

# Democracy demands

From Page 1

justification. Yes, by incorporating the infamous and shameful Indemnity Ordinance into our Constitution in 1979, General Zia definitely protected the killers. His action made ours perhaps the only Constitution in the world that gave unqualified, permanent and blanket protection to murderers, and for all time to come. Whatever President Zia's other achievements may be, he will be very harshly judged for this unconscionable compromise with killers. To this act, his providing them with diplomatic assignments further spoils his image and created a suspicion in the public mind about unknown and undisclosed links. What could he have owed them that he did them so many favours and for so long? This he did, being fully aware, that his actions not only maligned our diplomatic service but also greatly damaged the image of the country. Just imagine, our country being represented by killers.

In the past, BNP did protect the killers. But post-Khaleda Zia BNP has a different track record. To the extent that Khaleda Zia's government did not repeal the Indemnity Bill, did not discontinue the diplomatic assignments of the killers, it can be said to be guilty of allowing them to continue to benefit from their crimes. But after Awami League government came to power and started the trial, BNP did nothing to obstruct the legal process. Over the last 18 months -- the duration of the trial -- there was not a single BNP action or demand that can be construed as helping or protecting Bangabandhu's killers. In fact the time to 'help' them was during the trial itself -- during evidence gathering, during witness examining -- and not at the time of judgement, which is when the harkals have been called.

It is our view that the judgement in Bangabandhu's murder trial is not the cause of BNP's current hartal. It has been the aggressive and confrontational manner with which the ruling AL has been dealing with the main opposition party.

Let us analyse the recent events objectively. It started from the government's refusal to allow BNP to hold its token "Mass Hunger Strike" at the Paltan Maidan. Why was our biggest opposition party refused the use of Paltan? Ostensibly to carry on undisturbed the preparations for the Wills Cup cricket. We say ostensibly, because we have talked with the organisers and have been told that BNP's use of the Paltan on that specific day would have, in no way, disturbed the preparations. Even if the crowd had become unruly, what could it have done? The main stadium and all the essential preparations were off and well protected.

Then came the first week of November. The date of judgement was declared to be the 8th. The first question is why the 8th. Did we not know that 7th November is a big day for the BNP, a day they have been observing since its birth. Whether we like it or not is irrelevant. It is their day and they have right to observe it in a befitting manner. This right is tremendously reinforced by the fact that they received 34 per cent of votes in the last election, compared to the ruling AL's 37 per cent. It became even more crucial for BNP to observe it after AL came to power, and after the PM termed it 'Army killing Day' or something to this effect.

We would like to argue that if the judgement day was a few days after the 7th, it could have been easily arranged. Then much of the confrontation of the previous several days could have been prevented and the political situation would not

have deteriorated to the level that it did. The onus for this squarely rests with the government, as ultimately it is the government which is responsible for ensuring that the opposition can function properly.

This was followed by the events just prior to November 7th. The ruling Awami League declared that it would maintain its continuous presence on the streets up to the delivery of the judgement, which is the 8th. This was a sure recipe for confrontation, which the ruling party knew very well. For days on end AL workers carried out processions and rallies. If the BNP had carried out its usual preparatory public rallies for the 7th there would have been clashes.

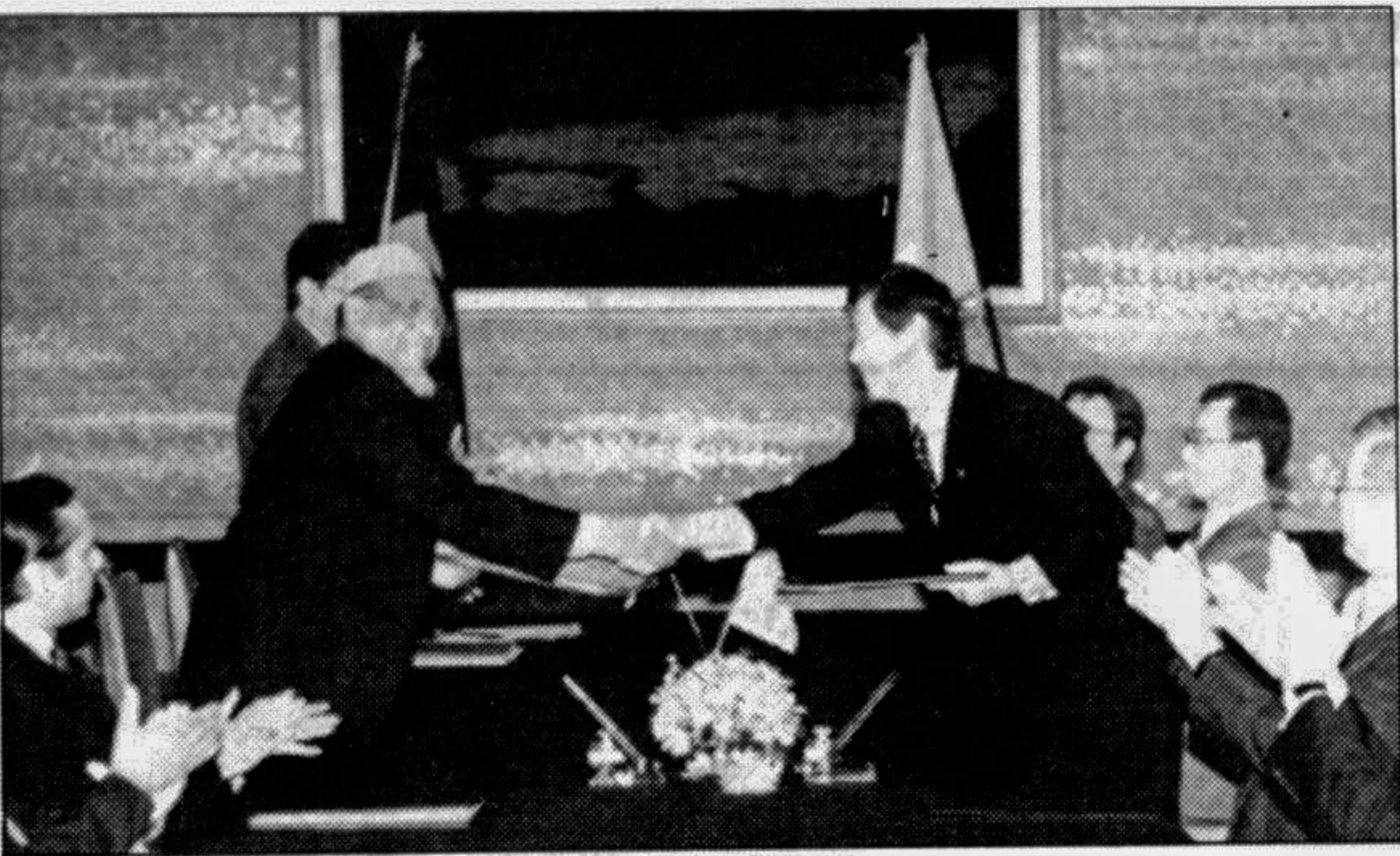
Then comes the event of the 7th itself. Throughout the day there were stray clashes between AL and BNP activists. Just before the grand rally, workers of the two parties clashed as they moved towards the 7th. At the 7th point, Poppkhana Road and Bangabandhu Avenue. What were the AL workers doing in these places? Why were they there? The common political courtesy is that when a major party is holding its rally the rival party, at least on that very day, stays away from the meeting venue and its vicinity. If not for courtesy, then at least to avoid clashes. AL should have asked its workers to leave the streets alone on that day. If not, at least it should have left the Paltan area alone for the duration of BNP's meeting. That is if AL wanted to avoid any clash.

Then comes the event of the meeting on the 7th itself. First the bursting of crackers followed by a rain of tear gas shells completely broke up the BNP meeting at Paltan. AL has tried to indirectly imply that BNP disrupted its own meeting to justify its subsequent mayhem and the hartal call. This would have been even remotely credible if it were not for the clashes nearby. The shelling of tear gas just when Khaleda Zia started to speak, and aiming many of them at the centre of the meeting and at the dais itself strongly suggest police complicity in the breaking up of the meeting. Now if the suggestion is that even the police conspired with the BNP to disrupt the meeting, then we really have nothing to say, except that in that case government can be said to have lost control of its own law enforcing bodies. The truth, we think, is far less dramatic and the answer is obvious.

The Prime Minister repeatedly asked during the speech in the Parliament on Monday "What is the issue" for this strike? In our view, it is clearly the oppression of the opposition.

We have decided to say this today because we believe that it is not only enough to speak the truth, but it has to be spoken at the right time. We think that the time has come to tell this government unreservedly that the way it has been treating the opposition is far beyond acceptable limits of democracy. Democracy means the rights to govern with the WILL of the people. We want to remind the ruling party that it gained the right to rule with a mere 3 (three) percent majority, itself getting 37 per cent of the vote and the opposition BNP getting 34 per cent. If peoples WILL gives AL the right to govern, then that same peoples WILL give the BNP the right to carry out its activities, regardless of whether we like it or not. The BNP, while in power forgot that AL had slightly higher percentage of popular votes than its own 30-plus per cent, and made the mistake of underestimating the electoral mandate of the opposition Awami League.

AL in power is repeating the same mistake.



Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad (left) shakes hands with his Japanese counterpart Masahiko Komura while other attendants applaud upon signing documents on their agreement of investment promotion and protection treaty between the two countries yesterday at the Foreign Ministry's Likura Guest House in Tokyo. — AP/UNB photo

## Former Japanese FM lauds efficient handling of flood situation

Former Japanese Foreign Minister Hiroshi Mitsuoka has appreciated the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in ensuring democracy and development in the country, reports UNB.

He also lauded efficient handling of recent flood situation by the government.

The Japanese leader was speaking at a dinner hosted jointly by Japan-Bangladesh Parliamentary Leaders and Japan-Bangladesh Friendship Association in honour of Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad, now in Tokyo, on Monday evening, according to a message received in the city yesterday.

Mitsuoka also lauded the leadership of Bangladesh government in consolidating democracy and strengthening the regional cooperation.

In this connection, he also appreciated Bangladesh's role in organising business summit of the three regional countries.

The veteran Japanese parliamentarian recalled the strong bond of friendship established between the two countries by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Samad Azad expressed his deep gratitude to the people and government of Japan for the assistance to Bangladesh since its independence in 1971.

He recalled the great support of Japanese people and leadership in the war of independence and assistance for building up the war-ravaged economy of the country.

He also appreciated the role of Japan-Bangladesh Parliamentary League and expressed the hope that the development efforts of Bangladesh will get support of Japanese Parliamentarians, so that Bangladesh can go ahead with its goals for attaining self-reliance and poverty alleviation.

## Essay contest for German learners

**By Staff Correspondent**

An essay and pictorial competition is being organised by the Embassy of Germany in co-operation with the Goethe Institut in Dhaka, says a press release.

Any person who is learning or has learned German may participate in the competition.

The theme of the essay contest is "Why I learn German". Entries should be written in German language, or in English for beginners, and should not be more than three pages.

For the pictorial contest, description of "My image of Germany" in photograph, collage, drawing or caricature may be submitted.

Entries should be submitted by December 15, 1998 and be certified by a German language teacher that the participant is either learning or has learned German.

There will be over 160 prizes. The first prize being a German language course at the Goethe Institut in Dhaka.

Interested persons may contact their German language teacher, the Goethe Institut or the Cultural Department of the German Embassy in Dhaka for further information.

## Partners in Population Annual Board meeting ends today

The fourth Annual Board Meeting of the Partners in Population and Development which began in the Egyptian capital, Cairo, on Sunday concludes today, reports APB.

The representatives of 13 member-countries, including Bangladesh, have been participating in the four-day meet of the Board, according to a message received in the city yesterday.

A three-member Bangladesh delegation, led by the Ambassador to Egypt Mohammad Ruhul Amin, is taking part in the Board meeting.

The other members of the delegation are Health and Family Welfare Joint Secretary Mollah Golam Sarwar and Director General of Family Planning Directorate Serajul Islam.

Besides, some representatives of different NGOs from Bangladesh are also attending the meeting.

The meeting was inaugurated by the Egyptian Health Minister Ismail Sallam. UNFPA Executive Director Dr Nafis Sadek and Director of Partners Secretariat Balla Musa Silla were present on the occasion.

During his deliberation, the Health Minister of Egypt supported the objectives of enhancing collaboration among the South-South developing countries in the field of reproductive health and family planning.

Dr Nafis Sadek expressed her satisfaction that the cooperation between the UNFPA and the Partners was developing very well.

She encouraged the Partners to continue and expand the utilisation of the available UNFPA country support teams in different regions across the globe.

# China accuses Dalai Lama of insisting on independence

BEIJING, Nov 10: Dampening prospects for a breakthrough on Tibet, China accused the Dalai Lama Tuesday of insisting on independence for his Himalayan homeland despite claims he wants to compromise, reports AP.

The criticism from the Foreign Ministry and the ruling Communist party's People's Daily was the latest in a barrage of invective China has launched to counter reports the Dalai Lama was preparing a peace overture to Beijing while on his current trip to the United States.

The Dalai Lama, the spiritual and political leader of Tibet who fled into exile 39 years ago, was due to meet Tuesday in Washington with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Vice President Al Gore and possibly President Bill Clinton.

Hours before, China's Foreign Ministry warned that

meetings between the Tibetan and US leaders would "seriously hurt the feelings of the Chinese people" and betray US support for what it claimed was the Dalai Lama's goal of separating Tibet from China.

"The Dalai Lama has never repented for his activities in splitting the motherland and advocating Tibetan independence," ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao said at a twice-weekly briefing for reporters.

Noting that Washington recognises Beijing's rule over Tibet, Zhu demanded that US leaders "not meet the Dalai Lama 'so as not to cause damage to China-US relations.'"

"We have always opposed foreign interference into China's internal affairs," the People's Daily, the party's flagship newspaper, said.

In the weeks before the Dalai Lama began his 10-day trip to the United States, aides said he

would make a conciliatory response to Chinese President Jiang Zemin's offer in June to hold talks.

So far, the Dalai Lama has not met China's conditions: that he renounce independence and recognise Tibet as an inseparable part of China and Taiwan as a province of China. On Monday, he described Tibetans as "victims of human rights violations."

"The Dalai Lama has presented nothing new this time," People's Daily said. It added that the exiled leader's remarks were designed to whip up international public opinion and proved he was insincere about wanting talks.

People's Daily accused representatives of the Dalai Lama of "circling around the issue of Tibetan independence" in fitful negotiations over the past 20 years.

## BANGLADESH—WI A SCOREBOARD

Scoreboard of the third and final one-day match between Bangladesh and West Indies A at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday:

**BANGLADESH**  
 Shahriar c McGarrell b King 0  
 Javed c Campbell b McGarrell 36  
 Faruque run out 28  
 Aminul st Browne b Sarwan 52  
 Akram c Browne b Bishop 8  
 Al-Shahriar st Browne 8  
 b Lewis 40  
 K Mahmud not out 23  
 Hasibul b Lewis 9  
 K Masood not out 3  
 Extras: (wb-7, nb-7, lb-15, b-1) 30  
 Total: (For seven wickets in 50 overs) 229

Did not bat: Enamul, Shafuluddin.

Fall of wks: 1-1; 2-72; 3-88; 4-104; 5-188; 6-196; 7-217

**Bowler**

O	M	R	W
King	10	3	25
Tuckett	10	3	25
McGarrell	10	1	36
Bishop	9	0	55
Lewis	10	0	56
Sarwan	1	0	8

**WEST INDIES A**  
 Griffith b Hasibul 2  
 Campbell c Aminul b Shafuluddin 16  
 Hinds c Hasibul b Aminul 34  
 Reifer b Shafuluddin 3  
 Sarwan c Javed b Shafuluddin 13  
 Browne c Javed b K Mahmud 10  
 McGarrell lbw b K Mahmud 10  
 Lewis b Aminul 16  
 Tuckett b Hasibul 13  
 Bishop run out 30  
 King not out 5  
 Extras: (b-1, lb-10, nb-3, w-5) 19  
 Total: (All out in 34.5) 184

Fall of wks: 1-15; 2-19; 3-21; 4-36; 5-53; 6-100; 7-119; 8-133; 9-150

**Bowler**

O	M	R	W
Hasibul	7	0	21
Shafuluddin	6.5	2	48
Enamul	7	0	29
K Mahmud	7	0	38
Aminul	7	0	38
Arif	1	0	2

**Result: Bangladesh won by 10 runs and the series 2-1.**  
**Player-of-the-match: Aminul Islam.**

# HR Group says Iraq executes 125 political prisoners

CAIRO, Nov 10: Iraq has executed 125 political prisoners arrested during and after a failed uprising in southern Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War, a human rights group said Tuesday, reports AP.

The executions, which included those of three Egyptians, took place in the infamous Abu Ghraib prison west of Baghdad in early October, the London-based Center for Human Rights of the Iraqi Communist Party said in a statement.

The group listed the names of the executed prisoners, which included 29 military men, some in the elite Republican Guards and the Iraqi air force.

The others, it said, are mostly from the southern Shi'ite Muslim towns or Kurds from the north. Southern Shi'ites and Kurds staged an unsuccessful uprising against President Saddam Hussein's regime after the Gulf War.

In a statement faxed to The Associated Press in Cairo, the human rights group listed the names of two colonels, one lieutenant colonel and a major in the Republican Guards. It gave the names of 13 Iraqi air force officers with ranks up to lieutenant colonel.

The group said the three Egyptians were executed for "supplying information to an enemy country."

There was no way to independently confirm the report.

There have been repeated reports of executions and widespread arrests by Saddam's regime to silence its opponents.

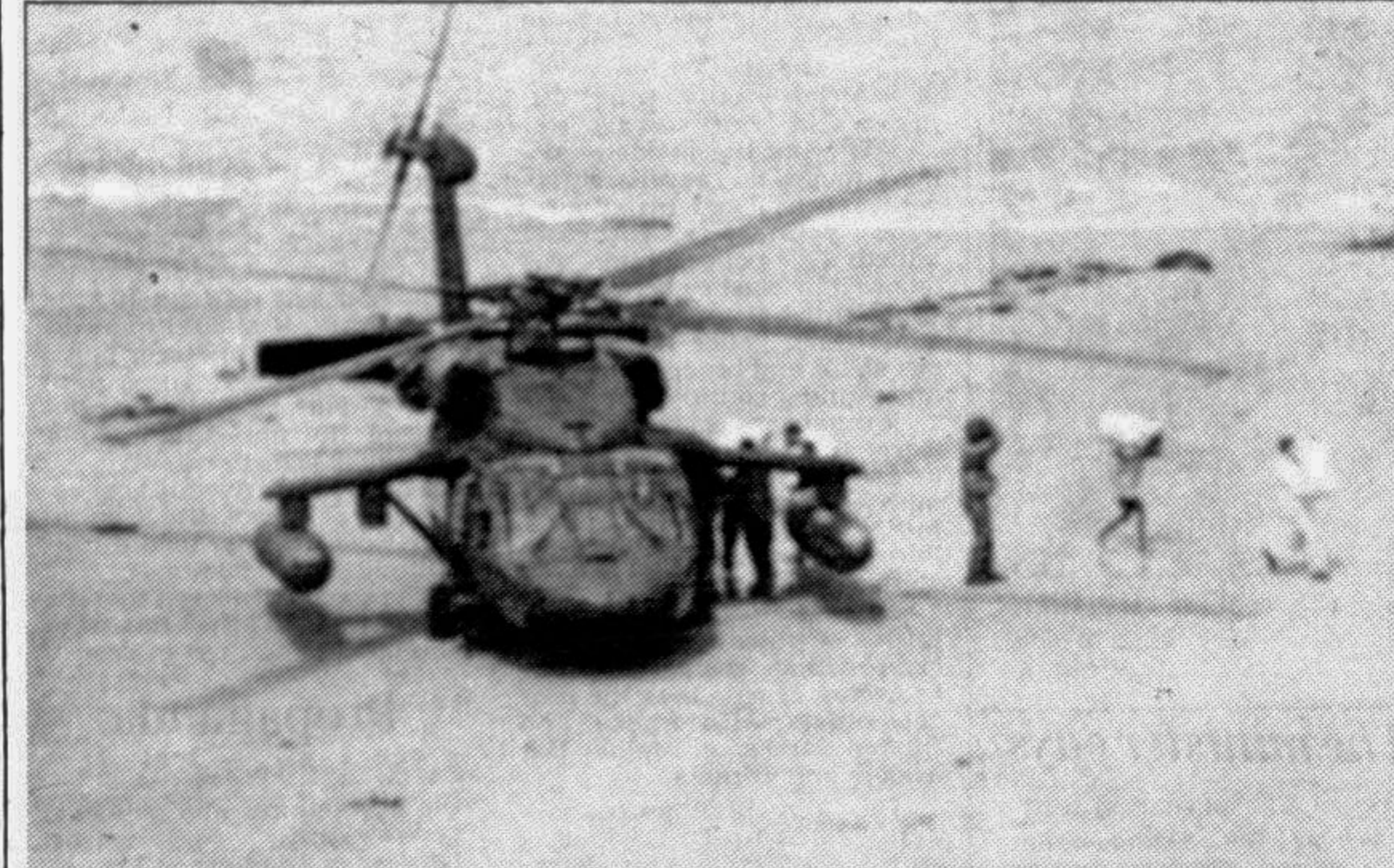
In April, the UN human rights commissioner responsible for Iraq, former Dutch Foreign Minister Max van der Stoep, said as many as 1,500 people may have been executed in Iraqi prisons and elsewhere last year.

"The new massacre is another chapter in a series of executions and mass killings which the ruling regime started since last autumn in what it termed the campaign for cleansing the prisons," the group said Tuesday.

Labour minister, Abdel-Aziz Mohammad Saleh al-Sayegh, in the first public admission of prison overcrowding, told a Baghdad newspaper in March that Iraqi prisons hold five times their capacity of inmates. Al-Sayegh was fired by Saddam on May 11 with no reason given.

The London-based group also said another Egyptian, Hamed Marai Abdel-Aziz, is waiting a similar fate in cell number 31 in the prison.

Prison authorities have handed the bodies of only three high-ranking officers to their families for burial, while the rest were buried by the Abu Ghraib municipality in a mass grave on October 8 near a dairy factory, the statement said.



A US blackhawk helicopter distributes medicine and food supply to the town of Santa Rosa de Aguan, Honduras, on Sunday. Most communities in the Aguan Valley can only be reached by helicopter. — AP/UNB photo

# Government cracks down on MQM to restore order in Karachi

KARACHI, Nov 10: Hidden in the darkness, heavily armed troops wade through a maze of narrow lane ways until they reach a shabby building -- the suspected hideout of ethnic terrorists, reports AP.

A commander barks orders Paramilitary soldiers and police burst through the doors. Gunfire breaks out, and screams are heard from the building.

The mission is successful. The troops emerge with several suspected militants of the Muttahida Qami Movement, a group that claims to represent Indian Muslims.

This scene replays itself several times a week in this troubled city.

The migrants, who settled in Pakistan in 1947 at the end of British rule on the Asian subcontinent, say successive governments have discriminated against them, denying them equal access to jobs, education and government positions.

They want to be recognised as a fifth ethnic group like Punjabis, Pathans, Baluch and Sindhis. The government refuses.

Adding to the tensions, the movement, known as the MQM, split several years ago. The splinter Haqqi group routinely clashes with the mainstream faction in a violent battle for control of the streets of this

southern port city.

The internal fighting, along with attacks on police, have taken at least 1,000 lives this year, according to police statistics. It has also crushed the economy in Karachi, the country's financial capital and largest city, with 14 million people.

The unrest has turned entire neighbourhoods, mostly in eastern and central Karachi, into battlefields. Hoping to restore order, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif imposed federal rule in Karachi in early November.

"It might take three months or it might take six months... the terrorism here is deep rooted," he said at the time.

Paramilitary officers park armoured personnel carriers on the fringes of the volatile neighbourhoods. Policemen in bulletproof jackets patrol the streets on foot and in armoured cars.

But the violence has only worsened, and the militants have begun to target the police and the paramilitaries. Authorities say they are afraid.

Their fears may be rooted in an earlier crackdown launched by former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in 1995.

Human rights groups accused Benazir's government of allowing summary executions

of suspected terrorists and covering up the killings. When the president, using his constitutional authority, dismissed her government in 1996, he accused her of sanctioning police hit squads.

Since then, dozens of policemen involved in the cleanup operation have been killed, said Karachi police officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity fearing retaliation.

"A large number of police officials, who were involved in the operation during the previous government, have fallen victim of the revenge killings," one official said.

Sharif said he launched the crackdown in response to the killing of a well-known philanthropist, Hakim Said, who often criticised the MQM for its strong-arm tactics.

"The prime minister's allegations are baseless and a part of the conspiracy to vilify the MQM," said Kunwar Khalid Younus, a member of the group's mainstream faction and a lawmaker in the powerful lower house of Parliament.

"The government is using the false charge of the MQM's involvement in the Hakim Said's murder to crush the organisation and take control of Karachi," he said.

Gaining control of Karachi, which is dominated by Muslim

## Taliban accused of violating ceasefire

ISLAMABAD, Nov 10: Afghanistan's northern-based opposition accused their Taliban enemies Tuesday of violating a ceasefire and attacking their positions north of the beleaguered capital, reports AP.

However, they said it wouldn't effect an agreement between Afghanistan's two warring sides to continue with a prisoner exchange.

The Taliban launched an offensive in Dasht-i-Archi, a district in northern Kunduz province, some 250 kilometers (150 miles) north of Kabul and resorted to heavy artillery fire in the Ghorband area of central Parwan province, barely 60 kilometers (36 miles) from the capital, opposition spokesman who identified himself only as Arif said.

There was no immediate comment from the Taliban militia.

Opposition fighters repulsed the Taliban attack in Kunduz province, while in Parwan province they retaliated, he said.

## Gingrich says he quits to prevent divisiveness

WASHINGTON, Nov 10: Reflective and partisan by turns, House Speaker Newt Gingrich said Monday night he decided to retire rather than fight for a new term last week because his continued presence would have become an excuse for divisiveness and factionalism inside Republican ranks, reports AP.

"As I leave public office and rejoin the ranks of active citizenship, the venue changes and the cause lives on," said the man who oversaw a Republican majority dedicated to less government and lower taxes.

Gingrich's speech before GOPAC, a Republican organisation he once headed, marked his first extended public appearance since a stunning decision last Friday to give up his high office and leave Congress after 20 years.

He offered no hint of his future political plans.

The Georgian was received warmly by the audience of about 250, and got a rousing ovation when he displayed his personal copy of the "Contract With America," the campaign manifesto that Republicans rode to their landslide election victory in 1994. "Again and again, calmly, systematically, we kept our word," he said.

Gingrich also used his speech to tick off accomplishments of the last four years -- welfare legislation, overhaul of government health care, expanded medical research among them.

"Let me say, without apology, that as Speaker I sought to aggressively lead toward our goals and our vision. We never had a big majority, but we stood for big ideas," he said. "And that is what made us different."

Listening in the audience was Rep Bob Livingston, the Louisiana Republican who challenged Gingrich for the speakership on Friday, and then became the overwhelming favourite to succeed him after the Georgian decided to retire.

"The next Speaker of the House," Gingrich called Livingston, and urged all Republicans to work with him to prevent a political victory in 2000 by Vice President Al Gore and congressional Democrats.

Gingrich decided to give up his powerful post last week after his party suffered unexpected setbacks in the congressional elections. Only hours after he had assured the rank-and-file that Republicans would gain as many as 30 House seats, the voters decided otherwise.

## Indian newspapers welcome verdict in editorials

NEW DELHI, Nov 10: Leading Indian newspapers in separate editorials today welcomed the verdict on the 'Bangabandhu Murder Case' describing it as, a landmark in South Asia," reports BSS.

The conclusion of the trial of the killers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman 23 years after the cold-blooded massacre of Bangladesh's founding father and 25 of his family members, friends and relatives is a landmark in South Asia," The Times of India said in an editorial.

It said Bangladesh's agonising deliverance from Pakistan in 1971 through war and bloodshed is heroic saga of democracy enlarging its boundaries in the Subcontinent. But the glory of the new-born democracy was cruelly cut short with the assassination of President Mujib on August 15, 1975, less than four years after the country's liberation from its subjugated status as East Pakistan.

That the course of justice has eventually triumphed in Bangladesh has widely implied a message for democracy and political security in the region which had reeled under the shockwaves of the 1975 assassination. In fact, it has been suggested that Indira Gandhi, who may have considered the lifting of emergency around that time, changed her mind because of Mujib's murder, The Times said.

In a separate editorial captioned "Long trial for Bangladesh," The Indian Express said the bloody event of August 1975 have corrupted politics and retarded the growth of democracy for almost a quarter of a century.

The politicians who protected the killers for 20 years, passing an indemnity law to prevent them being brought to trial and giving them diplomatic assignments abroad, have not given up yet, the paper warned saying "they have

learned nothing from the cycles of coups and vendettas which have kept Bangladesh in a state of political turmoil for the greater part of its independent history.

The Indian Express said justice is the last thing on the minds of leaders of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and other opposition groups who are making in the streets fanning passions against the verdict of the court.

No Bangladeshi can fail to recognise the objective. It is to subvert the legal process once again by causing civil disturbances, the paper said.

Referring to the reported links of the assassins with Taliban trained terrorists, the editorial said true or not, the fact that such reports are circulating is an indication of the complex challenges facing Sheikh Hasina. Her political opponents intend to give her no respite and she will have to find ways of containing them inside and outside parliament, the paper said.

In another editorial, The Pioneer said the killers not only perpetrated their inhuman massacre, but also imposed a horrible dictatorship on Bangladesh that in turn was short-lived and remembered chiefly for the ghastly murder of such respected Bangladeshi leaders as Syed Nazrul Islam and Tajuddin Ahmed and others in jail in November 1975. It was followed by a cycle of coups and countercoups and military regimes disguised and undisguised.

Sheikh Hasina's resolve not to let the killers of her parents and family go unpunished doubtless explains the recent proceedings. Nevertheless, the trial itself has, by all accounts, been fair and public. The Pioneer said.

## Britain ready to mediate in LTTE-govt talks

COLOMBO, Nov 10: A British Cabinet minister said Tuesday his government was willing to help end the civil war in its former colony, Sri Lanka, but had been approached by neither the government nor the Tamil Tiger rebels, reports AP.

"If asked by the parties involved, we are willing" to mediate, Derek Fatchett, Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, said at a news conference. "But I believe you should not go to a party uninvited. Currently there is no invitation on the table."

Fatchett met with Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadrigamer earlier Tuesday and later was to call on President Chandrika Kumaratunga and leader of the opposition Ran Wickremasinghe. Fatchett was in Sri Lanka to open a 50-company British trade fair.

His visit comes amid reports that the Sri Lankan government was looking for an opening to resume peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who also appear to be searching for a way out after 15 years of military conflict that has left over 55,000 people dead.

Before President Kumaratunga commits herself to talks with the LTTE, she will have to obtain the full support of the main opposition United National Party.

## Join Sri Lankan army, defence ministry urges youngmen

COLOMBO, Nov 10: The defence ministry is urging young men to join the Sri Lankan army, saying its war against Tamil Tiger separatists had entered a decisive stage and it was in need of heroes, reports AP.

"All patriotic youths of this country are hereby invited to come forward as heroes... the land to engage in this national endeavor..." the ministry said in an advertisement appearing Tuesday in the state-run newspaper The Daily News.

Fourteen recruitment centres will be opened island-wide for three weeks beginning Nov 18 to take applications from unmarried males between the ages of 18 and 24.

The 100,000-personnel Sri Lanka army is besieged by desertions and general lack of enthusiasm among able-bodied men to serve in the battlefield.

The army, which has been fighting Tamil Tiger terrorists since 1983, estimates the number of deserters at between 8,000 and 12,000.

Three amnesties were declared this year under which deserters could return without risking punishment. An estimated 10,000 responded, but other soldiers continued to desert.

More than 55,000 people have died in 15 years of fighting.