

Chernobyl virus strikes thousands of computers in Asia, ME

NEW YORK, Apr 28: The Chernobyl computer virus struck hundreds of thousands of computers in Asia and the Middle East, with Turkey and South Korea each reporting 300,000 computers infected. Home users in the United States, including college students nearing term-paper deadlines, also were affected, reports AP.

The virus, which is believed to have originated in Taiwan and attacks Windows '95 and Windows '98 computers, was designed to strike on April 26, the 13th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

In affected computers, the virus attempts to erase the hard-drive and write gibberish into the computer's system settings, called its BIOS, which would prevent the machine from being restarted.

Bill Pollak, a spokesman for the Computer Emergency Response Team at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, said Tuesday a "large number" of home users were affected in the United States after people returned home Monday night and turned on their computers.

He declined to estimate how many computers were affected, but said CERT received many e-mail reports on the virus.

About 100 computers belonging to Princeton students were

wiped out, less than two weeks before term papers were due, university officials said.

But the biggest damage was Asia and the Middle East, where virus protection isn't considered as important and there is a large pool of pirated software, said Dan Takata, senior engineer at Data Fellows, a software company that develops the F-Secure Antivirus software.

The virus infected some computers at an airport in Izmir, on Turkey's Aegean coast; erased computer memories at a military academy in the capital, Ankara; crashed computers at the state-run radio and television station; and slowed down transactions at a number of banks, Turkey's Radikal newspaper reported Tuesday.

South Korean officials also reported about 300,000 computers were hit in government offices, schools and businesses.

"We have been careless and lacked an understanding of this virus," said Vice Information and Communications Minister Ahn Byung-yop.

Ahn estimated the computer bug has hit nearly 4 per cent of computers in South Korea. Hundreds of computers in the United Arab Emirates were affected, including some at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the English-language Khaleej Times reported. The

Gulf News daily reported that up to 10 per cent of all computer users in the Emirates were affected.

Businesses, banks and publishing houses in India were shut down Monday and information worth millions of dollars was lost, the Indian Express newspaper reported. At least 10,000 Indian computer owners reported being affected by the virus.

In Bangladesh, the virus struck at least 10,000 computers. "This was the country's worst computer disaster," Ahmed Hasan, general secretary of the Computer Society, said by telephone.

At least 7,600 computers were damaged by the virus in China, state-run media reported. Liu Xu, General Manager of Beijing-based Ruixin Company, China's biggest anti-virus hi-tech company, estimated that 100,000 computers had been affected.

"All of our telephones have been busy since yesterday, jammed by computer users from various sectors and all the provinces," Liu said.

About 2,000 computers in Norway were affected, according to the Aftenposten daily newspaper. "This is definitely the worst virus attack ever," said Jan Kristensen, director of Norman ASA, Norway's largest virus-fighting company.

Russia, China block UNSC from issuing statement on Kosovo crisis

'Yslavia ready to compromise'

MOSCOW, Apr 28: Yugoslavia is ready to compromise to find a political solution to the Kosovo crisis, Russia's top Balkan envoy said Tuesday, reports AP.

"We told the Americans that Yugoslavia is ready to compromise," the envoy, Viktor Chernomyrdin, said after meeting US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott.

Speaking on Russia's RTR television, he said Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic "has agreed to an international presence... under UN leadership, with nations which are approved by Yugoslavia, and with the participation of Russia."

He acknowledged that the idea "will not completely satisfy" the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), now in its fifth week of air strikes against Milosevic's regime.

"But we have to negotiate," Chernomyrdin said.

Talbott, speaking earlier, did not refer to any possible compromise by Belgrade, which is dead-set against any NATO deployment in Kosovo.

NATO says it will keep on bombing Yugoslav targets until Milosevic pulls his security forces out of Kosovo and lets ethnic Albanian refugees return under NATO protection.

to impose an oil blockade on Yugoslavia.

Reuter adds from UN: Russia and China blocked the UN Security Council on Tuesday from issuing a strong statement on the Kosovo refugee crisis, suggesting the United Nations was still politically hamstrung over the conflict, diplomats said.

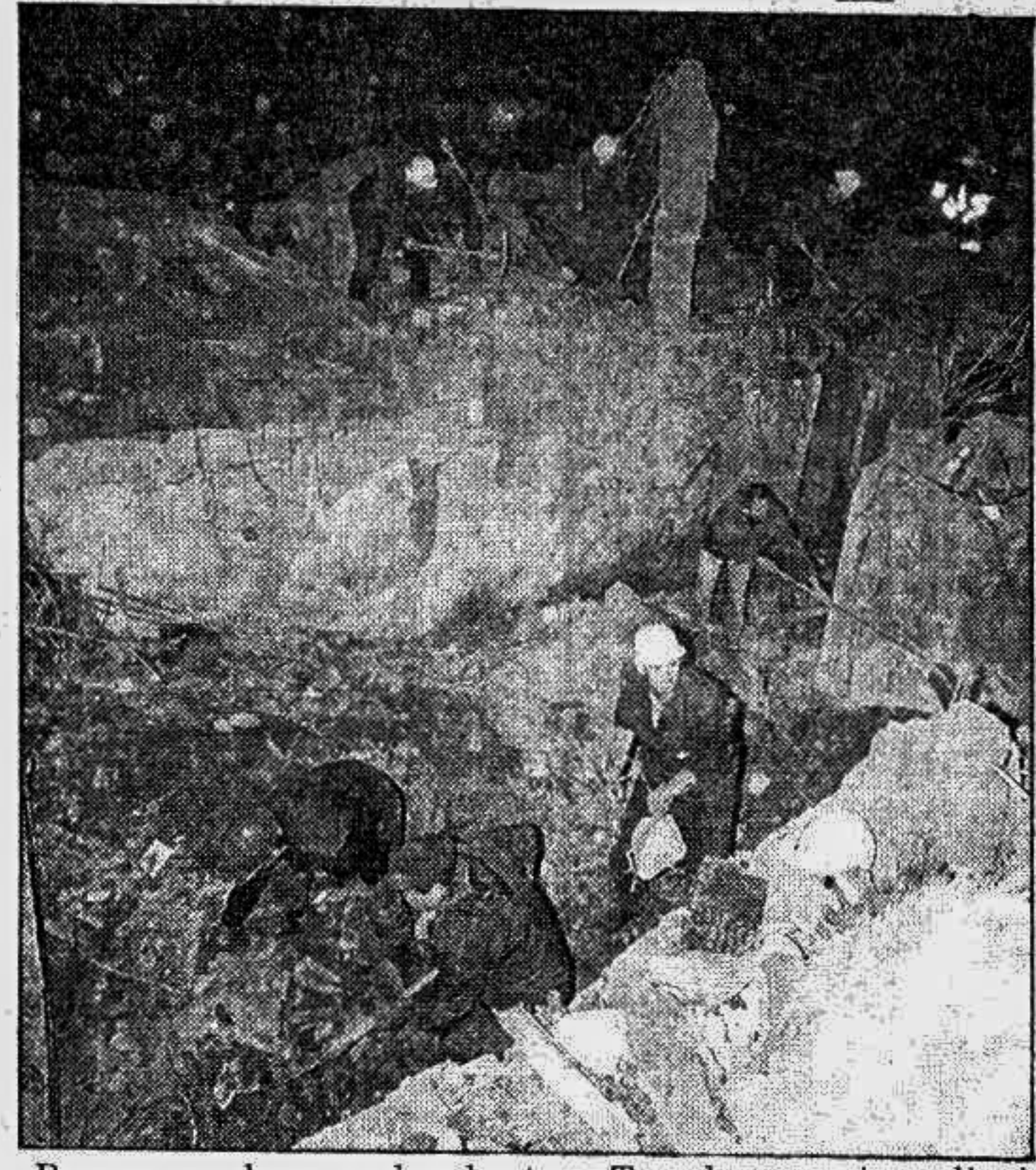
"It was extremely difficult to reach even a modest statement," Slovenia's ambassador Danilo Turk told reporters after a closed door session of the 15-member council.

Two permanent members of the Security Council continue to diminish the level of the humanitarian tragedy in Kosovo and bring all kinds of extraneous elements into the picture," he said, in reference to Russia and China, both of whom strongly object to the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia.

Meanwhile, NATO planes bombed targets in the greater Belgrade area and hit a fuel dump in central Serbia on the 35th night of strikes against Yugoslavia, Serb media and residents said today.

In stormy weather over Belgrade, Yugoslavia's air defences were engaged as explosions rocked the suburbs of Topcider, Senjak, Resnik and Rakovica, residents said. The blasts followed an air raid alert at 1:12 am (2312 GMT).

Residents said thick smoke gushed from Topcider and



Rescue workers and volunteers Tuesday evening, dig in ruins of civilians' houses in Surdulica (some 250 kms south-east of Belgrade) as they search for victims of a NATO air raid earlier Tuesday. So far 16 victims, among them 12 children, were recovered from the ruins. — AFP photo

Resnik. NATO planes attacked a fuel dump of state oil company Jugopetrol near the central Serbian town of Pozega early today, the Yugoslav state news agency Tanjug and Studio B city radio reported. There were no immediate reports of damage.

NATO missiles appeared to have hit ordinary homes in Surdulica town in southeast Serbia on Tuesday and officials say at least 16 townspeople, mostly women and children, died.

"We take every possible precaution to prevent harm to civilians but unfortunately we cannot completely exclude the possibility of harm to civilians or to civilian property during a conflict such as this one."

NATO spokesman in Brussels said.

AP adds from London: The United Nations chief war crimes prosecutor said any peace settlement reached over Kosovo should not include immunity from prosecution for Serb atrocities against ethnic Albanians.

Judge Louise Arbour, speaking on the British Broadcasting Corp.'s "panorama" television programme to be aired Wednesday night, said the UN will work to ensure that amnesty for accused war criminals does not become "currency" in settlement talks.



Pakistani elite police forces check a rickshaw and its passengers during religious rites of the Shi'ite Muslim in Multan city in the month of holy Moharram Tuesday. Thousands of Muslims observed Ashura throughout the country Tuesday to commemorate the seventh century martyrdom of Imam Hussain, grandson of holy Prophet Mohammad. — AFP photo

Contaminated milk leaves 170 unconscious in Multan

MULTAN, Apr 28: Shi'ite Muslim devotees drank contaminated milk causing 170 people to faint and leaving 35 people in hospital in serious condition, said police Wednesday, reports AP.

The case took responsibility for poisoning the milk, which was distributed free of cost to mourning Shi'ite Muslims in Jaranwala Tuesday, some 60 kilometres (36 miles) from Lahore, the provincial capital of Punjab.

The milk was among the beverages and food being served to Shi'ite Muslims who were marching through the streets beating themselves to mourn the death of 400 years ago of Imam Hussein, the grandson of Islam's Holy Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (SM).

Police have not released much details about the poisoning. It's not clear whether it was intentional or accidental.

Security in this Islamic nation has been tight to prevent violence between radical Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims during the traditional mourning processions by Shi'ite Muslims throughout the country.

Economy to be chief victim of political uncertainty Vajpayee blasts opposition for toppling his govt

NEW DELHI, Apr 28: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee lashed out at opposition parties today for toppling his coalition government and plunging the country into its third election in as many years, reports Reuters.

The caretaker prime minister said in a speech to a national conference of the Confederation of Indian Industry that although India's economic fundamentals were strong, the economy would be the chief victim of the political uncertainty.

"The country has journeyed through a period of unavoidable and unnecessary turmoil in the past few weeks," he said.

"Irresponsible and unprincipled politics has played tricks with the people's mandate. The cynical game of numbers has scored over the basic norms of democracy."

Vajpayee's 13-month-old coalition government was toppled 11 days ago when opposition parties joined hands to defeat it in a parliamentary confidence motion.

However, the opposition parties were subsequently unable to put together a majority for a new government. That led to the dissolution of the lower house of parliament and started the countdown to elections, which must be held within six months.

"I would not have minded if those who wanted our government to go were able to put together a stable, viable alternative. Alas, the country could not get any kind of alternative government."

8 Muslim militants get life term for bombing in Jordan

AMMAN, Apr 28: A military court on Tuesday sentenced eight Muslim militants to life imprisonment for a series of bombings that shook Jordan last year, reports AP.

The court sentenced a ninth militant to 15 years in jail, and acquitted four defendants.

Israeli, US defence ministers hold security talks

WASHINGTON, Apr 28: Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Arens briefed US Defence Secretary William Cohen Tuesday on Lebanon and expressed hope that Syria would respond to appeals to "put the lid on the situation," reports AFP.

Arens and Cohen also discussed the situation in Jordan, the Middle East peace process, missile defence cooperation and Kosovo.

"We in Israel are completely supportive of the position of the United States and of the actions taken by the United States and the NATO forces in the area," Arens said at a joint press conference.

He added that Israel was "prepared to be of whatever assistance we can if there is anything that we can do in terms of supply of any kind of hardware that might be useful at this time."

Arens expressed support for US efforts to prevent the flow of missile and Iran technologies from the Russia to Iran.

For his part, Cohen said they discussed the importance of supporting Jordan's security and economic development. He also said they discussed Israel's plans to upgrade its military.

BRIEFLY

Mandela arrives in Moscow: South African President Nelson Mandela, arrived in Moscow on Wednesday for a visit aimed at boosting economic ties, particularly in mining and nuclear power, AP reports from Moscow.

Mandela, in Moscow until Friday, was accompanied by Foreign Minister Alfred Nzo and South African business leaders — among them representatives of the De Beers diamond cartel. De Beers has been in talks with its Russian partners for several months to develop untouched diamond deposits near the Arctic Ocean port of Arkhangelsk.

Unions call strike in Peru: Peru's biggest union made a final call Tuesday for a nationwide strike today against President Alberto Fujimori's government in what may be one of the country's biggest social protests in years, Reuters reports from Lima.

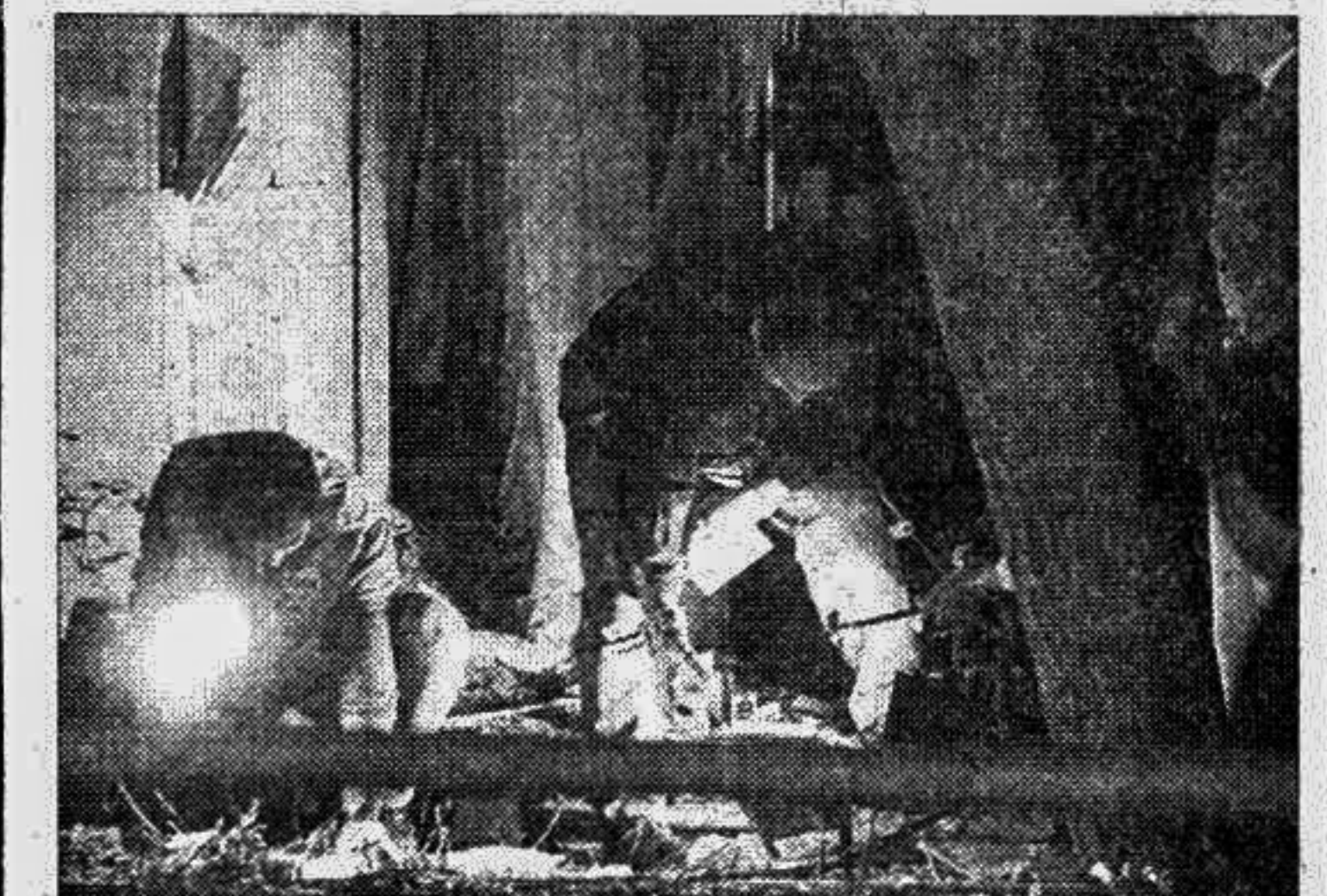
The union, which largely covers public sector, transport and construction employees, expected hundreds of thousands of workers to protest the government's economic policies and a possible reelection bid by Fujimori.

Prisoners on hunger strike in Bolivia: More than 1,000 prisoners in four Bolivian cities were on hunger strike on Tuesday to protest delays in processing their court cases, local radio and television reported, Reuters reports from La Paz.

The protest began five days ago in the central Bolivian city of Cochabamba, where 810 men and 255 women, seven of them pregnant, stopped eating. Some prisoners have had themselves crucified by other inmates and several have sown up their lips in the protest, according to television reports.

Italian presidential polls on May 13: Voting by a special 1,010-member panel to elect a new Italian president will begin on May 13, Parliament Speaker Luciano Violante announced Tuesday, AFP reports from Rome.

The panel of grand electors — 628 deputies, 324 senators and 58 representatives of Italy's 20 regions — will convene at Montecitorio, the seat of the lower house of parliament, to elect a successor to incumbent Oscar Luigi Scalfaro. For the next president to be elected, he or she must garner two thirds of the votes, or 674 in the first three rounds of voting. If a fourth round is necessary the simple majority, or 506 votes is enough.



Greek anti-terrorist police secure evidence during investigation outside the Athens Intercontinental Hotel, after an explosive device went off here late Tuesday, leaving one woman dead and one man injured. An anonymous caller, claiming to speak for the Greek terrorist group "Revolutionary Cells", had warned three Greek media about 15 minutes earlier that a bomb would explode outside the hotel. — AFPphoto

Pak govt orders establishment of anti-terrorist courts

ISLAMABAD, Apr 28: Anti-terrorist courts, with the job of handing out quick justice, have been established in Pakistan through a presidential ordinance, the News Network International news agency reported Wednesday, say AP.

The anti-terrorist courts are to replace military courts established last year by the government, but ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif established military courts to try to curb runaway lawlessness, particularly in Pakistan's southern Sindh province where ethnically motivated violence has terrorised the provincial capital of Karachi.

The courts, which were run by the army, were to conclude the case within two weeks. In Pakistan court cases can take as long as one year or more.

Human rights organisations and opposition groups condemned the military courts as unconstitutional. Several people were sentenced to hang by the courts and three hangings were carried out before the

Supreme Court outlawed the courts.

In the ordinance announced late on Tuesday, the government has ordered the provincial governments to set up the anti-terrorist courts.

These courts will be empowered to try cases ranging from murder, to extortion to kidnapping. The ordinance does not specify the length of time allowed for each case before the anti-terrorist court.

The ordinance adds a new offense called "creation of civil commotion."

This means anyone who calls an "illegal" strike or work slowdown. This could seriously affect opposition protests which usually take on the form of strikes or work slowdowns.

As well the new anti-terrorist courts will hear cases against anyone vandalising property, firing randomly to create panic or publishing material that propagates hate or attacks on specific groups.

Anyone found guilty of causing "civil commotion" can go to jail for seven years.

Anwar's wife in Manila to seek support

MANILA, Apr 28: The wife of jailed Malaysian dissident leader Anwar Ibrahim arrived in Manila Wednesday to seek support for her husband and meet with President Joseph Estrada, in a visit that has already strained ties between the two countries, reports AP.

Ignoring protests from Malaysia, Estrada said he would allow Azizah Ismail to visit because the Philippines is a democratic country.

On Tuesday, Malaysian officials summoned the Philippine ambassador in Kuala Lumpur to convey their displeasure over the visit.

Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar said his government views any opportunity given to Azizah to "pursue her political agenda" as an attempt to interfere in its internal affairs.

Estrada responded that Azizah was invited as a personal guest of former President Corason Aquino and her trip should not be viewed as Philippine interference. "We have to prove to them that we are a free country. Ev-

erybody is welcome here," Estrada said Tuesday.

"This is completely a private matter, that's very, very clear," Estrada's executive secretary, Ronaldo Zamora, said Wednesday.

Last year, Estrada was the first foreign leader to publicly criticise the jailing of Anwar, a first foreign leader to publicly criticise the jailing of Anwar, a former deputy prime minister. Philippine ties with Malaysia were strained when Estrada openly expressed support for Anwar and considered boycotting an international forum in Malaysia to protest the arrest.

When he later decided to attend the forum, Estrada met Anwar's wife, further displeasing protesters against Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's government.

Anwar was found guilty on four charges of corruption on April 14 and sentenced to six years in prison, triggering a protest against Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's government.

Train hits wedding party bus in UP: 43 killed

NEW DELHI, Apr 28: A train ramed into a crowded bus carrying a wedding party in northern India on Tuesday, killing at least 43 people and injuring 50 more, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said, reports AFP, AP.

Police said 43 bodies had so far been recovered from the wreckage and rescue operations were continuing, although hampered by darkness, PTI reported.

The accident occurred at 10:21 pm (1451 GMT) when the Avadh-Assam Express collided with the bus at an unmanned level crossing in Bahraich district, 80 km north of Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh state.

The bus was carrying a large party of people to a wedding ceremony.

At least 32 of the injured were rushed to nearby hospitals, where the condition of many was described as "serious". Initial reports had said none of the train passengers were hurt but PTI said it was now thought that at least some of the injured had been travelling on the train.

"The engine of the train is very badly damaged but we don't know yet if anyone in the train is injured," the official said on

customary condition of anonymity.

The area is 440 km south-east of India's capital New Delhi.

The Avadh-Assam Express was headed from New Delhi to the northeastern town of Gauhati, capital of the far-flung

hilly state of Assam. The site of the accident is located close to India's densely forested border with Nepal.

The accident occurred at a railroad crossing where there was no gate to regulate traffic, officials said.

Palestinians likely to delay declaration

GAZA CITY, Apr 28: Palestinian leaders meeting here formed a committee on Wednesday to draw up a draft statement on the question of Palestinian independence, officials said, reports AFP.

The PLO central council, which has been meeting in Gaza City since Tuesday to discuss a proclamation of independence, asked the members of the committee to submit a draft statement later Wednesday, they said.

"The committee will submit its report this evening," said Assaad Abdelrahman, a member of the PLO executive committee. "I think we'll be in a po-

sition to make a decision then."

Another participant in the closed-door talks, Imad Faluji, raised the possibility, however, that the meeting could go on into Thursday.

Several members of the PLO central council predicted that the delegates would agree not to go ahead with plans to declare an independent state on May 4, when peace accords with Israel expire.

Instead the council, the second-highest Palestinian decision-making body, would simply suspend its debate until after Israeli general elections which begin on May 17.



Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi speaks to reporters during a news conference at the prime minister's official residence in Tokyo Wednesday. Obuchi leaves for the US today for a three-city tour that will culminate in a summit with US President Bill Clinton in Washington on May 3. — AFP photo

Hotel suite reserved for Clinton gutted

COLOGNE, Apr 28: Fire early Wednesday gutted a hotel suite reserved for US President Bill Clinton during a June summit of world leaders, officials said, reports AP.

The occupant of the Cologne Hyatt's sixth-floor presidential suite was not injured, but two other guests suffered slight smoke inhalation, the fire department said.

Authorities said the cause of the fire was under investigation. There was no immediate damage estimate.

"Now our top priority is to restore the presidential suite," a hotel spokesman said.

Clinton is meeting the leaders of six other leading industrial nations and Russia in Cologne on June 18-20.

Mandela takes last salute as C-in-C

UMTATA, South Africa, Apr 28: President Nelson Mandela took his last salute as commander-in-chief of South Africa's armed forces on Tuesday at a parade bracketed by police action to keep protesters at bay, reports Reuters.



US Rep. Carolyn McCarthy, D-NY, (at podium), speaks as US President Bill Clinton (L) and First Lady Hillary Clinton (C) look on Tuesday during an event where President Clinton made a statement on crime legislation at the White House in Washington. Before she was in Congress, McCarthy's husband was killed and her son was seriously wounded in a shooting on a train in New York. Clinton announced new legislation that will ban juvenile possession of semi-automatic assault rifles, require checks for the purchase of explosives, and help law enforcement trace more crime guns to their source. — AFP photo