

India launches massive air strikes in Kashmir

NEW DELHI, June 1: India today launched massive air strikes against Muslim guerrillas in Kashmir and accused Pakistan of intensifying artillery fire along their disputed border, as the two rivals argued over dates for peace talks, reports AFP.

Military sources in New Delhi also reported an overnight assault by Pakistan-backed Muslim guerrillas to breach Indian defences in one of the four main conflict zones of northern Kashmir.

Air force sources said waves of MiG-21, MiG-23 and MiG-27 aircraft conducted at least six sorties in the battle zone of Kargil in northern Kashmir against entrenched guerrillas.

The raids which began at 7:00 am (0130 GMT) were spearheaded exclusively by fighter jets, a source said, adding that "helicopter gunships played no role in the attacks."

Mirage 2000 jets also prowled the Kashmir skies, jamming Pakistani missile

radars across the border of the Himalayan heights.

The air force deployed its Mirage 2000s after two of its MiG jets and a helicopter gunship were shot down during combat last week.

An Indian army spokesman said Pakistani troops have stepped up shelling along the line of control where clashes have been going on since May 9 following the infiltration of Islamic guerrillas into Indian territory.

He said the Pakistani offensive had spread from the remote northern mountain areas of Kargil and Drass to southern Kashmir.

"They are now not only concentrating there but are attacking our positions in Poonch and Rajouri," in the south of Indian-administered Kashmir," he said.

He said the shelling, which came after Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee agreed to talks with Pakistan Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz to

defuse the Kashmir situation, would not be successful.

"The Pakistanis are under the impression that we have moved away troops from border areas in Kashmir to Kargil and Drass," the spokesman said. "That is not correct."

"We have the men and we have the arms."

"Pakistan is moving artillery and heavy weaponry in almost the whole of the Line of Control (LoC) but we are prepared," he said of the deployment of reserve troops in the frontiers of the disputed state.

"We are making our presence clear on the ground, at the LoC, in the air and on our maritime boundaries," a senior defence ministry official said.

The fighting in the Kargil region of northern Kashmir is centred at a dozen posts in the mountainous sectors of Drass, Batalik and Mushko Valley.

Military sources said contingents of Muslim guerrillas made a daring raid overnight to cross a fast-flowing stream in

Batalik to escape heavy shelling and to breach Indian defences.

Reuters reports from Islamabad: At least 50,000 people have fled their homes on the Pakistan side of Kashmir amid stepped-up Indian attacks across the ceasefire line, a Pakistani cabinet minister said yesterday.

Kashmir Affairs Minister Majed Malik said Indian mortar and machine-gun fire had increased all along the dividing Line of Control.

"All along the line, I think there would be 50,000 to 60,000 people who have been affected so far. They have moved back-wards and they are in different areas and different groups," Malik said.

Indian troops, backed by jets, launched a seventh day of attacks today against what it says are Pakistan-backed infiltrators in northern Kashmir, with an aim to removing threats to a strategic supply highway.

Sharif rejects India's accusation

ISLAMABAD, June 1: Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday rejected India's accusation that Islamabad was pushing in rebels into Kashmir, saying people fighting Indian army in the valley are neither militants nor infiltrators, but are freedom fighters, reports PTI.

The people in the valley are neither militants nor infiltrators. They are just freedom fighters struggling for the liberation of their motherland, Sharif said and urged India to find a peaceful solution to issue as per the Lahore declaration he signed with Indian counterpart Atal Bihari Vajpayee in February.

Speaking at a public function in Lahore, Sharif asked India to work out a settlement of the Kashmir issue in accordance with the wishes of the people of Kashmir as they (the people) have an inalienable right to self-determination as set out by the 50-year-old UN security council resolution, the official AFP news agency reported.

He also said that Kashmir issue had to be solved ultimately as it is a prerequisite for durable peace in the region.

Sharif had met Vajpayee in Lahore in February and both had agreed to intensify their efforts to resolve all bilateral disputes including Kashmir.

Sharif's comments off the militants now waging a war against the Indian troops in the Kargil and Drass sectors of Line of Control (LoC) come even as India agreed to hold talks with Pakistan to defuse tension.

Nigeria's new leader cancels contracts under military regime

ABUJA (Nigeria), June 1: Two days after his inauguration speech against corruption, Nigeria's new civilian President Olusegun Obasanjo today suspended all contracts penned since the beginning of the year by the former military regime, reports AP.

Obasanjo's spokesman Doyin Okupe said in a statement that all senior government and diplomatic postings made since January 1 had also been suspended pending a government review.

The suspended deals included crude oil export contracts and all state approval for petroleum exploration. No other details of the move were available.

Nigeria, the world's sixth largest oil exporter, has been hobbled by years of military corruption that have made a select few fabulously wealthy while reducing Africa's most populous country to one of the world's poorest states.

Critics have accused the country's latest military leader, Gen. Abdulsalam Abubakar, of making improving economic deals in the final months prior to his weekend handover of power to Obasanjo.

Local newspapers and radio stations have also estimated that about 2.6 billion dollars has been withdrawn from Nigeria's foreign reserves during its yearlong democratic transition.

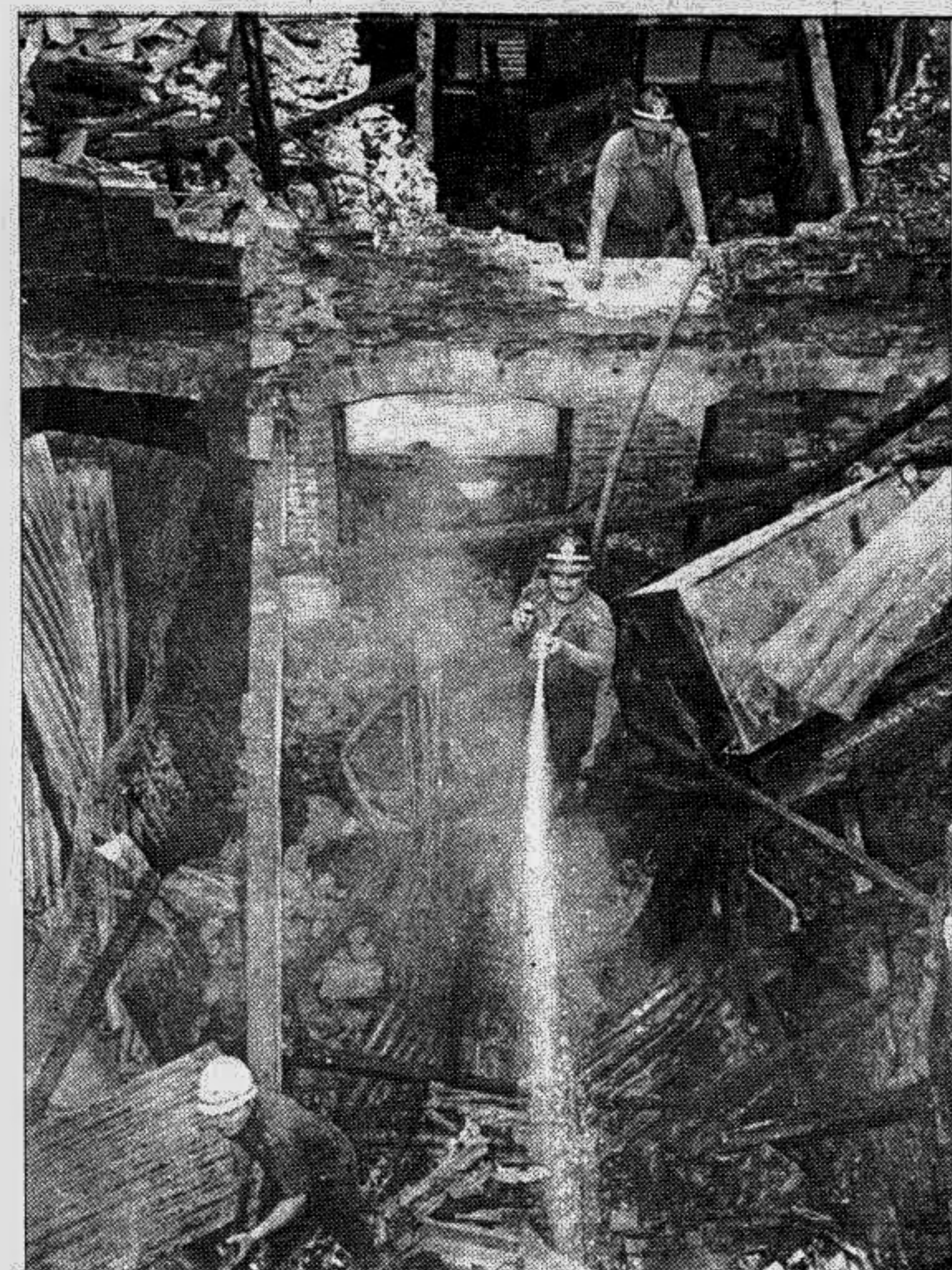
Colombian rebels still holding 60 churchgoers

CALI, Colombia, June 1: Troops searching for Marxist rebels holding about 60 of more than 140 people abducted from a church in Colombia seemed to come up empty-handed on Monday, a day after a crime the Vatican called an unprecedented act of "barbarity," reports Reuters.

Security sources said a combined force of about 3,000 soldiers and members of elite police counterinsurgency units combed the rugged Andes mountain zone in southwest of Cali, where National Liberation Army (ELN) rebels fled with their hostages.

But the search produced no fresh leads as to the exact whereabouts of the guerrillas and their captives, the sources said.

The ELN, Colombia's second-largest guerrilla army, is the same group that abducted all 41 passengers and crew aboard a commercial airline hijacked over northeast Colombia last month.



Firefighters douse the remains of a building in the thickly populated Lal Quam business district of old Delhi on Monday.

Fire kills 34 in Delhi

NEW DELHI, June 1: The death toll in a major fire in New Delhi rose to 34 Tuesday and several of the nearly 100 people injured may succumb to burn injuries, hospital sources said, reports AFP.

A doctor at a state-run city hospital told AFP that 19 more people, including children, had died overnight Monday of burn injuries.

He said several others were in critical condition.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Tuesday visited the injured at the hospital.

On Monday afternoon, a devastating fire swept through a row of shops in a densely populated business quarter after a large quantity of chemicals stored in a two-storey building exploded.

Backed by strong winds, the fire spread rapidly and destroyed more than a dozen shops. About 30 fire tenders took almost 90 minutes to bring the blaze under control.

Witnesses said the fire quickly spread to nearby shops and houses.

"I saw fireballs whizzing past my window. When I looked

outside, I saw people shrieking for help and the fire was spreading in all directions," said Mohammed Nasser, a local resident.

The fire also gutted a nearby nursing home.

"Police and the fire brigade reached there almost 45 minutes after the fire, but the local people managed to rescue many people from the burning buildings," Nasser said.

The blaze was brought under control 90 minutes later.

"The fire spread very quickly. By the time it was brought under control, at least 10 to 12 shops and buildings were burnt down," said Hanif, a labourer.

The fire started at about 3:50 pm when stored chemical consignments burst alight in a building in the Hauz Qazi area of the congested walled city.

"Twelve died on the spot. One was declared dead on arrival while three succumbed to their injuries later," said a senior doctor who asked not to be identified.

Tamil rebels kill 11 civilians in Lanka

COLOMBO, June 1: Tamil Tiger rebels attacked a van-carrying civilians in northeastern Sri Lanka, killing 11 people and wounding seven others, military officials said today, reports Reuters.

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Of concern to the ruling party is its quest for a clean sweep of the country's nine provincial legislatures, two of which -- the affluent Western Cape and the rural, mineral rich KwaZulu-Natal -- remain outside its control.

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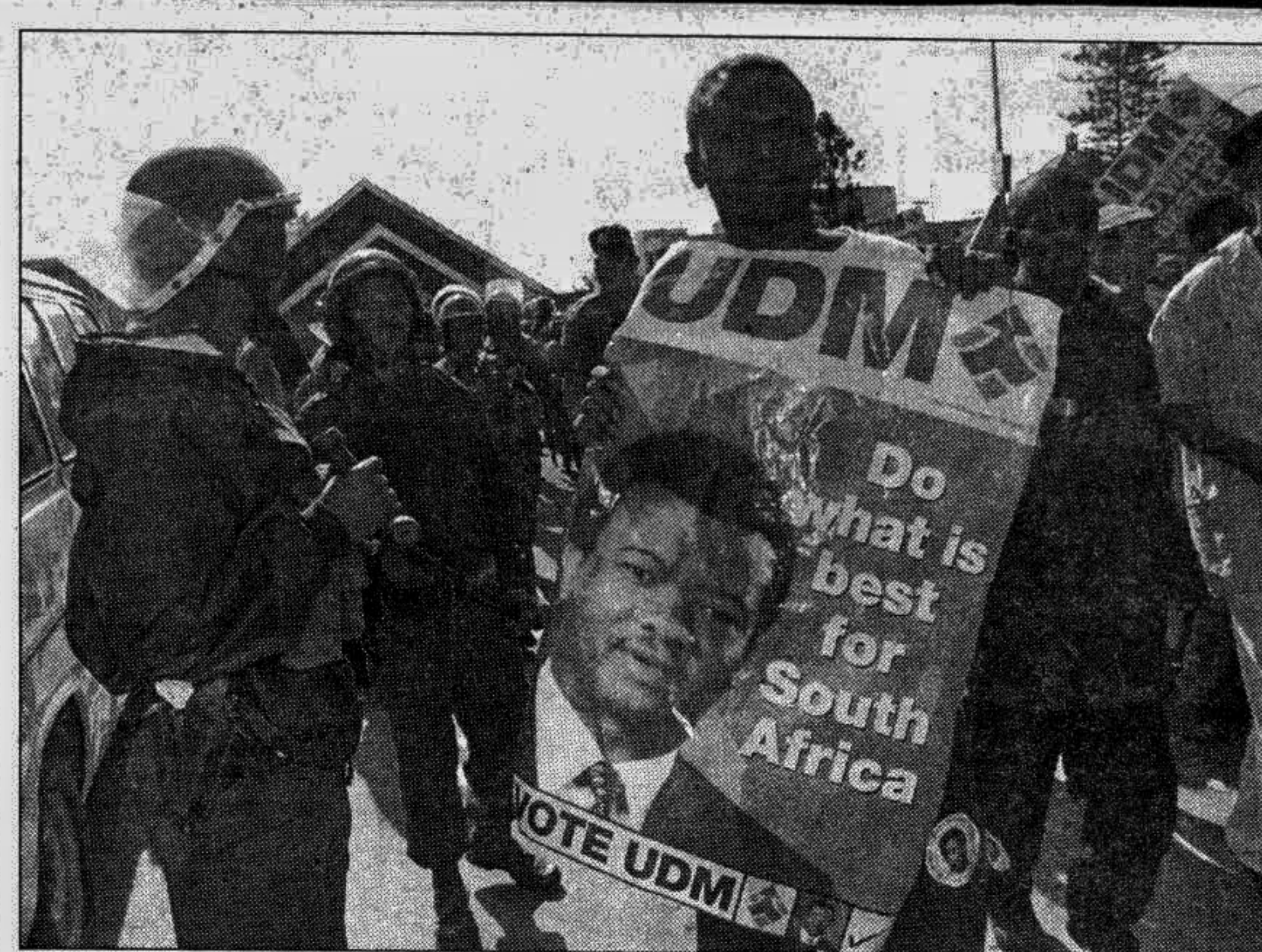
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Supporters of the United Democratic Movement (UDM) holds an UDM poster on May 29 near Umtata stadium where UDM leader Bantu Holomisa held his last rally before South Africa's second all-race elections today.

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Clinton admn blamed for Netanyahu's defeat

JERUSALEM, June 1: The administration of US President Bill Clinton worked against outgoing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during his reelection bid, a senior adviser to Netanyahu claimed today, reports AP.

David Bar-Ilan, who served as Netanyahu's communications director, said the US State Department ran its own campaign of disinformation against the premier while the White House encouraged financial contributions to Netanyahu's main opponent, and eventual successor, Ehud Barak.

Netanyahu, who slowed down the peace process with the Palestinians after his 1996 election, had a rocky relationship with the United States which wanted to see the process advanced quickly.

In an article written for the June 14 issue of the conservative National Review, Bar-Ilan wrote that the Clinton administration ran an "unrelenting, smoothly orchestrated campaign aimed at causing Netanyahu's defeat at the polls."