

International

Bid to woo minorities
BJP may tone down stand
on Ayodhya, Kashmir

NEW DELHI, Feb 1: In a bid to woo minorities, BJP is likely to tone down its stand on Ayodhya, Article 370 (special status to Jammu and Kashmir) and Uniform Civil Code in its election manifesto scheduled to be released on February three, reports PTI.

The thinking in the party now was to adopt a consensus approach on these critical issues as the party has entered into electoral alliance with half a dozen other parties and this was expected to be reflected in the manifesto, party sources said.

This change in stance comes in the wake of criticism on these issues by its ally, Samata Party and the manifesto committee was of the view that it was therefore "better to tone down stand on these issues in the larger interests," the sources said.

There appears to be some rethinking on the nuclear issue as well. The party which had all along been forceful in demand-

New US ideas to break ME stalemate
PLO EC yet to amend charter
seeking Israel's destruction

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Feb 1: The PLO's executive committee, in a surprise development, has taken no action on amending articles in the Palestinian Charter which Israel views as seeking its destruction, a cabinet minister said today, reports Reuters.

Senior Palestinian officials said the 18-member committee would ratify a 1996 resolution by the Palestine National Council (PNC) which the PLO contends annulled the offending clauses.

One committee member had said such a decision would have been a goodwill gesture towards US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who began a 24-hour visit to Israel and the West Bank earlier on Saturday.

But Palestinian Information Minister Yasser Abd Rabbo told reporters the committee had only "reviewed" a letter Presi-

dent Yasser Arafat gave to US President Bill Clinton last week which listed the Charter clauses annulled by the PNC.

Abd Rabbo gave no reason why the committee failed to act on the Charter.

AFP adds: US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright presented "new, additional ideas" to break the stalemate in the peace process during a four and half hour meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The meeting ended in the early hours of today — two hours longer than expected — and Albright cancelled a scheduled news conference after the talks, because she was tired, her spokesman James Rubin said.

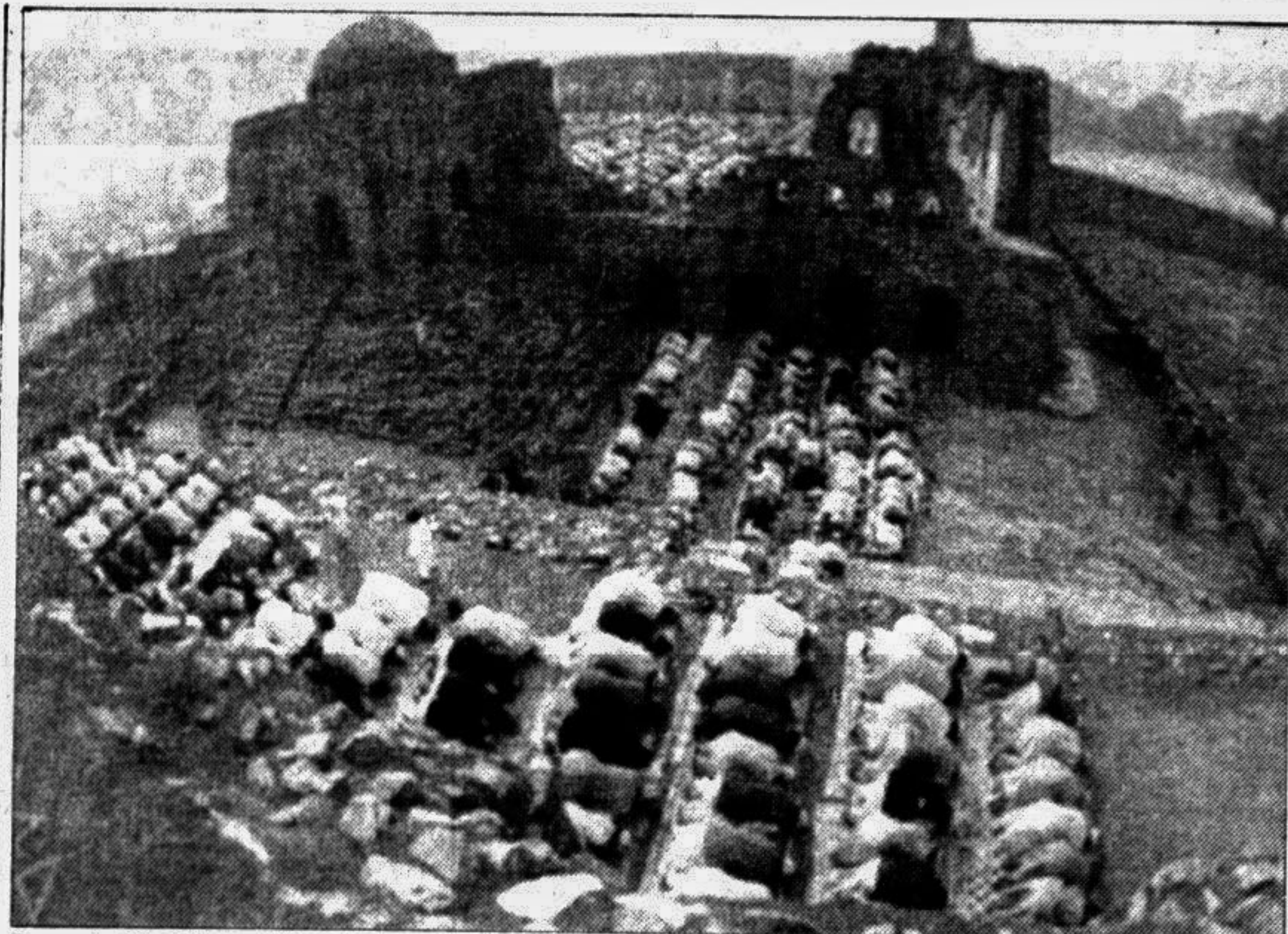
Albright raised "new, additional ideas" on how to relaunch peace talks that broke

down 10 months ago and the two officials had a "detailed exchange of views on these refinements," he said.

The United States is pressing Israel to carry out a promised Israeli troop withdrawal from the West Bank that would be matched by fresh efforts by the Palestinians to prevent attacks by extremists.

Albright will discuss the same proposals with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat when they meet later today in the West Bank town of Ramallah.

But her talks on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process have been largely overshadowed by Iraq. Her stopover comes amid a tour of European and Arab countries to drum up support for US demands that Baghdad give rein to UN disarmament inspection teams.



Devout Muslims offer Eid prayers in the ruins of an old Mughal structure called the Feroze Shah Kotla in New Delhi, Friday. Eid-ul-Fitr ends the month of Ramadan when Muslims fast everyday for a month. — AP/UNB photo

Rebels capture town of Aweil
in Southern Sudan

CAIRO, Feb 1: Southern rebels say they have captured the town of Aweil, the third largest in southern Sudan, for the first time in their 15 year rebellion against Khartoum, reports AFP.

A statement received here said the town's capture followed the return to rebel ranks of Kerbino Kunayen, a key commander who defected to the government last April.

It said fighting was still continuing around the government garrison which was encircled by forces of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA).

The SPLA statement denied government claims that it had retaken the second town of Wau but admitted that government troops had recaptured the airport and that heavy fighting was going on.

The SPLA said its forces were preventing any flights into Wau and also "now controlled the railway between Aweil and Wau, the only land access to Wau for government troops."

The fighting at Wau had inflicted "a large number of dead and wounded in government ranks," said the statement from the Eritrean capital Asmara.

The SPLA announced it had captured six strategic points in Wau including the airport and railway headquarters in a communique Thursday.

The Sudanese Army admitted on Friday that it had lost 23 men in the fighting, including four officers, but maintained it still controlled the town.

About 500 SPLA troops attacked Wau at midnight on Wednesday in an assault which coincided with other attacks in the same state against Gogrial and Aweil, the deputy chief of staff, General Abdul-Rahman Siral-Khatim, told the Suna news agency.

King Hussein
sick for months

AMMAN, Feb 1: In an emotional letter to his brother and heir, King Hussein said Saturday that he has been sick for months, suffering from fatigue, fever and weight loss, reports AP.

Hussein, 62, said he has been undergoing treatment in the United States and England.

Egypt, Jordan seek diplomatic solution
US may launch devastating
air attacks against Iraq

ABOARD THE USS GEORGE WASHINGTON, Feb 1: The commander of a US battle group in the Gulf says US warplanes could launch continuous attacks against Iraq for weeks, reports AP.

Rear Adm. Michael Mullen spoke to reporters from the hangar deck of the USS George Washington, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier sailing about 100 miles (160 kilometers) off the southern coast of Iraq.

"If we are called on to respond militarily, we are very capable of doing that and in a very strong, very precise and very devastating manner," said Mullen. He commands the George Washington battle group which includes three other ships and a submarine.

The George Washington and its sister ship, the USS Nimitz, each carry 50 strike aircraft and are both within striking distance of Iraq. A third carrier, the USS Independence, is expected to arrive in the Gulf early next month.

The US carriers have conducted joint maneuvers with the British carrier HMS Invincible since its arrival in the Gulf on January 25.

The United States also has more than 300 other aircraft in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain but would need the approval of those countries before launching any strike from their territory.

The United States has threatened to use force against Iraq if Baghdad continues to refuse to cooperate with UN weapons inspectors.

Mullen said pilots and ground crews aboard the carriers were training for a possible strike.

Reuter adds: Defence Secretary William Cohen on Saturday warned against "unreasonable expectations" from any US military raids on Iraq, saying no attempt would be made to destroy the country or depose President Saddam Hussein.

Cohen told reporters in a Pentagon interview that any

bombing and missile strikes by a major US force now in the Gulf would be "significant," but could not by themselves eliminate Iraq's ability to make chemical or biological arms.

"The United States has the power to do great damage. We also have the requirement that we act within certain guidelines," he said.

Another AP report says, Jordan's King Hussein and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, two of the United States' closest Arab allies, are cautioning Washington against using force in its confrontation with Iraq.

The United States and Britain have threatened attacks against Iraq if it refuses to allow UN weapons inspectors into sensitive sites.

Hussein reportedly told US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright that strikes against Iraq would harm civilians and set back the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Rajiv Murder
Appeal will soon
be moved in
Supreme Court

CHENNAI, Feb 1: Defence lawyer in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case S Doraisamy on Wednesday night said an appeal would soon be moved in the Supreme Court against the trial judge's order awarding death sentence to all 26 accused in the former prime minister's assassination, reports PTI.

"After the Nuremberg trial following World War II, this is the most extra ordinary order we have seen," he said.

Presiding Judge V Navaneetham while pronouncing the sentences, earlier in the day, had directed that all the accused be hanged to death, subject to confirmation by the Supreme Court.

"It is an erroneous order. Never before in trial history has there been such a conviction in which 26 had been sentenced to hang," Doraisamy said when asked for his reaction to the death sentences for the accused.

Hillary becomes
Clinton's full
defender-in-chief

WASHINGTON, Feb 1: First Lady Hillary Clinton stepped up her efforts Wednesday to defend her husband from a widening White House sex scandal, putting herself in the heart of the controversy, reports AFP.

Part fearsome lawyer, part loving wife, and now wholly her husband's defender-in-chief, the first lady is shrugging off allegations of serial infidelity as if to say, "if it doesn't bother me, why should American voters care?"

She has made two television appearances this week, poised but determined to discredit accusations — widely reported but denied by President Bill Clinton that her husband had an affair with a woman in her early 20s, then urged her to lie about it.

Early indications suggest her public-relations offensive might be doing some good. An ABC news poll on Wednesday found the president's approval ratings climbing from the lows of last week.

Off the Record
Unlucky intruders!

RANTOUL, Illinois: Doggone those police. These intruders had the run of a local pharmacy until the police put an end to their freedom, reports AP.

Police were investigating a possible break-in at a Revco Drug Store early Thursday morning after a witness reported movement in the store. It turned out to be a pair of chocolate-coloured Labrador retrievers.

According to the police report, employees had forgotten to lock the store when they went home Wednesday night. The stray dogs stepped onto the automatic door mats, which opened the doors, and they trotted inside.

When police tried to chase the dogs, they ran out of the drug-store and into a 24-hour grocery store next door.

Police captured the unlucky dogs in the grocery store and took them to the Rantoul Municipal Pound.

Tintoretto in train station
Clinton's popularity hits its
peak despite scandal

ROME: An anonymous telephone caller led police to a painting by Tintoretto in a baggage locker in a suburban Rome train station, Italian newspapers reported Saturday, reports AP.

"Deposition of Christ," from the late 16th-century, was one of 18 paintings recovered by Carabinieri, Italy's paramilitary police force, while investigating several art thefts in Rome, Tuscany and Lombardy over the last few years, the newspapers reported.

The recovered paintings, found in the last few days, range from the 16th through 19th centuries.

A Rome daily, Il Messaggero, reported that a tip led police to open a locker in the Tiburtina station on the outskirts of the capital, where they found the Tintoretto work.

The painting was stolen from a private house in Rome in 1996.

bring down his presidency by pressing for an investigation into allegations that Clinton may have lied under oath about having a sexual relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

But 56 per cent also agreed that "Clinton has only himself to blame" for the controversy and six in 10 suspect his presidency will be remembered mostly for allegations about his personal life and not for the accomplishments of his administration.

In the Chicago Tribune's random telephone survey of 700 registered Illinois voters conducted on Wednesday and Thursday, only 21 per cent said they disapproved of Clinton's job performance.

On the broader question of their personal opinion of Clinton, 60 per cent said they had a favourable opinion of the president.

US blasts authoritarian regimes
in Asia for HR violations

WASHINGTON, Jan 31: The United States blasted authoritarian regimes across Asia, condemning rulers in Myanmar, Indonesia and Cambodia for human rights abuses, but accepting some improvements in China, reports AFP.

In its annual report on human rights worldwide for 1997 released Friday, the State Department said there was growing tolerance in China, although abuses were widespread and well-documented.

It showed a different tone from last year when Beijing was blasted for crushing dissent. China's repression had not extended into Hong Kong, the former British colony handed back to Beijing in July last year.

Nevertheless the report was strongly critical of China. "The government continued to commit widespread and well-documented human rights abuses including torture, and mistreatment of prisoners, forced confessions, dissent, arbitrary arrest and lengthy incommunicado detention."

It also slammed "repressive" policies in Tibet, saying these "risk undermining Tibet's unique cultural, linguistic, and religious heritage."

Across the rest of Asia a string of regimes were slammed for rights abuses, repression and corruption.

In Myanmar, formerly Burma, the United States said the ruling military junta had changed its name — from the State Law and Order Restora-

tion Council (SLORC) to the State Peace and Development Council but not its ways.

"Security forces continued to commit extrajudicial killings, beatings and rape. The government continued its restrictions on basic rights of free speech, the press, assembly, association and privacy," it said.

The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) was constantly harassed, with restrictions tightened on its leader Aung San Suu Kyi especially.

In Indonesia the 450,000-strong armed forces were being used primarily to uphold an authoritarian regime, it said.

"Despite a surface adherence to democratic reforms, the Indonesian political system remains strongly authoritarian," the report said. "Pervasive corruption remains a problem."

The State Department's harsh words are likely to provide ammunition for critics of international efforts to strengthen Indonesia's troubled economy.

East Timor, the troubled former Portuguese colony, again witnessed torture and killings.

and after the July fighting, when first prime minister Prince Norodom Ranaridh was ousted, it said.

Forces loyal to victorious second Prime Minister Hun Sen had then launched a "campaign offer and political intimidation" seeking out supporters of the prince "some of whom they executed and others they detained," it added.

The United States has taken the strongest line of any member of the international community against Phnom Penh, cutting all non-humanitarian aid to Cambodia and effectively forcing the country's UN seat to remain vacant.

The report criticised Vietnam's civil rights record as "still poor", citing limits on freedom of expression, worship and assembly.

"The government continued to repress basic political and some religious freedoms and to commit numerous abuses," it said.

The ruling Communist Party of Vietnam is holding as many as 200 prisoners jailed for dissenting political or religious views.

In Afghanistan, where Civil War still reigns following the fall of Kabul to the Taliban Islamic militia in late 1996, law and order is enforced arbitrarily, the report said.

The report also highlighted poor human rights records on the Indian subcontinent in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and in Sri Lanka.

German sentenced to death in Iran

An Islamic court in Iran has sentenced a German businessman to die for having sex with a Muslim woman, AP reports from Tehran.

Sources close to the case identified the man as Helmut Hofer, 54. The sources said Saturday that the court sentenced Hofer Monday for an illicit relationship with a 26-year-old Iranian woman he met during a business trip last year to Mashhad in northeastern Iran. Hofer was charged with "Zenaye Mohsene," which under Iran's Islamic laws is defined as adultery with a married woman or sex between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man.

US sailor killed in Australia: A crew member from a United States naval vessel was stabbed to death during a nightclub brawl early Saturday morning police said, AFP reports from Brisbane.

The 34-year-old man was one of a group of 20 to 30 sailors on shore leave from the USS Blue Ridge, five were involved in the fight at the Gig nightclub. The man was stabbed in the chest and died almost instantly a police spokesman said.

4 poets arrested in China: Chinese authorities in southwestern Guizhou province have arrested four poets known for their liberal views a human rights group said Sunday, AP reports from Beijing.

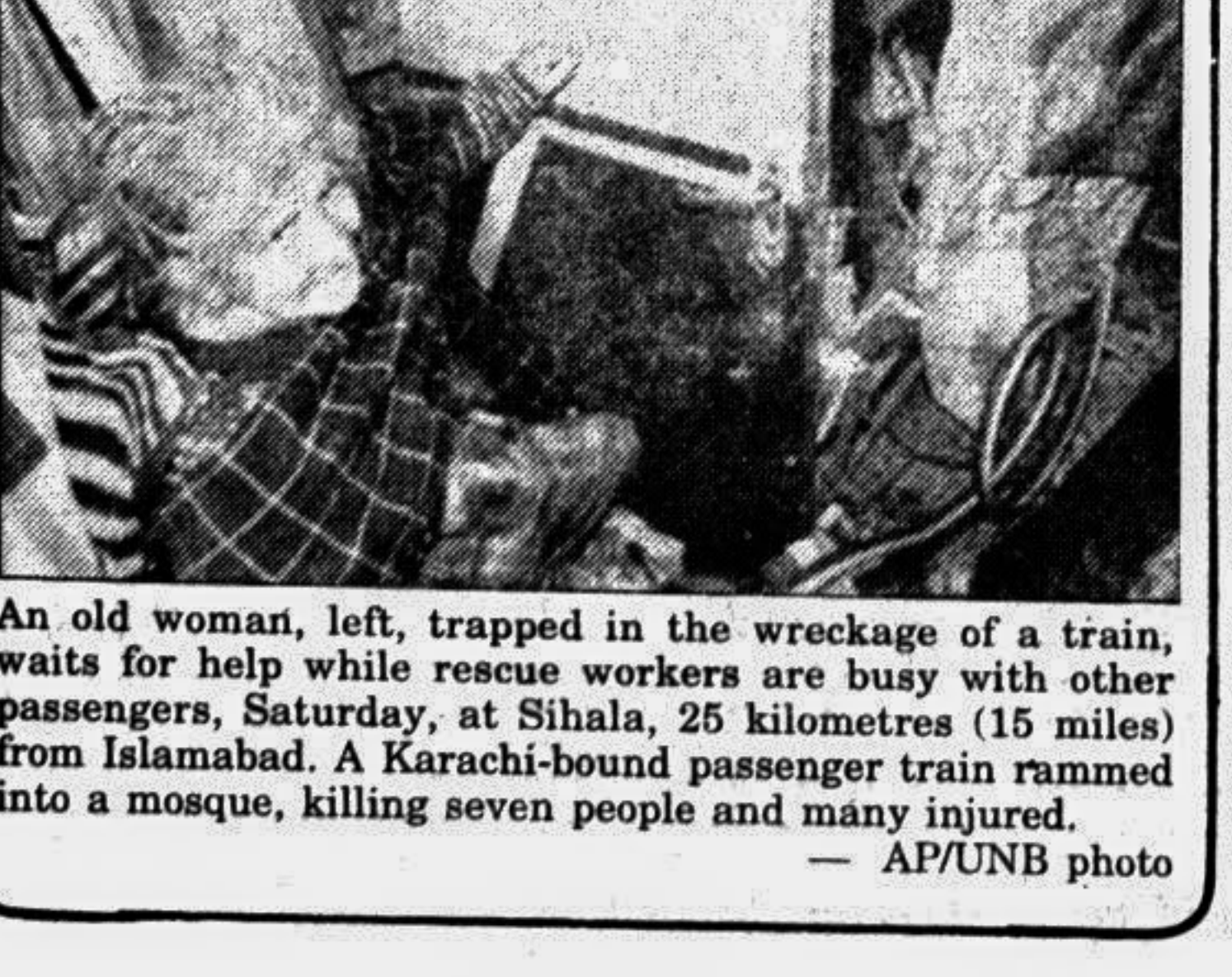
Wu Ruohai, Xiong Jinren, Ma Zhe and Ma Qing were taken away by the police on Monday and have been detained since, the Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China reported, citing anonymous sources.

8 die as van overturns in Malaysia: Eight people died and two were rushed to hospital when a van overturned and burst into flames in southern Malaysia, a fire department official said yesterday, AFP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

"Then van skidded and overturned. When we arrived the van was already engulfed in flames. I think the eight died because of the fire. But we are not sure," a fire department official in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan south of here told AFP. In one of the worst road accidents leading up to major holidays in Malaysia, the van carrying 10 people was heading towards Johor Bahru, in southern peninsula Malaysia, when it rolled and caught fire, reports said.

Croatian priest killed in Rwanda: A Croatian priest who had been living in Rwanda for 17 years was shot dead late Saturday in the centre of the capital Kigali, a hospital official said, AFP reports from Kigali.

Father Vjeko Curic was found dead in his car after being shot six times in the chest and back, apparently at point blank range by an individual who managed to flee, according to doctor Alojze Rwaka from the Kigali hospital centre.



An old woman, left, trapped in the wreckage of a train, waits for help while rescue workers are busy with other passengers, Saturday, at Sihala, 25 kilometres (15 miles) from Islamabad. A Karachi-bound passenger train rammed into a mosque, killing seven people and many injured. — AP/UNB photo



Indian Prime Minister I K Gujral, centre, flanked by Communist leader Harkishen Sing Surjeet, left and Jyoti Basu, who is also West Bengal Chief Minister at an election rally in the eastern city of Calcutta on Saturday. — AP/UNB photo

Preparations afoot for 50th anniversary celebrations
Security tightened in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, Feb 1: Thousands of extra police and troops poured into the Sri Lankan capital Colombo today before independence 50th anniversary celebrations this week which are overshadowed by fears of another Tamil Tiger suicide bombing, reports AFP.

Organisers of Wednesday's festivities, at which Britain's Prince Charles is due to be Guest of Honour, said schools in the city of one million people would close from Monday for fears of attacks by the separatist rebels.

Plans for a children's parade on Wednesday have been scrapped, they said.

Proposals to use decorated trucks as floats have also been

cancelled following the January 25 suicide truck bombing of a temple in the central city of Kandy which killed 16 people.

Security officials said the main venue for the celebrations outside parliament, an exhibition centre and the main business district had been declared "high-security zones" with parking banned.

Trucks have been banned from the whole city in daylight hours without a permit.

The security officials gave no figures for the number of additional troops and police brought into Colombo. Some 10,000 of them had been due to guard Kandy, planned as the main venue for events until the

truck bombing wrecked the country's holiest Buddhist shrine, the Temple of the Tooth.

Authorities then switched the main venue to Colombo, which has been the target of numerous deadly suicide bombings during a drawn out war waged by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for a Tamil homeland in the north and east.

Sri Lanka is the first leg of Charles's three-nation tour of South Asia, which will also take him to Nepal and the remote mountain kingdom of Bhutan. A Sri Lankan government spokesman said Prince Charles was due here on Tuesday afternoon.

Soyuz spacecraft docks
with Mir

MOSCOW, Feb 1: A Soyuz spacecraft docked flawlessly with the Mir space station Saturday, bringing a fresh crew of two Russian cosmonauts and a Frenchman to the orbiting outpost — along with a bottle of French wine, reports AP.

The docking occurred 16 minutes ahead of schedule, at 8:54 pm (1554 GMT). It was done on automatic pilot — a procedure that has not always worked in previous Mir couplings, but went without a hitch this time.

An hour and a half later, the crew opened the hatch and floated into the Mir — and into the arms of waiting Russian and American colleagues. The gathering apparently brought together Mir's most international crew ever.

Although he is a Russian cosmonaut, one of the new crew

members, Talgat Misabayev, has dual citizenship from Russia and Kazakhstan. He and his Russian colleague, Nikolai Budarin, arrived with Frenchman Leopold Eyharts.

They joined American astronaut Andrew Thomas who arrived on Mir last weekend from the US space shuttle Endeavour.

At Mission Control, officials from all four countries watched on television monitors as the new and old crews hugged and slapped each other's shoulders.

"I congratulate you on this excellent docking, and hope you will fulfill the rest of your programme just as well," said Boris Ostroumov, the deputy chief of the Russian Space Agency. "Now are have four nations represented on the orbit — the whole world is looking at you."

Protest rally in
Spain over
killing of
politician couple

SEVILLE, Spain, Feb 1: Almost 500,000 people marched here Saturday in a show of public anger at the killing of a local Spanish politician and his wife, blamed on the armed Basque separatist ETA, police said, reports AFP.

The demonstration which ended shortly after 10:00 pm (21:00 GMT) followed the funeral of conservative city councillor Alberto Jimenez Becerra and his wife Ascension Garcia-Ortiz — both shot to death Friday.

The couple were buried Saturday morning after a requiem mass at Seville Cathedral attended by Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, eight cabinet members and the eldest daughter of King Juan Carlos, Elena, as well as a huge crowd of mourners.