

High Court overturns death sentence in Pak blasphemy case

PESHAWAR, May 9: Two Shiite Muslim men won their appeal against a lower court's death sentence for allegedly insulting Islam, news reports said Thursday, says AP.

The Peshawar High Court on Wednesday overturned last year's controversial conviction and subsequent death sentence against the two Afghan nationals, Barat Ali and Qambar Ali.

The pair apparently tried to make copies of a photograph of Islam's prophet Mohammed. Under strict Islamic law it is blasphemous to display the image of the prophet.

But the Peshawar High Court ruled that the lower court based its judgement and subsequent sentence on "assumptions, presumptions and conjectures," according to the independent English-language daily newspaper, The

News.

Both international and local human rights groups have attacked Pakistan's blasphemy laws complaining they are vaguely worded and easily used to persecute members of minority religions in Pakistan, which is mostly Muslim.

Hardline religious parties have blocked attempts by Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's government to amend the laws to make it more difficult to lay charges.

Human rights groups, however, want the laws rescinded, something Benazir is unlikely to do.

Under existing laws it is a crime punishable by death to insult Islam or its prophet Mohammed. But the law is loosely worded making it possible to accuse someone of the blasphemy to get them arrested.

Cong's setback in polls likely to cost Rao's leadership

NEW DELHI, May 9: Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's Congress Party appeared headed for a historic defeat in India's general election today, a result likely to cost him the party leadership, reports Reuter.

Early trends showed Congress losing almost everywhere as India's massive 590 million electorate seemed certain to return a hung parliament. Complex negotiations on forming a coalition government appeared inevitable.

"The Congress is losing. It is very clear that we have done badly," Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee said.

State-run Doordarshan television analyst Prannoy Roy said the trends suggested Congress was likely to get no more than 145 seats in the Lok Sabha, the 545-seat upper house of parliament.

That would be its lowest total since general elections

began after the end of the British Raj in 1947 and it would be the first time Congress was not the biggest party.

The role seemed destined for the soaring Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which won just two seats in 1984. But the Hindu nationalists did not seem to be faring quite as well as opinion polls had suggested they would.

While it was making gains in most areas, the BJP was losing unexpected ground to socialists in its stronghold of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state which has 85 seats.

The trends suggested the BJP would win about 170 seats and that the big gainer would be the National Front-Let Front (NF-LF), a loose alliance of centre-left and Communist parties.

They showed the NF-LF could win between 140 and

150 seats, possibly pushing Congress into third place and complicating an already confusing set of coalition possibilities.

Signs of a Congress debacle began with the first official results as former minister B. Shankaranand, who had won seven, straight elections since 1967, was thrashed by more than 100,000 votes in the southern state of Karnataka.

The trends showed Congress and its allies were also being mauled other parts of the south, where it was strongest.

They put Congress ahead in only 93 out of 303 seats where counting was under way compared to its lead in 185 at the same stage of the last elections in 1991. The BJP and its allies were ahead in 85 seats and the NF-LF in 44.

Congress appeared heading for a worse rout than in 1977.

When Indian voters savaged then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for imposing two years of emergency rule. It won just 154 seats.

A clear result was not expected until the weekend but speculation was rife on the likely shape of a coalition.

Most analysts dismissed the possibility of the BJP drawing support from other parties which mostly consider it dangerously hostile to Muslims, 12 per cent of India's 930 million people.

They said the most likely outcome was a coalition between part or all of Congress and the NF-LF, which has said it would consider a coalition with Congress if Rao stepped aside.

The likely results added to the worries of jittery markets, which fear a weak coalition could set back economic reforms.

Off the Record



Princess Stephanie of Monaco (R) fixes the microphone for US singer Michael Jackson late Thursday in Monaco after he was given the best musical album of all times award during the World Music Awards ceremony. — AFP/UNB photo

Jacksonmania

MONTE CARLO, Monaco: It was Jacksonmania at the 1996 World Music Awards on Wednesday night, as the Gloved One captured five honours and screaming fans repeatedly interrupted the show, reports AP.

Based on record sales, the eighth-annual awards also honored Mariah Carey, Seal, Hootie and the Blowfish, TLC, Ace of Base, Deep Forest and country singer Shania Twain, among others.

Actor Jean-Claude Van Damme hosted the event along with Peter Gabriel, Natalie Cole, Tony Bennett, Julian Lennon and models Naomi Campbell and Karen Mulder.

Monaco's royal family hosted the golden statue awards, and Princess Stephanie had to stop her tribute to Jackson as fans began screaming.

"I love you. I love all the fans with all my heart," Jackson said as kids amid the crowd of tuxedos and bejeweled evening dresses chanted "Angel Michael, Angel Michael."

Michael Jackson walked away with awards for bestselling album of all time "Thriller", pop male artist, R and B artist, male recording artist and American male artist.

Performing "Earth Song" in his trademark open white shirt flapping in the wind and tight black slacks, Jackson stepped out of a silver globe that split in two and he broke into robot and moonwalk steps to the kids' delight.

The surprising no-show at the awards was soulbird Mariah Carey, who took four awards including bestselling pop female artist, R and B female artist, female recording artist and American female artist.

Alanis Morissette, who won four Grammys in February, took bestselling female rock artist and new female artist and The Cranberries were bestselling Irish group, but they also skipped the awards.

Diana Ross, given the Lifelong Contribution award by Monaco's Prince Albert, sang a medley before a fireworks finale outside.

What's in queen's face?

LONDON: Her face is lined and careworn. The eyes are tired, her hands are rough, reports AP.

Not a portrait of a washerwoman — but the British head of state, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

This latest picture of the queen, unveiled in London Wednesday at London's Mall Galleries, near Buckingham Palace, has stirred controversy.

Defenders say it is a "fearless" attempt to paint the queen as a 70-year-old woman. Detractors say it is unflattering and fails to capture the Queen's character.

Williams had six sittings with the Queen at Buckingham Palace, but had to respectfully request that she stop fidgeting.

"The Queen was constantly being distracted by things in her garden or she was quite keen to talk," he said.

6 prisoners of war freed US to host Bosnian-Croat Fed leaders' meet May 14

Fed leaders meet May 14

WASHINGTON, May 9: The United States will host a meeting of leaders of the Bosnian-Croat Federation here next week, the State Department said Wednesday, reports AP.

The May 14 meeting was announced after John Kornblum the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs returned from a visit to the Balkans to discuss the return of refugees and progress in implementing the Bosnia peace accord.

Secretary of State Warren Christopher was to attend the meeting of the so-called federation forum spokesman Nicholas Burns said.

The Bosnian-Croat Federation and the Serb republic are the two entities that form post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina but the future of the uneasy alliance between Muslims and Croats formed under US aus-

Meanwhile, rival factions in Bosnia released six prisoners of war late Wednesday after a ruling by the UN war crimes court in The Hague a top government official said here.

The Muslim-Croat authorities released two Serb prisoners Slobodan Sordic and Mile Maric after the international criminal tribunal on former Yugoslavia ruled they should be freed. Amor Masovic, head of the State Commission on War prisoners said.

The two were driven to the Bosnian-Serb stronghold of Pale 20 kilometers (12 miles) east of Sarajevo.

The Serb authorities in Pale then released three Muslim amir Dizdarevic, Maris Kalamujic and Ehes Starhanjic and a Bosnian-Croat, Damjan Lukac, who were driven down to Sarajevo AFP correspondents noted.

US, China hold talks on N-tech sale to Pakistan

WASHINGTON, May 9: The United States and China have held talks in recent weeks on nuclear proliferation and Beijing's nuclear technology sales to Pakistan, the White House said Wednesday, reports AP.

In the first indication of the state of bilateral talks in several months, White House spokesman Michael McCurry said the meeting had been "productive."

If successful results were reached, Beijing could avoid facing US sanctions which could hold up some 10 billion dollars in credit guarantees on US exports.

US Secretary of State Warren Christopher met April 19 with Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen at the Hague and since then "there have been follow-up conversations with the people's republic that have been productive."

65,000 flee homes to escape ethnic fighting in Zaire

NAIROBI, Kenya, May 9: About 65,000 people have fled their homes in the past month to escape ethnic fighting in eastern Zaire, the International Red Cross said Wednesday, reports AP.

"Ethnic hatred has now taken hold of a region so far spared by it," said Balthasar Staehelin, the Red Cross chief in Goma, Zaire.

Thousands of Zairians are leaving the Rutshuru region as fighting spreads from neighboring Masis, about 80 kilometres (50 miles) west of Rwanda refugee camps in Goma.

Iraq must be helped out of suffering, says King Hussein

CAIRO, May 9: Jordan's King Hussein underlined his support for the territorial unity of Iraq on Wednesday, saying the country must be helped out of its "dark tunnel of suffering," reports AP.

"We are for the integrity of Iraq, the sovereignty of Iraq over all its territory and that all the Iraqi family come together," King Hussein told a press conference with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

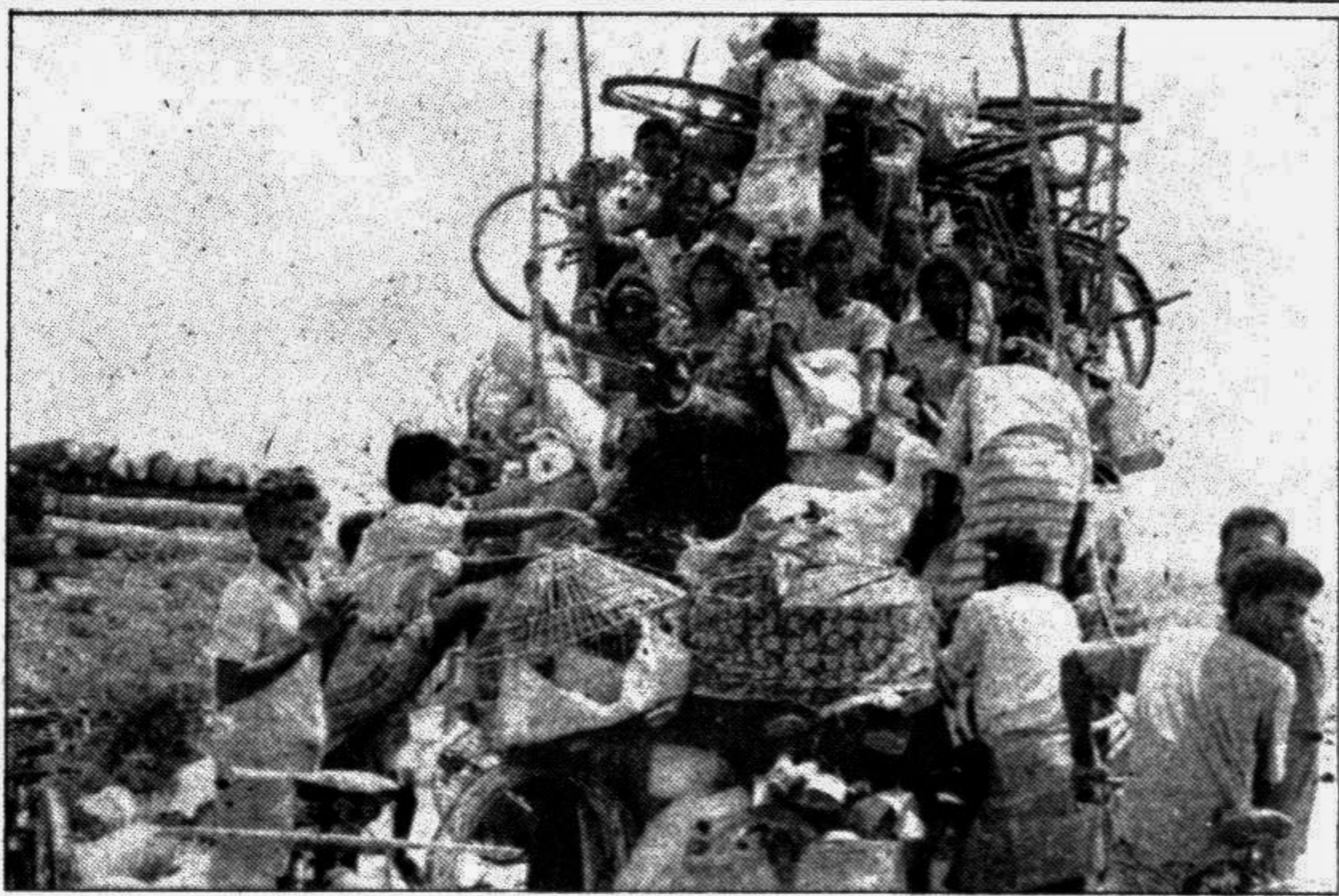
Jordan does not seek to fragment Iraq in any form of shape, he added.

Russian troops almost seal off Chechen town

LONDON, May 9: Russian troops have almost completely sealed off the southern Chechen town of Urus Martan, which was attacked by Russian helicopter gunships Tuesday, Moscow Echo radio reported, quoting the head of the local administration, Yusup Elmurzayev, reports AP.

The federal forces have blocked off all the roads except the road west leading to Gekhi, presumably, this road will be closed as well. Elmurzayev said.

"So far the forces' commanders have refused to make contact with us, he said adding there are no reasons for Urus Martan to be sealed off."



Tamil refugees load their belongings, including goats and dogs, onto a cart as they prepare to return home on Wednesday after security forces wrested large areas from Tamil Tiger guerillas. Security forces have driven out Tiger rebels who once ruled this town with an iron fist, but the military warned that the retreating rebels may be gearing for a jungle battle. — AFP/UNB photo

Navy destroy 5 LTTE boats, 4 killed

Thousands of Tamils return to their homes in Jaffna

JAFFNA, Sri Lanka, May 9: Thousands of Tamils who fled five months ago returned to their homes Wednesday, pushing their belongings on carts and bicycles past checkpoints of the Sri Lankan army, reports AP.

The army captured Jaffna from Tamil rebels in December. The city, the headquarters of the Tamil rebels, has borne the brunt of Sri Lanka's 12-year ethnic war. When the Sri Lankan soldiers captured Jaffna in December, the city of 120,000 was virtually a ghost town.

Allowed to visit Jaffna for the first time in more than a year, reporters saw a town with surprisingly little damage from the recent fighting but with so many soldiers that it looked like a city under occupation.

Soldiers were fortifying their defences in Jaffna. Others handed out rations to the returning civilians.

The government sees the return of 250,000 civilians to Jaffna and other evacuated areas as evidence that the Tamils are losing faith in the rebels and their fear of the military, which is dominated by the majority Sinhalese.

Reuter adds: Sri Lankan Navy patrol boats chased and sank five Tamil Tiger rebel craft in northern Sri Lankan waters, killing at least four guerillas, military officials said today.

They said the wooden-hulled craft known as "theppams" were intercepted when they were taking rebels to army-held Kayts Island west of the Jaffna Peninsula, the guerillas' former stronghold now mostly under military control.

The navy intercepted and destroyed the boats, a navy official said.

BRIEFLY

Muslim women to meet in US: Hundreds of Muslim women will converge on Washington this weekend to discuss ways to fight oppression and inequality in countries where Islamic fundamentalism is spreading, AFP reports from Washington.

Political leaders, scholars and diplomats from the Middle East, North Africa and Southeast Asia will attend the May 11-12 gathering which is a follow-up to last year's UN conference on women in Beijing.

Hamas wins student polls in WB: Students affiliated with the Islamic militant Hamas movement on Wednesday defeated Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement in student council elections at the West Bank's Bir Zeit University, AP reports from Bir Zeit.

The Islamic bloc won 23 seats to Fatah's 17, university officials said. Seven places went to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and one to the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, secular groups which, like Hamas, oppose Arafat's peacemaking with Israel.

Truck mishap kills 31 in India: At least 31 wedding guests were killed on Wednesday when a truck in which they were travelling overturned in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, the United News of India said, AFP reports from New Delhi.

Eleven others were injured in the accident in the state's Bidar district, it quoted police as saying.

Blast kill 5 children in SA: Five children aged between eight and 11 were killed Wednesday when a handgrenade exploded near Engcob village in South Africa's eastern Cape province police said, AFP reports from Johannesburg.

The children all from Lubiza Junior Secondary School were playing in a ditch when they found the grenade, police spokesman Monde Ngadini told the SABA News Agency. They began playing with it and it detonated, killing them on the spot.

Clinton's move to avert rail strike: President Clinton moved Wednesday to avert a nationwide railroad strike, creating an emergency board to mediate a dispute between a rail workers' union and a group representing 50 rail companies, AP reports from Washington.

Clinton appointed a three-member board to make recommendations for settling the dispute between the National Railway Labour Conference and the Transportation Communications International Union.

US, Israel close to defence accord: The United States and Israel have made progress toward a bilateral defence pact Israeli Foreign Minister Ehud Barak said Wednesday, AFP reports Washington.

Barak and US secretary of State Warren Christopher met in Washington Wednesday to discuss the plan, which would boost Israeli defences in the hope of fostering an Arab-Israeli peace plan.

Fighting resumes in Monrovia W African leaders cancel summit on Liberian war

MONROVIA, Liberia, May 9: Heavy fighting broke out in Monrovia on Wednesday, and West African leaders abruptly canceled talks in neighbouring Ghana that had been called to salvage a peace accord and reconcile the divided government, reports AP.

After a day of relative peace Tuesday, fighters from rival factions battled one another with heavy machine gun fire, small arms and rocket-propelled grenades on the edge of the Mamba Point diplomatic district.

Fighting was also reported on the strategic Johnson Street Bridge that leads into central Monrovia and in other pockets of the embattled capital.

"We are holding the ceasefire, but they are not," said one self-proclaimed general of Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front, who called himself General Lion.

Taylor's forces loaded their weapons in preparation for battle, shouted obscenities at rivals who were firing at them, then charged down the street toward the gunfire.

Taylor's main rival, Roosevelt Johnson, was among the political and faction leaders taking part in the meeting in Accra, Ghana.

But West African leaders called off the one-day Accra summit on Wednesday, saying the meeting was not necessary.

Ghanaian Foreign Minister Obed Asamoah said the nine members of the Economic Community of West African States had decided to call on Liberian officials to adhere to a peace accord they helped to broker last year.

But conference sources said the real reason for the cancellation was the absence of most heads of state, including Nigerian military leader Gen. Sani Abacha.



The delegates of the 1996 Miss Universe Pageant pose in Las Vegas, Nevada, on Wednesday, ahead of the Final Miss Universe Pageant competition to be held May 17, during a live telecast set on CBS-TV. — AFP/UNB photo

Women face discrimination in journalism

WASHINGTON, May 9: Women are flocking to journalism more than ever but a new worldwide survey shows the industry still offers them lower pay, fewer promotions and bigger obstacles than their male colleagues, reports AP.

"The people who own the businesses are men, the people that run the businesses are men," said Maureen Bunyon, co-chair of the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF).

"I don't think we're going to see major breakthroughs until we see a critical mass of women who are in top management and who are also owners," said Bunyon, a Washington television broadcaster.

The US-based IWMF just completed a survey of women reporters who attended last year's UN women's conference in Beijing and the organization's members from 40 countries.

Ninety-three per cent said they faced discrimination in the field, with pressure to choose between work and family, the lack of job mobility and role models cited as the biggest complaints.

Lower wages for equal work is one of "the most blatant forms of discrimination women journalists face," according to the report which found that half those surveyed thought they were paid less than men.

And though about half of all journalism students are women, only 20 to 24 per cent of them turn up in editorial positions and men are seven times more likely to reach the highest levels in the news business, according to the IWMF.

"Women who are employed in the media are more likely to be found in administrative positions rather than as reporters, anchors, technicians

or in management," the report said.

"Even within the management ranks, women at the top tend to be in administrative management positions, such as financing, rather than in position that directly affect the news," it added.

"Despite their areas of expertise and interests, many women journalists find themselves assigned to covering 'soft topics' such as fashion and entertainment," the IWMF said.

Most of the respondents said their male colleagues were more apt to cover the most visible, controversial and newsworthy stories — and that translates into bigger jumps for the men professionally.

Who covers the news also affects how it is covered in terms of gender.

Sixty-four per cent of those in the study believed that the media's portrayal of women is

in accurate and most thought "once greater equality for women is reached in the media and society as a whole women will demand to see and hear represented all of their various images."

Bunyon said the barriers women reporters face outside the United States are generally worse but that they do have some advantages.

"In many countries there has not been a tradition of a free press so many countries are going through dual cultural changes, leaning more toward democracy and at the same time women are moving toward more responsibility and participation in the community," she explained.

But she added that even in move traditional cultures some women reporters do manage to rise in their fields, command respect among their male colleagues and influence the industry.

Ghali defends UN report on Qana attack

NEW YORK, May 9: The United Nations' chief on Wednesday defended an objective report that found it doubtful Israel could have accidentally shelled a UN base crammed with Lebanese refugees, reports AP.

"I'm trying as hard as I can to be objective and neutral," UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali declared, addressing an audience of business leaders and non-governmental foreign policy organizations.

The report examined the April 18 attack in which at least 91 people were killed when Israeli shells landed in a UN compound at Qana in south Lebanon, where many Lebanese civilians were seeking refuge from a series of Israeli attacks.

Boutros-Ghali sent his military adviser, Maj Gen Frank van Kappen, to the region to make a technical assessment and learn "the point of view of the Israeli government and all the different actors of his tragedy."

The secretary-general, who forwarded van Kappen's findings to the Security Council Tuesday afternoon, emphasized Wednesday that the report "draws no conclusions."

In his account, van Kappen said that "while the possibility cannot be ruled out completely, it is unlikely that the shelling of the United Nations compound was the result of gross technical or procedural errors." He stopped short of accusing Israeli gunners of intentionally firing on the base.

Israel says it was firing in response of Hezbollah guerilla mortar and rocket attacks that came from positions as close as 200 yard (metres) from the compound at Qana.



US President Bill Clinton (C), Peter Knight (L) and Beth Dozoretz (R) laugh during comedian Robin Williams performance at the '96 Democratic National Committee Gala fund raising event at the White House in Washington on Wednesday. The event reportedly raised 12.5 million USD. —AFP/UNB photo