

Zairean govt rejects talks with rebels

KINSHASA, Jan 26: Zaire's government has rejected any dialogue with rebels in the east of the country, where hundreds of thousands of refugees are desperately trying to avoid being caught in fighting between the two sides, reports AFP.

A statement broadcast on national radio after a cabinet meeting Saturday reaffirmed Kinshasa's determination to recover all the territory lost to the Tutsi-led rebels led by Laurent Desiré Kabila.

The government also once again accused Rwanda and Uganda of supporting the rebels, who it claimed were using children as human shields.

The statement came shortly after UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata expressed serious concern at the threat to some 400,000 refugees from hunger, disease and the effects of the fighting.

Aid agencies were virtually unable to help them, Ogata said. Meanwhile the Zairean press reported that Kinshasa was using foreign mercenaries, accusing the West of "hypocrisy" in ignoring the alleged use of Rwanda, Burundian and Ugandan troops by the rebels.

The French daily Liberation reported Friday that a Belgian mercenary, Christian taverniers, had recruited some 280 European soldiers of fortune to help the Zairean army.

On Saturday the Belgian daily Libre Belgique said taverniers had made several trips to Africa in recent years, including to Zaire and southern Sudan.

It published a photograph of him in Nazi Wehrmacht uniform posing for a military magazine which edited in 1989.

Blaze in HK Police start questioning suspect

HONG KONG Jan 26: Police were Sunday questioning a suspect after a blaze in a Hong Kong Karaoke bar left 15 dead and two critically injured, reports AFP.

Police have classified the case as arson and suspect the fire spread so rapidly from the staircase to the second floor that it could mean there was some fuel to help the fire," director of fire services Peter Cheung was quoted as saying in Sunday newspapers.

A cache of knives cleavers and other weapons was found in the building late Saturday.

"We are monitoring the Triads but so far we have no evidence that this was a well-organised counter-attack superintended by Victor Lo was quoted as saying in Sunday's Hong Kong standard.

The 38-year-old arrested man had been involved in an assault at the bar, in the tourist and commercial district of Tsim Sha Tsui, on Thursday, a

Rallies in Seoul, 13 other cities demanding repeal of labour law

SEOUL, Jan 26: Tens of thousands of workers and supporters rallied in Seoul and 13 other cities Sunday to force the government to repeal a labour law that had sparked three weeks of nationwide protests, reports AP.

They were the first rallies jointly sponsored by South Korea's two rival labour groups — one sanctioned and the other outlawed by the government. Leaders of both groups agreed for the first time last week to take a common front against the law.

"Our fight has won a new friendly force," said Kwon Young-gil, head of the outlawed Confederation of Trade Unions, which played a key role in the nationwide protests.

"Our goal is one and the same: Repeal of the evil law," Park In-sang, head of the only government-sanctioned Confederation of Korean Trade Unions, said.

Organisers said that about 300,000 workers and supporters turned out for the rallies throughout the country, including 70,000 in Seoul. Many workers were bussed in for the Seoul rally.

At Seoul's Yoido plaza, demonstrators shouted "repeal the evil law" and "Kim Young-sam, resign," raising thousands of red, blue, yellow and white flags. Kim is the South Korean President.

Near a huge elevated platform facing the crowd were about three dozen black mourning streamers with a sign "funeral of democracy" written on them in white and yellow.

Wearing red headbands and jackets with a sign "Unity, Fight" on them, thousands of workers fluttered paper flags. Three car-sized air balloons floated over with streamers flowing down from them. One streamer said: "For victory by general strike."

The current labour protests began within hours after the disputed law was rammed through Parliament on December 26 by ruling party legislators in a secret, pre-dawn session. No opposition members were present.

Workers think the law threatens their jobs by allowing mass-layoffs while delaying key labour freedoms, including the right to form trade unions for several years.

Protests have since ballooned into the nation's largest organised labour protests ever. Hundreds of auto and other export plants were temporarily crippled, costing an already ailing economy over 3 billion dollars in lost production and export earnings.

Faced with dwindling support and pressure to compromise, unions called off the nationwide protests last week and ordered a one-day strike every Wednesday for the time being.

They promised to resume protests on February 18 unless the law is rewritten by then.

The government, under domestic and international pressure, also backed down and agreed to let Parliament reconsider the bill, scheduled to go into effect March 1.

Troops defuse 3 land mines in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Jan 26: Indian troops defused three land mines in Kashmir early this morning and were on a high security alert during the country's Republic Day which Muslim separatists have vowed to sabotage, reports AFP.

Soldiers chanced upon the mines near three security bunkers in this summer capital of Kashmir state during patrolling, a police spokesman said.

"The security forces remain on full alert," an officer told AFP. "We are not taking any chances."

Muslim guerillas opened up random fire from AK-47 assault rifle and triggered loud explosions overnight in Srinagar, sparking panic. But it was not clear if any one was hurt.

Hundreds of Indian soldiers and paramilitary troops and a Kashmir police patrolled the deserted streets of Srinagar today. The security was maximum in and around the Bakshi Stadium which a police-cum-military parade would be held to mark India's Republic Day.

Braving icy winds, soldiers in battle fatigue observed houses and rooftops from behind abandoned hard carts and inside underground bunkers in this city of 800,000 people.

Many had binoculars.

Soldiers were also inside armoured vehicles, jeeps and trucks which cruised the streets of Srinagar. Some were armed with light artillery and rocket launchers.

The security personnel also took up positions on rooftops around the Bakshi Stadium from where Muslim separatists have in the past fired rockets at the official celebrations.

The All Party Freedom Conference, an umbrella grouping of Muslim separatist outfits, has urged Srinagar's Muslim residents to remain indoors and boycott the Republic Day celebrations.

India observes Republic Day

NEW DELHI, Jan 26: India marked the 47th anniversary of the day it became a republic Sunday with its customary combination of pageantry and heightened security, reports AP.

Some 7,000 police officers kept the peace in the capital, where Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda opened celebrations in the morning by placing a wreath at India Gate, a stone arch at the heart of New Delhi that is a symbol of nationhood. Gowda and President Shankar Dayal Sharma later presided over a parade of soldiers, tanks, fighter planes and colourful floats.

New Delhi's Republic Day parade is a show of the country's military force, as if in answer to the challenge separatist guerillas traditionally make on the holiday. No violence was reported early Sunday.

Militants including Muslims in the northern state of Kashmir and tribespeople in several northeastern states want out of the 47-year-old republic, and often launch an attack on Republic Day.

Police over the last few days conducted sweeps in New Delhi, searching for bombs and militants. In Srinagar, state capital of Kashmir, the army has been conducting searches for the past week and a half.

Soldiers occupied houses and two hospitals near the Srinagar stadium where the main Kashmiri parade was held. The parade was peaceful, but attended by only about 400 military and political leaders.

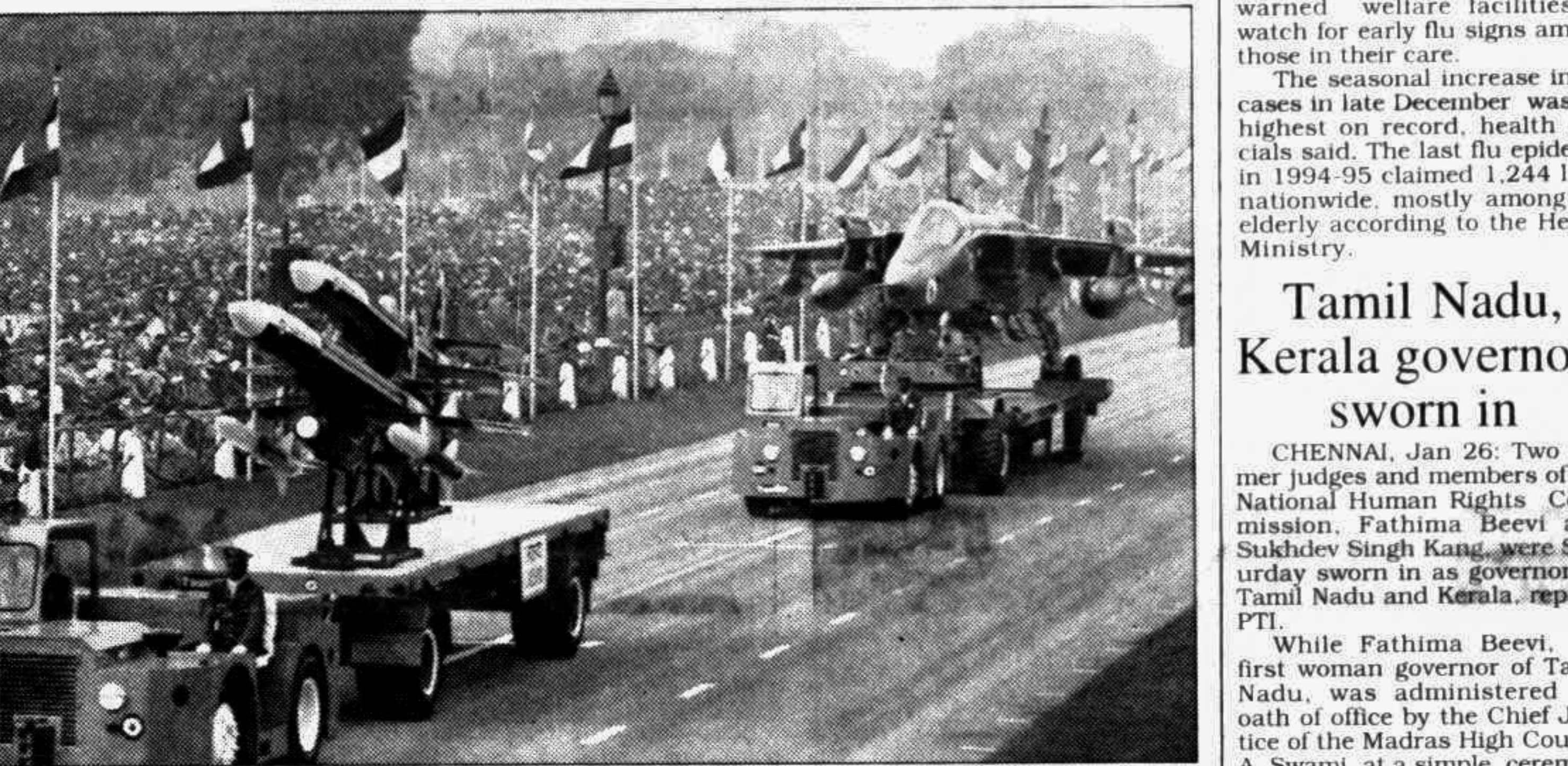
Sudan launches offensive against Ethiopian troops

KHARTOUM, Jan 26: The Sudanese army launched an offensive against Ethiopian troops in eastern Sudan, state television reported late Saturday, reports AFP.

The television said a large number of Ethiopian troops had been killed in the clashes in Sudan's Blue Nile state, but it gave no casualty figures.

It was the first report of direct clashes between Sudanese forces and Ethiopian troops.

Khartoum has accused neighbouring Ethiopia and Eritrea of supporting an offensive by Sudanese rebels in the east of the country.



The home-made pilotless target aircraft called "Lakshya" (L) are exhibited during the 48th annual Republic Day Parade in New Delhi yesterday. India displayed its military muscle and cultural variety at the colourful parade.

US doctors attempt to cure AIDS infection in newborn twins

WASHINGTON, Jan 26: A pioneering attempt to cure a pair of AIDS-infected newborn twins has resulted in apparent control of the virus in a baby girl but failure in her brother, reports AP.

The babies caught the virus from their mother, who did not know she was infected with HIV. Treatment with three AIDS drugs started when the babies were 10 weeks old. They are now 18 months old.

At first, both babies seemed to respond well to the treatment. Most signs of the virus disappeared from their blood.

However, two months ago, the virus returned in the boy. Meanwhile, his sister remains virus free, although doctors are hardly ready to declare her cured.

But that is their aim.

"Our goal is very long-term suppression of HIV with potential eradication," said Dr. Katherine Luzuriaga of the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

Luzuriaga described the babies' treatment Saturday at the fourth annual Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections.

This and other studies in adults will help determine whether it is indeed possible to cure an AIDS infection. Doctors say that ridding the body of HIV is theoretically possible, although for many patients the best that may be expected is keeping the virus from flaring up and making them sick.

The twin study "raises the big question: Can we eradicate the virus? We don't know yet, but if we are going to try, we want to do it as soon as the infection occurs," said Dr. Catherine Wilfert of Duke University.

That's why doctors are intrigued by the twins. Presumably, if AIDS can be cured, it is most likely to happen in those whose immune systems have not already been wrecked by HIV.

Dr. David Ho and others from the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Centre in New York are attempting to cure AIDS in adults by aggressively treating them within a few months of catching the virus.

US financial aid programme for South Asian societies

WASHINGTON, Jan 26: For a generation of American scholars and students, the Overseas Research Centres located in South Asia have provided an opportunity to explore the cultural richness of the Subcontinent, a chance to learn its languages, and to study the complexities of South Asian societies, reports AP.

Since the 1970s, the United States has provided — via the Department of State and the US Information Agency — financial support under the Fulbright programme for a number of these centers in South Asia to assist them in carrying out their activities.

Until 1993, USIA provided funds to these organisations on a direct basis, then began providing funds to the Council of American Overseas Research Centres which now oversees the distribution of assistance to the research centres.

Most of these studies associations were originally established to facilitate the work of scholars in academic fields, but their activities increasingly include sponsoring conferences and fora to increase understanding and intellectual exchange among peoples.

Ten centres worldwide receive support from USIA, three of which are located in the Asian Subcontinent:

American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS) is headquartered at the University of Chicago and maintains six offices in India — in Calcutta, Madras, Pune, Madurai, Ramnagar, and two in New Delhi — as well as two major research archives, one specializing in art and archaeology, the other in ethnomusicology.

AIIS was established in 1961 to promote Indian studies by Americans, to provide accurate knowledge about India to the international scholarly community, and to foster cross-cultural understanding between people from both countries.

During the last thirty-five years, AIIS has awarded more than 3,000 research fellowships in a wide range of disciplines plus grants to more than 730 US graduate students to study Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Sanskrit, and other languages of the Subcontinent. USIA funds support approximately fifteen fellowships for US students and scholars to study or conduct research work in India annually.

Demonstrating a bilateral operational approach, AIIS is supervised by a Board of Trustees in the United States and by an Indian advisory group and a binational committee in India.

The American Institute of Pakistan Studies, AIPS is a consortium of institutions and individuals created in 1973. The goals of the organization are to promote American scholarly research in Pakistan and promote interaction between the peoples of the two countries. AIPS is headquartered in the United States at Wake Forest University and recently opened its first independent field office in Pakistan.

USIA budget support for AIPS makes possible approximately six grants for US scholars to do research in Pakistan and sponsors Pakistani scholars traveling to the United States.

The American Institute of Bangladesh Studies, AIBS was founded in 1989. It is headquartered at Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. AIBS is represented in Dhaka by the Center for Development Research Bangladesh, founded in 1982, by Bangladeshi scholars, businessmen, government officials, and NGO activists.

AIBS and CDRB aim to increase the knowledge of Bangladeshi society and culture and to enhance mutual understanding between the two countries.

Activities currently being pursued by AIBS include supporting two Bangladeshi scholars-in-residence in the US workshops in Bangladesh for local scholars, supplemental support for six American scholars doing research in Bangladesh as AIBS Fellows, mostly funded by the Bangladeshi government, support of US undergraduate students doing social science research in Bangladesh, and a small program translating Bengali works into English.

These centre of research constitute one of the best avenues for American academics and students to become acquainted with South Asian societies. They also promote the important goal of strengthening knowledge and mutual understanding between Americans and the civilizations, cultures, and peoples of the subcontinent.

Off the Record



Model Felicity Gain, dressed as a Barbie Aerobics doll, holds up one of the new Barbie Collectibles Marilyn Monroe dolls Saturday. Three versions of the famous '50s sex goddess are to go on sale later this year, wearing three of Monroe's classic dresses, and they were displayed for the first time at the British Toy and Hobby Fair at London's Olympia. The fair is open until Wednesday.

'It's every Italian's dream'

NEW YORK: Tony Danza's dream has finally come true — he's a song-and-dance man, reports AP.

Doing his own cabaret act is a big change for the ex-boxer from Brooklyn who rose to sitcom stardom "Taxi" and "Who's the Boss".

"I never really saw myself as a television star — I really saw myself as Sammy Davis Jr.," Danza says in Saturday's New York Post.

Danza is performing at Rainbow And Stars, the cabaret lounge at the Rainbow Room restaurant in New York.

"It's every Italian's dream," Danza said. "A stage, a spotlight and a microphone."

His idol is Frank Sinatra, calling him "the greatest performer in the last 100 years." Danza worked with the Chairman of the Board during Sinatra's 80th birthday show, singing "Our Love is Here to Stay."

"It was one of the biggest nights of my life," Danza said, adding that he has no illusions about becoming another Sinatra.

"I couldn't fill Sinatra's shoes," Danza joked. "I couldn't carry his shoes. I couldn't shake them."

Good news for shy mothers-to-be

COLOMBO: Shy mothers-to-be will soon be able to savour comfort in a maternity hospital that will employ only women. Sri Lanka's health minister said Sunday, reports AP.

"Most pregnant mothers feel uncomfortable, and even embarrassed with male doctors and other staff working in a maternity ward," said A.H.M. Fowzie, the health minister.

All the staff in the new hospital will be female, relieving a "lot of the tension felt during the final days of labour for a woman," he said.

The all-female maternity hospital is expected to be completed by July.

ROK, Japanese leaders conclude summit

BEPPU, Japan, Jan 26: South Korean President Kim Young-sam and Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto concluded their summit Sunday by agreeing to continue their series of informal meetings, reports AP.

"I hope we can continue to maintain the kind of relations that enable us to visit each other wearing everyday clothes," Japanese officials quoted Hashimoto as telling Kim.

For his part, Kim told Hashimoto that he was welcome in South Korea anytime, the officials said.

The summit was the second in a series of informal gatherings that the two leaders have begun to conduct. The first, on the South Korean island of Cheju last year, produced an agreement to co-host the 2002 soccer World Cup.

Kim departed this hot spring resort on the southern island of Kyushu for South Korea on Sunday afternoon.

Earlier, he enjoyed a morning jog in brisk temperatures with about 20 aides and a number of police security escorts.

After their breakfast, the two leaders were visited by Beppu Mayor Nobuyuki Inoue and Oita prefectural (provincial) Governor Morihiro Hiramatsu, who had them sign a soccer ball. Oita was selected as one of the Japanese venues for the World Cup matches.

Saturday's summit meeting included an agreement on the two countries' North Korean policy. But it also saw Hashimoto being forced to apologise for pre-summit remarks by his top aide which South Korea found insulting. The aide, Seiroku Kajiyama, suggested that the Japanese military's use of sex slaves during World War II was justified by the mores of the time.

Despite the furor that resulted in South Korea, Hashimoto and Kim agreed to cooperate in trying to persuade North Korea to join four way talks on the future of the Korean peninsula. Such talks would include the two Koreas, the United States and China.

North Korea recently issued an apology for a September submarine infiltration into South Korea. Twenty-four North Koreans and 11 South Koreans died in the infiltration and the manhunt that followed.

Taliban capture 2 districts in N-Afghanistan

KABUL, Jan 26: The Taliban religious militia claimed today to have captured two districts in the strategic Ghorband Valley in northern Afghanistan and that rival soldiers switched sides, reports AP.

"Shinwari and Siagird districts in Ghorband Valley were captured by the Mujahideen of the Islamic army yesterday (Saturday)," the Taliban-controlled radio *Shariat* announced in its morning bulletin.

It said some 2,000 armed men "realising the reality of the Islamic government", defected and joined the Taliban in area.

The report could not immediately be confirmed.

Travellers stranded as IA pilots stay home in India

NEW DELHI, Jan 26: Hundreds of travellers were stranded across India on Saturday when pilots of the state-owned domestic airline protested by not turning up for work, reports Reuters.

Officials at Indian Airlines (IA) said 22 flights were cancelled on Friday and seven on Saturday as at least 92 pilots stayed home to back demands for fixed flying hours, allowances, free meals during layovers, and other benefits.

A total of 92 commanders and co-pilots have gone on sick leave or for other reasons and Indian Airlines (IA) has suffered a loss of around 13 million rupees (160,000 dollars) since yesterday. Shekhar Ghose, general manager of the airline told Reuters.

Airline officials said a wage agreement with the pilots was not up for re-negotiation until December 1998.

Ghose said four pilots had been suspended from duties after they refused to fly.

Rafsanjani meets Rabbani

President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani met in Tehran Saturday with ousted Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani, a gesture to support him as the head of the legitimate government in the war-torn Afghanistan. Xinhua reports from Tehran.

The state-run Iranian television reported that Rabbani expressed his thanks to President Rafsanjani for Iran's constant efforts in resolving the Afghan crisis. We and our anguished people hope that Islamic Iran would succeed in its efforts to bring the different Afghan factions to the negotiating table thereby paving the way for a ceasefire and restoration of peace in war-torn Afghanistan, Rabbani said.

Greece sends 22 Indians back home

Twenty two Indian illegal immigrants who claimed to have survived a mysterious shipwreck in which 283 people drowned in December off Malta have been sent back home police said on Saturday, AFP reports from Athens.

The Indians were put on board a regular flight from Athens to New Delhi late Friday police said. Thirty-seven Pakistanis and 29 Sri Lankans who survived the same shipwreck, were deported on Wednesday to Karachi, while 22 other Pakistanis are seeking political asylum and waiting for their requests to be processed.

Protestors free Albanian FM

Albania's Foreign Minister Tritan Shehu was on his way to Tirana late Saturday after being released by demonstrators who had been holding him in the southwestern town of Lushnja, state television reported, AFP reports from Tirana.

Earlier, the Foreign Ministry said it had lost contact with its minister, who had been hit by a rock and held by angry protestors. He had flown to Lushnja to try to calm tensions as thousands of protestors demonstrated against the collapse of bogus savings schemes.

Newsman killed in Algeria

The hand-cuffed and charred body of a news photographer of the Weekly Noticias was discovered Saturday in a car in a town south of Buenos Aires, police sources said, AFP reports from Buenos Aires.

Jose Luis Cabezas, 34, who had been covering the summer storm that hit the exclusive resort town of Pinamar, was found in an automobile on a coastal highway that links the country's resorts. Investigators, who said the body and the car were thoroughly burned, had no immediate leads.

7 die in Sumatra road accident

Seven Indonesians died and 20 were injured when a bus collided with a truck in Riau Province on Sumatra Island, the Antara news agency reported from Jakarta yesterday.

Antara quoted police sources as saying the accident happened on Saturday afternoon in Siak Sri Indrapura district. The bus was travelling to Buton from the provincial capital of Pekanbaru.

"Five of the victims died instantly while two others died on the way to the hospital," Antara said. It gave no other details.

Brazilian actor jailed for 19 yrs

Brazilian actor Guilherme De Padua Saturday was sentenced to 19 years in prison for the assassination of famous TV actress Daniella Perez on December 28, 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Xinhua reports from Brasilia.

De Padua and Perez were the actor and actress in a television novel in which they performed lovers. According to unconfirmed reports, De Padua killed Daniella to prove that he was a loyal husband after his wife was unhappy with his role in the TV novel.