

Pak police press ahead with crackdown on corruption

ISLAMABAD, Nov 19: Pakistan pressed ahead today with its crackdown on corruption as police hunted for more suspects among the country's wealthy elite, reports AFP.

In total 25 people have been arrested since the crackdown began on Wednesday, although two have since been released after paying back outstanding bank loans, the government said.

Those arrested included senior politicians, a retired air marshal and a retired admiral. Under a new law enacted Wednesday, Pakistan's military rulers set up a National Accountability Bureau and warned offenders faced jail terms of up to 14 years.

A small group among the Pakistani elite has been named as having stolen 211 billion rupees (4.1 billion dollars), a third of the national budget. Most of the money was borrowed from banks with little or no collateral.

Convicted offenders, many of whom are likely to be politicians, will be disqualified from holding public office for 21 years. The government will also seize any assets obtained through graft.

The government has decided that all corruption cases pending in the now defunct anti-graft tribunal set up by ousted premier Nawaz Sharif will be transferred to the new accountability courts.

"It shall not be necessary to recall any witness or again to record any evidence that may have been recorded," a decree issued by President Muhammad Rafiq Tarar said.

Under the 1997 Accountability Act, former premier Benazir Bhutto, sacked in November 1996 for alleged corruption and misuse of power, was sentenced to five years imprisonment along with her husband Asif Ali Zardari in April.

A Lahore High Court bench found the couple guilty of receiving millions of dollars in kickbacks in a 1994 pre-shipment inspection contract awarded to a Swiss firm.

The court imposed a 8.6 million-dollar fine and barred them from politics for seven years.

Benazir, who was sentenced in absentia, has since been living in self-exile in London and her appeal has yet to be decided by the Supreme Court.

The National Accountability Bureau has declared Benazir a fugitive from the law.

The bureau's list of suspects says Benazir "wanted in a number of cases, is a proclaimed offender and outside the country." Analysts said the statement apparently dashed Benazir's hopes of getting her guilty verdict overturned. Her party had been dismissed the case as a political vendetta by her rival Sharif.

Reacting angrily to the label of proclaimed offenders, a spokesman said her Pakistan People's Party said he was "shocked and dismayed."

"It is the task of the courts alone to declare a person as a proclaimed offender after due process of law," the spokesman added.

The previous government had vowed to arrest Benazir on her return home.

The army-led crackdown has netted influential leaders from the country's major political parties in addition to some senior retired military officials.

Those arrested for defaulting on bank loan and evading taxes also include executives of some of the country's key business houses.

Karachi police arrested a businessman shortly before he could board a Dubai-bound flight on Wednesday.



Supporters of toppled Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif try to stop an Armoured Personnel Carrier entering the anti-terrorist court in the southern port city of Karachi yesterday. Sharif, who along with three other officials appeared before the courts in two separate hearings, was seen in public for the first time after his detention following a bloodless military coup on October 12.

— AFP photo

Sharif summoned in contempt of court case

ISLAMABAD, Nov 19: Pakistan's Supreme Court today ordered ousted premier Nawaz Sharif to appear in a contempt of court case next month, court officials said, reports AFP.

A full bench headed by Chief Justice Saeeduzzaman Siddiqui issued notices to Sharif and former head of the Islamabad administration Akram Javed to appear on December 7.

Sharif, ousted in a coup by army chief General Pervez Musharraf on October 12, was not present.

Instead the former premier was produced in a treason and murder conspiracy case before a judge at an anti-terrorist court in Karachi, in southern Pakistan.

The contempt case, reopened after Sharif's ouster, relates to the storming of the Supreme Court by a mob reportedly comprising leaders and workers of his Pakistan Muslim League party on November 28, 1997 in a bid to foil an earlier contempt proceeding against Sharif.

Former chief justice Sajjad Ali Shah, who had initiated the case against Sharif amid a bitter row between the government and the judiciary, suspended the proceedings after the mob vandalised the court. A three-member bench earlier called the incident the most flagrant violation of the decorum of the court but acquitted the accused, including several party lawmakers, for lack of evidence.

The court issued today's notices following a petition moved by freelance journalist Shahid Oskazi.

9 Texas students dead as log bonfire structure collapses

AUSTIN, Texas, Nov 19: At least nine students were killed and 26 others injured when a four-story log structure collapsed at a Texas university early Thursday, the university president said as rescuers searched through the rubble, reports AFP.

Texas A and M University president Ray Bowen confirmed nine people died under hundreds of collapsed logs and said two other students were still missing.

Rescuers managed to pull at least one person from beneath the rubble and rushed the survivor to a hospital, Bowen said earlier. Later, they pursued the search, carefully removing the debris after hearing faint sounds of other possible survivors, he said.

About 70 students were reportedly working at 2:42 a.m. (2:42 pm EST) Thursday on the structure, which was to be the centerpiece of the "Aggie bonfire," a much-anticipated, popular student event held before the school's annual football match-up with its arch-rival, the University of Texas at Austin.



Democratic presidential candidate Bill Bradley talks to students and parents at Logan Street Elementary School Thursday while campaigning in Los Angeles, California. Bradley visited the school, which has one of Los Angeles' best after-school programmes, which Bradley hopes to expand nationwide if elected.

— AFP photo

Maldivians go to polls

MALE, Nov 19: Brisk polling was reported in the Maldives today as the election for a new parliament for the Indian Ocean archipelago got underway, officials said, reports Reuters.

They said polling was heavy in the capital Male and the 20 administrative atolls spread across the equator.

More than 125 candidates are contesting the 40 seats in the 50 member parliament known as the People's Majlis.

Two candidates have already been elected unopposed and eight members of parliament are nominated by the president.

— AFP photo

Mob burns hotels, discos in Java

JAKARTA, Nov 19: Hundreds of Indonesian Muslims burned down at least 11 hotels and several discotheques south of the capital Jakarta, saying they were used as prostitution and drug centers, reports said today, reports AFP.

An estimated 1,500 people went on a rampage Wednesday night in the resort area of Puncak in Bogor district, 70 km south of here, destroying and torching places they said housed prostitutes and drug users, the Detik online news service said.

Iraq slams extension of oil-for-food programme

BAGHDAD, Nov 19: Iraq today blasted the United Nations as the world body prepares for talks on extending the Baghdad oil-for-food programme, whose latest six-month phase is due to expire this week, reports AFP.

"Extending the oil-for-food programme for another six months is a new extension of the embargo" imposed on Iraq more than nine years ago, said the Ath-Thawra daily, mouthpiece of the ruling Baath Party.

"The United States wants to maintain the sanctions to pursue its war of attrition against Iraq... it is shameful that the United Nations is trying to camouflage US policy aimed at

starving and humiliating Iraq," the paper said.

The UN Security Council is to meet Friday to discuss prolonging the programme that allows Iraq to sell a limited value of crude in return for humanitarian aid.

Diplomats on Thursday said the Council had agreed to extend the programme, launched in December 1996 to help lessen the effects of the sanctions slapped on Baghdad for its 1990 invasion of Kuwait, for two weeks instead of the customary six months.

The present six-month phase is set to end on Saturday.

Commuter, freight trains collide in Los Angeles

LOS ANGELES, Nov 19: Eighteen people were injured Thursday when a commuter train collided with a freight train in Fullerton City, officials said, reports AFP.

Sylvia Palmer, a Fullerton City spokesperson, said six freight cars derailed, including four that overturned, scattering cargo over a wide area.

Eighteen people were injured, with the most serious being a broken leg, said city official Joe Felz.

The crash took place about 800 meters (half a mile) east of the Fullerton airport. The cause of the incident was under investigation.

The commuter train -- reportedly carrying 65 passengers, was going south. It apparently struck the freight train that was switching from the south to the north tracks, according to Fullerton police.

"The freight train had already switched tracks to an opposite track," Joe Klein of the Fullerton Police Department told local television.

Sonia pleads for life of one of convicts of Rajiv murder

NEW DELHI, Nov 19: In a rare gesture, Congress president Sonia Gandhi has urged President K R Narayanan to commute the death sentence of Nalini, one of the convicts in the assassination of her husband Rajiv Gandhi, as she is the mother of a small child, reports PTI.

Nalini, mother of a seven-year-old girl, was sentenced to death along with three others -- Murugan, Perarivalan and Santhan -- by a Chennai special court, a verdict later confirmed by the Supreme Court.

During a private meeting with Narayanan, Gandhi had conveyed to him her feelings as well as those of her son and daughter that the life of Nalini be spared as she is the mother of a small child, Congress spokesman Ajit Jogi told reporters here.

Catholics, Protestants edge toward binding peace

BELFAST, Nov 19: Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland were edging cautiously towards a binding peace deal today, bringing praise from US President Bill Clinton, who urged them to proceed with "rapid implementation" of a draft peace agreement, reports AFP.

The Irish Republican Army (IRA) took a historic first step on the road to disarmament on Wednesday, issuing a statement pledging to appoint a senior member to negotiate handing over weapons.

The negotiator will be named as soon as a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland is set up under the terms of a 1998 peace accord, it said.

"The IRA is committed unequivocally to the search for freedom, justice and peace in Ireland," its statement said, signed P O'Neill, an IRA pen name.

"In our view, the (1998) Good Friday Agreement is a significant development and we believe its full implementation will contribute to the achievement of lasting peace."

The move came after leaders of Northern Ireland's rival sides -- unionists, who are mainly Protestant and support British rule of the province, and republicans, mainly Catholic who want a united Ireland -- took steps to break 18 months of deadlock in the peace process.

Both sides pledged support for a compromise deal that could lead to the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and setting up a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland by the end of the year.

Sources close to the peace talks said power could be handed over from Britain to the devolved government on December 4.

Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader David Trimble took one of the biggest gambles of his political career with a call to his party to drop its long-held refusal to see a government set up before the IRA began to disarm.



Investigators examine Metrolink locomotive that derailed after sideswiping a freight train that failed to clear switches in time for the east-bound commuter in Fullerton, California, USA Thursday. Eight people from the four-car passenger train were shifted to hospitals with minor injuries.

Lankan town tense as Tigers consolidate fresh gains

VAVUNIYA, Sri Lanka, Nov 19: Tamil Tiger rebels were digging in across new territory taken from government troops in northern Sri Lanka today as tension gripped the nearby town of Vavuniya, reports AFP.

A 35-year-old mother and her two-year-old child were killed instantly Thursday and another 10-year-old girl died in hospital when the town was shelled in an attack believed to have been carried out by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Officials and residents here said that 500 families were made refugees by the artillery fire on the suburb of Thonikhal.

Most shops were closed and fewer people were seen in the streets in the town Friday as an uneasy calm prevailed. Banks and offices were closed.

The Tiger rebels last week asked Vavuniya residents to leave the town after they captured 10 military bases further north.

However on Wednesday, the LTTE asked people to return, suggesting that they had aborted plans to attack the town.

Then on Thursday heavy fighting raged just west of this strategic town and by late evening the Tigers said they had taken five more key towns from the military, including the sacred Roman Catholic Pilgrim town of Madhu.

However, the main thrust by LTTE fighters was over by late Thursday following an intensive 12-hour offensive that dislodged the army from its extensive defence lines.

Military sources said the



A supporter of the opposition National Justice Party pastes an 'Alternative Front' poster besides a banner of jailed former Malaysian deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim (L) in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. The National Justice Party president and wife of Anwar, Wan Azizah Ismail, told a press conference that the party will also field Anwar Ibrahim as one of their candidates.

— AFP photo

Militiamen attack convoy of E Timorese refugees

DILI, East Timor, Nov 19: Pro-Indonesian militiamen attacked a 15-truck convoy of refugees bound for East Timor, injuring two persons and bringing the flow of returning refugees to a virtual halt, the UN said here today, reports AFP.

A pregnant woman and her husband who were aboard the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) convoy were beaten up by the militia and hospitalized, Ariane Quentier of the UNHCR office here said.

Quentier said dozens of Indonesian police stood by and did nothing to prevent or halt the attack on the convoy by the 30 militiamen Wednesday in the border town of Atambua in Indonesian-controlled West

Timor. "Clearly these people are scared," she said, adding that the stream of thousands who had crossed the border on foot in the previous days had dried up to a trickle.

Only 250 crossed the border on foot on Thursday as compared to 1,000 on Monday, she said, adding that the attackers were stopped only when the UNHCR arrived at the scene with Indonesian army soldiers who then arrested two of the militiamen.

In a statement issued in Geneva the UNHCR said the incident was "the worst involving refugees since the UNHCR started repatriations from Atambua late last month."

"UNHCR protested the incident, warning police officials in

Atambua that it would be forced to suspend repatriation operations unless measures were taken to immediately halt militia activity."

Quentier, who said the militia had also seized the refugees' meagre belongings, said the UNHCR planned to raise the incident with Indonesian Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri during a scheduled visit to West Timor over the weekend.

"Of course we are going to try to see her," she said.

Some 75,000 out of an estimated 250,000 East Timorese refugees who fled or were pushed into West Timor during a murderous rampage by the pro-Jakarta militia in September have so far returned home by land, sea and air.



South Korean activists shout anti-US slogans as they protest in front of Seoul's US army base yesterday. The demonstrators were protesting against the claim that the US military told Seoul to use Agent Orange, a toxic defoliant, along the demilitarised zone between the two Koreas in 1968-69 to block possible infiltration by North Korean troops.

— AFP photo