



Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, left, is greeted by French President Jacques Chirac upon his arrival at the Elysee Palace for talks and a luncheon Tuesday in Paris. — AP/UNB photo

Search on for missing Lankan passenger plane

COLOMBO, Sept 30: Military planes and naval gunboats searched Wednesday for a passenger plane which is believed to have crashed into the Indian Ocean off war-torn northern Sri Lanka with 55 people on board, officials said, reports AP.

The Lionair Antonov-24 disappeared minutes after taking off from Palali airport in Jaffna, on the northern tip of this Indian Ocean island, Tuesday afternoon. The plane had fuel for two hours, the flight to the capital takes less than an hour.

Lionair and the other commercial airline serving Jaffna, Monara Air, suspended their four daily flights from Colombo after the Lionair plane disappeared.

There was no distress signal from the seven-member crew, officials said. Four of the crew were Russian, they said, correcting earlier reports only two were Russian. All others aboard were Sri Lankan.

The search is being conducted between Jaffna and Mannar island 80 kilometres to the south.

US bombing Sudan demands compensation

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 30: The United States has no reason to oppose a fact-finding mission to a Sudanese pharmaceutical plant it bombed last month if it is certain that deadly chemical agents were being produced there, Sudan's foreign minister said on Tuesday, reports AP.

Mustafa Osman Ismail also said the United States must compensate Sudan for cost of the plant he said used to produce more than 50 per cent of his country's medicines.

"We wonder why the Americans are opposing the sending of a fact-finding mission if they are so sure of their own findings," Ismail said in a speech to the UN General Assembly.

The United States has said a UN investigation is unnecessary because US intelligence showed the El Shifa plant produced chemical weapons. US officials have cited a soil sample taken from the grounds of the complex that they say contained Empta, a precursor chemical for the deadly nerve agent VX.

East Timorese demand release of political prisoners

DILI, Indonesia, Sept 30: Hundreds of East Timorese protested Wednesday, demanding that the Indonesian government release all political prisoners from the former Portuguese colony including the jailed separatist guerrilla leader Xanana Gusmao, reports AP.

The demonstrators protested in front of a prison in Baucau, 100 kilometres (60 miles) east of the territorial capital, Dili.

Police said the protest broke up peacefully after an hour.

Gusmao was arrested in 1992 and is serving a 20-year term in Jakarta's Cipinang penitentiary.

Indonesia's President B J Habibie has released dozens of East Timorese prisoners since he replaced former authoritarian leader Suharto in May.

However, at least 89 political prisoners are still behind bars in East Timor, a former Portuguese colony invaded by Indonesia in 1975.

He wasn't angry, he was dead

MEXICO CITY, Sept 30: Margarita Sanchez's husband didn't speak to her for eight days, she thought he was angry, but he wasn't. He was dead, reports Reuters.

Cayetano Sanchez, 83, died in bed more than a week ago, but his wife slept next to him every night for eight days before she realised it, the Mexican government news agency Notimex reported on Tuesday, citing police sources.

State judicial police in the town of Juatusco, in the Gulf coastal state of Veracruz, reported finding Sanchez's partially decomposed body with the bed covers up to his neck, Notimex said.

The wife told authorities her husband did not speak to her for eight days even though she tried to speak to him without realising he was dead, Notimex said.

A preliminary investigation suggested Sanchez may have died of alcohol poisoning, Notimex said.

Lockerbie bombing trial Tripoli sets fresh conditions for surrendering 2 suspects

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 30: Libya told the United Nations Tuesday it would not surrender the two suspects accused in the 1988 Pan Am airliner bombing if they had to serve any jail terms in Scotland, reports Reuters.

While not flatly rejecting the new Anglo-American proposals for a trial in the Netherlands under Scottish law, Libya's UN Ambassador Abuzed Omar Dorda set several conditions that Washington and London have said were not negotiable.

Specifically, Dorda told the UN General Assembly that if the two were convicted for the midair bombing over Lockerbie, Scotland, their sentence could not be carried out in Scotland, that Libya should not be asked to provide witnesses for the prosecution and that any trial should be held as planned at a former US Military base in the Netherlands.

Libya, Dorda said, "Has accepted a trial of the two suspects before a Scottish court that would sit in the Netherlands and will not accept the setting of any conditions in relation to the implementation of that proposal."

"This is another dose of poison being slipped to us in the honey," he said.

Of all the objections, the venue for serving a jail term appears to be the main stumbling block with Dorda insisting any sentence be carried out in the Netherlands or in Libya.

Libya has raised such conditions before but their presentation to the assembly gives them added official weight.

The two suspects have been indicted in the United States and Britain for their role in the December 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight-103 in which 270 people were killed, including all 258 aboard and 11 on the ground.

In a policy switch last month the United States and Britain dropped their insis-

tence on a trial in either of the nations and challenged Libya to make good on its repeated offer to allow the suspects to be tried before a Scottish court in a third neutral country.

The Security Council endorsed the Anglo-American proposal and said sanctions imposed in 1992, and tightened in 1993, including an arms and air embargo would be suspended as soon as the two arrived in the Netherlands for trial.

Dorda told the assembly "Scottish law stipulated that sentences should be carried out in Scotland because Scottish courts sit in Scotland while this court will sit outside Scotland, thus, any sentence should also be carried out outside Scotland."

In response US representative Peter Buringale said Libya had violated sanctions more times since the new proposals were endorsed by the Security Council than before.

US House moves bill to provide aid to Iraqi opposition groups

WASHINGTON, Sept 30: Congressional Republicans introduced legislation Tuesday to provide nearly 100 million US dollars in military aid to Iraqi opposition groups trying to oust President Saddam Hussein, reports AP.

"It is time to move beyond political support to direct military assistance," said Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott in introducing the Iraq Liberation Act. A similar bill was introduced in the House by the chairman of the International Relations Committee.

The Clinton administration had no immediate response to the Republican move that would, in effect, openly commit the United States to overthrowing Saddam — a tack the administration has resisted. The bills have some Democratic support.

However, Lott said he consulted with the administration in drawing up the Senate measure.

In the past, the White House has opposed direct aid to the

Iraqi opposition on the grounds it could lead to further US obligations. The groups themselves also have preferred covert assistance that would not openly identify them as US-backed. The CIA aided Iraqi resistance groups after the Gulf War in 1991 and Congress earlier approved some humanitarian and political support for Kurdish and other opposition groups operating outside Iraq.

This is the 55th day without weapons inspections in Iraq," Lott said. The problem in Iraq is not the people of Iraq, the problem is Saddam Hussein. And we should have a direct, active, overt support of the opposition that would lead to the removal of Saddam Hussein from office."

He called for continued support for UN inspections and urged a bipartisan approach to US policy towards Iraq. At least one Democrat, Sen. Joseph Lieberman, had signed on as a co-sponsor of the bill.

On the House side, Rep. Benjamin Gilman said, "As the title suggests, the purpose of this legislation is to finally and irrevocably commit the United States to the removal from power of the regime headed by Saddam Hussein."

Both Lott and Gilman acknowledged that the task of removing Iraq's president would not be easy. Gilman said another war may be necessary to remove Saddam.

"But before we put American lives at risk in that faraway land, we have a duty to explore the alternatives. One alternative is to assist freedom-loving Iraqis," Gilman said.

The act, if approved by both houses and signed by President Bill Clinton, would allow the president to provide up to 97 million dollars in military aid to Iraqi opposition forces. Lott said the president could designate which groups received the assistance.

In addition, 2 million dollars could be provided for US broadcasts into Iraq.

Arafat accepts Israeli formula for 13 pc pullout from WB

WASHINGTON, Sept 30: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said Tuesday that he has accepted the Israeli formula for a 13 per cent withdrawal from the West Bank but stressed that vital security arrangements must still be hammered out, reports AFP.

We have accepted it, Arafat said following an hour long White House meeting with President Bill Clinton aimed at overcoming the final obstacles stalling a Mideast peace deal.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who met with Clinton and Arafat here Monday had initially agreed only to a nine or 10 per cent pullout but finally compromised by adding another three per cent in a nature reserve.

Arafat, who accepted the 13 per cent figure some time ago, first balked at Netanyahu's deal as the reserve is unpopulated and thus insignificant.

He told reporters here Monday he has agreed to that, but he also needed more details on security arrangements for the reserve where the Palestinians have control over civilian affairs but the Israelis have mili-

tary access. Arafat also emphasised the importance of clinching a peace deal, the goal of the new US effort to break the 18 month impasse in the process.

Peace is a Palestinian need, an Israeli need, an Arab need, he said.

Reuters from Jerusalem adds: A surge of unrest among Arabs in Israel spread to the historic city of Nazareth on Tuesday after the apparent failure on an attempt by Israeli President Ezer Weizman to ease tensions.

Weizman had earlier visited the northern town of Umm Al-Fah, where disturbances began on Sunday over land confiscations but residents said clashes with security forces had continued into the night there for a third straight day.

A municipal spokesman in Nazareth, hallowed to Christians as the place where Jesus grew up and Israel's largest Arab city, said protesters and pelted the local police station with stones and bottles after security forces raided two homes of a prominent family.

Schroeder sees no problem to appoint Greens leader as foreign minister

BONN, Sept 30: Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder said in an interview published Wednesday that he sees "no problem" in appointing Greens leader Joschka Fischer as foreign minister, despite his radical past, reports AP.

Schroeder told Die Woche Newspaper that Fischer, once a self-described "professional revolutionary" as part of the leftist student movement in the 1960s and '70s, has since developed into "an unusually rational political man."

"And in the face of the fact that this development process went amazingly fast, I see no problem" with him as foreign minister, Schroeder said.

The Social Democratic Chancellor-to-be was less clear about another controversial figure that he has invited to join his Cabinet.

The non-partisan computer entrepreneur Jost Stollmann served during the campaign as Shadow economic minister, often angering traditional Social

Democrats with his calls for cuts in the social welfare state.

Schroeder said Stollmann would certainly be part of his government, "but its structure will be determined after we clear up the questions of content in the coalition talks."

The Social Democrats, the strongest party after Sunday's election, open coalition talks with the ecology-minded Greens on Friday.

Schroeder was visiting Paris on Wednesday a trip meant to stress that German foreign policy will remain stable when he officially takes over from Chancellor Helmut Kohl.

The new government's defence policies could first be tested on the issue of German involvement in possible NATO strikes in the Serb-ruled Yugoslav republic of Kosovo.

The outgoing Cabinet was to meet Wednesday to confirm Germany's offer to offer 14 fighter planes to participate in possible NATO air strikes.

BRIEFLY

17 killed in Algeria violence Seventeen people were killed in an operation by security forces against an armed Islamic group near the village of Sid-Boubekeur near Saida in western Algeria, the state television reported in its nightly news bulletin Tuesday. AFP reports from Algiers. Fifteen Islamic militants were killed in the operation, along with two women they had been holding, the television said, adding that security forces had rescued a young girl who had been kidnapped by the group.

Violence claims 7 in Colombia: At least seven people died in Colombia's latest round of political bloodletting including a 65 year old widow killed in a grenade attack and a young police officer found tortured to death, authorities said on Tuesday. Reuters reports from Bogota. The widow identified as Aura Maria Pico, was killed when suspected leftist rebels hurled two hand grenades into a storefront in Barrancabermeja Colombia's main oil town, police said.

Ogata's term extended for 2yrs: The General Assembly agreed Tuesday to extend the term of the top UN refugee official for another two years, a vote of confidence for Sadako Ogata in the face of allegations her agency is losing millions of dollars because of mismanagement, AP reports from the United Nations.

The 71-year-old Japanese native has headed the UN High Commissioner for Refugees since 1991. Her position will be extended by two years, until Dec 31, 2000.

Earthquake hits Tibet: An earthquake measuring 5.5 hit Tibet on Wednesday but there were no reports of injuries or damage, the state-run Xinhua News Agency reported. AP reports from Beijing.

The quake hit at 10:20 am (0229 GMT) in Xainza County, about 300 kilometers (200 miles) northwest of Lhasa, the capital of the region.

Flooding kills 2 in Mexico: Heavy rains battered a wide swath of Mexico on Tuesday, killing at least two people and provoking emergency measures in Mexico City, AP reports from Mexico City.

In the Chiapas capital of Tuxtla Gutierrez, floodwaters swept away a taxi and another car Tuesday. The taxi passenger, an unidentified woman, was found dead, while the cab driver and a passenger from the second car were missing, the government news agency Notimex reported.

Russian kidnapped in Chechnya: A member of the Russian government mission in Chechnya has been kidnapped in the breakaway southern territory, officials said Wednesday. AP reports from Moscow.

Akmal Saidov, a bureaucrat at the mission, was kidnapped after attending a public rally Tuesday in the Chechen capital Grozny, the Interfax news agency reported.

Quake rattles Belgrade An earthquake shook Belgrade and other parts of Yugoslavia early Wednesday, shutting off electricity temporarily, rattling buildings and sending frightened residents into the streets, AP reports from Belgrade.

There were no reports of deaths or serious injuries.

Opposition parties condemn police brutality on Anwar

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 30: Opposition parties condemned the government Wednesday over allegations by ousted deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim of police brutality, while Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad hinted Anwar's wounds might be self-inflicted, reports AP.

Anwar may have intentionally hurt himself to derive public sympathy, the national news agency, Bernama, quoted Mahathir as saying.

"It's not impossible because he will get plenty of mileage if he showed he was abused by police," Mahathir told reporters.

Anwar told a court Tuesday that he was punched and a slapped until he fell unconscious on the first night in captivity on Sept 20 when he was arrested under a harsh security provision.

When he appeared at another

court on Wednesday, he repeatedly took off his glasses to dab the area around his left eye that is still black with blood clots.

"All Malaysians are asking how they could be safe when former deputy prime minister could be brutally assaulted while in police custody," said Lim Kit Siang, the leader of the opposition Democratic Action Party.

The Malaysian People's Party, another opposition group, called on Mahathir to guarantee that physical and psychological force would not be used against Anwar.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International has called for an investigation into allegations of police brutality against detained opposition activists, including ousted deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim. The US State Department also expressed displeasure.

Minister Didier Munguti told The Associated Press that troops from other countries will soon follow to help fight rebels trying to oust Kabila from power in Africa's third largest country. Although he did not give details, other unconfirmed reports said 1,000 Chadian soldiers had been dispatched.

They join forces from Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia which were recruited by Kabila within weeks after the rebel war began in early August. Sudan has denied allegations of intervening on Kabila's behalf, despite claims made by the rebels.

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Former Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev poses for a picture with youths dressed in traditional Sardinian costumes, after participating in a live internet conference in Cagliari, Sardinia, Tuesday. — AP/UNB photo

Troops retake key town in N Lanka

COLOMBO, Sept 30: Sri Lankan government troops captured the key northern town of Mankulam Wednesday after a bloody one-year siege, military officials said, reports AP.

Tamil Tiger guerrillas withdrew from the battered town of 24.5 kilometres north of Colombo, the Sri Lanka capital, as government troops encircled it.

The military said it killed 477 rebels and lost more than 262 soldiers in highway battles — the heaviest fighting this year. This includes more than 100 rebels and 62 soldiers killed in fresh fighting near Mankulam on Tuesday, the military said in the statement. Another 300 soldiers were wounded.

The military first reached the outskirts of Mankulam from the south last October. Since then, government troops trying to surround the town have had to fight inch by inch through a rain of mortar and artillery fire from guerrillas in

the north of Mankulam. The rebels claim that they captured Kilinochchi and the town of Paranthan further north which lie on the northernmost stretch of a 70-kilometre (45 mile) highway. The government says it still controls parts of the towns.

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Off the Record

Dinosaur eggs for sale! NEW DELHI: Rare and priceless dinosaur eggs are going for a song in some remote Indian villages, a newspaper reported here.

The prehistoric eggs are available — under cover — for anything between 2,000 rupees (\$48) to 20,000 rupees (\$476) in some interior tribal villages in the western state of Gujarat. Ever since scientists authenticated the presence of dinosaur eggs last year in Gujarat's Jhalod and Dahod regions, about 180 km east of state capital Gandhinagar, these genuine remnants of the Jurassic age are slowly vanishing at a nominal price, reported The Indian Express on its front page, says IANS.

A large number of paleontologists, research students, curious foreigners and antique dealers have been visiting the tribal villages in the region in search of the historical treasure.

For the poor tribals of the region, these eggs have served as religious icons for ages and are worshipped in several temples. But in just one year, the dinosaur eggs have regularly been missing from these temples.

"There were two foreigners last month who visited these villages and reportedly got some eggs for large sums of money," a villager was quoted as saying.

The local tribal residents fear that a few among themselves were acting as middlemen for undercover traders.

Although state Geology and Mining Minister Narottam Patel was not fully aware of the problem, government officials, the paper said, were in the know.

District Collector Elias Ibrahim Kalashya and Superintendent of Police KLN Rao admitted to receiving information regarding the theft of the eggs. Both claimed they were working towards a concrete plan to curb the menace.

"I admit the eggs in the Dahod areas have not been taken care of," said Geology and Mining Commissioner HK Das.

Das said that precautions for the safety of the dinosaur eggs would be similar to those taken for the security of the Jurassic graveyard in Rahloli village of Gujarat's Kheda district, 75 km south of Gandhinagar.



A model wears a razor blade dress by British designer Andrew Grouves during his fashion show in London Tuesday. The show was the last of London Fashion Week, where designers displayed their Spring/Summer 1999 collections. — AP/UNB photo

Huge wave of energy from distant star hits Earth's atmosphere

WASHINGTON, Sept 30: A burst of radiation from a distant star smashed into the Earth's upper atmosphere last month with enough energy to power civilisation for a billion years, astronomers say, reports AP.

The immense wave of energy, the most powerful ever recorded from beyond the sun, caused at least two satellites to shut down briefly, but it reached the Earth's surface at a strength equal only to a typical single dental X-ray.

"We've been monitoring things like this for 30 years and we've never seen anything like this before," Kevin Hurley, a research physicist at the University of California, Berkeley, said Tuesday at a NASA news conference.

The burst of gamma and X-ray radiation struck the Earth over the Pacific Ocean at night on August 27 and was so powerful that it temporarily ionized

the upper atmosphere just as the sun does in the daytime, said Hurley.

Seven scientific satellites, five in orbit of the Earth, one approaching an asteroid far beyond, and one near the orbit of Jupiter, all detected the massive eruption. Hurley said the burst was so intense that two of the satellites were forced to shut down to protect their electronics.

However, the energy was largely absorbed by the upper atmosphere and only a minuscule amount of radiation reached the Earth's surface. It posed no hazard to life, Hurley said.

The eruption came from a neutron star, called SGR1900+14, in the constellation Aquila some 20,000 light years away. A neutron star is the collapsed core left after a massive star explodes. A light year is about 6 trillion miles (9.5 trillion kilometers).

Astronomers said it is extremely rare for such a distant stellar explosion to have any effect on Earth, attesting to the immensity of the energy release.

They estimated that the energy, if captured and put to use, could power all of the Earth's energy needs for a billion billion years — that is one billion periods of one billion years.

"In this five-minute-long flash we saw as much energy as there will be coming from the sun for the next 300 years," said Hurley. "If we could harness this energy we would have enough power to power every city, every village, every light bulb until the end of the universe and far beyond."

The source star already was being studied because it is one of four known members of a class of stellar objects called "soft gamma ray repeaters." These are neutron stars that put out steady flashes of gamma rays.

But the extreme energy burst last month also suggests the object is a magnetar, a weird type of star first suggested by astrophysicists Robert Duncan of the University of Texas, Austin, and Christopher Thompson of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

The dramatic proof of the star's existence, said Cornell University astronomer Jim Cordes, "is a triumph for theoretical astrophysics."

Duncan said at the news conference that magnetars are rapidly spinning neutron stars that have created a magnetic field far greater than any other known.

He said the magnetic field around the star is so powerful that from more than 100,000 miles (160,000 kilometers) away "it could erase the magnetic strip on your credit card and such the keys out of your pocket."

Duncan said the energy burst

probably occurred when the magnetic field ripped apart the one-mile (1.6-kilometer) thick metal crust of the star, releasing an immense eruption of X-rays and gamma rays. This radiation is not optically visible, but it can be detected by instruments on satellites.

Magnetars are extremely dense objects, containing one and a half times the mass of the sun in an area just 12 miles (20 kilometers) across, he said.

"A tablespoon of material from this star would weigh as much as an aircraft carrier," said Duncan.

Approaching a magnetar would not be healthy, the astronomer noted.

X-rays erupting from the star would kill from a distance. As one got closer, there would be lethal levels of electrons and anti-electrons, in addition to immense heat.

It is not, said Duncan, "a good place to go."