

Mexican govt, rebels claim progress in talks

SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS (Mexico), Feb 23: Masked rebels and the government's negotiator said they have made progress in the second day of talks to end a peasant uprising in southern Mexico, reports AP.

Today the important thing is that we are moving forward in search of a dignified peace, government peace envoy Manuel Camacho Solis told more than 100 journalists packed into the cathedral Tuesday in San Cristobal de Las Casas, the colonial city where the rebellion began January 1.

Roman Catholic Bishop Sael Ruiz, the officials mediator, said the rebels presented proposals on national, local and Indian issues and that Camacho gave a general response.

But it was the man known only as Subcomandante Marcos, the rebels' chief spokesman, who stole the show.

Marcos, with a pistol strapped to his side, took the stage in front of the cathedral's altar along with 17 other masked representatives of the rebel Zapatista National Liberation Army.

"The dialogue is on the right path," he said. "We have found ears that listen and a will to seek a solution."

But he made a powerful defence of the group's decision to take up arms and an appeal for support from the people of Mexico and the world.

"Why is it necessary to kill and die" so that the voices of poor Chiapas Indians can be heard, Marcos asked in an emotion-laden statement.

The Zapatistas are fighting for justice and recognition for the forgotten, impoverished Indian communities of Chiapas and Mexico, and war was the only way, he said.

"We will not play with the blood of our own," he said. If there is another way to achieve social justice in Mexico, "we will open that door and take another path."

"If it is possible that wars and armies are no longer necessary, without fire and blood to make history, let it be so."

"But if not... if the peace is not dignified and true, who, we ask, would deny us the sacred right to life?"

Bomb kills 3 in Kashmir

JAMMU, Feb 23: A time bomb planted in a motor scooter exploded in a vegetable market in Jammu city Wednesday, and police said at least three people were killed and 28 injured, reports AP.

As police rushed to the scene, crowds that formed in the streets pelted them with stones. Shouting slogans, the people condemned the police for failing to prevent insurgents fighting for independence in Kashmir from exploding bombs in the area.

Police shot rifles into the air over the crowd, struck the protesters with batons, and fired tear gas to disperse the mob.

Yeltsin for one-day summit to end Bosnian conflict

MOSCOW, Feb 23: President Boris Yeltsin called today for a one-day summit with his counterparts from the United States, Britain, France and Germany to sign an "historic" document to end the conflict in former Yugoslavia, reports AFP.

Yeltsin said he had suggested to the leaders of the four countries that they meet here or in Geneva but did not say when the summit should take place or give details on the nature of the proposed peace settlement, the presidential press service said.

In London, a spokesman for British Prime Minister John Major described the Yeltsin proposal as an "interesting idea" but said "no formal request" had yet been received from Moscow. He added that, if received, such a request would be studied "very carefully."

The Russian leader, speaking to reporters after he laid a wreath at the tomb of the unknown soldier to mark a military holiday here, said he wanted leaders of the five countries to sign a document which would have an historic importance and would end the bloodshed in Yugoslavia. Itar-Tass reported.

He said it was necessary for the leaders to meet in order to bring the 22-month conflict to a close.

A Foreign Ministry official said he could not provide details on the latest Russian initiative but added that Yeltsin's envoy for talks on the former Yugoslavia, Vitaly Churk, had been tasked with rallying support for the meeting.

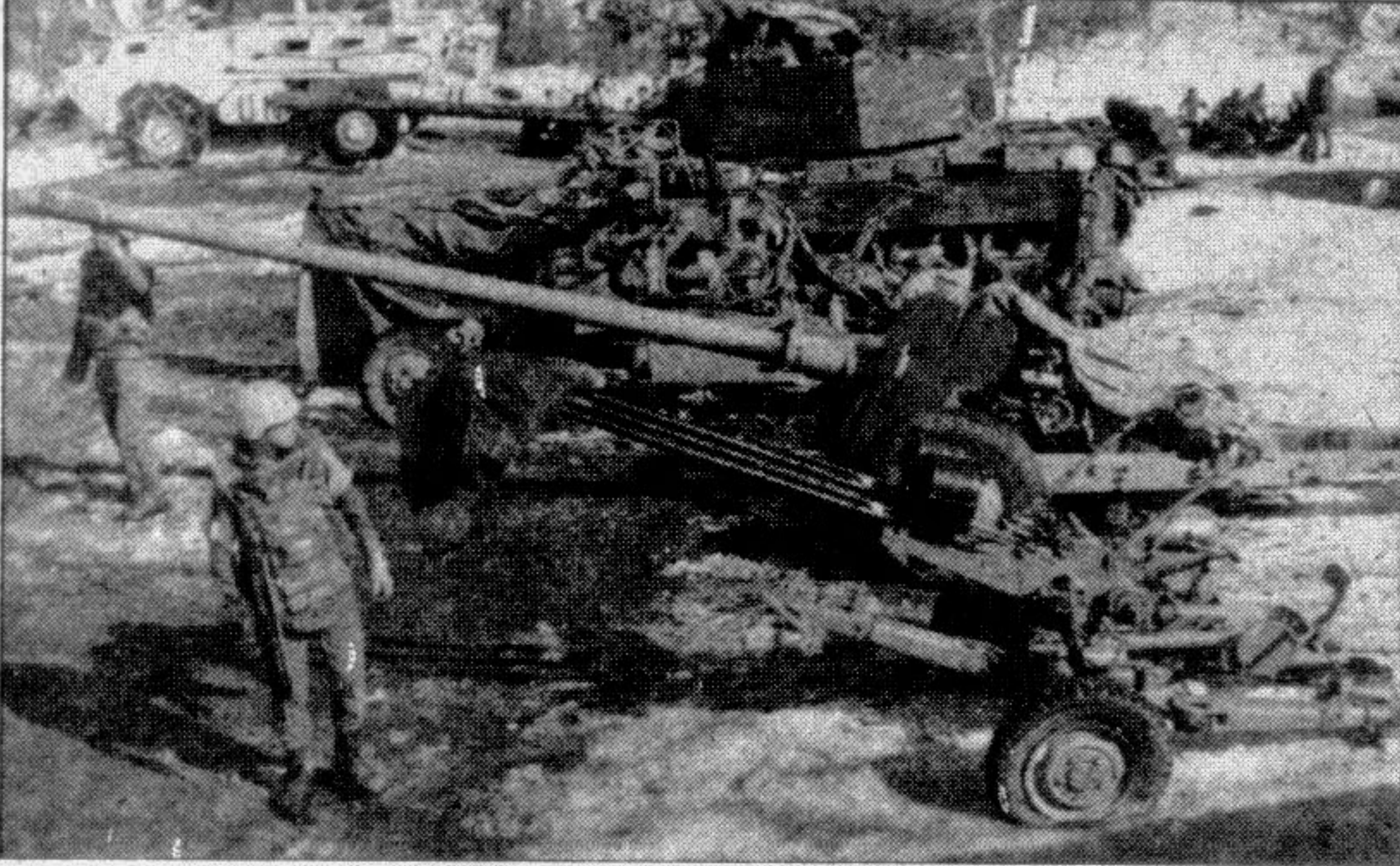
German officials said Tuesday that Chancellor Helmut Kohl also favoured a plan to convene an international conference on Bosnia "at the highest level."

Diplomats from Russia and the West met Tuesday in Bonn to discuss the possibility of extending efforts to break the siege of Sarajevo to other parts of Bosnia and agreed on the need to prevent the conflict from spreading elsewhere.

Meanwhile, Chancellor Helmut Kohl said on Tuesday Germany would press Croatia, which has close links with Bosnia, and Bosnian Muslims to move towards a comprehensive peace plan for war-torn Bosnia.

Kohl said that after Sarajevo's ceasefire there was the first real chance to end the war involving Bosnia's Muslim-led government, rebel Serbs and Croats.

"In my view there is for the first time, and I don't say that it has succeeded yet, but there is a real chance to really move towards a peaceful solution," Kohl told German television.



UN soldiers, members of the French peacekeeping forces, guard Serbian heavy artillery, at their camp on Hresa Hill some 7 km north of Sarajevo, Feb 22. The UN soldiers continue to track the location of weapons in an effort to put them all under their control within the 20 km radius around Sarajevo.

UN special report

Myanmar citizens live in constant fear

GENEVA, Feb 23: Myanmar citizens live in constant fear, deprived of basic civil and political rights such as freedom of expression, a UN special report concluded late Tuesday here, reports AFP.

Rapporteur Yoza Yokota told the UN commission on human rights that Myanmar had to "bring into line with accepted international standards regarding protection of physical integrity rights."

Yokota, from Japan, drew up his report after a visit to Yangon in November 1993 and added that to his knowledge hundreds of people had been killed or had disappeared in demonstrations in 1988 and December 1991.

Despite certain improvements, such as the release of 2,000 political prisoners since April 1992 and proposals for talks with armed rebel groups, he said he remained concerned "about the serious restrictions imposed upon people in the enjoyment of civil and political rights."

During his visit he met the head of the military junta, General Khin Nyunt, but was unable to meet opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Daw Aun San Suu Kyi.

She has been under house arrest for the past five years. Earlier this month US congressman William Richardson became the first non-family member to be allowed to visit her.

"The people do not generally enjoy freedoms of thought, opinion, expressions, publication and peaceful assembly, they seem to be always fearful that whatever they or their family say or do, particularly in the area of politics, would risk arrest and interrogation by the police or military intelligence," Yokota reported.

But he added: "In Yangon and Sitway, there were visible signs of relaxation of tension in the life of the people."

He recommended that authorities try to force the military regime to respect human rights, and that they cooperate with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to allow the return of Muslim residents chased from their homes towards Bangladesh.

Pullout to take 4 weeks: Peres

JERUSALEM, Feb 23: Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said Wednesday it may take "just four weeks" to complete Israeli troop withdrawal from the occupied Gaza Strip and Jericho once an autonomy agreement with the PLO is signed, reports AP.

Israel report Wednesday quoted unidentified government officials as saying the pullout could be completed by the third week of May and that Israel had informed PLO chief Yasser Arafat about this assessment.

But Peres denied that a date was set and that the Palestine Liberation Organisation was told about it.

However, Peres told Israel army radio that if negotiators continued to make progress, then "there is a chance that in a few weeks the negotiations will be finished."

Asked whether Israel would need four months for troop withdrawal, the period allotted in the Israel-PLO agreement signed Sept 13, Peres said: "If the agreement will be signed, then we won't need four months. We may need just four weeks or even less than this."

The latest round of talks between Israeli and PLO negotiators over implementing Palestinian self-rule in Gaza and the West Bank region of Jericho began Monday in Cairo and was expected to end with a news conference Wednesday.

Negotiations are to resume next week in the Egyptian resort of Taba, Egypt's Middle East News Agency said.

Under the original agreement, withdrawal was due to start Dec 13 and be completed April 13. Differences over security arrangements, control of borders and the size of the Jericho region stalled implementation.



Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen (R) and his Pakistani counterpart Asif Ali are on their way to a dinner banquet at the foreign office in Islamabad February 22. Qian arrived here Feb 21 for a three-day official visit on the first leg of a regional tour which includes Iran, Bangladesh, Nepal and the Maldives.

BJP demands dismissal of UP gov

NEW DELHI, Feb 23: The BJP members in the Rajya Sabha yesterday demanded the dismissal of the Mulayam Singh Yadav government in Uttar Pradesh for its "failure" to maintain law and order and prevent atrocities on women and Harijans but their demand led to protests from both Samajwadi party and Congress members, reports PTI.

Raising the issue, JP Mathur, BJP, said Uttar Pradesh was witnessing crime against women, Harijans and other weaker sections as never before and charged the Mulayam Singh government with lack of responsibility.

Algeria frees 2 FIS leaders

PARIS, Feb 23: Algeria freed two leaders of the banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) on Tuesday who had been jailed for insurrection, the official news agency APS said, reports Reuter.

Ali Djeddi and Abdelkader Boukhakhham were convicted on July 16, 1992 of "complicity in the direction and organisation of an insurrectional movement" and had been sentenced to four years in prison, the agency monitored in Paris, said.

The release of the two leaders appeared to be a gesture towards militants of the FIS, which was banned by court order in 1991.

Off the Record

Parliament okays civil marriages of homosexuals, lesbians

NUKK, Greenland: The Greenland parliament approved Tuesday the civil marriages of homosexuals and lesbians living on the Arctic island, reports AFP.

The decision is in line with laws in a mainland Denmark, which administers Greenland. Copenhagen became on October 1, 1989 the first city to allow homosexuals to marry at town halls.

The weddings, called "partnership contracts," put homosexual couples on the same legal footing as heterosexuals. But under the Danish legislation, homosexual couples are barred from adopting children and lesbians cannot have artificial insemination.

Mother sets car ablaze with her kids inside

FREEHOLD, NJ: A mother was charged with incinerating her two youngest children Tuesday in the back seat of her car as it was parked outside of her in-laws' house, reports AP.

Maria Montalvo, 29, was charged with two counts of murder and one count of aggravated arson for the deaths of her 28-month-old son, Rafael Aponte, and 18-month-old daughter, Zonaida Aponte.

Prosecutors said Montalvo had recently fought with her husband and may have been suicidal.

Montalvo bought a container of gasoline as she drove the children from their Union Beach home to her in-laws' house in Long Branch, said Robert Honecker, a Monmouth County prosecutor.

Montalvo's mother-in-law, Tomassa Aponte, said she saw flames flare up inside the car after Montalvo threw something on the front passenger seat, Honecker said.

Mrs. Aponte tried to open the back door of the car but it was locked, Honecker said.

"The car exploded in flames," Honecker said. "In all likelihood, they died instantaneously."

Montalvo, who has two older children ages 10 and 6, was held in lieu of 500,000 dollar bail.

Cigarette ads entice underage girls to begin smoking

NEW YORK, Feb 23: Cigarette advertisements aimed at adult women in the 1960s enticed underage girls to begin smoking, yet more evidence that tobacco ads create demand among children, researchers said Tuesday, reports AP.

A study found a jump in rates at which girls younger than 18 began smoking around 1967, when advertising began targeting specific cigarettes for women.

The work is a crucial extension of prior research that showed a cartoon character used to advertise Camel cigarettes was widely recognised by children, said study co-author P. Pierce.

While earlier research suggested that advertising could encourage children to start smoking, "we had to establish the link between advertising and the uptake of smoking among minors," Pierce said in an interview.

Pierce is head of the Cancer Prevention and Control Programme at the University of California, San Diego, Cancer Center in La Jolla. He and colleagues present their study in Wednesday's issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association. He described the results in New York at an AMA media briefing.

The work is "yet another piece of evidence that is increasingly demonstrating that cigarette advertising does have a recruitment effect on primarily adolescent smokers," said Donald Sholand, coordinator of the National Cancer Institute's smoking and tobacco control programme.

But Karen Daragan, spokeswoman for Philip Morris USA, which makes Virginia Slims, offered a different explanation for the results.

BRIEFLY

Syria frees 3 politicians: Syria has released three former leaders of the Baath Party jailed since 1970, diplomatic sources said on Tuesday. Reuter reports from Damascus.

The three were named as Ahmed Sweidani, Mustafa Rustom and Hadethi Murad. The three were members of the regional command of the Baath Party and the last remaining Baath symbol's still in jail.

Syria has released thousands of political prisoners recently as part of an amnesty ordered by President Hafez Al-Assad.

4 bodyguards of Ortega held: Four bodyguards of army chief General Humberto Ortega have been arrested in connection with the 1990 shooting death of a teenager, a military prosecutor said Tuesday. Reuter reports from Managua.

Jean-Paul Genie, 16, was shot after he and a friend passed a military motorcade transporting Ortega, the brother of former Sandinista President Daniel Ortega, while they were car-racing, according to human rights workers.

Military Prosecutor Lieutenant Lester Gallo placed two of the officers under provisional arrest Tuesday at a preliminary hearing. Two others, including a captain who is the General's chief bodyguard, were arrested Monday.

Elizabeth leaves Guyana: Britain's Queen Elizabeth II wrapped up a four-day visit to Guyana on Tuesday and left for Belize to continue a tour of Commonwealth countries and former colonies in the region, AFP reports from Georgetown.

Elizabeth and her husband Prince Philip were given a rousing steelband salute at the British-owned "Forté Crest" hotel as they left for Timeheri International Airport.

Hundreds of men, women and children gathered at the hotel waving the union jack as the royal couple departed.

LTTE kills 4 soldiers: Rebels ambushed a military patrol in northwestern Sri Lanka on Wednesday, firing rocket-propelled grenades that killed four soldiers and injured three, AP reports from Colombo.

The troops retaliated with air and artillery support, and 15 Tamil rebels were believed killed in Parakramapura village, military officials said in Colombo on condition of anonymity.

The attack on the troop carrier 225 kilometers (140 miles) northeast of Colombo was the second guerrilla assault in the area in 24 hours. On Tuesday, one soldier died and six were injured when insurgents attacked troops as they bathed in a tank of water.

Mudslide kills 7 in SA: Mud and rocks spilled onto homes from a mine refuse dam overnight, and searchers had discovered seven bodies by mid-morning Tuesday, AP reports from Virginia.

More than 70 people were hospitalised with injuries suffered in the dam burst, which followed heavy rains in this area some 260 kilometers (160 miles) south of Johannesburg. The dam, used to hold material discarded in the mining process, was near the Harmony Gold Mine's housing complex.

5 Swedish troops hurt in Bosnia: Five Swedish UN soldiers were injured Tuesday when a grenade struck their tank north of Vares outside Tuzla, northeast Bosnia, the Swedish Defence Ministry said Tuesday, AFP reports from Stockholm.

Four of the soldiers suffered shrapnel wounds, while one suffered eye injuries, Swedish Defence ministry officials said. They were transported by helicopter to a Norwegian field hospital outside Tuzla.

It is not yet known who was responsible for the attack. Both Serbs and Muslims hold positions in the area.

Ghali condemns killing of Rwandan minister

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 23: UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali strongly condemned the secretariat killing of a Rwandan Minister on Tuesday, calling on all sides to show "maximum restraint," reports AFP.

In an official statement, Boutros-Ghali said the people responsible for the killing of Felicien Gatabazi, minister of Public Works and Energy, should be handed over to justice "as soon as possible."

The "cowardly act" threatened to complicate current efforts to form a broader-based transitional government in Rwanda he added.

US, Russia pushing Bosnian factions toward settlement

BELGRADE, Feb 23: After nearly two years of frenzied killing, fruitless talks and futile diplomacy, Bosnia's warring sides are being forced into an endgame that may halt the bloodshed, reports AP.

The scheme is hardly new. Various proposals to divide Bosnia among its warring Muslim, Serb and Croat factions have been on the table during most of the 22-month-old war.

But since NATO's get-tough approach has eased the Serb siege of Sarajevo, Washington and Moscow are turning up the heat on the Bosnian factions to make the final painful compromises for peace.

Russians are telling the Serbs to give up some battlefields gains to Muslims in exchange for a chance at realising their major goal: "Greater Serbia."

Muslim negotiators say Washington is telling them to accept Serb and Croat concessions that would leave them "a viable and well-protected state."

That still leaves Bosnia's Slavic Muslims the biggest losers in a war that has killed an estimated 200,000 people. They would be left with a fragile ministe surrounded by hostile Serbs and Croats.

It also means abandoning dreams of a unified, multi-ethnic Bosnia.

"We are prepared to accept a settlement that is the least unjust of all — meaning that we have accepted to reorganise our country into different units now in order to try to compromise," Bosnia's Muslim premier, Haris Silajdzic, said Monday after meeting Secretary of State Warren Christopher in Washington.

Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, whose troops are accused of the worst aggression, also indicated for the first time that he was ready for more concessions.

"It is not the quantity, but the quality of territory that matters," he said Monday.

He already has agreed on UN administration for Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital, for at least two years, and to leave Muslims about one-third of the republic for their own state.

Muslims made up 43 per cent of Bosnia's prewar population of 4.3 million. Serbs, who made up 34 per cent, now control 70 per cent of the country.

The Muslims have held out for slightly more territory in areas they say were mainly Muslim before the war. The Serbs are loathe to give up anything for which they fought.

But in Serbia proper, Karadzic's powerful patron, President Slobodan Milosevic, is anxious for a settlement that would end a sweeping UN trade embargo that has helped ruin the economy.

Serbs also are more comfortable with their historic Slavic and Orthodox Christian allies, the Russians, negotiating on their behalf.

Milosevic and Karadzic are in a compromise mood, said the Belgrade independent weekly Vreme.

"No matter how big the Bosnian Serb territory will be, Milosevic will go down in history as the first Serb leader to create Greater Serbia. And that is all he wants," it said.

Bosnian Croats, 17 per cent of the prewar population, also have reason to settle. Their patrons in neighbouring Croatia are under threat of sanctions for military meddling in Bosnia, and the Bosnian Croats themselves have been losing ground recently to resurgent Muslim forces.

The outgunned Muslims stand little chance of recapturing lost territory, however, and Russia's emergence as a Serb patron makes Western armed intervention increasingly unlikely.

With the Serbs appearing to have made a big concession by complying with NATO demands to pull their guns from Sarajevo, there may be little left for the Muslims but to take the best negotiated deal the Americans can help them get.

Elements of the probable outcome:

- Bosnia, which was a state in the middle ages and a compact Yugoslav republic from 1945 until war erupted in April 1992, will cease to exist and will be divided into three ministates.
- The areas controlled by Serbs and Croats eventually will join neighbouring Serbia and Croatia.

Tajikistan to sue Amnesty

TASHKENT, Uzbekistan: Feb 23: Tajikistan said on Tuesday it will protest in international courts against Amnesty International over a report alleging the existence of secret prison camps in the former Soviet republic, reports Reuter.

Tajik leader Imamali Rakhmonov denied that his central Asian nation had any such camps.

We do not have such camps in Tajikistan and we allow Foreign observers to visit our prisons where they can meet prisoners," Rakhmonov told a news conference.

The London based human rights group called on the Tajik government last week