



Sonia Gandhi, widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, places flower petals on a memorial to Rajiv in New Delhi Thursday on the 7th anniversary of his death. Rajiv was assassinated by terrorists in 1991.

— AP/UNB photo

### Sonia against decision to conduct N-tests

NEW DELHI, May 22: In yet another shift of stand on the nuclear tests Congress president Sonia Gandhi, today came out against the decision to conduct the tests and warned that the parliamentary democracy was in danger following the talk of switch over to presidential system, reports PTI.

"Real strength lies in restraint and not in display of it," Sonia said referring to the recent nuclear tests carried out by India.

Addressing a rally at the All India Congress Committee (AICC) headquarters marking the seventh death anniversary of Rajiv Gandhi, she prefaced her statement by congratulating the scientists for the capability shown by them.

"Along with use of science for national security, it should be utilised for removal of poverty and backwardness in the country," she said.

The Congress and initially questioned the timing of the tests and had sought to know as to what prompted the decision.

Later, Sonia in remarks at the Congress working committee last week, had said that the nuclear question was a national matter and not a partisan one and accused the BJP of trying to exploit the issue politically.

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## New 'reform' Cabinet formed in Indonesia

JAKARTA, May 22: Promising new leadership to a nation fed up with corruption and nepotism, Indonesia's new president announced a new 'reform' Cabinet that he hoped would placate the discontent that brought down his autocratic predecessor, reports AP.

Wanting to break from the past, despite his own close links to x-President Suharto, B J Habibie banished Suharto's eldest daughter and his multi-millionaire golfing buddy from his 36-member team. But 20 are holdovers from the old Cabinet.

Popular support for Habibie, handicapped by Suharto to serve as Indonesia's third president since the country won independence from the Dutch in 1945, remains unclear.

Rock-throwing and scuffles broke out after thousands of pro-Habibie supporters confronted anti-government student protesters who have been occupying the national Parliament for most of the week.

The clash raises the spectre of intervention by the military, which has allowed the students free rein of the legislature since Monday.

Six serving or retired army generals and six prominent Muslim figures were included.

The majority are members of the ruling Golkar party.

Habibie's announcement 24 hours after Suharto stepped down followed days of protests and riots, which culminated Thursday with the resignation of Suharto and the swearing-in of the new president with the backing of the powerful military.

Indonesia's main opposition figure Amien Rais, who has called for an end to cronyism, declined to pass judgement.

He said he was 'neutral' on its makeup even though it still 'reflected the old ways' of Suharto.

Rais, a high-profile Muslim leader, said he believed the new Cabinet would not last until 2003, the scheduled end of Habibie's term, and repeated his insistence that there must be elections leading to a real democracy.

He said the Cabinet was 'technocratic' but still reflected cronyism. The choices were 'posturing to convince the world to bring investment to Indonesia,' Rais said, while adding that he didn't think the new Cabinet would succeed in doing so.

In a nationally televised speech from the Presidential

Palace, Habibie said the Cabinet had representation from all of Indonesia's three officially-recognised political parties, the armed forces and other groups.

It is a 'Cabinet of reform,' Habibie, dressed in a modest grey safari suit and black peci (cap) told the nation from a podium inside the red-carpeted, ornately decorated reception hall of the palace.

He said it was 'in line with the spirit and determination of the Indonesian people as reflected in the demands for total and constitutional reform led by students and the young generation.'

Habibie, who must now tackle the country's worst economic crisis in 30 years, promised the Cabinet would be free of corruption, collusion and nepotism.

'It is the same old game. It is still made up of people who have been closely associated with President Suharto,' said Syahrir, a former student activist, now economist.

While trying to satisfy loud demands for reform, Habibie also made concessions to the military-backed elite.

Significantly, military commander Gen. Wiranto remains defence minister.

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## Army's ultimatum forced Suharto to bow out?

JAKARTA, May 22: An ultimatum from the once-loyal armed forces was the turning point which forced former Indonesian President Suharto to resign after 32 years in power, the Jakarta Post said Friday, reports AP.

The leading English-language daily, citing unnamed sources, said armed forces chief and defence minister General Wiranto visited Suharto Wednesday night to deliver a message from the military leadership asking him to step down.

Suharto, himself an ex-soldier who holds the rare honorary rank of five-star general, resigned the next morning in favour of Vice President Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie in a hastily arranged televised ceremony at the Merdeka State Palace.

House Speaker Harmoko, in the first sign of an open split in the ruling clique, had given Suharto a Friday deadline from Parliament to step down or face impeachment but Wiranto had publicly branded their call as illegal.

The Post said the military top brass conferred Wednesday and decided to ask Suharto to step down rather than face impeachment.

At the handover ceremony, Wiranto delivered a speech vowing to protect the safety and

honour of Suharto and his family and warning against further unrest following last week's riots which left 500 dead in Jakarta.

But after the handover of power, student demonstrators who led the anti-Suharto struggle and a top Muslim leader demanded a trial for the former president, whose family is accused of amassing billions of dollars through corruption and nepotism.

UN urges new govt to resolve E Timor issue

UNITED NATIONS, May 22: Following the resignation of Indonesian President Suharto, the United Nations is quietly urging the new leadership to resolve the dispute over East Timor, the former Portuguese colony the Indonesians seized 23 years ago, report AP.

But UN officials, and diplomats are not optimistic that the new president, BJ Habibie, will be strong enough to take dramatic steps necessary to satisfy the world community, which has never officially accepted Indonesia's annexation of the territory.

China slates Dalai Lama's support for Indian N-tests

BEIJING, May 22: China today accused the Dalai Lama of 'showing his true nature' by what it called his support for India's nuclear tests, reports AP.

'By supporting India's provocative action in public, the Dalai Lama unveiled his true colours,' the China daily said in a commentary. 'This clearly shows that he is not a genuine defender of peace.'

'For many years the Indian government has given him much assistance, both covertly and overtly. It was time for him to repay the Indian government for its 'kindness,' the paper said.

The Tibetan spiritual leader has lived in exile in India since 1959.

In a statement Tuesday

Dalai Lama said he was 'saddened' by the nuclear tests and reaffirmed his support for a Chinese proposal that all nuclear weapons be banned.

But he also said that since the big powers possessed nuclear weapons, it was 'not right to outrightly condemn India's action.'

The China daily called this attitude 'an insult to peace.'

It said the Dalai Lama had many times said he was willing to hold negotiations with China's central government and did not seek Tibet's independence.

But now he felt extremely excited about the nuclear testing conducted by a country treating China as its potential enemy. This made people see through his hypocrisy.'

## BRIEFLY

**Factory blast in China kills 9:** Deadly explosions that flattened a Japanese-owned fireworks factory in South China may have been sparked by employees testing new fireworks, an official newspaper reported, AP says from Beijing.

The death toll in Tuesday's blasts rose to nine, and two others, including a Japanese technician, were missing. Investigators believe the blasts in the factory in Huizhou, 75 km north of Hong Kong, may have been caused by workers — including a Japanese technician — who were testing new fireworks.

**Police shoot dead 2 naxalites:** Two naxalites of 'Janashakti' group, including its central organiser Venugopal, were killed in an encounter with police in Medan district of Andhra Pradesh Thursday, PTI reports from Hyderabad.

Police said on being accosted by a police patrol near Chegunia village in the district, Venugopal and his associate Pazi opened fire at the police. Police retaliated killing the two on the spot.

**Dolphin protection accord signed:** The United States and six other countries signed an agreement on Thursday to protect dolphins and other marine species in the eastern Pacific Ocean, AP reports from Washington.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright signed for the United States and was accompanied at a ceremony by representatives of Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and Venezuela.

**Beijing opens Christianity centre:** A new research centre on Christianity was set up Thursday in the Chinese capital, the Xinhua news agency reported, AFP says from Beijing.

It quoted Zhuo Xingping, the centre's first director as saying it was the largest of over 10 such institutes in China and would play a leading role in China's Christianity research.

**DPRK soldier defects to ROK:** A North Korean soldier walked across a mine field on the heavily guarded border and defected to South Korea Friday, the Defence Minister said, AP reports from Seoul.

Cpl Sohn Chul Min, 20, was first spotted 300 metres in front of a South Korean guard post by soldiers who then guided him through the mine field, the ministry said.

**NW China hit by floods:** Torrential rains in northwest China have left eight people missing after floods washed away 680 buildings and broke through dykes and reservoirs, Xinhua reported yesterday, AFP reports from Beijing.

According to local meteorologists, rainfall of up to 74 mm was recorded Wednesday in Gansu province worst hit were Yongdeng, a suburb of the provincial capital Lanzhou where 80 houses were destroyed in Gaolan county where more than 600 buildings collapsed, roads and power were cut, and 2,600 hectares of farmland was flooded.

## Malian children sold into slavery in Ivory Coast

BAMAKO, May 22: Thousands of children from drought-stricken Mali have been sold into slavery to plantation owners in neighboring Ivory Coast, Malian officials announced Thursday, reports AP.

Around 10,000 boys and girls between 8 and 16 years old had been sold by their parents or guardians to cocoa and coffee farmers in Ivory Coast's southern agricultural belt, Malis Justice Minister Amidou Diabate, said in a statement. He did not say when the sales took place.

Impoverished parents sometimes gave up their children for as little as dir 35, and the children were whisked away by night across Mali's southern border.

Both countries had recently signed an agreement to fight the illegal trade, Diabate said.

The traffic of children has today almost replaced the traditional migration of Malian (adult) temporary workers who have for decades sought profit in the plantations of Ivory Coast," Diabate said.

Officials said the smuggling rings were based in the town of Sikasso in southern Mali and Ivory Coast's northern trade center, Korhogo.

## India blasts UK govt for meeting with POK 'PM'

NEW DELHI, May 22: India yesterday took serious note of British government having a meeting with the so-called Prime Minister of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) despite New Delhi's advice to the contrary, reports PTI.

An External Affairs Ministry statement here said India had conveyed to the British government that if such a meeting were to take place, it could not be without 'negative consequences' for relations between India and the United Kingdom.

'We understand that the meeting took place in London on May 19. We have taken note of the British government's meeting (with him) in spite of our advice to the contrary. We reserve further comment' the statement said.

The statement said the government had received reports several weeks back that Sultan Mehamud Chaudhury, the POK leader, was to be officially received by a ministry in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

**UNSC urges Taliban to restart talks with opposition**

UNITED NATIONS, May 22: The UN Security Council (UNSC) urged Afghanistan's Islamic Taliban to restart talks with the armed opposition, the council president said, reports AFP.

Kenyan Ambassador Njuguma Moses Mahugu, this month's council president, said the council called on both sides to return to the negotiating table.

The United Nations announced Tuesday that the Taliban had decided to abandon peace talks and blamed the opposition Northern Alliance for refusing to cooperate.

**Moros cancel talks with Philippine govt**

ZAMBOANGA, Philippines, May 22: Muslim separatist guerrillas have cancelled peace talks with the government, this weekend, saying they prefer to negotiate with the incoming administration, a military official said Thursday, report AFP.

The two sides came to a mutual agreement to shelve scheduled meetings this weekend in the southern city of Marawi and will resume contacts only after the June 30 turnover, southern Philippine army chief Major General Joseline Nazareno told reporters.

Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) chief negotiator Ghali Jasep raised concern that Josep Estrada, the apparent winner of the May 11 election, could renege on any accord signed before he is sworn into office, said Nazareno.

**US, Russia discuss ways to prevent Pakistan from conducting N-test**

WASHINGTON, May 22: US President Bill Clinton conferred Thursday with Russian President Boris Yeltsin about ways to prevent Pakistan from carrying out nuclear tests in response to India's recent blasts, reports AFP.

They discussed ways in which we might continue to impress upon the government of Pakistan the importance of not testing," White House spokesman Michael McCurry said after the 15-minute telephone call.

India tested five nuclear devices on May 11 and May 13, prompting Pakistan to consider reacting in kind and drawing strong international condemnation and tough sanctions

## Israel rejects call for int'l conference on ME peace

JERUSALEM, May 22: Israel on Thursday rejected calls by France and Egypt for an international conference of those determined to save the Middle East peace process, reports AFP.

'Israel is opposed to an international conference to which the parties involved are not even invited,' a statement from the Israeli Foreign Ministry said.

French President Jacques Chirac and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak made the call for the conference after a meeting in Paris on Monday.

French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine told an Israeli daily on Wednesday that it was 'impossible' to convoke such a

conference with the participation of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Vedrine said the conference should be in two stages, with Israeli and Palestinian officials taking part only in phase two.

'We do not believe such a conference can advance the talks,' the Israeli Foreign Ministry statement said. 'It is not in this way that agreements have been reached up to now.'

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who also holds the foreign affairs portfolio, called on the Palestinians, Syria and Lebanon 'to sit down at the negotiating table to talk directly with Israel.'

'Our neighbours must stop thinking that others will do the work for them,' Netanyahu told reporters.

'Our neighbours have no other choice. Are they going to resume the path of war when they do not have the means?'

Palestinian officials on the other hand welcomed the Franco-Egyptian plan for an international conference.

'This initiative is a reflection of the anxiety of the international community in the face of Israel's refusal to implement the agreements it has signed,' the Secretary General of the Palestinian Authority, Tayeb Abdelrahim, told the official Palestinian news agency Wafa.

Indian Border Security Force (BSF) personnel patrolling the border with Pakistan in Suchitgarh area 35 kms from Jammu, the winter capital of India's troubled state of Jammu and Kashmir, Thursday. Security has been beefed up in border areas after India conducted two nuclear tests in Pokhran last week.

— AP/UNB photo

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UN oil-for-food accord

Iraq rejects proposal of amendments by US

BAGHDAD, May 22: Iraq on Thursday rejected US proposals of amendments to the UN oil-for-food accord, dismissing them as a ruse to prolong sanctions indefinitely, reports AP.

'Iraq categorically rejects these US proposals to change the terms of the programme and insists on its provisional and exceptional character, a foreign ministry spokesman said.

The spokesman quoted by the official news agency INA, urged other Security Council members to foil these proposals, which Iraq redesigned only to keep up economic sanctions in place.

The sanctions in force since Iraq's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait, can not be lifted until Baghdad is declared free of weapons of mass destruction.

## Fall of Suharto shows autocrats are dying breed in Asia

TOKYO, May 22: As the fall of Indonesian President Suharto has shown once again, autocrats are a dying breed in Asia. Over the past decade, street protests have brought them down from South Korea to Thailand, reports AP.

Many of the fallen dictatorships have been replaced by increased democracy. And it is all stirring up an element of uncertainty throughout the region.

'Indonesia won't immediately become a democracy like the Philippines or South Korea did,' said Yoshinori Mural, an Indonesia expert at Tokyo's Sophia University.

'But there will be no going back to the past,' he said.

Suharto's decision to step down in the face of widespread civil unrest is in keeping with a larger trend that has already significantly changed the political outlook of Asia.

The Philippines, famous for its peaceful 'people power' revolution that toppled Ferdinand

Marcos in 1986, saw a lively democratic system revived after the dictator was forced into exile.

Huge protests in 1987 against the regime of former army general Chun Doo-hwan led to presidential elections in South Korea. The country's last three leaders have been freely chosen.

Not all transitions have been smooth, or positive.

In Thailand, 52 people died, hundreds were injured and more than 40 remain missing after 'Black May' in 1992, when Gen. Suchinda Kraprayoon ordered troops to open fire on unarmed democracy demonstrators in Bangkok.

The bloodshed led to a rare intervention by the country's respected constitutional monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who persuaded Suchinda to step down. Democracy has since flourished.

But in Myanmar, military dictator Ne Win, who ruled for

26 years, was succeeded by a new generation of generals in 1988 after soldiers gunned down more than 3,000 protesters demanding democracy. The junta still rules.

A transition of power in Taiwan was peaceful and largely orchestrated from the top.

The late President Chiang Ching-kuo, the son of nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek who fled to Taiwan after losing China's civil war in 1949, gave the move toward democracy a boost by ending martial law in 1987.

His death in 1988 paved the way for successor Lee Teng-hui to open the country's political process further, culminating in Taiwan's first-ever direct presidential election in 1996, which Lee won.

## Off the Record

Students sue striking teachers

NEW DELHI: Not in a mood to let their teachers get away with their six week old strike, school students in the central Indian state of Rajasthan have sued them for compensation for their loss of studies, reports IANS.

The student community in the two cities of Jodhpur and Udaipur have told the Rajasthan High Court that they would like to be co-appellants in a public interest litigation (PIL) filed by a citizen alleging that the strike by teachers would harm the careers of thousands of students, the Hindu newspaper reported.

The students are demanding compensation on grounds of loss of studies and 'hardship' caused to them during their annual examinations because of classes not being held. They have asked for the compensation amount to be deposited in the Students' Development Fund, the paper said.

High school teachers across Rajasthan have been on strike since early April disrupting the annual examinations and forcing state education authorities to recruit temporary staff to stand in for the striking teachers.

After a preliminary hearing, the court directed the state government not to pay the teachers for the period of the strike. Despite appeals from the Chief Minister and the Education Minister of the state, the striking teachers refused to report for work.

Still at work at 107!

BEIRUT: Abdul-Rahman Skafi is 107 — but still at work. That's because Lebanon has had no municipal elections for 35 years to replace him, reports AP.

But Skafi, a 'mukhtar' or chief of a village or neighbourhood, will soon be retiring at last. Balloting for nearly 10,000 political posts across the country begins Sunday and runs for the following three Sundays.

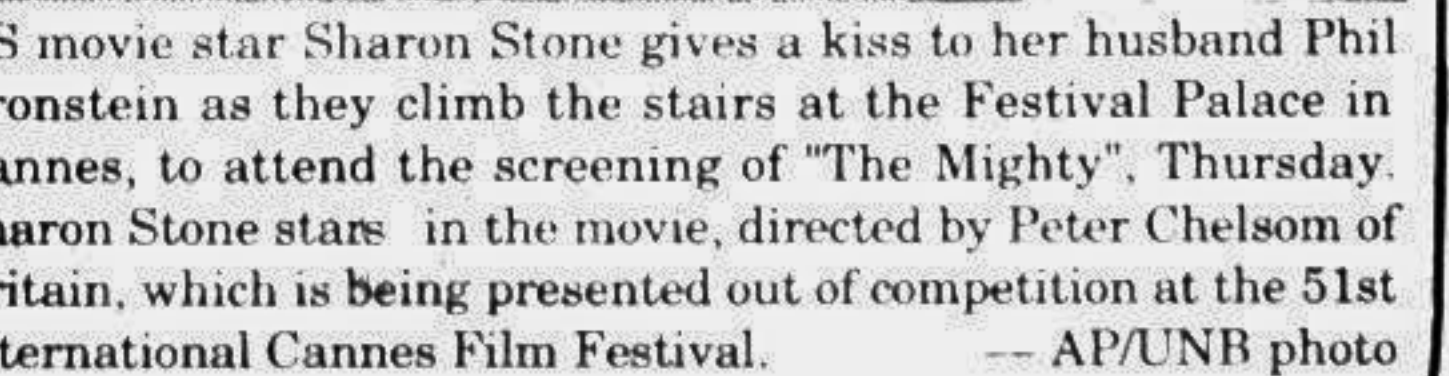
The first such elections since 1963 bring right-wing Christians back into the political arena, creating some strange bedfellows and allowing the citizens — finally — to inject new blood into local government.

'I like to feel I can make a change,' said Rita Saba, a 27-year-old government employee in Beirut, one of many enthusiastic about the chance to vote.

Social concerns amid the tough economic times are reflected in the campaign. In the southern city of Sidon, one man is running for municipal council as the 'candidate of the penniless.'

But the race for 7,662 municipal council seats and 2,041 mukhtar posts in 646 municipalities will not change the sectarian nature of Lebanese politics, where quotas divide political jobs among the various Christian and Muslim sects.

Municipal elections scheduled in 1969 were never held because of political tensions that eventually erupted in 1975 into the Lebanese civil war that raged for 15 years.



US movie star Sharon Stone gives a kiss to her husband Phil Bronstein as they climb the stairs at the Festival Palace in Cannes, to attend the screening of 'The Mighty', Thursday. Sharon Stone stars in the movie, directed by Peter Chelsom of Britain, which is being presented out of competition at the 51st International Cannes Film Festival. — AP/UNB photo