the opening of the Commonwealth Heads of State Conference in Edinburgh Friday. The Queen later delivered her first ever speech at the summit, during which she urged the Commonwealth states to use "strength of purpose and clarity of vision" in their decision.

BRIEFLY

Sihanouk leaves for China: King Norodom Sihanouk left Cambodia for China Saturday, despondent over continued political turmoil and violence in his homeland, and uncertain whether he would ever return, AP reports from Siem Reap.

In a low-key send-off which seemed to match his mood, the king smiled and said goodbye to the handful of well-wishers who lined a red carpet before boarding a Royal Air Cambodge plane to Beijing where he will undergo medical treatment. The country's strongman Hun Sen and his co-premier Ung Huot attended the farewell despite a request by the king that top officials and diplomats not see him off.

Rebels kill 4 in Manipur: At least four persons, including a child, were killed and over 35 houses set ablaze when Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA) and Paite activists attacked three Kuki villages in Manipur's Churachandpur district Friday night, PTI reports from Imphal.

Official sources yesterday said that ZRA and Paite activists, equipped with automatic weapons, first surrounded Beijang village, about five km south of Churachandpur town, and opened fire indiscriminately killing four persons including a mother and her child. At least 24 houses were set ablaze.

Shi'ite activist, son killed in Lahore: Assaults slit the throats of a Shi'ite Muslim activist and his 10-year-old son in what police suspect was a religiously motivated attack, AP reports from Lahore.

Family members found the bodies of Aslam Raza Kazmi, a member of the militant group Movement for Shi'ite Law, and his son Mohammed Ali, in the family's home Saturday in Lahore, the capital of Pakistan's eastern Punjab province. Family members had left the day before to attend a wedding in a nearby town. Police believe the murders were the latest in a wave of violent clashes between extremist Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims that have left about 200 people dead in Pakistan this year.

Cuba sets date for polls Jan 11: Cuban officials said Friday that legislative elections would be held on January 11, less than two weeks before the arrival of Pope John Paul II, AP reports from Mexico City.

The government's Prensa Latina news agency announced the date for provincial and national parliament votes had been set by the nation's Cabinet. It will be the second time that the Communist government has held direct elections to parliament. The first came in 1993 following an electoral reform.

Human chain formed to protest Indian rule over Kashmir

MUZAFFARABAD, Pak- istan, Oct 25: Thousands of Kashmiris linked hands to form a 56-km (35 miles) "human chain" on Friday to protest Indian rule over most of their disputed Himalayan region, witnesses said, reports Reuter.

"We will snatch freedom, freedom is our right," "Why should we not get freedom," the protesters chanted as they formed the line from Muzaffarabad, capital of Pakistan-ruled Azad (free) Kashmir, to the Chakothi border point with Indian-ruled Kashmir.

The demonstration, organised by the Kashmir solidarity forum, an alliance of 12 political groups in Pakistani Kashmir, was held on the 52nd anniversary of the ratification of the United Nations charter to attract world attention to the dispute.

UK won't meddle in Kashmir dispute, assures Blair

EDINBURGH, Oct 25: Prime Minister Tony Blair sought on Friday to patch up Britain's relations with India by assuring Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral that it would not meddle in Delhi's dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir, reports Reuter.

A goodwill visit by Britain's Queen Elizabeth to India and Pakistan earlier this month was marred by a series of diplomatic gaffes, including references by the monarch herself to "historical hostilities" in the region.

The trip was not helped by denials by British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook that he had offered to mediate in the Kashmiri dispute and by Indian officials that Gujral had termed Britain a "third rate power" for meddling.

Aides said Blair, aware of reports that the visit had plunged anglo-Indian relations to a new low, trod carefully when he met Gujral on the fringes of the Commonwealth Summit.

A spokesman for Blair said he told Gujral: "This is essentially a bilateral issue for India and Pakistan and Britain is not seeking to mediate against their will."

Gujral ally predicts fresh elections soon

NEW DELHI, Oct 25: A prominent ally of Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral's minority coalition has predicted a general election in India soon, reports said today, says AFP.

Chandrababu Naidu, chief of the regional Telugu Desam party and a key figure in the multi-party government, was quoted by The Pioneer daily as saying that elections could be held any time now.

"I have asked my members of the party to prepare as if elections are tomorrow. I am ready for elections anytime," Naidu said.

He said the Congress Party, the power behind the coalition government, was "desperate for power" following a setback in the country's political heart of Uttar Pradesh.

Congress sparked a national crisis this week by trying to pressure Gujral into sacking the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in the northern state.

Congress alleged the BJP had used bribes to win a trust vote and said a mass brawl in the assembly chamber indicated law and order was breaking down in Uttar Pradesh, which has given India eight of its Prime Ministers.

Gujral's United Front coalition, made up of more than a dozen small leftwing and centre parties and kept in power by Congress, was badly split over the issue.

Analysts, however, pointed out the once-dominant party was not ready for elections and is trying to rebuild its popular base after being routed in the 1996 elections.

Albright terms Tigers as Hindu separatists

WASHINGTON, Oct 25: US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has branded the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) waging a war for a separate homeland in Sri Lanka as "Hindu separatists," reports PTI.

"In recent years, we have seen bloody acts of terrorism committed by Hindu separatists in Sri Lanka and Kurdish separatists in Turkey," she said in a speech at the Catholic University here.

In the first statement of its kind after Washington declared the LTTE as a "terrorist organisation," Albright sought to explain the island nation's ongoing civil war, hitherto characterised as an "ethnic conflict," in terms of religion.

48 burned to death in Turkey road mishap

KONYA, Turkey, Oct 25: A passenger bus collided with an empty fuel truck, burning 48 people to death on a highway near the central Turkish city of Konya, an official said Saturday, reports AP.

Their bodies have been charred and cannot be identified, Namik Gurel, the governor for Konya, told reporters.

Five passengers were injured, and three suffered serious burns in the accident late Friday. It took firefighters more than an hour to bring the blaze under control, the Anatolia news agency said.

Israeli protestors demand PM's resignation

JERUSALEM, Oct 25: Hundreds of Israelis demonstrated Friday outside Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's home, demanding that he resign for saying dovish Israelis "have forgotten what it means to be Jewish," reports AP.

Standing among the about 400 demonstrators were two dozen middle-aged army reservists who had marched for three days from the Tel Aviv square where former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by an ultranationalist Jew in November 1995.

Bandannas tied around their heads, the reservists held signs reading "Bibi incites." Others waved black flags meant to symbolise what they felt would be Israel's black future if Netanyahu stayed in office.

"No matter what Bibi does wrong, he never even thinks to apologise. He totally ignores the writing on the wall, and we are all afraid of what will come next," said marcher Ariel Doron.

Other demonstrators carried signs reading "there is no peace and there is no security," a reference to Netanyahu's 1996 campaign slogan promising he would bring peace with security.

Netanyahu's opponents have accused him of willfully destroying the peace process with the Palestinians by going back

on earlier agreements and refusing to make concessions.

Earlier this week, Netanyahu outraged Israel's dovish opposition by telling a leading rabbi privately that Israeli "leftists have forgotten what it means to be Jewish" because they were willing to leave Israel's security, to some extent, in Arab hands.

The remarks were taped by an Israel radio reporter and broadcast on the evening news, causing an outcry.

A group of 98 army reservists wrote an angry letter to Netanyahu.

"Can it be that only when we are called to the next war, God forbid, you will recognise our Jewishness once again, Mr Prime Minister?" the reservists wrote in the letter published Friday in the Maariv daily.

Another peace group, Dor Shalom, asked its members to show up Sunday morning outside the chief rabbinite in Tel Aviv and demand to see proof that they are still registered as Jews.

The chief rabbi of Israel's Ashkenazi Jews, Meir Lau, advised Netanyahu that he should work to enhance unity, media reports said. Lau, who normally supports the prime minister's hard-line views, warned Netanyahu that "violent words will lead to violent acts."

UNGA urged to ask members to cut defence budget

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 25: Women from more than 100 countries presented a petition Friday to the General Assembly, calling on the 185 UN member states to reduce their defence budgets, reports AP.

The petition, which organisers said contained 100,000 signatures, called on governments to reduce their military budgets by five per cent annually and spend the money on health, education and other programme that benefit women.

"War has to be put on the table for discussion," said Cora Weiss, a member of the International Peace Bureau which launched the campaign.



President Clinton prepares to lead the National Symphony Orchestra in a rendition of John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" to close a performance at the Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts in Washington Friday. The President conducted the final encore of a performance to celebrate the re-opening of the Kennedy Centre Concert Hall following extensive renovations.

Survivors denounce Pol Pot as 'liar'

SIEM REAP, Cambodia, Oct 25: Survivors of Pol Pot's genocidal Khmer Rouge regime responded with disbelief Thursday at his lack of remorse in a historic interview and said they wanted to kill him, reports AP.

Recalling horrifying executions, torture and starvation people in this northern town near the ancient Angkor temple — monuments to Cambodia's past grandeur — were quick to call Pol Pot a liar for saying he wanted only to save his country.

"If you ask 10 Cambodian families, I'm sure seven will tell you they lost members of their family. Pol Pot is responsible for that," said Soum Sotthol, 33, a taxi driver, who saw a man dragged to death by a horse as punishment for breaking Khmer Rouge rules.

The Maoist-inspired Khmer Rouge turned Cambodia into a vast labour camp after seizing power April 17, 1975. As many as 2 million Cambodians — one in five — died of malnutrition, overwork, illness or systematic execution.

In his first interview in more than 18 years, Pol Pot told American journalist Nate Thayer that he had "made mistakes" but blamed most of the mass deaths on Cambodia's historic enemy, Vietnam, which invaded and toppled his regime in 1979.

"My conscience is clear," said Pol Pot. "To say that millions died is too much."

The interview appeared in Thursday's edition of the Hong Kong-based Far Eastern Economic Review magazine, though extracts were released Wednesday. APTV footage could be seen on the few televisions in Cambodia that receive international news broadcasts.

When a glimpse of Pol Pot flickered on her small television, Chea Sanchanic, 31, a maid, strained her ears to hear his raspy voice behind the dubbed-over English translation.

"I hate him so much, just seeing him brings back all the memories," said Chea Sanchanic, whose brother and sister starved to death under the Khmer Rouge.

Chea Sanchanic recalled her own narrow escape from death. She was hit in the back of the head with a hoe — a common Khmer Rouge execution technique — and left for dead in a mass grave after the revolutionaries. Her crime: sneaking a sweet potato.

Narayanan is seen as saviour of Indian democracy

Mahesh Uniyal writes from New Delhi

In the end it was seen as a victory for Indian President K.R. Narayanan who became the first head of state to succeed in overruling a decision by the Council of Ministers.

The loss of fate for India's United Front (UF) coalition government Wednesday, when it was forced to take back its advice to President Narayanan to impose federal rule on the most populous state of Uttar Pradesh, was a win for democracy, political analysts noted.

It also had far reaching implications for the major political parties, especially the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the former ruling Congress, which was said to have arm-twisted Prime Minister I K Gujral's Cabinet to nullify the BJP's dramatic win in a trust vote in Uttar Pradesh.

While media commentators noted that the fact that it was forced to backtrack amounted to the "collapse of its political and moral authority," the UF government could, paradoxically, be the gainer in the short run, analysts said.

It would now be more difficult for the Congress Party to pull the rug from under Gujral's six-month-old government, they pointed out. The Congress would not want to force a midterm election on the country at a time when things are not going well for the party which has ruled India for most of the past 50 years, they said.

Media commentators were, however, full of praise for the "great helmsman" Narayanan and his "unprecedented decision" to ask the Cabinet to consider its advice to him to use a controversial constitutional provision to impose president's rule on the state.

"A president, believing in treading the righteous path, has prevented what could have been a major blow to democracy in the country. The Times of India newspaper said in a front page editorial titled, "The President saves the day".

"At the hour of our greatest need, Indian democracy and its Republican Constitution have indeed found their saviour," said The Pioneer in its front

page editorial which described the bid to scuttle the BJP's win in the Uttar Pradesh confidence vote as "the attempted gang-rape of democracy".

Commentators agreed that 77-year-old President Narayanan had "distinguished himself" within three months of taking an office which has mostly ceremonial value, by "refusing to be badgered into taking a decision against his better judgement and ... against his conscience."

"The country applauds his courage and wisdom. Where the executive is content to dance to the tunes of the contemptible Kesri, Narayanan has proved that he is no pushover like so many of his predecessors," noted The Statesman.

The daily was referring to the widely held view, notwithstanding Congress president Sitaram Kesri's denial, that he had forced a reluctant Gujral to recommend president's rule for Uttar Pradesh. The 14-party UF was said to be sharply divided over the decision with Defence Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav

and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) pressing for it while Gujral and the powerful southern regional satraps in the UF were against it.

Analysts noted that the Congress, which is keeping Gujral's minority government in office and described the Cabinet's changed decision as "unfortunate," would be the biggest loser.

The Congress is said to have precipitated the crisis because it was panicked by the vertical split in its Uttar Pradesh unit. More than half the Congress lawmakers in the state assembly had formed a breakaway group to support Chief Minister Kalyan Singh's government in the confidence vote held after the pro-Dalit (lower caste) Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) had walked out of the BJP-BSP ruling alliance there.

The Congress rebellion in Uttar Pradesh has not only dented the party's electoral prospects in its former stronghold state where it now trails in the fourth spot, but has become a cause for real worry in

other states as well as at the national level, analysts said.

They noted that the BJP win in the Uttar Pradesh confidence vote had exposed cracks in the UF-Congress secular front forged last year to deny office to the Hindu nationalist BJP after the unclear verdict of the May 1996 general election.

"For the first time, the Congress has split to align with the BJP and this will have a bearing on the BJP's political untouchability. So far only individual Congressmen had veered towards the BJP," pointed out a close observer of Congress politics.

The BJP is now said to be eyeing disgruntled Congress members of national Parliament ahead of a renewed bid to cobble together a majority in the 545-member Lok Sabha, the Lower House of Parliament. A BJP government led by Atal Behari Vajpayee quit after 13 days in office in May 1996 as it failed to muster the necessary numbers for a simple majority.

— India Abroad News Service

S Asian film festival begins in Kathmandu

KATHMANDU, Oct 25: The first festival of documentary films from South Asia, "Film South Asia," opened here today, reports AFP.

A total of 55 documentaries from Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka were chosen for screening during the festival out of the 130 submitted, said Kanak Mani Dixit, editor of Himal South Asia which is organising the festival.

Dixit said the four-day event was the first of its kind in South Asia, subjects include a study of the feelings of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, about partition in 1947; the anti-liquor agitation in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh; a retrospective on Bangladesh's Liberation struggle; and how Sri Lankan families come to terms with bereavement amid civil war.

Some 35 film makers from the region have arrived in Kathmandu to lead discussions on their works.

Australia being flooded with illegal immigrants

SYDNEY, Oct 25: Organised Asian crime syndicates and corrupt consulate officials were helping flood Australia with illegal immigrants to aid drug smuggling, prostitution and extortion rackets, a report said today, says AFP.

"Human smuggling represents a serious threat to Australia," a recent closed meeting of senior police and forensic experts was warned in Sydney, the Australian newspaper said.

Richard Basham, an expert on Asian crime, told the meeting that immigrants were forced into crimes such as prostitution in "near slavery" conditions to repay debts will invoke serious sanctions, including murder, said Basham, head of Sydney University's Anthropology department.

He said immigrants, particularly from China, were being forced to a pay as much as 15,000 Australian dollars (10,800 US) to crime gangs who charged high interest rates.

Chinese triads and other Asian gangs saw Australia as a "soft target" and had an almost free hand in helping immigrants pose as students on sham English-language programme.

Unless immigration laws were substantially tightened the matter would only get worse, Basham said.

The meeting of the Australian Academy of Forensic Scientists was told police should treat all official documents from Asia with caution and "take care" when exchanging sensitive information with their Asian counterparts.

Basham said corrupt consulate officials in Asia had been known to provide fake documents for illegal entry into Australia or legitimate documents to undesirable immigrants.

The meeting was also warned that the illegal immigrants were unlikely to pay tax or cooperate with Australian laws and authorities.

Some Asian cultures did not consider heroin importation and dealing loan sharking, extortion and prostitution as serious crimes.