

BRIEFLY

Albright to visit Kosovo July 29:

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright will visit Kosovo in a week to assess the situation there after the deployment of NATO peacekeepers, the State Department announced Thursday. AFP reports from Washington.

Albright will meet with leaders of the NATO-led Kosovo force (KFOR) and officials of the United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo (UNMIK), the State of Department said in a statement.

Quakes hit northern Japan:

An earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of 4.6 was among four moderate tremors that struck off Japan's northern coast early Friday, the Meteorological Agency said. AP reports from Tokyo.

Local police said there were no immediate reports of damage or injuries from the quakes, which had virtually the same epicenter and occurred within a two-hour period.

Clinton telephones Barak:

President Bill Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak talked by phone on Thursday ahead of weekend meetings Barak will have with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Reuters reports from Washington.

P J Crowley, a spokesman for the White House National Security Council, said the two leaders spoke for 10 minutes in a phone call that Barak initiated from Israel.

Barak to ask Arafat for changes in Wye accord

JERUSALEM, July 23: Prime Minister Ehud Barak will ask for changes in the interim Wye River peace agreement when he meets with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat late Saturday, Barak's top security adviser said, reports AP.

Arafat has rejected such an idea up to now, demanding that the Wye agreement be implemented in full and according to its original three-month timeframe.

Under Wye, Israel was to withdraw from 13.1 per cent of the West Bank in three stages between November 1998 and January 1999. Barak's hard-line predecessor, Benjamin Netanyahu, suspended the accord after the first pullback, charging the Palestinians had reneged on their security commitments.

Barak has said he would resume implementation, but would like to fold parts of Wye into negotiations on a final

peace agreement. Barak feels that implementing the third stage of Wye would unnecessarily delay talks on a peace treaty.

The Palestinians want to control as much West Bank land as possible before heading into so-called final status negotiations. Once Wye is implemented in full, they would have full or partial control of 40 per cent of the land.

Barak's security adviser, Danny Yatom, told Israel TV's Channel 2 on Friday that Barak would suggest in his meeting with Arafat to combine the last part of the Wye accord with talks on a final peace treaty "to increase the chances of arriving at a permanent solution." The Wye accord "is not the final goal," he said.

Barak has said he would implement Wye fully if Arafat does not agree to the changes.

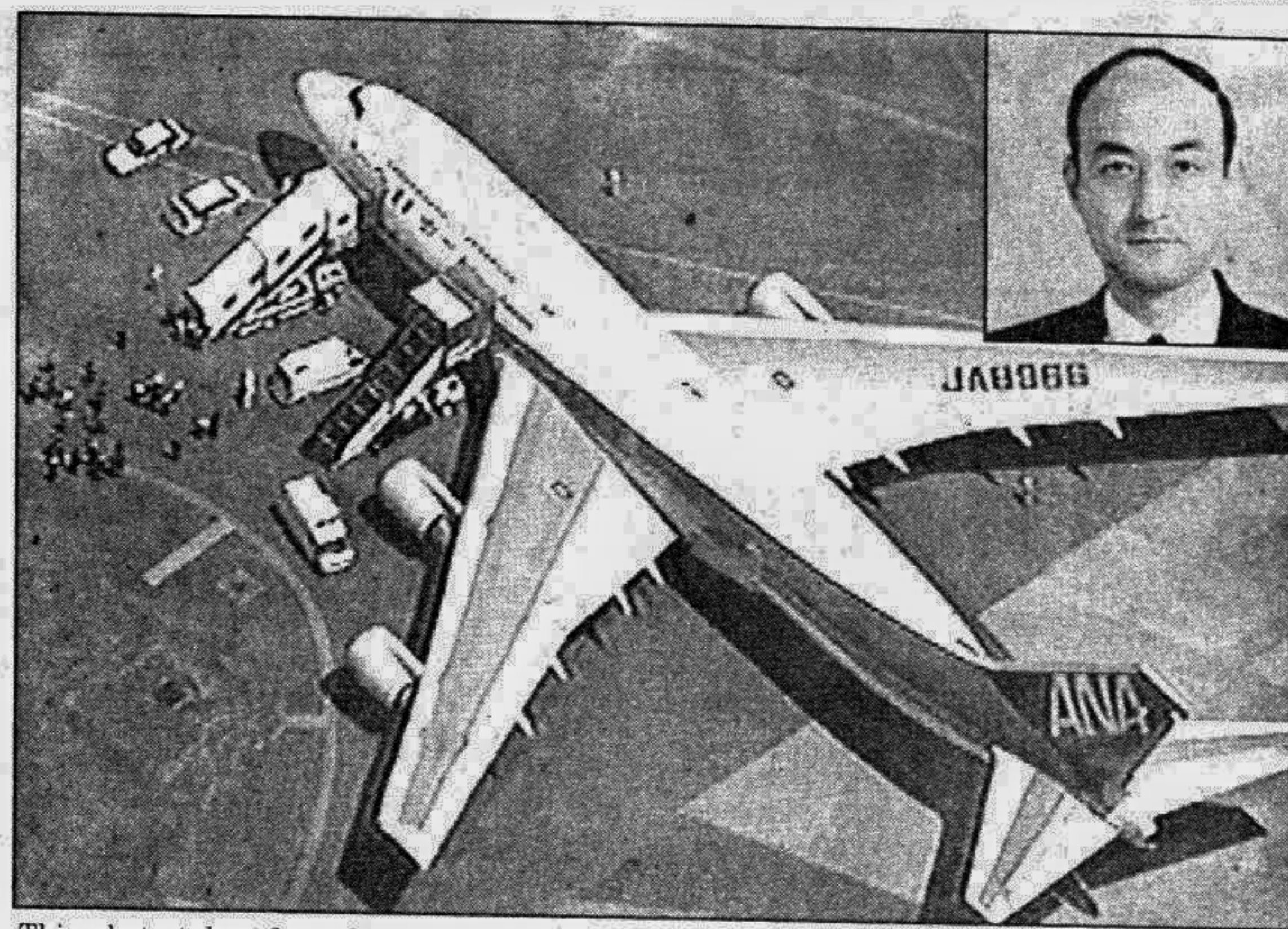
The Barak-Arafat meeting will be their second since Barak took office July 6. Barak re-

turned from talks in Washington and London on Tuesday. He plans to fly to Egypt on Sunday to meet President Hosni Mubarak. Yatom said Barak would also see Jordan's King Abdullah II soon. He met the three leaders before leaving for Washington.

Barak has set a goal of completing peace talks with the Palestinians and Syria within 15 months, restarting a process frozen under Netanyahu. Barak defeated Netanyahu in the May 17 election.

Addressing Cabinet ministers from his One Israel party, Barak warned that peace negotiations would be difficult. He said the process would not be a walk in the park, but rather, rafting down the Colorado River, Israel radio reported.

Barak also complained about statements from ministers about releasing Palestinian prisoners.



This photo taken from Japanese television shows a hijacked Boeing 747-400 of Japan's All Nippon Airways Co. Ltd (ANA), carrying 503 passengers and 14 crew, sitting on a runway just after it landed at Nanded Airport in Tokyo yesterday. The pilot (inset) was stabbed to death while overpowering a knife-wielding hijacker. Story on Page 1 — AFP photo

Serbian opposition united to oust Milosevic

VIENNA, July 23: Serbian opposition parties today urged international financial help for the democratic cities of Serbia and said they were sufficiently united to oust Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic by the autumn, reports Reuters.

"We have agreed to coordinate our street demonstrations and I believe that the last bloody dictatorship of this century could be destroyed by the autumn," Nenad Canak, head of the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina, told reporters.

"If he (Milosevic) remains any longer he will stand on his feet again and all our efforts will be useless. In November, the one who will have a loaf of bread and a finger on electricity will rule Serbia," Canak said during a two-day meeting of European socialist leaders in Vienna.

Opposition attempts to remove Milosevic have been hampered by infighting be-

tween the 30-party Alliance for Change movement and the Serbian Renewal Movement of former Yugoslav Deputy Prime Minister Vuk Draskovic.

Vuk Obradovic, president of the Social Democratic Party — an Alliance for Change member — said the opposition would continue to hold two or three street protests per week, moving closer to Belgrade as long as Milosevic remained in power.

He said the opposition wanted Serbian President Milan Milutinovic, as well as Milosevic, to resign. An interim government of technocrats should then be installed.

The new government would be charged with arranging democratic elections in Serbia and Yugoslavia within a year.

"We have not talked about leaders (of the new government) yet but we at the Alliance for Change believe Dragoslav Avramovic could be a unifying personality," Obradovic said.

Indian politician, 7 Islamic militants killed in Kashmir

Border to be manned 24-hour: Fernandes

SRINAGAR, India, July 23: An Indian opposition activist and seven Islamic mercenaries were killed Thursday in the troubled Himalayan state of Kashmir, the police said, reports AP.

Habibullah Wani, a local Muslim leader of India's main opposition Congress party, was shot dead by suspected Muslim guerrillas in a crowded street in this summer capital of Kashmir, a police spokesman said.

The killing sparked panic in the area, where traders hastily closed down their shops.

Indian security forces, meanwhile, gunned down three foreign Muslim militants in a gunbattle at Uri, 110 kilometre north of here, the spokesman said.

The nationality of the dead was not immediately known. Many Islamic guerrillas from Pakistan and Afghanistan are known to be fighting on the side

of local militants in Kashmir.

Another four militants were shot dead following a major police search operation through a forest in bandipur district, some 60 kilometre north of Srinagar.

More than 24,000 people have died in a Muslim separatist drive raging since 1989 in Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state.

Meanwhile, Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes on Thursday said the disputed Kashmir border with Pakistan would be manned round the year along with electronic surveillance to prevent another conflict.

Trust of India after a trip to Kashmir, where Indian troops and Pakistan-backed guerrillas fought for 10 weeks after hundreds of intruders occupied key Indian peaks, that the frontier would be manned all the time.

"Of course, (the border) needs to be manned round the year. We must take quick steps to make the entire area secure as Pakistan has demonstrated its betrayal of trust," he said.

A comprehensive plan is expected to be finalised in the next two months for permanent manning of the Line of Control (the official name of the border) and surveillance through satellites and electronic gadgets," he said.

Fernandes conceded that the latest conflict in Kashmir, which follows three Indo-Pakistani wars, was almost a "full-scale" battle.

"We came close to a full-scale war but the other side was aware that another adventure would be giving them a bloodier nose," he said.

The minister said vast stretches of the border were unmanned since the last India-Pakistan war in 1971.

Islamic party prepares for huge rally against Sharif

LAHORE, Pakistan, July 23: Pakistan's leading Islamic party Friday geared up for a massive march to condemn Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's "treacherous retreat" from Kashmir, reports AP.

Hundreds of Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) zealots in vehicles fitted with loudspeakers roamed the streets blaring appeals for people to participate in Sunday's rally which has been billed as "a million-man march."

Caravans of Jamaat workers from different parts of the country's largest Punjab province poured into the provincial capital which is awash with posters hailing the "liberation" movement in India-held Kashmir.

Militant groups whose fighters have been battling Indian forces in Kashmir will also take part in the march.

"The rally will mark people's indictment of Sharif for the

treacherous retreat from Kashmir under a conspiracy hatched by the United States," JI Secretary General Munnawar Hasan told AFP.

The Jamaat has bitterly opposed Sharif's July 4 agreement with US President Bill Clinton in Washington leading to the withdrawal of Pakistan-backed guerrillas from strategic peaks in Indian Kashmir.

Other religious parties as well as militant groups involved in the Kashmir jihad (holy war) have also denounced the accord that ended two months of military confrontation between Pakistan and India.

The JI leader said the pullout of the mujahideen, or freedom fighters, from the Kargil peaks was an "act of treason" by Sharif.

The rally would be kept peaceful, he said, but warned of retaliation if the government "tries to disrupt" it.

"We are confident the protest will draw an unprecedented crowd in Lahore," Hasan said.

Police officials, recalling the violent protests staged by the Islamic party when Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's visited Lahore in February, said extensive security arrangements had been made to maintain peace during Sunday's rally.

"We have sought assurances from the Jamaat-i-Islami to control their workers," said a senior police official, Malik Mohammad Iqbal, warning any violence would be severely dealt with.

According to the programme, people will gather at the city's Nasir Bagh ground in the afternoon. Later the crowd will march several kilometers to the provincial assembly where JI chief Qazi Hussain Ahmed will deliver his key address.

Space shuttle Columbia blasts off

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla., July 23: The space shuttle Columbia roared into space and into history early today, carrying the first female space commander, Eileen Collins, reports Reuters.

Columbia blasted off at 12:31 am EDT (0431 GMT), with Collins, 42, at the helm, after two earlier launch attempts were halted late in the countdown — Tuesday because of a technical glitch and Thursday because of stormy weather.

"And we have a liftoff, reaching new heights for women and astronomy," said Lisa Malone, launch commentator at the Kennedy Space centre on Florida's Atlantic coast as Columbia blasted into space amid billows of smoke and flames.

With the shuttle racing into orbit at over 8,000 mph (13,000 kph), Collins was in charge of the shuttle from her post in the forward portside seat of the flight deck — the commander's seat, always occupied by men on past launches.

NASA took 38 years to put a woman in charge of a space flight. The Soviet Union launched a woman, Valentina Tereshkova, into orbit aboard a one-person Vostok spacecraft in 1963, but she was not allowed to take the controls, as male cosmonauts were.

About five seconds after launch, mission controllers detected a brief drop in voltage that seemed to indicate a loss of power to one of the shuttle's three main engines. But it did not affect Columbia's flight.

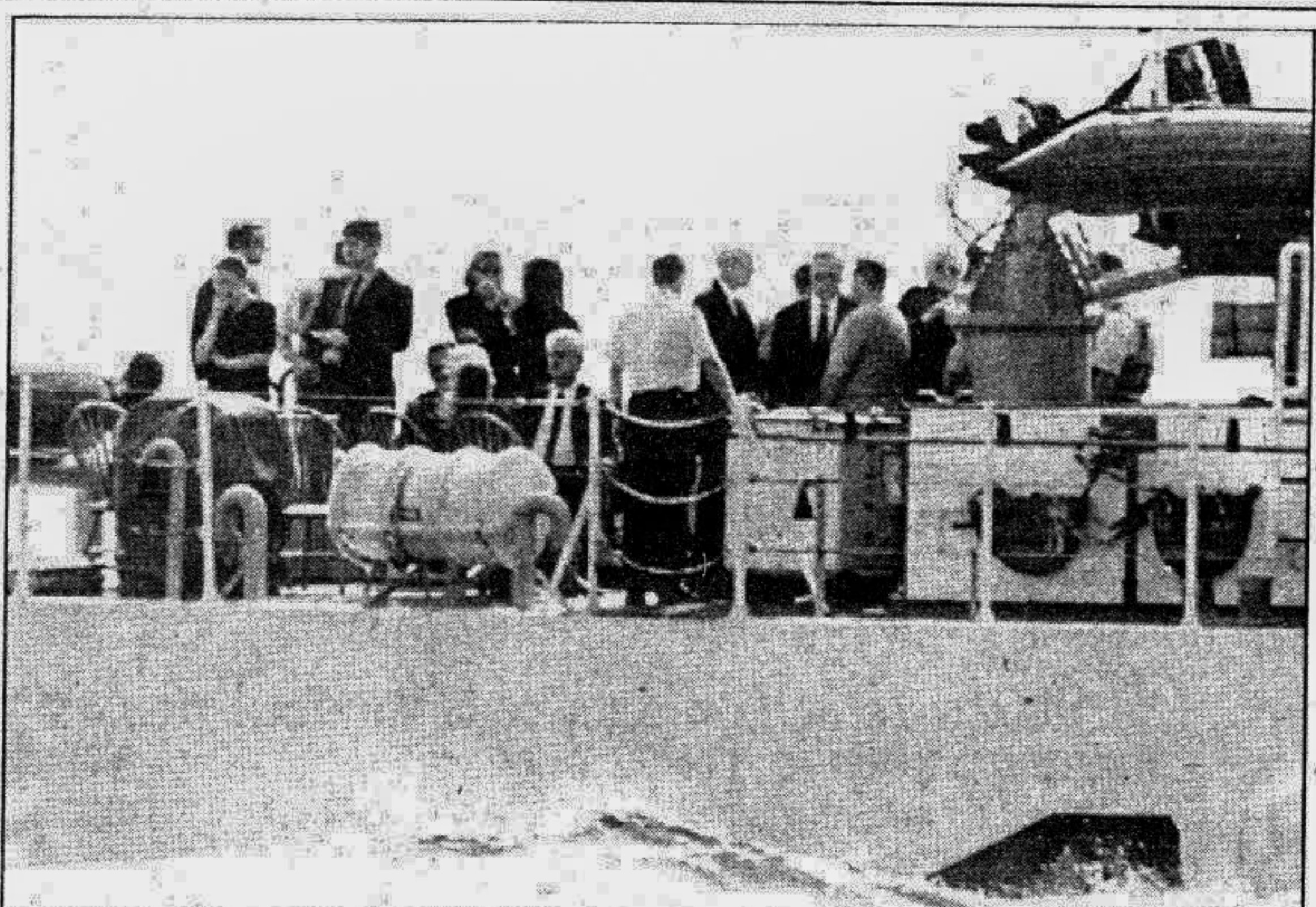
"All three engines performed as they normally would," said NASA spokesman Kyle Herring. The crew performed a quick systems check once it was in orbit and determined all circuit breakers were in the proper position.

"It's great to be back in zero-G," Collins called to earth from the zero-gravity environment of the crew cabin.

Collins was joined in the crew cabin by pilot Jeffrey Ashby and mission specialists Steven Hawley, Cady Coleman and Michel Tognini, a French astronaut.

Their mission is to launch the four-story Chandra X-Ray Observatory from Columbia's cargo bay about seven hours into the mission. The 1.5 billion-dollar, 50,000-pound (23,000-kg) science satellite and its two-stage booster rocket are the heaviest payload ever put aboard a shuttle.

As commander, Collins will lead the shuttle during critical manoeuvres and land it like an airplane when it returns to Earth.



Senator Edward Kennedy (R) and other members of the Kennedy family are taken to the Navy Destroyer USS Briscoe aboard the Coast Guard vessel Sanibel on Thursday off Woods Hole, MA. The family spread the ashes of John Kennedy Jr., his wife Carolyn Bessette Kennedy and her sister Lauren Bessette into the sea. — AFP photo

Death toll 251 Flood situation grave in Assam, Bihar

NEW DELHI, July 23: The situation in flood-hit Bihar and Assam remained grave today with the overflowing rivers threatening to rise further following fresh rains, even as the toll in the current monsoons rose to 251 with ten more deaths reported from Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Punjab and Assam, reports PTI.

Moderate to heavy rains in Uttar Pradesh claimed four lives, two each in Pithoragarh and Barabanki, while a youth drowned in Siwan river in Punjab where Satluj river crossed the danger mark at Anandpur Sahib, flooding low lying villages.

Four deaths were also reported from Gujarat's Broach, Kheda and Baroda districts.

One person was washed away by swirling water in worst hit Dhenjli district of Assam where about 800 villages in ten districts have been inundated affecting three lakh people.

In Bihar rivers Kamal Balan, Bagmati, Burhi Gandak and Kosi, flowing much above the danger mark, threatened to rise further following torrential rains in their catchment areas in upper Nepal.

The situation in Kathihar and Kishanganj districts worsened with turbulent Mahananda inundating vast countryside following seepage in its eastern embankment.

Floods have taken a toll of 108 in Bihar and two Assam, while 41 people have died in heavy rains in Maharashtra 34 in Gujarat, 17 each in Kerala and Karnataka, 16 in West Bengal, four in Himachal Pradesh, seven in Uttar Pradesh and one each in Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab.

Syria demands full return of Golan

DAMASCUS, July 23: Syria gave only a guarded welcome Friday to Israel's agreement to resume peace talks where they left off in 1996, insisting that it would accept nothing less than the full return of the Golan Heights, reports AP.

The peace demanded by Syria is based on UN resolutions and on the principle of an exchange of land for peace, which means an Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 lines," Vice President Zohair Masharqa said.

"Syria will move toward peace as much as the Israeli government while maintaining a policy which ensures the restoration of its rights and the return of every inch of its occupied territory," he told the official SANA news agency.

His comments followed an announcement late Thursday by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's top advisor that he was ready to accept what his hard-line predecessor Benjamin Netanyahu had always refused and resume the talks where they broke off.

But security advisor Danny Yatom made clear there were still differences between the two sides over what exactly was agreed when the negotiations came to a halt.

"We are not opposed to the Syrian demand to resume negotiations at the point they broke off, but that point is a matter for interpretation," he said. Damascus says Israel's then Labour government gave an undertaking in principle to withdraw from the Golan Heights, which Israel occupied in the 1967 Middle East war and annexed in 1981.

An editorial in the Syrian ruling party daily Al-Baath Friday was also cautiously optimistic, saying that "what was

announced yesterday is certainly a positive sign."

But it warned that "the important thing is that Israel undertakes to implement UN resolutions dealing with the occupied territories and a withdrawal to the borders of June 4, 1967 as the essential condition for peace."

Without the return of territory, peace will be impossible," said the government daily Ath-Thawrah.

It added that an agreement would also involve "full reciprocity in matters of security," referring to Israeli demands for Syrian forces to pull back from the border and for early-warning stations in the Golan.

Syrian state radio said, "the way is open to a relaunch of Syria-Israel negotiations" following Yatom's comments. It said that negotiations with Syria and Lebanon "must be undertaken simultaneously" but warned that they would be "difficult and will take time and effort."

The radio insisted that Israel had already agreed to a full withdrawal from the Golan in the last round of talks in the United States but warned that this undertaking had only been secured "after tough negotiations."

It said a comprehensive agreement could be reached if Israeli intentions were "good," stressing that "the Arabs just want their lands and their rights restored."

Barak aides have indicated in private that the new Israeli premier is not prepared to give in to Syrian demands and return the whole of the strategic plateau.

"Syrians will not go swimming in the Sea of Galilee," an aide told AFP in Washington.

US House okays \$266b defence budget

WASHINGTON, July 23: The House approved a 266 billion dollar defence budget Thursday without money to buy the next generation of stealth fighter jets that the Air Force considers critical to future US air superiority, reports AP.

Representative Bob Barr, a Republican, withdrew an amendment that would have restored 1.8 billion dollars for the F-22 Raptor after leading a parade of House members in support of the radar-evading aircraft.

Deleting the money because of concern over rising F-22 cost gives the House leverage in its negotiations with the Senate over the final defence budget. Senator John Warner, a Republican and chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said Wednesday he would seek a compromise on F-22 funding to continue the programme.

Representative Jerry Lewis, a Republican and chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee that first cut the F-22 money, promised the carefully consider the funding in conference with the Senate, where the F-22 has strong support.

"At the end of the day, we will do everything that is necessary to make certain there is no nation that will threaten us in tactical air (capability) in the future," Lewis promised.

With little debate on major provisions of the defence bill, the House voted 379-45 to approve it.

A House Appropriations Committee report says the military appears unable to control the F-22's rising costs and can maintain a 5-1 advanced fighter advantage through 2010 without it.

Falungong founder warns of bloodshed

WASHINGTON, July 23: The founder of a mystical group banned by the Chinese government warned Friday of the prospect of bloody clashes to rival those at a pro-democracy protest in Tiananmen Square a decade ago, reports AP.

The warning from Li Hongzhi, the New York-based founder of the Falungong group, came as thousands of the group's followers were released from makeshift detention at two stadiums in Beijing.

Li, whose movement claims up to 100 million followers, told AFP: "I am also concerned that the Chinese practitioners will be more severely persecuted... I am deeply worried that another June 4 bloodshed will take place."

He was alluding to the June 1989 military crackdown on

pro-democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square.

"I am shocked by the Chinese approach to the people who practice Falungong, and it is extremely incomprehensible," Li said in a written statement received here late Thursday.

His comments preceded the release of thousands of Falungong members who were penned in by police at the Shijingshan and Fengtai stadiums in Beijing, witnesses said.

Beijing, meanwhile, continued Friday with its nationwide propaganda campaign against the group that was banned Thursday.

Chinese officials said that most of the Falungong followers who travelled to Beijing to protest a government ban had been sent home after receiving education.

Off the Record

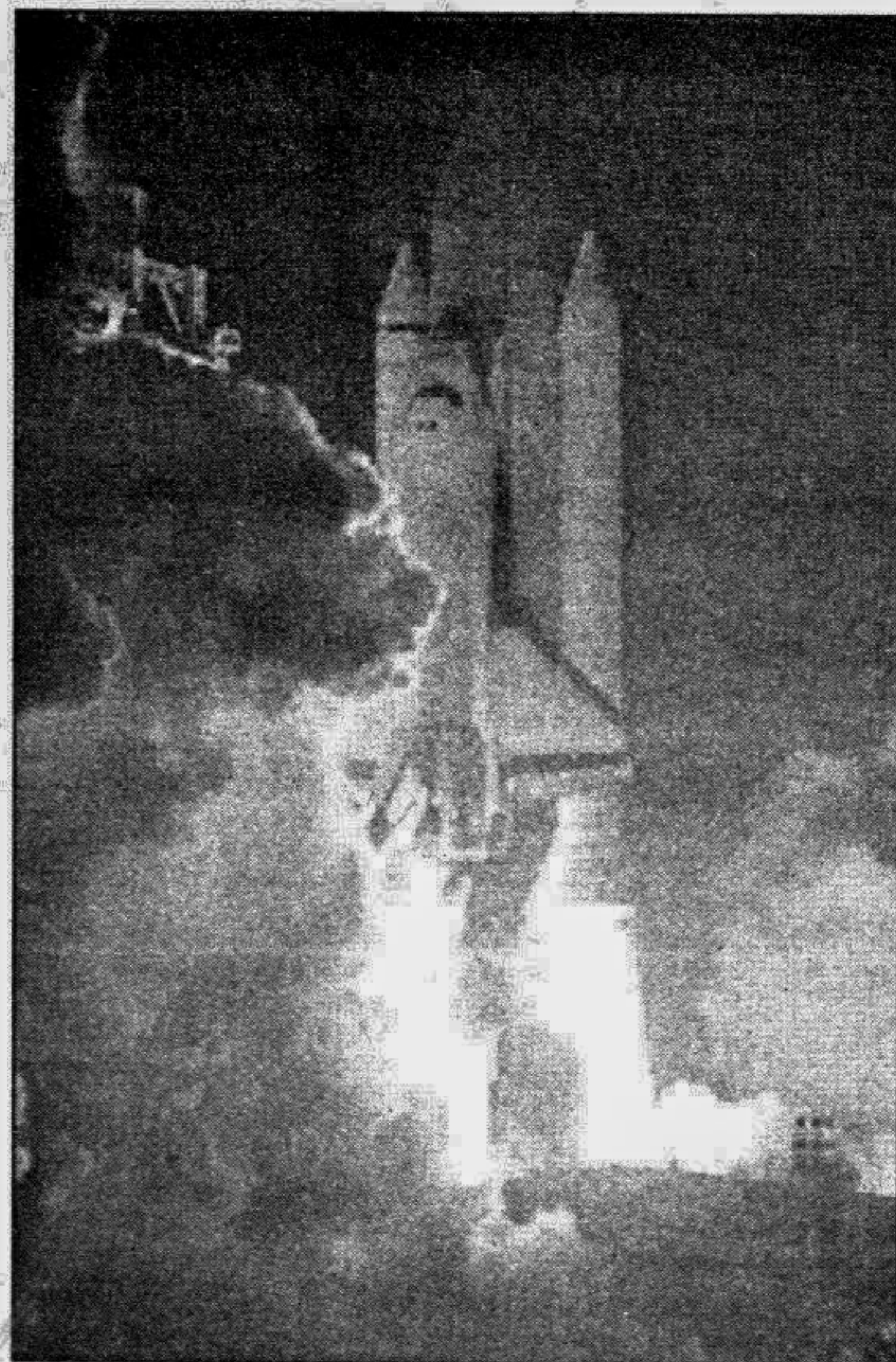
A lesson for husbands

MEXICO CITY: Some Mexican housewives went on strike Thursday, forcing their husbands — many for the first time in their lives — to cook meals, do laundry and wash dishes, reports AP.

The 24-hour strike was arranged by the Programme for Equal Participation of Women, a Mexico City government agency, "to draw attention to the fact that housework benefits the entire family and society as a whole," said director Gabriela Delgado Ballester.

Studies conducted by the Programme for Equal Participation of Women show Mexican men are less likely to share the burden of housework than men from most other Latin American countries, despite the fact that a growing number of Mexican women now work outside the home.

It was not known exactly how many women participated in the daylong work stoppage, but more than 100 women attended government-sponsored forums, concerts and plays Thursday at the organisation's 16 community centers located throughout the city, organisers said.



The space shuttle Columbia, with the first female mission commander aboard, climbs through an exhaust cloud as it blasts off launch pad 39-B at the Kennedy Space Center yesterday. — AFP photo