

Wijetunga boycotts opening session of parliament

COLOMBO, Aug 25: Sri Lankan President Dingiri Banda Wijetunga today boycotted the opening of the first parliamentary session of the People's Alliance government which came to power after last week's elections, reports AFP.

Wijetunga, who now represents the opposition following his United National Party's defeat at the August 16 polls, was due to address the inauguration of the 10th parliament but pulled out at the last minute, officials said.

Despite the electoral debacle, Wijetunga can continue as head of state until his term ends in January 1995.

Usually the president, who is not a member of parliament, makes a policy statement at the beginning of assembly sessions.

The newly-elected members of the 225-seat house led

by Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga took their oaths as MPs before Secretary General of Parliament Bertram Tittawala.

The ruling People's Alliance (PA) nominee for speaker, K B Ratnayake, a former minister for parliamentary affairs and sports, received 127 votes at a secret ballot to win the post comfortably.

The PA together with two regional allies have 113 seats in the legislative assembly, but they have also received the unconditional support of two minority Tamil parties which between them have eight seats.

Kumaratunga's brother, Anura Bandaranaike who had defected to the UNP late last year, also ran for the position of speaker but received only 93 votes, or one less than the total of 94 UNP members in parliament.

Sharif defends claims on Pak nuclear programme

ISLAMABAD, Aug 25: Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is standing by his assertion that Pakistan has nuclear weapons, saying the statement was designed to deter India and prevent any move by Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto to give up the nuclear option, reports Reuters.

A statement issued by his Pakistan Muslim League (PML) party late on Wednesday said Sharif wanted to pre-empt what he called Benazir's plans to roll back Pakistan's nuclear programme.

"Had he not made this forthright and categorical statement... there were fears that (Benazir's) Pakistan People's Party would compromise the nuclear programme and renounce the nuclear option through its repeated declarations that the deterrent did not exist," the statement said.

"We have the deterrent to stand up to India and counter

the Indian threats," it quoted Sharif as saying.

Sharif's remarks, repudiated by Islamabad, have focused fresh attention on the risk of nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan, which have fought three wars since 1947.

Sharif said the world was trying to push Pakistan into a corner to force it to accept an imposed settlement of its dispute with India over Kashmir.

"The international community must accept Pakistan as a civilised and responsible nuclear power," Sharif said.

"Instead of seeking to isolate Pakistan internationally through acceptance of Indian hegemony or a Camp David-style settlement, it would be in their interest as well to see the country as stable and prosperous," he added.

He was referring to the 1978 US-mediated Camp David accords which led to a

peace treaty between Israel and Egypt.

The Pakistani government has dismissed Sharif's nuclear disclosures as irresponsible and false. Foreign Minister Asif Ahmad Ali reiterated on Wednesday that his country had no plans to acquire nuclear bombs and favoured non-proliferation.

But he kept up the war of words with New Delhi, saying India's nuclear and missile programmes were a threat.

"Its deployment of the Prithvi (short-range missile) along our border is especially designed to threaten us and these deployments will oblige Pakistan to respond in kind," he said in a speech at a military college in Quetta. He did not elaborate.

India, which denies having nuclear arms, on Wednesday seized on Sharif's atomic bombs claim to demand international action to halt Pakis-

tan's alleged nuclear weapons programme.

"We hope that the international community will compel Pakistan to abandon this dangerous course which would endanger peace and stability," the Indian Foreign Ministry said.

Pakistan says it will sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty if India does the same. India, which exploded a nuclear device in 1974, says the treaty, due for extension next year, discriminates against non-nuclear powers.

Pakistan has proposed a regional pact barring nuclear arms from South Asia with guarantees from the United States, Russia and China. India has declined, citing threats from China.

The United States cut off all military and new economic aid to Pakistan in October 1990 over the nuclear issue.

Off the Record



The Princess of Wales jumps down a step as she leaves a fitness session at the Harbour Club in Chelsea, London, via the kitchen door, Aug 24. — AFP photo

Rats outnumber Venetians by five to one!

VENICE: An army of rats has conquered the historic lagoon city of Venice and outnumbers the residents by five to one, Italian television said on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

The city council has been flooded with calls from worried locals reporting hordes of oversized rats in canals, gardens, shops and houses — and even chasing cats.

Health authorities said the rat population had doubled to almost 350,000 in the last few years. The rats have colonised many of the growing number of derelict city centre buildings and grow fat on the rubbish discarded by tourists.

The human population of Venice has shrunk to just over 70,000 as high rents and living costs force Venetians to flee to the mainland.

Thief concerned over queen's security, returns royal key

THE HAGUE: A thief stole the key to the Dutch royal palace gate but then sent it back because he was worried about the Queen's security, the daily newspaper De Telegraaf said on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

The 12-cm (five-inch) key was left in the gate to Queen Beatrix's palace earlier this week and the man stole it. "So I can boast that one of the women whose keys I have is the queen," he wrote in an anonymous letter to the newspaper. He sent the key to the daily.

The officer who watches the gate will "undoubtedly get a good dressing-down," a government spokesman said.

Claudia Schiffer, Paul Newman — the world's sexiest woman, man?

PARIS: French people rank German supermodel Claudia Schiffer and US actor Paul Newman as the world's sexiest woman and man, according to a poll published on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

The poll, in the weekly magazine Paris Match, said Schiffer edged out American supermodel Cindy Crawford and US actress Kim Basinger for second and third.

The top six sexiest men were all American Hollywood actors, led by 69-year-old Newman, 57-year-old Robert Redford and Richard Gere, 45.

The sexiest French woman was actress Emmanuelle Béart, who was fourth. The sexiest man was actor Vincent Perez, ranked eighth.

Commenting on the survey, based on interviews with about 1,000 people, Paris Match sniffed that the men's ranking "is not the triumph of seduction, but of television."

French women seemed infatuated by characters in ageing movies, the magazine said.

BJP Bombay unit chief shot dead

BOMBAY, Aug 25: The local head of the opposition right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was shot dead in Bombay today by two unidentified gunmen on a motorbike who riddled his car with bullets, police said, reports Reuters.

BJP chief Ramdas Nayak was rushed to hospital in a critical condition and later declared dead.

The police declined to give any further details saying investigating officers had not yet lodged their preliminary findings as they were still at the scene.

The firing at Nayak's car began soon after it had pulled out of his house compound in Bandra, said Mukund Kulkarni, a junior BJP official. The party said he was riddled with 54 bullets.

Iraq, Iran key obstacles to ME peace: Clinton

WASHINGTON, Aug 25: President Bill Clinton called on Wednesday for the end of the Arab boycott of Israel and blamed Iraq and Iran for hindering efforts at a broad Arab-Israeli peace agreement, reports AFP.

Speaking to a Chicago gathering of the Jewish organisation B'nai B'rith, Clinton called the Arab economic boycott a "relic of a bygone era" that "cannot possibly be justified."

The US president said two key obstacles to peace in the Middle East were "Iraq and Iran and the radical groups they continue to support," and argued for continued international sanctions on Baghdad.

"Baghdad still refuses to recognise the sovereignty and borders of Kuwait," he said.

At UN headquarters in New York, UN experts said the were satisfied with weapons monitoring systems installed by Iraq as a condition to end UN sanctions. But diplomats said US officials were unwilling to lift the embargo.

Clinton called Iran "the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism" and urged US allies "to recognise the true nature of Iranian intentions and to help US to convince Tehran that we will not tolerate rogue behaviour."



Peruvian First Lady Susana Higuchi Fujimori gives reporters a statement August 24 at the government palace in Lima, Peru. Fujimori remains in her office at the palace since her husband President Alberto Fujimori announced August 23 in televised speech that he was barring her from her duties as first lady because she accused government officials of corruption. — AFP photo

S Korea closely monitoring situation in North

SEOUL, Aug 25: South Korea said today it will work out measures to cope with any change in the situation in Communist North Korea caused by problems with the leadership succession, reports Reuters.

"The government is keeping a close watch on North Korea as there seems to be uncertainty regarding the change of power," a statement by the Unification Ministry said.

"We will work out measures to cope with the changing situation," it said.

The statement was issued after a meeting of senior policymakers led by Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hong Koo.

Seoul said on Wednesday it was concerned by the prospect of instability in the North after several indications that Kim Jong-il was facing problems consolidating power following the death of his father, President Kim Il-Sung, on July 8.

South Korean President Kim Young-Sam was quoted by an aide on Wednesday as saying there had been a number of "significant movements" in the North and people in the South should be prepared for any

eventuality.

More than six weeks after Kim Il-Sung's death, the Communist North is still without a formal head of state.

Kim Jong-il, 52, was groomed for more than two decades as his father's successor and continues to be hailed as such by Pyongyang's official media.

Israeli defence team in India

NEW DELHI, Aug 25: A high-level Israeli delegation is in India, marking the start of long-term defence cooperation between the two countries, a newspaper report said today, reports AFP.

The delegation, headed by former Israeli air force chief David Ivry, arrived here on Wednesday on a five-day trip, the Indian Express said.

Ivry will hold discussions with Indian defence officials and the three armed forces service chiefs, the daily said, adding that the trip would herald military ties between India and Israel.

India and Israel established diplomatic relations in January ending more than 40 years of hostility.

BRIEFLY

Guerillas attack SLA posts: Guerillas shelled the town of Marjayoun and attacked posts of Israel's militia allies in the Jewish state's occupation zone in South Lebanon yesterday, security sources said. Reuter reports from Marjayoun Lebanon.

They said at least 30 120-mm calibre artillery shells slammed in the early morning into and around Marjayoun, where the Israeli-backed South Lebanon Army (SLA) militia maintains its headquarters in the border buffer strip.

Ghali sending emissary to Haiti: Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali is sending an emissary to meet Haitian military leaders as a first step toward seeking their departure, UN diplomats said on Wednesday, AP reports from United Nations.

The diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that the emissary would leave in the next day or two and probably would meet Haitian military leaders in the Dominican Republic.

Quake rocks northern Japan: An earthquake measuring 5.2 on the open-ended Richter scale rocked northern Japan yesterday, the Meteorological Agency said. Reuter reports from Tokyo.

There were no immediate reports of damage or casualties. The tremor hit Japan's northern island of Hokkaido at around 10.24 am (0124 GMT), the agency said. The quake was centred 70 km underground in the Pacific Ocean off Kushiro, about 900 km north of Tokyo.

Palestinian killed in S Lebanon: Unidentified gunmen shot dead a Palestinian member of a Muslim militant group in South Lebanon, security sources said yesterday. Reuter reports from Sidon, Lebanon.

They said the gunmen opened sub-machinegun fire from a speeding car on Mohammad Nimr Sama'allah as he drove in the port of Sidon, 40 km (25 miles) south of Beirut, on Wednesday night.

Clinton's aid in Dublin: A close aide to US President Bill Clinton arrived in Dublin yesterday before talks in Belfast with Gerry Adams, the leader of Sinn Fein, the IRA's political wing, Friday, AFP reports from Dublin.

Serbs expel 187 from Bijeljina: Bosnian Serb forces have driven another 187 Muslims from their homes in Bijeljina in Northeastern Bosnia, an official with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees announced on Wednesday, AFP reports from Sarajevo.

Those expelled later arrived in Tuzla, also located in the northeast. An estimated 700 Muslims have now been forced to leave Bijeljina, which lies close to the border with the Serbian republic, since mid-July.

3 killed in Kabul shelling: Forces opposing Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani fired rockets and mortar shells on residential areas of the capital Kabul, killing three people and wounding 12, official Kabul Radio said on Wednesday. Reuter reports from Islamabad.

3 monks arrested in Lhasa: Three monks were arrested for defacing a Tibetan national flag and shouting pro-independence slogans in Lhasa, a human rights group said on Thursday, AP reports from Beijing.

The brief demonstration occurred on Tuesday in the centre of the old Tibetan section of the capital, the Tibetan Information Network said.

Yeltsin to visit UK in Sept: Russian President Boris Yeltsin will visit Britain next month, Prime Minister John Major's office said on Wednesday, AFP reports from London.

US grants asylum to former Saudi diplomat

WASHINGTON, Aug 25: The United States has granted political asylum to a Saudi diplomat who defected after denouncing human rights abuses in his country, the ex-diplomat's lawyer said, reports AFP.

Mohamed al-Khilewi, a former member of the Saudi delegation posted at the United Nations, applied June 14 to the immigration and naturalisation service for asylum after he and his family received death threats.

His lawyer said Wednesday that his application was approved.

Iraq to return Kuwaiti plane soon

KUWAIT, Aug 25: Iraq is to start returning soon a C-130 transport airplane taken from Kuwait during the Iraqi occupation, the Kuwait news agency quoted a United Nations official as saying on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

It quoted Hans Giltner, a UN representative working for the return of property to Kuwait from Iraq, as saying the aircraft was damaged in the Gulf War and must be dismantled.

Violence in Goma camps creates a state of 'virtual war'

GOMA, Zaire, Aug 25: A state of "virtual war" has broken out in Rwandan refugee camps around Goma in Zaire, sparked off by renegade soldiers and extremist militias, a UN official warned here today, reports AFP.

A mob hacked a thief to death in one incident on Wednesday and armed bandits wounded a refugee in another in the Kibumba camp, the largest of the region, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spokesman Ray Wilkinson said.

"This is a flavour of what's happening in the camps every day," he said. "We are in a state of virtual war in the camps."

Wilkinson blamed much of the violence on clashes between refugees and gangs formed by troops of the former Rwandan government army and Hutu militias, who fled to Zaire as the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) seized power in July.

In another incident reported to the UNHCR, a thief hurled a grenade as he was being chased by a crowd of refugees, but it fell into water before it exploded and nobody was hurt.

The soldiers and militias,

blamed by the RPF for the massacre of up to a million Tutsis and moderate Hutus when Rwanda plunged into a bloodbath in April, are shunned and feared by the refugees, from who they steal to live.

Zairean authorities have pledged to disarm them, but many still have their weapons. Hardline Hutu authorities also use the armed gangs to intimidate the refugees into not returning home to Rwanda, by telling them the RPF will slaughter them should they do so.

Walkinson said the climate of violence was a serious threat to relief workers in the sprawling camps — Kibumba alone is home to some 180,000 refugees — though no "major incident" involving humanitarian personnel had yet occurred.

Reliable sources separately said that the German branch of the charity Care recently "lost" five ambulances in the Kibumba camp.

The United Nations and the new Rwandan authorities are keen to see refugees go home and the government in Kigali, which includes Hutu leaders,

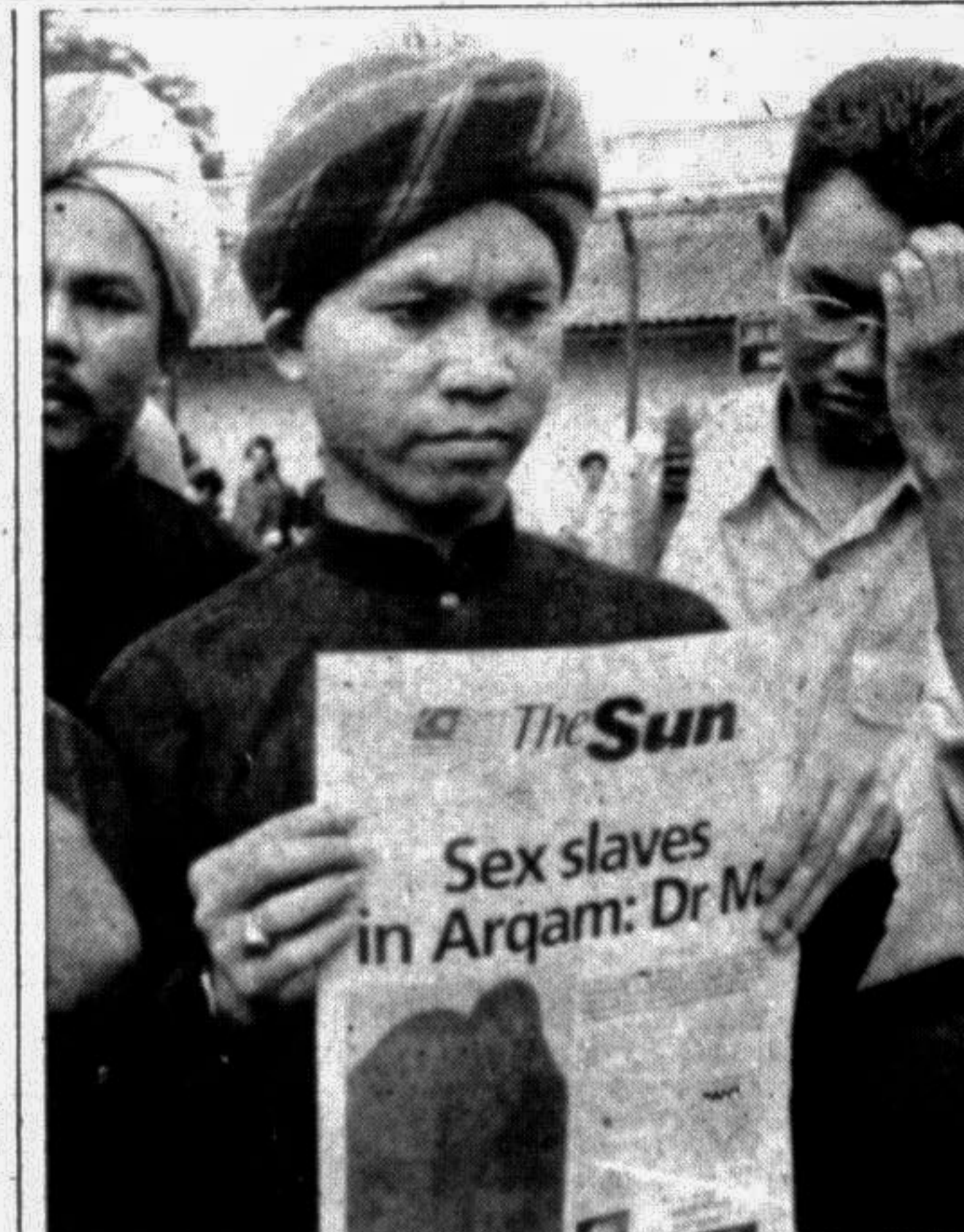
has pledged that there will be proper trials but no summary reprisals regarding the massacres.

But a bid by the UNHCR on Wednesday to repatriate some 300 refugees wishing to return to Rwanda turned into a disaster when the convoy was attacked by armed men who seriously wounded one person and abducted four or five others.

Wilkinson said the UNHCR planned to ask Zairean authorities to make an army unit available especially to escort returning Rwandans back to their country.

The Zairean army keeps order, after its own fashion, in Goma, 30 kilometres from Kibumba. On Wednesday night, automatic weapons fire was heard in the town for almost an hour, but details of the incident could not be obtained on Thursday as normal life resumed.

More than a million refugees fled across Rwanda's northwest border towards the town when the carnage broke out after the death of Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana in a suspicious plane crash on April 6.



A member of the Al-Arqam Islamic messianic sect shows Aug 24 in Kuala Lumpur a Malaysian newspaper's headline of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's allegations against the group. Mahathir charged that Al-Arqam made sex slaves of its female followers through its practices of polygamy, leading to the sect lodging a police report against him for defamation. — AFP photo

Five killed in Kashmir schoolbus blast

JAMMU, Aug 25: A powerful bomb exploded inside a private bus carrying schoolchildren in Jammu-Kashmir state on Thursday, killing five people and injuring 28, police said, reports AP.

No one immediately claimed responsibility, but Islamic militants fighting for independence in Kashmir have been targeting Hindu-dominated Jammu city for the last year.

All five people killed were schoolchildren. The injured included 23 kids and five adults, including the driver. Police said a time bomb had been planted inside the bus.

Private buses such as the one that was bombed carry many children to school and commuters to work in Jammu every day. The blast occurred during the morning rush hour on the outskirts of Jammu, the winter capital of Jammu-Kashmir state.

The explosion reduced the bus to a piece of twisted metal, and witnesses who rushed to the scene found the mutilated bodies of three children and blown-apart lunch boxes on the road.

The attack enraged the witnesses so much that they stoned fire engines that arrived on the scene. Police had to disperse the mob by charging them with nightsticks.

The blast came two days after 45,000 Hindus completed an annual pilgrimage to a cave atop a Himalayan mountain in Kashmir, despite a death threat from a militant. Most of the pilgrims returned to Jammu, and some are still on their way back.

During the 12-day pilgrimage to the Hindu god Lord Shiva, the militant group lobbed two grenades at the convoys and planted two land mines that soldiers found, but no one was injured.

Russia for tougher sanctions against Serbs

MOSCOW, Aug 25: Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev said today Russia wanted tougher sanctions against Serbs in the former Yugoslav republic of Bosnia, but Belgrade should be rewarded for supporting an international peace plan, reports Reuters.

"We are not for lifting sanctions (against Bosnian Serbs) but for strengthening sanctions against them," Kozyrev told reporters before leaving Moscow on a two-day trip to Uzbekistan.