

HK takes first step toward choosing new legislature

HONG KONG, Apr 2: Hong Kong began the long process toward choosing its first legislature under Chinese rule Thursday with a vote for members of an electoral college that will pick 10 of the 60 seats in elections set for May 24, reports AP.

But with just 140,000 of Hong Kong's 2.6 million registered voters allowed to vote for the 800-seat election committee, democrats criticised the first step as a "small-circle election."

Speaking outside a polling station early Thursday where her pro-democracy Frontier Group held a small protest, former lawmaker Emily Lau called the election "utterly repugnant."

"In this day and age... the only way for people to choose their legislature is for all seats to be elected by universal suffrage," Lau said.

But Hong Kong leader Tung Chee-hwa said the election was fair and open.

"The 800 will be representing views from all cross-section of our community," Tung said.

"The legislature's 60 seats

will be chosen by three different methods under a cumbersome voting system introduced after Hong Kong's July 1, 1997 handover to Chinese rule.

Twenty seats will be chosen in elections based on universal suffrage. Thirty seats are "functional constituencies" which represent and are chosen by members of businesses, professional associations and other bodies, with the remaining ten seats chosen by the electoral college.

The voting system was proposed by the government and approved by an unelected Provisional Legislature which replaced Hong Kong's pre-handover, elected body the day China resumed sovereignty over the former British colony.

China said the elected body, which was half-way through a four-year term, had to go because it did not agree with the rules that produced it.

The pre-handover body was elected under democratic reforms introduced by Chris Patton, Britain's last colonial governor.

Israeli troops tighten control at West Bank roadblocks

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Apr 2: Fearing Hamas revenge attacks after the death of the militant Islamic group's chief bombmaker, thousands of Israeli troops tightened controls at West Bank roadblocks Thursday and patrolled markets, bus stations and malls in Jerusalem, reports AP.

In the autonomous Palestinian town of Ramallah, merchants closed shops and students stayed away from schools in preparation for the funeral of the Hamas fugitive, Mohiyeddine Sharif, later Thursday.

Palestinian officials were undecided on whether to give Sharif — who topped Israel's most-wanted list — a hero's funeral with military escorts as a way of defusing Hamas anger. Thousands were expected to attend the burial.

The circumstances of Sharif's death remained in dispute, with Palestinian police saying he was shot to death and Israeli authorities saying he died when

a Hamas bomb intended for Israel exploded prematurely.

Sharif's body was found Sunday night near a rigged car that exploded in a garage in an industrial zone of Ramallah, but the identity of the dead man was not announced until Wednesday.

Palestinian police, citing an autopsy report, said Sharif was shot twice in the chest and once in the leg three hours before the explosion. Police said Sharif, already dead, was then taken to the Ramallah garage where the bomb was detonated by remote control.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and police officials did not cast direct blame, but Palestinian Planning Minister Nabil Shaath accused Israel of having carried out an assassination.

The chief of the bomb squad in Israel's police, Menachem Bosma, who had examined the site of the Ramallah explosion earlier this week, on Thursday

disputed the Palestinian findings.

Bosma told Israel radio that the garage was a Hamas bomb factory with large amounts of explosives. He said the main explosion took place in the garage, and then triggered a smaller blast in the car. Bosma said he found no signs that the explosives were set off by remote control.

Asked about the Palestinian autopsy report that Sharif was shot three hours before the blast, Bosma said large amounts of ammunition were found at the scene and that the heat of the explosion would have set off the gunpowder in the cartridges.

Israeli officials from the prime minister on down have categorically denied Israeli involvement in Sharif's death.

"In this case, we were not involved," the minister of public security, Avigdor Kahalani, said Thursday. Kahalani said he was concerned that Hamas

would exploit Sharif's death "to recruit more suicide volunteers into its ranks."

In a leaflet, Hamas vowed to carry out new attacks in Israel to avenge Sharif's death. Since 1994, Hamas has been responsible for more than a dozen suicide bombings in Israel, including four in 1996 in retaliation for the death of Sharif's predecessor, Yehiyeh Ayyash, better known as "The Engineer." Ayyash killed by a rigged mobile phone and Israel was widely held responsible for his death.

In response to the Hamas threats, thousands of Israeli troops were deployed Thursday in Jerusalem and at West Bank roadblocks ringing the city. Police patrolled markets, bus stations and malls, and officers with binoculars were posted on rooftops. In Arab neighborhoods, troops stopped Palestinian pedestrians to check their identity cards.

Poor teaching adds to South Asia's woes, report says

NEW DELHI, Apr 2: Poor teaching has helped keep South Asia the most illiterate region in the world, according to a report on education in the region released Thursday, reports AP.

Enrolling children in schools was not enough. The real challenge was to keep them there, said the report released in New Delhi by the Pakistan-based Human Development Center headed by economist Mah-bub ul Haq.

"Every year, over 60 million children drop out of primary schools, mainly because of the poor level of education offered," the report said. The dropouts are nearly half of the 150 million students enrolled.

That is in addition to the 50 million children who never went to school in the first place in the region comprising seven nations and one-fifth of the world's population, it says.

There are 400 million illiterate adults in the region — nearly half of the world's total. Two-thirds of the female population in South Asia, 243 million women, can't read or write. "Policy makers not only can,

but must, act now to end the region's shameful neglect of basic education," the report said.

The report said that children in successful East Asian nations are with teachers four times as long as students in South Asia.

This was partly because of shorter school terms and high absenteeism by South Asian teachers, who are paid abysmally low salaries and given no incentives to live in villages and teach, it said.

"It is disgraceful that policy makers of South Asia are willing to entrust the education of the children of their nation to teachers whom they are willing to pay even less than their cooks or chauffeurs," said Haq, who headed by team of authors.

Apart from higher pay, the report suggested reducing class sizes and raising the entry-level qualifications required of teachers.

The region could generate enough resources to restructure its primary education system by freezing military spending, the reports said.

Angioplasty may be the best treatment for heart attacks

BOSTON, Apr 2: Michigan researchers have found that the medical procedure angioplasty may be the best treatment for one of the most deadly forms to heart attacks, according to a new study, reports Reuters.

Angioplasty, in which a tiny balloon is inflated inside a narrowed artery to reopen it, dramatically improved the recovery rate for patients with "right-side" heart attacks, according to a study published in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine.

About one in four heart attacks affect the right ventricle, the more complex and little-understood side of the heart that pumps blood to the lungs.

"When one considers that heart attacks are the number one killer in the Western World, one in four is quite a number of people who are affected," Dr. James Goldstein, one of the researchers from the William Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak, Michigan, told Reuters in an interview.

Patients with "right-side" heart attacks require longer recuperation and 30 to 60 per cent never recover and die, Goldstein said.

Goldstein and his colleagues

studied 53 patients with an average age of 63 who had "right-side" heart attacks.

Angioplasty successfully restored blood flow to the right and left ventricle and the right coronary artery and its branches in 41 patients or 77 per cent of the cases.

UN arms experts inspect Saddam's main palace

BAGHDAD, Apr 2: UN arms experts are conducting a "very comprehensive" inspection of Saddam Hussein's main presidential palace, which serves as the seat of the Iraqi government, a senior diplomat said Thursday, reports AP.

The experts, searching for information on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, inspected the Republican Palace in Baghdad on Wednesday and were to go back there Thursday, said Jayantha Dhanapala, head of the diplomatic corps monitoring the visits.

Asked if the palace complex holds special interest for the experts, Dhanapala said: "Yes,



Arriving at the presidential palace in Dakar, Wednesday, President Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton are welcomed by Senegal's President Abdou Diouf and wife Elizabeth. Senegal is the final port of call in Clinton's twelve-day tour of sub-Saharan Africa. — AP/UNB photo

Tornado claims 70 lives recently in India

NEW DELHI, Apr 2: A total of 70 people have perished and about 1,300 others injured in the recent tornado which hit parts of Orissa and West Bengal on March 24, Minister of State for Agriculture Sompal told Rajya Sabha yesterday, reports PTI.

Making a statement on the tragedy, the minister said as per the latest data, three villages in Jaleswar Tehsil at Balasore in Orissa were hit by thunder squalls affecting about 5,000 people.

Two thousand houses and four educational institutions were also damaged during the calamity which claimed 22 lives, including those of 13 children.

In West Bengal, 18 villages in three blocks of Midnapore district were hit by the squalls which left 48 people dead Sompal said. About 30,000 people were affected by the squalls which damaged 5,702 houses and 2,569 hectares of cropped area, he said.

Giving details about the financial aid already given to the affected states, so pal assured no effort would be spared to relieve the suffering of the affected populace.

Supporters urged not to respond to provocations Police clamp down around Ranariddh's hotel

PHNOM PENH, Apr 2: Riot police blocked the area in front of Prince Norodom Ranariddh's hotel to crowds in a security clamp down Thursday following clashes between hundreds of his supporters and protesters loyal to archrival Hun Sen, reports AP.

Police reported no arrests but said four people were injured in the intermittent clashes Wednesday that climaxed with a street battle with sticks and rocks, disrupting traffic on one of the capital's main boulevards.

The confrontation underscored the tensions between Ranariddh and Hun Sen since the prince returned Monday to prepare for polls slated for July 26. The visit is Ranariddh's first since Hun Sen deposed him in a violent coup nine months ago.

Hun Sen's authorities have organized protests against the prince since last week, but the situation got out of hand Wednesday and the police, armed with assault rifles, clubs and electric shock batons, had to separate the clashing factions.

Ranariddh urged his supporters not to respond to provocations with violence, fearing Hun Sen would use the excuse to bar him from returning again. He is scheduled to go back to Bangkok, Thailand, on Friday.

The prince appreciates those who have shown their support to him, but he also appealed for calm and begged his supporters and protesters not to pursue clashes — just go to the polls," said Vibol Kong, a Ranariddh aide.

Checkpoints were set up overnight in a search for illegal weapons. Roadblocks restricted traffic outside the Hotel Le Royal where Ranariddh is staying, preventing motorcycle taxi drivers who gathered in hundreds to support him Wednesday from congregating again.

Two men were detained for carrying firearms but were released after they turned out to be plainclothes officers.

"We are increasing security to prevent an incident like yesterday from occurring again," said Rean Vichit, a police officer. "It will be removed after the prince leaves."

BRIFFLY

Bridge collapses in Vietnam: A section of a bridge on national highway number one on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City collapsed after it was struck by a barge, local reports said yesterday. AFP reports from Hanoi.

A 600-tonne barge hit one of the bridge supports late Wednesday, causing a section to collapse and fall into the canal below. Three trucks, a motorcycle and bicycle fell in with it, but no deaths were reported. The 124-metre long and 12-metre wide bridge spanned a canal along the highway linking the city to the southern Mekong Delta region, causing major disruptions to regional traffic, the paper said.

Blizzard claims 6 troops in ROK: Six South Korean Special Forces soldiers died of exposure when they were caught in an unseasonal blizzard while on a 20-day mountain training march south of Seoul here, the army said yesterday, AFP reports from Seoul.

The troops, including a captain, were on a mountain peak in north Chungchong province when the blizzard hit Wednesday driving temperatures down to minus 10 degrees Celsius. Yonhap news agency said, Helicopters trying to reach the troops were driven back by the snow and zero visibility, the army said. The exercise had been drawn up to cross the peninsula from the southwest to the northeast.

Vasile Romania's new PM contender: Romania's ruling party on Wednesday named Radu Vasile as its candidate to succeed Victor Ciorbea as prime minister, the party's chairman said, AFP reports from Bucharest.

The National Peasants' Christian Democratic Party's choice is a almost certain to be appointed, although under the constitution President Emil Constantinescu must confirm the nomination on Thursday.

Synagogue bombed in Latvia: A synagogue belonging to the Lubavitch Hassidic movement was bombed before dawn Thursday in the Latvian capital Riga, police said, AP reports from Moscow.

The powerful blast damaged the building and smashed windows in nearby houses, the Interfax news agency cited city police headquarters as saying. In New York, Zalman Shmotkin of the Lubavitch headquarters said the synagogue building was heavily damaged. There were no immediate reports of casualties and no claims of responsibility, he said.

China plans to protect newsmen: China plans to set up a committee to protect journalists following an increase in attacks on reporters, an official newspaper said Thursday, AP reports from Beijing.

Cases of journalists being threatened and even injured have risen amid recent efforts by Chinese media to become more aggressive in their reporting, the China Daily said. Chinese media are closely controlled and supervised by the government. But they have been given slightly greater leeway in recent years to expose cases of official malfeasance and examine sometimes sensitive topics such as crime or corruption.

Sat launched to study solar events: NASA has launched a satellite designed to study solar events that may endanger astronauts and spacecraft, AP reports from Vandenberg Air Force Base, California.

The satellite was boosted Wednesday on a Pegasus XL rocket dropped from a jet flying at 39,000 feet (62,800 kilometers) over the Pacific Ocean off the California coast, said Jim Sahly, spokesman for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

Rain forces Menem to cancel NZ visit: Gale-force winds gusting to 100 mph and driving rain have blown Argentine President Carlos Menem's formal state visit off course, AP reports from Wellington.

When the Gale and rain forced his Boeing 757 away from Wellington airport Wednesday afternoon, Menem flew north to Auckland. Instead of a formal reception for a head of state, with Maori wero and haka (challenge and war dances), an honour guard inspection and state dinner, the president spent a quiet evening having dinner at an Auckland hotel.

Prisoners free all hostages in Turkey: A two-day-old prison standoff ended Wednesday when prisoners at seven Turkish jails released the 55 officials they had taken hostage after reaching an agreement with the government, AP reports from Ankara.

The government compromised Wednesday and decided to send 10 inmates, whose transfers from Buca jail in western Turkey sparked the action, to prisons close to their families. Lawyer Behic Ascı, who was mediating between the inmates and the government, said the rioters were pleased with that decision as well as government pledges to always consult prisoners before transfers, to investigate the officials at Buca for possible improper conduct and not to punish the inmates for the riot.

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh may become 'sick men' of Asia

Sanjay Suri writes from London

India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are in danger of becoming the "sick men of Asia," European officials have warned as the second Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM 2) gets underway in London on Thursday.

In the past Turkey was considered the "sick man of Europe" for failing to integrate with European economy and advancement. A well-placed European Union (EU) official said something similar is now happening to South Asia.

The EU has begun to look on Asia as divided into three distinct entities — East Asia, West Asia and South Asia — the senior official involved with ASEM told India Abroad News Service here. Of these the EU is looking primarily to East Asia to build strong economic links with it, the official said.

The economic crisis of East Asia has come as only a "blessing in disguise" for that region, the official said. "It has given us an entry to encourage reforms and to build economies we can do business with," the official said.

West Asia, with its largely oil-rich economies but underdeveloped manufacturing, offers "very active markets" for EU goods, the official said. The high-performance East Asian economies offer a large network of manufacturing bases and

markets for a broader range of business dealings, he said.

South Asia is emerging as the poor blot on the map, he added.

"It is not a question of which areas you allow investment in," said the official, who has been involved recently in negotiations with the Indian government, even a small number of serious investors into South Asia.

Differences between the rest of Asia and South Asia are expected to surface at a World Trade Organisation (WTO) ministerial meeting due in Geneva next month, the official said. Officials have begun to speak of South Asia, African countries and tiny states as countries in danger of missing out on significant new opportunities.

The Asia-Europe meeting here might well isolate South Asian economies further, the official said.

The EU which makes significant contributions to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has backed recent moves to stimulate domestic demand in Japan and in the other East Asian economies. These economies mark a rapidly growing market for EU goods.

The EU is using economic and political means arising from the economic crisis "to pursue further trade liberalisation," the union announced on the eve of the ASEM on Wednesday. The second ASEM will be used to break down a range of trade barriers in East Asia, the official said.

This has long-term political and economic consequences for South Asia, the official said. "If trade barriers and tariffs are pulled down in East Asia, South Asia cannot stand alone in the world resisting these changes," he said. Several countries in South America have already backed moves by the EU for a new round of negotiations to pull down trade barriers.

The EU is looking to build long-term relations with East Asia. Many EU member states are offering "bilateral technical assistance in the areas of banking supervision and financial restructuring to countries affected by the crisis," the EU said in its announcement.

The London meeting will address trade liberalisation, particularly in customs procedures, standards and certification, public procurement, intellectual property rights, business mobility and market access in the distribution sector, the EU announced.

— India Abroad News Service

Rwandan genocide tribunal turns down request for joint indictment

ARUSHA, Tanzania, Apr 2: The Rwandan genocide tribunal on Wednesday turned down a prosecution request for a new, joint indictment of former Hutu officials charged with masterminding the 1994 slaughter of at least half a million people, reports AP.

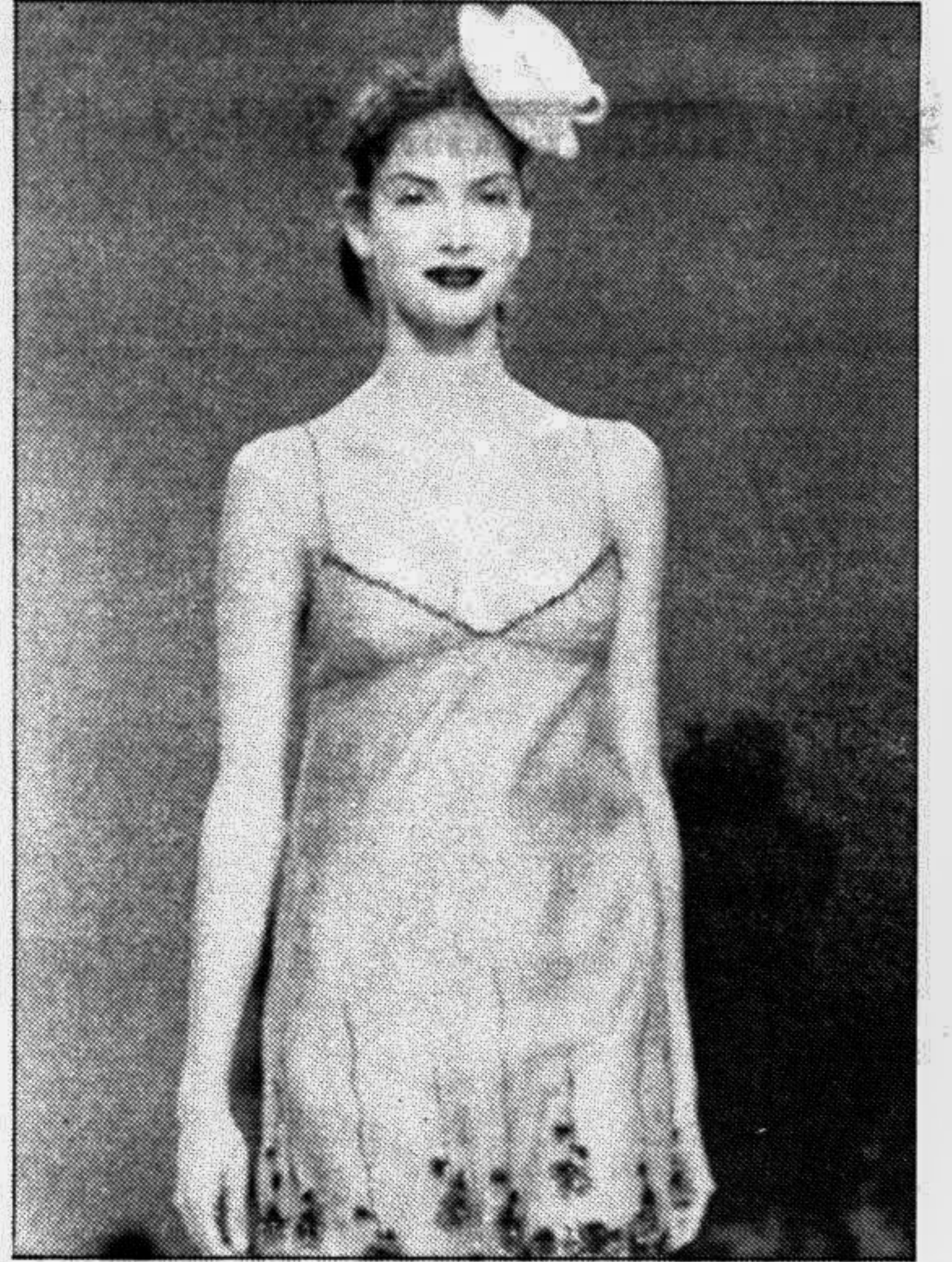
Last week, chief UN prosecutor Louise Arbour asked for a new indictment of Col Theoneste Bagasora — considered to be the most important genocide defendant in UN custody — and others under his command.

The Canadian judge told The Associated Press earlier that the joint indictments would serve to expose the chain of command and the intent of the former top Hutu officials to order the massacres of minority Tutsis and politically moderate Hutus.

But Tanzanian Judge Tafazzal Khan said he lacked jurisdiction to confirm the indictment of people who had already been indicted.

US President Bill Clinton, who made a brief visit to Rwanda last week, said he hoped such joint trials would speed up the slow pace of the 3 and a half year-old tribunal.

Four years after the Rwandan genocide, the tribunal has indicted 35 people, 23 of whom are in its custody.



A model wears a beaded silk chiffon dress with tea cup hat Wednesday during the presentation of the Cynthia Rowley Fall '98 collection. — AP/UNB photo

UK govt rejects UN findings of police abuses in N-Ireland

BELFAST, Northern Ireland, Apr 2: The British government on Wednesday rejected the main conclusions of a United Nations report into allegations that Northern Ireland's police force harassed defense lawyers and conspired to have one murdered, reports AP.

The UN report, officially published Wednesday but leaked to journalists earlier this week, found widespread deficiencies in how Northern Ireland police and courts treat terrorist suspects and the lawyers who defend them.

The report's author, Malaysian jurist Param Cumaraswamy, called on the government to launch an investigation into the 1989 killing of Patrick Finucane, a lawyer who represented many people accused of Irish Republican Army activities.

Finucane was shot dead in his north Belfast home by members of the Ulster Defense Association, Northern Ireland's main pro-British paramilitary group. His widow, who was wounded by the gunmen, said police made her husband a target by branding him as an IRA member.

The government statement noted that three Protestant militants had been charged with possessing the gun used to kill

Finucane, but that they were released after authorities concluded there wasn't enough evidence to hold them.

"Unless new evidence is brought to light, there can be no justification for another inquiry, although the police file remains open," it said.

Cumaraswamy, the UN Commission on Human Rights' special rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, also accepted allegations that detectives interrogating suspects had often threatened the lives of their lawyers. He called for authorities to audiotape all interrogations and permit lawyers to sit in on them to ensure this couldn't happen.

The government called these allegations "a matter of considerable concern," but asked for Cumaraswamy to provide "specific details on which the allegations are made."

It defended the police's power to prevent a suspect from seeing a lawyer for the first 48 hours of interrogation because "lawyers, however unwittingly, sometimes may be used to convey information or be forced to reveal it under duress to the outside, which may prejudice the outcome of an investigation."

It noted that silent videotaping of interrogations had begun

this month and that audiotaping "will follow as soon as possible."

The government also defended the qualified right to silence that exists in Northern Ireland's no-jury courts, another issue criticized by Cumaraswamy. The law here permits a judge to draw a negative inference if an accused person refuses to answer a question, and cite that silence as a sign of guilt.

Flawed coup report

Mandela to meet top military leaders

JOHANNESBURG, Apr 2: President Nelson Mandela called a meeting with top military leaders to discuss the "glaring shortcomings" of a military report that accused ruling party members of planning a coup against him, reports AP.

A statement issued by Mandela's office gave no time or place for the meeting on Thursday. Presidential spokesman Parks Mankahlana said it was unlikely there would be any immediate statement after the meeting.



Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, accompanied by Qatar's Foreign Affairs Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jasmin bin Jabir Al Thani, gestures while talking to reporters at the State Department in Washington Wednesday after their meeting. Albright expressed encouragement over the more moderate tone of Iranian authorities and said she is hopeful this will result in policy changes. — AP/UNB photo