

BRIEFLY



Prince William, left, and Prince Harry, centre, share a laugh behind their father Prince Charles during a guest book signing at a school for the deaf in Burnaby, British Columbia Tuesday. The princess are in Canada for a visit including a ski vacation in Whistler. — AP/UNB photo

Blast kills 1 in Pakistan: Bomb explosions rocked three cities in southern Pakistan's Sindh province Tuesday killing one and injuring more than a dozen people, police said. AFP reports from Karachi.

The first bomb went off during the rush hour at a district court in Larkana leaving a 50-year-old man dead and three other people injured, police said. Another home-made device exploded at a bus stand in Rohri where five people were injured, they said.

4 die in ambush shooting in a US school: At least four people have died in the ambush shooting Tuesday at a school in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Sergeant Darrell Staidon of Arkansas State police said. AFP reports from Washington.

Two heavily armed boys were taken into custody after the shooting at west side middle school, in which several other people, including a teacher, were wounded, police said.

Time Int'l managing editor dies: Karsten Prager, managing editor of Time International since January 1991 and former Associated Press bureau chief in Bangkok, died Tuesday at a local hospital, AP says from Richmond.

Prager, who had been undergoing treatment here for lymphoma since November, was 61. He had moved to Washington, Conn., from New York last August. A native of Koenigsberg, Germany, Prager joined the English-language Bangkok World in Thailand in 1960 after graduating from the University of Michigan.

5 killed in Philippines police firing: Five people were killed after police fired on a stolen van in Cabanatuan city, north of the Philippine capital, a police report said yesterday. AFP reports from Manila.

The five, believed to be part of a car theft gang, were spotted riding in a stolen van on Tuesday, prompting police to follow them, the report said. The men in the van, stolen in a Manila suburb in November, noticed the police and fired on them. Police returned fire killing all five, the police report said.

Australian FM in Japan: Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer arrived in Tokyo on Wednesday for two days of talks with Japanese government, political and business leaders which were expected to focus on the Asian financial crisis, officials said. AP reports from Tokyo.

According to the Australian Embassy, Downer was scheduled to meet Japanese Foreign Minister Keizo Obuchi and Koichi Kato, the secretary general of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, on Wednesday afternoon. On Thursday, in addition to holding a press conference, Downer was slated to meet Japanese Trade Minister Mitsuho Horiuchi as well as business leaders, including Shoichiro Toyoda, president of the Keidanren, Japan's leading business lobby.

5 feared dead in US plane crash: Five people affiliated with an American missionary group were feared dead after their airplane crashed in Venezuela's Amazon jungle, the group said. AP reports from Caracas.

Two Americans, two Canadians and a South American Indian were on board the Cessna 207, which slammed into the side of a mountain shortly after taking off from the village of Toqui where the missionaries worked, the New Tribes missionary group announced on its Internet website Tuesday. "Searchers have been unable to reach the site but people who have seen the site from the air hold out little hope for their survival," the Florida-based group said.

US engineer killed in China: An American engineer working in China was attacked and killed in his hotel room, a spokeswoman for the company that hired him said. AP reports from Athens.

Leonard Phillips, 42, of Athens, was killed in Dongguan City on Monday night. Phillips was working at Duracell Inc.'s battery manufacturing plant there. "We don't have confirmation of the cause of death or motive at this point," Duracell spokeswoman Jill Fallon said Tuesday by telephone from the company's headquarters in Bethel, Connecticut.



First lady Hillary Rodham Clinton strolls through the gardens at State Lodge, in Kampala, with Ugandan First Lady Janet Museveni, while wearing traditional African clothing Tuesday. The President and Mrs. Clinton are on a six-nation African tour and are also scheduled to visit Rwanda, South Africa, Botswana and Senegal. — AP/UNB photo

MQM and its faction call shutdown accusing each other of shootings

Strike paralyses Karachi

KARACHI, Mar 25: Pakistan's largest city, Karachi, was paralysed today by a general strike following a new wave of factional violence that left 20 people dead, reports AFP.

The shutdown was called by the influential Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which represents the Urdu-speaking settler community and its rival breakaway faction MQM-Haqiqi.

The strike follows violence on Monday and Tuesday, in which 20 people were killed, both sides claim they lost ten activists and accuse the other party of the shootings.

Authorities imposed strict security measures across the sprawling city of more than 10 million people, with paramilitary troops and police guarding sensitive installations and important buildings.

Public and private transport ground to a halt in most part

of the city, while police and paramilitary rangers in armoured vehicles patrolled streets, residents said.

Major shopping markets and small businesses remained closed.

Groups of armed youths torched at least six vehicles ahead of the strike and warned shopkeepers to down shutters. It was a curfew-like situation in several neighbourhoods, witnesses said.

Armed men opened fire on a truck overnight, injuring the driver after he failed to stop the vehicle in the city's Teen Hitti area, police said. The boys later doused the vehicle with petrol and set it alight.

MQM, which is a coalition partner in the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, termed the violence a conspiracy to sabotage its alliance with the ruling party.

The ethnic party split in 1992. Since then hundreds of people have died in factional fighting.

An earlier report says: Two rival Pakistani ethnic parties on Tuesday separately called for a general strike in the port city of Karachi and blamed each other for the killings of their members.

"We will observe a day of mourning on Wednesday against the killing of our innocent workers," senator Aftab Sheikh, a spokesman for the Muttahida National Movement (MQM), told a news conference.

The MQM forms part of a coalition government with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League at national level and in Sindh Province, of which Karachi is the capital.

"We urge all the traders and businessmen to keep their

businesses shut and offices closed to mourn the death of our 11 workers," Sheikh said. "We also urge the transporters to make this strike a success."

Earlier, the Mohajir National Movement (Haqiqi Faction), a splinter group of the MQM, called a strike in Karachi today.

The two groups have been engaged in a bloody conflict for the past several years in which hundreds of people have been killed.

Younus Khan, a Haqiqi faction spokesman, told Reuters at least 11 workers belonging to his party had been killed since Monday evening.

"We are protesting against the atrocities of the Muttahida (MQM) against our workers," he said.

The two sides have held each other responsible for the killings. Each denies involvement in the violence.

Tornado death toll now 120 in India

MIDNAPORE (WB), Mar 25: The death toll in the tornado, which flattened 20 villages under Dantan police station in this West Bengal district neighbouring Orissa, yesterday, reports PTI.

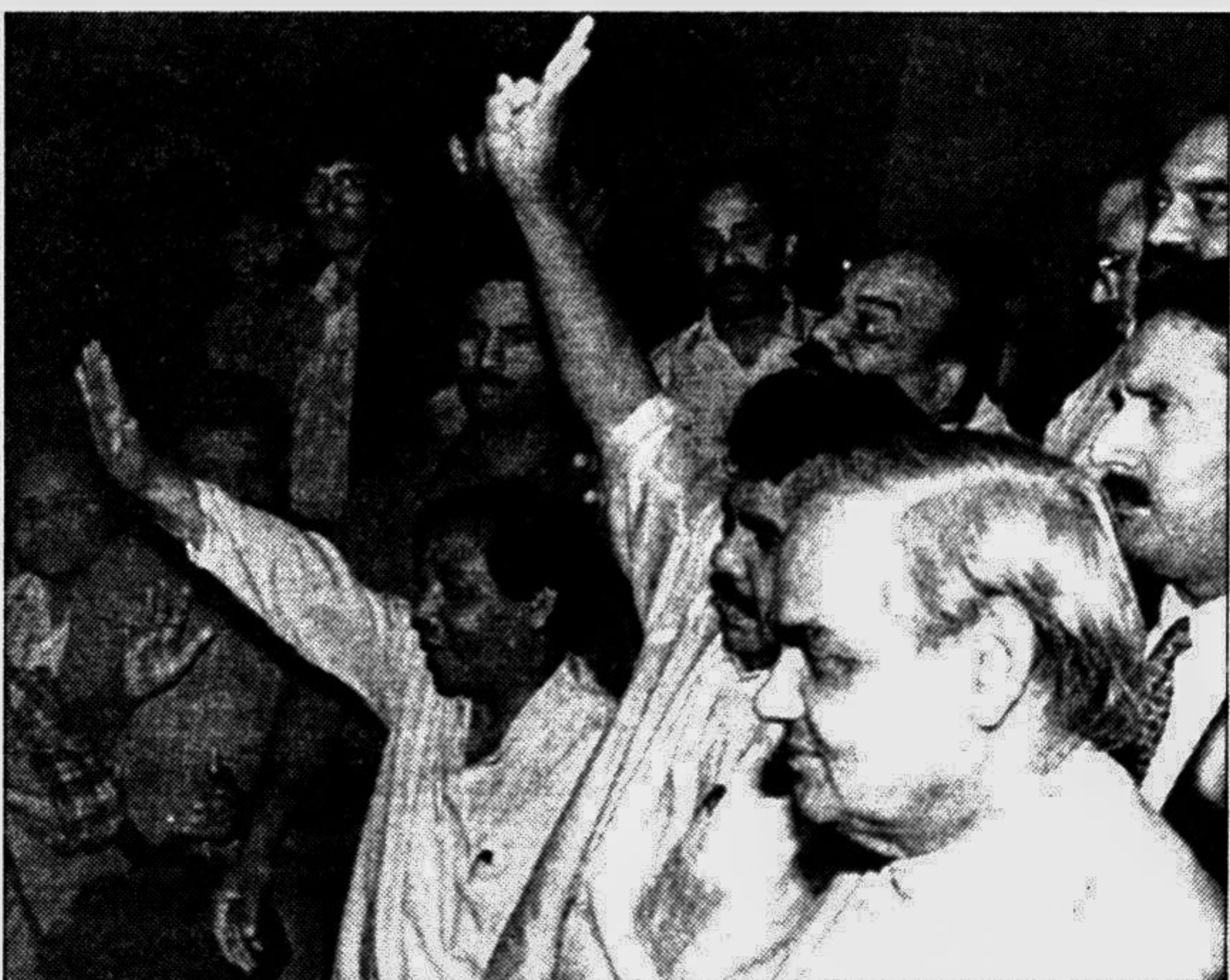
Mounted to 120 this morning, according to official sources.

About 40 school children were missing when a school building crumbled to dust at Raipatna under Dantan PS yesterday, the sources said.

Reports, quoting the message of BDO Danton to district headquarters, said over 500 persons were still feared trapped in debris.

About 10,000 people were rendered homeless by the twister which swept through villages including Sijua, Raipatna, Uttaripur, Ranipukur, Sonakonia, Kasbagola under Dantan police station and some parts of Egga block.

Sources said many people were seriously injured when a bus was swept off 10-15 feet in the air by the 500 km per hr storm and hurled to the ground. Ten thousand head of cattle perished in the devastation, the sources said.



India's new parliament speaker GMC Balayogi, centre, greets press and supporters outside the parliament building Tuesday in New Delhi. At his side are new Indian Prime Minister Atar Bihari Vajpayee, right, and former speaker P.A. Sangma. — AP/UNB photo

Over 20 Tajik cops killed in worst violence

KOFARNIKHON, Tajikistan, Mar 25: More than 20 Tajik policemen as well as some civilians and suspected Islamist militants were killed on Tuesday in Tajikistan's worst violence since a peace deal last year ended a civil war, reports Reuters.

An official from the Moscow-backed government, which blamed the official Islamist opposition for failing to control its own fighters, said clashes were continuing nine hours after an armed band attacked a police post in the town of Kofarnikhon, some 20 kms (12 miles) east of the capital Dushanbe.

Sustained automatic rifle fire rattled for hours across fields and between rural cottages.

The government official told reporters more than 20 policemen had been killed. Other officials at the scene said at least one civilian and two gunmen had also died.

The government and Islamist opposition signed a peace treaty in Moscow last June, formally ending years of civil war that left tens of thousands dead following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then leading Islamists have joined a coalition cabinet to try to rebuild a stable society.

UN suspends operations in Kandahar

ISLAMABAD, Mar 25: The United Nations on Tuesday suspended operations in southwest Afghanistan because of harassment, physical assaults on its staff and general interference in its programmes by the purist Islamic Taliban, a UN spokeswoman said, reports Reuters.

All 14 UN international staff members were told to leave Kandahar Province and about 120 local staff were being advised to stay home, the spokeswoman, Sarah Russell, said in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad.

Kandahar is the headquarters of the Taliban movement and its ideological stronghold.

In response, a Taliban government leader, Mullah Mohammad Rabbani, promised there would be no interference with the United Nations operations. He said a joint UN-Afghan Commission would resolve the issue.

Rabbani was in Islamabad for talks with a UN peace envoy and with Pakistani authorities.

Russell said operations were suspended in Kandahar "as a result of a long chain of incidents of harassment and interference from the Taliban authorities in UN programmes."

She said the situation came to a head in the past week after three incidents of physical assault on UN officials inside UN offices by a high-ranking Taliban official. The last incident was on Monday.

Fresh fighting erupts in Kosovo

PRISTINA, Serbia, Mar 25: Fighting erupted between Serbian police and Kosovo Albanians on Tuesday on the eve of a meeting of major powers to decide whether to punish Yugoslavia with more sanctions, reports Reuters.

Machinegun fire ripped through the countryside and rocket-grenades thudded around the village of Dubrava as helicopters buzzed overhead. Police ordered journalists who reached the area to leave.

Serbian authorities said they retaliated after guerrillas ambushed a police patrol, killing a policeman and seriously wounding another. The ethnic Albanian Kosovo information Centre accused police of

forcing Albanians to flee villages around Dubrava.

An unofficial Serbian source reported that four Albanians, alleged to be members of the separatist Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), were killed in the fighting.

Western reporters who reached the area said terrified local people who claimed not to know why the villages had been targeted. Some reporters came under gun and mortar fire.

The violence was to the southwest of the Drenica area, where Serbian police killed 80 Albanians earlier this month in a crackdown on KLA guerrillas which the United States and its European allies condemned as an over-reaction.

6 lakh Muslims to perform Hajj this year

DUBAI, Mar 25: About 600,000 Muslims have arrived in Saudi Arabia from all over the world to perform the annual Hajj, the official Saudi press agency said, reports Reuters.

The agency said that by Tuesday a total of 603,410 pilgrims had arrived in the kingdom from abroad by air, sea and road to perform the Hajj.

About two million Muslims perform the Hajj every year. Half of them come from inside the kingdom, including both Saudis and foreign residents, and the other half from abroad.

Good side of El Nino

TOKYO: The El Nino weather phenomenon, blamed for floods, droughts, famine and raging bushfires around the world, is also responsible for early flowering of Cherry Blossom, a Japanese report said, reports AFP.

Assistant professor Park Hye-Sook of central Japan's Mie University has studied the effects of El Nino on Cherry Blossom flowering between 1953 and 1989. Kyodo news agency said.

The findings were released as Japan prepared for spring Cherry Blossom viewing, in which friends, colleagues and families picnic beneath cherry trees to watch the blossom, helped with copious amounts of "sake" rice wine.

Cherry Blossoms in Japan, South Korea and China begin blooming three to five days earlier than average in most areas when the El Nino phenomenon was present, Park said.

Asian nations urged to update legislation to fight organised crimes

MANILA, Mar 25: The UN crime prevention agency today urged Asian nations to update their legislation to deal with organised syndicates engaged in high-tech crimes in the 21st century, reports AFP.

The Vienna-based agency proposed a 2.5 million dollars two-year project to update legislation in Asian and middle eastern countries against organised crime.

"The attention given to these areas was a result of the realisation that criminal activities have evolved into a more diverse and complex form along with the rapid advancement of technology," a statement from

the UN office for drug-control and crime prevention centre said.

The statement was issued at the end of a three-day Asian regional ministerial meeting on transactional crimes being held in the Philippine capital.

The statement said that "current administrative and legal frameworks of many countries are insufficient to handle the threat caused by new forms of crimes."

It also said that in some cases, officials charged with the implementation of laws sufficient information and necessary skills.

BJP urges Indian leaders to rise above rivalries

NEW DELHI, Mar 25: India's fledgling government pleaded anew Wednesday for leaders to rise above the rivalries and ambitions blamed for the country's political instability, reports AP.

The call, read to a joint session of parliament by President KR Narayanan on behalf of the coalition government, came a day after angry scenes in the lower house. Opposition politicians accused the dominant Bharatiya Janata Party of abandoning any pretense of cooperation by giving the post of parliamentary speaker to a small regional party in order to secure its votes in an upcoming confidence measure.

My government... will chart a new course in governance that seeks to unify and not divide. Dialogue and debate and discussion will replace the narrow antagonisms of the past," Narayanan said.

As is customary soon after a new government takes over in India, the ceremonial head of state was reading its policy statement. The BJP has repeatedly called for cooperation since it won the most parliamentary seats in the recent elections, but not enough to govern without partners.

After a similar result in 1996 elections, the BJP's Atal Bihari Vajpayee was able to lead the government for only 13 days before losing a vote of confidence.

This time, the BJP toned down its Hindu nationalist ideology to build a disparate, 20-member coalition ahead of a vote of confidence expected Friday or Saturday. In his speech Wednesday, Narayanan reiterated the government's commitment to respecting all religions.

The president also said the government would review economic reforms. The BJP has said the reforms begun in the

early 1990s would not be abandoned, but must be refined because they had failed to alleviate poverty.

To address that, Narayanan said, spending on education would be increased to six per cent of GDP, compared to about two per cent in recent years. He also promised the government would work to provide basic health care and safe water to all Indians, and to control population growth.

All our efforts will be directed at building a new India," Narayanan said. "An India free from the triple curse of insecurity, hunger and corruption; an India free from illiteracy and disease; an India where more and more people are gainfully employed, an India where every citizen, irrespective of his caste, creed or faith, feels proud to be an Indian."

Narayanan did not refer to the BJP's stated determination

UN, Iraq ready to inspect presidential sites

BAGHDAD, Mar 25: Iraq and the United Nations are "ready to go" with the first arms inspections of presidential sites, UN weapons chief Richard Butler said here Tuesday, as diplomats arrived to take part in the inspections, reports AFP.

Butler said the issue was touched upon in his three rounds of talks with Iraqi officials since Monday, although most of his talks were focused on Baghdad's weapons programmes.

"We did refer to it just quickly and were able to confirm on both sides that this has been a great achievement by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, and that we are both ready to go," Butler told AFP in an interview.

Annan signed the February 23 accord under which weapons experts are to inspect eight presidential sites, accompanied by diplomats to address Iraqi concerns over sovereignty.

Butler said the UN arms ex-

perts who are to carry out the inspections as part of a special group would arrive here "very soon," while a pool of 19 diplomats for the inspections flew into Iraq earlier Tuesday.

The issue itself was raised only briefly in his talks with Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, said the chairman of the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) in charge of eliminating Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

The head of the special group, Sri Lankan arms control expert Jayantha Dhanapala, has "done his work getting the diplomats who will join those teams, and it's all coming together in the next few days," said Butler.

He has denied suggestions that Annan's accord weakened his position by leading to the creation of Dhanapala's post and appointment of a UN special envoy to Iraq, Indian diplomat Prakash Shah.

Annan welcomes Israeli proposal to withdraw troops from Lebanon

JERUSALEM, Mar 25: Still basking in the glow of his success in Iraq, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan visited Israel and welcomed its proposals to pull troops out of Lebanon, reports AP.

The UN chief downplayed chances of making headway on the Israel-Palestinian stalemate, however, saying Tuesday he will do his best "to help the process and to support ... the US efforts."

On Wednesday morning, Annan was to visit the Yan Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, where his wife Mane is to lay a wreath. Annan will lay a wreath later at a war memorial at the Knesset, Israel's parliament.

Initially, Annan refused to lay a wreath at the Knesset; his aides said he would already lay one at Yad Vashem. The squabble ended when it was agreed that Annan's wife — niece of the Swedish diplomat Raul Wallenberg, who saved hundreds of Hungarian Jews during World War II — would lay the wreath.

On Tuesday, Annan met with

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other Israeli leaders.

At a joint news conference in Jerusalem, Netanyahu said he expected his Cabinet to soon embrace Security Council Resolution 425 — calling for Israel's unconditional withdrawal from Lebanon and asked for Annan's backing.

Netanyahu said the pullout would be "within the context of security arrangements." He said he hoped Syria — the main power in Lebanon — "will not raise obstacles ... and that the Lebanese government will also understand that it is in their interest to have this carried out."

"I think it is significant that the Israeli Cabinet will be taking a decision on the implementation of 425," Annan replied, adding that the United Nations "will work with ... all the parties concerned to insure that withdrawal is implemented effectively."

Israel first invaded southern Lebanon in 1978 to drive Palestinian guerrillas away from its border.

Arab FMs reject Netanyahu's anti-peace policies

CAIRO, Mar 25: Arab foreign ministers on Tuesday angrily rejected the policies of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as being against the spirit of peace, reports Reuters.

"All ministers feel angry because of Netanyahu's anti-peace policy," Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara said at Arab League headquarters in Cairo. "They reject provocative and aggressive statements by him and his defence minister."

Shara spoke to reporters after a meeting of Arab League foreign ministers.

"The foreign ministers' council is studying the best way to express this annoyance and strong condemnation," he said. The annual meeting of Arab League foreign ministers dis-

cussed Iraq and the Middle East peace process, especially its stalemate on the Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian tracks.

Progress in the peace process shuddered to a halt after Netanyahu broke ground on a new Jewish settlement in Arab east Jerusalem last year. Palestinian "suicide" bombings and disagreement over the extent of a West Bank pullback worsened the crisis.

Palestinian President Yasser Arafat called for an Arab summit on the deadlock. He earlier met Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, whom he often consults on the peace process.

"I repeat by call to convene an urgent Arab summit to review the situation," Arafat told the meeting.

US-Iran ties slowly improving

WASHINGTON, Mar 25: US scholars attending a seminar in Iran were surprised by the warm reception they got — from the people and the government. They weren't frisked at the shrine of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, for example, and they shared a meal of spicy lamb and rice with the deputy foreign minister, reports AP.

"I didn't have one word of hostility aimed at me. No one was trampling on our (US) flags," said Roscoe Suddarth, a former State Department official who heads the Middle East Institute. "We were treated with great courtesy, and I would say even deferentially."

They also found interest in the West among the people: A textile merchant in the Iranian city of Isfahan wanted Suddarth to get the makers of Camel cigarettes to send him a copy of their original camel logo to put

on his cloth. Suddarth and five other scholars — two of them former US government officials — recently returned from a trip to Iran, where they attended a conference on Gulf security as guests of the Foreign Ministry. But their visit to the country where the United States has often been denounced as the "Great Satan" was more than an academic jaunt.

It was another step in the people-to-people contacts that Iran and the United States have been encouraging since January, when Iranian President Mohammad Khatami broke with a rigid anti-West policy and called for an exchange of scholars and athletes. The new contacts have raised hopes that ties severed after the 1979 Islamic revolution ousted the US-backed shah could be resumed.

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Narayanan promised "renewed efforts" to improve relations with India's neighbours, an apparent reference to Pakistan, Pakistan, with whom India has fought three wars, was critical of the BJP's stated nuclear policy.

Tuesday, members of parliament shouted that Prime Minister Vajpayee had "betrayed" the popular incumbent speaker, PA Sangma, when Vajpayee rose in parliament to introduce GMC Balayogi as the new speaker shortly after a voice vote.

The elevation of the little-

known Balayogi of the Telugu Desam Party was widely linked to his southern regional party's decision to help the BJP in the vote of confidence. Earlier, the BJP had indicated that as proof of its willingness to cooperate across party lines, it would support Sangma, nominee of the rival Congress Party.

Balayogi's TDP, which has 12 lawmakers in the lower house, is expected to abstain from the vote of confidence or support the BJP — either move would likely result in a BJP victory.

Earlier, TDP leader Chandrababu Naidu had said he would not support the BJP because its policies promote Hindu-Muslim tension.

He also has refused to support Congress, a strong rival to the TDP in its stronghold, Andhra Pradesh state, where local assembly elections will soon be held.