

BRIEFLY

Road mishap claims 13 in Egypt: Thirteen people were killed and 45 others injured on Saturday in four road accidents in northern Egypt, the country's Middle East News Agency reported. Xinhua reports from Cairo.

A security source said the first accident took place on a highway near the city of 10th of Ramadan between two buses carrying employees of two companies in the city.

One soldier killed in Aceh: An army soldier was killed by unidentified assailants in Indonesia's restive province of Aceh, police and witnesses said Sunday. AP reports from Banda Aceh.

Police sources said Sgt Banta Lidan was stabbed to death on Saturday while sitting at a roadside food stall in a town.



A shoeshine man plies his trade in a New Delhi street Sunday in front of election posters of Hindu Nationalist Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, whose party is tipped to return to power with a record victory in next month's national elections. — AFP photo

E Timorese urged to defy militia terror as voting begins today

DILI, East Timor, Aug 29: The Nobel prize winning head of the Roman Catholic church in East Timor on Sunday urged people to defy intimidation and vote on their future, as rival factions sealed a pact aimed at curbing violence, reports AFP.

The call by the Bishop of Dili, Carlos Felipe Ximenes Belo came amidst mounting international concern over the impact of pro-Indonesian militias on Monday's historic ballot.

Australia's Prime Minister John Howard again warned Sunday that troops would move into East Timor if the lives of Australians came under threat during the UN-organized vote.

But the importance of the occasion was stressed to the largely Catholic territory by Belo.

"I appeal to all of you that tomorrow, the 30th August, all of you who have registered to vote, I ask you all to go to vote," Belo said in a message read in churches throughout the former Portuguese colony.

"Vote according your conscience. At this time I ask all of you not to be afraid... Don't be afraid, be brave and choose the future of East Timor," said Belo, who won the Nobel peace prize in 1996 jointly with exiled Indonesian campaigner Jose Ramos Horta.

Ramos-Horta told CNN from Australia that despite "the incredible and unacceptable level of violence orchestrated by the Indonesian military," the vote should go ahead.

The 450,000 East Timorese

are to vote whether to accept autonomy under Indonesian rule. Indonesia has suggested it will give independence if the autonomy package is turned down.

Since Indonesia invaded the territory in 1975, an estimated 200,000 people have died through clashes between the military and separatist groups, disease and mistreatment. The United Nations and most countries refuse to recognise Indonesian sovereignty.

The run-up to the vote has been marred by violence blamed on pro-Indonesian militias, with international fury levelled at Jakarta for failing to act to rein them in.

On the eve of the vote, rival factions announced a pact designed to prevent disruption of the vote, at a press conference attended by UN officials, Indonesian police and the military.

Falur Ratelael, deputy commander of Falintil, the armed wing of the independence movement, and Eurico Guterres, deputy chief of the pro-Indonesian militias, announced the agreement.

The parties call on the Indonesian police to arrest under existing Indonesian law any of their members carrying weapons outside their designated cantonment areas," said the pact read by the head of the UN Mission in East Timor UN-AMET Ian Martin.

In the final two days of campaigning for Monday's vote rampant militia violence claimed eight lives.

Also present at the announcement was the commander

of the Indonesian armed forces in the territory, Colonel Muhammad Noer Muis, and Indonesia's East Timor police chief Colonel Timbul Silaen.

But there was scepticism over the implementation of the pact, agreed in the eastern coastal city of Baucau on Saturday, after last week's militia violence which sent hundreds of Dili residents fleeing into the hills.

"An agreement reached in the past have done nothing to reduce militia violence.

Falur said: "The time is too short... so let's work together."

Police chief Silaen called the pact "a large step forward" even though past agreements had been "difficult to fulfill."

"We will begin an operation to confiscate arms outside cantonment areas," he said, adding that the operation would be joined by the unarmed UN civilian police here.

The UN mission leader read out a message from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who also called for East Timorese to vote on Monday and settle this "long-running dispute through peaceful means."

The Australian prime minister had "extensive discussions" about East Timor with Indonesian President B.J. Habibie in a telephone call, an Australian spokesman said.

Howard said Indonesia must ensure the safety of Australians, including UNAMET officials and election observers, in East Timor and "told Habibie that the readiness of the Australian Defence Force had been increased to cover the need for evacuation."

Military admits security not guaranteed

The Indonesian military on Sunday said it was unable to "100 percent" guarantee security in East Timor if mass unrest breaks out.

The Indonesian armed forces (TNI) and national police (Polri) "remain committed" to protecting East Timorese before and after Monday's landmark self-determination ballot, TNI spokesman Brigadier General Sudrajat said.

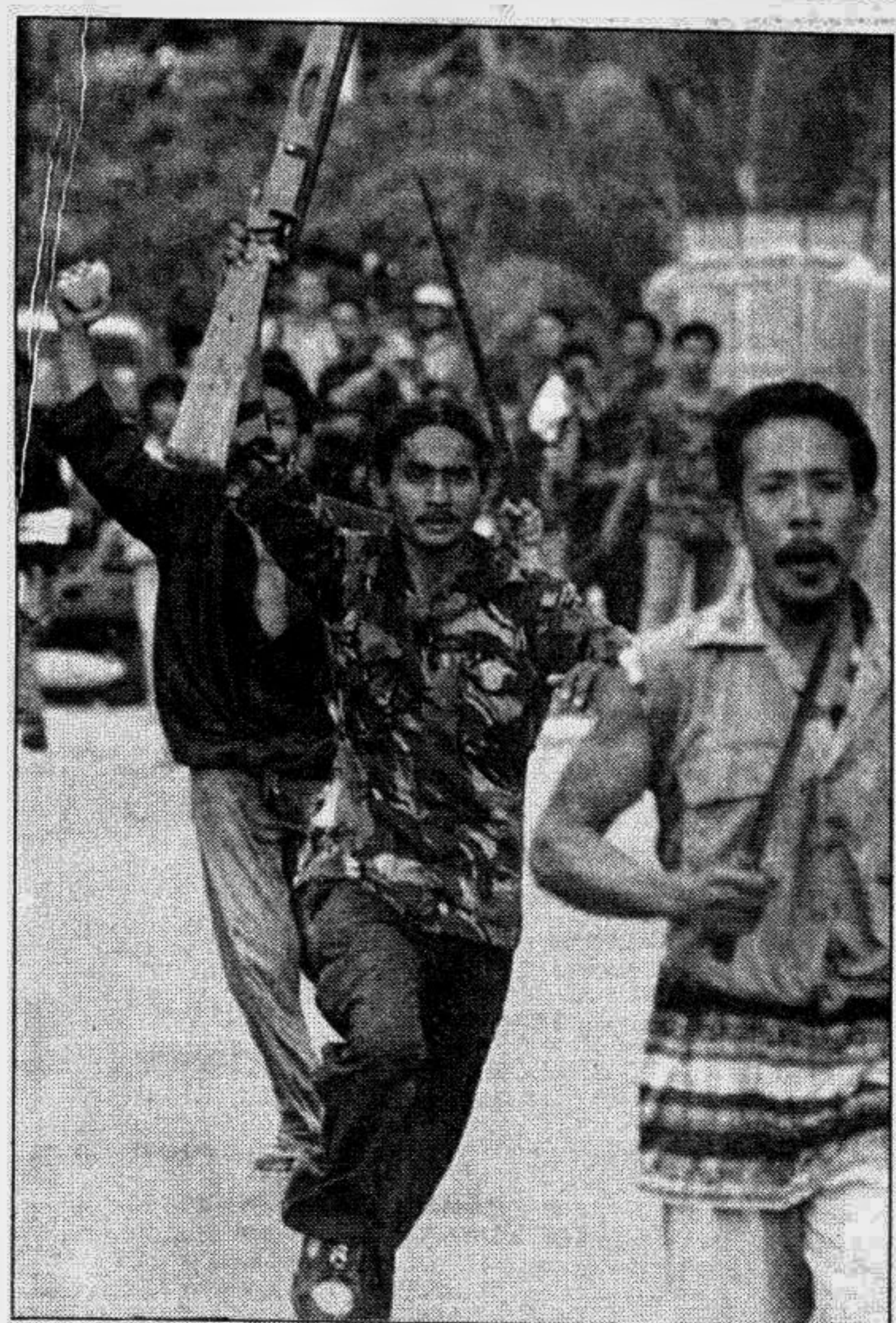
He said Indonesian security personnel had so far done their best to prevent and halt incidents of mass violence from breaking out in the territory.

Australian military ready to move

Prime Minister John Howard told Indonesian President B.J. Habibie in a phone call Sunday that Australia's military would move into East Timor if the lives of Australians came under threat in Monday's autonomy ballot.

The call was the latest in more than 100 representations Canberra has made to Jakarta about the need for better security in the disputed territory.

The prime minister had extensive discussions with President Habibie about East Timor," his spokesman told AFP, adding that Howard emphasised the importance of a fair ballot and stressed the need for adequate security.



Pro-independence supporters brandishing machetes and a homemade rifle charge down a road in search of rumoured opposition militia in the Becora district following renewed tension between pro and anti-integration groups, Sunday, on the eve of a historic vote to determine the future of the troubled territory. After a two-week campaign marred by violence, voters are to decide in a UN-sponsored ballot today whether East Timor should become an autonomous province of Indonesia or choose total independence. — AFP photo

4 die as bomb goes off in Indian minister's home

NEW DELHI, Aug 29: Four people died in a massive bomb blast at the home of a provincial minister in southern India a week ahead of national elections, police said Sunday, reports AFP.

The bomb exploded late Saturday at the ancestral home of Kodela Sivaprasad Rao, a minister in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh which has been wracked by rebel violence.

Three people died immediately while one died in hospital today," said Mazharuddin, police chief of Guntur district where the blast occurred.

"It was massive. There were gaping 12 feet (four meters) by 15 feet holes on two walls of the room which is about 25 feet wide. The minister escaped because he was campaigning in another part of Guntur."

The attack came ahead of India's staggered elections which start early next month.

Mazharuddin said the blast occurred at a makeshift election office on the first floor and "the four victims appear to be people

helping (Rao) in his election campaign."

He said the minister had blamed the attack on the People's War Group (PWG), an outlawed Maoist guerrilla group which frequently uses bombs, kidnappings and murder in its fight for agrarian rights in Andhra Pradesh.

"The minister claimed he had received death threats from the PWG recently for speaking out against its members," Mazharuddin said.

"Our investigation is on and I cannot tell you at this stage if it (the rebel group) was involved."

But he said the attack could be linked to the elections.

"There are all kinds of claims and counter-claims. Some political parties are saying Rao's people were making bombs to intimidate rivals and voters when one of them accidentally exploded, he said.

Russian forces swoop on villages in Dagestan

MOSCOW, Aug 29: Russian Interior Ministry forces and special troops swooped on two Dagestan villages Sunday whose residents fought alongside Muslim insurgents from Chechnya earlier this month, the press center of the Interior Ministry said.

The residents of Karamakhy and Chabanmakhy in southwest Dagestan were told to hand over their weapons, the interior ministry in the Dagestani capital of Makhachkala told AFP.

The Russian forces said they did not rule out the use of force if the villagers refused to disarm, a spokesman added.

Islamic group claims responsibility for Yemen explosions

DUBAI, Aug 29: A militant Islamic "army" has claimed responsibility for a massive explosion that rocked the Yemeni capital killing at least two people, a London-based Islamist said Sunday, reports AFP.

"During a quick phone call the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army claimed responsibility for the two explosions which took place in Yemen," said firebrand Abu Hamza al-Masri in a statement received here.

"The fighters who carried out the two operations escaped unhurt," he said, adding that they had "promised to issue a detailed statement in a day or two."

HK maids protest plans to clamp down on pregnancies

HONG KONG, Aug 29: About 200 foreign housemaids marched through Hong Kong on Sunday to protest at plans to allow employers to fire them "by mutual agreement" if they became pregnant, reports AFP.

Carrying placards saying "Babies not allowed," and chanting "Migrants' rights are human rights, women's rights are human rights," they marched to the Labour Department at Sheung Wan on Hong Kong island.

Protest organizer Connie Bragas-Regalado of the Asia Migrant Coordinating Body (AMCB) said the government was "seeking to usher in an age of slavery" in trying to narrow maternity protection.

Fernandes joins govt's onslaught against Sonia

NEW DELHI, Aug 29: Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes has joined the government's general election onslaught against Italian-born opposition leader Sonia Gandhi, according to a report Sunday, says AFP.

The outspoken Fernandes insisted Sonia was not Indian and termed members of her Congress Party "eunuchs" for choosing a foreign-born chief.

Women's groups have reacted angrily to government comments about Sonia.

And the Indian Express daily said Fernandes, socialist leader in Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist-led coalition government, had "stooped to a new low" in his attack at a rally ahead of next month's national polls.

"What is her contribution to the nation? Yes, there is one contribution... the two children she gave birth to. She has contributed two people to the 100 crore (one billion) population,"

the Express quoted him as saying.

Fernandes made the remarks Saturday during a tour of the southern constituency of Bellary, which Gandhi is contesting.

Sonia, who married former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1968 but became an Indian national only in 1983, entered politics last year.

Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani said Gandhi lacked any administrative experience or real knowledge of India, adding this was more important than her nationality.

"Every Indian should (question) whether such a vast country could be placed in the hands of a person who is totally inexperienced, whose knowledge of the country is nothing, and (who) even lacks the vision to lead India in the coming years," the United News of India quoted him as saying.

Advani said apart from being Rajiv Gandhi's widow, Sonia

Gandhi had no "qualification" to lead the Congress party.

The outspoken Fernandes alleged Sonia Gandhi only became an Indian citizen after her brother-in-law died in a plane crash and she was sure her husband would succeed her mother-in-law as prime minister.

"Is this her love for the country?" he asked.

Information Minister Pramod Mahajan attacked Gandhi but rejected reports that he had compared her to White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

"Our motherland has not turned so infertile so that we have to be ruled by some foreigner... Nobody can become an Indian by merely wearing a sari," the Press Trust of India quoted Mahajan as saying.

The Hindustan Times daily on Saturday had quoted Mahajan as saying: "If we are so keen on having a foreigner as prime minister, why not have Tony Blair or Bill Clinton or even Monica Lewinsky?"



Late Israeli Premier Yitzhak Rabin's killer, Yigal Amir (L) his brother Hagai (3rd from L) and Jewish extremist Dror Adani (R) sit at Israel's Supreme Court escorted by a policeman Sunday in Jerusalem. The Supreme Court added another three years, to the life sentence imposed on Yigal Amir, for conspiracy to murder and for having prepared attacks on Arabs. Hagai was sentenced to an extra four years for the same offence. The Supreme Court also confirmed a seven year sentence on Adani, for conspiracy in the killing of Rabin. — AFP photo

Pakistan wants SAARC role for tackling political issues

ISLAMABAD, Aug 29: Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on Saturday called for evolving a mechanism under the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to deal with political problems, reports AFP.

Sharif made the proposal during a meeting with visiting Nepalese Foreign Minister Ram Sharan Mahat, who delivered an invitation to the 11th SAARC summit scheduled in Kathmandu for November 26-28.

Regional socio-economic cooperation is "hampered due to lack of an enabling environment of mutual trust and understanding," an official statement quoted Sharif as saying during the meeting.

A mechanism to discuss the inter-linked issues of peace and development should be developed by the regional grouping, he said.

Sharif "regretted" that India "was not reciprocating with sincerity and seriousness to Pakistan's efforts to promote

peace and stability in South Asia," the statement said.

The unremitting mutual hostility between SAARC's two major members, India and Pakistan, since the partition of the sub-continent in 1947 is considered a stumbling block to the development of regional cooperation.

The main cause is the India-Pakistan dispute over the ownership of the Himalayan region of Kashmir, which has been the source of two of the three wars between the two neighbours.

Sharif, who accepted the invitation to attend the Kathmandu summit, said SAARC had a "great potential" to ensure a bright future for the region.

The Nepalese foreign minister agreed with the need for removing tensions to ensure peace and prosperity in the region, the statement said.

The other members of SAARC are Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives and Sri Lanka, where the last summit was held in 1998.

US holds out prospect of food aid to North Korea

SEOUL, Aug 29: The United States is holding out the prospect of food aid and high-level talks if famine-stricken North Korea scraps plans to test fire a ballistic missile, a senior South Korean official confirmed Sunday, reports AFP.

"If the Berlin meeting proceeds well, there may be full-dress talks on proposals made by US policy coordinator William Perry," Unification Minister Lim Dong-Wan said.

The minister also claimed a virtual success in South Korea's diplomatic campaign to dissuade North Korea from test firing a Taepodong II missile -- capable of hitting parts of the US.

"Diplomatic efforts, launched by South Korea, the United States and Japan to stem North Korea's missile test, appear to be almost successful," he said.

"I take a positive view of the fact that there are no signs yet that North Korea will fire a missile."

His comments followed policy consultations with Perry

last week in the United States, which has agreed to resume missile talks with North Korea in Berlin next week.

Perry was appointed by US President Bill Clinton to draft a report on Washington's future policy towards North Korea.

"(Perry) suggested the Berlin meeting would produce a good result," Lim said, adding Perry's report would be announced simultaneously in Washington, Tokyo and Seoul after the Berlin meeting.

"Perry's report has already been completed. I had the feeling that it could be revised based on the outcome of US-NKorea talks in Berlin."

Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency said Saturday the Berlin meeting would begin on September 7.

"(North Korea and the United States) agreed to have bilateral high-level talks on a regular basis and have held talks... to settle the outstanding issues of common concern through negotiations," it said.



A worker tugs on the nose of the wreckage of a China Airlines jet as the front third of the plane is lifted by a crane onto a flatbed truck for removal Sunday at Hong Kong's Chek Lap Kok Airport. After finding it impossible to move the plane in one piece, airport authorities cut it into three sections to facilitate the cleanup. Flight CI642 from Bangkok with 315 people on board flipped over during landing on August 23, leaving three dead and 206 injured. Thirty-one victims remain in hospital, one in critical condition. — AFP photo

Deal to implement Wye accord likely soon

CAIRO, Aug 29: The Israelis and Palestinians have come close to reaching a deal on implementing the Wye accord which will probably be signed in Egypt on Thursday, Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Mussa said Sunday, reports AFP.

Mussa said it was "probable" the two sides would sign an agreement in principle on implementing the Wye River land-for-security accords during US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's visit.

However, Mussa told reporters, it has "not yet been decided" that the US-brokered deal will be signed during her visit.

"There has been enough progress to allow us to foresee the implementation of the Wye River agreement," Mussa told journalists.

"We are waiting for the two sides to reach an agreement on all outstanding points" before announcing a signing ceremony, the Egyptian official said.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak was also optimistic about the chances of a deal when he spoke to the Cabinet Sunday and said it was possible one could be signed in Egypt on Thursday.

Mussa meanwhile warned that continued Jewish settlement building would undermine the upcoming launch of the final status negotiations which cover crucial issues like statehood, boundaries, Jerusalem, water and refugees.

"Settlements must stop because it is a dangerous issue which does not bode well for the future and can have a negative impact on the general atmosphere," he warned.

"The danger of settlements is not only clear to the Palestinians and the Israelis, but it also represents an obstacle on the path to peace," Mussa said.

He added that the "moment has come for reconciliation" between Syria and the Palestinians.

Continuing Syrian-Palestinian differences undermine inter-Arab relations in general. We hope this question will be settled and that relations and understanding resume between Syria and Palestine," he said.

Meanwhile, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators are to meet again Sunday for the second time in 24 hours in a bid to find agreement on procedures for implementing the long-overdue Wye River accord, officials here said.

The two sides met late Saturday, but broke up after three hours without reaching agreement on the thorny issue of prisoner releases.

However, Prime Minister Ehud Barak was optimistic about the chances of a deal when he spoke to the cabinet Sunday.

He said the arrangement could be signed in Cairo in the presence of US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who is due there on Thursday.

Dennis gains strength as it churns toward US mainland

MIAMI, Aug 29: Hurricane Dennis continued to strengthen Sunday as it churned along its slow course toward the southeastern United States, threatening a wide swath of coastline from Florida to Georgia, reports AFP.

Residents in Dennis' path stocked up on supplies and worry tracked the progress of the hurricane, which was blowing at close to 160 kilometers (100 miles) per hour with higher gusts.

A hurricane watch from north of Savannah, Georgia to Surf City, North Carolina was extended north to Cape Hatteras, the US National Weather Service said early Sunday. The tropical storm warning was discontinued from Sebastian Inlet to Plagier Beach in Florida.

"Although the center of the hurricane is forecast to remain offshore, the large extent of winds requires the warnings," the service said.

At 5 a.m. EDT (0900 GMT) Sunday, Dennis was 435 kilometers (270 miles) south-southeast of Charleston, South Carolina and 540 kilometers

(miles) south of Wilmington, North Carolina, the service said.

Hurricane force winds could be felt as much as 140 kilometers (85 miles) from Dennis' center, and tropical storm force winds extended outward up to 280 kilometers (175 miles).

The hurricane was moving in a north-northwesterly direction at about eight miles (13 kilometers) per hour. Dennis was expected to continue at that leisurely pace, turning northward and gaining still greater force over the next 24 hours.

Meteorologists warned that Dennis' slow pace meant it would pack an even greater punch. Forecasters said it was possible the hurricane would stall, probably in South Carolina, giving it still greater destructive potential.

"We do expect it to get stronger... it could go up to 115 to 120... miles per hour (185 to 195 kilometers per hour) Jerry Jarrell, director of the US National Hurricane Center, told CNN.

Boat owners in coastal communities are being urged to evacuate.