

Protest against killings by LTTE Lankan opposition boycotts parliament

COLOMBO, Oct 23: Opposition lawmakers boycotted parliament and shops closed today as Muslims staged a work stoppage to protest Tamil guerrilla attacks against civilians in eastern Sri Lanka, witnesses said, reports AFP.

Most of the wholesale and retail trade controlled by the minority Muslims remained shut, school attendance dropped and the usual rush hour traffic snarls disappeared as many people stayed home, police said.

A spokesman for the main opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) said they were staying away from parliament today in response to the strike call issued by the pro-government Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC).

"We have decided to go along with the SLMC and boycott parliament. Opposition benches are empty today."

The spokesman said, government MPs, however, attended parliament and carried on with routine business.

The protest — dubbed "Black Friday" — was aimed at condemning massacres carried out by the dominant Tamil separatist group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The government blamed the LTTE for last week's slaughter of 161 men, women

and children and 20 security personnel in four Muslim villages in eastern Polonnaruwa district, the LTTE has denied the allegation.

First reports from the multi-ethnic eastern province said almost all Muslim shops remained shut and fewer people were seen on the streets.

A Muslim student organisation Tuesday burnt a portrait of President Ranasinghe Premadasa to condemn the government's failure to protect Muslims and torched a picture of LTTE Supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran.

The radical Nava Sama Samaja (New Equal Society) Party (NSSP) said they were sympathetic about the plight of the civilians in the eastern province, but wanted the SLMC protest directed against the government as well.

Security was tightened in the capital Colombo with hundreds of heavily armed police and anti-riot squads taking up positions in strategic locations within the city and its suburbs, witnesses and police said.

SLMC leader Mohammad Ashraff said the LTTE was being encouraged by the Israeli secret service Mossad to slaughter Muslim villagers in the east. Colombo has said it has no evidence to support Ashraff's claim.

Russian VP for firing of 6 top leaders

MOSCOW, Oct 23: Russian vice president Alexander Rutskoy has called for the dismissal of six senior government leaders, charging that Russia has become a "political trashcan," reports AFP.

Rutskoy, quoted today in the Russian parliamentary journal Rossiskaya Gazeta, did not name the six officials he said should go but was scathing in his assessment of the current political situation.

"Russia has been transformed into a huge political trashcan," he told a gathering Wednesday of young militants from the Peoples Party for free Russia, of which he is one of the leaders.

"If reforms continue in the same direction, the Italian mafia will come to take lessons from us," he declared.

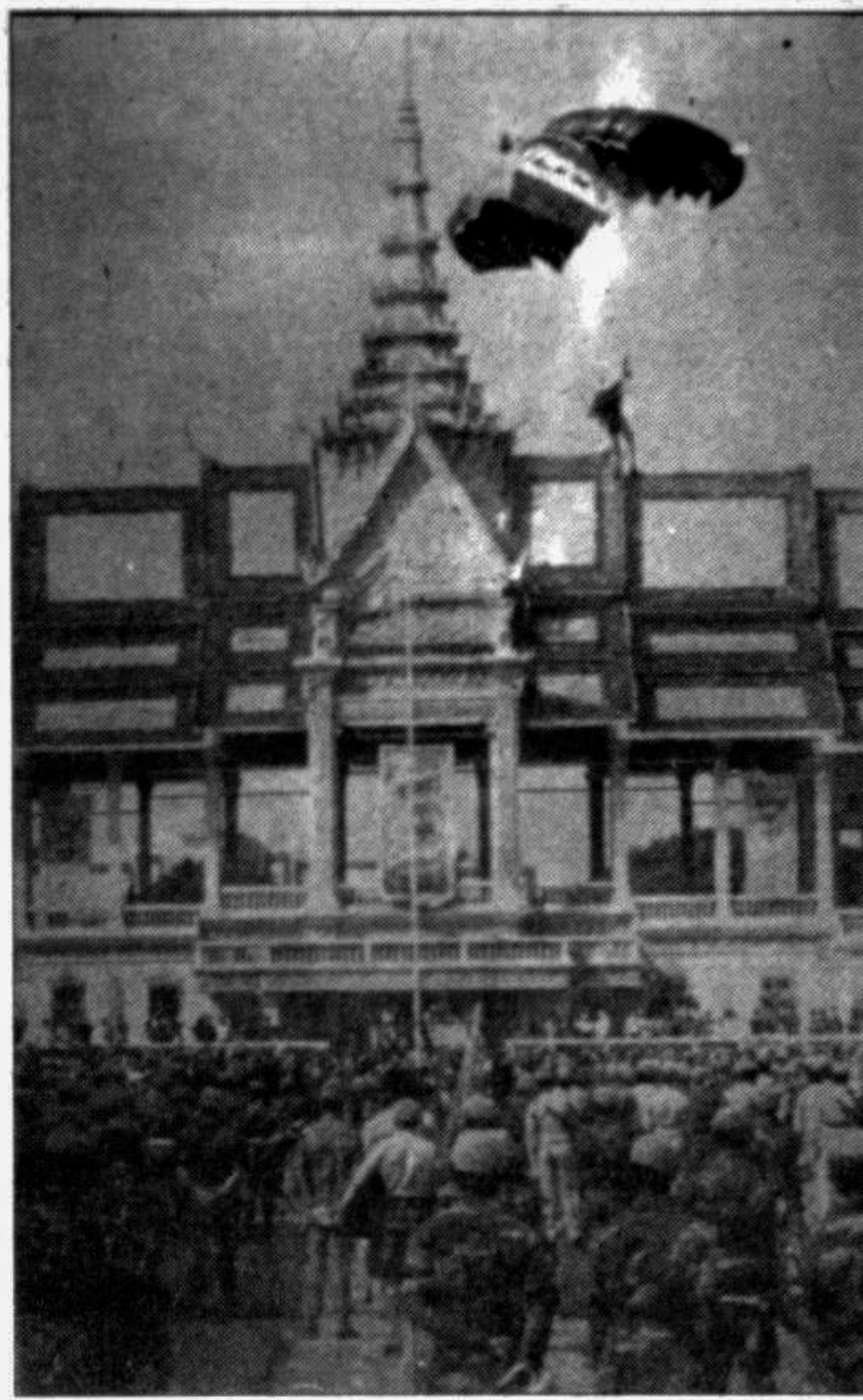
Rutskoy also urged the removal of "six people from the upper ranks of power."

He charged the recent distribution to the population of privatization coupons was "nothing more than a new gimmick."

"The privatization of the land and our major industries has but a single purpose. To pillage the country... it is one more step toward civil war."

On the bloody ethnic conflicts that have torn apart the post-communist Soviet Union, Rutskoy argued that "a thousand warnings will have to effect."

"We shouldn't warn the bandits."



PHNOM PENH: A French UN peacekeeper glides in for a landing during ceremonies marking the first anniversary of the signing of the Paris peace accord on Friday. — AFP/UNB photo

18 more killed in Punjab

CHANDIGARH, Oct 23: An Akali Dal activist, six militants, including two Lt. Generals and two area commanders of KCF Zaffarwal, and five securitymen were among 18 persons killed in Punjab since Thursday night, reports PTI.

Four militants of the Khalistan Command Force Zaffarwal were killed in an encounter with police between villages Sagawal and Jaspal in Ludhiana district Thursday night.

They were later identified as Santokh Singh alias Sukhdev Singh alias Sukha and Balwinder Singh alias Indri, both lieut. generals of the outfit and Gural Singh alias Kirpal Singh alias Palla and Rupinder Singh alias Pitu both "area commanders".

According to police, the four killed militants were responsible for about 300 killings and a large number of cases of extortions, kidnappings and dacoities in the state.

One police constable was killed in the ongoing encounter which followed an attempt to rescue the two and a half year old nephew of Phagwara municipal commissioner near village Munna in Jalandhar district.

One police constable, Ajit Singh and Pali, a close relative of the commissioner, Jaidev Sukhir, were earlier killed in the encounter.

Off the Record

Restriction on Madonna's 'Sex'

PERTH: West Australia state on Friday restricted sales of Madonna's controversial new pictorial book "Sex" to stores registered to sell adult publications, reports AP.

Arts Minister Kay Hallahan said her decision came after advice from the State Advisory Committee on Publications. The 128-page book, which illustrates the pop star's sexual fantasies, must be kept under the counter. It also can only be sold to people over age 18 and cannot be advertised.

The book depicts people in degrading poses as well as simulated violence, bondage and bestiality, said Mrs Hallahan, who reported she had "a quick flick through the book the other day".

A spokeswoman for Octopus Publishing, the Australian distributors of "Sex", said thousands of copies had been sold in West Australia since the book hit shelves Wednesday.

Paul Michael, state manager for the national Angus and Robertson bookstore chain, said his company's stores in West Australia had sold out the book.

'It comes as a shock'

WASHINGTON: US Navy fighters are dropping dummy training bombs near sea lions on a federal wildlife refuge off the coast of Washington state, environmentalists charged Thursday, reports AP.

"It comes as a shock to people that national wildlife refuges are not what they say they are," said Karin Sheldon, vice president of the Wilderness Society.

Her group, the National Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife and others filed two lawsuits in US District Court in Seattle on Thursday seeking injunctions to halt alleged government abuses on 10 of the country's most sensitive refuges.

The military exercises, livestock grazing, motorized boating and other recreation illegally harm wildlife on those reserves in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Colorado, Arizona, California, Massachusetts and Florida, they said.

One lawsuit singles out what the environmentalists said is the "most outright example of illegality" — drenching Navy jets dropping 25-pound (11-kilogram) inert loads on the rocks and islands of Washington's Copalis National Wildlife Refuge.

Australia deports 7 Chinese boat people

CANBERRA, Oct 23: Australia deported seven Chinese boat people Friday and Immigration Minister Gerry Hand declared that his country will maintain its tough stand on illegal immigration, reports AP.

The seven, including a couple and their infant child, were taken from the remote West Australian town of Port Hedland, where they and other illegal entrants were held in a detention center.

"They sought asylum and have been found not to be refugees," Hand said. "The successful removal occurred without incident and without the use of any force."

They were flown to Guangzhou, China on a Falcon jet from the Air Force's VIP fleet. The government did not explain why it decided to use the jet.

Hand said Australia, which has instituted a new, fast-track assessment process for those seeking refugee status, would not accept "queue jumpers" — illegal immigrants who try to circumvent the procedure.

The seven were among 10 boat people who arrived in the northern port of Darwin on May 10. All participated in a three-day rooftop hunger strike at the detention center in August after learning a review committee planned to recommend their expulsion.

Another man from the group, who asked to be allowed to return to China, is leaving separately.

The last two men are still receiving medical treatment after jumping off the detention center roof during the protest and will not be expelled until they can travel.

Australia accepted thousands of Indo-Chinese boat people after the Vietnam war and over the years had accepted more refugees, on a per-capita basis, than any other country.

More recently, it has been hardening its policies and expelling all who do not qualify as refugees under United Nations standards, which require applicants to show they would be in danger if sent home.

Hand said the Chinese government had assured Australia that the seven deported Friday would not be punished.

BRIEFLY

35 kidnapped in Serbia: Serb militia forces kidnapped 35 Muslims in the south-west of Serbia Thursday, aiming to trade them for Serbian and Montenegrin prisoners in Bosnia-Herzegovina, local Muslim officials said, AFP reports from Belgrade.

The local ISA news agency in the Sandzak region of Serbia quoted the region's national Muslim council as saying that the Muslims were seized from two buses in which they were traveling near the town of Pribor, on Serbia's border with Bosnia.

The statement did not say where the Muslims were from, or where they were going.

It was the Serbs had taken the Muslims into Bosnia with the aim of bartering them for prisoners from their own side held around the eastern Bosnian town of Gorazde.

Blast at Lankan housing complex: A powerful blast rocked a government housing complex in a fashionable residential area of the Sri Lankan capital Colombo yesterday injuring at least one woman, police said, AFP reports from Colombo.

The explosion was at the summit flats compound of a senior police officer who was assassinated by suspected Tamil guerrillas last month, a police officer said.

Fahd, Hassan talk border issue: King Fahd of Saudi Arabia and Hassan II of Morocco met here Thursday to discuss ways of solving regional border disputes, Moroccan officials said, AFP reports from Jeddah.

They also examined the latest developments in the Arab-Israeli peace talks, which resumed Wednesday in Washington, as well as ways of securing a just and permanent peace in the region guaranteeing Palestinian rights, they added.

King Hassan II briefed King Fahd on a series of ideas aimed at giving a new impetus to the bilateral negotiations. The officials who are part of the Moroccan delegation said. They did not elaborate.

Japan will continue plutonium shipment

TOKYO, Oct 23: Japan will continue to rely heavily on plutonium to fuel its fast breeder nuclear reactors, the government said in an annual report released today, reports AFP.

The announcement came amid growing international criticism of Japan's planned shipment of plutonium from France.

"Since Japan is not blessed with energy resources, there is no way but relying on nuclear energy," said Shigeru Maeda, an official with the Science and Technology Agency.

"Plutonium is inevitable in Japan," the official stressed at a news conference.

"For the time being, updating of technology and the system toward practical utilization of the Fast Breeder Reactor (FBR) will be promoted," the annual report on nuclear energy said.

One tonne of plutonium planned to be imported from France this year is to be used for Japan's first FBR, due to start operation in March, officials said.

Government officials, lawmakers and environmentalists

in Asia-Pacific countries have expressed strong objections to the shipment of plutonium which they said could be the cause of maritime pollution or the target of terrorist attacks.

Maeda confirmed Japan would import 30 tonnes of the highly radioactive and explosive material by 2010 from France and Britain. But he refused to disclose details of the plan for security reasons.

Greenpeace has said here that the 3,800-tonne Akatsuki-Maru, which left Japan in late August to pick the plutonium at France's Cherbourg port, might leave the port Monday, at the earliest.

Greenpeace warned that the plutonium would pose a major threat to the environment in case of an accident. Chile, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay reportedly ban ships with plutonium on board from passing through their 200 nautical-mile economic waters.

The agency report said that Japan had consultations with countries concerned on the sea transport of plutonium from France.

Japan has 42 nuclear reactors which generated 21.08 megawatts electricity last year or 27.1 per cent of the country's total electric power generation.

Forty more nuclear reactors are planned to be put into operation in Japan by 2010, increasing the ratio of nuclear generated electricity in the total to 43 per cent.

Japan built a nuclear power plant last year and is to complete four more by September next year, the Science and Technology Agency report said, nothing the plan might face difficulties in finding the sites in light of nuclear opponents.

The report said Japan would help prevent the nuclear proliferation which was expected from the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

Japan plans to provide funds and human resources to the International Science and Technology Center to be set up in Moscow for nuclear scientists, it said.

The center is supported by Japan, the United States and the European Community.

Turkey sends troops into N Iraq

ANKARA, Oct 23: Turkish troops have moved farther into northern Iraq than ever before to try to wipe out bases of separatist Turkish Kurds, Turkish newspapers reported Friday, reports AP.

About 5,000 Turkish troops moved early Thursday against rebel camps in Haftanin and Hakurk, some six miles (9.5 km) into northern Iraq from the Turkish border, the newspapers said.

Turkish jet fighters have been bombing the camps for the past 10 days. But in the past, troops have ranged no more than one or two miles into Iraq. There were no reports of casualties.

The Kurdistan Workers Party has been fighting a guerrilla war in southeastern Turkey since 1984. They operate mainly from their bases in northern Iraq.

News reports said there were about 4,000 Turkish Kurdish guerrillas in northern Iraq.

The Turkish Kurds recently escalated their campaign. More than 800 people died in the fighting in the last month.

PLO seeks 'much bigger' UN role in peace talks

PARIS, Oct 23: The PLO's Foreign Affairs Chief Farouk Kaddoumi called upon the United Nations to play a "much bigger role" in the Israeli-Arab peace process.

Kaddoumi who heads the Palestine Liberation Organisation's political department (foreign ministry) said in an interview with AFP that he had conveyed this view to UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in September.

Unfortunately, "There was not unanimous support" for an enhanced UN role "the Israeli government remaining hostile to such an initiative despite international pressure," said Kaddoumi who flew back to Tunis Thursday after meeting French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas on Wednesday.

"It is unfortunate that the UN is unable to play the role which falls to it," said Kaddoumi noting that current Middle East talks were based on UN resolutions 242 and 338.

Kaddoumi said the UN should be prepared to play a part in a transitional period in the occupied territories. He appeared ready to accept for the occupied territories a period of "administrative autonomy" provided the UN is in charge.

"We accepted the idea of a transitional period with the sole aim of bringing in the UN and there by creating a climate of trust," said Kaddoumi while adding that the "key" to progress lay in a commitment by Israel to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza.

Kaddoumi said the change of government in Israel had led to "a change in tone but not in substance". He said the half in Jewish settlement of the West Bank was decided more on "economic grounds" than from political reasons.

Crackdown on opponents of Deng's reforms likely

BEIJING, Oct 23: The Chinese Communist Party's internal watchdog said Thursday it would crack down on party members who oppose leader Deng Xiaoping's market reforms, the official Xinhua news agency reported, says AFP.

It would pay special attention to guarding against leftism— official parlance for Marxist ideologues who still support class struggle—to ensure that economic development is not disrupted.

The discipline inspection commission said it uncovered 870,000 cases involving violations of party discipline in the last five years, expelling more than 154,000 members.

The commission would also make "great efforts" to crack down on corruption within the party and set up a mechanism to restrict abuses of power.

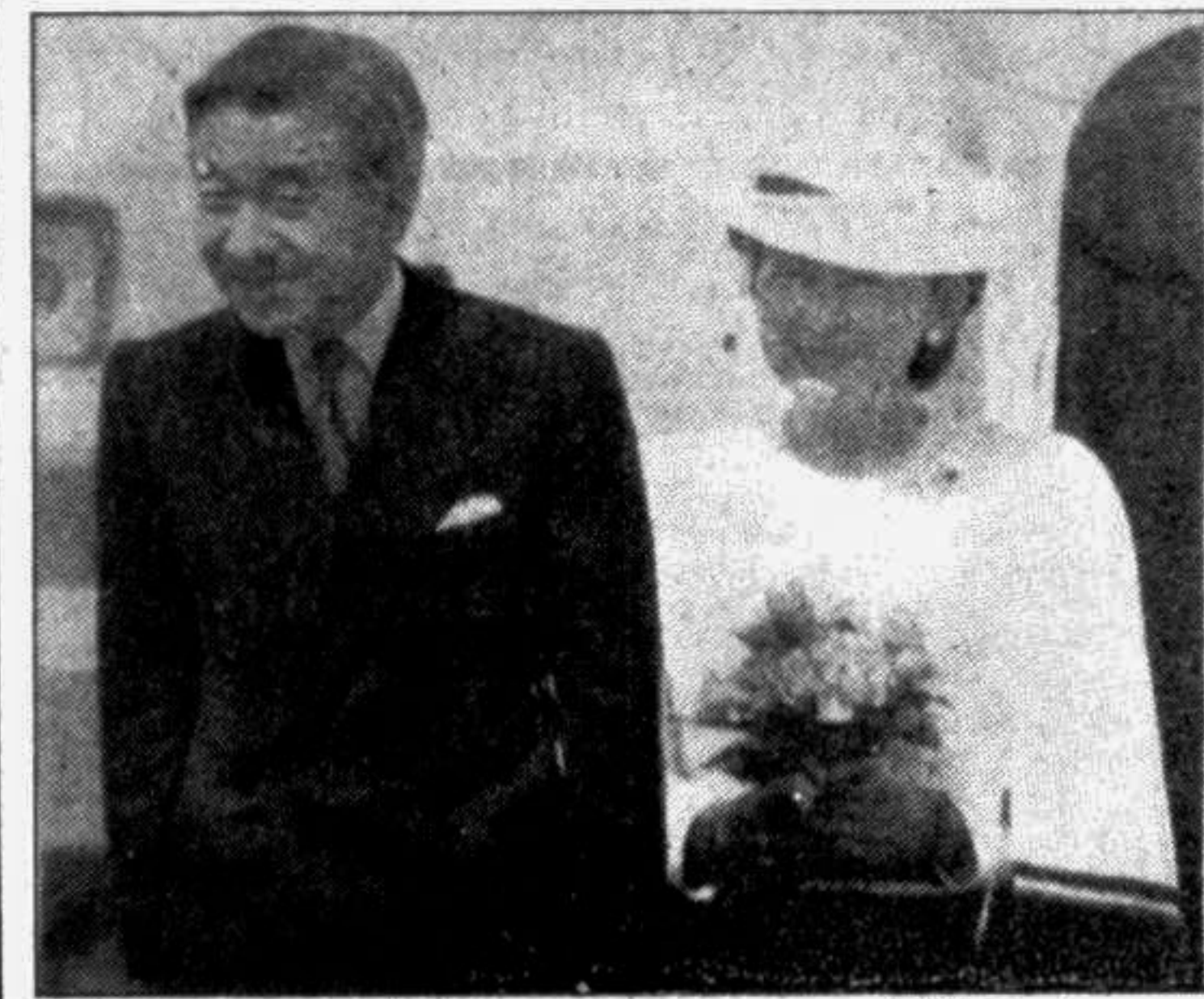
More than 730,000 members were disciplined and 42,000 were taken to court and convicted of crimes.

The shift to a market economy, adopted on Sunday at the party's 14th congress, has led to a surge in corruption as government and party organs cut personnel and allow them to go into business for themselves.

The commission would now "concentrate its efforts on uncovering cases involving people who resist and oppose the policy of reform and opening to the outside world," Xinhua

Many have used their previous connections and influence to do business, despite being banned from doing so.

Akihito starts China visit



TOKYO: Emperor Akihito (L) and empress Michiko bow to a group of officials and imperial families before boarding a plane on Friday at Tokyo international airport the imperial couple departed for China for a six day historical visit. — AFP/UNB photo

BEIJING, Oct 23: Japanese Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko arrived in Beijing on Friday for a visit that may open as many wounds as it heals, reports AP.

The royal couple received a red-carpet welcome when their chartered Japan Airlines jet flew into the Beijing airport with Japanese and Chinese flags flying from the cockpit.

The emperor and empress paused at the door of the plane, smiling broadly and waving to several hundred Japanese schoolchildren waving paper Japanese flags snapping in a sharp wind. Michiko held on to her wide-brimmed white hat with one hand to keep it from flying off.

They were welcomed by Vice Foreign Minister Xu Dunxin and State Councillor Song Jian, then moved slowly down a receiving line of Japanese and Chinese dignitaries.

UN commission finds signs of mass grave near Croatian city

ZAGREB, Croatia, Oct 23: A UN-sponsored commission on Thursday said it discovered signs of a mass grave near the Croatian city of Vukovar, the scene of heavy fighting last year between Serbs and Croats, reports AP.

Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the UN envoy investigating human rights violations in former Yugoslavia, told reporters that the grave's surface measured about 30 square meters (yards).

He declined to give details of its location or how many bodies might be there.

Clinton unworthy of the presidency, Bush says

UNDATED, Oct 23: President Bush claims he's closing the poll-ratings gap with Bill Clinton, and with 11 days left before Election Day he's relentlessly pleading with voters to hand him a comeback victory by abandoning the Democrat as unworthy of the presidency, reports AP.

"Now we're getting down to a choice: Who do you trust to be leader of the free world and president of the United States?" Bush told an enthusiastic rally of about 500 people in an aircraft hanger at Robbinsville, NJ, on Thursday.

Bush returned to the White House late Thursday, but was leaving early Friday to campaign in Kentucky, Florida and Alabama.

Clinton on Friday was con-

tinuing his push in Republican strongholds, including Nevada and Missouri, a state Bush won in 1988 but which he is in danger of losing this year. Ross Perot, the independent candidate, had no campaign appearances scheduled Friday, except for a 30-minute network advertisement focusing on his family.

Clinton is training his verbal artillery on the Bush administration's economic record, saying the Republican is leading the "things could be worse crowd." Indeed, one of Bush's key arguments is that while the economy may be relatively weak, conditions — including inflation — would be worse if a Democrat were in the White House.

Robbinsville, NJ, Bush said Clinton's economic prescriptions "sound identical" to those administered by the last Democratic president, Jimmy Carter. "We cannot go back to the failed policies of the past," he said later.

The latest national poll of registered voters showed Clinton with a 19-point lead over Bush, a bit beyond the 10-15 point edge the Democrat has maintained throughout the fall campaign. That news Thursday didn't stop Bush from claiming more voters are beginning to move into his column.

"Something is happening," Bush shouted to thousands of supporters at a rally in Ridgewood, NJ, on Thursday. "We're moving up on this guy."



He didn't cite any poll results, and in recent days Bush has made a point of calling pollsters "nutty" and telling voters to ignore opinion surveys.

Bush is still telling voters he's got a better economic plan than Clinton, but with that approach apparently not helping erode Clinton's lead in the polls, the president is focusing mainly on what he calls "a question of trust."

During a live television "town hall meeting" Thursday evening in Cecaucus, NJ, Bush described his long-shot home-stretch campaign strategy this way.

"I will be appealing here in the last 10 days on the basis of trust. You know, I admit to making mistakes, but I also have kept the trust, and so has

Barbara Bush. We've been good custodians of the Peoples House. I think character is vitally important, and I'm going to appeal on that basis."

Among other developments: Democratic vice presidential nominee Al Gore headed Friday to Florida, another traditional Republican stronghold that is now in the tossup category. He was giving a speech on space technology in Brevard County, whose economy is largely dependent on the space programme.

Perot aired a 30-minute biographical commercial Thursday night, to be followed by a 30-minute ad Friday night focusing on his family. Campaign finance reports show he's spending about 2 million dollar a day

Aquino wins libel case against columnist

MANILA, Oct 23: Former Philippine President Corason Aquino today won a celebrated libel case against a columnist who wrote that she hid under a bid during a bloody coup attempt in 1987, reports AP.

Manila judge Ramon Makasar sentenced columnist Luis Beltran and publisher Maximo Soliven of the Philippine Star newspaper to four months to two years in jail and ordered them to pay two million pesos (80,000 dollars) in moral damages to Aquino.

Both were freed on bail while appealing the ruling, one of the few libel convictions, ever won against journalists in a country which prides itself on a free press.