

Uncertainty still looms over fate of Pak democracy

LAHORE, Feb 4: Pakistanis were told Monday's elections for parliament and a new prime minister would give them a new grip on democracy. Instead, they face the same old uncertainty, reports AP.

In the shadows, a powerful president and an interfering army threaten to weaken the authority of the new government.

Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, whose dismissal on corruption charges in November made Monday's vote necessary, has accused the president of rigging the elections in favour of her rival, Nawaz Sharif.

Though official result had not been announced late Monday, Sharif was ebullient, telling supporters early estimates showed his Pakistan Muslim Party winning a simple majority in the 217-seat National Assembly. Benazir's own party said she was lagging behind.

Benazir had threatened to go to court to challenge the validity of the vote if her Pakistan

People's Party wins fewer than 90 seats.

If Sharif does get into office, he'll face an opposition that will see Monday's low voter turnout as proof he lacks broad support. Election observers estimated turnout at 25 per cent, the lowest since the military yielded to civilian rule in Pakistan 12 years ago.

Hard-line Muslim parties that boycotted the polls threaten street demonstrations aimed at toppling the government.

But all that may be the least of the new government's worries.

Since firing Benazir 90 days ago, President Farooq Leghari has implemented sweeping economic reforms and established a security council that gave the army a foothold in civilian politics.

Leghari insists the council's role is merely advisory. But in Pakistan's 50-year history, the army has ruled 25 years, throwing out elected governments because the generals said the politicians were incompetent.

When Pakistanis have elected representatives, presidents step in a few years later to fire them. This has happened to all four elected governments since military rule ended in 1985.

When Leghari dismissed Benazir, he told Pakistanis that the new elections would revive the country's democracy.

Yet, the president also has made it clear that if the new prime minister attempts to stray from the economic path dictated while the interim government was in power, that person, too, will be fired.

Leghari was elected by members of the last parliament and has two more years in an office meant to be largely ceremonial.

He said his economic agenda is the only "safe" route. But his calls for new taxes and limited government spending — not even on desperately needed schools, hospitals and roads — will be a difficult plan for an elected government to sell in a country where many people barely can afford two meals a day.

Troops mount fresh offensive against LTTE

COLOMBO, Feb 4: Heavily armed Sri Lankan troops today mounted a fresh drive against Tamil Tiger guerrillas on the anniversary of the country's independence, officials here said, reports AP.

Security forces began their advance into territory held by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from the northern district of Vavuniya, the officials said.

There were no immediate reports to casualties in the operation, which coincided with the 49th anniversary of Sri Lanka's independence from Britain.

Analysts had expected the offensive for some time as part of the government's objective of opening a land route to the island's northern Jaffna peninsula which was taken from the rebels earlier last year.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga used the Independence Day occasion to again vow to restore peace in her ethnically divided nation, where a drawn out Tamil separatist war has claimed more than 50,000 lives since 1972.

"The promise of a lasting peace is in the air. We hear ev-

erywhere the sound of reason, and the echoes of the sweet music of brotherhood and understanding," she said in an address shown live on state television.

The president said that although the country built political institutions, health and education systems after winning independence from Britain in 1948, it had lost its way.

"We have meandered. We have faltered. We have let our nation fall into the deep, dark abyss of intolerance and terrible violence," the president said.

Hundreds of elite police and army troops armed with automatic weapons reinforced thousands of constables guarded the Independence Square here where Kumaratunga attended the main freedom day celebrations.

Police said the tight security was taken following reports that Tiger bombers had infiltrated the capital to stage attacks.

Independence Square in Colombo's plush Cinnamon Gardens area, where state radio and television stations are located,

was cordoned off overnight as bomb disposal squads searched for explosives.

Invited were frisked today for explosives and weapons before being allowed into the square where 21 people died when an LTTE suicide bomber blew up his explosives-packed car in August 1995.

Kumaratunga, dressed in a silver and grey sari and flanked by military commanders, received a 21-gun salute during ceremonies at Independence Square, built as a symbol of freedom from British rule in 1948.

She made no direct reference to the Tamil rebels but said the war caused "serious ripples in the Sri Lankan society."

"We shall not be diverted from our path by the irrational protests of a malicious few. We are strong in our resolve because we have the confidence and support of our people of all races, religions and creeds," she said.

In a separate freedom day message, the president said the government had undertaken a reform of the constitution to bring about peace.

Rajiv didn't take bribes to seal Bofors deal: Kesri

NEW DELHI, Feb 4: Former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi did not take bribes to seal a controversial 1.3-billion-dollar arms deal, the chief of India's Congress (I) Party said in remarks published Monday, reports AP.

Sitaram Kesri told the Hindustan Times daily that Rajiv Gandhi who was prime minister when the contract was finalised in 1986, was above suspicion.

"I do not think there can be anything against Rajiv Gandhi or his family. There is no reason to disbelieve his statement in parliament 10 years ago," he said.

The scandal followed a 1986 deal between the government and Swedish company Bofors for 410 artillery guns.

It was later claimed that middlemen and Indian officials had received 50 million dollars in bribes to seal the deal.

Last month, Indian detectives received 500 Swiss Bank account documents relating to the scandal from Switzerland. The papers reportedly contain names of people involved in the bribery.

The scandal helped topple Gandhi's Congress (I) govern-

ment in 1989.

Kesri denied personal involvement in the affair and said reports that his party was pressuring India's current coalition government to stall its investigations were baseless.

"The Congress will not allow itself to be beaten by the threat of disclosure of names in the Bofors scandal," he said.

"I am not scared of conspiracies and nor do I fear court trials."

"Let them do what they want. I am not scared of anything."

Several politicians have called for the names of Indian officials involved in the case. Meanwhile, a team of 12 detectives from the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) set up Thursday to probe the case have started moves to extradite key Indian suspects living abroad.

CBI officials said former top bureaucrats and ministers would be questioned again, including then army chief K.S. Sundarji, former Defence Ministry chief S.K. Bhattacharya, former defence minister Arjun Singh and former minister Arun Nehru, a cousin of Gandhi.

BRIEFLY

6 sr officials executed in Iraq:

Six senior military officers have been executed and dozens arrested for plotting against the regime of Saddam Hussein, an Iraqi opposition group said Monday, AP reports from Cairo.

The Iran-based Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq said that two brigadier generals, two colonels, one lieutenant colonel and one captain were executed. The report, which could not be independently confirmed, did not say when the executions or arrests took place and gave no details on how those executed or arrested opposed the government.

Blast kills 1 in Russia:

A bomb exploded near a bus depot, killing a man who may have been handling the device, a news agency reported Tuesday, AP reports from Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky.

The explosion occurred Tuesday morning just 70 metres (yards) from the entrance of a bus depot in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, the main city in the Kamchatsky Peninsula in Russia's Far East. The body of the unidentified man was torn apart by the powerful blast, and police believe he may have been carrying the bomb when it exploded, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported.

US envoy in France sick:

US Ambassador Pamela Harriman was hospitalised Monday with an undetermined illness, an embassy spokesman said, AP reports from Paris.

US government sources in Washington, however, said the 76-year-old ambassador had suffered a stroke. The sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said her condition was serious. The embassy spokesman, Chris Snow, said Harriman had fallen ill Monday night at the Ritz Hotel, which is near the embassy. He said she was taken to the American Hospital in Neuilly, a western Paris suburb.

Bishop shot dead in Philippines:

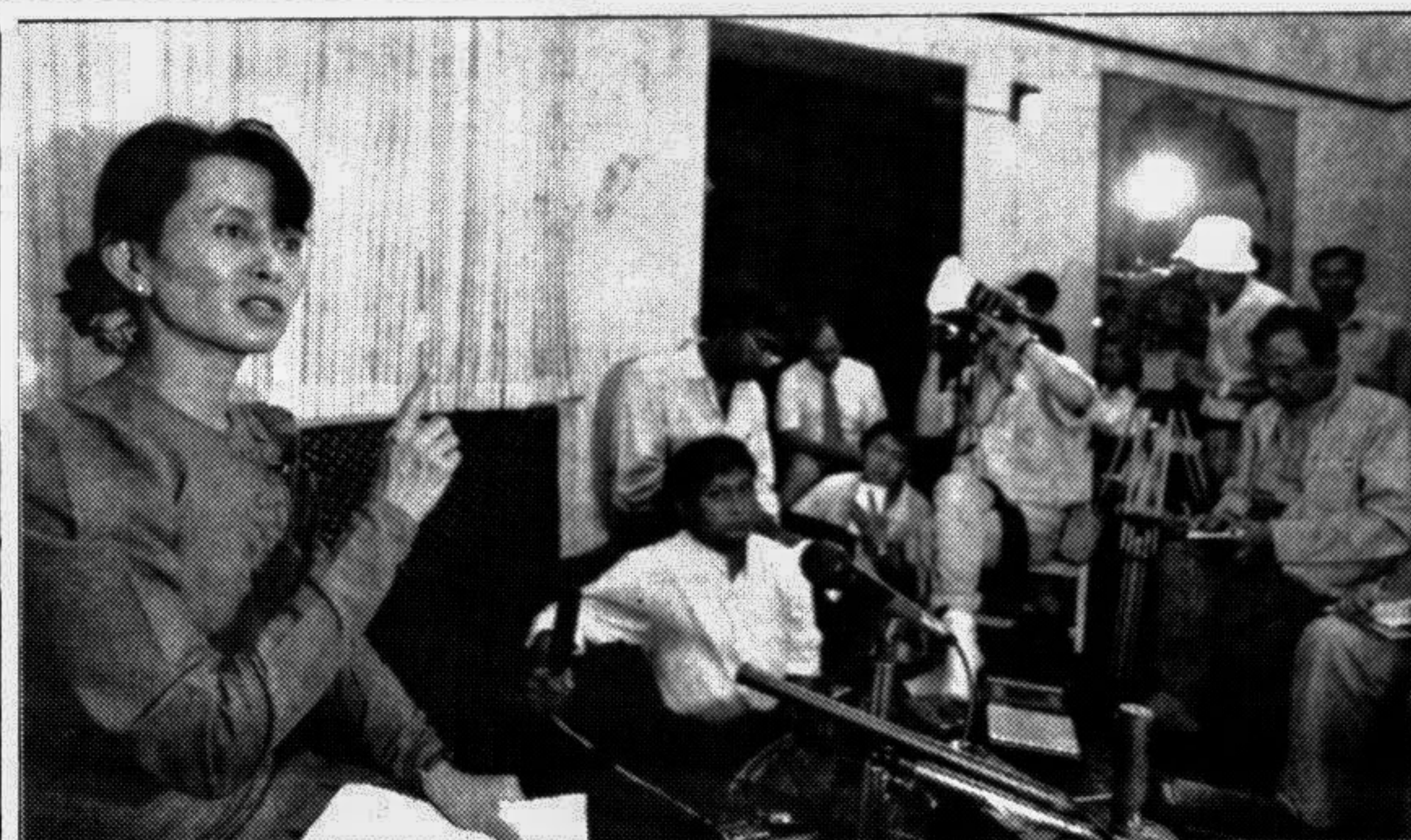
A Philippine Roman Catholic bishop was shot to death yesterday by unidentified gunmen in the predominantly southern Muslim town of Jolo, officials said, AFP reports from Zamboanga, Philippines.

The killing of bishop Ben De Jesus, 56, prompted the military's southern command to declare a red alert in Jolo, 160 kilometres (100 miles) south of Zamboanga and to pursue the men, said military spokesman major Fredesvindo Covarrubias. A woman bystander was also killed and five people were wounded, including a nine-month old infant, in a brief shoot-out between the men and police who had heard the gunshots that killed the bishop, a military report said.



The Belgium pigeon Gerda is admired by one of her former owners Saturday, after she was bought by Seikan Kodama of Japan during an auction in Roostern late Saturday. Gerda became the most expensive pigeon in the world as Kodama paid around 115,000 US dollars for her.

— AFP/UNB photo



Myanmar democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi (L) gestures during an impromptu press conference at her house on Monday. Some 20 journalists were allowed by authorities to cross the barricades set up in front of Aung San Suu Kyi's house and meet with the opposition leader. Aung San Suu Kyi said that conditions in Myanmar are such that they would meet condition for international sanctions as "there is a large scale repression of the democracy movement going on with over 100 people arrested within a month."

— AFP/UNB photo

Countdown to UK polls begins in haze of disinformation

Neville Stack writes from London

The countdown to the British general elections has begun in a haze of disinformation and hidden agendas. All that is certain is that it will be a no-holds-barred affair.

Previous election campaigns have been as short as three weeks, in the belief that the voters have an attention-span little longer than that of a small insect. But this time all the parties are giving themselves time to tease and room to manoeuvre.

The election has been promised for May, though Westminster pundits are staking wagers on it being called earlier by the prime minister, who is the sole arbiter.

Already he has mischievously dangled some morsels of information about the Conservative manifesto for the Press pack to snap up. But only the politically naive will fall for that one.

No government would go for re-election on a rag-bag of campaign items so uninspiring as the privatisation of the post office and some tinkering with inheritance and capital gains taxes, and sentimental obduracy over the opposition's plans for constitutional reform.

The Big Idea is still to be disclosed. But the word is in the Tory Central Office that it will be to damn and discredit New Labour in general and its leader in particular. Any stick will do to beat them with, but inexperience of office and lurking suspicion of their high-minded promises will do for starters.

Major is a shrewd campaigner, and the stakes are high: if the Tories win it will mean a record 20 years in of-

fice. He waves aside as death-wishers the long-sighted advisers who are already calculating what will happen if — as the polls indicate — his party loses. "A spell in opposition to regroup under a new, right-wing, leader and back into battle when Labour messes things up," is how one former minister confidently predicted to the *Straits Times*.

The Labour Party have even more at stake. They have invested 15 years in re-thinking, reorganisation and reform. If they were to lose, the party will blow apart. Its leader, Tony Blair, would be jettisoned, and the party would fragment.

Already Labour is issuing election credentials to the correspondents and holding press conference almost daily. The Conservatives have gone so far as to head off their new wave of Europhobic candidates by issuing them with a multiple choice statement for their personal election manifestos, such as "I cannot envisage that I would vote for the single-currency."

The Europhiles have not yet opened their own campaign, and it is suspected that when the issue boils down to jobs, security and rising living standards, membership of the European Union will suddenly appear much more attractive to the voters. So the party will split wide-open again.

Already, big business, ranging from British Airways to GEC and Shell, have expressed some support for social legislation as the European "social chapter" of workers' rights and the minimum wage, which Labour espouses.

While the rightist Press, the Telegraph, Mail and Sun fulminate hysterically, there is genuine concern, expressed by such venerable and distinctly non-socialist organs as the *Financial Times* and the *Economist*, that the government is forever widening the gap between the well-heeled and the financially challenged. As the founder of the Conservative Party, Benjamin Disraeli, observed back in Victoria's time: "If the cottage is not happy, the castle is not safe."

Labour is pinning its hopes on moderation in economic matters, a massive boost for education and skill training, and a wary commitment of European co-operation. And "time for a change" as its counter to charges of inexperience.

But Major is already showing relish for the battle ahead. Every week the passes sees the economy becoming stronger, and the business cycle is not due to peak of a year or two. Some of the long-overdue reforms in areas of public concern such as education, social welfare and the health service are beginning to pay off.

The battle for the centre ground is becoming intense. Up to now the parties have been competing for the title of "more moderate than thou." But the trench warfare is over.

The lofty pledges by all concerned to keep the battle on the lofty plane of ideals and ideas are about to be thrown out the window. British politics are adversarial and ruthless — and, thanks to marginal seats, unpredictable. And the best man does not necessarily win.

Week-long truce begins in Kashmir

JAMMU, Feb 4: Indian troops stopped operations against Kashmiri secessionist rebels Tuesday for a week so that the Muslim-majority state could observe peaceful last days of Ramadan fasting and the Eid-ul-Fitr festival, reports AP.

"We do not want to cause any inconvenience to the people on this occasion," said Lt. Gen. JS Dhillon, the military commander of Jammu-Kashmir. The announcement was made Monday in Srinagar, the state's summer capital.

Muslims observe Ramadan to celebrate God's delivery of the Quran, Islam's holy book, to the Prophet Mohammed nearly 1,400 years ago.

Even if Indian troops sighted wanted rebels, they would not fire if the guerilla was unarmed. The clemency would not be extended to mercenary fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan who have joined the Kashmir rebel groups in their war against India, Lt. Gen. Dhillon said.

Deve Gowda may expand cabinet

NEW DELHI, Feb 4: Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda is expected to expand his council of ministers on return from his current foreign tour, well ahead of the budget session of parliament scheduled to begin on February 20, reports BSS.

Well-placed United Front sources said Gowda had himself raised the question of inducting more members to his cabinet at this week's meeting of the front. The prime minister is scheduled to return here on February 6 at the end of his two-nation tour of Switzerland and Mauritius.

Gowda had earlier reportedly said that it became difficult for him to carry on with the present cabinet strength of 38. It is however, not clear whether the prime minister will utilise the opportunity to reshuffle his team or promote anyone from among the junior ministers.

Taiwan to receive US, French-made warplanes in '97

TAIPEI, Feb 4: Taiwan will put 60 new French-made warplanes into service by the end of this year, said by the end of 1990 US-made F-16s, its air force chief said Tuesday, reports AP.

The Mirage 2000-5 will begin arriving in May, Gen. Huang Hsien-jong told reporters, without giving schedule details. Purchased in 1992 in defiance of objections from rival China, the Mirages and F-16s will replace Taiwan's aging F-104 and F-5E fighters.

China, which claims sovereignty over Taiwan, pressured the French government into promising in 1994 to sell no more weapons to the island.

In an interview with Germany's ARD TV, Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui urged the Bonn government to sell submarines to Taiwan, according to a statement released by Lee's office Monday.

Releasing rebels out of question: Fujimori

WASHINGTON, Feb 4: With President Bill Clinton backing his handling of the Lima hostage crisis, Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori once again ruled out giving in to the hostage takers demands, reports AP.

It is "out of the question to free the rebels" Fujimori told reporters at the National Press Club after meeting with Clinton earlier at the White House.

Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) rebels are holding 72 hostages in the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima which they stormed during a December 17 reception. Their main demand is to exchange the hostages for about 440 of their jailed comrades.

"The terrorists know perfectly that this is not possible," Fujimori said.

Earlier Monday Clinton expressed his support for Fujimori's "patience" in the stand-off. White House spokesman David Johnson said.

Clinton met with Fujimori

for 20 minutes to "tell him how much he appreciated and admired the way he has been handling this crisis," Johnson said.

Clinton told Fujimori that it was a very hard line to walk but it's the right one and he was handling it very carefully and that "he appreciated the patience and the care he was taking in resolving this crisis peacefully," he added.

Russia opposes NATO expansion

SAVOS, Switzerland, Feb 4: Russia's Presidential chief of staff Anatoly Chubais warned NATO leaders Monday that any moves to expand before Russia gave its assent could be their biggest mistake in 50 years, reports AP.

If the alliance pressed ahead with expansion before a "legally binding" accord with Moscow, he said, "it could be the major mistake made by western leaders in the last 50 years."

Zairean rebels attack key city in Shaba

KINSHASA, Zaire, Feb 4: Anti-government rebels may have seized control of a major city in the mineral-rich southern region of Shaba, government officials said Monday, reports AP.

A senior defense ministry official said the port city Kalemie on the shores of Lake Tanganyika had been surrounded by rebels preparing to launch further assaults on the southern province.

Zaire alleges that troops from Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi are aiding Zaire's Tutsi-led rebels, who have seized at least six cities near the eastern borders with Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda since September.

The ministry of defense official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the army was struggling to hold on to Kalemie. "It's quite probable that Kalemie has fallen into rebel hands," the official said, adding there were violent battles around the city and at the airport.

Minister of Defense Gen. Likulia Bolongo on Monday called on youths between the ages of 15 and 18 to voluntarily join the army, admitting the desperate need for fresh troops.

The armed rebellion began when ethnic Tutsis who have been living in eastern Zaire for decades were threatened with expulsion. They were joined by anti-government Zairian rebels led by Laurent Kabila, who says their main objective is to overthrow his longtime foe President Mobutu Sese Seko.

Mobutu, who has ruled the vast central African country since 1965, arrived Monday in the Moroccan capital for talks with King Hassan II expected to focus on the deteriorating mili-

tary situation in Zaire. Mobutu, suffering from prostate cancer, abruptly ended his stay at his French Riviera villa to meet with the Moroccan monarch before returning to Zaire later in the week, his entourage said.

Expelled opposition members condemn Suu Kyi

YANGON, Feb 4: Two expelled members of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's political party Tuesday denounced their electioneering deal to compromise with the military regime, reports AP.

Than Tun and Thein Kyi were elected to parliament in 1990 for Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. The ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council never allowed the legislature to convene.

At a SLORC-approved press conference, Than Tun praised Suu Kyi's courage and charm but said that she "is far behind Burma's politics, confrontational and unrealistic."

The pair had suggested that Suu Kyi, winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, break a political deadlock with the SLORC by ending the party's boycott of the National Convention, a panel that is intermittently writing a new constitution.

Suu Kyi led her party out of the convention more than a year ago, saying it was stacked in favor of the junta and committee to prolonging military rule. The walkout has robbed the convention of legitimacy.

Than Tun said that party members regarded Suu Kyi as "an idol, a spiritual leader," and were afraid to disagree with her.

Islamic govt losing ground in battle for Sudan's soul

WAD AL-MAHL, Feb 4: On the grassy plains along the Blue Nile, the Islamic government is losing the battle for Sudan's soul, with its soldiers talking rebellion and its will to fight in question, reports AP.

The swath of eastern Sudan just miles (kilometres) from the front looks deserted. No soldiers patrol the single, rutted dirt road to the fighting. Neither tanks nor supplies move forward for the government's promised offensive against Sudanese rebels, who this year have demonstrated renewed vigor.

Ragged refugees seeking shelter along the river complain the army could not defend them when the rebels attacked three weeks ago. Army soldiers recovering in a nearby, barren hospital complain the Islamic government has forsaken them for Sudan's revolutionary militia, the ill-trained Popular Defence Forces.

Some, in fact, say they are fighting a war that should never

have begun, the latest battle over power and politics that has pitted a string of Muslim-dominated governments against rebels seeking autonomy for the neglected south.

"The government should come down here and find a solution to that there can be peace," said Sgt. Adam al-Nur, who was wounded in the thigh. "It's a political problem that can be solved."

The southern rebels, mostly Christians and members of tribal faiths, took up arms 14 years ago. In a move to broaden their support, they joined forces last year with northern opposition parties opposed to the government of Lt. Gen. Omar el-Bashir which seized power in a 1989 coup.

Their joint offensive along the Ethiopian border sent unprepared government forces reeling, and for now, the government seems thankful just to have stemmed the offensive.

There has been no attempt yet to retake any of the towns,

said Capt. Fathi Rahman Mohammed, an army spokesman in Damazin, the region's main city. "The military leadership will decide when to attack," he said. "It's a political question."

The fighting has left the rebels — and the government contends, Ethiopian soldiers — controlling a 110-mile-long (175-kilometre-long) strip of land on Ethiopia's border, said soldiers and villagers who fled the fighting.

But more important, it has shown that the rebels, operating from neighbouring Eritrea and Ethiopia, can pose a threat to a revolutionary Islamic government in a part of Sudan traditionally removed from the fighting in the south.

The government already faces resentment over a crumbling economy and isolation from its neighbours and Washington, which regards it as a sponsor of terrorism. It seems reluctant to risk more by sending soldiers into what could be major battles.

"Little military traffic plies the road from Khartoum to Wad al-Mahl, a village of thatched huts about 10 miles (16 kilometres) from the front.

Refugees trudge along the road, some of them with their chairs and tables stacked in trucks, others with their possessions pulled by tractors through a sun-baked savanna.

About 2,000 refugees are said to be camped by the Blue Nile near Wad al-Mahl, their goods piled under trees or against cots.

"The protection was trivial," complained Mahmoud Abdullah, a 37-year-old farmer who fled his home about two weeks ago. There were just six soldiers guarding the village, he said. "If there was a big army, then nothing would have happened."

Soldiers themselves speak of fleeing before the rebels.

At the dingy Damazin Hospital, where dozens of soldiers were recovering, Sgt. Al-Nur recalled the surprise attack at 3

am.

"I tried to call for help," said Al-Nur, who at the time had his unit's field telephone. "I tried to get them to come and help us." Instead, Sudanese soldiers fell back in confusion, and the armoured cars and tanks that withdrew were destroyed.

The Islamic government has tried to cast the fighting as a holy war, a struggle against foreigners intent on destroying Islam. But Al-Nur, a Muslim differs.

"All of the fighting has to do with power," he said from his hospital bed. "It has nothing to do with religions."

In fact, only the militia called the Popular Defence Forces exudes the zeal the regime has so desperately sought to cultivate.

The government has sent at least 5,000 militiamen to the front, diplomats and Sudanese leaders say, although the recruits have no more than two months of training, sometimes less.

As the government's main proselytising tool, the militia is geared more toward religious indoctrination than military strategy. Cadets are required to memorise parts of the Quran, and training sessions often amount to a religious pep rally.

Another soldier, who asked not to be named, said the government has neglected the 115,000-man army for the sake of the militia. The army, he said, is considered too secular.

"There's discrimination between them and us," he said, adding that others share his resentment. "I think if the rebels get as far as here, a large number of people will go over and join them."

Army officials acknowledge some soldiers have differences with the regime, but insist these do not interfere with fighting. "Disagreements happen, but disagreements could happen even between two brothers," said Capt. Bashir Abu Qasab, another army spokesman in Damazin.

Netanyahu invites Pope to Jerusalem

VATICAN CITY, Feb 4: Pope John Paul II and Israel's hard-line prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, clasped hands warmly, joked and spoke about the Polish background of previous Israeli leaders, reports AP.

While the atmosphere was extremely friendly in the papal library Monday, Netanyahu failed to pin down John Paul on a visit to Jerusalem, which the pope has often said was a major goal of his pontificate.

"We look forward to receiving you in Jerusalem," Netanyahu told the pope, to which John Paul responded, "God bless Israel."

Since 1992, successive Israeli leaders have renewed the invitation. John Paul has accepted in principle, saying it could be part of this travels to mark 2000, when Christianity begins its third millennium, but the Vatican appears to be waiting for further progress in

the peace process.

The Israeli prime minister, after meeting the Polish-born pope for the first time, sought to make the best of the encounter.

"I invited the pope to visit Israel for the 2000th year since the birth of Jesus Christ," he told Israeli army radio. "This is a very important event in Christian history. He said he wants to come before then, and we said we would of course discuss the details."