

International

Attempt on life of Vajpayee?

SRINAGAR, India, Dec 7: A powerful bomb planted close to where Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was staying on his first visit to Kashmir rocked the state's summer capital late Sunday, police said today, reports AFP.

The deafening blast came from a tiny public toilet near the Dal Lake, destroying it and shattering window panes of some half-a-dozen buildings in the vicinity, police and witnesses said.

No one was injured in the explosion, and police and paramilitary troops quickly sealed off the deserted area in the heart of Srinagar, the summer capital of the troubled Himalayan state.

More than half of foreign students in US are from Asia

WASHINGTON, Dec 7: Boosted by students from Asia, the number of foreign students in the United States surged 5.1 per cent to 481,200 in 1998 after four years of flat growth, says a new study released today, reports AFP.

The number of American students abroad also rose a steep 11.4 per cent from 1997 to nearly 100,000.

These figures are part of "open doors," says an annual report on international educational exchange by the Institute for International Education (IIE). The US Information Agency (USIA) funds the study. "We are delighted to see both

the increased numbers of international students choosing to study in the United States and the unparalleled numbers of US students going abroad," said Keith Geiger, USIA's director of academic programmes.

But he warned that from 1995-97, the American share of all international students dropped from 32 per cent to 30 per cent, down from 40 per cent in the 1980s.

Japan is the leading country of origin for foreign students here with 47,073, followed by China with 46,958, and South Korea 42,890. Asian students account for more than half of international student enrollment

in the United States — 57.6 per cent — and increased by 6.4 per cent to 277,508 this year, the "open doors" survey reported.

Korean student enrollment rose 15.5 per cent, Chinese enrollment 10.5 per cent, and Indian enrollment 10.4 per cent, IIE said.

The study does not take into account the higher-than-usual dropout rate this year among the 80,000 Asian students whose home countries were hit hardest by the Asian financial crisis: Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand.

An IIE survey in March

found nearly 10 per cent of students from these countries dropped out in 1998. The decline in South Korean students was sharpest, with many US campuses reporting losses of up to 20 per cent.

The most popular single destination is New York City with 29,855 international students this year. Manhattan alone drew 21,948 students, edging out Los Angeles for the second year as the top US host country.

Foreign students comprise just three per cent of the US student population at colleges and universities, but the commerce department ranks higher education as the country's fifth-

largest service export.

The US government says foreign students contribute more than 7.5 billion dollars to the US economy annually in their school fees and living expenses.

Business administration and engineering remain the top fields of study for international students, while the number of computer science majors surged 20 per cent and arts majors grew 14.7 per cent.

Most American students still go to Western Europe, but more are heading to Asia and Latin America — those travelling to Australia rose 16.8 per cent, China 16.5 per cent, Costa

Rica 13.5 per cent, and Mexico 10.4 per cent.

Sixty-eight per cent of all foreign students receive most of their funds from family and personal sources. More than 75 per cent receive most of their funding from sources outside of the United States, IIE said.

In a separate category on non-enrolled post-doctoral scholars, universities reported some 65,494 international students teaching or conducting research during the 1997-98 year.

Forty-three per cent were East Asian nationals: China accounted for 10,709, Japan 5,472, and Korea 4,520.

World War II bomb explodes: Four Filipinos killed

MANILA, Dec 7: A World War II-vintage bomb dug up by men under a house exploded Monday in a central Philippine city, killing the house owner and three others, police said, reports AP.

Police said carpenters digging a hole to install a septic tank found the bomb 15 days ago under the house in Tacloban City but did not report it to authorities.

The house owner called three friends Monday to try to open the bomb, hoping they could sell its power, a police investigator said.

The 1,000-pound bomb went off as the men were tinkering with its, instantly killing them and destroying the house.

Azizan now says Anwar did not sodomise him

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 7: In a startling turnaround, a key witness whose allegations form the bulk of sex charges against jailed politician Anwar Ibrahim, denied Monday that he was ever sodomised by the former deputy prime minister, reports AP.

Azizan Abu Bakar, the former driver of Anwar's wife, has for the last week testified Anwar repeatedly forced him into sodomy, a crime in this predominantly Muslim nation.

But when the trial resumed after the weekend recess, he told his cross-examiner that he had not been sodomised.

Anwar is currently on trial on four counts of abuse of power. He will be tried later on another charge of corruption and five charges of committing illegal sex acts.

He has denied any wrongdoing, calling the charges part of a high-level conspiracy to ruin his political career.

If the defence punches out holes in Azizan's testimony, it could be a crushing blow for

prosecutors who have based the most serious charge of illegal sex acts mostly on Azizan's accusations.

Taken back at Azizan's retraction, defence attorney Christopher Fernando repeated his question as a hushed silence fell on the courtroom and everyone strained to hear the answer.

"I put it to you that Anwar Ibrahim did not sodomise you and that is why you visited him between 1992 and 1997," Azizan: "Yes."

Fernando then asked the court interpreter to repeat the query in Malay so that there was no doubt that Azizan understood and that Judge Augustine Paul recorded the response. The answer remained the same.

Surprisingly, Christopher did not press him with more questions and prosecutors did not react.

Azizan's accusations have related to events in 1992 when he was employed by Anwar's wife, Azizah Ismail. He told the

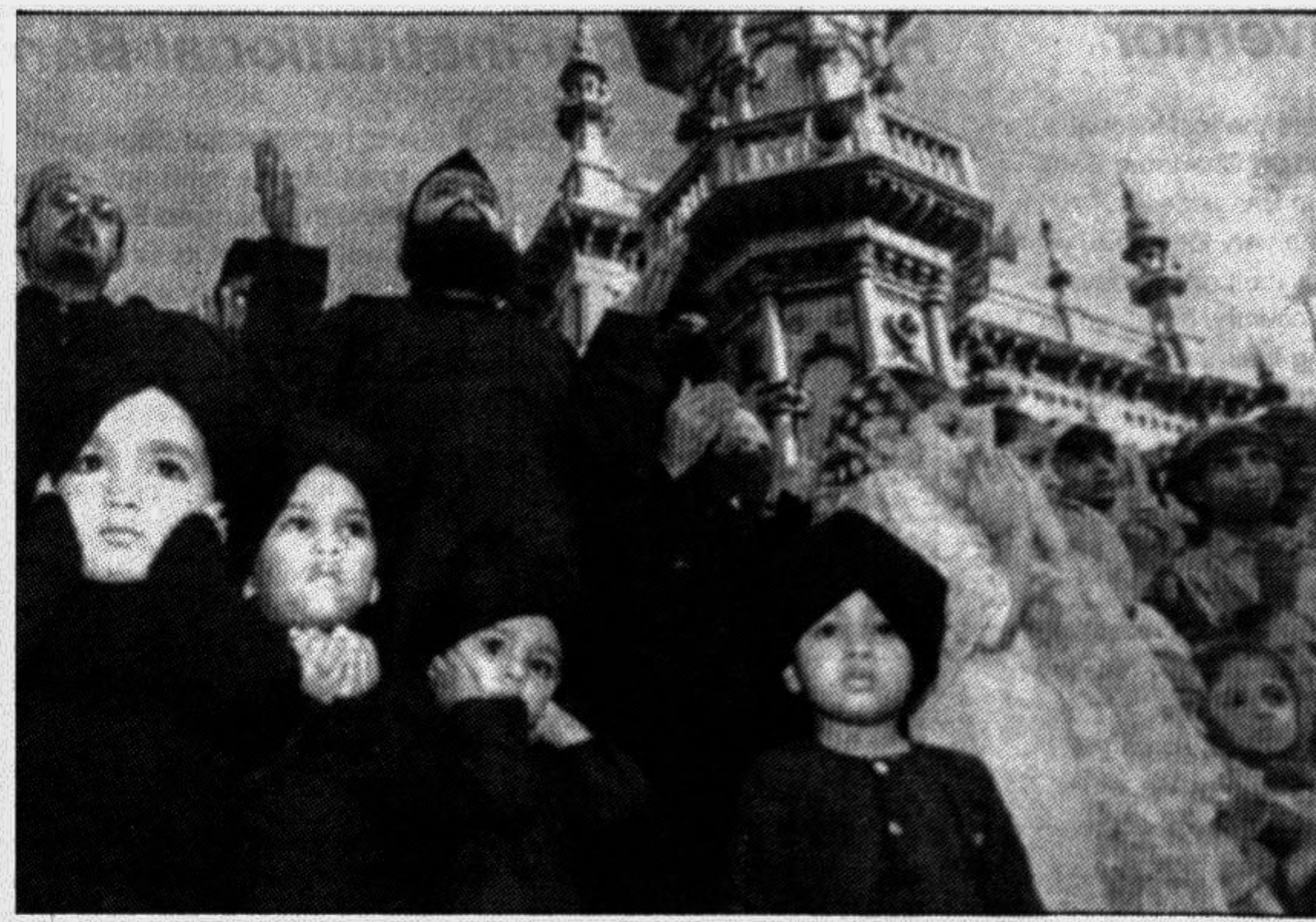
court last week that shame and guilt kept him from making Anwar's repeated homosexual acts public.

He did so when prompted in 1997 by Ummi Hafidha Ali, who herself has separately accused Anwar of sleeping with her brother's wife. Her brother was a former secretary of Anwar.

Azizan and Ummi have retracted their accusations earlier, but at the trial they said they were arrested and coerced by police, allegedly at Anwar's behest, to sign retractions.

During cross-examination last week, Azizan wavered on his testimony, prompting the defence lawyer's accusations that his story was inconsistent and contradictory.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad fired Anwar on Sept. 2, saying he had determined Anwar was morally unfit for office. The sacking led to demands for political reforms and massive anti-government protests in the normally placid Southeast Asian capital.



Muslim children join their parents in a protest march in Mumbai Sunday to mourn the sixth anniversary of the demolition of Babri Mosque in central India. More than 200 Muslims participated in the protest which ended with a prayer for peace. — AP/UNB photo

Kofi Annan says Settlement of Lockerbie affair within reach

ABU DHABI, Dec 7: UN Chief Kofi Annan told US secretary of state Madeleine Albright Sunday that a settlement of the 10 year old Lockerbie bombing affair was finally within reach, a UN spokeswoman told AFP.

"We are well on the way to resolving the problem, the UN chief told Albright by telephone on his flight here from Tunisian spokeswoman Nadia Youness said.

He noted that the Libyans had their own way of consulting their people within their own reality and they would determine how to consult their people for a decision and a way to announce it, she said.

AP says from London: Britain said Sunday that following UN talks with Libya, two Libyans suspected in the bombing of Pan Am jet over Lockerbie, Scotland may be in custody by Dec 21, the 10th anniversary of the disaster.

"I think you could sum up our mood as one of qualified optimism," Foreign Secretary

Robin Cook said in a British Broadcasting Corp television interview.

But Cook said Britain will not budge on the demand by Washington and London that the suspects must serve in a Scottish jail any sentence passed by Scottish judges sitting at the special court in the Netherlands.

In talks in a desert tent in Libya on Saturday, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi failed to make a deal on handing over the suspects. But Annan said he believed an agreement could be reached soon.

Cook said he spoke with Annan on Sunday and was "very encouraged by what he tells me."

Cook said it would be a great comfort to the relatives of the 270 victims of Pan Am Flight 103 if the suspects, Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi and Lamen Khalifa Fhimah, are brought to trial by the anniversary.

BRIEFLY



A Palestinian salesman hangs American flags outside his store in Gaza City Sunday in preparation for US President Clinton's upcoming visit. Clinton is expected to go to Gaza during his three-day visit to try to help move along implementation of the Wye Peace accord. — AP/UNB photo.

11 hurt as rival political groups clash in Jakarta

JAKARTA, Dec 7: Eleven people were injured when supporters of rival political parties clashed in an Indonesian town, a news report said Monday, reports AP.

Fighting broke out on Sunday in Brebes, about 250 kilometers (150 miles) east of the capital, Jakarta, between followers of the ruling Golkar Party and the Indonesian Democratic Party, or PDI, who are loyal to opposition figure Megawati Sukarnoputri.

The newspaper Kompas said PDI supporters in three trucks and on hundreds of motorcycles went through the town and burned Golkar flags. They then assembled outside a sports stadium where about 7,000 Golkar supporters were holding a rally.

The two groups clashed at the stadium's gates before being broken up by police.

The paper said 19 vehicles were damaged.

Also on Sunday Megawati, the eldest daughter of Indonesia's founding President Sukarno, staged a rally in Jakarta where she called on her supporters not resort to violence.

Death toll in LTTE attack rises to 5 Lankan troops kill 8 rebels

COLOMBO, Dec 7: Sri Lanka troops killed eight Tamil Tiger guerrillas as the death toll in a rebel bomb attack that narrowly missed a senior minister rose to five, the defence ministry said here today, reports AFP.

A naval rating died of his injuries overnight following Sunday's mortar bomb attack on the northeast town of Oddusudan, military officials said.

The defence ministry in a statement said troops shot dead four members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) outside the newly established army defences at Oddusudan on Sunday.

Four more Tiger rebels were killed near the northern town of Paranathan on Sunday, the ministry said.

The killings came after the mortar bomb attack against Oddusudan which the security forces wrested from Tiger control on Friday.

Energy minister Anuruddha Ratwatte, who also holds the

junior defence portfolio, was leaving a Hindu religious ceremony at Oddusudan when shells rained down, officials said.

At least 40 people were wounded in the attack blamed on the LTTE. "The first bomb exploded as I was about to get into my vehicle," Ratwatte told state television. "One went off just 15 meters away from me."

He vowed he will continue to visit the battle front despite the attack.

He was accompanied by the airforce as well as police top brass, military officials said, adding four members of the Minister's inner security ring were among the wounded.

Ratwatte later flew to the town of Anuradhapura, 75 miles to the south of Oddusudan, to take part in a Buddhist ceremony.

An army general, Neil Dias, who was accompanying Ratwatte was wounded in the attack, which came as the defence ministry was due to fly in a

group of Colombo-based foreign and local journalists to visit Oddusudan.

The press tour of Oddusudan, which the army captured from the LTTE on Friday, was called off and the journalists were brought back to Colombo.

Ratwatte had a similar brush with death exactly two years ago Monday when his helicopter mistakenly landed inside a rebel-held area of the island's north because his pilot lost his bearings and ran out of fuel.

With the help of local residents, Ratwatte, who is also a part-time pilot, walked about five miles to reach a military bunker. The Tigers blasted the helicopter within minutes.

Overnight the LTTE also pounded army positions in northern Sri Lanka after the government suddenly halted its biggest and bloodiest offensive against the guerrillas.

More than 55,000 people have been killed since 1972 in the Tamil separatist campaign led by the LTTE.

Off the Record

**Hihi's problems**

WELLINGTON: Too much sex may lead a rare New Zealand bird, the hihi, to extinction, a university researcher warned, reports Reuters.

There was a possible link between the hihi's aggressive mating behaviour and exposure to a common fungal disease, Isabel Castro, from Massey University's Institute of Natural Resources, was quoted as saying in the university's Alumni magazine.

The problem — which has seen annual mortality rates of up to 50 per cent in some hihi populations — became known when efforts were made to introduce the rare bird to new habitats.

Castro, hired to find out why so many hihi were dying, said constant pressure from males to copulate were making females stressed and more susceptible to disease.

The males were also less resistant to infection because testosterone was a natural immuno depressant.

While the hihi is small, about the size of a robin, the male ego is huge, its testosterone levels are very high and monogamy is unheard of.

The high sex drive — which afflicted both male and female hihi — was thought to have come about because there was no synchronisation between male and female breeding cycles.

Male hihi would rape female birds if there was not a more willing partner around, Castro said.

"One of the first things I saw was male hiding behind a rock," she said "he was waiting to ambush any female that landed nearby."

**The Xmas spirit**

ROME: Christmas makes old people feel like children, says Pope John Paul II, who on Sunday told youngsters how he stays fresh in spirit, reports AP.

Speaking to more than 100 cheering school-age children at a parish in an upper class Rome neighborhood, John Paul said: "I know why you're happy. It's because Christmas is coming."

Later, to a group of adults, the 78-year-old pontiff referred to the encounter and said that Christmas is joyful for old people, too, because they feel "like children again."

And to the children he added: "Stay young. If you can't with physical strength, then with the spirit. This I feel even in my own experience."

The ailing pope, who has trouble walking and often tires during public appearances, frequently seems invigorated by meetings with young people. He spoke with a strong clear voice and seemed relaxed.

**Stephen Hawking meets the Simpsons**

LONDON: Physicist Stephen Hawking, author of "A Brief History of Time," flew to Hollywood for a role in "The Simpsons" television series and managed to wow Bart, Homer and Lisa, according to a British newspaper, reports AP.

Hawking, who holds the Cambridge University post once held by Sir Isaac Newton, plays himself, complete with "supercharged wheelchair" and his distinctive electronic voice. The Independent reported Sunday.

"He comes in to make a commentary on the universe as a whole and intellectuals," producer Bonnie Patila, was quoted as saying. "He plays himself — it's a show that has to do with intellectuals and we don't know anyone more intellectual than him."

Friends said the academic "greatly enjoyed" his Hollywood experience and would like to get more acting parts, according to the report.

The episode is to be broadcast in the spring.

The professor suffers from Lou Gehrig's disease, which affects the motor skills. He uses an electronic synthesiser to speak.

China likely to put dissident on trial

BEIJING, Dec 7: Speeding up a campaign to stamp out a would be political opposition party, Chinese authorities will put one of its leading organisers on trial next week, a rights group reported Monday, reports AP.

Court officials in east China's Hangzhou city notified Wang Youcai's wife Monday that his trial on charges of "inciting the overthrow of state power" will be held Dec 17, the Hong Kong-based Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China reported.

Detained a month ago, Wang was only formally arrested on Nov 30, part of a concerted effort to silence the leadership of the China Democracy Party.

Authorities appear to be moving with haste against the three dissidents. To arrest and try Wang in what would be 18 days is unusual, especially in such a politically sensitive case. The Information Centre called the speed proof that Chinese leaders have already decided to convict Wang.

Yeltsin fires most of his top aides

MOSCOW, Dec 7: Coming back to work with a bang, President Boris Yeltsin fired most of his top aides on Monday in his first working day at the Kremlin after a two-week hospitalisation with pneumonia, reports AP.

Yeltsin dismissed Chief of Staff Valentin Yumashev and his deputies Yuri Yarov, Mikhail Komissar and Yevgeny Savostyanov, a Kremlin spokesman said.

Nikolai Bordyuzha, the secretary of the presidential security council, was appointed the new chief of staff, while the other posts remain vacant. Bordyuzha, who will serve in both posts, was chief of the Border Guards before his appointment to the post earlier this year.

The Kremlin had no immediate comment on the sudden dismissals.

Yeltsin has a habit of unexpected and often unexplained dismissals. The latest round of dismissals could reflect his unhappiness over the way some aides handled his recent hospitalisation and their unusual candidness about the president's health.

The Russian media has said that the passive and defeatist aides were further eroding

Yeltsin's power. The dismissed aides handled the workings of the Kremlin and the president's routine and had considerable influence.

Yumashev and other Kremlin aides openly said that Yeltsin is too weak to handle day-to-day affairs or to make foreign trips and suggested he leave control of the economy and other current affairs to Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov.

On Monday, Yeltsin also took personal control of the justice ministry and tax police — two key government structures previously under Primakov's command. The move was clearly aimed at strengthening Yeltsin's authority, although its immediate implications remain unclear.

Yeltsin insists he has no serious health problems and that he remains in control of the government.

Yeltsin had all but disappeared from sight when he entered a government hospital Nov 22 with pneumonia, the latest in a long string of health problems in recent years.

Yeltsin's power. The dismissed aides handled the workings of the Kremlin and the president's routine and had considerable influence.

Yumashev and other Kremlin aides openly said that Yeltsin is too weak to handle day-to-day affairs or to make foreign trips and suggested he leave control of the economy and other current affairs to Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov.

On Monday, Yeltsin also took personal control of the justice ministry and tax police — two key government structures previously under Primakov's command. The move was clearly aimed at strengthening Yeltsin's authority, although its immediate implications remain unclear.

Yeltsin insists he has no serious health problems and that he remains in control of the government.

Yeltsin had all but disappeared from sight when he entered a government hospital Nov 22 with pneumonia, the latest in a long string of health problems in recent years.

Chavez elected Venezuela president

Former coup leader Hugo Chavez Sunday won presidential elections with 56 per cent of the vote, according to partial results with 64 per cent of the vote counted, AFP says from Caracas.

His closest rival, Henrique Salas Romer, took 39.7 per cent of the vote, according to the partial results. Chavez spent two years in jail after he attempted and failed to topple the government in February 1992.

5 hurt in China earthquake

Five children seriously injured in school collapses were among the 84 people hurt in an earthquake in southwest China last week, an official newspaper reported, AP says from Beijing.

The 5.1 quake on Dec 1 in Xuanwei, a country with 1.3 million people in Yunnan province, damaged 472 schools and 21,400 houses and caused 187 million yuan (dollar 22.5 million) in damage, the China Daily reported.

Fire kills 7 in France

Fire broke out in a retirement home outside Paris before dawn yesterday, killing seven people and injuring 36 others, 10 seriously, authorities said, AP says from Paris.

The blaze began at about 4 am (0300 GMT) in Livry-Gargan in the northern working-class suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis, firefighters said.

Eroglu leading in N Cyprus polls

Dervis Eroglu, prime minister in the breakaway Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus looked set to win elections after preliminary results show him getting more than half the 50 parliamentary seats, AP says from Nicosia.

Eroglu's National Unity Party, managed to gain 26 seats after more than half of the votes were counted, the Turkish Cypriot news agency TAK reported on Sunday.

Gunmen kill one in Philippines

Gunmen killed a bank manager and his computer technician and seriously injured a security guard yesterday in an roadside ambush outside Cotabato, AFP says from Philippines.

Oscar Abelarde, 53, the local manager of Metropolitan Bank and Trust Co and computer technician Richard Salamat, 27, were driving to Cotabato with security guard Jay Morales when about 10 men in fatigue uniforms blocked their way. Provincial police chief Juhan Kairan said the armed men repeatedly fired at the car until it swerved off a cliff and crashed.

**French sculptor Cesar dead:** French sculptor Cesar, best known for crushing car wrecks into metal, has died, radio and television said yesterday. He was 77, Reuters says from Paris.

Cesar, whose full name was Cesar Baldacci, worked scrap metal with a blowtorch to produce extravagant sculptures. A controversial artist, he built a 500 tonnes wall of piled up cars for the Venice Film Festival in 1995, and a 12-metre-tall thumb standing in Paris' La Defence business district.



Model Kristina looks out onto a square in Knightsbridge, London while posing for photographers wearing embroidered lingerie from Janet Reger's new Christmas collection Sunday. — AP/UNB photo

Chinese smog pollutes US skies

SAN FRANCISCO, Dec 7: Plumes of Asian smog and dust from powerful desert storms are streaming eastward across the Pacific Ocean, affecting air quality in the western United States, according to new studies presented on Sunday, reports Reuters.

"This is the first time that anybody has ever documented that pollution from one continent can be transported all the way to a downstream continent," said Dan Jaffe of the University of Washington in Seattle.

Jaffe and other environmental researchers told a meeting of the American Geophysical Union in San Francisco that on two separate occasions in 1997 and 1998, instruments in the United States picked up documented proof of Asian smog and dust cascading down through the atmosphere.

The 1998 event, sparked by a major dust storm in China's Gobi Desert, was serious enough to boost air pollution measurements in certain areas of the United States to as much as two-thirds of the safety standard set by the Environmental Protection Agency.

"We're still talking about a relatively small part of the pollution, but with the rapid industrial growth taking place in Asia we expect that the impacts will increase," Jaffe said.

Earlier studies of pollutants and weather patterns indicated that Asian smog was floating past Hawaii and could account for as much as 10 per cent of the

**Acid rain-damage covers 40 pc of China**

BEIJING, Dec 7: China's rapid economic growth and heavy reliance on coal have spread acid rain damage to 40 per cent of the country, an official newspaper reported Monday, reports AP.

China depends on coal for 75 per cent of its energy, and coal use has doubled during the breakneck growth over the past two decades of economic reforms. Acid rain is formed when fossil fuels such as coal are burned and oxides of sulfur and nitrogen are emitted into the atmosphere.

ozone and other pollutants found in the air along the US west coast.

At Sunday's meeting, researchers said these models had been put by two closely studied events in the past two years.

One, in March 1997 revealed that air blowing across Washington state from the Pacific contained carbon monoxide and particulate matter directly traceable to East Asia, sometimes making the journey in as little as four days.

The second, in April 1998, showed that a major dust storm in northwestern China sent enough material into the air that, for several days, the sky literally turned 'white' over much of the western United States — some 8000 kms away.

"A large fraction of the United States was, in effect, covered by this," said Thomas Cahill of the University of California. "If you looked up, you could see the sky was milky white."

The scientists said advances in satellite monitoring of pollution streams had helped in development of new models for inter-continental pollution drift.



Bill Cosby arrives at the White House in Washington Sunday with his wife Camille for Kennedy Centre Awards ceremonies. Cosby, who became the first black star of a weekly TV series in the 1960s and dominated Thursday nights in the 80s with "The Cosby Show," was honoured Sunday night for his lifetime achievement in the arts. — AP/UNB photo.