

Hereditary peers to lose right to sit, vote in UK Parliament

LONDON, Nov 29: Britain's Queen Elizabeth II has agreed that leading members of the Royal Family will lose their historic right to sit and vote in Parliament as part of government reforms of the House of Lords, it was confirmed today, reports AFP.

Prince Philip, Prince Charles, prince Andrew and the Dukes of Gloucester and Kent will all lose their seats along with other hereditary members if legislation announced in last week's Queen's speech is passed.

Formal advice has been received from the government on reforms and in line with established constitutional practice, the Queen has accepted that advice, a Buckingham Palace spokesman said.

The peers of first creation — the Prince of Wales (Charles), the Duke of Edinburgh (Philip) and the Duke of York (Andrew) would lose their seats.

There would be no separate arrangements for the Duke of Gloucester and the Duke of Kent. They would not be able to remain in the House of Lords.

A government spokesman pointed out that members of the Royal Family have not voted for many years.

The House of Lords Reform Bill, which will remove the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the Lords, is expected to be introduced in the New Year.

Taliban foil plot to kill Bin Laden

DUBAI, Nov 29: A plot to kill Saudi-born-billionaire terrorist Osama Bin Laden allegedly by the Hizb-e-Islami in central Kabul was foiled recently by Taliban, a report in the Gulf News English daily claimed today, reports PTI.

The report claimed that four attackers were gunned down after they were entrapped in a cordon that the Taliban threw about two km from the hideout of Bin Laden.

The report quoting an Urdu daily did not directly name the United States but implied that the Americans allegedly masterminded the plot and added that Mullah Humayun Taqi, a former commander of the Hizb-e-Islami, was its principal architect.

It said Taqi finalised the details of the attack on the Saudi exile with two friends and a relative. The plan was hatched in central Kabul at the residence of an Afghan holding Canadian nationality who was appointed to look after the UN Food Programme, the daily said.

China may be working on laser weapon, warns Pentagon

WASHINGTON, Nov 29: Pentagon officials are warning that China may be working on a powerful laser weapon that could knock out orbiting US spy satellites in seconds, the Los Angeles Times reported on Saturday, says AFP.

Citing a 15-page military report to congress released earlier this month, the Times said the Pentagon lacks conclusive proof that Beijing is redefining the weapon but remains concerned that hundreds of US military satellites are in jeopardy.

The satellites are crucial for gathering information about enemy troops and equipment and played a major role in the 1991 Gulf War, the Times said. The report said the Pentagon believes that China may be getting a hand from scientists from the former Soviet Union which had a longstanding laser programme.

Jiang's gift for Japan

TOKYO, Nov 29: Chinese President Jiang Zemin gave a pair of crested ibises, a rare species of bird, to Japan during his visit here, hoping they will mark closer ties between the two Asian nations, reports AFP.

The species was virtually wiped out just two decades ago but China has used artificial reproduction to restore the population.

Mamata says Performance of Vajpayee govt not satisfactory

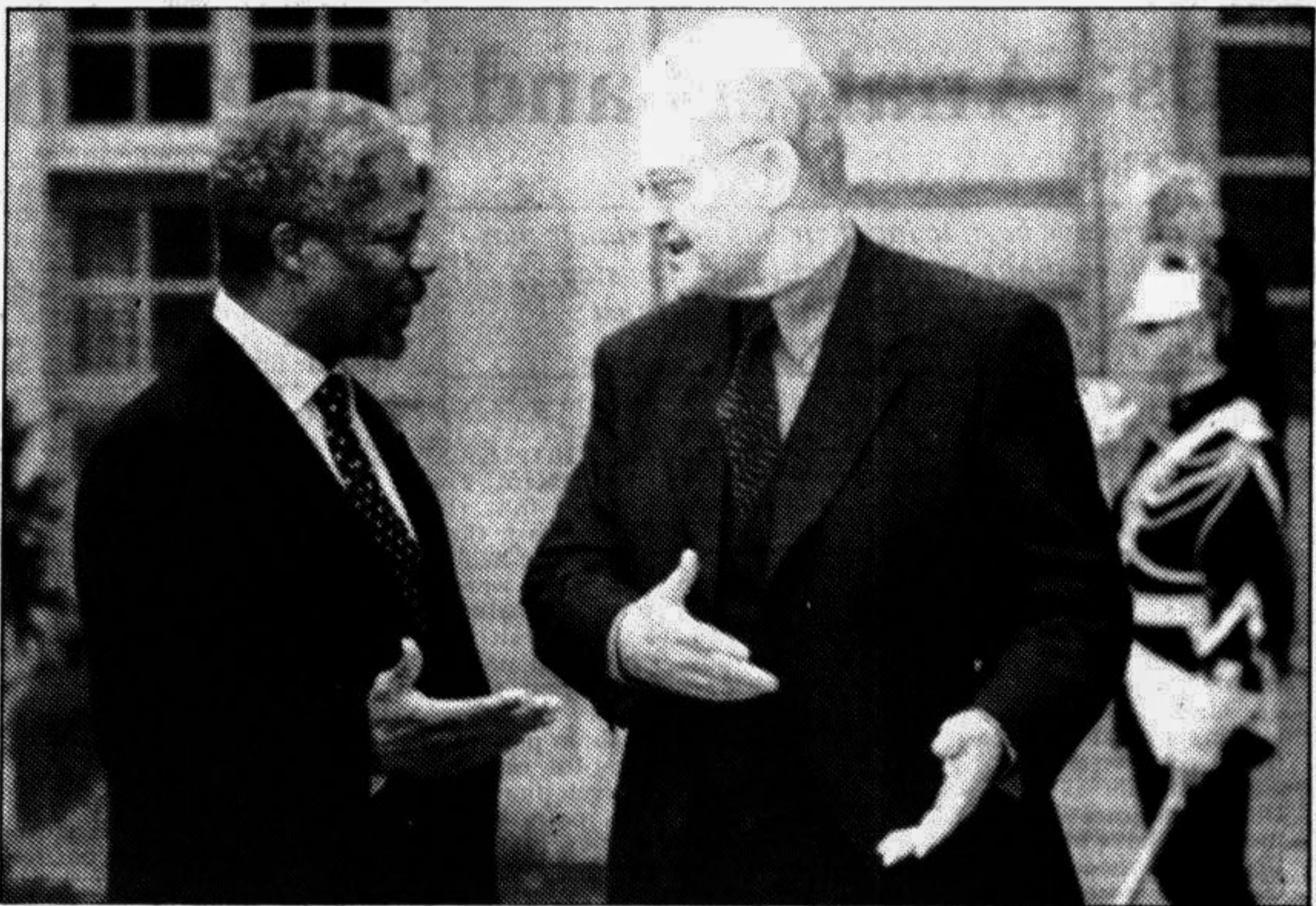
CALCUTTA, Nov 29: Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee today said the performance of the Vajpayee government in the last eight months was not satisfactory but assured that her party would continue its support to the BJP-led coalition at the centre, reports PTI.

Commenting on the poor performance of BJP in the assembly polls in four states, Banerjee told a private TV channel that the Vajpayee government should be effective.

On the possibility of her party withdrawing support to the central government, Banerjee said Trinamool Congress would not betray the people. The party had made the commitment to support the Vajpayee government.

Meanwhile, Trinamool Congress spokesman Sudip Bandyopadhyay said BJP would not have fared the RUP had the party paid heed to Banerjee's advice to control the price rise.

Mamata Banerjee would not attend the meeting of the leaders of BJP allies convened by Vajpayee today, he told PTI.



French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, right, greets UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan after the Franco-African Summit in Paris and Saturday. They discussed the situation in Congo. — AP UNB photo

Colombo govt urged to grab Tigers' peace offer

COLOMBO, Nov 29: Minority Tamil legislators in Sri Lanka today urged the Colombo government to grab the latest peace offer by Tamil Tiger rebels to break the stalemate in the long-running separatist war, reports AFP.

The moderate Tamil parties asked President Chandrika Kumaratunga to respond positively to Friday's offer of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to resume political negotiations.

Tamil legislator Dharmalingam Sidhathan said the remarks by Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran provided hope of breaking the political and military impasse in the drawn out conflict which has claimed over 55,000 lives.

"The government can make use of the opportunity and go for talks," Sidhathan said. "It should not be like in the past where you go on talking and talking. You must agree to a specified time period."

The LTTE leader in a speech broadcast over his clandestine voice of Tigers Radio to commemorate thousands of his cadres killed in the campaign for an independent homeland said they favoured third party mediated talks.

There was no immediate reaction from the government, however, the state-run Sunday Observer said government officials would not immediately take a "definite position" on the Tiger offer.

speech faxed to news agencies here made it clear that the Tigers were not prepared to accept any preconditions to resume talks.

"We are not prepared to accept pre-conditions for political dialogue," Tiger leader said.

"We hold the view that political negotiations cannot be free, fair and just if the government utilises the military aggression on our soil and the restrictions imposed on the economic life of our people as political pressures."

"We are prepared to engage in initial talks to discuss the removal of such pressures and to work out a basic framework for political negotiations," Prabhakaran said.

Britain denies deal to put Pinochet on trial in Santiago

LONDON, Nov 29: The British government late Saturday refused to respond to reports that it was preparing to accept a deal proposed by the Chilean government which would see Augusto Pinochet put on trial in Santiago, reports AFP.

Early editions of two Sunday newspapers said British ministers increasingly believed such a result was the best way to bring the 83-year old to justice without destabilising Chilean democracy or endangering trade relations.

They said the deal was proposed by Chile's Foreign Minister Jose Miguel Insulza who is meeting ministers on a four-day visit from Friday.

Insulza stressed on Saturday that 14 separate private cases had been filed against the former dictator since he stepped down as army commander in

Britain denies deal to put Pinochet on trial in Santiago

chief in March. The Observer newspaper added that Insulza had also said that a state prosecution, covering all the charges of genocide, terrorism and torture in the extradition warrant to Spain, was also a possibility.

Britain's Home Secretary Jack Straw now has until December 11 to decide whether to allow the extradition requested by a Spanish prosecutor on crimes alleged to have been committed during Pinochet's 1973 to 1990 military rule in Chile.

Britain's law lords on Wednesday ruled that Pinochet is not immune.

Later, asked about the reports of a deal, a spokesman for his office, merely said that Straw would be considering all grounds for Pinochet's release under the law and any talk of "deal" was inaccurate.

Ted Newhouse dead: Theodore Newhouse, an expert in newspaper management and production who helped build one of the world's largest news organisations, died Saturday after a long illness. He was 95, AP reports from New York.

Newhouse was associate publisher of the Newhouse newspaper group and with his brothers, Samuel I and Norman Newhouse, built and operated the family-owned enterprise.

Sudanese Speaker to resign: The most influential person in Sudan's government, parliamentary Speaker Hassan Turabi, told fellow lawmakers Saturday that he will resign from the Speaker's Post, a report said, AP reports from Khartoum.

Deputy Speaker Ellison Magaia was quoted by the official Egyptian news agency MENA as saying that Turabi would resign in order to devote his time to the National Congress, which is effectively the ruling party.

6 cops killed in ambush in Colombia: Six police died and four others were seriously injured in an ambush by leftwing guerrillas in southern Colombia on Saturday, official said, AFP reports from Bogota.

Insurgents from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) ambushed a police patrol outside the town of Puerto Asis in the southern department of Putumayo which borders Ecuador and Peru.

Bomb blast kills 2 in Java: Two men died and six others were injured when a car exploded, apparently from a home-made bomb, in the island of Madura, off the coast of East Java, reports said yesterday, AFP reports from Jakarta.

Pamekasan district police chief Lieutenant Colonel Wahyudi was quoted by the Jawa Pos daily as saying he suspected that the blast on Saturday was related to disappointment over a local village chief elections.

Honduras evacuates 10,000 people: Authorities began evacuating more than 10,000 people from the northern town of Choloma out of fear that four days of heavy rains could cause mudslides, AP reports from Tegucigalpa.

Vice President Billy Hoidal said the evacuations that began Saturday could be extended to other towns on Honduras' Caribbean coast if rains continue as forecast. Already, parts of Choloma, 200 KM north of Tegucigalpa, are flooded, and the Choloma River has risen 3 feet (about 1 metre) above its normal levels. The waters continue to rise.

Mild haze over Kuala Lumpur: A mild haze caused by smoke blown from forest fires in Indonesia hung over Kuala Lumpur, but was expected to clear soon, the weather office said on Sunday, AP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

Smoke from fires on the nearby Indonesian island of Sumatra blanketed Singapore and parts of southern Malaysia on Friday and Saturday. Skies turned gray over Kuala Lumpur and visibility dropped on Sunday morning, but a desk officer at the meteorological forecasting office said it was because of dark clouds and not the "slight haze."

New Miss World was raped in Italy last month?

LONDON, Nov 29: Italian police confirmed that the new Miss World, Israel's Linor Abargil, reported that she was attacked last month while in Italy for a fashion show, British newspapers reported in Sunday's editions, reports AP.

Abargil, the reigning Israel who was crowned Miss World on Saturday night, told police she was attacked on October 6 after going to a travel agency to buy a plane ticket to Rome, where she planned to meet her mother before flying home, The Times of London and several other newspapers reported.

The Egyptian owner of the travel agency has since been arrested and charged in the attack, the newspapers said.

Julia Morley, one of the organisers of the Miss World competition, told The News of the World that she nor Abargil would comment on the rape report. Abargil could not be reached, and a family member who answered the phone at Abargil's home in Jerusalem declined to comment.

"For legal reasons, absolutely no comment can be made by Linor or myself," Morley was quoted as saying.

Abargil told police that the man, who was not named in the reports, offered to drive her to Rome himself because he had business there and all flights were booked, the newspapers said. She told police that he pulled off the road shortly after starting out, tied her up and sexually assaulted her.

"It went on and on for about two hours," The News of the World quoted Abargil as telling Italian police.

Abargil told police that after the attack, he tried to apologise as he drove back to Milan, the newspapers said. In the morning, Abargil caught a train to Rome and went with her mother to tell police there what had happened, the newspapers reported.

Details of the ordeal were uncovered by Guido Columba of the Ansa news agency.

Nehru-Gandhi dynasty on limelight again

NEW DELHI, Nov 29: India's most famous political dynasty returned to the spotlight today after Italian-born Sonia Gandhi led her Congress party to a stunning victory in state elections, reports AFP.

Gandhi, a 51-year-old mother of two, presided over noisy victory celebrations here as masses of cheering party activists poured into her heavily-guarded house in the heart of New Delhi.

She was, however, guarded in her comments following the humiliating defeat her party handed to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian people's party).

Of the four regions that went to the polls Wednesday, the

Rivals agree to sign truce accord in DRC on Dec 18

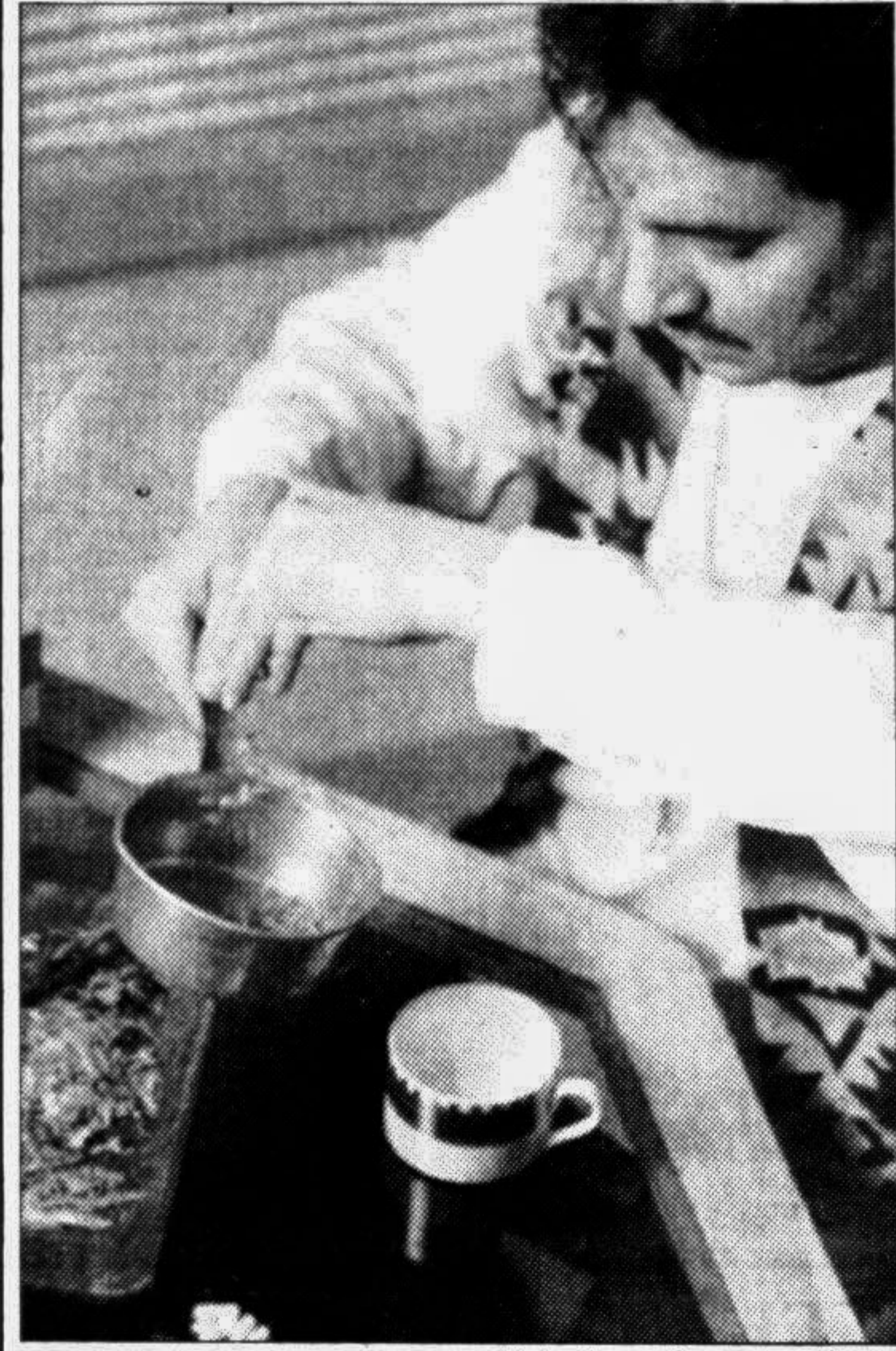
PARIS, Nov 29: President of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Laurent Kabila, announced on Saturday that a ceasefire to the conflict in his country will be signed on December 18 in Lusaka, Zambia, reports AFP.

Kabila, speaking after the close of a two-day summit of 49 African countries hosted in Paris, told reporters the ceasefire agreement itself would be negotiated in Burkina Faso at talks in Ouagadougou on December 17 and 18.

Reuters adds: United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced on Saturday that countries fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo had agreed to an immediate ceasefire in their four-month old war.

However, there was widespread confusion over the details of the pledge, with Congolese President Laurent Kabila denying that a deal had been reached and the Rwandan president, who supports Congo

Off the Record



Ricardo Rojas, 37, makes a medicinal tea from sage in a South Minneapolis housing community for Native Americans with HIV and AIDS called Maynidoowahwak Odena on Monday. Rojas takes a collection of pills twice daily, commonly known as the 'AIDC Cocktail' but also uses Native American herbs to help maintain his physical and spiritual health. Rojas has been living with HIV since 1991. — AP/UNB photo

Banquet for monkeys

LOPBURI, Thailand: With big appetites and their own version of table manners, hundreds of monkeys got their annual reward on Sunday for bringing good fortune to this central Thailand town — a feast served up on red table cloths, reports AP.

Scouting down from their perches in ancient temples, squads of simians descended upon a dozen banquet tables to grab noodles, popcorn, mangoes, papayas, nuts and soft drinks. While the macaques appeared to have learned little etiquette of sit-down dinners in the 10 years since the feast started, a certain method in the monkey madness emerged.

Rather than overwhelm the tables, aggressive males helped themselves to the chow first, followed by shy mothers and their babies.

Older, experienced types plopped themselves casually at the centre of tables, confidently stuffing themselves, while youngsters would grab a few handfuls from the plates and eat either on the run or crouched under a table.

By day's end, hundreds of monkeys were fed at two settings within Lopburi's Three Pagoda Compound, watched by thousands of tourists and townsfolk who joined in the merriment while keeping a respectful distance from the diners.

Leading the locals was monkey magnate Yongyuth Kitwatananusont, the 57-year-old son of impoverished Chinese immigrants who suddenly experienced good fortune when they moved to the town.

Yongyuth ascribed it to the monkeys, resident in the town for centuries and traditionally regarded as luck-bringing despite their habit of snatching food from passers-by and food stalls.

Proving there was no business like monkey business, Yongyuth dreamed up the simian feast idea decade ago. While he makes little or no money from the actual event, tourists crowd the hotels and stores he owns in the town, 115 km north of Bangkok.

Japanese aggression in China dominates Jiang's Tokyo visit

SAPPORO, Japan, Nov 29: Chinese President Jiang Zemin today wrapped up a landmark visit to Japan marred by his failure to get a written apology for Tokyo's wartime atrocities, reports AFP.

Jiang visited at a monument to great Chinese writer Lu Xun in the northern city of Sendai before flying to this nearby snowbound city, dwelling for a short time on the cultural side of history.

But it was the brutal 1937-45 Japanese aggression in China that dominated the six-day state visit aimed at improving ties, the first by a Chinese leader to Japan since diplomatic ties were resumed in 1972.

He received only a verbal apology at his Tokyo summit on Thursday with Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi.

A written joint declaration issued after the summit mentioned Japan's "deep remorse" but failed to offer a proper apology. Neither of the leaders signed the statement.

Jiang refused to let the dark history go. "Japan should 'guide the nation and young generations

with correct views of history and never allow a repeat of the ideology or force of militarism," he told students at Tokyo's Waseda University on Saturday.

China says 20 million people died as a result of the 1937-45 occupational. The 1937 Nanjing massacre alone killed 140,000 people, according to allied trials of Japanese war criminals.

At a weekend news conference, the Chinese leader accused "certain people in high positions" in Japan of distorting history and trying to gloss over the past aggression.

Protests by extreme rightists who deny the Nanjing massacre took place dogged the trip, although none got past heavy security, enforced by 10,000 extra Japanese police, to approach Jiang.

Ironically, it was left-wing demonstrators who faced off with the Chinese leader, interrupting his university speech with anti-nuclear and Tiananmen Square protests before being dragged off by security guards.

"When I was even younger than you, I personally experi-

enced the suffering of a crisis of our people and a devastation of our country," the Chinese leader told students the day before.

"As an eye-witness, I am responsible for telling the fact to younger generations. We have to face up to the sad events."

Jiang had also sought a strong statement on Taiwan from his summit here, laying out Japan's support for China's policy of no to Taiwan's independence, no to two Chinas (China and Taiwan) and no to Taiwan joining international organisations as a sovereign state.

Instead, Beijing merely got a restatement of Japan's promise not to recognise Taiwan as a separate state. China regards the island as a renegade province.

Early Sunday, Jiang travelled to Tokyo to Sendai to trace Chinese writer Lu Xun's voyage of nearly a century ago.

Jiang placed flowers at a five-metre (16.5-foot) stone monument with a bronze relief of Lu Xun holding a cigarette in his right hand, in the Sendai Museum area along Hirosegawa river, west of central Sendai.

Kurdish rebels shoot down Turkish chopper

ANKARA, Nov 29: Kurdish guerrillas whose leader Abdullah Ocalan is the focus of a row between Turkey and its NATO allies Italy and Germany said on Saturday they had shot down a Turkish Army helicopter and killed over a dozen troops, reports Reuters.

The Sikorsky helicopter was shot down by National Liberation Army of Kurdistan (ARGK) forces as it tried to deploy troops on the Kartal peak in the Cukurca area," the Kurdish Dem news agency said. The ARGK is the military wing of the PKK.

The agency quoted the PKK as saying that 17 soldiers were killed.

Turkey's governor's office in Diyarbakir had said earlier 15 soldiers had died and one was injured when the Sikorsky helicopter crashed on Friday near Curkura close to the Iraqi border while returning from an operation against the PKK.

Investigations into whether it crashed due to a technical fault or was brought down are continuing," a security official told Reuters. PKK rebels brought down two Turkish military helicopters in Iraq last year using Russian-made missiles.



Chinese President Jiang Zemin, left, talks about his calligraphy before presenting it to Tohoku University President Hiroyuki Abe on Sunday, as he tours the university campus to look at items related Lu Xun, one of Chinese literatures' most revered figures who spent his youth age in this northern city of Sendai. — AP/UNB photo