

Tougher C'wealth rules proposed

LONDON, Nov 8: Zimbabwe, Kenya, Zambia and Sri Lanka could face expulsion from the Commonwealth under proposals for tougher 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 Blair.

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 report 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 colonies.

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 a "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 said.

Members would be expelled if they refused to maintain an independent judiciary, tackle corruption and promote civil society. The commonwealth has suspended Pakistan because of last month's military coup in the Asian state.

Israel, Palestinians launch talks on final peace deal

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Nov 8: Israeli and Palestinian negotiators began crucial talks today aimed at reaching a permanent peace settlement after decades of conflict, reports AFP.

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.

Resolution 242 only applied to the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights which Israel captured from Egypt and Syria, Israeli public radio said.

Warplanes pound Grozny 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 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 north-east, and the Oktyabrsky, Zavodskoi and Staropromyslovsky districts.

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

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

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 exodus of civilians from nearby villages, officials said, reports AFP.

As the shelling intensified, along the northeastern Welioya sector, about 7,000 villagers in the region had moved to areas further south, officials said.

way into the army's worst defeat yet at the hands of Tiger rebels while the authorities attempted to lift troop morale with a major shake-up in the high command.

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 eucumenical 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.

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.

Anonymous caller claims Israeli pipe bomb attacks

JERUSALEM, Nov 8: An anonymous caller telephoned a Tel Aviv newspaper claiming responsibility for pipe bomb attacks in Israel in the name of the fundamentalist movement Islamic Jihad, the paper said today, reports AFP.

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, AFP reports from Berlin.

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 Bogota.

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 province, authorities said. The quake struck shortly before 1 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 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 the next few days, although light rain was falling in some of the worst-hit provinces. But generally clearer skies allowed helicopters to deliver emergency supplies of food, fresh water and medicine into more remote areas, relief officials said.



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.

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 AFP.

The ministry carried out inspections on the 17 major nuclear facilities, excluding power plants, in October after a major nuclear accident on September 30 which started the country.

While we have ordered those who failed the inspection to improve their safety measures for plant workers, we will raise the number of our regular investigations," the official said.

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.

It was reborn in a modern version in 1949 when member states accepted India's plan to become a republic, and now the 33 republics it contains outnumber the 21 monarchies.

111 Falungong members arrested so far

BEIJING, Nov 8: China said today it had arrested a total of 111 Falungong members 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.

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 vote is set to be put to the 50 all-male members of the new parliament, which is dominated by the opposition, for their approval at their weekly session.

Women's political rights

The government has launched a draconian crackdown, with a huge mobilisation of police and propaganda resources, 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 compound in central Beijing on April 25.