

China to appoint new cabinet

BEIJING, Mar 18: Chinese legislators gathered Wednesday to appoint a new Cabinet expected to give freshly appointed Premier Zhu Rongji control over economic policy while retaining key posts for his Communist Party rivals, reports AP.

Party leaders have turned to Zhu, who steered economic policy as vice premier for the past five years, to guide China's end game in its 20-year transition from central planning to capitalist markets.

But in the zero-sum dynamics of leadership politics, they are loathe to give him too free a hand.

In a sign of Zhu's popularity, the National People's Congress gave him an unexpectedly solid endorsement as premier on Tuesday.

Only 2 per cent of the delegates opposed his promotion — marginal even by the legislature's rubber-stamp standards.

No list of Cabinet nominees has been released, and, in keeping with the party's penchant for control, most personnel shifts were set in secret by senior communists three weeks ago. Others have been debated along the sidelines of the congress's annual session.

It was unclear whether legislators would be given a choice of candidates for any of the nearly 40 senior government posts to be decided Wednesday. Zhu and other top party leaders have all been appointed to state and legislative posts unopposed.

Zhu's rise and his insistence on elevating like-minded technocrats signals a more professional administration, less riven by factional struggles. It also marks China's further passage from the era of rule by revolutionaries whose uncompromising politics were forged in battle and the underground.

Appointments have been sprinkled throughout the influential if fluid and informal party factions, from the liberal Wen Jiabao, expected to be named vice premier, to Xu Yongyue, an old-line conservative rumoured to be the top choice for secret police chief.

Unlike other Chinese leaders, Zhu seems not to have a habit for cronyism and tends to promote professionals he can work with.

"He looks at whose work is beneficial and whose abilities are strong," said Wang Shan, a political commentator.

Four appointments are believed to strengthen Zhu's hold on fiscal and industrial policies to meet his mandate to overhaul dying state industries. Rescue bankrupt state banks and keep the economy growing to provide jobs for millions of laid-off workers.

Vajpayee takes oath today BNP promises to fight religious discrimination

NEW DELHI, Mar 18: A day before taking over the government, India's rightist-alliance promised Wednesday to spur economic growth and fight religious and other kinds of discrimination, reports AP.

The Bharatiya Janata Party's long-standing Hindu nationalist goals were missing from the "national agenda for governance" it worked out with its score of allies. The BJP's softened stance had been expected, because even though it is the biggest party in the newly elected parliament, it cannot govern without partners.

BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee, known as a moderate within the party, will be sworn in as prime minister Thursday on the laws of the presidency.

Vajpayee must rely on fragile partnerships with parties ranging from religious rightists to secular socialists. If his government falls, the rival Congress was expected to try to step in with its own coalition.

Monday, Congress made Sonia Gandhi, widow of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, its uncontested leader, hoping her links to what was once India's most powerful political family would revive a party weakened by scandal and infighting in recent years.

Vajpayee's coalition agenda was free of such controversial issues as building a Hindu temple where its supporters razed a mosque in 1992; spreading Hindu laws designed to allow Muslims and other non-Hindus freedom to practice their religion.

"We will truly and genuinely practice the concept of secularism consistent with the Indian tradition," the governing agenda said. "We are committed to establishing a civilised, humane and just civil order which does not discriminate on grounds of caste, religion, class, colour race or sex."

In a document that borrowed heavily from an earlier BJP platform in the defence and economic areas, the government-in-waiting said it would "exercise the option to induct nuclear weapons." India is believed to have nuclear weapons capability but previous governments have said their nuclear programmes were purely peaceful.

The alliance also said it would encourage foreign investment, but not in unspecified "non-priority areas."

The BJP has promised political stability after two years of uncertainty in India. After a 1996 vote resulted in a deadlocked parliament, politicians tried for two years — under three prime ministers — to form an enduring minority or coalition government. When they failed, elections were called three years ahead of schedule, and held last month and earlier this month.

BJP's agenda at a glance

NEW DELHI, Mar 18: In their policy document released Wednesday, a day before they take over the Indian government, the Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies pledged to:

- Continue the economic reform process India began in the early 1990s, but largely limit foreign investment to infrastructure.
- Banish unemployment by channelling investment into housing, infrastructure and other areas where jobs can be created.
- Restrict foreign equity holding in private television stations to 20 per cent.
- Reserve 33 per cent of the seats on all elected bodies, including parliament, for women and provide free education for girls through high school.
- Decentralise, giving more powers to the states.
- Enact special legislation to deal with political corruption.
- Review nuclear policy and exercise the option to introduce nuclear weapons into the Indian arsenal.
- Ensure the economic and educational development of minorities.
- Respect all religions, reports AP.

UNGA condemns house-building near Jerusalem

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 18: The general assembly issued a new condemnation Tuesday of Israel's failure to halt construction of a housing project on occupied territory south of Jerusalem and again called for a conference of parties to a Geneva convention barring such settlements, reports Reuters.

The vote, at a resumed emergency session of the 185-nation assembly, was 120 in favour and three against, with five abstentions.

The session was first convened last April when a resolution was adopted demanding that Israel abandon plans to build 6,500 homes at a site called Har Homa in Hebrew and Jabal Abu Ghneim in Arabic that Israel captured in the 1967 Middle East war.

AFP adds from Jerusalem: Israel lodged a formal protest with Britain Tuesday after Foreign Secretary Robin Cook met with Palestinian officials outside a contested new Jewish settlement in east Jerusalem, officials said.

By meeting with the Palestinians, Cook has violated all the prior agreements on the organisation of his visit, said Eitan Ben-Tsur, Director General of the Foreign Ministry, on Israel Radio.

The British minister has set a meaningless precedent by expressing a biased opinion concerning Jerusalem, he said.

Clinton to visit China in June

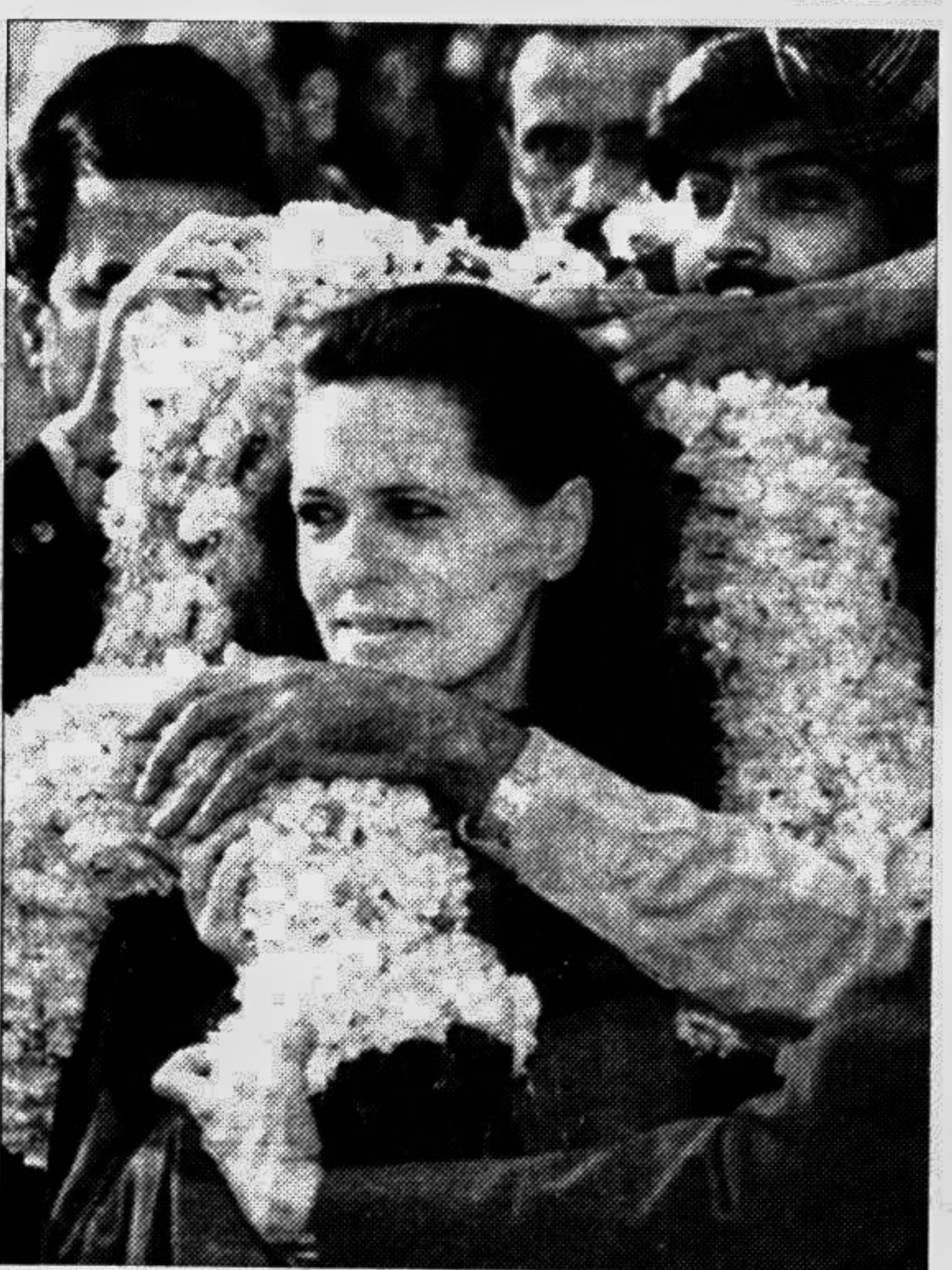
BEIJING, Mar 18: China's foreign ministry yesterday announced US President Bill Clinton will arrive here for a visit in late June, says AFP.

Clinton "will pay a state visit to China in late June. The Chinese side expresses welcome," ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao told reporters.

'UN intervention brings diplomatic success to Iraq'

Iraq's Ambassador to the UN, Nazir Hamdoun has told BBC World that the intervention of UN Secretary General has brought diplomatic success to Iraq in dealing with the crisis over weapons inspections and urged UNSCOM to be more cooperative, says a BBC report.

In an interview with BBC Correspondent Rob Watson, Nazir Hamdoun told BBC News what he will say to the UNSCOM leader Richard Butler when he returns to Baghdad later this week: "I think the message will be, the more the co-operative approach — the more the technical, professional approach there is. On his part and his team's part, the more outcome, the more satisfaction, the more smoothness of the operation you will be getting."



Sonia Gandhi, the newly elected president of Congress Party, is garlanded by supporters at her home in New Delhi Tuesday. Sonia Gandhi was elected the chairperson and head of the Congress Parliamentary Party on Monday. — AP/UNB photo

OIC urges Muslim states to reconsider ties with Israel

DOHA, Mar 18: Muslim foreign ministers on Tuesday urged Islamic countries that have established relations with Israel to reconsider because of the lack of progress in Middle East peace talks, reports Reuters.

In a communique adopted at the closing session of a three-day meeting in Qatar, the ministers from the organisation of the Islamic conference (OIC) condemned Israel for its violation of the principles and underpinnings of the peace process.

Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al-Thani said after the session that Qatar might shut Israel's trade mission in Doha because of the virtual halt in the peace process.

"This is for me not a surprise if we take a decision like this," he told a news conference. "We think there is a limit for cooperation between US and Israel."

The ministers urged Islamic states that have taken steps to establish ties with Israel since the 1991 Madrid peace conference "to reconsider such relations by closing missions and bureaus."

Jordan has signed a peace treaty with Israel, since the Madrid peace talks and has established diplomatic ties. Egypt resumed diplomatic relations with Israel after the 1979 Camp David peace accord.

Qatar and Oman forged trade links with Israel after the 1993 Israel-Palestinian peace deal, but Oman has since frozen these ties. Secular Turkey has irritated other OIC members by signing a defence pact with Israel.

UN-OIC joint mission to visit Afghanistan

JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia, Mar 18: A joint delegation of the United Nations and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) will go to Afghanistan shortly to contact the various factions there, an OIC news release said Monday, reports AFP.

"In the framework of the close UN-OIC cooperation, it was decided to send a joint mission from March 22 to April 9 to Afghanistan and its neighbours to contact the Afghan factions and these countries of officials," the statement from OIC headquarters here said.

The OIC did not specify which countries the mission would visit after Afghanistan.

'Pakistan capable of responding to Indian N-challenge'

ISLAMABAD, Mar 18: Pakistan is capable of responding to any challenge in the nuclear field by India's Hindu nationalist rulers, the country's leading nuclear scientist said yesterday, report AFP.

"There will be an appropriate response if India conducts a nuclear test," Abdul Qadeer Khan told Saudi Urdu News in an interview here. The daily is published from Jeddah, Damam and Riyadh in the Urdu language.

Khan, considered the architect of the country's nuclear programme, said Pakistan "cannot be blackmailed" by India, according to text of the interview made available here.

"We are examining all aspects of the situation after the rise to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India," Khan said.

Khan said Pakistan had never rolled back or capped its nuclear programme under any outside pressure and reached a stage where it was now taken as a nuclear capable country by the entire world.

He said India's missile programme was not a source of fear for Pakistan because "our missiles can reach any part of India and we have full ability to defend ourselves."

Pakistan has to keep its options open, Khan stressed, criticising those who had been conducting nuclear tests for 40 years and were "advising us" to sign the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT) unilaterally, a reference to countries like the United States.

Khan, referring to Israeli nuclear capability, said some Arab countries had made a "blunder" by signing the NPT.

BRIEFLY

30 drowned in Peru: Rescuers on Tuesday began hauling bodies from vehicles underwater after more than 30 people drowned when a swollen river destroyed a road bridge in northern Peru, authorities said, Reuter reports from Lima.

Battling the current to dislodge corpses from inside crowded minibuses and cars, navy scuba-divers fished out five bodies on Tuesday, bringing to 14 the number of dead recovered. Rescuers' and survivors' reports show about 20 more people died in the worst single incident since El Nino storms began causing havoc in Peru late last year, local Mayor Jose Aguilar said.

Russia expels 2 Norwegian envoys: Russia ordered two Norwegian diplomats on Tuesday to leave the country by the end of the week in a tit-for-tat retaliation for last week's expulsion of Russian diplomats from Norway, Reuter says from Moscow.

Tuesday the Russian foreign ministry summoned the Norwegian ambassador in Moscow, a ministry statement said. "He was told that competent Russian organs have in controvertible evidence about the involvement of a counsellor of the Norwegian Embassy in Moscow, Rune Castberg, and the consul at the Norwegian consulate in Murmansk, Ole Bjornoy, in activities incompatible with their official status."

30 top officials held in Belarus: Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko said on Tuesday 30 top officials had been arrested for embezzlement and abuse of power as part of his anti-corruption drive in the former Soviet Republic, Reuter says from Minsk.

"I've counted — we have put handcuffs on about 30 high-ranking officials recently, they are now in remand prisons," the authoritarian Lukashenko said in an interview with state television. He said the arrests would uncover other top officials linked to the alleged crimes, which he did not detail.

Emergency goes in Zambia: Zambian President Frederick Chiluba on Tuesday lifted the state of emergency imposed after a failed coup last October, saying the move should appease critical western aid donors.

Presidential spokesman Richard Sakala told Reuters that lifting the state of emergency would strengthen Zambia's emerging democracy.

Danish opposition leader resigns: The leader of Denmark's main opposition Liberal party resigned Tuesday a week after cliffhanger national elections in which the governing coalition won a one-seat majority, AP says from Copenhagen.

Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, a former foreign minister, is one of Denmark's best-known politicians.

Chopper crash kills 5 in Guatemala: Five people were killed and four injured when a UN helicopter carrying human rights workers crashed in a mountainous area of Guatemala on Tuesday, UN spokesmen said, Reuter says from Guatemala.

Spokesman Hiro Ueki, speaking at UN headquarters in New York, said a total of nine UN human rights workers were in the helicopter, which was on a routine mission.

280 Hutus killed in 3 weeks: The Rwandan army has killed more than 280 Hutu insurgents in battles in Gitarama province over the past three weeks, military sources quoted by the independent Rwanda News Agency said on Tuesday, Reuter reports from Kigali.

"Security has been restored in almost all the communes attacked by the infiltrators, and operations are continuing to track down the remnants of these criminals," RNA said.



Jordan's Queen Noor looks towards guests after receiving the Wiesenthal Centre humanitarian award at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel in New York Monday. King Hussein and his American-born wife were honoured for their efforts to bring peace to the Middle East. — AP/UNB photo



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, right, surrounded by bodyguards, walks with British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook to a Press conference following their meeting at Arafat's office in Gaza City, Tuesday. Cook, speaking after a meeting with Arafat and just before a planned tour of Har Homa, said that halting Jewish settlement expansion was a prerequisite for progress in the troubled Mideast peace talk. — AP/UNB photo

Serbia, Albanians in Kosovo urged to open talks by today

PRISTINA, Serbia, Mar 18: Western powers are cranking up pressure on Serbia and restless Albanians in Kosovo to open talks by Thursday, when tough new sanctions against Belgrade come into force, if it fails to make headway, reports Reuters.

The US State Department says major powers have agreed on the text of a UN resolution imposing an arms embargo on rump Yugoslavia because of its treatment of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. Diplomats at UN headquarters in New York say it could be adapted this week.

US special envoy Robert Gelbard was due in Kosovo today to meet leaders of ethnic Albanians who make up 90 per cent of the province's 1.8 million population.

Gelbard is expected to urge Albanian leaders to sit down to talks with a Serbian government delegation after spurning several invitations, or risk being wrong-footed as Belgrade blames them for the impasse.

The Albanians are refusing to meet the delegation until it agrees to discuss independence for Kosovo, ruled out by Serbia, and by the international community which is pressing for restoration of the province's autonomy.

Gelbard's visit is likely to coincide with the latest in a series of mass peaceful demonstrations by ethnic Albanians across Kosovo calling for an end to "Serb repression."

On Thursday French and German foreign ministers Hubert Vedrine and Klaus Kinkel fly to Belgrade and according to French diplomats might offer Serbia cooperation agreements in return for concessions on Kosovo.

The two countries are among five big powers which imposed sanctions on Serbia on March 9 over a bloody crackdown of alleged Albanian separatists in Kosovo and threatened tougher ones unless Belgrade opened talks within 10 days.

The diplomats said the two European ministers could make "constructive proposals" about cooperation between Belgrade and the European Union of Serbia allowed the EU to open an office in Kosovo's capital Pristina.

Paris and Bonn could also help lift Yugoslavia's suspension from the 54-nation Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe if OSCE observers were allowed to operate in Kosovo, the diplomats said.

On Tuesday Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov flew to Belgrade with a message from President Boris Yeltsin to Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic outlining Moscow's vision of how to resolve the Kosovo crisis.

There were no details of the contents, but an indication of their thrust emerged as Primakov called indirectly for wider autonomy Kosovo while rejecting ethnic Albanians demands for independence.

Serbia suspended Kosovo's autonomous status in 1989.

'Saddam can't be indicted under US-backed court formula'

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 18: Iraqi President Saddam Hussein could probably never be tried by a future international court if the United States succeeds in imposing limits on the role of the prosecutor, human rights groups said Tuesday, reports AP.

Experts from more than 150 countries began a three-week preparatory committee meeting this week to prepare for an international conference in Rome in June.

The conference will draft a treaty to establish the world's first permanent international criminal court to try cases of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity when national courts cannot or will not do the job.

Such a tribunal would differ from the International Court of Justice in The Hague, which decides cases between countries but does not prosecute individuals.

up to try cases of war crimes and genocide in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

One of the major unresolved issues facing delegates here is the role of the prosecutor. Human rights groups and some governments want the prosecutor to have the authority to decide when to launch an investigation and seek an indictment.

But the United States and others want the Security Council or individual governments to decide when the prosecutor will act.

The chief US delegate, David Scheffer, said Washington wants to avoid situations in which US troops sent to conflict areas might face "frivolous" prosecution for their actions.

"An ill-conceived court could undermine chances for an effective court," Scheffer said. "We want to be very certain our military has the ability to respond to requests without undue concern about prosecutions."

Senate would never ratify the treaty if it might open the door to American troops or officials standing in the docket before a UN court.

But Richard Dicker of Human Rights Watch said there were already enough controls within the draft court statute to prevent "individual soldiers from facing prosecution."

For example, the court would automatically defer to US military courts — even in cases where evidence was strong that an offence had been committed, he said.

Since the court would only prosecute large scale and systematic instances of war crimes and genocide, "I don't see much room for an isolated beating of a suspect to emerge before this court," Dicker said.

Dicker offered the hypothetical case of Saddam being targeted for investigation of human rights violations, such as the 1988 massacre of Iraqi Kurds or attacks against Shiite Muslims after the 1991 Gulf War.

Deposed Cambodian co-PM found guilty of sedition

PHNOM PENH, Mar 18: A military court found deposed Co-Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh guilty Wednesday of conspiring with Khmer Rouge guerrillas to overthrow the government and sentenced him to 30 years in prison, reports AP.

Ranariddh, who has been in exile since he was ousted during a July coup d'etat launched by his rival Co-Prime Minister Hun Sen, was tried in absentia and did not provide any legal defence. He has denied all the charges and called the proceedings illegal.

The court also tried and sentenced in absentia three of Ranariddh's top aides. One of them, Chao Sambath, is already dead, however, killed by Hun Sen's troops during the coup.

The guilty verdict was widely expected from the Hun Sen-controlled military court. The trial was meant to discredit Ranariddh rather than actually send him to prison.

The proceedings were part of a complex Japanese-brokered settlement that should eventually see Ranariddh pardoned by his father, King Norodom Si-

hanouk, and return to Cambodia to compete in elections slated for July 26.

"Ranariddh is surely guilty," said Nhey Thol, the presiding judge. "Ranariddh wanted to seize the power. These activities cannot be forgiven."

Ranariddh and the three supporters on trial with him were fined 54 million dollars for damages to businesses caused by looting during the coup.

Most of the looting was carried out by Hun Sen's soldiers. "In case they do not pay, they will be thrown in jail and forced to do so," said Nhey Thol. It's not clear if Sihanouk's pardon will cover the fine.

The judge sentenced Ranariddh's top military commander, Gen Nhek Bunhchay, to 20 years in prison and Ranariddh's former security advisor, Serey Kosal, to 20 years imprisonment. Neither were present.