

Pollution kills more than road accidents

GENEVA, June 17: Pollution caused by motor vehicles can kill more people a year than road accidents, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has found after studying European countries Austria, France and Switzerland, reports AFP.

Long-term exposure to exhaust fumes caused the premature death of 21,000 people from respiratory and heart disease in the three countries, compared with nearly 10,000 deaths from accidents, a WHO report said Wednesday.

The report was prepared for submission to a conference of 70 environmental and health ministers being organised by the United Nations agency in London from Wednesday through Friday.

"The growing evidence that air pollution is causing a major health burden adds to the effects of road traffic through noise, accident and barriers to cycling and walking, and we need to approach this head on," said Carlos Dora, a doctor with the WHO's European centre for environment and health.

"We are paying a huge price for this excessive road transport: With our money and with our health."

Gore launches presidential campaign

WASHINGTON, June 17: US Vice President Al Gore plunges into the 2000 White House race with Democratic front-running status and a formidable fundraising machine, but low poll numbers and a rising-star Republican challenger have him campaigning as an underdog, reports AFP.

Gore, 51, threw his hat in the ring Wednesday in his birthplace of Carthage, Tennessee, in a mere formal step in the long-expected campaign which has won the unusually early endorsement of President Bill Clinton.

The only challenger for the party's nomination thus far, former senator Bill Bradley, trails Gore by some 40 points in the polls and he is twice as far behind in name recognition.

Gore has also locked up the essential political "money men" who finance the increasingly exorbitant US races and the endorsements from key interest groups.

First cloned human embryos

LONDON, June 17: US scientists have cloned the first human embryos, the Daily Mail reported today, says AFP.

Using methods similar to those which produce Dolly the sheep, scientists at Edinburgh's Roslin Institute, they produced a male embryo, comprising nearly 400 cells, according to the British tabloid.

The scientists at the Massachusetts-based Advanced Cell Technology then incinerated it after two days.

They want to produce human body tissue which can be used to treat patients with various conditions, including nerve damage, diabetes and Parkinson's disease.

A DNA-loaded nucleus of a human cell was extracted from a skin sample from a man's leg and then inserted into the outer protein of a hollowed out cow's egg under laboratory conditions, said the Mail.

The egg was then placed in a laboratory dish and soaked in a chemical solution which fooled it into thinking it was a newly conceived embryo.

110-yr-old learner

BUENOS AIRES, June 17: Saying she still hopes to live many more years, an illiterate 110-year-old Argentine woman has started learning to read and write to prepare herself for the challenges of the next century, reports Reuters.

"I want to learn reading and writing as one has to be prepared for the future," said Concepcion Fernandez, interviewed in the northern province of Chaco by the state-run news agency Telam.

Fernandez, a mother of 12, started taking lessons at home on Saturday under programme launched by the government of the impoverished cotton-growing province.

"I want to live many more years. I am sound. I only feel a minor pain in leg when a horse once kicked me. But nothing else," said Fernandez, who continues to work on the land.

Lanka mass graves probe makes breakthrough

JAFFNA, Sri Lanka, June 17: Forensic experts made a breakthrough Thursday when they found the remains of two men during excavations of a suspected mass grave in this embattled northern Sri Lankan district, reports AFP.

The internationally monitored excavations which began Wednesday at the village of Chemmani, 11 kilometres south of here, unearthed the remains, officials said.

The site was pointed out Wednesday by a former soldier, currently facing a death sentence for rape and murder of a teenage Tamil and her family, who claimed three killed people were buried there in 1996.

The Jaffna Magistrate Manikkawasagum Ilanchelvan ordered the excavations of the soldier, the excavator Rajapakse, said in an open court here he knew 10 grave sites in the area.

"I know of 10 places where people have been definitely buried," Rajapakse said.

Indian Navy on alert to counter Pak build-up

NEW DELHI, June 17: India pressed its attacks on what it says are Pakistani-backed infiltrators on its side of divided Kashmir today and put its navy on alert in the Arabian Sea.

"Operations are in progress," a senior army official, who asked not to be identified, told Reuters. He could not immediately confirm if Indian warplanes also were involved in the attacks to flush out guerrillas dug into the icy heights.

Weeks of fighting in Kashmir have pushed tensions between India and Pakistan to their highest levels in nearly 30 years and prompted increasing international calls on the nuclear-capable rivals to show restraint.

All India Radio said India had put its navy on alert in the Arabian Sea to ensure the crisis "did not spill over to the sea," it

said, quoting defence sources. Officials said earlier this week that India had shifted some ships from their usual stations in the Bay of Bengal to areas off the west coast, which borders Pakistan.

The Times of India quoted naval chief Admiral Sushil Kumar as saying the alert also was a response to a Pakistani naval build-up.

"Although it has currently adopted a defensive posture, it is in a position to launch an offensive at short notice," it quoted him as saying.

US President Bill Clinton urged Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on Tuesday to withdraw the militants, despite Pakistan's insistence that it only gives moral support and not military aid to some groups.

An alliance of guerrillas fighting Indian rule in Kashmir on Wednesday spurned the US

demand for their pullout from the Indian side of northern, Kashmir.

"We will not budget an inch from the territory we have captured in Kargil (area) under any external pressure," Muthidda Jihad Council alliance chief Syed Salahuddin told Reuters.

India hopes other major world leaders will echo Clinton's calls at a meeting of Group of Eight nations in Cologne on the weekend, and expects the group could even issue a statement on Kashmir, the Times of India reported. It did not identify its sources.

Indian officials say 600 to 700 infiltrators are still holed up in high ridges on its side of the Line of Control dividing Kashmir.

India says 297 fighters have been killed on the Pakistani side since last month while India has suffered 104 dead.



Ethnic Albanians wave the victory sign as Serb vehicles leave Kosovo Wednesday to take refuge in Serbia fearing reprisals from returning Kosovar refugees. — AFPphoto

BRIEFLY

Rebels kill 4 soldiers in India: Tribal guerrillas ambushed and killed four Indian paramilitary soldiers in the northeastern state of Assam yesterday, police said.

"Four soldiers of the Central Reserve Police Force died when a group of unidentified tribal rebels ambushed the vehicle carrying them near Umrangso," a senior police official told Reuters in Guwahati, the region's biggest city. Umrangso is nearly 400 km from the state capital Dispur.

Jet crash kills 17 in PNG: A twin-engine aircraft crashed in the jungle in Papua New Guinea yesterday, killing all 17 people aboard, domestic airline operator Airlink said, Reuters reports from Port Moresby.

"We have search and rescue people in there, but there seems to be no survivors," Airlink general manager Colin Bubner said from Lae on the northern coast of PNG. The turbo-prop Bandeirante was flying from Lae to Goroka in the rugged Eastern Highlands, a routine 30 minute trip. Bubner said it carried 15 passengers, including two Australians, and two crew.

Israeli jets bomb Lebanon: Israeli warplanes unleashed missiles deep inside Lebanon on Wednesday, hitting an area on the northeastern corner of the country near the Syrian border, security officials and witnesses reported, AP says from Baalbek.

The jets fired two air-to-surface missiles just before 2 pm (1100 GMT) at a valley near the Orontes River about 10 km from the Syrian border and some 45 km north of Baalbek, the officials said. They spoke on customary condition of anonymity.

Rebels kill 5 Filipino troops: At least five soldiers were killed when Communist guerrillas ambushed a Philippine Army patrol on the southern island of Mindanao, an army spokesman said yesterday.

One other soldier was wounded while the guerrillas suffered an undetermined number of casualties in the clash which occurred on Wednesday in a mountainous district near Davao City, Captain Noel Detoyato told Reuters. A Manila radio station, quoting a civilian source, said up to 10 soldiers were believed to have died in the clash but Detoyato said the official report he had received listed only five dead.

Yeltsin talks to Obuchi by phone: Russian President Boris Yeltsin spoke by telephone with Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi yesterday, Interfax news agency quoted the Kremlin chief's press spokesman Dmitry Yakushkin as saying, Reuters reports from Moscow.

The report gave no details of their conversation. Yeltsin is expected to meet Obuchi in the German city of Cologne this weekend during a summit of the Group of Eight, which comprises the seven main industrial democracies and Russia.



Tamil refugee children cling to a barbed wire fence as a soldier keeps guard Wednesday at the village of Anandakulam in north-western Sri Lanka after security forces wrested control over the region from Tamil Tiger guerrillas. Troops took the area as forensic experts began excavations of a mass grave where some 400 people allegedly killed by government troops are buried. — AFP photo

Mahathir rules out resignation

KUALA LUMPUR, June 17: Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad today rejected rumours he was planning to resign as Malaysia's ruling party began an annual congress in an up-beat and fighting mood ahead of general elections, reports AFP.

In an interview with Cable News Network (CNN), Mahathir, 73, declined to give any hint of the election date and rejected speculation he would soon step down after 18 years in power.

"I don't see why I should resign at this moment when I have always said that I need to have time to hand over the reins of the government to somebody who is capable of doing so, taking over from me," he said.

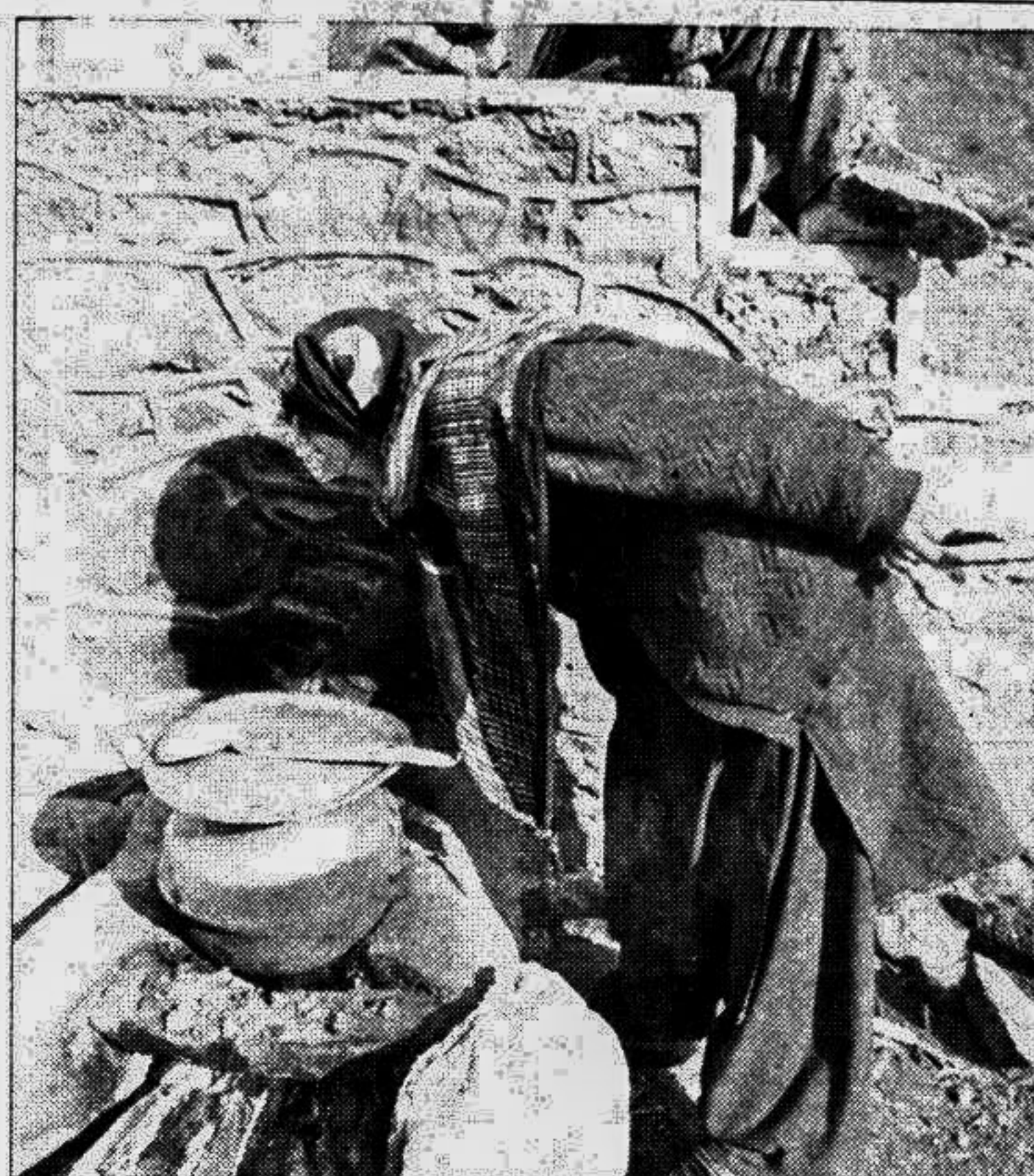
He indicated he would consider handing over power only after the polls.

The government's term ends in April and elections can be held up to two months after that, but Mahathir is widely expected to call for an early poll, fuelling interest in his speech to the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) general assembly on Friday.

Earlier Thursday, the first congress of the party since deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim's traumatic sacking and arrest last September was opened by Anwar's successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Inside a courthouse a few kilometers away, Anwar, jailed for six years in April for abuse of power, was undergoing a second trial, this time on sexual charges punishable by another 20 years in prison.

With the economy rebounding from recession and the opposition still fragmented, the UMNO congress opened in the festive atmosphere under the slogans "UMNO Then, Now and Forever" and "Unity, Loyalty, Service."



Kashmiri woman from the Dras area prepare food in a camp for displaced persons in Gagangir Thursday as cross-border shelling between India and Pakistan, and the fear that the conflict may escalate, has caused many people to flee from border areas. — AFPphoto

US rejects Russian demands

'Torture centre' found in Kosovo

HELSINKI, June 17: The United States on Thursday rejected Russian demands for a separate zone for Russian troops in Kosovo amid dimming hopes for a rapid agreement on Moscow's role in KFOR peacekeeping force, reports AFP.

"We have made it quite clear that there will not be a separate Russian sector," US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright declared as she arrived here on the second day of talks.

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said agreements had been reached on two key issues: Russia's place in the peace force's unified command structure and on usage of the Pristina airport, which is held by Russian troops.

But he said: "There is still no agreement on the deployment." "We managed to agree on a lot of points in Helsinki. But we do not have an agreement on a

Russian troops deployment," he told a news conference here.

Taking a stroll along Helsinki's waterfront during a break in the talks, US Defense Secretary William Cohen told reporters: "There can be no agreement until all points are agreed on."

Other US officials insisted that a partial agreement was not enough.

"It is all or nothing," a senior US defense official said.

"We need full agreement on not just the airport but on a deployment plan as well as a command structure," said another US official, adding that the US side viewed these issues as inseparable.

"There is not high confidence that we will finish this thing today," he said.

Cohen held nearly eight hours of talks Wednesday with Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeev, and then resumed the

discussions Thursday morning. Cohen met one-on-one with Sergeev earlier in the day before the talks broke up into sessions by teams of technical experts on both sides, the senior defense official said.

Negotiators have taken over the second floor of Finland's presidential palace, at one point overloading the telephone system with international calls.

"I told the ministers that they'd better get their work done," Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari told reporters.

Meanwhile, British forces today found what they said was a Serb-run police torture chamber in Kosovo's provincial capital of Pristina, reports Reuters.

Reporters taken into the cellar at an interior Ministry police station in the centre of the capital saw drugs, clubs, batteries, knuckle-dusters,

knives, a sword and a chainsaw in the dank space.

A British military spokesman said investigators from the United Nations war crimes tribunal in The Hague had twice visited the cellar since it was found and had taken away documents and instruments used in interrogations.

"We have found what we believe is strong evidence of the systematic torture of prisoners by (Yugoslav President Slobodan) Milosevic's police in this cellar," British military spokesman Colonel Nick Clisitt told reporters.

British forces have cordoned off this latest site, where the spokesman quoted ex-prisoners as saying that at a time in a room 10 metres (33 feet) square.

There was also a camp bed, with a frayed belt attached to it in a separate small room.

US sends warships, planes to Yellow Sea

SEOUL, June 17: North Korean ships steered clear of a disputed area in the Yellow Sea on Thursday as US warships and aircraft headed to the region in a show of force following a firefight with South Korean gunboats, reports AFP.

South Korea boosted its patrols of the tense buffer zone where the two sides fought a naval battle Tuesday, as the military in the area remained on a heightened state of alert to thwart any North Korean reprisals.

"Around 10 North Korean patrol and six fishing boats have been spotted between three and five kilometers inside their own waters but have not approached the buffer zone," the joint chief of staff said.

Seoul's ally Washington ordered a missile ship and another boat as well as four surveillance aircraft to monitor tensions between the Cold War rivals following Tuesday's clash in which a communist torpedo boat was sunk.

"In view of the recent incident between North and South Korean naval vessels in the Yellow Sea, ships from the US 7th fleet will deploy near (South Korea) to monitor the situation and contribute to peace in the west Pacific region," a spokesman for the 36,000-strong US Forces in Korea said.

The Pentagon said two naval vessels, including the cruiser Vincennes, would head to the area. Four EA-6B electronic surveillance planes would also be deployed.

The Vincennes, normally stationed in Japan, carries guided missiles. No decision has been taken yet on what other Navy vessel would be sent to the region.

In addition, the aircraft carrier Constellation will leave its base in San Diego Friday for Korea.

News reports said two US nuclear-powered submarines had

also arrived in the southern Korean port of Chinhae to join in patrols of the Yellow Sea, but US military officials here declined to confirm the report.

Meanwhile, Pyongyang, warning the peninsula stood on the brink of war, banned South Koreans from visiting its capital and cancelled the planned handover of remains of US war dead.

Pyongyang "vehemently denounces the South Korean authorities for bringing ... the country to the brink of war and worsening ... inter-Korean relations," its official media said late Wednesday.

DPRK conducting missile test

TOKYO, June 17: North Korea has been conducting propulsion tests on a long-range missile that could reach the western United States, Japanese media reported today, reports Reuters.

Quoting unnamed US military sources, NHK public television said reclusive North Korea in April started experimental propulsion tests of a Taepodong-2 missile with a range of up to 6,000 km (3,750 miles), which could put Alaska within its reach.

The US military sources did not rule out the possibility of Pyongyang test-firing the newly developed Taepodong-2 missile by the end of this year, NHK said.

Kyodo news agency quoted Japanese government sources as saying North Korea has been preparing to test-fire a Taepodong-2 missile in July or August.

Citing information obtained through US intelligence satellites, the sources said the launch pad for the Taepodong-2 ballistic missile has been enlarged and fuel has been transported to storehouses, Kyodo said.



Outgoing South African President Nelson Mandela (R) waves as he arrives for the inauguration of Thabo Mbeki (R) as second democratically elected President of the Republic of South Africa at the Union Buildings in Pretoria Wednesday. — AFP photo

Megawati faces attacks from Islamic groups

JAKARTA, June 17: Megawati Sukarnoputri, whose party is leading the seemingly never-ending vote count of Indonesia's elections, is the target of intense attacks from Islamic groups aiming at barring her path to the presidency, reports AFP.

Whether direct or veiled, the attacks focus on the religious make-up of Sukarnoputri's Indonesia Democracy Party-Struggle (PDI-P), accused of containing too many non-Muslims, especially Christians.

Her political and intellectual competence, and even gender have also been called into question.

"Whether she is presidential timber or not, we don't know. Although she is stupid, she loves people," the leading moderate Muslim leader Abdur Rahman "Gus Dur" Wahid has said of his ally in the June 7 elections.

The attacks and the smears do not stop there. "She was not interested in politics until later. Cooking is her main passion," said a member of a renowned study centre, who asked not to be named.

Indonesia's tabloids have also dissected the private life of Megawati and her immediate family, including the activities of her husband -- her third.

US, Russia at odds over lifting oil embargo against Iraq

UNITED NATIONS, June 17: The United States gave qualified support Wednesday to a British-Dutch proposal that could lead to suspension of the oil embargo against Iraq -- but Russia said it was unrealistic and would lead to a deterioration of relations with Baghdad, reports AP.

The divide between Washington and Moscow shows that the Security Council still has a lot of work to do before its 15 members agree on a new policy towards Iraq.

But the new proposal, circulated Tuesday, did represent a significant breakthrough because Britain and the United States have never before agreed to even consider suspending the oil embargo.

The British-Dutch draft sets tough conditions before the embargo, imposed after Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, can be lifted.

Under the plan, Iraq must answer the remaining questions about its banned weapons programme and adhere to strict financial controls to ensure that revenues from oil sales aren't spent on new weapons.

Deputy US Ambassador Peter Burleigh said the proposal meets key issues for the United States: It requires real disarmament, links suspension of the oil embargo to compliance with specific disarmament demands, and imposes serious financial controls.

"We have some problems with small parts of it, but by and large it's something the US can support," Burleigh said.

Russia continues to promote the Iraq resolution it cosponsored with China and France, calling for the suspension of all economic sanctions once a system to monitor Iraq's weapons programmes is in place. Russia's UN Ambassador

Sergey Lavrov said Secretary-General Kofi Annan should establish the parameters of the monitoring programme report when it's up and running, and then the Council should suspend sanctions.

Burleigh said the Russian draft requires only Baghdad's cooperation with UN weapons inspectors, not compliance, a condition that could be met by "simply allowing an office to open."

The Security Council has been deadlocked on Iraq since the United States and Britain launched air strikes in mid-December over Baghdad's refusal to cooperate with UN weapons inspectors.

The inspectors pulled out just before the bombing. Council members have been trying to devise a way to get the inspectors back while improving life for Iraqis suffering under sanctions for nearly nine years.

Rescue operation in Mexico

PUEBLA, Mexico, June 17: Rebuilding efforts got under way Wednesday following a violent quake that shook central Mexico, leaving at least 25 people dead, hundreds injured and historic buildings damaged, reports AFP.

More than 500 Mexican soldiers were busy removing tonnes of rubble in the state of Puebla, the worst affected by Tuesday's quake that measured 6.7 on the open-ended Richter scale.

Workers used heavy machinery to clear roads blocked by mudslides triggered by the quake, while affected residents started repairing their damaged homes.

In the state of Puebla alone, 20 people were killed, including two children crushed by a collapsing wall. Another two were killed in Mexico City and three died in other areas, the Interior Ministry said.

In addition, between 200 and 300 people were injured in Puebla and dozens more in other states, officials said.