

Voting closes in E Timor

79 pc turnout likely

DILI, East Timor, Aug 30 : Most polling stations in East Timor closed voting at 4:00 p.m. (0800 GMT) on Monday with turnout expected to be at least 79 per cent, UN officials said, reports AFP.

Voting had officially ended but some polling stations would stay open to deal with queues of people still waiting to vote, said officials of the UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET), which organised the landmark autonomy polls.

UNAMET spokesman David Wimbush told a briefing that by 1:00 p.m. (0500 GMT), 231,946 votes had been cast at the 850 polling stations, giving a turnout rate of 52.9 per cent.

Nearly 47,000 people out of the 430,000 eligible voters were still queuing to cast their ballots, giving an extrapolated turnout rate at 1:00 p.m. of 79 per cent.

East Timorese were voting on an offer of autonomy within Indonesia. If they reject the offer, they may gain indepen-

dence.

Long lines of people ignored months of violence and threats Monday to take part in East Timor's historic vote on whether to remain part of Indonesia.

"It's good news so far. The numbers are enormous, thousands upon thousands of voters are out there," an official from the UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) told AFP.

But the United Nations also reported one UN staff member was hurt after shots were fired at one polling station at Gleno, southwest of Dili.

Senior UNAMET officers also went to investigate reports of trouble at Cassa in Ainaro district, south of Dili. And a helicopter carrying the UN representative for East Timor, Jamsheed Marker, was unable to land in Viqueque, southeast of here, when the helipad was occupied by militiamen.

The campaign has been marked by widespread violence and threats, mostly blamed on

pro-Indonesia militias.

But UN officials were optimistic. Most of the 850 voting stations opened on time at 6:30 a.m. as the territory's 430,000 people got their first chance to vote on Indonesia's rule since it invaded the former Portuguese colony in 1975.

In Dili's Kuluhun area, some 250 people waiting for the opening, led by a 66-year-old woman supported by two family members. The woman said she was injured in an attack by pro-Indonesian militiamen last Thursday in which six people died.

Twenty-four assistants trained by UNAMET, which is organising the ballot, were on hand to assist voters. Observers watched as the blue ballot boxes were sealed.

Each voter's finger was marked with invisible ink, detectable by a special ultra-violet lamp, designed to prevent militia members from identifying voters.

Portuguese envoy to Indonesia Ana Gomes said: "I see the determination of East Timorese people to exercise their democratic rights."

Pro-Indonesia militia leader

Eurico Guterres, who voted at a school near the residence of Nobel Peace Prize winner Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo, vowed to respect the result.

"It is the people who win or lose. The situation is safe. There is no problem," he added.

Pro-independence leader Xanana Gusmao, who is still serving a 20-year jail sentence in Jakarta, voted in the Indonesian capital 2,500 km west of Dili.

He called for reconciliation after the vote and urged everyone to turn out.

One UN staff injured after shots fired

A UN staff member was injured after shots were fired near a polling station in the East Timor township of Gleno during Monday's landmark self-determination vote, UN officials said.

It was the first reported case of violence on voting day. The campaign leading up to the vote on whether East Timor wants to remain a part of Indonesia has been marked with widespread violence, largely blamed on pro-Indonesian militias.



Hundreds of East Timorese voters wait to cast their vote in the territory's historic referendum Monday in this village 30 km west of Dili where some 50 people were massacred by pro-integration militia in a church last April. East Timorese turned out in large numbers despite the prevailing climate of fear. — AFP photo

Gusmao one step closer to leading free East Timor

JAKARTA, Aug 30 : Separatist leader Xanana Gusmao, voted in detention in the Indonesian capital on Monday but is set to emerge to lead a free East Timor, reports AFP.

Indonesia says that if East Timorese vote against autonomy, it will grant independence. And Gusmao, now six years into a 20-year jail term, is to be released in mid-September.

Gusmao voted at the United Nations office in Jakarta. Some 100 East Timorese youths kept well-wishers and reporters at bay.

He made no comment but made an appeal for reconciliation in a statement released for the UN-organised ballot.

"Today the 30th of August is a day of great historical significance in our liberation struggle," said the guerrilla chief.

"Today before the international community we will decide our destiny, our future, our freedom, our independence."

Gusmao said pro-Indonesian militias had created an intimidating climate but reaffirmed an order for supporters not to retaliate against militia violence, which has left nine people dead in the past four days.

"I order the youths and youth leaders to be in control of their emotions, to refrain from the provocation, and resist the temptation to respond to provocation."

East Timor must turn its back on the 24 years of violence which have devastated the former Portuguese territory since Indonesia invaded, said Gusmao.

Gusmao, who was moved from jail to house arrest in February, has throughout his detention worked tirelessly to promote an independent East Timor. This has led to comparisons with Nelson Mandela.

Like Mandela, he led an armed campaign before his capture and a trial that many foreign observers said was politically charged.

Independence would be the crowning glory of Gusmao's rocky life.

Born on June 20, 1946, Gusmao joined the Portuguese civil service in the 1970s, but by 1974 was caught up in politics as a member of the Associação Social Democrática Timor -- a new pro-independence political party.

He married Amelia Baptista Gusmao, and they have two children.



Jailed East Timorese rebel leader Xanana Gusmao casts his ballot at the Jakarta polling station Monday in a referendum for the territory's fate. Gusmao appealed to Timorese to vote in spite of the climate of fear. — AFP photo

Pakistanis slam forthcoming polls in Kashmir

ISLAMABAD, Aug 30 : Forthcoming polls in Indian-held Kashmir, part of nationwide parliamentary elections, were dubbed a farce Monday by Pakistani commentators and Kashmiri militants here, reports AFP.

Pakistan-based guerrilla organisations involved in the long-running separatist drive in India's only Muslim majority state have vowed to sabotage the ballot.

They claim to have stepped up strikes against Indian authorities in Kashmir, operating in tandem with local political and armed groups across the

disputed border.

Reports from Indian Kashmir almost daily violence appear to substantiate those claims.

"All Mujahideen groups fighting Indian rule in Kashmir are determined to frustrate Indian forces' attempts to take Kashmiri people to polling stations against their will," a spokesman for the Hizbul Mujahideen said Monday.

He said the Mujahideen groups were carrying out operations under a "unified strategy to foil the Indian plan to undermine the liberation movement by staging an electoral drama."

Taiwan appeals for end to stalemate with China

TAIPEI, Aug 30 : Taiwan appealed for an end to the long-standing stalemate with its arch-foe China Monday but reiterated its demand for equal status in any reunification talks, reports AFP.

"The stand-off (across the Taiwan Strait) over the past five decades is enough," Vice President Lien Chan told reporters, referring to the separation of the island and the mainland in 1949 at the end of a civil war.

"I do hope Beijing would share such feelings... but I'm afraid Beijing does not think so," Lien said in his first press conference after the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) endorsed him and running mate Premier Vincent Siew as their ticket for the March presidential elections.

Bilateral ties have hit their lowest ebb in three years after President Lee Teng-hui last month enraged Beijing by say-

ing he wanted relations to be on a "state-to-state" basis.

But Lien, currently one of the KMT's vice chairmen, is expected to continue with Lee's policy if elected.

"Now that Lee will continue to be the party chairman, there will be nothing wrong in consulting with him," he said. Lee, who is to retire as president in March, will remain the KMT chairman at least until the party convenes the 16th national congress in 2001.

Lien repeated the official explanation behind his mentor's claim to statehood. "Basically the remarks were aimed at clarification, trying to present the ongoing reality between the two sides," Lien said.

He said his government "in a goodwill gesture has taken actions in a bid to create a friendly atmosphere since 1991 although we still insist the Republic of China (Taiwan) is a sovereign state internationally."

Hurricane Dennis edges closer to US coast

MIAMI, Aug 30 : Hurricane Dennis continued to move closer to the coast of the southeastern United States Monday, as authorities ordered the evacuation of several Outer Banks barrier islands in North Carolina, reports AFP.

Tide levels along the South Carolina coast were running up to half a meter (two feet) above normal, officials said.

As of 5:00 a.m. Monday morning (0900 GMT), Dennis was about 160 kilometers (100 miles) south-southwest of Cape Lookout, North Carolina, and moving north-northeast toward the mainland, the National Weather Service said.

The hurricane was packing maximum sustained winds of 160 kilometers (100 miles) per hour, and moving at 19 kilometers (12 miles) per hour. It is expected to strengthen over the next 24 hours, the service said.

"Isolated tornadoes are possible in portions of eastern North Carolina tonight and Monday," the service said.

On its present course, the

storm could brush the east coast up to North Carolina before a Canadian air system pushes it out into the Atlantic by early Wednesday, National Hurricane Center Director Jerry Jarrell told CNN.

"I think there's reason for optimism but it's cautious optimism," Jarrell said.

A hurricane warning remained in effect from Little River Inlet in South Carolina to Oregon Inlet, North Carolina. A tropical storm watch was extended from Oregon Inlet, North Carolina to the Virginia border, the service said.

Meanwhile a gale warning was declared from Chincoteague, Virginia to Cape Henlopen, Delaware.

Two North Carolina barrier islands were being evacuated, while other evacuations in North Carolina were taking place in Topsail Beach, about 80 kilometers (50 miles) north of Wilmington, five beaches in nearby New Hanover County, and Bald Head Island, state emergency spokesman told.

Six gunned down in Pak village

ISLAMABAD, Aug 30 : Six people were shot and killed in a Pakistani village Sunday when a family feud turned violent, news reports said Monday, says AFP.

The attack in Chanki village near the town of Jauharabad in Punjab province was linked to an old grudge between two family groups. The Nation daily said, without giving further details.

The report said five armed men fled after opening fire on the farmers as they were watering their fields, killing six and injuring one other. The victims included four brothers.

Fresh tremors rock Turkey

ISTANBUL, Aug 30 : Five aftershocks rocked Turkey's earthquake-stricken Marmara region overnight, the Anatolia news agency reported Monday, says AFP.

The tremors measured up to 4.0 on the Richter scale and could be felt in the quake-hit towns of Adapazari and Yalova as well as in Balikesir in western Turkey and on the Princes Islands just off Istanbul in the Marmara Sea.

Two tremors, one of which topped 4.8 on the Richter scale, on Sunday shook Bolu province on the eastern fringes of the earthquake region, causing five damaged buildings to collapse and sending residents into the street in a panic.

The toll of the earthquake that struck northwestern Turkey with a force of 7.4 on the Richter scale on August 17 stood at 14,095 dead and 27,234 injured, according to the government crisis centre.

Anwar loses \$25m libel suit against Mahathir

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 30 : Jailed politician Anwar Ibrahim on Monday lost a \$25 million defamation suit against his former boss, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, reports AP.

High Court Judge R.K. Nathan struck out the suit, saying it is a frivolous abuse of the judicial process, the national Bernama news agency reported.

Mahathir had filed an application in April asking the court to dismiss the lawsuit.

Anwar, the former deputy prime minister, accused Mahathir of slandering him at a press conference on September 22 in which the prime minister graphically described Anwar's alleged acts of sodomy to the international media. Sodomy is a crime in mostly Muslim Malaysia.

Mahathir, in his defence, denied that the comments were calculated to disparage Anwar. He said he acted within his capacity as prime minister and had wanted to make known his reasons for dismissing Anwar.

Russia bombs mountains in Dagestan

MAKHACHKALA, Russia, Aug 30 : Russian warplanes carried out bombing raids on the Chaban mountains of Dagestan Monday in an operation to flush out Islamic rebel supporters, the interior ministry said, reports AP.

Russian forces began Sunday to zero in on villages in the Buntak region, some 70 km south of Makhachkala, where residents supported a Muslim insurgency against Moscow earlier this month.

A total of 40 suspected collaborators have been arrested in the sweep, the interior ministry said.

Access to the villages of Karamakhy, Chabanmakhy, Kadar and Durangy was under the control of Russian forces, the press center of the Interior Ministry said.

The order has been given to carry out air strikes also on the mountain areas near the villages and the Volshy Vorota pass further south, the Interior Ministry said.

The attack on the villages sparked a wave of refugees who fled further east to Karabudakhy.

11 killed as troops clash with militants in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Aug 30 : Nine Moslem separatists and two Indian commandos have been killed in a clash in northern Kashmir, near the disputed border with Pakistan, a defence spokesman said Monday, reports AFP.

The encounter occurred overnight Sunday in a forested area of Kupwara district, some 110 km north of Srinagar.

According to the spokesman, a detachment of commandos from the ninth paratroop regiment had cordoned off the area on a tip-off that it contained a separatist hideout.

In the ensuing shootout, nine militants and two commandos -- one of them a major -- were shot dead.

Kupwara has seen an upsurge in militant activity in recent weeks, with the separatists increasingly targeting army facilities.

More than 25,000 people have been killed in separatist-linked violence in Kashmir since Muslim militants launched an armed insurgency against Indian rule in 1989.

In another incident late Sunday, separatists hurled a

grenade at a private Indian television crew in Kashmir, seriously injuring six journalists. The attack took place as the crew's vehicle was trying to cross a narrow bridge on the outskirts of Srinagar.

One of the six injured in the blast had to have his leg amputated and was in a critical condition, a police official said.

The crew was working on an anti-militancy feature for state-owned broadcaster Doordarshan, whose reporters have been targeted by separatists in the past.

Tokyo may suffer repeat of Kobe disaster: Expert

TOKYO, Aug 30 : Japanese experts warned Monday that Tokyo could suffer a repeat of all the disasters that befell Kobe five years ago if a major earthquake struck, reports AFP.

Just weeks after the August 17 tremor that killed at least 14,000 people in Turkey, they warned Tokyo could endure a catastrophe to compare to the quake in the western city of Kobe on January 17, 1995, that killed more than 6,400 people.

"What happened in Kobe can happen in Tokyo," said Tsuneo Katayama, director-general of the National Research Institute for Earth Science and Disaster Prevention.

Depending on the magnitude of the quake, "aging houses will break down, burn and collapse like those in Kobe," the leading Japanese expert told the

Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan.

In the city's outer areas, "there will be a lot of fires and ageing concrete buildings built before 1970 will sustain substantial structural damage," he warned.

Residential areas created by flattening mountains would be struck by landslides, and soil on which homes stand could liquefy along rivers, valleys and shores.

"I am not saying that that will take place exactly," Katayama said. But "if a big one hits, all the things that happened in Kobe can happen in this area."

A survey published Sunday by Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi's office found in June that 34 per cent of Japanese had not prepared for a large quake,

up from 23 percent in the previous survey in 1997.

"I feel very, very sorry about the result," said Katayama.

Despite spending about 450 million dollars on a machine to test buildings and running annual drills involving millions of people, experts warned the key to preparations -- common sense -- may be lacking.

Yoshimitsu Okada, director of the Earthquake Research Centre, told the same news conference that decision makers "must have common sense and knowledge about these earthquakes."

"Shortly after the Kobe earthquake, there were strange reports from China that parrots were screaming and that might have meant that another big one was imminent," he recalled.

Just for visiting bachelor pads

KUWAIT CITY, Aug 30 : Kuwait's security services have arrested 25 women, including four Kuwaitis, for visiting bachelor pads known to be dens of iniquity, the Al-Siyassa newspaper said Monday, reports AFP.

The foreigners arrested -- four Filipinos as well as Lebanese, Syrians and Egyptians -- will all be deported, the newspaper said. They admitted that they visited the flats "to kill time and to have fun."

The Kuwaiti women will have to "pledge, in writing, to no longer frequent these places which are being used for immoral activities," the daily said.

The women were arrested in a police swoop on flats in the Salmiya and Hawalli areas of the capital, after complaints from neighbours.

While such visits are not illegal, Kuwaiti police have the right to question women visiting men who are not members of their family.



A Japanese girl enjoys a ride on a large lotus leaf, 1.3-meter in diameter, at a lotus pond of a botanical garden in Nagoya city, central Japan Sunday. The botanical garden offered an enjoyable moment to the children weighing under 30 kilograms. — AFP photo

US admin isolated on its sanctions policy: Iraq

BAGHDAD, Aug 30 : An official Iraqi newspaper on Monday said a visit to the sanctions-struck state by a US congressional delegation showed how isolated the Washington administration was in supporting the UN embargo, reports AFP.

The American administration is very isolated and is in an embarrassing position even if it says there is a unified position on Iraq," the ruling Baath party's mouthpiece Ath-Thawra said.

This position is contested in the United States... otherwise why would the state department be forced to oppose the congressional visit, and why would they (the delegation) persist in carrying out the visit?"

The daily's comments came as a controversial US delega-

tion arrived in Baghdad on Sunday to evaluate the impact of nine years of crippling UN sanctions on Iraq, imposed following the 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

The delegation comprises five congressional aides, a representative from a Washington think-tank and a member of non-government organisation in the first congressional fact-finding mission of its kind since 1990.

The truth is that the American administration no longer has any justification to oppose Iraq's right to a lifting of the embargo, and its lies can no longer convince anyone," Ath-Thawra said.

As the delegation arrived in Baghdad, Phyllis Bennis of the Institute for Policy Studies told journalists the delegation

would not "be meeting with Iraqi government officials, we are not here for those discussions."

"We are here to see (matters) on the ground as an independent fact-finding delegation... to get an independent look at the impact of the US policy that has been in place now for almost a decade."

The delegation is expected to meet United Nations officials and members of non-government organisations in Iraq, including the Australian group CARE and the Middle East Council of Churches, as part of their trip, Bennis said.

US State Department James Foley on Thursday said the US administration objected to the trip and said his department would not validate the aides' passports.

Vajpayee slams personal slurs against Sonia

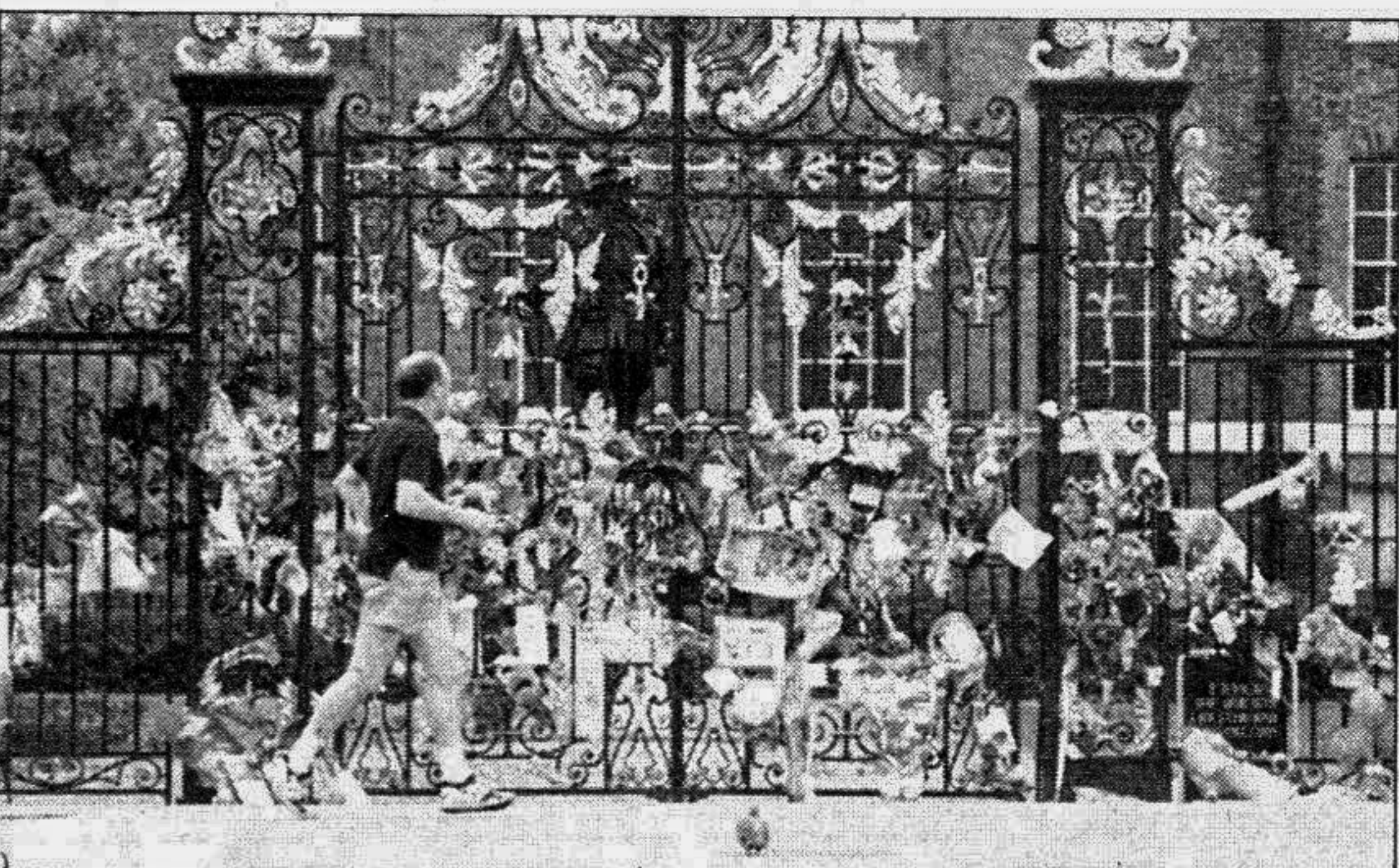
NEW DELHI, Aug 30 : Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee Monday denounced personal attacks by some of his ministers on Italian-born opposition leader Sonia Gandhi, reports AFP.

Vajpayee said in a statement in the northern city of Sikar: "I am deeply distressed to note the transgression of the standards of decent and dignified electioneering."

"I especially disapprove of any remarks about Congress party president Sonia Gandhi that are or can be construed to be undignified."

Vajpayee's remarks came a day after Defence Minister George Fernandes, a socialist ally, said Sonia, 52, had made no contribution to India except for mothering two children.

Fernandes' statement, on top of one last week by another federal minister equating Sonia with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky, was widely condemned in India.



An early morning jogger looks at the floral tributes, attached to the gates of Kensington Palace Monday, outside the former London home of Diana, the Princess of Wales, on the eve of the 2nd anniversary of her death in a Paris car crash. — AFP photo