

Iraq's assessment of UN humanitarian programme

No alternative to lifting of sanctions

UNITED NATIONS, May 13: After two years, the UN humanitarian programme in Iraq has failed to relieve the suffering of the Iraqi people. Baghdad concluded in a 12-page review of the programme that calls for sanctions to be lifted, reports AP.

Getting humanitarian goods approved and into the country takes too long and the United States and Britain continue to hold up approval for equipment to repair Iraq's oil industry, Foreign Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf wrote Secretary-General Kofi Annan in the report released Wednesday.

"The government of Iraq, while displaying all the facts before your excellency, calls upon you to shoulder your responsibility by frankly announcing that the programme has never, and will never, achieve the lifting of the great suffering of the Iraqi people," al-Sahaf wrote.

"The only logical solution is the lifting of the blockade without additional conditions. This is Iraq's moral and legal demand of the United Nations," he concluded.

The letter came after the UN humanitarian programme itself concluded earlier this month that the programme — while delivering billions of dollars worth of food and medicine to Iraqis living under UN sanctions — cannot meet the overwhelming needs of the people.

The UN oil-for-food programme, started in 1996, allows Iraq to sell \$5.26 billion worth of oil over six months to buy spare parts and food, medicine and other humanitarian aid for 22 million Iraqis suffering under sanctions imposed after Baghdad's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

The sanctions bar Iraq from freely selling its oil on the open market, depriving it of its most valuable commodity.

UN officials have stressed that the programme was never intended to care of all the needs of the Iraqis, and has faulted the Baghdad government failing to implement it effectively.

On Wednesday, the head of the programme, Benon Sevan, said government warehouses were "literally overflowing," with medicine that had been purchased through the programme but not delivered.

UN figures show that about \$570 million worth of medicine and medical supplies had arrived in the past two years, but that only 48 per cent — \$278.8 million — had been distributed to clinics, hospitals and pharmacies.

Sevan noted that the UN sanctions committee on Iraq had recently approved a contract worth \$700,000 to buy 36 forklifts — and that the purchase of new trucks was anticipated — to help move the medicine out of the warehouses.

Al-Sahaf acknowledged that medicines had been held up in warehouses, but he blamed the delay in distribution on New York. Some medicines can only be distributed with certain equipment, and when the equipment doesn't arrive, the medicine has to be stockpiled, he wrote.

Concern about the inefficiencies of the programme and the overall toll sanctions have taken on Iraqis has formed the basis of efforts in the council to improve the humanitarian situation there while returning inspectors to check Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

Under UN resolutions, the embargo cannot be lifted until UN weapons inspectors report Iraq has destroyed its banned weapons.

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The NATO spokesman again dismissed claims that Milosevic has achieved many of his key objectives despite the seven-week long NATO air campaign.

Another report from Brussels says: NATO dismissed as "insignificant" Thursday the reported departure of a group of 250 Yugoslav soldiers from Kosovo, three days after Belgrade announced a partial withdrawal from the province.

Spokesman Jamie Shea said the troop movement, even if confirmed, amounted to "no withdrawal at all" compared to the estimated 40,000 Serb forces in the tiny province.

"If that is true, that would be good news to the extent that that would be 250 less to burn villages, to expel the civilian population, to shell internally displaced persons," he said.

"But at the same time that would represent less than half of one percent of what the Serb forces have in Kosovo, and therefore I wouldn't even dignify that with the term 'partial withdrawal'. I would still say 'no withdrawal at all'."

AP adds from UN: Russia

and the world's industrialised powers are busy drafting a UN resolution outlining a peace deal for Kosovo, despite China's anger at NATO and a political crisis in Moscow that could threaten or delay a final agreement.

After nearly a week of telephone calls and one-on-one meetings, political experts on the eight nations armed with fine-tuned proposals are expected to meet to work on a first draft, German Foreign Ministry officials' Volker Pellet said Wednesday.

The first printed draft probably won't be ready "until the middle to end of next week at the earliest now," said Western diplomat who has been tracking the consultations.

But that proposal will just begin what is expected to be a lengthy process before a resolution is even considered by the UN Security Council.

The first step is the easiest. Leaders of the so-called Group of Eight — the United States, Russia, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Canada and Japan — must sign on, which might require a meeting of foreign ministers, said the Western diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (R), wife of jailed former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim, joins other opposition party leaders at the press conference in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad warned 2.7 million members to be on guard against the growing influence of opposition parties on the 30th anniversary of Malaysia's May 13 1996 racial riots.

— AFP photo

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— AFP photo



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— AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Sharif arrives in S'pore: Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif arrived yesterday in Singapore to discuss bilateral and regional issues with Singapore leaders. The Pakistan High Commission said, AFP says from Singapore.

Sharif arrived from Brunei, accompanied by his wife Kulsoom Nawaz and senior officials and businessmen. He will meet with Singapore counterpart Goh Chok Tong and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew later, officials said.

5 commit suicide in India: A family of five failing to find means of paying up huge debts killed themselves by consuming poison in their flat in north Calcutta's Cossipore area Wednesday night, PTI says from Calcutta.

Dipak Kothari, 38, his wife Prem of 34 years of age and mother, 60-year-old Sohini Devi, took poison injections and administered it to their daughter 12-year-old Nitu and son Ankit, 7, with water, resulting in deaths for all.

2 hurt in ROK refinery fire: Two people were seriously injured when a fire swept through an oil refinery plant in the southeastern port of Ulsan yesterday, a television report said, AFP reports from Seoul.

The fire followed a mysterious blast in the plant at SK Corporation YTN television said. Two workers at the plant were seriously burned and listed in serious condition in hospital.

Thai king advised rest: The world's oldest reigning monarch, Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej, has been advised by his doctors to rest after undergoing medical treatment, a statement from the Royal Household said yesterday, Reuters says from Bangkok.

The 71-year-old monarch was exhausted after losing blood from a brief surgical procedure to remove a tiny section of non-malignant tissue from a tract in his digestive system on May 11, the statement said.

1 killed in Russia bus crash: One person was killed and 20 injured in central Russia yesterday when a bus swerved into a ditch and flipped over, a news report said, AP says from Moscow.

The bus was carrying oil workers when its steering system malfunctioned and the driver lost control near the village of Pavlovka, 1,200 kms east of Moscow, according to the ITAR-Tass news agency. Four of the injured passengers were in serious condition, the report said.

ROK minister leaves for US: Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Hong Soon-young left for Washington yesterday for a five-day visit to discuss policy toward communist North Korea, AP says from Seoul.

Hong will meet Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and congressional leaders to discuss measures to persuade North Korea to abandon its ballistic missile and nuclear programmes, the Foreign Ministry said.

3 held for murder spree in China: Chinese police in Hubei province have captured a gang of three men who conducted some 30 robberies in at least three provinces and killed more than 70 people, a police spokesman said yesterday, AFP says from Shanghai.

In the 13 months to March, the gang travelled state highways, breaking into stores, rural infirmaries and isolated homes, stealing money and raping women, he said, confirming a report in the official Baokan Wenzhai daily.

Boy dies in Indian wedding tragedy: A wedding ceremony in the Indian capital New Delhi ended in tragedy when an eight-year-old boy was killed by celebratory gunfire, reports said yesterday, AFP says from New Delhi.

The bridegroom's brother had fired in the air at Wednesday's ceremony with a double-barreled shotgun, when one of the cartridges misfired, hitting the young boy in the thigh, the Statesman daily.

Van Gogh painting fetches \$20m: Van Gogh's 'Canal with Washerwoman' was sold for nearly 20 million dollars last Wednesday at Christie's spring art sale, AFP says from New York.

The oil painting, which dates from 1888, fetched 19,802,500 dollars, almost exactly its pre-sale estimated of 20 million dollars.

Tremors jolt northern Japan: An earthquake measuring 6.1 on the Richter scale jolted northern Japan early yesterday but there were no reports of casualties or damage, the meteorological agency said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The epicentre of the quake, which struck at 2:59 am (1759 GMT Wednesday), was located in Kushiro, Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost main island, 1,500 kilometres north of Tokyo, the agency said.



Czech top model Adriana Karembeu poses as she arrives for the opening ceremony of the 52nd Cannes Film Festival on Wednesday. The world's cinematographic event started with Russian filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov's movie 'The Barber of Siberia.'

— AFP photo

G-8 leaders busy drafting peace plan Y'slav army 'melting away': NATO

BRUSSELS, May 13: NATO said Thursday its air raids are taking an increasingly heavy toll on Serb forces, having destroyed some 100 aircraft so far and "melting away" the Yugoslav army, reports AFP.

Five more Serb jets were destroyed on the ground in the last 24 hours, said spokesman Jamie Shea, citing President Slobodan Milosevic himself as admitting the impact the 50-day toll campaign is having.

"There are signs today that he is realizing the fact that his activities in Kosovo and the NATO air operations are both taking an increasingly heavy toll of his forces on the ground," he said.

He quoted the Yugoslav leader as saying in an address to Serb soldiers that "in that struggle many of your members bravely gave their lives."

"He's admitting to heavy losses," said Shea. "The fact that Milosevic is indicating it suggests it is significant, otherwise why would he bother to mention it."

"It also suggests that he is realising that his army is being melted away," he said.

Shea confirmed that its operations had been helped by good weather on Wednesday, al-

though cloud cover again led to the cancellation of some planned attacks overnight.

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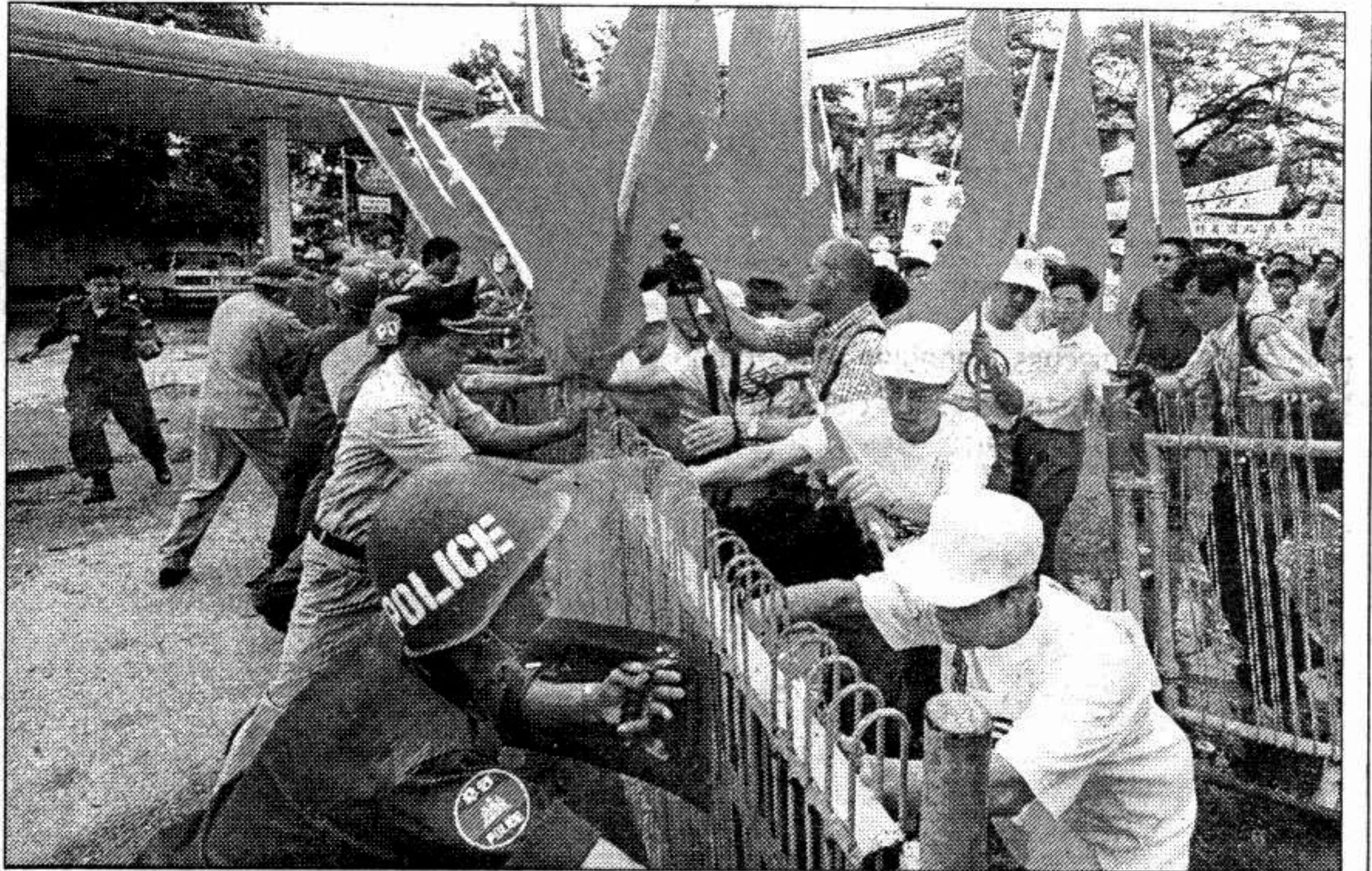
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Cambodian police try to hold their ground as ethnic Chinese demonstrators storm a security cordon pushing through a gate outside the US embassy in Phnom Penh, yesterday, as a form of protest against NATO's bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. At least 30 warning shots were fired by police when the 400 demonstrators charged a security cordon, some demonstrators making it to a second checkpoint before police reinforcements were rushed in to calm the scene.

— AFP photo

Pakistan slams US for meddling in internal affairs

ISLAMABAD, May 13: Pakistan yesterday slammed the United States for "unwarranted interference" in Islamabad's internal affairs by criticizing the arrest of senior journalist Najam Sethi and crackdown on others, reports PTI.

In a strongly-worded statement, the foreign ministry said Pakistan had taken strong exception to the statement made by the US department of state alleging mistreatment of mediemen.

The statement of the state department is "unwarranted interference in the internal affairs of Pakistan" based on "assumptions which are not supported by facts," a foreign ministry statement said.

It alleged that the US statement lacked objectivity and understanding of the circumstances that led to the arrest of the concerned individual.

The foreign office denied that Sethi had been physically mistreated or arrested without charge and claimed that he had been arrested on the specific charge of "anti-state activities"

Rajiv Murder Renganath ready to reveal all about assassination plot

CHENNAI, May 13: Renganath, one of those acquitted in the 'Rajiv Gandhi assassination case', yesterday said he was ready to reveal to the multi-disciplinary monitoring agency (MDMA) details about who funded the plot to assassinate the former prime minister to create a political vacuum, reports PTI.

Talking to newsmen outside the Chennai Central Prison after being released, he alleged that the funds had been provided from many sources, including from a 'godman'.

Claiming that he was 'forced' to harbour the one-eyed jack, Sivarasan, and his associate, Subha, in Bangalore, Renganath claimed that he had also knowledge of how Sivarasan had brought the weapons into Tamil Nadu and was ready to provide the information to the MDMA.

While Sivarasan had committed suicide by shooting himself and consuming cyanide, Subha had also consumed cyanide when police were about to close in on them.

He claimed that he was also in the know of how the one-eyed-jack had made his way to Sriperumbudur on May 21, when the bomb strapped to suicide bomber Dhanu exploded killing Rajiv Gandhi and some others on the spot.

The MDMA, set up from within the CBI, was constituted by the centre following the recommendation by the JAIN Commission for further probe into certain aspects of the assassination.

Renganath also alleged that the case was foisted on him by Dr Karthikeyan, a former CBI director who led the special investigation team to probe the assassination, only because he had provided the information and named certain persons.

Sundaram, another of the acquitted, said he owed his acquittal to some persons, who had formed a committee to raise funds to meet the expenses for challenging the death penalty in the Supreme Court awarded to 26 persons, including five women, by the trial judge on January 28, 1998.

Call for end to violence in E Timor

DILI, East Timor, May 13: Hundreds of people marched through East Timor's capital Dili today call for an end to killings in the troubled territory, witnesses said, reports Reuters.

Catholic priests and nuns joined civilians waving banners that read "No Violence" in the peaceful protest, which started at Dili's main cathedral and which witnesses said included as many as 2,000 people.

"We are calling for an end to the violence in East Timor, that's the reason why we took to the streets today," said a man who participated in the rally.

Indonesian police watched the protest and there were no reports of violence.

Clashes between East Timorese in favour of remaining part of Indonesia and those who want independence have intensified in recent months after Jakarta abruptly changed its policy towards the predominantly Catholic territory in January.

Jakarta has said it would grant East Timor independence if the former Portuguese colony rejects an offer of wide-ranging autonomy within Indonesia in a ballot scheduled for August 8.

Four people were killed this week in the clashes between warring groups. Scores have been killed this year, many in attacks by armed pro-Indonesia

forces that have at least tacit support from the Indonesian army.

On Wednesday, hundreds of East Timorese gathered in Dili to pray for peace in territory, during which Bishop Carlos Belo urged the rival groups to put down their arms.

Indonesia has promised to clamp down on the violence ahead of the UN-brokered independence vote on August 8, but it shows few signs of abating.

Indonesia invaded East Timor in 1975 and annexed it the following year. The United Nations still regards Lisbon as the administering power in the territory of 800,000 people.

Pak SC rejects Benazir's appeal

ISLAMABAD, May 13: The registrar of Pakistan's Supreme Court today rejected on technical grounds an appeal lodged by opposition leader Benazir Bhutto against her conviction for graft, officials said, reports AFP.

The registrar said in an order that Bhutto, who is currently abroad, must surrender herself before the court, the official AP news agency said.

Lawyers for the former premier filed the appeal on her behalf, two days before the expiry of a stipulated 30-day period allowed under the law to challenge the April 15 conviction on charges of corruption.

Bhutto and her husband Asif Ali Zardari were sentenced to five years in jail on charges of receiving millions of dollars in kickbacks from a Swiss firm in return for a 1994 pre-shipment trading cargo inspection contract.

The court also fined them 8.6 million dollars, barred them from public office and ordered the seizure of their property. Bhutto, who is Dubai, has described her conviction as politically motivated.

Labour clinches coalition deal in Scottish Parliament

EDINBURGH, May 13: The ruling British Labour party said late Wednesday it had struck a coalition deal with the minority Liberal Democrats in the first Scottish parliament in nearly 300 years, reports AFP.

Labour and the Liberal Democrats have agreed the basis of a deal to form an alliance, a Labour official said, after a marathon session of talks.

The announcement was swiftly denied by the Liberal Democrats, who insisted the talking was still going on, although the search for agreement was "making progress."

"Both sides are continuing to talk," said a Liberal Democrat spokesman. "There is not going to be a statement this evening. They are still talking and still making progress."

If the talks do yield agreement on a coalition to run Scotland, the two parties will have to go to their parliamentary groups with the plan today.

Labour's claims of a settlement came after MPs were sworn in Wednesday, marking the first step in the establishment of a semi-autonomous government here following last week's historic elections.

Priyanka new youth leader of India?

NEW DELHI, May 13: National Students Union of India (NSUI) the student wing of Congress party, yesterday decided to project Priyanka Gandhi as the youth leader of the country and requested her to contest the coming Lok Sabha polls, reports PTI.

Priyanka should be projected as the youth leader to generate a spirit of positive policies and rejuvenate the youth of the nation to work for the programme and policies of the Congress, NSUI National President Meenakshi Natarajan, who presided over the student wing's state presidents meet here, said in a statement.

The meeting also decided to request Congress President Sonia Gandhi to contest the Lok Sabha polls from two seats, one in the north and another in the south, Natarajan said.

She said the party president should give Lok Sabha ticket to at least one person from NSUI Central Committee in coming polls and similarly, adequate representation should be given to state units in the assembly polls.

Five to die for smuggling in China

BEIJING, May 13: Six people, including two customs officials in a southern Chinese city, have been sentenced to death in China's biggest smuggling case in 50 years of Communist Party rule, state news reports said Thursday, reports AP.

The three Hong Kong residents and three from the Chinese mainland were convicted of bribery and smuggling and sentenced by courts in Guangdong, near Hong Kong, Wednesday, the state-run Xinhua News Agency reported. Twenty-five others received lesser sentences.

Among those sentenced to death were Cao Xinkang, the city's customs chief, and Zhu Xiangcheng, head of the city's customs inspection section.

US lauds Indonesia's preparation for polls

WASHINGTON, May 13: The Clinton administration is optimistic about Indonesia's first democratic elections in four decades, with a top official describing preparations as "a remarkable achievement," reports AP.

The Indonesian government deserves great credit for devising and implementing a credible election process, Assistant Secretary of State Stanley Roth told the House subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific on Wednesday.

Roth, however, also cautioned that "money politics" — an Indonesian code-word for official corruption — could undermine the validity of the election process.

The relative success of the transition to democracy was all the more surprising in view of the political upheaval a year ago when President Suharto, Indonesia's longtime authoritarian ruler, was ousted amid massive antigovernment rioting, Roth said.

B J Habibie, the interim president, "has been able to come up with a process and a timetable that has turned out to be a 'ceptable to the vast majority of the opposition parties,'" he said.

Another good sign was that Indonesia's politically influential armed forces, which have a long tradition of meddling in politics, apparently have decided to remain neutral in the contest, Roth said.

"My sense is that the military has made the correct judgement that it can't predict who the winner is going to be, and that therefore to come down on the side of any one party would not be a good tactical move," he said.

Despite continuing separatist and intercommunal violence in many parts of the country, 48 parties have so far been certified for participation in the elections.

The elections are a two-step process. On June 7, voters will elect a 500-member national parliament and local government bodies but will not choose the president and vice-president.

That will occur in November, when parliamentary deputies supplemented by another 200 members selected from local governments and other constituencies, convene to elect a president and vice-president.

Mamata defends centre's decision CPI(M) protests removal of West Bengal governor

CALCUTTA, May 13: CPI (M)-led ruling front yesterday urged the President KR Narayanan to ensure that the union government was restrained from taking recourse to "undemocratic methods" and that there was no recurrence of "indecent removal" of governors from other states, reports PTI.

At a public rally here as part of state-wide "protest day" against the "removal" of the state governor AR Kidwai, front leaders said that it had been decided to submit a memorandum to the state government for forwarding it to the president in this regard.

Speaking at a rally in city's Rani Rashmoni avenue, CPI (M) politburo member Biman Bose said that the people would raise their voice of protest against the "unethical and undemocratic stance" of the Vajpayee government.

CPI (M) state secretary Anil Biswas said people of West Bengal would welcome the new governor "provided he acts in accordance with the constitution."

Meanwhile, Trinamool congress leader Mamata Banerjee yesterday defended the centre's decision to change the West Bengal governor and said the CPI(M)-led front had "no right" to question the action which had President approval.

"CPI (M) has no right to question the president's approval," Banerjee told newsmen as her residence.

Banerjee said the term of the state governor had expired long back and there was no room for any criticism of the centre's decision.

Banerjee came down heavily on the "orchestrated criticism" of both congress and CPI (M) of the centre's decision on the governor, and alleged "both the parties are once against exposed."

The Trinamool leader was of the view that the Vajpayee government had not crossed its limit in changing the governor of West Bengal.

Off the Record

Tree killer

FALL RIVER, Massachusetts: Police were looking for a man suspected of killing more than 30 trees by training his pit bull to sharpen his teeth on the bark, says AP.

One witness said he saw the dog hanging from a tree limb by its teeth in a park in the city south of Boston.

The dog owner apparently had the animal jump up and bite the trees to sharpen its teeth, killing two, police said. The dog has stripped away bark, leaving its teeth marks visible on the undersides of the trees.

"We're doing our best to find the culprit," said police Capt. Al Morrisette.

Police only have a description of the man, who could be charged with violating a city ordinance against injuring a tree and fined \$150 for each offense.

Monica's Story remainderd

NEW YORK: From Barbara Walters to the bargain bin. Two and a half months after the release of 'Monica's Story,' the former White House intern's best seller has joined the ranks of the "remainderd," books offered at a big discount, says AP.

"It's common approach that publishers use to try to boost sales of a hardcover that's lagging," Jim Milliot, "business and news editor for the trade magazine Publishers Weekly, said Tuesday.

"Monica's Story," easily the year's most-publicised book, came out in early March, the day after Ms Walters interviewed Ms Lewinsky on national television.

Although hated by reviewers, it was hardly a commercial flop. According to John Murphy, director of publicity at St Martin's Press, the book easily sold out its initial printing of 350,000 and has now sold about half a million copies in the United States alone.

Written by Princess Diana biographer Andrew Morton, Ms. Lewinsky's memoir about the affair with President Bill Clinton immediately topped best-seller lists and soon faded.

Rock politics?

LIMA: A Peruvian rock band is rattling supporters of an exiled former president, says AP.

A song titled "Alan" by the band Nosequein Y Nosecuantos parodies the final years of Alan Garcia's populist government. Initially popular when he started in 1985, Garcia left in 1990 amid corruption scandals, inflation at 7,000 per cent a year and Marxist rebels who planted car bombs at will in the capital.

Garcia fled in 1992 to exile in Colombia and France to avoid arrest on corruption charges. Garcia wants to return and his party has chosen him to head their list of candidates in the 2000 congressional elections.

The rock 'n' roll song has become a favourite of radio stations with lyrics such as: "We Peruvians love you, but living in Paris... Alan! Alan! Don't come back."

Leaders of Garcia's left-centre APRA party said they plan to sue the group for defamation and suspect that Peru's powerful intelligence service, which supports President Alberto Fujimori, paid the group to undermine Garcia's return.