

Mass burial found near Mexico border

WASHINGTON, Nov 30: Some 200 US investigators plan to exhume as many as 100 bodies of people killed in drug-related violence, just across the Mexican border from El Paso, Texas, CBS television reported Monday, says AFP.

Mexican authorities confirmed that Mexican and US security forces had started a joint investigation into a series of killings over recent years of US and Mexican citizens, apparently by members of the Juarez drug cartel.

CBS said that about 500 Mexican soldiers have cordoned off two ranches near Juarez, Mexico, just south of the border, where the bodies are believed to be buried in ravines and slit trenches, according to the report.

A US task force from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) will exhume the bodies and, under agreement with the Mexican government, take them to El Paso for identification and notification of families, the report said.

The people believed to be buried at the ranches allegedly died at the hands of Mexico security police or drug cartels in the region, the report said.

One ranch is about 16 kilometers south of the border, while the other 48 kilometers south of the first ranch, CBS said.

The FBI expects the operation to take 30 days.

The Mexican Attorney General's office said security forces on both sides of the border had set up a joint investigation office in El Paso, Texas.

Russia arrests US embassy official

MOSCOW, Nov 30: Russian security services have arrested a senior US embassy official here suspected of spying on Russia, Interfax cited the Federal Security Service (FSB) as saying today, reports AFP.

FSB spokesman Alexander Zdanovich told the agency the suspected spy, identified by Interfax as Oleg Leberknight, served as second secretary at the military-political section.

Zdanovich said she "was a CIA collaborator" and had been arrested on Monday evening.

Michael Hurley, the chief US embassy spokesman, when reached by telephone said: "I can't confirm and can't comment" on the report.

Zdanovich said the suspected spy "was trying to get from a Russian citizen documents on military and strategic information classified as state secrets."

After her arrest, Leberknight was taken to the FSB, the successor to the KGB, for questioning in the presence of Russian foreign ministry officials and a US embassy official.

Shahbaz Sharif sent to jail

KARACHI, Nov 30: The brother of deposed Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was remanded to jail today when he appeared before an anti-terrorism court in a treason and conspiracy to murder case, reports AFP.

Shahbaz Sharif and two senior officials who were arrested last week, were ordered to be transferred from police custody to jail.

Judge Rehmat Hussain Jafri said they should appear before the court on Saturday, when the former Prime Minister himself and three other officials are also due to appear.

S Korean PM to resign next month

SEOUL, Nov 30: The coalition partner of South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung will resign as prime minister late next month to prepare his minority conservative party for next spring's parliamentary elections, his office said Tuesday, reports AP.

Prime Minister Kim Jong-Pil's resignation is expected to set off a major reshuffle within President Kim's government, which has been rocked by a influence-peddling scandal.

President Kim is working to create a new ruling party ahead of next April's parliamentary elections, where he hopes to win a majority in South Korea's 299-member National Assembly.

Castro won't go to Seattle for WTO meeting

HAVANA, Nov 30: Cuban President Fidel Castro said he would not travel to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) beginning today in Seattle, Washington, because he feared attempts to arrest or even assassinate him, reports AFP.

Castro had been invited to give a presentation at the University of Washington in Seattle on Thursday.

"I cannot travel to US territory if the official spokespeople of the government declare the visit 'inappropriate,'" Castro said in a letter to US Representative Jim McDermott, from Washington state, made public here Monday.

In his place Castro is sending Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque and Foreign Trade Minister Ricardo Cabrisas.

There was unquestionably a plot, backed by the State Department, against my travelling to and even political and moral fear of my participation in the WTO meeting in Seattle," Castro said in the letter.



An elderly Chechen woman carries her belongings as she and other women cross the Chechen-Ingush border near the village of Assinovskaya together on Sunday. The total number of refugees in Ingushetia is now estimated at 220,000.

— AFP photo

Fiercest ground battle in Chechnya

GROZNY, Russia, Nov 30: Chechen rebels engaged Russian forces in some of the fiercest ground battles in two months today as the North Caucasus war raged on despite strong condemnation from the IMF and the pan-European security body, OSCE, reports AFP.

Chechen defence officials reported that clashes continued at the foothills of the rebel republic's southern mountains near the villages of Allerai and Noybera, as well as Novogrozny, which has a population of about 25,000 people.

No immediate casualty report was available. The rebel capital, Grozny, was also the focus of a massive Russian air and artillery attack. Streets remained deserted here as residents covered for safety in underground bunkers, trying to avoid heavy bombs that left craters some 20 meters (yards) deep in the ground.

Some 80 percent of the capital's buildings are currently standing in ruins, while residents reported that Russian attacks against roads leaving out of the city had left thousands trapped inside.

In Moscow, meanwhile, defence officials said federal forces had conducted 95 air combat missions over the republic in the latest 24-hour span.

The air assault concentrated on the second chief rebel stronghold of Urus-Martan, along with the villages of Starye Atagi, Chir-Yurt and Alkhan-Kala, Interfax reported.

The fighting came one day after Russia slapped down an Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) offer to help negotiate an end to the war, and expressed dismay at an International Monetary Fund warning that it could cut

off financial assistance should the fighting rage on.

OSCE chief Knut Vollebæk on a visit to Moscow also failed to make any progress on negotiating terms for a potential inspection trip to Chechnya and the neighbouring Russian republic of Ingushetia, the site of 225,000 refugees from the war.

Russian official said they could not yet guarantee Vollebæk's safety during the trip, and would study the matter further in cabinet hearings.

After Vollebæk's visit, the United States urged Russia to fulfill commitments given at a key security summit earlier this month, when Moscow had agreed to allow the OSCE to visit Chechnya.

"We hope and expect that Russia will live up to the agreements reached during the Istanbul summit," State Department spokesman James Rubin said.

Mahathir Asia's longest-serving leader

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 30: Defying the current of change that has swept out old leaders elsewhere in Asia, Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has entrenched himself as the region's longest-serving head of government, reports AP.

By winning a two-thirds majority in Monday's election, held amid protests of unfairness from the opposition, Mahathir proved once again that his unorthodox politics are mainstream here.

Faced with a sinking economy last year and the country's worst political crisis in decades triggered by the sacking and arrest of deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, Mahathir reacted in characteristic manner.

While Thailand, South Korea and Indonesia swallowed the International Monetary Fund's bitter pill to end recession through austerity and high interest rates, Mahathir went in the opposite direction.

He imposed exchange controls, expanded government spending to revive expensive public works projects and helped banks stay in business by reorganising bad debts. So

far, it's worked.

In a trade tinged with anti-Semitism, Mahathir rallied against Western currency speculators, accusing them of plotting against Malaysia. He blamed the foreign media for stocking political unrest by writing articles about civil liberties and democracy.

The 73-year-old leader, now in his fifth term, deployed police to crush the public outcry over Anwar's arrest, his severe beating by the police chief and the anger over his six-year imprisonment.

In the two years since Asia's financial crisis, political change led to greater openness in Thailand and South Korea and a pro-democracy movement overthrew Indonesia's autocratic President Suharto last May.

Discontent in South Korea over the economic crisis helped elect Kim Dae-jung, the first opposition leader to become president in the nation's history.

The crisis also opened the way for powerful family-owned conglomerates that had thrived for years on cozy ties to the political establishment.

The crisis also increased

pressure on Thailand's notoriously corrupt politicians and forced them to adopt a new constitution in late 1997. Shortly afterwards, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh was forced out of premiership to make way for a six-year sentence for corruption and has become a capable at economic management.

But on Monday, Mahathir clearly proved that the opposition was wrong in hoping that Malaysia was ready for similar changes.

He has survived the most vocal street protests in three decades in the aftermath of last September's sacking and arrest of Anwar, who is now serving a six-year sentence for corruption and has become a symbol of state oppression.

Slogans of more civil rights, a freer judiciary, freedom of expression and an unfettered press may have aroused a public debate and increased political consciousness, but have not won votes, analysts say.

Until the crash in 1997, Malaysia's 8 per cent annual growth rate was benefiting most of the country's 22 million, putting televisions air conditioners and cars into millions



of Malay homes.

The country's average annual income grew from 300 dollar in 1957, when it won its independence from Britain, to 3,800 dollar this year.

"Voters have clearly leaned toward economic prosperity," said William Case, a professor of politics at Australia's Griffith University, who was in Kuala Lumpur to observe the election.

12 die in Pak gas cylinder explosion

MULTAN, Pakistan, Nov 30: At least 12 people were killed and 21 injured when gas cylinders stored in a shop exploded in a central Pakistani town, police said today, reports AFP.

At least three houses collapsed and about a dozen shops were gutted as the explosions in Hasilpur, 200 km southeast of here late Monday triggered a huge fire. Senior police official Qayyum Nawaz Qaisrani said.

The official ruled out sabotage, saying the explosion was apparently caused by leakage of gas from a cylinder.

There is no evidence of a sabotage, he told AFP.

Gaisrani, blaming negligence, said the incident occurred late in the night when the market was closed.

Police and rescue workers had recovered 12 bodies from the debris, he said, adding the dead included six men, three women and three children.

Purulia arms drop case Proceedings resume

NEW DELHI, Nov 30: A Britain and five Latvians are set to end their fifth year behind bars facing the death penalty or life in prison for allegedly parachuting weapons to an Indian rebel group, reports AP.

Court proceedings in the case began again Monday before a new judge after months of wrangling over procedure and the delay in calling foreign witnesses.

A defence counsel said the six accused - British arms dealer Peter Bleach and five crewmen on a Latvian cargo ship, have had enough.

"We want the court to either release them or conclude the trial," Syamal Ghosh, counsel for the Latvians, told the Associated Press by telephone from Calcutta, where the trial is being conducted.

Bleach has admitted to hopping across Europe and Asia on the plane named by the Latvians, which parachuted assault rifles, antitank missiles,

rocket launchers and thousands of rounds of ammunition over the eastern Indian village of Purulia on December 18 1995.

The Latvians Alexandre Klinchene, Oleg Gaidach, Igor Noskov, Igor Timmerman and Eugene Antimanko have become ill nad appear frail and exhausted in the hot, humid weather. Klinchene is in hospital suffering from tuberculosis.

The prosecution named 315 witnesses supporting the case but stopped after questioning 145 people as the trial was taking too long. The defence alleged most of the witnesses were poor, illiterate villagers, were coached by the investigators, a charge prosecutors denied.

Investigators accuse Bleach and the five Latvians of waging war against India, an offense for which the only punishments are the death sentence or life imprisonment. Police say the arms were meant for a rebel group.

1,500 mercenaries fighting in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Nov 30: Some 1,500 foreign militants are currently fighting alongside Muslim separatists in Indian Kashmir, the head of the state's Border Security Force (BSF) said today, reports AFP.

"Nearly 1,500 foreign militants are present in Kashmir and are actively taking part in attacks on security forces," BSF chief K. Vijay Kumar said.

"To stem their activities, we have launched a winter offensive across Kashmir," Kumar said.

Separatist political groups in Kashmir strongly dispute the foreign militant figure, accusing the Indian authorities of downplaying indigenous support for the Kashmiri struggle against Indian rule.

Kumar declined to say which countries the militants belonged to, although the majority of mercenaries killed by the security forces have been from Pakistan and Afghanistan.

US accuses Iran of supporting terrorism

WASHINGTON, Nov 30: Accusing Iran of reneging on promises, the State Department said authorities in Tehran are intent on "destroying the hopes of all Arabs and Israelis to achieve a comprehensive peace" by backing radical Arab terrorists, reports AP.

Spokesman James P. Rubin, noting that senior Iranian officials have publicly denounced terrorism, said it is "reasonable for us to expect that the actions and policies of the Islamic Republic should reflect these statements."

Rubin's comments Monday were among the harshest by a US spokesman since Secretary of State Madeleine Albright proposed in a June 1998 speech that the two countries open an official dialogue.

Rubin said Iran was severely critical of the October 1998 agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, negotiated in the United States, and also opposed a September agreement under which Israel is required to withdraw from occupied territory.

He added that Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Shiite group in Lebanon, has threatened Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's life

for making peace with Israel.

"This is no small matter at a time when the Arab world is looking toward a future of peace and reconciliation," Rubin said. He accused Iran of encouraging terrorist activity involving Hezbollah and several radical Palestinian groups, including Hamas in the Palestinian West Bank and Islamic Jihad.

"We have made clear to Iran that there cannot be an improvement in relations until Iran takes meaningful steps to end its support for terrorism and cooperates in the fight against terrorism," Rubin said. "There cannot be a lifting of the sanctions we imposed in the absence of meaningful steps to those ends."

He said continuing disagreements with Iran do not lessen the US interest in promoting unofficial contacts between Iranians and Americans.

"The more the people of the United States and the people of Iran understand each other's concerns and interests, the better chance it is to improve relations, which of course would require improvements in the issues of concern to the United States," he said.

BRIEFLY

10 killed in Indian truck accident: Ten people were killed and 25 injured when the truck carrying them overturned in the eastern Indian state of Orissa, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported Tuesday, AFP says from New Delhi.

The accident occurred late Monday when the driver lost control following a mechanical failure, PTI quoted local police officials as saying. The dead included nine women.

Schroeder to meet French leaders: German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder holds talks here Tuesday with French President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin to prepare for next month's European summit in Helsinki, AFP reports from Paris.

The French and German leaders are keen to put forward in Helsinki plans for improved European cooperation in the areas of education, training and employment. They also hope to advance the case for a European defence force and may adopt a declaration on concrete measures towards setting up a 50,000-60,000 force to react to crises outside Western Europe.

6 more planets discovered

WASHINGTON, Nov 30: Astronomers have discovered six additional planets orbiting stars, which brings the total number of planets found outside the Earth's solar system to 28, the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) announced Monday, reports AP.

These planets, seen from the Keck I Telescope in Hawaii, orbit stars similar in age, size and strength as the sun, said astronomer Geoffrey Marcy of the University of California at Berkeley and Paul Butler of the Carnegie Institute in Washington.

Five of the six planets are located in the "livable zone,"

from their suns — not too close and not too far to have liquid water, the developer of the Keck I Telescope Steve Vogt said.

"These planets are at just the right distance, with temperatures in one case around 108 degrees Fahrenheit (44 degrees Celsius) — like a hot day in Sacramento," Vogt said.

"These planets were not actually seen, they were detected by the amount they move their suns when they pass by in elliptical orbits, at distances between 0.5 and 192 light years from Earth."

"It is beginning to look like neatly stacked, circular orbits such as we see in our own solar system are relatively rare," Vogt said.

Clinton's drive for peace is back on track

WASHINGTON, Nov 30: One of President Bill Clinton's main foreign policy goals, peace in Northern Ireland, is back on track, boosting his record as a peacemaker, reports AP.

The new Northern Ireland Assembly began forming a government Monday in which Protestants and Catholics will share power.

The hurdles to peace after 30 years of sectarian strife are high. For one thing, the Irish Republican Army has not said publicly it will destroy its weapons.

But under the patient oversight of Clinton's special emissary, former Sen. George Mitchell, the main Protestant party on Saturday softened its demands for IRA disarmament and set Northern Ireland on a course to home rule.

Mitchell went to the White House on Monday to brief Clinton on the agreement.

Mitchell said he believes the agreement will hold, even though there are small numbers of people on both sides who "regard any kind of agreement as a sellout" and may stir up the violence again. But he said violence should not be allowed to derail the peace.

"No society in human history has ever been able to achieve the complete absence of violence," Mitchell said. "Let's not set for the people of Northern Ireland a standard which no one else has ever been able to meet."

US president has given peace in the province higher priority than Clinton. The regard for Clinton among the Irish north and south was un-

mistakable when he traveled there last September, a welcome respite from the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern credited the president with pointing a way to peace and prosperity in the north. "He's laid down for us — for all of us — that there is a path to follow and if we are sensible, if we're brave and we follow that path, then the reward is peace and stability and confidence. If we don't well, then the future is as gloomy as the past."

Clinton began his intervention in the Irish conflict in 1994, authorizing a visa that permitted Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Féin, the IRA's main political ally, to visit the United States.

The president twice visited

Northern Ireland and placed peace in the province on his list of high foreign policy priorities, topped only his No. 1 goal: Peace between Israel and the Arabs.

In Northern Ireland, the goal is step-by-step progress toward self-rule, but if the IRA fails to begin disarming, David Trimble, the Nobel Prize-winning leader of the Unionist Party, has vowed to resign from the provisional government, which could stop the peace process again.

John Hulsman, senior European policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation, a private research group, said Monday he credited Clinton "up to a point" with advancing peace in Northern Ireland.

"The administration has devoted sufficient political capital to doing this, and that much

has to be said," Hulsman said in an interview. "But if the forces on the ground aren't headed in the direction of peace, it wouldn't matter."

Peter Rodman, director of national security programme at the Nixon Centre, a private research group, praised Trimble as a courageous leader, and said the onus now was unmistakably on Sinn Féin and the IRA to disarm.

"That's been an obstacle for 30 years," Rodman said. "There is no more room for indulging the IRA."

While not praising Clinton, the former White House and State Department official said he was impressed Nitchell had the confidence of both sides and "the Americans have done well on this."

Off the Record

Striptease & Elton John

LONDON: Pop music superstar Elton John caused outrage in the press and among scouting groups here Tuesday after his dancers dressed in scouts uniforms began stripping at a concert in aid of a homosexual association, reports AP.

John, who makes no secret of his homosexuality, performed with the six dancers who began a striptease routine to the strains of the song "It's a Sin" by the Pet Shop Boys during the benefit gig for the Stonewall association.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's wife Cherie, who was among celebrities in the audience at the Royal Albert Hall Monday, was "stunned" by the performance, The Sun tabloid daily said.

Scout Association spokesman John Fogg said: "We think it is pretty deplorable and in bad taste what they have done, in terms of denigrating our uniform and what it stands for."

"I think what Stonewall have done is to link again homosexuality with paedophilia," he added.

3 Picasso artworks stolen

EDWARDS, Colorado, Nov 30: The Picasso restaurant is missing three artworks by its namesake, reports AP.

Three original Pablo Picasso works valued at 41,500 dollar were stolen from the Picasso restaurant at the Cordillera Resort and Spa on Saturday afternoon, Eagle County Sheriff Investigator Doug Winters said. The resort is about 10 miles west of Vail in central Colorado.

As of late Monday, there were no suspects in the theft of the two etchings and a tile, which were taken from the walls of the restaurant.

North Ireland: what next?

