



Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi delivers his policy speech at the lower house of parliament in Tokyo yesterday. Obuchi launched 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 Arafat and Oded Eran -- met for two hours in a Jerusalem hotel along with the head of the Israeli president's office, Arie Shumer, 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 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

# C'wealth team meets Pak military ruler

ISLAMABAD, Oct 29 : A Commonwealth ministerial mission seeking a commitment from Pakistan to restore civilian rule from the 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 not set out a clear time-frame 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 suspen-

sion," 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 Saeed Zaman Siddiqui and Foreign Minister Abdul 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 "un-

derstanding and sympathy" to the post-military coup situation in Pakistan.

In a memorandum to the mission he said the people of Pakistan had "had 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.



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 separatists 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 western Chechen villages of Bamut, Samachki and Achkoi-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's warplanes blasted Grozny airport and the north-west of the besieged city, Chechen officials said, as federal forces also battled Chechen guerrillas 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, TV station reported, citing federal military officials.

Chechen sources meanwhile said that Russian Grad rocket-

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

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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 arms bordering on Chechnya to assess the needs of more than 190,000 refugees who 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.

## US to give Iraqi opposition military training

WASHINGTON, Oct 29 : The United States will provide military training for opponents of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein from next week, Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said confirmed Thursday, reports AFP.

"This is to basically develop and support forces for democracy for a move to democracy within Iraq," Bacon said.

The New York Times reported Thursday that four Iraqi rebel leaders, including two former officers in the Iraqi armed forces, would undergo a 10-day training course in an air force facility in Florida next week.

The course would train the Iraqis in "how to organise a military in an emerging state," the newspaper said.

Bacon confirmed the course aimed "to begin working to build a democratic movement

outside of Iraq."

A state department official, who asked not to be named, added the course would be "classroom training, not field training," but that other courses could follow.

The goal of providing such aid to the Iraqi opposition was "to train people who would be ready to set up a democracy and operate a democratic government when a change of government comes in Iraq."

A conference of Iraqi opposition groups in New York this weekend has received explicit support of the US administration, in the hope that it will help forge a more united platform among the seven main groups that oppose Hussein's regime, the New York Times reported.

The state department official added that some delegates to the conference had been

threatened by the Iraqi authorities, and had received phone calls from relatives in Iraq asking them not to attend.

The main Shi'ite opposition group, the Tehran-based Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, will not attend the New York conference, the official said.

"They live in Iran. They can't really make their decision independently," he said.

The New York Times said this latest US assistance to the Iraqi opposition includes two million dollars' worth of office supplies, and is within the 97 million dollars of aid to the Iraqi opposition that the US Congress authorised last year.

After a US-led coalition force reversed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990-1991, the United States has openly encouraged Iraqi opposition groups.

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.

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.

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## 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.

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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.

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.

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

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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 Mahmud Ismail and Law and Legislation Minister Yusril Ihza Mahendra. — AFP photo

## 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.

The clashes were in the area of Ampakana 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 sheltered 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.

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.

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