

More than 800 missing in Kashmir since '90: AI

NEW DELHI, Mar 2: Hundreds of people have disappeared after being arrested by police or security forces in India's northern Kashmir state during a nine-year old insurgency, Amnesty International said Tuesday, reports AP.

In a report called, "If they are dead, tell us," Amnesty estimated there have been more than 800 unexplained disappearances since 1990. Ordinary people — lawyers, businessmen, teachers, labourers — disappeared and many had no links to the fighting between separatist militants and security forces.

Government spokeswoman NJ Krishna said Tuesday she could not immediately comment on Amnesty's charges. In the past, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has acknowledged what he called isolated incidents of human rights violations by his security forces in Kashmir, but said his government was committed to rooting out abuse.

Amnesty said it had submitted a draft report to the Indian government in November 1998 and had offered to send an expert delegation to help locate some of the missing people. The government of India has yet to make a substantive response, Amnesty said in a statement.

Dozens of groups in the state are fighting for an independent Kashmir or for a merger with neighboring Pakistan. As many as 17,000 people have been killed since the fighting began. India accuses Pakistan of training and arming separatists, a charge Pakistan denies.

Amnesty said it did not underestimate the security problems in Kashmir where "armed groups with foreign backing have committed terrible abuses against the common population." But this did not excuse the disappearances or absolve the government of the responsibility to trace the missing.

The report accused the state of obstructing justice and not prosecuting the guilty. Amnesty said it was not aware of a single disappearance case where those responsible were convicted and sentenced.

Instead, relatives of missing people were threatened and warned to give up their search, the report said.

US jets hit Iraq's air defence targets in no-fly zones

WASHINGTON, Mar 2: In one of the heaviest raids on Iraq in two months, US jets on Monday dropped more than 30 bombs on radio relay sites, communications targets and air defence guns in Iraq's northern no-fly zone, the Pentagon said, reports Reuters.

Defence Secretary William Cohen again stressed to reporters that US pilots had been given increased flexibility to hit a range of air defence targets in no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq when they are targeted by President Saddam Hussein's forces.

In a statement from Incirlik air base in Turkey, the US European command said F-15s based at Incirlik "dropped more than thirty 2,000-pound and 500-pound laser-guided bombs on Iraqi communications sites, radio relay sites and anti-aircraft artillery sites" near Mosul in response to radar threats.

Details were not provided, but Monday's strikes were among the most extensive of about 100 such incidents in the no-fly zones since late December. They came a day after US jets struck a communications facility in the north, apparently interrupting the flow of Iraqi oil through a pipeline into Turkey.

"Pilots have been given greater flexibility to place those systems that place them in jeopardy. They are not simply going to respond to a triple (anti-aircraft artillery) site or to a SAM (surface-to-air missile) site," Cohen said.

"They can go after command and control and communications centres as well that allow Saddam Hussein to try to target them and put them in jeopardy. So they have some flexibility and that flexibility," he added.

Senior military officials said last month that US pilots were being given more discretion to disrupt Iraqi air defences.

Iraq does not recognise the no-fly zones, set up to protect Kurds in the north and Shi'ite Muslims in the south from Saddam's military, and since December Baghdad has stepped up its challenge to western warplanes patrolling them.

That stance followed intense US and British cruise missile and bombing raids on Iraqi targets in mid-December after Baghdad halted all cooperation with US weapons inspectors.

The Pentagon also announced on Monday that Cohen would make an eight-day visit to six friendly Gulf states and to Israel, Egypt and Jordan beginning on Friday.

He will also go to Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait to discuss Iraq's threat to the region and US bilateral military ties with each of the countries, the Pentagon said.

Cohen said on Monday that US air strikes in the northern zone on Sunday "may or may not" have interrupted the flow of oil from Iraq to Turkey.

Hardliner threatens to nullify local elections in Iran

TEHRAN, Mar 2: Allies of Iran winning a single race, according to preliminary results, reports AP.

The tally from Friday's voting for thousands of municipal council seats elsewhere in Iran may not be counted for several days.

But the preliminary figures, released Monday, prompted the hard-line chairman of the electoral supervision board to announce that he would challenge the results.

With more than half the votes counted Monday, loyalists of President Mohammad Khatami won 12 of the 15 seats in Tehran, the focus of the struggle between hard-liners and moderates in Iran's Islamic government.

Independents won the other three seats in the vote, the country's first local elections since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

"We will definitely nullify the votes of those candidates who were disqualified by us ahead of the polls and were illegally allowed to run by the Interior Ministry," said Mohsen Yahyavi, the head of Tehran Supervision Board.

The board, which is dominated by hard-liners, disqualified about 50 candidates, mostly moderates, before the elections. But Khatami ruled the disqualifications illegal and instructed the Interior Ministry, which ran the elections, to let the candidates stand.

Several of the front-runners in the Tehran results, including the popular former Interior Minister Abdollah Nouri, were on the board's disqualified list.

It was not clear whether the electoral supervision board or the Interior Ministry would prevail in the dispute. Both organisations claim to have the right to supervise the polls.

Election officials had counted about 15 million votes, or 60 per cent of the ballots, by Monday, Tehran radio reported.

The ministry says final results may not come before Friday, especially in larger cities like Tehran. In some towns and cities, the turnout was so high that polling stations ran out of ballots and voting hours had to be extended.

Clinical tests on anti-AIDS drugs to begin soon

WASHINGTON, Mar 2: Clinical tests are set to begin on a new anti-AIDS drug that tries to "starve" the virus that causes the deadly disease by cutting off its energy source, the company that developed the drug said Monday, reports AP.

The new drug — HE2000 — works on a different principal than other medications tried to date, said Hollis-Eden Pharmaceuticals.

"HE2000 is believed to work by inhibiting the host cell's energy-producing enzymes and proteins, thereby 'starving' the virus of the energy that it needs to replicate," Hollis-Eden said in a statement.

The San Diego-based company said it had received approval from the US Food and Drug Administration to begin clinical trials of the drug in the United States.

Other anti-retroviral therapies block the action of viral, not cellular, proteins needed for replication, said James Frincks, Hollis-Eden vice president of research and development.

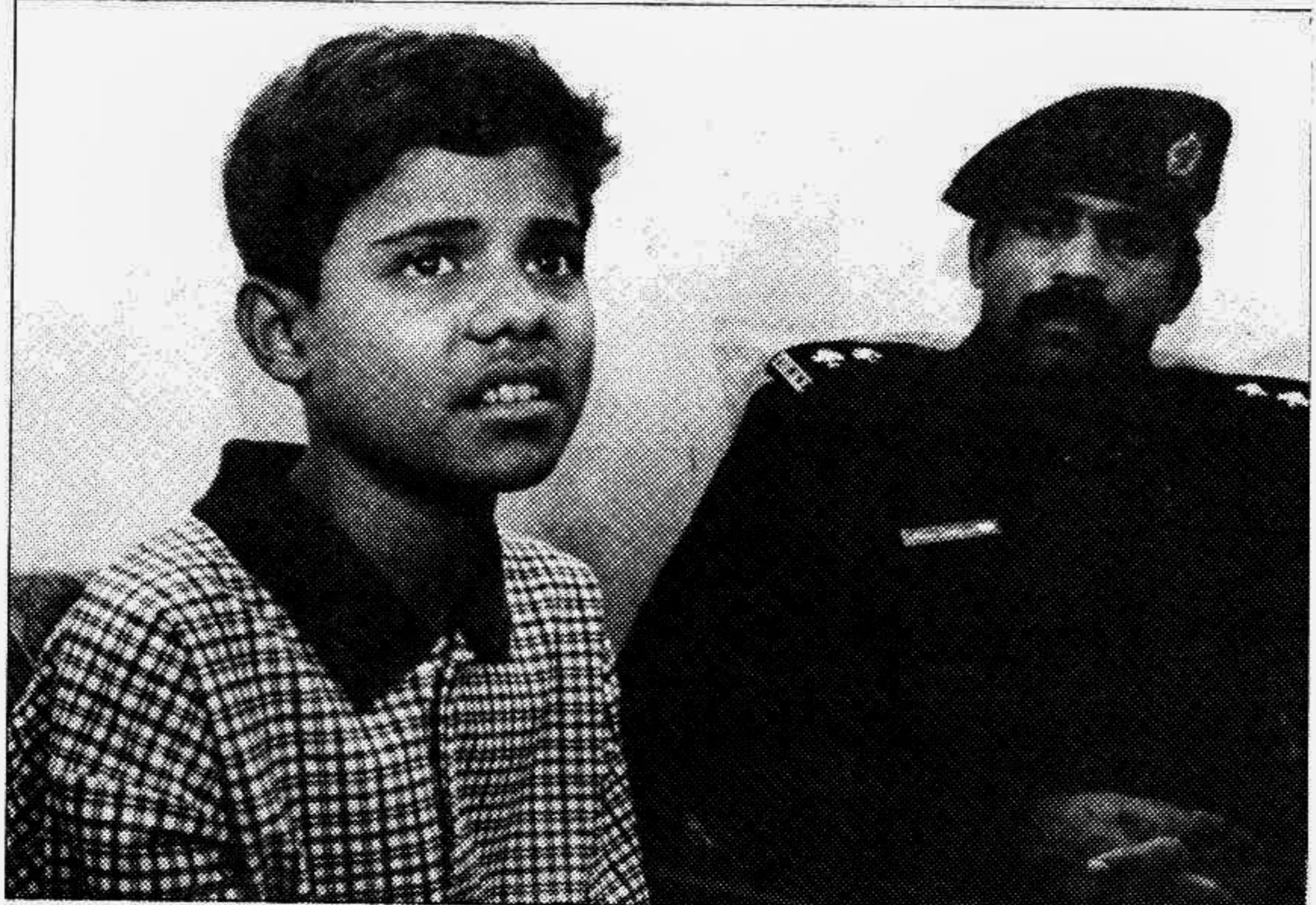
Though temporarily effective, those drugs can be foiled by HIV mutation, resulting in drug resistance. That does not happen with HE2000, Frincks said.

"What's different about our approach is that this drug protects against the disease-causing agent by acting on the host cell's biochemical mechanism, he said.

More than 33 million adults and children worldwide are living with HIV/AIDS, according to the World Health Organisation and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS. By 2000, 40 million people worldwide are expected to be infected.

"Drug resistance to currently approved therapies for AIDS continues to emerge," said Thomas Merigan, professor of medicine and director of AIDS research at Stanford University.

"Because of this, we need to find new drugs that offer more durable, less toxic and more affordable treatment options," Merigan said.



Thirteen-year-old Rizwan Ahmed (L) gives an interview in police custody after his arrest for terrorism in Karachi, Pakistan, on Sunday. Analysts say that extremist groups often use children and young teenagers as couriers, lookouts and tipsters. — AFP photo

Taiwanese PM survives vote of no confidence

TAIPEI, Mar 2: Premier Vincent Siew survived a vote of no confidence on Tuesday, easily overcoming the Taiwanese Legislature's first such test of the government's leader, reports AP.

Nationalist Party legislators who hold 123 of the chamber's 225 seats unanimously supported Siew. They found allies in 19 independent lawmakers who helped defeat the no-confidence motion — which could have removed Siew from office — by a vote of 142-83.

Opposition lawmakers acknowledged in advance they would probably lose, but they insisted the vote was a worthwhile way to highlight ambiguities over the division of power between the premier and president that prompted the vote.

Siew came under fire after he apparently caved in to pressure from President Lee Teng-hui and switched his position on a proposal to cut taxes on stock sales in hopes that would prop up Taiwan's ailing market.

Socialists endorse joint manifesto for EU polls

MILAN, Italy, Mar 2: Socialists from 15 European Union nations endorsed Monday's joint manifesto for upcoming European elections stressing their commitment to tackling the social ills facing Europe at the dawn of the 21st century, reports AP.

Co-author Henri Nallet from France said the 21 point statement was "more than a campaign text" claiming it ranked as a political event.

The text which was revised 12 or 13 times according to Nallet, included "what brings us together and what divides us."

The Agenda 2000 negotiations "shows each of our countries has legitimate interests to defend even while we are trying to stick together and define common objectives," the former French minister added.

Ten heads of government including Britain's Tony Blair, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, France's Lionel Jospin and Italian Premier Massimo d'Alema were to join about 1,000 delegates and guests at the three-day congress.

Germany Rudolf Sharping head of the European Socialist Party, opened the congress and lambasted Europe's conservatives calling them "a factor of instability" in European politics because of their inner division.

French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin said the June 13 vote "could be a new chance to move Europe to the left, while Schroeder took a realistic approach and pleaded for the Agenda 2000.

"The agenda which is to define the EU's financial guidelines for the year 2000-2006 must be agreed upon by the end of March, Schroeder said.

"Without the Agenda 2000, our projects make no sense," he claimed.

The party of European socialists with 214 of 626 seats in the current parliament is the largest political group. Conservatives of the European People's Party hold 202 and smaller parties the remainder.

Fresh fighting feared along Israel-Lebanon border

BAALBEK, Lebanon, Mar 2: Despite a quiet day along the Israel-Lebanon border, residents in both countries remain fearful of renewed hostilities following a deadly guerrilla attack on Israeli troops over the weekend, reports AP.

The tensions began after a roadside bomb killed Brig-Gen Erez Gerstein and three other Israelis — including a journalist — in south Lebanon on Sunday.

Two rockets, fired from unidentified guerrillas in Lebanon, also hit an Israeli neighbourhood, slightly injuring one woman.

The death of Gerstein prompted airstrikes against the Iranian-backed Hezbollah guerrilla group.

Other anti-warplanes roared into Lebanon on Monday for a second straight day as new bombing runs were reported, although sonic booms and the rumble of distant warplanes could be heard in Beirut, the capital.

But the fear remained. Crowds were smaller than usual at the main market in Baalbek, a city of 200,000 located 100 kms north of Israel's border. Parents also kept their children home from school.

In the northern Israeli town of Kiryat Shmona, colourful balloons decorated the shopping mall Monday, but the residents who would have been celebrating the Jewish holiday of Purim were crowded in bomb shelters, fearing more fighting with Hezbollah Lebanese guerrillas.

Israel carved out a "security zone" in south Lebanon in 1985 to protect its northern settlements from attack. Hezbollah fighters are determined to force the Israelis out of Lebanon.

Milosevic rejects possibility of sending NATO troops to Kosovo

PRISTINA, Mar 2: Eager to keep the momentum of recent peace talks rolling, international officials were shuttling between ethnic Albanian and Serbian leaders, reports AP.

Norwegian Foreign Minister Kari Vollebaek, whose government heads the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, was expected to meet Tuesday with ethnic Albanian leaders in Kosovo.

On Monday, Vollebaek met with Yugoslav leaders in Belgrade, where sentiment had changed little since talks in Rambouillet, France, ended inconclusively last month.

Vollebaek told reporters after the meeting that Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic had "flatly rejected" any possibility of sending a NATO peacekeeping force to Kosovo, which is part a draft peace accord discussed in France.

Kosovo's conflict started a year ago when Milosevic sent troops to crush ethnic Albanian rebels seeking independence. Kosovo is a poor southern province of Serbia, the dominant republic in Yugoslavia.

More than 2,000 have died and hundreds of thousands of other — mostly Albanians — have been displaced in the fighting.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has asked former presidential candidate of Bob Dole to help push the Clinton administration's drive for a peaceful settlement in Kosovo.

Dole, who agreed to talk to the ethnic Albanians, may also go to Belgrade to try diplomacy on the Serbs.

On Monday, US envoy Christopher Hill met with top Kosovo Albanian political leaders who participated in the negotiations.

Hill said that the signs were positive that Albanian politicians would sign and stressed the need for an international peacekeeping force.

"There is no question that there are very serious problems on the ground," he said. "We feel the way to solve this is through the Rambouillet accords... and this means the presence of a NATO-led force, which we feel is in everyone's interest."

To the southwest, in Orahovac, international monitors defused a standoff between government troops and Kosovo rebels by securing the release of one of two Serbs abducted by the rebels on Saturday.

Palestinian gets life term for trying to bomb NY subway

NEW YORK, Mar 2: A Palestinian national convicted of trying to bomb the New York City subways and kill "as many Jews as possible" was sentenced to life imprisonment Monday by a Federal judge who chastised him for his anti-Semitism, reports AP.

Chazi Abu Maizar, 25, who holds Jordanian passport, expressed no remorse for his crimes. Instead he used his sentencing as a forum to condemn Israeli occupation of Palestine charging Israel was conducting a "genocide" upon the Palestinian people.

He also blasted the United States for supporting Israel.

Gen Obasanjo back to power in Nigeria

ABUJA, Mar 2: A retired general who 20 years ago stepped down as the head of a military junta was declared the winner of Nigeria's presidential elections amid widespread allegations of fraud, reports AP.

The election won by former Gen Olusegun Obasanjo had been billed as the final step in a return to democracy for Africa's most populous country.

But election monitors from the United States said Monday they found flaws in the electoral process, including inflated vote returns, ballot box stuffing and altered results.

"What happened on Saturday was a farce, a charade," former Finance Minister Olu Falae, Obasanjo's defeated opponent, declared Monday. "The degree of fraud was so monumental as to make nonsense of the entire process."

Former President Jimmy Carter, who led a delegation of observers, told Nigerian election officials that fraud was so widespread it was impossible to judge whether the results were accurate in the first election in 15 years.

Local observers were even harsher in their assessment. Nigeria's Transition Monitoring Group said parties backing both candidates were guilty of cheating and that electoral officers "colluded across the country" to falsify results.

Nigeria has never held a presidential election in which the loser accepted defeat. In both previous presidential elections, in 1979 and 1993, the apparent result was contested by at least one of the candidates.

Obasanjo admitted to irregularities, but said they were committed by "ignorant" people.

BRIEFLY

Zemin meets with Albright: Chinese President Jiang Zemin met US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright yesterday on the last morning of a visit marked by deep differences over human rights, AFP reports from Beijing.

Albright, who arrived Sunday, had earlier met Premier Zhu Rongji, vice premier Qian Qichen and foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan. The rift over human rights dominated what the US termed "forceful and tough" talks.

5 die in Bihar road accident: At least five persons were killed and over 24 injured when a minibus which they were travelling in overturned and rolled into a roadside ditch near Rajaura village in Begusarai, Bihar on Monday, police sources said, PTI reports from Begusarai.

While four persons died on the spot another succumbed to injuries on way to hospital.

3 Americans abducted in Colombia: Three US researchers reported missing in the jungles of Colombia have been kidnapped, Colombian officials confirmed on Monday, AFP reports from Bogota.

Citing the FBI and US officials here, the head of Colombia's anti-kidnapping unit, Jose Alfredo Escobar, said the trio had been taken hostage by rebels. "The FBI and the American consulate have confirmed the kidnapping of Terence Freitas, Larry Gai Lameanal and Ingrid Inawatuk, who were investigating the disappearance of the native U'wa tribe," he told journalists.

Dissidents detained in Cuba: Nearly 100 Cuban dissidents were either detained or prevented from leaving their homes in Havana on Monday as the trial of this Caribbean nation's most prominent opposition group began, a human rights organisation said, AFP reports from Havana.

According to the Cuban Commission on Human Rights and National Reconciliation, at least 45 dissidents were rounded up by Cuban security forces while another 46 were barred from leaving their homes.

Politician killed in Haiti: Unidentified gunmen shot and killed a prominent opposition political and critic of President Rene Preval in Port au Prince Monday, police said, AFP reports from Port au Prince.

The gunman fled and police said they have so far found no motive for the killing of Senator Jean-Yves Toussaint, 47. Witnesses said the senator was shot in the street while leaving the home of a friend after being told his car had a flat tire. Toussaint was a member of the Organisation of the People in Struggle (OPL), the party that dominates parliament but is locked in a bitter battle with Preval's administration.

Palestinian shot in WB: Israeli troops shot and wounded a Palestinian man Monday who was trying to break through a military checkpoint in the West Bank, the army spokesman said, AP reports from Jerusalem.

The soldiers opened fire on a car with Palestinian licence plates near the Jewish settlement of Mevo Horon after the driver "tried to break through an army checkpoint", the spokesman said in a statement. A hospital spokesman said the man had been shot in the pelvis and was in stable condition. The army said it was investigating the incident.

Trial of Anwar Ibrahim

Ex-police chief denies acting under orders from Mahathir

KUALA LUMPUR, Mar 2: Showing no sign of remorse, Malaysia's former police chief testified Tuesday that he repeatedly struck ousted Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in jail, but denied acting under orders from Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, reports AP.

"I slapped him both on the left and right. He fell," said Abdul Rahim Noor, reading from a prepared statement before a panel probing the police violence on the night of Anwar's arrest.

"Within that split second, I cannot remember whether I delivered other physical acts on him," he said.

Abdul Rahim, who quit as inspector general of police in January amid speculation that he was Anwar's assailant, told the panel that he lost his temper after Anwar called him "the father of dogs." "I lost my cool, I lost my sense of control," Abdul Rahim said from the witness stand in a matter-of-fact voice describing the events in a police lock up.

Anwar, 51, has testified that the former chief may have been acting under orders from Mahathir, who until January also served as Malaysia's home minister. Anwar denied using abusive words against his captors the night he was beaten.

On Tuesday, Abdul Rahim told the panel, "I wish to make it clear that my acts as referred to were not prompted, abetted, advised, directed, assisted by anyone else. Not even by my police officers, not even the prime minister."

On Sunday, the former top police official acknowledged through his lawyer that he punched and slapped Anwar on Sept 20, after Anwar was arrested for leading a demonstration of tens of thousands of people demanding Mahathir's resignation.

Prince Andrew arrives in Vietnam

HO CHI MINH CITY, Mar 2: Britain's Prince Andrew got the red-carpet treatment as he arrived Tuesday for a five-day visit largely aimed at promoting trade and bilateral ties, reports AP.

After arriving on a small chartered flight, he was greeted by a small delegation including Vu Huan Viet, vice chairman of the Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee, and a girl in a traditional ao dai tunic who gave him flowers.

The Duke of York, making his first visit to Vietnam, then had tea and chatted with Vo Viet Thanh, chairman of the People's Committee.

While the visit will include a meeting, with Vietnamese schoolchildren, a wreath-laying at Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum and visits to the war-era Cu Chi tunnels and a malaria research project, the focus clearly was on trade. Britain has become Europe's biggest investor in Vietnam.

Helicopter-like satellite launcher unveiled

MOJAVE, California, Mar 2: The prototype of a reusable, manned rocket designed to land like a helicopter after carrying satellites into orbit was unveiled on Monday, reports AP.

The Roton, built by Rotary Rocket Co of Redwood City, is a launch vehicle powered by kerosene instead of costly hydrogen, which the firm hopes will cut launch costs by 90 per cent. It has been designed to launch like a rocket, then deploy a propeller and land like a helicopter.

Some 1,200 people gathered as the prototype was rolled out of a hangar at Mojave Airport. Among those in the crowd were NASA chief engineer Daniel Mulville and techno-thriller novelist Tom Clancy, a Rotary Rocket investor.

"It's our job as citizens to make space happen, to make space the place where people work," said Clancy, pointing to Roton. "What opened the West wasn't wagon trains, it was railroads and this is the railroad of the future."

The 20-metre-high rocket looks something like a windmill with a helicopter propeller fixed on top.

"It is not the shape of the rocket, it is the dream of the person," said Mulville, who hopes NASA will become a customer of such commercial launch vehicles.

It is expected to deliver its first satellite into orbit in the summer of 2000, said Gary Hudson, president of Rotary Rocket.

"This is only a step," Hudson said. "We still have a long way to go."

Bill introduced to allow spouses, kids of green-card holders to visit US

Washington, Mar 2: A Congressman has introduced legislation seeking to permit the admission to the United States of non-immigrant visitors who are the spouses and children of permanent resident aliens (green-card holders) living and working in this country, reports IANS.

Currently the spouses and children of green-card holders have to wait for years until their immigration petitions are approved before they can come to the U.S., because they are invariably refused visitor visas for fear of overstaying.

"This legislation," Rep. Frank Pallone explained, "is intended to fill a void in our current immigration policy that has resulted in permanent resident aliens...being separated from their spouses and children, often for periods of several years."

He said his bill "would simply make it easier for family members to come to the United States on a temporary basis. Its goal is to alleviate the human hardship of prolonged family separation."

Pallone, former head of the Congressional Caucus on India, noted that the issue of spousal and child reunification has been identified as one of the top domestic priorities of the Indian community in the U.S. and for many other ethnic groups with large number of people who have been forced to leave immediate family members behind under current rules.

According to Pallone, the proposal had already received significant support from some of America's major corporations -- particularly in the information and communications sectors -- which recognise the importance of allowing their valued employees to have greater contact with their families.

Pallone has been pushing for this legislation for several years and has introduced such

He said, "The legislation anticipates the possibility that some may violate the terms of their visas by overstaying the period for which the visa provides."

As a caveat against misuse of the concession, Pallone said his legislation "penalises spouses or children of permanent residents who overstay their visas by allowing the Secretary of State to delay their permanent visa durations for one year if visa durations are violated."

"In order to allay some of the misunderstandings and opposition that could arise," Pallone said "it should be pointed out that the legislation will not result in an increase in the numbers of immigrants admitted annually."

He said it would not "have an impact on the labour market" either "and will not have any adverse effects on government social programmes serving the spouses will not be entitled to these benefits."



Tottenham Hotspur's French soccer star David Ginola (R) whispers to British singer Des'ree at a function in Piccadilly Circus on Monday celebrating the ban on anti-personnel mines paving the way for total eradication under the Ottawa Convention. — AFP photo