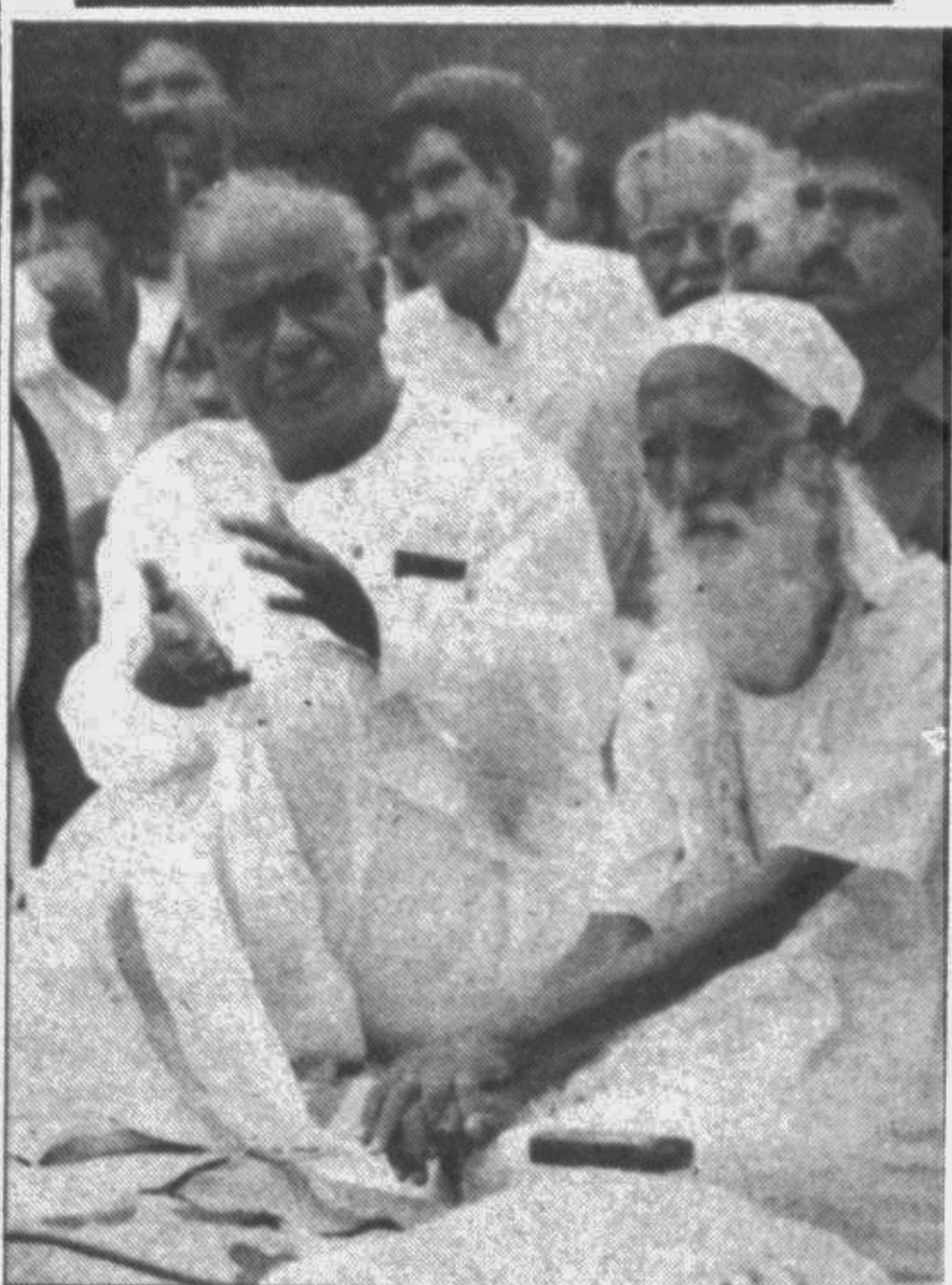


BRIEFLY



Indian environmentalist Sunderlal Bahuguna (R) with the Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda on Tuesday after he broke a 72-day-old fast which he launched to demand a review of a proposed dam project on the Himalayan foothills. Bahuguna says the dam will submerge a town and some 120 villagers. —AFP/UNB photo

Palestinian MP held in Israel: A prominent Palestinian legislator was detained for several hours for questioning Tuesday by Israeli police as he tried to cross into Jordan from the West Bank, police said. AP reports from Jerusalem.

He was later released and allowed to leave the country, police said. The arrest comes at a sensitive time with negotiations on hold in the wake of the election of Israel's new hard-line government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu.

Dudayev's wife may seek asylum: The widow of slain Chechen rebel leader Dzhokhar Dudayev is likely to seek asylum in Finland, a newspaper reported Tuesday. AP reports from Helsinki.

A family friend told the daily Helsingin Sanomat that Alla Dudayeva was hiding in another country awaiting identity papers. She fled Moscow this month with her 13-year-old son. Dudayeva's late husband, as president of Chechnya, led the republic's drive to secede from Russia. The Russian army began a war against the separatists in late 1994. Dudayev died in April, with rebels saying he was killed in a Russian airstrike.

SA local govt polls begin: Voting began on yesterday in local government elections in south Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province, Reuters reports from Durban.

About 3.5 million people will vote for rural, town and city councils under a blanket of tight security. The election has been postponed three times because of widespread political violence in the province, pitting the African National Congress against the Inkatha Freedom Party.

EU urged to reject fatwa on Rushdie: The Dutch government Tuesday urged the European Union to reject any compromise with Iran that accepts the death edict against British writer Salman Rushdie. AP reports from the Hague.

The statement came after a meeting Monday between Rushdie and Dutch Foreign Minister Hans van Mierlo. At a book signing session in Amsterdam, Rushdie, who has lived under guard since the edict, or fatwa, was issued in 1989, told The Associated Press that "we have not come this far to have the European Union accept the validity of the fatwa." Foreign Ministry spokesman Gert Kampman said an exchange of letters between Iran and the EU is being prepared.

TB situation in SA worst: South Africa has the world's worst tuberculosis (TB) problem, with 10 people infected with the disease every hour, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said on Tuesday, Reuters reports from Pretoria.

"I have investigated the TB situation in over 150 countries, and South Africa's epidemic is the most frightening situation I have ever encountered," WHO consultant Donald Enarson told a news conference. Around 100,000 South Africans are infected with TB each year — a rate of 311 per 100,000 people — way above the world average of about 250.

Libya to stage air force maneuvers: Libya will stage air force maneuvers with live ammunition and is warning civilians to avoid the mock battle area along the Mediterranean coast the government's news agency reported Tuesday. AP reports from Cairo.

The exercises will be held "over several days" and the starting date will be announced later, the JANA agency said without revealing the exact location. "All types of military aircraft will participate in the maneuvers with the aim of upgrading the fighting capabilities of the pilots," JANA said. Libya's air force has 65 armed helicopters and 406 combat aircraft, according to the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Blast kills 2 in Vietnam: Two people were killed and nine others, including six children, were badly injured when a bomb left over from Vietnam's war with the United States exploded in a central province, a report said yesterday. AFP reports from Hanoi.

The fragmentation bomb exploded when picked by a farmer, killing two people immediately and injuring the nine others, the Lao Dong newspaper said. The accident took place in central Quangnam-Danang province. Hundreds of people are killed or injured each year in Vietnam from exploding ordnance left over from decades of war.

5 miners killed in Moscow: Five miners were killed and a sixth was feared dead when a roof collapsed at a base metals mine in Central Kazakhstan, ITAR-Tass news agency said on Tuesday. Reuters reports from Moscow.

ULFA commander, 3 others shot dead in Assam

NEW DELHI, June 26: Indian troops shot dead a leader of an insurgent group and three of his associates in the far-eastern state of Assam, the United News of India (UNI) reported today, says AFP.

Siba Bora, a district commander of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), was killed on Tuesday after an army patrol busted a militant hideout in Karbi Anglong district.

Three other "hardcore militants" were also slain in the swift operation that was launched following a tip off. UNI said.

The army men seized four AK-47 assault rifles, a light machine gun, three 303 rifles, a Chinese assault rifle, a pistol two revolvers, two grenades and a radio from the hideout.

The ULFA is fighting to carve out an independent homeland in oil-rich Assam, which borders Bangladesh.

Clashes leave 10 killed in Lanka

COLOMBO, June 26: Seven Tamil rebels and three soldiers were killed in clashes in Sri Lanka, military officials said Wednesday, reports AP.

Soldiers shot dead six rebels trying to sneak onto army-controlled Mannar Island, 230 kilometres (145 miles) north of the capital, Colombo, said Tilak Dunuwhille, a military spokesman. One soldier was also injured Tuesday's incident.

Also on Tuesday, two soldiers were ambushed and killed by the guerrillas near Seruvila town in eastern Trincomalee district, said Dunuwhille. The area is 220 kilometres (135 miles) north-east of Colombo.

About 30 kilometres (20 miles) to the north, a soldier and a guerrilla were killed in two separate clashes in the Mullaitivu district, said Dunuwhille.

Tamil rebels are fighting for a homeland in the north and east since 1983.

C'wealth states won't impose sanctions on Nigeria

LONDON, June 26: The Commonwealth agreed Tuesday not to impose sanctions against Nigeria immediately but Canada announced it will unilaterally go ahead with sanctions including a ban on arms exports and sporting contacts, reports AP.

A joint communiqué at the end of two days of talks between a 17-strong Nigerian delegation and a special Commonwealth committee welcomed the dialogue and agreed to hold off on sanctions until the committee's next meeting in September.

But the Canadian Foreign Minister said his country will go ahead with sanctions recommended by the committee in April.

These also include visa restrictions on members of the Nigerian regime and their families, withdrawing military attaches, halting military training, downgrading diplomatic missions and cultural links, and denying educational facilities to members of the regime and their families.

Burundi seeks int'l help end ethnic killings

ARUSHA, Tanzania, June 26: Feuding members of Burundi's government set aside hatred Tuesday to make their first appeal for foreign help to end ethnic killings in their tiny central African nation, reports AP.

Burundian Prime Minister Antoine Nduwayo said the motive was desperation. "We're not excluding any type of assistance which can help us stop the killings," he said.

The appeal came at a six-nation conference called to prevent Burundi's Hutus and Tutsis from plunging into full-scale war. Foreign leaders exerted strong pressure on the Burundian leaders to ask for their help.

Opening the summit, Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa said Africa must end its image "as a continent synonymous with endless conflict."

US urges Myanmar junta to free all political activists

WASHINGTON, June 26: The United States, responding to the death in jail of an honorary consul in Yangon called on Myanmar's military rulers on Tuesday to free all those being held for a exercising their political rights, reports Reuters.

State Department spokesman Glyn Davies told reporters that Washington had no way of verifying the official Burmese account of the death of Leo Nichols 65, who represented the interests of Norway and three other European countries.

Davies quoted reports from Myanmar saying Nichols a businessman and friend of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, suffered a cerebral haemorrhage in his cell on June 22.

The London based human rights group Amnesty International said it had obtained credible reports that Nichols who had a history of medical problems had been deprived of sleep during long interrogations prior to his death.

Nichols was jailed for three years by the Myanmar authorities for operating telephones and fax machines at his house without permission.

AP adds, harsh conditions in his Myanmar prison may have contributed to the death of a former Scandinavian consul and pro-democracy activist, the State Department said Tuesday. James Leander Nichols, of Greek and Burmese ancestry, was pronounced dead Saturday in Yangon General Hospital shortly after officials said they found him unconscious in his cell.

Certainly his imprisonment on a questionable charge and the harsh prison conditions, which included being kept in isolation, may well have contributed to his death, State Department spokesman Glyn Davies said.

Davies said the death of Nichols heightens the urgency for the Burmese authorities to

release all those who are being held solely for peaceful exercise of their basic political rights.

Meanwhile the family of James Leander Nichols has raised questions about official accounts that he died of a stroke in a Myanmar jail last Saturday.

Nichols, 65, an Anglo-Burmese businessman whose family lives in Australia, had served as honorary consul for Norway and had represented Denmark, Finland and Switzerland in Myanmar.

Nichols' son, bill Nichols, is concerned by the official refusal to release the body to the family.

He said Wednesday it was difficult for him to believe his father had died of a stroke. "I wouldn't say he was 65 years old — but we didn't really consider that he was unhealthy or that he would suddenly pass away," Nichols told Radio National.

With an average response time of 11 minutes 30 seconds over a 10-kilometre radius, it usually beats an ambulance by between 15 and 30 minutes, most commonly treating victims of traffic accidents and heart attacks.

The motorlane comes with a small oxygen tank, resuscitation equipment, a small suction pump to relieve throat blockages as well as standard fire aid gear and emergency medication.

Using mobile phones, its medics can also relay electrocardiogram scans to the hospital, which is one of Thailand's leading heart facilities, allowing doctors to advise on what treatment is urgently needed.

One motorlane driver, Somboon Sananprom, 30, proudly told how one recent call-out saved a 60-year-old cardiac arrest victim in Bangkok's Ramkhamhaeng district, arriving in seven minutes flat down a notoriously congested highway.

TOKYO: Japanese crows have developed a new line of behaviour that has train commuters in rage, reports Reuters.

Police staking out railway tracks have on three occasions videotaped the birds picking up stones and placing them on the rails of busy lines.

Police in Kanagawa prefecture near Tokyo released the videotape but were, along with railway officials, quick to point out that the stones were only small bits of gravel.

While the birds' behaviour was unexplainable and annoying, police said crows were unlikely to have been involved in a large number of cases of track vandalism recorded in the past two months.

The officials said washing machines, bicycles even a 220 kg (485 lb) slab of concrete have been placed on train tracks. Most of the cases remain unsolved, although six of the incidents were later attributed to a prank by primary school students.

Railway officials said no injuries have been caused so far the vandalism just lengthy delays for passengers.



US President Bill Clinton (2nd L) poses for photographs with Latvian President Guntis Ulmanis (L), Estonian President Lennart Meri (2nd R) and Lithuanian President Algirdas Brazauskas (R) outside the White House in Washington, DC, Tuesday. The three presidents are scheduled to travel to New York later where US Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright will present each with the Institutes of East-West Studies Award for New European Statesmanship. —AFP/UNB photo.

China warns US not to help Taiwan authorities split motherland

BEIJING, June 26: China has warned the United States not to help Taiwan authorities split the motherland by allowing them to buy 300 US make tanks and other military hardware, a foreign ministry spokeswoman said today, reports AP.

China said the US should refrain from doing anything that will foster or help some certain Taiwan authorities in their attempt to split the motherland and realise the independence of Taiwan, said a foreign ministry spokeswoman.

US officials this week said Taiwan has asked to buy 300 M240 machine guns.

In a statement, the Pentagon said Taipei would use the 223 million dollars worth of equipment to maintain its

existing capabilities and that the sale would not change the basic military balance in the region.

But China was less conciliatory, saying the US should not take any actions that will lead to an exacerbation of the tensions in the region or bring harm to the healthy and long term development between China and the US.

The United States recognises Beijing rather than its longtime rival Taipei as the sole government of China, but it continues to sell military equipment to the nationalist island.

Congress has the authority to veto any such sale of military equipment, but it rarely does so. Officials expect the tank sale to go forward.

Major urges Diana to accept divorce settlement

LONDON, June 26: British Prime Minister John Major has urged Princess Diana to accept a multi-million pound (dollar) settlement for a divorce from Prince Charles, a newspaper said today, reports Reuters.

The Sun, Britain's best selling tabloid said Major had issued the plea during a 45-minute meeting with the Princess at her London home on Monday.

"The premier wants the final act in the bitter royal saga before the political machine moves into election overdrive," the newspaper said.

A spokesman for Major's Downing Street office confirmed that the two had met on Monday but refused to comment on what had been said.

Diana 34, has been embroiled in a bitter divorce battle with the heir to the throne since she agreed to end their 15-year marriage earlier this year.

Off the Record

Bid to beat traffic gridlock

BANGKOK: In a bid to beat a traffic gridlock that leaves Bangkok's ambulances in a jam a private hospital has launched the city's first motorcycle medical service, "Motorlane", reports AFP.

Four hefty 600 cc Hondas, worthy of a 1960s road movie but widely enough to weave through the rush-hour crush, have been customised with life support equipment and put on call with teams of two medics at Bangkok General Hospital.

For a generation of city-dwellers who have known nothing but logjam during Thailand's economic boom of the past decade and who have little reason to believe it will get any better, the "motorlane" crews could be lifesavers.

"There is almost no hope of getting straight through the traffic from 7 am to 7 pm, in a normal ambulance," said Chatterue Duangent, the hospital's Chief Executive Administrator.

"Babies are delivered in taxis and people die of heart attacks in this traffic. People accept the risk as part of their lives."

The motorlane, which entered service in January, allows the nurse and a driver with medical training to stabilise patients until a four-wheel ambulance can squeeze its way to the scene.

With an average response time of 11 minutes 30 seconds over a 10-kilometre radius, it usually beats an ambulance by between 15 and 30 minutes, most commonly treating victims of traffic accidents and heart attacks.

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God knows why

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Ciller proceeds coalition talks with Islamists

ANKARA, June 26: Rejecting opposition from followers, former premier Tansu Ciller and representatives of an Islamist party pressed ahead with coalition talks Tuesday, reports AP.

Necmettin Cevheri, deputy chairman from Ciller's center-right True Path Party, said meetings with the Welfare party would continue until a decision is reached 'one way or another'.

Cevheri did not say where the talks stood, but added: "If we haven't called off negotiations, it means we are on the right track."

Ciller has come under sharp opposition from the liberal wing in her party. Five lawmakers, some of her closest aides, resigned last week to protest the proposed ties with Welfare.

Welfare, which seeks to steer Turkey away from its pro-Western orientation, is sharply opposed by supporters of Turkey's secular political system. Turkey's strong military is clearly against any major pro-Islamist shift in this NATO member nation.



Death toll now rises to 443

Rains threaten largest petroleum refinery in India

NEW DELHI, June 26: One of India's largest petroleum refineries faced a threat Tuesday from floods in northern Mathura as eight more deaths in Kashmir took to 433 the number of people killed by the savage monsoon rains, reports AFP.

Officials said rains flattened 50 houses and tore communication and power lines in the district of Mathura, threatening a petroleum refinery which feeds a major part of northern India and the defence services here.

"We are taking maximum precautions but the rivers here are I spate," said an official from the state-run Mathura refinery which daily produces 8,000 tonnes of petroleum products.

The Manasi Ganga river burst its banks in the town of Govardhan in Mathura as thousands of Hindu pilgrims arrived Tuesday to offer annual religious prayers, the United News of India said.

News agencies reported eight more deaths on Tuesday in Kashmir and said the latest toll took to 433 the number of people killed in rain-related accidents in the flood-hit northern Himalayan state, bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan.

State government authorities shut down an unspecified number of roads and highways and evacuated people from low-lying areas of Kashmir fearing the worst.

"The situation could go out of hand because we are not equipped to handle floods under the present situation," an official said in Srinagar, Kashmir's summer capital where the rains have drastically lowered the summer temperature.

Czech leaders fail to form new coalition govt

PRAGUE, Czech Republic, June 26: Leaders of three Czech parties failed Tuesday to meet a self imposed deadline in forming a new coalition government but talks continued as parliament had its opening day, reports AP.

President Vaclav Havel asked Premier Vaclav Klaus to form the new government after elections and the Civic Democratic Alliance and the Christian Democrats have a combined total of 31. The three parties governed in the previous coalition.

Dream of passage to West ending in East European jails

BUCHAREST, June 26: In the dozen years since he fled his native Sudan, Michael Kwan Mathed has wandered from country to country, trying to make his way to the West. His journey ended in January at the Romanian-Hungarian border, when he was arrested with a forged South African passport that he bought in Greece for 1.5 million lei (500 dollars). He was convicted of attempting to illegally cross the border and sentenced to 15 months in prison.

Even though he has been released, he still is in limbo. Romanian authorities have denied his request for asylum and now are considering charging him with entering the country illegally from Bulgaria.

"I've got no one left, no hopes and nowhere to go," he says.

Mathed's story could have been told by any one of hundreds of Sudanese, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankans, Kurds and citizens of other Asian and African countries trapped in Europe's formerly communist countries.

The way to the West opened with the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and the loosening of the Marxists' tight controls on travel. Eastern Europe quickly became a popular route for tens of thousands of people fleeing war, poverty or repression.

But many people hoping to get to the wealthy West have gotten stuck in Romania and its neighbours after western European countries tightened rules for immigration and political asylum.

Germany negotiated agree-

ments with its neighbours requiring them to take back any illegal immigrants who cross from their territory. As a result, the number of people trying to transit Poland has fallen, and countries farther back in the immigration pipeline have negotiated similar treaties.

Romania and Hungary, at whose border Mathed was caught, have such a treaty.

On another route, Italy began patrolling its coast against speed boats bringing illegal immigrants across the Adriatic Sea from Albania.

In the past five years, nearly 35,000 people have been caught trying to cross Romania's borders illegally. Most are either jailed or detained until they can be sent home.

The pressure at Romania's borders is terrible, and this country can't deal with it alone anymore," said Col. Grigore Stamate, chief of Romania's border police.

In a country where the average monthly salary is only 300,000 lei (100 dollars), the government simply does not have the resources to deal with the problem, he said.

Official reports estimate there are more than 20,000 illegal migrants in Romania alone, mostly Asian men. The Bucharest office of the International Organization for Migration estimates the number at twice that.

Many use false documents to stay in Romania while they wait for an opportunity to continue west. In most cases, their goal is to reach Germany or Italy.

Officials in both Romania and its southern neighbour, Bulgaria, say it is too expensive

to send back home those who are caught. Bulgarian officials put the cost of repatriating a single illegal immigrant at 750,000 leva (5,000 dollars) five times the cost of housing and feeding a refugee for one year.

Poland and Hungary report that among the biggest groups trying to cross their countries are Afghans fleeing the chronic strife in their country.

Having come so far, many immigrants will take virtually any risk.

"Some of them are desperate and put themselves at extraordinary jeopardy," said Liliana Mircescu, the Bucharest representative of the International Organization for Migration. "They often leave home with all their savings and return years later with a plastic bag and even more desperate."

Over the winter, Romanian border guards detained 72 Bangladeshi men, ages 18 to 50, headed west. Some were found bare-footed and nearly frozen near Romania's northern border with the former Soviet republic of Moldova. Others were picked up at the Hungarian border.

All of them applied for political asylum, but Romanian authorities considered them economic refugees seeking a better life in a rich country.

Held in a small army cabin in the Danube port of Giurgiu, about 60 kilometres (37 miles) south of Bucharest, the Bangladeshis slept on dirty mattresses on a cement floor and shared food with Romanian soldiers. Once a week, the soldiers took them to public showers.

US denies Cuban charges on UN agency report

WASHINGTON, June 26: The US State Department dismissed as "nonsense" Tuesday allegations by Cuba that US pressure prompted a UN agency to conclude that Cuba was at fault in shooting down two Miami-based planes north of the island last February, reports AP.

Cuban National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon made the allegation in advance of a meeting Wednesday in Montreal in which the International Civil Aviation Organisation will review its recently completed report on the incident.

Alarcon will represent Cuba at the meeting.

Transportation Secretary Federico Pena will lead the US delegation.