

India buying \$47m artillery shells as fighting in Kashmir escalates

NEW DELHI, June 3: India is buying 47 million dollars worth of artillery shells to replace ammunition fired at infiltrators entrenched in the Himalayan heights on the Indian side of the dispute border with Pakistan, a news report said Thursday, reports AP.

The Defence Ministry is finalising terms with Denel, a manufacturer in South Africa, to purchase 155-mm shells for Bolov howitzers, which are being used extensively by Indian troops fighting around Kargil in the Kashmir region, where a fierce battle has been raging for the past week. The Indian Express newspaper reported.

India says it will continue the military campaign until its

soldiers evict the infiltrators, whom it describes as Afghan mercenaries and Pakistani soldiers dressed as Kashmiri guerrillas. Pakistan denies its soldiers are involved in the fighting.

Both nations have fought three wars in the last 51 years, two of them over the Himalayan territory of Kashmir which both claim in its entirety. The area is divided between them by a Line of Control, the ceasefire line that they agreed upon in 1972.

India said the infiltrators sneaked into Indian-held Kashmir last month and were trying to seize Indian territory. Since then, air force jets and helicopters have fired rockets

to dislodge the infiltrators, with the army moving in later in a move to evict them.

The newspaper said the government is likely to finalise the arms deal in the next few days to purchase 25,000 155-mm shells, each costing 1,000 dollars, from the South African firm.

It said the government planned to spend another 22 million dollars to purchase additional artillery shells from other foreign companies.

It includes the purchase of 30,000 160-mm mortar rounds from Israel Military Industries, each costing 400 dollars and 50,000 130-mm shells for MM46 artillery field guns from Russia at a cost of 150 dollar

each.

Independent confirmation of the report was not immediately possible.

India's stock of shells produced by its ordnance factories is running low, the newspaper quoted unnamed military sources as saying.

In Srinagar, heavy shelling rocked the disputed Kashmir border between India and Pakistan on Thursday, as the Indian air force launched strikes against Islamic guerrillas for the ninth straight day.

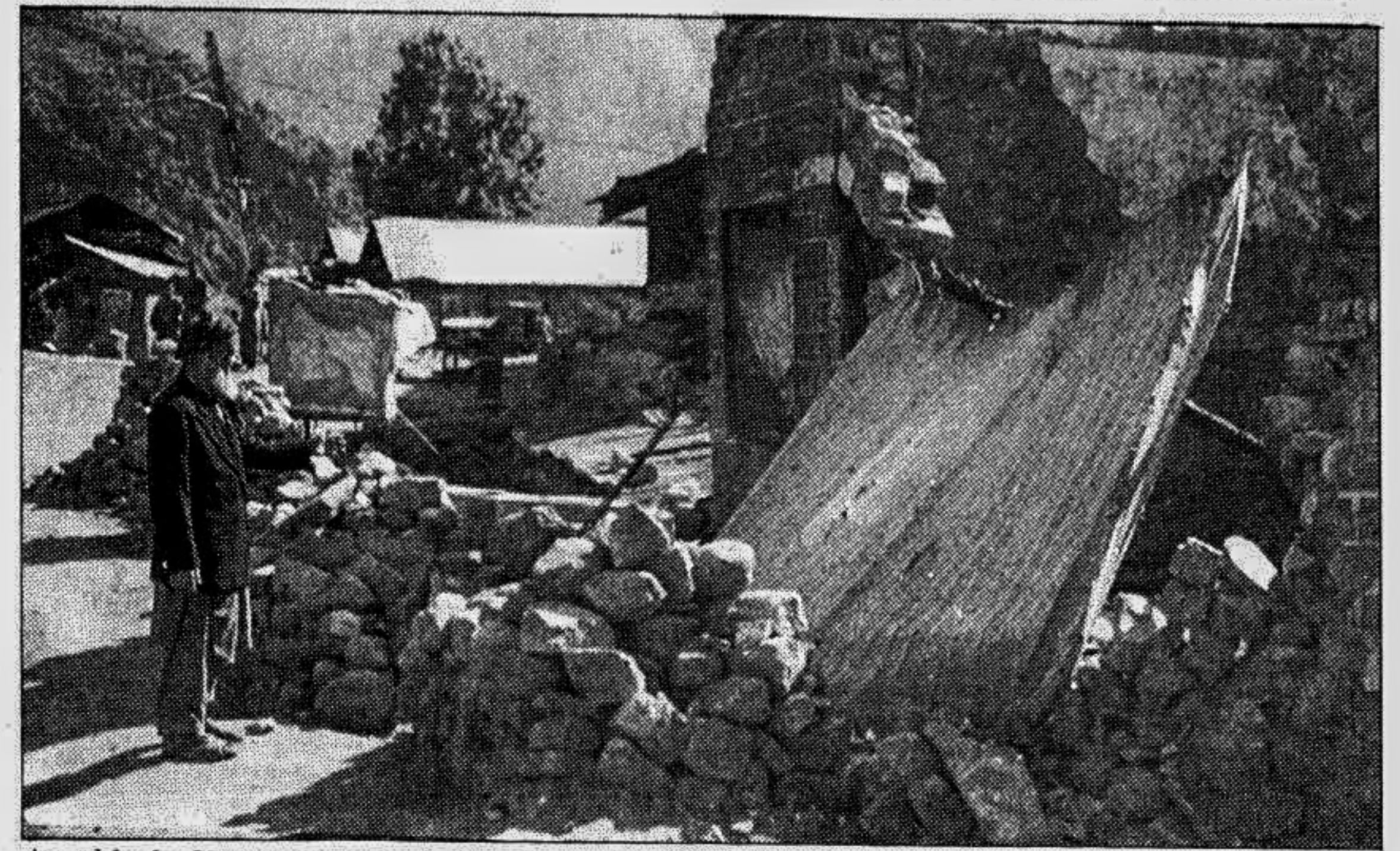
Military officials said the border regions of Kargil, Drass and Baru came under intense fire from Pakistani heavy artillery batteries throughout the

night.

"Our units also bombarded Pakistani positions," one official said, adding that shelling ceased at 5:00 a.m. (2330 GMT Wednesday).

The Indian air force then took over, launching air strikes at 6:30 a.m. against guerrilla positions in mountains around the Batalik region, which has witnessed some of the heaviest fighting in recent days.

Meanwhile, the commander in chief of the 15th Indian Army Corps based in Kashmir and Ladakh, General Krishan Pal, went to Kargil Thursday for discussions with senior division commanders in the field.



An elderly Kashmiri man looks at a school building that was destroyed by Indian shelling in the Naqdar sector of the Neelum Valley in Pakistan-held Kashmir on Thursday. At least 10 students were killed when an Indian rocket landed in the school building. — AFP Photo

Nine Indian security men killed in blast

NEW DELHI, June 3: Eight paramilitary troops and a policeman were killed when Maoist guerrillas set off a remote-controlled landmine in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, police said Thursday, reports AFP.

The mine was detonated Wednesday night near a small bridge when the security forces were on patrol. Inspector General of Police Niyaj Ahmed told the United News India (UNI).

Five others who were part of the patrol were reported to be critically injured.

Ahmed blamed Maoist guerrillas belonging to the outlawed People's War Group for the killings.

Maoist guerrillas are active in several parts of India, including Bihar, organising the rural poor. The guerrillas frequently target police and security forces.

Ahmed said security in the Jehanabad district of Bihar had been stepped up in view of the fact a police station was also at-

tacked by the People's War Group on the night of the landmine explosion.

A massive hunt was on to apprehend the attackers.

State Director General of Police KA Jacob told UNI that the landmines were detonated as the police van in which the CRPF reached Deoria bridge on way to Bhagwanjari. The CRPF personnel were proceeding to Bhagwanjari following an alarm call to Masurhi police station that PWG men had attacked the Bhagwanjari police station.

Jacob said the extremists laid the landmines before opening fire at the police station in a strategic move to trap the CRPF Jawans.

The police van was blown up in the blast, he said.

While five CRPF men and a Constable were killed on the spot, other two succumbed to injuries on way to hospital.

Pak FM to visit India next week

ISLAMABAD, June 3: Pakistan Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz said Thursday he expects to go to New Delhi next week for talks with Indian leaders on reducing tensions in Kashmir, reports AFP.

But as India pursued its artillery shelling of rebels on the Kashmir frontier, Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif brought forward plans to visit his country's strategic ally, China.

In an interview with AFP, the foreign minister said India and Pakistan would discuss ways of monitoring the ceasefire Line of Control that separates the Himalayan region, which has seen renewed confrontation for nearly a month.

Aziz said new measures could include the expansion of the small UN monitoring force along the disputed frontier.

"The talks will probably be held next week. Obviously there are some differences. The basic point is that one has to see the nature of the ground situation, our perspectives and assessments are different," he said.

"We don't want to engage in a war with India," he said. "We

have concluded that a military solution to Kashmir is not possible."

The Pakistan prime minister is to visit Beijing soon for talks with Chinese leaders, a cabinet member said. The visit had been planned earlier for late June or beginning of July but the dates have apparently been advanced.

"It is natural among friends to make such adjustments," Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Siddiq Kanju said adding that a schedule would be finalised in coming days.

China is Pakistan's traditional ally and a major source of weapons. It has given political support on several major issues.

Army chief General Pervez Musharraf spent a week in China last month as Pakistani and Indian armies stepped up their fierce artillery duels in Kashmir.

Kanju said he was not pessimistic about diplomatic contacts between Pakistan and India to schedule talks proposed by Shari for his Indian Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee on defusing the Kashmir crisis.

"We made an offer which has been principally accepted. Both sides are working on appropriate time and dates of the visit and meeting. I don't see any reason to be pessimistic."

Signals from New Delhi have, however, indicated that an early meeting would depend on progress made by the Indian army in their operation against guerrillas.

Indian government leaders have said it would not be possible to have constructive talks while infiltrators, that India has said come from Pakistan, remained in mountain bunkers in the Kargil and Drass sectors of Indian Kashmir.

Pakistan strongly denies it has infiltrated any men into Indian territory, insisting that the "freedom struggle" in Kashmir is indigenous and linked to Indian "repression" in the disputed land.

Kanju said if there were any substance to the Indian accusations, India would have agreed a Pakistani proposal to deploy "neutral observers" along the Line of Control and let the United Nations play a role in the crisis.

ANC set for overwhelming majority

JOHANNESBURG, June 3: The ruling African National Congress (ANC) was Thursday set for an overwhelming majority at South Africa's general elections, providing a ringing endorsement for Thabo Mbeki as Nelson Mandela's successor, reports AFP.

The party had 65 per cent of the votes with little more than half of the votes counted, surpassing its total of 62 per cent won in the first all-race elections in 1994.

State television predicted hours earlier that the ANC would take a two-thirds majority.

Mbeki was expected to make a victory speech at the party's headquarters at Midrand, north of Johannesburg, at 10 p.m. The 56-year-old is likely to succeed Mandela when parliament meets on June 14 to elect a new president.

The opposition parties were far behind.

The liberal Democratic Party (DP) was in second place with

10.5 percent, ahead of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) of Zulu leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi, which was polling strongly with 8.2 per cent.

The renamed former apartheid power, the New National Party (NNP) of Marthinus Van Schalkwyk, appeared set to lose its mantle of official opposition to the DP, with just 7.7 per cent.

Wednesday's election, characterised by day-long queues outside polling stations in poor areas, had been "free and fair", European and African parliamentary observers declared in Pretoria.

"As far as we can see, these elections are indeed, as in (the 1994 election), free and fair with less irregularities than five years ago," Jan Nico Scholten, president of the Association of Western European Parliamentarians for Africa (AWEPA) told reporters.

Scholten praised the "rapid growth of democratic maturity" among South Africans.

The ANC was predicted to re-

tain control of seven of the nine provinces, but as expected, there was a tight contest in both the provinces it failed to win in 1994.

In the hotly contested Western Cape, the NNP had 41.0 per cent, compared with the ANC's 38.6 per cent, with almost 61 per cent of the votes counted.

The DP increasingly looked like holding the balance of the power in the province, with 12.6 per cent.

In KwaZulu-Natal, the other province outside ANC control, the ruling Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) was leading with 40.4 per cent, ahead of the ANC's 39.3 with 54 per cent of the ballots counted.

Essop Pahad, a close friend of Mbeki's and minister at the Deputy President's office, said the ANC had secured an "overwhelming majority" nationally despite an attempt by opposition parties to create a "white laager of fear" by raising concerns about a possible two-thirds majority.

BRIEFLY

US soldier shot dead in Mexico: A US soldier was found shot dead in this Mexican city just across the US border, authorities said Wednesday, AFP reports from Mexico.

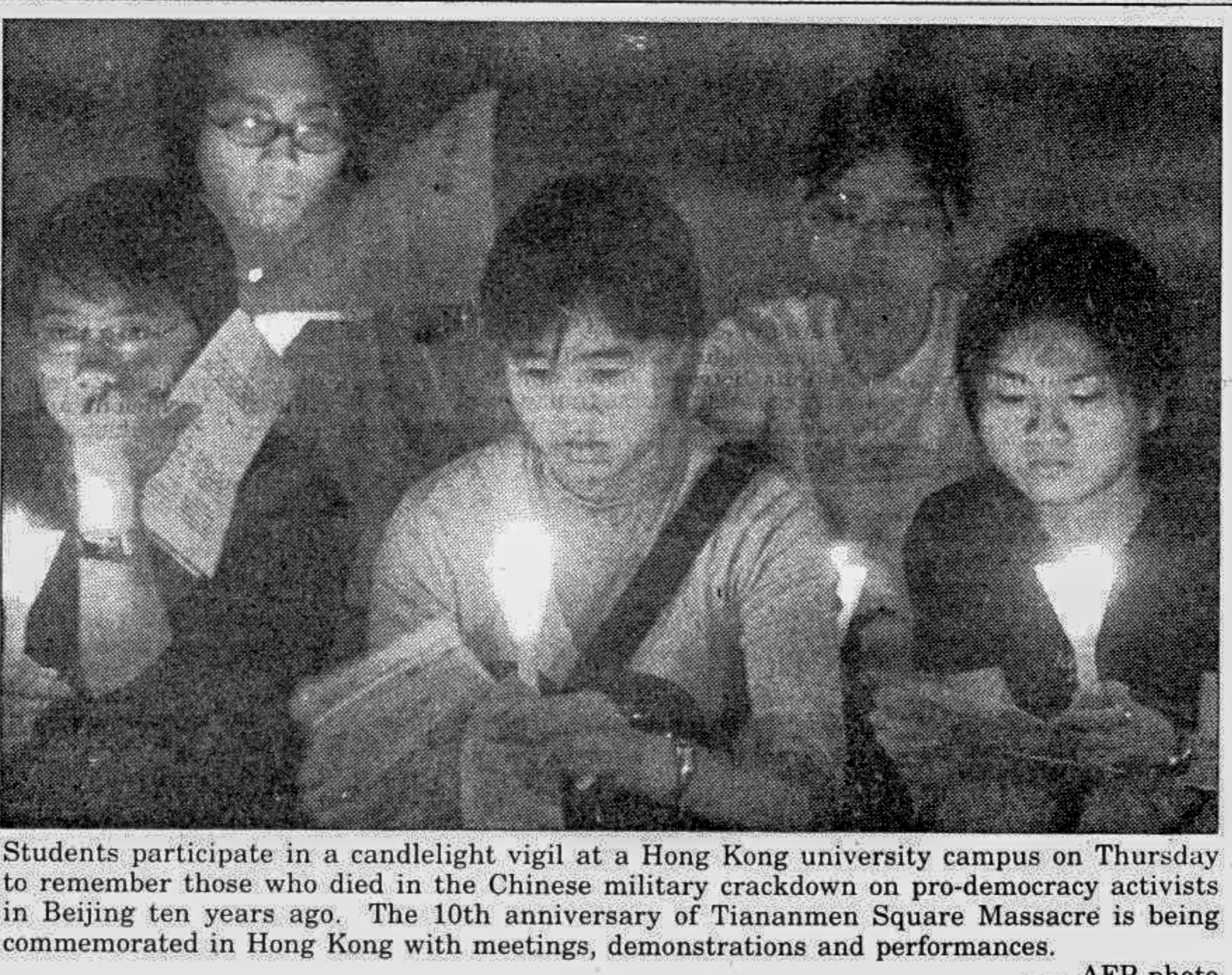
The victim was identified as Manuel Guillen, an active member of the US Army, said state prosecutor's spokesman, Juan Manuel Carmona. The body was found inside a car parked about 500 meters from the Zaragoza bridge that links El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juarez. He said Guillen was shot in the head from a short distance.

Israeli soldier kills Palestinian: An Israeli soldier shot and killed a Palestinian man early Thursday at an army checkpoint south of Hebron, the army said, AFP reports from Hebron.

The army said the soldier opened fire after a car carrying the Palestinian tried to run him down at the checkpoint. The car continued but stopped at another checkpoint where soldiers found the Palestinian man with serious gunshot wounds, an army spokesman said. The man was taken to a local hospital where he died of his wounds, he said.

India restores ties with Fiji: India Thursday officially restored its diplomatic ties with Fiji, nine years after its Suva embassy staff were given 24 hours notice to leave the country, AFP reports from Suva.

India's new ambassador Ishwar Chauhan presented his credentials to President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, who as prime minister in 1990 ordered the mission closed, claiming it was interfering in Fiji's internal affairs. "My policy will be to develop ties of friendship with Fiji after a gap of nine years when India was not represented in Fiji," Chauhan told AFP.



Students participate in a candlelight vigil at a Hong Kong university campus on Thursday to remember those who died in the Chinese military crackdown on pro-democracy activists in Beijing ten years ago. The 10th anniversary of Tiananmen Square Massacre is being commemorated in Hong Kong with meetings, demonstrations and performances. — AFP photo

ROK, DPRK to resume talks June 21

SEOUL, Jun 3: Talks between North and South Korea, suspended since April of last year, will resume on June 21 at the vice-ministerial level, South Korea's unification minister Lim Dong-won said today, reports Reuters.

He added that South Korea would provide famine-stricken North Korea with 200,000 tonnes of fertilizer and that the talks would address the issue of family members separated since the 1950-53 Korean War.

Lim said the two Koreas had reached an agreement to restart the bilateral talks after four instances of unofficial contacts between the two countries in Beijing, but that the agreement did not stipulate a location for the talks.

Talks between the two Koreas broke off in April last year after Seoul insisted it would offer aid to North Korea only if Pyongyang committed itself to allow reunions of tens of thousands of families separated after the war.

Lim said South Korea hoped the new talks would result in letter exchanges, visits to each side by separated family members and, in the final stage, an option for surviving family members in the South to return to North Korea to live.

3 injured as US, British planes hit Iraq

BAGHDAD, Jun 3: Three Iraqis were injured Wednesday during strikes by US and British planes against civilian targets in the north of the country, an Iraqi military spokesman said, reports AFP.

"Enemy planes bombed civilian installations and camps in Nineveh province (in the north), where three citizens were injured," said the spokesman, quoted by the official Iraqi INA news agency.

"Iraqi anti-aircraft artillery opened fire on enemy planes overflying provinces in the north and south of Iraq on Wednesday," he said.

"US and British planes coming from Turkish air space carried out 21 raids on the provinces of Dohuk, Erbil and Nineveh before being forced to flee by anti-aircraft fire," he added.

He said anti-aircraft fire had also driven back planes which had entered Iraqi airspace from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and

flow over Basra, Misan, Dhi Qar and Muthanna provinces in the south.

Earlier, US military officials at the Incirlik base in southern Turkey said US warplanes bombed Iraqi military targets in the northern "no-fly" zone after the aircraft were illuminated by radar.

"Responding in self-defence, US Air Force F-16CJ Fighting Falcons and F-15E Strike Eagles dropped GBU-10 and GBU-12 precision-guided munitions on Iraqi military command and control facilities south of Mosul," they said in a statement.

The strikes came between midday and 2:00 pm Iraqi time (0800 and 1000 GMT) during routine patrol flights in the exclusion zone, the statement added.

"All coalition aircraft departed the area safely," it said, adding that experts were assessing damage to Iraqi forces.

Kurdish rebels warn of fighting

IMRALI ISLAND (Turkey) June 3: The court trying rebel leader Abdullatif Ocalan for treason has asked both sides to wrap up their cases, a sign that a verdict could come as soon as next week, reports AP.

Meanwhile, Kurdish guerrillas say they support Ocalan's calls for peace, but warn they will keep fighting if his conciliatory offer goes unanswered.

There have been sporadic rebel attacks since the trial began Monday. In the largely Kurdish southeast, a suspected rebel blew himself up near a military garrison Wednesday, causing no other casualties.

Emotions ran high at the trial Wednesday, with the widow of a slain soldier describing how she watched her husband being led away from a rebel roadblock and shot.

Spectators and lawyers were moved to tears when a sobbing Yildiz Namdar shouted: "You apologize, but will you bring my husband back?"

"I share your grief," replied Ocalan, who could be sentenced to hang.

Ocalan pressed his defence, stating that since 1993 his Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, has wanted to pursue a peaceful solution to the rebel fight for autonomy. Earlier, he told rebels from his bulletproof, bombproof enclosure in the courtroom to lay down their arms and said he was ready to work for peace.

"I want my message regarding peace and brotherhood to be noticed," Ocalan told the court.

The PKK leadership said it fully backed Ocalan's offer.

Dozens of dissidents arrested on Tiananmen eve

BEIJING, June 3: Dozens of dissidents have been detained throughout China by authorities wary of any attempt to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Tiananmen crackdown on pro-democracy activists, reports AFP.

The tightened security has forced some activists, fearing arrest, to scale down plans to mark the massacre.

The police clamp on dissidents has spanned across China on the anniversary of the 1989 massacre when troops moved into Tiananmen Square on the night of June 3-4 killing unarmed pro-democracy demonstrators.

In Hangzhou, where the fledgling China Democracy Party (CDP) has a strong following, activist Wang Rongqing has

been told he will not be allowed to return home "until the 5th or 6th of June," his mother said.

Wang was taken away on Wednesday along with Zhu Yufu and Lai Jingbiao.

"Yesterday, the police took him away. He still has not returned," Wang's wife said Thursday.

In Beijing, dissidents He Depu and Zha Jiansuo, also detained on Wednesday, remained in custody Thursday, their relatives told AFP.

"He (Zha) came home at 10:00 p.m. yesterday from the Public Security Bureau. This morning at 8:00 a.m., he had to go back to the Public Security Bureau again," his daughter Zha Huiyi said.

Other prominent Beijing-based dissidents -- Gao Hong-

min and Wang Zhixing - have also been detained, the Hong Kong-based Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China said in a statement on Wednesday.

A total of 80 dissidents had been detained to date, of whom are 28 are still in custody, it said.

Other activists Ren Wanding, Bao Tong and lawyer Zhou Guoqing were not contactable Thursday.

Several CDP members have been warned against attending a public gathering in Hangzhou planned for Thursday to those killed. CDP member Mao Qingxiang said.

"If they wouldn't give police a guarantee they would stay away, they were threatened with detention," he said.

SLA completes Jezzine pullout

JEZZINE, Lebanon, June 3: The Israeli-armed South Lebanon Army (SLA) militia completed its withdrawal Thursday from the Jezzine region of southern Lebanon, pulling back into the Israeli-occupied border strip, reports AFP.

The streets of this mainly-Christian town held by the SLA for the past 14 years were virtually deserted Thursday after the overnight withdrawal by the SLA, although shops and businesses were open.

Prime Minister Salim Hoss hailed the "liberation" of Jezzine and asked its inhabitants to "take part with their brothers in other liberated areas in the liberation of Lebanese territories still under occupation."



A bodyguard covers the face of former South Korean president Kim Young-Sam after he was attacked by a 70-year-old South Korean man with red paint mixed with eggs just before his departure for Japan at Seoul's Gimpo Airport yesterday. The attacker reportedly said Kim was to be blamed for economic crisis that hit South Korea in late 1997. — AFP photo

Schools, offices torched in troubled Aceh

LHOKSEUMAWA, Indonesia, June 3: An unknown group torched six elementary school buildings and two offices in the troubled Indonesian province of Aceh early Thursday ahead of June 7 polls, a resident said, reports AFP.

The buildings were burned in the Lhoksukon sub-district in North Aceh district at around 2:00 a.m. (1900 GMT Wednesday). Most residents had already fled the area three days ago following rumors of attacks before Monday.

Thousands of Javanese settlers in Lhoksukon, some 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) south of here, have fled since Tuesday, fearful of an attack before the Indonesian elections which have been rejected by many in Aceh, where calls for a referendum on self-determination are growing.

Residents who stayed behind have been hoarding foodstuffs,

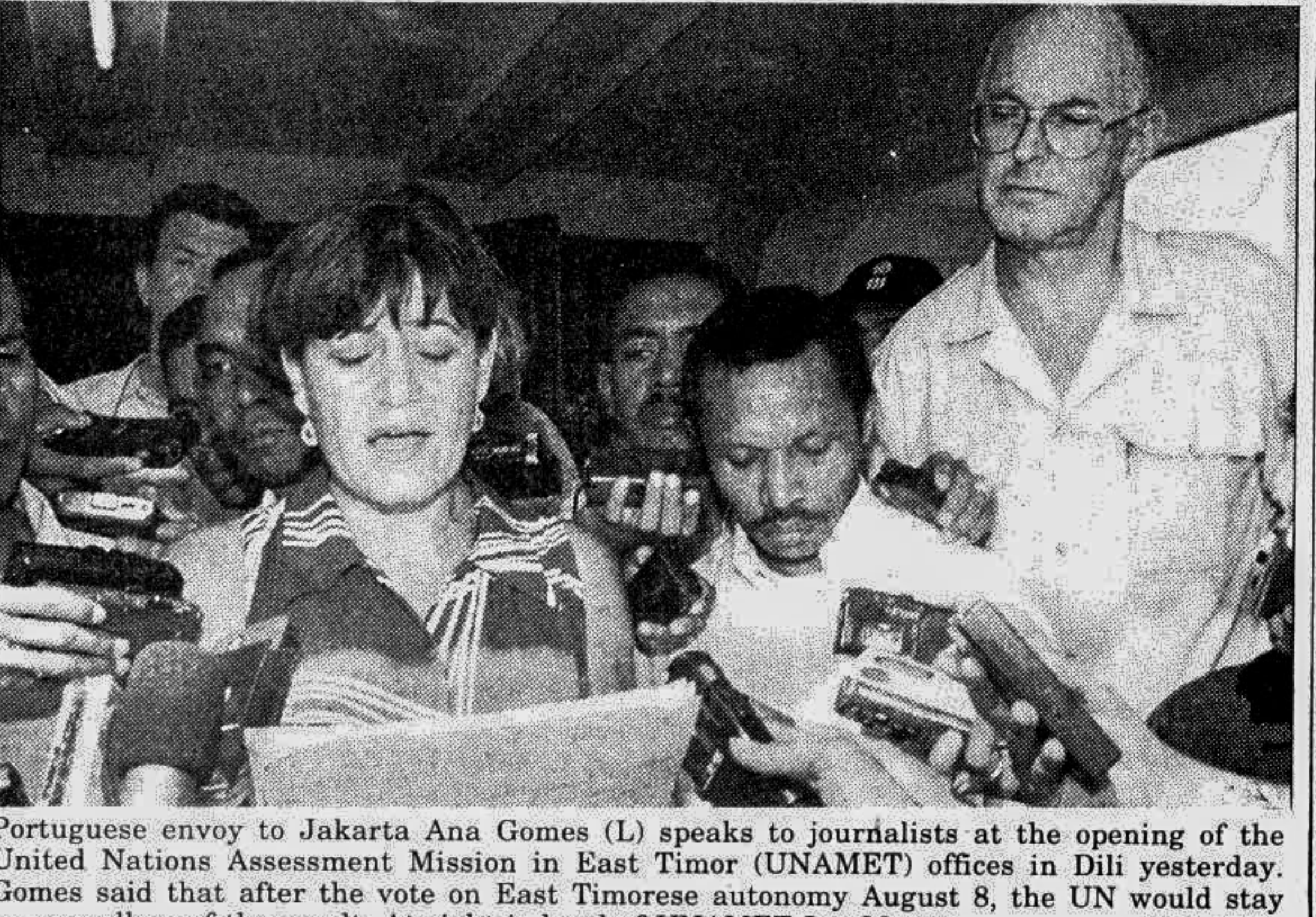
the witness said.

North Aceh, along with the districts of Pidie and East Aceh, has seen growing resentment against the central government and the military following a harsh decade of anti-rebel military operations there, which were only halted last year.

Thousands of people perished during the operations, which were also marked by widespread abuses by soldiers, human rights groups have said.

The violence in Aceh has forced election authorities to mull delaying voting in the June 7 elections in the three districts by up to one month.

Opposition leader and presidential candidate Amien Rais, campaigning in the provincial capital of Banda Aceh Thursday, urged Aceh voters to take part in Monday's polls to help determine its future course, the Antara state news agency said.



Portuguese envoy to Jakarta Ana Gomes (L) speaks to journalists at the opening of the United Nations Assessment Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) offices in Dili yesterday. Gomes said that after the vote on East Timorese autonomy August 8, the UN would stay on regardless of the result. At right is head of UNAMET Ian Martin. — AFP photo

Melting Himalayan glaciers pose flooding dangers

LONDON, Jun 3: Glaciers in the Himalayas are melting at an alarming rate and gold cause a catastrophe if Meltwater lakes overflow into surrounding valleys, Indian researchers have warned, reports Reuters.

All the glaciers in the middle Himalayas are retreating, Sayed Hasnain of Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi told new scientist Magazine here yesterday.

The Gangotri glacier at the head of Ganga river is receding at a rate of 30 metres per year, according to Hasnain's four-year study which will be presented to the International Commission on Snow and Ice (ICSI).

"If current trends, blamed on global warming, continue, he predicts, all the glaciers in the Central and Eastern Himalayas could disappear by 2035 with disastrous consequences.

As ice melts, water accumulates in lakes between the glacier and debris and rock, called moraine.

The moraine is unstable, occasionally these lakes burst, releasing enormous amounts of water, said Hasnain, adding this is recognised as a serious problem in India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Tibet and China.

Scientists have identified Imja glacier lake in Nepal's Sagarmatha National park as potential trouble spot. The lake in the popular trekking area holds 30 million cubic metres of water and experts think it will burst within five years.

Hasnain said glaciers in the Himalayas are retreating faster than anywhere else on the planet. Along with potential flooding problems, the flow of rivers could become less reliable and eventually dry up, leading to water shortages.

Inventor of hovercraft dead

LONDON, June 3: The inventor of the hovercraft, Sir Christopher Cockerell, died Tuesday at the age of 88, a close friend said, reports AFP.

He died peacefully in his sleep at a nursing home in Southampton, southern England, Warwick Jacobs said.

His death came on the 40th anniversary of the launch of the first version of his most famous invention, and three days before he would have been 89.

Cockerell, who also worked for electronics giant Marconi, was on the team that invented radar.

Jacobs, a member of the Hovercraft Society, described him as "a gentleman and a genius" who had 90 patents to his name and was still inventing until five years ago.