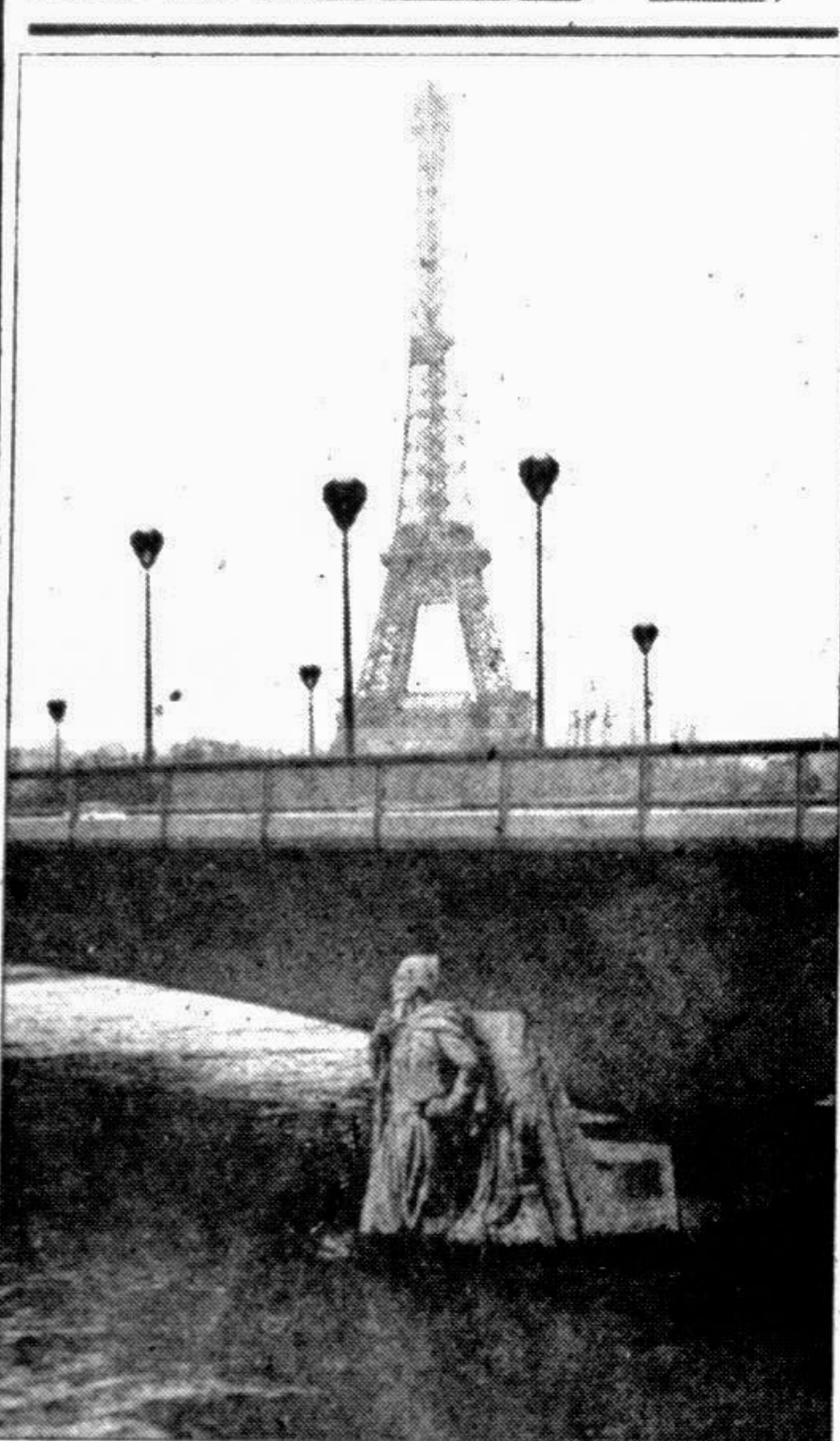


BRIEFLY



View of the Seine at the Pont de l'Alma in Paris on Friday. Large parts of northwest Europe were under water as rivers rose under the pressure of heavy rains. The Seine river rose to more than four metres in central Paris, where riverside expressways have been flooded for two days. — AFP photo

Mahathir in Manila: Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who arrives in the Philippines Saturday, says ties between Kuala Lumpur and Manila have warmed considerably, despite last year's roundup of Filipino maids in Malaysia, Reuters reports from Manila.

Mahathir said in a television interview, aired on Friday evening, that relations improved after Philippine President Fidel Ramos visited Kuala Lumpur in 1993 to end decades of hostility caused by Manila claim to the east Malaysian state of Sabah.

Shevardnadze to visit UK in Feb: Eduard Shevardnadze will make his first official visit to Britain as leader of Georgia in mid-February, a senior official said Saturday, AP reports from Tbilisi.

According to Gela Chalkviani, head of Shevardnadze's foreign relations department, the former Soviet foreign minister will meet with Prime Minister John Major and representatives of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and other financial institutions.

Afghan jet crashes in Tajikistan: An Afghan military jet has crashed in Tajikistan after the pilot, an air force general, ejected, a Tajik Foreign Ministry spokesman said on Friday, Reuters reports from Dushanbe.

Zafar Sayidov told Reuters the Soviet-built Su-22 flew over a border post 120 km southeast of the capital Dushanbe on Thursday afternoon in violation of the former Soviet Republic's airspace.

One militant killed in Cairo: Police and a suspected Islamic militant exchanged fire Thursday at a crowded train station in southern Egypt. The suspect was killed and a bystander was wounded, AP reports from Cairo.

Police officials said Ali Hassan al-Sherif started shooting as police tried to arrest him at the station in Sohag, a provincial capital 240 miles south of Cairo. Police killed him and wounded the bystander. Officials said 29 other people suspected of working with al-Sherif were arrested.

15.2kg heroin seized in Vietnam: Vietnamese police have seized a record 15.2kg of heroin and arrested two foreigners caught with the drug in a car, the army newspaper Quan Doi Nhan Dan reported today, Reuters says from Hanoi.

"It is the biggest case of heroin trafficking seized so far in our country," the newspaper said. It did not give the nationality of the two arrested men, but staff at the Hanoi hotel where they were reported staying said they were Lebanese.

Ghali discusses ME peace: United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali discussed the Middle East peace process on Friday with Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and his Egyptian counterpart, a UN statement said, Reuters reports from Geneva.

The UN chief held 45 minute talks with the two ministers at Zurich airport before returning to New York, it added.

New justice to World Court named: The United Nations named a Russian justice to the World Court on Thursday, filling a vacancy left by the death of a fellow countryman, AP reports from UN.

Vladlen S. Vereschetin, a 63-year-old international law expert, was approved in voting by the UN Security Council and the General Assembly for a term ending February 5, 1997. The 15-member International Court of Justice, as the panel is formally known, is the judicial arm of the United Nations.

Mandela pays tribute to Mahatma: Nelson Mandela on Friday made an emotional pilgrimage to the headquarters of the late Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi, who helped launch the fight against racism in South Africa early this century, Reuters reports from Bombay.

Gandhi subsequently returned to India to lead the struggle against British colonialism in his own country.

Doctors stage rally in Cairo: Around 2,000 members of the Egyptian Doctors' Union held a rally at their Cairo headquarters Friday to demand the immediate release of seven colleagues arrested during a crackdown on the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood, AFP reports from Cairo.

Essam El-Erian, a leader of the union and Ibrahim al-Zafarani, head of the union's Alexandria branch, were among the 27 members of the Muslim Brotherhood arrested last weekend.

3 sentenced to death in Morocco: Three Muslim militants, two of them from a Paris suburb, were convicted and sentenced to death Saturday for the deaths of two Spanish tourists in a series of attacks, AP reports from Fez, Morocco.

A Pez court also convicted three other militants of the attacks and sentenced them to life in prison for the attacks last summer that Moroccan officials at one point claimed were masterminded by Algerian secret police.

Karens vow to continue struggle despite fall of HQ

BANGKOK, Jan 28: Once powerful Karen rebels formally announced the fall of their headquarters but vowed Saturday to continue their 46-year insurgency against the central Myanmar government, reports AP.

The Karen National Union, the political organisation of the ethnic insurgency, said Manerplaw, the headquarters, was abandoned as four Myanmar divisions closed in from three sides and artillery fire rained down on the camp.

Reports from the area said the Karen torched buildings and rice stocks as they pulled out Thursday to regroup in other areas along the Thai-Myanmar border.

Manerplaw had served as headquarters for 21 years of what is one of the world's longest running insurgencies. Its capture is regarded as a major victory for Myanmar's ruling junta, which has successfully stamped out or negotiated the end of a welter of insurgencies.

"Under intense artillery attacks it became clear that Manerplaw could only be defended with heavy casualties," said a Karen statement received Saturday.

The rebels have refused to say how many casualties they suffered.

"The fall of Manerplaw, while representing a military setback, does not weaken the KNU's determination to continue the struggle for genuine peace, democracy and freedom for all Myanmar's people's, with emphasis on political means," it said. Fighting is expected, to continue as the Myanmar attempt to wipe out the few remaining bases of the Karen and allied, pro-democracy groups along the frontier.

Foreign aid agencies estimated that between 5,000 to 10,000 refugees have crossed the border into Thailand. Aid sources said they had been told by Thai authorities that the refugees would be allowed to remain in the country temporarily.

Earlier the KNU said some 15,000 Myanmar troops, backed by about 50 armored personnel carriers recently purchased from China, had taken part in the assault on their last major stronghold.

Manerplaw is located on the border-marking Moei River, 240 kilometres (150 miles) east of the Myanmar capital of Yangon.

In Yangon, government military sources Friday confirmed the rebel base had fallen, but said it had been taken over by a break-away Buddhist faction of the Christian-led KNU, backed by Myanmar troops. The sources, in keeping with the usual practice in the military-run regime, spoke on condition of anonymity.

The Karen have been fighting for greater autonomy since 1948. The group, which has 4,000 troops, is the largest and most important insurgency fighting the junta.

The Karen had offered late last year to negotiate an end to the war with Yangon.

Last-ditch search for victims in Kobe

KOBE, Jan 28: Fifteen thousand police and soldiers carried shovels into the earthquake-shattered area around Kobe on Saturday to begin a last-ditch search for people still missing, reports Reuters.

By Saturday morning, the earthquake had killed 5,090 people since it struck on January 17, but police said 29 people still recorded as missing were believed trapped under the wreckage of collapsed homes and buildings.

Many of the new rescue workers were mobilised in Kobe's Nagata Ward, and area with a large number of old wooden houses that was damaged worst by the quake and is home to more than half of those reported missing.

Sixteen thousand relief workers have been working in the disaster zone, searching for people as well as carrying out other relief work, a police spokesman said.

However, no survivor has been found since Saturday last week, four days after the tremor struck.

Reform panel recommends end of veto in UNSC

DAVOS, Switzerland, Jan 28: As part of a reform of the United Nations, the Security Council should increase its membership by 65 per cent while the United States and other permanent members phase out their own veto rights, Swedish Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson said Friday, reports AP.

Carlsson, co-chairman of a panel of diplomats and international leaders, told The Associated Press that the group recommends the 15-member Security Council should be increased as soon as possible to 23 members to make the body more representative.

The United Nations also should form a 10,000-member rapid deployment force to be dispatched quickly to world trouble spots, the panel said in its report Thursday to UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali at the start of the annual World Economic Forum of government and business leaders.

The United Nations has

grown dramatically since a relative handful of nations formed the world body at the end of World War II and selected the Soviet Union, China, Britain, France and the United States as permanent members of the council, the panel said.

"We live in different world today," said Carlsson. "It's important to bring in some new countries."

The panel recommends creating a new class of "standing" members who would be added to the permanent five. This would include two industrialised countries, and one from Latin America and one from Asia, he said.

The panel declined to name who should be standing members, but it has been widely suggested that Germany, Japan, India and Brazil should be included.

The group said it would be a backward step, however, to give the standing members the veto and that the permanent five should refrain from using their rights.

Top leaders meet Deng

BEIJING, Jan 28: China's senior leader Deng Xiaoping met the country's top leaders and asked them to convey his greetings to the country for the Chinese New Year, an official report said Saturday, reports AP.

The report by the Xinhua News Agency followed foreign press reports in recent weeks that Deng, who is 90, was critically ill.

Deng is known in China as the great architect of the country's economic reforms and opening to the outside world beginning in the late 1970s.

Chinese officials have maintained Deng is healthy. But his daughter, Deng Rong, was quoted earlier this month as saying his health had declined and he could no longer walk or stand.

Emergency declared in Ecuador

QUITO, Ecuador, Jan 28: President Sixto Duran-Ballen said Friday night that Peruvian forces attacked various Ecuadorian border positions and combat has been going on "all through the day," reports AP.

In a television and radio broadcast, Duran-Ballen declared a state of emergency throughout the country and announced a state of national mobilisation.

In a four-minute speech Duran-Ballen denied that an Ecuadorian helicopter had attacked a Peruvian border post, as the Peruvian government claimed.

The president of Peru has ordered the removal of our forces that occupy Ecuadorian territory, a fact that has resulted in conflicts of major magnitude," Duran-Ballen said.

Georgia, Abkhazia talks in Feb

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 28: Officials from Georgia and the breakaway region of Abkhazia will resume talks next month aimed at settling their disputes, the United Nations said Friday, reports AP.

UN special envoy Edouard Brunner has scheduled a new round of negotiations February 7-9 in Geneva to deal with Abkhazia's political status and the return of war refugees, a UN statement said.

Abkhazians fear the return of ethnic Georgians will leave them outnumbered in the region.



A Chechen woman sits by her child, wounded by artillery shelling in Grozny Friday at the Nazran hospital. —AFP photo

Yemen seeks foreign monitoring of border with S Arabia

SANAA, Yemen, Jan 28: Yemen called Saturday for foreign monitoring of its border with Saudi Arabia following a deadly skirmish earlier this month, reports AP.

President Ali Abdullah Saleh claimed Friday that Saudi troops had massed so close to the border that they could be seen from Yemen, but they have since pulled back somewhat.

The government Saturday called for a joint military commission including Egyptian and Syrian officers to carry out a fact-finding mission to the contested border.

A government official who refused to be identified said the mission would restrain "those who seek to ignite sectarian in the region."

He was referring to hard-line elements within the Saudi

leadership whom the Yemenis blame for exacerbating tensions, according to diplomats in Sanaa, the capital.

The trouble started when Yemen accused Saudi Arabia of building roads into its territory near the border, which has been disputed for more than 60 years.

Yemen claimed Saudi troops killed 10 Yemenis in a January 10 incursion. The Saudis maintain the Yemenis crossed and attacked, killing a construction worker.

Following Egyptian and Syrian mediation, a parity was opened between pro-Saudi Yemeni politicians and Saudi leaders in Riyadh.

Saleh said the Saudi forces, comprising one armored and one mechanised brigade, had withdrawn 10 kilometres (six miles). However, he added that

the talks had not reached "positive results."

Saudi Arabia issued a statement late Friday urging the Yemenis to present border complaints "directly to the Saudis" in the interest of preserving the atmosphere of harmony and understanding between the two countries.

Despite expressions of friendship, Saudi Arabia and Yemen have long been locked in a test of wills played out largely behind the scenes.

Meanwhile Reuters adds from Dubai: Saudi Arabia has denied claims by Yemen's President that the kingdom is massing troops on the countries' disputed border and urged the Sanaa government to check with Riyadh first before making such accusations.

Anti-Rabbani forces rocket Kabul

ISLAMABAD, Jan 28: Forces opposing Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani rocketed residential areas in the capital Kabul on Friday, killing an unspecified number of people, the official Kabul Radio said, reports Reuters.

The broadcast monitored in Islamabad, blamed the rocketing on the militia controlled by Hezb-e-Islami party leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Rabbani's arch-foe.

The rockets "mostly hit residential areas causing loss of life and damage to property," the late-evening broadcast said.

The rocketing follows Afghan government reports on Thursday of a two-pronged assault on the strategic northern town of Kunduz by anti-Rabbani forces of northern warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostum.

There was no information on Friday about the progress of the attack on Kunduz, which an Afghan Defence Ministry spokesman in Kabul said on Thursday was launched along the Salang highway from the Jarkhoshk district to the south of the town Kunduz and

from the Yerganak pass in the west.

The offensive had followed two days of bombing by Dostum's fighter jets, which the official Kabul radio said had killed 22 people and wounded several others, and the pounding the forward defences with artillery on Wednesday.

Aid agency sources in Kabul confirmed on Thursday there was a major attack under way in Kunduz province, of which the Kunduz town is the capital, but they said they had no details.

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US, Vietnam diplomatic ties established after twenty years

HANOI, Jan 28: Twenty years after the Vietnam War the United States and Vietnam took a major stride toward full diplomatic relations by agreeing Saturday to open liaison offices in each other's capitals, reports AP.

The former enemies agreed to return or pay for diplomatic properties seized when the Vietnam War ended in 1975.

"The liaison offices are now established with the signing of that formal document," said James Hall, who will head the liaison office in Vietnam.

Hall refused to say when the office would open for business, but US diplomats said earlier they might move in later Saturday.

Hall signed the agreement in a brief ceremony in Hanoi's government guest house. Signing for Vietnam was Nguyen Xuan Phong, director of the Americas Department at the Foreign Affairs Ministry.

A ministry communiqué said the new offices would create favourable conditions for the further strengthening of relations.

The liaison offices will fill consular, political and economic functions and probably serve as a transitional step toward the establishment of embassies. The US office will also support efforts to learn the fate of 1,621 American servicemen listed as missing in Vietnam.

President Clinton has said Vietnam must do more to help on the MIA issue before the United States agrees to exchange ambassadors. The decision to open liaison offices demonstrates Washington's approval of Vietnamese efforts so far.

US diplomats in Hanoi took pains to play down the signing ceremony, saying as late as Friday that they would block news media from attending. They were apparently concerned that conservative US Congressmen might make another last-minute effort to derail the accord.

Senate foreign relations committee chairman Jesse Helms (R-NC) and eight other members of Congress sent a letter to President Clinton

Tuesday, asking him to postpone the office openings. They said Vietnam still seemed unwilling to provide key information on MIAs.

Clinton, who avoided the draft during the war, is vulnerable to charges that he is too eager to reconcile with a former enemy.

But ten other senators wrote him a letter of support Thursday, saying a liaison office would actually help in collecting information about the missing men.

US-Vietnam relations began to warm when Clinton agreed in July 1993 to stop blocking Hanoi's access to international development loans. He lifted the 19-year US economic embargo against Vietnam last February, and more than 50 American companies have already set up shop here.

The President also agreed last February to set up the liaison offices, but wrangling over the status of 36 US diplomatic buildings hindered progress. The two sides finally initialled a properties agreement last month.



Director of the US Liaison Office in Hanoi James Hall (L) and Director of the Americas Department of the Department of Foreign Affairs Nguyen Xuan Phong sign yesterday an agreement between the two countries' liaison offices in Hanoi and Washington. Behind in the centre is Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Le Mai. —AFP photo