



Workers unload medicine donated by a group of Egyptian artists headed by Syrian actress Ragda as a gesture of solidarity with the Iraqi people at Saddam International Airport Sunday. There is a shortage of medicine and medical supplies because of UN sanctions. — AP/UNB photo

International

Vote counting begins amid tight security

BJP may win majority if early trends continue: Expert

NEW DELHI, Mar 2: Hindu nationalists today made early gains at the start of the count in Indian elections, officials said, with an expert speculating they might even win a majority, reports APF.

The nationalists Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party) was leading in 15 out of 36 constituencies from across the country. Six of these had previously been held by its rivals.

Seven BJP allies were leading in seven other seats, two of which held by anti-nationalist parties.

Exit polls suggested the Hindu nationalists would top the polls but fall short of an overall majority.

Election analyst Pranroy Roy, however, said the early trends showed the BJP was poised to win at least 250 seats in the 545-member parliament and could even reach a majority

with its allies. "It will be inching closer and closer to the 250-mark," said Roy, India's most respected election expert.

"They can even get a majority if this trend continues." Candidates for the Congress, the nationalists' main opponent, were struggling in many areas. They led in four constituencies, small groups and independent candidates had forged ahead in 10.

Earlier AP says, after a vote marked by violence, security was tight Monday as counting began in Indian parliamentary elections a right-wing Hindu nationalist party is expected to win.

In all, 543 seats are at stake, with two remaining filled by appointment. Counting was underway for 527 races. In others, voting has not yet been held or challenges to balloting have delayed counting. Trends pointing

to a winner were expected to be clear late Monday or early Tuesday.

The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's position as the largest party in the last parliament bolstered its claims to give India a stable government, with voter discontent over political uncertainty a key campaign issue. Exit poll results released after the fourth day of voting Saturday indicated the BJP would win the most seats in parliament, but not the clear majority needed to govern without partners.

The elections in the world's largest democracy — some 300 million voters turned out — was staggered over four days over the last two weeks, to allow security troops time to move to different trouble spots. Voting in another six races is scheduled Saturday and June 21. With the current federal budget

expiring March 31, officials can't wait until all the votes are in before moving to seat a new government.

Violence erupted on each of the four voting days held so far. On Saturday, eight people were killed in election-related violence, bringing the death toll to at least 84. Another 58 people died in a series of bombings in the southern city of Coimbatore on the eve of first voting on February 16, but it was not yet clear whether those deaths were linked to the elections.

Monday, roads leading to counting stations were closed and police and party representatives stood guard as election officials began the counting process by shuffling ballots from different polling stations to assure the first results did not reflect geographical trends.

The ballot mixing was expected to take several hours, said Sajeew Pandey.

Indian SC refuses to reinstate bribery charge against Advani

NEW DELHI, Mar 2: The Supreme Court on Monday refused to reinstate charges against the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party in a 23 million dollar bribery scandal, Press Trust of India news agency said, reports AP.

The Central Bureau of Investigation had appealed a lower court ruling last year that it had failed to produce sufficient evidence against LK Advani, the BJP's president. The Supreme Court upheld the earlier ruling Monday.

Advani was among 25 political figures and 18 bureaucrats facing trial for accepting bribes from a business family in return for public contracts or other favours.

His Hindu nationalist BJP is expected to win the most votes in India's ongoing parliamentary elections, but not enough to govern without partners. Its candidate for prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, is considered more moderate than Advani, the party president.

100 MQM activists arrested in Karachi 3 Shi'ites killed in Punjab

ISLAMABAD, Mar 2: Three Shi'ite Muslims were gunned down in eastern Punjab province in the latest round of religiously motivated violence sweeping the country, according to news reports Monday, says AP.

Two leaders of a militant Shi'ite group and their bodyguard were ambushed on Sunday night near Jhang, about 200 km southwest of the federal capital of Islamabad, the English-language newspaper, The News, said.

Safdar Ali Sial and Amjad Ali Sial were ambushed while driving on a narrow country road on the outskirts of Jhang.

Gunmen drove up beside them and opened fire, killing all three of them. The lone survivor, their driver, was taken to hospital where he reportedly is in serious condition.

The victims all belonged to

the Tehrik-e-Jafria or Movement for Shi'ite Law. The group routinely clashes with militant Sunni groups, particularly the Sipha-e-Sahabah or Guardians of the Friends of the Prophet, which is headquartered in Jhang.

Although no one has taken responsibility for the killings, police officials say they believe it was religiously motivated.

Another report from Karachi says, police swept through this troubled port city on the weekend arresting scores of activists belonging to a militant ethnic party in connection with a shootout that left eight people dead, authorities said Monday.

Most of the estimated 100 people who were arrested belonged to the Haqiqi faction of the Mohajir Qami Movement (MQM) a fractured party representing Indian Muslims who

immigrated to Pakistan 50 years ago.

Police say they suspect the Haqiqi faction of carrying out the February 22 killings that appeared to target members of a rival faction, named for its exiled leader, Altaf Hussein.

Among the dead were two young girls caught in the cross-fire while they played in the street.

The police sweep was conducted over the weekend. Heavily armed police, wearing bullet proof vests and brandishing their automatic rifles, kicked in doors of suspected hideouts, raided faction offices and burst into homes to arrest people.

The police action sparked sporadic protests Sunday in Karachi as bands of young boys, believed to be members of the Haqiqi faction, blocked roads and set tires on fire. There were no injuries in the protests.



Lower Saxony State Governor Gerhard Schroeder of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) chats with his wife Doris Schroeder-Koepf during the election party in Hanover, Germany, on Sunday night. After winning Sunday's state election by about 48 per cent, Schroeder will be the challenger of Chancellor Helmut Kohl, of the Christian Democratic Party, during the general elections on September 27. — AP/UNB photo

Kohl to face tough, telegenic foe in Sept 27 polls

HANOVER, Germany, Mar 2: A surprisingly broad victory by Gerhard Schroeder, a popular moderate with telegenic charm, has given Germany's opposition new hope that it can finally drive Chancellor Helmut Kohl from office after 16 years of conservative rule, reports AP.

Fresh from a reelection triumph in his home state, the 53-year-old Lower Saxony governor is to get the Social Democratic party's nomination today to run against Kohl, Germany's longest-serving leader this century.

Schroeder is counting on Germany's yearning for change to lift him to the nation's top job in the September 27 election. The winner will lead the government's historic move back to Berlin and take Europe's largest nation into the new millennium.

Off the Record

Contraceptives for elephants!

KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, South Africa: Times have changed for park ranger Douw Grobler, reports AP. Once he fired tranquilizer darts to sedate elephants suffering from a culling programme that reduced South Africa's burgeoning herds. These days he shoots elephants to help save them.

A ground crew of American and German scientists rushes in to examine the three sedated animals. Their mission: to check if a contraception experiment started about a year ago can limit population growth enough to prevent the resumption of culling. The helicopter carrying Grobler swooped after a herd of elephants changing through the bush. The ranger picked out three of the elephant cows in the experiment, each identified by a mud-caked collar, and fired his dart gun.

The research team moved in on the three cows lying within 20 meters (yards) of each other, snoring gently from the tranquiliser. Within minutes the scientists had set up equipment and started their tests.

Along with blood and fecal exams, a specialised theme from the German Institute of Biology and Wildlife Research in Berlin performed a trans-rectal ultrasound pregnancy test on the stumbling creatures.

Madonna's wish

LOS ANGELES: Madonna doesn't want her baby daughter to be an only child, reports AP.

"I would love to have a brother or sister for Lola," Madonna said. "I don't know when, but it'll happen."

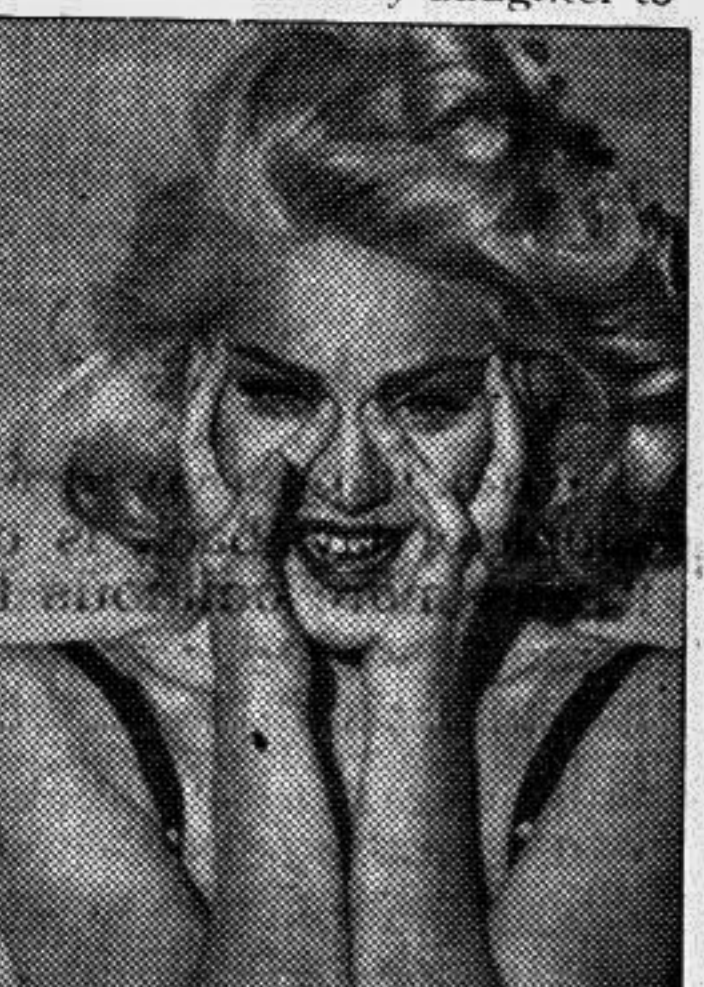
Lola is Madonna's nickname for her 16-month-old daughter, Lourdes Maria, who the 39-year-old superstar says has made her life "infinitely richer."

"I feel like I'm starting my life all over in some ways," Madonna said. "My daughter's birth was like a rebirth for me."

The Material Girl has a new album out, "Ray of Light," but wants to limit touring so she can spend as much time with Lourdes as possible, saying motherhood brought emotional growth for the entertainer often criticised as childish.

"I got to a point where I went, OK, I've been incredibly petulant, incredibly self-indulgent, incredibly naive," she said. "But I needed to do all of those things to get where I am now, and where I am now I'm very happy with."

"I don't have any regrets."



BRIEFLY

Road mishap kills 6 in Pakistan: A truck carrying soldiers plunged into a ravine in southwestern Baluchistan province, killing six soldiers and injuring 20 others in Pakistan, an English-language newspaper reported Monday, AP reports from Islamabad.

Their truck was driving on a rural highway near Sui town, located 600 kilometres (360 miles) south of the federal capital of Islamabad on Sunday when the accident occurred. It's not clear what happened, but it appears the driver lost control of the vehicle. The soldiers were en route to help local officials conduct the country's first census since 1981, The News reported.

50 feared dead in Vietnam: Nearly 50 people were killed and 20 injured when an overcrowded bus plunged into a swamp in one of Vietnam's worst road accidents, local officials said Monday, AP says from Hanoi.

The bus was trying to pass a cement truck when it crashed through the concrete sides of a bridge and fell into the 6-metre-deep (20-foot-deep) swamp around noon Sunday, said Nguyen Vi Thanh, deputy director of An Nhon district hospital in the central coastal province of Binh Dinh. Survivors smashed windows to swim to safety, while the rest of the passengers drowned, he said.

US spl envoy in Jakarta: US special envoy Walter Mondale arrived in Jakarta yesterday for talks with Indonesian President Suharto on the country's economic crisis, Reuter says from Jakarta.

Mondale was greeted on the tarmac of Jakarta's international airport by US ambassador Stapleton Roy and was driven straight into the city, witnesses said.

11 of a gang held in Colombia: Soldiers arrested 11 suspected members of a right-wing death squad and confiscated an arsenal of machine guns, pistols and grenades in central Colombia on Sunday, authorities said, Reuter reports from Bogota.

The men were captured near the town of Puerto Berrio, in the middle Magdalena region — the birthplace of Colombia's ultraright wing paramilitary gangs — a spokesman for the army's 14th brigade said.

Road mishap kills 40 in Nigeria: Forty people died on the spot while several others were seriously injured when a luxury bus lost one of its tyres and ran into a ditch in Nigeria Thursday night, the news agency of Nigeria said Sunday, Xinhua says from Lagos.

The report said the accident occurred at Ohono village, Kogi state in central Nigeria, when the bus was on its way from Nigerian capital Abuja to the southern city of Lagos.

16 die as ship sinks in Indonesia: A passenger ship capsized on a river in northwest Indonesia after being hit by a tidal surge, killing at least 16 people, an official said Monday. Another 23 people were missing, AP reports from Jakarta.

The ship sank on Saturday with 72 passengers and four crew members on the Rokan River on Sumatra Island, about 1,170 kilometres (731 miles) northwest of Jakarta, said port authority chief Bangko M Yusuf.

Lewinsky case 'Ken Starr should end investigation of Clinton'

WASHINGTON, Mar 2: A White House aide said Sunday it's time for Kenneth Starr to end his investigation of President Bill Clinton, and an administration supporter said the independent prosecutor was out of control, reports AP.

"This is not about seeking the truth. This is a partisan political pursuit of the president, and it's time for Ken Starr to start wrapping up pieces of his investigation and get to the bottom of it," said White House adviser Rahm Emanuel on CBS television.

Sen. Patrick Leahy took the attack a step further, declaring that the special prosecutor was out to oust the president.

"Starr has gotten totally out of control. He has this fixation of trying to topple the president of the United States. He's doing everything possible to do it."

'Di called out for Dodi after car crash'

LONDON, Mar 2: The bodyguard who survived the car crash in which Princess Diana died says she called out for her companion Dodi Al-Fayed after the crash, a British journalist told Sky television on Sunday, reports Reuter.

Bodyguard Trevor Rees-Jones says he heard Diana's voice after the accident in Paris on August 31. Piers Morgan, the editor of the Mirror newspaper who has interviewed Rees-Jones, said.

"He can remember Princess Diana's voice in the back of the car calling out for Dodi Fayed," Morgan told Sky. "Now if this is true, and the psychiatrists who have been coaxing these flashbacks out of him believe that it is true and accurate, portrayal of what happened that evening, then it establishes that Princess Diana was conscious after the collision."

US lawmakers for ousting Saddam 'Iraq to honour accord with UN'

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 2: With the Security Council expected to threaten "very severe consequences" Iraq's UN ambassador said Sunday that his government will honour an agreement to open suspected weapons sites to UN inspectors, reports AP.

But Ambassador Nizar Hamdoun said the inspections should not be open ended, even though no time limit is mentioned in the agreement signed last week with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

The 15-member council was to meet Monday to consider a US-backed resolution, submitted by Britain and Japan, endorsing the Annan agreement, which reduced the possibility of a military strike by the United States and Britain.

The inspectors are trying to determine whether Iraq has complied with orders issued at the end of the Gulf War, to destroy all long-range missiles and mass destruction weapons. That is the main condition for the council to lift crippling economic sanctions imposed on Iraq in 1990 after Saddam sent his forces into Kuwait, leading to the Gulf War.

The final draft of the resolution warned of "very severe"

consequences if Baghdad breaks the accord. Earlier drafts used the phrase "severe consequences."

Another report says, while war with Iraq has been averted for now, the crisis will not end until Saddam Hussein is removed from power, US lawmakers from both parties.

"I think we have got to change the objective and say that our nation is going to be on the side of liberating the people of Iraq from their prisons or from the terror of his dictatorship," Sen Bob Kerrey, a Nebraska Democrat, said Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press."

Khatami calls for Iranians to tone down rallies in Makkah during Hajj

TEHRAN, Mar 2: President Mohammad Khatami called for Iranians to tone down the demonstrations they hold during the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Makkah, reports AP.

The call made in a speech broadcast on state-run television Sunday appears to be aimed at improving relations with Saudi Arabia, which has long opposed the political rallies staged by Iranian pilgrims during the Hajj, or annual pilgrimage.

The Hajj should be free of "fanaticism, backwardness and the propensity to impose one's views."

The followers of unnecessary rigidity in the observance of (religious) injunctions are not the representatives of the Muslim community," Khatami said. "They should not be allowed to breed hatred, dissension, and ignite the flames of conflict in the holy precincts where unity, solidarity and fraternity should be preached."

Ever since some 400 pilgrims, mostly Iranians, died in clashes with Saudi police during a rally at the 87 Hajj, the demonstrations have been something of a test of honour for the Iranians.

Every year, urged on by their leaders, Iranian pilgrims have defied a Saudi ban on demonstrations to hold a small rally in their living quarters in Makkah. Such rallies tend to condemn the United States and other perceived enemies of Islam.

Khatami is the first Iranian president to speak out against the rallies and the move reflects his desire to forge a new relationship with Saudi Arabia. Riyadh and Tehran have been edging closer since May's election of Khatami, a moderate cleric who has been trying to temper Iran's militant foreign policy.

The Organisation of Islamic Conference summit in Tehran in December, Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah held two meetings with Khatami.

1 Aum member gets life-term for gas attack in Tokyo

TOKYO, Mar 2: Japanese prosecutors Monday recommended life imprisonment, rather than the death penalty, for one of five doomsday cult member who directly released sarin nerve gas on the Tokyo subway system three years ago, reports Reuter.

The recommendation at the trial of Ikuo Hayashi, a doctor who was a senior member of Aum Shinri Kyo (The Supreme Truth Sect), was the first sentence recommendation against any of the 14 main defendants accused of staging the attack, which killed 12 people and made thousands ill.

The charges against Hayashi involved five separate cases and included not only murder but anti-terrorism laws, both of which can carry the death penalty.

Hayashi, who has pleaded guilty, admits he was one of five cultists who used umbrellas with sharpened tips to puncture plastic bags of the deadly gas they placed on crowded trains on March 20, 1995.

Tens of thousands of countryside supporters march through central London, Sunday to voice their fears for the future of the countryside and to protest legislation they believe is a threat to their rural way of life. — AP/UNB photo



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'4 lakh troops exposed to depleted uranium during Gulf War'

WASHINGTON, Mar 2: As many as 400,000 Gulf War troops may have been exposed to hazardous particles of uranium from shells fired by American tanks and aircraft, says a study released Monday by a coalition of veterans groups, reports AP.

The National Gulf War Resource Centre also alleged that the Defence Department was aware of the potential health problems from battlefield exposure to depleted uranium before the 1991 war but failed to alert the troops.

The US Department of Defence has engaged in a deliberate attempt to avoid responsibility for consciously allowing the widespread exposure of hundreds of thousands of US and coalition servicemen and women," the group contended.

Depleted uranium is a metal residue left when natural uranium is refined. It is used in artillery shells and bombs designed to penetrate the armour of tanks. It is also used as a protective shell on armoured

vehicles. When sealed in armour or in a bomb or artillery shell, depleted uranium exposure is relatively harmless. But when a depleted uranium shell hits its target, some of the metal burns and oxidizes into small particles. This creates an airborne dust that, if inhaled or ingested, can be toxic to humans.

Until just recently, the Pentagon office investigating links between the mysterious ailments of Gulf War veterans, known collectively as Gulf War illnesses, and troop exposures to a variety of toxins and chemical agents had insisted that only 27 soldiers had possibly been exposed to depleted uranium. It also contended that the troops faced no health risk from their exposures.

But on January 8, in a report marking the first year of its investigation, the Office of the Special Assistant for Gulf War Illnesses made a sweeping — but little noted — admission that thousands of troops may have been exposed.

It acknowledged "serious deficiencies in what our troops understood" about the health dangers of depleted uranium. "These hazards were well documented" by the Army, it said.

"Unfortunately, this information was generally known only by technical specialists, and combat troops and those who scoured the battlefields in Iraq and Kuwait after the war were not aware of dangers.

The failure to properly disseminate such information to troops at all levels may have resulted in thousands of unnecessary exposures," the Pentagon report said.

The veterans coalition went further, alleging that the Pentagon — purposely kept soldiers in the dark and failed after the war to conduct immediate testing of those possibly exposed.

"They were aware they had a problem on their hands, and they were looking to minimise the (public relations) fallout from it," Dan Fahey, the principal author of the study, said in a telephone interview. Fahey is with the Swords to Plowshares Veterans Rights Organisation, based in San Francisco.

A Pentagon spokesman on Gulf War illness issues, Air Force Capt Tom Gilroy, said he was unaware of the report being released Monday.

"We welcome anything that can help," he said. "The report's authors said they could not make a firm estimate of the number of US and allied soldiers who were exposed to the depleted uranium particles because too little is known about the circumstances of exposure incidents."

They settled on a rough estimate of 400,000 troops exposed based on surveys that indicated about three-fourths of the 541,000 US servicemen and women present during the war were present during the war.

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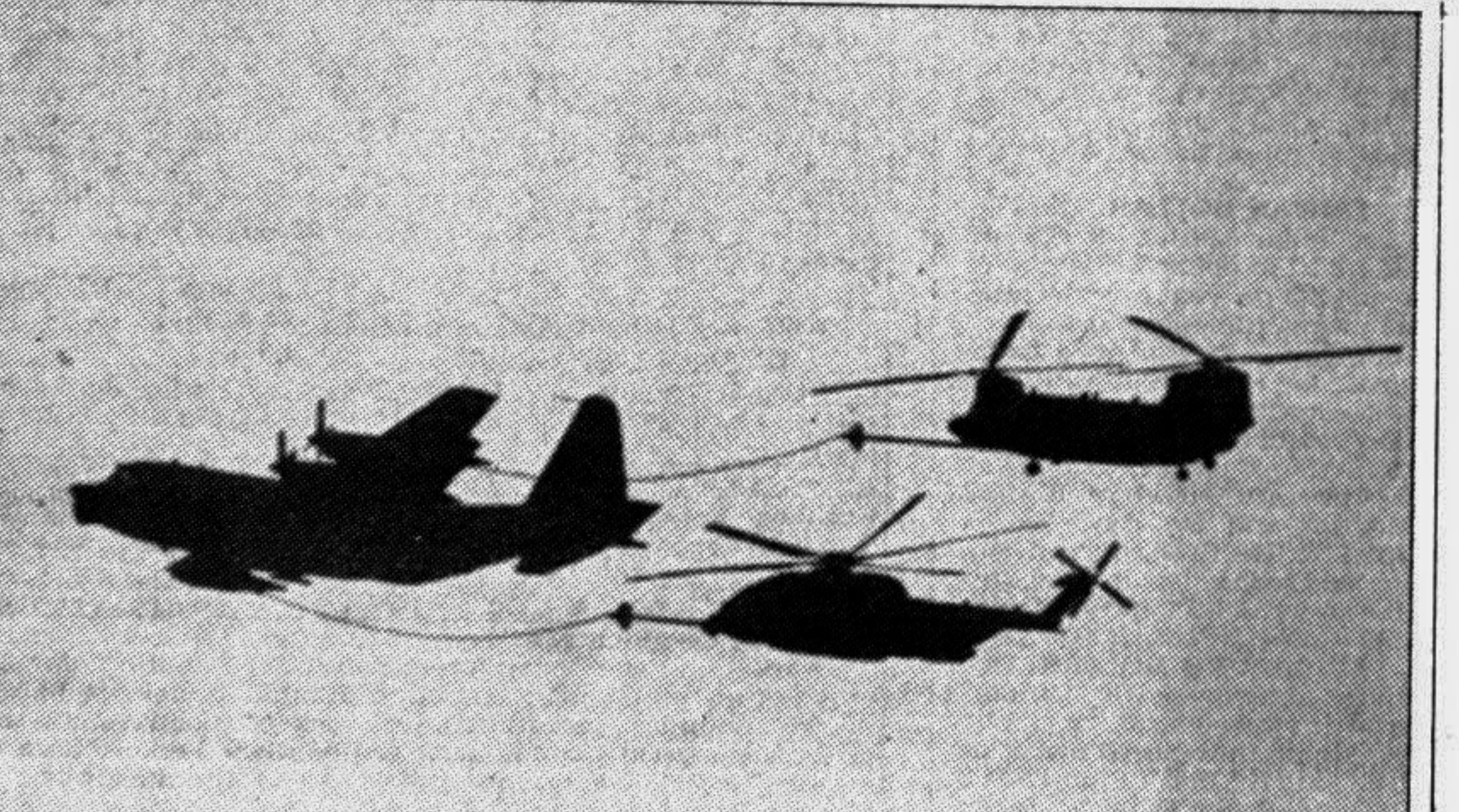
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destroyed Iraqi vehicles were on postwar missions to clear the battlefield or to destroy what remained of Iraqi equipment to prevent the Iraqis from collecting it later, Fahey said. If those US troops had simply been instructed to take proper precautions, the exposure problem would have been minor, he said.

Fahey's study quoted Victor Suell, who was a radio operator with the Marines as they swept into Kuwait in February 1991.

"We came across a lot of destroyed vehicles and dead bodies as we moved up through Kuwait," Suell is quoted as saying. "Nobody every told us to stay away from the vehicles that might have been contaminated with depleted uranium."

Suell returned to Kuwait with the Marines in 1992 and his unit again encountered destroyed Iraqi vehicles. "Lots of people were climbing on those vehicles," he said. Suell now has kidney problems and other ailments he thinks may be related to his Gulf service.



A US Air Force HC-130 Hercules tanker plane practices air to air refuelling with a Black Hawk and a Sea King US Navy helicopters over the Kuwaiti desert of Al Deera Range 40 km from the Iraqi border on Sunday. US forces in the region continue with their training exercises despite the agreement signed between UN and Iraq over the weapons inspections. — AP/UNB photo