

An Atlas 2AS rocket lifts off on Wednesday pad 36-A at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, Florida carrying a Palapa C-1 communications satellite to orbit for Indonesia. The Palapa C-1 will provide communications links ranging from Iran to Japan and from Russia to Australia. — AFP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

Taiwan elects Speaker: In a dramatic demonstration of the ruling Nationalist Party's declining power, its choice for speaker squeaked through the legislature by just one vote Thursday against a determined opposition onslaught, AP reports from Taipei. Liu Sung-pan defeated Shih Ming-teh, chairman of the Democratic Progressive Party, 81-80, after an 80-80 tie in the first vote. The close vote reflected the weakened state on the Nationalists, who have dominated Taiwanese politics since they fled the Communist takeover of mainland China in 1949.

US consulate closed in Bordeaux: The US consulate in Bordeaux, southwest French city, the oldest American diplomatic representation in the world, shut down on Wednesday after more than 200 years because of budget cuts, AFP reports from Bordeaux, France. The consulate was established in 1790, 14 years after the 1776 US declaration of independence; when Bordeaux was the biggest French Atlantic port. Robert Kiene, Acting Consul since the departure last August of Consul Alan Eastham Junior, said on January 3 the closure decision had not been an easy one. "Budget restrictions are the cause of this decision," he said.

WW II bomb found in London: Scores of people were advised to leave their homes early Thursday as army experts worked to defuse an unexploded World War II German bomb found in southeast London, AP reports from London. A park keeper spotted the 110-pound (50 kg) four-foot (1.2 metres)-long bomb in an ornamental lake in a park in the South Norwood district on Wednesday. It had been there undiscovered since being dropped and failing to explode in an air raid over London more than 50 years ago.

4 Germans die as balloon smashed: A hot air balloon smashed into a mountain in central Switzerland on Wednesday, killing at least four people, while at least four more were killed in a helicopter crash in the country's northeast, police said, AFP reports from Geneva. The balloon was hit by severe turbulence in the Lauterbrunnen valley and was knocked against a mountain at an altitude of 2,400 metres (8,000 feet). Four of its five passengers, all Germans, were found dead. The fifth was still missing late Wednesday, police said. Two other balloons that had taken off with the Germans were safe.

'Russia not entitled to 'veto' expansion of NATO' LONDON, Feb 1: Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov said late Wednesday that Moscow did not consider its veto over the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, though it opposed it, reports AFP. Primakov, quoted by ITAR-Tass news agency monitored here by the BBC, was speaking in Kiev after talks with his Ukrainian counterpart Gennady Udovenko. Russia was against such expansion, Primakov said, but went on: "This does not mean that we consider that we are entitled to 'veto' or entitled to prohibit certain countries from joining this military bloc."

He said he hoped the Russian leadership would manage to find some solutions with the West and a way out of the situation. Tass quoted Udovenko as saying that Ukraine's position coincides with Russia's on the issue of NATO's expansion eastwards. He added: "Like Russia, we consider the national interest of our states should be taken into consideration."

Ukraine broadly supports NATO expansion, which would ultimately bring the alliance right up to Russia's western borders. The Russian news agency Interfax reported meanwhile that Primakov and Udovenko continued to differ about the consequences of the two countries' continuing disagreement over the future of the Black Sea Fleet. Primakov said the problem should be resolved before Russian President Boris Yeltsin visits the Ukrainian capital, the Russian news agency Interfax reported. Yeltsin is due at the end of March to sign a friendship treaty.

Greek PM fights off no-confidence ATHENS, Feb 1: Greece's new Prime Minister Costas Simitis fought off a parliamentary vote of no-confidence late Wednesday in a raucous session that came on the heels of a territorial dispute with Turkey, reports AFP. A total of 166 deputies backed Simitis, 123 were against and three abstained. Earlier in the day Simitis faced a call for his resignation from deputies of his own socialist Pasok Party as well as the opposition, who said Greece had lost face in the dispute with Turkey over a tiny, barren, uninhabited island in the Aegean Sea. Simitis took office just two weeks ago, replacing Andreas Papandreu.

Scientists to get first look at Mars's composition in July '97 PASADENA, California, Feb 1: A six-wheeled rover about 3 feet (1 metre) high should be jerking across the surface of Mars and giving scientists their first look at the planet's composition soon after a July 4, 1997, landing, reports AP. On Wednesday, engineers at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory showed off the rover, named Sojourner, and the Mars Pathfinder that will protect it during the end-of-year launch and seven-month journey to Mars. They invited reporters to vacuum off and suit up before entering the spacecraft assembly clean room where Pathfinder, its rover, parachute, antennas and airbags are being prepared for additional

ore-launch testing. Pathfinder takes off December 2, 1996, from Cape Canaveral. "This is actually the first and last time that we will see Pathfinder and Sojourner completely assembled until just before launch," said Brian Muirhead, Pathfinder flight system manager and Wednesday's tour guide. The Pathfinder lander weighs 772 pounds and stands about 3.2 feet tall. Three solar panels unfold to reveal the rover stowed inside, along with antennas, a panoramic-view camera and even tiny wind socks that will take part of a planetary weather report. When Pathfinder lands

during the Martian summer, daytime temperatures will be about freezing, while at night they slip a couple of hundred degrees. If all goes according to plan, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington could be putting out a daily Martian weather report with information gleaned by Pathfinder, said David Budov, Mars Pathfinder project secretary. During the trip through space, Pathfinder will be guided by both sun sensors and star sensors and an antenna that lets it communicate with Earth. Pathfinder will enter the martian atmosphere — only about 1 per cent of what's

found on Earth — at 17,000 mph (27,000 kilometres per hour). It will slow within two minutes to 900 mph (1,400 kilometres per hour) before its parachute opens. Seconds later, its red-hot heat shield will fall away, the lander will separate from a protective outer shell and at an altitude of about 100 feet (30 metres), a giant cocoon of air bags will inflate. The cocooned craft will bounce before coming to rest somewhere in Ares Vallis, an ancient flood basin likely to contain many kinds of rocks. Pathfinder's airbags will retract, daylight will come and provide the solar power for the 22-pound (10 kilogram) rover to rise on its

metal haunches and roll down a ramp to the Martian surface. There, the steel-wheeled rover will be guided by a laser navigation system that tells it when to avoid deep depressions and big rocks. For any, whether from seven to 30 days, it will roll up to rocks, where an instrument called an alpha proton X-ray spectrometer will shoot out alpha particles whose bouncing paths tell scientists what the rocks are made of. "The entire history of the planet is held in rocks," said Howard Eisen, lead mechanical engineer for the rover. "We're going to find a lot of iron," said Donna Shirley, programme manager for the

Mars exploration office. "Mars is rusty. That's why it's red, from iron oxide." Dubov explained that Pathfinder will do more than the two Viking missions that landed on Mars in 1976, which stayed put and extended their robotic arms to sample the surface. In today's dollars, the Viking missions would cost \$3 billion, Shirley said. In contrast, Pathfinder is a bargain at less than 300 million dollars. Pathfinder will be arriving on the 20th anniversary of Viking, part of a line of cheaper, smaller Discovery missions that can be developed and launched quickly.

Asian FMs meet begins today PHUKET, Thailand, Feb 1: Foreign ministers from 10 Asian countries began arriving here today for two days of meetings to map out a joint strategy ahead of a summit of 25 leaders from Asian and Europe next month, reports AFP. The meeting will be the first time so many Asian leaders will have met to set out a joint policy and direction for the region. Singapore's Foreign Ministry Director Ong Keng Yong said. The meeting, which opens tomorrow, brings together foreign ministers from the association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and their counterparts, from China, Japan and South Korea.

Combat helicopters to patrol frontier villages India steps up security along Kashmir border

NEW DELHI, Feb 1: India stepped up security on its Kashmir border today, pressing helicopters to guard frontier villages, as a ceasefire between Indian and Pakistani troops held for the second day, reports AFP. Indian Defence Ministry sources here said a mutual ceasefire put in place on Wednesday at the line of control, which splits the Indian and Pakistani zones of divided Kashmir, remained in place. The firing, which began on January 19, became intense on Friday after a rocket landed on a mosque in the border village of Kahuta in Pakistani-held Kashmir, killing 20 worshippers. "Things now seem to have quietened down a bit," a se-

nior military source said of the ceasefire at the border, which runs across a mountainous region in the Himalayan foothills. Defence sources and newspapers today said combat helicopters patrolled the heavily militarised border as security was increased to protect clusters of frontier villages in the Indian zone of Kashmir. Paramilitary Border Security Force (BSF) personnel have been also put on a high security alert in the tense region, the sources added. The lull came as Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao, who also holds the defence portfolio, said on Wednesday that India was taking steps to maintain a high level of security at its borders.

"All possible steps to safeguard the country's security and to maintain the highest possible level of preparedness of the armed forces were being taken," newspapers quoted the premier as saying. Both New Delhi and Islamabad have accused the other of firing the rocket that hit the mosque and the attack sent tensions soaring between the two nuclear-capable nations which have fought three wars since independence in 1947, two of them over Kashmir. At least one Indian villager was killed and seven wounded by Pakistani fire since Friday, according to Indian officials. No military casualties have been reported.

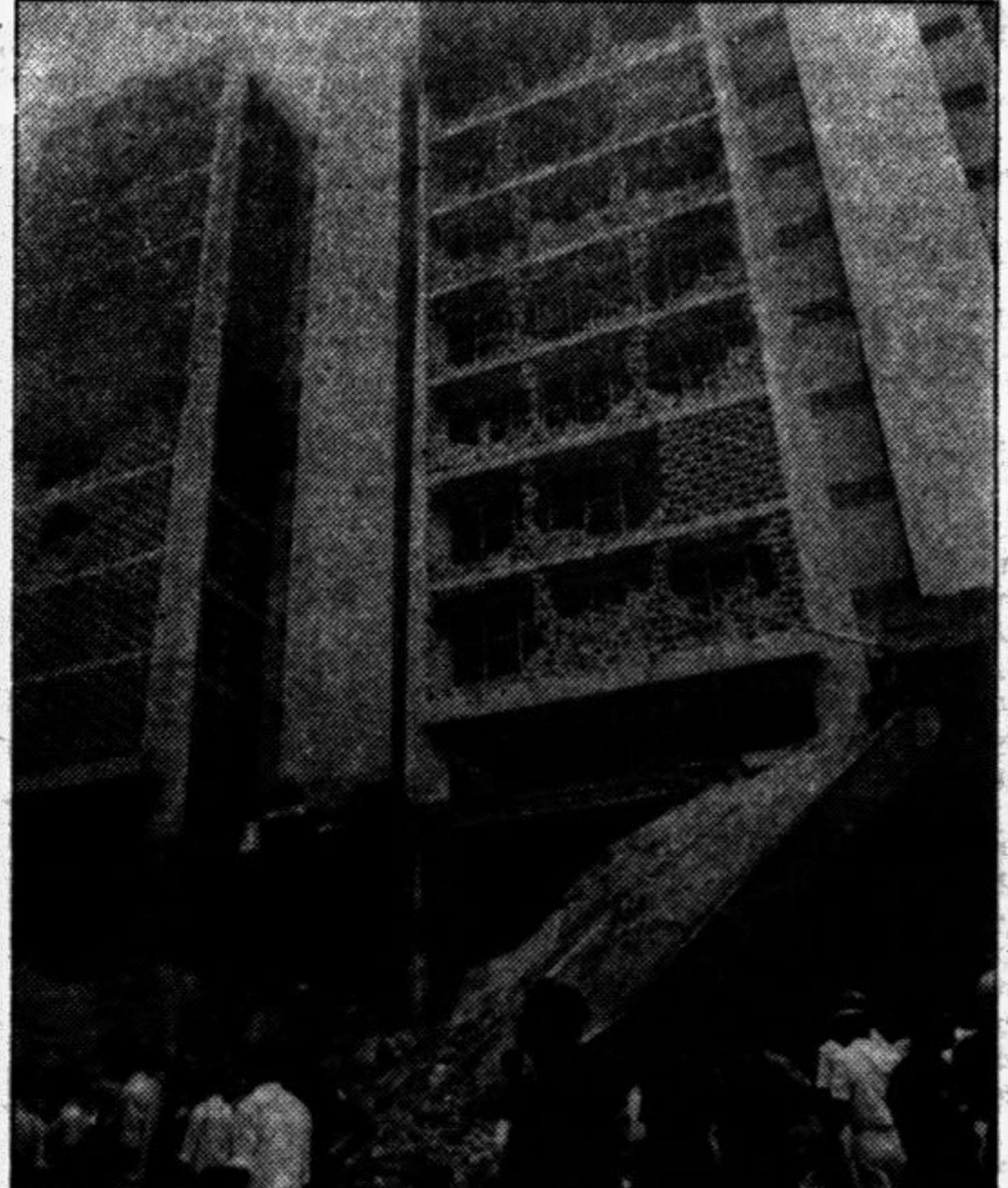
Colombo, Feb 1: A suicide bombing by suspected Tamil rebels outside the Sri Lanka Central Bank here on Wednesday killed more than 70 people, a senior police officer said today, adding that nearly 1,300 remained hospitalised, reports AFP. Deputy Inspector General of Police Mitra Ariyasinghe told reporters that 72 people had been confirmed dead in the bombing and 1,272 were still in hospital. At least 40 of the people killed when a suicide bomber detonated a truck loaded with explosives outside the Central Bank were bank employees, according to bank officials. Earlier AP says: Rescue workers on Thursday dug out 10 more bodies from the burned-out wreckage of commercial buildings destroyed by a suspected Tamil rebel suicide bomber. Using everything from shovels to earthmovers, the soldiers and construction workers said they didn't expect to find any more survivors in one of the worst attacks in Sri Lanka's 12-year civil war.

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Lankan blast toll rises to 72

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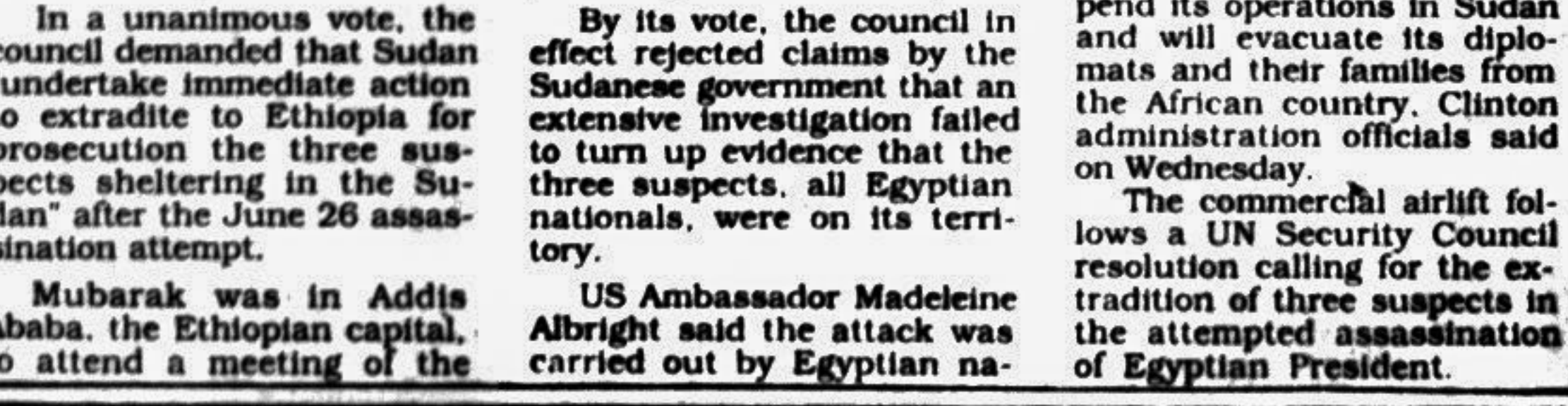
Rescuers standby at the site of a bomb blast on Wednesday at the Sri Lanka Central Bank building after suicide bombers rammed an explosive-laden truck into the front gate of the building. — AFP/UNB photo

US decides to withdraw diplomats from Khartoum UN asks Sudan to stop backing 'terrorist activities'

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 1: The Security Council called on Wednesday on Sudan to hand over three suspects in last year's assassination attempt against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and to stop supporting "terrorist activities", reports AP. In a unanimous vote, the council demanded that Sudan "undertake immediate action to extradite to Ethiopia for prosecution the three suspects sheltering in the Sudan" after the June 26 assassination attempt. Mubarak was in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, to attend a meeting of the

Organisation of African Unity when gunmen opened fire on his car. The council also urged Sudan to "desist from engaging in activities of assisting, supporting and facilitating terrorist activities" including providing them sanctuary. By its vote, the council in effect rejected claims by the Sudanese government that an extensive investigation failed to turn up evidence that the three suspects, all Egyptian nationals, were on its territory. US Ambassador Madeleine Albright said the attack was carried out by Egyptian na-

tional who had been based in Sudan for two years. She called evidence of Sudanese involvement "compelling and convincing" and termed Sudan's offers of cooperation "transparently insincere." Meanwhile, the United States has decided to suspend its operations in Sudan and will evacuate its diplomats and their families from the African country. Clinton administration officials said on Wednesday. The commercial airlift follows a UN Security Council resolution calling for the extradition of three suspects in the attempted assassination of Egyptian President.



A Chechen boy raises his fist shouting anti-Russian slogan during a rally against the presence of Russian troops in Chechnya in Novogrozenskaya on Tuesday. — AFP/UNB photo

Myanmar masses troops to attack Karenni bases

BANGKOK, Feb 1: Myanmar troops massed for an assault on the southern outposts of ethnic Karenni rebels along the Thai border awaited supplies after separate division took hill positions to the north, a Karenni source said Thursday, reports AFP. About 4,000 Myanmar troops had massed near Kawkau in the south of Myanmar's eastern Kayah state opposite the Thai province of the Mae Hong Son, and a party of 70 porters was being escorted into the area with supplies, the sources said in a statement. The porters, usually villagers abducted and forced into service, included more than 10 women, the statement said. An offensive was expected in the Kawkau area when the additional food and ammunition arrived, it said.

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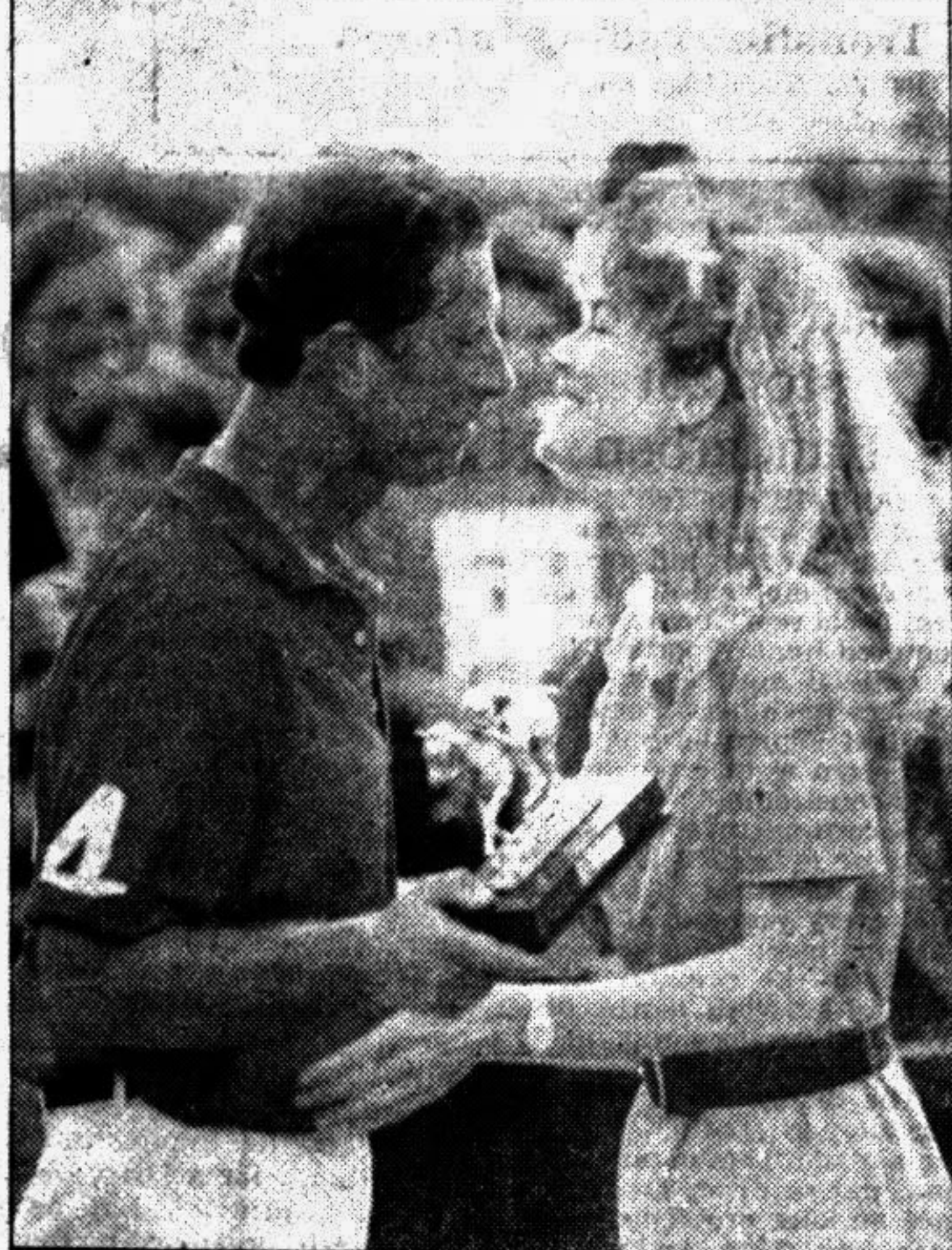
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Off the Record



Picture dated July 31 '94 of the Prince of Wales greeting Lady Romsey. The British Sun newspaper named on Wednesday Lady Romsey as the mystery woman whose telephone conversation to Prince Philip, Queen Elizabeth's husband was recorded by a radio amateur who tuned into the phone frequency December 21, 1996. — AFP/UNB photo

Sad news of a great smoker

BUCHAREST, Romania: The Romanian just doesn't get it: The Guinness Book of Records no longer rewards people for trying to kill themselves, reports AP. Stefan Sigmond reportedly smoked 800 cigarettes in less than six minutes this week. His previous attempts to win immortality via Guinness include eating 29 hard-boiled eggs in four minutes and leaping into a lake from a height of 135 feet (41 metres). "We do discourage that sort of thing," said Guinness spokeswoman Carol Jones, speaking from Guinness' London headquarters on Wednesday. The message hasn't yet reached the Transylvanian City of Cluj, hometown to 29-year-old Sigmond. He traveled to Bucharest, the Romanian capital, on Tuesday for his latest try to enter the record book. He assembled a bundle-like contraption in a city square and puffed away through a 2-inch (5 centimetre) tube, the Libertatea newspaper reported. Talk about secondhand smoke: Spectators backed away from flames. "I am a bit dizzy, and my head hurts," Sigmond told Libertatea afterwards. He stuck to foreign brands, he said, because the Romanian brands make him choke.

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