

International

Albanian govt, opposition sign accord to form nat'l unity govt

TIRANA, Mar 10: Albanian President Sali Berisha and leaders of all political parties signed an agreement on Sunday calling for a national unity government and elections by June in a bid to end an armed rebellion in the south, reports Reuters.

The nine-point accord gave rebels holding several cities in the south a week to hand in weapons. The agreement, clinched after two days of talks and mediation by senior European emissaries followed Berisha's reversal of his refusal to form a coalition with the Socialists, heirs to Albania's Communist Party that ruled for five decades.

The June deadline for fresh elections was a further concession to the opposition. Berisha had initially proposed new polls within 45 days and then extended this to two months.

Meanwhile, Albanian President Sali Berisha has reached a deal with political opponents to resolve the Balkan country's crisis but must now persuade rebels in the south to lay down their weapons.

The nine-point accord, signed on Sunday after two days of talks and mediation by senior European emissaries, calls for the formation of an interim government from all major parties to oversee elections to be held by June.

Negotiations were to begin immediately on distributing portfolios. Opposition politicians predicted a battle with Berisha's right-wing Democratic Party over the key security posts.

The agreement followed Berisha's reversal of his earlier refusal to form a coalition with the opposition Socialists, heirs to Albania's Communist Party that ran a repressive regime for five decades. The Socialists have since formally renounced Marxism.

Rebels controlling many towns in the volatile south after more than a month of civil dis-

turbances were sceptical about the accord. Some pledged to hold out for Berisha's resignation.

Ex-General Agim Goxhita, the rebel leader in Gjirokastra, a garrison town 30 km (20 miles) from the Greek border, said he was pleased with the agreement and was conferring with other rebel-held towns.

The deal extended for a week an amnesty for rebel fighters if they gave up their arms, but Goxhita said: "At this point our position remains that Berisha must quit before we surrender our weapons."

Another member of the newly-elected rebel council in Gjirokastra, Murat Kaci of the

Socialists said: "Berisha has a very bad record of keeping his word and we don't believe him. We'll decide what to do when it's proven that what he says is true."

Rebels accuse the president of standing by while thousands of Albanians lost their lives in a series of pyramid investment schemes that collapsed in January, sparking the initial unrest that turned into an anti-government uprising in the south.

Kaci said the Socialists wanted the immediate release from jail of their leader Fatos Nano, imprisoned on corruption charges the party says were

politically inspired. Berisha said his Democratic Party's statutes forbade deals with ex-Communists but added he had taken account of other considerations.

"Last night I was categorical about the Socialists Party. But there are moral considerations... a moral obligation. Sometimes, you have to choose morals over laws."

Paskal Milo, of the opposition Social Democrats, described the pact as "a very important first step. There may be some problems when we start dividing up ministries. You can imagine that jobs like the Interior Ministry are important."



The wife (no name available) of 33-year-old Kosma Mata, who was allegedly shot and killed by Albanian soldiers while working in his field, mourns with an unidentified relative in the village of Fitorija, 20 km north of Vlore, Saturday. — AFP/UNB photo

Pak woman freed to join her husband Marriage without consent of guardian not invalid: Court

LAHORE, Pakistan, Mar 10: A Pakistan court freed a woman to join her husband today, dismissing her Muslim fundamentalist father's petition that the marriage was invalid because it had taken place without his permission, reports Reuter.

"Marriage without the consent of a wali (guardian) is not invalid," said Justice Ehasan Ul-Haq Chaudhry, reading the Lahore High Court decision that set aside a Muslim conservative case pitting Muslim conservatives against women's rights advocates.

The three-member bench split 2-1 in a majority decision that upholds 22-year-old Saima Waheed's marriage to Arshad Ahmad, a lecturer in English at a government college.

"It is the most wonderful day of my life," a jubilant Ahmad said at the court. "We have gone

through a great ordeal that was spread over 11 months. But now I can join hands with my wife once again. I am extremely happy."

Saima will now be able to leave a women's shelter where she has been kept under court order for the past 11 months.

"It's a historic decision for the women of Pakistan said Asma Jahangir, Saima's lawyer and Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP).

The case was one of the most controversial faced by the Lahore High Court since a 1994 trial of three Christians accused of blaspheming the Prophet Mohammed (SM).

Jahangir also defended the three Christians, one of whom was shot dead outside the Lahore High Court building and two of whom fled to Germany after their acquittal in 1995.

Peruvian rebels willing to resume talks

LIMA, Mar 10: Rebel leader Nestor Cerpa said Sunday that he is willing to resume negotiating for the release of 72 hostages held in the Japanese ambassador's residence, according to a local radio report, says AP.

Cerpa, speaking by two-way radio, told Radio Programas that negotiations could resume as early as Monday.

His comments came after meeting with two of the talks' neutral guarantors, who visited the residence for two hours.

One guarantor, Archbishop Juan Luis Cipriani, had said after the meeting that efforts were being made to resume negotiations. His muted statement had indicated that Cerpa was willing to return to the talks as early as Monday.

Cerpa, in speaking with Radio Programas, confirmed Cipriani's statement, but ap-

parently added little else. His exact statements to Radio Programas were not immediately available.

The rebel leader had called off the negotiations last week after claiming the government was trying to tunnel under the residence. Cerpa had said the tunnel would be a sign of bad faith while the two sides were trying to end the crisis through negotiations.

Some government officials, including Peru's defence minister, have said the allegation of a tunnel is a product of nervousness on the part of the rebels. President Alberto Fujimori has refused to confirm or deny its existence.

Earlier, Japanese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hiroshi Hashimoto in Tokyo said the wide differences between the two sides makes any chance of a quick resolution remote.

Sudan accuses Uganda of launching offensive

KHARTOUM, Mar 10: The Sudanese army has accused Uganda of launching a military offensive in southern Sudan, reports AP.

Gen Mohamed Sanousi Ahmed, the army spokesman, said in a communique issued Sunday night that Ugandan forces earlier in the day attacked the southern Sudanese towns of Kaya and Bazi. Both towns are southwest of the provincial capital Juba, which is 120 kilometres (72 miles) south of the national capital Khartoum.

Ahmed said that Ugandan soldiers entered from Uganda, while a second force came in from an area of Zaire controlled by Ugandan-backed Tutsi rebels.

The spokesman had no reports on casualties, but said the Ugandan forces appeared intent on opening a path so that Sudanese rebels could advance toward the town of Yei, which is 120 kilometres (72 miles)

southwest of Juba. Sudanese troops were "courageously fighting the aggressors on all battle fronts," Ahmed said.

Brig el-Tayeb Ibrahim Mohamed Kheir, Sudan's information minister, told the official Sudan News Agency that a "big number of tanks and heavy artillery were used by the aggressors."

Kheir said Sudan "reserves the right to respond to this heinous aggression by all means available."

He also charged that Uganda, like Ethiopia, would claim to have nothing to do with the attacks.

Sudan has repeatedly accused neighboring Ethiopia and Eritrea of being behind an offensive launched last December by Sudanese rebels along Sudan's eastern border.

Off the Record

Bid to set world dance record

HAVANA: About 1,000 couples joined a five-day dance marathon here in an attempt to set a new Guinness world record, reports AFP.

The marathon of Salsa and other dances began Saturday evening at La Tropical, a Havana dance Mecca. Nonstop music was being played by 55 different bands.

Earlier, some 2,000 musicians belonging to seven recording studios began what is billed as the world's longest song Thursday.

Participants include the country's top bands and singers.

50pc Chinese dismiss fortune telling as superstition

BEIJING: China has completed an unprecedented survey of fortune telling — an activity previously vilified by the authorities as one of the "six vices" afflicting the country, reports AFP.

The nationwide survey, which was carried out at the end of last year by the China Association of Science and Technology (CAST), covered 5,000 adults between the ages of 18 and 69, the official Xinhua news agency said.

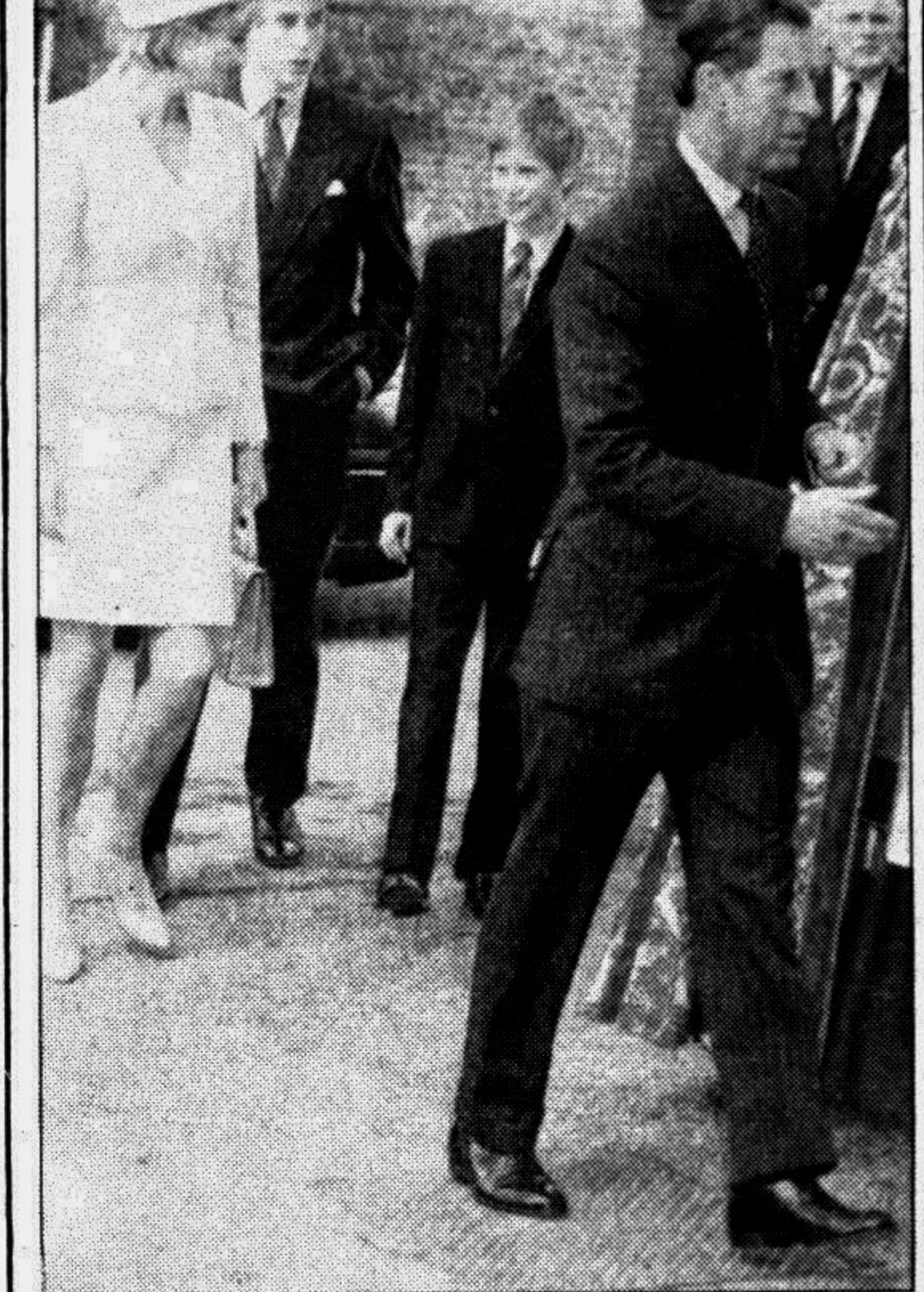
The survey found that more than 50 per cent of Chinese dismiss fortune telling as mere superstition, while only 7.6 per cent said it had a scientific basis.

Of the respondents, 22 per cent said fortune tellers were crooks.

The survey also found that 26.4 per cent of Chinese believe in extra-terrestrial beings.

Despite being repeatedly attacked in the official media, fortune tellers have recently made a comeback in China after decades of communist suppression.

Superstition is among the "six vices" targeted by the government, along with prostitution, gambling, selling of women and children, drug trafficking and abuse, and pornography.



The Prince and Princess of Wales arrive with their sons Prince William (2nd left) and Prince Harry, for the Confirmation of Prince William at St George's Chapel in Windsor Sunday. — AFP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

Swedish queen's mother dies:

Alice de Toledo Sommerlath, the mother of Sweden's Queen Silvia, died Sunday. She was 90, the Swedish news agency TT reported. AP reports from Stockholm.

The report did not give the cause of death. It said Sommerlath recently had been visiting Drottningholm, the royal residence, but did not say where she had died. A duty officer at Drottningholm declined comment, saying no information would be available until Monday morning.

\$ 1.6m aid for quake victims in Iran: Iran has received more than 1.6 million dollars in cash and other donations to help cope with last week's devastating earthquake, the United Nations said Sunday, AP reports from Tehran.

Norway, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Japan, Germany, Switzerland, the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries and various UN agencies donated a total of 1.68 million dollars as aid for quake victims, according to a statement issued by the UN's information centre in the Iranian capital Tehran. In addition to \$15,000 dollars in cash, the donations include tents, food, plastic sheets, stoves, water tanks, blankets and medical supplies.

Floods claim 9 in Brazil: Nine people died and some 8,000 people fled their homes as heavy rains caused mudslides and flooding in northeastern and Central Brazil civil defence officials said Sunday, AFP reports from Sao Paulo.

In the northeast city of Salvador, five members of one family were killed when mudslides washed away homes in a shanty town, another 50 homes were destroyed by flooding on the Cabrera river.

Rally against N-waste dump in Spain: More than 15,000 people rallied Sunday against a proposed nuclear waste facility in southern Spain, AP reports from Cordoba, Spain.

Wide support for the gathering came from local government officials and a variety of political and social groups. An area near this popular tourist city is one of three sites being considered by the Spanish energy company Endesa for the construction of the nuclear waste facility.

3 Chinese warships in Pearl Harbour: Three Chinese military ships have arrived in Pearl Harbour for a four-day visit, AP reports from Honolulu.

It's the first visit by the US by Chinese military vessels since 1989, when ships also stopped at Pearl Harbour, and the second since Communist took power in 1949. US ships have made visits to Chinese ports in 1995 and 1996. The US and China have the largest navies in the Pacific. Several hundred Chinese sailors will visit with the US counterparts, take tours of Pearl Harbour and other military sites and give tours of their vessels.

HK's most notorious criminal jailed: Yip Kai-foon, Hong Kong's most notorious criminal, was ordered Monday to serve 41 years in prison after being convicted of weapons offenses and opening fire to resist arrest, AP reports from Hong Kong.

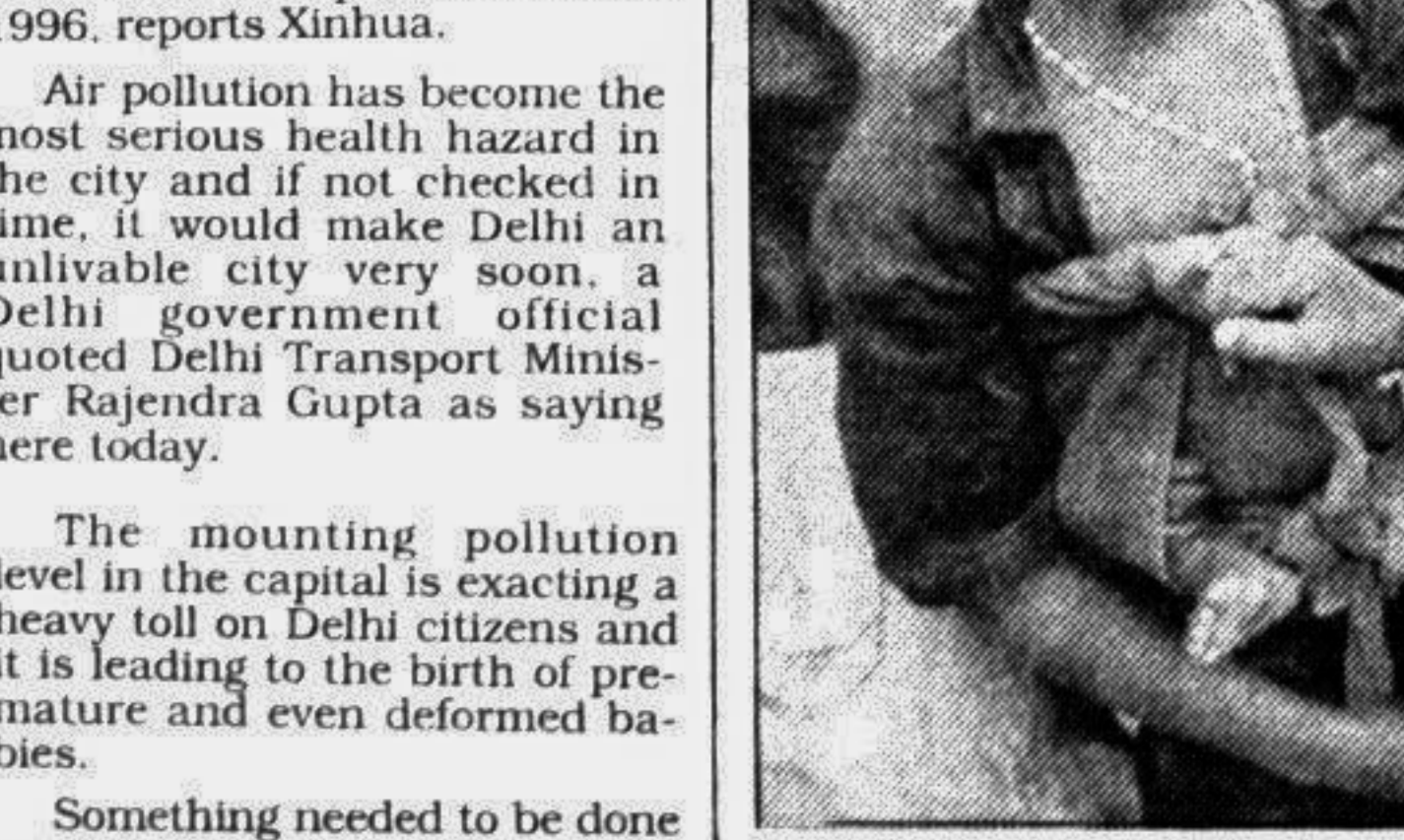
Yip, 35, known as "the big robber" and "dog fangs", was sentenced to 30 years, plus the remaining 11 years of a 16-year sentence during which he escaped. Yip was arrested in May in a shootout with police that left him paralysed from the waist down.

Pollution causes 7,500 premature deaths in Delhi: NEW DELHI, Mar 10: As many as 7,500 people died premature deaths while a whopping 2.5 million people received medical treatment on account of air pollution-related diseases in New Delhi, capital of India in 1996, reports Xinhua.

Air pollution has become the most serious health hazard in the city and if not checked in time, it would make Delhi an unlivable city very soon, a Delhi government official quoted Delhi Transport Minister Rajendra Gupta as saying here today.

The mounting pollution level in the capital is exacting a heavy toll on Delhi citizens and it is leading to the birth of premature and even deformed babies.

Something needed to be done to check the increasing number of vehicles on the roads as vehicular pollution was the single largest contributor to air pollution, its share being over 75 per cent.



Abandoned children within the Tingi Tingi refugee camp ask for food Sunday during an assessment visit by a team of United Nations humanitarian workers who made their first visit to the camp since it's some 130,000 Rwandan refugees fled a rebel advance one week ago. The several hundred refugees left in the camp were either too weak or sick to flee. — AFP/UNB photo

Advancing Zairean rebels surround Kisangani

TINGI-TINGI, Zaire, Mar 10: Rebels advancing in eastern Zaire said they had surrounded the city of Kisangani where civilians have been fleeing an expected attack, reports Reuter.

The radio of the rebel Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL) said the government was deserting Kisangani, the base for its army's troubled counter-offensive against the rebels.

The AFDL forces have now surrounded Kisangani," the Voice of the People radio said from Goma, the largest city seized by rebels who now control a 1,000 km (600-mile) border strip.

"The people are awaiting the arrival of (rebel leader) Laurent Kabila. The AFDL forces are in evidence on the battle front in Kisangani and the Zairean government is fleeing," said the broadcast, monitored by the BBC.

No independent account of the situation around Kisangani was immediately available but

travellers from the area said on Saturday there was no sign of rebels. The last fighting was reported on Wednesday about 40 km (25 miles) to the north.

AP adds from Walikale: Zairian rebels, poised outside a strategic government-controlled city, said Sunday they will not stop fighting until President Mobutu Sese Seko begins negotiations with them.

Despite indications a day earlier that rebels had accepted a UN peace plan, rebel spokesman Nyembwe Kazadi, speaking by telephone from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, said talks had to come before any ceasefire.

"We won't stop the war until we begin negotiations," said Kazadi. "We have to sit down and negotiate any ceasefire."

Since September, the rebels have captured a 900-mile (1,450-kilometre) swath of eastern Zaire, nearly one-third of the country. Their main demand is that Mobutu, who during 31 years of corrupt and dic-

tatorial rule has left most of Zaire's people impoverished, must resign. They have consistently said face-to-face negotiations with Mobutu must come before a ceasefire.

Mobutu said last week that he was ready to accept the UN's five-point peace plan. That plan, however, requires an immediate ceasefire before talks can begin — something the rebels have yet to agree to.

Kazadi said Sunday that rebels were still waiting for reinforcements to launch their attack on Kisangani, one of Zaire's largest cities and an important staging ground for the government. The city's international airport has served as the army's local headquarters.

Rebel troops are already at the northern approaches to Kisangani and are waiting for additional soldiers advancing from the east and south, including Walikale, about 120 miles (190 kilometres) northwest of the rebel headquarters in Bukavu.

Hijacked Taiwan airliner lands in China

BEIJING, Mar 10: A hijacked Taiwan airliner landed safely at a South China airport today, an airport official said, reports Reuter.

"It just landed," said the official, "it came down safely." Far Eastern Flight 128, a Boeing 757 with a capacity of 201 passengers, had departed from Taiwan's southern port city of Kaohsiung on a scheduled flight to Taipei when it changed course and headed towards the Chinese communist mainland.

It was not immediately known how many passengers and crew were aboard.

Aviation sources contacted by Reuters in Taiwan said a lone hijacker, said to be a journalist, doused himself with gasoline and ordered the pilot to fly to the Fujian province port of Xiamen.

5 DPRK soldiers infiltrate into ROK border

SEOUL, Mar 10: South Korean troops on the eastern front-line briefly went on alert Monday after five North Korean soldiers were found inside their side of the demilitarised zone, the Defence Ministry said, reports AP.

There was no exchange of fire during the one-hour encounter starting at 5:30 am (20:30 GMT) along the eastern sector of the 4-kilometre (2.5-mile) wide DMZ that separates the two Koreas, it said.

After the North Koreans withdrew, South Korean troops searched the area but found no signs that the communist soldiers were on any special mission, the ministry said.

Ministry officials said the exact activities of the North Koreans could not be determined, because they were moving slowly in the dark.

Jin Coles, the spokesman for the US military command in Seoul, said it was not known why the North Koreans had crossed over.

Taliban slimming down govt

KABUL, Mar 10: Afghanistan's purist Islamic Taliban is slimming down the government because it is bloated with too many ministries and is a heavy burden on the country, reports Reuter.

The six-man Ruling Council of the Taliban, which rules three quarters of Afghanistan, decided to merge a number of ministries and slash others to department level on the orders of their leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar.

"On the basis of an order by the Amir-al-Momnteen (leader of the Faithful), a change in the structure of the government has been approved," said the Taliban-controlled Voice of Shariat radio on Sunday evening.

"The Caretaker Council of the Islamic State of Afghanistan has ordered a rev-

sion of the ministerial structure of the government established in 1356 (1977) (in the Islamic calendar)," the radio said in a report monitored in Kabul.

"It has ordered that some of the ministries and departments created during the Communist regime and the evil and corrupt governments that followed them be adjusted to departments and directorates."

Any ministry lowered to the level of a department loses its seat in the Cabinet.

The Taliban's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sher Abbas Stanakzai, told Reuters in a recent interview the Communists and their successors had bloated the government structure to create more jobs.

The existing system was proving a heavy burden on the country, he added.

came to power (in 1977) they wanted to employ more people, so they changed departments into ministries. We now have more than 28 ministries in Afghanistan, which is a big load on the government's shoulders," Stanakzai said on Thursday.

The order said the ministries of transport, civil aviation and tourism, light industries and food, labour and social affairs, refugees' repatriation, martyrs and disabled, rural development, and central statistics would become departments.

The order said the department of accountability would become the department of intelligence. Until the Taliban captured Kabul last September, the department was known as the Ministry of National Security.

"When the Communists

AP adds: Israel's plans for a

PLO rejects Israeli plan for pullout from WB rural areas

JERUSALEM, Mar 10: Palestinian negotiators Sunday rejected Israel's plan for a limited pullback from rural areas in the West Bank and stormed out of a meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy, officials said, reports AFP.

Israel responded by saying that the withdrawal, due to begin in the next few days would be delayed because of the Palestinian refusal. Aviv Shir-on, spokesman for the Israeli delegation, told AFP.

"They are supposed to receive land from us if they don't want then it will be delayed, he said.

Angry Palestinian negotiators, who suddenly left the meeting at the west Jerusalem hotel, refused comment except to say that the issue would now be presented to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

West Bank troop pullout were on hold Monday after the Palestinians rejected the withdrawal plan, provoking a new crisis.

With Israel unlikely to improve its offer to withdraw troops from 9 per cent of the West Bank, and tensions already high over planned Israeli construction in disputed east Jerusalem, the brinkmanship raised fears of a breakdown in the peace process.

A top Israeli official said Sunday that US intervention might be needed to resolve the impasse over the pullout, the first of three "further redeployments" Israel has promised to carry out.

Although the Israel-PLO accords, brokered by the United States, allow Israel to dictate the pullouts' extent, Palestinian officials told Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy Sunday night that the Israeli decision

was too restrictive and did not show good faith.

Palestinian officials effectively could wreck any Israeli plans for the withdrawal by declining to cooperate or take control of the evacuated areas.

The decision, narrowly approved by the Cabinet Friday after an overnight session, was viewed as relatively generous in Israel and even sparked a mini-rebellion in Netanyahu's conservative coalition.

But even though Yasser Arafat immediately complained about the decision, the Israelis seemed surprised when his representatives refused to coordinate the transfer of authority at a meeting in Jerusalem.

"We totally rejected their percentage," said Palestinian negotiator Mohammed Dahlan.

"We informed them that this was not acceptable," Arafat's deputy Mahmood

Abbas also gave Levy a letter protesting Israel's plans to build the 6,500-home Har Homa neighbourhood and shut down four Palestinian offices in east Jerusalem, where the Palestinians hope to establish their capital.

The tense three-hour meeting ended in stalemate, and the Palestinians returned to autonomous Gaza to brief Arafat.

Levy suggested the pullout — which had been expected within several days — might now be postponed.

The government made a decision, it prepared for implementation, and if they (the Palestinians) don't accept it then they are causing delays," he said. "They will have to discuss it among themselves and give us an answer."

Israel Radio said Levy later briefed Netanyahu and US Secretary of State Albright.