

International

Escape route for refugees cut off: UNHCR

Breakthrough on Kosovo settlement imminent: Spanish PM

MOSCOW, May 17: Visiting Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar said Monday that a "serious breakthrough" on settling the Kosovo conflict could come any day, the ITAR-TASS news agency reported, says AFP.

Aznar, speaking after a meeting with Russia's Balkans envoy Viktor Chernomyrdin, said he was counting on "a serious breakthrough concerning a political solution to the conflict in Kosovo," the agency said.

The accord between the Group of Seven leading industrial nations and Russia in Bonn earlier this month "contains some criteria that will allow the conflict to return to the path of a political settlement," Aznar said on arrival here Sunday.

Chernomyrdin repeated his country's position that Russia demands "above all an end to the air strikes and then the application of all these measures."

Aznar also is expected to meet Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Prime Minister-designate Sergei Stepashin.

Another report says Britain on Monday stepped up its campaign to persuade its allies to send ground troops into Kosovo without waiting for Yugoslav

authorities to give their formal agreement.

Speaking at NATO headquarters here, British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook reiterated that the allies would not allow President Slobodan Milosevic a veto on action deemed necessary to ensure the return of refugees.

"We are not going to hang around in Macedonia until there is a grand signing ceremony in front of the flags and the cameras," Cook said.

The British minister reiterated that London was not prepared to "launch a major invasion against organised armed resistance."

But he said the alliance had to "examine very carefully how much longer the Yugoslav army can continue without reaching the point at which it cannot provide organised resistance."

Meanwhile, the apparent sealing of Montenegro's borders with Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina will cut off major escape route for refugees from Kosovo, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) warned Monday.

The Yugoslav army late Friday "moved to take control of the border between Montenegro and Albania," and has reported-

edly done the same with cross-points into Bosnia-Herzegovina, UNHCR spokesman Kris Janowski said in Geneva.

According to reports from refugees, a group of between 100 and 150 men travelling towards Albania were taken off buses late Friday, and allegedly sent back to Kosovo in Yugoslav federal army vehicles.

"We have been in touch with the authorities in Montenegro. They are very alarmed. They say it is totally illegal what happened," Janowski said.

Two of the men on the buses managed to "buy their way to freedom in Albania by paying 15,000 German marks, according to an account given to the UNHCR in Roazje by a refugee who had contact with one of the men."

"For the first time ever there are efforts to take men away in Montenegro itself and take them back to Kosovo, which in itself sounds very, very ominous."

"We assume they are not being taken back there to be placed in a spa," Janowski said.

A source close to the Montenegrin police said Sunday the Yugoslav army put checkpoints on the borders between Montenegro and Bosnia in an at-

tempt to stop recruits and reservists leaving the country.

The source told AFP that over 20 percent of recruits and reservists from Montenegro, Serbia's tiny partner in the Yugoslav federation, had accepted military call up. Thousands of them had already left the country, various sources say.

Elsewhere, around 1,300 Kosovar refugees poured into Macedonia over the weekend, according to the UNHCR.

Most came by train from Urosevac area, others from Lipjan, Stojni, Vitina and the capital city Pristina.

AP adds: President Slobodan Milosevic has agreed to meet a UN delegation before allowing the world body to make its first inspection of Kosovo since nearly half the province's population was driven out and NATO launched an air campaign against Yugoslavia.

The 15-member team, driving a fleet of white four-wheel drive vehicles with a diesel fuel tank behind, arrived in Belgrade Sunday and said they would assess humanitarians needs throughout Yugoslavia. They were due to meet Milosevic on Monday.

AP adds: The candidate who emerges as Israel's next prime minister faces the task of guiding the country past a traumatic campaign into a peace process fraught with the potential for further division.

Polling stations in the vote pitting Prime Minister Ben-

'Ehud Barak will unseat incumbent PM'

Netanyahu's nightmare comes true

JERUSALEM, May 17: Labour Party challenger Ehud Barak will unseat right-wing incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel's general election today, an opinion poll released at the start of voting showed, reports Reuters.

The prime minister's race had been expected to stretch into a runoff vote in early June. But the last-minute withdrawals by three minor candidates meant that Netanyahu and Barak would decide the election in a single round.

The deeply personal, retributive contest between the former army mates seeped into a campaign replete with epithets like "liar" and "thief."

Each blamed the other for the bitterness.

"With God's help, we will win and we will overcome the inexcusable, hateful campaign of the prime minister," Barak told supporters in a Tel Aviv suburb.

Oddly, the issue that substantially divides them — how to revive the peace process — barely rippled throughout the campaign.

Netanyahu, who froze peace talks with the Palestinians in December, has said they must fulfill a long list of demands before he brings Israel back to the table. Some of his demands have been dismissed by the region's US peace brokers as unrealistic.

He also backs a crisscross Jewish settlement pattern in the West Bank that would make Palestinian statehood, some-

thing he opposes, virtually impossible.

Barak wants Israel to return to its commitments under the Wye River peace agreement brokered by US President Bill Clinton last October. The deal calls on Israel to cede land to the Palestinians in exchange for security measures. Barak also wants to contain settlement and advocates a separation from the Palestinians.

In Lebanon, Netanyahu wants to end Israel's military presence by reaching an agreement with Syria, the main powerbroker in the country. But he is not ready to pay the Syrian price — the return of the disputed Golan Heights.

Barak, a former military chief, backs territorial compromise.

Whoever wins, Arabs in the region have tired of the five-month campaign that has effectively stymied any progress in the peace process.

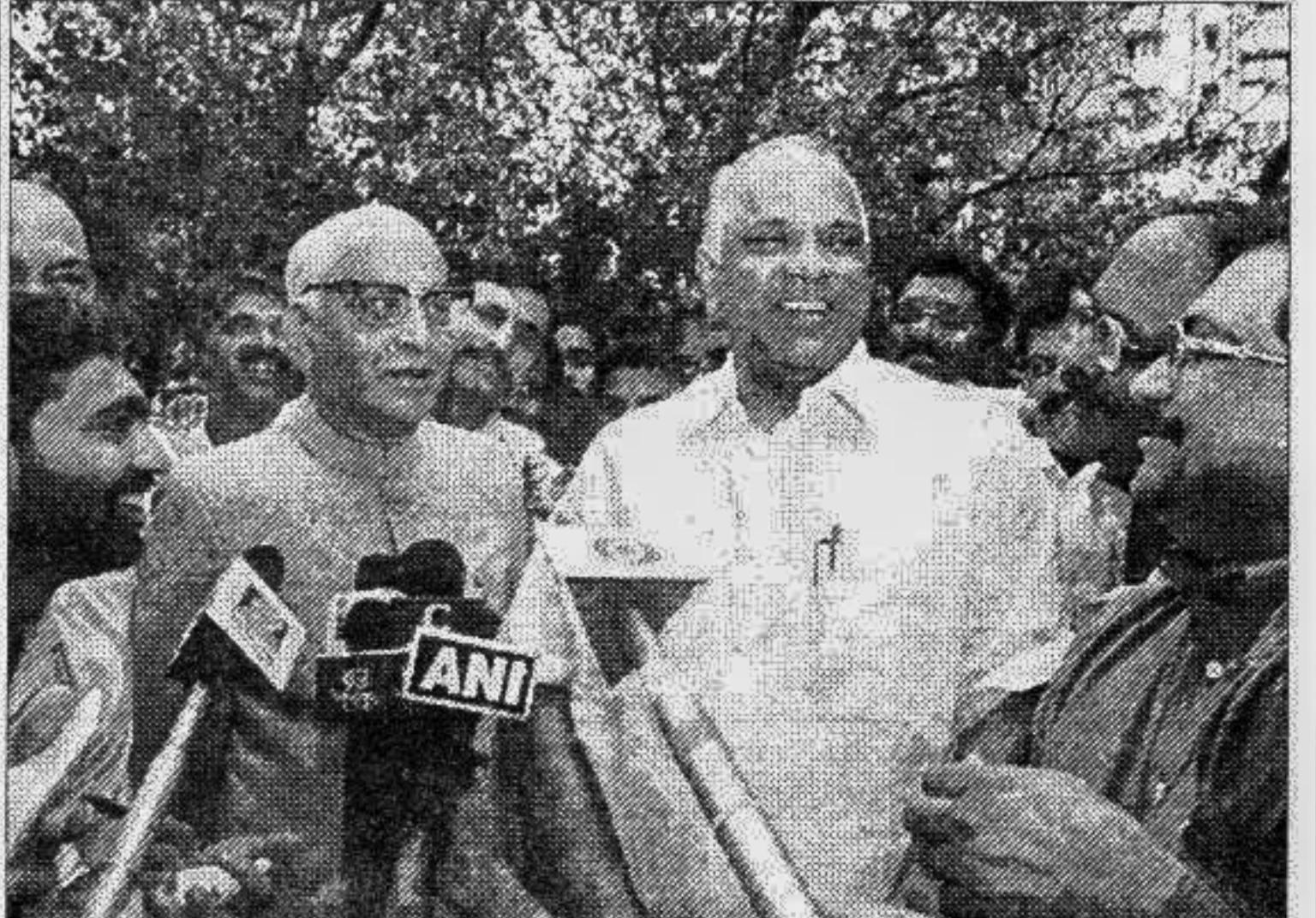
"All I hope for is that whoever wins will believe that peace is the only way to achieve stability in this region," Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was quoted as saying by the daily Al-Gomhuria newspaper.

Officially, Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority has remained neutral, wary of being drawn into Netanyahu's efforts to portray Arafat as intervening on Barak's behalf.



Israeli Labour Party leader Ehud Barak casts his ballot in Kokhav Yair yesterday, during Israeli general elections. Israelis are voting for prime minister and a 120-member parliament, with polls pointing to a comfortable victory for Barak over incumbent prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY



Congress stalwart Sharad Pawar (white shirt) along with Sudhakar Naik (glasses) speaking to journalists at the Chavan center in Bombay yesterday, where Pawar met his supporters to decide the next phase of action if he is sacked by the Congress Working Committee president Sonia Gandhi, after Sharad Pawar, P A Sangma and Tariq Anwar in a letter to Sonia Gandhi questioned her credentials to become the prime minister in view of her foreign origin.

— AFP photo

Tornadoes kill 2 in Iowa: Tornadoes have swept through western Iowa, killing two people and injuring at least 14, authorities said, AP reports from Logan.

Names of those who died were not released pending notification of relatives. Jim Symour, a hospital administrator, said Sunday.

A tornado that developed near Logan on Sunday afternoon destroyed six homes, damaged several others and destroyed a bridge on a rural gravel road, authorities said.

Fiji PM concedes defeat: Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka conceded defeat yesterday in Fiji's historic multi-race election after his rainbow coalition was decimated at the polls. Reuters reports from Suva.

The swing in the vote has clearly indicated that the people want a change, want a change in government, want a change in policies, want a change in personalities and we should respect the wish of the people," Rabuka told Reuters in an interview.

Quake shakes E Indonesia: An earthquake with an estimated magnitude of 6.2 struck off eastern Indonesia early Monday, the Hong Kong Observatory said. There were no immediate reports of damage or injuries. AP reports from Hong Kong.

The quake was centered near Irian Jaya, about 490 km east-southeast of Manokwari, the observatory reported.

Irian Jaya comprises the western part of the island of New Guinea. Papua New Guinea makes up the eastern part.

Elephants kill 2 in Vietnam: A herd of elephants has trampled two villagers to death in Vietnam's central province of Binh Thuan, forestry officials said yesterday in Hanoi.

Villagers found the crushed bodies of a peasant and his wife near the forest of Tan Linh district, an official from the forest protection department told AFP. "We have noted a troop of between five and seven elephants whose presence has sown panic among the local population," the official said. "They have been instructed to protect the animals but do not know how to avoid attacks." The latest attack brings the death toll from elephants to nine in the past six months.

Advani more foreign than Sonia: Kanshi Ram

JALNDHAR (Punjab), May 17: BSP supremo Kanshi Ram yesterday said union Home Minister L K Advani was "more foreign than Congress President Sonia Gandhi," reports PTI.

When asked by reporters about whether the BSP would make Congress President Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin an election issue, Kanshi Ram said Advani, "who was raising this issue time and again, was more foreign than Gandhi."

Advani is a dangerous foreign hand, Sonia is a lesser danger as Italy is far away," the BSP supremo, who was here to attend a training camp of his party workers, said.

Kanshi Ram ruled out any alliance with the Congress at national or state level.

Kuwaiti Islamists oppose vote for women

KUWAIT, May 17: Influential Kuwaiti Islamists on Sunday rejected a first step by the conservative Muslim state to grant women full political rights, reports Reuters.

An order by the ruler, Emir Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah, of Kuwait, to allow women to vote and run for public office as of 2003 was passed by the government as a decree on Sunday.

Constitutional experts said the measure would still have to be approved by the all-male parliament to be elected in July.

The last parliament, the only such elected assembly among Gulf Arab states, was dissolved by the Emir this month during a dispute between lawmakers and the government over distribution of faulty copies of the Quran.

Judge gunned down in Ukraine

KIEV, May 17: The chief judge of a regional court was gunned down in Ukraine's Black Sea port city of Odessa in an apparent contract killing, a news report said Monday, says AP.

Two unidentified assailants killed Borys Vilkov, the head of the regional arbitration court, as he was driving to his home on Sunday, the UNIAN news agency reported Monday.

The attackers blocked Vilkov's car with their vehicle and opened fire at close range, also killing an Odessa television chief who was with Vilkov, the report said.

The 15 billion dollars, it said, included "nine billion dollars in cash that was transferred from a bank in Switzerland to another, presumably safer, bank in Austria" shortly after Suharto resigned in May 1998.

The magazine also said it had documented that more than 73 billion dollars "in revenues

Second stage of polls begin in Nepal

KATHMANDU, May 17: Voting opened in the second round of Nepal's general election today, with just over half the kingdom's 13.5 million electorate getting the chance to cast their ballots, reports AFP.

The election has been split into two stages covering different parts of the Himalayan Kingdom to help security forces deal with the threat of violence from Maoist rebels.

The first round was held May 3.

Polling began at 8 am (0215 GMT) in 39 of Nepal's 75 districts, and the counting of votes from both rounds will begin as soon as ballot booths close at 5:00 pm.

Final results are not expected until later this week.

Opinion polls and political observers predict that the centrist Nepal Congress led by Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala will emerge as the largest single party in parliament followed by the two main communist factions.

However, there are doubts as to whether the Nepali Congress can secure the minimum 103 seats required for a simple majority in the 205-member lower house.

Police recovered and defused four bombs in Karaiya village in Rupandehi district, 200 kilometres (125 miles) west of Kathmandu.

An AP report adds: Police defused four bombs in a village, as thousands of Nepalis lined up at voting stations Monday in the second and final round of general elections, officials said.

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'Suharto family has accumulated \$15 b'

JAKARTA, May 17: The US weekly magazine Time has traced some 15 billion dollars in wealth accumulated by former Indonesian president Suharto and his family, the magazine said in a statement received here today, reports AFP.

The upcoming issue would detail the current holdings of Suharto and his six children in "cash, shares, corporate assets, real estate, jewellery and fine art," it added.

The investigation into the family fortune, it said, was the result of a four month investigation by Time correspondents in 11 countries involving hundreds of interviews.

The 15 billion dollars, it said, included "nine billion dollars in cash that was transferred from a bank in Switzerland to another, presumably safer, bank in Austria" shortly after Suharto resigned in May 1998.

The magazine also said it had documented that more than 73 billion dollars "in revenues

and assets" passed through the Suharto family's hands during his 32 years in office.

But it said the holdings have been reduced over the years by mismanagement and Indonesia's financial crisis."

Suharto has in the past year consistently denied that he accumulated a fortune while in power and in one television appearance described a Forbes magazine estimate that he was one of the world's richest men as "ridiculous."

Time also said that the family between them holds some 3.6 million hectares (8.9 million acres) of real estate (an area larger than Belgium), and own "significant equity in 56 companies" in Indonesia.

Overseas interests include hundreds of companies from the United States to Uzbekistan, from the Netherlands to Nigeria," the statement said.

The government of Suharto's protege and successor, President BJ Habibie has been probing Suharto for months on accusations that his wealth was accumulated illegally.

He insisted the real factor behind deteriorating US-China relations was NATO's accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, which he called a "horrifying atrocity."

Cox's bipartisan investigation initially focused on two American companies, Hughes Electronics Corp. and Loral Space and Communications. The companies are under investigation by the Justice Department for allegedly supplying rocket technology to the Chinese after the failure in 1995 and 1996 of Chinese rockets carrying US satellites.

The report also reveals that China conducted a half-dozen tests in the mid-1980s of neutron bomb technology believed to have been stolen from the

United States, the officials said.

"There is no question that what the People's Republic of China is now doing is a direct result of what they have stolen from the United States," Cox said on ABC television.

China's ambassador to the United States Li Zhaoming, said the charges of spying were "an intentional and deliberate fabrication."

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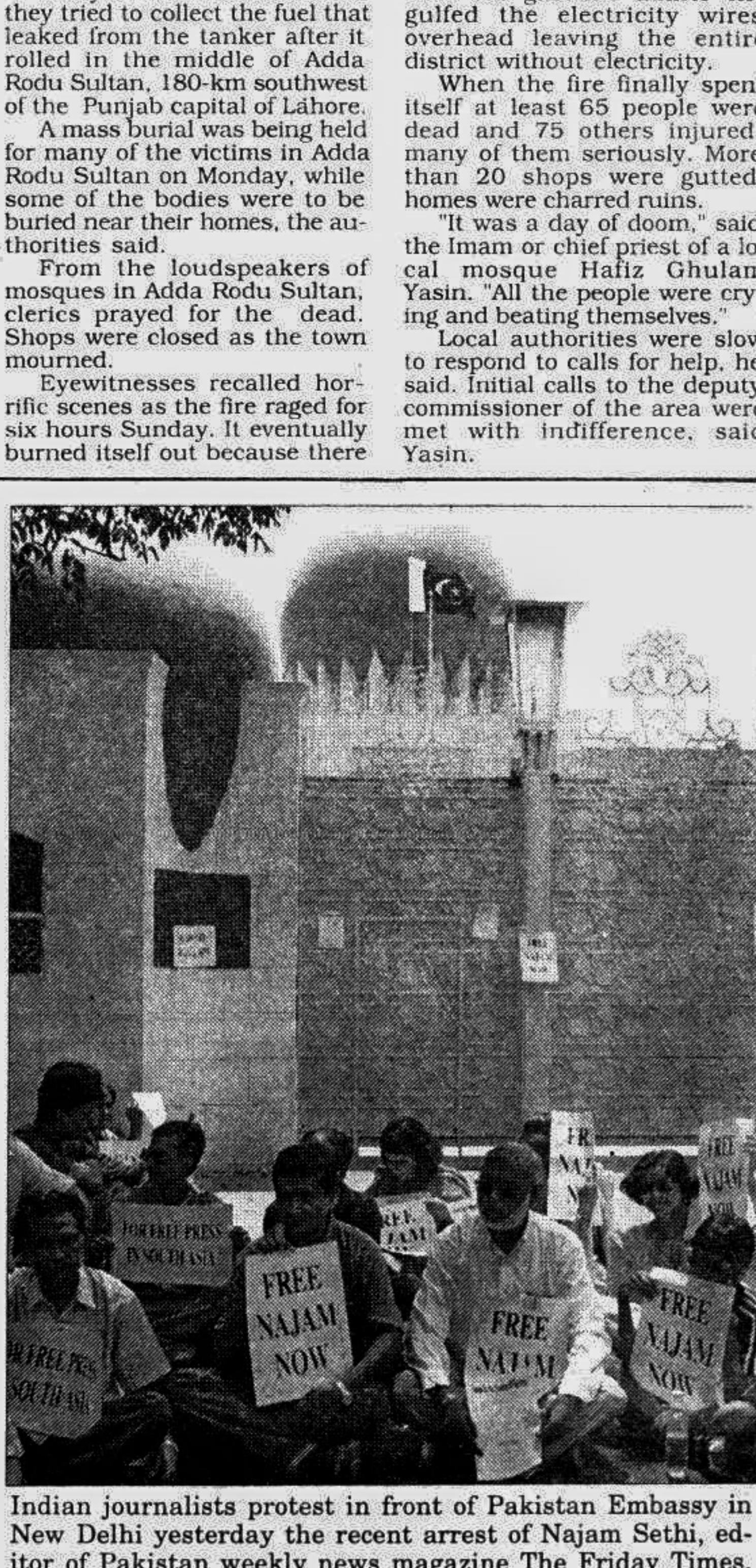
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Both companies have denied wrongdoing. Cox said Sunday their actions were "neither legal nor above board."

Indian journalists protest in front of Pakistan Embassy in New Delhi yesterday the recent arrest of Najam Sethi, editor of Pakistani weekly news magazine The Friday Times.

Najam's detention by Pakistani authorities has sparked protests in India and elsewhere.

— AFP photo



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