

International

Air strike may be close: Clinton

Peace monitors pull out of Kosovo embassies begin evacuating staff

PRISTINA, Yugoslavia, Mar 20: International monitors sent to Kosovo five months ago to verify a now-defunct ceasefire evacuated today as a determined NATO and defiant Serbs geared up for a showdown over the rebellious province, reports AP.

Amid ominous signals of a resumption of all-out war, fighting was reported in the north today and a huge column of Yugoslav tanks and other armoured vehicles was on the move west of the capital Pristina.

The situation in Kosovo was deteriorating dramatically within a day after peace talks ended in failure in Paris.

In Washington, US President Bill Clinton warned Friday that the talks collapse had raised the stakes and "if we and our allies don't have the will to act, there will be more massacres."

NATO has threatened mas-

sive airstrikes against Serb-led Yugoslavia if President Slobodan Milosevic does not accept a peace plan providing for sweeping autonomy for Kosovo and NATO troops to police the accord.

After the Serb delegation rejected the plan Friday, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe ordered the evacuation of the 1,380 monitors. A few left Friday and the rest were streaming out Saturday to neighboring Macedonia.

The evacuation, which began before dawn, appeared to be proceeding without problems, but in a sinister sign of what lies ahead it passed a Yugoslav convoy of about 30 vehicles, including tanks, armoured vehicles, and trucks carrying anti-aircraft guns, heading westward from the Pristina area.

William Walker, the US diplomat who heads the monitoring mission, said he now ex-

pects "a more dangerous time."

"My military advisers say things could go bad," he said in an interview at the Macedonian border, where 60 OSCE vehicles stood waiting to be processed through customs.

The departure of the monitors could lead to an escalation of violence without the presence of international groups to mediate. Serb sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said ethnic Albanian rebels launched attacks today on a Serb police station and two patrols northwest of Pristina in the rebel-held Drenica region.

Reporters also said shelling was heard in the north.

The monitors were sent to Kosovo under an October 12 agreement between Milosevic and US envoy Richard Holbrooke for a ceasefire, which began breaking down in December.

Signs of the seriousness of

NATO's threat were evident in Yugoslavia's capital, Belgrade, where the embassies of the United States, Canada, Britain, Germany, Austria, and France began evacuating staff and family members.

The British, French and Polish foreign ministers on Friday recommended their citizens leave Yugoslavia immediately.

Russia reiterated its opposition to NATO airstrikes. A Russian Foreign Ministry source in Moscow said Russia may cut off relations with NATO if the alliance attacks Serbia.

Meanwhile, President Bill Clinton suggests Slobodan Milosevic has already crossed the threshold for triggering airstrikes by the United States and its NATO allies. Barring a last minute change of heart by the Yugoslav president, "We are prepared, and so are they, to carry it out," he says.

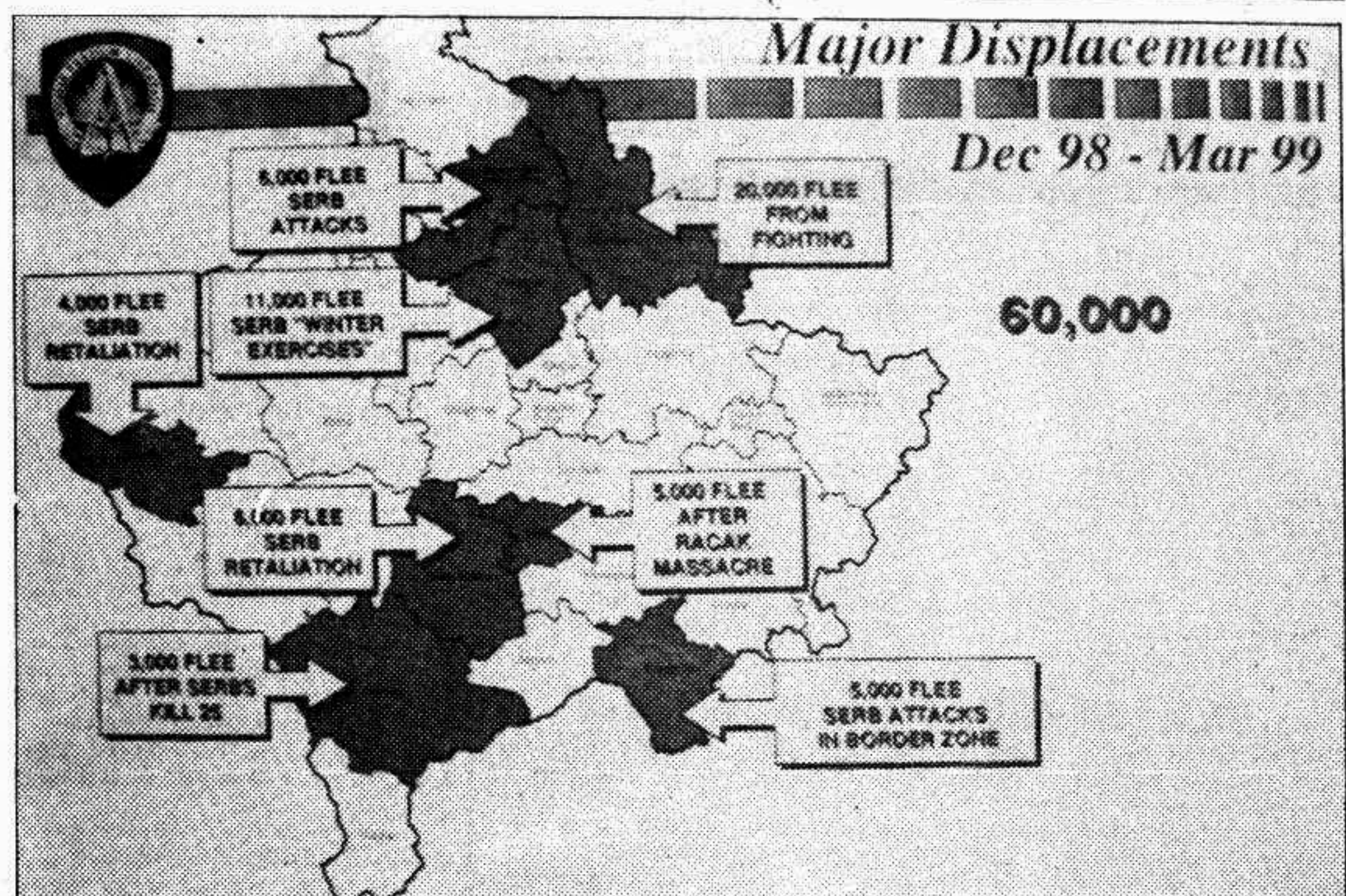
At a White House news con-

ference and a briefing for congressional leaders Friday, Clinton suggested that an air bombardment of Serb positions may be close.

He said he knew this could put American and allied pilots at risk. "The Serbs have a strong air-defence system. But we must weigh those risks against the risks of inaction," he said.

At the news conference, Clinton noted that 40,000 of Serbian troops and police had massed threateningly on the Kosovo border. Asked if an offensive into Kosovo by these forces would trigger airstrikes, he replied: "I think whatever threshold they need to cross has already been crossed."

Despite Western Threats, the Serbian government remained firm in rejecting the peace plan, calling it an "American-Albanian attempt" to breakaway Kosovo from Serbia.



A map shows the major displacements of the Kosovar population from December 1998 until March 1999 as it was presented by the Supreme Allied Force Commander Europe (SACEUR), US General Wesley Clark, during a press conference in Mons Friday as a Kosovar delegation visited NATO SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters of Allied Powers in Europe), who signed the Kosovo peace plan in Paris Wednesday.

— AFP photo

Yeltsin dismisses chief of staff

MOSCOW, Mar 20: Russian President Boris Yeltsin dismissed his Chief of Staff on Friday and replaced him with a deputy, a Kremlin spokesman said.

The spokesman contacted by Reuters said Yeltsin had signed an order dismissing Nikolai Bordyuzha from his post as Chief of Staff and Secretary of the influential Security Council. He said Bordyuzha's former deputy Alexander Volshin would become the new chief of staff. It was not clear who would take up the Security Council post.

Bordyuzha, a 49-year-old former KGB officer, left hospital on Thursday after undergoing treatment for what the Kremlin said was a heart condition.

Marxist rebels kidnap 55 people in Colombia

BOGOTA, Mar 20: Marxist rebels abducted at least 55 people Friday in a kidnap spree across three Colombian provinces, authorities said, reports Reuters.

Witnesses told the Radionet All News Radio Network the wave of abductions began Thursday in southern Putumayo province, where paramilitary gunmen raided a village near the oil refining town of Horminga and carted off 25 towns people in the back of trucks.

Police and local government sources however were unable to confirm any kidnappings in Putumayo.

The worst incident occurred in northern Cesar province, where Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebels nabbed at least 30 motorists at a makeshift roadblock erected across a major highway, according to a report issued by army headquarters in Bogota.

It said the mass kidnappings took place early Friday morning in an area known as El Desastre or the disaster but did not explain the origin of the name.

We love each other: Clinton

WASHINGTON, Mar 20: President Bill Clinton declared Friday that he and his wife, Hillary, love each other. He said he doesn't know whether she'll run for a Senate seat from New York, reports AP.

Amid mounting speculation about Hillary Clinton's political plans two years before her husband's term ends, the president said at a news conference, "I literally don't have a clue" whether she will run for the Senate.

He said she told him a year ago, however, it might be a good idea to move to New York after they leave the White House. Running for the Senate would require her to establish a separate residence in New York before they move out of the White House.

As for the first couple's personal relationship following a year of revelations about his affair with a former White House intern, Clinton said, "We're working hard. We love each other very much and we're working on it."

Did Nathuram kill Gandhi?

NEW DELHI, Mar 20: Did Nathuram Godse kill Mahatma Gandhi?

This question is raised after 51 years by a petition filed in the Supreme Court yesterday which seeks reinvestigation of the case by CBI citing grave irregularities in the trial, reports PTI.

The petition filed by director of controversial play "Me Nathuram Godse Bolloy" Pradeep Chandrakant Dalvi, claimed that no post mortem was done on Gandhi's body, no ballistic report of the bullet allegedly fired by Godse was called for and two key witnesses Abha and Mani, the granddaughters of Mahatma Gandhi, were not examined by the prosecution.

Given these irregularities the petitioner said it could not have been established conclusively that Nathuram had killed Mahatma on January 30, 1948.

Libya to hand over PanAm blast suspects by Apr 6

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 20: Libya officially informed the United Nations on Friday it would turn over for trial by April 6 two men accused of blowing up a PanAm airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland, in December 1988, reports Reuters.

Secretary-General Kofi Annan said he was "greatly encouraged by this development and necessary arrangements would now be initiated" by his staff.

Annan has been mandated by the Security Council to arrange the handover of the suspects and has been passing messages on arrangements between Libya and the United States and Britain for months.

Libya's UN Ambassador Abuzed Omar Dorda delivered a letter to Annan in a hastily arranged meeting after South African President Nelson Mandela announced in Tripoli that Libya had set a date for the handover to a Scottish court sitting in the Netherlands.

The official letter, obtained by Reuters, said that Libya had agreed "to ensure that the two suspects would be available to the Secretary-General of the

United Nations to take custody of them on or before 6 April, 1999 for their appearance before the court."

Mandela made the announcement in Tripoli with Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. UN sources said the letter included all the points Mandela had made.

The United States and Britain say they have convincing evidence the two men — Abdel Basset Ali Mohamed al Megrahi and Lamien Khalifa Fhimah — planted the bomb that blew up PanAm flight 103 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie on December 21, 1988 killing 270 people in the air and on the ground.

After initial scepticism, the US State Department welcomed the development. Spokesman James Foley said in Washington, "We welcome the news that we have heard from President Mandela today. We are expecting the turnover of the two suspects to custody in the Netherlands on or before April 6."

One potential stumbling point in the agreement an-

nounced by Mandela is that Libya wants the Security Council to adopt a resolution on all the arrangements concerning the suspects.

But Dorda said this was not a condition. "It is our wish. We had better leave it in the hands of the Secretary-General."

Under Security Council resolution, UN sanctions against Libya are suspended once the two suspect arrive in the Netherlands. Following a report by Annan after 90 days, the Council must vote to lift them permanently.

Mandela said the sanctions, imposed in 1992 and tightened in 1993, would definitely be lifted after Annan's report, indicating Washington and London may have given private assurances they would vote in favour.

Annan has to report on Libya's cooperation on giving information on alleged terrorist bases in its country and whether Tripoli had cooperated satisfactorily with France on the 1989 mid-flight bombing of a UTA airliner over Niger in which 171 people died.

India sends back four Pak bus passengers

NEW DELHI, Mar 20: Indian authorities turned back four Pakistani passengers from the newly introduced bus service for carrying excess baggage that included two little lambs in a basket, a news report said today, reports AP.

This was the first hitch in the bus service that began playing last week. Indian and Pakistani passengers are checked at the land border near Amritsar, 400-km north of New Delhi.

Each of the four passengers off-loaded on Friday was carrying dried fruits and cigarettes worth 15,000 rupees (348 dirr). One of the carried the lambs as well, The Times of India newspaper said.

Passengers travelling by Lahore-New Delhi-Lahore bus service are allowed to carry baggage up to 20 kilograms (44 pounds). When the four refused to pay for excess baggage and the customs duty on cigarettes, the Indian officials sent them back to the Pakistani side, the newspaper said.

The Indian officials said the four also violated the agreement that the passengers would board the bus at the starting point in the Pakistani city of Lahore.

Japan, ROK urge DPRK to stop escalating confrontation

SEOUL, Mar 20: Japan and South Korea agreed today to seek greater engagement with North Korea in efforts to eliminate the communist state's menacing missile and nuclear capabilities, reports AP.

Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung agreed on the common policy toward North Korea during nearly two hours of talks.

The leaders also agreed to deepen a growing partnership between the two historical rivals by boosting economic and cultural exchanges.

"We have an intention to improve ties with North Korea," Obuchi said at a joint news conference with Kim. "We urge North Korea to stop escalating confrontation and tension and open the door for reconciliation and exchanges."

Obuchi came here Friday for a three-day visit, his first since becoming the prime minister last summer. The trip follows a visit to Japan by Kim last October.

Obuchi said Japan is willing to help North Korea if Pyongyang takes "constructive measures" regarding its missile programme and other pending issues between the two countries.

Infuriated by North Korea's firing of a multistage rocket over its territory on August 31, Japan has since suspended all food aid and talks aimed at normalising ties with the famine-hit communist country.

North Korea claims that the rocket launched a satellite into earth's orbit but Tokyo believes that it was a firing of a ballistic

missile that can reach anywhere in Japan.

Obuchi said Japan fully supports South Korea's efforts to lead North Korea out of isolation and become a responsible member of the international community.

"As far as North Korea is concerned, there is basically no difference between policies of Japan and South Korea," Kim said.

Kim said he suggested to Obuchi that Japan improve ties with North Korea.

"Our engagement policy is not an illusion... We send out messages of both hope and warning. We hope North Korea will take the message of hope," Kim said.

Obuchi and Kim pledged strong cooperation with Washington to foil North Korea's missile and other programmes to develop weapons of mass destruction.

The United States is worried that North Korea may have missiles capable of reaching western states.

Obuchi's visit comes three days after North Korea relented and agreed to allow US inspection of a suspected nuclear weapons site in the communist country.

South Korean officials say the North's agreement considerably defused tensions on the peninsula, giving new impetus to their policy of engaging North Korea.

Other major topics discussed at the Obuchi-Kim talks included action plans for a "21st-century cooperation agreement" signed during Kim's October visit to Japan.

Four killed in E Timor

DILI (Indonesia), Mar 20: Men armed with guns and wearing masks attacked a village in East Timor at night and opened fire on three homes, killing four civilians and injuring five, according to a priest and an activist group, reports AP.

The pro-independence activist group said the attack and robbery in East Timor on Friday night were politically motivated. But security forces were not immediately available to confirm the killings or say who may have planned them.

Tensions in the former Portuguese colony of East Timor have increased this year following Indonesia's policy reversal on the territory it invaded in 1975. Human rights abuses and rebel war have plagued the island in southern Indonesia since the invasion.

Spanish poet Jose Agustin dies

BARCELONA, Mar 20: Spanish poet Jose Agustin Goytisolo threw himself from his apartment window Friday, committing suicide at the age of 70, National Spanish Television TVE reported, says AP.

Goytisolo was known to suffer from depression, TVE said. Goytisolo was a key figure in the "1950s Generation" or "Poets of Experience," credited with revitalising Spain's lyrical poetry after the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War and during the subsequent 40-year dictatorship of Gen Francisco Franco.

Born in 1928, Goytisolo studied law and published his first book in 1955, "El Retorno" ("The Return").

N-tech theft from US lab Clinton steps aside from condemning China

WASHINGTON, Mar 20: President Bill Clinton on Friday resisted pressure to condemn China for allegedly stealing US nuclear secrets and doggedly defended his administration's policy of engagement, reports AP.

In his first press conference in nearly a year, Clinton said the allegations against the Chinese, which Beijing has vehemently denied, remained unproven.

"It is my understanding that the investigation has not yet determined for sure that espionage occurred," he said.

Though he described US-China relations as "inherently frustrating" he made a strong case for their development and said he was looking forward to the visit here next month of Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji.

"I believe the course I have followed with China is the one that's best for America, disagreeing where we have serious disagreements, pursuing our common interests where I thought it was in the interest of the United States," he said.

Clinton also defended his administration's response to early warnings that China may have stolen nuclear technology.

"I am confident that we in the White House have done what we could to be aggressive about this," Clinton said, referring to allegations China stole nuclear technology from a US lab in the mid-1980s.

The president also dismissed allegations that he suppressed information about the reported theft to shore up his own political fortunes and chronically

difficult US-China relations. "I can say categorically that I never crossed my mind that I should not disclose some inquiry being undertaken by the United States government for reasons of commercial or other gain. That is not true," he said.

National Security Adviser Sandy Berger received a first warning in 1996 of a possible security breach at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, Clinton said, and an FBI probe began.

"Then sometime in the middle of 1997, he was notified and I was notified that the extent of the security breach might have been quite extensive," he said, so the CIA and Energy Department began probes too.

Asked if any further spying had occurred at US nuclear laboratories since he took office in January 1993, Clinton replied: "No one has reported to me that they suspect such a thing has occurred."

Republicans in Congress have sharply criticised the administration for what they regard as foot-dragging after warnings as early as 1996 of a possible theft.

In the resulting political firestorm, some legislators have called for a broad and thorough reassessment of Clinton's policy of frequent high-level contact and commercial exchange with China.

Among other complaints, they cite China's renewed crackdown on dissident, resistance to opening its markets to foreign goods and services, and continued sabre-rattling toward Taiwan.



Two models display the costumes of Academy Award nominee for Best Costume Sandy Powell during a show organised by the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising (FIDM) in Beverly Hills, CA, on Friday. Powell's costumes were used in the film "Shakespeare in Love". The 71st Academy Awards will be held today at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles.

— AFP photo

Chinese President sets off for European visit

BEIJING, Mar 20: Chinese President Jiang Zemin set off Saturday on a three-nation European tour, looking to boost trade ties and counter concerns over China's human rights record, reports AP.

Jiang's departure for Italy, Switzerland and Austria came ahead of the UN Human Rights Commission's annual meeting in Geneva at which China may encounter criticism.

Jiang's colleagues in the government and ruling Communist Party saw him off with handshakes and smiles Saturday at a brief farewell ceremony in the cavernous Great Hall of the People beside Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

Jiang is expected to defend his government's rights record during his 11-day tour in the face of European unease over the recent jailings of dissidents who were trying to set up an opposition party.

The crackdown on dissent has prompted renewed calls for China to be targeted for criticism at the rights commission's six-week session in Geneva. The European Union is expected to

decide Monday, when the annual meeting opens, whether to support a motion at the commission critical of China. The United States also is deliberating whether to back a motion.

Neither the EU or the United States supported such a motion last year.

China hopes Jiang's tour will boost trade. The state-run Xinhua News Agency predicted Friday that his trip will not only help strengthen business-to-business cooperation but also push trade ties "to a new level."

The economies of China, Italy, Switzerland and Austria are strongly complimentary, the potentials for trade and economic cooperation are huge," Xinhua said, quoting unidentified trade experts.

Jiang will be the first Chinese head of state to visit Switzerland and Austria. His first stop is Italy. He will meet top government officials and industrialists but has no meeting scheduled with Pope John Paul II, rare for a visiting leader.