

NATO's war, dispute with Russia raise concerns across Asia

TOKYO, Apr 26: NATO's decision to step up its air strikes and impose an oil embargo on Yugoslavia raised concerns across Asia on Monday, especially regarding the alliance's dispute with Russia, reports AP.

Even though Asia and Australia aren't part of NATO, its 50th anniversary summit in Washington made front-page news in the region. It also generated editorials questioning NATO's plans and goals, not only in Yugoslavia but in the rest of the world, too.

"Divided on whether to commit ground troops to the war in Yugoslavia, NATO has marked its 50th anniversary in subdued fashion," The Sydney Morning Herald said in an editorial Monday.

"Moving to cut oil supplies to Yugoslavia will put NATO in conflict with Russia," the editorial said, just as it is celebrating its long role as Europe's peace-keeper.

NATO's 19 leaders used their weekend meeting to show solidarity in their military operation against Slobodan Milosevic in an effort to make his Yugoslav forces withdraw from Kosovo and allow hundreds of thousands of Albanian refugees to return home.

The NATO leaders agreed to intensify their air strikes against Yugoslavia and to impose an oil embargo enforced by NATO ships, despite Russian objections.

No decision was reached about whether to send NATO ground forces into Yugoslavia. On Sunday, US President Bill Clinton spoke once again on the telephone with President Boris Yeltsin about his objections to the war against Russia's Balkan ally, and to encourage Moscow's efforts to press Milosevic to accept a peaceful solution to the crisis.

But that didn't allay concern in Asia about NATO's war, its dispute with Russia, a non-NATO member, and questions the fighting has raised about the alliance's future.

In South Korea, the NATO summit generated front-page headlines such as "Oil Embargo to Yugo" in most major newspapers, and an editorial in the Chosun Ilbo that questioned the decision.

In Japan, a key US ally, the NATO summit also dominated the front pages of newspapers, and generated a host of editorials, some of which raised questions about the alliance's goals. "Can NATO maintain a bal-

ance in Europe, or does it create more tension? The absence of the Russian president at the summit symbolises the problems that NATO is facing," the Asahi Shimbun said in an editorial in its Sunday edition.

At the same time, it said: "Unless NATO can achieve the goal of saving ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, NATO will lose the meaning of playing its card. Ironically, for NATO the year to celebrate has turned out to be the year of ordeal."

Fearful that NATO's acting without UN approval sets a precedent that could one day be used against China, Chinese leaders have used the state-run media to denigrate the alliance, portray the Yugoslav resistance as heroic and stir up Chinese nationalism.

Even Australia's government, which has repeatedly supported NATO's actions in the Balkans, refused on Monday to endorse the use of ground troops there.

"We're not involved in the Kosovo business. That's a NATO operation," Defence Minister John Moore told the Ten network. "We do not comment on the actions taken by NATO itself, as to whether it's troops, whether it's bombing strategies, or what."

Milosevic still defiant despite sign of crack in his own rank

BELGRADE, Apr 26: As NATO leaders pledged to intensify airstrikes, allied missiles early Monday destroyed another big bridge on the Danube River and struck targets in central, northern and southern Serbia, reports AP.

The last of three bridges in Novi Sad, the second largest Yugoslav city, had been damaged in three previous attacks, the state Tanjug news agency reported. It said the 466-meter-long (1,500-foot-long) rail and road bridge suffered several direct hits before collapsing Monday.

NATO has said it was destroying bridges in the northern city to prevent troop deployments south to Kosovo. The alliance has targeted infrastructure in Yugoslavia's north amid speculation that a ground campaign could be launched from the northern border with NATO member Hungary.

Hours earlier, NATO leaders wrapped up a 50th anniversary summit in Washington, pledging to intensify the air campaign against Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic and bring it to a successful end. They agreed to move toward

an oil embargo to hinder Milosevic's military, despite Russia's objections and French misgivings. But there was no agreement on the possibility of introducing ground forces.

As NATO and the Clinton administration insisted the air campaign will press on, NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana has asked the military to reassess what it would take to win a land war in Kosovo.

In Washington, members of Congress promised 10 billion dollars in emergency funding for the Pentagon to pay for operations in Yugoslavia and deter potential adversaries elsewhere.

In other NATO attacks early Monday a fuel depot was targeted near the central Serbia town of Valjevo, Tanjug said.

Nine missiles blasted a military airport in Sombor, near the border with Hungary, Serbian media said. And an area close to Kosovo's provincial capital of Pristina was also struck, including the Slatina military and civilian airport, Tanjug said.

Milosevic has remained defiant. But in a sign of a possible crack in his government,

Yugoslavia's deputy premier on Sunday criticised his policies, calling on Yugoslav leaders to "stop lying to the people in Serbia, and finally tell them the truth."

"The people should be told that NATO is not facing a breakdown, that Russia will not help Yugoslavia militarily and that the world public opinion is against us," Deputy Premier Vuk Draskovic told local Studio B television.

Draskovic, once the main opposition leader before joining Milosevic's government last year, said Serbia is isolated and seriously weakened after more than a month of allied bombardment.

"People who lead this country must say clearly where we stand," Draskovic said. "They must say what will be left of Serbia in 20 days if the bombing continues."

Meanwhile, refugees fleeing Kosovo brought some of the grimmest accounts so far of Serb gunmen killing villagers by the dozens. Kosovo refugees reaching Macedonia told relief workers of Serb paramilitaries entering villages, ordering residents out of their homes and

opening fire on them. While Serbs had emptied southern towns with "clinical precision," the latest accounts depicted roaming Serb paramilitaries butchering people in more northerly villages, said UN spokesman Ron Redmond.

More than 600,000 refugees have fled Kosovo since the airstrikes began, and Western aid groups say hundreds of thousands of others are displaced within the province, many trying to leave.

Near the Albanian border with Kosovo, spokesman for the rebel Kosovo Liberation Army appealed for NATO to supply them arms and deploy US Army Apache helicopters against Serb forces immediately.

"The Serbian war machinery makes Kosovo one very big concentration camp," said Gani Sylaj, a spokesman for the rebel movement.

Also in Albania NATO commander Gen. Wesley Clark visited US soldiers Sunday who were readying an Apache helicopter unit for action against Serb forces. He said the air campaign was "right on schedule."

Security alert in London over racist bombings

LONDON, Apr 26: Britain's minority non-white communities warned today that vigilante-style patrols may take to the streets to hunt down white supremacists blamed for a second nail bomb attack in eight days, reports Reuters.

The government told black and Asian communities to be on full alert for new attacks in what the media have called the nation's worst outbreak of racist violence since the late 1970s.

A neo-Nazi group claimed responsibility for the attacks on successive Saturday evenings, prompting officials to express fears that Jews may become a target.

While dealing here with extremely evil criminals and terrorists. Until they're caught, that danger remains, Home Secretary (interior minister) Jack Straw told reporters on Sunday.

In the latest attack on Saturday, a bomb sprayed nails through a busy market street at the centre of the Bangladeshi community in London's East End. Seven people were injured.

Indian troops attack Pak village in Kashmir: 15 hurt

MUZAFFARABAD, Apr 26: Indian troops barged into a Pakistani village and fired mortar shells across the troubled border of Kashmir, wounding at least 15 civilians, police said Sunday, reports AP.

In a hit-and-run attack on Sunday, police said Indian soldiers destroyed two homes in a village along the disputed border that divides Kashmir between Pakistan and India.

Thousands of Indian and Pakistani soldiers face off along the disputed border, the flash point of two previous wars between the uneasy neighbours.

The area of the reported attack is about 260 kilometres (156 miles) north of Muzafrabad, the capital of Pakistani-ruled Kashmir.

At least six people, including a girl, were wounded in the attack, police said. The Indians retreated to their area soon after the attack.

No other details were immediately available and the report could not be confirmed by army sources in the area.

Meanwhile, Indian troops also fired mortar shells in the same area, but from their side of the border, wounding nine people.

Sharif to visit Albania tomorrow

ISLAMABAD, Apr 26: In a gesture of solidarity with refugees from Kosovo and with the government of Albania, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif will visit Albania this week, a foreign ministry statement said today, reports AP.

Sharif, who will travel to Albania on Wednesday, will visit a refugee camp in Albania.

Pakistan has called for greater United Nations involvement to find a diplomatic end to the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. Pakistan also has offered to send in peacekeeping troops, but so far has refused to participate in a military force.

It is shocking that soon after Bosnia, massive crimes against humanity are being perpetrated by the same regime in the midst of Europe," the foreign ministry statement said.

"The brutalities being committed against the innocent Kosovar Muslims violate all basic human rights."

While in Albania, Sharif will "express the support and appreciation of the government and people of Pakistan to the government and people of Albania for the admirable manner in which they are providing shelter and relief to the Kosovar refugees."

Yugoslavia's neighbours have been overwhelmed by ethnic Albanians forced to flee Kosovo since the NATO air strikes began on March 24.

It is estimated that there are 363,100 Kosovo refugees living in neighbouring Albania, 135,200 in Macedonia, 65,700 in Montenegro and 32,500 in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Anwar's lawyers begin process of appealing

KUALA LUMPUR, Apr 26: Lawyers of jailed politician, Anwar Ibrahim, Monday began the process of appealing the harsh six-year sentence against their client, one of the lawyers said, reports AP.

The first step toward challenging the April 14 verdict by filing a notice of appeal to the court registry would be taken on Monday, said Sankaran Nair. A date for filing the appeal would be set after the court responds to the notice.

Anwar was convicted on four counts of abuse of power to cover up allegations of sodomy and adultery.

The High Court is likely to decide Tuesday whether the sacked deputy prime minister will be tried soon for five more charges of sodomy, lawyers said. Anwar also faces another charge of corruption.

Anwar's brother was charged Friday with two counts of sodomy, indicating that Malaysia may proceed with sodomy charges against Anwar himself.

Sukma Dermawan was charged with one count of assisting Anwar in an act of sodomy against Anwar's former driver and one count of sodomy on the driver. If convicted, Sukma could face up to 20 years in prison. His testimony against Anwar's trial on the illegal sex charges could be crucial.



British Prime Minister Tony Blair (R), US President Bill Clinton (2nd-R) and Italian Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema (L) listen to Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok (2nd-L) Sunday during a meeting of the "Third Way: Progressive Governance for the 21st Century" in Washington. The leaders went straight to the meeting following the conclusion of the NATO 50 Summit in Washington. — AFP photo

'Violence may escalate if E Timor vote postponed'

NUSA DUA, Indonesia, Apr 26: Australia's foreign minister Monday warned that violence could escalate in East Timor if a UN-supervised vote on the future of the former Portuguese territory, planned for July, is postponed because of fighting between pro and anti-independence forces, reports AP.

Speaking on the eve of talks between Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Indonesian President BJ Habibie on the resort island of Bali, Alexander Downer cautioned, however, that proper preparations must be in place before the vote can be held.

Procedures for the ballot are now the subject of negotiations at the United Nations between Portugal and Indonesia, which invaded East Timor in 1975.

Under the plan, East Timor's people are to vote either for or against an offer by Indonesia to grant autonomy to the half-island territory.

Habibie has said that if they reject the offer, East Timor can become totally independent.

That prospect has triggered bloody fighting among pro and anti-independence groups as well as the Indonesian military.

Dozens have been killed in recent weeks. UN officials have warned that the ballot might have to be postponed.

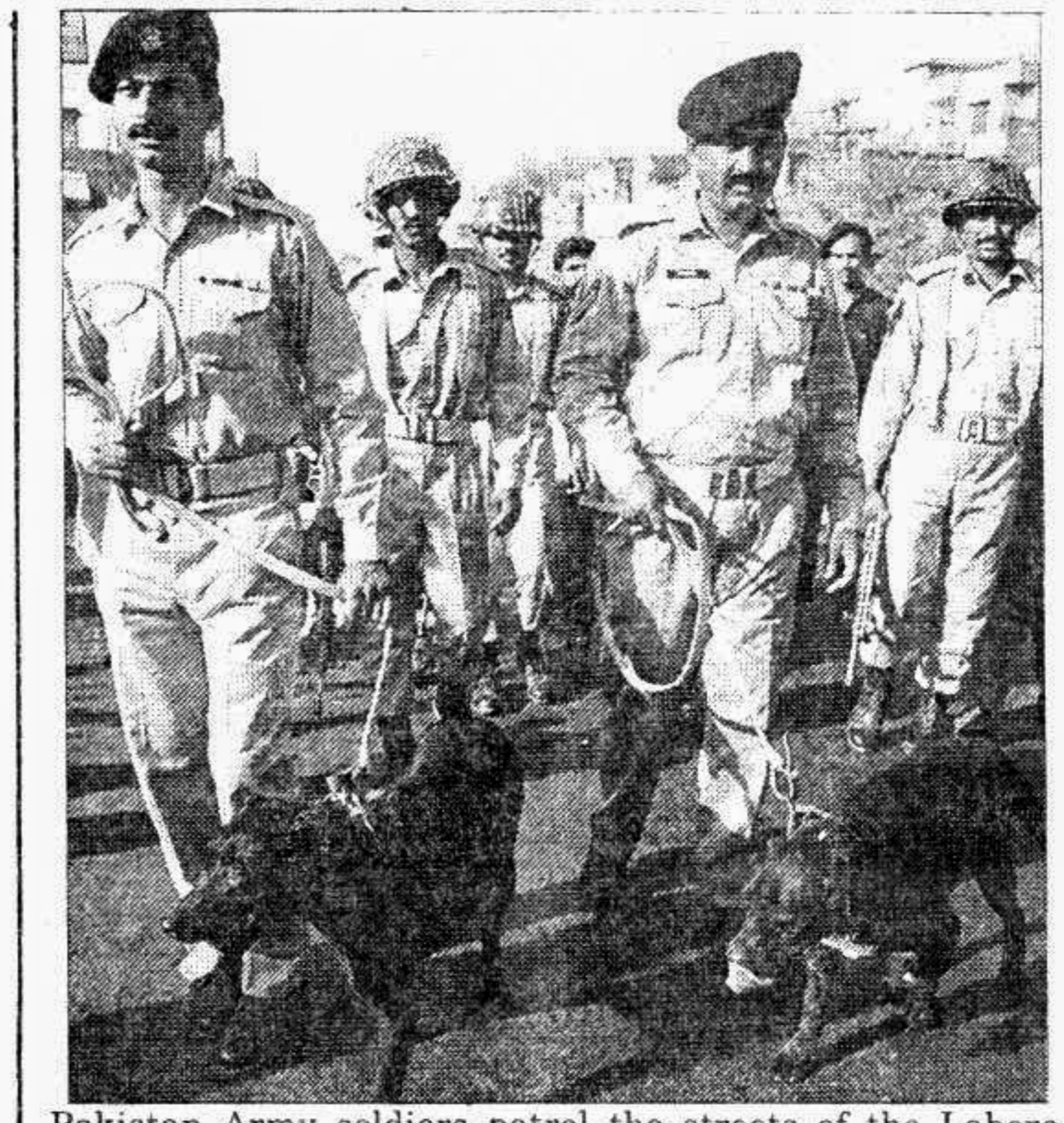
"The Indonesians and the Portuguese and the United Nations and Australia would like to see the vote taken sooner rather than later," Downer said.

"I think if the vote is put off for too long then you run the risk of there being an escalation of violence. If the vote is (held) too quickly, it won't be possible to put together the mechanisms to make sure the vote is a fair and open process."

Pro-independence groups predict the vast majority of East Timor's people will vote to break away.

However, anti-independence militia groups, some already accused of atrocities, have vowed they will fight to remain part of Indonesia, which annexed East Timor as its 27th province in 1976. Independence activists have accused the Indonesian military of arming and training militiamen in a bid to scuttle the vote through violence and intimidation.

The army has rejected the charge.



Pakistan Army soldiers patrol the streets of the Lahore city with specially trained dogs as part of a security alert for Moharram religious rites in the country on Sunday. Security beefed up in all major cities of the country for fear of sectarian violence between Shi'ite and Sunni Muslim communities. — AFP photo

Declaration of Palestinian state May 4 PLO central council meets today for decision

GAZA CITY, Apr 26: The PLO central council meets here Tuesday to decide whether to declare a Palestinian state on May 4, when the five-year interim Oslo peace accords expire, or bow to international pressure to delay the move, reports AP.

It is a delicate choice for the 124-member council and its chairman, the ailing Yasser Arafat. For many Palestinians the symbolism of announcing their own state after decades of Israeli occupation is overwhelming, no matter what the circumstances.

For others, more conscious of the balance of military and economic power which greatly favours Israel, realpolitik prevails.

Under the Oslo accords, so-called final status issues — such as the return of Palestinian refugees, the status of occupied east Jerusalem and the final borders of Israel and a Palestinian state — were supposed to have been settled by May.

But the vision of the original architects of the Oslo process, Arafat, slain Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and former Labour Party leader Shimon Peres, has come to very little.

Arafat currently has total control over just 10 per cent of the West Bank and 60 per cent of

the Gaza Strip. The Palestinians remain financially dependent on the much larger Israeli economy and on welfare payments from international donors.

Militarily, Arafat's 30,000 lightly-armed policemen represent only a modest threat to the Israeli army.

But Arafat sold the Oslo peace process to ordinary Palestinians, involving recognition of Israel and an end to the successful popular uprising or intifada against Israeli occupation, by telling them that at the end of the interim period they would have their own state.

On Sunday he came under renewed pressure from all member factions of the PLO to stick to that commitment.

And one of his most senior advisors, Speaker of the Palestinian legislature Ahmed Qorei, went on the record two weeks ago explicitly calling for the declaration of a state on May 4.

Arafat has lately embarked on a mammoth tour of world capitals ostensibly in order to garner support for a statehood declaration.

But he has received little from the countries he has visited. Most governments, including the United States, Russia, The European Union, and even close allies Egypt and Jordan, have urged Arafat to put off

declaring a state. They argue that a Palestinian state is not viable under current circumstances and that any declaration would play straight into the hands of Netanyahu, currently fighting for his political survival in a tough election campaign.

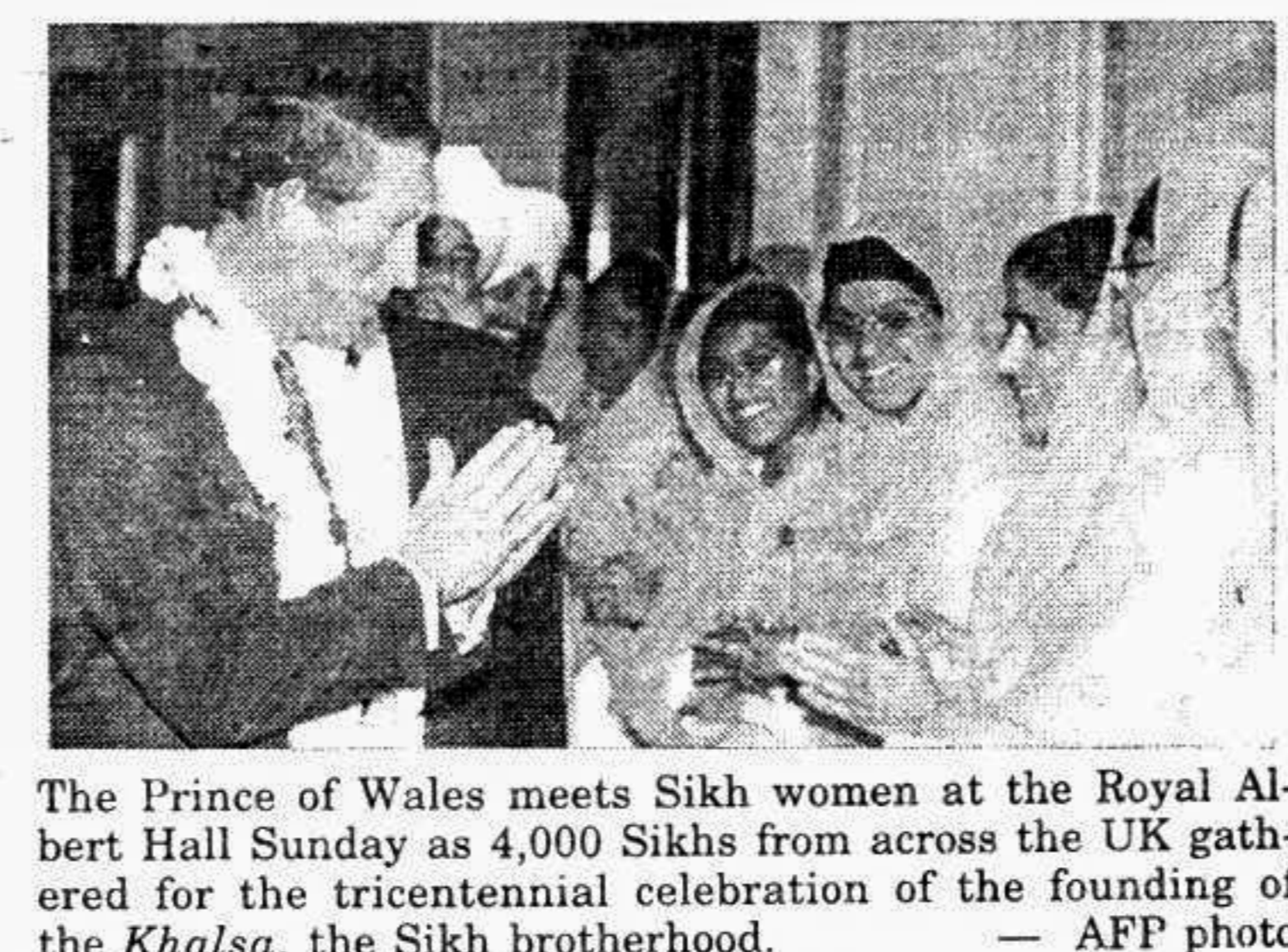
With the first round of voting in Israeli elections due on May 17 and a likely run-off for the post of prime minister due on June 1, Netanyahu trails Labour opposition leader Ehud Barak in the polls by only a few points.

The fear is that, if Arafat announces a state, Netanyahu will play the security card which was largely responsible for getting him elected in 1996 and the peace process will remain in its current unhappy state.

Many analysts and diplomats, noting a softening in the fortunes used by Palestinian leaders, think that Arafat and the central council will not declare a state.

But Palestinian leaders claim to have scored at least one victory in promoting worldwide acceptance of a future Palestinian state.

"The issue is not any more if there will be a Palestinian state but when," the top PLO official in Jerusalem, Faisal Hussein, said Sunday.



The Prince of Wales meets Sikh women at the Royal Albert Hall Sunday as 4,000 Sikhs from across the UK gathered for the tricentennial celebration of the founding of the Khalsa, the Sikh brotherhood. — AFP photo

Rebels reject Manila's offer to resume talks

MANILA, Apr 26: Philippine Communist rebels rejected an offer by President Joseph Estrada on Monday to resume peace negotiations following the guerrillas' release of the last of five military and police hostages, reports AP.

Estrada said the government is willing to accept an offer by Manila's Catholic archbishop, Jaime Cardinal Sin, to hold the talks at his Manila residence.

"We're all set. We are ready if they are ready," Estrada told reporters. Estrada suspended the peace talks in February after the

rebels abducted several police and military officers, including an army general.

But a rebel leader said new conditions set by Estrada, such as holding the negotiations in the Philippines and concluding them this year, were unacceptable.

Luis Jalandoni, chief negotiator for the Marxist umbrella group, the National Democratic Front, said the conditions were designed to scuttle the peace talks and legitimise subsequent military offensives against the rebels.

Charles hails contribution of Sikhs in UK

LONDON, Apr 26: Prince Charles paid tribute Sunday to the Sikh religion and culture and its contribution to British life, reports AP.

Sikh values have a universal appeal, said the prince, speaking at celebrations marking the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Sikh religion.

"I want to congratulate you on the anniversary and to say both how very much I value your contribution, both as a community and as individuals, to the life of this country and how delighted I am to see that this contribution is increasingly being recognised," he said to an audience of more than 4,000 Sikhs gathered at London's Royal Albert Hall.

He was applauded as he spoke a traditional greeting in Punjabi.

"This is only one of many celebrations taking place, from Glasgow to the House of Commons, and in the Midlands, where so many Sikhs live," said Charles, wearing a garland of yellow flowers presented to him by six-year-old Simran Singh.

BRIEFLY

New Malaysian king sworn in: Sultan Salahuddin of Selangor was sworn in Monday as Malaysia's 11th king under a five-year rotational system dating back to independence in 1957. AFP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

The 72-year-old Sultan took his oath of office in a nationally-televised ceremony at the National Palace in Kuala Lumpur. At the same time, Sultan Mizan of the eastern state of Terengganu was named to succeed the Sultan of Selangor as deputy head of state. Thousands of schoolchildren and other onlookers earlier lined the streets of Kuala Lumpur, waving Malaysian flags as the royal motorcade led by a maroon Rolls Royce made its way to Parliament House for a welcoming ceremony.

4 drown as boat capsizes in Vietnam: Four people drowned in southern Vietnam after their small boat capsized, local police said Monday. AP says from Hanoi.

Two other passengers managed to swim to shore on the Tram river in Dong Nai province last Wednesday, police said. One body was recovered the same day; the other three on Thursday. Police blamed overcrowding on the boat.

Tornado kills 3 in China: A tornado destroyed more than 5,000 houses and killed at least three people in China's southern province of Hunan, a local official said yesterday. Reuters reports from Beijing.

The tornado ravaged Anxiang county for an hour on Friday evening, injuring 197 people, the official said. About 6,000 hectares (14,800 acres) of rice, 13,000 hectares of rape, and 3,000 hectares of cotton were affected, he told Reuters from Anxiang. A total of 5,100 houses were destroyed.

Japan inches closer to approving security guidelines with US

TOKYO, Apr 26: North Korean ballistic missiles. A military buildup in China. Economic crisis and social unrest, reports AP.

After years of talks and a month of legislative debate, Japan is about to deliver its answer to growing security threats in Asia: new defence guidelines to tighten Tokyo's military alliance with the United States.

A legislative committee was scheduled to approve most of the guideline package late Monday, and the powerful lower house of Parliament was to vote on Tuesday. The upper house will take a largely symbolic vote in May.

The moves come just in time for Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, who was eager to wrap up the security agreement before leaving on Thursday for a May 3 summit with President Clinton in the United States.

The government is very pleased," Kyoto News agency quoted Obuchi as saying of a compromise struck Sunday night that paved the way for approval of the pact.

The new guidelines, the first

update of the US-Japan military alliance since 1978, expand the role that Japanese forces will play in assisting US fighters in Asia.

The pact will give America access to Japanese logistical expertise and civilian installations for defense of Japan and — for the first time — in support of US missions in the region.

The Japanese will help with technical support, search and rescue, minesweeping and evacuations, while the United States will continue the role of providing military hardware and fighting forces.

But the guideline package now moving through Parliament is missing an important chunk: provisions allowing Japanese forces to inspect foreign ships to enforce economic sanctions.

That measure will be dealt with in separate legislation as part of an agreement struck between the ruling Liberal Democrats, the Liberals and the smaller New Komeito party to win votes for most of the package.



Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi answers a question during a final session on a set of three defence bills aimed at providing rear-area logistic support for the US forces in emergencies in areas surrounding Japan at the House of Representatives in the National Diet Monday in Tokyo. — AFP photo