

# Fierce fighting in Lanka continues

COLOMBO, Sept 17: Bitter fighting raged today in north-eastern Sri Lanka as government troops lost four more men in their bid to penetrate Tamil guerrilla defences outside a key rebel camp, officials said, reports AFP.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) also suffered heavy casualties in the fighting in jungle-bound Mullaitivu District, a military spokesman said, adding troops were still some distance away from the main Tiger base.

"We lost four men and 30 others were wounded during operations near the Michael Camp," the spokesman said, referring to the rebel base by its LTTE codename.

"Resistance is still fierce, but we have inflicted heavy

casualties on the terrorists." The latest casualties took to 63 the number of army dead and to more than 550 the number of militants killed, according to official figures, since troops launched their biggest jungle drive against the LTTE on September 2.

Scores of troops and Tigers have also been wounded. Officials said large numbers of teenaged LTTE guerrillas were firing rockets and rocket-propelled grenades at troops advancing on the main LTTE hideout, which also has ten smaller satellite bases in the region.

The Mullaitivu region, which is used by the LTTE as a transit point for smuggling arms, remained under an indefinite curfew clamped by the military.

## Borders with neighbouring states sealed

# Troops storm 12 rebel camps in Assam : 136 arrested

NEW DELHI, Sept 17: Hundreds of Indian troops Monday pursued a crackdown in the oil-rich province of Assam against hardline guerrillas who have threatened to kill seven hostages seized in July, reports AFP.

Soldiers in battle fatigues, backed by police and paramilitary forces, fanned out across the northeastern state, arresting at least 136 members of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).

The troops sealed Assam's borders with neighbouring states, raided 12 rebel camps located in forests and patrolled

all key highways, the Press Trust of India (PTI) and officials said.

An army spokesman said in Assam's Guwahati city that the crackdown which got under way Sunday, was much bigger than the five-month-long army sweep against the ULFA that ended in April.

The spokesman said that operation rhino — as the present campaign is being called — was having appreciable success and that it would be possible to flush out militants from their hideouts soon, PTI said.

The number of soldiers in-

involved was not revealed, but officials in New Delhi said they totalled several hundred, and that many of them had previously fought Tamil guerrilla in Sri Lanka.

It was not known if there had been any resistance from the ULFA, a self-styled Maoist group fighting for an independent Assam, claiming that the state has never been a part of India.

Assam, state of 22 million is ruled by Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao's Congress (I) party.

In New Delhi, Home Minister SB Chavan termed

the situation in Assam as very grave and said the army had been moved into nine districts that are reputedly ULFA strongholds.

Chavan expressed concern over the continued detention by the ULFA of seven of 14 civilians seized by its gunmen on July 1. The seven include four officers of India's state-run Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC).

"I trust that they will be released soon and normalcy in the state will be restored early to enable us to withdraw the army (from Assam)," he added.

# Off the Record

## Kaifu regrets comments on US politicians

TOKYO : Japanese premier Toshiki Kaifu, anxious not to offend powerful allies in Washington, apologised today for saying US politicians lacked ethics, reports Reuter.

Kaifu told parliament last Friday that politicians running for the United States Congress were unethical because they used excessive campaign funds. "I don't think American candidates observe very strict ethical codes (in campaigns)," he told a Lower House panel.

Fearful of a backlash from the United States, Kaifu decided to apologise after consulting aides over the weekend.

Today, a solemn-looking Kaifu apologised before the same panel. "It was inappropriate of me to use the word 'ethics' in my remarks and I regret (the incident)," he said.

"What I meant to say was that the United States does not have a system like ours...so there are no rigid restrictions on campaign spending as in Japan."

Kaifu, who faces a bruising leadership battle next month, has argued that Japan needs to overhaul its political system to reduce dependence on campaign funds and stamp out corruptions.

His two predecessors both resigned before the end of their terms because of a shares-for-favours scandal and sex scandal.

A Foreign Ministry spokesman later told reporters Kaifu's comments to the Lower House panel today were not an apology. "It is not meant to be an apology, it is a clarification," he said.

Asked why Japan was not worried about reaction in the United States, the spokesman replied. "This (clarification) is understood and communicated (to Washington), there is no need to worry about a reaction."



## A narrow escape

COLOMBO : A poisonous snake crept into a man's trouser pocket as he was engrossed in a newspaper report on dramatic political moves to impeach President Ranasinghe Premadasa, a local press report said today, reports AFP.

The unidentified man was at a small tea kiosk in mountainous central region of Nawalapitiya reading the report Monday when a bystander spotted the snake's tail sticking out of the man's trouser pocket, the Sinhalese language Lankadipa said.

It said the man narrowly escaped as witnessed pulled out the serpent by its tail before it could attack the intended victim.

# BRIEFLY

**Security forces kill 10 in Kashmir:** At least 10 people were killed in India's troubled Kashmir state on Monday when security forces opened fire during an operation to search for Muslim separatist militants, Reuter reports.

Police officials speaking in the state capital Srinagar, said 10 bodies had been recovered after the incident. But they added the death toll could be higher.

Local reports said several civilians died in a crossfire when they were fleeing the army operation in Kunsna and Wannagam villages near the northwestern town of Bandipore.

A police official said "It is possible some civilians might have been caught in the crossfire."

Residents said they had seen vultures hovering over the villages.

**USSR appeals for truce in Yugoslavia:** The Soviet Union called on all parties in the Yugoslav conflict on Monday to adhere to a ceasefire and work to keep channels of Dialogue open, reports Reuter.

A statement by the foreign Ministry in Moscow said very new violent steps created a situation which could lead to a full-scale "fratricidal war".

We are convinced that the sole solution to Yugoslavia's problems are finest talks, patient dialogue in the search for mutually acceptable formulas and new forms of living side by side and cooperation it said.

Fighting on Croatia intensified on Monday, pitting the breakaway republic's militia against Serbian guerrillas and the Yugoslav army. The European Community was considering the dispatch of an armed peace-keeping force.

**Three-PLO men to hold talks on ME:** The Palestine Liberation Organization gave its blessing for three Palestinians to hold talks Monday with US Secretary of State James A. Baker III in Jerusalem on a Middle East peace conference he is trying to arrange, reports AP.

They are Faisal Husseini, the leading Fatah supporter in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, Bir Zeit University English professor Hanan Ashrawia and Dr Zakaria Al-Agha, head of the Gaza Strip Medical Association.

The Palestinian news agency Wafa in Tunisia said the trio, all supporters of PLO chairman Yasser Arafat's mainstream Fatah faction, would spell out PLO demands for guarantees in the peace talks.

They will also try to nail down US positions on unspecified "fundamental questions" and present them to the Palestine National Council, the Palestinian parliament-in-exile, which is to convene in Algiers on Sept 23, Wafa cited a PLO spokesman as saying.

The PNC is expected to give a formal Palestinian response to the conference. The PLO has condemned Israeli insistence that neither the organization nor east Jerusalem Arabs have a role.

**Israel hopes to get US loan :** Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy, speaking on television in Jerusalem after talks with US Secretary of State James Baker, expressed hope that a compromise could be reached over Washington's refusal to grant loan guarantees to Israel in advance of a planned peace conference, reports AFP from Jerusalem.

"We discussed this affair with James Baker at his initiative and I hope that we will be able to make progress, he said. We will find a solution. If it's not on Tuesday, it'll be the day after. The main thing is that there is a common will to find an equitable solution."

US President George Bush has threatened to veto US Congress plans to extend 10 billion dollars in credit guarantees to Israel to be used to build housing for new immigrants to the country.

**Tel Aviv to close West Bank, Gaza :** Israel will close the occupied West Bank and Gaza strip on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, the Israeli army said on Monday, reports Reuter from Jerusalem.

The closure, from 2 pm (1200 GMT) Tuesday until 3 A.M. (0100 GMT) on Thursday, will ban the 1.75 million Arabs of the occupied lands from Israel during the sunset-to-sunset holiday. The holiest day in the Jewish calendar.

Israel routinely closes the Arab lands it occupies during major national and religious holidays.

In the heyday of the 45-month-old Palestinian uprising against the occupation, Israel also imposed massive curfews on the Palestinians during holidays confining as many as one million Arabs to their homes at a time.

**Six businessmen kidnapped in Delhi:** Six millionaires businessmen from Bombay were kidnapped while they were in New Delhi to conclude a business deal, news reports said Tuesday, reports AP from New Delhi.

It was the latest in a series of high-stakes kidnappings for ransom in and around the capital.

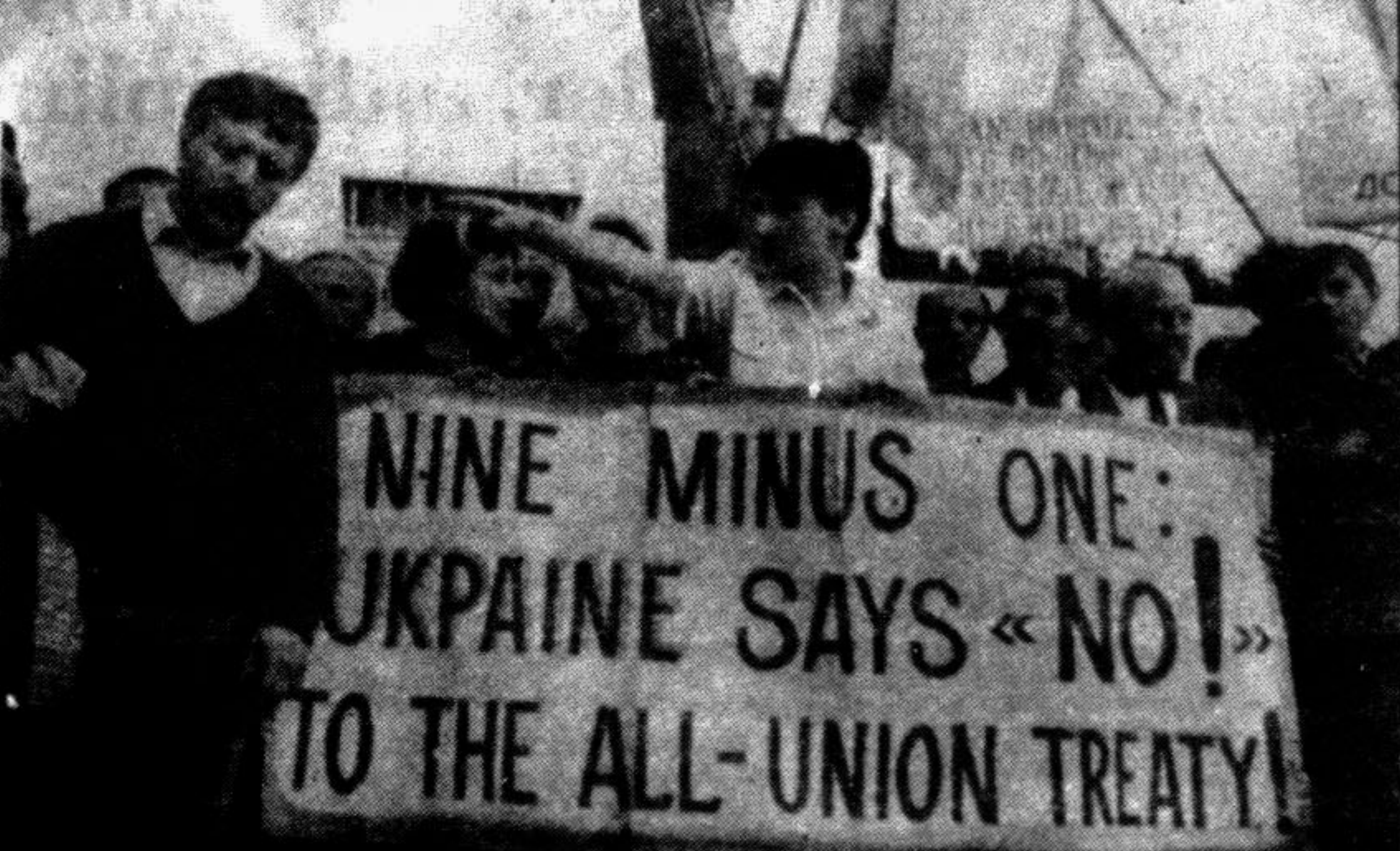
The six businessmen and the wife of one of them were kidnapped on Saturday, the Indian Express and the Times of India newspapers reported. They were last seen leaving one luxury hotel for an appointment at another luxury hotel.

The victims include two of the wealthiest diamond dealers in Bombay, the newspaper said. There was no indication if any demand for ransom had been received.

Police officials refused to comment.

At least seven other businessmen have been kidnapped from the capital in the last two months. One was rescued and two returned after ransom was paid. The whereabouts of the other four are unknown.

The minister of state for home affairs, M M Jacob, told Parliament earlier last month that 384 kidnappings were reported in the capital in the first seven months of this year.



KIEV, Ukraine: Pro-independence demonstrators make their feelings known with an English-language banner in Kiev's Liberty Square in front of Lenin's statue September 15 during a rally attended by several thousands. The Ukraine is to confirm its independence during a referendum in December '91. — AFP/UNB photo

# Iraq allows UN choppers to fly over its territory on condition

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 17: Baghdad conditionally agreed to allow United Nations arms inspection experts to fly UN helicopters into Iraq, Iraqi Ambassador Abdul Amir al-Anbari said Monday, reports AFP.

But an Iraqi official would have to be aboard each helicopter to ensure respect of the country's sovereignty. Al-Anbari said after meeting with Security Council President Jean-Bernard Merimee of France.

"We are ready to let helicopters into Iraq," the Ambassador said. "We have provided the framework for the operation of helicopters that would not jeopardize our

national security." In addition to putting an Iraqi official on each chopper proposed by the UN itself — Iraq wants to bar the taking of detailed aerial photographs over its territory and designate certain areas that would be off-limits to flights by UN helicopters.

Diplomatic sources said the last two conditions had little chance of being accepted by the Security Council.

Baghdad's refusal to allow UN experts to enter Iraq aboard their own helicopters — as directed in UN Resolution 707 in August — had been seen as an Iraq test of the Security

Council's resolve. Resolution 707 obliges Iraq to allow the UN team of experts charged with seeking out and supervising the elimination of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction to use its own means of transportation to move freely throughout the country.

Germany has lent the United Nations three helicopters and crews to carry out arms inspection missions over Iraq, but Baghdad has refused to let the aircraft enter Iraq airspace and the choppers are currently on the ground in Turkey.

On Friday, Merimee met with Iraqi Ambassador,

# Japan to closely observe developments in Philippines

TOKYO, Sept 17: Japan will closely observe developments in the Philippines following the Senate rejection of a new bases treaty with the United States, Chief Cabinet Secretary Mitsuji Sakamoto said today, reports AFP.

Speaking at a press conference, Sakamoto said: "The Philippine government is making efforts by holding a referendum. We will closely observe the developments with concern."

Sakamoto declined to say whether Japan and the United States were discussing possible alternative sites should Subic Naval Base be closed following the Senate vote on Monday to end nearly a century of US military presence in the Philippines by rejecting a new base treaty.

# Safety standards at Indian N-plants poor : Fernandes

NEW DELHI, Sept 17: A senior opposition leader warned today that several Indian nuclear power plants were dumping radioactive waste into rivers and coastal waters near populated areas of the country's north, west and south, reports AFP.

Jana Dal (People's Party) leader George Fernandes, 61, said poor safety standards in India's nuclear installations could trigger "disaster" and warned he would launch a crusade to focus attention on the threat.

Fernandes, who has held ministerial posts twice, said the latest threat as from the Rajasthan Atomic Power Plant which was discharging irradiated water into a local river.

He said villages near the plant were reporting a sharp increase in deformities in new born babies and that men were becoming impotent after drinking water from the river.



TBILISI, Soviet Georgia: A woman dances with the Georgian flag September 15 during a rally in support of the republic's President Zviad Gamsakhurdia here. The controversial president has come under criticism from 26 opposition parties, as well as from members of his own parliamentary group. — AFP/UNB photo

# Gates admits mishandling of Iran-Contra scandal

WASHINGTON, Sept 17: Roberto Gates, President George Bush's choice to run the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), admitted on Monday that he had mishandled his role in what became the Iran-Contra scandal, reports Reuter.

But Gates, in an opening statement before the Senate Committee weighing his nomination, said then-CIA Director William Casey kept him in the dark about the affair.

Gates told the Senate Intelligence Committee that he wanted to speak about the misjudgements that I made and the lessons I learned.

Gates was Casey's Deputy when the scandal began rocking Ronald Reagan's presidency in late 1986. Casey died in May 1987.

The affair, made public in November 1986 by then-Attorney General Edwin Meese, involved dodging a congressional ban on aid to Nicaragua's Contra rebels by sending them profits skimmed from secret arms sales to Iran.

In a 67-part questionnaire released by the panel, Gates said he was unable to recall his role in events related to Iran-Contra in at least 33 instances, according to one count.

Several senators criticised Gates for his professed lack of knowledge about the diversion of funds to the Contras. You were absolutely surrounded by

the truth — who could you possibly not know? as number two man at the agency, such willful ignorance is inexcusable, said Democratic Senator Howard Metzenbaum.

The assertion that Gates must have known about the diversion is based on the notion that Casey knew and perhaps engineered the affair, as Metzenbaum put it, and that Gates's subordinates were also aware of it.

Gates, in response to questions, testified that neither Casey nor George had informed him of the diversion of funds, which tarnished the Reagan administration in its last years.

He said Casey apparently withheld the truth from him to shield CIA as an institution. In other words Gates suggested, Casey sought to cap any institutional harm by restricting those who knew of the diversion.

Gates, 47, is now Bush's Deputy National Security Adviser.

After reading his opening statement, Gates said he should have taken more seriously warnings that Oliver North, a former National Security Council aide, may have been evading the congressional ban on aid to the Contras.

A federal judge on Monday dismissed all Iran-Contra convictions against North, who in riveting testimony in ended the most celebrated criminal case to arise from the scandal.

"I should have asked more questions and I should have been less satisfied with the answers I received, especially from Director Casey," Gates said. "At the same time I believe that the actions I did take

were well-intentioned and honest."

Senators said they would also question Gates about alleged unauthorised covert deals with Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war and possible distortion of intelligence on the Soviet Union.

Democratic Senator Bill Bradley said Gates, a career Soviet affairs analyst, had persistently overstated Soviet military intentions. In a 1988 speech, for example, Gates called Soviet communist power untouched and untouchable.

Bradley said Gates's overstating of the Soviet threat may have kept US intelligence from focusing on Iraq threats.

# US disappointed at vote on base treaty

WASHINGTON, Sept 17: The United States said on Monday it was disappointed at the vote of the Philippine senate to end the US military presence in the country but expressed hope that President Corason Aquino would succeed in reversing the decision, reports Reuter.

State department spokesman Richard Boucher said, the United States is disappointed by the action of the Philippine Senate in rejecting an agreement that clearly is favoured by the large majority of the Filipino people.

The Senators voted 12-11 to reject a pact that would have granted the United States use of Subic Bay Naval Station for 10 more years. Washington had already decided to give up its volcano damaged Clark Air Force Base.

The two bases were once at the heart of American military strategy in the region.

Boucher said the United States would now begin looking more closely at the necessary preparations for withdrawal.

Boucher applauded Aquino's pledge to take the issue to a referendum to try to reverse the Senate decision.

"We admire her determination as she continues the efforts to put the treaty into effect. We support her efforts to find a way for the Philippine side to ratify the agreement and we'll continue to follow the process closely," he said.

US spokesmen have repeatedly made it clear that the United States would not stay in the Philippine if it was not wanted and would leave if asked to do so.

# Iran, Pakistan to promote sectarian harmony

ISLAMABAD, Sept 17: Iran and Pakistan are to exchange delegations of Muslim religious scholars and leaders, officials said here Monday, reports AFP.

Pakistani President Ghulam Ishaq Khan and his Iranian counterpart, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, decided on the exchange during talks in Tehran with a view to promoting sectarian harmony, they said.

Ishaq Khan returned here late Sunday from Iran after a five-day official visit during which the two sides signed a series of accords aimed at promoting bilateral cooperation in the spheres of railways, communications and oil and gas.

Pakistan has recently witnessed a surge in sectarian friction between Sunni and Shi'ite citizens in the wake of the killings of nine religious

figures this month.

Sunnis form the overwhelming majority in Pakistan while Shi'ites command the same position in neighbouring Iran.

A militant Sunni religious organization, Anjuman Sipah-e-Shahab (ASS), has been leading an anti-Shi'ite campaign in Pakistan since the assassination of its founder Haq Nawaz Jhangvi in February 1990.

In December the same year, the head of Iranian Cultural Centre, Sadiq Ganji, was killed in Lahore. Both Iran and Pakistani Shi'ites had blamed the ASS for the murder.

Pakistani Foreign Secretary Shaharyar Mohammad Khan told reporters here Monday the president had returned "very satisfied" with the outcome of his Iran visit.