

Ayodhya temple-mosque dispute BJP seeking solution with help of Muslim leadership?

NEW DELHI, Oct 21: Under pressure from radical Hindu affiliates of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is reportedly sending feelers to Muslim religious leaders to find a solution to the Ayodhya temple-mosque dispute, reports IANS.

The BJP-led coalition government had decided to shelve the issue when it took office in March with the BJP conceding that it did not have the popular mandate to fulfil its electoral promise to build a Hindu temple at the site of the medieval Babri Mosque in the north Indian town of Ayodhya which was demolished by Hindu zealots in December 1992.

However, the BJP's restive Hindu partners who have been expressing unhappiness with the dilution of the BJP's main agenda, have forced Vajpayee to approach influential Islamic leaders to persuade them to accept a compromise. The Telegraph newspaper reported today. According to the daily, Vajpayee sent a BJP lawmaker elected from Uttar Pradesh state, where Ayodhya is located, to meet ailing Islamic scholar Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, who chairs the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board.

Board contacted by the newspaper said that Nadwi was told that the BJP-led government was keen to find a solution to the dispute with the help of the Muslim leadership. "Vajpayee is leading an uneasy coalition, where he has to keep the Sangh Parivar (BJP's Hindu affiliates) in good humour and, at the same time, keep happy 'pro-secularism' leaders (in the ruling coalition)," the member was quoted as saying.

However, the Muslim leaders are reportedly wary of the initiative with the BJP suspecting a ploy to get the Muslims to "voluntarily" agree to build a new mosque away from the disputed site.

But the Muslim leaders are said to be open to a discussion provided the BJP's radical allies tone down their aggressive pro-Hindu talk. "They should first express some regret over the demolition and accept that Muslims have a right to have a mosque near the Ram temple," another Board member told the paper.

The BJP refused to comment on the Telegraph report. "As far as we are concerned there is no issue now. The matter is in the courts. The government has decided not to interfere in the matter," BJP spokesman Venkaiah Naidu told India Abroad News Service.

Korean peace talks resume after 6 months

GENEVA, Oct 21: Talks aimed at bringing a durable peace to the Korean Peninsula resumed Wednesday after a six-month break, with little sign of a early progress, reports AP.

The peace talks group South and North Korea, the United States and China.

"The four-party talks have great importance for the peace and stability in and around the Korean Peninsula," said South Korean delegation leader Park Kun-woo.

"I will do my utmost to move forward in this session both as the representative of the Republic of Korea and as the chairman of the session." Each side takes turns chairing the talks.

Park refused to give details of the agenda. Nobody else spoke.

The four delegations seemed in a jovial mood as they smiled for the cameras in the conference room.

However, chances of a breakthrough seemed limited.

Saddam suffering from cancer?

JERUSALEM, Oct 21: A report on Israel's Channel 2 TV Tuesday said that Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein is suffering from cancer, reports AP.

Quoting unnamed Western and European sources, the report said the Iraqi ruler has been undergoing chemotherapy treatment for cancer for some time.

The report said the information had been relayed to US President Bill Clinton during a Mideast summit he is hosting in eastern Maryland.

A Kuwaiti newspaper reported last week that Saddam is suffering from colon cancer. However, there is no public indication that the Iraqi ruler is seriously ill. In the past ten days he has chaired three sessions of the Iraqi Cabinet, all shown on Iraqi television.

Typhoon Babs approaches Philippines

MANILA, Oct 21: Officials cut electrical supplies and evacuated thousands of people from coastal villages Wednesday as Typhoon Babs began battering the central Philippines with winds reaching 235 kilometers per hour, reports AP.

Disaster official Jason Aragon said maximum storm warnings were issued in eastern Bicol province, where residents of low-lying villages were ordered to evacuate.

Power officials cut electricity to Catanduanes island and portions of Albay province to prevent accidental electrocutions, he said.

Babs continued to intensify as it approached Catanduanes, with sustained winds of 195 kilometers (122 miles) per hour and gusts up to 235 kph (147 mph), weather forecaster Susan Dainoff said.

Ex-Spice Girl turns UN goodwill envoy

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 21: Former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell (Ginger Spice) on Tuesday began her first day on the job as a UN goodwill ambassador, saying she would use her fame and energy to promote women's health and safe sex in the third world, reports Reuters.

The appointment for the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) comes five months after Halliwell, 26, quit the Spice Girls, Britain's biggest pop phenomenon since the Beatles, because of differences with her four fellow singers.

"I am famous, lots of people know who I am," she told a UN news conference, "and I am doing well going to use my fame positively. If I save one person's life, just by awareness, I'm going to do it."

"This is the first day on my new job. I'm learning. I have to get my hands dirty, I really will. I am really going to have to learn a lot about this," she said.

Major religions can help save world from environmental destruction?

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 21: For three years, more than 1,000 scholars, believers and activists explored what ten of the world's major religions can do to help save the world from environmental destruction, reports AP.

Their conclusion announced Tuesday: Religions must use their moral force to end mankind's unrestrained exploitation of nature's resources and instill a collective responsibility toward environmental preservation. Religious leaders must work with scientists, economists, educators and public policy makers toward these goals.

"We are in a moment of crisis — recognising the environment is in danger and we as humans may even be endangered," said Mary Evelyn Tucker, a professor of religion at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, who helped conceive and coordinate the Harvard Project on Religion and Ecology.

The project, a wide-ranging series of conferences which started in 1996, explored the relationship between the environment and 10 major religious traditions — Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, indigenous traditions, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto and Taoism.

India rejects Pakistan's proposal for 'no-war' pact

NEW DELHI, Oct 21: India has rejected Pakistan's proposal for a "no-war" pact as Islamabad has linked it to the settlement of the Kashmir issue, Prime Minister's Principal secretary Brajesh Mishra said last night, reports PTI.

The no-war pact is that they link it to the settlement of the Kashmir issue before it comes into being. Now that is something which is not acceptable to us, Mishra said.

If there is to be a no-war pact it must be on the basis that status quo exists between the two countries and you must not cross that line. That is what no-war pact in our view is, Mishra told 'Star TV' in an interview.

Replying to questions, Mishra said the proposal for having a Delhi-Lahore bus service was in final stages and the idea might concretise in the next few weeks.

Both governments are now pushing that and hopefully in the next few weeks the idea will concretise and you may go in a bus to Lahore, he said.

An AP report adds: The prime ministers of India and Pakistan spoke over telephone following lack of progress reported during official-level talks held

earlier this week in the Pakistani capital, newspaper reports said Wednesday.

On Tuesday, Vajpayee used a hotline that was set up last year between the two prime ministers, an official statement said in New Delhi.

Vajpayee expressed satisfaction over the outcome of talks, The Hindu newspaper said. But that contrasted with an earlier comment by Pakistan Foreign Minister Sartaz Aziz that the result has been less than what Pakistan expected.

India and Pakistan have fought two wars over Kashmir in the past 50 years. Jammu-Kashmir is the only Muslim majority state in a predominantly Hindu India. India controls two-thirds of Kashmir and Pakistan the rest. Muslim militants have been fighting a separatist war since 1989.

On Tuesday, India accused Pakistani soldiers of firing on an India position in the Siachen Glacier at 19,000 feet (5790 meters) in the Himalayan territory. There was no immediate comment by Pakistan.

Pakistan says India should hold a plebiscite in Kashmir under the United Nations resolutions of 1940s to give the ma-

majority Muslims a choice to stay with India or join Pakistan.

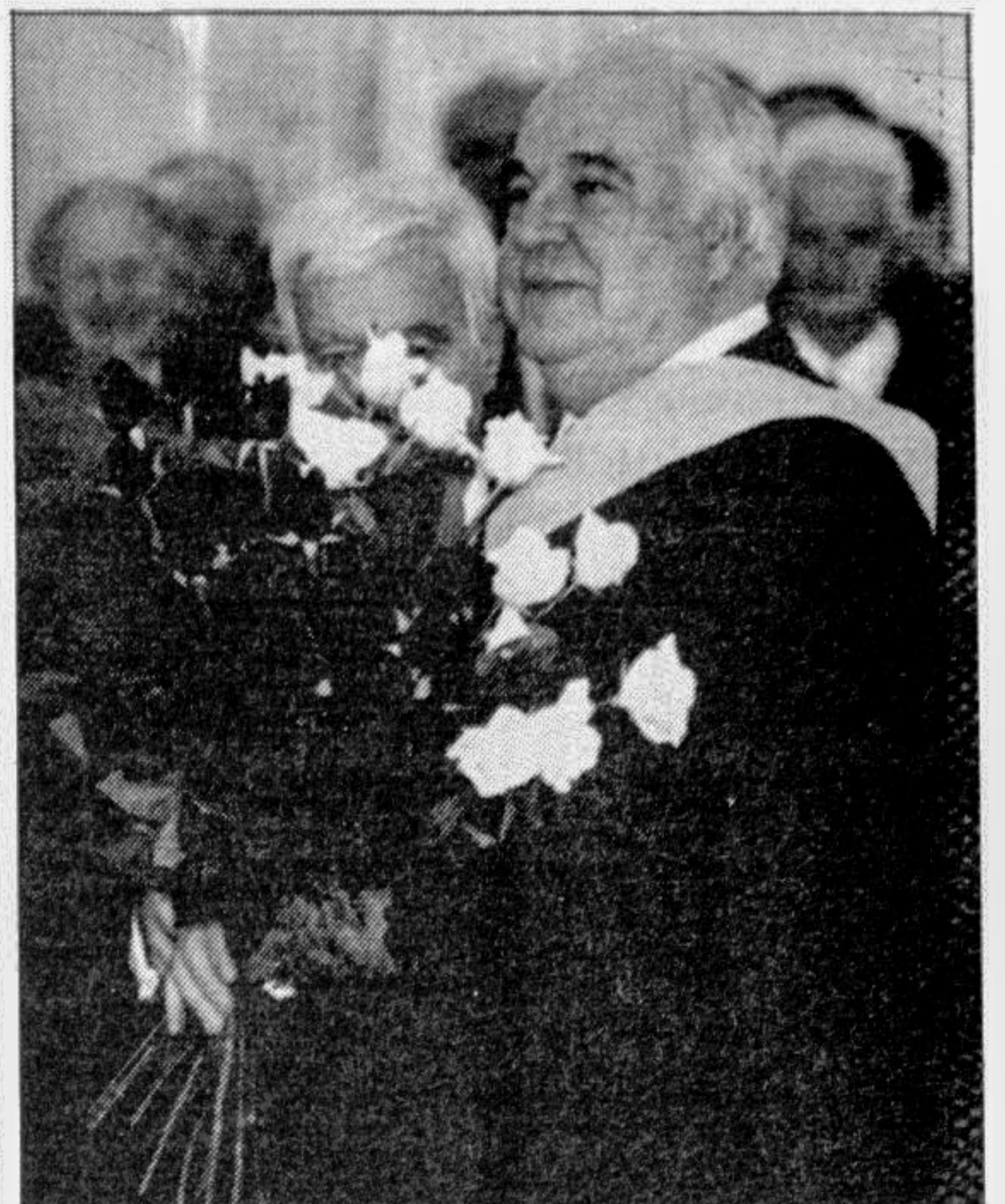
India says it will never agree to a plebiscite in Kashmir. Pakistan considers Kashmir a core issue, linking its settlement to any improvement in trade and economic ties with India.

At their meeting earlier this week, Indian and Pakistani foreign secretaries couldn't make any progress on Kashmir but promised to meet again in February.

Both India and Pakistan are under pressure from the United States and other countries to ease tensions over Kashmir, especially after both carried out nuclear tests in May and declared themselves to be nuclear powers.

The two sides also discussed their ballistic missile capability and conventional arsenals. Both India and Pakistan have missiles capable of carrying multiple and single nuclear warheads.

They also discussed measures to avert the risk of a nuclear conflict and to prevent an expensive nuclear arms race in the volatile subcontinent. But they were yet to agree on any confidence-building measures.



German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, after receiving Poland's top distinction from President Aleksander Kwasniewski in Warsaw Tuesday, Kohl, who steps down Oct 27, was awarded the White Eagle Order in recognition of his support for Poland's integration with NATO and the European Union. — AP/UNB photo

Israel, Palestinians near accord on West Bank

QUEENSTOWN, Maryland, Oct 21: Under President Bill Clinton's prodding and with Jordan's King Hussein at hand, Israel and the Palestinians neared a West Bank agreement that calls for the CIA to supervise the jailing of suspected terrorists, two parties to the Middle East talks said, reports AP.

Clinton finalised the CIA-terrorist arrangement during dinner Monday with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, the sources said.

Palestinian terrorist suspects wanted in Israel would not be extradited to Israel for trial, as Israel initially demanded. But the presence of the CIA to verify that punishment is being meted out by Palestinian authorities evidently satisfies Israel's concerns, said the sources, who spoke only on condition of anonymity.

With Hussein providing advice in separate talks with Clinton, Arafat and Netanyahu, Israel and the Palestinians began shaping the framework of a West Bank land-for-peace accord on Tuesday. The sixth day of their summit talks, Hussein joined the talks for most of the

day at the administration's request.

The pace of negotiations picked up, with Israel and the Palestinians getting down to hard bargaining. Clinton, in his fifth day at a secluded Maryland retreat, met for 45 minutes with Arafat and then held a three-hour meeting with Netanyahu that ended at 0525 GMT. In the first two hours, Clinton, and Netanyahu were joined by Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon, Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai and Natan Sharansky, the trade and labour minister.

Clinton left Wye at 0620 GMT to return to Washington. There was no immediate indication what the schedule would be for Wednesday.

Clinton had been briefed on his arrival from Washington by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who met with Arafat following the president to nail down some details ahead of the US-Israeli bilateral meeting.

"There is important work going on here but significant gaps are still there," White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said.

The sources, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that while several knotty issues remained, Israel and the Palestinians had succeeded in reaching a preliminary understanding on several points.

These included a 12-week Israeli pullback from a further 13 per cent of the West Bank, with the Palestinians responding with the confiscation of illegally held weapons from militant groups on territory they already control and the jailing of suspected terrorists.

Israel claims 17 suspects remain free in Palestinian-held land and 13 serve in the Palestinian police force. Initially, Israeli negotiators demanded their extradition for trial in Israel, but they are settling for trial and punishment by Palestinian authorities.

The United States would assume the role of verifying both the weapons seizures and the jailings, the sources told The Associated Press.

CIA Director George Tenet has played a behind-the-scenes role in the summit talks. He made several trips to the Mideast to develop intelligence cooperation between Israel and Arafat's Palestinian Authority.

Breath of fresh air draws customers to Delhi bar

NEW DELHI, Oct 21: The first oxygen bar in New Delhi, one of the most polluted cities in the world, is attracting customers by promising that rarest of commodities — "a breath of fresh air," reports AFP.

The "life care 02 bar" in the heart of the Indian capital, opened in early August and the response has so enthused proprietor Deepak Singh that he is in talks to set up 300 more such bars across the country.

Singh, 28, says he got the idea while travelling overseas. "I went to one in Japan but it did not give me an idea. But in Bangkok I went to one to have relief from the traffic fumes. It was like a pub and disco, people were drinking and dancing."

That gave me the idea to give Delhiites breath of fresh air. The Indian version has five leather swivel chairs and five oxygen machines placed opposite a mirrored wall. A television blares away in a corner and magazines restacked for those who want to read.

In other cities such as Hong Kong where such bars have opened, medical authorities and experts have questioned the claims of those operating them.

Among the bar's most high-

profile customers has been octogenarian Jag Pravech Chandra, a leader of the main opposition Congress Party in New Delhi.

Chandra told AFP he felt a marked difference after his first session when he inhaled "93 per cent" oxygen for 30 minutes.

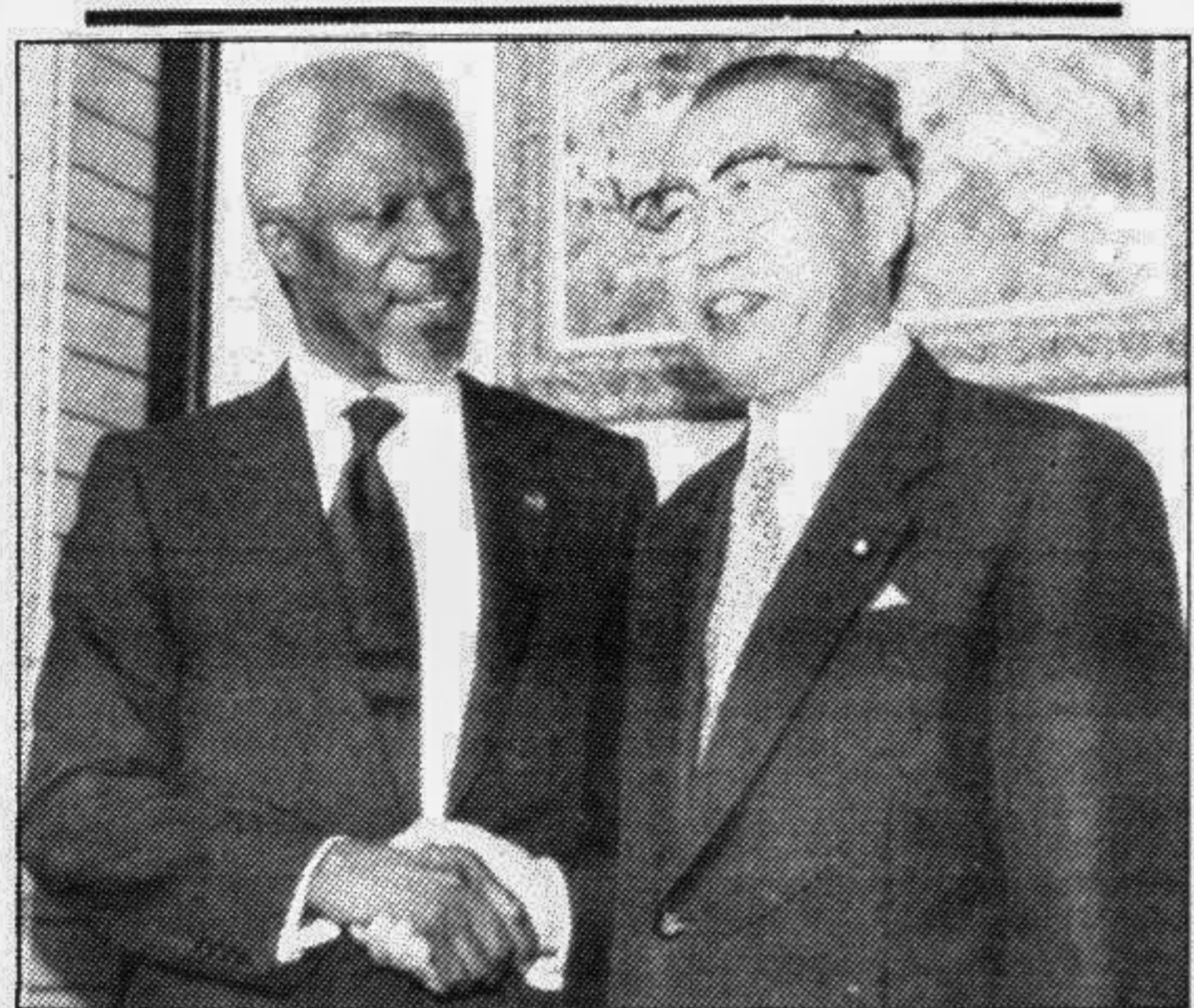
"After 20 minutes I felt refreshed," Chandra, a leader of New Delhi's provincial government between 1983 and 1990, said. "It was like charging my batteries."

He added: "On any day a non-smoker takes in pollution equal to 20 cigarettes. Ten years ago the pollution level was 1,000 metric tonnes a day. Today it is 2,500 metric tonnes. You feel you are moving through a tunnel of smoke. Delhi is becoming like a gas chamber."

Apart from the noxious fumes of New Delhi a notorious traffic there are several other pollutants — tens of thousands of small factories belching smoke and the common practice of burning heaps of fallen leaves on the roadside.

Proprietor Singh said the idea was, "like anything in India," taking time to catch on.

BRIEFLY



United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, left, and Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi shake hands prior to their talks at the prime minister's official residence in Tokyo Wednesday. Annan arrived in Tokyo to participate in the African Development Conference. — AP/UNB photo

2 die in Thai ferry accident: Two people drowned when a ferry carrying 30 people capsized in high seas in the Gulf of Thailand en route to a southern Thai tourist island early, yesterday, Reuters reports from Bangkok.

The two dead were that nationals, police in the southern province of Surat Thani said. The ferry was on an overnight crossing from Surat Thani to the island of Koh Tao, popular with backpack tourists, when it capsized in rough seas at about 3 am (2000n GMT).

New White House chief of staff: President Bill Clinton appointed John Podesta his new White House chief of staff on Tuesday, effective Nov. 1, replacing Erskine Bowles, who may run for governor of North Carolina, reports Reuters from Washington.

It will be the third tour of duty in the Clinton administration for Podesta, 49. He has been deputy chief of staff for the past two years and previously served as Clinton's staff secretary.

4 killed in Vietnam blast: Four people, including three from one family, were killed when a war-era artillery shell exploded in central Vietnam, local police said Wednesday, AP reports from Hanoi.

Pham Van Doung was killed instantly in Quang Nam province along with his wife, son and a neighbour when the 105mm shell went off as they were trying to cut into it to extract the explosives, police said. Doung's wife had found the shell in the jungle.

Quake hits New Zealand: An earthquake capable of causing severe damage in populated areas hit an isolated offshore area of the Southern Alps region in New Zealand, yesterday, causing some property damage, AFP reports from Auckland.

The Institute of Geological and Nuclear Sciences said the quake measured 6.1 on the Richter Scale.

Malaysian boat mishap toll now 12: The death toll from a weekend boat accident off Malaysia's western coast rose to 12 Wednesday, with rescuers still searching for three more bodies, a news report said, AP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

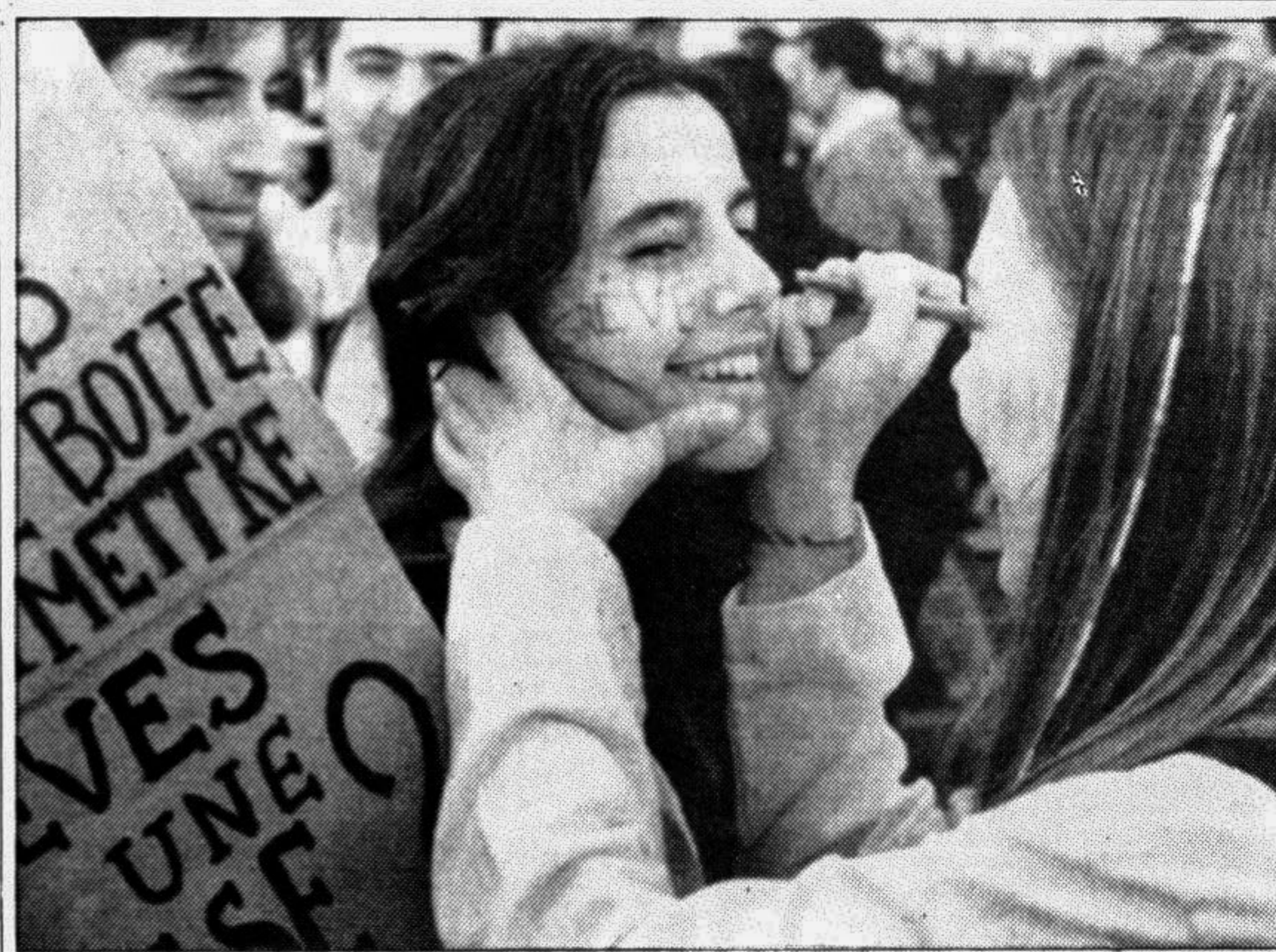
Police said they discovered the body of Norhisam Hashim, 20, about 5 km away from the resort island of Pulau Besar off the southwestern state of Malacca, the national news agency Bernama reported.

Colombian mayor shot dead: Suspected right-wing paramilitary gunmen shot to death a provincial mayor in northwest Colombia on Tuesday, the 11th such slaying of a mayor in the past 10 months, police said, Reuters reports from Bogota.

Mayor Hector Piedrahita, 39, his driver and a human rights official were apparently pulled from their car on the outskirts of the town of Anori. Their bullet-riddled bodies were later found on the roadside, and the car abandoned.



Supporters of Kargozaran Party wave Iranian flags while listening to the party Secretary General Gholamhossein Karbaschi, the suspended mayor of Tehran, during a gathering at Shiroudi Sport Stadium in Tehran Tuesday. Karbaschi urged his supporters to take part in Friday's elections for the 86-seat Assembly of Experts, a body that elects Iran's supreme leader. — AP/UNB photo



A high school student writes "strike" on a friend's cheek at the start of a demonstration in Paris Tuesday. Thousands of high school students were expected to demonstrate across the country to press demands for more teachers, better equipment and buildings and a lighter course load. — AP/UNB photo.

Lockerbie bombing suspects happy to be tried in Netherlands: Gaddafi

LONDON, Oct 21: Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi said the suspects in the Lockerbie bombing are "very happy" to be tried in the Netherlands, and he hoped the trial would lead to a better relationship with the United States, reports AP.

"We can solve this problem very easily," he told the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in an interview released Tuesday. "Then the families of the victims will be satisfied and get rid of this anxious problem."

"When peace comes between the two countries, they will shake hands and there will be peace. After that such acts will automatically come to an end," Gaddafi said.

The United States and Britain have accused Libyans Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi and Lamem Khalifa Fhimah of blowing up a Pan Am jumbo jet over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988, killing 270 people. Both men were indicted in 1991, and the United Nations imposed sanctions in 1992 to try to force Gaddafi to hand them over. He argued that the two would not be guaranteed a fair trial in either

Britain or the United States.

But after nearly a decade of deadlock, the UN Security Council approved a US-British plan in August for a trial of the two Libyans in the Netherlands overseen by Scottish judges following Scottish law.

Libya has accepted the idea in principle, but Gaddafi has demanded negotiations to ensure the safety of the suspects. He also wants the men, if convicted, to serve their sentences in Libya or the Netherlands. Britain and the United States have refused to negotiate.

Gaddafi did not discuss that obstacle in the BBC interview. But he did seek to distance himself from the two men, who the United States and Britain say are Libyan agents.

"They may be guilty or not guilty, Gaddafi told the BBC. "That is the job of the court to decide. If they are guilty, it is because there is revenge between individual Libyans and America. Perhaps these Libyans took their own revenge against America."

Jamaat organising 3-day gathering in Islamabad

ISLAMABAD, Oct 21: Thousands of members of an orthodox religious party were erecting a tent city in the heart of the federal capital on Wednesday in preparation for a massive three-day gathering aimed at "enforcing a true Islamic order" in Pakistan, reports AP.

More than 10,000 tents stretch across the vast lush green lawns outside the grand marble Faisal Mosque, its giant minarets reaching skyward to dominate the capital skyline.

The small, but powerful right wing religious group, Jamaat-e-Islami, which is organising the three-day conference in Islamabad expects 500,000 people to attend.

Giant green banners have been strung across the wide three-line boulevards of the capital extolling the virtues of an Islamic state and calling on the faithful to fight for their religion.

"Pakistan is for Islam and nothing else," said a Jamaat worker Miraj Uddin "We want to establish a society based on justice and free from corruption... it is a misconception that Islam only means chopping off hands and feet of the criminals."

Rather he said his version of Islam is "a system in which the poor will be heard, there will be justice and peace, and accountability of corrupt rulers like

(Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif," he said.

Jamaat-e-Islami has dismissed Sharif's attempts to impose Islamic law in Pakistan as a thinly veiled ploy to consolidate power in his hands.

"These rulers are using the name of Islam... they are not sincere to enforce Islam," said Jamaat leader Liaquat Baluch. Sharif's ruling Pakistan Muslim league already has passed a controversial constitutional amendment in the National Assembly or Lower House of Parliament which would give the federal government the authority to "prescribe what is right and forbid what is wrong" according to its interpretation of Islam.

The amendment still must be passed by the Senate to become law and it's not certain that Sharif will be able to muster the votes he will need.

Human rights activists and members of minority religious groups in Pakistan have adamantly opposed the amendment saying it will give the radical Islamic element in Pakistan greater authority to impose its rules on the majority.

Opposition politicians say it will be a precursor to a Taliban-style government, a reference to the hard line religious militia which rules in neighboring Afghanistan.