

Russia plans to privatise military properties

MOSCOW, Aug 2: The Russian government plans to privatise nearly 9,000 military properties from the beginning of next year, including 5,000 small stores and 2,000 canisters, a senior privatisation official said Friday, reports AFP.

Alexander Braverman, First Deputy Chairman of the State Property Committee told a news conference that the sell-off would include some 5,000 of the army discount stores collectively known as Voenitory.

Under Russia's sweeping military reform plans some of the loss making army enterprises will be closed and others privatised.

Many of the agricultural enterprises created in the Soviet period to provide cheap food for the army are chronically inefficient.

The lion's share of the revenue from the privatisations — 87 per cent — will be ploughed back into the army, to cover social benefits for service and retraining for some 500,000 personnel due to be shed from the armed forces in the next two years, Braverman said.

The Federal Security Service (FSB), the main successor to the Soviet KGB secret police will act

Yeltsin names new dy PM for ethnic ties

MOSCOW, Aug 2: Russian President Boris Yeltsin named Friday a prominent figure from the troubled North Caucasus region as a new deputy prime minister for ethnic relations, Interfax news agency said, reports AFP.

Ramazan Abdulatipov, a former Deputy Speaker of the upper house of parliament before he was elected a deputy to the lower house in 1996, will be the seventh deputy premier in the government.

He comes from the multi-ethnic North Caucasus republic of Dagestan, which borders the Caspian Sea and the rebel republic of Chechnya, and is a member of the tiny Avar ethnic minority.

US ends ban on sale of high-tech warplanes to Latin America

WASHINGTON, Aug 2: President Bill Clinton on Friday ended a 20-year-old ban on the sale of high-tech US warplanes and advanced weapons to Latin America, reports Reuters.

The decision to allow sales of high-performance planes to the region comes as Chile begins shopping around to replace its fighter planes and has shown interest in buying F-16s made by Lockheed.

This decision puts US arms transfer policy toward Latin America on a par with our policy towards other regions of the world and will be implemented in a way that serves our objective of promoting stability, restraint and cooperation in the region.

White House spokesman Mike McCurry said in a statement.

The Carter administration adopted the arms sales policy at a time when most of Latin America was under military regimes.

But now, McCurry said, "Latin America has changed dramatically from a region dominated by coups and military governments to one of

democracy and civilian control.

"Our partnership with countries in the region has reached a new level of maturity, cooperation and dialogue," he said.

He stressed the need for engaging Latin American governments as "equal partners" as they modernise and restructure their defence establishments and said this would promote security and stability in the region.

The change was urged by the Pentagon, Latin American governments and arms dealers eager for a lucrative market.

In practice, the change will have the most immediate effect on Chile, which has been seeking to buy advanced fighter aircraft, US officials said.

Last April, Clinton indicated a change of policy was in the works when he authorised US manufacturers to bid to sell jets to the Chilean air force as part of a plan to modernise the country's ageing air fleet.

US officials said two US firms — Lockheed and McDonnell Douglas — are competing for that sale but firms from

Sweden and France were also asked to bid. Chile is not expected to make a decision until year's end.

Other countries have also expressed interest in buying US made weapons but those deals are further into the future, US officials said.

One senior official said the United States will "clearly not" be offering advanced weapons to Peru and Ecuador, who went to war in 1995 over a long-standing border dispute.

The two countries "are seeking new weaponry and we are discouraging acquisition... this decision will not change that policy," the official told Reuters.

US officials had argued before that Latin American countries would be better off spending their resources on other things than military hardware as they struggled to implement economic reforms and strengthen democracy.

But some countries have gone elsewhere to buy weapons, such as Peru, who bought Russian-made Mig-29 warplanes from Belarus earlier this year.

US officials denied the policy change would set off a buying spree.

McCurry said the US government would seek to prevent an arms race, would support transparency and confidence-building and ensure that defence modernisation occurred responsibly.

An interagency government chaired by the undersecretary of state for arms control and international security affairs will consider the advanced arms sales requests.

The change brought a quick response from representative Nita Lowey, a New York Democrat, who said McDonnell Douglas and Lockheed Martin must not be allowed "to dictate our foreign policy."

"The ban promotes peace and democracy in Latin America and it must be maintained. Lifting this ban will set off an arms race in Latin America that will divert scarce resources there from pressing social needs," she said in a statement.

She has introduced legislation to put a ban on arms sales to Latin America into law.

Is Benazir losing interest in domestic politics?

Tariq Butt writes from Islamabad

Even as Ms Benazir Bhutto left this week for a month long visit to Britain, speculation intensified over whether the former Pakistani Prime Minister and now the main opposition leader was losing interest in politics.

Almost half of the time since the Nawaz Sharif government assumed office in February this year, Ms Benazir Bhutto has preferred to stay out of the country.

All the three children of Ms Bhutto have been in London for the past three weeks. According to a report, she has admitted them in a school there. Earlier she reportedly tried to get admission for them in an educational institution in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

"It is a mere allegation that Ms Bhutto has lost interest in domestic politics," a key leader of her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) told IANS. "She has to go abroad frequently for her commitments in different countries."

Since February, Ms Bhutto has visited the United States, Britain, the UAE and Sri Lanka to deliver speeches at seminars or attend different ceremonies in these countries.

Since the present government came in place, Ms Bhutto has not attended the National Assembly sessions much, leaving the parliamentary affairs of her party for others, with little political clout, to handle.

In her absence, the PPP is leaderless and inflected with infighting, with nobody around to settle the raging controversies within it. In particular, its chapter in the North Western Frontier Province is beset with gross differences.

With Ms Bhutto staying away from the country, the government consistently continues to dig alleged corruption scandals against her and husband Asif Zardari.

Zardari, who has been arraigned for several criminal charges, including the murder of her brother Murtaza Bhutto, remains in jail. He was arrested on November 5, the day the Benazir Bhutto government was dismissed by President Farooq Leghari for violating the Constitution.

Zardari, who was made Investment Minister by his wife, enjoyed unprecedented power during her incumbency and is the only member of the previous government who has been in prison since it was ousted.

In her absence, the job of defending her and retaliating against the government has been left to a team of her media advisors in Islamabad. They churn out her statements every day.

Some PPP leaders had hinted that Ms Bhutto would lead a Kisan Bachao Tehreek (Save Farmers Movement) against the imposition of agriculture land tax in Punjab. But this does not seem possible now after her departure for Britain.

By the time she returns after a month, the farmers' movement, which was confined to only one district of Punjab province, is likely to have died down.

The basic reason behind Ms Bhutto's apparent disinterest in home politics and staying out of the country is that she knows that she has no chance to come to the political centrestage in the next few years," a member of the Sharif cabinet claimed.

In the suffocatingly humid weather that Pakistan has during the months of July, August and September every year, most top out-of-government politicians invariably go away to Europe but Ms Bhutto's long leave of absence is causing political tongues to wag.

India Abroad News Service

Allegations of corruption

Most of Arafat's ministers offer to resign

RAMALLAH, West Bank Aug 2: Almost all of Palestinian president, Yasser Arafat's 18 ministers have offered to resign after allegations from legislators of corruption and mismanagement, reports Reuters.

Agriculture Minister Abdel Jawad Saleh said he and all but two colleagues told Arafat they were ready to quit at a cabinet meeting in the West Bank town of Ramallah on Friday.

"Sixteen ministers submitted their resignation," he said.

The offer came as Arafat grapples with a grave crisis in the peace process with Israel after the killing of 13 people in Jerusalem on Wednesday by two Islamist militant suicide bombers.

It was not clear whether Arafat, eager to shore up popular legitimacy in the midst of an Israeli security clampdown on Palestinian self-rule areas, would accept the resignations.

His office, in a brief statement said only that "some ministers submitted their resignations and asked president Arafat to consider these resignations at a suitable time."

Arafat has previously indicated that he is prepared to reshuffle his cabinet but transport minister Ali al-Qawasmeh said he doubted the Palestinian leader would act now.

No resignation at this time. We must be united together in militants since Wednesday's attack, Palestine Liberation Organisation forces also made arrests in areas under their security control.

Israeli Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai said Palestinian forces had begun to act to a certain extent but not with "full intensity."

"If they want to move forward with us in the peace process, they need to meet their basic commitment to fight terror," he told Israel's channel two television.

Israel has tightened security as a precaution against further bloodshed. Islamist militants have in the past carried out a series of suicide bombings over several days.

Mordechai said Israel had not yet identified the two bombers but the militant Islamist group Hamas was responsible.

Guatemalans for probe into assassination cases

GUATEMALA City, Aug 2: Hundreds of Guatemalans marched on Friday to urge the full investigation of the tens of thousands of assassinations and cases of torture that marked the country's 36-year civil war, reports Reuters.

"We've fought for the truth for years, and we believe the moment has arrived to have an answer," Marcher Emilia Garcia told Reuters. Her son, Edgar Fernando Garcia disappeared in 1984.

Under peace accords signed by the government and leftist rebels in December, the commission, which began work on Friday, has six months to a year to look into and tell the history of Guatemala's war.

About 750 people marched to the offices of the commission, carrying banners from the mutual support group, the national widows coordination and other human rights groups.

Garcia said the marchers supported the work of the commission and hoped investigators could clarify as many as possible of a huge number of cases of assassination, disappearance, torture and other human rights abuses.

The marchers left wreaths of flowers in remembrance of the dead in front of the US embassy, "because we know some orders that affected our families came from there," and the army's honour guard, "because we know that there was a torture centre there," Garcia said.

A German law professor and human rights expert, a Guatemalan attorney, and a Guatemalan Indian woman who is a professor of education were named to the truth commission by the government.

A Hamas member carrying his machine gun marches along with about 300 Palestinian refugees Friday at the Ain Helwe Palestinian camp to demonstrate his support for the deadly Islamic suicide bombings in Jerusalem, chanting "Death to Israel, Deaths to Jews". The protest was organised by about 30 Islamic militants carrying machine guns over their shoulders and dressed in black with scarves covering their faces.

— AFP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

10,000 evacuated from Gujarat:

About 10,000 people have been evacuated from 125 villages following monsoon floods in the western Indian state of Gujarat, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported yesterday, AFP reports from New Delhi.

The evacuation was carried out in the districts of Kaira and Baroda, where around 230 people have died since June during torrential rains.

PTI said helicopters and army and paramilitary personnel backed up police during the evacuation.

US bid to ease Korea's tensions: The United States plans to propose new ways to ease tensions between the two Koreas as part of a negotiating process that begins on Tuesday in New York, US officials said on Friday, Reuters reports from Washington.

The United States, China, South Korea and North Korea are to sit down for the first time together that day at Columbia University to work out the mundane details of when and where substantive peace talks will take place.

ASEAN envoys meet Hun Sen: Three top level envoys from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) began a meeting with Cambodia's Second Prime Minister Hun Sen and Foreign Minister Ung Huot in Phnom Penh yesterday, AFP reports from Phnom Penh.

Foreign ministers Ali Alatas of Indonesia, Domingo Siazon of the Philippines and Thailand's Prachuchai Chaiyasarn began the closed-door meeting with the two top officials and it was expected to last two hours.

They were expected to discuss what role the regional grouping would play in resolving Cambodia's political turmoil, following Hun Sen's ousting of first prime minister Norodom Ranariddh earlier this month.

11 killed in Philippines: Eight Communist guerrillas and three private security guards were killed in two separate attacks involving Communist guerrillas in the southern Philippines, the military said yesterday, AFP reports from Zamboanga.

About 100 rebels attacked a paper mill Thursday in the village of Salvacion, killing three security guards. They also took six weapons from the slain guards, a report by the military's southern command said.

The guerrillas ambushed a group of soldiers sent to reinforce the security guards, sparking a gun battle in which eight of the rebels were killed, the report said.

17 Japanese held in Malaysia: Malaysian authorities arrested 17 Japanese expatriates, including three women at an electronics factory in the northern state of Penang, officials said yesterday, AFP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

A state Immigration Department official said 17 of them, who were detained Friday, were working illegally as they were on social visit passes.

Penang, dubbed the "Silicon Valley" of Malaysia, houses one of the largest concentrations of hi-tech electronic factories from Japan, the United States and Europe.

US Congress accused of backing anti-Arab group

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Aug 2: Palestinian Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo accused the US Congress Friday of supporting the radical Jewish anti-Arab group Kach, reports AFP.

The position of the US administration in the peace process "has been balanced. But the Congress has been flagrantly biased toward Israel's position," information minister told journalists.

"It's as if it's in a continual demonstration for the Kach movement," he said.

The racist group Kach was banned in Israel after one of its members gunned down 29 Palestinians praying in a Hebron mosque.

The US House of Representatives provoked Palestinian anger by voting in June for a resolution opposed by President

Bill Clinton that recognised Israel's sovereignty over all of Jerusalem.

In addition, several members of Congress have threatened to cut off aid to the Palestinian Authority.

Palestinians have frequently accused US peace envoy Dennis Ross of being biased towards Israel.

Kach whose members continue to be active under other names, has reappeared in the past few months in a number of anti-Arab incidents committed by extremists.

An anonymous caller to Israeli television claimed Thursday that Kach had kidnapped four Palestinians and was prepared to kill them in retaliation for a double Palestinian suicide bombing which killed 15 people and injured more than 150 others in Jerusalem.

Ahead of fighting between two rival premiers Over 5000 Cambodian refugees flee to Thailand

ARANYAPRATHET, Thailand, Aug 2: More than 5,000 Cambodian refugees and 374 royalist soldiers have fled to Thailand ahead of fighting between forces of Cambodia's rival premiers, the Thai military said today, reports AFP.

The soldiers were disarmed and allowed across the border late Friday after troops loyal to Cambodian Second Prime Minister Hun Sen surprised them with a night attack using heavy weaponry, Thai army sources said.

Troops loyal to ousted First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh appeared to be on

the run in the area, but an officer from the Cambodian 12th Army Division of General Lay Virak said the fighting would go on.

"Royalist forces will not lose. We will continue to fight in every military style (as guerrillas)," said Colonel Saow Tik, one of the Cambodian soldiers held in a Thai camp separate from the civilians.

Another 100 Cambodians had come across today at a border checkpoint some 20 kilometers (13 miles) north of here to join some 1,700 still gathered there, while another 3,300 had been sent to a camp

prepared for them, the army said.

Thai red cross officials said however that they were assisting 7,000 civilian refugees from areas near the northwest Cambodian border town of Poipet, opposite the checkpoint, with food and medicine.

Clashes began Thursday night when Hun Sen forces attacked three border settlements held by troops loyal to the prince, including the 12th army, Thai army officials said.

By Friday afternoon Hun Sen troops had secured one of the three settlements north of Poipet.

Correct policy towards Israel, Iran urges Arab states

TEHRAN, Aug 2: Iran Friday called on Arab states to "correct" their policy towards Israel and accused the United States of playing a dishonest role in the Middle East, reports Reuters.

Israel "is an illegitimate entity... and its nature is against peace," Iran's spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was quoted as saying by state television during a meeting with visiting Syrian president Hafez Al-Assad.

He said Arab states "must correct their stance towards (Israel) and the so-called Middle East peace process" which "proved to be fruitless and an illusion" as Iran had predicted long ago.

Iran and Israel have been bitter enemies since Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution.

Europeans living longer than ever before

BRUSSELS, Aug 2: Europeans are living longer than ever before and, after years of declining birth rates, have begun to have more babies, figures published on Friday reveal, reports AFP.

The statistics, produced by Eurostat, show that the average women in the 15 European Union countries will have 1.44 babies, up from the all-time low of 1.43 registered in 1995.

But the overall upturn marks sharp disparities between member states, with birth rates now significantly higher in the north of Europe than in the south.

Ireland maintained its traditional place at the top of the fertility league with an average of 1.91 births per woman, followed by Finland and Luxembourg 1.76, France 1.72 and

Britain 1.7.

Italy 1.22 and Spain 1.15 had the lowest fertility rates. "It just goes to show that Italians are all talk and no action," quipped one commission official from a northern EU state.

The overall EU fertility rate is similar to Japan's 1.41, but well behind the United States, where each woman is likely to have just over two children, and the developing world, where the average is well above three.

The rising birth rate helped generate a natural increase in the EU's population of 309,900 last year. Allied to net immigration of 727,700, this took the bloc's total population to 373,691,200.

Baby girls born in the EU in 1996 had an average life expectancy of 80.5 years, compared with 74 years for boys.

Traffic monitoring Delhi traffic police hoping to use helicopters

NEW DELHI, Aug 2: New Delhi traffic police are hoping to use helicopters to monitor the Indian capital's growing traffic problems, a newspaper said today, reports AFP.

A request for five helicopters was turned down in 1992 by the federal government but traffic police chief Qamar Ahmed, quoted by the Hindustan Times, said: "The traffic situation has changed drastically since 1992."

"Air surveillance through helicopters is essential to control bottlenecks and traffic jams."

The Indian capital has an estimated 2.6 million vehicles.



Mirror, mirror on the wall... Young Russian ladies crowd the hall of "Fashion House of Slava Zaytsev" during a model contest by designer Slava Zaytsev, one of Russia's most famous designers on Friday. — AFP/UNB photo

Life may have existed beyond Earth

SAN FRANCISCO, Aug 2: A NASA physicist said on Friday he had found what may be the fossilised remains of extraterrestrial microorganisms in a meteorite providing more evidence that life may have existed beyond Earth, reports Reuters.

Astrophysicist Richard Hoover said that while investigating samples of the Murchison meteorite that fell on Australia in 1969, he had found complex structures that appeared to be biological.

It is potentially the case that it's signs of life from somewhere other than the planet Earth, that is a real possibility that must be considered," Hoover told Reuters in a telephone interview from San Diego.

Hoover, an astrophysicist at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's George C Marshall Space Flight Centre in Huntsville, Alabama cautioned that more study was needed and he could not say for

sure where the microscopic structures came from.

Hoover's work appears to support the findings of US scientists who announced last year that they had found possible fossilised microbes in a meteorite from Mars.

In a scientific paper presented at a conference in San Diego this week Hoover said he had concluded that the Murchison meteorite contained a population of indigenous microfossils, "shape like mushrooms stalks or filaments."

The mushroom shaped bodies are considered to represent the carbonised remains of biological forms," he wrote.

Hoover obtained images of the forms using an environmental scanning electron microscope and analysed them with X-ray energy dispersive spectroscopy.

The bodies resembled some types of bacteria, but experts had been unable to identify them as known earthly micro-

bial groups, Hoover said. He said the bodies resembled other unidentified forms found in another meteorite by earlier researchers.

"It is concluded that this population of complex structures may represent remains of extraterrestrial microorganisms which lived within or contaminated the parent body of the Murchison meteorite at various times during the past 4.4 billion years," Hoover wrote.

The parent body of the Murchison meteorite is unknown, but Hoover said there was strong evidence that it did not come from Earth, the Moon or Mars and may have come from a comet or asteroid.

He said the structures he had observed appeared to have arrived on Earth with the meteorite and not be something that formed its way there after it landed.

It was also possible that asteroid impacts on Earth billions of years ago could have

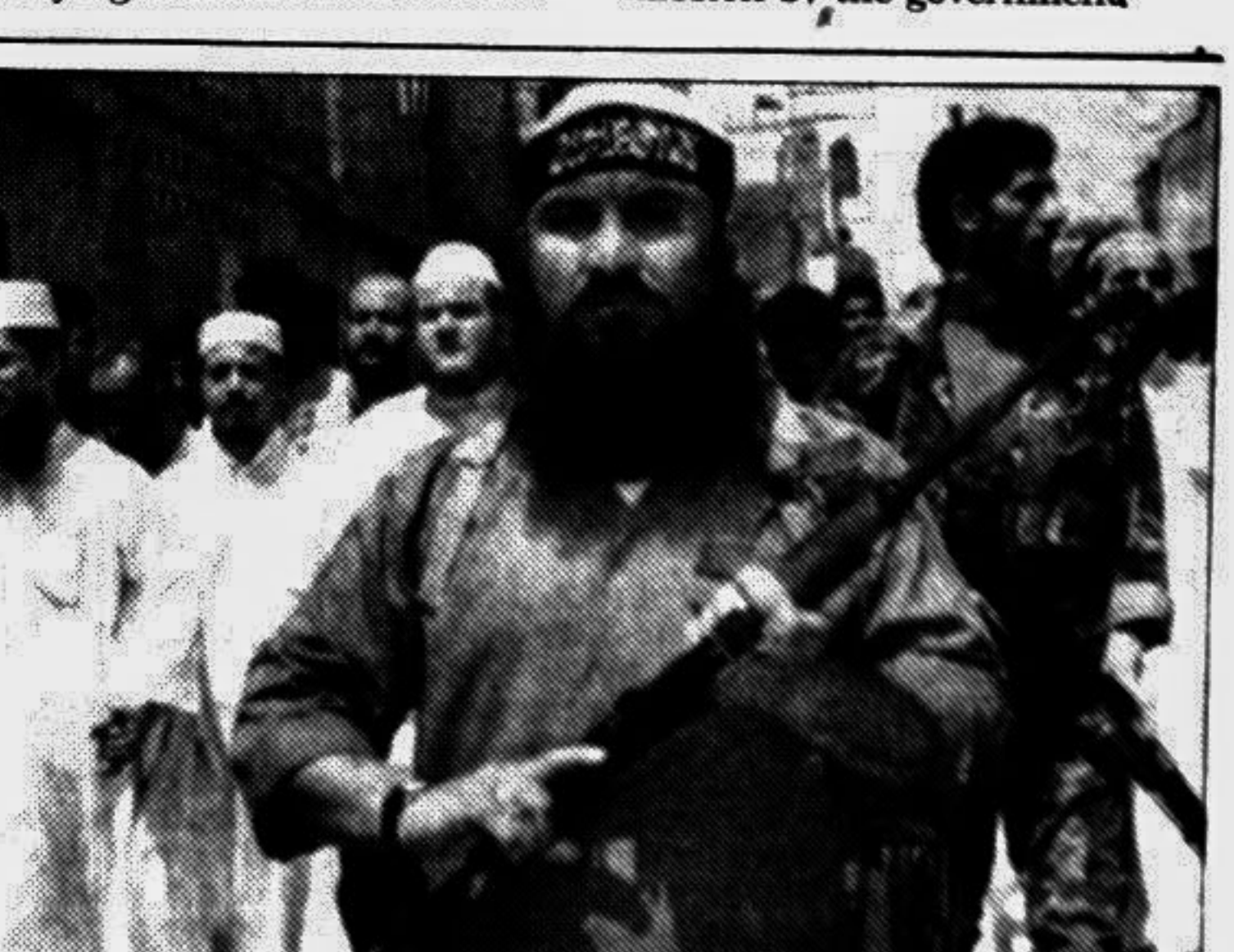
catapulted materials from Earth into space and that any microfossils in the meteorite could have originated on Earth, but the same thing could have happened on Mars or another body, he said.

"We are doing additional work to determine what (the structures) are... and to determine if we can obtain carbon isotope measurements to give an idea of whether they are terrestrial or extraterrestrial in nature."

He said that earlier this year a scientific team in Russia reported finding similar structures within the Murchison meteorite.

Hoover said scientists must continue studying meteorites.

"The meteorites are messages from space, they are bringing us information that we must study and learn, telling us where to go to seek conclusive proof for the existence of extraterrestrial life, he said.



A Hamas member carrying his machine gun marches along with about 300 Palestinian refugees Friday at the Ain Helwe Palestinian camp to demonstrate his support for the deadly Islamic suicide bombings in Jerusalem, chanting "Death to Israel, Deaths to Jews". The protest was organised by about 30 Islamic militants carrying machine guns over their shoulders and dressed in black with scarves covering their faces. — AFP/UNB photo