

# Historic elections begin in Britain

LONDON, May 6: Historic elections to reshape the constitutional map of Britain got underway slowly Thursday, with voters asked to elect the first Scottish parliament in three centuries, a Welsh assembly, reports AFP.

In what has been dubbed "super Thursday," some 30 million Britons are also voting in local elections that are as big a test of the fragmented opposition Conservatives as a mid-term referendum on Tony Blair's government.

Polling stations opened at 7:00 a.m. (0600 GMT) to a slow start, and will close at 10:00 p.m.

First results from Scotland and the municipal elections are expected soon after they close and from Wales on Friday morning.

For Scotland and Wales, the ballots are part of a sweeping constitutional change promised under Blair's pet project of devolving power from Westminster to the regions.

The vote for Scotland's 129-seat assembly is effectively a two-way battle between pro-independence nationalists and Blair's ruling Labour party.

Although Labour is expected to win comfortably, last opinion polls suggest it will fail to

get an absolute majority, forcing a likely coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

It would make the separatist Scottish National Party (SNP) of Alex Salmond a sizeable opposition, enshrining its position at the heart of a new Scotland and giving it a permanent platform from which to campaign for independence.

"It must be the worst May morning I have ever seen," said Labour's leader in Scotland, Donald Dewar, as he cast his vote in the rain early on.

"Let's beat the weather and the opposition."

The new parliament will have powers confined to local concerns such as health, education, housing, tourism, transport and law and order, but will be able also to vary the national income tax rate by up to three pence and to make laws.

Reserved for London will be foreign and defence policy, economic strategy, and crucially, the power to engineer further constitutional change.

Wales is getting its own less powerful, but it will be less powerful, with no ability to alter tax rates or legislate.

Labour support there is rock-solid, with most opinion polls suggesting it will win an abso-

lute majority of the 60 seats.

Alun Michael, the party's choice to be the assembly's First Minister, said it was "a tremendous day for Wales" and called for a large turnout.

Meanwhile, 13,000 council seats on 362 municipal authorities in England -- except London -- Scotland and Wales were also up for grabs.

Blair has turned the vote into a mid-term referendum on his government two years after it took power.

But it is the Conservatives who arguably have most at stake. The party is riven by splits over the legacy of former premier Margaret Thatcher, with the leadership trying to edge away from her pure free-market policies.

If the Tories fail to make significant headway, it could cost party leader William Hague his job.

Political analysts predict Labour will lose more than 1,000 council seats, but it can afford to do so from the huge majority it won after trouncing the Conservatives in the last municipal vote in 1995.

Hague must realistically aim to win at least 1,500 seats from Labour to be able to proclaim some sort of political comeback for his demoralised party.

Labour currently controls 172 of the councils up for election, the Liberal Democrats 37 and the Tories just 12.

The elections in Scotland and Wales are the first time that proportional representation methods have been used in the United Kingdom outside Northern Ireland.

In Scotland, 73 of the 129 deputies will be elected by constituencies, and eight electoral regions will each pick seven additional members.

Recent polls put Labour on course for 56 seats, the SNP 43, the Tories 17 and the Liberal Democrats 11.

Two-thirds of the Welsh assembly will be elected on first-past-the-post in constituencies and the rest on the regional list system.

Latest polls put Labour with 34 seats, Plaid Cymru on 13, the Conservatives on seven and the Liberal Democrats on six.

Both the Scottish parliament and Welsh assembly plan their first meetings in Edinburgh and Cardiff next Wednesday.

When the counting is over, the United Kingdom will have four parliaments, the national legislature at Westminster and one each in Northern Ireland -- elected in June last year -- Scotland and Wales.

## Defence weekly says India developing Agni-III missile

LONDON, May 6: Indian scientists are reportedly developing a longer version of the intermediate range ballistic missile Agni-III with 3,500 km reach capable of engaging targets deep inside China, according to the Janes Defence Weekly, reports PTI.

Together with the just test-fired two stage solid fuel 2,000 km range Agni-I, designed to carry nuclear warhead, Agni-I, already test fired three times, and short range surface-to-air, Akash, and Trishul missiles and to be acquired Russian 300v anti-tactical Ballistic Missile, the under development Agni-III will form India's minimum nuclear deterrent (MND), it said in a country defence profile on India.

The defence journal claimed that along with land based missiles, India was also on the threshold of deploying submarine launched ballistic missile 'Dhanush' which would be later deployed on surface warships.

Quoting Indian sources, it said defence planners were working out estimates to develop a hugely expensive command structure of the country first ever minimum nuclear deterrent force. The weekly, however, reported squabbling between the army and the air force over rights to command such a force.

## Spanish court moves to limit charges against Pinochet

MADRID, May 6: Prosecutors for Spain's highest court moved Wednesday to limit the charges against former Chilean president Augusto Pinochet, who is awaiting extradition from London for human rights offences, reports AFP.

The prosecutors for the National Audience have always opposed the pursuit of Pinochet by one of the court's judges, Baltasar Garzon, for the abuses committed under his rule in Chile.

They said Wednesday after Garzon raised the number of cases of alleged torture levelled against Pinochet to 72, that Spain could not try such offences committed against non-Spaniards by non-Spaniards outside Spain.

Pinochet was arrested in Britain last October at the request of Garzon, and the British House of Lords ruled he could be prosecuted, but only for the last two years of his 1973-1990 military rule, when torture was an extraditable offence under British law.

British Home Secretary Jack Straw gave the green light for extradition proceedings and on Friday Garzon raised the number of alleged offences against Pinochet from 51.

The Spanish prosecutors also expressed the view that the new charges required Spanish government approval, as had the initial request for extradition filed in November.

## 38 Muslim rebels surrender in Philippine

ZAMBOANGA, May 6: At least 38 members of the Muslim extremist group Abu Sayyaf have surrendered to the military in the southern Philippines, an official said today, reports AP.

Col Orlando Buenaventura, 3rd Marine Brigade commander, said the Abu Sayyaf members are in the custody of the marines on Jolo island in Sulu province, about 945 km south of Manila.

Buenaventura said formal surrender ceremonies, to be attended by Defense Secretary Orlando Mercado, have been scheduled for Friday.

Buenaventura said the surrender followed a "long series of negotiations" by the marines. He said he expected more guerrillas to come down from the hills.

The military estimates there are about 200 Abu Sayyaf members, most of them based on small southern Philippine islands. The group, however, claims more than 1,000 members.



Refugees from Kosovo arrive at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey on Wednesday before they are transferred to a housing set up at the US Army Garrison at Fort Dix, United States. More than 450 Kosovar refugees arrived Wednesday after a 13-hour journey from Macedonia. — AFP photo

# G-8 opens talks for Kosovo peace effort

BONN, May 6: Foreign ministers from the Group of Eight club of industrialised powers opened talks here today expected to set the wheels in motion for a new Kosovo peace effort, an official German spokesman said, reports AFP.

Russia, the United States and their G8 partners Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan, were hoping to piece together a plan to end the violence in Kosovo and signs Belgrade was offering to compromise after six weeks of NATO bombings.

At issue is a draft plan providing for an end to the NATO bombing campaign, a withdrawal of Serb forces from Kosovo, the deployment of an international peacekeeping force and provisional government under UN authority, German officials said.

In Rhein Main Air Base, US President Bill Clinton said Thursday that Russia, after weeks of siding with Yugoslavia, is nearing agreement with the Western powers on a military force to protect ethnic Albanians once the fighting

stops in Kosovo.

"They're getting closer and I wouldn't be surprised if it happens today," Clinton said in an interview with European TV correspondents. "If it doesn't happen today, I think it will happen soon."

Clinton held out that hope as he headed to a refugee processing center in Ingelheim to meet with a group of ethnic Albanian families driven by Serb forces from their homes in Kosovo province.

He reiterated that NATO must be "at the core" of any international security force in Kosovo -- "because otherwise, I don't think the Kosovars will go home and it would be a terrible thing to set this up and not have it work" -- but he welcomed participation by Russian forces.

In Belgrade, NATO jets struck fuel depots in Yugoslavia's third-largest city and other targets.

In another possible overture toward peace, Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic allowed Kosovo's most prominent ethnic Albanian leader, Ibrahim Rugova, to leave the

country Wednesday for Italy.

Rugova arrived in Italy three days after Milosevic freed three American soldiers captured March 31 along the Yugoslav-Macedonian border.

Nevertheless, NATO continued its relentless air attacks for a 43rd straight night. Yugoslav media reported attacks late Wednesday against two fuel depots -- one oil and the other gas -- near Nis, a major industrial center and the country's third-biggest city located 200 kilometers (120 miles) southeast of Belgrade.

Meanwhile, Macedonia closed its border Wednesday to ethnic Albanians back fleeing Serb authorities, as the government announced it would only accept as many new refugees as were flown out each day.

Around 5:00 pm (1500 GMT) the Macedonian military presence increased around the Blace crossing and they closed the border, said Paula Ghedini, spokeswoman for the UN refugee agency in Macedonia.

## Mass graves discovered in Kosovo

LONDON, May 6: Albanian TV reported that a number of mass graves had been discovered in the Serbian province of Kosovo containing the bodies of mostly young victims of Serbian forces, reports Reuters.

The station, monitored by the BBC, said the rebel Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) discovered some 50 bodies of ethnic Albanians who had been killed in the past two weeks.

A total of 34 of them were still unidentified and remained unburied as a result of the large number of Serbian troops in the areas where they had been found.

The youngest victim cited was a 12-year-old, killed on a road in Reziale, while the oldest was 76. It added that a grave with 100 bodies had also been found at Reziale.

In a separate report the television said Serbian police had buried 70 bodies in the graveyard of Zest on Sunday.

## 35 drown in Calcutta bus plunge

CALCUTTA, May 6: Thirty-five people were feared dead after a bus fell into the river Bhagirathi in India's eastern state of West Bengal today, police said, reports Reuters.

The bus was travelling from Calcutta to Siliguri in the early hours of the morning when it broke through a bridge railing, said the assistant inspector of police in Berhampur, Dilip Dey.

Thirty-three passengers and two drivers were on the bus, he said, adding that the bus sank and all 35 were still missing.

Divers were searching for the missing people, but there was little chance of their survival, said Susanta Ghosh, the West Bengal State Minister for transport.

## Heat wave toll rises to 103 in India

NEW DELHI, May 6: Heat wave conditions continued to oppress several parts of the country yesterday with 14 more deaths due to heat-stroke taking the toll to 103 so far, report PTI.

Seven people died in Orissa, two in Andhra Pradesh and five in Uttar Pradesh though mercury dipped slightly in several parts.

Adilabad and Madak in Andhra Pradesh lay groaning under heat with temperature registering 44 Degrees Celsius, the second highest in the state for the second consecutive day even as many areas in the coastal belt recorded between 40 and 42 Degrees Celsius.

The heat wave has claimed 48 lives in Orissa, 20 in Andhra Pradesh, 11 in Bihar, 19 in Uttar Pradesh and five in Gujarat.

Mercury soared to 47 Degrees Celsius at Banda, Jhansi and Agra, met office said. Ambala in Haryana and Amritsar in Punjab sweltered under 43.1 and 41.3 Degrees Celsius.

## Rockets rattle northern Kabul

KABUL, May 6: A barrage of opposition rockets rattled northern neighbourhoods of the beleaguered capital early on Thursday. There were no immediate reports of casualties, said doctors and witnesses, reports AP.

At least 12 rockets slammed into neighbourhoods north of the combined military and civilian airport apparently from opposition positions, some 20 kilometres north of the city.

The barrage follows an opposition rocket attack on Wednesday on a military base and ammunition depot in the heart of a congested residential northern neighbourhood of Kabul.

Residents of the area said three major explosions were followed by dozens of smaller ones that caused hundreds of shells and mortars to rain down on homes. A child was killed and several people were injured. Windows were smashed in hundreds of homes.

# Mandela slams ethnic cleansing, NATO airstrikes

BEIJING, May 6: South African President Nelson Mandela Thursday slammed both NATO air strikes and ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia during the China-leg of his farewell tour, while Chinese officials expressed skepticism over ethnic cleansing reports from the Balkans, reports AFP.

Security was tight as a frail-looking Mandela addressed a capacity crowd at Beijing University for almost one hour, making a passionate plea to end the NATO bombing of Kosovo, which he characterised as "deeply disturbing."

"On the one hand human rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Rights are being violated in ethnic cleansing. On the other hand the UN Security Council is being ignored by the unilateral and destructive action of some of its permanent members," Mandela said.

"Both actions must be condemned in the strongest terms," he said, to applause from the audience, of which just a small minority were students.

Mandela told the capacity crowd he believed the NATO bombing risked undermining the authority of the UN Security Council.

"Can the world afford, at the end of a century that has seen so much pain and suffering, to risk damaging the authority of the world body that has the task of maintaining international peace?" he asked.

Asked if China was prepared to share Mandela's position on

ethnic cleansing, China's foreign ministry expressed doubts about reports of ethnic cleansing and suggested the refugee exodus from Kosovo was a result of the NATO bombing campaign.

There are different interpretations and reports over this. We must make sure what has really happened," ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao said.

We're opposed to ethnic cleansing in any form if there is such cleansing. With regard to ethnic cleansing in Kosovo,

there have been various reports," he said, adding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Yugoslavia must be respected.

Mandela, whose country established ties with China only in January 1998 after breaking off relations with Taiwan, is the first South African head of state to visit China.

He was greeted by President Jiang Zemin on Wednesday as he began the final leg of his farewell tour.



South African President Nelson Mandela waves farewell to students at the Beijing University on Thursday after a ceremony at the campus library. — AFP photo

# Accord on E Timor referendum

DILI, Indonesia, May 6: Pro-and anti-independence activists in East Timor on Thursday welcomed the signing of a UN plan on East Timor's political future, reports AP.

On Wednesday, Indonesia and Portugal signed a historic agreement allowing the East Timorese to vote on whether to remain part of Indonesia or seek independence in an Aug 8 ballot. Indonesia invaded the former Portuguese colony in 1975 and annexed it a year later.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who hosted the signing ceremony at UN headquarters in New York, urged an end to the recent upsurge in violence in East Timor. Pro-Indonesian militiamen have killed dozens of civilians in recent weeks, and separatist rebels staged several attacks on the military.

Leandro Isak, a pro-independence leader in Dili, East Timor's capital, said the UN plan recognised the right of his homeland's 800,000 people to choose between independence and a measure of autonomy.

"We welcome the signing in New York," he said. "But let's wait and see how things turn out after the people are informed about the plan."

Outside the state University of East Timor, about 100 students demonstrated for independence and raised a banner that read, "Reject autonomy in every form."

Florentino Sarmiento, a former legislator who supports autonomy, also said the ballot plan was positive because it would provide an outline of the autonomy proposal.

The autonomy offer would give the East Timorese control over local administration, education, and cultural affairs, while Indonesia would keep control over security and defence.

"Our struggle is bearing fruit since we've been fighting for this for a long time," said Sarmiento, head of a government-backed human rights commission in Dili.

"I hope that the people accept autonomy as a gift from the international community," said Abilio Soares, East Timor's Indonesian-appointed governor.

"In a democratic world, we should accept or reject this through the ballot."

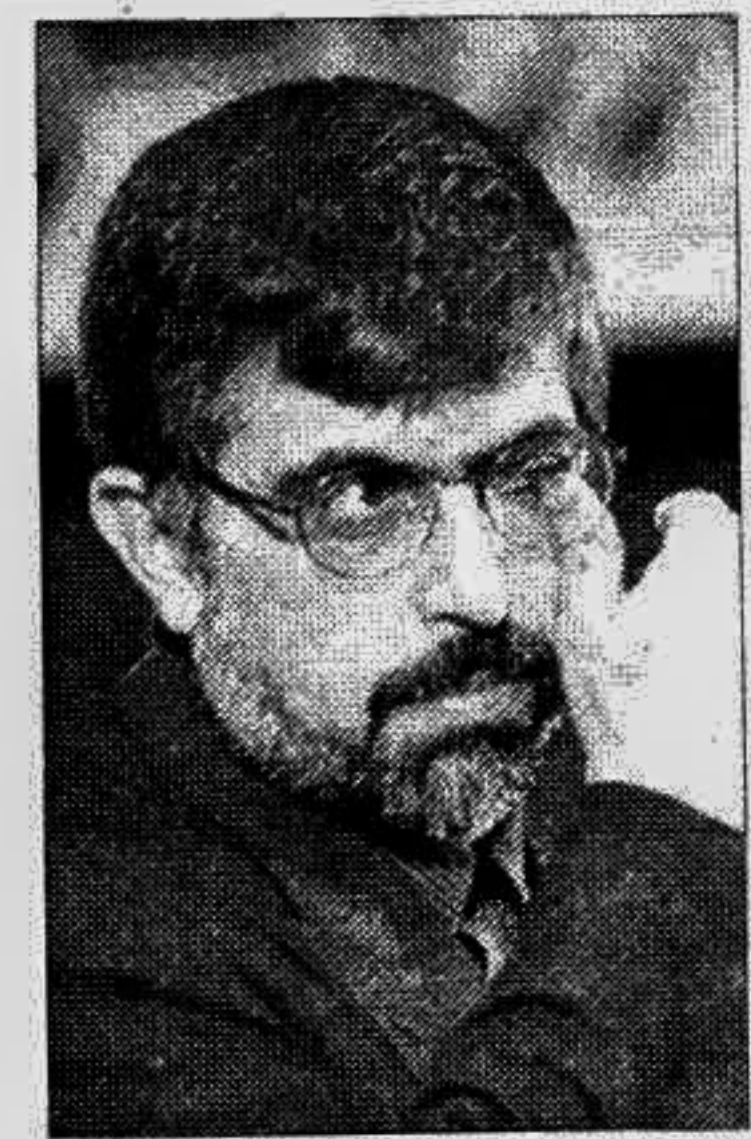
Militia leaders have criticised the UN package and have threatened hundreds of UN advisers who are expected to arrive in East Timor in the weeks ahead to help guarantee security.

The UN advisers will work with Indonesian troops who have been accused of collaborating with militiamen during their attacks on suspected separatist sympathizers.

The military has acknowledged providing training and weapons to some militia groups, but says the armed civilians are supposed to be neutral peacekeepers.

Bishop Carlos Belo of Dili, a co-winner of the 1996 Nobel peace prize for his efforts to solve the conflict in his homeland, said the signing in New York was a step forward.

"I hope the UN police forces will cooperate with the Indonesian police to create a peaceful situation prior to the August ballot," Belo said.



AFP file photo of Golam Hossain Karbaschi, the former Tehran mayor who was put to jail on Thursday.

## Tehran's former mayor sent to jail

TEHRAN, May 6: Tehran's popular former mayor Gholamhossein Karbaschi was taken to jail on Thursday after being convicted last year on charges of corruption, his aides said, reports AFP.

Karbaschi had given himself up to a Tehran court following a warrant issued against him last week amid last-ditch efforts by his supporters to keep him from serving a two-year jail sentence.

He was taken to Evin prison in northern Tehran in a police car after the court confirmed the sentence.

Iranian police broke up a demonstration outside the courthouse by supporters of Karbaschi, a reformer close to moderate President Mohammad Khatami who is credited with giving Tehran a much-needed facelift during his term in office.

Supporters chanted "Karbaschi, you are our hero" and hurled flowers at him as he left the courthouse, but tussles broke out with demonstrators hostile to the former mayor.

Karbaschi had been free since his conviction last year, but the warrant issued a week ago indicated that the 44-year-old former cleric would have to turn himself in no later than Thursday.

## Bid to kill Rafsanjani foiled

TEHRAN, May 6: Iranian authorities have foiled an attempt on the life of influential former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani by a radical religious movement, a newspaper reported Thursday.

The assassination bid was "discovered and neutralised," the English-language Iran News reported, without giving any date or other details about the attack.

Quoting an "informed source," the newspaper said the attack was prepared by a group linked to another fundamentalist movement which is already implicated in an assassination attempt on a top judicial official in January.

Ali Razini, head of Tehran's justice department, was paralysed in the legs after a bomb attack in the capital that left one person dead and another four injured.

Tehran announced last month it had arrested Hassan Milani, the leader of a shadowy fundamentalist religious network with about 30 members, for the Razini bombing.

Rafsanjani, 65, one of the architects of the 1979 Islamic revolution and a close confidant of the republic's late founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was head of state from 1989 to 1997.

He remains a powerful figure as head of the state Expediency Council, which settles constitutional disputes, and he is the top advisor to Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

While regarded as a guardian of the moderate wing, Rafsanjani has close ties with all political factions and is a key figure in Iranian politics.

Iran has been rocked in recent months by a series of deadly attacks against intellectuals as well as leading officials.

# Lanka extends emergency powers of security forces

COLOMBO, May 6: Sri Lanka's parliament Thursday extended by one month the emergency powers of the country's security forces fighting the Tamil Tiger rebels, reports AP.

The measures allow soldiers and police to detain any suspect without trial for 90 days and search civilian houses on mere suspicion that a guerilla may be harbored inside.

The military said it had killed 14 Tamil guerrillas Wednesday in four clashes in the north, where the separatists are fighting to carve out an independent homeland for the country's minority Tamils.

In the national capital, Defence Minister General Anura Kumudatille accused the rebels of continuing "atrocities" in different parts of the country.

"In the circumstances the government cannot take any chances," he told Parliament deputies in his argument to extend the emergency powers.

Although Sri Lanka has an elected government, the "Public Security Ordinance" gives sweeping powers to the police and the military to deal with members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the main rebel group.

The emergency rule, however, must be extended on a month-to-month basis by Parliament.

Ratwatte said his troops were successfully pushing the rebels out of towns and into jungles in the north, the center of the 16-year old insurrection.

Military spokesman Col Ranjith Witana said eight rebels were killed when troops spotted a rebel position and attacked with artillery. The area is near the government-held town of Mankulam, about 250 kilometers (155 miles) north of Colombo. Four rebels were killed in a separate attack, also near Mankulam. The remaining fatalities occurred around the area in two other incidents.

There was no independent confirmation of the military's claim as the government discourages civilian visits to the war theater.

The LTTE says it wants a separate homeland for Sri Lanka's 3.3 million Tamils, accusing the 14 million Sinhalese majority of discrimination -- a charge the government denies. Over 58,000 people have died in the insurrection since 1983 in the country off India's southern coast.

# BRIEFLY

## US to inspect N-site in N Korea: A

US team will begin an inspection of a suspected nuclear weapons site in North Korea on May 18, South Korean officials said Thursday, AP says from Seoul.

About 15 American officials and nuclear experts will spend several days inspecting the site at Kumchang-ri, northwest of the North's capital, Pyongyang, they said. At least two inspections are planned to clear US suspicions that the communist country may be reactivating a nuclear weapons programme frozen under a 1994 agreement with Washington.

## Russian volcanologist rescued: A

A Russian volcanologist, Alexander Mironov, was rescued on the point of starvation after being lost in the Kamchatka peninsula without food for two months, ITAR-TASS news agency reported yesterday, AFP says from Moscow.

Mironov, 50, had arrived in the far eastern peninsula on February 17 to observe the activity of Mount Mutnovsky. But he had fallen ill, and on March 8 robbers had stolen his food supplies. Since then he had eaten nothing until he was found by hunters in a mountain refuge in a state of extreme weakness, with his legs paralysed, ITAR-TASS said.

## 2 rebels slain in Philippine: Two

Two communist rebels were killed and an army soldier was wounded in a gunbattle in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, a military spokesman said yesterday, AFP says from Zamboanga.

A New People's Army (NPA) band ambushed an army special forces patrol near the town of Baganga on the island's eastern coast late Tuesday, Colonel Horacio Lapinid told reporters. The soldiers fought back killing two rebels while one of their own was wounded, he added.

## Troops kill tribal in Myanmar: A

About 30 Myanmar soldiers raided a hilltribe village close to the Thai border on Wednesday night and killed one villager, a Thai security source said, Reuters says from Bangkok.

The source in Thailand's Mae Sai district opposite Myanmar said 42 ethnic Akha villagers escaped into Thailand after the raid on Sampli village close to the Myanmar town of Tachilek. They told police the raid might have been the result of a dispute over narcotics since villages in the area are known drug transit points. They said Myanmar troops rounded up about 200 villagers during the raid and shot one when he attempted to run away.



Prince Albert of Monaco (R) hands the trophy of Best Record Sales to US singer Janet Jackson on Thursday in Monaco during the World Music Awards ceremony. — AFP photo