

China for strengthening defence coop with Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Feb 20: Chinese Defence Minister General Chi Haotian arrived here late Friday for talks with Pakistani officials on strengthening bilateral defence cooperation, officials said, reports AFP.

The 16-member Chinese delegation, which included senior military commanders, was greeted at the Islamabad airport by Pakistani Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz and defence secretary (Iftikhar Ali Khan).

In a statement on his arrival Chi said military relations between China and Pakistan were an important "component of the inter-state relations."

He said frequent exchanges of visits by leaders of defence institutions and the armed forces as well as the development of military relations through friendly cooperation helped facilitate peace and stability in the region.

"My current visit is aimed at enhancing mutual understand-

ing and trust, promoting friendship and cooperation, and strengthening the comprehensive partnership of cooperation towards the 21st century between our two countries and two armed forces," the defence minister said.

The force of the wind tests the strength of the grass, and time reveals a person's heart," he said, adding that Sino-Pakistani friendship had stood the tests of time and changing circumstances.

The Chinese team will hold talks with Pakistani officials today.

Earlier Aziz told state-run television that the visit was of "great importance."

Both sides would discuss ways to further cement defence relations, he said.

Officials said the wide-ranging talks would cover political, regional and international issues and peace and security in the region.



Chinese Defence Minister General Chi Haotian (R) waves while being greeted by Pakistani Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz at the Islamabad airport Friday. Chi, who heads a 16-member delegation that arrived here for a five-day visit, said military relations between China and Pakistan were an important "component of the inter-state relations."

— AFP photo

Indian SC rules

Mother is also natural guardian of her children

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: In a landmark judgement upholding the cause of gender equality in India, the country's Supreme Court ruled that the mother is also "the natural guardian of her minor children," reports IANS.

The pathbreaking decision by the apex court came on a petition filed by renowned Indian author Githa Hariharan and environmental activist Vandana Shiva, with the assistance of the Lawyers Collective Women's Rights Initiative. The petition challenged the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) refusal to let Hariharan make an investment in the name of her minor son on the ground that Section 6(a) of the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (HAMA) allowed the mother to be a natural guardian only "after" the father.

The Supreme Court interpreted the words "after him" in Section 6(a) of HAMA to clarify that both parents were the natural guardians of the child and

that the mother, in the absence of the father, would be accepted as the natural guardian. The father's absence, it ruled, could be on several accounts — illness, inability to discharge parental responsibilities, travel or desertion. The petitioners' case, argued by noted lawyer Indra Jaisingh, director of the Lawyers Collective, cited the need for equality in the area of parental responsibility as well as the right of a child to equal access and care by both parents.

According to the Lawyers Collective, Jaisingh drew examples from countries like Britain, arguing how legislative changes in this area had led to an abandonment of the "guardianship-control" approach in favour of a "care-responsibility" approach in that country. The verdict was delivered by a bench of judges headed by Chief Justice Adarsh Seel Anand. The ruling is being seen as a considerable shift in favour of women's custody rights over their children.

Contempt petition against Clinton

LITTLE ROCK (Arkansas), Feb 20: A woman who says President Bill Clinton defamed her by denying she had an affair asked a federal court here Friday to begin criminal contempt proceedings against him, reports AFP.

Dolly Kyle Browning's request came after Judge Susan Webber Wright said Tuesday that she might hold Clinton in contempt to court for providing misleading testimony about his affair with Monica Lewinsky in the Paula Jones sexual harassment case.

The case Jones brought against Clinton — which has been settled — led to the year-long Lewinsky scandal that eventually led to Clinton's impeachment and acquittal.

Browning also asked that Wright recuse from the case and that the matter of contempt be transferred to a court outside Arkansas, after Wright said she would do so at the request of any of the parties in the Jones case.

It was not clear if Browning, who was a witness in the case, has standing to ask for recusal. Browning — who is represented by Judicial Watch, a conservative anti-Clinton group — is a former high school classmate of Clinton.

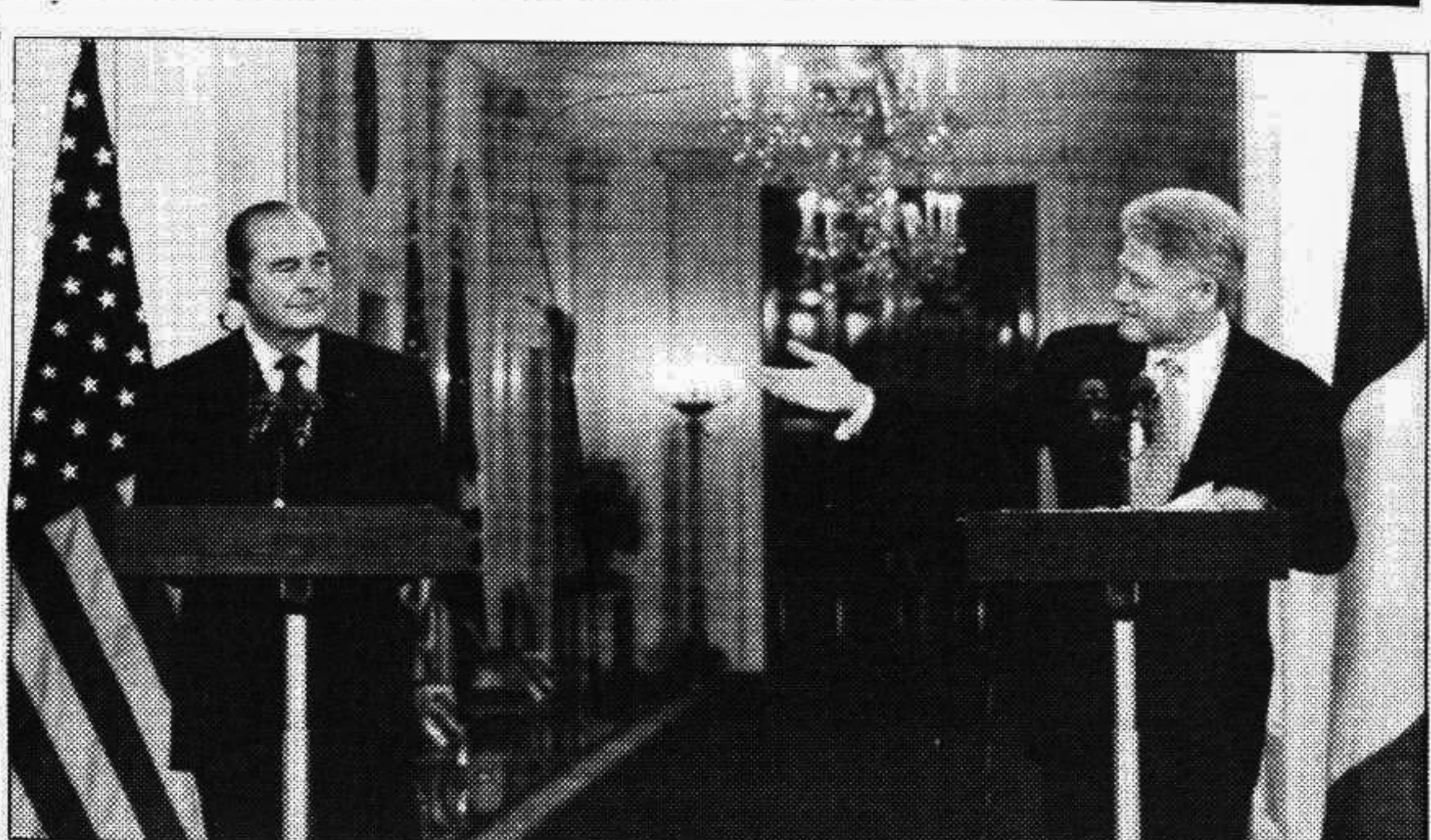
She wrote a book about what she says was a long-term sexual relationship with him while he was governor of Arkansas.

AP adds from Washington: A week after surviving impeachment, President Bill Clinton

said he expects "two good years here" but acknowledged that America probably paid a price for his ordeal. He said it has been "a very exhausting year" for his wife, Hillary.

The president said he hoped the presidency had not been harmed by his experience, which provoked bitter battles in the courts and in Congress. He added, "I think the Constitution has been in effect re-affirmed."

Clinton strode into the East Room with visiting President Jacques Chirac for his first post-impeachment news conference, a session limited to only three questions each from French and American reporters. Clinton declined an opportunity to stay longer.



French President Jacques Chirac (L) and US President Bill Clinton (R) conduct a joint press conference in the East Room of the White House Friday in Washington, DC. The two responded to questions about the situation in Kosovo.

— AFP photo

'Demand for Tamil Nadu govt's dismissal isn't acceptable'

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee yesterday disagreed with the demand for dismissal of the DMK government in Tamil Nadu raised by AIADMK and endorsed by Trinamool Congress, reports PTI.

Like the demand for dismissal of the central government, this demand is also not acceptable to me, he told reporters who sought his comments on Banerjee's remark made after a meeting with AIADMK supreme Jayalalitha in Chennai yesterday.

Vajpayee was making a sarcastic reference to the recent demand made by Samajwadi Party's Mulayam Singh Yadav that the BJP-led coalition government at the centre should be dismissed for its failure to check killings of Dalits after the imposition of president's rule in Bihar.

'Mystery disease' kills 150 in remote Afghan villages

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 20: A "mystery disease" has killed 150 people in remote villages in northeast Afghanistan. A UN spokesman said Friday, reports AFP.

Experts from the World Health Organisation (WHO) plan to attempt to travel to the villages in the Darwaz region in the next few days. UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said.

Last week officials in Darwaz told WHO that 2,000 people were suffering from the illness, and that 150 of them had died.

Symptoms of the sickness include fever, cough, aches, vomiting, and diarrhoea, he said.

The WHO plans to send two epidemiologists to Dushanbe in neighbouring Tajikistan from where they will attempt to reach the affected villages, he said.

The villages located in narrow valleys between Bigh mountains are normally accessible only by foot or on donkey.

Strike paralyses life in violence-hit Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India Feb 20: A strike called by Muslim leaders paralysed life in violence-hit Kashmir today as Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee prepared to leave for a historic visit to Pakistan, police said, reports AFP.

Muslim separatist guerillas stepped up attacks on the eve of Vajpayee's visit and 21 people, including nine soldiers, seven wedding guests and five militants, were killed overnight Friday.

Business establishments, post offices and schools were shut down today in response to a call by the Freedom Conference an umbrella group representing more than a dozen

militant and political groups. The conference said the shutdown was to protest the absence of Kashmiri leaders in the talks between Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif.

"By this strike we want to make it clear to the world community that Kashmiris should be allowed to participate at all levels of negotiations on Kashmir," a statement issued by the group said.

"Our inclusion would make the talks meaningful."

Indian soldiers patrolled Srinagar, the Kashmir's summer capital and the main hub of the separatist campaign, and traffic went off the roads.

Vajpayee's bus trip to Lahore

Nothing dramatic expected to emerge from talks: Media

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's historic bus ride to Pakistan today received a lukewarm reaction from the Indian media which said nothing very dramatic was expected, reports AFP.

Vajpayee was due in Pakistan on a cross-border bus ride this afternoon, becoming the first Indian premier to set foot on Pakistani soil in 10 years.

The event made front page headlines in the Indian capital, along with cricket, India's favourite sport, and domestic politics.

"Bon voyage, Atalji" said the Times of India in an editorial adding "All those with a sense of the epochal are hoping that the sheer symbolism of the bus ride will put relations into a higher gear."

The Asian Age daily argued in its editorial "All set for a ride" that scheduled talks between Vajpayee and Pakistani Premier Nawaz Sharif would be held amid pressure from the

"Big Brother," the United States. The Times said though Vajpayee's visit had generated much popular interest in the country, "noting very dramatic is likely to emerge from the talks" between the two premiers.

The past few months have not exactly done wonders for the image of the BJP-led government and Vajpayee badly needs to do something right."

"As for Pakistan, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif appears equally keen to make this visit a success."

The third round of talks between the two prime ministers, after both nations held tit-for-tat nuclear explosions in May, is expected to discuss a raft of issues including the thorny Kashmir dispute.

"The Pakistani side will presumably focus on Kashmir but this should not perturb the Indian party unduly... but there is still urgent need for concrete confidence building mechanisms to minimise the risk of a nuclear war," the Times said.

Last-ditch effort to avert NATO air strikes in Y'slavia

RAMBOUILLET, France, Feb 20: Negotiators in the Kosovo peace talks prepared today for a last-ditch effort to secure an agreement before the 1100 GMT deadline and avoid NATO air strikes against targets in Yugoslavia, reports AFP.

The threat of NATO action was directed against Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, who refused Friday to see US envoy Christopher Hill, saying that Belgrade would never allow foreign troops on its territory.

The issue of an international force to monitor the implementation of a peace deal is the main stumbling block in talks between the rival Serb and ethnic Albanian delegations at the Rambouillet

chateau near Paris on the future of Kosovo, a largely Albanian-populated province of Serbia.

As the Pentagon ordered six B-52 heavy bombers to join 51 other US warplanes flown to European bases for possible strikes, US President Bill Clinton warned, "We stand united in our determination to use force" to persuade Belgrade to comply.

Speaking at a joint news conference with Clinton, visiting French President Jacques Chirac said, "Our agreement is an unqualified agreement. The time has come (for Milosevic) to choose the path of wisdom and not the path of war."

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's office said that he and Clinton had "assessed that

there was still a real chance of an agreement in Rambouillet but that Milosevic should be under no illusion about our resolve should be prevent a deal."

However, a top Serb official suggested late Friday that Yugoslavia could "maybe" accept United Nations troops to police the Kosovo peace accord.

Asked in a BBC television interview if Belgrade could invite UN troops instead of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces, Serbian Deputy Information Minister Miroslav Popovic replied "maybe there is."

Meanwhile the ethnic Albanian side also toughened its stance.

Divorce

Fergie to give up battle for more money

LONDON, Feb 20: Britain's Duchess of York known as Fergie, is to give up her battle with the Royal family to obtain more money from her divorce settlement after running up huge legal costs, it was reported today.

AFP quoting The Times broadsheet said Sarah Ferguson was horrified at a legal bill of 70,000 pounds and had decided to abandon her efforts as she has failed to win further concessions from Queen Elizabeth II.

However, a spokeswoman for Prince Andrew's ex-wife said she could not confirm the report, "as far as the Duchess was aware, nothing has been decided," she said.

According to The Times, Ferguson has decided to let the 1.5 million pound house bought with the Queen's help for her daughters, Princess Beatrice and princess Eugenie, and is looking for a cheaper home. Birch hall, a huge 18th century property built on the site of an old hunting lodge in Surrey, Southern England, was bought last year as part of the divorce settlement between Fergie and Prince Andrew.

The newspaper said the Duchess could not afford to live there without an increase in her divorce settlement.

She received a lump sum of 300,000 pounds for herself which was now spent it said.

Ferguson 39, divorced in 1996 from prince Andrew, Elizabeth II's second son, however, she has continued to live in a wing of Sunninghill, the countryside home of her ex-husband.

Nigerians vote to elect new parliament

LAGOS, Feb 20: Up to 40 million Nigerians head to the polls today to vote for a new Parliament in the third round of elections due to take Africa's most populous country back to civilian rule later this year, reports AFP.

Voters across Nigeria were called to choose their representatives for the two chamber Parliament after already voting in local and state-level elections in December and January under a programme aimed at ending more than 15 years of military rule.

Three parties were competing in the polls, the southwest based Alliance for Democracy (AD), the righting All People's Party (APP) and the centre-left People's Democratic Party (PDP).

The polls precede presidential elections due next weekend, to be followed by a hand over by the military on May 29.

US working with African states to set up centre to promote democracy

President Bill Clinton said that the United States is working with African countries to establish a centre to promote peace and democracy on the continent, one of several administration initiatives aimed at broadening US ties with Africa, reports AP.

The centre's goals also will be to enhance military professionalism, civil society, the rule of law and respect for human rights, a State Department official said. And it will address such issues as terrorism, narcotics, arms control, humanitarian relief, refugee flows and peacekeeping capabilities.

Electricity worth to die for

From Syed Talat Hussain

ISLAMABAD, Feb 20: Balochistan is Pakistan's largest province in terms of territory: it is nearly half the country's land. But it is also the least populated. For this reason it is also the most neglected. Shares in everything are divided among Pakistan's four provinces according to population density. Now leaders from this neglected province have taken upon themselves to get Balochistan better shares in the pie of resources.

A minister in the present Balochistan government who hails from Panjgur district has given an ultimatum that if his area is not connected with the main electricity grid as quickly as the 15th of March, he would begin a hunger strike until death. He has decided this unique way of protest after his repeated efforts to have access to electricity for his area.

He says he feels humiliated when he goes before his constituents who ridicule him for being ineffectual in getting them the basic necessities of life. But in Balochistan, getting electricity is tough. The area is

vast and sparsely populated and low electricity consumption does not make network of electricity supply financially viable.

That is why only 10 to 15 per cent of the total population of the province has access to electricity. Lack of electricity and the hardship it causes the public, has frequently sparked violent protests. In the mid 80's a broken generator led to a severe water shortage in Gawadar, a port area. The public came out on the streets and attacked the offices of the local administration, which reacted by opening fire, resulting in the death of a woman.

However, low access to electricity is only part of Balochistan's many woes. It is also the least developed part of Pakistan, with lowest literacy rate. Lack of facilities and proper infrastructure has caused many potential foreign investors to put their money in to exploit the province's rich soil and for this reason Balochistan has received negligible foreign investment in the last three years.

Iraq urges UN to denounce patrols over no-fly zones

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 20: Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz called on the United Nations Friday to denounce almost daily US and British patrols over Iraq's 'no-fly' zones, reports AFP.

"Silence on the part of the United Nations in the face of these actions by the United States and the United Kingdom would have dangerous repercussions for international peace and security," Aziz said in a letter dated February 12.

It would represent the beginning of the collapse of the collective security system enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, Aziz wrote.

US and British clashes with Iraqi air defences in the 'no-fly' zones have become more frequent since Britain and the United States launched a four-day air campaign against Iraq in mid-December.

"Day after day, events prove the existence of this policy of aggression against Iraq," Aziz said.

On Friday, American and British warplanes attacked two Iraqi anti-aircraft sites in the

northern exclusion zone. Aziz called on UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to intervene before the Security Council to bring an end to the unlawful actions.

He said Iraq has the right to defend its airspace and its territorial integrity and to seek full compensation from the "aggressor countries and from those countries...that facilitate the aggression."

Iraq has blasted Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Turkey for allowing US and British forces to use their air bases to monitor the 'no-fly' zones.

Baghdad does not recognise the exclusion zones. Meanwhile, two panels set up by the UN Security Council to review relations with Iraq following US and British air strikes have held their first meeting, a UN spokesman said Friday.

A third panel, which is to focus on Iraqi disarmament and future monitoring efforts since the December air strikes is to hold its first meeting next Tuesday and continue discussion throughout next week.

Three-man team lifts off for rendezvous with Mir

BAIKONUR, Kazakhstan, Feb 20: On the 13th anniversary of the Mir's launch, a new three-man crew lifted off today for a rendezvous with the Russian space station in what may be the Mir's last manned mission, reports AP.

Russian Viktor Afanasayev, French astronaut Jean-Pierre Haignere and Slovak Ivan Bella blasted off successfully from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan and will link up with the Mir on Monday.

The Mir's fate has not yet been sealed, but the trio could be the last of more than 100 men and women who have lived and worked on the space station since it was launched on February 20, 1986.

The Mir was expected to last only five years, but has performed well throughout most of its extended lifetime, aside from several serious breakdowns in 1997.

Russian space professionals want to keep the Mir in orbit for several more years, but it may be abandoned as early as August

if the Russians cannot find private donors to pay the Mir's expenses, estimated at about 250 million dollars a year.

Bella will spend eight days in space and then return to Earth with the Mir's current commander, Gennadi Padalka.

Padalka's crew-mate, Sergei Avdeyev, will stay aboard with Afanasayev and Haignere until August 23. After that, the station may be discarded.

Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov said last month that Mir could stay in orbit for another three years — but only if private investors pay all expenses, and no one has yet offered the money.

The US space agency NASA wants the Russians to abandon the Mir so Moscow can concentrate its limited resources on building the new International Space Station, a massive project involving 16 countries, led by the United States and Russia.

The initial components of the new station were put into orbit at the end of last year,



Dancers perform a welcoming dance during an annual ceremony marking the 210th anniversary of Vietnamese troops' victory over Chinese Qing dynasty's troops in 18th century at Dong Da, the very site of the victory in Hanoi yesterday. In the background is the huge statue of King Quang Trung, who led Vietnamese troops to the victory.

— AFP photo

Turkey to face consequences if Ocalan harmed: PKK

ISTANBUL, Feb 20: A Kurdish rebel commander has warned that Turkey will face serious consequences if imprisoned guerilla leader Abdullah Ocalan is harmed, reports AP.

Turkey is preparing to try Ocalan, who was captured this week, on capital charges. Cemal Bayik, a top figure in Ocalan's Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, did not say exactly what the PKK would do, but warned Turkey not to "touch a single hair of our leader. If they harm our leader, they will face the consequences."

"Even though we have lost a great leader, this does not mean that our party and army are weakened," Bayik said in a statement faxed Friday to The Associated Press.

Turkish leaders say that Ocalan's capture earlier this week marks the end of the PKK and its nearly 15-year war for autonomy in southeast Turkey. The government has urged the rebels to surrender and launched an offensive against

their hideouts in Iraq. Turkish police have detained 1,000 pro-Kurdish demonstrators nationwide this week, according to Turkey's independent Human Rights Association.

Rights activists fear violence today, when relatives of people who have disappeared in police custody gather in central Istanbul. Their weekly demonstrations often lead to confrontations with police.

Istanbul Police Chief Hasan Ozdemir authorized riot police to shoot at the feet of pro-Ocalan demonstrators, Turkish television networks reported.

Ocalan, who was brought Tuesday to Turkey, is now the sole inmate of a prison on Imrali island off of Istanbul. Turkey has banned fair and sea traffic from around the island.

Some Kurdish analysts said Ocalan's arrest could increase violence. Some 37,000 people have been killed since the PKK launched its insurgency in 1984.

BRIEFLY

Rare Chinese tiger gives birth: A South China tiger gave birth to three cubs this week, raising the known number of the rare cats to 56, state media said Saturday, AP reports from Shanghai.

The first cub was born Monday at the Suzhou Zoo minutes before the Chinese Lunar Year of the Tiger ended, the Xinhua News Agency said. Two others were born early Tuesday.

Tigers in Asia have been hunted to the brink of extinction for pelts or body parts used in traditional medicine.

Malaria epidemic likely in Vietnam: Malaria epidemics are likely to break out in a quarter of Vietnam's provinces, a Health Ministry official said Saturday, AP reports from Hanoi.

The disease is most likely to spread in mountainous areas and the central provinces, where environmental conditions are ripe for the mosquito that transmits malaria.

Uzbek rebels blamed for blasts: The president of Uzbekistan charged Friday that religious extremists had carried out a series of car bombings that killed 16 people in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent earlier this week, AP reports from Moscow.

"I can state with all responsibility that the terrorist acts were carried out by religious extremists, fanatics," Islam Karimov told reporters in Astana, Kazakhstan, where he was visiting. Islamic fundamentalists have long been at odds with Karimov, and news reports in Uzbekistan have said they were under suspicion, although authorities have not said there was any evidence implicating them.