

Stampede in Belarus beer festival kills 54

MINSK, Belarus, May 31: A crowd attending a beer festival and rock concert stampeded in an underground passageway in the Belarusian capital, leaving 54 people dead and more than 100 injured, an official said Monday. The tragedy occurred Sunday night at a festival sponsored by a local beer company marking the two-year anniversary of the Mir radio station. The crush occurred in a pedestrian tunnel near the Nemiga metro station close to the center of the city.

Belarusian Interior Minister Yuri Sivakov said about 2,500 people — many of whom had been drinking — left the festival near the city Sports Palace and dashed into the underpass when heavy rain mixed with hail began to fall.

"The weather worsened sharply ... and the crowd, some of whom were under the influence of alcohol, rushed to find cover," Sivakov told state television.

Sivakov said several women, wearing high heels, tripped on the slippery cement floor of the underpass and were trampled by the oncoming crowd. People still outside didn't know what had happened in the passageway and kept pushing forward to get out of the rain, crushing still more.

He said many people suffocated in the push, while several

others died from being stepped on by girls wearing sharp high-heels.

Cezary Goliński, a Polish journalist who lived nearby, said he was on his balcony when he heard screams coming from the underpass. He ran down to the entrance, where police had cordoned off the area and ambulances were taking injured people to the hospital.

According to Sivakov, 42 women — mostly teen-age girls — were killed. Two police officers also died trying to control the crush.

"To have taken measures to prevent this situation would have been practically impossible," he said.

Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko said Monday, "I have no explanations for what has happened. It simply can't be explained." He said none of those in the crowd was drunk.

Paramedics removed the dead and injured, carried out 12 huge sacks of clothing lost in the crush replaced broken glass windows and doors, and washed out the underpass.

"Many young people believe that police did not act properly, and don't want to say anything for fear of retribution," said one woman who identified herself only as Zoya.

New Nepali PM names 16-member Cabinet

KATMANDU, May 31: Nepal's new Prime Minister, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, named a 16-member Cabinet Monday, state-run radio said, reports AP.

King Birendra, the monarch, formed the new council of ministers on recommendation of the prime minister. Radio Nepal quoted an announcement by the palace.

Bhattarai became prime minister last week after his Nepali Congress Party won a majority in the elections, held earlier this month, winning 110 of the 205 seats in the Lower House of Parliament.

Bhattarai and his ministers will take the oath of office later in the day.

Bhattarai has kept the important ministries of home and foreign affairs for himself while his loyal supporter, Yog Prasad Upadhyaya, has been appointed education minister.

Mahesh Acharya will be the finance minister. Govindraj Joshi will look after water resources and Purna Bahadur Khadka will be information and communications minister.

The party picked up many important seats from its rival, the United Marxist Leninist Communist Party of Nepal, breaking into some of the traditional communists strongholds in the east and west.

Opposition seeks Fernandes's resignation

NEW DELHI, May 31: An Indian opposition leader Monday demanded Defence Minister George Fernandes' resignation, blaming him for the infiltration of Islamic guerrillas into Kashmir, reports AFP.

Jayalalitha Jayaram said her long-standing argument that Fernandes' is unfit to head the Defence Ministry stands vindicated.

"The minister has failed to perform his duty by letting the infiltration go on for months without any preventive action," she said in the southern city of Madras.

Jayalalitha said she had warned the government of a possible influx of heavily-armed Moslem guerrillas into the Indian state of Kashmir in October 1998 when she was a member of India's coalition government.

India has accused Pakistan of aiding the infiltration of guerrillas into Kashmir, where the two countries are again at loggerheads.

"It will be a danger to the country to leave Fernandes to continue as defence minister," she said.

Fernandes has come under all-round attack for failure to check the infiltration by the guerrillas who have occupied strategic hills along the Kashmir border, sparking tensions with Pakistan.

He also been flayed for absolving Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of responsibility for the infiltration.

Jayalalitha, an influential politician in southern India, had also denounced Fernandes when he sacked the Indian naval chief in December.

Clinton backs Nigeria's new president

WASHINGTON, May 31: A vacationing President Bill Clinton got out of bed in the predawn hours to watch the inauguration of Nigeria's President Olusegun Obasanjo and said later he was "really pulling" for the newly elected leader, reports Reuters.

Clinton, returning from a five-day break in Florida, told reporters aboard Air Force One on Sunday that he had gotten up at 4:30 am EDT (0830 GMT) to watch the swearing-in.

He said he thought Obasanjo had given "a great speech" and that the new president would be able to reform Nigerian politics, improve its economy and root out corruption.

"It's so important that they make it," Clinton said. "I'm really pulling for him. I hope ... I hope he can do it."

Obasanjo was sworn in on Saturday, ending 15 years of military rule in Africa's most populous country.

He takes office as Nigeria faces its worst economic crisis since independence from Britain in 1960.

New Cabinet appointed in Bahrain:

Bahrain's Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa yesterday appointed a new Cabinet, his first since he took over after the death of his father in March, Reuters reports from Manama.

An Emiri decree, carried by the official Gulf News Agency (GNA), named 17 ministers with most key portfolios retained by ministers from the outgoing Cabinet.

Suharto's daughter questioned:

The eldest daughter of ex-President Suharto was questioned

International

India moves more troops to Kashmir

NEW DELHI, May 31: India has moved more troops to bolster its ground-and-air offensive on its side of Kashmir's ceasefire line to flush out what it calls Pakistan-backed intruders, army officials said today.

Defence officials in Jammu, winter capital of the disputed Jammu and Kashmir province, told Reuters Indian air strikes resumed at 5:30 am (midnight GMT) today in the mountainous Himalayan territory.

They said the raids were preceded by night-time reconnaissance missions, adding there had been fresh shelling by Pakistan across the military control line in the Batalik, Dahanu and Davar sectors of Kargil, Batalik and Drass enclaves.

"Additional troops are being sent, there is no doubt," an army spokesman told Reuters by telephone in New Delhi.

India reacted coolly on Sunday to an offer by Pakistan to send Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz for talks in New Delhi, saying the only purpose of the meeting could be for Islamabad to take back the intrusion India accuses it of masterminding.

"We are still awaiting confirmation and if the confirmation comes the meeting will take place within this week," said a source told Reuters Television in Islamabad today.

Last week, a Pakistani missile brought down an Indian MiG fighter jet, killing the pilot, while four Indian airmen died after a stinger missile hit their Mi-17 helicopter gunship.

Pakistan says the jet violated its airspace but India denies this.

India on Sunday reported the death of an army major M Saravanan in a hand-to-hand combat with Kashmiri intruders after killing four of them.

The situation as of now is firmly under the control of the security forces," Major-General J. J. Singh, additional director-general of India's military operations, told reporters on Sunday.

New Delhi also accuses Pakistan of supplying Stinger

missiles to the militants and cites it as proof of Islamabad's backing.

Islamabad denies Indian charges of aiding Kashmiri guerrillas in the two-thirds of the territory ruled by India. The rest is under Pakistani control.

The two nations have fought two wars over the region since their independence from Britain in 1947.

Vajpayee on Sunday stonewalled efforts by United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan to send a special envoy, saying such a representative should be sent to Islamabad to seek the withdrawal of the Kashmiri intruders.

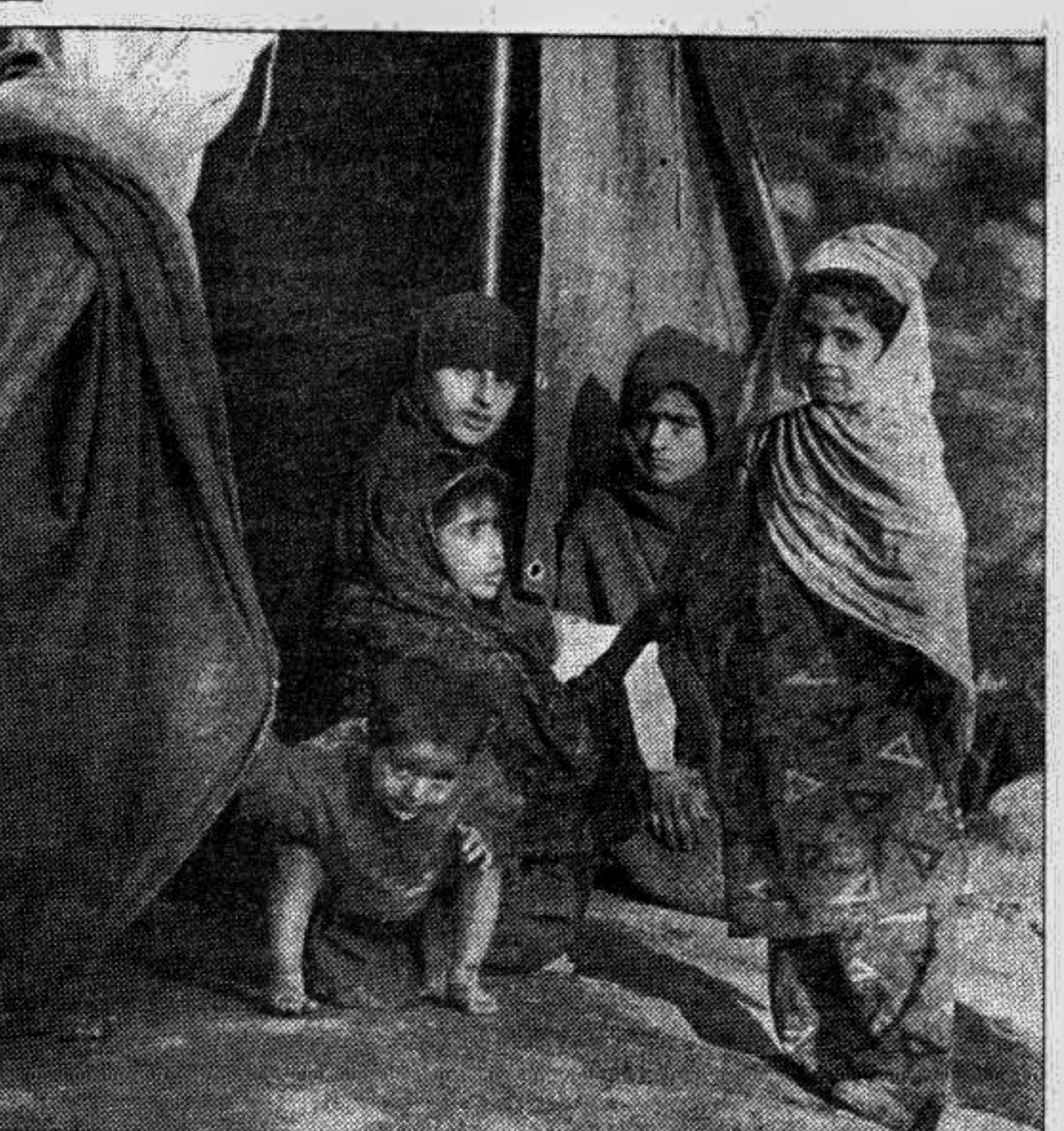
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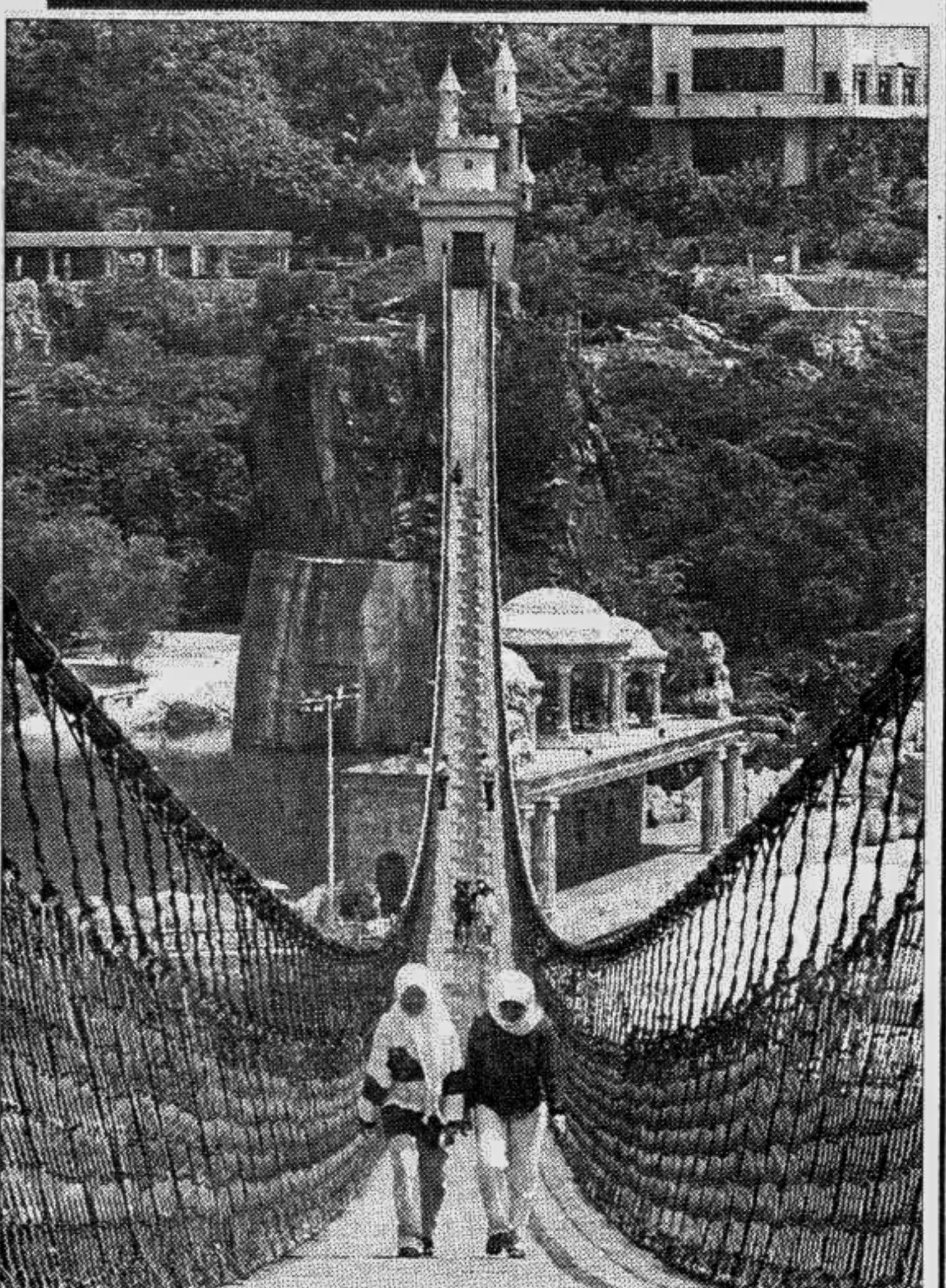
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Kashmiri displaced children sit outside their tent at a make-shift camp in Batang in the Neelum Valley of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir Sunday. Hundreds of Kashmiri families have been shifted to safer places up in the mountains away from the reach of Indian gunshots as shelling continues across the Line of Control. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY



Two Muslim girls walk on the world's longest pedestrian suspension bridge measuring 428 metres long Monday at Sunway Lagoon Theme Park in Kuala Lumpur. The theme park is a favourite hang out place among youths who are currently having their school holidays.

— AFP photo

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Suharto's daughter questioned:

The eldest daughter of ex-President Suharto was questioned

Monday by the state prosecutor in connection with allegations that the former first family has amassed a fortune abroad, AP reports from Jakarta.

Siti Hardiyanti Rukmana, who was social minister in Suharto's final Cabinet and is better known as Tutut, arrived at the attorney general's office accompanied by lawyer Amir Syamsuddin and several bodyguards. She also was questioned early this year in her capacity as official of a charity foundation headed by Suharto.

UN soldier killed in Lebanon:

An Irish soldier in the UN peacekeeping force in south Lebanon was killed yesterday when his outpost was hit by shell fire, a UN spokesman said, Reuters reports from Jerusalem.

"An Irish soldier was killed and another Irish soldier was seriously wounded when shells hit their position at Brasheet," UN spokesman Timur Gokseli said. He said it was unclear who launched the attack.

Yeltsin may meet Stepashin:

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Discovery astronauts enter ISS

were assembled by the Endeavour's shuttle crew in December 1998.

Due to logistical constraints, the first components of the fledgling space station were placed in orbit stripped of much of the equipment and comfort features needed to make ISS livable.

Over the next four days, the Discovery astronauts are to install some 750 items into the space station, including computers, clothes, water and spare parts, to prepare ISS for its first occupants.

US commander William Shepherd and his Russian colleagues Yuri Gidzenko and Sergei Krikalev are due to move in next spring.

The Discovery crew is also tasked with repairing some of the technical glitches that have surfaced over the first six months of the station's existence.

Tokarev and Canadian astronaut Julie Payette are to change the defective battery chargers of the Zarya module and to install noise reduction devices aboard.

Separate press reports quoted an independent poll watchdog as saying that soldiers tortured six of its student volunteers in West Aceh after an ambush in the region Saturday that left nine soldiers and policemen dead.

Gafur and other campaigners managed to escape in a backup car after the van parked behind the stage was burned by the angry mob, Kompas said.

Meanwhile, Kurdish rebel

Mob attacks ruling party campaign in Aceh

JAKARTA, May 31: A mob stoned officials of Indonesia's ruling party to death.

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Meanwhile, Kurdish rebel

Court rejects adjournment of Ocalan's trial

IMRALI, Turkey, May 31: A Turkish State Security Court trying Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan on Monday rejected a request by defence attorneys to adjourn the trial, the Anatolia news agency reported.

The defence team had earlier said it would ask for an adjournment to gain time to prepare his case as well as to allow parliament time to pass a legal reform to change the status of State Security Courts.