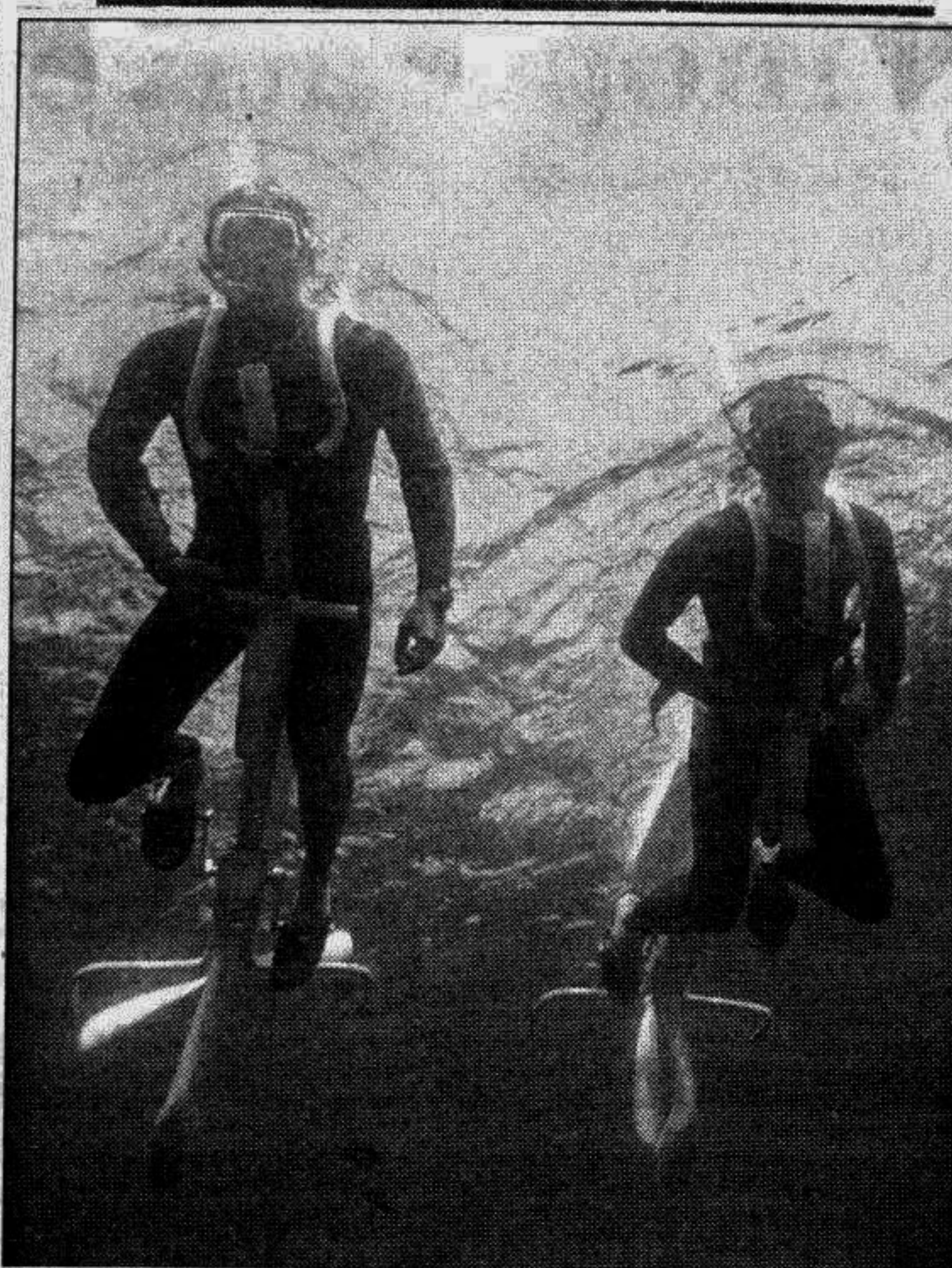


BRIEFLY



David Adrian (L) and a friend cruise on submarine cycles which he invented at la Seyne-sur-mer on July 19. The cycle is claimed to reach a speed of 5 km per hour on the surface and underwater twice as fast as using fins.

Albright to visit ME in mid-Aug: US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright on Tuesday announced that she would travel to the Middle East "around the middle of August" to help restart the stalled peace negotiations, Xinhua reports from Washington.

Russian FM to meet Jaswant: Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov would hold bilateral talks with his Indian counterpart Jaswant Singh during Asean Regional Forum (ARF) meet in Singapore next week to discuss a wide range of issues including regional security and bilateral interaction, PTI reports from Moscow.

Next G-8 meet in Miyazaki in Japan: Japan yesterday announced venues for meetings preceding next year's Group of Eight (G8) summit, Reuters reports from Tokyo.

Nicaraguan plane missing with 16: Nicaraguan officials searched on Tuesday for a commercial plane carrying 14 passengers and two crew members which disappeared after it took off from Managua for Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, authorities said, Reuters report from Managua.

Over 1,300 die of AIDS in Vietnam: A total of 1,341 people have died of AIDS and another 14,034 people are known to be HIV-positive in Vietnam, an official from the National Committee for AIDS Prevention said yesterday, AFP reports from Hanoi.

Editor of Iranian daily detained: An editor of a moderate Iranian newspaper was detained Tuesday for publishing an article that allegedly distorted Islam and insulted the divine prophets, the official Islamic Republic News Agency reported, AP says from Cairo.

6 militants killed in Assam: Indian troops and police gunned down six militants in the country's northeastern state of Assam in separate clashes in a pre- offensive against separatist guerrillas, police said yesterday, Reuters reports from Guwahati.

Unnamed plague claims 9 in Russia: A mysterious killer virus spreading across the south of Russia has left nine dead and more than 100 hospitalised, with Russian experts stumped as to the nature of the disease, news agencies reported, says AFP from Moscow.

29 miners trapped in China: Some 29 miners have been trapped for nine days 150 m underground in east China's Shandong province, Xinhua reports from Jinan.

Basque separatists score major political victory
22 leaders freed in Spain

MADRID, July 21: Spain's Basque separatist movement on Wednesday scored a major political victory when 22 former leaders were released after the Spanish constitutional court overturned seven-year prison terms against them, reports AFP.

In its first response, the Spanish government said the ruling was "positive" and called on the public to accept it, despite widespread public condemnation of political violence in the Basque country.

Hundreds of overjoyed relatives and parents, cheering and chanting Basque slogans, gathered outside prisons across gates in the Basque region to greet the former detainees as they walked to freedom.

The 22 former leaders of Herri Batasuna (HB), the political wing of the outlawed separatist group ETA, had been in prison since December 1997 on charges of "collaboration with an armed group."

A 23rd HB leader, Jon Idigo-

India, Pakistan exchange heavy artillery fire

MUSHKOH VALLEY, July 21: Indian soldiers Wednesday bombarded Pakistan-backed Islamic rebels clinging to a few hundred meters of captured territory atop three jagged peaks in the Indian part of disputed Kashmir state, military officials said, report agencies.

Pakistan retaliated with heavy artillery shelling, threatening the 10-day-old truce between the hostile neighbours.

In New Delhi, a senior army official said, India renewed artillery fire today in three areas in northern Kashmir where intruders had not yet withdrawn behind the Line of Control with Pakistan.

He said 100 to 150 militants were still held up in the Mushkoh Valley, Drass and Batalik sub-sectors of Kargil, where Indian ground and air forces waged a two-month offensive against hundreds of intruders until a withdrawal agreement last week.

He said Pakistan was responding with artillery fire from its side of the Line of Control, which was drawn in 1972 after the last of three wars between the nuclear-capable rivals.

On Tuesday, India's defence ministry said plans to evict the stragglers had been drawn up and would be executed if necessary.

The officials, who asked not to be identified, declined to give details of the plans. "Rest assured, either they get out or we will get them out," he said.

Li Gen HM Khanna told reporters in Srinagar, the summer capital of India's Jammu and Kashmir state, that the remaining intruders were "not of nerve-shattering tactical relevance."

Asked if he saw any chances of a re-escalation, the commander of the Northern Command said: "I would not rule it out, but having conceded to the world that they would withdraw to their side of the Line of Control, I assume they will comply."

He said 96-99 per cent of the occupied areas had been recaptured and the military operations chiefs of both sides would discuss the final pockets of intrusion.

New Delhi says most of the intruders were Pakistani soldiers while Islamabad maintained they were freedom fighters against Indian rule in Kashmir.

Pakistan's army chief said last week there had been "aggressive patrolling" by Pakistani troops across the Line of Control. However, an army spokesman said that did not amount to an admission Pakistani troops had taken part in the capture of strategic heights in Kargil.

Khanna said India's military campaign in Kargil, known as Operation Vijay, may have slowed but the "proxywar" fomented by Pakistan in Jammu and Kashmir state was continuing.

"For me the war is not over, the war is continuing," he said. "According to me, Operation Vijay was an extension of the proxy war pushed on us by Pakistan. While operation Vijay may be toned down, the proxy war is continuing."

He (Pakistan) will definitely attempt to rejuvenate militancy," Khanna said, referring to guerrilla attacks in Kashmir, rocked by a decade of separatist insurgency.

On Monday night, 19 people were killed in attacks by militants on villagers and Border Roads Organisation workers in the south of the state.

TAIPEI, July 21: Washington has drafted measures penalising Taiwan — including suspending a sale of military planes — to show its annoyance at President Lee Teng-hui's provocation of a row with China, a newspaper reported Wednesday, says AP.

The US State Department has urged cancellation of the sale of E-2G Hawkeye early warning aircraft and putting sharp limits on unofficial contacts with Taiwanese officials, Taipei's China Times reported in a front page story. The China Times quoted "highly reliable" sources in Washington but did not identify them.

The moves would register Washington's "extreme displeasure" over Lee's July 9 characterization of dealings with China as "state-to-state" relations, the paper said.

But Taiwan's Central News Agency quoted the Defence Ministry saying it has not received any word of a US suspension of arms sales. The E-2G sale has not been finalised, so therefore there is nothing to cancel, government-run CNA quoted the ministry saying.

The China Times report comes amid a flurry of US

US may penalise Taiwan for China row

diplomatic activity aimed at heading off a crisis between Taiwan and China, which has extremely delicate relations with Washington.

Lee's statement enraged Beijing, which viewed it as a major challenge to its "one-China principle." That policy effectively relegates Taiwan to the status of a renegade province that China says must eventually be reunited with the mainland, by force if necessary.

Chinese saber rattling over Lee's comments has sent tensions between the sides to their highest level in more than three years.

Lossing recent gains in relations with Washington would be a major backfire for Lee in what was considered an attempt by him to strengthen Taiwan's position for political talks with Beijing.

If adopted, the US penalties would send relations between Washington and Taipei back two decades to where they stood when the United States first broke diplomatic ties with Taipei to form relations with Beijing, the paper said.

Though Washington maintains only informal contacts with Taiwan, Taipei in recent years has won greater support for arms sales and more frequent contacts between US and Taiwanese officials.

Washington is still navigating out of a rough patch in ties with China over NATO's May bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade and allegations of Chinese nuclear spying, and US officials are inclined to give a dim view to any challenge to the status quo between Taiwan and China.

US President Bill Clinton reassured his Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin by phone Sunday that Washington was sticking by its "one-China policy" to recognise Beijing and have only unofficial relations with Taipei.

But Clinton said at a White House news briefing Tuesday he also told Jiang the United States would "take very seriously" any attempt by China to use military force against Taiwan, a reiteration of American policy insisting that disputes over Taiwan must be resolved peacefully.

Assistant Secretary of State Stanley Roth leaves Wednesday for China to lay groundwork for Albright's meeting with Tang.

Crackdown on Falungong sect
Thousands of followers arrested in China

BEIJING, July 21: Chinese police Wednesday rounded up thousands of followers of the mystical Falungong sect nationwide, while tightening security around central government headquarters in Beijing where the group held a huge mass rally in April, officials said, reports AFP.

Two thousand Falungong people were at the moment, an official at the western suburban stadium told AFP Wednesday morning.

"They started arriving at around 6:00 a.m. (2200 GMT Tuesday)," she said, adding the followers were from Beijing and provincial cities.

The official added police were at the stadium and had sent some Falungong followers back to Baoding, Hebei province on Tuesday evening.

Wednesday evening stadium officials said there were still "lots and lots" of Falungong followers in the gymnasium complex, but refused to estimate the numbers.

Beijing police further warned foreign journalists against covering the police roundup of Falungong followers and told them the government would soon issue a statement on the nationwide crackdown.

"The government will soon issue a statement so your coverage should be based on this," a police official told AFP.

In southern China, around 100 people were detained in Guangzhou and Shenzhen in the early hours of Wednesday as Falungong members were gathering for their morning exercises, a spokeswoman for the group said from neighbouring Hong Kong.

Further arrests were being made as some 20,000 people gathered at the Guangdong provincial government headquarters in Guangzhou to protest against the first detentions, Sophie Xiao told AFP.

In Shenzhen between 800 to 1,000 people assembled at the city's government offices, she said.

Those assembled in Shenzhen were all taken in buses to a school in the outskirts of the city," she said. In Guangzhou, police were continuing to arrest protesters but their fate was not known, she added.

The nationwide crackdown began in the early hours of Tuesday morning.

"A crackdown was ordered on Monday evening after President Jiang Zemin called a meeting in Beijing," a source close to party officials told AFP.

"I would estimate that several thousand Falungong followers have already been detained in Beijing alone and police have been ordered to stay on duty round-the-clock in the capital," he added.

Hundreds of uniformed and plainclothes police lined Beijing's main artery, the Avenue of Eternal Peace (Chang'an Jie) and the streets around the Communist Party's central government headquarters at Zhongnanhai, to the west of Tiananmen Square.

Police vans were parked at regular intervals with as many as two dozen patrol cars stationed at the main entrances to Zhongnanhai. Pedestrians were told to keep moving past the compound.

Police were searching the bags of many passers-by, some of whom argued loudly, while plainclothes officers — with walkie-talkies in hand — stood at the entrances to all subway stations.

At least one street in the vicinity of Zhongnanhai was completely blocked off from traffic for a period while police lined both sides of the street.

3 socialist parties join BJP-led alliance to contest elections

NEW DELHI, July 21: Three Indian socialist groups joined hands today to contest the September-October general elections with the alliance led by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), reports Reuters.

The move adds another party to the rainbow of groups in the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which analysts said should enhance its chances in the country's third general election since 1996.

George Fernandes, who is defence minister in the caretaker coalition government, said his Samata Party and Commerce Minister Ramakrishna Hegde's Lok Shakti party had decided to merge with the Janata Dal.

"Following discussions between the leaders of the Samata Party and Lok Shakti it has been decided to merge with the Janata Dal," Fernandes told a news conference.

All the three parties were earlier part of a socialist grouping which spearheaded a protest against the imposition of emergency rule by former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975.

After the end of the emergency in 1977 the socialist grouping fragmented into small parties but remained attached to the same ideology.

The Lok Shakti and Samata Party are allies of the BJP and part of the coalition government whose defeat in a parliamentary confidence vote three months ago triggered the latest round of elections.

The grouping will be a part of the NDA.

Elections to the lower house of parliament, the Lok Sabha, start on September 4 and end on October 1.

The merger of the three socialist parties was expected to result in a split in the Janata Dal as some members were opposed to the idea of aligning with the Hindu nationalist BJP.

Analysts said the merger could boost the prospects of the NDA in the forthcoming polls.

"The splintering of the Janata Dal would erode the anti-BJP vote in the election," said Pran Chopra, and analyst with the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi.

The Janata Dal, which had six of the 545 seats in the lower house which was disbanded when elections were called, has a strong presence in the southern state of Karnataka and in the eastern state of Orissa.

Lankan newsmen protest attack on colleagues

COLOMBO, July 21: Hundreds of Sri Lankan journalists took to the streets today in protest against the alleged assault of colleagues by presidential security guards while covering an opposition demonstration, reports Reuters.

Some 300 journalists, most dressed in white and wearing black arm-bands, pushed past two police barricades while trying to march to President Chandrika Kumaratunga's highly guarded downtown residence.

Hundreds of riot police were deployed and all roads leading to Kumaratunga's residence were closed, causing major traffic jams.

The protesters were stopped at a third police barricade where they burnt effigies of Media Minister Managala Samarawera and Nihal Karunaratne, head of the presidential security division.



Followers of the mystical Falungong sect sit and read outside the offices of China's official Xinhua news agency yesterday in protest. The group members were protesting the arrest of more than 100 members in a crackdown in southern China following huge gatherings there and in Beijing.

Suharto improves

JAKARTA, July 21: Ex-President Suharto, who ruled Indonesia with an iron fist for 32 years, remained in hospital Wednesday and underwent tests for a second day. Doctors said he had suffered a light stroke, but his condition had improved, reports AP.

His lawyer and a hospital spokesman insisted publicly that the 78-year-old retired five-star army general, who is facing corruption allegations, was simply undergoing a routine checkup.

Physicians at Jakarta Pertamina Hospital told The Associated Press Suharto had suffered a stroke, but was not seriously afflicted. He was recovering and could be released within a day or two, the doctors said on condition of anonymity.

The Jakarta Post quoted sources close to Suharto's family as saying the old autocrat was overcome by the stroke and collapsed in his bathroom at his private residence in central Jakarta on Tuesday.

The newspaper said one of Indonesia's top neurosurgeons had examined Suharto.

Suharto ruled Indonesia for 32 years. Although forced from office by riots and protests last year, he is still regarded by many as a key behind-the-scenes political operator.

Barak urges Britain to play Kosovo-style role in ME

LONDON, July 21: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak called Wednesday on Britain to take the lead within Europe on the Middle East peace process in the style of its "unique role" in resolving the Kosovo crisis, reports AFP.

After a working breakfast with his British counterpart, Tony Blair, Barak said he wanted the European Union (EU) to back the process politically and financially but let Israel and its neighbours negotiate their own solutions.

Blair said there was now a "tremendous opportunity" to move peace forward, while signalling that any advance had to be consistent with Israel's need for security.

The two prime ministers talked for more than half an hour on a European stop-over on Barak's way home after an official visit to the United States.

The Israeli premier briefed Blair on his visit there, including talks with US President Bill Clinton, and detailed his strategy for a comprehensive Middle East peace that would include Syria, Israel's hardline neighbour.

"I believe that Britain can have a leading role within the European Union in supporting this peace process," Barak said. "In the same way that Britain, under the leadership of Prime Minister Tony Blair, played a unique role in deciding the Kosovo crisis."

He said the Kosovo conflict was "an excellent example" of how "free-world leadership" should act on a global arena.

Speaking a short while later, Barak said he hoped Britain could help unite the EU behind the Middle East peace process "and to provide both political support and financial support, especially to the Palestinian side."

Barak's US trip was his first official visit to Washington since he became premier after the Israeli elections in May.

Before leaving on Tuesday, he appealed to US lawmakers to support fresh funding for Israel in the name of peace in the Middle East.

During their talks, Barak and Clinton agreed to restructure US assistance to Israel, with Washington pledging to incrementally increase military aid by one third.

NLD rejects junta's conditions for talks

YANGON, July 21: The pro-democracy opposition led by Aung San Suu Kyi spurned conditions Wednesday set by the military regime before talks aimed at breaking Myanmar's political impasse can be held, reports AP.

The government last week urged the National League for Democracy (NLD) headed by Suu Kyi to be "pragmatic" and dissolve a committee set up last year representing a parliament elected in 1990 that the military never allowed to convene.

Tin Oo, vice chairman of the NLD, ruled out abolishing the committee, as was widely expected since the party's legitimacy is closely identified with the election victory.

Tin Oo said that the party had already made a significant concession to the military by agreeing that Suu Kyi did not have to take part in initial talks.

"Asking us to abolish the 10-member committee is tantamount to setting a precondition," Tin Oo said. "The door to open a dialogue is always open, but we will not dissolve the committee."

"We have agreed to lower-level talks and we believe that a dialogue will take place eventually," Tin Oo said.

Suu Kyi, winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, has called in vain for a dialogue to bring the country closer to democracy since she was freed from six years of house arrest in 1995.

The military, which has ruled Myanmar, also known as Burma, since 1962, refuses to speak to her. Last year, two meetings were held with party chairman Aung Shwe that the NLD likened to being given orders to stop causing trouble.

Suu Kyi's 34-year-old independence hero daughter, Aung Mye Thazan, valedictorian of her father's murder by a political rival, one of the few appearances she is allowed to make.

Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest 10 years ago Tues-

Thai policewomen incensed by short skirt ban

BANGKOK, July 21: Bangkok policewomen are incensed by a ban on short skirts, dyed hair and makeup, the Bangkok Post reported today, says Reuters.

The city's police chief issued an order on Monday saying female officers' skirts must be knee-length, their hair natural and "make-up discreet," the English-language daily said.

The policewomen said they considered the order a joke and a challenge to femininity, it said.

"Imagine yourself in a long skirt with a pale face and no hairdo," said one. "My husband will surely dump me."

Another officer complained that she would have to buy new uniforms to conform to the regulations.

"I know that police officers must obey their superiors and have discipline, but this is way too rigid," she said.

Bangkok police chief Lieutenant-General Wannarat Kotcharani called the complaints unreasonable. He said the dress code had been in force for some time, but many officers had ignored it.



Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak (2nd R) and his wife Nava (2nd L) greet Cherie (L) and Tony Blair (R) on the steps of Number 10 Downing Street in London yesterday. Barak is in London on his only stop over in Europe for a working breakfast with Blair after his official six-day visit to the United States. Barak is expected to outline his plans to Blair for relaunching the peace process.

44 killed in Congo church bombing

BRAZZAVILLE, July 21: A bomb attack left 44 people dead at a church in Congo at the weekend, a local legislator said yesterday, reports AFP.

The attack occurred during mass at a church in Mouyondzi, some 160 kilometers (100 miles) west of Brazzaville, lawmaker Jacqueline Mamouni said over pro-government Radio Liberte.

Mamouni, who is from Mouyondzi, blamed the attack on supporters of ousted president Pascal Lissouba.

Her allegation could not be independently confirmed.