

Snap polls imminent in India, warns BJP

NEW DELHI, Apr 5: Hindu nationalists opened a meeting of their leadership here today with a warning that early parliamentary elections were imminent in India, reports AFP.

"A snap poll is almost a certainty," Kalyan Singh of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party) said, six days before the Indian government's fate is to be decided by a crucial trust vote in parliament.

"I think the elections cannot be averted," he said.

Singh's comments came immediately after the BJP began a meeting here of its national executives amid a political crisis sparked by the withdrawal of support to India's ruling United Front coalition by the Congress (I) Party.

The BJP, India's main opposition party and the largest group in the 545-seat hung parliament, has said it will vote against the government in the House on April 11 and try to form a government if asked by President Shankar Dayal Sharma.

The BJP formed a government in New Delhi for the first time after last year's hung parliamentary elections but quit after 13 days after failing to muster majority support.

BJP leaders say some of the parties in the United Front coalition in New Delhi which had voted against the Hindu nationalist party a year earlier may now prop it up.

The Congress decision to withdraw support has reduced the 10-month centre-left government of Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda to a minority. The two sides are now trying to work out a compromise.

Earlier PTI adds: The Janata Party president, Dr Subramanian Swamy, said here yesterday that there were 65 per cent chances of the country facing a mid-term poll.

Alternatively, if Deve Gowda did not resign, he would lose vote of confidence on April 11 and the president might ask the Congress president, Sitaram Kesri, to take over and give him 15 days to prove his majority.

Can computer cope with the year 2000?

PARIS, Apr 5: Your computer might be able to do all kinds of neat things these days. But can it cope with a simple thing like a year that goes by the number 2000?

Many computer experts fear not. With 1,000-odd days to go before a new millennium gets underway, they say computer programmes must be rewritten — and fast — to handle the switch, reports AFP.

It's a task that could involve billions of dollars and a lot of headaches, they said.

"It's not just about rewriting programmes for slightly aging computers. In many cases, an entire corporate computer system will have to be worked over," said Serge Kampf, head of Cap Gemini, a European leader in computer servicing.

To save on memory and data procession, computers and programmes from the 1970s and 1980s were designed to understand dates in double-digit terms.

Thus they cannot distinguish whether "00" means 1900 or 2000 — and the knock-on results could well mean computers that crash and programme applications that go up.

Especially prone to "total chaos" are expensive computers used for airline reservations, banking networks and pension funds, said Rob Wirsiczek chairman of a crisis unit set up last year by the British government to look into the issue.

Some other governments think the problem is not so serious, as in many instances aging computer programmes will be updated before January 1, 2000 by ones which can think in four-digit years.

Computer firms are stepping up sophisticated methods to identify 2000-prone programmes, but the very speed at which the industry changes is causing problems.

The first management programmes, written in such languages as Cobol, have in many cases been preserved by their users, albeit upgraded over the years.

Experts say 80 billion lines of Cobol-written programming still exist. Problems is, it is considered a dinosaur language now, and programmes who can handle it are few — and price.

"It is not only management programmes that are going to crash," said Frederique Huynh of the French Computing Security Club. "Telephone switchboards are going to stop transferring calls, intelligent buildings will stop letting people enter with their passes, water and electricity supplies will be cut off," she said.

If nothing is done, US experts estimate the cost to the global economy of 2000-related computer breakdowns will run in excess of 500 billion dollars.

BRIEFLY

Fujimori arrives in Bolivia: Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori arrived to update leaders on efforts to free Bolivia's ambassador from leftist guerrillas who are holding 72 hostages at a diplomatic mission in Peru, AP reports from La Paz.

"I hope the takeover does not end in violence," said President Sanchez de Lozada, who greeted Fujimori on Friday at the airport of Santa Cruz, a tropical city in central Bolivia. "We do not want to risk the lives of hostages." The Tupac Amaru rebels have held Bolivian Ambassador Jorge Guncuio for 3 1/2 months inside the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima, Peru. The rebels say they will keep Guncuio as long as four of their comrades remain in prison in Bolivia.

Annan's India trip begins: UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan opens a two-week tour to India, Switzerland, Italy and Germany, on Saturday when he meets leading Indian politicians in New Delhi, AFP reports from United Nations.

On Monday he will address the Non-Aligned Movement ministerial meeting in the Indian capital where expansion of the 15-member UN Security Council is expected to be raised. Annan is expected to address the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva, Switzerland, on Wednesday when he will also meet Turkish-Cypriot leader Rauf Denktaş.

Fire claims 1 in Philippines: A small fuel tanker exploded into flames while berthed in a southern port early Saturday, killing one crew member and injuring three others, AP reports from Zamboanga.

The fire also destroyed a maritime training ship and damaged a cargo vessels at the Zamboanga city port. Danilo Bilangan, chief mechanic of the small tanker, Petron, said that a spark from the vessel's battery ignited gasoline that was leaking into the engine room.

Quake shakes Japan: A fairly powerful earthquake shook southwestern Japan Saturday, 10 days after a stronger tremor hit the same area, leaving at least 22 people injured, AP reports from Tokyo.

There were no immediate reports of injuries or damage from the 4.9 magnitude quake, which struck Saturday at 1:30 pm (0430 GMT). It was centred 10 kilometres (6 miles) below the ground near the city of Sendai in Kagoshima Prefecture on the main southwestern island of Kyushu, about 900 kilometres (560 miles) southwest of Tokyo, the Central Meteorological Agency said.

Road mishap kills 21 in Honduras: Twenty-one people were killed in a fiery collision of a truck and a passenger bus Friday near the southern Honduran city of Choluteca, police said, AFP reports from Tegucigalpa.

The head-on crash in San Lorenzo triggered an explosion and intense fire that engulfed the bus, incinerating several of the passengers, and killing at least two occupants of other vehicles. At least 10 injured people were rescued from the flames, and some managed to escape through windows.

29 kg heroin seized in India: Police in the northern Indian state of Punjab seized 29 kilograms (64 pounds) of heroin that they say was dumped by drug dealers in neighbouring Pakistan, an officer said Saturday, AP reports from Amritsar.

The heroin could fetch 270 million rupees (7.6 million dollars) in the international market, police officer Arun Aaron said. Soldiers of the Border Security Force seized two kilograms (4.4 pounds) of heroin Thursday night after it apparently had been thrown by couriers across a barbed wire fence at the border of India and Pakistan, Aaron said.

China to simplify trading of bonds: A senior financial official has promised China will further simplify trading of government treasury bonds for individual investors, a newspaper reported Saturday, AP reports from Beijing.

Gao Jian, director-general of the Ministry of Finance's state debt department, told a seminar Friday that market-oriented reforms in treasury bond issuance will continue, the official China Daily reported. Among further reforms planned are the creation of a unified national registration and clearance system for treasury bond trading, Gao said, according to the English language daily.

Natanyahu tells cabinet ministers US initiative based on Israel's plan to expedite peace talks with PA

JERUSALEM, Apr 5: An evolving US initiative is based on Israel's proposal to speed up talks on a final peace treaty with the Palestinians, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has reportedly told senior Cabinet ministers, reports AP.

The Palestinians have spurned Netanyahu's offer, saying they believe it's a ploy to get out of commitments Israel made in earlier peace agreements, including a three-stage troop pullback from the West Bank by mid-1998.

Netanyahu travels to Washington on Monday to consult with President Clinton on breaking the deadlock in Middle East peacemaking. In the meantime, he is threatening to use greater military force against Islamic militants, who have staged three suicide bombings since the peace process broke down last month.

Netanyahu is proposing to

try to reach a final peace agreement within six to nine months — well ahead of the current May 1999 deadline for a final peace treaty.

Under his proposal, final talks on the toughest issues could take place in a Camp David-style setting, with Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat negotiating face-to-face.

Peace efforts began to falter after Israel's decision last month to start building a Jewish neighbourhood in disputed east Jerusalem, the sector Palestinians want as the capital of a future state.

Palestinians also are angry over Netanyahu's plan to expand settlements in other territory they claim for their state — in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

In the West Bank on Friday, Israeli troops fired rubber bullets to disperse Palestinians

stone throwers in the towns of Hebron and Bethlehem. Sixteen Palestinians were hurt by rubber bullets in Hebron.

In Friday's weekly cabinet meeting, the head of the Shin Bet security service, Ami Ayalon, told ministers that while Arafat was encouraging stone-throwing protests, he was making an effort to prevent terror attacks by Islamic militants, Channel 2 said.

Ayalon appeared to be contradicting Netanyahu, who repeatedly has accused Arafat — most recently on Thursday — of giving the green light to radical Palestinian groups to carry out attacks.

In the wake of twin bombings Tuesday, Arafat's security forces have arrested dozens of militants, said the Palestinian attorney general, Khaled Kidreh.

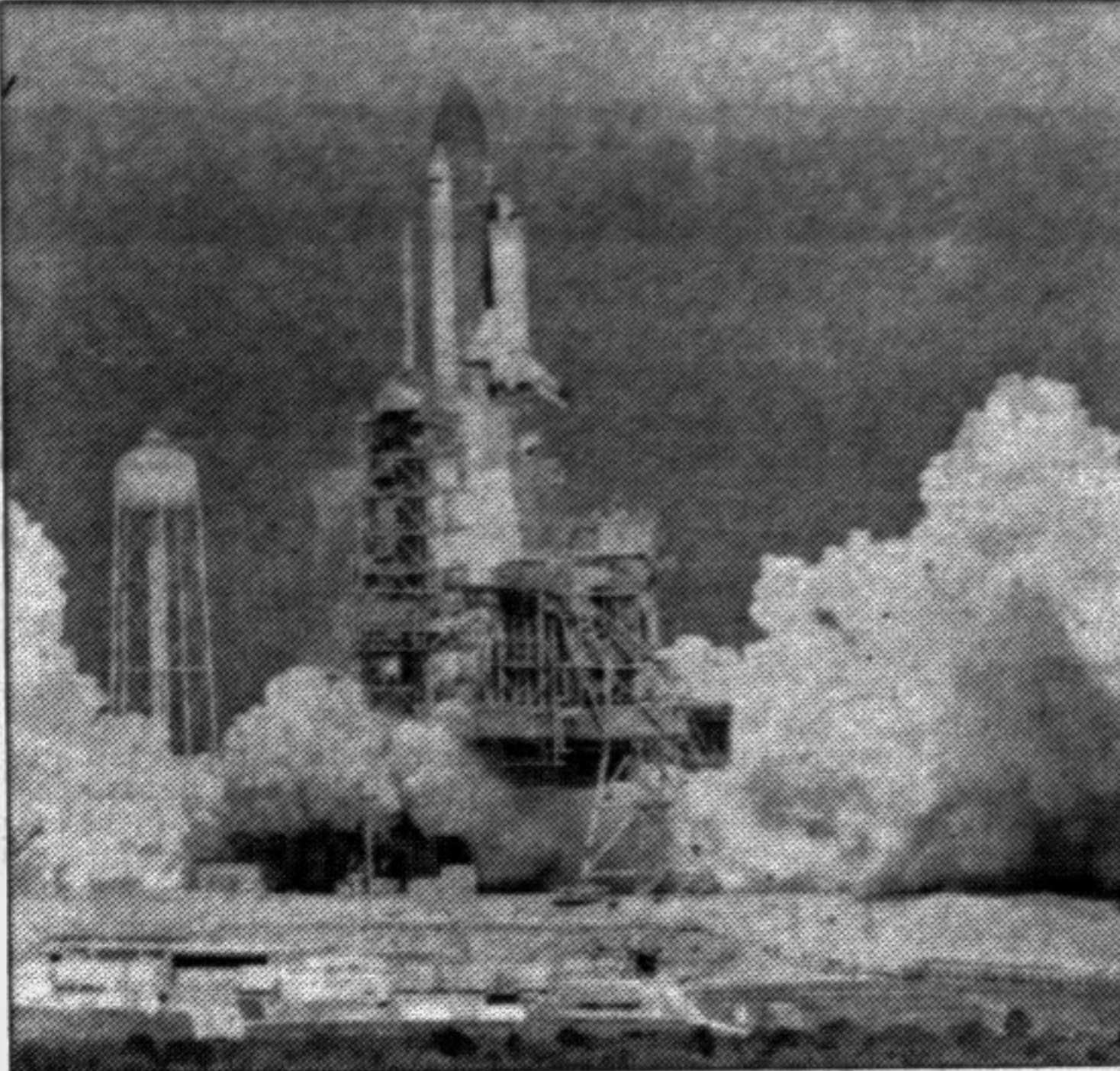
Netanyahu, meanwhile, met

with senior Cabinet ministers Friday ahead of his trip to Washington and outlined the emerging US initiative to rescue the peace process, Israel radio said.

Reuters adds: A proposal by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to meet US and Palestinian leaders for intense Camp David-style peace talks received a cool response not just from Palestinians but also by inside his own party.

Palestinian President Yasser Arafat convened his weekly cabinet meeting in self-ruled Gaza late on Friday and participants said they discussed the peace process but took no decisions on how to revive frozen contacts with Israel.

"The leadership studied ways and proposals to help get out of the present crisis," said PLO executive committee member Ghassan Shakha who attended the cabinet meeting.



The Space Shuttle Columbia lifts off on Friday from Kennedy Space Centre's ocean side launch pad in Florida. The Columbia and her seven-person crew is scheduled for a sixteen-day mission in space devoted to scientific experiments in weightlessness.

— AFP/UNB photo

UNSC denounces Libya for violating UN air embargo

UNITED NATIONS, Apr 5: The UN Security Council Friday denounced Libya for a "clear violation" of a UN air embargo for carrying passengers from Libya for the annual Hajj, for pilgrimage to Makkah, reports AFP.

In a statement read by Council President Antonio Monteiro of Portugal, the council noted that arrangements had been made for Libyan worshippers to travel to Saudi Arabia without violating the embargo.

But diplomats here said no additional action is planned against Tripoli.

Libya violated the embargo for the third consecutive year Friday by bringing 105 pilgrims, including members of Libya's official delegation, to Saudi Arabia on a Libyan Arab Airways flight.

The plane returned to Libya the next morning.

Libya also violated the flight embargo in 1995 and 1996 to transport pilgrims to Saudi Arabia and for some trips by its leader, colonel Moamer Gaddafi.

Syria refuses to help capture mastermind of Dhahran blast

WASHINGTON, Apr 5: Syrian authorities refused to help Saudi Arabia capture the dissident identified as this mastermind behind a terrorist bombing months before the blast killed 19 US airmen in Dhahran, the Washington Post reported today, says AFP.

Citing "Arab sources and court documents," the daily said the Saudi government was hunting Ahmed Ibrahim Mughassil in connection with the earlier bombing of a US military facility in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia suspected that Mughassil a member of the radical Islamic group Hezbollah, was planning further attacks the paper said.

Mughassil was with the Hezbollah militia in Lebanon, a country dominated by neighbouring Syria, which declined to help capture him because it did not want to trigger a clash with the group, the paper quoted Arab sources as saying.

OJ Simpson's lawyers ask for fresh civil trial

SANTA MONICA, California, Apr 5: Lawyers for OJ Simpson on Friday asked for a new civil trial, contending that blacks were "systematically eliminated" from consideration as jurors in the case that found him responsible for the deaths of his ex-wife and her friend, reports AFP.

The lawyers also cited procedural mistakes in asking for a new trial.

In a 59-page document, Simpson's lawyers quoted jury expert Richard Gabriel as saying the final jury pool "was not representative of the community."

Gabriel added: "The jury pool started out with nearly 35 per cent African-Americans. Nonetheless, the final jury panel ended up with no jurors of African-American descent, excluding a single individual who was both half African-American and half Asian."



US President Bill Clinton (2nd L) applauds a speaker along with (L-R) US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, former secretary of state James Baker, Defence Secretary William Cohen and Vice-President Al Gore during ceremonies at the White House in Washington on Friday in which Clinton urged the Senate to pass a global ban on chemical weapons. Lawmakers, diplomats, veteran's groups, arms experts, and religious and military leaders gathered in support of passage of the 161-nation chemical weapons ban treaty before the April 29 deadline.

— AFP/UNB photo

Lanka has no plans to hold peace talks with Tigers

COLOMBO, Apr 5: The Sri Lankan government said Saturday it has no plans to talk with Tamil Tiger guerrillas despite an agreement between the two main political parties to work together to end the 14-year war, reports AP.

The Foreign Ministry quoted its Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar as telling local newspaper editors Friday that the government had often said it would hold talks only if the rebels lay down arms and agree to a settlement in a stipulated time. The rebels have repeatedly rejected the idea.

In a statement issued Saturday, the ministry quoted Kadirgamar as saying there was no plan to hold talks with the guerrillas right now.

Tamil Tiger guerrillas have

been fighting for an independent homeland for the country's 3.2 million minority Tamils, charging that the majority Sinhalese discriminate against them. They have lost 48,000 lives since 1983.

In the British-brokered accord reached Thursday, President Chandrika Kumaratunga and opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe agreed to consult one another. They also agreed the opposition would not undermine government negotiations with the rebels.

Under the accord, any agreement made with Tamil rebels would be binding, even after a change of government.

The United States, India and Australia have praised the accord to end the war.

Many countries, including

Canada and Australia, have offered to mediate, but the government has publicly held that the war is a domestic problem.

Kadirgamar, according to the statement, also said "the government is not contemplating mediation or facilitation by any foreign government or third party at this point of time."

Implementation of this agreement is entirely a national matter.

The deal was modeled on the British approach toward negotiations on Northern Ireland. British Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind and his deputy, Liam Fox, visited Sri Lanka several times in the past year to talk to Mrs. Kumaratunga and Wickremasinghe.

Peace efforts have broken down three times since 1983, most recently in April 1995.

Manila reviewing ban on return of ex-army chief

CEBU, Philippines, Apr 5: The Philippine government is reviewing its ban on the return of a military chief who was ousted with former strongman Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, President Fidel Ramos said Saturday, reports AP.

Former chief of Staff Gen. Fabian Ver, one of Marcos' closest aides, fled with Marcos to Hawaii after a "people power" revolt ousted them. Ver has since lived in an undisclosed country and has not been permitted to return.

Ramos, in Cebu to attend a meeting of Asian rim finance ministers, said there was "a continuing review" of Ver's status.

On Thursday, Marcos' widow, Imelda, urged the government to allow Ver to come back, saying he may be able to identify the person who ordered the assassination of opposition leader Benigno Aquino Jr. at Manila's airport in 1983.

It was the first time Mrs. Marcos has suggested that an aide of her husband could provide clues to the death of Aquino, whose wife, Corazon, later became president.

Ver was accused of involvement as military chief in Aquino's killing but was acquitted while Marcos was still

in power.

The government has said Ver's return would endanger stability and security.

But Ramos told reporters that "it's not really a matter of national security. It's a matter of what is the involvement of that individual in criminal acts."

Aquino's murder unleashed a wave of opposition to Marcos, culminating in the 1986 popular uprising that swept him from power and installed Mrs. Aquino as president.

The court that acquitted Ver during the Marcos administration also freed several other military defendants and ruled that Aquino was slain by a supposed communist, Rolando Galman, who then was killed by security guards.

After Marcos was ousted, the Supreme Court nullified the acquittals and ordered a new trial.

In 1987, a court convicted 16 soldiers of killing both Aquino and Galman and sentenced them to life imprisonment. The trial failed to establish the mastermind, but many Filipinos believe it was Marcos.

Ver has not been retried because Philippine law bans trials in absentia.

Chances for ceasefire bleak Zairean factions to meet first time in Pretoria

JOHANNESBURG, Apr 5: The two sides in Zaire's civil war were due to meet face-to-face for the first time today, but prospects for any quick ceasefire looked bleak, reports Reuters.

The talks between Zairean government representatives and rebels who have overrun the east of the country were to start at 10 am (0800 GMT) at the South African government's main headquarters in Pretoria.

Zairean President Mobutu Sese Seko's security adviser and chairman of the eight-member government negotiations team, Honore Ngbanda, arrived in South Africa on Thursday ahead of Bizimwye Kabila, a rebel leader.

Kabila has shrugged off all offers of appeasement from Kinshasa, insisting that only

the removal of Mobutu — in power for 31 years — would satisfy his alliance of democratic forces for the liberation of Congo-Zaire.

Kabila, the rebels' foreign affairs commissioner, threatened on Friday to return to Zaire if the government delegation did not demonstrate it was prepared to talk in earnest.

Meanwhile with Rwandan refugees dying of malnutrition and disease, the United Nations Security Council on Friday joined an appeal of humanitarian groups for Zairean authorities to allow relief workers access to them.

"They need help and they need it now," he told reporters after a closed-door informal council session.

US to hold non-explosive N-test in June

WASHINGTON, Apr 5: The United States will hold its first non-explosive nuclear test in June, with a second one expected in the fall, the Energy Department said on Friday, reports Reuters.

The new round of underground tests are designed to ensure the reliability of the US nuclear stockpile without breaking an international ban on nuclear bomb tests.

"Subcritical experiments are essential to our commitments to a world free of nuclear testing and a reliable nuclear deterrent and are fully consistent with the CTBT (Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty)," Energy Secretary Federico Pena said.

The subcritical tests involve nuclear materials such as plutonium but do not trigger a self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction that would cause an explosion.

The expected announcement inspired a string of protests this week by anti-nuclear activists, who blocked routes to the Nevada test site and barricaded gates to the site.

Anti-nuclear groups believe the experiments violate the spirit of the test ban treaty and send a bad signal to other countries that are tempted to build nuclear weapons.

"The US has the opportunity to drive the nuclear disarmament process forward, but it could also inadvertently drive the world right back into a nuclear arms race," said Bruce Hall, a disarmament campaigner for Greenpeace.

An arms control expert said that while the tests were allowed under the international test ban, they should be conducted above ground.



Doctors and interns from the Toulouse Hospital demonstrate in Toulouse, France on Friday, to protest against a medical convention signed by the French government.

— AFP/UNB photo

Worries extend far beyond well-being of Mugabe

HARARE, Apr 5: When President Robert Mugabe's jet made an emergency landing last month in Ireland, worries extended far beyond the well-being of Zimbabwe's only leader since independence in 1980, reports AP.

The 73-year-old politician, visibly shaken, was whisked to safety through a barrage of wailing emergency vehicles at Shannon airport.

Back home, his compatriots wondered what would have happened if his Boeing 707, its nose wheel jammed and sparks spewing from one engine, had crashed and Mugabe had died.

Zimbabwe's much-travelled leader, credited with bringing reconciliation and peace to a nation once divided by civil

war, has no apparent heir.

While feted for engineering stability in Zimbabwe, Mugabe has kept his rule strong by exploiting tribal rivalries and enriching his ruling party.

A sudden leadership vacuum could plunge the country into confusion and chaos — and maybe violence.

Discontent simmers under the surface appearance of stability, and Mugabe's sudden death would pit his lieutenants against each other in a power struggle dependent on military backing, said John Mukumbe, a political scientist at the Zimbabwe university.

"The Machetes are literally being sharpened. When they start to swing, I expect it will be

very bloody," Mukumbe warned.

Mugabe has tried to groom successors, but in three cases ended up demoting heirs apparent he had promoted into the political mainstream.

Top contenders appear to be Emmerson Mnangagwa, the powerful justice minister; Eddison Zvogob, a US-trained lawyer who preceded Mnangagwa at the Justice Ministry; and Sidney Sekeramayi, the minister in charge of national security.

None ever have openly admitted presidential ambitions, and the ruling party's communist-style politburo dropped the succession issue from the agenda of a party convention last year.

"There's an atmosphere of fear, and this is a sensitive matter," Mukumbe said. "So far, no one wants to stand up and be counted."

One reason is the autocratic style of Mugabe, who has ruled seemingly on personal whim in recent years. Laws pushed through parliament provide money and favored status for the governing Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front, while secret police harass opposition groups.

Despite rumors of failing health, Mugabe last year easily won election to another five-year term and also married a woman about half his age. They are now expecting a child, their third.

Mugabe has surrounded himself with a Praetorian-like guard of security men and loyal aides, mostly from his own Zezuru ethnic group. His stern manner and frequent rebukes of colleagues about punctuality, drinking and personal habits have earned him few close confidantes outside his family.

But he still commands unwavering party loyalty, due to the riches, government contracts and other favors bestowed on party supporters.

Ibbo Mandaza, head of the Sapes Trust, a political and economic research institute, said the lack of a significant political opposition to Mugabe and favour party leaders he allows to get rich off government contractors "also means people

are not yet completely dissatisfied with the system."

After years of socialism and shortages, younger Zimbabweans enjoy recently acquired benefits of Western-style economic liberalisation, such as access to cars, electronic equipment, liquor and other imported luxuries.

As long as the middle class have got their whiskey and beer, they're not about to look for office, but of course that could change very quickly," Mandaza said.

Joshua Nkomo, 78, once Mugabe's biggest challenger is out of the succession equation because of a dispute over a 50 million dollars cellular phone deal with the state telecommunications network.