

Yeltsin, Jiang sign mutual cooperation agreement

MOSCOW, Apr 23: President Boris Yeltsin welcomed his Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin to the Kremlin on Wednesday amid warming relations and plans to trim the numbers of troops along their common border, reports AP.

Yeltsin, who is prone to grandiose statements, said the friendly meeting between the one-time rivals had "a tremendous, perhaps even historic importance, because we're determining the fate of the 21st century."

The document stressed their goal of forming a "multipolar world," and it criticised attempts to preserve "Cold War thinking" with one country assuming international leadership, a clear reference to the United States.

Jiang's five-day visit underscored the warming relations between Russia and China after decades of hostility. It was the two presidents' fifth summit since 1991 and a follow-up to Yeltsin's Chinese visit in 1996, which produced a breakthrough cooperation agreement.

Jiang arrived Tuesday, and Yeltsin, who had been on vacation at Russia's Black Sea resort of Sochi, returned to Moscow for the summit.

Top Russian officials, including Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and Defense Minister Igor Rodionov, took part in Wednesday's talks. Jiang was accompanied by Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, Defense Minister Chi Haotian and

other officials.

On Thursday, Yeltsin and Jiang will be joined by presidents of the Central Asian nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to sign an agreement on troop reduction along the 7,000-kilometer (4,300-mile) former Soviet-Chinese border.

Jiang has said the agreement would have "a far-reaching importance for the strengthening of relations ... between the People's Republic of China and the above four countries and for the securing of peace and stability in the area of the border."

The Chinese president, who speaks Russian, spent two years in the Soviet Union in the mid-1990s, training as an electrical engineer at what is now Moscow's Zil automobile plant.

Not long after that, the two communist giants had an ideological falling out that chilled relations for three decades. The Chinese-Soviet border was a scene of constant tension and occasional clashes.

Seeking to counter US clout and NATO's eastward expansion, Russia is looking for new allies in Asia, with China foremost among them.

Although Russia and China are far from creating a formal alliance, they see each other as natural trading partners who share a lengthy border and have a common interest in limiting US influence.

The two leaders signed a joint declaration pledging to further develop mutual ties and

maintain "strategic interaction."

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Clinton optimistic about chemical weapons treaty

WASHINGTON, Apr 23: Another Republican US senator joined support for the global chemical weapons treaty, but an undecided Republican raised a new objection, President Clinton said he was "quite optimistic" of passage, reports AP.

Just seven days before the treaty takes effect in 74 other, ratifying countries, key Republicans remained publicly uncommitted on Tuesday. Debate opens Wednesday and the Senate is voting on ratification Thursday.

US Sen. Alfonse D'Amato announced his support for the accord, calling it "the most effective mechanism to assure control of chemical weapons and assure their destruction."

D'Amato said in an interview he had no idea how many Republicans would support the treaty, which requires a two-thirds majority vote.

The debate on Wednesday reaches the US Senate floor, where Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott and several other Republicans remain uncommitted. The treaty has solid Democratic support, and some Republicans led by Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana strongly support the treaty.

Among the undecided, Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky raised a new concern Tuesday:

The treaty's extension of the period for destroying all chemical weapons three years beyond the US target date of 2004.

The treaty aims to rid the world of all chemical weapons by 2007.

"It takes the pressure off the military" to get the weapons destroyed as soon as possible, said McConnell, chairman of the Senate Appropriations' foreign operations subcommittee. He said that would factor in his decision whether to support the treaty.

Clinton said Vice President Al Gore and others in the administration had been working on gaining passage for the treaty, "doing the best we can to put together a strong case."

He said the fact that the administration has agreed with treaty opponents on the 28 "clarifying amendments" shows "the good faith in which we have proceeded."

"We have worked very hard on this, and I'm actually quite optimistic," Clinton told reporters before leaving for a trip to flood-ravaged North Dakota.

Lott, who as Senate majority leader holds the key to passage, had raised several questions about the treaty before agreeing to a vote. All are addressed in amendments that are now part of the legislation.

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UNGA meet on Israeli settlement issue today

UNITED NATIONS, Apr 23: The 185-nation UN General Assembly is to meet in emergency special session on the Israeli settlement issue on Thursday, the United Nations announced on Tuesday, reports APF.

The special emergency session was scheduled after the required number of 93 UN member states sent letters in support of the meeting. UN spokesman Juan Carlos Brandt said in a statement.

The special emergency session, only the 10th in the UN's half-century existence to be held under assembly's "uniting for peace" resolution (377), is expected to last two days.

The UN Arab group, backed by non-aligned states, officially requested the emergency special session on April 1 after the United States cast its second veto in the UN Security Council to prevent adoption of a resolution calling for a halt in the construction of a new Jewish settlement.

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New poll shows dramatic fall in Labour's lead

LONDON, Apr 23: A new poll showing a dramatic fall in the opposition Labour Party's lead today electrified the campaign for Britain's May 1 election, turning what had seemed to be a certainty into an open race, reports Reuters.

The ICM poll in the Guardian newspaper slashed Labour's lead from 14 to just five points, the first time the opposition's advantage has fallen to single figures since November 1993.

Tory strategists said the dramatic change showed Prime Minister John Major's tactic of focusing on Europe and the threat to Britain's sovereignty from Brussels was working.

Labour's foreign affairs spokesman Robin Cook dismissed it, saying: "We're not worried, we know we're comfortably ahead."

Govt, rebels talks stalled again in Philippines

MANILA, Apr 23: Peace talks between the Philippine government and communist rebels have stalled again following a dispute over how to implement future agreements, the government said Wednesday, reports AP.

Government negotiators said the two sides declared a recess Tuesday following four days of intensive negotiations in the Netherlands — the latest snag in the formal talks on ending the Philippines' 28-year communist insurgency.

Preliminary talks were held in 1992 shortly after President Fidel Ramos took office. Formal talks opened in June 1996 in the Netherlands, where rebel negotiators live in exile.

The formal sessions have been postponed at least twice because of arrests of rebel leaders involved in the talks.

The two panels had been working on an agreement on human rights and international humanitarian law. That was one of four main agreements, with others on economic and social reforms, electoral reforms and disposition of forces.

Poverty drives them away from schools in Karachi

ISLAMABAD, Apr 23: Thousands of children are toiling at auto-repair shops and car wash stations in Pakistan's largest city of Karachi to support their impoverished families, a newspaper reported, says AFP.

They clean vehicles, remove tyres, repair and fill them with air and fix auto parts, besides, dashing off to fetch food and perform other chores for adult employees, Karachi's leading English-language daily Dawn said.

In its report published Tuesday it cited the cases of several children forced away by poverty from schools and homes.

Yasir dropped out of class to work in a dirty, grimy welding shop.

His father works as a truck driver for monthly wages of 1,800 rupees (45 dollars) and Yasir's 60 rupees (1.5 dollar) daily supplement the meagre earnings of the family of eight people.

A welder working with Yasir explained why the boy's family had not educated their only son. "It costs at least 1,000 rupees per month to sent

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1m foreigners get permanent residency in US in '96

WASHINGTON, Apr 23: Nearly a million foreigners were granted permanent residency in the United States last year, reversing a four-year downward trend in legal immigration rates, reports AP.

Some 915,900 people immigrated here legally last year, a 27.4 per cent increase over the 720,461 people granted permanent resident status the year before, the Immigration and Naturalization Service said Tuesday.

Nearly half of the new arrivals clustered in just three states: California, New York and Texas. Other top destinations were Florida, New Jersey and Illinois.

Pro-immigration and anti-immigration groups alike pounced on the new statistics to buttress their arguments.

"We don't need increasing numbers of immigrants," said Dan Stein, head of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which favors a moratorium on most immigration.

"The whole system is out of control, and what we need is an immigration timeout... to allow Congress to rework the system so that it protects America's long-term interests."

But a pro-immigration coalition pronounced the 1996 increase a temporary surge, noting that INS projections show rates declining after the next year or two.

"Legal immigration is a highly regulated and tightly controlled system that we believe serves the national interest," said Jeanne Butterfield, executive director of the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

While the 1996 numbers mark an upswing from the past

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The Dalai Lama (L) greets workers at the Radio Free Asia station in Washington, DC, Tuesday as he arrives for a radio interview. The Dalai Lama is scheduled to meet with US President Bill Clinton Wednesday at the White House. — AFP/UNB photo

Indian minister welcomes signs of improving ties with Pakistan

NEW DELHI, Apr 23: India's defence minister said Wednesday he welcomed signs of improving relations with Pakistan, but cautioned real change won't come quickly, reports AP.

A reduction in troops along the countries shared border, for example, can only come after a long process of "negotiations and discussions," Mulayam Singh Yadav told The Associated Press in interview.

"If the environment is conducive and tension is lessened ... this can be achieved," Yadav said. "India stands for good neighborhood. This particular question of pulling down troop levels can be linked to that stand."

Earlier this month, then Indian foreign minister I K Gujral held talks with his Pakistani counterpart in the highest-level meeting between the belligerent neighbors in seven years. Gujral was sworn in as India's prime minister Monday, and pledged to continue overtures to Pakistan.

Gujral and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who promised better ties with India during his recent election campaign, were expected to hold talks next month during meetings of a regional organization.

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Off the Record

Sweet word for French children

PARIS: The word 'amour,' meaning 'love' in French, is the most beautiful word for French children aged from four to eight, the French Ministry of Culture said Tuesday, reports Xinhua.

In a language quiz for an unspecified number of children of the age group recently organised by the ministry, 'amour' came up on top of all words on the list, being cited 2,629 times.

'Liberte' (freedom) ranked the second most liked word, being cited 1,280 times. It was followed by amitie (friendship), paix (peace), egalite (equality), fraternite (brotherhood) and nature.

The word maman (mum) was ranked on the 11th position, while papa and noel (santa claus) tied for the 25th place.

Kim's care for knees

SEOUL: President Kim Young-sam has given up his daily early morning jog and taken up swimming instead, his office said Wednesday, reports AP.

Kim, 69, stopped jogging on April 16 on advice from his doctor that the daily exercise could damage his knees, presidential spokesman Yoon Yoo-joon said.

Kim instead strolls around his office twice a day — after lunch and before dinner — and swims regularly, about 30 minutes at a time, Yoon said.

"I can't say for now whether the change in President Kim's routine will be permanent," Yoon said.

Kim had jogged 2 to 3 kilometers (1.8 miles) every morning for the past 30 years. He had never skipped the daily routine, even during official visits to other countries.

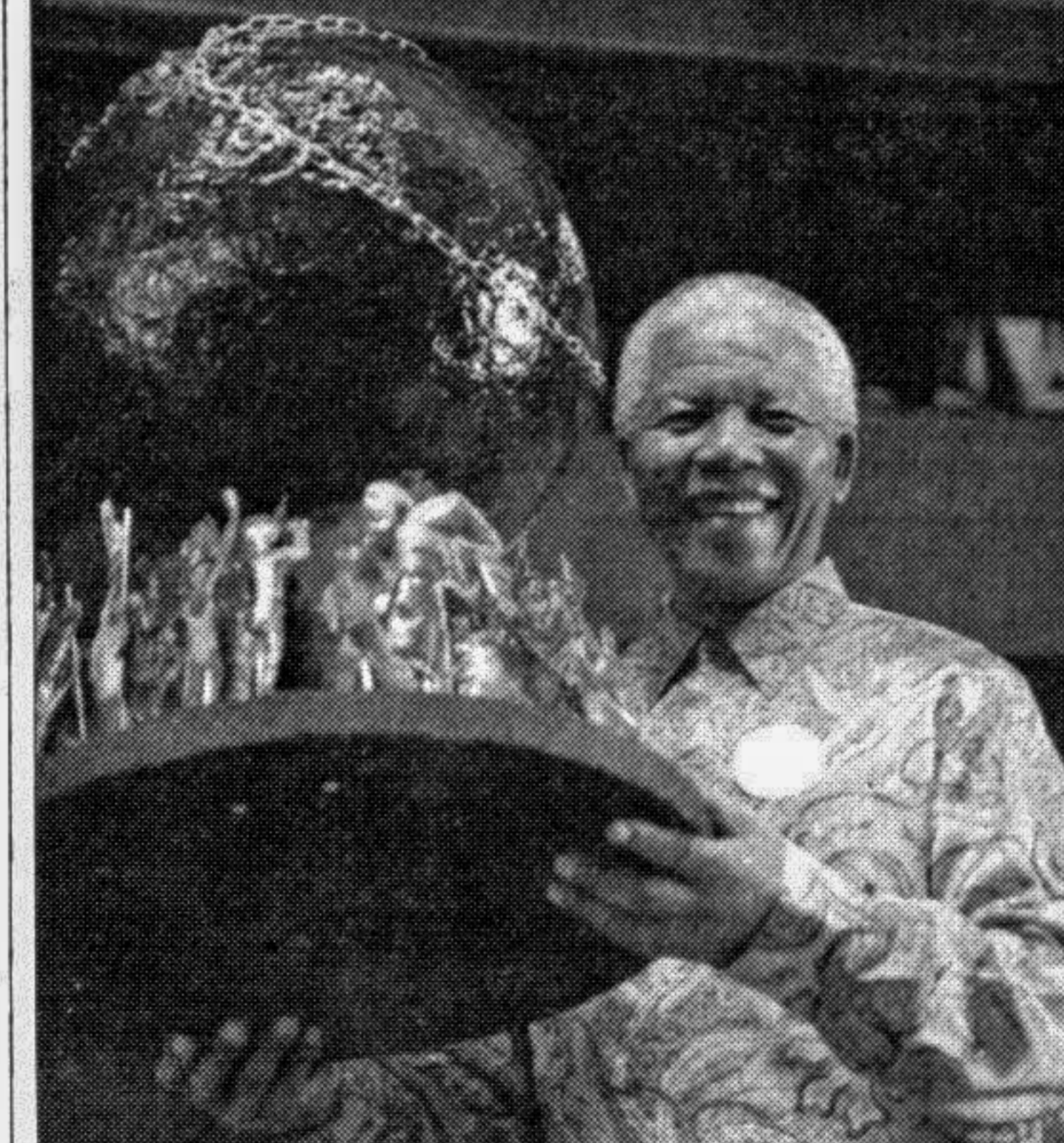
Marcus returns to Rome

ROME: Welcome back, Marcus. Or at least a modern twin, reports AP.

After a 16-year absence, the statue of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius astride his horse, was returned Saturday to the plaza in front of Rome's city hall.

More than 6,000 people filled the Michelangelo-designed square for the unveiling of a copy of the 2nd century bronze original, which was removed in 1981 because of deterioration from pollution and the elements.

The event — part of celebrations for Rome's founding 2,750 years ago — included mayors from modern namesakes including Rome, New York, and Rome, Georgia.



President Nelson Mandela displays a world globe presented by pupils at the Johannesburg Girls Preparatory School, Tuesday. Mandela was a surprise visitor at the school to give a presentation on President Mandela's Children's Fund and also to break the news that a class won a trip to Disneyland Paris. The winning class will be among 1000 children from 39 countries gathered to create a Charter on Society in the Third Millennium. The charter in turn will be distributed to UNESCO's 185-member states and to the United Nations to ensure the children are heard. — AFP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

Leghari to visit China Apr 29: Pakistani President Farooq Leghari will hold talks with his Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin and Prime Minister Li Peng during a state visit to China on April 29 and 30, an official announcement said on Tuesday, Reuters reports from Islamabad.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Information Adviser Mughshid Hussain said Pakistan's ties with China were the cornerstone of its foreign policy, the official press agency APP reported.

Fire ruins 1000 houses in India: More than a 1,000 homes, including a temple and a church, have been burnt down in a fire that ripped through a residential neighbourhood in northeastern India, the United News of India reported Tuesday, AFP says from New Delhi.

The blaze started near the railway tracks close to the town of Dimapur but powerful winds spread the flames to adjoining areas. Though most of the residents were asleep when the fire started, there was only one casualty when an elderly man died of shock. Officials have failed to identify the cause of the fire.

ULFA kidnaps 1 in Assam: Tribal guerrillas Monday kidnapped the chief of a top tea plantation in the far eastern Indian state of Assam, police said Monday, AFP reports from Guwahati.

Arup Shankar Bhaduri, director of Sonapur tea estate, was kidnapped by suspected guerrillas belonging to the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) separatist group, a police spokesman said. "Police investigations are on," an official said without giving further details.

Strong quake shakes Indonesia: A strong earthquake measuring 5.6 on the Richter Scale hit the southern part of Indonesia's western Sumatra island on Tuesday afternoon, the Royal Hong Kong Observatory said, Reuters reports from Hong Kong.

The quake was detected at 0602 GMT with its epicentre initially determined to be about 300 km (180 miles) southeast of Padang, it said in a statement. There were no immediate reports of damage or casualties.

Politician sued in Singapore: A court has ruled against an opposition politician in another slander lawsuit filed by a leader of Singapore's ruling party after a bitter election campaign in January, AP reports from Singapore.

Judge Lai Kew Chai ruled Tuesday that Tang Liang Hong slandered Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong when he said he was afraid to return from Malaysia, where he fled after losing the Jan. 2 election.

Violations of parking rules

Bangladesh may be benefitted from truce between UN, New York City

NEW YORK, Apr 23: Bangladesh, which at number 37 is among the major violators of parking rules in New York City, may benefit from a "truce" worked out between the UN and the City of New York over diplomats' rights and violations of parking rules, reports AP.

After days of bickering verbal assaults, a grumbling Mayor of New York City and reluctant diplomats at the United Nations agreed this week to end their war of words by agreeing to a mutually acceptable arrangement.

The squabble started last month after Mayor Giuliani announced a plan to tow diplomatic vehicles and impound them for failing to pay fines for

parking violations.

For years, the diplomats at the United Nations ignored parking tickets — given each time a violation occurs, and piled up millions of dollars in unpaid fines. There were also several incidents of drunk driving and accidents involving diplomats from several former Soviet Republics. On each occasion, the diplomats cited diplomatic immunity and escaped unscathed.

The Mayor's plan to "punish" deeply offended the diplomats, who described such attempts as a violation of the rights and privileges granted to them by the host country agreement. The matter was discussed in UN Committees where angry diplomats demanded a special

General Assembly session and sought to send the matter to the World Court in the Hague.

Some even went as far as suggesting a change of venue for the UN Headquarters. Brazil's representative Jose Eduardo Martins summarized the sentiment best when he compared diplomatic immunity with virginity: either you have it or you don't. "I have never seen a half virgin," he said.

Mayor Giuliani, well known for his arrogance, immediately responded by sending a farewell message. The UN is welcome to leave, he said. "I'll build a stadium there, this will bring us more revenue."

Realising that the situation was going out of hands and, in the event the Mayor towed away

any car for parking violations, the US missions could face reprisal actions in foreign countries, the State Department quickly intervened urging both sides to cool off.

Apparently, the heads have cooled off. Under a new arrangement, negotiated by the State Department and grudgingly accepted by the UN and Mayor Giuliani, the City of New York will now not renew the registration of diplomats' cars with a year's worth of unpaid tickets. However, the City will not be allowed to remove the plates.

Diplomats, in theory, could still drive cars with unregistered plates. However, as a State Department official explained

last week, the rules that govern the UN presence in New York provide for substantial penalties for driving un-registered cars. "Diplomats are law abiding people," said a US spokesman and noted that such a plan has worked just fine in Washington DC.

The Mayor is obviously not entirely satisfied. To show that he has more tricks under his hat than most diplomats thought possible, he has started issuing a quarterly list of missions and consulates whose cars with diplomatic plates have received parking tickets.

This, according to some old-timers, is somewhat reminiscent of attempts by Ed Koch, a former New York City Mayor, to read out a weekly list of people

arrested for visiting prostitutes.

According to the first report issued last week, during the first three months of 1997, the UN diplomats from 185 countries received about 35,000 parking tickets, amounting to US 2 million dollars. Russia tops the list of worst offenders, followed by several East European and former Soviet Republics. On this list, Bangladesh is at number 37.

With only three official vehicles and less than 10 private cars with diplomatic plates, Bangladesh's permanent mission and the Consulate received 177 parking tickets, amounting to US 11,410 dollars.

When asked to explain the violations, Bangladesh's per-

manent representative to the UN Ambassador Anwarul Karim Chowdhury rejected any wrong-doing. "Our official vehicles are professionally manned and a driver is always present to follow police instructions even when parked," he said.

Yet, how could less than a dozen vehicles pile up so many parking tickets in just three months? Ambassador Chowdhury carefully formulated his answer. "New York is a congested city and the diplomats have only a few reserved spots for parking." Granting parking spaces to diplomats is a normal diplomatic practice, he said.

Ambassador Chowdhury was clearly unhappy with Mayor Giuliani. "We bring in a lot of business to New York

City, something like US 1.3 billion dollars annually," he said.

In fact, the UN and the diplomats, who work here, contribute over US 3.2 billion dollars to the City's economy, a City report had earlier acknowledged. Mayor Giuliani himself had often noted the usefulness of the UN presence in the past, but not once since the verbal war was launched.

The agreement on the parking issue is perhaps only a temporary truce. If the diplomats don't understand that Giuliani, who is running for re-election next year, has his patience on a short leash, and the Mayor fails to see the advantage of having the "world's parliament" in New York City, both sides will stand to lose.