

Belgrade reinforcing troops in Kosovo

NATO to send more forces to end Balkan conflict swiftly

LONDON, May 24: British Defence Secretary George Robertson on Monday reiterated that more NATO troops could be sent to the Balkans in a bid to bring the Kosovo conflict to a swift end, reports AFP.

"I would anticipate that more troops will start moving into the area quite soon in order to build up the numbers that will be appropriate for the job that will have to be done," Robertson told BBC radio.

His comments echoed statements made over the weekend by Foreign Secretary Robin Cook that alliance forces should be ready to go into Kosovo with or without the agreement of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

But Robertson refused to confirm reports that NATO was preparing a 40,000-member force on the borders of the Ser-

bian province.

He said that original estimates were that around 25,000 troops were needed in a "completely permissive environment."

"If we had to look at something that is less ordered, then the numbers will have to be greater than that," he said.

Cook said NATO had been asked to bolster its forces in the Balkans to about 40,000 troops. Meanwhile, Belgrade is reinforcing its troops in Kosovo less than two weeks after announcing it was reducing its forces there, The New York Times said Monday.

"The Yugoslav military is sending fresh troops into Kosovo to reinforce positions near the border with Albania," it quoted NATO officials as saying.

"We have no signs of with-

drawal," the Times quoted NATO military spokesman Major General Walter Jertz as saying.

Some 40,000 Serb military and police are estimated to be in Kosovo.

The Washington Post, meanwhile, quoted a NATO commander in Italy as saying he expected Serb forces would be forced out of Kosovo within two months.

Another report says, NATO bombed power stations in Serbia for the third night running, leaving much of the country without electricity Monday, the Serbian media reported.

On its 61st night of air strikes, NATO hit installations of the Serbian electricity authority EPS in Novi Sad, Kostolac and Nis, EPS said, cited by the private Studio B radio.

The raids left many towns

and cities without power, including parts of the capital Belgrade, EPS said.

Repeated power cuts over the past three days have severely reduced water supplies, notably in Belgrade and the northern city of Novi Sad, the independent news agency Beta said.

Meanwhile, the diplomatic push to end the conflict was expected to gather pace this week.

Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, the European Union's Kosovo envoy, and US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott were expected in Moscow Tuesday to resume talks with Russian leaders.

Earlier talks failed to make a breakthrough, but Ahtisaari said that "on the main issues, we see eye to eye."

On the humanitarian front, refugees continued to flood out of Kosovo.

Belgian film wins Golden Palm at Cannes

CANNES, May 24: Awards given Sunday at the 52nd Cannes Film Festival, voted by a 10-member jury led by Canadian director David Cronenberg.

Golden Palm: "Rosetta," Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, Belgium, reports AP.

Grand Prize: "Humanity," Bruno Dumont, France.

Jury Prize: "The Letter," Manoel de Oliveira, Portugal.

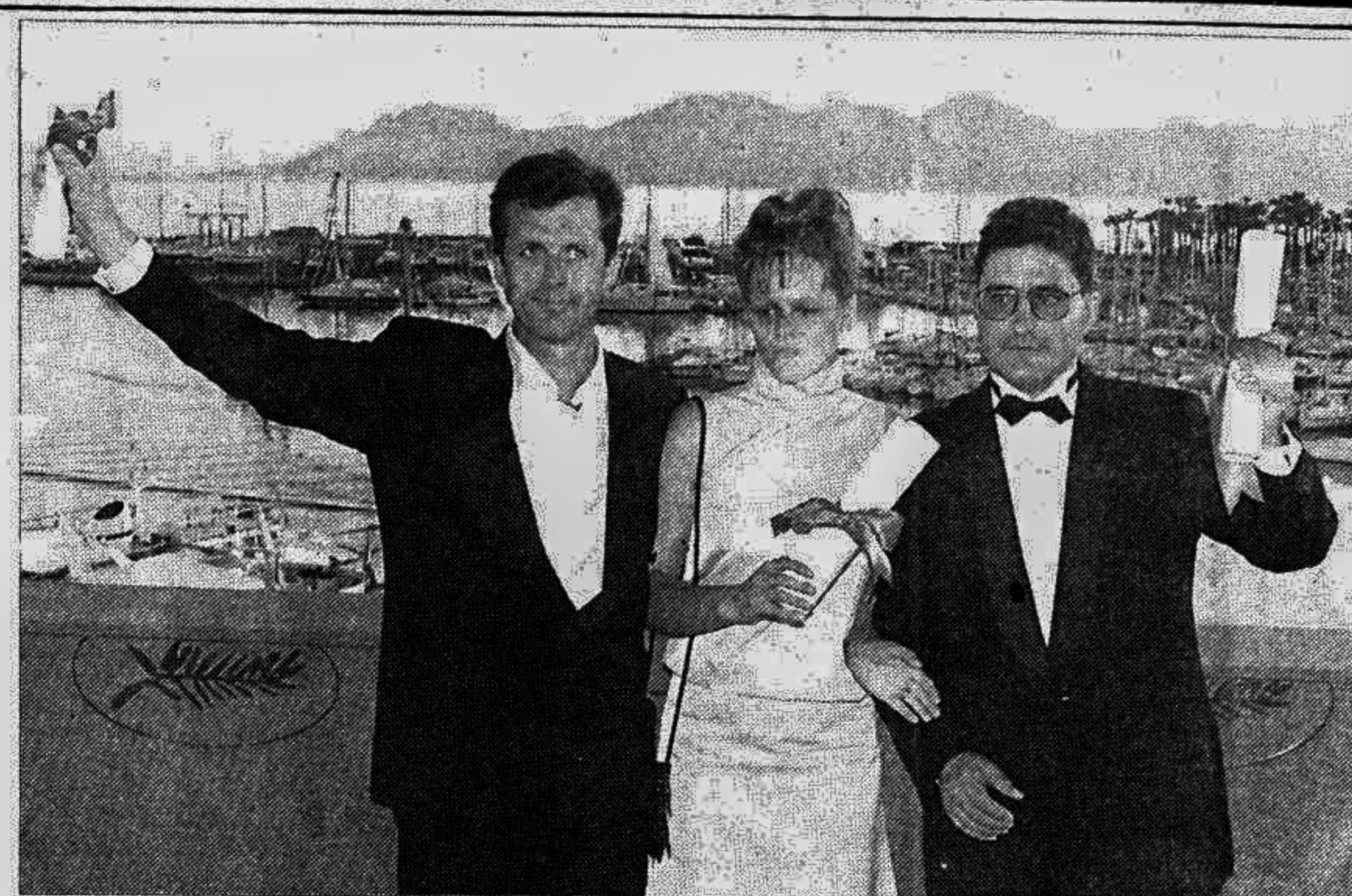
Best Director: Pedro Almodovar, "All About My Mother," Spain.

Best Actor: Emmanuel Schotte, "Humanity," France.

Best Actress: Severine Caneele, "Humanity," France and Emilie Dequenne, "Rosetta," Belgium.

Best Screenplay: "Moloch," Youri Arabov and Marina Koreneva, Germany and Russia.

Golden Camerera (first-time director): "Marana Simhasanam," Murali Nair, India.



French director Bruno Dumont (L), Grand Jury Prize, poses with actress Severine Caneele (C), Best Actress, and Emmanuel Schotte, Best Actor, for photographers after they received their prizes for the movie "L'Humanite", during the 52nd Cannes Film Festival Sunday in Cannes. — AFP Photo

Bomb goes off in Pak town: 12 killed

LAHORE, Pakistan, May 24: At least 12 people were killed and 30 injured Monday when a bomb planted on a cycle exploded in a town in Pakistan's Punjab province, police said, reports AFP.

The explosion occurred at Daska, a country town in the district of Sialkot which is near the border with India.

The bomb went off in a crowded area of the town which is 150 kilometers (93 miles) south of the provincial capital Lahore. At least two of the injured were said to be in critical condition.

The bomb went off in an area where labourers usually gather in search of daily work. "It was a terrible scene, with victims lying in pools of blood and severed limbs scattered around," a witness said.

A senior police official in Lahore said the blast, in which a timing device was used, was

suspected to be the work of India's intelligence agency RAW (Research and Analysis Wing).

"We believe it is a continuation of RAW-sponsored activities in border areas in the Sialkot district," said the official, who declined to be identified.

Pakistani and Indian authorities have often blamed each other's intelligence services for cross-border sabotage.

Police in the Sialkot district said several bombs had been found and defused in different places in recent months.

The explosion coincided with new border tensions between Pakistani and Indian troops in the disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir, where artillery duels have occurred for the past two weeks.

The Sialkot district is near the Indian-controlled zone of Kashmir.

Off the Record

Miracle still happens

BEIJING: A newborn Chinese baby who dropped through the squat toilet of a high-speed train was alive and well after landing on the tracks, the official Xinhua news agency reported, says Reuters.

The mother, a nine-months pregnant migrant worker, had squatted down to relieve herself but gave birth instead.

Panicked, she ripped off the umbilical cord with her bare hands but fumbled the baby boy and let him slip through the toilet hole and onto the tracks below.

Just as three railway workers spotted the infant another train hurtled over his body, Xinhua said in an overnight report seen Monday.

"When that train passed and the three approached the rails they could hardly believe their eyes: The baby was still alive with his hands and legs quivering," Xinhua reported.

The 2.7 kg (5.9 lb) baby suffered slight bruising and a small cut on the head, which required three stitches. Mother and baby were in hospitals in the southern city of Guangzhou.

Child bank robbers!

PERTH: Two girls aged 11 and 7 were found hiding under a desk after smashing their way into a bank, rummaging through drawers looking for money and trying to break into a vault, reports AP.

Acting Police Sgt Don Campbell of Armadale, south of Perth, said the 11-year-old was the "ringleader" but had tried to put the blame on her 7-year-old cousin.

Neither would face criminal charges, police said. The pair broke into the Commonwealth Bank branch in Armadale about 7:30 pm Sunday by smashing a back window with concrete chunks.

Silent alarms were set off but the girls searched teller areas and drawers for money for 25 minutes before security guards and police arrived, Campbell said.

"They fossicked through the bank and it appears they have tampered with the digital combination control on the bank vault as any curious 11-year-old would," Campbell said.

"But, of course they never would have got inside the vault." "Thinking it's a bank, in the mind of an 11-year-old, they probably thought money was there to be taken," he said. Campbell said the 11-year-old had been handed over to the care of Family and Children's Services.



Am Quimbao, who is representing Philippines at the 1999 Miss Universe competition, walks across the stage during pre-taping of the National Costume portion of the competition Sunday in Chaguaramas, Trinidad and Tobago. Eighty-five contestants are competing for the title of Miss Universe 1999, and the winner will be crowned on May 26. — AFP Photo

Handy spy all time at home!

SINGAPORE: Watch out in Singapore, because big brother — or your boss, or your parents — might be watching your every move with tiny spy cameras hidden at home and at work, the Straits Times reported Monday, reports Reuters.

Demand has soared for secret surveillance devices to watch over premises and spy on employees, as well as children and maids at home, the paper said.

It quoted one security company official as saying his firm had enjoyed a 300 per cent jump in demand over the past year for the small secret cameras that are often disguised as wall sockets or smoke detectors.

A wide range of people in Singapore who want to be in control by the devices, which cost about S\$400-S\$1,200 (US \$230-US \$690) each and can be ordered from abroad and through the Internet, it said.

Some people want to make sure that domestic maids — thousands of whom are employed in Singapore — are hard at work on household chores while their employers are at the office. A rich dealer Christy Tan, who has installed a camera at home, told the newspaper: "Once I saw my maid sitting on the couch watching television."

"Cameras are a great help, especially when you are stuck in the office, not knowing what's happening at home," she was quoted as saying.

Private investigator Harmon Singh told the newspaper that parents also wanted to keep tabs on their children.

"Some parents want to know what their children are doing when left alone in the house. Others want to know if their children are watching television or taking a swim when they are supposed to be studying," he was quoted as saying.

"Some people just don't trust the friends their children bring into the homes," he added.

Indian Navy searching for 250 missing fishermen

AHMEDABAD, India, May 24: Indian Navy is searching for more than two hundred fishermen reported missing since a severe cyclonic storm developed in the Arabian Sea, a government official said today.

"We are trying to locate 48 boats carrying some 250 fishermen who went to the sea from the Gujarat coast before a cyclone warning was issued," Vijaysinh Parmar, Gujarat state's Relief Commissioner, told Reuters.

Five helicopters have been deployed to search between Naliya and Porbandar near the Gulf of Kutch to locate the fishermen, Parmar said.

Fishermen normally remain at sea for 10 to 15 days, and these boats ventured into the ocean a few days before a cyclone warning was issued," he added.

The Meteorological Department warned of the cyclone last Tuesday.

Parmar said navy helicopters rescued 14 personnel of India's paramilitary Border Security Force from Bhuj in Kutch district.

Pawar declines to divulge about likely alliance

MUMBAI, May 24: Expelled Congress leader Sharad Pawar today declined to divulge anything about the likely alliances his proposed political outfit would have with other like minded political parties, reports PTI.

"We will announce with whom we will have alliances at an appropriate time. At this moment it is not alright for any individual to make any comments on the issue," Pawar said at a press conference here when asked whether the proposed political party, being floated by him and other expelled Congress leaders would have either a direct or indirect alliance with BJP and allies.

"Our party will follow the ideology of the old Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru," he said, adding that "social justice" would be the main plank of the party, name for which would be decided after consultations with election commission.

Suharto never lies, says Habibie

JAKARTA, May 24: Indonesian President BJ Habibie said in an interview aired today his disgraced predecessor Suharto, who has repeatedly denied allegations he amassed a billion-dollar fortune through corruption, never tells lies, reports Reuters.

Asked about Suharto's insistence that he does not have a fortune stashed abroad, Habibie told CNN: "He never lies. He keeps something (quiet) maybe because he is not allowed to say. If he doesn't want to tell you, he quietly smiles."

With Indonesia's June 7 elections approaching, Habibie's comments will provide fresh ammunition for opposition parties who accuse Habibie's government of stalling an investigation into allegations of corruption by Suharto during his 32-year rule.

Libya calls Sunday Times report 'blatant lies'

CAIRO, May 24: Libya has dismissed as a "pack of lies" a London newspaper report that Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi ordered the Lockerbie bombing, reports AP.

The new deliberate and disgraceful attempt at distortion... forces us to warn international public opinion that what has been published is an attempt to politicise the case once again," an unidentified Foreign Ministry official told Libya's official news agency late Monday.

Last month, Libya bowed to international pressure and surrendered for trial in the West two Libyans suspected of blowing up Pan Am Flight 103 over the Scottish village of Lockerbie in 1988. The explosion killed 270 people on board and on the ground, most of them American or British.



Battle-ready Indian soliders armed with a light machine gun head from Srinagar towards Kargil town Monday. Thousands of reinforcements have been sent in to Kargil and Drass towns where there has been heavy shelling between India and Pakistan. — AFP Photo

Japan passes law to boost defence ties with US

TOKYO, May 24: Japan's parliament Monday passed key legislation to strengthen defence ties with the United States despite strong protests at home and in China, reports AFP.

Each of the three bills passed easily through the upper house, about a month after their approval in the powerful lower house, parliament officials said.

Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi can now enact the law at any time.

"I am delighted the bills, designed to secure peace and security in Japan, have passed both the lower and upper houses with overwhelming majorities," Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura told reporters.

The law allows Japanese troops to serve independently outside Japan for the first time since World War II. Previously, they could only serve overseas as part of UN peacekeeping operations.

"The law contributes to deterring the breakout of military attacks against our country,"

defence agency chief Hosen Norita said in a statement.

"With the law, the Self-Defense Force can provide rear support and rescue operations, and that will greatly contribute to secure peace and security not only in Japan but also in the Asia-Pacific region."

About 150 people staged a sit-down demonstration in rain outside parliament in protest at the legislation, which upgraded Japan-US defence guidelines in areas surrounding Japan.

Another 400 union members separately held a rally near the building, yelling in chorus: "We don't need new guidelines! We don't allow such emergency legislation."

The legislation triggered deep concern in North Korea and in China, which worries about Japan and the United States interfering in its fraught relations with Taiwan.

A Chinese official said last month Japan had "ignored the strong concerns of its neighbouring countries, including China," adding the move would "bring new complications and

have an adverse impact on regional security."

The legislation is expected to be on the agenda for Obuchi's talks in early July with President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji during his six-day trip to China and Mongolia.

Beijing has refused to renounce the use of force to regain sovereignty over Taiwan, which split from the mainland in 1949 following a bitter civil war.

The new law enshrines Japan-US defence guidelines that allow Japanese forces to give stronger rearward support to US forces in regional crises that directly threaten the country's security.

US naval forces would be allowed to use Japanese civilian ports and Japanese ships could conduct minesweeping operations.

Earlier plans for Japanese warships to be allowed to carry out inspections on the high seas during such crises were dropped because of concerns about Japanese forces being dragged into violent conflict.

Sonia surrendered Italian passport 16 years ago

NEW DELHI, May 24: The Congress, for the first time, tonight categorically said Sonia Gandhi had surrendered her Italian passport 16 years ago, reports PTI.

Senior Congress leader Pranab Mukherjee, who has been presiding over CWC meetings since Gandhi's resignation as party president, told Star TV that Gandhi had surrendered her Italian passport to Indian authorities on April 27, 1983.

In recent weeks, questions have been raised by media and political parties whether Gandhi has surrendered her Italian passport.

Congress rebels — Sharad Pawar, PA Sangma and Tariq Anwar — had last week questioned Gandhi's credentials for prime ministership in view of her foreign origin.

Sad end of a climber couple

PORTLAND, Oregon, May 24: A married couple climbing on Mount Hood fell 1,000 feet (300 meters) to their deaths just after they began their descent down the north side of the peak, reports AP.

The climbers, a husband and wife in their 20s whose names were not immediately released, were linked together. One of them slipped and pulled the other about 9 am Sunday morning as they were descending the Cooper Spur route, officials said.

Other climbers said conditions were soft and mushy on the mountain as temperatures jumped into the high 80s and low 90s (above 30 C) for the first time this year across much of the state.

Mountain rescue crews were climbing to Eliot Glacier to retrieve the bodies, which were at the 8,800-foot (2,400-meter) level, authorities said.

Barak begins talks to form govt

HERZLIYA, Israel, May 24: Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak of Israel's Labor Party opened preliminary negotiations Monday with other political groups on forming a broad coalition government a week after his election victory, reports AP.

Barak entered the coalition talks strengthened by his overwhelming defeat on May 17 of the right-wing incumbent premier Benjamin Netanyahu, but he faces a tough task trying to form the broadest possible coalition among the 15 parties which will make up the next parliament.

Proceeding with caution, Barak named David Libai, a former Labor Party justice minister and experienced political operator, to lead a first round of coalition contacts.

Only after testing the waters with potential partners early this week will Barak issue the policy guidelines of his government and then enter into serious horse-trading about the distribution of cabinet posts, Labor Party officials said.

A 12-member team opened the talks by meeting with leaders of the left-wing Meretz party at a hotel in Herzliya, a wealthy seaside town north of Tel Aviv where Barak set up his transition headquarters.

The negotiators then met representatives of Israel B'Aliya, a party representing Russian-speaking immigrants and led by outgoing trade and industry minister Natan Sharansky.

Later Monday they were to meet with the Center Party, whose leader Yitzhak Mordechai gave up a bid for the prime ministership and endorsed Barak, and then Shinui, a movement which ran on a platform of opposing the growing political influence of ultra-religious parties.

Tuesday and Wednesday Libai's team will meet with the other parties, notably those representing the Arab Israeli minority, the Likud formerly led by Netanyahu and the Sephardic ultra-Orthodox movement Shas.

In last week's election, the natural leftist and centrist allies of the Labor Party won nearly 70 of the 120 seats in parliament.

But Barak told a victory rally



Some 30 demonstrators raise their fists as they protest against bills to renew Japan-US defence cooperation, near the National Diet in Tokyo Monday, where the bill is being discussed at the House of Councillors. — AFP Photo

BRIEFLY

5 die as jet crashes in Malaysia: A Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) aircraft crashed shortly before landing yesterday at the Kuching International airport in the eastern state of Sarawak, killing all five people on board. Bernama news agency reported, AFP says from Kuala Lumpur. Bernama cited an RMAF spokesman as saying the Caribou plane crashed at about 0500 GMT. Kuching is the capital of Sarawak, which together with Sabah comprise the Malaysian states on Borneo Island.

Landslide kills 2 in Vietnam: Two construction workers were killed and another was injured in a landslide in the northern province of Yen Bai, a local police officer said Monday. AP reports from Hanoi. The incident took place Saturday during work on the foundation of a house at the foot of a hill. Weakened by rain Friday night, the hillside collapsed, burying three people, he said. It took rescuers an hour to recover the bodies of two workers. Local authorities have warned people not to build houses at the foot of the hill, but they have gone ahead anyway.

Accidents kill 6 in India: A state-run bus crashed into a truck and caught fire in northern India, killing at least five passengers and injuring 30 others, United News of India news agency said Monday. AP reports from New Delhi.

The fuel tanks of the two vehicles caught fire engulfing the passengers on Sunday night near Muzaffarnagar, a town 110 km north of New Delhi.

An ambulance taking some of the injured to a nearby hospital also met with an accident. The ambulance driver died after hitting a car on New Delhi-Hardwar highway, UNI said.

Mubarak to meet Gaddafi: Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak left Cairo Monday for a previously unannounced visit to Libya, where he is to hold talks with Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, officials said, AFP reports from Cairo.

The Egyptian President will spend several hours in Libya and return to Cairo later in the day, the presidential officials said. Mubarak is accompanied by Information Minister Safwat Al-Sherif, Finance Minister Mohamed Al-Gharbi, Cabinet Chief Zakareya Azmi and his chief political adviser, Osama al-Baz.

Parlour fire kills 7 in Japan: Seven people were killed and one seriously injured in a fire that broke out in a mahjong parlour near Tokyo, police said Monday. AP reports from Tokyo.

Parlour manager Katsuo Sugawara, 55, and employee Takashi Yamamoto, 51, were among those killed in the Sunday afternoon blaze in Yokohama, a local police official said. The other victims had yet to be identified but were believed to be customers at the establishment, located on the first floor of a two-story building, he said, on condition of anonymity.