

Sharif's family asks military govt to unseal business offices

LAHORE, Pakistan, Nov 10: The family of deposed prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has asked Pakistan's military government to unseal its business offices to help them clear bank loans, members of the family said today, reports AFP.

The family is unable to pay back the loans because its offices in Lahore were sealed when the military seized power on October 12, they said.

The request has been made in a letter to military ruler General Pervez Musharraf by Hamza Shahbaz, son of the deposed premier's brother Shahbaz Sharif, they said.

It comes ahead of a November 16 deadline for all defaulters in the country to pay back bank loans. Musharraf has warned those failing to comply will be dealt with sternly in new anti-corruption courts.

The Pakistani elite owe an estimated four billion dollars in defaulted bank loans.

"You should understand that it is virtually impossible for our family to pay back loans when our business centres are sealed, accounts frozen and we are under detention," the sources quoted Hamza as saying in the letter.

Sharif, his brother and several other members of the family were put under detention following the coup.

They are being probed for bank loan defaults and tax evasion, but no charges have so far been brought against them.

Priyanka not joining politics; Congress

NEW DELHI, Nov 10: Congress yesterday dismissed as baseless and just rumours reports that Priyanka Gandhi Vadra was joining active politics and would be given some responsibility in the organisation, reports PTI.

The news reports to this effect were baseless and just rumours. There is also no truth in reports that some organisational responsibility is being assigned to any of the children of Congress President Sonia Gandhi, party spokesman Ajit Jogi told reporters.

He recalled that Sonia Gandhi had said time and again that at the moment, her children are not going to take part in politics.

The denial by the AICC of the reports came over a week after the Congress President was quoted as having said at Amethi that Priyanka was joining active politics and would be entrusted some organisational responsibility.

Nothing of that sort was said at Amethi, he said.

Orissa cyclone death toll rises to 7474

BHUBANESHWAR, India, Nov 10: The death toll in India's cyclone-ravaged Orissa state has more than doubled to 7,474, a state government official told Reuters today.

The death toll has risen to 7,474 with 6,383 deaths reported from Jagatsinghpur district, an official in the state's cyclone-relief control room said. The toll had been hovering around 3,500 for the past few days but more bodies are being recovered as flood waters recede.

"As water levels are receding more and more bodies have been found," the official said. Hundreds of badly decomposed bodies and animal carcasses still floated in the waters in Paradeport town and adjoining regions.

The storm, which struck the eastern state on October 29 and 30 with wind gusts up to 300 kilometres per hour, left millions homeless and flooded vast areas of the state.

Nearly two weeks after the cyclone, relief helicopters have been able to land in some of the marooned regions for the first time to distribute food, medicines and also airlift some people.

Officials said the number of people in hospitals suffering from diarrhoea was 1,919 and 27 had died from it, health officials said. But rescue workers said the numbers of those ill or dead were "much, much more."

Mahathir announces snap polls Parliament to be dissolved today

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 10: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad announced a snap election today, saying he was confident of retaining the two-thirds parliamentary majority on which he has staked his political reputation, reports AFP.

"The government has decided to dissolve parliament from Thursday, November 11, to enable general elections to be held," he told a press conference.

Asia's longest serving elected leader, who has kept the country guessing for months on the poll date, said the independent Election Commission would set the dates for nominations and polling day.

The commission will meet Friday to decide on the dates, chairman Omar Hashim was quoted as saying by state Bernama news agency.

Polls can be legally held as soon as 11 days after the commission sets the date for nominations. In the past three elections, during which Mahathir was in power, campaigning

lasted just 10 days each time.

A jovial and wisecracking Mahathir said he decided to call the polls before the month of Ramadan in December to prevent the opposition from using the mosques to campaign.

He said he was also worried about attempts by the opposition to disrupt the election by staging street demonstrations and riots, especially when they realised they might not win.

Asked if he was sure of retaining his ruling coalition's two-thirds majority, the premier said: "Yes, very confident."

"Everything has been completed, the machinery is ready. Otherwise I wouldn't call for election."

Analysts say Mahathir, 73, faces his toughest challenge of recent years after the sacking and jailing of his popular deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998, a move which split the bedrock Malay constituency.

His National Front coalition has secured a two-thirds parliamentary majority for the past three decades and the pre-

mier has committed himself to doing the same this time.

Opposition parties which have formed a loose alliance tacitly concede they have no hope of winning but are determined to deny the Front its two-thirds majority, which allows it to change the constitution.

Mahathir said he was not seeking to reaffirm his popularity or an endorsement of his economic policies.

"I don't go for election to test my popularity against somebody," he said. "This is not a game that we play... What is important to me is that this country gets a good government."

The premier said there was "nothing personal" about the election.

"I happen to be the leader, yes, but we work as a team and we stand united," he said. "I don't care if I go down in history as a good guy or a bad guy. What is important is what is achieved."

He poured scorn on the opposition alliance and his former rival Anwar, its candi-

date for prime minister.

"They will promise the moon and the sun and everything because they know they are going to lose. We do not make promises we cannot keep."

The premier said Anwar had been "accusing everybody of all kind of misdeeds" while giving evidence in his sodomy trial.

"We are prepared to face this kind of situation. We are not worried about his accusations. We know him. He will try everything possible to disrupt the government," he said.

Asked about his retirement plans, Mahathir said he would have a "step down" some day but declined to say if this would be his last election.

The premier Tuesday evening cancelled his trip to a Commonwealth summit in South Africa, hours before he was due to depart.

Opposition parties have criticised the October 29 budget, which cut income and other taxes and boosted wages for civil servants, as a pre-election vote grabber.



Fireworks light the sky over the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin on Tuesday, where thousands of people gather to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall. — AFP Photo

Israeli army evicts settlers from WB

HAVAT MAON, West Bank, Nov 10: The Israeli army moved in before dawn today to dismantle a rogue Jewish outpost in the West Bank, where the settlers and their supporters had dug in behind burning barricades, reports AFP.

In a five-hour operation starting at around 3:30 a.m. (07:30 BST), some 1,000 soldiers and policemen cleared the hill-

top at Havat Maon, near Hebron in the southern part of the occupied West Bank, where the outpost had been set up about a year ago.

Bulldozers demolished homes after the army said it had removed some 250 settlers camped out on the site and taken them off in buses to the nearby Gush Etzion settlement bloc.



Israeli policemen evacuating a settler with his baby in his arms from the illegal settlement of Havat Maon south of the West Bank town Hebron yesterday. — AFP Photo

Some 50 people were arrested for assaults, threats and disrupting the evacuation, the army said.

Havat Maon was the last of 10 wildcat outposts in the West Bank ordered dismantled last month by Prime Minister Ehud Barak in a compromise with a leading settler group.

The dozen settlers living at Havat Maon and some 250 of their supporters set fire to barricades erected over the past few days and shouted anti-government slogans.

Some settlers kicked soldiers and one family opened a gas container as the police and army tried to evacuate them.

The noise was deafening as the troops approached the settlers' mobile homes, with the settlers begging the soldiers not to remove them and shouting "you don't have the right," and "don't do that."

But the soldiers, who had received psychological preparation during the past few days, moved in relentlessly and carted off the settlers one by one, though they were careful to avoid violence.

"We are trained to fight in battle against enemies, not against Jews... so it's of course a difficult mission," said Major General Moshe Yaalon, head of the Israeli army's Central Command, who oversaw the operation.

Among the soldiers were women who removed the female settlers.

Many of the settlers, who had promised passive resistance to their eviction, scrambled on top of the half-dozen mobile homes that formed the settlement.

Barak, who returned to Israel from Paris late Tuesday, went ahead with the evacuation despite an appeal by three Israeli ministers for a 10-day delay.

"No-one in Israel is above the law. The government cannot negotiate with those who do not accept our authority," Barak's security advisor Danny Yatom told Israeli radio.

Taliban to send team to Pakistan for talks

DUBAI, Nov 10: The new foreign minister of Afghanistan's ruling Taliban movement said in remarks published today his government would soon send a team to Pakistan for the first talks since the October coup in Islamabad, reports Reuters.

"Our position on what happened in Pakistan is that it is an internal matter. In relation to ties with Afghanistan, the matter is not yet clear," Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil told the United Arab Emirates newspaper.

"So far there has been no meetings with Pakistani officials and we will soon send a delegation to Islamabad to discuss all issues...," he added.

"Pakistani officials assured our ambassador in Islamabad during meetings that the previous policies did not change and that there will be no change in relations between us," said Muttawakil, who was named foreign minister in a cabinet reshuffle in late October.

Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are the only three countries that recognise the Taliban's rule.

Nawaz Sharif, the former Pakistani prime minister ousted in the bloodless military coup led by General Pervez Musharraf on October 12, had blamed a wave of sectarian violence in Pakistan on "terrorists" who trained at camps in Afghanistan.

11 Pakistani, 4 Indian soldiers killed in border skirmish

NEW DELHI, Nov 10: Eleven Pakistani and four Indian soldiers were killed in an intense artillery duel between the two sides on the disputed Kashmir border, a defence source said today, reports AFP.

An army spokesman on Tuesday had said 10 Pakistani soldiers were killed in the skirmish.

Islamabad Wednesday dismissed as "rubbish" New Delhi's claim and said Indian troops suffered "heavy" casualties.

Four Indian soldiers of the 12th Bihar regiment were killed in the Pakistani shelling "somewhere in the Gulmarg sector" on Tuesday night, the defence source said.

"We had reports of Pakistani soldiers moving about in the top pickets of Faulad and in Uri and three other regions in Gulmarg region. The reports were right when they fired on our troops last night."

The firing led to a gunbattle in which 11 Pakistani soldiers were killed and our troops lost

four persons," the source said.

The Faulad post in the northern region of Uri is about 140 kilometres north of Srinagar.

Some of the buildings in the tourist station of Gulmarg have been badly damaged in the shelling, a witness said.

"Massive army movement was seen in Gulmarg since the last two days. No one could sleep last night due to the shelling," Abdul Rashid, a hotel employee in Gulmarg said.

"This is the first time Pakistan has shelled Gulmarg," Rashid told AFP by telephone.

He said heavy snowfall in the region Wednesday had reduced the intensity of shelling.

In Islamabad, a military spokesman said "the Indian claim is nothing but rubbish. It is absolutely wrong."

He said more than 200 Indian troops backed by intense artillery and mortar shelling attacked a small Pakistani post late Tuesday.

Gunman kills 7 for rejecting marriage proposal

BIELEFELD, Germany, Nov 10: A gunman shot dead seven Turks, four women and three men, in an apartment in the west German town of Bielefeld on Tuesday after one of the men rejected the killer's proposal to marry his daughter, police said, reports Reuters.

They said the victims were from Germany's large Turkish community and were possibly ethnic Kurds. They added the suspect, himself also believed to be of Turkish nationality, was currently on the run.

Police said they were called to the scene late on Tuesday evening after neighbours heard shots coming from the apartment, within a six-story block in which around 50 people lived.

"We are hunting the suspect, but we have no idea where he is at the moment," said a police spokesman in Bielefeld, some 130 km northeast of the Rhineland town of Dortmund.

"The victims are Turks, and, we believe, ethnic Kurds although that is hard to confirm at this stage," he said.

He added that the police did not expect to release more information on the incident before carrying out a post-mortem on the bodies which would likely last into late morning. A news conference was planned later in the day.

Lankan opposition calls for talks with Tigers

COLOMBO, Nov 10: Sri Lanka's main opposition today called for talks with Tiger rebels who scored a wave of successes this week and said the government's war-for-peace strategy had proved a fatal failure, reports AFP.

Former prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said he hoped to start talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels and planned to integrate the militants into the government's armed forces if he was elected.

Wickremesinghe who is challenging President Chandrika Kumaratunga at the December 21 polls said he was confident of an outright victory as the ruling People's Alliance

(PA) had failed to deliver peace.

"I am not promising peace in 24 hours, but I am willing to take the first practical step," Wickremesinghe said, accusing President Kumaratunga of scuttling several opportunities to resume negotiations.

President Kumaratunga came to power in 1994 promising peace and opened a dialogue with the LTTE, but the guerrillas abruptly pulled out of a 100-day truce and resumed their long-drawn out campaign for a separate state.

"The government had said it was forced to fight the rebels, but Wickremesinghe said the administration failed to make use of later military gains to force the rebels to talk."

Wahid sends envoy to Aceh to resolve crisis

JAKARTA, Nov 10: Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, under growing pressure to stem a tide of separatism in Aceh, today dispatched a senior minister to the troubled province, reports AFP.

Human Rights Minister Hasbullah Saad, a native of Aceh, will leave for the strongly Islamic province on Saturday for a trip aimed at preparing the ground for a visit by Wahid himself.

The decision came three days after hundreds of thousands of Acehese rallied in the province's capital Banda Aceh to demand an East Timor-style referendum on self-determination.

"The president has asked Hasbullah to go to Aceh to hold dialogue with the leaders of the Acehese society, to obtain pure input, uncontaminated by other interests, so the response of the government will not be wrong," Security Minister General Wiranto said.

Saad added: "The president firmly said, return to Aceh and patiently talk to whoever wants to talk with the president and the president will later also come there."

He said Wahid will visit Aceh after his Nahdlatul Ulama Muslim organisation's congress, which opens on November 21.

Wiranto said the government was committed to improving security in Aceh, including strengthening the police there and rotating troops.

BRIEFLY

Kofi Annan in Tokyo: UN Secretary General Kofi Annan arrived in Tokyo on Wednesday for a five-day visit on the first leg of a tour of Japan, China and Turkey, foreign ministry officials said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

Annan is to meet Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko today before holding talks with Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi and Foreign Minister Yoko Kono. He departs Friday for the ancient capital of Kyoto in western Japan before heading to Beijing on Sunday.

'Discovery' launch rescheduled: NASA has tentatively rescheduled the launch of the space shuttle Discovery, which is to make repairs to the Hubble Space Telescope during a 10-day mission, the shuttle's flight director said Tuesday, AFP reports from Washington.

"The target date has been set for December 6," said Linda Ham, lead flight director at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas, in a press teleconference. NASA will announce a definitive launch date on November 19, said NASA spokesman Joe Wells from the Kennedy Space Center.

Indian FM to visit Japan

NEW DELHI, Nov 10: Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh is to visit Japan this month, the first such trip in four years, in a bid to renew frosty ties, a foreign ministry spokesman said today, reports AFP.

"There is a thaw in relations now. Relations were frozen after India's May nuclear tests. But this visit is aimed at bringing those strained relations back to normal," the spokesman said.

Singh, during the four-day Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) beginning on Friday in Durban, South Africa, will meet leaders of Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

3.5m Indians HIV-infected

NEW DELHI, Nov 10: India has 3.5 million persons infected with the AIDS-causing Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), according to the official estimates released yesterday by the National Aids Control Organisation (NACO), reports PTI.

NACO's working estimate, based on new calculations and recognised by international experts, will help government plan programmes and policies to arrest the rising HIV infections and provide care and support to the affected, JVR Prasada Rao, Additional secretary in the Health Ministry and Chief of NACO, told reporters yesterday.

The estimate is based on data collected in October 1998 from 180 HIV sentinel surveillance sites set up mostly in medical colleges across the country.

The assumption and results of this exercise were presented at the Monitoring Aids Pandemic (MAP) meeting in Kuala Lumpur last month.

Using these assumptions and state-specific estimates of HIV infections, NACO has calculated that there are 2.97 million HIV infected people in the country, plus or minus 20 per cent.

This puts the number in the range of 2.3 million to 3.5 million in mid-1998, Rao said.

Five states — Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Manipur — are high-prevalence areas. Gujarat and West Bengal fall in the medium prevalence and the rest of the country low prevalence categories.

Plane crash kills 18 in Mexico

MEXICO CITY, Nov 10: A Mexican jetliner fell from the sky today while flying over central Mexico, killing all 18 people on board, reports AP.

The accident occurred shortly after TAESA flight 725 took off from the airport in Uruapan in the state of Michoacan, about 180 miles west of Mexico City.

Inspector Juan Alfonso Lara of the state civil protection agency said the plane apparently exploded in the air. He said witnesses saw a brilliant light in the sky and the debris fall in the mountains 10 kilometres southwest of Uruapan.

He said rescue crews were in the area, but there was no chance of finding survivors.

"It was completely destroyed," he said.

The DC-9 took off from the western border city of Tijuana with 91 passengers on board, but most got off in Uruapan and a previous stop in Guadalajara, said TAESA spokesman Eduardo Cacho, speaking at a news conference.

The accident occurred minutes after the plane took off to its last stop in Mexico City with 13 passengers and five crew members.

Russians tighten grip on Chechen strongholds

GROZNY, Russia, Nov 10: Russian forces tightened their grip today around Grozny and other key Chechen strongholds, where troops are massed waiting Moscow's orders to launch an offensive, reports AFP.

Ignoring growing western calls for an end to the war, Russian warplanes, artillery and multiple rocket-launchers bombarded targets across breakaway Chechnya overnight.

First winter snows and heavy fog forced the Russian air force to slightly scale down its daily bombing missions across Chechnya.

But the weather has also increased pressure on Moscow to move ahead quickly with its two-month-old campaign to subdue the rebel republic. So far Russian forces have failed to capture any major Chechen bases.

Federal troops Wednesday entered the western Chechen stronghold of Bamut to launch

a "mopping-up" operation, conducting house-to-house searches for Chechen "rebels" on the northern edge of the village.

The operation in Bamut, a key Chechen base to which Russian troops have laid siege since last month, took place after a night of heavy air bombardment of the village, ITAR-TASS reported, citing Russian military officials.

Chechen forces are holed up inside a former Russian rocket base in Bamut, sheltering inside concrete and steel bunkers.

Meanwhile, as artillery rained down on the republic's second city Gudermes, 10 Chechen gunmen were killed trying to break through Russian lines which have sealed the city off in preparation for storming it, ITAR-TASS also reported.

Russian and Chechen forces also exchanged fire throughout the night in the outskirts of Grozny, where thousands of

federal troops are massed, Chechen Colonel Isa Munayev told AFP.

The Russian troops, which occupy strategic heights within sight of the city, are less than three kilometres from Grozny.

The new operation has been demanded by Russian generals who suffered a humiliating defeat during the 1994-1996 war with Chechnya in which some 80,000 people died.

But the United States, which maintained throughout the earlier conflict that it was a Russian internal matter, has been increasing protests about the latest war and its civilian casualties.

Rising public concern among US officials comes ahead of a November 17-19 summit of leaders from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Istanbul during which events in Chechnya are expected to be hotly debated.

HIV drugs may cause heart disease: Study

ATLANTA, Nov 10: HIV patients who take strong cocktails of drugs may be keeping themselves free of AIDS, but they may be running the more long-term risk of heart disease, researchers said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

They said they found more evidence that protease inhibitors, the drugs credited with making the cocktails work against the virus, cause changes that can lead to heart disease.

"Patients are clearly getting tremendous benefits from the use of HIV protease inhibitors, but (heart disease) appears to be a significant side-effect to that benefit," Dr. James Sosman of the University of Wisconsin, who worked on the study, said in a statement.

The researchers told a meeting of the American Heart Association that they found evidence the drugs were affecting the lining of the blood vessels, called the endothelium.

Doctors had feared there might be side-effects of protease inhibitors — besides the nausea, diarrhoea and other immediate side-effects — when some patients started complaining of strange fat deposits.

They got nicknames such as "porteaie paunch" and "buffalo hump" because of their odd distribution.

Tests showed some patients using the protease inhibitors had unusual blood sugar and blood cholesterol levels, and some gained weight.

Sosman's team used ultrasound to image blood flow in the arteries of 21 HIV patients taking protease inhibitors, and compared them to seven patients who did not take the drugs.

They found suggestions that the endothelial linings of the protease patients were not working properly, as compared to the seven not taking the drugs.



Queen Elizabeth II and South African President Thabo Mbeki (R) smile as the British monarch is invited to inspect honour guard at the Union Building in Pretoria yesterday. — AFP Photo