



Spanish top-model Ester Canadas presents a black dress with pleated white swirl motifs and long white gloves by US designer Oscar de la Renta for Pierre Balmain, during the Autumn-Winter 1999/2000 haute couture collections in Paris on Wednesday. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

14 killed in bus crash in India:

Fourteen people were killed on Thursday when a state-owned bus rolled down a hill in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, the United News of India reported, says AFP from New Delhi.

Nearly 40 others were injured, some seriously, in the accident near the state capital Shimla, officials said. The cause of the crash was not known.

9 traffickers killed in Iran:

Troops killed nine smugglers and seized six tonnes of opium and other drugs in a week of clashes with camel caravans in southeast Iran, the Iranian news agency IRNA reported on Wednesday. Reuters says from Tehran.

It quoted Brigadier-General Abooiat Pourshasb, chief of the army's ground forces as saying his forces also arrested 30 armed traffickers and seized 82 camels in the clashes near the borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan in the past week.

Cohen to visit Tokyo, Seoul:

US Defence Secretary William Cohen will visit Japan and South Korea next week amid escalating regional tensions over the China-Taiwan relationship and worries North Korea will launch a new long-range missile, Reuters reports from Washington.

Cohen will leave on Sunday for Tokyo and visit Seoul later in the week for meetings with senior officials. Pentagon officials said yesterday. He will also visit the former Soviet Republics of Georgia and Ukraine before returning to Washington on August 1.

S Korean President to visit NZ:

South Korean President Kim Dae-jung will make a state visit to New Zealand, the first such visit since 1968, New Zealand Prime Minister Jenny Shipley announced yesterday. Reuters reports from Wellington.

Kim would make the visit after attending the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Auckland in September, said Shipley, who is currently visiting Seoul.

Russian FM in Britain:

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov arrived in London on Wednesday to start his first diplomatic visit to Britain since the end of the Kosovo conflict, the Russian embassy said, AFP reports from London.

The visit had been set for May, but was cancelled on the order of Russian President Boris Yeltsin to protest NATO's bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade.

Fayed sues 4 people:

Mohamed Al Fayed sued four people, claiming they tried to sell him bogus information about a supposed murder plot behind the car crash that killed his son Dodi and Princess Diana, court papers showed on Wednesday. Reuters reports from Los Angeles.

Fayed, millionaire owner of Britain's Harrods department store, claims the four tried to sell him forged CIA and British secret service documents about the fatal 1997 Paris car crash, according to papers filed in Los Angeles Superior Court.

Japanese doomsday cult doctor jailed

TOKYO, July 22: A doctor in Japan's Aum Supreme Truth cult was sentenced to 18 years in jail Thursday for mailing a bomb to the Tokyo governor, planting poison gas in a railway station and trying to kill a lawyer, reports AFP.

The 30-year-old doctor, Masahiro Tominaga, was sentenced by Tokyo district court presiding Judge Takao Nakayama after being found guilty of several attempted murders and breaching explosives legislation.

"You should deeply regret it and sincerely come to terms with it, as you have told the court," the judge said.

Tominaga, who trained at Japan's elite Tokyo University, had denied the charges, saying he was under the control of sect leader Shoko Asahara, himself facing 17 charges including murder.

Asahara is accused of mass-murdering the March 1995 attack on Tokyo's subway in which followers spread the Nazi-invented Sarin nerve gas, killing 12 people and injuring thousands.

The doctor was one of the senior advisors in the cult known as the "emperor's secretariat."

Together with other doomsday cult disciples, Tominaga tried to confuse police investigations into the sect after the subway attack by sending a parcel bomb to the then Tokyo governor in May 1995.

The bomb exploded in the hands of the governor's secretary, who lost all the fingers on his left hand.

The doctor was "clearly" attempting murder in the parcel bomb case, said the judge.

In the same month, the doctor placed a device designed to

release deadly hydrocyanic acid gas in a public restroom at Shinjuku railway station, one of Tokyo's busiest.

The device was found before it could release any gas, but the judge noted Tominaga's involvement had stretched to paying an advance visit to the site of the attempted gassing.

In May 1994, a year before the Tokyo subway attack, Tominaga collaborated with the cult leader by pouring Sarin nerve gas onto a car belonging to an anti-cult lawyer, Taro Takimoto, who was unharmed.

US envoy in Taiwan to defuse tensions

TAIPEI, July 22: A United States envoy arrived in Taipei Thursday as part of Washington's efforts to calm escalating tensions following Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui's statehood claim, reports AFP.

The purpose of this Taiwan visit is to exchange views with government officials on cross-strait relations and other topics, Richard Bush told reporters in Chinese upon his arrival.

"All my discussions in Taipei are based on the friendship between Taiwan and the United States."

The two-tier efforts came as US President Bill Clinton Wednesday urged China and Taiwan to calm escalating frictions between them, calling a military showdown in the Taiwan Straits "unthinkable".

Washington favors a one-China policy and dialogue between Beijing and Taipei, he said.

Congress steps up campaign against Vajpayee

NEW DELHI, July 22: India's opposition Congress party has stepped up a personal campaign against Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee for his handling of the Kashmir conflict, reports AFP.

Newspapers Thursday said the tactic was aimed at stealing Vajpayee's thunder during the upcoming general election campaign.

Concerned that the prime minister's Hindu nationalist BJP party will push India's success in ousting Islamic guerrillas from Kashmir as a major vote winner, Congress clearly feels it has no alternative but to try to pull the rug from under Vajpayee.

ee's feet, they said.

"The revelation of the truth (about Kashmir) would have exposed Vajpayee to ridicule before the nation," the Congress Working Committee, its top decision-making body, said in a statement late Wednesday.

Opposition parties have held the government and its intelligence agencies responsible for the delay in detecting the initial incursion by Pakistani-backed guerrillas over the Kashmiri border.

They say the delay allowed the infiltrators to strengthen their positions and ultimately cost lives in the Indian offensive to push them back over the

border.

"The finance, security and foreign policies of the country have to be decided by the prime minister. How can Vajpayee absolve himself of responsibility for the Kargil crisis?" said Pranab Mukherjee, a Congress leader.

The Congress statement said the government had the "information but not the will to act."

"It is perhaps for this reason that Vajpayee has consistently refused to inform the nation as to when he personally came to know of the infiltration," it said, adding the delay cost the nation "many brave and pre-

cious lives."

More than 400 Indian soldiers died in the 10-week conflict, according to official figures.

India's staggered general elections will begin on September 4 and end early in October.

BJP party president Kushabhau Thakre insisted Thursday the government would not make the Kashmir "victory" an election issue.

"But if the Congress decided to make it a poll issue then we will counter the Congress with a set of questions on Kashmir," Thakre was quoted as saying by the United News of India.

World pressure mounting on India to open talks: Pak FM

ISLAMABAD, July 22: Pakistani Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz said Wednesday that international pressure was mounting on India to resume a dialogue with Pakistan on a settlement to the festering Kashmir dispute, reports AFP.

"The pressure has started intensifying on India to resume the dialogue," he said, following Pakistan's agreement to defuse the crisis by securing the withdrawal of Islamic militants from Kargil in Indian-held Kashmir.

The pressure will continue to increase in coming weeks, Aziz said as he wound up debate in parliament on the government's Kashmir policy.

"The nation will see that it was the Kargil issue that forced India into meaningful dialogue in the next few weeks and resolve the Kashmir issue," he said.

Aziz said a joint statement issued after Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's July 4 meeting with US President Bill Clinton, where Sharif promised the withdrawal, was drafted only after Indian premier Atal Behari Vajpayee "assured talks on Kashmir if Pakistan made progress on the Kargil issue."

He said Clinton spoke to Vajpayee on Tuesday to call for the resumption of talks and "we hope further strengthening of the US role towards the settlement of the Kashmir issue in the next few days."

India has firmly rejected the involvement of any third party in discussions on the Himalayan state which is divided between the two rivals.

The Islamic guerrillas, which India says were backed by Pakistan, withdrew from the strategic peaks after a two-month Indian offensive to dislodge them that had raised fears of an all-out war between India and Pakistan.

Indian mortar and artillery units fired Wednesday on guerrillas who had failed to withdraw fully across the Kashmir border with Pakistan. Claiming the Kargil episode as part of the broader Kashmir issue, Aziz said the first part of the Sharif-Clinton statement -- the withdrawal -- was complete and the second part -- arranging talks -- was now in the process of implementation.

He said said Pakistan was interested in "meaningful and purposeful" dialogue. "The dialogue should not be for the sake

of dialogue, it should not be an exercise in futility."

He rejected Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh's assertion that by backing intrusion into Kashmir Pakistan had "betrayed India's trust" and hampered talks.

"The real trust between India and Pakistan had never existed throughout the past 52 years, so the question of betraying it does not arise," Aziz said.

He accused New Delhi of repeatedly damaging chances of building mutual trust by using "force or coercion" to resolve any issue that arose between the two neighbours.

A settlement of the Kashmir dispute could not be delayed and "peace in the region cannot remain hostage to India's designs and wishes," he said.

Aziz reiterated Pakistan's call for third-party mediation, arguing that India and Pakistan were not communicating effectively.

"We talk of peace, they talk of aggression, we talk of freedom and self-determination (for Kashmiris) and they talk of repression -- so there is a vast difference in the languages we speak."



Motorcycles lead a motorcade with Barnstable County Medical Examiner trucks carrying the bodies of John F. Kennedy, Jr., his wife Carolyn Bessette Kennedy and her sister Lauren G. Bessette as they leave the Coast Guard Station on Wednesday in Woods Hole, MA. The bodies were recovered from the crash site of the small plane flown by John F. Kennedy, Jr. off Martha's Vineyard and were being taken to the Barnstable County Medical Examiner office for autopsy. Accompanying the bodies were Sen. Edward Kennedy and his sons Edward Kennedy, Jr. and Patrick Kennedy. — AFP photo

US 7th Fleet monitors China-Taiwan tension

MANILA, July 22: US naval forces in the Pacific are monitoring the tension between China and Taiwan, the 7th Fleet commander, Vice Admiral Walter Doran said Thursday, but stressed Washington favoured a peaceful solution to the crisis, reports AFP.

There is "nothing particular, nothing exceptional," about the Japan-based fleet's movement in the region, he told reporters aboard USS Blue Ridge, the fleet's command ship which arrived here Thursday.

Washington had sent a naval battle group through the Taiwan Strait when Beijing held war games near Taipei's shores in March 1996.

"As the Seventh Fleet commander, I am the operational commander and I think the position of the United States on the situation with China and Taiwan is pretty well documented," Doran said.

Washington has never explicitly said it would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack. But observers say any confrontation between the communist giant and its tiny neighbour, a nascent democracy, could risk drawing the United States into a conflict.

"In the public domain, we all very much want and support the situation being solved very peacefully," he added.

However, he said his fleet, which covers a "a huge area of

responsibility" from the international dateline to the eastern shores of Africa is also keeping watch on military movements.

The fleet is the largest of the forward-deployed US fleets, with about 53 ships, 350 aircraft and an estimated 60,000 navy and marine personnel.

"We keep watch and we keep track and we monitor what is happening, particularly military activities in that entire area," Doran stressed.

Doran's comments follow an appeal by US President Bill Clinton for Taiwan and China to calm the tension. Clinton, who has reaffirmed the one-China policy, said a military confrontation was "unthinkable."

Columbia space launch delayed again

CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida, July 22: The space shuttle Columbia's launch was delayed for the second time this week early Thursday because of thunderstorms around Kennedy Space Center, NASA said, reports AFP.

The Columbia's space mission -- the first-ever under a woman's command -- will be delayed one day, NASA said.

The countdown for the 12:28 (0428 GMT) launch was stopped five minutes from ignition as the space center awaited the storm to abate during a 52-minute launch-window of opportunity before it all had to be rescheduled.

The five-day space mission was originally programmed to blast off early Tuesday, but a false alarm stopped that countdown six seconds from liftoff.

"We made the right decision," flight manager Donald McMonagle told reporters after the launch was called off early Thursday.

A Friday night launch was not possible because of an unmanned Delta rocket firing on Saturday.

However, the US Air Force, which controls the Kennedy Space Center, told NASA it could reschedule the Columbia flight for 12:34 a.m. Friday (0434 GMT).

If the Columbia mission fails to take off Friday, McMonagle said, it will have to be pushed back to August 18.

First Lady Hillary Clinton had returned here for the second launch effort to watch air force Colonel Eileen Collins, 42, take off as the shuttle's first female commander.

However, Collins, with two shuttle missions under her belt, French astronaut Michel Tognini, pilot Jeff Ashby and mission specialists Steve Hawley and Cady Coleman, alighted the Columbia for the second time this week.

Columbia's goal is to place the Chandra X-ray observatory into orbit, where it will examine the most powerful sources of X-rays in the universe -- black holes, colliding galaxies and the remains of supernovas.

Before this week's mishaps, the mission had already suffered 10 or 11 delays since its original lift-off date of November 1998.

McMonagle dismissed comments that the Columbia mission was jinxed. "I don't believe there is an external force behind all the delays, he said."

Muslim leader quits Congress in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, July 22: A Muslim leader of India's main opposition Congress party in Kashmir quit Thursday, demanding talks between Muslim separatists and New Delhi, reports AFP.

Mehmooda Mufti also resigned from the Kashmir assembly, in which she headed the Congress legislative wing.

Mufti told reporters that the Congress, which is headed by Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, was showing no interest in pressuring the Hindu nationalist government to open a dialogue with Muslim separatists.

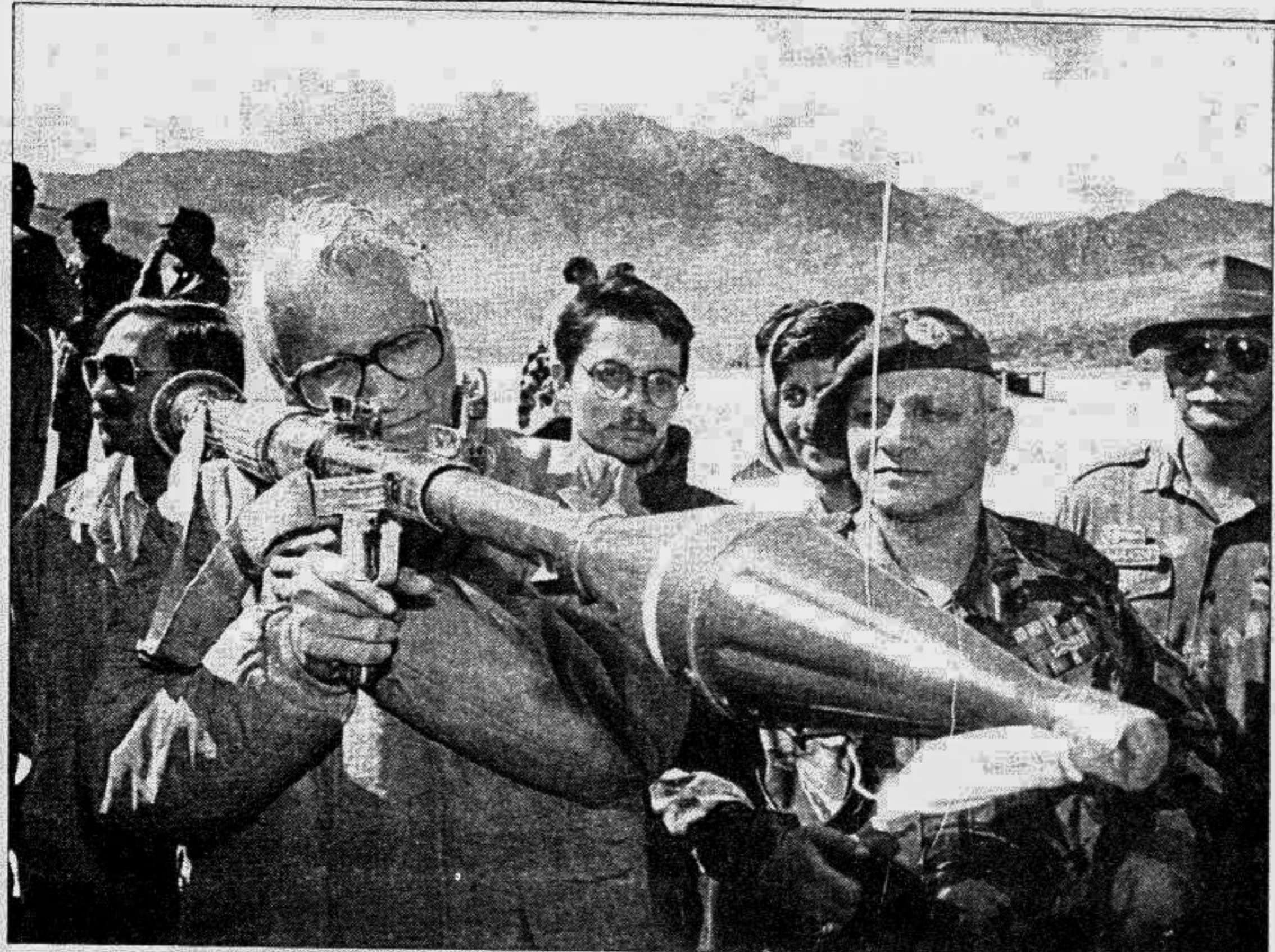
"Time and again I have said to party leaders (to demand) a dialogue with the separatists to end the alienation of the Kashmiri people."

"On ly a dialogue will serve the interests of the country," she added.

Mufti is the daughter of Mohammed Sayeed, who is a Congress member of parliament from Kashmir. Newspapers said he was also contemplating resigning from the party.

Both the father and daughter are expected to throw their weight behind a rival Congress faction ahead of national elections in September-October.

The move is expected to weaken the Congress in Kashmir, India's only Moslem-majority state where a Muslim separatist campaign raging since 1989 has claimed more than 24,000 lives.



Indian defence minister George Fernandes takes aim through a grenade launcher which was confiscated from the posts held by the Muslim infiltrators as senior Indian army officer General H.M. Khanna (2nd R) looks on during Fernandes' visit to Kargil yesterday. Fernandes said that there could be no talks between India and Pakistan regarding the Line of Control until all infiltrators withdraw from Indian territory and shelling from across the border comes to a halt. — AFP photo

IRA blames Britain for Northern Ireland crisis

BELFAST, July 22: The Irish Republican Army (IRA), on the eve of fresh talks today aimed at putting Northern Ireland's faltering peace process back on track, angrily blamed Britain for the province's political crisis, reports Reuters.

The guerrilla group, which wants to end British rule in Northern Ireland, said last year's peace agreement, designed to end three decades of sectarian and political violence, had failed to deliver progress and now seemed less likely to do so.

Britain's Northern Ireland Secretary, Mo Mowlam, said the IRA statement was unhelpful. "I think it is unhelpful because it shows the degree of mistrust that exists and probably fuels that mistrust," she told BBC radio from Washington.

Mowlam hoped that former US Senator George Mitchell, who is making a fresh attempt to revive the peace accord, would be able to help rebuild confidence between rival Protestant and Catholic political parties.

British security sources said there was nothing in Wednes-

day's IRA statement to suggest the guerrillas planned to end their ceasefire.

The IRA gave no direct response to demands by politicians in Britain and Ireland that it should disarm to help the stalled peace process.

The process has been deadlocked because politicians from the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland refuse to sit in a planned power-sharing provincial government with the IRA's political wing Sinn Fein until the guerrillas disarm.

Protestant Unionists, who want British rule to continue, said they regarded the IRA statement as a thinly veiled threat against the peace agreement.

"The agreement has failed to deliver tangible progress and its potential for doing so has substantially diminished in recent months," the IRA said.

The IRA, which waged a 30-year war against British rule in the province, accused Unionists of reneging on commitments.

"The primary responsibility for the developing political crisis rests squarely with the British government. They have

once again demonstrated a lack of political will to confront the Unionist veto," it added.

The IRA's blunt words came as Mitchell began talks with Protestant and Roman Catholic politicians to assess the difficulties besetting the Good Friday accord.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair is due to hold talks with two key players today -- Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams and David Trimble, leader of Northern Ireland's main Protestant party -- the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP).

The IRA dimmed hopes of a conciliatory stance by warning Britain against backing disarmament demands which it said could be seen as a cover for seeking the defeat of the guerrillas.

A truce declared by the IRA in 1994 foundered in 1996 because of what it said was a demand by the then Conservative government in Britain "for an IRA surrender."

Sir Reg Empey, a senior UUP negotiator, told BBC radio the IRA was trying "to bully and browbeat the British government."

China bans Falungong sect

BEIJING, July 22: China banned the mystical Falungong sect Thursday, forbidding Communist Party members from practising its exercises and launching a massive propaganda offensive as police rounded up thousands of people, reports AFP.

"Because the Falun Dafa research organisation has not registered according to law, it has been decided that it is an illegal organisation," said the statement, read by a state-run Central China Television (CCTV) announcer.

The organisation had "engaged in illegal activities, advocating superstition, and spreading fallacies, hoodwinking people, inciting and creating disturbances, and jeopardizing social stability," the announcement said.

Therefore, in accordance with the Regulations on the Registration and Management of Mass Organisations, the Research Society of Falun Dafa and the Falun Gong organisation under its control are held to be illegal and are therefore banned," it said.

Tens of thousands of people have demonstrated in cities across China to protest the detention of dozens of the sect's leaders, after authorities launched a crackdown on the group two days ago.

On the streets of Beijing, uniformed police on motorcycles combed the main East-West artery, Chang'an Boulevard, questioning those gathered in small groups and examining what they were reading.

At Zhongnanhai, the seat of the central government where 10,000 Falungong followers staged a massive protest in April, uniformed and plainclothes police were gathered at intersections and all entrances to the compound.

Police vans were also stationed outside Beijing Railway Station, where most practition-

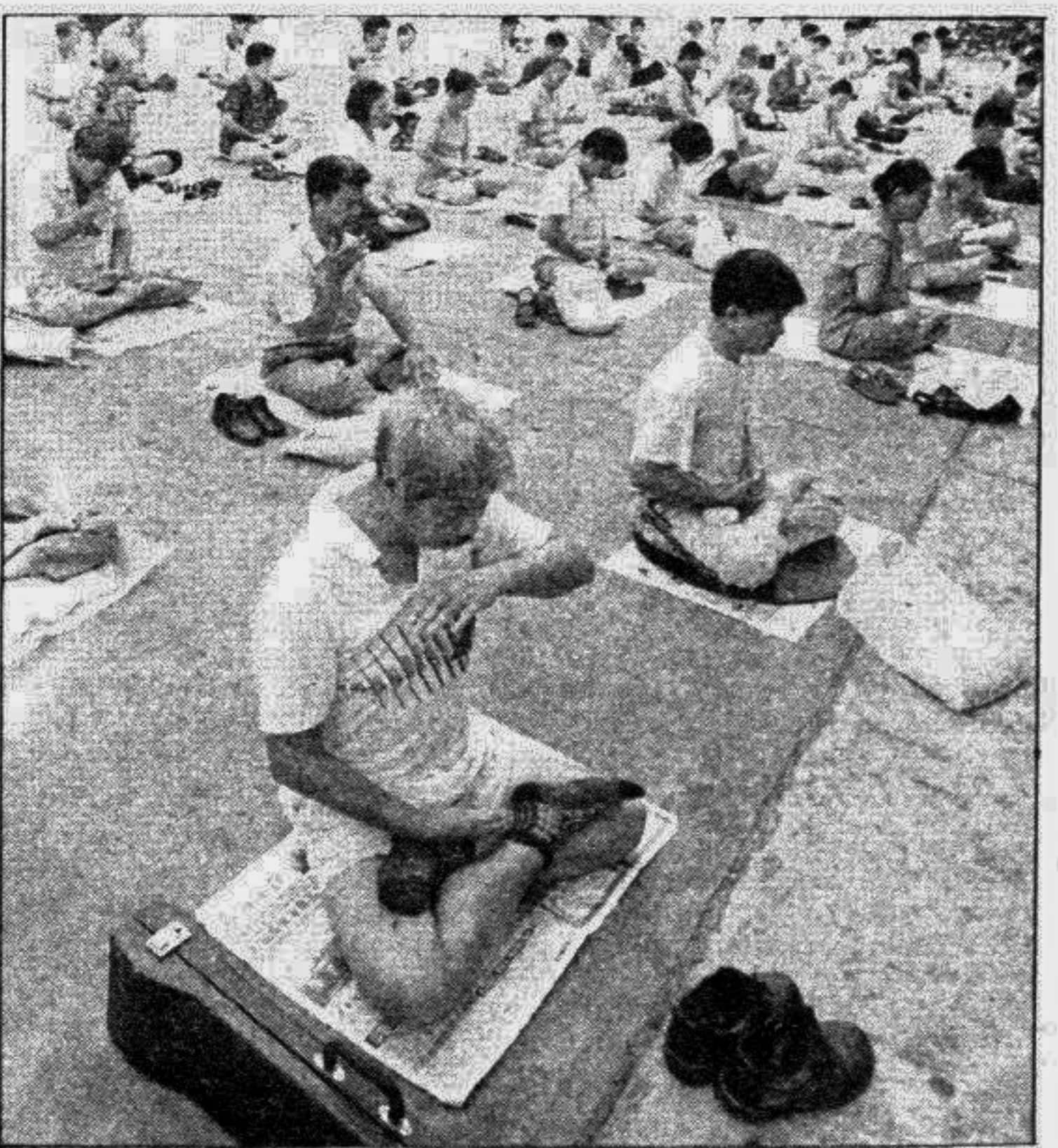
ers from the provinces could arrive in a bid to reach the capital to protest the ban.

Police were working on double shifts in the capital, a source said.

"Since the crackdown began on July 20, over 200 Falungong leaders have been detained, with about 50 released to date," said the Hong Kong-based Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China.

Some 30,000 Falungong members protested in 30 cities in 12 provinces Wednesday, the centre said in a faxed statement, adding about 10,000 were briefly detained and about 100 were injured in scuffles.

In Beijing, several thousand Falungong members were Thursday penned in at stadiums in Shijingshan in the west, and Fengtai district in the southwest, with armed police guarding them, witnesses said.



People participates in a morning meditation and exercise group of the Falungong spiritual movement yesterday in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, just hours before the group was declared an illegal organisation by the Chinese government. — AFP photo