



Followed by security guards, Bosnian Serb President Biljana Plavsic leaves a polling station in Banja Luka, some 200 km north of Sarajevo Saturday during parliamentary elections in Republika Srpska, the Serb held half of Bosnia. — AP/UNB photo

Turnout seems lower than expected Bosnian polls may widen power struggle

BANJA LUKA, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Nov 23: Parliamentary elections that the West hopes will weaken the top Bosnian Serb war crimes suspect could backfire and widen the power struggle between him and his chief rival, reports AP.

Two-day elections go into their final day Sunday. President Biljana Plavsic and the international community hope they will strengthen her and cut into the grip that supporters of war crimes suspect Radovan Karadzic have on the 83-seat parliament.

But with loyalties split, the elections could likely exacerbate the already deep chasm among Bosnian Serbs and further a division of their statelet.

Plavsic controls most of the western part of the substate and Karadzic the east. The pro-Karadzic camp might opt for a formal split rather than to accept a loss.

Even if the substate stays together and a governing coalition is formed, coalition negotiations are likely to be lengthy. Lack of clear leadership during such negotiations could lead to

chaos, unless NATO-dominated peacekeeping troops and civilian officials enforcing the Dayton peace accords show a firm hand.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) — the international organisation overseeing the ballot — reported no major incidents as the first day of voting drew to an end at 7 pm (1800 GMT).

"The polling stations are now closing, and the OSCE is very pleased with the election so far," said Luke Zahner, an OSCE spokesman.

But Zahner said turnout appeared lower than expected, and turnouts in rural areas seemed to be higher than in urban areas, Zahner said. That could hurt Plavsic, whose supporters tend to live in larger towns.

In Banja Luka, Nedjo Draskovic, the head of the Bosnian Serb electoral commission, said turnout was at 22 per cent two hours before polls closed.

Bosnian Serb radio said there were 1.148 million eligible voters.

Taliban exchange POWs with Uzbek warlord

ISLAMABAD, Nov 23: The United Nations brokered the first exchange of prisoners between Afghanistan's Taliban army and its Uzbek enemy, Rashid Dostum, in what the UN hopes will lead to further exchanges, an official said on Sunday, reports AP.

The Taliban Islamic Army, which rules much of Afghanistan, freed five commanders loyal to Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek whose forces run parts of northern Afghanistan.

In return Dostum released four Taliban soldiers, said Zamir Kabulov, a UN official who helped broker the deal.

The prisoner exchange was the culmination of a week of negotiations, he said.

The Taliban religious army, which has imposed a rigid form of Islamic rule in the estimated 90 per cent of the country under its control, is locked in a protracted and bitter battle with an alliance of smaller parties, all based in northern Afghanistan.

Dostum is part of the anti-Taliban alliance, however in recent weeks he has stepped out on his own to negotiate a prisoner exchange with the Taliban.

On Friday, a UN plane ferried the freed Taliban soldiers to Afghanistan's southern city of Kandahar from northern Afghanistan, where they had been held since last May when the Taliban were thrown out of the north in a ferocious battle. Hundreds of Taliban died in that fight and thousands more were believed to have been taken prisoner.

China to help more foreigners become familiar with language

BEIJING, Nov 23: China has decided to help more foreigners become familiar with the Chinese language, which is spoken by the biggest population on earth, reports Xinhua.

Zhu Kaixuan, minister in charge of the state education commission, said at a meeting that this is in line with China's further opening up to the outside world and its increased national strength.

The work of teaching Chinese as a foreign language will be enhanced next year, he said, noting that foreigners are becoming more interested in Chinese for cultural, political and economic purposes.

In 1997, the number of people taking the HSK, or Chinese proficiency test, is expected to reach 26,000, an increase of 24 per cent over 1996.

More than 84,000 people have taken the test since it was established in 1988.

China is drawing up a new teaching outline and will make a greater effort to push Chinese teaching in North America and Europe.

International Sharif seeks to heal rifts with president, judiciary

ISLAMABAD, Nov 23: Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is seeking to heal rifts with the president and the judiciary after army mediation helped defuse a constitutional crisis, political sources said today, reports AFP.

Tensions eased four days after Army Chief General Jehangir Karamat stepped in an parliament backed off from a move to impeach President Farooq Ahmed Leghari.

The following day the Supreme Court Chief Justice, Sajjad Ali Shah, adjourned for a week a crucial contempt case against Sharif that threatens his nine-month rule if a conviction disqualified him from office.

Relieved from pressure that forced him to cancel a visit to Bangladesh and kept him embroiled in party meetings, Sharif has been presiding over an investment conference and

an air force graduation ceremony.

The government will "revive its relations with both the president and the chief justice," said one of Sharif's close confidants Nisar Ali Khan, Minister for Petroleum and Natural Resources.

Restoring a working relationship with Leghari and the judiciary is the "foremost priority" of the government, he said.

It was in the national interest to "forget the past bitterness and work together," he said.

Everything is under control, Sharif himself told reporters during the air force ceremony Saturday at Rissalpur, which was attended by top military officials including General Karamat.

Downplaying the crisis he said some problems had cropped up because of "misunderstandings" which had been overcome.

But observers said the crisis could resurface, with the contempt case still alive despite Sharif's personal appearance in the court to express his high regard for the judiciary and his badly-strained ties with Leghari.

Another potential irritant is a petition before the court challenging a constitutional amendment pushed through by Sharif which slashed presidential powers, including the authority to dissolve the assembly which Leghari used in November 1996 to dismiss Benazir Bhutto as premier.

"The country may have heaved a sigh of relief at the apparent ceasefire between warring institutions of the state, but troubling questions remain," said an editorial in the Nation Daily.

The newspaper said it would "not be easy to restore mutual confidence and re-establish a

functional relationship" between the president and the prime minister.

Leghari caused uproar in the government last week when he delayed signing into law a hastily-passed bill to amend the 1976 Contempt Act.

The amendment would give Sharif the right of appeal that would put any conviction for contempt in abeyance pending a hearing by a bench excluding Supreme Court judges now handling the case.

Sharif faces a contempt charge following comments he made about the judiciary at a news conference.

Earlier Sharif was locked in a row with the judiciary over appointments of judges in October. That dispute was defused when he raised five high court judges to the Supreme Court as recommended by the chief justice.

BJP for deleting remarks on Tamils, Sikhs in Jain Commission report

HYDERABAD, Nov 23: BJP General Secretary, M Venkaiah Naidu today demanded that the remarks on Tamils and Sikhs in the interim report of Jain Commission findings should be deleted in the final report, reports PTI.

Speaking to reporters here, Naidu took objection to the naming of Tamils and Sikhs and attributing them with "anti-national" motives. "This is unfair," he said.

"DMK government in Tamil Nadu is a democratically elected government and the criticism from some quarters dubbing it as anti-national is unjust and unfair," he said.

Coming down heavily on the reported remarks of Congress leader Jitendra Prasad on the issue, Naidu said at some point of time the then Congress government encouraged LTTE and it was a pity that the party accuses DMK of being anti-national.

Global campaign making progress in limiting spread of Hepatitis B

MADRID, Nov 23: An aggressive global vaccination campaign to fight Hepatitis B, which kills more than a million people worldwide each year, is making progress in limiting the spread of the viral disease, experts said, reports AFP.

The surge in Hepatitis B in the last decade, which like other forms of hepatitis causes inflammation of the liver, prompted a group of experts to band together in 1992 to form the Viral Hepatitis Prevention Board (VHPB).

Their aim was to back recommendations by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in hepatitis prevention and treatment.

The group met this week in Madrid to assess five years of efforts, notably in Europe where nearly one million people continue to get infected each year by this virus, 90,000 become chronic carriers and 24,000 die.

Earlier this decade, the WHO — looking ahead — urged countries to integrate a vaccination against Hepatitis B into their national vaccination programmes as of 1997.

In 1994, the WHO then launched a global challenge —

to reduce by 80 per cent new cases of carriers of the virus among children by the year 2001. Recalled Mark Kane, physician, member of the VHPB and the medical officer responsible for WHO World Vaccination Programme against all forms of hepatitis, based in Geneva.

Victims of the disease generally experience nausea, fever, weakness, loss of appetite and jaundice. Outright prevention — via vaccinations — is considered the best approach for this tenacious virus than can land a victim in bed for up to eight weeks and, in some cases, weakened for up to a year.

Six years after the WHO recommendations to states to implement national anti-hepatitis injection programmes, more than 90 countries around the globe have heeded this advice and now urge systematic preventive vaccination of all children and adolescents, the VHPB experts said.

Overall, these countries account for about 40 per cent of the 145 million babies born each year on the planet, and about 60 per cent of the 350 million carriers of the virus worldwide.

Kane told AFP he was "optimistic" that the goal would be reached to reduce the number of children carriers of the disease by 2001 and that "great progress" had already been registered worldwide.

Five per cent of the world's population, or some 350 million people, are chronic carriers of Hepatitis B after being exposed themselves and threaten to pass it on to others, notably through sexual contact.

A quarter of these chronic carriers develop serious liver problems, either chronic hepatitis, cirrhosis of the liver or liver cancer.

The vaccination of newborns, born to mothers who are carriers of the virus, is administered in hopes that the infants will not become chronic Hepatitis B carriers. Without this, 70 to 90 per cent of them will.

In Europe, in 1993 Italy was the first and only country to launch into a generalised anti-Hepatitis B vaccination programme. Today, the number has grown to 28 countries, in both Eastern and Western Europe, have either already implemented or are starting such a programme, Kane said.



The Royal Yacht Britannia sails into Portsmouth southern England, Saturday, for the last time before she is decommissioned next month. Thousands of people lined the shore and gathered at the entrance to the harbour to witness the historic moment as the grand old lady of the seas arrived at the end of her farewell tour of Britain. — AP/UNB photo

Off the Record

Fatwa against Queen Elizabeth?

LONDON: The official Libyan news agency Jana said on Saturday that Queen Elizabeth II should have been stoned to death for having had her daughter-in-law Princess Diana murdered, reports Reuters.

A commentary by Jana's foreign editor on the British monarch's 50th wedding anniversary was broadcast on Libyan television and monitored by the BBC in London.

He expressed surprise the anniversary should be celebrated at all so soon after Diana's death in a car crash on August 31 and reiterated Libyan allegation that the British royal family had her killed.

"Is it not astonishing that England and the queen, whose criminal and scandal-ridden throne is collapsing, celebrate this event?" the Jana foreign editor said.

"The Queen, by committing this horrible crime together with her family, should have been stoned rather than allowed to celebrate this event."

According to strict Islamic law, the punishment for murder is stoning to death, though it is carried out very rarely.

No spokesman for the royal household, Buckingham Palace, was immediately available for comment.

But allegations in some middle eastern news media that Diana was murdered to prevent her being converted to Islam by her boyfriend, Egyptian-born Dodi Al Fayed, have been generally ignored or ridiculed in Britain.

Mr Bean's bad idea

NEW YORK: Rowan Atkinson did all his own comedy stunts in "Bean," including wearing a turkey carcass on his head, reports AP.

The British actor behind the goofball Mr Bean even tried using a real, uncooked turkey as a prop despite the "high risk of salmonella poisoning."

Bad idea.

"It's horribly bloody and bony inside," Atkinson says in the Dec 1 People magazine. "You don't want that next to your earlobes. So we used a fake turkey. It was just as heavy, but not as smelly."

Before the film, Atkinson performed as Mr Bean on his own BBC television show. "Bean" is an international hit, having sold \$130 million in theatre tickets before opening in the United States. It's done well since its US debut, too, finishing in the top five in its first two weeks of domestic release.

Charles Spencer begins to like the media

CAPE TOWN, South Africa: The brother of Princess Diana, who accused the media of making her miserable while she was alive and pursuing her to her death, is slowly re-emerging as a media figure himself, reports AP.

Earl Charles Spencer attended a gala ballet performance Saturday to raise money for emergency hot lines, his second appearance in three days to promote charities.

The media-wary earl told a crowd of 800 Cape Town dignitaries that he had been inundated with requests to do charity work after Diana's death, and had received 200,000 letters of sympathy.

Saturday's visit followed an appearance Thursday at Cape Town's plush Mount Nelson Hotel, where Spencer dedicated a fund-raising campaign for local hospices to Diana.

Spencer slammed the press at Diana's funeral, accusing it of making her "the most hunted person of the modern age." She died in a Paris car crash on Aug 31 — paparazzi photographers in pursuit.

Postmortem report of Alexander the Great

HYDERABAD: More than 2,300 years after his death, doctors seem to have found how and why Alexander the Great died, reports PTI.

In a poster presented at the recent 38th Annual National Conference of the Indian Society of Gastroenterology here, Dr Propedeutic of Greece says that the great king of Macedonia died of acute pancreatitis, secondary to heavy alcohol consumption and very rich meal.

Dr Propedeutic, who works in the Department of Surgery, University of Thessaloniki, Hippokratien Hospital, Greece, said that he had arrived at his "postmortem" findings after carefully reconstructing the last two weeks of Alexander's life.

The conqueror of an empire that covered much of Asia, Alexander suffered from depression following a mutiny in his army that prevented him from advancing to the Ganges after he had defeated Porus in 327 BC.

Iraqis breathe sigh of relief while Hamdoon predicts another crisis

BAGHDAD, Nov 23: Cafes were crowded Saturday along Baghdad's main shopping drag, Iraqis drank tea, smoked cigarettes and played cards but the talk was mostly of one thing: relief that the conflict was over, reports AP.

Iraq has been on alert of military attack from the United States for three weeks, since Saddam Hussein ordered the expulsion of American UN inspectors searching Iraqi military sites for weapons of mass destruction.

To prepare for war, people stockpiled food — cans of beans and tuna — and lined up for gasoline under government-ordered rationing: for private cars, just 40 litres (10.4 gallons) for four days. They dismantled factories, carrying machinery to hiding places to protect it from bombing.

With the inspectors back in Baghdad, the worst of the tension seems to have passed. A US warship is still in the Gulf, and extra US fighter planes are still in Kuwait, just over the border. Iraq is still on alert.

But for the moment — Iraqis say they are satisfied. "I consider this the end of the embargo, and it is a diplomatic victory of Iraq," said Mazen

Ahmed, a 28-year-old labourer. In exchange for the inspectors' return, Russia promised to fight for the easing of sanctions on oil exports, imposed after Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. The sanctions have devastated Iraq's economy, and those few people willing to speak to reporters expressed optimism that recent events mean the embargo may be over.

Anger toward the United States was rife, with the slogan "Down with America" scrawled on walls, buildings and streets all over the city. Last week, the speaker of parliament urged school children to write the slogans, setting an example by writing the slogan in chalk on a sidewalk.

Many people are sick of having UN inspectors searching Iraq's factories and warehouses for weapons and chemicals, and seeing American U-2 spy planes soaring overhead.

"They are about to take the Iraqi flag down and put their own flag instead," Baghdad resident Saeed Jasim said Saturday, expressing a comment heard from many others. With rationing still in place, few cars were on the streets and lines were long at gas stations. Many more people have been

riding the boats that run regularly on the Tigris River through the city's centre.

Few people were shopping Saturday, after buying up all the emergency supplies and food they need over the past weeks. The cafes were crowded primarily because people aren't working, with many factories closed.

But some have been re-assembled, including the nation's biggest oil refinery, which sits in the middle of Baghdad. Like a giant candle, the tall pipe of the Douna refinery blazed with fire as usual on Saturday, a message to Iraqis for miles around that the crisis was coming to an end.

Another report from UN says, after Russia failed to convince the United Nations to make changes in the Iraq weapons inspection programme, the Iraqi UN ambassador is warning that another showdown with the international community is likely.

Nizar Hamdoon, appearing Saturday on CNN's "Evans and Novak" show, was asked whether a "repeat performance" of the events of the last three weeks was possible, meaning a standoff between the Iraqis and UN inspectors trying to enter

sensitive Iraqi sites. "I don't wish that to happen, obviously," Hamdoon said. "But it's clear here that if the people of Iraq, the 22 million people of Iraq, continue to die silently, I don't think that they will stay quiet for a long time."

Hamdoon added that "if nothing is resolved because of the American pressure on the Security Council members, then in a while — I don't know when — in weeks or months, we could get back into a similar situation."

Hamdoon appeared on the programme shortly after the Security Council met to discuss a report by the emergency meeting of the UN Special Commission, which performs arms inspections in Iraq.

Russia hoped to use the meeting to make changes in the programme and accelerate the process for certifying Iraqi compliance with UN disarmament resolutions in the fields of nuclear and long-range missiles.

But the plan backfired, and the commission produced a set of recommendations and observations which were virtually identical to the Anglo-American view of the situation. The commissioners said more information was needed

before Iraq could be declared in compliance with its nuclear resolutions governing its nuclear and long-range missile programmes.

They also repeated allegations — which Iraq has denied — that Baghdad has mounted a concealment campaign to hide proscribed weapons and materials and pressed again for permission to base fixed-wing surveillance aircraft on Iraqi territory.

Before the television programme, Hamdoon told reporters at the United Nations that the Special Commission report failed to reconcile the difference between the UN's demand to enter any site it chooses and its acceptance of Iraqi sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Most of the standoffs have occurred at sites which Iraq says are unrelated to its weapons of mass destruction programme but which are vital to national security and the protection of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Iraq says the UN teams have sought to enter those sites as part of an American campaign to topple Saddam under the cover of the inspection programme.

OIC summit to help end Afghan crisis, hopes Rabbani

TEHRAN, Nov 23: Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani expressed the hope here yesterday that the upcoming summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), to be held here on December 9-11, would help put an end to the current Afghan civil war, reports Xinhua.

While meeting with Iranian Majlis (Islamic consultative assembly) Speaker Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, Rabbani said that Afghanistan expects the OIC Summit to launch a serious effort to put an end to the civil war in the country, Iranian official news agency IRNA reported.

Afghanistan is in very need of peace and tranquillity, he said, adding that his country appreciated Iran's peace efforts in this respect.

Rabbani, currently in Iran for medical treatment, also blamed foreign countries for intervening in Afghanistan, saying that the foreign interference had led the country into the current dilemma.

Nouri also said Afghanistan can solve the problem by itself if certain foreign countries do not meddle in the Afghan affairs.



South African President Nelson Mandela shakes hands with Indonesian President Suharto, left, after Mandela decorated him with the Order of Good Hope at his residency in Cape Town, Saturday President Suharto ends his official visit to South Africa and is due next in Canada. — AP/UNB photo