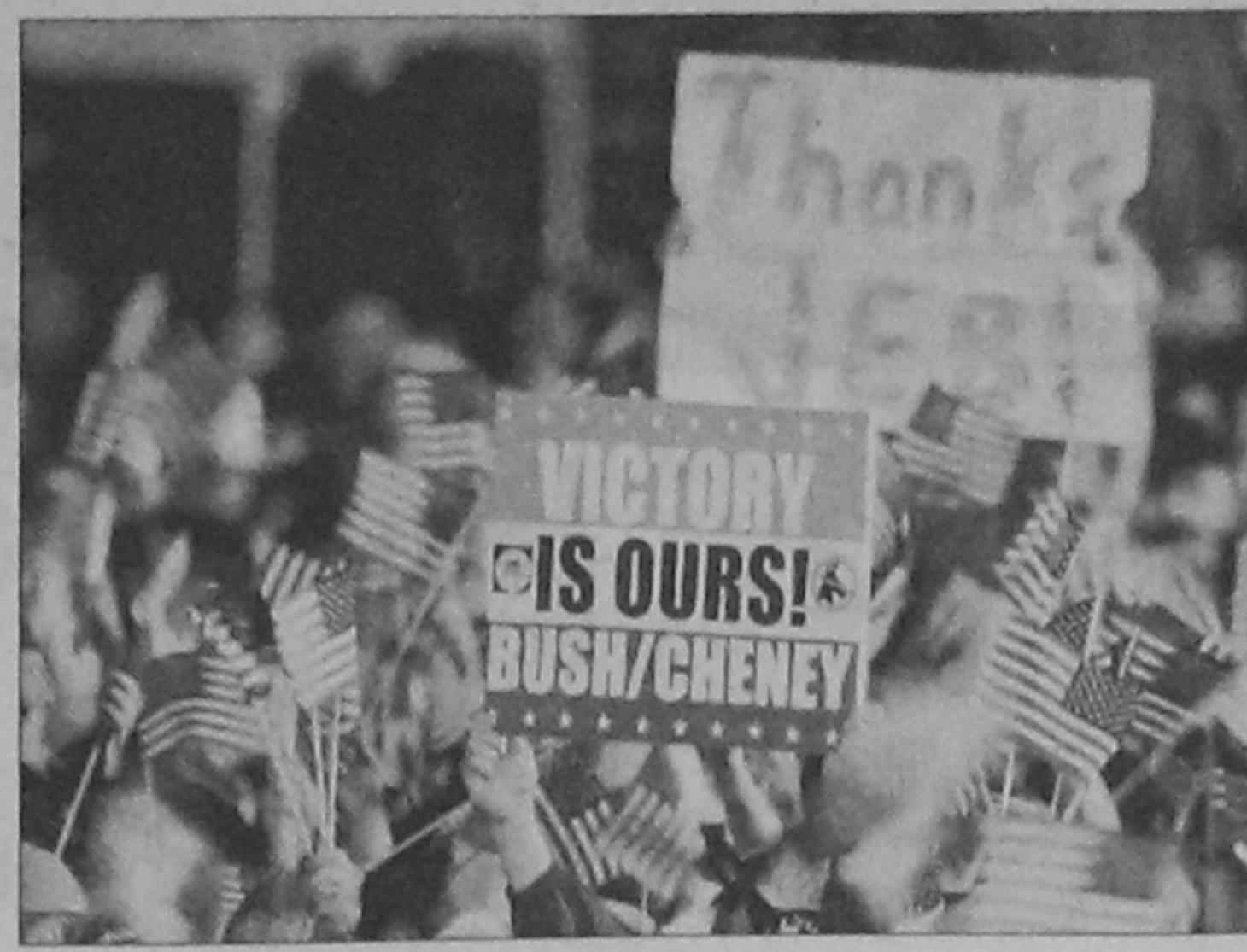




Revellers celebrate in front of the Tennessee State Capitol Building early yesterday in Nashville, Tennessee, after Democratic presidential candidate and US Vice president Al Gore retracted a message of concession to Republican presidential candidate and Texas Governor George W. Bush following confusion over the results in the key state of Florida.

- AFP photo



Supporters wave US flags and hold signs in support of Florida Gov. Jeb Bush at a rally for his brother, Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush, outside the Capitol building early yesterday in Austin, Texas. The winner in the presidential election could not be announced due to confusion in the results in the key state of Florida.

- AFP photo

World bewildered by US election

TOKYO, Nov 8: Japan's top newspaper put out a special edition then pulled it back. A Hong Kong teacher called the confusion "ridiculous." The German foreign minister just shrugged his shoulders.

The cliffhanger presidential election in the United States on Tuesday fascinated and bewildered folks around the world, where many were waiting for word about who would take the helm in the globe's most powerful nation.

The announcement by US TV networks that Gov. George W. Bush had clinched the White House and that Vice President Al Gore had conceded sent newspaper presses rolling and foreign leaders congratulating.

Then Gore retracted the concession.

In Japan, the country's largest newspaper sent out 20,000 copies of a special edition with a Bush victory in banner headlines to distribution points around Tokyo and then put on the brakes.

"We called the drivers and told them to stop," said Masayuki Miyashita, distribution official for the Yomiuri newspaper.

Others didn't make that call on time. The Japanese tabloid *Gendai* hit the streets Wednesday night with "Bush Barely Wins" as the headline and a colour photo of the Texas governor giving a gleeful thumbs-up.

Foreign leaders were also caught off-guard. South Korean President Kim Dae-jung was among the officials who sent a congratulatory message to Bush a little too soon.

British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook was more circumspect.

"I congratulate George Bush, if it is confirmed that he was won," Cook said, adding that he looked forward to working with the new president.

The Germans were also hesitant. Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder had initially scheduled a news conference on Wednesday morning then kept reporters waiting when the apparent Bush victory fell into doubt.

Eventually, Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer appeared to say: "Before one of them conceded the election ... Without completing his sentence, Fischer just shrugged his shoulders.

On the streets, regular people seemed incredulous that the election

of such an important post leader of the world's biggest economy and strongest military power could turn into such a guessing game.

"It's ridiculous," said 46-year-old Hong Kong teacher Anny Poon. "Hong Kong elections are much better in this aspect."

"How can they be so careless?" chimed in Jennifer Chueng, 36, a hotel supervisor. "I think we could forgive such mistakes in Hong Kong, but not in a big country like the United States."

The reaction reflected the interest the election has generated overseas for good reason. US foreign policy and trade posture have a decisive influence in many parts of the globe.

In Asia, where dead-heat race played on TVs all afternoon, many pondered the effect that a possible shift from the Democrats to the Republicans in the White House would have on their region.

Hong Kong people wondered if a stricter China policy would hurt the territory's stock market.

An Indonesian official hoped for less meddling in Jakarta's affairs.

The future of the US relationship with Israel was a top priority in the Middle East.

In South Korea, the leading worry was how Washington's attitude toward Seoul's efforts to draw communist North Korea out of isolation would change if a more conservative administration came to power.

The tight race kept many tuning in periodically to television and the Internet for updates.

Hundreds of expectant Americans gathered on Wednesday for a watch party in Hong Kong's luxurious Ritz-Carlton Hotel, in a ballroom decked out with American flags, with a Statue of Liberty outside the door.

"This is closer than anyone expected," said Amy Weaver, a 33-year-old lawyer from Seattle, as the suspense built early Wednesday. "I think it's going to be a very long morning."

The horse-race atmosphere was engendering excitement among foreign media as well. Japanese national broadcaster NHK had maps showing the states won by each candidate. New Delhi Television broadcast tallies of the electoral votes.

"It's a fantastic election," gushed Prannoy Roy, the Indian network's anchorman. "It's really right down to the wire. A few thousand votes could make all the difference."

Militants kill 8 civilians in Assam

S Arabia to boycott OIC summit

RIYADH, Nov 8: Gulf regional power Saudi Arabia will boycott the summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Doha because of the "deteriorating situation" in the Palestinian territories, the royal palace announced today, reports AFP.

Five of those killed in the northeastern state's Barpeta district belonged to a minority community and the others were from the eastern state of Bihar.

PTI did not say how the eight were killed.

Police suspect the militants belong to the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, which has been fighting for 12 years for a separate country for the tribal Bodo people.

Bodos, who constitute 13 per cent of Assam's population of around 25 million people, accuse the majority non-tribal population of exploiting them.

Assam is one of India's seven land-locked northeastern states plagued by dozens of militant tribal groups fighting either for independence or greater autonomy.

Official sources had earlier said Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz would not attend the November 12-14 gathering because of Qatar's continued links with Israel.

The prince made the decision because Qatar has refused to close the Israeli trade bureau in Doha despite the clamour in the Arab world to isolate the Jewish state, the sources said.

The 56-member Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which has its headquarters in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, is organising the summit in Qatar.

The communiqué, which did not mention Qatar's ties with Israel, appeared to leave the door open by voicing "hope that there will be better conditions so that Saudi Arabia can take part."

The palace said the success of the three-day summit, which opens Sunday, depended on good preparation, founded on the resolutions of the Arab summit in Cairo on October 21-22 that called for a halt to further normalisation with Israel.

However Libyan leader Colonel

In Doha, an Iranian envoy announced Monday that President Mohammad Khatami was to take part in the summit, despite Qatar's resistance to calls for the closure of the Israeli trade office.

Khatami himself on Monday renewed a call for all Muslim countries to sever relations with Israel in solidarity with the Palestinians.

The book, about an 82-year-old woman who reflects on her far from exemplary life including the events surrounding her sister's tragic and early death, was picked from 120 entries. Atwood was the bookmakers' favourite to land the coveted prize with her 10th novel.

Four killed as violence continues in Gaza Strip

GAZA CITY, Nov 8: Three Palestinians and one Israeli woman were killed today as clashes raged on in the Gaza Strip despite a US initiative to wrap a tourniquet round the weeks of bloodletting, reports AFP.

Faris Ouda, 14, died after he was shot in the neck during fighting at the Karni crossing point between Israel and the Gaza Strip, a site of frequent confrontations over the past six weeks of fighting. Four others were wounded at the crossing used by both Jewish settlers and Palestinians for commercial transport.

Also Wednesday, an Israeli woman was shot and killed by Palestinian gunfire near the Rafah terminal at the border between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, Israeli army radio and Palestinian officials reported.

Israel responded by closing the terminal, which is jointly controlled by Israel and Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority.

Another Israeli and Palestinian were seriously wounded at Rafah, a Palestinian source at the terminal told AFP.

The body count from the past six weeks of fighting also rose Wednesday, with two Palestinians dying from wounds sustained in clashes over recent days.

Gaza City's Shifa hospital said Mohammed Mahanai, 24, died of a bullet wound to the head he received in clashes with soldiers at Karni on Tuesday.

Ibrahim Fouad al-Kassas, 13, also died after he was shot in the head on Saturday at confrontations at Khan Yunis in the Gaza Strip.

Canadian novelist wins Booker Prize

TORONTO, Nov 8: The fourth time proved to be a charm for Margaret Atwood, Canada's most celebrated author and poet, who won The Booker Prize, Britain's top fiction award on Tuesday for her novel, "The Blind Assassin."

Best known for her novels "The Edible Woman" in 1969, "Surfacing" (1972) and "The Handmaid's Tale" (1985), Atwood has written more than 36 books, including novels, short stories, children's books, works of literary criticism and social history.

Her works have been published around the world and translated into more than 33 languages.

It was the fourth time Atwood has been nominated for the 21,000 pound (\$29,980) prize that guarantees the author instant literary cult status and a place on bestseller lists around the world.

The organisers have said the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will dominate the agenda of the November 12-14 summit.

The foreign ministers, in a preparatory meeting on Thursday and Friday, and the OIC leaders will each devote a special session to "Israel's aggressions against the Palestinian people," an OIC official said.

The heads of state are due to converge on November 11.

Qatar established trade links with Israel in 1996 but froze the normalisation process later the same year after right-wing Benjamin Netanyahu came to power as Israeli prime minister.

Moamer Kadhafi has said he will stay away from the summit and has suggested that Qatar's fear of its neighbours could explain its continued links with Israel.

The Islamic summit will be just like the Arab summit - just ink on paper," he said.

The Emir of Bahrain has also announced he will boycott the summit because of a simmering territorial dispute with Qatar which is before the International Court of Justice.

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This is all about books and reading and writing," she told a glittering dinner at London's Guildhall after accepting the prize, one of the most renowned in the world.

The book, about an 82-year-old woman who reflects on her far from exemplary life including the events surrounding her sister's tragic and early death, was picked from 120 entries. Atwood was the bookmakers' favourite to land the coveted prize with her 10th novel.

The plane crash that killed Carnahan, his son and an aide last month turned the nationally watched contest against Republican Sen. John Ashcroft from notoriously bitter to bizarre.

The crash occurred too late to revise the ballot. No one had ever posthumously won election to the Senate, though voters on at least three occasions sent deceased candidates to the House.

Gov. Roger Wilson, who took office after Carnahan's death Oct. 16, said he would appoint Carnahan's 66-year-old widow, Jean, to a two-year term should Ashcroft lose. Mrs. Carnahan became the implicit challenger when she declared herself strong enough to accept appointment.

Some Republicans had threatened a court challenge if that happened.

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