

BRIEFLY

60 Kurds on hunger strike in Paris:

Sixty Kurds went on a hunger strike in Paris Sunday to support Kurds imprisoned by Turkish authorities, police announced. AFP reports from Paris.

China quake death toll now 14:

The death toll from an earthquake in northwestern China has risen to 14, with more than 60 injured, the China daily said yesterday. Reuter reports from Beijing.

Mild quake strikes Osaka:

A moderate 4.2 magnitude earthquake struck the suburbs of Osaka early Monday morning, but there were no reports of damage or injuries. AP reports from Tokyo.

1 killed in Polish coach mishap:

An Australian was killed and 21 other people, most of them Australians, were injured when a coach crashed Sunday near the Polish town of Neszcze, 114 kilometres (70 miles) south of Warsaw, Polish police said. AFP reports from Warsaw.

Heat wave claims 2 more in Spain:

Intense heat killed two people in Seville Sunday bringing to 17 the number of people mainly elderly killed by the intense heat during the past week. AFP reports from Spain.

Armenian PM reappointed:

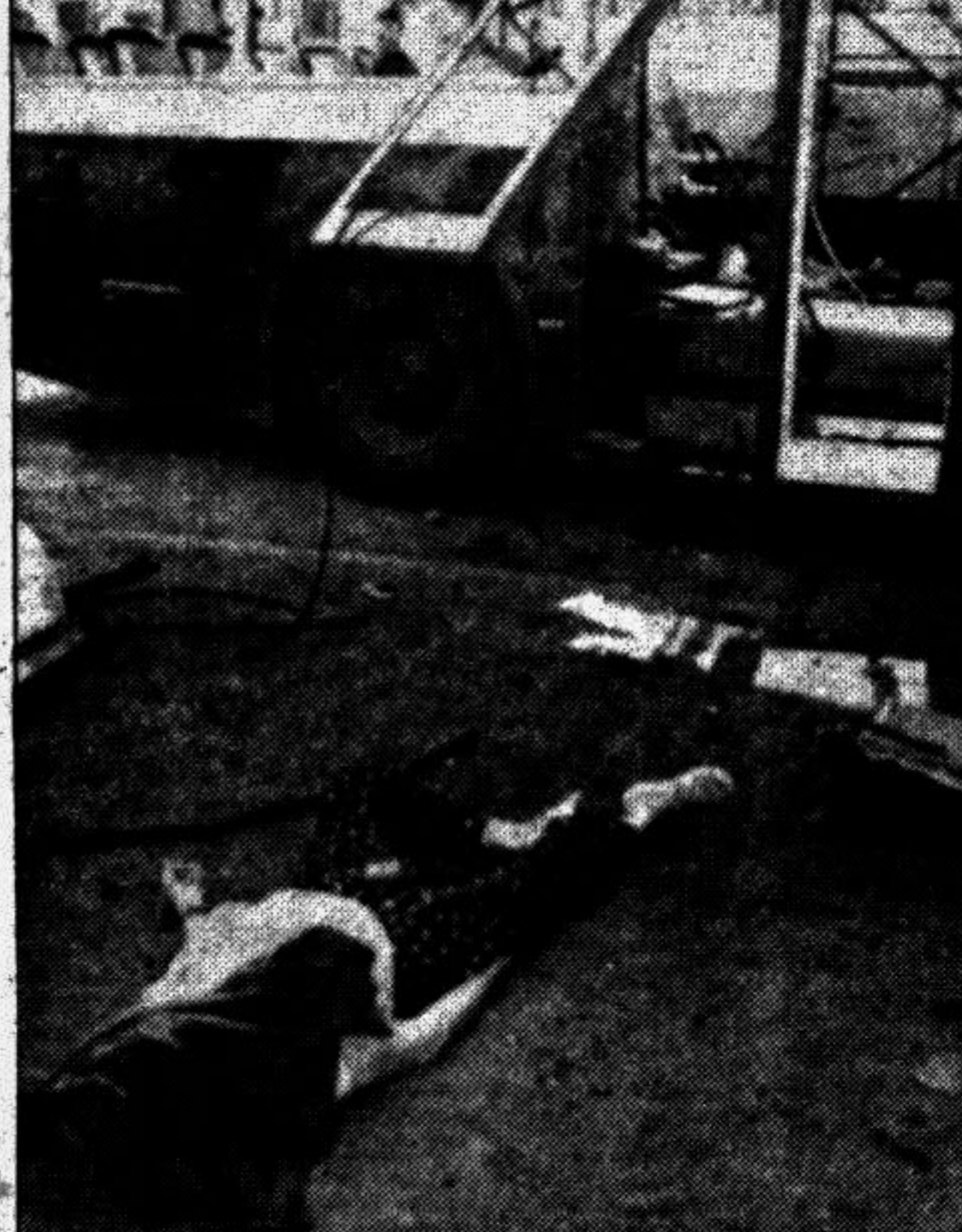
Armenian Prime Minister Grant Bagratian has been reappointed by President Levon Ter-Petrosian less than three weeks after the ruling coalition government won general elections. ITAR-Tass News Agency reported Sunday. AFP says from Moscow.

Colombia landslide death toll now 19:

The death toll from a landslide that wiped out part of a northern town increased to 19 Sunday as rescuers continued to find bodies amid the rubble and tons of earth. AP reports from Bogota.

Blast blows up bus in Punjab:

A bomb blew up a bus in the central Pakistani province of Punjab near the Indian border, killing three people and injuring 25, police said yesterday. Reuter reports from Islamabad.



A dead Israeli woman lies on the ground and the body of another passenger remains inside bus number 20 in the Ramat Gan suburb of Tel Aviv yesterday. At least six people were killed and 28 injured when a suicide bomber blew himself up in the bus at rush hour. The Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas claimed the responsibility for the attack. — AFP/UNB photo

Murayama will stay in power despite setback in polls

TOKYO, July 24: Fresh from a trouncing at the polls, Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama vowed Monday to make his way through "rough seas" and stay on as head of Japan's weak and divided government, reports AP.

But calls mounted for the 71-year-old leader to quit, and commentaries said the shaky state of the government would make it harder to deal with tough issues like trade disputes and the flagging economy.

In Sunday's parliamentary elections, the governing coalition won just over half the upper-house seats up for grabs, barely meeting its minimum goal and falling well short of original expectations.

Voter apathy was rampant

The turnout was only 44 per cent, the lowest ever in a Japanese national election. Stocks slipped in early

trading Monday, with the Nikkei Stock Average ending the morning session down 86.63 points, or 0.52 per cent.

Analysts said they did not expect the results to provoke any dramatic downturn, but said they underscored a continuing sense of malaise and disillusionment.

"I think the big loser was the political system, but the market didn't have any faith in that to begin with," said Paul Migliorato, senior trader at Jardine Fleming Securities.

A subdued Murayama told reporters the election results were "very regrettable" and acknowledged that quitting had crossed his mind. But he said he and his allies agreed that he should stay on.

Naturally, Murayama should resign, said a leader of the opposition New Frontier party, former defence minister Kazuo Aichi. "We have received a vote of confidence."

Sunday's election did not involve Parliament's more powerful lower house, which chooses the prime minister. Lower-house elections were not expected until late this year or early next year, but leading papers urged the prime minister to dissolve the lower house and call for early elections.

The mountain has collapsed, the mass-circulation Asahi Shimbun editorialised. "The prime minister should take responsibility and resign."

Newspapers also bemoaned the record-low voting turnout, with the Asahi saying it showed "our democracy is in danger."

Most commentaries said the government was unable to effectively lead the country.

Final official results of Japan's upper-house elections announced Monday. In Sunday's voting, 126 seats, or half the chamber's 252 seats, were contested.

The breakdown, with parties' previous showing: Governing Coalition: Liberal Democrats, 46 seats, up from 33; Socialists, 16 seats, down from 41; Sakigake, 3, up from 1; Opposition: New Frontier, 40, up from 19; Communists, 8, up from 5; Independents, 9; Minor parties, 4, down from 12.



Japanese Prime Minister and the Social Democratic Party chairman Tomiichi Murayama (C) and ruling coalition party leaders Yohei Kono (R) of the Liberal Democratic Party and Masahoshi Takemura of the Sotokake Party pose together for a photo before their meeting to discuss management of the coalition government after the Upper House election yesterday at the Prime Minister's official residence in Tokyo. — AFP/UNB photo

India contacts Al-Faran to free Western hostages

SRINAGAR, India, July 24: The Indian authorities have re-established contact with a Muslim separatist group holding five Western tourists hostage in the northern state of Kashmir, officials said today, reports AFP.

Top officials of the Kashmir government spoke with a representative of the Al-Faran group by telephone late Sunday in a bid to end the hostage crisis, the officials said on condition they not be identified.

Details of the discussions were not immediately available. But the officials said Al-Faran was sticking to its demand that the Indian government release 21 jailed Muslim militants in exchange for the hostages.

The rebels have alleged

that two of the hostages were injured in a gunbattle when Indian troops stormed a hideout on July 20. On Sunday, Al-Faran said one of the hostages was in critical condition.

Indian officials today denied there had been any shootout with the abductors and called for the immediate release of the Westerners.

Another report from New Delhi adds, Indian authorities today urged

Muslim militants holding five western tourists in Kashmir to free them in response to rebel claims that one of the hostages was critically injured, reports AFP.

The Al-Faran group said Sunday that one of the two westerners allegedly wounded during a gun-battle with Indian troops last week

was still in a critical condition.

The hostages — two Britons, an American, a German and a Norwegian — have been in detention since their abductions early this month. The military has carried out a massive search of the mountainous terrain but failed to find the men.

An officials spokesman said in New Delhi the Kashmir administration was willing to provide medical attention to the hostage if he was released without delay.

"If somebody is not well, we will be very keen to ensure that the person is picked up from wherever he is," the spokesman said. "We can fly helicopters, pick him up and see that he gets medical attention at the earliest."

Military offensive against Serbs won't work: Gaddafi

SIRTE, Libya, July 24: Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi said Bosnian Muslims should not seek an independent state and added he did not believe a western military offensive against Bosnian Serbs would work, reports Reuter.

Gaddafi, speaking in a tent in the Libyan desert, broke ranks with other Arab leaders who have urged more help to Bosnian Muslims and restricted himself to urging Bosnian Serbs not to deport Muslims in areas they conquer.

"Muslims are not the masters of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The interest of Muslims is to stay in a unified Yugoslavia and not in the fighting between Bosnian Muslim President Alija Izetbegovic

and Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic."

But Gaddafi, famous of his radical and confrontational stands, called Muslim nations "dogs" for following western policy on Yugoslavia.

"The Muslim states are demagogues and are ignorant of the ABC of the issue. They are following the position of their (western) masters like dogs," he told a group of reporters.

The issue is not religious between Muslims and Orthodox (Christians) ... it is a political fight between leaders. Foreign intervention will not solve the Bosnia-Herzegovina crisis," he said, near the city of Sirte, 450 km (280 miles) south of the capital Tripoli.

Many Arab and Muslim

countries have called for stronger action by United Nations forces to help beleaguered Muslims in Bosnia resist Serb onslaughts, and a lifting of the arms embargo on the Muslim-led government in Sarajevo.

Gaddafi called on Karadzic not to deport Muslims after seizing land in the Bosnian republic.

"It is not acceptable that Serbs deport Muslims from lands they conquer. The inhabitants of this land are all Slavs, including Muslims. They are all Yugoslavs."

He warned Karadzic of continuing what he called "religious cleansing" because this would create a historical case for Muslims similar to that of the Jews after the Second World War.

Hekmatyar turns down Rabbani's peace proposal

ISLAMABAD, July 24: Hezb-i-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) led by former Afghan Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has turned down the peace formula proposed by Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani to UN special envoy Mahmud Mestiri, reports Xinhua.

The Pakistani English newspaper Muslim Today quoted HIA spokesman Ustaad Saeed as saying the formula of inducting professors and judges from all over Afghanistan in a commission and later in a Grand Assembly was unacceptable to them.

Rabbani reportedly offered the peace formula during his talks with Mestiri in Kabul last Friday. Saeed, Hekmatyar's close confidant, said Rabbani's proposal was aimed at seeking further delay in transfer of power.

Argentina to sell N-reactor to Syria conditionally

JERUSALEM, July 24: Argentina's foreign minister said Sunday that his country will not sell Syria a nuclear reactor before Damascus signs a peace treaty with Israel, reports AP.

Foreign Minister Guido Di Tella said such a sale would be "one of the first consequences of peace," but that it would not currently be desirable. Di Tella, who arrived Saturday for a four-day visit, spoke after meeting with Israeli counterpart Shimon Peres.

Argentinean officials were quoted Saturday as saying their country would condition the sale on a Syrian pledge not to use the reactor to make weapons, and that the low-power reactor would be for producing medical radioisotopes.

Taiwan rebuffs China's criticism of Lee

TAIPEI, July 24: Taiwan rebuffed today China's criticism that President Lee Teng-hui was plotting to declare the island independent, reports Reuter.

"The Republic of China (Taiwan), President Lee and the Nationalist Party all hope to pursue peaceful reunification," the semi-official Central News Agency quoted Chien Hansen, spokesman for the ruling Nationalist Party, as saying.

Chien was quoted as saying China's criticism of Lee, made on Sunday by Beijing's official Xinhua news agency, was irresponsible.

Xinhua's criticism not only was completely at odds with the facts, it was also very irresponsible," the agency quoted Chien as saying. State television also carried Chien's remarks.

The rejection of China's

accusation was likely to increase tensions, which have soared over Chinese missile testing just 140 km (85 miles) north of Taiwan, an act seen in Taipei as a direct military threat.

A Defence Ministry official said on Sunday China had fired four missiles toward the target area, but one missile completely missed its target. He did not say where the stray landed or from where the missiles were launched.

Both Beijing's communist rulers and the Nationalist Party in Taiwan advocate reunification, but differ over how to achieve their aim.

Beijing has regarded Taiwan as a rebel province since the Nationalists fled there after losing the civil war in 1949.

Relations have deteriorated sharply since June.

Off the Record

Their festive mood suddenly changed

LONDON: British police arrested 17 protesters at an anti-car demonstration on Sunday which they said began as a festive street part and ended in a barrage of bricks, bottles and firebombs, reports Reuter.

The protest aimed at reclaiming streets for pedestrians — brought six hours of good natured gridlock to the usually busy streets of Islington in north London but eyewitnesses said the scene turned confrontational as evening fell.

A police spokesman said bricks, bottles and fireworks were thrown at police trying to clear a hardcore of 150 protesters who refused to disperse after the 1,500 strong demonstration.

Angry Stallone

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico: A TV station cameraman has sued Sylvester Stallone, saying the actor and four bodyguards assaulted him and confiscated his videotape of a movie in progress, reports AP.

The tape of "Assassins" was returned a few hours later to station WAPA, where Cesar Santos works. Stallone is directing the movie.

"When I got there, he (Stallone) started insulting me and telling me that I couldn't take video there. A bodyguard told me that if I didn't give him the video he would bust my face," Santos told The Associated Press on Friday.

Spokesman for Stallone have said Santos was trespassing.

He's not satisfied with one identity

SALT LAKE CITY: A man who posed as a woman during a three and a half-year marriage to an unwitting husband apparently also masqueraded as a doctor at least one hospital, an investigator said, reports AP.

Access keys to four Salt Lake City hospitals were found among the possessions of Felix Urioste, who was arrested last month at his sister's home in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Bountiful police Sgt. Grant Hodgson said Thursday.

Hodgson located Urioste while tracing a missing persons report filed by Bruce Jensen, who had married Urioste in the belief Urioste was a pregnant woman.



German top model Claudia Schiffer and magician David Copperfield arrive hand in hand at the Cartier international polo event at Smith's Lawn in Windsor, United Kingdom on Sunday. — AFP/UNB photo

White House divided over Hillary's Beijing trip

WASHINGTON, July 24: The White House is divided on whether First Lady Hillary Clinton should cancel her plans to attend a Women's Conference in Beijing as a protest to China's human rights policies, officials said, reports AFP.

These are issues that tear at individuals, an administration official said on condition of anonymity. "Right at the White House there are a lot of diverging views."

US-China relations have deteriorated rapidly recently with Beijing's protest against the private visit here by Taiwan's president last month and the June 19 arrest of Harry Wu, a US citizen and human rights advocate.

Hostage issue does not affect Kashmir's daily warfare

SOIBUGH (India), July 24: The nightmare that has struck so many villages in Kashmir's guerilla war arrived in Soibugh just as 300 elementary school children were finishing their morning prayer, reports AP.

Their mothers were working in nearby rice fields. Some of their fathers were sitting down in the village square, reading the day's local newspaper and smoking a hookah.

One by one, the children fell silent as a military convoy of 95 vehicles rumbled into the hamlet. As the children hit the floor and their parents ran for cover, this village of 12,000 people, mostly farmers and weavers, became a battlefield between Indian

soldiers and Kashmir separatists. By dusk Saturday, two Indian soldiers and six militants were killed. One civilian died in the cross-fire — a man the military had forced to approach the rebels and demand their surrender.

The military firepower burned down the 60-year-old, three-story wooden house the rebels were hiding in.

Three weeks after five Western tourists were kidnapped by a Kashmir militant group, little has changed in the daily mayhem of the northern region's battle for independence.

The Indian government has promised to keep its soldiers away from the little-known Al-Faran group that is holding the hostages: an

American, two Britons, a German and a Norwegian. The militants have threatened to kill the hostages if soldiers come too close in the Himalayan foothills of Jammu-Kashmir state.

Al-Faran has said two of the hostages were wounded last week in a gunbattle with Indian forces, but New Delhi denies that. It also refuses to meet a rebel demand and free 21 jailed guerrillas.

The captives are Donald Hutchings, 42, of Spokane, Washington; Paul Wells, 23, of London; Keith Mangan, 33, of Middlesbrough, England; Dirk Hasert, 26, of Erfurt, Germany; and Hans Christian Ostro, 27, of Oslo, Norway.

A second American captive John Childs, 41, of Simsbury, Connecticut, escaped on July 8 during a rainstorm.

India, a predominantly Hindu country, has 300,000 troops in Jammu-Kashmir, the country's only Muslim majority state, to crush the separatist campaign. More than 13,000 people since late 1989.

Every day, an average of about 10 people, most of them militants and civilians, are killed in skirmishes. Anti-Indian sentiment is so deep that even little children shout "Freedom!" "Freedom!" when they see soldiers walk by.

Skirmishes often occur in Srinagar, the summer capital, where Western diplomats and wives and girlfriends of four of the five male hostages are trying to win their release.

Even on hot days, all win-

French opposition for referendum on N-testing

PARIS, July 24: France's opposition Socialist Party today called for a referendum on President Jacques Chirac's decision to resume nuclear testing in the South Pacific, reports AFP.

Party official Gerard Fuchs urged Chirac either "to call off his decision to resume nuclear tests" or to organise a referendum in view of "the constantly growing international alarm" over the decision.

Fuchs, who is the party's national secretary for international relations, the tests should be called off "for the good of the country." On Sunday an opinion poll said Chirac had plunged 10 points in his popularity rating.