

Taliban claim victory on diplomatic front Muslim leaders call for more cooperation among OIC states

ISLAMABAD, Mar 24: Muslim leaders Sunday here called for more cooperation on security issues to defend the Islamic world from outside threats and end tension between member states, reports AFP.

The Islamic world is weak and divided. Many of us are locked in disputes with each other, Pakistani President Farooq Leghari said in his inaugural address to a special summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

He proposed that Islamic leaders meeting in Islamabad consider creating a permanent summit committee to mediate disputes and differences that exist or may arise among Muslim countries.

Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani said during Sunday's working session that the "implementation of an appropriate pragmatic mechanism for the dispute settlement and crisis management among

Muslim countries is one of the most crucial" challenges facing the Islamic world.

Despite the common religion of the 54-member countries, serious tensions exist between several members of the sprawling Islamic organisation and with other non-Muslim neighbours.

"We have been calling for the unity of ranks for non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries for solution by peaceful means of disputes, said Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir.

He said Sudan, which is in the grip of civil war, was "exposed" to armed aggression from three neighbouring countries that are threatening "our Islamic territory."

"And it is most regretted that a certain member country is involved in this in contradiction with all conventions of this organisation," he said in an apparent reference to Uganda.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan's Taliban militia claimed a victory on the diplomatic front Sunday at a special summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

Invited as observers to the OIC summit, called to mark Pakistan's 50th anniversary since independence from Britain, Taliban Islamic militia officials said they were confident of gaining Afghanistan's seat in the 54-member grouping.

"Today we are very happy, God willing, we will have the (OIC) seat soon," a confident Mufti Mohammad Massom Afghani, Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, told AFP. "It is our right under Islamic principles to have that seat."

The seat has been left vacant since the Taliban militia seized Afghan capital Kabul on September 27 last year and ousted the government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani.

Lankan navy kill 100 Sea Tigers

COLOMBO, Mar 24: Tamil Tiger rebels attacked Sri Lankan naval boats off the country's northeastern coast early today, but were repulsed after a four-hour battle, a naval spokesman said, reports Reuter.

He said an estimated 100 Sea Tigers from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were killed and at least 10 rebel boats were sunk in the attack when the navy returned fire.

"Some 25-30 rebel boats took us about 10 miles off Mullaitivu after midnight on Sunday. They were met by an equal and strong force from our side and their flotilla was destroyed," the spokesman told Reuters.

The spokesman said one naval man die and five were wounded in the attack which began at about 1.45 am (1945 GMT Sunday). Mullaitivu lies 280 km (175 miles) from the capital Colombo.

"We have sustained minor damages to our boats," the spokesman said. He did not say how many naval vessels were involved in the attack.

"Their (the rebels) remaining boats were seen limping back to Mullaitivu," the spokesman said.

An LTTE spokesman was not immediately available for comment.

The Tamil Tigers are fighting for a separate home in the island's north and east in a war now in its 14th year that the government says has claimed some 50,000 lives. The LTTE says the toll is higher.

Government troops had attacked rebel bases in the Mullaitivu jungles earlier this month. Bases of the rebels' Sea Tiger naval wing were also attacked.

Military officials then said the strikes were aimed at disrupting guerrilla preparations for an attack.

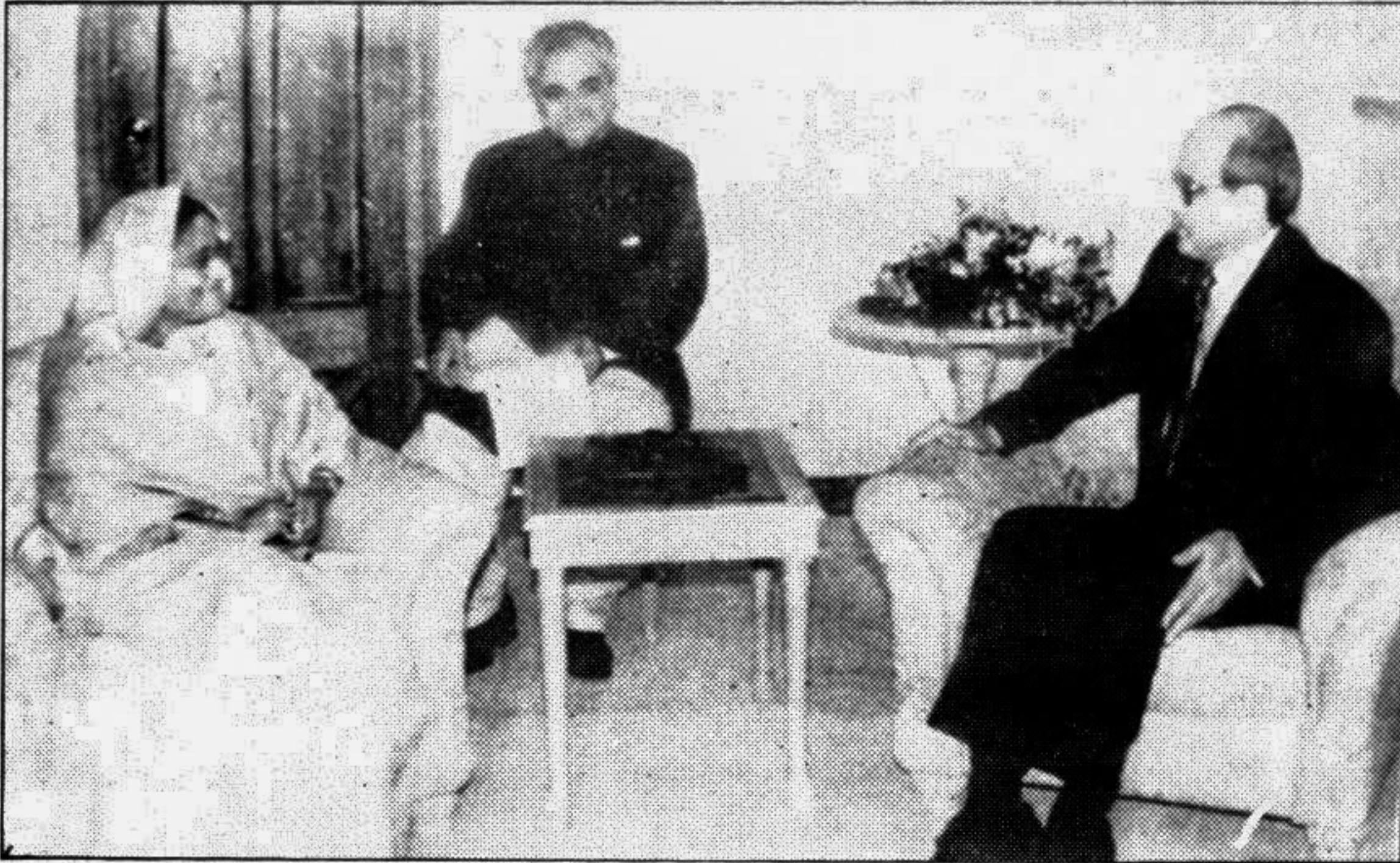
The rebels overran a key military base in the area last year, killing or capturing 1,000 soldiers in the army's worst setback in the war.

Earlier AP says, Sri Lankan naval gunboats fought off an attack on a convoy of cargo ships by a fleet of Tamil rebel speedboats off the northeastern coast early Monday, killing at least 30 guerrillas and one sailor, military officials said.



The five directors nominated for the best 1996 Foreign Language Film, pose together at the Academy headquarters on Saturday. They are (L to R) Nana Djordjadze, director of 'A Chef In Love,' Jan Sverak, director of 'Kolya,' Berit Nesheim, director of 'The Other Side of Sunday,' Sergei Bodrov, director of 'Prisoner of the Mountains' and Patrice Leconte, director of 'Ridicule.' Norman Jewison, moderator of the event, looks on (R).

— AFP/UNB photo



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called on Pakistan President Farooq Ahmed Khan Leghari at the International Conference Centre in Islamabad on Sunday. —PID photo

Deal on sale of N-reactor likely Gowda may sign seven accords with Russia

NEW DELHI, Mar 24: Indian Premier HD Deve Gowda is expected to sign seven agreements and clinch a deal on sale of nuclear reactors during his three-day state visit to Russia beginning today, reports AFP.

The Business Standard newspaper said pacts on avoidance of double taxation, customs, extradition, mutual legal aid in criminal matters youth and sports and a consular convention, will be signed.

"Moscow is keen on rebuilding a strategic partnership with India," Albert Chernyshev, Russian ambassador here said.

Chernyshev said the sale of Sukhoi jets to India was an example of this partnership.

Deve Gowda's government agreed to buy 40 Sukhoi jets worth 1.8 billion dollars from Russia last year and is also believed to be negotiating a billion dollar air defence package.

Experts said the visit to Moscow, the first by an Indian Premier in three years could also speed up a deal on nuclear reactor and open talks on an aircraft carrier that Russia hopes to sell to its closest ally outside the eastern bloc.

Inder Kumar Gujral, Foreign Minister said the cabinet had given approval for the reactor deal.

The Hindustan Times said the deal will be announced immediately after Deve Gowda meets Russian President Boris Yeltsin on March 25.

The deal is a further step in promoting Indo-Russian ties. Once the detailed project report is done, then comes the other things like finance and technological details, Gujral said.

The two nuclear reactors are to be set up in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

Arab League raises doubts about US role Israel lays down 6 conditions for resuming talks with PA

JERUSALEM, Mar 24: The Israeli Security Cabinet on Sunday laid down six conditions for the resumption of peace talks with the Palestinians following the Islamic suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, reports AFP.

The terms announced after a four-hour meeting of the council chaired by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, included: — The Palestinian authority must tighten its cooperation with Israel in the area of security.

— It must prevent the incitement of violence and hostile propaganda.

— It must effectively fight terrorist organisations and destroy their infrastructure.

— It must arrest and punish terrorists.

— It must confiscate illegal arms.

— It must examine the extradition requests for terrorists presented by Israel.

According to the statement, the Security Cabinet, which includes Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai and Foreign Minister David Levy, reviewed a report by Israeli intelligence indicating the 'Palestinian Authority led terrorist organisations to believe they had received a green light to commit attacks against Israel.'

The Islamic resistance movement (Hamas), which claimed responsibility for Friday's bombing, has warned it will carry out further attacks to protest Netanyahu's decision to begin construction this week of a new Jewish settlement in annexed Arab east Jerusalem.

Another report from Cairo adds: The Arab League raised doubts Sunday about the US

role as an honest broker in the Middle East peace process after it twice vetoed a UN resolution condemning Israel.

The fact that the United States stood alone for a second time in as many weeks with its veto, despite its criticism of the Abu Ghneim settlement, raised many questions," League Secretary General Esmat Abdel Meguid told reporters.

He said the US actions are "regrettable and lead the Arab and Islamic world to raise questions about the American role as a co-sponsor of the peace process," alongside Russia.

"The Israeli practices require that all the parties concerned with the peace process, particularly the United States, take firmer positions so that the process can achieve its objectives," he said.

BRIEFLY

7 of a family killed in Pakistan: A family of seven, including four children, were murdered as they slept in a family room early Sunday in the central Pakistan city of Jhang police said, AFP reports from Islamabad.

Neighbours, who scaled the walls after a milkman failed to get response to repeated knocks, found the victims in a pool of blood with their throats slit, police said. The owner of the house, Ahmed Din, his son, daughter-in-law and his four grandchildren, died in a family feud, a senior police official said.

Al Gore urged to raise Wei's plight: The sister of jailed Chinese dissident Wei Jingsheng has asked US Vice President Al Gore to raise her brother's plight with Chinese leaders during his visit this week, a pressure group said yesterday, AFP reports from Beijing.

"I ask you to appeal to the Chinese government for my brother's prompt release and, prior to this release, for his parole for medical treatment," Wei Shanshan said in a letter dated March 4, supplied by New York-based watchdog Human Rights in China (HRIC).

3 hanged for murder in Lebanon: Three Muslim extremists convicted of assassinating a senior Sunni Muslim fundamentalist cleric were hanged at dawn Monday, and army troops were put on alert to head off possible violence by other Muslim fundamentalists, AP reports from Beirut.

The three were hanged at the courtyard of the Roumieh prison, the country's main penitentiary in a northern suburb of Beirut at 4:50 am (0250 GMT). They shouted the Islamic battle cry of 'Allah Akbar', or God is great, as they were led to the gallows. Their last wish was to be buried together.

Thai army threaten Karens to send back: Thai military officials are threatening to send Karen refugees, including women and children, back to areas in Burma this week, aid workers said Monday, AP reports from Bangkok.

The Karens fled a Myanmar military offensive in mid-February and their homeland is now occupied by Myanmar troops, which have been fighting Karen guerrillas seeking autonomy from Yangon for nearly 50 years.

5 beheaded in Saudi Arabia: Five men, a Saudi and four Nigerians, were beheaded Sunday for stealing, the official Saudi Press Agency reported, AP reports from Riyadh.

It quoted an Interior Ministry statement as saying the thefts ranged from stealing a man's wallet and car to robbing shops. The men terrified people by shooting in the air during their robberies and by carrying axes, the statement said.

Train mishap kills 13 in S Korea: At least 13 people were killed and another 20 injured when a train ploughed into a bus near the southern South Korean city of Namwon early yesterday, reports said, AFP reports from Seoul.

Yonhap television news said the accident occurred at 9:00 am (0000 GMT) when the driver of the passenger bus ignored a stop signal at a level crossing on the outskirts of Namwon 220 kilometres (130 miles) south of Seoul.

WW II bombs discovered in China: Farmers in central China's Hubei province early this month discovered fifteen unexploded bombs dropped by Japanese aircraft during World War II, the official China Daily reported yesterday, AFP reports from Beijing.

Military authorities have removed the bombs from Yichang village for further inspection, the report said, adding that a search for other hidden ordnance in the area had been ordered. Imperial Japan occupied much of coastal China during the 1937-1945 war, forcing the country's nationalist regime and Communist guerrillas to fight a war of resistance from inland bases.

5 found dead in Canada: Five people — three men and two women — have been found dead in a house belonging to a member of the Swiss-based order of the Solar Temple Cult, police said in St Casimir Sunday, AFP reports from St Casimir, Canada.

The gruesome discovery was made Saturday night after a passerby noticed smoke coming from the house in this small community, south-east of Quebec city.

HK residents stage rally: Thousands of Hong Kong residents staged a celebration march and rally here today, to mark the beginning of the last 100 days of British rule, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

PNG governor urges PM to step aside

PORT MORESBY, Mar 24: Papua New Guinea's Governor-General Sir Wiwa Korowi today urged Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan to 'step aside' pending the outcome of an inquiry into the decision to hire mercenaries to crush secessionist revolt, reports AFP.

Korowi made the remarks to a news conference following a two-hour meeting, held at his residence, of constitutional office holders to discuss options for ending the country's increasingly bitter political crisis.

The consensus of the meeting was that Chan should "use his good sense and step aside until the inquiry is completed," he said.

Mobutu emerges from seclusion

KINSHASA, Mar 24: Wearing his leopard-skin cap and waving a wooden cane, President Mobutu Sese Seko emerged from his riverfront residence and pledged himself to "the highest interest of Zaire," reports AP.

That, he said, means unity and territorial integrity, but the ruler of 31 years brushed aside questions about the rebel forces who have seized about a third of the country.

Asked what his role would be in efforts to forge a national reconciliation, he said only: "You will know within the next 48 hours."

He appeared Sunday with South Africa's deputy president, Thabo Mbeki, who has been trying to bring about peace talks between the government and the insurgents led by Laurent Kabila.

It was Mobutu's first public appearance since his return from Europe on Friday to face the rebellion that has been ravaging his country.

Violence claims 15 in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Mar 24: Eight Muslim separatists and seven others died in stepped-up violence in Kashmir, as protests erupted Sunday against the massacre of Hindus by anti-Indian guerrillas, officials said, reports AFP.

Four rebels and an Indian soldier died late Saturday in a gunbattle at Awthan village in northern Kashmir, officials said the fierce fighting lasted for 20 hours after troops cordoned off the sector.

Heavily-armed militants, hiding inside houses, opened fire, resulting in the fighting during which nine houses caught fire in the district of Baramulla, they said.

The guerrillas belonged to the powerful Hizb-ul Mujahideen, which advocates Kashmir's accession to Pakistan. The group has been badly mauled by Indian security forces in recent weeks.

An official spokesman described the killing of the four militants as a major break through and said they were wanted for scores of bomb attacks and attempts to assassinate Kashmir Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah.

"With the elimination of these four, militancy has suffered a terrible blow in Kashmir," he said.

10 low caste people gunned down in Bihar

NEW DELHI, Mar 24: At least 10 people belonging to a low caste were gunned down by armed men belonging to another caste in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said today, reports AP.

The news agency, quoting police, said the killings took place about 50 km (30 miles) from Patna, the state capital of Bihar, late on Sunday night.

PTI said another person was injured in the incident and was admitted in critical condition to Patna Medical College.

Bihar State Chief Laloo Prasad Yadav and police officials have rushed to the scene PTI said.

Off the Record

Bullet train sets new world speed record

TOKYO: Japan's latest bullet train, the Nozomi 500, set a new world speed record for a train in service when it started operation Saturday, west Japan railway said, reports AFP.

The Nozomi (hope) 500 set an average speed of 261.8 kilometres (162.6 miles) an hour between the towns of Hiroshima and Kokura, the company said.

The new train has been put in service between Osaka and Fukuoka.

The established record is held by France's Train a Grande Vitesse (TGV), which covers the approximately 250 kilometres (150 miles) from Paris to St Pierre des Corps, near tours in western France, at an average speed of 253 kilometres (157.1 miles) an hour.

West Japan railway said it would seek to register its record with the Guinness Book of Records. The French TGV will retain the fastest all-time speed record of 515 kilometres (320 miles) an hour, set in 1990.

Residents stage rally for unity in Tirana

Albanian PM seeks help from Italy, EU

TIRANA, Mar 24: Prime Minister Bashkim Fino will seek help from Italy and the European Union on Monday to rescue Albania from the brink of anarchy, reports Reuter.

Fino, whose National Unity government is trying to restore order after weeks of armed unrest, will hold talks with Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi in Rome after European Union foreign ministers meet in Brussels to work out an aid mission.

The two leaders will also talk about the effect on Italy of an exodus of nearly 14,000 Albanian refugees who have fled across the Adriatic on a flotilla of rusty ships.

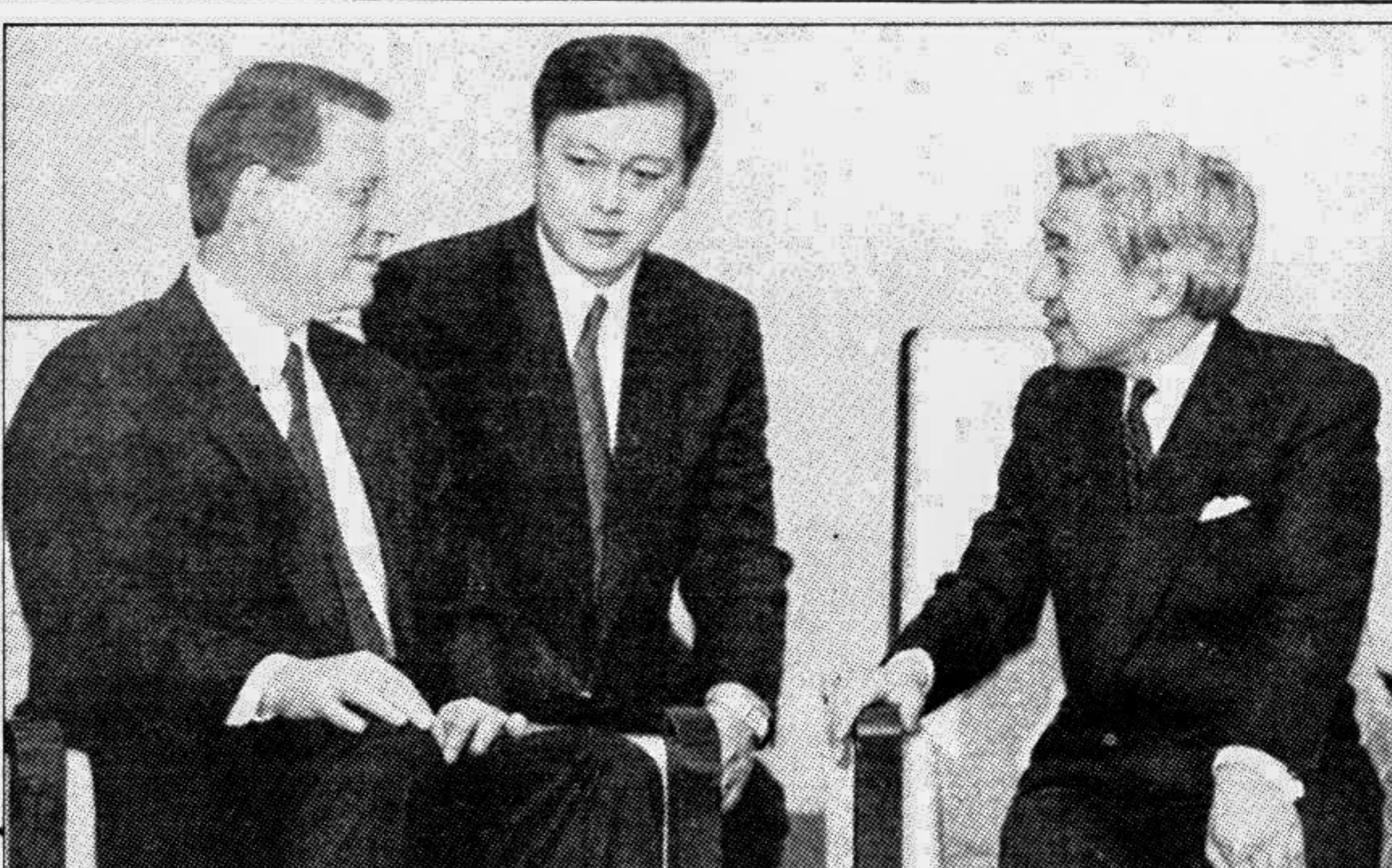
Italy landed a first shipment of medical aid in the southern Albanian port of Vlore on Sunday and is expected to fly in further supplies to Tirana on Monday.

Albania wants police units from abroad to help secure ports, airports, roads and railways so that relief supplies can be distributed.

AP adds: More than 1,000 people demonstrated in the capital to press for an end to the unrest that has traumatised Albania since popular high-risk investment schemes began to unravel.

Demonstrators Sunday held small wooden sticks inscribed with the names of Albanian cities, and called on Albanians to remain united. They shouted: "South and north, Albania is one!"

Albania has been gripped by chaos since February, following the collapse of the financial schemes in which most Albanians lost money. Many blame the government for not warning people and some claim it profited from the funds.



Visiting US Vice President Al Gore (L) chats with Japanese Emperor Akihito (R) at the Imperial Palace Monday. Gore is here as part of his Asian tour to discuss Japan-US security — AFP/UNB photo

Child prostitution flourishes worldwide

— The children's families, whether or not they admit to themselves how the money sent home from the big city is earned.

The United Nations Children's Fund estimates that every year at least 1 million children most of them girls, become prostitutes.

The problem is not limited to developing countries, where conventional wisdom blames poverty. UNICEF's estimated includes at least 100,000 children in the United States, in Japan and other industrial countries, and middle class high school girls turn to prostitution to earn money for designer clothes.

In some places, child prostitution has grown out of ancient tradition. Families in the West African nation of Ghana offer up daughters to appease animist gods, and shrine priests use them as concubines. Similar practices in India have lost all religious significance over the

years — now the girls are peddled as prostitutes.

In India, child prostitution remains a shameful trade that few people want to admit exists.

Rama, who gave only her first name, has a room in a dilapidated building that houses dozens of prostitutes. She fears being sent to one of the country's notorious juvenile detention centres, where caretakers are regularly accused of abusing their charges.

Nayanita Sardar, a social worker in Sonagachi, says many girls end up as prostitutes because, like Rama, their marriages fail. Childhood marriage is still common in rural India, and girls take on adult responsibilities as soon as they enter their in-laws household.

Rama left after six months, accusing her new family of beating her. Back home, worried she was a burden, Rama turned to a neighbour who had gone to Calcutta and returned with money and tales of good

work in the city.

Sonagachi, a Bengali word meaning "the place where gold grows on trees," has been known for more than 200 years as the place to find prostitutes.

Visitors not here to buy sex are rare and unwelcome, so ideas from the larger world are slow to penetrate. On a recent weekend morning, women shopped among the pink and glistening wares of fishmongers spread on the sidewalk, or sat combing their hair in the sun. Younger prostitutes were out of sight.

The Indian government has moved slowly, both because sexual matters must be addressed delicately in a conservative society and because political will seems to be lacking.

Brazil followed a similar pattern after President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a sociologist, declared a nationwide campaign against child prostitution in 1995 and ordered Brazil's 26 states to submit a

plan of action. The states have been slow to respond, because what they are being asked to do is costly and difficult.

Last year, Thailand's government passed a law that allows for the prosecution of parents who sell their children into the sex industry and increased fines and prison terms for procurers, brothel managers and patrons of child prostitutes.

But as Thai social critics point out, a country ranked among the world's major centres of child prostitution already has plenty of laws and plans, but little enforcement. Activists estimate more than 1 million prostitutes work in Thailand, and as many as 40 per cent of them are children.

The government of the Philippines is waging a publicity and education campaign against the problem, following President Fidel Ramos' admission that his country had a centre for child prostitution. Critics say that laws against child prostitution are good, but that enforcement is weak.