

'Violence may have killed tens of thousands in East Timor'

Militias defiant as peace force approaches

LONDON, Sept 19: The violence in East Timor may have claimed tens of thousands of lives, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said in a BBC-TV interview on Sunday, reports AFP.

Downer said he had no precise figures on casualties, blamed on Indonesian troops and anti-independence militiamen, but "it could be as high as tens of thousands rather than hundreds."

Last week, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation estimated that 7,000 people had been killed in East Timor, while between 300,000 and 400,000 had been displaced and more than 200,000 were at risk of starvation.

Downer described the devastation of property in East Timor as "very substantial," saying he had been informed that "something like two-thirds" of the buildings in the capital city, Dili, had been burned out.

The 7,000-strong multinational force preparing to take over from the Indonesians in East Timor -- commanded by

Australia -- would probably have to remain in place for two to three months, he said.

It would give way to a "more familiar kind of United Nations peacekeeping operation which will not be quite so overwhelming Australian," he added.

"But that will then in turn be in place for quite some time because the UN will administer East Timor for a period which could be around two years before East Timor becomes a fully-independent country," Downer said.

In Jakarta, East Timor's feared militias were defiant Sunday as peacekeepers approached their shores, vowing to resist and insisting the territory be split between their supporters and those who favour independence.

Eurico Guterres, commander of the pro-Jakarta Aitarak militia which has waged a campaign of terror in East Timor, warned his men would not be pushed out of their homeland by the international troops poised to land there Monday.

"The leader of the UN forces

from Australia is very wrong if he said he will repel the members of the PPI the moment he lands in East Timor," he said, speaking for the main militia group Pro-Integration Forces (PPI) of which he is deputy commander.

"He cannot force me to live under independence and I cannot also be forced to accept them (pro-independence supporters) to join me -- therefore there is a need to talk about the boundary of the territories," Guterres told Indonesia's Antara news agency.

His comments came as the Australian commander of the International Force for East Timor (Interfet), Major General Peter Cosgrove, warned the militias to hand over their weapons, saying his troops were authorised to use whatever force necessary to wrest control of the territory.

After a brief visit to Dili to discuss preparations for the peace force's deployment, Cosgrove said he was concerned about the threats of violence.

This is a cause for concern and I really hope that they will

understand that our mission here is only to bring assistance to all East Timorese in need of assistance," he told reporters.

But he said he had not yet had an opportunity to assess the risk for himself.

Shortly before he departed from the northern Australian city of Darwin with his advance delegation, Cosgrove said he anticipated "some disquiet" at the peacekeepers' arrival.

"It is hard to say whether or not the same militias who have visited this awful violence in East Timor will feel like trying their hand against a modern military force," he said.

Militia leaders have vowed to "fight to the last drop of blood" to retain control of the territory but Guterres did not say Sunday whether they still intended to resist the international peacekeepers by force.

However, a pro-Indonesia activist speaking from Atambua, across the border in West Timor, promised there would be attacks on the troops, which include a strong contingent from Indonesia's southeast Asian neighbours.



Commander of the United Nations peacekeeping force for East Timor Major General Peter Cosgrove (2nd L) boards an Australian Air Force plane from Darwin to East Timor yesterday. Cosgrove leads a UN delegation to Dili to prepare the way for peacekeeping troops expected to arrive today in the troubled territory.

— AFP photo

A polling station in India to cater just 3 voters

GUWAHATI, India, Sept 19: A polling centre in a remote hamlet in the far-eastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh caters to just three voters -- who don't seem too keen to vote, reports AFP.

According to officials, it is located at 8,500 feet (2,575 meters) above sea level at Chaku village, some 120 km from the town of Bomdilla.

Polling officials had to trek to the polling station because part of the mountain road leading to it had been damaged by landslides.

The only three voters live in two huts at Chaku.

"We shall have to make all formalities to conduct polls at Chaku despite the fact that there are just three voters," said Arun Daroka, the area's chief election officer.

In the 1998 elections, none of the three voted.

Gunmen kill Sunni Muslim cleric in Hyderabad

KARACHI, Sept 19: Unidentified gunmen shot and killed a Sunni Muslim cleric outside a mosque in the southern city of Hyderabad early Sunday, police said, reports AP.

Haliz Muhammad Idrees, 50, a leader of Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadis, was shot dead by two gunmen as he left a mosque in central Srayghat neighborhood of Hyderabad, 120 kilometers (72 miles) north of the port city of Karachi, a police official said on condition of anonymity.

No group has claimed responsibility for the killing. But police said the Sunni Muslim Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadis has been waging a dispute with another Sunni Muslim group over the control of mosques in Hyderabad.

No arrests have been made so far.

Rival Muslims sects routinely clash in Pakistan over ideological and religious differences.

Lanka tightens security

Ethnic bloodbath raises int'l worry as 76 villagers perish

COLOMBO, Sept 19: Sri Lanka's ethnic bloodshed has worsened with the slaughter of 76 civilians in attacks amid mounting international concern for the innocents caught between government troops and Tamil Tigers, reports AFP.

Women fighters of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas butchered 54 ethnic Sinhalese villagers Saturday in one of the bloodiest massacres in the embattled country in over four years.

The slaughter was seen by many here as a tit-for-tat revenge attack by the LTTE to avenge the deaths of 22 minority Tamil civilians who were blown to pieces by an airforce bombing raid three days earlier.

The attacks are again shifting towards civilians and as fighting between government

forces and the rebels intensify, the civilians will suffer more, an international aid worker here said.

Western diplomats here noted that the number of violent incidents in the past six months had been mounting adding to a daily death. About 10 to 15 people are killed in the conflict each day.

In the past three months, there have been a spate of spectacular suicide attacks carried out by the Tamil Tigers claiming heavy losses among government troops, civilians and rival Tamils.

The LTTE's July 29 suicide bombing of a moderate Tamil legislator here drew international condemnation and calls for a speedy resolution to the dragging separatist conflict which has claimed more than 55,000 lives in the past 27 years.

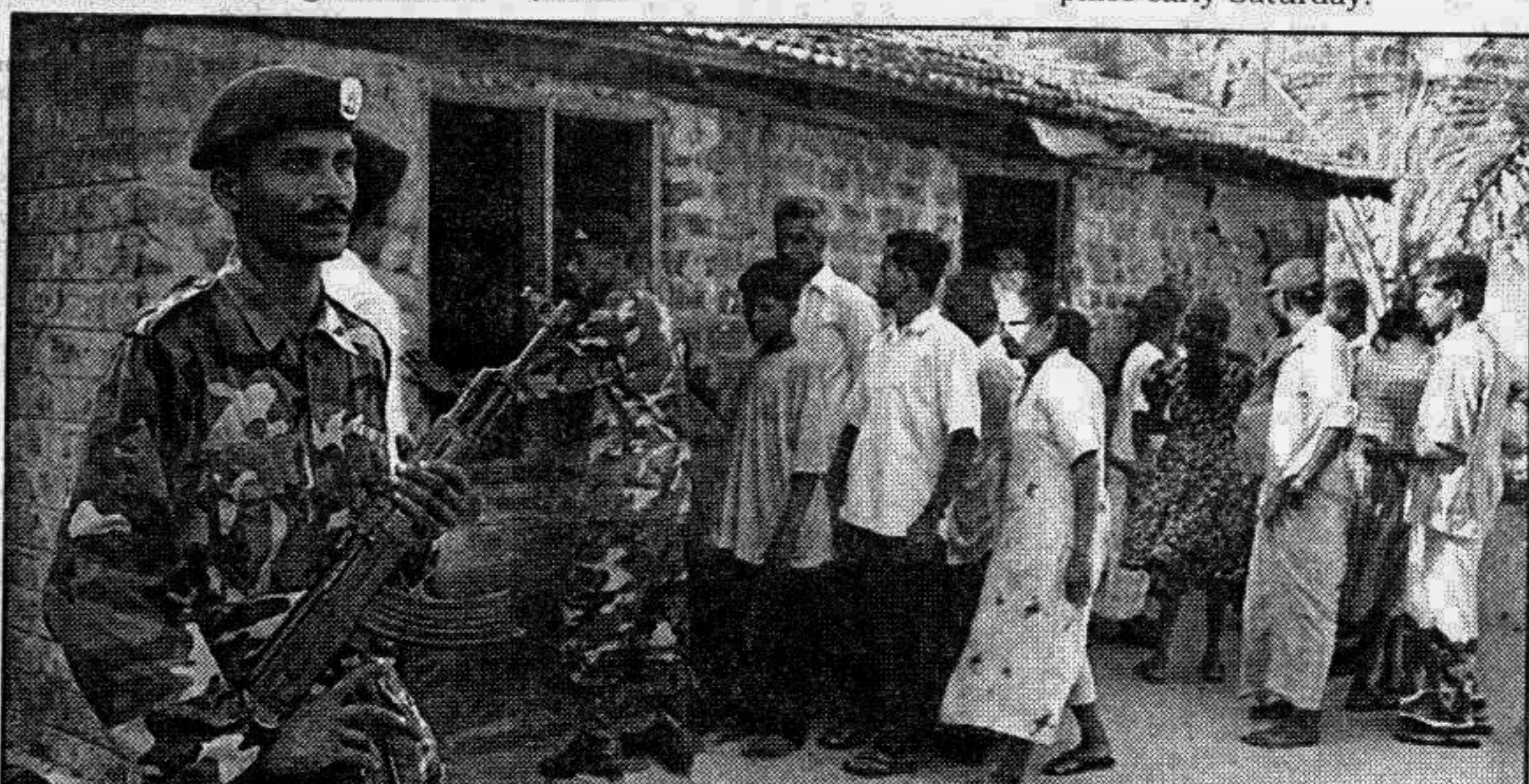
US President Bill Clinton strongly condemned the slaying of Tamil legislator Neelan Thiruchelvam and called on all sides in Sri Lanka to work towards peace.

Lanka tightens security

Meanwhile, more troops poured into eastern Sri Lanka Sunday as survivors prepared for a mass funeral for the 54 Sinhalese villagers hacked to death by Tamil Tiger guerrillas, officials said.

Junior defence minister Anuraudha Ratwatte ordered more than 100 para-military homeguards to be deployed in the district of Ampara, 350 km east of here after Saturday's massacre, officials said.

He said the authorities had made arrangements for mass burial at a cemetery in the same village where the attack took place early Saturday.



Armed troops take up positions at a funeral Saturday after Tamil Tiger guerrillas massacred 54 ethnic Sinhalese at the eastern Sri Lankan village of Panchisigiriya. A total of 54 ethnic Sinhalese were massacred in a retaliatory attack for an airforce raid that killed 22 Tamil civilians three days earlier.

— AFP photo

Police use tear-gas to disperse Anwar supporters

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 19: Malaysian police Sunday fired tear-gas and water cannon to disperse thousands of supporters of jailed ex-deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim at the national mosque here, reports AFP.

Some supporters were seen throwing stones, sticks and even flower pots at police, who then fired several rounds of tear-gas and water cannon, witnesses said.

More than 2,000 people earlier assembled at the mosque to perform prayers as police mounted light security, with several roads leading to the area sealed off and a helicopter hovering above, they said.

The crowd then stayed on to listen to speeches by opposition leaders including Anwar's eldest daughter Nurul Izzah, and occasionally shouted "Reformasi" -- Anwar's rallying call for reforms.

Police warned the group to leave but they refused, prompting the police action.

Pak court acquits suspects in murder of US diplomats

KARACHI, Sept 19: An anti-terrorism court in Pakistan has acquitted three suspects in the 1995 murder of two US diplomats and dismissed the case for lack of evidence, court sources said Sunday, reports AFP.

Judge Javed Alam on Saturday said the accused Saadat Mirza, Arif Tulu and Pervez Saliman Haider, were liable to be cleared, prosecutor Haq Nawaz Baloch said.

The trio, belonging to the Muttahida Qaum Movement (MQM), have not been released as they are wanted in other criminal cases, he added.

They were implicated in the killing of Jackie Van Landingham and Gary Durrell of the US consulate in Karachi on March 8, 1995.

Another US diplomat, Mark McCoy, was injured when unidentified gunmen ambushed their vehicle.

Court officials said police

failed to arrest any of the co-accused in the case or collect evidence and record eyewitness statements.

A police investigating officer told the court the absconders were dangerous criminals and no one was ready to give information about them because of fear.

Saulat Mirza has already been sentenced to death in the 1997 murder of a top government official. His appeal is pending at the Sindh High Court.

The court said the case would be re-investigated after the arrest of the absconders.

Earlier two MQM activists, Ahmed Saeed, alias Bharam, and Muhammad Salim, alias Ganja, were sentenced to death by an anti-terrorism court on August 4 for killing four US oil executives and their Pakistani driver in Karachi on November 12, 1997. They have appealed.

The MQM, which represents

Urdu-speaking migrants from India after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, has denied any involvement by its activists.

It has accused the government of trying to "defame" the MQM in the eyes of the international community and portray it as a "terrorist" party by involving its activists in the killing of the US officials.

The MQM has been at loggerheads with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government since last October when it imposed direct federal rule in Sindh to curb lawlessness.

The anti-terrorism courts have been set-up to provide "speedy justice" to the victims of violence and terrorism in Karachi, where more than 4,000 people have died during the last four years.

The MQM claims more than 50 of its workers have been handed down death sentences since May this year.

VHP vows to build Ram temple

NEW DELHI, Sept 19: Hindu zealots linked to India's ruling nationalists Sunday pledged to construct a temple on the ruins of a 16th-century mosque razed seven years ago, reports AFP.

The Press Trust of India quoted the World Hindu Council (VHP) as saying it was determined to build a multi-million-dollar temple for Hindu warrior God Rama in the northern town of Ayodhya.

Thousands of Hindu fanatics tore down the mosque in Ayodhya in December 1992, setting off the worst Hindu-Muslim violence in India since independence in 1947, in which some 2,000 people were killed.

The Hindus then hurriedly raised a makeshift Hindu temple at the site. The VHP has promised to replace it with a grand temple.

The VHP is allied with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party. The BJP has been espousing Hindu moderation in recent years in a bid to widen its mass appeal.

VHP secretary Pravin Togadia told reporters in the southern city of Madras that building a grand Rama temple on the mosque rubble at Ayodhya was "a national issue."

"The VHP is committed to build the temple," he said.

Hindus form the overwhelming majority among India's nearly one billion people. Muslims are the largest minority.

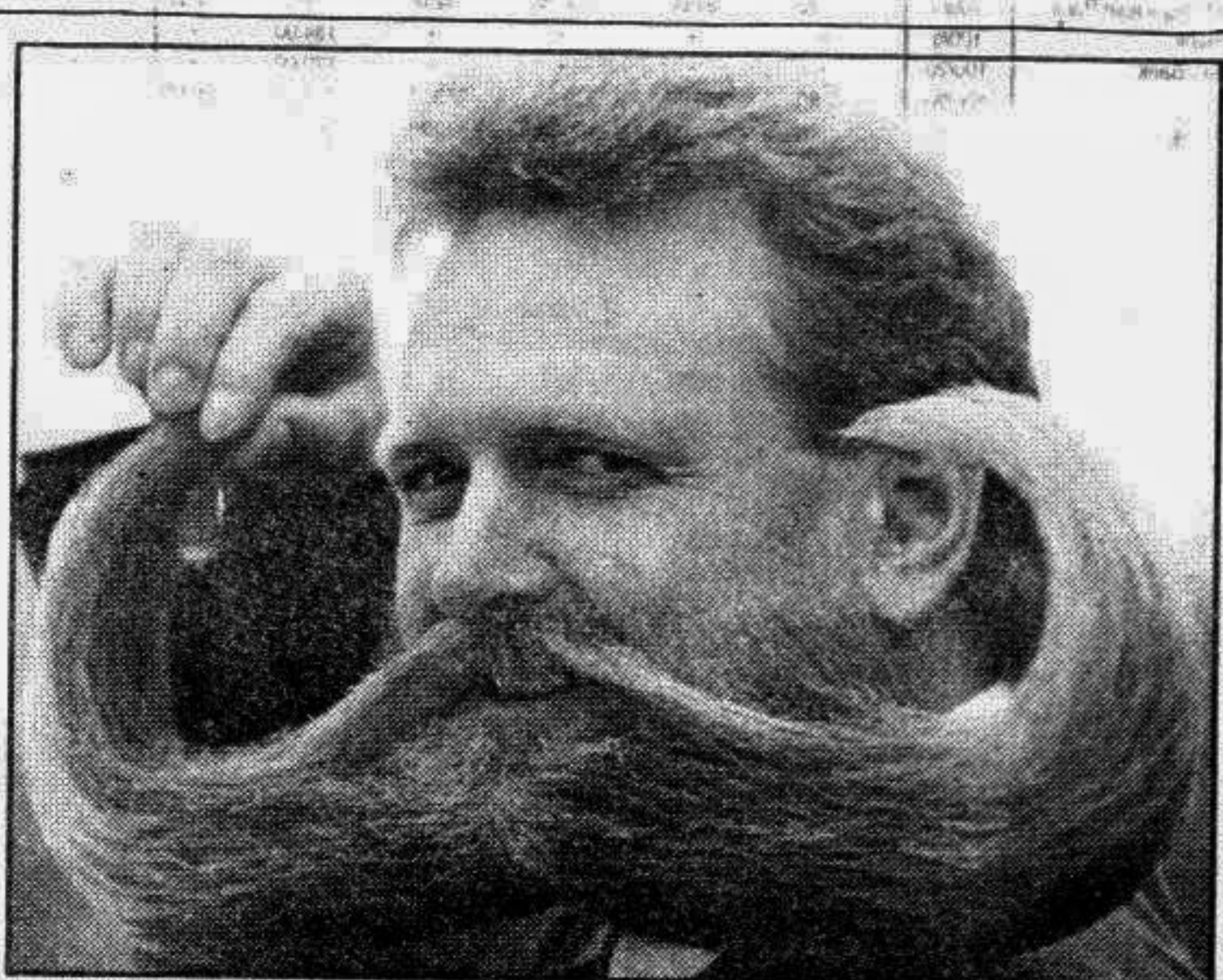
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Hirsute Dietmar Stohr gives a loving twirl Saturday to his eighty centimeter combination of moustache, sideburns and beard as he 'limbers' up for the forthcoming world championships in Ystad, Sweden.

— AFP photo

Orbiter to begin circling Mars on Thursday

WASHINGTON, Sept 19: The human fascination with Mars will enter a new phase Thursday when the US space probe Mars Climate Orbiter begins circling the red planet, peering at it from various angles and sending reports back to Earthling controllers, reports AFP.

"After travelling 670 million km (416 million miles) during the last nine months, Mars Climate Orbiter is now ready for its most dramatic moment, the orbit insertion burn," said Sam Thorman, the probe's flight operations manager at NASA.

"The spacecraft is on a course that will pass just 193 km over the North Pole of Mars, at which point it will fire its main engine to break into orbit," said the distribution of water on Earth's red neighbour.

Three months later, a second product of the rebirth of human attention aimed at Mars -- the Mars Polar Lander -- will actually land on the planet and look for underground water.

Bin Laden followers in Turkey for bomb attacks

ANKARA, Sept 19: Turkish anti-terrorism police have been put on alert over reports that six followers of Saudi billionaire Osama Bin Laden were in Turkey planning bomb attacks on US and British diplomatic missions, a newspaper said on Sunday, reports AFP.

Citing a police document, the liberal Milliyet daily said that the six men, four Kurds and two Algerians, entered Turkey in June from Iran to plan the attacks.

Two Iranians, meanwhile, were on stand-by in Iran, the report said.

The document asked for ex-

tra security measures around US and British embassies as a precaution against possible attacks, Milliyet said.

British and US diplomats were not immediately available for comment on the report.

Bin Laden, believed to be in Afghanistan, is accused by the United States of masterminding bloody bomb attacks against its embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August of last year which killed more than 220 people.

Washington has offered a reward of five million dollars for information leading to bin Laden's arrest.

Hurricane Floyd's sopping aftermath Hundreds waiting on their roofs for dramatic rescue

WASHINGTON, Sept 18: Entire towns along the US east coast lost power and were submerged in rising water Saturday, as Hurricane Floyd's sopping aftermath forced hundreds to their roofs for dramatic rescues by helicopter, reports AFP.

With tropical storm warnings discontinued, official counts of Floyd-related fatalities in the United States had topped 30 by Saturday morning.

"We're in search and rescue mode," said North Carolina Emergency Response Team spokeswoman Holly Urlick by telephone. "A fourth of this state is under water. The sun is out and shining but the water is still rising."

Nine areas of Virginia were designated major disaster areas by President Bill Clinton as flooding continued on five rivers, Virginia's Emergency Services Department said.

"We've got a city that's totally

under water and the water is rising. We're not out of the woods yet," said spokeswoman Janet Clements.

In the city of Franklin, 200 businesses are under water, scores of houses are under water. Main Street is 12 feet (3.6 meters) under, and City Hall, all of downtown, is flooded. The river nearby is still rising," she added.

She said Franklin was not alone: other cities throughout the eastern part of Virginia had succumbed to Floyd's floods.

"Those cities are in real bad shape. They've lost all phone service, all 911 (the emergency phone line). We're literally flooding the area with state resources to try to assist them," she said.

Two people were killed in Virginia when trees fell on them, and two others died in flood-related car accidents, she said.

Obuchi set to secure party leadership

TOKYO, Sept 19: Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi is set to secure his re-election as chief of the ruling party this week, but analysts have warned his planned mega-coalition could threaten his position, reports AFP.

Obuchi, who heads the largest faction of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), is expected to win overwhelming support in the party's presidential election on Tuesday, against former party secretary general Koichi Kato, and Taku Yamazaki, a former policy chief.

Schroeder heads for another polls disaster

BERLIN, Sept 19: Voting began Sunday in Saxony, in eastern Germany, with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's Social Democrats (SPD) heading for yet another big defeat, polls predicted, reports AFP.

Polling stations opened at 0600 GMT in Saxony, which with 4.6 million people is the most populous of the former East German states.

The SPD has lost four state elections this year, in Hesse in February as well as this month in Saarland, Brandenburg and Thuringia, thereby losing its majority in the national upper house of parliament, the Bundesrat, that represents Germany's 16 states.

Only 11 months after taking office, Schroeder's popularity has plummeted as voters are disappointed by in-fighting in the SPD, sceptical of Schroeder's 30-billion mark (16.3 billion dollars/15.34 billion euros) of budget austerity cuts and weary of chronically high unemployment.

Violence in East Timor 'US trained Indonesian forces'

LONDON, Sept 19: Indonesian military forces linked to the violence in East Timor were trained in the United States under a covert programme sponsored by the Clinton administration, the Observer newspaper reported here Sunday, reports AFP.

The newspaper also said London had spent around one million pounds training more than 50 members of the Indonesian military in Britain.

Human rights campaigners claim a number of those trained in Britain and the United States are likely to have links with those involved in atrocities

against supporters of independence in East Timor.

The US programme, code-named Iron Balance, was hidden from legislators and the public when Congress curbed the official schooling of Indonesia's army after a massacre in 1991, the newspaper said.

It said the programme continued until last year.

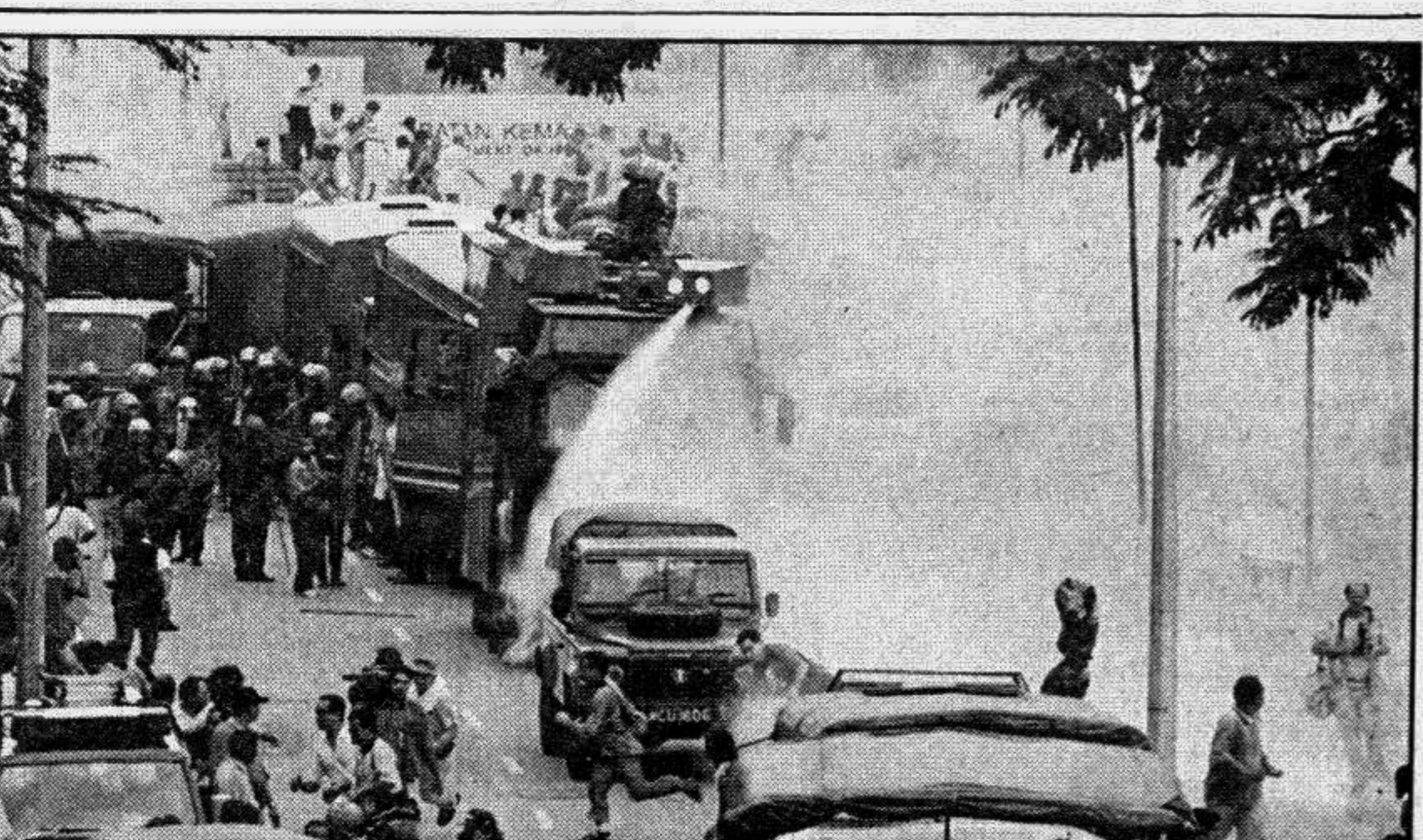
Quoting Pentagon documents, the Observer said one of the units trained was the Kopassus special forces unit, an elite force with a "bloody history."

The force was built up with US expertise despite awareness

of its role in the genocide of about 200,000 people in the years after the invasion of East Timor by Indonesia in 1975, the report said.

Rights organisation Amnesty International describes Kopassus as "responsible for some of the worst human rights violations in Indonesia's history."

The training programme, conducted under a Pentagon project called Joint Combined Education and Training, included urban guerrilla warfare, surveillance, counter-intelligence and sniper marksmanship, the newspaper said.



Riot police spray a water cannon at supporters of jailed former Malaysian deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim Sunday in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysian police fired tear gas and water cannon at more than 2,000 supporters of Anwar who gathered at the National Mosque to perform prayers and hold a demonstration against the government in support for Anwar, who is in hospital after he was allegedly poisoned with arsenic last week.

— AFP photo

BRIEFLY

5 die in Mexican jet crash:

Five crew members were killed when a Mexican Air Force C-130 Hercules crashed north of Mexico City, the military said Saturday, AFP reports from Mexico City.

Officials launched an air and land search for the aircraft after controllers at the Santa Lucia air force base lost contact with it late Friday, the Mexican Defense Ministry said in a statement.

10 killed in landslide in India: Ten members of a family including five children were killed in a landslide in village rated, about 50 kms from Chhindwara in Pataktot area, on Friday night, PTI reports from India.

Chhindwara District Collector Sanjay Bandopadhyay told PTI on Saturday that all the 46 houses in the village were affected by landslides and the occupants of most of them had moved to safer places.

Heavy rains cause havoc in Rome: The arrival of an Atlantic storm front has brought heavy rains to northwest and southwest Italy with flooding and strong winds causing considerable damage, Xinhua reports from Rome.

The tail of a previous storm system leaving Italy to the southeast brought considerable rainfall to the region of Puglia, especially the Taranto area where flooding interrupted some road communications and isolated several communities. Damage was also reported to vineyards and fruit groves.