

International

BRIEFLY

Avalanche kills 7 in Pakistan: At least seven people died and several others were injured when an avalanche hit a village in Pakistan's northern Baltistan region, press reports said yesterday. AFP reports from Islamabad.

The avalanche struck a hamlet in the area of Gultary Samlok late Sunday, the news daily said, adding army troops had recovered the bodies of most of the victims.

Ex-ROK spy chief indicted: Prosecutors indicted a former government spy chief Tuesday on charges of plotting to smear President Kim Dae-jung during his election campaign last year, AP reports from Seoul.

Kwon Young-hae, 60, a former head of the Agency for National Security Planning, was accused of hiring a Korean-American businessman to allege in news conferences in December that Kim was a communist sympathiser and unfit to lead South Korea.

Bosnian war criminal denies guilt: Zoran Zilic, a Bosnian Serb linked to a notorious "death camp" during the early months of the 1992-95 Bosnian War, on Monday pleaded not guilty to charges of war crimes before the UN tribunal, AP reports from The Hague.

Zilic, 39, was one of 19 people indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in February 1995.

Philippine Muslim rebels behead 3: Muslim rebels in the southern Philippines beheaded three villagers whom they suspected of being government spies, police said Tuesday. Reuters reports from Zamboanga.

The bodies of the three men, abducted on Friday by suspected members of the Abu Sayyaf extremist group, were found lashed to coconut trees in nearby Basilan Island at the weekend. Security forces found the bodies after an encounter with the rebels, who were seen carrying one of the victim's heads as they retreated.

Refugee camp attacked in Kosovo: Gunmen opened fire and threw grenades at a Serb refugee camp in the troubled province of Kosovo overnight, the Serbian Information Centre in Pristina said Monday, AFP reports from Pristina, Yugoslavia.

No one was injured in the attack, it said. The camp in the village of Babaloc has been targeted in earlier attacks and is home to 123 Serb families who left neighbouring Albania in 1990.

2 killed in Russian tornado: A tornado swept through a town in Russia's Far East, killing two people and injuring several others, officials said yesterday, AP says from Moscow.

The tornado, which touched down for about five minutes, ripped roofs off houses in Arsenyev and hurled up to 100 metres away, said the town's municipal housing chief, Sergei Oleinikov. Monday's tornado also knocked down a crane which fell on a mobile home housing construction workers. Two workers were killed and several injured, according to the ITAR-Tass news agency.

Chinese dissident jailed: Chinese authorities have sentenced a dissident two years in a labour camp for meeting an exiled democracy campaigner who slipped secretly back into China, a monitoring group said yesterday, AP says from Beijing.

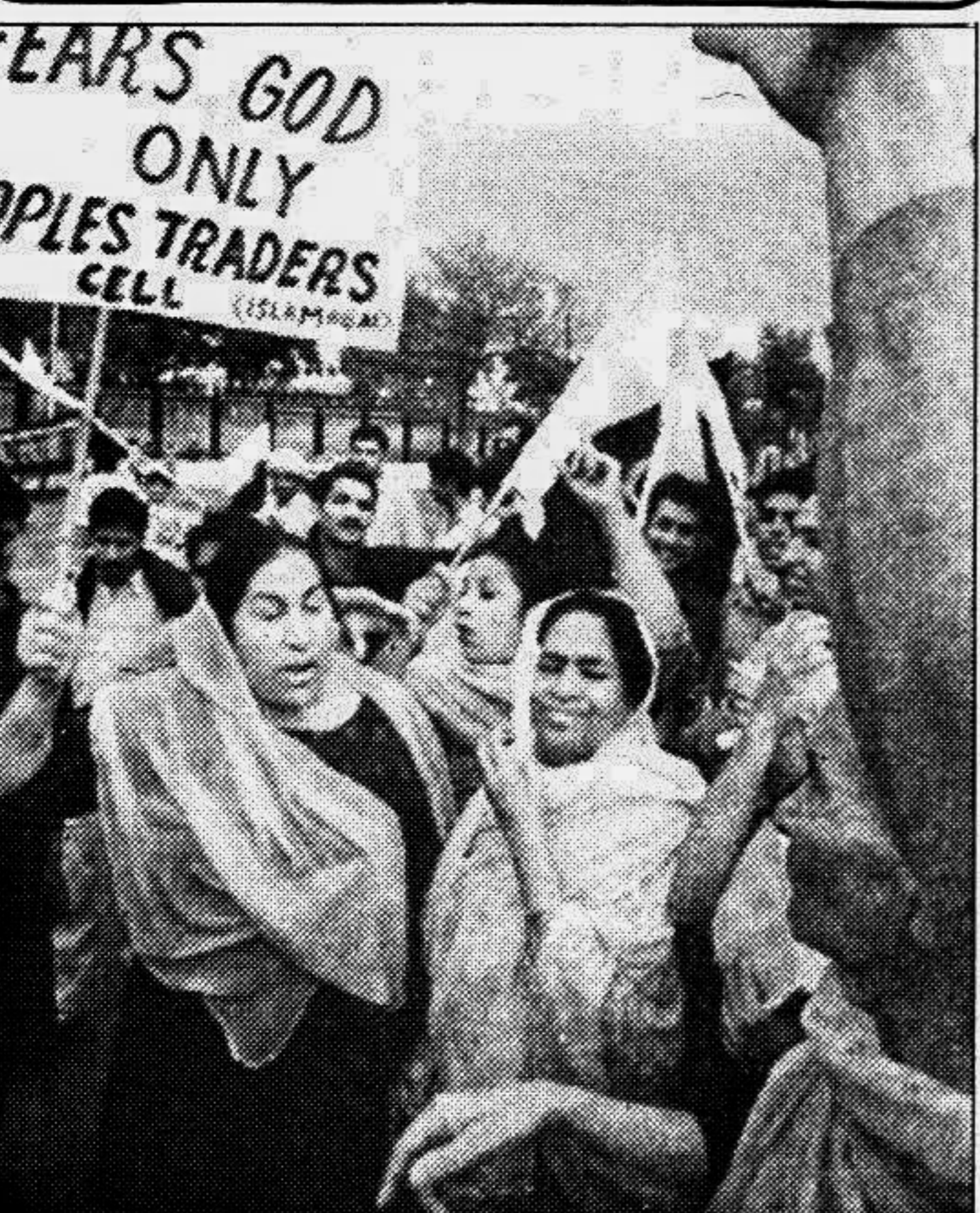
Wang Tingjin, a maths teacher from the eastern city of Bengbu who had previously served a two-year sentence for dissident activities, was taken from his home by police on April 14, the Hong Kong-based Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China said.

Strange flu in S Lanka: Scientists are investigating an unusual strain of viral flu which has afflicted thousands of people across the Indian Ocean island nation, officials said Tuesday. AP reports from Colombo.

The flu, which lasts nearly a week, has unusually hit more adults than the children. Symptoms include high fever up to 40 Celsius, and sometimes vomiting and wheezing. However, no deaths have been reported so far.

Mild quake shakes Japan: A mild earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of 5.0 shook northern Japan yesterday, but no major damage or injuries were reported, AP reports from Tokyo.

The Central Meteorological Agency said the quake registered an intensity of three on the Japanese scale of seven in Nami, 230 kilometres northeast of Tokyo. The tremor, which started at 1:58 pm (0458 GMT) and lasted several seconds, was strong enough to rattle windows and doors.



Supporters of former Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto protest before the parliament house in Islamabad Monday against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government for propaganda against their leader regarding corruption and looting of public money during her tenure. — AP/UNB photo

Mexico bids farewell to Octavio Paz

MEXICO CITY, Apr 21: Mexican leaders and top Spanish-language writers on Monday bade an emotional farewell to Octavio Paz, poet and Nobel laureate who died on Sunday night at age 84 after a long battle with cancer, reports Reuters.

President Ernesto Zedillo led a final ceremony for Paz in Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts just hours after returning from the 34-nation Summit of the Americas in Chile.

Zedillo was joined by top writers, his entire cabinet of ministers, leading congressmen and judges, Mexico City's Mayor and members of the diplomatic corps. Most donned black ties.

The coffin stood in the middle of the art deco foyer of the palace of fine arts, draped with a Mexican flag. The walls were hung with black pallis in stark contrast to the gaudy murals on the upper galleries of legendary painters Diego Rivera and David Siqueros.

Paz lay in state at the palace exactly five years to the day after the death of legendary Mexican screen comic Mario Moreno, alias "Cantinflas", who was also accorded the same honour.

A hearse took the coffin away two hours after the official ceremony ended and Paz's remains were cremated shortly afterwards at the nearby Spanish cemetery.

A winner of the Nobel prize for literature in 1982, Paz was regarded as one of the Spanish-speaking world's greatest writers of this century.

Colombia's Gabriel Garcia Marquez, now Latin America's only living Nobel literature laureate, joined in tributes to Paz that poured in from around the world.

"Any praise for Octavio Paz is superfluous at this stage of his glory," Garcia Marquez said in Bogota.

Palestine, Israel agree to attend London talks

TEL AVIV, Israel, Apr 21: Giving a boost to stalled Mideast peace talks, the leaders of Israel and the Palestinians have agreed to attend talks in London next month aimed at ending a year-long impasse. But whether a summit of the two leaders will take place remains uncertain, reports AP.

The Palestinians, who now back an American peace plan, say any meeting between Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hinges on Israel also accepting the US plan.

Senior US envoys Dennis Ross and Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk are expected in the region Friday seeking support for the US proposal which calls for further Israeli troop withdrawals from the West Bank, a freeze on Jewish settlement construction and Palestinian security cooperation.

"If Ross fails with Netanyahu, then the... (London) meetings will remain as they are," Nabil Abourdeh, an aide to the Palestinian leader, said Monday.

For the time being, there are no arrangements for direct talks between Arafat and Netanyahu. Instead, US Secretary



British Prime Minister Tony Blair, escorted by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat reviews the Palestinian honour guard upon his arrival at Arafat's headquarters in Gaza City Monday. — AP/UNB photo

Referendum on Irish peace deal

UK's main political leaders to join campaign for 'yes' vote

LONDON, Apr 21: Leaders of the main political parties in Britain are joining to urge voters in Northern Ireland to support a peace agreement which calls on Catholics and Protestants to share power in local government, reports AP.

"It is right to reiterate that this is not peace. It is merely the opportunity for peace," Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown said in the House of Commons Monday.

This is the foundation stone on which peace can be built, but it is up to the Northern Ireland people to build it.

Ashdown and Conservative Party leader William Hague both offered to campaign with Prime Minister Tony Blair to urge a "yes" vote in the May 22 referendum.

"The Good Friday agreement is as inclusive an agreement as is ever likely to be achieved," Hague wrote in the Times of London. "Those who oppose it should ask themselves what better alternative will ever be available."

Blair's office said he would begin working on the details of the joint effort after he returns Tuesday from his tour of the Middle East.

The expected joint campaign for the agreement did not sit well with Ian Paisley, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, who boycotted the negotiations and is now leading a campaign for a "no" vote.

"They never came here to fight the IRA, they never came to the funeral of one victim of violence," Paisley said in Belfast. "But now they are coming to tell the people of Northern Ireland: You must vote Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness — the godfathers of the IRA — into your government."

Adams leads the Sinn Fein party, which is allied with the Irish Republican Army, and McGuinness was the party's chief negotiator. Sinn Fein has yet to decide whether it will urge its supporters to vote for the agreement, which stops far short of the party's goal of a united Ireland.

Experts exhume probable site of Srebrenica massacre

BRNICE, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Apr 21: Under a bleak gray sky, experts from the UN War Crimes Tribunal on Monday officially began exhuming a site in Northeast Bosnia thought to contain victims of the Srebrenica massacre, reports AP.

The site, next to a power dam near Zvornik, 35 kilometres from Srebrenica, is one of several that the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) plans to dig up this year in connection with Europe's worst war crime since World War II.

"We have found some human remains, some clothing, shoes and personal effects scattered throughout the area," UN spokeswoman Kelly Moore told reporters at the scene.

Also discovered by the dozen-odd team members inside the muddy 150-square-metre zone were "quite a large number of skull fragments" and 1,500 bullet casings, Moore said.

According to US estimates, at least 3,000 males were killed after Serb forces pushed aside lightly-armed Dutch UN peacekeepers and swept over the Muslim enclave on July 11, 1995.

But with 7,000 men from Srebrenica still on a missing list compiled by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) the final number of the dead could be much higher.

Prompting the latest exhumation was a tip that the plateau by the power dam at Brnice which serves an aluminium plant nearby was the scene of a mass killing three days after the fall of Srebrenica.

"What we look for is evidence to corroborate the other evidence that we have," the ICTY's prosecutor, Canadian judge Louise Arbour explained to reporters as she inspected the site in the afternoon.

"It's a criminal investigation," said Moore earlier, "not a humanitarian exhumation with the sole purpose of identifying any human remains found."

Swiss banks send back half of Marcos' money

ZURICH, Apr 21: More than half of the \$20 million dollars stashed in Swiss banks over a decade ago by former Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos has been sent back to Manila, the judge handling the case said Monday, reports AFP.

Zurich judge Peter Cosandey said that 300 million dollars had been transferred last week to an escrow account at the Philippines National Bank in Manila.

However, Cosandey, confirmed that the rest of the money was blocked in Switzerland following a last minute "extraordinary" appeal lodged at the Swiss Supreme Court by lawyers of the Marcos family.

Koirala expands cabinet

KATHMANDU, Apr 21: Nepal's new Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala on Tuesday appointed 25 ministers, including 10 lawmakers belonging to a dissident group within his Nepali Congress Party, reports Reuters.

Koirala won the support of these 10 lawmakers who had pulled down his government in 1994 leading to fresh elections which the party lost. They had stayed away during a confidence vote.

On Tuesday, Koirala kept the key portfolios of foreign affairs and defense.

He was sworn in by King Birendra on Wednesday to head a minority government after no other political parties managed to form a coalition government.

Koirala had appointed Shalaja Acharya as his deputy and water resources minister and Ram Sharan Mahat as the finance minister last week.

Abacha now sole presidential candidate

LAGOS, Apr 21: Military ruler General Sani Abacha has completed a five-for-five clean sweep of nominations, making him the only candidate for president in elections which he has promised will return Nigeria to democratic rule, reports Reuters.

The grassroots Democratic Movement, at a ballot in the northeastern town of Maiduguri Monday, became the fifth of five registered parties to adopt Abacha as its nominee for the August 1 contest. He won by 1,368 votes against 408 for former police chief Yusuf Mohammed.

Abacha, has not yet said he will contest the poll but a vast campaign on his behalf has left few Nigerians in doubt that he hopes to move from military to civilian rule.

The Transition Implementation Committee charged with overseeing the path to democracy said the August 1 vote would most likely be held as a referendum on Abacha's candidacy.

'Bandit Queen' eligible for Nobel Peace Prize?

MUMBAI, Apr 21: The reformed 'Bandit Queen' Phoolan Devi, whose name was proposed by two British Labour Party MPs for the Noble Peace Prize, yesterday asserted that she was an "eligible" candidate for the coveted award, reports PTI.

"If Nelson Mandela, who has spent several years in jail, and Yasser Arafat could win the award, so can I," the former MP said at a press conference here.

Phoolan Devi, whose name was proposed by Mildred Gordon and Ken Livingstone following a vigorous campaign by a fan club comprising non-resident Indians, said "my winning the prize will not only enhance the status of Indian women but also be a matter of national pride."

"I am glad that the west has recognised the trauma and pain I have gone through after spending 11 years in jail and many more years in the dense jungles of the Chambal Forest," said Phoolan, who had wreaked havoc against the upper caste in the 1980's after she was brutally gang-raped by some members belonging to the community.

—AP/UNB photo

90 combatants killed Troops capture Tiger base in N Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, Apr 21: Government troops captured a Tamil Tiger base in northern Sri Lanka in a renewed push to seize control of a rebel-held area as fierce fighting left nearly 90 combatants dead. The defence ministry said today, reports Reuters.

A ministry statement said troops backed by air force jets and artillery had advanced northwards at first light on Monday and captured the complex near Olumadam, which lies close to Mankulam.

Mankulam is the last major town held by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels on the highway the military has been trying to capture in an offensive launched last May.

The terrorists fled further northwards when troops kept advancing. Thereafter, there was a lull in the battle and approximately around noon (0600 GMT, Monday) terrorists fired

mortars at the advancing troops," the statement said.

It said 28 army personnel were killed and 114 wounded in the fighting on Monday, which began after troops launched a fresh bid to move on Mankulam.

Defence ministry officials quoted ground troops as saying that some 60 LTTE rebels were killed and a large number wounded in Monday's battle.

The LTTE's clandestine Voice of Tiger radio said early on Tuesday that the army had begun moving from three points in the northern Wann, but the rebels had resisted the push by firing mortars and artillery at the soldiers.

The radio monitored in the northern government-held frontier town on Vavuniya, said the rebels had damaged three armoured personnel carriers belonging to the army as well as a helicopter gunship.

Air France plane crashes in Bogota, killing all 53

PARIS, Apr 21: A total of 53 people were killed when a Boeing 727 leased by Air France crashed near Bogota shortly after take-off Monday, air France said in a statement issued in Paris today, reports AFP.

The airline said the cause of the crash of flight AF 422 to Quito and the identity of the passengers were not yet known.

AP adds: The lights of Bogota's El Dorado Airport runway were visible from the crash site, and planes could be seen taking off. The takeoff route from the airport heads straight toward the ridge of mountains bordering the city's eastern side, and planes typically veer either to the north or south as they gain altitude.

Dionisio Sosa, an air traffic controller at the airport, said the plane was supposed to turn 90 degrees to the south on a heading known as "Girandot

One" about 600 metres after clearing the runway at a beacon known as "Romeo." Instead, it continued straight for about 3.2 kilometres until it struck the mountain.

Sosa said controllers were unable to see the plane on radar as it departed. They radioed the plane, but the only response from the aircraft was a crew member giving the plane's identification as "Air France 422."

The jet was climbing at about 280 kilometres per hour, said Col Julio Alberto Gonzalez, deputy director of the civil aviation authority. He refused to speculate on the cause of the crash and noted that the plane had arrived in Bogota an hour early from Quito.

"The plane was flying very low," said Sergio Rodriguez, a 15-year-old peasant living near the crash site.



Some of the 1252 string players taking part in setting a record for the world's largest orchestra, in Pittsburgh Sunday. A total of 2049 musicians took part in the event, passing the old record of 2023. — AP/UNB photo

Protest in parliament — Canadian style

OTTAWA: The youngest member of the Canadian Parliament Monday protested the political impotence of junior members by storming out of the chamber — carrying his chair with him, reports AFP.

Stephan Tremblay, 24, a member of the Bloc Quebecois, which is seeking Quebec's independence from Canada, recalled that when he was elected two years ago, "I swore an oath to serve the well-being of my fellow citizens."

But he said, this had become increasingly difficult because of the globalisation of markets. That's why I'm taking my member's seat to begin a debate among the population on globalisation.

At this stage, he lifted his seat above his head and, to the astonishment of other MPs, walked out with it.

Later, speaking on a cellular phone while driving back to his constituency in Quebec, Tremblay said he planned to bring the chair back "in a day or two."

The seat, he said, was safely stowed in his van and he was planning to show it to his constituents.

The Speaker of the House, Gil Parent, had tried to rule Tremblay out of order under parliamentary rules, but was unable to speak because he was laughing so hard.

Alexa McDonough, leader of the New Democratic Party, said she did not care if all the Bloc Quebecois MPs left the House, "but please don't take our furniture with you."

'Ganja club' goes up in smoke

SAN FRANCISCO: It was going, going, ganja for San Francisco's biggest cannabis club Monday, reports Reuters.

A purplish-green haze hung in the Cannabis Cultivators Club as San Francisco county sheriff Mike Hennessey, acting under a court order to crack down on abuse of California's medical marijuana law, evicted the club from its offices.

Dozens of sick and disabled members gathered peacefully, pipes and joints ablaze, as Hennessey and 10 of his uniformed deputies arrived to shut the club.

A throng of journalists waited inside the smoke-filled offices as the club's maverick founder, Denis Peron, symbolically handed the keys to Hennessey.

But before the smoke from the last joint cleared, medical marijuana supporters said they planned to light up again as members of a new club, the San Francisco Cannabis Healing Centre, due to open in the same building later.

"This is the end of an era and the beginning of a new one," a smiling Peron said as he walked out of the club's offices carrying a brown cardboard box that contained a small, leafy marijuana plant.