

China pledges to preserve HK's autonomy

HONG KONG, June 30: What China calls "zero hour" is finally at hand. Hong Kong, a British colony for 156 years, reverts to Communist China at the stroke of midnight Monday.

Handover day, a holiday for the territory's 6.3 million residents, dawned steamy and cloudy. That's good weather by summertime standards of Hong Kong, which is in the midst of typhoon season.

The mood is expectant. It is excited, it is a lot of conflicting emotions for most people," US Consul General Richard Boucher told CBS-TV as workers scrambled to make final preparations for the gala of fireworks and festivities that will mark the handover.

As Hong Kong headed into its last hours under the British flag, China pledged to preserve its autonomy and Britain staged final colonial flourishes.

With dozens of top foreign officials in town, a flurry of diplomatic activity was taking place, including early-morning talks between US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook.

Polls have shown that Hong Kong people are for the most part calmly accepting the handover, despite undercurrents of anxiety.

"I hope there will be no change, that everything will be peaceful," said Thomas Kuk, waiting for a bus headed to a temple to pray for a calm transition.

China, which regards the return of its territory with pride, was staging celebrations of its own.

Chinese streamed by the tens of thousands of Beijing's Tiananmen Square to take pictures of a huge sign saying "Celebrate the Return of Hong Kong" or to view the clock counting the seconds until midnight Monday.

Leaving Beijing for Hong Kong, President Jiang Zemin renewed China's vow to preserve the freedoms and capitalist vigor that have made Hong Kong an economic powerhouse.

"We will firmly... safeguard the Hong Kong residents' rights and freedoms in accordance with the law," China's official news agency, Xinhua, quoted Jiang as saying before he departed. Jiang was arriving later Monday, the first Communist Chinese president ever to visit Hong Kong.

For Hong Kong's colonial government, last hurrahs were the order of the day. Chris Patten, the last British governor, was to depart Government House for the final time Monday afternoon after saying good-bye to the staff and bringing down the Union Jack.

China will be swift to assert its newly-regained sovereignty. Six hours after the handover, 4,000 People's Liberation Army troops were to arrive by ships, helicopters and armored vehicles.

Britain has protested, saying armored personnel carriers in urban areas will alarm people. Albright was also critical.

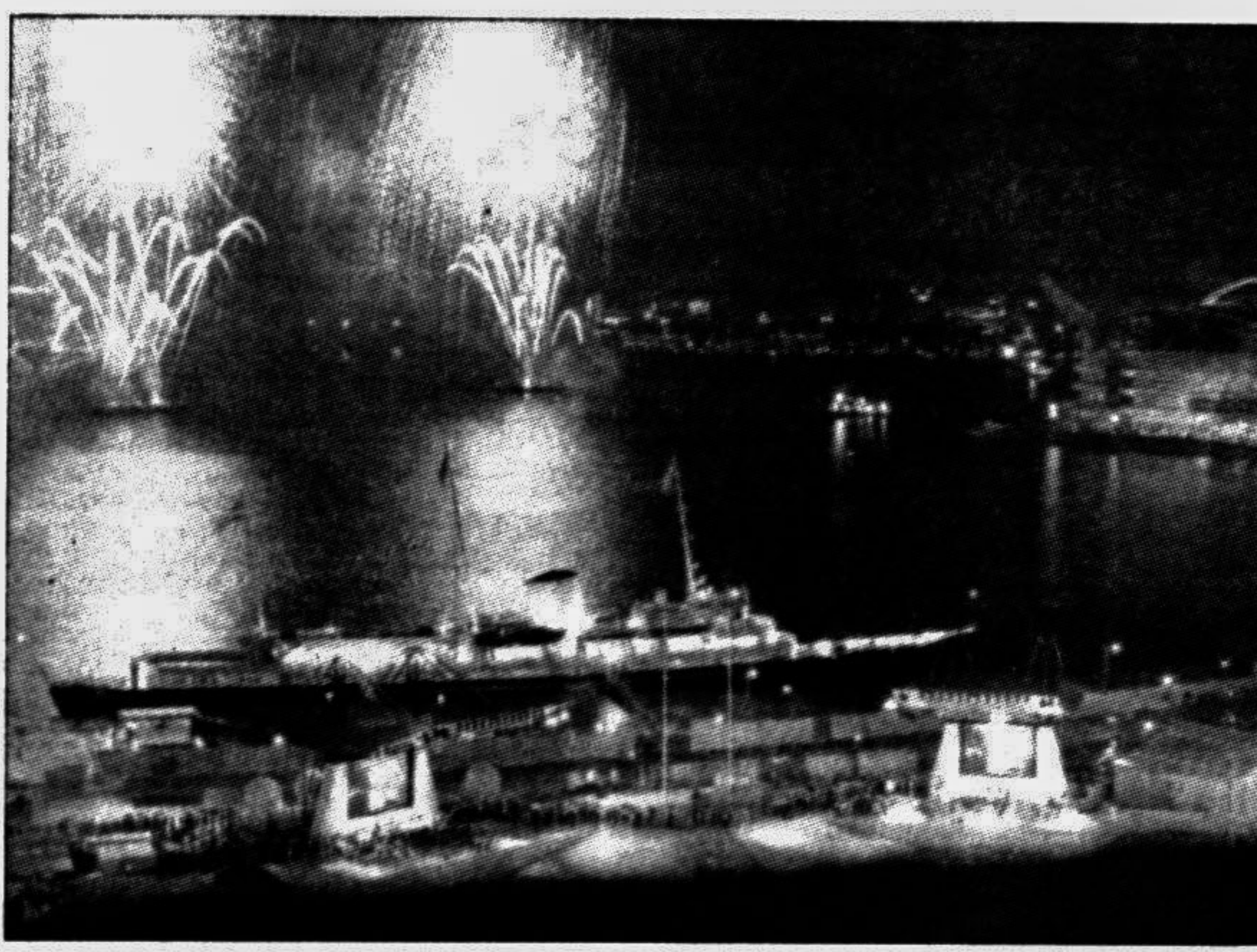
"It's not so much as what is permitted but what kind of a signal that it sends, and I have to say that I personally think it's not the best first signal," she told the CBS.

Like Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, Albright will attend the formal ceremony handing over Hong Kong to China, but skip the swearing-in of the unelected legislature set up by China.

Hong Kong's Chinese-backed new leader, Tung Chee-hwa, has been telling visiting foreign officials that the new government will try to hold elections next May.

But that doesn't satisfy democratic activists, who have sharply protested the disbanding of their elected legislature. Democratic Party leader Martin Lee said it was like having trespassers move in and being assured by police that they would be gone in a year — "And you are supposed to rejoice over it."

During the handover, protesters will be allowed to gather at two sites a few hundred yards from the convention center. A handful of demonstrators moved into position Sunday evening with banners calling for the release of Chinese dissidents.



Fireworks light up the sky in front of the Royal Yacht Britannia in Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour yesterday as part of events marking the end of 156 years British rule in the territory. The 20 minute display happened as Chinese Troops prepared to enter Hong Kong to assume control.

—AFP/UNB photo

US joins UK's call for free, fair polls in HK

HONG KONG, June 30: The United States joined Britain today in issuing a call for free and fair elections in Hong Kong after the territory reverts to China in less than 16 hours, reports AFP.

"After tonight, what is important is that democracy is restored to Hong Kong," British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook told reporters after meeting with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright aboard the Royal Yacht Britannia.

That is why we are both agreed and are both saying, that there must be restored to Hong Kong free and fair elections for a new democratic legislative council as soon as possible and in an any event within 12 months."

A spokesman for Hong Kong's new Chief Executive, Tung Chee-hwa, said Sunday the post-handover administration was prepared to hold legislative elections in May.

The poll would elect a legislature to replace an assembly whose members have been hand-picked by Beijing. The appointed body will replace the current elected body from midnight.

Standing in front of the Britannia, which will sail off this evening with Hong Kong's last British leaders on board, Cook said Washington and London were "particularly concerned" by the decision to scrap the legislature.

Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, Cook and Albright will not attend the swearing-in ceremony of the new assembly but they have decided to send diplomats to represent their countries at the event.

Describing Hong Kong as "one of the great wonders of the world," Albright praised the territory's institutions and free economy.

Lawmakers plan balcony protest

HONG KONG, June 30: The stroke of midnight Monday, 21 democratically elected legislators will be out of their jobs and locked in a contest with the new government to show they remain a popular political force, reports AP.

The battleground: The balcony of the colonnaded stone legislative chambers in downtown Hong Kong.

The outgoing politicians have invited supporters to rally outside the building through Monday night to protest the dissolution of the legislature by the new Chinese sovereign, and its replacement by a non-elected body. They plan to address the crowd from the second-floor balcony.

The incoming government has said they can rally outside and even hold news conferences in the chambers, but the balcony is off limits.

BRIEFLY

4 DPRK defectors arrive in Seoul: Four North Korean defectors, including a former government official, arrived in Seoul Monday, the foreign Ministry said, AP reports from Seoul.

Min Mun Shik, 48, a senior trade official at a joint venture coal firm in an unspecified former Soviet republic, defected with two family members and a fellow countryman, it said. Min served as head of the import department of North Korea's coal Ministry before being transferred to the joint venture firm a few years ago, the ministry said.

Australia to send envoy to Cambodia: Australia will send a special envoy to Cambodia to help try to promote peace and political stability, the government confirmed Monday, AP reports from Canberra.

A spokesman for Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer said the head of the department's South-East Asia division, John Dauth, will travel to Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital. He said other countries in the region had also recently sent envoys. In recent days a peace deal between the government and Khmer Rouge guerrillas snagged over the fate of Pol Pot, the former rebel leader reportedly held captive by his own fighters as a bargaining chip.

Hanoi defends HR abuse report: Dismissing a human rights report on alleged abuses in its prisons as "slanderous," Vietnam defended its expanded use of the death penalty on Monday, AP reports from Hanoi.

Last week, a French human rights group criticised Hanoi for extending the death penalty to economic crimes, including fraud and embezzlement. The Foreign Ministry said the expanded use of the death penalty "shows the strictness of the law and the government's determination in the intolerable fight against crimes." Last year, Vietnam condemned 113 people to death. At least 16 people were executed, said Paris-based Vietnam Committee on Human Rights.

13 die of food poisoning in India: At least 13 people, including nine children died of food poisoning after eating spoiled milk and rice at a religious ceremony in northeastern India, police said yesterday, Reuter reports from Guwahati.

More than 50 others were taken to hospital after they ate the food on Saturday during the inauguration of a Hindu prayer house in Bar Pathar village in Assam state. Police in the state capital Guwahati, 200 kms (120 miles) east of the village said the food was prepared in a community kitchen set up for the ceremony. Samples of the food were being taken to Guwahati for testing.

Hong Kong at a glance

HONG KONG, June 30: Facts and figures on Hong Kong: GEOGRAPHY — The British colony lies on the coast of China's southern Guangdong province. Its 1,076 square kilometers (420 square miles) consist of a peninsula and 237 islands, many of them tiny and uninhabitable. The population density of 5,800 per-square-kilometer (15,000 per-square-mile) is one of the world's highest, reports AP.

PEOPLE — Most of the 6.3 million people live on Hong Kong island and the Kowloon peninsula across the harbor. About 98 per cent of the population are ethnic Chinese, most of whom speak the Cantonese dialect. About 57 per cent of the population was born locally, and most of the rest are immigrants from China. Main religions are Buddhism and Taoism, and most people practice ancestral worship.

ECONOMY — Hong Kong is one of the world's leading financial centers. Trade is the backbone of the economy, and major exports include textiles, clothing, consumer electronics.

HISTORY — Hong Kong island was ceded to Britain after China's defeat in the First Opium War (1840-42). China also lost the Second Opium War and in 1860 ceded part of Kowloon peninsula. In 1898, China leased the New Territories, which forms Hong Kong's rural areas, to Britain for 99 years. The approach of the 1997 handover led to the Chinese-British Joint Declaration of December 19, 1984, whereby Britain agreed to return Hong Kong to China in 1997, and China agreed the territory could keep its capitalist system for 50 years.

GOVERNMENT — The Crown Colony was ruled by a British governor with sweeping powers. The Legislative Council was not wholly elected until 1995. From July 1, Hong Kong is called a Special Administrative Region of China, running its own domestic affairs under a Hong Kong Chinese chief executive chosen by a committee of 400 and approved by China. China is responsible for Hong Kong's defence and foreign affairs. A new legislature will be elected by mid-1998.

Kashmiri man kills 10 in rage over chopped down tree ISLAMABAD, June 30: A Kashmiri man gunned down ten people after flying into a rage when his nephew chopped down a tree against his orders, an English-language newspaper reported Monday, reports AP.

Mohammed Yaqub grabbed an automatic weapon and shot and killed his nephew Yaseem when he learned the tree had been cut down, the News reported.

He then turned the weapons on family members and bystanders, killing seven other relatives and two neighbours. Four other relatives were injured in the shootout.

The report gave no reason why Yaqub reacted so strongly to his nephew's defiance. Yaqub surrendered to police soon after the bloody shootout near Muzaffarabad, in Pakistan's portion of the disputed state of Kashmir, 100 kilometers (60 miles) northeast of Islamabad.

India holds the other two-thirds of the former princely state.

Hong Kong people neutral about handover

HONG KONG, June 30: Most Hong Kong people feel neutral about the return of the British colony to Chinese rule, but only 4.7 per cent feel negative, according to an opinion poll published Monday, reports AP.

Neutrality was the term chosen by 59.1 per cent of those polled, while 29.1 per cent felt positive about the midnight Monday handover, the survey said.

Another 4.6 per cent expressed mixed feelings, and 2.5 per cent had no answer, it said.

The survey of 546 people, by the Social Science Research Center of the University of Hong Kong, had a margin of error of 4.2 per cent.

Another poll by the same group, with a margin of error of

Sihanouk urged to break political deadlock

KEIEN SAVAY, Cambodia, June 30: King Norodom Sihanouk was urged Monday to end four months of medical convalescence in China and return home to break a political deadlock paralysing the country, reports AP.

Second premier Hun Sen said the king should end his "self-exile" and help end a dispute between Hun Sen and the king's son, First Premier Norodom Ranariddh.

Tensions between the co-premiers have soared recently, leading to a firefight between their supporters June 17 in Phnom Penh, the capital, that killed two of Ranariddh's bodyguards.

Hun Sen's immediate concern is to reconvene the National Assembly. Ranariddh's royalist party, FUNCINPEC, has refused to allow the body to meet for two months, demanding that eight renegade party members first be expelled from their seats.

The renegades have thrown their support behind Hun Sen's former communist Cambodian People's Party and the CPP refuses to consider depriving them of their seats. Their change of loyalty would shift the assembly's balance of power in Hun Sen's favour.

Hun Sen, speaking at a village just south of the capital, said Sihanouk should return home so that Chea Sim, acting head of state, can resume his role as the assembly president.

3551 full-blown AIDS cases in India

CALCUTTA, June 30: Altogether 3,551 full-blown AIDS cases have been reported in the country till the end of May ever since the dreaded disease first struck in 1986, says PTI.

A total of 56,409 persons have been found to be HIV seropositive in the country during the same period, according to the consultant of the National AIDS Control Organisation, Dr D Sengupta.

A most disturbing trend is that 89 per cent of the AIDS patients were in the economically productive age group of 15 to 45, Dr Sengupta told PTI here.

NACO studies also reveal that the disease is no more confined to the high-risk groups like sex-workers, homosexuals or the intravenous drug users. HIV has in fact spread among the general population.

If not checked now, AIDS can have in the near future a very adverse impact on household and society," he said.

The contagious disease, which manifests itself through infections like tuberculosis, might also lead to a rise in adult and child mortality. Consequently, the medical infrastructure of the country would be strained, Dr Sengupta said.

While the disease was found to be wide spread in Tamil Nadu, Manipur and Maharashtra, the number of AIDS cases in the other states was also growing.

Excepting Arunachal Pradesh, all other states in the country were affected by the disease to which there is no cure, he said.

Union Jack raised for last time in HK

HONG KONG, June 30: The last colonial insignia came off the government buildings, flags went up welcoming China, and killed Scottish troops raised the Union Jack in central Hong Kong for the last time, reports AP.

A century and a half after the British seized Hong Kong and transformed a rural clump of mountains into a financial jewel, Hong Kong's return to China was finally at hand Monday. A mood of expectancy, celebration and anxiety coursed through the city.

Some prayed in temples for a peaceful return to Chinese rule. Others crowded outside the British governor's residence to snap photos of what would shortly be history.

Workers removed the insignia of the Chinese dragon and British crowned lion from government buildings and carefully crated them up for shipment to Britain.



Albanian president Sali Berisha flashes the victory sign as he leaves a polling station in the centre of the Tirana Sunday. Albania's two main political leaders, Berisha and Socialist Party chief Fatos Nano, cast their votes in the capital each proclaiming that the legislative elections were an important turning point for the troubled republic.

Albanian Socialists claim victory in polls

TIRANA, June 30: Albanian Socialist leader Fatos Nano claimed a sweeping victory over President Sali Berisha's Democratic Party in elections on Sunday intended to end months of violence and he suggested the president would have to quit, reports Reuter.

With only a minute fraction of official results declared in the largely peaceful polls it was impossible to forecast the final outcome.

But Nano told reporters his party's data showed it had won 60 of 115 seats contested under majority voting rules and together with other leftist parties would have a two-thirds majority in Parliament.

"A centre-left coalition will control two-thirds of the new parliament for sure," Nano said. He said the Socialists also stood to win half of the 40 seats contested under proportional rules.

Nano, released from prison

only three months ago, indicated in the final stages of the campaign that a "cohabitation" with Berisha was not possible in the event of a big Socialist win and he said at a hastily-convened news conference the outcome he expected meant the President should resign.

"With those figures that are already confirmed and the support that the Albanian people gave the centre-left coalition this problem is already resolved," he said.

Berisha, was elected by Parliament and has been president since 1992, has also suggested he would step down if his party was beaten into opposition.

Jubilant at Socialist headquarters contrasted with long faces among Berisha stalwarts, reflecting possible losses.

The official count so far gave the Socialists a handful of seats in the south, heartland of months of rebellion against

Crackdown on offices, homes of Pak extremists: Hundreds arrested

LAHORE, June 30: Police swept through offices and homes of known Muslim extremists early Monday arresting hundreds of people in an attempt to end the relentlessly motivated violence that has plagued eastern Punjab province in recent months, reports AP.

The crackdown followed an attack Sunday on a mosque in Lahore's congested old city. Four worshippers were gunned down as they knelt in prayer.

According to eyewitness and newspaper reports a lone gunman entered the Al-Hilal mosque in Lahore's old city just as evening prayers were about to begin on Sunday. He fired three shots at the imam or prayer leader, Abdul Khalq, 32, a Sunni Muslim.

When worshippers tried to overpower the gunman he opened fire killing another three people, including a 60-

year-old man, the independent daily newspaper, The News, reported.

Initial reports said two people were involved. There was no immediate explanation for the discrepancy, although witnesses said the firing caused immediate panic and that could account for the confusion.

Earlier Sunday a Shiite Muslim worker was killed in Lahore when gunmen burst into his office. Police fear the massacre at Al-Hilal mosque may have been in retaliation for that attack.

Pakistan's most populous eastern Punjab province, home to 60 per cent of the country's 140 million people, has been wracked by relentless violence between militant Shiite and Sunni Muslims.

The attacks have escalated in recent months prompting the Punjab government to set up an anti-terrorist force.

Turkey's secular party likely to get parliamentary approval

ANKARA, Turkey, June 30: Three more resignations from the Islamic alliance on Sunday appeared to give Turkey's new, pro-secular government the votes it needs for parliamentary approval, reports AP.

The three defections came from Tansu Ciller's True Path party, an ally of the Islamic Welfare Party. With the defections from True Path and its own party over the past week, the Islamic alliance has lost its parliamentary majority.

Many of the defectors have already joined the parties who are coming together to form the new government under conservative leader Mesut Yilmaz.

Russians remain suspicious despite accord with NATO

MOSCOW, June 30: After five decades of nuclear confrontation, Russia's new agreement with NATO clearly and boldly states that "Russia and NATO do not consider each other as adversaries," reports AP.

Just try telling that to Viktor Ilyukhin, the Communist Party legislator who heads parliament's security affairs committee.

"NATO hasn't dropped its intention to move towards Russia's borders and they don't plan to cut their forces," he says with conviction. "NATO's aggressive nature remains practically unchanged."

He and many of his countrymen have a hard time accepting that a military alliance they believe spent nearly 50 years seeking to destroy their

country now just wants to be friends.

That conviction has been strengthened by NATO's plan to add former Soviet allies in Eastern Europe as members. At NATO's summit in Madrid, Spain, on July 8, the alliance plans to offer membership to the first new candidates — probably Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

Western leaders have tried to break down Russia's wall of distrust, arguing that NATO is now more interested in promoting democracy than stockpiling weapons.

This new NATO will work with Russia — not against it," President Clinton asserted after signing the Russia-NATO charter in Paris.

But as far as Russia is concerned, there is one question

the west has been unable to answer: Against whom does an expanded NATO need to defend itself, if not Russia?

Although NATO keeps an eye on the Middle East and other regions, its major interest is European security. And in Europe, no country has the power to threaten the alliance as much as Russia.

However, Russia is not the old Soviet Union. For one thing, Russia is smaller — with about half the population and 20 per cent less territory than the Soviet Union.

And Russia is both more vulnerable and less stable than during the Cold War.

Consider the map of Europe as seen from the Kremlin. After NATO's expansion, the alliance will be 500 kilometres (300 miles) closer to Moscow. And

for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia will have a small border with a NATO country — Russia's Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad shares a 200-kilometer (120-mile) border with Poland.

Inside Russia, the economy is a mess and a significant portion of the population is disenfranchised with what they see as the failed promises of capitalism.

The once-powerful military is so demoralised and poorly equipped it is effectively unable to fight — as Russia's war in separatist Chechnya demonstrated all too clearly.

Under these circumstances, Russian leaders had little choice except to accede to NATO's expansion. What they did was negotiate the best deal they could, gaining the right to voice their views in a special Russia-

NATO joint council.

Military analysts say the agreement provides Russia important access and influence over the alliance.

"The question is no longer whether we like or dislike NATO."

The important thing is that Russia can take part in NATO," says Andrei Piontkovsky, director of Russia's Strategic Studies Center.

All the same, hard-liners see it as a sell-out. Even Mikhail Gorbachev — the former Soviet leader reviled at home and adored in the West for helping end the Cold War — calls the charter a "double game" by NATO to deceive Russia while proceeding with the expansion.

In the Kremlin, distrust lingers. In recent months Russia has turned eastward,

strengthening its ties with China, India and former Soviet republics. It even signed a union treaty with one of them Belarus, on Poland's eastern frontier.

Some have interpreted the move as the first step toward reconstituting the Soviet Union.

In the end, Russians view are likely to be influenced less by lavish assurances before the expansion than by NATO actions afterward.

Alexei Arbatov, a reformer and deputy head of parliament's defence affairs committee, says NATO must stick to its charter with Russia and keep nuclear weapons out of eastern Europe and troops away from Russia's borders.

"If that doesn't happen, then the charter will remain just a piece of paper," Arbatov says.

Voters reject new polls-system as stagnation grips New Zealand

WELLINGTON, New Zealand, June 30: As political and economic stagnation grips New Zealand, voters are turning against the new proportional voting system that elected the new Parliament last year, reports AP.

A nationwide poll published Monday shows 54 per cent of respondents want to return to the old first-past-the-post election system, while just 30 per cent want to retain the mixed member proportional (MMP) system now in place. Sixteen per cent were undecided.

The new mixed member proportional system makes it almost impossible for any single party to win an outright majority of Parliament.