

Israeli military closes passage into Gaza

GAZA CITY, Nov 19: The Israeli army closed the Karni crossing into Gaza Strip from Israel today, a move that blocks food and basic goods from entering the Palestinian territory, Israeli and Palestinian officials said.

The Karni crossing is closed until further notice following an armed attack by Palestinians against an Israeli convoy in the area, an army spokesman told AFP.

Palestinian officials confirmed the closure of the crossing, through which imported commercial goods enter the Gaza Strip.

Earlier, a 14-year-old Palestinian who was throwing stones died after he was shot in the chest by soldiers at the crossing. Eight other Palestinians were wounded in the incident, hospital officials said.

The Israeli army had earlier sounded a positive note for the first time in seven weeks of violence that has wracked the Palestinian territories.

Senior commanders said there had been a drop in fire in the Gaza Strip and West Bank after Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat ordered a halt to shooting from areas under their control.

Meanwhile, the Israeli military said today a Palestinian policeman who killed an Israeli soldier at the weekend was likely working alone, and that police in the territories were cracking down on gunmen after an order by their

leader Yasser Arafat.

"According to initial information from the investigation, the shooting was an individual initiative, from what Palestinian officials have told us," General Yom Tov Samia, a regional commander in the southern Gaza Strip, where the deadly shoot-out took place on Saturday, told Israeli radio.

Palestinian officials announced an unprecedented probe into the incident.

The shooting came a day after Arafat said he had ordered a halt to fire at Israeli targets from Palestinian-controlled areas. It was his first public statement repudiating violence since the launching of an Intifada or uprising seven weeks ago.

Before dawn on Saturday, 28-year-old Palestinian policeman Doha Salama Said entered the outpost at the Kfar Darom Jewish settlement in the southern Gaza Strip and unleashed fire on soldiers, killing 21-year-old Baruch Plum from Tel Aviv and wounding two others, one critically, before Israeli soldiers shot him dead.

After the shoot-out, Samia said Israel reserved the right to retaliate, but Palestinian officials announced an immediate investigation and urged the army not to seek revenge.

On Sunday, Samia toned down his language and commended Palestinian police for lowering the incidence of fire from their territories.



Israeli forces fire at Palestinian demonstrators in Hebron on Saturday. A Palestinian policeman killed an Israeli soldier early Saturday and injured two others before being shot dead in the Gaza Strip. --AFP photo

Troops take key town from LTTE: 27 killed

COLOMBO, Nov 19: Government troops wrested a key town from Tamil Tiger rebels Sunday after heavy overnight clashes saw the death toll on both sides rise to 27, the defence ministry said, reports AFP.

Troops advanced from Chavakachcheri town in the Jaffna Peninsula and within a few hours took Maduvil South, three km away along the main A-9 highway, ministry spokesman Sanath Karunaratne said.

"We don't have casualty details yet, but it is believed that the terrorists suffered heavy losses," Karunaratne said. "The capture of this town gives a lot of depth to the Chavakachcheri town."

The ministry corrected its earlier report which had identified

fled the captured town as Nunavil.

Ministry spokesman Karunaratne said seven soldiers were killed and another 27 were seriously wounded in the confrontation. He said security forces removed the bodies of 10 Tigers killed by troops.

There was no immediate reaction from the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to the latest offensive in the Jaffna Peninsula, but the Tiger radio said they killed four soldiers in a clash elsewhere.

The clandestine Voice of Tigers radio said they stalled a military offensive in the northern mainland and later captured the bodies of four government soldiers killed by them.

Protesters rally outside int'l climate confce in the Hague

THE HAGUE, Nov 19: Thousands of demonstrators beat bongos drums and built a mock dike Saturday to symbolise threatened flooding from global warming, demanding real action at an international meeting on greenhouse gas emissions, reports AP.

"Stop Climate Change! Stop the Oil Giants! Not Everybody Can Swim," read banners draped over a 400-hundred-yard-long barrier across the street from the UN Climate Conference.

The crowd of protesters from around the world roared when conference chairman Jan Pronk, the Dutch environment minister, added a few sandbags to the shoulder-high barrier.

"We cannot build a dike with words alone," Pronk told the demonstrators after scaling 15

feet of scaffolding to reach the stage.

"We need to build it with action that is based on words which are agreed upon," he added, referring to the accord expected at the conclusion of the two-week conference, which began Monday.

The protest was largely nonviolent, though noisy, with music blaring from outdoor concert speakers.

However, police spokesman Rob Kouwenhoven said nine demonstrators were arrested for allegedly throwing paint bombs against the Municipal Museum next door.

Inside the conference hall, delegates from some 180 countries were haggling over draft texts of emissions ceilings, pollution trading schemes.

BRIEFLY

Maoist rebels kill 2 cops in Nepal: Suspected Maoist rebels attacked a police post in west Nepal, killing two policemen and wounding six, an official said yesterday, Reuters reports from Kathmandu.

The incident occurred on Saturday in Baglung district, about 325 km northwest of Kathmandu, the district's top bureaucrat Ratna Raj Pandey, told Reuters. Baglung is one of several districts plagued by a four-year-old Maoist insurgency aimed at overthrowing Nepal's constitutional monarchy.

Quake shakes Taiwan: A moderate earthquake shook southern Taiwan on Sunday, seismologists said. No damage or injuries were immediately reported, AP says from Taipei. The 4.4-magnitude tremor was centered 4.4 kilometers (2.7 miles) southwest of Chiayi County, the Central Weather Bureau said. Chiayi is about 180 kilometers south of the capital, Taipei.

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Visiting US President Bill Clinton is mobbed by a crowd of Ho Chi Minh City residents as he tours the streets yesterday. --AFP

Clinton ends Vietnam visit

HO CHI MINH CITY, Nov 19: President Bill Clinton wrapped up his landmark reconciliation visit to Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City Sunday, receiving an ecstatic welcome from tens of thousands at the scene of America's humiliating retreat from the war, reports AFP.

Massed crowds of waving and cheering Vietnamese brought the former Saigon to a standstill early Sunday as they welcomed the first American head of state to return since the US-backed Southern capital was taken by North Vietnamese troops in 1975.

Surging throngs were packed outside the old presidential palace where communist tanks crashed through the gates during the fall of Saigon and formed an almost unbroken line from the city centre along the five-kilometre (three-mile) road to the airport.

"I was here 25 years ago when the Americans left and I am very honoured today to see President Clinton," said Trinh Quang Dai, 44.

US Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky, leading talks on a trade deal signed in July, called the reception "tremendous" and "heart-warming... something all of us will always remember, most particularly the president."

The rapturous welcome accorded Clinton and his wife Hillary on their last scheduled foreign trip has taken Vietnam's communist regime, based in the north, by complete surprise and there were signs of irritation

Clinton has been free to take walkabouts in Hanoi, make a number of public speeches -- including a live address to the nation -- and visit excavations for the remains of Americans still listed as missing in action (MIA). On Sunday Clinton met in private the city's Roman Catholic Archbishop Pham Minh Man, whose church was persecuted after the US pull-out and is still regarded with high suspicion.

The state press has maintained a stony silence on the crowds and made no mention of such attempts to raise the issues of human rights, religious tolerance or freedom of information.

Vietnam's headline communist leader, in a tone contrasting with reformers in his own government and Clinton's pleas to heal past scars, Sunday hailed the guerrilla resistance against the United States in the War as the birth of Vietnamese socialism.

Communist party general secretary Le Kha Phieu demanded the US respect Vietnam's monolithic political system and banged the drum of the North's victory over the American-backed South.

"The resistance wars brought the Vietnamese people national independence and reunification to advance the country toward socialism so for the Vietnamese people the war was not ultimately a story of darkness, sadness and unhappiness," the official Vietnam News Agency quoted Phieu as saying when he met Clinton on Saturday.

It is a second marriage for Michael Douglas, who separated from Diandra, his wife of 18 years, in 1995. The wedding is the first for Zeta Jones, who has an infant son, Dylan, with Douglas.



UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and wife Nane enter the Plaza Hotel to attend the wedding of Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones on Saturday in New York. Guests attending included actress Goldie Hawn, director Oliver Stone, and actor Danny DeVito. --AFP photo

Counties counting costs of US vote recount

MIAMI, Nov 19: Democracy comes at a price, taxpayers in south Florida will soon be reminded, once the bill for sorting out the winner of the disputed presidential election comes due, reports AFP.

The total cost of an endless stream of ballot counts and recounts in Palm Beach, Broward and Dade counties could be months away yet, but officials expect the sum to be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, as the three jurisdictions employ a small army of part time and temporary workers to help with the tallying.

Across southern Florida, officials also have enlisted scores of county employees, many of whom are racking up expensive overtime hours to help scrutinize through thousands of ballots.

Hand tallies were already underway in Palm Beach and Broward counties and were set to begin Sunday in Miami-Dade, the state's most populous county.

Dade County official said the recount there could take until December, as state election officials try to determine whether Vice President Al Gore, or Texas Governor George Bush won a greater share of Florida's vote.

Victory in the Sunshine State would end the deadlock and allow federal officials to declare a winner of the November 7 presidential elections.

Palm Beach County has drawn on its large population of retirees to help with the task of checking some 460,000 ballots. The task is expected to take five dozen ballot counters nearly a week, at a cost of seven dollars and fifty cents per hour for each worker.

7 Bangalees among 14 massacred in Tripura

GUWAHATI, India, Nov 19: At least 14 people were killed today and 13 critically wounded in a renewed spurt of ethnic violence in the restive far-eastern Indian state of Tripura, police said, reports AFP.

A Tripura police spokesman said heavily-armed separatist rebels of the militant tribal National Liberation Front stormed the village of Boroholdi, about 200 km north of the state capital Agartala, and gunned down seven Bangalees.

"The militants rounded up the Bangalees and shot them dead. The victims included a child and two women," spokesman G. Sarkar told AFP over the telephone.

"Six villagers were injured in the attack," he said, adding that the 20-odd militants then torched about a dozen homes before fleeing.

Sarkar said that as news of the

attack spread, a rival Bangalee militant group called the United Bangali Liberation Tiger Force staged a retaliatory attack in a nearby village, killing seven tribals and critically wounding seven others.

"It was a clear case of tit-for-tat," he said.

Sunday's violence in Tripura's Kanchanpur area comes just four days after earlier ethnic clashes there.

That unrest started after members of a Bangalee rebel group threw a bomb at a passing jeep, killing three tribals, and injuring seven others.

Incensed tribals then staged a counter-attack, killing three non-tribals.

In May, ethnic violence in Tripura, where tribal and Bangali-speaking rebels are staging separate campaigns for independent homelands, claimed at least 40 lives and made more

than 20,000 people homeless.

A senior police official said, on condition of anonymity, that clashes between tribal and Bangalee rebels had been increasing but added: "The problem we are facing is that we don't have adequate paramilitary forces in the state."

"We need more forces to contain the ethnic violence as militants sneak into neighbouring Bangladesh after staging the attacks."

More than 10,000 people have lost their lives in insurgency in Tripura over the past decade.

At least 50,000 troops are deployed in India's troubled northeast, where more than a dozen separatist guerrilla groups have been fighting for independence or autonomy for decades in the region's seven states.

Nearly 50,000 people have died in insurgency-related violence.

Arab woman leaders call for their better lives

CAIRO, Nov 19: Ten of the Arab world's first ladies came together in an unusual gathering Saturday, pushing for the improved status of women in their male-dominated societies, reports AP.

Queen Rania of Jordan, Egypt's Suzanne Mubarak and others, activists in their own right, were using their charisma and influence to campaign on behalf of women in this three-day meeting of women leaders and gender-equality campaigners.

"Development will not achieve its goals unless women participate in it as complete and effective partners in all fields," Queen Rania told an audience of more than 2,000. She called for "legal and legislative reforms that achieve equality and justice for women."

Suzanne, one of the conference organisers, said they must find ways to respect the social differences that distinguish Arab countries while still cooperating to attain the summit's main goal: creating a better life for Arab women.

The status of women varies between countries in the Arab world. While women in some parts of the Gulf, such as the conservative Saudi Arabia, are required to be covered from head-to-toe and are not allowed to drive, their counterparts in more

liberal countries, including Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon, enjoy more freedom and richer public lives.

However, illiteracy, marginalised decision-making roles and under-representation in the political arena are some of the common problems Arab women share.

Many women, though, are struggling to change the status quo and have achieved some gains. This year in Egypt, for example, avid campaigning helped women reverse laws that prevented them from obtaining divorce and traveling abroad without their husbands' permission.

Mubarak said Arab women should build on their achievements and use them as motivation for beating future challenges.

Many of the speakers, representing the 19 countries participating in the summit, underlined the importance of meeting the demands of the modern society while still preserving Arab identity, tradition and beliefs.

Presenting a more positive, well-wounded image of Arab women in the face of negative stereotypes was another challenge tackled on Saturday.

Soha Arafat, wife of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, blamed the

media for negatively stereotyping Arab women as "ignorant, submissive and deceived."

Arafat called for changing such a mentality inside and outside the Arab world. She demanded a fair portrayal of Arab women, reminding the audience of women's role in liberating their Arab countries from occupation.

Other speakers feted the struggle of Palestinian women and pledged support to the Palestinian cause.

Arab League Secretary-General Esmat Abdel-Meguid applauded the Palestinian mother who courageously sacrifices her loved ones to "fight with unbreakable will for the freedom of her country and children."

More than 230 people, the vast majority Palestinian, have been killed in seven weeks of fighting in Israel and the Palestinian areas.

Angela King, the United Nations' special adviser on women, said the role of women becomes even more important in such conflicts.

King said women in the region are a valuable resource and should effectively work toward peacemaking. "Women with men have a vital role to play in peacemaking. ... There's no sustainable peace without gender equality."

Delayed triplets

BEIJING, Nov 19: A Chinese woman gave birth to a set of twins five days after having a baby girl, a report said today, reports AFP.

The 29-year-old mother gave birth to the first baby, who weighed 1.5 kilograms, on November 9 at her home in Chongqing city, southwestern China, the Beijing Morning Post reported.

She did not realise she was carrying triplets, but felt movement in her stomach and went to hospital for a checkup two days later.

On November 14, she gave birth to the twins, who were born five minutes apart.

It is unusual for one or more babies in triplets to be born so far apart, the report said.

Thousands seek refuge as troops hunt Aceh rebels

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia, Nov 19: An Indonesian security operation to flush out a rebel base in the flash-point province of Aceh has forced thousands of villagers to flee their homes in fear, residents said today, reports AFP.

Some 2,200 residents said they had abandoned their homes in the Keumire area of the Indrapuri sub-district on Saturday, after soldiers and police moved in to hunt down separatists, alleged to have abducted several officials.

"We are afraid of becoming the victims and therefore we are forced to flee and leave our homes, our fields and our livestock," an elderly refugee, declining to identify himself, told AFP.

Unionists plot to unseat Trimble

ENNISKILLEN, Northern Ireland, Nov 19: Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which is fiercely opposed to the province's peace process, on Saturday warned it would overtake the mainstream Ulster Unionist Party at the next general election, reports AFP.

The headline DUP predicted during its annual congress here that it would pick up votes from Protestants who are disillusioned by the 1998 Good Friday peace accord, which is backed by the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP).

"We will pick up the standard they have deserted and carry it forward," said DUP deputy leader Peter Robinson.

The next general election will give us the opportunity to change the face of unionism. I am talking about a revolution within unionism."

Suu Kyi to be allowed out of house arrest for court hearing

YANGON, Nov 19: Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi will be allowed to emerge briefly from house arrest Tuesday if she chooses to attend a court hearing over her brother's claim on her Yangon home, a junta spokesman said, reports AFP.

If Aung San Suu Kyi answers the summons in person, it will be her first public appearance since September 22 when the junta slapped on the restrictions in retaliation for her attempt to travel north to Mandalay.

The Nobel laureate was subpoenaed to appear in Yangon Divisional Court after her US-based brother Aung San Oo filed for half-ownership of the house which once belonged to their late mother.

Colonel Than Tun, the military liaison between the junta and the National League for Democracy (NLD), said Aung San Suu Kyi and other detained party leaders were allowed out in certain circumstances.

"We are not preventing them from going out if there is a legitimate reason," Than Tun told AFP, adding that NLD deputy leader Tin Oo had recently attended the funeral of one of his relatives.

"Since there is this provision, we have no reason to bar Aung San Suu Kyi from attending or responding to the court summons if she wishes to go."

Aung San Oo's legal move comes a month before the 12th anniversary of his mother's death, which marks the expiry on the statute of limitations in property claims.

Tug of war over Mori's no-confidence vote

TOKYO, Nov 19: A party strongman within Japan's ruling party said today Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, faced with an opposition no-confidence motion, could go only after he has fulfilled his duty, reports AFP.

Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) secretary general Hiromu Nonaka also threatened to expel his predecessor Koichi Kato unless he dropped his threat to join the no-confidence vote due late Monday.

In a last-ditch tug of war, Kato, who leads a major LDP faction, said he would withdraw his promise to back the vote only if the gaffe-prone premier is otherwise made to step down "in the near future."

But Nonaka, a reputed power-broker, said any party leadership shakeup should wait until after the LDP's convention set for next March.

Instead, Nonaka and other LDP executives decided at a meeting late Sunday to expel Kato and his ally Taku Yamazaki from

the party if they fail to voluntarily quit.

"Unless they accept our recommendations to leave the party by noon tomorrow, we will expel them," Shizuka Kamel, head of the LDP's policy affairs council, told reporters after the meeting.

Nonaka said earlier on a television talk show that it would be possible to bring forward a party presidential election scheduled for next September. But party rules should be changed at the convention to accommodate such an early contest.

Nonaka, who was one of the four LDP leaders who handpicked Mori last April in a backroom deal to replace the then coma-stricken and dying Keizo Obuchi, said he could not rule out the possibility of Mori resigning.

"But it is not a matter that would happen today or tomorrow," Nonaka said. "We should let Mr. Mori do what he should do as prime minister before he clears up his position himself."