

Pro-Moscow govt bldg falls to Chechen rebels

7,000 Russian soldiers trapped in Grozny

MOSCOW, Aug 9: The situation in the Chechen capital Grozny is totally out of control with 7,000 Russian soldiers trapped by separatists, a senior Russian officer told Interfax news agency today, reports AFP.

He was speaking from the Russian staff headquarters, said that Russian units blocked in Grozny are not even trying to attack the separatists, limiting themselves to passive defence.

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He was speaking from the Khankala Base, on the outskirts of Grozny, the headquarters for the some 7,000 Russian troops and Interior Ministry police in Chechnya.

Earlier report says: Chechen separatists said today they had taken the building housing the pro-Russian Chechen government and the nearby Interior Ministry building in Grozny, the Interfax news agency reported.

The rebel command said they fell at 11.15 am (0715 GMT) and that "heavy fighting is underway for the federal security service building" which "is the only place where federal forces are still resisting" in the city centre.

It added that Russian soldiers had been offered the chance to surrender but had refused.

Buildings housing Chechnya's Moscow-installed administration suffered heavy attacks all night, and several were earlier reported to be on flames.

Chechen rebels, who mounted the surprise offensive on Grozny early Tuesday, said late Thursday they had seized part of the government offices.

Earlier AP says: Chechen rebels pushed back Russian armoured columns advancing to reinforce besieged government buildings in Grozny on the third day of fighting for

control of the Chechen capital.

On the eve of President Boris Yeltsin's Friday inauguration, Russian forces death toll in the rebel offensive on Grozny reached 70, with another 300 servicemen wounded, the Russian military command said. It estimated rebel casualties at more than 200 dead.

Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin promised that rebel leaders will be held responsible, although he ruled out full-scale retaliatory attacks, spokesman Viktor Kononov said.

Separatists claim to have killed several hundred Russian troops and destroyed 80 armoured vehicles, nine helicopters and a fighter jet, the Interfax news agency said.

Russian commanders confirmed the loss of several helicopters and armoured vehicles, but denied that rebels shot down a warplane.

Separatists stormed the city Tuesday in their largest offensive since March, when they seized sections of Grozny and fought off Russian troops for several days.

The rebels accuse Russian forces of ignoring two peace agreements signed in May and June. The Russians said their own offensive in southern Chechnya last month was in response to rebel attacks.

The latest rebel assault cast a shadow over Friday's inauguration of Yeltsin, who had promised during his campaign this spring that he would end the war.

More than 30,000 people have been killed since Yeltsin sent troops into Chechnya 20 months ago to root out the separatists.

In Grozny, Russian and separatist forces battled in the deserted streets with mortars, grenade launchers and automatic weapons.

BRIEFLY

20 die as boat capsizes in China: A boat carrying more than 50 passengers capsized in a flood-swollen river in southwestern Sichuan province killing 20 people, a newspaper reported yesterday. AFP reports from Shanghai.

The Liberation Daily reported that more than 30 others barely escaped drowning when the motorised junk was slammed by waters released from flood gates on Peijing River Tuesday.

The reports said boatman Chen Yongqin was steering the junk from Tongnan county when he lost control of the vessel in a rush of water in Sankuashih.

US sends soldiers to Kuwait: About 1,200 US Army soldiers will spend four months in Kuwait as part of a military exercise displaying their ability to rush to the oil-rich nation and "shoot out into the desert" in their armoured vehicles, Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said Thursday. AP reports from Washington.

The exercise, dubbed Intrinsic Action 96-3, is one of a series of such exercises conducted by US forces since Saddam Hussein's forces were pushed out of Kuwait in the Gulf war of 1991.

It is intended to demonstrate the continuing commitment of the US to the security and stability of the Gulf region, a Pentagon statement said.

1 die, 66 hurt in train crash in London: A woman died and 66 people were injured on Thursday when a commuter train crashed into an empty train travelling in the opposite direction, northwest of London, police said. Reuter reports from Watford, England.

Some 23 passengers had to be released by firemen who used cutting gear, senior fire officer Steve Seavers told a news conference.

Rwanda suspends air links with Burundi: Rwanda said it was suspending road and air links with joining other east and central African states in sanctions to drive Burundi's Tutsi-led army from power, Reuter reports Nairobi.

"In accordance with the decision of the Arusha declaration of the regional summit of July 31, 1996, the government of the republic of Rwanda has decided to suspend road and air links with Burundi effective from August 9," a foreign ministry statement said.

Pak film star Mohammad Ali joins PML: Pakistan screen star Mohammad Ali has launched a new career in politics, joining the main opposition Pakistan Muslim League party of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to run for office, AFP reports from Karachi.

"I am very confident about my success in politics, similar to the success God has given me during my long film career," the 60-year-old legendary star told AFP yesterday.

"I will be sincere with the people as a politician, as I was with my fans while I was doing films," he said.

5 killed in chopper crash in Austria: A helicopter fell from the sky "like a stone" on Thursday, killing five people and seriously injuring a sixth, witnesses and Austrian media reported, AP says from Austria.

The helicopter hired by an Austrian industrialist, crashed near St. Andrea northwest of this southern Austrian city, on its way to Siofok, in western Hungary.

Death toll from Spain flood now 63: The death toll from floods which swept through a pyrenees campsite in northern Spain rose to 63 yesterday, according to an official toll, with up to 40 people still listed as missing, AFP reports from Biescas, Spain.

Earlier, the regional prefecture had put the death toll at 72, a figure which had included some people listed as missing but feared dead. A spokesman said there was no final figure on the number of missing, but that it could be as high as 40.

Manila to auction 2 TV stations: A special Philippine Presidential Commission is set to auction two government television stations for at least 2.1 billion pesos (80.7 million dollars), newspapers reported Friday, AFP says from Manila.

Presidential Commission on Good Government (PCGG) chairman Magtandang Gumigundo was quoted as saying that the two stations Radio Philippines Network (RPN) and the Intercontinental Broadcasting Network (IBC), would be up for bids early next year.

8 die from food poisoning in Japan: A one and a half year old girl died of food poisoning near Tokyo on Friday, bringing deaths this year from a killer germ to eight, Reuter reports from Tokyo.

A 21-month old girl died at a hospital last morning, a spokesman for the Chiba city government said.

She had been infected with the 0-157 colon bacillus, he told Reuters.

Quake shakes Tokyo: A moderate earthquake with a preliminary magnitude reading of 4.7 shook Tokyo and areas southwest of the capital early Friday, but there were no immediate reports of damage or injury, AP reports from Tokyo.

The quake, which struck at 3:21 am (1821 GMT Thursday), was centered 20 kilometres (12 miles) beneath the seafloor 80 kilometres (50 miles) southwest of the capital, according to the Central Meteorological Agency.

Father indeed!

VASTO, Italy, Aug 9: Police found the 7-year-old girl by the side of the road, shoeless, dirty and crying. Her father had let her out of the car to go to the bathroom and sped off, she told the officers, reports AP.

Some 450 miles (720 kilometres) to the north, police said Thursday, her 8-year-old brother lay abandoned for two days in a hospital in Vicenza.

The story, which was a main item on the evening news programme and news agencies, had all the elements of an Italian tragedy in a country that takes special pride in how it values its children.

According to an account by Vasto police inspector Vincenzo Verretti, a patrol car came upon the girl along the Adriatic Sea coast Thursday morning. She was just outside this beach resort 185 miles (300 kilometres) northeast of Rome.

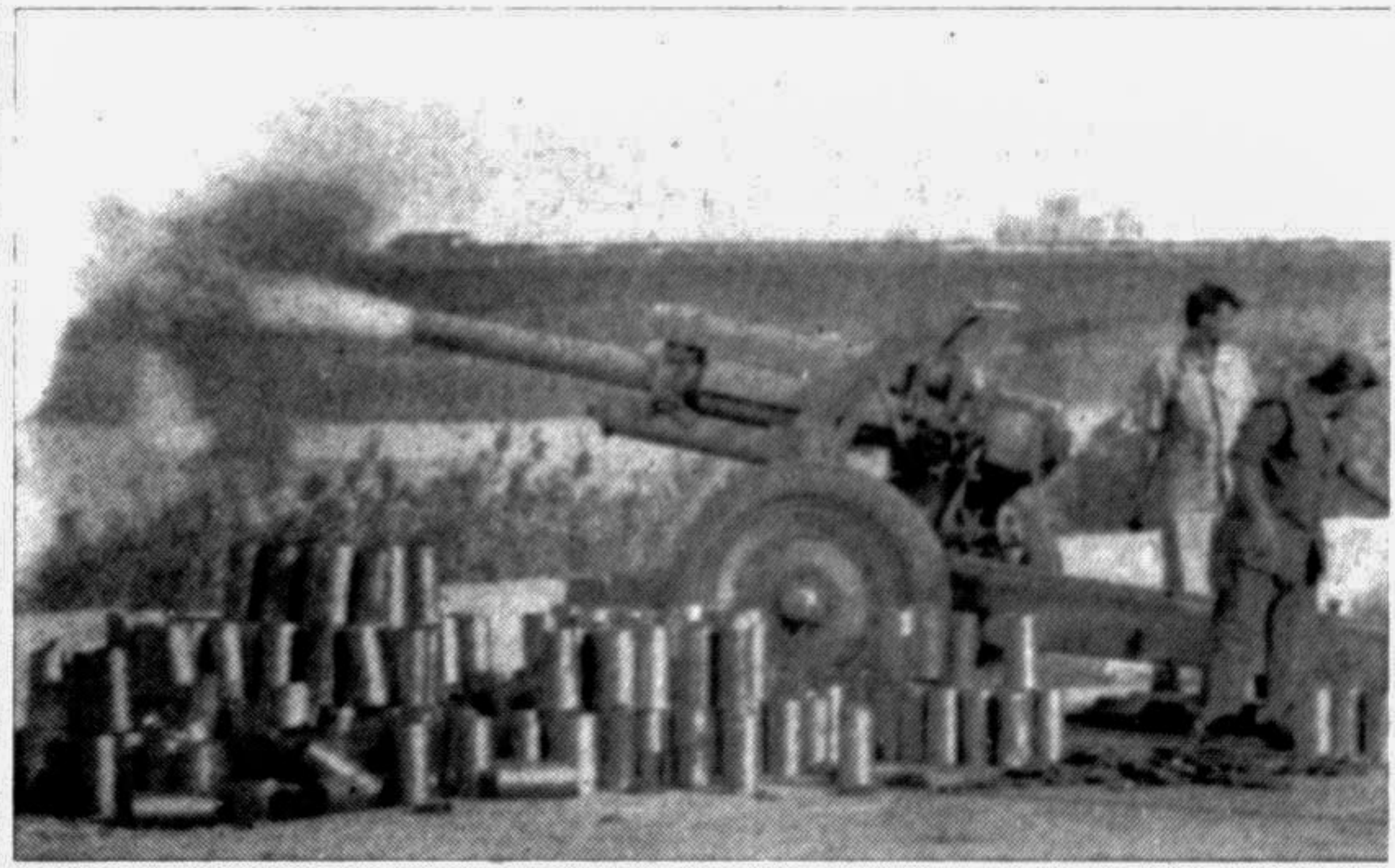
Verretti identified her only by the initials, G.P. She was unable to describe her father's dress. "She was confused, poor child," he said.

V P Singh for reservation of women's seats in parliament

MUMBAI, Aug 9: The former prime minister, V P Singh today conceded that women kith and kin of men in power would be the foremost beneficiaries of the proposed 33 per cent seat reservation for women in parliament, reports PTI.

"In the first round of elections, yes, but they will be thrown out in the second or third round if they do not perform," Singh told a meeting of the press guild of India at the Maharashtra Chamber of Commerce here.

Singh was in favour of a legislation reserving seats for women in parliament to be passed in the current monsoon session itself and discounted the need for sending the bill to a select committee of both the Houses which would only delay the matter.



An Iraqi canon fires in Baghdad on Thursday to commemorate the 8th anniversary of the end of the 1980-88 Iraq-Iran war. Iraq urged Iran to bury the hatchet and work for true normalisation between the two neighbours. — AFP/UNB photo

Govt offensive displaces 200,000 civilians Tamil Tigers call for int'l intervention

COLOMBO, Aug 9: Tamil Tiger guerrillas today called for international intervention to stop a major military campaign against their political headquarters in northern Sri Lanka, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said the government offensive against the town of Kilinochchi had displaced 200,000 civilians and called for a halt to the military drive.

"The international community should prevail on the Sri Lankan government to stop its aggression which brings about shot term and long term disasters to the Tamil people," the LTTE said in a statement from its London office.

It said more than 30 civilians had died in the ongoing

army drive against Kilinochchi where Tiger fighters are putting up a stiff resistance in the past six days. Civilians had already fled the area to other rebel-held areas.

Tigers said the refugees were faced with starvation but military spokesman Sarath Munasinghe said the guerrillas were not allowing trucks to come into a government-held town in the island's north to take food cargoes.

Heavy long range battles raged in the area for the sixth straight day Friday as the Tiger kept up a fierce counter-attack to defend their political headquarters, the military spokesman said.

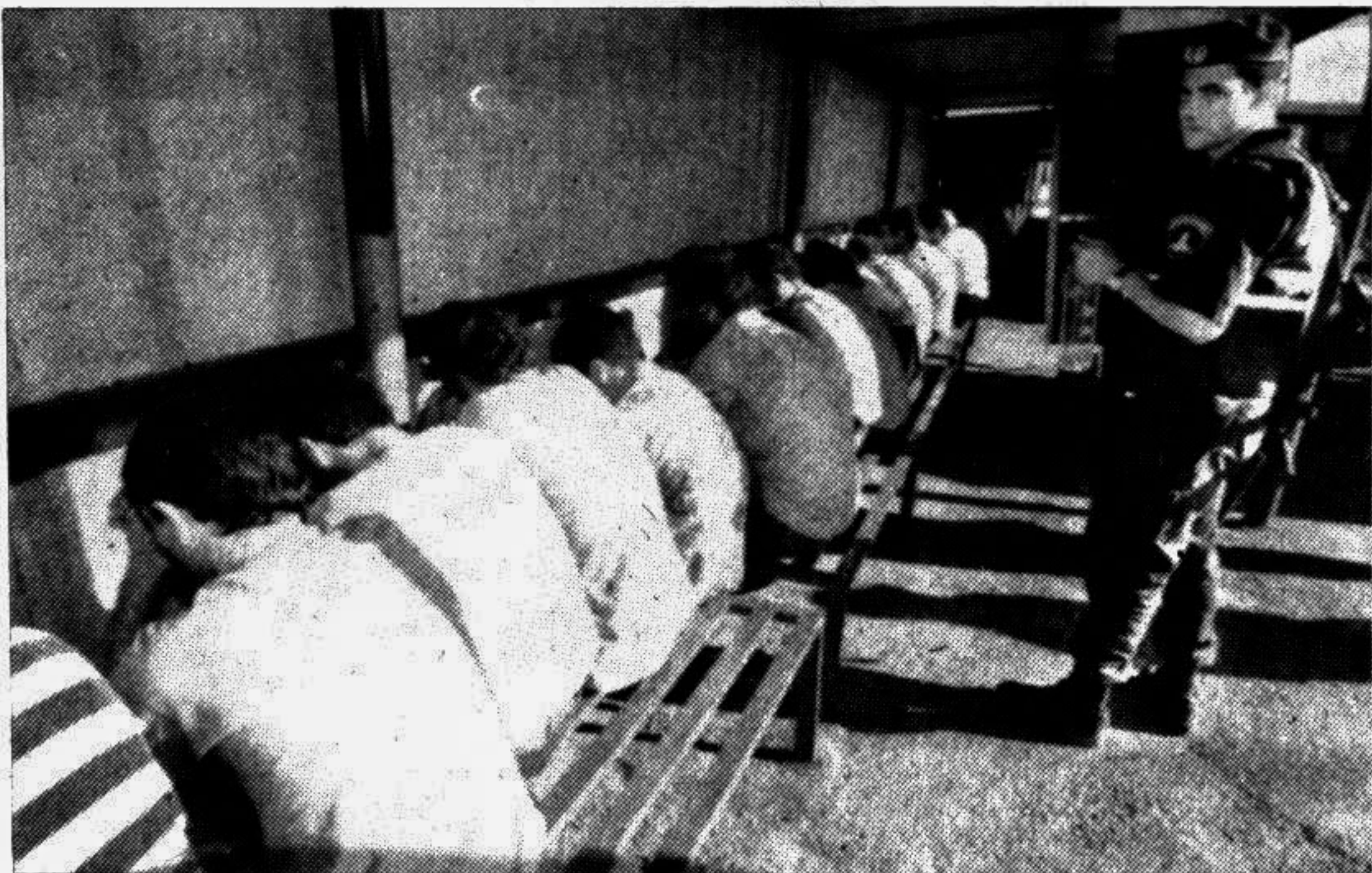
He said the Tigers had given the names of 182 cadres killed in the latest wave of

fighting which erupted on Sunday but the military estimate for the rebel losses was more than 300 killed.

Government troops had moved within a kilometre (0.6 mile) of the outer limits of the Kilinochchi town, Munasinghe said denying Tiger claims that the town had been razed by intense aerial and artillery attacks.

The army has lost a total of 48 soldiers killed and 67 seriously wounded in the past six days, Munasinghe said.

"We are losing men no doubt," he said. "Our objective is to draw as many terrorists as possible and kill them with the least amount of casualties to us. We are achieving that through the latest offensive."



An Israeli soldier watches a group of suspect arrested Palestinians at Bethlehem checkpoint near Jerusalem on Thursday. Most Palestinian are arrested for having faulty entry papers. — AFP/UNB photo

Netanyahu asks Syria to return to negotiating table

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia, Aug 9: The leaders of Egypt and Saudi Arabia agreed that a land-for-peace formula must guide talks with Israel, whose prime minister Thursday pleaded with Syria to return to the negotiating table, reports AP.

In his most forceful entreaty yet to Arab countries, Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu asked Syria to resume peace talks. He expressed frustration with Damascus' lukewarm reaction to his proposal to resolve the Lebanon issue before tackling other pieces of the negotiations.

"I find myself in a Kafkaesque situation, an almost unbelievable situation: The prime minister of Israel announces he wants to leave the territory of an Arab country, Lebanon, and the government of Syria and the government of Lebanon oppose this," Ne-

tanyahu said, speaking at the army's officers' college in Tel Aviv.

In the Red Sea port of Jeddah on Thursday, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Saudi King Fahd repeated their long-held positions that Middle East negotiations must revolve around a swap of land-for-peace, official Saudi sources said.

That formula calls on Israel to return Arab lands captured in the 1967 Mideast war in exchange for peace with its Arab neighbors. That equation has underpinned Arab-Israeli talks since a 1991 peace conference in Madrid under US and Russian sponsorship.

Netanyahu's new government recently has indicated the formula could be scrapped. Mubarak's visit Thursday is the latest in a flurry of high-level Arab contacts following Netanyahu's May 29 election.

Some of Netanyahu's early pronouncements on the future of Arab-Israeli peace have caused serious concern in Arab capitals.

His opposition to returning the Golan Heights to Syria and creating an independent Palestinian state have been particularly worrisome to Arab leaders. He has since moderated his stance.

Egypt, the Arab world's most populous nation, and Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest oil exporter, enjoy considerable influence in the Middle East.

An AFP report from Jerusalem says, Foreign Minister David Levy boycotted Israel's weekly cabinet meeting Friday, fueling speculation he may resign in a dispute with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over the sharing of responsibility for Israel's foreign policy.

US presses India not to block CTBT

WASHINGTON, Aug 9: US Secretary of State Warren Christopher pressed India on Thursday not to block an international accord banning nuclear testing, reports AP.

A State Department spokesman said Christopher had received Indian Ambassador Naresh Chandra earlier in the day discuss the issue.

"The United States is still urging India to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)," spokesman Nicholas Burns said. "We will continue to expect in the negotiations that India not seek to frustrate the will of the international community on this particular treaty."

India is the last participant in the 61-nation Conference on Disarmament in Geneva still opposed to the draft to the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Negotiators need to get India on board as many nations feel the treaty is pointless unless all nuclear powers — declared and undeclared — sign.

Along with Israel and Pakistan, India is thought to have nuclear capability. It has fought

wars with neighbouring China and Pakistan and says it is determined to keep all defence portions open.

India objects to the accord because it does not require the five declared nuclear powers — Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States — to dismantle their arsenals within a set time.

Negotiators hope to have the treaty ready for signing next month at the UN headquarters in New York.

"We believe that India should allow the international community to move forward to finish discussions about this treaty so that leaders of the world can convene here in the United States just in a month or so to sign this treaty," Burns said. "And that was the basic message the secretary gave to Ambassador Chandra this morning."

AFP adds: In Geneva earlier, India's representative at the UN Conference on Disarmament said New Delhi planned to prevent the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) from being sent to the United Nations General Assembly.

TDP threatens to quit Gowda's coalition govt

NEW DELHI, Aug 9: India's loose-knit coalition government is facing a fresh challenge with one of its partners threatening to withdraw support from Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda's alleged bias towards his home province, reports AFP.

The Telegu Desam Party (TDP), in power in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, on Thursday criticised Deve Gowda for allowing the construction of a higher dam in his neighbouring home state of Karnataka, affecting the flow of water to Andhra Pradesh.

"He is behaving like the chief minister of Karnataka (a post Deve Gowda held before being elected prime minister), not the prime minister of India," a senior TDP member was quoted as saying in remarks published today.

"He is a man without character," the unidentified state minister told the Hindustan

Times.

Andhra Pradesh chief minister and TDP chief Chandrababu Naidu on Thursday sent a strongly-worded letter to Deve Gowda threatening to withdraw support from the two-month-old United Front.

He also warned of "serious consequences" if a grant of two billion rupees (\$7.1 million dollars) to Karnataka out of a 10-billion-rupee (285 million dollar) federal irrigation scheme was not withdrawn.

"I strongly protest the action of the government of India. I would request you to kindly see that if any such central assistance has been sanctioned,

The United Front government, which took power on June 1, allowed the state government of Karnataka to raise the height of the Alamatti Dam. Naidu says it will affect the flow of the waters of the Krishna River into Andhra Pradesh.

Off the Record

Fowl march to protest new taxes

ISLAMABAD: Why did the chicken cross the road? To protest the high cost of feed, farmers in central Pakistan say, reports AP.

Members of the Pakistan Poultry Association released hundreds of chickens onto a road next to the provincial assembly building in the Punjab capital, Lahore, a newspaper reported Friday.

The fowl march on Thursday was held to protest new federal taxes, which have increased the cost of chicken feed, the English-language daily Nation reported.

About 500 farmers participated in the protest by pelting eggs on the road near the assembly building, and by releasing their chickens.

New member in gorilla family

SAINT-ETIENNE, France: A 1.5 kilogram (three pounds) female gorilla was born Sunday at a nearby zoo specialising in protecting endangered species, reports AFP.

Saint-Martin-la-Plaine Zoo is one of only two in France which has a fertile male gorilla, the father, of Sunday's arrival, zookeeper Pierre Thivillon said.

The 20-year-old mother had given birth 18 months ago — but not having weaned her earlier offspring, she was able to procreate again.



Nekala Mihajlovic, Acting Chief of Mission of the UNHCR, offers yesterday a gift to Nhuyen Xuan Dung with his wife Nguyen Thi Thu and children, the 50,000th voluntary returnee under the UNHCR's Voluntary Repatriation Programme which has operated since March 1989. Two planes carrying 309 passengers left the colony for Hanoi. — AFP/UNB photo

Police question Megawati over riots in Jakarta

JAKARTA, Aug 9: Jakarta police questioned Indonesia's figurehead opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri today in an investigation into recent riots that rocked the city of 10 million people, reports Reuter.

Megawati entered police headquarters in the central business district at 9.15 a.m. (0215 GMT) and had not emerged more than three hours later.

About 300 police, including riot police and dog-handlers, secured the area around the police complex, but there were no demonstrators on hand.

Megawati, ousted in June as leader of the opposition Indonesian Democratic Party

(PDI) by a government-backed political rival, has emerged as a focal point for dissent in the world's fourth most populous country of nearly 200 million.

Police called her as a witness as part of an investigation into the left-wing People's Democratic Party (PRD) which the government has blamed for riots last month in which at least four people died.

The riots, the worst in Jakarta in more than 20 years, followed a police assault on the PDI headquarters in central Jakarta to evict Megawati supporters from the building to allow her rival Surjadi, the Deputy Speaker of Parliament, to take over the sprawling Dutch colonial-style bungalow.

Critics dismiss communist threat as excuse for Jakarta's crackdown

JAKARTA, Indonesia, Aug 9: His leftist fringe does even have 200 members, but 27-year-old Budiman Sujatmiko is accused of being at the heart of a communist plot to topple the government, reports AP.

Budiman is the target of a nationwide manhunt, charged with inciting Indonesia's worst rioting in decades. President Suharto accused him Wednesday of treason. His weeping parents have appeared on television, begging him to turn himself in.

But opposition figures and others reject claims that riots July 27 were part of a plot by Budiman or anyone else. They say Suharto and top officials are using the riots as an excuse for a sweeping crackdown on labour activists and other dis-

sidents.

Harold Crouch, a specialist on Southeast Asian politics at the National University of Australia in Canberra, says that rioters — far from being communists — are simply frustrated by slow economic development.

"The people they suggest are communists are clearly not," Crouch said.

Allegations of subversion are especially explosive in Indonesia where the military and right-wing death squads killed as many as 500,000 people in 1966 during a spasm of anti-communist violence.

Suharto's government uses the label against intellectuals, labour leaders and other critics despite repeated pleas by public figures to avoid unfounded allegations that could

revive a 1960s-style climate of mistrust.

Security officials haven't released any evidence to support claims that leftists are trying to revive the Indonesian Communist Party, which with 20 million members was the third-largest in the world before its destruction.

"The charge of communism has been used as a weapon that kills all the civil and political rights of leaders and activists who are pioneering democratisation," the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation, a human rights group, said in a letter to the government released Thursday.

"We demand that the government and the military have some restraint and also show some respect for the rule of law and the rights of citizens

to gather, form associations and opinions free from threats and violence and various kinds of political suppression."

Police also are looking for 20 members of Budiman's Democratic People's Party, Jakarta police spokesman Lt. Col. Iman Haryatna wouldn't say how many other people are wanted on subversion charges, but told The Associated Press it is "quite a lot."

Suharto said at a Cabinet meeting Wednesday that the party, known as the PRD, "committed activities with the character of treason," according to Information Minister Harmoko.

According to Iman, 133 people have been detained in connection with violence that erupted after police raided the headquarters of an opposition

party headed by pro-democracy leaders Megawati Sukarnoputri.

Arrested last week was Mughtar Pakpahan, leader of Indonesia's biggest independent labour union. Accused of plotting with Budiman, he is so far the only detainee charged with subversion, a crime punishable by death.

The 43-year-old lawyer and former university lecturer is a frequent target of government attacks. He was jailed in 1994 on charges of inciting a riot, but was freed after six months when his conviction was overturned.

Mughtar was accused last year by Lt. Gen. Suyono, the armed forces chief of general affairs, of being leader of a "formless organisation" — the government's term for clan-

destine communist groups.

Luthfi Hakim, one of Mughtar's lawyers and a co-chairman of his union, denied his client has communist sympathies and dismissed the current charges against him as politically motivated.

"They're radicals, yes, but not revolutionaries," Luthfi said with an indulgent laugh. "They're still young."

Crouch, the Australian scholar, points to a different reason for public unrest and official backlash: growing uncertainty over who will succeed the 75-year-old Suharto.

"If you get a sense that no one's really in control in Jakarta, there's a possibility that rioting like that could break out all over," he said in a telephone interview.