

BRIEFLY

2 Protestants killed in N Ireland: Two Protestants were killed on Sunday when masked gunmen opened fire on a group of men in the south of Belfast, Northern Ireland police said. Reuter reports from Belfast.

Police officers made chase as the two gunmen sped by car towards a Catholic area of the city and the security operation was continuing, said a spokesman for the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

Blast leaves 6 hurt in S Lebanon: Six Lebanese civilians, including three children, were wounded on Sunday in South Lebanon in a bomb attack claimed by pro-Iranian Hezbollah guerrillas, Israel's proxy militia in Lebanon said, AFP reports from Marjayoun.

The victims were in a car that was hit when a bomb exploded on a road near Beit Yahou, inside Israel's self-proclaimed "security zone" in Lebanon, the South Lebanon army militia's radio said.

9 die as train, car collide in Russia: Nine people died when an overloaded car smashed into a freight train in central Russia, a Civil Defence Ministry spokesman said yesterday. Reuter reports from Moscow.

The spokesman said medical tests after the accident, which took place on Sunday near the town of Vladimir, showed all six passengers and the driver of the 1950s Pobeda car were drunk. The train was not derailed, but two people in a freight wagon were killed in the collision.

Floods claim 2 in Philippines: Two persons drowned and 20,977 people fled their homes last weekend after floods swamped two cities and four towns in the central Philippine island of Panay, the Social Welfare Department said yesterday. AFP reports from Manila.

The floods, brought on by heavy monsoon rain, destroyed 32 houses. A 19-year-old woman and a nine-year-old boy drowned in Iloilo City, a department bulletin said.

21 bandits to die in Shanghai: Shanghai authorities sentenced 21 railway bandits to death last week, 12 of whom were executed immediately, local reports said yesterday. AFP reports from Shanghai.

Lengthy jail terms were handed down to a further 32 criminals convicted of railway related offences, the reports said.

British writer Robin Cook dies: British mystery writer Robin Cook, who wrote dark and violent novels under the Nom de Plume Derek Raymond, has died of cancer at 63, his family said. Reuter reports from London.

The press association news agency reported on Sunday that his daughter Zoe said Cook had died on Saturday.

Quake shakes central Japan: An earthquake measuring 3.9 on the Richter scale shook Yamanashi prefecture in the central Japan yesterday, the meteorological agency said. AFP reports from Tokyo.

The epicentre of the quake, which occurred 1:48 PM (0448 GMT), was 20 kilometres (12.4 miles) underground in central Yamanashi. No damage or injuries were reported.

Typhoon hits South Korea: One person was killed and 28 others were missing yesterday as heavy rainstorms carried by Typhoon Brendan hit South Korea's southern areas, relief officials said. Reuter reports from Seoul.

They said two trawlers with a total of 26 crew and fishermen aboard sank in rough seas off the southern island of Cheju.

Three others were swept away while camping at a valley which was flooded by rainstorms. One of them was found dead later.

Blood processing centre in Iran: Iranian President Ali Akbar Hasemi Rafsanjani opened a blood processing centre in Tehran on Sunday, said to be the largest in the Middle East. Tehran radio reported. AFP says from Tehran.

The centre can process up to 80,000 litres (168,000 pints) of blood for production of blood derivatives, the radio said. The target was to end Iran's dependency on blood imports.

Filipino rebels free US priest: An American priest was seized by armed men as he said Mass in a police camp on a southern island but was freed by Muslim rebels who killed three of the four kidnappers, the US Embassy said on Monday. AP reports from Manila.

Rev Clarence Bertelsman, 70, was reported in good condition after gunshot wounds in the buttocks and left forearm, the embassy said. There was no word on the fourth kidnapping.

Japan develops cable-free robot: A Japanese gas company said yesterday it has developed the world's first cable-free robot to crawl along pipes checking for cracks. Reuter reports from Tokyo.

Tokyo Gas Co Ltd said its robot can go up to 150 metres (500 feet) along gas pipes — horizontal or vertical — as it will not have to drag a weighty cable behind it. With a more powerful battery it will be able to go even further. Current robots have a distance limit of about 50 metres (170 feet).

Bihar clash leaves 25 dead: Some 25 people were killed when rival gangs fought each other in Khagaria district of the eastern Indian state of Bihar on the weekend. Press Trust of India (PTI) said yesterday quoting unofficial sources, reports Reuter from New Delhi.

It said they were killed when two gangs, one led by Wakil Singh and the other by Ambika Singh, clashed in Barun village on Saturday.

US-DPRK talks Aug 5 ROK team off to Geneva to coordinate strategy

SEOUL, Aug 1: A team of senior South Korean officials left here today for Geneva to coordinate strategy with Washington before crucial US-North Korean nuclear talks, a spokesman said. reports AFP.

The four-member team was led by Ambassador Kim sun-hoon. South Korea's pointman on North Korea's nuclear issue.

They will have talks with US officials, including Assistant Secretary of State Robert Gallucci, to coordinate strategy to resolve the North's nuclear standoff ahead of the August 5 US-North Korea talks.

While in Geneva, the South Koreans will consult closely with their US counterparts, as South Korea has its own concerns over the direction of the US-North Korea talks, officials here have said.

South Korea will stress that special inspections of North Korea's undeclared nuclear sites must be carried out to reveal the North's past nuclear activities, including the amount of plutonium it has

stockpiled.

South Korea suspects that Washington might be more interested in securing the freeze of the North's current and future nuclear programme and put aside the question of a stockpile of plutonium in favour of a quick solution to the drawn-out dispute.

The US-North Korea talks resumed last month after the North's late president Kim Il-Sung promised to freeze Pyongyang's nuclear activities, but was adjourned after Kim's death on July 8.

A freeze on nuclear activities appears to be still in effect. The White House has said, although the question of disposal of rods taken out of a five megawatt reactor earlier this year will have to be tackled soon.

The Washington-Pyongyang talks will discuss ways to secure transparency in the North's nuclear programme in return for economic aid and diplomatic recognition by the United States.

Haiti declares state of siege

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Aug 1: Haiti's provisional president declared a national state of siege Monday and dramatically announced that "the battle of Haiti is under way," reports AP.

The predawn declaration by Emile Jonassaint came 14 hours after the UN Security Council cleared the way for a possible US-led invasion to oust Haiti's military leaders and restore deposed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to office.

Under the 1987 constitution, a state of siege allows for the suspension of certain civil liberties, but it was not immediately known what steps would follow.

Jonassaint, the chief justice of the Haitian Supreme Court, was installed as president in May by a minority group of army-backed lawmakers. He assumed the prime minister's post and named a clique of extreme rightists and nationalists to the Cabinet.

"The battle of Haiti is under way," he said on national radio and television, although probably few Haitians were awake to hear him. "We will fight it with all our might and means. It will be hard and implacable."

He accused the international community of racism and of openly declaring war on "a nation that threatens no one."

Jonassaint was accompanied by Cabinet ministers and senators who had been meeting since the Security Council acted Sunday afternoon.

The Council voted 12-0, with China and Brazil abstaining, to authorise the use of force to restore democracy in Haiti.

The resolution set no dead-

line and gave no timetable for the possible invasion, but said member states could "use all necessary means" to push the military leadership from

power. According to Haiti's constitution, a state of siege can be declared in the case of civil war or invasion. It allows the

executive, with the parliament, to suspend certain fundamental liberties.

The executive order should be signed by both the president and prime minister, and should be followed by an immediate convening of the National Assembly.

In this case, Jonassaint is both president and prime minister. He did not call the National Assembly into session. Shortly after his appointment, Jonassaint on June 12 declared a "state of emergency" in a similar early morning broadcast. That entailed such measures as putting certain strategic zones off-limits — a mostly symbolic action, except along the border.

The eastern border with the Dominican Republic has been sealed to all traffic, although it has proved porous to contraband goods, especially gasoline.

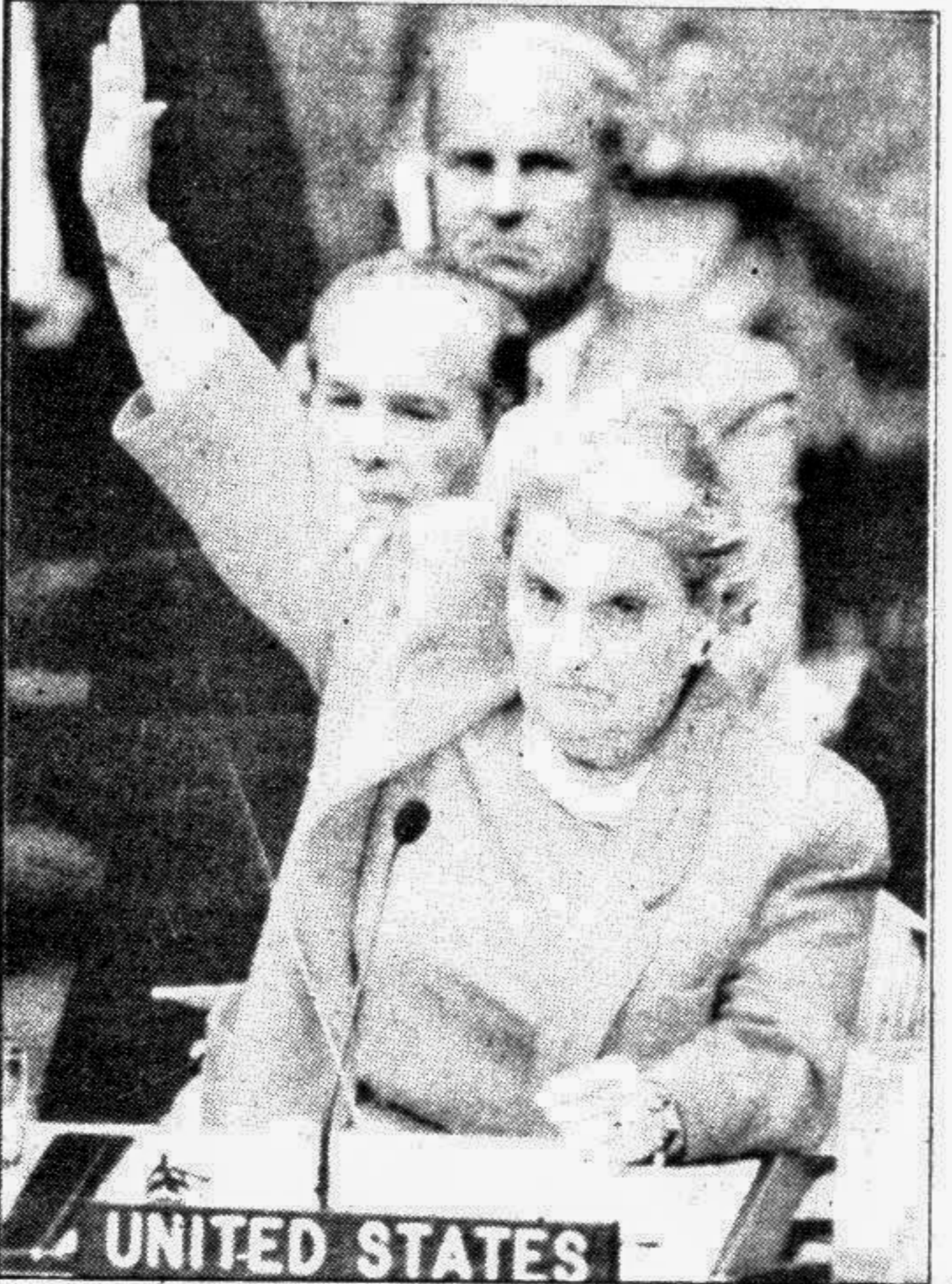
"Let no one doubt our determination," Jonassaint said this morning. "The threat of invasion and occupation is on the way to becoming a reality."

The expressed friendship toward foreigners who have shown solidarity with Haiti, though he mentioned no one specifically.

Jonassaint called on Aristide to show spiritual depth, and implicitly to call off the invasion of his own country.

He then switched from French to Haiti's native Creole and told the people "We can't back off... We have protectors," another apparent reference to Haiti's voodoo deities, which he had also invoked in June.

The UN resolution also calls for a deployment of a 6,000-member UN force following any invasion.



Madeleine K. Albright, US Ambassador to the United Nations, votes on Sunday at the United Nations in favour of UN Resolution 940 which would allow the use of force to dislodge Haiti's military government. The Security Council vote cleared the way for a possible US-led invasion of Haiti. — AFP photo

Floods hit 12.7m in China

BEIJING, Aug 1: Severe flooding caused by torrential rainstorms killed 128 people in northern China in July and destroyed more than 500,000 homes, the Civil Affairs Ministry announced today. reports AP.

A total of 12.7 million people were affected by the flooding in the northeastern provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning, as well as the northern autonomous region of Inner Mongolia, a ministry statement said.

Direct economic losses in all four areas were estimated at 8.1 billion yuan (930 million dollars).

In Liaoning Province, 55 died and 70 were severely injured in floods caused by torrential rains from July 12 to 14, the statement said, adding

that 70,000 housing units collapsed.

Infrastructure damage was estimated at 2.15 billion yuan. Heilongjiang was badly hit with 54 people killed after 10 medium-sized rivers burst their banks during persistent downpours from July 5 to 15.

So, 400,000 housing units were flooded, of which 180,000 have already collapsed, and damage to crops and transport networks totalled around 2.8 billion yuan.

In Jilin, 14 people lost their lives and nearly 500,000 had to be evacuated from their homes amid rainfall that was three times heavier than normal for July.

Recorded water levels in some of the province's major rivers were at their highest since 1949, the statement said.

Thousands of heads of livestock were lost and a massive area of arable land completely inundated, and 159,700 homes destroyed, at a direct economic cost of 1.86 billion yuan.

In the sparsely inhabited region of Inner Mongolia, 145,000 hectares (358,000 hectares) of land will have no summer harvest as a result of extensive flooding that affected 1.43 million people.

There were no fatalities, but 114,000 homes were destroyed, and flood damage was estimated at 1.28 billion yuan.

The ministry statement said local government in all four affected regions had taken effective anti-flood measures and organised emergency relief operations with the help of the army.

It manoeuvres US bombers to blast Kuwaiti desert today

KUWAIT, Aug 1: American B-52 bombers will blast the Kuwaiti desert tomorrow to mark the fourth anniversary of Iraq's invasion and show Washington's determination to prevent a repetition, reports Reuter.

Residents have been told not to be worried by the noise, the first time the small emirate will have heard thunderous aerial bombing since the 1991 Gulf War.

It will be the first participation by the giant Boeing strategists in a series of US-Kuwait joint exercises that have been held regularly since the Emirate's 1991 liberation.

US marines join war against wildfires

ENTIAI, Washington, Aug 1: The Marines joined the war against wildfires raging across the American West Monday, camping in a smoke-filled valley near this central Washington town to help battle the biggest blaze, reports AP.

The first of 1,100 Marines from California's Camp Pendleton arrived Sunday. They were welcome relief to 2,775 sleep-starved firefighters trying to choke off a 36,800-hectare (90,900-acre) fire burning across pine-covered ridges and valleys in the eastern Cascade Range.

Busloads of Marines travelled up a winding road to a ranch donated as a camp site. They searched for clear spots among the cow patties and rattlesnakes and pitched a city of green, two-person tents as fire crept through the woods on either side of the broad meadow.



Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (L) and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (R) wave as they arrive for a press conference after their meeting in Taba Sunday. — AFP photo

Russia clearing ammunition dumps

Vladivostok, Russia, Aug 1: The Russian navy has begun dismantling more than 15 ammunition dumps located near residential areas in the Far East because of the threat of explosions, a news agency reported Monday. reports AP.

The move came after a huge blast rocked the village of Novonezhino on May 14. ITAR-Tass said. Two aviation bombs exploded at the depot, shattering windows in nearby homes and forcing the evacuations of thousands of residents. Tremors could be felt 50 miles (80 kilometres) away.

Two years earlier, a giant ammunition dump blew up in Vladivostok. Several people died when exploding mines and artillery shells sent shrapnel flying into the air.

Russia's Pacific fleet has already cleared almost 80 per cent of the designated danger zone. Several hundred bombs have been placed in a seaside warehouse.

Vice Adm Igor Khmeinov, the acting Pacific fleet commander, said some of the bombs will be shipped elsewhere and some will be dumped at sea.

Assad blasts PLO, Jordan for separate deals with Israel

DAMASCUS, Aug 1: Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad on Monday criticised Jordan and the PLO without referring to them by name for making separate, peace with Israel, reports Reuter.

In a message addressed to the armed forces to mark their 49th anniversary on August 1, Assad said both had violated Arab coordination and weakened Arab ranks.

The President praised Lebanon — the other Arab partner in peace talks with Israel which opened in Madrid in 1991 for maintaining coordination with Syria.

"We exerted the maximum effort to maintain coordination among the Arab parties involved in the peace process and to maintain the effectiveness of the United Arab stand," Assad said.

But some had violated the coordination and the united stand. Those should bear the responsibility towards their people and towards the Arab peoples, he said.

Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation signed a peace deal in September and

achieve military superiority over all Arab states, adding that it was Syria's right to improve its military capabilities.

Another report says: Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin said today there were already "some signs of components of peace" with Syria.

"There is a sort of Syrian agreement to some signs of components of peace," he told Israeli radio. "I cannot elaborate because it is more in the talk between Syria and the Americans than between Syria and US."

US Secretary of State Warren Christopher is due in the region next week to resume efforts to bridge what Rabin described as "huge gaps" in Israeli and Syrian positions on ending nearly half a century of conflict.

"On the timetable and substance they (the Syrians) are still far from satisfying us," he told Israeli radio.

Israeli-Syrian peace talks are stuck on the fate of the Golan Heights, captured by Israel in 1967. Syria has demanded a full withdrawal.

Kashmiri militants firm to sabotage Hindu pilgrimage

SRINAGAR, India, Aug 1: Kashmiri, Muslim guerilla groups said today that a "ban" they have imposed on an annual Hindu pilgrimage to the Himalayan state was irrevocable, reports AFP.

In a statement here, they said the "ban" would stay even if the Indian government conceded to their demands to dismantle security bunkers outside Srinagar's Hazratbal Mosque, Kashmir's holiest Islamic shrine.

The statement was released jointly by the Jamaitul Mujahideen, the Hizbul Mujahideen, the Al Umar Mujahideen, Al Jihad, Jihad Force, Hezbollah, Harkat-ul-Ansar and Allah Tigers.

The groups, which are fighting for an end to Indian rule over Kashmir and accession to neighbouring Pakistan, said they had information that the government planned to remove the troops deployed outside Hazratbal.

The gesture was aimed at paving the way for a pro-India political process in Kashmir," their statement said.

It added that the guerillas would, however, intensify their efforts to sabotage the pilgrimage "at all costs."

The Harkat-ul-Ansar, which has many Islamic mercenaries on its rolls, had on July 6 announced that it would not allow Hindus to perform the annual August pilgrimage to the Amarnath cave in the mountains of South Kashmir.

The Harkat, whose call was

supported by the other groups, said it was imposing the "ban" to demand the removal of the security pickets set up outside Hazratbal to prevent guerillas from using the shrine as a sanctuary.

Thousands of Hindus from all over India go every August to the Amarnath cave, located some 15,000 feet (4,545 metres) above the sea level, which they believe to be the abode of Shiva, the god of destruction in Hindu mythology.

On Sunday, Kashmir police hospitalised a Muslim separatist leader who launched a hunger strike to protest the paramilitary deployment outside Hazratbal.

Israel, PLO start autonomy talks

CAIRO, Aug 1: Israeli and PLO negotiators began a new round of talks in Cairo today on limited autonomy for parts of the West Bank still under Israeli occupation, reports Reuter.

The chief Israeli negotiator, Major General Danny Rothchild, said the main issue was how to finance the public services which the Palestinians plan to take over.

Both sides say they are close to agreement on how to transfer control of education and health to the Palestinians in areas outside Gaza and the West Bank town of Jericho. They have yet to talk about control of tourism and social welfare.

Demonstrations in East Timor banned

DILI, Indonesia, Aug 1: An Indonesian military commander on Monday prohibited demonstrations in the former Portuguese colony of East Timor and threatened stern action against anyone who takes part in protests, reports AP.

Maj Gen Adang Ruchyatna, chief of the Udayana military command, which oversees East Timor, said people with complaints should present them through the local parliament instead of demonstrating.

He also suggested that groups planning to visit the parliament should ask for police guards to maintain security.

Ruchyatna said those people

involved in recent demonstrations in Dili, East Timor's capital, would be put on trial.

He was referring to protests last month at the University of East Timor which turned violent when police dispersed students who were marching to the parliament.

The students were demanding greater religious freedom and punishment for two soldiers accused of trampling on holy wafers during a Mass at a Roman Catholic church near Dili.

More than a dozen students were injured and at least 14 others were arrested in the clash, believed to be the worst in the former Portuguese colony since November 12, 1991.

Off the Record

Vicar defends his unorthodox belief

STAPLEFIELD, England: A Church of England vicar, preaching to his congregation for the last time Sunday after being fired for his unorthodox beliefs, denied that he was an atheist, reports AP.

The Rev. Anthony Freeman had disturbed his bishop by publishing a book in which said: "There is nothing out there — or if there is, we can have no knowledge of it."

The Bishop of Chichester, Eric Kemp, last week revoked Freeman's license, saying the priest's views were "incompatible with the job."

About a hundred people, many of them Freeman's supporters, crowded to the 19th-century St. Mark's Church in Staplefield, 25 miles (40 kms) south of London.

But some members had left the church in protest to Freeman's views, and said they would not return so long as he was there.

Freeman was said to be the first priest dismissed by the Church of England in this century because of unorthodoxy.

Freeman, 48, said in his sermon that he did not believe in God as "a person" but as a figure whose "mercy and grace are mediated through human beings."

"I am not an atheist — that is nonsense. I have proclaimed I believe in God," Freeman said.

Church Warden Mike Tuckwell said it was a sad day for all the congregation.

"He has been a great parish priest and has worked wonderfully hard in the community in the five years he has been here. He will be difficult to replace but we must look forward now," Tuckwell said.

Noreen Harden, who had stopped coming to St. Mark's, said Freeman "is a non-believer and so has to go."

"There is a danger within the church that we are losing the true Christian worship and I hope that his dismissal will be a turning point," she said.

Though Freeman can no longer serve in the Chichester diocese, he remains a priest and perhaps could take a job in another diocese.

Impact of adult videos on schoolgoers

TOKYO: More than three-quarters of boys in Japanese high schools and nearly a quarter of the girls have watched adult videos, according to a government report quoted by Kyodo news agency on Sunday. reports Reuter.

Kyodo said the survey showed that those who had seen adult videos had a "poorly developed sense of guilt" over sex crimes and a low appreciation of the feelings of victims of such crimes.

Ninety per cent of those who had watched pornographic videos said they did not mind high school students having sex, said the report by the management and coordination agency's youth affairs administration.

As a result of the report, the government agency will lobby for a revision of laws on the sale and renting of videos, Kyodo quoted officials as saying.

Most of the students said they got the videos from a friend or acquaintance, while several said they had access to them in their own homes.

A third of the parents or guardians polled said they did not mind their children seeing such videos or thought it was inevitable, but 55 per cent said they opposed it.