

BRIEFLY

Annan arrives in Beijing: UN Secretary General Kofi Annan arrived in Beijing yesterday for talks on the agreement giving UN arms officials access to Iraq's Presidential Palaces for weapons inspections, AFP reports from Beijing.

Annan is due to meet Chinese deputy prime minister and former foreign minister Qian Qichen Tuesday as part of his tour of permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. He has already visited Washington, Paris and Moscow and after his two-day visit will leave Beijing for London before returning to New York.

Blast kills 1 in Pakistan: Two consecutive explosions rocked the Pakistani port of Karachi yesterday killing at least one person and wounding 12, police and ambulance sources said, Reuter reports from Karachi.

The morning rush-hour blasts, apparently caused by explosive devices, took place within a kilometre of each other in stalls below residential buildings in the centre of the city, police said. Doctors said one person was killed and they were treating 12 wounded.

Killers of US engr held in China: Chinese police have arrested three people who confessed to killing an American engineer hired to work at a Duracell Inc. Battery manufacturing plant in southern China, an official newspaper said Tuesday, AP reports from Beijing.

Leonard Phillips, 42, of Athens, Tennessee, was attacked and killed on March 23 in his hotel in Dongguan City—freewheeling fast-growing city 100 kilometres (60 miles) northwest of Hong Kong. Police arrested three people Sunday after investigations in several cities, including the capital, Beijing, the Guangzhou Daily said.

India's finance minister to visit US: India's finance minister will travel to the United States next month to explain his new government's economic policies, New Delhi's Business Standard newspaper reported Tuesday, AP says from New Delhi.

The Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which leads the governing coalition, campaigned on a platform of economic nationalism and promises to keep new foreign investment out of areas like consumer goods. Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha has said foreign companies already doing business in India have nothing to fear, and stressed that foreign investment in building infrastructure is welcome.

Old Tokyo to suffer most in quake: Soft waterside land reduced to sponge. Aging wooden homes smashed to splinters. Narrow, winding streets clogged with panicked victims fleeing spreading fires, AP reports from Tokyo.

That's the kind of disaster that could hit east Tokyo's working-class enclaves if a major earthquake strikes the city, according to a government study mapping the capital's most vulnerable areas.

The report, released by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government on Monday, predicts that the sprawling capital's oldest parts—known as shitamachi—would suffer the most in a massive quake.

Road mishap claims 15 in India: A jeep collided with a truck hauling concrete railway sleepers in southern India Tuesday, leaving 15 people dead, AP reports from New Delhi.

Police, quoted by local news agencies, said the accident occurred near Perambalur, about 1,100 miles (1,760 kilometers) south of New Delhi. All the dead had been riding in the jeep.

Spanish jet missing with 1 on board: A Spanish air force F5 jet with one person on board disappeared on Monday while flying over mountains in the south of Toledo province, about 100 kilometres south of Madrid, the defence ministry said, AFP reports from Madrid.

The plane which was used for training, had taken off from Talavera base in southwestern Spain and was bound for to rejoin near Madrid. A search has been launched to try to locate the aircraft.



Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto holds a beer mug presented him by Nina Alswede, Cherry Blossoms Queen from Hamburg, during her courtesy call at the prime minister's official residence in Tokyo Tuesday. — AP/UNB photo

Benazir leads thousands of people in motorcade Newly-formed front opens anti-govt campaign

LAHORE, Pakistan, Mar 31: Pakistan's opposition leader and former prime minister Benazir Bhutto led thousands of people in a motorcade Monday as a newly formed multi-party front opened an anti-government campaign, reports AFP.

"People will rally to our call to oust the corrupt and fascist government" of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, she told the crowd at Kamoki while on her way to a planned rally in Gujranwala city.

The procession covered the 80 kilometre route to Gujran-

wala, a major industrial city in Punjab, Pakistan's political heartland, in six hours.

Benazir and other leaders in the Pakistan Awami Ittehad (PAI—Pakistan People's Alliance) addressed the Gujranwala rally late Monday after three weeks of preparations to kick off the campaign against Sharif's government.

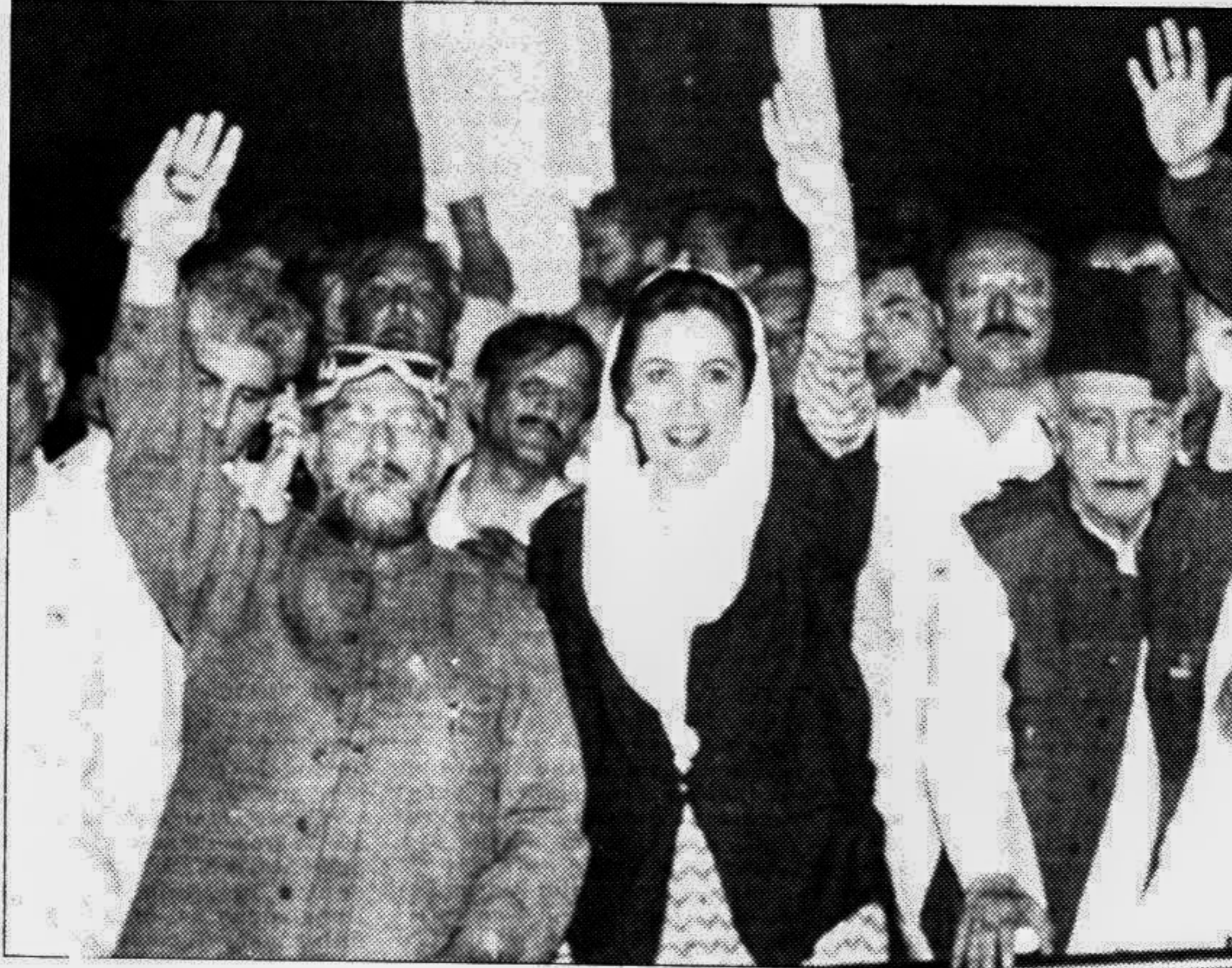
The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of Benazir is the only component of the alliance represented in parliament. The PAI, formed this month by about a dozen parties, is

headed by a religious figure Maulana Tahirul Wadri.

Anti-government placards and posters demanding the release of Benazir's husband Asif Ali Zardari were plastered around Gujranwala, residents said.

Zardari has been in jail since the dismissal of the PPP government in November 1996 for alleged misuse.

Benazir's sacking triggered new elections in which Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League won a landslide.



Benazir Bhutto, centre, former Prime Minister of Pakistan and leader of opposition, waves to supporters with her allies, Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan, right, and Tahirul Qadri, left, chief of Pakistan's Wing religious party, Monday, at Gujranwala, 100 kilometers south of Lahore. — AP/UNB photo

Hun Sen refuses Ranariddh's offer for meeting

PHNOM PENH, Mar 31: Cambodian leader Hun Sen refused Tuesday to meet with the co-prime minister he deposed in a violent coup, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, during the prince's brief visit home after nine months in exile, reports AP.

Prak Sokhon, an aide to Hun Sen, said the powerful co-prime minister spurned the prince's request for a meeting to discuss looming polls because he is still mourning the recent death of his mother and has vowed to not meet officials or diplomats until May.

"A meeting might be possible after that," Prak Sokhon said.

Ranariddh said he would seek the meeting shortly after arriving Monday on a flight from Thailand that marked a key step forward for holding elections Hun Sen has called for July 26.

The prince plans to meet supporters of his royalist FUNCINPEC party, which was decimated and split by the coup, in an attempt to bring the party together and strengthen it ahead of the polls.

Hundreds of the Prince's supporters erupted in applause when Ranariddh stood on his balcony Tuesday and waved between meetings.

Hun Sen deposed Ranariddh in a coup last July, ending their tense co-premiership installed by UN-organized elections in 1993. At least 43 of the Prince's supporters were killed. Foreign nations cut off aid in protest and Hun Sen needs new elections if he is to legitimize his rule.

Critics accuse Hun Sen of using all means to pervert the polls in his favour, engineering splits in every opposition party

and even using violence against opponents. Several Ranariddh supporters have been killed in recent weeks.

Ranariddh consulted early Tuesday with ambassadors of Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, the three members of the association of Southeast Asian Nations who formed part of the diplomatic effort for his return.

A Japanese-led diplomatic plan enabled the Prince to return Monday after being pardoned by his father, King Norodom Sihanouk, for conviction

in show trials of arms smuggling and plotting his own coup with Khmer Rouge guerrillas.

An aide to Ranariddh, Lu Lay Sreng, said the Prince plans to return Friday to Bangkok. Concerns are high for his security and not all conditions of the Japanese peace plan have been fulfilled, among them a ceasefire between Ranariddh's armed supporters and Hun Sen's army in northwestern Cambodia.

Ranariddh also has to break his loose alliance with the last hardline Khmer Rouge guerrilla faction that kept his armed forces alive over the past nine months.

The guerrillas are currently fighting each other following a Hun Sen-supported mutiny in their ranks last week. Defectors have delivered some key strongholds to the government forces, including the 800-year-old cliff-top temple of Preah Vihear on the Thai border.

The handover of Preah Vihear lent credence to other government claims that the main body of guerrillas had been evicted from their headquarters of Anlong Veng and were on the run.

Some 7,000 refugees from fighting between rival Khmer Rouge factions in the Anlong Veng area have assembled at the border with Thailand.

Thai officials say they will not admit either the faction leader, Ta Mok, nor the historic chief he toppled in a mutiny last year, Pol Pot. The movement has been fragmenting since 1996.

Pol Pot led the Maoist-inspired Khmer Rouge regime that caused the deaths of as many as 2 million Cambodians between 1975 and 1979.

Polls in Ukraine Communists claim victory

KIEV, Ukraine, Mar 31: Claiming victory Monday in parliamentary elections despite a dearth of official results, Ukraine's Communist leader said his party will seek major policy changes and advocate a tough stance towards western countries and institutions, reports AP.

"Ukrainians who supported the Communists indicated their negative attitude to this regime and demanded a change," Communist Party leader Petro Symonenko told reporters.

"The people have shown that we must cast off this ruinous course," he said, accusing President Leonid Kuchma of "bringing Ukraine to the brink of economic collapse."

Ballots cast Sunday were still being counted, and the results were not expected until Friday.

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Sonia urges party MPs to keep issues of national concern alive

NEW DELHI, Mar 31: India's main opposition party today warned that it would keep the country's new Hindu nationalist government on its toes, reports AFP.

Congress president Sonia Gandhi urged the party's Members of Parliament (MP) to "use their experience and knowledge to keep issues of national concern alive and the government on its toes."

The Italian-born widow of former premier Rajiv Gandhi, who became party chief this month, made the comments after criticising the government for not selecting a parliamentary speaker in consultation with the opposition.

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FMs of KSA, Egypt, Syria discuss ways to resume ME talks

RIVADH, Mar 31: The Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria met Monday to discuss ways to restart the Middle East peace process, Arab diplomats here said, reports AP.

Saudi Arabia's Saud Al-Faisal met with Egypt's Amr Mussa and Syria's Faruq Al-Shara after the Egyptian and Syrian top diplomats arrived separately late Monday for a 24-hour visit.

The diplomat said the officials met behind closed doors to "discuss the possibility of organising an Arab summit as soon as possible."

The three-party meeting "could be enlarged at a mini-summit which would group Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the Palestinians and possibly Morocco," said the diplomat, who requested anonymity.

The results of the three-party meeting will determine the chances of a mini-summit, he said.

Canada, Quebec agree to seek compromise

OTTAWA, Mar 31: Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien and Quebec premier Lucien Bouchard agreed Monday to seek a compromise in the latest constitutional wrangle between their two governments, reports AP.

Chretien has announced a 2.5 billion dollars (1.75 billion US) "millennium fund" to offer loans and bursaries to deserving students throughout Canada.

But Bouchard whose governing party Quebecois wants to see Quebec separate from Canada, has claimed that this is an infringement on provincial government jurisdiction, pointing out that education is not administered by the federal government.

After a meeting between the two men, Chretien told reporters "We'll find a mechanism that will permit the fund to operate in a way that is compatible with Quebec's programmes and jurisdictions we've made progress."

Bouchard simply confirmed that the two men had agreed to try to resolve their differences with the appointment of special negotiators by each side.

Tripura health minister shot dead

NEW DELHI, Mar 31: Suspected separatist guerrillas today shot dead a provincial government minister in the northeastern Indian state of Tripura, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported, says AFP.

Gunmen shot Tripura Health Minister Bimal Sinha and his younger brother in the state's Dhali district, the news agency said.

US may end ME peace efforts, says Albright

WASHINGTON, Mar 31: Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's spokesman raised the option Monday of ending US peacemaking efforts in the Middle East if the diplomatic stalemate persists, reports AP.

With US mediator Dennis B. Ross winding up another futile attempt to push Israel and the Palestinians into talks over the West Bank, spokesman James P. Rubin said, "There are many options, and one option has always been to disengage."

"If the two sides aren't prepared to make the hard calls, the catalyst can only do so much," he said, referring to the United States.

Still, Rubin said that disengaging is "not an option that the secretary is advocating or an option that we would like to see happen at all."

He ruled out, meanwhile, holding a summit in Washington to try to break the deadlock "precisely because we have been unable to bridge the gaps on the hard questions: How much territory, what kind of security steps the Palestinians would take, et cetera."

Albright and Ross have failed to make headway with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on how much of the West Bank he would be willing to relinquish now or on persuading Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to take anti-terrorism actions that would meet

Israel's demands.

As a result, Rubin said, the administration was preparing a set of proposals to end the yearlong stalemate.

These are expected to include a call for a sizable Israeli withdrawal — Netanyahu has offered to withdraw from 10 per cent of the West Bank still controlled by Israel, the administration is pushing for 12 per cent to 15 per cent and Arafat says he is entitled to 97 per cent — and for a freeze on construction of new homes for Jews on the West Bank or in east Jerusalem.

The Palestinians already control 27 per cent of the West Bank.

The package also is likely to include a call for a lowering of Palestinian rhetoric and an acceleration of moves to break up terrorism cells on land controlled by Arafat.

The United States has acted as mediator between Israel and the Arabs since the 1973 Mideast War. Pulling out now would be a dramatic step. Just raising the possibility breaks new ground, even if it designed mostly to spur the two sides to make concessions.

"I was not signaling that is a likely option, that is a preferred option, that is the best option," Rubin said. "I was merely pointing out the obvious, which is that it's an option."

Iraq fails to convince UN on missile research

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 31: Iraq has failed to convince UN arms experts that it never built weapons containing deadly VX chemical agents or that it was trying to extend the range of missiles to reach targets beyond its borders, the chief UN inspector reported on Monday, reports AP.

In a report to the Security Council, Richard Butler said he raised these issues with Iraq officials during talks last month in Baghdad. Butler said he told the Iraqis that his inspectors believed Iraq "had the capability to produce and weaponise large quantities of VX."

Butler, chairman of the UN Special Commission, said Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister, Tariq Aziz, "challenged the methodology used ... to reach that assessment."

"Iraq was a developing country, achieving success in some areas and not in others," Butler quoted Aziz as saying. "He reiterated that Iraq had failed to produce VX on an industrial scale and had not weaponised it."

The two sides agreed that UN and Iraqi experts would meet

again in May to discuss the situation. VX is a colourless, odorless nerve agent which can kill in three to 10 minutes when exposed to the skin.

Last month, an international team of experts reported that Iraq had the technology and equipment to manufacture as much as 200 tons of VX. Butler quoted Aziz as saying Iraq had procured "important quantities" of VX ingredients but had not produced them on a large scale.

In the report, Butler also said he discussed the UN finding that Iraq may have been using components of missiles purchased from the Soviet Union to extend the range of its missiles.

Iraq is permitted to manufacture missiles with ranges less than 150 kilometers (93 miles). But UN inspectors suspect Iraq may have modified its missiles to reach targets beyond the 150-kilometer (93-mile) limit.

The Iraqi side did not accept the commission's contention, Butler said. "Further consideration of these matters will take place."

DPRK blames US for failure of peace talks

SEOUL, Mar 31: North Korea, in a statement monitored today, blamed the United States for the failure of four-party Korean peace talks, and said the prospects for the talks were now "uncertain," reports AFP.

"The responsibility for the deadlocked talks rests with the US side," said the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) monitored here.

"Whether the talks continue or not depends on the US attitude," said the statement issued late Monday.

It was one of several warnings North Korea has issued since the breakdown of the four-party peace talks in Geneva earlier this month with no agreement, and not even a date set for the next round, because of North Korea's demand that the issue of US troop withdrawal from the south be discussed.

"The US troop pullout from South Korea and the conclusion of a peace agreement between the DPRK (North Korea) and the United States which we have persistently called for should be discussed as the main agenda

items of the talks," the KCNA said.

"Whether or not the matters which involve the talks is a key to progress of the 'talks' discussed by the two Koreas, the United States and China.

It said Washington "brought forward matters which have nothing to do with the purpose of the talks, intentionally laying obstacles to progress of the talks."

The United States last week rejected North Korea's effort to blame Washington for the impasse, saying Pyongyang's refusal to consider "pragmatic steps" was the reason for the failure of talks.

This month's talks in Geneva were the second round following a landmark meeting last December to replace the current armistice that technically ended the 1950-53 Korean War with a permanent peace treaty.

China, which chaired the second session, has said it is convinced the four sides will get back together at the negotiating table, but has urged patience.

'EU decision to talk with Greek, Cypriot can be dangerous'

BRUSSELS, Mar 31: Turkey on Monday warned the European Union that opening accession negotiations with Cyprus would lead to a "dangerous escalation" of tension in the eastern Mediterranean and ensure the island remains divided permanently, reports AFP.

The intensified sabre-rattling came a day before the EU opens formal membership negotiations with the divided island's internationally recognised government here.

Speaking in Nicosia, Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem said the EU's decision to negotiate with the Greek-Cypriot administration as the representative of the whole island, "constitutes the first step toward escalation in the eastern Mediterranean, which can be very dangerous."

Rauf Denktaş, the leader of the breakaway Turkish-Cypriot Republic in the north of the island, warned: "If you (the EU) want to divide Cyprus, go ahead, what you do is leading to a permanent division."

Turkish-Cypriot leaders have rejected an offer to appoint

officials to the delegation that will negotiate with the EU, arguing that their republic must first be granted international recognition. It is currently recognised only by Ankara.

The bellicose tone from Cem and Denktaş overshadowed efforts by Cypriot Foreign Minister Ioannis Kasoulides to press the island's case for early membership of the EU at Monday's formal launch of the EU's enlargement process.

Kasoulides said the prospect of joining the union would act as a "catalyst, inducing all sides involved to work for an early solution well in advance of the next EU enlargement."

Northern Cyprus, which is much poorer than the south has most to gain from EU membership.

But the prospects of a deal on the basis of a long-standing UN plan to create a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation have been badly hit by the deterioration in the EU's relations with Turkey, which is furious at being excluded from the current round of enlargement talks.

PML, MQM alliance on verge of collapse

LONDON, Mar 31: The alliance of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) representing the Mohajirs was headed for a breakup following alleged crackdown on the latter's supporters, reports IANS.

The crackdown came the day Altaf Hussain, the MQM leader who lives in exile in London, was due to address a meeting of MQM supporters. The meeting was cancelled "while we take stock of the new situation," a leader of the MQM said.

The crackdown came just three weeks after a lengthy announcement from the MQM headquarters in London that such an action was imminent. The party warned of the consequences of "the unlimited powers and absolute control of the intelligence agencies over the successive governments in Pakistan."

The MQM is in political alliance with the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML) in Sindh province. But scores of MQM workers have been detained, tortured or killed in Sindh over the past several months.

Altaf Hussain was due to make a strong public condemnation of the Nawaz Sharif government at the rally in London on Sunday, MQM sources said.

The crackdown may have been timed to pre-empt him, the sources said.

The MQM headquarters in London arranges to circulate video recordings of any speech by Altaf Hussain right across Sindh. MQM leaders arrange also to broadcast his speech live to groups over the telephone.

A cancellation of the meeting scheduled for Sunday could be the beginning of "decisive action" by Altaf Hussain, the sources said. "We are waiting to find out whether this move was initiated by Nawaz Sharif or by the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) without his knowledge or control," one MQM leader said.

Earlier in March the MQM had issued a statement from its London headquarters warning of "alarming similarities" between present events and the incidents that led to the launch of "Operation Clean Up" against the MQM in June 1992.

"The events occurring presently and specially during the past few weeks are indicative of another round of extremely ruthless action by the authorities against the MQM," the party said.

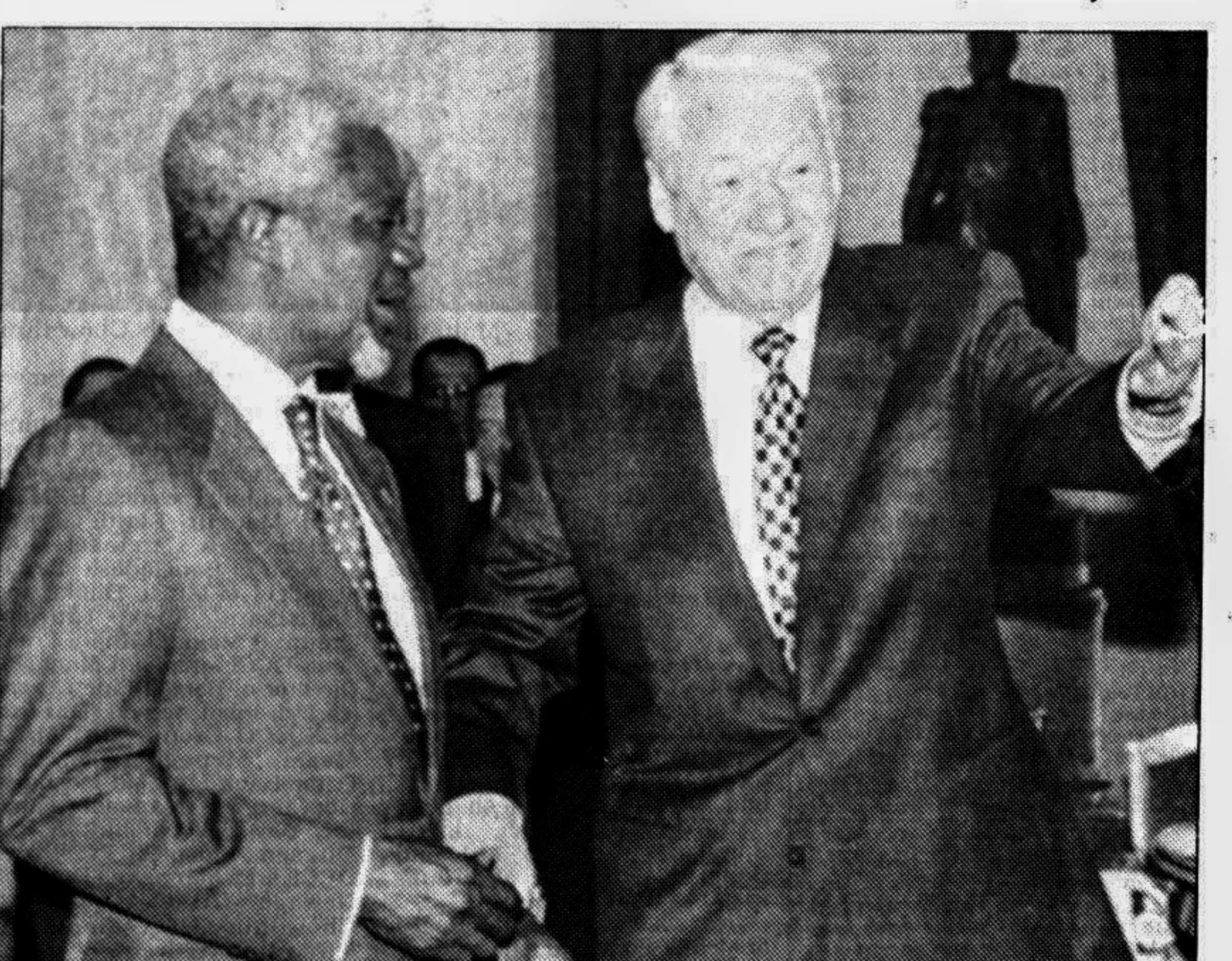
As in the days leading to the 1992 crackdown, the MQM said that "in a similar manner, MQM office-bearers, workers and supporters are being caught

and unlawfully detained and tortured by the intelligence agencies." The party headquarters warned that "a list of MQM workers is being prepared as it was done prior to Operation Clean-Up 92."

Some MQM workers say that the recent bomb blasts in Pakistan were being made the excuse to target the MQM. Some Pakistan leaders have blamed India for the blasts, and many in the Pakistani establishment believe that MQM leaders and workers are India sympathisers. Mohajir, which literally means migrant, is the name given to Pakistanis who migrated from India after the partition.

The MQM headquarters in London said in a statement that Nawaz Sharif made assurances of protection to MQM supporters, but "could not stand by his promises." It said that "the power of the intelligence agencies had superseded the promises and assurances of the Prime Minister."

But MQM leaders said that the alliance with Nawaz Sharif's party is now threatened even if Sharif pleads helplessness in the present situation. "The Prime Minister may not be responsible, but he is still answerable," one MQM leader told IANS.



Russian President Boris Yeltsin welcomes UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in Moscow's Kremlin, Monday. President Yeltsin indicated Monday that he supports the plans of ousted prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin to run for President in 2000. — AP/UNB photo