



Palestinian President Yasser Arafat (C) stands between PLO Council Speaker Salim Zaanan (L) and Ahmed Qurei (R), the President of the Palestinian Central Council, Thursday in Gaza City, as they announce that Palestinian leaders agreed to delay a decision on unilaterally declaring independence until June, passing over a symbolic May 4 target date for statehood. —AFP photo

Declaration of Palestinian state

PLO delays decision

GAZA CITY, Apr 29: Defusing a potentially explosive issue, the Palestinian leadership voted overwhelmingly Thursday to delay a decision on statehood until after Israel's May 17 election, report AP.

The vote came on the third day of debate by the PLO's Central Council on whether to declare statehood May 4 — the date the Palestinians say marks the end of the five-year autonomy period provided for in the interim Oslo peace accords — or extend peace talks with Israel.

prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, of fodder for his campaign. Netanyahu, who says he is the only candidate able to stand up to Palestinian demands, made Arafat's initial pledge to declare statehood on May 4 a key campaign issue.

"We decided to give ourselves an open-ended session because we don't want to let any decision serve Netanyahu and the Israeli groups that are fighting peace," said Abdullah Frangi, the PLO's representative in Germany and a PCC member.

The council also said work on writing a draft constitution. The committee is to be headed by Ismat Abdel Maguid, the secretary general of the Arab League.

The council also authorized a smaller group, the 18-member PLO Executive Committee, to review letters of assurances Arafat has received from the European union and the United States.

Arafat had traversed the globe in recent weeks to drum up support for Palestinian independence.

The decision approved Thursday declares the current session of the Central Council open-ended and convenes another general meeting of all 124 members in June.

Israel's election is slated for May 17, with a possible runoff set for June 1.

In exchange for agreeing to delay a declaration of statehood, Arafat won EU backing for a Palestinian state within a year and the strongest expression of support yet for Palestinian self-determination from President Bill Clinton.

NATO bombs Milosevic's hometown

US House withholds support for airstrikes

BELGRADE, Apr 29: NATO pummeled targets Thursday in Belgrade and in Montenegro in its strongest attack yet on that small Yugoslav republic, and struck for the first time in President Slobodan Milosevic's hometown, reports AP.

Thousands more refugees fled Kosovo on foot and on tractors, giving accounts of a new killing spree by Serb paramilitary forces in the southwest of the province. UN aid officials suggested the latest explosions might be part of a "final push" to flush most of the remaining ethnic Albanians from the province.

Russian officials claimed to be making headway in efforts to find a peaceful solution as former prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin flew to Germany for talks. But UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who was due to meet later Thursday with top Russian leaders, cautioned against hopes for a settlement any time soon.

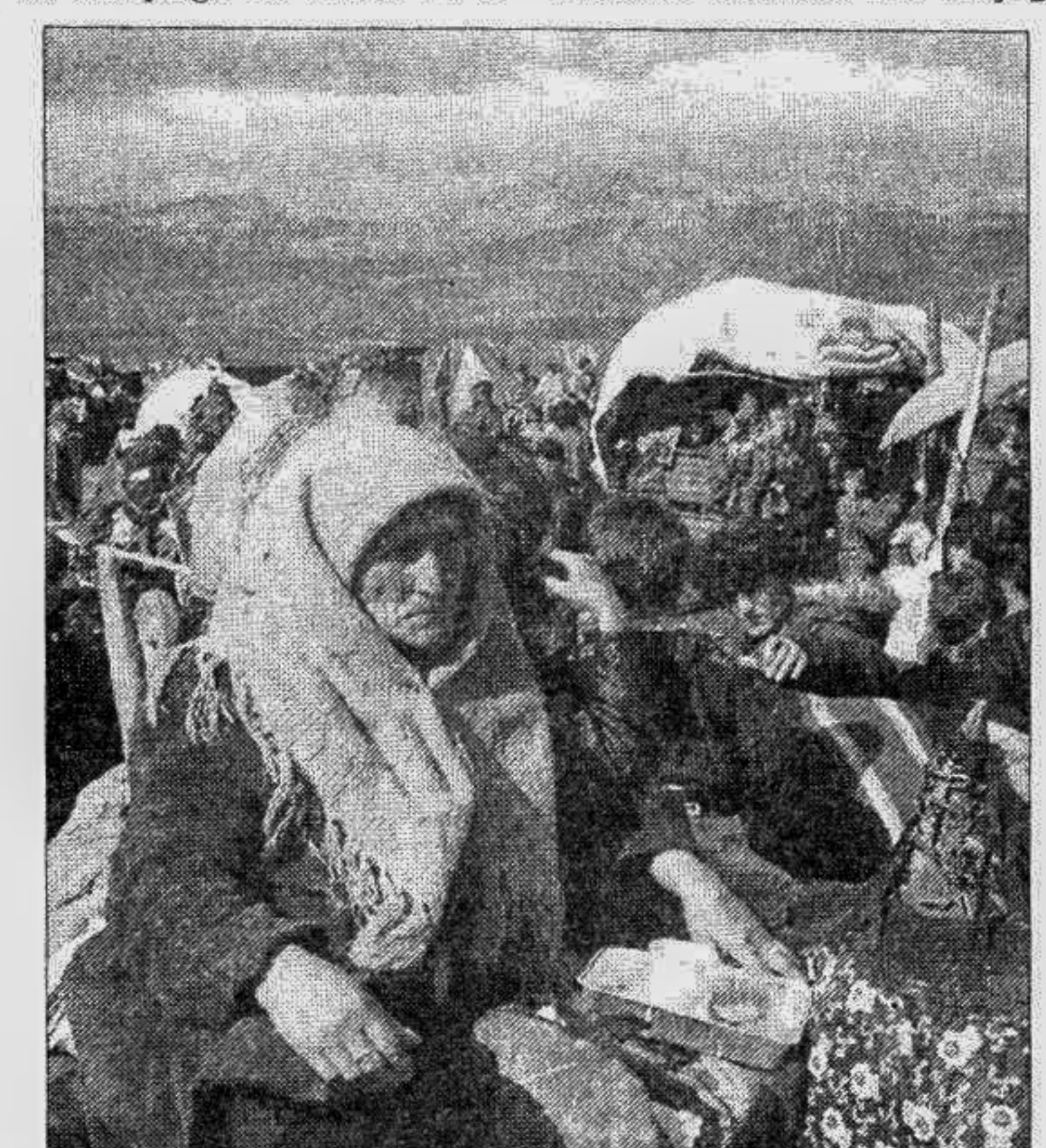
Strong explosions also shook Podgorica, the capital of Montenegro, and reports said more than 50 missiles rained down on the area around the city.

Tanjung described the attacks as the strongest "by NATO criminals" against Montenegro since the alliance launched its air campaign on March 24 to force Milosevic to accept a Western-dictated peace plan for Kosovo, a province of the main republic Serbia. The Montenap news agency said one woman was killed and three were injured in Wednesday attacks.

Belgrade's Studio B television said the Montenegrin coastal towns of Bar and Petrovac were also hit. Tanjung

also reported NATO jets struck the oil refinery in Novi Sad, Yugoslavia's second-largest city, and an oil storage depot in Pozega, 110 km south of Belgrade.

In neighbouring Bulgaria, President Petar Stoyanov sought an explanation from NATO on Thursday and urged citizens not to panic after a missile slammed into a suburb of the capital Sofia late Wednesday, damaging a house.



Kosovar refugees rest after crossing the Kosovo-Albanian border near Morina Wednesday. Thousands of Kosovar Albanians were arriving in Macedonia and Albania, expelled by Serbian ethnic cleansers who have emptied the once-autonomous Serbian province of more than half its 2 million Albanian-majority population in a campaign of atrocities and village burning. —AFP photo

NATO pressed its air campaign as alliance officials claimed to be detecting signs of growing discontent within Yugoslavia to Milosevic's confrontational policies.

On Wednesday, Yugoslav Prime Minister Momir Bulatovic fired a deputy premier who had suggested Belgrade was ready to accept key NATO demands for ending the crippling air campaign. Vuk Draskovic had also called on the government to "stop lying" to the Serbian people about prospects for defeating NATO.

Tanjung said Draskovic, a former Yugoslav opposition leader, was dismissed because of "public statements which were contrary to the government stands."

A NATO official speaking on condition of anonymity called the move "the first visible fracture" in the Yugoslav leadership. But the White House is facing its own political problems over the military confrontation.

The House first voted 249 to 180 to make Clinton obtain congressional approval before sending "ground elements" to Yugoslavia.

Then, in what was intended to be a largely symbolic vote, Democrats sought approval of a resolution to bestow after-the-fact blessings on the NATO bombing campaign. It failed in a 213-213 tie despite appeals by Clinton for the nation to speak "with a single voice."

More than 2,000 Kosovo refugees crossed the border into Albania on Wednesday and 4,000 arrived in Macedonia, including ethnic Albanians who said they had been expelled from other parts of Serbia.

"We may be seeing some sort of final push here," said Ron Redmond, a spokesman for the UN refugee agency.



US President Bill Clinton makes a statement to the press after meeting with members of Congress on the situation in Kosovo Wednesday at the White House in Washington DC. Clinton said he intends to intensify NATO air strikes in Yugoslavia. —AFP photo

Khmer executioner implicates leaders in genocide

PHNOM PENH, Apr 29: The Khmer Rouge's chief executioner has implicated surviving guerilla leaders in the systematic planning and execution of the "killing fields" genocide of up to two million Cambodians, reports AP.

In a magazine interview published today Kang Kek Ieu, alias "Duch," claimed military chief Ta Mok and ideologue Nuon Chea ordered torture and mass extermination in a brutal trial led by Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot. "The first was Pol Pot, the second was Nuon Chea, the third Ta Mok," he told the Hong Kong-based Far Eastern Economic Review.

"The decisions for the killings were made not by one man, not just Pol Pot but the whole central committee. Whoever was arrested must die. It was the rule of the party," he said in an interview in remote western Cambodia where he now preaches as a born-again Christian.

Reviled Khmer Rouge chief Pol Pot died in the Cambodian jungle in 1998 without ever facing justice.



President Boris Yeltsin (C) and South African President Nelson Mandela (L) watch as Yeltsin's wife Naina Yeltsin (2nd L) greets with flowers Mandela's daughter Zenani Mandela-Dlamini (R) during a welcoming ceremony at the Kremlin in Moscow, Thursday. Mandela arrived for a visit aimed at boosting economic ties. —AFP photo

Yeltsin signs decree to deploy tactical arms

MOSCOW, Apr 29: President Boris Yeltsin, at a top-secret meeting on Russia's nuclear arsenal, signed a decree today on committing Moscow to develop and deploy tactical weapons, Russian news agencies reported, says Reuter.

They quoted Vladimir Putin, the secretary of Yeltsin's advisory Security Council, as saying the president had also set out key tasks for the nuclear defence industry that included developing ways to simulate atomic tests on computers.

Yeltsin said in televised remarks at the start of the Security Council meeting that Russia's huge nuclear arsenal remained a key component of the country's defence strategy.

RIA news agency quoted Putin as saying Yeltsin had signed two decrees and a third document.

Opposition groups in Malaysia move toward coalition

KUALA LUMPUR, Apr 29: Groups opposed to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad are banding into a coalition with a single election manifesto, a newspaper reported Thursday, quoting opposition leaders, reports AP.

A new party launched recently by ousted Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's wife is in the final stages of talks with a small centrist opposition group, the Democratic Action Party, and the Islamic Fundamentalist Party Islam SeMalaysia, The Star said.

Marina Yusoff, vice president of the National Justice Party, which comprises Anwar's supporters, said a formal electoral pact would be announced within a month.

If such an alliance is formed, it could threaten Mahathir's chances in the next general election, which has to be held within one year.

It would also be the first time that the predominantly Chinese DAP would be allying itself with the PAS, which openly advocates an Islamic state.

Anwar's sacking and arrest last September unleashed widespread anger against Mahathir's 18-year-rule, bringing major opposition groups to a common platform in support of Anwar.

Off the Record

Iron Lady's illusion

LONDON: Margaret Thatcher started drinking heavily after she was ousted from office as prime minister and found it hard to accept the loss of power, according to one of her former MPs, reports AP.

George Walden, whose memoirs are being serialised in the Times, said she became very downcast by her ouster at the hands of Conservative MPs in 1990, 11 years after first leading the party to victory in general elections.

He claimed Thatcher "was a sad sight," having "not taken her loss of power well."

"From a distance she looked fine but close up, at cocktails of dinner, her mouth was pinched in a sort of purposeless determination, and her eyes had a faraway look, like an endlessly on the point of delivering her curtain speech."

"She was also drinking too much," Walden added. "In the old days she would put down a whisky soda of two in the evening, after her umpire-hour day; now she seemed to have had a little too much before dinner."

"There was no arguing with her any more, in fact it was impossible to talk to her."

He added: "The moment you said anything she would grip your arm and with a steadfast look, deliver herself of some pronouncement that sounded as if it had been borrowed from the archives."

"She had reached the point where she did not know she was doing it."



People stroll along beside carpets of tulip petals on a street in the Ginza shopping district in Tokyo Thursday. 1.25 million petals were used to make up 12 floral carpets on the "Greenery Day" national holiday, which marks the beginning of the Golden Week holiday. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Two smugglers to die in Vietnam: Two people were sentenced to death and six others to life in prison for their role in Vietnam's largest ever smuggling trial, a Ho Chi Minh City court official said yesterday, AFP reports from Hanoi.

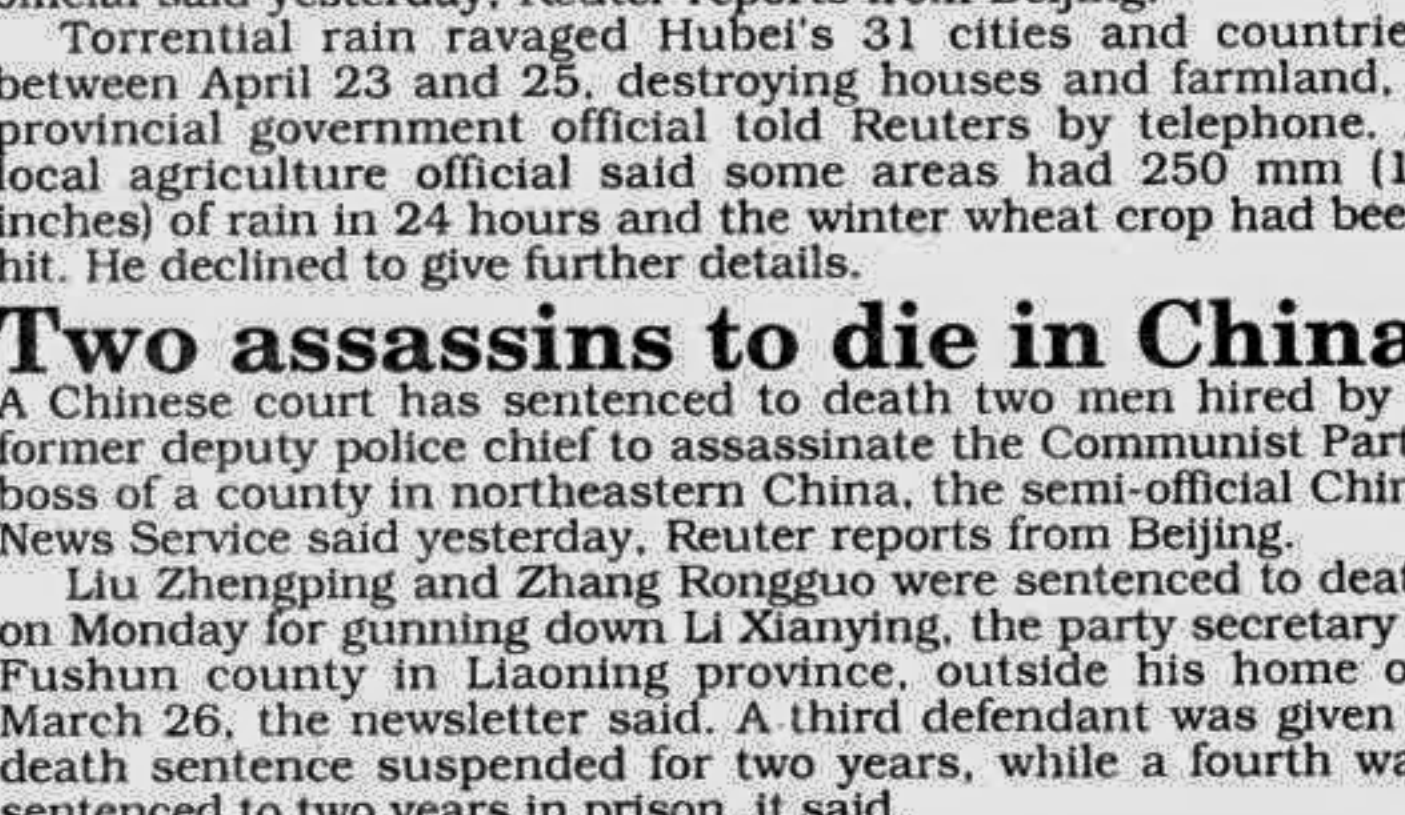
Sixty-year-old Tran Dam received the death sentence for masterminding an operation which smuggled in more than 900 billion dong (64 million dollars) worth of automobiles, electrical appliances and other goods between 1994 and 1997. Phung Long That, chief of the anti-smuggling investigation division of the Ho Chi Minh City customs department, was also condemned to death.

Storm claims 22 in China: At least 22 people were killed in a two-day storm which bombarded China's central province of Hubei with hailstones, a local official said yesterday, Reuter reports from Beijing.

Torrential rain ravaged Hubei's 31 cities and counties between April 23 and 25, destroying houses and farmland, a provincial government official told Reuters by telephone. A local agriculture official said some areas had 250 mm (10 inches) of rain in 24 hours and the winter wheat crop had been hit. He declined to give further details.

Two assassins to die in China: A Chinese court has sentenced to death two men hired by a former deputy police chief to assassinate the Communist Party boss of a county in northeastern China, the semi-official China News Service said yesterday, Reuter reports from Beijing.

Liu Zhengping and Zhang Rongguo were sentenced to death on Monday for gunning down Li Xianying, the party secretary of Fushun county in Liaoning province, outside his home on March 26, the newsletter said. A third defendant was given a death sentence suspended for two years, while a fourth was sentenced to two years in prison, it said.



Pakistani Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz (R) greets Turkmenistan Deputy Prime Minister Batyr Sardjoev in his office for a meeting, in Islamabad Thursday. Sardjoev discussed a proposed two-billion dollar project for transmitting gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan. —AFP photo

8 killed in Philippines: A gunfight between followers of feuding politicians in a remote southern Philippine town has left eight people dead, the military said Thursday, AP reports from Zamboanga.

Police said seven aides of Sumisip town Vice Mayor Harwan Hataman and one follower of Mayor Abdulatip Tahajid were killed Wednesday. One of the mayor's followers was also injured in the fight. The army sent troops to pacify the warring factions, said Lt. Col. Horacio Lapind, spokesman for the military's Southern Command.

US eases sanctions on Iran, Libya and Sudan

WASHINGTON, Apr 29: The White House has opened the way for the sale of food and medical items to three countries listed as terrorist states — Iran, Libya and Sudan — arguing that economic sanctions do more harm than good, reports AP.

"Sales of food, medicine and other humanitarian necessities do not generally enhance a nation's military capacity or support terrorism," Under Secretary of State Stuart Eizenstat said Wednesday. "On the contrary, funds spent on agricultural commodities and products are not available for other, less desirable uses."

"Our purpose in applying sanctions is to influence the behaviour of regimes, not to deny people their basic humanitarian needs," he said.

Barring such sales usually falls to hurt targeted regimes while depriving American companies of export opportunities, officials said.

The new policy is part of a broader attempt at comprehensive sanctions reform. The goal is to resort to unilateral sanctions "only after all other op-

tions, including diplomacy and multilateral sanctions, have been exhausted.

Under the changed approach, humanitarian items will be exempted from future sanctions. Wednesday's announcement will not affect Iraq, North Korea and Cuba, all sanctioned countries to which sales of certain items are already permitted.

US officials said it was unclear whether the changed policy meant a pending Iranian request for more than 500 million dollars worth of American grain and sugar will be approved. A number of US lawmakers from agricultural states have been seeking approval of the request.

Sen. Byron Dorgan, a Democrat from the midwestern farm state of North Dakota, welcomed the policy shift. He said he White House has, in effect, been telling farmers, "You pay the cost of our foreign policy."

"Fidel Castro and Saddam Hussein have never missed a meal because of our sanctions policy."

He noted that large grain stocks have led to depressed prices.

Sen. Dick Lugar, a Republican from Indiana, another farm state, a strong advocate of sanctions reform, also was supportive.

"I do not believe that food and medicine should be used as a tool of foreign policy," said Lugar, the Senate Agriculture Committee chairman. "Doing so typically injures innocent civilians in the sanctioned country, imposes little hardship on recalcitrant leaders whose behaviour we wish to change and opens the door for other exporting countries to replace the US as a food supplier."

Government experts predict the policy change could increase wheat and corn exports by 1 million tons, said Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman.

Eizenstat said the new policy is not directed at any particular country. Among the countries subject to curbs on food and medicine, only Iran has been a target of a US effort for improved relations.

US to inspect DPRK's N-site in May

SEOUL, Apr 29: US officials are likely to begin inspections of a suspected underground nuclear site in communist North Korea in the third week of May, news reports here said today, says AP.

The landmark inspections were agreed in talks between Washington and Pyongyang to help allay suspicions that the rogue state could be reviving its nuclear programme. The reports quoted North Korea's vice foreign minister Kim Kye-Gwan as saying the date was set during his meeting in Geneva with senior US State Department official Charles Kartman on the sidelines of four-party peace talks.

"The inspection will be held around mid-May, after the 15th," the Chinese official quoted Kim as saying. Kim said US inspectors would arrive in North Korea around May 16th, and start inspection from that week.

N Korea blasts Japan-US defence guidelines

TOKYO, Apr 29: North Korea accused Japan on Thursday of approving new defence guidelines with the United States as part of Tokyo's plan to invade the communist country, reports AP.

"These bills are war legislation that will realise the ambition of re-invasion by Japanese reactionaries, taking advantage of an overseas invasion war scheme of the United States," the north's official Radio Pyongyang said.

The radio, in a broadcast monitored in Tokyo by Japan's Radiopress, said that North Korea was "the No. 1 target" of the legislation.

On Tuesday, the powerful lower house of Japan's Parliament passed legislation updating guidelines to expand the US-Japan military alliance. The upper house is expected to approve the legislation next month.

The bills allow Japanese forces to provide greater assistance to US troops in Asia and give the United States greater access to Japanese airports and seaports. Tokyo and Washington have insisted that the pact is not aimed at any particular country.

Benazir's career may end as it began — in exile

ISLAMABAD, Apr 29: The political career of Benazir Bhutto, the first woman to rule a modern Muslim state, may end as it began — in exile, reports AP.

Once the champion of democracy in a country ruled by a heavy handed dictator, Benazir now is in Britain, unable to return home without being arrested.

Shamed by allegations of rampant corruption and abuse of power, she has been convicted of taking kickbacks from a Swiss company, sentenced to 5 years in jail and ordered disqualified from politics.

Her husband of 12 years, Asif Ali Zardari, is in jail charged with the murder of her estranged brother, Murtaza, who was killed in 1996 in a gun battle with police outside his home in Karachi.

Her three small children live without either parent in the United Arab Emirates because she fears for their lives if they stay in Pakistan. The country backed her father, and gave safe haven to many of his supporters after he was executed.

She was in the country Thursday and it was unclear how long she would be there. She only occasionally sees them and Benazir says it breaks her heart.

"The one thing I find really difficult to talk about are my children and the effect all this has on them. It makes me feel so emotional, I feel like I will fall apart," she said in a telephone interview from London, where she had been staying with her younger sister.

"What do you tell a child when she says 'mommy don't go' and when the children start to do badly in school and you know it is because they need their parents?"

At night alone in the dark, far away from her home and her son Bilal, 11, and daughters Bakhtawar, 9 and Asifa, 6, Benazir says she wonders if the price for her political career has been too high.

"I think the price is too high... but I think I have to pay it," she said. "I only hope that one day when they are grown they will understand."

Twice elected prime minister of Pakistan, Benazir has twice been removed in shame amid charges of runaway corruption and mismanagement.

Her husband was dubbed Mr 10 per cent during her first term in office because of the commissions he allegedly charged industries wanting to do business in Pakistan.

During her second term in power, he was renamed Mr 40 per cent in line with an alleged increase in his commissions.

Benazir dismisses allegations of corruption as a vendetta being waged by her political opponents, led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, to get her out of politics.

"I never influenced the awarding of a contract and until my dying day I'll stand by it," she said. "They have tried to ruin me because they want to ruin the concept of a pluralistic liberal Pakistan."

"To be accused of robbing, that really pains me. ... I can't tell you what that means to me, property and material things have never meant as much to me as my name," she said.

The government and her detractors say the trail of corruption and economic misdeeds is a long one that winds all the way to Switzerland, where the government there froze Benazir bank accounts as well as her

husband's and her ailing mother's. There was 13.7 billion dollars in the banks.

Both she and her husband allegedly have been tied to overseas properties, the most controversial being a country estate in Britain valued at 2.4 million dollars.

The charge on which Benazir was convicted says she and her husband received kickbacks from two Swiss companies, Societe Generale de Surveillance SA and a subsidiary, Cotena Inspection SA for a pre-shipment inspection contract.

The documents were gathered by the Swiss authorities, says Pakistan's Law Minister Khalid Anwar.

Benazir is appealing her conviction to the Supreme Court, but few people in Pakistan appear to care.

When the 5-year jail sentence was announced in Pakistan, barely 1,000 people took to the streets to protest in her hometown of Karachi. Elsewhere the protesters were in the hundreds.

This contrasts to her triumphant return to Pakistan from exile in 1986 when she was greeted by 1 million people,

who stood shoulder to shoulder crammed into the narrow streets of Lahore.

Today most people in Pakistan seem sure that Benazir and her husband are guilty of corruption, but they also paint Pakistan's present rulers with the same brush.

A cover story in Pakistan's reputable English-language magazine Newsline, says that the government's process of accountability "is not to eliminate corruption as is ostensibly claimed, but to remove political opponents from the scene."

Benazir was drawn into the rough world of Pakistani politics at age 26 when the army handed her father in 1978 when military strongman Gen. Mohammed Zia-ul Haq died in a mysterious plane crash, paving the way for Pakistan's first free elections.

Now Benazir is back in Britain in self-imposed exile rather than return to Pakistan and face prison.

"I'll fight from wherever is best," she said. "I would like someday to get out of (politics) but this is not the right time... I am determined to fight."