

EU grants candidate status to six nations

HELSINKI, Dec 10: The European Union today agreed to open membership talks with six new countries from eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania and Slovakia, a Finnish government official said, reports AFP.

The agreement from EU leaders gathered at a two-day summit signals the first step for the six applicant nations to begin membership negotiations, due to kick off in 2000.

A further six nations -- Estonia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia -- last year began talks for full membership of the powerful 15-nation bloc.

There was no immediate word on the fate of Turkey's long bid to also begin membership talks.

Israel-Syrian talks to be held in Jordan

JERUSALEM, Dec 10: Israeli-Syrian peace talks will move to Amman after their ceremonial opening in Washington next week, Israel public radio said Thursday, reports AFP.

Israel has given its agreement that the talks will be continued later in Amman after an offer made by King Abdullah of Jordan by telephone, the station quoted a high-ranking official as saying.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak should have two meetings in Washington next week, then the talks should resume in an isolated place, like Wye Plantation in Maryland, and later move to Amman, the official said.

Barak will leave for Washington on Monday for the start of the talks, his office has announced.

He telephoned King Abdullah II, who is in London, on Thursday to "inform him of the latest developments concerning negotiations with Syria," a statement from his office said.

In the past 24 hours, it said, he had also called Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to discuss the same subject, and to pass on his greetings for Ramadan.

US President Bill Clinton announced on Wednesday the talks would be opened by Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara.

Girl babies make mothers sick: Study

LONDON, Dec 10: Boys may be more boisterous and difficult to handle but girls make mothers sick, reports Reuters.

New research by scientists at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm shows that women suffering from extreme morning sickness during the first three months of pregnancy are more likely to be carrying a daughter than a son.

Johan Askling and his colleagues believe it is all due to a pregnancy hormone called human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG).

"In normal pregnancies, a female foetus is associated with higher concentrations of hCG at birth than a male foetus," the scientists said in a research letter published in *The Lancet* medical journal.

High levels of the hormone are thought to be the cause of severe morning sickness in early pregnancy.

Askling and his team compared more than a million births in Sweden with records of women admitted to hospital for extreme morning sickness.

More girls had been born to women who had been admitted to hospital for the disorder.

The researchers also said their hypothesis had some strong historical backing.

More than 2,000 years ago, Hippocrates stated that female foetuses gave the mother a pale face, whereas a mother carrying a male foetus has a healthier tone to her skin," they said.

Strike paralyses Kashmir valley

SRINAGAR, India, Dec 10: A strike sponsored by Islamic separatists to highlight alleged human rights abuses in Kashmir by Indian troops paralysed the Kashmir valley today, officials and residents said, reports AFP.

Shops and businesses, schools and colleges, government offices and post offices were closed in this summer capital of the state to mark international human rights day, officials said.

The strike also affected normal life in other parts of the valley.

The call for the shutdown was given by the All Party Conference, which supports the Muslim militant campaign to end Indian control over Kashmir.

The strike was also supported by several militant groups.

A statement by the strike sponsors said 6,545 civilians had been killed in Kashmir by Indian security forces since October 8, 1996, when a new government took power in Kashmir.

It said Indian troops also blasted 1,879 houses of alleged militant sympathisers during this period.

The statement urged the United Nations to focus attention on the "alarming increase in the rights abuses" in Kashmir.

International

EU elevates 7 more countries to candidate-member status

HELSINKI, Dec 10: The European Union said today that seven countries are now eligible to negotiate entry into the organization, but insisted that one of them -- Turkey -- must first improve its record on human rights and good neighbourly relations, reports AP.

Leaders attending a summit were also expected to endow the EU with a military arm. However, the meeting got off to a shaky start amid spats over a savings tax and British beef, and no clear vision on how to get Russia to stop its Chechnya war.

Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Malta are now formal candidates for membership, said Finnish Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen, the summit's host. Their entry talks are expected to open early next year.

All except latecomer Malta were put on hold in 1997, when the EU agreed to open negotiations with Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Estonia and Cyprus.

EU leaders decided also to begin entry talks with Turkey, Lipponen said.

But the government in

Ankara first must show it is serious about improving its human rights record and willing to accept the International Court of Justice in The Hague, Netherlands, as the final arbiter of its territorial disputes with Greece, the EU said.

Turkey must do more to resolve the division of Cyprus, a country in line to join the EU

which Turkish troops invaded in 1974, EU leaders said. Ankara props up a Turkish-Cypriot republic in the northern part of the Mediterranean island that no other country recognizes.

EU leaders set a goal of December 2002 to complete an overhaul of the union's institutions to prepare for the influx of

as many as a dozen newcomers.

Ahead of the summit, the EU finance ministers met in an emergency session but failed to debate a compromise to rescue the contentious plan for a 20-per cent EU-wide tax on savings earnings.

France on Thursday renewed its refusal to accept British beef imports -- even though the EU in August lifted a three-year ban on the exports of British beef following an outbreak of "mad cow" disease. The move, which stunned British Prime Minister Tony Blair, only stiffened British opposition to the proposed EU-wide tax on interest income.

Britain views the measure as a threat to London's huge Eurobond market and did not want to discuss even toned-down version of the tax, which the ministers debated.

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