

BRIEFLY

Quakes shake Indonesia: Two powerful earthquakes shook a far eastern region of Indonesia on Monday. There were no immediate reports of casualties, AP says from Jakarta.

The quakes occurred in the province of Irian Jaya, the most remote of the quaternary Indonesian archipelago. The first tremor, with an estimated 6.2 magnitude, was felt at 3.34 am (1834 GMT), and the second one with a magnitude of 6.8 at 8:53 am (2353 GMT), said Sindhunugroho of the Meteorological Agency in Jakarta.

Al Gore starts ME tour: Vice President Al Gore arrived in Cairo on Sunday on the first leg of a five-nation tour to strengthen ties with American allies in the Middle East in advance of crucial peace talks between Syria and Israel, AP reports from Cairo.

Gore said he chose Cairo as his first stop "in recognition of the critical role Egypt has played and continues to play in bringing peace to a region sacred to three great faiths yet too often scarred by the horrors of war."

Fire claims 12 in S China: A hotel fire in southern China killed 12 people and injured five, press reports in the neighbouring Portuguese enclave of Macao said on Monday, AP reports from Macao.

The reports said the fire broke out on the third floor of the seven-story Zhong Lu Hua Qiao Da Xia (China Travel Overseas Chinese) hotel in Zhongshan city around midnight Sunday.

11 die in Filipino violence: Eleven people killed in two separate attacks in one day in towns just 30 kilometres (18.6 miles) apart, the provincial police chief said in Cotabato on Monday, AFP reports from Cotabato.

Six people were killed and 40 others injured when an unidentified man tossed a grenade into a village dance hall in the town of Pikit late Sunday, Superintendent Julius Obella said. Just a few hours earlier, communist insurgent guerrillas ambushed a soldier, two militiamen and a civilian riding aboard a modified motorcycle in the town of Makilala, killing all four as well as another civilian bystander, Obella said.

Ex-Mafia chief killed in Italy: Gunmen on Sunday killed an 82-year-old former Mafia chief outside his home in southern Italy, judicial officials said, AFP reports from Bianco, Italy.

Giuseppe Nirta, who headed the N'Drangheria, the Calabrian branch of the Mafia, was believed to have retired from crime and was due to testify next week in a trial of several Calabrian Mafia members, the officials said. Despite being under police surveillance, he was shot five times, mostly in the head.

40m poppy plants seized in Egypt: A massive police raid in southern Sinai netted more than 40 million poppy plants, worth an estimated five million dollar, police said on Sunday, AFP reports from Cairo.

A thousand policemen in armoured vehicles and backed by a helicopter seized a 320 hectares (790 acres) of poppies, used in making opium, in the mountainous region of Al-Tor, 370 kilometres (220 miles) southeast of Cairo.

Woman journalist shot dead: An Algerian woman journalist working for the state-run television was shot dead yesterday morning by suspected Muslim guerrillas as she was heading for work in Algiers, Algerian television said, Reuter reports from Tunis.

Rachida Hamadi, aged 32 years, was gunned down in the Algiers Ben Aknoun sector on her way to the television headquarters in central Algiers.

Hungary, Slovakia sign treaty: Hungarian and Slovakian Prime Ministers Gyula Horn and Vladimír Mečiar formally signed a good neighbour treaty here on Sunday ahead of a two-day conference on stability in Europe to be staged in the French capital from yesterday, AFP reports from Paris.

The treaty, signed as French Prime Minister Edouard Balladur looked on, recognises the inviolability of Hungary's border with Slovakia and also the rights of the 600,000 strong Hungarian minority living in Slovakia.

Kim meets UNGA chief: President Kim Young-sam on Monday met with the head of the UN General Assembly and promised to increase South Korea's participation in the world body, AP reports from Seoul.

In the future, South Korea will actively take part in the UN's peace keeping and development efforts, Kim told the visiting UN General Assembly chief, Amara Essy Essy, who is also Ivory Coast's foreign minister, arrived on Sunday for a three-day visit.

Queen decorates Mandela: Queen Elizabeth yesterday decorated President Nelson Mandela with the order of merit at a brief ceremony on the steps of Tuinhuys, the president's offices in the Cape Town parliamentary complex, AFP reports from Cape Town.

"Your majesty, this is a high honour indeed," Mandela said as he received the medal. He then turned to the Queen with the order of good hope - telling her: "This is the highest honour that we can give."

4 killed in Burundi: Four people were killed in fighting between Tutsis and Hutus outside the main market of Burundi's capital Bujumbura on Monday, witnesses said, Reuter reports from Bujumbura.

The fighting broke out as news spread of an ambush outside the capital late on Sunday in which police said 17 people, including three Belgians, were massacred.

17 fishermen drown in China: Some 17 fishermen died after being swept away by waves when their boat hit a rock and sunk off the coast of Shantou in southern Guangdong province, a report said yesterday, according to AFP from Beijing.

The fishermen, among a crew of 30 fishing aboard boat no 51002, have not been seen alive since their boat sunk as it was returning to port on March 12, the Chinese news service said.

Georgian refugees hold rally: Georgian refugees from the breakaway republic of Abkhazia held a rally in Georgia on Sunday to protest a violent Abkhazian campaign against them, the news agency Itar-Tass said, AFP reports from Moscow.

The rally, held in the Georgian town of Zugdidi, resolved to appeal for help from Russian President Boris Yeltsin and from the Georgian authorities.

**UN deadline expires today
Rabbani may not resign**

KABUL, Mar 20: Now that his forces have taken control of Kabul and its suburbs for the first time since 1992, Afghanistan's president is likely to ignore a UN deadline for him to step down tomorrow, reports AP.

The United Nations peace plan calls for President Burhanuddin Rabbani to hand over power to a multiparty governing council that's open to Afghanistan's 10 separate Islamic factions.

But Rabbani, whose term expired in December, has said he won't be bound by the UN timetable. With the latest military victory, he is now in his strongest position since he came to power in December 1992, and many people expect him to stay in power.

On Sunday, Rabbani's army scored its biggest victory in the 3-year-old civil war. It attacked before dawn and drove the rival Taliban militia from its main base just south of Kabul.

All opposition groups are now too far from the Afghan capital to wage sustained rocket attacks, and the beleaguered residents of Kabul are likely to enjoy relative calm for the first time in a long time if the government can hold its territorial gains.

More importantly, the Taliban appeared to have collapsed on Sunday as quickly and dramatically as they had emerged.

In recent months, the group mostly made up of militant religious students — had captured 10 provinces in the south and east of Afghanistan and arrived on Kabul's outskirts in February.

However, they had met little resistance until they came

up against the president's troops. And Sunday's fighting made it appear that their strength had been overestimated.

"Now they are out of rocket range for Kabul. This was our initial objective," Abdullah, a spokesman for the Defense Ministry who uses only one name, said on Sunday.

Government troops began pounding Taliban positions at around 4am with mortars, heavy artillery, tanks and machine-gun fire.

An hour after the barrage began, the Taliban soldiers fled their base in Charasayab, 25 kilometres (15 miles) south of Kabul, according to the Defence Ministry. The government forces also took strategic hills in the area that have been used by various opposition groups to fire rockets on Kabul.

Libya to telecast hangings of murderers

CAIRO, Mar 20: Libya will televise the recent hangings of several murderers on a programme called "Security and Society," which has broadcast taped executions before, reports AP.

Libyan television reported that "a number of people" convicted of "committing premeditated murder for trivial and base reasons in a brutal manner" were executed Sunday.

It said tapes of the executions, along with the stories behind the murders, would be shown on Wednesday night.

The report, monitored by the British Broadcasting Corp in London, gave no further details.

Libya, criticised by the United States for serious violations of human rights, announced earlier this month that it had abolished the country's last prison and freed the 305 inmates.

22 prisoners suffocate in Rwanda

NAIROBI, Mar 20: Twenty-two prisoners apparently suffocated when they were packed in a small cell with 52 other inmates at a police station in the Rwandan capital, reports AP.

Lt. Kent Page, the UN military spokesman in Kigali, said the dead prisoners were discovered Friday morning in their cell at the Muhima brigade police station. He said he did not know why the news of their deaths was withheld until Sunday night.

Radio Rwanda, quoting national gendarmerie chief-of-staff Col. Deogratius Ndirwami, said all of the prisoners were charged with involvement in last year's genocide, which left an estimated 500,000 people dead.

Ndirwami said the 74 prisoners had been held in a cell which "obviously can hardly hold five to 10 people."

"The prisoners started screaming and making a noise, calling for help because the air they were breathing had become poisonous, but no one on guard paid attention to the screams, and what happened was the result of this," Ndirwami said in the broadcast, monitored by the British Broadcasting Corp. ration (BBC).

He said an investigation showed the guards did not react "because apparently prisoners of this type, in cases where genocide is involved, have the habit of fighting in their cells." He said the guards took the screaming as "routine behaviour."

The official who locked the prisoners in the cell and the night guards have been arrested, Ndirwami said.

Page said an investigation was continuing.

Opposition wins Finnish polls

HELSINKI, Mar 20: Finnish voters threw out the centre-right coalition government and gave the opposition Social Democratic Party its biggest election victory since World War II, reports AP.

After four years of unpopular welfare cuts during Finland's worst recession in 50 years, Prime Minister Esko Aho's centre-right coalition Sunday lost its majority in the Parliament.

But the composition of the next government was unclear.

"We haven't tied ourselves to any government options," said Paavo Lipponen, chairman of the Social Democrats. "What we've said is that the current government has outlived its time."

Aho was ready to form a new government with the Social Democrats and his main government partner, the Conservative Party.

"We should not rule out a wide government base," Aho said. "Forming the next Cabinet isn't going to be easy."

Official government talks begin after March 28, when the new Parliament convenes.

In Sunday's election, the Social Democrats became Finland's largest party with 63 seats in the 200-member Parliament, an increase of 15 on the previous election in 1991.

Aho's Centre Party lost 11 seats and has 44 lawmakers in the new Parliament. The Conservative Party lost one seat and now has 39 legislators. The third government member, the Swedish People's

Tibet plans to reduce monks

BEIJING, Mar 20: Authorities in China's Himalayan region of Tibet have announced a crackdown on religious institutions in the deeply Buddhist region, reports Reuter.

They announced regulations to limit the number of monks in each temple, saying young monks outnumber schoolchildren in some places, and to expel lamas from monasteries with too many, the Tibet Daily said in a report seen on Monday.

In a front-page article on the Tibet Daily of March 10, the 36th anniversary of an abortive uprising against Chinese rule, a local official called on Tibetans to be vigilant against the Dalai Lama, condemning the exiled god-king as a "tool of western hostile forces."

Professor indeed!

SEOUL: A debt-ridden South Korean professor was arrested Monday for killing his wealthy father to inherit millions of dollars, police said, reports Reuter.

A police detective said Kim Song-Bok, 41, economics professor at a Seoul University, confessed to the murder of his father, 72, found bleeding from the neck in their home earlier this month.

Kim was quoted by police as saying he covered the face of his sleeping father with towels and stabbed him in the neck. The father was taken to hospital but died.

Police said Kim told them he wanted to inherit from his father quickly as he was under pressure to pay back two billion won (2.6 million) he owed and a company he controlled was being pushed to the brink of bankruptcy.

Police said Kim was estranged after finding out his father intended to donate most of his wealth to a school foundation.

Last year, a South Korean teenager, scolded by his parents for losing thousands of dollars in gambling debts, was charged with killing them to inherit expensive real estate.

Off the Record

Malaysia seizes Chinese trawler

KUALA LUMPUR, Mar 20: Navy patrol boats opened fire on an armed Chinese trawler which encroached on Malaysian waters, after the vessel's crew refused to head warnings to stop, police here said today, reports AFP.

Four of the 16 crew members aboard the Swee Yee trawler were "slightly injured" in the two-hour chase off Malaysia's southern Sarawak state on Thursday, police said.

Several rifles, a machine gun and some ammunition were found aboard the trawler, believed to have been on an illegal fishing trip, police said.

The crew members, aged between 20 and 54, were detained at a Sarawak police lock-up after those injured were treated at a local hospital.

To dock or not to dock?

BIRMINGHAM, England: Breeders at Crufts, the world's oldest dog show, are snarling at each other across the drinking bowls and grooming brushes over one question: to dock or not to dock, reports AP.

Rules from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons permit veterinarians to dock, or cut, working dogs' tails, which can become snagged in undergrowth as the dogs retrieve a shot duck or herd sheep.

The college, however, bars cosmetic docking as cruel and unnecessary.

But many breeders, desperate for a Crufts prize, seek out the rare vet who docks for beauty reasons, saying this is the look judges expect.

"It's traditional to dock the tail," said Tom Bury, a breeder of English springer spaniels. His Lyndora Game Boy was declared the best puppy of the breed Thursday, the first day of the 105th annual Crufts at the National Exhibition Centre.

"If I were judging two dogs which were equal in all other respects, but one had a tail intact, I would probably go for the one with the docked tail," said Bury, who does not use his dogs to hunt.

The winner turned out to be a full-tailed Irish setter named Champion Starchelle Chicago Bear. The docked tail belonged to the runner-up a Welsh terrier.

Some 20,000 dogs were entered in this year's competition.

Charles most-criticised person

MADRID: As Princess Elena and her new husband packed for a honeymoon shrouded in secrecy, the rest of Spain spent Sunday deciding what went right — and wrong — at its first royal wedding in 89 years, reports AP.

Newspapers carried pages of glowing coverage of the marriage Saturday of the daughter of King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia to Jaime de Marichalar, a banker, in the Cathedral of Seville.

But it was not without a hitch or two.

The royals and the Seville city hall issued a brief apology to thousands who missed seeing the newlyweds after they apparently took a wrong turn in their 18th-century carriage.

But the most-criticised person at the wedding was probably Britain's Prince Charles. He arrived just a few minutes before the ceremony and left almost immediately afterwards — skipping the wedding banquet for 1,300, including most of Europe's royal families. Buckingham Palace said he had to hurry home to see his son Harry's school play.

The royal couple was expected to leave Seville Sunday for a honeymoon about which little — not even the length — has been disclosed.

Lanzarote in the Spanish Canary Islands was reported to be the couple's first stop. Spain's royals have a residence there, a gift from Jordan's King Hussein.

Gibault first woman conductor of La Scala Orchestra

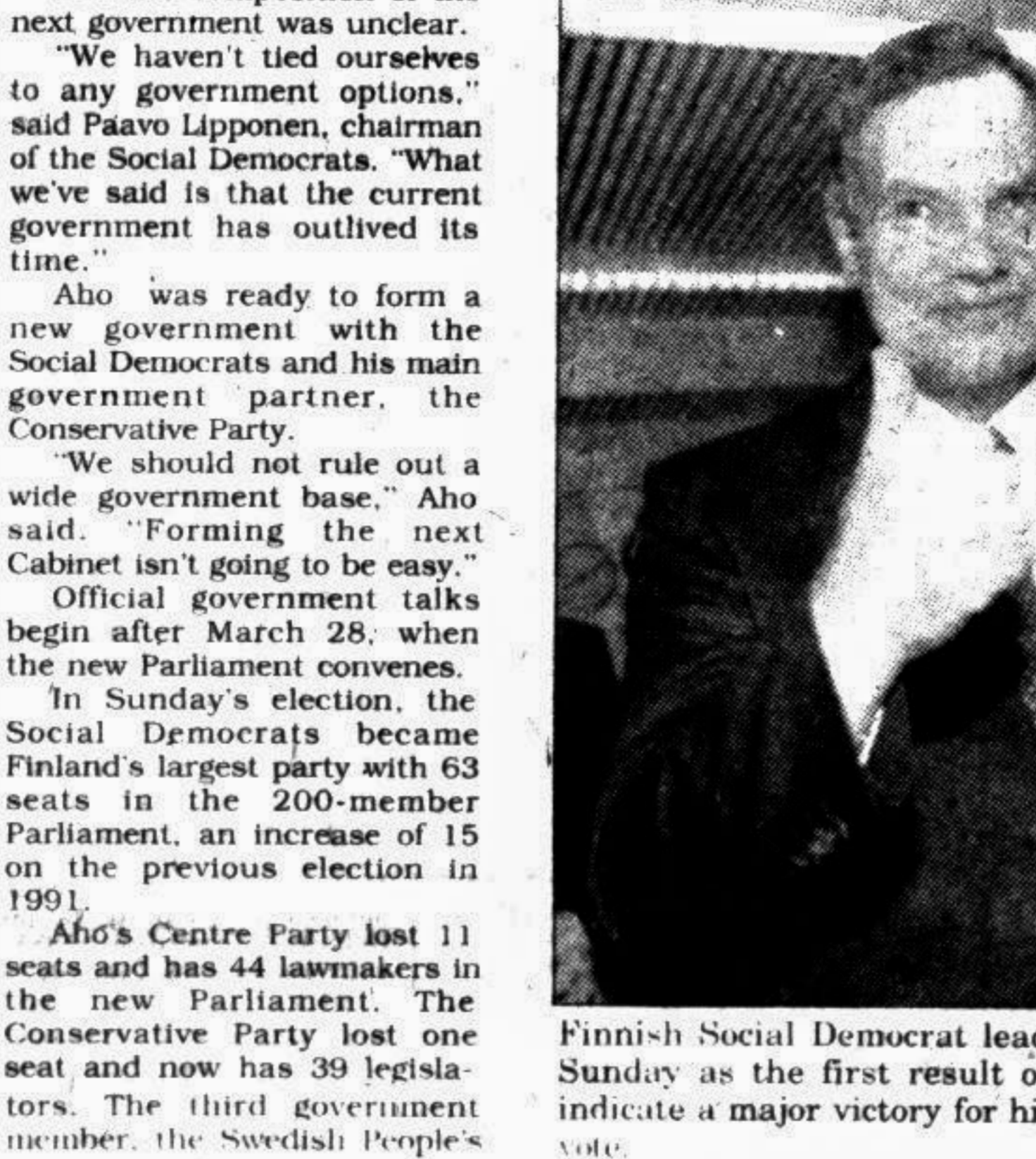
MILAN, Italy: A woman took the bows for the first time Sunday as conductor of the famous La Scala Orchestra, reports AP.

Claire Gibault received a long ovation following "La Station Thermale," a modern opera based on an 18th century play about the troubles and dreams of a group of people at a thermal spa.

The 49-year-old French conductor ended the all-male legacy at the La Scala Orchestra years after the gender barrier was broken in other cities. Women have conducted orchestras in many major cities such as New York and London.

The three-act "La Station Thermale" was performed at the Teatro Lirico, a theater a few blocks from the La Scala Opera House. The theater is often used for modern works.

Gibault, who lives in Lyon, France, has directed the Lyon Opera since 1990 and worked with orchestras in London and San Francisco.



Finnish Social Democrat leader Paavo Lipponen smiles on Sunday as the first result of the parliamentary elections indicate a major victory for his party with 29 per cent of the vote. —AFP/UNB photo

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The crew members, aged between 20 and 54, were detained at a Sarawak police lock-up after those injured were treated at a local hospital.

Shah for tripartite talks to end Kashmir crisis

NEW DELHI, Mar 20: Kashmir separatist leader Shahir Shah said on Sunday that a solution to the Kashmir problem would be impossible without tripartite dialogue between India, Pakistan and the people of Jammu and Kashmir state, reports Reuter.

"This issue involves three parties, that is the people of Jammu and Kashmir, India and Pakistan and unless all these three parties sit around the table no solution is possible," Shah said in a statement.

"I offer myself unconditionally for such a tripartite dialogue," said Shah, who has spent 14 of the last 20 years in prison.

The Press Trust of India (PTI) said Shah has sought the permission of the Indian government to visit Pakistan to facilitate such a dialogue.

"Just like Pandit (Jawaharlal) Nehru showed wisdom in allowing late Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah to visit Pakistan 21 years ago to remove misgivings, I should be allowed to go to Pakistan to facilitate a dialogue on Kashmir," PTI quoted Shah as saying.

New Delhi has been battling separatist rebellion in Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state. Police

Indian request to Pakistan

NEW DELHI, Mar 20: India has urged Pakistan to reconsider its unilateral decision to close down the Pakistan Consulate in Bombay and ordering closure of the Indian Mission in Karachi, reports PTI.

However, Pakistan has not yet responded favourably, the External Affairs Minister, Pranab Mukherjee told the Lok Sabha during question hour.

These unilateral Pakistani decisions could adversely affect people-to-people contacts and consular, commercial and cultural relations between the two countries, he said.

greeted Shah, leader of the People's League, as he arrived in Delhi on Saturday on his first visit to the capital since being free from jail last October.

Shah, 40, had been held without trial in 1989 under tough anti-terrorist legislation, accused of heading to Pakistan to buy arms to fuel the revolt, which exploded a few months later.

On Sunday, Shah met European Union ambassadors including those of Germany, France and Spain. PTI said Shah had sought EU mediation to resolve the Kashmir problem.

Shah said that, when British rule over the subcontinent ended in 1947 and India and Pakistan emerged as two independent nations, "unfortunately the political destiny of the people of Jammu and Kashmir was left hanging in the balance."

He said no one could deprive the people of Jammu and Kashmir of their basic right to self-determination.

"We are not terrorists, our youth were forced to adopt violent methods as their peaceful struggle was crushed with power," he said in the statement.

Sino-Philippines talks on Spratly begin

BEIJING, Mar 20: A high-level Philippines delegation began talks here today over the disputed Spratly Islands, amid fresh accusations from Manila over Chinese encroachment in the South China Sea archipelago, reports AP.

The Philippines team, led by Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs Rodolfo Severino, will hold three days of talks with Chinese officials led by Vice Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan.

While the most vocal arguments over the islands have previously been dominated by China and Vietnam, the Philippines recently moved into the spotlight after protesting Chinese construction work on a reef claimed by Manila.

The Spratlys and their adjacent waters — believed to contain vast oil and natural gas deposits, are claimed wholly or in part by Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam.

So far, the Chinese side has admitted only to building fishing shelters on the disputed reef.

Clinton to work for peace

WASHINGTON, Mar 20: President Clinton is pledging to work closely with British Prime Minister John Major to foster peace in Northern Ireland, even if Britain disagrees with his tactics, reports AP.

In a 25-minute telephone conversation labeled warm by the United States and businesslike by the British, the president tried Sunday to set aside differences over his concessions to IRA ally Gerry Adams.

A White House statement said, "The president... reaffirmed his desire to continue to play a positive role in support of the joint efforts of the British and Irish governments."

'Guns are a way of life for Karachi militants'

KARACHI, Mar 20: Police battling widespread violence in Pakistan's commercial capital are being hindered because there are many areas of the city which are so dangerous security forces simply cannot enter, residents say, reports AP.

Pak colony, in the city's western district, has been tense since 12 activists of the Haqiqi faction of the ethnic-based Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) were killed there last week.

Haqiqi activists prevent people from going about their daily routine and most shops still remain closed in the area, a resident said.

When security officials tried to enter the area, gun-toting militants put up huge marble

slabs at the entrances and opened fire on police manned armoured personnel carriers.

Guns are a way of life for all militants, "keeping arms is an addiction," says one ethnic party militant. "It begins from a 22 pistol and never ends."

"We watch (Western) moves that have a lot of fighting," says another. "Then we go for operations."

According to private estimates, there are 100,000 Kalashnikov rifles in the city. Police have captured only a little in massive swoops for unlicensed weapons.

Young men wearing sunglasses and camouflage jackets, and sporting automatic weapons, positioned themselves on the rooftops of the headquarters of the Sunni Muslim Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP). The headquarters of the rival Shite Muslim Tehrik-e-Jafria Pakistan (TJP) presents a similar sight.

"We do not rely on the administration (for protection) because of our past experiences," said SSP leader Akhtar Siddiqi.

TJP leader Hassan Turabi says his men do not carry unlicensed weapons, but he too is surrounded by armed activists.

Fighting between rival factions of the MQM, which represents Urdu speaking migrants from India, have divided the city.

The congested and troubled central district is dominated by the mainstream MQM, headed by self-exiled leader Altaf Hussain.

Rebels raid Myanmar army barracks

BANGKOK, Mar 20: Fighters loyal to Myanmar's opium rebel Khun Sa today raided a Myanmar army barracks in a northeastern town, the latest in a series of guerrilla attacks aimed at deflecting a government army offensive, reports Reuter.

Some 60 fighters from Khun Sa's Mong Tai Army (MTA) staged the early morning raid on a Myanmar army barracks and military guest houses in Tachilek, a bustling border town opposite the Thai town of Mae Sai, rebel sources and Thai officials on the border said.

The rebels, firing rocket propelled grenades and automatic rifles, attacked for about one hour before withdrawing, one MTA official said.

Myanmar troops kept up an artillery barrage in the direction of the retreating rebels for several hours after the hit and run raid, the guerilla sources said.

"Casualties on both sides were not yet known," he said.

Seven MTA guerrillas crossed into Thai territory during the attack and were disarmed and detained by Thai forces, he said.

A senior local Thai government official in Mae Sai said, Thailand had closed the border today.

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