

Algerian rebels revolt at jail, kill 4 guards

ALGIERS, Feb 22: Islamic militants rebelled at an Algiers prison, killing four guards who were taken hostage before security forces deployed Wednesday to thwart a massive escape attempt. The Justice Ministry said, reports AP.

The revolt began Tuesday and some of the mutineers reportedly were still holding out with hostages at midmorning Wednesday as soldiers and police sharpshooters encircled Serkadji prison.

Officials said inmates armed with homemade knives took six guards hostage Tuesday, then began organizing an escape of up to 1,000 jailed Islamic militants and regular prisoners.

Four of the guards were killed and one wounded, the Justice Ministry said. It gave no details on the fate of the six guard or the inmates who were held hostage.

Unofficial press reports said the initial revolt involved about 40 or 50 of the hundreds of Islamic extremists at the prison. An unspecified number of mutineers were killed by security forces.

The Justice Ministry said all the mutineers had been jailed for involvement in the three-year insurgency waged by Muslim militants against the army-backed government. An estimated 30,000 people have been killed in the conflict.

The prison is located near the Defense Ministry and the headquarters of the gendarmes, Algeria's paramilitary police force.

It was the second major prison mutiny during the insurgency. Several inmates who refused to join a rebellion at Algiers Berrougahia prison in November were killed.

In March 1994, Islamic guerillas raided the Tazult-Lambese prison in southern Algeria and freed hundreds of their detained colleagues.

Among the militants held at Serkadji are several leaders of the banned Islamic Salvation Front, the fundamentalist party that was on the verge of winning control of parliament when the military cancelled second-round elections in January 1992.

That cancellation, followed by a declaration of a state of emergency and a massive crackdown on fundamentalists,

No more talks with Chechens, say top Russian commanders

MOSCOW, Feb 22: Russian top commanders said there would be no more talks with Chechen rebels as their forces attacked separatists, ending a relative lull in the 10-week conflict, reports Reuters.

ITAR-Tass news agency said the Chechen delegation was not allowed on Tuesday to Nazran, the capital of Chechnya's neighbour region Ingushetia, where talks on extending a ceasefire were due to be held.

"There should be no more ceasefire talks with the (Chechen) fighters," it quoted Defence Minister Pavel Grachev as saying.

The collapse of a shaky four-day truce between the Russians and forces of the rebel leader Dzhokhar Dudayev on Sunday led to a new round in fierce fighting, which a human rights body said had killed more than 24,000 civilians.

A report, prepared by experts working for Russian human rights commissioner Sergei Kovalyov, said the scale of civilian deaths was comparable only with Poland in World War Two.

Interfax news agency quoted the report as saying that in the two months up to January 25 some 3,7000 children below the age of 15, 5650 women over 15 years, 2650 men over the age of 50 and 13,350 unarmed men between the ages of 15 and 50 had been killed.

The document gave no figure for Russian losses. But defence officials have put the number of military dead at more than 1,000 more than half dying in the battle for Grozny.

Meanwhile, Russian forces have told Chechens to surrender rebels' weapons and remain safe but a paratroop commander vowed a crackdown on separatist fighters.

The twin messages, an olive branch and an iron-fisted pledge, came a day after expiry of a ceasefire dimmed peace prospects.

The Russian military promised not to attack villages which eject rebels fighting Moscow's troops for 10 weeks.

"Stop your sons and brothers, neighbours, and others from senseless bloodshed and recklessness. Don't allow armour to be stationed in your homes, schools and hospitals," said an appeal released late on Monday.

"Don't allow fighters to hide behind your backs and fire on Russian servicemen," it said.

Hours earlier, the head of Russia's paratroop forces had vowed to crush the secessionists.

"Now that we have upset the hive, we have to catch all the bees," general Yevgeny Podkolzin told a news conference after the loope of a four-day ceasefire on Sunday night.

Only minor clashes were reported on Monday between the two sides.

"Podkolzin's remark reflected an increasingly harsh line among Russian military and politicians after the shaky truce expired and talks on extending it collapsed.



The world's oldest woman, France's Jeanne Calment celebrates her 120th birthday on Tuesday at a retirement home in Arles, southern France. — AFP photo

Off the Record

Asians look the same?

DERBY, England: A British judge was under fire on Tuesday for telling a trial jury that Asian men all looked the same, reports Reuters.

Judge Alexander Morrison made the remark when he was shown a set of photographs of Asian men during the trial on Monday in northern England of 23-year-old Abid Iqbal on robbery charges.

Turning to the all White jury, Morrison said I have in front of me photographs of 12 Asian men all of whom look exactly the same which I am sure you can appreciate.

One of Derby's Asian community leaders Ateeq Gulnawaz, accused the judge of blatant racism.

Judges are supposed to set an example to society but by making racist comments judge Morrison has shown how out of touch the legal system is, Gulnawaz told reporters.

The remark is the latest in a series of clumsy comments about women sexual behaviour and racial minorities made by Britain's White male dominated and mostly elderly judges.

Opposition leader charged with sexual offence

KUALA LUMPUR: An opposition Islamic party leader will go on trial to answer charges that he violated a law prohibiting an unmarried couple to be alone together, reports AP.

Parti Islam SeMalaysia, whose platform calls for passage of strict Islamic laws, has been severely embarrassed since its deputy Youth Wing chief, Mohammad Sabu, was allegedly caught by religious policemen in a hotel room on Jan. 31 with a housewife.

Mohammad and the woman, Norma Abdul Halim, pleaded innocent to the crime of "Khalwat," or close proximity, when they were formally charged on Tuesday in an Islamic court in Kota Baru, capital of Kelantan state. Kota Baru is 400 kilometres (245 miles) northeast of Kuala Lumpur.

Kelantan is ruled by Parti Islam SeMalaysia, or PAS, the only one of Malaysia's 13 states that it controls. The others are held by Prime Minister Mahatir Mohammad's Barisan National coalition.

PAS, which also advocates setting up an Islamic state, has often criticised Barisan for ignoring Islamic values.

Snake popping up in toilet bowls

SINGAPORE: At least six families in a Singapore condominium have been terrorised by a snake popping up in toilet bowls, reports AP.

After eight sightings, the consensus is that it is either gray with white spots or brown with stripes, the Straits Times reported Wednesday.

But some residents think there may be more than one snake living in the sewers of the estate and surfacing once in a while for a breather.

Jenny Fong, a 61-year-old retired nurse who saw a reptile two months ago, said, "Its head was about the size of a fist, and part of its body about the length of my lower arm. It was just sleeping peacefully there."

Efforts by the condo management, the Singapore zoo and the police to catch the snakes have failed.

US, Russia to inspect each other's N-sites

WASHINGTON, Feb 22: The United States and Russia will begin inspecting each other's top secret nuclear sites next month to verify compliance with the START-1 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, the Pentagon said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

US experts will go to Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus starting on March 1, and inspectors from Russia and the other three countries will shortly afterwards begin visiting nuclear production sites and bases in the United States.

The detailed inspections of Cold War nuclear arsenals, from storage sites to submarine bases, will come in a 120-day "baseline" period to confirm numbers of weapons in the United States and former Soviet Union from which cuts will be made.

Both sides will be absolutely sure of what the other side is up to," army Brigadier General Gregory Govan, head of the US on-site inspection agency, told reporters at a Pentagon briefing.

Govan said the baseline period will be followed in years ahead by subsequent spot inspection of many of the 36 sites in the United States and 65 sites in the other four countries.

The START-1 treaty, which went into effect in December after a long delay, will slash the combined total of US and former Soviet nuclear warheads to 12,000 by the end of the year 2001 from a Cold War high of 21,000.

Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus have agreed to transport all of their former Soviet nuclear weapons to Russia or destroy them.

Sanaa to take dispute with Riyadh to ICJ

SANAA, Feb 22: Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh said on Tuesday he was ready to take his country's border dispute with Saudi Arabia to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, state radio reported, says AFP.

Saleh said: "Yemen is anxious to settle peacefully its border dispute with the Saudi brothers, through dialogue, mediation or by recourse to the international court."

He was speaking to the US Charge de Affairs to Riyadh, David Welch, who is visiting Yemen, Sanaa radio said.

Saleh also urged the United States to "assume its responsibilities to relieve the suffering of the Iraqi people through the embargo," imposed on Baghdad after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Yemen and Saudi Arabia opened talks to resolve their border conflict on January 23, negotiators were meeting in the Saudi Red Sea city of Jeddah on Tuesday.

However officials in Sanaa have said the talks are stalled as the two sides cannot agree on a joint approach to settling the row.

The two Arab peninsula neighbours dispute three provinces near the border which were assigned to Saudi Arabia in 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.

The two sides are also divided on a Yemeni demand for prior normalisation of ties and the demarcation of the border beyond the three provinces covered by the Taif accord.

100 more striking doctors fired in India

NEW DELHI, Feb 22: Over 100 doctors at India's leading hospital have been dismissed after going on strike 15 days ago to protest against the sacking of a surgeon, officials said today, reports AFP.

Twenty-two doctors at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) here were served dismissal orders Tuesday, taking to 102 the number of people sacked since the weekend, an AIIMS spokesman said.

The authorities cracked the whip after the doctors refused to end the strike called to demand the reinstatement of a colleague who was sacked in January for alleged incompetence.

BRIEFLY

Clinton to visit Moscow this yr: Russian leader Boris Yeltsin on Tuesday said US President Bill Clinton would visit Moscow this year to discuss a major new nuclear arms reduction treaty, Reuters reports from Minsk.

He told reporters during a visit to the former Soviet republic of Belarus that he and Clinton would begin preparations for what he called the Start-3 treaty, but gave no further details.

Amadou new Niger PM: The Secretary-General of Niger's main opposition party, Hama Amadou, was Tuesday named prime minister by President Mohamed Ousman, a presidential statement announced, AFP reports from Niamey.

Amadou's appointment was demanded by the opposition which has had a parliamentary majority since early elections were called in January.

Russia, Bosnia set up ties: Russia formally established diplomatic ties with Bosnia-Herzegovina Tuesday, according to official announcements in both countries, AP reports from Sarajevo.

Most Western countries formally recognized Bosnia-Herzegovina in April 1992, when the Serbs rebelled against the decision by Bosnia's Muslims and Croats to leave the Serb-dominated Yugoslav federation.

Pope plans visit to Belgium: Pope John Paul II is planning a short visit to Belgium in June for the beatification of Father Damien after his trip last year was cancelled because of injury, organisers said Tuesday, reports AP from Brussels.

The Roman Catholic bishop conference said the pope would arrive in the afternoon of June 3 and leave the next day for Rome. The visit will be a shortened version of the planned papal trip last year, which had to be called off when the pope sustained a hip injury.

Jet makes emergency landing: A Philippine Airlines 747 jumbo jet with 331 passengers made an emergency landing on Wednesday as it arrived on a flight from Thailand, authorities said, AP reports from Manila.

There were no injuries among the passengers and the plane was towed safely to the Ninoy Aquino International Airport terminal, said Lee Villacorte of the Airport Emergency Services.

Polls in Haiti in June: Four months after deposed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was restored to power, Haiti's Provisional Electoral Council on Monday called for general elections in June, Reuters reports from Port-Au-Prince.

The first round of voting will be held on June 4, with run offs for any undecided parliamentary seats set for June 25, the Electoral Council said.

3 Jewish teenagers held in WB: Israeli police said they detained three Jewish teenagers on Tuesday who were carrying incendiary materials and bullets as they tried to enter the Hebron shrine where a Jew massacred 29 Muslims a year ago, Reuters reports from Jerusalem.

The 15 and 16-year-old youths from Jerusalem were held for questioning at the police station in the West Bank town. Police said at first they had discovered a small bomb on the youths but later described it as more like fireworks capable of causing injury.

UN launches 'Year of Tolerance': The UN chief has kicked off the "Year of Tolerance," saying that diversity "is crucial to the survival of humanity," reports AP from United Nations.

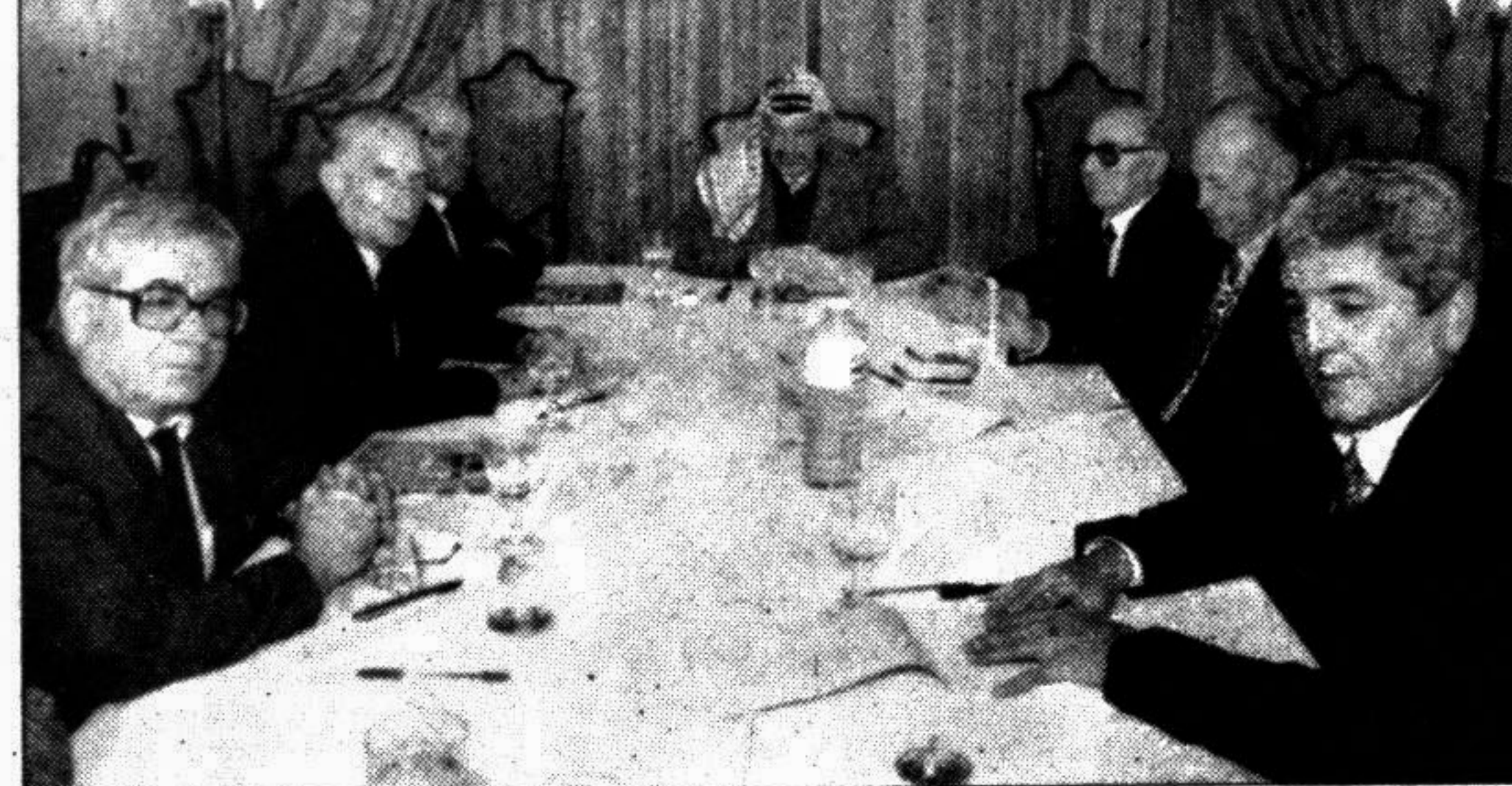
The United Nations plans a series of regional meetings this year to promote tolerance and will send 29 goodwill ambassadors, including soccer great Pele and tenor Placido Domingo, to spread its message. "The importance of tolerance has been made tragically clear in recent years," Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said on Tuesday.

AP photographer hurt in Chechnya: An Associated Press photographer was wounded when his car came under fire, apparently from Russian troops, as it left Grozny, capital of the breakaway Chechen republic, AP reports from Moscow.

Alexander Zemlianchenko suffered a flesh wound in the leg as he and a crew from Associated Press TV left Grozny after dark on Monday on their way to the neighbouring republic of Ingushetia.

Algerian army official killed: Islamic extremists have killed a ranking official in the Defense Ministry and two bodyguards in the latest show of deadly force that has marked the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the French and Arab press reported on Tuesday, AP says from Algeria.

Col. Djilali Meraou, 56, best known as Col. Salah or Si Salah, was killed on Sunday while riding in a two-car cortège near his home in Kouba, a fundamentalist stronghold on the edge of the capital, according to the French paper Liberation. The two cars were peppered with machine-gun fire.



PLO chief Yasser Arafat (C) chairs a crisis meeting of the PLO's executive committee at the Andalous Palace in Cairo on Tuesday. Arafat called the meeting to seek a new strategy for autonomy talks with Israel. — AFP photo

LTTE denies plans to assassinate Chandrika

COLOMBO, Feb 22: Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels denied plans to assassinate President Chandrika Kumaratunga but tacitly admitted having killed former Indian Premier Rajiv Gandhi, press reports here said on Tuesday, says AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) discounted claims by Kumaratunga herself that the guerilla group had targeted her despite current peace moves to end Sri Lanka's ethnic bloodletting.

"Chandrika's hand is clean. We have no reason to assassinate her... what is important is to find out why some leaders were assassinated than to find out who assassinated them," LTTE ideologue Anton Balasingam said.

He told reporters in their northern Jaffna stronghold over the weekend that a solution to Sri Lanka's dragging conflict was possible through negotiations with Kumaratunga who launched the peace process after winning August polls.

Kumaratunga announced earlier this month that a cameraman arrested near her ancestral home outside the capital had been commissioned by LTTE leaders in the island's northern Killinochchi region to photograph places she visits.

She said the plan fitted into the LTTE style of previous assassinations of high profile politicians whose movements were closely photographed before striking with a suicide bomber.

Rajiv Gandhi was killed by a Tamil suicide bomber in 1991 but the Tigers have always publicly denied involvement. However, LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran and his intelligence chief Pottu Amman have been named as the main suspects.



Workers of the Sarajevo morgue on Tuesday unload dead bodies from a UN truck. The mortal remains of ten Bosnian soldiers, who were killed in action a few months ago and buried in the Serb cemetery in Lukavica, were exchanged with the corpses of seven Serb soldiers in a recent exchange of war victims. — AFP photo

US invites ASEAN members to join jt naval exercises

HONG KONG, Feb 22: The United States is inviting Southeast Asian nations to take part in bilateral naval exercises that could begin as early as May, a US navy official said on Tuesday, reports AFP.

The gesture is intended to reassure Southeast Asia of Washington's commitment to regional security, amid concern over China's claims over the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

The senior official, who requested anonymity, said the United States would assign several ships, including a couple of destroyers, frigates, submarines and amphibious landing vessels — for the exercises.

"We need to show the navies of southeast Asia that we really are interested in operating with them," he said.

The war games, modeled on US manoeuvres with Latin American navies known as UNITAS, would be held from May or June on a bilateral basis, and would ideally become an annual series, he said.

Naval exercises have been staged in the past with Southeast Asian navies, but they involved US warships briefly seconded from US battle groups which happened to be sailing through the region.

The official declined to identify the countries invited to join the exercises, but they are understood to include member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

ASEAN comprises Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, all of which have taken part in past exercises with US naval forces, another US source said.

While plans have yet to be finalized, the US navy official said: "The initial indications we have are positive."

News of the exercises follows a stand-off between China and the Philippines over part of the Spratlys, an archipelago also claimed, in whole or in part, by Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei.

Though small, the islands lie amid strategic shipping lanes through the South China Sea.

Manila last week beefed up its military presence in the Spratlys

Kashmiris kill 5 soldiers

JAMMU, India, Feb 22: Muslim militants ambushed paramilitary soldiers, killing five of them and injuring another four in strife-torn Jammu-Kashmir state, a news report said Wednesday, reports AP.

The soldiers were trapped on their way Tuesday to a raid on militants' hideouts in Doda district, 180 kilometers (115 miles) northeast of Jammu, the state's winter capital.

The militants hiding on a hillside fired gunshots and lobbed hand grenades on the soldiers, United News of India news agency quoted police as saying. The guards returned fire but the rebels escaped.

Muslim rebels are fighting for the secession of Jammu-Kashmir state from India. More than 11,000 people have been killed since the insurgency flared up in 1989 in India's lone Muslim-majority state.

Amnesty calls for release of 2 Pak Christians

LONDON, Feb 22: Amnesty International on Thursday called for the release of two Pakistani Christians sentenced to death on charges of Blasphemy against Islam's Prophet Muhammad (SM), reports Reuters.

The human rights group said the original charges against Salamat Masih, 14, and Rehmat Masih, 40, were maliciously brought because of hostility toward the Christian minority.

"Islamists demonstrated throughout the trial for the death of the defendants and there was no material evidence for the alleged offence," it said in a statement.

"Death threats and insults both inside and outside the Lahore High Court where the appeal is being heard, underscore our concern that all those associated with this, Blasphemy case are in danger," it added.

The pair, who deny the charge, were arrested in May 1993 after a village imam, or prayer leader, accused them of throwing pieces of paper bearing blasphemous remarks into his mosque.

Russian Gen urges Yeltsin to quit

BONN, Feb 22: A general in command of a Russian army division has called on President Boris Yeltsin to resign, saying he had lost control of the state, in an interview yesterday in the mass-circulation Germany Daily Bild, reports AFP.

The situation worsens every minute President Yeltsin stays in the job."

The 44-year-old general was interviewed at his headquarters in Moldova where he commands the 14th Russian army, General Alexander Lebed said.

"The control of the state is lost and Russia looks like a boat without a rudder," he said. "We are heading for a major social explosion. And it will spread everywhere, not only in Russia," he said.

General Lebed however warned western governments "not to isolate Russia."