

Indian govt asked to explain why Priyanka allotted luxury home

NEW DELHI, Nov 6: The Indian government has been given 10 days to explain why the daughter of former premier Rajiv Gandhi has been allotted a luxury government home in the capital, reports said today.

The Delhi High Court on Wednesday asked New Delhi to explain why Priyanka Gandhi should be eligible for a government house.

She married a businessman in February but has continued to be protected by Indian commando bodyguards and treated as a VIP (Very, Very Important Person), even though she has no direct link to politics.

Rajiv Gandhi was blown up by a suicide bomber in 1991 while campaigning during general elections.

The court said the government should draw up specific guidelines for the allotment of government houses.

It added that some widows of political VIPs, awarded coveted home, were turning them into museums in memory of their husbands while continuing to live elsewhere.

Priyanka Gandhi's grandmother Indira Gandhi was assassinated in 1984 while serving as prime minister. Sonia Gandhi, Priyanka's mother, lives in New Delhi but has resisted calls to enter active politics.

Sri Lanka to upgrade navy

COLOMBO, Nov 6: President Chandrika Kumaratunga said Thursday her government will upgrade Sri Lanka's navy and provide soldiers with new equipment to combat Tamil separatists, reports AP.

"If we had upgraded our navy earlier, the problem of terrorism would not have taken this form," she told reporters a day after her government presented an annual budget that sets aside 13.7 per cent of spending for defence.

The rebels want a homeland in the north and east for minority Tamils, who they say are discriminated against by the majority Sinhalese. The war began in earnest after 1983 ethnic riots in Colombo in which hundreds of Tamil civilians were killed by Sinhalese nationalists. The war has left over 50,000 people dead on both sides and has harmed Sri Lanka's economy.

After 14 years of fighting, the government now seems to have an upper hand after driving out the rebels from their headquarters in northern Jaffna. The rebels, however, continue to engage 60,000 Sri Lankan soldiers in the north and east of this island nation, and occasionally target Colombo in the south. Last month, Tamil rebels bombed Colombo's business district.

Mir commander begins fresh space walk

MOSCOW, Nov 6: Mir Commander Anatoly Solovoy and fellow cosmonaut began a new space walk today to continue repairs to their aging space station mission control spokesman Valery Lyndin said, reports AP.

The pair began the space walk, scheduled to last more than five-and-a-half hours at 3:12 am Moscow Time (0012 GMT) Lyndin said. Adding "everything went off as planned, and even more quickly than planned."

The two cosmonauts made a similar expedition Monday despite a fault which stopped flight controllers receiving data on conditions inside Solovoy's space suit and the astronaut's vital signs.

After a two-hour delay, mission control ordered their space walk to go ahead and the two astronauts spent six hours in space removing a spent solar panel.

Engineers later discovered that the fault was not with the space suit but with a transmission unit inside Mir itself which astronauts managed to repair.

Vietnam storm 900 fishermen rescued

HANOI, Vietnam, Nov 6: Army helicopters and a ragtag armada of ships rescued more than 900 fishermen feared lost at sea in the wake of a crushing typhoon, a government relief agency said, reports AP.

However, hope for more survivors was waning Thursday, four days after Typhoon Linda pounded Vietnam's southern-most provinces.

Authorities confirmed at least 300 people were killed by Typhoon Linda, while as many as 800 more sailors and fishermen missing at sea were presumed dead.

Another 2,248 people are unaccounted for in the wake of the largest storm to hit southern Vietnam this century. The Central Committee for Flood and Storm Control said Linda slammed down on Ca Mau and Kien Giang provinces.

The region's toll also included at least 23 dead in Cambodia and seven in Thailand.

Some 200 people were missing in Cambodia, and at least 100 Thai fishermen were feared lost in the Gulf of Thailand.

The search and rescue operation in Vietnam included navy cutters, coast guard dinghies, rickety fishing yaws and just about any other available boat in the region.

Move to end row over US arms inspectors UN envoys resume talks with Iraqi officials

BAGHDAD, Nov 6: Three United Nations envoys resumed talks with Iraqi officials today in order to resolve a row over US arms inspectors, the Iraqi news agency INA reported, says Reuters.

The third session of talks between Iraq and the United Nations Secretary-General's mission has started this morning," INA said.

The UN diplomatic mission follows Baghdad's decision last week to expel 10 Americans among a 100-member UN arms inspection teams.

The envoys held two round of talks with the officials on Wednesday on an Iraqi decision last week to expel 10 Americans among 100-member UN weapons inspection teams.

Today's talks were held as tension between the two sides rose further after the United Nations accused Iraq on Wednesday night of tampering with weapons monitoring system, moving arms-related equipment away from UN surveillance cameras and covering up the lenses of the cameras themselves.

The mission is headed by former Algerian foreign minister

ter Lakhdar Brahimi and includes former Argentine UN representative Emilio Cardenas and Jan Eliasson of Sweden, a former ambassador to the United Nations.

INA said the Iraqi side to the talks was headed by Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz.

The other Iraqi officials attending the talks are foreign Minister Mohammed Saeed Al-Sahaf, Oil Minister Amir Mohammed Rasheed, Adviser in the presidency office Amir Al-Saadi and Iraq's UN envoy Nizar Hamdoun, it said.

AFP adds, the top UN arms inspector expressed concern Wednesday that Iraqi authorities have moved equipment out of the range of UN cameras checking Iraqi disarmament.

Western diplomats told AFP that UN Special Commission Chairman Richard Butler had written to the UN Security Council expressing concern that so-called "dual use" equipment had been moved out of sight of the UN cameras.

The cameras are set up in factories and other Iraqi installations to ensure long-term monitoring of Iraqi disarmament.

ment. Dual use, equipment includes products that may be harmless in themselves but which can be transformed into weaponry.

Another AFP report says, US President Bill Clinton called on the international community to show "long term patience and discipline" in dealing with Iraq but expressed some reservations on UN decision to temporarily suspend spy plane flights over Iraq.

At a brief press conference in the White House Oval Office Clinton distanced himself from a decision by Special UN Arms Inspection Chief Richard Butler to postpone flights until next week of an American U-2 reconnaissance plane over Iraq.

I would have been disturbed if the flights had been suspended and there had been a clear statement that they would be resumed shortly Clinton told reporters.

Saddam last week ordered all US nationals working as part of the UN inspections teams to leave the country. But later decided to push back the deadline initially set for Wednesday.



Palestinian schoolboys carry a green-tinted photo of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein during a pro-Saddam demonstration organised by their local school administrators at Dehaishe refugee camp near the West Bank town of Bethlehem Wednesday. Three UN envoys opened a delicate diplomatic mission to Iraq Wednesday, hoping words would resolve a crisis over US weapons inspectors that threatened to erupt into armed conflict.

— AP/UNB photo

Russia ratifies int'l ban on chemical weapons

MOSCOW, Nov 6: Russia ratified an international chemical weapons ban obliging Moscow to destroy its huge arsenals and convert production plants to peaceful use within a decade, Interfax news agency said, reports Reuters.

Interfax quoted President Boris Yeltsin's administration as saying that the Russian leader signed the ratification bill late on Wednesday after it was unanimously approved by the Federation Council, the upper house of parliament, earlier in the day.

Officials were not immediately available to confirm the report but Yeltsin has many times expressed his support for the ban and has urged parliament to speed up its ratification. The state Duma lower house approved the ratification on October 31.

"The measure fully corresponds to the interests of Russia and the stability of the whole world," Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov said after the vote in the Federation Council.

"We have much stronger deterrents," he told reporters. "As far as economics are concerned, if we didn't join the convention we'd still have to spend about 30 billion dollars to destroy chemical weapons that are already old or getting old."

According to the convention, Russia will have to spend 250 million dollars over the next 10 years on destroying chemical weapons. Moscow will also have to contribute 80 million dollars to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), officials said.

"If this vote didn't occur, there would be no finances for this," Defence Minister Igor Sergeev told reporters. "But they have approved it, giving a guarantee of funding for the government and the president."

The Duma deferred approval of the measure in April, saying Russia did not have enough money to destroy its weapons.

"I warmly welcome the action by the Russian government today in ratifying the chemical weapons convention," US President Bill Clinton said in a written statement on Wednesday.

More than 100 countries have ratified the chemical weapons convention, which outlines development, production, possession and use of chemical weapons.

Signatories must destroy their chemical weapons and production plants within 10 years and provide detailed information about the production and export of listed chemicals which could be used to make them.

Congress (D) to consider joining UF govt : Kesri

NEW DELHI, Nov 6: India's Congress Party will consider joining the United Front minority government to which it provides key support provided such a proposal came from the ruling coalition, the Press Trust of India said, reports Reuters.

"The United Front is in the government, a proposal from it should come to join the government. Then only will we consider," the news agency quoted party president Sitaram Kesri as saying during a press briefing late on Wednesday.

It was the first time the party chief had publicly expressed interest in his party joining the coalition government, to which it offers support in parliament.

Earlier reports that Congress was toying with the idea had been ejected by party spokesman V N Gadgil, who

said the Congress would continue to support the government from outside.

The Congress offers key support to Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral's minority coalition government in India's fragmented national parliament.

Kesri's remark was significant following developments in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh where the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) last month weaned away some legislators from Congress to form a state government.

BJP leaders have said they are in touch with members of the lower house of parliament owing allegiance to the Congress in hopes of forging a new political alignment at the centre.

Aussie PM bows to grey-vote power

SYDNEY, Nov 6: Prime Minister John Howard has damaged his political authority by bowing to grey-vote power and ditching a policy on nursing homes, newspapers said today, reports AP.

Howard introduced a policy last month under which elderly people entering nursing homes would be required to post a accommodation bonds averaging 26,000 dollars (18,000 US) which critics said could force some people to sell the family home to raise the money.

There was a storm of protest from the elderly and welfare organisations and a wave of disquiet among government MPs holding marginal seats who saw their position threatened in the next election, due in 18 months at the latest.

As Howard was vowing to stand firm on the policy designed to give the country's aged care industry a capital injection

tion a series of opinion polls showed coalition support falling 5-6 per cent below that of the Labour opposition.

Backing among voters aged over 55 especially women, who have been big supporters of the Liberal led coalition government, dropped by around 10 per cent.

On television Wednesday night, Howard said the bond would be replaced with average annual fees of 4,000 dollars.

This would ensure that the elderly would not be forced to sell the family home, he said.

Howard said elderly people would not have had to sell their homes under the original plan but a scare campaign by the Labour opposition convinced people they would be forced to.

"I think we've made a mistake with the implementation of this," Howard said.

"Governments from time to time make mistakes and when

they do," what they ought to do is recognise it and do something about it."

Newspapers saw the change of heart as one of the biggest backslips of the government 18 months in office.

It was a "major embarrassment" said the Conservative daily Telegraph.

The backdown revealed the prime minister's weakness and demonstrated that Howard "does not have the ability to take good decisions and stick with them," said the Australian political correspondent.

"So spectacular has been the collapse of Howard's political authority that his leadership is now in serious strife," wrote the Australian Financial Reviews political correspondent.

Welfare groups expressed delight at the backdown but said a critical shortage of nursing home beds had still to be addressed.

Ousted president's allies kill 25 in Sierra Leone

FREETOWN, Nov 6: Allies of Sierra Leone's ousted president Ahmad Tejan Kabbah killed 25 people when they ambushed a bus in the country's eastern region at the weekend, national radio said Wednesday, reports AFP.

Major Eddie Kanneh told the radio that several other passengers of the bus were wounded in Sunday's attack carried out by the Kamajors traditional hunters, in Belewahun, near Kenema.

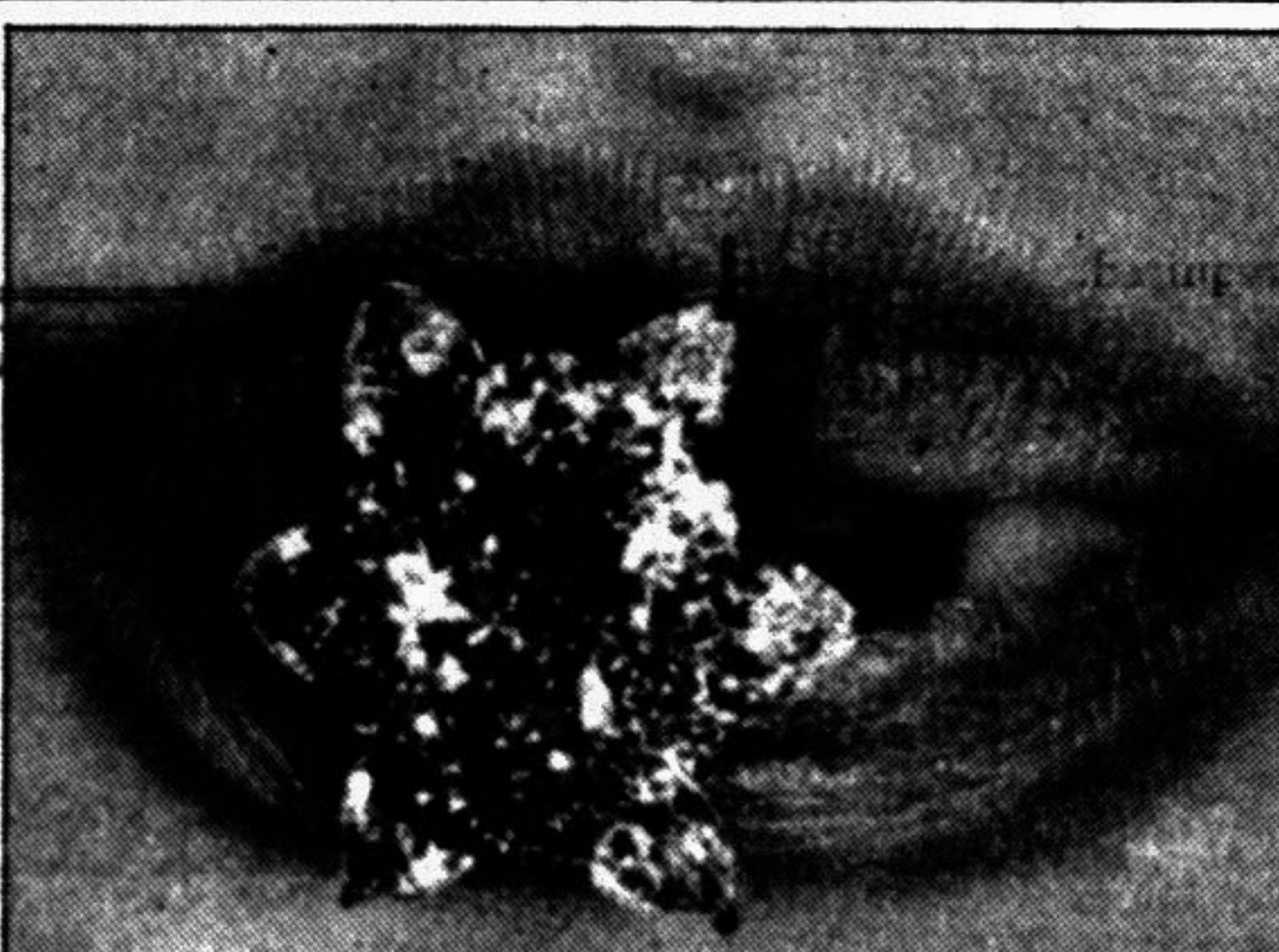
The Kamajors sued modern weapons including rocket launchers and mortars, said the major adding the weapons were provided by Nigeria "which wants to have people believe that fighting is continuing in Sierra Leone."

Polls were rigged, alleges Jordan's opposition leader

AMMAN, Nov 6: A leading opposition candidate in Jordan's parliamentary elections on Wednesday accused King Hussein's government of massive vote fraud and said she would ask the courts to order a fresh poll, reports AP.

Toujan Faisal, a popular social activist who narrowly lost a seat that she was widely expected to win, said government candidates stuffed ballot boxes and deprived opponents of up to 500,000 votes nationwide during Tuesday's elections.

In the voting, tribal leaders loyal to Hussein defeated Muslim fundamentalists, giving the king a free hand to run Jordan's affairs and pursue peace with Israel. During his 45-year reign, Hussein has given tribes power, free education and health services, and large tracts of land to settle nomadic peoples.



An extremely rare fancy intense yellowish green diamond ring of 3.07 carat is displayed at Sothebys in Geneva on Wednesday. The jewel will be auctioned in Geneva on November 19 and should fetch US \$520,000.

— AP/UNB photo

Officials will leave Washington without any deal UNGA to convene another meeting on Israeli settlement next week

UNITED NATIONS, Nov 6: The UN General Assembly will convene another emergency session next week to discuss Israeli settlements and their impact on prospects for reviving the Middle East peace process, reports AP.

A UN statement said the one-day session would take place next Wednesday. It is likely to result in another General Assembly resolution denouncing Israel for the crisis in the peace process.

The emergency session was first convened in April after the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced plans to build a 6,500-unit Jewish housing project in Jerusalem which the

Palestinians want as a future capital.

At the insistence of Arab countries, the General Assembly took up the issue.

AFP adds: Palestinian and Israeli officials meeting Washington will leave Thursday without an accord on advancing the peace process, but both sides have agreed to further talks in the Middle East Sunday.

"Big gaps were evident... the gaps are still there," said chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat adding he did not expect any significant agreement from the Washington talks even though negotiators were to convene for a fourth day in Washington.

Keep mum on haze issue, Malaysia asks experts

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 6: Fearing damage to its multi-billion-dollar tourists' industry, the Malaysian government has told scientists and environmentalists in universities to stop commenting about the country's haze problem, local newspapers reported Thursday, says AP.

The Cabinet has ordered experts at state-funded universities to stop talking to the press and making public statements on the thick smog that has made the air in large parts of the country unbreathable, the dailies said, quoting a top official.

Comments by experts had been distorted by foreign media, marring Malaysia's image and this was also keeping away tourists, Education Minister

Najib Abdul Razak told a Cabinet meeting Wednesday, the Star reported.

"Some are speculative findings and if allowed to continue could bring negative effects especially on tourists," Najib was quoted as saying.

But he clarified that it was not a blanket ban.

"This does not mean the academics cannot communicate with the press, but in sensitive matters, such as the haze, the Cabinet recently decided that only higher authorities are allowed to make statements," he said.

Written orders had been sent to state-funded universities, he said. The ban, however, did not cover experts working in private institutions.

HR investigator concerned at executions in Iran

UNITED NATIONS, Nov 6: The number of people executed in Iran doubled between 1995 and 1996 and may double again this year, a UN special investigator reports, reports AP.

In a report to the General Assembly this week, special investigator Maurice Danby Copithorne also said improvements in the human rights situation have been "imperfectable, or at least so modest as to represent little substantive improvement."

Copithorne noted that the UN Human Rights Commission said earlier this year that the number of executions in Iran last year "had reportedly at least doubled" since 1995. He provided no figures.

He said Iranian media reported that 137 people had been executed between January and September, "a rate of increase

that it continued to the end of the year would likely constitute a further doubling."

"In addition, there continue to be troubling reports of disappearances and deaths under suspicious circumstances," he added. "Public hanging also appears to be on the increase."

The election last May of President Mohammad Khatami had been seen as a mandate to ease social restrictions in places since the 1979 overthrow of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and the establishment of a strict Islamic regime under the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Although the UN report mostly covers the months before Khatami took office, it noted little improvement so far in the human rights situation in Iran.

Mir's crewmen begin spacewalk to install new solar panel

MOSCOW, Nov 6: Two Russian cosmonauts headed out into open space and began installing a new solar panel Thursday, a mission intended to wrap up months of repairs on the Mir's damaged power supply system, reports AP.

The cosmonauts exited the Mir at around 3:15 am (0015 GMT), several minutes ahead of schedule, and were expected to spend about 6 hours on the outside of the orbiting station.

The solar panel was stored on the exterior of the Mir, and the cosmonauts had to unpack it and mount it on the Kvant module, one of six modules that make up the sprawling station.

If the mission is successful, then eight of the Mir's 10 solar panels will be working normally. The ninth is operating, but at less than full capacity, and one was damaged beyond repair in a June crash with a cargo ship.

The accident knocked out four solar panels and cut the Mir's power supply almost by half, and the crew has been working steadily to increase energy levels.

The world's most experienced spacewalker, Mir Commander Anatoly Solovoy, and fellow cosmonaut Pavel Vinogradov removed an old solar panel on Monday, and Thursday's effort was the second half of the operation.

"It's clear that (Solovoy) has done this kind of work before," said US astronaut Dave Wolf, who filmed the cosmonauts from inside the Mir.

Wolf was monitoring controls and planned to switch on the solar panel after it was installed. His Russian colleagues will remain outside to make sure the panel unfolds properly and push it open manually, if necessary.



Former president George Bush, centre, introduces his son, Texas Governor George W. Bush, to the crowd after arriving by train in College Station, Texas, for festivities leading up to the opening of the Bush Presidential Library Wednesday. The official library opening ceremony is scheduled for Thursday.

— AP/UNB photo

Pakistan, China enjoy spl friendly ties: Ayub

ISLAMABAD, Nov 6: China is a friend of Pakistan worthy of trust, Pakistani Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan said yesterday, reports Xinhua.

The foreign minister made the remarks here this evening at a welcoming dinner hosted by him in honour of the Chinese delegation headed by Chen Muhua, special envoy of China and deputy chairperson of the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress.

Ayub Khan said Pakistan and China enjoy a special friendly relationship which has stood the test of time.

In the last 50 years since the inception of Pakistan, China has always stood side by side with Pakistan, especially in those difficult times, he noted. China is a friend of Pakistan worthy of trust," he added.

The foreign minister said that the Pakistani people are

very happy to welcome Chen who is here in the capacity of the special envoy on the occasion of Pakistan's golden jubilee celebrations.

Chen said on the occasion the road that Pakistan has traversed since its independence has been extraordinary and glorious, as evidenced by tremendous changes in the face of the country.

She expressed her belief that "under the leadership of the Pakistani government, the Pakistani people of various ethnic groups will take the 50th anniversary as a fresh start upon which to build an even better future with concerted efforts."

The Chinese government has always attached importance to and treasured the special traditional friendship between the two countries, Chen said.