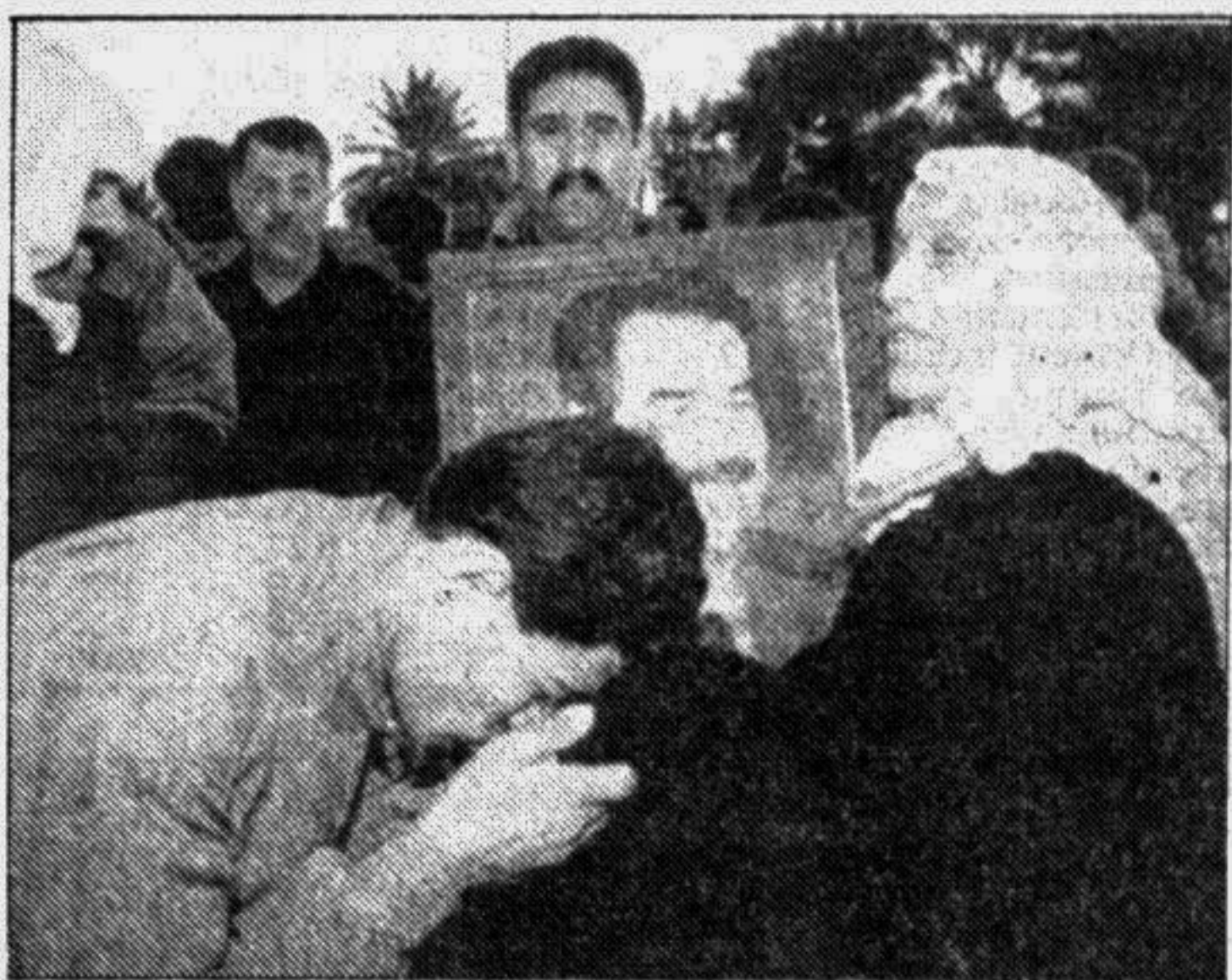


BRIEFLY



A Jordanian prisoner freed by Iraq on Wednesday, kisses the hand of his mother who came to Iraq to meet him. Iraq Wednesday released all 80 of its Jordanian prisoners, heeding a request from Jordan made after six Iraqis were stabbed to death in its capital, Amman. — AP/UNB photo

15 die as boat sinks in India: A crowded boat carrying Hindu pilgrims sank in a lake and at least 15 people drowned, local news agencies reported Wednesday, AP says from New Delhi.

Five others swam to safety at the Koyana Dam backwaters in the western state of Maharashtra Tuesday night. Press Trust of India news agency reported. Survivors said the boat overturned and got stuck in the silt. United News of India news agency said. The passengers were going from Kharoshi village to a Hindu fair in a nearby village. The area, south of Bombay, is 1,250 kilometres (800 miles) southwest of New Delhi.

Mudslide claims 26 in Mozambique: Heavy rains triggered a landslide that killed at least 26 people and left 60 missing in central Mozambique, an official radio broadcast said Wednesday, AP reports from Maputo.

The rain and strong winds sent stones and mud sliding down Tumbine mountain on to settlements in Milange district of Zambezia province on Tuesday, state-run Radio Mozambique reported. Heavy rains have hit several areas of the southeast African country in recent weeks, causing floods and other problems in several provinces.

Doomsday cult leader freed on bail: The leader of a suspected doomsday cult accused of trying to induce 31 followers to commit suicide was released on bail Wednesday, AP says from Santa Cruz de Tenerife.

A judge ordered the release of Heide Pitkau-Garthe, 57, a German psychologist, the state news agency EFE reported. The amount of bail was not disclosed. Pitkau-Garthe was arrested for allegedly planning the mass suicide on Jan 8, just hours before the group believed the world would end.

Clinton to visit SA in March: President Bill Clinton will visit South Africa and several other African countries in March. The White House announced Wednesday, AP says from Washington.

"This historic visit will be an opportunity for the President to highlight the growing US partnership with a new Africa," the White House said in a statement.

1 killed in Ireland shooting: Three men were shot, including one who was killed, in separate incidents Wednesday in northern Ireland, security forces said, AFP reports from Belfast.

The third victim was shot and badly injured on a Protestant estate in south Belfast, security forces said late on Wednesday. Hospital sources said he was in a "serious state" with "multiple gunshot wounds."

Earlier, a 55-year-old Catholic man was shot dead when gunmen opened fire on him as he was getting into his car in a staunchly Protestant loyalist area of Belfast.

US aircraft carrier off to the Gulf: The US aircraft carrier Independence will leave its home port in Tokyo Bay today for the Gulf, a US military spokesman said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The 80,643-tonne Independence will depart from Yokosuka Port to replace the carrier Nimitz, which is to return home from the Gulf, the military spokesman said yesterday.

The carrier will be escorted by three warships and a submarine.

Famous US actor Jack Lord dead: Jack Lord, whose gruff portrayal of a Hawaiian police chief helped turn "Hawaii Five-O" into one of television's longest running shows, died Thursday evening of heart failure. He was 70, AP reports from Honolulu.

Lord died at his Honolulu home with his wife, Marie, at his side. "Jack loved acting and he loved these islands," Mrs. Lord said in a statement. "Through all his years he was blessed with kindness, affection and support of many fans and friends. He always appreciated that and forgot it."

4 killed in riot in Harare: Four people were reported killed in the violent food riots that led to important material damage in Harare over the past three days, as life seemed back to normal in the city centre today, AFP reports from Harare.

Army units were still present in the southern outskirts of the city where street violence erupted earlier this week. Initial reports said two people were shot dead during the clashes between rioters and police and two others including a young child, died crushed by a fleeing crowd.

UNCHR high commissioner in Cambodia: UN High Commissioner for human rights Mary Robinson arrived in Cambodia yesterday as government criticisms of the UN's rights operation mounted, AFP reports from Phnom Penh.

The former Irish president began her visit just one day after co-premiers Ung Huot and Hun Sen slammed the UN Centre for Human Rights (UNCHR) for "illegitimate and arrogant behaviour" and "used it of psychological warfare." Robinson told reporters on her arrival that she was aware of the complaints and a letter sent by the prime ministers "raises a number of issues which will be addressed seriously and responded too."

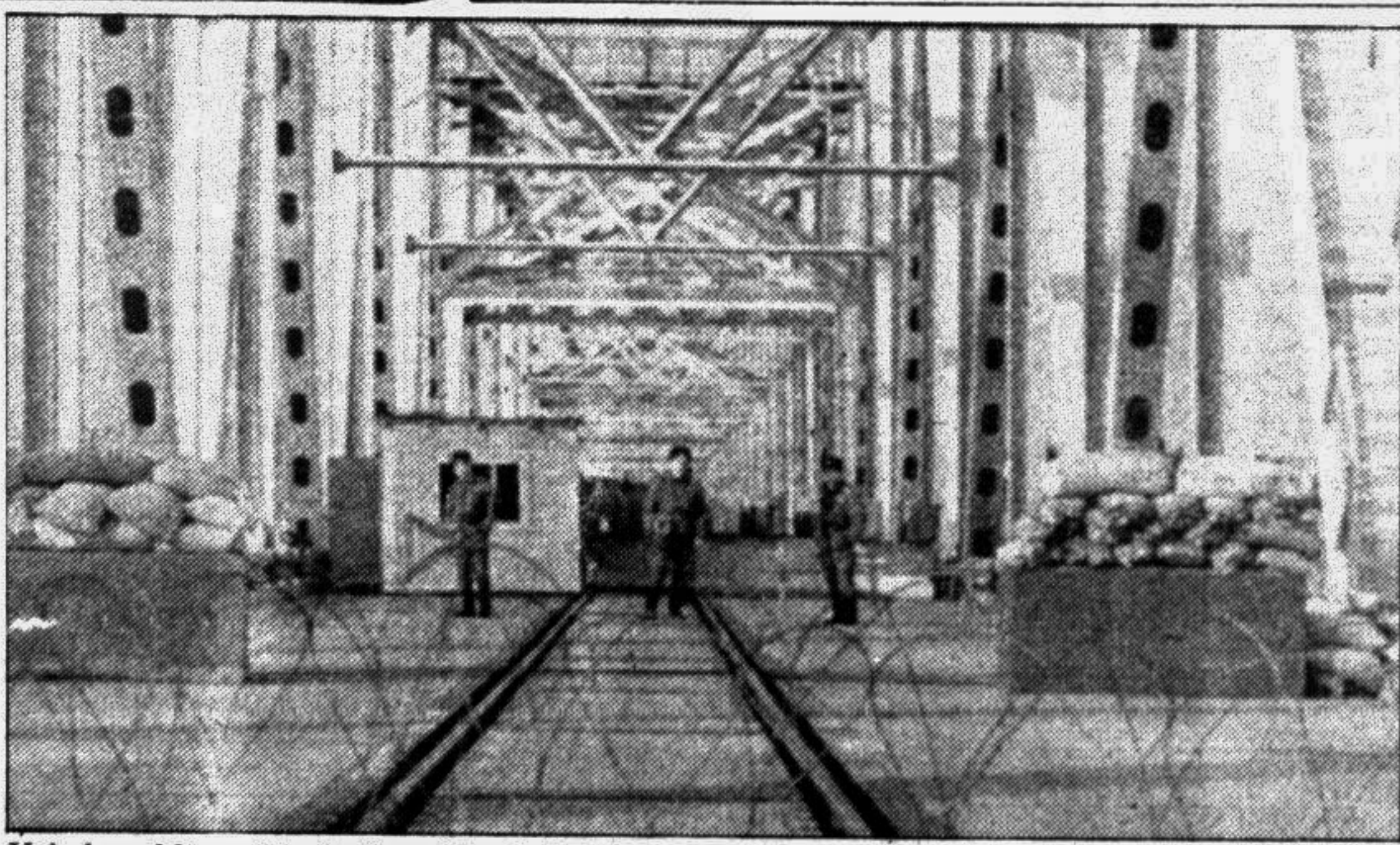
IRA rejects Anglo-Irish blueprint for peace

BELFAST, Jan 22: Republican gunmen, whose ceasefire underpins northern Ireland's peace talks, have rejected an official Anglo-Irish blueprint for peace and said the whole process was "in crisis," reports Reuters.

The Irish Republican Army statement came on one of the bloodiest days in Belfast since the British-ruled province's first ceasefire in 1994 but made no threat to break its truce, which gained the IRA's political wing, Sinn Féin, a place at the negotiating table.

A middle-aged man drowned in his car in the Wednesday evening rush hour was the sixth Roman Catholic to be killed since Republican prisoners shot a leading pro-British "loyalist" dead in jail last month.

A second man believed to work for a Catholic taxi firm, managed to drive himself to hospital after he was shot.



Uzbek soldiers block the friendship bridge that links Afghanistan to Uzbekistan at Hairaton, 55 kilometres (33 miles) north of Mazar-i-Sharif, on Tuesday. The Uzbeks sealed the border last May after Afghanistan's hard-line Taliban militia briefly controlled the border region, fearing attempts by the Taliban to spread their brand of Islam in Uzbekistan. Afghan opposition leader Rashid Dostum is negotiating with the Uzbekistan government to reopen the border now that the Taliban army has been pushed back. — AP/UNB photo

'Netanyahu ready to withdraw Israeli troops from 10pc of WB'

JERUSALEM, Jan 22: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told US President Bill Clinton he was ready to withdraw Israeli troops from 10 per cent of the West Bank, but would forgo other pullbacks he had promised the Palestinians, a newspaper said Thursday, reports AP.

Netanyahu said the 10 per cent withdrawal could take place in three stages, the Haaretz daily said.

Clinton, the turn, told Netanyahu in talks at the White House on Tuesday that the Palestinians were now willing to settle for a 15 per cent withdrawal, half their initial demand, the Haaretz daily said.

The report came as Clinton was to meet with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in Washington on Thursday. Arafat was expected to ask Clinton to pressure Israel to keep its withdrawal promises.

Haaretz quoted a senior US official as saying that Clinton would settle for a 12 per cent pullback. The official was not identified.

In a US-brokered agreement a year ago, Netanyahu committed himself to three West Bank troop pullbacks by mid-1998 without specifying how much land the Israelis would give up.

Israel's first offer, made in March, was to pull back from 2 per cent of the West Bank, but was never implemented because the Palestinians rejected it as insufficient. The second withdrawal is several months overdue.

Netanyahu has said he wants to skip the third pullback and only carry out the second one once the Palestinians meet a 12-page list of conditions, most dealing with security.

Netanyahu told Clinton this week that cancelling the third pullback would give him the necessary leeway in his hard-line Cabinet for getting approval for a 10 per cent withdrawal, Haaretz said.

Meir Shetreet, a senior official in Netanyahu's Likud party, told Israel radio that such a proposal would likely win approval.

"Nobody in the Cabinet is naive enough to think that they will carry out a redeployment less than 10 per cent," Shetreet said.

Security in remote areas of Tripura beefed up

AGARTALA, Jan 22: Security has been beefed up in the remote areas of Tripura in view of the "boycott" and "Bandh" call given by the outlawed militant outfit, All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), on both Republic day and for the February 16 elections in the state, reports PTI.

The Home Minister Samar Choudhury today said the government had asked all security agencies to intensify patrolling in the remote areas of the four districts of the state to prevent any untoward incident on both days.

The Tripura People Democratic Front (TPDF), a political wing of the banned ATTF militant outfit, gave a call to observe "protest day" on February 16 coinciding with the elections to two Lok Sabha and sixty assembly seats in the state. This had created fear in the minds of the people, mostly residing in the rural areas of the state, official sources said.

Pak cabinet approves plan to combat terrorism

ISLAMABAD, Jan 22: Pakistan's federal cabinet approved on Wednesday a plan to combat terrorism which sets out to recover all illegal arms from citizens and ban the display of weapons in public, reports Xinhua.

The plan asks all the people holding licenses of weapons to deposit their arms at the offices of their respective district magistrates.

The plan also bans the display of weapons in public with the obvious design of threatening others.

"I don't foresee anyone in the coalition withdrawing support from the prime minister over the implementation of the withdrawal, of course given that the Palestinians fulfil their commitments," Shetreet added.

Israel is demanding that the Palestinian scrack down on Islamic militants before any further land transfers are made. The Palestinians presently have full or partial control over 27 per cent of the West Bank.

Clinton is promoting a plan that would have Israel cede small parcels of land in phases while the Palestinians take matching steps against terrorists, including prosecuting and jailing those suspected of having killed Israelis.

The Palestinians want Israel to halt settlement construction and carry out the long-delayed pullout before they take further steps to implement the autonomy accord.

On Wednesday, Netanyahu aide David Bar-Ilan said that

in the wake of the Washington talks, the question was "How much time they (the Palestinians) should be given to fulfill commitments, and the nature of the commitments they must fulfill."

Arafat has warned in recent days that a continued deadlock could bring about a new uprising. On Wednesday, Israel's military chief-of-staff, Lt. Gen. Amnon Shahak, said any such threats were "a mistake" and that Israel's army has contingency plans for any outbreak of violence.

Meanwhile, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, arriving in the United States for talks with President Bill Clinton, demanded that Israel abide by its agreement to cede West Bank land to the Palestinians.

"I'm not asking for moon; I am asking for what was signed at the White House," Arafat said, referring to 1993 and 1995 peace agreements with Israel.

Following Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Washington, Arafat was Sec-

retary of State Madeleine Albright's guest for a late evening meal Wednesday. He was seeing Clinton Thursday.

In Arabic, Arafat said his working 90-minute dinner with Albright was held in a very constructive atmosphere and that he expected any US ideas to break the stalemate with Israel would be offered Thursday.

Albright then went with Netanyahu to Andrews Air Force Base in suburban Maryland to see the Israeli leader off.

Netanyahu, during his meetings Tuesday with Clinton, proposed only a modest withdrawal of Israeli troops from the West Bank. "We'll not ever be pressured into jeopardising our security," he said after meeting with congressional leaders.

Before departing from Washington, Netanyahu said in an interview taped for CNN's Larry King Live show that Clinton had asked him to weave a pullback of Israeli troops with Palestinian action against terrorists.



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat meets with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright at the State dept, Wednesday, in Washington. Feeling "very constructive and positive," Arafat entered into meetings with the US government Wednesday insisting that Israel abide by its commitment to cede more of the West Bank to the Palestinians. — AP/UNB photo

Iraq for freeze on presidential palace inspections till more talks

BAGHDAD, Jan 22: Iraq has proposed that the United Nations freeze its demand that weapons inspectors gain access to presidential palaces until more discussion on the sensitive issue takes place, the chief UN weapons inspector said Wednesday, reports AP.

The official, Richard Butler, said he was not sure how the UN Security Council would respond to the proposal, but added that he felt it defied UN demands for unfettered access to all sites.

Butler spoke to reporters after meeting with Iraq's deputy prime minister, Tariq Aziz. He later left for Bahrain.

A freeze on the palace inspections — until at least April — would end Iraq's confrontations with the inspectors it has blocked from so-called sensitive sites.

While making clear it would be the Security Council's responsibility to decide whether to accept the proposed freeze, Butler said he had told Aziz: "Your answer of a freeze flies in the face of the council's decision" on access.

In New York, the US ambassador to the United Nations, Bill Richardson, said the Security Council would wait for Butler to report to them Friday.

He added, however, that "the early news is quite disturbing." Chinese spokesman Chen Ranfeng urged "all sides to exercise restraint" and said upcoming technical meetings with Iraq were important.

British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook said Iraqi obstruction of UN inspections was serious because it defied the Security Council and allowed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein time to build chemical and biological weapons.

"Every week Saddam Hussein

is creating enough additional anthrax to fill two missile warheads," Cook said at news conference during a visit to Hong Kong.

"We cannot allow him to decide where the inspectors go and where the inspector cannot go," Cook said. "If we allow that then we will never be able to assure the world that we have succeeded in stopping Saddam Hussein having a chemical or biological capacity."

Inspectors have accused Iraq of using presidential palaces as hiding places, but Iraq has challenged their right to enter

the facilities, which it argues symbolise the country's sovereignty.

Butler said he proposed to Aziz that if the arms monitors are allowed into presidential palaces, he would try to respect Iraq's concerns about sovereignty and dignity. He didn't elaborate.

Butler also quoted Aziz as saying Iraq's ultimatum for UN inspectors to finish their work in the country is still valid. He said when he asked for clarification of the deadline, Aziz responded, "The president's statement said what it said."

Lankan security tightened ahead of Charles' visit

COLOMBO, Jan 22: Sri Lanka has mounted its biggest security operation for the visit here by Britain's Prince Charles next month, amid fears of Tamil Tiger rebel attacks, a senior minister said, reports AFP.

Some 10,000 troops and police will guard the historic town of Kandy where ceremonies to mark the 50th anniversary of independence from Britain will be held on February 4, said Anuruddha Ratwatte, the Junior Defence Minister.

Security was tightened due to fears that the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) will try to disrupt the celebrations and avenge a military offensive against them in the north of the country, he said.

Ratwatte, who is also the Energy minister, said the heir to the British throne will be the guest of honour at the main celebrations at the hill town of

Kandy, 72 miles (112 kilometres) east of here, some 15 foreign ministers will also attend.

Prince Charles is expected to arrive here on February 3 and visit the Temple of the Tooth, Buddhism's holiest shrine in the country.

A top Buddhist monk who announced a boycott of the official independence ceremony because of the British royal presence will, however, attend a religious service for Prince Charles, a temple official said.

The monk, Rambukwelle Vipassi, will receive Prince Charles at the Temple of the Tooth.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga, at the top of the LTTE's hit-list, will receive the salute at a military parade to open the Freedom Day ceremonies.

Prince Charles will leave two days after the main celebrations.

Off the Record

A Lenin clone?

MOSCOW: First there was Dolly, the cloned sheep. Then came George and Charlie, the cows. So the question naturally arises: is the world ready for a Vladimir Lenin clone?

Probably not, but officials of what is left of Russia's Young Communist Union, or Komsomol, spent a wistful moment thinking about it Wednesday during an otherwise tedious news conference about cloning (they're for it), reports AP.

"If the experiment succeeded, I would be happy," said Darya Mitina, first secretary of the Komsomol and a member of the Communist faction in the Duma, Russia's Lower House of parliament.

Among long-dead historical figures, Lenin has a huge advantage from the git-go. The leader of the Bolshevik revolution is also the world's most prominently embalmed man, whose remains have been on display in Red Square since shortly after his death in 1924. Smash the glass case and - bingo! - instant gene pool, bald head, spiffy goatee and all.

Of course, even Mitina conceded that a cloned Lenin just wouldn't be the same as the original.

"There will be no second Lenin," she said.

Older than the oldest!

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 22: A Malaysian record book due out later this year will feature a man said to be 140-years old, more than two decades older than the woman currently designated as the world's oldest living person, reports AP.

The book says that while the Malaysian man, Omar Abas, does not have a birth certificate, the registration department where he lives has confirmed his birth date was Sept. 26, 1857, according to a report in Thursday's New Straits Times newspaper.

That would make Omar older than Canadian Marie-Louise Febronie Meilleur, 117, who was deemed the world's oldest person after France's Jeanne Louise Calment died last August at age 122.

"As long as his age is certified by the registration department, Malaysia Book of Records accepts this as proof of his age," said Irene Liong, spokeswoman for the record book.

Registration department director Wahab Mohd Yasin was quoted in the newspaper report as saying Malaysian citizens were not issued birth certificates until June of 1926. Residents born before then were given ration cards which recorded their particulars.

Omar, who says he will turn 141 on September 26, has 23 grandchildren, 73 great grandchildren and says the secret to longevity is proper diet and exercise, the paper said. He married in his late sixties and lives with his 96-year-old wife, Minah.

Electioneering on wheels

MADRAS, India: An Indian political party will launch its election campaign with two million of its members taking to their bicycles, officials said today, reports AFP.

The novel electioneering ploy by the Tamil Manila (national) Congress (TMC) — whose party symbol is a bicycle — will be staged across the southern state of Tamil Nadu on January 30 before upcoming national polls, party chief GK Moopanar said.

Every party in India is identified by a symbol printed on ballot papers to cater for voters who cannot read or write.

Moopanar said that on January 30, marking the 50th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, "Our members and leaders will ride on bicycles for a minimum of 10 kilometres (six miles)."

"Each person will cover at least five villages, popularising our election symbol."

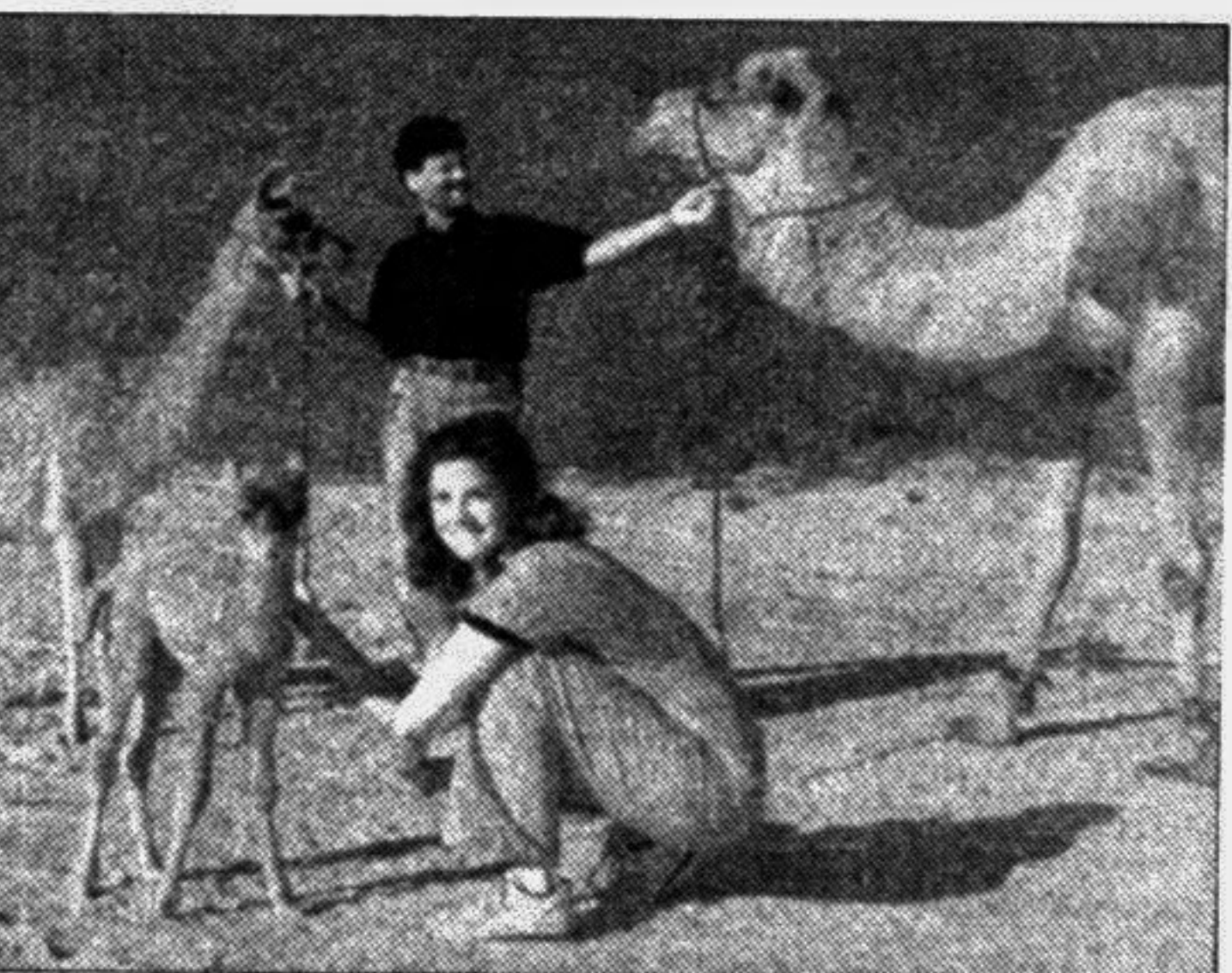
Among the riders will be Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram, an architect of economic reforms.

Ancient gold currency unearthed

COPENHAGEN: Archeologists in Denmark have dug up 12 ancient pieces of gold once used as currency, a museum official said Wednesday, reports AP.

The stick-like pieces, dating back to about AD 350, measure between 10 and 25 centimetres and weigh a total of 500 grams, said Orla Madsen, curator of the Haderslev Museum Traders used to cut pieces off for purchases.

An amateur archeologist accidentally found the gold in a marsh last fall near Haderslev, 240km southwest of Copenhagen. The discovery was kept secret so that no one would disturb the dig, Madsen said.



Dr Lulu Skidmore poses with Rama, the first ever cross between a camel and a llama while an attendant holds on to the parents of the new animal. The new male animal, called a cama, was born last Wednesday at the Camel Reproduction Centre in Dubai. Skidmore achieved the artificial insemination that created Rama after a two-year effort. The camel and the llama descend from the same species that lived 30 million years ago. — AP/UNB photo

Sonia Gandhi as Indian as Mother Teresa, claims Cong (I)

NEW DELHI, Jan 22: The Italian born widow of former premier Rajiv Gandhi is as Indian as Mother Teresa, her party had claimed in a bid to play down a political row over her foreign origins, reports said Thursday, reports AFP.

The Indian Express said the once-dominant Congress Party, hoping to return to power in upcoming national polls and composed songs stressing its star campaigner was as Indian as the Roman Catholic nun.

The move follows accusations by rival parties that she was a "foreigner" who should be barred from leading a political party.

India goes to the polls between February 14 and March 7 following the collapse of a minority coalition.

The Congress which ruled India for around four decades under the Gandhi-Nehru political dynasty, is hoping to exploit the family name to revive its sagging fortunes.

The Express said the party

had composed three election songs eulogising the 51-year-old Sonia Gandhi, who is not standing for office but has agreed to act as its campaign figurehead.

One went: There are those who questioned if Mother Teresa was ours after losing mother and husband she carried out her duty, here comes Sonia Gandhi.

Hindu nationalist right-wingers have also homed in on her Catholic faith.

Sonia Gandhi became an Indian citizen in 1986, 18 years after her marriage. Mother Teresa, born to Albanian parents and who died last year, had also taken on Indian Citizenship.

Another song starts with the line "Rajiv is my jewel," the third goes "Now that Sonia has come, the Congress will win and everything will be hunky dory."

A party official said 300,000 cassettes of the "Sonia" songs would be distributed across In-

dia and played "wherever madam goes."

Party sources said songs would be backed by video clips containing vignettes of the Gandhi-Nehru family at work and play including the wedding of Rajiv Gandhi's daughter Priyanka last year.

Sonia Gandhi, who wears a sari in public and speaks Hindi, responded to the jibes last week in a campaign speech, saying she considered herself a daughter of Mother India.

She moved to India in 1968 following her marriage, and has continued living in New Delhi since her husband's assassination in 1991.

Hindu nationalists also criticised Mother Teresa, who lived in the country for more than 50 years, they accused her of trying to convert vulnerable Hindu in Calcutta slums to Christianity.

Following Mother Teresa's death last year, a Hindu fundamentalist leader opposed her state funeral.

Fresh accusations against Clinton 'painful': Hillary

WASHINGTON, Jan 22: US First Lady Hillary Clinton admitted Wednesday that fresh accusations of wrongdoing by her husband, President Bill Clinton, were "painful" but said they were orchestrated by his political opponents, reports AFP.

"I wouldn't say that it's not hard, because it is difficult and painful any time someone you care about, you love, you admire is attacked and subjected to such relentless accusations as my husband has been," Hillary said in a radio interview.

"But I also have now lived with this for ... more than six years, and I have seen how these charges and accusations evaporate and disappear if they're ever given the light of day," she added.

The first lady spoke shortly after her husband, in a string of interviews, denied allegations he had a sexual relationship with a White House aide and later instructed her to lie about the liaison in testimony to lawyers.