

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 AP.

The agreement from EU leaders gathered at a two-day summit signals the first step to 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 AP.

"Israel has given its agreement that the talks 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 AP.

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.

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

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 export 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 a toned-down version of the tax, which the ministers debated.

The EU's new defense role will come with a pledge to Washington that its allies are not out to erode the NATO alliance. The aim is to prevent crises and conflicts on the EU's doorstep without having to rely on American political and military clout, as happened in recent Balkan wars.

Confce against racism: 7 goodwill ambassadors

GENEVA, Dec 10: Nobel Laureates Seamus Heaney of Ireland and Wole Soyinka of Nigeria were among seven goodwill ambassadors appointed to prepare a world conference against racism due to take place in South Africa in 2001, the United Nations announced today, reports AP.

Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun, musicians Ravi Shankar of India and Ruben Blades of Panama, the former president of Iceland Vigdís Finnbogadóttir and US human

rights activist Marian Wright Edelman were the other representatives named by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson.

Regional meetings around the world and two preparatory sessions in Geneva will precede the world conference on racism.

The seven personalities will be charged with awakening the conscience of the global community against acts of racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and intolerance, the statement said.



Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad announces the new parliamentary cabinet yesterday at his office in Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur. Mahathir announced the new cabinet, with few changes in top posts and said this will be his last term in office. — AFP photo

This will be my last term: Mahathir

New cabinet announced

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 10: Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who has led Malaysia for 18 years, said today he would be standing down after his current term in office as he unveiled a post-election cabinet, reports AP.

"This will be my last term," the 73-year-old Prime Minister said after unveiling his line-up following the November 29 elections which his National Front coalition won for the fifth time.

"By the next term I'll be very near 80 years old," Asia's longest-serving elected leader told a press conference, ending months of speculation.

"I'll be having a stiff neck and failing eyesight and all that kind of thing. So this will be my last term."

"Although there have been people who have been asking that I should continue for ever, continuing for ever is a little bit difficult."

Mahathir, in power since 1981, scored a personal triumph by retaining his National Front coalition's two-thirds majority in the November 29

polls. Unveiling his new cabinet, he retained Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as his deputy premier and home minister.

Mahathir also reappointed Daim Zainuddin as finance minister and special functions minister. Rafidah Aziz keeps her job as international trade and industry minister.

Former education minister Najib Tun Razak, considered one of the possible successors to the 73-year-old Mahathir, becomes defence minister. The previous defence minister, Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha, did not seek re-election.

Cabinet changes were mainly to fill posts left vacant when four ministers failed to win re-election. But the premier crushed any lingering hopes which Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah might have of a political comeback.

Razaleigh nearly unseated Mahathir as leader in a party poll in 1987 and founded a breakaway grouping before returning to the ruling party fold in 1998.

BRIEFLY

Clark sworn in as NZ PM:

Helen Clark was sworn in as New Zealand prime minister by Governor-General Sir Michael Hardie-Boys in Wellington on Friday, AFP reports from Wellington.

She replaced Jenny Shipley who resigned shortly after her National Party was defeated in last month's general election. Clark now heads a minority coalition government made up of the centre Labour Party and the left-wing Alliance Party which together have 59 seats in the 120 seat Parliament.

Chinese FM in Seoul: Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan arrived in Seoul Friday for three days of talks with South Korean leaders on bilateral relations and regional security, AP reports from Seoul.

The visit comes amid efforts, especially by Seoul, to broaden relations beyond trade and economy. China, a longtime ally of communist North Korea, opened relations with capitalist South Korea in 1992. China is South Korea's third-largest trading partner after the United States and Japan.

3 die in Russian air crash: Three people died when their AN-14 turboprop plane crashed in the deep forest of the Russian Far East, but four survivors were rescued, Emergency Ministry officials said Friday, Reuters reports from Vladivostok, Russia.

This morning at 11:00 am (0700 BST) a rescue helicopter located the crash site near the village of Kvishchevka in the north of Primorsky province," Pavel Chuprin, a duty officer at the provincial Emergency Ministry office, told Reuters.

10 killed in Sumatra landslide: Ten people are dead and 50 missing after a landslide buried 20 houses in the Indonesian province of West Sumatra, officials said Friday, AFP reports from Jakarta.

Relief workers have recovered 10 bodies and three survivors from the landslide at the foot of the Lantaki hill in South Padang, Abdul Karim, a spokesman for the governor's office told AFP from Padang, the capital of West Sumatra. He said 20 houses at the foot of the hill were buried in Thursday's landslide.



Miss Philippines Geogina Anne de la Paz Sandico (L), Miss Korea Lee Jae-Won (2nd R), Miss Malaysia Andrea Franklin Gomez (2nd R) and Miss Japan Kana Onoda (R) pose for a photograph in front of the great statue of Buddha in Kamakura yesterday. Fifty-three contestants of Miss International Beauty Pageant, who will compete for the finals in Tokyo on December 14, visited the ancient city of Kamakura, south of Tokyo. — AFP photo

3 US soldiers killed as plane makes emergency landing in Kuwait

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 10: Three US soldiers were killed and 16 wounded today when a Hercules transport plane made an emergency landing without its main wheels at Kuwait's main airport, the official KUNA news agency said, reports AP.

Three American soldiers were killed and 16 were lightly wounded in an emergency landing of a large Hercules C-130 from the US army at Kuwait's airport, the deputy head of Kuwait's civil aviation, Zohair al-Zamel, said.

"The wounded US soldiers were quickly taken to hospital," he added.

A total of 96 people were on board the Hercules, KUNA reported.

Zamel said "Air Traffic Control received a distress signal from the Hercules' pilot signalling a fault in his main landing system."

Kuwaiti authorities took "necessary measures" but were unable to avert the emergency

landing, he added.

The US embassy here confirmed the Hercules, from the 61st Airlift Squadron based at the Little Rock US Air Force base, Arkansas, was conducting a routine transport mission.

The C-130 was transporting US military personnel within Kuwait when the aircraft declared an in-flight emergency and diverted to Kuwait City International Airport, an embassy statement said.

The C-130 conducted an emergency landing without landing gear," it said.

The statement credited "the Kuwaiti emergency response crew with greatly reducing the severity of the incident through the rapid preparation of the runway for landing."

"Recovery efforts are underway and medical personnel are evaluating the passengers and crew," the embassy said, adding that a board of officers had already been convened to investigate the crash.

18 states to sign protocol against women's discrimination

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 10: At least 18 nations marking UN Human Rights Day on Friday by becoming the first signatories to a legal protocol to help women fight discrimination, reports AP.

The protocol will enable women for the first time to submit sex discrimination complaints directly to the United Nations if they don't get heard in their home country.

It does not require, however, that countries hand over information about individual cases.

The UN General Assembly adopted the 21-article optional protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women on Oct. 6.

It decided to open the protocol for signatures on Human Rights Day, observed annually on Dec. 10 to mark the anniversary of the adoption by the General Assembly of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

The UN Division for the Advancement of Women said Thursday that 18 nations will sign the optional protocol at a ceremony Friday at UN headquarters. Austria, Belgium, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Denmark, Ecuador, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Senegal and

Sweden. Several other nations were also considering signing, the department said.

The General Assembly urged the 163 nations that have ratified the convention to ratify the optional protocol as soon as possible. It will enter into force as soon as 10 countries have ratified it.

The original convention, adopted by the General Assembly in December 1979, bars abuses against women.

Among other things, it requires that women have equal rights to work, pay, benefits and safe working conditions. It also prohibits discrimination against women in political activities and requires a minimum age for marriage.

But the treaty did not include complaint procedures, so women could bring their grievances before the United Nations if they weren't addressed by their own countries.

Twenty years later, women are likely to get that right. After four years of negotiations, the Commission on the Status of Women approved the optional protocol in March and sent it to the General Assembly for final approval.



Russian President Boris Yeltsin (L) poses with his Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin during a stroll at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing yesterday. Russia and China signed a joint communique rejecting the West's use of human rights to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. — AFP photo

Russia eases deadline for Grozny residents

MOSCOW, Dec 10: Bowing to intense world pressure, Russia today eased a Saturday deadline for the terrified residents of Grozny to flee or face destruction, offering to negotiate their safe exit with rebel leaders, reports AP.

Russian Emergency Minister Sergei Shoigu said that civilians left in the Chechen capital would still be permitted to leave after Saturday, and promised that federal bombardment would ease to allow them to use safe corridors.

"This is not the last date when people will be permitted to leave," he said, referring to the five-day ultimatum issued Monday by the Russian military in leaflets dropped onto Grozny.

At that time the army told the residents to flee by Saturday or be considered "terrorists" and wiped out by a massive aerial and artillery onslaught.

The Russian minister said he was ready to enter negotiations with the separatist government of President Aslan Maskhadov on the safe exit of

the civilian population. "I am ready to negotiate even with the devil," he told a press conference.

"There are still real men who remain," he said. "Maskhadov, if you're a man, let the people out... the elderly, women and children."

Shoigu also promised that the Russian aviation and artillery would scale down their offensive to permit the civilians to escape from the city.

"We will put in place temporary corridors. The military actions in these corridors will cease from time to time, so that people can leave safely and we will transmit that information to people as best we can."

Western governments reacted angrily to the initial Russian ultimatum to Grozny and in Helsinki on Friday, European Union leaders were expected to impose sanctions against Moscow for its Chechnya offensive.

The 15 heads of state and government attending the EU summit will discuss "the best ways of making Russian Presi-

dent Boris Yeltsin and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin understand that they must absolutely change their behaviour," French President Jacques Chirac said in the Finnish capital.

In recent days, Russian generals and political leaders have denied they intended to target civilians in the city.

They insist the warning was aimed at safeguarding the lives of the estimated 40,000 residents left in Grozny by getting them to safety.

But the relentless bombardment of the city has made it impossible for the trapped civilians to flee through Pervomayskaya, where Russian forces said they would open a safe corridor for them.

"We have scaled down our bombing of Grozny, but after the 11th (of December) it will be quite different. We will destroy everything if necessary," Russian officer Mikhail Andreyevich told AFP at a position about 10 km west from the Chechen capital.



Some 300,000 Cubans march in Havana yesterday to demand the return of six-year-old Elian Gonzalez. US officials have outlined procedures the boy's father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, must follow to prove his claim that the boy should be returned to Cuba. Gonzalez must provide documentary evidence of his relationship to the boy and prove that he has carried out his parental obligations. — AFP photo

Political persecution in police custody: Pakistan style

ISLAMABAD, Dec 10: For five days political activist Mohammad Sarwar was tied to a chair in a police station in the southern Pakistani city of Karachi and tortured till he agreed to confess to being involved in multiple robberies there, reports IPS.

"Investigators hit my toes with a hammer until I was ready to confess crimes I never committed," Sarwar, 30, a former office bearer of the ethnic political party, Mohajir Quami Movement, said in an interview.

But that was not the end. A policeman in plainclothes then offered to set him free, without charges being registered, if he would pay 150,000 rupees (roughly 2,900 dollars).

"Since my life was in their hands, I had no other option but to give them the money," said Sarwar, who has been left with a permanent limp from that brush with the law.

In police stations in Pakistan like in other countries in South Asia, the use of torture is routine procedure to extract confessions. Although prisoners have been known to be maimed or killed in custody, not one police official has been convicted.

"For lack of evidence, not even once has a police official accused of torture been punished by the court of law. Since it was inside the police station, victims could not furnish witness," says criminal lawyer

Hashmat Ali Habib, a former secretary general of Amnesty International's Pakistan chapter.

What is unpardonable is that in many cases the victims do not even know why they have been arrested.

The most common methods of torture included beatings with a baton or whip, standing for hours with arms stretched to the side, hanging by the ankles, twisting the genitals, burning with cigarettes butts and punches in the abdomen.

If they are women, chances that they will be raped in custody are very high.

Pakistan is a signatory of the UN convention against torture, 1984, and Article 9 of its constitution says that no person shall be deprived of life or liberty save in accordance with the law.

Yet, the autonomous Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) observed in its 1998 annual report that "Torture and police excesses while dealing with citizens remain as endemic as ever."

The survivors, suffer, for years in many cases, from anxiety, depression, a feeling of shame, guilt, impaired memory and concentration, headaches, sexual problems and many other things.

Instances of death in police custody from torture are routinely dubbed as suicides by the police. These get "considerably

less publicity than killings in police encounters which receive extensive coverage, comments the HRCP.

Under Pakistan's laws, the police have to produce suspect before a judicial magistrate within 24 hours of their arrest and seek physical remand-legal permission to extract evidence from the accused. However, the procedures are seldom followed.

"Since there is usually no record of who is taken in and released, nobody from outside the police station can prove any wrongdoing," said a police sub-inspector who naturally did not want to be identified.

Invariably too the majority of police torture victims, according to rights activists, are from the urban poor sections. They may be people leading precarious lives as migrants struggling for adequate livelihoods and decent living conditions in the city and pushed into the world of petty crime.

Apart from lacking awareness about their rights, they don't have the money to fight their case in court.

"If victims want to move court, they will have to pay 15,000 rupees (3000 dollars) as court fees in addition to the lawyer and other expenses. In most cases, the damages claimed remain less than the expenses on the perusal of a case," said lawyer Habib.