

BRIEFLY

Libya denies Swiss entry: Libya has imposed an entry ban on Swiss citizens because a son of Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi was refused a visa to study in Switzerland, the Swiss Foreign Ministry said Thursday. AP reports from Bern, Switzerland.

Doctors' hunger strike in Australia: Foreign-trained doctors on a hunger strike in Sydney and Melbourne will be joined by other doctors in Adelaide and Canberra, a spokesman for their national association said Friday. AP reports from Sydney.

Russia, Yugoslavia sign military deal: Yugoslavia and Russia have signed a military accord under which Belgrade will receive credit worth 150 million dollars to modernise its army, Tanjug news agency reported, AFP reports from Belgrade.

Netanyahu arrives in Paris: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu arrived in Paris early yesterday morning for a meeting later with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright on problems holding up the Middle East peace process, AFP reports from Paris.

Ramos to declare 'state of calamity': Philippine President Fidel Ramos is to declare a "state of calamity" in Manila due to a severe water shortage which has forced the city's utilities to ration tap water, a senior official said yesterday, AFP reports from Manila.

Volcano erupts in Russian Far East: A Russian volcano situated along the Pacific Rim's "Ring of Fire" erupted Friday, spewing ashes eight kilometres (five miles) high and forcing US airlines to change their flight paths, AP reports from Moscow.

Charles meets old school-mate: On a visit with the down-and-out, Prince Charles was taken back Thursday to encounter a homeless man who told him he and the would-be king attended the same exclusive prep school when they were boys, AP reports from London.

Indian political parties kick off campaigns for early elections: Political parties scrambled Friday to strike deals, plan strategies and kick off their campaigns after the president dissolved Parliament and called for early elections, reports AP.

Taliban claim advance over Masood forces in Takhar: ISLAMABAD, Dec 5: The Taliban militia today claimed their first significant advance in six months after heavy fighting with forces of their key rival commander, Ahmed Shah Masood in the northern Takhar province, reports AFP.

Strike begins in Bihar: NEW DELHI, Dec 5: A 24-hour strike began in the eastern state of Bihar today to protest the massacre of 61 villagers caught up in a caste war, the Press Trust of India reported, says AFP.

Bangladesh seeks nationality proof of children rescued in Delhi: NEW DELHI, Dec 5: The Bangladesh government has asked for documentary proof that children "rescued" by Indian police from becoming camel race jockeys in the Middle East are its nationals, according to India Abroad News Service.

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Indian political parties kick off campaigns for early elections

NEW DELHI, Dec 5: Political parties scrambled Friday to strike deals, plan strategies and kick off their campaigns after the president dissolved Parliament and called for early elections, reports AP.

Elections were called Thursday because no political group was able to cobble together a majority to form a government after the powerful Congress pulled down the minority coalition of Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral a week ago.

The independent Election Commission called a meeting Friday to begin preparations for the balloting — expected in mid-February or early March. At stake are 545 seats in the Lok Sabha, the lawmaking lower house of Parliament.

In the last elections in May, 1996, voting was scattered over three days to allow security forces to be moved around the country. The Hindustan Times newspaper quoted Chief Election Commissioner M S Gill as saying a similar strategy could be followed this time.

The polling dates will be announced January 5 after the list of voters is published. Gill was quoted as saying.

More than 630 million people are eligible to vote in the election, the 12th nationwide balloting since independence 50 years ago. All Indian over the age of 18 are eligible to vote.

Gill has estimated that the balloting would cost the government 7 billion rupees (189 million dollars) and that political parties would spend another 10 billion rupees (270 million dollars) on campaigning.

Election commissioners have proposed barring anyone with a criminal record from contesting the election. Dozens of persons with records of murder, looting and kidnapping have won elections to legislatures, especially in the lawless states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

Gill has urged political parties not to field such candidates this time.

The three major groups in the previous Parliament — the United Front coalition, the Congress, and the Bharatiya Janata Party — all have accused each other of causing the political instability that led to elections. None had the majority to govern alone in the now disbanded Parliament, and ideological differences and competing ambitions had kept them from working together.

Congress was irked that Gujral refused to fire a regional coalition partner accused of supporting the suspected assassin of Rajiv Gandhi, a former Congress prime minister. Gujral said there was insufficient evidence to convict the ethnic ally.

Now the Congress wants Front members to support it in the elections, closing ranks against their common foe, Bharatiya Janata, whose policies are blamed for Hindu-Muslim tension.

Front leaders have so far rebuffed Congress.

The well-organized Bharatiya Janata is widely expected to do well in the polling, though no opinion polls have been conducted.

Taliban claim advance over Masood forces in Takhar

ISLAMABAD, Dec 5: The Taliban militia today claimed their first significant advance in six months after heavy fighting with forces of their key rival commander, Ahmed Shah Masood in the northern Takhar province, reports AFP.

Masood lost more than 30 soldiers in the fighting on Wednesday and Thursday, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) said quoting Taliban spokesman Syed Mohammad Haqqani.

Haqqani, speaking from the religious militia's southwestern Kandahar base, told the Pakistan-based private news service the Taliban fighters captured a stretch of land of up to 15 kilometres (nine miles).

The stretch includes the villages of Deh Veeran and Parkera, besides the Bangi Pass and some strategic mountains in the Eshkakesh district.

Independent confirmation of the report was not immediately available.

Haqqani said Masood loyalists fled after suffering heavy losses.

"At least 33 bodies are still lying in the area," he said.

The Taliban also captured three tanks and nine other military vehicles from the retreating troops of the deposed

Afghan government commander, the spokesman said.

He gave no details of Taliban losses.

AP put the Taliban casualty toll at 22 killed and wounded in the fighting, which was the first major offensive mounted by the Taliban against Masood forces in Takhar province in almost six months.

It said both sides used heavy weapons and long-range cannon firing was also heard today.

Western sources in Kabul earlier confirmed fierce fighting erupted early Wednesday close to Bangi village.

The village sits between Masood's north eastern base of Taloqan and the headline Taliban's northern enclave of Kunduz.

Strike begins in Bihar: NEW DELHI, Dec 5: A 24-hour strike began in the eastern state of Bihar today to protest the massacre of 61 villagers caught up in a caste war, the Press Trust of India reported, says AFP.

The strike, called by a group of political parties, was met with heavy security around public buildings and key installations, the news agency said.

The massacre was perpetrated Tuesday in Bihar's Jehanabad district. Men, women and children were shot or hacked to death in their sleep by feudal landlords who suspected them of supporting calls for higher wages for landless peasants.

Bihar, a rural region of around 90 million people bordering Nepal, is infamous as India's most lawless state. Armed clashes between low-caste peasant workers and rich, high-caste landlords are common.

The Indian government has sent 1,000 extra paramilitary troops to the area to launch a manhunt for the killers.

India's Hindu society is traditionally divided into social groups, or castes, with pre-designated roles and jobs. The system, however, has begun to be challenged in recent years by members of the lower castes.



Indian President K R Narayanan, left, and caretaker Prime Minister I K Gujral, right, chat at a Navy Day function in New Delhi Thursday, shortly after Narayanan dissolved parliament. Midterm elections will be held within the next few months. — AP/UNB photo

Bangladesh seeks nationality proof of children rescued in Delhi

NEW DELHI, Dec 5: The Bangladesh government has asked for documentary proof that children "rescued" by Indian police from becoming camel race jockeys in the Middle East are its nationals, according to India Abroad News Service.

The Delhi police had said it had rescued 16 children, some of them below six years, while they were being allegedly taken to Dubai and other Middle East countries for the camel races. They were jailed after being produced before a court. Six of them are still languishing in the capital's Thar Jail.

"Unless Bangladesh is satisfied with their nationality, they cannot be taken back," said an official of the Bangladesh High Commission here.

According to the High Commission, Bangladesh is willing to accept the children if they are able to tell at least their home addresses, or provide any other

proof that can establish their identity.

The Delhi High Court, which has been hearing a public interest litigation seeking transfer of the children from Thar Jail to a welfare home, has directed the police to ascertain the children's nationality.

The High Court also asked the Indian External Affairs Ministry to take up the matter with Bangladesh High Commission.

People's Rights Organisation (PRO), a human rights body, had moved the High Court seeking its intervention to remove the children from jail to a juvenile home.

Dr. Aurobindo Ghosh, counsel for the petitioner, argued that putting the children in jail is a serious violation of constitutionally guaranteed liberty and equality of treatment to all people in India. He pleaded that if the lawful guardians of the children could not be found soon, they should be shifted to government-run juvenile homes in Bangladesh.

Libya to send aid to Lebanon for campaign against Israel: TRIPOLI, Dec 5: Libyan Leader Moammar Gaddafi pledged aid Thursday for the campaign against Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, Libyan television reported, reports AFP.

He made the promise in a telephone conversation with Lebanese President Elias Hrawi, in which he agreed to a request "to provide help to the Lebanese people in resisting Israeli occupation," the television said.

It did not specify the nature of the help that would be provided, by Libya.

Pakistan to seek renewed OIC support for Kashmiris

ISLAMABAD, Dec 5: Pakistan will seek renewed support for Kashmiri separatists and plead for recognising the Taliban militia, during next week's summit of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), observers here said, reports AP.

Support for the Kashmiri militants has been obtained in advance of the December 9-11 summit meeting in Tehran, diplomatic sources said, but adding the issue of recognising the current regime in Kabul fails to figure on the agenda.

The OIC has always backed Islamabad's stand on Kashmir, calling for a plebiscite under the United Nations' auspices. New Delhi, which controls two-thirds of Kashmir, has rejected the demand, considering the Himalayan state to be an integral part of India.

Pakistan, which controls the remaining third of the Muslim majority state, has fought two wars over the territory with India since the two countries gained independence from Britain in 1947.

Traditionally, every OIC summit has adopted a unanimous resolution voicing support for the Kashmir separatists.

Observers said such unanimity will however be sorely lacking for an oath of Islamabad's key diplomatic concerns, namely the question of recognition for the Taliban militia which took Kabul in September 1996.

Pakistan is seen as the main backer of the Islamic fundamentalist militia which now controls more than two-thirds of Afghanistan, the rest held by a fragmented opposition alliance based in the north of the country.

"In December 1996, in Indonesia OIC adopted a 'vacant seat' policy for Afghanistan and there is no reason for changing it during the next summit which is being hosted by the fiercest opponents of the Taliban, one diplomat here said.

In fact Shi'ite Iran is the main supporter of the Afghan opposition alliance and sees the Taliban as fundamentalist Sunnis, Tehran also considers the current regime in Kabul as a tool in the hands of the United States serving to isolate Iran.

Moreover, the observers pointed out, Islamabad is sorely lacking in support for its stand on the Taliban as only two other countries apart from Pakistan recognise the current regime in Kabul, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Many other OIC members states, especially the former Soviet Central Asian Republics back the deposed president Burhanuddin Rabbani while others are neutral.

Nevertheless, Iran and Pakistan will table a joint resolution at the Tehran summit calling for a cease-fire and broad-based government in Afghanistan, the Iranian ambassador here said Thursday.

Mehdi Akhundzadeh told reporters the resolution would also call for a ban on arms supplies to the warring sides in Afghanistan and urge the international community to help Afghans curb the drug trade.

Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Alaeddin Bouroujerdi visited Islamabad last month for talks with the Pakistani government, which centred on coordinating peace efforts in Afghanistan.

UNSC renews oil-for-food deal with Iraq: UNITED NATIONS, Dec 5: The UN Security Council on Thursday renewed for six months an oil-for-food deal with Iraq, but delayed a possible expansion of the humanitarian scheme, reports AFP.

The 15-member Security Council, expressing concern about the nutritional and health situation in Iraq, unanimously adopted Resolution 1143, which provides for the third phase of the humanitarian arrangement to come into effect at 0501 GMT today.

Indian analysts say Election may return once again a hung parliament

NEW DELHI, Dec 5: India's president ended two weeks of political suspense by disbanding the lower house of parliament on Thursday and ordering elections that political analysts say may once again return a hung parliament, reports Reuter.

President Kocheril Narayanan dissolved the badly-fractured lower house of parliament after Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral's 15-party United Front coalition recommended this.

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The group were executed Thursday in Shenzhen, bordering Hong Kong, after sentencing by the city's Intermediate People's Court, the Shenzhen Special Zone Daily reported.

"They had to die for their many evils," said the headline in the state-run newspaper.

The report gave few details about their crimes.

accuse the party of trying to impose Hindu cultural values and religious beliefs on them.

BJP leaders told a convention of young Muslims that the Congress Party was responsible for encouraging religious divisions.

Political analysts said the elections might still not give India a stable government.

"This whole thing is unnecessary. At the end of the election, you might have pretty much the same combination in power," said Pran Chopra, a political analyst at the centre for policy research.

The fractious United Front went down united while the crumbling Congress looked set for soul-searching.

"The Congress thought it played an ace, but it may well turn out to be a joker," said Mahesh Rangarajan of the centre for contemporary studies.

Initially Congress demanded that the report of the inquiry into Rajiv's murder must be released in parliament, then insisted that the regional Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam Party named in the probe must be dropped from the coalition.

"They really did not bargain for this, an election was never on the agenda..." said Rangarajan.

Fears of another hung parliament dominated the political landscape.

Mars was once warm, moist and more like Earth

WASHINGTON, Dec 5: The Pathfinder robot uncovered evidence that Mars was once warm, moist and more like Earth than its forbidding surface might now suggest. All of this is "a shot in the arm for the possibility of finding evidence of life" on the Red Planet, says one researcher, reports AP.

The body of evidence returned by Pathfinder are suggestive that conditions had been conducive for the formation of life early in Mars' history, said Matt P. Golombek, a Pathfinder mission scientist and lead author of a research report in the journal Science.

Golombek said that several lines of evidence has produced a strong consensus among scientists that Pathfinder landed July 4 on a Martian plain that was sculpted by liquid water sometime in the past billions of years and that such water proves the planet once was a warmer, more life-friendly place.

Although Pathfinder and its faithful wheeled rover, Sojourner, found no definite evidence of life, the report in Science said the spacecraft studies "Appear consistent with a water-rich planet that may BE more Earth-like than previously recognised, with a warmer and wetter past in which liquid water was stable and the atmosphere was thicker."

Finding evidence of "liquid water," a term used by scientists to differentiate from water in other forms it takes under various pressures and temperatures, "is a shot in the arm for the possibility of finding evidence of life," said Golombek. "If there was no liquid water, then there would be no need to search for life on Mars."

"There's nothing we found that would preclude life on early Mars," said John T. Schofield of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, the California In-

stitute of Technology agency that controlled Pathfinder for NASA.

"Because there was liquid water billions of years ago, it is conceivable that there could have been life," said H J Moore of the US Geological Survey, one of the principle researchers with Sojourner. "The liquid water makes that a possibility."

Liquid water would mean that Mars was much warmer than the minus 100 degree temperatures experienced by Pathfinder, the researchers say in Science. This, in turn, means that the atmosphere on Mars was then much thicker than it now, the researchers say.

Moore said that Sojourner, the small wheeled rover that roamed for more than 170 feet around the landing site, found a number of rocks that bear a strong resemblance to rocks that on Earth are formed in the presence of water.



Students dressed as Santa Clauses pose for a group photo in Berlin Thursday. The students, who are trying to make some extra money, were meeting at a Berlin University to receive final instructions for the Christmas season. Banner in background reads "Dear Santa Claus, Make it happen that can go to university." Students have been protesting for a month against bad conditions at German universities. — AP/UNB photo

HR group blasts US for blocking efforts to ban anti-personnel mines

WASHINGTON, Dec 5: As-sailing US "arrogance," a leading human rights group accused the Clinton administration on Thursday of blocking global efforts to ban anti-personnel mines and use of children as soldiers, reports AP.

Human Rights Watch, a New York-based private group also said the United States has sought to emasculate attempts to create a permanent, independent criminal court to prosecute crimes against humanity.

And it took European countries to task for not being more persistent against human rights abuses in China.

It is time for the international community to stop indulging this obstructionist behaviour," the group said in its annual report.

"If the US government persists in its dismissive posture toward international human rights law, the international community should simply leave the United States behind."

State Department spokesman James P. Rubin rejected the suggestion that the United States is a human rights laggard.

"I think if you look around the world and you ask the people of the world which nation they look to as to the beacon for human rights, democracy and freedom, there is no question the answer would be the United States."

On land mines, the report faulted the United States for refusing to join with other governments in accepting the "military inconvenience of abandoning land mines in the interest of a strong international norm that would curtail their humanitarian cost."

The United States has said it could sign a land mine treaty only if exemptions were made to protect its troops in Korea and allow continued use of its anti-tank munitions. In response to a question on Thursday, Rubin said the United States spends more money and effort than all nations combined on demining efforts.

The critique by Human Rights Watch came as representatives of 125 nations, assembled in Ottawa, were signing a treaty to ban anti-personnel mines. The United States is attending the ceremony as an observer.



Iranian women pray at the grave of a soldier who died during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war at the Behesht Zahra cemetery where thousands of Iran's fighters are buried Thursday. The 8th Islamic Conference is scheduled to start December 9 in Tehran. — AP/UNB photo