

Minister's resignation rocks Australian govt

CANBERRA, Australia, Jan 22: Prime Minister Paul Keating's government was rocked Saturday by the surprise resignation of his industry minister, who is suspected of misusing party funds, reports AP.

Federal Minister for Industry, Technology and Regional Development Alan Griffiths resigned from the Cabinet, but not from Parliament, and insisted he had not personally done anything wrong.

Keating said in a statement that Griffiths had informed him about "serious concerns" about the possible misuse of funds he received for party political purposes, the possible misuse of facilities at his Melbourne electoral office and irregularities in campaign fund raising and expense documents.

Keating said Griffiths "told me that he had no involvement

at all in any of those matters..." The prime minister said police would examine the matters and decide if an investigation was warranted.

Keating said he would advise his Labour Party caucus not to fill the ministry vacancy until after the investigation was completed, anticipating that Griffiths would clear his name and could be reappointed.

A spokesman for the prime minister said he could not give any information relating to the possible misuse of political funds.

Griffiths, 41, enjoyed a steady rise in federal politics.

A former rigger, scaffolder and trade union official with degrees in economics and law, Griffiths entered Parliament a decade ago, and was considered by some as future ministerial and even leadership material.

Somalis welcome pact

MOGADISHU, Jan 22: Thousands of Somalis from two rival clans took part in a rally here Friday to welcome a peace pact signed between the warring factions earlier in the week, reports AFP.

Members of the Abgal clan, from northern Mogadishu, and loyal to interim President Ali Mahdi, travelled to southern end of the capital to join the Habr Gedir under Mohamed Farah Aided.

The pact was signed Sunday after three days of talks chaired by the Imam of Hirab, Omar Mohamoud, an Islamic leader revered by both groups. But neither Ali Mahdi nor Aided attended the negotiations and neither signed the treaty.

Civilian spokesman for the UN operation in Somalia George Bennett described the demonstration Friday as unprecedented.

"UNOSOM applauds the large peace demonstration in south Mogadishu today in sup-

port of the Hirab initiative. Thousands of people from the north of the city joined others in the south to celebrate the dawn of peace.

"Many camels were slaughtered to mark the occasion," he said.

The treaty calls for the clans to live together in peace, end the division of Mogadishu and return property looted during the civil war.

But a power struggle still divides the two men, whose fighters gutted Mogadishu in four months of carnage before the first US marines landed in December 1992.

US forces are now being gradually withdrawn from Somalia, with 74 troops due to return to the United States today.

US forces spokesman Steve Rausch announced meanwhile that the US army chief of staff, General Gordon Sullivan, was expected here today for a brief visit to the 5,414 US troops in the city.



Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic (L) greets Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (R) at the International Conference of Parliamentarians on Bosnia-Herzegovina in Kuala Lumpur on Saturday. Mahathir attacked the western powers for not doing enough to end the war in Bosnia. — AFP photo

Russian parliament votes for lifting sanctions on Y'slav states

MOSCOW, Jan 22: The Russian Duma, the lower house of parliament, voted overwhelmingly Friday in favour of lifting sanctions against rump Yugoslavia and said it opposed the use of force to settle the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, reports AFP.

The new Duma, in which conservative forces gained a majority in last December's elections, voted by 280 votes to two, with eight abstentions, for a resolution calling on the Russian government to present to the UN Security Council "an initiative concerning the lifting of sanctions against Serbia."

The debate on the resolution, introduced by the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission, Vladimir Lukin, was the first foreign policy discussion by the new parliament.

UN-mandated sanctions were applied against Serbia and its ally Montenegro in May 1992 for their support for Serb separatists in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Deputies also said they were "very concerned" over "discussions within NATO on the possibility of bombing certain targets in former Yugoslavia."

The use of force "will not bring about the end of the war but on the contrary could lead to an escalation in the cruelty and confrontation," they said in a statement passed by the chamber.

Member nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation last week approved in principle the use of allied warplanes if necessary to free up besieged towns in Bosnia and open an airport near the northern town of Tuzla.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergi Lavrov told the deputies that for the moment the NATO proposal was "only a threat" that could be implemented only after consultations with UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and members of the UN Security Council.

"In such a case, our position will be clearly negative," Lavrov said.

Russia enjoys a veto on the Security Council, and Boutros-Ghali has indicated strong opposition to the use of air strikes in Bosnia.

Lavrov told deputies that the use of NATO air strikes in the event of attacks on UN personnel applied to all participants in the conflict, and was "not only an anti-Serb measure."

The choice of the Bosnian conflict as the subject for the

China's plea not to show film on Mao

HONG KONG, Jan 22: China urged foreign reporters in Hong Kong on Friday not to show a controversial British Broadcasting Corp (BBC) documentary about the life of chairman Mao Zedong at their club on Monday, reports AFP.

But the board of governors of the Foreign Correspondents' Club (FCC) said they would go ahead with Monday's screening of "Mao Zedong: The Last Emperor" — and also ignore an unusual Hong Kong government request that they secure a permit for the members-only event.

FCC Vice President Carl Goldstein said China's demand was presented to the board by two officials of the foreign affairs department of the Hong Kong branch of the Xinhua news agency, Beijing's De Facto consulate in the British colony.

ROK may ask US to deny Kim Chong's residency

SEOUL, Jan 22: South Korea may ask the United States to deny permanent residency to a former national security adviser wanted for questioning in a multi-million dollar military procurement scandal, a report said Saturday, reports AP.

Kim Chong-whi, a Cabinet member and national security adviser under ex-president Roh Tae-woo, left South Korea last April, two months after Roh's term ended and as the new government launched an anti-corruption campaign.

Kim, 59, was never charged. But his position as one of Roh's closest advisors has made him a target of critics who claimed top officials in the Roh government gained millions of dollars in bribes and political kickbacks.

On Saturday, the national Yonhap news agency quoted

Vice Foreign Minister Hong Soon-young as saying that the South Korean embassy in Washington has been asked to clarify with US officials whether a request for residency can be blocked.

Reports earlier this week that Kim applied for permanent US residency set off a flurry of demands that Kim be recalled to Korea to answer questions from investigators.

A former defence minister and top military officials were arrested and convicted of taking bribes from arms dealers.

The campaign to clean up government has been a key-stone of the administration of President Kim Young-sam. More than 3,000 officials, lawmakers and businessmen were jailed, reprimanded or fined for bribes and political kickbacks in 1993.

Off the Record

Witchdoctor dies with all his teeth

NIAMEY: Bawa Daouda, the greatest Bawura or witchdoctor among Niger's animist minority, died this week at the age of 126, and "with all his teeth", according to his devotees, reports AFP.

A legend in the Arewa district, an animist stronghold in this mainly-Muslim country, Bawa Daouda died at his birthplace Bagagi, a village near Dogondoutchi, 210 kilometres east of here.

He leaves two wives and 17 children, the youngest of whom is nine, conceived when Bawa Daouda was 115, his followers insist.

By repute he was an infallible healer, a rainmaker and a master of the forces of evil.

One day, I went to see the Emir of Sokoto (in Nigeria) who had had a majestic mosque built.

"Inside they showed me a tiny shelter, and told me: (That's the house of God. I opened it and there was no one inside.)"

As a young man, Bawa Daouda won himself a reputation as a peerless hunter, and then turned to farming.

Wife electrocutes husband by wiring his

MANILA: A Filipino housewife, angered by her drunkard husband, wired his penis to an electrical device used to stun fish while he was asleep and turned it on, electrocuting him, the Manila Times newspaper reported Saturday, says AFP.

The newspaper, which did not say when the incident happened, said Erlinda De La Cruz, 37, was furious with her husband Basilio, 38, for spending all the money from the sale of three sacks of rice in a local beerhouse.

She confronted him when he came home but he became angry and attacked her with a machete, the Times quoted the woman as saying.

La Cruz fled to a friend's house and came back several hours later to find her husband asleep, the Times said.

She took his illegal fishing device that uses electricity to stun fish, tied it to his penis and pressed the button.

The Times said Basilio was declared dead on arrival at a nearby hospital and that his penis and chest were charred.

Erlinda surrendered to police but the newspaper did not say what charges would be filed. Police could not be reached for comment.

Love has no bars

STARKE, Florida: Love had no bars Friday as a death row inmate and his ex-con bride exchanged vows and wedding rings through a hole in a plastic glass barrier separating them, reports AFP.

Condemned inmate Frank Valdes, 32, married Wanda Eds, 51, in a no-frills ceremony in Florida state prison's no-contact visiting area.

Prison officials would not allow the couple to be wed side-by-side because Eds, once known as "Wicked Wanda," was deemed a security risk because of a robbery conviction. She met Valdes 15 years ago when he was imprisoned with her son.

Valdes paid for the pair's gold bands with his canteen money. The couple lobbied prison officials for three years before the rules prohibiting weddings were changed.

IRA leader accuses Major of 'blocking' peace effort

LONDON, Jan 22: Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams late Friday accused British Prime Minister John Major of "blocking" the peace effort in northern Ireland by refusing to clarify the Anglo-Irish declaration on the province, reports AFP.

Adams, head of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) political wing, charged that major had published Sinn Fein correspondence requesting clarification "in a patently obvious attempt to frustrate a genuine effort to end the stand off."

"The text of his reply... deliberately blocks this effort by rejecting the need for clarification of the key issues," Adams said in a statement.

Earlier Friday, Major had written to Adams denying the Sinn Fein Request for "full clarification" of the December 15 joint declaration, saying it was not open to "renegotiation."

Both the Prime Minister and

the Taoiseach (Irish Premier Albert Reynolds) have made clear that there can be no question of renegotiation of their joint declaration.

"It provides a balanced framework for peace and democracy which recognises the interests and aspirations of both main traditions that exist in Ireland. That text, and only that text, is what is at issue."

Adams had asked Major in an unsigned and supposedly private letter on January 7 for "full clarification" of the declaration, urging Major "to take the necessary steps to realise this opportunity."

In an interview with channel four news later Friday, Adams, who appeared furious at Britain's refusal to budge from the its original stance, accused Major's government of delaying and stalling. He decided the declaration as "at times a masterpiece of ambiguity."

Lenin's death anniversary observed

MOSCOW, Jan 22: Several hundred die-hard communists succeeded in commemorating the 70th anniversary of Lenin's death Friday in Moscow despite a general lack of interest by most Russians, reports AFP.

They gathered early Friday in Red Square in front of Lenin's tomb to pay homage to the father of the Bolshevik revolution, who died on January 21, 1924.

Despite the occasion, the tomb remained firmly closed as it does every Friday, but Lenin's fervent followers laid a wreath outside the building.

Anatoly had gathered with about 30 others in front of the tomb to "commemorate the greatest man of our era who gave his life for the liberation of the workers."

Earlier Friday Pravda, the former official organ of the communist party, organised a conference on the theme "Is Lenin still alive today?"

UN envoy looks into Cambodia's HR situation

PHNOM PENH, Jan 22: A special UN envoy began looking into Cambodia's human rights situation today as part of a week-long fact-finding mission aimed at strengthening human rights education, officials said, reports Reuters.

Australian Michael Kirby, appointed last November as the United Nations' Special Representative for Human Rights in Cambodia, arrived in Phnom Penh on Friday.

"Today (Saturday) he's meeting with all the human rights groups — they'll brief him on the human rights situation in Cambodia," said UN human rights officer Leah Melnick.

Kirby on Saturday also met Cambodian Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen on Saturday.

Rejection of reforms bill disappoints Japanese

TOKYO, Jan 22: The upper-house rejection of a landmark Japanese political reform package was greeted with groans of disappointment Saturday from media, financial markets, and political observers, reports AP.

Top officials from the seven-party coalition of Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa set to work to discuss ways to salvage the legislation intended to clean up decades of corrupt money politics. Hosokawa has staked his political future on the passage of the bills.

The package, which already passed the lower house of Parliament but was defeated in the upper house Friday by a vote of 130-118, can still pass if a compromise version is agreed to by a conference committee, or if the lower

house passes it by a two-thirds majority.

News of the stunning setback for Hosokawa was splashed across front pages of all major Japanese newspapers Saturday. Editorials and analyses were mixed in assigning blame, but most were in agreement on the need to resolve the reform issue quickly and move on to fixing the economy.

An emergency economic stimulus package was expected to be the next order of business after political reform, but with Japan's political leadership in turmoil the timing of the package is uncertain at best.

Other pressing economic issues, including a major overhaul to the tax system and the drafting of a budget for the fiscal year beginning in April,

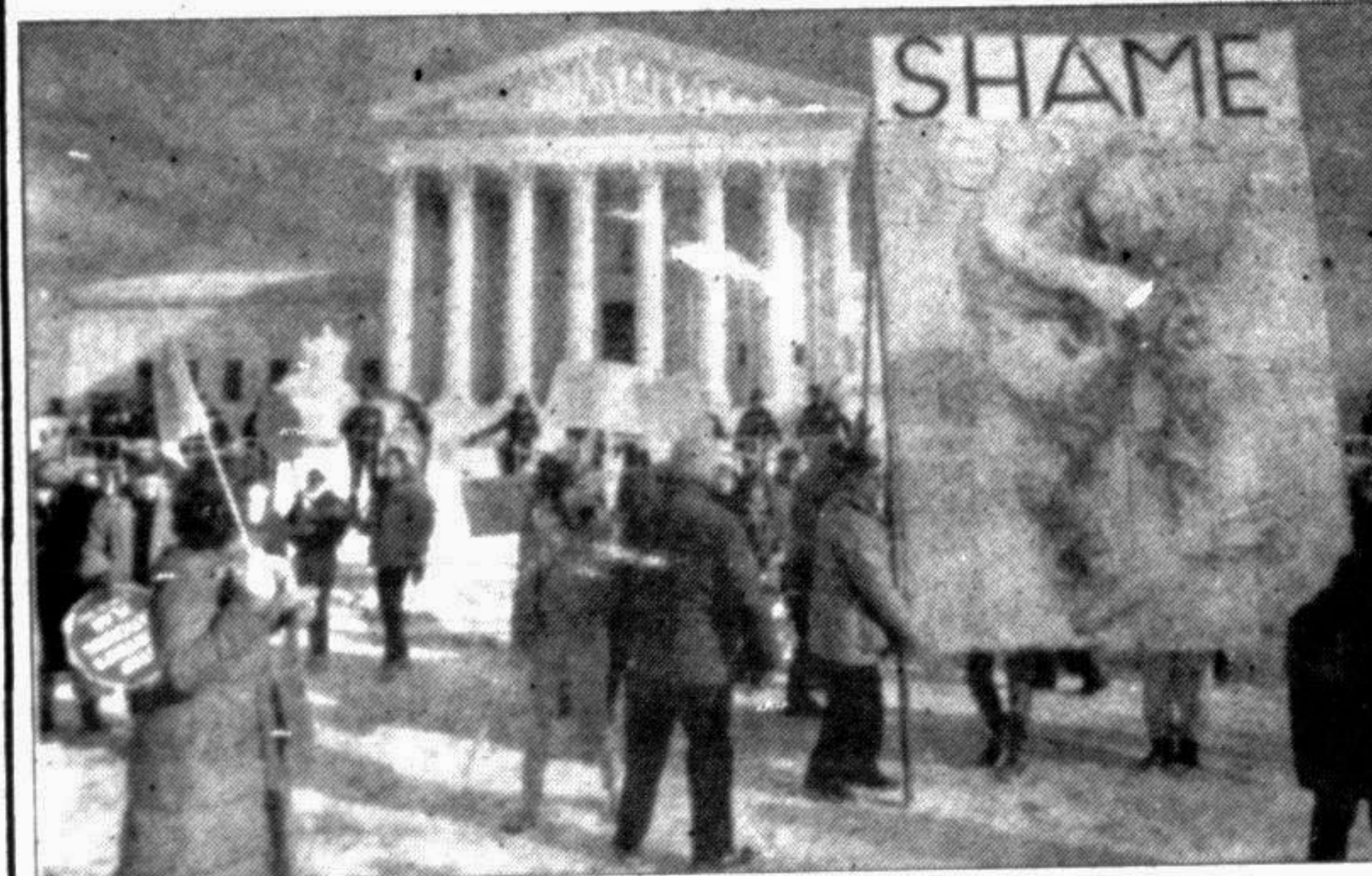
have also been put on the back burner in favour of the reform package.

The political uncertainty led overseas investors to dump shares of Japanese companies and mutual funds. Trading in the Japanese currency was also volatile.

The vote, which had been too hard to call for most pundits, came after Tokyo financial markets had closed. Analysts expected stock prices to fall when the market reopens Monday.

The setback also means Hosokawa could face President Clinton in a Washington summit February 11 as a lame duck if his fragile coalition shatters.

Newspapers expressed disappointment with the rejection and urged the government to waste no time.



Anti-abortion protesters erect a sign of an aborted fetus in front of the US Supreme Court on Friday. An estimated 35,000 marchers braved snow and ice at an outdoor rally marking the 21st anniversary of legalised abortion in the United States. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

China to celebrate lunar year: China's cultural commissars are laying plans for "high taste" celebrations of the lunar new year next month, the first in thousands of years in which traditional fireworks will be banned officially in Beijing, according to Reuters.

The Ministry of Culture's spring festival television broadcast will emphasise "A repertoire which lauds the ongoing reform and opening," the official Xinhua news agency said on Saturday.

"The programmes are aimed at promoting serious culture," Xinhua said, although it added that "The event will leave room for a few pop singers."

US condoles Basil's death: The United States on Friday offered its condolences to Syrian President Hafez al-Assad following the death of his son Basil in an automobile accident, the U.S. State Department said, AFP reports from Oslo.

Department spokesman Michael McCurry said Secretary of State Warren Christopher spoke for 10 minutes with the Syrian leader. The conversation took place as Christopher was flying to Oslo to attend the funeral of Norwegian Foreign Minister Johan Jorgen Holst.

Sihanouk returns home in Apr: Cambodian head of state King Norodom Sihanouk says he will return home in April but will still need medical treatment for cancer, Reuters reports from Phnom Penh.

The King announced his plans in an interview recorded in Beijing and broadcast on Cambodian state-run television and radio on Friday night.

Sihanouk appeared almost totally bald, the effect of chemotherapy used by Chinese doctors to treat his cancer.

Ghali starts France visit: UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali began a private visit to France late Friday after earlier hinting that air strikes might be necessary to relieve the besieged Bosnian towns of Srebrenica and Tuzla, AFP reports from Paris.

His arrival came amid fierce French criticism of the United Nations and allegations that the world body was facing a crisis.

Boutros-Ghali said in the Hague that the situation in the two Bosnian towns was on the point of being resolved but added: "supposing it will not happen, then we will, after a decision, have to use air power."

Primakov's secret visit to Seoul: Russia's external intelligence agency chief Yevgeny Primakov visited Seoul last month for talks with President Kim Young-Sam on North Korea's suspected development of nuclear arms, South Korean news media reported on Saturday, says Reuters.

Primakov, whose agency is the successor to the KGB of the now-defunct Soviet Union, also discussed the nuclear issue with Kim Deok, Director of South Korea's Agency for National Security Planning, and other senior government officials during his secret visit late in December, the media said.

Primakov and the Security Agency Director discussed ways to improve cooperation between their organisations. South Korea's domestic Yonhap news agency said.

Korean movement godfather buried

SEOUL, Jan 22: The Rev Moon Il-Kwan, godfather of a nationwide movement to unify the rival Koreas and fiery orator who battled past military regimes, was buried Saturday amid controversy and renewed calls for reunification, reports AP.

North Korea's Communist government, who highly praised Moon, blasted South Korea's refusal to allow northerners to attend the burial, saying "the South turned our visit into a political issue."

South Korea said it was inappropriate to permit a North Korean visit while tensions are high over the North's suspected nuclear weapons programme.

Extinction of birds a sign of increased threat to all species

WASHINGTON, Jan 22: The world is not going to the birds — because the birds are going first, says AP.

Millions of wild birds around the world are being trapped, shot, cooked, plucked, starved, poisoned, driven out of their nests, covered in oil or illegally caged as pets, according to recent reports by environmental and conservation groups.

Bird-monitoring groups say 1,000 species face possible extinction which is viewed by some environmentalists as both a global tragedy and a sign of increased threats to all species, including humans.

Nearly 70 per cent of the world's 9,600 bird species are

on the decline, a British study concludes. Another study says uncontrolled trade in wild birds is a growing threat to hundreds of species particularly in Southeast Asia.

"Just as coal miners once carried canaries into the mines with them to test for dangerous air, we can monitor birds at large to spot incipient danger in the world at large," said an article in World Watch semi-monthly publication of the Worldwatch Institute, a non-profit environmental research group.

The report cites studies by US Fish and Wildlife Service, Duke University's Centre for Tropical Conservation, and Bird Life International in

England that show falling bird populations in various parts of the world.

Most bird species are declining because natural balances are being knocked askew by the global expansion of humanity," the report says.

A recent US government survey showed a 30 per cent drop in the 10 most common North American duck species since 1955.

Among other birds disappearing are white storks, mythical carriers of human babies which used to be common across Europe, the hooded robin of Australia, the wood thrush eastern North America and the ostrich-like Rheas of South America.

A study published last week

by the World Wildlife Fund's trade-monitoring arm, "Sold for a Song," chronicles the dramatic growth of commerce in wild birds. It says 2,600 bird species have been recorded in international trade in the past 20 years.

The study focusing on Southeast Asia says up to 5 million specimens are traded each year in the region, with the undocumented Chinese songbird trade accounting for as many as 3 million more. Some of the trade is illegal under international agreements, but much of it is not restricted by local laws.

Some commercial airlines in the region refuse to carry wild birds, the report said, but

Singapore "has established itself as the central trading post and shipment route for the whole region."

It said loopholes in the laws allow wild birds that have been illegally exported from Indonesia, Thailand or Malaysia to become legal cargo out of Singapore.

The report says wild birds often sell for a few dollars in hundreds of market stalls in Indonesia, but rarer species can bring thousands of dollars in New York or London.

Trade in wild birds "is of a scale and scope far greater than was previously supposed," the report said.

Wild birds often are tightly packed in cages with many

perishing before they can be sold or living only a few days after purchase, the report said.

It acknowledges arguments that a maintaining an economically viable trade in birds may be the only way of ensuring their conservation. But it cautions that paying too much attention to birds with a commercial value would lead to ignoring other endangered species.

The report recommends that countries in the region closely monitor the wild bird trade and strengthen laws protecting native bird populations. It also proposes that several birds be added to lists of those protected by international agreements.

Lobbying for holiday on Buddha's birthday

HONG KONG, Jan 22: Hong Kong Buddhists said Saturday they will lobby China after it recovers the British colony in 1997 for a holiday on the Buddha's birthday, possibly replacing celebrations marking the birthday of Queen Elizabeth II, reports AP.

"It's the same idea as having Christmas as a public holiday," said S.Y. Chiu, chief executive of the Hong Kong Buddhist Association. "We have to popularise our religion," he said in an interview.

At a meeting Friday, colonial officials told the association it was not possible to increase the number of annual holidays from the present 17, Chiu said.