

BRIEFLY

7 kidnapers shot dead in India:

Police shot dead seven members of Balamir Khangar gang in Hamirpur district Wednesday and rescued two persons kidnapped by them, official report said. PTT says from Lucknow.

Leader of the gang and two women members were among those shot dead during an encounter in forest area of Khadehi Lodhan village. The gang had kidnapped Balamir Gupta and Anant Ram Gupta on October six and was also involved in a number of other kidnappings and murders, the sources said.

Landslide kills 12 in China:

Twelve people were confirmed dead and 13 left missing after a massive wall of mud unleashed by heavy rains tore off of a mountainside in southwestern Yunnan province, an official report said Thursday. AP reports from Beijing.

The 750-metre (2,500-foot) wide swathe of hillside swept into a remote mountain village on Friday, damaging 182 houses. 11 of which were still buried several days later, the newspaper China Daily reported. A much larger chunk of land was still slowly sliding downhill, threatening an even larger landslide, the report said. Officials in the remote mountainous region, some 2,200 kilometres (1,375-miles) southwest of Beijing, were not immediately available to provide updated details on the disaster.

Solana to visit Japan next week:

Javier Solana will make the first visit to Japan by a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Secretary-General since 1991 next week, a NATO official said. AFP reports from Brussels.

He will also go to the United States to defend and explain NATO's expansion into eastern Europe, the official said. Solana leaves Tuesday for Tokyo, where he will meet Emperor Akihito and government leaders.

Quake shakes Japan:

An earthquake measuring 5.6 on the open-ended Richter Scale jolted northern Japan yesterday, the Hong Kong Observatory said. Reuter reports from Hong Kong.

The epicentre, detected at 0527 Local Time (2127 Wednesday), was near Hokkaido, Japan. The observatory gave no further details.

Road mishap claims 2 in US:

A driver who said her gas pedal got stuck plowed her car into pedestrians on a busy downtown street, killing two people and injuring 10 others, two critically. AP reports from Chicago.

"I just heard a thump, and then five or six people were flying 3, 4 feet in the air," said Terry Coxworth, who was standing at the intersection where the accident happened Wednesday. The driver, Eleanor Soltis, 76, was cited for operating an unsafe vehicle, failure to exercise due care and disobeying a red light, police spokeswoman Arlene Mays said. Soltis, who told police her gas pedal had stuck, was treated at a hospital and released.



The Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral garlands a bust of Mahatma Gandhi Wednesday at Gandhi's original house in the Phoenix Settlement near Durban. Gujral is on the final leg of a six day official visit to South Africa. — AP/UNB photo

Movie on Diana to begin filming early next year

LOS ANGELES, Oct 9: A movie based on the revised Princess Diana biography "Diana: Her True Story in Her Own Words" will begin filming early next year, a producer said, reports AP.

American producer Martin Poll, whose credits include a 1993 television miniseries on Diana, has joined with German producer Christian Seidel to create a theatrical movie drawn from Andrew Morton's book.

A fall 1998 release is planned.

The film will feature "Distinguished British actors," Poll's spokesman, Dick Guttman, said Tuesday. A United Kingdom-wide search will be held to find an actress to portray Diana.

Poll's 1993 miniseries for NBC, "Diana: Her True Story," was based on the original edition of Morton's biography.

Russian cargo ship docks with Mir

MOSCOW, Oct 9: An unmanned Russian cargo ship docked 'very cleanly' with the Mir space station Wednesday in the first successful use of a new procedure, reports AP.

The Progress M-36 brought a back-up computer, scientific equipment, fuel, drinking water and a new European-built device intended to fly around the outside of the Mir to examine its surface.

The cargo ship came in on automatic pilot a few minutes ahead of schedule. Automatic dockings are not unusual but it was the first using a new method that had failed on two past attempts, causing the crew to switch to manual controls.

After each failure we analysed the math ... and adjusted the docking procedure," said flight control chief Vladimir Solvyov, briefing reporters at Mission Control.

Yeltsin appoints low ranked official as new envoy to Chechnya

MOSCOW, Oct 9: President Boris Yeltsin gave the job of Chechen envoy to a lower-ranked official Wednesday in a move clearly aimed at slighting the breakaway republic's leaders, reports AP.

Yeltsin released Ivan Rybkin, the head of his policy-making Security Council, from the side job as presidential representative in Chechnya and gave the post to Valentin Vlasov, a little-known administrator.

Rybkin, who announced the decision, said the idea behind the move was to have a lower-ranked official representing the president in Chechnya. Vlasov's government rank corresponds to those of Yeltsin's representatives in other Russian regions, he said.

Chechnya considers itself independent and has been running its own affairs since Russian troops withdrew last fall following a two-year war. Moscow says the Muslim republic is and will remain part of Russia.

Release of Hamas leader Arafat slates Jordan's role

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Oct 9: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat indirectly criticised Jordan Wednesday for its role in the release of Hamas's spiritual guide from an Israeli prison, a Palestinian legislator said.

"President Arafat criticised some foreign powers which injured the Palestinian Authority by bypassing it," Marwan Barguti told AFP after a speech by Arafat behind closed doors to the Palestinian Legislative Council meeting in Ramallah.

Negotiations between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Jordan's King Hussein — without Arafat's involvement — resulted in the return Monday to the Gaza Strip of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) guide, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, after eight years in prison.

In exchange, two Israeli agents who participated in the

Release of Hamas leader

September 25 assassination attempt against another Hamas leader in Amman were released.

Arafat also committed himself to initiating laws passed a year and a half ago by the legislative council, Council Speaker Ahmed Gori said.

A committee of four deputies, four cabinet members and a security-service official will discuss the 186 laws promulgated by the council to determine which are still current and then Arafat will sign them, Gori said.

The Palestinian leader also said he will submit the proposed budget to the legislative council for approval so that spending by the ministers "will be established in a clear and exact manner," Gori said.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held talks by telephone Wednesday with Jordan's King Hussein during a meeting with

US envoy Dennis Ross, the prime minister's office said. Netanyahu and the King discussed ways of re-establishing the good relations between the two countries' the office said in a reference to the tension caused by the September 25 assassination attempt of a Hamas leader in Amman by Israeli agents.

As part of an agreement between the two countries, Israel freed Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual guide of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and Jordan released two Israeli agents who carried out the attack.

The prime minister also told the Jordanian sovereign about his pre-dawn meeting Wednesday with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, their first together in eight months, which peace-process envoy Ross attended, the office said.



US actress Demi Moore is flanked by Italian actresses Sophia Loren, at left, and Claudia Cardinale, at right, as the trio are VIP guests at the Giorgio Armani fashion collection in Milan Wednesday. — AP/UNB photo

Life expectancy in Africa will decline to half due to AIDS

HARARE, Oct 9: Life expectancy in eastern and southern African countries with severe AIDS epidemics will decline by 2010 to half that originally projected before the virus spread, experts predict, reports AP.

The result, according to recent estimates by the US Bureau of the Census, is that average life expectancy in Malawi will drop to 29.5 years, the lowest in the world, instead of 57 otherwise.

In 1996 life expectancy in Malawi stood at 36. Without the ravages caused by the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome it would have been around 50.

In Zambia, life expectancy is estimated to fall to 30 years by 2010 while in Botswana it will go down to 33 years, both 50 per cent of that originally expected.

In the absence of AIDS, life expectancy in Zambia would have been 57.5 years in 1996 but has been reduced to about 36, while Botswana was projected to be at 60 years but was down to 46 years.

The average Zimbabwean born in 2010 could have an expected to reach 70, but now he will be lucky to reach 33. Life expectancy last year was put at 42, but without AIDS it would have been 64.

East Africa is better off, because although AIDS is still rife there the epidemic is not as severe.

Kenya's life expectancy for 1996 had been estimated at 65 but fell as a result of AIDS to 56, while Uganda's dropped from 53 to 40. In 2010 it will be 44 instead of 68, and 35 instead of 54 respectively.

The national percentage of adults infected with the HIV Virus that causes AIDS is about 18 per cent in Zambia and Zimbabwe and about 14 per cent in Uganda.

Albright takes steps to block fund raising for 30 terrorist groups

WASHINGTON, Oct 9: Hoping to dry up support for terrorism, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright took steps Wednesday to block fund raising and punish US backers of 30 foreign organisations she designated as terrorist groups, reports AP.

The list included 13 Islamic organisations in the Middle East along with two Israeli groups. Also on the list were a number of Asian and Latin American groups. Missing were the Irish Republican Army and the Palestine Liberation Organisation, both on past US lists.

Albright's action was in response to a 1996 law designed to stop fund raising in the United States by and on behalf of organisations that engage in or sponsor terrorist acts.

As of Wednesday, any money that the 30 organisations have in the United States will be blocked. Also, it will be a crime to provide money, weapons or other types of tangible support

to any of the groups.

In addition, members and representatives of these organisations will be ineligible for US visas and will be subject to exclusion from the United States.

"Our goal is to make the United States fully a 'no-support-for-terrorism' zone," Albright said in a statement.

"By steadily reducing the habitat in which terrorism thrives, we can hope to make terrorists first an endangered species and ultimately an extinct one," she said.

In a statement issued during a political trip in New Jersey, President Bill Clinton said, "The United States is committed to fight against those who speak the language of terror."

The law was inspired in part by the April 1995 bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City.

portions of Islamic groups included on the list.

Citing State Department figures, the committee said there were only three anti-US terrorist attacks in the Middle East last year.

Among the better known Islamic groups named were the Palestinian organisation Hamas and the Lebanese group Hezbollah.

Also designated were Kach and Kahane Chai, Israeli groups whose stated goal is to restore the Biblical state of Israel.

The list also was assailed by the National Coalition to Protect Political Freedom, which called it an attack on First Amendment rights.

Excluding religious materials and medicine, "Any funds that a US person gives to schools, medical clinics or orphanages linked in any way to the designated foreign groups will become a federal crime punishable by up to 10 years in

Lanka lauds US move to declare LTTE as terrorist group

COLOMBO, Oct 9: The government on Thursday welcomed the US decision to declare the Tamil Tigers a terrorist group, saying it will force the rebels to negotiate and stop their 14-year-old insurgency, reports AP.

"At last the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam has got the correct label. Now they will have problems in raising funds," said Brigadier Sarath Munasinghe, the spokesman for the defense ministry.

"With less funds they will have problems in getting weapons and we plan to push them militarily to the point where they will have to talk peace," Munasinghe told reporters.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright took steps Wednesday to block fund rais-

ing, freeze assets and punish US-based backers of the Tamil Tigers and 29 other foreign organisations she designated as terrorist groups.

"It is a victory for Sri Lanka's foreign policy and testimony of a strong and healthy bilateral relationship that exists between Sri Lanka and the United States," the foreign ministry said in a statement Thursday.

The Tamil Tigers maintain a major office in London and also are active in promoting their cause and seeking financial support elsewhere in Europe and in North America. Most of the group's funds are believed to come from sympathizers.

According to independent estimates, over 6,000 rebels have been killed since the beginning of the war.

Muslim parties sweep local polls in Srebrenica

SARAJEVO, Oct 9: Bosnian Muslim parties have swept to victory in municipal elections in the eastern town of Srebrenica which fell to Serb forces amid a massacre of Muslim men two years ago, Western officials said, reports Reuter.

The Muslim parties won a majority of seats on the Town Council after receiving the support of Muslim refugees from elsewhere in Bosnia and abroad, the officials said on Wednesday.

The Bosnian Serb army has executed or ambushed thousands of Muslim men fleeing Srebrenica in 1995 in what human rights officials called Europe's worst atrocity since World War II.

A Muslim victory was expected in Srebrenica after registration figures showed absentee Muslim voters outnumbered Serbs who had moved to the area.

The Western officials confirmed Serb media reports that the Muslim coalition for a

united and democratic Bosnia Herzegovina had won 24 seats out of a total of 46 on the council. An independent Muslim candidate won one seat.

The nationalist Serb Democratic Party had 12 seats and its ally, the Serbian Radical Party, won nine seats.

The result in Srebrenica meant that it was the only municipality in Serb controlled territory where Muslim parties managed to secure a majority in last month's local elections across the former Yugoslav Republic.

Muslim parties won a plurality of the vote in the north-west town of Prijedor but Serb parties could control the council if they agree to form a coalition.

Political analysts say implementing the results in Srebrenica and elsewhere may prove impossible because local nationalist authorities oppose reversing the results of territorial conquest and 'ethnic cleansing'.

Suu Kyi's jailed ally near death

BANGKOK, Oct 9: A close ally of Burmese democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, imprisoned by the military government for the past eight years, has been sent to Yangon General Hospital and is probably near death, a human rights group said Thursday, reports AP.

Win Tin, a member of the central executive committee of Suu Kyi's political party, the National League for Democracy, was transferred to the hospital from Myingyan Prison near Mandalay sometime last week, Human Rights Watch Asia said in a news release received in Bangkok.

Sources in Yangon confirmed that Win Tin has been admitted to the hospital, but no other details were available. The military government has

not yet responded to queries about him.

The former newspaper editor, reportedly viewed by the military as a trouble some adviser to Suu Kyi, suffers from a heart condition that requires constant medication. He also developed spinal problems while in prison.

The Burmese military has denied the Red Cross access to political prisoners. Human rights groups have documented systematic abuses in the Burmese prison system, considered one of the worst in the world.

Rights groups reported last year that Win Tin had been beaten and was being kept in a tiny cell meant to house military dogs.

Resistance leader calls for end to fighting in Cambodia

PHNOM PENH, Oct 9: A top resistance commander loyal to ousted co-premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh called Thursday for an end to the fighting in the country's north-west, saying it has killed too many Cambodians, reports AP.

"I don't want to pursue any more fighting between Cambodians and Cambodians," said Nhek Bun Chhay, who since a July 5-6 coup has led resistance forces opposing the Phnom Penh government. He is a former senior official in the royal army.

"I want to negotiate peace and see democracy take root according to the wishes of the Cambodian people," he said in a faxed statement. It also said his forces have killed at least 2,000 of coup leader Hun Sen's troops.

But he also set conditions for peace talks that the government is certain to reject.

A relatively small force of Ranariddh's loyalists have been stubbornly holding on to a small enclave at O'Smach along Cambodia's northern border since the prince was deposed by his co-premier Hun Sen.

The fighting against Hun Sen's stronger and better-equipped army also has been spreading slowly east to Preah Vihear province and to Samlout, 200 kilometres (125 miles) southwest of O'Smach.

"In my name as an army commander and a Cambodian, I am very upset about the dead and wounded," said Nhek Bun Chhay, adding that his troops have suffered minor casualties but "the blood which dropped on the ground is also that of Cambodians."

New variety of seedless grape developed

HEFELI, Oct 9: A new variety of seedless grape has been developed in east China's Anhui province, reports Xinhua.

Three years of experiments have shown that the seedless grapes weigh more than 20g on average and some even as much as 30g, compared to 2 to 4g for ordinary seedless grapes.

The new grape is the brainchild of Zhong Jiahuang, a professor at Anhui Agriculture University, who found a new way to get varieties of grapes with seeds to bear seedless fruit.

The Jingya variety produces 95 per cent seedless grapes and has a maturation time that is 10 days earlier than usual, greatly improving economic returns.

The grape is also suited to the weather conditions of south China, unlike other seedless types.

Mars might once have been hospitable to life!

PASADENA, California, Oct 9: The Mars Pathfinder has yielded what scientists said is the strongest evidence yet that Mars, like Earth, has a crust, a mantle and an iron core — lending support to the theory that the Red Planet might once have been hospitable to life, report AP.

The evidence that the planet is not merely a solid ball of rock came from analyzing radio signals from Pathfinder as Mars spins on its axis.

Having enough heat to create these distinct layers gives weight to the theory that Mars once may have been warm and wet enough for life to evolve, as it did on Earth. Mars formed 4 billion years ago.

William Folkner, a scientist at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, said Wednesday that scientists do not yet know

whether that iron core is solid or molten like Earth's. However, they know it is smaller, at somewhere between 800 miles (1,280 kilometers) and 1,247 miles (1,995 kilometers) in radius. Mars' full radius is 2,113 miles (3,381 kilometers).

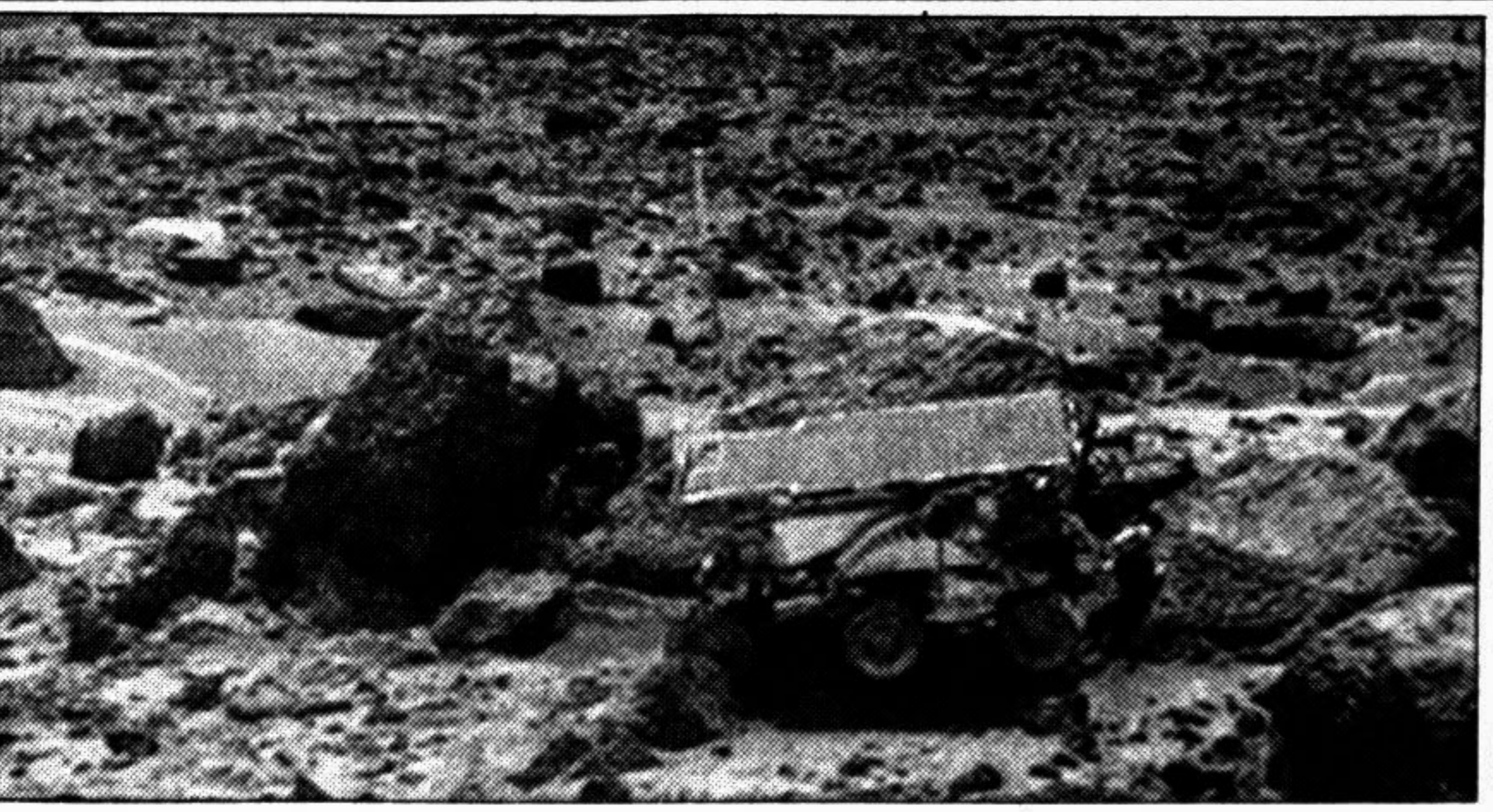
Molten cores are rare, of the planets, only Earth and Mercury are known to have one. Jupiter's moon Ganymede is thought to have one, too. The motion of liquid metal in the Earth's core is what creates the magnetic field around our planet. By contrast, our moon is solid and "dead."

So far, the orbiting Mars Global Surveyor has found evidence of a weak magnetic field at the Red Planet, but Pathfinder scientist Matthew Golombek said those observations are not necessarily evidence that the magnetic field

was generated by the interior or that the core is liquid today.

Scientists still remain a long way from finding another component of life — water. But they have detected signs that the surface once teemed with water flowing in streams and deep channels that carried rocks from place to place. Pathfinder yielded close-up images of martian rock conglomerations that showed small spheres, probably pebbles smoothed by water.

Wes Ward, a Pathfinder scientist from the US Geological Survey in Flagstaff, Arizona, also said he has seen the first signs of true sand on Mars, with grains about 1 millimeter in size. A product of weathering and erosion, they lie in dunes and in fluted patterns like desert sands on Earth.



Sojourner's Alpha Proton X-ray Spectrometer (APXS) is shown at what NASA has named Moe. Mars Pathfinder scientists announced Wednesday that like the Earth, Mars appears to have a crust, a mantle and an iron core, signs that the planet may have once had water on it. They got their first strong evidence that the planet is not merely a solid ball of rock by measuring the changes in radio signals from Pathfinder as Mars spins on its axis. — AP/UNB photo

NZ ready to normalise ties with France

WELLINGTON, New Zealand, Oct 9: Prime Minister Jim Bolger will "set the final seal" on the resumption of normal relations with France when he visits Paris later this month, government officials said Thursday, reports AP.

"The cessation of French nuclear testing in the South Pacific and the closure of the test sites removed from the agenda an issue that had bedeviled France-New Zealand relations for the last 30 years," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said.

"It opened the way to the resumption of a completely normal relationship with France."

Bolger is due to leave for London on October 20, spending two days there before going to Edinburgh to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting before flying to Paris on October 27 for a two-day official visit.