#### Tougher C'wealth rules proposed

LONDON, Nov 8: Zimbabwe, Kenya, Zambia and Sri Lanka could face expulsion from the Commonwealth under propos-als for tough new membership criteria based on democracy and human rights, the Daily Telegraph reported today, says Reuters.

The newspaper said the proposals were in a report prepared by the London-based Foreign Policy Centre, an independent think-tank whose president is British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and whose patron is British Prime Minister Tony

The report, to be published at the Commonwealth heads of government meeting in South Africa later this week, called for Zimbabwe, Kenya, Zambia and Sri Lanka to be expelled if they did not improve the treatment of their citizens, the Daily Telegraph said.

The newspaper said the re-port had semi-official status because it had been written in consultation with the Commonwealth's own human rights advisers.

It said the report questioned whether heir-to-the-throne Prince Charles should take over from Britain's Queen Elizabeth as head of the grouping of some 50 mainly former British

The report also asked whether the Commonwealth's headquarters should remain in London, the newspaper said.

No immediate comment was available from the British government but the Daily Telegraph said the report's publication would provoke a furious row at the summit in South Africa.

It said the report called for the Commonwealth to adopt new powers against countries that failed to live up to its standards, with the appointment of "Good Governance Commissioner" to police member states.

"It also includes a checklist of criteria for membership, which would oblige member countries to hold free and fair elections and to respect human rights, including freedom of expression, association and the press." the Daily Telegraph

"Members would be expelled if they refused to maintain an independent judiciary, tackle corruption and promote civil

The commonwealth has suspended Pakistan because of last month's military coup in the Asian state.

#### Pope ends India visit

NEW DELHI, Nov 8: Pope John Paul II left India today afreepla two-day write during which he issued a call for conversion aimed at expanding the Catholic Church's reach in Asia in the next millennium, reports AFP. The pope's two-day visit.

which had been the subject of protests by right-wing Hindus prior to his arrival, passed off peacefully, including a public mass in New Delhi on Sunday attended by 50,000 people.

"Though some people made some statements, good sense prevailed on all of them," said Minister of State for External Ajit Panja after he saw the pope off at the airport.

"The visit went off very well and the Vatican has expressed satisfaction about it," Panja

The pope held meetings with President K.R. Narayanan and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who stressed India's commitment to its secular constitution and traditions of religious tolerance. Church leaders here had

been hoping that the visit would focus attention on a series of attacks against their community in the past 18 months.

Navarro-Valls said the talks had helped to "clear up misunderstandings," with both sides agreeing on the need to protect minorities.

Despite regional sensitivity over the issue, the pope outlined evangelical guidelines that unequivocally laid down conversion as the cornerstone of the Church's future activity in Asia.

#### Disease spreading in cyclone-hit

#### Orissa

BHUBANESHWAR, India, Nov 8: Disease was spreading in the cyclone-hit eastern Indian state of Orissa today as the death toll in last week's monster storm crept closer to the 3,500-mark, reports AFP.

"The toll now stands at 3,458 after rescue teams on Monday discovered 23 more bodies," a government relief official said, adding one of the 10 cyclonestricken districts alone had ac-

counted for 2,472 bodies. He said the crippled state administration, which is facing a massive shortage of wood for mass cremations, was worried

the final death toll could touch 5,000.

There is a great fear of that. but we are hoping against hope that will not happen," he said. A spokesman from the cyclone control room Monday said several private organisations had volunteered to conduct mass cremations of unat-

tended corpses. This service will take some of the pressure off us," the official said of the task of collecting and disposing off hundreds of human bodies littering the

submerged countryside. A military spokesman said four flattened districts re-

mained cut off Another relief official said there have been reports of "an acute outbreak of gastroentritis all over the affected region." with people swamping local hospitals and the army's mobile clinics.

## Israel, Palestinians launch talks on final peace deal

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Nov 8: Israeli and Palestinian negotiators began crucial talks to-day aimed at reaching a per-mament peace settlement after decades of conflict, reports

The negotiations opened in the Grand Park Hotel in the West Bank town of Ramallah under the leadership of career diplomat Oded Eran for the Israelis and information minister Yasser Abed Rabbo for the Palestinians.

The two teams of half a dozen negotiators are due to address the thorniest issues still outstanding between Israel and the Palestinians -- Palestinian statehood and borders, the status of Jerusalem, water rights, and the future of Jewish settlements and Palestinian refugees.

Both sides brushed aside reporters' questions as they headed into the talks, but Eran and Abed Rabbo are due to make

public statements at the conclusion of the closed-door meeting. The negotiations began de-spite a triple bomb attack Sunday in the Mediterranean resort town of Netanya by suspected Palestinian extremists which

wounded around 30 people.
"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," Israeli Deputy Defence Minister Efraim Sneh said on Sunday.

The two sides have set September 2000 as the target date for striking a comprehensive peace deal and are due to reach a framework agreement by mid-February, although Monday's negotiations are ex-pected to focus on the agenda

and procedural matters. The ambitious timetable for resolving a dispute which has defied the efforts of world statesmen for more than a cen-

tury was laid out in the landmark peace accord Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat signed with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak in the Egyptian re-sort of Sharm el-Sheikh on September 5.

But both sides remain diametrically opposed on most of the issues and many consider the deadlines unrealistic. On the very eve of Monday's talks Barak infuriated the

Palestinians with two an-

nouncements that went to the heart of the peace process. The Israeli premier told his cabinet that he did not consider UN resolutions calling for the exchange of land for peace ap-plied to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. He said that these territories did not belong to an inter-

nationally recognised govern-ment before Israel captured them in the 1967 Middle East Barak said he considered Resolution 242 only applied to the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights which Israel captured from Egypt and Syria, Is-raeli public radio said.

Also Sunday, Barak announced the expansion of a West Bank Jewish settlement by 10 times its original size, defying Palestinian demands that Israel stop preempting the talks by pressing ahead with settlement of the occupied territories.

The final status negotiations first launched symbolishortly before former rightwing premier Benjamin Netanyahu took office, but were immediately suspended.

Another formal ceremony opening the talks was held a week after the Sharm agreement, but no working meetings were scheduled until Barak finally appointed his chief negotiator late last month.



Crowds of Acehnese shout "Merdeka" (freedom) slogans in the yard of main Baiturrahman mosque in Banda Aceh, about 1,700 kilometres northwest of Jakarta, during a mass rally yesterday. More than one million people attended a mass rally and crowded the mosque yard to demand an East Timor-style referendum.

# Warplanes pound Grozny Massive rally in Aceh

Moscow rejects pleas for end to war

MOSCOW, Nov 8: Russian warplanes and artillery pounded the centre of the Chechen capital today, where two bombs left large craters in an intersection in the centre of the city, reports AFP.

The fiercest bombardment of the rebel capital in days came as Moscow dismissed Grozny's appeals to Washington for help to end the war, after a top general warned he would resign if the offensive was halted.

Two bombs struck the intersection of Lenin Avenue and Nuradilov Street in the centre of the city, making craters about seven metres deep and 12 metres wide, Interfax news agency said.

The Russian forces were also reported to be striking at military barracks in the south of the city, as well as the road leading towards Sheikh Mansur airport in the northeast, and the Oktyabrsky, Zaand Starovodskoi promyslovsky districts.

The Chechen presidency, cited by Interfax, said there were numerous dead and wounded. But this could not be confirmed independently.

Russian forces, which poured troops and tanks into the rebel republic on October 1 after nearly a month of bombardment in a declared bid to wipe out "terrorists," have been pounding the Chechen capital for the past six weeks. Chechen officials say some 3,200 civilians have been killed by indiscriminate Russian bombings.

Outside Grozny, where thousands of Russian troops are massed on surrounding hills within sight of the city, federal forces attacked the village of Alkhan-Kala west of the capital, Interfax reported.

Tanks and helicopter gunships fired at the village before withdrawing, said Chechen military commander Mumadi Saidayev.

Overnight, Russian planes flew some 30 missions, raining "precision" missiles and bombs on Grozny, the western

stronghold of Bamut and Chechnya's second city Gudermes in the east.

At the weekend Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov appealed to US President Bill Clinton and other world leaders to help end the war and get talks between Moscow and Grozny

Letters had gone to all leaders of member states in the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) which will hold a summit in Ankara from November 17 said presidential spokesman Selim Abdulmuslimov.

But Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin dismissed the initiative.

#### for referendum BANDA ACEH, Indonesia, Jihad if the referendum does (Freedom)". "Long Live the Peonot take place." ple of Aceh" and "Long Live Referendum," and "A united Aceh

Nov 8: Up to a million people massed at a mosque in the capital of Indonesia's volatile province of Aceh today in a peaceful rally demanding an East Timor-style referendum on self-determination, reports For about two hours, Muslim

scholars and leaders, student representatives and activists, addressed the crowd of up to one million people, some calling for Jihad should their demand go unheeded by Jakarta. Cut Nur Asyikin, a woman

AFP.

pro-referendum activist from Pidie district, roused the crowd asking them whether the people of Aceh "are prepared to go on

A petition in support of a referendum for Aceh, to be sent to the leaders of the Indonesian legislature and to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, was also signed at the mosque by the leader of the Aceh parliament, Muhammad Yus and Vice Governor Bustari Mansyur.

"Today, it has been proven that all the people of Aceh are united, and came to Banda Aceh to voice their aspiration and demand for a referendum," Teungku Bulkaini, a traditional Muslim leader, told the crowd according to the Detikcom online news service. Yells of "Merdeka

with the raising of a giant four by eight metre white flag carrying the word "Referendum" in bold blue letters, on the mosque's front flag pole.

## Artillery duels rage in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, Nov 8: Tamil Tiger rebels and government troops exchanged long range artillery and mortar bomb attacks today, triggering an exo- with a major shake-up in the dus of civilians from

villages, officials said, reports As the shelling intensified, along the northeastern Weli Oya sector, about 7,000 villagers in the region had moved to areas further south, officials

However, the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had slowed an advance along a strategic highway after capturing some 10 towns from government forces in five days of fighting since Tuesday.

The LTTE overnight pounded the new military defence lines but failed to capture any further ground as regrouped military units were resisting, official sources said.

An investigation is under-

way into the army's worst defeat yet at the hands of Tiger rebels while the authorities attempted to lift troop morale The ETTE said over its un-

derground Voice of Tigers radio Sunday that its fighters were moving southwards from the town of Puliyankulam which they took over Saturday.

Army units were regrouping and setting up a new defence line just south of Puliyankulam while the defence ministry said that 35 Tiger rebels and seven troops had died in a renewed clash on Saturday.

Military-held towns in northern Sri Lanka have crumbled at an astonishing rate since Tuesday, when the LTTE launched a ferocious counteroffensive against the army's earlier offensive code-named "Watershed."

But the offensive has turned

into a Waterloo for government forces who had taken over more territory than they could defend with their meagre resources.

Junior Desence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte was quoted on state radio as saying that the losses were not as high as widely believed and troops were launching fresh operations to regain lost territory.

more than 1,000 dead, but the defence ministry has said only 89 soldiers have died.

"Depending on the outcome

#### Families hold memorial for Egypt Air victims

NEWPORT, Rhode Island. Nov 8: Relatives of the 217 victims who died aboard EgyptAir Flight 990 said goodbye to their loved ones in an emotional seaside service, as officials hoped improved weather today would allow them to resume their search for the flight's data recorders, reports AFP.

During Sunday's 40-minute ecumenical memorial, Christian, Jewish and Muslim clergy led the 280 family members in prayer, while representatives of the Canadian, Egyptian and US governments brought messages of condolences.

Nearly 300 relatives and families attended the service. along with more than 150 members of the National Transportation Safety Board, the American Red Cross, hotel workers, and other private and government groups charged with tending to the bereaved.

The EgyptAir Boeing 767 crashed early October 31 some 30 minutes after takeoff from New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport, killing all passengers and crew.

## Pak strongman vows more de-escalation but not in Kashmir

DOHA, Nov 8: Pakistani strongman General Pervez Musharraf vowed here Sunday to continue the policy of de-escalation on the international border with India he announced last month but announced no extension of the policy to disputed Kashmir, reports AFP.

Musharraf told the official QNA news agency he regretted the absence of a favourable reaction from India to the de-escalation he announced on October 17, five days after he took control in a coup that ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif. But he added he had not really been disappointed by the

Indian reaction. Musharraf made no response to calls made by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright last month after a flareup of fighting on the Line of Control in Kashmir for the deescalation policy to be extended to the disputed territory.

"The point here is that he did say he was going to withdraw them from the international border, but we would also like it done on the Line of Control, Albright said. Musharraf, on his second

foreign tour since his bloodless coup, also promised he would strengthen democracy in Pak-Another report says: Pak-

istan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf arrived in Turkey today on his first visit to a NATO-member country following his October 12 coup. Musharraf, who arrived

from Qatar for his one-day visit, is scheduled to meet President Suleyman Demirel and Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit.

Turkey expressed hope for a rapid return to democracy after Musharraf toppled elected prime minister Nawaz Sharif and put himself in power in a bloodless coup.

improve their safety measures

for plant workers, we will raise

the number of our regular in-

vestigations," the official said.

after a huge leak at a uranium

processing plant in Tokaimura,

120 kilometres north of Tokyo.

privately owned by JCO Co. Ltd.

Three workers at the plant

The inspections were held

### Anonymous caller claims Israeli pipe

people cannot be defeated," re-

sounded throughout the area as

well as went the participants

There was no reported inci-

dent of violence and not a single

uniformed Indonesian soldier

or police officer was seen in the

The massive rally started at

around 8:45 a.m. (0745 BST)

were on their way home.

JERUSALEM, Nov 8: An anonymous caller telephoned a Tel Aviv newspaper claiming tacks in Israel in the name of the fundamentalist movement Islamic Jihad, the paper said

The caller telephoned the Jerusalem bureau of Hebrew

"It seems doubtful because in general these claims are made by fax," a Yediot Aharonot editor told AFP, adding that the paper had not published a report about the call in its Mon-

tacks over the past few years. In London, the head of Is-

val Hamas, was behind the bombings. Hamas, which frequently strikes at key moments in the peace process, warned on Saturday it was preparing to carry out a wave of attacks on Israeli

## 111 Falungong

targets "in the coming weeks

#### arrested so far

today it had arrested a total of 111 followers of the outlawed Falungong group so far, including some who committed crimes before the group was banned on July 22, reports AFP.

"According to the Public Security Bureau, as of November 4, 111 Falungong practitioners have been formally arrested on charges of organising and using a heretical cult to undermine the implementation of the law.

cil's news office told AFP Other charges included gathering crowds to disturb social order, illegal business practices and illegally obtaining state se-

She refused to reveal when

the trials would be held. The government has launched a draconian crackdown, with a huge mobilisation of police and propaganda re-

sources, against the group that practices traditional meditation and breathing exercises. The government has vowed to crush the group after 10,000 followers surrounded the

Zhongnanhai leadership compounded in central Beijing on April 25. A parliamentary decision earlier this month greatly ex-

panded the scope of police and judicial powers to crack down on the group, with the government indicating that the decision will be used retroactively to prosecute Falungong actions before the July 22 ban. Monday the official Legal Daily announced the arrests of

three members of a publishing house n northern Jilin Province who were facing charges of printing and selling Falungong material between February 1992 and October 1998, well before the ban of the

# 

Grobachev honoured: Germany's President Johannes Rau presented the former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev with one of the country's highest awards on Sunday for his role in bringing about the fall of the Berlin Wall,

Gorbachev received the Bundesverdienstkreuz (Cross of Merit) for what Rau called his decisive contribution to reunifying Germany. German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder attended the ceremony. Former US president George Bush, who is also at ceremonies marking the 10th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, was made a honorary citizen of Berlin. Quake rocks Colombia: A powerful

earthquake rocked much of Colombia and destroyed a number of homes in a northeastern mountain town while residents slept early Monday, authorities said, Reuters reports from The quake, measuring 6.5 on the Richter scale and classified as capable of causing widespread damage in cities and towns, had its epicentre near Pie de Cuesta in northeastern Santander

am local time (1200 BST). Vietnam flood toll 527: Central Vietnam's worst floods in a century have killed at least 527 people as relief convoys pushed further into the devastated

the next few days, although light rain was falling in some of the

worst-hit provinces. But generally clearer skies allowed heli-

copters to deliver emergency supplies of food, fresh water and

medicine into more remote areas, relief officials said.

province, authorities said. The quake struck shortly before 1

region Monday, even using the wartime Ho Chi Minh Trail to deliver supplies, Reuters reports from Hanoi. Forecasters have predicted better weather for the region over



A family member of a victim of the crash of EgyptAir Flight 990 holds a child close under a blanket as they sit along the shore of the Atlantic Ocean following a memorial service on Sunday at Brenton Point State Park

### in Newport. -AFP photo

states accepted India's plan to become a republic, and now the sembly. 33 republics it contains out-Some countries, such as Ausregular meetings of finance and other ministers.

as head of the Commonwealth. The organisation is a loose association of states with no treaty, charter or written con-

velopment. Central administration is assured by the Commonwealth Secretariat based in London and founded in 1965 as "a visi-

Rebel radio said 115 Tigers had been killed in the first five days of fighting. The rebels had earlier placed military losses at

The ministry, however, admitted losing the strategically important towns and said a three-member court of inquiry was probing the disaster.

of the Court of Inquiry, severe punishment will be meted out to all those who are found responsible," the statement said.

## 15 key N-facilities in Japan fail safety checks

TOKYO, Nov 8: Fifteen of Japan's 17 key nuclear fuel facility operators had inadequate safety measures for workers. the labour ministry said in a report released today, reports

The ministry carried out in-

spections on the 17 major nu-

clear facilities, excluding power

plants, in October after a major nuclear accident on September 30 which startled the country. "We found that out of the 17 key facilities, only two have no problem with health and safety control systems, such as regularly checking radiation levels

doctors," a ministry official In particular, the report discovered nine nuclear-related facilities violated the Industrial Safety and Health Law, the ministry said.

and inspections by industry

were injured when they illegally used steel buckets to pour 16 kilograms of uranium into a

"While we have ordered those who failed the inspection to

precipitation tank, setting off a critical reaction. In the worst-affected of the workers, 35-year-old Hisashi Ouchi, was in a critical condition at Tokyo University Hospital despite receiving blood

transplants.

Radiation from Japan's worst nuclear accident was estimated at 75 times the annual exposure limit at a distance of 80 metres from the site, the government said last week.

# Celebrating 50 years of C'wealth

LONDON, Nov 8: The Commonwealth marks its 50th anniversary with a membership that, despite the momentous changes of the last half-century, now encompasses more than a quarter of the world's population, reports AFP.

When Commonwealth heads of government meet in Durban later this week for their biennial summit, they will be making up the largest inter-governmental conference in the world after the United Nations. Its 54 members range from

vast Australia to populous In-

dia to the tiny St Kitts and

Nevis, including of course the "mother country" -- Britain. The Commonwealth was founded in 1926 as a group of "autonomous communities within the British empire ... united by a common allegiance

to the Crown.' It was reborn in a modern version in 1949 when member

number the 21 monarchies. tralia and Canada, still recognise the British monarch as head of state. Others may be republics, but all acknowledge Queen Elizabeth symbolically

stitution, with core principles of political democracy, human rights, good governance, the rule of law and sustainable de-

continents increased and com-

eration" running through the organisation. It enjoys observer status at the UN General As-The Secretariat organises the biennial summit, as well as

ble symbol of the spirit of coop-

The Commonwealth secretary-general is Chief Emeka Anyaoku of Nigeria, who bows out after this week's summit in Durban, South Africa.

continuing relevance in the changing world, particularly in the face of globalisation. He said it was a force for the promotion of "unity in diversity," and that role would grow as globalisation stepped up, the migration of peoples across

In his 1999 report, he em-

phasised the organisation's

munications advances "continue to shrink time and space and erode borders." Member states of the Com-

monwealth ar :: Antigua and Barbuda; Australia; Bahamas; Bangladesh; Barbados; Belize; Britain: Botswana: Brunei: Cameroon: Canada; Cyprus; Dominica; Fiji; Gambia; Ghana; Grenada; Guyana; India; Jamaica; Kenya; Kiribati; Lesotho: Malawi; Malaysia; Maldives; Malta; Mauritius; Mozambique. Namibia: Nauru: New

Zealand; Nigeria; Pakistan; liament, which is dominated by Papua New Guinea; St Kitts and Nevis; St Lucia; St Vincent and Grenadines; Samoa; Seychelles; Sierra Leone; Singapore; Solomon Islands; South Africa: Sri Lanka; Swaziland; Tanzania; Tonga; Trinidad and Tobago; Tuvalu; Uganda; Vanuatu; Zambia; and Zimbabwe.

### Women's political rights Kuwaiti parliament to vote today

KUWAIT CITY, Nov 8: Kuwait's parliament is expected to vote Tuesday on whether to give Kuwaiti women political rights amid warnings by liberal MPs that foreign relations will be seriously damaged if the law is rejected, reports AFP. The decree giving women the

the opposition, for their approval at their weekly session. Women's rights groups in the Gulf Arab state have called on Kuwaiti women to be present for the vote, though female activists here could not confirm if there would be any formal demonstrations as a show of

vote is set to be put to the 50 all-

male members of the new par-

support for the law. The move to grant women political rights ran into trouble last week when a parliamen-

The interior and defence commission argued the decree was unconstitutional because parliament was dissolved at the time it was issued by Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah.

emir for issuing the decree.

tary commission criticised the

World leaders including US President Bill Clinton were quick to welcome the proposed emancipation of Kuwait's women, and a meeting of liberal MPs late Sunday warned that Kuwait's foreign relations would be undermined if the law does not go through.

# bomb attacks

responsibility for pipe bomb today, reports AFP.

newspaper Yediot Aharonot overnight following the blasts in the Mediterranean resort of Netanya which injured 34 peo-

But the newspaper said it was dubious of his claim.

day edition. Islamic Jihad is violently opposed to the peace accords between Israel and the Palestinians and has carried out a number of deadly anti-Israeli at-

lamic group Al-Mujahirun said that Ezzedin al-Qassam, the armed wing of Jihad's larger ri-

### and months." members

BEIJING, Nov 8: China said

Xi Yanchun of the State Coun-

crets, she said.

group.

## Vatican spokesman Joaquin AFP reports from Berlin.