

VHP urges Vajpayee to wage war against Pakistan

NEW DELHI, Feb 7: A Hindu revivalist group has urged Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to wage war against Pakistan instead of taking a cross border bus ride to boost ties, reports said today.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (world Hindu council), closely allied to the country's coalition government said Vajpayee was in the wrong for wanting to take the inaugural New Delhi-Lahore bus service.

Acharya Dharmendra, a member of VHP's policy-making body, was quoted as saying late Saturday that Vajpayee, a Hindu nationalist, should travel to Pakistan in a battle tank instead.

"Visit Pakistan by all means," The Indian Express quoted him as saying in the western city of Ahmedabad.

"Why should you go in a bus? Go in a tank use Bofor guns, use the bombs which you tested (in May). What are these for?"

"You allowed the (India-Pakistan) cricket match, but what

is needed is a final match on the battlefield."

The VHP's reaction followed the Prime Minister's widely-hailed decision to travel to Pakistan when the bus service between the two countries starts.

Indian and Pakistani officials last month organised a trial run of the bus service, which the two governments say would improve mutual relations and reduce tensions.

Plans for the bus service, to run four times a week, emerged at a meeting between Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif in New York last year.

Hindu and Muslim hard-liners in both countries are, however, opposed to the bus link.

The VHP, a brazenly anti-Muslim and anti-Christian group also declared Saturday that Vajpayee must work to promote the interests of the country's majority Hindu community.

VGP supreme Ashok Singhal, however, said in a later

speech that his organisation — blamed for the 1992 razing of an ancient mosque in India — believed the Indian government seemed to favour Hindus over others.

"We want this government to continue because this is the first government which is not against us," said Singhal, a firebrand leader dubbed by critics as a Hindu fundamentalist.

PTI adds from Coimbatore: The Vajpayee government has not softened its attitude towards Pakistan by allowing its cricket team to tour the country, Home Minister L K Advani said yesterday.

The Pakistan cricket team's trip to India was aimed at greater interaction between the two countries, Advani told reporters here.

"There is no question of softening attitude towards that country, but as far as sports, music and culture are concerned, it is in the larger inter-

est of the people of both countries to have greater interaction among themselves," he said.

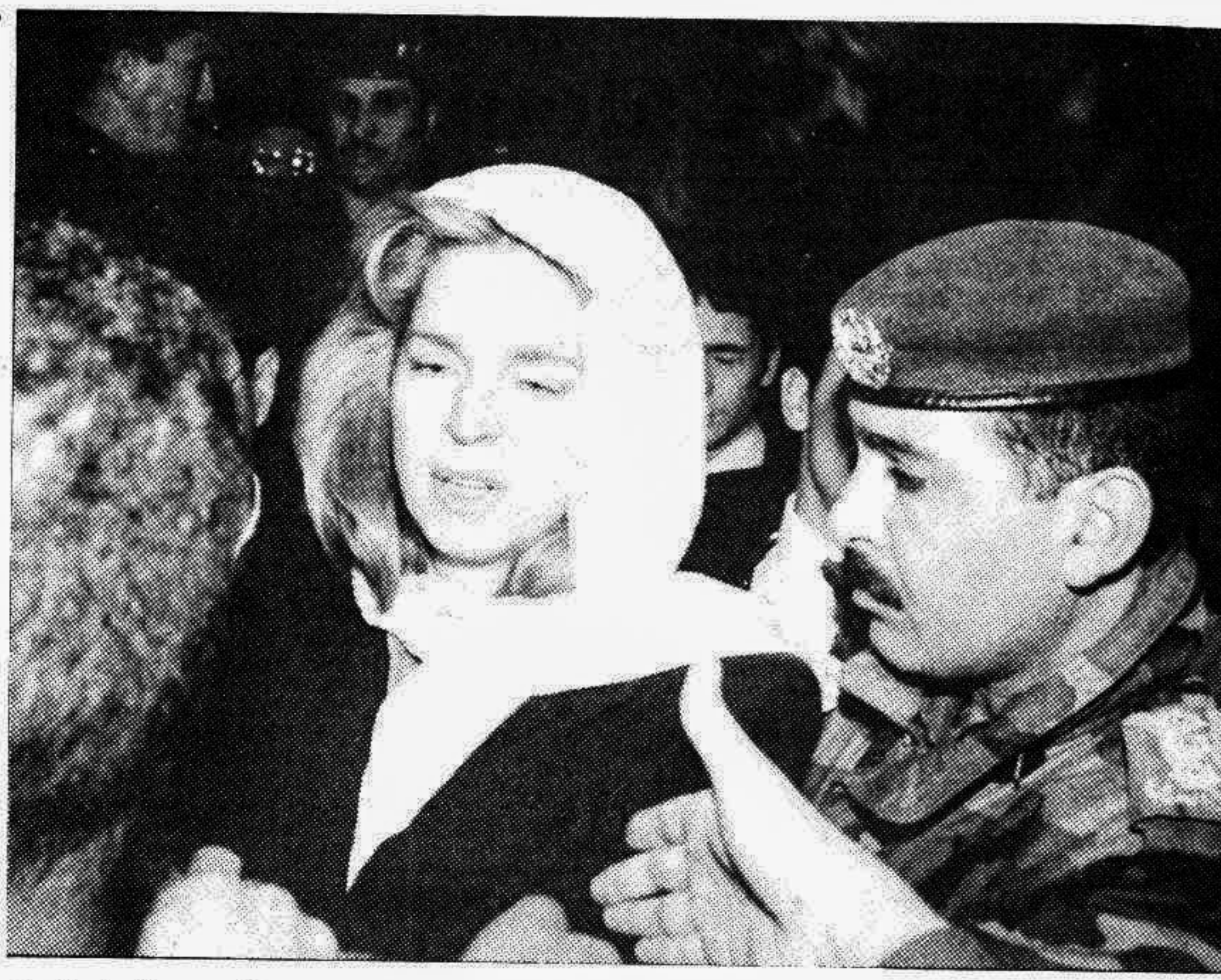
Advani said there was no let up in the centre's efforts to deal sternly with those who try to indulge in subversive and violence within the country.

On reports of the prime minister's bus travel to Lahore, he said as per his knowledge it was only a proposal.

Asked whether the activities of Sangh Parivar or statements of leaders like J P Mathur and Madan Lal Khurana criticising the Sangh Parivar has embarrassed the government, Advani said their is no embarrassment at all.

The responses of the centre to the happenings in Gujarat, MP and Orissa were very correct, he said.

The government held talks with Christian leaders and ensured that the culprits were brought to book. It had also guaranteed security to them, Advani said.



Jordan's Queen Noor, escorted by security officers, makes her way through the crowds outside the King Hussein Medical Centre in Amman Saturday. — AFP photo

Manila trying to reach peace accord with separatists

ZAMBOANGA, Philippines. Feb 7: Philippine peace negotiators were today preparing to meet Muslim separatists to hammer out a solution to more than two decades of insurgency that has ravaged the south, reports AFP.

But while the government said it would exert all efforts to reach an accord with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the military reported violations of a truce signed last week.

Field reports received by the military's southern command here indicated large guerrilla movements in nearby Bukidnon province, where they have allegedly occupied several areas and set-up temporary camps.

The guerrillas, armed with small rockets and mortars, were believed to be strengthening their positions, having constructed bunkers and foxholes in several hinterland villages in Bukidnon, army spokesman Colonel Horacio Lapina said.

"The MILF forces are not supposed to be there," Lapina said, stressing this was a clear violation of the truce that called for both camps to maintain position and refrain from firing.

China frees dissident

BEIJING, Feb 7: Chinese authorities have granted early release to a veteran democracy activist imprisoned after the government crushed pro-democracy protests in 1989, his sister said Sunday, reports AP.

Sun Weibang, 57, was released Thursday from Weifang prison in eastern Shandong province having served 10 years of a 12 years sentence, his sister Sun Weixian said. He got back to his family's home in the eastern port city of Qingdao on Friday, she said.

"His health is good," she added.

Sun, who ran a small restaurant in Qingdao, provided food to protesting students in 1989 and was given a 12-year jail term for "counterrevolutionary propaganda and incitement" after the protests were crushed, the Hong Kong-based Information Center of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China said.

Human Rights Watch, another rights group, has said that Sun ran a broadcasting station for student protesters in Beijing, and was arrested on charges of spreading rumors, blocking traffic and disturbing social order.

Sun also was jailed for three years without trial or sentence in the early 1980s after participating in China's seminal Democracy Wall movement that the government also crushed, according to Human Rights Watch.

Talks begin to end war in Kosovo

RAMBOUILLET, France, Feb 7: Make-or-break talks to end the war in Kosovo began Saturday, with the international community cranking up the pressure on the Serbs and Kosovo Albanians to end one of the bloodiest conflicts in post-war Europe, reports AFP.

"You represent people who fully belong to Europe," French President Jacques Chirac told delegates as he lifted the curtain on the negotiations at Rambouillet castle, outside Paris.

"That is why a war in Kosovo is unacceptable to us. We want peace on our continent," he said.

But even as the conclave got underway, the killing continued.

In Kosovo's capital Pristina, at least three people — including a young girl — were killed in an explosion at a vegetable store, police said.

Several other people were seriously hurt.

One police officer said the explosion was caused by a "Powerful explosive device," but

US favours facilitator to end conflict in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, Feb 7: The United States supports the idea of a "facilitator" to bring Sri Lanka's warring Tamil Tiger rebels to the negotiating table, a press report here said today, reports AFP.

The US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Karl Inderfurth, who is ending a two-day visit to Sri Lanka Sunday, met with government as well as opposition politicians and discussed the island's Tamil separatist conflict.

"During a breakfast meeting with Tamil Political parties Inderfurth declared that the United States was in favour of facilitator or facilitators to end the Tamil ethnic conflict," The Sunday Times said.

Diplomats here said Inderfurth had talks on a "full range of issues, including trade and investment, bilateral cooperation and regional affairs" before leaving for the Maldives to end his South Asia tour.

Inderfurth visited Sri Lanka in April last year together with US Permanent Representative to the UN, Bill Richardson.

Jordan's allies signal support for Abdullah

AMMAN, Feb 7: Jordan moved into a new era today after Crown Prince Abdullah took over as regent, assuming the power that the dying King Hussein can no longer exercise, reports Reuters.

As the 37-year-old Abdullah — the King's eldest son and an army major general — sworn in to take the powers of head of state on Saturday, the country's allies moved to signal their support.

US President Bill Clinton pledged 300 million dollars in aid to help keep the impoverished country stable, saying in a written statement, "The United States stands by Jordan and is determined to do all that it can to support and strengthen it."

He said the United States was also working with the international community, including key allies and Group of Seven nations, to mobilise additional resources to help Jordan maintain its economic stability.

Senior administration officials said Clinton wanted to send more aid as a sign of strong support for a friend and ally, not to signal a sense of emergency in Jordan.

"We think it's important to demonstrate at this difficult time that Jordan has friends and can rely on them," said one senior official.

In Israel, with which King Hussein sealed a peace treaty in 1994 and where he enjoyed immense popularity as the closest Arab friend of the Jewish state, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said: "There's no question that the peace between us will stand."

He told Reuters in an interview: "It has its bumps on the road, but I think that peace is inexorable."

Netanyahu added that Abdullah had spoken to him by



Delegations representing the Serbs and ethnic Albanians from Kosovo listen to French President Jacques Chirac at the opening of the Kosovo peace talks at the Rambouillet Chateau near Paris Saturday. — AFP photo

Taliban ready to discuss US demands to hand over Osama

ISLAMABAD, Feb 7: Afghanistan's Islamic militia leadership is prepared to discuss US demands to hand over Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden who is accused of two murderous bombings, Taliban spokesman was reported saying Saturday, reports AFP.

Washington wanted the expulsion of the alleged terrorist from Afghanistan or his hand over to the United States or Saudi Arabia. Taliban spokesman Abdul Mutmaen told the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP).

Speaking to the Pakistan-based private information service from Kandahar, the Taliban's headquarters, Mutmaen said US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, Karl Inderfurth, made the proposals in talks with Taliban.

Deputy Foreign Minister Maulvi Jalil Akhund in Islamabad on Wednesday.

"The proposals will be presented to (Taliban chief) Amirul-Momineen Mullah Mohammad Omar in Kandahar," Mutmaen said.

He said the Taliban position on the American request would be made public after discussion by the leadership.

Bin Laden has been charged with masterminding the bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania last August that killed more than 200 people.

The US government has offered a five million dollar reward for his arrest.

Another report adds: Osama bin Laden is believed to be plotting to attack British targets in Europe, a newspaper reported today.

Visa to Rushdie Iranian papers slam India

DUBAI, Feb 7: Two Iranian newspapers yesterday slammed the Indian government for issuing a visa to Indian-born British writer Salman Rushdie with one of them warning him that it may be his last visit abroad, reports PTI.

By allowing such a visit, the Indian officials are taking a great risk The Tehran Times said.

If the visit of this most hated blasphemous and disgraceful person takes place, there is every possibility that it will be his last visit abroad, however providence may have destined this shameless character to meet his end in the opinion column of Tehran Times said.

Rushdie has spent nearly a decade in hiding after Iran's Islamic leader late Ayatollah Khomeini called for his death in 1989 saying his book the 'Satanic Verses' had insulted Islam.

Off the Record

On suspicion of being a witch...

KATHMANDU: A 62-year-old woman has been stoned to death at a village in western Nepal on suspicion of being a witch, reports IANS.

Mangali Bishwakarma, a resident of Hile Taksar village in the Lamjung district, died a violent death on Thursday when her neighbour, Karna Bahadur Gurung, pelted her with stones for allegedly using witchcraft to kill his buffalo.

According to the Lamjung police, Gurung was enraged on being told by villagers that his buffalo that died three days ago may have fallen prey to an evil spell cast by a witch. He immediately suspected Bishwakarma of being responsible and pelted the woman with rocks while she was working in her garden. Her face was crushed so badly that it was unrecognisable, villagers said.

Gurung was allegedly drunk when he took the poor woman's life. He then fled the village and has been at large ever since, according to the police.

This is not the first time that a woman has been murdered here on charges of witchcraft. Police records suggest that in this district alone five women have been killed by villagers in the past five years on suspicion of being witches. Human rights activists protested last year when a woman, in her late 30s, was killed in the heart of Kathmandu by a 'jhantri' (witch doctor) saying she was possessed by the devil.

Beauty queen stripped of crown for stripping

KUALA LUMPUR: A Malaysian beauty queen was stripped of her crown after posing nude in a foreign film and magazines, news reports said Sunday, reports AP.

Joey Tan Eng Li — crowned Miss Malaysia Chinatown 1997-98 — was featured as the January cover girl in 'Penthouse' magazine's Hong Kong edition. She appeared in another adult magazine and also played the part of a rape victim in a Hong Kong-made film, the Sun newspaper reported.

The pageant's organiser, EVA Productions, said the woman violated a three-year exclusive management contract and was "calculated to bring discredit, disrepute, ridicule and contempt on herself and the promoter."

EVA Giam, the group's manager, said legal action would be taken against Tan, who broke contract with organisers after being sent to Hong Kong last year to represent Malaysia in an international pageant.

"We want to make it clear that we do not condone immoral and undesirable acts that contravene the fundamentals of our society," Giam was quoted as saying.

Tan, a 22-year old actress, says she only accepted the alternative work because she needed to support herself and EVA had failed to find her modelling or other jobs after a year as their crown bearer.

She protests the allegations against her, saying the magazine photos were altered by computers and most of her body parts were covered in the film.

"Penthouse" and the other magazine, a photo collection called, "Tan Eng Li Transcends Time," are banned in Malaysia, the Sun said.



A young bride (R) from the Unification Church, known as "Moonies", has a look at the older brides (L) as she walks past them at Seoul's Olympic Stadium where Unification Church founder Sun Myung Moon officiated over the weddings of some 40,000 couples of his believers yesterday. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Quake hits Pacific region: A major earthquake occurred beneath the sea yesterday in a remote region of the Pacific near the Solomon Islands, seismologists said. There were no reports of injuries or damage, AP reports from Sydney.

The earthquake, with a preliminary magnitude of 7.3, occurred at 8:48 am local time (about 0048 GMT) near the Santa Cruz group of islands, the US Geological Survey in Reston, Virginia, said. The epicentre was about 290 km north of Santo Benatu island and some 2,141 km north of Brisbane, Australia. The quake occurred at a depth of 90 km.

Stardust launch delayed: An alarm went off just before a rocket was to blast off Saturday with NASA's comet-chasing Stardust spacecraft, delaying the launch by at least one day, AP reports from Cape Canaveral, Florida.

The Boeing Delta rocket was scheduled to lift off at 4:06 pm (2106 GMT). With less than two minutes remaining, however, a dip in current was detected from a rocket radar beacon and a red alarm went off. Launch managers tentatively rescheduled the launch for yesterday afternoon. That assumes the problem can be fixed by then, said a NASA spokesman.

2 killed in plane crash off NZ: Italian stunt pilot Luciano Nustrini and his wife were killed Saturday when the vintage plane he was flying near at Italian yacht in the Around Alone yacht race crashed into the sea, AP reports from Auckland, New Zealand.

Nustrini, who lives in Auckland, and his wife had earlier told the Italian skipper of the yacht Fila, Giovanni Soldini, that they would be flying over his yacht as a farewell gesture. The Around Alone fleet left Auckland at noon for Punta del Este, Uruguay, the third of the four legs of the round-the-world race.

Defence opens Anwar's case today

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 7: After months of seething silently in the dock, jailed politician Anwar Ibrahim will finally have his day in court, where the former deputy prime minister is accused of engaging in illegal sex and abusing his power to cover up his actions, reports AP.

However, it's unclear whether he will actually be given the chance to clear his name when the defence opens its case Monday.

Anwar has repeatedly asserted his innocence and insists the allegations against him were cooked up to undermine his challenge to the 18-year leadership of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

Last week, High Court Judge Augustine Paul refused to throw out four corruption charges despite the prosecution's request. Paul said there was enough evidence to justify prosecution.

The judge did, however, allow the government to weaken those four charges so that prosecutors would only have to prove that Anwar abused his power by ordering a cover-up.

Original charges required the state to prove that Anwar engaged in illegal sex.

"Barring any unexpected changes, we're still planning to make Anwar our first witness," Kamar Aniah, one of Anwar's nine lawyers, told The Associated Press.

The defence also intends to ask Mahathir to take the witness stand. He fired his hand-picked successor on Sept 2 after denouncing him publicly as morally unfit to lead this Southeast Asian nation.

Anwar's supporters, many of whom took to the streets after his arrest and imprisonment, hope he will embarrass Mahathir and prove that top government officials plotted to topple him.

Our client will try to talk about the political conspiracy against him and how the police acted in bad faith by fabricating evidence," said Kamar. That's been our strategy right from the very start.

But the prosecutors are determined to scuttle that strategy.

One killed, 13 hurt as Israel attacks S Lebanon

MARJAYOUN, Lebanon Feb 7: Israeli and allied gunners shelled southern Lebanon on Saturday, wounding 13 civilians after a bomb attack by guerrillas, Lebanese security officials said, reports AFP.

Another three Lebanese civilians living near the Israeli border were injured in what were apparently retaliatory attacks by Lebanese guerrillas.

In Jerusalem, an Israeli military spokesman said a militant from the South Lebanon Army was killed and another wounded in a roadside bomb attack in the occupied zone. The wounded militant has been flown to a hospital in Israel.

Lebanese officials said guerrillas detonated the bomb by remote control as a militia patrol was passing near Houla, a village a few hundred yards from the Israeli border. The officials spoke on customary condition of anonymity.

Lewinsky tells her story to Senate, US nation on videotape

WASHINGTON, Feb 7: Monica Lewinsky told her story in public at long last on Saturday, testifying in videotape snippets before President Bill Clinton's impeachment trial and a worldwide television audience about a White House sexual affair and cover-up, reports AP.

First, the House prosecutors, then the president's defense team served up segments of her taped deposition to the Senate to buttress the case for and against Clinton's conviction.

In portions aired at the behest of prosecutors, Ms Lewinsky said Clinton had never instructed her to tell the truth when word of the affair began to leak, responding "correct" when asked if that were the case. "I knew I would deny the relationship," she also said.

But in tape shown by the Clinton defense team she testified Clinton did not suggest she use their cover story in an affidavit she was to file in the Paula Jones lawsuit. In addition, she said she never thought the affidavit was to be false. Had Clinton suggested that, she said, "I would have remembered something like that, and I don't."

Ms Lewinsky's image, a young woman in a dark dress adorned by a single, strand of pearls, lit up four large video monitors in the Senate chamber. Viewers saw her flip her hair from her face periodically.

There was no indication that her testimony had shaken the prospects for Clinton's expected acquittal on the two articles of impeachment by the end of the week.

Already the two sides were jockeying over how strongly — and whether — to censure Clinton following acquittal.

Some reactions to Saturday's session divided along party lines.

Sen. Larry Craig, a Republican, said the prosecutors' presentation, which included videotaped testimony from Ms Lewinsky, presidential friend Vernon Jordan and White House aide Sidney Blumenthal, was "devastating to the White House."

But a Democratic defender of the president disagreed. "I don't think it's a bombshell to see her, the face and the voice together," said Sen. Barbara Boxer.

The Senate, signaling its eagerness to wrap up the trial, refused earlier this week to allow House prosecutors to call Ms Lewinsky for live testimony.

Instead, senators gave the prosecutors, then White House lawyers, three hours each to present portions of videotape to buttress their cases for and against Clinton's conviction.

Rep Jim Rogan was scathing. Disputing Clinton's claim that his relationship with Ms Lewinsky had begun as a friendship, the California Republican said, "The president impulsively began using her for his gratification the very day he first spoke to her."

He juxtaposed the image of Ms Lewinsky, swearing an oath to tell the truth, with the familiar footage of Clinton denying sexual relations with "that woman, Ms Lewinsky."

"If her testimony is truthful, then the president committed the offenses in the articles of impeachment," Rogan said. Ms Lewinsky was granted immunity from prosecution by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, and could face prosecution if her testimony turned out to be false.

In one videotaped segment, Rep Ed Bryant was heard asking Ms Lewinsky at her deposition: "The president did not in that conversation on December the 17th of 1997, or any other conversation for that matter, instruct you to tell the truth, is that correct?"

"That's correct," she replied.