

BRIEFLY



Leader of the former communist Bulgarian Socialist Party 35-year-old economist Jean Videnov, smiles during a press conference in Sofia on Monday after the announcement of the results of Sunday's early parliamentary elections in Bulgaria. The Socialist Party will control an absolute majority of the seats in the next parliament.— AFP photo

Bus mishap claims 8 in Brazil:

Eight people, six of them children, were killed and 17 were injured when a bus carrying a school group slammed into a truck and burst into flames in southern Brazil on Monday, police said. Reuter reports from Rio de Janeiro. "It must have been a driving mistake because the collision was head on," said Joao Macheki, the head of highway police in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul state. The dead also included a school teacher and the driver of the bus. The group was on an excursion to a nearby beach.

Dispute over statue of Mao:

The Chinese government and a local auction house are locked in dispute over whether a statue of the late chairman Mao Tse Tung can be auctioned, the China Youth Daily said yesterday. Reuter reports from Beijing. It said that when the Hubei provincial government's propaganda department asked Beijing for advice on the planned auction, it was told that statues of national leaders cannot be auctioned as relics because that would be "extremely unseemly."

Kukis ambush convoy, 11 killed:

At least eleven persons — seven Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) jawans and four civilians — were killed when suspected armed Kuki militants ambushed a CRPF convoy at Dulen Kuki village area in Manipur's Tamenglong district Monday afternoon, PTI reports from Imphal.

Animal rights activist jailed:

An animal rights activist who planned attacks on shops, sabotaged trucks at an abattoir, and planted explosive devices at a battery chicken farm was jailed for 14 years on Monday, AP reports from London. The judge described Keith Mann, 28, as a leader of a shadowy extremist group, the Animal Liberation Front, with terrorist style tactics.

Thai monk wins UNESCO prize:

A Buddhist monk and writer from Thailand, Prayudh Payutto, has been awarded the 1994 UNESCO Prize for Education for Peace, the UN organisation announced on Monday. AFP reports from Paris. The award is accompanied by a cash prize of 25,000 dollars, and was to be given to him in a ceremony yesterday by UNESCO Director-General Federico Mayor.

US convicts Colombian hitman:

A US federal jury on Monday convicted a Colombian drug cartel hitman for bombing an Avianca Airlines jet in 1989, killing 107 people, and on charges of drug trafficking conspiracy and murder. Reuter reports from New York. In the second trial of Dandenny Munoz-Mosquera, the jury in Brooklyn Federal Court convicted Munoz on all 13 counts after deliberating over the weekend and Monday.

China deports 100 for bird theft:

China has fined and deported more than 100 foreigners for capturing rare birds for export, an official report said Monday. AP reports from Beijing. Since September, there have been numerous cases of foreigners posing as tourists to capture Chinese wild animals in Xinjiang, Ningxia, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia and other provinces, the People's Daily reported.

Czech police seize 3 kg uranium:

More than three kilograms (6.6 pounds) of weapons-grade uranium believed to have come from Russia has been seized and three men arrested, police said, AP reports from Prague. An International Atomic Energy Agency spokesman said it wasn't enough uranium to build an atomic bomb, but the seizure underlined concerns about dangerous materials being smuggled out of the former Soviet Union.

Collor's brother dies:

Pedro Collor de Mello, whose accusations of corruption led to his brother's resignation as Brazil's president, died on Monday. He was 42, AP reports from New York. Collor was undergoing treatment for a brain tumor at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York. Collor, who ran his family's media interests in Brazil, denounced a corruption scandal in 1992 that led to the impeachment and resignation of his brother, President Fernando Collor de Mello.

Beijing bans luxury projects:

China's central government has banned luxury projects such as building golf courses and five-star hotels during all of 1995, the official press said on Tuesday. PA reports from Beijing. Construction of villas, office buildings and race tracks also will be forbidden in the coming year as part of government efforts to steer investment funds into infrastructure projects, the China Daily reported.

8 Tutsis killed in Burundi:

Gunmen in army uniforms killed eight people, almost all members of Burundi's Tutsi minority, in a suburb of the Burundian capital, cutting the head off one of the victims and tearing his heart out, witnesses said on Monday. Reuter reports from Bujumbura. They said gunmen wearing uniforms of the Tutsi-dominated army killed the eight on Sunday night in the southern suburb of Musaga. Security sources said the gunmen were extremists from the Hutu majority loyal to Leonard Ntaryingoma, a former interior minister.

HK repatriates 369 Vietnamese boat people

HONG KONG, Dec 20: Hong Kong repatriated 369 Vietnamese "boat people" Tuesday — the largest group to volunteer to return home since the programme started in March 1989, reports AP. The Vietnamese who flew home on a chartered Boeing 747, had been detained in camps in Hong Kong because they did not qualify as political refugees, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said. This month, 792 Vietnamese have volunteered to go home on UNHCR flights.

Uproar in Lok Sabha over corruption scandals

NEW DELHI, Dec 20: The Indian parliament was gripped by bedlam today as the opposition pressed its attack on the government of Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao over a series of corruption scandals, reports AFP.

Speaker Shivraj Patil was forced repeatedly to call the lower house to order as the opposition demanded the government release a report on a 1.3 billion dollar securities scam in which public funds were diverted to the stock market.

Temper flared as Mani Shankar Aiyar, an MP from Rao's ruling Congress (I) Party, accused opposition MPs of stalling the proceedings of the Lok Sabha, the lower house.

The fireworks in the Lok Sabha came a day after Rao absolved his Food Minister, Kalpana Raj, of any wrong doing in another scandal, this one involving sugar imports.

Addressing the legislature

for the first time since the opposition launched a concerted assault on his government last week, the 73-year-old premier said the system and not the food minister was at fault in the sugar scandal.

He admitted the country had suffered financial losses earlier this year due to delays in importing sugar and promised to punish the guilty, but denied that his food minister was the culprit.

"I will take action within seven days against the guilty, but I am confident there were no mala fide intentions on the part of the food minister," he said.

Rao's remarks provoked a storm in parliament, which has been paralysed for a week by opposition protests over the sugar scandal and the securities scam.

Rao's statement appeared to contradict a government commissioned report which said Food Minister Raj was

"entirely responsible" for freezing imports despite a domestic shortfall, allegedly to favour sugar barons in his home state.

The 126-page report, compiled by a retired civil servant and unveiled in parliament last week under opposition pressure, prompted calls on Rao to dump Raj and other ministers accused of corruption.

The opposition lashed out at Rao for defending his food minister, and demanded immediate action against those responsible for the step rise in sugar prices.

Jaipal Reddy of the centrist Janata Dal party called the prime minister's remarks a "diabolical falsehood" while other opposition legislators accused the government of involvement in a cover-up.

Newspapers here, meanwhile, said Rao's pledge to take action within a week was

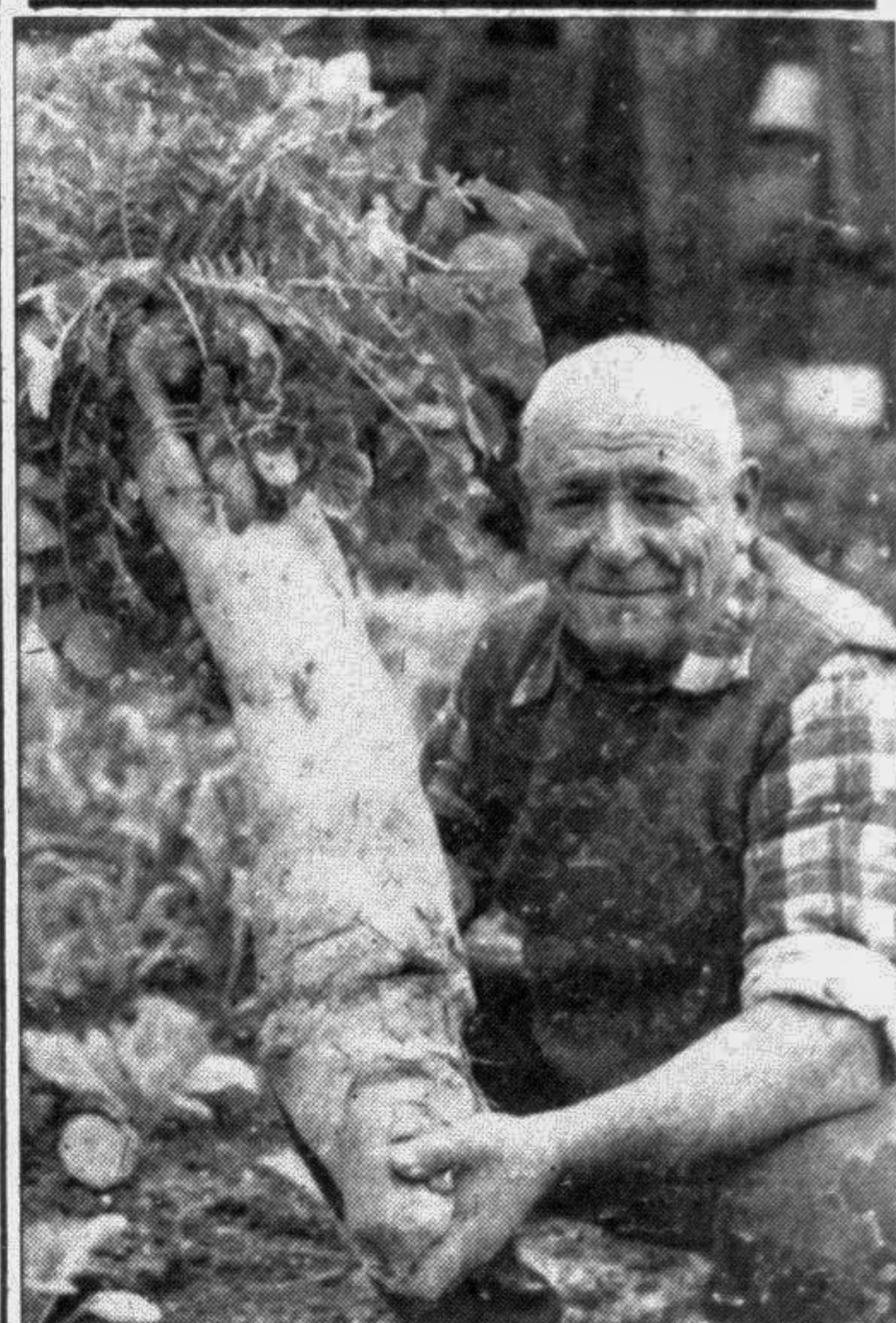
strong indication that the prime minister planned to reshuffle his cabinet once the current session of parliament ends on Friday.

Rao's Congress has been in turmoil since its humiliating defeat in state assembly elections in two southern states this month and the opposition has taken advantage of its current weakness to press attacks over corruption.

But Rao has dismissed opposition calls for the resignation of his government and has resisted pressure so far to sack Raj and other members of his cabinet tainted by corruption charges.

Some of the pressure on the prime minister has come from within his party, with some Congress leaders expressing fears that unless the party revamps its image it could face another disaster in more state polls slated for February.

Off the Record



Oscar Wittmer, 71, shows off a giant white radish, weighing 11 kilos and measuring 80 cms, he harvested on Monday in his vegetable garden in the eastern French town of Selestat. The gardener says he used seaweed fertilizer to grow such an unusual radish. — AFP photo

Musical feat of endurance

MADRAS: A light music troupe — 'Lakshman-Sruthi' — completed a 36-hour non-stop music performance here Sunday night in a bid to enter the Guinness Book of World Records, reports PTI.

The 45-member group, comprising mostly students, rendered over 4,000 Tamil film songs starting from 0900 hrs on December 17, ending their feat of endurance at 2205 hrs on Dec 18.

Music maestro Ilayaraja congratulated the members of the troupe on their achievement and handed over mementoes to them.

Lakshman, who heads the group, said the troupe would claim entry into the Guinness book.

The continuous programme had been recorded by a private television company and the customs collector had also issued a certificate on the performance, fulfilling a requirement for entry into the Guinness book, he added.

Politicians' "sensitive" details on sale!

JERUSALEM: Computer disks containing "sensitive" information about Israel's political leaders and security service officials are on sale to the public for up to 3,000 dollars, Israeli television said on Monday, reports AFP.

The Interior Ministry had given the disks to political parties during last year's municipal elections so they could send correspondence as part of their electoral campaigns, state-run television said.

Some of the parties failed to return the disks as promised and they were discovered on the open market at prices ranging from 500 to 3,000 dollars.

Through the disks it is possible to find out the personal address of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin or army chief of staff Ehud Barak, as well as details of their shares portfolios, the names of all their neighbours and the ages of their wives.

The television said it had also discovered all details of the head of Shin Beth, Israel's secret service, whose identity is supposed to be kept secret.

Haim Gluckman, director general of the Justice Ministry, said a complaint had been made to the police about the violation of privacy law.

Malaysia to seek Turkish help for defence industry

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 20: Malaysia plans to ask Turkey for help in developing its local defence industry, a defence ministry spokesman said today, reports Reuter.

Malaysian Deputy Defence Minister, Wan Abu Bakar Wan Mohamad said on Monday that Malaysia would explore the feasibility of joint production of military equipment with Turkey but gave no further details.

He was speaking after receiving his Turkish counterpart, Teoman Erkan, who is in Malaysia on a five-day official visit.

Malaysia sent 600 soldiers to Turkey for training last year and currently has two army members studying at the Turkish defence college, the spokesman said.

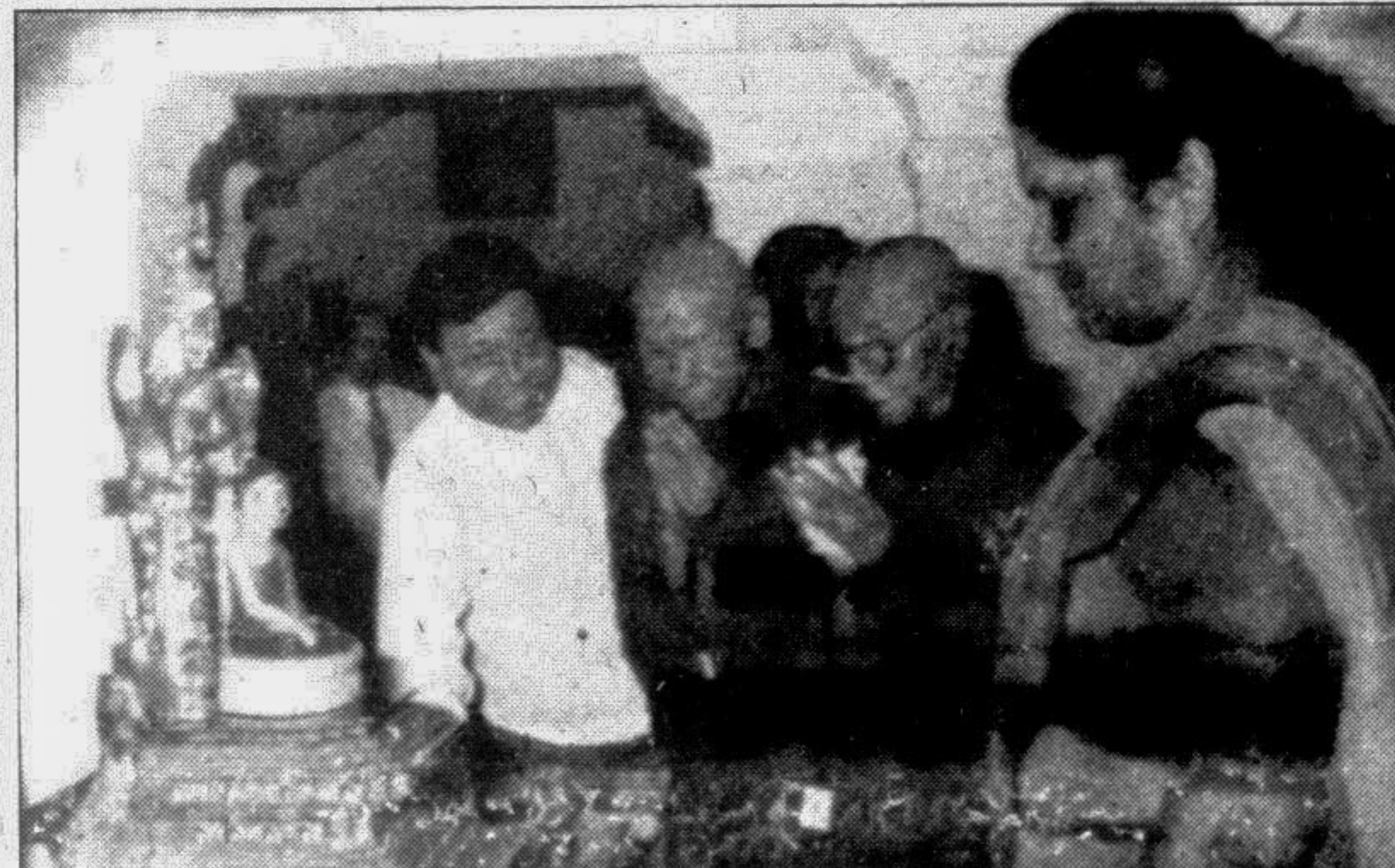
Benazir sacks law minister

ISLAMABAD, Dec 20: Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has sacked Law Minister Iqbal Haider, official sources said, reports AFP.

An official statement released by the Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) said Bhutto expressed dismay at the minister's performance during a cabinet meeting on Monday. She later asked Haider to submit his resignation, the official news agency said.

It said the sacked minister might be assigned some other portfolio.

Official sources said Bhutto was unhappy that financial scandals were not properly prepared before being filed in courts. As a result the accused, most of whom belong to the opposition, are being released on bail.



Two Buddhist monks from Myanmar (C) pray at a gold-plated religious statue they presented as a gift to Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga (R) on Monday in Colombo. The monks are part of a delegation on an official visit to Sri Lanka. — AFP photo

Russian delegation's appeal to Yeltsin

Peaceful end to Chechnya crisis still possible

MOSCOW, Dec 20: An official Russian delegation to Chechnya early today appealed to President Boris Yeltsin to call off a Russian military advance on the Chechen capital Grozny, reports AFP.

"We are convinced that peaceful means to settle the conflict have not been exhausted, unlike those who want to see the bloodshed continue in the Caucasus and beyond," said the appeal, signed by four officials, including three members of the Russian lower house of parliament.

The appeal came as Russian ground forces were closing in on Grozny and as Russian warplanes attacked the capital

from the air.

Russian troops moved into Chechnya on December 11 to crush a three-year-old independence movement launched by Chechen leader Djokhar Dudaev.

"The information we are receiving proves that what is happening can no longer be considered a massive human rights violation but a major human tragedy," the delegation wrote from Grozny.

"We call on you to stop the war immediately and undertake negotiations."

The team is headed by 64-year-old Sergei Kovalev, a former dissident under Soviet communism and currently an

advisor to Yeltsin on human rights.

"You should know that Djokhar Dudaev is not surrounded by armed gangs but by a people in arms," the appeal said, quoted by Moscow Echoradio.

"The Chechen people, as any other, can make mistakes in... their choice of leaders and policies, but that does not give anyone the right to attack them."

Russian soldiers and officers do not want to fight the Chechen people and have asked us to inform you," the statement concluded, urging Yeltsin to meet with Chechen authorities.

Mandela re-elected ANC leader

BLOEMFONTEIN, South Africa, Dec 20: South Africa's ruling African National Congress has re-elected President Nelson Mandela as its leader, but dealt him a rare rebuff by rejecting his proposal for choosing the party executive, reports Reuter.

A senior ANC source said Mandela had proposed that 50 of the 88 members of the policy-making National Executive Committee (NEC) be picked by six top party officials.

But this was turned down as "undemocratic," said the source, who asked not to be identified.

Kader Asmal, water and forestry minister and a senior party official, confirmed that Mandela's proposal had been withdrawn at the party's congress in Bloemfontein, provincial capital of the Orange Free State.

"This was done to allow the broad democratic process to take its course. There are no ill feelings," he said.

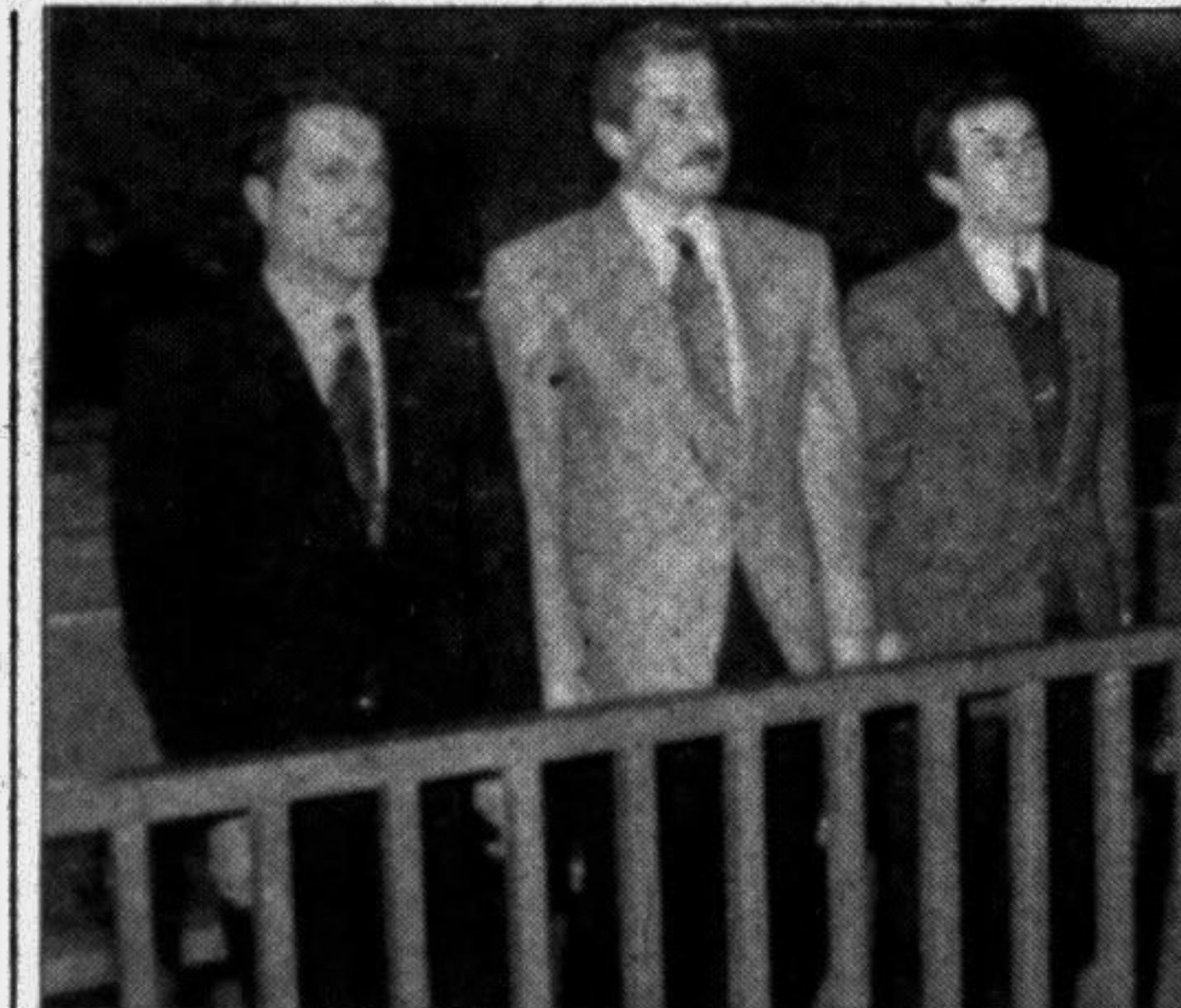
But the source said debate over the issue had been heated.

The Mandela initiative was definitely going to circumvent international democracy," the source said. "We rejected it. We told him it is undemocratic to hand-pick people for leadership positions."

The five-day congress, which opened on Saturday, is the party's first since it came to power last April.

Mandela had argued that his proposal would ensure the NEC was representative of all ethnic and racial groups and was balanced between men and women.

"Mandela was defeated hands down," the source said.



Three Turkish human rights activists (L to R) Akin Birdal, Husnu Onul and Sedat Aslantas face judges during their trial on Monday at the State Security Court in Ankara. State prosecutors asked for jail sentences ranging from 6 months to 5 years for the five activists accused of spreading separatist propaganda by helping to publish a report on torture. — AFP photo

Bomb episode clouds N Ireland talks

BELFAST, Dec 20: A bomb explosion overshadowed a second round of talks Monday between Sinn Fein, the IRA's political partners, and British officials, reports AP.

After four hours of talks, British officials and Sinn Fein said they will meet again mid-January, with the most pressing immediate issue of surrendering or decommissioning IRA weapons unresolved.

The Catholic-based Irish Republican Army denied responsibility for the bomb planted outside a furniture store. It contained two pounds (about 1 kg) of semtex explosive, which only the IRA is known to use in Northern Ireland.

Protestant politicians said they did not believe the details by the IRA, which declared a ceasefire six months ago.

"Round table talks will not

be able to start until this question has been satisfactorily dealt with," Michael Ancram, the second-ranking British official in Northern Ireland, said after Monday's talks.

There was no indication that the talks had made much progress from the first session on Dec 8.

They are exploratory sessions before planned roundtable talks with all the parties and the British and Irish governments on the future of British-run Northern Ireland.

Martin McGuinness, leader of the Sinn Fein delegation, suggested the bomb, which was found at the weekend and defused, may have been a dirty tricks operation.

"We are now in a totally new era and I regard the particular incident as being of no great significance," McGuinness told reporters after the talks.

Efficiency of US-ROK air defence system questioned

SEOUL, Dec 20: The downing of a US Army helicopter in North Korea raises serious questions about the efficiency of the US-South Korea air defence system, local media said Tuesday, reports AP.

They said the incident vividly shows the lack of co-operation between the US and South Korean armed forces, despite assurances that their combined defence system is foolproof.

US officials have called the incident a worst-case scenario in which everything that could go wrong did: fresh snow made the mountainous terrain difficult to read and covered

navigational placards, while the helicopter flew so low that absence of radio or radar contact was not alarming.

"No matter what excuses they make, it clearly shows that serious defects exist in the South Korea-US air defence system," the influential newspaper Chosun Ilbo said in an editorial.

The paper said in a separate analysis that if a few South Korean ground troops hadn't seen the chopper fly across the border into North Korea, the incident would have gone unreported even longer.

It took hours for the US military to determine the exact time the unarmed OH 58C

Kiowa Warrior, carrying two crewmen, crossed into the communist North across the heavily fortified border.

According to the Chosun Ilbo newspaper, the South Korean unit on duty along the border was not informed in advance of the training flight. By the time they saw "something" fly into North Korea, it was too late for the guards to fire warning shots, the paper said. The South Korean military also waited hours before finding out that the craft was a US chopper.

Yonhap News Agency reported that the unit on duty had electrical problems and turned on a generator, drowning out the chopper's approach.

US official said the pilots reported in their last radio contact that they were still in South Korea, when they were actually about 17 kilometres (10.6 miles) to the North — about 5.6 kilometres (3.5 miles) into North Korean territory.

It was unclear what happened to the chopper after it crossed the border, whether it made an emergency landing or was shot down, as North Korea has claimed. One pilot died and the other, reportedly uninjured, was taken captive.

The South Korean newspaper Chosun, quoting South Korean officials, said the aircraft might have landed and tried to take off, prompting North Korean troops to open fire.

However, the last radio contact was at 10:43 am, and North Korea claimed it shot down the helicopter two minutes later.

Another South Korean newspaper, Hankyoreh Shinmun, quoted a North Korean diplomat at the United Nations as saying North Korean troops fired as the chopper attempted to fly south despite warning shots.

In South Korea, all 37,000 US troops and 650,000 South Korean soldiers are under the operational control of the Combined Forces Command, headed by an American General.

Oman for stern action against extremists

MANAMA, Dec 20: Oman has called on the Gulf Arab summit in the Bahrain capital to take a stand against religious extremism, officials said today, reports AFP.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) foreign ministers drafting the final communiqué, were studying the Omani proposal, the official told the Kuwaiti news agency Kuna.

It calls for the summit to "denounce religious extremism and fanaticism which divides Gulf Muslim societies, and distorts Islam which advocates tolerance and coexistence between religions."