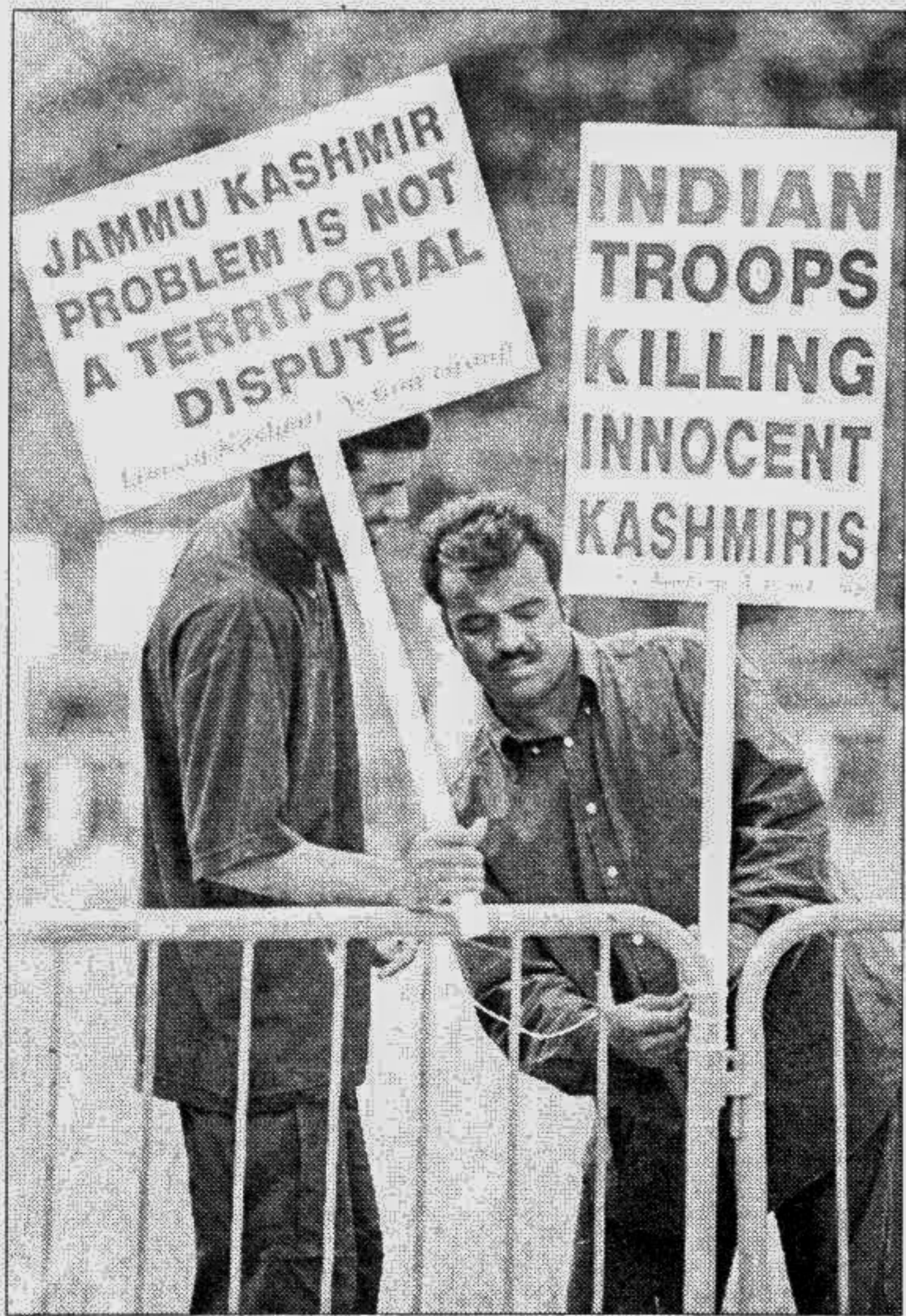


Settle Kashmir dispute for durable peace: Sharif



Demonstrators attach placards reading "Indian Troops Killing Innocent Kashmiris" during a protest outside the Houses of Parliament in London Wednesday. The Indian and Pakistani armies have been locked in clashes along the Line of Control (LOC) that divides Kashmir since early last month after India began an offensive to flush out Muslim infiltrators allegedly backed by the Pakistani Army in its part of the disputed state. —AFP photo

GULTARI, Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, June 24: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif Thursday urged India to hold talks on the Kashmir dispute so that permanent peace can be established in the region, reports AFP.

Sharif warned if the current tension in Kashmir escalated into a war it would cause "irreparable" losses to both sides. "Not only Kargil but the fundamental issue of Kashmir (must) be resolved," he said while addressing troops at the Line of Control (LoC) that separates the Indian and Pakistani parts of Kashmir.

"India should try to extinguish the big fire engulfing the whole of Kashmir instead of focusing on the Kargil issue," Sharif said.

Border clashes erupted when India launched military operations on May 9 to regain key heights seized by guerrillas on the Indian side. India says the guerrillas in Kargil are infiltrators sent by Pakistan.

Islamabad has denied the charge but has vowed to give moral and diplomatic support to what it says are Kashmiris fighting for self-determination. Sharif's visit to the mountainous Gultari area only nine km from the LoC was his first to the conflict zone since military tensions escalated early last month.

The rival armies have been engaged in heavy artillery duels in Kashmir for the past six weeks.

Sharif, accompanied by army chief, General Pervez Musharraf, met with troops, witnesses said. Praising their role in defend-

ing the country, Sharif said the entire nation was proud of them and was united for the national defence.

He also visited wounded soldiers at a hospital and announced 100,000 dollars in aid to upgrade the facility.

Pakistan holds the northern third of Kashmir while the rest of the Himalayan state is administered by India.

The state has sparked two of the three Indo-Pakistan wars since their independence in 1947.

Meanwhile, a high-level US delegation sent by US President Bill Clinton arrived here Thursday for talks with Pakistani officials amid efforts to end weeks of fighting in Kashmir, officials said.

The delegation led by General Anthony Zinni was sent by Clinton to meet with Pakistani military and civilian leaders "to pursue our concerns about ending the fighting in Kargil area of Kashmir," a US embassy spokesman said.

Officials said Zinni, commander-in-chief of US Central Command (CENTCOM), would meet Pakistan army chief general Pervez Musharraf and senior government officials.

"The trip is part of our continuing close contact with both Indian and Pakistani governments," the US embassy spokesman said.

Clinton last week spoke by telephone to both Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Indian Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee urging them to halt the fighting which has raged since early May.

US team in Islamabad to defuse tension

atives for defusing the crisis, the foreign office said. The visit comes amid heightened tensions in Kashmir and growing fears the fighting could erupt into open conflict between the two new nuclear powers.

Meanwhile, about 80 per cent of the raiders infiltrated in Indian Kashmir are regular Pakistani soldiers, Defence Minister George Fernandes was quoted as saying Thursday.

"We are fighting the Pakistani army. I don't think we should have two thoughts about that," the Press Trust of India quoted Fernandes as saying in a television interview due to be aired on Friday.

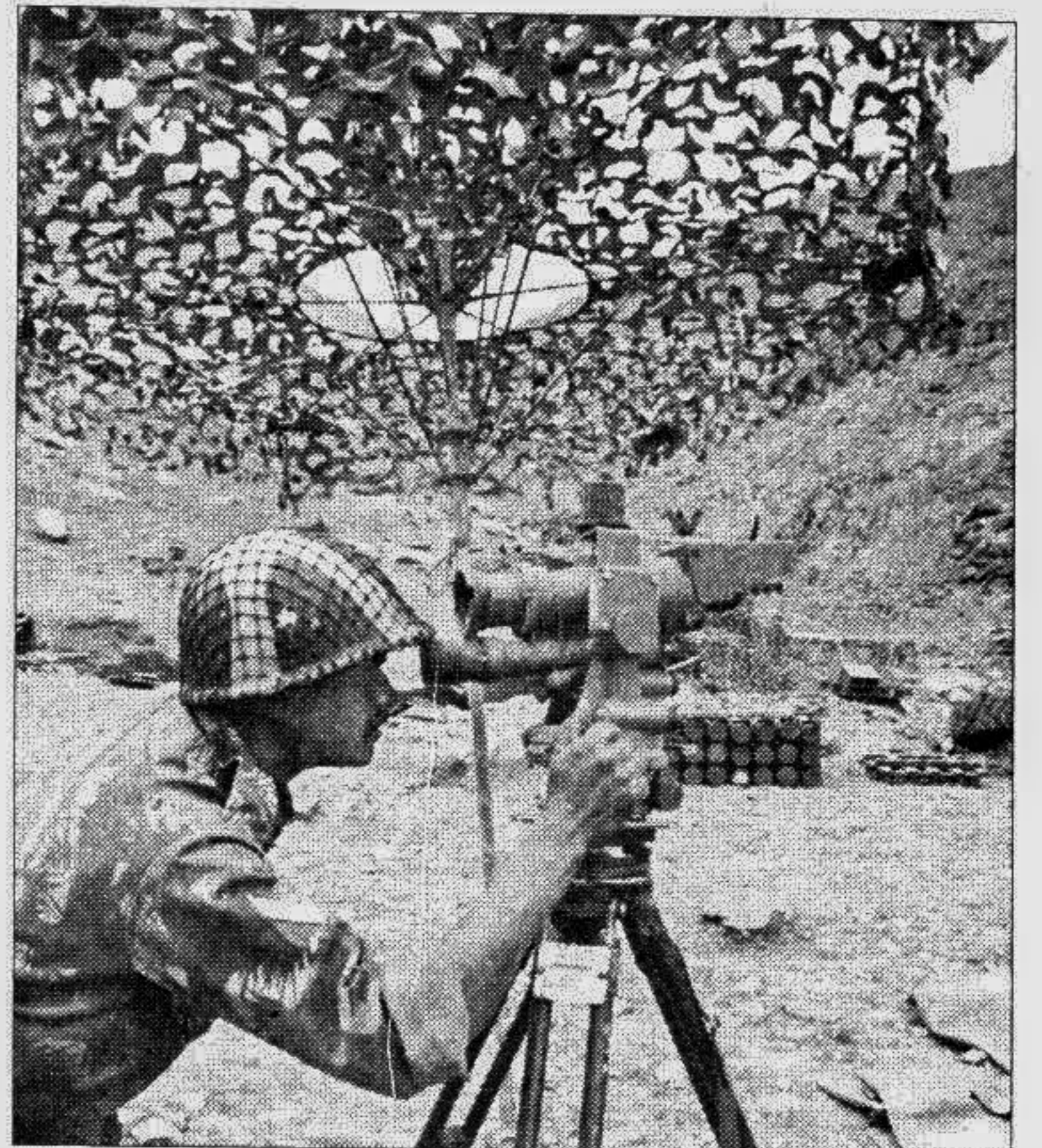
"Our estimate is that 80 per cent (of them) are Pakistani army regulars. The mercenaries are much less because the rest of the 20 per cent are porters and others who provide supplies."

Fernandes conceded that Indian intelligence had failed to detect the intrusion by hundreds of Pakistani-backed forces into key northern mountains in Indian Kashmir.

He said the "intelligence establishment had failed to provide any advance warning of the Pakistani infiltration."

"I don't think we were able to penetrate into the sanctum sanctorum and get out information... Entering the portals of decision-making in Pakistan may have been beyond us," he admitted.

The minister said he hoped the 47-day-old fighting would cease by the end of September.



An Indian Army trooper looks through binoculars near Drass Wednesday, focusing on positions held by Pakistani-backed guerrillas through the viewfinder. Indian troops launched heavy ground attacks Wednesday on Muslim raiders holding key positions in Kashmir amid an escalating war of words between India and Pakistan. —AFP photo

Floods kill 15 in E Europe

UNDATED, June 24: Heavy rain, lightning and damaging winds killed 15 people in central and eastern Europe and flooded farmland while destroying salt caves that were a major tourist attraction in Romania, officials said Wednesday, reports AP.

The damage from the storms spread from Moldova, a former Soviet republic that borders Romania, to Poland, with homes damaged and fields submerged in Romania, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

The region has been hit by heavy rain in the past week, including storms that sent rivers over their banks.

Eleven of the deaths occurred in Romania, where one man was killed by lightning and 10 drowned in eastern districts, including seven when floodwaters in a valley rose almost 10 feet Tuesday night to cover the villages of Cuculeasa, Costientii and Zota.

Police Maj. Viorel Nita said the overnight flooding 130 km northeast of Bucharest caught people by surprise. Hundreds of farm animals also were killed.

In Moldova, a government statement said four people died near Ungheni, 95 km west of Chisinau, the capital, when struck by lightning Tuesday.

Hillary to set panel for Senate race July 7

WASHINGTON, June 24: First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton will set up a political exploratory committee on July 7 that will be her first formal step toward running for the US Senate from New York, sources close to her said on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

The sources said Hillary will make the announcement at the upscale New York farm of retiring Democratic Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, whom she hopes to succeed.

An exploratory committee allows Hillary to raise funds for a race to replace Moynihan but stops short of a formal declaration of her candidacy.

BRIEFLY

ROK minister sacked: South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung yesterday sacked Environment Minister Sohn Sook, a former actress, after she accepted cash gifts from businessmen, AFP reports from Seoul.

"President Kim decided to accept the resignation of Minister Sohn Sook," a president spokesman said, using the traditional formula for announcing ministerial dismissal. It was the second time in two weeks that Kim has replaced a Cabinet minister amid controversy.

3 Indians commit suicide in Bahrain:

Three Indians working in the Gulf emirate of Bahrain hanged themselves from ceiling fans in their rooms on the same day, the Gulf Daily News reported yesterday, AFP reports from Manama.

Police told the daily the suicides — two Keralaites and a Tamil, all in their 30s and living alone — were not related.

DPRK-Australia to hold talks:

Officials from North Korea and Australia will meet in Bangkok on Friday for their highest-level meeting since the countries severed diplomatic ties in 1974, AP reports from Canberra.

North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam Sun requested the meeting in a letter to Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer last month.

China refuses permission to US jet to land in HK

HONG KONG, June 24: Beijing has reportedly refused permission for United States military aircraft to land in Hong Kong, joining a ban on US warships ordered after NATO's bombing of China's Belgrade Embassy, reports AFP.

The South China Morning Post today quoted US Consul-General Richard Boucher as saying "one or two" landing applications had been knocked back, together with a series of requests for ship visits.

An unnamed US Consulate spokesman told the Post a navy P-3 Orion was denied permission to touch down in the territory as part of a navigation training flight.

The Orion, deployed to detect, track and attack submarines and the conduct maritime patrols, usually flew from Japan on training exercises to Southeast Asian nations.

Boucher said he was confident the ban, which came in retaliation for the embassy bombing that killed three Chinese, would be lifted soon.

"We've had no indication there's a permanent ban," he said. "I'm fairly confident it won't be long before we'll see US ships visiting here again."

The Post said the aircraft ban could jeopardise visits by US congressional delegations, who were due to travel here on air force jets during the summer break.

The US consulate was not immediately able to confirm the report today.

China has firmly resisted NATO's persistent explanation that the May 8 bombing, which sparked huge anti-US demonstrations across China, was a mistake.

The United States sent top diplomat Thomas Pickering to Beijing earlier this month to present a report on the bungled bombing, but China rejected the explanation as "unconvincing."

The British plan presented to the Security Council linking a suspension of sanctions with the UN's image after the behaviour of the special commission charged with disarming Iraq.

The daily reiterated Baghdad's demands for an end to the nine-year embargo, a halt to the air raids and compensation as a basis for any settlement that Iraq can consider.

"Any proposal that does not answer Iraq's concerns is null and void," Babel said.

Iraqi Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan said Wednesday that Baghdad rejected offer of monitoring system in Iraq.

France presented another proposal last week calling for all sanctions to be lifted for renewable periods of 100 days once a new weapons monitoring regime is in place in Iraq.

Milosevic to be killed by own police: ex-PM

BUDAPEST, June 24: Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic will be captured and killed by his own police forces, former Yugoslav premier Milan Panic predicted Thursday, saying he would be gone within three months, reports AFP.

"His own friends will betray him. In his present position, he will be wary of his own police and army," Panic, a Serbian-born US businessman who was briefly Yugoslav premier in 1992, told the Magyar Hirpal daily newspaper.

"I do not wish anyone's death but I am convinced that his own police will capture and kill Milosevic," he added.

There is a 15-per cent chance that he will commit suicide, and I give also 15 per cent for him to be killed. There is a 25-per cent chance that he flees somewhere. The rest I do not know," said Panic.

He predicted that the Yugoslav head of state will disappear from the political scene "within 90 days," and insisted that "Milosevic will not allow elections in Yugoslavia."

"Milosevic is the biggest tragedy that could have happened to the Serb people in its entire history," he said.

Turkish court resumes hearing of Ocalan's treason trial

IMRALI, Turkey, June 24: A Turkish State Security Court on Thursday resumed hearing the treason trial against Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan with the defence team continuing their final summing-up, Turkish state television reported, reports AFP.

In their 350-page defence, Ocalan's 12 lawyers will argue in favour of the rebel leader's calls for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish conflict.

The defence team is expected to finish their final summing-up on Thursday and the court's verdict, which observers say will most probably be a death sentence, will come before the end of June.

In Wednesday's hearing, Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), had warned the Turkish government to agree to negotiate with the PKK, threatening that it could be fighting the rebels "for 100 years" if his appeal for peace goes unheeded.

"Peace is not established with the Turkish state, the PKK could become an open threat. My task is to prevent such a threat," the 50-year-old rebel leader said.

Ocalan, 50, is on trial on charges of treason, separatism and the death of thousands in the PKK's 15-year armed struggle for Kurdish self-rule.

Mbeki to address nation today

CAPE TOWN, June 24: South African President Thabo Mbeki will set the broad agenda of his new government when he delivers his maiden state-of-the-nation address to parliament Friday, concentrating on issues such as crime, job creation and foreign policy, officials said, reports AFP.

"No surprises are expected," said chief government spokesman Joel Ntshitenze. "We are not at that stage yet."

Mbeki pledged during the recent election campaign to address social inequalities caused by apartheid.

Ntshitenze told AFP that Mbeki will be sworn in as president on June 16 after taking over from Nelson Mandela, will speak on issues relating to "efficient government", including social services, macro-economic policy, safety and security, and foreign policy.

EU backs democratic Kosovo

PRISTINA, June 24: Foreign ministers of the four main European peacekeeping forces in Kosovo have pledged support to rebuild a free and open society from the ruins of conflict and ethnic cleansing, reports Reuters.

In a ground-breaking visit to Kosovo just days after the last Serbian troops withdrew, NATO troops took control, the ministers of Britain, France, Italy and Germany said their peacekeeping troops would protect all Kosovo's residents.

"We are here in Pristina together to demonstrate our unity of purpose and the strong commitment of Europe to build... a free and democratic country open to all," British Foreign Minister Robin Cook said.

He was speaking a few hours after visiting the site in the Kosovan village of Velika Krusa of a massacre of ethnic Albanians in the first days of NATO's air campaign to evict Serb forces from the province.

"What I saw at Velika Krusa was horrifying. It reminded me of the scenes, very similar, which I saw in Rwanda... What we saw here was the deliberate attempt to murder the man of an ethnic identity," Cook told reporters.

"It really still hits you in the stomach when you look at it and see what it actually meant. You can feel the terror that these people must have gone through in their last moments," he said.

The charred remains of up to 45 men and boys have so far been found at Velika Krusa, where body bags line the courtyard of a small farm and pockmarked walls and burnt buildings bear testimony to the killings.

But the ministers urged ethnic Albanians, most of whom were forced into hiding or fled Serb forces during months of conflict, not to take justice into their own hands.

"Peace cannot be built on revenge, but must be built on justice," said German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer. "It is very important that war criminals are brought by an independent prosecutor to the indepen-

Y'slavia to lift state of war

months. UN officials say the organised return of refugees to Kosovo from Macedonia and Albania is likely to begin within the next week.

Cook said they have assured them that the NATO peacekeeping force — would be even-handed in its treatment of all Kosovo residents.

"All three (Albanians) strongly expressed the need to build a multi-ethnic community within Kosovo and their wish for the Serb community to remain in Kosovo and to share in the pluralist democracy," Cook said.

Cook was due to hold talks today in neighbouring Macedonia and Albania, which bore the brunt of the wave of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanian refugees who fled Kosovo in the last three

a move which would go into effect June 26.

The government, headed by Prime Minister Momir Bulatovic, proposed on Monday to lift the state of war, after officials from the Atlantic alliance announced a formal end of its air campaign on Yugoslavia.

NATO had previously suspended its strikes on June 10, when Yugoslav and NATO militaries signed an accord for the withdrawal of Serb troops from the province.

Shortly before the start of the parliament's session, the government revoked all decrees it had issued under the state of war, state agency Tanjug reported.

The decrees covered army financing, banking system operations and export trade. Another decree barred men of fighting age — from 18 to 60 — from travelling abroad, except when allowed by the Yugoslav army chief of staff.



French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine (L) gestures during a joint press conference with his counterparts (from right) of Italy, Lamberto Dini, of Germany, Joschka Fischer and of Britain, Robin Cook, in Pristina Wednesday. —AFP photo

Iraq for direct talks with UN

BAGHDAD, June 24: Iraq urged the United Nations on Thursday to launch a "frank dialogue" with Baghdad in order to solve the deadlock over sanctions and weapons monitoring, reports AFP.

"The Security Council can settle the current crisis over Iraq by opening a frank dialogue with Iraq based on respect for its own relevant resolutions," said the Babel newspaper, run by President Saddam Hussein's eldest son Uday.

The comment came ahead of a Security Council debate on Monday on separate proposals by Britain, France and Russia on how to reinstate a weapons

monitoring system in Iraq. Babel criticised the council for "failing to end the aggression led by the United States and Britain and to improve the UN's image after the behaviour of the special commission charged with disarming Iraq."

The daily reiterated Baghdad's demands for an end to the nine-year embargo, a halt to the air raids and compensation as a basis for any settlement that Iraq can consider.

"Any proposal that does not answer Iraq's concerns is null and void," Babel said.

Iraqi Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan said Wednesday that Baghdad rejected offer of monitoring system in Iraq.

France presented another proposal last week calling for all sanctions to be lifted for renewable periods of 100 days once a new weapons monitoring regime is in place in Iraq.



Iraqi women collect water from a leaking pipe in Dayala Thursday as the volume of water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers which flow through drought-hit Iraq has dropped by around 20 per cent. In May a UN report warned that Iraq was facing crop failure because of record drought. —AFP photo

New plan to break deadlock on IRA's disarmament

LONDON, June 24: Britain and Ireland have fresh proposals to break the deadlock over guerrilla disarmament which has paralysed the Northern Ireland peace process, British newspapers reported today, says Reuters.

The two governments hoped to end the deadlock before a June 30 deadline by putting intense pressure on the British province's main Protestant leader David Trimble to accept the proposals, the newspapers said.

The Guardian quoted an unidentified official at Britain's Northern Ireland Office as saying it was all about creating trust between the growing Protestant and Roman Catholic politicians.

"The mood here is determined," the official said. Trimble's Ulster Unionist Party has so far refused to sit alongside the Irish Republican Army's political wing Sinn Fein in a planned power-sharing executive for the province until the IRA hands over guerrilla weapons. Sinn Fein insists it cannot force the IRA to give up arms.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair has warned that Northern Ireland could be plunged into violence if last year's Good Friday peace agreement collapses.

The news said London and Dublin planned to put Trimble on the spot by proposing the formation of the executive before a single IRA weapon was handed in.

AIDS confce calls for spread of information in ME

ABHA, June 24: AIDS specialists, health workers and government officials would up a three-day conference Wednesday with the consensus that information on the deadly disease must be more vigorously disseminated throughout the Arab world, reports AP.

Cases of AIDS and HIV — the virus that causes AIDS — remain relatively low in the Middle East and North Africa Region — 19000 adults and children in the region were infected with the human immunodeficiency virus in 1998, compared with 44,000 infections in North America and 30,000 in Western Europe.

But the disease is slowly spreading, and nearly 500 people gathered in this mountain resort some 1,000 km south of Riyadh this week to hear the latest on how to combat the epidemic.

"The stumbling block (that the figures on HIV/AIDS infections) may not be accurate," said Dr. Fahad Al-Rabiah, a specialist on infectious diseases at King Faisal Hospital in Riyadh, the capital.

The conference, the third such gathering held every five years, was organised by the King Faisal Hospital and Research Centre, the World Health Organisation and the Saudi Health Ministry.

Strict social and moral codes that prohibit premarital sex, adultery, homosexuality and drug abuse are effective in

slowing the spread of HIV infections in Arab and Islamic countries, the speakers noted.

But these same codes consider discussing sex and sex education taboo, limiting the flow of information about the disease.

WHO estimates that there were 210,000 adults and children with HIV or fully developed AIDS in the Middle East and North Africa region in 1998.

The conference speakers pointed out that the number of cases will continue to rise as more young people experiment with sex and drugs without knowledge of safe sex methods and other precautions.

Most HIV cases in the region are attributed to heterosexual transmission and shared drug needles.

Adding to the growing concern, many Arab governments are not willing to treat AIDS as a threatening epidemic, so testing for HIV and medicine supplies are inadequate.

According to 1998 WHO figures, there are 373 AIDS patients in Saudi Arabia, considered the most socially and religiously strict country in the Arab world.

"The figures are low, but that should not make us become lazy (in combating AIDS)," Dr. Al-Rabiah said. "The most important way to fight the disease in the kingdom now is to make people aware of it and admit that it exists."