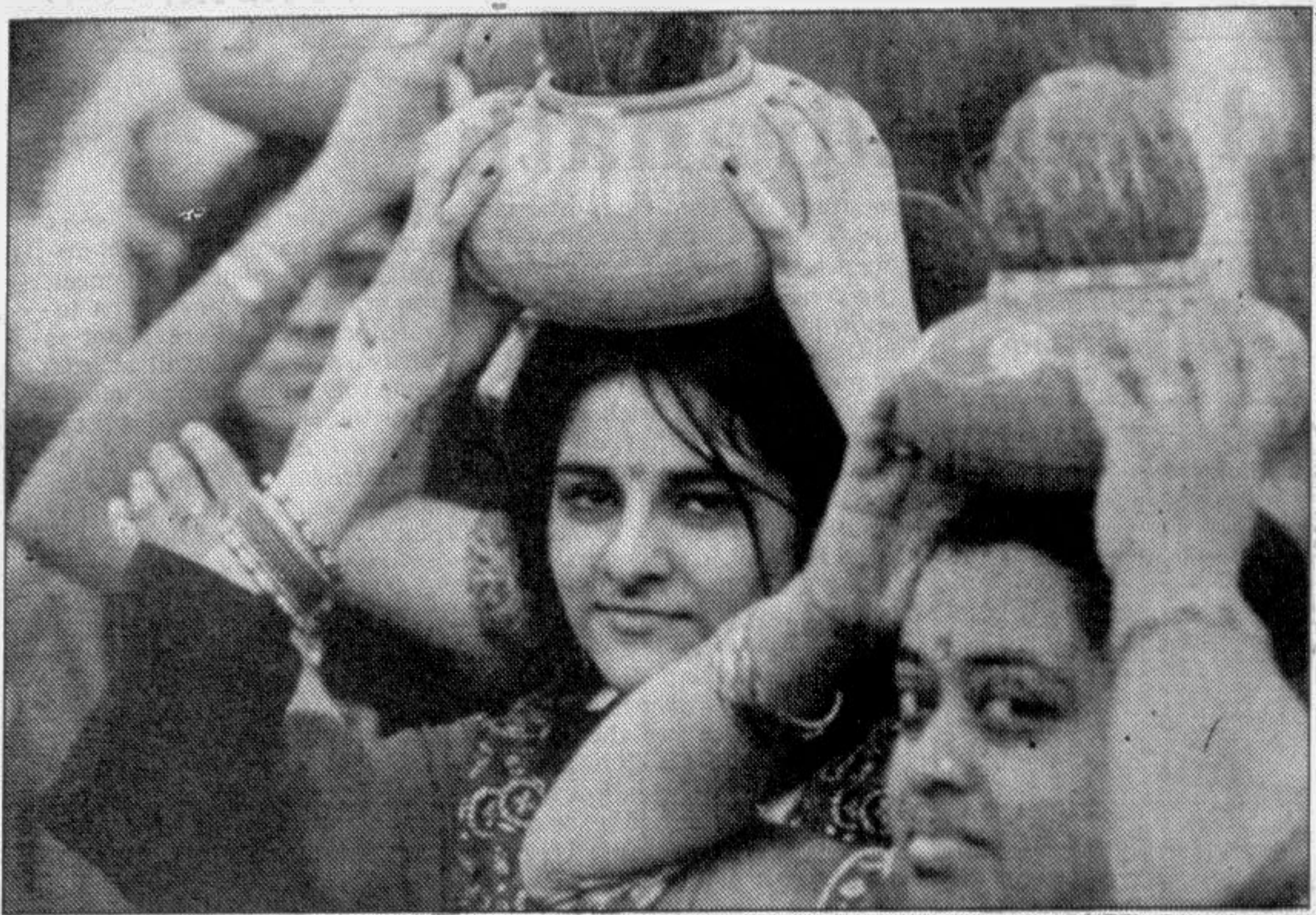


International



Portuguese Hindu women carry above their heads colourful pots containing coconuts outside a Hindu temple before its inauguration on Wednesday in Lisbon. The coconut, always present in the Hindu ceremonies, represents what every human being should be like, a hard shell to face life while holding a sweet core. Several thousand people gathered for the opening of the first Hindu temple in Portugal, a country home to about 9,000 Hindus. — AP/UNB photo

Indo-Pak talks on water sharing begin in Delhi

NEW DELHI, Nov 5: India and Pakistan opened talks on Thursday on a water sharing dispute as part of an attempt to improve relations between the nuclear rivals, even as they continued border skirmishing, reports AP.

Talks over the next week in New Delhi on water sharing and a range of other issues have been overshadowed by the main dispute between the two neighbours: Their competing claims to the Himalayan border region of Kashmir.

India had hoped progress on other issues could improve the atmosphere to the point where Kashmir could be tackled. But Pakistan maintains that no progress can be made until Kashmir is resolved.

Since their twin independence in 1947, India and Pakistan have fought two wars over Kashmir, a border region divided between them that both claim in its entirety. The two sides regularly skirmish over Kashmir — Indian police reported Thursday that three civilians were killed by a Pakistani shell that landed in a northwestern region of Indian-held Kashmir on Wednesday night.

Their enmity and Kashmir's central role in the rivalry became an international concern in May, when India and Pakistan conducted underground tests, declared themselves nuclear powers and generated global fears of a nuclear confrontation.

Hopes were raised when Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif met in July and agreed to resume peace negotiations that had been suspended in 1997. But when Pakistan's top foreign office bureaucrat and his Indian counterpart met last month in the Pakistani capital to discuss Kashmir, their consultations yielded little more than pledges to meet again in February.

Thursday's talks resume negotiations last held in 1992 on the use of the Jhelum River, which flows through Kashmir. Under a 1960 agreement, Pakistan was to have unrestricted use of the waters of the Jhelum. India wants to construct a dam to control the Jhelum's flow to make the river navigable in the dry season.



Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi receives a ceremonial sword from Sikh community leaders at her residence in New Delhi on Wednesday. The leaders promised to support the Congress Party in the upcoming November 25 Assembly elections. — AP/UNB photo

'Conspiracy on to topple Vajpayee gov't in Delhi'

CALCUTTA, Nov 5: The Samata Party and Trinamool Congress last night said that a "conspiracy" was on to topple the Vajpayee government in Delhi, but declined to name the forces behind it, reports PTI.

"These forces are working day and night to topple the government," the Defence Minister, George Fernandes, and the Trinamool Congress chairperson, Mamata Banerjee, told newsmen after emerging from the one-and-a-half hour closed-door meeting at her south Calcutta residence.

Asked to name the conspirators, Fernandes replied, "I will like the central government to expose them. These forces are from within the country and outside they are not reconciled to the verdict given by the people in the last election and resorted to rumour-mongering about prices of essential commodities there was no shortage at all."

Echoing the statement of Fernandes, Banerjee said that her resignation stands but it will not destabilise the government. "People do not like the toppling of the government frequently."

Court says Yeltsin can't seek a third term as president

MOSCOW, Nov 5: Russia's highest court said Thursday that Boris Yeltsin cannot seek a third term as president because he already has been elected twice, the limit under the constitution, reports AP.

The Constitutional Court's announcement should finally settle the question on whether Yeltsin is permitted to run for re-election in the year 2000. The court noted that Yeltsin himself has all but ruled out running for a third term, and a presidential aide said the court's decision was correct.

"As a guarantor of the constitution, the president himself has repeatedly said he wouldn't run again in the year 2000 because that would contradict the current constitution," the court said in its verdict.

The court said there was no case to consider because the constitution was clear that the president may only serve two terms.

But some of Yeltsin's supporters argued that his first term should not count against the limit, because it began in 1991, before the current constitution was adopted in 1993. Yeltsin was re-elected in 1996.

Yeltsin had been coy about whether he would seek a third term, letting aides promote the idea. He appeared to have given up the idea in recent months as speculation has mounted about the state of his health.

Yeltsin is currently recuperating from his latest illness at the Black Sea resort of Sochi in southern Russia.

It has been clear for the president. He said he wouldn't run again," Mikhail Mityukov, Yeltsin's envoy to the Constitutional Court said after the verdict. "This case has been inspired by the political games in (Parliament)."

Alexei Zakharov, one of the lawmakers who asked the court to rule on whether Yeltsin could seek a third term, said the decision was a victory for democracy.

He said the verdict would entrench constitutional rule and prevent abuses of power, and he also praised Yeltsin for his contributions to democracy.

"We should thank the president, he was among those who gave us freedom. But he should leave on time, in accordance with the law, without provoking a riot and let people use this freedom," said the member of the liberal Yabloko faction.

The president's critics have been saying that Yeltsin is not physically fit to run the country and should resign. The president insists he does not have any serious health problems and will serve out his tenure. Thursday's announcement

came on the second anniversary of Yeltsin's quintuple heart bypass surgery, which sidelined him for months in 1996. The president has been ill several times since then, and has been working only sporadically in recent months.

Yeltsin's fragile health and the court ruling will encourage several top political leaders to step up preparations for presidential bids. Yeltsin insists he will serve out his term until the middle of the year 2000, but there is growing speculation in Russia that elections may come sooner.

Top presidential candidates include Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov and nationalist leader Alexander Lebed. Both have been calling on Yeltsin to step down early because of his poor health, while reviving up their presidential campaign preparations.

Top Kashmiri leader killed

SRINAGAR, India, Nov 5: A top separatist leader and Muslim scholar has been shot dead by unidentified gunmen in the troubled northern Indian state of Kashmir, police said today, reports AFP.

Ghulam Qadir Wani, 48, was gunned down late Wednesday inside his home in the village of Arin, 50-km north of the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar.

Wani was general secretary of the now-defunct Muslim United Front — a coalition of pro-separatist political parties whose loss in rigged 1987 elections fanned separatist flames into a full-blown armed insurgency two years later.

Police said a group of gunmen broke into Wani's house and opened up with automatic weapons fire, killing him and his niece. Wani's teenage daughter and a servant were wounded in the attack.

Wani's body was taken to the police station, and extra officers were called in to prevent any outbreak of violence in the wake of the shooting.

UNSC will urge Iraq to resume cooperation with UNSCOM

UNITED NATIONS, Nov 5: The UN Security Council on Wednesday reached broad agreement on a draft resolution calling on Iraq to immediately resume cooperation with UN arms inspectors, reports AFP.

British ambassador Sir Jeremy Greenstock, the draft's main sponsor with the United States, informed reporters that the 15 Council members had agreed in principle on the text, which was to be referred to capitals for final approval.

US charge d'affaires Peter Burleigh said it appears to be a consensus document. The Council hopes to adopt the resolution, which Burleigh described as a good and strong text on Thursday.

The draft text condemns Iraq's decision last Saturday to break off all cooperation with the UN Special Commission tasked with Iraqi disarmament as a flagrant violation of UN resolutions, but refrains from explicitly threatening the use of force.

Greenstock noted that the resolution enshrined in legally binding terms the language of a press statement issued on Saturday following Iraq's announcement.

Britain and the United States agreed to several concessions to China, France and Russia which tend to sympathise with Iraqi positions in order to secure Wednesday's relatively rapid agreement on the draft text.

But it remains to be seen whether Iraq will be sufficiently encouraged to resume cooperation after Britain and the United States only agreed to an indirect reference in the text for a timetable leading to the lifting of sanctions.

France and China on Tuesday proposed a specific reference to paragraph 22 of resolution 687, providing for the lifting of the oil embargo once Iraq has complied with disarmament requirements.

The issue would be discussed as part of a comprehensive review which the 15 Council members have agreed to undertake if Iraq rescinds its decision to halt cooperation with the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) overseeing Iraq's disarmament.

The Council is also unanimously demanding the rescinding of Iraq's August 5 decision which suspended cooperation with UNSCOM and scaled back cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The final version of the draft also makes other concession to France, Russia and China by agreeing to mention a role for UN Chief Kofi Annan in defusing the crisis.

Britain and the United States also agreed to delete a paragraph stating that Iraq continues to pose a threat to international peace and security. However, Washington says that it has the authority to strike Iraq under existing UN resolutions.

BRIEFLY

43 Indians die as bus plunges into river: A crowded bus plunged off a bridge into a river in eastern India on Thursday, killing at least 43 people, Press Trust of India reported, AP says from New Delhi.

Police said the accident occurred as the driver tried to pass another vehicle on the bridge over the Mahanadi River near Cuttack, some 1,200-km southeast of New Delhi. Divers were searching for people who may have been trapped in the bus underwater. Witnesses said 90 people were on the bus. Twenty-seven bodies were recovered and 30 injured passengers were being treated at a hospital.

Fresh warning to Dalai Lama: China has issued a fresh warning to the Dalai Lama to keep quiet over contacts with the central government, accusing the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader of whipping up propaganda as he starts a key visit to the United States, AFP reports from Beijing. The fact that the Dalai Lama is using contacts and negotiations with the central government as a pretext to launch propaganda and sway public opinion can only demonstrate his lack of sincerity, said a government spokesman. The Dalai Lama must sincerely abandon calls for the independence of Tibet and cease activities designed to split the motherland, said the spokesman quoted by the official Xinhua news agency late Wednesday.

4 to die in China: A former senior tax official and three businessmen were sentenced to death in the country's largest tax fraud case involving 6.31 billion yuan (760 million US dollars), the China Daily reported yesterday, AFP says from Beijing.

Yang Shangrong, former director of the Jinhua Tax Bureau Inspection Team, Hu Yingfeng, Wu Yuedong and Lu Huaming from Jinhua county in eastern Zhejiang province were sentenced to death by the Jinhua Intermediate People's Court. The four were among 89 people including senior officials arrested in the case, the report said.

Boy dies of snake-bite in Australia: A 14-year-old Australian boy died yesterday after being bitten by a tiger snake, the second snake death in western Australia in six days, authorities said, AFP reports from Perth. The boy, who was not identified, was bitten while filming a video with friends in bush land near Perth's airport on Tuesday and died early Thursday in Royal Perth Hospital. After he was bitten, friends dragged the boy hundreds of metres through the bush to a road where they flagged down a motorist who drove them to the hospital.

S'pore minister leaves for US: Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan left Thursday for a two-week visit to meet with defence officials in the United States which will focus on strengthening military ties between the two allies, AP reports from Singapore. Tan, who is also defence minister, will formalise plans to allow US Navy access to the Southeast Asian city-state's Changi Naval Base once it is completed in 2000, according to a statement issued by Singapore's Ministry of Defence. During his visit, Tan will meet US Secretary of Defence William Cohen in Washington, DC on November 10. He was also scheduled to officiate at the inauguration of the Singapore Air Force's new F16 C/D fighter training detachment at Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico on November 12.

150 killed in fighting Colombian Army retake border town from rebels

BOGOTA, Nov 5: The Colombian Army retook the remote border town of Mitu from leftist guerrillas early Wednesday after fighting left more than 150 dead, according to reports on a Bogota radio station, reports AFP.

Troops regained the town in southeastern Colombia about 5:00 am (10:00 GMT) after heavy fighting since dawn, the director of the local hospital told Caracol Radio.

But when the soldiers entered the town they found the Marxist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas had abandoned Mitu, taking their dead and wounded with them. The army and the Red Cross were working to evacuate those

wounded in four days of heavy fighting.

More than 150 people — troops, guerrillas and civilians — died in the conflict and the rebels refused to evacuate the wounded, except three children, said William Vaquero, the hospital director.

He reported that the hospital was unable to cope with the number of dead and wounded and three houses were turned into emergency medical centres to deal with the wounded.

The fighting, which began with a siege involving 1,000 rebels early Sunday also gutted the town, Vagero reported.

It destroyed the police garrison, and nearby houses, the town hall, banks and telecommunications lines, he said.

NATO evacuation forces for Kosovo will be ready by end of Nov

BRUSSELS, Nov 5: NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana said on Wednesday the alliance's special force for emergency evacuation of civilian monitors in Kosovo will be ready to go by the end of November, reports AP.

The North Atlantic Council, NATO's top policymaking body, approved the "initial concept of operations" for the force and is expected to give its backing to the final operations plan next week, officials said.

The extraction force of allied soldiers will be responsible for the emergency rescue of civilian monitors being dispatched to Kosovo if they run into unexpected danger.

"I expect to have it ready around the end of the month," Solana told reporters. "Everything is in place now for finalising the plan."

Jiang will travel to Russia, Japan later this month

BEIJING, Nov 5: Making up for foreign travels postponed by devastating summer floods, China announced on Thursday President Jiang Zemin will travel to Russia and Japan in late November, reports AP.

Jiang's trip is intended to preserve the momentum in steadily improving relations with Russia — once a Cold War foe — and help propel forward often rocky relations with Japan, China's leading investor.

He will hold his sixth summit meeting with President Boris Yeltsin, despite reports about the Russian leader's ill health, and he will urge Japan to support China's claim to rival Taiwan, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao told reporters.

Opposition wants amnesty for supporters in Cambodia

PHNOM PENH, Nov 5: Hardening the political deadlock that has left Cambodia without a government, the opposition on Thursday said it would not join any coalition unless supporters convicted in political cases received pardons, reports AP.

The new demand widens the gap between the opposition and strongman Hun Sen, who narrowly won disputed elections in July but has been unable to win the opposition support needed for a two-thirds majority in Parliament to endorse a new government.

The new demands, issued in a joint statement by opposition leaders Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Sam Rainsy, are aimed at winning a pardon for Gen. Nhek Bunchhay, the main general who stayed loyal to the prince when Hun Sen ousted him as co-premier in a 1997 coup.



Prince Charles receives flowers from Romanian children in the village of Mosna, 350 km north-west of Bucharest on Wednesday. Prince Charles is on a three-day visit to Romania. — AP/UNB photo

Netanyahu presents accord with PA to cabinet for approval

JERUSALEM, Nov 5: After several delays, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday presented the land-for-peace agreement with the Palestinians to his cabinet for approval, taking a necessary step toward implementation of the accord, reports AP.

The cabinet was expected to narrowly ratify the agreement despite vocal opposition by several ministers. However, the vote might not be taken until Friday or even Sunday, after many hours of debate, said Netanyahu adviser David Bar-Ilan.

Netanyahu had postponed the cabinet meeting twice in two days, charging that the Palestinians had failed to present a time table for the arrests of 30 suspects in the killings of nearly 100 Israelis.

Bar-Ilan said the cabinet was convened after Israel received assurances from the United States on Wednesday evening that the 30 would be arrested in three stages, with the roundup to be completed by the end of January.

However, Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said the Palestinians had not provided any new assurances in the past two days. Erekat said the latest delays and disputes did not bode well for the implementation of the accord.

"I urge Netanyahu to stop such painful tactics, to stop exporting blame to us... and maybe to start thinking of the mentality of a partner," Erekat said.

Under the accord reached during last month's Mideast summit at the secluded Wye Plantation in Maryland, Israel is to withdraw from 13 percent of the West Bank over a period of 12 weeks, with the Palestinians taking steps against Islamic militants during each

phase of the pullback. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said Wednesday that 12 of the wanted men were already in detention, and that he would make an effort to round up the others.

A Palestinian police official said Thursday that in all, 14 were in jail. Several of the suspects have been in Palestinian jails for months or years, but Palestinian security officials in the past refused to provide exact figures.

US Mideast envoy Dennis Ross, meanwhile, delayed his trip to the region. Ross was to arrive on Thursday to oversee implementation of the agreement, but is now expected over the weekend, Palestinian officials said.

While the dispute over the wanted men appeared to have been settled, the next crisis already loomed on the horizon. Israeli and Palestinian officials have widely divergent interpretations of the procedure that will lead to the annulment of clauses in the Palestine Liberation Organization founding charter calling for Israel's destruction. The paragraph in the peace agreement addressing the issue is vaguely worded.

Israeli officials insist that the clauses be annulled with a vote by the Palestine National Council, a body with hundreds of members.

to convince Tehran, AIP said. "Expelling refugees at a time when the winter season has started is a condemnable act," the Taliban official said.

AIP quoted Afghan ambassador to Pakistan, Maulvi Saedur Rehman, as saying that 60 Afghan refugees had been killed in Iran in recent months. The ambassador also accused the Iranian authorities of arresting thousands of Afghans.

Iran said on Saturday it had given hundreds of thousands of illegal Afghan refugees three weeks to leave the country.

Iranian Interior Ministry official Hassan-Ali Ebrahimi said the Afghans must report to the ministry by November 21 and the government will then issue exit permits in Mashhad in Korasan province, which borders Afghanistan.

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Off the Record

Yet another film on 'Bandit Queen'

LUCKNOW, India: India's notorious "Bandit Queen" Phoolan Devi is set to be the subject of another film — but this time made by the village where she allegedly gunned down 20 men to avenge her rape, reports AFP.

The original film, "Bandit Queen" directed by Shekhar Kapur, received international acclaim, but not among the Thakurs — upper caste Hindu landlords — of Devi's home state of Uttar Pradesh.

The Thakurs complained bitterly that the film portrayed Devi as a heroin, and themselves as a band of rapacious landlords gleefully committing atrocities on the lower castes.

The bandit-turned-politician currently lives in New Delhi, although she still faces some 55 murder charges.

The main movers behind the new film are the people of the remote village of Behamai, where Devi and her outlaw band allegedly massacred 20 people on February 21, 1981.

The film project has been backed by a landlord's association, the Thakur Samaj, which agreed to help finance the writing of script. "The first film projected Devi as a woman wronged, assaulted and tormented by upper caste Hindus," the headman of Behamai, Raja Ram Singh, told AFP.

"The film showed that Devi was gang-raped at Behamai and massacred the 20 people to avenge the insult. But this was absolutely untrue," he said.

"We have evidence to show that Devi's version is a pack of lies and that her depiction as a wronged woman was just a cover-up for her ghastly misdeeds, including cold-blooded murders."

Singh, who escaped the 1981 massacre by hiding in nearby ravines, lost a brother and two nephews to the bandits bullets. Devi, now 36, does not deny her years with the bandits but claims she never killed anyone.

However, she has repeatedly defended her right to "take revenge" on the Thakurs of Behamai village after a group of them gang-raped her.

Singh dismisses the revenge defence, pointing out that two Muslim men and three low caste Hindus were among the 20 people massacred. "She knew about the identity of these five but that did not stop her from massacring them," said Singh.



He is no more an ordinary worker

BEIJING: An ordinary worker has salvaged a sunken barge of 24 tons by himself, a new world record, reports Xinhua. KuaI Shibo, a worker with a steel company in Yantai City, east China's Shandong province, had his name recorded in the Guinness Book of World Records last week, six years after his heroic deed, today's China Daily reported.

KuaI was reminded of a sunken barge near new harbor in April 1991 when the construction project was just announced. The barge, 24 meters long and 4.9 metres wide, had sunk about six months before, it originally belonged to a local fishery company.

KuaI, a veteran diver, decided to pull the barge out to enable the construction of the new harbor. He then bought the barge at a price of 10,000 yuan (1,204.8 US dollars).

KuaI started with wooden plugs to block up holes on the ship which was under three-meter deep water. But a thick coat of algae had blurred the location of holes.

The steel worker dived into the sea one hour every day with a home-made lamp in one hand and an iron shovel in the other. It took him half a year to complete the first part of his plan.

Then the diver indulged himself in watching the tide. The right moment arrived on January 2, 1992. KuaI predicted that the water level would then rise by 1.7 meters when the tide would arrive.

At 3:00 in the morning, KuaI pumped water out of the barge. When the ebb tide came at 7:00, the barge emerged from the sea.