

BRIEFLY

Sharif to visit Brunei May 11:

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif will leave for Brunei on May 11 for a three-day official visit aimed at strengthening economic ties, officials said yesterday. AFP reports from Islamabad.

Sharif will hold talks with Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah on issues concerning the Islamic world and matters of bilateral interest, they said.

Blast claims 19 miners in China:

At least 19 miners were killed and seven others injured after an explosion in a coal-mine in north-west China, a report received yesterday said, AFP says from Beijing.

According to the Lanzhou Chenbao newspaper, the April 24 explosion happened in the Yaolie state mine in Gansu province. The tragedy occurred when the 27 miners in the mine received a warning gas was present. The warning came too late however, according to the newspaper report published Wednesday. The exact cause of the blast has not yet been established.

2 children shot in West Bank:

Shots fired by an Israeli soldier injured two Palestinian children Saturday in the West Bank city of Hebron, Israeli and Palestinian sources said, AP reports from Hebron.

The Israeli army spokesman's office said "according to initial reports, the children were injured when a soldier's gun went off accidentally. An 11-year-old boy and a 4-year-old girl were hurt." However the boy, Jawad Muhtaseb, told The Associated Press that the soldier shot him and his sister deliberately, injuring the girl in the head. He was injured in the leg. The girl was taken away in an Israeli ambulance, Palestinian sources said.

Sihanouk returns home:

King Norodom Sihanouk returned home yesterday after a weekend in China as an honoured guest at the world's largest garden show in the southwestern city of Kunming, AP says from Phnom Penh.

The 76-year-old monarch, rumoured to be ailing in recent months, appeared in good health as he confidently descended the steps of his chartered jet with queen Monineath at the Phnom Penh airport.

5 die as bldg collapses in India:

At least five people were killed and 11 others injured early on Saturday when a building collapsed in a suburb of the Western Indian town of Bombay, fire brigade officials said, AFP reports from Bombay.

Fire official CJ David said the two-storey house crumbled to the ground in the suburbs of Thane at 2:15 (2045 GMT), trapping several people. "We have brought out five bodies and rescued eight people," he said. "There are three others trapped under debris."

Sudanese president in Qatar:

Sudan's president arrived in the Qatari capital Doha where he is expected to meet his Eritrean counterpart in a Qatari mediation bid in the conflict between the two African countries, Reuters says from Doha.

The official Qatari News Agency said Lieutenant-General Omar Hassan al-Bashir arrived in Doha on Saturday night, one day after Eritrea's President Isayas Afewerki held talks with Qatar's Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani.

Journalist arrested in Egypt:

Police arrested a journalist on Saturday who is accused by Egypt's powerful Journalists' Syndicate of setting up an illegal union, AP reports from Cairo.

Hussein al-Mataani's lawyer, Ayman Abu el-Ezz, told The Associated Press he was not allowed to see his client at the Cairo police station where he was being held. Prosecutors were expected to question al-Mataani on Sunday.

Quake jolts southern Iran:

Two days of earthquakes jolted several areas of Iran, damaging buildings but causing no casualties, the Islamic Republic News Agency reported Saturday, AP reports from Dubai.

A magnitude-4.7 earthquake destroyed many buildings in the ancient part of Khomein town in southern Iran on Friday afternoon, IRNA said. Some homes in nearby villages also were destroyed, said the agency, which was monitored in Dubai. It gave no details. The epicentre of the quake was about 1,000 kilometres southeast of the Iranian capital of Tehran, IRNA said.

Paloma Picasso gets married:

The daughter of painter Pablo Picasso married her French boyfriend Friday in a low-key service in London, AP says from London.

Paloma Picasso, 49, wed gynecologist Dr. Eric Thevennet at the 700-year-old Ancient Chapel of the Bishops of Ely, in St. Eheldreda's Catholic Church. The wedding comes three months after she divorced her husband of 26 years, Argentinian playwright Rafael Lopez-Cambil.

11 drown in USA:

Eleven people were killed Saturday when an amphibious tourists boat sank in a lake. Divers were searching for a 12th victim, AP reports from Hot Springs, Arkansas.

Police Cpl Mike Buck said 20 people were aboard the Army-surplus boat, known as a duck because of its use on both land and water.

Lake Hamilton, south of this popular tourist town, was crowded with visitors enjoying a warm spring day when the boat took on water and sank suddenly.

Iranian press voices warning to reformist minister

TEHRAN, May 2: Iran's conservative press fired off a stern warning to reformist Culture Minister Ataollah Mohajerani today after he narrowly beat off a parliamentary censure motion by hardliners, reports AFP.

"The minister's vote of confidence does not mean the minister's handling of cultural issues has been proper," said Abrar newspaper, adding that the censure motion was called because of the "dissatisfaction of devout members of parliament with the turbulent cultural situation."

Mohajerani held on to his post with a 135-121 vote in the

Islamic parliament on Saturday after an impeachment motion brought against him by a group of hardline MPs over his "laxity" in handling press and cultural affairs.

Abrar called on the minister, a close ally of President Mohammad Khatami and the driving force behind cultural reform in the Islamic republic, to embark on a "major spring-cleaning at the ministry" to purge it of "foreign elements."

"Mohajerani must try now to leader the ministry back on the right path in order to ease the troubled minds of our MPs," it said.

US imposes trade ban on Serbia

WASHINGTON, May 2: President Bill Clinton on Saturday imposed a US trade embargo on the Yugoslav republic of Serbia, report agencies.

Clinton signed an executive order Friday night to enact the embargo. The European Union's ban on oil shipments to Yugoslavia took effect Saturday as well.

The main thrust of the order was to begin cutting off the supply of oil to Milosevic's forces as NATO airstrikes aimed at halting the Serbs' persecution of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and other civilians.

Another report from Yugoslavia adds: Three US soldiers released after nearly five weeks of captivity in Yugoslavia walked across the border into Croatia Sunday as Belgrade launched a fresh bid to end the war over Kosovo.

A convoy carrying the three Americans and US civil rights

leader Jesse Jackson, who won their release in talks with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, arrived at the Lipovac border post at around 9:55 a.m. (0755 GMT).

Holding hands with Jackson, a black Baptist minister, the three Americans walked across the border and were taken to Zagreb airport to board a plane bound for a US air base in Germany.

Meanwhile, about 11,000 refugees have crossed into Albania at the Morina border post since Friday evening in the wake of a Serb sweep on Kosovo's second city of Prizren, UN aid officials said yesterday.

The new arrivals brought to 23,000 the number of displaced who have entered through Morina since Thursday, according to an AFP tally of figures provided by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

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US civil rights leader Reverend Jesse Jackson (C) is flanked by US soldiers Corporal Steven Captured (L), Sergeant Christopher Stone (2nd R) and Sergeant Andrew Ramirez (R), captured few weeks ago in Kosovo, after the three were released into his custody in Belgrade on Sunday. — AFP photo

Outcome of upcoming polls 44pc Indians fear another shaky coalition govt

NEW DELHI, May 2: Forty-four per cent of Indians think the third elections in a little more than three years will again lead to a shaky coalition in a badly fractured parliament, an opinion poll said today, reports AFP.

A survey of 1,997 voters in eight Indian cities, questioned by the Times of India daily, also revealed 70 per cent wanted legal amendments to ensure that future parliaments survive a full five-year term.

However, a majority of respondents said they would be voting for ousted Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP Party, whose 13-month rule at the head of a minority coalition ended on April 17 when it lost a parliamentary confidence vote by a single vote.

Forty-six per cent said they would vote for the BJP, while 24

per cent said they would back the main opposition Congress Party, led by the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi.

The date of the polls are expected to be announced this week by the independent election commission. India has had three elections since 1996 and all have yielded hung parliaments with weak coalition governments.

Vajpayee favours an early election, preferably in June, expecting to ride back to power on a wave of sympathy over the way his multi-party coalition was toppled.

But the opposition argues monsoon rains at that time of year would affect voter turnout, and wants the elections to be held as late as October.

The survey said an overwhelming majority thought the Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist party, which staged shock nu-

clear tests last May, was better equipped to tackle national security and foreign affairs.

Forty-four per cent thought the Hindu nationalists would provide a stable administration. Thirty-six per cent thought the Congress was a better option.

However, a majority disagreed with the contention of some Hindu nationalist leaders and their allies that Sonia Gandhi was unfit for the prime minister's job because she was foreign born.

Forty-one per cent felt that Gandhi, who has lived in the country for 32 years after spending the first 20 years of her life in Italy, was Indian.

Thirty-nine per cent felt she was still a "foreigner" while 20 per cent said they were undecided if she should hold the top post or not.



Anti racism and gay protesters march through the streets of Soho en-route to Trafalgar Square on Saturday in London, demonstrating against the recent bomb attacks in the British capital. A man has been arrested over the bomb attack in Soho which killed three people and injured 70. — AFP photo

Five die as Maoist rebels clash with police in Nepal

KATHMANDU, May 2: Five people were killed and five injured today in pre-election clashes between Maoist insurgents and security forces in the Himalayan foothills of western Nepal, police said, reports Reuters.

Sahabir Thapa, a deputy inspector general of police, told Reuters that two police personnel on duty for Monday's general election, were killed in an ambush by suspected Maoist rebels at Gaurigaon in Rolpa district.

15 political dissidents detained in Beijing

BEIJING, May 2: Police have detained at least 15 Chinese political activists to stop them from planning commemorations of the Tiananmen Square democracy demonstrations on the 10th anniversary of their violent end, a rights group said Sunday, reports AP.

Police in the city of Acheng in Heilongjiang province detained six activists from Heilongjiang and two other northeastern provinces who were discussing anniversary plans at a restaurant on Saturday afternoon, the Information Center of Human Rights and Demo-

cratic Movement in China said in a statement. Their whereabouts remained unknown Sunday, it said.

In Changsha, capital of the southern province of Hunan, police detained eight activists and told them to sign a guarantee that they would not participate in a commemoration, but they refused, the Hong Kong-based center said.

They were all released by Saturday afternoon, but police were watching them, it said. Three of them also had been detained earlier in the week.

Nine killed in Assam violence

GUWAHATI, India, May 2: Eight tribal separatist rebels and an Indian army officer died today in a fierce gunbattle in the far-eastern state of Assam, police said, reports AFP.

A spokesman said the incident occurred early today when army troops raided a hide-out of an outlawed tribal militant outfit in the district of Sonitpur, some 280 kilometres (170 miles) from the Assam capital Guwahati.

"As soon as the army soldiers reached the area, the militants opened indiscriminate fire. The encounter lasted for about an hour in which eight rebels were killed while a major leading the army unit died on the spot."

The official said a large cache of weapons and ammunition had been recovered from the hide-out being used by the National Democratic Front of Bodoland guerrilla group, which is fighting for a tribal homeland carved out of Assam.

Truce in Mogadishu

MOGADISHU, May 2: Clan elders negotiated a truce between two groups of militiamen after 30 people were killed and 50 wounded in three days of intense gun battles in south Mogadishu, sources close to the talks said Saturday, reports AP.

Hospitals and local aid groups provided figures on the dead and wounded.

The fighting erupted Wednesday outside a former police station near Bakara market in the southern half of the war-wrecked Somali capital.

The fighting, near the main market in south Mogadishu, had pitted militiamen representing three Islamic courts in southern Mogadishu against gunmen loyal to warlord Mohamed Qanyareh Afrah, who controls the neighbourhood.

Nepal abolishes death sentence

KATHMANDU, May 2: Nepal portrayed itself as a leading human rights advocate on Saturday when the death sentence was officially abolished and replaced by a maximum 25-year jail term and confiscation of property, reports AFP.

"We have taken a more courageous step than the United States or other advanced democratic countries by abolishing the death sentence," the Secretary for Law and Justice, Tirtha Man Shakya, said.

King Birendra put his royal seal on laws relating to the military and royal succession. "Nepal has set an example on human rights," he said.

The maximum sentence now is a 25-year prison term and confiscation of property. However, anyone receiving the maximum term would be liable to a 25 per cent reduction for good behaviour and a separate 25 per cent concession as well as being in line for release on special occasions such as the King's Birthday or National Democracy Day, legal sources said.

Crime wave on rise in Punjab

By Syed Talat Hussain

ISLAMABAD, May 2: Just like the present heat-wave whose up-curve appears never-ending, Pakistan is also experiencing a crime-wave whose graph is rising. According to the latest statistics from the Punjab, the home province of both prime minister Nawaz Sharif and his brother and chief minister, Shehbaz Sharif, different types of crime has led to the death of 1,086 persons.

Figures of casualties from the other three provinces showed that Punjab the worst hit by growing trends of violence producing dead 4 bodies a day. In Sindh the number of dead in the same period of time ie, February to March is 434, Baluchistan 61, and the NWFP 633. Even more worrying is the fact that apart from this murderous crime wave, there is also an upswing in incidents of rape of women. In Punjab the highest number of women, 354, were raped, while the figure for Sindh is 75, Baluchistan is 9

and NWFP 34. These figures put the Sharif government in an embarrassing situation when in a questioning session in the Senate, the upper house of Pakistan's bi-cameral parliament, opposition leaders raised the subject of deteriorating law and order situation. Government senators could not defend their positions on the score because these statistics which were requested by the opposition spoke louder than any opposition criticism.

The fact that Punjab is the seat of the most number of killings and rape is disturbing also because the province is traditionally regarded as the safest place in the country.

Moreover, Prime Minister Sharif, in his present as well as previous stints in power, has been talking tough against crime against women, rape being the worst of the entire range.

Off the Record



Twenty-four contestants in the Miss IMF (I'M Fat) pageant line up on Saturday in Nakorn Prathom province outside of Bangkok. Unlike in other beauty pageants, the winner of Miss IMF is chosen in part by her weight, and many contestants weigh over 100 kilograms. — AFP photo

A 'smashing' party

NEW DELHI: An elephant at a corporate party? It had to be. After all it was a "smashing" party, reports IANS.

Instead of the usual air-conditioned board room, the dark suits, the designer ties and fine wine, it was a very hot April sun, an elephant decked in red and warm Coca-Cola that welcomed guests at the corporate do outside an office complex here. The event was organised by the National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) and the Business Software Alliance (BSA) to launch a campaign to destroy pirated software.

In a symbolic gesture to portray the tough stance the two organisations plan to take, NASSCOM president Dewang Mehta rode the elephant, which crushed — though reluctantly at first — a pile of pirated CD-roms and other software devices which had been seized during recent raids on stores. Citing a Rs. 7 billion (\$166 million) annual revenue loss due to software piracy, the two organisations tried literally to crush the widespread problem underfoot.

The two organisations, Mehta said, were trying to counter the attitude of fake software producers who believe "copyright means right to copy."

Mehta said NASSCOM and BSA, which is a global organisation set up by leading software companies in the US that is conducting educational campaigns in 65 countries, were planning to conduct at least 25 to 30 raids on resellers and end-users of pirated software in the next six months.

May Day observed across the world

BERLIN, May 2: Appeals for an end to the war in Kosovo mixed with traditional calls for workers' rights and jobs at May Day events around the world Saturday, reports AFP.

At Germany's biggest rally, the former No 2 man in Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's government, Oskar Lafontaine, demanded an end to NATO airstrikes on Yugoslavia. "More and more innocent people are becoming victims of the bombardment," he told 12,000 people gathered in Saarbruecken, in southwest Germany.

It was the outspoken leftist's first public attack on government policy since he quit in March as finance minister and chairman of Schroeder's Social Democratic Party following a power struggle with the centrist chancellor.

At another union rally in Goettingen, Environment Minister Juergen Trittin was heckled with cries of "warmonger" from a crowd of about 1,000. Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping faced cries of "murderer" from about 100 protesters during a rally in Ludwigshafen.

The protests highlighted increasing strains facing Germany's centre-right government over its participation in the NATO campaign, the German military's first combat opera-

tion since World War II.

Opposition to the NATO airstrikes was even more pronounced in Greece, where most people sympathise with their fellow-Orthodox Serbs.

Two US flags were burned at a demonstration of 10,000 people in Athens that brought Greece's fractured labour unions together for the first time in years.

France's far-right National Front held two separate marches in Paris, "underscoring the split within the anti-immigration party. Jean-Marie Le Pen, the National Front's long-time leader, reaffirmed his solidarity with "the heroic Serb people," whom he called victims of "injustice" by Europe and the United States.

Minor clashes between opponents and supporters of the NATO action followed a demonstration by 20,000 people in the Spanish capital of Madrid, where union leaders demanded an end to both the NATO airstrikes and the Serb campaign to oust Kosovo Albanians.

Some 5,000 police officers were deployed in Berlin to prevent violence during leftist marches against the NATO action in Kosovo and Turkey's arrest of a Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan. Police moved in

with tear gas, water cannons and nightsticks after groups broke away from a march in a heavily Turkish neighborhood and attacked officers with stones, bottles and firecrackers. Numerous injuries and arrests were reported.

Sympathy for Kurdish rebels was also visible in Istanbul, Turkey, where more than 10,000 people marched peacefully. Elsewhere in the city, a small leftist group threw firebombs into a street before vanishing into back streets, the Anatolia news agency said.

International Labour Day, once a glorious holiday across the former Soviet bloc, has dwindled in importance since the fall of communism.

In Belarus, 19 opposition activists were arrested after disrupting a May Day rally with calls for the resignation of President Alexander Lukashenko, who is openly nostalgic of Soviet times.

An estimated 20,000 people turned out for rallies around Moscow — a fraction of the huge government-organised crowds that paraded before Communist Party leaders during Soviet times.

There too, denunciations of the NATO attacks on Yugoslavia, Russia's Balkan ally, were heard amid demands for

better living conditions.

Moscow's powerful mayor, Yuri Luzhkov, accused NATO of genocide, while Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov blamed President Boris Yeltsin for not protesting the alliance's actions strongly enough.

Marchers in the Pacific port city of Vladivostok burned an American flag outside the US consulate.

The NATO bombardment was a prominent theme in Ukraine as well. At a rally of about 4,000 people in the capital, Kiev, Communist Party former parliament speaker Oleksandr Tkachenko praised the Serbs for waging a "courageous and sacred struggle against the NATO aggressors."

The Western alliance's new members also had anti-NATO demonstrators.

Petitions were circulated at a Communist-organised rally in Prague, Czech Republic, against the possible stationing of NATO military planes in Prague and the sending of Czech troops to Yugoslavia.

In Poland, some of the leftists demonstrating in a downtown Warsaw square pinned bulls-eyes to their clothing — copying a protest against the bombing seen in Yugoslavia. Groups of far-right and far-left youths threw eggs, tomatoes

and other items at each other in several Polish cities.

In Communist Cuba, thousands of workers, carrying signs such as "USA Hands Off Yugoslavia," answered President Fidel Castro's call to show a united front to opponents.

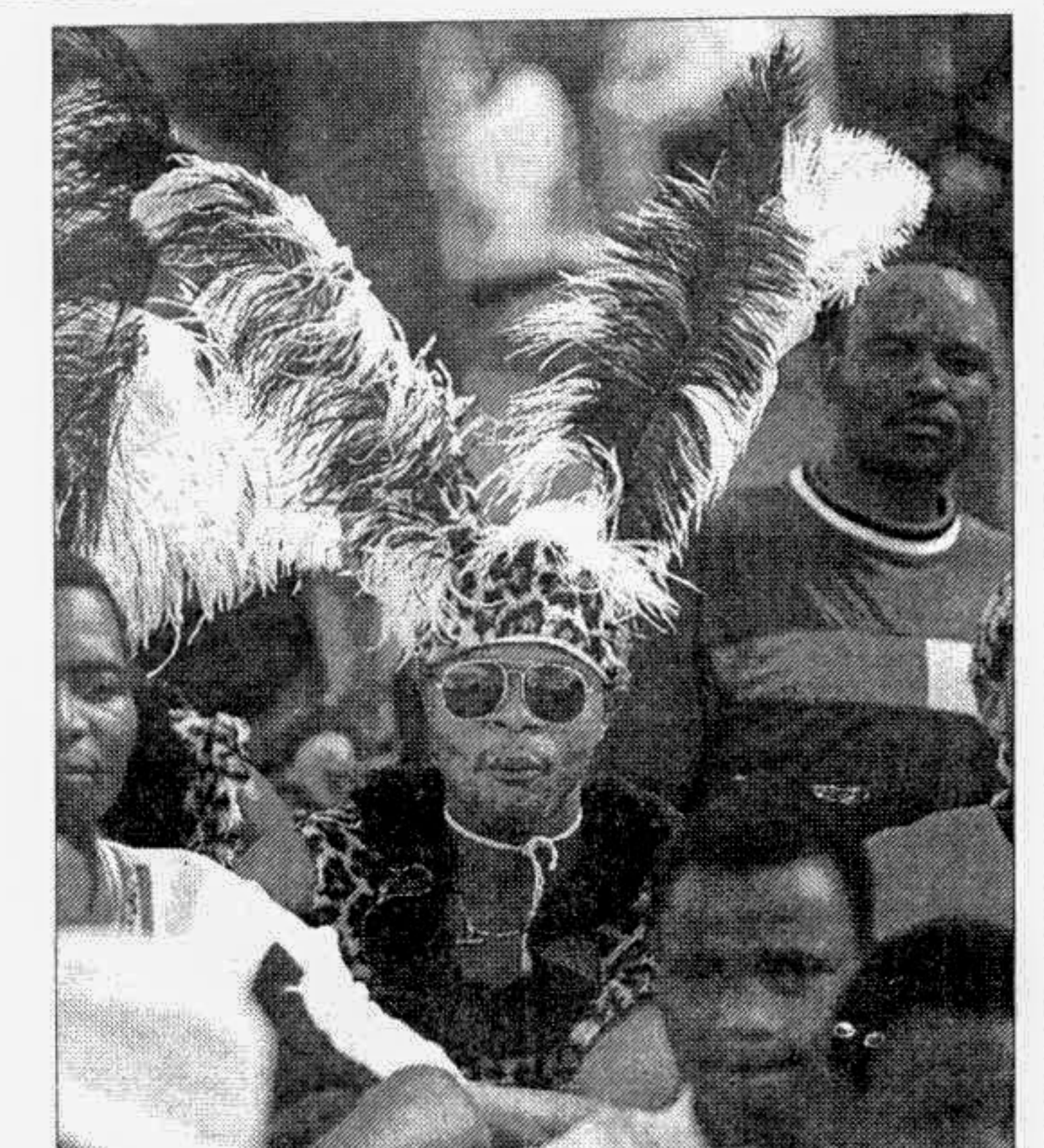
In Asia, thousands of workers defied authorities to protest layoffs, poor working conditions and low wages.

China's Communist Party marked International Labour Day by urging the country's workers, increasingly suffering under free-market reforms, not to relent on unrest.

About 25,000 workers and students marched through downtown Seoul, South Korea, vowing to fight government-ordered corporate reforms they fear will mean huge layoffs.

In the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, more than 1,000 factory workers led by opposition leader Sam Rainsy marched to parliament to protest against poor labour conditions.

In Manila, the Philippine capital, thousands of workers held demonstrations and marches to demand pay increases, while President Joseph Estrada warned workers that a sudden wage hike could upset the fragile economic recovery.



Workers of the Confederation of Trade Unions (CTU) and supporters of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) listen to Zulu chief and home affairs minister Mangosuthu Buthelezi on Saturday during a May Day rally at George Goch stadium in Johannesburg. — AFP photo

1000 sentenced to death in Philippines since '94

MANILA, May 2: Philippines courts sentenced 27 criminals to death last month, raising the total number of death sentences meted out since capital punishment was brought back in 1994 to 1,017, an official said Sunday, reports AP.

The number of death convictions handed down by Philippine courts each month is among the highest in the world, according to said Sen. Loren Legarda, an anticrime activist.

Of the 27 people given death sentences last month, 16 were convicted of rape while the rest were convicted of murder and robbery, he said.

Among the 27 was a house painter convicted of raping his 10-year-old stepdaughter, last February in the country's first judicial execution in 23 years.

Estrada said he wanted Echegaray's execution to serve as a warning to would-be rapists and other criminals. He turned down appeals from the Vatican, European Union, Canada and other countries to call off the execution and abolish the death penalty.

Four other executions are scheduled for this month to July.