

International

40 Hindu devotees feared drowned in Bihar

NEW DELHI, Oct 2: At least 40 Hindu devotees were feared drowned after an overcrowded boat capsized in the northern Indian state of Bihar, newspapers said today, reports AFP.

Voting begins in Australia today

UNDATED, Oct 2: Some 12 million eligible voters among Australia's population of 18 million will go to the polls Saturday in a national parliamentary election, reports AP.

Prime Minister John Howard's governing conservative coalition, composed of his urban-based Liberal Party and the Rural National Party.

Howard is running on his management of the economy, growing at about 3 per cent while most of Asia is in recession, and on the need for tax reform. He wants to introduce a 10 per cent goods and services tax.

Kim Beazley's Labor Party, which was ousted by Howard's conservatives in 1996 after 13 years in power. Beazley is promising no goods and services tax if his party is elected, and is also offering more modest income tax cuts targeted at Labor's working class constituents.

Labor has also promised to create 500,000 jobs in its first three-year term.

The conservatives and Labor have been attracting about 43 per cent each in neck-and-neck polls throughout the campaign.

Violence marks strikes in Ecuador

GUAYAQUIL, Ecuador, Oct 2: Four deaths, bomb blasts and looting marked a day of strikes and protests in Ecuador on Thursday against the government's belt-tightening economic measures, reports AFP.

A security guard was killed in Guayaquil during a shootout between police and protesters, and a police officer died in a bomb explosion in Protejovje.

The security guard died in a hospital after he was shot in the neck during a shootout between police and protesters trying to flatten car tires to halt traffic, an official told AFP.

A short time later, officials said a police officer died and two others were injured in a blast at a police station in Protejovje, 240 km southwest of Quito.

Five held for planning protest in Irian Jaya

JAKARTA, Oct 2: Police have arrested five people on charges of planning a pro-independence protest in Irian Jaya, an Indonesian province on New Guinea Island, reports AP.

The five were detained Wednesday night in Jayapura, the provincial capital of Irian Jaya, about 2,300 miles (3,700 kilometers) east of Jakarta, the official Antara news agency reported.

It quoted Brig. Gen. Hotman Siagian, chief of the local police, as saying the five have been formally detained as suspects.

Among them were Don Flasi, secretary of the local development planning agency, and priest Agustinus Ansanay.

Siagian said police also have summoned a number of people including Martinus Weimon, chairman of the student senate of the state-run Cendrawashi University, for interrogation.

Siagian did not rule out possible interrogation of Yoris Raweyal, an Irianese member of the People's Consultative Assembly who allegedly masterminded a plan to hold protests Thursday and Friday.

Security personnel had tightly guarded some strategic places in the provincial town since Wednesday, Antara said.

Indonesia took over the former Dutch colony that covers the western portion of New Guinea Island in 1963 and named it Irian Jaya.

Butler warns against premature claims on nerve gas UNSCOM shared information on Iraqi disarmament with Israel

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 2: The top UN weapons inspector on Thursday confirmed UN cooperation with Israel in disarming Iraq, in an admission which handed Baghdad a propaganda victory, reports AFP.

Responding to reports in the Washington Post and Israeli media about the sharing of sensitive information on Iraqi disarmament with Israel, UN Special Commission chairman Richard Butler said that it was among the 50 member states cooperating with UNSCOM.

At a news conference here, Butler said: "We have had such cooperative relations with 50 member states, that's almost one third of UN membership. Israel is one of them."

But he added that it was UNSCOM policy "not to go into the details of that cooperation, to respect the confidentiality."

The Washington Post on Tuesday detailed Israeli assistance provided to UNSCOM, and reported that the UN weapons inspectors shared intelligence with the Israelis from US spy planes on loan to UNSCOM.

According to the Post, many of the best leads on concealed Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and on Iraq's biological weapons programme have come from the Israelis.

The reports about the extent of UNSCOM cooperation with Israel have undermined the agency's neutrality as a UN body, and provided Iraq with a new opportunity to claim that the weapons inspectors are working for US and Israeli intelligence services.

"UNSCOM's lies and allegations are dictated by Zionists and Americans," the Iraqi ruling Baath Party's daily Ath-Thawra said on Thursday.

Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz on Thursday wrote to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to protest the reports in the Post and in the Israeli Haaretz newspaper, and asked for an official investigation.

UN sources said that the letter was being translated from Arabic on Thursday.

AP adds: The chief UN weapons inspector warned Thursday against making "premature claims" about results of European laboratory tests looking for traces of the deadly nerve agent VX in Iraqi missile warheads.

Diplomatic sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said earlier this week that the completed Swiss tests had turned up negative. French tests were incomplete and inconclusive, they said.

Richard Butler said much of the speculation this week about the results was untrue. French confirmation that Iraq had successfully loaded VX into missile warheads would seriously jeopardise Iraq's efforts to have sanctions lifted.

Butler's statement came as a high-level Iraqi delegation led by Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz was in New York for talks on resolving the latest standoff caused by Iraq's decision on August 5 to halt cooperation with UN arms inspectors.

In June, Butler confirmed that a US Army laboratory at the Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland detected the presence of degraded VX on fragments of missile warheads destroyed after the Gulf War. A few drops of the colourless, odorless gas can kill in minutes.

The results contradicted Iraq's claim that it never succeeded in producing VX in a form that could be loaded into missile warheads.

France elects new Senate head: Christian Poncelet of President Jacques Chirac's conservative Rally for the Republic Party was voted the new head of the French Senate early Friday, AP reports from Paris.

Poncelet, 69, replaces Rene Monory of the centrist Union for French Democracy. Monory, who has headed the Senate since 1992, was seeking re-election, but pulled out of the race after trailing behind Poncelet after the first round of voting.

Poncelet, 69, won 189 votes in a third and final round of voting, beating his main rival, Claude Estier of the Socialist Party, who mustered 93 votes. He is senator for the Vosges region in eastern France. He was elected after nine hours of debate and voting by the country's senators.

Quebec singer commits suicide: Pauline Julien, a popular singer who often performed at rallies of Quebec's separatist movement, committed suicide after suffering a lengthy illness, her family said Thursday. She was 70, AP reports from Montreal.

Among those paying tribute to her was Quebec's separatist premier, Lucien Bouchard. "She was a woman of great passion," he said. "She will live on in Quebecers' memory forever."

Julien's niece, Marie-Helene Guay, said the ailing singer left a note to explain why she decided to take her own life Wednesday night. Friends said she had suffered from aphasia, an ailment that impaired her ability to speak.

Floods kill 8 in Liberia: Heavy rains triggered flooding in northwestern Liberia, forcing more than 5,000 people to flee their homes in recent weeks to escape rising waters, AP reports from Monrovia.

At least eight people have died in the floods and about 160 homes have been washed away, rescue workers were quoted as saying in Thursday's Inquirer newspaper. The worst of the flooding affected about 20 villages in Grand Capemout County near the border with Sierra Leone, the newspaper reported.

4 Ukrainian buried alive in coal mine: Four Ukrainian miners were buried on Thursday when 200 tonnes of coal and rock crashed down into a gallery at a pit in the Donbass region, IITAR-Tass reported on Friday, AFP says from Moscow.

The rockfall at the Enakyevo mine trapped the miners as they were working at the coal face, despite several hours of frantic efforts, rescue workers have so far managed only to clear 10 metres (33 feet) of the 25 metres of gallery blocked by the cave-in. Rescue work was continuing but IITAR-Tass said there was little chance of finding the men alive.

6 held in ROK for leaking data: Four military officers and two arms brokers were arrested on Friday on charges of leaking classified information on South Korea's arms procurement programmes, AP reports from Seoul.

The officers were accused of providing arms dealers Shin Dong-yoon, 56, and Kim Jang-hwan, 51, with details of Seoul's plans to buy surveillance aircraft, new fighter planes and air-to-surface missiles. The Defence Ministry called the officers "colonel-level" but declined to provide further details pending an investigation of other military officers and arms dealers.

Shin and Kim sent the classified data to their US-based business partner, Linda Kim, 41, between February 1997 and last March, ministry officials said.

Hurricane Georges causes \$36m in damage to Mobile, Gulf Shores

MOBILE, Alabama, Oct 2: Hurricane Georges caused at least \$36 million in damage to Mobile and Gulf Shores, where there was major damage to 251 homes and 70 businesses, officials said, reports AP.

Meanwhile, in Mississippi, thousands of homes were still without power and many residents said Thursday it would be weeks before they could reach their flooded homes.

As Alabama residents picked up storm debris and watched swollen rivers empty toward the Gulf, Gov. Fob James and disaster teams toured areas hit by Georges.

US warns DPRK against tests, missile exports

WASHINGTON, Oct 2: The United States warned North Korea of "very negative consequences" Thursday if that country further tests or exports long-range missiles, reports AP.

The warning was issued by State Department spokesman James P. Rubin as US and North Korean officials opened two days of missile talks in New York.

Rubin said North Korea's August 31 launch of a missile to orbit a small satellite was another step forward in North Korea's missile development programme and it is a matter of "deep concern" to the United States.

"A further launch of long-range missiles or transfers of such missiles would pose a threat to our interests, to our allies and could spark an arms race in missiles in the region," he said.

"We intend to make quite clear to the North Koreans that, if they were to proceed with additional launches or were to export such missiles, there will be very negative consequences for our policy."

Settlement of Paula Jones lawsuit Clinton's lawyers raise offer

WASHINGTON, Oct 2: President Bill Clinton's lawyers have increased their offer to settle the Paula Jones lawsuit to 700,000 dollars from 500,000, dollar but her lawyers are holding out for one million dollar, the Washington Post reported today, says Reuter.

The newspaper quoted sources close to the case as saying that negotiations between the two sides were foundering in part because Clinton was furious. Jones' lawyers had claimed that any payment would amount to an implicit admission of his guilt.

David Pyke, one of Jones' Dallas-based lawyers, refused to comment on the Post report.

White House spokesman Jim Kennedy also had no comment on the report. Clinton's personal attorney, Robert Bennett, could not be reached for comment.

White House deputy counsel Bruce Lindsey said on Sunday the two sides were discussing a possible settlement of Jones' sexual harassment lawsuit. But if Clinton agreed to pay Jones money to settle the case, this would not signify an admission of wrongdoing, he said.

The White House is keen to settle the Paula Jones lawsuit so it can focus solely on likely impeachment hearings in Congress about Clinton's admitted improper relationship with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

But the Post, quoting people monitoring the talks, said both sides had grown "increasingly pessimistic that they will be able to find an amicable deal" and the next few days were considered critical.

Clinton's affair with Lewinsky was first unearthed by Jones' first set of attorneys as they attempted to show a pattern of behaviour by the president.

In his report to Congress, independent counsel Kenneth Starr accused Clinton of lying under oath in the Jones case when he denied having a sexual relationship with Lewinsky.

Jones is using that assertion — and Clinton's admission that he misled people about the affair — to try to revive the case, which was dismissed in April.

Meanwhile, in New York, multimillionaire Abe Hirschfeld said he wanted to offer Jones one million dollar to settle the suit.

Lewinsky affair with Clinton Democrats trying to limit scope of Congressional probe

WASHINGTON, Oct 2: With thousands more documents detailing President Bill Clinton's tryst with Monica Lewinsky set for release Friday, Democrats are struggling to limit the scope of the Congressional probe against Clinton, reports AP.

On Thursday, the Democrats, who face a near-impossible task in preventing the Republican-ruled House of Representatives from opening impeachment proceedings against the president, made their intention clear.

"This cannot be a never-ending fishing expedition," said John Conyers, the senior Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, which is to decide next week whether to refer the explosive matter to the full 435-member body.

"We cannot commit all the country to a process that could last for months, for years," he said.

The Democrats will propose a resolution to limit the investigation of the Lewinsky's scandal and attempt to set time limits on hearings, Conyers said.

The proposal was unveiled Friday but Conyers said the investigation should not last longer than four to six weeks or it could risk poisoning US public life.

Some Democrats want the House to move directly to a censure vote against the president for his role in the sex-and-lies scandal as a way to avoid impeachment proceedings.

But the Republican leadership has made it clear that it intends to follow the open-ended precedent set by the judiciary committee in 1974 when it began proceedings against president Richard Nixon.

"It would be irresponsible for us to establish artificial limits on the enquiry," said Charles Canady, a Republican member of the judiciary committee.



US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton sits with pre-school children as they sing her a song while visiting the CODICEN School in Canelones, Uruguay on Thursday. Earlier the First Lady was in Chile attending a conference of first ladies from around the Americas. — AP/UNB photo



Children in Fonds Verrettes look around the area where their house once stood, after it was destroyed by Hurricane Georges Wednesday. The village was almost totally wiped out by floodwaters, killing some 86 people. — AP/UNB photo

Off the Record

Do you know what Clinton and Pamela have in common?

LONDON: What do President Bill Clinton and buxom starlet Pamela Anderson have in common?

They are the most mentioned man and woman on the Internet, according to the 45th edition of the Guinness Book of Records, which is published on Friday. Its 336 pages catalogue natural wonders as well as stories which celebrate human endurance, foolhardy feats and obsessive behavior, reports AP.

Originally designed for British pub owners who wished to "turn the heat of argument into the light of knowledge," the book first appeared in 1955 and has since sold more than 80 million copies.

Among the weird and wacky items in the latest edition: — Ten thousand mourners turned out for the funeral of a canary named Jimmy, who was laid to rest in a tiny white coffin. That happened in New Jersey in 1920.

— A Thai man spent 24,000 pounds (40,800 dollars) on a wedding for his cats. The "bride" and "groom" arrived for the ceremony in a Rolls-Royce car and a helicopter, both animals dressed in pink satin.

— The world's longest kiss — 29 hours. — The world's longest lawn mower ride — 3,366 miles (5,400 kms) across 19 American states last summer by 12-year-old Ryan Tripp.

The most likely place to be killed by a snake — Sri Lanka, with an average of 800 people dying each year. The Guinness Book of Records claims to be a record-breaker itself — the best-selling copyrighted book in the world.

100% Monica-free

WASHINGTON: Escape the Clinton-Lewinsky drone. Tune to a Seattle radio station that has declared itself a Clinton-free zone. Read a news release stamped "100% Monica-Free." Pick up a newspaper from Portugal where news organisations are voluntarily censoring coverage of the president's private life, reports AP.

Even Monica Free, a homemaker from Waterloo Iowa, hopes the news will soon reflect her name.

"It's a mess. People are weary of it all," Mrs Free says. "I don't like it at all."

At isolated sports around the country and the world, the plea is being heard.

In Seattle, KJR 95.7 FM, a classic hits station, has banned the world "Clinton" from the air. When a caller or disc jockey slips, a game-show buzzer sounds, a cash register clanks "ch-ching" and the radio station drops 10 dollars into a children's charity fund. The balance is 370 dirts.

"We're going to do it until he's out of office," said programme director Gary Bryan.

We just decided that everybody knows what's going on about the news so let's just be the one place in the world where people can go and not hear about it.

Sometimes, though, it's hard to go cold turkey.

At the Country Music Association awards recently in Nashville, host Vince Gill got a laugh when he reassured the crowd at the Grand Ole Opry that they could escape the Lewinsky story for the next three hours.

But later in the show, he slipped and nominated the much-profiled Ms Lewinsky for the annual Horizon Award, recognising progress in one's career.

Sometimes, the Monica-free zone is unintentional.

Bob Brewin, a writer for Federal Computer Week, didn't mention the affair for six months. But then in June, he wrote that the Lewinsky hoopla had delayed the nomination and confirmation of a senior Pentagon official.

"Ah, I finally managed to get her name into this newspaper, which has, until now, been one of the few Monica-free zones on the planet," he wrote.

Desperate desire to become grandma

COLD SPRINGS, Nevada: A woman whose 19-year-old son killed himself while playing Russian roulette wants so badly to become a grandmother that she had sperm removed from him while he was on life-support, reports AP.

The young man's mother, Pamela Reno, a 38-year-old cocktail waitress, wants to find an egg donor and a surrogate mother to become artificially inseminated and carry the fetus. She had her dead son's sperm frozen in the meantime.

The sperm was taken from her only child, Jeremy, at a hospital in Reno last Friday. He died later that day.

"I told them I have to get my son's sperm. It's the only way I can be a grandma," said Ms. Reno, who is single.

Dr. Russell Foulk, who helped remove the sperm, said it won't be used until a number of ethical and legal issues are addressed.

"We're kind of in new ground here," Foulk said, referring to the harvesting of sperm from the dying. "We've not had the ability to do this until recently. I've heard of scattered reports. It is a request that is becoming more and more frequent among transplant physicians."

Foulk, a specialist at the Northern Nevada Fertility Center in Reno, said the matter will probably be taken up by a hospital ethics panel. He said he will also discuss the ramifications with Ms. Reno in more detail.

"Ideally you want to find out the intent — find out the guardianship of who owns the sperm and most importantly, what the plans are to do with the sperm," he said.

UNSC condemns massacres of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 2: The Security Council has condemned the recent massacres of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, but has not assigned blame and added no new legal backing for any NATO action in the southern Serb province, reports AP.

The council issued a statement Thursday, hoping to increase pressure on Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic to stop the crackdown on ethnic Albanians, who are seeking independence for Kosovo. The province is 90 per cent ethnic Albanian.

Attempting to head off threatened NATO attacks, Yugoslav's Serb leadership offered on Thursday to let foreign experts investigate the massacres — a key demand of the

council. But it wasn't clear if the gesture would be enough. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright declared that NATO "is now prepared to act" militarily against Serbian positions after briefing nearly the entire US Senate on the escalating tensions.

The international outrage was sparked after diplomats, journalists and human rights workers reported seeing as many as 18 mutilated bodies in the forests around the Kosovo town of Obrinja earlier this week. Residents in the nearby town of Golubovac reported that Serb forces surrounded a group of refugees on Saturday, separated 13 men and shot them.

The Serbs have denied involvement in the massacres.

Serb Deputy Premier Vojislav Seselj claimed on Thursday that Western nations staged the massacre "to push through ... a NATO attack decision in the UN Security Council."

Serbian security forces are trying to crush ethnic Albanian separatists in Kosovo.

The council expressed "considerable alarm" that fighting was continuing despite a UN demand last week for a ceasefire — but did not single out the Serbs.

Council members "strongly condemned those responsible for the atrocities and called upon President Milosevic and the government in Belgrade immediately to investigate and identify and punish those responsible."

LTTE raises flag over ex-army HQs in Killinochchi

COLOMBO, Oct 2: Tamil Tiger guerrillas have raised their flag over the former army headquarters in Killinochchi and urged government troops who survived this week's carnage to surrender and save themselves, defence sources said today, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been making repeated surrender calls in Sinhala, the language of most soldiers, over loudspeakers, they said.

The announcements were interspersed with revolutionary Tamil songs, lauding the rebels' campaign for an independent state in the northeast in which more than 55,000 people have died since 1972.

Killinochchi town and the large military base there fell to the rebel fighters Tuesday after three days of fierce fighting that left, according to official figures, more than 400 soldiers and 520 guerrillas dead.

However, defence sources said more than double that number of troops had been killed and the LTTE put the figure at more than 1,000. The rebels admitted losing only 240 of their fighters.

The LTTE surrender announcement assured government soldiers they would not be harmed and would be handed over to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).



Foreign Minister of Iran Kamal Kharrazi, left, shakes hand with United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan during a meeting on Thursday at the UN. — AP/UNB photo

Sihanouk delays trip to China to help ease crisis

PHNOM PENH, Oct 2: King Norodom Sihanouk has delayed plans to leave Cambodia for medical treatment in Beijing and will instead fly to Phnom Penh next week, a government spokesman said on Friday, reports AP.

A letter released by the Royal Palace confirmed that Sihanouk and Queen Monineath will leave his residence in the northwestern city of Siem Reap and arrive in Phnom Penh on Monday.

Diplomats in Phnom Penh said the king's trip to the capital is probably intended to spur Cambodia's politicians to hasten the pace of negotiations over forming a new working government.

Sihanouk's arrivals and departures from Cambodia are often seen as a barometer of his opinion of the political situation, which has been frequently wracked by violence.

Palace sources reported this week that the king would fly to Beijing on Monday to receive medical treatment from his Chinese doctors.

The 75-year-old monarch suffers from a variety of illnesses. He was diagnosed with colon cancer in 1993, but it has since gone into remission.

Sihanouk's mediating efforts helped bring Cambodia's bitterly divided political factions to the bargaining table last month after street clashes broke out in Phnom Penh over the results of the July 26 national election.