

Crisis in Afghanistan ECO summit calls for end to outside meddling

ASHKABAD, May 14: Central Asian leaders meeting here have called for an end to outside meddling in the Afghan conflict and for an "economic" strategy to restore stability in the region, reports AFP.

The war in Afghanistan dominated the first day of a two-day summit of the 10-nation regional economic cooperation organisation in the Turkmenistan capital of Ashkhabad due to wind up here today.

"We must put a stop to all outside interference in the Afghan conflict," said Uzbek President Islam Karimov.

"We must succeed using purely economic means, in restoring stability in the region," Turkmenistan president Saparmurad "Turkmenbashi" Niyazov told his peers.

With the exception of Azerbaijan and Turkey, the eight other members of the ECO are implicated to varying degrees in the Afghan imbroglio by having supported rival Afghan factions.

They are Pakistan, Iran and the five former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

The latter are seriously concerned lest the headline Taliban Islamic militia who have

BRIEFLY

Picasso's 'Guernica' to stay in Madrid: Picasso's masterpiece 'Guernica' will not be moved to the new Bilbao Guggenheim in northern Spain, despite pressure from Basque groups, the Reina Sofia Museum announced Tuesday, AP reports from Madrid.

Reina Sofia officials said the delicate state of the 60-year old painting precluded it from being transferred to another museum. The Bilbao Guggenheim, built at a cost of more than 22 billion pesetas (171 million dollars), had requested that 'Guernica' be loaned or permanently moved to the Basque country museum for its Oct 3 opening. The black-and-white mural immortalised the 1937 Nazi bombing of Guernica, a town 25 kilometres (15 miles) from the industrial city of Bilbao. Between 1,000 and 1,650 people were killed in the attack, the first air raid ever on an undefended town. The Basque government denounced the decision not to move the painting, saying politics, not the painting's condition, were the real reason for the refusal.

Road mishap kills 10 in India: At least 10 persons were killed on the spot and 18 others injured when a tempo in which they were travelling collided with a lorry near Manoli village in Karnataka's Belgaum district Tuesday night, PTI reports from Bangalore.

The Additional District Magistrate of Police, T. Madiyal, told PTI the mishap occurred when the tempo driver was trying to overtake the lorry. Police said the injured had been hospitalised.

WEU, Russia to sign accord: The Western European Union (WEU) will sign accords soon with Russia and Ukraine to fly European troops to crisis zones aboard former Soviet transports, a senior European official said on Tuesday, Reuters reports from Paris.

"We expect these accords with Moscow and Kiev to be signed in a matter of weeks," the official told Reuters. He was speaking at a ministerial meeting of a WEU, a European defence grouping without heavy airlift capacity.

Blast claims 4 in Zaire: Four people were killed and six badly injured in an explosion Tuesday night at Kinshasa river port, aboard a ferry arriving from Brazzaville (Congo), the Zairean Information Ministry said, AFP reports from Kinshasa.

Tourist plane crashes in Morocco: A plane carrying three tourists crashed Tuesday in southern Morocco because of bad weather, the Interior Ministry said. It was not immediately known if there were any fatalities, AP reports from Rabat.

Emergency rescue teams were sent to find the fallen plane, and the passengers' condition and details of the crash were not immediately available. The Ministry gave no information on the plane's crew, but said the passengers included two Swiss citizens and one German.

The plane was one of seven Swiss tourist planes en route from the city of Marrakesh to the southern city of Quarzazate.

King Hussein meets Marzook: Hamas leader Mousa Abu Marzook met King Hussein on Tuesday and thanked the Jordanian leader for letting him enter the kingdom after 21 months in US custody, AP reports from Amman.

Abu Marzook, who was detained for violating immigration laws, was released from a US jail and deported to Jordan on May 5. Abu Marzook was accompanied by his wife, Nadia Ashy, at the meeting, the state-run Petra news agency said. It did not provide details, and Hamas officials were not available to comment.

2 US sailors jailed in Japan: A Japanese court in southwestern Japan sentenced two US Navy sailors to five years and six months in prison Wednesday for assaulting and robbing a Japanese man, AP reports from Tokyo.

Seaman recruit William Plummer, 21, from Palmdale, California, and seaman Carl Albee, 20, from Columbus, Ohio, were convicted of robbing and assaulting the 37-year-old Japanese. Judge Kiyomi Yano of the Nagasaki District Court's Sasebo branch told the court that the two men's crime was "vicious."

Chirac opens Japanese culture centre: Japan's imperial princess on Tuesday inaugurated a Japanese culture centre at the foot of the Eiffel Tower, saying she hoped it would "deepen the links of friendship" between the two countries, AP reports from Paris.

Princess Nori, the only daughter of Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, joined French President Jacques Chirac in the ceremony highlighted by Japanese theatrical performances. The inauguration of the new Japanese Culture House of Paris is among the first of some 300 events planned to celebrate the Year of Japan in France. The center will open to the public in September.

Levy to visit Washington

WASHINGTON, May 14: Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy will visit Washington at the end of the week for talks with US officials, the State Department said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

"Foreign Minister Levy will be here, I believe on Friday," spokesman Nicholas Burns told a regular briefing. The visit follows efforts in Israel by US mediator Dennis Ross to revive Palestinian-Israeli talks after a two-month crisis.

Negotiations have been largely stalled since Israel started a new Jewish settlement in Arab east Jerusalem on March 18 and a Palestinian bomber killed himself and three Israeli women at a Tel Aviv cafe three days later.

Iranian troops engaged in digging out bodies of quake victims

ARDAKUL, Iran, May 14: Anxious to prevent the outbreak of disease, soldiers digging out the victims of the weekend's earthquake hoisted bodies onto stretchers and put them in a pile for burial in mass graves, reports AP.

In grief, the parents of a 12-year-old girl rushed forward to stop the soldiers.

"God took her life. At least give me back the body," said the girl's father, Abbas Rastgou-Najad, whose black pants and jacket were white with dust from digging through the brick, mud and concrete of his crumbled village.

The soldiers relented. Moments later they found her 8-year-old brother. The family took the children's bodies to the stream to wash for burial, according to Muslim traditions.

Guided by the smell of decaying bodies, anguished villagers and soldiers wearing scarves across their faces pressed forward Tuesday with the task of recovering the dead from Saturday's 7.1 magnitude quake. Against all odds, some still hoped to find survivors.

Soldiers used bulldozers and spades. Others dug through bricks that once were their homes, some with bare, bleeding hands. A 10-year-old boy joined the digging with his toy shovel.

Rescue workers in the village of Hajjabad uncovered a broken wall clock that had stopped at 12:28, when the earthquake struck early Saturday.

Rasul Zargar, Iran's top official for natural disaster relief, dismissed previous government estimates that 2,400 were

killed, saying Tuesday that 1,560 had died. His figure was based on surveys of Iranian aid workers who have reached damaged villages in northeastern Iran.

The quake smashed the mud houses scattered through this farming region near the Afghan border. More than 4,460 people were injured and 60,000 left homeless, the Iranian Red Crescent Society said Tuesday, adding that not all villages had been reached yet.

In Ardakul, where almost a third of the village's 1,600 residents were killed in Saturday's earthquake, a 12-year-old girl picked through the wreckage.

"We have lost everything," said Fatima Yari.

Still, her 3-year-old sister, Mehri, survived the earthquake

when blankets and mattresses fell on top of her as the roof of their home collapsed.

Other residents, worried about the bodies of missing relatives, urged soldiers not to use bulldozers, which earlier tore apart the remains of a young boy and girl. Muslims believe a body should be returned to God as it came into the world — whole.

Since Saturday, 195 aftershocks have rattled the stricken region. A magnitude-4.8 tremor struck Monday night near Qaen, one of the hardest-hit towns. But the official Islamic Republic News Agency said there were no reports of casualties or damage.

Near-freezing temperatures at night have made survivors miserable. Planefloads of tents, blankets and food finally arrived Tuesday from neighboring countries, including the oil-rich Arab Gulf.

The Red Cross in Geneva said 5 million was donated in one day for the victims, one of their biggest and quickest responses to an appeal.

The deal comes less than two weeks after FAI Insurances ditched a partnership with Alpic to enter the Indian general insurance market.

FAI dissolved its joint-venture with Alpic on May 2 after becoming increasingly frustrated that the Indian government was delaying moves to privatize the highly unionized Indian insurance sector.

MMI's general manager of international operations, Angus Maciver, said the group had pushed the deal with Alpic for more than six months but only

reached agreement after FAI decided to terminate its arrangement.

"So far, all the Indian government has said is that it will allow applications for licenses to write health insurance business in India and we still don't know yet what shareholding each company will be permitted to hold," he said.

Respective shareholdings in the proposed joint venture hinge on Indian foreign investment guidelines.

Maciver said the initial focus of the joint venture would be health insurance, including personal, accident and illness cover. But it would eventually be extended to cover workers compensation and other areas of the general insurance market.

SMYRNA, Tennessee, May 14: A Baptist minister who couldn't swim drowned after rescuing his 7-year-old son from a lake, reports AP.

After being saved by his father, David Johnson Jr went down a road for help and found two fishermen, but they returned too late.

David Johnson Sr, 45, minister at New Brentwood Primitive Baptist Church, was fishing Saturday with his son from the bank of Percy Priest Lake when the boy slipped and fell into the water, authorities said.

The father dove in, pushed his son toward a rock but couldn't make it himself. His boots filled with water and he disappeared.

The two fishermen encountered the boy on the road along the lake and asked what was wrong.

Asian countries to intensify campaign for independent state of Palestine

HYDERABAD, May 14: Asian countries have decided to intensify the campaign for the formation of an independent state of Palestine, according to Congress MP and Chairman of Asian Coordination Committee on Palestine (ACCP), K M Khan, reports PTI.

He was talking to reporters here yesterday on his return from Jakarta after attending a meeting of the representatives of Asian governments and non-governmental and intra-governmental organisations.

The meeting was organised by the United Nations Division for Palestine Rights to discuss the current situation in Palestine and to review the implementation of various agreements and accords reached between Israel and Palestine.

According to Khan, the meeting, inaugurated by the Indonesian Foreign Minister, had expressed its deep concern and anguish over the "negative" attitude of Israel with regard to peace in West Asia.

It also regretted that the Israeli government headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was not honouring the commitment made by that country while signing the Oslo

Agreement, Khan said, adding that the meeting had decided to mobilise support among Asian countries for the Palestinian cause.

Another report from Cairo adds: The Palestinians on Tuesday called on Arab countries neighboring Israel to join together in putting pressure on the Jewish state to back down on its hardline policies.

"We have to relaunch coordination between the five countries surrounding Israel to firm up the Arab position against the unprecedented crisis in the peace process," said Salim Zaun, President of the Palestine National Council (PNC) — the Palestinians Parliament in exile.

The coalition of Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon and the PLO was created by the Arab League to face up to Israel, but it has not met in its entirety for 20 years.

Zaun, addressing a conference of Arab parliamentarians in Cairo, also called for the holding of an Arab summit to put an end to the headline policies of right-wing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians ground to

a halt on March 18 when Israel began the construction of a new Jewish settlement on the edge of Arab East Jerusalem.

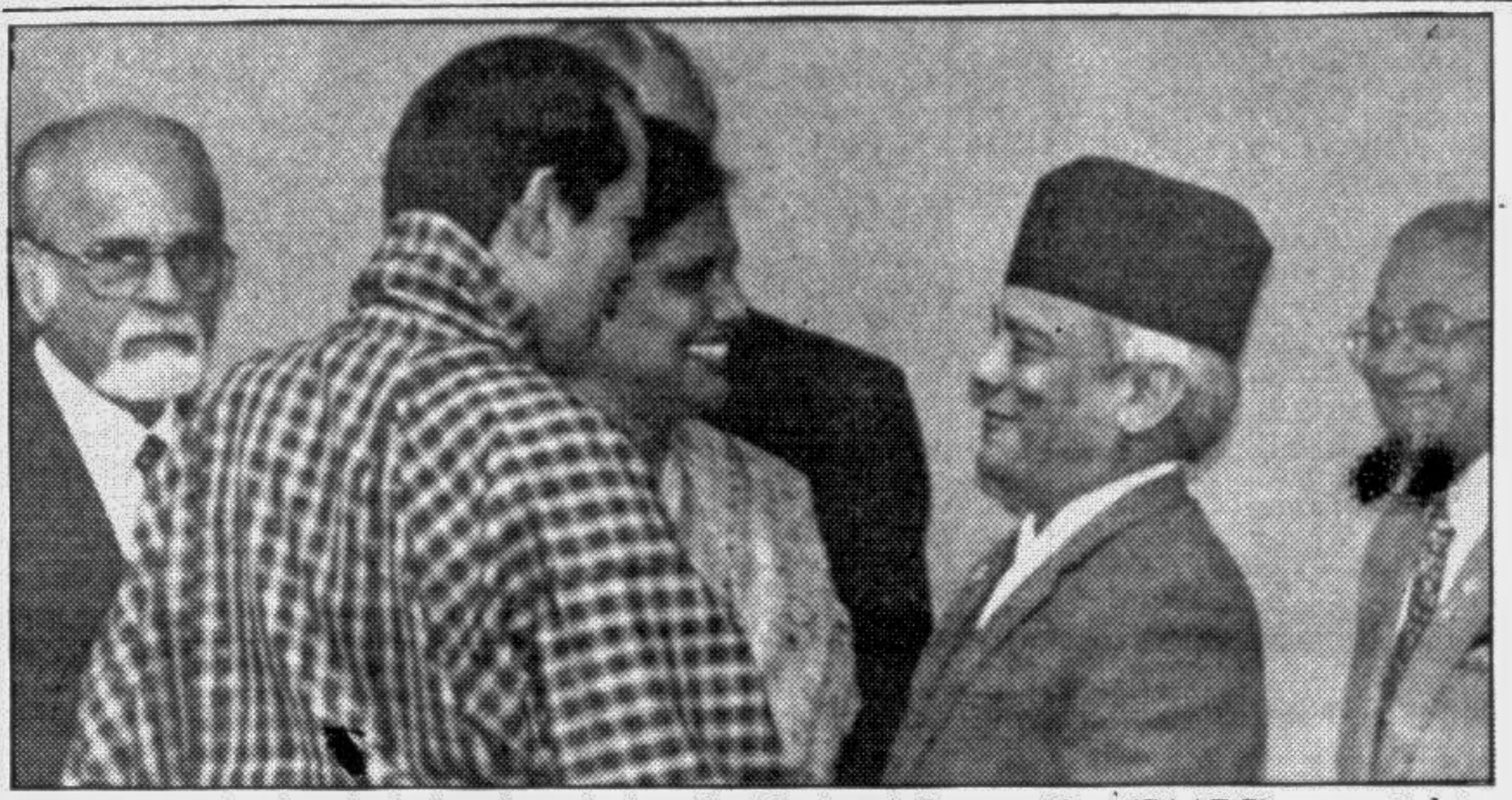
Reuters from Damascus reports: President Hafez Al-Assad told Norway's Foreign Minister Bjorn Tore Godal on Tuesday that Syria was still committed to making peace with Israel.

Presidential spokesman Joubran Kourieh said that Assad and Godal discussed the Arab-Israeli peace talks and "the obstacles placed by the Israeli government to block the negotiations."

"We are with peace and we want peace on the basis of the Madrid Peace Conference," Kourieh quoted Assad as saying.

He was referring to UN Security Council resolution 242 and 338 and the land-for-peace principle on which the Arab-Israeli peace talks were based when they opened in Madrid in 1991.

Kourieh said Godal, who earlier met Foreign Minister Farouq Al-Shara, told Assad that he understood the difficulties facing the Middle East peace process and that he greatly appreciated President Assad's remarks on peace.



Leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) congratulate one another at the conclusion of the 9th SAARC summit in Male yesterday. From left are: Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral; Bhutanese King Jigme Singye Wangchuck; Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga; Nepali Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand and Maldivian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. — AFP/UNB photo

Lankan troops inch way forward into LTTE's heartland

COLOMBO, May 14: Sri Lankan troops inched their way forward into the heartland of Tamil Tiger rebels after launching a major offensive on Tuesday to open a strategic land route to the northern government-held town of Jaffna, reports Reuters.

Troops backed by helicopter gunships, artillery and tanks advanced five km (3.1 miles) into the rebel-held Wanni region, meeting little resistance, a Defence Ministry statement said.

"Enemy transmissions indicated four Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) cadres were killed and a fair number were wounded," the statement said.

It said there were no troop casualties.

Soldiers left their bases in Vavuniya, 220 km (135 miles) north of the capital Colombo, at first light and headed towards the mostly shrub jungle-covered Wanni region further north, military officials in the north said.

Civilians and aid workers in Vavuniya told Reuters the town was rocked by outgoing army artillery fire ahead of the advance.

Last July, government forces advanced further south of Jaffna, moving about 20 km (12 miles) down from the peninsula to Kilinochchi, forcing their way into the rebel heartland.

The current offensive plans to link Kilinochchi with Vavuniya, establishing a military landsupply route all the way to Jaffna.

sive code-named 'Jaya Sikuru' or sure of victory," was to open a land supply route linking Vavuniya and the Jaffna Peninsula, about 100 km (60 miles) further north, military officials in the north said.

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Visiting UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (R) and his wife Nane (L) hold a certificate of the Honorary doctorate degree presented at Chuo University in Tokyo Wednesday. Annan arrived in Tokyo Sunday on a four-day visit which is his first visit in Japan since he assumed the leader of the UN. — AFP/UNB photo

Indian school children to carry limited weight

NEW DELHI, May 14: An Indian state Tuesday took a load off its schoolchildren, limiting the number of books they have to carry every day, the United News of India reported, says AFP.

The Education Minister of the western state of Maharashtra said primary school pupils would henceforth carry books weighing a total of one kilogramme (2.2 pounds) while those in junior high school would carry a maximum load of three kilogrammes (6.6 pounds). Minister Sudhir Joshi said in the state capital Bombay that primary school students would only have to take vernacular, English and mathematics textbooks to school and a 100-page exercise book for taking notes.

Indian educationalists have been campaigning for reform of the school system, including a less cumbersome syllabus and changes in examination papers to test comprehension instead of memory.

'AIDS vaccine may be impossible'

WASHINGTON, May 14: Despite an extensive and detailed understanding of AIDS, an expert said it is possible that medical science will never find a vaccine that protects against infection from the virus, reports AP.

Drugs have been found that appear to suppress HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, but researchers still don't how to make a vaccine that will keep people from getting infected after being exposed to HIV, said Dr Robert Gallo, co-discoverer of the AIDS virus.

Vaccines now protect against polio, measles, small pox and many other diseases, but HIV presents unique problems, he said.

"We have to say it is a serious possibility that we will never succeed with a vaccine against HIV," Gallo said Tuesday at a vaccine symposium sponsored by the Albert B Sabin Vaccine Foundation.

"Nobody can say that we will (succeed) for sure," he said. "That needs to be said. We have to be realistic."

This problem, he said, has led some people in the World Bank to investigate the possibility of controlling AIDS by treating all of the world's HIV patients with new and expensive drugs that suppress HIV to the point that the virus is undetectable.

"I had discussions with people at the World Bank who are seriously contemplating the possibility of taking the drugs and treating everybody," said Gallo. But he said the discussion was only "exploratory" and that there are no firm plans for drug treatments on such a massive scale.

SC hears petition to prosecute Netanyahu

JERUSALEM, May 14: The Supreme Court heard petitions Wednesday to prosecute Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and two of his allies for fraud in a recent political scandal, reports AP.

Israel's high court is notoriously activist and independent, and a ruling to force charges against the prime minister would likely bring down the government, though technically he could remain in office until convicted.

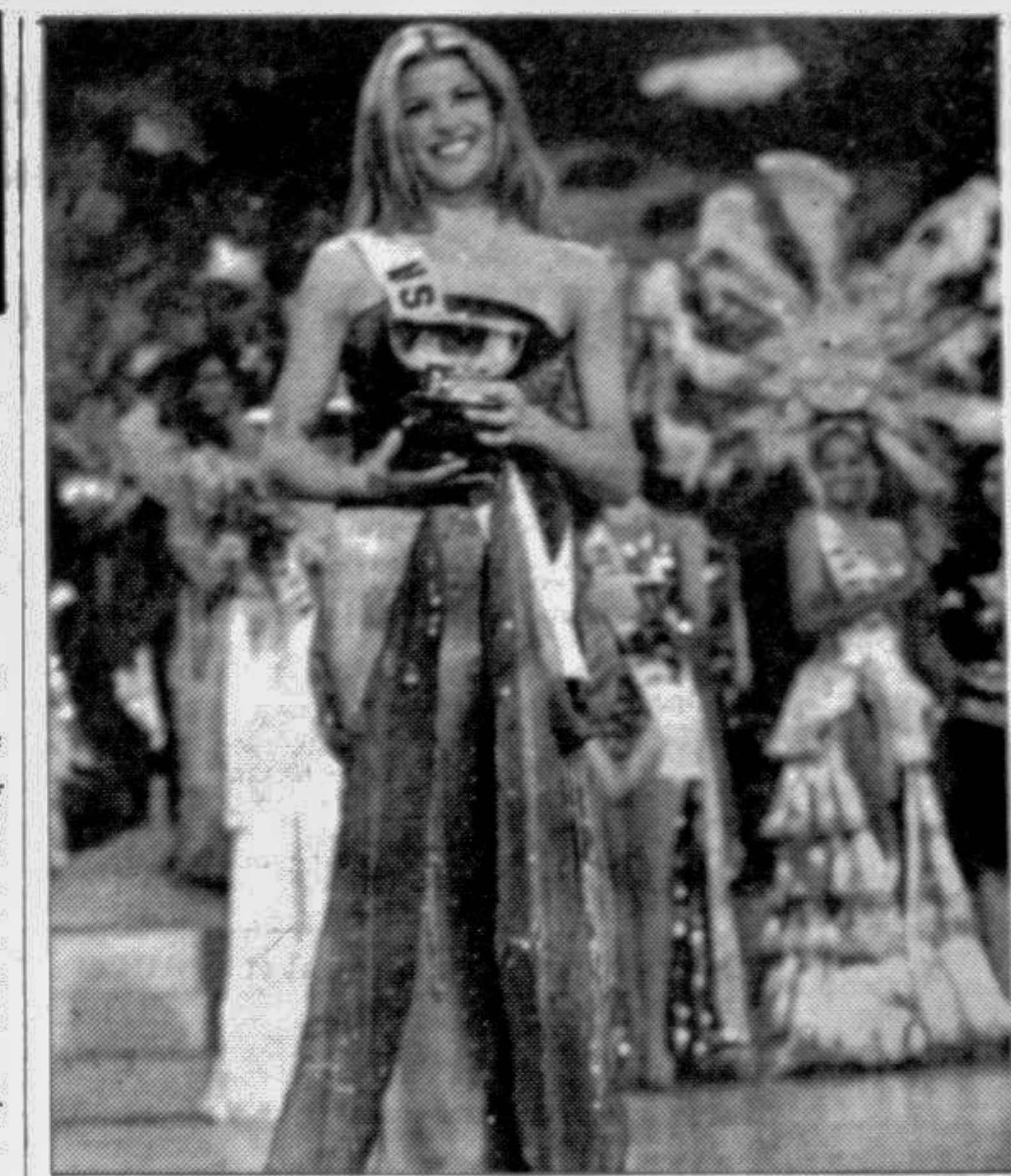
However, observers believed the five-judge panel was unlikely to interfere in this case.

The court was not expected to rule on the nine petitions Wednesday.

Security was tight Wednesday morning, with dozens of police, including paramilitary border police, deployed outside the courthouse.

On Tuesday night, hundreds of followers of the religious Shas party leader Aryeh Deri — the only one facing indictment in the scandal — demonstrated outside the Supreme Court and briefly burst into the entrance hall.

Israel radio said guards had to smuggle justices out through a side door. Police spokeswoman Linda Menuhin said the protest was dispersed without arrests.



Miss Australia, Laura Csorton, reacts as she receives the Miss Congeniality award by delegates at the 1997 Miss Universe Pageant during a taping session on Tuesday for the 1997 Miss Universe Pageant in Miami beach. Laura receives a \$ 1,000.00 cash prize and a trophy, and the annual event is scheduled for Friday. — AFP/UNB photo

Overnight curfew imposed on Kinshasa Kabila leaves Lumumbashi for talks with Mobutu

LUBUMBASHI, Zaire, May 14: Rebel leader Laurent Kabila flew out of his southern Zairean stronghold today for last-ditch talks with President Mobutu Sese Seko aboard the South African navy vessel Outeniqua, airport officials said, reports AFP.

Kabila left Lubumbashi for Pointe Noire, Congo at 6:30 am 0430 GMT.

Another report says: Zairean rebels stepped up a military and psychological war on the government ahead of scheduled peace talks Wednesday with a so far unverified claim that a vanguard rebel force had "already" entered the outskirts of the capital.

The government on Tuesday imposed an overnight curfew on Kinshasa and the three in-

ternational airlines serving Kinshasa, Swissair, Sabena and Air France, cancelled flights to the Zairean capital, airport officials said.

Zaire's rebel voice of the people radio confirmed that talks with President Mobutu Sese Seko would go ahead today.

Meanwhile, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright Tuesday urged Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko and rebel leader Laurent Kabila to meet as planned to put in place a process to rebuild Zaire.

"What is most important here now is that there be a process," Albright told a news conference at the end of a one-day visit, her to help organisers prepare for next month's summit of the eight.

Britain to help end child labour in India

LONDON, May 14: The new Labour government said on Tuesday it would work with Britain's business and union leaders to help end reported child labour in India, says Reuters.

The decision followed a report by the Charity Christian Aid, which urged British sports goods companies that are major buyers of Indian exports to use their influence to improve the lives of children on the Indian subcontinent.

"Everyone deplores the exploitation of child labour highlighted in Christian Aid's report," Trade and Industry Minister Margaret Beckett said in a statement referring to the charity's details on abuses in India.

"Many British companies

are already committed to action to raise their overseas suppliers' Labour standards and I want to harness the efforts of British business and unions to do whatever we can to ensure that abusive labour practices are eliminated."

Minister for Trade Stanley Clinton-Davis will meet officials from the confederation of British industry and the Trades Union Congress to discuss what they can do to solve the problem.

Christian Aid, an agency of British and Irish churches which works with the poor in 60 countries, said Indian children as young as seven spend days stitching footballs and boxing and cricket gloves for export to Britain.

Tremor hits Pakistan, Japan

ISLAMABAD, May 14: An earthquake originating in the Hindu Kush mountain range in neighbouring Afghanistan shook a wide region in Pakistan on Tuesday, residents and seismological monitors said, reports AFP.

The tremor caused cracks in mud-and-stone houses in remote northwestern areas including Swat, Chitral and Dera Ismail Khan, but no casualties were reported.

A seismological station in Peshawar near the Afghan border said the earthquake measured 6.5 on the Richter Scale and its epicentre lay 250 kilometres (156 miles) north of the city in the Hindu Kush range in Afghanistan.

The French National Seismic Monitoring Centre near Strasbourg put the intensity of the quake at 6.7 on the Richter Scale.

Tremors were also felt for a few seconds in Islamabad and the eastern city of Lahore and to her places in central Punjab province, residents said.

The quake was also felt across a large part of northern India, an earthquake of 6.0 de-

grees on the Richter Scale can cause severe damage.

Meanwhile aftershocks continued Wednesday in southern Japan a day after a strong earthquake injured at least 34 people and caused a gas explosion in a food shop, landslides and damaged several buildings.

The earthquake measuring 6.2 on the Richter Scale which hit Kyushu island, caused 27 landslides and damaged 26 buildings, Kagoshima police officials said.

The meteorological agency had monitored 78 aftershocks as of 9:30 am (0030 GMT) Wednesday.

The epicentre of the quake Tuesday was in Kagoshima prefecture in the south of the island which has been hit by a series of jolts in recent months, the agency said.

On March 26, a quake with a magnitude of 6.3 injured 20 people and caused landslides in the area.

In the latest quake, a supermarket partly collapsed injuring one man, and a woman received burns to her face and arms in a gas explosion at a food shop in Sendai, the officials said.

Tragic!

SMYRNA, Tennessee, May 14: A Baptist minister who couldn't swim drowned after rescuing his 7-year-old son from a lake, reports AP.

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