

BRIEFLY



A family is seated amid the ruins of the destroyed Islamic shrine Monday in northern Kashmiri town of Charar-e-Sharif. Kashmiris have been fighting Indian security forces for the last six years. — AFP/UNB photo

Ex British PM Wilson dead: Former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson died peacefully in his sleep yesterday at the age of 79. Lady Wilson said, Reuter reports from Reuter.

Wilson led Britain's Labour Party between 1963 and 1976, for nearly eight of those years as prime minister. He was the last man to lead the Labour Party to a general election victory.

China explosion kills 12: Twelve people were killed and 17 seriously injured in a blast at a small explosives factory in a central Chinese village earlier this month, the Beijing youth daily reported yesterday. AFP says from Beijing.

Dozens of houses in Dagan, Henan province, were destroyed in the May 18 explosion and many of the victims were buried in the stone debris, the newspaper reported. The factory had stocked more than one tonne of explosives, the report said, without elaborating.

Bus mishap claims 15 in India: Fifteen people were killed and 25 injured when a bus plunged off a mountain road in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh on Tuesday, the Press Trust of India reported. AFP says from New Delhi.

The driver and conductor were among those killed when the bus fell into a 500-foot (150-meter) gorge near the Himachal Pradesh resort of Shimla, the news agency said.

LTTE kills 2 police commandos: Tamil Tiger guerrillas ambushed a civilian bus in eastern Sri Lanka yesterday, killing two police commandos and three women passengers, the military said. AFP reports from Colombo.

Gunmen from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fired at the bus carrying about 30 passengers, of whom five were commandos from the police Special Task Force (STF) in the Batticaloa district, a military statement said.

Russian envoy visits Belgrade: Russian peace envoy Alexander Zotov visited Belgrade yesterday to take over failed US attempts to persuade Serbia President Slobodan Milosevic to recognise Bosnia in exchange for the easing of sanctions. Reuter reports from Sarajevo.

Moscow announced the trip by its chief Yugoslavia negotiator after talks with United States envoy Robert Frasure foundered on Milosevic's insistence sanctions be lifted, not just suspended.

US envoy cancels Kashmir trip: The US ambassador to India has cancelled a trip to Kashmir following a flare-up of protests in the troubled Himalayan region but Britain's top envoy hopes to go there soon, diplomats said on Tuesday. Reuter reports from New Delhi.

US Ambassador Frank Wisner had planned to be the highest ranking American official to travel to Kashmir since a separatist revolt erupted five years ago.

Filipino maids return from KSA: The Philippine government is flying home every month hundreds of maids complaining of abuse from employers in Saudi Arabia and it repatriated 4,370 last year, diplomats in the Gulf have disclosed. AFP reports from Abu Dhabi.

With another 1,000 maids flown home from Kuwait and other professionals would be "less vulnerable" to mistreatment, according to several diplomats who requested anonymity.

Earthquake rocks Tokyo: A moderate earthquake registering a preliminary magnitude of 4.0 rocked northern Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost main island, Wednesday, the Central Meteorological Agency said. AP reports from Tokyo.

There were no immediate reports of injuries or damage from the earthquake, which occurred at 2:38 pm (0538 GMT), police said. Wednesday's quake was part of a series of aftershocks from a quake with a magnitude of 5.6 that hit same region Tuesday evening, the CMA said.

Sergeant to face trial in SA

JOHANNESBURG, May 24: A police sergeant will stand trial in July on charges of selling human organs from a city mortuary, reports AP.

Sgt. Tjaart Schutte allegedly sold a human heart and three gallstones from the police mortuary in Hillbrow, a Johannesburg suburb.

He was charged with corpse mutilation and violating the Tissues and Corruption acts, prosecutors said Tuesday. He allegedly sold the heart and gallstones for a total of 3,500 rand (just under \$1,000).

Human organs are used by some traditional healers.

'Aid cut yields little to stop HR abuses in Myanmar'

YANGON, May 24: US authorities trying to plug the pipeline that supplies America with 70 per cent of its heroin are debating whether to give Myanmar money to fight drug trafficking, reports AP.

The United States now supplies no such aid, insisting that Myanmar first put a stop to human rights violations and adopt democratic reforms.

Deputy US Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Hubbard said recently that any direct US aid to the Southeast Asian Nation's ruling junta would "grant legitimacy to a regime that seized power by overturning democratic elections and

persecuting its opponents. But there are indications this stance may change, given the amount of heroin smuggled from Myanmar into the United States. The results are violence, the spread of AIDS, overdose deaths among some 600,000 heroin addicts and enrichment of crime syndicates.

Proponents of anti-narcotics assistance to Yangon says training Myanmar police, sharing intelligence and providing funds and equipment such as helicopters and communication gear would stem some of the heroin tide.

While large-scale aid is not

foreseen, knowledgeable sources expect at least training assistance and more funds channeled to UN drug programme in Myanmar this year.

"Clearly if you are going to deal with the heroin problem you have to engage Myanmar," said Dr. Lee Brown, director of White House Office on Drug Control policy and the Clinton administration's top anti-drug official.

Another huge crop of about 2,500 of opium was harvested in Myanmar late 1994 and early this year. Refined into heroin in remote laboratories, the drug is trafficked to North America, Europe, Australia and

Asian nations.

As this latest avalanche of white powder rolls into American cities, a new heroin strategy is in the final stages of formulation before being sent to President Clinton.

American officials in Southeast Asia say Brown's office, the US Drug Enforcement Administration and the section of the US State Department dealing with narcotics favour more cooperation with Yangon. Opposed to closer ties are the State Department's human rights officials and members of the National Security Council.

The Myanmar have in fact scored some gains, hoping at

the same time to shed a poor international image acquired after the military's brutal suppression of pro-democracy demonstrators in 1988. They are eager for foreign aid.

In a now two-year campaign against Khun Sa, the Myanmar Army has suffered hundreds of dead while disrupting the operations of an opium warlord wanted by the United States. They have also started a UN-backed programme to substitute opium with cash crops.

There have been "modest signs of greater government effort" in Myanmar but since the military junta seized power, opium production has

soared, according to a 1995 State Department report.

The Myanmar junta argues that without international support it can only take limited action; that weaning opium growers from their deadly crop takes years; and that it has little access to opium-growing areas controlled by insurgent armies.

Writing in Myanmar debate, an activist journal, a US government official using the pseudonym Frank Mastersen argued that "US pressure on Myanmar including the cut-off of narcotics aid, has had little effect on the military's harsh rule."

French medical, food aid to Iraq

BAGHDAD, May 24: France is to donate medical and food aid to Iraq hit by almost five years of crippling UN sanctions for bidding trade and oil sales, a senior Iraqi official said on Tuesday.

Salah al-Mukhtar, head of a government group called the Iraqi Association for Peace, Friendship and Solidarity, told AFP that a week-long visit to Paris had been "fruitful and allowed Iraq to win medical and food aid from France."

"It is a big step forward destined to prepare the way for a resumption of Franco-Iraqi relations," Mukhtar said.

Growing Indo-Iranian ties concern Washington

WASHINGTON, May 24: Indian and US representatives praised expansion of their relations Tuesday. But Secretary of State Warren Christopher denounced Iran, India's close neighbour, as a funder of terrorism and underminer of Middle East peace, reports AP.

Welcoming India's external affairs minister to the State Department, Christopher said, "I certainly intend to discuss with the minister... the concern that we have for Iran as perhaps the major proponent of state-sponsored terrorism, the fact that we... believe they are conducting a nuclear programme, and that they're undermining the Middle East peace process."

Indian Minister Pranab Mukherjee said "the expansion of Indo-US relations in the

year has been remarkable." In other appearances during the day he said India has achieved a post-Cold War thaw in relations with America while preserving traditionally close ties with Iran and Russia.

Christopher said the US-India "relationship is broadening in many respects... We're having a deeper security relationship than we have had in the past... The overall relationship is strong, and I hope will grow stronger."

A US official, talking on condition of anonymity, confirmed that during their hour of talks followed by lunch, Christopher voiced US concern about Iranian nuclear ambition and support for terrorism. He also discussed cooperation with India on global and regional issues in the

United Nations and elsewhere.

Earlier, answering questions at a news conference, Mukherjee called "absolutely baseless" reports that India or Indian firms helped Iran develop chemical weapons.

"We have an old relationship, also good cooperation with Iran," whose president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, visited India last month. Mukherjee said he did not consider that Indian relation with Iran stand in the way of good relations with the United States. He said that Iran is an important member of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, and all of its members are developing relations with India.

The United States understands that "India needs to have a relationship with a neighbour country like Iran"

while still concerned that it not help Iran in ways that support terrorism or nuclear development, the US official said.

"We have successfully re-structured our relations with Russia, managing to preserve the essentials of our past cooperation arrangements with the erstwhile Soviet Union," Mukherjee said.

"We have had cooperation and close consultations on a wide range of international issues including UN peacekeeping. The process is gathering momentum with trade and investment in the lead."

The minister said India cooperates with the United States in negotiations for a comprehensive nuclear test ban and a cutoff in production of fissile material while maintaining its refusal to sign NPT.

Russia launches offensive in Chechnya ahead of talks

GROZNY, May 24: Russian forces using artillery and warplanes launched a major offensive against rebel positions in southern Chechnya on Wednesday on the eve of planned peace talks, Russian news agencies reported, says AP.

To fulfill the operation, we shall use all available forces and means," said the local Russian Commander, Lt. Gen. Mikhail Yegorov, in an interview with the Interfax News Agency.

"We shall move slowly but surely, trying to reduce to a minimum the casualties among personnel and the civilian population," he said.

The ITAR-Tass news agency said federal forces launched air and artillery attacks against rebels Wednesday

morning in the southern, southeastern and western parts of Chechnya.

The fighting did not bode well for peace talks scheduled for Thursday morning in Grozny, the ruined Chechen capital now held by the Russians.

The talks are sponsored by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which has asked for a ceasefire starting at midnight (2000 GMT) Thursday.

The head of the organization's Chechnya mission, Sandor Meszaros, said invitations had been accepted by Russian authorities, Russian-backed provisional government of Chechnya and rebel President Dzhokhar Dudayev.

It was unclear, however, who would represent the war-

ring sides or whether they would try to observe the truce.

Dudayev was expected to send a representative rather than come to Grozny himself. Russian officials have issued an arrest warrant for the rebel leader, and in the past have ruled out personal negotiations with him.

Despite the stepped-up fighting, Meszaros said everything was ready for the talks, including security measures for those who attended. ITAR-Tass reported.

He said mediators had "concrete proposals" to present, but he did not elaborate.

Moscow sent troops into Chechnya on December 11 to end Dudayev's three-year independence drive in the southern republic.

Vietnam builds lighthouse in Spratlys

HANOI, May 24: Vietnam has built a new lighthouse in the disputed Spratly Islands to bolster its claim to the entire archipelago, an official report said Wednesday, reports AP.

Workers braved foul weather to complete the lighthouse last week on An Bang island, about 600 kilometres (370 miles) southeast of Vietnam in the South China Sea, the Quan Doi Nhan Dan (People's Army) reported. An Bang lies in the southern part of the Spratlys chain, where Vietnam and five other nations have competing claims.

The announcement came as senior officials met for the third day in Brunei to discuss regional security issues at a forum sponsored by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which groups Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei and the Philippines. They are expected to discuss the Spratlys dispute.

New South Wales intends to cut links to British Monarchy

SYDNEY, May 24: One of Britain's most loyal former colonies, now the state of New South Wales, has declared its intention to sever its 225-year link to the British Monarchy by removing "God save the queen" from its proclamations and documents, reports AP.

A pledge of loyalty to Australia rather than an oath of allegiance to Britain's Queen Elizabeth will also be part of the new regime under a bill to be introduced soon in the state parliament of New South Wales, officials said Wednesday.

It was announced for the first time Tuesday by Republican State Premier Bob Carr, whose labour government won office at a state election here in March.

Although his Conservative Liberal Party opponent Peter Collins is also a declared Republican, he said Wednesday he was opposed to the manner in which the bill was announced by a government which had no mandate for it.

Israel approves building 6500 homes in E Jerusalem

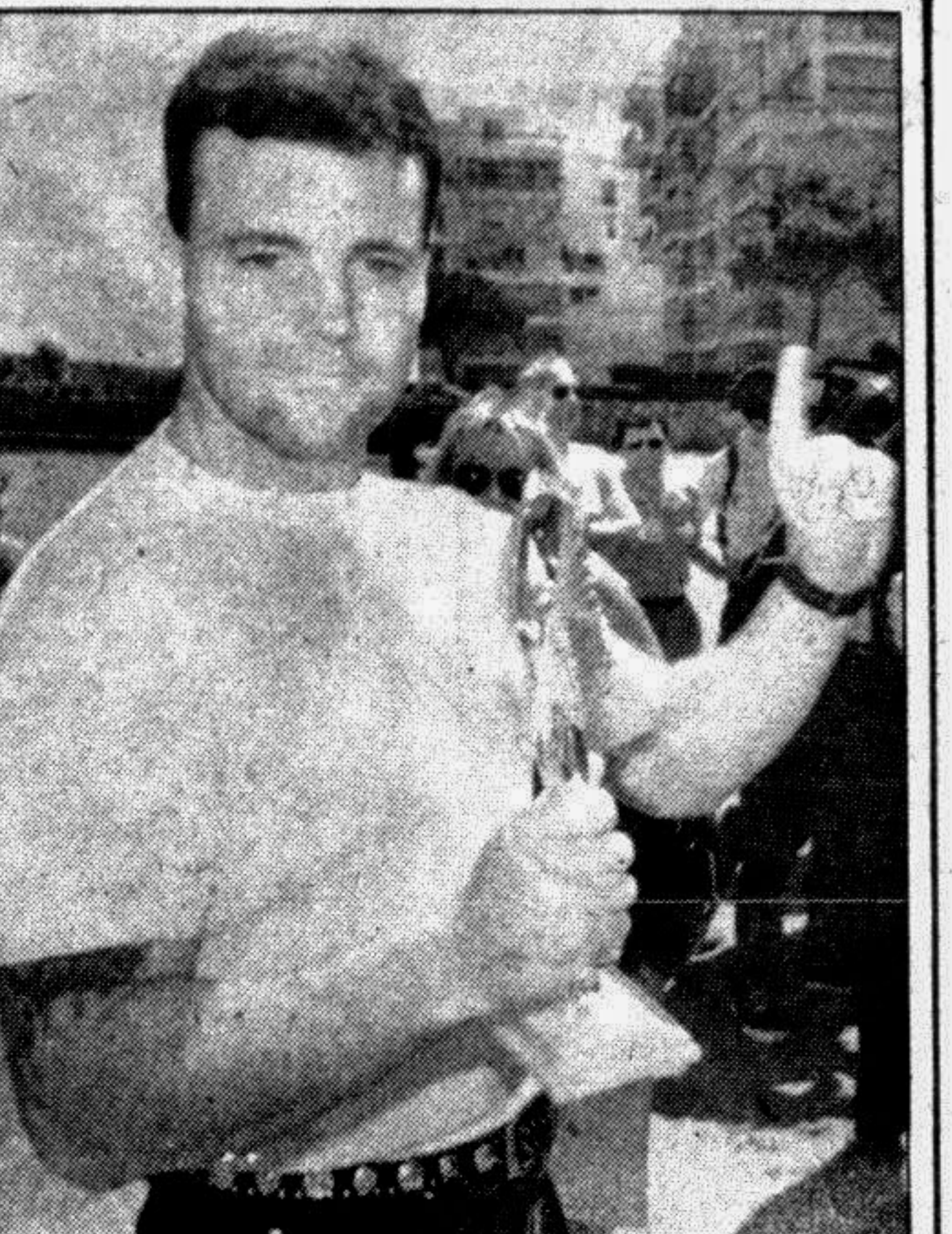
JERUSALEM, May 24: Israel's Interior Ministry on Tuesday approved the construction of 6,500 homes for Jews in annexed East Jerusalem, said a ministry spokesman, reports AP.

The homes will be built on 185 hectares of land (455 acres) expropriated in 1991 for the new Jewish quarter named Har Homa in the south of the annexed part of the holy city, the spokesman said.

Bulldozers have already started work and actual construction should begin in the next six months.

The government's decision on Monday to freeze the confiscation of a further 53 hectares (131 acres) of mainly Palestinian lands in East Jerusalem does not affect the Har Homa project, the spokesman said.

Off the Record



US John Wayne Bobbit, who had his penis cut off by his wife Lorena, poses with the "Hot d'Or" trophy which he received for the film detailing his subsequent experience Tuesday in Cannes. The ceremony of the "Hot d'Or" took place yesterday on the occasion of the International Film Festival. — AFP/UNB photo

Facts and lies of Mugabe's secret

HARARE: Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe, who is reported to have secretly married his former private secretary months after the death of his first wife, told journalists on Tuesday to leave the issue alone "because it is a very personal affair and nobody's business," reports Reuter.

"Some of the things that have been published are facts and some are lies," he said at a news conference, refusing to elaborate.

He was speaking on his return from a visit to the United States to promote investment in his country.

"For now, this is a very personal affair and nobody's business. When the time comes for a public presentation or for a wedding you will get a big invitation card," he said to a reporter who asked him to comment on the press reports.

"Why should I? When you got your own woman, your own wife, did you blow the horn to let the whole world know. Why should I be an exception? I am entitled to some privacy, some family life," Mugabe said in a near confirmation of the reports.

Mugabe is also reported to have fathered two children with Grace Marufu his former secretary, years before the death in 1992 of his Ghanaian wife Sally.

They don't know smiling blonde on stamp

LISBON: Those sultry eyes gaze from calendars in Guatemalan gas stations and plastic lapel pins in Kenya, but there are still a few places where they say "Who?" when you ask about Marilyn Monroe, reports AP.

One is the African island nation of Sao Tome and Principe — home to the world's first Marilyn Monroe postage stamp.

Apparently, a lot of islanders are licking and sticking with no idea who the smiling blonde on the front is.

The US, Post Office has yet to release its Marilyn stamp, but this tiny Portuguese-speaking nation has issued nine different stamps that commemorate the late actress's career, said John Van Emdem of the International Collectors Society in Baltimore, Maryland.

The brilliantly-colored Marilyn stamps are "a gesture of respect to that great North American celebrity, as yet unknown in our nation," Sao Tome Postmaster General Antonio Cunha said Monday.

Saudi Prince criticises US dual containment policy

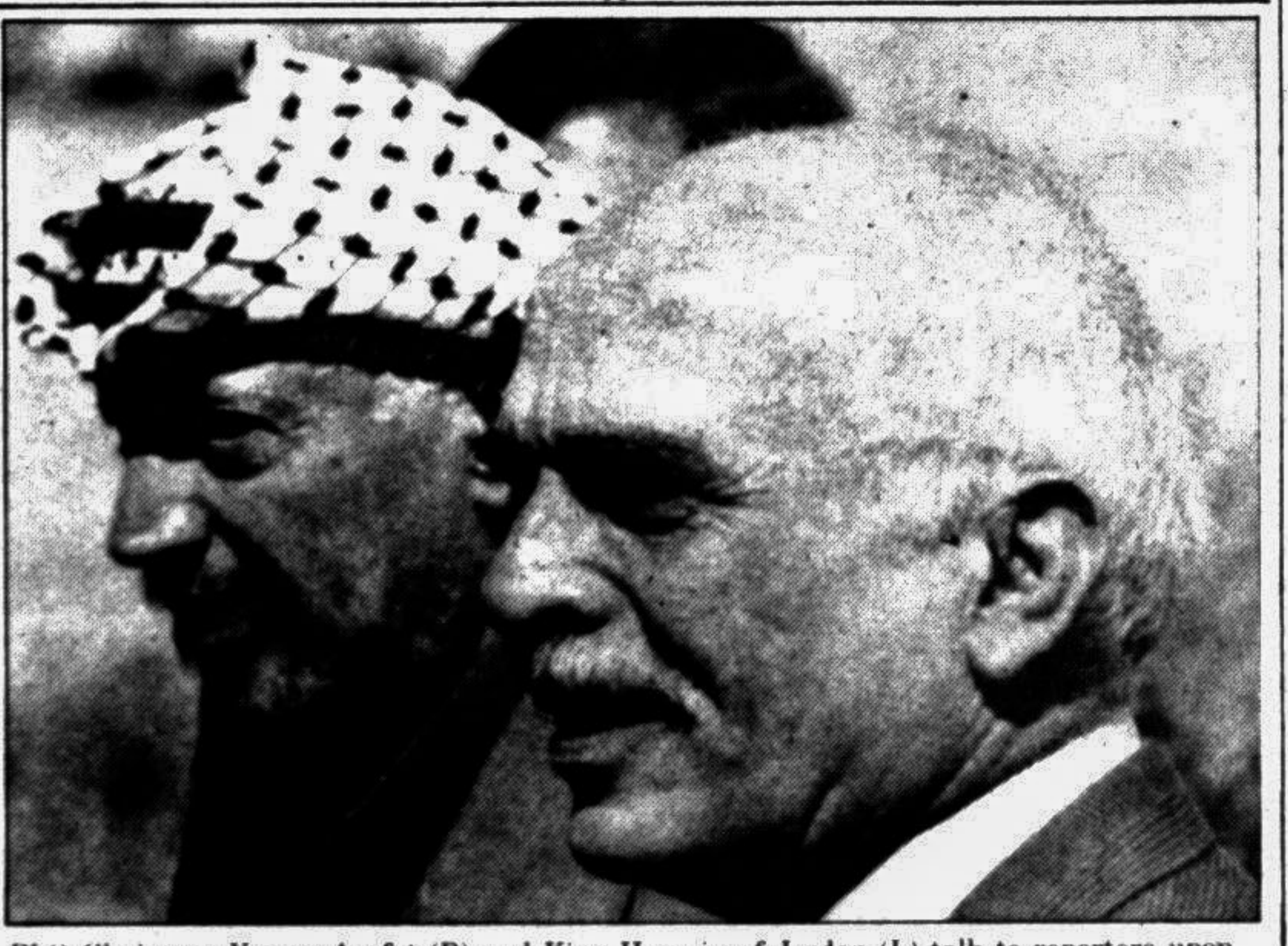
WASHINGTON, May 24: Saudi Arabia's Prince Khaled Bin Sultan yesterday criticised the US dual containment policy toward Iraq and Iran, reports Xinhua.

The Iraqi people are suffering a lot from the US continued sanctions against Iraq, Prince Khaled told a meeting at the centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

Khaled, who was former commander of the Arab and Muslim forces during the Gulf War, said the dual containment policy "is not a sustainable long-term policy," urging the United States to review the policy.

He also sharply criticised the United States for supporting Israeli efforts to impose peace on the Arab world, saying the US support for Israel on several sensitive issues in recent months has not been helpful to the Middle East peace process.

Khaled said during the debate over indefinite extension



PLA Chairman Yasser Arafat (R) and King Hussein of Jordan (L) talk to reporters upon Arafat's arrival at Marka airport in Amman Tuesday. Arafat is in Jordan for a two-day visit to discuss with King Hussein the latest developments in the Middle East peace process, including Israel's suspension of the expropriation of mainly Arab land in East Jerusalem. — AFP/UNB photo