

India heading for fresh mid-term polls: BJP

NEW DELHI, Apr 8: India is heading for fresh elections, with no solution in sight to a political deadlock set to topple the country's 10-month coalition government Friday, Hindu nationalists said Tuesday, reports AFP.

"In the given situation, it seems the country is heading towards a new mid-term polls," said Kirshan Lal Sharma vice-president of the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party). He said it was highly unlikely that India's ruling United Front coalition led by Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda would survive a confidence vote in parliament Friday after losing his majority.

The Congress (I) Party, which has kept the government in power for 10 months, withdrew its backing on March 30 and said it wanted to form its own government, calling on the United Front's dozen parties to back the move. Sharma, however, said since both the Congress and the Front had taken rigid positions and a compromise did not appear likely, the government would topple Friday.

last-minute developments, there are clear indications of (fresh) elections," the BJP veteran said. Sharma said the BJP, which Monday pledged to try forming a government after Deve Gowda's exit, had not yet received any firm support from regional groups which it needs to take office.

No single party in India's hung 545-seat parliament has enough strength to form a government on its own, any new government which assumes office after Friday would have to be a coalition.

India, the world's largest democracy with some 550 million voters, went to the polls to elect a parliament last year. The next set of elections are due in 2001.

Meanwhile, Indian politician Sitaram Kesri, the man who single-handedly provoked a political crisis in the world's largest democracy, may end the week as one of the biggest losers, analysts say.

Analysts argue that the Congress (I) Party president's attempt to overthrow the country's coalition government might succeed — but at a dis-

trous cost to both him and his party.

Kesri's gamble in withdrawing support from Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda's United Front minority government last month, leaving it to face a confidence vote on Friday, was so unexpected that it took most of his own party colleagues by surprise.

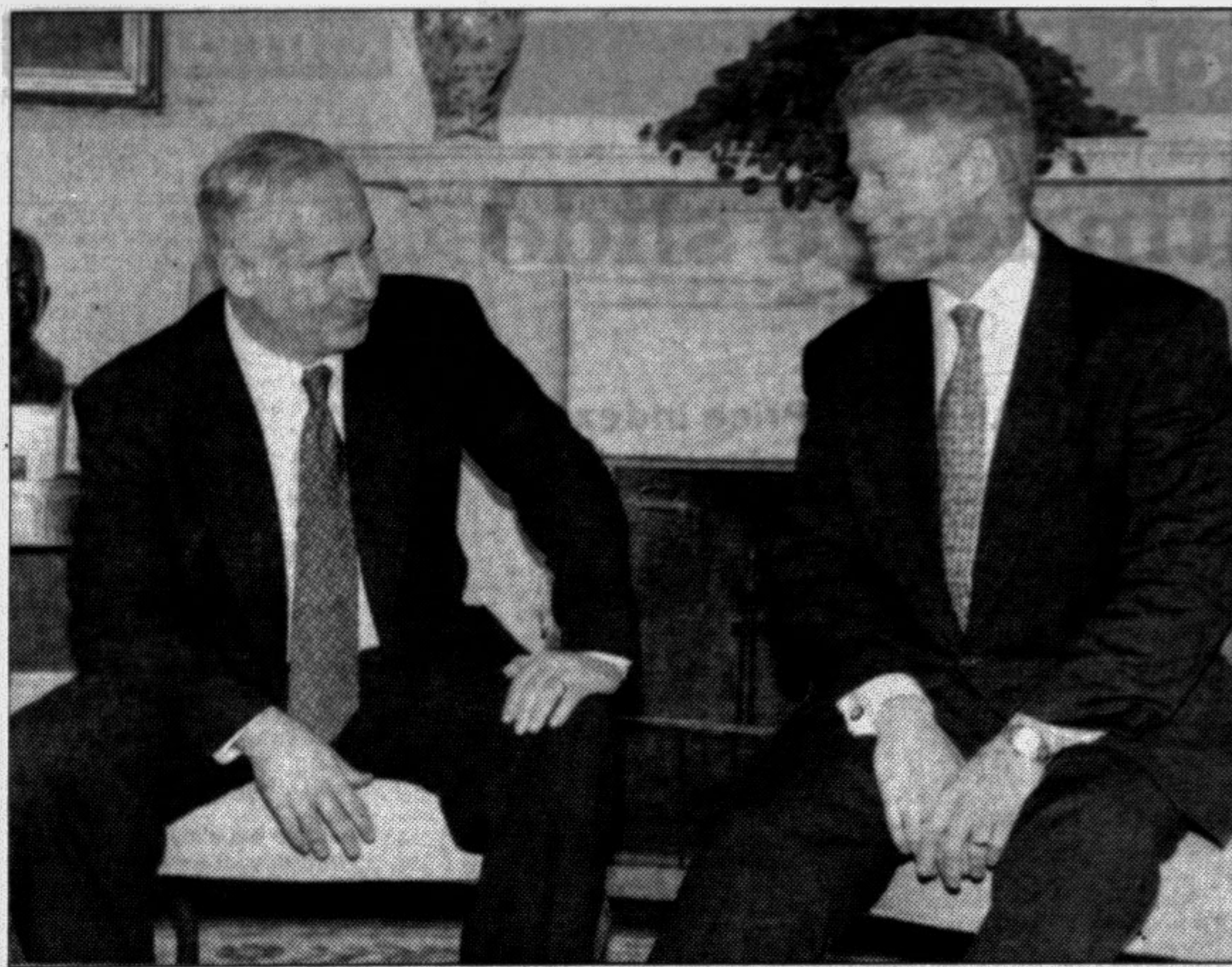
His theory was based on the premise that some of the United Front's 13 parties, determined both to avoid elections and to keep the Hindu nationalists out of power, would realign behind him, thus enabling Kesri to fulfil his ultimate ambition — becoming prime minister.

In his rush for power, however, the Congress leader failed to consider one key question.

What if the United Front did him to go hang?

Which is exactly what they have done, leaving Kesri dangling vulnerably at the end of his own rope.

Political Science Professor Zoya Hassan, from New Delhi's prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University, said: "As things stand, Kesri seem to have overplayed his hand this time."



US President Bill Clinton (R) meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (L) in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington Monday. Clinton is seeking to get the peace talks back on track between the Israelis and the Palestinians in the wake of renewed violence in the Middle East. — AFP/UNB photo

Clinton, Netanyahu talk ME peace process

WASHINGTON, Apr 8: President Bill Clinton held "frank, candid" talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday, rebuffing his call for a US-led Mideast summit while trying to revive stalled peace efforts, reports Reuters.

Tough talk by both Clinton and Netanyahu reflected the difficulties they face trying to keep an outbreak of violence over new Jewish housing in east Jerusalem from derailing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Using diplomatic jargon that usually suggests a strong clash of views and little progress, Clinton said after his two hours with Netanyahu that, "We had a very specific, frank, candid and long talk."

"Now we're going to talk to the Palestinians and see whether there's something we can do to get this thing going again," Clinton said. A Palestinian delegation was to come to Washington later in the week.

Netanyahu has proposed that he and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat reach a final peace agreement within six months, and said the goal may require an intensive three-way summit like the one that led to

agreements between Egypt and Israel.

The urgency of their meeting was underscored by yet more violence on the West Bank, where a Jewish settler shot and wounded at least two Palestinians during a stone-throwing incident on Monday.

Both Clinton and Netanyahu declined to discuss details, with Clinton telling reporters "the more I comment, the more I undermine the chances of success."

In remarks broadcast by Israeli radio, Netanyahu said Clinton "raised some suggestions for reviving the diplomatic process in a later stage... I won't get into details, but I can say the talk of pressures and threats and things like that did not come up at all."

Administration officials have said US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright might be sent to the region as a follow-up to Clinton's diplomatic efforts, which is likely to include a chat with the Palestinians.

Netanyahu sounded defensive during a news conference, at one point declaring: "I come here with absolutely clean hands."

He said the Palestinians had succeeded in painting Israel as "the heavy" in the recent breakdown of their peace talks.

BRIEFLY

Fire claims 7 in Hong Kong: Seven people were killed and 28 injured when a fire raged through a residential building on Hong Kong's Kowloon Peninsula yesterday, the government said, Reuters reports from Hong Kong.

The dead included four women, two baby girls and one man, the government's information service said.

The information service earlier reported that 43 people were injured but later revised the number down to 28.

Direct talks with MRTA unlikely: The leader of leftist rebels holding 72 hostages here continued his hard-line Monday, telling reporters direct negotiations would not occur until the government did "something concrete," AFP reports from Lima.

"For direct talks to resume there has to be something concrete from the government," said Nestor Cerpa, head of the Tupac Amaru (MRTA) rebel group, told international reporters.

Sitting around a negotiating table seems unnecessary if President Alberto Fujimori doesn't have the political will to take real decision and solve the problem."

Settler kills Palestinian: A Jewish settler shot dead a Palestinian in the West Bank town of Hebron yesterday, hospital officials and Palestinians said, Reuters reports from Hebron.

"We have a martyr. His name is Asem Rashad Kamel Arafah, 24 years and he was shot in the chest. They told us he was shot by a settler," an official at the Hebron hospital told Reuters.

Israeli police said the settler opened fire after being stoned by Palestinians.

Clash leaves 2 dead in Brazil jail: An inmate and a police officer were killed in a firefight Monday between police and rebel prisoners at the agro-industrial penitentiary centre in Goias, officials said, AFP reports from Rio de Janeiro.

Eight prisoners armed with revolvers, knives and clubs rebelled Monday morning, taking nine hostages in an administrative building, most of the hostages were women.

Sobhraj deported to France: Notorious criminal Charles Sobhraj, linked to a series of unsolved murders across Asia in the 1970s, was deported from India to France yesterday, witnesses said, AFP reports from New Delhi.

The 52-year-old French national, who served 20 years behind bars, left on an Air France flight bound for Paris, escorted by two Indian immigration officials, a witness said.

Mobs attack food stores in Pakistan

PESHAWAR, Pakistan, Apr 8: Mobs attacked food stores and restaurants here today in the worst unrest during a current food crisis caused by acute shortages of wheat flour, witnesses said, reports AFP.

Hundreds of people looted a large government-run food store, taking away grain and other food items, they said.

Other angry crowds also stormed and looted food and other items from several restaurants and shops in Peshawar, capital of North West Frontier Province, the witnesses said.

Police moved into action with batons to disperse the unruly crowds who broke glass window pans and caused other damage, a police official said.

Tight security in Yangon

MYANMAR, Apr 8: Security was tight in Yangon today following the bombing that killed a daughter of the junta's second secretary, Tin Oo, but official reaction to the blast was muted, sources said, reports AFP.

Security checks had been increased although troop presence on the streets was already heavy in the run-up to the Burmese New Year celebrations and in the wake of recent anti-Muslim unrest, they said.

State-run media carried a short report on the attack, broadcast on radio and television on Monday night and carried in all newspapers Tuesday, with an obituary of Cho Lei Oo, 32, it apportioned no blame for the parcel bombing.

China to sign UN rights document

BEIJING, Apr 8: Trying to head off international condemnation of its human rights record, China announced Tuesday that it will sign a UN treaty Western critics have long demanded Beijing observe, reports AP.

China's decision to join the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights by the end of the year seemed clearly designed to influence voting at the 53-nation UN Human Rights Commission, now in session in Geneva.

For weeks, China has been engaged in a careful campaign to threaten nations that seek to confront it on human rights and to reward those who don't.

China's tactics surfaced in deliberations among European Union members on whether to criticise China at the commission.

Denmark insisted Monday it will introduce a resolution to censure China, drawing immediate threats from Beijing of possible economic, trade and diplomatic sanctions.

France on the other hand has vowed it won't support the measure and vetoed efforts by EU members to forge a common stand.

Chinese President Jiang Zemin announced Beijing's willingness to sign the UN treaty in a meeting Monday with French Defence Minister

Charles Millon, the official Xinhua News Agency reported. Jiang told Millon that French President Jacques Chirac's decision not to support the resolution was "wise and farsighted," Xinhua said.

"It shows France has an independent foreign policy of peace and shows French determination in developing the Sino-French partnership," it said.

Jiang said he looked forward to Chirac's May visit to Beijing. He added that prospects are good for trade between their nations and agreed to regular exchanges between the countries' militaries.

Opposition rejects Berisha's call

TIRANA, Albania, Apr 8: Opposition Socialists rejected President Sali Berisha's invitation for talks on a new constitution Monday, still angry over a grenade attack on Albania's Socialist premier, reports AP.

Some Socialists blamed Berisha's supporters for the grenades hurled at Premier Bashkim Fino's motorcade Saturday — only one of the latest acts of violence in a nation that has all but disintegrated into armed anarchy.

"It seems absurd to discuss the constitution with tanks in the streets," Socialist spokesman Pandell Majko said, according to the state ATA news agency.

Albania has been in turmoil since late January, when public rage over failed investment schemes swelled into a rebellion made especially lethal by

the looting of government arsenals.

Berisha had suggested talks with the opposition to try to come up with a new constitution in advance of promised June elections meant to end the chaos.

Fino — who escaped injury in Saturday's attack — was silent on Berisha's proposal, but the leader of Fino's Socialist party — the second-largest in Albania after Berisha's Democratic Party — rejected it.

Fino's government met Monday to discuss the grenade attack, apparently intended to prevent Fino from visiting Shkoder, a northern stronghold of the president.

Fino's Socialists have demanded the resignation of a Berisha ally in the interior ministry and other police officials for alleged negligence in

the attack. In Washington, State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns cited the grenade-throwing in urging Albanians to resolve their differences peacefully.

"We are deeply disturbed by the actions on Saturday by armed individuals who blocked Prime Minister Fino from addressing a group in his own country," Burns said.

Since February, Albania's violence has killed more than 200 people and injured at least 700.

In the southern port city of Vlorë on Sunday, a mine and a grenade exploded as children played with them, blowing off arms and legs of three children, hospital workers said.

In Tirana, a resident was shot dead Sunday night as he entered his house.

Fahd urges pilgrims to stay away from politics

DUBAI, Apr 8: Saudi Arabia's King Fahd urged the two million Muslims expected to perform this year's Hajj in the kingdom to steer clear of politics, the official Saudi press agency reported today, says Reuters.

It said the King made his comments at the weekly cabinet meeting in Riyadh on Monday night.

King Fahd said he hoped pilgrims understood that Saudi Arabia — custodian of Islam's two holiest shrines in Makkah and Madinah — was always eager to perform its duties in such a way as to not cause concern for pilgrims, the agency said.

Therefore, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stresses the need for the pilgrimage to be free from any political aims because the kingdom deeply believes that God has made pilgrimage a duty to be performed without obscenity or wantonness," it quoted the King as saying.

Saudi Arabia has over the past two months reiterated warnings that it would deal harshly with any violators of its ban on political activity during Hajj.

The warnings appear aimed

at Iran, which insists on holding political rallies mainly directed against the United States and Israel in defiance of the Saudi ban. Saudi Arabia says Hajj is a religious duty that should not be politicised.

Iran-boycotted Hajj for three years after some 400 people, mainly Iranian pilgrims, were killed in clashes in 1987 between Saudi police and Iranians holding a political rally in Makkah.

US has no plan to intervene militarily in Zaire

WASHINGTON, Apr 8: The United States said Monday it had no plans to intervene militarily in Zaire, rejecting claims by Zairean rebel leader Laurent Desire Kabila that the US presence in the region posed a threat to Zaire, reports AFP.

"The United States has no intention — zero — of intervening militarily in Zaire to affect the course of the fighting," State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said.

"We support the territorial integrity of Zaire."

2 top politicians cleared in India's financial scam

NEW DELHI, Apr 8: A court Tuesday threw out cases against two top politicians in a corruption case, saying there was not enough evidence to prosecute them, a local news agency reported, says AP.

The judgement of the New Delhi High Court could boost the political fortunes of Lal Krishna Advani, who resigned from parliament last year as leader of the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party, after he was named in the scam.

The other politician, Vidya Charan Shukla, belongs to the Congress Party, which lost the election last year.

Advani was among the 25 political figures and 18 bureaucrats facing trial for accepting bribes from a business family in return for public contracts or other favours.

The sensational case was one of the main issues in the general election last year.

So sensitive was the case that the Supreme Court even ordered the Central Bureau of Investigation, which is similar to the American FBI, not to take

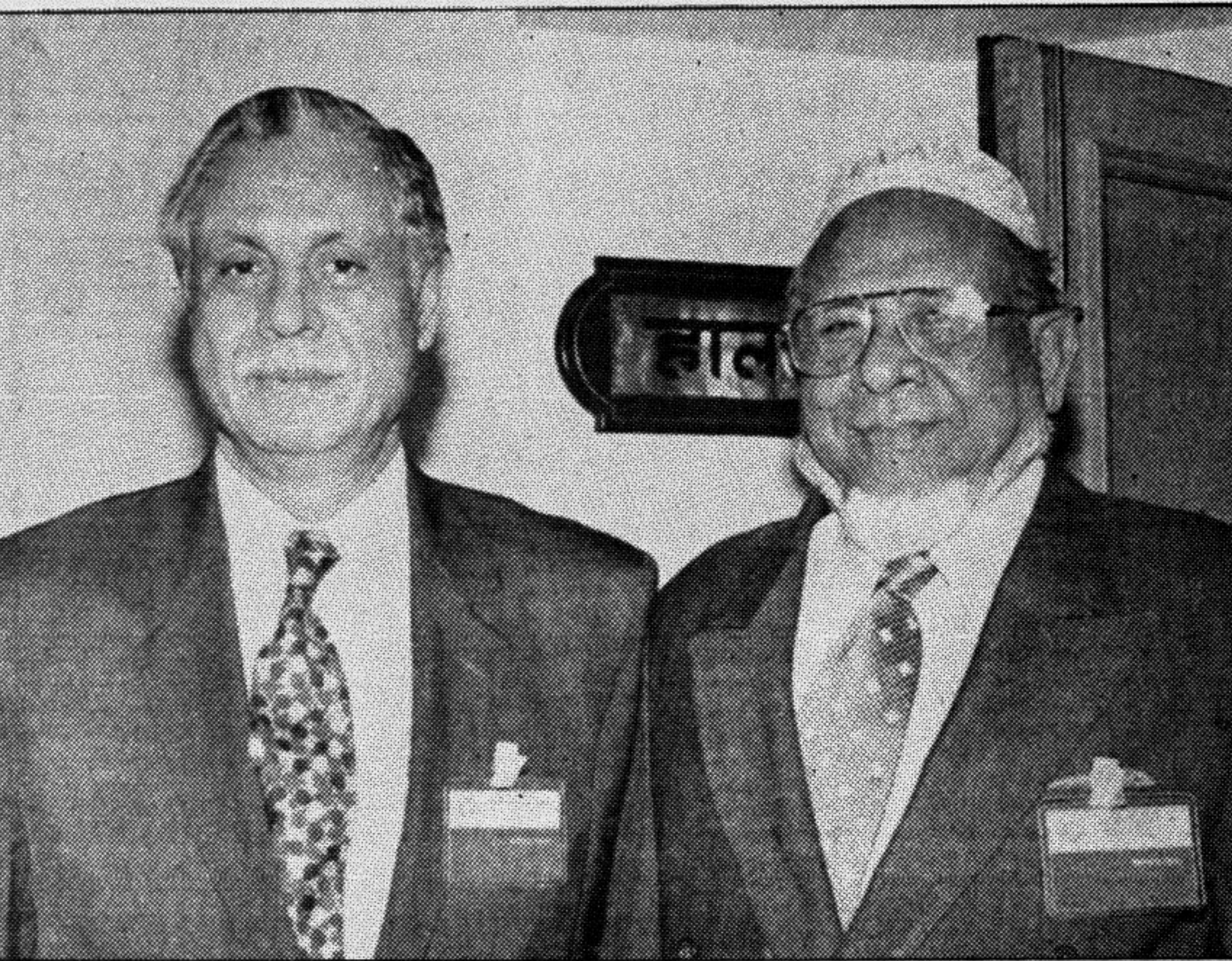
orders from the prime minister's office, which is in charge of the department.

Tuesday, the High Court also threw out charges police had filed against two businessmen who allegedly paid bribes to more than 100 influential figures between 1988 and 1991, United News of India news agency reported.

SK Jain, one of the brothers accused in the case, had claimed during police interrogation that he paid former Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao 30 million rupees, then worth 1.7 million dollars. Police said the charge was unsubstantiated.

In Parliament, Rao's government was accused last year of going slow with the investigation. The probe began in 1991 when police linked the Jain family to illegally laundered funds that went to Muslim militants fighting for independence in the disputed state of Kashmir.

The Jain brothers were also accused of violating India's foreign exchange laws to allegedly launder the money.



Pakistan Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan (L) with his Bangladesh counterpart Abdu Samad Azad at Vigyan Bhavan in New Delhi during the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) ministerial conference yesterday. — AFP/UNB photo

'8m North Koreans may die from dire food shortages'

TOKYO, Apr 8: Six to eight million North Koreans could starve to death from dire food shortages in a disaster of "gigantic proportions," US Congressman Tony Hall warned here Tuesday after a fact-finding mission to the country, reports AP.

"I have seen enough hunger in my life to say that North Korea is rapidly descending into the hell of severe famine," said the Democratic Congressman from Ohio.

"I was stunned by what I saw and by how much worse conditions have gotten since I was there last August," he said.

Hall, a nutrition expert, had just returned from a four-day mission to Stalinist North Korea to assess crippling food shortages, financed by the US government and Congress.

He said humanitarian agencies and the US State Department "put the number of people at risk of death between six and eight million."

Evidence of slow starvation on a massive scale was everywhere we made and effort to look," he said.

His warning came after UN Undersecretary-General for

Humanitarian Affairs, Yasushi Akashi, on Monday appealed in New York for a total of 126.2 million dollars urgent humanitarian aid to avert a famine.

Akashi, who described food shortages in North Korea as "a humanitarian disaster in the making," said the bulk of the funds would be earmarked for emergency food aid from now until March next year.

Pyeongyang's neighbours, Seoul and Tokyo both responded on Tuesday saying they would consider giving aid to the North Koreans.

And sources in Vietnam said a high-ranking North Korean minister would plead for rice donations during a week-long visit to Hanoi.

Hall said that almost every child he saw during his trip suffered from some kind of respiratory problem or diarrhoea and malnutrition had discoloured the hair and stunted the growth of many, he said.

The congressman, who travelled with a Korean-speaking US doctor who acted as an interpreter, said daily rations in the isolationist North Korea were as low as 100 grammes (three ounces) and 150 grammes, or a half bowl of rice.

Villagers told him they were eating only one meal a day made from tree bark and wild vegetation — the only nourishment they could find.

"The soil looks bleak, depleted. North of Pyongyang you don't see trees."

"What the world has promised is not enough and is not even close — a human disaster is in the making."

In Seoul, officials said South Korea was considering providing further aid to the North after the UN's announcement on top of the six million dollars already contributed to a UN World Food Programme (WFP) appeal.

"It is under review," Foreign Ministry spokesman Lee Kyu-Hyung told AFP.

Foreign Minister Yoo Chong-Ha was due to fly to Tokyo on Monday for a three-day visit for a regular bilateral meeting likely to include North Korea high on the agenda, he added.

And Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Seiroku Kajiyama told a press conference here that Tokyo would also consider food aid to the famine-hit North.

Israel accused of revoking Palestinians' rights to live in Jerusalem

JERUSALEM, Apr 8: Away from the bulldozers and stone-throwing, another battle for Jerusalem is under way, reports AP.

Palestinians and Israeli human rights groups charge that Israel is quietly and deliberately revoking residency rights of Palestinians who live in Jerusalem in order to strengthen its grip on the disputed city.

The policy is not new: Palestinians who don't become Israeli citizens and who move outside the city — even to the neighbouring West Bank — can lose their residency permits, which means they cannot legally return to live in Jerusalem.

Only, now, the groups say, the Israeli government is enforcing the policy with new vigor. Palestinians returning after living elsewhere have been

notified that their permits have expired and they have make 15 days to get out.

"The idea is simple," Yuval Givhar of the Israeli group Betsalem said Monday. "Israel will do anything to make Palestinians leave Jerusalem."

Betsalem and Hamoked, another Israeli human rights group, issued a report Monday accusing Israel of revoking the rights of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Palestinians to live in Jerusalem during the past 18 months.

Betsalem's Yael Stein said the policy was part of the government's goal to "decrease the number of Palestinians and increase the number of Jews living in the city."

The point, Stein said, was to secure Israel's sovereignty in east Jerusalem, which the Palestinians want as the capital of their future independent

state. Israel says it will never allow the redivision of the city, and that all of it is Israel's capital.

The Interior Ministry denied revoking Palestinians' residency permits. Rather, "when permanent residents sever their connection with Israel... their free choice causes the expiration of their permanent residency," ministry spokesman Tova Ellinson said Monday.

Ellinson stressed that Israel's Supreme Court had upheld the policy, and that the issue has come to the fore recently because Palestinians who had been living overseas have been returning in the wake of the Israel-Palestinian peace agreements first signed in 1993.

The ministry said it did not have statistics available on how many Palestinians had lost their residency rights.

Palestinian residents of east Jerusalem, which Israel captured from Jordan in 1967, are eligible to become Israeli citizens — but most do not because they do not recognize Israel's annexation of the city. Only a few thousand, out of about 150,000, have accepted the offer.

Particularly galling to Palestinians born and raised in Jerusalem is that they have less right to live in the city than any Israeli — even new immigrants or those who have lived overseas for many years.

Faisal Hussein, Yasser Arafat's minister in charge of Jerusalem affairs, said the issue of residency rights is as crucial as the question of Israeli building in east Jerusalem.

Azmi Abu Saoud, who collects data on residency rights for the Orient House, the PLO headquarters in east Jerusalem, called the Israeli

policy "an attempt to destroy the Arab presence in Jerusalem."

Government spokesman Moshe Fogel called that charge absurd.

Palestinians lose their right to live in Jerusalem only when they "make two decisions of their own free will," he said. "They refuse Israeli citizenship, and they make an active choice not to live in Jerusalem."

Fogel also said that Palestinians who lived outside the city for many years on a temporary basis — such as students — do not lose their residency rights.

The Interior Ministry has issued hundreds of orders to Palestinians to leave the city within 15 days, but has not physically forced them to go, said Elisha Abram, legal director of Hamoked.

But Abram said Palestinians

who remain illegally in Jerusalem lose social benefits such as health care, free schooling and insurance, and cannot ever leave the city for fear they won't be allowed to return.

"People are being turned into illegal immigrants hiding out in their own homes and in their own city," he said.

According to the report, Palestinians particularly vulnerable to losing their residency rights are women whose husbands are not from Jerusalem and follow them outside the city to live because they cannot get family unification permits; residents who work abroad; residents who move to surrounding West Bank neighbourhoods because of housing shortages, and people who have dual citizenship or residency rights in the United States or other countries.



A model wears a copper embroidered black net, coat dress over black stretch pants in the showing of the Betssey Johnson Fall 1997 Fashion collection on Monday in New York. America's top designers are showing their latest fall fashions through April 11. — AFP/UNB photo