

Mahathir won't endorse strict Islamic law

KUALA LUMPUR, May 17: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said Monday his federal government would not endorse strict Islamic legislation proposed by fundamentalists in the multi-racial northeastern state of Kelantan, reports AFP.

UMNO in 1990 general elections. Kelantan state secretary Ismail Hassan was quoted by local newspapers as saying Monday that Kelantan's Sultan Ismail Petra, Mahathir's arch-rival and one of Malaysia's in hereditary ruler, had given his assent to the laws.

"The laws had not been gazetted because of the need to wait for the decision of the federal government in the context of the (federal) constitution," Ismail said.

Under the Hudud, thieves could have their hand or legs chopped off robbers crucified, adulterers stoned to death, and drinkers whipped 40 to 80 times, PAS official said.

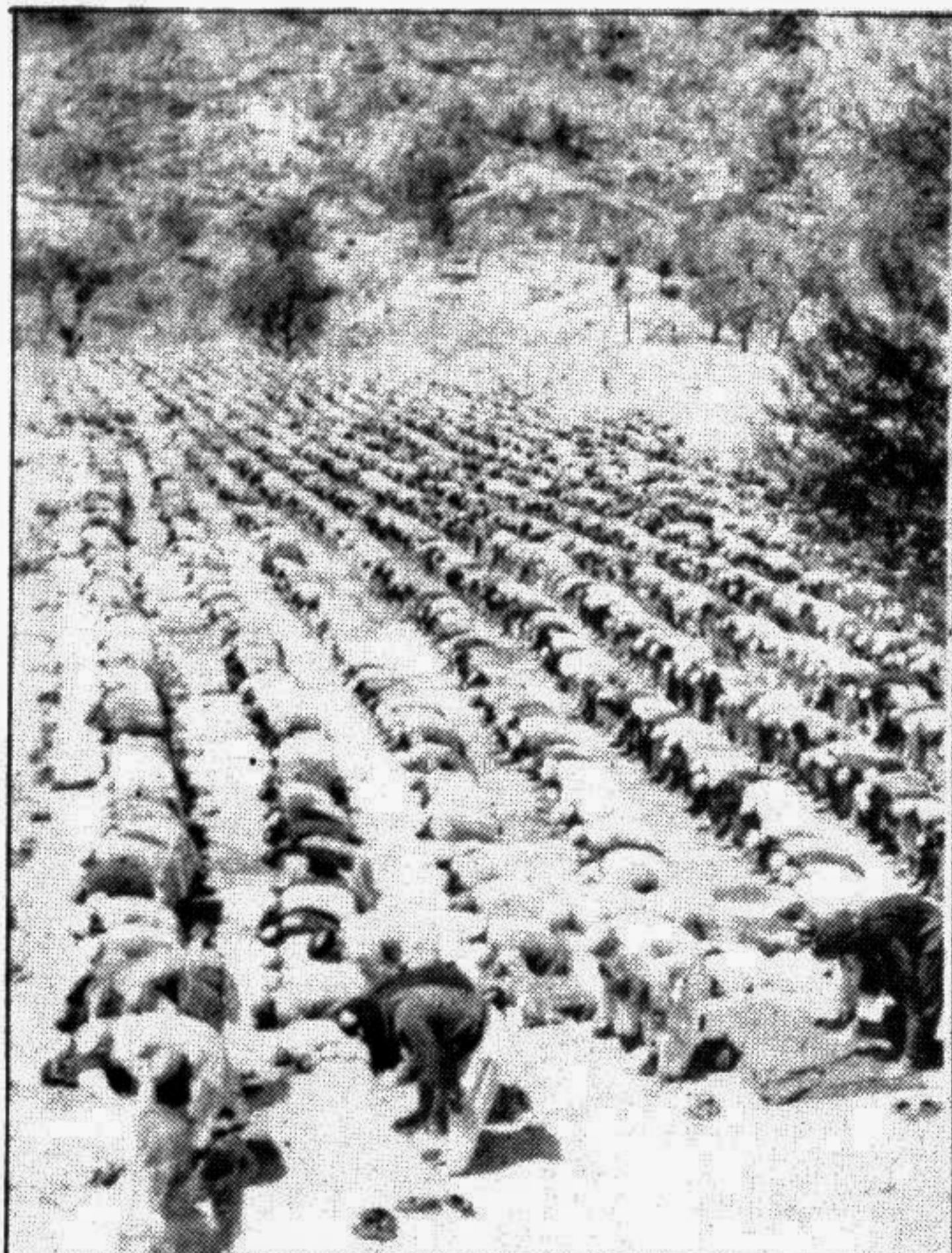
"Islam speaks of the importance of justice and how cruelty should not be present in the implementation of anything at all in Islam," Mahathir said. "The question of amending the federal constitution to allow for the implementation of the laws does not arise at all."

The Hudud has sparked a bitter war of words for more than three years between PAS and Mahathir's UMNO, which labelled the laws UN-Islamic after initially agreeing to back them.

PAS officials said the punitive legislation would only be enforced on the mostly Muslim community in the state.

Malaysia's predominantly Chinese-based Democratic Action Party has threatened to drag the issue to court if PAS unilaterally implemented the laws.

Benazir to introduce Sharia law in Malakand region



Orthodox Muslims pray Tuesday in Malakand during a protest against Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's decision to introduce Sharia law in northwestern Malakand region. — AFP photo

ISLAMABAD, May 17: Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has bowed to Muslim militants and agreed to introduce Islamic Sharia law in part of northern Pakistan following clashes with security forces Monday in which 10 people were killed, reports AFP.

The government issued a decree late Monday announcing the immediate introduction of the Sharia to replace the existing civil code in Malakand region of the North West Frontier Province where the disturbances occurred.

Benazir, 40, favours a modern and liberal interpretation of Islam, gave in the small clerical party Tehrik-Enifaz Sharia (Movement for the introduction of Sharia) which had mobilised tens of thousands of people behind its militant religious stand.

Movement leader Soofi Mohammad called for a Jihad (holy war) against security forces and the Jamaat-i-Islami, Pakistan's main fundamentalist movement, is urging a general strike Friday in the province.

Malakand, is a rural and mountainous region, populated by Pashtuns, a heavily armed ethnic group, fiercely proud of its traditions and autonomy, and deeply religious, a factor which the clerical movement has exploited.

Monday's clashes, which also left about 30 people injured, erupted in the town of

Buner following several days of demonstrations in which militant Muslims blockaded roads.

Security forces opened fire after repeated baton charges and teargas shelling failed to disperse crowds chanting slogans in favour of Sharia law, witnesses said.

The provincial government said security forces had been fired on first, prompting retaliation.

Governor Khurshid Ali Khan later announced that the government would enforce Islamic laws in Malakand.

The region was formerly part of the princely state of Swat which was merged with the North West Frontier Province in the 1960s and its traditional administrative system in which Islamic Qazi courts used the decide disputes was abolished.

AP adds: The vast majority of Pakistanis are Muslim, though they have rejected religious fundamentalists as leaders. The leading religious party won only 3 per cent of the vote in the country's 1993 national election.

A Supreme Court ruling in February abolished many of the regulations governing the Malakand region, and Mohammed's group decided it was an opportune time to press for Sharia.

Pakistan presently has a confusing legal system. Britain, the colonial power, left behind its laws and court system.

Off the Record



Japanese-Brazilian model Tamy smiles wearing a bustier using a total of 123 carats of diamonds valued at 100 million yen (952,331 USD) in Tokyo on Tuesday. The Diamond Bustier has been created to incite young women to wear diamond jewellery as part of their life style. — AFP photo

Chinese dissident detained for an hour

BEIJING, May 17: Prominent Chinese dissident Wang Dan was released today after being held by Beijing police for an hour, reports AFP.

The former student leader during 1989 pro-democracy demonstrations was arrested by 10 policemen during an interview with five journalists from the American television network NBC at his residence.

"The police asked me how the journalists contacted me and what we had spoken about," he said, adding that the interview had focused on human rights.

BRIEFLY

Benazir goes to Nepal May 24:

Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto will pay a three-day official visit to Nepal from May 24 at the invitation of Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, the Foreign Ministry said yesterday, AFP reports from Kathmandu.

Benazir will be the first elected Pakistani Prime Minister to visit Nepal though several Pakistani presidents have visited this Himalayan Kingdom between 1965 and late 1980s.

Mujahideen free 2 Russians: Two Russian prisoners of war (POW) were freed by Afghan Mujahideen and handed over to visiting Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Anatoly Adamishin yesterday, diplomatic and Afghan sources said, AFP reports from Islamabad.

The POWs — Alexie Ivanovic Olinin, 31, and Yuri Fedorovich Stepanov, 25 — had been released by Afghan Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the sources said, and transferred to Pakistan.

They had been captured by Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami faction during the Soviet Union's 1979-1989 military intervention in Afghanistan.

US woman held in Mexico: Mexican narcotics agents arrested an American on drug trafficking charges Monday after Mexico City Airport customs officials found heroin in her luggage, the Attorney General's office reported, Reuters says from Mexico City.

The woman, identified as Loreen Cato Tina, who is pregnant, was arrested after officials discovered 4.4 pounds (two kg) of high quality white heroin hidden in her baggage.

Indian bus mishap claims 12: A tourist bus hit a tanker truck carrying chemicals in northwest India on Tuesday, and 12 people died when the bus caught fire, a news agency reported, AP says from New Delhi.

The accident occurred before dawn near Makarpura city in Gujarat state, and relatives of the deceased were summoned to help identify the charred bodies, Press Trust of India said.

Thirteen people were injured, three seriously.

Kim starts Moscow visit June 1:

South Korean President Kim Young-sam will visit Moscow next month at President Boris Yeltsin's invitation, Yeltsin's office announced Tuesday, AP reports from Moscow.

Kim's official visit, scheduled for June 1-4, will be the first by a South Korean leader to independent Russia.

The South Korean visit comes as North Korea grows increasingly isolated, and perhaps dangerous, suspected by the West of secretly trying to develop nuclear weapons.

Ramos orders release of CP leader:

President Fidel Ramos has ordered the release of an ailing Communist leader captured by government agents early this month, AP reports from Manila.

Ramos gave the order late Monday to release Wilma Austria-Tiamzon, a member of the Communist Party of the Philippines' Central Committee, who faces criminal charges in the local court.

Malawians go to polls:

Malawians voted Tuesday in their country's first democratic election, choosing a new president and government to end 30 years of one-party rule and start the country on the road to recovery from poverty and isolation, AP reports from Blantyre.

"We feel very high, because this is our chance to select the government we want," said 40-year-old Burton Chimwaza, one of about 1,000 people who waited in line in the cold, misty morning to vote at a Blantyre suburb primary school.

Chimwaza was 10 years old then this landlocked country in southeast Africa gained independence from Britain and fell into the iron grip of Kamuzu Banda.

14 executed in China:

Authorities in the eastern Chinese city of Nanjing have executed 14 criminals as part of a sweeping law-and-order crackdown across the country, AFP reports from Beijing.

The 14 were among 25 criminals tried by the Nanjing Intermediate People's Court in Jiangsu province on May 9 for a variety of crimes ranging from murder and rape to armed robbery, the Yancheng Evening news reported.

Emergency in Natal fails to halt unrest

DURBAN, May 17: A state of emergency in South Africa's Zulu heartland of KwaZulu Natal has failed to halt political unrest and independent monitors say it should remain in place until bloodshed ceases, reports Reuters.

They insist the March 31 measure should only be lifted if the new government led by President Nelson Mandela can guarantee a strong security force presence in the trouble-racked area.

The state of emergency often used in the past to crush anti-apartheid dissent, was

imposed during severe pre-election factional fighting between the African National Congress and the rival Inkatha Freedom Party.

Investigators say the emergency, backed by thousands of extra troops helped put a brake on political unrest in the volatile province where some 10,000 people have been killed over the past decade.

Local violence has receded greatly since Inkatha decided at the last minute to join all-race elections from April 26 to 30, which swept it to the head of the provincial

administration and the ANC to lead a national unity government.

But violence monitors from church, political parties and human rights groups say about 400 people were killed last month despite deployment of troop reinforcements.

We couldn't manage without the army at the moment. It would be dangerous to allow the army to go, said independent violence monitor Mary De Haas.

Inkatha leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who is South Africa's new Home Affairs Minister,

has opposed from the start calling in the military to quell unrest in the black townships. He has said repeatedly the measures were aimed at victimising his party.

"I'm very, very unhappy about the state of emergency," Buthelezi told Reuters at the weekend, adding he would be discussing the measures with the new ANC government.

"The fact that it is prolonged makes me feel very uneasy." But the ANC says the emergency has helped reduce violence.

Fierce fighting as N Yemeni troops advance on Aden

ADEN, Yemen, May 17: Fierce battles raged around a key air base today as South Yemeni forces, backed by warplanes, tried to prevent northern forces from advancing on Aden, witnesses said, reports AFP.

The Northerners, loyal to President Ali Abdullah Saleh, captured Al-Anad airbase on Monday, opening the way for a push toward Aden, 50 kilometers (30 miles) to the south.

"Fierce battles have raged around Al-Anad since the early morning," said one of the witnesses.

The Southerners, backed by warplanes were "trying to push back the advance" of pro-Saleh forces on the Southern stronghold of Aden, said the

witness.

The Northern troops, backed by tanks, artillery and anti-aircraft batteries, captured the base on Monday and cut off Southern troops, an AFP photographer said.

But the Southerners later claimed to have recaptured the base, and the intensity of today's fighting made it impossible to say who was in control.

Southern warplanes were bombing the newly won Northern positions, defying anti-aircraft fire.

Meanwhile, Reuters reports, Southern Yemeni military sources denied that their Northern civil war enemies on Monday had captured a key southern military base.

"We deny completely that

2 Israelis shot dead in Hebron

JERUSALEM, May 17: Palestinian gunmen shot dead two Israelis and seriously wounded another in an ambush south of the West Bank town of Hebron on Tuesday, military officials said, reports AFP.

The killers lay in wait by the roadside near the Jewish settlement of Haggai, south of Hebron, and opened fire on a passing car.

A man and a woman died and another man was injured. It was not immediately clear if the casualties were settlers.

The army closed off the area and began a manhunt.

It was the first killing of Israelis since Israel and the PLO signed an agreement on May 4 to implement autonomy in the Gaza Strip on the West Bank town of Jericho.

Iran blasts Austria

TEHRAN, May 17: Iran condemned today the granting of a literary award to British author Salman Rushdie in Vienna, saying it was an insult to Islam, reports AFP.

Foreign Ministry spokesman, Mahmud Mohammadi, blasted the move as an insult to "all Muslims and followers of other religions."

"The prize was a basis for more disrespect to the divine religions," he said, quoted by the Iranian news agency.

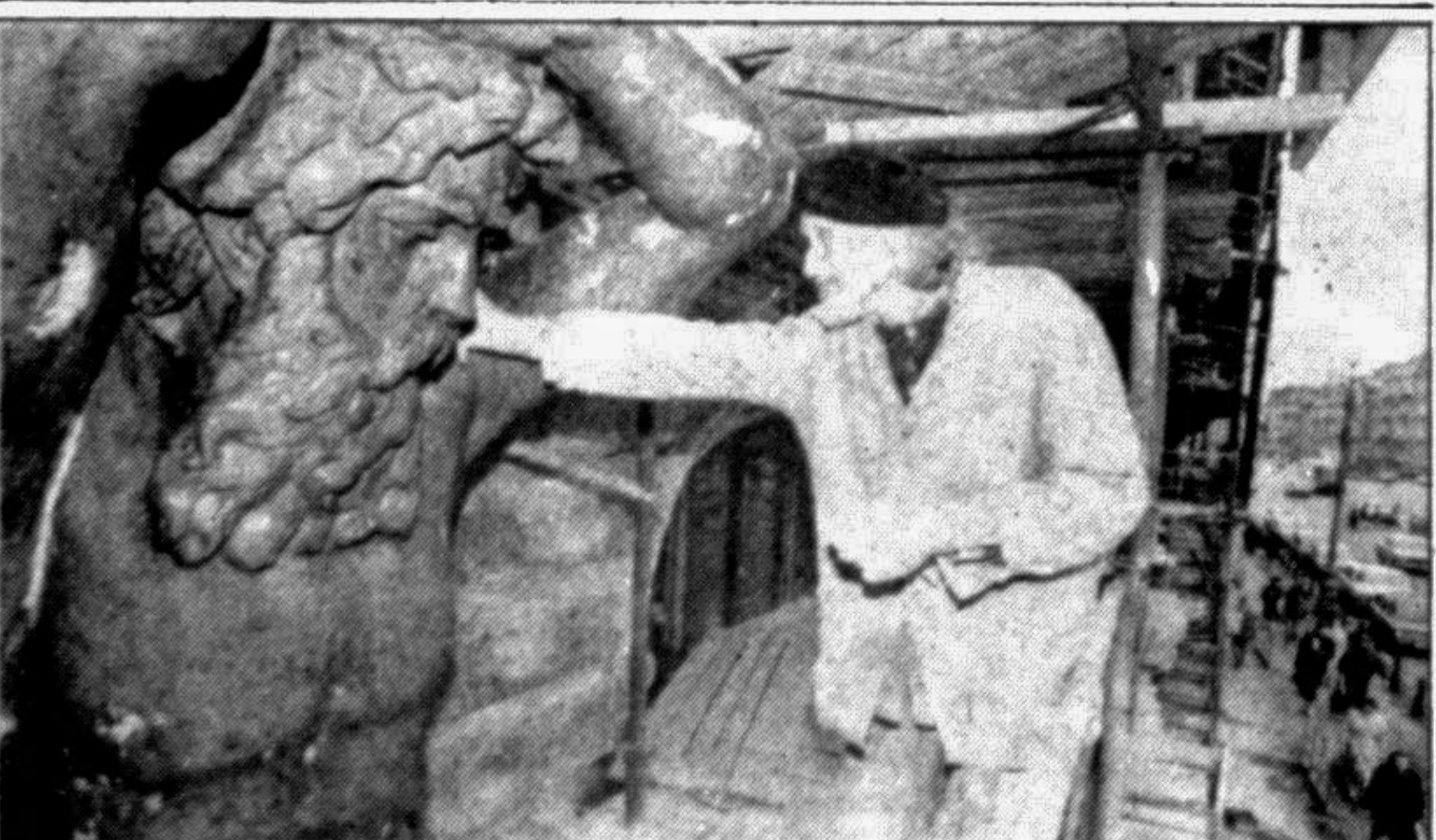
The European prize for literature, which was awarded to Rushdie in 1992, was handed over to him on Monday by Austrian Minister for Education and Culture Rudolf Scholten.

Rushdie has been living in hiding since he was condemned to death by the late Iranian spiritual guide Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini for allegedly blaspheming Islam in his novel "The Satanic Verses."

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A Russian sculptor retouches one of the statues decorating the front of the 150-year-old Belozersky Palace in St Petersburg on Monday. This monument, among others which survived the Soviet era intact, is being repaired with the support of a group of British investors led by the Prince of Wales and the St Petersburg Council. — AFP photo

'Haitian Cabinet illegal'

PORT AU-PRINCE, Haiti, May 17: The new military approved President of Haiti named a cabinet Monday but caretaker Prime Minister Robert Malval called it illegal and demanded civil servants refuse to obey its orders, reports Reuters.

Malval, breaking a six-month silence with a bold act of defiance, also called on military chief general Raoul Cedras to resign immediately, saying he had disgraced his uniform and locked the country into the darkness of night."

While Malval vented his fury at the military's appointment of Emile Jonassaint as provisional president to re-

place the ousted and exiled Jean Bertrand Aristide, Jonassaint named a 12-member cabinet that did not include a prime minister, indicating that he planned to perform those duties as well.

The cabinet includes one fewer minister than Malval's government because the ministries of Defence and the Interior are combined under a single minister.

The Jonassaint government is believed to have had a difficult time finding people to fill the cabinet positions.

The United States expressed outrage when Jonassaint was appointed Haiti's provisional president.

Americans against arms ban on Bosnia

WASHINGTON, May 17: The American people agree with Congress that the arms embargo against Bosnia should be lifted, but mainly recent opinion polls indicate because they hope it will end the fighting there — and they want the United States to remain neutral, and not sell arms to either side.

And a third poll, taken by Time/Yankelovich, found only 20 per cent approved of the United States selling arms to the Bosnians while 76 per cent wanted it to 'stay neutral' and not sell arms to either side.

All three polls found support for US and allied air strikes to stop Bosnian Serb forces from attacking UN declared 'safe havens' in Bosnia, it ranged from 64 to 26 per cent in favour to 48 to 41 per cent in favour. But when one poll asked about bombing transportation and other facilities

used by Serbs for both military and civilian purposes, respondents said no by 58 per cent to 35 per cent.

Two polls found a majority of Americans in favour of sending US troops to Bosnia as part of an international peace-keeping operation to enforce an agreement reached by the parties, one found 73 per cent support for that, the other found 53 per cent support. But another poll that asked about sending US ground troops to Bosnia to maintain a peace settlement got a 56-39 per cent negative response.

According to pollsters data,

17 per cent of Americans believe Serbia is mainly responsible for the war, 3 per cent believe Bosnia is, 1 per cent believe Croatia is — and 66 per cent agree with the formula "all are equally responsible."

Polling data also indicate a majority of Americans think the Bosnian situation is important to their country: 53 per cent said the United States has "a great deal at stake" in what happens in Bosnia. But 53 per cent said South Africa also has that level of significance for the United States, 62 per cent said North Korea does, and 70 per cent said Russia does.

Russian DPM resigns

MOSCOW, May 17: Sergei Shakhrai, one of Russia's leading young politicians, resigned Tuesday as deputy prime minister a day after he was fired from another post, minister of nationalities and regional policy, reports AP.

Shakhrai told a news conference he had submitted his resignation to President Boris Yeltsin because he had not been consulted about the naming of a new minister for nationalities issues, news agencies said.

"I don't think anybody understands nationalities policy better than I do," Shakhrai, a long-time Yeltsin ally, told the Interfax news agency.

Shakhrai had clashed with the administration over policy toward Chechnya, a region in the Caucasus Mountains of southern Russia that declared independence in 1991.

Shakhrai openly supported the Chechen opposition against the region's president, Gen. Dzhokar Dudayev, who has refused to open talks on improving ties if Shakhrai represents Russia.

On Monday, Yeltsin replaced Shakhrai as nationalities chief with Nikolai Yegorov, head of the southern Krasnodar region, which borders the Caucasus. Under the presidential order, Shakhrai remained deputy prime minister.

Irish pub for US artist

COBH, Ireland: A 27-year-old American artist was given his own Irish pub on Monday after winning a competition run by the Guinness brewery, reports Reuters.

John Joseph Mulligan won the pub in Cobh, southern Ireland, after his 50-word essay on the Guinness brew beat more than 31,000 other entrants in a competition for US residents.

A Guinness spokeswoman said Mulligan would be able to keep the Connie Doolan pub or take a cash prize.

Mulligan told the award ceremony, "I'll try my best to keep up the great Irish tradition... To be a part of Ireland where my relatives come from is an impossible dream that's come true."