

# Instability to be key campaign issue in fresh polls: BJP

NEW DELHI, Dec 4: Recurring political instability will be a key campaign issue in new elections in India, which has witnessed split verdicts since 1989, the Hindu nationalists said today, reports AFP.

"This will be the major issue facing the electorate," Krishan Lal Sharma of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party) said, a day after the outgoing coalition government suggested dissolution of parliament.

"In fact we will make it a major issue," he said. "After all, stability is a must." He said the country had been facing "various stages of instability since 1989," when India's first coalition government took office.

"We will emphasise that only the capability and capacity to provide a stable government. Our voters have suffered enough. They are bound to elect a stable government."

The BJP, with 162 seats, is the largest group in the present 545-member parliament.

Indian President K R Narayanan is expected to dissolve parliament and suggest elections after a meeting with

# US to join soon, predict activists 125 nations begin signing landmine ban treaty

OTTAWA, Dec 4: Goaded into action by a global grassroots alliance, 125 nations Wednesday began signing a treaty to ban anti-personnel land mines. The leader of the United Nations called it "a historic victory for the weak and vulnerable of the world," reports AP.

Looking on, as Canada became the first nation to sign, were mine victims in wheelchairs, jubilant activists who began campaigning for a ban seven years ago, and observers from major holdout nations such as the United States which now face increased pressure to support the ban.

"Here we have 125 governments recognising that the tide of history has changed," said Jody Williams, who shared this year's Nobel Peace Prize with her anti-landmine coalition. "It's a new definition of superpower. It is not one, it is everybody. We are the superpower."

Williams shared the podium at the ceremony with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Canadian Prime Minister Jean

Chretien. Canada played a pivotal role in persuading other nations to form an unprecedented alliance with non-governmental agencies in pushing for a ban.

"It is an alliance that has shamed the world and enlightened it," Annan said. "It has, for once, made the international community a living, thriving reality."

With so many countries lined up to sign, the ceremony was scheduled to continue through Thursday while delegates held roundtable discussions on the next steps — notably raising funds to aid mine victims and clear away the estimated 100 million mines scattered round the world.

"Let us swear to the hundreds of thousands who have been murdered by land mines that we will not turn back," said Chretien, whose government pledged \$70 million over five years. "This slaughter must end."

The treaty requires signatories to destroy their stockpiles of mines within four years and remove deployed mines within 10 years.

Major holdouts refusing to sign include the United States, Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Libya, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Israel, North Korea, South Korea and Vietnam. Many of these countries sent observers who participated in discussions about mine-clearance.

Another report from Washington adds: The Clinton administration will give in to political pressure and join the international treaty prohibiting anti-personnel land mines within the next few years, activists for the ban predicted Wednesday.

"I think the reason we will see the US signing the treaty in the foreseeable future is that the popular interest and the political support on Capitol Hill for the ban has just grown exponentially," said Holly Burkhalter of Physicians for Human Rights.

The administration, which sent observers to Wednesday's

# No sign of primitive life on Mars

WASHINGTON, Dec 4: Mars meteorite ALH-8400 shows no sign of primitive life, contrary to some expectations, according to US scientists writing in the weekly Nature, reports AFP.

Geologist John Bradley of the Georgia Institute of Technology argues that the "microorganisms" believed found on the meteorite that fell on the Antarctic 13,000 years ago were nothing more than lifeless carbon crystals.

The study is the first in a major publication that casts doubt on the assertions of possible life on Mars which were made in August 1996.

Daniel Goldin, head of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), had said then that a team of scientists at the Johnson Space Flight centre in Texas had found the fossilised microorganisms that supported a hypothesis of life on Mars 3.6 billion years ago.

The assertion ignited a controversy.

Examining the meteorite under an electron microscope, Bradley and two colleagues said that they found no signs of life but only geologic structures.

While some resembled tiny fossils at a certain angle, when examined from other angles they were clearly not remains of life forms, the scientists wrote.

"Peculiar surface structures or segmentation on the worm-like forms are artifacts from conductive metal coatings applied to the samples for imaging in the electron microscope," wrote Bradley.

"This is not the first time metal coating artifacts have led to misidentification of non-fossils in rocks," he added.

**India sends its biggest team to Malaysian air show**

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 4: Eager to tap into a growing defence market, India has put up its largest display ever in any foreign aerospace and maritime show, an Indian official said Thursday, reports AP.

But despite the presence of delegations from five state-owned defence companies and the Ministry of Defence and of three naval ships made by India, chances of striking major deals appeared slim because of the region's current economic crisis.

# BRRIEFLY

**Rebels kill 4 in E Timor:** Rebels in the troubled territory of East Timor have killed four members of the local Catholic Youth Movement, the Indonesian military said in a report yesterday, AFP reports from Jakarta.

"The bodies of the victims were found bound and with marks of having been tortured," East Timor military chief Colonel Slamet Sidabutar was quoted as saying by the Antara News Agency.

**Canterbury's Archbishop in Pakistan:** The Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey arrived in Islamic Pakistan on Thursday on a four-day visit that will include meetings with both the Christian and Muslim communities, AP reports from Islamabad.

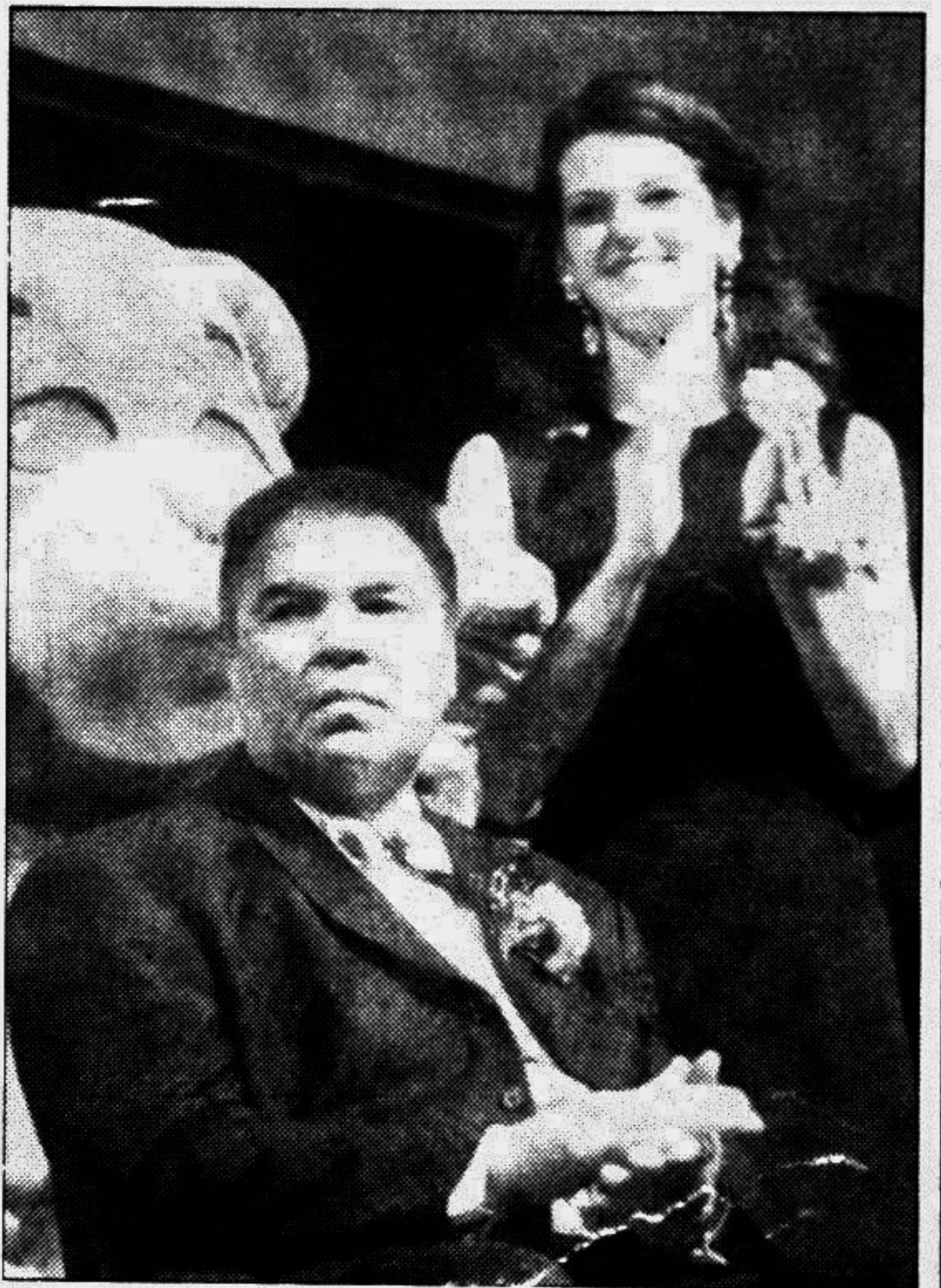
The archbishop's visit has been relatively low profile. Missing are the daily articles in local newspapers that usually precedes the arrival of dignitaries to Pakistan.

**Blast leaves 3 dead in India:** Three women were killed when a bomb exploded near a business complex in southern India, the United News of India (UNI) reported today, AFP reports from New Delhi.

Three others were injured in the blast Wednesday at Udumalpet, 60 kilometers (37 miles) from the town of Coimbatore, where some 20 people were killed in Hindu-Muslim violence during the weekend. It was not clear if the explosion was linked to the communal clashes.

**Explosion kills 1 in US:** A pregnant woman was killed early Wednesday when a bomb exploded outside her apartment, apparently as she picked something up off the sidewalk, AP says from Louisiana.

Tammy Lynn Baker, 24, was killed around 4:30 am by a blast that was heard for miles (kilometres) around. It blew off Ms. Baker's hand, blew holes in the front of her apartment and dented a nearby car. "She never knew what hit her," said Louisiana Police Chief Ashland Fortune. Police said they had no suspects.



Former heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali and Miss America 1998 Kate Shindle applaud at the conclusion of the 12th annual Olender Foundation Awards Wednesday at the Kennedy Centre in Washington. Ali received the 1998 Peacemaker Award and Shindle received the 1998 America's Role Model Award during the ceremony. —AP/UNB photo

# Winnie denies charges of assault

JOHANNESBURG, Dec 4: President Nelson Mandela's former wife, Winnie, today took the stand at South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and denied all the charges of assault and murder levelled against her, says Reuter.

Responding for the first time to eight days of relentless testimony of assault, torture and murder by her and her Mandela United Football Club entourage, she dismissed all the allegations as "ludicrous fabrications."

The witnesses described her as leading a double life as a world renowned icon of the struggle against apartheid and as the architect of a reign of terror in Johannesburg's vast Soweto township.

Today, Madikizela-Mandela, 63, said she had never met some of the witnesses who testified that they had lived in her home in 1988 or 1989 and had taken orders from her.

# Tigers decline from 100,000 to less than 7,000

WASHINGTON, Dec 4: The world's tigers, whose worldwide population stood at more than 100,000 at the turn of the century, are disappearing so rapidly they are in danger of vanishing altogether, the National Geographic Society says, reports AP.

In an article in the society's magazine, author Geoffrey Ward says that between 5,000 and 7,000 tigers roam the wild, about half of them in India.

The article calls for "major human intervention" by both the international community and by governments in the 14 countries where the animals still can be found.

# Gurkhas honoured as Britain's most faithful friends

LONDON, Dec 4: Nepalese Gurkha regiments who have served Britain with legendary courage and loyalty for nearly two centuries were honoured Wednesday with a bronze memorial unveiled by Queen Elizabeth II, reports AP.

"Bravest of the brave, most generous of the generous, never had country more faithful friends than you," reads the inscription beneath a 9-foot (3 metre) sculpture of a Gurkha soldier outside the Ministry of Defence in central London.

The Gurkhas had always been there in Britain's hours of need. Field Marshal Lord Bramhall said during the unveiling ceremony.

"Throughout, they have remained unwaveringly loyal despite suffering tens of thousands of casualties. This country owes them a great debt of gratitude. Never has this country had a more faithful friend."



Former Indian Prime Minister I K Gujral talks with President K R Narayanan at a meeting marking the International Day of Disabled Persons in New Delhi Wednesday. Gujral and his outgoing cabinet recommended to the President Wednesday that he call for fresh elections. —AP/UNB photo

# UNSC demands unimpeded access of arms monitors Iraq returns all equipment to suspected sites

BAGHDAD, Dec 4: Iraq said Wednesday it has returned all the machines that were removed from suspected weapons-making sites during the recent standoff with the United Nations, reports AP.

UN inspectors have been told that none of the equipment "was used whatsoever from October 30 to November 22 and that all the adhesive tape, stamps, monitoring material and sensors are safe and sound," said Maj Gen Hussam Mohammed Amin, the director of Iraq's National Monitoring Commission.

In a statement to the official Iraqi News Agency, Amin reported that the cables of two cameras installed by UN inspectors in the State Phosphates' Organisation premises were cut on November 14.

An investigation showed that the cutting was the act of an individual and not something that was ordered by the government, he added. The investigation results have been passed on to the UN Special Commission, according to Amin.

The commission and its inspectors are charged with overseeing the elimination of Iraq's long-range missiles and weapons of mass destruction. Until these arms are destroyed, the UN Security Council says it won't lift the sweeping sanctions imposed on Iraq after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

The sanctions ban the sale of oil, Iraq's economic mainstay, and prohibit air travel to and from the country.

During the three week standoff, triggered by Iraq's decision on October 29 to expel American inspectors, the commission accused Iraq of removing equipment with weapons-making potential from the sites.

Iraq admitted it had done so, but said this was to protect the machines from a possible US air strike.

On Wednesday, Amin told the news agency: "Iraq has completed the process of returning to its original place all the equipment and machinery which was removed last month as a precautionary measure to protect it from a possible aggression."

Also Wednesday, Nils Carlstrom, the head of the UN inspection office in Baghdad, said that since the inspectors resumed their work on November 22, they "have had access to all sites" they approached.

In a separate development, a UN spokesman in New York said Wednesday that scheduling problems have forced the head of the UN weapons inspection programme to postpone his visit to Iraq.

AFP adds: The UN Security Council on Wednesday demanded "unimpeded access" for UN arms inspectors in Iraq attempting to track down weapons of mass destruction.

The 15-member Security Council adopted by consensus a Russian US draft statement warning that an early lifting of sanctions depended on full Iraqi cooperation with the UN inspectors.

The council warned that "the effectiveness and speed with which UNSCOM may accomplish its responsibilities, is above all determined by the degree to which the government of Iraq cooperates" in disclosing details of its banned weaponry.

An early decision by the council to lift the seven-year-old sanctions also depends on Iraq "granting UNSCOM unimpeded access to all sites, documents, records and individuals," it added.

# Algerian troops kill 4 rebels

ALGIERS, Dec 4: Algerian security forces killed four suspected Islamic extremists Wednesday after laying siege to the town of Kartoufia in the hills southwest of Algiers, press reports said, reports AP.

The Algerian newspaper El-Khabar reported today that security forces circled the town, near Tiaret, 200 kilometres (120 miles) southwest of Algiers — after learning of the presence there of suspected armed extremists.

The newspaper Le Matin reported the recent killing of two armed extremists by a self-defence force in the town of Boufarik 20 kilometres (12 miles) south of Algiers.

# Global warming threatens endangered species

KYOTO, Japan, Dec 4: Global warming is threatening the lives of the world's endangered species, including the reindeer, the giant panda and the tiger, the world-wide fund for nature said Wednesday, reports AFP.

As 147 nations gathered here for the 10-day UN conference to tackle global warming, the WWF said climate change caused by global warming "represents a major threat to species and habitats all around the world."

"Many species are being severely hurt, in some cases even going extinct, from global warming now — and that damage will mushroom as every day of inaction goes by," said Adam Markham, director of WWF's climate change campaign.

The fund listed 10 species including plants and natural areas, which it considers the most vulnerable to climate changes caused by global warming.

"The reindeer, or caribou, was being forced by warmer Arctic weather into migrating earlier in the year to find enough food for survival and the giant panda, in particular, is under the threat of extinction as a result of habitat destruction and from illegal poaching."

"Global warming could make the situation worse by altering the forest ecology of the panda habitat. There could be serious consequences for pandas in the coming decades," the fund said.

Two populations of tigers, already facing a high risk of extinction from poaching, are at risk. In Bangladesh rising flood waters are flooding their land, and the forest habitat of the Siberian tiger is changing rapidly and with serious consequences.

# Sharif finds himself at helm of shaken country after Leghari quits

ISLAMABAD, Dec 4: The resignation of President Farooq Leghari may have ended Pakistan's two-month old constitutional battle, but Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif now finds himself at the helm of a badly shaken country, reports Reuter.

"I see it as a total failure of the institutions and democratic culture," Asma Jehangir, noted lawyer and chairwoman of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, said on Wednesday.

"I think we now have to take stock of ourselves before we are forgotten as a nation of fools and become history," she added, the day after Leghari stepped down.

The bitter power struggle pitted Sharif against Leghari and the judiciary, but ended when a number of judges turned against Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah, removing him from office on Wednesday on a technicality and ensuring Sharif's survival.

"The tussle has resolved but leaves behind a crisis of governance and a crisis of rivalry and intrigue," she said.

But the English-language daily The News said it was still too early to assess the issues that lay at the heart of the rift.

"These will no doubt be debated for a long time to come," it said.

"The extent of the damage inflicted by this unprecedented crisis upon the country's fragile institutions, too, will only be evident with the passage of time," it added.

Commonwealth Secretary-General Emeka Anyaoku, who is visiting Islamabad, greeted the resignation as a welcome turn of events.

"I am greatly relieved that the latest developments indicate that the crisis is effectively over," said Anyaoku, who is due to hold talks with Sharif.

The standoff has paralysed Pakistan's political and economic life and stirred widespread apprehension of a military takeover in the country, which has lived under martial law several times in its 50 years of independence.

But several Pakistani newspapers said the restraint shown by the army over recent weeks had in fact saved democracy.

The head of the armed forces, General Jehangir Karamat, held separate talks with Leghari and Sharif earlier and was thought to have mediated to prevent constitutional deadlock.

Army spokesmen have publicly denied that military had designs on power but said Karamat was mediating to prevent an irretrievable breakdown.

"We have been very fortunate this time that there was some silver lining, that they army did not step in... this is for the first time I have seen the army maintain restraint," Jehangir said.

The row itself began in October when Sharif refused to appoint five judges to the Supreme Court on the advice of the then Chief Justice Shah.

Sharif later gave in but was slapped with contempt of court charges by Shah on remarks he made in the Parliament when the court suspended his first piece of legislation.

Leghari had sided with the Chief Justice in a battle over the supremacy of the Supreme Court, which had attempted to overturn a number of constitutional amendments enacted by the Sharif government.

# UNGA agrees to postpone vote on upgrading status of Palestine mission

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 4: The 185-nation UN General Assembly on Wednesday agreed to postpone a vote on upgrading the status of the Palestine mission to the United Nations, reports AP.

UN General Assembly president Hennadiy Udovenko announced during a debate on eight Middle East resolutions, including one on upgrading the observer status of the Palestinian mission, the postponement until next Tuesday of all the votes.

The 15 European Union states had put forward an amendment seeking to delay a decision by asking UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to produce a report on the issue.

European delegates said that if approved as drafted, the draft resolution providing for the Palestinian upgrade would have a status which is not in the UN Charter.

One European diplomat said that "the Palestinians would have a status superior to that of the Vatican and Switzerland," if the resolution was adopted.

Udovenko's spokesman Alexander Tsakatchi said that the decision was taken after consultations with various regional groups, as "all kinds of problems" had emerged.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with his top aides Wednesday to draw up maps for a limited transfer of more West Bank land to the Palestinians which he hopes to sell to world leaders as an honest bid to break the deadlock in the peace process.

But he said the project would not be ready for presentation to

# Fighting on in northern Lanka

COLOMBO, Dec 4: Sri Lankan troops backed by war planes were fighting pitched battles with Tamil Tiger rebels in the north today, military officials said, reports Reuter.

"Intense fighting has been reported this morning. It is still continuing. Ground troops are being supported by the Sri Lanka air force and artillery," military spokesman Brigadier Sarath Munasinghe told reporters.

He said fighting was taking place in the Wanni region north of the government-held frontier town of Vaunniya, but declined to give details citing security reasons.

Troops have been fighting for control of a key northern highway, which would give them road access to the former rebel stronghold of Jaffna Peninsula where half a million Tamils live.



A forest fire sweeps over Scotsman Hill on the edge of the Australian county town of Lithgow, 120 kilometres (75 miles) west of Sydney, Wednesday. More than 150 fires continue to burn in the state of New South Wales including this fire that claimed the lives of 2 firefighters Tuesday. —AP/UNB photo

# Hutus attack prisons, free 507 comrades

KIGALI, Dec 4: Hutu rebels attacked a second prison in as many days Wednesday, authorities said, freeing 507 of their comrades in what appeared to be a new strategy in a simmering conflict, reports AP.

The attack on a prison at Bulinga, 50 kilometres (30 miles) northwest of Kigali, came a day after 103 inmates were set free by a group of about 400 rebels who raided the Rwereze prison, on the border with Congo.

Col Balthazar Ndengeyinka, a local military commander, said the early Wednesday attack was swift and successful — most of the prisoners had escaped and at least three soldiers were wounded.

Attacks on prisons appear to be a new weapon in an undeclared war between Hutu rebels and Rwanda's Tutsi-led government.

The Hutu rebels appear to be using attacks on prisons to free jailed comrades, many of whom have been arrested on genocide-related charges from the country's 1994 Hutu massacre of 500,000 minority Tutsis. At least 120,000 people are awaiting trial.

Wednesday's attack was the boldest yet since the return late last year of nearly two million Hutus from Congo, Tanzania and Burundi, where they fled in fear of reprisals for the genocide.

Authorities say rebels bent on destabilizing the country have mixed with civilians. Since the mass return, barely a week passes without a rebel attack.

The human rights organisation Amnesty International has estimated 6,000 people have been killed by both the rebels and the army since the beginning of the year.