

Germany goes to polls today

BERLIN, Sept 26: With polls predicting one of the tightest races in postwar German history, Chancellor Helmut Kohl and challenger Gerhard Schröder both made final appeals to supporters to get out and vote in Sunday's parliamentary election, reports AP.

"It's up to you now," Schröder told an enthusiastic crowd of 8,000 at his campaign finale Friday night in Berlin, just before the band struck up his team's theme song, "Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now."

Schröder called Kohl "the chancellor of unemployment," responsible for record double-digit joblessness, and said Sunday's election was a choice between "a new start or stagnation."

In the Rhine River city of Mainz, Kohl also called the election a pivotal one for Germany. But he saw it as a choice between sticking with him and the safe "politics of the middle," or a swing to the radical left with Schröder's Social Democrats.

"There's still a lot to be done," he told 10,000 supporters in the city's cathedral square. "We need every vote."

Both candidates, in fact, have targeted middle-of-the-road voters in this election, with neither promising major changes in German foreign or

domestic policy if elected.

Kohl, who has served 16 years as chancellor and wants an unprecedented fifth term, used the slogan "stability instead of risk" to appeal to traditionally cautious Germans.

Schröder sought to capitalise on the feeling among many Germans that Kohl's centre-right government is worn out. Campaigning as a fresh face, his posters carry the simple slogan: "Germany needs a new chancellor."

With unemployment topping 10 per cent the central election issue, both Kohl and Schröder say they want to pare regulations blocking innovation and sapping the German economy's competitiveness.

But Kohl is proposing a bigger tax cut than Schröder, whose campaign has stayed close to his party's liberal ideals despite his business-friendly reputation.

Schröder has tried to widen his appeal by giving few specifics of what he would do. His few detailed plans involve repealing modest cuts in social welfare and retirement programmes that the Kohl government has pushed through in the last four years.

Yet as Election Day nears, Schröder has seen the 12-point lead he held in the spring evaporate.

Bid to dismiss Bihar govt Indian opposition hail president's decision

NEW DELHI, Sept 26: India's ruling Hindu nationalists were licking their wounds today after being dealt a major blow when President K R Narayanan refused to sack a provincial government, reports AP.

But as leaders of the rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), went on the offensive, the opposition celebrated.

Narayanan, the country's constitutional head, on Friday referred back to the cabinet for "reconsideration" a central government request for the dismissal of the government in the eastern state of Bihar.

Bihar, India's most crime-prone state, is ruled by Rabri Devi, a 40-year-old illiterate mother of nine whose centrist National People's Party bitterly opposes the Hindu nationalists.

Her husband Laloo Prasad Yadav, the real power, was Bihar's chief minister until July last year when he handed over the reins to Devi before his imprisonment in a 271-million-dollar corruption scandal.

Yadav, who is currently on bail, is a maverick but popular politician and one of India's opposition leaders.

Newspapers said Narayanan had informed Prime Minister

Atal Behari Vajpayee's central government that he did not agree there had been a constitutional breakdown in Bihar to warrant the dismissal.

The decision was a humiliating setback to the Hindu nationalists, who ended up triggering fissures in their 16-party ruling coalition and united a splintered opposition.

The nationalists argued they wanted the Bihar government sacked because the sprawling state, with some 100 million people, had slipped into lawless anarchy.

The opposition, united for the first time on a single issue since the nationalists took power in March, hit back saying BJP-ruled state government would have to go first if law and order was the yardstick to remain in office.

The Hindu newspaper today described the president's decision "a severe moral blow" to the nationalist government.

The Asian Age said the BJP was stunned.

"We respect the president's decision," BJP spokesman Krishnan Lal Sharma said. "It is now for the cabinet to decide. The party cannot say anything

on this matter."

The presidential decree followed nationwide protests on Friday by opposition parties against the recommendation which saw sporadic violence in the BJP-ruled northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

There was no comment from Vajpayee, who is in New York to attend the UN General Assembly.

Indian laws allow the central government to recommend the dismissal of a state government, but this has to be approved by the president.

But the president would have to endorse the cabinet's decision if the demand was sent to him a second time.

A political analyst said the government might do that.

The government, having come this far, is unlikely to take the cabinet recommendation back, analyst GVL Narasimha Rao told AP. "I think the BJP was prepared for the president's decision."

Partners in India's multi-party coalition government broke ranks with the BJP over Bihar, saying they were opposed to the sacking of the state administration.

BSF kills 3 Pak Muslim militants

JAMMU (Indian), Sept 26: Indian security forces today shot dead three Pakistani Muslim militants when they sneaked into the northern state of Kashmir, officials said here, reports AP.

The three armed men were killed by the Border Security Force (BSF) inside Indian territory, a BSF official said in this Kashmir winter capital.

The killings took place at Sambah, 45 kms from Jammu, the paramilitary BSF, which guards India's land borders, said all three men were Pakistani nationals.

Indian officials say a large number of Islamic mercenaries, mainly from Afghanistan and Pakistan, are active in the Indian state of Kashmir, waging a bloody separatist campaign.



President Bill Clinton listens as Bernon Robinson, 10, shows off his reading skills at the Jenner Elementary School in Chicago Friday. — AP/UNB photo

Kuwait calls for continued Int'l pressure on Iraq

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 26: Kuwait's foreign minister called for continued international pressure on Iraq to comply with UN resolutions, and said Baghdad's defiance was underscored by its refusal to express regret for its 1990 invasion of Kuwait, reports AP.

The long series of crises triggered by the Iraqi government are pre-calculated attempts from time to time to disavow and circumvent its legal obligations," Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah told world leaders on Friday at the United Nations General Assembly session.

"The sad certainty, alas, is that all these crises contribute to the perpetuation of the sanctions for which the government of Iraq alone bears full responsibility," he said.

He said Iraq was trying to mislead the world with claims that it had lived up to its obligations.

"How could one reconcile that claim with the fact that we have not yet heard from Iraq any declaration or seen any gesture suggesting that Iraq regrets what it has done," Sheikh Ahmed said.

He called on Baghdad to release all Kuwaitis captured during its seven-month occupation of the emirate. Kuwait accuses Iraq of holding some 500 of its citizens, a charge denied by Baghdad.

NLD vows to continue struggle for democracy

YANGON, Sept 26: Marking its 10th anniversary, Myanmar's decimated opposition party vowed Saturday to continue its struggle for democracy in the military-run nation, reports AP.

Founded a decade ago Sunday, the National League for Democracy (NLD) is headed by Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi.

A party statement said the military regime has to date detained 921 of its members, including 200 winners of a 1990 parliamentary election the party won by a landslide.

Due to general difficulties the country is facing now, the people are desirous of changes which will bring about a democratic state," the statement said. "It has become absolutely essential to form a parliament and to carry out the responsibilities of the country in accordance with the law. The military, which has ruled Myanmar since 1962, refused to accept the results of the 1990 election and convene a parliament. Instead it is working on a new constitution.

2 new planets discovered

WASHINGTON, Sept 26: US astronomers aided by an amateur have found two new planets orbiting sun-like stars, bringing the total number of confirmed extra-solar system planets to 12, reports Xinhua.

According to a report from The Washington Post, Geoffrey Marcy, of San Francisco State University and the University of California at Berkeley, and his team detected the new planets with the powerful Keck Telescope in Hawaii.

The first planet, located around a star known only as HD 210227, 68 light-years away in the direction of the constellation Aquarius, is about the mass of Jupiter, which means it is most likely another giant gas planet with no hard surface.

The second newly discovered planet, whipping around its star HD 187123, which is 154 light years away in the direction of Cygnus, is at the smallest distance of found so far — one twenty-fifth the distance of Earth from the Sun.

Pakistan for lifting of sanctions before signing CTBT

WASHINGTON, Sept 26: Pakistan wants US and international economic sanctions lifted before it will sign a treaty banning nuclear testing, Information Minister Mushahid Musseini said Friday, reports AP.

The sanctions were imposed last May by the United States and the Group of Seven major industrialised nations after Pakistan tested nuclear weapons.

Sayed said he understood a congressional vote would be needed to lift US sanctions. Prominent Republican lawmakers have told the Clinton administration they opposed lifting sanctions as a price for adhering to nuclear agreements.

"For us cumulatively, the US sanctions, the G-7 sanctions and the pressure from the international financial institutions amount to an atmosphere of coercion and Pakistan would only sign (the treaty) when this atmosphere is removed," Sayed said at the National Press Club.

He said by announcing a moratorium on future testing, Pakistan had committed itself to abiding by the principles of nuclear nonproliferation "and

there should be reciprocity for what Pakistan has said."

Sayed said Pakistan considered the sanctions, which have hit his country hard, "unfair and unjust."

He said the sanctions imposed by the seven major industrialized countries as a group and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund "are not linked with US law so lifting them would not be a problem of law but basically a political decision."

The US sanctions suspended direct foreign aid, including government loans and guarantees; cancelled US export licenses; banned private loans and require Congress to oppose aid channeled through the multilateral lending agencies such as the World Bank and the IMF.

The administration subsequently said IMF aid to Pakistan could continue so the country did not default on its international loan obligations.

Sayed also said Japan's accusation that Pakistan imported missiles from North Korea for a test in April thought to be part of the country's nuclear programme was "not true at all."



Three residents hold on to each other as they battle 90 mph winds along Houseboat Row in Key West, Florida Friday. The three had sought shelter behind a Key West hotel as Hurricane Georges descended on the Florida Keys, but were forced to seek other shelter when the storm conditions became too rough. Hundreds of people were killed by the storm when it swept through the Caribbean. — AP/UNB photo

Associate of Bin Laden charged with murder

NEW YORK, Sept 26: US authorities filed murder charges against a ranking member of the terrorist group headed by Osama bin Laden, the Saudi exile wanted in last month's embassy bombings in Africa, reports AP.

A criminal complaint unsealed Friday in US District Court in Manhattan charges the suspect Mamdouh Mahmud Salim, with murder conspiracy and use of weapons of mass destruction in an international plot to kill US citizens. The plot allegedly included an attempt to obtain nuclear weapons.

Salim has not been accused of being involved in the simultaneous attacks on American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania on Aug 7 which killed 259 people, including 12 Americans, and wounded thousands.

The complaint instead charges Salim with helping finance, train and arm members of al Qaeda, including the alleged embassy bombers. He is described in the complaint as one of the founders of bin Laden's al Qaeda organisation.

Taiwan to enjoy more autonomy than HK if it rejoins China

NEW YORK, Sept 26: China will offer Taiwan more autonomy than Hong Kong or Macao if it reunifies with the mainland, the Chinese foreign minister said Friday in a speech indicating a softening in Beijing's stance, reports AP.

"As for Taiwan, we will adopt an even more flexible policy than that toward Hong Kong and Macao. Taiwan, once reunited with the mainland, will enjoy a greater autonomy than Hong Kong and Macao," Tang Jiaxuan said in a speech at a luncheon sponsored by the Asia Society and the National Committee on US-China Relations.

James Reardon-Anderson, professor of Chinese studies at Georgetown University, called the statement "quite a significant" one that may indicate a change in China's policy toward Taiwan.

There might be a signal from somebody in the Chinese government trying to say that they ought to be more flexible," Reardon-Anderson said, who was not at the luncheon.

Tang did not specify in his speech what "greater autonomy" Taiwan would receive. Questions he took from the primarily business audience did not touch upon the subject.

Hong Kong reverted from British rule in July 1997 in a smooth handover to China, which promised to leave its political and economic structure generally intact under a policy of "one country, two systems." China regains the tiny Portuguese colony of Macao in what it hopes to be an equally smooth transition in December 1999.

Tang's speech, made on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly debate, appears to back Taiwanese news reports this week that Chinese President Jiang Zemin hopes to make a major breakthrough on relations with Taiwan.

China and Taiwan have been making plans recently to resume negotiations. China broke off talks with Taiwan in 1995 in anger over the island's efforts to assert itself internationally.

"At present, we are vigorously pushing for political talks between the two sides across the Taiwan Straits. We have proposed to start discussing procedural arrangements for the political talks, the promotion of personnel and economic exchanges," Tang said in his speech, which was read in English by a translator.

China considers Taiwan a breakaway province. The sides separated politically in 1949 during the Chinese civil war that brought the Communists to power on the mainland.

In his speech, Tang again urged the United States to back its efforts for reunification, saying the move would not affect the existing economic, trade and cultural relations and personnel exchanges between the United States and Taiwan.

"It has direct bearing on whether China-US relations will grow healthily and steadily," he said.

"It will only enable them to develop better and the US economic interests in Taiwan will be better protected," Tang said. "As far as China-US relations are concerned, an early resolution of the Taiwan issue will remove a major obstacle in our relations, facilitate a sound and steady growth of our relations and continued peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific.

A model wears a two piece embroidered outfit by designer Antoino Berardi during his show in London Friday. — AP/UNB photo

Palestinian state Declaration may upset ME peace process: US

WASHINGTON, Sept 26: The Clinton administration is concerned that the Palestinians could upset the Middle East peace process at a delicate moment by trying to lay the groundwork for a statehood declaration next May, reports AP.

The American uneasiness was outlined for reporters Friday night during a briefing on talks Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had with leading officials from Saudi Arabia, Syria, Algeria, Egypt and Lebanon.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was expected to lobby diplomats attending the UN General Assembly session to win global backing for independence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Arafat has said he will declare statehood May 4, 1999, regardless of whether a final peace agreement with Israel has been negotiated.

A senior US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said it would be unwise for the Palestinians to talk now about their intentions next May because that could impair the peace efforts over the coming week by President Bill Clinton and Albright.

Albright will meet Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in New York this weekend. Clinton will receive Netanyahu at the White House on Monday and Arafat will pay a call later in the week.

The United States has been trying to win Israeli approval for a plan that calls for Israel to withdraw from an additional 13 per cent of West Bank territory.

The senior US official said the Palestinians run the risk of squandering a potential territorial gain by pushing the statehood issue now. Acquiring territory would mean a lot more to the Palestinians than the issuance of declarations that could make Israel dig in its heels, the official suggested.

Earlier Friday, State Department spokesman James P. Rubin said American opposition to unilateral actions by Israel and the Palestinians has been made clear to both sides.

BRIEFLY

- 1 killed in jet crash in Siberia:** A military MIG-29 jet crashed Friday just minutes after take-off in the Siberian region of Chita, killing the pilot, Itar-Tass reported yesterday, AP reports from Moscow.
- Fire kills 6 in Argentina:** Four girls and two boys died early Friday morning when their house on the outskirts of the Argentine capital, Buenos Aires, caught fire, police said, Xinhua reports from Buenos Aires.
- AIDS victims on rise in Vietnam:** Nearly 300 persons died of AIDS in Vietnam over the past week, an indication that the deadly virus is rapidly spreading in the country, officials said Saturday, AP reports from Hanoi.
- 7 Maoist guerillas killed in India:** Indian police have shot dead seven Maoist guerillas in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, the United News of India (UNI) reported yesterday, AP reports from New Delhi.
- 2 killed in blast in Australia:** Victoria state is fast running out of natural gas Saturday following a massive fire that killed two workers at the Esso gas plant and injured eight, AP reports from Melbourne.



Women from Iranian mobilisation forces take part in a parade in Tehran Friday marking the 18th anniversary of the outbreak of the war with Iraq. President Mohammad Khatami addressed crowds at the parade saying Iran was ready to use force if diplomacy failed to ease the tension with neighbouring Afghanistan. — AP/UNB photo

NATO planning to tame Belgrade

VILAMOURA, Portugal, Sept 26: For the first time, the NATO allies plan to take the offensive, readying bombers, missiles and warships to strike at a European neighbour that, at best, poses a vague threat to them, reports AP.

The Kosovo crisis has dragged them into something new: they are publicly planning for hostilities, rather than reacting to them.

During 45 Cold War years, NATO never said it would not be the first to strike. Nor did it say it would be. It kept Moscow at bay with the threat of massive retaliation to any attack, a strategy that worked so well the allies were able to reap a huge "peace dividend" when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.

"But that dividend has been paid out," Dutch Defence Minister Frank de Grave said Friday after a two-day NATO defence ministers meeting.

"NATO cannot go on endlessly cashing in that dividend. The world has not become a safer place. We still must invest in our security."

Against that backdrop, the

allies are preparing for air strikes on Yugoslavia unless President Slobodan Milosevic ends his attacks on ethnic Albanians struggling for independence in Kosovo. If necessary, NATO says it will attack with missiles and bombs, gradually intensifying the assault until Milosevic halts his offensive in Kosovo.

After months of contingency planning NATO knows its way around Yugoslavia. For one thing, sources say, military planners have identified 600 surface-to-air missile sites across the country that would be targeted and knocked out along with their command and control centres.

Although allied air strikes helped end the Bosnian war, Kosovo is different.

What we are really talking about here is a humanitarian disaster precipitated by the cold political calculus of an autocratic leader who has pursued a political strategy by military means against his own citizens," said Gen. Wesley K. Clark, supreme allied commander in Europe.

In Bosnia, NATO was a partner of the United Nations which passed 36 Security Council resolutions aimed at achieving peace.

NATO could have cited a half dozen of the resolutions to justify military action, particularly to retaliate for Bosnian Serb attacks against UN "safe havens" and to protect international peacekeepers.

Milosevic threatens no NATO troops or UN peacekeepers and considers Kosovo an internal matter. To him, the province was Serbia's heartland in the Middle Ages and integral part of the Serbian state since the Serbs regained independence from the Turks in 1878.

How then can NATO justify attacking a sovereign country that does not threaten it?

The United States and Germany lead a camp that argues that by bombing his own subjects, making almost 300,000 of them homeless and turning hundreds of villages into ghost towns, Milosevic undermines stability on NATO's eastern doorstep.

An allied attack, they say, is about defending Western values and interests and NATO needs no formal approval for that from the United Nations.

"The United States believes that no authority from the Security Council is necessary," Cohen told reporters here. "The credibility of NATO is on the line."

France and others are less sure. French Defense Minister Alain Richard, pressed by reporters, said: "It would be irresponsible to say what the next step is going to be."

The United States is confident, in the end, the allies won't let themselves be hog-tied by the need to get UN blessing for military action and thus run the risk of a Russian or Chinese veto.

This debate does not end with Kosovo. Next April, NATO leaders meet in Washington to approve a new overall post-Cold War strategic concept, one that will deal with new security risks and challenges just like the one the allies are facing from Belgrade today.

Off the Record

Medicinal secrets of black bear guts

SALEM, Oregon: A plain-spoken man who can't read or write, Wayne Smith is not your typical convert to the medicinal secrets found in the guts of a black bear, reports AP.

Yet the only thing that can soothe his throbbing headaches is the bile from the bear's jiggling, apple-green gallbladder.

"It's bitter as hell. You've got to pretty well grit your teeth to take it," said the 65-year-old retiree. "But I guarantee, it does make you feel better."

Growing demand for bear parts in Asia and in Chinatowns across the United States has fueled a bear poaching industry that has begun to tap the Pacific Northwest.

Smith was arrested two weeks ago, accused of being part of a ring that killed 28 black bears, gutted them for their gallbladders and left their carcasses for the vultures. In some cases, they also allegedly chopped off the saucer-sized, sharp-clawed paws.

In states where the sale of bear parts is illegal, authorities are using racketeering laws to ratchet up the penalties. Where a poaching arrest once brought no more than a year behind bars, the accused ringleader in the latest bust could get up to 20 years in prison if convicted.

A properly dried gallbladder can fetch hundreds if not thousands of dollars in Asia for its soothing effects on fevers and liver and blood diseases. A steaming bowl of bear paw soup serves up for more than \$100 in posh restaurants. Some paws end up as ash trays.