

Nigerian junta rules out early handover of power.

LAGOS, Nigeria, Dec 22: An aide to Nigeria's military ruler Thursday ruled out negotiations on an early handover of power, declaring that the junta will rule for three more years, reports AP.

His comments came a week after hundreds of politicians held a summit to decide how best to motivate Gen Sani Abacha, who took power in a November 1993 coup, to quickly hand power to a civilian government.

Abacha drew more international condemnation last month for executing nine political activists, including playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa, last month.

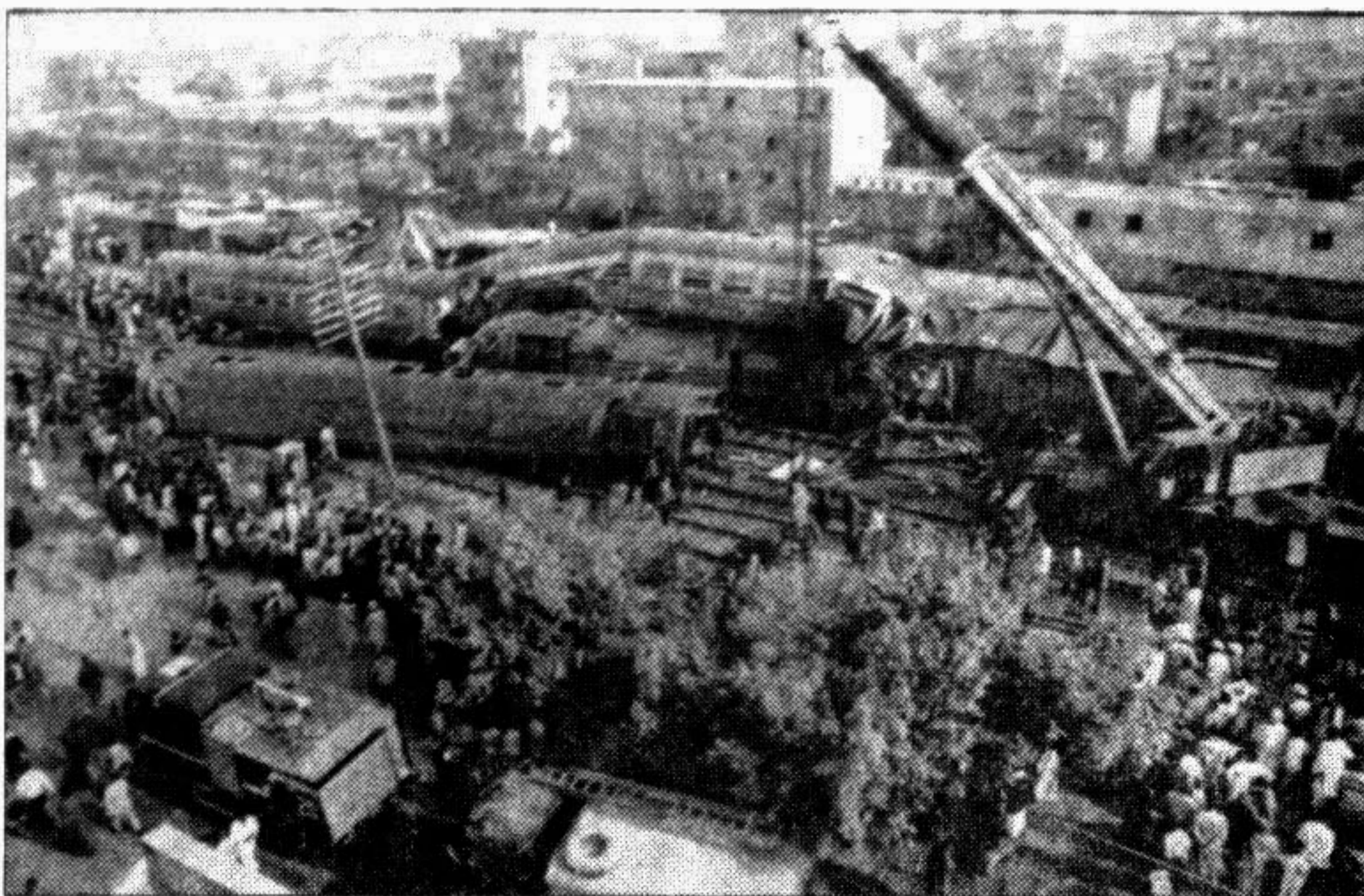
The summit, sponsored by an opposition coalition, agreed to enter talks with the government in an effort to persuade Abacha to leave

office. In addition, the Commonwealth on Wednesday decided to send a five-nation mission to Nigeria next month to encourage democratic reforms.

But Abacha aide Lazarus Unaogu, speaking Thursday in the capital Abuja, said there was no chance the military government will step down anytime soon.

"We have no intention of entering into any discussion with anyone over our handover programme," said Unaogu, Special Duties Minister in Abacha's government. Abacha earlier this year bowed to pressure and said a civilian government would take over in October 1998.

Unaogu said Thursday that people should accept the three-year transition as a reality.



Overall view of train crash site in Badrshin, some 20 kilometres outside Cairo, on Thursday after two trains smashed into each other that killed 75 people and left 150 others injured. — AFP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

Latvian MPs approve new govt:

Legislators in Latvia on Thursday approved a new government presented by Prime Minister-designate Andris Skele, ending weeks of political uncertainty in the Baltic nation, AP reports from Riga, Latvia.

The Interfax news agency said the parliament voted 70-24 in favour of the government presented by Skele.

60 journalists killed in '95:

More than 60 journalists were killed around the world in 1995, many of them victims of assassination in Algeria, according to a report released Thursday, AP reports from Brussels.

"What is certain beyond doubt is that 1995 has been another tragic year for media freedom," the International Federation of Journalists said in its annual report on news reporters killed while on assignment or for their views.

Rafsanjani's mother dies:

The mother of Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani died on Thursday at the age of 90, the official news agency IRNA said, AFP reports from Tehran.

Hajie Khanom Mahbibi Hashemi will be buried at Qom, 100 kilometres (60 miles) south of Tehran, after Friday prayers at the University of Tehran, the agency said.

Mauritius opposition wins polls:

The main opposition alliance in the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius won 65.2 per cent of all votes cast at Wednesday's parliamentary elections, final results from the National Electoral Commission showed on Friday, Reuter reports from Port Louis.

The commission said the alliance of Navin Ramgoolam and Paul Berenger captured 65.2 per cent of 556,297 ballots cast while the governing coalition of Prime Minister Sir Anerood Jugnauth won just 19.7 per cent of the vote.

Algerian TV director killed:

The production director of an Algerian public television station has been assassinated, apparently by militants who have been targeting journalists, police said Thursday, AP reports from Algiers.

Authorities said the body of Mohammed Belkacem, 46, was found just one kilometre (1/2 mile) from the spot where he was kidnapped Wednesday in the eastern Algerian suburb of Baraki by three armed men. Belkacem's throat was slashed.

60pc Japanese want new govt:

Sixty per cent of Japanese voters want a new government to replace the tripartite coalition led by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, according to a poll published Friday, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The Yomiuri Shimbun polled 3,000 voters on Saturday and Sunday, of whom 69 per cent responded.

Uzbek PM replaced:

The Uzbek parliament on Thursday dismissed Prime Minister Abdulkhoshim Mutalov and named Utkir Sultanov a former foreign trade minister, to replace him, the Interfax news agency said, AP reports from Tashkent.

No reason for Mutalov's removal was given, but President Islam Karimov indicated to parliament that the government needed a fresh approach to the economy.

Smoking banned in Beijing:

The capital of the world's largest producer and consumer of tobacco on Thursday banned smoking in public places, AP reports from Beijing.

The standing committee of the Beijing People's Congress passed the no-smoking law, which is to go into effect on May 15, 1996, the official Xinhua News Agency reported.

Georgians mark Stalin's birthday:

About 1,000 people nostalgic for communist times marked the 116th anniversary of Josef Stalin's birth with a rally in the Soviet dictator's birthplace, the small mountain town of Gori, AP reports from Tbilisi, Georgia.

About 500 people, mostly silver-haired veterans, gathered for speeches, communist songs and Stalin films in the Rustaveli theatre in central Tbilisi, the capital of the former Soviet republic.

3 executed in Japan:

A man convicted of kidnapping and murdering a female university student was hanged Thursday, as were two other convicted murderers, activist groups said, AP reports from Tokyo.

Shuji Kimura, 45, was executed at a prison in Nagoya, central Japan, said Akiko Takada, a member of a group opposing the death penalty. She said the group received the information from Kimura's family.

Governor, 30 others killed in Burundi

BUJUMBURA, Dec 22: Gunmen in separate incidents killed more than 30 people near Burundi's capital and assassinated the governor of a northern province, state-run radio said today, reports Reuter.

Burundi radio said "armed gangs" — wording reserved by Burundian officials to describe Hutu guerrillas — killed more than 30 people in Mukimbe commune southeast of Burundi on Thursday.

It said the attackers, who came from neighbouring communities, burned down some 50 houses at Rutukina Hill and stole more than 70 cows, most of which were later recovered.

Royals' disunity damaging British monarchy, nat'l unity

LONDON, Dec 22: Britain's Prince Charles is resigned to becoming king without a queen but Princess Diana does not appear ready to make a snap decision on a speedy divorce, reports Reuter.

Eager to quash speculation that has plunged the tarnished monarchy into crisis, Charles vowed on Thursday he would not remarry if Diana agreed to a permanent separation.

That could spell the end of his relationship with divorcee Camilla Parker Bowles, the love of his life. One churchman even told the heir to the throne "Be celibate if you want to be king."

Queen Elizabeth, seeing the House of Windsor plunged into disrepute by the

antics of its warring young royals, wrote to Charles and Diana telling them divorce would be best after months of their using the media for a public slanging match.



She left driven to act after Diana gave a frank television interview in which she admitted to adultery, questioned Charles' suitability as

king and labelled royal courtiers "the enemy". Diana's bluntness brought to a head a situation she had not wanted and friends said she was devastated by news of the queen's letter being leaked to the tabloid press.

For Diana had said in that interview: "I don't want a divorce but we need clarity on the situation. I await my husband's decision on which way we are going to go."

He stated his position within hours, backing his mother's call for an end to the 14-year old marriage.

Diana's confidants felt she would agree too — but no speedy decision was likely as the lawyers involved on both sides were away on holiday until the New Year. Diana will want unlimited

access to her sons, Princes William and Harry. She may agree to a clean break settlement of 15 million pounds (23.07 million dollars). Separated since 1992, they could under British law be divorced within three months.

Prime Minister John Major faces a delicate task playing honest broker to the sparring royals.

It is he who will help define the future role of Diana, who sees herself as a caring "queen of hearts" and wants to be a roving ambassador for Britain.

Some cabinet ministers and diplomats are lukewarm about such a role but none doubts her media pulling power and commitment to a string of charitable causes. Experts insist divorce

Hurriyat Confce alleges 100 custodial deaths

SRINAGAR, Dec 22: A pro-independence group in Kashmir on Thursday alleged that at least 100 civilians have been killed in the last two months while in custody of security forces battling the Muslim insurrection in the northern state, reports AP.

The allegation by the Hurriyat Conference — which was denied by the government — came on a day when 11 people, mostly militants, were killed in gun battles with security forces in Jammu-Kashmir.

Omer Farooq, who heads the Conference, an umbrella group of 32 pro-independence organisations, told reporters in state capital Srinagar that at least 100 houses of civilians have been burnt down in the last two months by security forces and former militants.

Dissident Wei appeals against 14-yr prison term

BEIJING, Dec 22: China's best-known dissident Wei Jingsheng appealed today against a 14-year prison term for conspiring to subvert the government, a court spokeswoman said, reports Reuter.

"Wei Jingsheng appealed today," the spokeswoman said by telephone. She declined to say when the Beijing Higher People's Court would hear Wei's appeal.

Wei, 45, a 1995 Nobel Peace Prize nominee widely regarded as the father of China's modern democracy movement, was convicted on December 12 and sentenced to 14 years in prison for conspiring to subvert the government.

The Beijing number one Intermediate People's Court convicted Wei of financing China's struggling democracy movement, whose very existence is seen by the state as seditious because it questions the Communist Party's absolute rule.

US for imposing oil embargo on Libya

WASHINGTON, Dec 22: The White House called on Thursday for a possible oil embargo against Libya to force the handover of two Libyans accused of bombing a Pan Am jetliner over Scotland in 1988, reports AFP.

"To this day the perpetrators of this savage act remain free, sheltered by Libya in defiance of the will of the international community," said a White House statement on the anniversary of the bombing which killed 170 people over Lockerbie, Scotland.

"Current UN sanctions have not resulted in the outcome we all seek — the handover of the two suspects in the bombing," it said.

Iraq in danger of catastrophe, says King Hussein

AMMAN, Dec 22: King Hussein of Jordan said on Thursday that Iraq was in danger of a catastrophe and urged its fragmented opposition groups to unite to prevent the country's disintegration, reports Reuter.

"I do not see any window of hope... the result I see is a catastrophe in Iraq in front of us and will harm others if we do not work towards avoiding it in one way or another," King Hussein told Jordanian senior editors at a televised meeting.

"Our duty is to prevent the tearing apart of Iraq or our loss of Iraq or its disintegration," he said.

King Hussein said he was urging Iraq's fragmented opposition to unite to help save their country before it was too late.

Sharif blames Benazir for confrontation

ISLAMABAD, Dec 22: Pakistani opposition leader Nawaz Sharif on Thursday blamed Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto for the unabated confrontation in the political system and the country's economic decline, reports AFP.

"From day one the government has been on the war path against the opposition," the former prime minister said in a speech to the National Assembly.

Law and Justice Minister Nabi Dad Khan termed Sharif's blistering attack "disappointing" and vowed that the Benazir administration would complete its five-year term.

Sharif, rejecting Benazir's offer for talks, reiterated his demand for mid-term polls. "The present crisis has

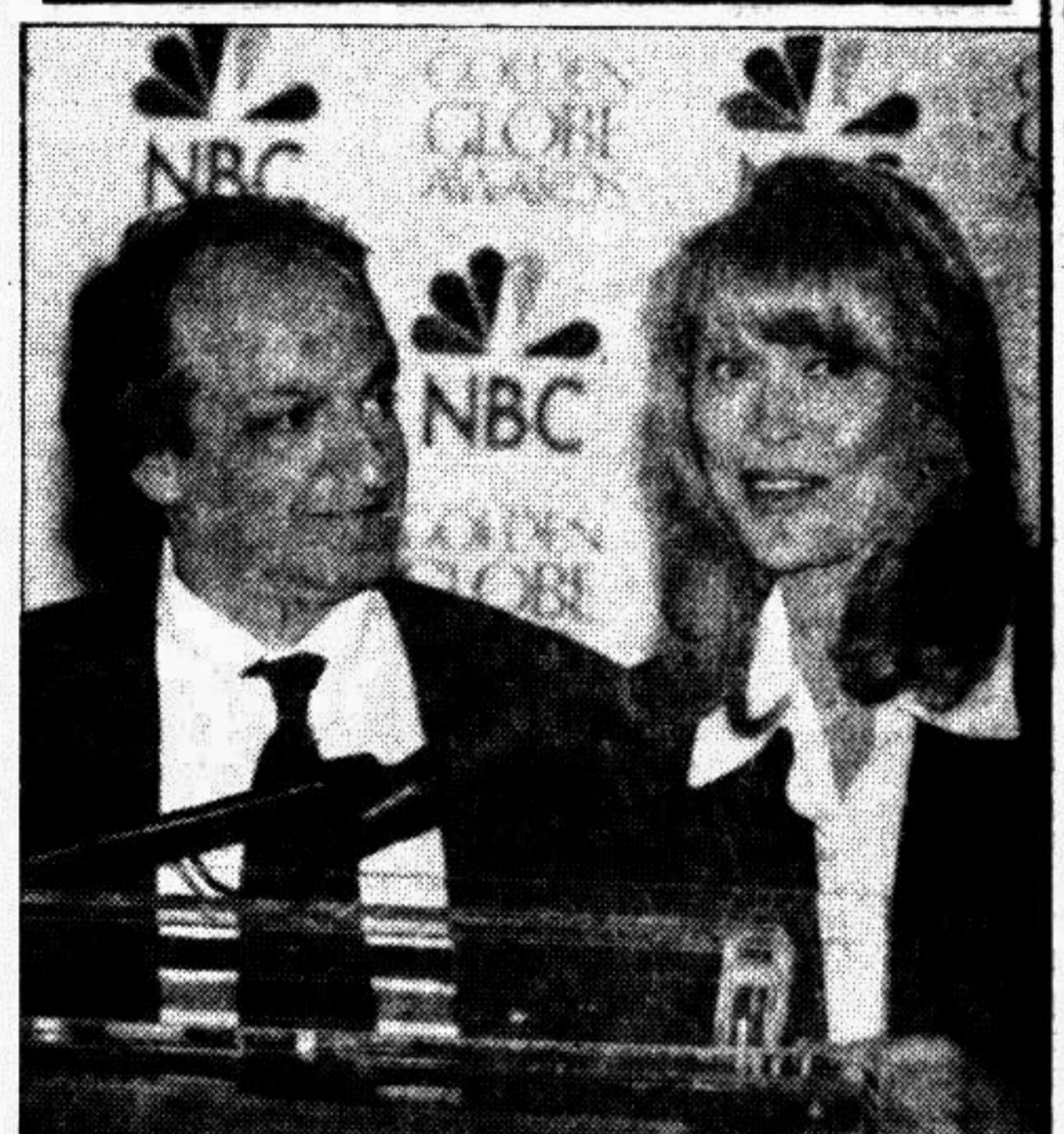
pushed us far beyond the stage of talks for which the prime minister has extended an invitation," he said.

"The crisis demands that we should go back to the people to seek a new mandate," he said.

He urged Benazir's to accept mid-term elections and then set up a committee in consultation with the opposition to prepare a package for constitutional reforms and other measures to remedy the current ills.

The committee should deliberate on issues such as the eradication of corruption, forming a permanent watchdog commission to check the misuse of political influence, ensuring the independence of the judiciary and ending floor crossing in parliament, he said.

Off the Record



US actors David Paymer (L) and Faye Dunaway announced on Thursday nominations in the film category for the 53rd Annual Golden Globe Awards on Thursday in Beverly Hills, California. The film, "Sense and Sensibility" won six nominations for Golden Globe Awards, considered a precursor to the Academy Awards. The Golden Globe Awards will be presented 21 January 1996 by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association. — AFP/UNB photo

To illustrate scandals

LONDON: Opposition leader Tony Blair on Thursday ordered the scrapping of his Labour Party's Christmas card, which carried an illustration of a condom and a topless woman saying "spank me," reports AFP.

The card was supposed to poke fun at scandals that have occurred within the ruling Conservative Party, and contained a spoof version of the song "Twelve Days of Christmas" — listing twelve months of failure, eleven chickens running, the high court losses, nine whiplash wonders, eight per cent on fuel and seven sleazy scandals.

To illustrate the scandals, the card, unveiled at a Labour function at Westminster, showed a bra, underwear, a whip and hotel bills as well as the condom and the naked woman.

Blair said the card, designed by Labour's advertising agency, showed a lapse in good taste.

Ekeus shows evidence of Iraqi violations of UN ban

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 22: The chief UN weapons inspector on Thursday showed reporters a missile guidance device pulled from an Iraqi river, evidence that Iraq may still be violating a UN arms ban, reports AP.

The demonstration followed a closed meeting of the UN Security Council, where Rolf Ekeus discussed his latest report on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

"We have no shred of evidence that they have destroyed their missile warheads for biological weapons," he said. "The same goes, of course, for the chemical agents."

However, Ekeus said Iraq did not appear to be an immediate threat to stability in the Mideast. "We think we have good control and are

monitoring Iraq's activities," he said.

The United Nations has refused to lift crippling economic sanctions imposed after Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait until Baghdad has fully disclosed details of its nuclear, biological and chemical warfare programmes.

Ekeus said his comments to the council focused on the recent seizure in Jordan of high-grade missile components bound for Iraq.

He said there were indications the material was for use in a long-range missile programme.

Iraq has denied the claim, saying the reports were an attempt to undermine its efforts to end the sanctions.

Ekeus held up a missile gyroscope — a mud-colored cylinder the size of a softball.

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Chun to face corruption charges

SEOUL, Dec 22: Former President Chun Doo-hwan, in jail for allegedly masterminding a 1979 coup, will also face corruption charges for amassing a slush fund of millions of dollars, a prosecutor said Friday, reports AP.

Senior prosecutor Kim Sung-ho said the sum could match the amount stashed away by Chun's successor, Roh Tae-woo, who is on trial for taking bribes and amassing \$650 million during his 1988-93 term.

His (Chun's) secret fund was a bit less than that of Roh's, but when inflation factors are considered, the amount may be larger than that of Roh in terms of value, Kim told reporters.



marriage with Parker Bowles. Divorce, unlike the abdication crisis of 1936 when Edward VIII was forced to step down to marry divorcee Wal-