

BRIEFLY

Arafat in China: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat arrived in Beijing yesterday for a two-day visit to garner China's support for the declaration of a Palestinian state, the official Xinhua news agency said, AP reports from Beijing.

Chinese President Jiang Zemin will hold talks with Arafat during the visit. Beijing said last week that it supports Palestinian calls for statehood but will leave it up to the Palestinian leadership to decide when the time is right.

Japan sets world train speed record: Japan set a world speed record today of 552 km (342 miles) an hour with a magnetically-levitated train on a test track near Tokyo. Central Japan Railway Co said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The manned "Maglev" train, which is lifted off the tracks with magnetic power, beat its own record of 531 km (329 miles) an hour for a manned train set on December 12, 1997, a company spokesman said.

British entertainer Newley dies: British entertainer Anthony Newley, known for the stage hit "Stop the World - I Want To Get Off" and the 1967 film version of the children's classic "Doctor Doolittle," is dead. He was 67, AP reports from Stuart, Florida.

The actor, playwright, author, composer, lyricist and singer died Wednesday afternoon at his southeast Florida home in Jensen Beach after a lengthy bout with cancer, his former wife Dareth Newley Dunn confirmed. He was first diagnosed in 1985 with renal cell cancer and had one kidney removed. After years of good health, the cancer returned in 1997, this time attacking his lungs, then spreading to his liver.

Colombian plane hijackers release 8 hostages

BOGOTA, Apr 15: Five elderly people, two women and a baby kidnapped along with 40 others aboard a hijacked Colombian airliner were released by their captors in two days, reports AFP.

Six hostages — five elderly people and a baby — were handed over to the International Committee of the Red Cross on Tuesday, spokesman Pierre Gassmann said.

The head of the Colombian Armed Forces, General Fernando Tapes, said the kidnappers Wednesday released two female hostages who were handed over to a representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

One former hostage, identified as Isaac Rincón, an executive with the Colombian Gas Company, was pregnant, while the other, Rebeca Corso, was recovering from a recent operation, Tapes said.

On Monday, gunmen hijacked a Fokker-50 plane operated by Colombia's Avianca airline, taking 46 hostages.

Colombian authorities accuse the National Liberation Army (ELN), the country's second largest rebel group, of hijacking the airliner, but the ELN has not claimed responsibility.

The hijacking was "a terrorist act... a serious and premeditated violation of international law and human rights," government peace negotiator Victor Ricardo said, reading from a government statement.

He went on to demand "the immediate and unconditional release" of all the hostages.

The government said it had confirmed the ELN's involvement through a German citizen named Michaela Mauss, who in the past acted as an intermediary between officials and the rebels, Ricardo said.

The captors released the eight hostages "for humanitarian reasons," Gassmann of the ICRC said, adding that the handover took place in a remote area of Bolívar province where the Avianca Fokker-50 was forced to land Monday.

64 Albanian refugees killed in Kosovo

Y'slavia, NATO blame each other

BELGRADE, Apr 15: Pursued by shellfire and terrorised by the gruesome attack on a refugee convoy a day earlier, thousands of Kosovar Albanians poured into neighbouring Albania and Macedonia, while NATO acknowledged apparent involvement in the convoy strike, reports AP.

At NATO headquarters in Brussels, a military officer speaking on condition of anonymity said evidence pointed to an allied plane having struck at a mixed convoy of refugees and Serb military vehicles in western Kosovo on Wednesday.

In the strike, what appeared to be a tractor was hit, the officer said. In the long column of refugees, tractors were towing flatbed trailers packed with scores of refugees.

Yugoslav officials said the convoy attack, which it said killed 64 people and wounded 20, came from NATO warplanes. Previously, the alliance acknowledged attacking only military vehicles and said there were indications that Serbs themselves had attacked refugees, either from the ground or air.

Nearly 24 hours later, the circumstances remained murky. An international observer, part of a team monitoring the Albanian border, said Thursday that refugee accounts indicated that Serbs, using MIG jets and helicopters, had taken advantage of a NATO military strike to deliberately target refugees.

The convoy's movement came against a backdrop of what is described by Western officials as a vast campaign of "ethnic cleansing" in which Serbs have systematically driven more than a half-million ethnic Albanians out of Kosovo. That exodus is now gathering renewed force after ebbing in the past week.

Thousands of refugees poured across the Albanian border at the Morini crossing between midnight and dawn, some of them witnesses to the carnage of the convoy attack. Shaban Hasanaj, 15, came along later in a column of thousands that fled toward the Albanian border on foot, and said he saw the aftermath of the strike.

"I could see bodies without heads, tangled arms and legs," he said.

Early Thursday, what was apparently Serb shellfire landed inside Albania just beyond the border post. No casualties were reported, but the shells hit in an area where humanitarian workers have been operating and near where refugees have been passing.

Wednesday's bloodshed along a rural road near Djakovica marked the latest grim drama in a 3-week-old air war that has seen NATO warplanes hammer Serb targets throughout Yugoslavia in an effort to force Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic to accept a peace deal for Kosovo.

In the latest wave of attacks, NATO targeted military barracks, transmitters carrying state-run TV and a series of bridges. The state-run Tanjug news agency said 10 towns or their wider areas were targeted overnight, including:

— The southern Belgrade district of Rakovica, where NATO took aim at a military barracks, reportedly leaving the area without power. Tanjug reported a number of injuries and damage to civilian homes without giving specifics.

— Pristina, the Kosovo capital, where three missiles hit late Wednesday.

— Macedonia took in 3,000 more Albanians Wednesday and officials with the UN refugee agency said the numbers could swell to 50,000 based on refugee reports that Serbs are clearing out the region around Urosevac, 30 kilometers (20 miles) from the border.

More than 3,000 Kosovar Albanians crossed into northern Albania late Wednesday and early Thursday. Many said they had been walking for three days and night before finally reaching the relative safety of the border.

The convoy attack's aftermath — as seen in pool video shot under Serb supervision — was horrific. Bodies and belongings were scattered along a rural-looking roadway, and the smashed wreckage of vehicles was visible. People in rough peasant clothing, some with blood streaming down their faces, loaded bodies of the dead and wounded into trunks of cars or wheelbarrows.

In Washington, Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said Gen. Wesley Clark, the top NATO commander in Europe, said he had reports that after military vehicles in the refugee convoy were hit, Serb "Military people got out and... began to attack civilians" in a nearby convoy on the same road.

According to Bacon, Clark believed a military convoy hit by NATO "in close proximity" to the refugee convoy that Clark has accused the Serbs of attacking in retaliation.

Bacon also said there was another incident involving a reported attack against refugees. UN officials quoted refugees as saying that 600 women and children were attacked by Serb aircraft while traveling Wednesday on a road between the Kosovo town of Prizren and Kukes, Albania, according to Bacon. He said there was no word of casualties.

In Belgrade, Yugoslav Foreign Ministry spokesman Nebojsa Vujovic said Yugoslavia had no planes in the air and denounced the strike as a "crime against humanity."

According to Serb accounts, two separate refugee convoys were bombed, most of the made up of women, children and elderly ethnic Albanians traveling by tractors, trailers, in private cars or on foot.

If the reported death toll were accurate, it would be by far the largest single loss of civilian life in an airstrike during the Yugoslav-NATO standoff.

In Brussels, European Union leaders are backing a UN peace initiative for Kosovo while still unwavering in their support for NATO's bombing campaign to end the Serb offensive in Kosovo.

"There's not going to be a halt to the NATO action until the demands that we have set out — which are entirely reasonable, humane, civilized demands — are met in full," British Prime Minister Tony Blair said Wednesday after the



Mutilated bodies of ethnic Albanian refugees, claimed by Yugoslav government to have been killed in a NATO air raid on an Albanian refugee convoy in the village Meha, about five kilometers from the border with Albania, lie next to an abandoned tractor Wednesday.

derly ethnic Albanians traveling by tractors, trailers, in private cars or on foot.

15 EU leaders met with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to discuss the Kosovo crisis.

Billed as a summit to discuss a German peace plan, the leaders instead backed a five-point initiative that Annan launched last week in Geneva.

Annun's formula, which closely resembles NATO's conditions for stopping airstrikes, calls for:

— An immediate end to the campaign of intimidation and expulsion of civilians.

— Ceasing all military and paramilitary activities in Kosovo and withdrawing these forces.

— Accepting unconditionally the return of all refugees and displaced people to their homes.

— Accepting the deployment of an international military force to help in the return of refugees and delivery of aid.

Permitting the international community to verify compliance.

Annan said he had no plans to go to Belgrade to speak to Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and there was no indication Milosevic would accept such a deal.

German chancellor and current EU president, Gerhard Schroeder, said the EU still supports a political settlement based on the February agreement at Rambouillet, France — which the Kosovo Albanians signed and the Serbs rejected. He said the EU was prepared to run an interim administration of Kosovo under such a plan.

French President Jacques Chirac said the EU will support a political settlement based on the February agreement at Rambouillet, France — which the Kosovo Albanians signed and the Serbs rejected. He said the EU was prepared to run an interim administration of Kosovo under such a plan.

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Verdict against Anwar sparks violent protests in KL

KUALA LUMPUR, Apr 15: Calm returned to Malaysia's capital today after violent protests following the jailing of former finance minister Anwar Ibrahim, report agencies.

Traffic flowed normally through Kuala Lumpur, which on Wednesday was rocked by repeated clashes between Anwar supporters and security forces that lasted for more than seven hours.

Police said there had been no more demonstrations after 6:30 pm (10:30 GMT) on Wednesday. Anwar was convicted on four counts of corruption and sentenced to six years in jail.

A total of 18 people were arrested on Wednesday as protesters lit bonfires, threw stones at riot police, broke windows and smashed parking meters of using excessive force.

Opposition parties held a joint rally on Wednesday night and pledged to close ranks ahead of general elections due by June 2000.

The wife of a leading reformer stepped forward Wednesday to unite opposition parties against Malaysia's long-serving ruler, galvanised by her husband's stiff sentence on corruption charges.

The term effectively bars Anwar, 51, from politics for at least five years after his release from prison. He had repeatedly declared his innocence, saying he was the victim of a political conspiracy to eliminate his challenge to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's 18-year rule.

There were gasps in the courtroom and protests in the streets, though Anwar seemed unmoved.

"My body may be incarcerated," he said. "But my soul is free."

Azizah Ismail, Anwar's wife and now the leader of his political reform movement, fought tears as she spoke to reporters outside the courthouse.

"Our family is sad. My children are deprived of their father," she said. "But we don't regret. We feel proud with my husband's stand and the principle we all fight for."

As Paul read the verdict, hundreds of supporters of the ousted deputy prime minister held violent demonstrations, vowing to continue his campaign to rid Malaysia of corruption and Mahathir.

Chanting "reformasi," the Malay word for reform and Anwar's political rally cry, protesters brought part of downtown Kuala Lumpur to a standstill as they rampaged in the capital's streets, lighting bonfires, hurling rocks at police and smashing car windows.

Bomb rips thru' dance party in Philippines: 15 killed

LEGASPI, Philippines, Apr 15: A bomb ripped through a village dance party in the eastern Philippines early today killing 15 people and injuring 50 others, officials said, reports AFP.

The armed forces mounted an emergency operation to evacuate the injured after the attack on the remote island of Rapu-rapu for treatment at a government hospital here, they said.

No suspects have been arrested and no group has claimed responsibility for the blast.

Philippine National Police Director-General Roberto Lastimoso said: "This could be the handiwork of some drunk."

Police said the device, rigged to dynamite, went off around 12:30 am today at an all-night dance at a clearing in the village of Santo Nino.

The dance was held to celebrate the feast of the town's patron saint, said Superintendent Herman Duria, the Bicol regional police chief.

US pledges \$37m to help Kenyan bombing victims

NAIROBI, Apr 15: The United States pledged more than 37 million dollars Wednesday to help Kenyan victims of the US Embassy bombing in Nairobi try to rebuild their lives, reports AP.

The money will go toward medical care for the injured, school fees for orphans and repair costs for damaged buildings.

US Ambassador Prudence Bushnell stressed that the United States, which many Kenyans have criticised as unsympathetic to their losses, was also a victim of the bombing and was giving the aid as "a symbolic gesture" of friendship.

The August 7 bombing killed 213 people, 12 of them Americans, and injured 5,400 people, leaving some blind, others permanently disfigured. A nearly simultaneous bombing at the US Embassy in Tanzania killed another 11 people and injured 85.

The money includes 28 million dollars to aid small businesses hurt in the bombing and to rebuild nearby buildings.

MANAMA, Apr 15: Iraqi President Saddam Hussein could be toppled soon, a senior US official said, reports AP.

Martin Indyk, Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and Asian Affairs, reiterated Wednesday that the United States sought the overthrow of the Iraqi government.

"Our view is that sooner or later, Saddam Hussein should go, and we believe it should be sooner, and we believe it may be sooner than you and I think," he said.

Indyk declined to offer a more specific assessment for such an action, although he said the United States would "do what we can to ensure that once Saddam goes, there will be a stable future for Iraq."

US President Bill Clinton has declared that Saddam's ouster is a major US goal. Congress has allocated 97 million dollars in aid for Iraqi dissidents.

A two-day meeting of Iraqi dissidents in London last week was an "important development," he said.

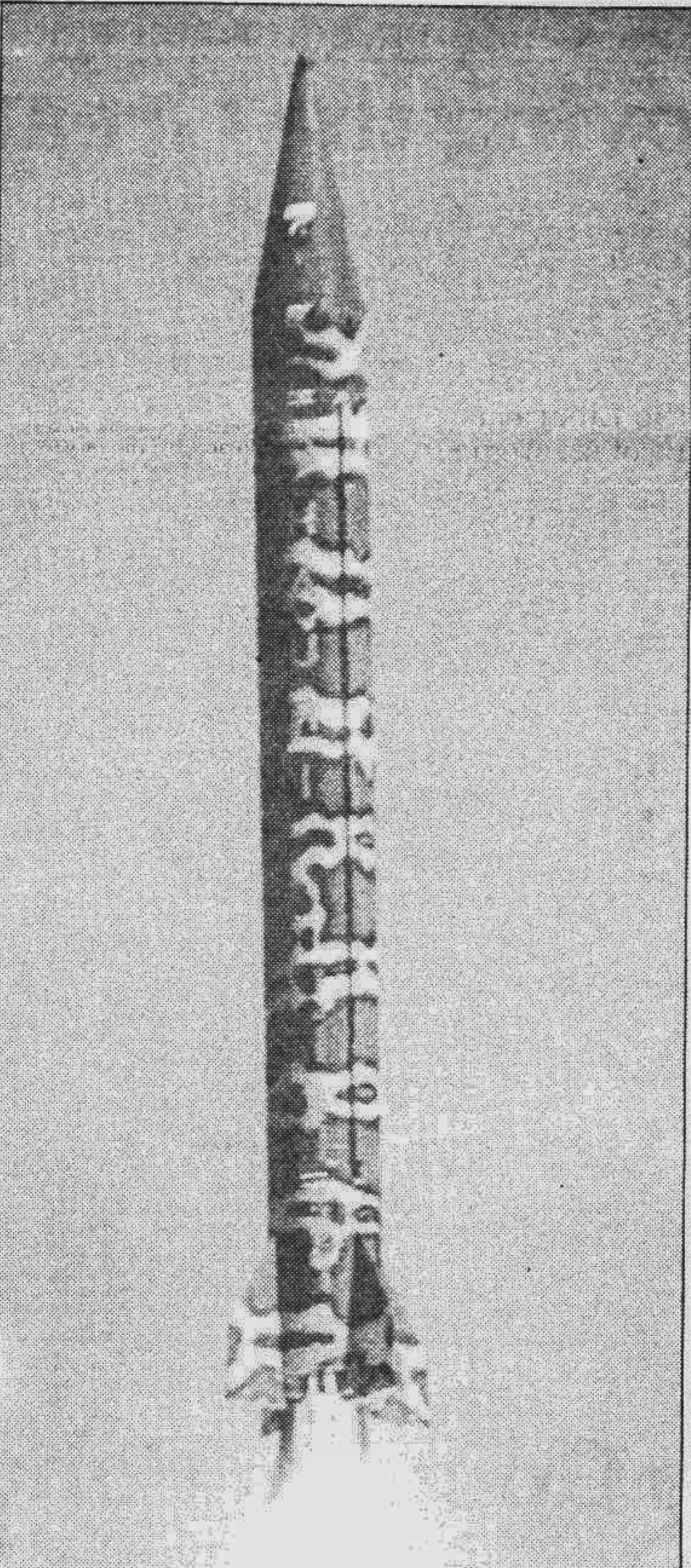
"Groups came together to elect a new leadership and plan their steps for a renewed effort to illegitimize Saddam Hussein," Indyk said of the meeting that appointed a new executive to the Iraqi National Congress.

Indyk spoke to reporters after meeting Bahraini's new ruler, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa.

Indyk said his talks with the new emir covered the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which the United States plans to try to push forward after Israel's May 17 elections.

Arab states have accused Israel of failing to honour its commitments under the Wye River accord and an earlier pledge to negotiate the final status of the Palestinian territories.

Another report from UN says: Three main camps have



Pakistan conducts a successful Gauri missile test near Jhelum, some 120 km south of Islamabad Wednesday. The new Gauri missile can carry any type of warheads and has a range of 2,300 kilometers.

Pakistan, India urged to halt arms race

BEIJING, Apr 15: China urged India and Pakistan today to ease regional tensions and avoid wasting precious resources on an arms race, reports AP.

With the missile testing by the two rivals "ultimately a new balance of military strength will be struck in South Asia," an editorial in the official English-language China Daily said.

"It might look as if nothing had actually happened, only that such a constant match of military armament will keep alive the tension in the region and steadily drain its resources for economic development."

The paper laid the blame for the renewed tensions at India's door following the launch of its 2,500-kilometer (1,550-mile) Agni-II missile on April 11. Any euphoria in India at the successful test must have been dampened after Pakistan on Wednesday tested a ballistic missile in response, the paper said.

With the launch of its Gauri-II missile with a range of 2,300 kilometers (1,437 miles) Pakistan "drew even, just as it had done when India tested its nuclear bombs 11 months ago," the editorial added.

AP adds from Moscow: Russia's Foreign Ministry on Thursday urged India and Pakistan to halt their arms race after both countries tested missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads, a news report said. Russia calls on Pakistan and India "to stop the arms race, which may result in the destabilization of the situation not only in the Asian region but also on a large scale," a Foreign Ministry official said, according to the ITAR-Tass news agency.

E Timorese youths seek US mediation to resolve crisis

JAKARTA, Apr 15: A group of 50 East Timorese youths Wednesday picketed the US embassy here to demand Washington's involvement in a peaceful settlement for the troubled former Portuguese colony, reports AFP.

"America should be actively involved in settling the problem of Timor Leste (East Timor)," one of the posters carried by the youths, who said they belonged to the pro-independence East Timorese umbrella group, the National Resistance Council of Timor (CNRT).

The group also conveyed a letter to US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright through embassy political officer Edmund McWilliams, which urged the US government to devote its attention to the problem.

"We the East Timorese youth come before you to remind your excellency and your government to pay a bit of your sense

US accuses Netanyahu of renegeing on promises

WASHINGTON, Apr 15: Accusing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of renegeing on a promise, the State Department said Wednesday Israel has accelerated construction of Jewish housing on the West Bank, thus casting doubt on its seriousness about pursuing peace with the Palestinians, reports AP.

Spokesman James P. Rubin said Netanyahu informed US officials at all levels on many occasions that as a matter of policy there would be no new settlements and no expansion of existing settlements.

Nonetheless, he said, there has been an "accelerated pattern" of both types of construction.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright raised concern about the settlement activity last week in a meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon. But Wednesday's official statement went further than one issued after the Sharon meeting because it personally criticised Netanyahu.

Asked in Israel about American criticism of the settlement activity, Sharon said Tuesday, "There are things we have to do even if they don't agree."

In his comments, Rubin made no reference to a report in the Israeli daily Haaretz that US satellites are tracking settlement growth in the West Bank. It said recent photos have revealed at least 12 new settlements in the area.

Rubin said Israel and the Palestinians "have an obligation to do their part to create an environment for the pursuit of peace and the achievement of peace."

moment he saw a falling apple, I had long developed my theory of plastic decomposition by bacteria," said Otake.

The researcher said he had been looking for a good sample to prove that "when the proof turned up in his garden."

After years of research, the team had now identified three types of bacteria that devour low-density polyethylene materials.

The results are to be officially announced at the annual meeting of the Society of Polymer Science, Japan, which is to be held in the ancient capital of Kyoto from May 27.

"With enzymes, these particular types of bacteria decompose low-density polyethylene which is the type of plastic most widely produced around the world," said Engineering Professor Katsumichi Ono of Ibaraki University.

"When I saw it, I knew I had found it," said Otake, a senior research associate at the institute.

The discovery was unearthed literally when builders were doing reconstruction work on his house and a piece of polyethylene was pulled out of the earth in his garden eight years ago, he told AFP.

The plastic was too rotten to work out its original form.

"As (Isaac) Newton just didn't theorise the law of gravity the

Environment-friendly bacteria

TOKYO Apr 15: A Japanese researcher says he has found bacteria which gobbles up plastic in his back garden, opening the way to a new solution for the country's overloaded rubbish tips, reports AP.

The research was led by scientist Yoshito Otake of the Chemicals Inspection and Testing Institute, Japan, in collaboration with five private-sector companies.

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