

BRIEFLY

Cocaine seized in France Police said on Tuesday they had seized pure cocaine worth more than 36 million dollar in one of the biggest drugs haul in France in recent years. Reuters reports from Paris.

Six people were arrested, 370,000 francs (66,500 dollar) in cash recovered and several weapons seized. The drugs were found in a raid on a house in a northern Paris suburb on Monday. About 179 kg of cocaine was hidden in a garage wall and two kg was discovered in a car. A further three kg had just been handed over to dealers.

Lankan journalist freed: A Tamil journalist imprisoned for three months for his alleged involvement with separatist Tamil tiger rebels has been released on bail, his colleagues said yesterday. AP reports from Colombo.

S. Sriganan, a reporter with the Colombo-based Tamil language Virakesari newspaper, was released on 2,000 rupees (dhs 30) bail by a Colombo magistrate on Tuesday. He was ordered to appear before the court on Nov. 2 for a final hearing.

Chinese PLA chief in Brazil: General Fu Quanyou, chief of the General Staff of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) arrived in Sao Paulo on Tuesday for a five day official visit to Brazil, Xinhua says from Brasilia.

Fu is expected to meet with a Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso and his Brazilian counterpart General Benedito Leonel.

Annan to visit N Africa in Nov: UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan will visit several north African countries next month, with much of his trip focused on the issue of western Sahara, a UN spokesman said on Tuesday. Reuters reports from UN.

He is due to fly from Paris to Mauritania on Nov. 7 and travel to El Ayoun, western Sahara, on Nov. 8. Annan will be in Morocco from Nov. 9-12 in Tindouf, Algeria, on Nov. 12, in Tunisia on Nov. 13, and in Algiers from Nov. 14-16, when he returns to New York via London.

Italian PM wins confidence vote Italy's New Prime Minister Massimo D'Alma on Tuesday won a confidence vote in his government in the Senate (upper house). Reuters reports from Rome.

The government, which had been expected to triumph in the vote, won by 188 votes to 116 with one abstention.

Cohen starts E Asia tour Sunday: US Defence Secretary William Cohen will go to Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan on a six-day Asia visit beginning on Sunday to emphasise US military and economic commitment to the region, the Pentagon said on Tuesday. Reuters reports from Washington.

A senior US Defence Official told reporters that the trip to discuss the threat from North Korea, missile defence and other issues would help pave the way for a scheduled visit by President Bill Clinton to Asia in mid November.

Mountaineer missing in Nepal: In two days of searching, a group of international mountaineers failed to find a Colombian colleague swept away by an avalanche on the 8,163-metre Mt. Manaslu, the man's colleagues said, AP reports from Kathmandu.

Five members of a Colombian expedition were descending from camp two at 6,300 metres to camp one at 5,900 metres in waist-deep snow on Sunday when an avalanche of hard snow broke them free of their fixed rope line, the Colombian team said in a statement faxed from their base camp.

Quake rambles Indonesian islands: An earthquake rambled some remote Indonesian islands early yesterday but there was no immediate reports of damage, Hong Kong weather officials said, AP reports from Hong Kong.

The earthquake, estimated at a magnitude of 5.9 on the Richter scale, had an epicentre near the island of Halmahera, about 2,500 kms east of Jakarta.



Newly elected German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, left, and his predecessor Helmut Kohl toast in Bonn on Tuesday, during the hand-over ceremony of the chancellor. New government coalition of Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens will be led by Gerhard Schroeder, elected last month on a platform of change, as postwar Germany's seventh chancellor. — AP/UNB photo

Israeli cabinet meet to okay ME deal postponed

JERUSALEM, Oct 28: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has postponed a crucial Cabinet meeting that was to approve the US-brokered Israel-Palestinian peace agreement. The move could disrupt the timetable of Israel's West Bank pullback, reports AP.

In a statement Tuesday evening, Netanyahu blamed the delay on the Palestinians, saying they failed to present a detailed plan for stopping extremist attacks against Israel. However, Israeli media reported Wednesday that Netanyahu postponed the Cabinet meeting because he is having trouble assuring a majority in favour of the agreement.

Several Cabinet ministers who initially said they were undecided have announced in recent days that they would vote against the agreement. Netanyahu said Tuesday that if his Cabinet fails to approve the withdrawal deal, it would not be carried out.

The most vocal opposition to Netanyahu comes from erstwhile supporters. Jewish settlers who fear a troop pullback

will endanger them and turn several settlements into isolated enclaves in Palestinian areas.

In recent protests against Netanyahu, demonstrators have shouted "traitor, traitor." Such cries were common in the weeks leading up to the assassination of late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by an ultranationalist Jew in November 1995, and there was growing concern in Israel that Netanyahu could also be targeted by extremists.

Security for Netanyahu has been increased in recent days. Israel radio said that as part of the changes, he will cut down on appearances in large crowds and travel to the West Bank and Gaza Strip only by helicopter. Under the peace accord signed last week in Washington, Israel would hand over 13.1 per cent of the West Bank to Palestinian civilian control, in exchange for a Palestinian crack-down on Islamic militants.

Netanyahu said Tuesday that he was expecting clarifications from the United States about the Palestinian security

work plan. He said the United States promised the clarifications by Friday.

The government statement said that once the Palestinian plan is submitted, the Cabinet will convene to ratify the accord.

The Palestinians said the delays is technical, because the head of Palestinian security in Gaza, Mohammed Dahlan, is in Europe.

Israel's chief demand of the Palestinians, in return for handing over territory, is a comprehensive plan to combat extremist organisations responsible for attacks against Israel.

In the accord, the Palestinian Authority, headed by Yasser Arafat, pledges to move against the extremists, confiscate illegal weapons and stop incitement against Israel.

Netanyahu said Israel will check Palestinian progress according to a strict timetable. If they do not stick to it, he insisted, "They will not get anything."

Use of deadly VX nerve gas Iraq rejects UN weapons experts report

BAGHDAD, Oct 28: Iraq rejected on Tuesday a united nations weapons experts report that Baghdad had used deadly VX nerve gas on missile warheads, reports Reuters.

Baghdad said the report was a ploy to prolong arms inspectors work in Iraq.

Iraq has not weaponised VX and what chief weapons inspector Richard Butler and the UN special commission have said is confusing and aimed at procrastination, said General Amir Al Saadi, an adviser to President Saddam Hussein.

Of the three reports issued by the UN on Monday evening, the US study asserted Baghdad had VX shells ready for use in the war while the French and Swiss reports were inconclusive.

On Tuesday, France said Butler should continue his talks with Iraq since the UN studies were inconclusive.

At no point do the experts mention that the analyses proved Iraq had succeeded in making VX militarily operative foreign ministry spokeswoman Anne Secret Gazeaus said in Paris.

Butler is right to suggest that he continue with further discussions between the special commission and Iraq, she said. In reaction to the report at the UN headquarters in New York.

Iraq has admitted putting sarin gas that causes spasms, nausea and possible death into warheads but repeatedly has denied it was able to use VX in weapons or load it aboard missile warheads before the 1991 Gulf War.

The issue of the deadly VX began in June when a US army laboratory said it found traces of VX in swaps it analysed, Iraq accused the US of distorting the results and insisted French and

Swiss laboratories duplicate them. Samples of Iraqi warheads were then given to Swiss and French government laboratories. The report said tests from Switzerland proved negative as did a second round of a US tests from other samples.

Of the 40 samples they analysed, the French chemical experts said in their report that only one sample turned up a degraded product of a chemical warfare agent, although it could not be established whether this was degraded VX or not.

But the report suggested that an attempt had been made at some point to remove traces of any nerve gas.

Instead of admitting... that there was no VX he (Butler) has issued statements which contradict with the results reached by laboratories, Saadi said.

Air China pilot hijacks own plane to Taiwan

TAOYUAN, Taiwan, Oct 28: An Air China jet with 104 people aboard was hijacked to Taiwan on Wednesday by the disgruntled airline captain, who brought his wife on the flight as he tried to escape an unhappy life, officials said, reports AP.

Flight CA905 took off from Beijing to the southern Chinese city of Kunming, but it was diverted in the air and arrived safely under military jet escort at Taiwan's main international airport at 11:17 am (0317 GMT).

Taiwan Television showed the captain, whom officials identified as Yuan Bin, in his uniformed white shirt and a suitcase, being led out of the plane by policemen in helmets and bullet-proof vests. His wife, who was not immediately identified by name, was shown in a black coat.

No passengers were hurt, officials said. Authorities said the captain diverted his own jet to Taiwan because he apparently was unhappy with his job. In Beijing, the official Xinhua News Agency confirmed the plane was hijacked with 95 passengers and an unspecified number of crew on board.

Chang Chia-ju, Taiwan's aeronautics chief, said the hi-

jacker would be detained to face trial in Taiwan. Authorities were planning to let Air China's other pilots fly the jetliner back to China with its passengers.

The airline had two pilots and two co-pilots aboard the Boeing 737 that was to have continued its flight from Kunming to Yangon, Myanmar Chang said.

Benazir demands resignation of Sharif's govt

ISLAMABAD, Oct 28: Pakistan's opposition leader Benazir Bhutto yesterday demanded the resignation of the Nawaz Sharif regime and called for fresh elections within three months under a neutral government, reports PTI.

Alleging that the Sharif government had failed on all fronts, she said the situation calls for immediate resignation of the present rulers.

Speaking at a Pakistan People's Party (PPP) meeting in Lahore the party leader said, we need a neutral set up which should hold elections within three months as stipulated in the constitution.

Hope for govt-LTTE talks falters in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, Oct 28: Speculation about possible talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil rebels has been scotched with President Chandrika Kumaratunga disclosing that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has rejected the conditions set by the government, reports IANS.

"I have sent a message to (LTTE chief Velupillai) Prabhakaran through various means that we are still willing to negotiate if they are willing to accept certain conditions. But he is not willing to accept those conditions," she said in an interview to state radio.

The government has set three conditions: that the rebels should give up their armed separatist campaign and symbolically surrender weapons, the talks should be completed within a time-frame; and the negotiations should be at the highest level.

Meanwhile, political analysts have interpreted the release of six soldiers and three civilians from LTTE custody as a goodwill gesture by the rebels.

One of the released civilians, Loyala Fernando, Captain of the ship M.V. Iris Mona, said that LTTE political wing leader Thameel Chelvam had told them that they were being released in expectation of a positive response from the government.

"Chelvam addressed us the day before we were released and said that the LTTE was willing to discuss ways and means of finding an amicable solution," Fernando said.

"He said that if the government releases a few LTTE leaders in custody, including senior military leader Kennedy and two women's brigade leaders Uma and Mala, they would release some more military men in their custody," he added.



President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore look on as Tyra Brown of Washington speaks in the East Room of the White House Tuesday, during a roundtable discussion on women and retirement security issues. Molly Lozoff of Miami is at left. — AP/UNB photo

Clinton okays bill to promote religious freedom

WASHINGTON, Oct 28: US President Bill Clinton on Tuesday signed into law a bill to promote religious freedom around the world and praised lawmakers for giving him flexibility in applying the bill's sanctions provisions, reports Reuters.

"I commend the congress for incorporating flexibility in the several provisions concerning the imposition of economic measures," Clinton said in a statement.

"Although I am concerned that such measures could result in even greater pressures — and possibly reprisals — against minority religious communi-

ties that the bill is intended to help. I note that section 402 mandates these measures only in the most extreme and egregious cases of religious persecution," he added.

The bill gives the president 15 policy responses — eight diplomatic and seven prohibitions on US aid or economic sanctions — to countries found to be engaged in religious persecution. The options range from diplomatic protest and cutting off of diplomatic exchanges to limits on export licenses and votes against loans made by international financial institutions.

Clinton is required to consult with other governments before ordering any punishment and could waive sanctions if US national interests would be harmed. Any US response must be targeted towards ending the religious persecution, its effectiveness must be evaluated and sanctions would be limited to two years.

The legislation represents a compromise between religious groups and business interests who had feared the mandatory sanctions required in an earlier version would backfire on US economic interests overseas.

Clinton said the bill was not aimed at any one country or religious faith.

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20 killed in clashes in Lanka

COLOMBO, Oct 28: Sri Lankan troops killed 16 separatist Tamil Tigers and lost four soldiers in several clashes in the north, the defence ministry said Wednesday, reports AP.

Military spokesman Major Kumara Dewage said two soldiers were also wounded in the fighting which took place Tuesday in the Paranthan area, which is close to Kilinochchi, a rebel-held town about 275 kilometers (170 miles) north of Colombo.

There was no independent confirmation of the defence ministry's statement as the government bars reporters from the area.

Injection of pure alcohol to help heart patients

WASHINGTON, Oct 28: It sounds horrible, but an injection of pure alcohol could help patients with enlarged hearts, researchers said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

A team at the Baylor College of medicine in Houston, Texas, said that, when done properly, the procedure reduces the debilitating symptoms of an enlarged heart.

"It is not a procedure that is to be undertaken lightly because it has its hazards," Dr. William Spencer, who led the study, said in a statement.

Writing in the American Heart Association Journal Circulation, Spencer and colleagues said the procedure is a safe and effective treatment for

hypertrophic obstructive cardiomyopathy, in which excess growth of heart tissue blocks blood flow from the heart.

Sufferers are short of breath, often cannot walk even a short distance, faint and have chest pains.

But up to a third of them might benefit from this new treatment, Spencer says. "The alternative is open-heart surgery," he added.

The alcohol kills off the overgrown tissue, which withdraws away. A pacemaker keeps the patient from suffering other symptoms of a heart attack. The procedure was developed by Dr. Ulrich Stewart at the Royal Brompton Hospital in London.

Hopelessness, frustration evident among most mainstream Tamil leaders

COLOMBO, Oct 28: It has been a long wait for Sri Lanka's Tamil parties, reports Reuters.

Many of them gave up arms a decade ago and joined the political mainstream in search for a peaceful solution to the country's long-drawn ethnic war.

A democratic struggle in a parliamentary system looked more meaningful to them at that time than an armed insurrection.

But now, hopelessness and frustration are evident among most mainstream Tamil political leaders.

"I don't see light at the end of the tunnel and it seems a very long tunnel," said Dharmalingam Siddharthan, a rebel turned politician who now heads the Peoples Liberation Organisation for Tamil Eelam (PLOTE).

"There is political stalemate.

I don't believe the (Tamil) rebels will come for a political settlement and the Tamil people are really fed up because there is no one to give them solace."

Politicians say joining the democratic mainstream has done little to help the Tamil ethnic minority as successive Sinhala-majority parties that rule Sri Lanka have let them down.

The two main parties continue to squabble over a peace deal and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels still have the muscle to stall the military and kill at will.

Peace, always a distant dream, looks even further away now and Tamils, as a people, are tired of waiting. Some Sinhala government must solve our problems. So far no one has and I don't think anyone is committed to doing it

not even the present government, said Amirthanathan Adakkannathan of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO).

PLOTE is one of several militant groups that joined the mainstream when India brokered a peace accord to end ethnic strife in Sri Lanka in 1987.

Indian peacekeeping troops sent to Sri Lanka to enforce the accord ended up fighting the Tigers, who said the deal did not meet the aspirations of the Tamil people.

When Chandrika Kumaratunga led the People's Alliance to power in 1994, Tamils rallied to support her.

She initiated talks with the LTTE and, when negotiations derailed, her promise of a set of political proposals that would give minorities greater autonomy offered Tamils hope.

"When this government came to power we were willing to support them, but now they are beginning to let us down," said V. Anandasangari, senior vice president of the moderate Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF).

It has been four years. They could have done so much to end this war. But they are prolonging it, and this has caused suspicion in the eyes of the Tamil people," he added.

As the country's ethnic war enters its 16th year after claiming more than 50,000 lives, Kumaratunga's political proposals remain stalled, facing opposition from hardline Sinhala groups and the influential Buddhist clergy.

The main opposition United National Party (UNP), whose support in parliament is vital for the proposals to be passed, has also rejected them.



Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, right, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, second from right, and Pakistani President Rafiq Tarar, second from left, look at a model of a mosque at the Punjab governor house, Tuesday, in Lahore. Abdullah ended his three-day visit to Pakistan Tuesday. — AP/UNB photo

Off the Record

Making a killing on dinosaur fossils

NEW DELHI: From dinosaur eggs to dinosaur fossils, get-rich-quick Indian businessmen are reportedly making a good killing, reports IANS.

After the alleged sale of rare and priceless dinosaur eggs found in some remote parts of western India, comes the report of a sale of fossils of the long-extinct leviathans. Fossils of the animal that ceased to exist about 60 million years ago were slowly vanishing from the remote Raholi village in the western state of Gujarat, The Indian Express newspaper reported.

The nine acres around the village in the Nadiad district, south of the state capital of Gandhinagar, has been demarcated by the Geological Survey of India and is considered by paleontologists as the graveyard of dinosaurs. In the absence of adequate security measures and lack of stringent laws, unscrupulous people have homed in on the fossils, the paper said. A large number of people, including paleontologists, research students, foreigners and antique dealers were visiting the area in search of the fossils and taking away a few with them.

Last month the paper reported that the dinosaur eggs were being sold at prices ranging between Rs. 2,000 (\$48) to Rs. 20,000 (\$476).

After an international conference of paleontologists in Gandhinagar earlier this year, the state government had embarked upon an ambitious Rs 6.5 million plan (\$154,000) to preserve the geological site. But security was woefully inadequate. The four security guards deputed at the Jurassic age site could hardly keep any vigil. Besides, several times the guards themselves had to dig out the fossils on behalf of their senior officials, the paper alleged.

Giving evidence of the involvement of government officials, the paper reported a senior official as writing a letter to a village subordinate for a fossil. "What better gift to give or item to sell than something as old as 60 million years," an official was quoted as saying. Senior government officials, the paper said, could not take any action as dinosaur eggs or its fossils are not covered by the Mines and Mineral Act, 1996, which considers their possession as illegal.

"The law is not exhaustive enough," state geology and mining commissioner H.K. Das said, adding that he could not take legal action against any unauthorised possession of the fossils. He said that the government has not received any complaint of theft of the fossils. But "I have taken the initiative and am coordinating with collectors, panchayats (village assembly) chiefs, and forest officials to do the needful (for the protection of fossils). Results will follow soon."