

Israel, PA accept Clinton's step-by-step approach

WASHINGTON, Jan 27: Israel and the Palestinian Authority accept President Bill Clinton's step-by-step strategy for further peacemaking but the two sides remain far apart on terms of a settlement, the State Department spokesman said Monday, reports AP.

The hard decisions — how much land Israel would give up and what security steps the Palestinians would take — have not been made, spokesman James Rubin said at the department's daily news briefing.

The strategy Clinton outlined separately to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat at the White House last week calls for Israel to give up West Bank land in phases, with the Palestinians providing matching security moves.

There is a conceptual acceptance of this parallel approach ... as a way to put the peace process back on track," Rubin said.

Secretary of State Madeline Albright followed up in a telephone conversation Sunday with Netanyahu.

Their conversation was focused almost exclusively on the Middle East peace process," Rubin said.

The next step in US peace-making may be to set up a joint meeting in Europe with Netanyahu and Arafat, with Albright as the mediator. In the meantime, she has begun consultation with other governments on a growing possibility the United States will attack Iraq unless it permits UN weapons inspectors access to suspect sites.

This could scramble any plans Albright may have made to travel.

Still, Rubin said, "Believe me, I'm not going to rule out there will contacts with a friend as close as Israel is, if we get to another phase or even before we get to that phase (in Mideast peacemaking)."

Reuter adds: The US State Department said on Monday it believed both Israel and the Palestinians had accepted a new US approach to Middle East peacemaking, even though they still differ on basic issues.

"We believe the two parties are now grappling in a serious way with the ideas we put forth," a spokesman said after President Bill Clinton last week met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat.

"There are still major gaps on very important particular issues," spokesman James Rubin told a news briefing. "But we do believe that the construct, the concept the president laid down ... is one that both parties have accepted on principle."

Major issues dividing the sides include the extent of a proposed Israeli troops withdrawal from the West Bank and the scale of a Palestinian crackdown on guerilla violence.



Bodies of Kashmiri Hindus shot dead by unidentified gunmen in the village of Wanham, 20 kms south of the capital Srinagar, are laid out late Sunday night. Twenty-three Hindus, including nine women and four children, were killed in the incident. — AP/UNB photo

Rajiv Gandhi murder Indian court to pronounce verdict today

MADRAS, India, Jan 27: An Indian court will pronounce its verdict on Wednesday on the 1991 assassination of former premier Rajiv Gandhi, who, prosecutors claim, was killed by Sri Lankan Tamil guerillas, reports AFP.

Judge V Navaneetham will give his judgement on the case after more than six years of police investigations during which 1,044 witnesses were cited by the prosecution and 288 examined in the court.

"We are satisfied with the job we have done," said Radha Vinod Raju, Deputy Inspector General of Police and the second highest ranking officer in the Special Investigation Team (SIT) which probed the murder.

Rajiv Gandhi was killed when a woman suicide bomber, allegedly from Sri Lanka's rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), blew him up along with 17 others.

Indonesians warned against linking politics with economic crisis

JAKARTA, Jan 27: Indonesia's military Tuesday warned the country against linking politics with the economic crisis gripping the southeast Asian giant, saying it could lead to further instability, reports AFP.

"We must never be caught off-guard by rumours that politicise the present economic crisis," said the military's socio-political affairs chief Lieutenant General Yunus Yosfiah.

History had shown that confusing economic reforms and political reforms could lead to a rise in political instability, he was quoted as saying by the state Antara News Agency.

Apportioning blame and identifying scapegoats did not solve problems, he added.

"We must not use street demonstrations or other political maneuvers to solve the country's problems. We must instead strengthen national unity to get out of this difficulty."

His comments follow several riots and other social unrest linked to the economic chaos and a rise in political dissent, with several opposition figures openly accusing President Suharto and his government of causing the crisis.

The military has taken a more visible stance over the past month in showing its support for nationwide campaigns mounted to bolster the country's devastated currency, which has lost more than 80 per cent of its value against the dollar since July.

Military officials recently specifically called on all non-indigenous Indonesians, primarily ethnic — Chinese and Indians, to join the "love the rupiah" campaign and turn in their dollars.

Laloo, Fernandes file nominations for 34 seats in Bihar

PATNA, Jan 27: Rashtriya Janata Dal president Laloo Prasad Yadav and Samata Party national president George Fernandes filed nominations on the penultimate day of the filing of nominations for 34 of the 54 Lok Sabha seats in Bihar today, reports PTI.

Accompanied by his wife and Chief Minister, Rabri Devi, the RJD president arrived at Madhepura by a helicopter and went in a procession to the District Collectorate to file papers, official sources said.

Janata Dal president Sharad Yadav had already filed his nominations from Madhepura.

The Samata Party president Fernandes also submitted his papers from Nalanda. Lok Sabha constituency, the sources said.

EU FM's adopt action plan on immigration

BRUSSELS, Jan 27: EU foreign ministers have approved a common action plan on immigration, a reaction to the recent arrival on Italy's shores of hundreds of Kurdish refugees from Turkey, says AP.

The plan includes 46 proposals to strengthen cooperation among the 15 EU countries, including the coordination of police efforts, British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook said Monday.

"Our concern is not the scale of the migration, which hasn't really increased, but rather the growing evidence of black marketers operating here," said Cook.

Other proposals deal with broad issues such as the need to respect the Geneva Convention on human rights, to fight organised crime and illegal immigration as well as technical points such as the joint training of border guards.

Spice Girls dominate American Music Awards

LOS ANGELES, Jan 27: The light and sassy Spice Girls used "girl power" to dominate the American Music Awards Monday night, winning three awards and beating out such heavyweights as U2 and The Wallflowers, reports AP.

The Spice Girls, who were in Ireland preparing for a tour, ruled the pop-rock category, winning the best album award and being named favourite new artist and best group.

The three-hour show — broadcast on ABC — included live performances by Garth Brooks and Boyz II Men, who were named best soul/rhythm and blues group.

The emotional centerpiece of the show came in a tribute to the ailing Frank Sinatra. His daughter, Nancy, accepted the special Award of Merit.

BRIEFLY

UK bans handguns: A total ban on handguns came into effect in Britain on Monday. Now anyone who decides to hold on to their favourite pistol could face up to 10 years in jail, Reuter says from London.

The firearms legislation, among the toughest in the world, was introduced after a highly publicised massacre in the Scottish town of Dunblane in 1996, when crazed loner Thomas Hamilton shot dead 16 schoolchildren and their teacher before killing himself. Owners of handguns less than 0.22 calibre now have until the end of February to hand in their weapons in return for compensation or face draconian punishment. All guns over 0.22 calibre were supposed to have been surrendered last year.

Queen Mother undergoes surgery: Well-wishers brought bouquets Monday and waited outside the hospital where the Queen's much-loved 97-year-old mother underwent hip replacement surgery after falling while viewing horses at one of her daughter's estates, AP says from London.

With the Queen Mother Elizabeth II, remained at Sandringham, the royal estate in eastern England, where her mother stumbled and fell Sunday at the stud stables. The operation, carried out Sunday night with six doctors in attendance, was a success, Buckingham Palace said.

600 evacuated in Australia: More than 600 residents and tourists were evacuated from the devastated northern outback town of Katherine as flood water rose to record levels Tuesday in the aftermath of a tropical cyclone, AFP says from Darwin.

Defence force troops were called in after a state of emergency was declared for Katherine and surrounding communities, as people rendered homeless fled to shelters on higher ground secure from the worst flooding in half a century. More than 30 elderly patients in a nursing home and 45 patients in the local hospital were rescued by emergency services as flood-water inundated buildings and cut major highways and power supplies.

7 Russian troops killed: A soldier with an army unit in Russia's Far East city of Khabarovsk has shot dead seven fellow servicemen and badly wounded another, the Russian news agency Itar-Tass reported yesterday, Reuter says from London.

Tass, monitored by the British Broadcasting Corporation, quoted a local military spokesman for its information. The spokesman gave no reason for the incident nor any other details, the agency said.

Noted jazz guitarist Zoller dead: Renowned jazz guitarist Attila Zoller, who produced innovative recordings and worked with famed bandleaders such as Herbie Mann, has died. He was 70, AP says from Townsend.

Zoller, who had been suffering from colon cancer, died Sunday at a hospital in the northeastern state of Vermont. Despite his failing health, Zoller was performing and recording until this month. Zoller was born in Hungary, where he performed with jazz groups before escaping to Vienna in 1948. Later, he moved to Frankfurt, Germany, where he toured and recorded with both his own group and visiting American musicians. In 1959, he moved to the United States.

Loyalist group quits peace talks: Representatives of Northern Ireland's biggest pro-British paramilitary group withdrew from peace talks Monday after coming under fire over recent murders of Catholic civilians, upping the threat of more bloodshed, AP reports from London.

The Ulster Democrats, legal representatives of the outlawed Ulster Defense Association walked out shortly before the British and Irish governments expelled them for allegedly violating the nonviolence pledge required of all negotiators. Their sudden departure from the talks, which began in June 1996 and are supposed to conclude by May, will do little to dampen widespread fears of more random attacks against the north's Catholic minority.

US concerned at dispute in Cyprus: The United States expressed concern Monday over the latest dispute in Cyprus over air bases and called on Turks and Greeks to refrain from taking action that exacerbate tensions, AFP reports from Washington.

The remarks came after Turkey said it may open an airbase in north Cyprus to counter the opening soon of a Greek-Cypriot base for Greek military jets in the south of the divided Mediterranean island. "We remain concerned in general about the increasing militarisation of Cyprus," state department spokesman James Rubin said.

Baghdad mobilises one million people 'Iraq faces military strike if attitude not changed'

DUBAI, Jan 27: Iraq faces a military strike if it does not change its attitude towards UN weapons inspectors, British Prime Minister Tony Blair said in a newspaper interview today, reports AFP.

Britain is hoping that diplomatic efforts to end the three-month stand-off will succeed, but it is not prepared to rule out any options at this stage, Blair told the Arab newspaper Al-Hayat.

Britain has sent the aircraft carrier *Invincible* to the Gulf as a precautionary measure but "We do not rule out the possibility of recourse to military force if Iraqi President Saddam Hussein does not change his position," he was quoted as saying.

"We must not underestimate the danger Saddam poses in the region if he continues to possess weapons of mass destruction," Blair reportedly said.

"He has already used these arms and he will not hesitate to use them again to reinforce his interests, to the detriment of the interests of others."

Britain and the United States both favour a hard line against Iraq, which is preventing UN weapons inspectors from searching presidential sites on the grounds of sovereignty.

The three other permanent members of the UN Security Council — France, Russia and China — have come against the use of force.

The British foreign office stressed on Monday that London wanted all diplomatic avenues explored first, before there is any recourse to military means.

Russia, whose Deputy Foreign Minister Viktor Pustovoyuk is due to arrive in Iraq later today in a bid to defuse the crisis diplomatically, on Monday warned the United States against using military force.

US assembling powerful multi-service force to keep pressure on Iraq

Reuter adds: The United States has assembled a powerful multi-service force to keep pressure on Iraq in the standoff over UN access to suspected weapons sites, US military officials said on Monday.

Two aircraft carrier battle groups with 108 embarked tactical aircraft are patrolling the Gulf, providing a capability to hit targets, 1,000 miles (1600 km) or more away with high-technology weapons.

Overall, about 25,000 US personnel have been deployed afloat and ashore in the region, including about 8,000 airmen and 3,000 army troops, according to the US Central Command, responsible for coordinating US forces in the region.

AP adds: Iraq has mobilized 1 million people to prepare for a possible US strike, with university and high school students registering for military training, officials of the ruling Baath Party said Monday.

Iraq's ambassador to the United Nations, Nizar Hamdoun, warned his country could respond to an American attack by ceasing to cooperate with the UN inspectors.

Ban on LTTE raises fears of more bloodletting

COLOMBO, Jan 27: The Sri Lankan government's ban on the main Tamil rebel group not only closed the door on talks to end this island nation's civil war, but also raises fears of more bloodletting in this once idyllic country, a political analyst said Tuesday, reports AP.

Monday's ban came a day after suicide bombers raided the country's holiest Buddhist shrine, and left 15 dead. The ban could mean escalated fighting, running the risk of further widening the ethnic divide in this nation of 18.4 million people.

The bombing of the temple has done to the soul of every Buddhist here," said political analyst Jehan Perera.

Monks' word, ordinary Buddhists expressed disbelief. The government deployed soldiers to stop any Sinhalese backlash and made repeated appeals for calm. A repeat of the 1983 Sinhalese attacks on Tamils now could derail the government's campaign to convince members of the two ethnic groups they can build a unified, peaceful country.

Banning the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the main rebel group blamed for Sunday's bombing, was meant in part to calm angry Buddhists, Perera said.

The wounds are still raw, but at least the ordinary people now believe that the government has done something to heal them," he said.

The ban, however, does not affect the operations of the Tigers, whose members were already subject to arrest under anti-terrorism laws. But it does make it illegal for the government to enter into peace talks.

Several rounds of peace talks have ended with the rebels breaking off negotiations and staging surprise attacks on the military. The last negotiations were in April, 1995.

Both sides are now expected to go flat out in the battlefield, escalating the war that has already claimed 51,000 lives since 1983. The government ousted the Tigers from their main base in the northern town of Jaffna in 1995, driving them into jungles. But a repeated government attempt to clear a rebel-held highway that connects the Jaffna peninsula with the rest of the country.

The Tigers are expected to increase strikes on soft targets like the one at Kandy.

Though not all Tamils support the rebels' extreme solution, many among them accuse the Sinhalese majority of widespread discrimination against them.

On Thursday, local government elections will be held for the first time in the northern Tamil heartland of Jaffna. After the vote, Parliament is expected to debate a new constitution that would give local councils wide autonomy.

A section of Sri Lanka's Buddhist clergy has tried to rouse public opinion among the Sinhalese majority against the draft constitution, saying it would divide the country along ethnic lines.

Opposition against NATO expansion grows in US

WASHINGTON, Jan 27: Describing NATO expansion as a "giant strategic blunder," an unusual coalition of conservative and liberal groups announced Monday a major effort to show the dangers of adding new members to the alliance, reports AP.

"We find ourselves in agreement on this matter, not only in our belief that NATO expansion is bad for all Americans ... but also in the conviction that a matter of this importance should not be railroaded through the Senate," said William S Lind, of the conservative Free Congress Foundation.

In a statement released Monday, the newly-established Coalition Against NATO Expansion said that adding Eastern European nations to the Western alliance contradicts vital American strategic, political and financial interests.

The body consists of the right-leaning Free Congress Foundation, Eagle Forum American Defence Institute and Media Research Centre, and the left-leaning Council for a Livable World Education Fund, Peace Action Centre for Defence Information, and the Union of Concerned Scientists.

The organisations, which jointly called for a series of debates in major American cities on the merits of the plan, usually hold sharply differing views on most social, political and economic issues.

Last summer, a summit of NATO leaders in Madrid, Spain, invited Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic to join the alliance. The door was left open for other candidates, including Slovenia, Romania and despite Russia's vehement objections — the three Baltic republics.

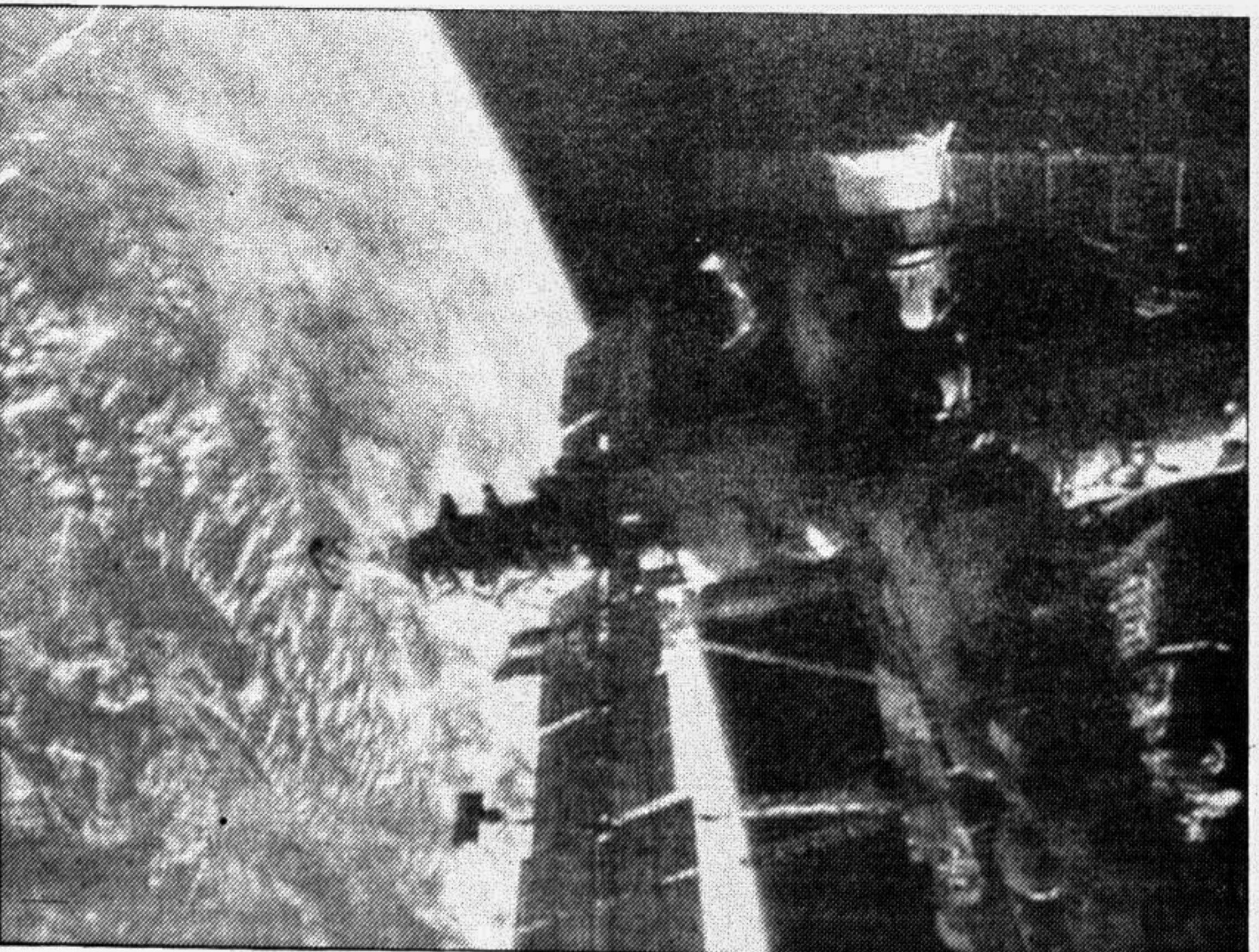
The US Senate could vote to ratify the move as early as next month.

"The geography of NATO's proposed expansion cannot be disguised, it cannot be directed against anyone but Russia," Lind said. He warned that dismissing Russia's legitimate national security concerns risks alienating Moscow, rekindling the Cold War and squandering a historic opportunity to draw Russia into the community of Western nations.

John Isaacs, of the Council for a Livable World, accused the administration and NATO of giving low estimates of the costs US taxpayers will have to pay to bring the new members into the alliance.



Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair greets Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat at No 10 Downing Street in London on Monday. Arafat made a brief visit to London on his way back to Gaza following a three-day visit to Washington for talks with US President Bill Clinton to try advance the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process. — AP/UNB photo



The Russian space station Mir and space shuttle Endeavour complex is shown as it orbits the Earth on Monday, in this image from NASA Television. — AP/UNB photo

Jesse Jackson gives emotional support to Chelsea

WASHINGTON, Jan 27: Civil rights leader Jesse Jackson said Monday that Chelsea Clinton has been holding up well in the wake of an ever-widening sex and perjury scandal enveloping her father, US President Bill Clinton, reports AFP.

Jackson, a year-long Clinton family friend told CNN that he spoke to Chelsea recently at the president's request to provide emotional support.

"He (President Clinton) did ask me to call her," Jackson said, saying that the teenager was fully aware of the swirl of allegations around her father.

"She's so sweet and mature beyond her years," Jackson said, adding that the current scandal "is not the first time she's seen her father named in the negative."

Jackson said the Stanford University freshman is "devoted to her father totally believing in him."

Lewinsky may testify to having affair with Clinton in return for immunity

WASHINGTON, Jan 27: With the Clinton presidency at risk, Monica Lewinsky offered to cooperate with Whitewater prosecutors and President Bill Clinton emphatically denied any improper behaviour, reports AP.

"I did not have sexual relations with that woman" he declared Monday with Hillary Clinton at his side.

Sources have said Lewinsky was willing to testify that she had sex with Clinton while working at the White House. In secretly taped conversations with a friend, she says that Clinton urged her to deny their relationship under oath, according to officials who have heard the tapes.

"I never told anybody to lie," Clinton said in the remarkable White House statement. "Not a single time. Never. These allegations are false and I need to go back to work for the American people."

It Whitewater prosecutor Kenneth Starr offers Lewinsky immunity to testify, it would likely put the 24-year-old former White House intern on a collision course with Clinton, whose denial Monday was unequivocal.

The stakes couldn't be higher: Democrats and Republicans alike have warned that it turns out Clinton is lying about the affair, his presidency would crumble.

Administration officials said the Secret Service had investigated rumours that an agent had caught the two together and was unable to verify the reports. Senior officials with the agency told The Associated Press they had doubts about the reports.

Clinton had been silent on the matter since last Thursday even as tension was building for him to explain any relationship with Lewinsky.

Wagging his finger for emphasis at the end of a White House ceremony on childcare, Clinton stared into a bank of TV cameras and declared, "I want to say one thing to the American people. I want you to listen to me. I'm going to say this again. I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky."

Her attorney, William Ginsburg, provided Starr an outline of how she could help his investigation. Starr must now decide whether he wants to meet the terms. Ginsburg has said he was demanding full immunity for his client.

"The ball is totally in Judge Starr's court and Judge Starr has to tell us what he will do," Ginsburg said, jostled by a swarm of photographers and reporters as he made his announcement.

Lewinsky's offer to cooperate — which sent shock waves through the White House — prompted an indefinite delay in any grand jury appearance by her. She earlier had been expected to testify Tuesday.

Ginsburg, who has negotiated with Starr's office for days, told reporters that Lewinsky "is getting stronger. She does not like being isolated."

Meanwhile, attorneys for Clinton asked a federal judge in Little Rock, Arkansas, to move up the trial date for Paula Jones' sexual harassment lawsuit against Clinton, complaining that the media frenzy surrounding the Lewinsky case had created an "undue distraction."

"Clinton's legal team thinks the lawsuit could be a high-profile forum to discredit Lewinsky if she cooperates with prosecutors against the president. Jones was opposing the change."

When Clinton delivered his dramatic 20-second statement, it buoyed his supporters and riveted attention on Lewinsky as she prepared for a grand jury appearance. Starr is investigating whether Lewinsky or the president lied in providing depositions in the Jones case and whether he encouraged her to lie under oath.

The New York Times reported in Tuesday's editions that Lewinsky visited Clinton at the White House in late December, two weeks after she was subpoenaed to provide information in the Jones case and one week before she submitted an affidavit declaring that she and Clinton had not had a sexual relationship.