

Gunfire in Dili as militias threaten showdown with Interfet

Martial law from East Timor goes

JAKARTA, Sept 23: Indonesian President B.J. Habibie on Thursday issued a decree lifting the martial law imposed on East Timor on September 7, Justice Minister Muladi said, reports AFP.

The president today issued one presidential decree... which revokes presidential decree number 107 of 1999 on the emergency commission in East Timor considering the improving conditions in East Timor," Muladi said.

West Timor.

"I am looking to accelerate the arrival of troops into East Timor," Australian Major General Peter Cosgrove told reporters.

Some 3,800 troops have been deployed from a 7,500-strong force charged with wresting control from the anti-independence militias who have terrorised the territory and forced most of its people to flee their homes.

"Misunderstandings sometimes happen in the field."

However, the commander of the British contingent in the force denied any of the international troops had used their weapons and accused Indonesian troops of firing shots near his soldiers.

"I am not aware of any shots being fired by Interfet troops," Brigadier David Richards told reporters.

Richards said automatic gunfire fired in the air from trucks believed to be carrying Indonesian territory troops near a contingent of Gurkhas was an attempt to test the renowned force's mettle.

"We were expecting just this kind of activity. They are probably trying to find out what our response drills are -- are we quick, are we disciplined -- I think they're trying to see what we do," he said.

The skirmishes came as fears of a major clash between the multinational force and the militias mounted.

About 500 militiamen were massing in the town of Liqueisa, west of the capital Dili, saying they would mount an attack on multinational peacekeepers, witnesses said.

"We want war," one of the camouflage-wearing militia said.

Cosgrove said he was also concerned about reports that pro-Jakarta militia were massing on the border of West Timor, but that the international force did not have a mandate to act outside East Timor.

"I have heard there are reports of militia from West Timor planning to come into the province," he said. "We are going to monitor their progress and see what eventuates."

Another confrontation took place between Australian and Indonesian troops at an Indonesian military camp in the Taibessi area of eastern Dili.

One report said Interfet troops had entered an empty military compound there and tangled with Indonesian soldiers who returned unexpectedly.

A journalist who accompanied the Indonesian military said the foreign troops fired warning shots, but other accounts said they were chased out by Indonesian soldiers.

Indonesian military spokesman Colonel Willem Rampangli told reporters his forces and Interfet troops charged with restoring peace in East Timor were investigating the incident.

Witnesses said retreating Indonesian troops were also sending volleys of automatic gunfire into the air as they sped out of Dili.



Soldiers give family photos found in a destroyed home to a woman who was waiting for the rescue of her brother-in-law in Chungliano, Nantou county, Thursday, as more bodies of victims of the massive earthquake are retrieved from under damaged buildings. The small town has so far 140 deaths as recovery work continues. — AFP photo

Meanwhile, armed militias clashed with peacekeepers in the East Timorese capital for the first time Thursday, sending gunfire ringing out over the city in a major escalation of tension in Dili.

The commander of the multinational troops said he would speed up deployment in response to the trouble and reports that pro-Jakarta militia were massing outside Dili and on the border with Indonesian

Dili in several separate incidents, including one where the Indonesian military said multinational troops had fired into the air to warn off Indonesian troops collecting ammunition from a store in Dili.

"Interfet had a misunderstanding about the activities of Indonesian soldiers who were moving goods from the store," Indonesian military spokesman Colonel Willem Rampangli said of the international force in East Timor.

Interfet had a misunderstanding about the activities of Indonesian soldiers who were moving goods from the store," Indonesian military spokesman Colonel Willem Rampangli said of the international force in East Timor.

Interfet had a misunderstanding about the activities of Indonesian soldiers who were moving goods from the store," Indonesian military spokesman Colonel Willem Rampangli said of the international force in East Timor.

Interfet had a misunderstanding about the activities of Indonesian soldiers who were moving goods from the store," Indonesian military spokesman Colonel Willem Rampangli said of the international force in East Timor.

Priyanka alleges electoral foul play

NEW DELHI, Sept 23: Priyanka Gandhi, daughter of Indian opposition leader Sonia Gandhi, has filed an official complaint charging the ruling Hindu nationalists with election malpractice, the Press Trust of India said Thursday, reports AFP.

Priyanka, who is running her mother's election campaign in the northern constituency of Amethi -- a stronghold of the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty -- filed the complaint with the local electoral officer late Wednesday, PTI said.

The complaint accused the Hindu nationalist BJP party of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee of plotting to rig votes and capture polling stations when Amethi goes to the polls

on October 3.

Sources said Priyanka also charged that a team of female Congress workers were recently beaten up by BJP activists in a village in Amethi.

In an interview published Wednesday with the on-line news service Rediff, the 27-year-old Priyanka outlined her fears in greater detail.

"I have heard reports of AK-47s being brought into the constituency," she said.

Priyanka and her older brother Rahul have both been helping their mother as she attempts to defy the opinion polls and push her Congress party to victory in staggered general elections that began September 5 and end October 3.

China spells out offer of autonomy to Taiwan

SINGAPORE, Sept 23: China has spelled out its offer of a "high level of autonomy" to Taiwan in the event the renegade province agrees to reunification, the Straits Times reported Thursday, reports AFP.

The 17-page document presented at a forum here Wednesday by Wang Yonghai, deputy head of China's Taiwan Affairs Office, includes an offer to grant Taipei the right to have its own military, a judiciary and courts independent of the mainland.

It also promises Taiwan freedom to draw up commercial and cultural agreements with other nations.

Taiwan would become a "special administrative region with a high level of autonomy" after reunification, Wang said, read-

ing from the document in Chinese.

"Taiwan will not be the same as any other province or region in China. It will have the right to administer and govern on its own, the right to legislate and the right to have an independent judiciary which contains the institution for final judgement," he said.

Taiwan can manage its own political party, government, army, financial and cultural affairs. It can also have its own military, while the central government will not despatch troops and officials to be stationed on the island," he added.

Wang was part of a six-member delegation which included Li Yafei, the deputy secretary-general of the semi-official As-

sociation for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait.

The group was brought to a tour which brought them to Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines to explain their views.

The visit follows Chinese President Jiang Zemin's offer of help to quake-devastated Taiwan, which he hoped would signal a possible "new beginning" towards reconciliation amid long-running cross-strait tensions.

Such tensions flared in July after Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui's controversial claim to statehood.

Observers have said that Jiang's offer tied in with Beijing's overall aim of reunifying

Taiwan quake death toll set to soar

PULLI, Taiwan, Sept 23: The death toll from the Taiwan earthquake was set to rise Thursday with hundreds still trapped under the rubble, as the government moved against contractors arresting one whose buildings crumbled, reports AFP.

As international rescue experts backed by sniffer dogs combed the debris for survivors, the number of confirmed dead rose to 2,106 with 7,821 injured.

Hopes were fading fast more than 63 hours after the deadly quake, for the 634 people still listed as missing or buried, rescue officials said.

Only nine survivors were pulled from the rubble on Wednesday, and those still entombed under tonnes of mangled concrete and bricks were most probably dead, officials admitted.

Some 2,207 other people were

listed as stranded in remote areas due to the disruption in communications, the officials said, after revising their earlier figures.

"The chances of recovering survivors is really small," said Kan Hsin-Chin, fire chief at the small town of Chungliano in central Taiwan, where four out of five houses were destroyed by Tuesday's pre-dawn quake.

Because of the weight of high rises collapses, "a lot of people were buried very deep underground and rescuing them, even the bodies, is very difficult."

A doctor working at a nearby crowded refugee camp said without food, water, medicine or oxygen, living for a third day would be "a miracle".

"People simply cannot survive in this environment," he said.

Amid the horror of the tragedy, recriminations began as details of sub-standard

building work began to emerge.

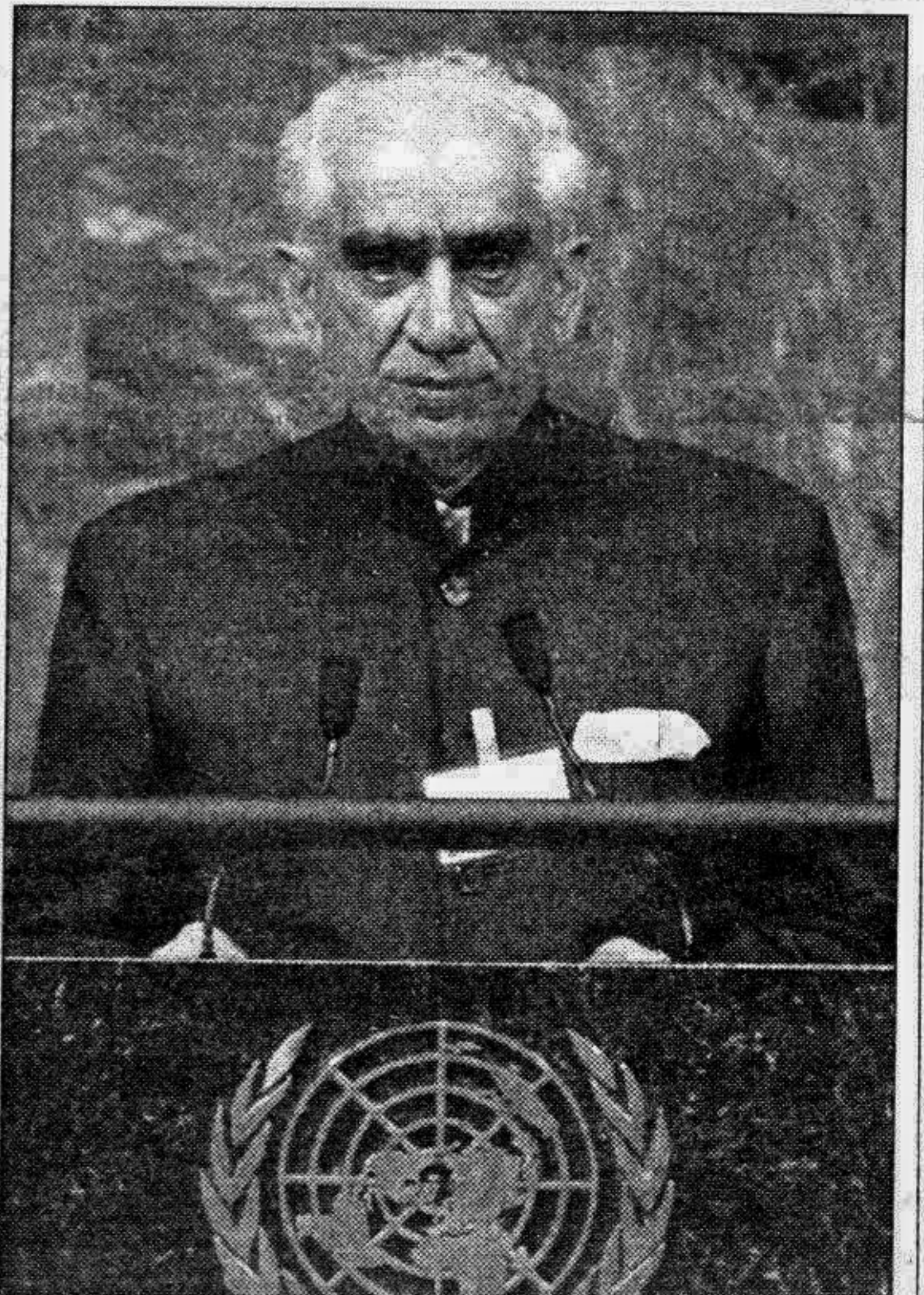
One contractor who built four properties in Yunlin county destroyed during the quake had been arrested, Vice Justice Minister Tseng Yung-fu told AFP.

An initial investigation by the ministry showed the walls of the collapsed buildings were filled with empty plastic bottles and metal buckets instead of bricks.

"This is a clear violation of the construction law," Tseng said.

"He is expected to be charged with a criminal offence, but the highest penalty he would face is five-year jail term according to existing regulations."

A civil suit was also filed against a contractor who erected a building which collapsed in Taipei county, killing 20 people. The contractor was being sought for arrest.



Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh addresses the fifty-fourth session of the United Nations General Assembly Wednesday at the UN headquarters in New York City. — AFP photo

Islamabad rejects Tokyo's demand to sign CTBT India, Pakistan accuse each other of pushing region toward conflict

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 23: South Asian nuclear rivals Indian and Pakistan carried their hostilities to the UN General Assembly (UNGA) accusing each other of pushing the fragile region toward a bloody conflict, report AP.

Warning of nuclear "doomsday" in South Asia, Pakistan urged world leaders and the United Nations to rein in its rival, India, from developing a massive arsenal of atomic weapons.

Last year, Pakistan matched India's nuclear test within days, India's Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh blamed Pakistan for the rising tensions, saying its western neighbour had spurned India's olive branch and attacked the northern Himalayan region of Kashmir, which both claim.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz said the world should not believe India's promise not to be the first to use atomic weapons.

"Pakistan believes that it is now essential to convene a conference, with the participation of all permanent members of the Security Council... to promote the goals of strategic restraint and stability in South Asia," Aziz told the UN General Assembly on Wednesday.

Many observers had hoped that Singh and Aziz would meet in New York on the sidelines of the General Assembly, in an ef-

fort to reduce tensions. But Indian diplomats said no Pakistan request for a meeting had been made. They did not say why India never requested a meeting.

The world's newest nuclear nations nearly went to war earlier this year. Hundreds of soldiers from both sides were killed in the Himalayan region of Kashmir.

New Delhi accused Pakistan of sending in troops to grab territory, a claim which was denied by Pakistan. Islamabad said the fighters were indigenous freedom-seeking Kashmiris. Fighting ended after US President Bill Clinton persuaded Pakistan to pull out its troops.

The conflict has raised the danger of a full-scale nuclear war among the two claimants to Kashmir. They have fought three wars since gaining independence from Britain in 1947.

Pakistan's Aziz urged the United Nations to intervene in the Kashmir imbroglio and ensure that people in the only Muslim-majority state in predominantly Hindu India have a chance to vote against staying under Indian rule.

"Kashmir is not a dispute over land; it is about the destiny of people," he said.

"The international community must act -- and it must act immediately -- if it is to avoid a hair-trigger security environ-

ment in South Asia," Aziz said.

But India's Singh told the General Assembly that Kashmir was an integral part of India and its future was not negotiable.

Aziz proposed a six-point programme to get India to reduce its nuclear weapons, starting with India dropping plans for an atomic arsenal and development of long-range ballistic weapons.

Reuters adds: Aziz called on the United Nations to convene a conference of nuclear powers to promote the goals of strategic restraint and stability in South Asia.

He said Pakistan remained committed to the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty "in an atmosphere free of coercion."

Pakistan officials said that meant there was no prospect of Islamabad signing the pledge as long as US-led sanctions triggered by the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests remained in effect.

Another PTI report from United Nations says: Pakistan has rejected Japan's demand that Islamabad sign the comprehensive test ban treaty (CTBT) as soon as possible citing India's draft nuclear doctrine, general elections and US sanctions.

Violence feared as '7-Sisters' go to polls tomorrow

GUWAHATI, India, Sept 23: The seven states that make up India's insurgency-torn northeast go to the polls Saturday, bringing the threat of fresh militant violence to the ramp end of month-long national elections, reports AFP.

Some 200,000 troops, police and paramilitaries have been deployed in the so-called "Seven Sisters," where at least a dozen separatist groups have called for a boycott of the elections.

The security clampdown and militant threats are nothing new for the region's 30 million people, many of whom have suffered five decades of insurgency that has claimed more than 25,000 lives.

"Security forces are on maximum alert throughout the northeast, as militants might target political party leaders and voters during the polls," said an army commander stationed in the Assamese capital, Guwahati.

The separatists have already struck in Assam state, killing the leader of a regional party last week and kidnapping an election candidate from the Hindu nationalist BJP party.

Campaigning has been relatively low key, not only because of the militant threat in troubled states like Assam, Tripura, Manipur and Nagaland, but also in deference to widespread voter apathy towards the central government.

"New Delhi has always acted

like a stepmother in its relations with the northeast, seeing us as nothing more than a buffer against foreign aggression," said Paul Lotha, a young businessman in Kohima, the state capital of Nagaland.

"What is the point in electing representatives, when the central government deliberately allows the area to rot?"

In this remote region, bordering China, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar, it is not the recent Kashmir conflict or the debate over opposition leader Sonia Gandhi's foreign origins that dominate campaigning.

Local issues like drinking water and unemployment, as well as insurgency problems, form the primary election planks of almost all the parties.

"We are not bothered about who forms the government in New Delhi. We are more concerned about finding a solution to the region's escalating militancy and unemployment problems," said Taru Basumatary, a Bodo tribesman in Assam.

According to Assam Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, the militant boycott of the elections will only have a limited effect.

"We are not unduly bothered about the militants, as people have already started defying their diktats," Mahanta told AFP.

"The militants might try and create violence during the elections, but we are geared up to meet any eventualities."

In a region which is 35 percent Christian, the Church plays a prominent role during elections, exhorting parties to fight a clean campaign without the usual mud-slinging.

Like a stepmother in its relations with the northeast, seeing us as nothing more than a buffer against foreign aggression," said Paul Lotha, a young businessman in Kohima, the state capital of Nagaland.

BRITFLY

Army personnel expelled in Vietnam: More than 300 people have been kicked out of the army in a one-year period for drug-related offences, a newspaper said Thursday in a rare report on crime in the military, AP reports from Hanoi.

The People's Army paper quoted a report at the army's drug control conference Wednesday as saying the expulsions in the 12 months ending in June involved drug abuse, trade and trafficking. It did not say how many were tried or how many officers were involved.

Malaysia's new monarch installed: In a glittering ceremony, Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah on Thursday was installed as Malaysia's new constitutional monarch, AP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

Surrounded by dozens of local leaders and foreign dignitaries, the new king was installed at the throne room of the Istana Negara palace in the capital, Kuala Lumpur, as the country's 11th king. The ceremony was broadcast on national television.

Singer Diana Ross arrested: American singer Diana Ross was arrested Wednesday at Heathrow Airport after allegedly assaulting a security officer. She was released Wednesday afternoon and left hours later for New York, AP reports from London.

She was cautioned but not charged with an offence, Scotland Yard said. "Police here are wonderful," she said in response to one of a flurry of questions as she left the airport in the afternoon after the incident and was whisked away in a limousine.

Russian police defuse explosive in apartment block

MOSCOW, Sept 23: Russian police early Thursday defused an explosive device planted in a 12-storey block of flats in the town of Ryazan, 600 km south-east of Moscow, Moscow Echo radio reported, says AFP.

Police found three sacks of the explosive hexagon mixed with sugar, and primed with detonators and a timer in a basement of the apartment block. The timer was set for 05:30am (0130 GMT) Thursday.

One resident of the block of flats reportedly saw men unloading suspicious sacks from a car, which had no number-plate, and contacted the police.

Residents were evacuated and moved to city hotels.

Voting begins in Yemen

SANAA, Sept 23: Voting began Thursday in Yemen's first direct presidential election, with 5.5 million people called to the polls for what has turned into a referendum on the 71-year-old rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh, reports AFP.

Dozens of men and women queued separately in blazing sunshine outside polling stations in the capital before they opened at 0500 GMT.

Field Marshal Saleh, who has been president ever since 1978 and is assured of victory for a sixth term, is running against a no-hope challenger from his own General People's Congress (GPC), Najib Qahtan al-Shaabi.

Anti-Taliban forces claim significant gains in west

KABUL, Sept 23: Afghanistan's opposition United Front Thursday claimed significant gains in the country's west after five days of heavy fighting against the ruling Taliban, reports AFP.

The ousted Afghan government's Deputy Foreign Minister Abdullah said 200 villages in Ghor and Farah provinces which surround the strategically important Herat province were now under opposition control.

He said forces loyal to opposition commander Ahmad Shah Masood were 15 km from Shindand airport, used by the Taliban militia as a base for its ageing fleet of MiG fighters.

Independent sources confirmed fighting was heavy in both provinces after a series of pitched battles between Taliban forces and locals linked to the United Front in Herat last Friday.

"We could be seeing the start of another push with Masood and the Taliban positioning themselves to grab as many strategic positions as they can before winter," one western observer said.

"Then they will use winter to stock up on supplies before tackling each other again next year," he added.

A Taliban spokesman was unavailable for comment.

Abdullah said 172 villages were captured in Farah and 28 were being held by the United Front in Ghor.

"Mujahedeen have captured and maintained their positions in the mountainous area of Taywara and Porchaman and we are 15 km away from the Shindand highway," Abdullah said.

The Taliban controls about 80 percent of Afghanistan, including the capital Kabul, while the opposition has been resisting its efforts to seize remaining land in the northeast.



Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and his daughter Irina (2nd L) sit at the coffin with the body of his wife Raisa Gorbacheva during the funeral ceremony at Russia's Culture Fund in Moscow Thursday. Raisa Gorbacheva, 67, died on Monday in Muenster, Germany, where she had been treated for leukemia for two months. — AFP photo

Albright rules out 'consensus at any price' over Iraq

NEW YORK, Sept 23: The United States is not prepared to endorse "a consensus at any price" on the issue of lifting sanctions against Iraq, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said Wednesday, reports AFP.

Any agreement on easing sanctions would require "compliance from (Iraqi President) Saddam Hussein on the disarmament aspect," Albright told reporters here on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

Albright insisted that international inspectors should return to Iraq and be allowed to "work effectively" to ensure that Baghdad is not producing weapons of mass destruction.

She added that she would "have to look at it" first before evaluating its merits.

FBI expands probe into alleged Chinese spying

WASHINGTON, Sept 23: The Federal Bureau of Investigation decided to expand its investigation into allegations of nuclear espionage by China at US nuclear laboratories, Republican Senator Orrin Hatch said Wednesday after meeting with Attorney General Janet Reno, reports AFP.

Hatch said he and Reno had a detailed discussion about the fact that the FBI "has decided to expand its investigation," he told journalists after the two-hour meeting.

Hatch added that Reno "is satisfied they are doing the right thing" in expanding the investigation, which has been primarily focused on the alleged theft of nuclear secrets from the Los Alamos nuclear laboratory in New Mexico.

'BJP to retain electoral lead'

NEW DELHI, Sept 23: India's ruling Hindu nationalists will retain their overall electoral lead following voting this weekend in the country's northern heartland, a survey said Thursday, reports AFP.

However the survey published by the Times of India showed the main opposition Congress party making substantial gains and reining in what many thought would be a runaway win for the alliance led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party.

According to the poll, Saturday's voting in nine states would fetch the BJP alliance 42 of the 74 seats on offer, with the Congress party and its allies taking 24 seats.

It also predicted that Congress would make significant gains in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, winning 13 seats after being completely wiped out there in 1998 elections.

The survey, which covered 2,554 voters in 72 of the 74 constituencies that will vote on Saturday, claimed an error margin of three percent.

The coming ballot is the fourth and penultimate stage of India's month-long staggered elections for the 545-member federal parliament. Voting began on September 5 and ends October 3.

Of the 421 seats that will have been contested after Saturday's round.