

Keeping 100,000 troops in Asia-Pacific region

US reaffirms commitment

WASHINGTON, Nov 24: The United States reaffirmed its commitment Monday to keeping 100,000 troops in the Asia-Pacific region, warning of setbacks to peace on the Korean peninsula and uncertainty created by the Asian financial crisis, reports AFP.

Defence Secretary William Cohen, acknowledging the "great consternation" caused by a North Korean missile test in August, said Washington would stick to dialogue with Pyongyang to try to promote greater restraint.

But Cohen — and a report on the first Pentagon review of US strategy in the region in three years — made clear that US military presence in east Asia and the Pacific was now more important than ever.

"Our military presence in Asia serves as an important deterrent to aggression, often lessening the need for a more substantial and costly response later," said the report, titled "The United States security strategy for the east Asia Pacific region."

"Today deterrent capability remains critical in areas such as the Korean peninsula," said the report.

The report comes amid rising concerns over North Korea's intentions following the launch August 31 of a two-stage Teppo Dong rocket carrying a small satellite.

Adding to concerns is North Korea's refusal to grant the United States access to an underground facility that Washington believes was being built to hide a nuclear facility and circumvent a 1994 agreement that froze Pyongyang's nuclear programme.

"I think it's important to say that there have been serious questions raised," Cohen said. "Those serious questions have to be resolved. And unless they are resolved, then that will, in my judgment at least, call into question the viability of the agreed framework."

The report said the missile launch and uncertainty over its adherence to the agreed framework "threaten to set back the prospect for renewed south-

north dialogue and progress in four party talks to reduce tensions on the peninsula and achieve a peace treaty."

The report noted that the 1994 agreement "defused a critical source of tension and deflected what could have been a military confrontation with North Korea."

"Ongoing concerns about DPRK (North Korea) compliance with the agreed framework have underscored the need for continued vigilance and close monitoring of the terms of the agreement," the report said.

It added, however, that Washington still regarded the agreement as "the best vehicle available for limiting North Korean nuclear activities and creating an opening to pursue other issues of concern with the DPRK, such as missile and chemical weapons proliferation and the recovery of Korean War remains," the report said.

"If North Korea proves unwilling to fulfill the terms of the agreement, the United States will pursue its fundamental security interests

through other diplomatic and security means," the report said.

The Pentagon said the updated US-Japan alliance was the lynchpin of US strategy in the region and that Washington would continue its policy of engagement with China.

It cited the Asian financial crisis and nuclear tests by India and Pakistan earlier this year as other sources of concern.

Indonesia's economic and political difficulties will pose challenges to the established order internally and in the region, the report said.

Domestic crises in Cambodia and Myanmar also threaten the region's progress toward stable political cooperation, it said.

"The intention of the United States is to help dampen the sources of instability by maintaining a policy of robust engagement, overseas presence and strengthened alliance, while searching for new opportunities to increase confidence and a spirit of common security," the report added.

'Deeper cuts in Russian, US N-arms to save scarce defence funds'

WASHINGTON, Nov 24: Defence Secretary William Cohen said on Monday that deeper cuts in US and Russian nuclear arms would save scarce defence funds in both countries, but refused to say whether the Pentagon had pressed Congress to make unilateral US cuts, reports Reuters.

He was asked at a news conference about a New York Times article saying the Pentagon had quietly recommended in a report last April that Congress consider unilateral cuts because of weakening security threats coupled with budget concerns.

Cohen said the military, under orders from Congress, was exploring a variety of options on nuclear disarmament but called the report "a highly classified document."

"We intend to keep it at that level for the time being," he told reporters.

The Times reported that senior Clinton administration officials said the military's proposed cuts would reduce the US arsenal below the 6,000 nuclear warheads allowed on both

sides under the first strategic arms reduction treaty, or START-1.

Defence officials, who asked not to be identified, told Reuters on Monday that both the navy and air force as well as the energy department would like to see the US arsenal slashed because it costs billions of dollars a year to maintain warheads that will never be used.

UNSC extends oil-for-food plan for Iraq

UNITED NATIONS, Nov 24: UN Security Council members late on Monday reached broad agreement on renewing the Iraq oil-for-food plan for another six months, including monies to upgrade Baghdad's dilapidated oil equipment, diplomats said, reports Reuters.

A resolution to renew the plan for six months at the current rate of 5,256 billion dollars in oil sales is expected to be adopted on Wednesday.

BRIEFLY

US wishes Yeltsin speedy recovery: The US government extended best wishes for a speedy recovery Monday to Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who has fallen ill with pneumonia but was able to meet in his hospital room with Chinese President Jiang Zemin, AP reports from Washington.

President Bill Clinton was informed of Yeltsin's third illness in recent weeks by Sandy Berger, his assistant for national security affairs, on his way home from a trip to Asia. White House spokesman Joe Lockhart extended good wishes in Clinton's behalf at a refueling stop in Hawaii. In Washington, the State Department spokesman, James P. Rubin, noted that Yeltsin had been diagnosed with pneumonia and hospitalized in Moscow, but that he had met with Jiang.

3 killed in mine blast in China: Three people were killed and 32 were missing in a gas explosion at a coal mine in northwest China on Monday, the China Daily reported Tuesday. AP reports from Beijing.

Thirty-seven miners were evacuated from the shaft after the explosion at 12:10 am, including 11 who were injured, the report said. The explosion occurred in the Liushichun mine in Shaanxi Province. China has a high fatality rate in coal mine accidents.

Chad, Libya open border: Chad and Libya officially opened their border on Monday at a ceremony in the remote Tibesti region, AFP reports from N'djamena.

Chadian Interior Minister Oumarou Djibrillah and his Libyan counterpart Mahamat Mahmoud Alhidjazi presided at the ceremonies. Chadian radio reported. Radio Chad said the ceremony began on the Chadian side at Ounianga where the Libyans have already built huts for use as offices.

Quake jolts northern Japan: An earthquake measuring 5.4 on the Richter scale jolted northern Japan early yesterday, but there were no reports of casualties or damage, the meteorological agency said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The epicenter of the quake, which struck at 4:48 am (1948 GMT Monday), was located off the coast of Miyagi prefecture, 300 kilometres (186 miles) north of Tokyo, at a depth of 80 kilometres (49.6 miles) under water.

Blast kills 5 in Buenos Aires: Five people were killed when an explosion ripped through an illegal fireworks factory in a working class Buenos Aires suburb on Monday, police said, Reuter reports from Buenos Aires.

Another two people were injured in the blast at the private home which operated as an unlicensed factory in the southern Buenos Aires district of Monte Chingolo, police told local news agencies and television.

Rs 3 cr heroin seized in Mumbai: The narcotics cell of Customs Department on Monday raided a flat in Navi Mumbai and seized Rs three crore worth of heroin besides arresting four persons — three Nigerians and their Indian supplier, PTI reports from Mumbai.

According to additional commissioner of Customs AK Chatterjee, the raid was conducted on specific information on the premises situated in Vassundhara Cooperative Housing Society of sector 23, Khairane, Navi Mumbai.

190 fishermen freed from Pak jails: A group of 190 Indian fishermen who were languishing in Pakistani jails, returned home on Monday to an emotional reunion with their near ones, PTI reports from Rajkot.

They landed along with their 31 boats at Okha port in Jamnagar district of Gujarat two days after they were freed by Pakistani authorities as per an agreement with India. The fishermen, who were detained in Pakistan on the charge of intruding into its territorial waters, had to undergo a medical check-up on their arrival, according to official reports reaching in Rajkot.

Sindh govt working to set up military courts

RAWALPINDI, Nov 24: Sindh Government is working closely with Corps Headquarters Karachi to finalise arrangements for setting up military courts, which are to be established according to Ordinance 245, to try terrorists and other outlaws in Karachi, reports PPI.

Officials of the "Judge Advocate General" (JAG) of Pakistan army have also reached Karachi and are engaged in consultations with the concerned authorities to set up the courts. Informed sources told PPI here Monday.

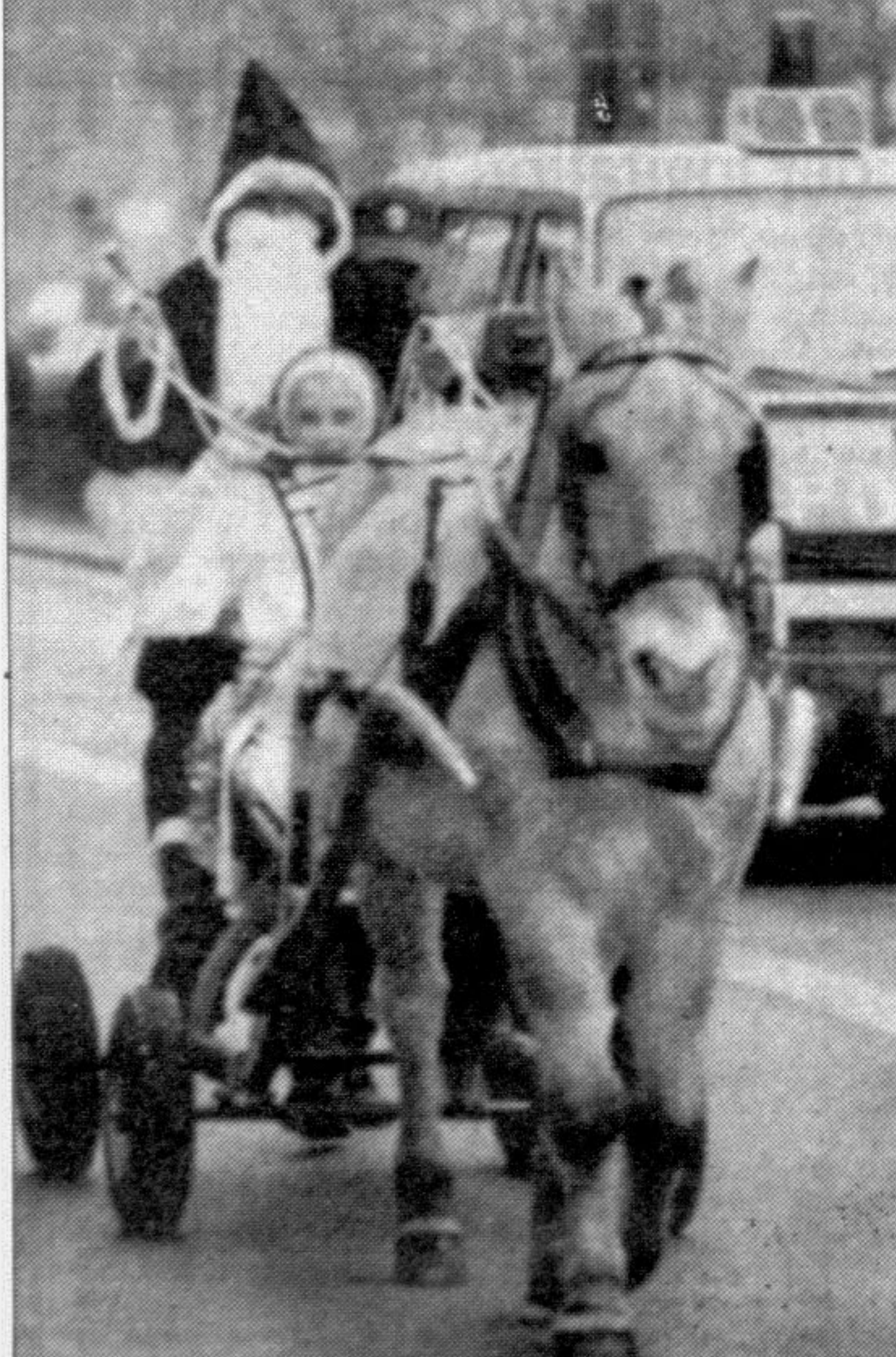
They said it was expected that necessary spade work to constitute the courts would be completed shortly paving way for their establishment adding that officials of the Sindh government, Corps Headquarters and JAG branch are also currently finalising matters pertaining to composition of the courts which may have three members.

There were many legal aspects involved in establishment of the courts adding that entire work is being done in close co-ordination between the concerned civil and military au-

Clinton back to Washington

ANDREWS Air Force Base, Nov 24: President Clinton returned to Washington late Monday after a five-day trip to Asia that took him to Japan, South Korea and Guam, reports Reuters.

The presidential aircraft, air force one, touched down at Andrews Air Force Base in suburban Maryland outside Washington around 7:30 pm (0030 GMT).



Followed by a police vehicle, a bell-ringing Santa Claus and angel arrive on a horse-drawn sled that was mounted on a cart at the Christmas market at the Kaiser-Wilhelm Memorial Church (unseen), downtown Berlin, Monday, as all Berlin Christmas markets were opened.

Typhoon Dawn kills 102 in Vietnam

HANOI, Nov 24: At least 102 people died, 14 were injured and an unspecified number were missing after Typhoon Dawn hit central Vietnam, officials said today.

Many of the missing were fishermen caught offshore when the typhoon struck on Friday, an official from the central committee for Flood and Storm Control in Danang city told AFP.

According to Vietnam News Daily, the toll could rise to several hundred dead and more than a thousand injured as hundreds of fishing boats were reported missing.

Typhoon Dawn was the worst to hit central Vietnam in three decades, the daily said.

It caused at least 392 billion Dong (28 million dollars) in losses to the provinces of Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Thua Thien-Hue, Dangang, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, Dak Lak, the official said.

The most seriously hit areas were Thua Thien-Hue, Quang Tri, Quang Nam and Binh Thuan.



Miss World finalists from Holland, Nerena Ruinemens, left, Russia, Tatiana Mokrouchina, centre left, Paraguay, Pearla Gonzalez, centre, right, and Portugal Marcia Vasconcelos, right, shop together on Intendance Beach in the Seychelles, Monday, ahead of Thursday's Miss World '98 pageant.

Indo-Pak issues must be solved bilaterally: SA

NEW DELHI, Nov 24: South Africa on Monday favoured a bilateral solution to all Indo-Pak issues, including Kashmir, and said President Nelson Mandela's suggestion at NAM summit meant contribution from member nations to resolve the dispute over the state, reports PPI.

"Our President (Nelson) Mandela during Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit at Durban did not mean involvement of third party. He only called for contribution from all member nations to help resolve Kashmir problem," South African ambassador to India JM Matsila told reporters here.

The envoy stressed that India and Pakistan should settle all issues bilaterally.

He added that Non-Aligned Movement was still relevant as ever.

Taliban free 100 prisoners

KABUL, Nov 24: An opposition rocket slammed into the beleaguered capital shortly before dawn on Tuesday, but there were no immediate reports of casualties, reports AP.

The rocket attack came just hours after the Taliban army announced the release of 100 opposition prisoners "as a gesture of good will" according to Radio Shariat.

The prisoners were soldiers loyal to opposition leader and former military chief Ahmed Shah Massoud, the radio broadcast said.

The men had been held in the Pul-e-Charkhi jail on the outskirts of the capital.

Opposition soldiers, who are hunkered down in positions barely 20 kilometers (12 miles) outside the capital, have not taken responsibility for the rocket attack. However in recent days they have been targeting the combined military and civilian airport with their rockets in an attempt to stop the taking off of Taliban military fighter jets from the airport.

Russia will not challenge China's claim on Taiwan

TAIPEI, Nov 24: Following Russian President Boris Yeltsin's meeting with Chinese President Jiang Zemin, Russia will promise not to challenge China's claim to Taiwan or sell the island weapons, a newspaper reported Tuesday, reports AP.

Russia will pledge not to recognise Taiwan's independence, support Taiwan's entry into the United Nations or formally recognise the political split between Taiwan and China, the United Daily News reported, quoting Chinese news agency reports.

And Russia will promise not to sell weaponry to Taiwan — a symbolic concession — in a joint statement that the two sides plan to release, the newspaper said without indicating when the statement was expected.

Lawyers accuse police of treating Anwar harshly

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 24: Lawyers defending Anwar Ibrahim Tuesday alleged that while people who accused him of sexual misdeeds were treated softly, policemen were harsh with the former deputy prime minister, reports AP.

Police broke the door of the former deputy prime minister's home to arrest him on Sept. 20, but negotiated for more than four hours before arresting two people who had made allegations of sexual misconduct against him, a lawyer told the trial court.

The two who had made allegations were arrested and forced to retract their statements by police allegedly acting on orders of Anwar last year.

The prosecution is trying to establish that Anwar misused his powers last year to cover up sexual misdeeds.

The arrests of Ummi Hafidha and Azizan Abu Bakar were delayed because the police had to negotiate with the landlady, Restina Majid, for four hours.

police officer Mazlan Mansor testified Tuesday.

Mazlan, a prosecution witness, was among a team of police officials sent to arrest the two on Aug 18, 1997.

"I am putting it to you that Restina, Ummi and Azizan were given special treatment and the police dared not move in because there were people behind these people who have clout," said Christopher Fernando, a defence lawyer.

The witness said: "I don't agree."

The defence has earlier insinuated that there may have been a conspiracy involving senior government officials to frame Anwar.

Restina is the sister-in-law of Aziz Shamsuddin, press secretary of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

On Tuesday afternoon, a police intelligence officer testified that he was present at a meeting where Anwar ordered police to seek out Ummi and Azizan and

find out why they had made the allegations.

Amin Yunus, a former deputy director of the Special Branch said Anwar wanted the police to intimidate the two.

The accused ordered us to track down Ummi and Azizan and dig up all the information from them as to why they came up with the allegations," Amin said. He did not say whether Anwar had ordered the arrest of the two.

The 51-year-old sacked deputy denies the charges, calling them part of political vendetta orchestrated by his former boss.

So far, all 10 police officers have testified in support of the prosecution version that Anwar had forced the police to obtain retractions from Ummi, the sister of his former secretary, and Azizan, his former chauffeur.

Ummi had accused Anwar of having sex with her brother's wife, Azizan claimed he was sodomised by Anwar.

Campaign in Indian state polls over Surveys predict gains by Congress

NEW DELHI, Nov 24: A noisy, colourful election campaign for crucial state elections is over in India, and authorities are gearing for their next challenge: Preventing violence at 100,000 balloting stations, reports AP.

Pre-election surveys predicted gains by the Congress Party over the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party because of widespread discontent with the soaring prices of vegetables. The BJP, which also heads the federal government, governs two of the four states, and Congress rules one.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said at a rally Monday the election will not affect his 19-party coalition, although most analysts see the vote as the first test of popularity for the BJP-led government since it came to office in June.

If the BJP fares poorly, it could increase tension within the alliance, where relations already are precarious.

More than 80 million voters are eligible to choose 626 state legislators from among 5,000 candidates Wednesday in four of India's 26 states. Elections frequently turn violent in India.

"We have done everything we can, and we expect totally peaceful elections," K J Rao, a senior official at the Election Commission who looks after security arrangements, told The Associated Press Tuesday.

Tens of thousands of armed police have taken positions at balloting stations in the northern state of New Delhi where the federal capital is located, in Rajasthan in India's western desert, in the central state of Madhya Pradesh and in the

tiny northeastern state of Mizoram.

On Tuesday, a cabinet minister from the state of Uttar Pradesh was expelled from Rajasthan where he had brought hundreds of armed supporters, reportedly to canvass for a local candidate. The Minister,

around Delhi wearing garlands of onions, their way of protesting a 700 per cent rise in the price of the staple since September.

On Monday Sushma Swaraj, Delhi's chief minister, stood at a press conference holding the Bhagwad Gita, one of the holiest Hindu books, and swore she had nothing to do with an alleged swindler with close links to powerful politicians, bureaucrats and Mafia gangs — a charge made by the Congress Party.

An IANS report adds: Of the four states that go to the Assembly polls on Wednesday, the one in Madhya Pradesh is perhaps the most keenly fought and eagerly awaited. Apart from being the home state of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee as well as that of a host of opposition Congress leaders, the results in Madhya Pradesh is likely to have a direct bearing on the future of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led coalition at the centre.

Adding to the suspense is the fact that Madhya Pradesh is one state where, more than any other, the pollsters have been reluctant to predict the outcome. The few who have dared have come out with conflicting assessments. The Congress, which rules the state, and the challenger BJP are in a race that could well end in an exciting photofinish. Nearly 45 million voters will exercise their franchise to elect 320 members of the legislature from a total of 2,510 candidates in state which, sprawled over 443,000 square kilometres, is India's largest.



Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi addresses a rally at Shahdara in New Delhi Monday.

Involvement in bloody clashes Indonesian military police have jailed 163 soldiers

JAKARTA, Nov 24: Indonesian military police have jailed 163 soldiers involved in bloody clashes between troops and students that claimed 15 lives and left more than 400 injured, reports said today, says AFP.

"This was a form of disciplinary punishment... They will be jailed for 21 days," Indonesian military police chief Major General Djasri Marin was quoted by the media Indonesia as saying.

"But if after the investigation they are found proven guilty, they are likely to be court-martialed," he said.

Fifteen people died and more than 400 were injured on November 13 when troops fired what they said were rubber bullets, teargas and water cannon on students attempting to march to parliament to protest a legislative session they refused to recognise.

The students deride the legislature as a legacy of former President Suharto, who fell from power in May, and say it cannot be entrusted with the people's calls for reform.

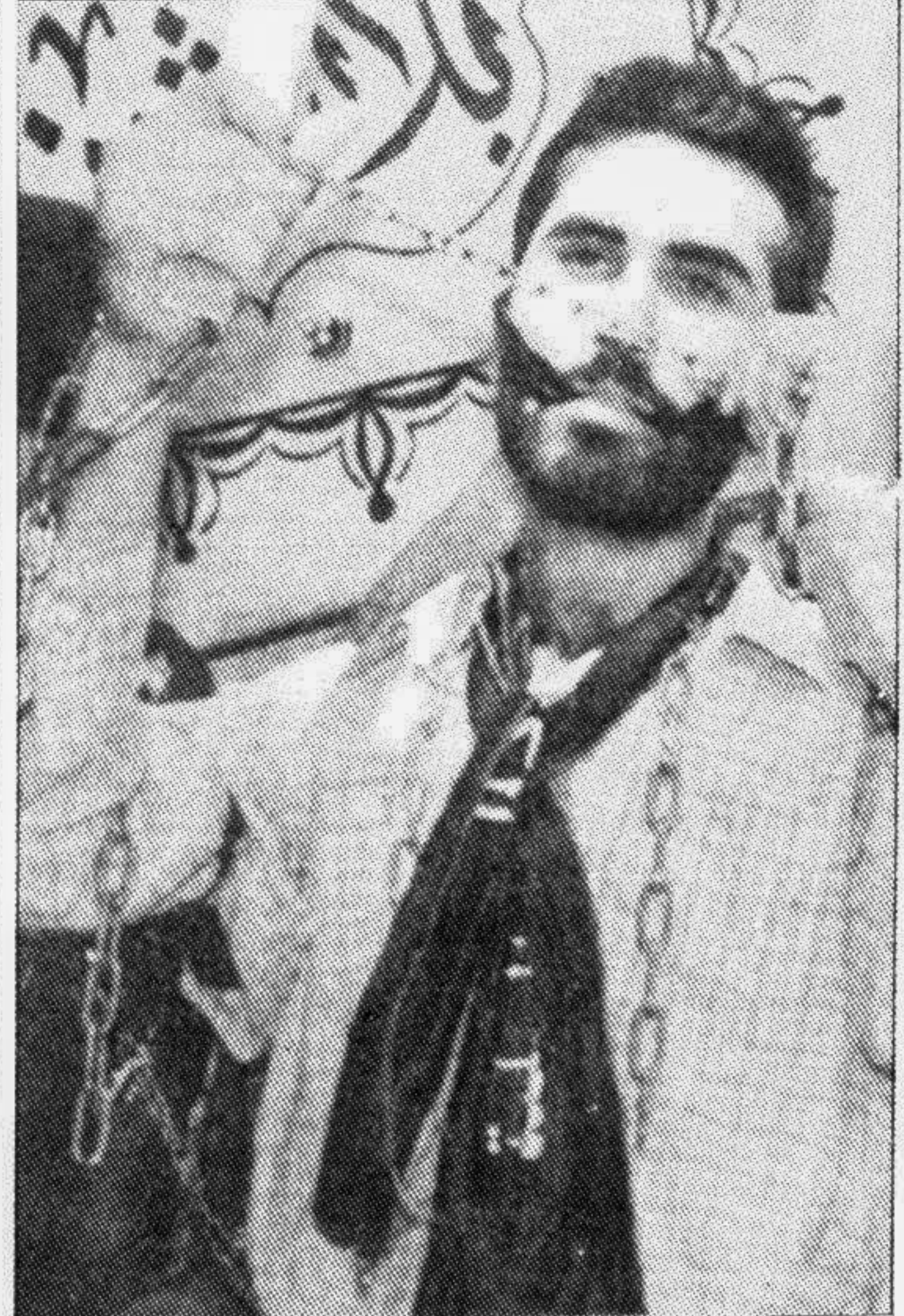
Armed forces spokesman Major General Syamsu Ma'arif said Sunday that 144 soldiers had admitted to having fired rubber bullets without orders from their superiors.

He also said the military was investigating autopsy reports that fragments of live ammunition had been found in some of the victims.

The 144 were among 163 charged under the army's disciplinary code. Among those charged were 12 acting officers who allegedly could not control their subordinates, and army members who found beating up journalists, Ma'arif said.

He said "irregularities" had been found in autopsies that indicated live ammunition was used and in at least one case was of a type not issued to the military.

Marin said ballistic tests were underway and the military police would summon Wiwid Pratiwo, a 21-year-old student who confessed Saturday he was forced into begin an informer by the military.



A supporter of the radical Islamic group Hamas wears chains and a gag, to show his solidarity with Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails, while he participates with others in an all-faction student demonstration at An-Najah University in the West Bank town of Nablus Monday.