

# C'wealth team meets Pak military ruler

ISLAMABAD, Oct 29 : A Commonwealth ministerial mission seeking a commitment from Pakistan to restore civilian rule met military ruler General Pervez Musharraf today, reports AFP.

The meeting was held in the garrison city of Rawalpindi near Islamabad. The talks lasted 45 minutes and had been conducted in a "cordial atmosphere" with a "free exchange of views" officials said.

No further details were immediately available.

Sources said the four-member team, led by Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, would try to ascertain how long it will take for the military to restore democracy after an army coup earlier this month.

Pakistan has been warned that it faces indefinite suspension from the Commonwealth

if it does set out a clear timeframe for an end to military rule.

At talks in London on October 18, Commonwealth Foreign Ministers agreed to suspend Pakistan with immediate effect from all meetings of the 54-nation organisation, including the heads of government summit in Durban, South Africa, from November 12 to 15.

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group -- the organisation's democracy watchdog -- will however review this decision on the eve of the Durban summit in light of the results of the ministerial mission.

Mission spokesman Kaye Whiteman told reporters here that the question of Pakistan being expelled from the organisation would not be on the agenda in Durban. "The matter to be decided is formal suspension," she said.

Musharraf has said he is committed to a return to civilian rule in Pakistan but has not specified any date.

The armed forces have no intention to stay in charge "any longer than absolutely necessary," Musharraf told the nation after the October 12 ouster of prime minister Nawaz Sharif's government.

The Commonwealth mission has already met with President Muhammad Rafiq Tarar, chief justice Saeeduzzaman Siddiqui and Foreign Minister Abdus Sattar.

It also held separate meetings with politicians, representatives of Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and the main fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) party.

JI chief Qazi Hussain Ahmed on Thursday urged the mission to respond with "understanding and sympathy" to the post-military coup situation in Pakistan.

In a memorandum to the mission he said the people of Pakistan had "heaved a sigh of relief" after the October 12 military takeover because they were "fed up" with the "undemocratic activities" of the Sharif regime.

Officials said the Commonwealth group at its meetings with President Tarar and Foreign Minister Sattar on Thursday had shown "understanding" for the need for change of the political setup.

The delegation appreciated that General Musharraf had pledged to return to a "genuine" democracy as soon as possible, they said.

The mission chief was expected to address a press conference before ending the trip late Friday.



New Indonesian Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri is flanked by President Abdurrahman Wahid (L) and Top Economic Minister Kwik Kian Gie during a family photo following the swearing-in ceremony of the 35 new Cabinet members at the presidential palace in Jakarta yesterday. Top row (from L to R): Home Affairs Minister Lt Gen Surjadi Soedirdja, Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab, Forestry and Plantations Minister Nur Mahmudi Ismael and Law and Legislation Minister Yusril Isha Mahendra. — AFP photo

Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi delivers his policy speech at the lower house of parliament in Tokyo yesterday. Obuchi launched a new Diet session promising more than 95 billion US dollar in state spending for the economy and special aid for small business. — AFP photo

## Israeli, PA hold first meeting on permanent peace

JERUSALEM, Oct 29 : Israeli and Palestinian negotiating teams appointed to hammer out a permanent peace settlement held their first meeting here Friday, Palestinian officials said, reports AFP.

The Palestinian and Israeli chief negotiators -- Yasser Abed Rabbo and Oded Eran -- met for two hours in a Jerusalem hotel along with the head of the Israeli president's office, Arieh Shummar, the officials said.

Their talks focussed on preparations for a three-way summit Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat are due to hold in Oslo Tuesday with US President Bill Clinton.

The two sides also discussed launching detailed talks on the final status of the West Bank and Gaza Strip immediately after the Oslo summit, the officials said.

## Thousands rally for referendum in Aceh province

JAKARTA, Oct 29 : Tens of thousands of people demonstrated in the separatist-plagued Indonesian province of Aceh to demand an East Timor-style referendum on independence, a report said today, reports AFP.

The protesters -- who came from all over the province in cars, motorcycles and buses -- gathered Thursday at the Darussalam University in Banda Aceh, the provincial capital, the Aceh-based Serambi daily newspaper said.

Speeches were made for around 90 minutes and shouts of "Long live Referendum" and "Freedom" were yelled by the crowd, said the report.

## Japan warns people to stock water, food, medicine for millennium bug

TOKYO, Oct 29 : Japan's government today warned people to stock up to three days' worth of water, food, fuel and medicine to ride out the millennium computer bug, reports AFP.

One of the most dramatic New Year alerts by an advanced nation, it is to be broadcast on television and printed in newspapers from Saturday, an official said.

Preparations for the year 2000, or Y2K, computer glitch were "considerable," Tokyo's advanced information and telecommunications society promotion headquarters said.



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II looks at a display on American history during a visit to Keele University in Keele, Staffordshire Thursday. — AFP photo



An Indian security force personnel stands vigil with a machine gun near a building housing most of the government offices in Srinagar yesterday. Four people were killed and dozens injured when suspected separatist guerrillas fired more than a dozen grenades towards the civil Secretariat building. — AFP photo

## Russia pounds Grozny as UN sending mission

GROZNY, Russia, Oct 29 : Russian forces pounded the Chechen capital for the third day today as the United Nations prepared to send a humanitarian mission to the rebel republic amid mounting international concern at the violence, reports AFP.

Moscow's warplanes blasted Grozny airport and the north-west of the besieged city, Chechen officials said, as federal forces also battled Chechen gunmen just outside Grozny's outskirts.

Russian bombers flew more than 70 sorties over Chechnya in a 24-hour period to wipe out "rebel bases" to the southwest and east of Grozny as well as the capital, NTV television station reported, citing federal military officials.

Chechen sources meanwhile said that Russian Grad rocket-

launchers blasted the western Chechen villages of Bamut, Samachki and Achkol-Martan, where Russian forces were poised just two km away.

Fighting also continued for control of Gudermes, Chechnya's second city just east of Grozny, with mixed messages from Russian generals about whether federal forces would take the city by storm.

Moscow said it had killed 30 Chechen fighters and destroyed two command centres, 10 vehicles and three communication centres after blasting "rebel" bases near Tsa-Vedeno, Itum-Kale and the Argun canyon, all in the south, as well as Grozny and Gudermes to the east.

Russian generals on Thursday vowed to encircle the capital by early November, saying 80 percent of all possible escape routes had already been

blocked off.

In New York, the United Nations announced it would soon dispatch a mission for areas bordering on Chechnya to assess the needs of more than 190,000 refugees who have fled fighting between Russian and Chechen forces.

In the strongest response to the month-old Russian ground offensive in Chechnya, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called on "both sides in this conflict to show restraint and to take special care to avoid civilian casualties."

Moscow says its military crackdown on the breakaway republic is aimed at wiping out Islamic "terrorists" behind incursions into neighbouring Russian territory and a wave of apartment blasts in Russia which killed nearly 300 last month.

## Fresh fighting kills 56 in Lanka

COLOMBO, Oct 29 : Government forces and Tiger rebels have fought intense battles in northern Sri Lanka, leaving at least 56 killed on both sides, defence officials said today, reports AFP.

The clashes were in the area of Ampakama which the troops captured from the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas recently, a defence ministry spokesman said.

He said 42 Tiger rebels were killed by troops overnight and troops had recovered the bodies of 27 guerrillas. The spokesman said five government troops were also killed.

In another clash at a nearby village, seven members of the LTTE were shot dead by troops while the LTTE shelled a hospital in the northern town of Elephant Pass.

Two soldiers were killed and over 20 wounded during the attack on the Elephant Pass base hospital.

## Philippine armed forces chief dismisses coup rumours

MANILA, Oct 29 : The Philippines' armed forces chief today denied suggestions a military coup was in the making, after analysts warned President Joseph Estrada's plummeting popularity could foment discontent within the ranks, reports AFP.

General Angelo Reyes said such speculation was "wild, irresponsible and baseless" and would only scare potential investors as it caused "unnecessary feeling of apprehension and concern."

"The armed forces has no agenda but to uphold the constitution of the people," Reyes said in a radio interview.

Political commentators here this week raised the possibility of a military takeover as Estrada's low ratings reached what they described as "dangerous" levels which they said could force the military to intervene.

## US speeds up naturalisation process

WASHINGTON, Oct 29 : The amount of time immigrants spend waiting for the United States to approve their applications for citizenship has dropped by more than 50 percent, the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) said Thursday, reports AFP.

At the beginning of the 1999 fiscal year -- which ended September 30 -- immigrants could expect to wait 28 months, just for their application to be processed. Now that time is down to 12 months, the INS said in a statement.

More than 1.2 million people applied to become US citizens in fiscal 1999, up 105 percent from the previous year, the INS said.

A total of 972,485 people actually received citizenship during that time.

"Welcoming new citizens is one of the most important things we do as a nation," said INS commissioner Doris Meissner in the statement.

## Progress made in Nagorno-Karabakh spat: Ivanov

MOSCOW, Oct 29 : Negotiations to settle the fate of the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh have advanced, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said today before meeting in Moscow with US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, reports AFP.

"We have decided to intensify our mediation efforts," ITAR-TASS news agency cited Ivanov as saying, without elaborating.

Russia, France and the United States, the so-called Minsk group, are mediating talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory. His comments came two days after gunmen who it is believed were possibly motivated by the territorial dispute burst into the Armenian parliament and shot dead the premier and seven other politicians.

## Indonesian Cabinet sworn in, to stay unchanged until 2004

JAKARTA, Oct 29 : Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid officiated at the swearing-in of his 35-member Cabinet today, warned them to lead honest lives and said he expected them to serve their full term until 2004, reports AFP.

Wahid stressed the Cabinet formation had been a collective effort and told the officials, formally sworn into office by Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri in a ceremony at the Merdeka Palace, to live simple and honest lives.

Cabinet members, he said, "should be able to live simply and honestly, be capable of carrying out their duties, be able to know what to do and be acceptable to the people."

As more than 1,000 demonstrators, most of them civil servants from abolished ministries, protested outside the palace gates, Wahid said Indonesians would judge the

cabinet by these criteria and called on his ministers to be "careful."

The president also pledged a clean government, a key reform demand, saying that any member of the Cabinet brought to court for any reason, should immediately resign.

"This is important to maintain international confidence, including from the business world, in the Cabinet in general, in me as president and in the vice president," he said.

The government of former strongman Suharto, and to a lesser extent that of his successor B.J. Habibie, were dogged by accusations of massive graft.

Wahid said that the selection of the cabinet members had been a joint effort involving not only the president and vice president but also the heads of both the lower and upper houses of parliament and outgoing armed forces chief, General Wiranto.

"The five of us formed this Cabinet and to show that this is the result of a collective work, I have asked the vice president to jointly responsible (for the cabinet). Although administratively it is the responsibility of the president, morally it is our collective responsibility," he said.

Wahid also dismissed criticism of some new ministers, saying: "This cabinet is one that basically should remain until 2004."

The Cabinet includes five active military officers, including former armed forces chief General Wiranto who is now coordinating minister for political and security affairs, and one retired general.

Wahid expressed his hope that all future cabinets would be formed in the same collective manner, reflecting a national character.

## World Bank says

## E Timor can expect up to \$500m Interfet pledges HR probes

DILI, East Timor, Oct 29 : The leader of the World Bank mission to East Timor today said donors could provide up to \$500 million dollars to help rebuild the territory, but he warned against a flood of grant aid, reports AFP.

"East Timor should not start with any debt," said Klaus Rohland, World Bank country director for Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands, adding that the nation could rely on non-refundable grant aid for the first few years.

As a result he said the World Bank planned to establish a trust fund for East Timor's development to full statehood.

"We want to give a measured dose of support. Too much money too quickly can ruin the social fabric and structure of a country as we saw elsewhere in the 1970s and 1980s," he told a press conference here.

He said donors were keen

not to repeat the experience of Indonesia where there was "development with corruption, or even non-development with corruption."

Rohland also stressed the importance of including East Timorese as much as possible in the planning process to tailor development strategy to meet its specific needs.

The International force in East Timor (Interfet) said today it would push ahead with investigations into atrocities until UN investigators arrive, despite criticism that vital evidence is being lost.

Interfet spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Mark Kelly, responding to a protest from Amnesty International that the UN investigation was taking too long to get off the ground,

said time was not an issue.

"I think that those experts that we have sought to come have dealt with similar scenes around the world, and they are able to deal with the sites regardless of the time they may take to get there," Kelly said.

He said Interfet was conducting all preliminary investigations with the assistance of non-military forensic experts and was seeking help from more forensic specialists.

He did not give details of cases being investigated, saying only that "all have been logged and filed and will be handed over in a thorough manner to those teams."

Amnesty Thursday strongly criticised the UN for being too slow in sending investigators to East Timor.



India's main opposition Congress Party activists wave photographs of assassinated prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and his widow Sonia Gandhi and shout slogans against Vajpayee government during a demonstration near the parliament yesterday to denounce the inclusion of Rajiv's name in a Swedish arms kickback probe. — AFP photo

## Indian church groups slam state boycott of Pope visit

NEW DELHI, Oct 29 : Indian Church groups responded angrily today to a government directive preventing the country's vice president from attending a multi-religious meeting during the visit of Pope John Paul II, reports AFP.

The government said Thursday it had asked Vice President Krishan Kant to boycott the multi-faith event that was to be addressed by the Pope during his November 5-8 visit.

The foreign ministry said the meeting was of a religious rather than a state nature, making it inappropriate for a senior member of a secular government to attend.

But the All India Catholic Union (AICU) -- a group representing India's 16 million Roman Catholics -- dismissed the ministry's argument as "specious" and accused the government of double standards.

"The highest dignitaries of the government... routinely attend functions of a religious nature organised by non-official and religious organisations," the AICU said in a statement.

"India is a secular nation with a plural heritage. Its people are deeply religious, and their participation in each other's ceremonies and functions is quite an integral part of their tradition."

## VHP vows to continue anti-Pope march

Meanwhile, radical Hindus vowed today to press on with a protest march against next week's visit by Pope John Paul II after state authorities in central India blocked their way.

Vishnu Hari Dalmia, a leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Forum) said the cross-country march would continue.

## IBM heralds dawn of flexible transistors

WASHINGTON, Oct 29 : IBM has developed a new, flexible transistor that could give rise to foldable electronic newspapers and computer screens and could revolutionise other devices such as solar cells. The New York Times said today, reports AFP.

The breakthrough was achieved by combining organic and inorganic materials for the first time, scientists at IBM's T.J. Watson Research Center in Yorktown Heights, New York, told the daily.

The hybrid materials could quickly lead to a new generation of inexpensive computer displays that are either flexible or embedded within curved plastic, glass or other materials, the researchers said.

The technology could also be used to develop solar cells that are lighter in weight, they added.

Current inorganic semiconductor require processing at high temperatures, making it impossible to embed circuits in plastic or other heat-sensitive materials, the daily said.

## ROK climbers rescued from Mount Everest

BEIJING, Oct 29 : Three Chinese rescue teams have reached 18 stranded South Korean climbers who have been snowed under on the north face of Mount Everest for nine days, South Korean officials in Beijing said today, reports AFP.

Two of the South Koreans, trapped at their base camp at 5,400 metre (17,800 feet), had been seriously injured in a fall and required urgent medical attention, they said.

With the aid of the Chinese rescuers they began descending down the Chinese side of Everest early Friday. Kim Muhan at the South Korean Embassy in Beijing told AFP.

## BRIEFLY

**Schroeder to visit Japan, China** : Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of Germany this weekend begins a visit to Japan, followed by one to China, with the aim in each case of forging closer political as well as commercial relations, AFP reports from Berlin.

Schroeder will be accompanied by some 40 captains of trade and industry, but the visits should in no way be seen as purely commercial interest, a senior official in the chancellor's office said.

**Japan vows legislation to curb cult** : Japan's Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi yesterday pledged to introduce legislation cracking down on the Aum Supreme Truth sect responsible for the lethal 1995 gas attack on Tokyo's subway system, AFP reports from Tokyo.

**King Sihanouk turns 77** : Cambodia's King Norodom Sihanouk will stay confined to the royal palace for his 77th birthday on Sunday, but aides asserted there was no cause for panic over his ailing health, AFP reports from Phnom Penh.

"His Majesty the King is old, so naturally he is tired and weak," palace protocol chief Khek Sisoda told AFP yesterday.

## Kocharian plots post-crisis future with Armenian MPs

YEREVAN, Oct 29 : Armenian President Robert Kocharian met with anxious lawmakers today to chart a political course out of a national crisis sparked by the murder of the volatile country's prime minister, reports AFP.

The nation had grown stable and politically calm, and everyone had hope in the future. But the situation changed in a matter of seconds, and now the nation stands before a new challenge," Kocharian told parliament in remarks broadcast on national television.

"We need cooperation and unity from society and all of the political powers," Kocharian said Friday he had not yet accepted the resignation submitted by Interior Minister Suren Abramian shortly after Armenia's defence ministry demanded a top-to-bottom security shake-up.

The streets of Yerevan remained calm although police were stepping up identity checks as the nation reeled from the shock of seeing Premier Vazgen Sarkissian and seven senior officials gunned down during a parliament debate Wednesday.

US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott was due to return to the Armenian capital on Friday to present Washington's condolences over the national tragedy in person, the US embassy announced in Yerevan.

A three-day official mourning period was to begin today in Armenia.

The 18-hour crisis ended after the gunmen -- whose motives still remain unclear -- surrendered after receiving assurances from the president that their lives would be spared.