

**Probe demanded into alleged murder plot against Sonia**

NEW DELHI, Feb 27: India's outgoing coalition said today it backed a federal investigation into an alleged "murder plot" against Sonia Gandhi, the widow of assassinated former premier Rajiv Gandhi, reports AFP.

Indian Home Secretary BP Singh said New Delhi wanted the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to probe the mysterious death of a man near a public meeting in Bilaspur, Madhya Pradesh, on Wednesday.

The dead man, an engineer, was found near a railway track. An aide to Sonia said when the police searched his house, they found a diary listing her previous public meetings and a sketch of her Bilaspur venue, including the speakers platform.

The man, a Hindu, reportedly came from Coimbatore. The Congress has demanded a high-level inquiry into the incident.

Madhya Pradesh police are already investigating the case but Singh told PTI that New Delhi "has offered all assistance to the state government, including its desire to hand over the case to CBI."

**Security tightened at polling stations Muslim groups call strike, boycott of today's polls in Srinagar**

SRINAGAR, Feb 27: Police fired tear gas to disperse stone-throwing protesters during an anti-election strike in the capital of volatile Kashmir state today, a day ahead of parliamentary elections in Srinagar, reports AP.

Muslim groups who want Kashmir to be independent of India have called another strike tomorrow, as well as an election boycott. Their opposition and cold weather in the Himalayan state are likely to keep turnout low.

Shops were closed and government offices deserted today. Small groups of protesters gathered at several spots in Srinagar. Local news agencies reported no injuries in the clashes with police.

Temperatures were just above freezing in Srinagar, with a foot (30 cm) of snow on the ground following storms that had shut down air and road traffic earlier in the week.

Voting scheduled in Srinagar and elsewhere in India, the fourth of six days of balloting, will wrap up all but a few par-

liamentary races. Counting begins the following Monday and a new parliament and prime minister and expected to be seated by mid-March.

Thursday, paramilitary troops took up positions at schools and government offices where the voting will be held in Srinagar, 600 km north of New Delhi.

Reuters adds: The crackle of gunfire and the crump of grenades do not echo very often these days through the narrow, twisting lanes.

But there is no escape from the military presence on the snow-covered roads, and Kashmiris say the appearance that everything is normal is a facade.

Although security has been beefed up this week ahead of the vote, it is lighter than a year ago and violent death is rarer these days. But anxiety levels remain high.

"There is a psyche of fear," said one shopkeeper, whose main business is selling fine embroidered Kashmiri shawls and blankets to tourists, who

have recently begun trickling in again after a hiatus of eight years.

Srinagar's fabled Dal Lake, with its houseboats parked in the shade of the "Chinar" trees, and the ski slopes of nearby Gulmarg used to draw hundreds of thousands of visitors annually until a revolt against Indian rule by Muslim guerrillas erupted in 1990.

The Srinagar shawl-seller said he had become numb to living alongside men with guns. "But I know there is no normalcy here," he said.

After state elections in late 1996, the first in nearly a decade, there have been signs that some semblance of order has been slowly returning.

"Kashmiris are not reconciled to the state of normalcy being projected by the government. It is a superficial situation created by coercion," an academic told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

The same feelings can be found elsewhere in Kashmir, the only Muslim majority state

in mainly Hindu India, where around 25,000 people have been killed in eight years of fighting.

Srinagar residents say they no longer hear gunfire at night or fear random grenade attacks. But living under the control of the military, backed by "pro-government" militia groups trying to tame hard-core separatist guerrillas, holds abiding terrors.

Just over two years ago Indian forces broke the back of the main militia groups fighting in Kashmir, forcing most of the guerrillas back across the border into Pakistan.

India controls two-thirds of the Himalayan region and Pakistan the rest. New Delhi accuses Islamabad of providing shelter, training and arms to the guerrillas, but Pakistan says it only provides political and diplomatic support.

One of the key milestones in India's war against the insurgency was the successful turning of two of the guerrilla groups against their erstwhile comrades in arms.



Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is escorted by Kuwait's Minister of Information Saud Nasser Al-Sabah upon her arrival at the Kuwait City International Airport, Thursday. Thatcher will visit British troops deployed to the desert during the crisis with Iraq over UN weapons inspections. — AP/UNB photo

**BRIFFLY**

**Libya, KSA sign security accord:** Libya and Saudi Arabia signed a security cooperation agreement during a visit to Tripoli by the Saudi Interior Minister, Prince Nayef Ibn Abdel Aziz, the official JANA news agency said Thursday. AFP reports from Tripoli.

The agency did not provide further details about the accord, the first of its kind between the two countries.

**3 die in Taiwan gas station blast:** An explosion at a liquefied gas (LPG) filling station in Taiwan's southern port city of Kaoshiung killed three people and injured at least 30, officials said yesterday. Reuters reports from Taipei.

The explosion occurred as an LPG delivery truck was filling its tanks, and was so powerful it hurled the vehicle about 100 metres. A fireman and a filling station worker were killed, a city official said the identity of the third casualty was not immediately known.

**Palestinian population now 2.89 m:** The Palestinian population in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem has grown to 2.89 million, up sharply from just over 2 million in the mid-1990s, according to Palestinian census results announced Thursday. AP reports from Ramallah.

The new figures will have repercussions for the peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, especially when the two sides begin negotiating issues such as final borders, the future of Palestinian refugees and the status of disputed Jerusalem.

**Malaria claims 135 in Philippines:** A house-to-house check by doctors of a malaria-infected island in the southern Philippines has shown that 135 residents have died of the disease since January, a health official said Friday. AP reports from Manila.

Health Secretary Carmencita Repida said the updated death toll was arrived at after an intensive check with residents of the remote island of Siasi.

**Couple held for killing baby in Japan:** A Japanese couple has been arrested on suspicion of murdering their 20-month daughter by starving her to death, police in western central Japan said Friday. AP reports from Tokyo.

The Osaka Prefectural Police identified the suspects as Tomokazu Nago, 30, a truck driver in Kobe, and his wife Yuri, 24. A police spokesman, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the two were arrested on Feb 8 after they confessed to starving their eldest daughter, Manami, who died on Jan 4, 1996.

**Canada to accept 19 Cuban dissidents:** Canada will accept 19 political prisoners being freed and expelled from Cuba, Prime Minister Jean Chretien announced Thursday. Reuters reports from Ottawa.

A statement from Chretien's office said they were on a list presented to the Cuban government by Pope John Paul during his visit to the communist island last month. "The 19 who have agreed to come to Canada as a condition of their release are among over 100 prisoners of conscience whom Cuban officials have agreed to discharge from prison," it said.

**Sierra Leone gov't to be reinstated:** Sierra Leone's President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, ousted in May by troops who were in turn overthrown this month by Nigerian troops, says his government will be reinstated March 10, a newspaper said yesterday. AFP reports from Lagos.

Kabbah made the statement Thursday evening in the Nigerian capital Abuja after a four-day visit.

**Colombia seizes 4 tons of cocaine:** Colombia seized more than four tons of cocaine in three separate raids on Thursday carried out as part of an anti-drug sweep dubbed "Operation Eclipse," police said. Reuters reports from Bogota.

The anti-narcotics division of the national police said the raids led to the dismantling of a clandestine drug laboratory in a mountainous area of central Boyaca province, where agents seized nearly 1,500 kg of pure cocaine. Another 1,200 kg of the white powder drug were confiscated when agents dismantled a drug lab in southwest Valle del Cauca province and an additional shipment, consisting of about 1,500 kg, was found aboard a ship in the country's main Pacific coast port of Buenaventura.

**Jackson to build park in ROK:** US pop star Michael Jackson has agreed to build a theme park in South Korea's most famous ski resort, Muju, site of the 1997 Winter Universiade, the Korean owning company revealed yesterday. AFP reports from Seoul.

The company, the financially-troubled Sangbang Wool Development Ltd (SBW), released copies of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed with Jackson on Nov 20, 1997. In the MOU, Jackson agreed to "create and design a theme park for Muju Resort" and invest 100 million US dollars.

**BJP accused of threatening aggression against Pakistan**

ISLAMABAD, Feb 27: Pakistan's Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub accused India's Hindu nationalist party of openly threatening aggression against Pakistan and warned of "a befitting reply," the state-run news agency reported today.

Addressing the National Assembly or lawmaking Lower House of Parliament Thursday, Ayub urged the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to "talk of removal of conflict and tension between Pakistan and India and not of nuclearisation, missiles, arms race and war."

Ayub was responding to reports that the BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee promised to take control of Pakistan-held Kashmir if his party wins national elections.

In its weekly briefing, Pak-

istan's Foreign Office spokesman Tariq Altaf said Vajpayee's statements "showed his party's avarice for territory and betrays its desire to take over what does not belong to it."

While talks between the unfriendly neighbours have never been smooth, they resumed last year after a three-year break. But the Foreign Office said the BJP's statements do not bode well for future talks.

"Such statements will spoil the atmosphere, making it foul and unsuitable for the process of dialogue," said Altaf.

Pakistan and India have fought three wars since 1947 when the Asian subcontinent was given its independence from Britain and Pakistan was created as a homeland for the Muslims of the Subcontinent.

A nine-year-old bloody se-

**Avalanches claim 20 in Kashmir**

JAMMU, India, Feb 27: At least 20 people died when snow avalanches hit villages in the northern Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, police said today. Reuters.

Nine people, including six members of a family, were killed after their house was buried under snow Thursday night in Chandimargh village, about 246-km north of Jammu, the state's winter capital.

Earlier on Wednesday night, 11 people died after an avalanche hit Mangatarigam village in Banihal town, 200-km east of Jammu. Six of the dead were women and five were children, police said.

"These are remote parts of the state. We receive information slowly," Kuldeep Khuda, Inspector General of Police, Jammu, told Reuters.

Police said there had been heavy snowfall in the area in the past few days.

**'Baghdad distrustful of arms inspectors, but will work with them'**

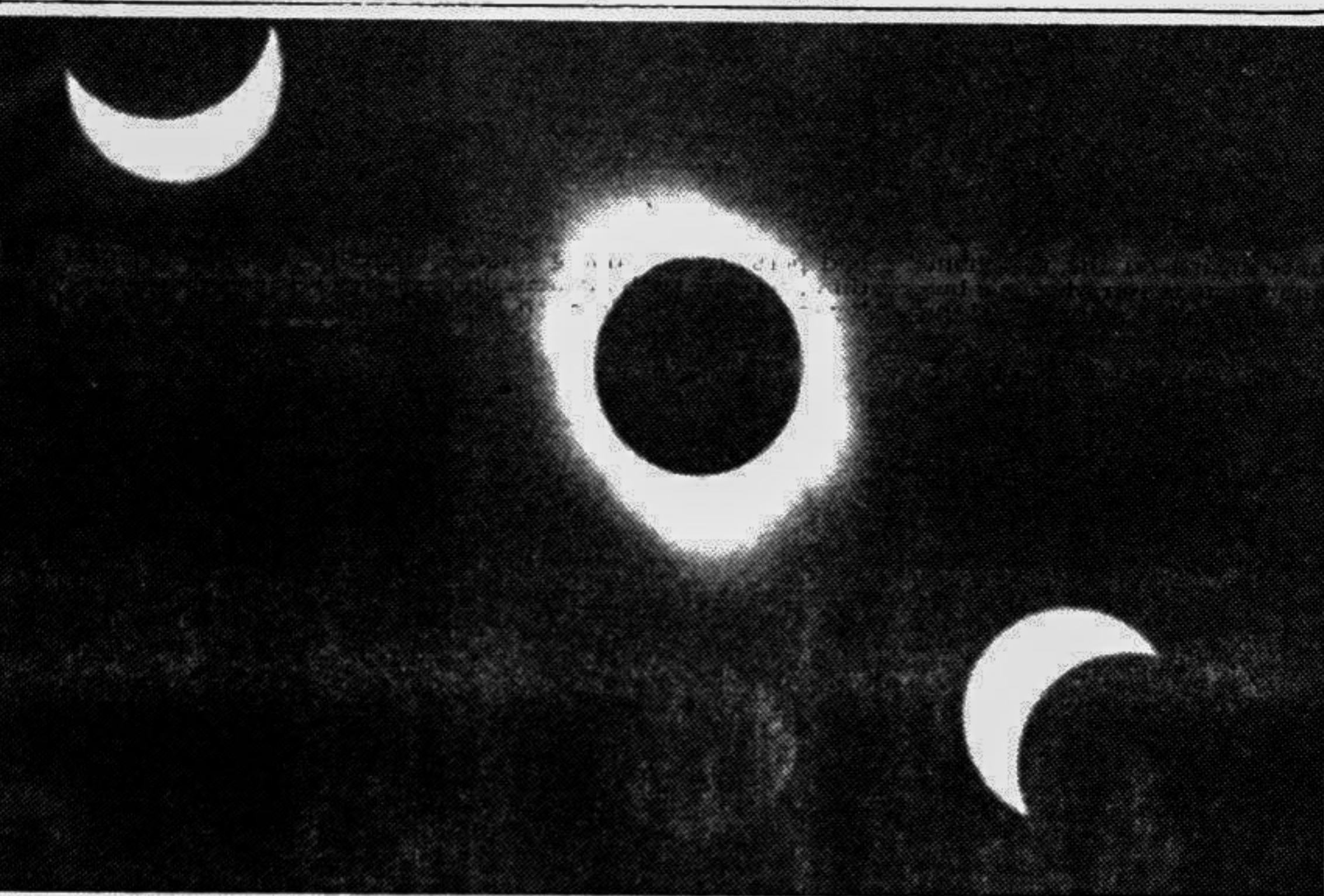
PARIS, Feb 27: Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz said on Thursday he did not trust the special group of arms inspectors and diplomats he agreed with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan but he would work with them, reports Reuters.

Asked by French TFI television whether he trusted the group, to be set up to survey eight so-called presidential sites, Aziz replied: "I have to be frank. My answer is no, but we will work with them because I trust the United Nations Secretary-General."

"We have signed a deal, and we are waiting for the Secretary-General to send the special group and we'll begin to work with them when they arrive in Baghdad," he said.

Annan and Aziz signed an agreement on Monday setting up the special UNSCOM group to end the standoff over arms monitoring and avert US-led strikes to force Baghdad to open up the sensitive sites to inspectors.

The 15-member Security Council is preparing a resolution backing the pact and warning Iraq of "the severest consequences" if it violates obligations to give UN inspectors unrestricted access to all sites. France has already given general support to this wording while Russia and China are considering it.



Three phases of a total eclipse of the sun, before, during and after, are seen in this time-lapsed multiple exposure photograph from Valledupar, on the northern coast of Colombia, Thursday. The eclipse, in which the moon blocked all but the sun's corona, or fringe, occurred in the Galapagos, northern Venezuela and Colombia, Aruba, Curacao, Bonaire, Montserrat, Antigua and Guadeloupe. — AP/UNB photo

**Ranariddh declares truce**

BANGKOK, Feb 27: Cambodian Co-Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh, deposed in a coup last July, announced Friday his resistance troops will adopt a unilateral ceasefire beginning at midnight in hopes of forging a peace deal with coup leader Hun Sen, reports AP.

"To end the suffering of the Cambodian people and to prepare for the upcoming general election in July 1998, from today, February 27 at midnight (17:00 GMT), I call on the (armed forces) loyal to me to declare a unilateral ceasefire," Ranariddh said in a statement issued at his home in exile in Bangkok.

The decision by Ranariddh may pave the way for him to

eventually return to Cambodia and participate in the elections scheduled for July 26.

Hun Sen, who was Ranariddh's co-prime minister before ousting him in the July coup, has insisted the resistance initiate a unilateral ceasefire as a precondition to any peace deal.

He has also insisted that Ranariddh stand trial on charges of smuggling weapons and conspiring with outlawed Maoist Khmer Rouge guerrillas.

Courts, controlled by Hun Sen, are certain to convict Ranariddh. But King Norodom Sihanouk is expected to pardon Ranariddh, who is his son.

A handful of troops loyal to Ranariddh have been holding on to an impenetrable plateau

**Judges for ads in newspapers asking Prabhakaran to surrender!**

COLOMBO, Feb 27: Frustrated with the inability of security forces to nab the country's most wanted man, Sri Lankan judges have taken the unusual step of ordering newspaper advertisements asking him to surrender, reports AP.

Colombo High Court Judge Nalliah Ramachandran on Thursday ordered prosecutors to place the advertisements calling on Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam guerrillas, to appear in court May 28 and face charges of devastating the capital's business district with a truck bomb.

Prabhakaran and seven other guerrillas have been indicted in the January, 1996 bombing of the Central Bank, which killed 78 people and wounded 1,400.

Prabhakaran is believed to be hiding in the forests of northern Sri Lanka which are outside government control. The court apparently saw the advertisements as the only way to issue a summons, generally required before trial can start, on Prabhakaran.

**Off the Record**

**Remembering position of objects .....**

WASHINGTON: It is done unconsciously, but when analysed is an amazing feat. Just how do people remember where something is once they stop looking at it?

It turns out humans have a separate region in the brain used specifically for remembering the position of objects, researchers said on Thursday, reports AP.

"Spatial working memory is used when you are driving in your car and glance in the mirror to see the cars behind you, but you still know where the cars are in front of you," said Dr Susan Courtney, who led the study at The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH).

It is a complex skill, but Courtney and colleagues reported in the journal "Science" that they had found the part of the brain that takes care of this ability.

Discovery of the area, which is about the size of a penny and located above the eyes, will also help scientists better understand mental illness and aid in the treatment of various brain injuries.

The researchers used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to see what part of the brain was stimulated when spatial working memory was used.

**Cattlemen vs talk-show host**

AMARILLO, Texas: A jury rejected a lawsuit Thursday by Texas cattlemen who claimed a talk-show host's televised comments about mad cow disease caused beef prices to plummet and cost them millions of dollars, reports AP.

"Free speech not only lives. It rocks!" defendant Oprah Winfrey said afterward.

**Drug-related ban on US aid to Pakistan goes**

WASHINGTON, Feb 27: Myanmar and Afghanistan were named on a list of drug-trafficking countries barred from receiving US aid Thursday but Pakistan and Cambodia received a sanctions waiver despite their poor record in the war on drugs, reports AFP.

In announcing the decision to deny aid to Myanmar and Afghanistan, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright cited their mammoth opium production.

"Opium and heroin remain Afghanistan's largest sources of income, a reality for which each of the major factions competing for power in that country deserve blame," Albright said.

**Ramos orders vigorous pursuit of Marcos' money**

MANILA, Feb 27: President Fidel Ramos on Friday ordered officials to vigorously pursue previously unknown wealth reportedly stashed by the late strongman Ferdinand Marcos in secret bank accounts in Switzerland, Hong Kong and the United States, reports AP.

Ramos gave the order during the founding anniversary of the Presidential Commission on Good Government, which was created in 1986 to hunt Marcos' alleged ill-gotten for tune.

"Our efforts at tracking down the assets supposedly looted from the economy should not stop now but be more vigorously pursued," Ramos said.

The commission's chairman Magtanggol Guingundo said the assets were reportedly hidden in more than 70 accounts in about 20 banks, half of them in Switzerland.

**Lockerbie dispute World Court declares jurisdiction**

THE HAGUE, Feb 27: The World Court ruled Friday it has authority to settle a bitter legal dispute that has blocked the trial of two Libyans suspected of blowing up a Pan Am jumbo jet over Scotland in 1988, reports AP.

The United Nations' highest judicial body declared jurisdiction in the case pitting Libya against the United States and Britain, still fighting for a trial nine years after a suitcase bomb killed 270 people in the air and on the ground in Lockerbie.

The ruling that the case was admissible was a boost for some relatives of the victims of Flight 103. But the decision did not settle the judicial deadlock and a trial could still be years away.

**Strange force pushing the universe apart**

WASHINGTON, Feb 27: New and surprising evidence that the universe is permeated with a strange force that is pushing it apart could turn the whole science of cosmology on its head, astronomers said on Thursday, reports Reuters.

The strange repulsive force seems to be working against gravity to speed up the expansion of the universe, they said.

"We are scratching our heads to think if there could be an alternative explanation for it — something more mundane than a repulsive force," said Adam Riess, a cosmologist at the University of California at Berkeley.

Riess and other members of the High-Redshift Supernova Search Team, an international group of astronomers from the United States, Latin America, Australia and Europe, were looking at supernovae. These exploding stars are so bright and so common that the provide useful information about the universe.

The Big Bang Theory of Creation holds that the universe exploded from a pinprick of matter between 11 and 15 billion years ago and is still moving outward.

What cosmologists want to know is will it keep expanding forever, or will gravity slow it down? Could it eventually all collapse back into a big crunch?

To their surprise, Riess and his collaborators found the universe is actually expanding faster now than it was 5 to 7 billion years ago. "It actually seems to be accelerating so it will be expanding forever," he said.

Riess said another team was duplicating the work, and so far the results were the same.

The group first reported their findings last week to a conference at the University of California in Los Angeles. The Journal Science carries a report in next week's issue.

Riess said he was not surprised that no had noticed the

**RAMOS orders vigorous pursuit of Marcos' money**

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The president now has to convince at least two dozen opposition members of Parliament to cross party lines and vote for Kim Jong-Pil as the nation's second highest official.

Ever since Kim was sworn in as president on Wednesday, the majority opposition party has boycotted Parliament, preventing a quorum from voting on the nomination.

The deadlock threw into question Kim's ability to implement economic and political reforms he has promised to restore the nation's shattered economy.

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