

We will assassinate Meshaal: Sharon

Arafat accuses Israel of escalating tension

DURA, West Bank, Mar 15: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat accused Israel of escalating tension on Saturday as a fifth day of riots on the West Bank left 16 Palestinians injured, including a security officer, reports AFP.

Meanwhile, a bomb went off in the central bus station in the north Israel town of Afula, seriously injuring an Israeli man who apparently lifted the box under which the device was hidden to see what it was, police said.

Israel's Police Commander in the North, Eli Kron, said the bombing may have been a politically-motivated attack but he could not yet say for sure.

Police detained a few Arabs in the area for questioning. No group claimed responsibility for planting the bomb.

The bomb blast came on the fifth day of clashes on the West Bank between Israeli soldiers and stone-throwing Palestinian youths protesting the killing of three Arab workers by soldiers on Tuesday.

Arafat said Israel was "escalating the aggressions against our people."

"We are calling for international protection immediately against these aggressions," he told reporters in Gaza City.

The Islamic radical group Hamas called on Arafat's self-rule security forces to allow the clashes to go on and stop trying to prevent youths from throwing stones at soldiers as they did on Friday and Saturday.

"All free men among our people are pained to see Palestinian police forces work to protect the occupiers from our

people's anger and our stones," the Islamic resistance movement said in a statement.

Hundreds of youths in Bethlehem, Hebron and Dura, the hometown of the slain workers, hurled rocks at soldiers who responded with rubber-coated bullets on Saturday.

Fourteen protesters were injured by rubber-coated bullets in the clashes, as was a Palestinian policeman hit by an Israeli bullet in Dura. An AFP photographer, Awad Awad, was hit by rubber bullets in his back and foot.

In Bethlehem, a Palestinian security officer was shot and moderately injured in the stomach by Israeli soldiers firing on protesters, prompting another officer to fire his automatic rifle in the air to warn the Israelis back.

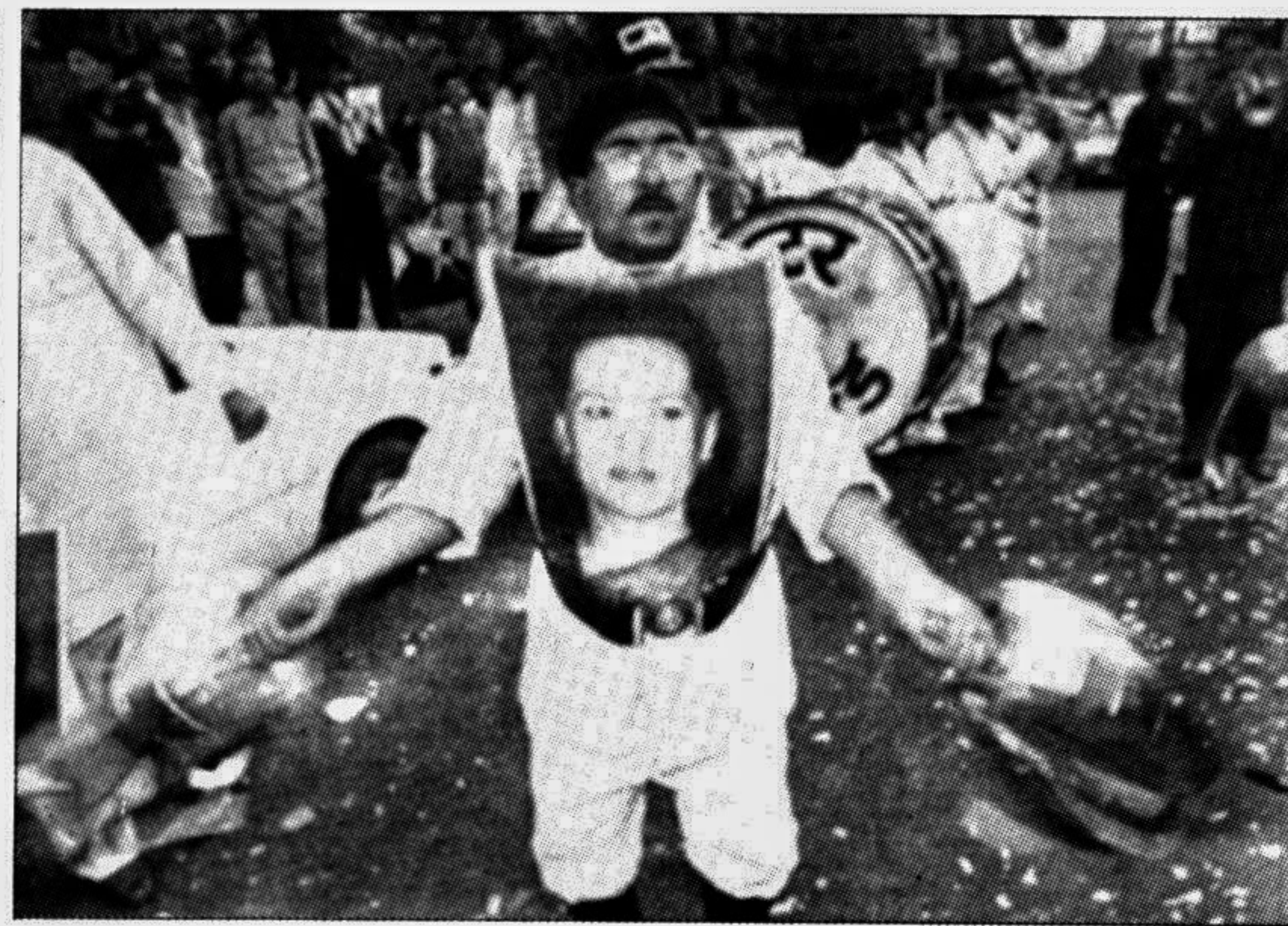
Palestinian security forces then pushed back the protesters to put an end to clashes.

Meanwhile, Israeli National Infrastructure Minister Ariel Sharon said Saturday that Israel would assassinate a leader of the Palestinian group Hamas in Jordan despite a failed attempt on his life last year.

"We will assassinate (Khaled) Meshaal," the headline Sharon told Israeli television Channel Two.

Israeli agents bungled an attempt last year to kill Meshaal in Amman, severely damaging relations between Israel and Jordan.

In response to Sharon's remarks, the Islamic resistance movement Hamas warned of severe consequences to Israel if it harmed Meshaal.



A band member plays a noisemaker outside the Congress Party headquarters Saturday, after Sonia Gandhi, the widow of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, was unanimously voted new Congress Party president in New Delhi. — AP/UNB photo

India expels Pak diplomat in retaliation

NEW DELHI, Mar 15: India expelled a Pakistani embassy official in a tit-for-tat move after one of its own embassy staffers was ordered to leave by Islamabad for alleged involvement in spying and subversion, newspaper reported today, says AFP.

The Pakistani official, Hameedullah Khan, was charged with "Indulging in activities incompatible with his diplomatic status" and asked to leave India within 48 hours, the External Affairs Ministry was quoted as saying.

Pakistan on Saturday ordered PN Nair, a visa attaché, to leave the country within 72 hours.

The expulsion followed a series of bombings in Pakistan. Islamabad said it had "incontrovertible evidence" of the diplomat's involvement in acts of "espionage and subversion."

India and Pakistan regularly expel each other's diplomatic staff, often amid accusations of sponsoring terrorism.

BRIEFLY

'Iran won't stage anti-US rallies'

Iran's foreign minister on Saturday sought to allay Saudi fears that Iranian pilgrims would stage anti-US rallies during this year's Muslim pilgrimage (Hajj) to Makkah. AP says from Riyadh.

Rumours that Iran would encourage anti-Israel and anti-US demonstrations among its pilgrims were "lies aimed at damaging relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia," Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi told reporters after talks with Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah. Every year, urged on by their leaders, Iranian pilgrims have defied a Saudi ban on demonstrations in the holy city of Makkah by holding small rallies in their living quarters. Speakers at the meetings tend to condemn the United States, Israel and other perceived enemies of Islam.

Italian president hospitalised

Italian President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro was admitted to a Rome hospital on Saturday for heart-related check-ups in the wake of flu, his office said. Reuter reports from Rome.

"Given the persistence of the trailing effects of flu Scalfaro has been admitted to the Gemelli hospital for cardiocirculatory check-ups," the statement said. Scalfaro last week postponed visits to Israel and Syria because he was suffering from the effects of flu and political sources said doctors had advised him to rest more.

Strong quake hits Iran

A powerful earthquake measuring 6.5 on the Richter Scale, struck Iran late Saturday, the French earthquake monitoring centre at Strasbourg announced. AFP says from Strasbourg.

The earthquake struck at 1940 GMT. The epicentre was located in a largely deserted region east of the central city of Baq, at 31.04 degrees north and 57.90 degrees east, the centre said. In Tehran, no news was immediately available on the reported earthquake or any casualties, radio, television and the national news agency were closed.

Clash leaves 4 hurt in Grozny

Four people were injured in the Chechen capital Grozny Saturday when guards and traffic police clashed with gunmen driving a truckload of stolen government oil, interfax reported, AFP says from Moscow.

Three passers-by were hit by stray bullets during the clash, but their injuries were not serious, interfax reported. Another person was hit on the head with a rifle butt. The gunmen were arrested, but the truck was later driven away with more than 10 tonnes of stolen oil by men believed to be friends of the truck's owner.

22 killed in fresh fighting Troops capture LTTE bunker in N-Lanka

COLOMBO, Mar 15: Feroocious fighting raged in northern Sri Lanka today as government forces captured a Tamil Tiger bunker line killing 18 guerrillas, defence officials said, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) kept up a massive mortar bomb attack against advancing government forces near the rebel-held town of Mankulam, inflicting heavy casualties, officials said.

The Defence Ministry said in a statement that eight soldiers were killed and another four were missing in the latest round of fighting, which erupted on Saturday. It said troops killed 18 rebels.

"At first light on Saturday troops commenced advancing further northwards from their earlier held positions in general area of Mankulam," the ministry statement said. "Troops captured a terrorist bunker line by noon."

Official sources said nearly 100 soldiers, including three brigadiers, were wounded in the weekend fighting but most of them suffered minor injuries and only 41 were admitted to hospital.

The clandestine Voice of Tigers radio said the guerrillas recovered the bodies of five soldiers after Saturday's fighting, in which it said the government side suffered heavy losses.

The Tiger attack came a day after the air force said it had bombed and destroyed two key LTTE bases near Mankulam.

"Aerial reconnaissance of the locations was carried out prior to engagement by high-tech surveillance equipment," the ministry said.

Thousands of soldiers are fighting to open a key highway through the town of Mankulam to the northern peninsula of Jaffna, but intense rebel resistance has slowed the campaign which began in May last year.

Many feared killed in clashes in Mazar-i-Sharif

KABUL, Mar 15: Heavy clashes have erupted between two member factions of the anti-Taliban alliance in their northern Afghan stronghold of Mazar-i-Sharif, independent sources told AFP Saturday.

A private Afghan information agency based in Pakistan said dozens of people were killed in the Mazar clashes.

According to sources based in Mazar, troops loyal to ethnic-Uzbek general Abdul Rashid Dostam attempted to grab control of parts of the city from the powerful Shiite Muslim Hezb-i-Wahdat faction.

"There is very heavy fighting throughout the city and the streets have been deserted since this morning when it all began," a western aid worker contacted in the city said.

The sources said the fighting — which involved machinegun, mortar grenade fire — erupted early Saturday when forces loyal to Dostam attempted to seize parts of the anti-Taliban capital.

"There is a lot of confusion in the city and which faction has gained the upper hand is still unclear as fighting is still going on," added another source late Saturday.

Mahathir against polls in 6 months

KUALA LUMPUR, Mar 15: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad said he will not hold a general election in the next six months, the New Sunday Times newspaper quoted him as saying, reports Reuter.

Mahathir was responding to opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) leader Lim Kit Siang's prediction in January that he would go to the polls within six months, the paper said.

Shahrukh, Madhuri win Zee-Cine Awards

MUMBAI, Mar 15: Popular actor Shahrukh Khan and noted actress Madhuri Dixit bagged the best actor and best actress awards respectively for their sterling performance in the soul stealing film "Dil To Pagal Hai" at the Zee-Cine Awards held here last night, reports PTI.

Dilip Kumar was honoured with life time achievement award for his noteworthy contribution to the tinsel world.

JP Dutta walked away with the best director award for his film "Border" while Yash Chopra's film "Dil To Pagal Hai," capturing the optimistic spirit and the universal emotion of love, bagged the best film award.

A total of 15 awards were presented at the function attended by film and TV celebrities including Saira Banu, Juhi Chawala, Shahrukh Khan, Asha Parekh, Javed Akhtar and Shabana Azmi.

Attack on Karen refugee camp feared Armed raiders allied with Myanmar troops concentrate along Thai border

BANGKOK, Mar 15: Armed raiders allied with Myanmar's military government reportedly concentrated Sunday along the border with Thailand in what aid workers feared was preparation to attack a Karen refugee camp holding some 30,000 people, report AP.

Meanwhile, fighting was still believed to be raging inside Myanmar between an estimated 1,000 government troops and some 300 Karen National Union fighters near KNU 7th Brigade Headquarters at Tha Ko Sutha, north of the Thai border town of Mae Sot.

The Myanmar army and its allies in a Karen splinter group, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, are staging late dry-season attacks against the KNU, which has fought for more autonomy for the Karen minority for 50 years.

The offensive has been accompanied by raids against camps inside Thailand sheltering some 100,000 refugees, mostly Karens. Some 100 DKBA raiders crossed into Thailand on Wednesday and torched the Huay Koloke camp. Three people died and 9,000 were left without shelter.

KNU officials and aid workers report that DKBA and Myanmar army troops have concentrated across the border from Nae Hla, a camp with some 30,000 people that was attacked by DKBA raiders a year ago.

One DKBA raiding party Friday night crossed into Thailand and was chased away by warn-

ing shots fired by Thai artillery, the KNU said. The retreating raiders reportedly sowed land mines that injured two Thai soldiers and destroyed a truck.

Pakistan wants quick enforcement of Islamic order, says Tarar

LAHORE, Pakistan, Mar 15: Pakistani President Muhammad Rafiq Tarar said Saturday the whole country desired quick enforcement of Islamic order and pledged to work to this end, reports AFP.

"It is the cherished desire of the people that Islamic rule should prevail in the country as it was created in the name of Islam," the official Associated Press of Pakistan news agency quoted him as saying.

Tarar, addressing a gathering at Pirkot near Lahore, said the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was making "dedicated" efforts to enforce Islamic order.

"I am also endeavouring my best to introduce Islamic order in every sphere of life soon," he said.

Tarar, a former judge seen by Pakistani liberals as a religious hardliner, said since his election in December he had been receiving thousands of letters daily asking him to strive for "early enforcement" of Islam.

"I will try my level best to live up to the aspirations of the masses," he said.

Thai army officers have not confirmed the report.

Last week's raid was condemned by several Western nations and human-rights organisations, which urged Thailand to improve security for the refugees. Thai army troops in the area of Huay Koloke were said to have done nothing to deter the attack.

Army commanders have vowed to beef up their troops along the rugged border, but visitors to the camps say they have seen little visible increase between the concentrations of refugees and the likely lines of attack.

Aid workers said the Thai army forced refugees who sought shelter outside the burned remains of the camp to return, threatening to deport them to Myanmar, also known as Burma, if they did not.

Thai army and government officials and aid agencies are looking for a safer site for the Huay Koloke refugees, after discussing the initial idea of moving them to Nae Hla.

In recent years, Myanmar's regime has settled longstanding ethnic rebellions with a score of rebel armies, but talks with the KNU, the largest group, have failed.

The attacks on the refugee camps are intended to scare the refugees in returning back to Myanmar. But most have fled a campaign by the army that human-rights groups and refugees say systematic rape, killing and torching of villages.

Off the Record

Teacher indeed!

SEATTLE, Washington: Mary Kay Letourneau, a former teacher convicted of child-rape after bearing the baby of a 13-year-old student, is pregnant again, allegedly with the boy's second child, reports AFP.

The Seattle post-intelligence quoted an unidentified source as saying that Letourneau, 36, was "absolutely giddy" about having another child with the boy after a prison program recorded a fetal heartbeat, confirming she is six weeks pregnant.

In November, Letourneau was granted a suspended prison sentence and sex deviancy treatment.

But she was returned to jail last month for 7-1/2 years after police caught her and the boy, now 14, together in a parked car, a violation of her parole.

In a subsequent investigation, a source familiar with Letourneau on condition told police that the woman also had sex with the boy while on parole, according to the post-intelligence.

Letourneau reportedly wants to carry the baby to term. It will be her sixth child.

Besides the 10 month infant girl from the affair with her former student, she is the mother of four children from a dissolved marriage.

British crown prince enjoys Italian cuisine!

LONDON: Prince Charles has urged Britain's food experts by saying he prefers Italian food to traditional British fare, says AFP.

In a contribution to a book honouring the nation's cuisine Charles turned his nose up at British roast beef, leg of lamb and saddle of venison and opted instead for Italian basil and pine out rept loaf, and Ignocchi pesto.

The publishers of Culinary Tour Around the World had to change the text of the book to account for Charles tastes, the Sunday Times reported, the introduction to the British section explains that "British cuisine is now so eclectic that we include some Italian recipes."

Book editor Wendy Hobson said when she received his choices she said it was "insulting to British cuisine," the publishers Marco Tiliary said the prince was twice asked to make a British choice but refused.

Gastronome Egon Ronay said there were innumerable British recipes he could have chosen.

But a spokesman for the prince said he had selected the dishes because they were what he ate and enjoys.

US prefers to keep mum on China's HR record in UN

WASHINGTON, Mar 15: A push to censure Beijing, born in the Tiananmen Square crackdown, is being set aside as the United States pursues engagement with China on human rights, diplomacy and business, reports AP.

The White House said Saturday it will neither propose nor support a resolution in the United Nations this year that criticizes China's human rights record. Fractured European unity had already made that perennial effort almost futile.

"We have taken note of a number of positive developments in the human rights situation in China," White House spokesman Eric Rubin said. These included Beijing's recent agreement to sign an international human rights covenant and its release of several dissidents.

The decision, coming as the UN Human Rights Commission prepares to meet in Geneva this week, brought a caustic reaction from a congressional critic of administration policy.

Whether it's human rights

or whether it is proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, they yield to China on promises, not performance," California Democratic Rep. Nancy Pelosi said of the administration.

President Bill Clinton made it clear earlier that a process to open China's lucrative nuclear technology market to US business would not be sidetracked by discovery of secret talks that could have resulted in China's sale to Iran of a chemical used in nuclear weapons development.

The talks were stopped after US intelligence found out about them. "We followed through on it," Clinton said. "The Chinese followed through on it and kept their agreement to the letter."

Clinton has moved ahead by several months his planned trip to China to capitalise on what he says is a receptive climate for improved freedoms. Britain had used the sanctions to try to undermine Iraq's leadership, with North Korea to open eight of Saddam's palace compounds to UN inspection and to improve cooperation with UN weapons teams.

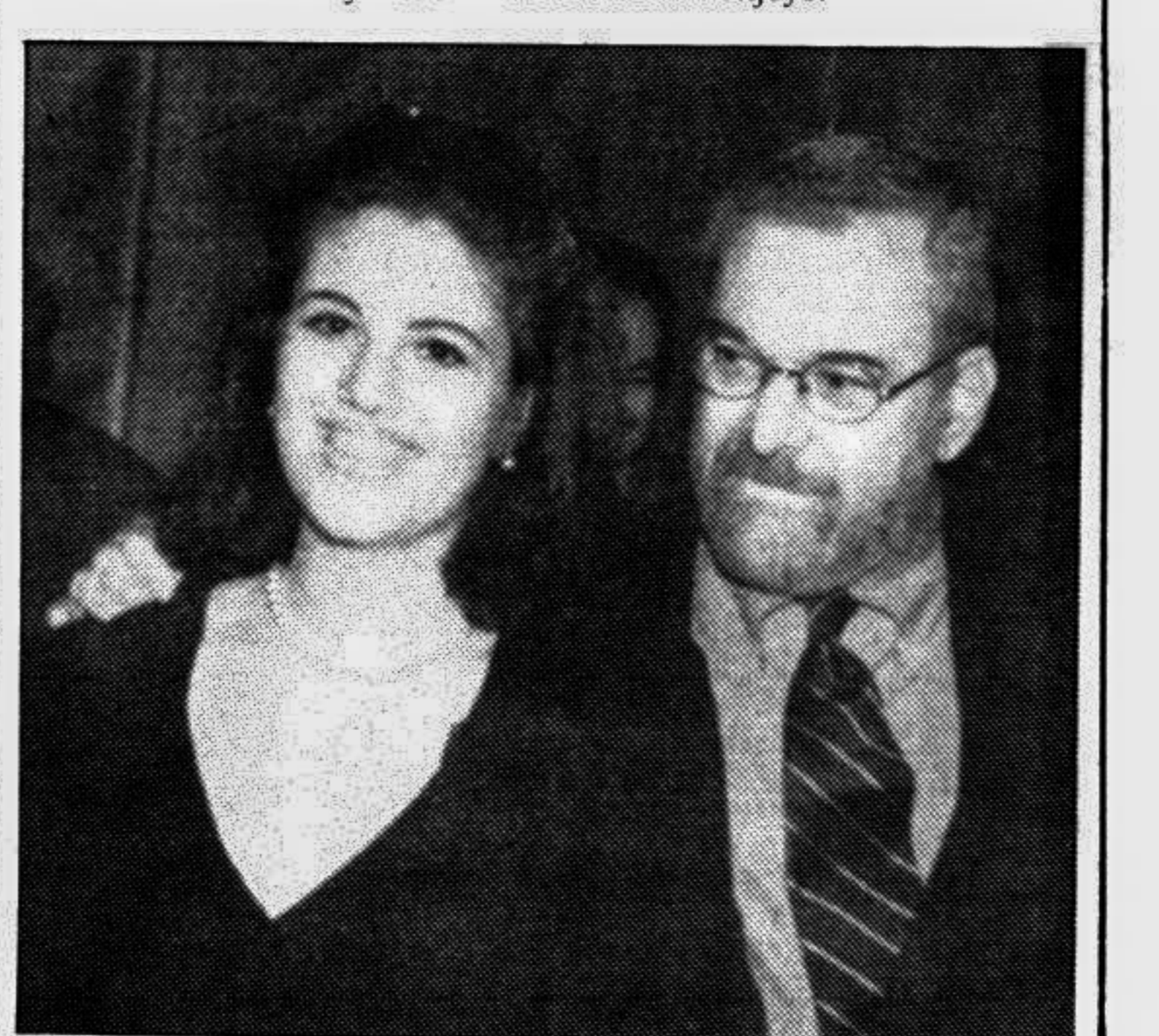
demonstrators.

The 15-nation European Union also has backed off trying to get the Human Rights Commission to censure China. EU ministers agreed last month that quiet diplomacy would achieve more than attempting again to pass a resolution that routinely fails and angers the Chinese.

Amnesty International said the position was taken because of trade, not human rights. France, a main opponent of the rights resolution, is trying to sell Airbus to China.

That view was echoed by Pelosi, long an advocate of a tougher US line. "The policy is so dominated by money that everything else, including our national security, our values when it comes to human rights, is secondary," she said.

Rubin said the administration's move away from a resolution reflects China's agreement to sign the covenant on human rights and accept the UN missions that would be involved, among other progress.



Monica Lewinsky and her attorney William Ginsburg appear at Morton's restaurant for a book party for TV host Larry King Friday night. Lewinsky has claimed on secretly recorded tapes that she had a sexual relationship with president Clinton beginning in late 1995 and that he urged her to lie about it to attorneys in the Paula Jones sexual harassment case against the president. — AP/UNB photo

Iraq urges US to normalise ties

BAGHDAD, Mar 15: In a change from its usual anti-American rhetoric, Iraq urged the United States on Sunday to "courageously" change its policies and normalise relations with Baghdad, reports AP.

An editorial in the state-run Baghdad Observer said that such a move by President Bill Clinton and his ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, would be in their political and economic interests.

The two countries have been the main supporters of keeping UN trade sanctions on Iraq. The sanctions, which ban the unlimited export of oil, were designed to punish Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein for his 1990 invasion of Kuwait, which set off the 1991 Gulf War.

The Security Council has said the sanctions won't be lifted until UN inspectors certify that Iraq has eliminated its weapons of mass destruction.

The editorial called for "a daring step by reasonable and realistic politicians" to reassess American policy toward Baghdad and "eventually call for direct talks with the government of Iraq so as to normalise relations."

It added: "Despite all hostile rhetoric and propaganda campaigns to demonise Iraq and its leadership, it is not impossible — nor is it unrealistic — for the American government to settle sharp differences peacefully as it has done before with the former Soviet Union, China or, recently, with North Korea."

The editorial, which was signed by the Observer's editor Najib al-Hadithi, charged that the White House and its allies in Britain had used the sanctions to try to undermine Iraq's leadership.

The editorial termed this a "futile, costly and unwarranted policy" and urged the United States to "courageously reshuffle it for a more realistic one that serves America's legitimate interests as well as the cause of peace, security and stability in this region."

The appeal came amid what appears to be a change in Iraq's dealings with UN weapons inspectors following a February 23 agreement negotiated by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Under the deal, Iraq agreed

Rocket heads for Mir with fresh supplies

MOSCOW, Mar 15: A Progress M-38 supply rocket blasted off into orbit Sunday carrying a cargo of fresh food, water and a new set of wrenches so cosmonauts can open a hatch and carry out a spacewalk, reports AP.

The cargo ship, propelled by a Soyuz-U rocket, lifted off from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan at 1:46 am (22:46 GMT), the ITAR-Tass news agency reported. It will dock with the Mir space station Tuesday morning.

In its cargo hold was a new set of tools to replace the three wrenches broken by cosmonauts Nikolai Budarin and Talgat Musabayev who were trying to open a stubborn lock on a hatch leading to outer space for a spacewalk.

'Albanians want independence from Serbia's rule'

PRISTINA, Serbia, Mar 15: Ethnic Albanians would be satisfied with independence for Kosovo as a republic within Yugoslavia, Albanian elder statesman Mahmut Bakalli said on Saturday.

Albanians want independence from Serbia's rule and that is their right," he told Reuters on Saturday. "But that does not mean changing Yugoslavia's borders, which is neither possible nor necessary."

Bakalli said the Kosovo he envisaged "would be a republic of all its citizens because Kosovo belongs also to the Serbs, this is a reality, this is where their monuments are."

"A republic of Kosovo would, together with Serbia and Montenegro, be a part of a new Yugoslav Federation or confederation."

Yugoslavia is currently a federation of the republics of Serbia and Montenegro which are equal under the constitution although Serbia with its 10.5 million people dwarfs Montenegro's 650,000 population. Kosovo, not a dependent

province, makes up 1.8 million of the population of Serbia but ethnic Albanians outnumber Serbs there by nine to one.

Refugees from Bosnia and Croatia who have no rooted loyalty to Kosovo make up a large part of the Serb minority.

Seychelles to host Miss World pageant in '98

VICTORIA, Seychelles, Mar 15: Seychelles will hold the Miss World pageant for the second straight year and has an option on the event for 1999, organisers say, reports AP.

The Seychelles government is satisfied that its 3 million dollars investment to hold the pageant last November had "significantly boosted" the 92-island archipelago's profile worldwide, said organiser Gilbert Pool, who is also a special adviser to President France Albert Rene. No date has been announced for this year's pageant.



President Saddam Hussein shakes hands with police officers of Al-Touz town, Salah al-Deen province 160 km north west of Baghdad during his visit to talk with villagers on Friday. — AP/UNB photo