

BRIEFLY

Kissinger's Thailand visit begins: Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger yesterday began a three-day official visit to Thailand during which he will meet the country's leadership to discuss the country's economic turmoil. AFP reports from Bangkok.

Kissinger arrived in Bangkok ahead of a planned meeting with Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai and Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan at the start of the visit at the invitation of the Thai Foreign Ministry. Thai officials reportedly want to lobby Kissinger, an elder statesman and secretary of state during a key period of US foreign policy in the 1970s, to lobby US leaders to lend their support to Bangkok during its crisis.

ROK officer killed in chopper crash: A South Korean army warrant officer was killed and another injured Wednesday when their helicopter crashed in a Seoul residential area, police said. AP reports from Seoul.

The four-seat 500-MD helicopter was on a routine training mission when it crashed onto the roof of a four-story building on the capital city's southside, they said. There were no casualties on the ground, police said.

Nationwide power outage in Lanka: An unexplained nationwide power failure brought work to a standstill in Sri Lanka on Wednesday afternoon, AP reports from Colombo.

An hour into the outage, engineers were still struggling to find what was wrong, said Neil Perera, vice chairman of the Ceylon Electricity Board. But there was no immediate evidence of sabotage, and the cause was likely to be a mechanical fault, said Perera.

Algeria rejects UN probe into massacre: Algeria has rejected a United Nations probe into the massacres in the country even as two powerful bombs exploded in the country killing six, taking the toll to 45 slaughtered in the last two days. PTI reports from Paris.

We had hoped that the Algerian government would agree to issue an invitation to the UN special rapporteur in Geneva to visit, but they were not ready to do so. We regret this, Britain's Derek Farchett, one of the three foreign ministers of the European Union mission, told a news conference in Algiers last night.

New Qatari DPM named: The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad ibn Khalifa al Thani, issued a decree Tuesday naming Sheikh Mohammad ibn Khalifa al Thani as deputy prime minister. AFP says from Doha.

Sheikh Mohammad had occupied the position of minister of finance, economy and commerce. According to the decree, the portfolios for finance, economy and commerce will be taken by Yussef Hussein Kamal.

4 Indians killed in Mexico: Four members of a leftist Indian peasant group were killed and 10 others were injured in a shootout near Oaxaca, official sources said Tuesday. AFP reports from Oaxaca.

The victims reportedly belonged to Ubiotz — the union for the social well being of the Triqui region, spokesmen for the group said the were attacked by a rival organisation, the Movement for Unity of the Triqui Struggle (MULT). Last year some 30 people were killed in clashes between the two groups in the Oaxaca area, one of the poorest in Mexico.

Quake strikes Taiwan: An earthquake measuring 5.3 on the Richter Scale rattled southeast Taiwan yesterday but no casualties were reported, the Central Weather Bureau said. AFP reports from Taipei.

The tremor, the fifth this month, struck at 7:29 AM (2329 GMT Tuesday) with its epicentre 12.5 kilometres west of Taitung and 7.8 kilometres under the earth's surface. An earthquake measuring 5.0 on the Richter Scale can cause moderate damage in a built up area.

12 killed in India road mishap: Twelve occupants of a jeep were killed on the spot when their vehicle and a truck collided near Basavakalyan in Biodar district of Karnataka yesterday night, according to police. PTI reports from Bangalore.

The victims, including five women, were returning to Maharashtra from Hyderabad after visiting a pilgrimage spot, the truck was on its way to Hyderabad when the mishap occurred on national highway nine, police said.

Iraq frees 68 Jordanian prisoners: Iraq on Wednesday freed 68 Jordanian prisoners, including two women handing them over to a Jordanian opposition leader who will take most of them back home. AFP reports from Baghdad.

The prisoners dancing with joy and carrying Iraqi flags and pictures of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, arrived at the Rashid Hotel in Baghdad to meet pro-Iraqi opposition leader Layth Shbeihat. Fifty of them will return to Amman in a convoy led by Shbeihat a high-profile Islamist leader in Jordan while 18 have decided to stay in Iraq.

US to stick with embargo on Cuba: The United States will stick with its three decade-old embargo on Cuba until the Caribbean nation moves toward democracy, President Bill Clinton said Tuesday. AP reports from Washington.

"We want Cuba to move toward freedom and openness, and if they do we'll respond," Clinton said. That's always been our position, and I believe in the end it will prevail." The president said after a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Congolese opposition leader held: The leader of one of the main opposition parties in Congo was arrested Tuesday for the second time in three months. AP reports from Kinshasa.

Soldiers seized Joseph Orlenghankoy, head of the Innovative Forces for Union and Solidarity, at his Kinshasa office, a party official said on condition of anonymity. Government officials could not be reached for comment Tuesday night. Orlenghankoy was seized by eight soldiers who burst into his office as two vehicles of uniformed men waited outside the building, party officials added, condemning his seizure.

Czech president re-elected: Vaclav Havel, 61, was re-elected Tuesday to a new five-year term as Czech president in the second round of voting, the Czech news agency CTK reported. AFP says from Prague.

The former dissident playwright won 99 votes from the 197 deputies present, and 47 out of the 81 Senators, giving him the majority needed in the two houses of parliament. Earlier Havel, who led the 1989 Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, had failed to Garner the majority required in a first round of voting, winning 91 votes in the 200-member lower house and 39 in the 80-seat Senate.

International

Clinton, Netanyahu hold second meeting

Israel rejects US proposal for military withdrawal from WB

WASHINGTON, Jan 21: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected US President Bill Clinton's proposals for Israeli military withdrawal from the West Bank, a senior US official said early today, reports AFP.

"I think we have a lot of work to do still to revive the stalled Middle East peace process," the official said after the two leaders ended 90 minutes of unscheduled late night talks that followed formal talks earlier Tuesday.

The President outlined a suggestion as to what he thought was necessary and Prime Minister Netanyahu felt that was not something he could do," said the official, who added not to be identified.

Clinton put forth his plan for an Israeli pullout during the first session with Netanyahu.

"Netanyahu explained why and we tried to explain possible solutions to his concerns, but they were not enough," the official added, without providing details on Clinton's proposal, which he said did not involve any maps.

Before the late night meeting began, however, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said that the two leaders would focus

on "appropriate elements for a further (Israeli) redeployment that is timing, the quality, quantity and of course, security aspects involved in that."

Israeli Cabinet Secretary Danny Naveh, who attended the White House meetings said today on Israeli radio that the talks "went off in a good atmosphere... and enabled progress to be made."

President Clinton expressed a desire to cooperate with Netanyahu to move forward in the peace process and both agreed that the Palestinians have to keep to their share of the commitments made in the Hebron agreement of January 15, 1997, Netanyahu added.

Under that accord, Israel handed over control of Hebron to the Palestinians and the latter pledged to crack down on anti-Israeli militants and reduce the size of the Palestinian security forces.

He said Clinton and Netanyahu had not scheduled any new meeting in the near future.

Speculation continued that Albright might travel to Europe in upcoming weeks to continue the dialogue with Netanyahu.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat is scheduled to meet here with Clinton on Thursday.

The second, unscheduled, Clinton-Netanyahu meeting took place at Clinton's living quarters in the East Wing of the White House. It ended shortly

Arafat and French President Jacques Chirac on Tuesday issued a joint plea for peace and support for Clinton's efforts to revive the stalled Middle East peace process. Arafat visited Paris after a stopover in Cairo.

The senior US officials stressed that Clinton and Netanyahu had a very intensive discussion of a full range of issues, including the question of further redeployment, security steps by the Palestinians and what the Israelis require, what would be the timetable of the military withdrawal. On some issues, he added, "We're closer to an agreement than on others."

"I think there is a very clear understanding by Prime Minister Netanyahu of what the President believes is necessary to get these negotiations resumed," the officials said.

"I think we have a good understanding from the Prime Minister of what he believes he can and can't do," he added.

The officials described the discussions as good and useful, but, he added, "We have a considerable distance to go."

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after midnight.

Also attending the talks were Albright, Clinton's National Security Adviser Sandy Berger and Naveh.

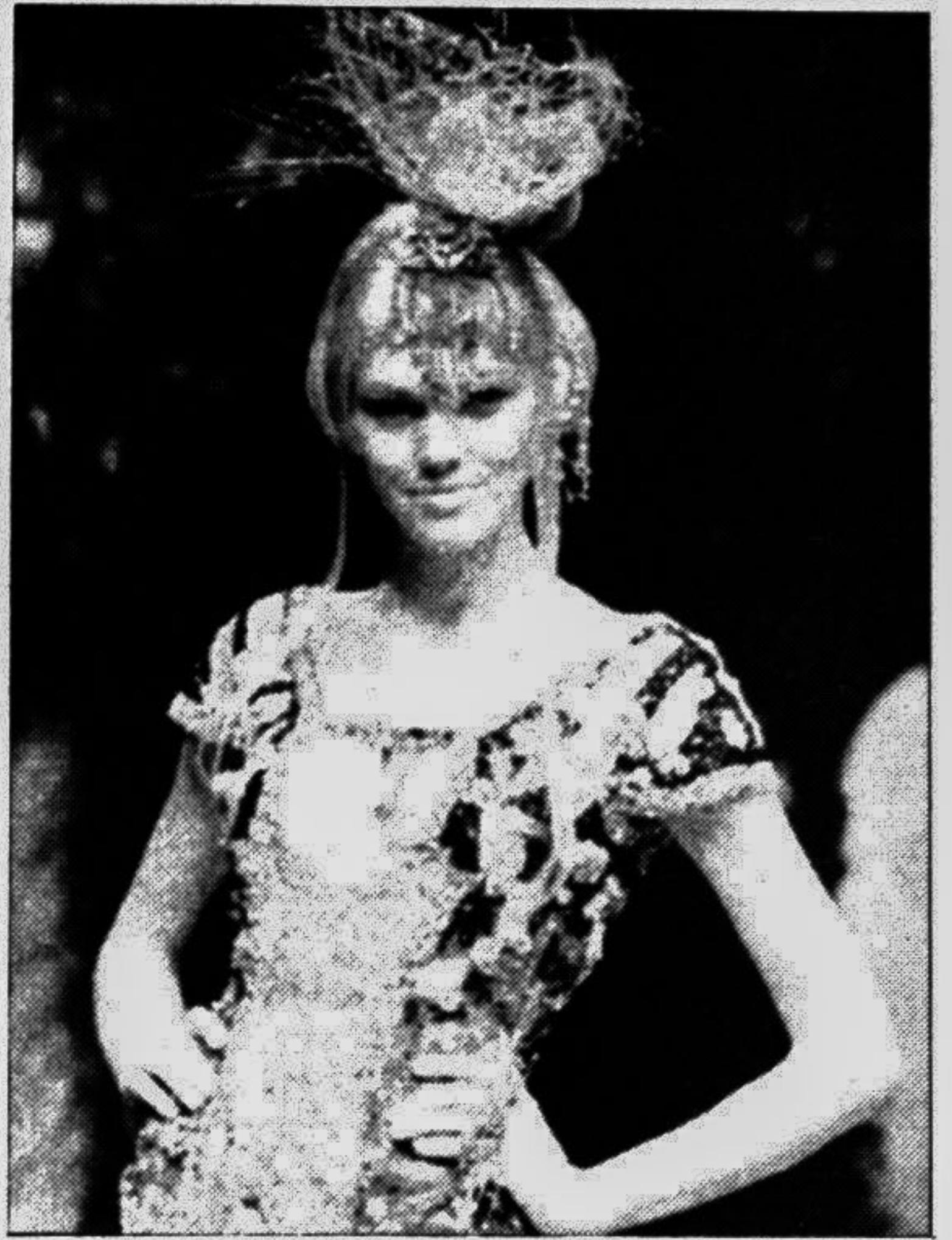
The administration has been pressing Netanyahu to carry out a "credible and significant" West Bank troop withdrawal, but the US has not publicly quantified the percentage of the territory it thinks should be placed under the control of the Palestinian authority.

Israeli radio said Clinton had persuaded the Palestinians to be content for the time being with an Israeli withdrawal from 15 per cent of the West Bank.

The Israeli daily Haaretz, meanwhile, quoted an Israeli official as saying "The Americans are trying to convince Israel to withdraw from between 11 and 14 per cent of the West Bank."

Netanyahu has now held seven hours of practically non-stop discussion in Washington with Clinton, Vice President Al Gore and US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

The senior US official said Netanyahu's programme in Washington remained unchanged with the departure scheduled for later Wednesday.



A model sports a long periwinkle blue and blueberry organza Maharanee sheath dress with all-over embroidery designed by Christian Lacroix during the 1998 Spring-Summer high fashion show in Paris Tuesday.

— AP/UNB photo



Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, left, joins former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, right, and World Bank President James Wolfensohn, centre, into a group handshake after signing the West Bank and Gaza Investment Fund agreement.

— AP/UNB photo

UN weapons inspection in Iraq

US still favours diplomatic solution to crisis

TOKYO, Jan 21: US Defence Secretary William Cohen said today that the United States still wanted a diplomatic rather than a military solution to the crisis over inspection of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

The latest crisis erupted last week when Baghdad barred an UNSCOM inspection team led by former US marine officer Scott Ritter, accusing him of being a spy.

Cohen said United States involvement in the UNSCOM teams was vital for the credibility and unity of the inspection work.

The US is part of the in-

spection teams and to the extent that the US is precluded from conducting its inspection efforts it would certainly have an impact upon the unity that UNSCOM has maintained and undercut its credibility as far as I'm concerned," he said.

But Cohen said that while the final decision on the composition of the UNSCOM teams was up to Butler, he anticipated there would be no change in US involvement.

Another report from Washington says: The United States has expressed confidence that it would receive support from other government if military action against Iraq was ever required.

State Department spokesman James Rubin said the long-held US view that military action against Iraq in a weapons dispute is not ruled out.

And when and if the time comes, we are confident that those whose assistance we need and whose support we have seen in the past will be with us, he added.

Rubin was speaking at a news briefing yesterday after US arms inspector Richard Butler ended talks in Baghdad and said that he was dispirited by what he had heard in them.

"We shall be watching closely to ensure that that is the

Britain praises China for keeping promises over HK

HONG KONG, Jan 21: Six months after he left Hong Kong to a new future under Chinese rule, Britain's foreign secretary awarded the former colony's Chinese rulers high marks Wednesday for keeping Hong Kong "genuinely free and prosperous," reports AP.

Salim Juma Mubarak has 22 sons and 27 daughters from six wives, three of whom have divorced, the Khaleej Times said.

"Salim has finally decided not to marry any more. He says he is now convinced that more marriages mean more children and consequently more financial burden," the paper said.

The 52-year-old man from the northern port of Ras Al-Khaimah said five years ago he wanted to set a record in the UAE by having at least 60 children.

At last he realised

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NEW DELHI: For five days, Ashraf Jamal has perched on a communications tower high above bustling downtown New Delhi, tossing plaintive pleas written on stiff sheets of paper to a curious crowd gathered below, reports AP.

Malik says love has prompted his unusual protest, which he called in a missive Tuesday a "fast unto death." He refuses to come down until he can be reunited with the woman he claims to have married several years ago.

According to local newspapers, Jamal claims his Hindu wife, whom he met at university, was abducted by her parents because they would not accept her marriage to a Muslim. Inter-religious marriages are uncommon in India, where most unions are arranged by families.

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