

BRIEFLY

Diphtheria cases soar in Russia: Diphtheria cases in Russia's Far east have soared to emergency levels, infecting more than 1,700 people, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported on Tuesday. AP says from Vladivostok.

Doctors are rushing to the hardest-hit areas of the Primorsky region to administer mass vaccinations against the disease, which has killed 35 people in the past year.

Serbs free 2 UN peacekeepers: Two Czech UN peacekeepers held by rebel Serb troops following a NATO air strike in Croatia on Monday have been released unharmed, Czech Defence Minister Vilem Holan said, Reuter reports from Prague.

Holan told the Nova television station that the two soldiers had been held for only one hour. The news came from the commander for UNPROFOR (United Nations Protection Force) in the southern sector of Croatia.

Mystery writer Symons dies: Prize-winning mystery writer Julian Symons, who said what most interested him was the violence of outwardly respectable people, has died at age 82, AP reports from London.

His family announced Tuesday that he died on Saturday. No cause of death was stated. His 26 mystery novels included "The Color of Murder" published in 1957 which won the Crime Writers Association Critics Award and "The Progress of a Crime" published in 1960 which won the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe Award.

US to reduce troops from Honduras: The United States will reduce its military presence in Honduras by one half from its current level of about 1,000 troops, a senior US military official said on Monday, AFP reports from Tegucigalpa.

Admiral William Owens, vice chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, announced the reduction at the end of a two day visit that included a meeting with President Carlos Roberto Reina.

16 die as buses collide in Brazil: Two passenger buses collided early Monday in southern Brazil, killing 16 and injuring 35, AP reports from Rio de Janeiro.

The accident took place in Barra do Ribeiro, about 730 miles (1,150 kms) south of Rio. One of the buses was carrying a delegation from the Rio Grande do Sul Federal University who had completed a weekend seminar in a city farther south. The other bus was a local passenger bus.

Mexico police detains trailer: Federal police have detained a trailer carrying 18 tonnes of high-power ammunition, the official news agency Notimex reported on Monday, AFP says from Mexico City.

Police stopped the Trac Mex Company truck on Sunday in sand Lusit Potolsi, 350 kilometres (215 miles) northwest of Mexico City, as part of an attorney general's office investigation.

23 Islamic Jihad men freed: Palestinian police, in a bid to ease tension in Gaza following unprecedented violence, released 23 Islamic Jihad activists, one of the freed prisoners said yesterday, Reuter reports from Gaza.

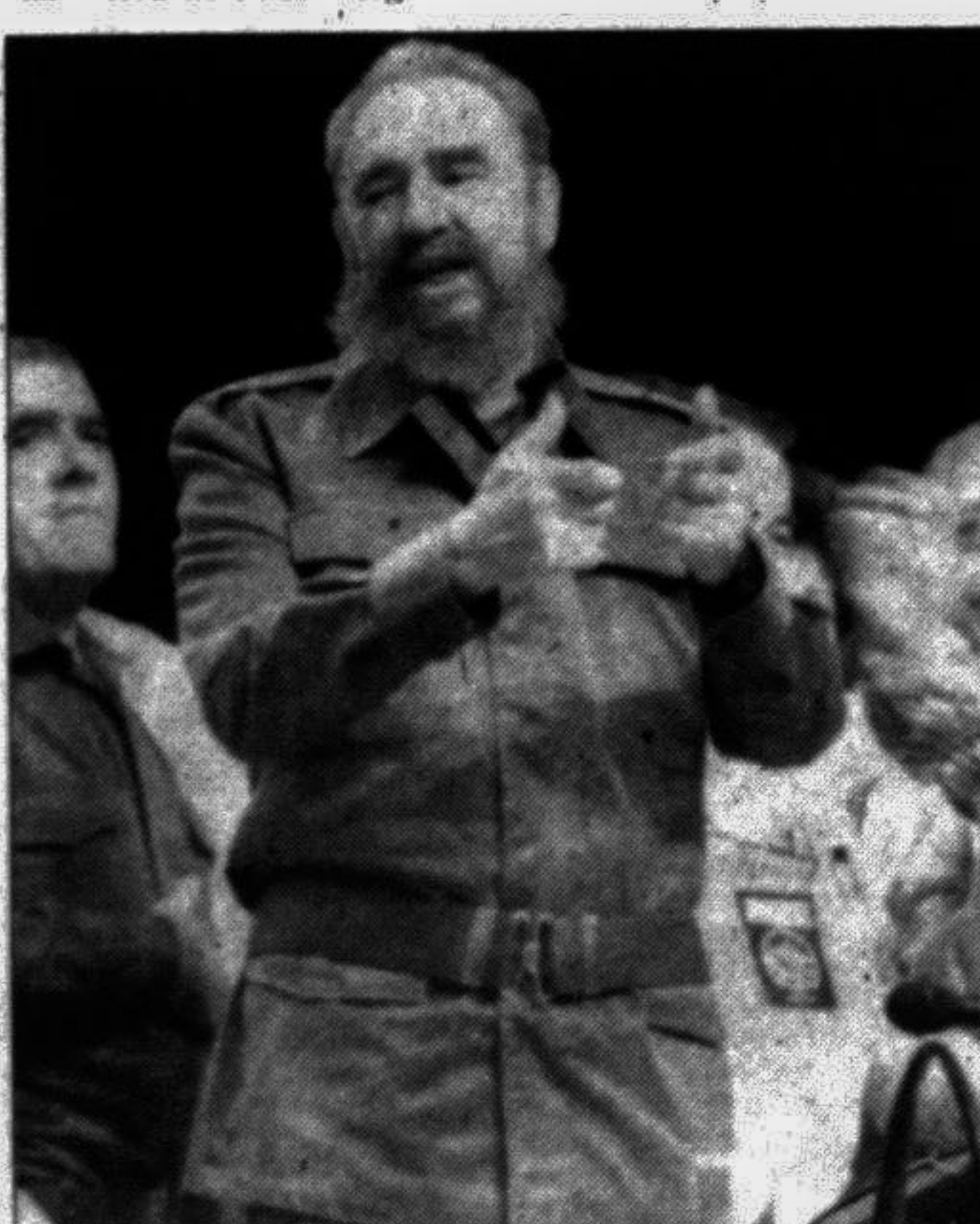
The 23 had been among 120 Islamic Jihad activists rounded up after a suicide bomber on a bicycle killed three Israeli army officers in Gaza on November 11.

Yeltsin drafts election bill: President Boris Yeltsin is drafting a presidential election bill that he hopes to send to parliament within two weeks, an official said Tuesday, reports AP from Moscow.

Under the bill, those running for president would have to collect 1.5 million signatures to be registered, Russian Election Commission head Nikolai Ryabov told the Interfax news agency.

Relief reaches storm-hit Haiti: Relief agencies delivered tons of food, medicine and housing supplies to this old coffee port devastated by Tropical Storm Gordon, AP reports from Jacmel, Haiti.

Of the estimated 750 Haitians who died, most lived near this small southwestern coastal city that normally is a 90 minute drive over a low mountain from the capital Port-au-Prince. Until the past couple of days, Jacmel was cut off by land because three bridges were washed away by flash floods.



Cuban President Fidel Castro addresses the inauguration of a world conference of solidarity with Cuba on Monday in Havana. Some 2,500 delegates from 108 countries are attending the conference to discuss the politico-economic situation in Cuba.

Russia, Kuwait sign 5 accords to boost ties

KUWAIT CITY, Nov 22: Russia and Kuwait signed five accords boosting cooperation between their countries, Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin said here on Monday, reports AFP.

He told a press conference that the accords dealt with the economy, investments, scientific research, culture and information.

The accord on protecting investments is of major interest for Russian and Kuwaiti businessmen, he said.

The economic accord foresees the creation of a joint commission to reinforce bilateral trade cooperation.

China, Vietnam agree not to escalate territorial disputes

HANOI, Nov 22: China and Vietnam agreed Tuesday not to escalate their territorial disputes or resort to force, and assured their nervous neighbors that they are willing to work for a peaceful settlement, reports AP.

In the only concrete move toward resolving the issue, they announced plans to form a new expert group to negotiate their rival claims to the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, which straddle major shipping lanes and fishing grounds and are believed to sit atop rich oil and gas deposits.

A joint communique issued at the end of Chinese President Jiang Zemin's three day visit said the two governments

Serbs continue to attack Bihac despite NATO air raid

SARAJEVO, Nov 22: Serb coalition forces today kept up attacks on the Bosnian enclave of Bihac, despite the NATO air raid which was meant as a warning to Croatian Serbs to stop intervening in the Bosnian war, UN spokesmen said here, reports AFP.

The air raid by 36 French, US, Dutch and British war-

planes against the Serb-held airbase at Udbina, inside Croatia, was meant as a "signal" to Croatian Serbs, according to UN force commander in the former Yugoslavia, General Bertrand de Lapresle.

NATO officials said the objective of the raid had not been to destroy the base and that only the runways had been

destroyed. The strike had been authorised by the UN Security Council Saturday after the secessionist Croatian Serbs had launched at least three air raids against the Bihac pocket, in northwestern Bosnia, from the Udbina airbase last week.

Monday's raid marked the sixth time North Atlantic



NATO Secretary General Willy Claes (L) and US Secretary of State Warren Christopher leave after a brief press conference on Monday at the US State Department in Washington, DC. The two discussed the NATO airstrike against a Serb airbase in Croatia.

— AFP photo

Arafat rejects any challenge to self rule authority in Gaza

JERUSALEM, Nov 22: PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat has rejected any challenge to his self rule administration's authority in Gaza, reports Reuter.

Speaking on Palestinian radio from Gaza on Monday night, Arafat sought to deflect away from the Palestinian authority any responsibility for the deaths of 14 Arabs killed on Friday in fighting between police and Muslim militant sympathisers.

The PLO leader said the violence erupted in part as a result of the slow pace of peace efforts with Israel, hesitation by foreign donors to make good on their aid pledges and incitement by local factions.

Witnesses say police opened fire on stone-throwing demonstrators on Friday and Muslim militants blame the police as being criminally responsible. Authority officials say unidentified outside instigators fired first and then led the crowd to loot and burn.

"The Palestinian authority will not allow any incitement against (its) security and police forces," Arafat said. "It will stand firm in confronting those who try to attack people's property and public institutions."

Arafat did not mention any group by name but said in apparent reference to Islamic militants opposed to his peace deal last year with Israel, that some elements did not want Palestinians to enjoy freedom and pursue reconstruction.

We say with all confidence to our people to all factions and leaderships those who think they can turn back the clock are dreaming, he said.

In Gaza on Monday, more than 10,000 Palestinians hundreds firing guns in the air marched to demonstrate support for Arafat following the violence on Friday.

The march by Arafat's Fatah faction showed the Palestinian rule Gaza Strip was as po-

larised as ever since the clashes between Muslim militant sympathisers and Palestinian police on Friday.

"Whoever wrongs Fatah, Fatah will open his head," roared hundreds of young men surging through Gaza's streets. "Where are you Zahhar, where are you Jabu Ammar Arafat will rip you eye out," they shouted referring to Mahmud al-Zahhar, a Hamas leader.

In Jerusalem, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said he did not think Arafat realised when he made peace the challenges to be faced in Gaza still do not see how Arafat is going to take control of this hornets nest, Peres said in a speech to Israeli Accountants Association.

Arafat, in his radio address, said Israel was trying to avoid implementing fully its peace agreement with the PLO under which Palestinian self-rule is to be widened to other areas of the occupied West Bank.

UN official criticises Myanmar junta

UNITED NATIONS, Nov 22: A UN human rights official criticised the government of Myanmar on Monday for the arbitrary arrest and five-year house detention of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, reports AFP.

UN special rapporteur for human rights Yozo Yokota said in a report that the dissident "is still being held under prolonged house detention without trial" and that many parliamentarians and non-governmental organisations were seeking her release.

Myanmar authorities responded by stating that Aung San Suu Kyi was legally detained under provisions of state laws that allow for a maximum of six years under house arrest.

Aung San Suu Kyi spent her fifth anniversary under house arrest on July 20.

Yokota also reported on other widespread human rights abuses in Myanmar including the arrest of political opponents, torture, gang rapes, forced relocation and internal displacement "on a wide scale."

Govt accuses UNITA of violating peace pact

LUANDA, Angola, Nov 22: The government claimed the rebels attacked on two battlefronts Monday, a day after both sides signed a peace accord, but aid workers in one of the areas said there was no fighting, reports AP.

Southern African leaders, meanwhile, considered sending troops to join a UN force that is to anchor the peace treaty.

Both Angolan state radio and the UNITA rebel station Vorgan broadcast appeals for peace and reconciliation after 19 years of war.

But later in the day, the government claimed that rebels under the command of UNITA Vice President Antonio Dembo attacked the northern city of Uige, in "flagrant violation" of the peace accord.

It said government troops "reserved the right to respond."

Aid workers in Uige said UNITA soldiers were patrolling tense streets but there was no fighting.

State radio also said rebels attacked the town of Cacolo in the diamond-rich province of

Luanda South. Journalists were not allowed on UN aid flights around Angola on Monday, apparently to prevent any possible reports of clashes from inciting either side to fight on.

Hospitals reported 10 people killed and 87 wounded in the capital, Luanda, by gunfire from citizens celebrating the accord signed Sunday, in Lusaka, Zambia.

At the United Nations, the Security Council on Monday urged all parties in Angola to prove their desire for peace by honouring the cease-fire.

"Angola's parties must continue to demonstrate their commitment to peace through the full and timely implementation of this detailed peace agreement," said US Ambassador Madeleine Albright, the Security Council president. "Most importantly, the cease-fire required by the protocol must be respected."

Repeating a ritual that has twice failed to end the war, Foreign Minister Venancio de Moura and UNITA Secretary General Eugenio Manuvakola signed the pact.

Opinion poll predicts major setback for Rao

NEW DELHI, Nov 22: An opinion poll has predicted major setbacks for Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao's Congress (I) party in crucial state elections in southern India, reports AFP.

Congress is expected to lose Andhra Pradesh, Rao's home state, and suffer a big erosion of support in neighbouring Karnataka, according to the survey published Tuesday.

The poll was conducted by the centre for media studies for frontline, southern India's leading news magazine, and its findings were seen as a cause of serious concern for the Congress. Party spokesman had no immediate comment on the findings of the poll which followed confident assertions by the Congress that it would ride back to power in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

Both states have been traditional Congress bastions, and the elections there constitute a major popularity test for the 74-year-old prime minister. A defeat could spark a rebellion against his leadership, analysts have said.

Karnataka is scheduled to vote on November 26 and December 1, while the Andhra Pradesh ballot is spread over December 1 and December 5.

The poll predicted an emphatic majority in Andhra Pradesh for the Telugu Desam Party of movie star turned politician N T Rama Rao, no relation to the premier.

It said the Telugu Desam was expected to win 175 to 180 of the 294 seats at stake

and the Congress 85 to 90. A swing of eight percentage points against the Congress coupled with four points in favour of the regional party have tilted the elections in favour of the Telugu Desam, the opinion poll said.

Rising prices and a lack of economic development under Congress rule have disenchanted Andhra voters, it found.

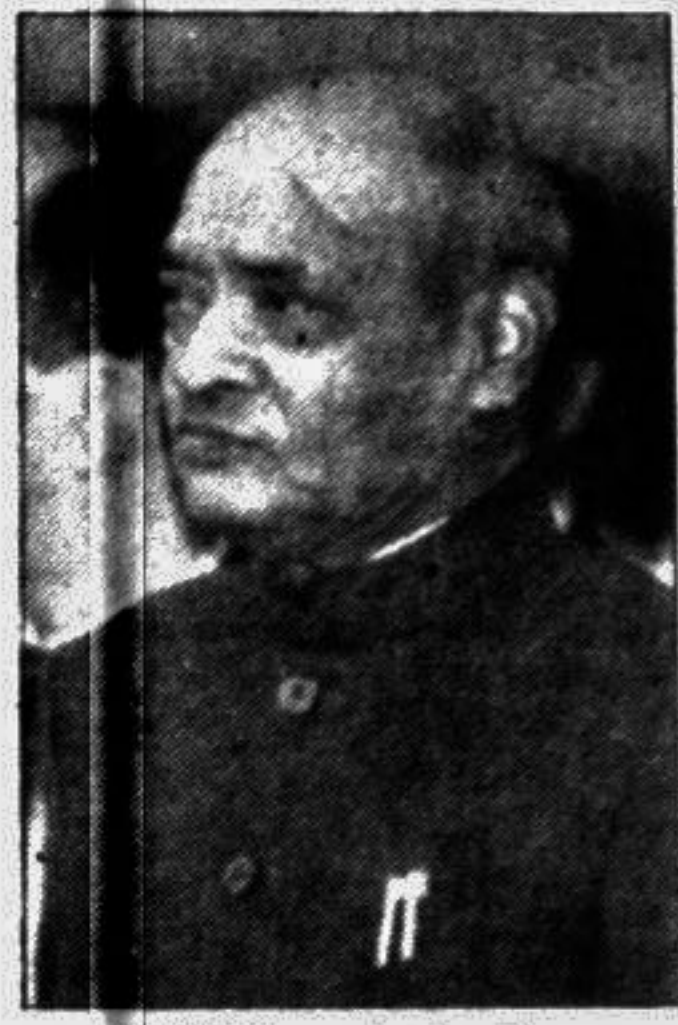
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P V Narasimha Rao

A hung assembly was predicted for Karnataka with the opposition Janata Dal (People's Party) tipped to emerge as the single largest party.

According to the poll, Karnataka voters have turned against the Congress because of ineptness, corruption and inflation although the electorate had no expectations of the opposition providing any better government.

Off the Record

'Romance improves office atmosphere'

BONN: More than 70 per cent of German men dream of having an affair with a female colleague and half of the working women find romance improves the office atmosphere, a women's magazine said on Monday, reports Reuter.

But keeping an office affair secret is next to impossible with 83 per cent of relationships noticed by other colleagues, said a survey in the latest editions of the magazine 'Freundin' ('Girlfriend').

"Love in the office is not easy," said psychologist Hiltrud Sennhenn.

Undaunted by prying eyes, 72 per cent of German men would like a fling with a female colleague and 56 per cent of working women said love in the office added spice to their day.

The onset of complications once a colleague turns into a lover means an average office affair lasts about two years, the magazine said.

Echo of the Bobbit case

NEW DELHI: An Indian state lawmaker who attempted to rape a girl was castrated by his intended victim, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported on Tuesday, says AFP.

The incident took place in the district of Supaul in the eastern state of Bihar on Thursday, the news agency said.

The legislator, identified by PTI as Yogendra Narayan Sar, dar of the Janata Dal (People's Party) which rules Bihar, allegedly tried to "outrage the modesty" of the girl, whose age was not available.

He was reported to be undergoing treatment at a private hospital in the Bihar capital Patna after being castrated by the girl, who lodged a complaint of attempted rape against the politician and two of his associates.

PTI called the incident an 'Echo of the Bobbit case' in the United States which won worldwide attention after Lorena Bobbit severed the penis of her husband John Wayne Bobbit.

Bush wins tennis match

SYDNEY: Former US President George Bush hasn't lost his touch on a tennis court, reports AP.

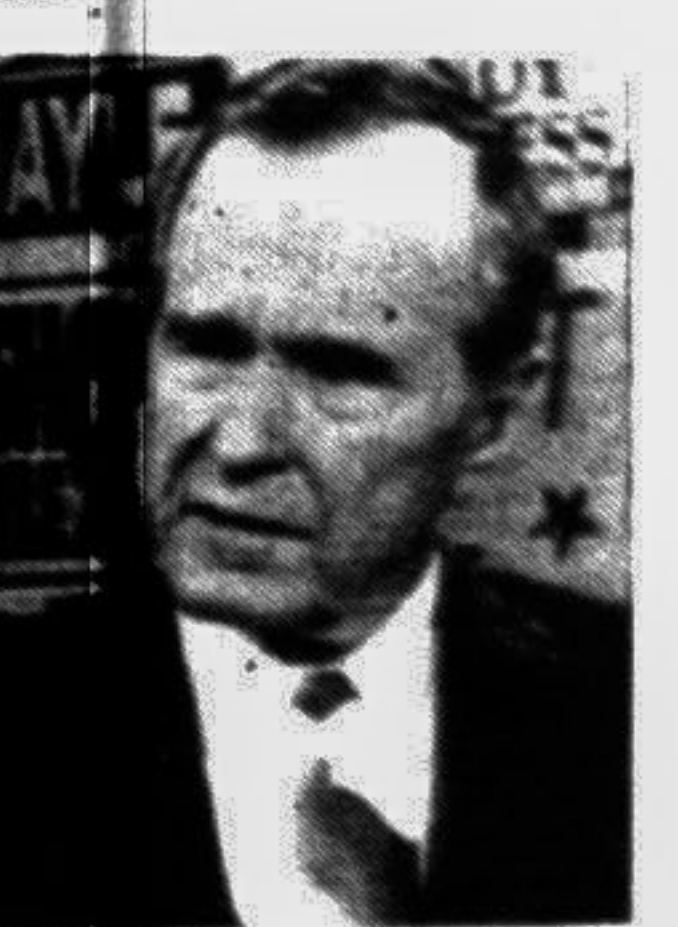
Bush, on a private visit to Australia with his wife Barbara, teamed up with Australian Davis Cup captain John Newcombe Monday to score a 6-3, 6-4 victory over his nephew Walter Stapleton and another former Australian star, Tony Roche.

The former president has known former Wimbledon doubles champions Newcombe and Roche for more than 25 years, while his 20-year-old nephew is studying political science at the University of New South Wales in Sydney.

"Mr Bush played very well and his aggressive serve-volley game was suited to the grass," Newcombe said.

Bush, 70, is making his first visit to Australia since losing the 1992 presidential election to Bill Clinton.

After the match, the Bushes attended a private dinner with Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating.



France to sell two frigates to S Arabia

PARIS, Nov 22: France has signed a 3.6 billion dollar contract to sell two frigates and corresponding weapons systems to Saudi Arabia, as well as build a naval base and train personnel, the Defence Ministry announced on Monday, reports AFP.

The contract was signed on Saturday in Casablanca, Morocco, by French Defence Minister Francois Leotard and his Saudi counterpart, Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz, the ministry said.

The 19-billion-franc deal was confirmed in a telephone conversation on Monday between Prime Minister Edouard Balladur and King Fahd.

progress in these groups' talks. Jiang presided over the signing of three government agreements on trade and transportation before leaving for home later Tuesday.

One agreement seeks to impose quality standards on each other's exports, a major concern of the Vietnamese, who say China has been swamping their markets with low-quality consumer goods. Many of these goods are smuggled.

Another agreement allows car and truck traffic across the land border. Traders previously had to carry goods across on foot.

Jiang's visit was the third summit between the neigh-

bours since November 1991, when they normalised relations scarred by a 1979 border war and a decade of frequent skirmishes, including a 1988 clash in the Spratlys.

The Chinese, the only side to hold news conferences during the visit, have skipped over that decade to emphasize their support for Vietnamese revolutionary Ho Chi Minh in the 1950s and early 1960s and the prospects for trade now.

"Both of our two countries are now working to develop our economies and improve the livelihood of the people. For that purpose we need to establish friendly relations," Qian said.

However, the visit and the joint communique can tell people that such is not the prospect for this issue. China and Vietnam are entirely capable of resolving this issue by themselves," he said.

Qian said he and his Vietnamese counterpart, Nguyen Manh Cam, agreed to act on a previous Vietnamese suggestion to set up an expert group on the Spratlys, and that they would soon nominate teams.

The two countries already have expert groups meeting regularly to discuss the 1,300-kilometre (800-mile) land border and demarcation of the Tonkin Gulf, parts of which China claims. Unofficial reports indicate little or no

moved more naval forces there.

Both China and Vietnam have awarded oil exploration contracts to US companies in disputed zones, and there was no indication that either side plans to rescind those contracts.

Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, asked at a news conference if the two sides came any closer to resolving their disputes over the Spratlys or their land border, said, "Such a visit is not an opportunity for specific negotiations."

He noted that many countries in the region fear another Chinese-Vietnamese armed conflict.

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