

## 6 mercenaries killed in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Aug 1: Indian troops shot dead six foreign mercenaries when they sneaked into the Himalayan state of Kashmir from Pakistan, a military spokesman said today, reports AFP.

The mercenaries were killed following a six-hour gunbattle late Saturday in a mountain range close to Kashmir's border with Pakistan, 110 kilometres (68 miles) north of Srinagar. Several other guerrillas managed to escape, the spokesman said.

The nationality of the dead men was not immediately known, but Indian authorities say a large number of mercenaries from Afghanistan and Pakistan are active in Kashmir. Elsewhere in the state, an Indian soldier was killed and seven others were injured in a land mine explosion on Saturday which was blamed on the Muslim separatists.

## Taliban capture opposition's key air base

ISLAMABAD, Afghanistan, Aug 1: The ruling Taliban militia captured the opposition's key air base Sunday and made other advances in its 5-day-old major offensive, officials said, reports AP.

Opposition spokesman Dr Abdullah, who goes by only one name, said the Taliban launched a very large two-pronged attack on the New Road and the Old Road at 3 am local time, capturing Bagram airport. Both sides suffered heavy casualties, and fighting was continuing beyond the airport toward Parwan province, he said. A Taliban official claimed the militia also captured the village of Stalis on another front.

Bagram is the only air base under the control of the opposition forces led by commander Ahmed Shah Masood of the Jamiat-Islami group. Its loss would be a major setback for the northern-based opposition alliance, which controls 10 per cent of the country.

However, the Taliban claim Tajikistan has been allowing the opposition the use of one airport and that Iran was using it to ship supplies.

In addition, the opposition lost Bagram airport for several days during the Taliban's major offensive last year before managing to reclaim it. The capital Kabul was buzzed several times early Sunday by Taliban fighter jets that appeared to be heading toward the front lines. Extensive artillery was audible in the distance.

## Israel lifts ban on Palestinian minister

JERUSALEM, Aug 1: Israel has lifted a three-month-old order banning a Palestinian minister from staying in Jerusalem, the prime minister's office announced today, reports AFP.

Ziad Abu Ziad, who is a minister without portfolio and a representative for Jerusalem in the Palestinian parliament, has been given back his special permit for Palestinian VIPs.

The Israeli authorities issue the permits to enable prominent Palestinians to enter Jerusalem relatively easily by getting through Israeli road blocks cutting the city off from the West Bank.

"The measure has been taken to strengthen trust between Israel and the Palestinian Authority," the office said.

Abu Ziad, who lives in a West Bank village outside the Jerusalem municipal boundaries, had his permit taken away by the previous right wing government of Benjamin Netanyahu, which accused him of conducting "political activities" in Orient House, the Palestinian headquarters in East Jerusalem.

## Crackdown on Iranian students continues

NICOSIA, Aug 1: Iranian police are continuing their crackdown on student protesters three weeks after a campus demonstration sparked the worst unrest there since the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, a leading human rights group said Sunday, reports AFP.

The New York-based Human Rights Watch named 77 people it said had been jailed or had "disappeared" and added that up to 600 people detained during the demonstrations may still be in custody.

The group said at least five students, who disappeared after a meeting on July 23, have not been seen since and are thought to be in detention.

It said one of them, Mehdi Fakhrzadeh, is a member of the Elected Council of Student Protesters, a coordinating body of students across the country.

HRW added that student leaders in Iran believe that between 200 and 600 people, most of them students, who were arrested in last month's clashes, are still being held by the authorities.

Police arrested 1,400 people following the July 9 protest over the closure of a leading pro-reform newspaper, which sparked six days of bloody clashes pitting demonstrators against security forces and Islamic hardliners.

The unrest in Tehran left one person dead and three wounded, according to official figures.

# Arafat seeks reconciliation with PLO rivals ahead of key talks with Israel

CAIRO, Aug 1: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat began mending fences here Sunday with opponents of his peace accord with Israel in a bid to strengthen his negotiating hand ahead of key talks on a permanent settlement, reports AFP.

Arafat warmly greeted Abu Ali Mustafa, the number two of the biggest PLO opposition faction, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, as they made their biggest push for reconciliation since the PFLP rejected the peace process launched in Madrid in 1991.

Mustafa told journalists his faction remains opposed to the Oslo accords which paved the way for limited Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip but now accepts them as a "political reality."

"We still reject the Oslo accords, but we believe these agreements have become a po-

litical reality and have become facts on the ground," he said. "Rejection of these accords does not prevent us from seeking a common vision to meet the dangers facing the Palestinian people."

He said it was important to open a dialogue on the future of the peace talks as they enter their final stage, broaching vital topics like Palestinian statehood, the status of Jerusalem, and the return of refugees.

This dialogue is part of national efforts to discuss questions about the destiny of the Palestinian people and we want to discuss together the means to protect the national interests of this people," he said.

Key Arafat aide Nabil Shaath said Palestinians had to close ranks ahead of the final status talks and meetings with other opposition factions would take place soon.

"We are passing through a decisive period. It's the transition to the final status talks. We think the time and the place are right to unify our ranks," he said.

"What's done is done. We hope to work with (the opposition) within the framework of the ongoing peace process and we welcome their participation in the negotiations on the final status," he said.

Shaath said Arafat was now "ready" to allow the opposition to play a greater role in decision-making.

Sunday's meeting was held on the sidelines of a session of the central committee of Arafat's mainstream Fatah faction which opened here late Saturday.

For the first time since 1994 the meeting was attended by three dissidents opposed to the Oslo accords - Faruq Kaddumi, who heads the Palestine Liber-

ation Organisation's political department in Tunis, and Mohammed Jihad and Mohammed Ghneim.

The meeting was held in the Egyptian capital to allow the four committee members living outside the Palestinian territories to attend.

Kaddumi said Fatah hoped to reach agreement with other factions on how to approach the final status talks which "is a difficult stage requiring an Arab effort and Palestinian unity."

The PFLP continued a violent campaign against Israel even after Arafat signed the Oslo accords in 1993 and established the Palestinian Authority in West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The Palestinian leadership now hopes to meet with the other main PLO opposition group, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine led by Nayef Hawatmeh.



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat meets with Abu Ali Mustafa (L), the number two in the main Palestinian opposition group, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), yesterday in Cairo. — AFP photo

## Blast damages church in Kosovo Serb farmer shot dead

PRISTINA, Aug 1: A powerful explosion damaged the new Serbian Orthodox cathedral in the Kosovo capital Pristina early today, a spokesman for the NATO-led KFOR peace force said, reports Reuters.

The explosion occurred at the southwest corner of the Orthodox cathedral. We have initial indications of structural damage but no reports of casualties," KFOR spokesman Major Roland Lavioie told Reuters.

He said an investigation was under way. The cause of the blast was unclear. But Kosovo has been plagued by ethnic Albanian violence against Serbs since Belgrade's security forces quit Kosovo and peacekeepers entered in mid-June.

The area around the cathedral was sealed off by NATO troops and a KFOR helicopter circled overhead, beaming

down a powerful spotlight in an apparent search for suspects of clues.

The 1:20 am (2320 GMT) blast, which rattled many buildings, sent a column of smoke above the downtown skyline.

The church towers above an open, unsecured patch of ground on a rise above the centre of the city of 200,000 people.

Kosovo's former Serbian authorities began building the church about three years ago but did not finish before Belgrade withdrew its military and police from the province. The building's interior remains largely empty.

Meanwhile, a Serb farmer was shot dead while picking plums in southeast Kosovo on Saturday, a US peacekeeping force spokesman said.

Captain Pat Sweeney said US troops rushed to the scene of

the 11 am (0900 GMT) shooting in Stanisor, a village outside the regional hub of Gnjilane, but apprehended no one.

US military police launched an inquiry.

The assailant was likely to have been an ethnic Albanian wreaking revenge for past Serbian repression of the province's majority population.

Scores of Kosovo Serbs have been slain and the homes of many more seized or looted and burned since NATO air strikes forced Belgrade to halt a brutal war against pro-autonomy Albanians and withdraw its forces from Kosovo.

Fourteen Serb farmers were ambushed and shot dead in a grain field outside a village 18 km south of the provincial capital Pristina on July 23. KFOR has arrested three ethnic Albanians over the massacre.

## Boat catches fire in Philippines: 3 killed, 131 missing

MANILA, Aug 1: Three people were killed and 131 were missing after a Philippine passenger boat caught fire off the central island of Cebu, the coastguard said today, reports AFP.

MV Rosario, II, with 200 people on board including its crew and three children, sent out a distress signal hours after leaving the port of Cebu early Saturday for nearby Masbate province. Commander Clinio Yalaw, duty officer at coastguard headquarters in Manila said.

A report filed by coastguard officials in Masbate said the vessel, owned by Lapu-Lapu Shipping Lines, caught fire, causing panic among passengers who jumped into sea, Yalaw said.

Passengers Maximo Bulon, Aniano Tumanagan and Nonito Abacador drowned while 66 survivors were rescued by the coastguard, Yalaw said.

One hundred and thirty one people were still unaccounted for although the coastguard received unconfirmed reports that most were rescued by fishermen, Yalaw said.

## Bride dies in fire at Saudi wedding tent

DUBAI, Aug 1: The 20-year-old bride was among 43 women and children who died when the main tent at a Saudi wedding caught fire, local newspapers reported today, reports Reuters.

The newspapers said the bride, Fatma Ali Abu al-Raha, died late on Saturday after suffering burns to more than 90 per cent of her body when the blaze broke out on Wednesday in the eastern village of Al Qateef.

"She spent the last three days fighting for her life with horrific burns," the English-language daily Arab News said in a front-page story.

Gulf news agencies said on Thursday that the death toll was 37, but by Sunday several more people had died from their injuries. The official Saudi Press Agency said 109 people were still being treated in hospital.

## S Korea resumes cruise tour to North Korea

SEOUL, Aug 1: South Korea, seeking to mend ragged ties with North Korea, on Sunday allowed the resumption of suspended cruise boat tours to the famine-stricken nation despite its growing missile threat, reports AFP.

South Korean tourists will be allowed to visit North Korea's scenic Mount Kumgang resort site this week, the unification ministry said.

The green light came after tour operators, the giant Hyundai Group, secured a new guarantee from North Korea on the personal safety of South Korean tourists.

The ministry said the resumption reflected South Korea's efforts to improve ties with North Korea, which has boycotted inter-Korean talks on family reunions over a naval battle between the two Koreas, still technically at war.

"It will also contribute to easing growing tensions over North Korea's preparations to test-fire a new ballistic mis-

sile," it said. The ministry, however, indicated the tours could falter again if North Korea went ahead with its missile launch.

Pyeongyang last August fired a medium-range rocket over Japan, prompting warnings in Washington and Seoul that a further launch would lead to the severance of an aid lifeline for North Korea.

The tour project, launched by Hyundai last November, was suspended on June 20 when North Korea detained a South Korean housewife for allegedly trying to entice a North Korean nature warden into defecting while on a cruise visit.

"The government decided to resume the tour as we judged that the safety of tourists would be guaranteed in a more secure manner," Hwang Ha-Soo, a ministry official, said.

Hyundai was also allowed to remit eight million dollars to North Korea for entrance fees and other expenses, he said.

The tours had taken some 86,000 South Koreans to North Korea, earning the impoverished country more than 150 million dollars in desperately-needed foreign exchange.

Under an agreement signed last week in Beijing, North Korea will deport any South Korean tourists who make provocative remarks during tours to Kumgang, the ministry said.

The agreement spelled out the level of fines in case of violations by tourists and called for Hyundai and North Korea to form a steering committee to handle serious crimes.

The agreement contained more concrete terms on the protection of tourists, South Korean officials said.

The tours were suspended when Min Young-Mi, a 36-year-old mother-of-two, was detained for bragging about the prosperous lives of two successful North Korean defectors living in the capitalist South.

## Habibie invites Megawati, other leaders for talks

JAKARTA, Aug 1: Indonesian President B.J. Habibie will hold talks with leaders of the main political parties, including presidential hopeful Megawati Sukarnoputri, on the country's future, reports said Sunday, reports AFP.

"This is a meeting ahead of the general convention of the MPR (the national assembly), therefore various programs for the convention will be discussed," State secretary Muladi was quoted as telling the Republik daily.

Speaking Saturday after a meeting between Habibie and popular Muslim leader Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid, Muladi said the president will invite the leaders of the political parties which gained parliamentary seats in the June 7 elections.

The meeting is scheduled to be held at the Negara Palace late Tuesday, Muladi added.

"I hope everyone will come," Muladi said.

Gus Dur will be invited even though he is not a party leader,

he said. Muladi said the meeting will cover "the various problems facing the nation" and the case of former president Suharto may also be on the agenda.

The Suara Pembaharuan daily on Sunday quoted Muladi as having said the government would choose "a political solution" to deal with Suharto's case.

The case of Mr. Suharto will be solved by means of a political solution. How can (the case) be solved legally if he remains ill," Muladi said. But he did not elaborate.

Suharto, 78, who had just spent 10 days in hospital following a mild stroke, has been under an official investigation following accusations he enriched himself during his 32 years in power.

The government of Habibie, Suharto's protégé and vice president when the former strongman appointed him his successor in May last year, has been accused of foot dragging in the investigation.

Muladi said last week the issue of the charges against Suharto would have to be discussed by the president with other public figures, including the leaders of the poll-winning parties.

Only 10 of the 48 parties that took part in the June 7 elections will be represented at the 500-seat People's Representative Council (DPR), the final vote count by the Indonesian Election Committee released July 15 showed.

The Indonesian Democracy Party-Struggle (PDIP) of Megawati led the poll tally with 33.7 per cent of the vote, followed by the ruling Golkar with 22 per cent.

Muladi said Habibie was also planning to meet on August 13 with the leaders of all 48 political parties.

The series of meetings were called by the president ahead of the convention of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) which will convene in November and pick a new president.

## BRIFFLY

### Israeli warplanes strike S Lebanon:

Israeli warplanes launched missile strikes against south Lebanon Sunday after Lebanese guerrillas attacked an Israeli patrol in the occupied border strip, police said here, AFP reports from Tyre.

Two Israeli fighters fired a total of nine missiles in two raids on targets close to the village of Majdel-Zoun, just outside the western sector of the Israeli-occupied border strip, they said without mentioning any casualties. The Syrian-backed Shiite Muslim militant group Amal said it carried out the attack on an Israeli patrol in the sector and had killed or wounded a number of Israeli soldiers.

### Iranian secret police officer killed:

An Iranian secret police officer was killed in clashes in eastern Iran that left two other people dead, the official IRNA news agency reported Sunday, AFP reports from Tehran.

It said two armed "thugs" who had been "creating insecurity" in the eastern town of Khawf in Khorasan province, close to the Afghan border, were killed in the clashes with intelligence ministry personnel on Saturday. It said the two had killed the intelligence ministry officer but did not provide any further details.

## Mob burns house in E Timor after one shot dead

DILI, East Timor, Aug 1: Two gunmen who witnesses said were members of pro-Indonesian militia shot and killed a man in East Timor Sunday, prompting an angry crowd to burn the house of a known militia member, reports AFP.

Angelino Amaral, 24, was shot in the street not far from his home in the Taibesi neighbourhood of the territory's capital Dili before dawn following a traffic accident, witnesses said.

Shortly after the shooting, a crowd formed around the scene and then marched to a nearby house belonging to a known Aitarak member, an AFP photographer said.

They first pelted the house with stones before setting it on fire.

## China's military marks 72nd anniversary with warning to Taiwan

BEIJING, Aug 1: China celebrated the 72nd anniversary of the People's Liberation Army today with a warning from Defence Minister Chi Haotian that Taiwan should not underestimate the military's resolve to maintain China's territorial integrity, reports AFP.

The PLA stands ready and prepared to defend the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity at any time and will firmly smash any attempts to split the motherland," Chi was quoted by the Liberation Army daily as saying.

"Going against the will of the entire Chinese people and the tide of history, (Taiwan President) Lee Teng-hui and the

Taiwan authorities have brazenly redefined cross-strait relations as 'state-to-state relations,'" Chi said at a 72nd anniversary gala Saturday evening.

However Chi, who also serves as vice chairman of the powerful Central Military Commission, noted that the mainland would continue to seek "peaceful reunification" in accordance with the principle of "one country, two systems," the report said.

China was enraged when Lee stated that Taiwan enjoys state relations with the mainland and would seek reunification only with a "democratic and free mainland."

## Hillary blames Clinton's infidelity on childhood abuse

LONDON, Aug 1: Hillary Clinton, US First Lady and likely candidate for the US Senate, has talked for the first time about why she stood by her man and blamed the President's infidelity on childhood abuse, said The Sunday Times, reports Reuters.

President Bill Clinton's wife said his two-timing "weakness" stemmed from a trauma caused by childhood abuse, the report said.

Quoting extracts from an interview due to be published this week in Talk, a new magazine edited by ex-New Yorker editor Tina Brown, the report quoted the First Lady blaming the President's childhood experiences for a chain reaction of philandering.

Referring to her husband as a "hard dog to keep on the porch," the newspaper said that once in the White House, the president's assistant had to spend much of her time dealing

with "bimbo eruptions". For many years, Hillary believed his weakness was under control until the scandal of his sexual relations with White House intern Monica Lewinsky erupted and at one stage threatened the presidency.

Clinton said in the report that the affair with Lewinsky took place after the death of the President's father and their friend Vincent Foster.

"He couldn't protect me, so he lied... this was a sin of weakness,"

"Yes, he has weaknesses. Yes, he needs to be more disciplined, but it is remarkable given his background that he turned out to be the kind of person he is, capable of such leadership," she was quoted saying in The Sunday Times.

"He was so young, barely four, when he was scarred by abuse. There was terrible conflict between his mother and grandmother. A psychologist

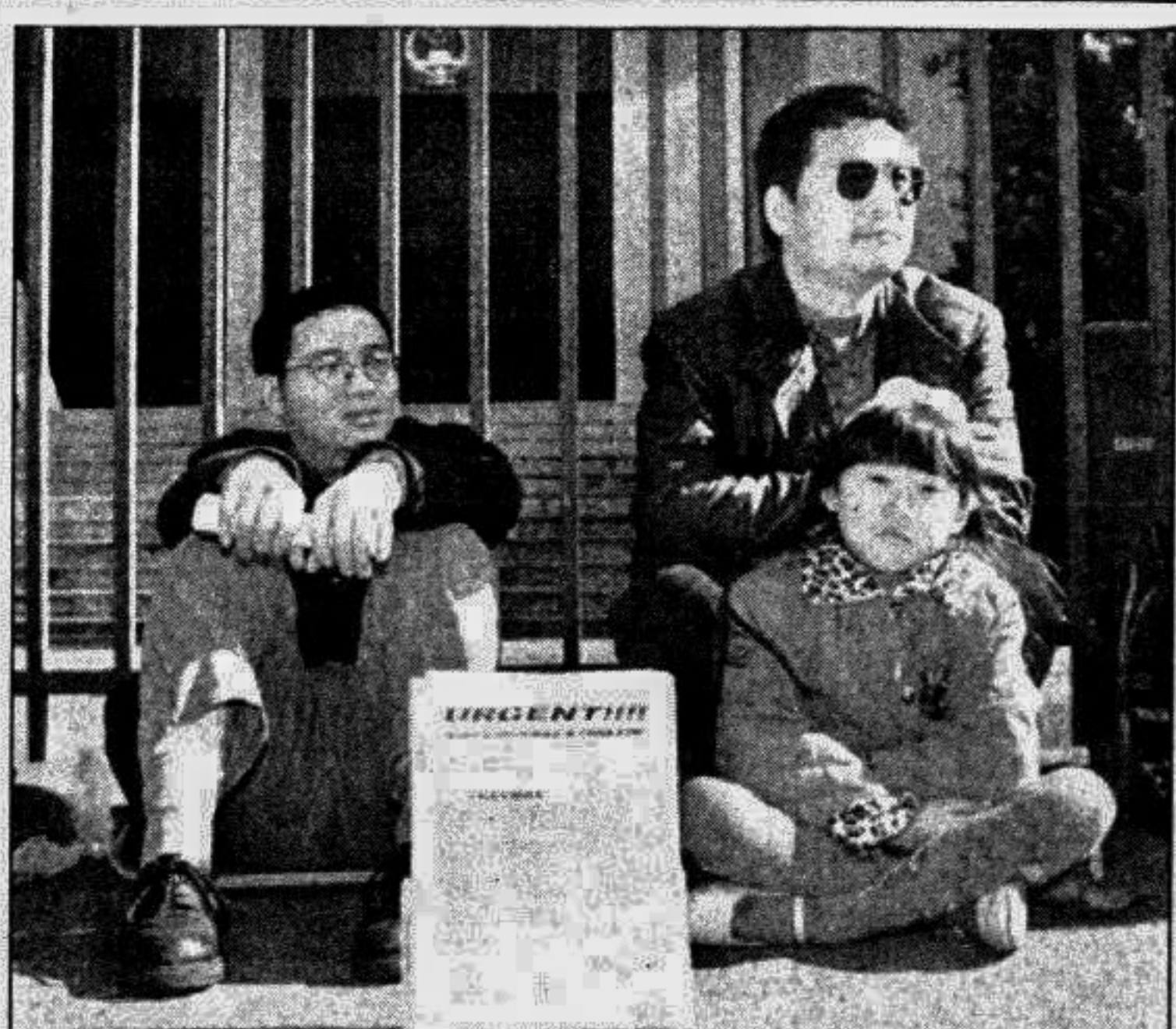
told me that being in the middle of a conflict between two women is the worst possible situation," Hillary said.

She went on to describe her vigil for many years to monitor her husband's faithfulness.

"I thought he had conquered it, but he didn't go deep enough or work hard enough," she said.

Asked whether their marriage could survive the strains of her embarking on a solo political career in the Senate, she said: "He's responsible for his behaviour whether I'm there or 100 miles away... it is their (the person's) responsibility whether it's gambling, drinking or women. Nobody can do it for you."

Clinton is currently on a campaign-style tour in New York. If she decides to run for the Senate seat being vacated next year she will be the first president's wife ever to seek office.



Falungong supporters protest outside the Chinese Consulate-General offices in Sydney yesterday over the Chinese government's banning of the sect in Beijing on July 22 and the issuing of an arrest warrant for sect leader Li Hongzhi, who resides in New York. — AFP photo

## Off the Record

### Dead man sitting

SYDNEY: A widow whose husband died six months ago walked into her lounge room to find him sitting in his favourite chair in front of the television, it was reported today, says AFP.

The Australian Police Journal said the woman's disturbed son exhumed the body in a bizarre attempt to comfort to his grieving mother.

A retired forensic officer wrote that the son, armed with a pick and shovel, dug up the grave and removed the corpse in the dead of night.

He then strapped the body into the passenger seat of his car and drove home where he put his father in an armchair before falling asleep.

His horrified mother found the body the next morning and ordered him to return the corpse to the cemetery.

But by then it was daylight and the son, afraid he would be seen, instead placed the body on his mother's bed, according to the report.

When she returned and found it, she became hysterical and finally called the police, who described the case as tragic.

"There was no question of laying charges against the man," one officer said. "He really did not understand the enormity of what he had done or the trauma he caused his mother."

### World's oldest twins turn 107

TOKYO: Toting sparkling pink shovels, the world's oldest living twins celebrated their 107th birthday with a tree-planting ceremony in northern Japan today, reports Reuters.

Kin Narita and Gin Kanie, considered national treasures, took a wagon ride after helping to plant a tree in a Sapporo park.

"I want to thank all of you for coming out here today," a beaming Gin said.

King and Gin, whose names mean silver and gold in Japanese, were born into a farming family near Nagoya in central Japan on August 1, 1892. They now live in separate homes in Nagoya.

Kin, the first born, was released from hospital last week after suffering from a stomach ulcer, local media reported.

The pair shot to fame at the age of 99 after local politicians visited them on "Respect for the Aged Day." The government designated them national treasures in 1991.

Since then, they have appeared in commercials, game shows, news programmes and even graced the pages of "People" magazine.

They recorded a "granny rap" record that vaulted up the Japanese pop charts for their 100th birthday.

It also took them 100 years to file their first income tax returns because of the unexpected income from their pop music venture, endorsement contracts and guest television appearances.

Kin has 11 children, seven grandchildren and five great-grandchildren while Gin has five children, four grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren.

"We never thought we would live this long," King said on her 100th birthday. "We could survive because we were twins. We need each other more than anyone else in the world."