

Pakistan opposes Indian suggestion to defer SAARC summit

ISLAMABAD, Nov 5: Pakistan yesterday opposed India's suggestion to postpone the SAARC summit and launched a veiled attack on New Delhi saying the 'adventurist' moves to defer the summit to 'serve hegemonic interests of one country will do incalculable harm to the grouping', reports PTI.

A foreign office spokesman said there was no precedence to postpone the summit on grounds of political change in a member country.

Obviously they recognise that an adventurist move to postpone the summit to serve hegemonic interests of one country will do incalculable harm to the organisation and weaken its capacity to push ahead with its agenda for development and stability," he said in a statement here.

In New Delhi, an external affairs ministry spokesman said India had sought postponement of the summit, to be held in Kathmandu from November 26-28, "for the time being".

Reiterating that the summit should be held on schedule, the Pakistani spokesman said "SAARC has now been in existence for the last 14 years and it has made significant progress in laying down the ground work for regional cooperation."

Pakistan appreciated that no other member-country had moved for postponement of the summit which is a proof of their maturity and their strong belief in the collective interest of the region, he said.

Sonia urged to seek clemency for killers of Rajiv Gandhi

NEW DELHI, Nov 5: A member of India's ruling coalition has urged opposition leader Sonia Gandhi to seek clemency for four people facing execution for killing her husband, newspapers said today, reports AFP.

The regional PMK party, a constituent of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's multi-party government, said Gandhi's intervention could save the lives of the four — two Indians and two Sri Lankans.

Former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi was blown up by a suicide woman bomber of Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at an election rally in southern India in May 1991.

The four condemned prisoners, including one woman, were originally sentenced to hang Friday in southern India, where they are now jailed.

But the government ruled that they would face the gallows only after Indian President KR Narayanan disposes of several mercy petitions wired to him on behalf of the condemned prisoners.

The Hindu newspaper said PMK chief S Ramadoss on Thursday urged the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi to recommend to the president that the death sentences be commuted to life imprisonment.

Ramadoss said Gandhi's killing was "a gruesome act." But he said if Sonia Gandhi helped the four to get clemency, she "would be acclaimed and appreciated by the lovers of human right."

Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party, which heads the ruling coalition, has said it supports the death sentence handed down to the four.

Cyclone razes India's most important zoo

NEW DELHI, Nov 5: A cyclone that devastated the eastern Indian state of Orissa did not spare the country's most important zoo, killing prize animals and razing parts of the park, zoo officials said today, reports AFP.

At least 12 crocodiles are thought to have escaped from the prestigious Nandankanan Biological Park during last Friday's monster cyclone which is believed to have left thousands of people dead and affected millions.

"Ninety per cent of the park's huge leafy trees have been uprooted, directly exposing animal enclosures and cages to the elements," the Press Trust of India quoted Zoo Director B.C. Prusty as saying.

Other officials at the zoo, which is 14 kilometres from the state capital Bhubaneswar, said they were trying to account for scores of animals killed or swept away.

At least a dozen crocodiles appeared to have taken advantage of flooding to escape to a nearby lake, they said, adding that the park's boundary wall had been destroyed.

A number of rare turtles were also missing, while a missing male hippopotamus had been traced to a location outside the 450-hectare national park.

"The calamity has caused the death of several animals and birds, including an 18-year-old lion, four deer, two rare hornbills and a blue bull," said Prusty, who managed to save some exotic species by sheltering them in his office.

"We have yet to make out how many animals and birds have perished," he said, warning that a shortage of clean drinking water could spread disease among the surviving animals.

The zoo was set up in early 1960s and soon became India's most important centre for botanical and zoological research and a popular tourist destination.

China agrees to resume military ties with US

WASHINGTON, Nov 5: China wants to resume military-to-military relations with the United States, which were suspended after a US bomber mistakenly struck the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo air war, US Defence Secretary William Cohen said Thursday, reports AFP.

China conveyed its decision to resume the military relationship in meetings in Beijing last week with Under Secretary of State Thomas Pickering, Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said.

"They have indicated they would like to re-establish these contacts," Cohen told reporters at a press conference with visiting Spanish Defence Minister Eduardo Serra.

Cohen said he was hopeful

that concrete steps to restore the relationship could come about soon.

"I would like certainly to re-establish my own relationship with the (Chinese) defence minister, and hopefully that can come about in the near future," he added.

Kurt Campbell, the deputy assistant secretary of defence for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, is scheduled to visit China later this month with an officer from the US Pacific Command to hold talks on next steps, Bacon said.

The next step is to get together the US and Chinese officials to work out how we plan to restart this relationship," he said.

He said the Pentagon hopes to hold a meeting of a US-Chinese defence consultative

committee in January.

Before the Kosovo crisis, the Pentagon and China had an active schedule of military exchanges, visits by top commanders, reciprocal port visits, and tabletop exercises that Washington hopes to revive.

The relationship was shattered by the May 7 bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, which killed three people, sparking anti-American riots in Beijing and charges in the official Chinese media that the attack was deliberate.

Washington has since moved to mend relations, paying compensation to the families of the victims of the bombing and discussing payment for damage to the embassy building.

Jakarta to offer greater autonomy to Aceh

JAKARTA, Nov 5: The Indonesian government will offer greater autonomy to restive province of Aceh as a compromise solution to demands there for independence, home affairs minister Suryadi Sudirja said today, reports AFP.

"Let's try to understand the demand (for independence) and then make a compromise... by offering greater autonomy," Sudirja told journalists before a cabinet meeting.

"I'm confident that a good approach will result in a sound solution," he said, adding that the government was striving to solve the problem without compromising the country's unity.

He said a decree issued by the national assembly last month will allow the province on the northern tip of Sumatra to enjoy a special autonomy.

But the minister called on the people of Aceh not to be "selfish" and likened their demand to quit Indonesia to a child wanting to abandon his family who love him.

"Causing many people misery is not the right thing to do," he said.

Aceh has seen massive popular demonstrations demanding a referendum on self-determination in the past six months, and at least 260 people have died in unrest, mostly involving troops and civilians, in the province since May.

In East Aceh on Thursday tens of thousands of protesters paraded peacefully through the town of Sigli, the second largest-scale protest in the area in two weeks.

On Tuesday in West Aceh se-

curity forces opened fire on around 5,000 protestors who had burned government buildings to the ground and freed prisoners from the local jail.

Indonesia's new President Abdurrahman Wahid said on Thursday Acehness had the right to hold an East-Timor style referendum, but that his government would not be pushed into a vote.

Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab said the president's comments did not constitute an offer.

The Aceh Merdeka (Free Aceh) movement has been fighting a 23-year battle for an independent Islamic state in the province, and members of the group were received by Wahid at the presidential palace for the first time over the weekend.

US to withdraw nuclear weapons from Europe

BRUSSELS, Nov 5: The United States is preparing to withdraw some 200 nuclear warheads stored at bases in seven European NATO states, diplomatic and military sources said here on Thursday, reports AFP.

The decision could be announced in December at one of two NATO ministerial meetings in Brussels, the sources said.

News of the possible nuclear scale-down came in the wake of revelations last month that up to 200 US nuclear warheads were still based in seven European countries.

A statement from the Pentagon in Washington Thursday said they had no information on any such announcement.

"I have no information to suggest that that report's correct," Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said.

"NATO maintains a small nuclear deterrent and I have no information suggesting that's about to change," he added.

A military source in Brussels told AFP: "Today, it is hard to see why these American nuclear bombs are in Europe."

The type of weapons involved were virtually obsolete today, the source added.

"This decision would allow the United States to make up some of the ground lost by US Senate's rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty," The Republican-dominated Senate's decision on October 13

not to ratify the treaty provoked widespread international criticism. The treaty is considered a cornerstone of international efforts to curb nuclear proliferation.

The whole issue resurfaced with the publication in October of an article in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists by three US experts.

The article dealt mainly with the United States' secret deployment during the Cold War of nuclear weapons and components, sometimes without alerting the countries concerned.

But it also revealed that between 150 to 200 nuclear stockpiles remained in several European countries.

Crackdown on Shiv Sena ahead of Pope's visit

NEW DELHI, Nov 5: The police have detained 32 activists of a hardline Hindu group in the Indian capital to prevent protests during the visit of Pope John Paul II starting today, reports AFP.

Ajay Shrivastava of the rightwing Shiv Sena (Shivaji's Army) said the police were continuing a crackdown on the group that began five days ago. "They are still raiding homes of our members," Shrivastava told AFP, saying he too was wanted by the police but had managed to avoid arrest so far.

The arrested activists here owe allegiance to Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray, an influential Hindu politician in western India, but function with a degree of autonomy.

Thackeray's Shiv Sena is a member of India's ruling coalition.

Police sources described the arrests as a "preventive" measure.

Hardline Hindus want the pope to apologise for abuses by early Christian settlers around 400 years ago in western and southern India, and for alleged forced conversions of Hindus.

Security will be tight for the November 5-8 visit, but Shrivastava said his group had no plans to disrupt the papal programme.

Trial of Falungong leaders begins Sunday

BEIJING, Nov 5: Chinese authorities have set a date for the first trial of leaders of the banned Falungong movement and reportedly arrested one of the group's followers who organised a press conference for foreign journalists.

A court official in Hainan city, in the southern province of Hainan, told AFP that the trial of four members of the Falungong -- Song Yuesheng, Jiang Shilong, Chen Yuan and Liang Yulin -- would begin on Sunday.

The four, who were formally arrested on September 28, have been charged with "using an evil religion to violate the law," according to the official Xinhua news agency.

They were prosecuted after continuing to organise Falungong gatherings after the spiritual group was banned in July.

Wang Zhiguo, a participant in a Falungong press conference in Beijing last week, was arrested in Anshan city, the Information Center for Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China said.

Wang, a former policeman in Anshan, is expected to be punished severely for statements condemning the crackdown on Falungong and because he is a policeman, the centre said.

The arrest of Wang could not be independently confirmed, but an official at the Anshan public security bureau did confirm the arrests of three women practitioners who were charged with "assembling to disrupt public order" and "using evil religion to violate the law."

The three women were identified by the information centre as Yong Fang, Wang Wei and Shang Fengzhi.



New Delhi police stand guard at a barracks in New Delhi to watch for Hindu activists protesting against the visit to India by Pope John Paul II yesterday. —AFP photo

Tamil Tigers claim third military base

Death toll rises to 1000

COLOMBO, Nov 5: Tamil Tiger guerrillas have overrun a third government military base in northern Sri Lanka and killed more than 1,000 troops this week, the rebels said today, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they had dislodged security forces from the village of Ampakamam which the guerrillas lost to government forces last month.

If confirmed, it would be the third important gain for the Tigers this week.

Since Tuesday, the LTTE had taken two other strategically important towns -- Oddusudan

and Nedunkerni -- from government forces and seized a large quantity of arms, ammunition and military vehicles.

"After several hours of sustained fighting the LTTE units destroyed several mini camps at Ampakamam today and caused heavy casualties to the enemy," the LTTE said in a statement.

Over 1,000 Sri Lankan troops have been killed and many more injured in the three days of intense fighting, the LTTE statement said. "So far 60 LTTE fighters have died in the battle."

The defence ministry said the government had lost only

107 soldiers killed with some 200 wounded. It estimated rebel losses at 115 killed.

Fighting is concentrated in the Wanni jungles, some 280 kilometres north of the capital Colombo.

The LTTE said that the International Committee of the Red Cross had been unable to get clearance from the military to transfer the bodies of the soldiers to the families.

As the guerrillas mounted pressure on other military bases in the northern Wanni region, the military poured thousands of additional soldiers to prevent further rebel advances.

US House panel approves plan to abolish INS

WASHINGTON, Nov 5: A panel in the US House of Representatives has approved legislation to dismantle the Immigration and Naturalisation Service and replace it with separate bureaus to serve the public and enforce immigration laws, reports AFP.

Supporters say separation of INS's sometimes competing missions would improve both enforcement and the delivery of benefits such as citizenship. Critics say the step would create problems of its own.

All sides agree fundamental change is imperative for an agency that has struggled to meet its mandate, hobbled by internal divisions, outmoded technology and management missteps.

Legislation approved Thursday by the House Judiciary

immigration subcommittee "eliminates the mission conflict and overload of the current INS," said the panel's chairman, Texas Republican Lamar Smith.

"We are hearing from every part of the country that the INS has now edged out the IRS for the agency Americans most want reformed," Smith added, citing a backlog of 4 million applications for citizenship, green cards or other benefits.

The Clinton administration, congressional Democrats and immigrant advocacy groups complained the proposal would create new confusion and help enforcement at the expense of services.

But supporters say the legislation's authors already made changes in response to those concerns.

Russian army commanders threaten to resign

MOSCOW, Nov 5: Russian army commanders have threatened to resign if the Kremlin opens up negotiations with Chechen leaders to end the violence in the breakaway republic, the daily Moskovsky Komсомолец reported today, quoting sources close to the presidency, reports AFP.

So loud was the generals' protest against the US-urged negotiations that it prompted President Boris Yeltsin to abruptly cut short his Black Sea holiday on Wednesday and return to Moscow, the sources said.

Army chief of staff Anatoly Kvashnin is ready to step down and he's not the only one. There's also a long list of generals who are fighting on the ground in Chechnya," the paper reported.

The Kremlin's head of administration Vladimir Voloshin and his deputy Sergei Prikhodko, worried about the "negative image of Russia in the West" provoked the stand-off when they told the military officials they had to prepare for the opening of dialogue between the Kremlin and Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov.

An incensed Kvashnin is reported to have telephoned Yeltsin, relaxing in Blac Sea resort of Sochi, asking him to "disavow what his staff said and threatened to resign," the paper's sources said.

Yeltsin was so "shocked by the revolt of the military" over Chechnya that he reassured them that operations were continuing and gave them to understand he was not behind the orders" of his administrative staff, the daily said.

Russian team in India for arms sale talks

NEW DELHI, Nov 5: A visiting Russian delegation led by Deputy Premier Ilya Islovich Klebanov began today what Moscow hopes will prove to be highly profitable arms sales talks with Indian leaders, reports AFP.

Klebanov, who has special responsibility for military and industrial affairs, arrived in Delhi on Thursday for a four-day visit, which will include a meeting of the Indo-Russian Group on Military Technical Cooperation.

His seven-member delegation included the minister of atomic energy, and the deputy ministers of defence and trade.

An ITAR-TASS report from Moscow quoting Russian government sources said the delegation hoped to clinch deals for weapons and military equipment sale worth three billion dollars.

The delegation is specifically expected to discuss the sale of T-90 heavy tanks and licensing rights to manufacture Sukhoi-30 combat jets in India.

The Russian side is also likely to raise issues relating to sale of the aircraft carrier "Admiral Gorchkov," the MiG-AT Advance Jet Trainer and MiG-29 fighter jets.

Moscow has offered to gift the aircraft carrier to India on condition New Delhi foots the bill, expected to run into millions of dollars, for the vessel to be overhauled in a Russian shipyard.

BRIEFLY

Barak, Mubarak hold phone talks:

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak informed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in a telephone conversation Friday about the three-way summit he attended in Oslo earlier this week, Barak's office said, AFP reports from Jerusalem.

He told him about his discussions with US President Bill Clinton and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, the office said, but gave no further details. Mubarak, 71, arrived in Paris Monday on a private visit, which included tests at the Val de Grace military hospital for an ear infection.

Japanese PM to visit Indonesia:

Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi will visit Indonesia on November 26 to pledge Tokyo's continued support for the country during talks with President Abdurrahman Wahid, a report said today, AFP reports from Tokyo.

Obuchi will express Japan's support for Indonesia's economic and political reforms and urge the Wahid government to come up with measures so that Jakarta can win back credibility with international financial institutions, the Nihon Keizai Shimbun said.

8 killed in Indonesia violence:

Eight people have been killed and some 100 homes burned down in the latest outbreak of Muslim-Christian violence in Indonesian's province of North Maluku, reports said Friday, AFP reports from Jakarta.

The clashes in Tidore island in the district of Central Halmahera on Wednesday erupted following the distribution of leaflets by an unidentified group calling for an uprising, the official Antara news agency said.



A doctor gives first aid to a sick woman among a crowd of refugees at the main checkpoint on Chechen-Ingush border on November 3. Russian authorities opened the corridor for refugees fleeing the war on Thursday moments before the UN mission arrived at the scene to evaluate the refugee crisis. —AFP photo

Anti-monarchists in last-ditch bid to save Aussie republic

SYDNEY, Nov 5: Anti-monarchists mounted a last-ditch effort Friday to save their dream of an Australian republic as another poll said they were heading for defeat in Saturday's historic referendum, reports AFP.

More than 12.3 million people are registered to vote in the compulsory ballot that will decide if the country should sever constitutional ties to Britain by replacing the Queen Elizabeth II with an Australian citizen as head of state.

The poll, taken this week for the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age of Melbourne, showed support for the "Yes" campaign trailing the "No" campaign by 41 to 47 per cent with undecided voters down to 12 per cent from 26 per cent a week before.

It also showed republican supporters of direct presidential election voting with the monarchists against the proposed "unitarist" republic in which a president would be endorsed by a two-thirds majority

of parliament still hold the key. If the alienated republicans, who make up a third of the "no" vote, were to switch sides it would boost support for the republic by 15 per cent, assuring its easy success, the Herald said.

The poll is the third this week to show fewer than 10 per cent oppose the republic because they actually prefer having the queen as Australia's head of state.

The monarchists have kept the queen well hidden, barely mentioning her at all and instead targeting alleged flaws in the minimalist republic in what has been seen as a highly effective scare campaign.

In a late advertising blitz, the republicans are reminding voters she is still the Queen of Australia by lampooning a toast to her majesty by US President Bill Clinton during a visit to Australia a few years ago.

The commercial, seen as a national embarrassment, was held back until the last few days to form part of multi-pronged

assault focusing on republican claims that Australia faces international humiliation if it votes for the queen rather than a "resident for president."

Polls show support for the republic is highest among well-educated and lowest among the poorly educated, leading to complaints by the republicans that they are fighting an uphill battle against the ignorance of the Australian electorate.

High-profile monarchist, professor Leonie Kramer, also told ABC television this week that Australians were not well-versed in constitutional matters and many had decided they were not going to vote for what they did not understand.

Leaders of the republican campaign bombarded the airwaves Friday to issue last minute warnings to those intending to vote "no" in the hope they will be able to vote for a direct-election presidency in another referendum soon.

"They have either been led up

the garden path by monarchists or they are naive," the Australian Republican Movement (ARM) said.

"Australians should not be fooled into thinking there will be another chance."

Federal Treasurer Peter Costello, the government's leading republican continued warnings of trouble for Australia if it rejected the republic, saying he feared a country which is predominantly republican will still be monarchist on Sunday morning.

But monarchist Prime Minister John Howard said the great failure of the campaign was that the republicans "haven't persuaded us that this country will be better" if it becomes a republic.

"I don't believe in change for its sake," Howard said, adding that the fact that Queen Elizabeth was also queen of other countries was no reason for Australia to sweep away a system which had served it so well.

"I say on balance it is not."

Posthumous wedding

SEOUL, Nov 5: Two victims of a South Korean car fire that killed 55 youngsters were buried beside each other today a day after they were married posthumously, reports AFP.

The parents of high school pupils Han Dong-Gun, 17, and 16-year-old Lee Ah-Na decided to hold a wedding ceremony for the dead teenagers to ensure their spirits will not be alone in the afterworld.

The young girl was today laid to rest beside her new "husband" in a ceremony in the mountains near the port of Incheon, where the two died when a blaze engulfed the packed bar on Saturday night.

While the young victims did not know each other when they were alive, their parents decided to marry them after death in a ceremony held in the mortuary of a hospital in the western city of Incheon.

Dozens of guests sobbed as the parents of the pupils exchanged flowers on behalf of their children during the brief ceremony held in front of pictures of the dead youngsters, witnesses said.

The parents then laid the flowers at the base of the photographs as the head of a local district office read from scriptures and pronounced the tragic couple man and wife.

Only Han's body was in the room for the ceremony, as Lee had been taken to another hospital, one witness told AFP.

"Many of the guests, who were mostly relatives of the two pupils, were crying," said a local official who helped set up the posthumous wedding.

"Han's father did not want his only son not to be alone and Lee's relatives also agreed it would be good to match them," he added.

Posthumous weddings are accepted as natural by Koreans who traditionally believe that the souls of those who die young and unmarried become frustrated and resentful and linger uneasily around their families.

Parents of victims of the fire have denounced police and public officials for allowing the unlicensed bar to continue operating despite an order that it should close being issued more than a week before the blaze.