

## 26 Iranian prisoners freed No breakthrough in talks between Taliban, UN

ISLAMABAD, Oct 18: A high level Taliban delegation led by the militia's chief spokesman Wakil Ahmad Saturday held talks with United Nations special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi on the militia's relations with Iran and the UN reports said, reports AFP.

The meeting, held in Islamabad, was a follow up to Wednesday's talks between the militia's supreme leader Mulla Mohammad Omar and the UN envoy in the Southern Afghan city of Kandahar, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) news agency said.

Details of the talks were not immediately available. Ahmed said another round of the UN-Taliban talks will be held later, but gave no date, AIP said.

Brahimi's mission to the Taliban headquarters in Kandahar was designed to ease tensions between the hardline militia and the Iranian government to ease tensions between the hardline militia and the Iranian government.

The militia Saturday released 26 Iranians following an understanding reached with Brahimi, AIP said.

The Pakistan-based private news service said Brahimi had promised to try to secure the release of Taliban prisoners held in Iran.

The detainees, who had been held in the southeastern Afghan town of Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold, arrived on an International Committee of the Red Cross plane and were immediately interrogated by Iranian authorities.

The released men then left the airport one at a time, with the first two telling reporters the Taliban had held them in a stable under "terrible hygienic conditions."

The Taliban agreed to release the detainees after the UN representative for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, gave the militia assurances that Iran would in turn free a number of Afghan national allegedly held by Tehran.

Brahimi, who is now in Pakistan, went to Kandahar after talks in Tehran and Islamabad to try to reduce tensions between Shite Muslim which backs the anti-Taliban opposition, and the Sunni Muslim militia which controls 90 per cent of Afghanistan.

## India against giving US observer status in SAARC

WASHINGTON, Oct 18: The U.S. has been lobbying intensely to obtain observer status in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), but India is strongly opposed to it suspecting a hidden agenda, according to Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar.

The minister, the point man for SAARC by virtue of Sri Lanka's current chairmanship, said India's opposition was quite understandable because New Delhi feared the U.S., if admitted as an observer, would try to politicise the forum and impose its non-proliferation and other agendas.

Kadirgamar, who was on an extended visit to the U.S., said: "The U.S. has put in a request for an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) and many of our SAARC countries are in favour, (but) one country, you might guess is not."

When pressed, he admitted the objections came from New Delhi. "India has certain apprehensions, naturally," he told India's Foreign News Service in an interview. "So they want to make sure that this (any MOU with the U.S.) will go only so far and no further, and it's perfectly understandable."

Kadirgamar said the "caution on the part of India is that this is a new creature (SAARC forging alliances with regional blocs and individual countries) and it should not lead to the camel and the tent kind of thing."

"With the U.S., everybody has to be careful. I don't know what their agenda is," he said. "If their agenda is economic co-operation, environment and things like that, then it is okay," he said. "But any question of nuclear tests and all this kind of nonsense — no, completely out."

In response to Washington's demarche to enter into an MOU with SAARC, Kadirgamar said he had informed U.S. officials that Sri Lanka "will see during our chair year what we can do to straighten that out."

"But I made it clear that they have to accept the position that no politics can come into SAARC," he emphasised. "It's economics and social issues or nothing. We don't want to be lectured..."

Kadirgamar claimed he had guaranteed India that if the U.S. is admitted, it would not be allowed to lecture. "I will tell them to their faces what they can do and what they can't do and that's exactly what I did," he added.

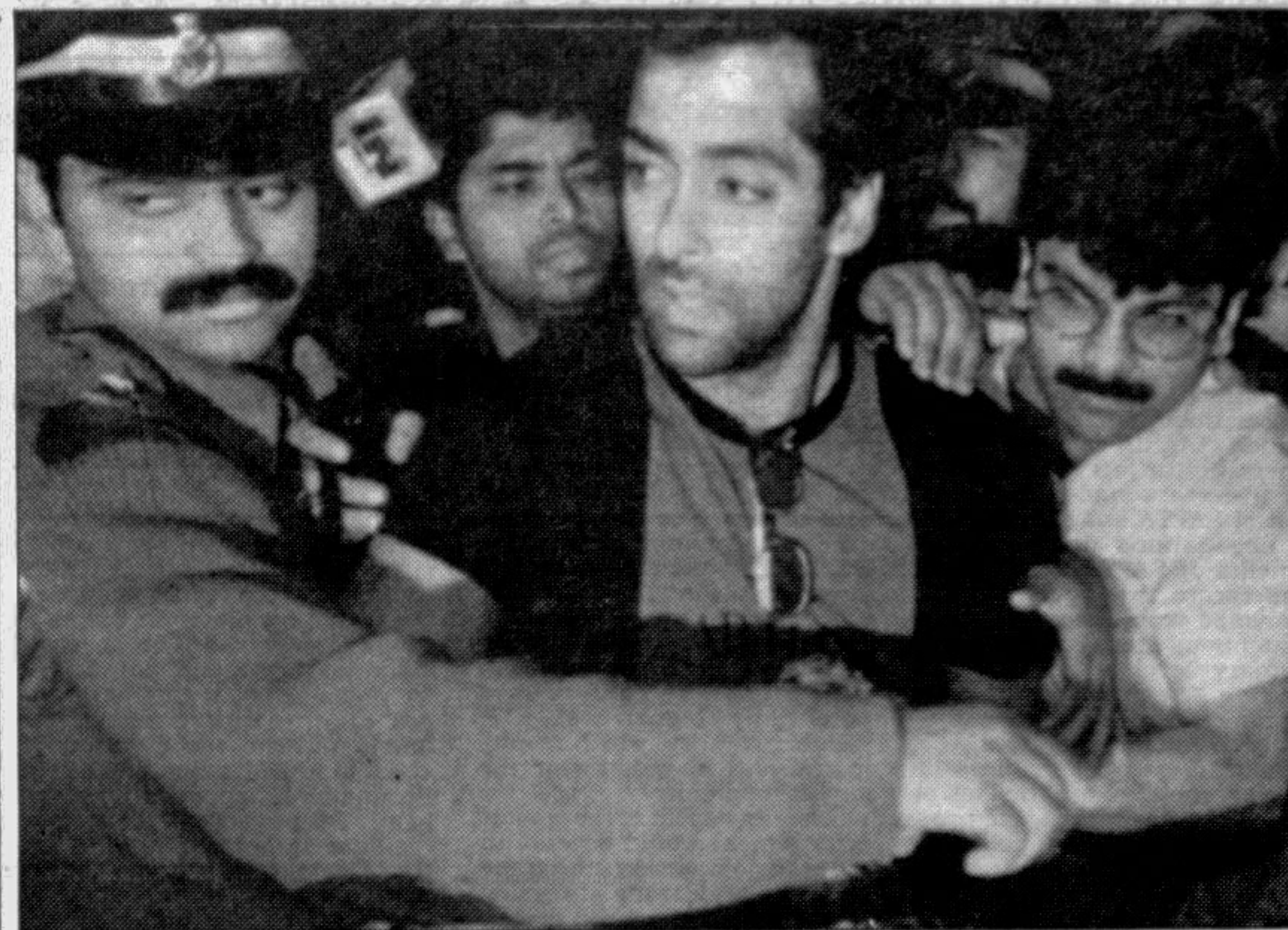
While in New York to attend the United Nations General Assembly session, Kadirgamar had met European Union (E.U.) and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) officials "and the significance of these meetings were that for the first time in our histories, they were at the political level."

He acknowledged that "the secretariats have met, but secretariats can't get going without political direction. They just meet and have a talk and do nothing. Nothing has happened. You can't blame them."

Kadirgamar said "unless you lift it and inject a degree of political commitment into it, nothing moves. That's what we did."

He noted that the meetings "were a clear manifestation of political commitment. We talked about a SAARC-E.U. Fund and that's on the table now and I will be going to Brussels at the end of October to pursue the negotiations."

Kadirgamar disclosed that the SAARC-E.U. Fund would be a replica of the SAARC-Japan Fund.



A policeman paves the way for Indian film star Salman Khan (centre) who arrived in Mumbai Saturday. The popular actor, who was arrested last week for hunting endangered species of antelope in a wildlife reserve in western India, was released on bail. Khan, who was ordered to pay a bail bond of 2,500 US dollars and to surrender his passport, will be tried for poaching and killing eight antelopes in two separate safaris, offences that carry a maximum sentence of seven years.

## Rushdie free to return home: Advani

NEW DELHI, Oct 18: Indian-born author Salman Rushdie, who has lived in hiding for almost a decade in Britain following an Iranian 'fatwa' (religious edict), is free to return home.

India's Home (Interior) Minister L.K. Advani told the Times of India newspaper that he would personally see to it that the writer does not have any visa problems.

Rushdie, whose book 'The Satanic Verses' was declared blasphemous of Islam in 1989 by then Iranian religious head Ayatollah Khomeini, has been in hiding ever since. Khomeini had also issued a 'fatwa', exhorting all Muslims to do their duty by killing him.

Though Iran lifted the fatwa in September, smaller groups in the Islamic country announced fresh rewards for his head.

"He is an outstanding writer and is welcome to return home," Advani told the newspaper. "There is no difficulty in his coming back to India." The Minister, claiming to be an ardent Rushdie fan, added that he would himself ensure that the author did not have any visa problems.

Rushdie has in earlier interviews expressed his displeasure at being treated as a pariah by his country of origin. India was the first country to ban 'The Satanic Verses' after Muslim organisations in the country raised objections to its allegedly anti-Islamic content.

However, there are no plans to revoke the ten-year-old ban on import of the book to India, Advani stressed.

Living under constant fear of being killed, on September 24 Rushdie breathed a sigh of relief when the Iranian government led by a moderate President Mohammad Khatami distanced itself from the 'fatwa'.

However, Rushdie's elation proved to be short-lived as Iranian fundamentalists, in a meeting in Tehran on Friday vowed to pursue the author and his publishers to the "end of the earth."



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## Gayoom reelected president for fifth term

COLOMBO, Oct 18: The Maldivians voted on Friday at a national referendum to re-elect president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom for an unprecedented fifth term in office, according to reports reaching here from Male today, reports Xinhua.

Gayoom won over 80 per cent of the voters during the elections, the reports said.

Under the Maldivian constitution, the citizens majlis (parliament) nominates a single candidate for president. This nomination is then placed before the electorate for the consideration of the people.

The 50-member people's majlis unanimously elected Gayoom as the sole candidate last month.

The elections department had set up 299 polling stations in various populated archipelago, a total of 126,128 voters, both men and women over 21-year old.

## Italy's new PM optimistic about forming govt

ROME, Oct 18: Italy's new leftwing Prime Minister, Romano Prodi, said Saturday he was optimistic about being able to form a government, apparently ending a week-long power vacuum in Rome, reports AP.

"The conditions have come together to move forward," D'Alema said after holding first-round talks with leaders across Italy's political spectrum aimed at establishing a government made up of communists and centre-right parties.

D'Alema, 49, head of the left democrats (DS) and the first former communist designated to hold power in Italy, was chosen Friday by President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, a day after acting prime minister Romano Prodi failed to win enough parliamentary support.

## Tariq Aziz accuses UN monitors in Iraq of spying

BAGHDAD, Oct 18: Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz has accused the remaining UN weapons inspectors in Iraq of spying and urged the UN Secretary-General to stop their "dangerous practices," the official Iraqi News Agency reported Saturday, reports AP.

In a letter to Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Aziz demanded an investigation into the practices of about 40 UN arms monitors who are still working in Iraq, according to the agency.

The agency did not say when the letter was sent and officials in Aziz's office could not be reached on the weekend.

Iraq has frozen spot inspections by UN arms monitors since August 5, effectively halting the search for its illegal long-range missiles and weapons of mass destruction.

The remaining 40 inspectors and their support staff of about 60 are allowed to visit only those weapons sites where the United Nations already has surveillance equipment installed.

Aziz wrote that even activities by these monitors border on espionage, the agency reported.

UN arms officials in Baghdad were not available for comment.

Aziz accused the monitors of trying to photograph troop movements, of asking for the names of Iraqis who hold high degrees, and of demanding an inventory of Iraq's water resources.

"Demanding special and new information about personnel, vital activities or strategic establishments closely linked to the security of the Iraqi people and its future (is an example) of these dangerous practices," Aziz wrote.

"There is no justification for getting information on all the water resources... Our conviction is that insistence on demanding such information is nothing but an act of espionage."

Iraq has long called for a halt to the UN inspections, saying it no longer possesses banned weaponry. But the inspectors' reports have accused the Baghdad government of withholding significant information.

The trade sanctions imposed on Iraq after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait will not be lifted until Baghdad shows it has eliminated its illegal arms.

## Landslide in Uttar Pradesh: 20 killed

NEW DELHI, Oct 18: At least 20 people were killed in an avalanche and a landslide in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported Saturday, reports AP.

Three Indian border guards were killed and four others injured Saturday when an avalanche engulfed their outpost in the upper reaches of Pithoragarh district, officials said.

The Indo-Tibetan border police organisation said the avalanche which followed a snowstorm also wiped out two camps of the paramilitary soldiers deployed on India's borders with China.

Heavy rains also lashed the resort state of Himachal Pradesh, killing two on Saturday, PTI said and added the higher reaches and mountain passes of the northern state were blocked with snow.

PTI also said that 12 members of an Indian road-building team were feared swept away by a landslide on Friday in the mountainous Chamoli district of Uttar Pradesh state.

A state government spokesman said a search for the missing workers was continuing despite bad weather and heavy rains across Chamoli.

## Mahathir fears people's wrath: Anwar Ibrahim

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 18: Malaysia's former No 2 leader said his release from detention under a harsh security law was prompted by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's fear of his countrymen's wrath and pressure from the international community, reports AP.

Anwar Ibrahim, the dismissed deputy prime minister who was arrested under Malaysia's harsh Internal Security Act, made the remark in a statement released from jail. He is awaiting trial to face a number of corruption and sex charges.

The statement was circulated by Anwar's wife, Azizah Ismail, late Saturday night. It was the first such statement issued since his arrest.

Anwar, 51, was taken into custody under the Internal Security Act on Sept. 20 after he organized mammoth rallies against the government. After 24 days in detention under the ISA, he was shifted to a regular jail cell where he has been permitted access to his lawyers and family.

The security, which allows for indefinite imprisonment without trial, had restricted such access.

The deposed deputy premier said Prime Minister Mahathir's government had acted to stem growing public sympathy for Anwar and ease pressure from abroad before Malaysia hosts a summit meeting next month of leaders from members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum.

"The plan was to get me out of ISA detention before APEC begins," Anwar Ibrahim said in the statement.

Malaysia's police chief, meanwhile, said more charges could be brought against Anwar, the Star newspaper said Sunday. Rahim Noor was quoted as saying that a probe into the activities of the dissident politician were ongoing.

Anwar's case drew international condemnation after he appeared in court with bruises and a black eye, and alleged he was a victim of police brutality.

Among those sympathetic to him were governments of several countries scheduled to attend the APEC summit meeting in Kuala Lumpur. The presidents of Indonesia and the Philippines have not yet confirmed their attendance.

Malaysia says the economic forum should not be politicized. Within Malaysia, protests have continued over Anwar's Sept. 2 dismissal and his subsequent arrest.

Defying a police order, Azizah Ismail joined thousands of protesters demanding Mahathir's resignation.

It was the first protest in which Azizah has participated since her husband was arrested last month after leading rallies.

## BRIEFLY



Cuban President Fidel Castro, right, points at his watch as he leaves a private meeting with Colombian President Andres Pastrana Saturday in Oporto, Portugal. Both leaders are in Oporto to attend the 8th Ibero-America summit. — AP/UNB photo

## 4 tribals shot dead in Assam:

Four tribals were shot dead by armed militants of a rival group in India's northeastern state of Assam, police said, Reuters reports from Guwahati.

Armed Bodo tribesmen gunned down four Santhals and injured a teenaged girl on Saturday at Athlabari near Sarfaguri in Kokrajhar district, 235 km west of the state capital. The victims had gone fishing in the River Sapkata from their government-sponsored refugee camp when they were attacked, police said.

## Typhoon Zeb claims 10 in Japan:

Ten people were killed, three were missing and at least 40 were injured after Typhoon Zeb swept through southern Japan and moved northward, police said yesterday, AFP reports from Tokyo.

Zeb, the first typhoon since 1990 to directly hit Japan, caused 286 landslides and flooded 4,562 houses in southern and central Japan. Police said seven bridges were washed away and nearly 146 houses were destroyed or partially damaged.

## Bus collision kills 14 in Brazil:

At least 14 people died and 45 were injured early Saturday when two buses collided head-on in Parana state in Brazil's southeast, federal traffic police said, AFP reports from Sao Paulo.

Heavy rains may have played a role in the crash, which took place around 2 AM (0400 GMT) on a stretch of highway between Guarapuava and Candi.

## US missionary killed in Russia:

An American Mormon missionary was killed and another seriously injured by a group of attackers in the eastern Russian city of Ufa in the Ural, the Itar-Tass agency said yesterday, AFP reports from Moscow.

The agency cited a communique from the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints.

## 4 die in Texas storm:

At least four people died and a young boy was missing on Saturday when a storm front swept across Texas, dumping up to 50 cm of rain and spawning several tornadoes, Reuters reports from San Antonio.

The monsoon-like rains turned rivers and creeks in central Texas into raging torrents and sent hundreds of residents scrambling to safety, officials said.

## Clinton signs two bills of \$250b

WASHINGTON, Oct 18: President Bill Clinton signed two bills on Saturday that gives the Pentagon 250 billion dollars to run the military for a year and affirmed US policy on defence matters, including funding proposals for Bosnian peacekeeping, reports Reuters.

Clinton complained, however, about language in the bill that could delay future troop deployment to other Balkan hotspots at a time when the United States and its NATO allies are threatening military action to punish the Serbs for their crackdown in Kosovo.

The Defence Department appropriations bills, signed by the President activates spending to run most military operations for fiscal year 1999, which began on Oct. 1. It includes a 3.6 per cent pay raise for military personnel, 951 million dollars for antimissile defence research, and 48 billion dollars to buy weapons and equipment.

The appropriations Bill Clinton signed was 485 million dollars below his request for funds.

"This act fully funds many of the department's critical readiness programmes and supports our commitments to a better quality of life for our military and their families," Clinton said.

Clinton also signed a defence authorisation bill that essentially affirms US military policy goals for fiscal 1999, including funding proposals yet to receive final congressional approval.

One policy proposal approved by Congress but not yet funded is a request for 1.9 billion dollars in emergency spending for peacekeeping operations in Bosnia.

The president hoped Congress would move swiftly in funding that proposal. "It strongly urge them to do so," he said.

But Clinton complained that congress may have complicated any future decision to deploy US forces to the Balkan states of Serbia, Albania or Macedonia.

He said he was concerned about a requirement in the appropriations bill that he submit a "burdensome" report to lawmakers on deployments to those three countries before going ahead with them. Clinton said the understood the provision to apply only to ground forces and not, presumably, to air or naval options.

NATO is threatening to launch air strikes against Serb military targets if they do not withdraw from Kosovo and take other steps to ease their grip on ethnic Albanians in the southernmost Serbian province by Oct 27.

## Pinochet arrested

LONDON, Oct 18: Former Chilean dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet, whose 17-year rule was marked by human rights abuses and a climate of fear, has been arrested in the deaths of Spanish citizens, despite protests from his country that he has diplomatic immunity, reports AP.

Responding to a Spanish extradition warrant, British police arrested Pinochet on Friday for questioning about allegations that he murdered an unidentified number of Spaniards in Chile between Sept. 11, 1973, when he and other military leaders seized power, and Dec. 13, 1983.

Chile said it would protest to British authorities, arguing that the 82-year-old senator-for-life has diplomatic immunity. But Britain maintains he does not, and Prime Minister Tony Blair's office said it was "a matter for the magistrates and the police."

Pinochet, whose ruthless regime ended eight years ago and was widely criticized for its human rights record, was recovering from surgery in a London clinic when he was detained Friday night.

No hearing date has been set. After Pinochet ousted leftist President Salvador Allende in 1973, the army and security forces cracked down viciously against the former president's supporters. According to a report by the Chilean government, 3,197 political opponents died during Pinochet's term and 1,102 people remain unaccounted for after being detained by his security agents.



A police officer takes away an unidentified woman during a demonstration in Kuala Lumpur Saturday. The protesters held up posters and shouted slogans against the government. — AP/UNB photo

## Sharif following in Benazir's footsteps?

ISLAMABAD, Oct 18: A corruption scandal forced Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto from office two years ago. Now, similar allegations about her successor are feeding speculation that his government will fall, too, reports AP.

Nawaz Sharif has been accused by police investigators of siphoning off millions of dollars from loans his companies defaulted on, taking kickbacks for his political influence and investing the money in London real estate. He denies any wrongdoing and has not been formally charged.

Similar accusations were levelled against Benazir, as well as her husband, who are awaiting trial on corruption and misuse of power charges.

Many Pakistanis complain that graft and patronage have become the hallmarks of government as the economy slumps. It seems ironic to many that in a country ruled for 25 of its 51 years by the military, state institutions have become moribund under democratically elected leaders. Some people worry the disarray may be inviting the army back.

In recent days, generals have called for the military to get a role in the government, criticised government policies and warned of dire economic consequences if Pakistan doesn't get its house in order.

The army's Chief of Staff, Gen. Jehangir Karamat, urged that a policy-making National Security Council be formed and include generals and economic experts as well as senior government officials.

Sharif rejected the idea and forced Karamat to resign, but he still retains influence within the military.

Karamat, who warned that the country cannot afford political "polarisation and vendettas," said the government should be focusing all its effort on fixing the economy, which appears on the verge of collapse.

Sharif's government is trying to negotiate an international financial bailout, but any loan is likely to come with one very big string attached — an end to corruption.

Right now Sharif's credibility is seriously eroded and even some political allies say his government is barely clinging to power.

Support from parties in the governing coalition led by Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League is waning. The partners are unhappy with his attempt to push through a constitutional amendment to impose Islamic law and give the government sweeping powers to legislate morality.

Sharif was accused, even from within his party, of seeking to become Pakistan's "Amir-ul-Momenen" — or King of the Muslims, a title taken by the leader of the Taliban religious army in neighbouring Afghanistan.

The move to replace a secular legal system with Islamic law reportedly was another factor that upset military leaders.

While staying on the sidelines for now, the generals are deeply concerned about the country's drift toward economic failure and institutional gridlock.

Some Pakistanis have even speculated the military was secretly behind the firing of British private investigators who first produced evidence linking Sharif to foreign investments. Those deals, Pakistani police investigators charge, were financed by money he got using his political influence and from loans to his businesses that were not repaid.

## Nigerian Nobel laureate, others plan to form opposition nat'l congress

LAGOS, Nigeria, Oct 18: Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka and other leading Nigerian democracy campaigners plan to form an opposition national congress to decide whether the ethnically divided West African country should remain a single state, a newspaper said Saturday, reports AP.

Soyinka, who returned home on Wednesday from four years in exile, said a number of prominent leaders were organising a "Congress of Nationalities in Nigeria" to debate, among other options, sovereign statehood for individual regions, the respected Lagos Guardian reported.

Nigeria's military leader Gen. Abdulsalam Abubakar has promised presidential elections in February and a transition to civilian rule by the end of May.

However Abubakar has rebuffed calls by opposition leaders to form a national political congress to reconsider the country's constitution prior to the elections.

"There is nothing that stops the transition to civilian rule... from going on side by side with the sovereign national conference," Soyinka told the newspaper.

Nigeria, where the mainly Christian southern provinces are rich in oil and gas, has long been dominated by military leaders from the predominantly Muslim north. Ethnic divisions have divided the country since colonial times and frequently explode into violent confrontations. The two-year separatist Biafra War in the country's southeast from 1967-70 resulted in between 500,000 and two million deaths.

Soyinka, who hails from the south where most people remain desperately poor despite the oil wealth, urged Nigerians in a public speech on Friday to demand that individual regions begin collecting — and spending — government revenue.