

Fate of 144 in hijacked Lankan ferry obscure

COLOMBO, Sept 3: The fate of 144 people aboard a ferry hijacked off Sri Lanka's north-eastern coast remained unclear for the fifth straight day today as the rebels issued conditions to free the crew, officials said, reports AP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) continued to hold the government-chartered ship, the *Aris Moana*, and its 136 passengers and eight-man crew since seizing the ferry on Tuesday, officials said.

Spokesman for the government's rehabilitation authority said they were still awaiting news about the ferry from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) which is mediating.

An ICRC spokesman confirmed that they are in contact with both sides to the crisis but declined to say what the LTTE's conditions were.

We are action as an intermediary between the government and the LTTE and for that reason we cannot give details, ICRC deputy head of delegation Ehre Paul Fruh said.

Military sources speculated that the LTTE may be keeping the crew aboard the ferry which ran around Wednesday but taken the passenger ashore for interrogation.

Military officials said the LTTE had also captured at least two sailors from two navy gunboats that were destroyed.

Security forces have ruled out any rescue mission because it could risk more lives, officials said. Two Israeli-built *Dvora* gunboats that went to the rescue of the *Aris Moana* were sunk by the LTTE together with at least 18 sailors on Tuesday.

Serbs asked to remove heavy guns or face more airstrikes

SARAJEVO, Sept 3: Rebuffed again by the Bosnian Serbs, an aggravated NATO gave their leaders a choice Sunday: Remove heavy guns and end the three and a half year siege of Sarajevo or face more punishing airstrikes, reports AP.

NATO Secretary-General Willy Claes also told the Serbs to give UN personnel complete freedom of movement, back off other UN "safe areas" and allow the reopening of Sarajevo's crucial airport.

If not, he said, NATO military commanders and their UN counterparts would be authorised to renew attacks that were suspended Friday. The alliance set no fixed deadline, but officials spoke in terms of hours, rather than days.

They had better get on with it," said Robert Hunter, the US ambassador to NATO. He dismissed demands by Serb military leader Gen. Ratko Mladic that his forces wouldn't back off until NATO airstrikes stopped with one word: "Garbage."

"If I were Mr Mladic, I would not sleep very well tonight, and I certainly would not waste any time tomorrow," Hunter said.

NATO ambassadors met for more than eight hours to discuss the way forward in Bosnia, where US envoy Richard Holbrooke has been making progress in the peace process.

According to a NATO official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, Holbrooke urged the alliance not to ease up on the Serbs, and to be ready for more airstrikes if necessary.

He addressed the meeting after Mladic rejected UN demands to unconditionally withdraw all heavy weapons from around Sarajevo, eliminate threats to other UN "safe areas" and agree to a ceasefire.

The attacks last week were launched after UN investigators concluded the Bosnian Serb rebels were to blame for the August 28 mortar shelling of a Sarajevo market in which 38 people died.

After three days, NATO called a pause Friday to give negotiators time to convince Bosnian Serbs to comply with UN demands.

In a statement, Claes said airstrikes will resume unless the Bosnian Serbs withdraw all heavy guns from within 20 kilometres (12 and a half miles) of Sarajevo, stop attacking the "safe areas" allow UN personnel complete freedom of movement and allow unrestricted use of Sarajevo airport.

UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in a statement issued Saturday night in New York, emphasised his desire for a diplomatic solution and urged the Bosnian Serbs to "act with a sense of responsibility."

"It is time for the bloodshed to end," Boutros-Ghali's statement said. "The ultimate objective of the United Nations remains that of a negotiated and durable settlement of this tragic crisis."

Talks between Indian govt, Al-Faran stalled

SRINAGAR, India, Sept 3: The fate of four Western tourists held hostage in Kashmir hung in the balance today as talks between separatist guerrillas and the Indian government to win their freedom stalled, reports Reuter.

Authorities said the captives and at least one Al-Faran captor had fallen ill following heavy rain in the mountainous region where the tourists are believed to be held. It was not known if the hostages were seriously ill.

Officials said Al-Faran's patience appeared to be wearing thin after nearly nine weeks of secret negotiations by radio.

"The mood is one of uncertainty," said a government official who asked not to be identified, late on Saturday, "their fate hangs in the balance."

Al-Faran, unknown even to Kashmiri separatist groups before the abductions, has demanded that India release 15 jailed militants including three Pakistanis, in exchange for American Donald Hutchings, German Dirk Hasert and Britons Keith Mangan and Paul Wells.

Turkish troops kill 20 Kurds

ANKARA, Sept 3: Turkish security forces killed 20 separatist Kurdish fighters in southeastern Turkey, bringing to 42 the number of militants killed in two days, the Anatolian News Agency said Saturday, reports AP.

Quoting security sources, the semi-official agency said 17 members of a "terrorist organisation" were killed in one village and three in another in the southeastern Hakkari region.

BRIEFLY

WW II bomb found in Russia: Government explosives experts flew to Kaliningrad in Far Western Russian on Saturday to detonate a huge German bomb from World War II that was found on a construction site, AP reports from Russia.

Experts from the Ministry for Emergency Situations in St Petersburg set off the 100-kilogram (220-pound) bomb in a concrete bunker, the Interfax news agency said.

Georgian security chief dismissed: Georgian Leader Eduard Shevardnadze, who was wounded in an attempt on his life earlier this week, told parliament Saturday that he has dismissed the head of his country's secret service, the former KGB, Igor Giorgadze, AFP reports from Tbilisi.

Georgia's special security forces would report directly to Shevardnadze following Tuesday's assassination bid, he said.

1 killed on way to Beijing confce: An American attending the largest international women's meeting in history was killed in a traffic accident and a fellow American was injured, the US Embassy said Saturday, AP reports from Beijing.

Gerard Skladal, from the New York area, died when the taxi he was traveling in was involved in an accident during heavy rain Tuesday, an embassy spokesman said, speaking on condition he was not identified.

14 killed in Mogadishu: At least 14 people were killed and up to 74 seriously wounded in fierce battles on Friday between forces loyal to Somalia's two most powerful warlords, hospital officials said Saturday, Reuter reports from Mogadishu.

The fighting pitted militia loyal to north Mogadishu faction leader Ali Mahdi Mohamed against those of his south Mogadishu rival Mohamed Farah Aidede.

Chechens hand over 1,100 weapons: Chechen fighters have handed over 1,100 weapons since a Russian-Chechen demilitarisation accord was signed on July 30, the deputy commander of Russian interior troops in the breakaway Caucasus republic said Saturday, AFP reports from Moscow.

Assad arrives in Cairo: Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad arrived Cairo on Sunday for talks with his Egyptian counterpart Hosni Mubarak on the peace process with Israel, AFP reports from Cairo.

The two leaders will discuss "current meters in the Arab world and developments in peace talks, as well as ways to strengthen bilateral relations," the government daily Al-Akhabar said.

Gas explosion kills 10 in Vietnam: At least 10 people were killed when a cooking-gas cylinder exploded and set fire to nearby oil drums on a ship off southern Vietnam, the official Vietnam News Agency (VNA) has reported, Reuter reports from Hanoi.

Another 15 people were missing and 20 were injured in the blast, the agency said late on Saturday. Terrified passengers jumped into the sea to flee fast-spreading flames, it quoted survivors as saying.

Cuban dies as boat sinks into sea: A floatilla sailing toward Cuba to stage a protest against President Fidel Castro turned back Saturday after one boat sank in rough seas and left one dead, AFP reports from Florida.

The 62-foot (14-metre) sundown two, part of a 25 boat flotilla of Cuban exiles, capsized and sank, stranding at 47 passengers in the choppy waters.

Maldives raising fund for Bosnia: The tiny Maldives launched a fund-raising drive for embattled Bosnian Muslims yesterday and immediately received pledges of more than 100,000 dollars government official said, Reuter reports from Male.

Maldivan President Mamoan Abdul Gayoom opened the campaign, which will include concerts, charity dinners, sports events and exhibitions, the official said.

US hands over 2 bases to Panama: The United States handed over two military bases to Panama Saturday as part of its phases withdrawal from the Isthmus under the 1977 Panama Canal Treaties, AFP reports from Panama City.

Panamanian President Ernesto Perez and US General Barry McCaffrey, commander of southern military operations, led the delegations from the two countries at a ceremony marking the transfer at Fort Davis 112 kilometres northeast of the capital.

5 rebels shot dead in Kashmir

JAMMU, Sept 3: Indian troops today shot dead an Afghan mercenary and four local Muslim militants in a fierce gunbattle in the northern state of Kashmir, police said, reports AP.

An Indian soldier was wounded in two-hour of fighting at Calian village in the mountainous district of Doda, a police spokesman said in this winter capital of Kashmir, the country's only Muslim-majority state.

The spokesman said some 30 guerrillas escaped, leaving behind the dead men. Troops seized four AK-47 assault rifles and a large quantity of ammunition from the site.

The gunbattle erupted when the militants ambushed an army patrol.

Fight on to save US children from computer pornography

WASHINGTON, Sept 3: The fight on to the souls of US children from computer pornography. But members of Congress, providers of Interactive Computer Services, and family groups are sharply divided over the best strategy to use, reports IPS.

Service providers and computer software firms allied with two members of the US House of Representatives are touting software that parents can use to select what their children see.

They said it is the only way to protect the children while remaining true to the first amendment freedoms of speech and information in the US Constitution.

On the other hand, a bill passed June 14 in the US Senate — the communications decency amendment — seeks to criminalise sleaze on the Internet. The Global Interactive Computer Service, and tighten the law on offenders.

If the bill becomes law, peddlers of pornography, including anyone who controls the services, would pay a fine of US dollar 100,000 or spend two years in prison or suffer both penalties.

The Senate passed the bill in the wake of increasing alarm in the country over pornography on the Internet. In recent months, US media reports have included stories of children running off with strangers who seduced them on the Internet.

But net users have lashed back, many of them upset in particular over a Time Magazine cover story in July on "cyberporn."

Wrote one irate reader to the US magazine: "contrary to every parent's fears, children are not bombarded by explicit images every time they venture on line."

Still, equally upset parents and politicians eager for their votes will not be stopped in their crusade, even as proponents of the "technology option" argue that new tougher laws will not work.

"One of the troubling aspects the Senate bill is that it gives parents a false sense of security," says Democrat Ron Wyden, one of the two house members backing the technology approach. "It's saying that government can solve the problem — parents can go take a nap."

Wyden and Republican Christopher Cox are pushing for an amendment that would waive liability for pornographic material posted on the Internet from the service providers. They argue that with available software, parents can sieve what their children see.

"We don't expect government to substitute for parents," Cox says.

America on-line, the leading provider of On-Line Services, as well as three computer software firms — Surf-Watch, Prodigy, and CompuServe — visited Congress recently to demonstrate hi-tech software parents can use. They displayed an array of software, some with child-friendly names like Net Nanny and Cybersitter. Net Nanny, developed by a Canadian firm, denies a child access to Internet sites ruled out by the parents. It has a dictionary in which a parent will key in sex-related words and any other material a child must not see.

Parents may also enter the following phrases: "What's your name", "what's your phone number", "where do you live", and "are your parents home?"

If anyone attempts to ask these questions, Net Nanny will automatically log off the network or shut down the computer," according to material accompanying the software package.

Cybersitter works in a similar way, and for control of On-Line Services used by children in schools Netscape Proxy Server, Webtrack, and Kid Code can be used.

Nonetheless, family groups who want pornography off the Internet altogether are critical of the technology-can-do-it-all approach.

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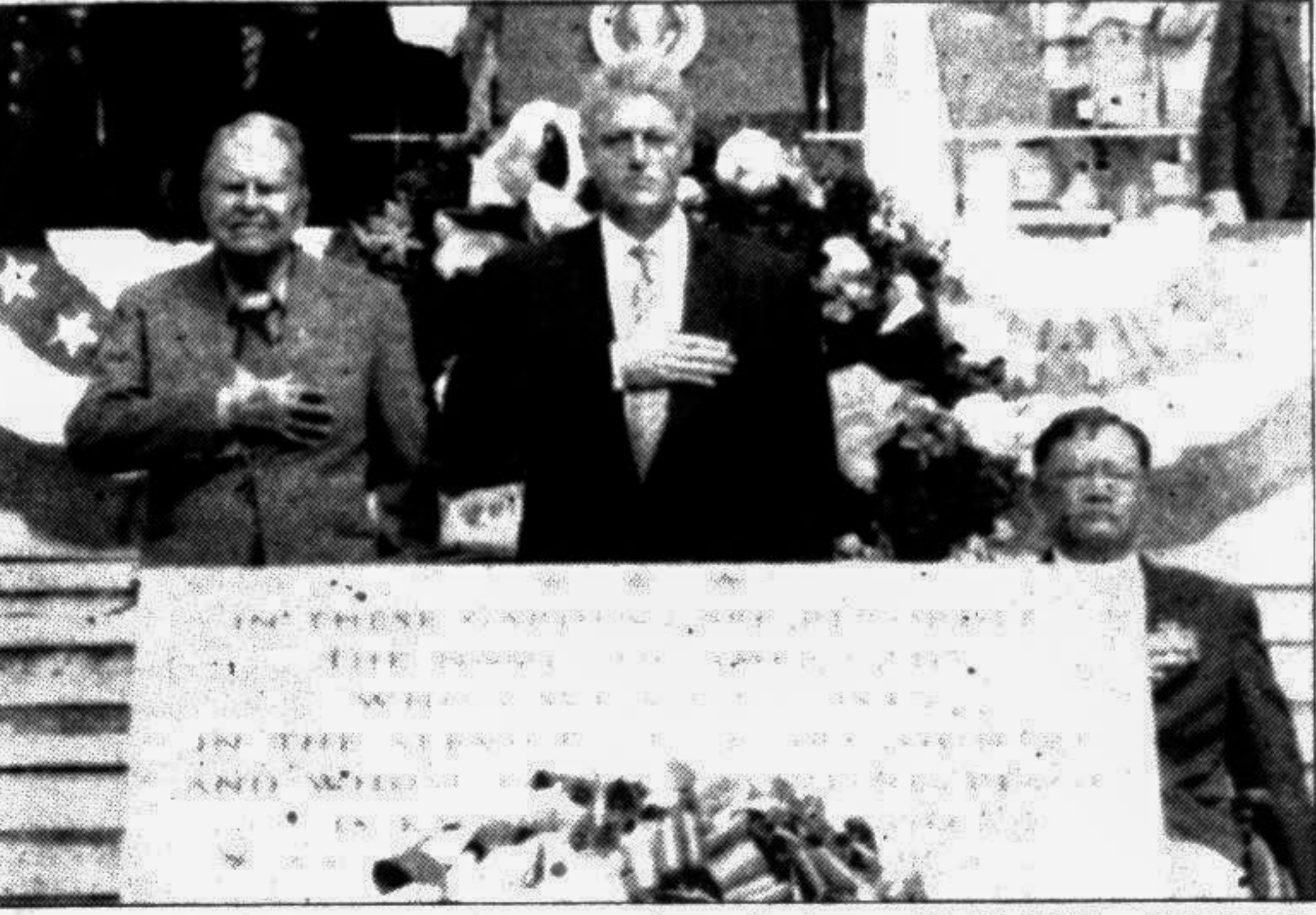
Mubarak orders Brotherhood men to go on trial

CAIRO, Sept 3: Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak has ordered Muslim Brotherhood officials to go on trial in a military court for the first time since 1965, legal officials said Saturday, reports AP.

He signed the order against 50 Brotherhood officials on Thursday, they added.

The daily Al-Ahram said they would go on trial on charges of having "bromen the law on organising political parties" and for trying to "create a bananst regime."

The decision to transfer them to the military high court unjust, protested Brotherhood spokesman Mamon Hodeiby.



US President Bill Clinton (C) holds his hand over his heart with World War II veterans Alfred Los Banos (R) and Robert Allen (L) on Saturday during commemoration ceremonies marking VJ-Day at the Punch Bowl National Cemetery in Honolulu. — AFP/UNB photo

Pakistan behind assassination of Beant Singh, alleges India

NEW DELHI, Sept 3: India has alleged that Pakistan was responsible for the assassination of an Indian chief minister who was blown up by a car bomb three days ago, a report said today, reports AP.

Federal Home Minister Shankarrao Chavan told the Economic Times that the gruesome killing Thursday of Beant Singh, Chief Minister of the northern state of Punjab, was masterminded by the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan.

"I can say without any fear of any contradiction that the ISI is behind the bomb blast," he said, adding that Sikh separatists wanted by Indian authorities were taking refuge in Pakistan.

India has repeatedly accused Pakistan of arming and training Sikh militants in Punjab and Muslim guerrillas in the neighbouring state of Kashmir. Islamabad denies the allegations.

Chavan, a confidant of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, told the daily that he had asked external Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee to officially take up the matter with Pakistan.

"I am sure my colleague in the External Affairs Ministry will be able to protest against the way Pakistan is trying to destabilise Kashmir and other areas of the country," he said.

"The recent incident in Punjab is quite a serious one," he added.

Chavan refused to say if he believed that the assassination was carried out by Babbar Khalsa, a hardline Sikh separatist group which claimed responsibility for the killing of Beant Singh, 73.

Beant Singh, a Sikh, was killed along with 15 others, including three elite commandos, by a powerful explosion when he got into his bullet proof car at his office in Chandigarh, the Punjab capital.

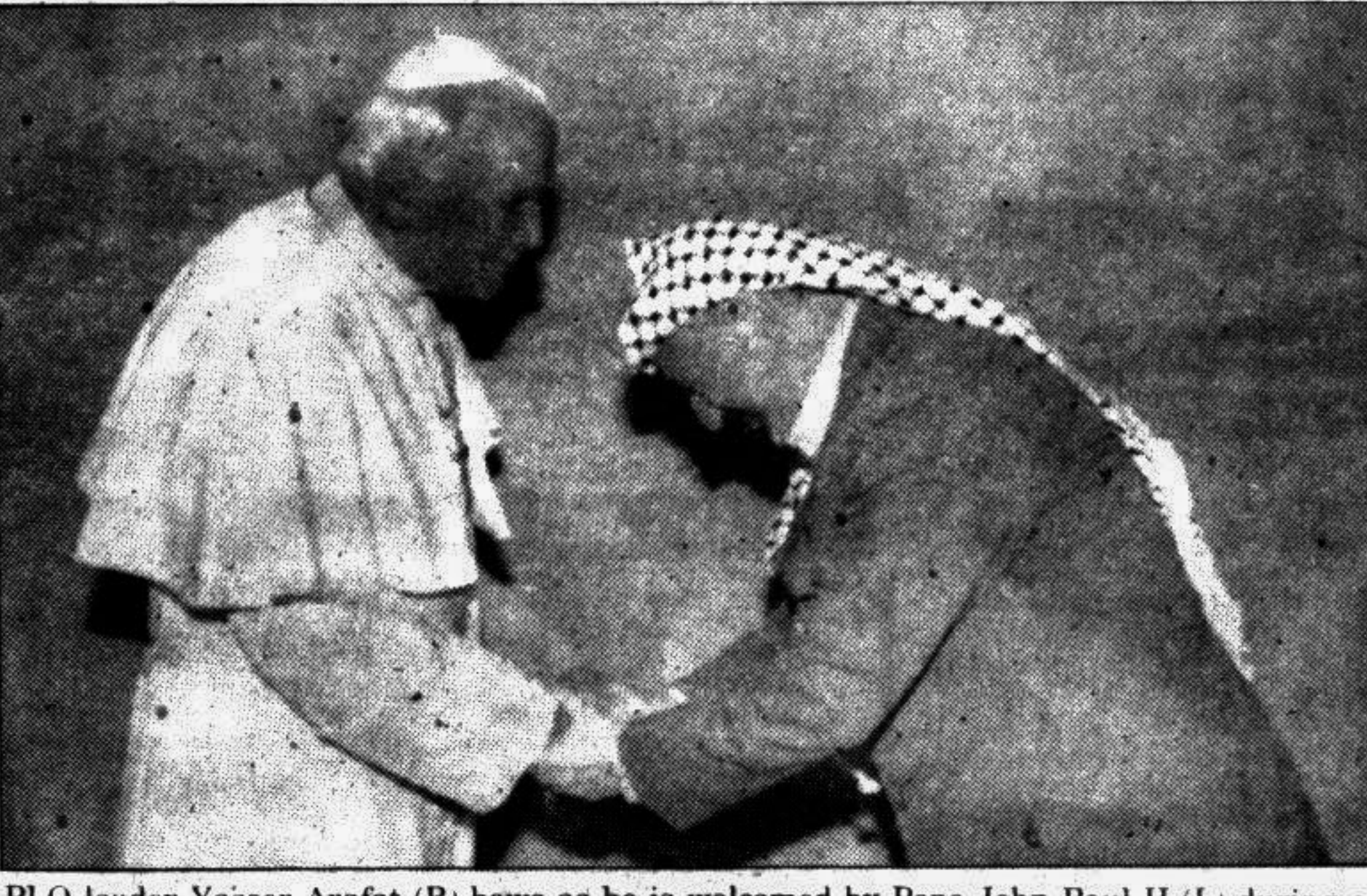
Beant Singh, a leader of India's ruling Congress (I) Party, became Chief Minister of Punjab in February 1992 and ordered a police crackdown against Sikh militants, almost crushing a 10-year-long bloody separatist movement.

The slain leader was cremated with military honours Saturday.

Ugandan govt contacts Idi Amin

KAMPALA, Sept 3: The Ugandan government is in contact with former dictator Idi Amin to try to convince him to return peacefully to Uganda, the official New Vision newspaper reported Saturday, says AFP.

The move comes as rebels loyal to Amin's former foreign minister Juma Oris are reported to have crossed into northwest Uganda recently from Sudan and mounted roadblocks in the region, where they have been intensifying operations aimed at returning Amin to power.



P.L.O. leader Yasser Arafat (R) bows as he is welcomed by Pope John Paul II (L) during a private audience at the pontiff's summer residence Castelgondolfo Saturday. Arafat arrived in Italy to participate in an international symposium on economy and politics and for talks with Italian politicians and Israeli Foreign Minister Simon Peres. — AFP/UNB photo

PLO leaders call to boycott Israeli celebrations

JERUSALEM, Sept 3: Palestinian leaders on Saturday called for a boycott of Israeli celebrations beginning next week to mark 3,000 years of Jewish presence in Jerusalem, reports Reuter.

"These celebrations are the celebrations of occupying Jerusalem," said Faisal Al-Husseini, the senior PLO leader in Jerusalem.

"We should have a clear position against these celebrations which deny completely the true Arab reality of the holy city."

The Europeans have boycotted it and so should we," he said, referring to a decision by the European Union (EU) not to participate in the 15-month-long series of events.

"No bad whores, just bad laws"

HUAIROU, China, Sept 3: Prostitutes, or sex workers as they prefer to be called, demanded today their labour in the world's oldest profession be recognised in a United Nations platform for action on women, reports Reuter.

"Prostitution should be decriminalised, sex work be recognised as legitimate work and prostitutes be given the same protection and rights as other workers," Britton Jo Doezema, one of seven members of the Network of Sexual Projects, told a news conference.

"Prostitutes are throw-away women," she said, "we are on the bottom of the scale... the lower the status of a woman the more acceptable it is to abuse them. People do feel they can abuse us with impunity."

The women were demanding recognition for their work be included in the document that will be discussed and adopted at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, which opens in Beijing tomorrow.

Another member of the group, Lee Christino from Australia, attended the news conference wearing a T-shirt with the logo "no bad whores, just bad laws".

Off the Record

There might have something wrong in calculations

LONDON: Queen Elizabeth II's leap to the top of Business Age magazine's list of Britain's richest people published Saturday is "ridiculous," Buckingham Palace said, reports AP.

It's not that Her Majesty had a sensational business year. Rather, the magazine changed the way it measured her pile. It calculated that she was worth 3.4 billion dollars, up from 245 million dollars.

A spokesman for Buckingham Palace dismissed the claim. "What they are saying is ridiculous," the spokesman said, arguing that much of the royal wealth doesn't belong to the individual on the throne.

Business Age, however, said it applied a strict legal definition of wealth.

"She holds title to Buckingham Palace, Windsor Castle, Sandringham, Balmoral and a number of other royal residences, although legally she might have problems actually selling Buckingham Palace," the magazine said.

Precisely, said the palace spokesman, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"The queen can no more sell Buckingham Palace, for instance, than President Clinton can sell the White House," he said on customary condition of anonymity.

The Sunday Times this year also revised its estimate of the royal wealth, from 7.75 billion dollars to 700 million dollars. That dropped her from No 2 in the Sunday Times 1994 list to 17th.



He didn't mean it

LONDON: A teenager who fired a starting pistol outside the home of British Prime Minister John Major was fined 250 pounds (400 dollars) on Monday, reports Reuter.

Robert Gipters, 19, admitted threatening behaviour and has written to the British leader to apologise for firing the pistol as Major was being driven past into his country home.

The court recognised that Gipters, who had been drinking and left home after an argument, did not intend to harm anyone as the pistol could not fire bullets.

Di not accustomed to share her food

LONDON: Princes Diana? Nice lady — but she wouldn't last long at a Pavarotti show down, reports AP.

Luciano Pavarotti hinted twice to the princess that he wouldn't mind sampling some of her shrimp — and then he came right out and asked, the opera tenor recounts in an extract from his biography published Sunday.

"I was at a dinner party in New York with the Princess of Wales," Pavarotti writes in "My World", which is extracted in the London Sunday Times. "She had broiled shrimp that looked wonderful."

"I said to her: Princes those shrimp must be very good, yes?" She said they were excellent. Later I said again they must be really delicious. She smiled and nodded enthusiastically.

"Finally, I said, 'Listen, I tried twice with no success. Now I ask you directly, May I have one of your shrimps?' She got very flustered and apologetic. 'I'm so sorry... I didn't realise.'"

Then she smiled in a shy way and said: "I am not accustomed to sharing my food." If that is true, she would have a terrible time at my family table."

Pavarotti says some people confuse his acknowledged love for food with him being happy with his weight.

"I am happy in spite of it," he writes. "I hate to see how I look to others. I glance in the mirror and I say: 'Oh my God!'"

