

US-led arms inspectors leave Baghdad ending standoff

BAGHDAD, Jan 16: The US-led UN team of arms inspectors left Baghdad on Friday, ending a standoff with Iraqi officials who had refused to let it work.

UN officials said the team had planned to leave Iraq anyway and insisted the departure was not a surrender to Iraqi pressure.

"We will be back," said Scott Ritter, the US inspector Iraq accused of spying for the United States.

Ritter and 15 other team members left the Iraqi capital by road for an air base at Habaniya, 65 kilometres (40 miles) west of Baghdad. They were to fly to Bahrain and then New York.

Iraq's ban on Ritter's team doing its work began Monday. Iraqi officials said the team included too many US and British inspectors. Other UN teams have continued their tasks.

Ritter's team could have stayed longer, but UN officials decided against it since the team was unable to work, said

Charles Duelfer, the deputy chief of the inspection programme.

"We had thought about keeping him there if we were making progress with the Iraqis, but we weren't so what was the point," Duelfer said Thursday in New York. "Other people on the team had other obligations, so logistically it would have been difficult to keep them there much longer."

A Washington official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Duelfer's boss, Richard Butler, made a "pragmatic decision."

The UN Security Council ordered the destruction of Iraq's nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programmes as a condition for ending the 1991 Gulf War. UN officials report progress in eliminating the nuclear and chemical programmes but suspect Iraq is holding back considerable information on biological weaponry.

Butler left New York on Thursday for Baghdad to de-

mand full access to all sites.

He was expected to stop in Paris for talks with French officials, who have offered additional French inspectors. Russia's defence minister said his government would provide surveillance planes to replace American U-2s. Iraq has insisted that the U-2s be replaced. In Beijing, Chinese spokesman Shen Guofang appealed to Iraq to cooperate with the inspectors but also suggested that inspectors should heed Iraqi sensitivities.

On Thursday, Butler said the team led by Ritter had been pursuing suspicions that Iraq's tested chemical and biological weapons on prisoners several years ago.

UN spokesmen said pictures showing beagles writhing in agony from chemical and biological agents and a human arm covered with lesions provided no conclusive proof that Iraq had performed such experiments.

Iraqi UN Ambassador Nizar Hamdoun and Iraq's deputy

prime minister, Tariq Aziz, have denied that any experiments were performed on humans.

US awaiting for result of Butler's visit

Reuter adds: President Bill Clinton says the United States is awaiting the results of a visit by Chief UN Arms Inspector Richard Butler to Baghdad next week before making a decision on any action against Iraq for blocking an inspection team led by an American.

Iraq has prevented the inspectors led by Scott Ritter, a former US marine captain, but not other teams, from doing their work. Ritter's group was blocked on Tuesday and Wednesday, and on Thursday Butler told members not to make another attempt.

Clinton said on Thursday he was encouraged that UN allies sympathetic to easing trade sanctions on Iraq viewed Baghdad's latest refusal to cooperate with UN arms inspectors as "totally unacceptable."



Dwarfed by portraits of her husband, Rajiv Gandhi, and mother-in-law, Indira Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi addressed a large rally in Bangalore Thursday. Both Rajiv and her mother were assassinated. Sonia was urged by Congress Party leaders to campaign for them as the party suffered the absence of a charismatic leader and hence wanted to make use of the Gandhi family name, which has a large support base in India. — AP/UNB photo

Clinton signs N-cooperation pact with China

NEW YORK, Jan 16: President Bill Clinton has signed a nuclear cooperation pact with China that certifies Beijing has met non-proliferation requirements and clears the way for new US business deals, the White House said Thursday, reports AP.

This agreement serves US national security and economic interests and demonstrates that the administration's policy of engaging China is achieving concrete result, a White House statement said.

Clinton signed the agreement on January 12, according to the statement released here where the president was travelling.

Clinton announced in October during the US visit of Chinese President Jiang Zemin that he planned to lift the ban on nuclear cooperation with China.

Explosives found on road Sonia to use

HYDERABAD, Jan 16: In a security lapse, road workers in the southern city of Hyderabad left a large quantity of explosives on a street on which Sonia Gandhi, widow of assassinated prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, was to pass on her way to a campaign rally Friday, reports AP.

Security experts see Sonia Gandhi as one of India's most threatened individuals. Her husband Rajiv Gandhi and her mother-in-law Indira Gandhi, both former Indian prime ministers, were assassinated.

The anti-sabotage squad of the Hyderabad police recovered a large quantity of explosives, including gelatin sticks and electric detonators from a pit on the road connecting Hyderabad's airport to the Nizam College grounds, the venue of the election rally. Hyderabad is 1,225 kilometres (735 miles) south of New Delhi.

Jyoti Basu's Trinamool Co. as "communal"

CALCUTTA, Jan 16: The veteran CPI(M) leader, Jyoti Basu, Thursday described the Trinamool Congress as "communal" and said that its leader, Mamata Banerjee, had exposed the party's secular pretensions by siding with the BJP, reports PTI.

"There was a time when we thought a united Congress in West Bengal was good as it would spare us from handling rowdiness by various factions, now we think that a divided Congress is better as the secular pretensions of both the factions are exposed," Basu said at an election rally here yesterday evening.

Deviating from his earlier stand that the Congress was secular, Basu said that both the Pradesh Congress and the Trinamool were harbouring communal elements. "At least (the Trinamool) has exposed itself by siding with the BJP,"

Police detect explosives on bus in Colombo

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka, Jan 16: Police said Friday they may have averted another attack on Colombo when they found about 30 kilograms (66 pounds) of explosives on a bus in the city centre, reports AP.

"We are maintaining maximum possible alert to thwart any more attempts by the terrorists to strike terror," said Superintendent of Police Henry Perera.

He said bags police found behind a bus driver's seat Thursday were examined and found to contain high powered explosives.

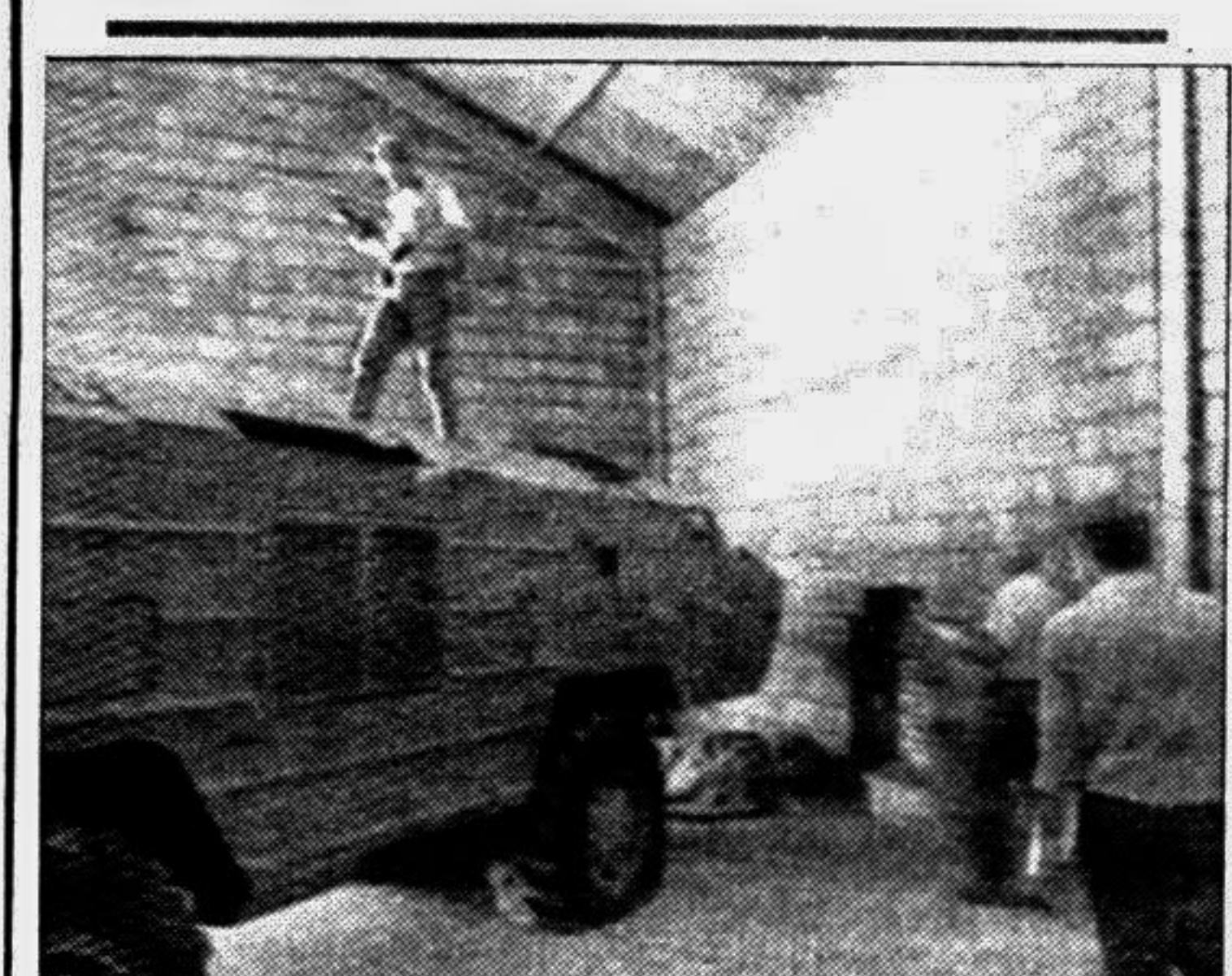
The driver was being questioned, Perera said.

Sri Lankan Police routinely search vehicles and residents in Colombo.



A model displays a long dress through dress designed by Hong Kong designer William Tang during the Asian Fashion Designer's Show, Friday. Tang is aiming for a slim unisex look with clean lines and feminine fluidity. The show is part of the annual Hong Kong Fashion Week for Fall/Winter '98. — AP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY



Iraqi weapons inspectors prepare to take down notes on an Iraqi mobile missile launcher they discovered which they claim was concealed from them at other sites they inspected in Iraq in this video released by the United Nations. The vehicle was suspected of having the capacity to launch biological and chemical weapons. The UN did not provide a dateline for this photo nor a date when it was taken. — AP/UNB photo

Naxalities kill Congress leader: Naxalites of the banned People's War Group (PWG) shot dead a Congress leader at Kallakonda village in Mahabubnagar district of Andhra Pradesh (AP) on Thursday, PTI reports from Hyderabad.

Police said the ultras stopped the Congress leader G Krishna Reddy while he was going on a scooter along with another person to Amanagall village and shot him dead.

Landslide in Peru claims 15: Fifteen people were killed in this week's landslide in southern Peru triggered by heavy El Nino rain and flooding a congressman from the area said Thursday, AFP reports from Lima.

Rigoberto Esquerre said 15 people were killed Wednesday in Santa Teresa and neighbouring Yanatile about 70 km from the ancient Inca ruins at Machu Picchu.

US aid for Chinese quake victims: The United States yesterday turned over 40 tonnes of relief supplies and 25,000 dollars in cash aid for the victims of an earthquake that killed 50 people northeast of Beijing last weekend, the US Embassy said, AFP reports from Beijing.

Drawn from military stocks, the supplies include blankets, warm clothing, sleeping bags, rations and medical supplies.

5 killed in Philippine clash: Four rebels and one soldier were killed in a clash between the Philippine government troops and the rebel Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) Thursday in southern Mindanao Island, local press reports said Friday, Xinhua reports from Manila.

Maj Rosque Garingalao, spokesman of an army division based in Cotabato province, was quoted as saying the MILF rebels fired 12 rounds of mortar shells at a government post, killing the soldier. Government troops fired back with artillery rounds and two helicopter gunships rained rockets on the rebel positions in Buldon city in Cotabato, leaving four rebel fighters dead.

2 soldiers killed in E Timor: Two soldiers of an Indonesian government militia have been killed by rebels in the troubled province of East Timor, the official Antara News agency said yesterday, AFP reports from Jakarta.

The soldiers, both East Timorese, were killed in an ambush Wednesday as they were escorting a local official who was not injured in the attack, the news agency quoted Col Slamet Sibadue as saying. He blamed the attack on the East Timor Liberation Front.

15 executed in China: China has executed 15 people in the southern Chinese boomtown of Shenzhen for crimes ranging from murder to armed robbery, the Hong Kong-based Ta Kung Pao newspaper said yesterday, Reuters reports from Hong Kong.



Taliban officials and Pakistan's paramilitary officials loading the dead bodies in helicopter on Wednesday in Khojak Quetta, southwestern Pakistan. Afghan cargo plane, Russian-made aircraft, carrying 51 passengers crash due to heavy fog and fuel shortage near Quetta Tuesday. — AP/UNB photo

Beirut govt ready to take over S Lebanon

JERUSALEM, Jan 16: Lebanon's leader are ready to deploy their army right down to the Israeli border if Israel withdraws its forces from south Lebanon, an Israeli newspaper said Thursday, reports AP.

Such a redeployment would mean that Lebanese government forces are ready to disarm Hezbollah, the Shi'ite Muslim guerrilla group that has repeatedly clashed with Israeli troops.

Lebanon's president, prime minister, foreign minister and parliament speaker made the redeployment pledge in separate meetings with visiting French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine, the daily Haaretz said, quoting French diplomatic sources.

Vedrine was in Lebanon on Monday.

Israel occupies a strip of land in south Lebanon to protect its northern towns and villages against attacks by the Iranian-backed Hezbollah.

The Israeli government maintains that Israeli troops can only pull out of Lebanon as part of a negotiated peace agreement with both Lebanon and Syria, the main power bro-

ker in Lebanon. Iranian supplies for Hezbollah are routed through Syria.

In a deviation from government policy, Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai has recently advocated an Israeli withdrawal in return for a Lebanese government commitment to deploy its army in the south and stop the guerrilla attacks.

Mordechai said Thursday he believes the Lebanese government is ready to deploy its troops right down to the border, but Syria does not allow it to do so.

Mordechai said he asked Western countries to strengthen Lebanon and encourage it to "take independent decisions."

If Israel withdraws, the UN peacekeeping force in south Lebanon could be moved to the international border within a week, UN spokesman Timor Goksel said Thursday.

The Shi'ite Muslim Amal militia group claimed responsibility for the bomb, which critically wounded an intelligence officer of the Israeli-backed South Lebanon Army militia.

Baltic leaders to sign accord with US

WASHINGTON, Jan 16: Leaders of the Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia on Thursday said a partnership agreement to be signed Friday with the United States is a crucial step in their quest to join NATO, the European Union, and other Western organisations, reports AP.

The charter recognises the role of the Baltic states in the American strategy of maintaining security and stability on the European continent, said Estonian President Lennart Meri.

He was referring to the US-Baltic Charter of Partnership which the three leaders and President Bill Clinton will sign in the White House Friday.

The document contains a commitment to strengthen US political and economic ties with the three Baltic nations and to assist with their integration into the transatlantic community. It also provides for an ongoing dialogue with Washington on security and other matters.

But the non-binding agreement, which will not require Senate ratification, stops short of guaranteeing the security of the three countries. And in an effort to avoid antagonizing Russia — which strongly opposes the expansion of NATO to its borders — the document pointedly avoids setting a timetable for their membership in the Western alliance.

On Monday, a US government official noted that the charter does not guarantee

membership in NATO, that being a decision for all the allies to consider.

"It's a framework for the development of our relations and a clear statement of our support for Baltic integration," said James P. Rubin, State Department spokesman.

The charter was hammered out after a NATO summit in Madrid last summer invited Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary to join the alliance, and left the door open for Slovenia and Romania.

But the three Baltic states, which broke free when the Soviet Union disintegrated and which have been striving for membership to guarantee their security, were placed on the back burner after Moscow objected to their inclusion.

"The next big challenge to NATO is the Baltic issue," Meri said.

The Baltic states' aim to join the EU and NATO represented the "logical conclusion" of the end of the Cold War, he said, adding that the charter would "effectively banish" the idea that a permanent buffer zone of neutral countries should exist between NATO and Russia.

Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania were overrun by the Red Army in 1940 and annexed as republics of the Soviet Union. The United States never recognised the occupation, and embassies of the three nations continued functioning in Washington.

Police deployed in Pakistan to prevent sectarian violence

ISLAMABAD, Jan 16: Police in helmets and bullet proof vests, brandishing automatic rifles, stood guard outside mosques and religious schools throughout the country on Friday, the Muslim sabbath, to prevent violence between protesting militants of rival Islamic sects, reports AP.

While Pakistan's majority Sunni Muslims have no grudge against their Shi'ite brethren, militant members of the two sects have carried out vicious attacks.

The worst was last Sunday when 28 Shi'ite Muslims at a cemetery in the heart of Lahore were gunned down. An old woman and an infant were among the dead.

Both sects are organising demonstrations Friday — Shi'ite Muslims to protest the mass killing, Sunni Muslims to protest the arrest of hundreds of their workers and top leaders in connection with the killing.

We want the government to release more than 500 of our workers picked up from different parts of the country," said Sheikh Hakim Ali, a leader of

the militant Sipha-e-Sahabah or Guardians of the Friends of the Prophet.

Ali's group, which has declared that Shi'ites are non-Muslims, has been linked to dozens of attacks against Pakistan's minority Shi'ite community.

The attacks launched by both sects have been brutal.

Grenades have been thrown into mosques, members of rival sects have been pulled off buses and shot, worshippers have been gunned down as they knelt in prayer.

In the federal capital of Islamabad, home to diplomatic missions, security was stepped up at mosques, barricades were erected on roads leading to the diplomatic enclave and "the law enforcement agencies were told to ensure vigilance on important public places," the Associated Press of Pakistan reported.

In several cities there were reports of marauding bands of youths, armed with sticks and bricks, warning shop owners and businessmen to shutter their shops, as a gesture of soli-

darity. The administration was asking them to resist the intimidation of both sects and stay open.

"We will give them protection," promised Lahore Police Chief Zulfiqar Cheema. "Both religious parties have given their word that their workers will not damage public property and will remain peaceful."

But the police are not taking any chances.

On rooftops in the warren of narrow streets in Pakistan's largest city of Karachi, policemen with rifles equipped with sights have taken up positions.

Their rifles were trained on mosques in the troubled central and eastern districts were rival Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims have clashed in the past.

Armoured personnel carriers and bullet-proof vans loaded with police were parked outside several of the more troublesome areas.

In Lahore paramilitary Rangers had been deployed. Policemen were stationed inside government buildings and outside.

Three day state mourning for Gulzarilal Nanda

NEW DELHI, Jan 16: A former Indian prime minister and disciple of independence leader Mohandas Gandhi has died, reports AP.

Gulzarilal Nanda, 99, died Thursday in the western city of Ahmadabad after a mild heart attack. He had been in a coma for the past six months, the Hindustan Times newspaper reported.

Nanda was interim prime minister twice, once when India's first premier Jawaharlal Nehru died in office in 1964, and again when his successor Lal Bahadur Shastri died in 1966.

Nanda was closely linked with the campaign against British rule, which resulted in independence in 1947.

India won't down size army

NEW DELHI, Jan 16: Government has not taken any decision to down size the army by 50,000 personnel, an official spokesman yesterday said, reports PTI.

Denying a report in this regard, he said no such proposal has come before the Cabinet for its consideration. The report is totally incorrect.

According to the report, the Cabinet has approved the plan to initiate manpower cuts by 50,000 and agreed that 600 crore rupees saved in the process would be put back in army's budget for modernisation programmes.

Netanyahu serious about troop pullback US insists on Israeli redeployment on WB

WASHINGTON, Jan 16: US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright is insisting on further Israeli pullbacks on the West Bank despite moves by the Israeli Cabinet to establish permanent control of certain parts of the territory, reports AP.

"It is premature to make those kinds of statements at this stage," Albright told National Public Radio in New York on Wednesday.

"It is important for us to move forward on these further redeployments and to fulfill some of the obligations of the interim (Oslo) agreements that has to do with opening airports and safe passage," Albright said.

A text of the interview was distributed to reporters Thursday by the State Department press office.

Albright's remarks may foreshadow a difficult discussion when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu calls on President Bill Clinton at the White House next Tuesday.

Clinton will see Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat two days later in an effort to spur Mideast negotiations. Key US goals include a sizable Israeli pullback on the West Bank and a suspension of settlement construction in the territory Israel won from Jordan in the 1967 six day war.

"We are looking for Prime Minister Netanyahu to come with a credible and serious offer on the further redeployment," Albright told NPR. "We are looking for Chairman Arafat to commit himself to security issues so the process can go forward."

Israel has turned over to the Palestinian Authority control of Gaza, the major cities on the West Bank and about one-quarter of the West Bank land it won from Jordan in 1968. The 1993 and 1995 Oslo accords between Israel and the Palestinians called for more Israeli pullbacks without specifying how much land Israel should yield.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu assured foreign diplomats Friday that he was serious about a West Bank troop pullback, but said he would not act until the Palestinians did more to fight Islamic militants.

Earlier this week, Netanyahu's Cabinet laid down a 12-page list of demands, most dealing with security, that the Palestinians would have to meet before Israel kept its withdrawal promise.

The Palestinians have accused Israel of trying to evade its US-backed pledge to carry out three pullbacks in the West Bank by mid-1998. They noted that Israel has violated a series of commitment, including a pledge to establish a "safe passage" route between the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Life traces in Mars probably came from Earth

WASHINGTON, Jan 16: Organic chemicals found in a Martian rock may be contamination from Earth and not evidence of life on the Red Planet, new studies suggest. But US space scientists say the reports "don't shake our belief one bit", reports AP.

Laboratory studies at the University of Arizona, Tucson, and the Scripps Institute of Oceanography conclude that amino acids and carbon found in a rock from Mars probably got there after the rock landed on Earth and lay on Antarctic ice for thousands of years.

This disputes a theory led by two National Aeronautics and Space Administration scientists that found evidence that Martian microbes once lived inside the rock and left behind fossil-like blobs and organic chemicals.

"Neither paper changes our original hypothesis," said Everett K Gibson Jr, a NASA researcher. "They don't shake our belief one bit."

Gibson and David S McKay, both of the Johnson Space Cen-

ter in Houston, announced in August 1996 that they had found evidence of life in a meteorite from Mars. The rock, called ALH 84001, was found in an ice field in Antarctica and has been identified chemically as originating from Mars.

The theory that the rock once contained Mars microbes has failed to win universal support among experts and the new studies, to be published Friday in the journal Science, are the latest to offer alternate explanations for the lifelike chemistry found inside the rock.

J Warren Beck of the University of Arizona, a co-author of one study, said his group analyzed part of ALH 84001 for organic carbon, an essential chemical for life. He said there were four types of carbon found and most of it originated on Earth, probably from contamination that got into the rock while it was on the ice.

But Beck acknowledged that his team found "a mystery carbon component" that could be extraterrestrial.

"What we found does weaken

their case, but it does not rule out the possibility for life on Mars," said Beck. "We have left the door open to there being extraterrestrial organic carbon in this rock."

Jeffrey L Bada of Scripps, however, said that his study clearly disproves the Gibson-McKay theory.

The Scripps researchers analyzed the Mars rock for amino acids, organic compounds that form proteins and are fundamental to life. Bada said that his team was looking at the chemical symmetry of the amino acids. On Earth, amino acids have a left-hand symmetry.

"If there is really evidence for Mars life in these meteorites, then amino acids should provide a diagnostic indication," said Bada.

Amino acids were found at very low levels, he said, "but they look just like the ones on Earth."

"More importantly, the