

BRIEFLY

Jiang, Blair to meet in HK:

President Jiang Zemin will meet with British Prime Minister Tony Blair in Hong Kong before ceremonies June 30 returning the British colony to Chinese control, China said Tuesday, AP reports from Beijing.

Details about this meeting are still being arranged. Foreign Ministry spokesman Cui Tiankai said at a weekly news conference. The British leader is scheduled to arrive in Hong Kong on the afternoon of June 30 and leave shortly after the midnight ceremony marking the end of 150 years of British colonial rule. "We welcome the British prime minister's attendance at the handover ceremony," Cui said.

Gunmen slain 18 in Algeria:

An armed group slashed in throats of 18 villagers during a nighttime raid, local officials said Tuesday, in the latest attack blamed on a 5-year-old Muslim insurgency, AP reports from Algiers.

A 6-month-old baby, four youths and eight women were among the those killed overnight Wednesday in a village 13 kilometres (8 miles) south of the capital Algiers, officials said on customary condition of anonymity. The victims, all members of the same family, were buried Thursday. There was no claim of responsibility for the massacre, which bore the hallmarks of Muslim militants, trying since 1992 to topple the military-backed government.

31 killed in China road mishap:

Thirty-one people died when a bus plunged down a 60-metre (200-foot) ravine in southwest China after colliding with a truck, a report received in Beijing Tuesday said, AFP reports from Beijing.

The accident occurred last Thursday on the road between Renhuai and Zunyi cities in Guizhou province, the Yangcheng Evening News said. Some 26 passengers on the bus were killed instantly and five died later in hospital. China's road deaths topped 73,600 last year, an increase of 9.5 per cent from 1995.

44pc have faith on Thai PM:

Only 44 per cent of Thais believe Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh is fit to be prime minister, according to the results of an opinion poll released Tuesday, AP reports from Bangkok.

Ex-Finance Minister Annuay Viravan was rated by 68 per cent of respondents as the most trustworthy member of the government, and the one most capable of solving the country's problems. Annuay resigned as finance minister on June 19, the last day of the poll, citing disputes over policy and warning that corruption was a major problem. The poll, conducted by Assumption University, surveyed 6,437 people in 17 of Thailand's 76 provinces between June 12 and 19. No margin of error was given.

Charles arrives in HK Saturday:

Prince Charles will arrive in Hong Kong on Saturday to oversee the colony's return to Chinese rule after more than a century, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

The Prince of Wales, Britain's senior representative at a midnight handover ceremony on June 30, will stay on board the Royal Yacht Britannia which arrived Hong Kong on Monday.

Ex-PNG PM on verge of defeat:

Former Prime Minister Pias Wingtu was on the verge of defeat Tuesday by a little-known Roman Catholic priest in the biggest upset so far of the two-week national elections, AP reports from Port Moresby.

At the close of counting Tuesday for the Western Highlands regional seat, Rev. Robert Lak had polled 37,875 votes, more than 2,750 ahead of Wingtu.

Australia to accept 4,000 refugees:

Australia will accept 4,000 refugees in 1997-98 and give high priority to those from the Middle East and the former Yugoslavia, AP reports from Canberra.

Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock also said in a statement Tuesday that he will visit the former Yugoslavia soon and meet officials of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He is to start that visit next week. He said Australia would accept 1,425 refugees from the former Yugoslavia in the new financial year.

Fighting leaves 7 killed in Georgia:

A soldier with Georgia's interior troops killed four comrades and three civilians during a wild shooting spree before being captured as he tried to flee Tuesday, officials said, AP reports from Tbilisi.

Police arrested the suspect, Zurab Chkheidze, and his alleged accomplice at a roadblock two hours after the shootings began, said Interior Ministry spokesman Valiko Gogulashvili. Chkheidze was on guard duty near a gasoline storage depot in the village of Gamarjeba, about 20 kilometres (12 miles) east of the capital, Tbilisi. According to the spokesman, Chkheidze fatally shot four other guards and a civilian depot technician and then left together with another soldier Petre Kamkamidze, taking two Kalashnikov rifles with them.

Storm kills 11 in Ukraine, Belarus:

High winds and driving rain that lashed through western Ukraine and Belarus killed 11 people and injured dozens, officials said Tuesday, AP reports from Ukraine.

In Ukraine, three people were killed Monday by falling trees and two by power lines in the Volyn region 200 miles (320 kilometres) west of Kiev. Emergencies Ministry spokesman Tatyna Pomazanova said. The cause of death for three other victims was unknown. In neighbouring Belarus, the same storm system was blamed for the deaths of three people. They were killed by collapsing roofs and falling trees in winds that raged for two hours Monday, said Belarus Emergency Situations Ministry spokesman Alexander Zuyev. More than 40 people were injured, many of them seriously, he said.

Explosion claims 4 in Portugal:

An explosion leveled a fireworks factory warehouse on Tuesday, killing the four employees who were inside, the state news agency Lusa reported, AP reports from Fornos de Algodres.

The blast flung the bodies of the victims — two men and two women between 16 and 24 years old — more than 15 metres (yards). The cause of the blast in Fornos de Algodres, 240 kilometres (150 miles) north of Lisbon, was unknown and was being investigated, Lusa said.

Bus crash kills 12 in Peru:

A bus slammed into a freight truck that had stopped with its headlights off at night, killing 12 passengers and injuring 20, police said Tuesday, AP reports from Lima.

The accident took place Monday night in the district of Ventanilla, 15 miles (25 kms) northwest of Lima. The truck had started to enter the highway but stopped to let cars pass, police said. The bus slammed into the truck's and bounced into a pole supporting high-voltage wires, police said.

590,000 held in China:

Chinese police arrested more than 590,000 suspects and seized almost 1.2 million firearms in a three-month anti-crime drive this spring, an official report said Tuesday, AP reports from Beijing.

Authorities have intensified their long-term campaign to curb rising violent crime to forestall trouble ahead of the July 1 reversion of Hong Kong to Chinese rule, the newspaper Legal Daily said. Police reported that they had solved 44,000 crimes. Of the 590,000 people apprehended, 23,000 were prison escapees and 131 belonged to criminal syndicates, the report said. The crackdown also resulted in the closing of some 14,000 illegal dance halls, saunas, massage parlors and other establishments involved in the sex trade, it said.

Pak police free 10 children:

Police freed 10 children being held hostage by a gang that forced them to commit crimes, a newspaper reported Wednesday, AP reports from Islamabad.

In a daring night raid, police in the southern port city of Karachi rounded up six ringleaders of a gang known as the Tiger gang. The children were being held at the gang's hideout and were allegedly being used to steal and some were forced into prostitution, said the English-language daily newspaper, The News. Gang members apparently used acid to burn the letter "T" into the hands of the children, some of whom may have been abducted from wealthy families in Karachi.

Mine blast claims 6 in Vietnam:

An anti-tank left over from the Vietnam War killed six people when it tore apart the truck in which they were riding, state-controlled media reported Wednesday, AP reports from Hanoi.

Over 100 killed as Tigers ambush troops

COLOMBO, June 25: Tamil rebel launched fierce assault on government troops trying to capture a vital road in northern Sri Lanka, leaving more than 100 casualties on both sides, military officials said Wednesday, reports AP.

A Defence Ministry statement said a large number of rebels struck before midnight at troops manning defences at Periyamadu, a village north of Omantai.

The troops retaliated, effectively repulsing the attack and causing heavy casualties among the terrorists," the military said, adding further details will be released later.

But military officials said more than 100 bodies were left on the battlefield. The bodies of 16 soldiers and 41 wounded men were brought to a government hospital south of the combat zone, said the officials who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The rebels also seized a 120mm artillery piece and four 80mm mortars, military sources said.

Soldiers were busy clearing the debris and rebuilding their

defences with the assistance of policemen and sailors who were rushed to the battlefield in trucks and buses, officials said.

The fighting continued for nearly 5 1/2 hours about five kilometres (3 miles) from the front line.

It was the second counter-attack by the rebels to stall the military's bid to capture the 88-kilometre (55-mile) roadway from Vavuniya to Kilonochchi, which leads to the government-controlled Jaffna, Peninsula, home to 500,000 Tamils.

On June 10, the rebels struck behind government lines killing nearly 200 soldiers and destroying a local army office, an ammunition dump and a bridge.

The military claimed that more than 320 rebels were killed, but guerrillas admitted only 80 deaths.

On Monday, troops resumed their campaign. A column of soldiers advanced further west of Puliyankulam, a town 235 kilometres (150 miles) north-east of Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital.

Seven soldiers were killed and 10 wounded in Tuesday's

fighting, increasing the military's death toll to 21 on Monday and Tuesday. The military claimed 40 rebels were killed and 70 wounded Monday, but the guerrillas admitted only 11 deaths on their side.

One column of troops is moving northwards, while another division of soldiers is pushing eastwards and is expected to enter the town on the highway.

Puliyankulam is 235 kilometres (146 miles) north of the capital, Colombo, and 25 kilometres (15.6 miles) north of Vavuniya, the town from where government troops began the thrust into rebel territory last month.

Independent reports are not possible because the government does not allow journalists into the region.

The rebels are fighting for a homeland for minority Tamils, who account for 18 per cent of Sri Lanka's 18 million people. They claim discrimination by the majority Sinhalese, who control the government and military. The war has killed more than 48,000 people.

4 shot dead in Pak Punjab

LAHORE, Pakistan, June 25: Four people were shot dead in suspected sectarian violence in central Pakistan's Punjab province Tuesday, police said, reports AP.

Gunmen on Tuesday shot dead Rao Khalil Ahmed, a lawyer for a radical Sunni Muslim faction, Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), they said.

He was assassinated by two men on a motorbike as he made his way to Lahore district court, police quoted witnesses as saying. The murder triggered tension in SSP headquarters in Jhang town, where unidentified gunmen opened fire on a electric store killing two Shi'ite Muslims, police said.

Another Shi'ite Muslim was gunned down in Khairpur Tamewal near Multan city, police said.

Ahmed, who had reportedly been handling cases for Sunni militants, was one of the lawyers for SSP chief Azam Tariq who was arrested in early May after the killing of a senior police official in the Punjab city of Gujranwala, sources said.

The attack followed the murder of a Shi'ite community lawyer, Ghulam Mustafa Jafry, by assailants here on June 6.

The SSP and the Shi'ite extremist faction Sipah-i-Mohammad Pakistan (SMP) blame each other for a series of hit-and-run killings.



Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong (R) talks with United Secretary General Kofi Annan Tuesday during a meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations (UN) Earth Summit II. The special environmental session of the UN runs through June 27. — AFP/UNB photo

DPRK drops demand for food aid, agrees to talks

SEOUL, June 25: Dropping its demand for food aid first, North Korea has agreed to preliminary talks aimed at a permanent peace treaty to end the 1950-53 Korean War, South Korean officials said Wednesday, reports AP.

"North Korea has accepted a proposal that high-level delegates of the United States, China and both Koreas meet in early August to set an agenda and other details of the peace talks," a Foreign Ministry official said.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said vice foreign ministers of the United States and the two Koreas will meet in New York on June 30 to discuss plans for the proposed four-nation talks.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Lee Kyu-hyung said there would be a simultaneous announcement of the agreement in Seoul and Washington at 10 pm (1300 GMT) Wednesday. He declined to divulge details.

He said the June 30 meeting was expected to set the date of preliminary talks to arrange for full-fledged four-party talks. Ministry officials said China will be invited to attend the preliminary talks.

The agreement, described by one Foreign Ministry official as "a step forward," was made public on the 47th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950.

The Korean War ended in an armistice in 1953. With no peace treaty signed to formally end the conflict, the two Koreas are still technically at war.

In April last year, President Clinton and South Korean President Kim Young-sam jointly proposed that the two Koreas meet to discuss a peace treaty, with the United States and China mediating.

After a year of the hesitation, North Korea agreed in April to participate in the four-way talks on condition that it be given large-scale food aid.

S Arabia worried over future of ME peace process

DAMASCUS, June 25: Saudi crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz on Tuesday expressed fears for the future of the Middle East peace process, on the eve of a ministerial meeting of eight Arab countries, reports AP.

"We are worried for the future of peace because the Palestinians are assassinated, their houses are destroyed, their land confiscated and their honour crushed in front of the eyes and ears of the entire world," the crown prince told reporters.

"The non-application of peace accords could lead to anarchy," he added, referring to the right-wing Israeli government's hostility to the Oslo peace accords with the Palestinians.

Israeli-Palestinian peace talks ground to a halt more than three months ago after Israel started building a new Jewish neighbourhood in disputed East Jerusalem.

Tory politicians slate Di's plans

LONDON, June 25: Princess Diana was criticised Tuesday by Tory politicians for her plans to discuss with British MPs ways to impose an international ban on landmines, reports AP.

"She should make up her mind whether she is in the royal family or not," a senior Tory source said. "You can't have one foot in the royal family and one in the mainstream politics."

Tory MP David Wilshire added that "there is a broader constitutional issue and that is that the monarchy, by doing this, is beginning to involve itself in politics."

A House of Commons Committee set up to examine the landmine issue said Diana would attend a meeting Wednesday addressed by former BBC war correspondent-turned-independent MP Martin Bell and landmines experts, who will brief MPs on international progress towards eliminating the weapons.

Information about Iraq's biological weapons top priority for UN

BAGHDAD, June 25: Extracting information about Iraq's feared biological weapons programme is the top priority for the United Nations, its deputy weapons inspector said Tuesday, reports AP.

Despite six years of crippling UN economic sanctions aimed at forcing Saddam Hussein to destroy his weapons of mass destruction, the biological arms programme remains "the least well-understood, well-documented and well-verified," Charles Duelfer, the UN official, said.

The inspectors have made more progress on the chemicals weapons programme and "perhaps the most mature is the missile file," Duelfer said.

On Sunday, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution, threatening Iraq with new sanctions if it continues to block the inspectors.

US fails to break deadlock over land-mine talks

GENEVA, June 25: The Conference on Disarmament remained deadlocked Tuesday over US-backed moves to open global negotiations for the elimination of land mines, reports AP.

The continued failure in Geneva to begin talks came as separate negotiations spearheaded by Canada were getting under way in Brussels.

The United States, which favours the Geneva approach because it would include countries like China and Russia asked the conference to vote on the first step — appointing a "special coordinator."

"We see no reason for further delay," said Katharine C. Crittenberger, acting head of the US delegation. The coordinator would draw up the framework for negotiations that could be accepted by all countries that belong to the 61-nation conference.

But Ambassador Maria Krasnohorska of Slovakia, who chairs the conference, said a decision had to be put off at least until Thursday after Sri Lanka complained that there had been insufficient time to receive instructions from home capitals.

Krasnohorska said she hoped the extra two days would allow all delegations to hear from their governments.

The Geneva effort to start land-mine talks has clashed with efforts by "non-aligned" countries like India to agree first to negotiate global nuclear disarmament.

The US wants to set up the elimination of land mines in stages, such as banning first the export and then the production of the weapons before moving on to forbidding their use.



Hong Kong governor Chris Patten (R) confers with his Chief Secretary Anson Chan Tuesday at the last meeting of the Executive Council Pattern bids farewell to his Executive Council of advisors as a lone heckler tested his dedication to free speech. — AFP/UNB photo

Rich nations urged to save planet from ecological disaster

UNITED NATIONS, June 25: The head of Greenpeace International on Tuesday called on the world's top industrialised nations to show leadership by acting to save the planet from ecological disaster, reports AP.

"My presence here is a testament to the fact that despite the alarm which has been raised, you have failed as yet to act," Greenpeace International Executive Director Thilo Bode said in a tough-worded speech to the UN Earth Summit which opened here Monday.

Making the first speech by a non-government organisation to a UN summit, he accused the north of yielding to commercial considerations and placing interests above the welfare of future generations.

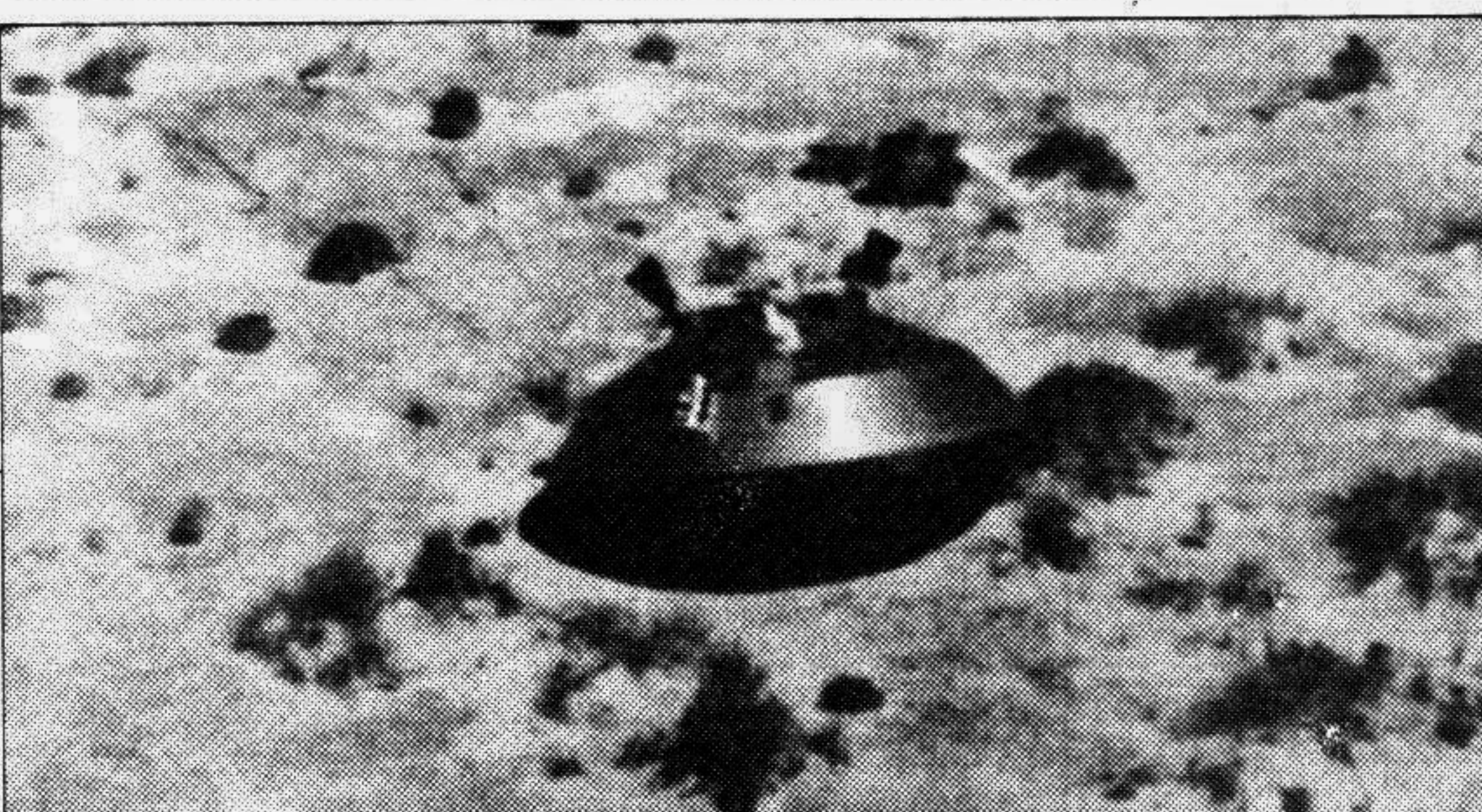
The European Union is calling for a 15 per cent cut on 1990 levels by the year 2010, while Washington, under pressure from major industries, has so far failed to express support for any concrete target or deadline.

"Industrialised countries must commit to cut their carbon dioxide emissions by one-fifth, on 1990 levels, by 2005," Bode added.

"Unless these countries, like the US, which consumes twice as much energy capita as the rest of the industrialised world, take the first bold steps, they will have failed to provide real leadership."

"The fate of this planet will be determined by the bravery or cowardice of your response to the challenge of global climate change at the conference in Kyoto."

Bode also called on "all governments to agree that this meeting marks the beginning of the phase-out of fossil fuels, and their replacement by renewable energy."



This 1972 photo released by the US Air Force shows a Viking space probe waiting for recovery after a supersonic test flight at the White Sands Missile Range, NM. The US Air Force released a report Tuesday debunking reports that the military concealed the crash of a UFO in the New Mexico desert. — AFP/UNB photo

US accused of undercutting democracy in Hong Kong

HONG KONG, June 25: Hong Kong's leading democrat accused the United States Tuesday of undercutting democracy in the territory by letting the US consul attend the swearing-in of its unelected substitute legislature, reports AP.

But Consul General Richard Boucher defended the move, saying he is "the person on the spot" who has to work with the future government.

The dispute over the legislature came as the incoming government was expressing disapproval of the last-minute enactment of a law on treason and sedition.

The two developments undermined how democracy and civil liberties have become the main stumbling block to a smooth transfer of sovereignty on July 1.

Martin Lee, leader of the Democrats, Hong Kong's largest party, said the latest US move "undercuts the elected legislature." "This is quite inconsistent with previous statements that this legislature is not legitimate," he said in a statement.

The United States has said the new legislature, which will supplant the existing one when China takes over on July 1, is "unjustified and unnecessary." It is not on record as calling it illegitimate.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright will attend the mid-night June 30-July 1 handover ceremony but is staying away from the swearing-in, scheduled for 90 minutes later.

Boucher noted that the swearing-in covers the new government as well as the provisional legislature. His presence would convey support for the new government, while Albright's absence would signal disapproval of the provisional legislature, Boucher said in an interview with The Associated Press.

"The Secretary is not going. That still conveys the main point, which is that we don't endorse the provisional legislature. In fact we look forward to its replacement as soon as possible," he said.

Rebels fire on Israeli outpost in Lebanon

SIDON, Lebanon, June 25: Shi'ite Muslim guerrillas fired on an Israeli outpost in southern Lebanon on Wednesday, provoking heavy Israeli shelling, security officials said, reports AP.

There was no immediate word on casualties from the attack by Hezbollah, or the Party of God, on the village of Sojod, the officials said on condition of anonymity.

The village is about 40 kilometres (25 miles) south of the Lebanese capital, Beirut.

Following the attack, Israelis and their allied militia fired mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and 155-mm howitzers on a string of villages in Iqlim al-Tuffah area where exchanges by Hezbollah and Israeli forces are frequent, the officials said.

ing, but Lee said "we'll climb up with a ladder" if the door to the second-story balcony is locked.

Even as Hong Kong's outgoing legislature rushed to enact a last-minute flurry of laws, the incoming government said Wednesday all the new measures would be closely scrutinized — and hinted some could be scrapped.

The outgoing legislature is considering dozens of new bills in the final days of its working life.

A statement from the office of Hong Kong's incoming chief, Tung Chee-hwa, said many of the changes had been "rushed through without thorough examination."

Some of them, including a controversial bill on anti-state activities passed Tuesday, would best be left to the future legislature, the chief executive's office said in a statement.

"We will not accept these amendments which are themselves confusing, and we will take necessary action to rectify the situation," it said.

Not all the objections to the new batch of bills are coming from the new government. The Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce complains that several proposed measures to protect workers — including an age-discrimination bill — would hurt Hong Kong's competitiveness.

Meanwhile, the Hong Kong government and US business leaders reacted with delight to the vote in Congress to renew China's trading privileges, saying it was especially important this year.