

International

Troops herd villagers from homes to cast votes

Militants rocket BSF camp to herald start of Kashmir polls

SRINAGAR, India, Sept 7: Muslim guerillas fired rockets at a paramilitary camp today to herald the start of Kashmir's first state elections in almost a decade, Indian officials said. Reports AFP.

Four rockets crashed onto a school building housing men from the Border Security Force (BSF) in Kupwara, near the Pakistan border but no-one was injured, police said. The building was slightly damaged.

A land mine went off elsewhere in Kupwara but there were no casualties. Soldiers defused another mine near a Sikh temple in the adjoining Baramulla district.

"The violence came as the first round of staggered balloting got underway in parts of the Himalayan state at 7:00 am (01:30 GMT), despite a boycott call by Muslim separatists, officials and witnesses said.

More than 15,000 people have died since 1989 when militants calling for independence or merger with Pakistan launched an armed separatist struggle in the region. Loudspeakers in mosques in the rural areas of the Kashmir Valley blared appeals to the people to vote, residents told the news agency. But it was not clear if the appeals were by officials or candidates.

AP adds: Waving rifles and blowing whistles through the streets, security troops herded Kashmiri villagers from their homes Saturday to vote in the state's first election in nine years.

Villagers accused the troops of forcing them to vote in state assembly elections that New Delhi hopes will restore democracy to Kashmir, where a 7-year Muslim-led rebellion has

claimed about 14,500 lives.

In Mazburgh, a sleepy village about 45 kilometres (27 miles) west of the state capital, Srinagar, villagers said soldiers ordered them to vote.

"I have no hope from these elections," said Gul Shan Arsh, 24. "These are the very soldiers who have killed my brother-in-law."

But commanders with India's paramilitary Border Security Force said they were only offering protection for voters.

Pro-separatist leaders this week openly campaigned against the election and appealed to the people to stay home. On Friday, soldiers stopped many of them in villages and small towns. Two secessionist leaders claimed army soldiers beat them with rifle butts. Two others were arrested.

Shops were closed and public transport was idle in most of the valley including the capital city of Srinagar, for the second consecutive day Saturday in response to a call by the All Party Hurriyat Conference, an umbrella group of 32 separatist organisations.

The group opposes the state elections and wants a referendum to decide whether Kashmir should belong to India, to Pakistan, or become independent.

Indian security forces armed with automatic weapons guarded voting stations in school buildings and local offices. Saturday's round of voting will cover 26 of 87 state assembly seats.

The remaining 61 seats will be contested on September 16, 21 and 30 in phased voting that allows authorities to deploy thousands of troops across the

insurgency-wracked northern Indian state of Jammu-Kashmir.

Results from the voting will be announced only after all phases of the election are complete.

In villages and towns throughout the mountainous region, residents were reluctant to participate in the Saturday's vote.

"I would not vote," said Bashir Ahmed. "We want freedom."

At polling stations, voter turnout was low, election officials said. Two hours after the polls opened on Saturday, only five of 920 registered voters had cast their ballots at one station.

Of those who did vote, some saw it as an opportunity to have a say in their state's future.

"I'm voting against terrorism," said A G Wani, 50, a busi-

nessman from the apple-growing village of Sopore. "It is clear the election is against terrorism."

Separatist rebels say the election will not solve the Kashmir problem and have attacked several election meetings, killing more than six people.

Campaigning went on under heavy army and police escort.

The main parties contesting the election are the National Conference, a local Kashmiri group, and three national parties — the Congress, the Janata Dal and the Bharatiya Janata Party.

India has tried to hold elections earlier in Kashmir, but most political parties didn't participate because of the threat of violence by rebels. That threat has diminished by repeated military crackdowns.

Taliban lose 15 posts to govt forces

KABUL, Afghanistan, Sept 7: Rival Taliban troops lost 15 posts, including a strategic mountain outpost southwest of the capital, in a blistering pre-dawn assault Saturday by government troops, reports AP.

Ground troops overran Sher Ali post overlooking the Taliban stronghold of Maidan Shahr, 40 kilometres (24 miles) southwest of Kabul, said Amrullah, a government spokesman who uses only one name.

The fighting has closed the road between Kabul and Maidan Shahr and temporarily ended a Taliban assault against government forces in Hazera in eastern Logar province.

"The Taliban has lost the high ground along the left side of the road to Maidan Shahr," Amrullah told The Associated Press.

He said 20 Taliban were killed in the initial onslaught and more than 30 injured. There were no reports of gov-

ernment casualties.

From the capital of Kabul the thunderous explosion of missiles, heavy artillery and long range mortars could be heard. The usually bustling market at Campaini on the southern outskirts of Kabul was deserted.

Buses and taxis that regularly ply that road were parked several kilometres (miles) away from the fighting.

In recent days fighting between government soldiers and Taliban fighters has increased around Kabul and in eastern Afghanistan.

In eastern Logar and Paktia province thousands of Taliban troops were trying to push toward the strategic town of Sarobi on the highway, that links Kabul to Jalalabad.

The Taliban army of religious students turned guerilla fighters is demanding the government in Kabul step down and establish a strict Islamic regime.

But Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, considered a fundamentalist Muslim by most, argues an Islamic government already is in place.

Since being sworn in last May Hekmatyar has closed Kabul's theatres, banned Indian movies and music, a popular form of entertainment in the capital.

But fighting between rival Islamic factions in Afghanistan has been going on since Muslim rebels threw out the communists in 1992.

All 10 main Islamic groups say they want an Islamic regime in Kabul, but they can't agree who will head it.

Hekmatyar was one of the biggest enemies of President Burhanuddin Rabbani's until he agreed to stop attacking Kabul and take on the job of prime minister earlier this year.

Pentagon spokesman reveals Half-dozen cruise missiles couldn't be fired against Iraq

WASHINGTON, Sept 7: About a half-dozen cruise missiles that should have been flung at Iraqi air defence sites couldn't be fired during the attacks against Saddam Hussein's forces, Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon revealed Friday, reports AP.

The Navy and Air Force launched 44 of the long-distance, remote-controlled weapons this week at targets inside Iraq, including surface-to-air missile sites, command-and-control units and radar sites. They acted in response to Saddam Hussein's attacks on Kurdish minorities in northern Iraq.

Bacon, asked at the Pentagon briefing about the effectiveness of the weaponry, said the complex computerised targeting systems on several of the missiles "weren't programme completely in time" to be fired on the first night.

On the second night, "several missiles did not fire as planned," but back-up missiles were fired from another Navy vessel, he said.

Bacon declined to specify what those problems were, or say exactly how long it takes to program targets for the missiles, which can fly upwards of 500 miles (805 kilometers) to their targets.

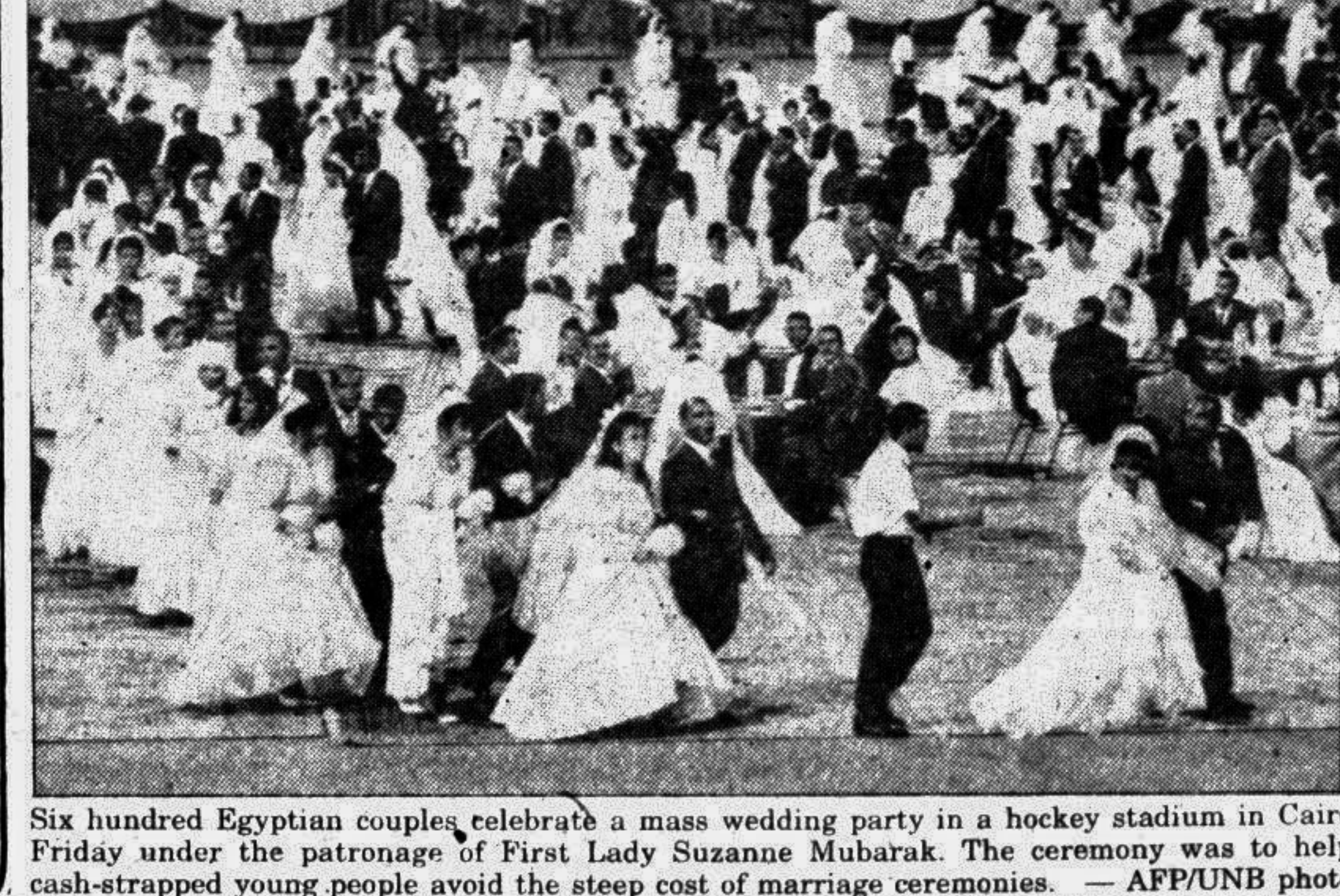
"Some complex tasks take a long time," he said. He said military planners know weapons can malfunction and therefore

plan for such events.

In another development, The New York Times reports in Saturday's edition that a covert CIA operation aimed at overthrowing Saddam was undermined by the Iraqi attack.

CIA officers who were secretly overseeing the operation in northern Iraq left the country last week as Iraqi forces moved in, the newspaper said.

Quoting unidentified senior administration officials, the Times said that President Clinton had expanded the operation in January, directing the CIA to provide weapons, organise some military training, install intelligence-gathering equipment for groups trying to overthrow Saddam.



Six hundred Egyptian couples celebrate a mass wedding party in a hockey stadium in Cairo Friday under the patronage of First Lady Suzanne Mubarak. The ceremony was to help cash-strapped young people avoid the steep cost of marriage ceremonies. — AFP/UNB photo

Tajik opposition fighters take control of Dzhirgatal

DUSHANBE, Sept 7: Tajik opposition fighters have seized the town of Dzhirgatal in the north of the Central Asian State, destroying local administration buildings in a fierce assault, a Tajik official said today, reports Reuters.

Zafar Ikramov, co-chairman of a joint commission set up to monitor a ceasefire agreement, told reporters that the attack was launched on Friday morning and the Islamic rebels had established control over the town by evening.

Dzhirgatal, near Tajikistan's border with Kyrgyzstan, is about 280 km (175 miles) northeast of the capital Dushanbe.

Ikramov said there must have been casualties in the attack but he could give no details, the buildings destroyed included the local headquarters of the Interior Ministry and State Security.

Tragic!

NEW DELHI, Sept 7: An Indian carpenter today killed his wife suspecting her to be a witch and two of his children and later jumped to his death from the roof of his house, police said, reports AFP.

Mohammed Ibrahim Khan, 45, suddenly attacked his wife Lateefa Begum, 35, and his six children in the southern city of Hyderabad with a crowbar, killed her and two daughters, aged 11 and two.

The United News of India (UNI) said the other children were injured.

When neighbours rushed out on hearing the children's cries, Khan ran to the roof and jumped.

Two Serbs kidnapped in Bosnia

TRNOVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sept 7: A band of Muslims sprayed a Serb car with gunfire along the sensitive Gorazde corridor Friday and carried off two men before nearby French NATO troops responded, reports AP.

A 59-year-old woman passenger was shot in the shoulder and hip. Two girls escaped unhurt.

Serb police in Trnovo, 20 miles (32 kilometres) south of Sarajevo, said it was the third kidnapping in two months. Two other Serbs are missing, they said, and another has been located in a Sarajevo jail.

"This is the worst incident we've seen in the three months we've been here, and it's a bad one," said Lt Nicolas Guisse. "No question, everyone is going to be tense after this."

The NATO-led peace force could not confirm the earlier incidents, and police from the Muslim-Croat federation could not be reached from comment.

Bosnian Muslim police said they feared reprisals. A senior officer, who declined to give his name, said reinforcements would protect Muslim hamlets scattered in the heavily forested hills.

Yeltsin's health : Kremlin reverts to its old ways

MOSCOW, Sept 7: At long last, the Kremlin lifted the lid on Boris Yeltsin's health secrets then promptly snapped it shut again, reports AP.

The ailing Russian president broke with years of tight-lipped tradition by admitting that he'll undergo heart surgery later this month and calling for a new era of openness on the taboo topic of a Russian leader's health.

But on Friday, a day after his nationally televised announcement, the Kremlin has reverted to its old ways by refusing to reveal what kind of operation Yeltsin will undergo or where it will be conducted or even who will be in charge in his stead.

The prospect of complex and risky surgery and what might be a long recuperation period has raised fears of instability in a country still wracked by economic troubles and political rivalries.

Cardiology Research Centre director Dr. Yevgeny Chazov, who for years helped keep Leonid Brezhnev alive, told the Interfax news agency that tests on Yeltsin showed "an operation on the coronary vessels is recommended" but that his heart's mitral valve would not have to be replaced. He did not elaborate.

It's expected that the operation will take place at the renowned clinic, but no one was talking. Everyone from secretaries to surgeons nervously declined to discuss the matter.

One prominent cardiologist was about to explain the procedure when he was interrupted by a colleague and promptly hung up the phone.

The dramatic news about the surgery provoked a similarly deafening silence from Yeltsin's administration. For the past two months aides have insisted Yeltsin just hand a cold. They had no more details this week.

It was hardly the neo-glasnost championed by Yeltsin in Thursday's interview: "I want you to have a society of truth. We should not conceal what has been concealed before."

Of course, the Kremlin couldn't expect to reverse overnight Russia's centuries-old policy of secrecy surrounding the health of its leaders — including Yeltsin.

Brezhnev's declining health was for years a matter of speculation and jokes. Earlier this century, the Imperial Family went to great lengths to conceal the hemophilia suffered by Alexei, the only son of Nicholas II, Russia's last czar.

When Yeltsin was hospitalized with the first of two bouts of heart trouble last year, a photograph of him was released to the press to allay public fears. It turned out the photo had been taken three months earlier.

Another "cold" — the term favoured by Soviet spindoctors concealing Brezhnev's and other Soviet leaders' illness — kept Yeltsin out of office for several weeks in 1994.

After Yeltsin ordered troops into breakaway Chechnya in December 1994, he suddenly disappeared for what was announced to be nose surgery — and was in recovery for a suspiciously long two weeks.

Three weeks ago, while Yeltsin was at the Cardiology Center undergoing extensive tests, his office didn't mention the procedure. It instead released the president's new list of Cabinet members.

It is not known who will run the country while Yeltsin undergoes the operation and recovers from it. The constitution only states that the prime minister takes over if the president dies or is permanently incapacitated.

Yeltsin's national security

Off the Record



India's "Bandit Queen", parliamentarian Phoolan Devi presents her autobiography "Moi, Phoolan Devi, reine des bandits" (My name is Phoolan Devi, Bandit Queen), written by French writer Marie-Therese Cuny from hundreds of hours of interviewing, in a Parisian restaurant Friday. — AFP/UNB photo

Human like affinity of elephants

SILIGURI: In the dog-eats-dog world of animals, elephants dying to save the life of another elephant sounds like a tale told from the book of human sacrifice. But that is exactly what happened at a village in Jalpaiguri district on Friday, report PTI.

Officials here said that a herd of 30 wild elephants was roaming near the Teesta Barrage at Gajaladoba village when it spotted a young pachyderm struggling in the river. Some of them immediately jumped in the swirling waters but were themselves caught in the vortex. At least four elephants were washed away.

Local people then raised an alarm and forced the barrage authorities to close the sluice gate and saved the elephants including the young one.

Now it's time to import brides

KAOHSIUNG, Taiwan: Taiwan, upset that so many of its men are marrying foreigners, is cracking down. And the men, who say Taiwanese women are too finicky and not obedient enough, are in an uproar, reports AP.

New quotas are designed to slow the influx of foreign brides — and boost the marriage prospects of Taiwanese women. To the 100 men who crammed into county headquarters in the southern city of Kaohsiung last week, the quotas constitute an "inhuman policy".

They have formed an Association for the Promotion of Marriage Rights to lobby against the quotas.

"Some men have looked in vain for a wife for 20 years and are getting old," said Yeh Fa-Tsung, whose mainland Chinese bride will have to wait 10 years to settle in Taiwan. "How can the government deprive them of their last chance?"

The government maintains that the flood of brides from China, Vietnam, Indonesia and elsewhere in Asia will lead to trouble. It claims ethnically mixed marriages are prone to collapse, and that Taiwanese women's marriage prospects are diminishing.

Yeh, 40, says the women have only themselves to blame: "Many women would rather remain single than marry someone inferior to them."

Clashes leave 14 killed in Colombia

BOGOTA, Colombia, Sept 7: At least 14 soldiers and policemen were killed in clashes with leftist rebels in central and southern Colombia on Friday, officials and military sources said, reports Reuters.

They said the worst fighting occurred in a rural area of southeastern Guaviare province where 10 to 15 soldiers were killed in an apparent ambush by Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerillas.

Guaviare Gov Juan Carlos Medina confirmed the attack in a remote part of the jungle-covered province known as La Carpa, about three hours by riverboat from the provincial capital.

NATO to admit new members from east Europe in 2000

STUTTGART, Germany, Sept 7: The United States has tried to put new momentum into NATO's post-Cold War transformation by formally proposing that a NATO summit in 1997 should approve an alliance charter with Russia, reports Reuters.

It has also signaled more explicitly than before its hope that NATO will admit new members from Eastern Europe in the year 2000.

"Let me share with you the vision that president Clinton and I have for the United States and Europe in the year 2000. It is a vision for a new Atlantic community." US Secretary of State Warren Christopher said in a major speech on Friday.