

## 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 Cheri 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 counsellor.

## 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 is 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 spokespersons 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 Seattle. This confirmed my perceptions on the opposition 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 Alleroy and Noyberya, as well as Novogroznensky, which has a population of about 25,000 people.

No immediate casualty report was available.

The rebel capital Grozny also was 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.

off financial assistance should the fighting rage on.

OSCE chief Knut Vollebaek 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 Vollebaek's safety during the trip, and would study the matter further in cabinet hearings.

After Vollebaek'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.

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

## International

# Mahathir Asia's longest-serving leader

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 30: Defying the current of change that has swept over 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 a 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 tirade tinged with anti-Semitism, Mahathir railed 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 authoritarian 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 Yongchayudh was forced out of premiership to make way for a Chuan Leekpai, whose administration is seen as more 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.

## 1,500 mercenaries fighting in Kashmir

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

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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.

## Purulia arms drop case

### Proceedings resume

NEW DELHI, Nov 30: A Briton and five Latvians are set to end their fifth year behind bars facing the death penalty or life in prison for allegedly purchasing 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 defences 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 maned by the Latvians, which parachuted assault rifles, antitank missiles.

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 and appreciate 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.

"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."

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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.

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