

**BRIEFLY**



Former President Corazon Aquino joins hands with Manila Mayor Alfredo Lim, who is celebrating his 68th birthday, during a mass yesterday at the Manila City Hall. Lim a lawyer and former police general became known as the "Dirty Harry of the Philippines" for his tough-talk and equally tough measures against criminals which critics claim violate human rights. Lim declared his ambition to run in the May 1998 presidential election. — AP/UNB photo

**Laotians vote for new parliament:** With all the candidates approved in advance by the ruling communist party, Laotians voted Sunday for a new parliament that is expected to continue gradual changes toward a more open economy, AP says from Vientiane.

Bars closed an hour earlier than usual Saturday night to ensure the 150,000 residents of Vientiane, the capital, got a good night's sleep before the polls opened at 7 am. The police presence was heavier in the days preceding the election. The streets of the capital were crowded with pedestrians Sunday morning as voters made their way to schools and temples to cast ballots. Photographs and biographies of the candidates were posted outside to help make last-minute decisions.

**Qian arrives in Syria:** Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen arrived in Syria on Saturday for talks with the Syrian government on the Mideast peace process and bilateral relations, AP says from Damascus.

"China has no initiative, but we will do our utmost to push the peace process forward," Qian told reporters at the airport in Damascus. Qian, who flew in from Lebanon for a two-day visit, is on the second leg of a regional tour aimed at boosting China's ties with the Middle East. After Syria, he is scheduled to visit Israel, Egypt and the Palestinian self-rule areas in the West Bank.

**US scientist killed in air crash:** US astrophysicist David Schramm has died in a plane crash outside Denver, Colorado, the University of Chicago said Saturday, AFP reports from Washington.

Schramm, 52, was piloting his twin-engine plane from Chicago to Aspen, Colorado on Friday when the accident occurred. The cause of the crash is under investigation. The scientist was a leader in the field of theoretical astrophysics and an expert in the "big bang" model of how the universe was formed, the university said in a press release.

**Fire ruins 113 stores in Japan:** A pre dawn fire burned down a total of 113 wholesale stores in Tokyo's major market at Tsukiji yesterday, police said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

More than 80 firefighters were mobilised to extinguish the fire, which broke out at around 3:30 am (1830 GMT, Saturday), they said. It destroyed some 200 square metres of the 230,000 square metre (2.5 million square foot) market, one of the world's largest wholesale markets for marine products.

**5 Indian cops charged with murder:** India's central investigation agency has charged five New Delhi policemen with a cold-blooded murder, the Hindu newspaper reported yesterday, AFP reports from New Delhi.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) on Saturday said the victim, Madan Lal, was killed in police custody in November 1993. The CBI said the policemen tortured the victim, hit him on his genitals and killed him and then tried to hush up his death.

**Farrakhan arrives in Libya:** Louis Farrakhan, the controversial US black leader, has arrived in Libya on a visit the US State Department has termed ill-advised, AP says from Cairo.

Farrakhan earlier stopped in Iraq — like Libya under UN sanctions — as part of what he claims to be a 52-nation tour. State Department officials urged Farrakhan, who heads the Nations of Islam, to avoid these countries, saying his visit could be used for anti-American propaganda.

**300 kg cannabis seized in HK:** Police said Sunday they have arrested two men and seized 300 kilograms (660 pounds) of herbal cannabis worth 15 million Hong Kong dollars (US dollars 1.9 million), AP says from Hong Kong.

The drugs, believed to have been smuggled in from Cambodia via China, were seized in a factory Saturday, police said. The suspects, whose names were not disclosed, will be charged with trafficking in dangerous drugs, they said.

**Charles to visit Nepal in Feb:** Prince Charles will visit the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal in February, as a guest of Crown Prince Dipendra, AP says from London.

**Arafat blasts Netanyahu for saying West Bank part of Israel**

CAIRO, Dec 21: Palestinian President Yasser Arafat criticised Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Saturday for saying the West Bank was part of Israel, reports Reuters.

"The most dangerous thing that happened since my meeting with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was the serious statement by Netanyahu that the West Bank was considered part of the Jewish state," Arafat told reporters in Cairo.

Netanyahu said in a speech to an international Jewish media conference in Jerusalem on Friday that the West Bank was "part of Israel proper."

He said most European countries interpreted Israel's struggle in terms of their own colonial past.

"Most of them think that Judea and Samaria is some colony like Algeria or possessions in Africa and of course neither is true, neither is the geographic or in the strategic or in the national sense," the Israeli prime minister said.

"We don't have a body of water separating Judea and Samaria — The West Bank — from Israel proper. It is part of Israel proper. It's our backyard," he added.

Arafat was speaking after briefing Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on his talks on

Europe this week with Albright, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and European Union officials.

Asked about Netanyahu's statement, Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa told reporters separately that it would be a "great apostasy" from the principles of Middle East peace-making based on the return of occupied land for peace.

Arafat said the West Bank was Palestinian land occupied by Israel since the 1967 Middle East war and its return was envisaged under UN Security Council resolutions.

**Serbia holds presidential polls again**

BELGRADE, Dec 21: In an effort to defuse an apparent political impasse, Serbia attempts for the fourth time Sunday to fill the presidential post left vacant by strongman Slobodan Milosevic, reports AP.

The race has boiled down to two candidates — Milosevic's fellow Socialist, Yugoslav Foreign Minister Milan Milutinovic, and the outspoken ultra-nationalist head of the Radical Party, Vojislav Seselj.

**GCC summit opens with scorn for Iraq, praise for Iran**

KUWAIT, Dec 21: Kuwait's leader lashed out at Iraq during an Arab summit, charging Saddam Hussein with bringing suffering on his own people by refusing to fully comply with UN weapons inspectors, report AP.

But the emir, in his welcoming address to five other leaders of the GCC, praised Iran, which many Arab states have viewed warily amid allegations that it exports Islamic revolution.

"The Iraqi regime is still trying to evade the international resolutions," Sheik Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah told leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council on Saturday.

By such evasion, the Baghdad government caused the UN trade sanctions to be maintained and inflicted "suffering on the brotherly Iraqi people," the emir told officials gathered at Bayan Palace.

The United Nations imposed an oil embargo and other economic sanctions on Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which touched off the Gulf War. The world organisation has said the sanctions will remain in place until UN inspectors certify Iraq has eliminated its weapons of mass destruction.

Iraq says it has complied but UN officials dispute the claim. Meanwhile, international aid agencies say Iraq is suffering shortages of food and medicine.

The emir praised the role of Iran in last week's Organisation of the Islamic Conference summit in Tehran, saying the Iranian government had launched a "new era" of neighbourly relations in the Gulf.

Turning to the Middle East peace process, the emir said there could be no peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without "the return of all occupied lands, and the setting up of a Palestinian state with holy Jerusalem as its capital."

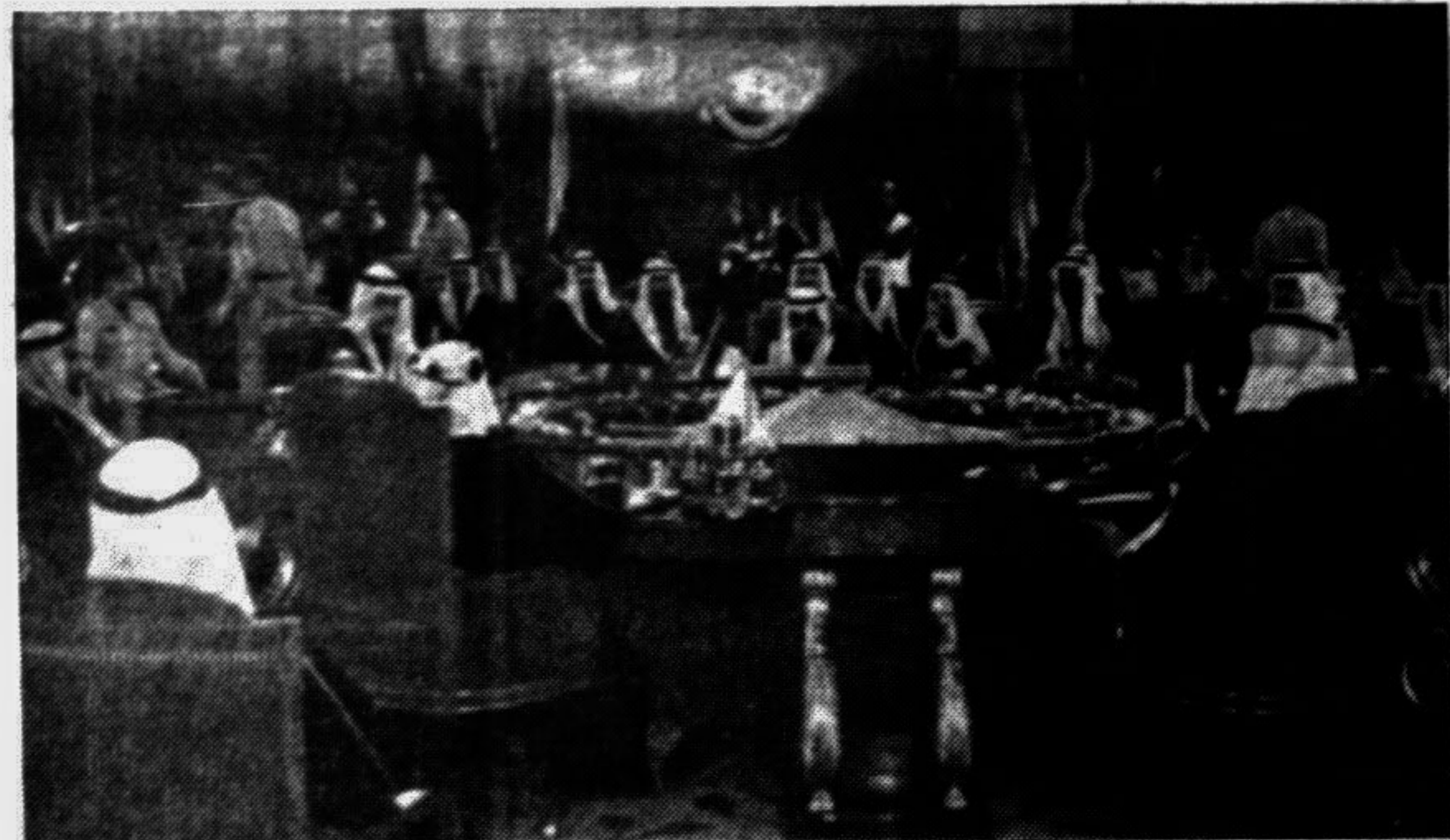
The GCC — which comprises Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman,

Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates — is organised to bolster trade and political ties among the six nations on the Arabian peninsula. But the group has recently been accused of not moving fast enough toward that goal.

A former Kuwaiti education minister, Ahmed al-Rubel, wrote in the Al-Qabas newspaper here this week that the 16-year alliance was moving "at the pace of a turtle."

A Kuwaiti public relations officer, Osama Safa, told the Associated Press that "the only tangible achievement I can see is that they have allocated a separate passport counter for GCC nationals at the airports."

GCC Secretary-General Jamil al-Hojjailan said the summit would discuss moves to force employers to give preference to GCC nationals and made it unnecessary for citizens to fill in immigration forms when traveling between member states.



Leaders attend the opening session of the 18th summit of GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states Saturday, at Bayan Palace, Bayan, Kuwait City. Kuwait's emir opened the summit of six Gulf states, pouring scorn on Iraq and praising Iran for its new friendliness toward its neighbours. — AP/UNB photo

**To protest against illegal immigrants Assam students vow to launch movement ahead of elections**

GUWAHATI, India, Dec 21: Students in India's restive northeastern state of Assam, protesting against illegal immigrants and loss of cultural identity, vowed today to launch a movement ahead of spring elections, reports Reuters.

The All Assam Students Union (AASU), which led a powerful political movement in the seventies and the eighties against the inflow of illegal immigrants into the state, accused New Delhi and the state government of neglecting the region.

"AGP (Assam Gana Parishad) has failed miserably. It has been given ample opportuni-

ties," Sarbananda Sonowal, President of AASU, told Reuters. "We want right over our land... safeguards to protect our culture, economy."

Assam's ruling AGP was born out of AASU after the federal government signed an agreement with the student group in 1985.

But Sonowal accused AGP led by Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, a former AASU president and a product of the powerful movement spearheaded by the students' group in the seventies and the eighties, of letting down the people of Assam.

"There is no faith left in the AGP, people of Assam are looking for a new idea, a group of people with fresh zeal, a vision to rejuvenate Assam," Sonowal said.

He said the government must delete the name of illegal immigrants from the voters list before the general elections, scheduled to be held in February-March.

AASU says that there has been large scale illegal immigration into Assam.

AASU leaders say illegal immigrants number about four million in the state's total population of about 25 million.

**Iraq won't remain idle if US obstructs path to lift embargo**

BAGHDAD, Dec 21: Iraq will not remain idle if the United States continues to place obstacles in the path of the lifting of UN sanctions on Baghdad, an Iraqi spokesman said on Saturday, reports Reuters.

"Iraq will not remain idle with folded arms while the American game continues to win time and keep the subject [of sanctions on Iraq] suspended from one month to another and from one year to another," the spokesman said in a statement carried by the Iraqi News Agency (INA).

INA said the statement was made after a meeting chaired by President Saddam Hussein and attended by three top Iraqi leaders.

Iraq has banned the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) in charge of dismantling Iraq's weapons of mass destruction from checking president sites, saying they are vital to its national security and sovereignty.

"The inspectors are trying to verify whether Iraq has complied with Security Council resolutions to scrap its ballistic, biological and chemical weapons. Arms compliance is a key demand before sanctions, imposed after Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, can be lifted."

They Iraqi spokesman said when Iraq accepted Russian

mediation to defuse a crisis over weapons inspections it had in mind "to give a chance to deal with the cause of our people in an objective way that will lead to an end to the sanctions in a full and comprehensive manner."

"We did not have in mind to end the crisis and push the cause of our people only into dark tunnels of ill-intentioned parties in the Security Council," the statement added.

Russia brokered an agreement with Baghdad in November to defuse the crisis with the United Nations, sparked by Iraq's expulsion of American members of UN inspection teams in October.



South African Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, left, the newly elected president of the African National Congress holds Nelson Mandela's hand up in the air while in his other hand he holds a walking stick that Nelson Mandela presented him with Saturday during the ANC's 50th general congress held in Mafeking. — AP/UNB photo

**Trustees of will of Diana to sue owner of Hotel Ritz**

LONDON, Dec 21: The trustees of the will of the late Diana, Princess of Wales, are preparing to sue the Hotel Ritz in Paris owned by Egyptian businessman Mohammed Al-Fayed, for damages over her premature death, the Sunday Times reported, reports AP.

The paper said the decision would depend on the outcome of the French investigation into the August 31 car crash in which Al-Fayed's son Dodi and driver Henri Paul were also killed.

If the probe concludes that Paul, the Ritz's security official was to blame for the accident, lawyers planned to file a suit against his employers.

Diana's mother Francis Shand-Kydd and her sister Lady Sarah McCorquodale who are among the trustees, have already taken steps to secure access to the legal file.

**Intel CEO named Time magazine's 'Man of the Year'**

NEW YORK, Dec 21: The name is unknown, but his products are ubiquitous, reports AP.

Intel Chairman Andrew Grove, whose innovative use of microchip technology helped change the computer industry, was named Saturday as Time magazine's "Man of the Year."

Grove, a Holocaust survivor who arrived in America as a penniless refugee in 1956, earned the 71st annual honour for his work as chairman and CEO of Intel Corp. His company produces nearly 90 per cent of the planet's personal computer microprocessors.

Grove, 61, joins an elite group of honourees stretching from the first winner, Charles Lindbergh in 1927, to last year's winner, AIDS researcher Dr. David Ho.

**Mandela steps down as ANC chief**

MAFIKENG, South Africa, Dec 21: Nelson Mandela has relinquished control of ruling ANC as he heads to retirement, bowing out with a speech that has rekindled argument over how reconciled South Africa's races really are, reports Reuters.

At the 50th conference of the African National Congress, Mandela handed leadership to his deputy Thabo Mbeki and with it a bitter pill for the white minority population to swallow.

They were told that if they thought apartheid was over and that they had done their bit for the new South Africa by ceding political power in 1994, they must radically think again.

**Tamil parties consider LTTE-called boycott of Jaffna polls**

COLOMBO, Dec 21: Tamil political parties were considering a rebel-ordered boycott of local elections in the northern Jaffna peninsula, a party official said Sunday, potentially delaying government plans to devolve power to the region, reports AP.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam last week sent letters to government officials ordering them to boycott the elections in the peninsula, captured by the Sri Lankan military over the last two years.

Most of the isolated northern peninsula is under the military's control, but sporadic attacks by rebel infiltrators are common.

The Tamil political parties are currently discussing whether to go ahead with the election or to boycott it," S Sivasithamparan, a Tamil lawmaker, told The Associated Press in a telephone interview Sunday.

Nominations for the election to area and town councils in the peninsula opened last week, but no political parties had submitted names by Friday.

It will be the first election in 14 years in the area most affected by the rebel war for an independent state. The government hopes to address minority Tamil grievances by devolving wide powers to nine regions, including a Tamil dominated one.

The political parties have asked president Chandrika Kumaratunga to postpone the elections to local councils in the northern Jaffna peninsula, but have yet to receive a reply said Sivasithamparan of the Tamil United Liberation Front.

The military is currently trying to capture a highway which would link the mainland with the peninsula, accessible at present only by sea and air.

The Tigers, recently branded a terrorist organisation by the United States, are fighting for a separate homeland for minority Tamils in the Indian Ocean island nation's north and east. They claim the Tamils are discriminated against by the majority Sinhalese, who control the government and the military.

More than 51,000 people have been killed in the civil war which began in 1983.

**Relations between Koreans likely to improve next year**

SEOUL, Dec 21: Frosty relations between South and North Korea are expected to see some improvement next year when newly-elected President Kim Dae-jung takes power, analysts and government officials said.

"I think we can expect some progress in our relations with North Korea. Until now they have been reluctant to meet with the current administration, but now I think they will be more willing," a government official told AFP today.

"It might be too early to predict, but a summit between the next president and north Korean leader, Kim Jong-Il is not out of the question," said the official, who is involved in South-North Korea affairs.

North Korea did not comment on Kim's victory immediately after Thursday's election, but broke its silence Sunday with a brief report.

The South's official Naewoe press monitor quoted Pyongyang radio as saying "South Korea could have a power transfer as a result of a presidential election held Thursday."

"But the president-elect is to face a slew of difficult tasks ahead, South Korean and foreign press organisations reported," the radio said. It did not mention Kim by name.

Kim 73, a veteran opposition leader and former dissident, has proposed a summit with the north's leader Kim Jong-Il to restore a landmark peace agreement signed between the two Koreans in 1992.

"Through direct dialogue with the north, we shall search for a way to settle the problems between our two separate people," said Kim, who takes office on February 25.

The 1992 agreement on non-aggression, exchanges, reconciliation and cooperation was touted as a historic accord when it was signed, but its implementation has been frozen mainly because of deep-rooted mistrust between the two Koreans.

Newspapers here also said the 73-year-old Kim was expected to take a more active approach in dealing with communist North Korea, especially when offering aid to help the starving nation.

**Parties putting aside ideology, making alliances Indian voters to face maze of alphabets, symbols in polls next year**

NEW DELHI, Dec 21: Voters in the world's biggest election in India next year will have to find their way through a maze of alphabets and poll symbols with political parties rushing into marriages of convenience, reports India Abroad News Service.

At last count, three main umbrella formations were readying to enter the fray to woo the estimated 600 million people eligible to choose India's new government some time in February-March 1998.

Putting aside ideological sensitivities, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Congress and the centre-left United Front (UF) combine were busy notching up alliances with groups, some of them with fewer leaders than the letters in their acronyms.

The BJP was tying up with regional and breakaway groups in south and eastern India, while the Congress had become part of the alternative anti-BJP "secular" front launched by former JD chief Laloo Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya (national) Janata Dal (RJD).

Yadav, on parole after a four-month jail term for his alleged role in the Bihar government financial fiddles, was making things difficult for the UF. He had announced a list of prospective allies and was due

to meet them in the capital.

The 14 parties in the UF were, however, sticking together. Although the UF was threatened in eastern Bihar by Yadav's desertion, it was heartened by the decision of Defence Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party (SP) to reject Congress overtures.

A knotty issue before the UF was the candidature of Prime Minister I K Gujral who is keen on contesting from his home town of Jalandhar in northern Punjab with the backing of the ruling Akali Dal, a BJP ally.

But the UF leadership is said to have put its foot down on Gujral accepting the Akali Dal's offer to ensure him a win to express Punjab's "gratitude" to India's first Prime Minister from the province. Gujral has since declared that he has still not made up his mind about contesting the Lok Sabha, lower house of Parliament, election.

The Prime Minister is a member of the indirectly elected upper house, Rajya Sabha and his term expires next year.

The BJP was also on an alliance forming spree having pulled off a surprise match with former Congress ally, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), in southern Tamil Nadu. The latest party to be roped in by the BJP

was the new-born Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in eastern coastal Orissa state hived off from the parent Janata Dal (JD), the main UF partner, by the son of the state's late charismatic leader Biju Patnaik.

Also heading for the BJP was another former JD leader, Ramakrishna Hegde whose Lok Shakti (People's Power) outfit in southern Karnataka state had spurned offers to join the secular front led by the Congress-RJD combine.

Addressing a conclave of the top BJP leadership in the Orissa capital Bhubaneswar, party president L K Advani said the tie-up with the BJD in Orissa "best symbolises the dramatic realignment of political forces, now in the making in all parts of India." He assured the leaders that the party would bag more allies in south and eastern India, areas where the BJP is still to make its electoral presence.

However, BJP hopes of winning over firebrand West Bengal Congress leader Mamata Banerjee got a setback with Banerjee reported to have been persuaded by Rajiv Gandhi's widow Sonia, not to desert the party in the eastern border state.

The BJP also lost out to the Congress in its former stronghold in western coastal Gujarat with the latter expected tying up with the break-

**Off the Record Mad rush for Superman's cape!**

NEW YORK: Not quite as fast as a speeding bullet, but still pretty quick, a surprise bidder flagged a taxi cab and rushed to Sotheby's auction house on Saturday just in time to buy Superman's cape, reports AP.

Swedish computer executive Stefan Hallin only heard about the Hollywood and rock 'n' roll memorabilia auction that morning while watching television during breakfast in his Manhattan hotel room.

"I rushed into a cab and got here in time, fortunately," he said after bidding 17,000 dollars for the Superman cape Christopher Reeve wore in the 1978 film. He also bought the maroon Star Fleet uniform jacket William Shatner wore in the 1965 film, "Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan." The price tag: 11,000 dollars.

The 28-year-old from Gothenburg joked that he may wear the Superman cape as "a robe in the morning." Hallin's said his next conquest involves a trip to Russia, where he hopes to buy spacesuits worn by famous cosmonauts.

**Cash crunch hits 'Bollywood'**

NEW DELHI: Film shoots in India's "Bollywood" film industry were deluged by about 70 per cent due to a cash crunch. The Times of India said Sunday, reports AP.

A report from the western city of Bombay, India's film capital, said there were hardly any new ventures.

"There is hardly any Hindi film being shot these days. The only shooting you may see are of films which are in the process of completion," GP Shirke, chief of the filmmakers' combined said.

Shirke blamed the funds squeeze on a spate of recent flops and fear of Bombay's underworld, which has been blamed for the murder of two Bombay film producers, an abortive murder bid on a director, intimidation and extortion.

"A majority of films have not done well," Shirke said. "There are a few exceptions like 'Ishq' (love) and 'Dil To Pagal Hai' (the heart is crazy). However, neither distributors nor financiers are satisfied with the overall performance of the Hindi film market."

Industry sources in Bombay, which accounts for a majority of the 800 films made in India every year, said distributors had lost about 500 million rupees (12m dollars) in recent month.