



Asif Ali Zardari denies suicide attempt

KARACHI, May 19: Weak from having neither slept nor eaten in three days, Asif Ali Zardari, the jailed husband of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, said his jailers tortured him, a colleague who saw him said Wednesday, reports AP.

The former defence minister in Benazir's government, Aftab Shaban Mirani, said Zardari late on Tuesday following police reports that he tried to commit suicide.

Zardari denied the suicide attempt, said Mirani in an interview with The Associated Press.

In a statement from the United Arab Emirates, where she is currently living, Benazir to accused Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government of trying to murder her husband.

The meeting between Zardari, Mirani and his father was held late on Tuesday in a stark cement box-shaped room in the Criminal Investigation Agency Centre in southern Karachi, said Mirani.

Zardari's neck was red and swollen and there was a bandage on his neck beneath his left ear, said Mirani.

Zardari was a week, his clothes disheveled and his eyes bloodshot, he said.

Zardari has refused to eat or drink anything for the last three days because he fears his jailers will try to poison him, said Mirani. Zardari has requested food from outside the CIA centre where he is being held, but the authorities have so far refused his request.

Mirani said the men spoke in whispers throughout the 15-minute visit to prevent nearby guards from overhearing their conversation, he said.

According to Mirani, Zardari told him: "I am being tortured and they keep asking me questions for which I have no answers. They haven't let me sleep in three days."

Zardari is being questioned in connection with the 1995 shooting death of retired Justice Nisam Ahmed. Zardari was connected to the killing of Ahmed by a co-accused who named Benazir's husband.

"We kept speaking in whispers because of the officials sitting there trying to listen," said Mirani.

# 'Milosevic ready to discuss G-8 peace plan for Kosovo'

PARIS, May 19: France's Minister for European Affairs said Wednesday there were signs Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic was ready to discuss an international peace plan for Kosovo, reports AP.

There are, it seems, people close to Milosevic who are starting to say that the conditions of the G-8 interest us," said Pierre Moscovici on France 2 Television.

However, Moscovici, a junior minister in Prime Minister Lionel Jospin's cabinet, said that such signs Belgrade was ready to deal must be "taken with much precaution."

Milosevic's government said Tuesday that despite "some reservations" it was open to G-8 proposals for ending the conflict with NATO and was "ready to cut a deal" if the alliance stops the bombing.

Foreign ministers of the so-called Group of Eight countries settled on a seven-point plan, still to be endorsed by the UN Security Council, at a meeting in Germany on May 6.

The plan calls for an end to violence in Kosovo, a withdrawal of Serb forces from Kosovo, the return of Kosovo refugees, the introduction of an international security force and a political settlement.

Meanwhile, Russia and the seven major Western powers are divided on whether to bring a Kosovo peace plan to the UN Security Council before or after Yugoslavia agrees to end the conflict a US official says.

Envoys from the so-called Group of Eight are meeting in Bonn, Germany on Wednesday and one of the key items on the agenda is the timing of a council resolution. That decision will determine the contents of the resolution, said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

China's refusal to even discuss a peace deal for Kosovo until NATO stops bombing Yugoslavia is a key factor.

Some European nations, reportedly including Germany and Italy, believe it is important to turn the G-8 agreement on principles for a Kosovo settlement into a Security Council resolution "sooner rather than later," the US official told the Associated Press on Tuesday.

But NATO members who are also part of the G-8 and the Security Council — the United States, Britain and France — are more cautious because they not only have to get Russia to agree to a resolution but China as well, the official said.

The G-8 agreement, reached two weeks ago, calls for immediate withdrawal of Yugoslav forces from Kosovo and deployment of an international security presence to ensure the safe return of nearly 800,000 refugees. It makes no mention of a bombing halt, raising the prospect of a Chinese veto.

"We do not want to bring a resolution to the council and have it vetoed prior to an agreement. We don't see any benefit to that at all," the US official said.

Slovak Foreign Minister Eduard Kukan, who is one of Secretary-General Kofi Annan's newly appointed UN ambassadors, said China's UN ambassador, Qin Huasun, showed no flexibility in Beijing's demand for a bombing halt when they met Monday.

Reuter adds: Russia and the United States failed to find an early breakthrough in tough Kosovo talks in Helsinki on Tuesday, with Moscow insisting NATO stop bombing Yugoslavia to pave the way for peace.

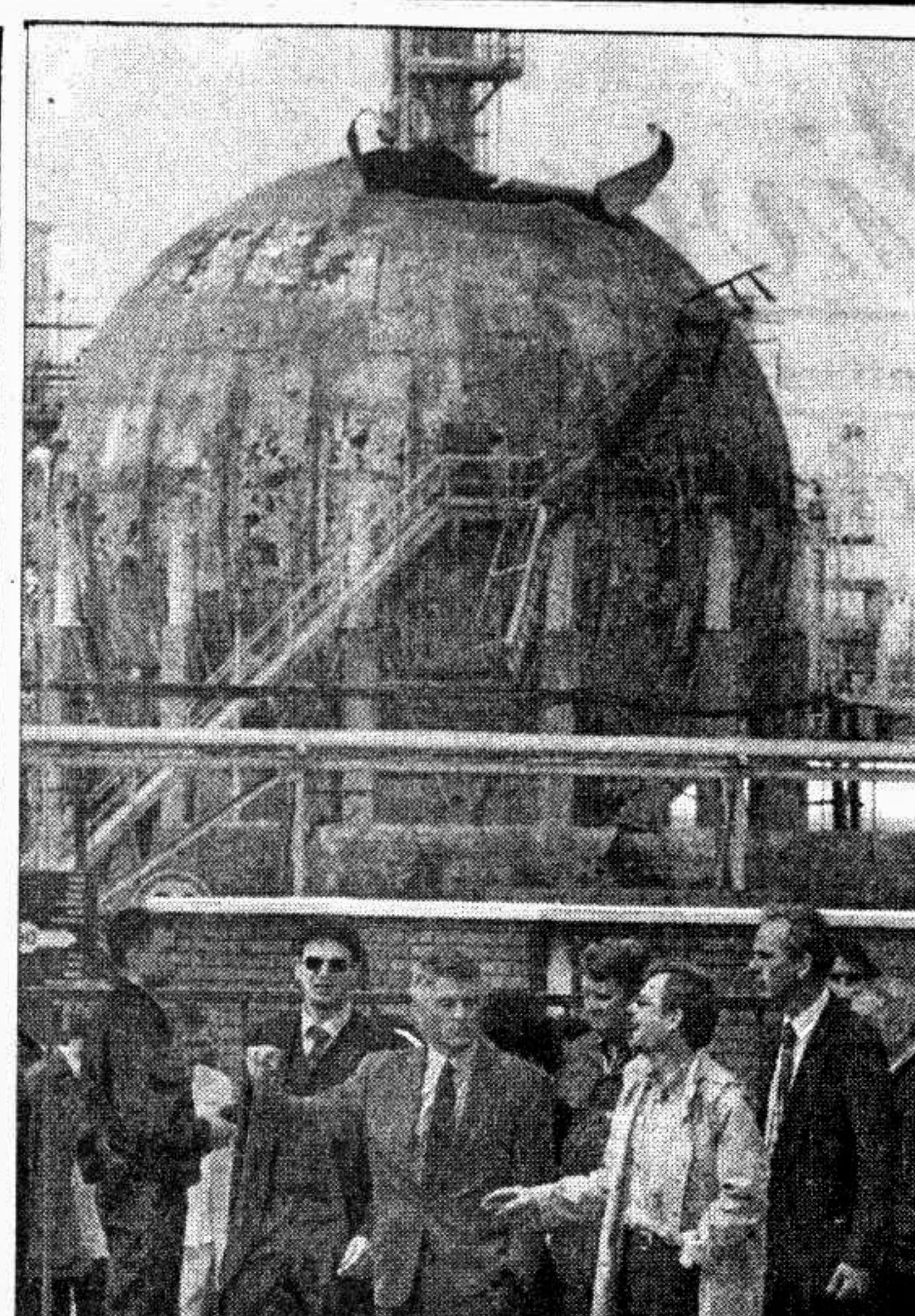
Russia's Balkans envoy Viktor Chernomyrdin and US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott met for seven hours then took a rest until today, the Finnish hosts said.

"The meeting was serious and constructive and will continue today at 10 am (0700 GMT)," a statement issued after the meeting said.

The talks are mediated by Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari.

In Washington, President Bill Clinton refused on Tuesday to rule out sending ground troops to fight in Kosovo, saying no option should be taken off the table.

The comment marked a shift in emphasis by Clinton, who has insisted since NATO began bombing Yugoslavia on March 24 that he had no intention of sending US ground troops into combat over Kosovo.



Members of the United Nations' team observe a petrochemical plant in the town of Pancevo north of Belgrade Tuesday. The plant was heavily bombed by NATO a number of times. Two members of the Yugoslav-UN mission to assess humanitarian needs from the conflict over Kosovo were injured yesterday in a car accident. — AFP photo

# Nepali Congress leading in polls

KATHMANDU, May 19: Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala of the Nepali Congress Party defeated an influential communist in his constituency, swelling the margin his party has over other groups so far, the Election Commission said Wednesday, reports AP.

Koirala's Nepali Congress has won 57 of the 107 seats declared so far in the general elections, which were held May 3 and 17. The party also is leading in 39 other constituencies.

The United Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of Nepal has won 39 seats. The National Democratic Party won six seats, the National Goodwill Party and the National Janmorcha Party each won two seats and the Nepal Workers and Peasants Party won one seat.

To form a government, a party must win 103 seats in the 205-member House of Representatives, the lower house of parliament.

Newspapers Wednesday predicted a victory for the Nepali Congress.

"We set to win polls," the Kathmandu Post headlined its main news article. "All indications for a Nepali Congress majority," the Himalaya Times said.

A clear majority for any party would break the political deadlock that has doomed Nepal to a succession of unstable governments since it became a parliamentary democracy nine years ago, during which three elections have been held. Krishna Prasad Bhattarai,

who was projected by the Nepali Congress as its candidate for prime minister, also won from his constituency in southern Nepal.

Bhattarai was the transition prime minister for about one year after a popular uprising brought an end to Nepal's absolute monarchy in 1990 until a constitution was written and elections were held. Although he was popular in Kathmandu, his subsequent attempts to win a parliament seat ended in defeat.

Ballots are still being collected from far-flung polling stations in this Himalayan country and counting has begun only in half of the 205 constituencies.

An opinion poll by a local magazine last month put the Nepali Congress slightly ahead of other parties but it predicted a hung parliament as in the last elections five years ago.

At least four people have been killed and 31 others injured in clashes between political rivals during the balloting.

Voting in 20 booths were annulled due to the violence. Polling will be rescheduled in those areas by the weekend.

Rampant corruption, stagnant development and a Maoist insurgency were key issues in the election.

King Birendra became a constitutional monarch after democracy was established in 1990. Nepal has had one majority, two minority and four coalition governments since then.

# Lawmakers urged to confirm Stepashin Vote in Duma to approve Yeltsin's nominee as PM

MOSCOW, May 19: Sergei Stepashin urged lawmakers Wednesday to confirm him as prime minister, warning that Russia needs urgent and courageous policies to rescue its battered economy and stave off social unrest, reports AP.

There is no room for half-measures and compromises any longer," he told the State Duma, the lower chamber of parliament.

"Time demands courageous and thoroughly verified steps," he added.

Stepashin, who headed the country's police and internal security forces as interior minister, told lawmakers he had no intention of resorting to unconstitutional policies or means.

The opposition-dominated Duma was due to vote later Wednesday on confirming Stepashin.

The ritual is familiar. This is the third time in little over a year that Yeltsin has replaced his prime minister and Cabinet.

Unlike the last two times, however, Stepashin's confirmation chances looked strong going into the vote. Some key factions suggested Tuesday they would support his nomination.

But Russian media reported Wednesday that the Kremlin could be having second thoughts about Stepashin, hoping he will be rejected so Yeltsin can propose another candidate, possibly one with stronger liberal economic views. It was also possible that the Kremlin leaks were a psychological tactic to put pressure on the opposition to back Stepashin.

Answering questions from lawmakers, Stepashin stressed Wednesday his loyalty to Yeltsin. Stepashin has long been seen as a Yeltsin loyalist whose support for the president had earned him high office.

"Regardless of any political situation, I shall never allow myself to leave or betray the president," he said.

Stepashin seemed to gain confidence Tuesday, warning lawmakers they had better approve a package of economic bills required for a new loan from the International Monetary Fund.



Russian Acting Prime Minister Sergey Stepashin delivers a speech in the State Duma before the voting on his candidacy as prime minister Wednesday. Duma overwhelmingly confirmed Stepashin as prime minister with 296 votes in his favour. —AFP photo

# Barak reiterates vow to pursue peace Political jockeying underway to form new Israeli govt

JERUSALEM, May 19: A day after his dramatic landslide election, Prime Minister Ehud Barak took up the peace-making legacy of his slain mentor Yitzhak Rabin, even as construction continued at two Jewish settlements in contested Arab areas of Jerusalem, reports AP.

With political jockeying already underway to form a new government, Barak made pilgrimages Tuesday to Jerusalem's Western Wall and to the black-granite grave of Rabin, the late prime minister who was murdered by an ultra-nationalist Jew opposed to ceding lands to the Palestinians.

At both stops Barak sounded the same themes of peace and reconciliation that had helped propel him to his remarkable victory over hard-line Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Behind the scenes, even his aides weren't ruling out an alliance with Netanyahu's hard-line Likud party.

At the tomb of Rabin, whom Barak calls his commander, the stocky, unassuming career military man placed a small stone on the gravestone in the traditional Jewish gesture of mourning and remembrance.

"A circle has been closed here at Yitzhak Rabin's grave," said Barak. "A possibility has been opened to fulfill the legacy of Yitzhak Rabin, and I am committed to that path."

"I, as he, am committed to security and peace for Israel, to a unified Jerusalem, to a concerted struggle against terror."

Earlier, at the Western Wall, Barak rested a hand on the enormous sun-warmed yellow stones of Judaism's most sacred site as he spoke.

Reuters adds: Ehud Barak took his first diplomatic baby steps as Israel's next prime minister, telling the leaders of the Palestinians and Jordan in phone calls that he aimed to break a Middle East peace deadlock.

The European Union's special Middle East Envoy Miguel Moratinos met senior members of Barak's Labour Party on Tuesday. He was due to brief Syria today on the talks which an EU official called "positive and optimistic."

Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, his peace moves with Israel stuck under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, phoned Barak to congratulate him on his victory in Monday's election. Arafat's aide Nabil Abu Rdaiah said:

"The two emphasised their commitment to the peace process and to getting it back on the right track," Abu Rdaiah said.

On the home front, Israeli rabbis and right-wingers alike began courting Barak, hoping to share power in the wide coalition he says he hopes will make peace among divided Israelis as much as with Israel's Arab neighbours.

Political power broker Aryeh Deri, sentenced last month to four years for bribery and fraud, said he was quitting parliament in a step that could enable his ultra-Orthodox Jewish Shas party to join Barak's coalition.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.

Barak had barred the 40-year-old Deri from any coalition. But Labour party associates said he had left the door open to Shas.



Breaking ten days' silence, Indian Army Lieutenant-General Krishan Paul addresses reporters Wednesday on the latest situation on Kashmir's Kargil border region where Indian and Pakistani troops are exchanging artillery fire. Twelve Indian soldiers and twenty-one guerrillas were killed in the recent offensive. —AFP photo

# BRIEFLY

**Cholera claims 54 in Cambodia:** A cholera outbreak in northeastern Cambodia has killed 54 rural villagers and left another 827 infected with the deadly bacteria, health officials said Wednesday, AP reports from Phnom Penh.

Cholera cases were first reported in the north of Ratanakiri in mid-April and quickly spread to three corners of the remote province. Dr Gerry Pais of Health Unlimited, and aid agency, said by telephone from the provincial capital of Banglung.

**Obuchi gaining popularity:** The approval rating for Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi's government has hit record-highs, eclipsing his disapproval rating for the first time, newspaper polls showed Wednesday, AP reports from Tokyo.

A survey by the national Yomiuri newspaper, Japan's largest, gave Obuchi 44.2 per cent support over 38.9 per cent opposition. The Mainichi newspaper set his approval at 39 per cent and disapproval at 26 per cent. The Yomiuri poll included response from 2,035 eligible voters questioned on May 15-16. The Mainichi polled 1,178 people on May 15 and May 17. Neither poll gave a margin of error.

**Flooding kills 3 in China:** Three people have drowned in flooding in the south-central China province of Hunan, the state-run Xinhua News Agency said Wednesday, AP reports from Shanghai.

Three days of torrential rain that began Saturday damaged houses in areas including the provincial capital of Changsha, Xinhua said.



An orangutan rides with supporters of Megawati Sukarnopurti's PDI-Struggle party during a parade along one of Jakarta's main arteries Wednesday. The campaign for Indonesia's first post-Suharto elections kicked off across the country with the capital seeing its ritual motorised parades of the 48 contesting parties. —AFP photo

# US team in DPRK to inspect N-site

WASHINGTON, May 18: A team of US technical experts arrived in the North Korean capital Pyongyang on Tuesday on a mission to inspect a suspected nuclear weapons site, a US spokesman said, reports Reuters.

The team of 14 people expects to go to the site on Thursday and stay in the area until it completes its work. State Department spokesman James Foley told a daily briefing.

The United States says the vast underground construction work at Kumchang-ri could be part of a nuclear weapons programme in violation of a 1994 agreement.

Pyongyang agreed to allow inspections of the Kumchang-ri site after months of negotiations in which the Stalinist regime failed to extract \$300 million as an access fee.

Washington has given food instead.

The United States has declined to make a link between its food aid to hungry North Koreans and attempts to ease security concerns, but Secretary of State Madeleine Albright on Monday announced 400,000 tonnes of extra food aid for North Korea.

# Nigeria to regain Commonwealth membership

LONDON, May 19: Nigeria will be restored to membership in the Commonwealth when its newly-elected government takes office later this month, the organisation announced Wednesday, reports AP.

The last hurdle to Nigeria's readmission was cleared when the heads of government of Commonwealth states approved its return to the group, the Commonwealth secretariat said.

Nigeria was suspended from the 54-nation association of Britain and its former colonies in 1995.

Nigeria held elections in February, and the new President, Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, is to take office May 29.

This fresh start is a victory for democracy, a victory for Nigeria — and a victory for a fundamental principle of the Commonwealth," Chief Emeke Anyaoku, a Nigerian who is secretary-general of the Commonwealth.

# Habibie, Mahathir brave diplomatic chill for talks

SINGAPORE, May 19: There likely will be a distinct chill in the air when the leaders of two Southeast Asian countries with a lot in common meet Thursday on a steamy island to discuss their differences and difficulties, reports AP.

Both Malaysia and Indonesia are predominantly Muslim. Both have suffered through the Asian financial crisis, and both have struggled through recent political difficulties.

But Indonesian President B J Habibie has miffed Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad over the last year with his support of Mahathir's jailed former deputy, Anwar Ibrahim.

And while both hope they have turned the corner in dealing with the economic crisis, they have taken very different paths.

It is unclear which leader initiated the meeting on Batam, a remote Indonesian island near Singapore, and neither has disclosed what is on the agenda.

could be a way for the two leaders to repair ties that were strained when Habibie publicly expressed concern over the sacking and arrest of the popular Anwar of sodomy and corruption charges.

Anwar has been sentenced to jail for six years on a corruption conviction, and faces another trial on the sodomy charges. His treatment sparked anti-government riots and a political movement called Reformasi, the Malay word for reform.

Indonesia-Malaysia relations also were dented when Habibie reportedly met with Anwar's 18-year-old daughter.

"Relations are probably slightly cool between Habibie and Mahathir because Habibie took a position. He made a statement in favour of Reformasi," said Indonesian academic Pande Silalahi.

Traditionally, such strains have been rare among Southeast Asian countries, which maintained a cardinal rule of non-interference in each others' domestic affairs.

# Off the Record

**Moviegoers' must**

LOS ANGELES: Undaunted by bad reviews, thousands of fans lucky enough to get tickets lined up outside theatres across the country Tuesday to see the new "Star Wars" movie, reports AP.

In New York City, the film debuted early Wednesday before 1,162 moviegoers who paid \$19.95 each for reserved seats at the Ziegfeld Theatre.

"I've waited 16 years for this," shouted James Colema, 25, who waited outside the theatre for two days to get his ticket. "Star Wars has had such a heavy impact on my life. It's incredible."

It's a foregone conclusion that "Star Wars: Episode I — The Phantom Menace" will be one of the biggest films of all time. The only question is whether it will get enough repeat business to approach the \$600 million "Titanic" collected in North America.

It's going to kill in that opening week and do just huge, unprecedented business," said Paul Dergarabedian, president of box office tracker Exhibitor Relations Co. "But beyond that you're in a very competitive release period."



A cinema-goer dressed as the character "Darth Maul" enters Wednesday the opening of "Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace" at Mann's Chinese Theater in Hollywood. —AFP photo