

India to test long-range missile soon

NEW DELHI, Nov 6: India will soon test a long-range ballistic missile, a junior defence minister said today in the government's first admission of the missile's existence, reports AFP.

Minister of State for Defence Bachchi Singh Rawat told reporters in the city of Pithoragarh that the 'Surya' (Sun) ballistic missile would be flight-tested soon, the Press Trust of India reported.

"It will have a range of up to 5,000 kilometres (3,100 miles)," Rawat said.

India first tested a medium-range ballistic missile named Agni (Fire) in March 1993. Earlier this year it launched a longer range Agni missile, with a range of 2,300 kilometres (1,426 miles).

Scientists here have built an array of guided missiles, some of which can carry nuclear warheads, but so far New Delhi has refused to acknowledge the existence of Surya and another top-secret cruise missile called Sagarika (Oceanic).

Defence Minister Rawat said a 14-billion-dollar military modernisation plan would be unveiled in parliament before the budget session began in March 2000.

India has come under strong international pressure, especially from China and the United States, to halt its missile programme in the wake of its nuclear tests in May last year.

The tests triggered a tit-for-tat response from rival Pakistan, sparking fears of a South Asia arms race.

India unveiled a draft nuclear doctrine in April, which envisaged the development of a land, air and sea-based nuclear deterrent.

Musharraf appoints 2 more ministers

ISLAMABAD, Nov 6: Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf named two more ministers to his cabinet today, raising the total to 10, state radio reported, reports Reuters.

It said the nominees were Petroleum and Natural Resources Minister Usman Aminuddin, and Kashmir Affairs, Northern Areas and Frontier Regions Minister Abbas Sarfraz Khan.

The nominations were announced hours before Musharraf's cabinet of non-political experts and technocrats was due to be sworn in by figurehead President Mohammad Rafiqe Tarar.

Six of the ministers were appointed on Thursday and two last month.

Aminuddin, who has worked with private oil companies, comes from the populous Punjab province and is a graduate of Britain's Cambridge University.

Sarfraz Khan is from North West Frontier Province and went to Boston University in the United States.

The cabinet replaces the one created by ex-prime minister Nawaz Sharif who was ousted in a bloodless military coup on October 12.

Political analysts say the cabinet ministers are uncontroversial and had no close links to the Sharif government or that of his predecessor, led by Benazir Bhutto, both of who are accused of overseeing corruption at the highest levels.

The makeup of the team ends Sharif's practice of assigning ministries largely to people from his native Punjab province, a key complaint of his provincial critics in months of noisy protest that preceded the army coup.

Freed British activist leaves Myanmar

BANGKOK, Nov 6: British democracy activist, Rachael Goldwyn, freed after serving only two months of a seven year jail term, has flown out of Myanmar after a "sightseeing" tour with her parents, a junta statement said today, reports AFP.

Goldwyn, 28, was released Monday from her sentence, imposed after she chained herself to a lamppost on September 2 and sang a pro-democracy song in a Yangon marketplace.

The junta said Goldwyn and her parents left Myanmar on Friday "after their return back to Yangon from a sightseeing visit to the Shan States."

"Like all foreign visitors, Ms Goldwyn is welcome to visit Myanmar at any time, as long as she respects national laws... and refrains from participating in any political undertaking," it said.

Meanwhile, the mother of another jailed British activist, James Mawdsley, was due to arrive in Myanmar late Saturday to visit her son, who is serving a 17-year jail term inside the military-ruled country.

Diana Mawdsley is expected to fly from Bangkok to Yangon Saturday before travelling early next week to northern Shan state, where her 26-year-old son is being kept in solitary confinement.

James Mawdsley was sentenced to 17 years imprisonment on September 2 after he crossed over the Thai border illegally carrying some 500 anti-government pamphlets.

Australians reject republic

SYDNEY, Nov 6: Australians voted overwhelmingly in today's historic referendum to retain the British queen as their head of state, shattering the dream that the country would be a republic early next century, reports AFP.

With more than 70 per cent of votes counted in all states except Western Australia, the republican "Yes" campaign was trailing an alliance of monarchists and alienated republicans by 54.3 per cent to 43.7 per cent.

More than 12.3 million people voted in the compulsory ballot to decide if Australia should sever the last of its 200-year-old constitutional ties to Britain by replacing England's Queen Elizabeth II with an Australian citizen as head of state.

The republican campaign needed a majority of votes nationally, and a majority in at least four of the six states, but was heading for defeat everywhere, with only Western Australia still to be counted.

As the reality dawned on mainstream republicans, "yes" campaign leaders angrily blamed monarchist Prime Minister John Howard who was ac-

used of sabotaging the campaign by rigging the referendum question.

The question, framed by Howard after last year's constitutional convention in Canberra, asked Australians to vote yes or no to whether they wanted a president elected by a two-thirds majority of federal parliament.

The victory for the "No" campaigners is being attributed not to support for the monarch, which polls have consistently shown to be less than 10 per cent, but to the republican supporters who wanted direct presidential elections.

They sided with the monarchists in a highly successful, but allegedly fraudulent campaign, focusing on the slogan 'say no' to the politicians' president.

The campaign has been marred throughout by allegations of fraud, lying and scare-mongering, particularly against the monarchist side.

As leading republican supporters conceded defeat, monarchist Kerry Jones, who led the "no" campaign, told supporters: "We're thrilled that the

'No' case has won a resounding victory."

"The Australian people have had their say and they have said 'No'. There are millions of Australians from all over the country who rejected this republic on offer today."

"All of us are deeply humbled by the confidence that the Australian people have shown in our country, our constitution. We've heeded the message that this republic is not the way."

Conceding defeat, one of the key figures of the "yes" campaign, opposition Labour leader Kim Beazley said: "It leaves our constitution in limbo and it is in limbo because of John Howard."

Australian Republican Movement chairman Malcolm Turnbull also conceded defeat and accused Howard of being "stubborn and retrograde".

But he added the result suggested "that Australians are more conformist and timid than are thought of being."

Howard hit back saying: "It is clear that the Australian people have rejected the republic proposal."

The government will now turn its attentions to those

things which directly affect the lives of Australians."

Former Labour Prime Minister Bob Hawke, who played a major role in the "yes" campaign, told ABC television: "The first thing to say is that I'm very sorry we have lost."

The second thing to say is that a clear majority of Australians are in favour of a republic and cutting the ties with the crown.

"The third thing to say is that I hope the prime minister will take note of the results in his own electorate. He is now the member for the republic of Bennelong and he should listen to his own voters."

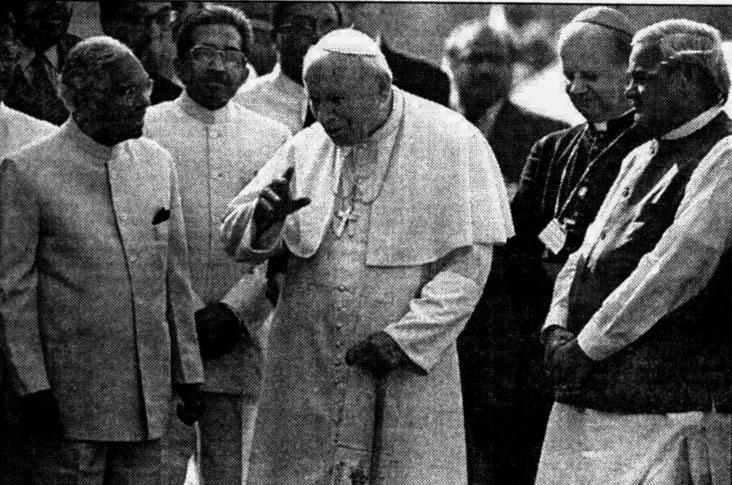
Howard's own Sydney electorate of Bennelong voted 55 per cent for the republic and 45 per cent against.

However, a coalition of republican groups announced Saturday they would fight for a new referendum for a directly-elected Australian president before 2005.

The Australian Republican Coalition (ARC) will be an umbrella organisation for the republican groups, the proposed coalition leader Paul Tully said in a statement.



Voters cast their ballots beneath Aboriginal murals at a polling station in Sydney yesterday during Australia's historic referendum on becoming a republic. —AFP photo



Pope John Paul II (C) gestures as he speaks to Indian President K.R. Narayanan (L) and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) during the official welcoming ceremony held at the presidential palace in New Delhi yesterday. The pontiff arrived in New Delhi on a four-day visit amidst protests by right-wing Hindus. —AFP photo

Pope begins India visit amid tight security

NEW DELHI, Nov 6: Pope John Paul II met Indian leaders Saturday at the start of two-day visit to India, held amid tight security following protests by small but vocal groups of right-wing Hindus, reports AFP.

The pope, on his second visit to India in 13 years, was given a 21-gun salute at an official welcoming ceremony at the presidential palace in the heart of New Delhi.

Dressed in his traditional white cassock, white skull cap and with a golden cross hanging from his chest, the 79-year-old pontiff was received by President K.R. Narayanan and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. Escorted to the saluting dais by presidential bodyguards, the pope bowed his head as the military band played the national

anthems of the Holy See and India.

With the help of a walking stick, he walked slowly down a red carpet to inspect the guard of honour, but returned to the saluting dais halfway through the ceremony.

The brief ceremony, which was held in bright sunshine, was also attended by India's Italian-born opposition leader Sonia Gandhi.

The pope, who flew into Delhi late Friday, held a private mass Saturday morning at the Vatican embassy.

Following the welcoming ceremony, the pope had a one-on-one meeting with Narayanan, the first Indian president to come from the "untouchable" caste.

According to a presidential

spokesman, the pope expressed his appreciation of the atmosphere of tolerance in India, which he said was part of the country's rich tradition.

Security was extremely tight, with a heavy police presence and detachments of riot police and water cannon standing by in case of any attempt to disrupt the visit.

Armed police lined the route of the papal convoy, while others searched bushes and litter bins.

Extremist Hindus held a series of small protests in the run-up to the pope's visit, demanding an end to alleged forced conversions and a papal apology for abuses carried out by Christian settlers 400 years ago.

VHP asks Pope to withdraw all foreign missionaries

NEW DELHI, Nov 6: Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) yesterday put a new demand before Pope John Paul II, asking him to withdraw all foreign missionaries from India besides tendering an apology for alleged atrocities by the church during Portuguese rule in Goa and other parts of the country, reports PTI.

Alleging that foreign missionaries funded by international church groups were backing terrorist activities in the North-East and indulging in conversions through inducements, VHP General Secretary Acharya Giriraj Kishore said the Pope should withdraw all foreign missionaries from our soil. Indian Christian missionaries are competent to do their job.

Addressing reporters on the day of the Pontiff's arrival here, the VHP leader alleged, extremist groups in the North-East are being financially supported an encouraged by the church.

The Acharya quoted a statement by the then Union Minister of State for Home Affairs Mohd Maqbool Dar in the Lok Sabha in December, 1996 to substantiate his charge.

The VHP leader accused the church of racial discrimination for stating that the inquisitions in Europe were different from those in India and reiterated the demand for a papal apology on the issue.

He, however, welcomed a reported statement by the church that it was willing to discuss the issue of conversion with VHP. We are ready for a dialogue wherever they want it.

Indonesian President arrives in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 6: Indonesia's new President Abdurrahman Wahid, described as an old friend of Malaysia's jailed ex-deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim, arrived here today on the second leg of a whirlwind Southeast Asian tour, reports AFP.

Wahid, who flew in from Singapore and was due to leave for Myanmar Sunday morning, is making his first overseas trip since taking office last month.

He was greeted by Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar at the airport before leaving for an audience with the king and a meeting and dinner with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad at a city centre hotel.

The opposition party headed by Anwar's wife Wan Azizah denied a newspaper report that she had also arranged to meet Wahid.

But party deputy president Chandra Muzaffar said Wahid was an old friend of Anwar's and had sent him a message of "sympathy and solidarity" about six weeks ago, before becoming president.

The Straits Times Saturday quoted an official of Wan Azizah's National Justice Party (Keadilan) as saying Wahid had agreed to schedule a courtesy call from her.

Chandra said neither Wan Azizah nor the party had formally requested a meeting with Wahid and he was not aware of any request from the Indonesian side. The Indonesian embassy was unavailable for comment.

US threatens to withdraw from ABM Treaty

WASHINGTON, Nov 6: The Clinton administration Friday threatened to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty if Russia keep opposing amending the US signed in 1972 by Moscow and Washington, report agencies.

"If they persist absolutely in that position, then the United States... will have to face a very difficult question, which is whether to withdraw from the treaty," said US Defense Undersecretary Walter Slocombe.

Slocombe made the remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) here when talking about the US plan to develop a national anti-missile defence system.

Seeking to reassure Russia, China and other critics of missile defence, the official said that such an anti-missile system would protect the United States and its allies would not undermine global security.

Slocombe added that Presi-

dent Bill Clinton would make a decision next summer at the earliest whether to order the deployment of a limited national missile defence. A bill for the move has been approved by Congress and signed by Clinton.

The US administration hopes to win Russia's agreement to modify the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which prohibits the kind of defensive system the Pentagon is proposing at a cost of about 11 billion US dollars.

Meanwhile, a resolution sponsored by Russia, China and Belarus aimed at pressing the United States not to proceed with building an anti-missile defence was adopted by a UN committee on Friday by a vote of 54 to four with 73 abstentions.

The resolution, which now goes to the General Assembly for endorsement, calls for continued efforts to strengthen and

preserve the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty between the United States and the then-Soviet Union.

The treaty limits defence systems designed to shoot down enemy missiles, on the theory that such shields would only tempt the other side to build more missiles to overwhelm the defences.

The United States wants to amend the treaty to permit it to build a limited defence against any attack on the United States or US troops stationed abroad by what it regards as "rogue states" such as North Korea and Iran, with a growing capacity to launch weapons of mass destruction.

The UN resolution calls on the parties to the treaty "to refrain from the deployment of anti-ballistic missile systems for a defence of the territory of its country and not to provide a base for such a defence."

Russia, India sign arms cooperation agreement

NEW DELHI, Nov 6: India and Russia, traditional military allies, Friday signed a sweeping agreement for the joint production of Sukhoi-30 fighter jets, missiles, submarines and a vast array of other military products, reports AFP.

"For the first time, a comprehensive document involving all kinds of military cooperation between the two countries was signed," visiting Russian Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Isovlovich Klebanov told reporters here.

The military protocol would be the basis for further defence cooperation between the two countries during the scheduled visit of Russian President Boris Yeltsin to India in early 2000, he said.

Klebanov said it was the first time Moscow and New Delhi

would be entering into joint ventures for manufacturing new types of weapon systems, adding the two countries would get down to work "swiftly."

Joint production and development of these systems would take place both in Russia and India," he said, adding they would be exported to third countries willing to buy them.

The agreement also covers joint manufacture of anti-missile systems and airborne early warning systems (AWACS), officials said.

When asked if nuclear cooperation also figured during talks with the Indian side, Klebanov said both countries discussed in detail peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

"As far as peaceful use of nuclear energy is concerned, we have a number of areas of common interest," he said.

Tamil Tigers seize 2 more key towns

COLOMBO, Nov 6: Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels have captured two more towns in an offensive which has killed hundreds of fighters on both sides just weeks before presidential elections, officials said today, reports AFP.

The strategically important towns of Kanakarayankulam and Nainamadu fell overnight Friday after troops pulled out of a bigger military base at Mankulam 10 kilometres further to the north, officials said.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been smashing military positions in northern Sri Lanka since Tuesday in a ferocious counter-offensive that has reclaimed a large area from troops.

Residents in Vavuniya, a town just south of the battle zone some 260 kilometres north of Colombo, said there was unease at the large numbers of government troops retreating there.

"There is a lot of tension,"

one resident said by telephone.

The heavy fighting coincides with an election campaign in which President Chandrika Kumaratunga is seeking a new term on December 21.

With the fall of Kanakarayankulam and Nainamadu, the LTTE has now regained control of the towns of Mankulam, Olumadu, Kurup-paddamurippu, Oddusudan, Ampakamam and Nedunkerni.

The spate of losses is seen as a major blow to the army, which sacrificed thousands of lives to capture the areas following a campaign between May 1997 and December 1998.

Political acrimony over the latest fighting is apparent, with President Kumaratunga accusing opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe of failing to help in efforts to end the protracted conflict.

The opposition on Saturday said over 800 government troops had perished in waves of Tiger attacks and appealed for calm.

Sonia accused of misleading people on Bofors issue

ETAWAH (UP), Nov 6: Samajwadi Party President Mulayam Singh Yadav yesterday accused Congress Chief Sonia Gandhi of attempting to mislead the people by pressing for dropping former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's name from the Bofors chargesheet, reports PTI.

Announcing that his party would launch a nationwide agitation if Rajiv Gandhi's name was deleted from the chargesheet, Yadav alleged Congress President Sonia Gandhi is trying to mislead and misguide the people of the country by pressing for deletion of the name of her late husband from the said chargesheet.

It is strange that Congressmen in general are mum on the issue, he said at a function here.

He claimed Sonia Gandhi was trying to shield corruption by removing her husband's name in the multi-crore scam and added that his party was for an open debate on the issue.

On the issue of a fixed Lok Sabha tenure, the former defence minister said his party was opposed to the move. In fact even this government is not going to last its full term, he remarked, claiming that the third front would emerge stronger in near future.

UN relief official to stay in his post despite US, British opposition

UNITED NATIONS, Nov 6: Secretary-General Kofi Annan reaffirmed on Friday that his top relief official in Baghdad, Hans von Sponeck, would stay in his post despite US and British opposition, reports Reuters.

"Von Sponeck will be going back to Baghdad. It was my decision to make," UN spokesman Fred Eckhard quoted Annan as saying after a meeting with American and British envoys.

Ambassadors Jeremy Greenstock of Britain and Peter Buirleigh of the United States raised the issue of Von Sponeck among other matters discussed in their 25-minute meeting with Annan, Eckhard said.

Von Sponeck, who was on his way to Baghdad on Friday, has been criticised privately by the British and openly by the United States, in part because of his opposition to the stringent sanctions imposed on Iraq after its troops invaded Kuwait in August 1990.

He is the fifth UN coordinator in three years of the "oil-for-food" programme under which Iraq is allowed to sell \$5.26 billion worth of oil over six months to buy food, medicine and other supplies despite the sanctions.

US State Department spokesman James Rubin twice this week accused Von Sponeck of overstepping his mandate, raising questions about how much longer the envoy would be in his post.

But UN diplomats said they believed Rubin had put Annan on the spot and had forced him to extend Von Sponeck in his post for a year on Tuesday as well as backing the German publicly.

Russian troops continue shelling as refugees stream out of Chechnya

KAVKAZ, Russia, Nov 6: Thousands more terrified refugees fled the Russian bombing of war-torn Chechnya Friday, as federal artillery pounded the outskirts of Sernovodsk, 40 kilometres west of the capital Grozny, where only civilians remained, reports AFP.

There was chaos at the border, even though soldiers had begun to let the refugees move through freely.

A constant stream of cars and mini-buses packed with refugees crossed the frontier from Chechnya into the neighbouring Russian republic of Ingushetia, where border guards

said they had almost stopped counting.

Residents of Sernovodsk told AFP that the federal forces continued intermittent artillery fire on the outskirts of the town, claiming several civilian victims, even though Chechen fighters had left.

The Russian troops had encircled the town and were awaiting an order to "clean it up," perhaps not realising that the fighters were long gone, residents said.

Most of the townsfolk had left Sernovodsk for Ingushetia, but some 20 per cent stayed behind.

By late afternoon Friday, some 3,000 Chechens had crossed the border, according to Ingush officials, but at least as many waited in the bitter cold on the other side, with their numbers swelling every hour.

Moscow bowed to world pressure Thursday and opened the border after sealing it tight for 10 days and then allowing through only a trickle at a time, stranding thousands of desperate civilians in the war zone.

But the massive human exodus continued as Russian warplanes and artillery pounded "rebel positions" across the breakaway republic, causing death and devastation among populated areas, according to

the accounts of Chechens who have fled.

"I have a home. I have a motherland. Why do I have to live in the open tent? Why are they killing my loved ones? Why are we condemned in this way?" Lisa, 52, wailed.

Marieta, 42, a doctor from Grozny, said Russian forces had dropped bombs on the children's hospital where she worked in the Chechen capital, forcing her to pack up and leave the wrecked city.

The outskirts of Grozny again rumbled from artillery and rocket fire as Russia's aid campaign against the separatist state entered its third month.

India orders probe into attack on army HQ

NEW DELHI, Nov 6: A federal probe has begun into a daring attack on Kashmir's virtually impregnable army headquarters by Muslim guerrillas, Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes said here today, reports AFP.

Military analysts say the attack by a two-man team which left seven including a high-profile army spokesman killed was a serious issue since the target was supposed to be the safest military complex in India.

Fernandes said the national probe would "ascertain whether there was any security lapse" in the November 3 attack by just two guerrillas who scaled a wall and killed at will before they themselves were shot dead.

find out what led to such a serious development in which our officers were killed," Fernandes said after placing a wreath on the slain army spokesman major P. Purushottam.

Defence minister Fernandes said special precautions have now been adopted to prevent a recurrence of such military humiliations for India's million-plus army in Kashmir.

"They cannot be announced in public... You know the security risks," Fernandes told reporters.

Major Purushottam and his team of six junior officials at the army's public relations department were shot dead one by one in broad daylight by the two militants.