

World hails decision to free E Timor

The birth of a new nation

JAKARTA, Oct 20: Indonesia today formally accepted East Timor's vote for independence, clearing the way for the creation of the world's newest nation, reports AFP.

The decision by the country's National Assembly was immediately welcomed by Australia, Britain, the United States and the UN, which is to set up an interim administration before the former Portuguese colony gains full statehood.

Assembly chairman Amien Rais said the historic decree recognising the August 30 vote, in which East Timorese voted 4-1 for independence, was cleared by representatives of all factions of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR).

No vote was taken.

"It means we have to move from transition to independence," UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said in Washington.

Annan said that some 9,000 UN forces, expected to take over from the Australian-led multinational force (Interfet) now in

East Timor, would probably withdraw "in a time frame of two to three years."

But the pullout could go faster, he said.

"Eventually there will be another election to choose their own leaders," Annan said.

US State Department spokesman James Foley said Washington expected to work with "key parties" to ease the transition to full independence.

"The challenges ahead include restoring security in East Timor, investigating the violence and preventing further bloodshed by disarming and disbanding the (pro-Jakarta) militia groups," Foley said.

Indonesia, East Timor, the United Nations and Portugal are all expected to be involved in the transition from Indonesia's 27th province, to full statehood.

British Foreign Minister Robin Cook praised welcomed Indonesia's move.

"The Indonesian government and parliament deserve

credit for their historic decision reversing the annexation of East Timor," he said.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard said he hoped the decision would help mend relations between Canberra and Jakarta, which have soured over the Timor crisis.

"In the relationship between Australia and Indonesia it will in one stroke remove one of the constraints that has always been there," he said.

The decision to approve East Timor's independence came hours before President B.J. Habibie announced he would not seek a second term of office after the assembly rejected an account of his 17-month administration.

Habibie has been subject scathing criticism from almost all sides of the political spectrum for allowing the vote in East Timor, which some fear could encourage separatist movements in other provinces.

In the end however, all of Indonesia's political factions, including the military, ap-

peared to accept that independence was unavoidable.

Indonesia invaded East Timor in 1975 and annexed the territory a year later in a move never recognised by the UN. Ever since East Timor has been Jakarta's foreign policy albatross.

Preparations for the handover to the United Nations are already underway.

In Dili, the capital of East Timor, an AFP reporter said many of the remaining 1,500 Indonesian troops were loading their belongings on landing craft at the port.

Discussions are also underway between the UN and a 31-man Indonesian task force on details of the handover of Indonesian state property to the UN.

A UN Mission in East Timor spokesman told AFP in Dili: "There's some suggestion that the final element of the TNI (Indonesian armed forces) may be withdrawn soon after the vote."

200 feared dead as Indonesian ship sinks

JAKARTA, Oct 20: More than 200 people are missing and feared dead after a passenger ship sank in waters off the coast of the remote Indonesian province of Irian Jaya, the state Antara news agency reported today, says AFP.

Antara said the ship, the KM Bimas Raya II, which was carrying about 300 passengers sank Monday off the Merauke district of Irian Jaya.

Only 26 out of some 300 passengers of the ship have been found, an official of the owner company PT Bimas Raya, was quoted by Antara as saying late Tuesday in Merauke, the ship's destination.

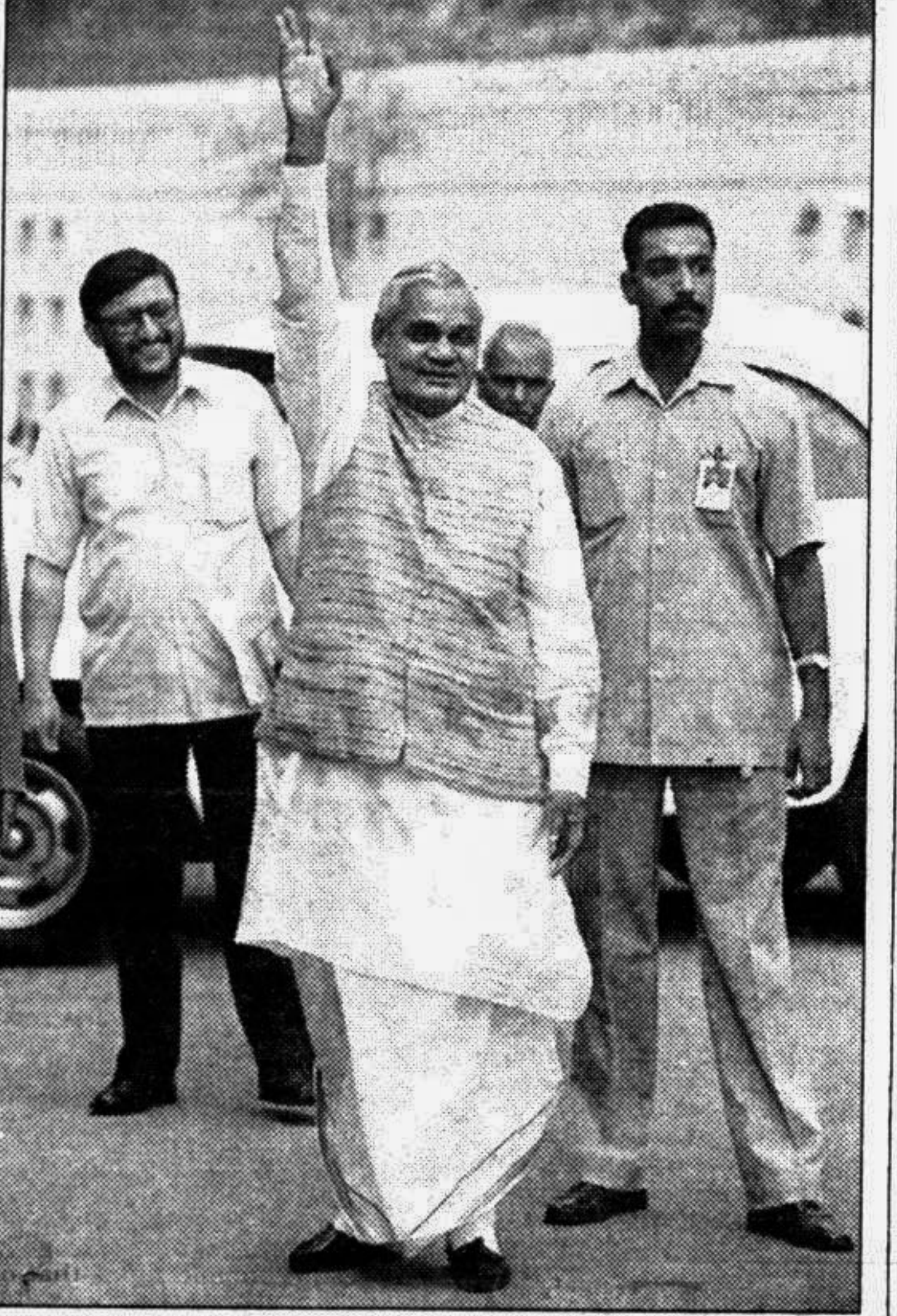
A few minutes before it sank, the ship's captain sent an emergency message to the PT Bimas Raya radio frequency, saying that the ship was in critical condition, Antara said.

There was no immediate information on the cause of the sinking.

The shipowner had sent the Bimas Raya II's sister ship, the KM Bimas Raya I, along with four other ships of several shipping companies, to search for more victims.



Brandishing an automatic pistol dropped by a policeman, this militant supporter of Megawati Sukarnoputri is stopped by a security officer of Megawati's PDI-Struggle party during violent clashes with security forces in south Jakarta yesterday. Megawati's supporters were angry that their leader lost the presidential vote to her rival, Muslim party leader, Abdurrahman Wahid, better known as Gus Dur. — AFP photo



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (C) waves to photographers as he enters parliament in New Delhi yesterday. Opposition leader Sonia Gandhi was the first foreign born person to enter the federal legislature, when she was sworn in on the first day of a new parliamentary session, following general elections. — AFP photo

Lanka announces snap polls

COLOMBO, Oct 20: Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga today announced a snap presidential election at least 10 months before the end of her six-year term, reports AFP.

Information department director Ariya Rubasinghe said the elections chief will announce a schedule for calling nominations and the balloting date within the next three weeks.

Kumaratunga's move would lead the way for elections 10 months ahead of schedule.

She made no reference to the parliamentary election which is due in August. Originally, the presidential election was to have come in November after the parliamentary vote in August.

Ruling party politicians had been speculating for some time that it would be better for the ruling party to field Kumaratunga as a presidential candidate and then to go for a general election.

It is widely believed that President Kumaratunga is more popular than members of her ruling people's Alliance party and a presidential victory would help them sweep the parliamentary vote too.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's main opposition today welcomed a snap presidential election called by President Chandrika Kumaratunga and said the surprise move showed deepening rifts within the ruling party.

Opposition United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe said he will stand against Kumaratunga at the elections due to be held sometime before mid-January. The vote was originally due by November.

"We are ready for an election," Wickremesinghe told AFP. "We have been campaigning for sometime because we expected this and we are confident."

Political sources said although there had been speculation of a possible snap presidential election sometime in January, the president's proclamation issued Wednesday had surprised many ruling party stalwarts.

"Even some senior government minister were not aware of the decision to announce the election today," a ruling party official said.

Diplomats said some of the key government officials they were meeting at lunch Wednesday were unaware of the election announcement.

Fighting kills 4 more

Meanwhile, four Tamil Tiger guerrillas were killed in clashes with Sri Lankan forces in the north of the country, the defence ministry here said today.

Government soldiers shot dead two members of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Well Oya on Tuesday and troops were arranging to return the bodies through the International Red Cross, the ministry said.

It said two more Tiger guerrillas were shot dead in two separate confrontations in the Jaffna peninsula.

Indian cyclone death toll now 84

BHUBANESWAR, India, Oct 20: The death toll from a ferocious cyclone which ravaged eastern India has risen to 84, and officials were grappling to deal with the aftermath of widespread destruction, reports AFP.

A total of 81 people have died in Orissa, with worst-hit Ganjam district alone accounting 73 fatalities, state officials said.

"The death toll can mount as rescuers reach fresh areas," Orissa's chief bureaucrat, Sudhansu Misra, said in the state capital of Bhubaneswar.

More than 100 others had been "severely injured," Mishra said.

Unconfirmed reports put the number of people killed at 100 and those injured at 500.

Three people were killed in the adjoining state of Andhra Pradesh.

Army helicopters Wednesday dropped food and medicines to thousands of people marooned mainly in Orissa's Ganjam district, where Monday's cyclone flattened around 25,000 mud houses.

Habibie bows out gracefully

JAKARTA, Oct 20: Indonesia's "instant president" B.J. Habibie bowed out gracefully today after abandoning a desperate attempt to get a new mandate and escape the large shadow of his ousted predecessor Suharto, reports AFP.

Just 17 months after inheriting the problems left behind by 32 years of iron-handed rule by Suharto, Habibie, 63, saw his ambition to be elected on his own merit sabotaged by a no-confidence vote in the national assembly.

The German-trained engineer, who had apologised to a nation last weekend in a last-ditch attempt to gain support, urged Indonesians to give their full backing to his successor, who is to be sworn in on Thursday.

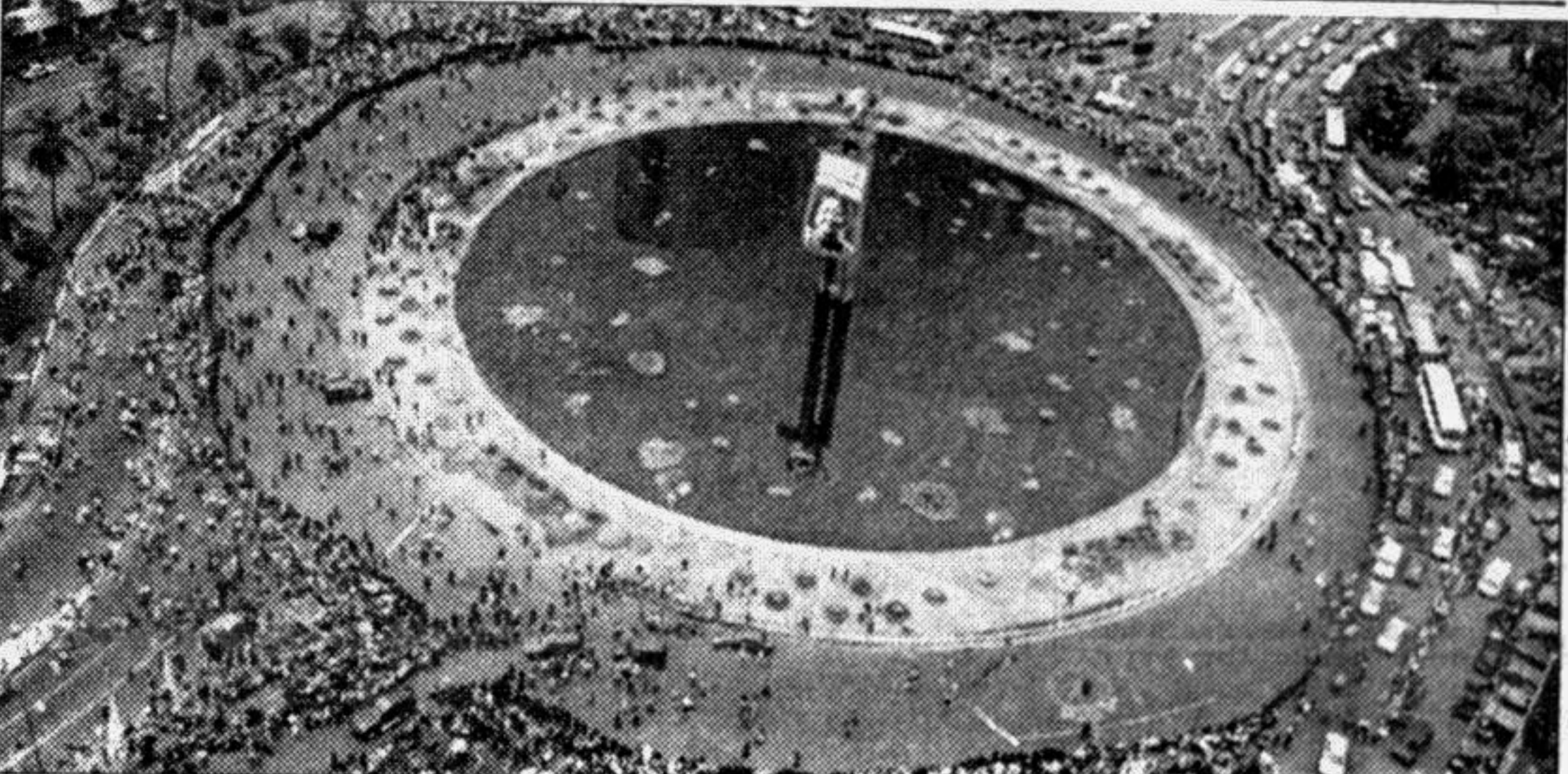
That new leader is Abdurrahman Wahid, 59, popularly known as Gus Dur, a frail, semi-blind moderate intellectual who heads the country's largest Muslim organisation. He beat popular opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri in Wednesday's vote at the national assembly.

"I hope that the entire Indonesian nation provides its full support to the elected president and vice president that will lead this nation in a planned, secure and peaceful way into the first century of the third millennium," Habibie said.

US Assistant Secretary of State Stanley Roth, who was attending an economic conference in Singapore, Wednesday praised Habibie's decision to opt out of the presidential race instead of fighting "to the bitter end."

"There has been a peaceful (election) process within Indonesia and it has taken place in a context of a debate within the Indonesian constitutional context," Roth said.

There were fears that a grim attempt by Habibie and his unpopular but well-endowed Golkar party to ensure his victory at any cost could trigger fresh instability in the nation of 210 million people.



Welcome Monument Square in Jakarta is sealed off by security forces forming a cordon around the fountain after an explosion went off while supporters of Indonesian presidential hopeful Megawati Sukarnoputri were rallying yesterday. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Russian official murdered: The Deputy Speaker of the Saint Petersburg local assembly, Viktor Novosolov, was murdered in a car bomb attack early Wednesday, police told AFP in Saint Petersburg.

The lawmaker, who had survived an assassination attempt in 1993 but lost both of his legs, died at 8:30 a.m. local time when an explosion tore through his Volvo car not far from his home in central Saint Petersburg. His driver was seriously injured, the Interfax news agency reported.

According to unconfirmed reports, police immediately arrested two suspects sitting in a car close to the lawmaker's home.

6 Colombians killed in massacre: Six people were assassinated and one wounded by some paramilitary members on a highway in the province of Cauca, south of Colombia, official sources said Tuesday. Xinhua reports from Santafe De Bogota.

The bodies of the six victims were found with gunshot wounds, said police inspector Luis Eduardo Osorio. All of the victims had been detained by an armed group who blocked a road on the highway and selected their victims based on a list.

British tourist shot dead in Thai bar: A British tourist was shot dead and another seriously wounded during an attack in a bar in the Thai resort town of Pattaya. British embassy officials said yesterday, AFP reports from Bangkok.

An embassy spokesman said Terence Morley, 31, from Romford in Essex, was fatally shot in the early hours of Tuesday. Dean Brendan Sherrin, also from Romford, was seriously wounded.

Philippine ship catches fire: At least 214 people were rescued from a Philippine passenger ship that caught fire Wednesday off Bataan province west of Manila, officials said. It was not immediately known how many people were on board, they said, AP reports from Manila.

Officials of the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority said they dispatched six rescue boats after receiving a distress call from the ship, which they identified as the MV Palawan Princess.

Dissidents call on Jiang to put rights on agenda

BEIJING, Oct 20: US-based Chinese dissidents have called on President Jiang Zemin and his European counterparts to put human rights at the top of the agenda during the Chinese leader's six-nation tour, reports AFP.

"China must be held accountable for its human rights abuses now, if it is to achieve sustainable development and true acceptance into the global community," the New York-based Human Rights in China (HRIC) said in a statement.

It said Jiang's visit to the United Kingdom, France, Portugal, Morocco, Algeria and Saudi Arabia provided a valuable opportunity for countries to voice their concerns over China's human rights situation, and for China to address them in an open manner.

Jiang's trip is largely a symbolic one, aimed at boosting his

international profile and improving relations with some of its major diplomatic partners.

"Substance must not be sacrificed for ceremony," HRIC said.

Tight security surrounding Jiang's trip to Britain has drawn stinging criticism in the British media, which focussed on the image of a royal guard drawing his bayonet and rifle as a protester made to charge at the carriage carrying Queen Elizabeth II and Jiang to Buckingham Palace.

UK to unveil new deals with China

Britain will unveil a number of new deals for British companies in China on Wednesday during a state visit by Chinese President Jiang Zemin, the trade and industry department said.

Sonia takes oath as MP

NEW DELHI, Oct 20: The leader of India's main opposition Congress Party, Sonia Gandhi, today took oath as a member of the Indian parliament, the first foreign-born person to enter the federal legislature, reports AFP.

Sonia, the 52-year-old Italian-born widow of former premier Rajiv Gandhi, took her oath in the Hindi language amid loud cheering by her Congress members at the beginning of the new parliament's first session.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who also took oath as an MP, greeted Sonia by thumping on his desk during the swearing in ceremony.

Sonia, making her first foray into parliament, won in her Amethi constituency in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh by 300,015 votes -- the highest victory margin by any candidate during the staggered Indian elections which concluded on October 3.

Sonia trounced a Hindu nationalist in Amethi. She also won an election victory in Bellary in south India, defeating seasoned Hindu nationalist woman politician Sushma Swaraj by around 50,000 votes.

However, in keeping with Indian election laws, a person winning two constituencies has to give up one seat within a fortnight of the national elections.

'Nerve gas antidote possibly caused Gulf War syndrome'

WASHINGTON, Oct 20: A drug given to US soldiers during the Gulf War to protect against nerve gas may have caused a variety of chronic illnesses in the troops, according to a Pentagon report released Tuesday, reports AFP.

Known as pyridostigmine bromide or simply "PB," the drug was given to 250,000 soldiers during the 1990-1991 war. In some cases, the drug could produce side effects similar to the chronic illness that has become known as Gulf War syndrome.



Chinese President Jiang Zemin (L) and his wife Wang Yeping shake hands over the meridian line during a visit to Greenwich Royal Observatory yesterday. — AFP photo

15 more killed in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Oct 20: Eleven Muslim separatist guerrillas and four Indian army soldiers were killed in stepped-up violence in the Himalayan state of Kashmir, officials said here today, reports AFP.

Muslim fighters in a series of attacks on military camps and army patrols in the state's Doda, Handwara and Kupwara districts killed an officer and three soldiers in the past 24 hours, a police spokesman said.

Four separatists were killed in a counter-attack by security forces in southern Doda district while two more were gunned down in the adjoining region of Poonch.

Indian soldiers, after a rebel-led attack left one trooper dead in Kupwara, killed four suspected Muslim guerrillas in the northern frontier district late Tuesday night, officials said.

Another guerrilla was killed elsewhere in the troubled Himalayan state bordering Pakistan.

More than 24,000 people have died in a bloody Muslim separatist campaign raging in Kashmir since 1989.

Palestinians, Israel reach accord on West Bank, Gaza road

JERUSALEM, Oct 20: An agreement was reached Tuesday on opening a "safe passage" road to Palestinians can get from the West Bank to the Gaza Strip, an Israeli spokesman said, reports AFP.

"All the technical details which were holding up an agreement have been settled," a interior security ministry spokesman announced in a statement issued after a meeting between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators in Jerusalem.

"It was agreed that the route would be inaugurated on Monday at the Erez crossing," the spokesman added.

The agreement was reached between Director General of the Israeli Interior Security Ministry Arie Ramot, and head of the Palestinian Civil Affairs office Jamil Tarifi.

Japanese minister quits over rape comments

TOKYO, Oct 20: Japan's vice defence minister resigned today after triggering widespread outrage by advocating nuclear weapons and saying deterrence was like anti-rape laws, reports AFP.

"Yes we have confirmed (he offered to resign) although we still don't know the details," said an official in the office of outspoken lawmaker Shingo Nishimura.

Just two weeks into the job, the deputy defence chief astonished the government by calling for Japan to consider arming itself with nuclear weapons -- anathema to the country since World War II.

Pak military regime rejects int'l criticism

Army chief needs a week to form government

ISLAMABAD, Oct 20: Pakistan's military regime has rejected international criticism and promised to unveil its new government within a week, reports AP.

Army spokesman Brig Rashid Quereshi also said Tuesday that deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif is in good health, but will remain in protective custody "until a corruption investigation is conducted."

"No one has been ill-treated at all," he said, declining to say where Sharif is being held.

Quereshi said that it would likely be another week before Army Chief General Pervez Musharraf announces the six-member National Security Council of army officers and civilians who will form a new government. Few people in Pakistan are in a hurry for the elections, and Quereshi said there is a lot of work ahead for the council before voting can be held.

He refused to speculate on a time frame, saying the army "does not want democracy in name only but in substance."

"Each decision that is taken is going to be well deliberated, well studied because if that amount of effort doesn't go into the initial stages it is likely to go wrong," Quereshi said.

He dismissed critics of the new military regime, saying "grave areas of concern need to be put right... a lot outside this country do not understand the ground realities in Pakistan."

Pakistan's foreign secretary, Shamsheer Ahmed, asked the Commonwealth to send a "fact-finding" mission to Pakistan to gauge the public support for the army before making a final decision.

Quereshi said an investigation has begun into what happened at Karachi Airport on October 12, when the aircraft returning Musharraf and 200 other people to Pakistan from Sri Lanka was not allowed to land.

The army takeover had already begun when the aircraft carrying the army chief was denied landing rights, apparently on Sharif's orders. The pilot was reportedly told he had to fly to another country.

It was kept in the air until the army gained control of the airport and allowed the plane to land with barely 10 minutes of fuel remaining.

Quereshi said no decision has been made about whether Sharif will be tried in military or civilian courts.

AP adds from Washington: Disappointed that Pakistan's new ruler has not presented a timetable for restoring democracy, the Clinton administration still is pursuing a heavy diplomatic agenda with the South Asian country.

A State Department spokesman, James Foley, said Tuesday "we have important areas on which we need to work with Pakistan." Among them, he said, are promoting talks with India and trying to curb the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Pakistan borders Afghanistan, where US officials believe the Taliban has given refuge to suspected terrorist leader Osama bin Laden, and Foley said "we need to continue to work" with Pakistan on that issue, as well.

President Bill Clinton, in a mixed reaction, said he was pleased with the general's "conciliatory tone" toward India but disappointed there was no commitment to a timetable to move toward democracy.

SA to end arms sale to Pakistan

A FTI reports from Johannesburg says, South Africa, one of the largest arms suppliers to Pakistan, is considering terminating arms sales to Islamabad following Tuesday's military coup, minister Kader Asmal has said.

Asmal, who is also chairman of South Africa's arms sales committee, said the military takeover has necessitated a change of stance.

He also confirmed the Pakistan would not be attending the Commonwealth summit meeting in Durban, South Africa.

China sets sights on landing on Moon, Mars

SHANGHAI, Oct 20: China, still preparing furiously for its first manned space mission, has already set its sights on landings on the Moon and on the planet Mars, the official Shanghai News reported today, reports AFP.

A recent national conference of space scientists held in southern Guangxi province's Beihai city set the landings as the "two big targets" for the country's space programme in the 21st century.

"Chinese scientists are in the process of discussing details of the lunar landing (project)," Ye Zili, the China Space Science Association's general secretary, was quoted as saying.

He said dozens of plans and proposals for the twin projects had already been put forward.

The language of the report left it unclear whether the missions under discussion would be manned or not, but Ye cited the goal of "opening up the Moon's resources."

No further details were provided on funding or the likely timetable for the landings.

While China's space programme is clouded in secrecy, a leading scientist recently told reporters in Hong Kong the country did not expect to put a man into orbit until around 2005.

A retrievable empty capsule is in development and is due for a test flight in the months ahead.

The United States and the former Soviet Union wound up their race to land human beings on the Moon in the 1970s and have shown little interest in it since.

A series of unmanned probes have been studying the surface of the Red Planet, however, and NASA expects to launch its first manned mission there around 2016.

The US probe Mars Polar Lander is due to touch down on Mars on December 3.

China has launched nearly 300 satellites into space since the early 1970s, some 25 commercially.