

Federal rule extended

India accuses US of meddling in Kashmir

NEW DELHI, Feb 15: India's interior minister has accused the United States on the floor of Parliament of supporting Muslim secessionists in the Indian state of Kashmir, reports AP.

"Unless we are prepared to toe their line... they will keep creating problems," said Interior Minister Shankarrao Chavan. He spoke Tuesday before the legislature voted to extend federal rule over the state until July 17.

India routinely accuses neighboring Pakistan, an Islamic state, of supporting the 5-year-old Muslim rebellion in Kashmir. But it was the first time in more than a year that an official of Chavan's rank has publicly alleged US involvement in Kashmir.

Mandela will retire in '99

CAPE TOWN, Feb 15: President Nelson Mandela said Wednesday he would retire when his term expires in 1999 to spend time with his grandchildren and read, reports AP.

"In 1999, I will be 80," Mandela told the South African Press Association. "I don't think an octogenarian should be meddling in political affairs. I would like to give over to a younger man. But I will be available to give advice."

Mandela, 76 spent 27 years in prison for trying to overthrow apartheid rule. He was released in 1990 and led the African National Congress in negotiations that set up the nation's first all-race election last year, which the ANC won to make him South Africa's first black president.

A US embassy spokesman declined to comment on the allegations, and said the embassy was trying to find the document that Chavan cited in Parliament. Chavan referred to a "research document published by the Republicans stating that the Democrats were creating problems in India by encouraging Pakistan to supply arms, provide training camps and logistic support" to the militants.

Chavan said the United States would only be satisfied if independence was granted to Kashmir. "We have defeated Pakistan so many times, we do not do it again. We are worried about complications of involvement of other parties," he said.

His speech made headlines in most Indian newspapers Wednesday. India says it will not grant independence to Kashmir, the only Muslim-dominated state in India, which is predominantly Hindu. More than 11,000 people have died in the insurrection, which began over demands for greater autonomy and an end of what the Muslims say is institutional discrimination.

Russia, Chechnya begin second round of talks on ceasefire

MOSCOW, Feb 15: The leaders of warring Russian and Chechen forces began a second round of talks today intended to build on a temporary ceasefire agreed earlier this week, reports Reuters.

Tass, reporting from the Ingush settlement of Sleptovsk just outside Chechnya, said the delegations were led by General Anatoly Kulikov, head of Russian Interior Ministry troops in Chechnya and Aslan Maskhadov, commander of Chechen separatist forces.

Kulikov and Maskhadov on Monday agreed a ceasefire covering use of heavy weapons — artillery, rockets and mortars — in the conflict. But the ceasefire was tented on Tuesday by an exchange of rocket and shell fire in and around the Chechen capital Grozny between Russian forces and remnants of Chechen irregulars who have largely been driven out of the city.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin sent troops into the north Caucasus territory on December 11 to crush a three-year drive for independence.

But the operation was poorly prepared and Russian troops met fierce resistance from the Chechens, leading to a conflict in which hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people have been killed.

AFP from Stockholm adds: Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev on Tuesday assured his British counterpart Douglas Hurd that there will be no more bombings in Chechnya. British government sources said in Stockholm. "Kozyrev said there would be no more bombings in Chechnya, but the proof of the pudding is in the eating," said a British government official who asked not to be identified.

On Tuesday, heavy exchanges of artillery shook strategic sites in Chechnya in violation of the ceasefire accord signed by Chechen and Russian commanders less than 24 hours earlier. Chechen commanders accused the Russians of breaking the truce.

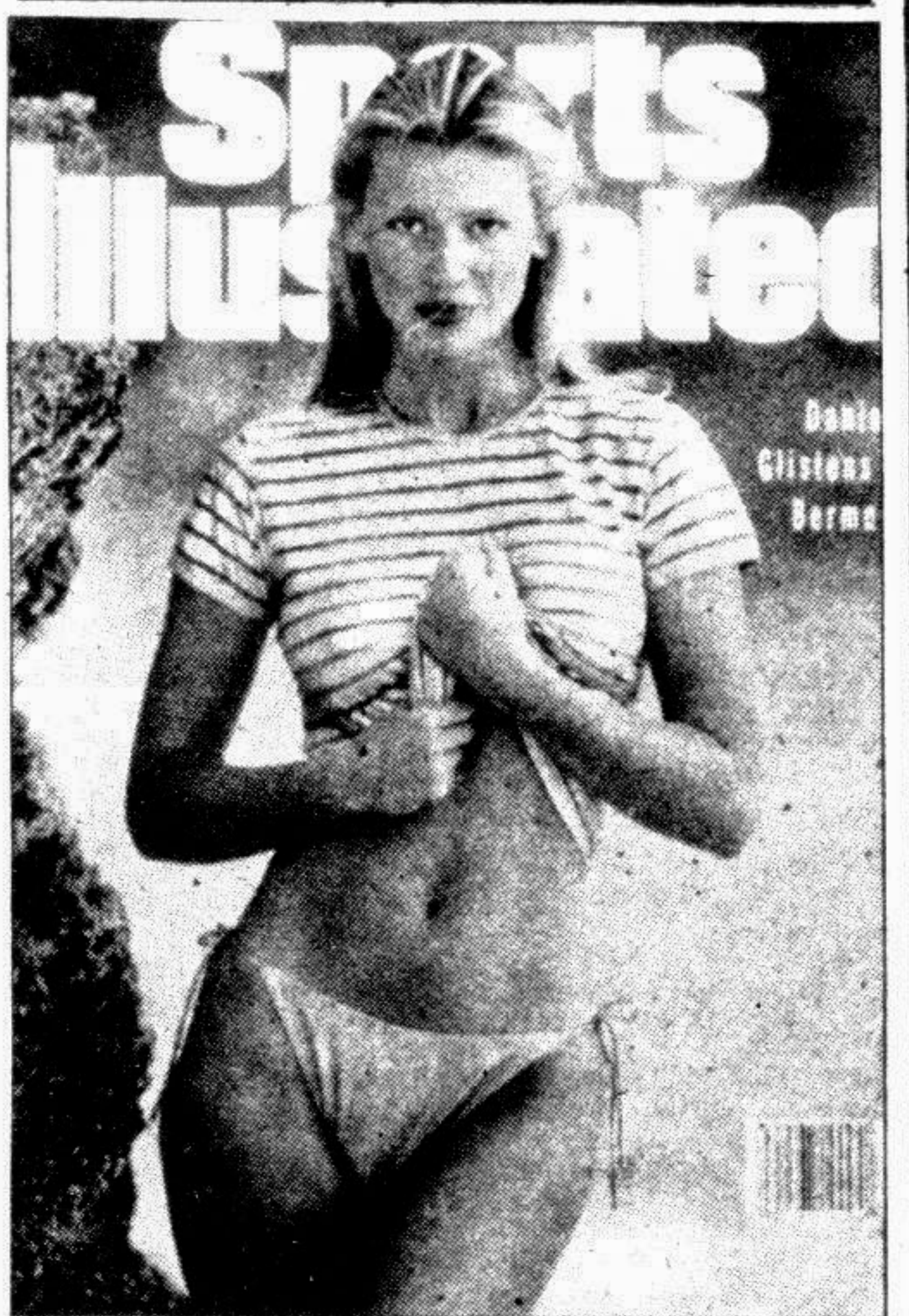
Kozyrev, who held talks with Hurd here over dinner, reaffirmed Russian President Boris Yeltsin's commitment to reform and assured Hurd that this process had not been affected by the events in Chechnya.

Hurd repeatedly referred to the events in Chechnya as a "dark cloud" over the Russian reform process, and said the setback was harming the relations between Russia and the West.



A Russian soldier stands Tuesday at the square in front of destroyed President's Palace in Grozny. Artillery fire rang out on Tuesday at strategic sites around Grozny in violation of a heavy-weapons ceasefire accord. — AFP photo

Off the Record



Sports Illustrated's 1995 swimsuit edition cover girl Daniela Pestova adorns the cover of the magazine in this photograph released by Time Inc. The Sports Illustrated issue is expected to reach estimated 50,000,000 readers. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Arafat to meet Mitterrand: PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat will meet French President Francois Mitterrand in Paris this weekend and take part in a UN symposium along with Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, a PLO official said yesterday. Reuters reports from Gaza.

Arafat's Press Adviser Nabil Abu Rdeih said Jordan's Prince Hassan will also attend the symposium on media in peacetime organised by UNESCO.

Mao's personal physician dies: Li Zhisui, personal physician to China's Mao Tse-tung for 22 years, has died. He was 75, AP reports from Chicago.

Li died Monday at his home in a western Chicago suburb. An autopsy was scheduled to confirm the cause of death, but family members said it was a heart attack.

In 1954, Li became personal physician to Mao, founder of the People's Republic of China, and held the position until his death in 1976.

12 rebels killed in Sierra Leone: Government troops killed 12 rebels in a weekend onslaught in which nine rebel bases were captured in the east of war-torn Sierra Leone, state radio announced on Tuesday. AFP reports from Freetown.

Grenades, rocket launchers and military uniforms were captured after a four-hour battle in the Baoma area, 235 kilometres (145 miles) southeast of Freetown, the station said.

Quake shakes northern Pakistan: A mild earthquake, shook northern parts of Pakistan on Wednesday but there was no immediate report of any casualty or damage, officials said. AFP reports from Islamabad.

The quake, measuring 4.5 on the Richter scale, originated 300 kilometres (187 miles) south of the border city of Peshawar, in the Hindukush mountain range in Afghanistan, the Pakistani meteorological department said.

Shevardnadze in London: Eduard Shevardnadze, Georgia's head of state, arrived in London on Tuesday for a three-day visit in a bid to promote bilateral cooperation with Britain, Xinhua reports from London.

During his stay in London, Shevardnadze will hold talks with British Prime Minister John Major and the two leaders will sign a joint declaration on friendly cooperation and an agreement on the promotion and protection of investment in Georgia.

Nepali DPM starts European tour: Nepal's Deputy Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal left on a five-nation European tour Wednesday to seek investment in his Himalayan country, AP reports from Kathmandu.

The visit is aimed at assuring the West that the new Communist government in Nepal is committed to democracy and an open-market economic policy, government officials said on condition of anonymity. Nepal is scheduled to visit Germany, Switzerland, France, Britain and Belgium.

Ryzhkov will return to politics: Former Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov has decided to quit his job as a banker and return to politics, ITAR-Tass news agency reported on Tuesday. Xinhua says from Moscow.

It quoted the private Tver Universal Bank as saying that Ryzhkov had offered to resign from the post of chairman of the board of governors of the bank, which he took up in March 1994.

Oleksy agrees to become PM: Jozef Oleksy of Poland's former Communist party has agreed to become prime minister, his party and that of outgoing Premier Waldemar Pawlak said on Tuesday. AFP reports from Warsaw.

Oleksy, currently the speaker of parliament, "has confirmed he is willing to form a new government and is continuing intense negotiations in the leftist coalition on selecting a cabinet," probably by late on Wednesday, the parties said in a statement.

Palestinian teenager shot dead: Israeli soldiers shot dead a Palestinian teenager and wounded seven people in clashes with stone-throwers in the occupied West Bank on Tuesday, the first anniversary of the Hebron massacre, residents said. Reuters reports from Hebron.

Palestinians in major towns, including Hebron, held a general strike in memory of the 29 worshippers shot dead by Jewish settler Baruch Goldstein in the Al-Ibrahimi Mosque before survivors beat him to death.

Quake shakes Hokkaido island: An earthquake registering 4.7 on the Richter scale struck the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido at 8:55 am on Wednesday (2355 GMT Tuesday), the Meteorological Agency said. AFP reports from Tokyo.

There was no fear of tsunami tidal waves, the agency said, adding that there were no immediate reports of damage or injuries.

Two die in Turkish plane crash: A military aircraft crashed Tuesday on an eastern suburb of Istanbul killing the two pilots and a technician on board, police said. AFP reports from Istanbul.

Ramos orders strengthening of military outposts in Spratlys

MANILA, Feb 15: President Fidel Ramos on Wednesday ordered the strengthening of military outposts in the contested Spratly Islands after Chinese moves in areas claimed by the Philippines, reports AP.

"While we are hoping for the best, we must prepare for the worst," Ramos said as he opened a meeting of the National Security Council on an emerging crisis triggered by China's occupation of the Pangasinan Reef, which Manila also claims.

The islands in the South China Sea, believed to be rich in minerals such as oil, are also claimed in whole or in part by Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei.

Ramos ordered the Department of Defence to strengthen within our limited capabilities, our detachments and our naval presence in the Kalayaan-Island Group and to intensify its aerial surveillance over Pangasinan Reef," Ramos said.

He did not specify whether "strengthening" would include sending more troops or upgrading weaponry. The military, citing national security,

has refused to say how many troops are stationed on the eight islands occupied by the Philippines.

Last week, Ramos said surveillance pictures showed that the Chinese have constructed structures at the reef and that Chinese naval vessels were in the area.

He also said Chinese forces briefly detained a group of Filipino fishermen last month.

In an editorial Wednesday, the Philippine Daily Inquirer said China's moves "show the fragility of peace in Southeast Asia as China projects her power to fill the void left by the shrinkage of American military presence in the area."

The US cutback followed the 1991 decision by the Philippine Senate to close the Subic Bay naval base 50 miles (80 kilometers) west of Manila. The Senate action was widely hailed by local media at the time as an assertion of sovereignty.

China's moves, however, have shown that the Philippines lacks resources of its own to defend its claims or prevent incursions.

In encroaching on the Pangasinan reef, Ramos said China ignored international law and a 1992 call by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to settle conflicting claims peacefully.

ASEAN, which includes the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Brunei, also urged claimants to work together to develop the Spratlys economically.

During the National Security Council meeting, Ramos described the Chinese moves as "incursions" into Philippine territory.



Turkish security forces check the bodies of Kurdish rebels killed in an anti-insurgency operation overnight near eastern Turkish town of Diele on Tuesday. Turkish forces backed by air power killed 38 activists of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the crackdown, officials said. — AFP photo

Blast kills 8 Indian troops in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, Feb 15: Eight Indian soldiers and one civilian were killed when an army truck in which they were traveling hit a land mine in Kashmir, defense officials said, reports AP.

The truck was coming from Lopang, a village on the India-Pakistan frontier, to the town of Kupwara when the incident happened, said the officials who cannot be identified under standing regulations. The area is 110 kilometers (68 miles) north of Srinagar.

Arab League, OIC to hold confce in Cairo March 12

CAIRO, Feb 15: The Arab League and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference will hold a conference here on March 12 to oppose Israeli settlement in Jerusalem, a league official said Tuesday, reports AFP.

Egypt's Foreign Minister Amr Mousa, a representative of Morocco's King Hassan II and around 20 Palestinians will attend the three day meeting, the league's deputy secretary general said, Kamal told AFP.

Israel's N-arms obstacle to ME peace: Syria

DAMASCUS, Feb 15: Syria today called for a dismantling of Israel's nuclear weapons, saying it is an obstacle to peace in the Middle East, reports Xinhua.

In an editorial published yesterday in the state-run newspaper Tishrin, Syria said Israel's nuclear weapons capability could push the region into a new arms race and curb the chances of peace.

"Israel's adherence to its nuclear weapons poses a direct threat to the security, stability and existence of the Arabs, ruins chances for the establishment of a fair and lasting peace and opens the door wide to a new nuclear armament race in the region," the paper said.

"All pretexts that Israel uses to justify its refusal to join the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty have collapsed... but Israel's position has remained unchanged," the paper added.

Bosnian govt threatens to ignore truce

SARAJEVO, Feb 15: The Bosnian government threatened on Tuesday to ignore a four-month truce unless Serbs halt attacks in the northwest and allow humanitarian aid to reach the region's hungry, reports AP.

The warning, in a statement issued Tuesday by the Bosnian Embassy in Zagreb, Croatia, was delivered Monday by Bosnian Foreign Minister Irfan Ljubijankic to chief UN envoy Yasushi Akashi.

Ljubijankic said conditions in the northwestern Bihaq pocket had to improve within the next 24 hours or the Bosnian government would consider the truce invalid.

In a letter to Akashi and to UN commanders, Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic made a similar threat but cited no deadline.

Fighting died down on two of three fronts in the north-west Bihaq region. UN spokesman Col. Gary Coward said it was quiet around the town of Bihaq.

But 200 explosions were recorded Tuesday south and southeast of Velika Kladusa, Coward said.

The Bosnian Serb news agency SRNA quoted Bosnian Serb army commander Gen. Ratko Mladic as protesting in a letter to UN commander Lt. Gen. Rupert Smith a government offensive in which five villages south and southwest of Bihaq were captured.

Mladic claimed government forces were brutally destroying Serb settlements, plundering and burning houses and expelling civilians.

Croatia's news agency HINA also quoted a Bosnian Croat commander as saying his troops and the government army had jointly retaken six villages.

Paul Risley, a UN spokesman in Zagreb, quoted Izetbegovic's letter as saying that unless Serb attacks on Bihaq cease immediately, "we will have no other choice but to activate other fronts" to draw Serb soldiers away and relieve pressure on Bihaq.

A jealous wind?

NEW YORK: A couple who planned to marry on Valentine's Day in the Empire State Building saw their marriage certificate but not their love — fly out the 80th-floor window of the famous skyscraper, reports AP.

Rose Marie Higby and Alan J. Ross, of Langhorne, Pennsylvania, were among 34 couples signed up for Valentine's Day weddings in the famous 102-story building.

"They had been dating for 17 years, and they finally made the move," said Dan Sieger, a spokesman for the 34th Street Partnership, a merchants' group that sponsored the "marriage marathon."

Just as Higby and Ross were about to tie the knot, a gust of wind blew their marriage certificate out the window, which was open only a few inches (centimeters).

"They were mortified at first," Sieger said. But not to worry. "We happened to have a Xerox (photocopy) of it downstairs and we were able to salvage the whole thing."

Kissing for charity

LONDON: More than 100 couples indulged in a five minute long kiss on Valentine's Day to try to raise money for charity and set a world record for the longest kiss, reports Reuters.

"I think we've made the heart of London a lot warmer today," Russell Millard one of the kiss-a-thon organisers said.

Millard said he hoped the kissing event would also go down in the record books for having the largest number of participants couples ranged from those engaged for one year to others who had met minutes before.

"We kiss for five minutes almost all the time, said one London couple and this time it's for charity."

Amorous couples all over Britain were encouraged through radio shows to phone a special toll number every time they kissed to raise money for the great Ormond street children's hospital.

At 12 pence (18 cents) a call, and with an estimated 500 red hot passionate couples out there, we hope to raise quite a lot of money, hospital spokeswoman Sarah Hopkins said.

The Guinness Book of world records, one of the sponsors of the event, has no kiss-a-thon record but it may include the event in its next edition, Millard said.

Riyadh-Sanaa talks: No breakthrough yet

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates, Feb 15: Talks between Yemen and Saudi Arabia in Riyadh aimed at settling their border dispute entered a crucial phase today after Sanaa warned they could be suspended if no breakthrough was achieved soon, reports AFP.

After 24 days of negotiations the gap between the two sides remained deep.

Yemeni Chief Negotiator Sheikh Abdallah al-Ahmar said "points of disagreement between Riyadh and Sanaa are numerous and large."

If the two sides do not reach agreement on unresolved issues at the end of the next two days, they will decide to resume talks after the end of the holy month of Ramadan, said Sheikh al-Ahmar, who is also Yemeni Parliament Speaker.

Officially the Saudis have only signalled their intention to try to settle the issue of the border between northern Yemen and the provinces of Najran, Jizan and Assir, assigned to Saudi Arabia by the 1934 Taif Accord.

Sanaa says the treaty expired in 1992 and has refused to renew it, but is using it as a basis for the negotiations.

Sanaa also wants a complete normalisation of ties with Riyadh, although it accuses Saudi Arabia of harbouring exiled southern Yemeni leaders ousted in the May-July 1994 civil war.

Palestinians to accept WB handover in stages

JERUSALEM, Feb 15: The Palestine Liberation Organisation, hoping to break at long last in Middle East peace talks, said on Tuesday it could possibly accept an Israeli handover of West Bank towns in stages rather than all at once, reports Reuters.

Top Palestinian officials reiterated the offer, subject to certain qualifications, ahead of a crucial summit on Thursday between PLO leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin at the border between Israel and the Palestinian-ruled Gaza Strip.

They said Palestinians would accept a West Bank handover in stages, starting with the towns of Jenin and Bethlehem, so long as it was accompanied by an acceptable overall timetable.

PLO officials said Israel so far had said it was ready to experiment, redeploying away from Jenin and Bethlehem, but without agreeing to an overall timetable.

Israel turned over most of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho to Palestinians in May. Under their peace deal, it was due to withdraw troops from other Arab West Bank towns last July to prepare the way for Palestinian elections.

But Israel is reluctant to go forward as long as Islamic militants opposed to the deal are killing scores of Israelis. It says Arafat must do more to crack down on militant groups.