

NATO draws up plans to choke off oil supplies to Y'slavia

WASHINGTON, Apr 25: NATO bombed targets across Yugoslavia today, halting television broadcasts and hitting a barracks and chemical plant, as the alliance drew up plans to choke off oil supplies to the country, reports Reuter.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, in Washington for a NATO 50th anniversary summit said there was no target date to put ground troops into Kosovo.

"What I think has really come out of this session here at the summit... is a really genuine support for an intensified air campaign," Albright told the BBC.

"Nobody has a date in the calendar and we are not operating to a date in the calendar," Cook said. "But we've always recognised that at some stage ground forces are going to be necessary to secure the territory of Kosovo."

Risking possible confrontation with Russia — Serbia's major oil supplier before air strikes started on March 24 — NATO said it planned to "visit and search" ships bound for Yugoslavia.

"How can we justify risking the lives of the pilots to go up and destroy the refinery and the supply capacity of Serbia and then say but it's OK with us if people want to continue to supply this nation and its outlaw actions in Kosovo in another way?" President Bill Clinton asked a Saturday news confer-

ence. In a relatively quiet 32nd night of air raids, hampered by cloud, NATO warplanes bombed a chemical plant in central Serbia and a barracks and industrial sites in the southern district of Srebrenica.

Serbian television went off the air after an attack on a transmitter near Belgrade. Clinton sought to justify allied tactics, saying NATO was not drifting into a Vietnam-style conflict. But the added conflict would not end swiftly like the Gulf War.

"I think the important thing for everyone to understand is that in order for this strategy to succeed, we need two things — one, vigorous execution, and two, patience," Clinton said.

More than 1,000 people wearing target signs that symbolise Serbian protest at NATO air strikes and chanting "stop the bombing" rallied noisily outside the White House as the summit met on Saturday.

NATO leaders want Russia to help mediate a settlement with Belgrade and contribute troops to a force to protect ethnic Albanians returning to Kosovo.

France President Jacques Chirac said France had already rejected reservations about the proposed searches. Stopping a ship on the high seas would be an act of war, he said. But Italian Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini said a blockade is preferable to destruction... of terminals in the port of Bar or of bridges and other facilities in Montenegro.

Russia's envoy on Yugoslavia Victor Chernomyrdin was preparing on Sunday for talks with NATO leaders after the alliance offered an olive branch by saying it wanted to cooperate with Moscow over the Kosovo crisis.

But earlier he dampened hopes of any imminent breakthrough. "If I had a trump card I would have already used it, and I would have gone there (Belgrade) to where I could play it," Chernomyrdin said on Saturday.

Canada's Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy said he would go to Moscow next week to hear from Chernomyrdin what progress had been made.

NATO gave a polite diplomatic brushoff to Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma's own Kosovo peace plan based on a simultaneous ceasefire by NATO, Yugoslav forces and KLA guerrillas, and the deployment of peacekeepers from neutral nations as Yugoslav troops withdrew from the province.

NATO leaders in Washington have vowed to step up military and economic pressure on Milosevic, demanding nothing less than a withdrawal from Kosovo and the return of 600,000 refugees protected by an international force, with NATO at its core.

But Yugoslav Foreign Minister Zivadin Jovanovic on Saturday rejected deployment of foreign armed troops, on his territory to enforce any peace as undermining Yugoslavia's sovereignty.

Military analysts say a growing allied force in Macedonia and Albania, expected to reach more than 30,000 in the coming weeks, could form the core of ground thrust.

NATO acknowledged it had effectively scrapped its original plan for a "three-phase" air strike campaign with clearly distinguished degrees of escalation.

It said Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) General Wesley Clark, had a free hand to direct attacks at any of NATO's list of agreed targets, without a formal decision of the 10 alliance members being taken each night.

The NATO summit was also scheduled to discuss plans for the rebuilding of the Balkans after the conflict. "We want that region... to be able to put the instabilities and the tragedies of the past behind and to join the European mainstream," NATO Secretary General Javier Solana said.

Serbs hunting down women to rape

BRAZDA, Macedonia, Apr 25: City by city and village by village, Serbs are hunting down young women to rape as they loot, empty and burn Kosovo's ethnic Albanian communities, women escaping beyond the province's borders say, reports AP.

International monitors, war crimes investigators and NATO all are reporting numerous accounts of rapes in Kosovo — atrocities that Yugoslav and Serb officials deny.

Witness testimony so far indicates the rapes in Kosovo are "neither isolated nor incidental," said Patricia Sellers, a UN war crimes prosecutor at The Hague, Netherlands, whose workers are gathering the first accounts.

"When the police entered the town, that was the first question they asked: 'Are there any women here?'" said Valbona Rrustemi, 19, of the southern Kosovo town of Urosevac.

Rrustemi fled Urosevac with her family April 16, the day after two girls came running through her family's garden, saying Serb police were after them, she said.

Minutes later, police knocked at the family's door, asking if there were any young women, she said. Her father said no while she hid, Rrustemi said.

Word later reached her of four Urosevac women who had been caught by the Serbs that day, she said. They included a friend who was raped in the street, Rrustemi said. She named the friend and gave her age, 22.

The woman's cousins had confirmed the attack, Rrustemi said.

said. No one has heard of the women or her immediate family since. "I don't know what happened to them. I hoped they escaped," said Rrustemi, one of several women at the Brazda refugee camp to give accounts of rapes in Urosevac.

NATO, also citing refugee accounts, contends there have been several instances of mass rapes, well-organised on at least a local level.

At Djakovica, near the Albanian border, Serb soldiers allegedly took women from their families, and sent them to any army camp where they were

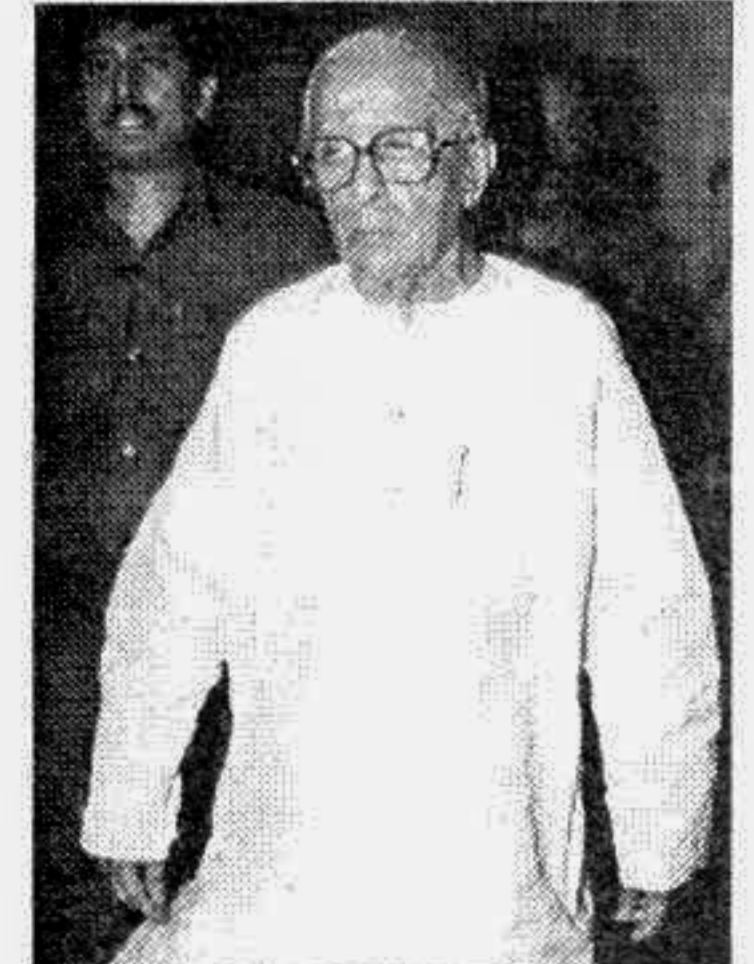
held for repeated rapes. — In Pec, a local Serb commander allegedly held ethnic Albanian women at a hotel, organising a schedule by which his soldiers could come to spend an evening.

At an ammunition factory and ferronickel plant at an unspecified site in Kosovo, 100 women allegedly were still being held as of mid-April.

In many cases, word that Serbs were separating ethnic Albanians into groups of women and men was enough to send families fleeing — making rape a means of emptying communities, as much as massacres, arson and looting.



Kashmiri Shi'ite Muslims make themselves bleed by inflicting wounds and cuts upon themselves in downtown Srinagar Sunday on the occasion of the martyrdom of the Imam Hussain, the holy Prophet Mohammad's grandson. Shi'ite Muslims all over the world mourn the seventh century killing of Hussain and his Family. — AFP Photo



Veteran Communist leader Jyoti Basu leaves a Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPI-M) meeting in New Delhi on Sunday. Opposition leaders have stepped up demands for Basu, Chief Minister of West Bengal, to take the plunge on the national stage, leading a coalition of opposition parties to counter a return to power of the ousted Hindu nationalist coalition that collapsed on April 17 after it was defeated in a parliamentary vote of confidence.

— AFP Photo

Algerian troops kill 9 militants

ALGIERS, Apr 25: Algerian security forces killed at least nine armed Islamists in the northeastern Bouira region last week, press reports said today, reports AFP.

Algerian opposition warns of new govt crackdown

ALGIERS, Apr 25: Opposition leaders criticised the Algerian government on Sunday for banning a street protest over alleged vote-rigging, saying the move heralded a crackdown on political activity under the rule of the new president, reports Reuter.

"We denounce that decision and we reserve the right to sue the authorities behind a ban which confirms our warnings that political activities and freedom of expression will be stifled under the new leadership," they said in a statement.

The authorities said the opposition could hold an indoor gathering, but it was not authorised to stage a street demonstration which could threaten public order.

The statement was signed by main secular opposition leader Hocine Ait Ahmed, former Prime Ministers Mouloud Hamrouche and Mokdad Sifi,

ex-Foreign Minister Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi, Islamist Abdallah Djaballah and former presidential adviser Youcef Khaliq.

The six politicians had been candidates for the presidency before they withdrew on the eve of the April 15's poll over alleged vote fraud, leaving former Foreign Minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika the only contender.

They vowed to stir opposition against Bouteflika's rule, including the use of street protests, to bring about what they called a "true democracy."

Bouteflika, 62, favoured by the dominant military, was declared the winner, taking some 7.4 million of the 10.5 million votes cast, according to the authorities.

He would officially take over from his predecessor Liamine Zeroual on Tuesday, Liberté and El Alam Asslassi newspapers reported on Sunday.



The wreckage of a Ford Sierra lies at the scene of the nail-bomb which exploded in Brick Lane, east London Saturday. At least five people were injured when the bomb exploded in the centre of the capital's Bangladeshi community, exactly a week after a similar bomb in Brixton. — AFP Photo

Sierra Leonean rebels begin talks in Togo

LOME, Apr 25: An initial group of guerrilla leaders from Sierra Leone's bush war has arrived in Togo and begun consultations with rebel leader Foday Sankoh on ending the conflict, rebel officials said, reports Reuter.

Fourteen senior commanders came out of the bush on Saturday and seven were flown by the United Nations to the Togolese capital Lome. Sankoh had arrived in the city earlier.

But the two biggest names in the rebel war command stayed behind in Liberia because of continuing fears over their security, senior rebel spokesman Omrie Golley said.

He said both guerrilla field commander Sam Bockarie and Sierra Leone's ousted junta leader, Johnny Paul Koroma, would come to Lome at a later date.

"They probably won't come tomorrow, and may not come on a UN flight," said Golley, who is also legal adviser to Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

PFLP to boycott PLO meet on declaration of state

GAZA CITY, Apr 25: A Palestinian group opposed to peace accords with Israel said today it would boycott this week's PLO meeting to discuss the possible declaration of a Palestinian state, reports AFP.

"The Palestinian right to an independent, sovereign state with Jerusalem as its capital is a sacred right which cannot be subject to discussions, manoeuvres or negotiations," the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine said.

The PLO's 124-member central council is to meet on Tuesday to vote on a course of action for May 4, when the five-year interim period set out in the Oslo peace accord between Israel and the Palestinians comes to an end.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat insists the Palestinians have the right to proclaim a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip on May 4.

But Palestinian officials say Arafat could delay a statehood

declaration, as urged by world leaders, in exchange for firmer international pledges to recognise the Palestinians' right to independence at a later date.

"The Popular Front believes it is necessary to announce the establishment of a Palestinian state in all the occupied territories... and to start establishing complete sovereignty in the zones under the control of the Palestinian Authority," said the PFLP, the largest PLO faction.

Arafat's Palestinian Authority, which was established under the 1993 Oslo peace accords, currently has full or partial control over 29 per cent of the West Bank and 60 per cent of the Gaza Strip.

In Damascus, Ali Badwaneh, a member of the central committee of another opposition group, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, said the proclamation of a state on May 4 was "necessary."

BRIEFLY

Armenia remembers 1915 genocide: Armenia commemorated on Saturday the anniversary of the 1915 genocide of between 1.2 and 1.3 million Armenians by the authorities of the Ottoman Empire, AFP reports from Yerevan. Armenian national and representatives of the Armenian diaspora came through the day to pay tribute to the victims, at the monument erected in their memory in the centre of Yerevan.

Venezuelans vote for constitution: The centrepiece of President Hugo Chavez's agenda to transform Venezuela — his proposal for a new constitution — is going before the people in a nationwide referendum, AP reports from Caracas.

Some 11 million Venezuelans were eligible to vote Sunday on whether to convoke a constituent assembly to rewrite the constitution, and whether to approve the terms Chavez has laid out for electing its members. Chavez, a former army paratrooper who stage and bloody, failed 1992 coup, has alarmed the political opposition by saying the proposed assembly should dissolve Congress and the Supreme Court.

3 Russian soldiers killed: Gunmen ambushed and killed three Russian Interior Ministry troopers in the restive Caucasus republic of Ingushetia, an official said Sunday, AP reports from Moscow. The gunmen fired grenades and automatic rifles at the three troopers patrolling Ingushetia's border with the breakaway republic of Chechnya on Saturday night, an Interior Ministry spokesman said. The soldiers, all sergeants, died on the spot, and the gunmen escaped, according to the spokesman.

ICRC chief visits Y'slavia: The head of the International Committee of the Red Cross met Yugoslav officials yesterday and told them the ICRC was ready to provide humanitarian aid to all who needed it, the officials Tanjung news agency reported, AP reports from Belgrade.

Blast kills 3 in Uganda: A bomb blast in a heavily populated low income neighbourhood in the Ugandan capital killed three people and injured 15 others, police said Sunday, AP reports from Manila. Police spokesman John Kimera said three police officers were among the victims of the Saturday night blast in the downtown Kisenyi neighborhood. No one immediately claimed responsibility for the blast and no arrests had been made, Kimera said.



Noble laureate Bishop Carlos Ximenes Felipe Belo holds communion with parishioners at his seaside compound during an early morning mass on Sunday in Dili, East Timor. Dili remained calm following an agreement on autonomy for the territory hammered out at the United Nations between Indonesia and Portugal. — AFP Photo

Clinton to ask Congress for stricter gun controls Colorado rampage copycat plot uncovered in Texas

WIMBERLEY, Texas, Apr 25: Gunpowder, crude bombs and computer disks with bomb-making information were found in the homes of three 14-year-old boys accused of plotting an assault at their junior high school, investigators said Saturday, reports AP.

"Based on the statements given, it is clear that these young men were serious about targeting fellow students and teachers," Hays County Sheriff Don Montague said of the alleged plot that was similar to the Colorado high school rampage.

Five eighth-grade boys were taken into custody Friday afternoon and held on juvenile charges of conspiracy to commit murder, conspiracy to manufacture explosives, authorities said.

The three boys whose homes were searched remained in juvenile detention Saturday along with another boy, the sheriff said. He would not reveal the location of the fifth boy.

Only three homes were searched Friday night because that's all authorities had probable cause to check, the Sheriff said.

The alleged plot, believed to have been conceived in January came to light Friday when school officials were contacted by students two had overheard

discussions. Another reports from Washington says: US President Bill Clinton plans to ask Congress for stricter gun laws and more money to fight school violence, in the wake of last week's school shootings that left 15 dead in Colorado.

"Government must take responsibility," the president said. Clinton said he would send two bills to lawmakers aimed at keeping US schools safe.



A girl writes her message on the coffin carrying the body of Rachel Scott during her funeral services in Littleton, Colorado Saturday. Scott was one of the 12 students from Columbine High School who died following a shooting by two fellow students on April 20. — AFP Photo

Thousands protest outside China central govt HQs

BEIJING, Apr 25: Thousands of people stood silently shoulder to shoulder on streets outside China's central government headquarters Sunday to demand the right to practise a system of meditation taught by a martial arts master living in the United States, reports AP.

More than 10,000 people crowded on the sidewalks for about two-and-a-half kilometres (one-and-a-half miles) along the streets north and west of Zhongnanhai, the walled government leadership compound just west of the imperial palace, or Forbidden City.

Part of the crowd also gathered near the main gate on the south side of the compound, a short distance from Tiananmen Square on the Avenue of Eternal Peace, the city's main east-west thoroughfare.

Demonstrators wanted legal protection for practising Falun Gong, said a young man standing quietly in the crowd. "Officials in some areas were 'mediating' and preventing people from practising Falun," said the man, a computer software engineer gave his family name, Sun.

Falun Gong (pronounced "fah-luhn gung") has 70 million to 100 million adherents throughout China according to a government estimate. The group was founded in 1992 by Li Hongzhi, a Chinese native who now lives in New York and lectures in the United States and other countries, but no longer in China.

Falun is a school of qigong, a system of controlled breathing, martial arts, meditation and healing that has been popular in China since bans on cultural traditions were lifted in the late 1970s. The government sanctions qigong, as unique Chinese tradition, but condemns some qigong groups as false schools.

The government is studying Falun and has not yet reached a conclusion on whether it is an acceptable school of qigong, Wang Kai, an official in charge of qigong under the State Sports Administration, said Sunday. He declined to comment further.

Police stopped traffic that earlier clogged Wenjin Street as drivers gawked. Crowds of police guarded the gates of the leadership compound, and others spread out to keep watch over the crowd.

The demonstrators stood or sat along the streets as if waiting for a parade. Many wore signs or carried out any demands. Near the main gate of the government headquarters many sat and read a book of Li's teachings.



Chinese police keep an eye on the thousands of people lining up on the street outside Zhongnanhai, the seat of power of China's central government in Beijing, in a peaceful protest on Sunday. The demonstrators, who are from provinces all over China, are practising falungong - a kind of martial art - in a protest for their rights. — AFP Photo

Followers say Falun is not a religion, but a system of meditation and exercise that brings them good health.

The gathering began early in the morning to protest critics who call Falun a superstition or religion, said a woman running a nearby kiosk.

They remained throughout the day, standing quietly along the sidewalks without blocking traffic.

The crowd wanted the government to give them a "legal environment," said a middle-aged man standing in the tightly packed crowd. He declined to give his name or say more, and nervously told a reporter in a low voice, "Go now." Many others refused to say anything.

The demonstration Sunday involved people of all ages.

Japanese voters cast ballots in local body polls

TOKYO, Apr 25: Japanese voters went to the polls Sunday to cast ballots for mayors and local assembly members in elections held around the country, reports AP.

The vote, the second in a series of local elections held every four years, follows an election for prefectural (state) governors held earlier this month.

Mayoral elections were kicked off in 98 cities, including the prefectural (state) capital of Utsunomiya, Urawa, Kofu, Matsuyama, Nagasaki and Oita.

Agreement will be shattered if peace process halted: Sinn Fein

LONDON, Apr 25: Sinn Fein today said a peace agreement for Northern Ireland would be shattered if the process was "parked" over the summer, reports Reuter.

"Our view is if you park the peace process there will be no Good Friday Agreement to come back to," Mitchel McLaughlin, chairman of the IRA's political wing, told BBC television in an interview to be broadcast later today.

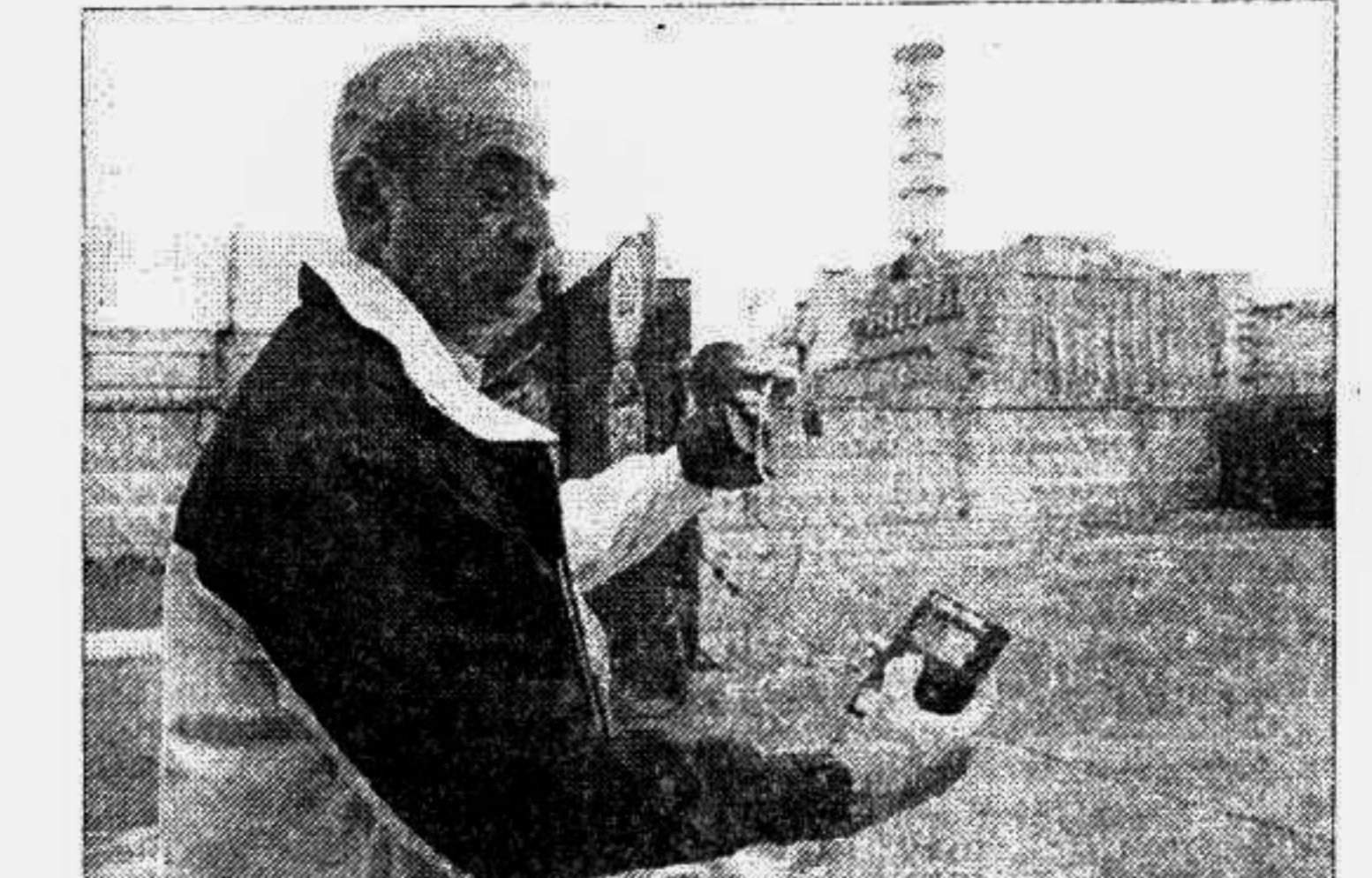
"I think we are already in a very deep crisis and clearly each day that we fail to find agreement on setting up the political structures, the political institutions, then that crisis will deepen," he said.

Ireland's deputy foreign minister, speaking on the same programme, agreed the process could not be halted.

A stalemate over the scrapping of guerrilla arms has stalled last year's landmark Good Friday Agreement, which committed all signatories to use their influence to get weapons handed over by May 2000.

Weeks of talks between parties have got nowhere and British and Irish Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern are likely to resume talks with the leaders of all the province's main parties next week.

Last week, a spokesman for Blair said there was no question of sidestepping the peace process but with agreement still elusive, speculation is rife that Blair and Ahern will suspend the agreement for some time rather than risk further damage.



Timmer Gerrit, military attache of the Dutch embassy in Kiev, measures the level of radiation at the sarcophagus of the fourth block (REAR) of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant Saturday. Diplomats from embassies in Kiev visited the site, two days ahead of the 13th anniversary of Chernobyl nuclear disaster. — AFP Photo