

# Arafat visits Israel for secret meet with Barak

JERUSALEM, Sept 17: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat made a rare visit to Israel for a secret overnight meeting with Prime Minister Ehud Barak to advance negotiations on a final peace agreement.

"It was a positive and important meeting," a Palestinian official told AFP on Friday.

"The main aim of the meeting was to create a suitable grounding for fruitful and positive talks on the final status (of the Palestinian territories) and implementation of interim agreements," he said.

Israel and the Palestinians formally launched final status negotiations at a ceremony on Monday with the aim of reaching a comprehensive peace agreement by September 2000.

But the Palestinian official

said the meeting, held near Tel Aviv, was not a negotiating session but more of a general discussion.

"It was a positive meeting," said Barak advisor David Ziso, declining to give more details about the encounter.

It was the first time Arafat has been in Israel since he paid a condolence visit to Leah Rabin, the widow of former premier Yitzhak Rabin who was slain by a right-wing extremist in November 1995.

The two leaders last met on September 13 for the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh accord in Egypt, which paved the way for the launch of the final status talks and ended a 10-month impasse in peacemaking.

PLO number two Mahmud Abbas, who is supervising the

Palestinian negotiating teams, also attended the overnight meeting along with chief negotiator Yasser Abed Rabbo, the Palestinian official said.

But Foreign Minister David Levy said he was "surprised" by the news, adding that he would deplore any such encounter that might have taken place without his involvement.

"I have not been informed," said Levy, who heads the Israeli delegation for negotiations on the final status of the Palestinian territories. "I have just heard about this from the radio."

Israeli radio said Barak had telephoned Levy on Friday morning to apologise for not informing him, saying it was the result of a "technical" error.



Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi listens to a question during a debate with two other candidates, ex-Liberal Democratic Party secretary general Koichi Kato and former chief policy coordinator Taku Yamasaki, for their presidential race of ruling LDP at the Japan National Press Club in Tokyo Friday. —AFP photo

## Obuchi clears debate for re-election

TOKYO, Sept 17: Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi cleared a key political debate with his two tough rivals on Friday, taking another step forward to his re-election as head of the ruling party, reports AFP.

Obuchi took part in the televised debate, which came ahead of Tuesday's election, with opponents from his Liberal Democratic Party: former party secretary general Koichi Kato and Taku Yamasaki, a former policy chief.

The two candidates criticised Obuchi's plan to form a three-party coalition, saying there was a wide policy gap between the three parties involved: the LDP, the Liberal Party and the New Komeito Party.

But Obuchi replied: "By forming a coalition, we can work hard together and create better ideas, which is our advantage."

## Fresh Iraqi incursion in Kuwait

KUWAIT CITY, Sept 17: Two Kuwaiti guards shot dead along the Iraqi border were killed by "aggressors" who had penetrated well into the emirate's territory before opening fire, press reports said Friday, reports AFP.

Iraqi aggressors led an incursion into the demilitarised zone and advanced 15 km inside Kuwait before shooting the Kuwaiti guards on Thursday, the Al-Qabas paper said, citing "informed" sources.

But the interior ministry said earlier Friday that Lieutenant Awad Ramadan al-Zafiri and Abdullah al-Matiri were killed by gunfire from Iraqi territory.

The official KUNA news agency said Thursday the pair were killed while carrying out a routine patrol on the Kuwaiti side of the border.

"The two agents were injured by bullets fired from the Iraqi side and died after being flown by helicopter to a hospital in Jahra'a in northwest Kuwait," it said.

Kuwait's Al-Anbaa newspaper said two other guards were injured in the attack and had been hospitalised. It described the incident as "a new act of piracy committed by the Iraqi regime."

## US Senate okays doubling of presidential salary

WASHINGTON, Sept 16: The US Senate gave its final approval Thursday to a presidential pay hike, elevating the chief executive's salary from 200,000 dollars a year to 400,000 dollars, reports AFP.

President Bill Clinton, however, will not enjoy the benefits of the raise -- the first for the office in 30 years -- since it will go into effect once his successor takes office in January 2001.

The measure was included in a bill outlining 28 billion dollars in budgetary spending, and was approved in a 54-38 vote.

The bill, which has already been approved by the House of Representatives, now goes to the White House for Clinton's signature.

## Indonesian House okays splitting of 2 provinces

JAKARTA, Sept 17: Indonesia's parliament has agreed to split the vast eastern provinces of Irian Jaya and Maluku into five separate provinces, reports AFP.

The 5.5 million square kilometre (2.2 million square mile) province of Irian Jaya was split into three provinces -- Irian Jaya, West Irian Jaya and Central Irian Jaya -- while the Maluku island province was split into North Maluku Province and Maluku Province, the Kompas daily said.

The decision was passed by parliament on Thursday but will also have to be approved by the president.

Also agreed was the formation of 32 new districts. Kompas said.

Indonesia currently has 27 provinces, including East Timor which the United Nations does not recognize as Indonesian territory.

# Centre-left parties may form next govt in India: Surjeet

NEW DELHI, Sept 17: An Indian opposition leader insisted Friday that centre-left parties could form the next government after ongoing elections, but political analysts dismissed the possibility, reports AFP.

Harkishan Singh Surjeet of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) said "a third front of like-minded parties" would play a key role in shaping the country's new government.

"A third front is just a matter of time," the Press Trust of India (PTI) quoted Surjeet as saying in the eastern city of Patna. "It will come into being the moment polls are over and the results are known."

India's staggered September-October elections are widely expected to return Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu

nationalist-led to power. But recent opinion polls say the main opposition Congress party of Sonia Gandhi could do better than expected, reducing the alliance's chances of a significantly increased majority in the 545-member parliament.

This has fuelled speculation that small centre-left groups that have earlier opposed both the Hindu nationalists and Congress could join hands to take advantage of a confused political scenario.

Surjeet, whose CPI-M played a crucial role in propelling a "third front" government in New Delhi in 1996-97, said "serious efforts" were on to forge "a (new) strong and vibrant" coalition of friendly parties.

But analyst N. Bhaskara Rao said such a scenario was highly

unlikely. "There is absolutely no possibility of a third front emerging after the elections unless the Vajpayee-led coalition breaks up," Rao told AFP.

"I rule that out. As of now, it is clear Vajpayee will again form the government."

Rao said some regional and communist leaders were talking about a "third front" because "politicians have to keep talking about capturing political power. If they don't do it, how can they be in business?"

Surjeet was also rebuked by The Times of India for speculating about a post-election third front.

"If Indian politics is a circus, then Surjeet is its supreme juggler," it said. "He can conjure up things where they don't exist."

# Hurricane Floyd kills 10 in US

NEW YORK, Sept 17: At least ten deaths are being blamed in the United States on Hurricane Floyd, now downgraded to a tropical storm, as it rapidly moved north, battering New England with heavy rain and strong wind, reports AFP.

Seven people died in the Carolinas and Virginia after Floyd made landfall early Thursday, local emergency officials said, mainly in weather-related traffic accidents.

Later in the day two girls were swept away by a storm-swollen creek and died when trapped in a sewage pipe in Delaware, state police reported. And in Virginia, local media reported that a woman was crushed to death by a tree toppled by strong wind.

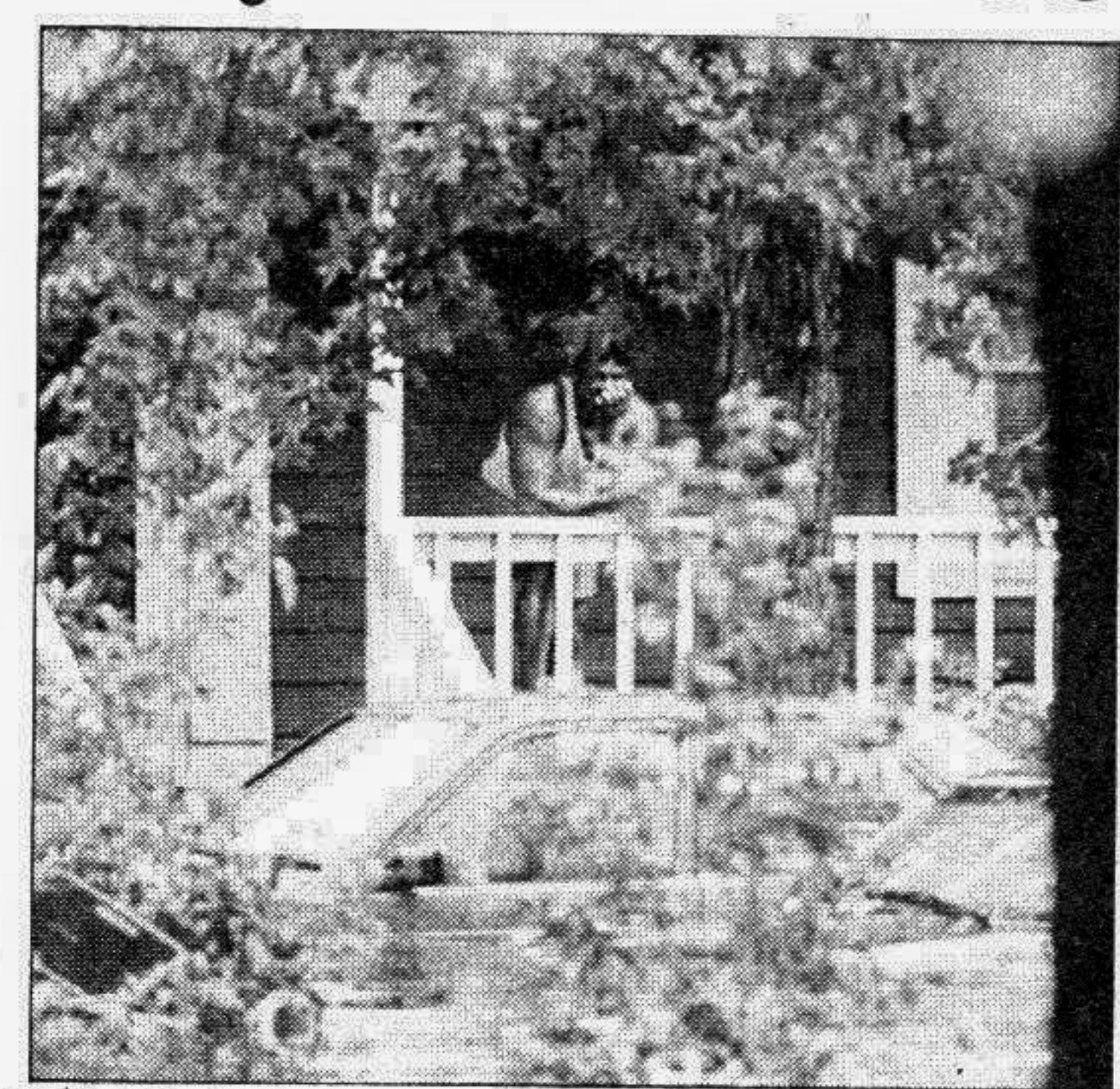
At 2:00 a.m. (0600 GMT) Friday the eye of Floyd was near Worcester, Massachusetts, the Taunton, Maine office of the US National Weather Service reported.

The storm was moving rapidly in a northeasterly direction, and expected to reach Maine around sunrise.

The tropical storm winds of up to 113 km per hour had knocked down trees and power lines across Rhode Island, Connecticut and southeast Massachusetts: early Friday up to 29,000 customers were reportedly without power in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, the NWS reported.

Floyd -- downgraded to a tropical storm Thursday -- pounded New York with heavy rain and powerful wind, causing widespread flooding and power outages.

Power crews were working into the night to restore power to some 19,000 Long Island



Daniel Graham looks from his porch as two of his cars stand partially covered by water in his front yard near Bolton, North Carolina the morning after winds from Hurricane Floyd whipped the region early Thursday. Hurricane Floyd made landfall near Wilmington, NC packing winds of 120 mph. —AFP photo

customers after power lines went down there.

As Floyd continued to weaken, the main threat remained heavy rain and inland flooding, the NWS said.

Rainfall totals have ranged from 10 to 30 centimetres (four to 12 inches) across the region, with the highest amounts being dumped over New Jersey and New York.

"This has turned into a water-rain event," said Dennis Michalski of New York's emergency management centre. "We're getting a lot of water."

The hurricane first crashed ashore in North Carolina, then flew up the east coast over New York state, moving north-northeast at about 48 km per hour.



Housing Inspector John Starczynski makes his way among downed utility poles on North Topsail Beach on Topsail Island, North Carolina, Thursday after Hurricane Floyd passed during the night. Officials anticipate that residents will not be allowed to return to their homes for several days. —AFP photo

# Indonesia starts pulling troops out of E Timor

JAKARTA, Sept 17: Indonesia pulled more troops out of East Timor Friday as the United States said it would commit 200 soldiers to the 7,000-strong multinational force poised to enter the devastated territory, reports AFP.

Indonesian military officials said about 5,000 East Timor-raised troops were being withdrawn in order to minimise the risk of conflict when the Australian-led peace force arrived, expected as early as this weekend.

President Bill Clinton announced in Washington that the American contingent in the force would provide "limited but essential" support in the form of airlift, intelligence, communications and logistics.

The Pentagon said the size of the US contingent could grow as Australia determined its needs in assembling the force to secure the territory and end a wave of bloodshed by militias opposed to independence from Indonesia.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard said Friday US combat troops would join the force if it came under attack by elements of the Indonesian army.

In Darwin, where the force is being assembled, an Australian Defence Force source said the operation's commander, Major-General Peter Cosgrove, may fly to Dil Saturday to consult with Indonesian officers.

Cosgrove was expected to meet Major-General Kiki Syahnakri, who is charged with overseeing martial law in East Timor.

The ADF source said Cosgrove planned to land in the East Timor capital with a small advance party.

## US will step in if Peacekeepers attacked: Howard

The United States could step up its military involvement if the Indonesian army attacked the Australian-led security force in East Timor, Prime Minister John Howard said Friday.

Howard warned Indonesia that any army attacks would spark a massive reaction from the rest of the world.

"They must, of course, contemplate that if that were to occur, then that in turn would provoke a much stronger level of intervention and retaliation including, I believe, a much stronger involvement by countries that are now giving important support but not massive support," he told a Melbourne radio station.

## Japan to revise law to join E Timor force

Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi said Friday his government planned to revise the country's peacekeeping law to allow Japanese soldiers to join the multinational force for East Timor.

Obuchi told a news conference that a planned coalition to be formed by his Liberal Democratic Party, the Liberal Party and the New Komeito Party had already agreed on the revision.



Australian Army soldiers sit in their armoured troop carrier before a training exercise at Robertson Barracks on the outskirts of Darwin Friday. Over 4,000 Australian troops will lead an international armed peacekeeping force into East Timor to restore law and order in the troubled territory. —AFP photo

## 6 militants killed in violence in Kashmir

JAMMU, India, Sept 17: Six separatists have been killed in a clash between Indian troops and guerrillas in the restive north Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, defence officials said today, reports Reuters.

A defence spokesman said the militants from the Kotli district in Pakistan-ruled Kashmir were killed near Keri in the border district of Rajouri. Keri lies about 20 km (15 miles) from the Line of Control dividing the disputed Himalayan region between India and Pakistan.

"Details are pouring in as the operation is still going on," added the spokesman in Jammu, the winter capital of the state.

He said Indian troops had recovered seven assault rifles, three pistols, a rocket launcher, two radio sets, 10 grenade launchers, 28 hand grenades, and 110,000 rupees (\$2,528) from the site of the clash.

Separatist violence involving Kashmiri guerrillas has been on the rise since Indian troops dislodged armed infiltrators from northern Kashmir in July after a two-month operation.

Nearly a dozen militant groups are fighting New Delhi's rule in Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state. Police and hospitals say more than 25,000 people have been killed in the nearly 10-year-old rebellion in the Himalayan region.

## Muslim leader slain in Kashmir ahead of polls

SRINAGAR, India, Sept 17: Suspected Muslim separatists shot dead Friday a pro-India Muslim politician in Kashmir, a day before another round of national parliamentary elections, police said, reports AFP.

Ghulam Mohammed War, a local leader of the state's ruling National Conference party, was killed at Kathabada, 27 km north of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, a police spokesman said.

Rafabad is part of Baramulla, which is one of 78 parliamentary seats across India going to the polls on Saturday.

The National Conference is a pro-India party which governs the Himalayan state of Kashmir. It is allied with the country's ruling Hindu nationalists.

Muslim separatists seeking to end Indian rule over Kashmir have launched a violent campaign to enforce a boycott of polling in the state.

## Typhoon York kills 7 in China

BEIJING, Sept 17: Typhoon York has pounded southeast China, killing seven and injuring 72, local officials said Friday, reports AFP.

Six people were killed and 34 others injured when driving winds overturned a bus from Xiamen, Fujian Province and bound for the city of Shenzhen near Hong Kong, the Yangcheng Evening News reported.

The report said some of the victims in the bus were from Hong Kong, but did not give their names and numbers. Two of the injured were in critical conditions, it said.

Typhoon York, which was one of the most violent storms to hit Hong Kong since the 1980s, also killed one and injured 21 in Guangzhou, the provincial capital of Guangdong, a government official there told AFP.

"The situation has returned to normal this morning with the schools and public transport that stopped all activities yesterday, beginning to take up normal operations this morning," he said.

The typhoon also injured 17 in Shenzhen, but no deaths were reported, a local official said.

In Fujian Province, across the straits from Taiwan, airports which were closed Thursday began normal operations on Friday, while some 10,000 people were trapped by "serious floods" and rising waters caused by the storm, Xinhua news agency said.

## AI raps Lanka airforce over civilian killings

COLOMBO, Sept 17: International human rights watchdog Amnesty International (AI), Friday expressed concern over a Sri Lankan airforce bombing that killed 21 civilians in the island's north-east, reports AFP.

The presence of rebel targets in the region did not absolve the air force of its responsibility under international humanitarian law to take all possible precautions to avoid harming civilians, AI said.

In a statement, AI said it had written to President Chandrika Kumaratunga "expressing concern" that Wednesday's attack in the district of Mullaitivu may have been unlawful.

"AI believes that the reported high number of civilian casualties and the significant distance between the intended objective of the air strike and the actual place where the civilians were killed, raise serious doubts about the duty of the intelligence used before the bombing raid," the statement said.

The defence ministry here denied that civilians were targeted in Wednesday's attack and said the air force had bombed two positions of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

## Russian police find 4 tonnes of explosives

# Two dead in St Petersburg blast, minister rules out terror link

SAINT PETERSBURG, Sept 17: Two people died in an explosion in a block of flats in Russia's second city, but Interior Minister Vladimir Rushailo on Friday quickly ruled out a link with a wave of bomb attacks which have left almost 300 dead, reports AFP.

Police were quoted by the Itar-Tass news agency as saying that the blast was caused by a bomb, with the strength of 4-5 kilograms (10 to 12 pounds) of TNT which exploded just before midnight on the sixth-floor of the building.

An AFP correspondent on the scene saw the bodies of two pensioners at the site of the blast and police confirmed that the toll stood at two. NTV television initially reported that four people had been killed.

The blast in the port district happened just before midnight (2000 GMT) on the sixth-floor of the building, but Rushailo insisted the explosion was "absolutely not linked" to five bomb attacks across Russia since August 31.

"This incident is not part of the chain of bombings," ITAR-TASS quoted him as saying following a meeting of the government.

Initial reports after the blast late Thursday suggested it might have been caused by a gas leak but police were quoted by ITAR-TASS as saying that a bomb had gone off.

Rushailo said the explosion was probably an accident, noting that a jerrycan of petrol (gasoline) stored in a neighbouring apartment had also erupted, adding to the force of the blast.

However, he also noted that the editor of a Saint Petersburg newspaper who was politically active lived in the building, suggesting that the blast may have targeted him.

Two pensioners aged 60 and 70 years old died in the explosion, police told AFP. The three injured people were treated for burns, emergency officials said.

Whatever the cause, the latest explosion further jangled Russian nerves set on edge by four massive bomb attacks on residential blocks since September 4, an unprecedented campaign of terror which has left 291 people dead.

It came less than 24 hours after an enormous truck bomb devastated a housing estate in the southern city of Volgograd, killing 17 people and wounding scores more.

The attack came amid a nationwide security clampdown

across Russia's 11 time zones ordered by President Boris Yeltsin, who Thursday vowed to face down the terrorists, pledging "they will not break us."

No group has yet claimed responsibility for Thursday's attack. But an unidentified caller to ITAR-TASS on Wednesday claimed two previous attacks in Moscow and a third in Dagestan on behalf of the little-known Dagestan Liberation Army.

The caller, who spoke with a Caucasus accent, said two blasts at Moscow apartment blocks and a devastating car bomb on a military hostel in Dagestan were a "warning" to Moscow to halt its month-long campaign to crush separatist Muslim militants in the southern Russian republic of Dagestan.

Earlier, two Chechens were arrested in Moscow for alleged involvement in two deadly bomb attacks on the Russian capital, the Interfax news



A firefighter stands on the balcony of an apartment after an explosion ripped through the building in St. Petersburg Friday. Two people died in the blast, three were injured, but Interior Minister Vladimir Rushailo on Friday quickly ruled out a link with a wave of bomb attacks that left almost 300 dead. —AFP photo

## 99 pc of Algerians support peace plan in referendum

ALGIERS, Sept 17: Algerian voters overwhelmingly supported President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's peace plan at a referendum Thursday, with 98.63 percent of votes cast in favour of the scheme, interior minister Abdelmalek Sellal announced, reports AFP.

A total of 14,591,064 people voted "yes" in the referendum with just 202,151 no votes cast.

The final turnout rate in the referendum was put at 85.06 percent of the 17.5 million eligible voters, the minister said early Friday.

The referendum was a test of Bouteflika's "civil reconciliation" program, the cornerstone of which is a law granting full or partial amnesty to Islamic militants who surrender, as long as they are not guilty of "blood crimes" or rape.

## 24 die as train bus collide in Central Java

JAKARTA, Sept 17: At least 24 people were killed when a passenger train slammed into a passenger bus in Central Java, an official report said, reports AP.

Five other people were severely injured in the collision early Thursday at a crossing in the town of Pemalang, about 350 kilometres (218 miles) east of Jakarta, the Antara news agency reported.

All of the victims were from the passenger bus which was dragged 700 meters (yards) away from the crossing by the train that was on way from East Java capital of Surabaya to Jakarta.

It quoted 1st Lt. Muslih of the local police as saying the crossing was left open by the guard who was sleeping when the train was coming.

## BRIEFLY

## 6 die in Guatemala plane crash:

Six people died on Thursday when the small plane they were flying in crashed some 280 kilometres north of the capital Guatemala City in Guatemala officials said, AFP reports from Guatemala City.

The plane took off at about 12:00 locales (1800 GMT) from La Aurora international airport in Guatemala City bound for the plantation near the northern town of Coban. Zimeri said. The cause of the crash was not immediately known.

## US MIA team leaves for Vietnam:

A team of 98 US military specialists leave for Vietnam Friday with hopes of recovering remains that may lead to the identification of American servicemen listed as missing in action in the Vietnam War, a press release said. AP reports from Hanoi.

The team will join Vietnamese counterparts Tuesday to begin joint investigations and recovery operations in 23 provinces and cities during the 30-day operation, the US Department of Defense release said.

## Annan for tough measures to protect civilians in war

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 17: The Security Council resumes debate Friday on a report by Secretary General Kofi Annan urging it to adopt 40 measures to strengthen the UN's capacity to protect civilians in times of war, reports AFP.

"Civilians have become targets in today's conflicts," Annan told the Council when the debate began Thursday.

"Belligerents are increasingly taking care to avoid direct confrontation with each other. Instead their favoured strategy to gain ground is the exercise of terror against defenceless citizens," he said.

The report recalled that more than half a million people died during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda where entire families were executed in their homes and whole villages brutalised in

an orchestrated campaign of mass extermination. In the past two years in Sierra Leone more than 5,000 people had been deliberately mutilated, while in Burundi a quarter of a million people had been killed, the report said.

"We are at the end of a century that has seen the creation and refinement of much of the corpus of international law," Annan said.

He warned the Council that "failure to address these issues will erode respect for the Council's resolutions and so diminish the authority of the United Nations as a whole."

The two-day debate had not been scheduled as a decision-making session but a Western diplomat said a draft resolution had been circulated among Council members.