

BRIEFLY

14 killed in Algerian attack:

Forty-seven civilians were killed and two others were injured in an armed attack on a village in western Algeria overnight, security services announced Saturday. AFP reports from Algiers.

The civilians were murdered in a "cowardly" attack by a "terrorist group" on Kaadra village, according to the communiqué, which said security forces had launched a sweep of the area. Press and security service reports have given a toll of more than 200 dead in the last 15 days of violence, with more than half the total reported among members of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA).

March to protest head scarf ban:

Some 100 pro-Islamic students began Saturday a 450 km march to protest a government ban on head scarves, the Anatolia news agency reported, AP says from Istanbul.

The students left Istanbul's main train station and were expected to reach Ankara Tuesday. The government says head scarves have become a political symbol to a too-fervent Islam threatening Turkey's secular system. It has called for stricter enforcement of the scarf ban in schools and public offices.

Japan's oldest person dies:

Japan's oldest person, Suekiku Miyahara, died at the age of 114 Saturday, Jiji Press News Agency reported. Miyahara died simply of old age, it said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

Born in 1884, she celebrated her 114th birthday in April at a nursing home in the southern Japanese town of Okuma, with the town mayor giving a congratulatory speech and handing her a bouquet of flowers. She married at 24 and had four boys and seven girls.

Landslide claims 2 in China:

A fresh landslide caused by torrential rains in southeastern China has killed two persons, bringing the total killed in flooding this year to 340, local officials said yesterday. AFP reports from Beijing.

The June 20 landslide in Nanping city, Fujian province, came after 70 cm of rain pounded the region over a seven-day period, officials said. A further 360,000 livestock have been drowned and 33,900 houses flooded in the downpour, they added.

Opposition win Czech polls:

Opposition Social Democrats, having won the country's early parliamentary elections, know the toughest part still awaits in upcoming coalition talks. AP reports from Prague, Czech Republic.

Parties were discussing possible alliances among themselves yesterday, before holding negotiations with President Vaclav Havel. The president has invited the leaders of the Social Democrats, the Civic Democratic Party, the Christian Democratic Party and the Freedom Union to Prague Castle today. More than 76 per cent of the country's 8.09 million voters cast ballots in the elections Friday and Saturday, which were held two years ahead of schedule.

5 die in Moscow storm:

At least five people were killed and more than 100 were injured when a violent thunderstorm driven by raging winds pummeled the Russian capital late Saturday night and Sunday morning, AP reports from Moscow.

A duty officer in the Moscow, health department said five people died as a direct result of the storm. The Interfax news agency said 121 had been hospitalised. The storm struck just before midnight and raged for about 30 minutes, with nearly constant lightning flashes, heavy downpours and howling wind. Thousands of trees were downed, causing power outages and traffic jams.

Iran, Iraq hold talks on POWs:

An Iranian delegation held talks with Iraqi ministers in Baghdad Saturday on prisoners of war from the 1980-1988 conflict between their countries, the official news agency INA said, AFP reports from Baghdad.

The delegation led by Gen Abdullah Najafi, head of the Iranian Committee on Prisoners of War, met Foreign Minister Mohammad Said Al-Sahhaf and Defence Minister Gen Sultan Hashem Ahmad. "Sahhaf" underscored the need to close the POW and missing persons file through joint efforts," INA reported.

EU envoys to leave Minsk:

Ambassadors of European Union countries will leave the Belarus capital Minsk today in protest over a row with Belarussian authorities over the control of official residences, AFP reports from Minsk.

The envoys from Italy, France, Britain, Germany and Greece each delivered notice of their departure to the Belarus foreign ministry, the British Ambassador, Jessica Pearse, announced.

Cuba, Bahamas deal on immigration:

The Bahamas will send home any Cuban boat people to reach its shores under a new deal signed by Nassau and Havana, officials said Saturday. AFP reports from Havana.

Bahamas Foreign Minister Janet Bostwick and Cuban Deputy Foreign Minister Jorge Bolano signed the agreement in Nassau, according to a statement, published in the communist party daily Granma. The accord, which updates the two island nations' 1996 immigration agreement, "aims to improve procedures for a more effective and speedy repatriation of illegal immigrants," the statement said.

Chemical train derailed in US:

A chemical train jumped its tracks, spilling 11,400 litres of formaldehyde that forced 100 families to evacuate and sent seven people to the hospital for breathing problems, reports AP from Huntington, West Virginia.

About 30 cars of the 148-car train derailed Saturday near the Ohio River, but none went into the water, official said. People who were within 1.6 km of the site were evacuated while other nearby residents were told to remain indoors and seal off ventilation systems. Six residents and the train's conductor were treated for breathing trouble. The train also carried sodium hydroxide, hydrochloric acid and mutton sulfur. Several coal cars were thrown from the tracks.

HK Airport Railway opens:

Hong Kong's Airport Railway an important piece of a new airport construction project costing a total of 202.1 billion US dollars, began service Sunday, two weeks before the airport opens, AP reports from Hong Kong.

The 34 km railway links downtown Hong Kong to the new Chek Lap Kok airport, built on a man-made islet at the tip of the outlying Lantau Island and the nearby town of Tung Chung.

Marchers in Cambodia hold rally defying ban

PHNOM PENH, Jun 21: Defying a government ban on demonstrations during the run-up to elections, thousands of Cambodians joined opposition leader Sam Rainsy on Sunday in a public rally calling for the July 26 vote to be free and fair, reports AP.

About 2,500 protesters marched through the streets of Phnom Penh carrying blue-and-white banners that said, "we want a free and fair election," "the election is being rigged," and "stop election killings."

The demonstration, which began at the Olympic Stadium and ended at the Sam Rainsy Party headquarters, went ahead despite repeated state-run television and radio broadcasts warning that rallies in Phnom Penh are prohibited until after the election.

Sam Rainsy ignored the ban, calling it "unconstitutional."

The authorities, apparently unwilling to give him more ammunition to criticise the political environment as not being conducive to free and fair polls, allowed the rally to go ahead.

However, about 100 people coming to the demonstration by bus and truck from a southern suburb of the capital were stopped and detained for two hours by local officials, according to a UN human rights worker.

They were released unharmed only to be temporarily detained a second time just outside the city.

Sam Rainsy said Friday his party would not participate in the upcoming campaign unless measures are implemented to ensure conditions are conducive for free and fair elections.

He indicated Sunday that the government's willingness to let him go ahead with the rally was a good sign.

His participation in the elections, he said Sunday, depends in part on "how free we can be to express our opinion" as the election date approaches. "The freedoms should be applied nationwide, he said.

Advani says India willing to discuss Kashmir with Pakistan

NEW DELHI, Jun 21: India's hard-line Interior Minister, in charge of formulating policy on Kashmir, has said his government is willing to discuss the dispute territory with neighbouring rival Pakistan any time, reports AP.

"We have never shied away from talking about Kashmir. Never. We are willing to talk about Kashmir," said Lal Krishna Advani in an interview to the private Home TV channel to be broadcast Monday night. Excerpts of the interview were made available to the press Sunday.

Just last month Advani had warned Pakistan not to interfere in Indian-held Kashmir saying that India's newly demonstrated nuclear capability that had introduced a new element in the simmering regional conflict. This sparked a war of words with Pakistan in which Advani was accused of brandishing a nuclear sword.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars in the last 50 years, two of them over the Himalayan territory of Kashmir

that is now divided between them. Both countries lay claim to the whole area.

India has repeatedly accused Pakistan of arming and training Muslim militants in Kashmir who want independence or union with Islamic Pakistan. Pakistan says it provides only moral support to the militants in Kashmir, the only Muslim-majority state in predominantly Hindu India.

Advani describes India's five nuclear tests — three on May 11 and two on May 13 — as one of the biggest achievements of his three-month old Bharatiya Janata Party-led ruling coalition. Pakistan responded with its own tests a few weeks later.

"For a long time... ever since China's first nuclear tests, I have been longing to see India become a nuclear power," he said.

Advani, who only recently stepped down as president of the Hindu right-wing BJP, said the talks on Kashmir would also include alleged Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in Kashmir.

Last month's tit-for-tat nuclear tests by India and Pakistan heightened tensions in one of the world's most volatile regions. The tests also brought the Kashmir dispute into international focus with the world community pressing for its early resolution.

Advani said India did not mind international pressure to discuss the Kashmir issue because New Delhi was "willing to do it anyway." But, he reiterated India's stand that it will not accept any outside mediation to help resolve the dispute. Pakistan wants outside involvement on the Kashmir issue, believing it is at a disadvantage in one-on-one talks with its much larger and more powerful neighbour.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is scheduled to meet his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif during a regional summit in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo next month, but officials refused to say whether the two would have any bilateral talks.



An Indian police officer interviews two brides, Leela, center, and Kerma, who survived a massacre, at the district police headquarters in Doda, 178 km from Jammu, India, Saturday. Twenty-five Hindus of a wedding party were allegedly killed by militants in Champanari of Jammu region. — AP/UNB photo

Mahathir quells allegations of corruption in govt

KUALA LUMPUR, Jun 21: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad appears to have emerged the winner Sunday at a party convention electrified by allegations of nepotism and corruption in his government, reports AP.

In a conference hall buzzing for three days with talk of corruption and cronyism in the upper echelons of the governing United Malays National Organisation party, Mahathir on Saturday released a list of people awarded government contracts and promised more names.

On that list were some of the very people who have accused his leadership of cronyism.

"This is a pattern Mahathir has followed whenever he has been challenged," said Chandra Muzaffar, a professor of politics at University of Malaysia.

Mahathir also met his critics head-on in 1987, when he faced a challenge from within his party regarding the country's recession, said Chandra.

On Saturday, Mahathir, 72, Asia's longest-serving leader since President Suharto's recent ouster in Indonesia, described the list as "just a start."

"We are preparing the details and maybe we will release more and the press can have a look," he said on the penultimate day of the UMNO convention. "We will see from the list who benefited, whether they are cronies or the son and daughters of the leaders."

Among the prominent names listed was that of Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, the powerful leader of the UMNO Youth wing whom the local press described as "No. 1 Antagonist" for spearheading the campaign against corruption in UMNO.

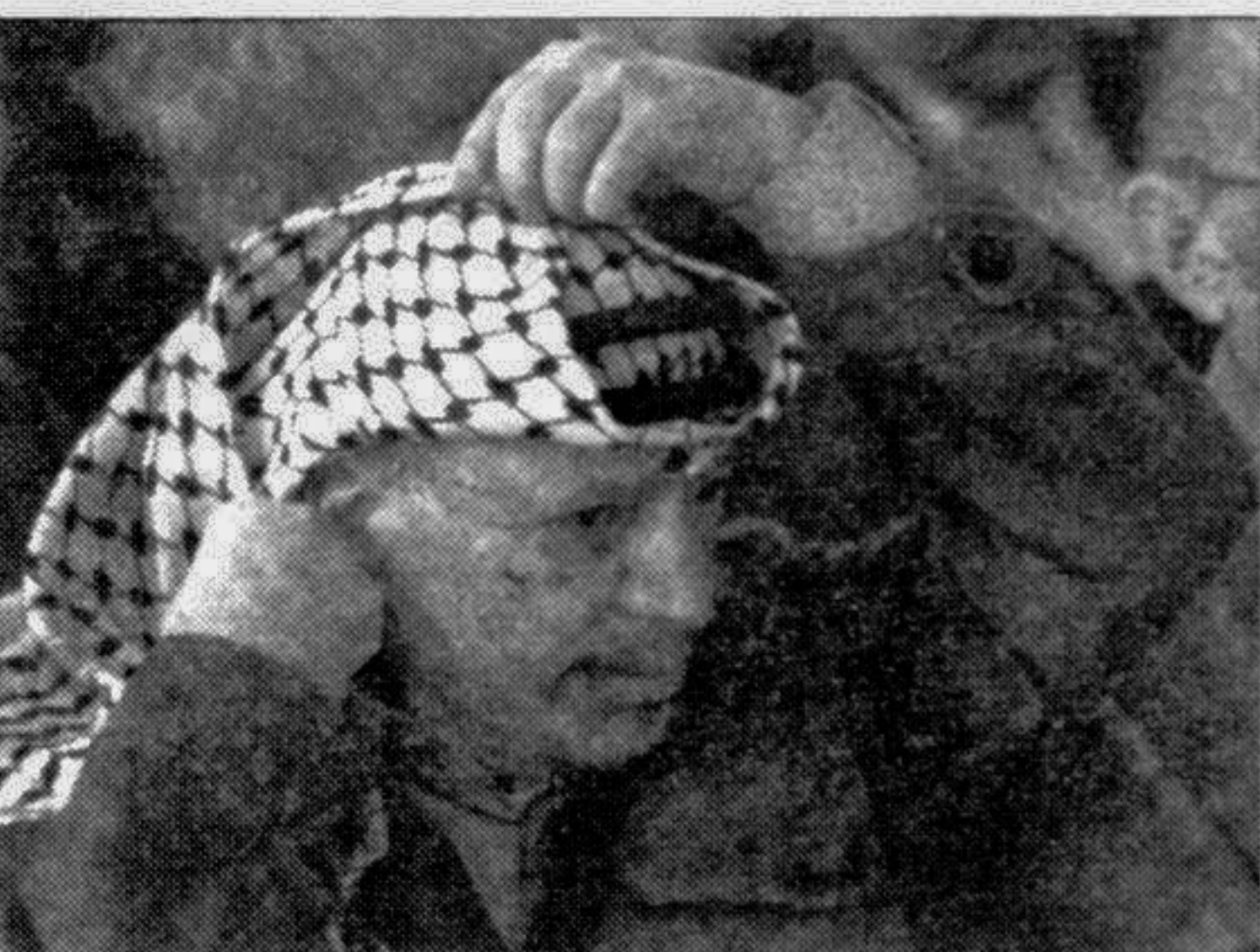
Before the delegates gathered Thursday for the annual convention, Zahid had threatened to do what Mahathir did Saturday — provide a list of beneficiaries of cronyism.

Zahid's list never materialised, though he called for an end to cronyism and nepotism in his speech before the UMNO Youth wing on Thursday, drawing some cheers and applause.

Now, Zahid appears on the defensive, and state-backed newspapers on Sunday criticised him for raising the issues.

Dr. Mahathir is all too aware of this tactic, having been given many labels — good or bad — in his six decades of political life," said Kadir Jasin, editor of The New Straits Times in an editorial Sunday.

"Mahathir has secured his position for now and immediate future," said Jomo Sundram, professor of economics at the university of Malaya.



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat adjusts his headdress during a ceremony in the West Bank town of Bethlehem Saturday. — AP/UNB photo

Arafat to meet 2 main opposition leaders soon

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Jun 21: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has agreed in principle to meet leaders of the two main PLO opposition factions in Cairo soon, the two factions said Saturday, reports AP.

The issue was raised and president Arafat gave his agreement in principle to this meeting of national dialogue," Kais Samara (Aka Abu Laila), an official of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), told AFP.

Samerai also said Nayef Hawatme, head of the DFLP, and George Habash, head of the biggest PLO opposition faction, the Popular Front for the Liberation (PFLP) would take part personally in the meeting.

Netanyahu defends new Jerusalem development plan

JERUSALEM, Jun 21: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu defended a new Jerusalem development programme against US criticism that it would jeopardise the peace process, Israel radio reported Saturday, reports AP.

The programme submitted to Netanyahu Thursday, seeks to boost investment and maintain the Jewish population of Jerusalem at 70 per cent.

It also proposes to expand the authority of the city ward to include several Jewish suburbs. It is expected to be passed by the Israeli Cabinet Sunday.

The Clinton administration has assailed Netanyahu for considering the plan, and in a phone conversation with Netanyahu over the weekend, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright expressed anger that Israel would take such a "provocative step," Israel radio reported.

Netanyahu, in response, said the programme was not intended as a political maneuver, but was designed to address economic needs, Israel radio reported.

Cabinet Secretary Danny Naveh said on Israel Television that Israel had every right to strengthen and develop Jerusalem.

"We are talking about development of infrastructure in Jerusalem... This programme is in no way contradictory to any agreements with the Palestinians," said Naveh.

The future of Jerusalem is to be negotiated in talks on a permanent Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement that have not yet begun, but are to conclude by May 1999.

'Clinton's trip to China full of political risks'

WASHINGTON, Jun 21: Bill Clinton will become the first US president to visit China since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre when he arrives there Thursday for a nine-day visit filled with significant political risks, reports AP.

With no major agreements in sight, Clinton will be under pressure to justify clinking champagne glasses with a communist regime accused of human rights violations and religious persecution.

Defending a policy he once denounced as coddling, Clinton will have to explain his pursuit of increased cooperation with Beijing. Television clips may remind Americans that candidate Clinton criticised President George Bush for signalling "that we would do business as usual with those who murdered freedom in Tiananmen Square."

"I don't think this is a political gainer for the president," said Andrew J Nathan of Columbia University's East Asian Institute. "In fact, China policy has been a political loss-maker for all the presidents since Tiananmen. But it's something that has to be managed in order to manager our foreign policy."

The mood of Clinton's visit has been tainted by congressional investigations of alleged campaign contributions from China and whether America's national security was jeopardised by China's launching of US-made communications satellites from Loral Space and Communications. Congressional committees and the Justice Department are investigating satellite technology transfers. Critics charge that campaign contributions from Loral and other companies have played a role as well.

Jailed Timorese rebel rejects Habibie's offer

JAKARTA, Jun 21: An imprisoned rebel chief from East Timor on Sunday rejected an offer from Indonesia's president for freedom in exchange for worldwide recognition of the disputed territory as part of Indonesia, reports AP.

"In principle, I don't agree," separatist rebel commander Jose Xanana Gusmao said in Jakarta's Cipinang jail, where he is serving a 20-year sentence for fighting Indonesian forces. He was arrested in 1992.

Gusmao briefly commented on the proposal by President BJ Habibie in response to a question from an Associated Press reporter who entered the prison during visiting hours.

Gusmao, who is revered by many East Timorese, has said the former Portuguese colony should be allowed to determine if it wants independence in a referendum.

Tens of thousands observe Sukarno's death anniversary

BLITAR, Indonesia, Jun 21: Tens of Thousands of people prayed here overnight to culminate celebrations marking the 28th anniversary of the death of Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, witnesses said today, reports AP.

Some 50,000 people poured into this east Javanese town Saturday to pay homage to the late Sukarno, better known as "Bung Karno," at the tomb where he was laid to rest.

"People were spilling into every part of the city. Every street corner was swamped by people," a resident said.

However, by dawn Sunday most of the crowds had begun to leave the city, leaving about some 2,000 praying at the house of Sukarno's late sister, and at the tomb.

4 European defence ministers see no use of force to solve Kosovo crisis

PALMA DE MAJORCA, Spain, Jun 21: Four European defence ministers said on Saturday they hoped military force would not be necessary to solve the crisis in Kosovo, and said Russia's efforts were key in finding a diplomatic solution, reports Reuters.

Defence ministers from France, Spain, Italy and Portugal made the comments after a meeting on this Spanish island to discuss topics related to the Europe for rapid response forces from the four nations.

A major issue raised at the meeting was the crisis the troubled Serbian province of Kosovo where more than 300 people have been killed and tens of thousands have fled since February when police cracked down on separatist ethnic Albanian guerrillas from the Kosovo Liberation Army.

Int'l airport of Guinea Bissau still under rebel control

DAKAR, Jun 21: Guinea Bissau's international airport was still in rebel hands Saturday, diplomatic sources said here, while sporadic automatic weapons fire was heard from the area during the day, reports AP.

Senegalese troops backing soldiers loyal to Guinea Bissau's President Joao Bernardo Vieira on Friday attacked army mineurs dug in at the airport, which has become the focus of fighting in the west African state.

Meanwhile, diplomatic sources in Dakar said seven white people — two French, a Canadian, two Dutch, a German and a seventh person of unknown nationality — had been taken hostage by insurgents 30 kilometres west of Bissau, the capital.

Newsweek report says China pledges to sign UN covenant on HR

NEW YORK, Jun 21: Chinese President Jiang Zemin has promised to sign the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in the fall, missing President Bill Clinton's upcoming state visit for this human rights breakthrough for Beijing, Newsweek says, reports AP.

The Newsweek report on Jiang's pledge, in the issue of the magazine due out Monday, follows a statement Thursday by China's foreign ministry saying Beijing was speeding up preparations to sign the UN covenant ahead of Clinton's June 25-July 3 trip.

China's UN ambassador signed its sister treaty, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on the eve of Jiang's landmark visit to the United States last October, and human rights groups had been hopeful of a parallel signing during Clinton's visit.

The economic, social and cultural rights covenant is waiting to be ratified by China's National People's Congress, Jiang is quoted as saying in Newsweek.

Jiang says the purpose of Clinton's visit "is to promote the further growth of Sino-US relations."

Off the Record

Real-life Rip Van Winkle!

TEZPUR, Assam: It might sound bizarre, but it's true. India now has its own Rip Van Winkle, though with a slight difference, reports IANS.

A 50-year-old man in the northeast Indian state of Assam has stepped out of his dingy dark room for the first time in 36 years.

Like any other boy of his age, Thula Bora was preparing for his matriculation examination way back in 1962 at Dekargaon village near Tezpur, 180 km north of the capital Guwahati. Suddenly he was struck by this wild idea of spending his life in absolute seclusion.

"He never came out of his room nor allowed any light to enter through his windows for the last 36 years," Anup Baruah, a school friend, told IANS.

Family members and relatives failed to persuade Bora to step out of his room and after a few months of coaxing they gave up. Since then he spent most of his time either sleeping or just doing nothing inside the room.

"He didn't shave, he didn't have a haircut all these years. And he refused to talk to anybody," Smriti Bora, a relative, said.

Last week the small village of Dekargaon woke up to a surprise when they found Thula Bora outside his house. As word spread and people from near and far kept streaming in to have a look at him, Bora sat totally silent.

"Curious onlookers have made a beeline (for the village) to see Thula Bora," Bjoy Das, a local resident, said.

Relatives and family members are now hoping that Bora does not go back into seclusion once again.

They are also nervous about the continuous stream of visitors. Family members recalled that when curious people came to have a look at Bora when he initially went into seclusion, he became irritable and refused to eat anything for days together.

"We don't know whether it was a bout of some psychiatric disorder or whether he was influenced by some supernatural power," a villager said of Bora's peculiar lifestyle.

Computer 'pets' for the elderly

LONDON: Hundreds of old-age pensioners at retirement homes in London are to receive Tamagochi computer 'pets' as gifts to help them stay alert, as part of a pilot project financed by the Japanese maker of the toys, The Observer weekly reported yesterday, says AFP.

In place of a dog or cat, which many elderly people must leave behind when they go into a home, the pensioners will have to look after the basic virtual needs of these electronic "chicks" which "die" unless they are fed and properly cared for.

After the phenomenal success of their product with children the world over, bandai, the Tamagochi makers believe the virtual pets can take over the therapeutic role habitually attributed to animal pets of old people.

However, Catherine Carroll, a psychologist quoted in The Observer disagreed. "It doesn't sound as though this will be very soothing for the pensioners. They will be afraid of them dying," she said.