

Pope calls for 'harvest of faith' in Asia

NEW DELHI, Nov 7: Pope John Paul II on Sunday declared Asia the evangelical focus of the Roman Catholic church in the next millennium, as he celebrated mass in front of 50,000 people in the Indian capital, New Delhi, reports AFP.

"Just as the first millennium saw the Cross firmly planted in the soil of Europe, and the second in that of America and Africa, so may the third Christian millennium witness a great harvest of faith on this vast and vital continent," the pope told the crowd gathered at the giant Nehru stadium.

The mass, held on the second day of the pope's two-day visit here, coincided with Diwali, the 'festival of lights' -- the high light of the Hindu religious calendar.

As the pope conducted the mass from a purpose-built podium -- shadowed by a giant pair of hands clasped together in the Hindu 'namaste' gesture of greeting around a 45-foot (13-metre) high cross -- the sound of Diwali 'firecrackers' outside provided a reminder of India's majority faith.

While the pope's visit had been preceded by protests from right-wing Hindus over alleged forced conversions by Christian missionaries, the pope made it clear that conversion would form the cornerstone of the Church's activity in Asia.

Calling for a 'new relationship of understanding and solidarity' among different religions, the pope also stressed 'the evangelical task' entrusted to those baptised in the

Catholic faith. Seated and speaking slowly in English, he also urged Asian Catholics to 'transform society by infusing the mind of Christ into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the world in which you live.'

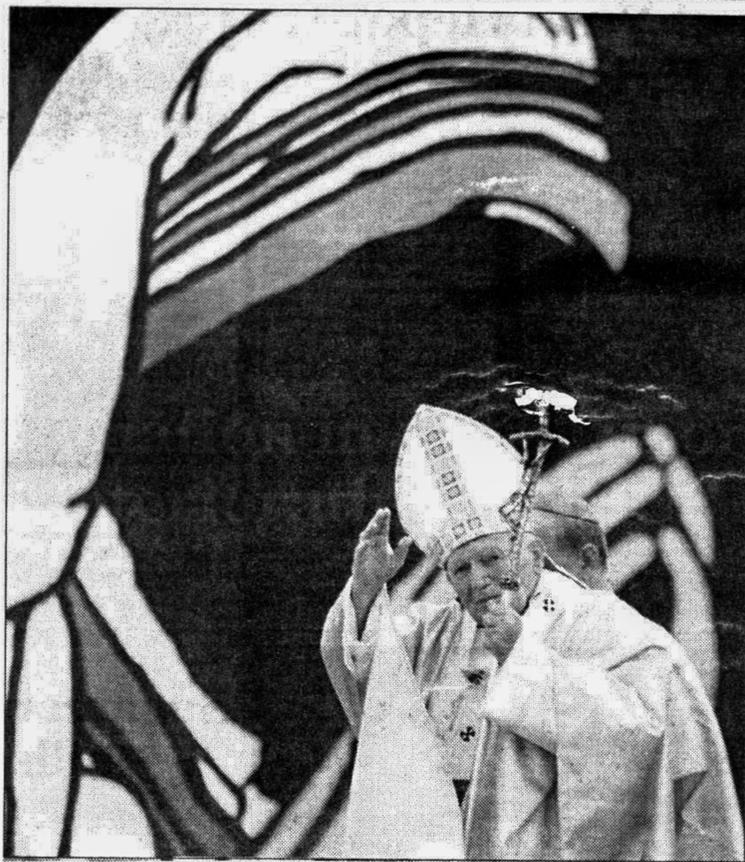
One of the main challenges, the pontiff said, was 'to bring the light of the gospel to bear on the family and on the defence of human life and dignity.'

Flanked by two bishops and waving from time to time from behind his glass cocoon, the pope made a slow tour of the stadium as the crowd clapped along to religious music blaring from loudspeakers. After changing into his papal robes -- complete with mitre -- the pope took his place on the podium, flanked on either side by about 20 bishops and cardinals from Asian countries.

Before the mass began, New Delhi's Archbishop Alan de Lastic named Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Home Minister L.K. Advani as he prayed to God 'to guide the leaders of our nation.'

Security was tight for the event, with regular and mounted police searching everyone going into the stadium and confiscating mobile phones, cigarette lighters and water bottles.

Inside, two large banners in Hindi and English ran along the both sides of the stadium, reading: 'His Holiness John Paul II and India: Together we celebrate Jesus Christ Jayanti (anniversary) 2000.'



Pope John Paul II waves goodbye to more than 50,000 people gathered at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium to hear the holy mass yesterday. Behind the pope in the stage backdrop is a painting of the late Mother Theresa of Calcutta. The pope told the audience that Asia will be the evangelical focus of the Roman Catholic church in the next millennium. —AFP photo

'Pakistan keen to improve ties with India'

ISLAMABAD, Nov 7: Pakistan's Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar said yesterday that Islamabad would make unremitting efforts for improving relations with India but regretted signals from New Delhi in its regard are not very encouraging, reports PTI.

India is alone in the world, targeting Pakistan and engaging in vilification, Sattar said while talking to Radio Pakistan.

He hoped that Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh would review the present situation and move in a constructive direction for the better future of peoples of the two countries.

Sattar said Pakistan would make efforts to reduce tension in South Asia.

Replying to a question about postponement of the SAARC summit, Sattar said except India no other member state of the organisation favoured postponement of the summit.

SAARC summit postponed after Indian request: Official

KATHMANDU, Nov 7: The 11th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit has been postponed following a written request by India because of the October military coup in Pakistan, a SAARC official source said today, reports AFP.

The summit was scheduled for November 26-28 in Kathmandu with a number of new economic and trade proposals up for adoption, particularly setting a date for launching the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), the source said.

SAARC Secretary General Nihal Rodrigo said current SAARC Chairperson and President of Sri Lanka Chandrika Kumaratunga had sent letters to all member countries, including Pakistan.

SAARC groups Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan Ambassador to Nepal Pamela Jayasekera Deen handed a letter from Kumaratunga to Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai Saturday, a Nepalese foreign ministry source said.

India asked last week for a postponement in view of political developments in Pakistan where the government of prime minister Nawaz Sharif was ousted in a military coup on October 12.

Pakistan has strongly decried the Indian move saying SAARC has nothing to do with the internal politics of its member countries.

Nepal had said the summit should be held on schedule as all arrangements for it had already been made.

SAARC observers here said the postponement had weakened the SAARC ideology of steering clear of internal politics of members and made it uncertain the summit would be held in Kathmandu in the near future.

Blast leaves 16 injured in Israel

TEL AVIV, Nov 7: At least 16 people were injured today, one of them seriously, in the Israeli town of Netanya when a bomb placed in a litter bin outside a town centre bank exploded, Israeli police said, reports AFP.

Bomb disposal teams succeeded in defusing three other devices, as large numbers of police combed Netanya in the search for other possible bombs, the police said.

The casualties were taken to two hospitals in Netanya, a resort which lies on the Mediterranean coast 40 kilometres north of Tel Aviv, the police said.

One of the injured, a woman, was reported to be seriously injured.

'It's a miracle no more were hurt,' Communications Minister Benjamin Ben Eliezer told army radio.

Shortly after the blast Israeli police arrested a Palestinian man in connection the bomb blast after witnesses identified him as having planted at least two of the devices, Netanya police chief David Sadeh told army radio.

The suspect was arrested as he tried to flee towards the largely Palestinian West Bank which lies only 20 kilometres to the east of Netanya, Sadeh said.

Large numbers of Palestinians who were working illegally in Netanya without work permits were also detained as security forces in other Israeli towns were placed on alert because other attacks were feared, the radio said.

In the first official reaction to the blast, Deputy Israeli Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh said on radio that it should not be allowed to derail the 'final status' peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians due to

start Monday. 'If we were to halt peace talks we would be doing exactly what the terrorists who set off this primitive device want us to do,' Sneh told army radio.

'Even if there were more wounded we would take the same position,' said Sneh, who is known to be close to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

Israel and the Palestinians are due to start talks to resolve the most difficult issues outstanding between them on Monday.

Sneh said that the Israeli security services did not yet have 'precise information on the attack on Netanya.'

China sentences 16 Falungong members

HONG KONG, Nov 7: A court in Tang Shan city in China's Hebei Province has sentenced 16 practitioners of the outlawed Falungong movement to up to three years in a labour camp, a Hong Kong-based rights group said today, reports Reuters.

The 16, including practitioners who had demonstrated in Beijing, were charged with 'using a cult group to sabotage legal institutions,' the Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China said.

The court passed the sentence three days ago.

This was the initial batch to be sentenced in Tang Shan, the rights group said. Next week, another group of 43 practitioners could be sentenced, it added.

On November 2, police arrested Dong Jinhong and Wang Peixia along with 41 others and informed their families the arrested would all be sent to labour camps.

Iraq rejects British draft at UN

BAGHDAD, Nov 7: Iraq's ruling Baath party today rejected Britain's new draft resolution at the UN Security Council and underlined that it would accept nothing less than an unconditional lifting of sanctions, reports AFP.

The draft 'perhaps contains some improvements in terms of pure form, but it is no less damaging than the previous one,' said the party's newspaper, Ath-Thawra.

'It is not possible for Iraq to accept a resolution which does not provide for the immediate and unconditional lifting of the embargo' slapped on Baghdad for its 1990 invasion of Kuwait, it said.

Iraq insists it has met the disarmament terms linked to a lifting of sanctions and that hardliners Britain and the United States are trying to add extra conditions.

Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz yesterday charged that the two Western allies were resorting to 'cheating' and

'tricks' to keep Baghdad shackled to a sanctions regime. 'These manoeuvres being carried out (at the Security Council) are unacceptable to us,' Aziz said.

'The Iraqi people have suffered for more than nine years. They have succeeded in resisting this aggression. They will continue their struggles no matter how long... to protect their rights, to protect their independence.'

The major powers in the Security Council have decided to step up discussions in the next few weeks to reach an accord on suspending sanctions against Iraq, British UN ambassador Jeremy Greenstock said Friday.

The debate aimed at bridging differences between the major powers is focused on a new secret British draft, following the Council's failure to agree on previous proposals from Britain, France and Russia.

Indonesian president fails to meet Suu Kyi

YANGON, Nov 7: Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid held talks with Myanmar's military rulers today during a brief official visit, but did not meet democratic opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, officials said, reports AFP.

Despite an earlier statement by the president indicating 'sympathy' for the junta's arch-rival whom he hoped to see, Indonesian and Myanmar officials brushed off speculation a meeting with the Nobel laureate had been planned.

'The contents of the talks between Wahid, elected by parliament last month after Indonesia's freest polls in decades, and the junta were not immediately known.'

Myanmar's generals for years drew comfort from former president Suharto's 32-year military-backed rule of Indonesia.

They also drew strength from Jakarta's presence on the conservative wing of the Association of Southeast Asian Na-

tions (ASEAN), which Myanmar joined in 1997.

The country has been under the iron grip of the military for decades and its generals, who prevented Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy from taking power following a 1990 election victory, have watched Indonesia's recent democratic reforms with alarm.

The visit took on extra interest after Wahid admitted last week he sympathised with Aung San Suu Kyi, prompting speculation he may meet her.

'We'll see how it goes there but I personally have sympathy for her,' he told a press conference, adding it would be up to the military regime 'whether or not I could meet her.'

His comments were bound to have annoyed the junta, given the close relationship enjoyed during the rule of Suharto, and ASEAN's sacred code of not interfering in the internal affairs of member nations.

Lanka launches probe into its worst defeat

Tigers seize 10 towns in five days

COLOMBO, Nov 7: Sri Lanka today launched a probe into its worst defeat at the hands of Tiger rebels, while demoralised troops in the country's north worked to build up defences and limit their losses, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they were advancing further into territory held by the army in the northern Wanni region where security forces have lost 10 key towns in the past five days.

The LTTE said over its underground Voice of Tigers radio that their fighters were moving southwards from the town of Pullyankulam which they captured from the military on Saturday.

Military-held towns in the country's north have crumbled at an astonishing rate since Tuesday, as the LTTE kept up a

ferocious counter-offensive. The defence ministry tactfully admitted losing the strategically important towns and said a three-member court of inquiry was probing the disaster.

Depending on the outcome of the Court of Inquiry, severe punishment will be meted out to all those who are found responsible, the statement said, adding that six senior officers in the region had already been replaced.

However, the main opposition United National Party (UNP) said the action was insufficient and demanded President Chandrika Kumaratunga accept responsibility and resign as commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

'President Kumaratunga should step down immediately and appoint someone from within the government who can

command the respect of all units of the armed forces,' opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe said.

Wickremesinghe, who is challenging Kumaratunga at the December 21 presidential election, urged army commander Sri Lal Weerasooriya to give a breather to government forces and help rebuild their morale.

Local press reports said that there had been serious breaches of discipline as the army retreated in the face of the unprecedented rebel onslaught. Reports said some troops opened fire at military policemen who tried to halt the retreat. Others said soldiers were begging for food from shops in the northern town of Vavuniya.

The LTTE has said it killed over 1,000 government soldiers for the loss of just 82 of their own combatants.

Situation in West Timor deteriorating: UNHCR

DILI, East Timor, Nov 7: The plight of refugees in Indonesian West Timor has deteriorated following a fresh flurry of militia incidents, including one attempt to detonate a hand grenade, a UNHCR spokesperson said today, reports AFP.

Ariane Gentier, spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) based in Dili said her colleagues based in West Timor's Atambua region reported an increase in incidents aimed at intimidating refugees and UNHCR staff.

'We are working in a very hostile environment, the situation is deteriorating by the day,' she told AFP quoting a colleague in Atambua, the main town in the Indonesian district of Belu in West Timor that shares a border with East Timor.

The most serious incident at the weekend occurred when a member of the militia threatened to detonate a hand grenade

before being disarmed by Indonesian soldiers, she said.

No further details were available on who the man was threatening or in what part of Atambua the incident took place, but Gentier said she believed it had occurred during the movement of refugees from camps in Atambua region to boats to ferry them back to East Timor.

The grenade incident occurred two days after militias fired rounds into the air holding up a convoy of seven trucks carrying 200 refugees to boats in Atapupu, north of Atambua, on Thursday.

Gentier said other incidents ranging from verbal threats to stone throwing had taken place in the past several days to intimidate refugees and international refugee workers.

'This is clearly intended to impede the return of displaced persons,' she said.

She expressed her deep frustration with the lack of access

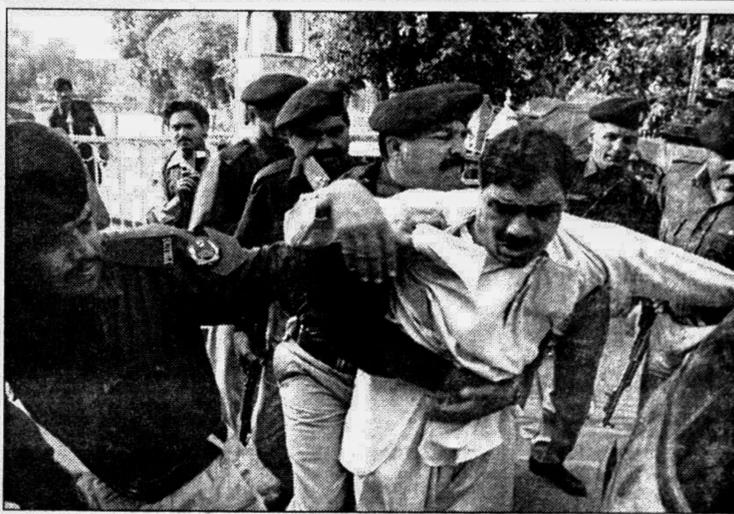
to the refugee camps for UNHCR workers in West Timor, who are restricted to five minute visits at the time when returnees are actually collected.

'Our major problem is access to the camps. Who knows what is going on inside there,' she said.

On Saturday, UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women Radhika Coomaraswamy said 'we have been receiving cases of rape, of sexual slavery in the camps, we are very concerned about what is happening in West Timor.'

The UNHCR and other relief groups, as well as journalists, have reported terrified refugees telling them of disappereances, especially of young East Timorese men from the camps in West Timor and unconfirmed reports of killings by the militias of those wanting to return.

To date, only one organised land border crossing of just over 100 refugees has taken place.



Pakistani police arrest a protester belonging to former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's party in Lahore, the home town of Sharif on Saturday. The lone protester was demonstrating against the detention of Sharif after a bloodless military coup in the country on October 12. —AFP photo

BRIFELY

Quake shakes Japan: A strong earthquake measuring 5.0 on the Richter Scale shook western Japan early Sunday but there were no reports of damage or injuries, the country's meteorological agency said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The quake occurred at 3:34 am (0034 BST), with the epicenter located in the Sea of Japan off the coast of Fukui prefecture and some 20 kilometers underground, the agency said.

Tajik President wins second term: Incumbent Tajik leader Imomali Rakhmonov swept to victory as expected in Saturday's presidential election, winning 96 per cent support in a ballot criticised for sidelining the opposition, Reuters reports from Dushanbe.

The election commission said early Sunday that turnout was an impressive 98 per cent. Officials said the 2.8 million electorate in the impoverished ex-Soviet republic had voted for peace and continuity following the 1992-97 civil war between Rakhmonov's Moscow-backed forces and the Islamic-led opposition.

5 soldiers killed in Algeria: Five Algerian soldiers, three of them officers, were killed in two attacks by suspected Islamic extremists, Algerian newspapers reported Sunday, AFP reports from Algiers.

The attacks on Friday and Saturday were in Algiers and Relizane, 300 kilometres west of the capital. An armed group on Friday killed and injured a naval colonel and two captains and wounded nine other customers including other officers in an attack on a seafood restaurant at Figuer, near Boumerdes, 50 kilometres east of Algiers. On Saturday, two soldiers were killed when an armed Islamist group launched a mortar attack on a military barracks in Ain Tarik, near Relizane.



Kerry Jones (C), leader of the 'No' campaign and executive director of Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy, celebrates with 'No' campaign director David Elliott (L) and Professor David Flint (R) in the Sydney tally room on Saturday, after 55 per cent voted 'No' in Australia's historic referendum on becoming a republic. Over 60 per cent of voters also rejected Prime Minister John Howard's proposal for a preamble to the Australian constitution. —AFP photo

World's socialist leaders meet in France today

PARIS, Nov 7: Socialist leaders from around the world, including Britain's Tony Blair, Palestinian President Yasser Arafat and Israeli Premier Ehud Barak, gather Monday in Paris for a congress to outline their priorities in the next millennium, reports AFP.

Convened every three years, the Socialist International congress will group some 1,000 party representatives from 140 countries.

Under the theme 'for a more humane society, for a world more fair and just,' delegates for three days will tackle the policies and priorities for democratic socialism in the next century and will also elect a new president -- Portugal's Prime Minister Antonio Guterres -- to replace former premier Pierre Mauroy.

The congress will also debate other areas of concern for the International, such as the search for peace in different regions facing conflict and the struggle for democracy and human rights in places around the

world where they are under threat,' organizers said.

A declaration to be examined and adopted during the congress is expected to integrate the various 'modernist' visions of the Socialist doctrine in the face of the new age of capitalism.

Observers said the aim is to find a compromise between the socialist-liberal policies, or 'third way,' embodied by British Premier Tony Blair and the more conservative vision of countries such as France.

Proposals on the declaration submitted by Blair and German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder ahead of the congress call, among other things, for a reduction in taxes and in public spending and for an end to systematic state funding of welfare programs.

France's Socialists, however, favour modernizing their ideas but not at the expense of their fundamental beliefs and reject the idea of going along with 'economic market forces.'

Russian warplanes pound Chechnya

GROZNY, Russia, Nov 7: Russian warplanes pounded near-deserted villages in Chechnya today amid uncertainty in the Kremlin about what to do next to bring the rebel republic to its knees, reports AFP.

The Zavodskiy region of the rebel capital Grozny was shaken by warplane bombardments early Sunday in attacks that the separatist command said had killed at least 10 civilians.

The attacks also targeted the villages of Vedeno, Shatoi, Bamut and Itum-Kale, Grozny said.

Moscow officials meanwhile reported that federal forces had delivered more than 100 rocket strikes against Chechnya. The Interfax news agency said at least 10 cars filled with 'terrorists' had been destroyed. As Russian artillery continued to pound Chechnya, top military officials said the gov-

ernment and the army were united in the fight against Chechen rebels.

The defence ministry, general staff and all armed forces form a united and effective front,' Defence Minister Marshal Igor Sergeev said in a joint statement with his chief of staff Anatoly Kvashtin.

'Any attempt to oppose the authorities and the military command is doomed to failure,' it added.

The statement followed media reports Saturday that President Boris Yeltsin could be about to suspend the military offensive in Chechnya and force Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to resign.

Other reports had already suggested several army generals would step down if the Kremlin bowed to western pressure and opened negotiations with Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov.

Deputy Chief of Staff General Valery Manilov rejected on Saturday a fresh appeal from the Chechen leader to negotiate a settlement to the crisis.

'Maskhadov put himself out of the talks process,' said Manilov. There could be no talks as long as Chechnya served as a base for terrorists, he added.

Earlier Saturday, Interfax reported Chechnya's Deputy Prime Minister Kazbek Makhachyov as saying Maskhadov had again declared himself ready for talks.

Maskhadov last month angrily accused Moscow of only being interested in war and having no intention of opening dialogue with the Chechens.

Yeltsin has met Maskhadov only once, in May 1997, when Russia recognized Maskhadov's right to rule the republic but delayed a decision on its status until year-end 2000.