

Pakistan urges Oman to mediate Kashmir issue

MUSCAT, Mar 29: Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto asked the Sultan of Oman on Monday to try to mediate with India for the peaceful resolution of the Kashmir problem, reports AFP.

"We have asked Sultan Qabus to help us in urging India to work out a peaceful solution (to the Kashmir conflict) and end human rights violations (in that region)," she told a news conference shortly before leaving Muscat.

Benazir said she asked Oman to attempt to mediate an "end to the escalation of tension" in Jammu-Kashmir because of the "good relations between India and Oman."

She said that "Jammu-Kashmir is an important question and should not be ignored, and should be resolved according to international rights."

The Pakistani premier who met the Sultan on Sunday, said

"It is impossible to close our eyes to the presence of 600,000 Indian soldiers in Kashmir."

On other matters, Benazir said it would "not be advisable" to build a pipeline to India for Omani gas.

"We do not see the utility of building a gas pipeline between Oman and India, but we believe it would be simpler to build one between Oman and Pakistan," she said.

Oman, where large groups of Indians and Pakistanis live, signed a letter of intent with India in 1993 for the construction of a 1,440 kilometre (900 mile) pipeline to deliver gas to the Indian subcontinent.

Omani economic sources said Pakistan was interested in importing gas from the Sultanate, which expects to be producing five million tonnes of liquefied gas annually by 1999.

Pressler threatens to block F-16s delivery to Pakistan

WASHINGTON, Mar 29: The author of legislation barring aid to Pakistan because of its nuclear programme threatened Monday to block an administration plan to deliver F-16 warplanes to Pakistan, reports Reuters.

Senator Larry Pressler, a South Dakota Republican, told reporters he was "astounded" at the proposed sale and predicted it would accelerate a regional arms race if allowed to proceed.

He said that if the proposal came before the Senate, he would launch a filibuster — unlimited debate — to try to block it, although it "might be tough" to prevent the sale going forward.

Under a provision of law known as the Pressler Amendment, military aid to Pakistan is banned unless the

president can certify Islamabad neither has nuclear weapons nor is trying to develop them. The White House has been unable to make that certification for nearly four years.

Aid was terminated in 1990 when the George Bush administration could no longer make such a certification.

The Clinton administration wants to lift the restriction on a one-time basis to sell up to 38 F-16s.

Pressler said the administration had promised that special mounts to carry nuclear bombs would not be attached to the aircraft, but he contended the mounts could be easily built by Pakistan.

He scoffed at an administration suggestion that the sale go ahead in exchange for assurances that Pakistan cap its

nuclear weapons programme.

"They (Pakistan) can solve the whole problem by dismantling their weapon," he said.

AP adds: The law (Pressler Amendment) was adopted in 1986 with support of President Reagan. Pakistan argued then Vice President George Bush it was not making an atomic bomb, Pressler said. But this proved false.

Pressler said the CIA says F-16s are a vehicle for delivering atomic bombs. "To give 38 planes capable of delivering nuclear weapons to a country in exchange for saying they're not going to build any more nuclear weapons... is a strange way to proceed in arms control," and a one-way concession, he said.

It would be better to discuss economic aid rather than

release of the F-16s, Pressler said. He said he could not judge the accuracy of reports that the proposal, aimed to preserve the F-16 production line and the American jobs involved.

Pressler said the Defence Department told him the F-16s would be delivered without bomb mounts but he added, "mounts for nuclear weapons can be built very easily," without high technology.

He also accused Clinton's administration of sending "disastrously mixed signals" on nuclear proliferation that emboldened North Korea to resist international inspections required by its treaty obligations.

"I'm afraid we're going to have a major arms race in Asia if China continues to be as aggressive as it is

UK yet to decide on EU voting rights

LONDON, Mar 29: Prime Minister John Major's cabinet holds a crucial meeting today to decide whether to accept a compromise on European Union voting rights or risk endangering expansion of the union to 16 states from 12, reports Reuters.

The row over the number of votes needed to block a decision in the EU's council of ministers pitted Britain and Spain against their 10 partners and threatened to derail or at least delay the accession of Sweden, Finland, Norway and Austria.

Also at stake is the reputation of Major, criticised by some MPs for departing from forceful remarks about adopting a determined stance on the voting issue and apparently being prepared to accept a deal which fell short of their expectations.

Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd said on Monday of the proposals: "I don't know whether the cabinet will consider those to be adequate. And I am certainly going to keep my counsel as to what recommendation I will make to the cabinet tomorrow."

The problem for Major is that having wrapped himself in the British flag, and pledged not to budge on what he was turned into an issue of sovereignty, he has to find a way to climb down without undermining his already weak leadership.

"Cabinet poised to accept deal over EU voting rights," was the headline in Tuesday's Financial Times.

At issue is the minority needed to block votes in the EU.

HR issue being used as means of pressure: India

NEW DELHI, Mar 29: The Indian Defence Ministry in its annual report for 1993-94 said that the issue of "human rights" is being used as a "means of pressure" by some countries with double standards, reports Xinhua.

"Ironically some of the countries espousing human rights in other countries appear to have different in fact opposite standards for themselves. Their own practices fail to recognise the standards they preach to others," the report said.

"The international strategic context had therefore become difficult and we need to be firm in our resolve to counter the pressures which may be sought to be placed on us."

In recent months, almost all western governments, including the United States have made the issue of human rights one of the central concerns in their dealings.

Liberian clashes claim 80

TUBMANBURG, Liberia, Mar 29: Ethnic clashes within one of Liberia's former warring factions has claimed at least 80 lives over the past three days, reports AFP.



Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia (R) and her Japanese counterpart Morihiro Hosokawa (L) reviewing the guard of honour during the welcome ceremony at Akasaka guesthouse in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP photo

US plans to speed up asylum claims

WASHINGTON, Mar 29: The Clinton administration plans to streamline the handling of requests for political asylum in order to keep up with an annual flow of 150,000 claims and deal with a huge backlog, reports AP.

Federal officials and immigration advocates in the private sector said the Justice Department is on the verge of implementing three steps: doubling the number of officials adjudicating claims, imposing a 130 dollars processing fee for those who can afford it, and delaying work permits until six months after application.

In a major policy change, the new system will be put to work on new claims immediately. "We're adopting a last-in, first-out policy," said one government official, who declined to be identified by name. "We are going to process new applications first and not immediately deal with the backlog."

That backlog now numbers 370,000 cases and the Immigration and Naturalisation Service estimates it could hit 500,000 cases by the end of the year.

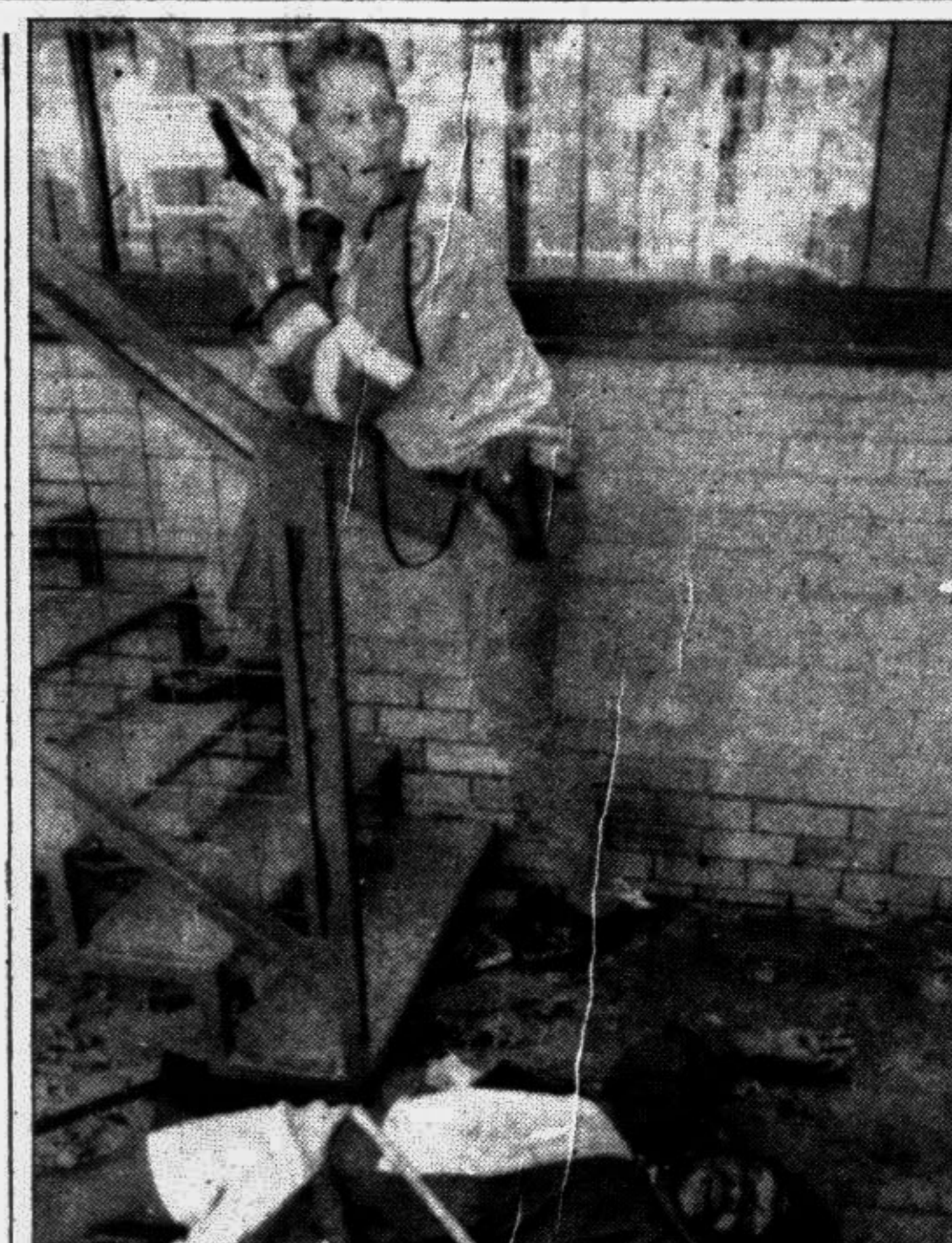
Immigration and Naturalisation Commissioner Doris Meissner was to outline the steps in detail at a news conference Tuesday.

But Arthur Helton, director of migration programmes for the Open Society Institute, said, "There's a real risk that this will simply transfer the backlog from one office to another within the Justice Department."

The administration plan to increase, perhaps double, the 85 immigration judges simply does not add enough judges to handle the caseload, said Helton, whose pro-immigration foundation was established by Hungarian-born financier George Soros.

He said the 85 judges, who also have other business, currently decide 20,000 asylum claims a year. Doubling them might add another 40,000 asylum decisions, but Helton said he expected they would be given an additional 120,000 cases a year.

The government official said, "We're trying to discourage claims based on no sound evidence but merely on a desire to get a work permit."



A policeman climbs stairs past bodies looking for snipers who shot from a rooftop near City Hall in Johannesburg on Monday during a Zulu demonstration. — AFP photo

Pretoria declares 11 dists as unrest areas

JOHANNESBURG, Mar 29: The South African government tonight declared 11 districts around Johannesburg as unrest areas with immediate effect following today's political violence here, reports Xinhua.

Announcing the declaration in Cape Town, Law and Order Minister Hermanus Kriel said the 11 areas are Johannesburg, Alberton, Boksburg, Benoni, Germiston, Kempton Park, Krugersdorp, Roodepoort, Springs and Westonaria.

He said that unrest regulations took effect at 10 pm today.

Kriel said the declaration of unrest areas has been cleared by the sub-council for law and order of the transitional executive council.

Thousands of Zulus marched into Johannesburg this morning, showing their support to the Inkatha Freedom Party and Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini.

Jordan bans Schindler's List

AMMAN, Mar 29: "Schindler's List," the award-winning film on the Nazi holocaust, has been banned in Jordan, Information Minister Jawad Anani said Monday.

Over 100 asylum-seekers on hunger strike in Britain

LONDON, Mar 29: More than 100 Africans and Asians seeking political asylum in Britain are on a hunger strike in an attempt to force the government to release them, reports AP.

Many asylum-seekers in nine detention centres and prisons throughout England have refused to eat since March 11. Some say they will continue to the death rather than be sent back to countries where they say torture or assassination awaits them.

The protest has highlighted Britain's treatment of illegal immigrants, several hundred of whom remain locked up while officials decide whether to deport them or grant them political refugee status.

"These people have real fears and experiences of persecution in their home countries," says a spokesman.

Some bear scars from torture. None of them have been charged with any crime, and yet they are being held like animals in a cage," said Claude Moraes of the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, a lobbying group that has supported the hunger strikers.

The Home Office, which oversees immigration, says it processes refugee claims as quickly as possible but the large number makes long waits unavoidable. To gain refugee status a person has to prove a well-founded fear of persecution, usually because of religious or political beliefs.

Most applicants are turned down, and may have to wait in detention a year before their appeals are rejected and they are deported.

The Home Office says it will

not speed up the applications of those refusing to eat.

"That would be unfair to all the other applicants for asylum, the vast majority of whom are not detained," said a Home Office spokesman, speaking in customary anonymity.

The Immigration Service has 47,000 outstanding asylum claims to deal with, he said, but only 640 of those applicants were being held under guard "as a last resort, because they were judged likely to abscond or go into hiding otherwise."

Most recent asylum-seekers in Britain have come from three of Africa's most anarchic spots — Zaire, Nigeria and Angola — from Kurdish south-eastern Turkey and from India, where government forces are challenging Kashmiri and Sikh separatists.

Afghan factions ready for ceasefire

ISLAMABAD, Mar 29: The two main factions fighting in Kabul are ready for a temporary ceasefire to allow a UN peace mission to visit the Afghan capital soon, a UN official said Monday, reports AP.

President Burhanuddin Rabbani and Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whose factions have been fighting for control of Kabul since January 1, are "prepared to extend full cooperation to the UN mission," which is expected in Kabul at the end of the week, the UN official said.

The timing of the ceasefire is still matter of consultations.

Former Tunisian Foreign Minister Mahmoud Mestiri, who flew here Sunday at the head of a peace mission appointed by UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, is expected to visit the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad before going to Kabul.

Off the Record

Bush brags of his son

BOCA RATON: He joked wistfully with the crowds about being 'retired and unemployed,' jostled playfully with his wife of '49 and two thirds years' and bragged of his son the candidate, reports AP.

It's all about family, faith and friends, former President George Bush told one group after another during a frantic, three-day tour of Florida to boost son Jeb Bush's candidacy for the republican nomination for governor.

The former first couple won over the crowds and helped rake in the money. The 10 fund-raisers brought in an estimated 1.1 million dollars for the campaign, Jeb Bush said.

But the return to the campaign trail for the former president and wife Barbara brought back memories, some painful.

On the first day of the tour that ended Friday, the former president talked about his pride in his 41-year-old son's bid to be governor of Florida. Then, he lost his composure and the tears began. Jeb Bush quickly strode to the podium and embraced his father.

Sergeant beheads wife's lover

HANAU: A US Army sergeant accused of killing his wife's alleged lover, then cutting off the man's head and delivering it to her, went on trial Monday for murder in a military court, reports AP.

Six people saw Sgt. Stephen Schap stab his fellow serviceman, spec. Gregory Glover, "10 to 15 times" at a sickles army air field phone booth December, the prosecutor, army capt. Michael Mulligan, said.

Schap attempted to cut off Glover's head with a machete as he lay dying, Mulligan said, "then kicked it two or three times" to free it from the body.

But Schap's civilian defence attorney, David Court, told the seven-member jury his client acted spontaneously after Mrs. Schap had told him she was pregnant and the child was not his. If convicted of premeditated murder, Schap faces an automatic life sentence.

Glover, 21, had been on the base for two years and the Schaps, both 26, for 3 1/2 years. Both men were mechanics, although on separate crews.

After severing the head, Schap picked it up by the hair, put it in a gym bag and drove to the Fulda hospital, where he laid the bag on his wife's night table, the prosecutor said.

German police arrested Schap a time while later at the hospital and turned him over to the US military.

The defence attorney said Schap had only found out the day of the murder that his wife was pregnant and in the hospital—and that she told him just before the slaying that he was not the father.

'Baby chickens have good memories'

BEIJING: Chinese scientists have found that baby chickens have good memories, reports Reuters.

Chicks were found to be "possessed of good and stable memory" in a research project aimed at understanding the human brain, the official Xinhua news agency said on Tuesday.

A research team from the institute of psychology at the Chinese Academy of Sciences experimented on 1,000 five-day-old chicks and found more than 70 per cent could remember enough to distinguish between different-coloured glass beads, it said. The chicks' memories lasted for up to five days, the scientists found. "Research on chicken memory and further research into the fowl's memory mechanism will boost efforts to ensure the healthy maturing of human brains," it said.

BRIEFLY

Pak army chief leaves for US:

Chief of Pakistan Army Staff General Abdul Waheed left Karachi this morning for Washington on a 12-day official visit to the United States, Xinhua reports from Islamabad.

During his stay in the United States, General Waheed will meet high-ranking US military officials and hold wide-ranging talks on defence matters, said an informed source of the inter-service public relations of Pakistan armed forces yesterday.

Clinton condemns African violence:

President Clinton condemned the violence sweeping South Africa and called on all sides Monday "to reject violence and intimidation and to work towards a peaceful transition to a nonracial democracy," AP reports from Colorado, California.

Those who are responsible for brutal acts of terror must not be allowed to impede South Africa's historic transformation," Clinton said in a statement issued while he is vacationing in Southern California.

CIS urged to form Euro-Asian Union:

Kazakhstan's President yesterday called on the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to form a 'Euro-Asian Union', Itar-Tass news agency said, Reuters reports from Moscow.

Nursultan Nazarbayev, speaking to a Moscow meeting of university teachers and students, said if broad support for the idea was not forthcoming from the CIS, Russia and Kazakhstan could create such a union themselves.

Proposal to demilitarise Spratly:

Philippine President Fidel Ramos on Tuesday proposed demilitarising the contested Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. He said he and Vietnamese leaders agreed on the need for cooperative ventures in the area, AP reports from Hanoi.

Ramos, on the second day of a three-day visit to Vietnam, also threw his support behind Vietnam for full membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

1.5 lakh HIV cases in Mozambique:

At least 150,000 HIV cases have been reported in Mozambique, according to statistics released recently by the Mozambique Health Department, Xinhua reports from Maputo.

The department said that the real situation is much worse because many cases are not contained in the statistics due to the lack of necessary diagnostic instruments and medical workers.

The statistics show that there are more than 10,000 AIDS patients now throughout the Southern African country and the situation is worsening.

Actress Lana Turner hospitalised:

Actress Lana Turner, who was diagnosed with throat cancer two years ago, was hospitalised for tests but will be released Tuesday, a Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre spokesman said, AP reports from Los Angeles.

"She was in for X-ray studies" and her spirits are quite good. Her condition is quite satisfactory," the spokesman, Ron Wise, said Monday. Doctors declined to elaborate on the nature of the tests, Wise said.

Miss Turner, 74, disclosed two years ago that doctors had found a small cancer on her throat.

China's FP cause of concern:

China's family planning (FP) had been a cause of concern to the world, a Chinese representative told the Population Commission which opened its twenty-seventh session Monday, Xinhua reports from United Nations.

In explaining why such efforts were necessary, Peng Yu, Vice-Director of the National Family Planning Committee, said by the end of last year China's population was more than 1.16 billion. The number of women at reproductive age was more than 324 million or 27 per cent of the population.

But China's arable land was only 7 per cent of the world's total. It had support 22 per cent of the world's people, Peng said.

Berlusconi stuns lefts in Italian polls

ROME, Mar 29: Ushering in a new era of Italian politics, media magnate Silvio Berlusconi stunned the left and led a conservative coalition to a projected victory Monday night in parliamentary elections, reports AP.

Berlusconi, one of Italy's richest men, entered politics just two months ago, declaring it his mission to keep the former Communists from power.

A right-wing coalition composed of his Forza Italia (Let's Go, Italy) party, the pro-autonomy Northern League and neo-fascist rooted National Alliance were projected the winners

Tuesday over the leftist bloc in parliamentary elections.

Projections by the Doxa polling agency gave Berlusconi's alliance a majority of 372 seats in the 630-seat Chamber of Deputies to 210-211 for the left.

With all the vote counted for the upper house, the 315-seat Senate, the right fell three seats short of an absolute majority. Candidates from Berlusconi's alliance won 155 seats to 122 for the leftists. Centrists took 31, and smaller movements took the rest.

Thirteen hours after the polls closed, there was still a long wait for official results for

the Chamber, whose votes were begun to be counted after the Senate. Only partial results were available for the quarter of the Chamber seats that are determined by proportional voting. No results were available yet for the bulk of the seats, which under recent electoral reforms, are filled on the basis of voters' selection of candidates.

The Milan stock exchange gained slightly Tuesday, and the lira rose against the dollar. But Tuesday's gains were far short of those of the last few days which were tied to expectations that the right would win. Tuesday's figures

appeared to be tempered by uncertainty over whether Berlusconi's campaign coalition could stick together and form a government.

Rightist supporters gave the stiff-armed fascist salute and yelled "Duce," a reference to World War II dictator Benito Mussolini, as they drove through the capital's central Piazza Venezia.

"I will commit myself to seek an accord in the government," Berlusconi said in pronouncing victory. He held himself out as a candidate for premier, who must form a Cabinet that will be approved by both houses of Parliament. It will be Italy's 53rd government since the end of World War II.

He acknowledged differences within his coalition, but said, "Victory brings unity."

The key to unity is Umberto Bossi, leader of the Northern League. Without his 100-plus deputies and more than 60 senators, Berlusconi can't form a government.

"There will have to be a government that leads to federalism and the creation of real jobs," Bossi said.

But Gianfranco Fini's National Alliance is strongly opposed to a federalist system. The alliance is strong in the south, while the league dominates the wealthier north. The league rose to prominence in the last elections in 1992, preaching tax revolt, autonomy and anti-corruption.



Media baron Silvio Berlusconi leaves the polling station after casting his ballot on the second day of the general election in Italy on Monday. — AFP photo