

BRIEFLY

Mahathir to join solar summit:

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad left Friday for a visit to Zimbabwe, Portugal and the United States. AP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

Mahathir is to be in Zimbabwe until September 17 to attend the World Solar Summit aimed at stepping up usage of solar energy.

He then visits Lisbon for three days to call on Portuguese President Mario Soares and hold talks with Prime Minister Antonio Guterres. From Portugal Mahathir is to fly to Boston where he plans to explore research facilities at the nearby Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Black Americans honoured:

After being ignored by history for 130 years, thousands of black soldiers who fought in the American Civil War got their due Thursday when the site for a national monument to their efforts was officially dedicated. AP reports from Washington.

Some 185,000 blacks fought in the nation's bloodiest war. But when the war ended, they were largely forgotten, and they were intentionally left out of a 1865 victory parade in Washington.

About 500 other people attended the ceremony in Washington's historically Black Show neighbourhood, where the African American Civil War Memorial will be built. The neighbourhood is named for abolitionist Robert Shaw, who led one of the first black Civil War regiments, the Massachusetts 54th.

Typhoon death toll now 162 in China:

The death toll from typhoon Sally, which battered southern China earlier this week, has risen to 162, official media said yesterday. Reuters reports from Beijing.

The typhoon had injured more than 5,000 and flattened more than 272,000 houses when it raged across southern Guangdong province on Monday and slipped into neighbouring Guangxi region the next day. The China Daily said.

It said 50 people were still missing.

Labour widens lead over Tory:

Labour has widened its lead over the ruling Conservatives and would win 51 per cent of the vote if an election took place on Friday. According to an opinion poll published Friday, AFP reports from London.

The Labour Party gained one point since August while the Conservatives at 28 per cent lost two points, the poll published in The Guardian indicated.

The Liberal Democrats lost three points to 15 per cent while other parties gained between two and five points, showed the poll carried out by ICM.

Arab League backs Ghali:

Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, whose hopes for re-election face the prospect of a US veto, received a renewed expression of support on Thursday from the 22-member Arab group. Reuters reports from United Nations.

At a lunch in Boutros-Ghali's honour, the group's current chairman Ambassador Gaafar Allagany of Saudi Arabia, reiterated the backing for a second term voiced by the Arab League at a summit in Cairo in June.

GCC states to hold war games:

Helicopters and forces from Gulf Arab states arrived in Kuwait on Thursday for military exercises. Bahrain's official Gulf news agency reported, but the exercises did not appear to be related to the crisis with Iraq. Reuters reports from Dubai.

The agency said a number of helicopters from the air forces of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states arrived at a Kuwaiti air base for exercises that will be held between September 14-19.

The agency said the manoeuvres were part of a GCC programme of joint exercises. The GCC is a military, political and economic alliance that groups Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman.

24 children fall from staircase, die in China

SHANGHAI, Sept. 13:

Twenty-four Chinese children were killed and another 98 injured when a crowd rushed down a narrow school staircase ended with students falling and being trampled in waves. Wenhui Bao daily said today, reports AFP.

The primary school children, from a rural area in south-western Yunnan Province, were hurrying to attend a daily flag-raising ceremony Monday in their school's front courtyard when disaster struck, the report said.

The school's two courtyards are connected by a passageway, and a staircase only 1.27 metres (4.2 feet) in width, and the mob

of children attempting to pour through numbered 1,300, it added.

The cause of the accident at the Nanping Primary School in Lingcheng county, some 270 kilometres (167 miles) southwest of Kunming, is being investigated.

But the report said the first students to reach the 28-step staircase were knocked down, leading to a pile-up of 200 fallen students in a 13-square-metre (140-square-foot) area.

Teachers and policemen rushed to send those hurt to hospital, but 24 died and 17 others were seriously injured, the daily said.

Junta restores parliament, lifts ban on political parties in Burundi

BUJUMBURA, Burundi, Sept. 13:

Burundi's military-led government restored the parliament and lifted ban on political parties Thursday, seven weeks after a military coup, reports AP.

The assembly is restored in its original form and there are no conditions on political parties. Jean-Luc Ndirizeye, spokesman for the military government, said after the announcement was made on state-run radio.

Military ruler Maj. Pierre Buyoya seized power on July 25, dissolving the parliament, suspending the constitution and banning political parties. President Sylvestre Ntibantunganya fled to the US ambassador's residence, where he remains.

The constitution remains suspended, however, enabling Buyoya to remain in control.

The move was apparently an attempt to ease sanctions imposed by neighbouring countries on August 9, cutting all trade and transportation links until a constitutional form of government was restored. They also demanded that the Tutsi-dominated military also begin peace talks with Hutu rebels.

Buyoya said at a Sunday press conference that he would only talk to rebel groups after they renounced violence and genocide as methods of political change.

Buyoya said he staged the coup as the only way to stop the ethnic violence in Burundi which has claimed more than 150,000 lives since 1993. He also accused Ntibantunganya and his Hutu-dominated FRODEBU political party of organising a genocide against Tutsis, who make up only 14 per cent of the population in Burundi.

International

Religion, politics intertwined as Bosnians go to polls today

SARAJEVO, Sept. 13: Religion and politics are intertwined in Bosnia, with imams and priests invoking support for political parties and whipping up tempers ahead of Bosnia's elections Saturday, reports AFP.

In the run up to the elections, religious images have been invoked by political leaders, while religious leaders have appeared at party rallies.

Religious hierarchies have appeared to be playing out the battles that kept them occupied for centuries.

After an incident late last month when expelled Bosnian Muslims returned to their former homes in a village in currently Serb-held land, a senior Bosnian imam issued a warning to the Serbs.

The message to the Serbs is that the Bosnian (Muslim) people will come in peace to all our villages... but if they want a confrontation, we will fight for our homes, the imam of Islam said.

Serb Orthodox priests, meanwhile, have played a part in the rallies of the ruling extreme Serb Nationalist Party (SDS), set up by wanted war

crimes suspect Radovan Karadzic.

At the northern town of Kotor Varos earlier this week, two Orthodox priests in black cassocks stood on the platform of SDS nodding in support as speakers set out the party's programme of ethnic separation.

Setting the mood, one speaker, Djordje Batinic, told the supporters: 'This is a fine rally but someone is missing... one man who is the personification of Jesus Christ,' he said referring to Karadzic, wanted worldwide on genocide charges.

The Serb candidate to the three-member Bosnian Presidency Monicilo Krajcinovic, a close ally of Karadzic, also invoked religion. 'God is Serb,' he told the same rally.

However this is not the only picture.

Working from an unheated office, Dusan Jovanovic, the Serb Orthodox priest who left the Bosnian capital four months after it was plunged into war has returned ahead of the elections.

On Tuesday he criticised the hierarchy of his own and other churches who mixed religion and nationalist politics.

Based in Belgrade, the Serb Orthodox church is closely implicated in the Bosnian war, with the head of the church, Patriarch Pavle, regularly meeting with Radovan Karadzic and backing his campaign to set up a Serb homeland.

'It is true a lot of people from all churches have been involved in politics,' Jovanovic said in an interview with AFP Tuesday. Choosing his words carefully, he added: 'My personal opinion is that we will all be much happier if the highest levels of all our churches would not get involved in political matters.'

His return, ordered by top church officials in Belgrade, was an 'attempt to rebuild links' and a 'symbol of peace,' said the priest.

And, according to Sarajevo students of theological politics, his highly symbolic return to Sarajevo could be a signal of a change in policy among the upper echelons of the church in Belgrade.

Speaking to AFP Wednesday, the Roman Catholic Cardinal of Bosnia, Vinko Puljic, also sounded a new political direction.

The Catholic Church, he said, had decided last month not to back in the elections the main Croat nationalist political party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ).

Meanwhile, the two main Serb opposition parties have agreed to form a coalition after elections in the Bosnian Serb entity, a rally of one of the parties heard Thursday.

Zivko Radisic, leader of the main opposition to the ruling Serb Democratic Party, the left-leaning Alliance for Peace and Progress (APP), told his party's final rally he had reached an agreement with the other main opposition party, the Democratic Patriotic Bloc (DPB).

The two are bidding to topple the hardline ruling party of Serb President Biljana Plavsic.

'We have just today achieved an agreement with the Democratic Patriotic Bloc and with the majority of political parties which are participating in upcoming elections,' Radisic told a rally of about 7,000 supporters at a soccer stadium.

The agreement would allow for the creation of a 'strong coalition,' Radisic, 59, said.

Top Shi'ite leader gunned down in Islamabad

ISLAMABAD, Sept. 13:

A prominent Shi'ite leader was gunned down as he said his final prayers of the day, the state-run news agency said Friday, reports AP.

Three gunmen burst into the home of Allama Murid Abbas Yazdani in a posh suburb of the federal capital late on Thursday and shot and killed him, the Associated Press of Pakistan reported.

Yazdani was the leader of the Shi'ite group Sipah-e-Mohammed and police officials were refusing to speculate. No arrests have been made.

In recent weeks there has been a fresh outbreak of sectarian violence between militant members of rival Shi'ite and Sunni Muslim groups.

Most of Pakistan's 130 million people are Sunni Muslims, who generally get along with their Shi'ite brethren.

Taliban capture another key town

ISLAMABAD, Sept. 13:

Afghanistan's rebel Taliban Islamic militia captured Mehtar Lam Town, capital of the eastern pro-government province of Laghman, early today, a Pakistan-based Afghan news service said, reports Reuters.

The Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) quoted Taliban sources in neighbouring Pakistan as saying there had been little resistance to the militia, who it said had advanced from the adjoining Nangarhar province which it freed on Wednesday.

The sources said the defenders of Mehtar Lam, which was controlled by the Hezb-e-Islami Party of Afghan Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, had fled by the time Taliban forces arrived before dawn.

Taliban sources in the main eastern town of Jalalabad, capital of Nangarhar, told reporters, on Thursday that the militia had entered Laghman territory in a three-pronged offensive.



Leader of the extreme left National Democratic Front-Nepal, Amik Sherchen (R) leads an anti-Indian demonstration in Kathmandu on Thursday. The nationwide demonstration was held to protest the Indo-Nepal Mahakali Integration Development Project Treaty, on the eve of a dawn-to-dusk general strike on Friday. — AFP/UNB photo

'Use of force in Iraq without UNSC approval unacceptable'

MOSCOW, Sept. 13: Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov said on Thursday the use of force in Iraq without the approval of the UN Security Council was unacceptable. Interfax news agency reported, says Reuters.

It quoted Primakov as saying, when asked about the situation in Iraq, that unilateral use of force by any state was 'absolutely unacceptable.' And that it must be sanctioned by the Security Council.

He said Russia is doing everything possible to prevent factors arising which would provoke an escalation of tension in the region.

Russia has denounced last week's US air strikes against Iraq. Security chief Alexander Lebed has said Washington was behaving like a 'bull in a China shop' and President Boris Yeltsin said in a television interview that he backed the government's opposition to the strikes.

Primakov said on Thursday Russia was doing all it could to ensure balanced, fruitful relations with the United States.

'This is essential for us. We know the role and place of the United States in the World. But that does not mean we should be in a supporting role and repeat everything Washington does.'

Russia has generally taken a softer line on Iraq than the United States since the end of the Gulf conflict, and has been pushing Washington and its Western European allies to lift crippling post-war sanctions against Baghdad.

Meanwhile, the United States on Thursday pledged to defend Kuwait and other countries in the Gulf after Iraq warned Kuwait not to permit US planes to use its territory as a base to attack Iraq.

The United States expresses its commitment to the security of our friends in the Gulf and in view of Iraqi statements repeats that commitment.

Rafsanjani says

Iran, SA won't tolerate US interference

PRETORIA, Sept. 13: Iran and South Africa will not tolerate interference by the United States in the growing friendship between the two countries, Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani said here Thursday, reports AFP.

Rafsanjani, who is on a controversial two-day state visit to South Africa, told a banquet thrown in his honour by President Nelson Mandela that Iran and South Africa are determined to pursue strengthened economic ties, despite Washington opposition.

'We are ready to assist you in development and I know that the United States will not be satisfied with this cooperation of ours,' Rafsanjani said.

'For those two nations that have struggled, that have triumphed over the struggle, they will never let America decide their fate and destiny,' Rafsan-

jani added, referring to South Africa and Iran.

Mandela, who spoke first, welcomed progress in relations between the two countries, saying more was being done to strengthen bilateral ties.

The South African leader told the banquet, which included many women dressed in black and wearing veils, that South Africa was grateful for Iran's contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle.

Mandela thanked Iran's Islamic government, formerly led by the Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, for building 'ties of brotherhood' with South Africa's now-ruling African National Congress (ANC) when it was banned during apartheid.

'Iran refused to oil the system which the world regarded as a crime against humanity,' Mandela said.



Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani inspects a company of mainly female South African medical service soldiers on his arrival at the Johannesburg International Airport on Thursday. His two-day state visit has prompted political criticism at home and abroad. — AFP/UNB photo

Possibility of Iraqi attack on Kuwait seems remote

WASHINGTON, Sept. 13: Iraq once again is talking war against Kuwait. But the threat, however unimpressive to Kuwaitis, is probably nothing more than that — talk, reports AP.

Even if the US-built defensive shield in the Persian Gulf fails to dissuade Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein from grabbing for Kuwait again, it would give him almost no chance to repeat the success of August 1990, when his army rolled over Kuwait with virtually no armed resistance.

'It's already too late' for Saddam to make a successful move on Kuwait, given the extra firepower the US military is now moving into the area, said Robert Gates, who was CIA director in the Bush administration's final year.

Might Saddam try anyway? 'With American control of the air, that would be an excep-

tionally stupid act,' Gates said Thursday. He and other private analysts said they saw little possibility Iraq would attack Kuwait, but they were unwilling to rule it out.

Kuwait had been quiet in the latest US-Iraqi confrontation, which focused mainly on Iraqi aggression in northern Iraq. That changed when the Pentagon announced Wednesday that Kuwait had agreed to let eight US Air Force F-117A stealth fighter-bombers use a Kuwaiti air base for potential strikes on Iraq.

That amounts to 'an act of war against the Iraqi state,' said Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz. He likened the situation to the 1990 period just before Iraq invaded Kuwait, which the Iraqis consider a renegade Iraqi province.

But much has changed since 1990.

Although Kuwait may be only marginally more capable of defending itself against Iraq than it was six years ago, the United States, with help from Britain and France, has developed a formidable defensive force in and around Kuwait.

In Kuwait: The US Army has stored enough tanks and other weapons and supplies to equip a full armoured brigade of about 5,000 soldiers. On short notice they could fly into Kuwait and link up with the equipment. There is a similar package of armour and supplies stashed in Qatar, just to the south.

The Army also has in Kuwait a Patriot air defence battalion whose missiles could be used not only against attacking Iraqi warplanes but also in the event Saddam launched Scud ballistic missiles toward Kuwait.

Coincidentally, about 1,200 US soldiers from Fort Hood, Texas, and Forty McPherson, Ga. are now conducting an exercise, 'Intrinsic Action,' in Kuwait.

In Saudi Arabia: The US Air Force has a powerful contingent of F-15 fighters and other aircraft, including an AWACS early warning plane, which have been patrolling the skies over southern Iraq since 1992 from Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

In the Persian Gulf: The aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson and its battle group are plying the Gulf waters, to be joined shortly by a second aircraft carrier, the USS Enterprise. The US 5th Fleet is based at Bahrain, just off the Saudi Gulf coast.

There was no US carrier in the Gulf when Iraq invaded Kuwait six years ago.

Logic also would argue against an Iraqi attack on Kuwait, if, as many Westerners believe, one of Saddam's top priorities is splitting the United States from its Arab allies in the Gulf. Logic, however, has not always been the best guide in trying to predict or interpret the Iraqi leader's military actions.

After investing billions of dollars and spilling American and allied blood to oust the Iraqi army from Kuwait in 1990, the United States is taking nothing for granted.

President Clinton has proven on at least two occasions that he is not going to let Kuwait be threatened by Iraq on the ground,' said Harry G. Summers, Jr., a retired Army colonel who monitors American military capabilities.

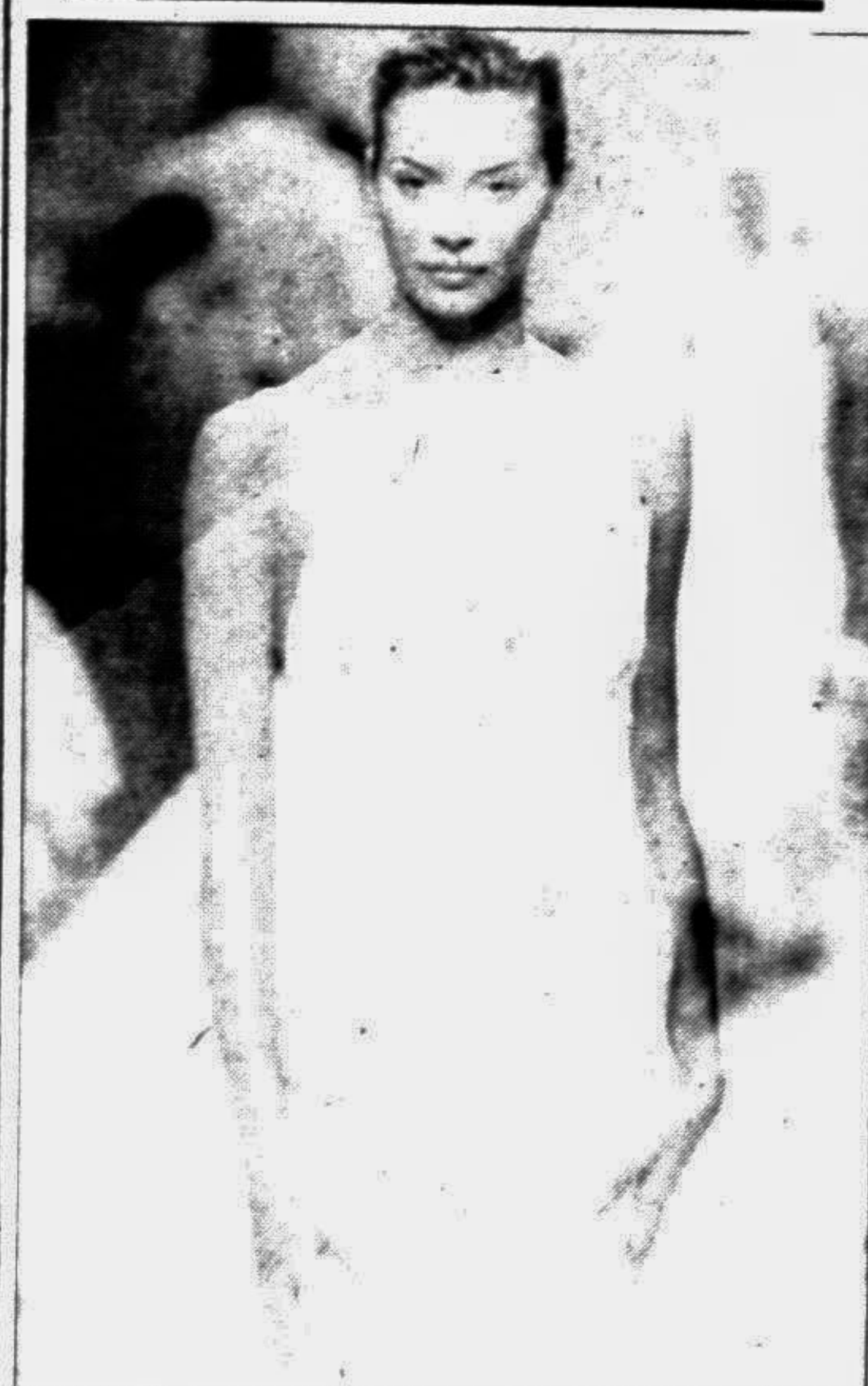
Summers was referring to two episodes — in October 1994

and August 1995 — which demonstrated that even a hint of Iraqi troop movements would trigger the Kuwaiti border to ward an immediate reinforcement of US firepower in the Gulf.

In the 1994 episode, the Iraqi army sent a large force toward the Kuwaiti border in what Washington viewed as the start of another invasion. Clinton ordered US air, sea and ground reinforcements to the Gulf. Saddam backed off.

Last August, the Pentagon put large numbers of US forces on alert for movement to the Gulf after US intelligence picked up indications that some Iraqi troops south of Baghdad might be preparing to head south. The threat never materialised, but US officials said they were unwilling to just watch and wait.

Off the Record



A model presents a dress of Spanish designer Antonio Perlas for the Spring Summer 97 fashion show 'the Pasarela Cibeles' on Thursday in Madrid. — AFP/UNB photo

Veterinarian fined for ruining parrot's sex life

SYDNEY: A judge has ordered a veterinarian to pay 12,300 Australian dollars (9,700 US dollars) to a bird collector for negligently treating his favourite parrot's legs and ruining its sex life, reports AP.

Judge Terence Christie said the 'possible stud career' of a blue and gold South American male macaw named Nelson is in doubt because strong legs are essential for the macaws' intricate mating ritual.

Bird lover Roger Schlup told the New South Wales District Court male and female macaws stand on a perch next to each other, twist around and align their rear ends when they mate.

Schlup said he took Nelson to veterinarian Ross Perry with a broken right leg in 1994.

He alleged that Perry somehow broke the bird's other leg during treatment and then failed to fix either properly. 'As a result of the negligent treatment, Nelson has been left with a... significant deformity of the left leg, a loss of mobility and loss of power and strength and consequent inability to mate,' Schlup said in a statement to the court.

Schlup said he now has no chance to breed the willing, but unable, Nelson and sell his offspring.

He had sued Perry for 12,300 Australian dollars (9,700 US dollars) in damages.

'Chinese were fertility worshippers'

BEIJING: China has found one of its oldest phallic symbols, a rare 3,000-year-old black stone carving that shows ancient Chinese were fertility worshippers, the Xinhua news agency said, reports Reuters.

The carving is a rare find in a country where people are traditionally not open about sex, the official news agency quoted Chinese archaeologists as saying.

The soft black stone carving of male reproductive organs dates back some 3,000 years and was found on an islet that will form part of the foundations of the huge Three Gorges Dam — China's largest water control project — in central Hubei province, Xinhua said.

Poor leopard's 3 hrs of freedom in a locality

BANGKOK, Thailand: A leopard who slipped out of its cage after its owner failed to lock it enjoyed only three hours of freedom Thursday before being shot to death, reports AP.

Dozens of villagers and officials from the police, navy and livestock department had joined the effort to corral the beast who escaped after its owner, Chare Sonkrung, failed to secure its cage after feeding her.

The hunt in Traklang district in the eastern seaboard province of Trat required little enterprise as the 11-year-old animal had wandered nearby to curl up under a food storage platform. Footage of the incident was shown on Thai TV Channel 7's evening news programme.

Efforts were made first to capture the animal with a net, and then by shooting it with tranquilizer darts, but they were unsuccessful. Many people were injured in the process, said the television report, without giving details.

The TV footage showed panicked people standing on the back of a pickup truck scrambling for safety as the leopard — which appeared unaggressive — approached.

It crawled under the vehicle and then was shot and killed with several rounds from an M16 rifle as it crawled out again.

Authorities said they killed the leopard because it had already mauled some people and they were afraid it would be escape to the jungle after dark.

The report did not say why Charay, a farmer, kept a leopard.



Ruth Nahamani, 42, smiles as she holds the 180-page ruling of the Israeli Supreme Court's 11-justice panel in Jerusalem on Thursday, that allows her to make use of eggs, fertilised in vitro by her husband Danny. Danny Nahamani, who married Ruth in 1984, lives with another woman with whom he has two children and he has filed for divorce from Ruth. Doctors say that Ruth who is unable to bear a child can probably no more produce eggs. Her only hope for a child of her own are these fertilised eggs and a surrogate mother that will bear the child. — AFP/UNB photo