

International

Barak authorised to decide alone on future reactions

Arafat expresses optimism about ME peace

JERUSALEM, Nov 24: The Israeli Security Cabinet decided late Thursday to authorise Prime Minister Ehud Barak to decide on future reactions to Palestinian terror acts without further convening the Cabinet for such matters, reports AFP.

Thursday night's decision came after two extraordinary sessions of the cabinet were held following the fatal bomb attack on a bus in the town of Hadera on Wednesday night.

Barak said he will exercise his discretion in the future in a proper manner "to use whatever means necessary" in case violent terror acts and other attacks against Israel continue.

On the latest attacks that claimed the lives of two Israeli civilians and two soldiers and injured more than 60 civilians, no retaliatory action had been decided.

Meanwhile President Yasser Arafat, said he was sure a way would be found to end almost two months of violence.

Asked after arriving at Moscow's Vnukovo government airport whether an end to the confrontation between Palestinians and Israelis could be found, Arafat told reporters.

"This is one of the most important steps we are going to discuss (in Moscow). We are sure to find a solution."

"(It is important) not to forget that Russia is a co-sponsor of the peace process and they have a political role," he added.

Arafat was later to meet President Vladimir Putin and Russia's special envoy on the Middle East,

Vasily Sredin.

On the other hand in talks at the Eres checkpoint in the north of the Gaza Strip, Israeli Deputy Defence Minister Efraim Sneh and Territories Coordinator Jakob Or met Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's chief of staff, Taji Abdel Rahim, and Civil Affairs Minister Jamil Tarifi.

The two sides agreed they will try to implement the agreement they reached in October in Sharm el-Sheikh in a bid to end the violence that has rocked the region for the past seven weeks.

However, both sides at the Eres talks would first have to confer with their respective governments before any agreement at the talks is finalised or implemented.

Palestinian sources said that an immediate ceasefire, a withdrawal of Israeli forces from advance positions and an end to the current Palestinian uprising, or Intifada were in general agreed upon between the two negotiating teams.

It was also agreed between the two negotiating teams that Israel would also reopen the Gaza airport and end economic sanctions against the autonomous areas. The Palestinian side would cease all violence and stop instigating violence through the media.

The Palestinian security council, in a late-night meeting chaired by Arafat, greeted the outcome of the talks, which sources said lasted more than two hours.

Violence between both sides had claimed more lives earlier in the day.



The ASEAN leaders with their counterparts from China, Japan and South Korea during the Informal Summit meeting in Singapore yesterday.

Temple on site of Babri Mosque Date to be announced next month: World Hindu Council

LUCKNOW, Nov 24: A temple to honour the Hindu god Rama will be built on a site where a 400-year-old Muslim mosque was destroyed, a Hindu nationalist party leader said Friday.

Hindu religious leaders will announce next month the date on which temple construction in Ayodhya will begin, Purushottam Narain Singh, organising secretary of the World Hindu Council, told the AP.

The announcement was likely to provoke anger among the nation's 140 million Muslims who were outraged the Babri Mosque in northern India was demolished by a mob of nearly 100,000 Hindus in 1992. The mosque destruction sparked Hindu-Muslim riots in which more than 2,000 people were killed nationwide.

While Muslims consider the 16th century mosque a holy shrine, Hindu nationalists placed statues of Hindu gods at the site they say is Rama's birthplace. Hindus believe that Rama was the incarnation of Vishnu, the protector of the universe and Hinduism's most revered deity.

The World Hindu Council is an affiliate of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's ruling coalition. His nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party gained strength when pro-Hindu sentiments were unleashed after the razing of the Babri Mosque eight years ago.

But when the party came to power in 1996 and again in 1998, it dropped parts of its Hindu-

nationalist agenda, including demands to build the temple, to form coalition governments.

The World Hindu Council has often criticised Vajpayee for distancing himself from demands to build the temple in Ayodhya.

After the announcement about temple construction, which is scheduled to begin in 2002, the Hindu religious leaders in January will ratify the plan to construct the Ram temple, Singh said.

The council plans to drum up nationwide support by sending hundreds of thousands of volunteers to the villages.

"Volunteers will persuade people to pressurise the government and opponents of the movement to accept construction of the Ram temple," he said.

While there has been no further construction at the temple site since 1992, artisans in Ayodhya and craftsmen in north-western Rajasthan state have been sculpting images of Hindu gods and goddesses, sandstone pillars and arches for eventual use in the temple.

The federal government has acquired land rights of the disputed site, which is currently surrounded by police barricades and heavy security. India's Supreme Court has also banned people from the premises.

But Singh warned: "We are ready to take on the government if needed ... No court of law can decide the temple issue. It's an issue of religious emotions."

Indian court unseats minister in favour of dead man

NEW DELHI, Nov 24: An Indian court has set aside the election of a government minister to the Punjab state legislative assembly and declared a dead man elected instead, reports said today, says DPA.

The Punjab and Haryana High Court Thursday declared the election of Punjab Minister for Printing and Stationery Satwant Kaur Sandhu null and void and instead declared her rival Sohan Singh elected unopposed, the Indian Express newspaper reported.

7 killed in Cambodian clash

PHNOM PENH, Nov 24: Seven people died and at least 12 were wounded when two groups of anti-government rebels battled security forces in Phnom Penh early this morning, police said, reports AFP.

The fighting, involving some 50 suspected rebels, was the worst seen in the Cambodian capital since the violent 1997 removal of Prince Norodom Ranariddh by Prime Minister Hun Sen.

The first armed group, estimated to number between 30 and 40 men, threw grenades and exchanged fire with soldiers and police outside the Ministry of Defence after arriving at a nearby train station at 1.30 am (1830 GMT Thursday).

Police said the group dispersed after battling security forces for just over an hour.

First German case of human form of BSE reported

BERLIN, Nov 24: Germany has possibly detected its first cases of a new type of the human form of mad cow disease, variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), two newspapers reported Friday, reports AFP.

One of the dailies, Tagesspiegel, said a 22-year-old living near the southern city of Munich had shown the telltale symptoms of the disease including severe depression and motor problems but a definitive diagnosis had not yet been made.

Another 40-year-old patient had been hospitalised in the central town of Bad Homburg with an illness doctors suspect may be vCJD, a new type of the human form of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), which is found in cattle.

Doctors are running a battery of tests to determine the exact cause of his illness, but the director of the first clinic the patient visited told the newspaper that neither the initial laboratory tests nor his symptoms pointed to vCJD.

Coach plunges into river in Nigeria: 60 dead

LAGOS, Nov 24: Sixty people were killed when a coach crashed with an oncoming truck, slid off a road and plunged into a river in southern Nigeria, police said today, reports AFP.

The driver, who was among the dead, lost control of the coach when overtaking another vehicle in the early hours of Thursday morning on the expressway linking Lagos and Benin City, a police spokesman told AFP.

The coach smashed into a truck, slid off the road and plunged into the Ovia River, about 20 kilometres west of Benin City, the spokesman said, confirming newspaper reports.

"There were five survivors. About 60 people died," said the police spokesman. The survivors were taken to hospital, he said.

Among the dead was a young woman preparing for her wedding next month, the newspaper The Guardian reported, quoting her fiancé. "We were planning to get married in December. She left for Lagos and now I will never see her again," he said.

Road accidents with high numbers of fatalities are extremely frequent in Nigeria.

The accident came the same day as 15 people died in Lagos when a mini-bus fell into Lagos lagoon after colliding with a bigger bus on a bridge in the city.

The Guardian reported Friday that 20 people had been killed when a lorry on which 20 people were travelling had plunged into a river near Mangu in Plateau State, central Nigeria, on Tuesday.

Seventeen of those aboard died instantly and three more died later in hospital, the paper said.

Floods in Malaysia, Thailand

Death toll rises to 20

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 24: The death toll in massive floods hitting Malaysia and southern Thailand rose to 20 on Friday, with tens of thousands of people from inundated provinces evacuated to shelters and schools, reports AP.

All the Malaysian victims were from Kelantan and Terengganu, two eastern provinces where dozens of villages and large tracts of rice paddies were destroyed by swirling waters this week, news reports said.

Floodwaters in the southern part of nearby Thailand have killed nine people since Tuesday and disrupted telephone and railroad services, an official at the Interior Ministry's civil defence division in Bangkok said.

The latest victims in Malaysia were a woman and her eight-year-old son, who were electrocuted when a live wire from an agricultural pump fell into nearby flood waters, the Malay-language Utusan daily said, citing government officials.

Details of the new deaths in Thailand were not immediately available.

The Meteorological Department in Kuala Lumpur said there would be a brief respite from the showers but then heavy rains would resume in a few weeks or even days.

In Thailand, more than 330,000 people have been affected by the rising floodwaters from the most recent deluge.

India, Pakistan won't target civilians

NEW DELHI, Nov 24: India and Pakistan have agreed to stop targeting civilians on both sides of the disputed Kashmir border, the Press Trust of India reported, reports Reuters.

India and Pakistan security forces routinely exchange artillery, mortar and small arms fire across the tense border and both sides accuse each other of killing civilians.

The Indian Border Security Force (BSF) and the paramilitary Pakistan ranger agreed in principle not to engage in unprovoked firing on civilians in border areas in the Jammu sector of insurgency-racked Jammu and Kashmir state, the news agency reported late on Thursday.

The agreement was struck during recent border talks, the agency said, quoting BSF Inspector-General Avtar Singh Aulakh who led a 10-member team to Pakistan.

A volatile Line of Control or ceasefire line divides Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistani Kashmir.



Former UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar (C) arrives at the Lima airport on Thursday from France. The new President Valentin Paniagua named De Cuellar as Peruvian Prime Minister.

-AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Drugs seized in Pak-Afghan border:

Anti Narcotics Force (ANF) in Pakistan's Balochistan province seized 108 kilograms of hashish and 47 kilograms of opium on Thursday, according to the Associated Press of Pakistan (APP), in Islamabad.

Working on a tip-off, ANF raided a place four kilometres east of Ghaiband pass near Quetta, capital of Balochistan province, on Thursday and recovered the drugs plus one AK-47 rifle and 30 rounds of bullets.

17 killed in boat capsized in India:

Seventeen people drowned after a boat capsized in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, a police spokesman said yesterday, AFP reports from Calcutta.

The boat, carrying 26 passengers, overturned late Thursday on the Mahananda River in the district of North Dinajpur. "The boat capsized after it got entangled in a fishing net," the spokesman told AFP, adding that pitch darkness had hampered rescue efforts.

8 killed as chopper crashes:

Eight people were killed Thursday after a military helicopter crashed while overflying an area in central Colombia threatened with flooding, officials announce, AFP reports from Bogota.

The Bell-202 helicopter of the Colombian Air Force crashed in a mountainous area near the town of Libano, in Tolima province, said town mayor Danilo Moreno. The helicopter fell into a 200 yard deep canyon where it was completely destroyed, Moreno said.

2 die in plane crash in Canada:

A small plane crashed onto a downtown street Thursday, hitting two parked cars and skidding down a sidewalk before coming to a fiery halt between two trees, witnesses said. The plane's occupants were killed, but no one on the ground was injured, police said, AP reports from Hull, Quebec, Canada.

Balkan states may be taken into EU:

The European Union was set Friday to declare five former Yugoslav republics and Albania "potential candidates" for EU membership at a landmark summit with western Balkan leaders here, reports AFP from Zagreb.

"The European Union confirms its willingness to contribute to the consolidation of democracy and to resolutely support the process of reconciliation and cooperation in the countries concerned," said a draft text of the Zagreb summit's declaration, obtained by AFP.

Four killed in Hindu-Muslim clashes in N India

LUCKNOW, India, Nov 24: Indian police reinforcements were deployed in the northern Indian district of Jaunpur today, after Hindu-Muslim clashes left four people dead, reports AFP.

The place is tense but under control," district magistrate Rajan Shukla told AFP.

The communal violence in Jaunpur, about 60 kilometres (40 miles) west of Varanasi, broke out Thursday after a group of Muslim youths threw home-made bombs at two Hindu men riding on a motorcycle.

One of the men was killed on the spot.

Angered by the incident, about 150 Hindus staged a protest, blocking roads outside the Muslim-dominated village of Jamalpur, and then attacked and killed three Muslims car passengers.

Shukla said the violence had its roots in a long-running feud between rival villages.

Mori faces another setback

TOKYO, Nov 24: Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's bid to consolidate his power base after surviving a no-confidence vote stumbled today as two top officials apparently ruled out serving under him in the next term, reports AFP.

Mori, eyeing a cabinet reshuffle in December, now looks set to lose the services of Economic Planning Agency chief Taichi Sakaiya and Finance Minister Kiichi Miyazawa, Japan's top two financial policymakers.

"It's better not to talk about future appointments, but I feel I have laid a foundation and direction" to guide the economy for recovery, Sakaiya told a press conference.

The remarks by the nation's top economic planner followed Wednesday's strong hint by Miyazawa that he would leave his post no later than December.

"Although the economy has yet to recover fully, it is moving in the right direction. I think I have done enough," Miyazawa said.

Following the defeat of an opposition no-confidence motion against Mori Tuesday, the government managed to steer a 44.5-billion-dollar supplementary budget through parliament in a final push to help the world's second biggest economy recover from its worst post-war recession.

India has fought two of its three wars with Pakistan since independence in 1947 over Kashmir.

India to buy Israeli spy planes for Kashmir

NEW DELHI, Nov 24: India will take delivery of unmanned spy planes from Israel next year and will deploy them along the borders with Pakistan and China in Kashmir, the Tribune newspaper said today, reports Reuters.

"The main job ... would be to keep watch on the movements from across the border and to supply information regarding developments across the border," the daily said, quoting Ministry of Defence sources.

It said that besides getting the real-time pictures, the aircraft would also come in handy during war times for carrying payloads.

Government and air force officials were not immediately available to comment on the report, which did not give the number of planes to be purchased or the cost of the deal.

The paper said the armed forces had been demanding the

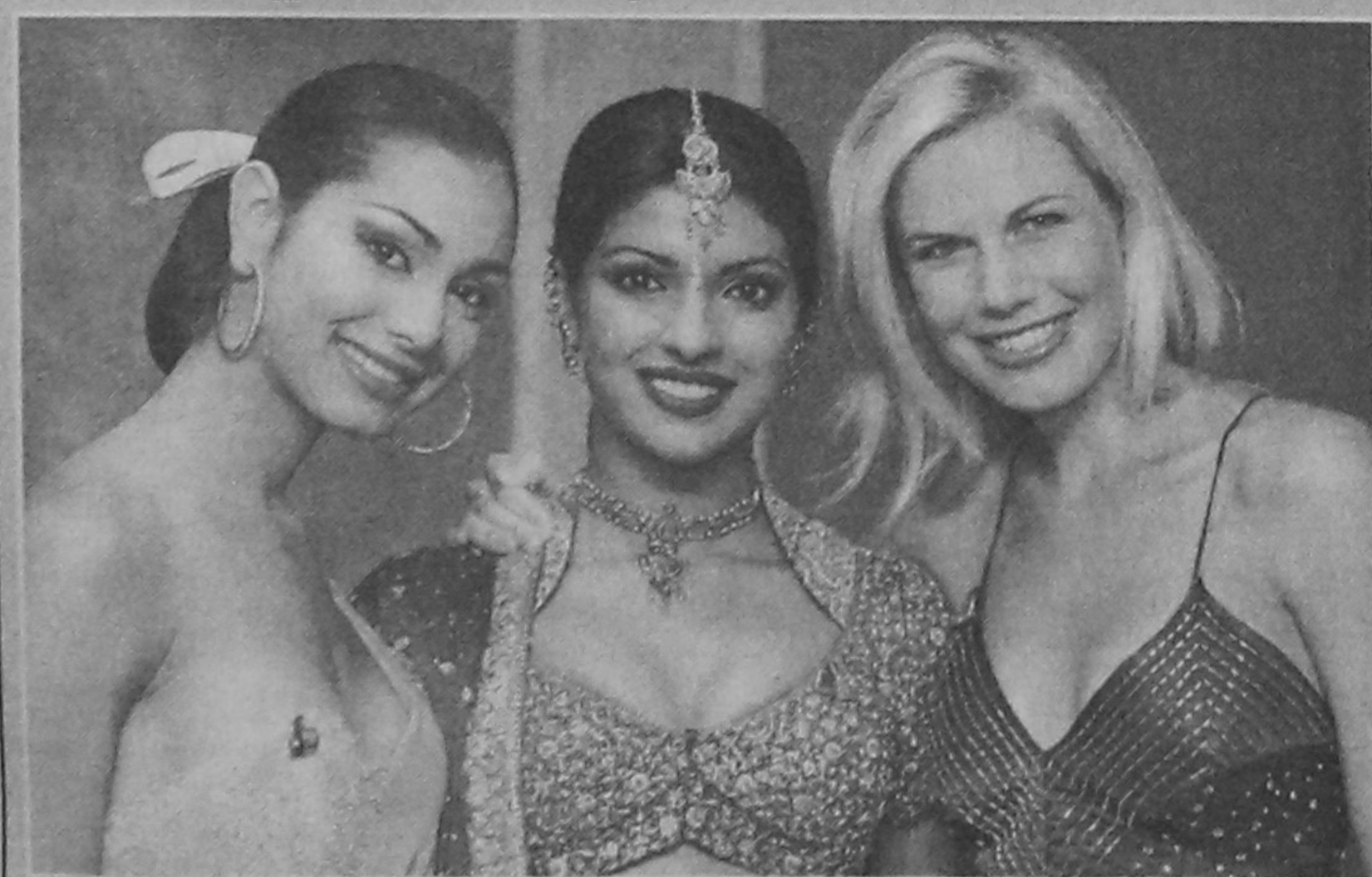
planes, technically known as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), for a long time. The need for such aircraft was stressed by a panel reviewing last year's Kargil conflict in Kashmir, which took India and Pakistan to the brink of another full-scale war.

"The army had also said that had the UAVs been in their possession, the intrusion by Pakistan in Kargil early last year would have been detected much earlier and the country would not have faced the 50-day war," it said.

India controls about 45 per cent of the disputed Himalayan territory comprising the regions of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. Pakistan holds just over a third of the territory and China controls the remainder.

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Aspirants for the crown



Miss Venezuela, 19 year old Vanessa Cardenas Bravo (L), Miss India, 18 year old Priyanka Chopra (C) and Miss South Africa, 23 year old Heather Hamilton (R) pose for the cameras at the official Miss World photocall at the Grosvenor House in London on Thursday. Miss Venezuela is favourite to win the final of the Miss World contest with Miss India 7-1 on and Miss South Africa 10-1 on. Last years Miss World was from India and the current reigning Miss Universe is also from India.

-AFP photo

Wait for decision in US presidential polls may be longer

TALLAHASSEE, Florida, Nov 24: A Sunday deadline for the final results of the US presidential election may not spell the end to the 17-day drama, as Al Gore has vowed to contest the results of one Florida county that refused to do a recount, reports AFP.

"We will certainly contest if indeed ... the Miami-Dade (Canvassing) Board files a return of votes that is incomplete, that leaves out thousands and thousands of ballots," Ron Klain, a legal advisor to the Democratic vice president, told CNN.

Klain said the challenge would be filed in a state court "as soon as possible," most likely Monday morning.

Political analysts believe the stage is set for more legal wrangling regardless of who is declared winner on Sunday -- if it is Republican George W. Bush, Gore will challenge the Miami-Dade results; if Gore wins, Bush will probably contest results in other Florida counties.

Meanwhile, vote counters in two other Florida counties are to resume their tedious task Friday. Palm Beach still has to count around two-thirds of its 462,000 votes, while Broward County will examine some 2,000 questionable ballots.

Those recount results must be filed with Florida state authorities by 5:00 pm on Sunday. If the state elections office does not open on that day, the deadline is extended to 9:00 am (2000 BST) Monday.

Gore's determination to contest the election results followed a ruling Thursday by the Florida Supreme Court refusing to order vote recounts to resume in the populous Miami-Dade county (650,000 votes).

The Democratic candidate had asked the high court to overturn a decision by Miami-Dade election officials to halt the manual recounts since they could not be finished by the Sunday deadline.

The Democrats had hoped recounts in the three counties would reverse Bush's 930-vote lead in Florida's official tally of votes that was announced November 14, and give Gore the keys to the White House.

Because the November 7 race was so close, whoever wins Florida will get all of the state's 25 electoral votes, putting him over the 270 required to win the White House.

The US Supreme Court, meanwhile, had yet to announce whether it would consider two petitions filed by Bush lawyers on Wednesday, asking it to stop the recounts altogether.

Gore campaign lawyers late Thursday filed a reply to the Bush appeal with the nation's high court, arguing that the matter was best left to Florida courts.

"Only on the most compelling showing of a constitutional violation should a federal court interfere with this task, uniquely delegated by the Constitution to the state government," the Gore legal team said in its brief.

As of late Thursday, the hand recounts in Broward County gave Gore 225 additional votes, while those in Palm Beach increased Bush's lead by 14 votes. The net gain for Gore was 211 votes.

Officials in Palm Beach on Friday were expected to decide what to do with thousands of contentious ballots, including many with "dimpled" chads -- the mark corresponding to a candidate is indented but not properly

punched through.

The Bush camp says the manual recounts are unfair, unreliable and unconstitutional.

In his petitions filed with the US Supreme Court, Bush pressed for expedited treatment of the case so it can be resolved before Florida's December 12 deadline for choosing its electors for the Electoral College, which is to meet December 18 to pick a successor to President Bill Clinton.

On Wednesday, the Republicans also filed a motion before a court in Tallahassee, demanding the inclusion of all military absentee ballots in the Florida presidential vote tally after 1,547, or 40 percent of the total, were declared invalid for different reasons.

Circuit Judge Terry Lewis ordered electoral officers to preserve the rejected ballots, and suggested the Republicans review them. He said he may intervene on Friday if the dispute was not settled.

Meanwhile, Bush's running mate Dick Cheney, 59, was recovering from heart surgery in a Washington hospital where he was admitted Wednesday after suffering what doctors described as a "slight heart attack."

Tests revealed a narrowing of his heart's left anterior descending artery but no damage, and he underwent a two-hour procedure to insert a stent in the artery.

Cheney, who has a history of heart problems, had traveled from Texas to the US capital in order to spend Thanksgiving with family members.

"If Cheney continues to do as perfectly as he is doing now, he should be discharged as early as tomorrow," a hospital spokeswoman said Thursday.