

Vajpayee begins sensitive task of forming government

NEW DELHI, Oct 8: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee began the delicate task of forming a new government Friday, fully aware of the doubts surrounding the stability of his multi-party alliance, reports AFP.

Officials from his Hindu nationalist BJP party said Vajpayee was holding extensive discussions with the two dozen partners in the BJP-led alliance that won nearly 300 seats in the 545-member parliament.

Party officials dismissed fears the diverse make-up of the coalition would hamper the job of governing the world's largest democracy.

"We have enough numbers to provide a stable government to the country," said BJP

spokesman J.P. Mathur.

"We are confident the new government will be stable and last its full five year term."

The Bombay share index burst through the psychological 5,000-point barrier Friday morning, as share prices continued their bull run on the back of the coalition's victory.

The 30-share Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) sensitive index had risen 2 percent by mid-day, following a 5.6 percent surge on Thursday.

With all but a handful of seats decided Friday from the national elections, the BJP coalition returned to office with 296 seats. The main opposition Congress party and its allies got 134 seats.

Leftists captured 42 seats while regional parties bagged 65.

Results of six more seats will be known by the end of the month, while two MPs are appointed by the president.

The late results are expected to see the alliance pass 300 mark. The BJP emerged as the largest single party, with 182 seats -- the same as last year.

It was the worst performance yet by the 114-year-old Congress party, and raised questions over the future leadership of its president Sonia Gandhi.

BJP officials said Vajpayee was keen to include as many of his allies as possible in his new cabinet, so as to give the government some inherent stability.

Waste drums leak small amount of radiation in Japan

TOKYO, Oct 8: Government inspectors discovered a low-level radiation leak in two drums containing nuclear waste at a disposal facility in northern Japan, officials said Friday, reports AFP.

The leak was detected in two 1,760 drum cans containing low-level nuclear waste as inspections were completed Friday in Rokkashomura, Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd. said.

Rokkashomura, a village some 600 kilometres (380 miles) north of Tokyo, houses storage and disposal facilities.

The drums were from Tokyo Electric Power Co. Inc.'s nuclear power plant in the northern prefecture of Fukushima.

"There was no nuclear leakage to the outside," said a spokesman for Japan Nuclear Fuel, which was set up by Japanese electric power companies. "There was no impact on the environment."

A municipal official at Rokkashomura said the leakage was found before the drums were buried underground and stressed nobody was exposed to radiation.

Japan was unnerved by a uranium plant accident last week, the world's worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl.



A file photo shows former Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet accompanied by unidentified aides as he leaves the Princess Margaret Hospital in Windsor on September 23 this year, where he had further check-ups. A British magistrate yesterday authorised the extradition of Augusto Pinochet to Spain on multiple charges of torture. — AFP photo

British judge authorises Pinochet's extradition

LONDON, Oct 8: A British magistrate on Friday authorised the extradition of the former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet to Spain on multiple charges of torture, reports AFP.

Judge Ronald Bartle told Bow Street Magistrates' Court in central London that he would now refer the extradition request to Britain's Home Secretary Jack Straw, who has the final say.

The judge upheld a request from Spain to extradite the 83-year-old general on 34 charges of torture and one of conspiracy to torture.

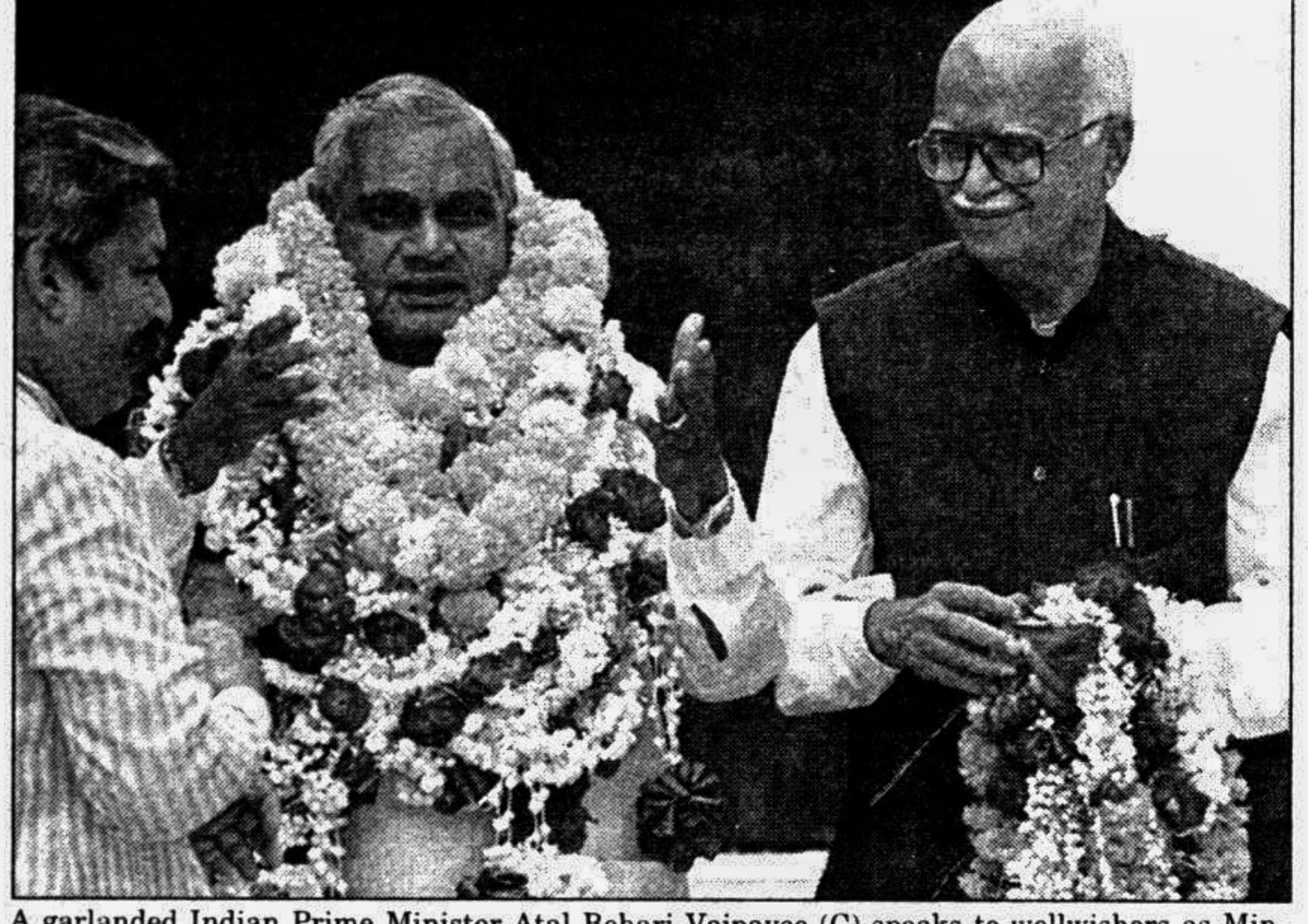
"All conditions are returned to oblige me to refer Senator Pinochet to the secretary of state's decision," Bartle said in his summary.

Lawyers for Pinochet are to appeal the decision, Pinochet's advisor Fernando Barros said Friday.

As the verdict was announced, a cheer went up among the almost 200 Pinochet opponents gathered outside the court building.

In Santiago, opponents of Augusto Pinochet shouted with glee while his followers shed tears after a British judge ruled that the former Chilean dictator can be extradited to Spain to face charges of torture.

Members of a group called Relatives of Disappeared Prisoners -- which holds Pinochet responsible for the deaths of thousands of political prisoners -- had gathered in downtown Santiago overnight to await the decision.



A garlanded Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (C) speaks to well-wishers as Minister for Home Affairs L.K. Advani looks on during a function at Vajpayee's residence in New Delhi on Thursday. The ruling Hindu nationalist alliance was celebrating victory in parliamentary elections, but the mood was dampened by concern over the long term stability of the new coalition government. — AFP photo

Second defeat for Laloo Prasad Yadav

PATNA, Oct 8: An image tainted by fodder scam, exceptionally bad law and order situation termed by the judiciary as 'Jungle Raj' and lack of development finally appeared to have overtaken Bihar strongman Laloo Prasad Yadav who was humbled by an outsider JD (U) chief Sharad Yadav in Madhepura Lok Sabha constituency by over 30,000 votes, reports PTI.

This was the only second defeat for the RJD chief who earlier lost in 1980 in the face of Congress wave sweeping the state following the failed Janata Party experiment.

The former Bihar chief minister, who resigned in the wake of a fodder scam, and got his wife Rabri Devi installed in his chair throning, that he would rule Bihar from behind the bar, lost to a worried Sharad Yadav, who alleged wide spread rigging and went on a hunger strike besides knocking at the doors of the high court for remedial measures.

Besides his personal defeat, Laloo Yadav also suffered a stunning reverse for his party as BJP-JD (U) combine appeared headed for a landslide victory winning 33 of the 43 seats decided so far and leading in six others.

The RJD-Congress combines were struggling to touch the half way mark of their joint tally of 22 last time.

Poling for four Bihar Lok Sabha seats had been put off for October 28 because of floods.

Timor refugees return home

DILI, East Timor, Oct 8: The first East Timorese refugees to be flown back from neighbouring West Timor arrived home Friday to an emotional welcome, weeks after fleeing militia violence here, reports AFP.

There were tears of joy but also bitter disappointment for those who had hoped in vain that missing friends and relatives would be among the first.

Indonesian authorities say more than 250,000 people have crossed over into West Timor following the militia violence.

that erupted after the East Timorese voted massively for independence on August 30.

The majority of them, now housed in squalid, insecure camps, want to return to East Timor.

The first group to go home were taken in French army trucks to Dili's sports stadium, where hundreds of the city's residents are living in makeshift shelters while they await the reconstruction of their burned-out homes.

As they arrived, the trucks were mobbed by hundreds of people clamouring to see if they recognised any faces.

After the initial jubilation, tears began to flow. "I am sad. My friends are not here," said one fearful woman.

But for Christiano Hernandez there was the relief of spotting a friend she had feared dead. "I have not seen him for more than a month. I was scared he was not alive," she told AFP.

After health checks, the refugees were given rice, cooking utensils and plastic sheeting to help them set up their own shelters.

World Food Programme spokeswoman Abby Spring said the refugees appeared to be in "reasonable condition" after a month in the Indonesian-run camps.

"There are no signs of malnutrition."

The UN High Commissioner for refugees hopes Friday's airlift marks the start of an operation which will see tens of thousands repatriated in the weeks ahead. Most refugees are expected to be taken home by boat or by road.

But there is concern among some aid workers that the world's interest in the fate of the refugees left in West Timor will fade now that a handful of them have gone home.

Seven more killed in Pak violence

KARACHI, Oct 8: Seven more people, including two doctors, were killed overnight in Karachi in apparent sectarian attacks, police said today, reports Reuters.

Police and authorities said they did not know why the doctors -- five have now been killed in the last two days -- were targeted.

More than 30 people have been killed since a wave of what police call sectarian attacks started last week with the murder of a religious party leader.

Most of the victims were Shi'ites, which make up about 15 per cent of Pakistan's 134 million people. Most of the rest of the population belong to the Sunni sect.

On Thursday, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif blamed Afghan-trained killers for some of the violence.

In the latest incidents, a former vice president of the Pakistan Medical Association was shot dead in his clinic in Karachi late on Thursday and another doctor was killed while riding a motorcycle.

A third doctor survived after he was shot in a separate attack. All three doctors are Sunnis. Late on Wednesday, three doctors -- two Shi'ites and one Sunni -- were shot dead in separate incidents in the port city of Karachi.

The medical association condemned the attacks and has called a meeting for Saturday.

Also, the death toll from a bomb blast on a Karachi bus on Thursday was raised to two, hospital officials said.

Police said they did not know if the blast, which blew out the back part of the bus, was linked in any way to the sectarian violence.

Sharif said some of the people involved in the recent attack had received weapons training across the border and that Islamabad had urged Afghanistan's ruling Taliban movement to close the camps.

Japan allows IAEA to inspect N-disaster site

TOKYO, Oct 8: Japan bowed Friday to an international inspection of the world's worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl and reports the disaster was bigger than first feared, reports AFP.

The government said it agreed to let in the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which offered to help immediately after the September 30 radiation leak only to be turned down.

The IAEA has offered to send experts to look into this accident. We will accept the offer," Science and Technology Agency chief Hirofumi Nakasone told a news conference.

"By providing clear information on the accident, we aim to increase transparency (of the investigation) and regain international trust," Nakasone said. The timetable had not been settled, he added.

The leak at a uranium processing site in Tokaimura, 120 kilometers (74 miles) northeast of Tokyo, exposed at least 49 people to radiation and forced more than 320,000 people to shelter at home for 24 hours.

The operator, JCO Co. Ltd., said three workers -- two of them in critical condition -- used steel buckets to pour 16 kilograms (35 pounds) of uranium into a tank, setting a blue flash as they set off a nuclear reaction.

It was the biggest accident since Chernobyl in 1986.

The worst-affected worker, 35-year-old Hisashi Ouchi, has had two transplants over the past two days of "stem cells," able to develop into blood's white cells, red cells or platelets.

Sumitomo Metal Mining Co., the owner of JCO, was reported by the Nippon Keizai Shimbun to be withdrawing from the nuclear fuel business before authorities revoked JCO's nuclear fuel processing licence.

Palestinian prisoner release postponed

JERUSALEM, Oct 8: A group of 151 Palestinian prisoners who were supposed to be freed Friday will remain locked up for now after a dispute between Israel and the Palestinians over which people to release, reports AP.

Under the terms of an interim peace agreement signed September 4 in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, Israel was to release the prisoners on October 8, which the Palestinians observe as an annual day in solidarity with the prisoners.

Israel released a first group of 199 prisoners on September 9, in accordance with the Sharm el-Sheikh agreement.

But the second release was postponed after Israel said the Palestinians raised demands that were not part of the latest agreement.

The Palestinians say the Israelis are trying to hold back 47 political prisoners who have longer sentences and instead release those with shorter sentences who would be out in a few months anyway.

"There is a real crisis on this issue," said Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, adding that the negotiations were continuing.

Adding to the tension, Palestinian leaders meeting in Ramallah issued a harsh statement charging that the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank "makes it impossible to conduct final status talks" regarding a peace treaty with Israel.

Internal Security Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami said Thursday that the decision about which prisoners to release is Israel's alone, though the Palestinians should be consulted.

Ben-Ami said that the delay was an attempt to preserve proper mutual relations. "So that we can continue to progress on the basis of trust," he said. "We are listening to what the Palestinians have to say."

Mexico flood death toll rises to 250

PUEBLA, Mexico, Oct 8: The death toll from torrential rains in Mexico rose to about 250 Thursday and was likely to mount further as thousands of people were missing, trapped under mudslides or isolated in villages rescuers could not reach, reports AFP.

With at least 200,000 people having to abandon their homes and shortages of drinking water in some areas, there was concern disease could spread rapidly through crowded emergency shelters and in remote communities.

As rain continued to pound parts of the country, villages cut off by mudslides issued urgent appeals for airborne aid.

The worst hit was the eastern state of Puebla, where some 170 people were killed. In Veracruz, 50 deaths were officially reported, though radio station put that toll at more than 70.

In several communities in the Sierra region of Puebla, dozens of people were feared trapped under tonnes of mud and rocks that came crashing down mountainsides onto their homes and schools.

Rescuers were battling bad weather and blocked roads to get to the isolated villages.

Many of those killed were Indians living in impoverished Sierra villages such as Tezuitlan, where rescue teams dug out 40 bodies buried by mud, or Tetela de Ocampo, where 31 were found.

"It's horrible, torrents of water are coming down the mountains. Walls have collapsed, houses are under three meters (10 feet) of water," helicopter pilot Alejandro Wong told AFP after surveying the region.

Several days of pounding rain caused significant damage across the state, destroying bridges, roads and homes and leaving vast areas without power or telephone lines.

Death sentence for Rajiv killers upheld

NEW DELHI, Oct 8: India's Supreme Court on Friday confirmed death sentences on four people involved in the assassination of former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991.

The court rejected an appeal for a review of the sentences handed down on the two Indians and two Sri Lankans.

All four were sentenced to hang in January 1998 by a special court in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Execution was deferred in June, pending the appeal.

After the Supreme Court ruling Friday, it was not immediately clear when the execution would be carried out.

Rajiv Gandhi was killed by a female suicide bomber belonging to Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at an election rally in Tamil Nadu on May 21, 1991.

When Rajiv Gandhi was prime minister, he had sent Indian troops to Sri Lanka in 1987 to help end an ethnic separatist war being waged by the LTTE.

The troops soon became the target of the LTTE, who saw them taking sides with the Sri Lankan government. Nearly 1,200 Indian soldiers died before the force was finally withdrawn.

The LTTE has repeatedly denied it killed Gandhi.



East Timorese refugees wave to a crowd of well-wishers lining the streets of Dili yesterday after being flown home from Kupang in West Timor. — AFP photo

Bed rest could be harmful: Study

LONDON, Oct 8: Prolonged bed rest -- prescribed by doctors since medicine began to speed up recovery from any number of ailments -- may not always help and can even be harmful, a new study suggests, reports AP.

Hippocrates, the father of medicine, who lived around 400 BC, once said: "In every movement of the body, whenever one begins to endure pain, it will be relieved by rest."

Since then, it has been a little-challenged assumption that bed rest is good for most illnesses, even those that don't force patients to remain immobile, said the new study, published in this week's issue of The Lancet, a British medical journal.

The research, by Australian scientists from the University of Queensland Medical School, examined all previous studies on the effectiveness of bed rest compared with getting up and moving around more quickly. It involved 5,777 patients with 15 different medical problems.

"Overall, there was no evidence that bed rest has any significant beneficial effect when used as a treatment or when used after surgery," the researchers said. "It may actually delay recovery and even harm the patient."

For example, the scientists found that taking to bed to ease nausea connected with having spinal fluid removed with a needle or a headache from undergoing spinal anaesthesia made both conditions worse.

And staying in bed just two or three hours more after a heart catheterisation, where blood flow is tested in the heart, increased the chances of blood leaking out of the artery and of back pain, they said.

The researchers also found that lying in bed for six or seven hours during the early stage of labour, instead of walking around, made contractions stronger and stretched out that stage.

Their findings also supported modern recommendations that bed rest should not longer be used for acute lower back pain, for recovery after a heart attack or for acute infectious hepatitis.

Some experts criticised the study, saying things have changed recently and that doctors prescribe prolonged stays in bed much more rarely.

Dr Henry McQuay, a professor of pain relief at Oxford University in England, said the study is a timely reminder that staying in bed is not good for lower back pain, but noted that experts stopped recommending that years ago.

Doctors in Britain also long ago gave up telling women to stay in bed when their blood pressure rises during pregnancy, said Dr Christopher Redman, a professor of obstetrics at Oxford.

But the researchers said ideas about bed rest seem so entrenched that medical practice has been slow to change -- even when faced with evidence of its ineffectiveness," they wrote. "There are also reports that bed rest is still being over-prescribed after heart attacks and catheterisations, and for lower back pain."

Dr Michael Fifer, director of the coronary care unit at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, said that assessment may not be fair when it comes to heart care.

15 Tigers killed in Lankan naval attack

VAVUNIYA, Oct 8: The Sri Lankan navy destroyed two Tamil rebel boats off the northern coast, killing 15 insurgents on board, the rebel radio said Friday, reports AP.

The military confirmed the attack, but said it was unable to give casualty figures.

The clandestine Voice of Tigers radio monitored from the northern town of Vavuniya said a Sri Lankan naval patrol detected the boats at dawn Thursday as they approached the town of Talaimannar, about 220 kilometres north of the capital, Colombo.

"We know for sure both the boats were totally destroyed by our fire," said a military official on condition of anonymity. "It is difficult to imagine how anyone could survive the attack, but then we have no body count."

Voice of Tigers radio often admits losses of its fighters and reads their names over the radio to inform their families. On Friday it read out the names of the 15 dead.

Afghan opposition launches counter-attack

KABUL, Oct 8: Forces loyal to Afghanistan's opposition United Front Friday fought heavy battles against Taliban forces in the north of the country, reports AFP.

United Front spokesman Mohammad Habel, said opposition troops had beaten back three Taliban strikes across front lines in Takhar province, killing 45 Islamic militia soldiers.

"Our attack captured the high grounds of Khwaja Ghar, including the airport, and the town itself is a no man's land," he said.

A Taliban spokesman was unavailable for comment. Independent confirmation was not immediately available.

11 die in clashes in Indonesia

JAKARTA, Oct 8: At least 11 people have been killed and scores injured in renewed clashes between Muslims and Christians in the riot-ridden Indonesian province of Maluku, reports said Friday, reports AFP.

One man was killed and six were injured in pre-dawn clashes on Friday in the Ahuru area of Ambon, the capital of Maluku province, the Antara news agency said.

Most of the victims were shot by security personnel trying to disperse the warring mobs, Antara said.

A battle in Haruku island also broke out on Thursday in which at least five people were killed following an attack by people from neighbouring Saparua island, the Media Indonesia newspaper said.

The clashes were continuing early Friday, but there were no immediate reports of further casualties.

BRIFFLY

35 drug dealers held in Kuwait: Narcotics police have arrested 35 drug dealers in Kuwait in a 48-hour crackdown this week, a newspaper reported Friday. AFP reports from Kuwait City.

A senior police officer told the daily Al-Qabas that interior Minister Sheikh Mohamed Al-Khaled Al-Sabah was personally leading a campaign which netted the 35 Kuwaitis and foreigners from Wednesday night. The suspects would be put in court on Saturday following the capture of "quantities of opium, heroin, hashish and arms in their possession", the officer added.

Nigeria stampede toll 16: The death toll from a stampede at a religious vigil led by evangelical German preacher Reinhard Bonnke in southern Nigeria has reached 16, state officials said Friday. AFP reports from Benin City.

Fourteen worshippers died later Tuesday when a stampede broke out as a group of the worshippers attempted to catch a glimpse of Bonnke, a controversial, charismatic preacher, currently visiting the country. Two more died on Thursday from injuries sustained in the crush, said officials.

European heads urge US to ratify CTBT

NEW YORK, Oct 8: The leaders of Britain, France and Germany joined voices in an op-ed piece published today's New York Times to urge the United States to ratify a global treaty banning nuclear tests which is headed for almost certain defeat in a crucial Senate vote next week, reports Reuters.

Rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty by the US Senate would relieve the pressure on other states still hesitating over whether to ratify the treaty, French President Jacques Chirac, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder wrote.

Rejecting the treaty would also encourage nuclear proliferation and expose a fundamental rift within NATO, the European leaders wrote.

Britain, France and Germany ratified the treaty last year.

Looking to the future, "we have to face the stark truth that nuclear proliferation remains the major threat to world safety," they wrote.

Critics of the treaty say it provides for no water tight guarantee that other nations will not conduct nuclear weapons tests in secret. The European leaders argue that adherence to the treaty will be verifiable under a global network of stations being set up to monitor nuclear tests.