

**Romanian clinics flooded with eclipse victims**

BUCHAREST, Aug 17: Romanian ophthalmologists are struggling to cope with a flood of people suffering eye problems after last week's total eclipse -- and many of them have suffered significant damage, a doctor said Tuesday, reports AFP.

About 30 of the 300 patients coming to Bucharest's main eye clinic have suffered retinal damage, or retinopathy, caused by watching the celestial spectacle without proper protection, said the clinic's director, Monica Pop.

The problem is thought to be worse in rural areas, where many people used alternative protection, such as glass darkened by candle smoke, to watch the eclipse. No figures for cases outside Bucharest were immediately available.

Romania enjoyed one of the best views of last Tuesday's eclipse. Skies were mostly clear, and the eclipse lasted longest over the impoverished Balkan country during its sweep over Europe and Asia.

Pop said there was no effective treatment for retinopathy, which could progress over a number of years, leading in extreme cases to total loss of sight.

**Pressure on UK minister to rule on IRA truce**

BELFAST, Aug 17: Leaders of the IRA's political wing were Tuesday meeting Britain's minister for Northern Ireland, who is under pressure from Unionists to conclude that the paramilitary has broken its ceasefire, reports AFP.

Northern Ireland Secretary Mo Mowlam received security assessments from the British-ruled province's chief of police Ronnie Flanagan on Monday and is due to meet Protestant Unionist parties later Tuesday.

She will make a statement on the security situation in Northern Ireland after the consultations, but probably not until next week, according to a Northern Ireland Office spokesman.

Unionists want Mowlam to demand a complete cessation of IRA violence, including "internal" murders and beatings by threatening to expel Sinn Fein from the peace process.

A source close to the Northern Ireland Office said however that the preferred sanction on Sinn Fein would be the suspension of IRA prisoner releases.



Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page entered the Kerrang Hall of Fame during the music award ceremony held in London Monday. —AFP photo

**Vietnam to free 1,000 prisoners**

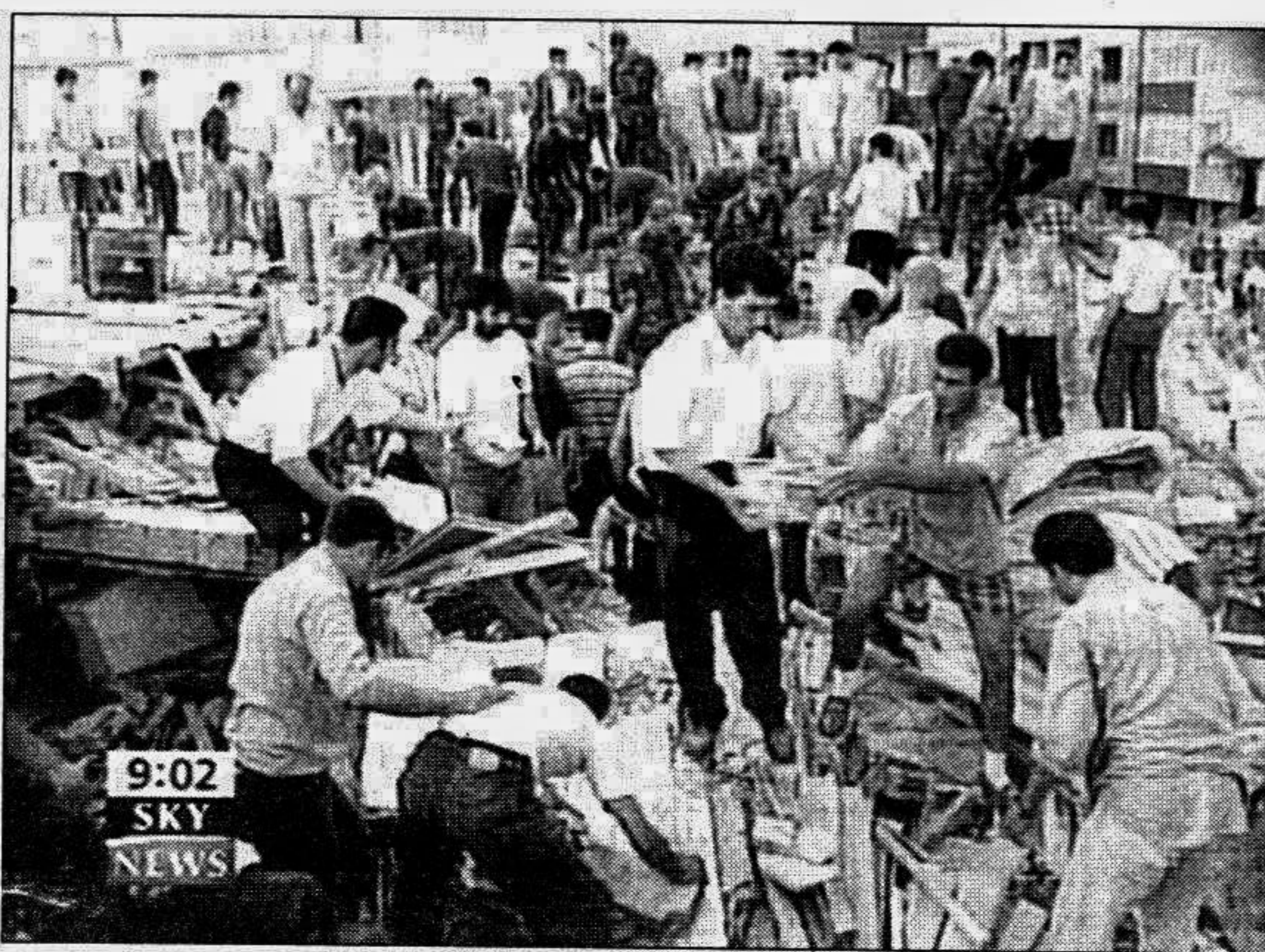
HANOI, Aug 17: Vietnam is to free 1,000 prisoners for the country's independence anniversary next month, a report said Tuesday, reports AFP.

The prisoners, all of whom had cooperated during their internment, would be released around the 54th anniversary of Vietnam's independence on September 2, said the *The Nong Thon Ngay Nay* (Rural Area Today) newspaper.

Most of the prisoners to be released have served the majority of their terms and have between one and three years left, the paper reported.

Last year Vietnam released about 7,800 amnestied prisoners in two waves, including a number of prominent political dissidents and Buddhist monks.

The Vietnamese government has repeatedly said it holds no prisoners of conscience.



A picture from Sky News TV showing rescue workers sifting through rubble in Istanbul early Tuesday as they search for survivors following a major earthquake that struck northwestern Turkey. At least 500 people are so far known to have died in the quake with more than a thousand injured. — AFP photo

**Quake-hit Turkey appeals for help**

ISTANBUL, Aug 17: The senior Turkish official in charge of rescue operations after an earthquake killed hundreds in western and central Turkey on Tuesday has appealed for technical assistance, reports AFP.

"Many countries have volunteered and we are thankful to them," Yahya Akkurt told BBC television.

"For the time being, what we need is to have rescue teams of experts and excavation teams," he said.

Akkurt said the rescue effort had been "well coordinated" after the pre-dawn quake rocked heavily populated areas, crushing apartment buildings in cities and sending millions rushing in panic into the streets of Istanbul and elsewhere.

"Internally, we have taken necessary action," he said.

The United States on Tuesday offered help to Turkey after a massive earthquake struck heavily populated areas in the west and centre of the country, killing hundreds of people and injuring thousands, reports AFP.

The offer of assistance came from Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, currently in Turkey for talks with Turkish officials on energy cooperation.

Richardson felt the tremor in his Istanbul hotel.

**US offers help**

"We are ready to help. We are waiting for the Turkish government to request that assistance," Richardson told CNN in a telephone interview from his hotel room.

"The Turkish government is preparing what they need in terms of us and other international donors," he said.

Richardson also disagreed with suggestions that rescue efforts were not well organised.

"My impression is that the Turkish government is responding," he said. "My sense right now is that the rescue efforts are going on. They are being effective."

Turkish state television TRT has reported some 500 people died in the earthquake, which was centered near the industrial city of Izmit on the Sea of Marmara.

The tremor was felt in several western and central provinces, including Istanbul, the capital Ankara and Kayseri in central Anatolia.

US Energy Secretary Bill Richardson and General Henry Shelton, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, were safe after a powerful earthquake

rocked Turkey's western and central Anatolian provinces. US officials here said on Tuesday.

"Secretary Richardson is fine and will continue his itinerary as planned. There are no problems," an official at the US consulate in Istanbul told AFP.

He refused to give details as to where the secretary was staying in Istanbul, which was badly damaged during the quake measuring 6.7 on the Richter scale.

According to Istanbul officials, some 400 people were killed in the city while scores of others sustained injuries.

A spokeswoman at the US embassy in Ankara, meanwhile, said General Shelton arrived in Ankara on Tuesday and was continuing his negotiations on schedule.

General Shelton is due to meet Turkish Defence Minister Sabahattin Cakmakoglu and Turkish chief of staff Huseyin Kivrikoglu in the Turkish capital, before visiting US forces at Incirlik air base in southern Turkey.

Earlier Iran extended its condolences to neighbouring Turkey after a powerful earthquake rocked Turkey early Tuesday, leaving some 500 people dead and thousands wounded.

**Pawar warns against 'foreigner' ruling India**

NEW DELHI, Aug 17: A former senior leader of India's Congress party -- expelled for challenging Italian-born party chief Sonia Gandhi's suitability to be premier -- has made the issue the focus of his election campaign, reports AFP.

"I do not accept any national of foreign origin to be a leader even at a village level," Pawar was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India on Tuesday.

"Then why must we accept a person of foreign origin as the head of our country?" Pawar, who now heads his own Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), told reporters at a campaign rally ahead of next month's general election.

"Persons of foreign origin should not be allowed to hold top positions in India and the people of India should not compromise their love for their motherland at any cost."

Pawar was one of three Congress executives who staged an unexpected and crippling revolt against Sonia's leadership in May, leading to their expulsion from the party.

**Unexploded Pak shell lands in Jammu**

JAMMU, India, Aug 17: Indian bomb disposal experts in the winter capital of Kashmir, Jammu, were trying Tuesday to defuse an unexploded Pakistani artillery shell that landed on the city's outskirts, reports AFP.

It was the first time Jammu itself has been targeted by Pakistan in years of artillery exchanges across the Indo-Pakistan border just 30 kilometers (20 miles) away.

The six-inch shell landed in the Greater Kailash district of Jammu at around 11:00 a.m., local police said.

The area was immediately cordoned off and an army bomb disposal squad called in to defuse the shell.

**Dead hero comes alive**

NEW DELHI, Aug 17: A soldier who was posthumously awarded India's highest medal for gallantry has been found alive in hospital, much to the embarrassment of army chiefs, reports said Tuesday, says AFP.

Yogendra Singh Yadav was one of three soldiers posthumously awarded the Param Vir Chakra (PVC) medal on the eve of India's independence day on August 15, for his role in capturing a key hill during the recent Kashmir conflict.

On Monday, stunned military officials were told by Yadav's wife that her husband was alive and recovering from multiple injuries in a military hospital in New Delhi.

Newspapers said Indian army chief, General V.P. Malhi, was livid over the goof-up. The general later rushed to the hospital to congratulate Yadav for his bravery and apologise for declaring him dead.

**Seshan to take on Advani in polls**

NEW DELHI, Aug 17: India's fiery former chief election commissioner will take on Home Minister and Hindu hardliner Lal Krishna Advani in next month's elections, newspapers reported Tuesday, reports AFP.

T.N. Seshan will stand for the main opposition Congress party against Advani, in the latter's constituency of Gandhinagar in the western state of Gujarat during the September-October polls.

It will be the first parliamentary election for a man who helped clean up India's electoral process during his controversial 1990-96 stint as head of the autonomous Election Commission.

By the time he retired, Seshan had been dubbed "Aisathian" for his tenacity in pursuing electoral fraud.

**61 executed in Chinese city**

BEIJING, Aug 17: Southwest China's Chongqing city stepped up a strike hard campaign against crime, holding two sentencing rallies last week resulting in the execution of 61 convicted criminals, state press reports seen in Beijing Tuesday said, reports AFP.

A sentencing rally held by the Chongqing city No. 1 Intermediate People's Court last Friday meted out death sentences to 30 criminals convicted of murder, armed robbery, rape and kidnapping, the Chongqing Daily reported.

**Israel welcomes Hezbollah leader's murder**

JERUSALEM, Aug 17: Israel welcomed Tuesday the assassination of a leader of the Hezbollah guerrilla group in southern Lebanon, without claiming the responsibility attributed to it by the Shiite Muslim movement, reports AFP.

Khodr Salame, a military official of Hezbollah's armed wing, was killed when his car was blown up Monday in Sidon. Hezbollah promptly blamed Israel and swore to be avenged.

Speaking on military radio, Israeli Communications Minister Benjamin Ben Eliezer said: "I don't know if Israel is behind what happened, but the terrorist targeted was one of the main organisers of anti-Israeli attacks in Lebanon."

**Pakistan may demand compensation for downed plane**  
**US worried about renewed Indo-Pak fighting**

ISLAMABAD, Aug 17: Pakistan yesterday indicated that it may demand compensation from India for shooting down its Naval Aircraft on August 10 in Gujarat in which 16 Navy personnel were killed, reports PTI.

Pakistan has every right to demand compensation under international law from India for its action... Information Minister Mushahid Hussain said addressing a parliamentary committee.

In this regard, according to Pakistan's official news agency APP, Hussain referred to the US compensation to South Korea after American air force shot down a South Korean airliner a few years ago.

He also said Pakistan had every right to raise the issue of downing of its unarmed Naval plane by India at all international forums.

The meeting, which was also attended by Kashmir Affairs Minister Majeed Malik, in a unanimous resolution de-

manded that Pakistan government should ask India to pay compensation under the international law.

"We deeply regret this cold-blooded murder and want act of aggression by India," the resolution said and urged the International Community to condemn the shooting.

An AP reports from Washington adds: Border skirmishes between India and Pakistan and renewed fighting in disputed Kashmir are raising concerns among US leaders that the two new nuclear powers may be marching toward a more serious confrontation.

"Some would say there's a pool of gasoline lying on the ground looking for a match," said Sen. Sam Brownback, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs.

The Clinton administration is searching for ways to help defuse the situation, but so far has kept mostly on the sideline.

Fear of appearing to favour one side or the other has produced a state of near-paralysis, some critics suggest.

Brownback, for instance, says the administration should be more aggressive in involving itself in the region. "We need to be further engaged, not less engaged," the Republican senator said.

Administration officials deny they're less than fully engaged, and note that President Bill Clinton intends to tour the region soon.

Tensions soared anew after an Indian jet on August 10 downed a Pakistani reconnaissance plane, killing 16. Pakistan responded the following day, firing a missile to Indian fighter and helicopters. Both nations put their militaries on high alert.

Border skirmishes and guerrilla attacks continue. Pakistani troops fired machine guns and rockets at an Indian border post on Monday, killing one soldier.

**Yeltsin warns new PM against quarreling with Kremlin**

MOSCOW, Aug 17: President Boris Yeltsin on Tuesday promised his new prime minister a degree of independence, but warned that his predecessors got themselves into trouble by sticking closely to Kremlin policies, reports AFP.

"Let's not divide the presidential office and the Cabinet," Yeltsin told Vladimir Putin, who was confirmed Monday as Russia's fifth prime minister since early last year. "When they were divided, it didn't lead to any good."

A prime minister could only lose, and that is natural," Yeltsin told Putin in remarks that were shown on Russian television.

Yeltsin hasn't given any reason for firing Putin's predecessor, Sergei Stepashin, who was considered extremely loyal a never publicly acted against the president's wishes.

The Russian media has speculated that the president and his inner circle wanted a prime minister who was not only loyal, but was also willing to take a tough line against the Kremlin's growing number of political opponents.

The 68-year old president has fired four prime ministers in the past 17 months and has frequently reshuffled his aides. The president's approval rating is in single digits, and he seems to resent any members of his Cabinet who appear too independent or become popular in



Russian President Boris Yeltsin (R) shakes hands with Vladimir Putin (L) during their meeting in Yeltsin's residence Gorki-9 outside Moscow Monday. The Russian President congratulated Putin after Russian State Duma earlier Tuesday confirmed his nomination as new Russian Premier. — AFP photo

their own right. Yeltsin, who has never been deeply involved in the day-to-day running of the government, promised Putin some autonomy in decision-making.

"We shall work together, respecting each other and having counsel on serious issues," he told Putin during a 30-minute conversation in front of Russian journalists. "At the same time, I'm allowing independence. It's not necessary to con-

sult me on small details." Yeltsin and Putin also discussed the situation in the southern republic of Dagestan, where Russian troops are battling Islamic militants.

The fighting is now in its 11th day and both sides claim to hold strong positions. Putin has pledged to crush the rebels within two weeks, but the shooting appears unlikely to end soon.

**Militants take new village, kill 10 troops in Dagestan**  
**Russian troops enter Chechnya**

GROZNY, Russia, Aug 17: Islamic separatists seized control of one more village in the mountains of Dagestan and killed 10 Russian soldiers in overnight fighting, a spokesman for the insurgents said here on Tuesday, reports AFP.

The gunman, who crossed from Chechnya into the southern Russian republic on August 7, took hold of the village of Tsbilta in the southern Bolikh region, the spokesman said.

This brings to 15 the number of villages controlled by the insurgents in Bolikh, he said. Another five towns are held by the Islamists in the Tsumada district just to the south.

But the spokesman refused to name the specific towns held under their control.

The Grozny press center further announced the capture of a Russian paratrooper general, although this could not be confirmed with the Russian interior ministry.

The Dagestan violence is the worst in the Caucasus region since the 1994-96 Chechen war that claimed some 80,000 lives.

In Moscow, President Boris Yeltsin vowed never to give up control over the northern Caucasus.

"This will never happen," ITAR-TASS quoted Yeltsin as saying during a meeting with Russia's new prime minister, Vladimir Putin. "Such talk is gibberish."

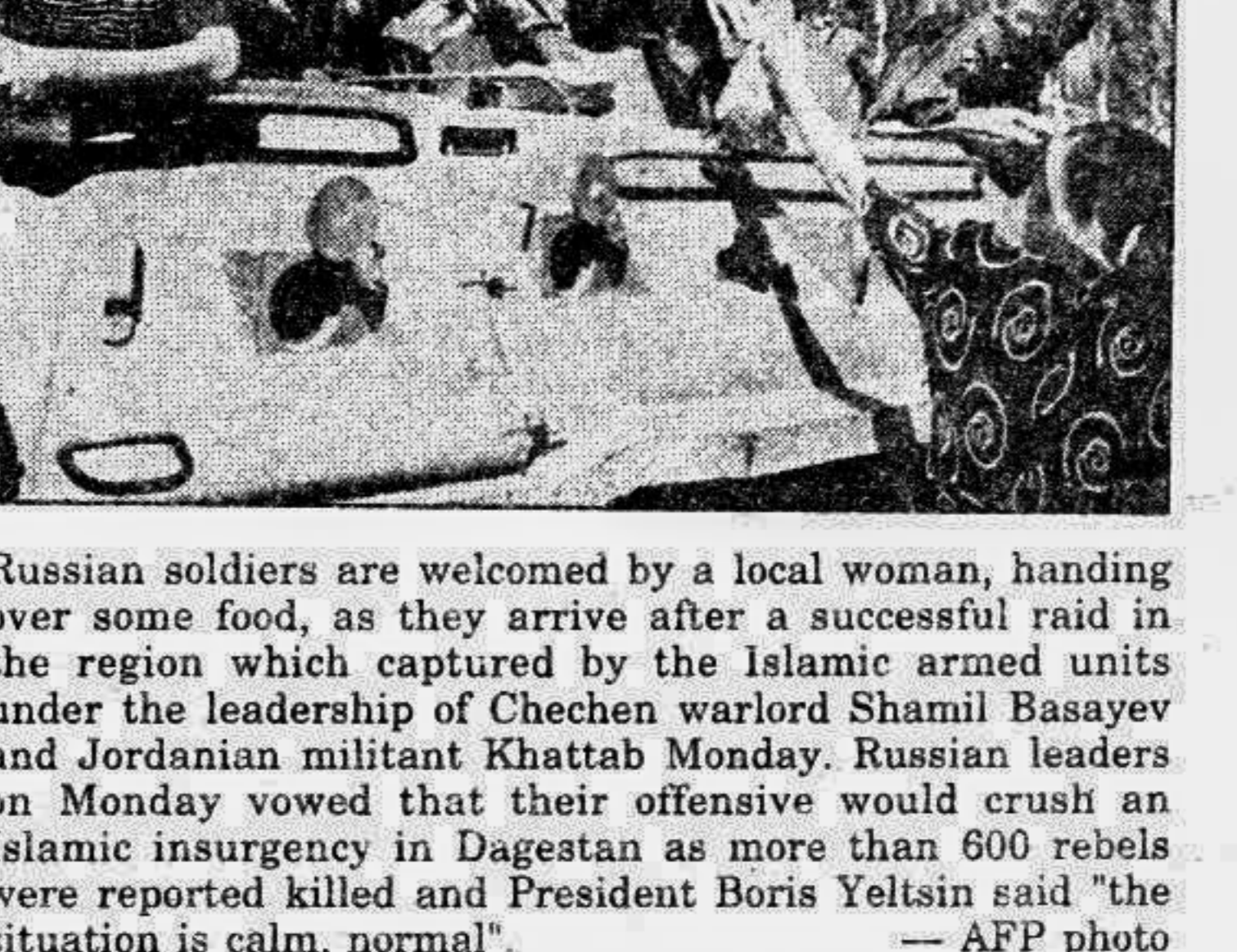
Yeltsin added that he expected Defense Minister Igor Sergeev to play a decisive role

in ending the armed conflict, which according to the Russian interior ministry has claimed the lives of some 600 insurgents.

"Sergeev must play the leading role in this because the bandits are well armed," Yeltsin was quoted as saying by Interfax.

Earlier Chechen President Asian Maskhadov said Tuesday that Russian troops had entered the northwestern region of the separatist republic, Interfax reported.

Maskhadov said the column, which included armored personnel carriers crossed into Chechnya's Nadterechny district that neighbor's Russia's southern Stavropol region.



Russian soldiers are welcomed by a local woman, handing over some food, as they arrive after a successful raid in the region which captured by the Islamic armed units under the leadership of Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev and Jordanian militant Khattab Monday. Russian leaders on Monday vowed that their offensive would crush an Islamic insurgency in Dagestan as more than 600 rebels were reported killed and President Boris Yeltsin said "the situation is calm, normal". — AFP photo

**UN generals seek tension-easing measures from North Korea**

SEOUL, Aug 17: United Nations generals attempted Tuesday to persuade North Korea to ease tensions as US and South Korean forces pursued war games and new reports said the communist North was ready to test a ballistic missile, reports AFP.

Senior officers from the US-led United Nations Command (UNC) met North Korean generals at the Korean truce village of Panmunjom for talks.

The UNC said the meeting was aimed at easing tensions heightened by a naval clash in a disputed fishing zone in the Yellow Sea in June. South Korean vessels sank a communist patrol vessel.

A signal system be arranged between the two Koreas so the rival navies could avoid unnecessary clashes. The UNC was also expected to propose a military hotline with the North.

The two Koreas have never formally ended the 1950-53 Korean War which was halted by a shaky armistice.

The meeting came as South Korea and the United States pursued the second day of their huge military exercises intended to put off any attack.

But signs have been increasing that North Korea has finished preparations to test-launch its new long-range Taepodong II missile which could hit parts of the United States.

The "Ulchi Focus Lens" exercises, the world's largest computer-simulated war games, started Monday with the deployment of around 19,000 US troops and 56,000 South Korean soldiers.

**BRIEFLY**

**3 girls commit suicide in SA:** Three teenage girls have died in small South Africa town of Danielskuil and three were in hospital on Monday after they took an overdose of pills in an apparent suicide pact, police said, AFP reports from South Africa.

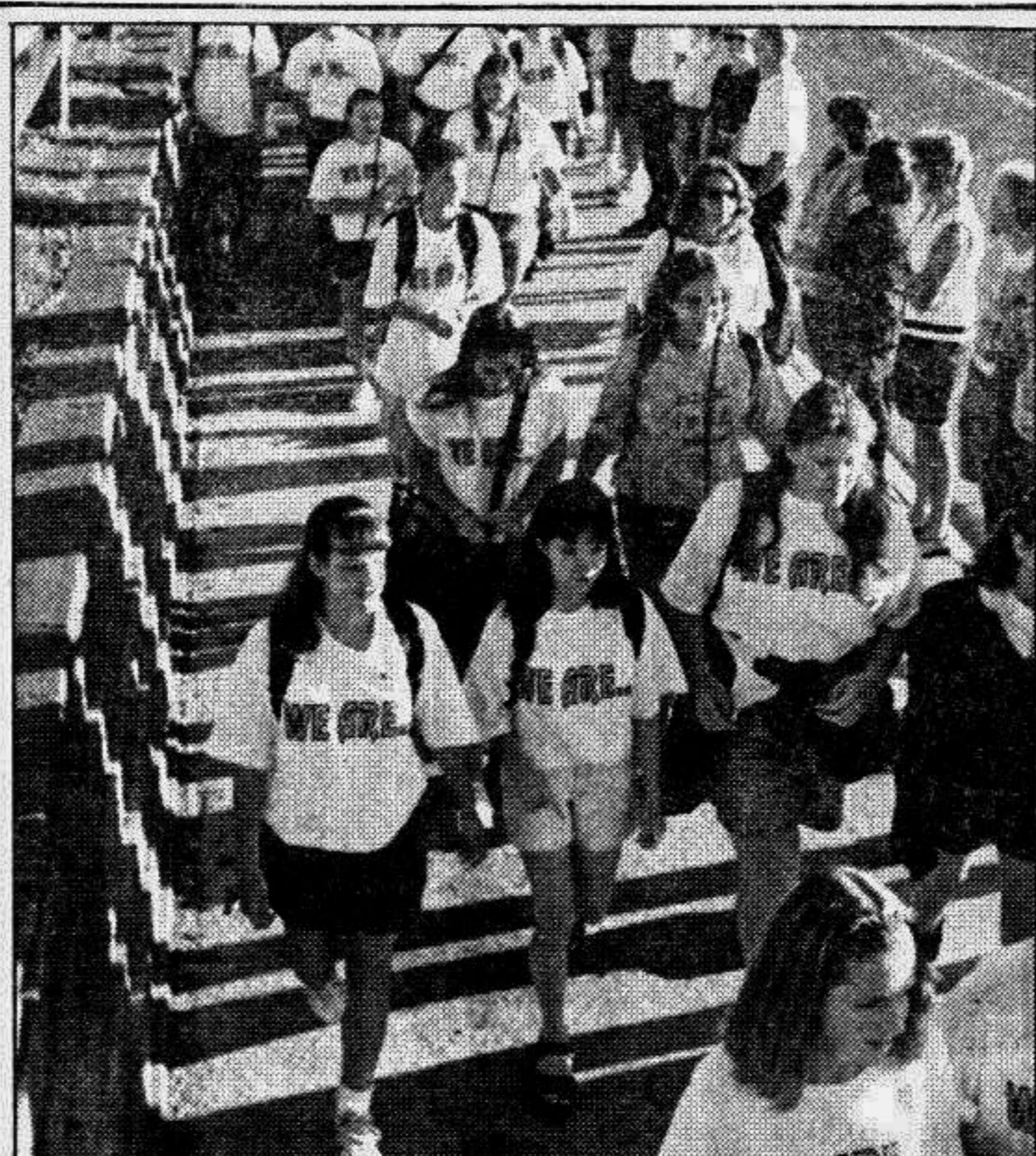
A 15-year-old girl died in the Northern Cape town late Sunday after falling into a coma last Thursday when she and five companions, aged between 11 and 15, apparently shared a bottle of pills used for the treatment of epilepsy.

**7 drug trafficker killed in Tajikistan:** Seven drug traffickers bringing 13 kilograms (29 pounds) of heroin from Afghanistan to Tajikistan were killed early yesterday on the border in two separate clashes, a spokesman for the Russian border guards in Tajikistan said, AFP reports from Dushanbe.

The clashes occurred three hours apart in the early morning 230 kilometres (140 miles) southeast of the Tajik capital Dushanbe.

**3 Naxals die in Andhra Pradesh:** Three Naxalites of the outlawed people's war group (PWG) including a dalam commander, were killed in two separate encounters with police in Warangal and Karimnagar districts of Andhra Pradesh on Monday, PTI reports from Hyderabad.

The PWG Commander of narsampet dalam K Kumaraswamy, involved in 36 cases of offences including 12 murders, was killed along with his associate Baka Senu in an exchange of fire at Govindapur village in Warangal district, police said.



Columbine High School students walk to school Monday in Littleton, Colorado. Parents, friends, and alumni lined the sidewalk to help shield the students from the media as they returned to Columbine for the first time since last spring's deadly shooting. — AFP photo