

UNGA upgrades Palestinian delegation's status

UNITED NATIONS, July 8: The UN General Assembly voted Tuesday to upgrade the Palestinian delegation's status, drawing shouts of triumph from Palestinian officials and dismay from Israel and the United States, reports AFP.

An overwhelming majority of the UN General Assembly voted to maintain the Palestinians' non-voting observer status but to give it additional rights and privileges.

A total of 124 countries voted in favour of the resolution while Israel, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia and the United States voted against it and 10 countries abstained.

The Palestinian envoy to the United Nations Nasser Al Kidwa, hailed the vote as a new step on the path towards independence saying a small victory was achieved for Palestine today.

We hope that the United Nations will accept Palestine as a member state in the near future... that shall be the big victory, he added.

It's an international recognition of Palestinian rights and the international legality of our cause, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina said in Gaza city.

It is an important and positive step on the path to a complete recognition of Palestine as an independent state covering all Palestinian territory including Jerusalem, he told AFP.

But the White House was quick to slam the vote as short-term political symbolism damaging to the peace process.

It's very similar to similar misguided efforts by the General Assembly in years past to inject themselves in what is obviously a sensitive delicate and

difficult process, said White House spokesman Michael McCurry.

McCurry said the vote preempted so called final status issues to be settled by Israel and the Palestinians and thus was "detrimental to the effort to help these parties bridge their differences."

It's got nothing to do with resolving the real issues that will bring peace in that region. It's got everything to do with short-term political symbolism, he said.

McCurry's comments came after the US state department criticised the decision calling it a "mistake that could harm the peace process."

We regret this decision, state department spokesman James Rubin said, adding: "We think this was a mistake, we think that this decision undermines the chances of bringing peace to

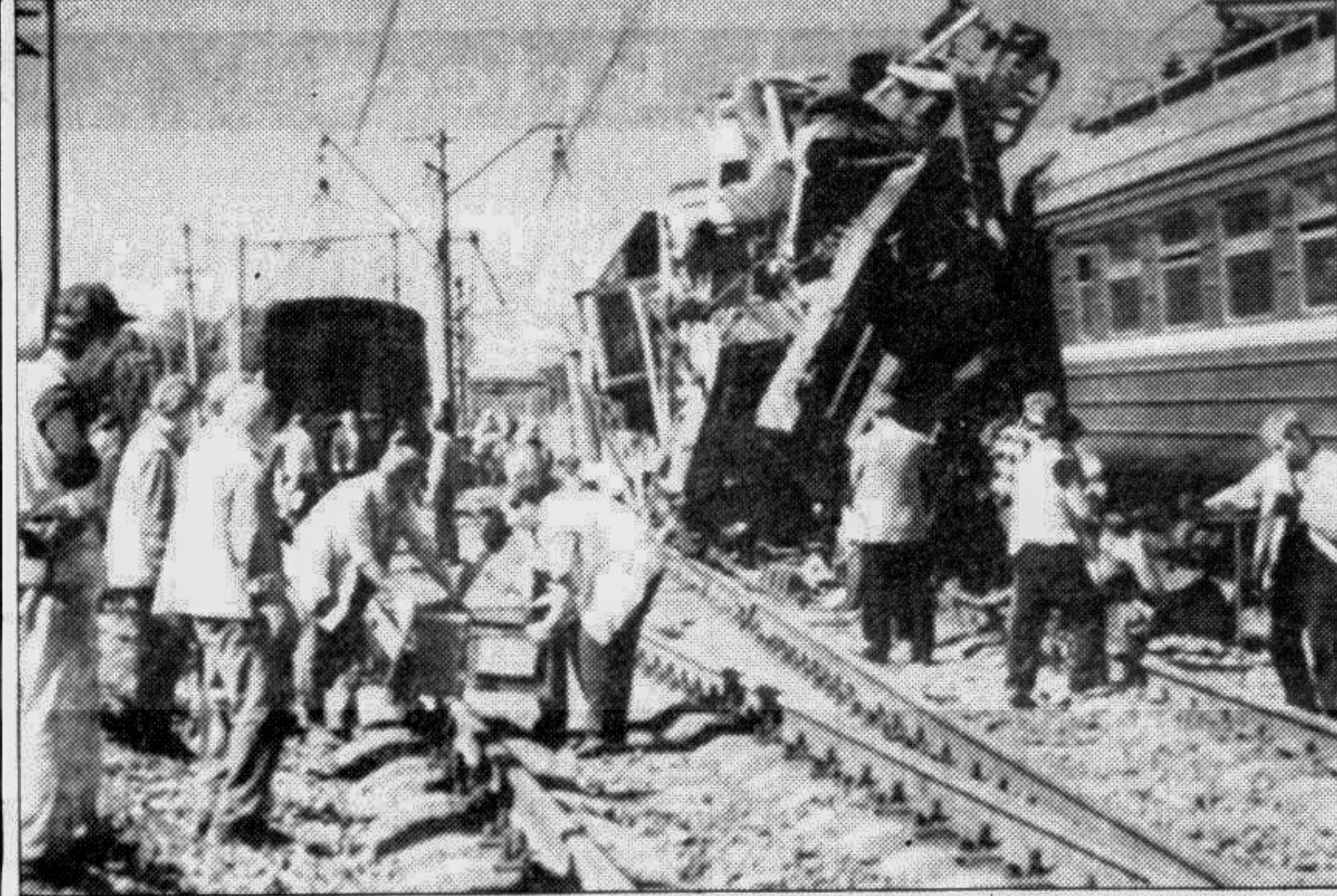
the Middle East.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry said the UN decision contradicted the principles and spirit of the Middle East peace process.

"This decision creates a negative precedent and contradicts principles of the peace process and the spirit of the Oslo Accords (on Palestinian autonomy)," the ministry said in a statement.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the Palestinian attempt to seek recognition from the United Nations preempted agreed talks on the final status of the Palestinian Authority.

I am concerned with the Palestinian attempt to seek final status talks. This was a clear violation of the Oslo Accord, he said at a press conference with visiting Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem.



Road workers clear debris and repair track following a collision between two commuter trains which killed three people and injured three others near Moscow on Tuesday. The collision occurred near the Bekasovo railway station 80 kilometres southwest of Moscow. — AP/UNB photo

Mahathir's book launched by Thatcher

KUALA LUMPUR, July 8: Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's new book on Malaysian politics and economics has been launched by former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in London, according to news reports, reports AP.

"The Way Forward", containing five essays, was written before that current economic downturn that is threatening to push the Southeast Asian nation into recession.

"Dr Mahathir's excellent essays contain many of the right answers, not quite all. You'll have to read my book for those," Thatcher quipped at Tuesday's launch in a London hotel, the national news agency reported.

Mahathir was not present at the event.

Both leaders are known for tough and often controversial policies. Thatcher, as prime minister, promoted privatisation, while Malaysia under Mahathir has been pushed along a fast high-tech track with dazzling projects.

Australian senate passes Aboriginal Land Rights Law

CANBERRA, July 8: Australian Parliament's Upper House Senate today formally passed the government's Aboriginal Land Rights Reforms, averting a race-based snap election that current conservative populist MP Pauline Hanson, reports Reuters.

The bill passed the hostile senate with the support of independent Brian Harradine, who last week struck a compromise on its terms with Prime Minister, John Howard, and fellow independent Mal Colston.

The 76-seat Senate voted 35-33 in favour of the bill winding back aboriginal rights to government pastures leased to farmers.

Aborigines say Howard's bill is a racist "modern-day dispossession" of their rights and land 210 years after white settlers first arrived and began their conquest of this vast island continent.

16th century painting lost in church fire

METZITLAN, Mexico, July 8: A candle apparently sparked a fire in one of Latin America's oldest churches, destroying a 17th-century painting revered by Catholic faithful, reports AP.

The Temple of the Holy Kings, dating to the 1500s, suffered minor damages Tuesday in the early morning fire.

The parish priest saw smoke coming out of the church and immediately ordered the bells to be sounded, summoning parishioners to help put out the blaze. They were unable, however, to rescue the image of the Virgin del Carmen and the child Jesus, which was painted in 1690 by the artist Spinoza.

The government news agency Notimex said a candle apparently started the fire.

Metzitlan is in the central state of Hidalgo, is 120 kilometres northeast of Mexico City.

Republicans criticise Clinton over remarks about Taiwan

WASHINGTON, July 8: After some initial grudging praise for President Bill Clinton's China trip, his Republican foes unleashed a barrage of criticism over his remarks about Taiwan, reports AP.

US Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott rushed to prepare a Senate resolution to "repair the damage that has been done."

The White House and congressional Democrats derided the latest Republican outburst, insisting nothing Clinton had said in China last week signaled a switch in US-Taiwanese relations.

Causing the commotion were comments by Clinton in Shanghai laying out what he called the US-Chinese "three noes" policy: no support for an independent Taiwan, no recognition for a separate Taiwanese government, no backing of Taiwan's entry into international organisations.

"He was counterproductive on what he said on Taiwan," Lott said, adding his voice to that of other conservatives who have suggested Clinton's comments altered US commitments to the island.

Although other US officials have made identical statements in the past, Clinton's public reiteration of the three noes was the first by a US president. Some leaders in Taiwan called the remarks a concession to Clinton's Chinese hosts, and said it will further isolate Taiwan.

Taiwan is the seat of the Nationalist Chinese government that lost the mainland to the communists in 1949. China considers it a renegade province.

Rep Christopher Cox, chairman of a special House committee looking into the administration's satellite deals with China, complained that Clinton's comments about the island on June 30 also suggested that the United States supported its eventual peaceful reunification with the mainland.

BRRIFFLY

Earthquake rocks N Philippines: A strong earthquake rocked remote northern Philippine islands before dawn Wednesday, but there were no immediate reports of damage, AP reports from Manila.

The earthquake, with a magnitude of 5.2, struck at around 2:30 am north of Calayan island, about 600 kilometres north of Manila, the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology said. The earthquake was tectonic in origin and the epicenter was located about 30 kilometres below the Luzon Strait.

Japanese architect Nagao dead: Yoriko Nagao, an architect who designed a futuristic complex of buildings in Tokyo, has died of lung cancer after years of illness, a hospital official said Wednesday. She was 52, AP reports from Tokyo.

Nagao, who was born Yoriko Ebine, died in a Tokyo hospital on Sunday. She was first diagnosed with cancer of the large intestine in 1993, and the disease eventually spread to her lungs.

6 killed in Colombia attack: At least six peasants were killed and another six were missing after right-wing paramilitaries attacked them in eastern Colombia, officials said Tuesday, AFP says from Bogota.

The victims were on a boat that was stopped by the paramilitaries, according to regional official Rocio Lopez.

2 die in US chopper crash: A US Army helicopter crashed in the Bahamas Monday night during a test flight, killing two women passengers and injuring three crew members, the army said Tuesday, AFP reports from Miami, Florida.

The Pentagon would not say whether the women, both civilians, were authorised to be aboard the UH-60 Blackhawk, which crashed at 7:30 pm near Georgetown, Great Exuma in the Bahamas.

2 patrol agents shot dead in US: A man fatally shot a mother and daughter in a pre-dawn attack at their home, then ambushed a group of law officers trying to find him, killing two Border Patrol agents, AP says from Texas.

The gunman, Ernest Moore, 25, was shot four times in the shootout and died hours later in hospital, says a spokesman.



Accompanied by officials, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, center, listens to Al-Azhar Sheikh Mohammed Sayyed Tantawi during a visit to mark the opening of the 1020-year-old mosque of Al-Azhar after its restoration Tuesday. The restoration of the mosque costed 13 million US dollars. —AP/UNB photo

'Corpse Flower' blooms in Atlanta garden

ATLANTA, July 8: A blooming but far from fragrant specimen of the world's largest flower, a rarity with the nickname "Corpse Flower," was polinated at a Botanical Garden in Atlanta on Tuesday after a cross country dash by a curator at the garden, reports Reuters.

Ron Gagliardi, curator of tropical plants at Atlanta Botanical Garden, used pollen collected last month from a giant *Amorphophallus titanum* that bloomed at Fairchild Tropical Garden in Miami to pollinate the blossom that opened on Saturday.

The *amorphophallus titanum* or Titan arum, is known as much for its unpleasant scent of decaying flesh as for its extreme rarity and size — the flowers grow some six to seven feet tall.

The flower had bloomed in the United States only five previous times in history before the blossoms opened within the last few weeks in Florida and Georgia.

The Curator was in Denver and when he heard of the development early on Sunday and raced to the airport, begging ticket agents for a seat on any flight back to Atlanta.

Gujral sees opportunity for progress in Indo-Pak talks

LONDON, July 8: Former Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral sees a more "solid" opportunity for progress in the forthcoming India-Pakistan talks since the nuclear tests have ruled out the prospects of war, reports India Abroad News Service.

Now that both countries have exhibited nuclear capability "there is all the more reason to talk more solidly since the tests rule out the prospect of any armed conflict," Gujral told IANS during a stopover here on his way to New York.

The leaders of the two countries meeting later this month on the sidelines of the SAARC summit in Colombo can draw lessons from Europe which has seen peace because both sides during the Cold War had the nuclear deterrent, Gujral said. The tests can have a positive angle "and I look at it from that angle," Gujral said.

But Gujral, who is a member of the eminent persons group being sent by the U.N. to inquire into the situation in Algeria, said too much should not be expected too soon. "A qualitative

Abiola's death condoled

LONDON, July 8: Shock, sorrow and renewed pleas for Nigeria to return to civilian rule greeted the death Tuesday of the nation's most prominent political prisoner, Moshood Abiola, reports AP.

Opposition groups blamed his death on ill-treatment during four years in jail and harassment by the military regime.

In New York, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who met with Abiola just a week ago and who expected his imminent release from jail, called on Nigeria's new military leader, Gen Abdulsalam Abubakar, to fulfill promises "to release all remaining political prisoners unconditionally and to define a credible process for the democratic transition to civilian rule within a reasonable period."

Abiola, presumed winner of 1993 elections, suffered an apparent heart attack while meeting a visiting US State Department delegation.

British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook said Nigeria had lost its "symbol of democracy."

It is therefore particularly tragic that he should die now at this time of change and hope for Nigeria," added Cook.

Abiola's daughter, Wuru, fighting back tears in a British Broadcasting Corp TV interview, said that "of all the conditions he had, heart was not one of them."

All our efforts have come to nothing because without his life there is nothing else we can fight for," she said.

But then Miss Abiola added, "This is the wake up call for all our leaders that we don't have time. We must secure the future for all Nigerians."

While Annan said Abiola had seemed in good health when they met, the London spokesman for a coalition of opposition groups said Abiola's health had been deteriorating for a long time.

Gaddafi undergoes hip surgery

TUNIS, July 8: Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi has undergone successful surgery for a broken hip suffered when he was exercising the Libyan official news agency JANA said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Gaddafi, 56, broke his hip on Monday and doctors had said he would be operated on shortly afterwards.

"The surgery carried out by Libyan doctors on a broken left hip was successful," the agency said.

Libyan Television Monday showed Gaddafi lying in bed in a meeting room in the city of Beida receiving heads of state from African Muslim countries to mark the birth of Prophet Mohammed.

Ukraine's Speaker elected

KIEV, July 8: The Ukrainian Parliament on Tuesday elected a Speaker at its 20th attempt appointing Olexander Tkachenko, a member of the leftist Selyanska Party, reports Reuters.

Valery Myshura, head of the Parliamentary Commission charged with organising the vote, told deputies that Tkachenko, the only candidate, had won the support of 232 of the 314 deputies who voted. He had required 226 votes to be elected.

Olexander Tkachenko has been elected as the Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada, Myshura told the assembly.

Ukraine's Parliament has been trying to elect a Speaker since early May after an election on March 29 in which left wing parties made a strong showing winning 40 per cent of the seats in the 450 member Parliament.

Failure to elect a Speaker has stalled the passage of laws that the government and president Leonid Kuchma hope will kick start stalled reforms in the country of 50 million people.

Tkachenko, 59, was Deputy Speaker in the previous parliament and has also been Ukraine's agriculture minister.

Pakistan's Foreign Secy tells US audience Sanctions are not in best US interests

NEW YORK, July 8: Pakistan's foreign secretary defended his country's nuclear tests Tuesday in a speech intended to explain Pakistan's reasons and the effects of resulting sanctions to a US audience, reports AP.

"Sanctions aren't in America's interest because they will lead to more instability in central Asia, Shamsah Ahmad told about 100 journalists, academics, business associates and foreign policy experts at the Asia Society.

"An economically destabilized Pakistan will not contribute to peace and stability in central and west Asia," Ahmad said. "An economically unstable Pakistan is certainly not in the interests of the United States."

Calling his country America's "most sanctioned strategic ally," Ahmad defended Pakistan's decision to test the devices as a right to protect itself against aggression from neighboring India, which exploded nuclear devices two weeks before Pakistan did.

The tit-for-tat tests this spring raised fears of a nuclear arms race in South Asia and resulted in US sanctions against both countries. Other countries,

such as Japan and Australia, cut off aid.

Ahmad urged international efforts to resolve what he called the root of the tensions between India and Pakistan — the disputed territory of Kashmir.

Muslim rebels have been fighting a separatist war in India-controlled Kashmir since 1989. India and Pakistan have fought two wars over Kashmir since they won independence from Britain 50 years ago. India has two-thirds of the territory and Pakistan the rest, while both claim all of Kashmir.

In a speech that cited references to nations' security by Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Thomas Jefferson, Ahmad listed what he said were repeated threats by India before and after New Delhi tested five nuclear devices on May 11 and 13.

"In fact, we were left with no other option," Ahmad said. "We were advised to take the moral high ground for the sake of nonproliferation and thus forfeit our right to exist as a free nation."

Ahmad rejected India's offer for a "no-first use" pact on nuclear weapons, saying no such pact has ever worked.

Suu Kyi unhurt after long confrontation with police

YANGON, July 8: Pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi returned home unharmed Wednesday after a nearly 24-hour standoff with police on a road outside the capital, an act of defiance the military regime said could disrupt peace, reports AP.

Suu Kyi, 53, winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, arrived back at her lakeside home Wednesday morning following an overnight sit-in in her car after she was stopped some 80 kilometres north of Yangon.

She rejected police orders to go back until she was allowed to meet a member of her National League for Democracy, who was brought to the car Wednesday morning from further north in Min Hla township, NID sources said on condition of anonymity.

"On the other hand, when you look at what's happened in



cial ban on Suu Kyi traveling outside Yangon and was viewed by the government in a statement Tuesday as a bid to "create unnecessary and unwanted confusion, confrontation and collision."



An Indonesian woman is helped out of a cooking oil distribution centre in Jakarta after she passed out from waiting in the long lines to receive cooking oil Tuesday. Indonesia's worst economic crisis in decades has caused prices of staple foods to rise rapidly and shortages and distribution problems are increasing. — AP/UNB photo