

Ferry leaves Dubai for Iraq breaking a hole in int'l isolation

DUBAI, Nov 8. The first ferry service to Iraq since its 1990 invasion of Kuwait left here Saturday breaking a hole in the international isolation created by eight years of UN sanctions including a ban on all regular flights, reports AFP.

The 140-ton Al-Wehda anchor and set sail for the Iraqi port of Umm Qasr offering travellers without special UN authorisation, the first alternative to the 950 km desert road journey from Amman.

The ferry can carry up to 550 passengers as well as 220 cars and 500 tonnes of goods on the 36 hours Gulf crossing to Iraq and will provide a weekly service.

But on its maiden journey to Iraq the Jebel Ali-1 carried only 40 or so passengers, officials from the ferry firm Naif Marine Services (NMS), acknowledged.

Around 15 of them were Iraqis, the official said, drawn from the 50,000 or so who live in the United Arab Emirates according to unofficial figures.

It's not too bad for the maiden trip. Our aim, first and foremost, is to establish a regular link to Iraq and then passenger numbers will go up, one of the UAE businessmen behind the project told AFP on condition of anonymity.

He added that for its first crossing the ferry had also been unable to carry vehicles. The firm asked the UN for permission to carry cars, lorries and freight aboard the ferry, but it was not forthcoming, the businessman said.

"We are going to submit a new request to the UN and we hope to get UN approval for future crossings," he said.

The ferry service will run at a substantial loss for some time to some of the businessmen acknowledged.

"The one way trip to Umm Qasr costs us a fortune between 25,000 and 30,000 dollars and 7,000 to 10,000 dollars a day more if the boat gets held up."

Passengers board a ferry service to Iraq that started on Saturday from Rashed port in Dubai, the first direct link between the Gulf and its sanctions-hit neighbour since the 1990 Gulf War. — AP/UNB photo

Pakistan to seek extradition of MQM leader

LONDON, Nov 8. Pakistan is to seek the extradition from Britain of the exiled leader of the country's third largest party, accusing him of involvement in a wave of political murders, it was reported here today, reports AFP.

The Sunday Times said that Altaf Hussain, self-exiled leader of the ethnic-based Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), who has lived in Britain since 1992, had been blamed for orchestrating the violence from London.

Citing Pakistani government sources, the British weekly newspaper said that if it proved impossible to have him extradited — London has no extradition treaty with Islamabad — Pakistan would press for him to be tried in Britain.

A recently passed law makes it a criminal offense to plan or

instigate terrorist acts abroad from British soil.

Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Algeria have accused London in the past of being a safe haven for Islamic fundamentalists and opposition members under arrest or wanted by authorities in those countries.

The Pakistani authorities alleged that Hussain has been involved in 50 murders and 150 cases of kidnappings and arson in a wave of political violence that has claimed 6,000 lives in Karachi and the surrounding areas of Sindh province in the past six years, said the Sunday Times.

MQM last month broke off its political alliance with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who accused the party of involvement in the recent murder of former provincial governor Hakim Mohammad Saeed.

UN chief visits Western Sahara

Kofi Annan's trip on Sunday to the Western Sahara gives the UN general secretary a firsthand view of the UN mission that has been pushing for seven years to resolve a once-bloody territorial dispute with a referendum, AP reports from Laayoune.

Annan's tour also includes stops in Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria, each of them countries that are directly or indirectly concerned by the quarter-century-long dispute, which at one point almost led to war between Morocco and Algeria. The high-level trip here could serve as a leveler in a highly-charged dispute over the future of the mineral-rich desert territory claimed by Morocco since 1975, when Spain abandoned it.

US journalist awarded

Nate Thayer, an American reporter who became the first Western journalist in nearly two decades to interview the elusive Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot, was awarded \$20,000 by an investigative research organisation on Saturday, AP reports from Cambridge.

Thayer, a Southeast Asia correspondent for the Hong Kong-based Far Eastern Economic Review, was given the award during the inaugural conference of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, held at Harvard University. The consortium's five-judge panel said Thayer had "illuminated a page of history that would have been lost to the world had he not spent years in the Cambodian jungle."

Mortar attack in S Lebanon

Guerillas fired mortars and rocket-propelled grenades at Israeli-backed militiamen on Sunday, provoking Israeli air and artillery retaliation, security officials said, AP reports from Rashaya, Lebanon.

There was no immediate word on casualties from the early morning fighting in the eastern sector of the Israeli-occupied buffer zone in south Lebanon, the officials said. Guerillas attacked the consortium's five-judge panel said Thayer had "illuminated a page of history that would have been lost to the world had he not spent years in the Cambodian jungle."

Rebels in DRC claim to have captured 400 Chadian troops

KIGALI, Nov 8. Rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) announced on Saturday that they had captured 400 Chadian troops fighting for President Laurent Kabila, reports AFP.

But a DRC spokesman previously unknown as a rebel fighter — declared that his independent group had carried out the attack and had killed 200 Chadian soldiers.

No confirmation of either claim was immediately available.

A highly placed source in Goma, the rebels' headquarters on the border with Rwanda told AFP in Kigali by telephone that the insurgents had captured 400 Chadian soldiers since Thursday near the rebel held northeastern town of Buta.

It is situated on a T-junction 400 km north of rebel-held Kisangani, the DRC's third city intersecting a road leading to Sudan to the east and the Central African republic, farther to the west.

Local polls in Mexico viewed as test of major party strength

MEXICO CITY, Nov 8. Local elections in three Mexican states Sunday are viewed as an important barometer of the strength of the country's three major political parties ahead of the 2000 presidential elections, reports AP.

The race for governor in the Pacific coast state of Sinaloa appears too close to call between the candidates of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, known as the PRI, and the conservative National Action Party.

The PRI — which has held the presidency and most state houses for 69 years, and which has won five of seven gubernatorial elections so far this year — appears likely to hold on to a key governorship in central Puebla state.

And the left-center Democratic Revolution Party, or PRD, appears to have a chance of gaining its second governorship in the small central Puebla state.

These elections will reflect on an important battle still to be fought among presidential candidates, columnist Salvador Garcia Soto wrote in the newspaper La Cronica on Saturday.

Czech president visits Slovak capital

BRATISLAVA, Nov 8. Czech President Vaclav Havel visited the Slovak capital Bratislava on Saturday for the first time in four years, saying there was new hope in the air since the election of a reform-minded government in Slovakia, reports Reuters.

Havel, who stayed away while former strongman Slovak Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar was in power, met new premier Mikulas Dzurinda, in office eight days, and other members of the government later on Saturday.

Central Americans dig out from hurricane damage, wait for aid

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras. Nov 8. Central Americans battled to get roads, water supplies and healthcare working again, to reach flood victims and avoid the outbreak of diseases after the region was battered by Hurricane Mitch, reports AP.

Across flooded Central America, health authorities warned on Saturday that diseases such as malaria and cholera could spread in the weeks to come.

Twenty-five cases of cholera have been reported in Guatemala, the Public Health Ministry there reported on Friday. The Guatemalan government has increased water-treatment efforts to prevent the disease from spreading.

International relief flights delivered the first water purification machines and needed medicines.

"We have supplies, but everything is going very slowly. The situation is very serious and there is a lot of concern there could be many more deaths," Tom Turley of the Connecticut-based aid group Americares said on Saturday.

Throughout Central America, the storm killed an estimated 10,000 people, 6,000 of them in Honduras. Turley said that many roads in Honduras may not be passable for four to seven more days.

Until roads are re-established, aid workers will probably depend largely on helicopter deliveries.

The United States plans to send 12 helicopters to join 20 already there. US Army Secretary Louis Caldera said during a trip to inspect storm damage and meet with Honduran President Carlos Flores on Saturday.

He said US soldiers have saved more than 700 lives in Honduras in rescue missions, using helicopters to pluck some victims from rising floodwaters.

"From day one, the soldiers who have been stationed here were out saving lives," he said.

US military engineers arrived on Saturday and more were on the way to help repair roads and bridges, and 3,000 National Guardsmen will be in the country between January and June for repair work, Caldera said. US forces also will help transport pipes into

tegucigalpa to repair the water network, now running at 25 per cent capacity, Caldera said.

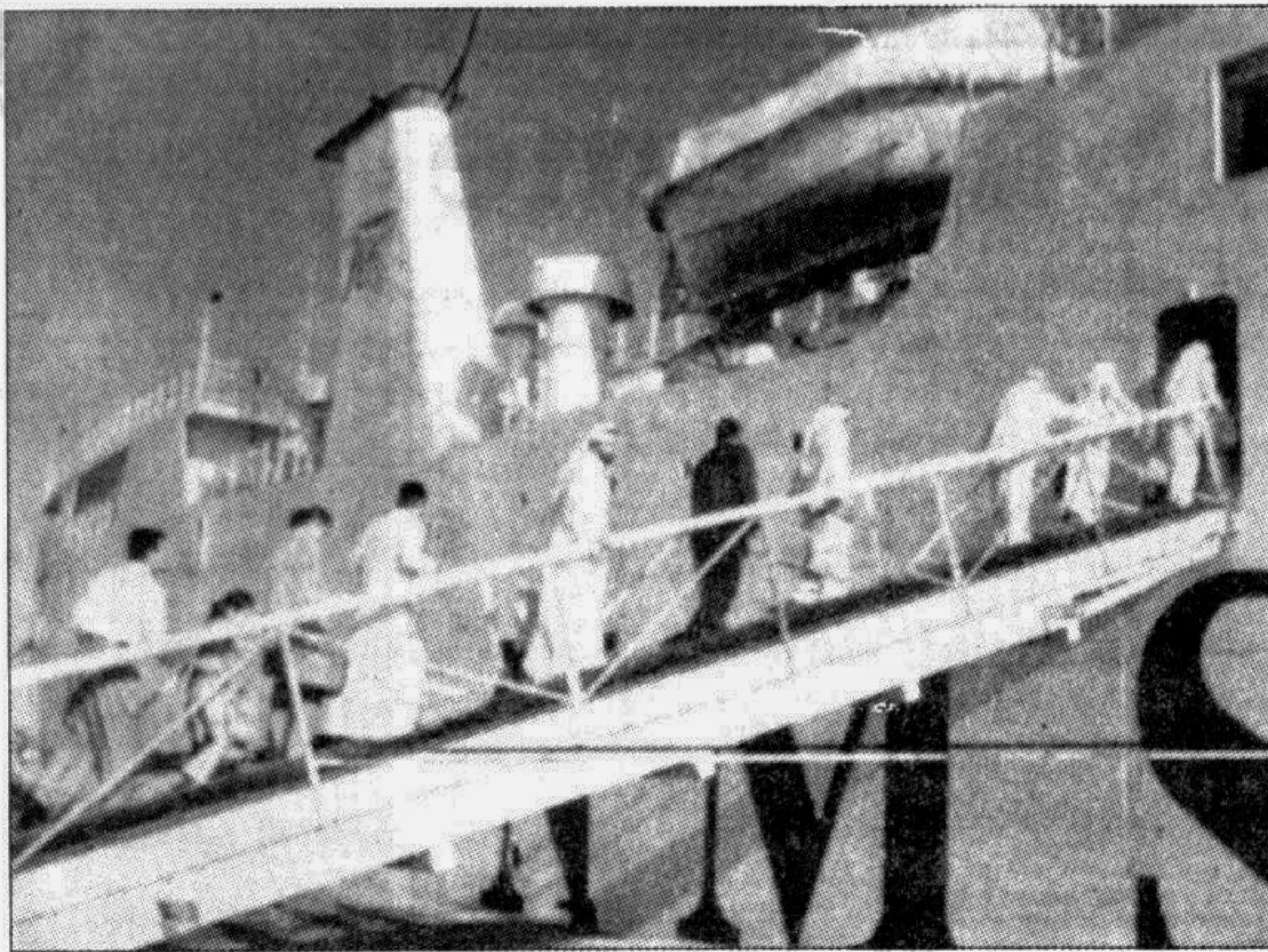
Over the long term, Caldera said, "It is clear that rebuilding Honduras and ... these countries of Central America is going to require a sustained effort."

Caldera announced the additional aid before flying to Guatemala and Nicaragua to evaluate storm damage and relief efforts in those countries. An estimated 4,000 died in flooding and mudslides in Nicaragua, and hundreds more died in Guatemala and El Salvador.

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan announced that top UN officials will begin a tour of the disaster area aimed at assessing relief needs starting from tomorrow.

Former President Carter visited Nicaragua on Friday, and former President Bush was due to visit Honduras on Sunday. Carter took a flight over Nicaragua's disaster zone, warning that "the worst is yet to come — cholera and dengue."

Some of the members from a party of 15 veterans who received the Legion of Honour medal from French Ambassador Daniel Bernard, standing centre back row, at a ceremony at the Imperial War Museum, south London on Saturday. To mark the 80th anniversary of the end of WWI, 160 surviving British First World War troops who fought on French soil received France's highest award. — AP/UNB photo



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Zyuganov will push for move to oust president Yeltsin defends democratic reforms

MOSCOW, Nov 8. President Boris Yeltsin defended his democratic reforms on Saturday, the 81st anniversary of the Russian revolution, and said even his bitter communist opponents had led to rest their violent past, reports Reuters.

Mass indifference lent weight to his dismissal of hard-line rhetoric from a few thousand nostalgic citizens who marked the date by rallying under the red flag. But further talk of Western food aid believed the ailing Kremlin leader's suggestion that Russia could speedily deal with its economic crisis.

Economy Supremo Yuri Malysukov said the government would publish the final package of anti-crisis measures, which he said were pro-market-but also socially oriented, on Tuesday.

Few Russians felt moved to

join thinly attended communist rallies marking what was once, as revolution day, a high holiday on the Soviet calendar. For the majority, simple economic survival was more pressing than making their voice heard.

Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, one of several leaders warning up for the election battle to succeed Yeltsin, told some 8,000 followers on Moscow's Lubyanka square that he would push for a rapid parliamentary move to oust the president, whose second term is not due to end until mid-2000.

"The first condition is Yeltsin's resignation," he said.

Police said some 270,000 people attended rallies across the country. An opinion poll, quoted by Interfax news agency, showed that only 13 per cent of

Russians agreed with communist ideology.

Yeltsin, who is in Sochi on the Black Sea recuperating from what the Kremlin says is "fatigue," looked tired in a television address to mark the 1917 revolution anniversary, which has been renamed the 'Day of Accord and Reconciliation' under Yeltsin.

He has insisted he will see out his term but has handed much of his work over to Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov.

His three-minute address on Saturday carried a note of valedictory self-justification. Even communists accepted democracy and the market, he said.

"No matter how much reforms are criticised today, they have achieved their main purpose," Yeltsin said.

Return of Discovery marks beginning of the age of space station

HOUSTON, Nov 8. The return home of the shuttle Discovery with legendary astronaut John Glenn on board marks the end of the era of early space pioneers and the beginning of the age of the space station, reports AP.

Thirty-six years after Glenn made history as the first American to orbit earth, he and six Discovery crewmates ended their nine-day mission on Saturday, landing safely at the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida.

Though Glenn, 77, looked a bit unsure on his feet as he left the craft, he seemed otherwise unaffected by the return to gravity after more than a week of near-weightlessness.

The landing brought Glenn's second trip to space to a close, a generation after his tiny Friendship 7 capsule blasted into the heavens atop a mercury

rocket for a flight that lasted just five hours and circled the planet only three times.

This time, Glenn orbited the earth in Discovery 134 times, travelling some 5.8 million km. But Glenn's final retirement as an astronaut also ushered in a new age of space exploration and science, an epoch which Discovery's October 29 launch symbolised.

The shuttle lifted off from the space centre's Pad B, not far from where Friendship 7 took off in 1962 and only a few hundred meters from where the shuttle endeavor is being prepared for its December launch to begin construction on the International Space Station (ISS).

"Today ... brings us to the next era," said Tommy Hoff, NASA's space shuttle programme manager. "The space station assembly is about to begin."

The space shuttle Discovery glides in front of emergency vehicles at Kennedy Space Centre Saturday, enroute to a landing with a crew of seven aboard after a nine-day mission. Senator John Glenn, 77, was one of the crew members aboard the shuttle and is the oldest man ever in space. — AP/UNB photo

Pinochet feels betrayed by Britain

LONDON, Nov 8. Former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet late Saturday said he felt betrayed by Britain over his arrest and warned that Chile's fragile democracy could be undermined if he is prosecuted over human rights abuses during his 17-year military rule, reports AP.

In his first public statement since he was arrested on October 16 to face possible extradition to Spain, the former junta chief said that Chile's democratisation was being damaged by the action against him.

Recent reports of his country's history had been a travesty of the truth and he was the subject of "spurious attempts by foreign prosecutors to convict me on unproven charges," he said in a statement released to the British media.

Pinochet who remains under armed guard at a London clinic while he awaits a ruling from Britain's House of Lords on his extradition, said he was "saddened that the experience of my arrest has shaken my belief in Britain."

"Previously, I never doubted that Britain was a country where people may move about freely," he said.

The retired general said he had come to Britain as a "special ambassador" for Chile, perhaps not specifically as the guest of the Foreign Office but with their full knowledge and cooperation.

Gunmen kill 7 in N India

GAUHATI, Nov 8. Unidentified gunmen fired on a crowd gathered for a Hindu festival, killing seven and injuring 25, police said Sunday, reports AP.

Police suspected ethnic Bodo militants in the attack Saturday because the victims were Assamese, in a village surrounded by Bodo settlements. Police added the indiscriminate firing was typical of a Bodo attack, though it was not clear to which of the two Bodo militant groups operating in Assam state they belonged.

Both the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland want to carve out a separate Bodoland from Indian territory for the Bodos, who consist of nearly 1.2 million of Assam's 22 million people.

The attackers arrived on bicycle as villagers gathered at the community sports field for ritual performances of scenes from the life of the Hindu god Krishna. They fired with automatic assault rifles.

The attack occurred in Jalah, a village 150 kilometers (90 miles) west of the state capital, Gauhati.

Protection of opposition leaders

HUN SEN, Nov 8. The opposition leaders and many of their supporters fled abroad shortly after the new National Assembly was sworn in on September 24, saying they feared violence from Hun Sen's supporters. They dismiss his promises that they are safe to return.

In letter released late Saturday, Hun Sen said he "fully supports the king's suggestion, Your Majesty's humble gesture and idea will make the return quickly possible, giving a golden opportunity for progress for our nation."

There was no immediate response from Ranariddh or Sam Rainsy.

Hun Sen's former communist Cambodian People's Party narrowly won the July elections, but failed to secure the two-thirds majority needed to approve a new government.

Tehran for improving ties with Cairo

RIYADH, Nov 8. Talks on Saturday between the Iranian foreign minister and his Saudi counterpart focused on Iran's wish to improve relations with Egypt and the Iraqi-UN standoff, Saudi officials said, reports AP.

The Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, who was scheduled to travel to Egypt Sunday for talks with President Hosni Mubarak, told reporters he hoped Iran and Egypt would upgrade their relations. The two states broke ties after Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979.

"There are no obstacles to high-level relations between the two sides," the prince said.

Officials said the object of Prince Saud's trip to Cairo was "to mediate and improve relations between Iran and Egypt."

Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi, who flew

Off the Record

Now, politicians on the same track

NEW DELHI: The Speaker of India's lower house of parliament reportedly attended a dinner at which the menu included protected species including peacock, a newspaper said on Sunday, reports AP.

Wild board and spotted deer were also among the delicacies served by a party colleague in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, the Indian Express quoted local officials as saying.

Speaker G M Balayogi, a member of the state's ruling TDP Party, could not be reached for comment.

Andhra Pradesh Forest Minister K E Prabhakar warned of "strict action" against the guilty "however powerful they may be."

The peacock is India's national bird and along with wild board and spotted deer forms part of the government-recognised list of endangered species whose hunting is outlawed.

The express said the politician who served the dinner at his village last month had gone underground to escape arrest along with his cooks and some relatives.

Last month five top Indian movie stars were arrested in the northern desert state of Rajasthan for allegedly hunting protected deer.

Laughing contest

PATTAYA, Thailand: Some bent over backwards. Others jumped up and down. And a few stomped their feet, struggling — painfully at times — to keep themselves laughing as long and loudly as they could, reports AP.

Spectators wondered whether permanent physical damage would result Saturday to some of the contestants at Thailand's first laughing contest, sponsored by the US-based Ripley's Believe It or Not.

"I've been to a number of fairs and contests around the world, and this was definitely one of the weirdest," said Jerry Reed, 66, of Santa Cruz, California, the only foreigner among the 15 finalists from an original 64 entrants.

Reed likened the laughing contest to chicken-clucking and hog-calling events he had taken part in Texas. His ho-ho-ho was something like an operatic baritone.

Competitors were judged on the originality and oddity of their laughs and got big points — in the form of giggles and guffaws — for endurance from the hundreds of spectators.

Kawachart Thongchue, a 54-year-old housewife and mother of four, walked away with the winner's prize of 10,000 baht (280 dollars) and a certificate from Ripley's acknowledging her achievement.

Kawachart laughed for nine minutes — the maximum allowed — and continued to do so even as she was escorted off the stage. She promised to donate part of the winnings to a Buddhist temple.

"It pleases me to be able to make people laugh, especially at a time when so many of us are facing economic hardship," Kawachart told reporters, referring to Thailand's worst recession in decades.

Kawachart said that she didn't think about anything particularly funny — mostly about herself and how silly she probably looked on stage. Her high-pitched, horse-like whinny sounded unmistakably genuine and had the crowd in stitches.

Ripley's opened a museum in this popular seaside resort in 1996. Besides giving Kawachart a cash prize, she will also feature in the Ripley's cartoon strip syndicated to newspapers in 42 countries.

The event was partly aimed at changing Pattaya's image from a polluted red-light district fronting the Gulf of Thailand to a more family oriented destination.

Ripley's plans to hold the contest annually.

Arafat urges Saddam not to give US excuse for strikes

BAGHDAD, Nov 8. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has sent a message urging Iraq President Saddam Hussein not to give the United States an excuse for military strikes against Baghdad, a Palestinian official said on Saturday, reports Reuters.

Palestinian Public Works Minister Azzam al Ahmad acting as an envoy for Arafat to Baghdad said he would deliver a message to Saddam on the current crisis over UN arms inspections.

Al Ahmad told Reuters that Arafat was urging Saddam to block the efforts of crisis seekers bent on confrontation.

We have the conviction that there are people in the United States who would like to bombard Iraq again this is what we want to avoid an endeavour not to happen, he added.

The Palestinian official said he had briefed Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz about the message.

"We are ready for political dialogue and finding a way out that meets the minimum demand of Iraq, Al Ahmad quoted Aziz as saying.

"Iraq wants to see the light at the end of the tunnel and Iraqis hope to have a particular date approaching towards putting an end to their plight, Al Ahmad said.

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