

UNGA approves confce on Israeli settlements in Arab areas

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 10: Over Israeli and US objections, the UN General Assembly over-whelmingly approved a resolution Tuesday calling for an international conference on Israeli settlements in traditionally Arab areas which the Palestinians claim are illegal, reports AP.

The vote was 115-2 with five abstentions — Australia, Bahamas, Cameroon, Romania and Swaziland.

The resolution, which is not legally binding, calls for a conference of signatories to the Geneva convention to be convened on July 15 to resolve whether Israel is illegally constructing new settlements in traditionally Arab east Jerusalem and on other lands the Israelis captured in 1967.

"Undoubtedly, this has a great importance," the Palestinian UN observer, Nasser Al-Kidwa, said after the vote. "We look forward to the convening of that conference on time. We look forward to the expected important results."

The Palestinians charge that Israel is blatantly disregarding the terms of a October Middle East peace agreement with settlement programmes. They claim the actions also violate the Geneva conventions, which deal mainly with wartime actions.

During two days of speeches, speaker after speaker supported the Palestinians and demanded that Israel halt construction in contested areas and adhere to the peace agreements.

The General Assembly had been scheduled to conclude the debate Monday but postponed the debate to pay tribute to Jordan's King Hussein, who was buried Monday.

On Tuesday, Jordan and Egypt were among the countries accusing Israel — as "the occupying power" — of ignoring in-

ternational law by building new settlements on confiscated land.

Israel has defiantly defended its settlement policies in the Har Homa neighborhood of east Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Israel opposes "one-sided UN resolutions," its UN ambassador said Tuesday, favouring instead "a negotiated settlement consistent with the commitments given in the (1993) Oslo accords."

The deputy US ambassador, Peter Burleigh, spoke in a similar manner, saying "this resolution is redundant." He asked UN representatives to allow negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians to proceed — without UN interference.

Does this resolution contribute to the peace process or improve the lot of Palestinians, Burleigh asked. "The answer is clearly no. This resolution (does) not advance that process even incrementally."

Israel's UN ambassador, Dore Gold, called the emergency session "a total abuse of the UN system," saying conventions meant to protect civilians in times of war are being manipulated to block housing projects.

"Israel views the attempt to convene a conference of the signatories of the Fourth Geneva Convention as a vulgar distortion of international humanitarian law for the purpose of narrow political interests," Gold said in a statement.

"No such conference has ever been held since 1949 with respect to any conflict in the world," he said.

The Geneva conventions established a code of conduct for the treatment in wartime of prisoners as well as the sick and wounded. They also say an occupying power must guarantee the protection of civilians in areas it occupies.

Refusal to resign led to charges against me: Anwar

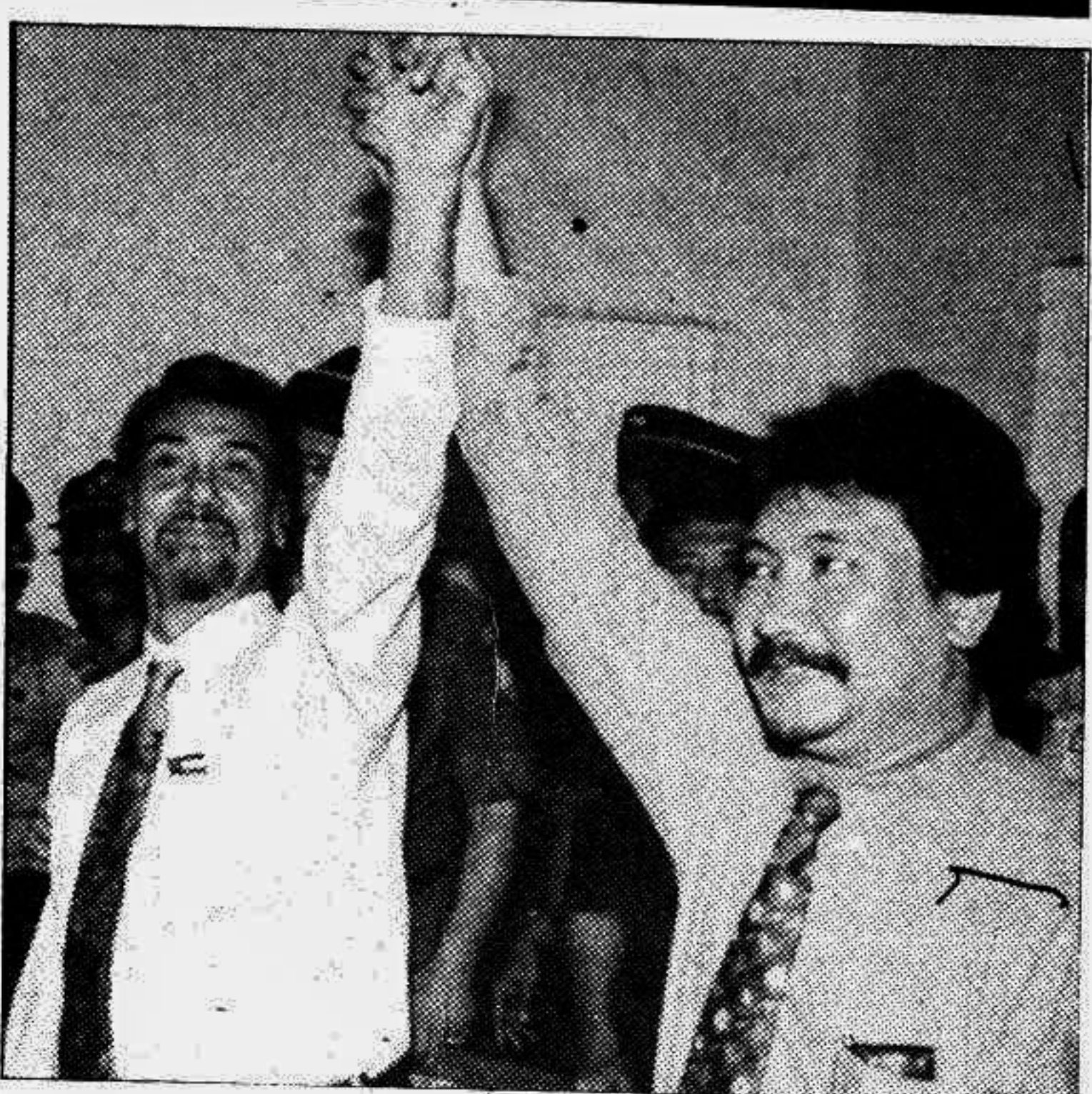
KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 10: Ignoring a gag order to keep politics out of his testimony, Anwar Ibrahim said Wednesday he was being tried for corruption and illicit sex because he defied Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's order to resign, reports AP.

On the third day of his testimony, the sacked deputy prime minister and finance minister said Mahathir gave him an ultimatum.

"Yes, an ultimatum was given on Sept 2 saying that I either resign effective that day or charges will be preferred against me in a number of related offences ranging from sexual misconduct to treason," Anwar said.

Both prosecutors and the judge tried to stop Anwar in his comments Wednesday. But he turned a deaf ear and raged ahead with allegations that powerful politicians close to Mahathir had plotted to get rid of him.

"This court isn't interested in the dispute between the then-



East Timorese rebel leader Xanana Gusmao and his lawyer Handardi (R) join their hands in victory upon Gusmao's arrival at his new house in Jakarta Wednesday. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Albright to visit Asia this month: US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright will travel to Asia later this month, stopping in China, Indonesia and Thailand, her spokesman announced on Tuesday, Reuters says from Washington.

"The purpose of the secretary's trip is to affirm continued US strategic commitments to Asia and take up specific regional and bilateral concerns, the Asian financial crisis and progress toward free, fair and credible elections in Indonesia," James Rubin told a news briefing.

Troops kill 7 rebels in Lanka: Sri Lanka's defence ministry said yesterday its troops killed seven Tamil Tiger rebels, wounded four and lost one soldier in clashes with the separatists in the northern battlefield, AP says from Colombo.

Ministry's spokesman Major Kumara Dewage said all the fatalities occurred Tuesday in four clashes. Four rebels were killed and two wounded near Oddusudan, 255-km north of Colombo. The other casualties occurred around the town of Manikulam, 20-km west of Oddusudan.

Tainted liquor kills 11 in India: Tainted liquor killed 11 people in a village in southern India Wednesday and landed 14 others in the hospital, a domestic news agency reported, AP says from New Delhi.

The dead included 10 men and a woman, who died in Puttural village in Tamil Nadu state after consuming a local brew. Press Trust of India quoted police as saying, Seven local police officers were suspended Wednesday pending an investigation into the deaths, the news agency reported. It did not describe the charges against the officers.

Mahathir's son sues Asian journal: Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's businessman son has filed a 150 million ringgit (\$39.5 million) defamation suit against the Malaysian printers of The Asian Wall Street Journal, the newspaper reported yesterday, AP says from Kuala Lumpur.

Mirzan Mahathir filed the suit against a subsidiary of the Star Publications Malaysia Bhd. for a Jan 4 article, "Mahathir's eldest son limits ambitions." The front-page article carried a detailed account of Mirzan's career and how he was helped by other Malaysian companies and banks in his ascent.

Chopper crash kills 4 in SA: A helicopter crashed onto the roof of a building opposite a major hotel in the centre of Cape Town yesterday morning, and four people aboard were killed, police said, AP reports from Cape Town.

The chopper had just lowered an air conditioner onto the roof of the office building and was lifting off at about 6:30 am when a rotor struck a billboard, police spokesman Capt. Mark Romburgh said. The craft fell back, crashed and exploded into a fireball, killing all four aboard, he said.

China cuts ties with Macedonia: China severed diplomatic ties with Macedonia on Tuesday over the Balkan state's decision to forge official relations with Taiwan, the Xinhua news agency reported, Reuters says from Beijing.

The move which followed a last ditch appeal by Chinese diplomats for Skopje to reconsider its new ties with Beijing's arch rival, threw into question the future of a UN peacekeeping force stationed in the Balkan state.

Sikh leaders vote to remove high priest

AMRITSAR, Feb 10: Sikh leaders voted Wednesday to suspend their hard-line high priest pending further investigation into a clash between moderates and a faction accused of trying to revive a bloody religious uprising in northern India, reports AP.

Mahendra Singh Ramana made the announcement Wednesday in the complex of the Golden Temple, Sikhism's holiest shrine, after he and nine other moderate members of the Sikh Shrinis Managing Committee international executive met to discuss high priest Bhai Ranjit Singh. The five other executive committee members, who support Singh, boycotted the meeting and had tried to derail it by locking the body's offices in the Golden Temple complex.

As thousands of their supporters sang hymns in the courtyard, the moderates held their meeting in another part of the complex, surrounding the gold-plated edifice that is the heart of the Sikh religion. Afterward, they said three of their members would meet with representatives of the Singh faction to try to resolve the controversy.

Singh could not immediately be reached for comment.

The moderates support Prakash Singh Badal, a Sikh and the top elected official of northern Punjab state, the Sikh Temple and the surrounding town of Amritsar are located. Badal has pledged allegiance to India's federal government, while Singh's demands for more autonomy for Sikhs recall the slogans of a separatist uprising in Punjab that was crushed by federal forces in 1993.

Clinton's impeachment trial Senate begins final deliberations behind closed doors

WASHINGTON, Feb 10: The Senate went behind closed doors on Tuesday for final deliberations in President Bill Clinton's impeachment trial, rejecting an attempt to let the public see the conclusive debate on the president's fate, reports Reuters.

With votes to acquit Clinton on two articles of impeachment expected by Friday, the Senate turned off the television cameras, cleared the chamber and closed the doors for the last arguments in the month-long trial.

About 18 senators spoke during more than four hours of debates before the Senate quit for the night. The closed-door session will resume at 10 am EST (1500 GMT) today.

"I wouldn't suggest it was soaring but it was thoughtful," Idaho Republican Sen Larry Craig said afterward. Senators said the session was dominated by speeches, not debate, although there were some pointed questions.

"I think some people spoke in very strong terms and with real conviction," said Connecticut Sen Joseph Lieberman, a Democrat.

The Senate had voted 59 to 41 to keep the debate open, falling eight votes short of the two-thirds majority needed to change Senate rules and allow public airing of the arguments on charges of perjury and obstruction of justice against Clinton.

Proponents of opening the doors said Americans were entitled to hear the deliberations, while opponents said open debate would lead to grandstanding that would prolong the trial and limit a full exploration of the issues.

Senators will be allowed to put their final debate speeches in the congressional record after the trial, a compromise that Democratic Sen Paul Wellstone of Minnesota called "a great leap sideways."

Given Clinton's expected acquittal, senators worked behind the scenes to hammer out a censure motion condemning his behaviour in the Monica Lewinsky affair but some said the effort appeared to be running out of steam.

"I'm afraid I'm a bit less optimistic right now," Lieberman said about the move for censure, which he said appeared headed for "parliamentary gridlock."

Few senators believed the final debate would change any opinions, as votes have solidified through weeks of arguments and presentations in the second presidential impeachment trial in history.

"To honestly believe you are going to change any minds in a closed-door session is a remarkable leap," said Sen Chuck Hagel, a Nebraska Republican.

The Senate is not expected to muster the two-thirds majority, or 67 votes, needed to convict Clinton and remove him from office. Some senators have questioned whether either article of impeachment will get a bare 51-vote majority.

The final closed-door debate could stretch into Thursday. But senators are anxious to conclude the trial by Friday's scheduled start of a week-long congressional recess.

Declaration of Palestinian statehood may be delayed

GAZA, Feb 10: The Palestinian Authority is considering delaying a declaration of statehood until two or three weeks after Israel's general election on May 17, reports Reuters.

Palestinian Cabinet Minister Nabil Shaath said on Tuesday.

But Shaath said the Palestinian Authority still reserved the right to proclaim an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip on May 4, when a five year interim period for negotiating a permanent settlement with Israel expires under the Oslo Accords.

"Our position concerning our right to declare a state on the fourth of May has not changed."

US says no to payment for inspection of DPRK N-site

WASHINGTON, Feb 10: The United States ruled out paying to inspect a suspect nuclear weapons site in North Korea, reports AP.

"We will not pay compensation to be permitted to ensure that an agreement is being properly implemented, and that is our principled position," State Department spokesman James P. Rubin said Tuesday.

North Korea has denied the facility under construction is related to nuclear weapons development and said it can open the site to outsiders only if the United States paid for the privilege.

"We have been in discussions with North Korea about getting to the bottom of the site in Kumchangni that we are concerned about," Rubin said.

North Korea agreed in 1994 to forgo nuclear weapons development in exchange for assistance with civilian energy production.

Al Fayed to get US intelligence dossier on Di

LONDON, Feb 10: The father of Princess Diana's companion Dodi Al Fayed may get US intelligence dossier on Diana, who died with Dodi in a Paris car crash, The Times newspaper reported, says Reuters.

A US judge has ordered the US Defence Intelligence Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to hand their 1,000-page dossier to Mohamed Al Fayed, a wealthy Egyptian businessman, because as the father of Diana's lover he is an "interested party," the paper said in its Wednesday edition.

The agencies have 30 days to challenge the court order issued by the US district court in the district of Columbia, it reported.

The National Security Agency (NSA) said it had "39 NSA-originated and NSA-controlled documents" about Diana, the newspaper added.

"It's a tremendous step forward. We know they were monitoring Diana right up until the night of her death," John Macnamara, head of security for Al Fayed's house of Fraser, was quoted as saying.

Gusmao removed from jail, put under house arrest

JAKARTA, Feb 10: East Timor's jailed separatist guerrilla chief Jose Alexandre Gusmao left a Jakarta prison for the comfort of a nearby state-owned house on Wednesday, reports AP.

The transfer of Gusmao, 52, from a cell to house arrest is part of UN-sponsored efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in the former Portuguese colony, which was invaded by Indonesia in 1975.

Gusmao, who is revered by many East Timorese, was driven out of the grounds of Jakarta's Cipinang Prison in a small passenger van.

Sitting inside the vehicle, he raised his fist in a rebel salute and smiled. He shook hands through its windows with a small group of supporters who chanted "Long live Xanana! Long Live East Timor!"

Earlier Xanana said he welcomed his transfer from the prison to the house, which is located next to another jail in a Jakarta neighbourhood.

He has said it would allow him to participate more easily in peace negotiations between Indonesia and Portugal.

Despite his hero status among East Timorese, the transfer was low-key.

Only about 30 supporters and about double that number of reporters and news crews showed up in the rain outside of Cipinang Prison where Gusmao has been held.

Several kilometres away, dozens of police and prison guards were on duty outside Gusmao's new home — modest, freshly white-painted concrete brick house surrounded by a new three-metre high fence.

Indonesian Justice Minister Muladi was on hand to welcome the rebel commander, who is still a prisoner of the Indonesian state.

Arrested in 1992, Gusmao is serving a 20-year sentence for fighting Indonesian forces in his homeland. Separatist guerrillas have been active for years and the Indonesian military has been accused of widespread human rights abuses.

Tensions between rival groups in East Timor have risen since the Indonesian government made a recent offer to consider independence for the half-island territory of about 800,000 people.

Netanyahu hints at new ME peace accord by 2000

RAMAT GAN, Israel, Feb 10: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hinted Tuesday that Israel could reach a peace agreement with Lebanon and Syria by the end of the year, reports AP.

"I promise a new peace agreement before the year 2000," Netanyahu told reporters during a visit to the diamond exchange in Ramat Gan, which came as he was in a tough campaign for reelection in May.

Netanyahu did not specify with whom Israel would sign the peace accord, but a close aide said he was referring to Syria and Lebanon.

In the same remarks, Netanyahu said, "I would be pleased to renew negotiation with Syria and Lebanon at any time," but he did not repeat his reference to a timetable.

The main opposition Labour Party attacked Netanyahu's pledge.

"The prime minister has merely recycled the same old promises he made three years ago to create illusions," the party said in a statement.

In an interview with a US television network broadcast earlier Tuesday, Netanyahu told of how during the funeral Monday for Jordan's King Hussein he had been just "a few metres away" from Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad, although the two did not speak.

"I think that after the elections, we'll sit together, one or another, in the same tent," he said.

"It doesn't depend only on me, but since I heard that same expression of hope coming from Syria, I'm eager to reciprocate it," he added.

Jakarta yet to trace Suharto's assets overseas

JAKARTA, Feb 10: Indonesian Attorney General Lt Gen A-M Ghalib has said that his office, in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has yet to find any wealth belonging to former president Suharto overseas, reports Xinhua.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a report to US has stated that in a conducted investigation into the possibility of Suharto possessing wealth overseas in the form of bank accounts, saving deposits or real estate, but so far, the ministry's search had not come to any discoveries," Ghalib said.

The result of months of work by the offices would be submitted to President B J Habibie soon, Ghalib was quoted by The Jakarta Post today as saying.

The Attorney General's office's spokesman Soehandoyo described the failed attempts of the Indonesian embassy in Britain to find any data or information on the money reportedly kept in Indonesian banks in London under the names of Suharto and his family members.

For its part in the task of tracking down and if possible retrieving Suharto's reported overseas wealth, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it gathered reports from at least 16 Indonesian embassies abroad.

"In Washington, it was difficult to seek any information about Suharto's wealth as the issue was considered too complex and sensitive there," Soehandoyo said.

Start of new reign: Cracks develop in Jordan's royal family unity

AMMAN, Feb 10: The man who spent his life preparing to sit on the Hashemite throne was absent when the new monarch began greeting his subjects, reports AP.

The death of King Hussein did more than shake up his nation. It rattled the royal family to the core.

At the centre of the storm is Hussein's brother, 51-year-old Prince Hassan, who had been groomed as the royal heir for more than three decades. Then a quarrel over succession left Hassan out in the cold last month when the ailing King Hussein picked his son, Abdullah, to take the throne after his death.

After Hussein died Sunday and King Abdullah took power, the family publicly united for the funeral.

But Hassan's decision to stay away from the greeting ceremony Tuesday could show cracks emerging. This has some people nervous after 46 years of

steadfast rule under Hussein.

There is no room for any family rift because that will imperil national security and disturb the personal interests of the royal family," said former Cabinet minister Jamal Shaer.

There is little chance of serious challenges since the military is loyal to Abdullah 37, a career officer. Yet Jordanians grow quickly uneasy over any royal discord in their tiny desert kingdom with an unmatched record of stability in the volatile Middle East.

"The monarchy here allows, for one head of state, not two," said a political analyst, Labis Kamhawi. "Hassan's options are simple and clear: Either to stay in the country quietly or leave."

Hassan's world came crashing down in the span of a few hours on Jan. 26. Hussein sent Hassan an angry letter of dismissal, accusing him of power grabbing and fabricating "lies and gossip" on his family. Palace sources said Hussein was referring to false allegations his wife, Queen Noor, had an out-of-wedlock child before marriage and that she was manoeuvring to have her son, Hamzah, replace Hassan as the crown prince — as he ultimately did.

At Hussein's funeral Monday, Hassan and his 19-year-old son Rashid were virtually the only immediate members of the family who did not wear the traditional mourning headress.

Hassan stood silently, staring at the ceiling of the ornate throne chamber in Raghdan Palace, as other members of the family tearfully shook hands with heads of state and dignitaries paying respects.

Hassan's Pakistani-born wife, Princess Sarvath, and their three daughters were not present at the funeral. Hassan's daughters did not visit their uncle the king in his sickbed at an Amman hospital in his last days, when all the other royal family members were in constant attendance.

A palace source, speaking on customary condition of anonymity, said it has been a "most strenuous time" for Hassan because of the loss of his brother and the swift changes that ensued.

Hassan has been cloistered in the library of his modest Amman home reading books until late at night, the source added.

Recently, rumourse mounted that Hassan will go into self-exile in London like his uncle, Prince Nayef bin Abdullah, who fled to Spain one year after King Hussein ascended to the throne, depriving him of the crown.

But Hassan's aides say there is "nothing in cards now" for any stay abroad.

In an emotional letter to Abdullah read Tuesday night on Jordan Television, Hassan pledged his support for the king and his crown prince.

I vow in front of Allah, the nation, and our great people to

support you and be a brother to your majesty and your crown prince," Hassan wrote.

There have been suggestions that Abdullah — who was sworn in as king only three hours after Hussein's death — would appoint Hassan as a chief adviser to primarily oversee economic development in Jordan.

But it was not immediately clear if Hassan would accept a post that would require working under his nephew, 18-year-old Prince Hamzah. As crown prince, Hamzah is now No 2 under King Abdullah, responsible for the country's affairs when Abdullah is away.

Hamzah is Hussein's son from his fourth wife, American-born Lisa Halaby, who adopted the name of Noor al-Hussein — after converting to Islam before she married the king in 1978.

Noor had ruffled the feathers of Hassan's family for showcasing Hamzah and grooming him for the throne in recent years, the royal palace sources said.

Noor will keep her title as queen even if King Abdullah decides to bestow the title on his wife, Princess Rania, as well. Jordan can have more than one queen.

Another new factor is Princess Muna — the former Toni Gardiner Hussein's British-born second wife and the mother of King Abdullah.

She went to live in Britain following her divorce from the king, but was in Jordan during Hussein's final illness, visiting him frequently at the hospital with other members of the royal family.

Muna had been little seen publicly in Amman for some years, but on Tuesday she re-emerged into view, joining Queen Noor and other royal relatives in receiving condolences from Jordanian women. In addition to Abdullah, she had a second son and twin daughters with Hussein.

THE Grandfather

LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL

TANGO

Hollywood actor Kevin Spacey (L) and the President of the Academy of Motion Pictures Art and Sciences Robert Rehme announce the nominees for an Oscar on the Best Foreign Language Film category at the Samuel Goldwyn Theatre in Beverly Hills on Tuesday. — AFP photo