

Ship sinks off Malaysia

All 1,000 passengers, crews rescued

PENANG, Malaysia, May 21: Rescuers plucked more than 1,000 passengers and crew from lifeboats today after a luxury liner caught fire and sank off the coast of Malaysia, reports Reuters.

"We believe all of the crew and passengers have been rescued," Jamarudin Yusoff, harbourmaster in Penang harbour in northwest Malaysia, told Reuters. "At the moment no loss of life has been reported."

The Sun Vista, registered in the Bahamas, sank about 60 nautical miles south of Penang Island and 50 nautical miles west of Port Weld in the Strait of Malacca dividing peninsular Malaysia and the Indonesian island of Sumatra — one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

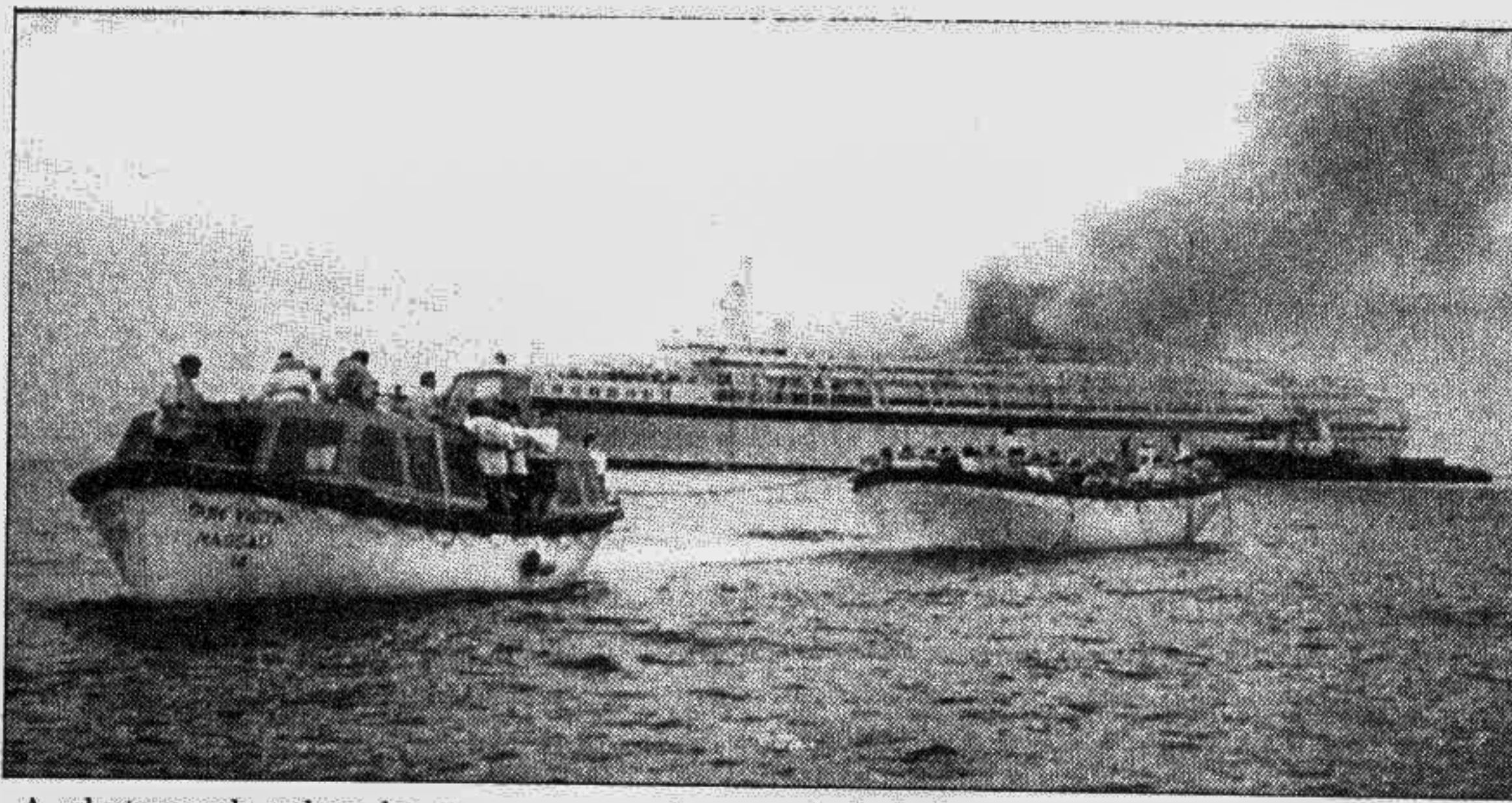
It was unclear how many passengers and crew were on board.

Jamarudin said 1,095 survivors arrived in Penang before dawn in two passenger ferries and two container vessels.

The Maritime Rescue Co-ordinating Centre (MRCC) in Port Klang said at least 30 others were expected to arrive on a fifth vessel in Port Klang, southwest of the capital Kuala Lumpur, later today.

At least six passengers were taken to hospital in Penang for minor injuries, Jamarudin said.

Two of the passengers clasped their hands together in silent prayer and looked skyward as they touched land in Penang. The passengers, all wearing bright orange life vests, included a few children among mostly older people.



A photograph taken by a passenger shows people being rescued by two boats while a coastguard vessel (R) sprays water at smoke rising from a cruise ship Thursday, some 50 nautical miles south of Penang island. More than 1,000 passengers on board the Singapore-based vessel Sun Vista were rescued early Friday morning after a fire broke out and sank the vessel.

The passengers and crew abandoned ship in 18 lifeboats and four life rafts, Ahmad Othman of the MRCC said. It took the first rescue vessel about one hour to reach the passengers, some of whom had to spend up to two hours in the lifeboats in all.

"I just heard the captain say 'Fire! Fire!' and everybody panicked," Sushma Jain of India, told the official Bernama news agency. "Then we ran and I don't know what actually happened."

"When the incident happened, we were having our tea. We did not know what happened and I'm sad that our holiday ended this way," her husband, AK Jain, said.

"I don't know what to do. My tickets and money are all gone," he said.

Fourteen ships including government and private ferries were involved in the rescue.

A spokesman for the marine police in Penang said the switchboard in the liner's en-

gine room caught fire on Thursday afternoon and the vessel sank at 1:22 am on Friday (1722 GMT Thursday).

Ahmad said passengers from at least 20 countries were on board, including Americans, Australians, British, Germans, Belgians, French, Indians, Indonesians, Japanese, Mexicans, Russians, Spanish and Swiss.

"It took some time for the fire to spread," an MRCC spokesman said.

Tension mounts between Serbia, Montenegro

No progress in Moscow talks as NATO apologises again

BELGRADE, May 21: A fresh round of talks aimed at resolving the Kosovo crisis wrapped up in Moscow on Friday but without visible progress, as tensions rose between Serbia and its junior partner in the rump Yugoslav state, Montenegro, reports AFP.

Meanwhile, NATO's latest bout of air strikes struck munitions and fuel dumps — but left the US apologising once more for damaging a diplomatic mission.

The windows at the Swiss ambassador's residence in a Belgrade suburb were blown out during an attack on a nearby fuel depot while the Swiss ambassador was hosting a reception, the official news agency Tanjug reported. There were no casualties.

On Thursday the Swedish embassy suffered collateral damage, as did the Norwegian and Spanish ambassadors' residences.

On May 7, NATO missiles hit and destroyed the Chinese embassy, killing three Chinese citizens and injuring 20 and sparking a major diplomatic incident.

In the latest repercussions of that row, China on Friday announced a ban on US Navy vessels visiting Hong Kong.

On the diplomatic front, the main focus of efforts was in Moscow, where Albright's deputy, Strobe Talbott, met

Russia's Acting Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov, but there was no report of any progress.

Talbott had met for six hours with Moscow's Balkans envoy, Viktor Chernomyrdin, and Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari as the three sought ways to ending NATO's standoff with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

Talbott came out briefly in the middle of the overnight meeting to announce in Russian: "Our talks are very constructive and productive, and they will continue."

Chernomyrdin added: "We are looking for a solution, we are going to look for it and we will find it."

The Russian mediator had returned from Belgrade early Thursday after meeting Milosevic.

The Group of Eight, whose senior officials were meeting since more in Bonn on Friday, is seeking to put together a draft UN resolution on Kosovo.

But the main sticking point appeared to be the make-up of an international force in Kosovo to oversee the safe return of the hundreds of thousands of refugees who have fled the troubled province.

Meanwhile, political tensions appeared to rise in Yugoslavia, after Montenegro's reformist president, Milo Djukanovic, on Thursday criticised Yugoslav Army officers

for linking themselves with the Milosevic government.

And amid reports of defections from Serb troops operating in Kosovo, the authorities of a town in the dissident Yugoslav republic of Montenegro called on the federal army to discipline troops based there.

The authorities in Cetinje, 55 km west of the Montenegrin capital of Podgorica, complained that reservists were swarming about town, armed and out of control, in the streets, hotels and shops.

Montenegro, Serbia's junior partner in the federation, has rejected the state of war declared by Belgrade on March 24, after NATO launched its bombing campaign against Yugoslavia, and refused to support its position on the Kosovo crisis.

Foreign ministry spokesman Nebojsa Vujovic said Belgrade accepted that the principles put forward by the Group of Eight (G8) countries should be a "basis for negotiation" in drawing up a resolution.

But Yugoslavia wanted to be actively involved in defining how it should be implemented, Vujovic said.

These negotiations as well as the United Nations Security Council resolution must confirm Yugoslavia's role as a factor for peace in settling the situation in Kosovo and in the implementation of an agreement within the United Nations," he added.

Russian envoy Viktor Chernomyrdin had pledged to speed up this process in talks Wednesday with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, the spokesman said.

Nepali Congress wins simple majority

KATHMANDU, May 21: The Nepali Congress (NC) today won a simple majority in the 205-member lower house of parliament with 103 seats, Election Commission (EC) officials said, reports AFP.

The main opposition Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML) took 64 seats.

Vote counting was continuing in other seats, the EC officials added.

The two-stage general elections were held in Nepal on May 3 and 17.

Pak oil tanker blast: death toll rises to 57

MULTAN, Pakistan, May 21: The death toll from last week's oil tanker disaster in a Pakistani town has risen to 57 after eight of the scores of injured died overnight, hospital sources said today, reports AFP.

The accident happened when the oil tanker overturned at Rodo-Sultan in Punjab province, sparking a devastating blaze.

The official count after the accident put the toll at 49 dead and 68 injured, while unofficial estimates said more than 60 were killed.

The eight died late Thursday at a burns treatment hospital in the city of Faisalabad. They were among 33 seriously injured who were brought there after the accident, hospital staff said.

Most of the other injured have been discharged from various hospitals.

Ethnic Fijians majority in Mahendra Cabinet

SUVA, May 21: Fiji's first prime minister from the large Indian minority on Friday chose ethnic Fijians to dominate his Cabinet in an effort to calm racial tensions, reports AP.

Although Mahendra Chaudhry's Fiji Labor Party won 37 of 71 seats in Parliament in the May 8-15 election, and his coalition partners added more seats to inflate his majority, he is carefully trying to avoid alarming the majority ethnic Fijians.

The last time an Indian-dominated government was elected in 1987, renegade army Col. Sitiveni Rabuka led a Fijian ultranationalist coup to oust the administration.

Chaudhry was one of the Cabinet ministers imprisoned briefly by Rabuka in 1987. This week, the voters ousted Rabuka as prime minister and brought Chaudhry back to power.

The Indians, descended from indentured laborers brought in by British colonialists in the 1800s to work the sugar plantations, prospered after several generations and ended up dominating business and commerce.

UN-supervised polls in E Timor to cost \$ 50 m

UNITED NATIONS, May 21: Secretary-General Kofi Annan says it will cost more than \$50 million to conduct a UN-supervised ballot on August 8 which will allow the people of East Timor to decide whether to remain part of Indonesia or seek independence, reports AP.

In a report to the General Assembly circulated Thursday, he asked for approval of an initial budget of \$45.7 million and said an estimated \$4.3 million more will be needed to deploy up to 300 foreign police officers.

A UN advance team was in East Timor when Indonesia and Portugal signed a historic agreement on May 5 authorizing the ballot.

BRIEFLY

Yeltsin goes on vacation:

After winning another major political victory over his hardline foes, Boris Yeltsin was to travel Friday to southern Russia for two weeks to vacation, his spokesman said, AP reports from Moscow.

Yeltsin was to leave Friday for the Black Sea resort town of Sochi, his spokesman, Dmitry Yakushkin, said. The announcement comes after Yeltsin ousted the Cabinet last week, faced down an impeachment vote on Saturday and saw his loyalist premier-designate, Sergei Stepashin, easily approved by the lower house of parliament Wednesday.

China bans US Navy visits in HK:

China has banned US warships from visiting Hong Kong in May and June because of "current circumstances," China's Foreign Ministry office in the territory said Friday, AP reports from Hong Kong.

Though officials did not offer a clear explanation, the ban was apparently a fallout from NATO's bombing of the Chinese embassy earlier this month. "Under the current circumstances, it is normal that the Central Government would not agree to the United States warships coming to Hong Kong," a statement from the Hong Kong branch of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said.

India to provide free edn for girls:

The centre will provide education free of cost to girls up to graduation, Union Minister for Human Resource Development, Science and Technology M M Joshi has announced, PTI reports from Allahabad.

The government decision is aimed at increasing female literacy for which a budgetary provision of Rs ten crore has been made, Joshi said at a public meeting on Thursday. He said new technologies should be implemented in agriculture and added that the government had taken several steps for the welfare of farmers, including announcement of support prices for crops.

Benazir to visit US to lobby against govt HR groups urged to probe Zardari's condition

ISLAMABAD, May 21: While newspapers in Pakistan displayed front page pictures Friday of an injured Asif Ali Zardari, lawyers for his wife, former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, asked human rights groups to probe his condition, reports AP.

Benazir says police have tortured her husband and she fears they want to kill him.

The government has denied the charges of torture, but Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has ordered a judicial inquiry into the allegations. Sharif has ordered the inquiry results within two weeks.

Zardari, currently in the Aga Khan Hospital in southern Karachi, where he is being treated for a cut tongue. Photographs of the injured Zardari showing his lacerated tongue were on the front pages of newspapers on Friday.

Police officials say the wound was self-inflicted in an attempt by Zardari to go to the hospital, Zardari says it was the result of torture.

In a letter to Pakistan's widely respected Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Be-



A girl and her younger brother waits for relief goods in front of their completely destroyed hut hit by a cyclone in the Ketty Bandar coastal area, some 190 km southeast of Karachi Thursday. A cyclone hit coastal towns in southern Pakistan and inundated make-shift huts and mud houses mostly belonged to fishermen.

Blair govt suffers lawmaker revolt

LONDON, May 21: Prime Minister Tony Blair's government Thursday suffered a legislative revolt by its own Labour Party lawmakers in the House of Commons over plans to reform the way it dispenses money to the disabled, reports AP.

The government prevailed in the vote, but was embarrassed as its large majority of 176 lawmakers was reduced to 40 votes.

Blair's Downing Street office said the government would press on with the legislation, which goes next to the unelected House of Lords, which can only amend and delay it.

The government's Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill proposes to restrict the number of people who receive financial benefits because of their incapacity, and to "means test" disability benefits — give them according to the recipients' income.

The government defeated the House of Commons amendment put down by the rebels and backed by opposition lawmakers by 310 votes to 270.

Vajpayee terms expulsion of Cong rebels 'fascist' act

NEW DELHI, May 21: India's out-going prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee today described the expulsion of three rebel leaders from the opposition Congress Party as a "fascist" act of political suppression, reports AFP.

Rather than initiating a rational debate on the issues raised by the rebels, the Congress leadership suppressed them with the "desperate act of expulsion," Vajpayee said in a statement.

The Congress executive announced Thursday that it had expelled the three senior leaders for six years, after they had labelled Italian-born party president Sonia Gandhi a liability because of her foreign origins.

Gandhi, widow of former president Rajiv Gandhi, resigned as president on Monday in anger at the rebels' assertion that her background should bar her from becoming prime min-

ister. Vajpayee, whose own Hindu nationalist BJP Party has delighted in highlighting Gandhi's foreign roots, said the expulsions "smacked of fascism" and were the act of a desperate party.

"This shows that the Congress party has nothing but contempt for internal democracy, whose cornerstone is debate based on freedom of thought and expression," he said.

Recent history reminds us that whenever the Congress has sought to crush dissent and debate on matters that are inconvenient to the party leadership, the country has had to pay a heavy price.

With general elections just four months away, the rift within the Congress Party has come as a campaign windfall to the BJP and its allies.

Having booted out the dissidents, Congress is still left with

the question of its vacant leadership.

Gandhi, 52, has so far stood firm on her decision to resign despite intense pressure to reconsider from party leaders and grassroots workers, who have camped in their thousands outside her New Delhi residence.

A Congress leader, Ghulam Nabi Azad, argued Thursday that the expulsions would not dim the party's electoral prospects.

"It will not have negative effect at all. The expulsions will only have a positive effect on the electorate. This is what every Congressman wanted," he said.

Vajpayee, however, made it clear that as far as the election campaign was concerned, the expulsions did not single any one out to the detriment of Sonia Gandhi's suitability to govern the world's largest democracy.

Tributes paid to Rajiv

NEW DELHI, May 21: President KR Narayanan, Vice President Krishna Kant and Congress leader Sonia Gandhi today offered floral tributes at Vir Bhumi, the samadhi of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi on his eighth death anniversary, report PTI, AFP.

Dressed in a white sari with a black border, Sonia along with her children Priyanka and Rahul and son-in-law Robert Vadra spent over an hour at the memorial as an all-religion prayer meeting was held.

A large number of Congress workers had assembled at the entrance to the memorial since early in the morning with banners asking Sonia to take back her resignation as Congress president.

Later, Sonia visited Shakti Sthal, the samadhi of her mother-in-law and former prime minister Indira Gandhi as slogans of "Rajiv Gandhi amar rahent the air."

Among others who offered floral tributes were former president Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma, senior Congress leaders Arjun Singh, Madhavrao Scindia, P Shiv Shankar, Natwar Singh, and Rajesh Pilot.

Delhi Chief Minister Siela Dikshit was also present along with several Congress MLAs.



US President Bill Clinton hugs his wife, Hillary, after she delivered a speech to Columbine High School students at the gymnasium of Dakota Ridge High School in Denver Thursday. The Clintons arrived in Denver to meet the families and students from the Columbine school where two teenagers killed twelve fellow students and a teacher before committing suicide April 20.

Another violence in US school Senate passes juvenile-crime bill

WASHINGTON, May 21: After Vice President Al Gore cast a tie-breaking vote on a watershed gun control amendment, the Senate on Thursday passed a sweeping Juvenile-Crime Bill that included the first new firearms measures since the Republicans won control of Congress in the 1994 elections, reports Reuters.

The 73-25 vote came exactly one month after two teenagers committed mass murder at their Colorado High School and just hours after a high school sophomore in an Atlanta suburb opened fire and injured six of his schoolmates.

Gore broke the tie on a proposal by New Jersey Democrat Frank Lautenberg to require background checks on all transactions at gun shows. Just a week ago, Senate Republicans narrowly defeated a similar Lautenberg gun show amendment.

In the shadow of the Littleton, Colorado, school rampage, Republicans flipped and flopped all week on guns. On gun show checks alone, they rejected them, accepted them, denied they created loopholes and then backed Oregon Republican

Gordon Smith's amendment to plug two holes they had argued did not exist.

Ultimately, it was a change of heart by Georgia Democrat Max Cleland that made the difference. He voted against Lautenberg last week but cast the tying 50th vote on gun shows Thursday, paving the way for Gore to cast the winning 51st.

Cleland decided on his position on Wednesday night, but news of the Atlanta shootings, near where he grew up, made him certain.

"I was ready to go last night, and like I said, coming down the ramp today, getting ready to cast the vote, in the middle of the Senate, in my mind's eye, I thought: This is a rare moment here. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason," Cleland later told reporters.

The bill, sponsored by Utah Republican Orrin Hatch, would dedicate \$1 billion annually for five years to cracking down on violent young criminals and gang members while expanding delinquency-prevention programmes.

Hatch had drafted the bill

long before the 15 deaths at Columbine High School in Littleton. But the shootings shocked Americans, coloured the eight days of debate and transformed the legislation.

The final Senate bill included the Lautenberg plan to require background checks on all gun show transactions. Such checks are already required for all sales by professional licensed dealers at shows or stores.

It also makes it harder for minors to get semiautomatic assault weapons, bans the importation of high-capacity ammunition clips, requires child safety locks to be sold with all handguns and authorises a study of gun marketing.

Though most of the gun steps were relatively modest and focused on youth, gun control advocates said they constituted a setback for the powerful National Rifle Association. Most of the measures had previously been defeated.

Republicans said existing gun laws had to be enforced rather than new ones enacted, and they repeated their view that violent movies and video games were more to blame for

youth violence than easy access to firearms.

Democrats did support some Republican amendments addressing such cultural factors as slasher movies and gory video games, but the Democrats pushed the gun issue persistently and adamantly, winning some swift victories and embarrassing the Republicans into reversing themselves.

AP adds from Canyons: A boy upset over a broken romance shot and wounded six students in yet another school attack in a comfortable suburban community, then fell to his knees, stuck a gun in his mouth and surrendered in tears.

"Oh, my God, I'm so scared," he said, according to witnesses. Exactly a month after the bloodbath in Colorado, the 15-year-old sophomore, armed with two guns, opened fire Thursday with a rifle about 7:55 am EDT (1:55 GMT), 20 minutes before classes were to begin at Heritage High School. It was the final day of class for seniors.

Witnesses said the gunman was running and shooting at no one in particular and firing at students below the waist so as not to kill them.