

BRIEFLY

Blast wounds 15 in Medellin: A car bomb explosion in downtown Medellin wounded at least 15 people and caused extensive damage, according to radio reports, AP says from Bogota.

The Caracas radio network, citing the Medellin Fire Department, said two police officers were among those wounded in the blast late Thursday. The explosion wrecked the offices of the state-run telephone company and two banks.

Authorities have not yet said who is responsible for the blast, but fugitive druglord Pablo Escobar is known to be behind a recent campaign of bombings that has killed 46 people and wounded more than 500.

About 2,000 special police officers and soldiers have been hunting the Medellin area for Escobar, who gave up in 1991 but escaped from prison last July.

10 Palestinians shot at in Gaza: Israeli troops shot and wounded 10 Palestinians on the occupied Gaza Strip on Thursday during clashes which followed a search for wanted gunmen, Palestinian sources said, AFP reports from Jerusalem.

The army had imposed a curfew on a quarter of Khan Yunis at dawn and ordered people out of their homes as part of a manhunt which provoked fears that houses would be blown up.

Sixteen buildings were destroyed in another neighbourhood of the town during a similar hunt two weeks ago.

Palestinian sources said the army made no arrests and lifted the curfew after three-and-a-half hours, but clashes developed as stones were thrown at soldiers.

Canada to reinstate Victoria Cross: Canada will reinstate the Victoria Cross as its highest military decoration, ending a long campaign by Canadian soldiers and veterans of two world wars, the Prime Minister's office said on Thursday, Reuters reports from Ottawa.

The Victoria Cross, awarded for exceptional heroism, was first instituted by Queen Victoria during the Crimean War over a century ago.

Ninety three Canadians received the VC. The last one awarded posthumously to Pilot Robert Gray for an attack on a Japanese destroyer in the last days of the World War Two.

But Canada dropped the medal in 1972 when it created its own military bravery medals as a further step by the former colony to cut links with Britain.

ICRC to close hospital in Peshawar: The Red Cross is closing its hospital in this frontier city after treating the Afghan war wounded here for 12 years, AP reports from Peshawar.

Yves Giovannoni, South Asia director of the International Committee of the Red Cross, said four surgical units in the mountains along the Afghan border also will close in early April.

The 390-bed, fortress-style hospital surrounded by gun-toting guards opened in 1981, two years after Moscow sent 115,000 soldiers into Afghanistan to crush a burgeoning Muslim insurgency and install its communist allies.

Some 100,000 operations have been performed and hundreds of thousands of Afghans have been treated at the hospital since it opened, Giovannoni said.

The Red Cross' Afghan staff will move to Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan where a government-run hospital will receive Red Cross funding and equipment, he said.

19 Japanese fishermen missing: Nineteen Japanese fishermen were missing after their trawler sank in the East China sea off South Japan yesterday, the Maritime Safety agency said, reports Reuters from Tokyo.

The 80-tonne No. 7 Ebiisu Maru, with a crew of 20 on board, capsized in stormy weather in the early hours of the morning about 30 km (20 miles) northwest of Ukujima Island, off Nakasaki prefecture, agency officials said.

Crewman Hiroshi Nagata, 50 was picked up by a nearby fishing boat and was the only known survivor, they said.

Lawmakers still under army siege in Zaire

KINSHASA, Feb 26: Members of Zaire's transitional parliament faced their second night under army siege in a row over bank notes which sparked riots last month, reports Reuters.

Some 400 members of the High Council of the Republic (HCR) were trapped in Kinshasa's peoples' palace conference centre on Thursday night, and soldiers showed no sign of letting them go.

Hundreds of troops blocked off the building after mid day on Wednesday, while in HCR was in session, and demanded it approve the use of new five-million-Zaire bank notes worth less than 2 US dollar.

The notes, issued by President Mobutu Sese Seko, are banned by reformist prime Minister Etienne Tshisekedi and are almost impossible to spend. Troops paid in the new notes went on a looting rampage in Kinshasa last month in which several hundred people were killed.

The siege has not been violent so far, but witnesses said the one hardened on Thursday. Soldiers stopped food being sent into the building, and let in only limited drinking water provided by the Red Cross. Sick and elderly delegates were not allowed to leave.

The soldiers, many accompanied by wives and children, have roamed on and off the siege in three shifts so far. They said they would keep up the blockade until a solution

was found to the bank note row, which has crippled Kinshasa's economic life. Zaire's new Army Chief of Staff, General Eluki Monga, has voted support for the troops.

HCR chairman Archbishop Monsengwo Pasinya was not inside the building. Protected by heavily armed bodyguards, he told reporters that three separate sources had warned him to stay away from Wednesday's HCR meeting.

"I fear for my life. I am afraid of being physically attacked", the widely respected churchman said.

650 Kuwaitis still in Iraqi jails
KUWAIT, Feb 26: About 650 Kuwaitis arrested during the Iraqi occupation are believed still held in Iraqi jails. Some are thought to have been killed, reports AP.

They are the reason Kuwait has not yet had a full-blown celebration to mark Feb 26, 1991, when the US-led coalition drove Iraqi forces out of Kuwait.

About 200 other nationals, mostly Arabs, are on Kuwait's official list of missing. There are also about 200 mostly stateless Arabs not on the list, according to the independent Kuwaiti Association to Defend War Victims.

UN slams Myanmar junta for oppression of minorities

GENEVA, Feb 26: A UN report Thursday slammed the Myanmar military authorities for maintaining "an atmosphere of pervasive fear" in the southeast Asian country and resorting to "serious repression," reports AFP.

The UN Human Rights Commission's special rapporteur Yocho Yokota said the members of Myanmar's ethnic minority groups including Muslims in Rakhine, (or Arakan state), Kreen, Sahn and Mon were the main victims of repression and submitted to forced labour. Many were dying of ill treatment, the report said.

Yokota was appointed in March last year and visited Myanmar December 7-14, where he met with General Khin Nyunt, head of the mili-

tary junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

Politicians in Myanmar were free as long as they did not disturb peace or quiet, the rapporteur was told.

Yokota could not meet Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the country's democratic opposition who has been under house arrest in Yangon since the ruling junta ignored the outcome of the 1990 elections.

He visited a Myanmar prison but was not allowed to see individual prisoners.

"On the basis of the visit to Myanmar and the well-documented information received, the special rapporteur has assessed that serious repression and an atmosphere of pervasive fear exist in

Myanmar," the report said.

Myanmar's military authorities were "responsible for carrying out arbitrary executions, death under custody and death due to torture within the context of armed conflict."

"Torture and death of porters by the military have also been prevalent."

Hundreds of people had also been abducted from villages, ultimately also leading to the flight of some 250,000 Rakhine Muslims, or Rohingyas to neighbouring Bangladesh.

More than 17,000 have now been returned but international humanitarian organizations and members of the international community have expressed serious concern that the repatriations have not been carried out under condi-

tions that are believed to have been voluntary, dignified or providing safety, the report said.

The special rapporteur called on Yangon authorities to comply with international conventions banning mass arbitrary executions, torture, and forced child labour. Yokota urged authorities to free Nobel Peace prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and other political leaders and said Myanmar law must not treat some minority groups as second-class citizens.

The Human Rights Commission is to vote a resolution on the basis of Yokota's report.

The military took power while quelling nationwide pro-democracy protests in 1988.



LONDON: Diana, Princess of Wales, arrives at Queen Mary's University Hospital Roehampton Thursday, to open the new Douglas Bader Centre, named after the famous British WW II fighter pilot who lost both his legs in a plane crash. — AFP/UNB photo

Kuwait dismayed by Saddam's political survival

KUWAIT, Feb 26: Kuwait celebrated the second anniversary of its Gulf War liberation today buoyed by new assurances of American support but dismayed by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's political survival, reports Reuters.

Kuwaitis began blaring car horns and hanging giant flags from apartment and office blocks to celebrate the 1991 rout of Iraqi occupation troops by a US-led military alliance.

They said they could never forgive or forget the seven-month occupation by their large northern neighbour in which up to 1,000 Kuwaitis were killed and hundreds more went missing.

The official Kuwait news agency KUNA redistributed an 18-month-old book of gruesome photographs of the corpses of Kuwaiti resistance fighters it said were tortured to death in acid baths during the occupation.

"The head of the ruling regime in Baghdad wants lots of Arab countries to forget what happened as a result of his betrayal, Prime Minister Sheikh Saad Al-Abdulla Al-Sabah told Al-Watan newspaper.

He said Kuwaitis had to remain alert and foster national

unity to thwart any future aggression by Saddam.

"We should monitor the Iraqi regime closely and continuously, especially his (Saddam's) intentions towards Kuwait. This will make us feel the continuity of the danger.

Appealing for national unity, he added: "We are like a big family... let no one sink the ship we sail in, for if we drown, we drown together."

Italy may hold referendum in April

ROME, Feb 26: The Italian government plans to hold a referendum in April on radical changes to reform the country's political system, a cabinet minister said on Thursday, reports Reuters.

The referendum would be aimed at ending Italy's system of proportional representation, blamed for the country's revolving door governments, and replacing it with a first-past-the-post, constituency-based electoral system.

Regional Affairs Minister Gianfranco Ciarrro said after a cabinet meeting that the vote would take place on April 18.

Serb troops ordered not to shoot at relief planes US to airdrop aid in eastern Bosnia

SARAJEVO, Feb 26: The United States announced Thursday it will airdrop aid to hungry refugees in eastern Bosnia, and Bosnian Serbs said they will not jeopardize the flights. Serb and Muslim leaders showed signs of flexibility toward renewed peace talks, reports AP.

In Washington, President Clinton said the airdrop programme the deepest US involvement so far in the Bosnian conflict, was strictly humanitarian and would be offered to all sides.

Bosnian Serb military commanders ordered their troops not to shoot at the US planes or "or to by any means jeopardize" the flights. In a TV interview their leader said he could accept the programme even though he thought it was misguided.

"It seems that by making such a decision, the (Clinton) administration is trying to stop being biased in the Bosnian war and move away from military intervention," Radovan Karadzic said on Belgrade TV. "Humanitarian help belongs equally to all ethnic groups, but I still think that the very idea to parachute aid is wrong."

He said he was worried Muslims would shoot down one of the planes and blame it on Serbs in an effort to draw the United States deeper into the conflict.

His foreign minister, Aleksa Buha, described the decision as "dancerous" and said "it impedes the continuing negotiations."

Li Gen Lars-Eric Wahlgren of Sweden, designated to take over next week as UN force commander in former Yugoslavia, said in Stockholm that an airdrop was a "last resort."

The airdrop would mainly be targeted to Muslim pockets of eastern Bosnia where besieging Serbs have refused to

allow aid through by road.

On Thursday, a UN convoy of 12 relief trucks reached the eastern town of Gorazde, which has received no aid since January 12, after a three-day hold up while Serbs searched it piece by piece. UN officials said.

The US plan foresees drops from 12,000 feet (4,000 metres) to protect US pilots from anti-aircraft or missile fire, though even that does not ensure their safety. Bosnian Serbs

have a variety of anti-aircraft missiles.

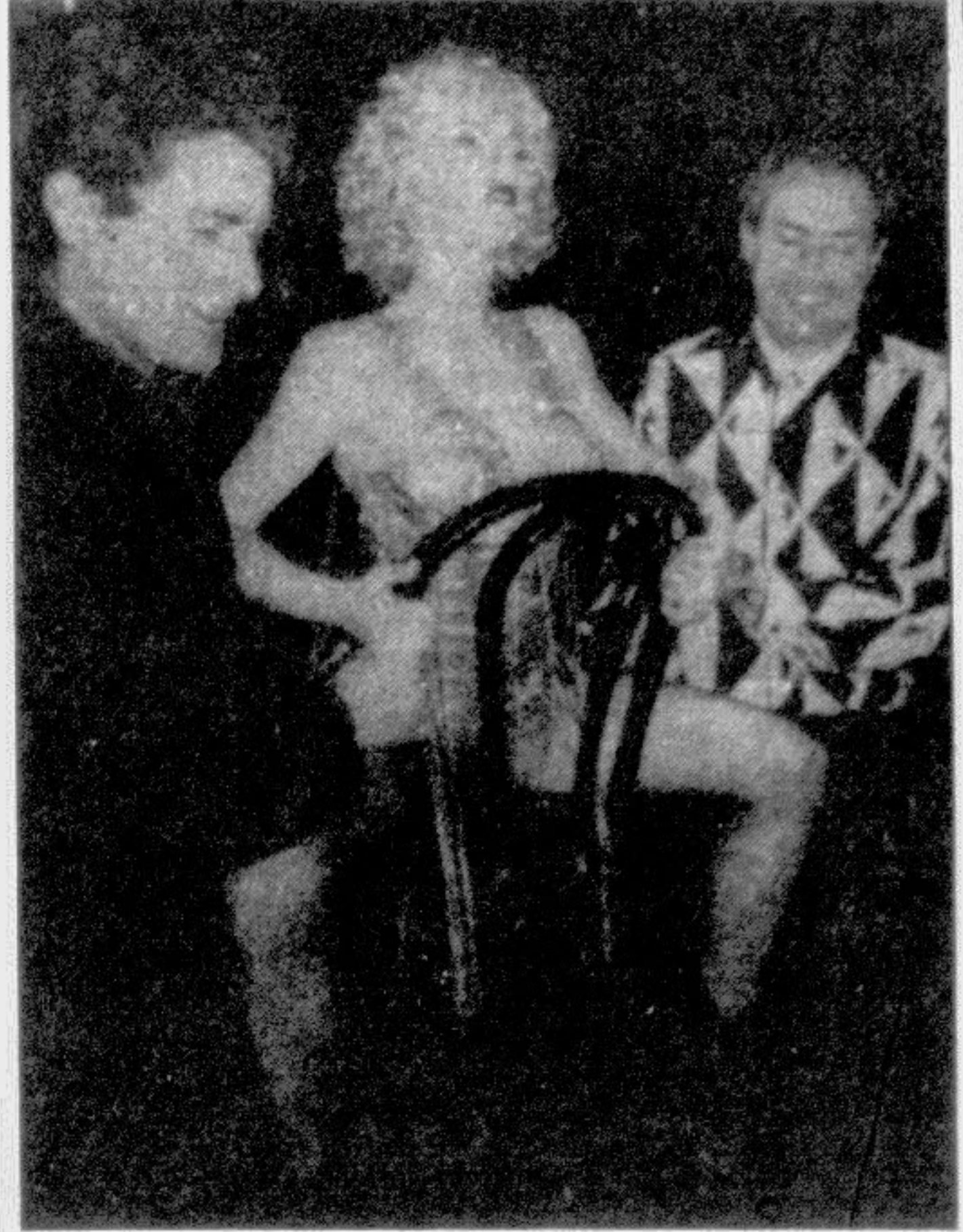
Packages released at that altitude could veer more than a mile (nearly .2 kilometres) from designated targets.

Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic was on his way Thursday to the United States for meetings with President Clinton and the next round of peace talks in New York. Karadzic said Serbs likely would leave for the United States on Friday.



Palestinian deportees pray Thursday, the third day of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, outside their camp in Marj Ez Zouhour in South Lebanon. — AFP/UNB photo

Off the Record



PARIS: A likeness of American popstar Madonna makes her debut at the Grevin Wax Museum Wednesday, helped by her sculptor Eric de Saint Chaffray (L). Blond with brown eyes, the model measures 1.65 metres (5'4") and is dressed by fashion designer Jean-Paul Gaultier. — AFP/UNB photo

Court rejects family benefits for gay pair

OTTAWA: Canada's Supreme Court refused to recognise a homosexual couple as legally married on Thursday and rejected family benefits for the gay pair, reports Reuter.

The court ruled 4-3 that homosexual couples do not constitute families under the country's Human Rights Act. The ruling ended a seven-year legal battle by Toronto translator Brian Mossop to claim a day of paid leave to attend his lover's father's funeral.

Federal employees get the day-off to attend funerals of members of their immediate families, including fathers-in-law of married heterosexuals. Mossop claimed he was being discriminated against on the basis of family status.

But the Supreme Court ruled that provisions in the Human Rights Act preventing discrimination against employees based on their family status did not cover homosexual couples.

He gets the ring back after 27 years

ST. LOUIS, Missouri: William Fortenbury was 22 in 1966 when he was horsing around during a hayride and lost his college ring. He got it back last week at age 49, reports AFP.

"Astonishing" Fortenbury said after the return of the ring. Fortenbury was throwing hay during the nighttime ride with fraternity members at his college and the ring came off.

He searched for it the next morning but came up empty-handed. A man searching for Indian arrow heads two weeks ago saw the ring bearing Fortenbury's initials sitting in a muddy field. A secretary at the college traced the ring to Fortenbury.

A bit better now than he was at 22, Fortenbury said he does not expect to lose it again.

Film nominated for Oscar competition disqualified

LOS ANGELES: A movie submitted by Uruguay and nominated for an Oscar as best foreign film was disqualified Thursday after judges concluded it was actual a product of Argentina, reports AFP.

It was the first time a film had been yanked from the Oscar competition after having been nominated. Officials of the Academy of Motion Picture, Arts and Sciences said Uruguay, which was competing for an Oscar for the first time with the film "A Place in the World," misunderstood the rules for entering the competition.

The movie was filmed in 1991 in Argentina, directed by Adolfo Aristarian of Argentina and financed largely by Argentines. It is about a Buenos Aires couple who try help the people of a rural community.

Tigers blow up naval craft, kill 2 sailors

COLOMBO, Feb 26: Tamil Tiger guerrillas Friday blew up a naval patrol craft in a restricted waterway in northern Sri Lanka, killing at least two sailors and wounding three more, the military said, reports AFP.

Guerrillas, of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) exploded a sea mine, blowing up the patrol craft as it operated in the Jaffna lagoon, a military spokesman said.

The loss of the patrol craft is a big blow to the morale of sailors operating in the lagoon. Tigers had been wanting to attack a navy boat for some time now, a senior military officer

Y'slavia denies exporting arms to Somalia

BELGRADE, Feb 26: The Yugoslav defence ministry denied today claims that it was exporting arms to Somalia, in a statement published in the Belgrade daily Politika, reports AFP.

The ministry said a US state department report Tuesday that a Greek cargo ship was transporting arms from Serbia to the conflict-torn horn of Africa state were "false" and were aimed at "Discrediting the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia," which consists of Serbia and Montenegro.

Serbia had long exports arms to southern countries, the ministry statement said.

Earth's ozone hole getting bigger

WELLINGTON, Feb 26: A hole in the earth's ozone layer covers nearly half of Antarctica and is getting bigger, a US NASA pilot who flew scientific missions over the continent said today, reports AP.

James Barrilleaux said the hole in the protective layer is about 32 million square kilometres (12 million square miles) in area. Latest satellite pictures over the antarctic showed about 50 per cent of the ozone was gone and the problem would get worse before it improved.

Barrilleaux is visiting New Zealand to explain the National Aeronautic and Space Administration's atmosphere research programme.

Nigerian troops trade fire with snipers, capture 8 Somalis

MOGADISHU, Feb 26: Nigerian soldiers exchanged fire with snipers Friday morning, then flushed out a building and captured eight Somali men in an area rocked by two days of violence, reports AP.

Nigerian troops at the city's main traffic circle nearby also fired repeatedly in the air Friday morning, showing a continued tough response to unruly crowds since rioting Wednesday.

Elsewhere in the city, calm was apparent as merchants opened for business in their ramshackle stalls of corrugated steel. The remains of bonfires from burning tires and junk still littered some streets, but traffic navigated around them.

Relief officials say the violence halted some food deliveries, but there were no plans to cut staff or curtail their activities.

A UN spokesman said contingency plans in place for months had been discussed in case the violence increased, but no evacuation was being considered now. He said the plan called only for non-essential personnel unable to perform their jobs to be moved elsewhere in Somalia or perhaps to Nairobi, Kenya.

Reports say at least six Somalis have been killed, with five US Marines and two Nigerian soldiers wounded in violence that started with protests by backers of one warlord who claimed US-led forces helped a rival.

The demonstration Wednesday escalated into rioting. It was the first major protest against the US-led coalition of 32,000 troops, including 17,000 Americans, who are in Somalia to secure relief shipments to millions of Somalis threatened by starvation after two years of civil war.

On Thursday and Friday, shooting broke out in the same area, although it was unclear who was doing the sniping that soldiers responded to.

Warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid, whose angry radio address Tuesday night helped set off the protests, urged calm Wednesday and on Thursday night accused looters of taking advantage of the situation.

US military officials said the

snipers were still unidentified but suspected of being Aidid supporters because the violence occurred in an area controlled by Aidid. They said the snipers could have been acting on their own.

On Friday, Nigerian troops atop a hotel used by the foreign news media poured heavy gunfire into a building across the street in response to the sniper fire.

Several troops entered the building from a side street, captured eight men and seized one weapon, a Nigerian commander said. One of the captured men claimed through an interpreter that some were friends of a security guard checking the building.

Nigerian soldiers handled

the captured men roughly before taking seven of them away in armored personnel carriers to Nigerian military headquarters. The Nigerian commander said they would be turned over to the US-led United Nations Task Force, or UNITAF.

Gunfire and grenade blasts rocked the same area of the capital for five hours on Thursday as soldiers pounded at snipers.

One Somali was killed and five soldiers, including three US Marines, were wounded. It was the heaviest shooting in the capital in weeks, but mostly by Nigerian soldiers under the US-led United Nations Task Force who fired without restraint at any niche they believed might harbor a