

Merkel forms new govt

AP, Berlin

German Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday announced a new, center-right government with the Free Democrats, saying the coalition will "bravely solve the problems that are lying ahead of us."

She detailed some of the cornerstone measures in her new government's platform, including an overhaul of the country's health care system, an increase in child subsidies and future tax cuts.

Merkel's Christian Democrats, their Bavarian-only sister party Christian Social Union and the pro-business Free Democrats came to a coalition agreement after nearly four weeks of negotiations following the Sept. 27 election.

Guido Westerwelle, the leader of the Free Democrats, said at a joint news conference with Merkel that the coalition agreement was "a great compass for our country."

He also said he wants all nuclear weapons to be pulled out of Germany, an issue that may prove vexing to the country's NATO allies, including the United States.

US probes pilots who overshot airport by 150 miles

AFP, Washington

US aviation officials and the FBI probed Friday how pilots of an airplane with 149 people aboard managed to overshoot their destination by 240km, prompting fears of a hijacking.

The US National Transportation Safety Board said controllers lost radio contact late Wednesday with the Northwest Airlines flight heading from San Diego, California to Minneapolis, Minnesota.

A Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) spokesman in Minneapolis confirmed that the agency had launched its own investigation into the incident, but declined to comment further.

Taliban vow to disrupt Afghan run-off vote

AP, Kabul

Taliban fighters warned Afghans not to take part in the war-racked country's upcoming presidential runoff, threatening yesterday to launch a fresh wave of violence on polling day to stop them.

The warnings came on the first official day of campaigning for the November 7 vote. The militant group denounced the race between President Hamid Karzai and challenger Abdullah Abdullah as "a failed, American process" and said its fighters would "launch operations against the enemy and stop people from taking part."

The statement said Taliban militants will also cut off key roads and highways, and warned that anyone who casts a ballot "will bear responsibility for their actions."

Taliban fighters killed dozens of civilians during the first round on Aug. 20,

barraging several southern cities with rocket-fire and cutting off the ink-stained fingers of at least two people who cast ballots in the militant south.

Security fears are just one of the challenges election officials face as they scramble to organise a new election amid a swelling Taliban insurgency before the advent of winter, which begin around much of the country around the middle of November, isolating remote villages and cutting off roads with snow.

As campaigning began Saturday, several senior Abdullah campaign officials accused the top three members of Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission of bias, saying they should be replaced to ensure the country's upcoming runoff is fair.

A spokesman for the commission, Noor Mohammad Noor, denied the allegations and said it was "impossible" to

replace them.

Under intense US pressure, Karzai acknowledged last week that he fell short of the 50 percent threshold needed for victory in the August ballot after UN-backed auditors threw out nearly a third of his votes because of massive fraud.

The Afghan Independent Election Commission, dominated by Karzai supporters, is under huge pressure to avoid a repeat of the cheating, which discredited the government and threatened to undermine public support for the war in the United States, which provides the bulk of the 100,000 Nato-led force.

Abdullah officials singled out election commission chairman Azizullah Lodin, chief electoral officer Daoud Ali Najafi, and the commission's deputy director, Zekria Barakzai. Abdullah's running mate, Houmayoun Asafi, said the three were "openly working for Karzai."



PHOTO: AFP

An armed security official guards the Independent Election Commission (IEC) warehouse in Kabul yesterday as ballot boxes and election materials are shipped out to provinces in preparation for the November 7 Afghan presidential run-off vote.

Taliban reprisals won't halt army offensive: Gilani

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has vowed that the military offensive in South Waziristan would continue until its logical conclusion despite the Taliban's continuous effort to create havoc across the country and derail the civilian government.

Speaking at a high level meeting on national security at the Prime Minister's House, Gilani said stern action would be taken against all those who challenge the writ of the state and stressed that failure in the ongoing Waziristan military operation was not an option.

"Failure (in dealing with terrorists) is not an option, irrespective of the ferocity of the recent attacks. The military operation in South Waziristan will be taken to its logical conclusion. The whole nation is united against those who are out to terrorise the society thinking their demands will be accepted," The Daily Times quoted Gilani, as saying.

Gilani said the government would provide all help to relocate people who are displaced because of the ongoing conflict and ensured all educational institutions would be pro-

vided fool-proof security cover.

"We will provide them Rs. 5,000 per month, in addition to ration and relief goods," Gilani said while referring to the internally displaced people.

Meanwhile, Pakistani intelligence agencies have warned that three would-be suicide bombers in guise of security personnel and three other extremists have entered Punjab to create havoc in the province.

According to an intelligence report, terrorists could use vehicles belonging to an army official to carry out the attack.

Following the intelligence report, the Interior Ministry has directed the concerned authorities to beef up security in and around strategic installations across the region, The Daily Times reported.

The directives also stated that a car (white colour Toyota Corolla) belonging to an army officer, which was stolen last month, should be recovered as soon as possible.

The intelligence report also directed senior Punjab police officials to ask the security personnel to be on the lookout for another black Toyota Corolla, which the terrorists dressed in police uniform, might use to launch an attack.

News in Brief

Bus crash kills 10 in Venezuela

AFP, Caracas

At least 10 bus passengers were killed and another 12 injured Friday when their vehicle collided with a truck on a main freeway in the Venezuelan capital, rescue officials said.

"Eight people died at the scene and another two" died at local hospitals, said Victor Lira, director of the area's Civil Protection agency, adding that some of the wounded were in a critical condition.

Two shot dead in Thai south

AFP, Yala

Suspected Islamic militants shot dead two men in separate attacks Saturday in Thailand's troubled south, police said.

They said a 45-year-old Muslim farmer was shot dead in a drive-by shooting in Pattani town, in the province of the same name.

Iran intensifies pressure on Pakistan to hand over Jundallah chief

ANI, Islamabad

Iranian Interior Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar has asked Pakistan to immediately hand over Abdolmalek Rigi, the chief of the militant Sunni Muslim group Jundallah, to Tehran, saying the country's intelligence officials have sufficient evidence to prove his presence in Pakistan.

"We have documents that show Rigi travels readily to Pakistan...we are here to ask Pakistan to hand over Rigi to Iran," The Dawn quoted Najjar, who arrived here to meet his Pakistani counterpart Rehman Malik, as saying.

Not much was revealed by either side about the outcome of the talks which were aimed at ending the deadlock between the two countries over the issue of Jundallah, a terrorist organisation that Iran blames for orchestrating a recent attack on the Revolutionary Guards.

The suicide attack in Pishin killed at least 42 people, including IRC deputy commander General Nur Ali Shushitari.

According to sources, Najjar very categorically told Malik that a row over Rigi was "not in the interest of the two countries good neighbourly relations."

Zardari extends olive branch but Sharif smells ulterior motives

ANI, Islamabad

Ahead of their scheduled meeting tomorrow, Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari conveyed to PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif that he is ready to abolish the 17th Amendment and implement the Charter of Democracy (CoD), but the former prime minister has expressed serious doubts over the PPP chairman's intentions.

"He lacks seriousness," was Sharif's immediate reaction when he received Zardari's olive branch.

The News quoted a PML-N source as saying that a senior PPP leader had told Sharif that Zardari had learned from his past mistakes and was now willing to closely work with Sharif to attain the common objectives of the CoD.

Zardari's representative also tried to assure Sharif that the president really wants to do what should have been done soon after the February 2008 elections, the report says.

Sharif, however, remained unimpressed, and said that Zardari was a not trustworthy.

Being fat can fry up chances of becoming a dad

ANI, Wellington

An Australian research has shown that overweight men are less likely to father children.

While it has been known for some time that obesity reduces the chances of a female conceiving, this is understood to be the first study to show the effects of a male's weight.

The study, which involved more than 300 couples, showed that as a man's weight increased, his chances of fathering a child decreased.

"Clinical pregnancy rates were significantly reduced as paternal body mass index increased," stuff.co.nz quoted Dr Hassan Bakos, of the University of Adelaide, as saying.

Dogs 'don't understand deception'

ANI, Washington

There is no evidence to prove that dogs can detect deception, says a new study.

Mark Petter conducted the study as an undergraduate student at the University of Western Ontario. He wanted to find out whether dogs could recognise if humans had the intention of deceiving them.

His study showed that dogs didn't differentiate between the human "cooperators" or "deceivers" to a remarkable degree.

Algae may be secret weapon in climate change war

AFP, Miami

Driven by fluctuations in oil prices, and seduced by the prospect of easing climate change, experts are ramping up efforts to squeeze fuel out of a promising new organism: pond scum.

As it turns out, algae -- slimy, fast-growing and full of fat -- is gaining ground as a potential renewable energy source.

Experts say it is intriguing for its ability to gobble up carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, while living happily in places that aren't needed for food crops.

Algae likes mosquito-infested swamps, for example, filthy pools, and even waste water. And while no one has found a way to mass produce cheap fuel from algae yet, the race is on.

University labs and start-up companies across the country are getting involved. Over the summer, the first mega-corporation joined in, when ExxonMobil said it would sink 600 million dollars into algae research in a partnership with a California biotechnology company.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian tribal women leave Midnapore Central Jail at Midnapore, some 100kms west of Kolkata on Friday after their release from custody. Fourteen tribal women were released from the jail on bail after their arrest on suspicion of being Maoist activists.

Obama offers millions in Muslim tech fund

AFP, Washington

The White House Friday highlighted a new multi-million-dollar technology fund for Muslim nations, following a pledge made by President Barack Obama in his landmark speech to the Islamic world.

The White House said the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) had issued a call for proposals for the fund, which will provide financing of between 25 and 150 million dollars for selected projects and funds.

The Global Technology and

Innovation Fund will "catalyse and facilitate private sector investments" throughout Asia, the Middle East and Africa, the White House said in a statement.

Eligible projects would advance economic opportunity and create jobs in areas like technology, education, telecoms, media, business services and clean technology, the White House said.

OPIC said sample projects could help foster the development of new computer technology or telecommunications businesses, or widen access to broadband Internet ser-

vices.

Proposals must be submitted by the end of November, and managers of funds that make a final short list will make presentations in Washington in January.

Final selections will be announced next June.

In his speech to the Muslim world in Cairo last June, Obama argued that "education and innovation will be the currency of the 21st century" and that under-investment was rife in many Muslim nations.

As well as the fund, Obama also said he will host a summit on entre-

preneurship this year to deepen ties between business leaders in the United States and Muslim communities around the world.

In his speech on June 4, Obama vowed to forge a "new beginning" for Islam and America, promising to purge years of "suspicion and discord."

In what may be one of the defining moments of his presidency, Obama laid out a new blueprint for US Middle East policy, pledged to end mistrust, forge a state for Palestinians and defuse a nuclear showdown with Iran.

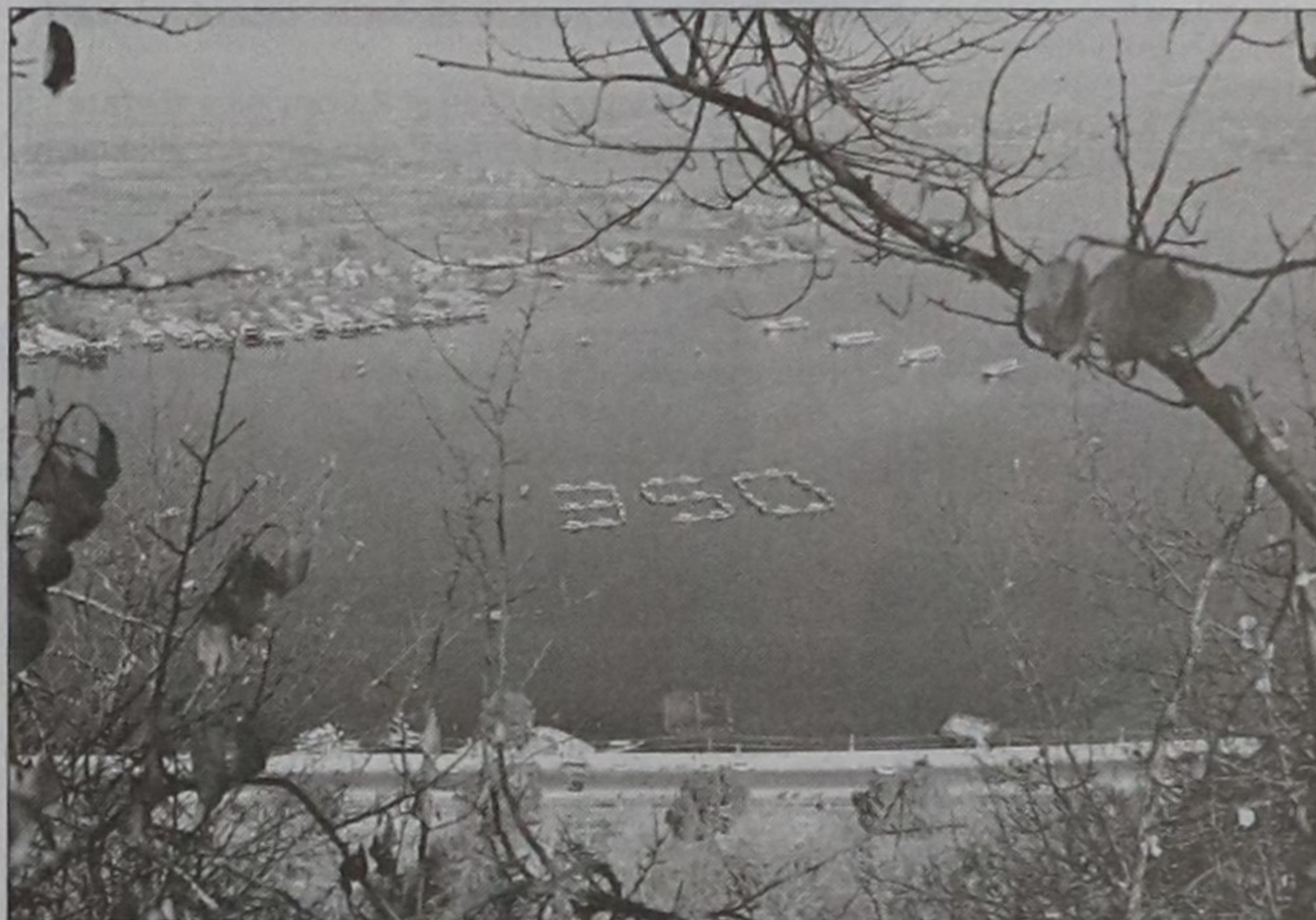


PHOTO: AFP

Kashmiri boats known as Shikaras form the number 350, representing what scientists say is the safe upper limit for carbon dioxide in the atmosphere as they float in formation on Dal Lake in Srinagar yesterday to kick off the International Day of Climate Action about global warming.

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