

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 Shabbaz, 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 Daily Jung.

I will coordinate with Muslim League workers until Mian Saheb comes out of jail, she was quoted as saying.

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 November 8, 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.

It is unlikely the Palestinians will declare statehood unilaterally before the September deadline for a final peace treaty with Israel.

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 Phillip 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 Jaa far, 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 resumption of the discussions.

International

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.

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, covering in cellars and awaiting a sniper.

"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 sniper-filled streets of Grozny.

Large numbers of casualties might also test 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, was 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.



An adjutant (L) and a protocol official (R) escort Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi (2nd R) and Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid to their meeting room at the presidential palace in Jakarta yesterday. Obuchi arrived on a brief visit for talks with senior Indonesian officials. — AFP photo

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 afire in Africa's most populous nation, reports Reuters.

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

The police are 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 Nazis which the NATO countries are trying to introduce in Kosovo in cooperation with 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 Serbs and other non-Albanians have fled Kosovo over the past few months, according to local authorities.

"I am certain that the civilizational values for which we

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 Dvergsdal, 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-

Fazal sworn in as Governor of Goa

PANAJI, Nov. 27: Mohammad 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) 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 ceremony.

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 Network.

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 (drills 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.

Speaker assumes office



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.

— AFP photo

Croatian president discharged of duties

ZAGREB, Croatia, Nov. 27: Parliament Speaker Vlatko Pavletic has assumed the duties of Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, owing 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 remained 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.

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.

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 to perform his duties.

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Defections plague Malaysian opposition ahead of polls

PERMATANG PAUH, Malaysia, Nov. 27: Malaysia's fledgling opposition coalition has been hit by a spate of defections two days before a crucial general election, news reports and party officials said today, reports AP.

More than 700 members of the National Justice Party, a key component of the four-party Alternative Front, had joined Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's National Front in the northern state of Penang, the Star newspaper said.

In the southern state of Malacca, another 100 members of the party, which is headed by ousted deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim's wife, Azizah Ismail, defected to Mahathir's group, the daily said.

In the western town of Kuala Selangor, about 70 members for the fundamentalist Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party crossed over to the National Front, the daily said.

"More and more people are declaring support for Dr. Ma-

hathir in the last minute," Yahya Omar, chief of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in Penang, told the agency today.

UMNO is the largest group in the ruling 14-party coalition, which is widely tipped to win Monday's election and possibly retain its two-thirds majority in the 193-seat Parliament.

Yahya said some 3,000 supporters of the Democratic Action Party in its stronghold in Penang had left the opposition to campaign for Mahathir. He was speaking to reporters in Permatang Pauh, Azizah's electoral constituency in Penang state.

An opposition spokesman in Kuala Lumpur confirmed that some defections had taken place yesterday but described the newspaper accounts as exaggerated. He did not provide a figure.

"We are still checking with our branches," said Raja Petra Kamaruddin.

Azizah Ismail told reporters on Friday that the opposition

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 pm 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.