

Int'l coalition launched to stop recruitment of child soldiers

UNITED NATIONS, July 1: A new international coalition said here Tuesday that government and rebel armies that use child soldiers in armed conflicts should be punished, reports AFP.

The coalition, which was formally launched Tuesday, is campaigning for a voluntary or binding "Universal ban on the recruitment and participation of children under the age of 18".

Coalition members, which include Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Save the Children, The Quakers and the Jesuit Refugee Service, estimate that more than 300,000 recruits under the age of 18 are fighting in armed conflicts around the world.

Stephen Lewis, Executive Di-

rector of UNICEF, said that the "authority of the criminal court in Rome must be extended: the recruitment and use of children soldiers should become a war crime."

Jo Becker, a member of the coalition's board of directors, stressed the dramatic increase in child soldiers in recent years. "Previous estimates were of 200,000 to 250,000," Becker said.

The UN special representative on children and armed conflict, Olara Otunnu, said that the "use of child soldiers is not new, what is new is its scale. It has become generalised," he said. "Children have become a central instrument of warfare."

The rise in the number of child soldiers can be attributed to technological innovations and the proliferation of small and cheap weapons that are light and easy enough for a 10-year-old to use, experts say.

And more children are likely to become involved in the more armed conflict expands, they say, adding that the regions most affected by this phenomenon are Africa, Asia and Latin America.

A child soldier from Guatemala, Emilio Hernandez Xicara, told reporters how he had been kidnapped by the army when he was 14 to "participate in a war when I didn't understand why it was being fought."

Becker noted the "incoherence of prevailing international law that allow 15-year-

Sharif arrives in Doha

DOHA, July 1: Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif arrived Tuesday in Doha from Kuwait for an official two-day visit, the official Qatari news agency QNA reported, says AFP.

During his visit, Sharif is due to discuss ways to strengthen bilateral relations with Qatar. Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani.

In Kuwait, Sharif held talks with Kuwait's crown prince, whose country has voiced support for Islamabad which has been hit by sanctions after its nuclear tests.

The official Kuwaiti news agency Kuna said crown prince Sheikh Saad -Al-Abdallah Al-Saleem Al-Sabah, who is also Kuwait's Prime Minister, and Sharif discussed plans to "boost bilateral ties and cooperation and other issues of mutual concern."

Sharif had also been due to meet the Emir, Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah.

His visit to the oil-rich Gulf emirate follows the US led economic sanctions imposed on Pakistan.



Children protest for peace in Karachi on Tuesday. In the previous 24 hours in Karachi, 23 people had been killed in ethnic bloodshed that has terrorised the city. Many people are getting out of their homes and moving in with relatives in other areas until the shooting stops. The provincial government have called in 3,000 police officers to try and stop the violence. — AP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

Tremors shake NW Japan: A pair of moderate earthquakes hit separate regions of Japan early yesterday, but there were no reports of damage or injuries, police said, AP reports from Tokyo.

The first quake, with a preliminary magnitude of 4.5, jolted the city of Nagano and other parts of northwestern Japan, the Meteorological Agency said. The quake struck at 2:22 am (1722 GMT Tuesday) and was centred about 10 kilometres underground near Nagano, the agency said.

Rapper ODB wounded in New York: Rapper ODB, founder and member of the popular rap group the Wu-Tang Clan, was wounded when two men barged into his apartment and shot him, AP says from New York.

The rapper, whose real name is Russell Jones, was shot once. He was in stable condition at Interfaith Medical Center's intensive care unit, said hospital spokesman Lars Larmon.

Quake splashes Great Barrier Reef: An earthquake stirred up the waters around the Great Barrier Reef but there have been no reports of damage, seismologists said yesterday, AP reports from Brisbane.

The quake, which struck at 12:58 pm Tuesday, measured 4.3 on the Richter scale, with its epicentre beneath the reef, about 250 km northeast of Rockhampton, the Queensland University Advanced Centre for Earthquake Studies said.



United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, left, shakes hands Tuesday, with Nigeria's new military ruler Gen. Abdulsalam Abubakar at the military leader's state residence in the capital Abuja, Nigeria. According to human rights and government officials speaking on a condition of anonymity, Annan is also expected to meet with Moshood Abiola, the presumed winner of 1993 elections who has been imprisoned since 1995. — AP/UNB photo

1 killed in Manila hotel fire: One person was killed and three members of his family were injured when the ground floor of a hotel in Manila caught fire at dawn yesterday, firemen said, AP reports from Manila.

The fire at the Camelot Hotel was contained before it could spread to the upper storeys fire official Generoso Placido told AFP. The dead man's wife and two children were treated for smoke inhalation.

Italian Premier arrives in Tehran: Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi arrived in Tehran Tuesday night, becoming one of a select number of western leaders to visit Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, AFP says from Tehran.

"I have come to Iran as an Italian Prime Minister and not as a representative of the European Union, Iran's official IRNA News Agency quoted Prodi as saying upon his arrival.

Husband kills wife, self in China: A husband angry that his wife would not return with him to his hometown in the countryside exploded a homemade bomb, killing both, in the northwestern city of Urumqi, according to a report seen yesterday in Beijing, AP says from Beijing.

Urumqi native Zhu Huajie, 30, married Shen Fuxin and followed him to Ningxia in 1990. In 1994, when their daughter was one year old, she returned to the city, leaving her husband behind, the state-run newspaper Xinjiang Daily reported last Friday.

Iraq condemns US attack US has no plans to boost its forces in Gulf

WASHINGTON, July 1: The United States has no plans to boost its forces in the Gulf in response to the incident in which a US F-16 fighter fired a missile at an Iraqi surface to air missile battery, US Defence Secretary William Cohen said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

"This will not alter our plans to continue drawing out US forces in the region, he told reporters at the Pentagon.

"I don't think we should draw any conclusion from this particular one incident."

Cohen said the F-16 fired a harm anti-radiation missile at an Iraqi position after it began tracking British tornado jets enforcing the no-fly zone over southern Iraq. He said the United States was uncertain whether the missile had hit its target.

Asked whether the alleged Iraqi radar illumination of the British jets was a "rogue" action, Cohen replied "we don't know, it could be simply an isolated example."

We have not seen any evidence from the Iraqis altering their air defence system we have not seen any examples of higher alert. We have not seen them moving their radars in any sort of aggressive fashion, he added so it might be a situation of an isolated example.

AFP adds from Baghdad: Iraq condemned a US missile attack on Tuesday as "unjustified aggression" and denied its radar targeted British planes on patrol over a southern "no-fly zone" in the first such incident since 1996.

Di's bodyguard to see magistrate investigating death

PARIS, July 1: Kes Winfield, the second bodyguard of Diana, Princess of Wales, is to see a magistrate investigating the Princess's death last year at his own request, a source close to the inquiry said, reports AFP.

Winfield, who was not aboard the Mercedes driven by Henri Paul when it crashed in the killing Diana, her companion Dodi Fayed and the chauffeur Trevor Rees-Jones.

Winfield resigned from the employment of Dodi's father, Egyptian millionaire Mohamed Al-Fayed, at the beginning of June, the source said.

Cambodia appeals for more funds ahead of polls

PHNOM PENH, July 1: Cambodia's national election committee today renewed an appeal to the international community to provide more funds and more observers for general elections later this month, reports AFP.

"The international community's full cooperation is needed," Committee Vice Chairman Kassie Neou said while receiving a Chinese donation of 27 jeeps to be used for distributing ballots, ballot boxes and other materials to voting stations ahead of the July 26 polls.

"More international observers and additional funding (are necessary) to meet our urgent needs," he said, adding that the committee's goal was to place at least one foreign observer at each of the 1,700 voting stations.

Between 500 and 600 international observers are now expected on the ground for the election and vote counting, according to the United Nations which is coordinating the effort.

"Please send more," Kassie Neou said. "As many as possible."

He also said previous appeals for an additional 5.1 million dollars in cash, without which the committee says it will be unable to properly fulfill its duties, had not yet been successful.

"To those countries that have pledged or are considering financial or other concrete assistance, please note that we have a serious shortfall," he said.

The international community is paying for much of the estimated 27 million dollar election but is demanding that it be free, fair and credible.

Some countries — notably the United States — have postponed or reduced their contributions due in part to concerns about political intimidation and violence, which the opposition claims is rampant.

PM deceived me from peace deal with PA, alleges Israeli president

JERUSALEM, July 1: Israeli President Ezer Weizman was quoted on Tuesday as saying Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was "cut off from reality" and had deceived him repeatedly over peacemaking with the Palestinians, reports Reuters.

In an interview with Israel's biggest newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth, the "outspoken Weizman — who called on Monday for an early general election — took criticism he voiced about Netanyahu on radio and television even further.

"Bibi lives in a state of Euphoria, in his own world, cut off from reality," Weizman said, using Netanyahu's nickname.

"The nation does not know where the prime minister is leading it. He is dumfounded and wrong."

Weizman, a shoot-from-the-hip maverick who helped forge Israel's peace treaty with Egypt in 1979, has frequently locked horns with right-winger Netanyahu over the pace of peacemaking since the latter's election in 1996.

Weizman's largely ceremonial post gives him no power to set a date for polls but the popular president's bombshell suggestion on Monday put another dent in Netanyahu's political credibility.

Netanyahu, responding to Weizman's call for early elections, said he intended to run his full term until the year 2000.

"Bibi has fooled me not once and not twice. I have reached my red line," Weizman told Yedioth Ahronoth.

Rebuffing criticism from right-wingers that he had overstepped his powers, Weizman said: "when they asked me to carry out diplomatic missions for the government and prime minister, they did not think I was too involved in politics."

In the past, Weizman has met Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordan's King Hussein.

Off the Record

Battle of the bottles

NEW YORK: It's the battle of the bottles. Calvin Klein says Ralph Lauren's soon-to-be-marketed women's perfume comes in a bottle that looks just a little too familiar.

In papers filed in federal court, Klein claims the upcoming Romance is identical in appearance to Klein's Eternity. Eternity comes in a silver-capped rectangular bottle with a collar shaped like a wedding band. Ditto for Lauren's Romance.

Also, the Eternity and Romance bottles contain an inner bottle shaped like an hourglass that "emulates the curves of a woman's body," according to the court papers.

Klein claims Lauren's bottle is likely to confuse shoppers. Not so, Lauren responded.

"This lawsuit is ill-conceived. The bottles are different. The packaging is different. The advertising is different," the company said in a statement Tuesday.

A court hearing is set for July 20.

Skinny-dipping proves costly for chef

SINGAPORE: A Japanese chef and his local girlfriend, a Singaporean masseuse, thought nothing about going skinny-dipping at Singapore's East Coast beach last weekend, reports AP.

Little did they expect it would get them arrested and fined 1,000 Singapore dollars (S\$1,000) each for committing an "obscene act in public."

But that's exactly what happened after a crowd of overnight picnickers at the beach saw them in their birthday suits and promptly called the police.

Awiyah Kassim, 38, said she had "a shock of her life" when a woman emerged from the water naked as Kassim and her family were picnicking nearby.

The case has caught unusual media attention in multiethnic Singapore, where in the same office one can find women in mini skirts as well as those in baju kurung, a traditional Muslim long dress.

"Singapore is different than Japan," said Inose, who came to the island republic last year to work in a Japanese restaurant.

One publicity turn deserves another

ORLANDO, Florida: A woman who gave birth as people across the world watched on the Internet — then disappeared after police said she was wanted for writing bad checks — turned herself in, reports AP.

Elizabeth Ann Oliver, 40, walked into the Orange County Jail Tuesday afternoon, said Orange County Sheriff's spokesman Cmdr. Steve Jones. She was freed on more than 9,000 dollars bond after a brief stay in jail.

After Mrs Oliver gave birth June 16 during a broadcast on an Internet site, authorities said they thought she was the woman wanted along with her husband on at least 13 warrants for writing bad checks.

But by that time, the couple had left the hospital, and were nowhere to be found.

Mrs Oliver who was known only as Elizabeth to Internet birth watchers, was wanted on nine misdemeanor warrants in Orange County, Jones said.

Myanmar exile group claims crackdown on opposition

BANGKOK, July 1: Myanmar's military authorities may have detained more than 40 parliamentary election winners from the opposition National League for Democracy in the past week, an exile group said Wednesday, reports AP.

A spokesman for the All Burma Students' Democratic Front said details were difficult to confirm, but the group had the names of three election winners from Irrawaddy Division, near the capital Yangon, who had been arrested.

Contacted from Bangkok, the spokesman, who asked not to be identified, said the crackdown was in apparent response to a June 23 demand by the league that the country's military regime convene by Aug 21 the pro-democracy Parliament elected in 1990 but never allowed to meet.

The demand marked the first time the party, headed by 1991 Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, had set a deadline for the military to convene Parliament.

In Yangon, the league sent a letter to the government Tuesday to protest reported restrictions against its elected candidates, according to a copy of the letter circulated to the press by the party.

Tripp gives long awaited testimony to grand jury

WASHINGTON, July 1: Linda Tripp, who instigated the White House sex scandal investigation by secretly recording Monica Lewinsky's talk of an alleged affair with President Bill Clinton, gave her long-awaited grand jury testimony on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Accompanied by her son Ryan and daughter Allison, the much-vilified Tripp, 48, swept into the courthouse where Kenneth Starr's prosecutors are gathering evidence in the sex and perjury inquiry, without speaking to reporters camped at the entrance.

She smiled in response to a shouted question about whether she was nervous about being called to the witness stand after months in seclusion at her suburban Maryland home.

Hong Kong's handover anniversary marks a year of reversals

HONG KONG, July 1: A subdued Hong Kong on Wednesday marked the first anniversary of its return to China, confident that the mainland would let it manage its own affairs but increasingly uncertain of its ability to do so, reports AP.

A harbour-side flag-raising ceremony in on the site of last year's handover ceremony, an all-star variety show and evening banquet to be attended by Chinese President Jiang Zemin offered Hong Kong's 6.5 million people a colourful spectacle.

Jiang, fresh from his summit with President Clinton in Beijing, also will dedicate Hong Kong's new \$20 billion international airport before going home Thursday. Clinton is to arrive at the airport just hours later for a brief visit ending his tour of China.

Mindful of the territory's economic woes, officials this year were spending just a fraction of what they spent a year ago to celebrate the handover.

Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa, speaking to an audience that included Jiang at the start of the variety show, praised China's non-interference in Hong Kong.

Jiang said that China's formula "one country, two systems" was a guarantee for Hong Kong prosperity, a model for the return of Macau and the solution to the Taiwan issue.

Macau, a Portuguese territory for more than 400 years, returns to China next year. Taiwan is perhaps the most contentious issue of all. The island categorically rejects reunification with China under similar terms as Hong Kong.

The first year under Chinese rule proved to be just the opposite of what most people in Hong Kong expected.

There were widespread fears that China would limit Hong Kong's political freedoms, but confidence that the territory's economy would continue humming.

China has kept hands off politically. However, Hong Kong's confidence in its near-legendary economic prowess has been deeply shaken by Asia's economic crisis.

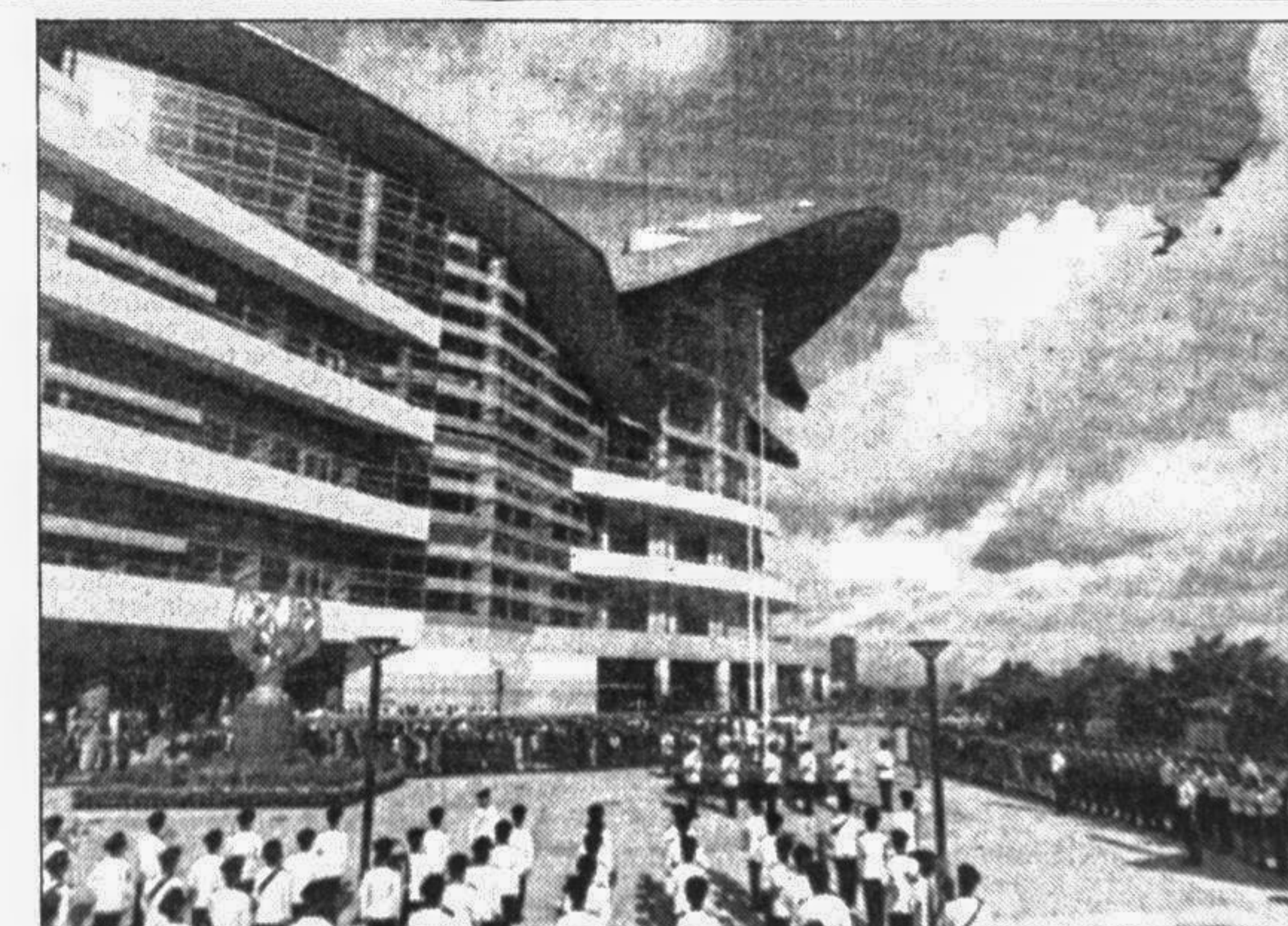
Even such a determined foe of Beijing as Martin Lee, Hong Kong's de facto opposition leader, acknowledged that the worst pre-handover fears have not come true.

Lee, writing Wednesday in the English-language South China Morning Post, cited examples of what he said were efforts to undermine political freedoms. However, he said that Hong Kong residents responded with "courage and conviction," including a record election turnout.

"In this historic first year as part of China, Hong Kong people — who many had long suggested were interested only in their wallets — shattered the myth they cared nothing for their rights and freedoms," Lee wrote.

But their wallets clearly were emptier than they expected. Unemployment soared to a 15-year high of 4.2 per cent, and was expected to go higher. The stock market's key index dropped by about half, and the economy plummeted into recession.

Many people expected it to get worse before it got better.



Hong Kong police officers raise China's national flag and Hong Kong's new Special Administrative Region (SAR) flag, outside the Convention Centre Wednesday, to mark the first anniversary of Hong Kong handover. — AP/UNB photo