

BRIEFLY

Perry in Ukraine : US Defence Secretary William Perry arrived in Ukraine yesterday, starting a week-long visit to former Soviet republics. Reuter reports from Kiev.

"Ukraine is a very important country to US and the national security of modern Europe," Perry said at Kiev Airport. Perry will meet President Leonid Kuchma during his two-day stay in Ukraine and tour a strategic nuclear missile base south of Kiev. He will also visit Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

3 more to quit Austrian govt : Three more ministers are leaving the Austrian government. Chancellor Franz Vranitzky said on Friday. Reuter reports from Vienna.

He announced their departures two days after the resignation of Finance Minister Ferdinand Lacina. Vranitzky said that Interior Minister Franz Loeschak, Minister for Social Affairs Josef Hesoun and Minister for Women's Issues Johanna Dohnal will step down.

Ramos talks with Clinton's envoy : Philippine President Fidel Ramos has held talks with a special envoy of US President Bill Clinton on China's incursions into the disputed Spratly islands, a statement said on Friday. AFP reports from Manila.

Ramos discussed the recent Chinese intrusions into the islands with Stanley Roth and showed him photographs of the structures set up by the Chinese on a reef claimed by the Philippines, the presidential palace statement said.

9 killed in Pak bus crash: At least nine people were killed and 13 injured when a bus went off a bridge and crashed into a dry river bed on the outskirts of Lahore Thursday, police said. AFP reports from Lahore.

The accident occurred as the driver lost control while trying to avoid a head-on collision with a cart drawn by a donkey. The vehicle smashed through the railing of the river bridge, and crashed to the ground below.

Russian satellite lost: The Russians told Israeli scientists on Thursday that their Gurwin-1 satellite probably fell into the sea after the fifth stage of the rocket launching it into space failed. AP reports from Jerusalem.

Drora Kass, head of public relations at the Technion Institute of Technology, said the Russian officials said that the satellite never made it into orbit. The Russian ITAR-Tass news agency reported on Thursday that a Mexican communication satellite and a mock Russian satellite jointly launched with the Gurwin-1 by the "Start" booster rocket on Tuesday were also lost.

Over 33000 Chinese sold: More than 33,000 Chinese women and children were abducted and sold by traffickers in the past two years, the People's Daily said on Thursday. AFP reports from Beijing.

Police broke up some 7,000 gangs of traffickers, arresting 50,000 people, the newspaper said, adding that even these figures were incomplete.

2 Malaysian newsmen held: Malaysian police yesterday extended the detention of two local journalists who were being held under state secrecy laws for leaking confidential information on a kidnap case. AFP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

Yusaini Ali, 24, and Saniboy Mohamed Ismail, 22, who were arrested on Thursday, may be held another four days in a police lock-up.

2 more Aum men arrested: Japanese police yesterday arrested two more members of the Aum supreme truth for illegal possession of toxic chemicals. AFP reports from Tokyo.

The sect is suspected of involvement in the sarin nerve gas attack in the Tokyo subway last week. Seiji Tashita, 25, and Ryoichi Iwabushi, 64, were arrested in Shizuoka city, central Japan.

Cop burned to death in Bahrain: One policeman burned to death on Thursday and two others were injured in a firebomb attack on their jeep, the Interior Ministry said. AP reports from Manama.

The attack in Sitra, 12 miles (20 kilometers) south of Manama, was the latest in a series of disturbances that have rocked this Gulf island state since December and intensified in recent days.

Talbott to visit Russia, Turkey: The State Department on Thursday announced plans for Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott to visit Russia and Turkey, where government military campaigns are causing increasing tensions with Washington. Reuter reports from Washington.

The trip, which begins on April 5, is being made in advance of a May summit in Moscow between President Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin and also a visit to Washington next month by Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller.



Italian bomb-disposal soldiers defuse Thursday, the second 500 pound bomb from World War II discovered under the Imola, Italy motor racing circuit during construction work. — AFP/UNB photo

Algeria confirms major attack on Islamic rebels

WASHINGTON, Mar 31: Algeria's ambassador to Washington confirmed on Thursday that a major government offensive had been launched against Islamic rebels, which was giving "spectacular results" with many rebel casualties, reports Reuter.

"It is quite true that there have been important operations taking place in Algeria, and with lots of casualties on the part of the militants there," Ambassador Hji Osmay Bencherif told Reuters.

The operations "are giving spectacular results at the moment," he said after making a speech to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a private think-tank.

Sushmita, Aishwariya inspiration for Indian fashion industry

BOMBAY, Mar 31: Under the soft glow of diffused lighting, six men and women pose in a tableau against a black backdrop. A photographer clicks away frenetically, stopping only to bark instructions, reports Reuter.

Serenely oblivious to the hectic activity, women nearby cluster round a mirror to watch a make-up artist at work. The artist's skilled hands deftly emphasise the fine features of her subject, and the finished result is striking.

A class is in progress at smiles, India's only school for models, started last September by an enterprising couple who have been between them

worked nine years in the fashion industry. "There has been a surge of interest in modelling careers after Indians won both the Miss World and Miss Universe titles last year," said Atul Kelkar, 37, the photographer who started the school last October along with his wife, Seema, a model.

The Indian fashion industry received a shot in the arm when top Indian models Sushmita Sen and Aishwariya Rai won the Miss Universe and Miss World Beauty Pageants, respectively, last year.

Top models like Rai and Sen can expect to earn 60,000 rupees (1,900 to 80,000 rupees (2,500 dollars) for every fashion show they participate

in, say industry sources. This is as much as some Indian executives might earn in a year. With advertising agencies increasingly professional, and willing to fork out large sums for established faces, even those on the second rung can earn around 20,000 rupees (625 dollar) to 30,000 rupees (940 dollars) an assignment.

This kind of success has fired the imaginations of dozens of teenagers, who see themselves sashaying down catwalks and raking in thousands of rupees in modelling assignments.

"People come to me and just beg to be given assignments," said production stylist Lorella Jacinto, who puts models in touch with advertising

agencies. "But 75 per cent of the people who come to me are just hopeless," she added. "And the rest, who are good-looking enough to be models, have already got other occupations."

Top model Namrata Shirodkar, a former winner of the Miss India contest, said modelling school could be the best thing that could happen to anyone.

"Because you know for a fact that here's someone who can teach you things in the right way and can take you to the right kind of people," she said. "We invested around 3.5 million rupees (110,000 dollars) in our school," Atul Kelkar noted. "We're just about beginning to break even now,"

Malik's threat to burn himself to death Strike paralyses Kashmir

SRINAGAR, Mar 31: A general strike called by Muslim separatists to commemorate the killing of a guerilla leader five years ago paralysed the Kashmir valley on Friday, police and residents said, reports AFP.

Government offices, banks, post offices, businesses, courts and educational institutions were closed in Srinagar, the summer capital of Kashmir state, and other Muslim-majority towns, officials said.

Private and public vehicles stayed off the roads throughout the valley in response to the strike called by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), the leading pro-independence group in the north-east state.

The JKLF organised the shutdown to mark the fifth anniversary of the death of one of its founders, Ashfaq Majid Wani, who was shot dead on

March 31, 1990 by Indian security forces.

Indian troops in Srinagar made no effort to intervene as hundreds of JKLF supporters marched through the city shouting slogans demanding independence for Kashmir, the country's only Muslim majority state.

India and Pakistan hold parts of Kashmir and dispute its ownership. The JKLF wants the whole of Kashmir to be a free country.

More than 10,000 people have died in the separatist drive in Indian-held Kashmir since 1989.

Meanwhile a prominent Kashmiri Muslim separatist leader has threatened to burn himself to death if Indian authorities held elections in the state to pick a local government, newspapers reported today.

Yassen Malik, who heads

JKLF, told a huge rally in Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar on Thursday that he would not let New Delhi succeed in its poll plans.

The proposal to hold elections "is a challenge to the pride of the Kashmiri people who have been laying down their lives for the cause of freedom," the Asian Age newspaper quoted him as saying.

He said the people of Kashmir wanted independence, not elections.

"Elections are not a substitute for the people's just demand," he said, addressing thousands of supporters to mark the fifth anniversary of the killing by Indian security forces of a JKLF founder.

Malik said if the "conscience of the world fails to stop India from going ahead with the elections, then I will commit self-immolation."

Benazir at war with 'murderers'

ISLAMABAD, Mar 31: Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on Thursday ruled out any compromise with "murderers" in the violence-hit part of city of Karachi and said she was at war with them, reports Reuter.

She said in a televised address she would not be lenient on crime and asked people to help her government maintain the peace.

Most of Benazir's attacks in her Urdu-language speech after several days of comparative peace in Karachi seemed aimed at ethnic Mohajir Na-

tional Movement (MQM) Party, often blamed by authorities for violence in Pakistan's commercial capital.

But she said the violence was not only a fight between ethnic factions but also the work of drugs and arms smugglers and land grabbers, each group seeking its dominance.

"So far no government dared to challenge them. But we, for your (people's) sake, for the sake of peace in Karachi and for stability in the country, are taking them on," she said.

"Benazir and the people are

at open war with those who destroy the country's peace, indulge in drug trafficking, do trade in politics and commit murder in the name of religion."

Some 340 people, including two US consulate staffers, have been killed so far this year in Karachi's mainly ethnic and sectarian violence and about 800 last year.

"I pledge that the government will take murderers to the gallows," Benazir said. "Many of them have come in the grip of the government."

Mass grave unearthed in Afghanistan

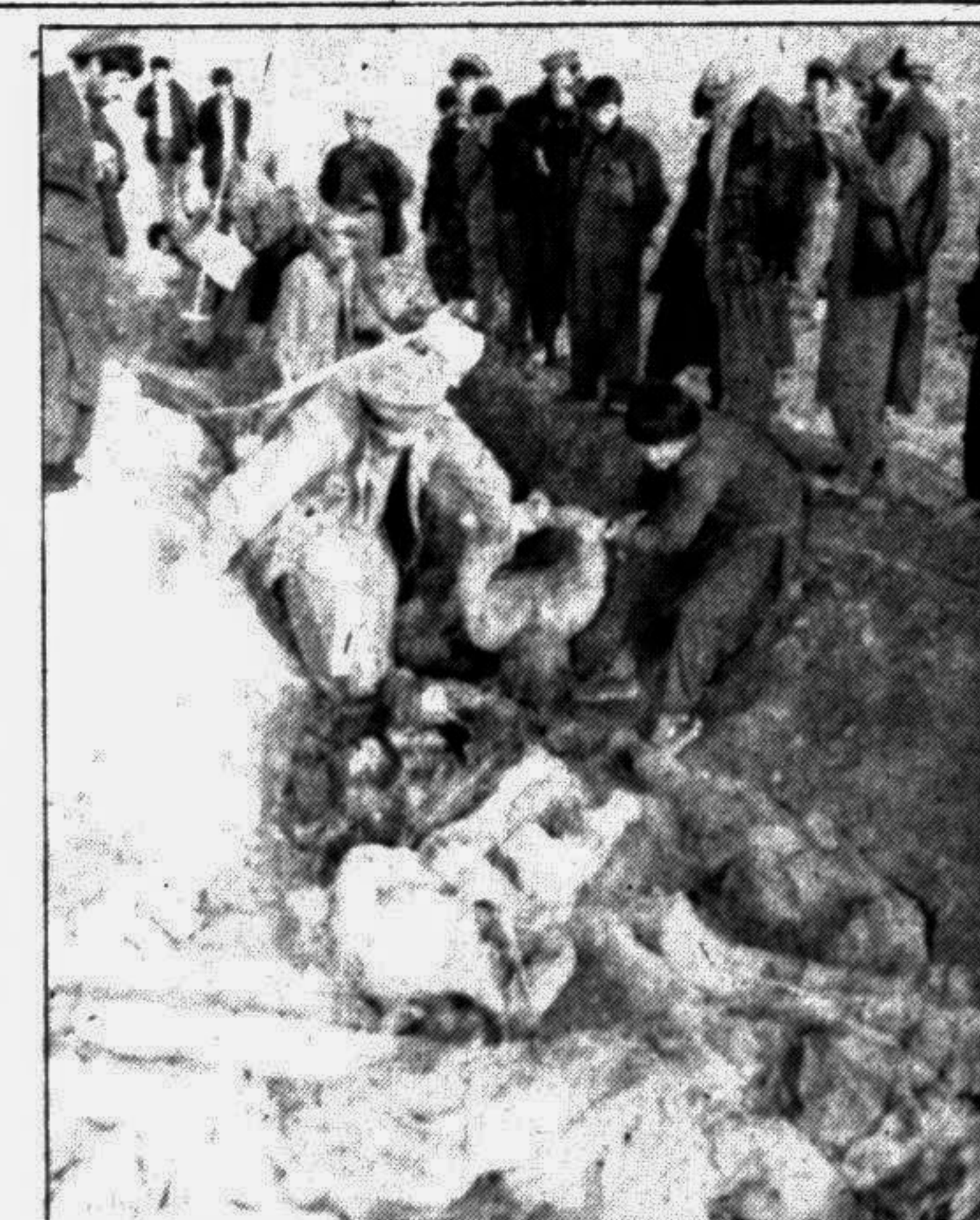
CHARASYAB, Afghanistan, Mar 31: The bodies of 22 executed young men, all with their hands tied behind their backs and shot in the head, were unearthed by security officials south of Kabul on Thursday, reports AFP.

It was not clear who murdered these men as they were found some 25 kilometres (19 miles) south of Kabul near Charasyab, a military base which has been occupied by three different factions in the past six weeks.

However, security officials of Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani said that the killings were done by the Taliban militant religious movement, who occupied Charasyab until 11 days ago when pro-Rabbani troops attacked and pushed them out.

The victims, mostly ethnic Hazaras, were reportedly gunned down by the recently defeated Shi'ite Hezb-i-Wahadat faction, who were prisoners of the Taliban.

Two of the victims were identified by their clothes as Uzbeks according to one pro-Rabbani official, although this was difficult to confirm.



One of the 22 Afghan execution victims found in a mass grave near Charasyab 25 kilometres south of Kabul on Thursday with hands tied behind their back. — AFP/UNB photo

Arab, Islamic confce opens in Khartoum

KHARTOUM, Mar 31: An Arab and Islamic conference opens in the Sudanese capital Khartoum yesterday to discuss issues including western attitudes to Islam and the situation of Muslim minorities, reports Reuter.

The Pan-Arabian Popular Arab and Islamic Conference (PAIC) said about 300 delegates from more than 80 countries would attend.

The Khartoum-based grouping was formed in 1991 to unite the Arab and Muslim world, which had been splintered by the Gulf War. This will be its third session.

Saudi Arabia and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) are both sending delegations for the first time. Others expected to attend include Chechen Foreign Minister Al-Din Yousif and Somali warlord Ali Mahdi.

Rwandans quicken exodus from Burundi

NGOZI, Burundi, Mar 31: Frightened by escalating ethnic violence, Rwandan refugees quickened their exodus from Burundi on Friday, with more than 45,000 reported on the road to a new country of sanctuary, reports AP.

The refugees, carrying mattresses, sacks of food, and other possessions on their heads and backs, formed a 10-kilometre (six-mile) line as they approached the Tanzania border on Friday morning.

The Rwandan Hutus had fled to Burundi last year, fearful of reprisals following massacres of ethnic Tutsis in their homeland.

About 1,500 people had already crossed into Tanzania before nightfall Thursday, said Peter Kessler, spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Nairobi.

"We don't see any evidence yet of this snowballing, but

there is a very real danger," he said. Aid groups said they were preparing for the arrival of up to 100,000 people in Tanzania. The flight was prompted by an attack on Monday by armed men in one of seven camps near the north-central Burundi town of Ngozi and by violence in Burundi's capital, Bujumbura, refugee officials say.

368 Indians in Pak custody

ISLAMABAD, Mar 31: Pakistan on Thursday denied holding any Indian military personnel or prisoners of war, but said 368 Indian civilians and fishermen were in its custody, reports AFP.

The denial was issued by a Foreign Ministry spokesman. The Indian government's claim was incorrect and misleading, the spokesman said.

Delhi reinforces troops around Char-e-Sharief

SRINAGAR, Mar 31: The Indian Army has rushed reinforcements to the Kashmir shrine town of Char-e-Sharief, where Muslim militants and Indian troops have been engaged in a tense standoff, police said on Thursday, reports AFP.

Hundreds of additional soldiers took up positions on the fringes of the besieged town near this state summer capital following a fierce exchange of fire involving mortars and rockets on Wednesday, police said.

"Troops are being regularly targeted by militants using automatic weapons," said Ravinder Kotwal, the police chief of Badgam district, where Char Sharif is located.

"More security pickets are being put up," he said.

No casualties were reported in Wednesday's firing but it has increased the fears of residents of the town of 20,000 people, many of whom have fled.

PPP retains two seats in by-elections

ISLAMABAD, Mar 31: Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) has won two seats in key provincial assembly by-elections in the North West Frontier Province, government officials said today, reports Reuter.

Thursday's victories in the province bordering Afghanistan will bolster the shaky PPP-led coalition there, which faces an opposition campaign to regain power it lost last April after floor-crossing by some deputies.

Both seats had fallen vacant with the deaths of two PPP deputies. The opposition alliance, which had won two seats in a by-election last May, had billed Thursday's vote as a test of its popularity.

The PPP holds only 23 of the provincial assembly's 83 seats but has managed to cobble together a tenuous majority with the help of opposition rebels.

Last April, the change of power in the province prompted the fiercest political confrontation between Benazir and her opponents since she came to power in October 1993.

Lanka seeks fresh dates for talks with Tamils

COLOMBO, Mar 31: The Sri Lankan government is seeking fresh dates to hold peace talks with Tamil rebels who dropped an ultimatum and offered to resume stalled negotiations on April 1, a senior government official said today, reports Reuter.

"We will be responding to them in a few days time on their offer to hold talks tomorrow," he told Reuters.

Off the Record



Palestinian girls from the Deir-Al-Balah dance team perform during the celebration of "Land Day" in Gaza City on Thursday. Land Day symbolises the Palestinian fight against expropriations and memory of six killed and 70 wounded when Israeli troops opened fire on Palestinians protesting against land confiscations in Nazareth 30 March 1976. — AFP/UNB photo

Sex scandal forces Yantra to leave monkhood

BANGKOK: Thousands of people — many of them bawling hysterically — jammed the streets Friday to bid farewell as one of Thailand's most popular monks was forced by a sex scandal to leave the monkhood, reports AP.

Yantra Ammarobhikku spent the morning praying with about 200 monks and more than 2,000 followers who refused to believe the charges that the 44-year-old monk had broken his vows of chastity in the red light districts of Australia and New Zealand.

Then he stepped inside the Royal Temple to eat his last supper as a monk and granted an exclusive interview to the Associated Press. His followers waited patiently in the hot sun to see the monk of 21 years turn in his brown monk's robe. Hundreds of riot police guarded the grounds.

"I never go to temptation place... It's a life," Yantra said calmly, still dressed in the brown robe. "I don't want to take off my robe. I still would like to help people know Buddhism." The Supreme Council of Buddhist Monks ignored for more than a year charges that Yantra had made love to several followers and even fathered a child. It was only about a month ago, when Yantra was charged with coveting with prostitutes abroad, that the council agreed to rule on the case.

On Monday, after a brief one-day hearing at which Yantra was not allowed to testify, the council ordered him defrocked by Friday. Police were under orders to forcibly take the monk's robe off Yantra if he failed to do so on his own.

"I feel regret because it is not fair," Yantra said. "It comes from jealousy, greed, hatred... They think if I grow too popular I can get too much power."

Indeed, Yantra had more than 2 million followers in Thailand and up to 100,000 abroad before he was accused of breaking his vows. His picture appeared on calendars, key chains and even rocks that were carried around by supporters.

Husband held for raping wife

RIO DE JANEIRO: An American has been charged with raping and torturing his Brazilian wife by branding her with a hot iron, police said Thursday, reports AP.

The case has sparked public outrage in Brazil and prompted demands that the government crack down on abuse against women, which is widely tolerated in Brazil.

State troopers say they caught Byron Jerry Proter of Cleveland, Ohio, on March 23 in the act of torturing his wife, Eliete, at their home in Natal, 1,700 miles (2,735 kms) northeast of Rio.

Inspector Margaret Gondin said troopers entered Porter's house after Eliete's former husband called the police and told them he heard screams from the building.

Officers found her covered with bruises, her head shaved and teeth missing from her bleeding mouth. On her buttocks were branded the first three letters of the word "puta," Portuguese for "whore."

"It was enough to wound the soul," Gondin said. Eliete Proter, 32, is hospitalised with head, chest, vaginal and anal injuries. Proter, 37, is charged with rape, torture, battery and unlawful imprisonment.

Afghan refugees start to leave Iran

NICOSIA, Mar 31: Afghan refugees living in an Iranian province bordering Afghanistan have started to move back home. Iran's IRNA news agency said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

It quoted a local official in Khorassan province as saying about 100,000 Afghan refugees "staying in Iran illegally" are expected to return home.

"Those who refuse to return will be sent to refugee camps," he said. Iran said earlier this month it would renew the temporary residence permits of an estimated half a million Afghans after the start of the new Iranian year on March 21, making their continued residence illegal.

They were given the choice to go back or live in camps.