

## Troops reinforced for possible riots Arabs to oppose new Jewish settlement in E Jerusalem

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 26: Arab states were Tuesday lobbying the UN Security Council to oppose the construction of a new Jewish settlement in east Jerusalem.

"Everybody understands the Arab position," Nasser Al-Kidwa, the permanent observer of Palestine to the United Nations told AFP Tuesday.

He made the comments just before a planned meeting with the new US ambassador to the United Nations, Bill Richardson.

Accompanied by the ambassadors from Jordan, Morocco, Oman and Qatar, Al-Kidwa said the Arab group was not prepared to tolerate any Israeli policies to develop a Jewish settlement in Jabal Abu Ghneim a hilly suburb of east Jerusalem.

AP adds: Soldiers braced for trouble Wednesday before an expected Israeli government decision to build a housing project in Jerusalem's disputed eastern sector.

Israeli army radio said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government had warned Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat that if there was a violent reaction to the 6,500-

unit project it could delay a West Bank Israeli troop withdrawal scheduled for March 7. Palestinian dailies ran banner headlines warning that construction in the Har Homa neighbourhood would lead to clashes.

"Netanyahu today is firing deadly bullets at the peace process," the daily Al-Ayaaam newspaper declared.

Ahmed Tibi, an adviser to Arafat, said, "there is tremendous anger and unrest among the Palestinians, and no one can assess what the response will be."

Palestinians object to the neighbourhood — known as Jabal Abu Ghneim in Arabic — because it is built on land seized from Jordan in the 1967 Middle East war. They also see the planned neighbourhood as a barrier that will cut off Arab sections of Jerusalem from the West Bank.

Adding to the tension on the eve of the Israeli Cabinet meeting, Israeli undercover soldiers shot and killed a Palestinian Tuesday in the West Bank village of Hizme just east of Jerusalem.

## Blast kills 5 in China's main Muslim region

BEIJING, Feb. 26: Time-bombs planted on buses killed at least four to five people in the capital of China's main Muslim region of Xinjiang on the day of memorials for paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, an official said today, reports Reuters.

Officials and residents in the city of Urumqi said at least 60 people were wounded by three blasts on Tuesday which shattered the calm prevailing in China since the death of paramount leader Deng a week ago.

I think at least four to five people were killed. Including one child who died instantly, said a television station official, who declined to be identified.

The blasts came within five minutes of each other in separate parts of the city, he said.

People are full of fear, he said. The city is on high alert, he said. It was the first violence reported in restive Xinjiang since anti-Chinese riots in the region's town of Yining on February 5 and a 6 left nine people dead and 198 wounded.

Chinese police arrested up to 300 people after that riot in Xinjiang, a region that Muslim separatists call east Turkestan. The official said one of the bombs on Tuesday was on a bus in the city centre, and a second was on a bus that had passed by the radio station.

The bombs exploded around 6:40 PM (1040 GMT) he said. "People in Urumqi usually finish work at seven so not too many people were injured or killed."

I think this is done by split-tists, said the officials, referring to Muslim separatists from the region's ethnic Uighur population.

"Police have tightened up security in Yining, so they (the separatists) come here," he added.

"We did not have a good year this year, we dare not to go out now. It is not stable here," he said.

## Sharif gives key ministries to PML stalwarts

ISLAMABAD, Feb 26: Pakistan's new Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has given key ministries to party stalwarts in his first six cabinet appointments announced today, reports Reuters.

Pakistan Muslim League (PML) Party secretary-general Sartaj Aziz was made finance minister, former National Assembly Speaker Gohar Ayub Khan became Foreign Minister and Punjab PML chief Shujaat Hussain returned to the Interior Ministry post he held in the last Sharif cabinet in 1990-93.

Sharif's close associates Ishaq Dar and Nisar Ali Khan took on the Commerce Ministry and Water and Power Ministry. Respectively, former ambassador to the United States Abida Hussain, the only woman in the cabinet, went to the Population Welfare Ministry.

The key defence minister post has not yet been filled.

All the ministers took the oath before President Farooq Leghari last evening, but their portfolios were announced after midnight. The new ministers were also given additional charge of several other ministries until the cabinet is expanded.

A little known National Assembly deputy from Sindh, Asghar Ali Shah, was named minister of state, equivalent to a deputy minister, in charge of housing and works.

PML information secretary Mushadid Hussain who is not a parliamentarian, was appointed the Prime Minister's adviser on information and media development.

Sharif said on Tuesday night that he would name more ministers later and that they would include representatives from his ally, the left-wing Awami National Party and the Karachi-based ethnic Mohajir National Movement (MQM).

Political sources said the cabinet would be much smaller than previous ones which sometimes contained more than 30 ministers.

Sharif announced the cabinet three weeks after the PML won a general election and eight days after he was sworn in to run his troubled country.

The long delay in naming the cabinet appeared to paralyse government business and provoked speculation about power struggles within the PML as party heavyweights jostled for slots in the slimmed down ministerial team Sharif had promised.

Commentators said Sharif had found it hard to balance his objective of bringing fresh blood into the cabinet with the demands of his senior party colleagues.

He said another problem was the Council for Defence and National Security (CDNS) created last month by President Leghari as an advisory forum grouping top generals and the ministers of foreign affairs, finance, defence and interior.

Most of Sharif's close colleagues are from his home province of Punjab. Including them in the CDNS would give it a Punjabi profile given that President Leghari and chief of army staff General Jehangir Karamat are also Punjabis.

Pakistan's smaller provinces of Sindh, north west frontier and Balochistan have in the past resented what they see as the dominance of wealthy and populous Punjab.

## French govt launches final push on immigration law as protest continues



Three young women distribute leaflets against French government plans to tighten laws against illegal immigrants Tuesday, close to the National Assembly where a second reading to the so-called Debre bill, named after its author Interior Minister Jean-Louis Debre, is to be held later Wednesday. Banner reads "Le Pen (Extreme right party leader) dreams of it, Debre does it".

PARIS, Feb 26: Backed by the polls, the conservative government on Tuesday launched a final push through parliament of stricter immigration laws, though protesters accused the majority of bowing to the far-right National Front, reports AP.

The National Assembly opened debate on the tightening of immigration laws just six days after lawmakers offered to withdraw the most controversial amendments, which would have required hosts to report departures of their foreign guests.

News of those amendments had set off a storm of protests by artists and intellectuals, who compared them to the World War II Vichy government's betrayal of French Jews to the Nazis.

Interior Minister Jean-Louis Debre, the bill's sponsor, defended the current proposals as measured, without excess, with firmness, without inhuman-

ity. The governing conservatives maintain a strong majority in the Assembly, and the bill is expected to pass when it comes to vote, probably on Friday.

As Debre was speaking, some 16,000 protesters marched along the Boulevard St. Germain to the Assembly, chanting, "It's not the immigrants, it's Debre that has to go."

Angry protesters clashed with police for about three hours during the debate, throwing eggs, bottles and trash at members of an anti-riot squad, but the crowds had dispersed by 10:30 pm (2130 GMT). Around 10 people were arrested, police said.

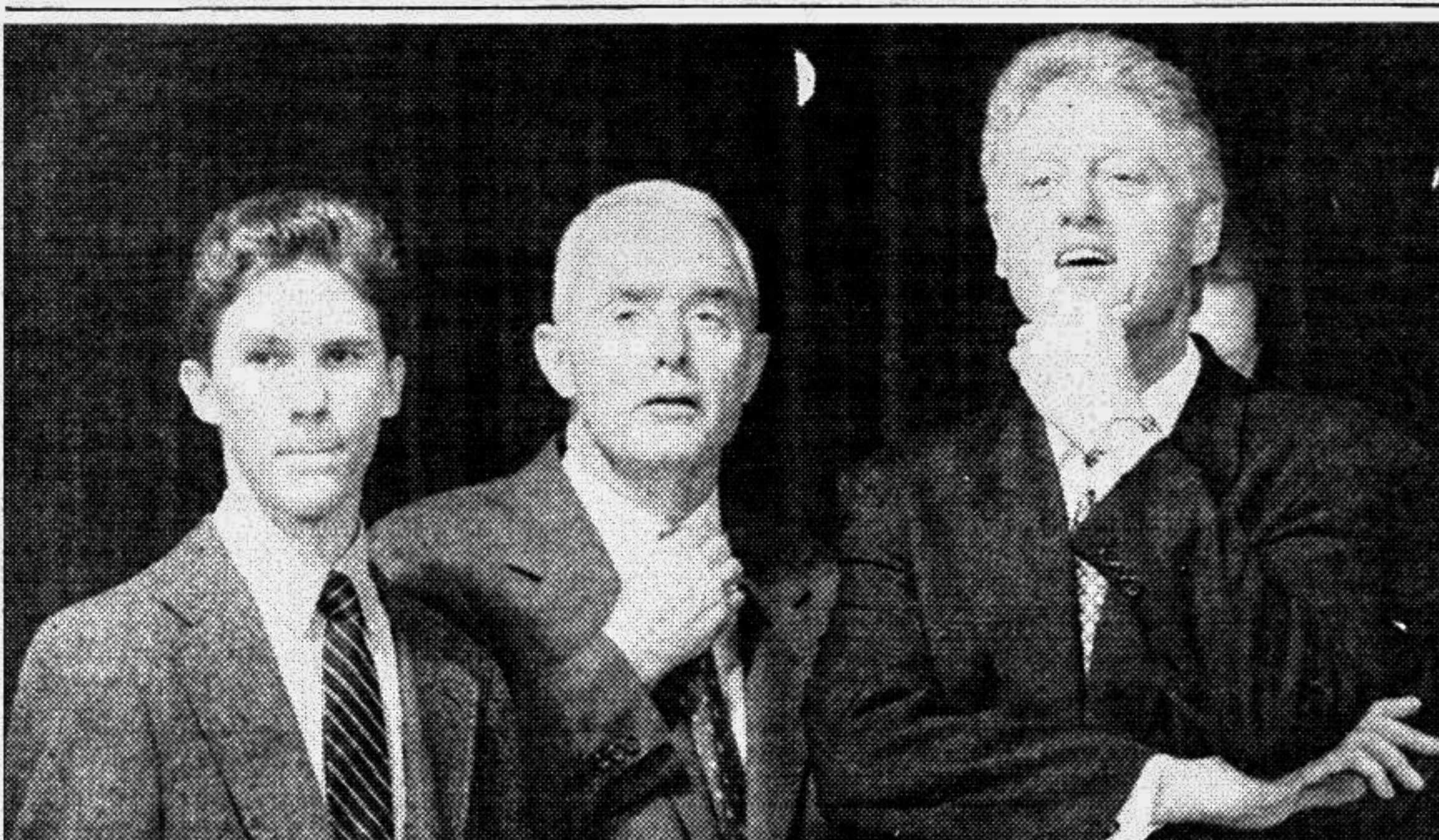
But polls show that more than two thirds of the French favour the bill.

The bill toughens an already restrictive immigration law passed in 1993, which made it harder for immigrants to stay in France and easier for officials to deport them. Authorities have since routinely chartered planes to send home illegal immigrants.

Under the new bill, longtime residents can no longer automatically renew their 10-year residency cards. They must first prove they are not "a threat to public order" and that they maintain a "regular residence" in France, an effort to crack down on fake addresses.

Among other measures, the law allows police to search workplaces for illegal employees. They would be able to search immigrants' vehicles and confiscate the passport of foreigners lacking required residency papers.

President Jacques Chirac on Tuesday chastised the president of the European Parliament, Gil Robles, for the European body's criticism of the Debre law last week, calling it "manifest interference in the interior affairs of France."



US President Bill Clinton (R), National Drug Policy Director Barry McCaffrey (C), and Nathan Habel (L), a student from Richmond, VA attend a drug strategy event at the Old Executive Office Building in Washington, DC Tuesday. A report prepared by McCaffrey, called the "1997 Strategy", proposes bold changes in the way the federal government organizes its efforts to reduce drug use.

## US citizens warned against terrorist acts in S Arabia

WASHINGTON, Feb 26: Concerned about threats issued by a "well known terrorist," the State Department is warning the 40,000 Americans living in Saudi Arabia to maintain a low profile and reduce travel within the country, reports AP.

The warning came as Saudi Deputy Prime Minister prince Sultan met with President Clinton to discuss security and other issues, and the top US Air Force general told Congress he strongly opposes punishing anyone under his command for last June's terrorist bombing in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 US airmen.

State Department officials said there was concern that the terrorists could stage a strike this week as the high-level Saudi delegation led by Prince Sultan holds meetings in Washington.

## Poor turnout Congress Party defeated badly in local polls

NEW DELHI, Feb 26: The Congress party got a drubbing by right-wing Hindu nationalists in local elections held in the Indian capital after a gap of 14 years, reports AP.

The Bharatiya Janata Party won 80 of 133 seats announced late Tuesday. Congress won 36 in the elections held over the weekend. The remaining districts were won by smaller groups and one seat was left to be determined.

Only 40 per cent of New Delhi's residents came out to vote in the city. Voters had been expected to turn out to express frustration over chronic electricity and water shortages in New Delhi, but their faith in politics has been battered by corruption scandals at the national level and by what was seen as political maneuvering in New Delhi.

In 1983, the Congress Party won a majority in New Delhi's city council for what should have been a four-year term. But in 1987, Congress Party federal lawmakers enacted a constitutional clause allowing them to extend the term by one year. It proceeded to order one extension after another.

## Palestinian killed as Israeli troops open fire on crowd in WB

HIZMEH, West Bank, Feb 26: A Palestinian was killed and three others wounded, one critically, when Israeli soldiers opened fire on a crowd in this West Bank village Tuesday, an Israeli military source said, reports AP.

Mohammed Abdul Aziz Abu Halul, 55, died shortly after he arrived at Hadassah hospital in the Jerusalem area, the military source said.

Another Palestinian was seriously wounded and two others were more lightly wounded. Two of those wounded have been identified as Ali Abdallah Mubarak, 43, and Hamza Mayel Mubarak, 22.

The soldiers were carrying out an operation in the area, near the autonomous town of Ramallah, when they came under a hail of stones thrown by local inhabitants and reacted by opening fire, said an Israeli army spokesman.

## DPRK defector in Beijing may not fly to Seoul soon

SEOUL, Feb 26: A prominent North Korean defector holed up in South Korea's embassy in Beijing is unlikely to be allowed to fly to Seoul soon, South Korean officials said Wednesday, reports AP.

"We think that China is unlikely to send him back to North Korea and that it also has not decided on his flight to Seoul," Ryu Kwang-suk, a senior Foreign Ministry official, told reporters.

Ryu, who heads the ministry's Asia-Pacific Bureau, said China needs time to smooth North Korea's ruffled feathers over the defection of Hwang Jang Yop, the highest ranking official ever to flee the communist nation.

National security adviser Ban Ki-moon, speaking at a meeting with presidential secretaries, also said Hwang's trip to Seoul would take time.

## Off the Record



Lord Charles Hindlip, chairman of Christie's International, answers a question at a press conference Tuesday in New York to announce the auction of dresses from the Princess of Wales' collection. Some 80 dresses dating from the years the Princess was travelling on official visits will go under the gavel June 25 in New York at a gala charity auction.

## Miracle of Jesus

BETHLEHEM, West Bank: Christians in Bethlehem are claiming a miracle after witnesses said a fresco painting of Jesus Christ in the town's nativity church shed tears and winked.

"I was in the process of cleaning dust of the painting when I noticed that Christ had tears in his eyes," Church employee Issa Ghattas told AFP.

Father Anastasias a Greek Orthodox minister said he had seen the Jesus figure in the 12th century painting "open one eye and close the other."

Asked by journalists why there was now no sign of movement on the face of Jesus, Anastasios replied that it only happens early in the morning. "You cannot always be there at the exact moment."

The Jerusalem based patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, which controls the Bethlehem church built over Christ's birthplace, insisted that "something extraordinary is currently happening in Bethlehem."

However, the Vatican has remained conspicuous by its silence and many inhabitants of Bethlehem believe the Greek Orthodox authorities may be milking the miracle story to attract more tourists in the run-up to Christmas.

The church is built over the stables where Christian tradition says Jesus Christ was born, and is the town's main tourist attraction.

Tourism has dropped off steeply since the violent clashes between Israelis and Palestinians in September which left 85 people dead.

## Lazy mail

NEW DELHI: A post card written by an Indian professor in 1949 informing his favourite student about a job prospect reached its destination in 1997, a newspaper reported on Friday, reports AP.

The ten-student, now a retired 71-year-old T M Mahadevan, was stunned to get the letter from T N Muthuswamy of Madras University on January 9, the Indian Express said.

The card was posted in the southern city of Madras. The Express failed to solve why it took half a century to reach Ernakulam, only 550 kilometres (343 miles) away on India's southwest coast.

## Indian govt urged to spend more on defence

NEW DELHI, Feb 26: Indian defence experts today urged the federal government to spend more on the military in the annual federal budget to be announced Friday, reports AP.

Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda's government has pledged to grant more funds to the military in its 1997-98 budget but experts said the increase must keep pace with inflation and the needs of the services.

Jasjit Singh, director of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA), an independent think-tank, said: "In terms of the rupee's current value, an increase is inevitable in the upcoming budget."

"But in real terms the hike in allocations would have to be at least seven per cent of GDP," Singh said a 16-per cent increase over the previous year's defence spending would be "realistic."

New Delhi increased defence spending by 270 million dollars to 7.94 billion dollars in the last annual budget, one of the lowest increases in decades.

Experts said India spent 2.36 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defence in the current fiscal year to March, compared to 6.88 by Pakistan and 5.63 by China.

Singh said there had been no modernisation of India's army, the fourth largest in the world with more than a million troops, the navy or the air force during the past 10 years.

"There would be some very tough choices to make because a large chunk of the allocations would now go into increased salaries. Will India go for modernisation? That is the million-dollar question?"

Major-General D. Banerjee, of the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, added: "Given our defence requirements, the allocation does not even meet 75 per cent of the total demand."

But rebels and aid workers said that Thai Border Patrol Police, while granting women and children refuge, have been refusing to allow unarmed Karen men to cross the border.

"They are sending them back so they will be wiped out," said one aid worker, who witnessed several incidents but demanded anonymity. "The Thais are definitely working with the Burmese."

## Currency rates in Afghanistan fluctuate with advance of Taliban rulers

MARZAR-E-SHARIF, Afghanistan, Feb 26: In the dusty bazaars and squalid money markets of Mazar-e-Sharif, hope and currency rates fluctuate with each advance of the army of Afghanistan's new Taliban rulers, reports AP.

The warlord who has made this poverty-stricken northern town his stronghold pledges it will never fall to the Islamic Taliban army, which already has overrun two-thirds of the country.

But townspeople and shopkeepers are fearful.

"I am not happy about the Taliban coming here," said Mohammed Akbar, a shop owner, who came from the capital of Kabul soon after the Taliban took power there last September. "If they come here, I will leave for Pakistan."

Battles with the Taliban fighters are raging all around;

to the west in the Badghis province, between the Taliban and warlord Rashid Dostum's soldiers, and some 250 kilometres (150 miles) to the south, where the Taliban are fighting Dostum's Shiite Muslim allies.

The Taliban are fighting to extend their strict form of Islamic rule throughout Afghanistan, an impoverished nation of 16 million people battered by 18 years of civil war.

In late January, they seized several strategic towns held by former government troops — Dostum's partners in the fight against the Taliban.

Steadily, the religious army marched northward through the provinces of Parwan and Bamyan — falsely claiming this week to have reached Sheber Pass, considered the gateway to Dostum's northern empire. In truth, the advance stalled at Ghorband Valley.

For the alliance arrayed against the Taliban, losing Mazar-e-Sharif would mean losing Afghanistan, leaving its leaders little choice but to flee the country.

"We will crush them like chickens if they try to come here," declared Gen. Yusuf, a spokesman for Dostum, who like many in Afghanistan goes by only one name. "They will never get there."

Just the mention of a Taliban takeover has made the people jittery.

Many dread the prospect of having to live under the Taliban's rigorous brand of Islam, which banishes women from the workplace and schools, and forces men to grow beards and pray five times a day.

But even more worrisome is the ethnic divisions between the Taliban, who belong to the majority Pashtun ethnic group,

and the minority ethnic groups of the north — Uzbeks like Dostum, Tajiks, Turkmen and Shiite Muslims.

"There is a real fear of the Taliban among the ethnic groups," said Mehmat Samsar, Turkey's consul general in Mazar-e-Sharif.

Uncertainty reigns in the squalid money markets of Mazar-e-Sharif, where money sellers clutching millions of Afghanis waded through a mob of bearded men hollering exchange rates.

The local currency has fluctuated wildly, from a January high of 150,000 Afghanis per US dollar to 25,000 Afghanis to the dollar in mid-February.

Yar Mohammed, a money merchant with millions of Afghanis stacked on a rickety wooden table, says the Afghanis plummeted every time the Taliban pushed northward.

But a modicum of stability has returned after the northern alliance halted the Taliban advance recently.

Diplomats here say Dostum is getting panelloads of money from both Iran and Russia. And the warlord is reportedly pumping tens of thousands of dollars daily into the local economy.

Mazar-e-Sharif's only liquor store, where canned Dutch whiskey can be bought for 4 dirrs and an oversised tin of British-made beer sells for 2 dirrs the owner says his only customers are soldiers.

They're the only ones who can afford the brew, which is strictly prohibited in Taliban-run areas.

It seems most residents are merely trying to survive.

In a filthy parking lot, Suleiman sought to hide from the bitter wind beneath a tattered blanket. Laid out in a neat row before him were the well-worn shoes of his five young children — all for sale.

From beneath his blanket a pair of women's high-heeled boots peeked out.

"These are my wife's," he said, his eyes lowered and his voice barely audible. "She doesn't want me to sell them but we have no money."

A labourer doing odd jobs, Suleiman says there is no work in Mazar-e-Sharif. "I am running out of money."

There are stories circulating in the town's bazaars that anyone with money is getting out, heading north toward Uzbekistan.

It's only a question of time before the Taliban take over Mazar-e-Sharif, says Umar Khan Alisherzai, Pakistan's consul general here.