

Arafat renews call for Arab summit on ME

CAIRO, May 27: Palestinian President Yasser Arafat renewed a call on Tuesday for an Arab summit on Middle East peace efforts and said his people would continue striving for a state of their own, reports Reuters.

"We will continue bearing our responsibility until we achieve the rights of Palestinians... in having an independent state of Palestine... with its capital Jerusalem," he said.

Arafat was speaking at the Cairo-based Arab League in a commemoration to mark what Arabs call the Nakba (catastrophe) — the creation of Israel 50 years ago and subsequent expulsion of many Palestinians from their homes.

Palestinians packed the gallery, waving small Palestinian flags and cheering the speeches delivered in the hall below.

Arafat said the occasion was a message to the world that "Palestine" remained the foundation of Arab unity and the main Arab cause. "And whoever objects to this can drink from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea," he said to impassioned applause.

He called for an urgent Arab Summit to "address the possi-

bility of the complete collapse of the peace process."

"From the house of the Arabs, I direct a call to convene an urgent Arab summit. It has become a national necessity to protect the rights and interests of our community," he said.

Such a summit would tell the world that "our people no longer accept international hesitation in the face of Israel's arrogance."

The Palestinian President welcomed last week's proposal by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and French President Jacques Chirac for an international conference to revive peace negotiation that have been stalled for a almost 15 months. Israel has rejected the idea.

Another Reuters report from Amman adds: Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa accused Israel on Tuesday of retreating from the basis of the Middle East peace process and called for increased diplomacy to salvage the talks.

You know the difficult and exceptional conditions we are passing through due to Israeli policies and the intransigence and retreat from the basis of the peace process and the rejection of initiatives... the last being

the US initiative", Moussa said on his arrival in Amman.

There is always permanent hope of reviving the peace process but in light of the current conditions and the current policy of Israel we do not think the peace process has a chance."

Israel has so far carried out only one of three troop withdrawals envisaged under interim deals with the Palestinians signed on the basis of trading land for peace.

Israeli-Palestinian peace talks collapsed 15 months ago when Israel began work on a new settlement in Arab East Jerusalem. Palestinian suicide bombings worsened the crisis.

The United States has been trying to revive the peace talks with a reported proposal that would require Israel to transfer a further 13 per cent of the West Bank in exchange for a Palestinian crackdown on militant violence.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has resisted the proposal, saying withdrawal from that amount of land would jeopardise Israel's security.

Palestinians have accepted the proposal, even though it falls short of their hopes.



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II arrives at Buckingham Palace in London with Emperor Akihito and the Empress Michiko of Japan on the first day of their five-day state visit Tuesday.

— AP/UNB photo

Londoners oppose idea of building Di memorial garden

LONDON, May 27: Angry Londoners on Tuesday strongly opposed the idea of building a large memorial to Princess Diana in the centre of the city, saying they feared being swamped by a flood of tourists, reports Reuters.

Residents in the exclusive borough of Kensington, where Diana lived before her death in a Paris car crash last year, called on the government to review plans to build a formal garden and a fountain in her honour.

At a raucous meeting of the local council, those who did not reject outright the idea of a memorial in Kensington gardens — the site of Diana's home — said the project had to be scaled down or moved elsewhere.

"What is at stake here is not the Diana memorial but a plan to create another tourist attraction in London," said one angry resident.

"The gardens were opened by (19th century) Queen Victoria for her subjects and their dogs, so let's keep it that way," said another. "We do not want foreign tour operators and smelly hot dogs."

The Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Committee said last

week that it had received 10,000 suggestions and that creating a garden and a fountain were amongst the most popular.

"The Princess was not interested in gardens, she cared about the sick, people who had AIDS and the victims of landmines. The money should be used to build a hospital instead," said one resident.

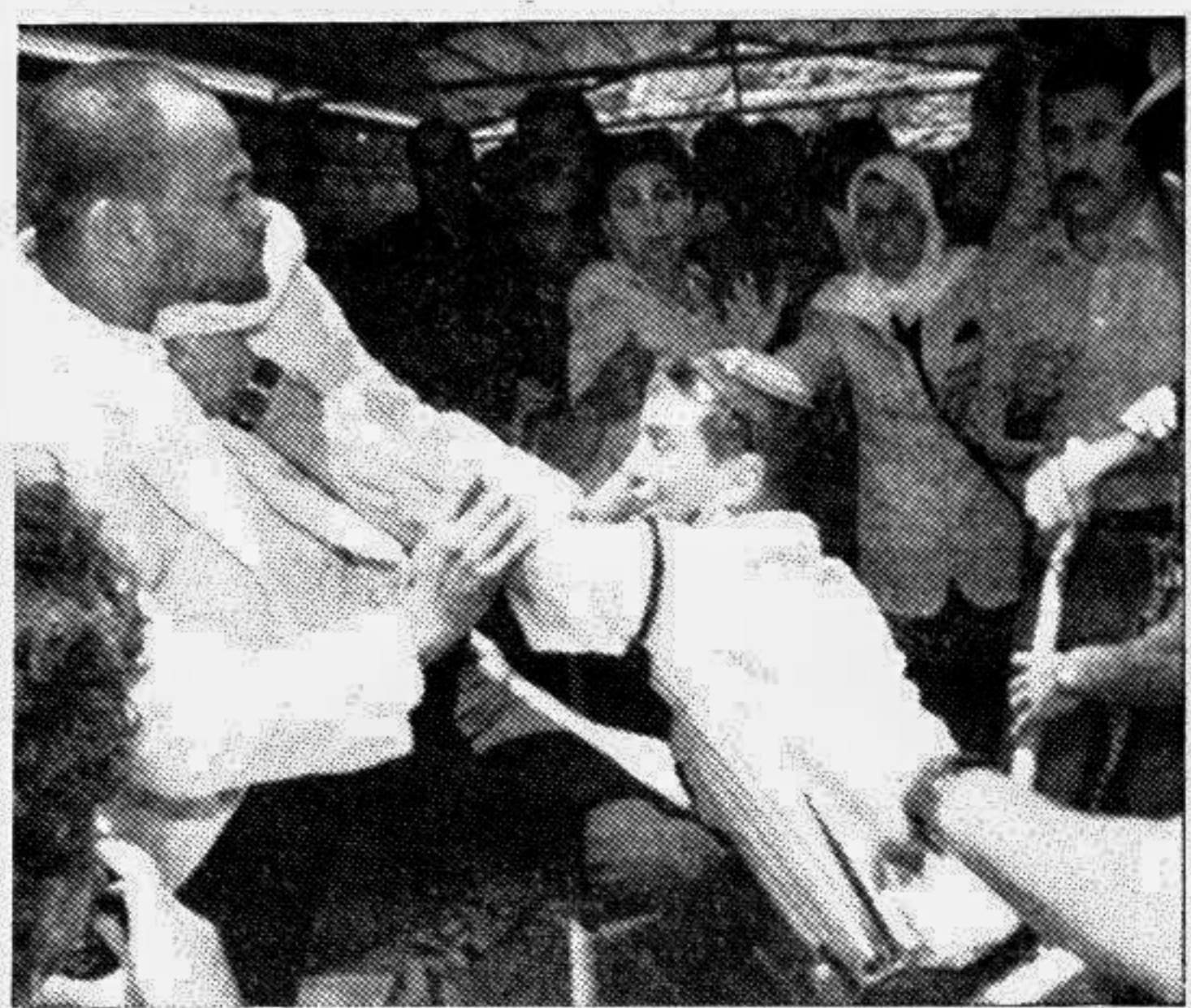
"She sought tranquillity and I am sure she would not want the tranquillity of Kensington to be disturbed," added a female resident. "This is no legacy to a woman with such a heart."

Last September hundreds of thousands of people flocked to London to pay homage to Diana, leaving about 15,000 tonnes of flowers outside Kensington Palace, Buckingham Palace and St. James's Palace, where her body lay before a funeral at Westminster Abbey.

Tourist operators said the residents' fears were exaggerated.

"I do not share the hysteria about the number of people who will come here," said Karen Taylor, a tourist guide. "It is nonsense to say every bus in the city will dash to Kensington gardens. What happened (last September) will never happen again."

BRIEFLY



Palestinian legislator Hanan Ashrawi, centre back, watches as her bodyguard, left, and an Israeli police officer exchange blows Tuesday during riots which erupted after hundreds of Palestinians, led by Palestinian legislators, tore down a shack erected by settlers in a new settler enclave in Jerusalem's Muslim Quarter.

— AP/UNB photo

Iranian FM invited to France: Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine has invited his Iranian counterpart to France, the ministry said Tuesday, an invitation that raises a notch what has been years of cautious diplomacy, AP reports from Paris.

The invitation to Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi was extended during the weekend visit to Tehran of the secretary general of the French Foreign Ministry, Bertrand Dufourcq.

China flood death toll 160: The death toll from heavy summer flooding across China rose past 160 yesterday as details of flooding in central Hunan and Southwestern Guangxi emerged. AFP reports from Beijing. "The initial reports were of 30 dead, but the figure so far is one to two times higher than that," said an official from the Hunan provincial civil affairs bureau who refused to provide figures.

7 killed in Algerian blast: A bomb killed at least seven people and wounded eight in a fruit and vegetable market in the northern Algerian town of Khemis Miliana on Tuesday, security forces said, Reuters reports from Algiers.

The blast ripped through the market place in Khemis Miliana, about 90 km southwest of the capital Algiers, 0700 GMT, the security forces said in a statement carried by the official news agency APS.

Pakistani killed in S'pore riot: A riot involving dozens of people fighting amongst themselves led to the death of a Pakistani man in Singapore on Wednesday, according to details given by state-run television. AP says from Singapore.

Mohamed Rana Sikandar Hyat, believed to have been on a social visit pass, was murdered in an open field in Singapore's Little India district at 12:25 am Wednesday.

Vietnam bans Viagra: Health officials in Ho Chi Minh City have banned the anti-impotence drug Viagra pending a Ministry of Health review of its safety, the Thanh Dien newspaper reported yesterday, AP says from Hanoi.

The city's Public Health Department issued a circular Monday saying violators of the ban will be severely punished. Smuggled Viagra has been selling for 15 dollars per tablet in Vietnam's largest city.

Briton jailed in Singapore: A British bank executive has been jailed for a week by a Singapore court and fined 3,000 Singapore dollars (1,800 dollars) for slapping a policeman, a newspaper reported yesterday, AP says from Singapore.

Paul Robert Wilson, a 29-year-old director of application sciences at a foreign bank in Singapore, began his jail sentence on Saturday, The Straits Times reported.

Blair to visit Dublin next week: British Prime Minister Tony Blair will visit Dublin next week for the first time since taking office last May, his office announced late Tuesday, AFP reports from London.

He will have a working dinner with Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern on Monday as part of his tour of European Union capitals ahead of next month's summit of European leaders in Cardiff.

Australia flight strikes turbulence: An Ansett Australia flight from Japan to Brisbane struck severe turbulence and dropped from its cruising altitude early yesterday, injuring 17 passengers who were hurled across the cabin, AP reports from Brisbane.

Sixteen Japanese and one South Korean were hurt. Flight AN882, with 79 passengers on board, was en route from Osaka to Brisbane International Airport when it struck heavy turbulence south of Papua New Guinea about 3 am.

Bolivian President appeals for calm: President Hugo Banzer appealed for calm Tuesday after three strong aftershocks shook central Bolivia, even as rescue crews struggled to deliver aid to victims of a severe earthquake, AFP says from Bolivia.

The aftershocks, the largest registering 5.6 on the Richter scale, shook buildings here, in the central city of Cochabamba and the southeastern city of Sucre, but injured no one and did not cause serious damage.

6 killed in clashes in Lebanon: Three soldiers of the Israeli-allied South Lebanon Army (SLA) and three pro-Iranian Hezbollah fighters were killed in a flareup of fighting Tuesday in south Lebanon, AFP reports from Lebanon.

Two of the SLA soldiers were killed in mortar attacks by the Hezbollah near the village of Beit Jbeil.

Mongolian jet crashes: All 28 aboard feared killed

ULAN BATOR, May 27: A Mongolian airliner carrying 28 people, including 12 children, crashed on a snow-covered mountain and no sign of life could be seen, an official said today, reports Reuters.

A helicopter that flew over the wreckage of the Mongolian Airlines plane, which went missing on Tuesday, reported no sign of bodies or survivors, said Oyundari Tsagaan, an official in the prime minister's office.

The twin-engine propeller aircraft was designed to carry 19 passengers and crew.

The fuselage of the Chinese-made Yun-12 appeared intact, but the aircraft's wings were ripped off and its tail was broken, Tsagaan said.

There were no signs of fire, she said.

The crash site in Galt county in Hovsgol province was 2,800 metres above sea level, and the helicopter was unable to land, Tsagaan said.

Earlier, a spokesman for a government commission coordinating search efforts said the plane was carrying 14 adult passengers, 12 children plus a pilot and copilot when it took off in windy conditions from Mongolia's second city of Erdenet.

Bangladesh to participate in summer festival in Germany

The Federal Foreign Office of Germany has sponsored a summer festival under the theme, "Initiative Tolerance", in the Rheinaue Park in Bonn to introduce the cultures of different countries of the World, says a press release.

All foreign embassies, numbering 145, have been invited to participate in the festival. The festival, which will be held for one day on June 6, will be officially inaugurated by the Federal Foreign Minister, Dr. Klaus Kinkel, and the Lord Mayoress of the city of Bonn.

The Bangladesh Embassy in Bonn will participate in the summer festival along with other foreign embassies. In the festival, there will be five tents under the banner of the Bangladesh Embassy, where, Bangladesh cuisine, handicrafts and traditional dresses will be exhibited in cooperation with the German NGO, Die Lichtbrücke, and the Kumidini Welfare Trust. Tourist literature on Bangladesh will be on display.

Apart from this, the Bangladesh Embassy will take part in the cultural event with Bengali songs and traditional dance, presented by Ferdousi Saklayen and by Melina and Ria Bhuiya.

1 tablet sells at \$100 in black market Viagra now a religious debate in Kuwait

CAIRO, May 27: The male potency pill Viagra sells for dils 100 a tablet on the black market in Kuwait and has become the subject of wishful cartoons and religious debate as word of its power spreads through the Arab world, reports AP.

But at least five Arab countries have banned the pill on medical grounds, saying they must conduct their own health tests before it can go on the market.

Many men in the Middle East are angry that government bureaucracy is preventing them from benefiting from the new performance-enhancing drug.

Last week, Egypt ordered the confiscation of thousands of Viagra pills being sold illegally. Viagra also has been banned in Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Even Israel ordered doctors to stop prescribing Viagra after the pill's manufacturer, Pfizer Inc., reported six deaths among users in the United States.

Islamabad dismisses report US intelligence reports Pak preparation for N-test

WASHINGTON, May 27: Pakistan has completed most of the preparations needed to test a nuclear weapon, US intelligence officials concluded Tuesday, reports AP.

Based primarily on satellite intelligence, US officials alerted policy makers that Pakistan is close to being ready to test a nuclear weapon, two weeks after arch-rival India set off five underground nuclear devices.

"They continue to make preparations and appear to be very close to being in a position to conduct a test should they decide to do so," said a US intelligence official who spoke on condition of anonymity. "The level of preparation would suggest that they do indeed plan to conduct a test."

As activity at the test site proceeded, Indian and Pakistani troops exchanged shell, artillery and mortar fire Tuesday along the disputed Kashmir border, where tension has mounted since India's nuclear tests.

There were no immediate reports of casualties in the fighting, the heaviest in recent days, Indian defence sources said. They said India is building up its forces in Kashmir and Pakistan said it was arming civilians along the border.

US spy satellites have been monitoring Pakistani activity at the Chagai Hills test site in western Pakistan. In particular, they have noted tunneling activity that typically precedes an underground test, as well as the laying of explosive moni-

toring equipment and the setting up of observation and measuring posts. It was the departure of trucks and heavy equipment from around the Indian test site that alerted US officials six hours before India set off the first of five underground explosions on May 11.

Criticism in Washington of the failure by US intelligence to provide more advance warning of the Indian tests has led to an intense focus on India and Pakistan by US intelligence assets.

India's ruling nationalist party declared the government's decision to test as a necessary act of self-defense.

AFP adds from Islamabad: Reports that Pakistan is ready to conduct a nuclear test in the next few hours are "absolutely incorrect," a Foreign Ministry spokesman said here early today.

Tariq Alfat dismissed a CNN report which quoted US intelligence sources as saying Pakistan had completed preparations for a nuclear test and could proceed in a matter of hours if it decided to go ahead.

"Such reports appear every now and then," said Alfat. Pakistan has refused to rule out detonating its own test device since India conducted five underground nuclear blasts a fortnight ago.

US officials have not been optimistic about their chances of persuading Islamabad not to match arch-rival India's tests of May 11 and May 13.

US to keep cruise missile force in Gulf

WASHINGTON, May 27: The United States will keep a cruise missile force in the Gulf twice as great as before a showdown with Iraq over UN arms inspectors, Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said Tuesday, reports AP.

Bacon was giving details of a US force reduction in the Gulf announced Sunday in Santiago by Defence Secretary William Cohen, who said Washington would scale down its military presence to roughly what it was before the confrontation.

Bacon told reporters the United States would be able to boost its cruise missile capability to four times what it was before the crisis but did not give precise figures.

2 more ministers held in Congo

KINSHASA, May 27: Security forces have arrested two more cabinet ministers in the Democratic Republic of Congo, informal sources said on Tuesday, bringing to four the number held in a new anti-corruption drive, reports AP.

The sources said two members of President Laurent Kabila's government, Planning Minister Etienne Richard Mbaye and Energy Minister Pierre Lokombe, had been detained overnight Monday. These arrests, which officials would not confirm, followed the weekend detentions of Information Minister Raphael Ghenda and Public Enterprise Minister Raphael Ghenda and Public Enterprise Minister Kambale Mututulo, amid allegations of financial misconduct.

A government minister, who asked not to be named, told AFP that more arrests were likely to follow as part of a crackdown on corruption and misappropriation of public funds. This is only the beginning, the official said anonymously.

Clinton to go ahead with China visit

WASHINGTON, May 27: President Bill Clinton says he will go ahead with his visit to China next month despite a chorus of criticism in Congress, reports AP.

The US-Chinese partnership is bearing enough fruit, after years of diplomatic estrangement, to justify a Beijing summit, he said Tuesday.

"It would be a mistake to postpone the trip to China," Clinton said.

"Our partnership with China has succeeded" on many fronts, he said, including persuading Beijing to constrain its sales of missile technology and working to prevent a new nuclear arms race between Pakistan and India following India's nuclear tests. "So I believe we ought to go forward."

He welcomed Habibie's release of some political prisoners and statements that a general election will be held, McCurry said: "The United States government has been anxious to see what other further steps would develop in Indonesia with respect to political reform."

"We take it as an encouraging development that the leadership and the people are focused on ways they can deepen a transition toward democracy," he said.

At the State Department, spokesman James Rubin urged Habibie "to make clear his intentions regarding the many

Police raid ahead of World Cup 88 Islamic militants held across Europe

PARIS, May 27: Police rounded up 88 Islamic militants linked to a radical Algerian insurgency movement in dawn raids across Europe Tuesday, launching a preemptive strike on groups suspected of plotting terrorist attacks at the World Cup, reports AP.

Coordinated raids were carried out in France, Belgium, Italy, Germany and Switzerland to snare the militants, the French Interior Ministry said.

Interior Minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement told French television Tuesday night that investigators had amassed sufficient information to justify suspicions of a terrorist attack during the June 10-July 12 World Cup.

"This operation became necessary..." Chevènement told France 2. "I don't think we can talk about preventative operations."

The minister said tight secu-

rity measures — in place since a spate of bombings in 1995 in which eight people died and 160 were injured — would be further stepped up by Thursday. He called on all people, French and foreigners, to dial the emergency police number — 17 — should they see a suspicious object.

The Interior Ministry said earlier the operation was aimed at dismantling "a network of dissident extremists" from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), the most radical faction waging an insurgency in Algeria, seeking to install strict Muslim rule in the North African country.

The suspects were also from France, Morocco and Tunisia, police said.

In a statement, the Interior Ministry said several months of surveillance had led police to "suspect the preparation of terrorist activity in the run up to the World Cup."

Clinton admin hits back at Gingrich's remarks

WASHINGTON, May 27: The Clinton administration hit back on Tuesday at House Speaker Newt Gingrich, branding as outrageous and offensive his comment that Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was an agent for the Palestinians, reports Reuters.

The state department also described as "stunning" — if true — reports that Gingrich was attempting during his current controversial visit to Israel to incite the Israeli government to resist US Middle East peace proposals.

"I found particularly appalling and outrageous his suggestion that the Secretary of

State of the United States was an Agent for the Palestinians," department spokesman James Rubin told a daily news briefing.

He was referring to comments by Gingrich two weeks ago in Washington, accusing the administration of pressuring Israel. "I think it's wrong for the American Secretary of State to become the agent for the Palestinians," Gingrich said.

Albright was "extremely troubled" by the remark, which came after she had briefed members of Congress on her efforts to move the peace process forward, Rubin said.

Hong Kong rejects demands for greater democracy

HONG KONG, May 27: Hong Kong leader Tung Chee-hwa has rejected demands for greater democracy following the resurgence of democratic parties in the territory's first election under Chinese rule, reports AP.

The chief executive, reacting to a growing calls for universal suffrage, said the government would stick to its plans for gradual political reform.

Members of the non-elected executive council, Tung's main body of advisors, also rejected calls for greater democracy.

They said amending the basic law, mini-constitution to speed up reform would be a very serious step.

The democratic camp, kicked out of the legislative council at the end of British

rule last July, stormed back in Sunday's election. They are the biggest single group, with around 20 of the 60 seats, but because of the labyrinthine electoral system devised by the pro-Beijing government could not get a majority.

"The election has laid a solid foundation for political development in the SAR (Special Administrative Region)," Tung said late Monday.

"The government will resolutely move forward to a more democratic form of government in accordance with the provisions in the basic law."

Executive council member Yang Ti-Liang, a former chief justice, warned that amending the basic law "is a very serious task."

White House press secy McCurry says

Habibie's actions since assuming power encouraging

WASHINGTON, May 27: New Indonesian President Jusuf Habibie's actions since assuming office have been encouraging, White House press secretary Mick McCurry said Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Asked about Habibie's release of some political prisoners and statements that a general election will be held, McCurry said: "The United States government has been anxious to see what other further steps would develop in Indonesia with respect to political reform."

"We take it as an encouraging development that the leadership and the people are focused on ways they can deepen a transition toward democracy," he said.

At the State Department, spokesman James Rubin urged Habibie "to make clear his intentions regarding the many

necessary political and economic reforms so clearly desired by the Indonesian people."

Toward this end, it would be "vital" for the government to continue its dialogue with all segments of the Indonesian political spectrum, he said.

But Rubin declined to pressure Habibie into setting a date certain for elections, saying "what we want to do is give the Indonesian people, the Indonesian leadership, an opportunity to engage in a dialogue and come up with an Indonesia plan that they can put together."

He welcomed Habibie's release of two important Indonesian political prisoners but said "many prisoners of conscience remain, and we believe that all of those held for the peaceful expression of their beliefs should be released."

"We will continue to watch this issue very closely as an im-

portant indicator of the Habibie government's commitment to political reform and human rights," the spokesman said.

An AP report from Jakarta says: A visiting US congressman met Indonesia's new president Wednesday and called for the release of all political prisoners as well as sweeping improvements in human rights, including an end to torture.

Chris Smith, who chairs the House of Representatives subcommittee on international operations and human rights, also met jailed East Timor rebel leader Xanana Gusmao during a visit to Jakarta's Cipinang prison.

BJ Habibie was sworn in as president after former autocrat leader Suharto resigned amid a wave of riots and protests as well as the worst economic crisis in 30 years.



New Indonesian President B J Habibie, left, hands over documents to former Home Affairs Minister Rudini, second from left, as he meets with opposition leaders at the State Palace in Jakarta Tuesday. Habibie has been meeting different Indonesian leaders as he begins implementing sweeping reforms, following the resignation of former President Suharto. Others are, from right, Nurcholish Madjid and Emil Salim.

— AP/UNB photo