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Jt venture bus service finally hits Dhaka roads this week

By M Shamsur Rahman

A joint venture premium bus service will finally hit the city roads this week after fighting a court battle with the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA).

Userix Nirapad Ltd, the first-ever joint venture transportation company, was scheduled to be launched on August 29 after being formally inaugurated by Communications Minister Anwar Hossain Manju.

But the move hit snags when BRTA issued an order on the same day stating that it had not issued route permits for the operation of the buses. The authorities said that it had only issued an acknowledgement slip, which can not be treated as route permits and that the company needs to launch the service with at least 40 buses rather than with only 11 it has.

Userix Nirapad Ltd applied for permission to operate its services between Uttara and Motijheel via Mohakhali, Farmgate and Dhaka Sheraton points. On July 21, 1999, the company received an acknowledgement slip specifying the routes.

Later on August 29, 1999, the company launched its air-conditioned premium city bus service at the IDB Bhaban in the presence of Communications Minister Anwar Hossain Manju and Malaysian High Commis-

sioner Dato Zukifli along with other guests and city elite.

After BRTA cancelled the launching, the company officials argued that as the route and registration numbers were mentioned in the slip, the authorities' claim that it is merely an acknowledgement slip does in no way support itself.

"In addition, when a car is registered, the owner is given an acknowledgement slip before the blue book is issued. The slip allows the vehicle on the roads," Managing Director of Userix Nirapad Ltd Feroz Mehdji said.

He also brushed off the BRTA argument that the company did not have the adequate number of vehicles to start the service. "Our application for the route permits were separately processed for every vehicle and were not related to each other. Therefore, the question of having 11 vehicles does not arise at all," he added.

He also pointed out that there was no such provision or condition in the Motor Vehicles Ordinance, 1983.

The company officials also pointed out that they had already invested around Tk seven crore and the authorities could have rejected their project proposal at the initial stage.

But as BRTA remained un-

wavered by the company's argument, it finally filed a writ petition with the High Court and the court stayed the BRTA order for three months.

After hearing the petitioners, the court also issued a rule upon BRTA to explain as to why its letter cancelling the route permit shall not be declared unlawful and having no legal effect.

Meanwhile, after winning the High Court order, the company planned to start its bus service from today, but was again forced to shift it due to the opposition-called hartal.

The company has already imported 14 air-conditioned 45-seater luxurious coaches, each costing Tk 50 lakh. It has also set up roadside shades for passengers.

Currently, only one private company is operating premium bus service on the route.

According to a World Bank report, there was a requirement for 4000 to 5000 buses in Dhaka city. The Bank also held an international conference inviting investments in the transport sector from all over the world.

Following the WB move, local businessmen started looking for foreign partners and finally a joint venture company between Bangladesh and Malaysia, Userix Nirapad Ltd, came into being.

Oil output cuts to remain in force: OPEC chief

ABU DHABI, Sept 12: Production cuts agreed last March by members of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) will remain in force, the body's president said here yesterday, reports AFP.

The agreement of March 1999 to cut oil output will be maintained until March 2000, said Yousef Youssi, quoted by the official WAM news agency.

There has been a great improvement in the price of oil, as results of [members'] respect for the agreement," he added, but warned that "world stocks remain high."

Oil-producing countries decided in March to reduce world crude oil production in a bid to boost flagging prices.

OPEC members accounted for about 1.7 million barrels per day (bpd) in cuts, while non-OPEC producers shaved an additional 400,000 bpd off their production.

Youssi is in Abu Dhabi for a 24-hour visit as part of a Gulf-wide tour ahead of the cartel's meeting in Vienna later this month, WAM said.

He is to discuss the oil market with Emirati Oil Minister Obaid bin Saif al-Nasseri during his stay.

Youssi, who is also Algeria's energy minister, is one of three candidates for the post of secre-

tary general of OPEC. Saudi Arabia and Iran have also named candidates.

Meanwhile, a report from Tehran says: Iranian President Mohammad Khatami yesterday hailed cooperation between his country and Saudi Arabia which boosted oil prices to their highest level in 32 months and he called for more work to strengthen OPEC.

Khatami's remarks came after he received a message from Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah delivered by a Saudi cabinet member, Tehran reported.

The strong stances of Iran and Saudi Arabia have led to a gradual increase in oil prices which are reaching their natural and rational levels in the markets," Khatami was quoted as saying.

"We must strive to make OPEC stronger and more coherent."

Khatami made a landmark visit to Saudi Arabia in May, the first by an Iranian president, which went a long way to dispel mutual suspicions between the former foes.

"Iran's increased relations with Saudi Arabia are a source of blessing for the people of the two countries and the region," state radio quoted the president as saying on Saturday.

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Talks on WTO entry resumes

Pact with China to be good for America: Clinton

AUCKLAND, Sept 12: As negotiations resumed today on China's bid to join the World Trade Organisation, President Bill Clinton began the task of convincing a sceptical US Congress and public that a pact with Beijing would be good for America, reports Reuters.

Record-setting US trade deficits have heightened protectionist sentiment in the United States, casting doubt on Clinton's ability to get a trade pact with China or any other country through the Republican-controlled Congress.

But Clinton told business leaders on the sidelines of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum that he was committed to bringing Beijing into the 134-member WTO as soon as possible, assuring them that he would not cave to domestic pressure to rebuff the Chinese.

US businesses have a lot riding on a pact since it would help them tap China's vast market, the world's largest with 1.2 billion consumers. They criticised Clinton in April when he backed a way from an agreement in hope of winning more market-opening concessions.

"I want to assure you — every one of you — that we are working hard to make it happen soon," Clinton said in Auckland, New Zealand.

After meeting with Chinese President Jiang Zemin on Saturday, Clinton instructed his

top negotiator, Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky, to jump-start WTO talks with her Chinese counterpart, Trade Minister Shi Guangsheng.

China had suspended the talks after NATO's May 7 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, sent Sino-US relations to their lowest point since diplomatic contacts were established in 1971.

Barshefsky and Shi began their meeting early on Sunday.

US officials said a pact could be completed relatively quickly. Commerce Secretary William Daley said negotiations could take just two weeks, so long as the Chinese stick to the market-access promises they made earlier this year.

Despite these obstacles, White House economic adviser Gene Sperling said Clinton and his economic team were committed to securing normal trade relations status for China by year's end by "whatever steps are necessary."

Clinton insisted on Sunday that a pact would benefit the US economy in the long run, an argument he will use to convince lawmakers and the public later this year.

"In our country, we have had remarkable growth with low inflation, thanks in no small measure to greater competition," Clinton said. "The world trading system will be even more beneficial as more nations commit to play by its rules."

Many US lawmakers are sceptical of free-trade agreements in general, and trade with China in particular, reflecting the views of a growing number of Americans who worry that cheaper foreign-made goods will put them out of work.

Other groups want a commitment from Beijing to improve human rights, labour and environmental standards.

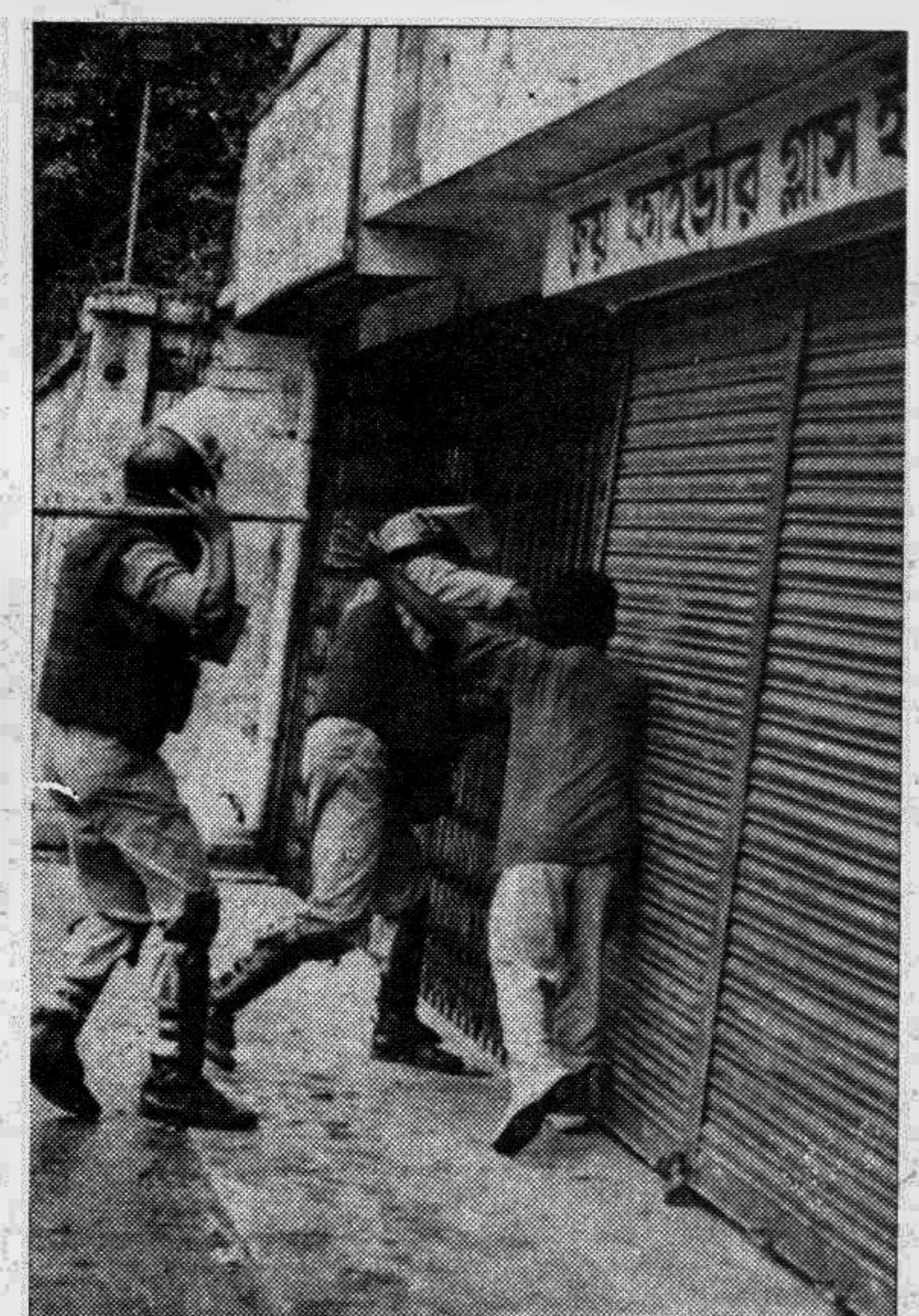
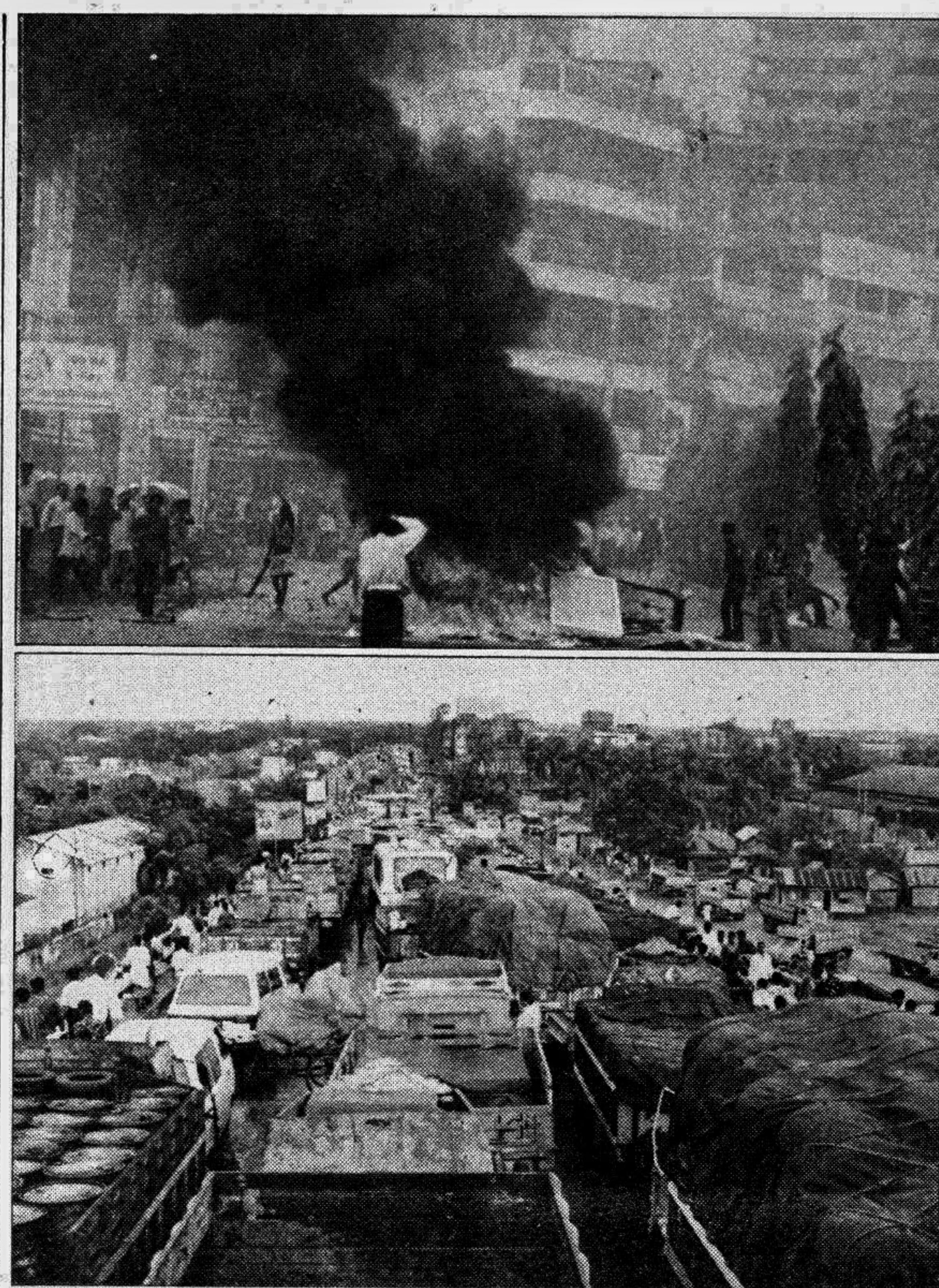
Many Republicans in Congress want Clinton to address their concerns about alleged Chinese espionage at US nuclear labs, and are pressing the White House to increase security for Taiwan.

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Clinton will not vote on China's WTO entry. But as part of the pact, Clinton must persuade lawmakers to grant Beijing permanent most-favoured nation status, which the United States now refers to as normal trade relations.



Business at a standstill: Motijheel, the city's business hub, was gripped by panic yesterday as the police and opposition fought a series of battles during a sit-in demonstration. Shops kept their shutters down throughout the day (above), as demonstrators clashed with the law-enforcers. Brand new cars and motor bikes went up in smoke (top-left). Those who managed to attend the offices braving violence, basically spent the day in anxiety and political gossips. At the same time, the Dhaka-Chittagong highway link, was totally cut off as vehicles could neither enter nor exit the city (bottom). As a result, exports suffered the most. Businessmen are bitter about the whole situation as the three-day hartal starting from today will further dent their activities.

—Star photo by AKM Mohsin

Anti-group conference told

APEC free trade agenda ignores ordinary people

AUCKLAND, Sept 12: "Free trade" — APEC's buzzword, panacea and holy grail — is inciting the ire of grassroots groups around the Asia-Pacific region opposed to what they see as the forum's exclusive focus on business, reports AFP.

Many are questioning how free trade liberalisation and the expansion of global markets advocated by APEC — the 21-member Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum — have addressed poverty, homelessness, unemployment and human rights.

And the overshadowing of APEC's "strictly business" agenda by the East Timor crisis highlights one of the main criticisms of the forum — that there is something immoral in refusing to include, or at least in sidelining, political issues.

For many New Zealanders, APEC is a flashpoint for growing disillusionment with the promised "economic miracle" the country's free trade policies were supposed to have delivered.

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