

BRIEFLY



Iraqi people on Sunday, protest in front of a vegetable oil factory in Baghdad to show their anger at the United States policy against Iraq. Hundreds of Iraqi protesters Sunday to offer themselves as human shields against any possible American attack upon Iraq. — AP/UNB photo

Vietnam's war hero Xien dies:

The former general secretary of Vietnam's now defunct Socialist Party and a decorated war hero, Nguyen Xien, has died after a lengthy illness. He was 91. AP reports from Hanoi.

In a brief tribute to Xien, the official Vietnam News on Monday said he had served the country as a revolutionary, a government official and an ideologue through much of this century. He died earlier this month in a hospital in Hanoi.

Xien served as the leader of the Socialist Party of Vietnam until it was dissolved and absorbed by the Communist Party during the 1980s.

Australia to sign Ottawa treaty:

Australia will sign the Ottawa treaty outlawing anti-personnel land mines and destroy its stockpile of 60,000 mines. Prime Minister John Howard said Monday. AP reports from Canberra. The treaty will mean that Australia will forswear the use of anti-personnel land mines and destroy its own stockpile of those land mines, he told Parliament.

Australia has around 60,000 anti-personnel mines, and all but a handful, which the treaty allows for training purposes, will now be destroyed.

Boat capsizes in Malacca Strait:

A boat carrying Indonesian workers home from Malaysia sank in bad weather in the Malacca Strait, leaving 22 people missing, press reports said yesterday. AFP reports from Jakarta.

The boat was carrying 36 passengers and a crew of four, the Suara Karya Daily said. Eighteen people were rescued by passing Indonesian fishing vessels some 10 hours after the boat sank on Friday.

The overcrowded boat from Penang in Malaysia was overturned by a large wave near the maritime border with Indonesia, the daily said.

Boy kills parents, grandmother:

A 14-year-old boy killed his parents and his grandmother after they forbade him to go to the local skating rink. Tanjug news agency reported, quoting prosecutors at Subotica in northern Serbia. AFP reports from Belgrade.

The unnamed youth took a pistol belonging to his father Ladislav Stangl, 50 and shot him in the head, before doing the same to his mother Eleonora, 46, and his grandmother Irma, 70.

He then took the family car and went off skating. A family friend found the bodies later as well as the boy, who had shut himself in his bedroom.

China softens Taiwan policy

for defining reunification

TAIPEI, Nov 17: China appears to have softened its demand that Taiwan recognise Beijing's sovereignty before high-level talks can resume, a pro-China organisation said Monday, reports AP.

Wang Dao-han, China's leading official for negotiations with Taiwan, reportedly said the two sides can take a more flexible approach to defining reunification.

Wang's remarks were quoted by the Taiwan-based Chinese Alliance for Democratic Reform. It said Wang was speaking in Shanghai on Sunday to alliance chairman, Hsu Li-nung.

Taiwan government officials gave a guarded welcome to the alliance report, but said they wanted independent confirmation.

"If this is official, then it shows the mainland is beginning to face up to the reality of separation between the sides."

UF, Cong (I) meet to resolve political turmoil

NEW DELHI, Nov 17: India's ruling coalition and the powerful Congress Party scheduled meetings Monday amid news reports that the government was on shaky ground, reports AP.

The political turmoil sparked by the results of a judge's probe into the 1991 assassination of Rajiv Gandhi has confounded the stock market and worried lawmakers eager to avoid another election in two years.

Local newspapers said Congress leaders will huddle later in the day to discuss formally asking Prime Minister I.K. Gujral to sever ties with a regional party that is part of his 14-member United Front. A judge has reportedly found the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, or Dravida Progressive Front, supported Sri Lankan guerrillas suspected of killing Rajiv.

A battle over whether the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

Baghdad hints compromise

Iraq may allow arms monitors to return

BAGHDAD, Nov 17: An Iraqi minister hinted at a compromise that could allow UN arms inspection teams to return to Iraq and resolve a crisis that has raised the possibility of US military strikes on Iraqi targets, reports Reuters.

US officials had no immediate reaction to the idea put forward by Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz in an interview with the French daily Le Figaro.

They said earlier Washington hoped that Russia and France would help in the hunt for a diplomatic solution. They said they expected Moscow to act soon to intervene but the response from Paris was "less certain."

Iraqi media, reporting on a Cabinet meeting, said President Saddam Hussein stressed Iraq was not seeking a confrontation with the United States and hoped a solution could be found that would "lead to the implementation of the Security Council's obligations to Iraq."

The reports gave no detail of what Saddam had in mind, but Aziz told Le Figaro that Iraq would allow UN arms monitors to return to Iraq if the five permanent members of the Security Council had equal representation on UN inspection teams.

Aziz later left Paris for Morocco to begin a five-nation North African tour aimed at rallying Arab support in the dispute. Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Mousa said he was expected in Cairo today.

The crisis erupted when Saddam, claiming that they were spies, expelled Americans working for inspection teams monitoring Baghdad's compliance with UN resolutions barring it from possessing weapons of mass destruction.

The United Nations responded by pulling out 68 other arms inspectors, while the United States rushed an additional aircraft carrier and its complement of attack warplanes to the Gulf.

Several Iraqi families, cursing the United States and chanting slogans praising Saddam, occupied a textile factory and a power plant in Baghdad as human shields against possible military attack.

US Secretary of States Madeleine Albright toured Gulf Arab states to try to rebuild the 1991 Gulf War coalition against Iraq while finding a peaceful way to make Saddam back down.

"In our effort to build diplomatic pressure... we look to the Russians and the French, because of their unique ability to communicate with Saddam Hussein, to convince him that the only way out is by changing course," she said in Kuwait.

An official traveling with Albright reported that Russia had said it was committed to using its special relationship with Iraq to help to find a solution, but whether France was prepared for that was "less clear."

US President Bill Clinton spoke directly with Russian

President Boris Yeltsin and French President Jacques Chirac by telephone on Saturday in a personal diplomatic effort.

The Security Council says UN arms inspectors must certify that Iraq is clear of weapons of mass destruction before UN sanctions, imposed for its 1990 invasion on Kuwait, can be lifted.

US blames France, Russia for standoff

Meanwhile, the US State Department's third-ranking official accused the presidents of Russia and France on Sunday of partial responsibility for the current United Nations stand-off with Iraq.

Thomas Pickering, the Under Secretary of State, said Russian President Boris Yeltsin and French President Jacques Chirac "bore some responsibility for this crisis" because their policies may have emboldened Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

"I believe that they and the other members of the Security Council who abstained on a critical resolution a couple of weeks ago at least were a contributing factor," Pickering said on the CNN programme late edition.

He said their relatively soft line toward Saddam then may have encouraged him to think that "the unity of the Security Council had fallen, that he could get away with confronting the Security Council."

Troops launch assault on LTTE, kill 20 rebels

COLOMBO, Nov 17: Sri Lankan troops launched the final phase of their assault on a key northern highway against stiff resistance from Tamil separatists, a military spokesman said Monday, reports AP.

About 30,000 soldiers are trying to capture the highway linking Jaffna Peninsula with the mainland. "We cannot give you the details of the battle right now, but we can say that the third phase of our operation started Sunday," said military spokesman Kumara Dewage.

Nine soldiers were killed in the early hours of the battle. The Tamil tiger rebels also suffered casualties, but details were not immediately known. Independent confirmation is not possible because the government does not allow reporters into the area.

"Our troops are fully prepared to drive out the terrorists and finish this war," said Brigadier Sarath Munasinghe, the top military spokesman. "We are advancing and the terrorists will not be able to stop us."

The rebels are fighting to create their own homeland, where they say Tamils will be free of the discrimination they face in predominately Sinhalese Sri Lanka. Tamils, who make up about 18 per cent of the population, have a different language, religion and culture from that of the Sinhalese, who control the government and the military.

Since May, government troops have seized half of the 85-kilometer (55-mile) highway from the rebels to gain land access to Jaffna Peninsula. Since

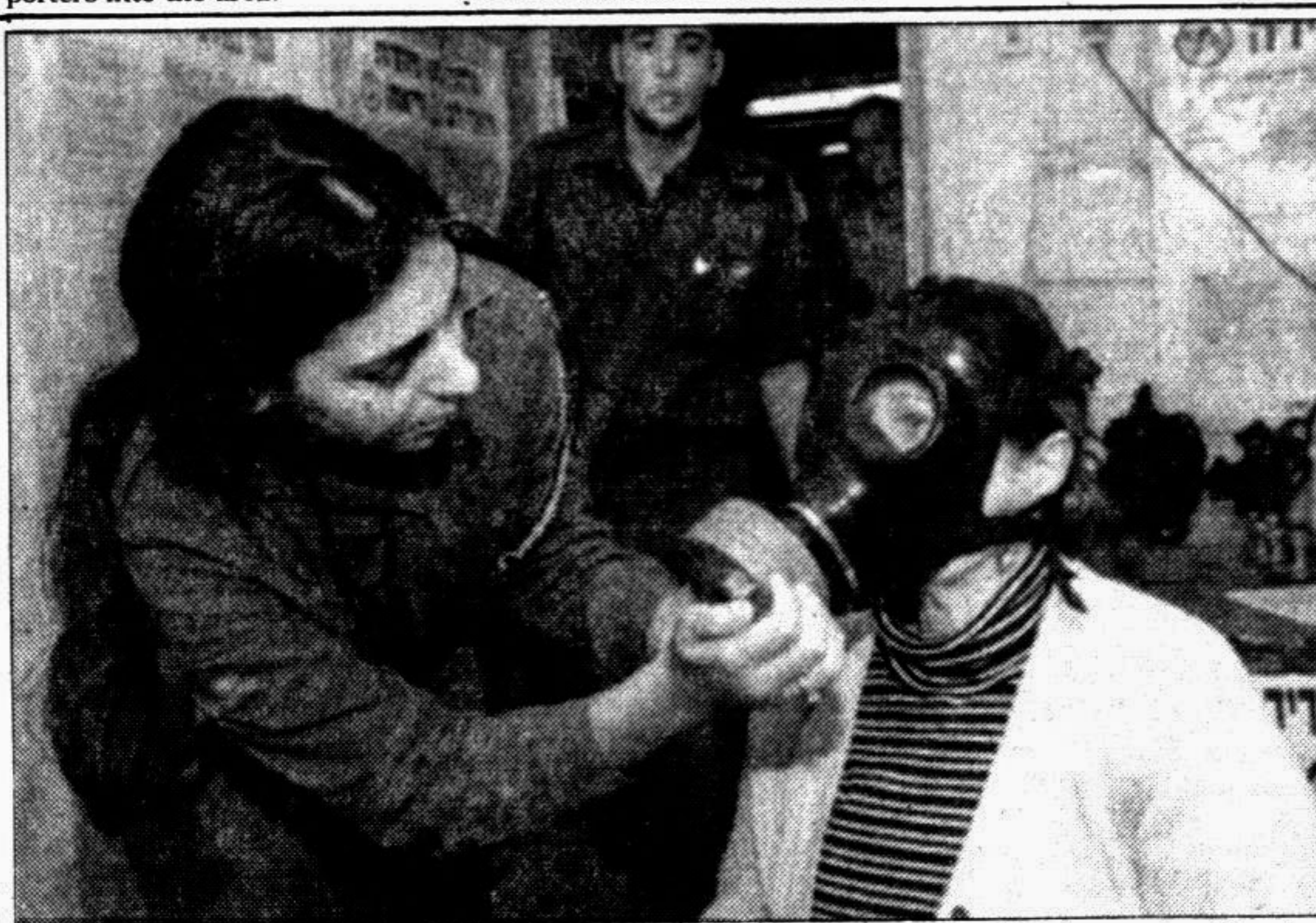
capturing the peninsula last year, the government has had to supply it by sea and air.

The current battle is going on in Mankulam, a town 275 kilometers (170 miles) north of Colombo, the capital.

The battle for the highway has killed 800 soldiers, according to official figures. The military says it has killed 2,500 rebels in the last six months. The rebels dispute that claim.

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan soldiers killed 20 Tamil rebels and wounded dozens as they began the final phase of their assault to take a key northern highway, a military spokesman said Monday.

About 30,000 soldiers launched the last push Sunday to capture the highway linking Jaffna Peninsula with the mainland.



An Israeli woman is fitted with a gas mask at a Jerusalem distribution centre Sunday. Amid growing concern of a possible missile attack by Iraq, Israelis converged on gas mask distribution centres to receive their masks. — AP/UNB Photo

Uzbek warriors uncover Taliban's mass graves

KABUL, Nov 17: On the desert plains of northern Afghanistan, Uzbek warriors uncovered several mass graves containing the bodies of an estimated 2,000 men believed to have been Taliban fighters, reports AP.

In a telephone conversation Monday from his headquarters in northern Afghanistan, Rashid Dostum, a powerful Uzbek warlord, said he has seen the remains of at least 700 men and he has reports of a further 1,300 bodies buried at several sites.

The discovery of these bodies is a calamity for the entire Afghan society, said Dostum, a former general in the deposed Communist regime.

Dostum joined Muslim insurgents in 1992 to help overthrow the Communist government, which eventually led the way for the establishment of Islamic rule in Afghanistan.

The graves contained the bodies of men killed last May when the Taliban was invited into the northern stronghold of Mazar-e-Sharif by his adversary Malik Pahlawan, Dostum told The Associated Press.

At that time the Taliban tried to consolidate its hold on northern Afghanistan. But before they could,

Pahlawan and his Shi'ite Muslim allies turned their guns on the Taliban. At the end of a fierce 18-hour battle hundreds of Taliban fighters were killed, trapped in a city they didn't know by heavily armed enemies with rocket launchers, mortars and short-range missiles.

International aid groups said they collected more than 300 bodies from the streets of Mazar-e-Sharif, some 300 kilometers (180 miles) north of Kabul.

Thousands more Taliban fighters were taken prisoner. Dostum, who fled to Turkey during Pahlawan's takeover of the north, returned to his homeland in September. There have been reports of fighting between Dostum and Pahlawan's fighters.

And lately Dostum has been making fresh overtures to the Taliban. Several weeks ago he released 200 prisoners as a gesture of good will, he said.

Dostum has offered to allow Taliban aircraft to fly into his stronghold at Sheberghan, about 60 kilometers west of Mazar-e-Sharif, to pick up the bodies.

There has been no independent confirmation of Dostum's report about the mass graves.

The international community evacuated Mazar-e-Sharif during heavy fighting in September.

So far the Taliban leadership has not commented on the discovery of the mass graves or whether it would try to retrieve the bodies.

Dostum said there were several graves in the vast desert area in his home province of Jozjan in northern Afghanistan, roughly 150 kilometers east of Mazar-e-Sharif.

Scores of bodies also were discovered stuffed into nine different wells in the area, he said. "Myself, I have seen one site with 300 bodies and another with 400 bodies," Dostum said. "They were killed by Malik without any trial. They were executed."

The Uzbek chief said he set up a commission to search for mass graves after receiving reports from at least four people who claimed to have witnessed mass killings during the Taliban's brief foray into northern Afghanistan.

The Taliban, which controls roughly 85-90 per cent of Afghanistan, including the capital of Kabul, is trying to consolidate its hold on the entire country.

Hungarians vote massively to join NATO

BUDAPEST, Nov 17: Hungarians voted massively in favour of joining NATO on Sunday, giving an unexpectedly strong endorsement to the government's plan to enter the Western military alliance, reports Reuters.

With almost 75 per cent of the vote tallied, the National Election Centre's Internet web page showed 2,403,914 million in favour of joining NATO and 411,698 opposed.

More than 51 per cent of the electorate participated in the vote which the government viewed as critical to its strategy to reorient this formerly communist country to the Western bloc.

"This is a very, very good turnout for a referendum," foreign minister Lazo Kovacs, one of the chief architects of Hungary's pro-European and pro-NATO strategy, told reporters at the Election Centre.

The 85 per cent vote in favour can of course change over time a little bit, but I can hardly believe that it is so good.

Myanmar junta arrests ethnic party leader

BANGKOK, Nov 17: Myanmar's military authorities have arrested a leader of a banned ethnic minority party, an exile opposition group said Monday, reports AP.

Dr. Min Soe Lin, general secretary of the Mon National League for Democracy, was detained on November 6 in Mudoon in the eastern province of Mon State, said a statement from the All Burma Students' Democratic Front.

The statement, received in Bangkok, said Min Soe Lin had been detained under the Emergency Provision Act for helping organise a celebration on February 23 of Mon National Day after the government had banned the event. It said it did not know where he was being held.

The statement said Min Soe Lin was one of five successful candidates from the Mon National League for Democracy in the 1990 general election.

Clinton welcomes Wei Jingsheng's arrival in US

MALIBU, California, Nov 17: President Bill Clinton, who dismissed the case of dissident Wei Jingsheng during a summit with China's president last month, on Sunday welcomed Wei's arrival in the United States, reports Reuters.

White House Chief of Staff Erskine Bowles said Clinton was pleased Wei, freed from a 14-year jail term, had come to the United States for medical treatment.

"After he gets that treatment, the president looks forward to meeting with him," Bowles said on CBS's Face the Nation.

Immediately on arrival in Detroit from Beijing on Sunday, Wei was admitted to the Henry Ford Hospital for evaluation and treatment, spokeswoman Julie Baumkels said.

Hun Sen promises to visit Ranariddh in jail

PHNOM PENH, Nov 17: Coup leader Hun Sen has promised to visit deposed First Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh in jail if he is found guilty by a military court of weapons smuggling and negotiating with Khmer Rouge guerrillas, reports AP.

"I will visit Ranariddh in jail, if after the trial he has to go to jail," Hun Sen said in an interview with Australia's Channel-7 television, which was aired on local radio Monday.

Ranariddh has been in exile since he was overthrown in a coup d'etat by Second Prime Minister Hun Sen on July 5-6.

Hun Sen has had a military court file criminal charges against Ranariddh, and is assisting the former premier stand trial if he comes back to Cambodia.

The military court is in the final stages of preparing its case against Ranariddh and the trial is expected to begin next month or in early 1998.

Abacha dissolves parliament

ABUJA, Nigeria, Nov 17: Nigeria's military ruler dissolved his cabinet Monday and granted amnesty for some political prisoners in a speech to the fourth anniversary of his seizure of power, reports AP.

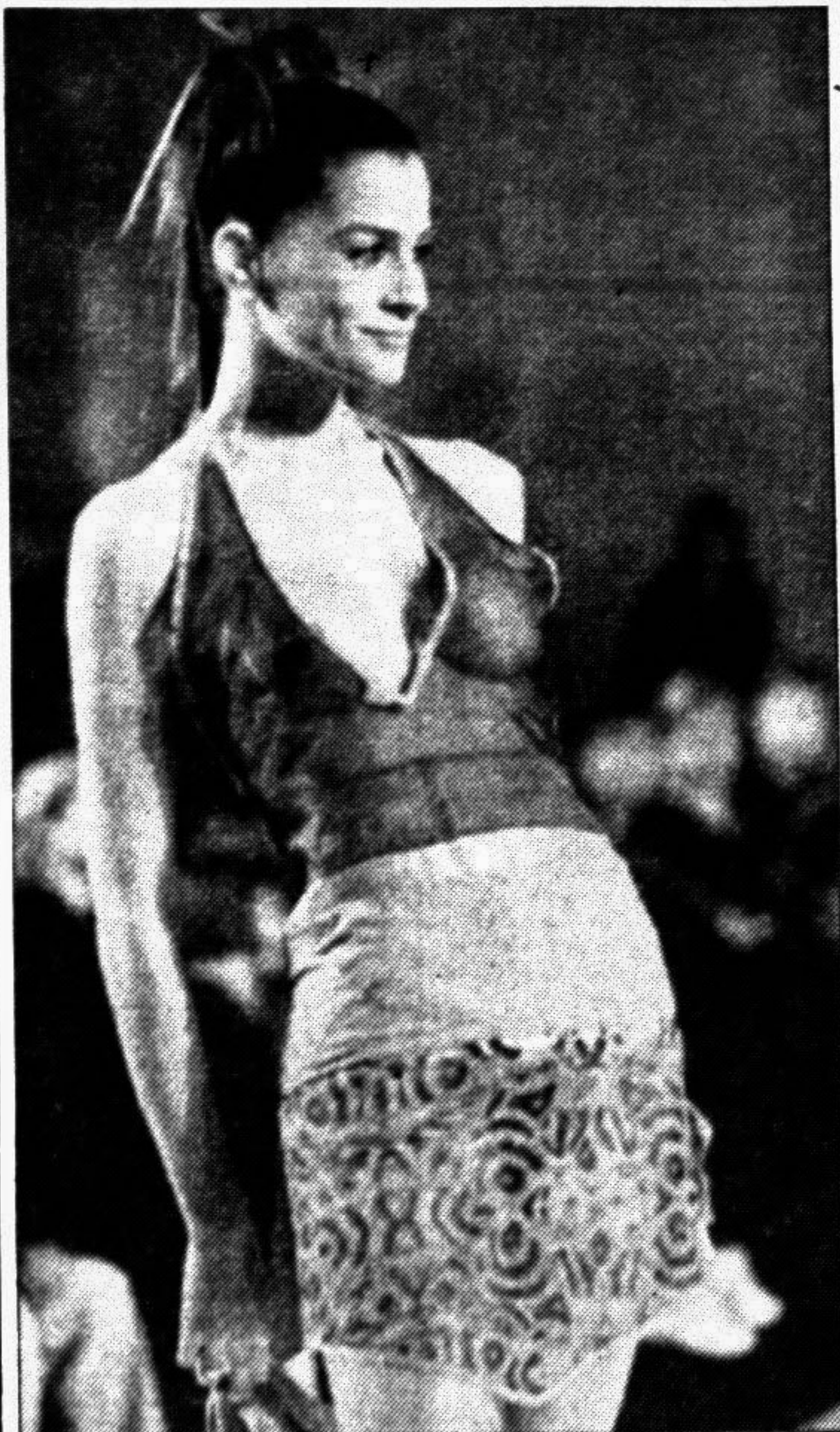
Gen. Sani Abacha, speaking in an early-morning radio and television address, said his government had decided to free "those detained persons whose release would constitute no further impediment to the peace and security of the country."

But Abacha, whose government has been accused of holding hundreds of political prisoners, did not say which detainees — or how many — would be freed.

He did not mention Nigeria's best-known prisoner, businessman Moshood Abiola, the presumed winner of aborted 1993 elections.

Abacha said he was dissolving his cabinet because a number of officials had indicated that they wanted to play larger roles in Nigeria's political transition.

Off the Record



Portugal's top-model Sofia Aparicio displays a light dress by Venezuelan-born young designer Katty Xiomara during the "Moda Lisboa" summer 98 fashion show Sunday in Lisbon. The three-day-long, twice-a-year, "Moda Lisboa" is Lisbon's main fashion event when Portuguese top designers present their collections for the next season. — AP/UNB photo

'She does not know what family planning is'

KATHMANDU: A Nepalese woman who got married 27 years ago is going to give birth to her 22nd child in a few months. The Kathmandu Post reported Monday, says Xinhua.

The pregnant woman does not know what family planning is, the newspapers said, adding the family planning programme have not reach her village in western Nepal.

Her husband, a carpenter by profession, is also unaware of family planning and temporary devices. "We must receive with open arms what god is willing to give," he said.

The population of Nepal, which stands at 21.4 million is growing at an alarming rate of 2.6 per cent.

The government is making efforts to operate clinics at villages and provide contraceptives as much as possible to reduce the fertility rate to four per cent from 4.6 per cent by 2000.

Veterinarians give new cornea to gorilla

BEIJING: Veterinarians say they have performed China's first cornea transplant on a gorilla to restore the sight of a giant primate stricken by cataracts in a zoo in central Henan province, reports AP.

Nikou, a 15-year-old gorilla at the Zhengzhou Zoo, received an artificial cornea in surgery Friday, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

The 100-kilogram (220-pound) gorilla began losing his sight several months ago because of cataracts, the report said.

"It couldn't walk and climb as freely as before, and even became fairly depressed due to the illness," zoo keeper Han Huaien was quoted as saying.

Twelve zoo keepers have been assigned to watch Nikou around the clock to keep him from pulling off his bandages, Xinhua said.

Top US official says Arab states boycotting Qatar confce missing opportunity

DOHA, Nov 17: A senior US official said Monday that the Arab countries boycotting the Middle East economic conference in Qatar are missing an opportunity to tell the world that the region is open for business, reports AP.

"By boycotting... they sent precisely the opposite signal — that again politics is going to dominate" to the detriment of investment, Undersecretary of State Stuart Eizenstat told a news conference.

"Those that are here are going to be the real beneficiaries," he said. "Those that are not, are not going to aid themselves economically."

Just six Arab countries — less than a third of the members of the Arab League — sent political delegations to the annual gathering. Israel also is attending, America's closest allies in the region, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, stayed away.

Most of the Arabs boycotted to protest the near-collapse of the Arab-Israeli peace process, which they blame on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Attending, they argue, would reward Israel for its intransigence.

Conference officials said that Israel, whose delegation is led by Trade Minister Natan Sharanski, is objecting to the conference's final statement that calls on Israel to trade land captured from Arab countries for peace.

Israel also is lobbying for the elimination of criticism of its military closures, which have prevented Palestinians from getting to their jobs.

Blair vows to toughen regulation on funding

LONDON, Nov 17: British Prime Minister Tony Blair promised today to introduce stiff new regulations on political funding, in the wake of an embarrassing labour over donations to his own Labour Party, reports AP.

"I will be recommending the toughest possible set of rules," he said in an article in The Times. "If there is one lesson to be learnt from this episode, it is that the current rules do not work."

On Sunday Blair apologised personally for the "appearance" of impropriety in a donation to Labour of one million pounds (£1.7 million dollars) party donation by motor racing chief Bernie Ecclestone.

The gift was followed by a government decision to exempt formula one racing from a proposed ban on tobacco advertising.

In his article today, Blair said "the questions are whether there should be ceilings on the overall amount spent in national elections, whether there should be top levels for individual donations, and whether the name and amount of individual and company donors should be published."

"Each of these suggestions would represent a major reform in itself. Taken together they would add up to a completely new world of electoral finance, making for greater openness and fairness in our democracy."

"And it remains open to consider whether there should be business funding at all."

But he was "cautious" about the possibility of having public funding for political parties.

Press comment on Blair's apology was mixed today with some newspapers saying the matter now seemed to be closed.