

International

Indian Parliament session begins today
Gujral may face demands to force out his party boss

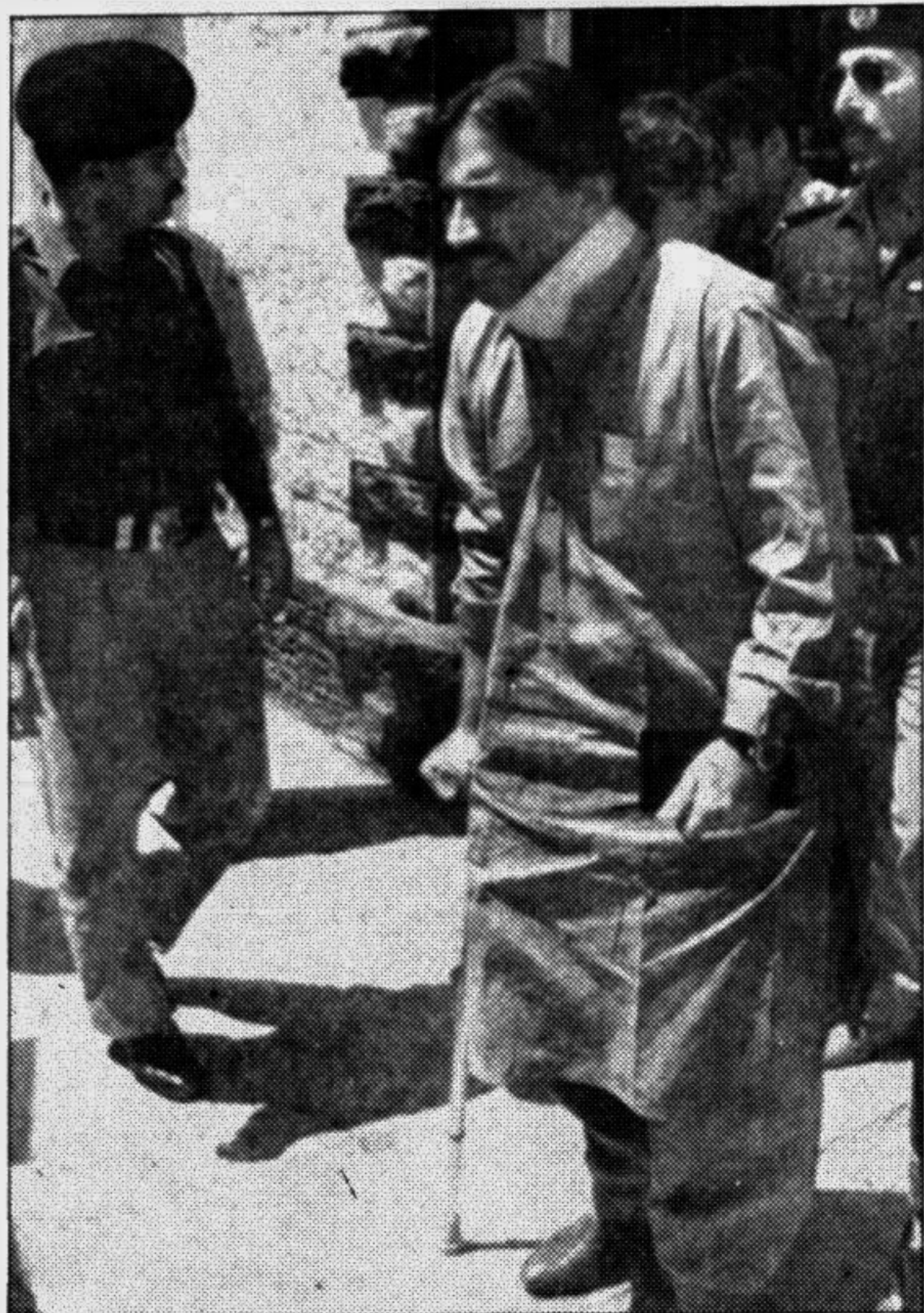
NEW DELHI, Apr 29: Barely a week into office, Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral will face demands to force out his party boss and challenges to his budget when parliament meets Wednesday, reports AP.

Janata Dal leader, also is among the 56 people the CBI wants to prosecute in the fraud case. Regional leaders of the Congress Party, a key United Front ally, also have been implicated.



Other parties in the United Front have called on Yadav to resign from politics. He has refused, saying that merely naming him in a corruption case does not establish his guilt.

The Central Bureau of Investigation, similar to the FBI, has named Laloo Prasad Yadav, president of the Janata Dal and Chief Minister of Bihar state, in an investigation into the misuse of government animal welfare funds. Yadav, who had denied any wrongdoing, faces a seven year prison term if convicted.



Former premier of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto's husband Asif Ali Zardari (C), wearing a neckbrace and using a walking stick comes out after court proceedings inside the central jail, Monday.

Chemical weapons ban treaty goes into effect

UNITED NATIONS, Apr 29: The worldwide treaty banning chemical weapons takes effect at midnight New York time Monday (0400 GMT Tuesday), 180 days after the 65th country - Hungary - ratified it, the United Nations announced, reports AP.

As of late afternoon Monday, 87 countries had ratified the treaty, including the United States which did so last Thursday. Cuba was expected to become the 88th late Monday or Tuesday, a UN official said.

The pact bans the use, development, production or stockpiling of all chemical warfare agents and requires the destruction of existing stockpiles over the next decade.

The United States and Russia are the only two countries that acknowledge they have chemical weapons.

India likely to deploy troops in Bihar

NEW DELHI, Apr 29: India will rush federal troops to eastern Bihar state because of fears of a backlash to the possible prosecution of its chief minister in a corruption scandal, a newspaper reported today, reports AP.

The Statesman quoting Home Ministry sources here said paramilitary soldiers would be deployed in the crime-prone state because of worries that political turmoil in Bihar could lead to violence there.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) Sunday said it would prosecute state Chief Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav, two of his cabinet colleagues and a federal minister from Bihar in a multi-million-dollar financial scandal.

Yadav, who is also the president of the largest party in India's ruling coalition government, has refused to resign from his political posts and has warned his party supporters would "take the issue to the streets."

Yadav, an influential politician, has also said he would "govern Bihar from prison" in case the CBI arrested him.

The CBI has accused Yadav and 55 other politicians and bureaucrats of siphoning 271 million dollars from a government fund set up two decades ago to subsidize cattle feed in Bihar.

general shutdown on May 3 to demand his ouster.

Analysts say action against Yadav could spell trouble for Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral's fragile coalition government, which comprises 13 centrist and leftist parties.

Yadav heads the centrist Janata Dal (People's Party) which has 46 of the ruling coalition's 180 members of parliament on its rolls.

The law and order in Bihar already merited extra forces, but the new development has been taken into consideration," the Statesman quoted a senior official as saying in the Home Ministry, which plans to deploy troops in Bihar.

3 killed in Paris chopper crash

EVRY, France, Apr 29: Three people died and one was seriously injured when a privately-owned helicopter crashed southwest of Paris, police said today, reports AP.

The accident involving an Alouette II aircraft, happened Monday night in a forest at Verrieres in the Essonne department. The crash site was found this morning.

The helicopter was reported missing Monday evening. A police search was launched but called off in the early hours, before being resumed this morning.

Taliban won't destroy statues of Buddha

ISLAMABAD, Apr 29: Afghanistan's Taliban Islamic government said on Monday it would not destroy two world-famous giant statues of Buddha, after an international outcry against reports that they were threatened, reports Reuter.

"Taliban won't destroy the sculptures at Bamiyan," the government's embassy in the Pakistani capital Islamabad said in a statement.

If Tories defeated in polls Cabinet will persuade Major to stay on as opposition leader

LONDON, Apr 29: The most senior members of Prime Minister John Major's Cabinet will seek to persuade him to stay on as opposition leader until the autumn if the Tories are defeated in Thursday's election, the Financial Times reported today, says AP.

The paper quoted "one of his closest Cabinet colleagues" as saying: "Both from his and the party's point of view, in the event of a defeat he should stay, if not, his legacy would be interminable warfare."

He noted that this was the "clearest indication to date that ministers are as preoccupied with the Tory succession as by the contest with Labour."

The Tory source told the paper that Major "will want to hand over the party in reasonable shape," adding that if there were a summer leadership election "it would tear the party apart."

For several years the Conservative Party has been bitterly divided between "Euro-sceptic" and pro-European Union factions.

All opinion polls predict a heavy defeat for the party in the May 1 vote, and speculation has been mounting as to who would replace Major if he stepped down after a Labour victory.

Meanwhile, opposition Labour leader Tony Blair is expected to break with tradition and move his family into Number 10 Downing Street if the party wins Thursday's election, Labour sources said yesterday.

This would be the first time that a prime minister with young children - there are three in the Blair family - lived in the central London residence and premier's office.

Blair, his wife, Cherie, and their children could have the pick of a number of central London residences owned by the government. They could also choose to remain at their home in Islington, north London.

But the Labour leader, if he wins on May 1 as predicted in all opinion polls, is to move into the house occupied for the past six-and-a-half years by Prime Minister John Major and his wife Norma, sources said.

A spokesman for Blair however later described comments about the Labour leader's post-election plans as "inaccurate, unhelpful and inappropriate."

The 10 Downing Street flat is described as a "modest" abode with four bedrooms, a sitting room, dining room, kitchen and two or three bathrooms.

Financial Times joins newspapers backing Blair

LONDON, Apr 29: With days to a national election, it's not just the electorate that is swinging toward the main opposition Labour Party, reports AP.

Some newspapers are, too. Britain's respected business daily, the Financial Times, came out for Tony Blair's new Labour Tuesday, snubbing the governing Conservatives, party of big business, because of its counterproductive approach to Europe.

"This year, the issue for the business community is whether Britain can remain constructively engaged in Europe during what will be a crucial period for the European Union's economic and political future," the newspaper said.

"If this is the question, there is only one answer. The Conservative party has reached a point which makes it all but impossible for its leaders to implement rational policies towards Europe."

"By default, that opens the door to Tony Blair and Labour," it said.

Less than a ringing endorsement, as the paper itself noted.

"The closer... Blair has got to power," the less impressive he has appeared," it sniffed.

Russia steps up security along Chechen border

MOSCOW, Apr 29: Russian forces stepped up security Tuesday along the border with the breakaway region of Chechnya after gunmen attacked a police post and a bomb shattered a railway station in southern Russia, reports AP.

The Interior Ministry said more troops were being deployed at border crossings after about 20 gunmen shot up a police post early Tuesday, wounding two police officers. The gunmen retreated to Chechnya after the attack, officials said.

Officials in the southern Russian city of Pyatigorsk said Tuesday that the death toll from a bomb explosion at the city railway station Monday had increased to two after a 15-year-old girl died overnight. Authorities blamed the attack, which also wounded 16 people, on Chechen separatists, who claimed responsibility for a similar attack last week.

President Boris Yeltsin was briefed on the security situation, his office said.

The train station in Pyatigorsk, a resort in Russia's northern Caucasus, was heavily damaged in the explosion near the ticket windows, officials said.



Iraqi President Saddam Hussein cuts his birthday cake on Monday, in Tikrit. Iraq marked the leader's 60th birthday with lavish celebrations and tributes.



Shah A. M. S. Kibria, Minister of Finance, Government of Bangladesh, who is leading the Bangladesh delegation to the 53rd session of ESCAP now being held in Bangkok, takes over the chairmanship of the 53rd commission of ESCAP Monday.

Probe into US citizenship programme launched

WASHINGTON, Apr 29: The US Justice Department inspector general opened an investigation Monday of alleged mismanagement, misconduct and illegality in the Immigration and Naturalisation Service's citizenship programme, reports AP.

The Citizenship USA programme was the immigration service's vehicle for naturalising more than 1 million people between September 1995 and October 1996.

The immigration service has been under attack for allowing 180,000 foreigners to become citizens without waiting for the results of FBI background checks.

Nearly 11,000 of the new citizens had felony records, but criminal conviction, even on a felony charge, is not an automatic bar to citizenship. An ongoing audit has discovered 168 cases of improper naturalisation.

Republicans in Congress alleged the process was rushed in order to naturalise as many aliens as possible in time for the November 1996 elections and that Vice President Al Gore's office may have played a role in that.

Inspector General Micheal Bromwich said his investigation will focus on development of the programme in Washington and its implementation in the field.

"We will be investigating allegations that an initiative that was designed for the commendable purpose of cutting down the backlog of naturalisation applications became something different along the way... the respects in which it may have gone off the rails," Bromwich said.

Qian meets Albright

WASHINGTON, Apr 29: Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen met Monday with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to lay the groundwork for an exchange of summit visits beginning later this year, reports AP.

But their talks, which yielded an agreement on navy stopovers in Hong Kong, were clouded by allegations that Beijing tried to illegally influence last year's US general election.

DPRK rejects food aid offer from Vietnam

HANOI, Vietnam, Apr 29: Impoverished North Korea has rejected an offer of free rice from Hanoi and will not allow Vietnam to settle an old debt with rice, a Vietnamese government spokesman said Tuesday, reports AP.

North Korea, which aid officials say could face a famine in months, sent Deputy Prime Minister Kong Chin-tae to Hanoi earlier this month to appeal for 30,000 tons of rice on credit, a Finance Ministry official said.

But Vietnam balked when Pyongyang insisted on dictating the terms of the aid, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Vietnam then proposed paying of an earlier debt to Pyongyang with an undisclosed amount of rice. But North Korea demanded hard currency instead, the official said.

Tiger-fear grips Spore island

SINGAPORE, Apr 29: It may sound like the stuff of urban legend, but Singapore authorities are taking seriously talk of tigers at large on one of the city state's outlying islands, reports Reuter.

State television and the Daily Straits Time newspaper said today that police has warned residents of Pulau Ubin, located between the main island of Singapore and the coast of Malaysia, to stay indoors at night.

Police have also advised the public to keep away from the island, the Straits Times said.

The warnings came after quarry workers and an island resident separately reported spotting animals that looked like tigers.

Although some three million people are crammed into Singapore's 648 sq km, Pulau Ubin has just 600 residents, and large patches of swamp, jungle and remnants of old rubber plantations.

BRIEFLY

Leghari arrives in China: Pakistan President Farooq Ahmed Leghari arrived in Beijing yesterday for a two-day working visit at the invitation of his Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin, AFP reports from Beijing.

Leghari was accompanied by Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan and minister of commerce, industries and investment Muhammad Ishaq Dar. The two presidents were scheduled to hold talks later yesterday. Pakistan has enjoyed considerable Chinese patronage in the past, and China is currently completing the installation of the Chashma nuclear power plant in Punjab.

Dengue claims 47 in Indonesia: An outbreak of dengue fever has claimed 47 lives in the past two months in the east Kalimantan province capital of Samarinda, the Indonesian Observer reported yesterday, AFP reports from Jakarta.

The head of the local health department, Dr H M Nuh, told the paper the epidemic has been partially caused by the recent damp and humid weather in which mosquitoes thrive. He said 29 people had died in March from the disease in the province, in the Indonesian region of the island of Borneo, and 18 in April.

ROK chopper crash kills 3 aboard: A South Korean helicopter crashed yesterday killing all three crew members, an official at Dong Ah Construction Industrial Co Ltd., Reuter reports from Seoul.

The helicopter, owned by Dong Ah, crashed around 11:40 AM (0240 GMT) about 50 km (30 miles) south of Seoul. Police were investigating, the official said.

Gunman kills 1 in US: A masked gunman opened fire and killed a bank teller during a robbery, authorities said, AP reports from Thousand Oaks.

The gunman and an accomplice escaped Monday with an unknown amount of cash from the Western Financial Bank in this city about 40 miles (65 kilometers) northwest of Los Angeles. The suspects entered the bank and shot one of the tellers execution-style without provocation, said Ventura County Sheriff's Deputy Bob Brooks.

Thai PM postpones Myanmar trip: A scheduled trip to Myanmar next month by Thai Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh has been postponed, Myanmar military authorities said in a statement received yesterday, AFP reports from Bangkok.

The postponement was due to the request made by the Myanmar side because the initial proposed date for the Thai PM's visit was not mutually convenient, a military official said in a faxed statement. Thai officials were not immediately available to comment on the reason for the postponement of the trip, which came a week after the United States announced it was clamping economic sanctions on Myanmar.

8 executed in China: Eight people including a man who forced women into prostitution have been executed in the southern Chinese city of Shantou, it was reported yesterday, AFP says from Hong Kong.

The eight-crime were sentenced for crimes including murders, armed robberies and fraud, the China-backed Ta Kung Pao daily said. They were taken to an execution ground in Shantou, in the southern coastal province of Guangdong, immediately after their death sentences were upheld on appeal.

4 die as fire breaks out in Thailand: A fire killed four people living above a shop on the southern outskirts of Bangkok yesterday, police said, Reuter reports from Bangkok.

The fire broke out in the early hours of the morning in a four-storey building where about a dozen workers were sleeping on upper floors, police said. Two people who jumped to safety were taken to hospital with serious injuries, police said.

Floods claim 3 in Russia: At least three people have died and more than 1,000 have been evacuated because of flooding in the Krasnoyarsk region of western Siberia, ITAR-Tass news agency said on Monday, Reuter reports from Moscow.

Tass said blocks of ice had built up in a dam on the Yenisei river, making the water rise by more than 10 metres (30 feet) and flooding houses up to their roofs. Rescue teams evacuated more than 1,000 people on Sunday and Monday and several hundred more had fled their homes to seek safety in the hills, it said.

Move to reform state-controlled monopolies in Russia

MOSCOW, Apr 29: President Boris Yeltsin moved Monday to reform Russia's huge gas, electric, rail and telecommunications monopolies and end the old Soviet practice of cheap housing and utilities, reports AP.

Yeltsin signed a sweeping decree aimed at reducing prices and stimulating investment but stopped short of dismantling the so-called "natural monopolies".

The state will retain control over these monopolies and will keep their national supply networks intact, First Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov said at a news conference announcing the decree.

Yeltsin has set reform of natural monopolies as a priority of his recently revamped government, Nemtsov, a young reformer, was brought to the Cabinet specifically to deal with that reform.

Those who support monopolies in this country are defending corruption and the deepening of economic crisis," Nemtsov said recently.

The International Monetary Fund, which has granted a 10 billion dollars loan to support Russian reforms, says reform of the monopolies - aimed at setting up a wholesale market and rationalising prices - is a condition for the continuation of its financial backing.

First US-Russian joint spacewalk begins

KOROLYOV, Russia, Apr 29: Astronauts Jerry Linenger and Vasily Tsibilyev on Tuesday began the first joint American-Russian spacewalk, emerging from the Russian Mir space station for a five-hour mission, reports AP.

Russian space control said the walk had begun on schedule and the two astronauts were fine. It was the first spacewalk for Linenger, and the first time an American astronaut has used a Russian-made spacesuit on a mission.

When the Atlantis docks with the Mir in May, it will bring Linenger's replacement, astronaut Michael Foale, who is scheduled to spend 4 and half months on board the station. Americans are scheduled to be aboard the Mir continuously to gain expertise needed for the new international space station.