

Sharif's wife to enter active politics

ISLAMABAD, Nov 27: Deposed Pakistani Premier Nawaz Sharif's wife Kulsoom Nawaz has announced her entry into active politics till the time her husband is freed and democracy restored in Pakistan, reports PTI.

Kulsoom, who reached Karachi on Thursday night to watch proceedings of the plane hijacking case against Sharif, his brother Shahbaz, and others, told newsmen at the airport that she would coordinate with workers of Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League until he comes out of jail.

Kulsoom Nawaz, who was allowed by military authorities to meet her husband last week, said she would plunge into politics until democracy is restored in the country and Mian Saheb comes out of jail, according to Urdu Daily Jung.

Arafat accuses Israel of delaying peace process

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Nov 27: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said Friday that Israel has hampered progress in peace talks by procrastinating as well as expanding Jewish settlements, reports AP.

Arafat spoke to The Associated Press and Dubai TV after the weekly session of his Cabinet.

Israeli and Palestinian negotiators have until February to formulate the framework for a peace treaty. However, there have been only five rounds since negotiations began in September 98, including only one 90-minute session this week, despite pledges by both sides to US President Bill Clinton to hold intensive negotiations.

Arafat said Friday that Israel was to blame for lack of progress. "There are difficulties still obstructing our way because there are attempts by the Israeli side to procrastinate and to increase settlement activity," Arafat said.

"God willing we will be able to solve these issues," he added. Arafat said Israeli settlement activity had intensified around Jerusalem and on the outskirts of the West Bank town of Bethlehem.

At Friday night's Cabinet meeting, Arafat said no more time should be "wasted" in putting together an agreement, according to a Cabinet statement.

By February, the negotiators have to reach agreement on four complex issues — the final borders of the Palestinian entity, the status of Jerusalem, the fate of Palestinian refugees and the future of Jewish settlements.

The slow pace of negotiations has raised speculation that either the real talks are going on in secret channels or the two sides are waiting for US intervention promised for late January.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian leadership announced Friday that a meeting of the PLO Central Council, the body that is to set the date for a statehood declaration, will convene in December.

Vanuatu quake death toll may rise to 12

MELBOURNE, Nov 27: The death toll from a powerful earthquake and tsunami which struck the South Pacific nation of Vanuatu could rise to 12, officials said today, reports Reuters.

A Vanuatu Disaster Management Office spokesman said that six people had died when a church collapsed in central Pentecost Island. Six people were also washed out to sea after the tsunami hit the southern coast with one body recovered.

Vanuatu Disaster Management Officer director Philip Karie told Reuters Pentecost Island was hardest-hit by the earthquake which measured 7.1 on the Richter scale.

The worst (hit) is the island of Pentecost. Some houses are smashed and there was a tidal wave," he said. "At the moment I know there are five dead."

Karie said his office was sending a team to the island to assess the extent of the damage.

Australian Broadcasting Corp radio said the French Earth Sciences Observatory had measured the quake at 7.3 on the Richter scale, the highest ever recorded in the Vanuatu region.

MILF postpones peace talks with Manila

ZAMBOANGA, Philippines, Nov 27: Filipino Muslim rebels today postponed peace talks with the government after the cancellation of a meeting between their leader and Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, reports AFP.

Ghazali Jaafar, vice-chairman for political affairs of the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), said his group had called off the resumption of talks scheduled on December 13.

He cited the start of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan next week as the reason, but gave no new date for the reopening of the discussions.

Offensive enters decisive phase

Russians ready to take on Chechens on their land

MOSCOW, Nov 27: After meeting little resistance during the first two months of their Chechen campaign, Russian commanders now say they are ready for the hard part — taking on the guerrillas on their own ground, reports Reuters.

General Valery Miloyev, the Russian Army's first deputy chief of staff and main Chechnya mouthpiece, announced the launch of a new phase in the campaign on Friday, saying troops would now pursue the rebels into the mountains.

After a relentless advance from east and west, Russian forces now control about half of the lowland valley south of the capital where most Chechens live. They have nearly encircled the capital itself and are pounding it from overlooking heights.

Russia's military said this week it would have the capital

surrounded by mid December. Miloyev did not spell out Grozny's fate, but Russian troops must either take the city or obliterate it if they hope to declare victory.

Russia hammered the capital with artillery and rockets more fiercely than ever this week.

Hundreds of residents scrambled to safety telling of a city in panic and flames. Thousands more are still thought to be trapped inside, cowering in cellars and awaiting an assault.

"We told the civilians to leave Grozny and they didn't listen," one artilleryman told Reuters reporter Maria Eismont on a ridge overlooking the city on Friday after a fierce bombardment that lasted until dawn.

"Look. They're listening now." The next phase of the

campaign is certain to be more dangerous for Russian troops than the fighting so far.

By saving for last the two toughest tasks — confronting the capital and pursuing the guerrillas into the mountains — Russia has so far avoided the early defeats that crushed the morale of its troops during the 1994-96 Chechen war.

That could change as Russian troops climb into the steep mountain gorges still littered with the rotting shells of their tanks destroyed in the costly assaults of the previous war, or if they try to storm the snip-filled streets of Grozny.

Large numbers of casualties might also test a political consensus that has so far made the campaign the most popular undertaking yet attempted by Russia's post-Soviet leadership.

But three weeks before a par-

liamentary election no party has yet dared challenge the campaign. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, virtually unknown when he took office in September, is now overwhelmingly favoured to win a presidential vote next year.

His patron, President Boris Yeltsin, again took ill this week as he recuperating from a cold and bronchitis at a country residence outside Moscow.

This week also ended with a tragic incident that raised questions about the discipline of Russian troops.

Military authorities detained five soldiers on Friday after witnesses said they ran amok, killing one young woman and wounding two other people after they were denied vodka at a market stall just outside the Chechen border.

Rioting claims 50 in Lagos Nigerian cities brace for more violence

LAGOS, Nov 27: Nigerian cities braced for more violence today after rioting killed more than 50 people in Lagos and set ethnic passions aflame in Africa's most populous nation, reports Reuters.

Police struggled to gain absolute control over the Keta suburb of Lagos, where clashes flared today between members of Nigeria's two biggest tribes, southwestern Yorubas and northern Hausas.

In northern Nigeria's main city of Kano, police said they would take no chances of a backlash against Yorubas in the largely Hausa-speaking city.

In the oil-producing Niger Delta, leaders of the small Odi community said thousands of

their people were hungry in the bush after fleeing troops trying to crush an ethnic Ijaw youth gang.

The clashes are the latest in a chain of bloodshed since the end of military rule six months ago lifted the lid off a bubbling cauldron of hatreds in the West African country of at least 200 distinct ethnic groups.

"The police is aware of the nationwide implication of the breakdown of order in some parts of Lagos," Inspector-General Musiliu Smith told a news conference in Abuja on Friday.

Hacked and charred corpses on the streets of several districts of Lagos demonstrated where police had not been able to act quickly enough.

NATO accused of trying to install 'Nazism' in Kosovo

BELGRADE, Nov 27: Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic on Friday accused the NATO military alliance of seeking to install "Nazism" in the southern Serbian province of Kosovo, now under de facto international rule, reports Reuters.

Milosevic said during a ceremony handing out decorations to senior army officers that Yugoslavia would "fight against the Nazism which the NATO countries are trying to introduce in Kosovo in cooperation with ethnic Albanian terrorists."

His remarks were broadcast on state television.

"We will fight for a Kosovo in which peoples and individuals would enjoy equality," Milosevic said.

"I am certain that the civilisational values for which we

are fighting will win over the dictate of force and darkness," he said.

The decorations were presented to army officers and other individuals for their part in the Kosovo conflict.

The Western military alliance launched 78 days of air strikes in March to halt Belgrade's repression of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. The air war came to an end after Milosevic agreed to withdraw his forces from the Serbian province.

The withdrawal has been followed by Albanian attacks against ethnic Serbs in the province in revenge for Serbian "ethnic cleansing."

Some 2,300,000 Serbs and other non-Albanians have fled Kosovo over the past few months, according to local authorities.

20 feared dead as ferry sinks off Norway

OSLO, Norway, Nov 27: People in this seafaring nation are expressing bewilderment and shock over the fatal sinking of a brand-new, ultramodern ferry that was equipped with the latest in high-tech navigation and rescue equipment, reports AP.

The 138-foot (41-meter) Sleipner catamaran with 89 people aboard ran aground in familiar waters and sank on Friday evening, leaving as many as 20 people feared dead. Eleven deaths were already confirmed by early Saturday.

"The boats we use are new, with top modern equipment," said Arne Dvergstad, of the local HSD ferry company that owned the ship. "It's incomprehensible that this could happen."

The high-speed ferry, just three months old, was streak-

ing through the winter darkness and rough waters of the North Sea off Norway when it hit ground. Roughly 45 minutes later, it sank less than a mile from land.

One survivor told Norwegian television that he watched from the cold water as the ship's stern tilted into the air and then slid under the waves. He said the scene reminded him of the movie Titanic.

Rescuers said there were 80 passengers and nine crew aboard.

Almost 12 hours after the accident, rescuers said 11 people were confirmed dead and nine were missing in the accident near Haugesund, about 400 km west of Oslo. Others were being treated for severe hypothermia.

Fazal sworn in as Governor of Goa

PANAJI, Nov 27: Mohamad Fazal was yesterday sworn-in as the new Governor of Goa at a simple ceremony at the Raj Bhawan, reports PTI.

Fazal, who was administered the oath of office by the Chief Justice of Bombay High Court Justice Y K Sabharwal, is the tenth governor of Goa since it was conferred statehood.

He succeeds Lt Gen (Retd) JFR Jacob, who has been transferred as governor of Punjab.

The Chief Minister Francisco Sardinha, his Cabinet colleagues, Justice of High Court, Bishop of Goa Raul Gonsalves, top government officials were among those present at the function.

Later talking to reporters, Fazal stressed the need for various political parties to work in harmony.

BRIEFLY

Annadashanker hospitalised: Noted litterateur and thinker Annadashanker Roy was admitted to a city nursing home with severe infection of malignant malaria, PTI reports from Calcutta.

Doctors attending on the 95-year-old bureaucrat-turned writer, said his condition remained unchanged and he was still running high temperature. Roy was admitted to the nursing home on Thursday night after he complained of chest pain, doctors said.

Plane crash claims 3 in US: A small plane crashed into a residential neighbourhood Friday, killing all three people on board and leaving a fiery trail as it hit at least two buildings. At least 10 people on the ground were injured, AP reports from New York.

The single-engine 1964 Beech Bonanza 35 took off from Linden Airport in New Jersey on Friday morning, and was en route to Dulles International Airport in Chantilly, Virginia, Federal Aviation Administration spokesman Jim Peters said. Air traffic controllers lost radio and radar contact with it five minutes after it took off. The cause of the crash and the identities of the dead were not immediately known, Peters said.

3 women to die in China: Three rural women were sentenced to death and a fourth to life in prison for holding rallies and collecting nearly 200 million yuan (US\$ 24 million) for illegal savings funds promising high interest rates, a state newspaper reported Saturday, AP reports from Beijing.

The four women, described as having little education, organized the Pagoda Society and illegally collected fees and cheated people in Zhejiang Province, the People's Daily reported. They were sentenced on Nov. 18 in Taizhou city, Zhejiang, it said.

2 trains collide in Australia: Four people were injured in Australia when two freight trains collided with each other head-on, police said Saturday, AP reports from Melbourne.

The trains crashed Friday night near the town of Ararat, 200 kilometers (124 miles) west of Melbourne, the capital of Victoria state. Authorities were still investigating how and why the accident occurred. All four injured were workers on the trains. The driver of one was airlifted to a hospital in Melbourne with chest injuries, police Chief Inspector John Rankin said.

Israel releases 6 Iraqis: Israel released Friday six Iraqi asylum seekers, who had been detained for the past five to six years without trial after sneaking into the country, prison officials said, AFP reports from Jerusalem.

The six were freed from Hasharon prison in central Israel and taken to two kibbutzim, collective farms or villages, in the north where they will stay until another country willing to take them is found, the officials said. Israel's Supreme Court Wednesday ordered the release of the six, who had been held for "security reasons" until a host country could be found for them.



Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and his wife Mirjana Marjovic arrive at a government building in Belgrade Friday, where the Serbian leader hosts a celebration for the upcoming state holiday "Day of Republic" on November 29.



Labour leader Helen Clark casts her vote in the national election at a polling booth in Auckland yesterday. Some 2,485,000 New Zealanders went to polls yesterday to decide if Helen Clark will replace the National Party's Jenny Shipley as the prime minister of New Zealand.

Speaker assumes office Croatian president discharged of duties

ZAGREB, Croatia, Nov 27: Parliament Speaker Vlatko Pavletic has assumed the duties of Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, vowing to maintain the course charted by the ailing leader, reports AP.

Pavletic, 69, became the interim head of state after an 11-member panel of judges from the highest judicial body in the country, the Constitutional Court, ruled unanimously yesterday that Tudjman was temporarily unfit to perform his duties.

Although Tudjman remains president, the step automatically transfers all of his duties to the speaker of the parliament for an interim period which can be renewed every 60 days.

Pavletic, a professor of Croatian linguistics and literature, vowed to preserve Tudjman's

legacy, but to also work towards further developing parliamentary democracy.

"I swear to exert all the power vested in me to prevent a lack of continuity in the functioning of the country and all its institutions," Pavletic said upon receiving a copy of the court ruling. "That means that I must continue what the president would do."

With less than a month before key parliamentary elections are to be officially set, it is expected that one of Pavletic's first binding decisions will be to call nationwide balloting.

Tudjman's ruling Croatian Democratic Union suggested after a meeting late Friday that elections be held on Jan 3, 2000, state-run HINA news agency reported.

Sudan govt, opposition sign accord to end civil war

CAIRO, Nov 27: Sudan's government signed a peace agreement Friday with an exiled opposition party, promising to "set up a democratic regime" in the country and to end a 16-year-old civil war within four years, reports AP.

Sudan Television said the agreement with Umma party was signed in the east African country of Djibouti, where Sudanese President Lt Gen. Omar el-Bashir and Umma Party leader Sadiq el-Mahdi held previously unannounced talks on Thursday.

This agreement "will be the beginning of the end of the major problems for Sudan," el-Bashir told reporters in Djibouti. His comments were broadcast by Sudan Television, monitored in Cairo.

Whether the peace agreement will have a real impact will only be clear in the coming days when other members of the National Democratic Alliance express their views.

The northern opposition groups want democratic rule in Sudan.

Japan ready to help resolve Aceh crisis

JAKARTA, Nov 27: Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi pledged Saturday to "spare no effort" to help put Indonesia's moribund economy on the road to recovery, and said Japan is ready to assist in resolving the separatist crisis in Aceh, reports AP.

"The issue of Aceh is a domestic issue for Indonesia, but at the same time the stability of Indonesia is a very important element of the stability of Asia as a whole," Obuchi said after a meeting with President Abdurrahman Wahid.

Hundreds of thousands of people in Aceh, Indonesia's westernmost province, are demanding on East Timor-style independence referendum for the oil and gas-rich province. Analysts fear that a plebiscite could embolden separatist movements throughout the archipelago nation.

"Japan will follow closely developments in the region and we will study the possibility of assisting in any way we can," Obuchi said.

The two leaders first met earlier this month when Wahid made a stopover in Tokyo on his return trip from the United States. That meeting focused on Japanese loans and grants the Indonesian government needs to improve its flagging economy.

Japan is Indonesia's largest trading partner and its most important source of aid and credit.

Japan and its banks were among the most exposed lenders when Indonesia's corruption-ridden financial sector crashed in mid-1997.

Government-to-government assistance amounted to about US\$ 830 million in 1998, up from US\$ 500 million in 1996.

Jakarta to probe wealth of 35,000 state officials

JAKARTA, Nov 27: Indonesia's month-old reformist government plans to investigate the wealth of 35,000 senior state officials in a purge on corruption that has plagued the bureaucracy for decades, news reports said today, reports AP.

The Jakarta Post said investigation would examine the financial affairs of President Abdurrahman Wahid, his Cabinet, aides and top bureaucrats, including provincial governors, judges, high-ranking police officers and ambassadors.

The reports did not say whether senior army officers would also be subject to scrutiny. Organisers of the investigation were not immediately available for comment.

Wahid, who was elected head of state last month, has stated a

determination to stamp out graft.

Meanwhile state prosecutors said Abdul Latief, a former Cabinet minister in the old authoritarian regime of ex-President Suharto, had been declared a suspect in a corruption case involving a workers' pension fund.

News of the latest crackdown on graft came just one day after an influential Muslim Cabinet minister, Hamzah Haz, quit Friday after he denied that he was also being investigated for corruption.

The newspaper Kompas quoted Darmin Nasution, chairman of a team to establish the commission, as saying the 25-member panel would have powers to summon witnesses and demand documents.

Voting begins Labour Party likely to sweep NZ polls

WELLINGTON, Nov 27: Voting began in New Zealand's general election this morning, with two women the leading contenders to become the next prime minister, reports Reuters.

According to opinion polls, Labour Party leader Helen Clark is poised to head a new centre-left coalition, narrowly defeating the minority government of the conservative National Party led by Prime Minister Jenny Shipley.

Polling was set to run from 9 am to 2:00 am BST till seven pm 12:00 noon BST. New Zealand newspapers and broadcast media are not allowed to report political news or commentary, or refer to the parties' positions, until booths close and counting starts.

The roughly two million registered voters will not directly choose the premier but have two separate votes — for a party and for a candidate — under a complex German-style proportional representation system.

Tamil rebels free seven soldiers

COLOMBO, Nov 27: Tamil rebels freed seven soldiers captured in a fresh wave of gunbattles with the Sri Lankan military. Red Cross officials said Saturday, reports AP.

The troops were released early Saturday to the International Committee of the Red Cross in the northern Wanni jungle to mark the 45th birthday of rebel leader Valupillai Prabhakaran, said Harsha Gunawardena, a spokesman for the relief group.

The ICRC is escorting them and we will hand them over to military officials in Vavuniya," said Gunawardena. Vavuniya is a strategic garrison town 210 kilometers north of the capital, Colombo.