

Taliban rocket Kabul: Several killed

KABUL, Mar 13: The emergent Afghan student militia Taliban rocketed Kabul on Sunday, killing several people after being routed by government forces in the southwest of the capital, official sources said, reports Reuters.

Government warplanes and artillery earlier pounded the Taliban Islamic militia base outside Kabul after driving its forces and those of an opposition Shiite Muslim faction from the city, witnesses said.

A Defence Ministry spokesman told reporters the attack on the Charasyab Base south of Kabul was intended to oust all government rivals from rocketing distance of the capital.

Taliban, driven out of its newly-captured Karte Seh district in southwest Kabul, responded with dozens of rockets, most of which landed in Kabul's civilian districts, witnesses said.

Military sources, quoted on state radio, described the Taliban rocketing as cruel and said dozens of people were killed or wounded.

Taliban is holding the leader of the Shiite Hezb-i-Wahdat party, Abdul Ali Mazari, captive at Charasyab, a witness said.

A Western journalist said he photographed Mazari, bound hand and foot, at Charasyab on Saturday. No other details of Mazari's capture were immediately available.

The fall of Karte Seh, completed overnight with the capture of a former Soviet Scud missile base nearby, consolidated Rabbani's grip on the capital.

It also handed the Taliban their first defeat, puncturing an aura of invincibility acquired by the new force as it swept through southeastern Afghanistan in the past few months.

Cong (I) rejects BJP demand for Rao's resignation, fresh polls

NEW DELHI, Mar 13: India's ruling Congress (I) Party today rejected opposition calls for Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao to stand down and hold general elections after its disastrous defeat in crucial state polls, reports AFP.

The performance of the central government was not an issue in these elections, Congress spokesman Vithal Gadgil said. "So we reject the demand for Rao's resignation and fresh (Parliamentary) elections."

The opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party) called on Rao to resign on Sunday after the Congress was routed in the western state of Gujarat and edged out in the adjoining state of Maharashtra.

Rao does not have the political or moral authority to continue in office, a BJP spokesman said.

The Hindu revivalist BJP cruised into power for the first time in Gujarat, while an alliance of the BJP and Hindu militant Shiv Sena was poised to take Maharashtra, whose capital is Bombay.

Both of the highly industrialised states were considered Congress bastions before last month's polls seen as a critical test of the popularity of the 73-year-old Rao.

The Congress, however, won a pyrrhic victory in the eastern state of Orissa, ousting a five-year-old government of the centrist Janata Dal (People's Party). Counting of the votes from the state elections began Saturday.

Gadgil said the Congress defeats, which came on the heels of a humiliating rout in two key southern states in

December, would not cause serious problems for Rao, who is also the party president.

The central government will not be affected and Rao's leadership will not be seriously challenged by the increasingly vocal dissidents in the party, the Rao confidant said.

Congress sources said the Prime Minister has warned party MPs he will call early general elections if they back the drive to oust him, at least as party chief.

"Every Congress MP is afraid of early parliamentary elections. They don't want early elections," Gadgil said. "So with murmurs and some dissidence, the party will continue."

He added that the Congress was resigned to seeing the BJP-Shiv Sena take power in Maharashtra, dismissing spec-

ulation that the party may try to bring dozens of independent candidates into a government.

"The general feeling in the party is that we should not form a government," in Maharashtra, a traditional Congress stronghold, he said.

"Our thinking is to let the BJP and Shiv Sena from the government. Within one year it will collapse because of their inner contradictions," Gadgil added. "They are hopelessly divided on so many issues."

With results still to be declared from 12 constituencies, the Congress has emerged as the single largest party in the 288-member Maharashtra legislature with 77 seats. The Shiv Sena, with 66 seats, and the BJP, with 63, have already staked a claim to form a government.

Off the Record



American model Nikki Taylor presents a ball gown from the collection of Tomasz Starzewski in London on Sunday as part of the London Fashion Week. — AFP/UNB photo

Motorbike race ends up in jail

HANOI: A court has sentenced 13 youths to jail for racing their motorbikes through city streets in the government's harshest move yet to quash the dangerous fad, a newspaper reported Monday, says AP.

The sentences, ranging from eight to 20 months, were handed down Saturday by the Hanoi People's Court. The court gave two other youths six months' probation, said Hanoi Moi (New Hanoi).

Motorbike racing has killed at least 14 people, nine of them bystanders, in the past two years. Police efforts to halt the nighttime sport previously were hampered by the fact that many racers are the sons of high-ranking officials and community leaders, who reportedly would intervene to block charges.

But when one racer was killed and a dozen others injured last September 20, police took 13 young people into custody and seized their motorbikes. Premier Vo Van Kiet issued a public statement condemning the races as a public disorder and demanding swift punishment.

Since September, Hanoi police have increased night patrols and equipped special squads with paint pellet guns and more powerful motorbikes to catch the racers.

World One-Day Novel Cup

LONDON: Fifty-eight writers spent the weekend struggling against the tightest of deadlines — to write a winning novel within 24 hours, reports AP.

The winner of the World One-Day Novel Cup in the Groucho Club, the exclusive West End hangout for London's literati, will be announced on March 20. Besides earning the author 500 pounds, the winning work will be published hardcover and in London bookshops the next day.

The contestants each were expected to produce a novel of approximately 20,000 words in length during two 12-hour bursts Saturday and Sunday. The exercise took its toll in throbbing eyes and aching fingers but participants held their discipline and none dropped out, according to organiser Rowland Morgan.

"Unlike last year, all the competitors have been very well behaved and diligent," Morgan said. "There have been no scenes of drunken collapse and revelry and nobody seems to have a hangover, which seems very strange."

Among the competitors were a creative writing teacher and one of her former students, an explosives expert, a Church of England priest, journalists from three British newspapers, and the teenage son of a former editor of The Times of London.

California floods claim 12

SALINAS, California, Mar 13: Floodwaters inundated California's highest fields, closed roads and left at least 12 people dead and thousands homeless with weather forecasters predicting more rain for today, reports AFP.

A series of Pacific storms that battered northern California for two days moved southward on Saturday, sending rivers and creeks surging over their banks with 39 of the state's 58 counties declared disaster areas.

Authorities said four more bodies had been pulled from the water late Sunday near the central town of Coalinga, where a highway bridge on Interstate 5 collapsed on Saturday, sweeping away three cars.

Two people were still missing from that incident, while 30 kilometres (20 miles) of Interstate 5 were closed to traffic.

"It's the most widespread geographic storm in California in this century," said James Bailey of the State-Federal Flood Operations Centre in Sacramento.

Sunday was rain-free for most of California, but showers forecast for Monday would hit ground that is still saturated from recent storms and those that hit in January.

Officials estimate that damages to roads, bridges, crops, homes and businesses will top two billion dollars. This, after the state has already been ravaged by recent earthquakes.

Arabs to set up joint court

CAIRO, Mar 13: Arab countries have decided to set up a joint court of seven judges for the first time in their history to resolve disputes and prevent conflicts such as that sparked by Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, reports AFP.

The plan to set up an Arab Court of Justice along the lines of the International Court in the Hague is to be adopted at a meeting of Arab League foreign ministers here on March 22.

The idea was first mooted after the 1991 Gulf War which ended Iraq's seven-month occupation of its tiny neighbour Kuwait. The crisis created huge rifts in the Arab world.

According to the draft text, the court will be "responsible for settling disputes between member states of the Arab League which will address it."

Non-members linked to Arab countries through bilateral or multilateral accords will be given the same rights to have recourse to the court.

The judges will be elected from candidates versed in Islamic Sharia and international law by a two-thirds majority of Arab League foreign ministers. They will serve for a non-renewable term of six years.

Each country can put forward two candidates, of whom only one may be elected as a judge.

"Countries which agree to have recourse to the Arab Court of Justice will not be allowed to ask for other international jurisdiction later," according to the draft plan.

West Bengal minister apologises

CALCUTTA, Mar 13: After being admonished by the Speaker for his absence in the house during question-answer session Friday last, state's Co-operative Minister, Saral Dev, today apologised in the West Bengal Assembly admitting his lapse, reports PTI.

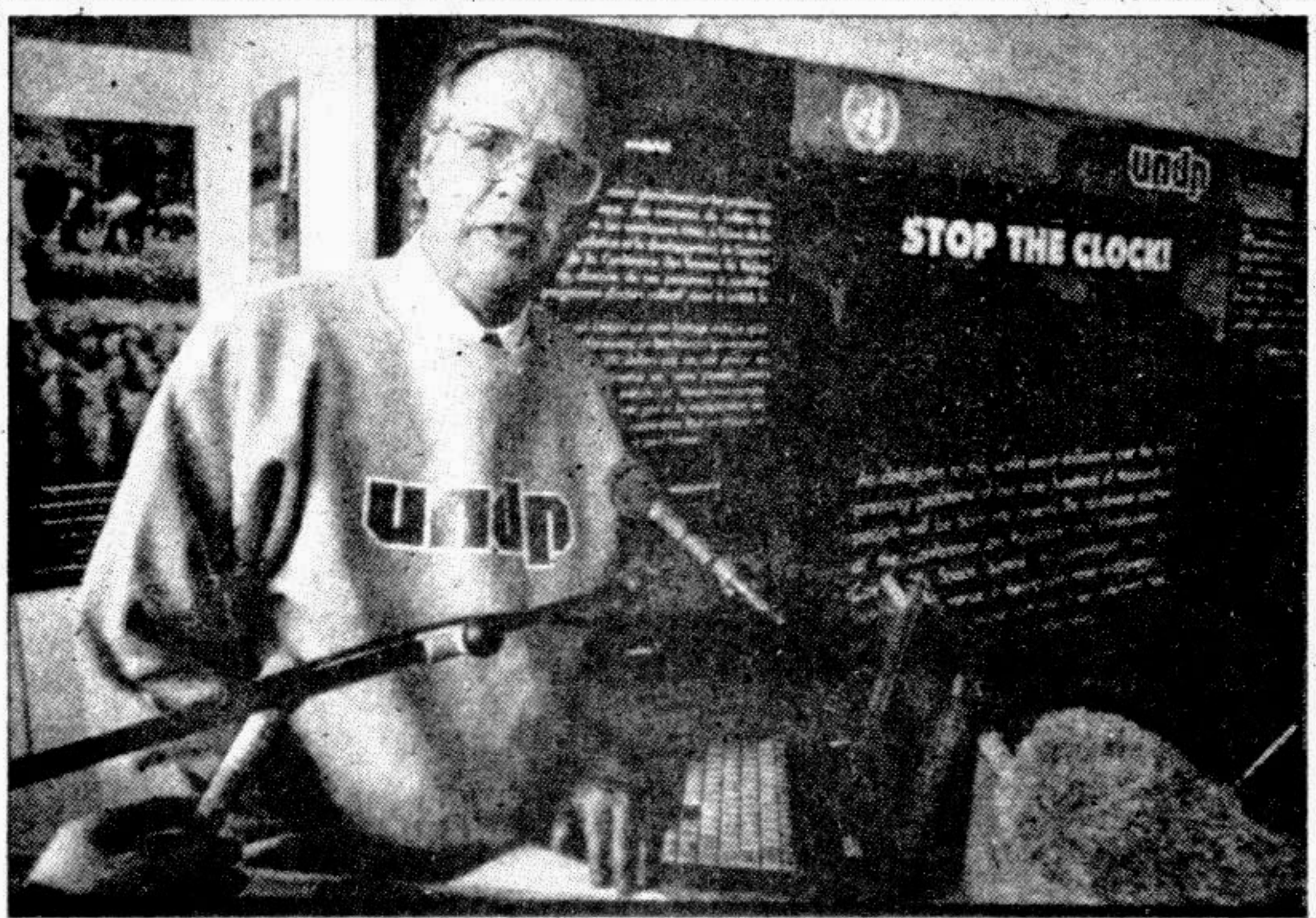
Asked by the Speaker, H A Halim, to explain his absence in the house, the minister admitted, his lapse, adding that he had no intention to curb rights of the member, Abdul Mannan, by remaining absent in the assembly that day. He assured the house that he would be cautious in future.

The chair, while asking the minister to be alert in future, directed him to inform the house in advance whenever he would not be able to be present in the assembly.

Former Nigerian military ruler arrested

LAGOS, Mar 13: General Olusegun Obasanjo, a former Nigerian military ruler, was arrested today, his aide said.

General Obasanjo was picked up this morning by security men," his personal assistant Ayo Aderewale told Reuters.



James Gustave Speth, Administrator of the UNDP, talks to the media during a press conference to announce the stopping of the UNDP Poverty Clock, in Copenhagen on Sunday. The clock, installed at the Bella Centre UN Social Development Summit site, shows the estimated amount of 598,070 children born into poverty during the UN summit. — AFP/UNB photo

US receives bodies of diplomats

WASHINGTON, Mar 13: More than 200 State Department employees including Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott received on Sunday the bodies of two US diplomats killed in an ambush in Pakistan, reports AFP.

The families of the victims accompanied the bodies aboard a special plane sent by the US government.

The two diplomats working in the US Consulate in Karachi, Jacqueline Valandingham and Gary Durrell, were shot dead when gunmen opened fire on their vehicle on Wednesday.

"We've been reminded yet again — vividly and tragically that those who work in our embassies and consulates face not only hardships but risk as well," Talbott told the group at Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington.

ROK opposition MPs occupy parliament

SEOUL, Mar 13: Opposition legislators occupied South Korea's parliament today after vowing to stop the ruling party from ramming controversial election law changes through the assembly, reports AFP.

The sit-in strike followed police raids on Sunday on the homes of National Assembly Speakers Hwang Nak-Ju and Vice Speaker Lee Han Dong to end a six day blockade by opposition lawmakers.

One speaker is required by law to preside over the passage of any law through the assembly.

Following an overnight sit-in, all legislators and assistants from the main opposition on Democratic Party (DP) and two splinter parties joined forces on Monday to block off the assembly building halls.

The ruling Democratic Liberal Party (DLP) has threatened to railroad revised election law through parliament unless the opposition present a compromise proposal.

DLP leaders contend election law changes are necessary for clear campaigning in local polls in June for provincial governors, mayors and county heads.

The ruling party hopes to bar candidates for mid-level administrative positions and councils from belonging to political parties, except in big cities.

But the opposition has accused the DLP of seeking to maintain its grip on local governments and assemblies.

At a caucus today, DP leader Lee Ki-Taek renewed his threat to launch an anti-government campaign if the ruling camp railroaded the election law changes through parliament.

China to produce plutonium

TOKYO, Mar 13: China is planning to reprocess nuclear waste into plutonium, a deadly radioactive fuel, by the year 2000, a Japanese official said today, reports AP.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said that Japan supports the plan, though the policy would run counter to UN efforts to reduce world stores of plutonium.

China will complete construction of a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant by the year 2000, a senior official in the China National Nuclear Power Corp told a Japanese delegation in February.

Officials of the China National Nuclear Power Corp. contacted in Beijing by The Associated Press on Monday, refused to comment on the Japanese official's remarks.

The Chinese plant, the first of several planned, will extract plutonium — a radioactive element that can be used to make nuclear bombs — from the spent fuel of nuclear power plants, the official said. He added that the plant will have a production capacity of 100 tons per year.

Plutonium is one of the most toxic substances known to man. A speck barely visible to the naked eye is enough to kill an adult. Plutonium can be used to make nuclear bombs.

There is an estimated 100,000 tons of plutonium in storage around the world, and reported cases of smuggling are on the rise. The United States and the United Nations are trying to reduce the plutonium in storage around the world and limit its production.

The official of Japan's Energy and Natural Resources Agency, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said China plans to keep its plutonium production under civilian control and has no plans to export it.

The Japanese official said the Chinese explained their plans for the fuel recycling plant to nuclear experts from the Ministry of International Trade and Industry who were in China.

BRIEFLY

Crime on rise in China: Chinese courts handled nearly 20 per cent more criminal cases last year than in 1993, the nation's top judge said on Monday in a rare government admission of the extent of rising crime. AP reports from Beijing.

Economic crimes are also on the rise, with courts last year handling 70 per cent more such cases than in the previous year. "China faces rising crime rates and poor social security in some places," said Ren Jianxin, president of the Supreme People's Court, in an annual report to the national legislature.

Christopher to visit Paris: US Secretary of State Warren Christopher will visit Paris this week for talks on arranging a summit on former Yugoslavia, French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said on Sunday, Reuters reports from Paris.

Juppe said on Radio Luxembourg that Christopher would stop over on his way back from the Middle East to discuss a five-power plan for a summit of leaders of Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia, which has run into trouble.

'Saddam Tower' opens: A huge telecommunications centre known as "Saddam Tower" was officially opened on Sunday on the site of a tower destroyed by allied bombing in the 1991 Gulf War, AFP reports from Baghdad.

The circular tower named after Iraqi President Saddam Hussein rises to 203 metres (670 feet), dominating the Baghdad skyline.

Siberian hotel fire kills 10: At least 10 people died and some 20 others were injured in a fire which broke out at a hotel in Irkutsk, Siberia, early Monday, Moscow Echo Radio reported, quoting a rescue official. AFP says from Moscow.

Firefighters tackling the blaze pulled out four bodies and another six were visible in the wreckage of the Sibir hotel where the fire was still raging, the radio said.

Hosni Mubarak in Japan: Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak arrived in Japan on Monday for a visit designed to boost bilateral ties and discuss global issues including progress in the Middle East peace process, Reuters reports from Tokyo.

He is due to hold talks with Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama and other government leaders as well as Japanese industrialists during his visit, which ends on Thursday.

Cypriot killed in Nicosia blast: A powerful bomb exploded under a car in Nicosia early Monday, killing a Cypriot man believed to have been involved with the Mediterranean island's underworld, police said, Reuters reports from Nicosia.

The victim was blown to pieces. We believe he is Andreas Boumboufta, 38, of Nicosia. ... he had been arrested in the past for possible involvement in bomb killings of mostly members of the underworld," a police source told Reuters.

Castro arrives in Paris: Cuban President Fidel Castro arrived in Paris on Monday on a controversial three-day visit to France, airport officials said, Reuters reports from Paris.

Castro was invited by Spaniard Federico Mayor, the Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) which is based in Paris.

Khmers step up assaults: Khmer Rouge guerrillas have stepped up their assaults on government troops occupying a former rebel base in Cambodia's remote northern Preach Bihear province, the provincial governor said Monday, AFP reports from Phnom Penh.

"Small Khmer Rouge groups are increasing attacks on the government troops stationed in their former base at Preah Pralay," Meas Sarin told AFP.

Moderate quake rocks E Japan: A moderate earthquake, measuring 4.7 on the Richter scale, rocked large areas of eastern Japan on Sunday, but there were no reports of casualties or damage, the meteorological agency said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The epicenter of the quake, which struck at 11:39 pm (14:39 GMT), was located in the Pacific, off Chiba prefecture, South of Tokyo, the agency said.

Journalist held in E Timor: A Portuguese journalist was arrested by the Indonesian authorities in the East Timor capital Dili on Sunday, Portuguese radio reported, Reuters says from London.

Joao Gabriel, who was in Dili on an assignment for the Portuguese independent television station TVI, telephoned his brother in Portugal asking for help, the radio, monitored in London, reported.

Biggest war-game since WW II begins in Australia

SYDNEY, Mar 13: The biggest naval exercise in Australia since World War II began today, aimed at fostering naval cooperation for the long-term security of Southeast Asia, a senior Australian naval officer said, reports Reuters.

Rear Admiral Don Chalmers said interaction between seven navies, including Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, was the primary objective of the Kakadu two naval exercise.

"Kakadu very firmly fits into our policy of regional engagement," Chalmers told reporters in Darwin.

A total of 22 warships, two submarines and a number of aircraft together with more than 5,000 military personnel are taking part in the 18-day exercise.

Marcos' son for reopening of Benigno Aquino murder case

MANILA, Mar 13: The son of the late strongman Ferdinand Marcos asked today for a reopening of the investigation into the assassination of Corason Aquino's husband even though millions of Filipinos believe his father masterminded the killing, reports AP.

The August 21, 1983, murder of Sen Benigno Aquino Jr led to a wave of opposition, culminating in the 1986 popular uprising that swept Marcos from power and installed Corason Aquino as president.

"Only a new investigation in light of the new revelations of some of those convicted may show the entire Filipino people what really happened," Rep Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr told reporters.

Marcos Jr, who is running for the Senate, is the latest

figure to issue such a call following claims last week by former Sgt Pablo Martinez that retired Brig Gen Romeo Gatan, retired Col Romeo Ochoco and businessman Hermilio Gosuico were directly involved in the slaying.

Those three never were charged in the case. Martinez was among 16 soldiers sentenced to life imprisonment for the assassination.

On Monday, the Philippine Daily Inquirer said Martinez wrote Prosecutor Fidel Ramos last year detailing his allegations against the three and suggesting that Corason Aquino's estranged first cousin, businessman Eduardo Cojuangco, was also involved.

Government officials have said Martinez's statements are insufficient to warrant reopen-

ing the case. But former prosecutor Raul Gonzalez said he believed Martinez's statements were enough. He accused the government of "indifference" toward finding out who masterminded the assassination.

One witness who is (involved) in the crime is enough," Gonzalez said Sunday. "To me, the testimony of Martinez is enough."

Gonzalez was the chief prosecutor in the retrial of defendants in the assassination. During the Marcos administration a court acquitted all defendants and ruled that Aquino was slain by a supposed Communist Rolando Galman, who then was killed by security guards at Manila airport.

After Marcos was ousted, the Supreme Court nullified the acquittals and ordered a

new trial. Gonzalez was removed as prosecutor a year into the trial after accusing several Supreme Court justices of impropriety.

The trial ended a year later with a new prosecutor. The court convicted Martinez and 15 others of killing both Aquino and Galman and sentenced them to life imprisonment. The trial failed to establish the mastermind, but many Filipinos believe it was Marcos.

Last week, Martinez said Gatan, Ochoco and Gosuico introduced him to Galman a few days before the assassination. Under Gatan's orders, Martinez said he took Galman to the airport on the day of the assassination.

Gatan told him that Galman was to kill Aquino, Martinez said. If Galman refused, Martinez said he was to kill

him. Martinez said Gatan told him that if Aquino also died in the cross fire "it's not your fault."

Gatan and Gosuico deny the claims. Ochoco is believed to be living in California.

On Monday, the inquirer quoted Martinez as saying he wrote Ramos on January 19, 1994, identifying Gatan, Gosuico and Ochoco as "the men who engineered the (Aquino) assassination." Martinez said he did not know whether Ramos ever received the letter.

In the letter, Martinez said, he also noted that Gatan and Gosuico "were both the men" of Cojuangco, a wealthy businessman and close ally of Marcos. Ochoco was closely associated with former Chief of Staff Gen Fabian Ver.

American expelled from jt space mission

MOSCOW, Mar 13: A member of the US team preparing for a joint space mission with Russia this week has been expelled for engaging in espionage, a television station said on Sunday, reports AP.

The private NTV station said the American was a consultant to the US team, NTV, which provided no source for its report, said the mission would go ahead as planned on Tuesday.

A spokesman for the Russian Counter Espionage Agency refused to confirm or deny the report.

A duty officer at the US embassy said he had no information on any expulsion.

The members of the team arrived at the launchpad in Kazakhstan on Thursday.