

Indian army soldiers at a staging area in the Kashmir battle zone of Drass, on Thursday, before leaving for a combat station in strategic heights which are occupied by Islamic raiders from Pakistan. Indian artillery units in northern Kashmir began a major bombardment yesterday ahead of what was expected to be the largest ground assault so far against the Islamic infiltrators.

— AFP Photo

Sharif holds key meeting on Kashmir

ISLAMABAD, July 2: Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif held a key meeting of cabinet ministers and defence forces chiefs today to discuss the military standoff with India over Kashmir, a senior government official said, reports Reuters.

He said the meeting, attended by chiefs of Pakistan's Army, Navy and Air Force and a few ministers, would discuss "recent developments" relating to Kashmir and conclude later today.

He gave no further details. Pakistani newspapers said the meeting was expected to take some strategic decisions to handle the present crisis in the region and assess the country's defence.

Nuclear-capable Pakistan and India are locked in their worst standoff in nearly three decades on Kashmir, over which the two neighbours have fought two of their three wars since gaining independence from Britain in 1947.

Rebels kill 10 Hindus in Kashmir

JAMMU, July 2: Suspected Islamic guerrillas attacked a village in troubled Jammu-Kashmir state early Friday, killing at least 10 Hindus belonging to two families, police said, reports AFP.

This was the third attack this week by suspected guerrillas who are fighting a separatist war in India-controlled Kashmir.

Then gunmen stormed into two adjacent houses in Arahi, a village in Poonch district, and gunned down six men, one woman and two children, a police officer said on condition of anonymity.

The village is 5 kilometres from the ceasefire line dividing Kashmir between India and Pakistan. The surrounding areas have been hit by Pakistani artillery shelling following escalation of tensions between the two countries.

Clinton urges Israeli govt to make peace

WASHINGTON, July 2: US President Bill Clinton urged the new Israeli government Thursday to make peace with the Palestinians, insisting that the recent elections proved the people were ready to sign a deal, reports AFP.

"The best way for the Israelis to have lasting security is a negotiated peace based on mutual respect," Clinton said in a joint press conference with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

He said he intended to host Israel's new Prime Minister Ehud Barak at the White House soon and that Benjamin Netanyahu's defeat at the polls represented the Israeli public's desire to press on with the Wye River accords reached last October.

After six weeks of negotiations, Barak -- a career soldier -- finalized a coalition government Thursday that unites around a pro-peace platform parties of the left and right, secular and ultra-religious.

While the coalition is a volatile mix of parties, the government will be so large that no single bloc is in a position to destabilise it or topple Barak.

Clinton stressed his commitment to the negotiations, saying: "I've been up to my ears and eyeballs in this peace process since the day I took office," but he would not elaborate on what he is offering -- or threatening -- the parties.

He did, however, condemn the Israeli settlements as "provocative," and urged the inclusion of Syria and Lebanon in the process.

Mubarak, who said he was also ready to meet with Barak, expressed optimism the new leader will propel the process forward.

"We hope that we could finish or reach a final status in one year. One year and a half is quite a lot of time for negotiations," he said.

Mubarak, who arrived in the United States on Saturday, met Wednesday with members of Congress.

Indian polls to be held on schedule

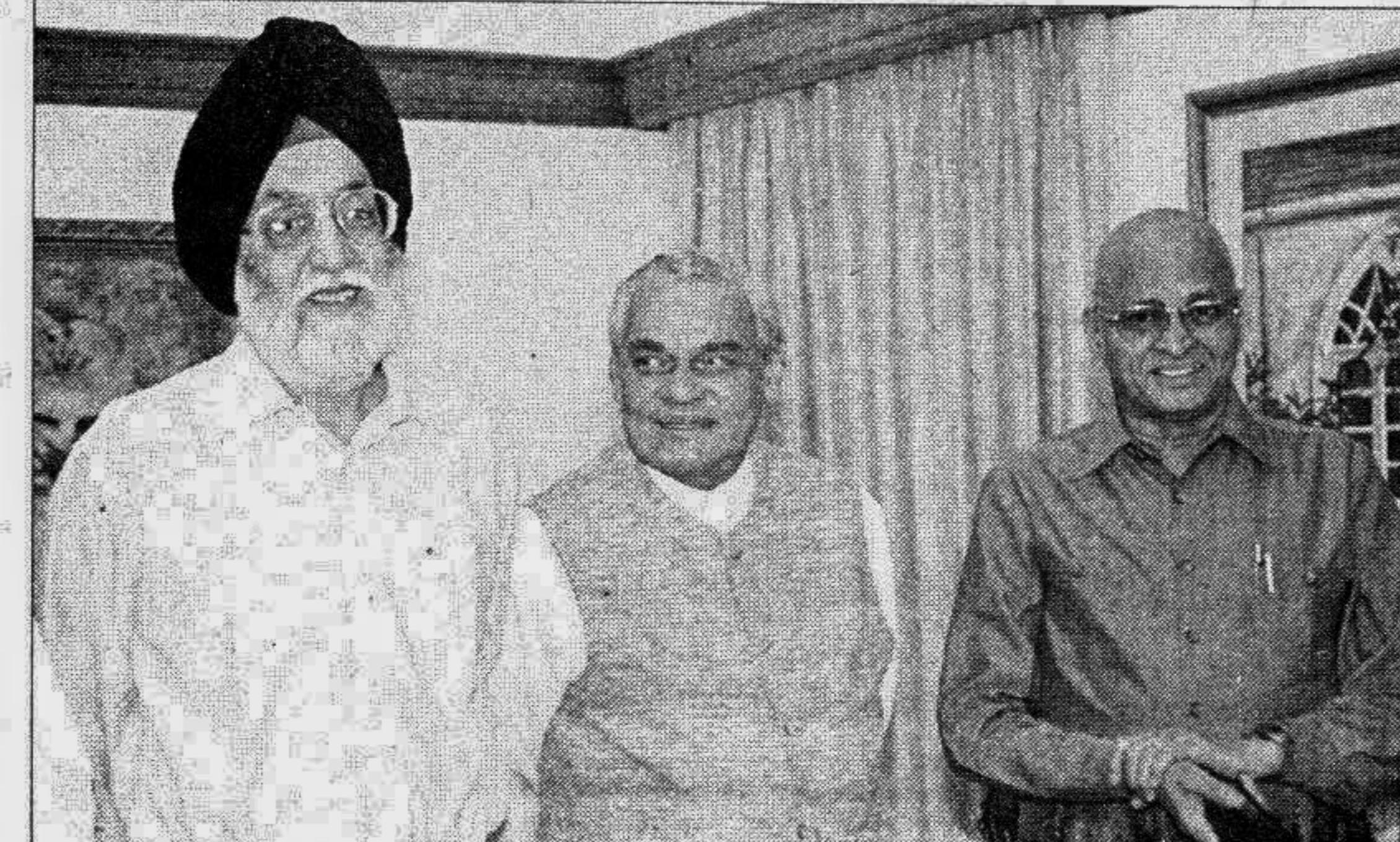
From Pallab Bhattacharya

NEW DELHI, July 2: The general elections in India will be held on time in September despite the Kargil standoff with Pakistan.

This was announced here today by the country's Chief Election Commissioner Manohar Singh Gill after a 30-minute meeting with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee who is understood to have conveyed the government's green signal for the elections.

Emerging from the meeting, Gill told reporters "We are going ahead and finalising the election schedule which will be announced at an appropriate time."

Gill's announcement sets at rest speculations about possibility of holding of parliamentary elections on time because of the Kargil conflict.



Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (C) with India's Chief Election Commissioner M.S. Gill (L) and Election Commissioner Kritishmurthy (R) during a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. Gill said India would go to the polls as slated in late September. — AFP Photo

Fifth day of N. Ireland talks Blair, Ahern trying to broker agreement

BELFAST, July 2: British Prime Minister Tony Blair returned Friday for a fifth and probably final day of peace talks in Belfast still hoping to broker a last-minute agreement on paramilitary weapons, reports AFP.

Despite signs to the contrary from Northern Ireland's rival party leaders, Blair's spokesman insisted there was still "every chance" of a deal.

The failure to agree on the pace, timing and verification of paramilitary disarmament has cast a huge cloud over last year's Good Friday accord.

Fourteen months after the deal was signed, the deadlock continues to block the formation of a power-sharing devolved government for the province.

"We're still talking about a deal with every chance," Blair's spokesman insisted.

"If there's not a conclusive agreement today [Friday], there will be a plan put forward for a conclusive agreement."

Blair and his Irish counterpart, Bertie Ahern, who has been co-chairing the talks with him, were due to make a joint

N. Korea proposes five-point plan to avoid naval bloodshed with South

SEOUL, July 2: North Korea today tabled a list of five demands to avoid naval clashes on its disputed sea border with South Korea, warning that failure to adopt them would result in further bloodshed, reports AFP.

The United States and the South Korean authorities should get a clear understanding of what our warnings mean," the official Korean Central News Agency said.

The demands, revealed by the agency as a five-point plan, were presented at a tension-reducing meeting of North Korean and United Nations generals in the border truce village of Panmunjom.

North Korea told generals of the United Nations Command (UNC), which oversees the tense armistice which ended the 1950-53 Korean conflict, it did

not recognise the NLL.

It also alleged that South Korean warships had made 63 incursions into Pyongyং's waters in the area since the June 15 gunbattle, an incident which helped scuttle inter-government talks between the two Koreas this week.

"More serious bloodshed will be inevitable unless the (South Korean) battleships' intrusion into our side's territorial waters is checked," North Korea's chief delegate to the talks Major General Li Chan-Bok said.

Reports here said the North repeated a demand for Seoul to apologize for the gunbattle and a demand for direct military talks with the United States.

Di's death
Al Fayed's appeal rejected by French court

PARIS, July 2: The Paris court of appeal today threw out a petition by Egyptian businessman Mohamed Al Fayed, who contended that Princess Diana's death was the work of the British intelligence service, reports AFP.

Al Fayed's lawyers appealed to the court earlier this year to order interviews of a British diplomat and three secret service agents -- one of them American -- after the magistrates investigating the August 1997 crash announced the inquiry was wrapped up and rejected their demand.

The premiers were expected to present a plan they consider to be the right way ahead, drawing on proposals the parties put forward themselves but failed to agree with each other.

Protestant Unionists refuse to form the government without the IRA handing over any weapons, and do not trust the Irish Republican Army's political wing Sinn Fein to be able to give such a guarantee.

Sinn Fein has conceded, significantly, that the IRA must decommission, but that is not enough for Unionists who want the terror group itself to make the pledge.

The inquiry determined that Diana and Dodi died when their Mercedes, travelling at high speed and chased by press photographers, hit the 13th pillar of the Alma Bridge road tunnel.

US against lifting of sanctions on Libya

UNITED NATIONS, July 2: The United States said Thursday it would oppose lifting UN sanctions against Libya -- regardless of the outcome of a report by Secretary-General Kofi Annan on whether Libya deserved to be permanently free of the measures, reports AFP.

Annan's report, which could be released as early as Friday, comes three months after the Security Council suspended the sanctions on April 5, when Libya turned over two suspects wanted in the 1988 PanAm bombing over Lockerbie, Scotland.

The report isn't expected to specifically recommend whether the Security Council should now lift the air and arms embargo, which were imposed in 1992 to compel Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi to turn the suspects over, UN officials say.

Rather, the assessment is expected to be more a progress report on Libya's compliance with all elements of UN resolutions that would highlight the good progress Libya had made in delivering the suspects for trial in the Netherlands, diplomats said.

UN resolutions, however, also demand that Libya cooperate with the trial and pay compensation to the families of the 270 victims of the crash if the two suspects are found guilty. Annan cannot address those requirements before the trial is completed, and already the start date has been pushed back to February, 2000.

"We do not believe that the council can agree to lift the sanctions at this point because there are several requirements that relate to cooperation with the investigation and the trial that are embedded in the resolution," Deputy US ambassador Peter Burleigh told a news conference Thursday.

"At a time like this, we think it's premature simply to talk about lifting," he said.

The United States was also holding out for demonstrations that Libya had renounced terrorism, another resolution requirement. US officials have refused to publicly say what they want Libya to do beyond Tripoli's public statements and official letters saying it doesn't support terrorism.

Kosovar refugees streaming home

MJEDA, Albania, July 2: Refugees from Kosovo are streaming home from temporary exile, converging on assembly points from all over Albania, reports AFP.

Late Wednesday some 300, exhausted and disoriented, arrived in the station at Mjeda, northwest Albania, the first to take advantage of the free repatriation being organised by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Burdened down with large quantities of baggage, including tents, blankets and cooking utensils, they got down painfully from a rusty train with broken windows to be taken in charge by North Atlantic Treaty Organisation troops.

"We left Durres at midday," said Nekhme Berisha, 63, referring to a port on Albania's central Adriatic coast. "The returnees were then directed to tents set up near the station to spend the night, before boarding buses for Kosovo. Their luggage was to be sent

separately aboard NATO trucks.

NATO peacekeepers have catalogued more than 100 sites in Kosovo where ethnic Albanians are thought to have been massacred and buried.

German peacekeepers in western Kosovo on Thursday put on show a mass grave where more than 100 people are buried -- the latest in a string of atrocities they say were performed by Serb forces.

A bright yellow child's shoe lay among the freshly turned earth of the complex of mass graves that German forces have found in the small village of Cetina, some 20 km from Prizren, Kosovo's second city.

The shoe, together with women's clothing strewn around the edge of the village, was a painful reminder of the terror of fleeing refugees shortly before they met their death.

Kim leaves for US: President Kim Dae-jung left for Washington yesterday to shore up support from the Clinton administration for his policy of engagement toward North Korea. AP reports from Seoul.

Kim is scheduled to meet President Clinton over lunch Friday in his third visit to Washington since he took office 16 months ago. He also plans to speak with William Perry, Clinton's point man on North Korea.

Reggae star Dennis Brown dead: Dennis Brown, a former child star who became known as the Crown Prince of Reggae, has died. He was 42. AP says from Kingston.

Initial reports suggested Brown died Thursday of complications caused by respiratory problems, but his cause of death has not been confirmed, said Carl Davis of the University of the West Indies Hospital. Brown rose to prominence during a 1970s wave of reggae singers that included Bob Marley, who introduced reggae music to listeners worldwide. Brown released more than 50 albums and a string of hit songs beginning with "No Man is an Island," which he recorded in 1969 at the age of 12.

BRIEFLY

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International

Indian forces start assault on Tiger Hills

peak in Friday's barrage.

Military officials said air strikes were planned for later in the day, with initial ground assaults expected to begin Saturday.

Up to 200 heavily armed guerrillas are believed to be entrenched in well-defended bunkers atop Tiger Hills.

India says Pakistani regulars are fighting alongside the infiltrators -- a charge Islamabad denies.

"We are moving in at least 100 extra Bofors guns for the Tiger Hills operations," a source said in Drass, one of the four regions in Indian Kashmir where fighting has been raging since May 9.

A military source said the ground assault on Tiger Ridge would involve at least three battalions (3,000 men), including commandos specially trained in mountain warfare.

Kashmir has been the source of two of the three wars between India and Pakistan since their independence in 1947.

Islamabad insists the guerrillas involved in the current con-

flict are indigenous Indian Kashmiris fighting against Indian rule.

India detains N Korean ship

BOMBAY, July 2: Indian customs have detained a North Korean ship in the western port of Kandla on suspicion of carrying arms for arch-rival Pakistan, officials said today.

Officials at the Kandla Port

Trust told AFP the ship, Ku Wol Sun, was detained on Wednesday and was currently being searched by teams from the Customs and the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence.

"A team of defence experts are also expected today to search the ship," the official said.

The ship reportedly took on 148 boxes of water refining and filtering equipment from a North Korean port, to be unloaded at Malta. In addition the ship had 13,000 metric tonnes of sugar loaded at Bangkok for Kandla.

Indo-Pak conflict

US slams Pakistan, demands withdrawal of forces

WASHINGTON, July 2: Coming down firmly against Pakistan, a House committee approved a resolution Thursday demanding the immediate withdrawal of Islamic forces that have pushed into Indian territory in the disputed region of Kashmir, reports AP.

One supporter praised India for its "amazing restraint" in responding to the crisis, even as Indian fighter jets and artillery struck the Islamic guerrillas that crossed the "line of control" set by a 1972 cease-fire agreement between the two South Asian powers, which now have nuclear weapons.

India claims Pakistan's military is directing the incursion by Pakistani soldiers and Afghan mercenaries. Pakistan denies its military is involved except in retaliatory shelling of advancing Indian forces.

Rep. Gary Ackerman said Pakistan is clearly the aggressor and India the victim in the current confrontation... He praised the Indian government for its measured military response so far but said public pressure in India for a broader response would be hard to resist as casualties mount.

The full International Rela-

tions Committee passed the measure on a 20-5 vote a few hours later. Next it goes to the full house.

"This could spin out of control quickly," said Bereuter, who said the resolution was aimed at pressuring Pakistan into withdrawing support for the Islamic guerrillas that crossed the "line of control" set by a 1972 cease-fire agreement between the two South Asian powers, which now have nuclear weapons.

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The full International Rela-

Seven killed in fresh violence in Turkey