

International

'Shakespeare in Love' wins seven Oscars

LOS ANGELES, Mar 22: In a night of surprises and upsets, the romantic comedy "Shakespeare in Love" won seven Academy Awards, including best picture and best actress for Gwyneth Paltrow. Steven Spielberg's bloody World War II epic "Saving Private Ryan" won the prize for directing and four other Oscars, reports AP.

Roberto Benigni, as an Italian Jew shielding his son from the horrors of the Holocaust in "Life is Beautiful," pulled off a stunning first — winning as best actor in a foreign film. The tragic-comic film, which Benigni also wrote and directed, won additional Oscars for foreign film and dramatic score Sunday.

"This is a terrible mistake because I used up all my English," he said, as he leapt to the stage for the second time.

Paltrow, never before nominated, was honoured for her role as the object of a young Bard's affections.

"I don't feel very deserving of this in your presence," she said.

sobbing, as she named her fellow nominees.

Judi Dench, who played the imperious but fair-minded Queen Elizabeth I in "Shakespeare in Love," and James Coburn, the alcoholic, abusive father in "Affliction," won best supporting Oscars.

"Shakespeare in Love," which led all contenders with 13 nominations, also picked up Oscars for original screenplay, art direction, costume design and musical or comedy score.

"Elizabeth," another best picture nominee, won just one award, for makeup, while the fifth contender, "The Thin Red Line," Terrence Malick's comeback movie about World War II in the Pacific, was shut out.

"Saving Private Ryan" also took prizes for cinematography, editing, sound and sound effects editing.

"Am I allowed to say I really wanted this?" Spielberg joked as he accepted his second directing Oscar. His first was for "Schindler's List" in 1993.

Spielberg expressed grati-

tude to all families who lost sons in World War II, and addressing his father, a veteran, said: "Dad, this is for you."

The unflinchingly realistic "Private Ryan" had looked as if it might become a runaway favourite early in the evening when it picked up the editing and cinematography awards, which are often precursors of best picture.

But "Shakespeare in Love," with its clever dialogue and showbusiness anachronisms, obviously entranced the Academy's voters.

Besides Benigni, the only performer in a foreign language film to win an Oscar was Sophia Loren for "Two Women."

Coburn, 70, had never been nominated.

"I've been doing this work for like over half my life, and I finally got one right, I guess," said the veteran actor, whose dozens of films include "Our Man Flint" and "The Magnificent Seven."

"Some of them you do for money, some of them you do for love. This is a love child," Coburn said.

I want to kiss everybody," said Benigni.

Another Holocaust film, "The Last Days," won the documentary award.

Dench, who made an indelible impression despite her brief screen time in the romantic comedy, held up her gold statuette and said with a smile: "I feel for eight minutes on the screen I should only get a little Davis than British, "I am the African Queen."

It was the first Oscar for the 64-year-old British stage actress, who had been nominated last year for playing a different queen, Victoria, in "Mrs. Brown."

Coburn, 70, had never been nominated.

"I've been doing this work for like over half my life, and I finally got one right, I guess," said the veteran actor, whose dozens of films include "Our Man Flint" and "The Magnificent Seven."

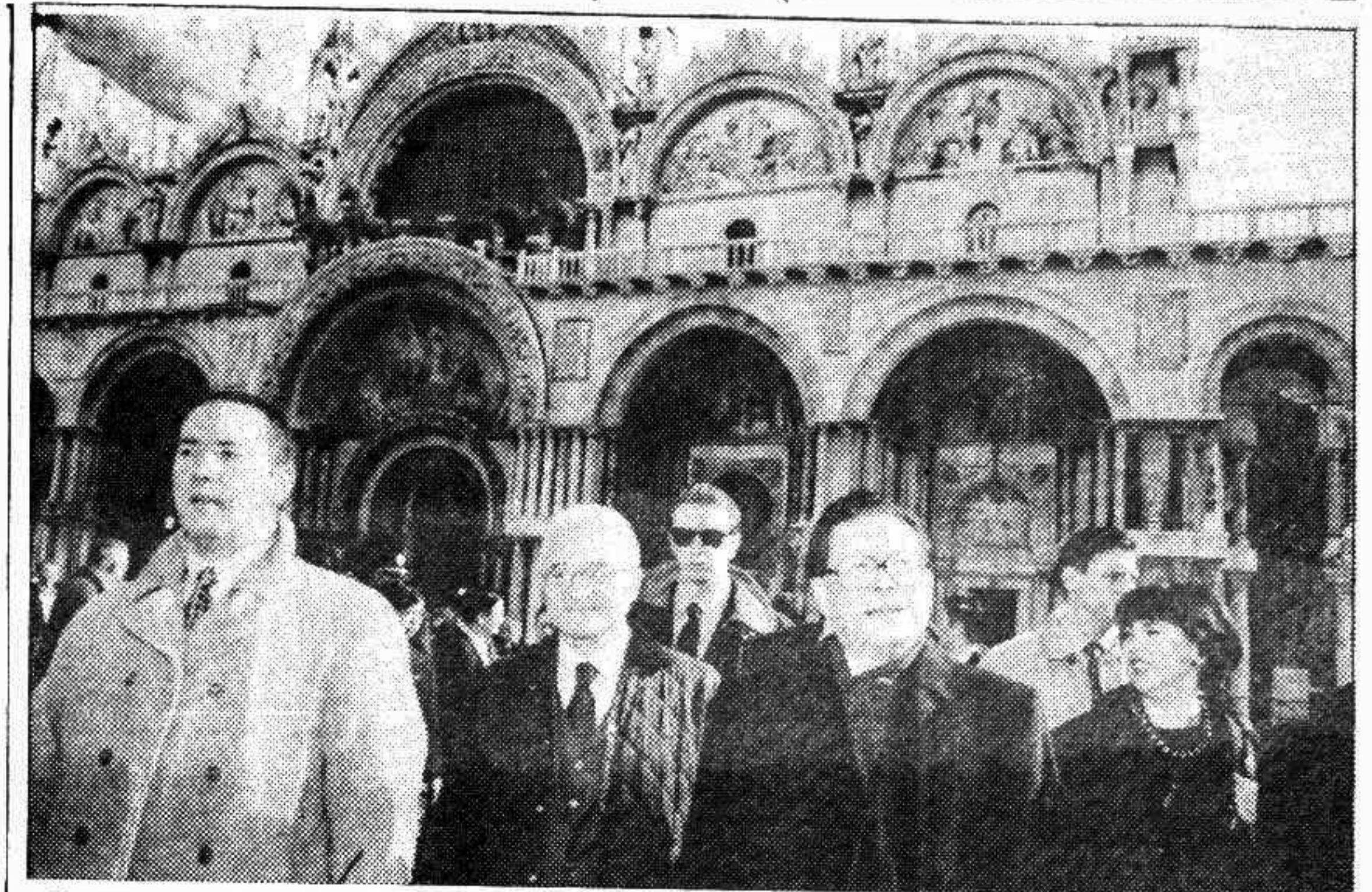
"Some of them you do for money, some of them you do for love. This is a love child," Coburn said.

Host Whoopi Goldberg, who changed costumes repeatedly to mimic film characters, got the show off to a rousing start when she came out in full regalia as Elizabeth — who figured in two of this year's contenders — getting a rousing ovation, then a laugh when she announced with an accent that was more Betty Davis than British, "I am the African Queen."

She joked about being the last master of ceremonies of the century and millennium, saying: "I am the last 20th century fox."

This year's awards returned to the small but classy Dorothy Chandler Pavilion of the Los Angeles Music Centre after several years at the larger, but less glamorous Shrine Auditorium.

The ceremony was one of the last in a borrowed hall. If all goes well, the academy will present the awards in its own theater in a brand-new complex on Hollywood Boulevard in 2001. It will mark Oscar's first appearance in the Hollywood district of the city since 1960.



Chinese President Jiang Zemin (2nd R) is flanked by unidentified officials during his visit to S Marco Square during a sightseeing trip in Venice Sunday before the start of an official ten-day European tour.

— AFP photo

Last-ditch attempt to avoid airstrikes on Serb positions

PRISTINA, Mar 22: A special US envoy is making a final effort to persuade Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic to accept a peace plan for Kosovo, where violence is sweeping rural rebel strongholds and the heavily guarded provincial capital, reports AP.

As NATO airstrikes loom, Richard Holbrooke, who negotiated a failed cease-fire last year, meets late Monday with Milosevic.

US National Security Adviser Sandy Berger said Holbrooke will be delivering a stark message: "Move to the path of peace or face the punishment of NATO."

In Washington, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright dispatched veteran Balkans troubleshooter Holbrooke to warn Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic he faces NATO air strikes unless he halts aggression in Kosovo.

"We will make clear that Milosevic faces a stark choice to halt aggression against the

Kosovo Albanians and accept an interim settlement with a NATO-led implementation force or bear the full responsibility for the consequences of NATO military action," Albright vowed in a statement.

However, the last-ditch attempt to find a diplomatic solution in Kosovo won't delay preparations for NATO airstrikes against Yugoslavia if the peace effort fails, Clinton administration officials say.

Whatever the outcome of the mission by special US envoy Richard Holbrooke, the administration is feeling heat from members of Congress to Holbrooke's effort on one hand and to the bombing plans on the other.

"I don't think this will delay the preparations that are going on in NATO," White House national security adviser Sandy Berger said on CBS television's "Face the Nation."

President Bill Clinton spoke Sunday about the situation

with French President Jacques Chirac, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. The White House said he was reaffirming NATO unity against Milosevic's continuing military campaign.

Criticism of the administration's activities began even before Albright announced the planned Holbrooke-Milosevic meeting.

In Kosovo, the Serb-led Yugoslav army struck again Sunday at Kosovo Liberation Army strongholds in the north and north-central parts of the province, driving several thousand ethnic Albanians from their homes.

In the provincial capital, Pristina, late Sunday, gunmen firing from a speeding car killed four Serb police and wounded another in a primarily ethnic Albanian neighborhood.

Meanwhile, Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov

warned Monday that Russia is totally opposed to possible NATO air attacks against Yugoslavia and said efforts to find a political solution must not be abandoned.

"We are categorically against the use of force against Yugoslavia. We believe that political levers to influence the situation are far from being exhausted yet," Primakov told reporters after meeting with visiting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

China's Foreign Minister has also warned that military action against Yugoslavia over Kosovo would be unacceptable, official media reported Monday.

"Resorting to a military action against Yugoslavia without the authorisation of the United Nations Security Council seriously violates the UN charter... and therefore cannot be accepted by the international community," Foreign Ministry spokesman Sun Yexi told the China Daily.

Iranian-backed Hezbollah

Israeli warplanes attack Hezbollah bases in Lebanon

SIDON (Lebanon), Mar 22: Israeli warplanes fired two missiles Monday at suspected guerrilla bases in southern Lebanon, Lebanese security officials said, reports AP.

The attack targeted the deserted village of Milta in the highlands of Iqlim al-Tuffah, a stronghold of the Hezbollah guerrilla group that faces an Israeli-occupied enclave in South Lebanon.

An Israeli army spokesman in Jerusalem confirmed the raid, saying all pilots returned safely to their bases.

There was no immediate word of casualties from the morning attack on Milta, some 20 kilometers (12 miles) southeast of Sidon, provincial capital of southern Lebanon.

Late Sunday, the Israeli army said its jets had attacked suspected guerrilla bases in the mountains around Sajid, also in Iqlim al-Tuffah. There were no reports of damage or casualties.

Iranian-backed Hezbollah

guerrillas are leading the fight to oust 1,500 Israeli soldiers and 2,500 allied militiamen from the Israeli-occupied zone, which Israel carved out in 1985 to protect against cross-border guerrilla attacks.

Clinton offers to help N Ireland peace process

LONDON, Mar 22: US President Bill Clinton offered in a telephone conversation with British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Sunday to help the Northern Ireland peace process in any way he could, Blair's office said, reports Reuters.

A spokeswoman said the two leaders touched on northern Ireland during a discussion on the Kosovo crisis.

Clinton briefed Blair on meetings he had with rival Northern Ireland politicians during St. Patrick's Day celebrations in Washington last week.

Clinton said "as ever he stood ready to help in any way he could in the next phase of the peace process" in the British province, the spokeswoman said.

Northern Ireland was rocked last week by a series of violent incidents, including the killings of Roman Catholic human rights lawyer Rosemary Nelson and former Protestant guerrilla Frankie Curry.

The United States, Britain and Ireland are pressing Protestant and Catholic parties in Northern Ireland to reach a compromise that would allow the creation of a power sharing provincial government at the end of this month.

Seven Lankan troops killed in mine blast

VAVUNIYA (Sri Lanka), Mar 22: At least seven government soldiers were killed and three wounded when their vehicle was blown up by mines planted by Tamil Tiger rebels, military officials said Monday, reports AP.

Sunday's attack was the first in an area which was captured by Sri Lankan military from the rebels earlier this month, said the officials speaking on condition of anonymity.

The soldiers were returning to their camps from duty posts when the blast occurred.

The rebels want a separate homeland for Sri Lanka's 3.3 million Tamils, accusing the 14-million strong Sinhalese majority of discrimination, a charge the government denies. Over 57,000 people have died in the insurrection since 1983 in the country off India's southern coast.

In a swift operation beginning March 6, Sri Lankan troops seized more than 500 square kilometres (200 square miles) from the rebels in their stronghold in the northern jungles.

More than 3,000 soldiers carried out the offensive, code-named "Operation Battle Cry." The rebels offered no resistance, and the troops suffered no casualties.

It was the first offensive by government forces since they called off a bruising campaign last December to take control of the highway linking the northern Jaffna Peninsula with the south. The 19-month campaign cost thousands of lives on both sides before it was abandoned.

The opposition wants peace and it is really ironic that the Taliban are blaming us for fighting," an opposition spokesman identified only as Abdulla said today.

The Taliban said the opposition attacked its positions north of Kabul, but they did not retaliate because they too wanted peace through negotiations.

Claims by both sides in Afghanistan's bitter and protracted conflict are difficult to

Congress launches campaign to topple Vajpayee govt

NEW DELHI, Mar 22: India's main opposition party has

launched a campaign to topple the Hindu nationalist-led government, reversing a year-long

resolve not to destabilise it, officials said today, reports AFP.

In a sudden reversal of tactics, the Congress Party has taken to disrupting Parliament's budget session and launched a war of words aimed at undermining the fragile multi-party government.

Congress leaders say the new aggression is following the orders of party president Sonia Gandhi who had earlier promised not to destabilise Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpeyi.

But with Vajpeyi celebrating one year in office, the Congress seems to have realised that its "we are not crazy-for-power" attitude is not taking it anywhere, analysts say.

And Vajpeyi, otherwise a soft-spoken man, is hitting back.

On Sunday, the prime minister told supporters in southern India that Congress, which has ruled India for most years since

1947, was

itching to return to power.

If congressmen want power, they should wait for elections, fight them and win a majority in Parliament, he said.

The next elections are due in 2003, but the Congress feels that is far away.

The Times of India newspaper reported today that Congress chief Sonia Gandhi has said to have finally made up her mind to try and pull down the coalition government" led by Vajpeyi's BJP party.

A Congress strategist said the party would try to see if "the budget session can be turned into the government's last Parliament session."

The BJP agreed it was facing a determined Congress onslaught.

"The conflict between the BJP and Congress is going to intensify in the coming days because of the latter's aggressive attempt to get back to power," BJP vice-president JP Mathur said.

Vajpeyi's coalition has a wafer-thin majority in Parlia-

ment. Voting on a key issue last month showed that the Congress was separated from the treasury benches by just 30 votes.

Congress strategists believe the numbers can increase from disaffected members of the ruling coalition. Vajpeyi's meeting Sunday were boycotted by a key southern regional ally.

Another government ally also hit out at the BJP on Sunday.

Differences also plague the BJP. Last week's celebrations here to mark one year of Vajpeyi in power were boycotted by several party stalwarts.

Congress chief Sonia Gandhi reportedly wants to press home the advantage.

The party at this hour needs street fighters like us," said Kamal Nath, one of "young turks" in Congress who are critical of old-timers for not taking an aggressive line against the nationalists.

"The battle on the streets cannot be kept out of Parliament," he said.

— AFP photo

Pakistan, India swap civilian prisoners

WAGHA, Pakistan, Mar 22: In a bid to improve their thorny relations, Pakistan and India exchanged civilian prisoners across their border today for the first time since 1991, reports AP.

Among the prisoners who crossed the border were two children who had spent the last three years in jail in Pakistan. The youngest child was four years old.

Clinton offered to help N Ireland peace process

LONDON, Mar 22: US President Bill Clinton offered in a telephone conversation with British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Sunday to help the Northern Ireland peace process in any way he could, Blair's office said, reports Reuters.

A spokeswoman said the two leaders touched on northern Ireland during a discussion on the Kosovo crisis.

Clinton briefed Blair on meetings he had with rival Northern Ireland politicians during St. Patrick's Day celebrations in Washington last week.

Clinton said "as ever he stood ready to help in any way he could in the next phase of the peace process" in the British province, the spokeswoman said.

Northern Ireland was rocked last week by a series of violent incidents, including the killings of Roman Catholic human rights lawyer Rosemary Nelson and former Protestant guerrilla Frankie Curry.

The United States, Britain and Ireland are pressing Protestant and Catholic parties in Northern Ireland to reach a compromise that would allow the creation of a power sharing provincial government at the end of this month.

The British document said the next president of the commission to be personally committed to reform.

European Commission president Jacques Santer and his 19 member team resigned on Tuesday after an independent investigation accused the body of turning a blind eye to fraud and corruption in the EU's civil service.

The British document said one of the new commission's vice-presidents should be responsible for reforming management, personnel and bud-

gets.

It said the commission's management structure should be more transparent and effective.

The promotion system should be based on proven ability and the numbers of senior staff should be cut, it said.

There should be a wide ranging external audit to modernise financial management systems and improve financial control, the document said