

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. reports AFP.

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 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 cemeteries, 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 AFP.

"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 AFP.

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 the 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 the 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 southernmost 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 yachts 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 Reuter.

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 arms inspection teams.

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 disarma-

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 US 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.

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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 AFP.

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 in-

jection 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 backflips of the government 18 months in office.

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

The breakdown 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 Howards political authority that his leadership is now in serious strife," wrote the Australian Financial Reviews political correspondent.

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

BRIEFLY

4 drug traffickers to die in Vietnam

A Taiwanese man and three of his Vietnamese associates were sentenced to death in connection with drug trafficking, the official Vietnam News Agency reported Wednesday, AP reports from Ho Chi Minh City.

The People's Court of Ho Chi Minh City found Chen Chi-tien guilty of producing and selling more than 170 kilograms (374 pounds) of illegal amphetamines, the news agency said.

In a one day trial Wednesday, the court convicted and sentenced the four men to death.

Jet makes emergency landing in UK

A Virgin Atlantic Airways jet from Los Angeles made an emergency landing at Heathrow Airport on Wednesday, causing some minor passenger injuries, an airport spokesman said, AP reports from London.

The left landing gear of Virgin's Airbus 340 failed to come down and then locked up, forcing pilot Tim Barnby to land using only the right gear.

"It went down the runway, sparks were flying, and it slid off towards the end of the runway, virtually out of sight," eyewitness John Asher told Independent Television News.

Chinese dissident arrives in NY

Prominent Chinese dissident Bao Ge arrived in New York Wednesday and vowed to continue working for democracy in China, AFP says from New York.

Bao, 34, who had been the most prominent dissident still free in China, left for exile after suffering persistent police harassment since his release from a labour camp in June. "I will try to learn from the democracy movement here, to create a democratic organisation when I get back to China," he told journalists at Kennedy Airport on arriving with his sister Bao Ying, who served as his interpreter.

2 strong quakes shake Japan

Two strong earthquakes with an estimated magnitude of more than 5 shook parts of Japan early Thursday, but there were no immediate reports of injury or damage, AP reports from Tokyo.

A quake with a preliminary magnitude of 5.2 shook the city of Kushiro, on Japan's northernmost main island of Hokkaido, just before dawn. The quake was centered about 120 kilometers (70 miles) underground. Another quake hit the island of Chichijima, located about 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) south of Tokyo, at 8:59 am (2359 GMT Wednesday). It had an estimated magnitude of 5.3 and was centered 40 kilometers (24 miles) under the sea floor near the island.

Grenade attack kills 3 in Russia

Two women were killed and three of their relatives were badly wounded Wednesday when a grenade was thrown into a bar in the Dagestani town of Sergokala, a Russian news agency said, AP reports from Moscow.

Police were unsure of the motive, but said the attack might have stemmed from a feud between villagers, ITAR-Tass said. Dagestan is a restive southern Russian region bordering Chechnya.

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 top government and army posts, free education and health services, and large tracts of land to settle nomadic peoples.

HR investigator concerned at executions in Iran

UNITED NATIONS, Nov 6: The UN General Assembly will convene another emergency special 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 part of Jerusalem which the

International



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 Reuter.

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, then there would be no finances for this," Defence Minister Igor Sergeyev 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 outlaws 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.

Married people sleep longer than singles

WASHINGTON: Married people and couples sleep longer than single people and snooze less during the day, US scientists say in a study published in the latest American journal of Public Health, reports AFP.

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

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