

SAARC leaders promise new era of peace, amity

MALE, May 15: South Asian leaders left their seven-nation forum here promising a new era of peace and friendship after lifting a ban on political debate and regional rivals India and Pakistan agreed to work to lower tensions, reports AFP.

The Male Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) will be remembered for two "historic events," said Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga before returning home today.

The summit recognised the need to encourage discussion on contentious issues and also pledged to make South Asia a free trade area by 2001, she said adding that it had induced "a new sense of vigour" in the 12-year-old organisation.

The Indo-Pakistan thaw after years of bickering overshadowed the summit which resolved to enhance economic co-operation, combat terrorism and drug trafficking and intensify the fight against poverty.

Most leaders expressed happiness at India and Pakistan's agreement to release civilian prisoners, set up joint working groups to resolve disputes and establish a hotline between the two prime ministers.

Foreign secretaries of the two countries will meet in Islamabad in the next few weeks to find ways of resolving problems including the "core issue of Kashmir," Pakistani officials said.

In a significant policy shift, the summit adopted a proposal by President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom of the Maldives to evolve a dispute resolution mechanism.

SAARC was formed in 1985 to promote economic cooperation, sidelining discussion on bilateral disputes that might hamper its progress.

Gayoom, calling the move a "watershed," said the process of informal consultations in future SAARC conferences will prove "useful" in relieving tensions.

"This is indeed an historic decision, one which takes SAARC into an era of new opportunities and great promise," he said. Stressing that "We want peace to reign in this region."

He said Monday's meeting between Indian and Pakistani prime ministers on the resort island of Kurumba was "a matter of great satisfaction to us all." The talks made the summit "truly memorable one."

Delegates said the leaders stressed that peaceful ties between the two bigger partners would "give new impetus" to the whole region.

"We hope and pray that they (Sharif and Gujral) will in the months ahead. Succeed in foreign a new understanding, amity and lasting friendship," Kumaratunga said.

Analysts said the solution of the 50-year-old Kashmir dispute would take time, but the understanding created by the two premiers would help ease tensions.



US President Bill Clinton (L) announces in the White House Rose Garden that Russia and NATO negotiators in Moscow have reached an accord Wednesday allowing Russia a voice but not a veto in NATO decisions. Standing behind Clinton are General Joseph Ralston, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (2nd-L), Secretary of Defence William Cohen (2nd-R) and Vice President Al Gore (R). — AFP/UNB Photo

NATO, Russia forge deal

BRUSSELS, Belgium, May 15: Wednesday's agreement between NATO and Russia will give Moscow a voice in the Western military alliance for the first time — but nothing that obliges NATO to listen, reports AP.

Ultimately, NATO can still pretty much do as it pleases if the circumstances warrant it. The key is whether the circumstances will ever require it.

The whole point of the accord, after all, is to bring the Russians in not shut them out — to include them in a continent-wide security organisation rather than isolate them.

The North Atlantic Council, NATO's top policy body, pronounced the agreement — worked out by NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana and Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov — a good one and sent it on to member governments for the necessary approval.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin also must give his OK before it becomes final.

Despite Russia's protests and occasional threats over NATO's plan to expand into central and eastern Europe, Moscow was unsuccessful in its attempt to

extract major concessions from the alliance in the agreement.

NATO retains the right to put its nuclear weapons where it chooses and to move its troops at will, within the limits of a treaty on conventional forces being renegotiated by about 30 countries.

In Wednesday's accord, NATO solemnly repeated its position that it has "no intention, no reason and no plan" to change its current nuclear strategy, but did not pledge never to do so. It also emphasised it had "no need to deploy" substantial combat forces, onto the territory of new member states, but nothing can prevent it from doing that should the security situation change.

And even though the Russian now have a seat in a new NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council, they have no vote, no veto and no way to impose their views.

NATO said from the very beginning that plans to expand the organisation into central and eastern Europe — including some former Soviet-bloc Warsaw Pact countries — would go ahead, whether the Russians agreed or not.

BRRIFFLY

New Chinese sat responding well:

China said yesterday its newly-launched telecommunications satellite was responding well to orbit tests since its launch four days ago, AFP reports from Beijing.

The Dongfanghong-3 satellite, which blasted off Monday after a nine-month suspension of operations has made three successful orbit changes and will go into its final orbit within 10 days. "Every system of the satellite is operating normally and it will soon move into its final position at 125 degrees east longitude above the Equator," an official at the Xian Satellite Test and Control Centre told the official Xinhua news agency.

Ex-Israeli minister acquitted: A Tel Aviv court yesterday acquitted former justice minister Yaacov Neeman on perjury and obstruction of justice charges, opening the way for his possible return to government, AFP reports from Tel Aviv.

Neeman resigned from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government last year after being indicted on charges of giving false evidence and interfering in the trial of Arieh Deri, head of the powerful religious party Shas. Neeman denied deliberately giving false evidence in Deri's trial for fraud and bribery, saying he made a mistake in his testimony. The court accepted his argument.

China drafts aid to Buddhists: China has drafted the assistance of its once-outlawed Buddhists to ensure a successful handover of Hong Kong on July 1, Xinhua reported yesterday, AFP reports from Beijing.

The Famen Temple, one of the four most famous Buddhist temples in China held a ceremony on May 14 that linked the return with the auspicious discovery of 1,000-year-old Buddhist relics. "We are praying for a new era for Hong Kong and we believe that it will have a brighter and more prosperous future," said the temple's eminent monk, Jingyi.

Russia to sign deal with SA co: The Russian government is close to a deal with De Beers Consolidated Mines Ltd of South Africa on purchasing Russia's diamond output, the Interfax news agency reported Thursday, AP reports from Moscow.

Interfax said legal work on the agreement is being wrapped up and the deal is likely to be signed by June 3 or 4. The report quoted First Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais as saying the government will issue an order approving export quotas for diamonds by May 30, allowing shipments before the deal takes effect. The government already has approved the new trade deal with De Beers, he noted, and all that remains are a few legal issues.

Road mishap kills 8 in China: A truck hauling pigs to market collided with a bus on a freeway in southern Guangdong province, killing eight people and injuring 20, state-run media reported, AP reports from Beijing.

The crash occurred Tuesday morning on the highway between the provincial capital, Guangzhou, and the coastal city of Shantou, when the pig truck crossed lanes and crashed head-on into the bus. The Guangdong-based newspaper Yangcheng Evening News said in a report seen Thursday in Beijing. A third vehicle, a truck, smashed into the two others after they collided, said the report, published Wednesday. Of the 20 people hurt, nine suffered serious injuries. More than 30 pigs also were killed, it said.

Historian wins top book award in UK: Cambridge historian Orlando Figes won the 25,000-pound (40,000 dollars) NCR book award Wednesday for his history of the Russian revolution, AP reports from London.

Figes 900-page chronicle, "A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924," beat Lady Antonia Fraser's book "The gunpowder plot" about the 1606 conspiracy against King James I and the English Parliament that immortalized the name of Guy Fawkes. Also short listed were Frank McLynn's "Carl Gustav Jung," and "A History of Europe," by Norman Davies, which had been favourite to win.

Yemen president names new PM: In an apparent move to heal lingering rifts between Yemen's north and south, the country's president named a southern official Wednesday as the new prime minister, AP reports from SANA.

President Ali Abdullah Saleh asked Faraj Said Bin Ghanem to form a new Cabinet following last month's parliamentary elections, in which Saleh's party won a majority of seats. Bin Ghanem was a minister of planning from 1989-90 in the former Marxist-led government of South Yemen and most recently served as the country's ambassador to Switzerland.

6 Ecuadoran troops held in Peru: Six Ecuadoran troops have been detained inside Peru in the latest spat between the two Andean nations over a stretch of poorly demarcated border, officials said Wednesday, AFP reports from Lima.

Victor Joy Way, the president of Peru's congress, said on Wednesday that six Ecuadoran soldiers were stopped on Tuesday afternoon seven kilometres (four miles) inside Peru along the two nations' Amazon border. "They were carrying weapons and landmines but we have no information on casualties," he told reporters.

Thai daily hails progress at Male SAARC Summit

BANGKOK, May 15: A leading Thai daily today hailed progress at the just-ended summit of South Asian leaders in the Maldives, saying it was a "good step forward" after years of bilateral bickering, reports AFP.

In an editorial, The Nation said the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) should follow the lead of the Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) in building confidence among members and tackling regional problems.

"Throughout its 12 years of existence, SAARC members have been spending too much time bickering incessantly over their bilateral rivalry, so much so that broader cooperation has been hampered and unable to progress," The Nation said.

India air collision Judge seeks more time to complete investigation

NEW DELHI, May 15: An Indian judge investigating the world's deadliest mid-air collision said Thursday he needed more time to complete his probe, reports AP.

Judge RC Lahoti was to have presented his findings on Thursday. Lahoti said he hoped to finish his work by mid-June. He said the questioning of officials was expected to be completed in a week's time. "I will then take two to three weeks to write my reports," Lahoti told The Associated Press in New Delhi.

Lahoti was asked by the Indian government to determine why a Saudi jumbo jet taking off from New Delhi's airport and a Kazak airliner attempting to land collided last November, killing all 349 people aboard both planes.

The judge already has questioned the representatives of the two airlines. The questioning of airport officials and air traffic controllers was expected to be concluded next week.

Early this month, a newspaper published transcripts from black boxes which suggested that the Kazak jetliner left its flight path before colliding with the Saudi Boeing 747.

Huge smuggled arms, drugs seized in Karachi

KARACHI, May 15: Pakistani authorities have seized separate consignments of smuggled weapons and drugs originating in Afghanistan, officials said today, reports Reuters.

A customs official said his men had found 23 Kalashnikov assault rifles, two sub-machine guns and 20,000 cartridges in a truck at Gadani near Karachi on Wednesday. The driver escaped.

The official said the weaponry had come from Afghanistan and was bound for the troubled southern port city of Karachi.

In a separate swoop, excise and taxation officials, acting on a tip-off, intercepted a truck near Attock on the boundary between North West Frontier Province and Punjab province.

Tigers bombard advancing Lankan troops

COLOMBO, May 15: Using captured military guns, Tamil Tiger rebels bombarded government soldiers to halt their advance on a strategic rebel-controlled highway in northern Sri Lanka, military officials said Thursday. Fifty-one soldiers were wounded but none were reported killed, reports AP.

The fighting Wednesday evening was the hardest so far of the 3-day-old offensive to seize the main road through rebel-held territory toward the Jaffna Peninsula.

The army was clearing land mines and booby-traps Thursday after capturing the town of Omantai, and prepared to continue their march up the 88-kilometre (55-mile) road to the town of Kilinochchi, once the command centre of the rebel Liberation Tigers for Tamil E-

lam. "Troops encountered heavy enemy resistance in reaching the area of Omantai and are now consolidating in the captured area," said Brigadier Tissa Jayatunge, the military spokesman.

Officials reported 51 casualties, although a Defence Ministry statement Wednesday reported only 23 were wounded while inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy.

Omantai is eight kilometres (5 miles) from the front line north of Vavuniya from where the offensive began, and 220 kilometres (135 miles) north of the capital, Colombo.

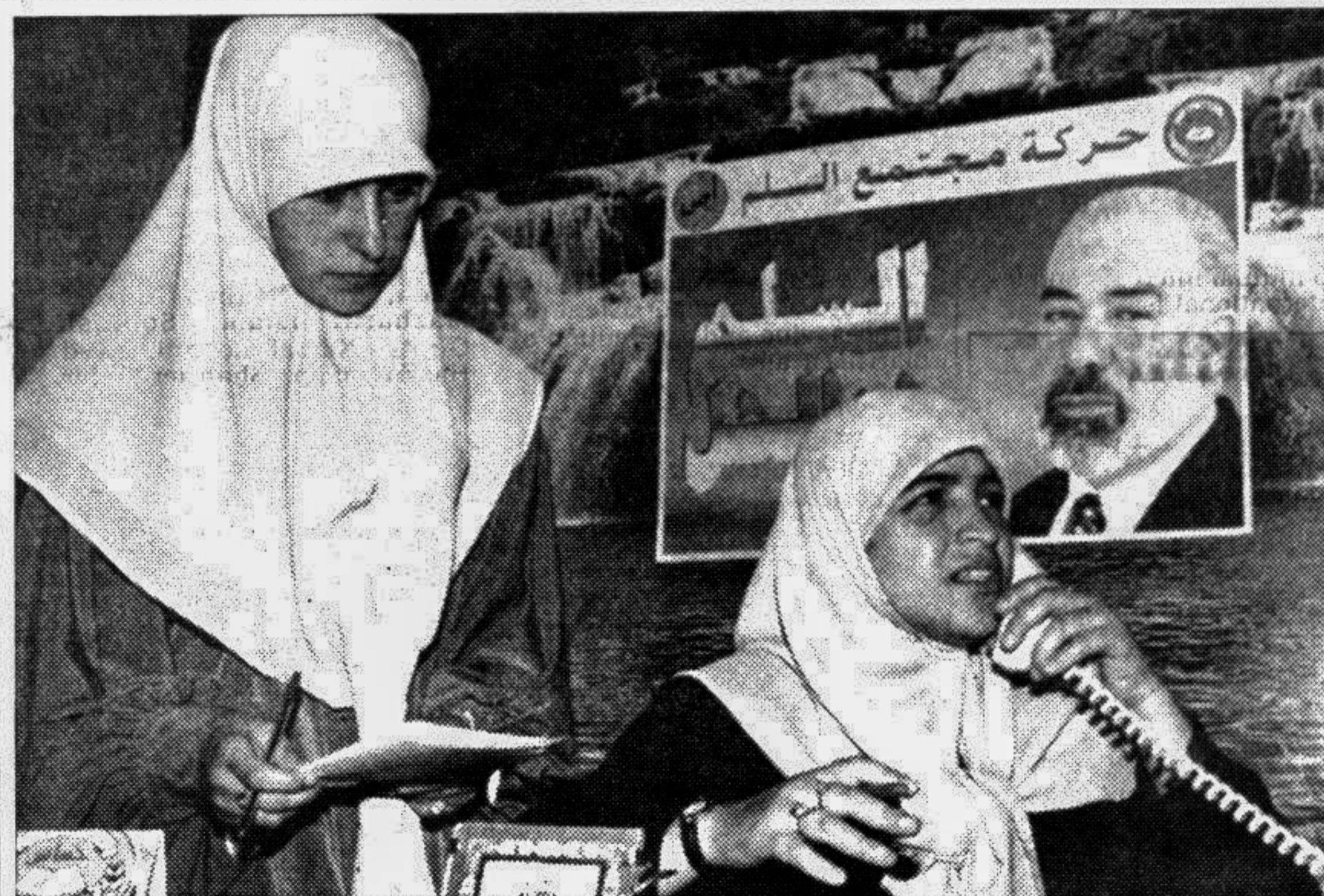
The guerrillas turned the army's own guns on the advancing columns, captured when the wiped out the 1,400-man garrison at the coastal base of Mullaitivu last July, the officials

said on condition of anonymity.

The rebels said two civilians were killed and accused the military of attacking civilian areas during the advance. In a statement from their London office, the rebels said two of their fighters were killed although the military put rebel casualties at four.

Omantai and Pullyankulan, both civilian centres, are scenes of devastation, with hospitals, public buildings, commercial centres and homes torn to the ground by heavy artillery fire from advancing forces," the guerrillas said.

"Helicopter gun ships and tanks are smashing up everything in their wake. The firing is intense, indiscriminate, and remorseless," the statement said.



Two militants of the Movement for a Peaceful Society (MSP, former MSI-Hamas) prepare their party's electoral campaign under a poster of MSP leader Cheikh Mahfoud Nahnah, Wednesday at the headquarters of the MSP in Algiers, on the eve of the official launching of election campaign. A total of 7,747 candidates will contest 388 seats in Algeria's national assembly in the June 5 general election. — AFP/UNB Photo

'ME' peace efforts still in deep crisis'

JERUSALEM, May 15: A senior PLO negotiator said today after a US sponsored meeting with Israel's defence minister that Middle East peace efforts were still in deep crisis, reports Reuters.

"I treatise now the magnitude of the crisis," Palestinian Cabinet Minister Saeb Erekat said after Wednesday's late-night session at the residence near Tel Aviv of US Ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk. "We are still in a major, major crisis."

Erekat and Palestinian Planning and International Cooperation Minister Nabil Shaath met for three hours with Israeli Defence Chief Yitzhak Mordechai and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The meeting, initiated and attended by US Middle East En-

voy Dennis Ross, was aimed at exploring the chances of resuming formal peace negotiations broken off in March after Israel began building a Jewish settlement in east Jerusalem.

"It was a very candid meeting, right to the point. There were no clear-cut results," Erekat said. "Ross will continue from here with the leaders. He met both Palestinian President Yasser Arafat and Netanyahu yesterday."

Erekat told Reuters in a telephone interview that the Palestinian side raised the issues of Jerusalem, Israeli land confiscation and settlement activities, the PLO has demanded.

Israel halt settlement work before peacetalks can resume. Israeli officials were not immediately available for comment.

Find way to direct talks, US urges Zairean rivals

WASHINGTON, May 15: The United States, pessimistic in the wake of the cancellation of a Mobutu-Kabila summit, appeared prepared for Zairean appeals to strike the Zairean capital of Kinshasa at any time, reports AFP.

The US State Department said it was "extremely disappointed" by the failure of Zairean President Mobutu Sese Seko and rebel chief Laurent Kabila to meet on a South African ship, the Outeniqua, off the Congolese port of Pointe Noire.

"State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns urged the warring rivals to find a way to talk directly," adding that "we fear what might happen" if Kabila's men clash with government troops in the capital.

Violence in Indonesia mars electioneering

JAKARTA, May 15: Election campaigning in the capital and central Java has been marred by violence, leaving six people dead and several others injured, reports and sources said today, reports AFP.

With only nine days left in Indonesia's campaign period, thousands of people in white — which does not represent any political party — took to the streets of the central Java re- gency of Temanggung.

The Muslim-based United Development Party (PPP) had suspended its campaign there after earlier clashes.

Yesterday (Wednesday) they pelted a number of government offices, including the Telkom Office and a Catholic church, with a telephone operator in Parakan in the Temanggung re- gency said today.

The operator added that the atmosphere in Parakan today was "Still quite tense."

Indonesia's three official parties — PPP, the ruling Golkar Party and the Indonesian Democracy Party (PDI) — are vying for 425 parliamentary seats in the May 29 elections. Violence has continued to mar the elections campaign, which started on April 27 and ends May 23.

A PPP official from Temanggung, Mudri, told AFP today that PPP Temanggung's chairman Imron was stopped and attacked by a mob armed with knives and machetes Wednesday night as he came out of a meeting.

He added that he was unaware of any arrests made following the violence. The Repubblica Daily reported today that scores of shops and homes in Temanggung were damaged by the mob Wednesday before the authorities secured the area by late afternoon.

Chicken virus attacks Antarctic penguins

CANBERRA, May 15: A chicken virus has infected Antarctic penguins, raising concern about further disease threats to the isolated region's wildlife, scientists said here today, reports AFP.

"They announced the discovery of Infectious Bursal Disease Virus (IBDV) antibodies in penguins in the current issue of the journal Nature."

"This raises concern for the conservation of avian (bird) wildlife in Antarctica," said the five researchers from the Australian Antarctic division and the country's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation.

IBDV is highly contagious and resistant. Widespread in poultry it causes immune deficiency and can kill young birds. This is the first evidence that IBDV antibodies have reached the Antarctic where penguin populations had been relatively disease-free due to their isolation.

The researchers tested 52 emperor penguin chicks and 133 adult adelic penguins at

three sites 40 to 60 kilometres (25 to 37 miles) from Australia's Mawson station between December 1995 and February last year.

"Another far more remote site was free from infected penguins, they found."

Careless disposal of poultry products, swooped on by scavenging birds, could have led to the spread of the disease, the researchers said.

"Spread within Antarctica could be facilitated through the movement of people carrying the virus on contaminated footwear, clothing, equipment or vehicles," they said.

The potential for expedition members and tourists to be carriers of the disease in Antarctic "may pose the greatest threat yet to its avian fauna," they added.

To keep chicken viruses out of Antarctica, strict regulations were already imposed on visitors, including a ban on consumption of chicken products outside bases or the disposal of chicken waste.

US Senate ratifies CFE treaty

WASHINGTON, May 15: The US Senate on Wednesday ratified the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, but tacked on a provision forcing Senate approval of anti-ballistic missile (ABM) multilateralisation, reports AFP.

The vote was unanimous. The CFE accord — called the flank agreement because it affects mainly Turkey and Norway — is to go into effect when it is ratified by the 30 signers to the CFE pact, first negotiated before the Soviet Union collapsed.

The agreement was unpopular with Senate conservatives because it allows Russia to increase its deployments on its southern flank to guard against what it believes is an increased security threat in the Caucasus.

The Senate conditioned its ratification on the White House's agreement to submit the ABM multilateralisation to the Upper Chamber for approval.

The ABM treaty signed in 1972 by the Soviet Union and United States restricts anti-missile defence systems.



Irish actor Pierce Brosnan (R) and Malaysian-born Hong Kong star Michelle Yeoh pose for the press at a Bangkok hotel Thursday prior to a press conference to present the latest James Bond movie, which is being partly filmed in the kingdom. Brosnan described Bangkok as "hot, hot, hot, hot, hot" as some 300 crew members for the 18th film of the super-spy series started filming in Thailand. Producers earmarked a budget of 100 million baht (four million USD) to be spent on filming in Thailand. — AFP/UNB photo

New celestial map changing ideas about age, size of universe

VENICE, Italy, May 15: European astronomers are unveiling the most accurate map yet of the stars — 17 volumes of celestial number-crunching that is already changing ideas about how old and how big the universe really is, reports AP.

Hundreds of astronomers from around the world flocked to Venice this week for a 4-day symposium devoted to the early results of the Hipparcos project, named after the ancient Greek who invented astronomy.

Even those who quibble with some of the conclusions agree the Hipparcos Catalog, as the 3-dimensional, celestial map is called, is a milestone in astronomy.

Already it appears to have resolved — or at least added an intriguing new wrinkle — to one raging debate in the scientific community.

Astronomers have been puzzled by the fact that the most ancient stars seemed several billion years older than the universe itself — a clear impossibility.

The new data from the Hipparcos satellite indicates that the universe is older than we thought and the stars are younger. If the scientists are right, that impossible, perplexing gap has been closed.

According to several studies presented in Venice, both the stars and the universe are now about 11 billion years old. The Hipparcos scientists also say the new data pushes up the size of the universe by 10 to 15 per cent.

Hipparcos, a 772 million dollars European Space Agency Project 17 years in the making, is pure science at its purest. "It's not sexy. It's not glam-

orous. There are no pretty pictures on the front pages of newspapers," said Dr Jeffrey Linsky, an American astrophysicist who helped design one of the Hubble space telescope's newest instruments.

"But it really tells us fundamental things about the age of the universe, the history of the galaxy — a lot of neat stuff." Unlike the glamorous, 3 billion dollars Hubble, Hipparcos produced no dramatic photos of the heavens — just numbers. Millions and millions of numbers.

From 1989 to 1993, the Hipparcos satellite orbited the Earth, its grids and detectors slowly scanning the sky, measuring the angles between stars. The results were radioed back to Earth.

It took four more years of number-crunching to produce

the map, which is 100 times more accurate than any other celestial survey. To get an idea of just how accurate that is, imagine your vision suddenly became so sharp you could see a little child walking on the surface of the moon.

"There has never been anything like it," said Dr Giovanni Bignami, an Italian astrophysicist who is on the ESA scientific advisory committee.

Scientists involved in the project got an early look at the data and scores of them are presenting their findings at the Venice symposium. The map — 17 volumes or six CD-roms of numbers indicating the positions, and motions of more than 118,000 stars — will be published in June as the Hipparcos Catalog.

And that means the fun — and the fighting — is just be-

ginning.

Astronomers everywhere will be able to use the Hipparcos Catalog to explore fundamental questions like how and when the universe was born and how it behaves.

The gold, as one scientist put it, is just beginning to be mined. "It's a massive leap forward in our understanding of what the hell is going on out there," said project scientist Michael Perryman.

Space science is fiercely competitive and the scientists in the Hipparcos project are intensely proud that the first such celestial map was produced by Europe.

"For 20 years we played second fiddle to America," said Dr Lodewijk Wolthuis, a Dutch astrophysicist who heads the ESA science advisory committee.