

Myanmar junta dissolves 14-member advisory body

YANGON, Dec 11: Myanmar's leaders have dissolved the 14-member advisory group to the ruling junta, only one month after it was formed in a major shake-up of the regime, a senior government official said today, reports AFP.

The group comprised generals and cabinet ministers who were ousted from the top echelons of the government when a new junta called the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) was formed last month. The advisory group has been dissolved because it is no longer required, the official said. Without giving further explanation.

It was unclear what would happen to the members of the group, some of whom are believed to be under investigation for alleged corruption. Analysts here said the advisory group had clearly been formed as the country's top generals moved to sideline junta figures in the former junta, known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

However, they expressed surprise that the dissolution of the group had occurred so soon after its formation on November 15, and that the latest move had not been formally announced.

The establishment of the SPDC, which saw the promotion of a younger corps of generals, was viewed here as a bid to improve the tainted image of the junta, streamline the chain of command and crack down on graft.

Officials here have confirmed that investigations into corruption in several ministries are underway, and there are unconfirmed reports that over a dozen lieutenant-colonels in ministries have been sacked as a department heads and had their military status stripped.

Others with business and family connections with some of the sidelined generals have been held for questioning and were prevented from trying to travel abroad from Myanmar sources said.

US president expresses concern over role of developing nations

Global warming control agreement approved

KYOTO, Japan, Dec 11: The world's nations approved a landmark agreement, early Thursday to reduce fuel emissions by industrial countries in the 21st century to guard the Earth against global warming, reports AP.

After working through the night, delegates held a final session of speechmaking which ended with loud round of applause signalling the formal approval of the pact. They will now take the agreement back to their government for ratification.

The Kyoto Protocol, approved after 11 days of arduous negotiations, will help set an energy course for much of the world for decades to come. "The eyes of the world are

upon us now," chief US negotiator Stuart Eizenstat declared in a contentious post-midnight session of the climate conference. "We have an opportunity to do really something good."

On a final night that stretched far into morning, the future of the carbon-loaded atmosphere hung on the calm click of calculators, as negotiators in conference backrooms set budget periods, apportioned quotas and toted up emissions of the "greenhouse" gases linked to global warming.

Eventually, a grand European-US-Japanese compromise took shape: The European Union would reduce its greenhouse emissions by 8 per cent below 1990 levels, the United States by 7 per cent, and Japan

by 6 per cent. Twenty-one other industrialised countries would meet similar binding targets, and the reductions would be achieved between 2008 and 2012. All are committed to more profound cuts after that.

Altogether, the 38 nations will be cutting greenhouse emissions by slightly more than 5 per cent under 1990 levels.

"This is a figure that is going to have an impact on the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere," said Raul Estrada, chairman of the talks. Meanwhile, US President Bill Clinton strongly endorsed an agreement of industrial nations to control global warming, saying it was "environmen-

tally strong and economically sound." But Clinton expressed regret late Wednesday about the lack of commitment by developing nations to reduce heat-trapping gases.

"I wish it were a little stronger on developing nations' participation," Clinton said. But he said the accord reached in Kyoto, Japan, was "a huge first step. And I did not dream when we started that we could get this far."

The president issued his statement after dozens of nations agreed at a conference in Kyoto to a landmark agreement to reduce fuel emissions by industrial countries in the 21st century.

Gujral will 'think twice' to hold top job after polls

NEW DELHI, Dec 11: Outgoing Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral Wednesday said he would "think twice" if offered the top job after general elections early next year, reports AP.

Gujral, a former diplomat who became the leader of India's 960 million people by default eight months ago, told a private television channel that his experience as premier had made him wary.

"I was reluctant earlier but now I will think twice," he said. Gujral became leader of the minority United Front Coalition government earlier this year when the alliance's key backer, the Congress (I) Party, withdrew its support demanding that Gujral's predecessor HD Deve Gowda be replaced.

A crisis was averted when Deve Gowda resigned and was replaced by Gujral — a compromise candidate acceptable to the front's 14 parties. But the suave, bookish leaders' government was rocked when Congress last month demanded the sacking of a coalition member party implicated in the 1991 assassination of former Congress premier Rajiv Gandhi.

Gujral, who resigned on November 28 after refusing to give in to the Congress demand, also said no single party would emerge a clear winner in the February-March elections. "I do not see any prospect of single party rule," he said, adding that coalitions should be forged before elections.

Ten die in Lankan clash

COLOMBO, Dec 11: Tamil Tiger guerrillas and security forces clashed in several parts of Sri Lanka's north-east, leaving 10 people dead on both sides, the rebels said today, reports AP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in a statement sent here from their London office, said they also lost seven fighters in two clashes in the north of the country on Tuesday.

Korea peace talks First round ends with a positive note

GENEVA, Dec 11: The countries that fought each other in the 1950-53 Korean conflict hailed as a success the launch here of landmark peace talks, but warned there was still a long way to go, reports AP.

It is significant that after all those years, the four countries involved have sat down at one table to put a final end to the Korean conflict, a South Korean government source told AFP Thursday. But he said it was still only the beginning and that "the road is going to be very very long and bumpy."

South and North Korea, the United States and China ended a ground-breaking first round of peace talks Wednesday with an agreement to continue negotiations on March 16.

However, the thorny issues not tackled in the first round of talks would be taken up at consultations in Beijing in mid-

February, the source said. "We had hoped to get some things agreed on the agenda in this round, but we knew that was too much to ask for in this round," the government source said.

"But we are pleased with the results of the peace talks, and will look forward to the next round," he said. He said that in Beijing the four parties were expected to put all "the final touches and agree on the things to discuss on the agenda, and the next talks here in Geneva."

"But if the worst comes to the worst and nothing is agreed in Beijing, we will have to bring them up in the next round of talks. But we are going to push to get some of the agenda fixed for the next meeting," he said. The United States side, which chaired this round of talks, expressed satisfaction with the outcome.

Simple lifestyle changes can prevent half of all cancers

BOSTON, Dec 11: Half of all cancers can be prevented by simple lifestyle changes, experts at the Harvard Centre for Cancer Prevention reported Wednesday, says AP.

The authors of the centre's annual report put particular emphasis on preventing colon cancer, which is frequently linked to inadequate exercise. Just a half-hour of daily exercise could ward off many cases of colon cancer. The study's authors assert they also recommended a high-fiber, low-fat diet rich in fruits and vegetables.

"This newest report actually details practical steps we can take to make those lifestyle changes," said Graham Colditz, the centre's director for education. The Harvard centre reported that 60 per cent of US adults do not follow those health guidelines.



Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, right, meets Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat during a break of the 8th Islamic Summit in Tehran Wednesday. Delegates from more than 50 Muslim countries are gathering in Tehran for a three-day summit. — AP/UNB photo

Opposition party submits no-confidence motion against Hashimoto

TOKYO, Dec 11: Criticising government efforts to turn around the faltering economy as inadequate, the main opposition party submitted a no-confidence motion Thursday against Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto, reports AP.

The motion — the first since Hashimoto became prime minister in January 1996 — is almost certain to be voted down by the ruling coalition, which holds a majority in the lower house of Parliament. But recent polls have shown eroding public support for Hashimoto.

"One of the biggest reasons for submitting the motion is that Hashimoto has failed to come up with any effective measures to steer the economy," said opposition legislator Nobuyuki Kanematsu. The main opposition New Frontier Party said the move

was prompted by the Japanese Economic Planning Agency's decision three days ago to abandon its previous stance that a recovery was under way.

In its gloomiest report in almost two years, the agency said the economy is stuck at a standstill. Economic growth has been crippled by weak consumer spending, low investment in plant capacity by manufacturers and massive bad loans and losses on the books of major financial companies.

The problems were underscored by the recent failure of several financial institutions, including one of Japan's largest brokerage houses, Yamaichi Securities Co. Two polls taken by major dailies showed public support for the administration no higher than 35 per cent, down from highs of above 50 per cent.

BRIEFLY

Yeltsin advised rest: Russian President Boris Yeltsin has been laid low by an acute respiratory viral infection and his doctors have ordered him to rest for 10 to 12 days, Reuters reports from Moscow. However, Kremlin officials insist his illness is not serious and say the 66-year-old president will continue working on documents at the sanatorium outside Moscow where he is staying. Today, Yeltsin was expected to record a radio address to be broadcast to the Russian people on Friday's constitution day, which is a national holiday.

Canadian jet crash survivors airlifted: Survivors of a Canadian plane crash spent the night at a nursing station in a remote northern community, and reached a Winnipeg hospital Wednesday after rescuers finally managed to overcome bad weather. AP reports from Little Grand Rapids. The injured had been pulled from the wreckage Tuesday afternoon by police and volunteers who raced to the crash site on snow machines. Four Manitobans were killed as the commuter plane tried to land at the gravel airstrip in Little Grand Rapids, an aboriginal community near the Ontario-Manitoba boundary.

UN team to begin work in Congo: UN investigators finally got the go-ahead to begin interviewing residents Thursday in a town where President Laurent Kabila's forces allegedly slaughtered Rwandan refugees, often in full view of townspeople. AP reports from Kinshasa. Team members met with Congo officials Wednesday in the northwestern town of Mbandaka, and the officials pledged to assist the probe, team leader Jose Diaz said. Seventeen UN investigators and 10 local workers have set up camp in Mbandaka, a remote town with no electricity or clean water.

Fiji to restore rule of Queen: Ten years after a military coup broke ties with Britain and made the nation a republic, Fiji will restore Queen Elizabeth II as its constitutional monarch, the prime minister said Thursday, AP reports from Suva. Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka — who led two coups in 1987 against an Indian-dominated government — was addressing Fijian clans celebrating Fiji's return to the Commonwealth last October.

Rabuka said the stage should be set for the return of normal relations with Britain, and said the Queen's restoration as the monarch of Fiji reflected the wishes of the Fijian people.

Gorbachev ready to join Solzhenitsyn: Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev said Wednesday that he was ready to join with writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn to save the people of Russia, AP reports from Moscow. Gorbachev has little influence in Russia today and for his gesture to the Russian people he chose another figure from the past whose star has fallen. "I am ready to support Solzhenitsyn, ready to sign an appeal to Russians with him, to call for agreeing to a new combination of political forces in order to change something," Gorbachev said, according to the Interfax news agency.

Ramos names new army chief: President Fidel Ramos yesterday named Lieutenant General Clemente Mariano as the new Chief of Staff of the Philippine Armed Forces, a presidential aide said, AP reports from Manila.

BJP confident of winning next Indian polls

NEW DELHI, Dec 11: India's powerful Hindu nationalist said today they would win easily parliamentary elections early next year, reports AP. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party), which ruled India for just 13 days in 1996, said the steady decline of the Congress (I), the country's oldest party, would ensure a Hindu nationalist victory.

"The very circumstances in which the elections are being held make its outcome utterly predictable," BJP's president Lal Krishna Advani told a news conference here.

Coalition govt removes police chief in Nepal

KATHMANDU, Dec 11: Nepal's coalition government today removed Communist-backed police chief Dhruva Bahadur Pradhan and reinstated his ousted predecessor, state-radio announced, says AP.

The former government, backed by the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML) and headed by then prime minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand of the rightist National Democratic Party (NDP), had removed Inspector General of Police Achut Krishna Kharel from his post and made him chief of the National Investigation Department.

Lankan opposition won't take part in local polls

COLOMBO, Dec 11: Sri Lanka's main opposition party decided Thursday not to participate in upcoming local elections in the Tamil heartland, saying the country's civil war makes the region unsafe, reports AP.

The decision dealt a setback to the government's efforts to bring normalcy to the north and east, the main battleground in a 14-year war pitting state troops against ethnic Tamil separatists.

Plans formulated for 13 pc pullout from WB Israel bans PLO political activity in E Jerusalem

JERUSALEM, Dec 11: Israel has tightened its hold on Arab East Jerusalem, imposing a broad ban on Palestinian political activity in the city in a move to block a PLO-backed census, reports Reuters. Right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu scrambled to push the bill through parliament in accelerated proceedings after legal experts said an existing prohibition did not cover Palestinian census-taking.

In a marathon session that stretched late into Wednesday night, parliament voted 26-11 in favour of the legislation. "The proposal widens the authority to prevent all activities of the PLO or of the Palestinian Authority inconsistent with the

sovereignty of the state of Israel," the justice ministry said in a statement. Palestinians began a population survey of the West Bank and Gaza this week, saying only that it would include all areas here Palestinians live, about 180,000 Arabs reside in East Jerusalem of the more than one million living in the West Bank.

A senior Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, said the Israeli parliament vote preached signed agreements. He told Voice of Palestine radio, monitored by the BBC, that 1993 Oslo peace accords permitted Palestinian population censuses. Another report adds: Defence Minister Yitzhak

Mordechai has formulated a proposal that allows for a withdrawal from 13 per cent of the West Bank which would satisfy US demands on the pullout, Israel radio reported today.

But Israeli national infrastructure minister Ariel Sharon opposes Mordechai's plan, preferring a smaller transfer of territory to the Palestinians, the public radio added. The two to meet later today with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister David Levy to work out a final proposal to be presented by Netanyahu to US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in a meeting between the two on Wednesday.



Aspiring neapolitan Top Guns 20-year-old Rugiada Rea, at centre, and 18-year-old Angela Mallardo, pose with Italian Air Force pilots in Pozzuoli Air Force Base, near Naples, Wednesday. 448 women have requested to be enrolled in the Italian Air Force, but the law which will allow women to be admitted in the armed forces is still under discussion in Parliament. It is expected the law will receive Parliament's approval by 1999. 150 women, from all over Italy, visited the Pozzuoli Air Force Base. — AP/UNB photo

Many women still deprived of basic freedoms: Hillary

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 11: In the almost half century since it was adopted, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has given the world a standard by which to measure basic freedoms, Hillary Rodham Clinton said, reports AP.

But for many women, that standard has not been met. Mrs Clinton said Wednesday at a UN ceremony beginning yearlong celebrations leading up to the 50th anniversary of the passage of the declaration. Women around the world lack equal rights and free speech, and are denied educational opportunities and jobs, she said. In parts of the world, they are subjected to ritual cutting of the genitals.

"What meaning can the language of freedom and human rights have for a young woman forced into prostitution and trafficked in the commercial sex trade? What meaning can it have for women forced into in-

voluntary servitude as sweatshop workers or domestic servants?" the first lady asked. She said domestic and sexual violence "remain the most serious, under-reported and widespread human rights violations in the world."

Mrs Clinton said, the violence cannot be dismissed as "part of a country's norm." "We do not believe that violence against women is simply cultural; we believe it is simply criminal," she said. The first lady and other speakers lauded the declaration, adopted on Dec. 10, 1948, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, as the first international attempt to spell out the basic rights all people are supposed to enjoy, such as equality before the law, the right not to be tortured, and freedom of expression, religion, movement and asylum.

And they lamented how much more needs to be done.

Off the Record

Model beggar
KUALA LUMPUR: Immigration authorities have stepped up efforts to spot a foreign beggar who allegedly goes to work in a car driven by a chauffeur, a Malaysian newspaper reported Thursday, says AP. Immigration Department director Rosli Mahmud was quoted by the Star Newspaper as saying that the 50-year-old handicapped beggar had apparently gone into hiding recently. "We also believe that he owns a brick house in a neighbouring country," Rosli said. The Immigration Department learned of the man's suspicious routine from another foreign beggar who was arrested in October and then deported, the paper said.

Shield against cybercrime
WASHINGTON: Ministers from the world's eight most powerful nations on Wednesday adopted a 10-point action plan against Internet and high-tech crime, reports AP. Ministers from Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the United States at the close of a two-day meeting here, agreed that given the transnational nature of cybercrime it was impossible for one government to act alone. They therefore pledged to allocate sufficient resources to their law enforcement agencies and to work together to stamp out abuses of the Internet and other high-tech communications tools.

OIC leaders seek consensus on ME peace, Gulf security

TEHRAN, Dec 11: Muslim leaders sought a consensus on Middle East peace, Gulf security and terrorism at an Islamic summit in Tehran that is closing later today, reports Reuters. Delegates said many differences had been papered over on Wednesday, but they were still in work late into the night to complete work on the statement to be issued at the end of the three-day Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Summit.

Iran, re-emerging on the world stage to host the biggest international event in Tehran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, has contended that US

backed Middle East peace efforts are futile and Gulf states should make a pact to defend themselves without relying on Western forces. It has not pushed its views to the limit to avoid offending moderate Arab states and has taken pains to reassure the Muslim world of its intentions.

"Iran intends to use its chairmanship of the OIC to remove misunderstandings and strengthen an atmosphere of understanding and tranquility in the region," President Mohammad Khatami said on Wednesday in a meeting with his Sudanese counterpart.

"Muslim states have to arrive at the fact that cooperation is possible in spite of some differing outlooks," he said. Iran and Pakistan, long at odds over Afghanistan, where they sympathise with rival factions, were due today to discuss ways to bring peace to their tormented neighbour.

Both say they want a broad-based Afghan government, but Pakistan has recognised the Taliban administration ruling Kabul, while Iran says ousted president Burhanuddin Rabbani, attending the summit as an observer, is the rightful ruler.

Iraq insists UN inspectors may not enter Saddam's palaces

KIRKUK, Iraq, Dec 11: Iraq's oil minister insisted Wednesday that UN arms inspectors may not enter President Saddam Hussein's palaces, setting the stage for a confrontation in upcoming talks with the chief inspector, reports AP. The remarks by the minister, Lt Gen Amer Mohammed Rashid, came two days before Richard Butler, head of the UN Special Commission, was to visit Baghdad for talks on inspecting so-called sensitive sites.

The commission, which is charged with overseeing the elimination of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, insists it

must have access to all possible hiding places for weaponry. Iraq has said palaces and other sites are off-limits. "Presidential sites are totally forbidden for UNSCOM inspectors because they are a symbol of (Iraq's) sovereignty," Rashid said at a news conference in this northern city. "On this we shall not compromise."

Butler is scheduled to arrive Friday and is expected to demand that his inspectors have access to all sites where they suspect Iraq may be hiding arms or the equipment to make biological and chemical weapons. Butler also was expected to

discuss other issues, such as Iraq's germ warfare programme, its alleged production of the deadly VX nerve gas and missing missile warheads. Rashid denied accusations that Iraq was still hiding weapons and materials proscribed under UN Security Council resolutions passed after the 1991 Gulf War.

"Since the end of 1991 there has been no proscribed weapon or equipment left in Iraq," he said. Rashid was in Kirkuk, Iraq's main oil city, to mark the first anniversary of the start of Iraqi oil exports under the special oil-for-food programme.

Jupiter mission finds evidence of salts on Europa

SAN FRANCISCO, Dec 11: The Galileo mission to Jupiter has found evidence of salts on the frozen moon Europa, boosting the possibility that the moon has an ocean that might have once harboured life, reports AP. Signs of magnesium sulfate, a mineral normally formed on Earth where salt water evaporates, were picked up on Europa by analysis of light reflected off the surface.

It could mean a liquid ocean rich in brine exists or recently existed beneath Europa's cracked, frozen expanses, say experts. "That briny water somehow was erupted or extruded or squirted to the surface" where evaporation took place, said

Tom McCord, University of Hawaii professor and a Galileo investigator. Salts like those on Europa can be found in dry lake beds in the Earth's deserts, McCord said. Europa, the smallest of Jupiter's four major moons, is the subject of an extended study by NASA because it likely has to important ingredients for life: water and internal heat caused by tidal forces.

The Galileo team presented findings and images from the mission Wednesday at the American Geophysical Union meeting. Johnson said the 1.5 billion dollars Galileo mission is in a kind of limbo.