

Chandrika prays for peace on birthday

COLOMBO, June 29 : Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga marked her 55th birthday today with prayers for peace in her embattled country, the government said in a statement, reports AFP.

Kumaratunga was spending the day with her son Vinnukti and urged her well-wishers not to send flowers but instead donate money to the welfare of government soldiers fighting Tamil Tiger rebels, her office said.

The President will spend the day alone, as she has done in the past several years, with her son in silent prayer for peace, her office said in a statement.

Kumaratunga came to power in August 1994 promising peace, but her talks with Tamil Tiger rebels ended in failure and fighting continued. Tiger guerrillas are currently locked in combat with government troops in the island's north.

Ugandans vote on referendum

KAMPALA, June 29 : Ugandans began voting today in a referendum to decide whether to go back to multi-party politics after 14 years of severe restrictions, reports AFP.

Voters are being given the choice between adopting meaningful multi-party politics or retaining the current system in which decisions at all levels are made by the National Resistance Movement (NRM), an entity that in theory includes all Ugandans.

In the capital Kampala voting was delayed due to heavy rain, with a handful of voters still waiting at All Saints cathedral in the city centre to cast their votes 90 minutes after polling stations were due to open at 7:00 a.m. (10:00 BST).

Blair losing popularity

LONDON, June 29 : British Prime Minister Tony Blair's popularity rating has slumped but his ruling Labour Party still has a commanding lead over the opposition Conservatives, a newspaper poll showed today, reports AFP.

A Mori poll for The Times showed satisfaction with Blair had fallen eight percent to 39 percent in the past month, while the number of voters dissatisfied with him had risen 10 percent to 52 percent.

Pakistan denies Chinese help in missile plant

WASHINGTON, June 29 : Pakistan's embassy in Washington on Wednesday branded reports that China was helping its government to build a new missile plant as "completely baseless," reports AFP.

The denial followed a report in the Far Eastern Economic Review of June 22, which said US officials were concerned Beijing may have resumed work on an M-11 missile plant it started building in Pakistan in 1999.

The Embassy of Pakistan categorically rejects the recent media reports, said a statement sent to journalists here.

"These reports are completely baseless. It is also regrettable that these false reports have been used to mislead the US Senate and criticize Pakistan."

Elian returns to Cuba

Bitter custody battle ends

HAVANA, June 29 : Elian Gonzalez and his family arrived back in Cuba late Wednesday to a low-key welcome which is likely to set the tone for his reintegration into Cuban society, reports AFP.

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Given the "rapid progress" Elian has already made, the

bers before settling into a complex in the Havana neighbourhood of Miramar, according to Cuban authorities.

Police threw a cordon around the mansion in the seafront area of the city, preventing all but residents from getting in or out late Wednesday.

The mansion, which was chosen in April to be a transit point for Elian as he reacclimates to Cuban life, has its own pool, park and therapy room.

There the young boy will be shielded from the glare of the international spotlight while he concentrates on his studies, according to a plan mapped out by Cuban officials in consultation with Elian's father.

"We hope that in just two or three weeks he (Elian) will be completely ready to begin second grade," according to official statements broadcast on television, as a band played the national anthem.

But as expected, the public celebrations were short-lived, with Elian, his father Juan Miguel, wife Nersy, and their infant son Haniy়া, climbing into a white Lada after a mere six minutes in the public eye.

The family was taken to an undisclosed location for a reunion with other family members.

transition period will be shorter than previously expected, authorities indicated.

"Our dedicated teachers will help him become a model child ... at the same time a normal citizen, and a symbol, an example for all the children of our country."

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They urged people to celebrate in their own homes with neighbours without taking to the streets on a wave of enthusiasm," which would be inappropriate at this time.

"We have achieved our objective of bringing this child back to his homeland," an official statement broadcast on television said. "But this is not the time for bragging, boasting or self-congratulation."

Only Ricardo Alarcon, the president of the Cuban parliament, was on hand to greet the Gonzalez family at the airport on their return from the United States.

And if Cuban President Fidel Castro was savoring his victory over his old foes the Cuban exiles in Miami, he was savoring it in private.

Castro, who promised in April that he would not treat Elian as a trophy in his public battles with Cuban exiles in Miami, stayed away from the event.



Six-year-old Cuban castaway Elian Gonzalez is carried by his paternal grandfather Juan Gonzalez beside his great-grandmother Ramona (L) upon Elian's arrival from the United States Wednesday at Jose Marti Airport in Havana.

— AFP photo

House favours questioning Wahid

JAKARTA, June 29 : Indonesia's parliament, the People's Representative Council (DPR), today voted in favour of questioning President Abdurrahman Wahid over the recent sacking of two ministers, reports AFP.

In a vote taken during a plenary session attended by 431 members of the 500-member DPR, an overwhelming 332 MP's voted in favor of summoning Wahid. Sixty-three were against the questioning while 36 abstained.

With the vote the legislature will exercise its interpolation rights -- the rights to question a member of the government, including the president, on a point of government policy.

The Indonesian Democracy Party-Struggle (PDIP) faction, the largest in the DPR, has spearheaded efforts to summon the president over the sacking of Laksamana Sukardi as investment and state enterprise minister and Yusuf Kalla as industry and trade minister.

Disgraced Kohl testifies to parliamentary committee

BERLIN, June 29 : For the first time since admitting to running one million dollars in slush funds, former German chancellor Helmut Kohl testified today before a parliamentary committee investigating the scandal, reports AFP.

Looking drawn but smiling as his testimony began, Kohl was appearing the day after an official report documented the destruction of a massive amount of government files in the chancellery at the end of his tenure.

He was sitting at a small table, flanked only by his lawyer, for the questioning from the all-party parliamentary committee.

Kohl has refused to name donors to illegal secret funds he ran while serving as chancellor and was not expected to budge from this position in his testimony Thursday.

The parliamentary committee investigating the scandal surrounding Kohl heard Wednesday that two-thirds of the chancellery data files were wiped out after his election defeat in 1998.



Former German chancellor Helmut Kohl (L) studies documents while sitting next to his lawyer Stephan Holthoff-Pförtner (R) as they face a parliamentary investigating committee into the slush fund scandal in Berlin yesterday.

— AFP photo

Aum cult member sentenced to death

TOKYO, June 29 : A Japanese court Thursday sentenced to death the Aum Supreme Truth cult's "killing machine," Yasuo Hayashi, for unleashing Sarin gas in a murderous 1995 attack in the Tokyo subway, a spokesman said, reports AFP.

The sentence at Tokyo District Court was the second death penalty handed out for the horrifying March 1995 attack, in which Nazi-invented Sarin gas killed 12 people and left thousands injured.

"He got the death penalty as sought by prosecutors," said the Tokyo District Court spokesman, who declined to be named.

Judge Kiyoshi Kimura said Hayashi, 42, must go to the gallows as one of five Aum disciples who released the nerve gas in packed subway cars during the morning rush hour.

"He has an extremely grave responsibility as an executor of the sect's organised crimes and cannot escape capital punishment," Kimura said, according to Japan Broadcasting Corp. (NHK).

Hayashi, wearing a tieless grey suit and white shirt, stayed calm when the death sentence was delivered, NHK television said.

Israel counting on Clinton to bridge gaps with Palestinians

JERUSALEM, June 29 : Israel is counting on US President Bill Clinton to bridge the yawning gaps between the Jewish state and the Palestinians in a three-way summit it hopes will take place in late July, an Israeli minister said today, reports AFP.

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negotiations were needed first. He did not rule out a summit later in July.

Communications Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said that only a third party can save the peace process at this stage.

"The Israeli side has gone as far as it can with its position on borders, Jerusalem, settlements ... on the other side they have toughened their stance, bordering on impenetrability," he told public Israeli radio.

But as the talking gets tougher Israeli officials are warning of serious violence if the summit fails, and particularly if Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat goes ahead with a threat to declare an independent state without an accord with Israel.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright left the region early Thursday after failing to bring the Israeli and Palestinian positions any closer, and was due to brief the president later in the day.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak told AFP Wednesday that the only way to secure progress ahead of a mid-September deadline for a final peace accord with the Palestinians was through a summit.

Arafat rejected a US suggestion for a mid-July summit, stressing to Albright that more

meanwhile warned Barak that failure of the summit could lead to an armed confrontation with the Palestinians.

"The army is preparing for the eventuality that there will be a serious escalation in violence," Lieutenant Colonel Sharon Grinker, an army spokesman, told AFP.

Reports said Thursday that if a summit fails and Arafat announces Palestinian statehood on September 13, Barak is likely to respond by annexing the territory it still occupies.

"If Arafat takes unilateral steps, we will have to respond with unilateral steps," a senior official in Barak's office said.

The Israeli newspaper Yediot Acharonot said Barak would immediately annex all territory under Israeli control -- amounting to some 60 percent of the West Bank and 35 percent of the Gaza Strip.

The prime minister is determined to take a series of steps in response to a declaration of statehood by Arafat quickly, determinedly, and without a minute's delay, the top-selling daily said.

Iraq impatient at lack of OIC support on sanctions

KUALA LUMPUR, June 29 : Iraq is pushing fellow Islamic nations to support its call for a lifting of United Nations sanctions but is getting little backing so far, a report said today.

The MDC took 57 out of the 120 contested seats -- the first time Zimbabwe has had a credible opposition in 20 years.

"Our common position is that he should step down by the time we hold our annual conference in December to save our party," the official told the paper.

"If he wants to seek re-election in 2002, he must go public... this would enable some of us to cross the floor now rather than later," another official was quoted as saying.

Senior party officials blame Mugabe for the party's dismal performance in the elections.

Saadoon said Baghdad had

made every effort to comply with UN resolutions and destroy its weapons even though its weapons inspections were just a pretext for spying.

"We have done everything at the expense of our children dying, our country becoming poor and the whole nation being devastated," he was quoted as saying.

"We hope to get the OIC to support our call for the UN sanctions to be lifted."

Iraqi delegates were not immediately available for comment on the report.

The OIC, headquartered in Saudi Arabia, represents all the Arab states which went to war against Iraq in 1991 under a US-led coalition to drive it out of Kuwait.

Military zone declared around Fiji's parliament

Speight issues fresh warning on hostages

SUVA, June 29 : Fiji's martial law authorities were preparing to set up a cordon around the Parliamentary Complex where 27 political hostages are being held captive, still detained by the RUF, reports AFP.

"We continue to hold negotiations with RUF Field Commanders including Brigadier Issa Sesay," Jetley told reporters.

"We are in daily contact with the hostages, sending them logistic support regularly every second day and our doctors are visiting them to assess their health," he said.

"We are having discussions with people on the ground and they too seemed eager to get the current situation behind them," he said.

Jetley denied media reports that a number of villages in the northeast of Mile 91 had been burnt down by rebels.

Coup plotters have held Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, his cabinet and ruling MPs hostage in Parliament since June 19.

On Wednesday a deadline imposed by the military on the plotters to sign an accord to end the drama passed without signatures.

Radio FM96 said the military had a decree ready for implementation Friday which would see parliament sealed off

from the outside.

Until now coup supporters had easy access into parliament enabling them to take in large amounts of food.

In the first week of the coup the area was sealed off, but coup leader George Speight and his followers tore down the barricades.

State run Fiji Broadcasting Commission said staff and students at the nearby Pacific Theological College had been told to evacuate.

The exclusive Domain Road area, which is home to the United States and French ambassadors, the British high commissioner and the deputy New Zealand high commissioner, was also evacuated.

Asked if that anger could be taken out on the hostages, who include deposed prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry, he replied: "That is a very distinct possibility."

US Supreme Court strikes down ban on abortion

WASHINGTON, June 29 : A sharply divided US Supreme Court ruled Wednesday that states cannot ban a controversial late-term abortion procedure described by its critics as "partial birth" abortion, reports AFP.

The justices ruled 5-4 that a Nebraska state law banning the procedure was unconstitutional because it violates the rights of women.

Abortion foes immediately denounced the decision while abortion rights advocates welcomed the