

International

Normalcy returns to Kashmir

SRINAGAR, Nov 20: Life in the Kashmir Valley returned to normal today at the end of a 34-day general strike to protest the Indian army siege of the Hazratbal Mosque, reports AFP.

Shops and business establishments reopened and traffic returned to the streets in Srinagar, Kashmir's summer capital, and other parts of the region troubled by a Muslim separatist revolt.

Banks and post offices, schools and restaurants were open.

The all-party Kashmir Freedom Conference, an umbrella group of political and militant organisations, on Friday announced an end to the general strike which had paralysed life in the Valley since October 16.

The strike was called off three days after Muslim militants entrenched in Hazratbal, Kashmir's holiest Islamic shrine, surrendered after holding out for more than a month against the army siege of the complex.

Kashmiris expressed relief at the resumption of normal life

after enduring the longest general strike in four years of Muslim separatist strife.

"During these strike days, I felt I was living in a prison," said Javed Ahmed, a computer operator, as he headed back to work.

"Thank god, the Hazratbal drama is over and the leaders have rightly called off the strike," added Idrees Khan, a medical college student.

Bansi Ram, a 31-year-old manual labourer, said he had been planning to return home to Bihar state on Saturday because of lack of work here and stayed back after hearing the strike had been called off.

"Thank god the strike is over. Otherwise I would have starved to death," said Ram.

AP adds: Even though many people had suffered shortages of food and medicine during the prolonged strike, the residents who seemed the happiest in the streets were the students walking to school.

"If the strike had continued, one whole year of study would have been wasted, a girl said.

9,000 PLA soldiers ready for deployment in Gaza, Jericho

TUNIS, Nov 20: Some 9,000 soldiers of the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA) are to assemble in Jordan and Egypt ready for deployment in the occupied Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho, a Palestinian source here said Friday reports AFP.

PLA soldiers in Iraq under the command of Haj Ismail will join up with the PLA's "Babr units in Jordan, for assembly in the Jordan valley before their entry into the Jericho region, the source said.

PLA troops in Algeria, Libya, Sudan and Yemen will assemble in Egypt prior to employment in the Gaza Strip town of Rafah, the source said.

Under the historic accord the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) signed with Israel on September 13, a Palestinian security force will take charge in the Gaza Strip and Jericho after the Israeli troops start withdrawing on December 13.

The force will be under the command of Colonel Nasser

Youssef, a member of the central committee of Fatah, the mainstream faction in the PLO.

Fatah's Revolutionary Council meeting here last week, end set up a military committee to carry out a census of PLA soldiers to prepare for their transfer.

Meanwhile implementation of limited Palestinian autonomy will begin on December 13 as planned provided both sides "work as necessary" to ensure its success, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said Friday.

Speaking on Israeli television in Tel Aviv, Peres said progress was being made "constantly — slowly but surely" in negotiations between Israeli and PLO officials.

"The Palestinians still have to take some decisions, notably on the economic field, and some points need to be clarified, particularly the question of Jericho," Peres said.

However, implementation of

the September 13 accord providing for limited Palestinian autonomy in Jericho and the Gaza Strip would start on the date planned," he said.

The Israeli military withdrawal is to begin on December 13 and be completed by April 13.

Peres said the Palestinian police responsible for ensuring security in the Gaza Strip and Jericho could start work in one month's time.

The minister was speaking after a ceremony in Tel Aviv to mark the 16th anniversary of a landmark visit to Israel by the former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, assassinated in October 1981. It was attended by the Egyptian ambassador to Israel Mohammad Basyuni.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Nabil Spaath said Thursday the Israeli-PLO autonomy talks would resume at a secret location in Cairo on Monday, and were expected to continue for four days.

Another report says, Egypt

Foreign Minister Amr Mousa said Friday he was optimistic the stalled peace talks between Israel and Syria would resume soon.

"There is great hope they will resume," Mousa said in Abu Dhabi following talks with his United Arab Emirates counterpart Rashid Abdallah.

Egypt has been playing a key role as a mediator between the different parties to the Arab-Israeli peace talks.

Mousa said the visit to the Middle East by US Secretary of State Warren Christopher, planned to start early next month, would be "focused on the Syrian-Israeli track" of the peace talks.

Syrian-Israeli talks which began in 1991 have been deadlocked over Syria's demand for a total Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, seized in 1967 and annexed in 1981, and Israel's insistence that Syria must first pledge its commitment to full peace.

Off the Record

Liz comes to the aid of Jackson



Elizabeth Taylor applauds on Friday during the opening ceremonies of the Elizabeth Taylor Medical Centre at the Whitman-Walkers Clinic in Washington. Taylor spoke about her friend, singer Michael Jackson, but declined to say where he is. — AFP photo

WASHINGTON: Michael Jackson is undergoing addiction treatment in Europe, Elizabeth Taylor said Friday. She said she helped arrange the treatment but wouldn't say more about where he was, reports AP.

"I have suffered and dealt with the same kind of medical problems now afflicting my friend Michael Jackson," Taylor said.

"Because of that and because of our friendship, when Michael's doctor called to ask if I would help, I was glad to intervene," she said. "Because of my own experience with addiction to prescription medicines, I was able to make a number of calls in search of the best and the most appropriate treatment for Michael, and he is now undergoing such treatment in Europe."

Jackson said last week that he had become addicted to prescription pain killers.

Taylor commented during the dedication of the Elizabeth Taylor Medical Center, an AIDS clinic in Washington. Taylor said she wouldn't reveal Jackson's exact whereabouts out of respect for his privacy.

"Because of my regard for him and my concern for his health, I will continue to be silent on these matters," she said.

Jackson stayed briefly at an isolated resort in the French Alps after canceling a worldwide concert tour last week. He released an audio tape November 12 saying his addiction was caused by anguish over the investigation into allegations he sexually molested a 13-year-old California boy.

BRIEFLY

IDC to be set up in The Hague:

A new United Nations body to coordinate worldwide policy for disabled people, The International Disability Centre (IDC), is to be set up in The Hague in January, a Dutch official said on Thursday evening, Reuter reports from The Hague.

The Hague's acting Mayor Constant Martini told a reception that the centre, with an initial staff of 50, would serve more than 30 million blind, deaf, mentally and physically handicapped people around the world.

It would help coordinate fund-raising, legal advice and the promotion of laws for disabled people with the aim of integrating disabled people fully into society, he said.

9 die in Armenian train crash:

At least nine people died and 36 were injured when two railroad locomotives illegally carrying passengers crashed in northern Armenia, officials said Friday, AP reports from Yerevan.

Frunzik Amirian, an official with the Tumanian regional council, said the two electric locomotives were carrying upto 60 passengers when they collided Thursday night.

Twenty four hours after the collision, rescue workers continue to comb the wreckage to remove more bodies. Three or four bodies were believed to remain clutched in the disfigured metal, Amirian said.

Kohl arrives in Hong Kong:

German Chancellor Helmut Kohl arrived in Hong Kong yesterday for a low-key unofficial visit, his first to the British colony, Reuter reports from Hong Kong.

Kohl, who arrived by train from the South China city of Guangzhou, will hold talks with Governor Chris Patten in a meeting which officials called a courtesy call.

China, which takes over Hong Kong in 1997, has repeatedly accused Patten of seeking international support in his dispute with Beijing over democratic reform in the colony.

French FM in Lebanon:

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe has stated that his country supports Lebanon's independence sovereignty and rehabilitation, Xinhua reports from Beirut.

Juppe Thursday met with Lebanese President Elias Hrawi, parliament speaker Nabih Berri, Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and other senior Lebanese officials.

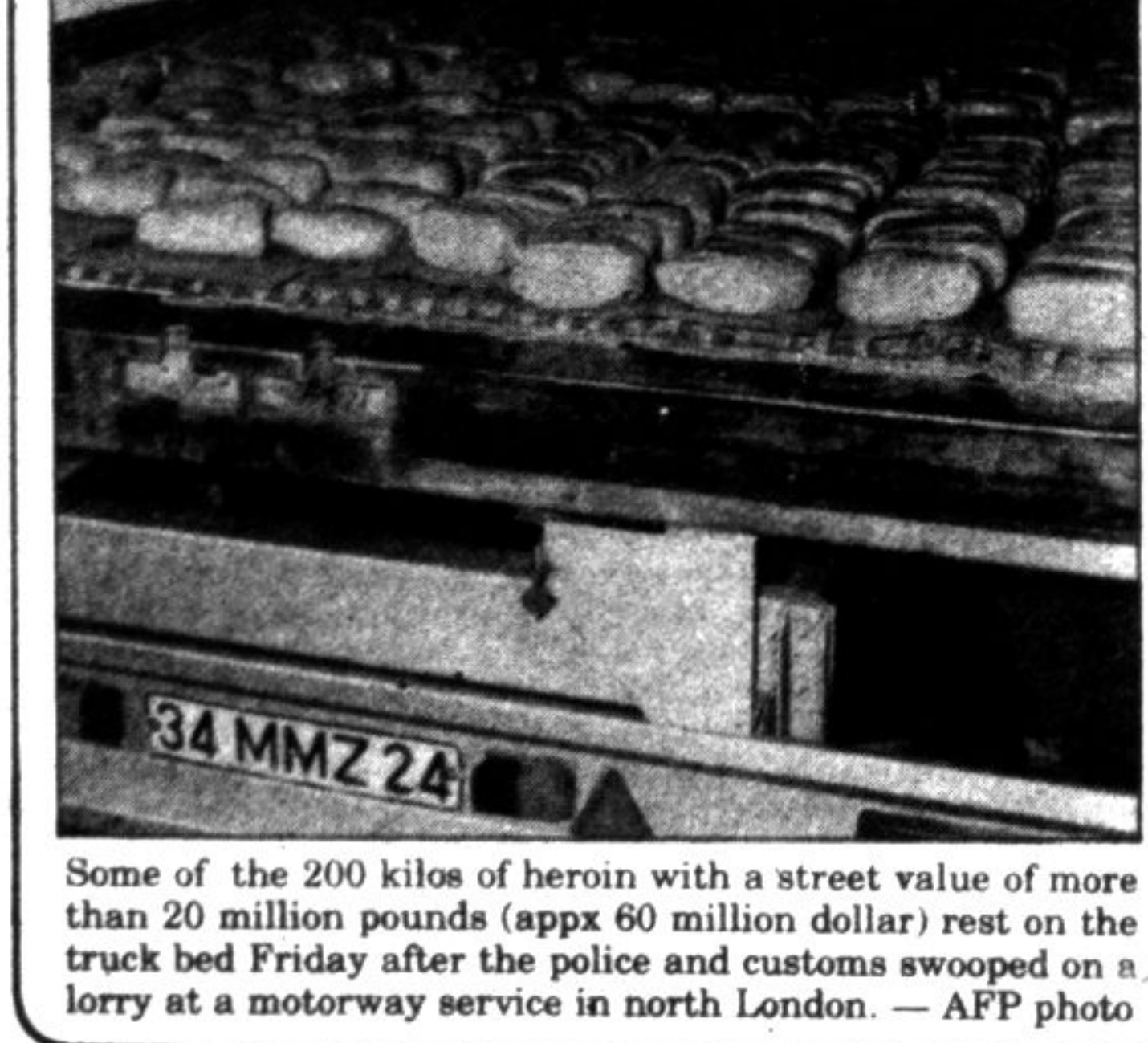
He told reporters after the meetings that Israel should pull out from south Lebanon, Lebanon's independence and sovereignty should be safeguarded, and the issue of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon be resolved.

450 pounds heroin seized in UK:

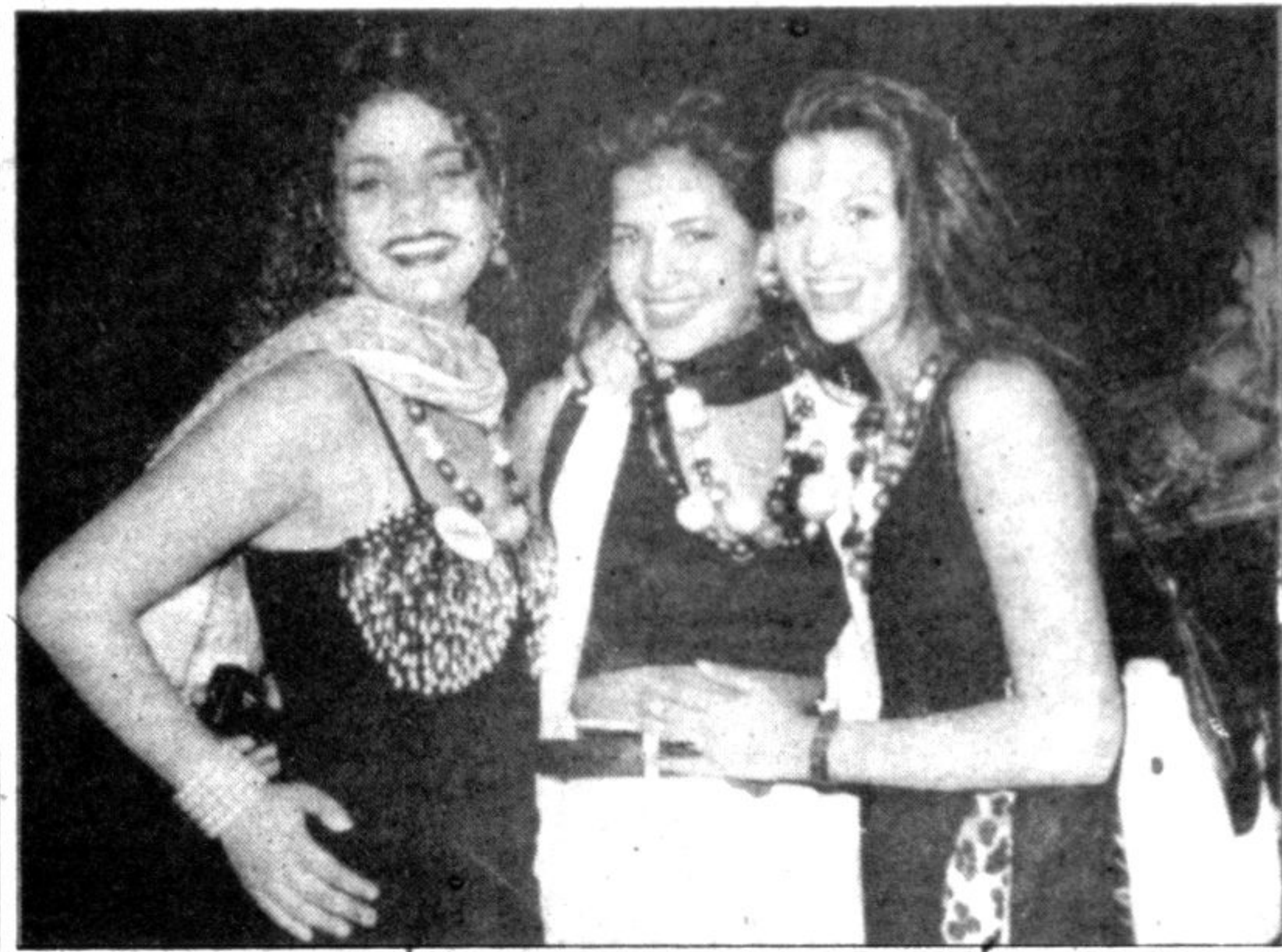
Police seized more than 450 pounds (200 kgs) of heroin after following a truck packed with Turkish tomatoes all over England, customs agents said Friday, AP reports from London.

Officials said the hidden heroin had a street value of more than 20 million pounds (30 million dollar) and was the largest haul of the opium-derived drug in British history.

"This is the biggest ever single seizure we've had," said Douglas Tweedie, chief customs investigator.



Some of the 200 kilos of heroin with a street value of more than 20 million pounds (approx 60 million dollar) rest on the truck bed Friday after the police and customs swooped on a lorry at a motorway service in north London. — AFP photo



Miss World finalists Maria-Magdalini Valinti of Cyprus, Emel Yildirim of Turkey and Maria Katsiki of Greece pose on Friday at the beach party at Sun City in South Africa before the Miss World final on November 27. — AFP photo

US Senate approves Brady Bill

WASHINGTON, Nov 20: Heeding the US alarm over street violence, the Senate overwhelmingly passed an anti-crime bill Friday. But a follow-up measure to require a five-day waiting period for handgun purchases was blocked short of passage, reports AP.

Despite a fresh plea from President Clinton, the Senate twice fell short - by three votes - of the 60 votes needed to choke off a filibuster mounted by lawmakers demanding that the five-day requirement preempt more stringent rules imposed by some states and local governments.

Senate approval of the gun control bill, known as the Brady Bill, this year is "little more than a fading hope," Sen. Joseph

Biden said late Friday night. Congress is working to adjourn for the year by early next week.

In contrast to the controversy over handgun controls, the anti-crime measure sailed through on a 95-4 vote, underscoring voter concern over street crime. The measure calls for more than 100,000 new police on city streets and more prison cells, and would ban the sale of combat-style firearms.

"Crime is the single most pressing issue on the minds of the American people," Biden, the Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman, said after the overwhelming vote. He called it "a dramatic step in stemming the tide of violence that's overwhelming this nation."

The House has already approved a handgun control measure. From a trade meeting in Seattle, Clinton tried to pry loose the Senate version, as well, so a bill could reach his desk by Thanksgiving, November 25.

"I'm distressed at the Senate," the president declared at a news conference.

In addition to requiring a delay before handgun purchasers can get their weapons, the Brady Bill requires checks into the customers' backgrounds.

For some senators, voting for gun control is politically difficult, Clinton said, "but clearly it is the right thing to do."

The proposal bears the name of James Brady, President Reagan's first press secretary.

He was severely wounded in a 1981 attack on Regan, Brady and his wife, Sarah, have long fought for gun control legislation.

Mrs Brady, a longtime Republican, said she was "furious" at Republican senators for "filibustering a bill this entire nation wants and needs and is crying for."

Foes won one skirmish. By a 56-43 vote, the Senate retained a provision that would phase out the waiting period after five years. The National Rifle Association, long the leading lobbying force against gun controls, supported that limitation.

The crime bill would authorize 8.9 billion dollar for the 100,000 new police officers.

Pakistan may recognise South Africa

ISLAMABAD, Nov 20: South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha arrived here Friday for a three-day official visit to political, diplomatic and economic issues, officials said, reports AFP.

Botha, who is heading a five-member delegation, will meet Pakistani Foreign Minister Assef Ahmed Ali as well as Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

Talking to reporters at Islamabad airport, Botha said things were settling down in South Africa after the ratification of the new interim constitution.

"Pakistan should have no difficulty in recognising my country," Botha said.

Delhi for talks with Islamabad

ISLAMABAD, Nov 20: Indian External Affairs Minister Dinesh Singh has called for Indo-Pakistan talks in a congratulatory message to the new Pakistani Foreign Minister, the Indian embassy here said today, reports AFP.

"Our conviction remains that it is possible for India and Pakistan to resolve all outstanding issues bilaterally and peacefully through negotiation," Singh told Assef Ahmed Ali.

"I look forward to your cooperation in this endeavour," Singh said, adding that his country wanted to resolve all disputes through bilateral dialogue without "interference from others."

All said after his appointment by Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto Tuesday that resumption of talks between the two countries depended on India.

Pakistan wants India to reduce the level of troops and improve the human rights situation in Kashmir after lifting the siege of the Hazratbal Mosque in Srinagar earlier this week.

Pakistan insist that the Kashmir dispute would be at the top of the agenda.

New Delhi accuses Islamabad, which controls the northern third of Kashmir, of training and arming the separatists in its only Muslim-majority state, a charge denied by Pakistan.

Plea to bar Thai coup leaders from elections

BANGKOK, Nov 20: A pro-democracy group has proposed that coup participants be banned by law from standing for election, a newspaper reported Saturday, says AP.

The Confederation for Democracy has asked a parliamentary committee to consider a constitutional amendment to keep out of politics those who have helped overthrow democratic regimes, the newspaper The Nation said.

The group and the Democrat Party of current Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai were among the leaders of massive pro-democracy demonstrations in May 1992.

Kissings no more important

TUBINGEN, Germany: East Germans pucker up more often than their West German cousins in the West, according to the results of a survey released here Friday, reports AFP.

The Wicket 00/5 late discovered that East German couples kiss on average 10.3 times a day compared with their neighbours in the West of the reunified country who only embrace 8.56 times a day.

And the survey also discovered that people are kissing less now than they used to 30 years ago in West Germany.

In 1963 West Germans used to kiss 10.9 times a day, but the number fell to 10.3 in 1973 and since 1982 has never been higher than 9.34.

Some 2,928 people over the age of 18 took part in the survey during the past 17 days undertaken by the Institute on behalf of an American film company.

And whereas 46 per cent of East Germans said kissing was an important part of their relationship, that figure fell to 34 per cent in the West.

It would also seem young people cuddle up more often, with 51 per cent between the ages of 18 and 29 saying smooching was important compared with 30 per cent among the over 50s.

Abacha's takeover an 'act of god'

LAGOS: Moshood Abiola, the presumed winner of the annulled June presidential elections, took a philosophical stance after the Nigeria's return to direct military rule, calling it an "act of god," reports AFP.

Abiola, whose apparent victory was swept away by then-President Ibrahim Babangida, still insisted in a brief interview with the local television in the state of Ogun, near Lagos, "ours is a national mandate."

Abiola described the two-day-old takeover of the government by General Sani Abacha as "an act of god."

"Nothing happens without the consent of god, who has several ways of manifesting himself," he said. "What is at stake is the peace and stability of the country."

Ogun television gave no other excerpts of the interview, which was the newspaper publisher's first reaction to the military takeover.

Abacha on Thursday dissolved not only the parliament and other institutions, but also the Social Democratic Party Abiola led to apparent victory in the June 12 elections.

Ariane blasts off

KOUROU, French Guiana, Nov 20: An unmanned European rocket blasted off from here Friday and minutes later deployed two satellites, reports AFP.

In the 61st mission of the Ariane Space programme, the rocket lifted off from a jungle launchpad in this French Department in northeastern South America at 01:17 GMT.

Twenty-two minutes later it eased into orbit a Mexican telecommunications satellite called Solidaridad-1.

About four minutes after that, it deployed the European weather satellite Meteosat-6, which belongs to the European space agency and a European Meteorological satellite organisation.

Ariane space is a mainly French corporation based in a suburb of Paris.

Suspicion, hatred obstacle to peace in Northern Ireland

BELFAST, Nov 20: Has a peace process started in Northern Ireland? With talk of breakthroughs interrupted by bombings and killings, it's tough to distinguish watersheds from wishful thinking, reports AP.

More than 50,000 Catholics and Protestants braved icy winds Thursday to attend peace rallies in Belfast and 15 Northern Ireland towns.

British Prime Minister John Major this week emphasised his government would include the Irish Republican Army's supporters in negotiations if IRA violence ended.

The IRA's allies say their violent campaign will stop once Britain recognises Ireland's right to self-determination.

These are familiar positions

in Europe's most enduring conflict. But lately, the old formulas have been expressed in ways that raise hopes of peace after a quarter-century and more than 3,100 deaths.

No one has yet to find a way to accommodate both a Catholic minority that wants to be fully Irish, and a Protestant community determined to remain a majority in a British-ruled province.

Among the encouraging signs:

—Sinn Fein, the party that supports the IRA, now emphasises the need for agreement with Northern Ireland's Protestant majority.

—Major has staked his personal honour on seeking peace; and the largest Protestant party says it could talk to Sinn

Fein if the IRA stops the killing. Nevertheless, while people's deep desire for peace is undeniable, the various factions cannot agree on its price. Suspicion and hatred are as widespread as ever — with the talk of secret peace deals inflaming opinion in some quarters.

Nonetheless, while people's deep desire for peace is undeniable, the various factions cannot agree on its price. Suspicion and hatred are as widespread as ever — with the talk of secret peace deals inflaming opinion in some quarters.

Fein and the IRA.

"The prime minister is saying quite clearly to him: You're talking about peace, well now it's time to put up or shut up about peace," said Dr. John Alderdice, leader of the non-sectarian Alliance Party.

The British and Irish governments have felt the pressure to respond positively to an initiative by John Hume, leader of the Catholic-based Social Democratic and Labour Party.

After six months of private talks, Hume and Adams announced their proposal for a peace process.

Adams appears to have embraced Hume's belief that Northern Ireland's core problem is the division between its people, and that it can't be solved by violence. But Sinn Fein still

Havel wins Indira Gandhi Prize

NEW DELHI, Nov 20: Vaclav Havel, president of the Czech Republic, has won the 1993 Indira Gandhi Prize for peace, disarmament and development, it was announced here, reports AFP.

Havel will be the eight recipient of the award instituted in the memory of the late Indian Prime Minister, who was slain by two Sikh bodyguards in 1984. The prize includes a cash award of 2.5 million rupees (83,333 dollar).

Former diplomat Natwar Singh, deputy chief of the Indira Gandhi Memorial trust, announced Havel as the winner of the prize at a ceremony here Friday, Gandhi's birth anniversary.

News Analysis

The bomb that killed nine Protestants in Belfast last month raised doubts about whether IRA commanders would cooperate with their political partners' ceasefire suggestions. A flurry of slayings in Northern Ireland by outlawed Protestant 'loyalists' in October demonstrated that even a hint of gains for one side can provoke violence from the other.

The Rev. Ian Paisley and his hard-line Protestant party want nothing to do with the current process, and he could be a formidable obstacle. Major has accepted that risk, saying that no single party has a veto.

Nearly three weeks ago, Major declared it would "turn my stomach over" to meet Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams, who had just been pictured on front pages shouldering the casket of an IRA bomber. By Monday, Major assured Sinn Fein that talks could follow a permanent IRA ceasefire.

Many politicians believe the heat now is on Adams, Sinn