

Rebels plan to strike again in southern Mexico

SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS, Mexico, Jan 20: Rebels are planning to strike again in southern Mexico, the government charged Wednesday, as US Rep. Joe Kennedy arrived to look into allegations of abuses against Indians in the region, reports AP.

The government warning came a day after the government's top envoy to the guerrillas offered to talk with the insurgents on their terms for disarming.

There has been no answer to that or other conciliatory offers by the government as it seeks to quell the uprising by rebels fighting for Indian rights in impoverished Chiapas state. The government on Wednesday ordered a new Indian affairs commission created to study improving conditions in the area.

The Defence Department statement said that rebels planned to attack the towns of Yajalon, Sabnillas and Venustiano Carranza in southern Chiapas. None were taken by rebels during the fighting that broke out January 1.

Hosokawa to resign if he fails to pass reforms bill today

TOKYO, Jan 20: A landmark package of electoral and political funding reforms five years in the making cleared a parliamentary committee Thursday, setting the stage for a final vote Friday that is expected to be very close, reports AP.

Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa has hinted he will resign or call new elections if he fails to pass the package, which would ban corporate contributions to individual politicians and change the system for electing the lower house of Parliament.

The reform bills are aimed at putting a stop to repeated bribery and money scandals that have brought down several governments and often brought policy debate to a standstill.

If the bills pass, it would represent the first major legislative success for Hosokawa, who has brought a fresh image to government in the five months since he took over from the corruption-plagued

Liberal Democrats but little concrete action. But the outcome of the showdown vote in Parliament's upper house is far from certain. The bills passed the lower house November 18 and cleared the next-to-last hurdle with approval Thursday by an upper house committee.

Hosokawa's coalition has 131 seats in the 252-seat upper house, five more than a majority. But several legislators from the Socialists, the largest party in the coalition, have said they will vote against the bills and around a dozen haven't announced their decision.

That means the coalition needs support from the Liberal Democrats. It picked up one vote Thursday from LDP legislator Tomochi Hoshino, who voted for the bills in the committee and said he planned to quit the party.

"The main event is still to come," said legislator Sadao Hirano of the coalition's Japan Renewal Party.

The reforms would overturn a 69-year-old system under which each district elects several legislators to the lower house. That leads to corruption, reform proponents say.



Morihiro Hosokawa because candidates from the same party often run against each other, resulting in campaigns that focus not on policy issues but on who can provide the most pork-barrel favours to constituents.

The new system would establish 274 single-seat districts, while another 226 legislators would be selected through proportional representation based on separate voting for political parties, rather than candidates.

Some Liberal Democrats and Socialists oppose the single-seat district idea, saying it could allow a party that only wins a minority of votes to take over the government.

Other critics say loopholes would allow companies to continue giving money to politicians by disguising their donations as gifts to a political party.

The reforms have been under discussion since the mid-1988 emergence of a scandal involving cut-price stock offered to politicians by the Recruit conglomerate.

Five killed as Abkhaz rebels blow up bridge

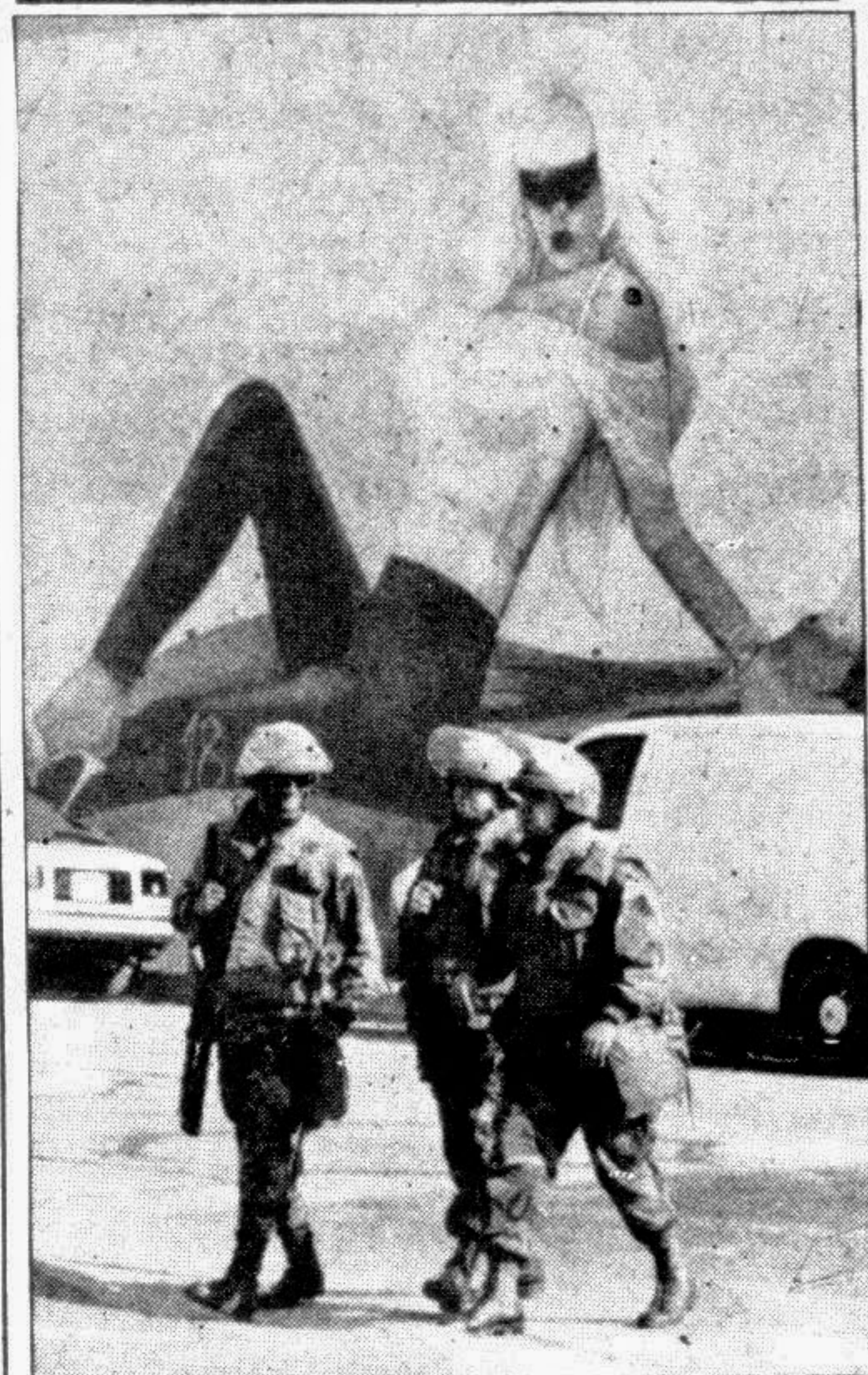
MOSCOW, Jan 20: Abkhaz separatists have blown up a bridge spanning the Inguri river which marks the border between the breakaway Abkhazia region and the rest of Georgia, suffering five dead and several injured in the attack, Itar-Tass news agency reported today, says AFP.

The bridge, which, thousands of Georgian refugees were to have crossed to return to Abkhazia under a UN-brokered bilateral accord reached in Geneva last week, was totally destroyed by the explosion which occurred between the two central pillars, according to the agency which quoted the Georgian Security Ministry.

Some 200,000 Georgians had been forced to flee Abkhazia during more than a year of ethnic strife that ended last September when the separatists seized control of the entire western region of Georgia.

Three months ago, Abkhaz separatists had also blown up the railway bridge that runs over the Inguri river.

Off the Record



National Guard troops walk down Hollywood Boulevard in the United States on January 19 to protect against any possible looting after the downtown area was damaged due to the Northridge earthquake. The quake was centered in the San Fernando valley. — AFP photo

Mandela blames de Clerk for violence

JOHANNESBURG, Jan 20: ANC leader Nelson Mandela on Wednesday accused South African President Frederik de Klerk of orchestrating violence in black townships in hopes of gaining an advantage in the April 27 all-race elections, reports AFP.

The President of the African National Congress (ANC) said Mandela told foreign journalists that he believed the strategy of de Klerk's ruling National Party (NP) was to try to use violence to intimidate black voters into staying away from the polls, thus boosting the NP's chances of victory.

"The state has adopted a strategy to orchestrate violence in township," Mandela said.

He said de Klerk "believes that if the violence continues until April 27... he might even continue to cling to power."

Fire destroys French plane

A fire destroyed a nearly-new Airbus A340-200 airliner worth 700 million francs (116 million dollars) a few hours before it was due to carry passengers on a regular flight, a spokesman for the Air France airline said here today, reports AFP.

The fire erupted shortly after the airliner had been towed out of a hangar while undergoing pre-dawn maintenance today, several sources said.

The blaze totally destroyed the plane but no-one was injured, and the cause was not known, a spokesman for the Air France airline, which operated the aircraft, said.

Firefighters teams fought the blaze for half an hour before bringing it under control. Air transport police have begun an investigation.

The airliner had been put into service on June 27 1993 and had spent only 2,448 hours in flight, the spokesman said.

Neo-Nazi party to contest Hungarian elections in '95

BUDAPEST, Jan 20: The banned Neo-Nazi World National Party for the People's Rule wants to run in the Hungarian general election in May 1995, party head Albert Szabo has told a meeting of supporters, most of them skinheads, reports AFP.

Older sympathisers and security guards, who banned photo journalists from Tuesday's meeting here at the offices of the Solidarity Trade Union, were wearing arm-bands originating from the rule of Hungarian Nazi leader Ferenc Szalas, the Nepezsabadsag daily reported here Wednesday.

Szalas was executed here for his role in the deportation of thousands of Hungarian Jews,

Liberia dumps toxic waste in Malaysian waters

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 20: Malaysia has demanded a 200,000 US dollar bond and other "safeguards" from agents of a Liberian-registered supertanker on which thousands of sacks of toxic waste were found, officials said Wednesday, reports AFP.

The Arabia Sea Monrovia was detained off southern Johore state by authorities late Tuesday for dumping part of the waste — sludge generated from tanker — cleaning operations — in the strait of Malacca, they said.

The next port of call of the 315,695-tonne tanker had not been determined, but Malaysian officials said it was intercepted while awaiting clearance from neighbouring Singapore to enter the republic's waters for repairs.

Officials said the tanker re-

cently dumped hundreds of sacks of the waste about five miles (eight kilometres) off Johore in the Malacca strait and had endangered breeding grounds of marine life along mangrove swamps.

The Malacca strait, which separates Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, is one of the world's busiest waterways and a favourite spot for tanker-cleaning operations, officials said.

"We saw thousands of sacks containing the waste stacked on the deck of this huge tanker," Rosnan Fathil, the acting Johore harbour master told AFP after inspecting the vessel.

The 338.32-metre (1,109-foot) long tanker has been cordoned off by Malaysian maritime and environment department vessels, officials

said.

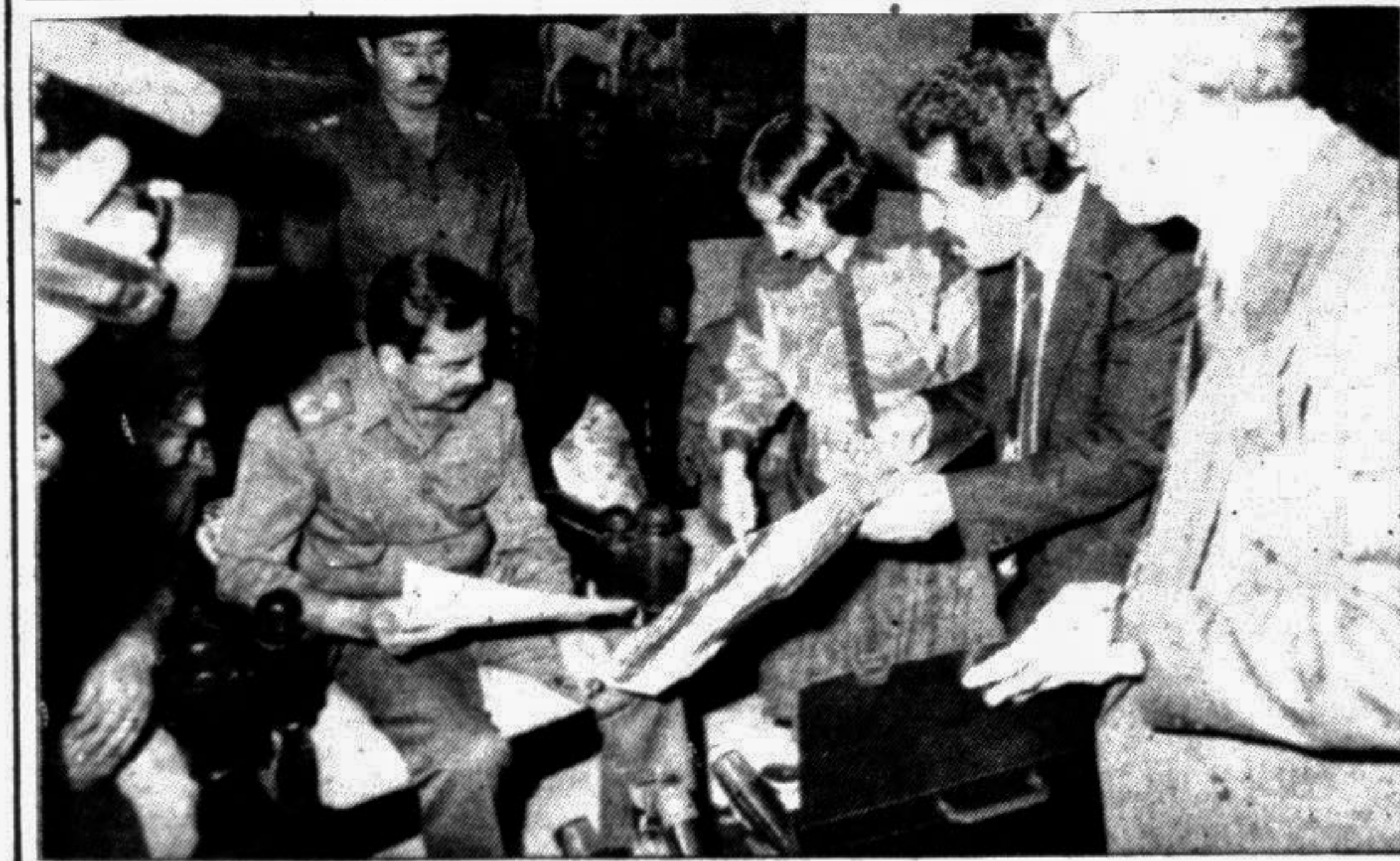
The tanker's last port of call was Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates, Rosnan said.

He said the onus was on the tanker's agents to produce a letter of undertaking from parties that agreed to accept the waste.

"This would show whether the waste is being legally accepted by someone or just to be disposed off indiscriminately," he said.

Seven Singaporeans who were among about 200 workers suspected to be involved in the cleaning operations of the tanker had been detained, Rosnan said.

"Even if the ship slips into neighbouring Singapore waters, the detention order would be brought into effect," Abu Bakar Jaafar, the director-general of the Malaysian Environment Department said.



Iraqi President Saddam Hussein addresses on Wednesday members of a European solidarity group in Baghdad supporting an end to sanctions against his regime, on democracy and human rights. — AFP photo

Violence against Pak women rises

ISLAMABAD, Jan 20: Many human rights abuses against women grew worse in 1993 and Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has done little to solve the problem, a private group said Wednesday, reports AP.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, an independent body, said none of the country's five governments last year made a serious effort to end human rights violations.

The most serious problems included violence against women, the deaths of people in prison, and a flawed legal system that's widely abused, the commission said.

"I didn't find the political will by any government in Pakistan to confront unpopular issues and take up human

rights," Asma Jahangir, the head of the commission, told a news conference.

A 55-page report said 52 people, almost all of them men, died while in jail or prison in 1993.

A cumbersome court system has allowed some suspects to languish in prison for more than a decade without going to trial, the commission added.

Also, "discrimination against women, both in law and in practice, and in economic, social and family life remained uniminished."

The report said violence against women increased in 1993 while the literacy for Pakistani women, already one of the lowest in the world at around 20 per cent, continued

to decline.

Ms. Bhutto came to power for a second time following election in October and has pledged to improve conditions for women. She has opened an all-female police station to deal with crimes against women, but other measures have yet to materialise.

Ms. Bhutto won widespread praise for restoring many human rights and freeing political prisoners when she was first elected in 1988. But she has been reluctant to confront religious leaders, many of whom oppose increased freedoms for women.

The Council of Islamic Ideology, a government advisory group that includes religious scholars, last year recommended a ban on women in sports.

BRIEFLY

Arafat in Cairo: PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat arrived in Cairo on Thursday for talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on Palestinian autonomy talks with Israel and the US-Syrian summit. Reuter reports from Cairo.

Arafat will also meet visiting US Commerce Secretary Ron Brown to discuss US aid for the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho, which are to come under Palestinian self-rule under the PLO-Israel peace deal signed in September.

The Palestine Liberation Organisation and Israel are still divided over security arrangements for the autonomous regions, officials at talks in the Red Sea resort of Tabat said on Wednesday.

125 tusks seized in Taiwan: Authorities said Thursday they seized 125 elephant tusks and other ivory products as they were being smuggled in Taiwan from Nigeria, AP reports from Taipei.

The haul worth more than 100 million Taiwan dollars (3.7 million US dollar) was the largest ever in Taiwan, customs officials said.

The tusks and 2,300 seals made of ivory were found Wednesday at the bottom of a container arriving at Keelung port near Taipei, they added.

13 die in Indonesian floods: A rescue team has found the bodies of nine people missing in floods on Indonesia's Java island, bringing the death toll to 13, the officials Antara news agency said yesterday. Reuter reports from Jakarta.

Fourteen people were reported missing on Monday after a passenger boat carrying 67 people capsized in a swollen river in the central Java town of Solo, 460 km (290 miles) east of Jakarta, after days of heavy rains.

The bodies of the five others missing from the boat have not yet been recovered.

6 bombs explode in Turkey: Six bombs exploded in Istanbul Wednesday, causing material damage but no casualties, in what police said was the work of an Islamic extremist organisation, the Anatolian news agency reported, AFP reports from Ankara.

Two other bombs were defused by police. A member of the Islamic extremist group the great eastern Islamic pioneer front was arrested in connection with the blasts, according to police officials cited by the agency.

The bombs were designed to make a lot of noise and to cause panic among the population, the agency said.

Strike paralyses Zaire: Markets, shops and businesses were shut down Wednesday, and people staged off the streets in a strike called by the opposition to protest military rule, AP reports from Zaire.

Troops cordoned off Limite, the neighbourhood where opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi lives. Tshisekedi called for street demonstrations, but there was no sign of protests.

Public protests are rare in Zaire because soldiers usually fire at demonstrators.

ROK FM to visit NAFTA states:

South Korea's Foreign Minister is to visit the three member nations of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to try to ensure the pact does not discriminate against non-members, the ministry said, Reuter reports from Seoul.

Hand Sung-Joo is to visit Canada on February 14 for two days, then spend three days in the United States before going to Mexico from February 20 to 22, a ministry statement issued yesterday said.

In the United States, he is expected to meet Secretary of State Warren Christopher to discuss ways of dealing with North Korea's suspected development of nuclear weapons, the Foreign Ministry statement said.

S Africa asked to join C'wealth:

Chief Emeka Anyaoku, secretary general of the Commonwealth secretariat, on Wednesday night invited South Africa to rejoin the Commonwealth, AP reports from London.

South Africa quit the 50-nation organisation of Britain and its former colonies in 1961 over the country's then apartheid policy of separate racial development.

Commonwealth leaders at a summit in Cyprus in December announced they were prepared to accept South Africa back in, saying change there is now irreversible. The Commonwealth lifted most of its sanctions against South Africa in September last year.

Vietnam CP politburo expanded

HANOI, Jan 20: The central committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam has elected four people to the Politburo including Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam, expanding the ruling body to 17 members, reports AP.

The committee meeting, ahead of the mid-term national conference to begin today, elected Cam as well as head of the army's political department Le Kha Phieu, head of the party's control commission Do Quang Thang, and one of the party's secretaries Nguyen Ha Phan to the Politburo, the Vietnam news agency reported.

Lenin lives on in the imposing statues scattered across Russia

MOSCOW, Jan 20: As the 70th anniversary of Lenin's death comes round Friday, he lives on in the imposing statues scattered across Russia, in the political reflexes of some of its leaders, and in the antique shops, but not in the hearts of the people, reports AP.

He no longer even forms part of the curriculum in Russian schools.

Just three short years ago, primary school teachers on graduation day were given a manual saying: "What we must make the children understand above all is that though Lenin is dead, he lives on in our hearts."

Communist diaphs rarely carry portraits of Lenin of their

demonstrations, preferring to brandish placards decrying the loss of the social benefits that accrued under communism, like education for all and healthcare free at the point of delivery.

The Russian Communist Party, which got 12 per cent of the vote in the December 12 elections, openly admits there is no question of turning back the clock.

Even Lenin's only living niece Olga Ulyanova, has gone over to capitalist principles. This self-styled guardian of her uncle's memory charges journalists 150 dollars an hour for an interview.

Only a few fringe groups still claim to be Marxist-Leninist. History will show

Lenin was right. Enthusiases Sergei Fedosov, spokesman for one of the radical communist groupings that boycotted the elections.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin shut down Moscow's Lenin Museum in November, but every town was he ever set foot at its museums to the memory of his visit. His birthplace, Ulyanovsk, boasts six.

Ulyanovsk is something of a Marxist-Leninist museum piece in itself. It still has collective farms who deliver their produce direct to the town that subsidises them.

Elsewhere the interest in Lenin is pecuniary. Lenin artefacts have become collectables.

Rugs vases plates

inkwells, badges, flags, picture, all emblazoned with Lenin's portrait were two-a-penny throughout the Soviet era, but some are now worth hundreds of dollars to avoid collectors.

The country is awash with Lenin busts that were given to young Soviet citizens the first time they voted, or badges that adorned the breastpockets of millions of schoolchildren.

One French expatriate in Moscow said: "I began my collection four years ago. There weren't many of us at the time, and your could pick stuff up for next to nothing."

The phenomenon took off when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. The return to the free market saw second

hand shops springing up with Lenin memorabilia for sale.

It got so bad that the army in 1992 asked for a ban on the shameful sale of medals, including the prestigious order of Lenin mushrooming in the small ads columns.

Three years after the fall, Lenin is in the antique shops at very uneconomical prices.

Vladimir, and antiques dealer in Moscow's historic Rabat precinct, pulls a magnificent bronze bust of Lenin from under the counter.

He admits it would have cost three or four roubles four years ago. Now he wants 150,000 roubles for it.

Not that beauty is a prerequisite for value. A 1920s rug from the caucas gains little from having Lenin's head plas-

tered all over it, but it had put the value up to something like 500 dollars.

In its glass topped coffin, the embalmed body of Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov still receives the visitors who file into his mausoleum in Moscow, but no longer the steady streams of yesteryear.

A debate is raging over whether he should be exhumed and buried in St Petersburg next to his mother.

Some say the country will never really change until the old symbols are gone especially among the politicians.

A journalist from the Daily Sevondia said: "they often continue to run the country as Lenin did, in an authoritarian manner without any attempt at compromise."

UN to appeal for food for Sudan

KHARTOUM, Jan 20: Seeking to help feed 3.75 million people in Africa's largest country, the United Nations plans a worldwide appeal for food to save war-wracked southern Sudan and isolated regions in the north, reports AP.

The United Nations will ask for 220,000 tons (200,000 metric tons) of grain, which will go to the south, where a largely ethnic rebellion has raged for 11 years and to the northern regions of Kordofan and Darfur, devastated by drought and locusts.

Malnutrition is as high as 40 per cent there, said Khaled Adly, operations director for the UN World Food Programme in Khartoum, the capital.



Queen Elizabeth II

Queen likes to feed pets

LONDON: Britain's Queen Elizabeth prefers to feed her pet corgis personally and even dishes up the dog's dinner on silver platters, according to a senior royal watcher, reports Reuters.

"After a light afternoon tea — Darjeeling, a couple of sandwiches and biscuits — she feeds the dogs," Richard Kay, a veteran royal court reporter for The Daily Mail newspaper, wrote in the latest edition of "healthy eating" magazine.

"A footman brings in dishes containing cooked meats, biscuits and gravy along with the empty dog bowls. The Queen then mixes a special dinner for each dog using a silver spoon and fork," he said.

The Queen's several corgis are her favourite pets and she often brings them along on her seasonal visits to royal estates such as Sandringham in eastern England or her Scottish castle, Balmoral.

"At Balmoral last summer she instructed staff to reward corgis who caught rabbits. The unfortunate bunnies were then served up on silver salvers to the dogs," the magazine said.

The Queen, 67, personally likes to drink tea and mineral water and to stick to simple foods with few exotic spices, Kay wrote. Garlic is absolutely banned, he added.