

Ruling Left Front in West Bengal blasts govt Centre interfering in internal affairs of states

CALCUTTA, Apr 23: The ruling Left Front in West Bengal yesterday came down heavily on the Vajpayee government at the centre for, what it said, "interfering" in the affairs of the states, reports PTI.

The front condemned such "interference" in the light of sending a central team to Tamil Nadu to assess law and order situation. "Law and order is a state subject and the centre has nothing to do with it," the front said.

The front, which met during the day, said it was reprehensible that the home ministry's special secretary Ashoke Kumar was "shifted" from his post for "giving a clean chit to the Karunanidhi government on the law and order situation in Tamil Nadu as headed of a visiting central team".

Such action, the front said, was taken "only to assuage the feelings of AIADMK leader Jayalalitha and it unmasks the dictatorial attitude of the Vajpayee government".

Briefing front committee meeting deliberations, CPI (M) leader and central committee

member Biman Bose said that the front partners flayed the centre's "apathy" to release money from the national calamity relief fund for the tornado victims of Midnapore and cyclone-hit people of Jalpaiguri.

"The Vajpayee government sent a team of his handpicked people to visit some tornado-hit areas of Baleswar and Dantan, but there is no follow-up action," he said.

To a question, Bose alleged that Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee was "conspiring against the Left Front government by desperately seeking to create lawlessness in the state".

The CPI (M) leader further alleged that Banerjee had "sought BJP's assistance to achieve her goal".

To a question, he said that the front was to "bothered" at the emergence of Trinamool Congress and BJP in the given political situation, adding that it was the need of the hour for the front to strengthen its base to win the ensuing panchayat elections.

'Washington dominating UNSC' Iraq accuses Butler of working for US

BAGHDAD, Apr 23: Iraq's deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz accused UN disarmament chief Richard Butler on Wednesday of working for the United States in a plot aimed at continuing crippling sanctions against Iraq, reports AFP.

"Today, after seven years of the embargo, after thousands of inspections and dismantling operations, the US agent Butler claims that Iraqis not cooperating with the United Nations," Aziz said at a working meeting in Baghdad.

"Butler, as a UN official, is not interested in disarmament or the security of the region. His mission consists of carrying out the orders of his masters in Washington," Aziz said.

The attack follows a report Friday by Butler, the UN special commission chairman often branded as a "mad dog" by Baghdad, that "virtually no

progress" had been made in Iraqi disarmament in the past six months.

"Washington does not want to lift the sanctions imposed on Iraq or Libya and refuses to allow the Arab nation to progress," Aziz said.

Aziz signed the February accord with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan that brought an end to the crisis over Iraq's refusal to allow weapons inspectors to search so-called presidential palaces.

The oil embargo, in force since the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, can only be lifted when UN inspectors certify the dismantling of Iraq's nuclear, biological and chemical weapons and long-range missiles programmes.

An AP report says: Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz accused the United States of dominating the UN Security

Council and said Wednesday there is little chance of a quick end to UN sanctions against Iraq.

The council has said the sanctions will only be lifted after weapons inspectors from the UN Special Commission, known as UNSCOM, verify that Iraq has eliminated its long-range missiles and chemical and biological weapons systems.

The United States and Britain, which can each veto council resolutions, have taken the hardest lines among the 15 council members.

"As long as the UN Security Council is controlled by America and UNSCOM is an American stooge... there is little chance that sanctions on Iraq will be lifted," Aziz told a conference of Arab trade union representatives.



Supporters of Benazir Bhutto, former prime minister and leader of the Pakistan People's Party, protest against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government, Wednesday in Karachi. The Sharif administration severely beat up Bhutto's senators on Monday when they were protesting against government propaganda claiming Bhutto's involvement in looting of public money and massive corruption during her tenure. — AP/UNB photo.

BRRIEFLY

Ex-Greek president Caramanlis dies: Former Greek president Constantinos Caramanlis died early yesterday in an Athens hospital. He was 91. AFP reports from Athens.

Caramanlis, who led Greece from 1980 to 1985 and from 1990 to 1995, had been suffering from respiratory infection.

Shi'ite clergyman killed in Iraq: A gunman killed a top Shi'ite clergyman shortly after he finished prayers at one of the most holy Shi'ite shrines in southern Iraq, the official Iraqi News Agency reported Wednesday. AP says from Cairo.

A leading Iraqi opposition group accused the Baghdad government of assassinating Ayatollah Murtadha Ali Mohammed Ibrahim Borujerdi, 70, for refusing to support government policies in his preachings at the Imam Ali mosque. The shrine in Najaf, 180 kms south of Baghdad, marks the grave of Ali, the son-in-law of Prophet Mohammed.

10 killed in Uganda mishap: A lorry ploughed into a crowd in a Kampala suburb Wednesday afternoon, killing 10 people and injuring 30, witnesses and hospital staff told AFP.

The crowd then doused the truck with petrol and set it ablaze, and police opened fire with live bullets, wounding an unknown number of people.

2 rebels die in Kosovo clash: Two ethnic Albanian "terrorists" were killed and seven wounded in a clash with Yugoslav army troops Wednesday in the troubled Serbian province of Kosovo, the daily Dnevni Telgraf reported yesterday. AFP says from Belgrade.

The paper said the troops were in training 4-km from Djakovica in the west of Kosovo when they came under fire from guerrillas of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK). The troops then returned fire and after a "violent clash" the "terrorists" retired, taking their casualties with them.

One executed in Texas: A Texas man sentenced to death for murdering a woman when he was 17 years old was executed by lethal injection on Wednesday despite a plea for his life by Pope John Paul. Reuters reports from Huntsville, Texas.

Joseph Cannon, 38, died at 7.28 pm (0028 GMT Thursday), 10 minutes after a fatal brew of chemicals was injected into his arm at a Texas prison. The execution was delayed just over an hour because of difficulties in administering the injection, a Texas Department of Criminal Justice spokesman said.

30 hurt in Canada factory blast: Some 30 people were injured, three critically, when a blast ripped through a factory northwest of Montreal, police said, AFP reports from Montreal.

A police spokesman said an oven inside Fasa Friction Laboratories, which makes automobile brake pads and batteries, in Saint-Laurent exploded around 1:10 pm (1710 GMT). The victims taken to the hospital suffered severe burns, respiratory problems and nervous shock, he added.

Gates to give \$ 1.7m to UNPF: A foundation started by Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates will give 1.7 million dollars to a United Nations programme that promotes population control in the Third World, the United Nations announced Wednesday. AP says from the UN.

The money, to be made available from the William H Gates Foundation over a 3-year period, will promote the sharing of population control technology and information among developing countries, the United Nations Population Fund statement said.

Jailed Tupac Amaru men begin fast: Peru and Japan paid homage to two slain commandos while Marxist rebels began hunger strike to honour their own dead Wednesday on the first anniversary of the end of Latin America's longest hostage siege. Reuter reports from Lima.

The Tupac Amaru guerrilla movement announced its "political prisoners" had started refusing food to remember their 14 comrades who were all killed when 140 troops stormed the Japanese ambassador's residence after a four-month siege. Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori led Japanese diplomats and Peru's top military brass in the ceremony to honour the two commandos who died freeing all but one of the 72 hostages in what he called "the world's most successful rescue".

Warning for US students in Moscow: The US Embassy in Moscow Wednesday warned Americans there, especially US students of African or Asian origin, to be on the alert after reports that skinhead groups had attacked Asian and African students. Reuters reports from Moscow.

The embassy statement, released in Washington by the US State Department, cited reports that over 20 "Skinheads" severely beat two young Asian women in Moscow Tuesday evening, and said the same groups had threatened the lives of other Asian and African students.



Indonesian students hide their faces with bandanas as they stage an anti-government protest at Padjajaran University in Bandung, 120 km southeast of Jakarta, Wednesday. About 7,000 students from three different universities participated in the rally, which resulted in at least 20 students being injured after fighting with police. — AP/UNB photo

First airlift to Iraq by US body announced

UNITED NATIONS, Apr 23: With the enthusiastic blessing of the Clinton administration, the first humanitarian airlift to Iraq organised by a US organisation was announced Wednesday by AmeriCares, reports AP.

The organisation, known for targeting hard-to-access crisis areas, will begin ferrying supplies to Baghdad on Monday, officials said at a news conference in a hotel across the street from United Nations headquarters.

"AmeriCares goes where there's a need, irrespective of race creed or political persuasion," said Guy Smith, a vice chairman of AmeriCares.

He commended Clinton administration officials for helping ferry the assistance through the UN sanctions committee, which must approve any flights into the country.

A diplomat at the US mission to the United Nations confirmed that the mission accelerated the process for AmeriCares.

47 rebels, 26 civilians killed in Burundi

BUJUMBURA, Apr 23: At least 73 people, including 47 rebels and 26 civilians, were killed in Burundi on Wednesday during an attack launched by Hutu rebels east of the capital, state radio said, reports Reuter.

It said the rebels attacked Bandagara and Rubingo hills, 20-km east of Bujumbura, at 5 am (0300 GMT), killing 26 civilians and wounding at least 10. Forty-seven rebels were killed in ensuing clashes with the army.

Administrative sources say the death toll has risen to 26 civilians dead and according to the same sources 47 assailants (rebels) were killed," the radio said.

It was the second most serious attack in Burundi this year. On January one Hutu rebels fighting the Tutsi-dominated country's main airport and around 270 people were killed in fighting that followed.

The rebels used hoes and machetes during Wednesday's dawn raid, the radio said. The rebels stole 30 head of cattle

and escaped to the Kibira forest north of the capital Bujumbura. Bujumbura residents said they heard gunfire to the east of the lakeside city early in the morning.

Military leader Pierre Buyoya, who came to power in a coup in July 1996, has pursued a twin-track policy of internal reform and attempting to win an end to sanctions imposed by regional states shortly after the coup.

His government and the army have also pursued a war against Hutu rebels of the national Council for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD) and the Party for the Liberation of the Hutu People (Palipehutu).

The rebels, who claim to represent the country's Hutu majority, say they want reform of the army, elections and a new constitution.

More than 150,000 people have been killed in the tiny Central African state since October 1993 when the first Hutu President, Melchior Ndadaye, was murdered by Tutsi troops four months after winning free elections.

30 killed as ship sinks off Haiti's north-west coast

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Apr 23: Some 30 people were killed and several dozen may be missing after a sailing ship secretly heading for the Bahamas sank off Haiti's north-west coast, a local source said Wednesday, reports AFP.

The number of missing could not be exactly determined, as a number of survivors opted not to come forth due to the clandestine nature of the voyage, the source said.

There was no official announcement regarding the shipwreck, which the source told AFP happened late Saturday or early Sunday, adding there were 12 survivors, the ship had been carrying 110 people.

Stormy seas gutted the overloaded ship, which had sailed from the coastal town of Novion, the source said, adding bodies, borne by ocean currents, were found along the coast near the Cap Haïtien.

Hong Kong lifts ban on import of Chinese ducks

HONG KONG, Apr 23: Mainland Chinese ducks will return to Hong Kong menus at the end of a ban on the import of the poultry due to an outbreak of the killer 'bird flu', which left six people dead here, reports AFP.

However, the ducks will be butchered at a new central slaughterhouse before being sold to the public Thursday.

A spokesman for the agriculture and fisheries department said yesterday that the first batch of 600 ducks, collected from two monitored poultry farms, would only be available to restaurants.

The public will have to wait another month before they can buy the birds in the territory's food markets.

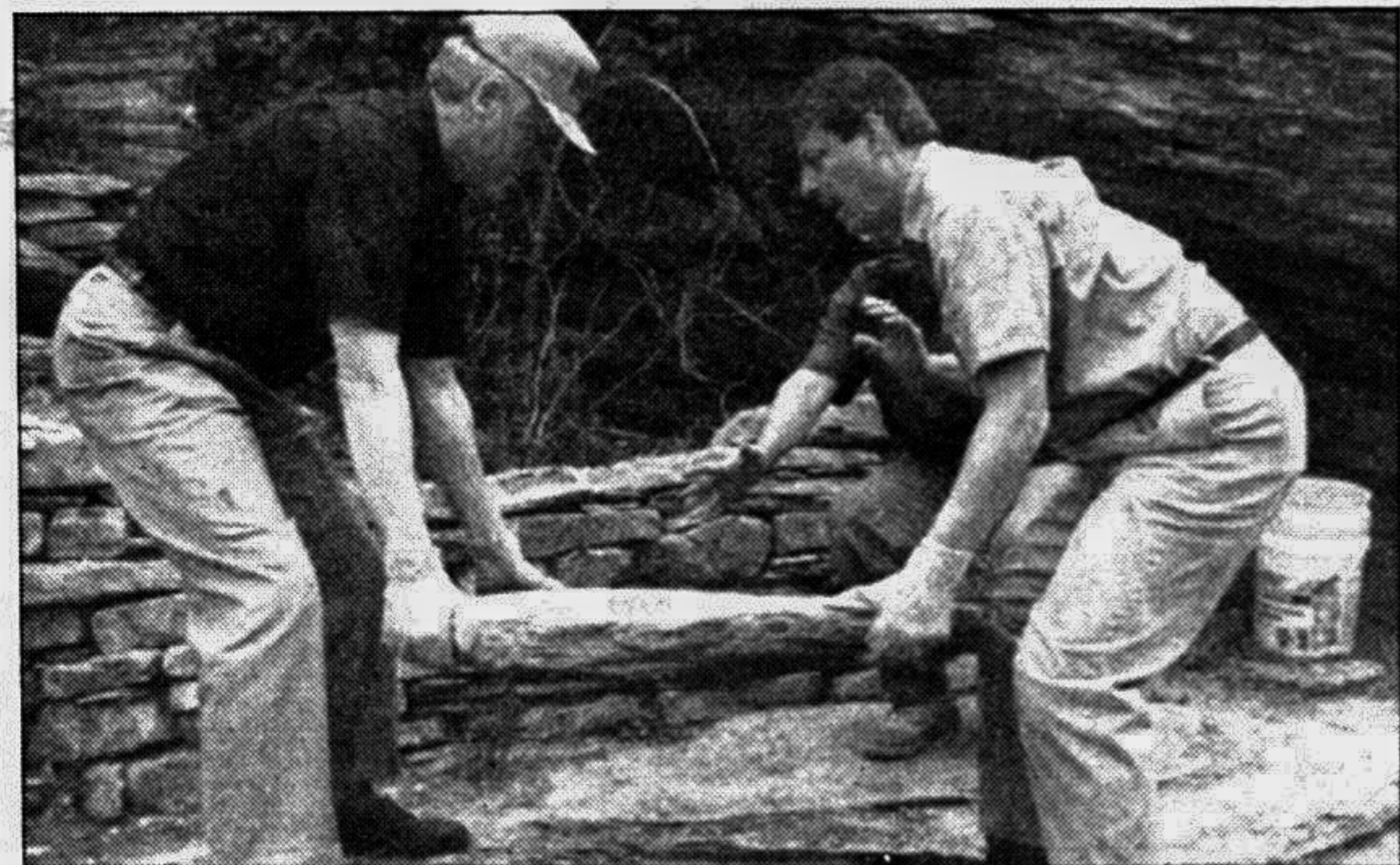
The central slaughterhouse scheme was introduced for all imported ducks and geese after the 'bird flu' struck.

Prayer, fasting for rain in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, Apr 23: More than 60,000 paddy farmers hit by drought in Malaysia's northern Kedah state would hold special prayers for rain to salvage a 45-million-Ringgit (11.8-million-dollar) industry, a report said today, reports AFP.

The Muda Agriculture Development Authority (MADA) farmers organisation committee chairman Ismail Arshad was quoted by the daily as saying that all those taking part in the prayers would also fast for three days.

"At the end of the three-day period, we will all assemble at an open venue to perform the special prayers," Ismail said, adding that 547 mobile pumps had been supplied to help farmers divert water to their paddy fields.



US President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore lift a large stone as they join a group of volunteers to build a stone wall along the Appalachian Trail Wednesday, in Harpers Ferry, W Va. Clinton and Gore were in West Virginia to take part in Earth Day events. — AP/UNB photo

Push to oust Hashimoto govt on

TOKYO, Apr 23: An opposition push to topple Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto's government over its handling of the economy gathered momentum today when a new party said it was thinking of joining in the effort, reports Reuters.

The Liberal Party, headed by Ichiro Ozawa, once one of Japan's most influential politicians, revealed it was holding discussions with Naoto Kan, leader of the Democratic Party, to mount a no-confidence vote against Hashimoto.

A 95-seat alliance headed by Kan is the biggest opposition group in the key 500-seat Lower

House of parliament. As to whether a formal coalition could be formed between the Liberals, who have 41 seats, and the Democrats, the spokesman told Reuters, "we're considering it. It could happen".

The anti-Hashimoto bandwagon began rolling on Wednesday when a senior member of the Japan Communist Party (JCP) said his party was willing to join forces temporarily with other opposition parties to topple Hashimoto.

The moves came as opinion polls show Hashimoto's popularity falling to new lows since his election in 1996.

A spokesman for the Demo-

cratic Party said Kan also discussed the no-confidence vote with communist executive Kazuo Shii at a reception on Wednesday for visiting Chinese vice-president Hu Jintao. An opposition no-confidence motion could work if all opposition groups banded together and drew enough votes from rebel members of the LDP, which has 261 seats.

Analysts said Hashimoto could also be indirectly felled if the opposition created gridlock in parliament's budgetary deliberations so bills fail to pass before the parliamentary session ends in mid-June.

Y2K crisis may hit Asia hard

BANGKOK, Apr 23: Asian countries are dangerously late in averting a major computer meltdown in the year 2000, when crisis looms over systems that can't tell apart the years 1900 and 2000, reports AP.

Experts of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific said Wednesday at the conclusion of the 54th Commission Session that much to Asia is muddling toward disaster.

"It's not a deadline that can be avoided," said Andrew J. Flatt, director of ESCAP's statistics division. "Yet apart from Australia and to a lesser extent Japan, it's something that people are only now waking up to."

The so-called Y2K crisis will strike in the year 2000, when the failure by the computer industry to account for the millennium change will suddenly result in software incapable of digesting the new dates and, in worst-case scenarios, going haywire.

Many computer systems abbreviate years to their last two digits, so that 1900 and 2000 both would be 00.

Adrianus Mooy, the UN agency's executive secretary, said the Y2K bug could paralyse "whole economies by interrupting electricity supply, telecommunications, financial transactions and other services modern societies depend upon."

Governments and organisations need to urgently draw up "contingency plans for the possibility that their own or their collaborators' systems will fail," Mooy said.

Some of the officials from the 41 countries gathered at ESCAP over the past week raised the problem in discussions on the social impact of Asia's economic crisis.

Flatt said it gradually dawned that few of their governments have tackled the issue. Many appear to hope that the United States and Europe will come up with solutions that can be applied in Asia.

That could be waiting too long, Flatt said. Top government officials need to get on top of the problem now, because sorting out the mess will take time and cannot start at the last minute.

"In just one example, Australia's national statistics department has had programmers go through 20 million lines of computer code to try to weed out Y2K problems," Flatt said.

Fixing the bug in Asia could cost 500 million dollars, based on programmer hours and getting new computer equipment.

The countries at greatest risk would not be more developed countries like Japan or Australia, or virtually computer-less ones like Bhutan or Laos, but those somewhere in between like Thailand.

These are countries that have rapidly computerised in the past few years but would not have the resources in programmers — or money since the Asian economic crisis — to stamp out Y2K problems.



Investigators search the site of Monday's Boeing 727 airplane crash on a hill outside of Bogota Wednesday. Air France Flight 422, using a plane leased from an Ecuadorian company, was en route to Ecuador's capital, Quito, when it failed to make a sharp turn south and plowed into the jagged peak Monday killing all 53 people aboard. — AP/UNB photo