



Muslim Congress (I) Party supporters burn an effigy of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and regional leader Mulayam Singh Yadav during a demonstration outside New Delhi's Jama Masjid, after the Juma prayers. The demonstrators accused Yadav of blocking the Congress Party's bid for power, after Vajpayee's coalition government fell on April 17, ushering fresh general elections. — AFP photo

NATO blows up army HQs in Belgrade

BELGRADE, Apr 30: NATO jets struck before dawn Friday in the heart of Belgrade, blasting the headquarters of the Yugoslav army, the Federal Interior Ministry and a residential neighbourhood in the alliance's strongest attack so far on the Yugoslav capital's centre, reports AP.

The attack occurred hours before special Russian mediator Viktor Chernomyrdin was due in Belgrade on a diplomatic mission to promote a peace plan for Yugoslavia.

American civil rights leader Jesse Jackson also was in Belgrade on a mission to win freedom for three US POWs held by Yugoslavia and try to help find a resolution to the conflict. Jackson called the bombing "intense" but said he thought there was an opening for diplomacy.

"Until there's a diplomatic breakthrough, the bombing will escalate and will expand," he said.

Following a series of huge explosions on Friday, fire and thick smoke rose above several major government buildings, and streets were littered with broken glass, tree limbs and debris.

Gaping holes were visible in the army's red, fortress-like twin headquarters buildings. Nearby buildings including the Yugoslav Foreign Ministry and the Serbian government headquarters also were heavily damaged, with holes bashed in their facades and doors and

window frames blown out.

Radio Novosti said a policeman and two other people were killed. The Tanjug news agency reported eight injuries in the attacks on Belgrade and an unspecified number of deaths.

The Yugoslav Interior Ministry was targeted for a second time since the airstrikes began on March 24 and witnesses said it also was substantially damaged.

Hours later, dazed soldiers cleaned up the tangle of twisted steel and concrete and firemen stumbled over the debris in front of army headquarters. Stunned onlookers wept.

"They are destroying us, one by one, piece by piece," said Jasminka Radovanovic, 30. "What do they want from us?"

Studio B television, located near the army headquarters, ceased transmitting temporarily.

Missiles also struck the Vracar residential district, less than two kilometres southeast of the army headquarters, damaging two houses and destroying several cars. At least four people, including one woman, were injured. The blasts shattered a water main, flooding the area.

Witnesses reported jets flying low overhead and dropping bombs after coming under heavy anti-aircraft fire.

The attack came several hours after NATO jets blasted a telecommunications tower southeast of the capital, knocking Serbian state television off

the air. Tanjug said one person was injured.

Several other targets throughout Yugoslavia were also hit overnight.

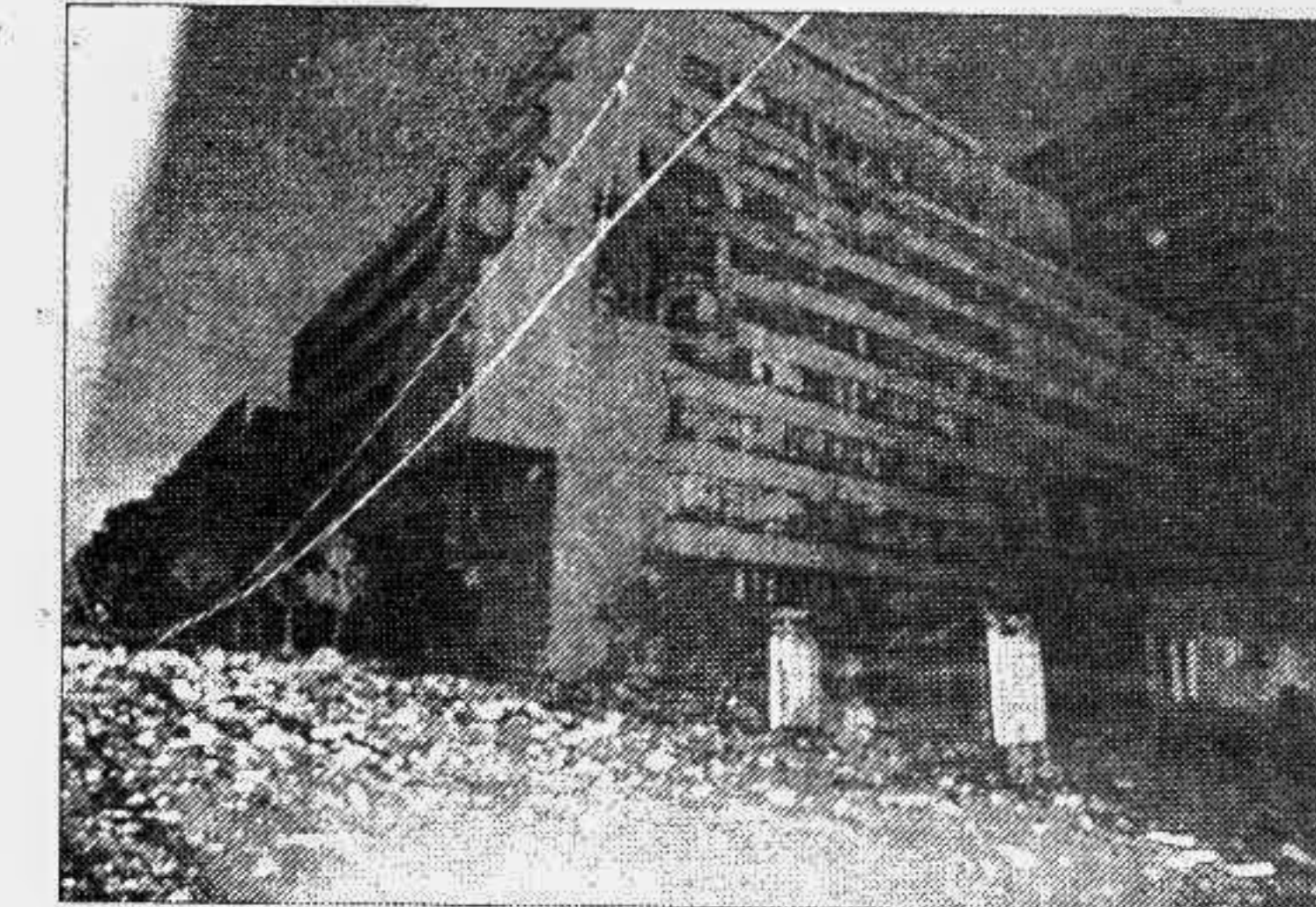
It was unclear how the attack would affect Chernomyrdin's mission. The former Russian prime minister was to explore ways of narrowing the gap between NATO and President Slobodan Milosevic on a settlement to the Yugoslav crisis.

In Bonn, Germany, Chernomyrdin insisted a halt to the

bombing was a precondition for peace talks, something the alliance has repeatedly refused.

While acknowledging "movement" toward a settlement following talks with the Russian envoy, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder insisted Milosevic has to withdraw Serb forces from Kosovo first before the bombing could be suspended.

The Russian plan calls for a UN-controlled international peacekeeping force in Kosovo.



A view of the damaged Yugoslav Army headquarters after NATO carried out bombing raids early Friday morning in central Belgrade. Beta news agency reported that the army headquarters was in flames after the explosions adding that buildings including the Yugoslav Foreign Ministry were damaged. — AFP photo

More than 600,000 ethnic Albanian refugees have fled Kosovo since last month, and hundreds of thousands more are homeless and displaced in the province.

In Macedonia, where 6,000 refugees arrived Thursday, relief workers said a Serb campaign to drive ethnic Albanians from other parts of Serbia is apparently forcing refugees to hike across remote areas where Yugoslav forces have laid mines.

Reuter adds from Brussels: A European Union ban on the supply of oil and oil products to Yugoslavia has taken effect, a European Commission spokesman said today.

"It's in place," spokesman Nigel Gardner said in response to a question.

The ban, agreed by the 15 EU governments last week, was endorsed by the bloc's ministers at a meeting in Luxembourg on Monday.

It is intended to complement NATO's efforts to isolate Yugoslavia and prevent the supply of fuel to President Slobodan Milosevic's military machine.

Eastern European countries seeking EU membership, including three of Yugoslavia's neighbours, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, said this week they would join the ban.

Russia said today it would not join an oil embargo imposed by NATO and EU countries against Yugoslavia despite Western warnings.

9 of family massacred in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Apr 30: Kashmir separatist rebels have massacred nine members of a Muslim family as six other people died in overnight clashes in the troubled Himalayan state, police said today, reports AP.

Police in Srinagar said masked gunmen raided a home in the frontier district of Kupwara on Thursday night and shot dead nine members of a family, including two women and a teenage girl.

Three other relatives of Abdul Ahad Ganai, a paid informant of the police in Kashmir, were seriously injured in the attack, officials said.

None of Kashmir's two dozen Muslim separatist groups has claimed responsibility for the massacre of Ganai's family in the village of Krishpora Nagri, some 100 kilometres (62 miles) north of Srinagar.

Top Indian model shot dead in Delhi pub

NEW DELHI, Apr 30: A leading Indian model and television celebrity was killed in an early morning shooting today in one of New Delhi's upmarket pubs, the police said today, reports AP.

Fashion model Jessica Lal was hit by a bullet in the head after a man fired twice with a pistol after he was refused a drink at the posh "Tamarind Court" bar and restaurant early this morning.

The 34-year-old model, who was also a well-known event manager, died instantly as the bullet pierced her brain, hospital sources here said.

The killer escaped, the police said.

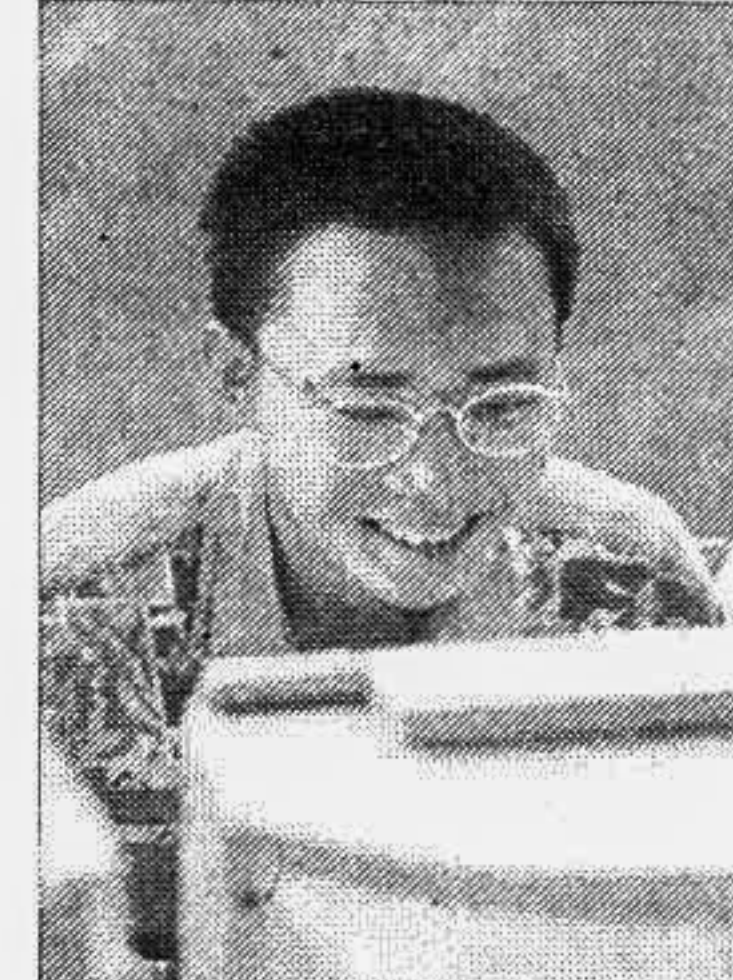
Estrada holds secret meeting with Anwar's wife

MANILA, Apr 30: Philippine President Joseph Estrada has held a secret meeting with Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, the wife of jailed former Malaysian deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim, sources said today, reports AP.

The meeting took place at the presidential place late Thursday, hours after Estrada said he had not received a formal request for a meeting with Azizah, Anwar and her daughter Nurul Izzah were secretly taken from their hotel to the place to avoid media attention, sources said. "We believe the condition of Anwar was discussed, although I can't give any further details," a source said, adding the meeting took only 30 minutes.

Azizah is due to fly back to Kuala Lumpur later today. She arrived Wednesday as a guest of former president Corazon Aquino. The Malaysian government had warned Azizah against arranging an audience with Estrada, saying this could affect relations between the two countries.

However, Estrada has maintained that the Philippines is a "free country" and that there was nothing wrong if it was done privately.



Chen Ing-hou, the creator of the Chernobyl virus, is all smile while explaining the making of the deadly bug at the Criminal Investigation Bureau Friday. Chen claimed he had created the virus after being angered by some computer software companies which sold useless anti-virus programs on the market. — AFP photo

Taiwan police questioning IT expert on Chernobyl virus

TAIPEI, Apr 30: Taiwan police today were questioning a computer expert who media reports said had boasted of creating the Chernobyl virus that recently wrought global havoc, reports Reuter.

Police said 24-year-old Chen Ing-hou had not been charged and their investigation had only begun.

Chen was being questioned in Taipei on suspicion of intentionally spreading a computer virus, a crime that carries a possible three-year prison term.

Authorities said Chen graduated from Taipei's Tatung Institute of Technology in 1998 with an information engineering degree and has since been undergoing Taiwan's mandatory two-year military service. Reports said Chen's school had known about his alleged involvement with the virus for a year. Former classmates and instructors said he had boasted of creating the Chernobyl virus and warned friends not to download it into their computers.

Though popularly dubbed Chernobyl because it strikes on the April 26 anniversary of the Soviet nuclear disaster in 1986, it is known to experts as CIH. Colleagues said Chen had

acknowledged using his own initials in naming the virus, according to the media reports.

Some reports said Chen had been reprimanded quietly by his institute a year ago but not further disciplined, prompting an Internet debate about Taiwan's vigilance against cyber-crime.

Chernobyl/CIH is one of the most damaging viruses of recent years, having crippled thousands if not millions of computers worldwide starting on Monday — particularly in developing countries where anti-virus defences are weak.

Estimates vary widely, but authorities have said Chernobyl hit hundreds of thousands of computers in South Korea, Turkey and China and tens of thousands in India and Bangladesh and the Mideast.

Less widespread than the e-mail replication virus called Melissa which swamped Internet servers around the world in April, Chernobyl and its variants are far more vicious.

Chernobyl/CIH employs a "specifying" technique that does up a computer's hard-disk storage system, effectively crashing most systems and in many cases making restart impossible.

HR abuse during Marcos' 2-yr rule US judge approves \$150m settlement for victims

HONOLULU, Apr 30: A US federal judge has approved a \$150 million dollars settlement of claims of human rights abuses that occurred under the 20-year reign of former Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, reports AP.

However, the settlement approved Thursday doesn't take effect until the Philippine government approves the transfer of the money from a Swiss bank account that holds 590 million dollars in frozen Marcos family assets.

District Court Judge Manuel set a deadline of May 10 for the money to be deposited into an account at First Hawaiian Bank.

The judge, in a temporary order issued in February, pegged final approval on the money being deposited first. But Philippine President Joseph Estrada was told he should not release the money until a final settlement was declared, said Birch Bayh, a former US senator representing the president at the hearing.

Each of the claimants will receive about 16,000 dollars each under terms of the settlement, which left open the question of attorneys fees.

The plaintiffs were awarded 2 billion dollars in damages by the court, but subsequent negotiations ended in February with

preliminary approval of the 150 million dollars settlement.

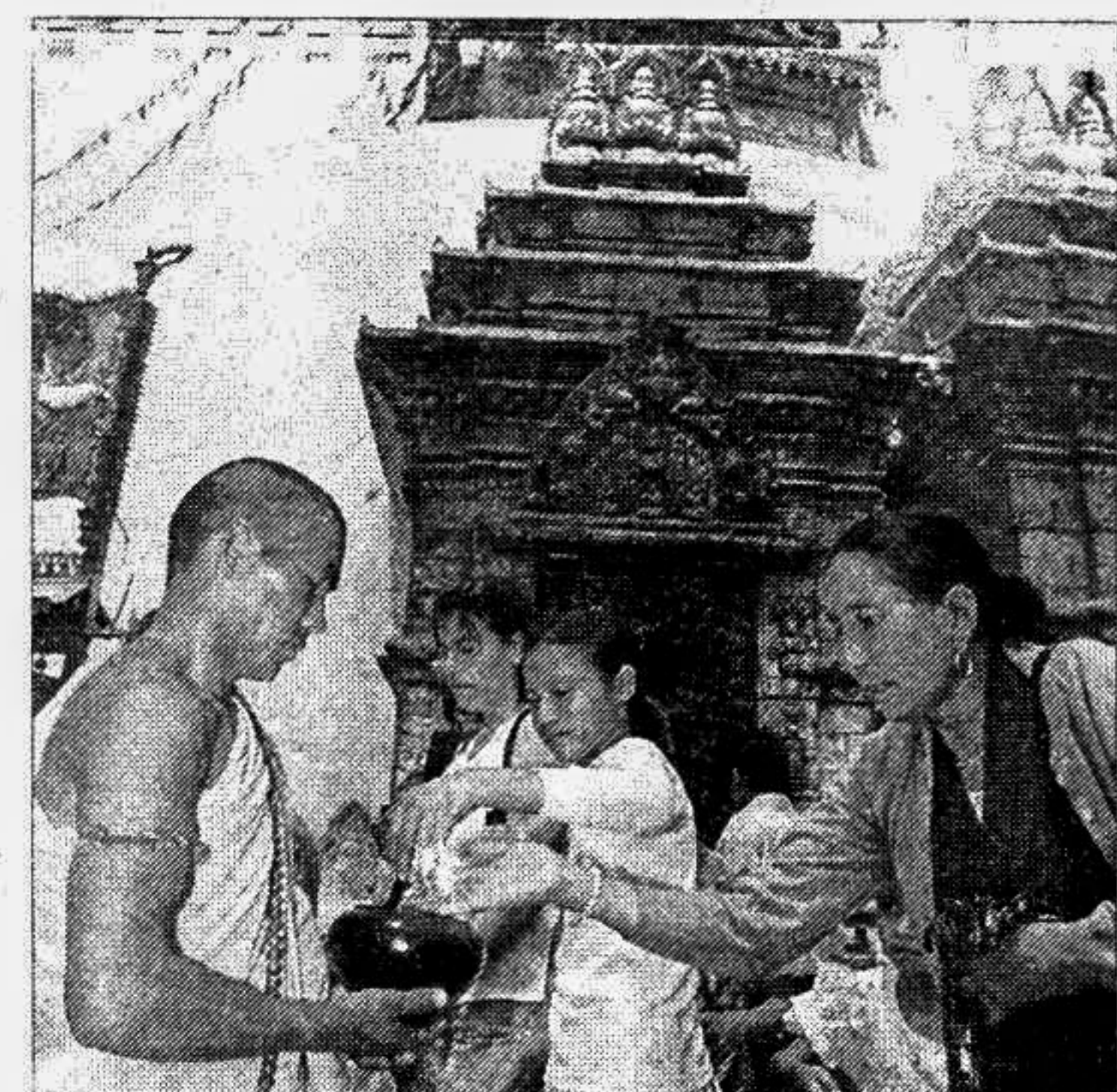
"It certainly is not what I would like to have happen, but it's the only money available to the plaintiffs," said Real, a Los Angeles-based judge. "There should be some closure to this matter."

The deal settles all past and future class-action claims by the more than 9,500 Filipinos who say they were detained and tortured for opposing Marcos, and of people who say family members were killed by the regime.

A group representing some victims went before the judge to oppose the lawsuit, pointing to a clause that says the Marcoses never have been charged civilly or criminally with a human rights violation anywhere in the world.

"Judge Real ... is not familiar with the political implications of the settlement," said Neri Colmanares, who was tortured and held for four years during the Marcos reign. "All he is worried about is the legal implications."

Real says the clause is included in almost all court settlements, and carries no force of law, but Colmanares said the Marcoses will use the wording to say they were absolved of guilt.



Buddhist devotees give alms to a monk at the Swoyambhunath stupa in Kathmandu Friday on the occasion of the 2543rd anniversary of Lord Buddha's birth. Nepal observed Buddha's birthday by organising various programmes, especially in Kathmandu and Lumbini, the birth place of Buddha. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Man executed for murder in US:

A man who robbed and slashed the throat of a 70-year-old woman was executed by injection, AP reports from Jarratt.

Ronald Dale Yeatts, 38, made no final statement Thursday. Yeatts went to the remote farmhouse of Ruby Meeks Dodson's in the fall of 1989 looking for drug money, according to an accomplice. The two pretended to have car trouble and asked for glasses of water. Once inside, they ransacked the home, took 1,400 dollars and killed Dodson.



A group of children from an Islamic School in Kampung Baru read a newspaper before commencing their Juma prayer in the mosque Friday in Kuala Lumpur. Umni Hal-fida Ali, the sister of ousted deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim's former private secretary, is filing a libel suit against Haraqah, a newsletter published by the Malaysia Islamic Party, for a satirical article about her published last month. — AFP photo

Ex-Colombian official shot dead:

A former Colombian attorney general who served three years in prison for accepting bribes from drug barons was gunned down Thursday in the southwestern city of Cali, police said, AFP reports from Bogota.

Guillermo Villa Alzate was shot by gunmen on motorcycles who intercepted his car in a residential part of Cali. Police General Jorge Montero told journalists. Villa Alzate was forced to resign in 1990 over accusations of links to the drug barons of the Cali cocaine cartel. At the time he was working closely with police who were trying to identify the drugs barons.

Quake shakes Y'slavia: An earth tremor rocked the Serbian cities of Belgrade and Novi Sad yesterday, residents and local media said. The Yugoslav state news agency Tanjug said an earthquake of weak intensity hit Belgrade and the northern city of Novi Sad at 5:30 am (0330 GMT). Reuter reports from Belgrade.

Belgrade residents said buildings shook. They reported hearing no blasts and did not link the tremor to NATO air raids over the capital earlier in the night. Belgrade radio station Radio Novosti reported an earthquake in both Belgrade and Novi Sad early Friday.

Australian woman jailed in Myanmar:

An Australian woman who failed to declare 5,000 dollars (\$3,250 US) of jewellery when leaving Myanmar has been sentenced to 10 years in Yangon's infamous Insein Prison, a report said yesterday, AFP reports from Sydney.

Australian officials in Bangkok told the Sydney Morning Herald the 53-year-old woman, who is married with children, was convicted last year. The Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra confirmed the sentence and said she had been visited by a consular official, but was not allowed telephone contact. She is launching an appeal. The colonial-era Insein Prison has a reputation for the harsh treatment of inmates.

Most Nepalis gripped by election fever, but some by fear

NEPALGUNJ, Nepal Apr 30: Most Nepalis may be gripped by election fever, but some are gripped by fear that an extreme left group could back its poll boycott with violence, reports Reuter.

About 13.5 million people are eligible to vote in the Himalayan kingdom's general election — the third since parliamentary democracy was restored nine years ago — which gets under way on Monday.

But the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists), waging an insurgency in some remote and rugged districts to topple the constitutional monarchy, has spurned the ballot box as a means to its goal of a communist republic.

The Maoists have called for a boycott of the election, but insist that they will not resort to violence to scare voters away from polling stations.

"We have no plan to completely ruin the entire election

process of the reactionary system," Prachanda, general secretary of the Maoist party, told a local newspaper.

Lok Bahadur Khatri, a top bureaucrat in the insurgency-racked district of Rolpa, told Reuters that election hopefuls had been given extra security in charge of flushing out the Maoists from their hideouts in Nepal's mid-western region, 400 km (250 miles) from the capital, Kathmandu.

Vigilance has also been stepped up in Maoist hotbeds, which are on maximum security alert for the ballot.

"They will, of course, try to disrupt the polls," said Sahabir Thapa, a senior police official in charge of flushing out the Maoists from their hideouts in Nepal's mid-western region, 400 km (250 miles) from the capital, Kathmandu.

Twelve of the Hindu kingdom's 75 administrative districts have been declared "sensitive" for the poll and the Elec-

tion commission has decided to hold the vote in two phases to avoid spreading security forces too thinly.

Voting in 39 districts, including the Maoist-hit western Himalayan areas and the Kathmandu Valley, will be held on May 3. Other areas will go to the polls two weeks later.

The threat of violence is a major issue for parties of all colours but they are divided over how to tackle it. A run of wobbly coalition governments has left the problem a running sore.

The Maoists, considered ideologically close to Peru's Shining Path, began that insurgency in February 1996, vowing to overthrow the constitutional monarchy which was set up after bloody street protests ended a 30-year autocratic regime in 1990.

They are active in backward areas, where poverty is extreme, literacy is low, the social struc-

ture is akin to feudalism and there are no economic development plans.

There is no evidence that the Maoists are funded from abroad, though they are known to rely on extortion, and looting mainly banks. Authorities have seized crude weapons, explosives and firearms during raids and encounters with insurgents, including some taken from officials in attacks.

"They are very good at making explosive devices," Thapa said.

Over 700 people have been killed in insurgent activities and in police action in three years since the Maoist problem began.

Human rights groups have pointed fingers at both the government and the Maoists for alleged rights violations, and opposition parties claim that more people have been killed by police than by the rebels in action.

BJP meets today to decide on alliance for snap polls

NEW DELHI, Apr 30: Indian caretaker Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu-nationalist party will meet here this weekend to plan strategies for the upcoming general elections, the party said today, reports AP.

The 11-member BJP national executive will meet for two days beginning Saturday to decide on the alliances it will forge for the mid-term polls, it said.

Vajpayee resigned on April 17 after his coalition government lost a legislative show of strength by a single vote in the deeply divided lower house of parliament.

President KR Narayanan dissolved the 545-member house on April 26 and ordered snap elections, the third since 1996, after the opposition led by the Congress Party failed to assemble and alternative coalition government.

The independent Election Commission will decide the

poll dates after an all-party meeting scheduled for Monday.

"The BJP executive ... is likely to retain all the political groups which supported the government during the confidence vote as its poll partners," a senior party leader said.

He said the national executive would also discuss forging closer ties with groups that extended unexpected support to Vajpayee's multi-party government during the confidence vote.

"With most of the allies deciding to continue with the BJP, the party will not find it difficult to draw up a common election programme," he said, adding the meeting would also discuss issues such as seat-sharing.

The Press Trust of India said the meeting was further expected to pass a resolution detailing "the developments which had led to the fall of the Vajpayee government and the machinations of the opposition."

Nigeria was suspended from the 54-nation grouping of mainly former British colonies in 1995 after it executed nine minority rights activists, including writer Ken Saro-Wiwa.

The Commonwealth decided to act after Nigeria finally embarked on a long-promised return to democracy last year which culminated in February in presidential elections to end 15 years of military rule.

The eight-nation Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), set up to investigate human rights abuses in member states with military governments, had decided unanimously that the suspension be lifted.

"CMAG decided to immediately recommend to Commonwealth heads of government that Nigeria's suspension from membership of the association be lifted," said the final statement, read out to journalists by Zimbabwean Foreign Minister and CMAG chairman, Stand Mudege.

The group looked forward to Nigeria fully returning to the Commonwealth with the assumption of office by the newly elected government on May 29, 1999," it said.

"On May 29 Nigeria will be a full member of the Commonwealth ... we are convinced they have met all the conditions for the suspension to be lifted," Mudege said, making clear that there was no chance that Commonwealth heads of government would reject CMAG's recommendation.

Commonwealth Secretary-General Chief Emeka Anyaoku will now send a letter to all member governments asking them to agree to end the sus-

pension on May 29, the day President-elect General Olusegun Obasanjo is due to take office.

The recommendation to lift Nigeria's suspension is another sign that the West African nation has come in from the cold after many years as a pariah state under a succession of hardline military rulers.

The CMAG statement said that despite deficiencies, the February elections had been free and fair, and commended current military leader General Abdul Salami Abubakar for ushering in the transition to democracy since taking power last year.

Deep splits within the Commonwealth prevented CMAG from cracking down too hard on Nigeria although the ministers did agree a limited package of sanctions.

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Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi addresses the audience at a California Welcome Dinner hosted by the Japan-America Society in Beverly Hills, California Thursday. Obuchi is on a week-long visit to the United States. — AFP photo