

BRIEFLY

Grenade found outside US Embassy: A grenade was found outside the US embassy in Jakarta but was defused, an embassy spokesman said yesterday. Reuters reports from Jakarta.

The grenade was found outside the embassy compound late on Tuesday night, acting spokesman Karl Stoltz told Reuters. "It was about 10 O'clock last night, in front of the embassy, not within the embassy," Stoltz said, adding that police were informed and a bomb squad defused the device.

7 killed in Manila restaurant: Seven people were slain when a gang shot and robbed their way through a restaurant, a gasoline station and a convenience store in northern Manila before dawn yesterday, Philippine police said, AFP reports from Manila.

The dead were all staff or customers in the establishments, including an off-duty cameraman for government television named Elmer Duque.

Saudi FM visits Libya: Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal whose country helped work out a compromise on the Lockerbie affair, arrived in Tripoli on Tuesday, Libyan state television reported, AFP says from Tripoli.

Prince Saud said he planned to "follow up on issues discussed" during a visit to Tripoli at the beginning of June by Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz.

120 killed in fresh clash in Nigeria

Lagos, July 28: At least 120 people have been killed in fighting which broke out Monday between two feuding communities in eastern Nigeria, reports in two newspapers said Wednesday, reports AFP.

The fighting involved residents of the Aguleri and Umuleri communities in eastern Anambra state, said the reports in the state-run Daily Times and the independent Vanguard newspaper.

The reports were not immediately confirmed.

A police official in Anambra State Police Command contacted by AFP by telephone in the state capital Awka declined to comment immediately, pending a report on the situation.

The reports follow separate communal clashes in southern and northern Nigeria in the past ten days that have left more than 100 people dead.

The Daily Times newspaper quoted a witness as saying that bodies littered the streets of the town of Otuocho.

Fighting had begun early Monday and automatic gunfire was heard in the area of Otuocho late Tuesday, he told the paper.

Dozens of people died in April this year when fighting last erupted between the two communities in continuation of an arcane 86-year-old dispute over control of a patch of land.

India, China ready to sign protocol for N-free SE Asia

SINGAPORE, July 28: South-east Asian nations ended three days of talks with their key overseas partners Wednesday after winning pledges from both India and China to observe a regional nuclear-weapon free zone, reports AP.

The pledges were a victory for the Association of South-east Asian Nations, which has been trying to convince nuclear powers to recognise the zone once it is established.

During the next year, 10 countries will look at moving from confidence-building to preventive diplomacy to deal with disputes among its members, Thailand's Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan, the new ASEAN chairman, told a closing news conference.

He said a "major priority" will be completion of a code of conduct to manage conflicting territorial claims over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Four ASEAN nations, plus China and Taiwan, claim portions of the islands.

Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan said China would "associate itself" with the code process "when the time comes," said Surin, announcing that the next ASEAN meetings would be held July 24-29 in Bangkok.

Tang pledged on Tuesday that China would sign the nuclear-weapon free zone protocol. ASEAN convened a commission on Saturday create the zone under a treaty ratified in 1997 to prevent development, manufacture or control of nuclear weapons in the zone.

The ministers discussed cross-border problems such as pollution, drug smuggling, sex slavery, and the millennium computer bug, as well as the nuclear-weapon free protocol.

"India is fully committed and is ready to sign the protocol," Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said Wednesday

after meeting with the South-east Asian foreign ministers. ASEAN also asked Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov Wednesday to sign the protocol, but he said there were still "some issues we have to clarify" about the commitments.

"Otherwise, we are prepared to support the treaty," he said. Ivanov also proposed that Russia and ASEAN set up a barter trade mechanism to avoid foreign currency problems.

Both Russia and ASEAN

have been ravaged by plunges in their currencies. In Asia, rapid currency declines two years ago triggered the region's worst recession in decades and dragged millions of people back into poverty.

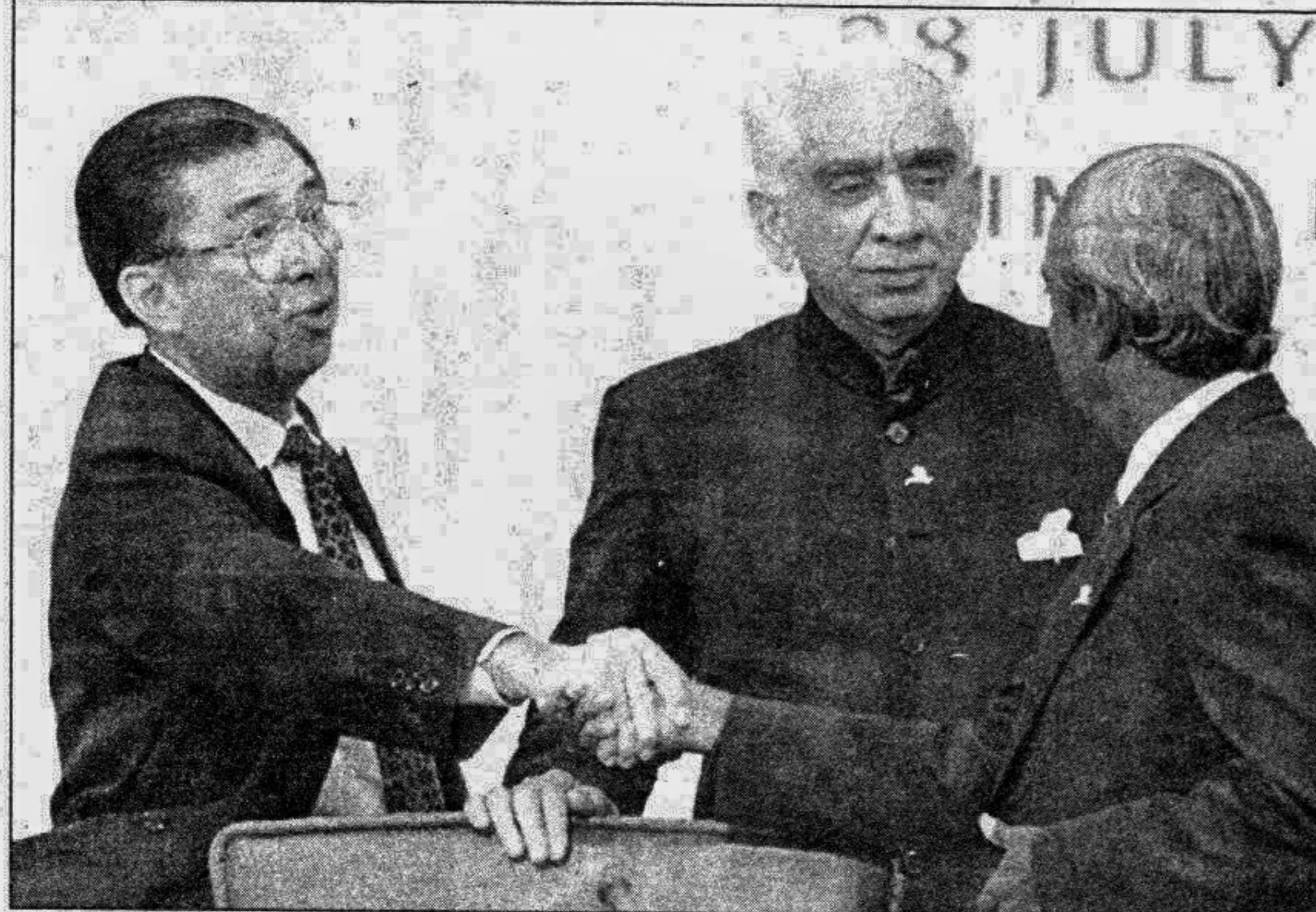
"At this meeting, in discussion on the economic crisis, there was a strong mood of optimism," said the host, Singapore Foreign Minister Shanmugam Jayakumar.

ASEAN foreign ministers meet each year for several days with their key "dialogue part-

ners," the United States, Russia, China, Japan, Australia, Canada, the European Union, South Korea, India, New Zealand and Mongolia.

The meetings attempted to bypass thorny issues such as the crisis between China and Taiwan over Taipei's recent claim of equal statehood.

But Tang warned other nations of the possibility of armed conflict if they interfere in what he said was a domestic matter.



Philippine Foreign Ministers Domingo Siazon (L) and his Indian counterpart Jaswant Singh (C) bid farewell to their Singaporean counterpart S. Jayakumar at the end of the ASEAN foreign ministerial meeting yesterday. — AFP photo

US replaces NATO commander Clark

TOKYO, July 28: The United States is replacing NATO commander General Wesley Clark, US Defence Secretary William Cohen said here Wednesday, insisting however he was satisfied with his performance, reports AFP.

Clark, NATO's top commander in Europe, would be succeeded by General Joseph Ralston, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Cohen told a news conference here.

But Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon denied a Washington Post report that Clark was being replaced next April in the light of tension with NATO's war against Yugoslavia. "Absolutely not," said Bacon, who was visiting Japan with Cohen.

It was "very clear" on the part of Cohen and US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Hugh Shelton "that he performed extremely well in his job during a very demanding time," said the Pentagon spokesman.

Clark, a 54-year-old Vietnam War combat veteran who took the prestigious NATO job in July 1997, was simply leaving towards the end of his three-year tenure in the job, he said.

General Clark's departure ahead of the end of his three-year term was because of "time pressures" next year relating to his successor, the US defence secretary said.

Ralston's current term would expire in February and he could only be kept on officially for an extra 60 days afterwards, said Cohen.

US, Russia agree new arms talks

WASHINGTON, July 28: Russia and the United States agreed Tuesday to a new round of talks on reducing long-range nuclear weapons in a sign that tensions have eased over the war in Yugoslavia, reports AFP.

Vice President Al Gore and Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin announced the decision after the regular meeting on US-Russian economic and scientific cooperation.

"We are expecting some very serious work on these issues, where the teams meet in August," Stepashin said through an interpreter in a joint press conference with Gore.

The Russian Duma has held up the START II agreement, which Washington insists be ratified before moving on to a START III pact on reducing nuclear stockpiles. The United States also wants to alter the

1972 ABM treaty to allow work to begin on an anti-ballistic missile system.

But Gore downplayed expectations for swift progress on the pacts, noting the recent rift with Moscow over the NATO-led strikes against Serbia, Russia's long-time ally.

"The US-Russian relationship has withstood some difficult tests," Gore said.

"Because of the tensions ... you're not going to expect this kind of action in the Duma next week," he said, adding that Washington had set no deadlines for the negotiations.

But he added that he was now "more optimistic about our ability to reach agreement on both issues."

Stepashin acknowledged that there had been "some cooling over Kosovo" so this was a very important move towards the arms negotiations.

Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan -- the four former Soviet republics that inherited nuclear weapons -- have all ratified the ABM treaty.

The treaty limits the capacities of the signatories' anti-missile systems, in order to discourage an arms race and the temptation for less protected nations to launch a preventative nuclear strike.

Under the 1993 START II agreement, the United States and Russia would reduce their arsenals of long-range nuclear warheads to between 3,000 to 3,500. Under START III, arsenals would be cut to 2,000 to 2,500 warheads each.

Stepashin also met briefly with US President Bill Clinton to discuss issues ranging from arms proliferation to the struggling Russian economy to the upcoming summit on recon-

struction for the war-torn Balkans.

US concerns about Russia's arms proliferation were raised earlier this month amid reports that Russia may revive arm sales to Syria.

And Russia protested Monday that plans to set up a US-Japan anti-ballistic missile defence system would undermine the balance of forces in Asia and spark a regional arms race.

Washington and Tokyo are planning to bolster security ties with a project to establish an early warning system against ballistic missile attacks.

But Stepashin's primary aim here is to build confidence in Russia's struggling economy to attract US investors and win approval for a 4.5 billion dollar credit line to Russia from the International Monetary Fund.

Special UN mission to visit Myanmar

SINGAPORE, July 28: Myanmar Foreign Minister Win Aung confirmed here Wednesday that a special United Nations mission will soon visit his country, but said it was still unclear whether the World Bank will join the mission, reports AFP.

Win Aung, speaking at the end of annual talks between Southeast Asia and its key partners, gave no specific dates but appeared to confirm that the mission led by senior envoy Awarde Soto would arrive in September.

Asked if Myanmar had agreed to a definite date for a UN and World Bank mission in September, he said: "We have planned this trip a long time ago and because of the convenience of the dates of the timing to visit our country ... there will be a visit," he said.

"Whether someone from the World Bank will be accompanying De Soto or not is the decision of the World Bank and the United Nations," he said.

"If so and when they come, of course we will discuss about the possibilities in many fields," he said.

In July, a four-man team representing Finland, Portugal, the EU secretariat and the European Commission travelled to Yangon to hold sensitive talks with powerful junta First Secretary Khin Nyunt, and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

In Wednesday's news conference, the Myanmar minister laid down conditions for cooperation with Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel peace prize winner and daughter of Myanmar's independence hero Aung San.

Taliban launch offensive

KABUL, July 28: The hard-line Islamic Taliban Wednesday launched its much-anticipated summer offensive aimed at defeating Afghanistan's Northern Alliance and opposition commander Ahmad Shah Masood, reports AFP.

Taliban authorities, the alliance and independent sources confirmed the offensive began about 4am local time (2400 GMT) with infantry assaults across four front lines which ring the Panjshir Valley.

Later Wednesday, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) reported from Islamabad the Taliban had captured two areas in Kapisa province northeast of Kabul.

The AIP quoted unnamed Taliban officials as saying the Islamic militia had taken Tagab and Najrab in Kapisa and was now attacking the provincial centre of Mahmoud-i-Raqi.

Fifteen tanks and a sizeable quantity of ammunition had been seized by the militia at Tagab, the officials told the agency, adding militia had also launched an attack for the Bagram airbase.

No independent confirmation of the Taliban claim was immediately available.

Kapisa is adjacent to the Panjshir valley, a heavily fortified stronghold of Northern Alliance commander Masood.

Wednesday's assaults were supported by heavy artillery barrages and aerial bombardments by the militia's fleet of Russian-made MiGs.

The opposition said heavy fighting was also reported from frontlines at the Old and New Roads outside of Kabul.

The Old and New Roads are about 25 kilometres (12 miles) north of Kabul.

N Korea accuses Japan of planning to invade

TOKYO, July 28: North Korea has sent a letter to Japan's Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi accusing Tokyo of preparing to invade and demanding that it apologise for its past wartime aggression, reports Reuters.

Japan, far from apologising and compensating for the past wrongdoings, is sharpening its sword to reinstate Korea, while going ahead with its extremely provocative anti-DPRK (North Korea) moves including "preemptive attack," the official Korean Central News Agency quoted the letter as saying.

It added that copies of the letter, signed by a private group called "The Korean Measure Committee for Demanding Compensation to Comfort Women for the Army and the Victims of the Pacific War",

were also sent to Japan's foreign minister and chief government spokesman.

Japan and North Korea have no diplomatic relations.

"The letters strongly urged the Japanese authorities to compulsively investigate and open to the public the truth behind the human loss and material damage inflicted on the Korean people as soon as possible, punish those responsible for them and make state apology and compensation for them," KCNA said.

News of the letter, which Japanese officials said had not yet arrived, comes as US Defence Secretary William Cohen is in Tokyo for talks focusing on fears that Pyongyang is poised to launch a new long-range missile.

Space shuttle Columbia returns to earth

WASHINGTON, July 28: The space shuttle Columbia returned to earth late Tuesday after deploying an orbiting X-ray telescope that will scrutinise some of the most violent forces in the universe, reports AFP.

After a five-day mission, Columbia touched down at the Kennedy Space Centre in Cape Canaveral, Florida at 11:20 p.m. (0320 GMT Wednesday) with its first female commander, Eileen Collins, at the helm.

After concerns generated by two mechanical problems during take-off last Friday, the shuttle landed without incident, easing into the docking station after deploying a parachute to brake its speed.

It was the 12th night landing by a US space shuttle.

During the mission, the five-member crew successfully launched the 1.5-billion-dollar Chandra telescope, which will examine the most powerful sources of X-rays in the universe, including black holes, colliding galaxies and the remains of supernovae.

The observatory, which was released from Columbia's cargo bay last Friday, will float in space for five years.

Over the coming weeks,

Chandra's integral propulsion system will move the observatory to an operating orbit of some 10,000 kilometres (6,800 miles) by 140,000 kilometres (86,966 miles).

While in space, Columbia astronauts carried out a series of secondary manoeuvres, ranging from experiments in plant growing in space to astronomy assignments.

Astrophysicist Steven Hawley observed celestial bodies such as Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and the Moon with the smaller Southwest Ultraviolet Imaging System (SUIS) telescope.

Now that Columbia is back on Earth, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration plans to look into what may have caused several technical glitches.

With the combined weight of the shuttle and the telescope totalling some 2,000 tonnes, the spacecraft was unable to reach its targeted altitude after take-off.

The shuttle will now be transported to California for renovation and will stay put until 2001.

Columbia, one of the oldest US space shuttles, embarked on its first space flight in 1981.



NASA Administrator Danial Goldin (L) talks with space shuttle Columbia Commander Eileen Collins (R) on runway 33 at Kennedy Space Center, Cape Canaveral, Florida yesterday after Collins landed the shuttle with the rest of her four-person crew. The Columbia and her five crew members returned from a five-day science mission in space that included the release of the Chandra X-Ray Observatory. — AFP photo

Barak, Arafat agree to review changes to Wye accord

EREZ CROSSING, Gaza Strip, July 28: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat agreed here Tuesday to take two weeks to study possible changes to the Wye River land-for-security agreement, reports AFP.

Barak, speaking at a press conference with Arafat, said the Palestinian leader had agreed to respond within two weeks to an Israeli request to modify the accord, which calls for further Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank.

Asked what will happen if the Palestinian leader rejects the Israeli request, Barak said: "I told him our position is implementing agreements, including Wye, honestly and accurately."

Arafat, while agreeing to the two-week request, reiterated that he wanted full implementation of the US-brokered Wye accord, which was signed in October and negotiated by Barak's predecessor as prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu.

"I asked Mr. Barak to start immediately implementing Wye," Arafat said, noting that it called for Israel to release Palestinian prisoners, carry out further redeployments from the West Bank and create a "safe passage" corridor for Palestinians between the West Bank and

Gaza Strip.

Netanyahu carried out the first of the withdrawals called for under Wye and released some prisoners but then froze further implementation, accusing the Palestinians of failing to live up to their security end of the bargain.

Arafat said an Israeli-Palestinian joint committee would meet starting Wednesday or Thursday to discuss Barak's proposals, which were not spelled out in detail.

"On our side we are committed to our commitments, including the security commitments," Arafat added following two hours of talks with Barak at an Israeli military base at this crossing point between Israel and the Gaza Strip.

"We will continue our policy of zero tolerance to terror and violence," the Palestinian leader said.

Arafat also said he had asked Barak to end to further Jewish settlement "so we can resume the final status negotiations" on such questions as the borders of the Palestinian entity, refugees and the status of Jerusalem.

A smiling Barak and Arafat shook hands warmly for the television cameras as they arrived here for their third meeting since Barak took office on July 7.



Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat (R) shakes hands with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak before their meeting at the Erez crossing point on Tuesday. — AFP photo

Experts destroys nerve gas in Iraq

BAGHDAD, July 28: A team of international experts wound up a mission here Wednesday by destroying vials of lethal VX nerve gas and Iraq charged the samples were only eliminated to clear UN arms inspectors of fraud accusations, reports AFP.

After several days of wrangling, the UN Security Council agreed Tuesday to destroy the VX abandoned in Baghdad by the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) in charge of disarming Iraq.

The independent experts from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague left the Iraqi capital after an overnight operation to destroy vials containing the VX samples, a UN official said.

A diplomatic source told AFP that diplomats from China, France and Russia observed the operation which lasted several hours.

UK to ban foreign donations to political parties

LONDON, July 27: British political parties are to be banned from receiving donations from foreign companies and individuals who are not registered voters in Britain, the government announced in Parliament on Tuesday, reports AP.

The draft bill follows a series of disputes over parties — mainly the opposition Conservative Party — getting money from wealthy foreigners or tax exiles.

At the center of the latest controversy is the Conservatives' treasurer, Michael Ashcroft, who lives in Florida and amassed a fortune in Belize, a former British colony in South America.

Ashcroft, a major Tory donor is suing The Times of London for alleging that he has been monitored by the US Drug Enforcement Agency over pos-

sible links to drug runners. A lawmaker later repeated the allegations in Parliament.

"For too long, public confidence in the political system has been undermined by the absence of clear, fair and open statutory controls on how political parties are funded," Home Secretary Jack Straw told the House of Commons.

The bill is likely to become law later this year because Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party government has a huge majority in the Commons.

The bill also envisages a 20-million pound (dls 32 million) limit on spending by political parties in the campaigns before national elections, and compulsory disclosure of political donations over 5,000 pounds (dls 8,000).

At May 1997 national elections, Labour spent 26 million pounds (dls 41.6 million) and the Conservatives 27 million

pounds (dls 43.2 million) — low by US standards because political parties cannot buy TV and radio time.

Traditionally, the Conservatives have long relied on big business for funds, while the giant labour unions helped bankroll Labour.

However, corporate donations to the Tories have fallen in the past decade — partly because Blair's New Labour is no longer perceived by many business leaders as a threat.

Straw has denied that the bill is aimed at Ashcroft. But he said it would be a "serious problem" for the Conservatives because of their penchant for secrecy over funding.

A government-appointed inquiry committee last year said the Conservatives acknowledged receiving more than 16 million pounds (dls 27 million) from foreigners between 1992 and 1997.

E Timor vote August 30

DILI, East Timor, July 28: Indonesia's foreign minister Wednesday said the vote on the future of East Timor would be delayed until August 30, as talks opened on how to register 60,000 refugees for the ballot, reports AFP.

Speaking in Singapore, Foreign Minister Ali Alatas said he had been informed by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan of the further postponement of the landmark vote.

"There has been an announcement by the UN Secretary General that the balloting will take place now on Monday, 30th of August," Alatas said after attending meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

"Because registration has started behind schedule, it was delayed, we need some more time. I assume that the registration will also be extended," he said.

The vote had initially been planned for August 8, and was

then postponed until August 20 or 21 amid concerns over security and logistics in the troubled territory invaded by Indonesia in 1975.

East Timorese will get the chance to choose between independence or autonomy under continued Indonesian control.

Annan, who also delayed the start of registration, had earlier said the vote was conditional on Indonesian authorities being able to improve security conditions on Timor, which he said were not good enough for a fair vote.

Jakarta annexed the former Portuguese colony in 1976 in a move never recognised by the United Nations.

UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) chief Ian Martin said he had reached an agreement with jailed pro-independence leader Xanana Gusmao for the armed wing of the pro-independence movement, Falintil, to confine its troops to barracks during the vote.