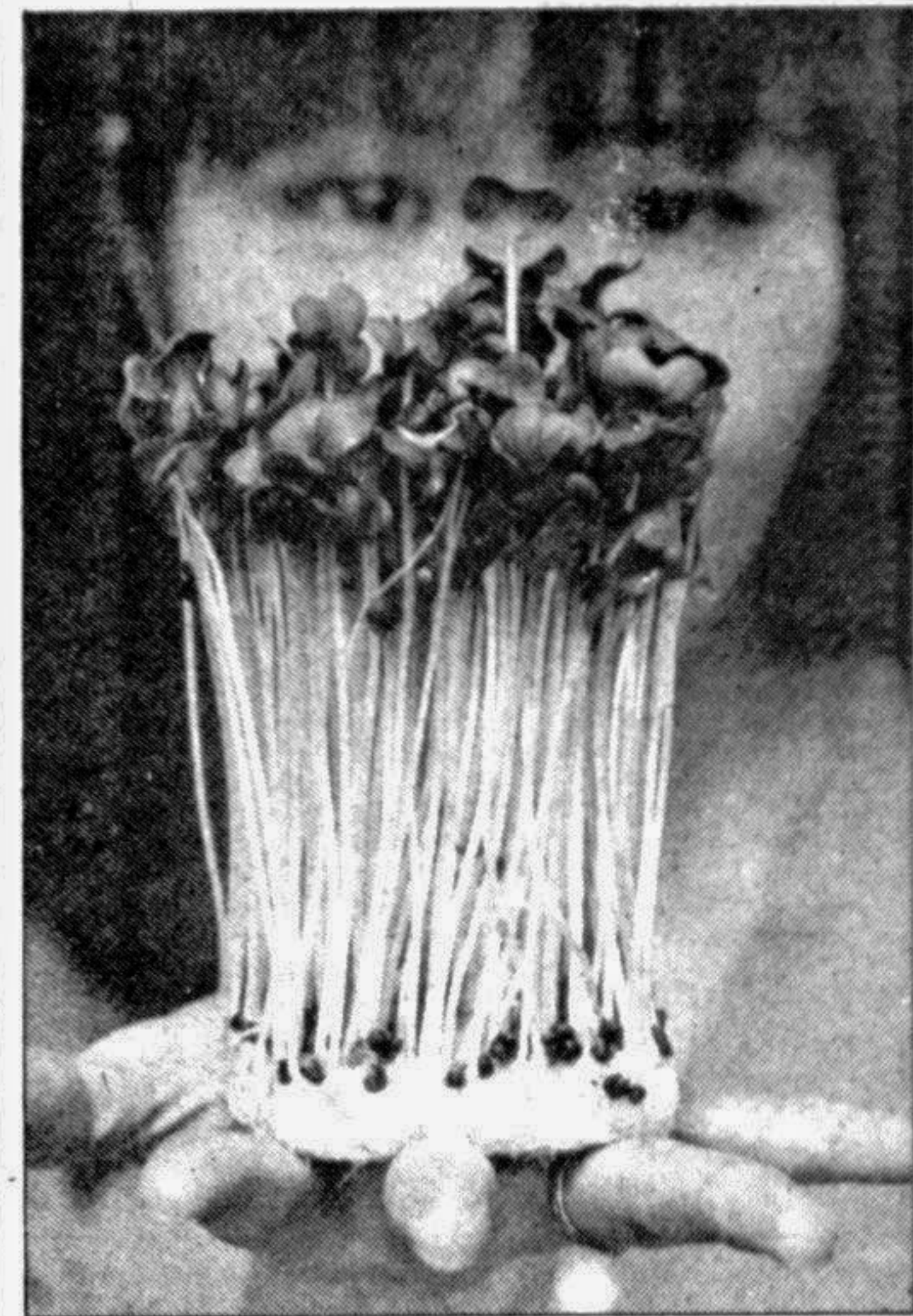


BRIEFLY



A model shows on Wednesday the same kind of radish sprouts contained in school lunches last month, which was blamed for food poisoning. Health and Welfare Minister Naoto Kan said that radish sprouts contained in school lunches last month were the most likely cause of Japan's worst outbreak of food poisoning in half a century.

— AFP/UNB photo

Landslides kill 30 in Nepal: Thirty people were killed in landslides triggered by torrential monsoon rains in a remote village in central Nepal, police said yesterday. Reuter reports from Kathmandu.

Relief workers dug the bodies of 14 victims from the site of the overnight landslides in Ghyaku village in Dolakha district, they said. A helicopter flew relief and to the village. Nearly 200 people have died in floods and landslides in the Himalayan kingdom in the past two months.

DPRK floods cause \$1.7b in damage: North Korea said yesterday that flooding last month caused an estimated 1.7 billion dollars in damage. Reuter reports from Tokyo.

The flood damage caused by floods in late July in 117 cities and counties of eight provinces of the DPRK, including north and south Hwanghae provinces, is so far estimated at 1.7 billion dollars, the official Korea central news agency said.

Australian FM talks with Mahathir: Australia's foreign minister held talks Wednesday with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in the first step towards improving lukewarm relations, AP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

"I think we will let things unfold from here rather than be commentators on what happened in the past," Alexander Downer told the Australian Broadcasting Co. before leaving Australia. Downer, who arrived on a four-day visit, said the talks provided a chance "to get together and just to help develop the personal relationship which is so important to the bilateral relationship."

Remains of 4 N Koreans return: The remains of four North Koreans, including two drowned soldiers, were handed across the border by UN and South Korean officials Wednesday, AP reports from Seoul.

The soldiers — a North Korean lieutenant and an enlisted man — were swept into South Korea by rain-swollen rivers late last month. Two other drowned North Koreans were found off the west coast just south of the heavily guarded border. A UN honor guard handed over two brown wooden caskets containing the remains of the soldiers to North Korean border guards at the truce village of Panmunjom. In a separate ceremony an hour later, two sets of civilian remains were returned.

UN sees renewed hope for Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, Aug 7: After an initial round of meetings with Afghanistan's warring factions, the United Nations special envoy on Tuesday said there was renewed enthusiasm for the UN peace mission, reports AP.

"There is a feeling that people are looking with new hope at the special mission," UN envoy Norbert Holl told reporters in the Pakistani capital.

Holl recently concluded a series of introductory meetings with the nominal Afghan government in Kabul and rebels in northern and southern Afghanistan.

The new envoy inherited a demoralised peace mission from former UN representative Mahmood Meatri.

Holl, a German diplomat, last week met with President Burhanuddin Rabbani and Kabul's new prime minister, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. He also visited the rebel Taliban stronghold of Kandahar and the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, where Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum is based.

Although Holl was reluctant to express outright optimism for a peaceful settlement to the 4-year-old Afghan civil war, he said there was room for negotiations.

"These meetings were not useless," he said. Civil war has shattered Afghanistan since 1992 when then-allied guerrillas turned their guns on each other after ousting Kabul's erstwhile communist government.

Holl's comments came as pro-government Hezb-e-Islami troops battled Taliban rebels in eastern Afghanistan.

State-run Kabul Radio said Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami forces had pushed back advancing Taliban troops in Paktika province, about 100 kilometres (60 miles) southeast of Kabul.

The fighting came after the Taliban claimed to have captured a Hezb-e-Islami military base in Paktika.

"They (the factions) were asked for a peaceful settlement to their conflict and to refrain

Polls in Kashmir in September

NEW DELHI, Aug 7: Elections for the local government in insurrection-wracked Kashmir will be held next month, six years after the previous legislature was dismissed, the Election Commission announced Wednesday, reports AP.

The ballot, which is opposed by pro-independence groups, will be the first legislative election in Jammu-Kashmir state since 1987.

Voting will be held Sept 7, 16, 21 and 30, said GVG Krishnamurthy, the election commissioner.

The staggering of dates will enable police and military to concentrate forces at polling stations to avoid violence by Kashmiri militants.

Jammu-Kashmir is the only Muslim majority state in predominantly Hindu India. Nearly 15,000 people have died in the fighting since the separatist revolt erupted in 1989.

The pro-separatist All Party Hurriyat Conference has decided to boycott the election. The umbrella group of 32 political and professional organisations says it wants an election under the supervision of the United Nations to determine Kashmir's future.

Megawati's rival accused of inciting riots

JAKARTA, Aug 7: A lawyers' group filed a criminal complaint Wednesday accusing a rival pro-democracy leader Megawati Sukarnoputri of sparking rioting July 27 that killed three people, reports AP.

Protests erupted after security forces raided Megawati's headquarters following a pre-dawn attack by supporters of Suryadi, the army-backed rival trying to replace her as head of the Indonesian Democratic Party.

The complaint doesn't specify what charges should be filed against Suryadi, but mentions that Megawati supporters were stoned and the party headquarters was damaged by fire.

"The raid led by Suryadi was the trigger that started the riots of 27 July," said the complaint, filed by a delegation from the 200-lawyer Public Defenders of Indonesian Democracy.

The group is independent, but it includes lawyer RO Tambunan, who is representing Megawati in a lawsuit challenging her ouster as party chief at a military-organized rebel party congress in June.

Russian Air Force shrinking for lack of funds

MOSCOW, Aug 7: The Russian Air Force is shrinking because it lacks funds to buy new aircraft and its air fleets could be reduced by 25 per cent by the end of the century, according to a report Tuesday, reports AP.

Col. Gen. Pyotr Deinekin, commander of the air force, told the Interfax news agency that the air force had purchased just 233 aircraft since it was created four years ago. He said the air force needs between 300 and 400 new planes annually to replace outmoded models and maintain its strength.

The Russian Air Force inherited some 6,000 planes from the break up of the Soviet Air force.

Russia's military has been hit badly by government funding problems since the demise of the Soviet Union. The military are short of weapons and other supplies.

Deinekin said the air force was not receiving enough money to maintain aircraft production in state-run factories even at low levels.

For wearing headscarf

COPENHAGEN, Aug 7: A Muslim woman was sacked from the hospital where she worked as a doctor for insisting on wearing a headscarf in keeping with Islamic tradition, a Danish anti-racist group said Tuesday, reports AP.

It has started legal proceedings claiming racial discrimination against the head of the Nykoebing-Falster Hospital, 150 kilometres (93 miles) south of Copenhagen.

The hospital, for its part, said the decision had been taken for the sake of hygiene because of the danger of bacteria being transported in the scarf from one room in the hospital to another.

Somali factions urged to take advantage of situation created by Aidid's death

UNITED NATIONS Aug 7: Security Council members on Tuesday urged factions in Somalia to take advantage of the situation created by the death last week of warlord Mohamed Farah Aidid and declare a truce, reports Reuter.

"The Council calls upon the factions in Somalia to use now the situation for a lasting truce," Council President Tono Eitel of Germany told reporters after closed door consultations on a number of topics.

A spokesman for the German UN mission later made clear this would take place during closed-door consultations and would not be a public debate.

Aidid died last Thursday after aides said he was shot on a frontline in South Mogadishu.

Chechens take control of Grozny

MOSCOW, Aug 7: Separatist rebels effectively held the Chechen capital Grozny today, 24 hours after a lightning offensive against Russian troops, Interfax News Agency said, reports Reuter.

An Interfax correspondent reported from the city that Russian forces were blocked at their own checkpoints and in the centre of the city. "The correspondent reported that the city is effectively controlled by the rebels," the agency said.

Rebel field commander Russian Gelayev was based just 500 metres (yards) away from the central building of the pro-Moscow Chechen government, Interfax said. "He has ordered his fighters to seize the building," it said.

Russian helicopters gunships were making strikes in the centre of the city while heavy artillery shelled Grozny

suburbs, the agency said. The separatists infiltrated the city on Tuesday and have been battling Russian forces based there.

Helicopters, firing rockets, targeted the central Minutka Square, site of bitter fighting in 1995 when Russian forces captured Grozny, and the railway station. The rebels seized partial control of the station on Tuesday.

Earlier Chechen rebel attack Tuesday on Russian forces in Grozny and another city left 29 dead and around 100 wounded on the Russian side officials said Tuesday, reports AP.

According to a toll given at 6:00 pm (1400 GMT) by the Interior Ministry of the pro-Russian Chechen government, the fighting in Grozny cost the lives of 13 Chechen police and left another 45 injured.

A further 14 Russian soldiers died in the assault and

50 were wounded, the Russian military commander in the Caucasus region, General Anatoli Kvashin said. Both sources were reported by the agency Interfax.

Two other Russian soldiers were reported killed in fighting at Argun 15 kilometres (10 miles) east of the capital, where the rebels launched a dawn attack.

No official figures were given for losses on the separatist side or among civilians.

However by late morning 17 wounded civilians were seen in one of Grozny's hospitals including five children many of them having been hit by exploding shells or rockets near their homes.

AP from Grozny, Chechen rebels attacked key government posts in the city centre Wednesday for a second day as Russian forces admitted suffering dozens of casualties.



British EU envoy to Mostar Sir Martin Garrod (R) gestures during a press conference with EU spokesman Dragon Gasic (L) in Mostar Tuesday. Bosnian Croats and Muslims signed an agreement ending a bitter row over the local government. The agreement was signed ending the row that flared when Croats refused to join a joint city council. — AFP/UNB photo

Muslims, Croats sign agreement on governing Mostar

Mostar, Bosnia Herzegovina, Aug 7: Mediators stitched together a deal to salvage the joint government of the city of Mostar, overcoming — for now — rifts between Muslims and Croats that threaten next months nationwide vote, reports AP.

The agreement Tuesday resolved a dispute over Mostar's City Council election in June, which illustrated the deep distrust remaining after 3 and a half years of war. Mediators have said that if the results are not abided by, there is little hope for September's national elections.

Mostar is divided in half by a river; during the war, Croats moved to the western side and Muslims to the east. The European Union has administered Mostar since 1994 in an effort to reunite the city.

In the elections, Croats narrowly lost to a Muslim-led coalition. They refused to take their seats on the joint City Council, claiming voting irregularities.

The European Union had threatened to pull out if a deal was not reached. Sir Martin Garrod, the EU negotiator, said Tuesday's agreement makes it possible for the EU to stay.

"Between us, we can go forward working towards making Mostar the city we would all wish it to be," he said.

Tuesday's agreement was reached only after prolonged, intense pressure by the United States and the European Union. Such agreements often dissolve in the Balkans as soon as the pressure abates.

Mijo Brajkovic, mayor of

Croat-ruled western Mostar, told reporters Tuesday that Muslims agreed that a still-to-be-formed constitutional court, would rule on the validity of the elections.

In return, the Croats agreed not to insist on the court's ruling before the council meets. The accord stipulates that after an initial City Council session appoints a mayor and a deputy, the court will issue its ruling within 60 days; the maximum time allowed between council sessions.

Brajkovic said the first joint council session would be held about August 15.

Croats and Muslims were allies against Serbs during most of the Bosnian war, but also fought each other before forming a federation in 1994 under US pressure.



Republican Senator Hank Brown of the United States (R) is greeted by top Muslim separatist leader Shabir Shah Monday in northern Kashmir. Brown met other rebel leaders ending speculation that India had rejected his plans to tour Kashmir. — AFP/UNB photo

Off the Record

Perfect house guest

LONDON: Princess Diana was a perfect house guest who helped with the washing up, liked chocolate cake and was very unhappy, the mother of her ex-lover says in an interview published Tuesday, reports AP.

"Who else could she talk to? Who could she turn to? James was in an impossible position," Shirley Hewitt said in an interview with a British magazine, "Hello".

Former army major James Hewitt, 38, was branded a cad and shunned by his upper-class friends for selling newspapers and TV the story of the five-year affair with the wife of Prince Charles, heir to the British throne.

Diana, 35, in a television interview in November publicly acknowledged Hewitt had been her lover, prompting Queen Elizabeth II to demand a swift divorce. Charles has also acknowledged adultery.

Mrs. Hewitt, who used to run a riding school, said Hewitt regularly brought Diana home and after the first few times she realised they were lovers. He was the riding instructor to her sons, Prince William and Prince Harry.

"As she came more often it became easier. She and James would go riding," said Mrs. Hewitt. "She was very helpful. She would always help carry the things out after lunch."

She said that once Diana tackled a cupboard packed with old bottles and sauces.

"She said, 'What's all this? It's disgusting,' and cleared the whole lot out and gave the cupboard a good wash!"

On Hewitt's selling the story, his mother said, "In his situation, no one is going to turn down money. That would be stupid. But money was never the intention. It was the last thing on his mind."



Big bellies indicate cop's poor health

BOMBAY: Policemen in Bombay have been told to shape up because their bulging stomachs are contributing to the force's sagging image. The Times of India reported Tuesday, says AP.

V N Deshmukh, a Bombay police commissioner, told the newspaper that the popular image of the obese policemen had lowered their esteem in the eyes of the populace.

"Photographs in the press showing pot-bellied policemen have brought a bad name to the force," he said. "Apart from that, big bellies are indicative of the poor health of policemen."

The Times said 110 overweight police officers were lectured on the merits of a lean frame on Sunday and made to exercise with great difficulty.

"Many of them had to remove their belts to be able to comply with the instructions," The Times said, adding that a woman physical instructor also asked a 95-kg policeman to stand on her abdomen.

"If a woman can have such tough abdominal muscles, why can't policemen like you?" she said.

Policemen in India undergo tough physical training when they are inducted into the force but often go to seed later in the absence of regular physical fitness tests.

Perry predicts more terrorist attacks against US targets

ORLANDO, Fla., Aug 7: Defence Secretary William Perry on Tuesday predicted more terrorist attacks against US targets but warned against withdrawing troops from the Gulf and urged Americans not to change their daily routines, reports Reuter.

"The worst thing we could do for our national security would be to withdraw our forces," Perry told the American Bar Association. "Likewise, when terrorists attack our trade centres our federal buildings our airlines the worst thing we could do as a society is to withdraw from our daily lives and commerce."

Perry returned last Thursday from Saudi Arabia, where he negotiated a deal to move 4,000 US troops to safer quarters in a remote site south of the Saudi capital of Riyadh.

He has also ordered about 700 military dependents to leave Saudi Arabia because of expected attacks.

The actions were being taken after the June 25 bombing that killed 19 US airmen in Dhahran.

Perry said the United States maintained the strongest military force in the Gulf and it could not successfully be engaged by any other power.

51 Tigers killed in military offensive in Kilinochchi

COLOMBO, Aug 7: Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger guerrillas today said 51 of their fighters had been killed in a military offensive aimed at seizing their political headquarters, reports AP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in a statement from their London office, said they were resisting the military onslaught, against the northern town of Kilinochchi begun on Sunday.

"So far 51 LTTE fighters have attained martyrdom in resisting the military advance towards Kilinochchi," the LTTE said, adding the government forces were pounding the area with artillery and ground-attack aircraft.

The Defence Ministry has said 203 Tigers were killed in the first two days of fighting alone and placed military losses at 31 killed and about 50 wounded.

The LTTE for its part has claimed killing "more than 100" government soldiers. The

Tigers also said that most of the buildings in Kilinochchi had been reduced to rubble by air strikes.

Officials said that fighting continued for the fourth straight day Wednesday and close air support was being given to ground troops who had moved within three kilometres (1.8 miles) from Kilinochchi.

The Sri Lankan Air Force continued to engage terrorist positions in depth causing severe damage to identified terrorist locations," the ministry said in a statement.

The LTTE said government forces tried to penetrate rebel defences by doing a manoeuvre but were halted by a ferocious counter attack by the guerrillas.

The LTTE had moved to Kilinochchi after losing their former citadel of Jaffna to security forces who mounted a series of operations to take the entire northern peninsula by April and May this year.

"There are no worthwhile buildings left in Kilinochchi," the LTTE said.

Researchers find evidence of life once lived on Mars

WASHINGTON, Aug 7: Researchers testing a meteorite from Mars claim to have found evidence that primitive life once lived on the red planet. Other scientists scoffed Tuesday and said stronger evidence is needed, reports AP.

Scientists from NASA and three American universities say chemical and microscopic tests of a rock from Mars detected organic compounds deposited in such a way that they could have come only from biological activity.

The hospital, for its part, said the decision had been taken for the sake of hygiene because of the danger of bacteria being transported in the scarf from one room in the hospital to another.

They also report seeing shapes that "resemble some forms of fossilised filamentous bacteria," although much smaller.

When studying these factors, the researchers report,

"we conclude that they are evidence for primitive life on early Mars."

The study is to be published next week in the journal Science. The journal released draft copies Tuesday after the contents were leaked.

Carl Sagan, a leading authority on the search for extraterrestrial life, called the findings "evocative and very exciting." But he said the chemical compounds reported in the paper "are not evidence of life."

Other scientists were more skeptical, saying the organic compounds found by the researchers could have been formed without life.

Past or present existence of

life on Mars has been considered a possibility ever since studies by spacecraft landers showed that water was once present on the planet surface.

None of the Martian landers, however, found evidence that life now exists on Mars, nor did the robot craft find chemical markers for life in limited soil samples that have been analysed.

The researchers say in the paper that a rock from space recovered in Antarctica contains organic compounds that could only have been deposited by biological activity.

The new findings center on a meteorite called Allan Hills 84001, the oldest of 12 pieces of rock that earlier studies

confirmed as originating from Mars.

Studies show that Allan Hills 84001 was crystallised from melted rock about 4.5 billion years ago, a time when the solar system was forming.

The rock is thought to have been knocked from the Martian surface about 15 million years ago and then landed on the Antarctic ice sheet about 13,000 years ago. It was discovered in 1984 and identified as originating from Mars.

Scientists from NASA's Johnson Space Center, from Stanford University, the University of Georgia and from McGill University in Montreal, recently studied thin slices of the rock that revealed organic molecules called polycyclic

aromatic hydrocarbons, or PAHs.

They said PAHs can be formed only in two ways — by biological action, such as by microorganisms, or in the process that forms planets.

The researchers determined that the PAHs in the rock were deposited in cracks that occurred after the meteorite was formed, suggesting the molecules were deposited by later biological activity.

Also, the researchers said that within the PAHs, they found particles of magnetite and iron sulfide, both chemicals that can be related to bacterial action.

Sagan said that if the researchers did, in fact, find microfossils within the Mars rock then that would represent the strongest evidence yet of life beyond the Earth.

But if the researchers' claim is based on the presence of organic chemicals, he said, "life, while possible, is not proven on Mars."

Referring to the organic compounds, Jack D. Farmer said, "If that's the evidence, I don't believe it."

Farmer, a geologist and paleobiologist of the Exobiology Branch of NASA's Ames Research Centre in Mountain View, California, said the bulk of magnetite is inorganically formed and that "PAHs have no direct relationship to biology. They are not an indicator."