

International

Kulsoom Nawaz rules out plans to join politics

ISLAMABAD, Feb 13: Kulsoom Nawaz, wife of deposed premier Nawaz Sharif, yesterday ruled out plans to enter politics but ruining the silence of leaders and workers of Pakistan Muslim League, when their leader was in jail, urged them to launch a mass contact programme, reports PTI.

Kulsoom said she had stepped out of the house because her husband was fighting for revival of the constitution and parliament. She was addressing party workers at the house of a local leader at Rawalpindi, private news agency NNI said.

Kulsoom said she would return to her house the day her husband came out of jail. For me it is a sacred struggle and it will continue until it meets objectives.

Exhorting workers to come out for democracy she said I regret the silence of leader and workers. My husband is fighting for the revival of the constitution, law and parliament. If PML workers do not come out and start a mass contact campaign, the party will be finished. Democracy will be finished... PML is the biggest party of Pakistan, its head is in jail, but its leader and workers are strangely quiet.

She said she feared the day when the people of Pakistan would take on the army and said she wanted the return of democracy before that happened.

Stressing the urgent need for launching a mass campaign, Kulsoom said we have to tell the people that what happened on October 12 (the day Sharif was deposed in a coup) was illegal and dangerous for the country. History never sides with military dictators.

Indian state minister quits over sex scandal

NEW DELHI, Feb 13: A minister in an Indian state government has resigned following allegations by a top woman bureaucrat he harassed her sexually, newspapers reported today, reports AFP.

Forest and Transport Minister Neelalohithadasan Nadar quit office in the southern state of Kerala late Saturday. The Asian Age and other dailies said.

Nadar was a member of a small centrist party which is a partner in Kerala's communist-led coalition government.

Nalini Netto, an official at the transport ministry, accused Nadar of sexual harassment.

"I explained to the authority to whom I submitted my complaint the trauma I had been undergoing," Netto said after the resignation.

"I am happy that they understand my problem. I was confident I would not be denied justice."

Endeavour starts 3-D mapping of Earth

CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida, Feb 13: The six astronauts orbiting Earth aboard the space shuttle Endeavour activated the spacecraft's antennae Saturday and began creating a three-dimensional map of the planet using sophisticated radar equipment, NASA officials said, reports AFP.

For this 11-day mission, the Endeavour is sporting two powerful radar antennae, one installed in its underbelly and the other at the end of a 60-metre-long telescope that sticks out from the shuttle's body like the mast of a ship.

Gathering light waves reflected off the Earth, the antennae are to record in detail the variations in altitude along the planet's surface.

The radar operations began at 12:31 a.m. here (1131 BST), slightly ahead of schedule, as the shuttle flew over Sri Lanka, India and the Maldives Islands, according to controllers at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Johnson Space Centre in Houston, Texas.

The six astronauts will be taking turns in teams of three, every 12 hours, to monitor the equipment and replace its tape recording bands.

Militants kill 17 civilians in Algeria

ALGIERS, Feb 13: Three separate attacks launched by Islamic insurgents in Algeria killed seventeen people last week, local newspaper reports said on Saturday, reports Xinhua.

Of the total, seven were killed on Thursday near Berrouaghia, 70 kilometers south of capital Algiers, when a group of militiamen sprayed bullets at a queue of vehicles, according to the Le Martin newspaper.

Another seven people, including three security guards, died on Wednesday in an ambush in Tissimts, 350 kilometers west of Algiers, La Tribune newspaper reported.

Also on Wednesday, three people were killed at a small beach resort in Tipaza, 70 kilometers west of the capital, said the Liberte daily.

The fatalities occurred as government forces for the last three weeks have been enforcing a crackdown on radical militants who refused to lay down their arms in exchange for amnesty.

Algerian President Abd-elaziz Bouteflika had promised to pardon Islamic militants who surrendered their arms by January 13, for a national reconciliation.

5 arrested for hunting animals: A senior bureaucrat and four others have been arrested in far-eastern India on charges of killing five rare monkeys and eight birds at a wildlife resort, officials said Sunday, AFP reports from Guwahati.

Vihili Sekhose, a member of the elite Indian Administrative Service (IAS), was arrested Saturday at the Deopahar Reserve Forest in Assam state. B S Bonal, a senior wildlife official, said Sekhose was caught after he had killed the monkeys and eight birds, including kingfishers, heron and owls, with hunting rifles. Others who were arrested included his family members and wife. If convicted, the officer faces up to six years in prison for killing endangered species.

Crackdown on immigrants: Police are arresting increasing numbers of illegal immigrants working in restaurants, bars and gambling dens as part of a crackdown by the Australian government, officials said Sunday, AFP reports from Sydney.

In a raid by police and immigration officers in Sydney's Chinatown on Friday night, 24 suspects were arrested, including some who jumped from a second floor window in a desperate bid to escape. A police spokesman said 28 suspected illegal immigrants were arrested in Sydney during the previous three nights in the latest phase of a crackdown known as Operation Pirbright.

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Wahid backs down over resignation demand

Fresh probe against Wiranto ordered

JAKARTA, Feb 13: President Abdurrahman Wahid appeared to back down Sunday from his repeated demands that Gen. Wiranto, Indonesia's powerful security minister, step down immediately over his alleged involvement in the bloodshed in East Timor, reports AP.

Cabinet secretary Marsilam Simanjuntak said the president had ordered the attorney general to mount an investigation of Wiranto's role in the violence that shook the former Indonesian province following an overwhelming vote for independence.

"The president agreed today to let the attorney general form a special team to investigate Gen. Wiranto's case," said Simanjuntak as the meeting was ending.

The president will not take any decision about Wiranto for the team reports the results of the investigations to the president," he said, adding that the probe would likely be completed within a month.

Wiranto met with Wahid at the palace just hours after the president returned from a 16-day tour of the Middle East, Europe and Asia. The trip was

largely overshadowed by his long-distance public row with Wiranto, accused by Indonesian and United Nations human rights panels of overseeing violence in East Timor in his former role as armed forces commander.

Also present at Sunday's meeting were Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri, Attorney General Marzuki Darusman and Lt Gen Arie Kumaat, who heads the national intelligence agency.

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110 countries threatened by desertification

DUBAI, Feb 13: Dozens of international experts on Sunday examined the latest methods to combat the threat of desertification which hangs over more than 110 countries, at a conference hosted by this desert Gulf emirate, reports AFP.

Seventy per cent of arable land in the countries most at risk is threatened by desertification, warned Mohammad bin Fahad, chairman of the organising committee of the five-day conference.

Klaus Toepfer, executive director of the UN Environment Programme, said the UNEP has

launched four full-scale projects costing more than 40 million dollars as well as 11 medium-sized projects to fight desertification.

Almost 150 experts are taking part in the Dubai conference co-organised by UN agencies on "better management of arid and semi-arid lands in the 21st century" that opened on Saturday. The organisers also invited around 60 ministers for the forum which is to discuss 120 fresh studies on the causes and effects of desertification as well as remedies.

The UN Convention to Com-

bat Desertification (UNCCD) is "one of the concrete results of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development" held in Rio de Janeiro, said Hama Arba Diallo, the UNCCD executive secretary.

"To date, the UNCCD has been ratified by 161 countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE)," he said.

"This large number of ratifications represents a worldwide consensus of the importance of desertification to both affected countries and those not affected," said Diallo.

Indian states calm after violence-hit elections

PATNA, India, Feb 13: The Indian states of Bihar and Manipur were quiet today, one day after widespread violence during local elections left 26 people dead and dozens injured, officials said, reports AFP.

Twenty people were killed across the eastern state of Bihar, while six others died in the small far-eastern state of Manipur, during and in the run-up to the polls on Saturday.

There is no tension anywhere in Bihar," director general of police K A Jacob told AFP in state capital.

"Now everything is quiet. The police and paramilitary troops have been withdrawn from most places."

Manipur officials also reported calm today.

The violence in Bihar, which claimed the lives of 14 security personnel and six others, began even before polling booths opened, with a landmine blast overnight Friday which killed eight paramilitary troops.

Police blamed most of the attacks across Bihar, dubbed by critics as India's most lawless state, on outlawed Maoist rebels who had threatened violence against anyone ignoring its election boycott calls.

Separate exit polls by a private network and India's national television predicted after Saturday's polling that Vajpeyi's alliance would pick up more than 60 of the 108 Bihar seats.

The elections are seen as an acid test for Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpeyi's Hindu nationalist-led coalition which returned to power in national elections four months ago.

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The three-stage elections — on Saturday, Thursday and on February 22 — were called to elect state assemblies in Bihar, Manipur, Haryana in the north and Orissa in the east.

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