

Fashion icon Yves Saint Laurent passes away



French fashion legend Yves Saint Laurent, who changed the silhouette of 20th century woman with a daring new dress code, has died aged 71.

The reclusive Saint Laurent died at his Paris home of a brain tumour late Sunday after a prolonged illness and is to be buried Thursday, said his long-time partner Pierre Bergé.

Mentally and physically frail through most of his life, the bespectacled Saint Laurent retired from haute couture in 2002 after a four decade career in which he dressed the likes of Catherine Deneuve, Paloma Picasso, Bianca Jagger and Lauren Bacall.

"I am shattered," said Bergé, who founded the iconic YSL fashion house in 1961 with the designer, then 25.

As tributes poured in from around the world to the tormented but visionary genius, Bergé said women around the world owed Saint Laurent a debt for revolutionising their wardrobes.

"He was the first to put women in pants, the first to put them in tuxedos, the first to put them in masculine clothes, the first to employ black models," he said. "He was audacious, he revolutionised the trade."

British designer Vivienne Westwood described him as "one of the great courtiers, one of the few who have achieved perfection with everything they touched."

A shy lonely child born to a well-off family, he was taunted over his homosexuality and became fascinated by clothes. He started his career with Dior but fell out with the house. Laurent went on to start one of the largest fashion empires, in his own name, with business partner Bergé.

Times of India faces sedition charges

AFP, Ahmedabad

The Times of India said Monday it is facing sedition charges from the police for allegedly questioning the competence of a senior officer in volatile Gujarat state.

Editor Bharat Desai and a senior reporter with the Ahmedabad edition have been charged along with a photographer for the Gujarat Samachar newspaper, the Times told AFP.

The leading English-language broadsheet was seeking legal advice after being informed of the charges, although they had not yet got copies of the charges filed against Desai and (Prashant) Dayal, a journalist said, asking not to be named.

Ahmedabad police declined to comment when contacted by AFP. The charges, which include criminal conspiracy, stem from a series of investigative reports questioning the alleged links of new Ahmedabad police chief O.P. Mathur with a mafia don and his ability to guarantee security in the city.

Mathur was appointed to the job just last month in Ahmedabad, the western state's commercial capital, which is reported to figure high on the hit-list of several Islamic rebel groups.

"As a leading responsible news-

paper, it was our duty to highlight the past of the man who is the new commissioner," Desai told NDTV news channel.

The daily wrote on its front-page Monday that "the reports essentially were a scrutiny of the track record of the top cop in view of the challenge posed by terrorists."

Hundreds of journalists and rights activists protested Monday outside Mathur's office, chanting slogans against attempts to "muzzle the media."

"This is a conspiracy against freedom of the press and we want that everyone across the country speaks up against this," said Rathin Das, a senior journalist with the rival Hindustan Times.

Rights activist Cedric Prakash said the charges were "symbolic of the fascist mindset of an administration which does not care about the constitutional rights of its citizens, specially freedom of speech and expression."

Gujarat, ruled by Hindu nationalists, witnessed widespread rioting in 2002 when mainly Hindu mobs rampaged through Muslim neighbourhoods killing at least 2,000 Muslims.

The rioting followed a fire in a train carriage that killed 59 Hindu pilgrims.

Olmert meets Abbas before US trip

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert held talks with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas on Monday ahead of a US trip that will give him a brief respite from corruption allegations against him at home.

The meeting took place one day after Israel enraged the Palestinians by announcing it will build hundreds more houses for settlers in annexed Arab east Jerusalem.

The issue of settlements, among the thorniest in slow-moving peace efforts, will figure prominently in the talks, Abbas said before the meeting.

"We have drawn the attention of Israel and the international community to the fact that if Israel does not stop the settlements it will be difficult to reach a political accord," Abbas told journalists after talks with German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

Following the meeting with

Abbas at his official residence in Jerusalem, Olmert was due to head to Washington, the main sponsor of the peace negotiations relaunched amid great fanfare last November.

The negotiations have produced hardly any tangible results so far and could be severely affected by the political crisis in Israel, amid growing calls for Olmert to step down over the corruption allegations.

Olmert, 62, is accused of unlawfully taking large sums of money from a US millionaire before becoming premier in 2006, although he denies any wrongdoing.

Abbas and Olmert last met on May 5. Israel at the time reported "significant progress" on the issue of the future borders of a Palestinian state, but Palestinian officials played down the assessment.

Following the talks Olmert was to fly to Washington, where he will meet US President George W. Bush.

IAEA demands full disclosure from Iran

AFP, Vienna

UN atomic watchdog chief Mohamed El Baradei demanded "full disclosure" from Iran at the start of an agency board meeting Monday focused on Tehran's disputed nuclear programme.

"It has now been more than five years since the (International Atomic Energy Agency) began this intensive phase of verification of Iran's nuclear programme," El Baradei said in his opening address to the 35-country meeting.

"While substantial progress has been made in clarifying many of its aspects, particularly with regard to Iran's enrichment programme, it is essential that the agency be able to

reach a conclusion regarding the nature of Iran's programme at the earliest possible date," the diplomat said.

"This depends primarily on Iran demonstrating the necessary transparency and providing full disclosure. I again urge them to be fully forthcoming in this regard."

ElBaradei said it was "regrettable that we have not made the progress we had hoped for with respect to one remaining major issue, namely clarification of the cluster of allegations and the secretariat's questions relevant to possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear programme."

Meanwhile IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei has also hit out at Israel and the United States on Monday for not passing on intelligence about Syria's alleged nuclear reactor and attacking the site before the agency had a chance to inspect it.

"It is deeply regrettable that information concerning the installation was not provided to (the International Atomic Energy Agency) in a timely manner and that force was resorted to unilaterally before the agency was given an opportunity to establish the facts," ElBaradei told the IAEA's board of governors.

The IAEA chief did not name the United States or Israel directly.

Nepal's ex-king to quit palace gracefully

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's ex-king has agreed to quit his palace before a June 12 deadline and live as a commoner in line with a constituent assembly's vote to scrap the monarchy, the home minister said Monday.

"He said he is ready to live life as a common citizen," Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula told reporters after talks with Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah.

"He welcomed and accepted the decision made by the

meeting of the constituent assembly."

The Maoist-dominated assembly formally abolished the world's last Hindu monarchy and set up a republic just before midnight Wednesday. The king was given 15 days to leave his palace in Kathmandu.

"I don't see any complications in the former king's departure from the palace. He told me he would leave within the (June 12) deadline," the minister told reporters after a 10-minute meeting.

Gyanendra is expected to move to a private residence in the north of the city -- a home he occupied before he was vaulted to the throne in 2001 after a palace massacre.

The 1960s, pink-hued Narayanhiti palace -- set in acres of prime land at the end of the capital's Kingsway commercial hub -- will be turned into a national museum, officials have said.

"Government committees are currently working inside the palace auditing property and taking stock of the security situation," minister Sitaula told journalists.

An estimated 1,500 soldiers protect the palace and security concerns have been raised for the former monarch when he moves to his private residence.

"Based on the recommendations of the security committee the government might provide some security for the ex-king," Sitaula said.

Gyanendra's coronation was tainted with tragedy after his nephew, Crown Prince Dipendra, wiped out most of the royal family in 2001 after being stopped from marrying the woman he loved.

The new king's unpopularity deepened in 2005 when he sacked the government and took direct control of the impoverished nation, a move he said was needed because the politicians had failed to tackle a bloody Maoist insurgency.



A young girl collects rain water running off a tent at a camp for people displaced from Cyclone Nargis near the Irrawaddy Delta town of Labutta, some 320 kms from Myanmar's largest city of Yangon on May 31, 2008. A month after Myanmar's cyclone left 133,000 people dead or missing, the UN's food agency chief warned yesterday that "urgent work" is needed to help hundreds of thousands of survivors stave off hunger.

Afghanistan disbands 300 armed groups

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan has disbanded 300 illegal armed groups over the past three years under an internationally backed scheme, but some 2,000 more are yet to be dissolved, officials said Monday.

With millions of dollars in funds from the international community, the country launched a massive programme in 2003 to disarm illegal militias after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001.

More than 60,000 militiamen loyal to former anti-Taliban commanders and warriors were disbanded under the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme, according to Afghan authorities.

The second phase of the scheme, called Disbandment of

Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG), began in June 2005.

"Based on our assessments about 300 illegal armed groups have been disbanded," Deputy Interior Minister Munir Mangal told a news conference.

"There are about 1,800 to 2,000 illegal armed groups still existing in the country," Mangal said.

Chris Alexander, a top UN official overseeing development work in Afghanistan, said some groups were linked to government officials.

"There are definitely still government officials linked to illegal armed groups, none of us deny that," Alexander told the same news conference.

He said a "few members" of the nation's parliament were also linked to such groups. He would not give a figure.

EC allows Sharif brothers to contest by-polls

THE DAILY TIMES, Islamabad

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Justice (r) Qazi Muhammad Farooq on Sunday allowed Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz chief Nawaz Sharif and President Shahbaz Sharif to contest the by-elections scheduled for June 26.

Disposing of an appeal challenging the Sharifs' nomination papers, the CEC held that as the appellate tribunal had failed to deliver judgement within the specified time (by May 31), the decision of the returning officer concerned was final.

According to a press release issued by the EC, the CEC has returned the file to the Lahore High Court registrar.

Farooq observed that no further action could be taken in light of sub-section 6 of Section 14 of the Representation of the People Act, 1976.

The sub-section reads: "An appeal not disposed of within the period specified in sub-section (5) shall be deemed to have been rejected."

4 Maoist rebels killed in India

AFP, Ranchi

Four Maoist insurgents were killed in a gun battle with security forces on Sunday in eastern India, a police official said.

The gunfight lasted for more than two hours in eastern Jharkhand state.

"Four rebels were killed and one woman rebel was arrested," said police spokesman R.K. Mallik.

The Maoist insurgency grew out of a peasant uprising in 1967 and now affects 15 of India's 29 states.

The Maoists say they are fighting for the rights of neglected tribal people and landless farmers.

S'pore leader jailed for contempt

AFP, Singapore

A Singapore opposition leader who is among a rare few to publicly challenge the country's rulers was sentenced Monday to 12 days' jail for contempt, in the latest legal ruling against him.

A judge ruled Chee Soon Juan, 45, secretary general of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), had been in contempt because he said justice had been "raped" and "kicked" during a defamation case filed by Singapore's leaders against him.

He remains free but Supreme Court Justice Belinda Ang Saw Ean ruled that Chee will be taken to jail if he does not file an appeal by late Wednesday.

Ang also sentenced Chee's sister, SDP member Chee Siok Chin, to 10 days in jail for contempt. She, too, is free pending appeal.

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Logistics & Support Services Division, Head Office  
29 Rajuk Avenue Motijheel C/A, Dhaka-1000  
Phone: 9567265; Fax: 9559257; E-mail: info@primebank.com.bd



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