

US plans to join NATO peacekeeping force

Deep divisions remain in Kosovo talks

RAMBOUILLET (France), Feb 13: After nearly a week of intense negotiations on Kosovo, deep divisions persist between the Serbs and ethnic Albanians on almost all important issues, international mediators say, reports AP.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was to arrive Saturday at the 14th-century chateau where the talks are being held to assess whether enough progress has been made to extend negotiations into a second week, said chief mediator, US envoy Christopher Hill.

Albright was expected in Paris on Saturday and was to visit the talks in Rambouillet, about 50 kilometers from Paris, on Sunday, before flying on to join US President Bill Clinton in Mexico.

Clinton planned to announce Saturday that the United States is prepared to contribute ground troops to a NATO peacekeeping force if a political settlement is reached, a senior administration official said Friday night, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Hill described the six days of negotiations so far between the Serbs and ethnic Albanians as "a very difficult process."

"We are going to have to make a lot of progress in the days ahead," he said. The rival sides have spent a week plowing through an interim peace plan proposed by the United States and five European countries, the so-called Contact Group trying to broker a peace in the southern Serbian province.

So far, however, not a single line has been agreed upon. The Serbs are still demanding that both sides sign a set of basic principles that guarantees Yugoslavia's territorial integrity and the Albanians want assurances they will have a referendum on independence after an initial three-year period.

France said on Friday that foreign ministers of the six-nation contact group would meet in Paris on Sunday to assess the talks so far, they are expected to extend them by a week.

The contact group — the United States, Russia, France,

Britain, Germany and Italy — wants to impose a peace deal allowing wide autonomy for Kosovo, but the Serbian side has insisted on conditions the ethnic Albanians find unacceptable.

Serbia has kept up a drum-beat of defiant declarations blaming NATO, the West and the ethnic Albanians for the delay in starting real negotiations.

US State Department spokesman Jamie Rubin said Albright would try to get an "on-the-ground assessment of the status of the negotiations," meeting with one of the negotiating parties and her fellow foreign ministers.

Hill and the other two mediators, Austrian Wolfgang Petritsch who represents the European Union and Boris Mayorsky of Russia, said deep divisions on almost all important issues remained.

Serbian President Milan Milutinovic, who visited the Serbian delegation, accused the mediators Friday of preventing the two delegations from meet-

ing face-to-face despite repeated Serb demands for direct talks.

"So far, for six days already, there has not been a single meeting between the two delegations because the representatives of the international community do not allow it," he said. "It's quite natural then to ask what was the purpose of coming to Rambouillet in the first place."

Asked for a comment, Petritsch said: "They live in the same castle and they can talk to each other whenever they want."

Despite his complaints, Milutinovic said the Serbs were "not ready" to walk out.

But he also said Serbia would not allow foreign troops in Kosovo.

The ethnic Albanians have called for NATO guarantees of any eventual interim settlement.

Both sides were forced to the table by the threat of NATO airstrikes against Serbia and other measures against the ethnic Albanians.

Iraq rejects UN proposal on pilgrimage

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 13: For the second year, Baghdad has rejected a UN proposal to allow thousands of Iraqis to make the annual pilgrimage to Muslim holy sites in Saudi Arabia, diplomats said Friday, reports AP.

The UN Iraq Sanctions Committee had proposed disbursing 44 million dollars from Iraq's oil sales — dhs 2,000 for each of the 22,000 Iraqis hoping to take part in this year's pilgrimage — either in traveller's checks or vouchers through a third-party.

But in a letter to the committee, the Iraqi government rejected the proposal and reiterated its call to have the money sent directly to the central bank, said a spokesman for the Netherlands' UN Mission, which chairs the committee.

The Sanctions Committee insists that sending money directly to the Iraqi central bank violates UN economic sanctions imposed after Baghdad's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Last year, Iraq made the same demand which was rejected by the committee — so only Iraqis who could pay for themselves were able to make the pilgrimage, or Hajj.

With this year's Hajj set to take place around the third week of March, there is little time remaining to find a solution.

"The Sanctions Committee is looking at other ways of making it possible," the Netherlands spokesman said, speaking on condition of anonymity. This discussion is not closed yet. We're trying our best to find a solution because the Hajj is important."

The Sanctions Committee monitors the UN oil-for-food programme, which allows Iraq to export limited amounts of oil — 5.2 billion over six months — to buy humanitarian goods for the Iraqi people. Its proposal would use money from the programme to fund the pilgrimage.

5 of a family burnt alive

HYDERABAD, Feb 13: In a gruesome incident, five members of a family were burnt alive for allegedly practising sorcery and witchcraft on residents of Dharamaram village in Nizamabad district of Andhra Pradesh yesterday, reports PTI.

Police said Saenghan Pedda Pochaiiah, 40, and his wife Sayamma, mother Pochava, 65, and two sons, Boomaiiah, 10, and Naveen, 12, were burnt to death when a 40-member group, armed with weapons, barged into the house and set ablaze the bedroom in which they were sleeping.

However, Pochaiiah's father Lamaiah managed to escape without any harm, police said.

The assailants were locals, police said adding that tension prevailed in the village following the incident.

President's rule in Bihar for seventh time

PATNA, Feb 13: In 47 years of its parliamentary history, Bihar has been brought under President's rule for the seventh time yesterday, but never before on the ground of breakdown of law and order, reports PTI.

Central rule was imposed for the first time on June 29, 1968 when Bhola Paswan Shastri was the chief minister. Shastri had the dubious distinction of being the lone chief minister to have been dismissed thrice, always because his government was reduced to a minority and nobody was willing to form the government.

Central rule was imposed again during his regime on July 4, 1969 and again in 1972. Bihar came under President's rule yet again on April 30, 1977 when Jagannath Mishra's government, in power during turbulent emergency years, was dismissed after Janata Party government of Morarji Desai assumed power at the centre.

When the Congress, led by Indira Gandhi, stormed back to power, the Bihar government, headed by Ram Chandra Prasad, was sacked on February 17, 1980 for the fifth time.

The state had the shortest spell of six days of central rule in 1995 when the term of the state assembly had expired as chief election commissioner TN Seshan extended the poll dates beyond the term of the house.

For the longest kiss...

SYDNEY, Feb 13: Medics were on standby as 53 couples locked lips Saturday at the start of a bid to set a new world record for the longest kiss, reports AP.

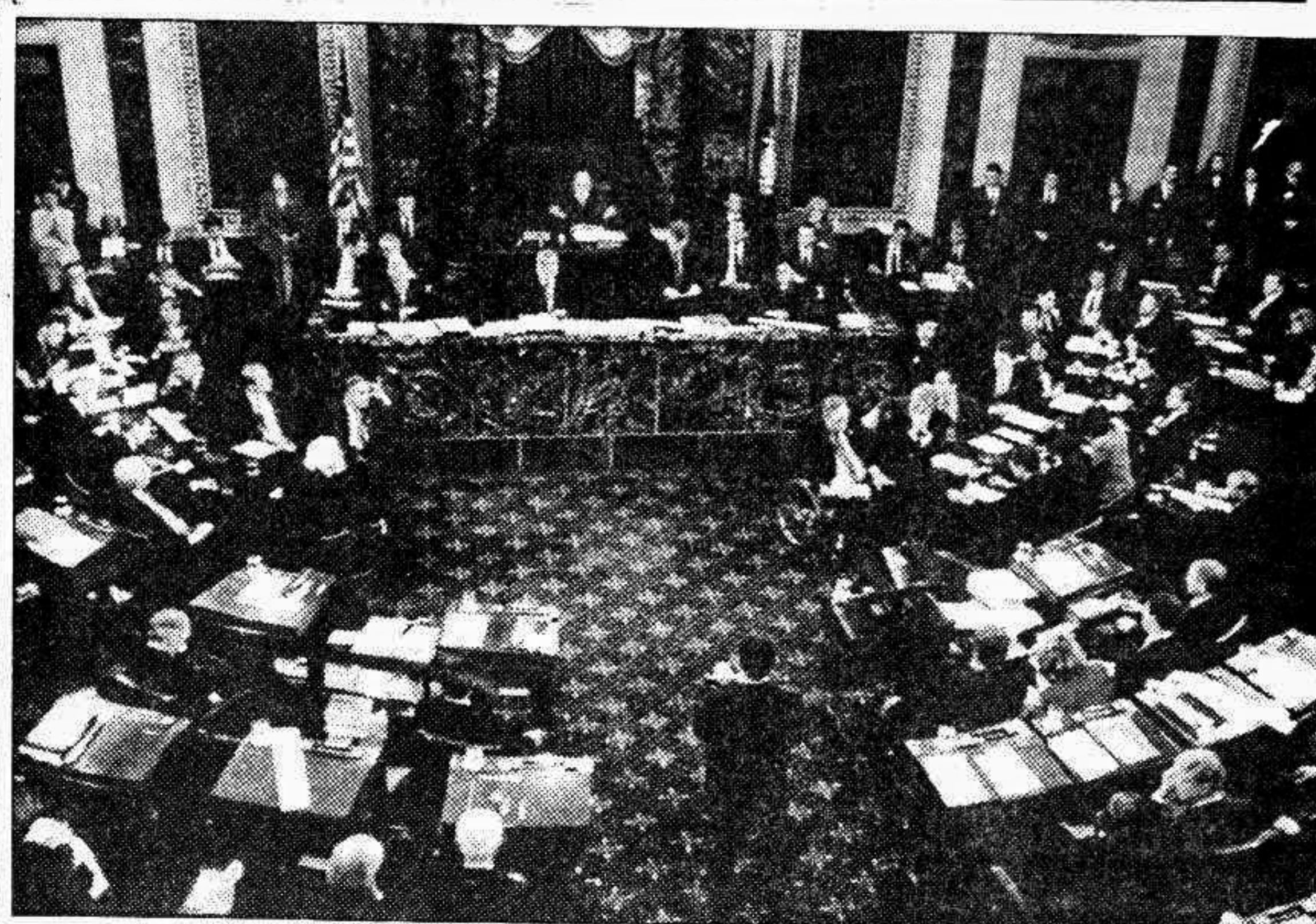
The couples will need to kiss nonstop for more than 29 hours and 57 minutes to make it into the Guinness Book of Records.

The Valentine weekend attempt was organised by a local radio station, which advertised for participants to take part on the foreshore at Newcastle.

To break the record, participants must follow strict rules, station spokeswoman Tricia Morris said.

"All times must be touching at all times, they must be standing, they must not fall asleep, must not leave the venue, mustn't wear any incontinence pads or adult nappies and there are no toilet breaks, Morris said.

"We've got surveillance cameras on them and there has to be a witness with them at all times."



The proceedings of the US Senate vote in the impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton is pictured in this general view Friday on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. Clinton, who escaped being removed from office, declared himself "profoundly sorry" for the year-long ordeal that led to his acquittal in the Senate.

— AFP photo

'Best Valentine's Day gift' for Clinton

LONDON, Feb 13: World leaders were largely silent but TV stations in Europe led news broadcasts Friday with the Senate's acquittal of President Clinton on charges of perjury and obstruction of justice.

The Indian media also gave prominent coverage to Clinton's acquittal, with the mass-circulation Indian Express calling it Clinton's "best Valentine's Day gift."

There have been many losers in this case and very few winners. France's TFI TV correspondent Ulysse Gosses said from Washington, "Bill Clinton is definitely among the losers, even if he has risen from the ashes."

In Britain, the British Broadcasting Corp. and rival ITN carried the story as their lead item.

"President Clinton is staying in the White House," said BBC news presenter Peter Sissons, introducing the BBC's main Nine O'Clock evening news.

Describing the Senate's proceedings as a "historic moment," SKY, a satellite TV service that broadcasts from London and covers Britain and parts of Europe, carried live coverage of the Senate vote to acquit Clinton on articles of impeachment for perjury and obstruction of justice.

Already sensing a loss of interest amongst readers, most British newspapers relegated the impeachment vote to inside pages.

"A license to lie and cheat again," ran a headline on page 8 in The Daily Mail, a broadly conservative and pro-American tabloid which has called for Clinton to resign. Only Britain's broadsheet newspapers ran the impeachment vote story prominently.

"Clinton: the great escape," reported The Times on its front page.

Politicians in Europe refused to comment on Clinton's victory, although in Israel, Ehud Barak, the head of the opposition Labour Party, sent congratulations to Clinton. In a letter, Barak said he was satisfied with the decision because it would let Clinton get back to aiding Middle East peace, Israel radio reported.

"I am sure that history will

judge you on your many achievements and your extraordinary successes and not on other subjects that are irrelevant," said Barak, considered to be one of the strongest challengers to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in May 17 national elections.

In Mexico, where Clinton is scheduled to meet President Ernesto Zedillo on Sunday and Monday, political analyst Sergio Sarmiento said Mexicans generally saw the whole process as absurd.

"It's incomprehensible for the majority of Mexicans," he said, "that an intimate relationship... would be converted into a political persecution."

In South Africa, President Nelson Mandela sent congratulations to both the Senate and the White House, and said he hoped that the US government could now focus on other issues.

Vajpayee hails acquittal

AFP adds: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, introducing the BJP's main Nine O'Clock evening news, said Clinton's acquittal in the Senate was a "historic moment."

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Hillary now plans to run for Senate seat

WASHINGTON, Feb 13: Now that her husband's impeachment trial is over, Hillary Rodham Clinton plans to give careful consideration to running in New York state for a US Senate seat in 2000, her aides said on Friday, reports Reuters.

Flattered by all the attention she has received about a possible run, Hillary has done nothing to discourage speculation about what would be an unprecedented political event: a current first lady actively campaigning to win a legislative seat.

"Now that the trial is coming to an end, she'll have a chance to put some thought into this," her spokeswoman, Marsha Berry, said.

"Other people have been very interested in the speculation and have talked to her about it. But it's not the kind of thing that she's really been able to think about at this point," Berry said.

She said it was unclear how soon Hillary would make a decision, adding that the first lady was simply "relieved" that the senate impeachment trial was over.

"The kind of people who have talked to her about it are people she respects, and I'm sure she'll give it very careful consideration," Berry said.

Other aides sought to dampen speculation that Hillary might announce a decision as early as next week.

Close aides, who asked to remain unidentified, said they still doubted that Hillary would take the plunge — particularly so soon after the difficult year she has had dealing with her husband's sex scandal and the resulting strain in her marriage.

But they insisted that she had not made up her mind and would want to talk to her husband and others about running for office.

Palestinians, Israelis held secret talks in 1980s

JERUSALEM, Feb 13: Israeli and Palestinian officials confirmed Friday that they held secret talks in the 1980s under the direction of Israel's then-Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chief Yasser Arafat, reports AP.

The talks were held in various European cities, said Ephraim Sneh, a legislator from the opposition Labor Party, and Hani Hassan, an aide to Arafat and member of the Central Committee of Arafat's Fatah faction. Both participated in the meetings.

The talks were kept secret because Israel at the time did not recognise the Palestine Liberation Organisation and Israeli law made contacts with PLO officials illegal.

Sneh and Hassan gave conflicting accounts of the purpose and duration of the meetings.

Sneh said the talks began in 1988, shortly after the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The labour legislator said Israel's immediate objective was to end the revolt and the long-term goal was to reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians. The two sides discussed, among other things, possible Israeli recognition of a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation, he said.

He said the talks ended with November 1988 elections that brought a new government to power in Israel.

Hassan said the meetings began in 1986 and broke down over Rabin's efforts to crush the uprising in which Israeli soldiers armed with assault rifles confronted Palestinian stone throwers.

The dialogue "was a big issue with us because it was the first time Israel was sitting with Palestinian representatives," Hassan said. The Palestinians did not inform the Americans about the talks, Hassan said.

Sneh said the talks were hampered greatly by Palestinian hard-liners who opposed such meetings.

Then-Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir knew about the talks and did not try to stop them, Sneh said. At the time, Shamir headed a broad-based coalition of his hard-line Likud Party and the center-left Labor Party.

BRIEFLY

Russia tests anti-missile system:

Russia carried out a first successful test of its new S-400 anti-missile batteries on Friday, Interfax news agency reported, AFP says from Moscow.

The ground-to-air battery was fired in the presence of Defence Minister Igor Sergeev and hit its target. Once all the tests are completed, the new anti-missile system will be able to intercept in flight "all currently existing means of aerial attack" in a radius of 300 to 400 kilometres, according to a senior military official.

Algeria goes to polls April 15:

Algeria's presidential elections are scheduled to take place on April 15, the country's president, Liamine Zeroual, announced Friday, AP reports from Algiers.

Zeroual, who announced in September that he was cutting short his mandate and would not seek re-election, made the announcement during a brief televised speech.

Avalanches claim 5 more in France:

Five more people died in avalanches in the French Alps on Friday, taking the toll of snowslides to 18 in a week following Tuesday's disaster in the Mont Blanc region, Gendarmes said, Reuters reports from Grenoble.

They said three people were killed in Les Arcs and two in Val d'Isere. All had ignored repeated warnings from authorities to stick to marked routes because of the high risk of avalanches after the heaviest snowfall in decades.

NZ polls in November likely:

The ruling National Party in New Zealand said Saturday it was planning for a November election, and that it may not contest several electoral districts to help potential coalition partners, AP reports from Wellington.

Party president John Slater, speaking at a joint press conference with Prime Minister Jenny Shipley, laid out National's programme for the rest of the year. "We are planning and preparing for a November election," he said.

Bihar Governor takes charge of state

PATNA, Feb 13: After last night's dismissal of Rabri Devi government, Bihar Governor Sunder Singh Bhandari today formally assumed reins of the state, reports PTI.

Bhandari was received at the state secretariat by newly appointed chief secretary Vijay Shanker Dubey, director general of Police TP Sinha and a host of senior officials.

He later held talks with top officers on the prevailing law and order situation, particularly the recent spurt in extremist-related violence and gave directions to deal with them with a firm hand.

The Governor also held detailed discussions on massive reshuffle in the administration in the aftermath of imposition of President's rule.

The rise and fall of Rabri Devi

PATNA, Feb 13: From raising nine children in the safe confines of her house to the hot seat of powerful chief minister of the second most populous state, Rabri Devi's rise was as meteoric as her fall was sudden, reports PTI.

Leave alone the people of the state, not even the MLAs of Laloo Prasad Yadav's all-powerful RJD had any inkling of what lay in store from them when they were summarily summoned to 1, Anne Marg residence of the Chief Minister on July 25, 1997.

As Yadav facing an arrest warrant by the special CBI court in the fodder scam installed his wife — a quiet and diminutive — Rabri Devi as new leader of the RJD legislature party, the political landscape of the volatile state underwent a drastic change almost overnight.

The initial hesitation and coyness quite evident at her maiden public appearance on August 9, 1997 at Ranchi to mark the third anniversary of creation of the Jharkhand area autonomous council disappeared in months.

When at a public meeting in Patna Rabri threatened to break the leg of an 'inconve-

nient' governor Sunder Singh Bhandari, her supporters claimed "she has come of age" as detractors dubbed her outburst as "transgression of constitutional authority."

Her nearly 19-month-old government, which survived one central recommendation for President's rule on grounds of collapse of law and order, could not survive the second in the wake of killing of 11 dalits at Narayanpur in Jehanabad within the span of a fortnight of slaying of 22 persons at Shankarbigha in the same district.

During her rule which came to an abrupt end following the Narayanpur outrage, was marked by 383 incidents of extremist-related violence which officially claimed at least 219 lives.

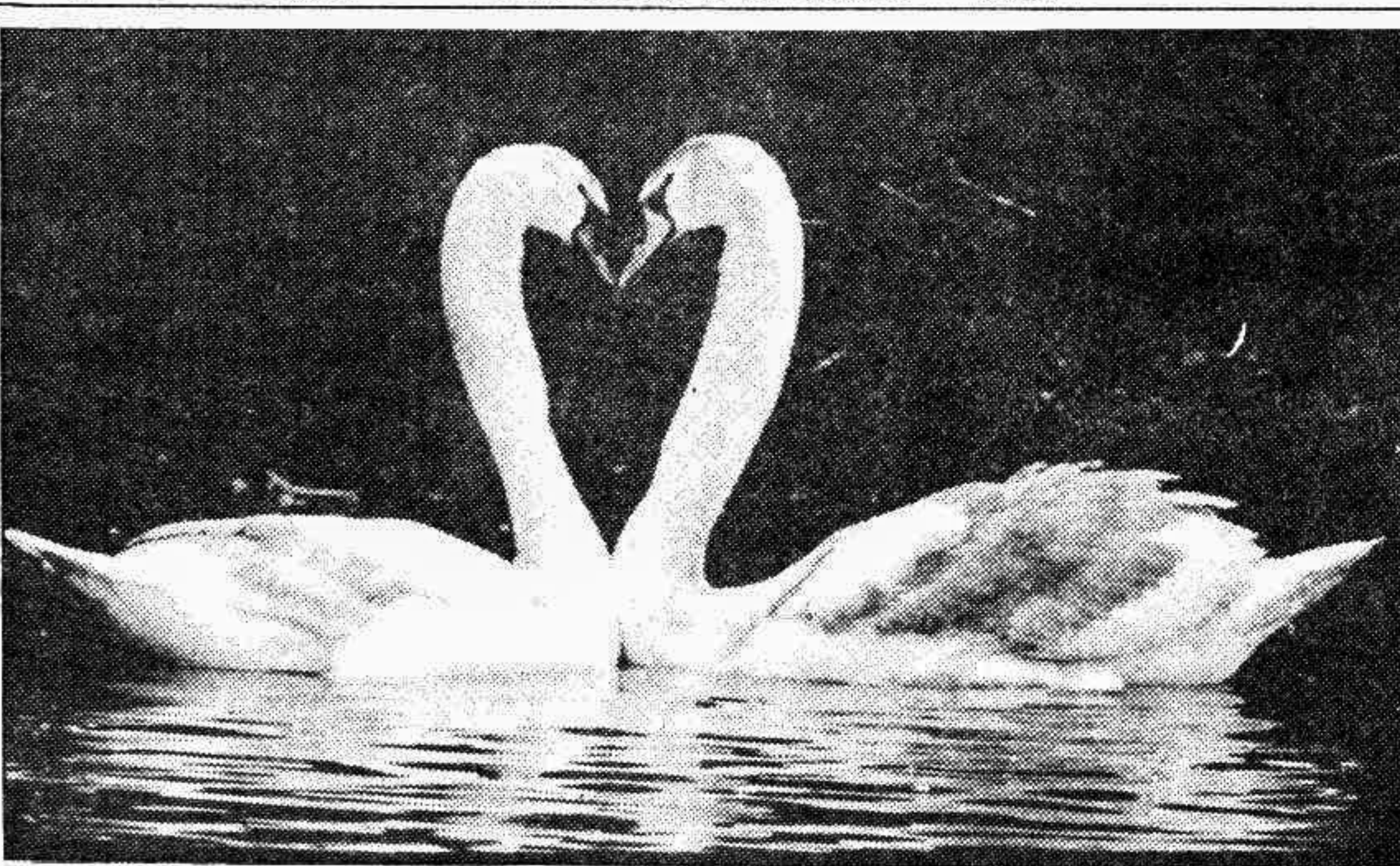
To avoid getting caught up in the romantic mood...

SINGAPORE, Feb 13: Singapore Muslims have been advised by their religious leaders not to celebrate Valentine's Day tomorrow because of its non-Islamic origins despite the modern commercialisation of dining out and buying flowers, presents, candy or card for one's sweetheart, reports AP.

"While we are asked to respect other religions, we should not imitate them," Murat Mohammed Aris, manager of the office of Singapore's multi, said.

He warned that young Muslim couples who go out for Valentine's Day may get caught up in the romantic mood and risk overstepping the bounds of Islamic morality. That was especially so for unmarried couples, who are required under Islam to have a third party with them, he said.

A letter from the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore advising against participation was published Friday in the Malay-language Berita Harian.



With uncanny and suspiciously acute timing, two young swans make a heart-shaped display during their courtship ritual at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Slimbridge, near Gloucester in western England Friday — two days ahead of St Valentine's Day.

— AFP photo