

## Close contest in presidential polls Nigerians move to push out military rule

LAGOS, Feb 28: Tens of millions of Nigerians took to the nation's all-but-empty streets to cast their votes in presidential elections that mark the final phase of democracy's return to Africa's most populous nation, reports AP.

The long-awaited vote Saturday, which came six years after Nigeria's last attempt to remove soldiers from power, set former Finance Minister Olu Falae against retired Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, a former military ruler seeking a civilian comeback 20 years after leaving power. Early results were expected today.

"Democracy is sweet," said Kola Omololu, smiling broadly as he stood next to an open sewer running through the poor Idaraba neighbourhood of Lagos.

"This is the last chance for an elected government," he said. "People are fed up."

Cities and towns ground to a halt as officials, fearing the voting could spark violence, ordered shop owners to keep their doors closed and drivers to leave their cars at home.

At outdoor polling stations in the commercial capital of Lagos, voters began lining up for accreditation, while on some street corners, groups of

exuberant young men shared bottles of palm wine, singing and chanting party slogans.

Nigeria, an ethnically divided country with large oil reserves but extreme poverty, has been held in a military choke hold for most of its 39 years of independence, its riches plundered by successive junta bosses.

The country's last attempt at democracy — presidential elections in 1993 won by businessman-turned-opposition leader Moshod Abiola — was annulled by the military. Abiola later died in prison.

Reuter adds: Former military ruler General Olusegun Obasanjo and his rival Olu Falae appeared neck and neck as early results trickled in from Nigeria's landmark presidential election.

The West African nation waited nervously for the official outcome of the polls held nationwide on Saturday, and which the Electoral Commission said it would start to announce today.

Pre-election favourite Obasanjo, who relinquished power 20 years ago, appeared to have lost some support in the ballot to end a crippling 15-year stretch of military rule in Africa's most populous nation.

## Gunmen kill prominent Sunni Muslim activist in Punjab

LAHORE, Feb 28: Gunmen shot to death a prominent member of a militant Sunni Muslim party in a small town of the eastern Punjab province Saturday in the latest escalation of religious violence, reports AP.

Police said two gunmen riding a motorcycle opened fire with automatic weapons on Haji Abdul Waheed, 42, while he was standing outside his shop in Naring (Mandi town), 60 kilometres (36 miles) northeast of the province's capital, Lahore.

Waheed was a prominent member of the militant Sipah-e-Sahaba party, or the Guardians of the Friends of the Prophet, which wants Pakistan to be declared a Sunni Muslim state.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility. But police said it seemed another of the lit-for-fat shootings in the Punjab province in which more than 40 people have died during the past two months.

Sipah-e-Sahaba is locked in a bloody conflict with Shiite Muslim groups that oppose a Sunni Muslim state.

## India vows not to lose land, says Vajpayee

NEW DELHI, Feb 28: Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee today asserted that India was determined not to lose its territory any further and said both India and Pakistan will have to make efforts to ensure that the agreements signed between the two countries in Lahore recently last, reports PTL.

"We have not attacked any country in our 50 years of independence, but we have been attacked several times and have lost our land. We are determined not to lose our land in future," Vajpayee said after inaugurating a "Bhagwan Mahavir Kendra" here.

The Prime Minister said there was no alternative to 'Ahimsa' (non-violence) and that problems between nations can be sorted out only through dialogue.

Asserting that his path-breaking visit to Pakistan and the agreement on confidence building measures between the two countries were signs of self-confidence and not weakness, he said friends can be changed but not neighbours. Both the countries will have to make efforts to ensure that the agreements signed recently last.

## Israel seals border with WB, Gaza for 4-day

JERUSALEM, Feb 28: Israel said on Saturday it was sealing the border with the West Bank and Gaza Strip for four days to prevent Palestinians from entering the country during a Jewish holiday, reports Reuter.

"Defence Minister Moshe Arens acted on the advice of the security establishment to impose a general closure ahead of the Festival of Purim which begins this week," the Israeli Army said in a statement.

In the recent years, Muslim suicide bombers opposed to Palestinian peace moves with Israel have launched attacks in Tel Aviv against Israeli civilians during holidays.

The closure was scheduled to begin at 2200 GMT on Saturday and would last until 2200 GMT on Wednesday.

## Libya rejects new deadline ICJ should deal with Pan Am bombing case: Gaddafi

CAIRO, Feb 28: Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi appears to be pulling back from a UN-brokered compromise on the 1988 Pan Am bombing case, reports AP.

In a joint statement issued Saturday in Tripoli with visiting Namibian President Sam Nujoma, Gaddafi said the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague, Netherlands, was the proper venue for a trial on the bombing of a Pan Am passenger jet over Lockerbie, Scotland, that killed 270 people, including 193 Americans.

The United States and Britain have pushed for the case to be heard by a Scottish court sitting in the Netherlands.

The International Court of Justice, also known as the World Court, has ruled in Libya's favour once before, deciding in February 1998 that it had the authority to hear the Lockerbie case.

The court has no enforcement powers and relies on voluntary compliance with its rulings.

Despite the decision, the United States and Britain continued to pursue the matter through the UN Security Council, which imposed sanctions

on Libya in 1992 to compel the country to turn over two Libyans wanted in the case.

The statement from Gaddafi argued that the council — where United States and Britain wield tremendous power — is not the right UN body to handle the matter.

It is not the authority of the Security Council to deal with the Lockerbie case, the statement said. The statement was read over state-run Libyan Television, which was monitored in Cairo.

On Friday, Libya's UN Ambassador Abuzed Omar Dorda, made a similar argument, saying the Lockerbie issue was legal, not political, and that the council was a political body. Tripoli fears that as veto-wielding members of the Security Council, the United States and Britain, may try to block the lifting of sanctions even if the two men are handed over for trial.

Peter Burleigh, the United States' deputy UN ambassador, said he couldn't comment on the Libyan statement because he hadn't seen anything official on it. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan also said he had no comment.

Libya has been arguing with UN officials for weeks over terms of a trial. Last August, Gaddafi agreed in principle to a proposal from the United States and Britain that the suspects be tried by Scottish judges under Scottish law in the Netherlands.

The Security Council later agreed that once the suspects were turned over, air and trade sanctions would be suspended.

Still, Libya has sought repeated clarifications via UN mediators and is believed to be dissatisfied that UN sanctions would be suspended, not lifted. It also has questioned arrangements for jailing the suspects, if they are convicted, in Scotland.

It was not clear if Saturday's statement was a total rejection of recent efforts to bring the suspects to trial.

On Friday, the United States and Britain gave Libya a one-month deadline to turn over the suspects.

There was no clear indication what Washington and London were prepared to do if the deadline passed, but both have threatened to seek further UN sanctions.

Libya on Saturday also rejected the new deadline.

## Malaysia's ex-IGP admits assaulting Anwar Ibrahim

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 28: Malaysia's former inspector general of police (IGP) Abdul Rahim Noor today admitted through his lawyer to assaulting sacked deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim during police detention, reports Reuter.

Abdul Rahim's lawyer Teh Poh Teik told a Royal Commission investigating injuries Anwar suffered after being arrested in September that his client had instructed him to admit to the assault. The also said Rahim had "acted under grave provocation."

Teh's remarks came after one member of the commission, Mahadev Shankar said to Teh that his cross examination of Anwar seemed to suggest that Rahim had assaulted Anwar.

Teh said "that's my position. That's the instruction from my client and... he acted under grave provocation."

Earlier Teh had asked Anwar during cross examination, you were hit by Rahim because you provoked him."

Anwar replied "there was absolutely no conversation at all in the cell."

Teh said "you provoked him (Rahim) by uttering the words, 'This is the father of the dogs.'"

Anwar denied making the

statement. There was no utterance of that sort, he said.

Anwar testified before the commission on Tuesday, describing being beaten around the head neck and arm after being arrested on September 20. And saying police personnel had told him then police chief Rahim had assaulted him.

That was the first time he had implicated Rahim who resigned last month following an internal police probe into the incident.

Anwar told the commission on Tuesday he was blindfolded and handcuffed when he was assaulted. He appeared in court in September with a black eye and bruises on his neck and arm.

Anwar has pleaded not guilty to 10 counts of corruption and sexual misconduct at a trial in the Capital High Court. The court is examining four corruption counts each of which carries a maximum penalty of 14 years in jail and a 20,000 ringgit (5,000 dollars) fine.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said he sacked Anwar because he was morally unfit. But Anwar said he was a victim of a conspiracy by Mahathir's close associates.

## Move to end war with Ethiopia Eritrea ready to accept OAU's peace plan

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 28: Eritrea, after military setbacks, announced on Saturday it would accept a peace plan put forward by the Organisation of African Unity to end its border war with Ethiopia, reports Reuters.

The 15-member UN Security Council, meeting in an emergency session, immediately welcomed Eritrea's statement, a reversal of earlier positions, and called for both sides to stop fighting immediately.

The meeting followed a similar statement from President Bill Clinton in Los Angeles who said he had been informed of the decision by Eritrean President Isayas Afewerki by letter.

The Security Council demands an immediate halt to all hostilities and calls on the parties to refrain from the further use of force, the council said in a statement issued at a formal meeting attended by Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

The Security Council welcomes the acceptance by Eritrea at the head of state level of the Organisation of African Unity framework agreement and recalls the prior acceptance of the agreement by Ethiopia, said the statement, read by council president Robert Fowler of Canada.

The Council was responding to an official letter from Eritrea's UN Ambassador, Haile Menkerios, that said "the government of Eritrea accepts the OAU framework agreement to pave the way for an expedited demarcation of its border."

Menkerios said that the "Ethiopian government now occupied by force Eritrean sovereign territory" in conflict which UN trouble-shooter Mohammed Sahnoun earlier this month called "nonsensical and unacceptable."

Ethiopia previously accepted an OAU peace initiative brokered by the United States and Rwanda which called for Eritrea to withdraw to positions

held before the conflict erupted. Until Saturday, Eritrea asked for an international monitoring force to be in place first.

The two East African neighbours in the Horn of Africa are contesting a largely uninhabited, rocky 390 sq km patch of land in their 1,000 kms border that has never been totally demarcated.

Fighting intensified since Tuesday with each side claiming to have inflicted heavy losses on the other. In May and June more than 1,000 people were killed, after which unsuccessful negotiations began, the fighting resumed on February 6.

The council on February 10 issued a similar appeal and also urged nations to halt arms sales to both sides. But that statement was not mandatory and diplomats said weapons were still flowing into the region from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

## Dozen dissidents held in Cuba

HAVANA, Feb 28: Cuban authorities have arrested up to a dozen dissidents in order to prevent trouble around the upcoming trial of the island's best-known jailed political activists. Dissident groups said on Saturday, reports Reuter.

"They simply want to have these people under their control so that no incidents occur around the trial," said Gerardo Sanchez, of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and national reconciliation, which named some of the detained dissidents.

The activists, thought to be temporarily arrested as a preventive move, were all members of small groups opposed to Fidel Castro's communist government or independent journalists working illegally outside the state-controlled media.



South African President Nelson Mandela (R) waves as he and Home Affairs Minister Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi (C-behind) arrives with an unidentified member (L) of the Shembe church in Durban where they attended Saturday the gathering of thousands of Nazaries whose Shembe church is one of the biggest indigenous faiths in South Africa.

— AFP photo

## Peace talks with communists fail Estrada asks troops to be vigilant

CAMP AWANG, Feb 28: Clad in combat fatigues, President Joseph Estrada crooned love songs to troops at a southern Philippine army camp Sunday and urged them to be vigilant after peace talks with Communist and Muslim rebels bogged down, reports AP.

Estrada had hoped to meet with Muslim secessionist leader Salamat Hashim Sunday but called off the meeting after both sides failed to agree on security and other arrangements.

On Wednesday, Estrada suspended peace negotiations with Communist rebels indefinitely after they abducted an army general, a junior officer and a police official.

The Communist New People's Army announced Saturday they have sentenced Brig. Gen. Victor Obillo, commander of the army's 55th Engineering Brigade, and logistics officer Capt. Eduardo Montealto to death on espionage charges.

"They have betrayed our trust," said Estrada and added the recent abductions "clearly manifest their insincerity."

After speaking to the troops, Estrada joined them for a meal in the traditional Philippine style, eating with his bare hands and using banana leaves as plates. He then serenaded the soldiers with local love songs, including "Because of You," a song popularised by former first lady Imelda Marcos.

Luis Jalandoni, the Communist rebel's chief negotiator, said they are considering permanent ending peace talks with the Philippine government after Estrada suspended the talks, which were being held sporadically in the Netherlands.

Jorge Madlos, a communist party regional leader, said Obillo and Montealto were "court-martialled" by rebels who seized them Sept. 17 on the outskirts of the southern port city of Davao.

Madlos said the two officers had sown intrigues, enticed rebels to surrender and organised spies to monitor the revolutionary movement. He said espionage is punishable by death in the rebels' justice system.

## Clinton, Arafat to discuss declaration of Palestinian statehood Mar 23

JERUSALEM, Feb 28: Yasser Arafat will meet President Bill Clinton on March 23 to discuss a Palestinian declaration of independence, a Palestinian official said Saturday, reports AP.

Arafat will seek American and European backing for Palestinian statehood and a guarantee that if he postpones a declaration of independence past May 4 that he will not have to wait long. Palestinian negotiator Nabil Shaath told The Associated Press.

May 4 is the deadline set in the Oslo Peace Accord for the end of a five-year period of Palestinian autonomy.

The United States and several European countries have urged Arafat to delay a declaration of statehood, saying it would hurt the peace process.

Shaath said Arafat has been discussing the May 4 deadline with many world leaders.

## Mandela has fallen victim of theft

JOHANNESBURG, Feb 28: South Africa's President Nelson Mandela has fallen victim to rampant crime in his country with goods including cell phones and a television set being stolen from his Cape Town office, The Sunday Press reported, says AFP.

A policeman stationed at his Tuynhuys offices is being investigated for theft after goods worth some 28,000 rand (4,500 dollars) disappeared from there in the past nine months. The Sunday Times newspaper said.

The missing items include four cellphones, a television set, a video recorder, a sound mixer, two computer printers and a polony cutter worth 8,000 rand (1,300 dollars), the paper reported.

## Changes in asylum laws protested in London

LONDON, Feb 28: More than 2,000 people gathered in central London on Saturday to protest proposed changes to Britain's asylum laws, saying they will encourage racism against refugees, reports AP.

The demonstrators in Trafalgar Square, from anti-racism groups and asylum seekers' rights groups, said the Asylum and Immigration Bill will be unfair and oppressive.

The bill would introduce a new system of distributing refugees around the country and would replace financial benefits with vouchers for food and prepaid accommodation.

The government proposed the changes when the system was found to be struggling to cope with a surge in the number of people applying for refugee status.

## BRIEFLY

**Heavy rain kills 3 in Brazil:** Heavy rain in Brazil's southern state of Sao Paulo killed at least three people and has left countless others homeless, the local fire department said early on Saturday. Reuter reports from Sao Paulo.

Two of the victims died early on Saturday when their houses collapsed in Sao Paulo's slums, while another man drowned in a massive lake that had formed in the street, a fire department spokesman said.

Brazilian television showed automobiles submerged in rain and people walking in water up to their waists.

**Hunsen leaves Tokyo for home:** Cambodian Prime Minister Hunsen left Tokyo yesterday morning for home, ending his six-day visit to Japan to attend an international meeting of donor countries and aid agencies, Xinhua reports from Tokyo.

During his visit, Hunsen met with his Japanese counterpart Keizo Obuchi, Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura and other Japanese government and business leaders. The Cambodian Premier also got a one-year aid package commitment worth 470 million US dollars from the donor countries and international aid agencies Friday at the end of the third consultative group meeting on aid to Cambodia.

**Thai businesswoman shot dead:** A Thai businesswoman suspected of masterminding the murder of a prominent media executive was shot dead by hired gunmen. The Nation newspaper reported on Sunday. AP says from Bangkok.

Ubol Bonnyachalothorn was shot more than 20 times by two gunmen on a motorcycle while she was in her Mercedes automobile outside the home of her daughter in Yasothorn province, 450 km northeast of Bangkok. Police said they were searching for a motive, the paper reported.

**Chinese PM concludes Russia trip:** Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji returned from his first official visit to Russia aimed at strengthening relations and trade, Xinhua news agency reported, AFP says from Beijing.

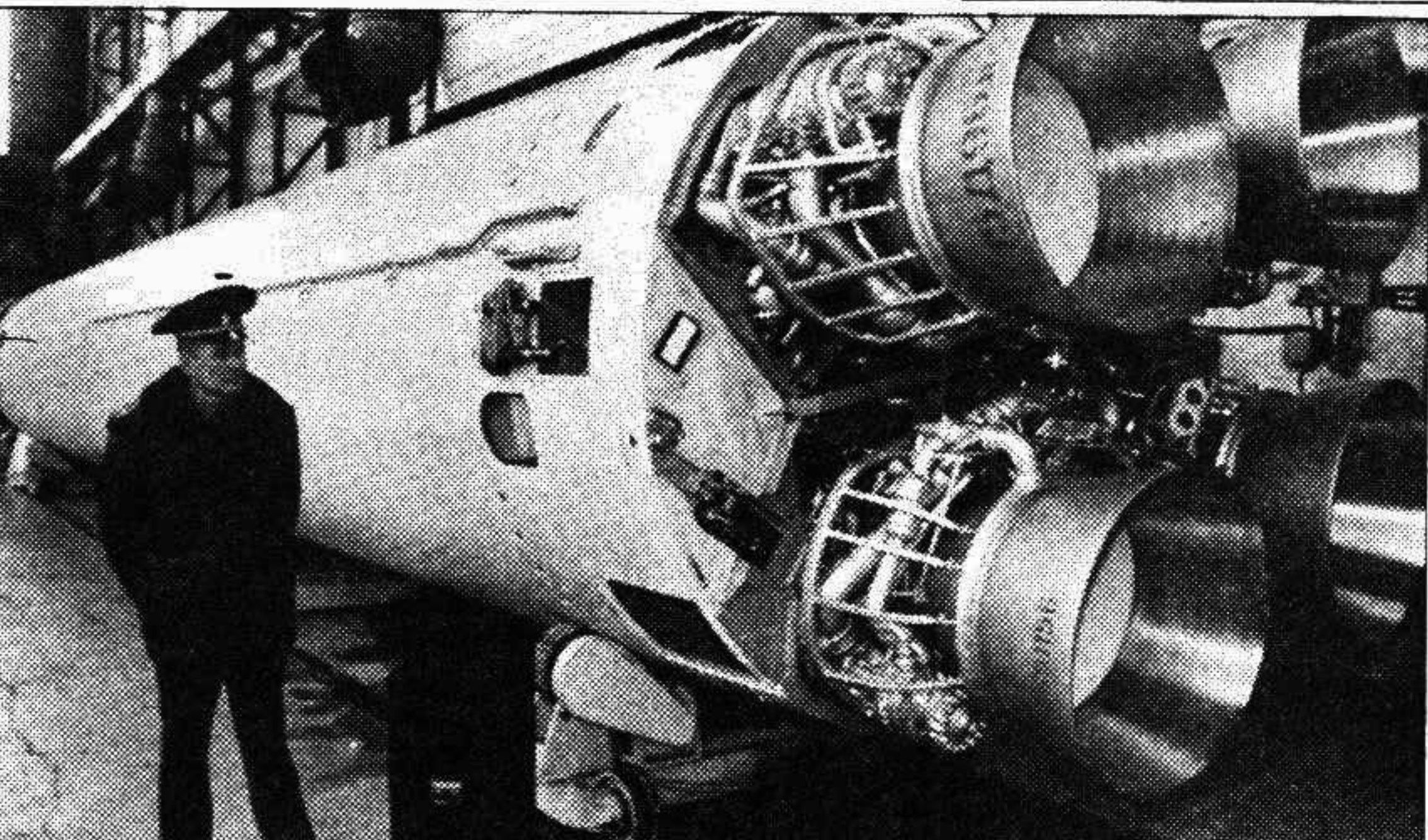
It said Zhu and his party were greeted at a ceremony in the Great Hall of the people. The two neighbours are struggling to overcome a sharp fall in trade triggered by the financial crisis.

**Viagra to be sold in S'pore:** Impotence drug Viagra will be making its debut in Singapore in less than six weeks, a newspaper said Sunday. AP reports from Singapore.

Viagra's manufacturer, Pfizer, told The Sunday Times that it agreed to comply with the conditions set by the Ministry of Health for the sale of the drug.

**Quake rattles N Japan:** A moderate earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of 4.1 struck the northwestern coast of Japan on Sunday morning, but no damage was reported, AP says from Tokyo.

The quake hit at 10:36 am (0136 GMT) near the port of Sakata in Yamagata prefecture, about 40 km north of Tokyo, the Meteorological Agency reported.



A Ukrainian officer walks by a SS-19 nuclear missile booster, on Friday, the last to be destroyed at the missiles dismantling site. Ukraine became a nuclear-free state in 1996 when the last warheads of its SS-19 and SS-24 rockets were shipped back to Russia in exchange of around \$1 billion worth of fuel for Ukraine's five nuclear power plants.

— AFP photo

## 60 pc Iranians turn up for voting Moderates lead in polls

TEHRAN, Feb 28: Political moderates and reformers apparently led embattled hard-liners in early returns Saturday from Iran's first municipal elections since 1979, reports AP.

An election official at the Interior Ministry estimated that as many as 25 million Iranians cast ballots, or about 60 per cent of the 40 million eligible voters. He spoke on condition of anonymity.

The heavy polling Friday demonstrated broad interest in a contest that could boost reformist allies of president Mohammad Khatami in the power struggle against hard-liners.

About 330,000 candidates ran for about 200,000 seats on municipal councils. Interior Minister Abdolwahed Musavi Lari thanked Iranians for their "massive turnout." He said that the votes could take

a week to count, especially in large cities like the capital, Tehran.

The Independent Jahan-e-Islam daily cited unidentified election officials as saying pro-Khatami candidates were the front-runners in early results from several cities.

An informal poll by reporters indicated that Khatami loyalist and former Interior Minister Abdollah Nouri was the first choice of many voters in Tehran.

In the city of Rasht, in northern Gilan province, allies of Khatami also appeared to be ahead, said an election official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Ebrahim Yazdi, the head of a small opposition Freedom Movement party, said the election was historic "because it installs democracy."

## Clinton's life seems almost back to normal

LOS ANGELES, Feb 28: Two weeks after his impeachment trial, President Bill Clinton's life seems almost back to normal: speeches, travel, fund raising, golf. There was even a family reunion at a Utah ski resort to celebrate Chelsea's 19th birthday Saturday, reports AP.

The Clintons borrowed the gated, multimillion-dollar mountaintop home of Hollywood executive Jeffrey Katzenberg for the Utah vacation, where they will stay until Tuesday. Katzenberg has several intermediate ski runs just off his back yard at the Deer Valley Resort, about 25 miles (40 kilometers) east of Salt Lake City.

After a scandal-scarred year, a sense of relief and higher spirits has seeped into Clinton's entourage. "We've come a long way in the last six years. We had a good time," Clinton told cheering supporters late Friday. He

talked about the agenda he will pursue "until the last hour of my last day in office."

But troubling problems remain for the president, as he acknowledged on this six-day trip in the West.

"I'm not sure I've made any progress at all in bringing peace to Washington, DC," the president said, only half-jokingly, at a San Francisco fundraiser.

Indeed, although the impeachment battle is over, Republicans remain angry and distrustful, clouding hopes for legislative achievements that could improve Clinton's tarnished legacy. His job-approval ratings remain high, but opinion polls show that most Americans deplore his personal conduct.

"They like his programmes, they don't like him," said Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Centre. "I don't think it's ancient history in terms of

how they feel about Clinton and the scandal."

Kohut said 78 per cent of Americans say they want a different kind of president than Clinton in 2000. "They want a different kind of person but they want the same kind of programmes and policies," he said.

"The public wants both continuity and change."

He thinks Clinton's poll ratings will start to slip over time. But not right now, not while scandal-related stories linger. "All of that keeps that dynamic of supporting the president alive," Kohut said. "We're not out of this environment quite yet."

There were angry demonstrators at Clinton's stops in Tucson, Arizona, San Francisco and Los Angeles, with signs recalling allegations of sexual misconduct against him. "Resign in '99," a sign read in

San Francisco. Many signs branded Clinton a racist, referring to accusations by Juanita Broaddrick that Clinton sexually assaulted her 21 years ago. The president's attorney says the charges are false.

The bitter aftermath of the impeachment struggle is likely to linger.

"It is not over," said William Kriston, a Republican strategist and editor of the conservative "Weekly Standard" magazine. "It's obvious now more than ever that the issue of Clinton, in its various aspects, is going to be the subtext of the next two years and the 2000 elections."

"You can't have the two parties divide so dramatically on such a fundamental issue as impeachment and then have it go away, even if lots of people in both parties want it to go away," he said. "November 2000 is when the real verdict comes."

## Monica sees her plight similar to Diana's

LONDON, Feb 28: Monica Lewinsky sees a parallel between her own difficulties and Princess Diana's problems, a British newspaper said today, reports AP.

"I'm not a princess in a royal sense, but I was also wronged by a man who said he loved me. Lewinsky was quoted as saying, 'And remember, I was in love with him. I was trapped, too. I had a lot of pressure on me, and like Diana, I had nowhere to go, nowhere to hide.'"

The Sunday Mirror, in a prelude to this week's publication of "Monica's Story," by Andrew Morton, ran an article that included Lewinsky's comments reportedly made during an initial meeting with the author. Morton's 1992 book, "Diana, her True Story," revealed the state of the princess marriage to

Prince Charles. Morton's book about the former White House intern and her relationship with President Clinton is to be published March 5.

The Sunday paper's daily sister tabloid, The Mirror, says it is going to be carrying "Monica's Story" in this week's newspaper, but hasn't indicated which day or whether there will be extensive excerpts.

The article published Sunday was by reporter Andrew Golden, describing the New York meeting of Lewinsky, Morton and his publisher at an unspecified date.

Golden quoted Morton as telling Lewinsky she was "a victim at the hands of the most powerful man in the world. There are huge similarities here to the Diana story."



The Australian All Stars Dance Team performs along Orchard Road Saturday during the Chingay parade in Singapore. Some 200,000 people watched the annual event featuring 2,500 performers from Singapore as well as several foreign countries.

— AFP photo