

A woman checks out election information on the Internet at a stall decorated with caricatures of Congress (I) Party President Sonia Gandhi and her rival from the BJP, Sushma Swaraj, on the opening day of Asia's largest annual Internet exhibition 'India Internet World '99', Wednesday. The month-long staggered elections are currently underway in the world's largest democracy.

— AFP photo

'Exit polls may subvert fair voting in India'

NEW DELHI, Sept 22 : A plethora of election polls is subverting fair voting in the world's largest democracy. Indian political parties and media analysts warned Wednesday, reports AFP.

The Hindu nationalist BJP party of Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee and the main opposition Congress accuse each other of stage-managing opinion and exit polls to show themselves as victors.

The polls' findings diverge wildly.

While some predict the BJP will win the most seats, others claim the Congress, which was ousted from power in 1996 after ruling India for about 40 years, will emerge as the single largest party.

N. Bhaskar Rao, director of the Centre for Media Studies, said many of the current surveys were "motivated with a total lack of transparency" and "conducted by people who are in

the payroll of parties."

The numerous polls, aired during the marathon, month-long national elections which are due to end early October, will "thwart free and fair elections and harm the democratic process," said Rao, who conducted India's first election poll nearly 30 years ago.

Most pre-poll surveys created a sympathy wave for the underdog -- that is the Congress, he said, adding that subsequent exit polls, most of which put the BJP far out in front, would affect voting patterns.

The exit polls are reinforcing the winner, by giving an increasingly high margin of victory."

The sudden flurry of polls in the past week followed a Supreme Court ruling against a ban by the Election Commission on the publication and broadcast of election surveys.

On Tuesday, an exit poll on

the private NDTV network said of the 344 seats where elections had been held so far, Prime Minister Vajpayee's party would win 213 seats and the Congress party would trail far behind with 90.

NDTV said it had surveyed about 120,000 voters in 127 constituencies spread across a dozen states.

On the same day, another exit poll conducted by the Marathi-language newspaper Lokmat said the BJP would win 105 seats while the Congress would get 139 seats. It was based on a sample of 5,000 voters in 67 constituencies.

The rival parties, naturally, bicker over which polls are accurate.

Kapil Sibal, a spokesman for the Congress party, claimed the NDTV poll was clearly slanted.

"What kind of organisation is conducting the polls? What kind of survey is being carried out? We have no idea," he said.



Thousands of Yugoslav opposition supporters mingle in front of Vojvodina's parliament building in Novi Sad, late Tuesday after more than 10,000 people came to protest for the first day of planned daily mass protests against Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and his regime.

— AFP photo

More votes than voters in Bihar

NEW DELHI, Sept 22 : India's Bihar state is once again living up to its bad-boy image, with polling stations reporting voter turnout of more than 100 per cent in last weekend's general elections, reports AFP.

The independent Election Commission said Wednesday it had ordered a probe into how the number of ballots cast in several areas had managed to exceed the number of registered voters.

The irregularities surfaced amid charges levelled by Defence Minister George Fernandes that bogus ballot papers printed in Calcutta had poured

into Bihar, ahead of polling last Saturday in 19 of the state's 54 parliamentary constituencies.

Uday Singh Kumawat, the returning officer in Nawada constituency in central Bihar, complained Monday that turnout was larger than the total number of voters in at least four polling stations.

"Just about everything is possible here," admitted Bihar's Chief Electoral Officer A.K. Basu.

It is a clear dereliction of duty on the part of the returning officers and I have ordered them to recount the votes once again and report back to me,"

Basu told AFP by telephone from the state capital, Patna.

According to Kumawat, 940 votes were polled in station number seven when the actual number of voters in the district was only 931.

Similarly, in Hisua polling station only 530 ballot papers were issued but 580 votes were registered.

The chief election official said "ballot-to-ballot" accounting before a poll could be conducted.

"The politicians here are scoundrels so one can expect anything from them," Basu said.

Top general rules out ground invasion of Chechnya

MOSCOW, Sept 22 : A top Russian general on Wednesday ruled out an immediate ground invasion of Chechnya, saying it would cost the lives of too many soldiers and mobilise the Chechen population against Moscow, reports AFP.

"We have no plans to enter Chechen territory," Deputy Interior Minister Igor Zubov told a press briefing. He dismissed as "lies" reports that Russian forces had done so in the past.

"If we enter Chechen territory then the Chechen population may unite against Russian

forces," he said, adding that it was "theoretically possible" that up to 30,000 Chechens would enlist should the Russians invade, he said.

"An invasion will lead to a great loss of life. The tactics we have chosen now are correct and working," he added.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has ordered some 30,000 federal troops to the border with Chechnya in an effort to isolate guerrillas who have on two occasions crossed into neighboring Dagestan.

Premiers to pensioners say farewell to Raisa

MOSCOW, Sept 22 : Hundreds of Muscovites from premiers to pensioners paid final farewell Wednesday to Raisa Gorbachev, the late wife of the Soviet Union's last leader who brought a dash of glamour and controversy to the job of first lady, reports AFP.

Queues stretched down Gogolevsky Boulevard in downtown Moscow as people waited patiently to pay their last respects to the woman who helped her husband Mikhail Gorbachev win western hearts with his "glasnost" charm offensive.

The body of Raisa, 67, who died in the German city of Muenster on Monday after losing a long fight with leukaemia, was flown back to the Russian capital Tuesday aboard an official aircraft.

Three Hamas leaders held

AMMAN, Sept 22 : Three leaders of the hardline Palestinian movement Hamas returned to Jordan today and were immediately arrested by the authorities here on their arrival at the airport, a senior official said, reports AFP.

"Khaled Meshal, Ibrahim Ghosheh and Musa Abu Marzuk were arrested as they left the tarmac and entered the arrivals terminal building," the official told AFP.

"Soon we will revoke the state of emergency in east Timor," coordinating minister for security and politics Feisal Tanjung said before meeting Habibie at the presidential palace.

Interfet warns Timor militias

Australia seeks new role in Asia after Timor crisis

DILI, East Timor, Sept 22 : The mutilated body of a western journalist was found Wednesday as the commander of the multinational forces warned militias were going on the offensive, angered by the joy which greeted his troops, reports AFP.

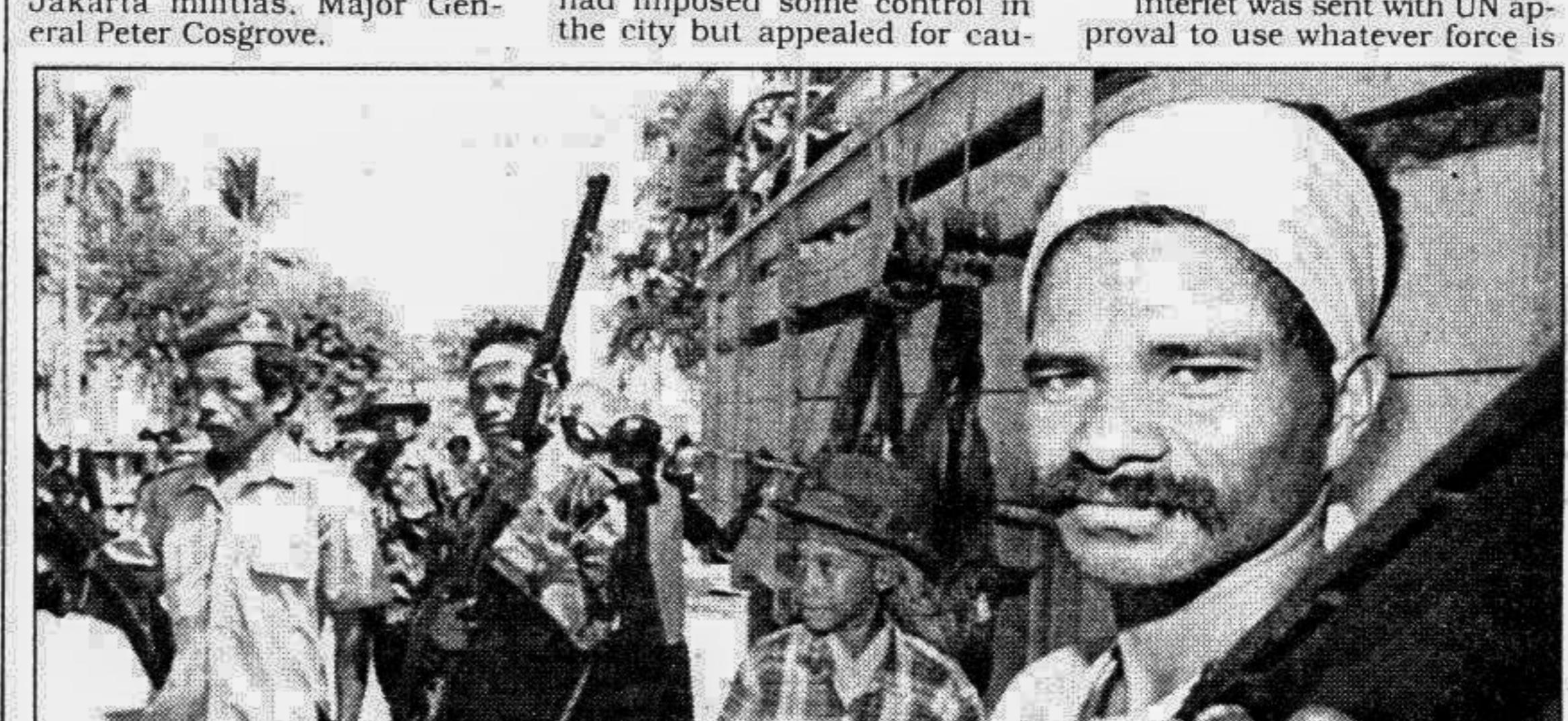
The celebrating refugees who flooded into Dili Tuesday after the peacekeepers secured the capital had angered the pro-Jakarta militias. Major General Peter Cosgrove.

He said the International Force for East Timor (Interfet) had imposed some control in the city but appealed for caution.

"There have been some signs of militia becoming agitated about what I might say would be a return into Dili of a previously displaced population," he said.

The mutilated body of Sander Thoenes, a 30-year-old Dutch national who worked for London's Financial Times was found Wednesday.

He said the International Force for East Timor (Interfet) had imposed some control in the city but appealed for caution.



East Timorese pro-Indonesian militias hold their weapons before their exodus to West Timor from Liquica, Wednesday. The persecution of East Timorese refugees has spread throughout Indonesia, with the military stepping up the campaign of terror and harassment in places like Bali and Java, according to reports yesterday.

— AFP photo

Troops were carrying in bags of rice and sugar, slung over their shoulders.

In a school yard, tents and awnings had been hastily slung up to provide shelter for some of the tens of thousands left homeless. Mothers and children lay dazed on simple rush mats, quietly staring into the distance.

Others clambered over the ruins, seeking what treasured possessions they could pull from the rubble. But for many there was nothing left. The possessions of a lifetime wiped out in a few seconds.

Dressed in bright red overalls and hard hats, they stooped down in the hope of catching any dim cries for help from below the mangled and twisted debris.

If no indication of life came quickly, the call would go out to move on. The hundreds of bodies they passed over could wait for later.

For relatives waiting for the rescuers to examine their collapsed homes, confirmation of their worst fears came when charity workers following the teams "handed out 'ghost money' to be buried for the dead to take with them."

UN sends coordinating rescue team to Taiwan

The United Nations has sent a team to Taiwan to help find survivors of a devastating earthquake after China approved the initiative, a UN spokesman said Wednesday.

The decision was taken after close consultation (with China), Jamie Ben Yahmed said.

The United Nations requested China's approval for the mission as it recognises Beijing's sovereignty over the island state.

Two members of the Office of Coordinating of Humanitarian Affairs in Geneva and four experts from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden were sent to Taipei, he added.

The UN officials were to coordinate the work of teams from around the world involved in the search and rescue effort.

British, Germany, Japan, Singapore, Switzerland and the United States have sent experts to Taiwan and aid has been promised by China, France, Israel, the Philippines, Spain, South Korea and Thailand.

Taipei hails China's help offer

Taiwan on Wednesday hailed China's offer of help in its earthquake rescue operations as a possible "new beginning" in their strained relations.

Chinese President Jiang Zemin on Tuesday pledged "any possible assistance" to Taiwan, saying the people of island and the mainland were as "close as flesh and blood."

China's Red Cross followed up the pledge Wednesday, offering 100,000 US dollars in funds and 60,500 dollars of equipment.

"We appreciate concerns from Chinese President Jiang Zemin on the huge earthquake which attacked us and his offer of humanitarian aid," said Su Chi, chairman of the cabinet-level Mainland Affairs Council.

Killer quake may cost Taiwan \$ 3b in damage

The largest earthquake to hit Taiwan this century may have caused damage of more than 100 billion Taiwanese dollars

(3.14 billion US), a top official estimated Wednesday.

The quake, measured at 7.6 on the Richter scale, left 1,712 people dead and 4,005 injured and toppled at least 1,700 buildings in the island, he said according to latest official estimates.

"The earthquake may have led to losses that may top 100 Taiwan billion dollars," said Liu Tai-ying, chairman of the ruling Kuomintang's powerful Business Management Committee.

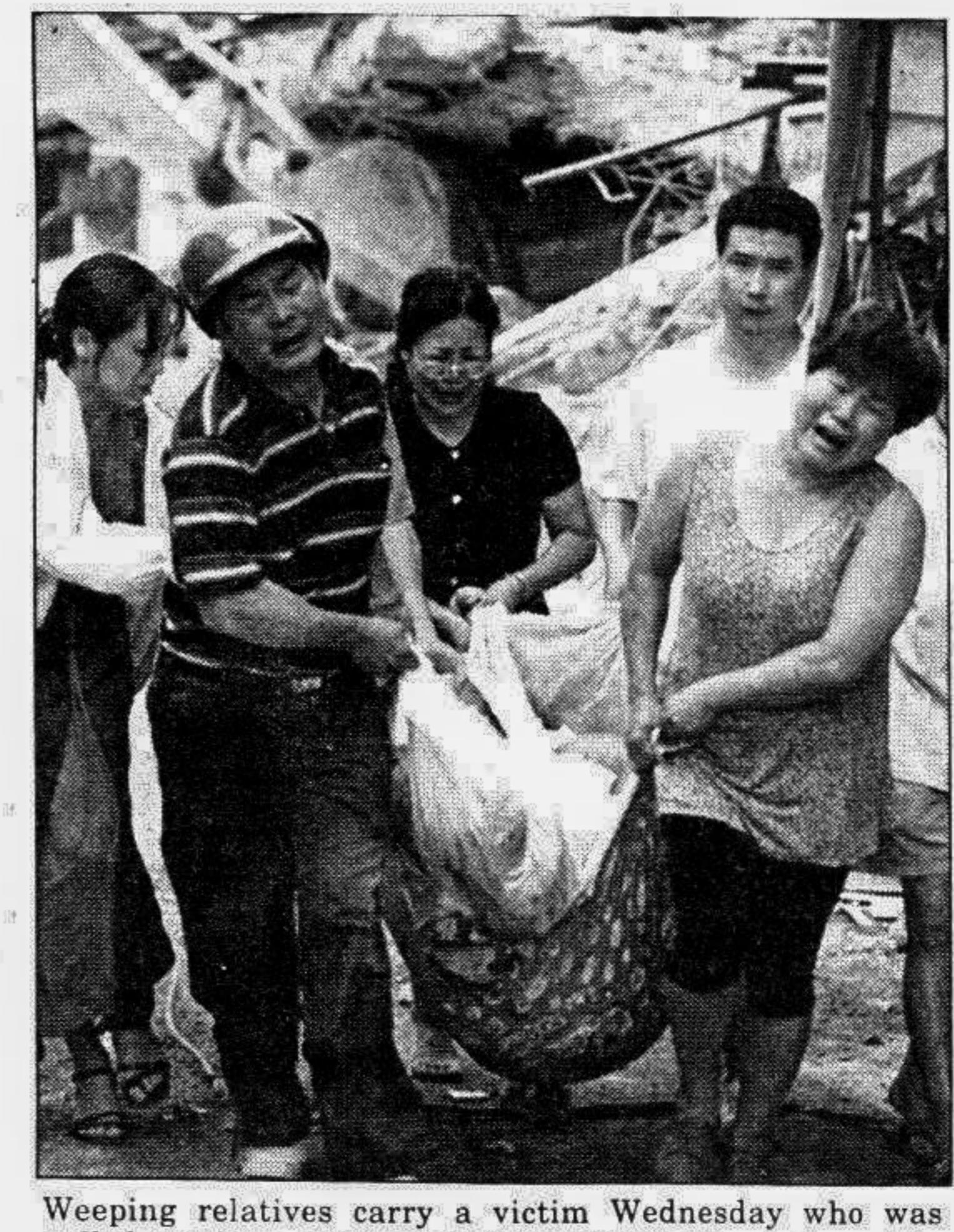
Scientists warn more quakes set to hit

Seismologists who predicted an imminent deadly earthquake for Taiwan warned Wednesday they were surprised by the location of the largest tremor this century and that they expected two more shattering strikes.

"We were almost sure in our prediction that the big quake was to hit Chiayi county instead of Nantou," said Shannon Lee, a professor at National Taiwan University of Science and Technology.

With the major quake cycle for Chiayi county, in the southwest, estimated at 30 to 50 years, Chiayi was widely predicted to be the next target for a big tremor. It was last hit by a quake of over 7.0 on the Richter scale in 1941, killing 358 people.

Scientists are also watching a faultline in Miaoli county which has a large quake cycle of around 70 years. In 1935, a quake measuring 7.1 killed 3,276 people in nearby Kuantao-shan.



Weeping relatives carry a victim Wednesday who was pulled out from collapsed buildings in Nantou destroyed in the earthquake that hit Taiwan early Tuesday. At least 1,712 people were killed and 4,005 people were injured with 3,807 people still trapped after the earthquake that measured 7.3 on the Richter scale.

she wrote.

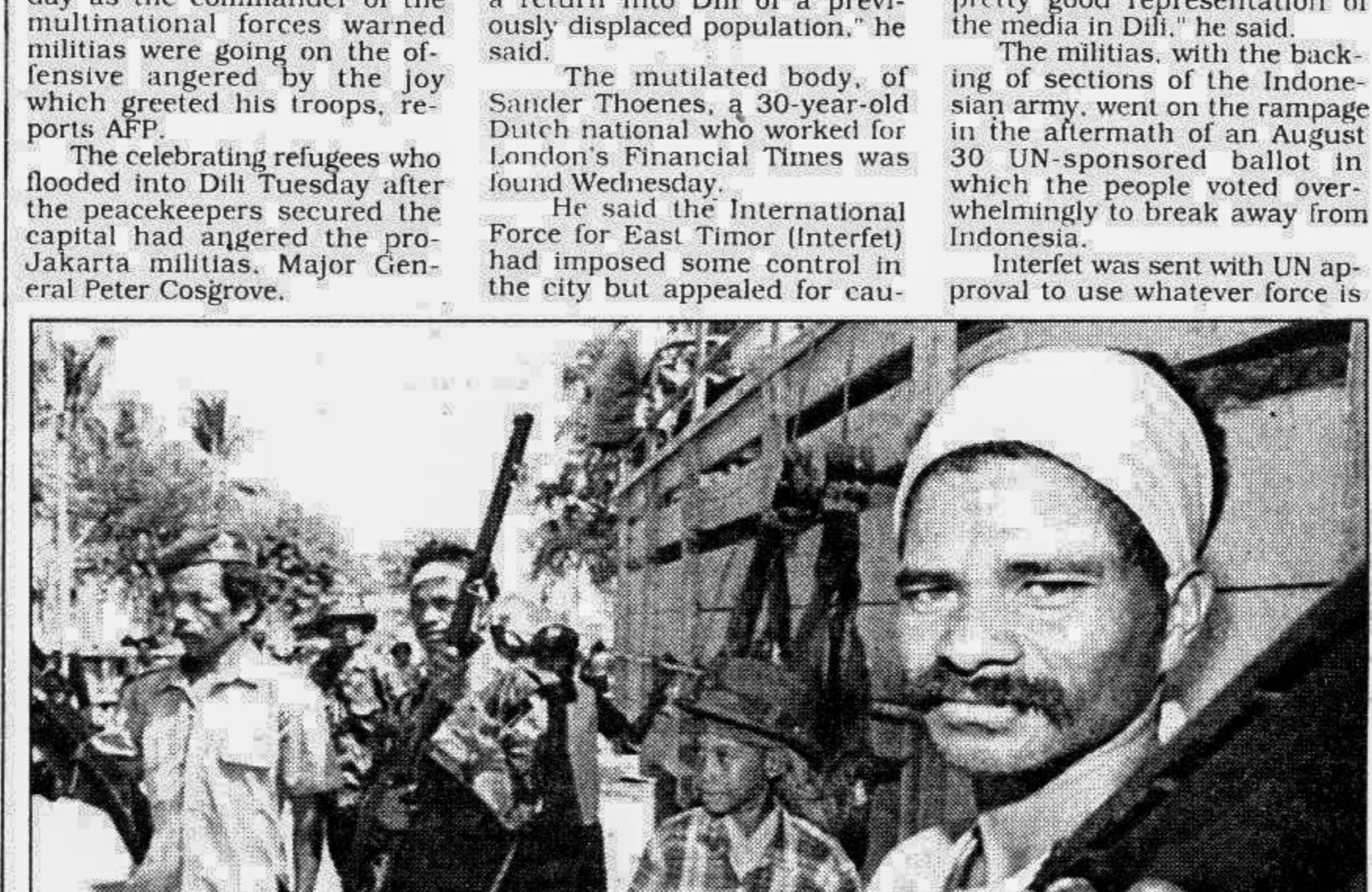
The Tamil leadership in all its variety has been single minded in its pursuit of ethnic Tamil nationalism through the use of armed violence. Has this strategy worked?

"We (Tamilis) claim that this has given us dignity. Has it? The majority of our people are now in diaspora and not in their 'homeland', eking out a living in some part of the globe.

Their children will soon be second generation migrants and will assimilate. I was on a plane with a Sri Lankan Tamil boy who spoke neither English nor Tamil -- he only spoke French."

She said Sri Lankan Tamils were now treated as outcasts in every airport in the world. An estimated 500,000 to one million Sri Lankan Tamils have left the country since 1983.

Her remarks came three days after suspected Tamil Tiger guerrillas, led by women fighters, butchered 54 ethnic Sinhalese in the east of the country.



MOSCOW, Sept 22 : Russian lawmakers failed in a bid to limit President Boris Yeltsin's powers to sack his prime minister, reports AFP.

Deputies in the State Duma, lower house of parliament, were unable to muster enough votes to pass a constitutional amendment that would force the president to seek parliamentary approval for any move to sack the government.

The chamber, dominated by Yeltsin's political opponents, voted 221 to 65 in favour of the change, but the figure was well below the 300 votes needed to take the measure forward.

A second attempt to force the bill through, instigated by the leftist Agrarian party, also failed 240-57.

The current Russian cabinet

chief, Vladimir Putin, is Yeltsin's fifth prime minister in 18 months. Tenure has often been as short as the president's approval rating was low.

Yeltsin sacked Viktor Chernomyrdin, his premier of five years, in March 1998, saying he wanted to give reform a fresh boost. Chernomyrdin was replaced by young reformer Sergei Kiriyenko who lasted until August 23, 1998, when he was dismissed following the financial crisis of that month.

Yevgeny Primakov, Kiriyenko's successor, lasted until May 12 this year when he fell victim to his soaring popularity and the president's notorious jealousy of his own political position.

Novice premier Sergei Stepashin, Yeltsin's loyalist interior minister, was drafted in to replace the former spymaster but he lasted only until August 9.

Observers say Stepashin was abruptly sacked after failing to unite centrists behind him in a political movement to challenge Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov, a potential presidential candidate who is seen as an anti-Kremlin figure.

Deputies have several times in the past attempted to clip Yeltsin's wings but backed down at the last minute fearing the president would dissolve parliament and call early elections.

Russia is currently gearing up for parliamentary elections on December 19 in which anti-Kremlin groups are expected to poll strongly.

A militant was arrested and another laid down his arms before the security forces, while ultra-rightists abducted a person in the valley during the period, the spokesman said.

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