

Junta waging dirty propaganda war against NLD: Suu Kyi

YANGON, Feb 26: Pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi has called mass resignations from her party reported by the state-controlled press part of a government campaign of dirty tricks, reports AP.

The resignations are "not worth the paper they were written on," Suu Kyi told a small news conference of foreign journalists Thursday. "Immense pressure is being put on our people everywhere."

Suu Kyi, head of the embattled National League for Democracy and winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, said that some resignations were forced under threat of jail and others were fabricated and submitted by people who were not party members.

For several months, the media — all of which is controlled by the military government — has been reporting the resignations en masse of members of the NLD nationwide, part of a propaganda war.

The pressure increased on Suu Kyi and her colleagues last year when they declared they were creating an alternative

parliament to symbolically represent the legislature voters elected in 1990.

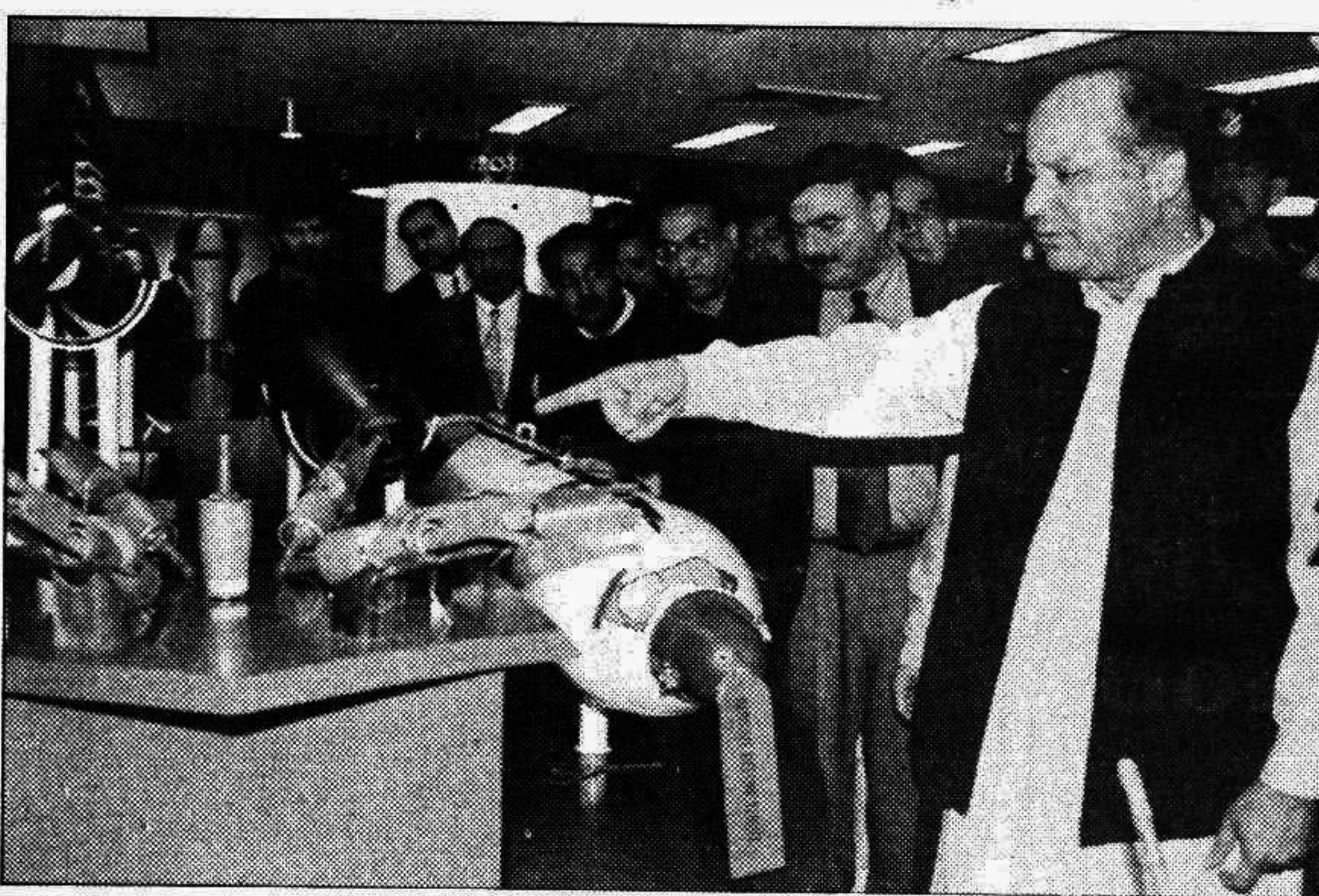
The NLD won a landslide victory in those elections, but the military, which has ruled since 1962, never allowed the legislature to meet.

The government reacted to the new moves by detaining more than 100 party officials who were among the would-be lawmakers and reportedly tried to coerce them to resign from the party.

The government's next move was to report the resignations of NLD members at the grassroots level and the alleged voluntary closings of local party offices.

Lately, the government has publicised what is alleged to be a grassroots campaign to recall and deprived of their seats NLD victors in the 1990 election with so-called no-confidence motions.

She said many signatures included the notation that the signers could not recall their party registration numbers, or simply didn't include the number at all.



Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (R) inspects medium range missiles and other weapons manufactured in the Wah Ordnance Factory, some 40-km from Islamabad on Thursday. Sharif said Pakistan's defence had been made impregnable through acquisition of nuclear capability. He said no enemy could dare attack Pakistan as every one knows it is a nuclear power now. — AFP photo

Senate asks Clinton admn to condemn China for HR abuse

WASHINGTON, Feb 26: The US Senate urged the Clinton administration to sponsor a resolution condemning China for human rights abuses when the UN Human Rights Commission meets next month in Geneva, reports AP.

Sponsors of the measure said Thursday's 99-0 vote, although not legally binding, would send a powerful message to the Beijing government as well as to democracy advocates in China in advance of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's visit next week.

"The arrested dissidents and their courageous supporters deserve our full backing in their historic struggle to bring democracy to China," said Sen. Paul Wellstone, a sponsor of the measure.

President Clinton ignored a similar resolution passed by congress last year.

The administration had pushed human-rights condemnations of China at past Geneva sessions but declined to do so in 1998 because Clinton was then planning a visit to China.

But since that trip last July, and despite Beijing's promises to exhibit more tolerance, China's communist leaders "have intensified their crackdown," said Sen. Tim Hutchinson. "The pattern of abuse is clear."

"It's important for our secretary of state to have that mes-

sage when she goes to China," Hutchinson said.

Albright is scheduled to meet Chinese officials on Monday and Tuesday for talks on an array of concerns, including human rights.

Testifying before the House International Relations Committee, Albright said Thursday she should would "bring a strong message of support for international norms of respect for human rights, and this will come as no surprise to Beijing."

"Let me stress," she said, "in our relations with China, engagement is not endorsement. We continue to have sharp differences with Beijing, but we also believe that the best way to narrow those differences and to make progress where our interests coincide is through regular contact and dialogue."

Albright told a Senate panel Wednesday that the administration hadn't yet decided whether to offer and anti-China resolution at the upcoming Geneva meeting.

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott told the Senate: "There continue to be terrible human rights violations in China."

Lott said he deliberately scheduled the measure second on the Senate calendar to emphasize its importance. The first, passed Wednesday, was a big pay raise for the military.

UNSC resolution to extend mission vetoed China lashes back at Macedonia

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 26: Over protests it was putting its domestic agenda ahead of international peace, China lashed back at Macedonia for establishing ties with Taiwan and blocked peacekeepers from staying in the strategic Balkan country, reports AP.

Chinese Ambassador Qin Huesun vetoed a Security Council resolution extending the Macedonia mission for six months, marking only the fifth time Beijing has used its "no" vote on a council resolution.

Qin said Thursday that the force wasn't needed because the ethnic conflict in Kosovo didn't constitute a true threat to Macedonia. Allegations that Beijing was vetoing the mission over the Taiwan dispute were "totally groundless," he said.

The outcome was a major blow to the United Nations, which has held up the Macedonia mission as a unique model of preventative peacekeeping. The UN Preventative Deployment Force was dispatched to Macedonia in 1992 during the Bosnian war to prevent the spread of the ethnic conflict.

China severed ties with Macedonia after it established diplomatic relations last month with Taiwan. Beijing considers Taiwan a renegade

province with no right to its own international relations. Taiwan has diplomatic relations with just 28 countries, most of them small and poor countries in Latin America and Africa that it supports with aid, loans and investment.

Macedonia received promises from Taiwan for direct economic aid worth 400 German marks 235 million dollars and possibilities for 1 billion dollars in investments.

Diplomats said they were disappointed with the vote because of the possibility that the fragile situation in Kosovo — where Serbs are trying to stifle an independence movement by ethnic Albanians — could spill over into Macedonia.

Russia, which has close ties to Serbs, abstained from the vote, saying its efforts to have the peacekeepers tighten the arms embargo on Kosovo hadn't been taken into account. The ethnic Albanians are believed to be arming themselves from neighboring countries.

UN officials believe Thursday's vote was the first time a UN peacekeeping mission was cancelled by a veto. They said the peacekeepers would start packing their bags Monday — a day after the mandate expires.

Diplomats said they may try to press China to reconsider its position by introducing another resolution to re-establish the force. That worked two years ago when China vetoed a resolution sending a force to Guatemala because of its relations with Taiwan, however, and were already discussing alternatives.

A NATO force already in Macedonia was a possible replacement, diplomats said. The force could be supplemented by the 360-strong American contingent of the UN peacekeeping mission in Macedonia.

Meanwhile, Taiwan today accused China of abusing its power in the United Nations by vetoing peacekeepers for Macedonia as a means of retaliating against the Balkan nation for establishing diplomatic ties with Taipei.

"This was an inappropriate act. It's too selfish," said Shuei Ke-sheng, vice chairman of Taiwan's government Mainland Affairs Council.

The move "fully demonstrated the Chinese communists' power abuse and their hegemonistic mentality that undermines world peace," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Roy Wu.

Kosovo Albanians invited to US to secure settlement

WASHINGTON, Feb 26: The United States is inviting senior ethnic Albanian negotiators from Kosovo to Washington in a bid to secure a settlement of their conflict with Serb-led Yugoslavia, reports AP.

Peace talks between the two sides ended this week in France without substantial agreement on a US-led proposal to grant autonomy to the ethnic Albanian majority in Kosovo. Ethnic Albanians have been pushing for full independence.

Two senior US officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Thursday that the White House wants to improve the ethnic Albanians' "comfort level" with how the plan would be implemented.

The Albanians are especially concerned about the future of the rebel Kosovo Liberation Army, which has fought a bloody war for secession against Yugoslav forces over the past year.

Under the proposed peace

plan, the insurgents would be disarmed, while most of the Serb troops and special police units are withdrawn from Kosovo. Many of the fighters are eligible to be absorbed into a local police force.

The idea is to tell them to understand they can still exist," said one of the two officials.

There was no word Thursday from chief ethnic Albanian negotiator Hashim Thaci and others on whether they would accept the invitation, and when the Washington talks might be held.

The Serbs, meanwhile, have not accepted various parts of the self-rule plan nor a NATO peacekeeping force of some 28,000 troops, including about 4,000 Americans.

Negotiations are due to resume March 15 in France.

Also Thursday, US officials expressed concern that both sides in the Kosovo dispute would use the recess to fortify their military positions.

The officials warned Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic that airstrikes were still a possibility, and they urged the Kosovo Albanian side to "show restraint or risk losing NATO support."

The threat of force remains in effect. Deputy Defence Undersecretary Walter Slocombe told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Meanwhile, with an upsurge of fighting between Kosovo rebels and Yugoslav army forces, NATO officials are urging both sides to hold to a ceasefire during a two-week suspension in peace talks.

NATO officials also expressed concern Thursday over what they called a "significant" buildup of Yugoslav army troops near the borders of the province.

German Gen. Klaus Naumann, head of NATO's panel of military planners, called the situation "more than tense."

JI protests arrest of its activists in Lahore

KARACHI, Feb 26: More than 1,000 activists of Pakistan's main fundamentalist party demonstrated here today against the arrest of its supporters during the recent landmark India-Pakistan summit in Lahore, reports AP.

The Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) activists chanted "down with Sharif and Vajpayee."

The party, which bitterly opposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's meeting last weekend with Indian counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee, has launched a protest campaign against the government.

"Bye, Bye Nawaz Sharif," shouted the bearded activists, vowing to launch an Islamic revolution in Pakistan.

"Nawaz Sharif, your government's days are numbered. We will not sit idle till we send you back home," JI chief Azizi Hussain Ahmad told the crowd, which responded by raising hands.

Ahmad said his party would continue its struggle until a true Islamic system was ushered in.

He condemned the arrest of hundreds of people in two days of clashes with police in Lahore during the demonstration to disrupt Vajpayee's visit. One policeman was killed and at least 150 people were injured in the clashes.

Azizah hits the campaign trail Another denies being sodomised by Anwar

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 26: A tailor who accused jailed politician Anwar Ibrahim of sodomising him filed a suit Friday against the police saying he was tortured into making the allegation, reports AP.

In his civil suit, Mior Abdul Razak, a dressmaker for Anwar's wife, denied ever having sexual relations with the ousted deputy prime minister.

"I had to confess as I could not tolerate the physical torture and humiliation by the police," he said in the civil suit claiming damages of 225,000 ringgit (dhs 5,920).

The hearing of Anwar's trial on four charges of abuse of power was adjourned today until Monday because one of the key defence lawyers had to leave to take care of his sick wife.

Anwar, however, is to testify on Sunday before an independent panel investigating the police attack on him on the night of his arrest.

Meanwhile, Anwar Ibrahim's wife Azizah Ismail, look all set to challenge Mahathir's parliament seat as she began campaigning for her party in the Malaysian countryside.

"The people ask me if I will contest. If the people of Kubang

Pasu asks me, who knows," Azizah said speaking from a makeshift podium set in a sea of rice fields in Kubang Pasu district in the northwestern state of Kedah.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is in your hand. The people hold the power!" she said, punching her fist in the air. Supporters from Azizah's fledgling Social Justice Movement, who helped plan the evening, roared their approval.

Azizah's visit to this agricultural villages has intensified speculation that she may contest Mahathir's Parliament seat here. It's just a matter of when, her aides say.

If Mahathir's Parliament seat here, it's just a matter of when, her aides say. Pasu, his home district which has faithfully elected him to power for nearly three decades, he would lose his seat in Parliament. That would end his 18-year tenure and he'd not be longer be Asia's longest-serving ruler.

The 73-year-old prime minister has avoided any test of strength since he fired Anwar last September — a move which incensed many ethnic Malays in the countryside and has deeply divided party leaders.

His unlikely challenger is hoping to pick up the pieces.

BRIEFLY

Indian delegation to visit Iran: An Indian delegation is to visit Iran to discuss the possibility of building an Indian Ocean pipeline to ship Iranian liquefied natural gas to the Sub-continent. Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi said Thursday, AFP reports from Tehran.

Writer Andre Dubus dead: Andre Dubus, praised by many as one of the finest short-story writers of his generation, has died. He was 62, AP says from Haverhill.

The cause of death was not immediately available. Dubus was discovered unconscious Wednesday night in his Haverhill home and later pronounced dead at Hale Hospital. Dubus was the author of "Dancing After Hours" and "Meditations From a Movable Chair." His stories focused on discontented New Englanders and his own struggle after losing a leg in an automobile accident.

Revision of penal code in Vietnam: A draft revision of Vietnam's penal code would reduce the number of offenses that carry death penalty from 44 to 32, a Justice Ministry official said yesterday, AP says from Hanoi.

"Some of the offenses that carry the death penalty are irrelevant in the current situation and need to be changed," she said. The penal code has been revised four times since it was introduced in 1985.

Hillary invites Chinese women to US: US First Lady Hillary Clinton has invited a 15 member delegation of Chinese women on a cultural exchange visit to Washington from Saturday, the official Xinhua news agency reported, AFP says from Beijing.

The visit, which will also include New York and Houston is the first of five by Chinese women to share ideas and experiences with women in the United States. Hillary initiated the programme last year when she accompanied her husband on a state visit to China.

Earthquake rattles Japan: A strong earthquake rocked parts of northern Japan yesterday, but there were no immediate reports of damage or injuries, AP says from Tokyo.

The quake had a preliminary magnitude of 5.4. Its epicentre was 20 kilometres under the ocean floor just off the northwestern coast near the city of Sakata. Sakata is about 370 north of Tokyo.

Rescue workers in a boat advance to the fuselage of a crashed plane on Thursday, as it is towed to the shore after plunging into the sea off the northern Italian city of Genoa. Three people were killed and some 20 injured, two seriously, when the twin-engine Dornier 328 plane crashed into the sea after a botched landing, airport officials and Alitalia said.

— AFP photo

Bid to halt US, British attacks Iraq urges Arabs to take 'decisive & swift' action

BAGHDAD, Feb 26: Iraq urged Arab states on Thursday to take immediate action to halt US and British attacks on its territory and not to wait until an Arab League meeting on the issue next month, reports AP.

The official Iraqi news agency INA quoted Sultan Al-Shawi, the Iraqi representative to the Cairo-based Arab League, as calling on Arab nations to take "decisive and swift" action to halt the "aggression."

Shawi said continued raids on Iraq by US and British warplanes posed a "serious threat" to all Arab countries.

The Iraqi delegate warned that the United States and Britain were seeking an escalation in the situation, and appealed to Arab states not to wait for the Arab League meeting scheduled to be held in Cairo on March 17 and 18.

The United States and

Britain have been staging regular raids on Iraqi air defences in the "no-fly" zones over northern and southern Iraq since December's desert Fox air war.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohammad Said Al-Sahhaf returned to Baghdad on Thursday at the end of a 10-stop tour of Arab states.

Sahhaf visited Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, in each case delivering a message from Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Xinhua adds: Britain Thursday cautioned the United States against giving military backing to the Iraqi opposition, which, instead, should take the "educative" role to influence world opinion against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

British Foreign Minister Derek Fatchett, who was in

Washington for talks with US officials, told reporters that the Iraqi opposition had a political task, which he said could help "shape the climate outside and that can possibly play back into Iraq," but that task did not include "bringing Saddam Hussein down from outside," he added.

"We must be realistic about their ambitions," Fatchett said. He explained what the educative role meant, saying it was to remind the world constantly of what Saddam has done to his people and to demonstrate that there is an alternative to his leadership.

Britain, the closest US ally in its tough policy toward Iraq, here was keeping some distance with the United States, which advocated containment plus regime changes by Iraqi opposition groups inside or outside Iraq, armed with US military aid.

Avalanches claim 12 army personnel in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Feb 26: Twelve Pakistani army personnel were killed when two avalanches struck their post in the Gultari area in the mountainous northern region of the country, official sources said today, reports AP.

Two officers, eight soldiers and two junior commissioned officers were manning a military post when the avalanches hit early Thursday.

The bodies had been recovered and arrangements were being made to transport them to their home towns, the sources said.

No further details were immediately available.

Lanka to set up all party jt polls monitoring cell

COLOMBO, Feb 26: Sri Lanka's political parties have agreed to set up a representative 12-party joint monitoring committee under President Chandrika Kumaratunga to prevent election violence and violations, reports Xinhua.

This decision was taken at an all party conference chaired by the President Thursday to discuss measures to eliminate election violence and violations at the upcoming five provincial council elections on April 1.

The meeting was called against the backdrop of allegations of violence and violations by the ruling People's Alliance

French police clash with demonstrators Greek churches helped fund Kurd rebels: Ocalan

ANKARA, Feb 26: In a development that threatened to heighten already-strong tensions with Greece, a Turkish prosecutor said Thursday that imprisoned Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan has revealed that Greek churches helped fund his guerrillas, reports AP.

Prosecutor Nuh Mete Yuksel said Ocalan disclosed in a 36-page confession that Greek churches collected money for his Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK. Turkey's semi-official Anatolia news agency reported. It did not elaborate.

Yuksel is one of three prosecutors who have interrogated Ocalan since Turkish commandos captured the rebel leader and brought him to Turkey earlier this month.

Ocalan was abducted outside the Greek Embassy in Kenya, where he was in hiding. Turkey on Thursday repeated its accusation that its traditional rival, Greece, has supported the rebels. Athens has denied the charge.

"Greece has emerged behind it," President Suleyman Demirel said, referring to the Kurdish conflict in Turkey's southeast.

On Monday, Demirel issued a thinly veiled threat of military force, saying his country had a "right to self-defence" against any Greek support for the PKK.

Greek military units in the Aegean Sea and near the Turk-

ish border were on their highest state of alert, defence sources in Greece said Tuesday, speaking on condition of anonymity.

On Thursday, Turkey's Foreign Ministry was considering reinstating a visa requirement for Greeks, the Hurriyet daily reported.

Turkey lifted its visa requirement for Greeks in 1985 in a bid to improve strained relations between the two countries, NATO partners but longtime rivals.

The ministry refused to comment on the report.

Also Thursday, Ocalan was allowed to briefly see his lawyers for the first time, a member of the legal team said.

The two lawyers were only allowed to question Ocalan about his health. A judge was present during the questioning. AFP adds: Several people were injured on both sides late Thursday when French riot police clashed with Kurdish demonstrators armed with petrol bombs near the Council of Europe headquarters in Strasbourg, local officials said.

At least three Kurds were arrested. The police intervened at about 09h40pm urging the Kurds to abide by an agreement under which they were authorized to hold their sit-in outside the Council of Europe building provided they did not damage the adjacent park and did not disturb local residents.

BJP asks Cong to make its stand clear on Bihar

NEW DELHI, Feb 26: The BJP yesterday asked Congress to make it clear whether it wanted Bihar governor to be replaced or it was opposed to the imposition of president's rule in the state on grounds of a principle, reports PTI.

The BJP would like Congress to make its stand clear on what issue it is opposing President's rule in Bihar because if it is opposed to it on principle, then it should make its stand clear on Article 356, party general secretary Venkaiah Naidu told newsmen here.

He said it was under Congress rule at the centre that Article 356 was invoked about 97 times in 28 states and now it was opposed to it in principle.

Iranians vote in local polls

TEHRAN, Feb 26: Iranians cast ballots today in the nation's first election of local officials in 20 years, with reformists hoping to gain the upper hand in a power struggle against hard-liners in the Islamic government, reports AP.

About 330,000 candidates, including 5,000 women, are contesting the elections for Islamic Councils. Council members manage local government in cities, towns and villages. Nationwide, more than 200,000 seats are at stake.

Off the Record That's what friends are for!

FOND DU LAC, Wisconsin: A fifth-grader who lost his hair because of cancer treatment got a boost from his classmates and teachers who showed up at school bald, reports AP.

Twenty-one students and teachers from Parkside School shaved their heads in a show of support for 10-year-old Scott Lackas.

Scott was diagnosed in January with alveolar rhabdomyosarcoma, a relatively rare form of cancer that starts in the muscle, said Lisa Brunette, a spokeswoman at University Hospital and Clinics of Madison.

The cancer has spread to Scott's spine, shoulders and back. He is undergoing chemotherapy treatment at Children's Hospital in Madison. Hair loss is a common side effect of the treatment.

Among those sporting a shaved scalp on Monday was 11-year-old Craig Holevatz. "He would probably do it for me if I had cancer," he said.

Teacher Gina Rieder didn't go totally bald — she had her hair trimmed shorter — but said she was impressed with her students.

Baywatch moves down under BRISBANE: Queensland's government said Friday it has clinched a deal in principle to be the new location for the filming of the world's most watched television show, "Baywatch," reports AP.

Tourism Minister Bob Gibbs announced the deal after meeting "Baywatch" executive producer Greg Bonann, who had hoped to move production to Avalon Beach near Sydney, but faced a revolt by local citizens. Bonann said the Gold Coast was now "Baywatch's" number one choice, and he was excited about the prospect of relocating filming there. Gibbs said he hoped to sign a contract early next week cementing the deal for production to start in June, which he said would be worth 20 million Australian dollars (12.4 million US dollars) to the Gold Coast economy plus massive world-wide exposure for Queensland.



Some 3,000 Kurds from Lebanon and Syria stage a protest on Thursday near the Turkish Embassy in Beirut against the "terrorism" that led to the capture of Kurd rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan. Demonstrators burned the Turkish and Israeli flags while shouting "Freedom or Death."

— AFP photo