

International

The lone survivor

NEW YORK, Nov 1: The only passenger who got off the doomed EgyptAir Flight 990 here before it crashed off the US east coast early Sunday was a grief counsellor who specialised in helping families struck by catastrophes, AFP said.

Edward McLaughlin, vice-president of the Family Enterprise Institute, appeared at a news conference here at the New York Port Authority (NYPA) following the crash that killed 217.

But none of the journalists in the room knew at the time that he was the mysterious "44th passenger" that had boarded the flight in Los Angeles, only to disembark in New York instead of continuing on to Cairo.

Under contract to EgyptAir, McLaughlin was considered an airline employee and it was thus possible for him to get off the international flight here, something forbidden to ordinary passengers.

He was quickly identified and questioned by investigators, who just as quickly ruled him out as a suspect.

EgyptAir crash

Hope for survivors fades

NEWPORT, Rhode Island, Nov 1: With hopes of finding survivors all but gone, searchers were to resume the grim task Monday of gathering the remains of an EgyptAir Boeing 767 that plunged into the Atlantic with 217 people aboard, reports AFP.

Authorities sought to determine whether foul play caused the tragedy, which saw the Cairo-bound aircraft plummet into the ocean just 33 minutes after taking off from New York, according to officials who cited radar reports.

As night fell over the crash scene off the US east coast, officials scaled back what they were still calling a search-and-rescue operation.

So far, those efforts have only yielded one body, some human remains and sundry wreckage from the debris field roughly 100 km southeast of Nantucket Island, Massachusetts.

"We found a wheel, life rafts that were partially inflated, portions of seats, clothing and

some paperwork including passports," Rear Admiral Richard Larrabee of the US Coast Guard told a Boston press conference.

The cause of the disaster, which occurred in clear weather after the Boeing left New York's John F. Kennedy airport at 1:19 a.m. (0619 GMT), was unknown said Jim Hall, chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board which coordinates crash investigations.

"We will undoubtedly hear many reports on what might have caused the crash of flight 990. All of those reports will be speculative. We do not know at this point what caused the crash," he told a Washington news conference.

Search efforts were to be "downgraded" by nightfall, with helicopters and aircraft to be "pulled back," leaving only four naval vessels at the site, he said.

In Washington, US Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater said federal officials would provide any assistance

needed in the recovery effort.

Among the assistance provided by authorities is the US Navy ship USS Grapple, equipped with highly sophisticated sonar, which left its base in Norfolk, Virginia for the Atlantic Ocean wreck site.

The Grapple could prove critical in locating the wreckage which is believed to be submerged in 65-80 meters (200-250 feet) of water.

Former US Navy diver Brendan Murphy said recovery efforts would be slow and arduous. "The cold and the depth of the waters will hamper the effort," he said.

The plane was carrying 197 adult passengers, two children not occupying seats, 15 crew on duty and three off duty when Flight 990 vanished from radar screens.

Last contact with the pilots was at 1:47 a.m. -- 28 minutes into the flight -- and was "routine," Hall said.

Three minutes later something went tragically wrong. "The aeroplane began a de-

scent from 33,000 feet (some 11,000 meters) at about 1:50 a.m." Hall said.

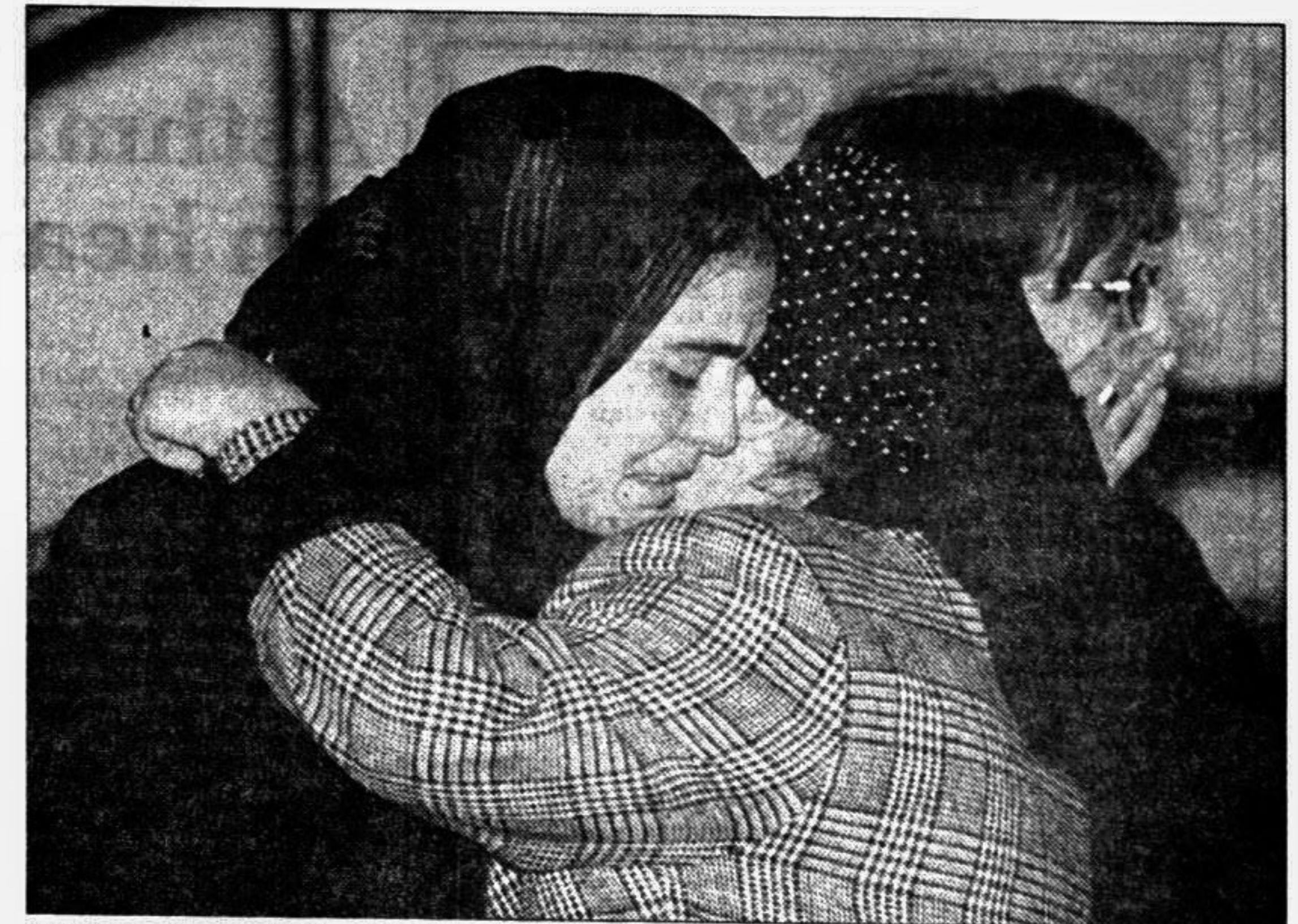
"The last radar contact in which the aeroplane provided altitude data was about 36 seconds later. At that time the aeroplane had descended to 19,100 feet (5,800 meters) -- a very rapid descent, approximately 23,200 feet (7,000 meters) per minute."

Two minutes later the plane disappeared, Hall said.

Egyptian Transport Minister Ibrahim al-Dumeiri said 129 US nationals and 62 Egyptians were among those aboard. Early reports said there were also two Sudanese, three Syrians, and one Chilean.

Meanwhile, experts were studying radar information to determine whether the plane had broken up before hitting the water.

Fox News, citing Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) officials, reported that the airliner may have exploded in mid-air. "We may have information on that later," said Hall.



A woman is consoled just before a memorial service for passengers of EgyptAir flight 990 on Sunday at the Islamic Center of Long Island in Westbury, New York. Two families in the mosque lost their parents on the flight that crashed into the Atlantic Ocean off Nantucket, Massachusetts.

— AFP photo

Fresh fighting kills 63 in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, Nov 1: Government forces and Tamil Tiger guerrillas clashed in northern Sri Lanka, leaving at least 63 killed on both sides, defence officials here said today, reports AFP.

Security forces killed at least 35 members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the loss of 28 government troops in fresh fighting near the town of Periyamadu over the weekend, a ministry spokesman said.

The fighting came as Tiger rebels identified 27 of their cadres killed by government forces in another confrontation near the village of Ampakamam on Friday.

The LTTE said over their clandestine Voice of Tigers radio Sunday that they had lost 27 of their fighters in the Wanni region on Friday but there was no immediate reaction to the latest military claims.

There had been heavy fighting in the north of the country in recent days, with both sides stepping up attacks ahead of full monsoon rains.

Rajiv killers appeal for mercy

NEW DELHI, Nov 1: Barely a week before the noose hangs around the necks of the four condemned prisoners in the Rajiv assassination case, a senior advocate has filed a mercy petition before President KR Narayanan requesting him to use his constitutional powers to commute their death sentences to life imprisonment.

Highlighting the case of the lone woman prisoner Nalini, Advocate BL Wadhera in his mercy petition said even one of the judges of the three-judge bench of the supreme court, which confirmed their death sentences, had commuted the capital punishment awarded to her to life imprisonment.

Quoting Justice Thomas, who had felt that Nalini deserved to be awarded life imprisonment, the petition said it could not be overlooked that she is a mother of a little female child who could not have experienced maternal cuddling as that little one was born in captivity...

Wadhera said the case of Nalini, an Indian Tamil, was distinguishable from the other three, her husband Murugan, Suthenthira and Perarivalan who were Sri Lankan Tamils who came to India to assist the crack team sent by LTTE supremo Prabhakaran to assassinate Rajiv.

Jakarta opens talks with Aceh rebels

JAKARTA, Nov 1: Indonesia has launched negotiations with a separatist rebel group in strife-torn Aceh in an attempt to bring peace to the region, a government minister said today, reports AP.

Attorney-general Marzuki Darusman said the government had opened top-level discussions with the rebel group, the Free Aceh Movement, and would do everything necessary to halt a decade of violence that has left more than 2,000 people dead and 150,000 displaced.

The situation in Aceh is very serious but I believe we can bring peace to the region," he said.

Darusman declined to elaborate on when and where talks with the rebels were being conducted.

Insurgents have intensified their campaign for independence during the past year. Their leaders said they were encouraged by the international community's willingness to support an independence referendum for East Timor.

Marzuki said President Abdurrahman Wahid had ordered a full investigation into the alleged killing of more than 50 civilians by the military in

On Saturday, a government fact finding team accused Indonesian soldiers of shooting dead 51 unarmed people from the village of Beutong Ateuh in west Aceh, some 2,000 kilometres (1,250 miles) northwest of Jakarta.

Pak military regime launches diplomatic initiative

EU delegation in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Nov 1: A special Pakistani envoy has left on a tour of major world capitals in a diplomatic offensive by the military regime to explain the circumstances leading to last month's coup, official sources said today, reports AFP.

Musharraf, who said the army was compelled to intervene because of a crumbling economy and institutional collapse, has set a reform agenda to lay the ground for returning the country to what he called a "true" democracy.

He has, however, not fixed a timeframe on how long it will take him to hold elections.

The military ruler has suspended the constitution, the parliament and provincial assemblies, appointing a national security council made up of military brass and civilians to aid and advise him.

Meanwhile, a three-member European Union fact-finding mission arrived here today to

explain the reasons behind the army action, which has sparked international criticism and calls for early restoration of the nascent democratic process in Pakistan.

The team, led by Finland's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Jukka Valtasaari, will meet military ruler General Pervez Musharraf and government officials during the two-day visit, they said.

Diplomatic sources said Valtasaari would gather facts on the situation in Pakistan following the October 12 coup that ousted the elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

The delegation will also determine the impact of the change in Pakistan on regional stability in South Asia.

On return the mission will report to the EU ahead of a meeting of its foreign ministers in Luxembourg later this month which is expected to discuss fu-

ture ties with Pakistan.

The delegation includes Kimmo Pulkkinen, a senior Finnish foreign ministry official, and Roland Zinzius, principal administrator at the EU council.

Valtasaari and his companions went into a session with newly appointed Pakistani foreign minister Abdus Sattar soon after their arrival, officials said.

They will also meet representatives of international financial institutions in Islamabad and call on General Musharraf on Tuesday.

A similar assessment mission from the British-led Commonwealth visited Pakistan last week.

Both the EU and the Commonwealth, which has suspended Pakistan from its meetings, have urged Pakistan's early return to democracy.

Food riots break out in cyclone-ravaged Orissa

India struggles with relief efforts

BHUBANESHWAR, India, Nov 1: Food riots were reported today in the Indian state of Orissa following a powerful cyclone which is feared to have killed thousands and left millions homeless, reports AFP.

Official sources reported an acute scarcity of foodgrains in Orissa, three days after the killer cyclone -- packing winds up to 260 km per hour (160 miles per hour) -- devastated the state's eastern coast.

Authorities said food trucks had been stopped and looted in several areas, including the state capital Bhubaneswar, where about 200,000 people have been left homeless.

"At its height, we never thought we would return alive from this disaster," passenger Nababaratna Pal, 40, told the Asian Age newspaper.

Tens of thousands of people have been camping out on elevated sections of the main national highway after their villages were submerged.

Relief officials said their main concerns were providing food and drinking water and preventing any outbreak of disease.

In this kind of situation, with many people still cut off after losing their homes, the relief needs are very pressing," said Patrick Fuller of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

Two IFRC teams were due to fly in to Bhubaneswar Monday to carry out an aerial and logistical survey of the affected regions.



A young girl wades through flood waters as she goes out looking for drinking water Sunday near Balasore in Orissa, as river waters flooded her village due to the cyclone.

— AFP photo

Gunman kills Brazilian mayor

The mayor of a southern Brazilian town was shot to death by an unidentified gunman late on Saturday, a city hall spokesman said on Sunday. Reuters reports from Sao Paulo.

Dorcelina Forlador, 37, was killed at her home in the town of Mundu Novo near the border with Paraguay in front of her husband and small daughter. "The killers made eight shots and hit her six times," the spokesman told Reuters. He said the killing could have been connected to Forlador's fight against corruption in the town.

Fireworks explode at Cairo airport

Fireworks exploded early Monday in the luggage of six Sudanese at Cairo's airport, creating panic, airport security services said, AFP reports from Cairo.

The airport had earlier echoed with the screams of hysteria and horror as distraught relatives learned their loved ones were aboard EgyptAir Flight 990, which crashed into the Atlantic off the east coast of the United States.

Myanmar frees HR activist

Myanmar freed British human rights campaigner Rachel Goldwyn Monday after granting her clemency, diplomats and government officials told AFP in Yangon.

Goldwyn was arrested after singing a pro-democracy song in a Yangon marketplace on September 7, convicted of sedition 11 days later and sentenced to seven years. British officials have been making strenuous behind-the-scenes efforts to win Goldwyn's release since her arrest, a strategy described by a diplomat here Monday as "quiet diplomacy."

Hackers break in to AP Web site

Hackers gained access to the corporate Web site of The Associated Press and displayed a Halloween greeting with a poem by Edgar Allan Poe, AP reports from New York.

The page placed on the AP site Sunday carried the name of the "United Loan Gunmen." That name has appeared on break-ins at six other sites since August, including those of three media outlets, the Drudge Report, C-Span and ABC. The group also claimed responsibility for hacking a site for Nasdaq and the American Stock Exchange. AP news operations were unaffected.

BRIEFLY

TAIPEI, Nov 1: Taiwan Defense Minister Tang Fei said today military expenditure would be raised by 40 billion Taiwan dollars (1.26 billion US) for the next fiscal year to cope with a perceived growing threat from China, reports AFP.

With the increase, the Nationalist island's military outlay would amount to 300 billion Taiwan dollars (9.45 billion US). Tang said in reply to queries raised at the parliament.

"Hopefully, the military spending would make up for three percent of the gross domestic product in the year 2001," Tang said.

He gave priority to beefing up of electronics warfare and anti-missile capability over traditional forces.

Given China's mounting threat, the military budget should have run higher if there were not the devastating earthquake on September 21, which killed more than 2,400 people and left 100,000 people temporarily homeless, Tang said.

Rehabilitation plans would cost the government tens of billions of US dollars.

According to foreign experts' estimates, the military forces of the Chinese communists are expected to rise to the level enabling them to use force against Taiwan from 2005 on," Tang said.

Jiang starts Saudi Arabia visit

DUBAI, Nov 1: China's President Jiang Zemin arrived in Saudi Arabia yesterday on the first visit to the oil-rich kingdom by a Chinese head of state since diplomatic relations were established, reports Reuters.

The Saudi Press Agency said Jiang was met in Riyadh at the start of the four-day official visit by King Fahd and Crown Prince Abdullah.

He is scheduled to hold talks with King Fahd and Crown Prince Abdullah, who diplomats say has been increasingly managing day-to-day affairs in the kingdom.

Jiang arrived from Algeria on a six-nation tour which has also taken him to Britain, France, Portugal and Morocco.

State meteorologists said the

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