

## Queen blocking remarriage of Andrew & Fergie

LONDON, Oct 18: Prince Andrew desperately wants to remarry his former wife Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York, but is being prevented from doing so by his mother Queen Elizabeth II, The Sun newspaper reported today, says AFP.

"It's so unfair," Andrew, the Duke of York, reportedly commented during a reception at Chequers, the country home of British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

"There is no doubt the Duke would like to get remarried but he would only do so with the consent of the Queen. That is not forthcoming, so there will be no marriage. Andrew would not consider going against his mother," a senior royal aide was quoted as saying.

Andrew, 39, and the 40-year-old Duchess, better known by her nickname 'Fergie', were divorced in 1996 but live in separate wings of the same house in Sunninghill, a wealthy suburb south-west of London, with their two daughters Beatrice and Eugenie.

Fergie launched the remarriage speculation in The Times Saturday.

## US, UK press Musharraf to set early timetable for return to democracy

WASHINGTON, Oct 18: The United States and Britain pressed Pakistan's new military ruler to set an early timetable for the restoration of democracy, reports AFP.

Statements from the White House and London said a pledge by General Pervez Musharraf to stay in power no longer "than absolutely necessary" was disappointing.

In a passionate address Sunday night, five days after ousting the elected government of prime minister Nawaz Sharif, Musharraf promised his military regime had "no intention to stay in charge any longer than absolutely necessary."

But Washington challenged Musharraf to outline a "clear timetable" for the restoration of democracy.

"We are disappointed that he did not offer a clear timetable for the early restoration of constitutional, civilian and democratic government," said US State Department spokesman

James Rubin.

"We call upon him to do so now."

British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook labelled the mere promise of a return to democracy as "insufficient" and said a firm timetable was needed.

"General Musharraf's statement tonight was disappointing in the absence of any end date to military rule," Cook said in a statement.

"A commitment to an eventual return to democracy is insufficient on its own. It needs to be accompanied by a credible and clear timetable."

Cook said he would consult with Britain's partners on the best way to make the Pakistan military authorities understand the "urgent need" to return to democracy.

The Commonwealth is to hold a special meeting in London on Monday to consider the suspension of Pakistan from the organisation and perhaps other financial measures.

"If it is confirmed that the

military will remain in power, I would expect this regime to be suspended from the Council of the Commonwealth," Emma Anyaoku, the secretary-general of the body in London, said after the coup.

"The Commonwealth has become an organisation whose members are committed to democracy," Anyaoku told the BBC. "What has happened flies in the face of that and therefore isolates the Pakistani regime."

Musharraf, in his 20-minute speech, did announce a "unilateral military de-escalation" along Pakistan's borders with rival India and said a six-member National Security Council would run affairs of state.

A seven-point plan pledged measures to rebuild national confidence and morale, restore national cohesion, revive the economy and ensure "swift and across the board accountability."

Cook, while welcoming the "confidence building" promise

to de-escalate military tensions with India, said no country can flourish "under an unelected and unaccountable regime."

While Rubin said it is "critically important for Pakistan to begin to resolve its differences with India, including the conflict over Kashmir."

Fighting between India and Pakistan over the Himalayan region, claimed in part by both countries, escalated between May and July.

The United States welcomed measures "such as the unilateral draw down of military forces along the international border with India that General Musharraf announced," Rubin said.

Indian newspapers also highlighted Musharraf's offer of unconditional peace talks and a "military de-escalation" along the border with India.

But the Indian government's initial reaction was Islamabad would first have to stop backing separatists in Kashmir.

## Cong forms govt in Maharashtra

BOMBAY, Oct 18: India's Congress Party today took power in the key state of Maharashtra in alliance with a splinter group, ending 10 days of political suspense and five years of Hindu nationalist rule, reports AFP.

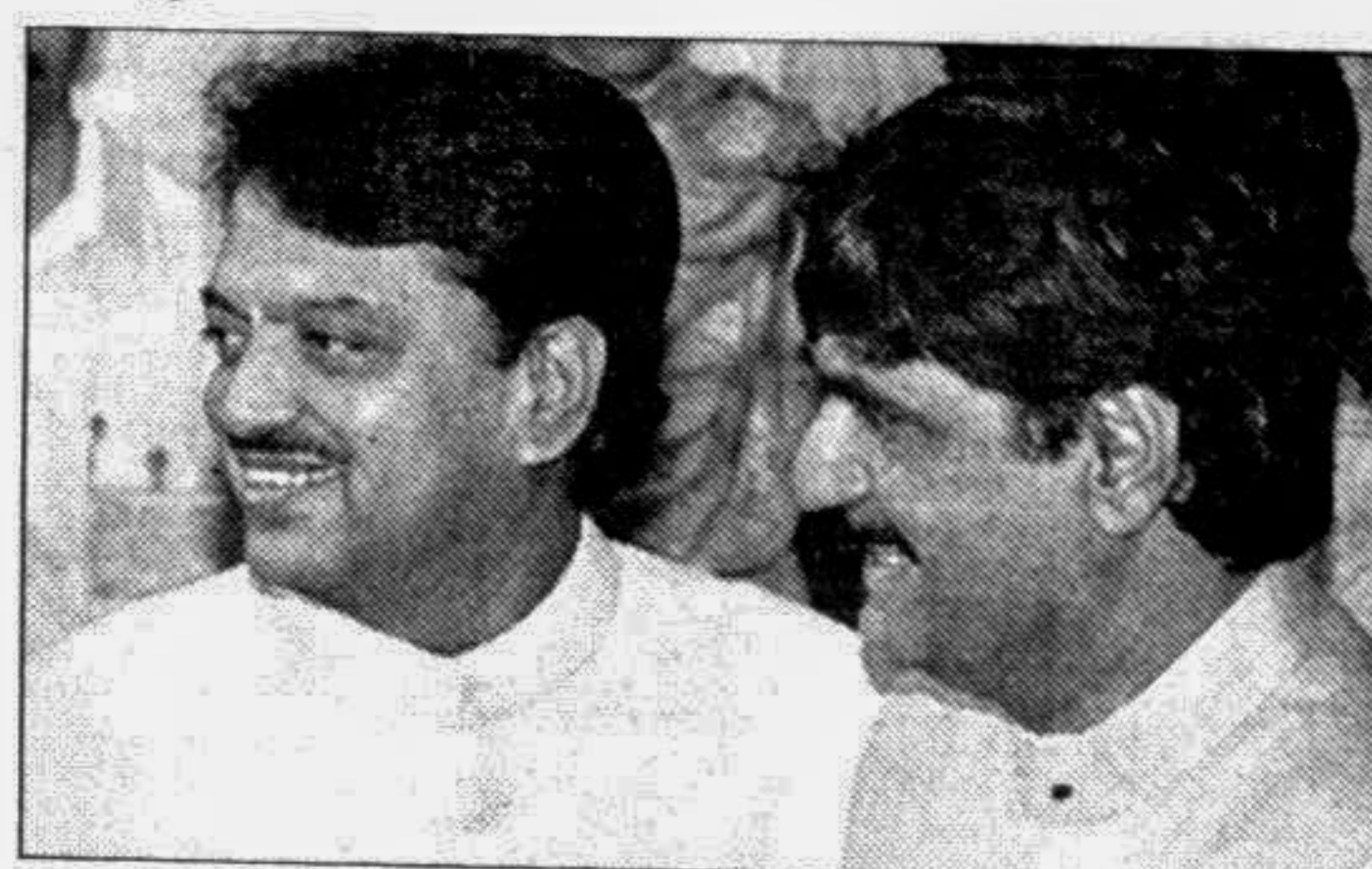
Vilasrao Deshmukh was sworn in as the 21st Chief Minister of Maharashtra as leader of a coalition government which also includes foe-turned-friend Nationalist Congress Party (NCP).

The NCP's Chhagan Bhujbal took the oath as deputy chief minister. Other ministers were to be sworn in later.

The new government replaces a coalition of Hindu nationalists which had governed Maharashtra since 1995. The nationalists lost the state elections held last month.

The NCP was formed in June by three Congress rebels after challenging the suitability of Congress chief Sonia Gandhi for the prime ministership on account of her Italian origin.

But Congress and NCP leaders said they had buried their differences, when it was clear they would have to join hands if they wanted to provide a gov-



The new Chief Minister of Maharashtra Vilasrao Deshmukh (L) of the Congress (I) Party with former deputy Chief Minister Gopinath Munde just after the swearing-in ceremony at the Raj Bhavan in Bombay yesterday.

ernment in the state.

Before and during state and national elections in Maharashtra, the Congress and NCP had ruled out an alliance and their top leaders vilified each other during campaigning.

Political expediency has led to a dramatic turnaround.

Elections last month for the 288-member Maharashtra assembly produced a badly hung legislature, with the Congress emerging as the largest party 75 seats. The NCP won 56.

The Congress-NCP decision followed 10 days of hard bargaining on both sides.

## Malaysian judge rules Anwar has case to answer on sodomy charge

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 18: In a new legal setback for Malaysia's sacked deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim, a High Court today rejected a defence submission to throw out the sodomy charge against him, reports AFP.

Anwar shook his head when Judge Ariffin Jaka ruled that Anwar and his Indonesian adopted brother Sukma Darmawan did have a case to answer on a charge of sodomising Azizah Abu Bakar, Wan Azizah's former driver.

Anwar later hugged his wife and eldest daughter Nurul Izzah and told them: "What is so shocking? You mean you didn't know it (the ruling)?"

His wife Wan Azizah told AFP: "It's expected."

Sukma is also charged with abetting the politician in the

act.

The judge ordered them to give evidence on Thursday and adjourned the hearing till then.

Defence lawyers told reporters they would seek to call Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and several ministers to give evidence. Anwar would maintain he is the victim of a high-level political conspiracy.

Ariffin said in court that the prosecution had "proven its case beyond reasonable doubt" after a 60-day hearing and refused a request by defence counsel Karpal Singh to explain his decision.

"I am not obliged to give my reasons at this stage. I have searched my conscience and I say this is not a complicated case. It is a normal criminal case of sodomy under the penal code," he said.



Chechen fighters study the movement of Russian federal troops through the optics of their guns near the western Chechnya village of Assinovskaya on Sunday as Russian Generals announced the start of the second phase of their campaign in Chechnya.

— AFP photo

## Benazir's conditional welcome to Pak military blueprint

ISLAMABAD, Oct 18: P) - Former premier Benazir Bhutto gave a conditional welcome today to the plans of Pakistan's new military rulers for governing the country and getting the economy back on track, reports AFP.

While applauding coup leader General Pervez Musharraf's commitments to root out corruption and reduce tensions with India, Benazir stressed the importance of a prompt return to democratic rule.

"It is my hope that the military leadership will, as quickly as possible, establish an interim government and set a date for national elections," Benazir said in a statement released in London.

Although she declined to condone last week's military coup that ousted the elected gov-

ernment of her arch rival Nawaz Sharif, Benazir voiced understanding that the situation had become untenable.

Benazir, who heads the Pakistan People's Party -- the main opposition party during Sharif's tenure as premier -- has reportedly been in contact with Musharraf to secure her safe return to Pakistan from self-imposed exile in London.

She and her jailed husband were convicted in April of corruption and sentenced to five years imprisonment, fined 8.6 million dollars and barred from politics.

"We stand prepared to work with the new leadership, but also to remain a consistent voice for the resumption of a working and representative democracy, free and open elections in Pakistan and the

speedy return to civilian rule at the earliest possible time," Benazir said.

Musharraf unveiled his blueprint for a post-coup government in a televised address to the nation on Sunday, but gave no precise timetable for the restoration of democracy.

**Kashmiri militants hail military regime**

Meanwhile, Pakistan-based Kashmiri guerrilla groups today welcomed the prospect of military rule, and urged the new regime not to compromise on the bitter Kashmir dispute with India.

The military has a "better understanding" of the Kashmir dispute than the civilian government ousted in last week's coup, said Bakht Zameen, chief of the Al-Badr group.

## BRIEFLY

**BDP wins Botswana polls:** The ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) of President Festus Mogae has been declared winner of the general elections, the Independent Electoral Commission announced yesterday, AFP reports from Gaborone.

As leader of the biggest party Mogae, 60, was declared president by Chief Justice Julius Nkomo, after the BDP had crossed the threshold of 21 seats in the 40-seat national assembly.

With counting continuing in 11 constituencies early Monday, the BDP held 24 seats, with the opposition Botswana National Front (BNF) led by veteran politician Kenneth Koma taking five.

**Cargo plane plunges into sea:** A Federal Express cargo plane has plunged into the sea after overshooting a runway at Subic freport north of the Philippine capital, officials said yesterday, AFP reports from Manila.

The two people onboard the aircraft, the pilot Captain Michael Rooney and first officer Cynthia Hubbard, "were able to get out of the plane shortly before it submerged," a report prepared by the Subic management said.

## Indian media blares Pak peace offer, officials prudent

NEW DELHI, Oct 18: Indian newspapers today highlighted the offer of unconditional peace talks by Pakistan's new military ruler, but officials and pundits here had their fingers crossed, reports AFP.

General Pervez Musharraf's announcement Sunday that he would like a "military de-escalation" along the border with India and was ready for negotiations with New Delhi drew banner headlines in the Indian media.

"Pak to pull back troops along border," screamed The Hindustan Times. "Musharraf offers result-oriented talks with Delhi."

The Times of India said:

"Pakistan announced troop reduction along border." The Indian Express added: "Pak forces to pull back from border."

Pakistan's military coup has been front-page news in India since Musharraf ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif last Tuesday.

India, which has fought three wars with Pakistan, had been keenly looking for Musharraf's views on bilateral relations.

"I take this opportunity to announce a unilateral military de-escalation on our international borders with India," Musharraf said in a nationally televised address.

"I hope this step will serve as

a meaningful confidence-building measure."

Musharraf also called for an "unconditional, equitable and result-oriented" dialogue with New Delhi but said Pakistan would continue its "moral, political and diplomatic support" for Muslim separatists in Indian Kashmir.

The Indian government's initial reaction was that Islamabad would first have to first stop backing separatists in Kashmir.

"Pakistan must stop cross-border terrorism for meaningful talks to begin," said Brajesh Mishra, national security advisor to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

## Taliban vow not to hand over Laden to UN

DUBAI, Oct 18: The leader of the Afghan Taliban movement said in remarks published today that his movement would not hand over Saudi Arabian dissident Osama bin Laden to the United Nations, despite international sanctions, reports Reuters.

But Mullah Mohammad Omar told the London-based Arabic-language al-Hayat newspaper that his movement would not allow bin Laden to stage attacks from

Afghanistan.

Omar said bin Laden was "a Muslim who fought against the communists in Afghanistan and handing him over, for us, is as difficult as leaving a pillar of Islam."

The United Nations Security Council on Friday imposed sanctions to make the Taliban surrender bin Laden for trial on charges he plotted the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Africa.

## Taiwan to return to Chinese fold next century: Jiang

LONDON, Oct 18: Taiwan will return to the Chinese fold in the first half of the next century, China's President Jiang Zemin said in an interview published in The Times newspaper here today, reports AFP.

"By the middle of next century... we will resolve the question of Taiwan and accomplish the great cause of national reunification by adhering to the policy of 'peaceful reunification' and 'one country, two systems,' after the successful return of Hong Kong and Macau," said

Jiang.

On Tuesday Jiang embarks on the first trip to Britain by a Chinese president.

China has considered Taiwan to be a renegade province since the Chinese Nationalists fled there in 1949 after a civil war with the Communists.

In 1997 Hong Kong returned from British to Chinese rule under the "one country, two systems" scheme which allowed the territory to maintain its free-wheeling capitalist lifestyle while under communist Beijing rule.

The tiny Portuguese enclave of Macau will return to Chinese rule in a similar fashion in December.

Commenting on steps to improve Sino-US relations, harmed by the NATO bombing of Beijing's embassy in Belgrade in May, Jiang said the United States should stop its arms sales to Taiwan and "refrain from creating new obstacles on the question of Taiwan and other matters, as they are detrimental to the improvement of China-US relations."

The US Congress is currently discussing a bill to allow fresh exports of US arms to Taiwan, as an island off the east coast of mainland China.

Also the United States and Japan have launched a defence cooperation project in the anti-ballistic missile field, which China is insisting must not involve Taiwan.

## 'Colombo not keen to talk to Tigers'

NEW DELHI, Oct 18: Sri Lanka is not keen to talk peace with Tamil Tiger guerrillas after they assassinated a moderate Tamil politician, President Chandrika Kumaratunga said in remarks published today, reports AFP.

"Now actually, we have sort of stalled all discussions, after Neelan's killing," Kumaratunga told The Hindu newspaper, referring to the July 29 assassination of Tamil politician Neelan Thiruchelvan.

"We have stopped even trying to negotiate. We are not at all

interested at the moment," the president said.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is waging a long-drawn separatist campaign for an independent homeland in Sri Lanka's north and east.

The group has been accused of killing several moderate Tamils who oppose the LTTE. Thiruchelvan, 55, a Tamil MP who was considered close to Kumaratunga, was killed by a LTTE suicide bomber in Colombo.

Kumaratunga said she did not consider the LTTE the representative of her country's entire Tamil minority.

"We believe the LTTE is not the only representative of the Tamil people and the best proof of this is that they consistently keep killing every credible Tamil leader, who comes up."

"So that shows the LTTE in no way consider themselves the sort of overruling authority to represent the Tamil people. If they think so, they don't need to annihilate people."

## US to honour CTBT commitment

WASHINGTON, Oct 18: The United States will continue to honour a nuclear test ban treaty despite its rejection by the Republican-controlled Senate, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said Sunday, reports AP.

A leader of anti-treaty senators warned that if President Bill Clinton again tries to have the Senate ratify the treaty, "it will be defeated."

Appearing on CNN, Albright said Wednesday's 51-48 Senate vote against the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty — far below the

67 needed to ratify — "hurt us internationally" and mystified our colleagues around the world.

"What we've lost for the time being is the real international leadership in terms of trying to make others live up to the CTBT," she said.

"But I want to assure all your viewers, around the world, that the United States is going to live up to the conditions of the treaty."

She noted that Clinton was the first world leader to sign the global treaty, which has been signed by 154 nations and rati-

fied by 51, including only 26 of the 44 countries potentially capable of producing nuclear weapons.

"The Republicans defeated a major landmark treaty that would really have helped generally in controlling nuclear weapons and our whole non-proliferation agenda," Albright said.

She did not say whether the White House would submit the pact for the Senate to reconsider its first Treaty rejection since the League of Nations treaty in 1920.

## China denies aiding Y'slav military

BEIJING, Oct 18: China today rejected reports that it aided the Yugoslav military in its war against NATO and said the Alliance was solely responsible for the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade.

"The so-called theory that the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia provided support for the Yugoslav military side is pure fabrication with ulterior motives," a foreign ministry spokesman told AFP.

"No matter what kind of lies the relevant parties fabricated, the US-led NATO cannot shirk from the responsibility they should take for the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia," he said.

China denies aiding Y'slav military

## Catalonia's ruling party narrowly won regional polls

BARCELONA, Spain, Oct 18: Catalonia's ruling nationalist party narrowly won the regional election here Sunday, beating the Socialist opposition by four seats, according to the official results released today, reports AFP.

The Convergencia i Unio (CiU) party, led by incumbent regional president Jordi Pujol, secured 56 seats in the 135-seat regional assembly in north-eastern Spain, despite winning fewer votes than their main rivals.

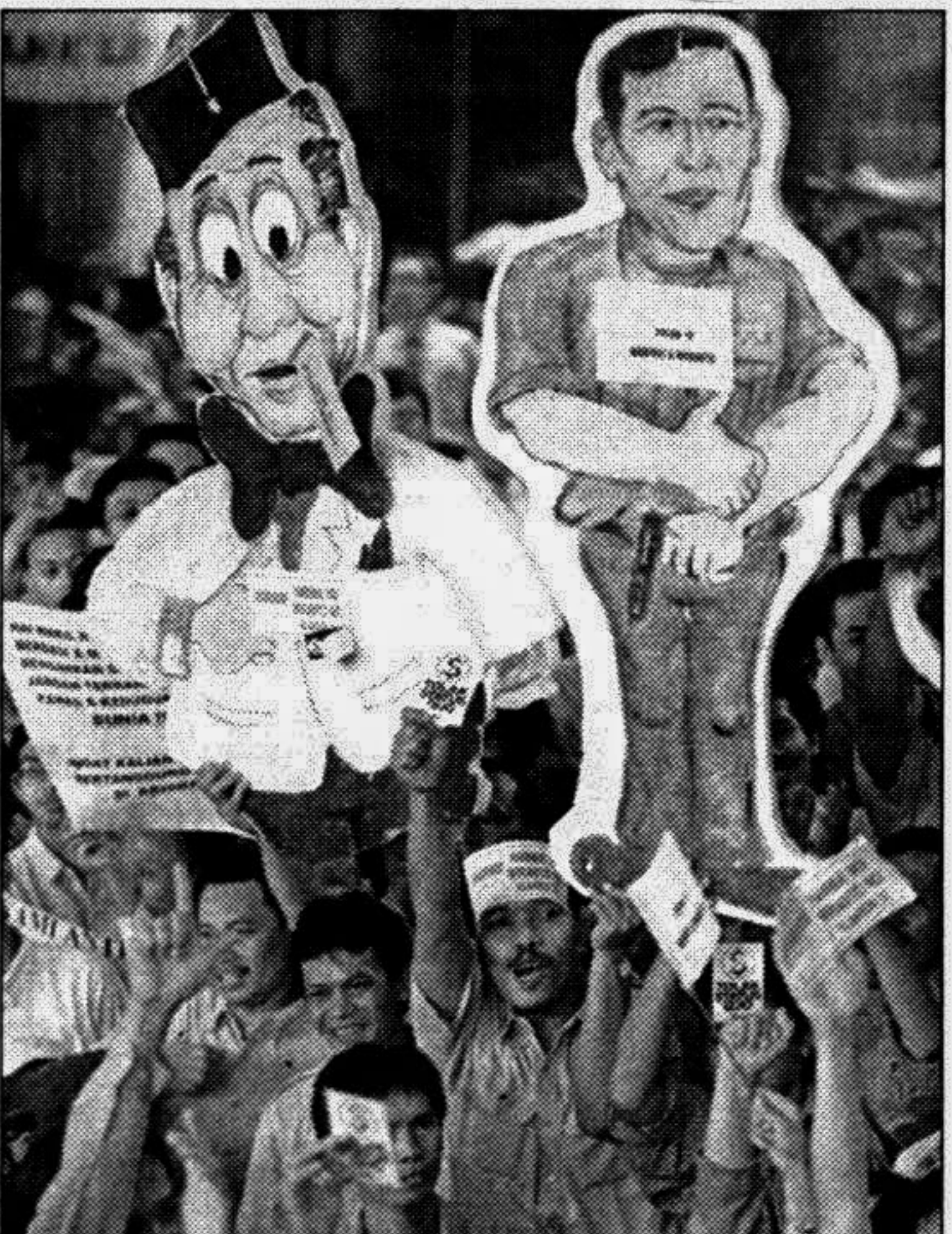
The Socialist Party, led by Pasqual Maragall, won 52 seats in the assembly with 37.88 per cent of the total vote, slightly more than the 37.68 per cent of votes which the victorious nationalists garnered.

## Russian raid claims 70 Chechen fighters

MOSCOW, Oct 18: Russian air and artillery strikes killed more than 70 Chechen gunmen in overnight attacks, the ITAR-TASS news agency cited the Russian defence ministry as saying today, reports AFP.

The fighting was reported at Sernovodsk, a village situated about 45 km west of the Chechen capital Grozny.

Officials in the rebel republic were not immediately available to confirm the report.



Indonesian white collar workers hold effigies of President B.J. Habibie (L) and military chief Wiranto as they shout slogans during a mass rally outside the Jakarta Stock Exchange yesterday. Some 1,000 workers, many of them from the financial sector, urged Habibie to drop his bid for a second term.

## Indian troops kill 5 foreign militants in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Oct 18: Indian troops shot dead five foreign Muslim guerrillas in a gunbattle in Kashmir which also left two civilians dead, officials said today, reports AFP.

The firefight erupted overnight Sunday in the forests of southern Kashmir's Poonch district, after Indian troops began combing the area for militants.

The civilians died when they were caught in the crossfire, the officials said. Six other militants, most of them foreigners, managed to escape.

## First Palestinian gets permission to use safe passage

EREZ, Gaza Strip, Oct 18: Ghalil Daghamash today became the first Palestinian to receive permission to use the safe passage linking the West Bank and Gaza Strip — despite not knowing when the road will open.

"For the first time in my life I will leave the Gaza Strip," 27-year-old Daghamash told AFP outside the Palestinian-Israeli liaison office at the Erez crossing between the Gaza Strip and Israel.

"I am very happy that I will be able to get to know new people in the West Bank," he said after receiving a magnetic card giving access to the route.

## Security stepped up in Jakarta ahead of polls

JAKARTA, Oct 18: President B.J. Habibie today paid tribute to the military and police as security was stepped up in the Indonesian capital two days ahead of the presidential election, reports AFP.

Habibie, seeking a new mandate from the National Assembly which will pick Indonesia's fourth president on Wednesday, mingled with security forces guarding the area around the presidential palace.

More than 41,500 policemen and soldiers have been mobilised across greater Jakarta to secure key sections of the city of 11 million people ahead of the vote by the 700-member People's Consultative Assembly (MPR).

Trailed by a tightly-guarded entourage which included national police chief General Rusmanhadi, Habibie gave some of the soldiers pecks on the cheek while the others loudly clapped.

He told journalists that the visit at Jakarta's Monas area was "to personally thank the troops... and it's normal and wise because they have done their jobs tirelessly and always with patience."

Habibie, who has upheld the importance of human rights and democracy and, to the surprise of many, adopted a reformist agenda, said that "what's best for the people... is

also best for the armed forces and the national police."

Habibie, who has rejected calls for him to drop out of the three-cornered presidential race, said that soldiers and police also had the right to enjoy human rights because they too "have families and honour."

The national assembly is set to vote Tuesday on Habibie's account of his 17 months at the helm.

A rejection of his report would not automatically knock him out of contention for Wednesday's presidential election but would drastically undermine his bid for a new term.

His own Golkar party has said it could propose a new candidate if he fails the assembly test. But chairman Akbar Tanjung and deputy chairman Mahadi Sinambela both admitted some elements within the party were pushing hard for the party to retain Habibie's candidacy.

As security precautions became more visible, political jitters today affected the Jakarta stock exchange, where some 1,000 people including dealers and employees of banks and securities firms staged a lunchtime protest urging Habibie to drop out of the race. The composite index closed the morning down 11,737 points or two per cent at 556.181.