

Israel, Palestinians reach crucial deal on prisoners

JERUSALEM, Sept 3: Israel and the Palestinians have clinched a deal on prisoner releases, the key obstacle holding up the signing of a revised land-for-security accord, Palestinian officials said on Friday, reports AFP.

The issue of the prisoners has been solved but there is still a small gap on other issues," the official said without elaborating.

Israeli army radio also said the Palestinians had accepted proposals on prisoner releases put forward by the government of Prime Minister Ehud Barak after three weeks of protracted negotiations but that differences remained on conditions for a final peace accord.

"But there is disagreement on the issue of unilateral measures. (Palestinian leader Yasser) Arafat does not want a formula that bars him from unilaterally proclaiming a state," the radio said, quoting government sources.

However, Barak's office said nothing had yet been settled.

"They haven't given us an answer. Nothing has changed," an official in Barak's office said, adding that there would be no signing ceremony Friday.

"There is no meeting right now. Regarding the prisoners, there is not going to be even one more prisoner let out, except these 350 that we agreed."

Israel had insisted it would free no more than 350 detainees, and was refusing to release those with Israel "blood on their hands" while the Palestinians were seeking the release of 400 political prisoners.

The disagreement about the fate of some 50 prisoners was the key stumbling block preventing the signing of a revised deal on the implementation of the long-delayed Wye River accord.

There had been hopes the two sides could resolve their differences in time for a signing ceremony with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh.

Egyptian officials confirmed that they had now abandoned plans to host a signing ceremony there Friday and cancelled a planned flight for journalists to the resort.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak flew to Sharm el-Sheikh on Thursday evening -- he is scheduled to meet Omani Sultan Qaboos there on Saturday.

Barak repeatedly threatened this week to implement the Wye accord, suspended in December by his hardline predecessor

Benjamin Netanyahu, under its original terms agreed to by Netanyahu in October -- terms less favorable to the Palestinians.

Albright's arrival in Israel after a round of talks with Arafat and Mubarak in Alexandria had raised hopes of an accord, but no breakthrough was reported after more than three hours of talks with Barak in Jerusalem overnight.

Albright made no comments to reporters as she headed into a meeting with Foreign Minister David Levy early on Friday.

— AFP photo



Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak welcomes U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright on her arrival at Barak's offices Friday. Albright met Barak following a day of talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat after Israelis and Palestinians failed to agree on a peace deal in time for her to witness a signing ceremony in Egypt.

— AFP photo

Clintons buy home in NY

AUBURN, New York, Sept 3: US President Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary signed a contract for a post-White House home in New York, they said in a statement, the surest sign yet that she intends to make an unprecedented bid for the Senate, reports AFP.

"We appreciate everyone who helped make our search for a new home an enjoyable experience," the Clintons said in the statement issued in New York where they were vacationing.

"We particularly want to thank the homeowners, their neighbors, and the real estate brokers who have been so gracious to us throughout our search," they said.

The Clintons are looking to settle in the state where Hillary Clinton has set up an exploratory committee for a Senate race in 2000.

The 110-year-old five-bedroom Georgian colonial house in the New York City suburb of Westchester County comes complete with a swimming pool, an exercise room, and close proximity to golf courses. It was listed at 1.7 million dollars.

Thousands protest in Aceh

JAKARTA, Sept 3: Police fired warning shots to stop a convoy of 2,000 people heading for a rally in Indonesia's troubled Aceh province, press reports said Friday, reports AFP.

The crowd lay down on the road linking Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh, and Medan in the neighbouring province of North Sumatra, after police forced their convoy of vehicles to halt around 18 kilometres (11 miles) east of the district capital Sigli on Thursday, the Jakarta Post said.

Police fired shots in the air when the vehicles refused to stop, and the people were then forced to leave the vehicles, the paper said.

"We only plan to attend a meeting, nothing else... the police didn't have to fire shots... many panicked," one of the participants said.

They had planned to attend a mass rally at the Darussalam University in Banda Aceh to call for a self-determination referendum for Aceh.

France drops case against paparazzi in Diana's death

PARIS, Sept 3: Two magistrates investigating the death of Princess Diana on Friday announced they would not press charges against nine paparazzi and a motorcycle messenger who chased Diana's car before the fatal crash of 1997, reports AFP.

In delivering their ruling, judges Herve Stephan and Marie Christine Devidal followed a recommendation from the Paris prosecutor's office saying there were no grounds to charge the photographers with manslaughter or failing to help the crash victims.

Diana, her companion Dodi Fayed, and their driver Henri Paul were killed in a crash in an underpass on the night of August 30, 1997 as they were being followed by the photographers at high speed through the streets of Paris.

A British bodyguard in the car, Trevor Rees-Jones, was seriously injured.

The judges said they believed

the accident was due to the fact that Paul was drunk and thus unable to control the vehicle at high speed.

"His state did not allow him to control the speeding car on a difficult portion of the road," the magistrates said in the ruling.

"He also had to avoid a vehicle traveling in the same direction but at much lower speed." Tests revealed that Paul, who had been taking anti-depressants, was three times over the drink-drive limit and the car as travelling much too fast at a bend at the entrance to the tunnel.

Dodi's father Mohammed Al Fayed, the millionaire Egyptian owner of Harrods department store in London and the Ritz Hotel in Paris, immediately announced Friday that he would file an appeal, his lawyer Georges Klejman said.

Al Fayed has repeatedly accused the British secret services

and the royal family of being behind the deaths of his son and Diana.

Judicial sources said it was highly unlikely, however, that an appeal court would accept Fayed's appeal and overturn the magistrates' ruling.

Al Fayed to contest Diana ruling

Mohammed Al Fayed, saying he was convinced the deaths of his son and Princess Diana were part of a plot, vowed Friday to contest a decision by France to drop the case against the paparazzi who pursued their car before it crashed.

But there was no substantial reaction from the royal family or from the princess's brother, Earl Spencer, who had been so scathing of the press in the aftermath of her death in August 1997.

"We have no comment," a Buckingham Palace spokesman said.

Police kill 2 MQM men on eve of anti-govt protest

KARACHI, Sept 3: Police shot and killed two activists of an ethnic-based party Friday, on the eve of a countrywide anti-government protest to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, reports AP.

The two men were killed in a western neighbourhood of Karachi, Pakistan's southern port city that is home to 14 million people, the majority of whom are considered to be supporters of the ethnic-based Muttahida Qami Movement.

The MQM, which represents Indian Muslim immigrants to Pakistan after independence in 1947, was unaware of the killings or the identities of the two shooting victims.

According to police officials who wouldn't be identified by name, the two men were asked to stop by police, refused and opened fire killing both men.

Police said they recovered two pistols from the activists and cans of gasoline, which po-

lice speculated the pair were planning to use to set vehicles, buses and tires on fire.

Demonstrations in Pakistan generally include the burning of vehicles, particularly in southern Karachi where entire neighbourhoods have been shut down while protesters set on fire buses and tires.

On Saturday Pakistan's combined opposition of 16 parties is planning nationwide protests. They have called for a complete strike with an aim to shutting down the country to press their demand for Sharif's resignation.

They have asked the entire transportation industry to abide by the strike as well as businesses throughout the country.

Sharif has been sending emissaries to meet with traders and representatives of the transportation industry to ask them to ignore the strike. It's not clear that he has had any success.

In the past one week police

say they have arrested nearly 700 opposition activists to prevent violence on Saturday. The opposition says more than 1,000 of their workers have been arrested.

Opposition politicians, who have been protesting throughout the week, complain bitterly that Sharif's government has ignored Pakistan's three smaller provinces in favour of his home province of Punjab, where 60 per cent of Pakistan's 140 million people live.

In Karachi, where protests traditionally turn violent, police have cordoned off the congested Burns Road neighbourhood where later Friday the MQM is planning to stage an anti-government protests.

Sharif has promised to use force against protesters if demonstrations spin out of control. His government earlier introduced an anti-terrorism law which makes strikes and agitation illegal and punishable by seven years in jail.

BRIEFLY

Panama tightens links with US: Panama's new government will cooperate with the United States on issues of common concern and tighten bilateral ties, said President Mireya Moscoso on Thursday. Xinhua reports from Panama City.

President Moscoso met with US Attorney-General Janet Reno yesterday, the first day of the term of office. The governing Arnulfoista Party, with Mireya Moscoso as the president, has traditionally maintained good relations with the United States. After the meeting, Reno left Panama City for home.

Quake shakes Athens: A mild earthquake registering 4.6 on the Richter scale shook Athens yesterday morning, but police said there were no reports of injuries or damage. Reuters reports from Athens.

Seismologists said the quake occurred at 8.30 am (0530 GMT).



Human rights activists stage a protest rally wearing black dress and beating on drums and cymbals Friday in Kathandu. Fifteen different human rights organisations are protesting over government's delay in fulfilling their demand for the formation of a Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights.

Lanka begins probe of PLOTE infiltration

COLOMBO, Sept 3: Sri Lankan authorities have begun probing possible Tamil rebel infiltration of a militia group whose top commandant was killed in a powerful bomb attack, officials said today, reports AFP.

Nagalingam Manikkadassan, the military wing leader of the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and his deputy K Ilanko were blown to pieces when a bomb went off in their base "Lucky House", Thursday.

The PLOTE said the bomb had been planted inside the building in the northern district of Vavuniya and was most probably detonated by remote control.

Police had earlier believed that it could have been the work of a suicide bomber.

PLOTE legislator Dharmalingam Sidhathana admitted their organisation may have been infiltrated by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which is opposed to Tamils co-operating with security forces.

Sidhathana said his party believed that the killing of Manikkadassan was the work of the LTTE. He said the PLOTE was holding its own inquiry on the basis that the attack was the work of the LTTE.

The attack becomes even more serious because it shows that there is very heavy infiltration of the PLOTE, a mili-

tary officer here said. The PLOTE co-operates with government forces in battling the LTTE.

In May, the LTTE carried out a suicide bombing and killed another militia leader from a rival group, Muthulingam Ganeshamurthy, in the eastern district of Batticaloa.

Fire damages Ananda Bazar Patrika

CALCUTTA, Sept 3: A major fire, raging through the third and fourth floors of the Ananda Bazar Patrika office since early this morning, seriously damaged the advertising, editorial and circulating departments of the leading Bengali daily, reports PTI.

Fire brigade officials supervising the operations said there were no immediate reports of casualty.

The fire, which broke out in the third and fourth floors of the five-storeyed building of the 75-year-old newspaper at 0530 hours, was still raging.

Thirty-two fire tenders were engaged in the fire-fighting operations for last seven hours.

The building houses ABP's sister concerns, 'The Telegraph', 'Desh' and its magazine sections.

Muslims urged to shun BJP, Cong

Army pledges to stay out of politics

NEW DELHI, Sept 3: The acting Pesh Imam (head priest) of India's largest mosque, Friday urged the country's Muslims to shun both the ruling Hindu nationalists and opposition Congress Party in upcoming elections, reports AFP.

Syed Ahmed Bukhari told some 15,000 people at midday prayers in the 17th-century Jama Masjid that both parties were responsible for the poor status of the 140 million Muslims in India.

But the cleric reserved most of his scorn for Sonia Gandhi's Congress, arguing it had done nothing for Muslims during most of the years it has ruled India since independence in 1947.

"We see no difference between the Congress and (the Hindu nationalist) BJP party" of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, Bukhari said in a 40-minute speech at the imposing redstone mosque.

Muslims form the largest minority in overwhelmingly Hindu India.

Indian Muslims have been among the traditional supporters of the Congress, but moved away after it failed to protect a 16th-century mosque from destruction by Hindu fanatics in 1992.

Since Gandhi became the Congress president last year, however, the community has begun returning to the party fold. Newspapers say most of the Moslems would prefer Congress in the elections beginning Sunday.

The majority of Muslims

will tilt towards the Congress," said Mohammed Muzammil Ahmed, deputy priest of the nearby Fatehpuri Mosque that was also built in the 17th century.

"Some Muslims will, however, go with the BJP," he added.

But Bukhari accused the Congress of taking Muslim support for granted in its campaign against the Hindu nationalists and its allied radical Hindu groups.

He said the Congress would never be forgiven by the Muslims for its failure to save the 16th-century Ayodhya Mosque from destruction -- an event that sparked horrific Hindu-Muslim violence.

"Grave injustice has been done to the Muslim community in India," Bukhari said. "Those who beg for Muslim votes during elections do nothing for the welfare of Muslims later."

Bukhari also hinted at forming a political party exclusively of Indian Muslims.

"Muslims can change the destiny of the nation. But that can be possible only when we utilise our vote as a weapon."

Reuters adds: The Indian army must be kept out of the electoral politics of the country as it could affect military operations in an uncertain security environment, the army said in a statement.

The army said it was open to inquiry into what led to a large-scale intrusion in northern Kashmir this summer, but the

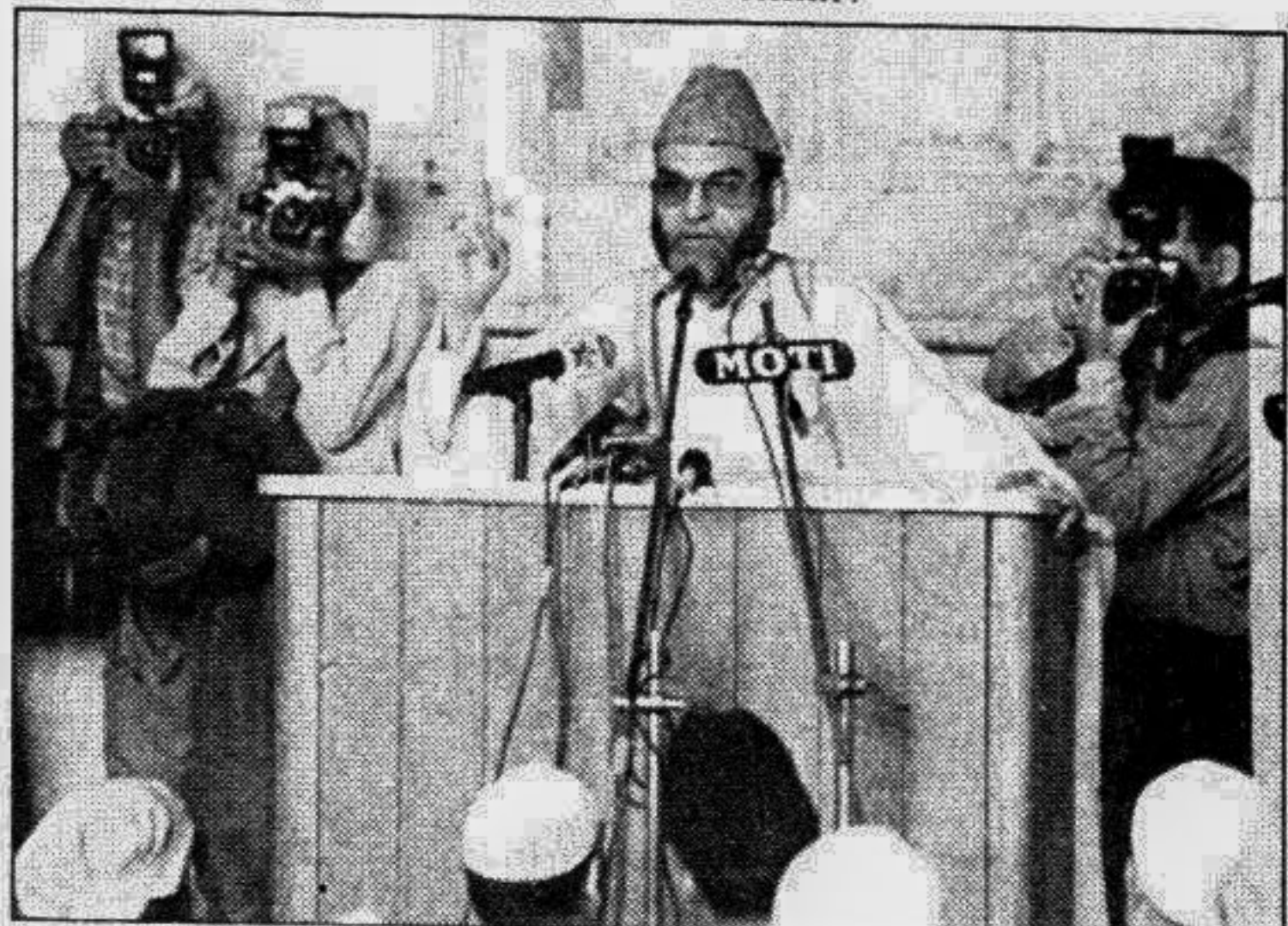
recent spate of allegations and counter-allegations by politicians and in the media would not help matters.

"If we were now to be dragged into electoral politics in so vicious a manner it will be a sad day for the country," said the statement, which was issued late on Thursday.

"We appeal to all countrymen, including media leaders,

please do not destroy the fabric of the organisation which has always stood by the nation," the army said.

India's main opposition party, Congress, has accused the Bharatiya Janata Party-led coalition government of ignoring warnings of intrusions in the Kargil sector of northern Kashmir.



Acting Pesh Imam (head priest) of India's largest mosque, Syed Ahmed Bukhari, gestures as he addresses devotees during the Jumma (Friday) prayer session in New Delhi's Jama Masjid. Bukhari, speaking ahead of the first day of voting in the month-long staggered elections, urged Muslims to shun both the ruling nationalists and the opposition Congress Party.

— AFP photo

Russia struggles to capture last pocket of rebels in Dagestan

NEAR CHABANMAKHY, Russia, Sept 3: Russian forces were locked in fierce fighting in this mountainous area Friday with Islamic rebels clutching to their last stronghold in the southern republic of Dagestan, reports AFP.

Russia's interior ministry announced Thursday that it had seized Chabanmakhy, which lies some 80 km south of Makhachkala, and was well on its way to wrapping up its campaign to crush the rebels in the coming days.

But one day after the announcement, Russian artillery continued to pound the Islamists who responded with mortar and automatic gunfire, and servicemen expressed surprise at the strength of the Moslem militants.

Muslim snipers in the mountainous region were also slowing down the Russian drive to re-assert Moscow's authority over the villages in the Butnakk district.

Philippine troops suspend operations against Muslim rebels

ZAMBOANGA, Sept 3: The military suspended operations against Muslim separatist rebels in the southern Philippines to allow peace talks to continue, officials said Friday, reports AP.

At least 18 guerrillas from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and four soldiers were killed in sporadic battles in southern Basilan province last week as the military pursued rebels suspected of kidnapping a granddaughter of a former town mayor.

Air and ground attacks on suspected MILF hideouts in Tipo-Tipo town in Basilan forced the kidnappers to release 4-year-old Wilmarie Furigay unharmed on Tuesday following negotiations with local police and civilian officials.

MILF leaders denied any involvement in the kidnapping and said the military was making up an excuse to attack their camps in Basilan, 880 kilometres (545 miles) south of Manila where the MILF has a strong presence.

Vote counting begins: Results today

UN evacuates staff from East Timorese town

DILI, East Timor, Sept 3: The United Nations Friday evacuated its staff from the militia-ruled East Timor town of Maliana, UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) officials said, reports AFP.

Two local UNAMET polls workers were murdered in Maliana, 75 km southwest of here, on Thursday, and some furious UN staff blasted Indonesian police for doing nothing while pro-Indonesian militia rampaged.

A convoy of 38 cars from Maliana, carrying 40 international UNAMET staff and 14 local staff, arrived at the UNAMET headquarters here at about 2:00 p.m. (0600 GMT) with some saying Maliana was in "anarchy."

"The UNAMET staff had sought refuge in the Maliana police station after the militia-men had gone on the rampage and torched houses."

"I haven't seen one ounce of police work since I got into this country," one angry UNAMET staffer said shortly after he arrived in Dili.

In a separate evacuation, four members of the International Federation for East Timor-Observers Project were on their way to West Timor under Indonesian police escort Friday, said IFET-OP official Charli Shiner in Dili.

East Timor's Human Rights and Justice Foundation told AFP that observers in Maliana had confirmed three civilians were also shot dead by Dadalus Merah Putih militiamen.

In Liquisa, another militia-ruled town 35 kilometres (22 miles) west of here, there were no plans yet to evacuate UN staff, UNAMET spokesman David Wimhurst said.

Militiamen had virtually taken over Liquisa and torched around 30 houses on Thursday.

Wimhurst did not say how many UN staff, including locals, were in the town.

Indonesian armed forces chief General Wiranto said Friday he had been told the results of the territory's landmark autonomy vote would be announced on Saturday.

But he declined to elaborate, saying only when pressed "ask UNAMET" -- the United Nations mission in East Timor.

UNAMET has said it expects the result from Monday's historic vote to be announced around next Tuesday.

The United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) on Friday began the actual vote count from the landmark polls to determine the future of the territory, UNAMET spokesman David Wimhurst said.

UN polling officials said that the proper count began at 6:00 a.m.



United Nations' election officials mix ballots from across the territory to avoid regional identification before the counting process begins inside the UN vote-counting centre in Dili Friday.

— AFP photo

Mass arrests in Myanmar ahead of uprising

BANGKOK, Sept 3: Exiled pro-democracy activists accused Myanmar's military authorities Friday of carrying out mass arrests in the capital Yangon, ahead of a rumoured uprising next week, reports AFP.

The All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABPDF) said 140 people had been arrested in Yangon recently, with the military targeting veterans of bloody 1988 democracy demonstrations.

Eleven years ago on August 8, 1988, or 8/8/88, hundreds of pro-democracy protesters were gunned down and a junta took power from dictator General Ne Win.

Dissident groups have said the people of Myanmar feel they have an "appointment" on September 9, or 9/9/99, to repeat the events of 8/8/88 and end the military's 37-year domination of politics.

The ABPDF said the junta also arrested high school students who held peaceful anti-junta demonstrations last month, bringing the total number of people arrested country-wide to about 500.

The junta has yet to respond to the claims.

Earlier the junta said a total of 37 people had been arrested in connection with the planned uprising, but predicted the so-called "four nines" movement would fail because the Myanmar people were "fed up" with

dissident groups.

"If they did not really believe that this potential existed... why have they arrested so many people and conducted such a massive crackdown?" asked ABSDF general secretary Aung Thu Nyein.

Earlier reports said, exiled dissidents claimed Friday the Myanmar military had launched a crackdown on pro-democracy sympathisers within its ranks.

The National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB) said seven officers and two rank and file soldiers were arrested last week in eastern Karen state after encouraging comrades to join the democracy movement.

"They had been circulating pro-democracy pamphlets, posters and stickers... and trying to organise fellow personnel to get involved in the democracy movement led by the National League for Democracy (NLD)," said an NCUB statement.

The men were "detained and interrogated by the military intelligence service," it said.

"The cruel treatment that officers provide for rank and file soldiers, and the general economic hardships that ordinary soldiers have to face while the generals enjoy the privileges of the ruling elite, have obviously become factors for disagreements within the military," the statement claimed.

Existence of new mass grave revealed in Kosovo

PRISTINA, Sept 3: New evidence of past atrocities in Kosovo has emerged with reports that 50 bodies were found buried in a garbage dump in the province's southwest, reports AP.

At a field outside Ljubizda, a blue plastic tarp covered what appeared to be parts of rotting clothing that reeked of decomposing flesh. The tarp -- at the foot of one of several mounds cordoned off by police tape -- was anchored on all sides by heavy stones and piles of earth.

A human femur lay exposed in a nearby pit, littered with a child's shoe and several plastic bottles.

No international troops or forensic experts were in sight Thursday. But a local farmer, Abedin Ademi, 67, saying he was repeating what he had been told by others, said the graves contained bodies of ethnic Albanians killed in April by Serb forces.

"The Serbs dug a deep hole and put Albanians in it -- men, women and children -- and dropped in a grenade. They buried those who were killed and those who were injured, even if they were still alive," Ademi said.

In London, British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook said that British troops had unearthed the bodies of 50 victims from the dump at Ljubizda, southwest of Pristina.

Such finds feed anti-Serb sentiment among Kosovo Albanians, and have led to a rash of violence against the dwindling Serb minority.

The head of Kosovo's former ethnic Albanian guerrillas on Thursday urged an end to revenge-taking against Serbs and called on them to return to the province.

Emerging from a meeting in London with Cook, Kosovo Liberation Army leader Hashim Thaci appealed to Kosovo Serbs to return "because we are interested in establishing in Kosovo a multiethnic society."

His comments were sure to be ignored by Serbs in Kosovo and elsewhere. They blame the KLA for the wave of anti-Serb violence since Milosevic's troops left the province in June as part of a peace agreement, in return for an end to NATO bombing.

Most of Kosovo's prewar population of 200,000 Serbs have fled since then, amid dozens of killings and abductions and other violence directed against them to avenge the deaths of more than 10,000 ethnic Albanians during the 18-month crackdown by Milosevic's forces.

In Belgrade, deputy Serbian Premier Vojislav Seselj accused the United States of being allied with Kosovo Albanian "murderers, drug traffickers and terrorists" wreaking violence on Kosovo Serbs.