

Colombian man confesses killing 140 children

BOGOTA, Oct 30: A 42-year-old man has confessed to killing 140 children in a five-year killing spree across 11 provinces, Colombia's chief prosecutor Alfonso Gomez said yesterday, reports AFP.

Luis Eduardo Garavito has been in police custody since April 22 in the city of Villavieja, where he was arrested for the 1996 murder of a boy in the city of Tunja.

But the investigation that ultimately led police to Garavito began in 1998, when the bodies of 36 children were found in the town of Pereira.

As police looked into that massacre, they were able to link Garavito to the Tunja murder and arrest him in April.

So far, 114 corpses have been found that police believe are Garavito's victims.

Most of Garavito's victims were poor children — either young workers, students, peasants or beggars, Gomez said. Garavito would pose as a street merchant, a monk or an aid worker to enter schools or other gatherings of children and find his victims, officials said.

Gomez described Garavito as mentally ill, and said he was apparently abused as a child himself.

Lanka plans snap parliamentary election

COLOMBO, Oct 30: Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga is planning a snap parliamentary election soon after her re-election bid for the presidency in December, state radio said today, reports AFP.

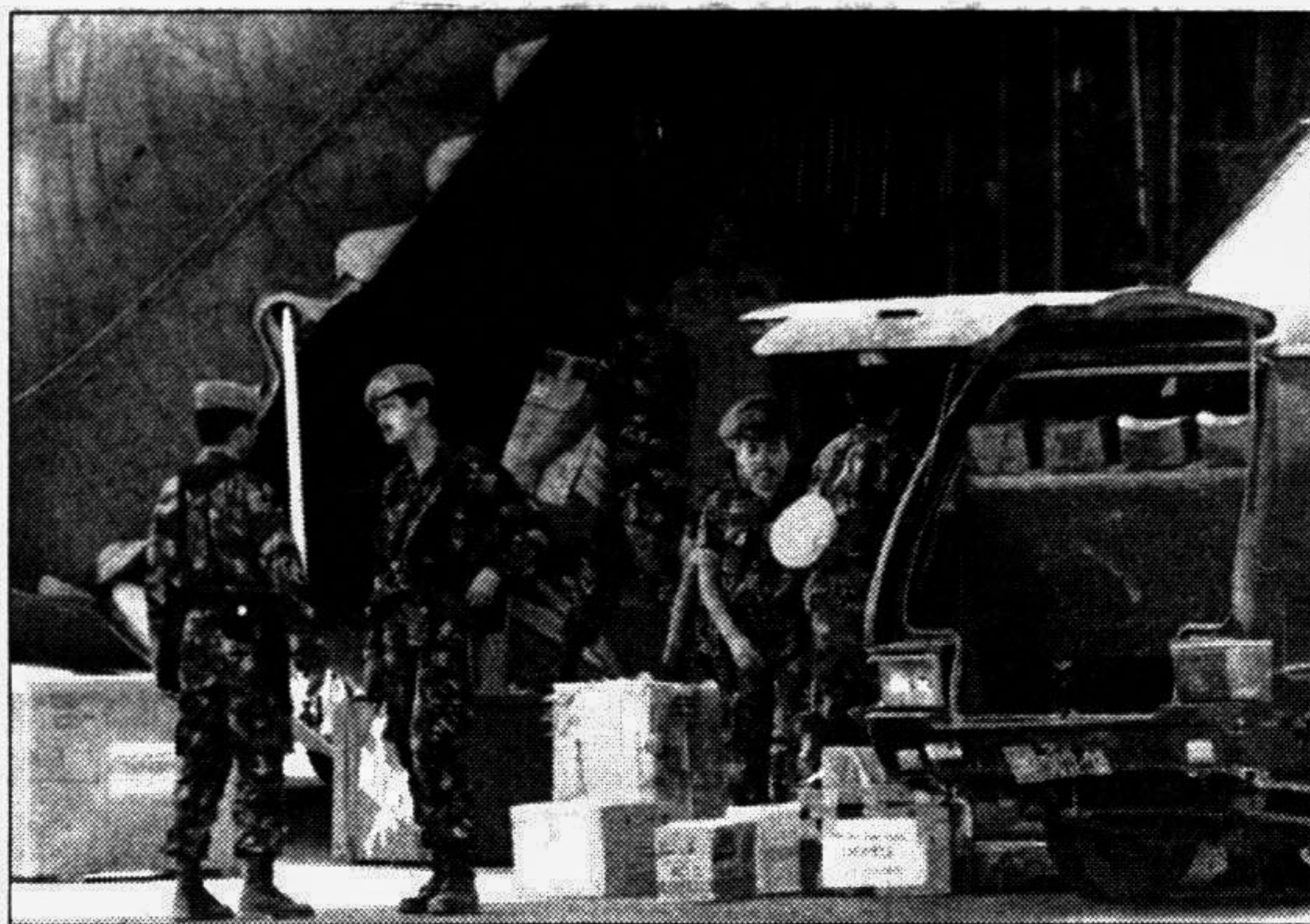
On October 20 Kumaratunga declared her intention to face a fresh presidential election at least 10 months ahead of schedule.

She was quoted as saying today that she also planned to have an earlier parliamentary election. The current parliament could go on until August next year but the president has powers to dissolve the assembly.

Parliamentary election will be held soon after the presidential election (on December 21), the radio report said, quoting the president.



Pro-monarchist Australian Prime Minister John Howard addresses the party faithful at the annual state Liberal Party conference in Sydney yesterday. A survey last week had indicated that 56 per cent intend to vote "No" to Australia becoming a republic in the national referendum on November 6. — AFP photo



Indonesian military personnel load a C-130 transport plane before their final departure from East Timor yesterday. The last Indonesia troops were leaving the territory, ending a quarter of a century of military presence in East Timor. — AFP photo

Gusmao bids farewell to last Indonesian troops

DILI, East Timor, Oct 30: East Timorese resistance leader Xanana Gusmao on Saturday said farewell to the last Indonesian troops here, and held out a hand of friendship to the new government in Jakarta, reports AFP.

Dressed in military combat fatigues, a smiling and relaxed Gusmao exchanged salutes with Indonesian army officers during an informal departure ceremony in the old terminal of Dili's Comoro airport.

He was later seen laughing and smoking a cigarette as he shook hands with Brigadier General J.D. Sitorus, the commander of the last Indonesian troops here, and ambassador Taufik Sudarbo, head of the Indonesian task force.

Gusmao told reporters after the 25-minute ceremony he felt the same elation he felt on August 30 when the people of East

Timor voted overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesia in a UN-sponsored referendum.

"I feel the same as I feel on August 30, a sensation of acquiring our rights to be free and to be independent," he said.

"I must say it ends the historical errors and mistakes between two countries turned enemy. It means also from now on we have to look at the future and our citizens. And I believe from Indonesia also we shall have to create a new relationship of cooperation and friendship."

Gusmao also expressed confidence in the new Indonesian government of President Abdurrahman Wahid.

He said he was prepared to meet Indonesian army leaders including former army chief General Wiranto to heal the wounds caused by the killing

and destruction carried out by Indonesian army-backed militias in the wake of the independence vote.

"I believe in the new government and the Indonesian people and the process of democracy that is going on in Indonesia," said Gusmao.

But he also called on Indonesia to allow the free return of all the estimated 260,000 East Timorese who fled or were pushed out of the territory to Indonesian West Timor during the militia reign of terror.

Gusmao arrived at the ceremony by helicopter from the headquarters of his Falintil guerrilla organisation at Remexio, around 30 km east of Dili, and security at the airport was tight.

Ian Martin, the acting head of the UN Transitional Authority for East Timor (UNTAET), praised Gusmao's "great gesture."

Commonwealth unlikely to suspend Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Oct 30: Commonwealth ministers who spent two days trying to investigate whether Pakistan's military-led government intended to restore democracy have softened their tone and are unlikely to recommend the country be suspended, officials said, reports Reuters.

The delegation of four Commonwealth foreign ministers failed to get a date for the return of power or to see ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The team, led by Canada's Lloyd Axworthy, was the first high-level mission to visit Pakistan since army chief General Pervez Musharraf deposed Sharif in a bloodless October 12 coup.

They said the delegation would urge a summit of Commonwealth leaders next month to give Islamabad six months to

prove it was serious about returning the country to civilian rule or face further sanctions.

Axworthy said Musharraf vetoed a meeting with Sharif but had promised the ministers could speak to him by telephone from their hotel suite.

But after waiting for more than an hour, the call failed to materialise and Pakistani officials said Sharif did not want to talk by telephone.

The Commonwealth has banned Pakistan from taking part in its meetings and threatened to push for formal suspension of membership, which would mean the end of all technical assistance to the impoverished country.

But the officials said the four ministers realised after their talks with a government and opposition officials that the situation in Pakistan was much

more complex than it had first appeared.

Asked whether the ministers were now distancing themselves from the idea that Pakistan be formally suspended, one member of the mission said: "That's a good assessment."

The ministers belonged to the eight-nation Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), set up to investigate abuse of democracy among the 54-member grouping of mainly former British colonies.

The team yesterday met Musharraf, who like other senior officials said Sharif's "chaotic" rule had been leading the country to disaster and pointed to signs that the general public had supported the army takeover.

Musharraf refused to pro-

duce the timetable the Commonwealth wanted, saying he wanted to focus on reforming the economy and legal system.

But the officials said they had been encouraged by his promises of reforms, although they made clear that CMAG would be watching events in Pakistan very closely.

"It's likely that we'll recommend Pakistan be given six months to make good on its promises. If it doesn't we'll write to all the heads of government and tell them we propose to suspend the country immediately," said one official. The officials said the ministers had taken note of the fact that virtually none of the people they talked to had expressed any support for Sharif's chaotic 31-month rule. Even the prime minister's own party did not ask for his restoration.

US, Russia call for return of civilian rule in Pakistan

WASHINGTON, Oct 30: The United States and Russia on Friday issued a joint call for the new military leaders in Pakistan to return the country to civilian control, reports AFP.

In a joint statement issued after three days of high-level meetings here between US and Russian diplomats, the two countries said peace and stability in South Asia would be enhanced by civilian rule in Islamabad and welcomed any moves made to reduce tensions with India.

"They encouraged the military authorities in Pakistan to take decisive steps to return the country to civilian, democratic and constitutional government including the announcement of a timetable," the statement said.

Pakistan's new military leader General Pervez Musharraf, who ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif on October 12, has promised to return the country to civilian rule but has

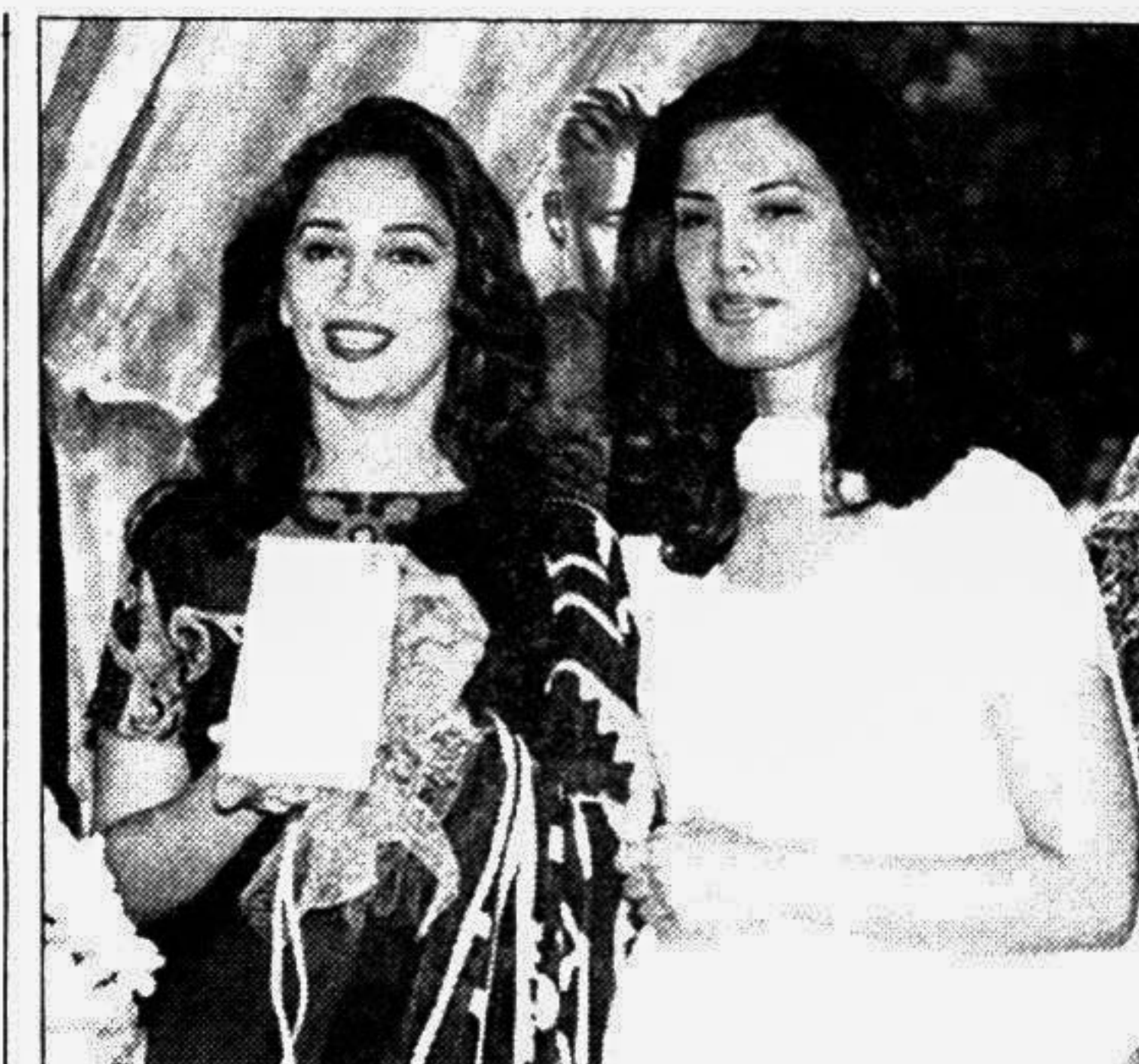
not yet said when he would do so.

In addition to the call for civilian control, the statement urged Pakistan and India to resolve their dispute over Kashmir. The statement came after talks between US assistant secretary of state for South Asia, Karl Inderfurth, and Russian deputy foreign minister, Grigori Karasin.

The disputed province has caused two of the three wars between India and Pakistan.

The two sides agreed on the importance of India and Pakistan overcoming their legacy of confrontation and called on both sides to resume their political dialogue at the earliest opportunity," the statement said.

It welcomed Musharraf's decision to withdraw some Pakistani troops from the international border with India and noted Washington's and Moscow's desire to see that reduction also occur on the Kashmiri border.



India's top film actress Madhuri Dixit (L) presents her new fashion book "101 Ways to Look Your Best" written by the country's leading fashion designer Ritu Beri (R) during its fashion launch in New Delhi yesterday. — AFP photo

Massive relief operation in India Cyclone leaves trail of death & destruction

NEW DELHI, Oct 30: Indian authorities today began a massive relief operation on the eastern coast after the "cyclone of the century" left an awesome trail of death and destruction, officials said, reports AFP.

The chief minister of the worst-hit state of Orissa said the estimated death toll could be in the "hundreds" after at least 14 people were killed Friday and more than 200,000 houses flattened.

"You cannot imagine the devastation," the United News of India quoted Chief Minister Girdhar Gangam as saying in the state capital Bhubaneswar, which was badly affected by the cyclone.

"The death toll will be not in the tens but in the hundreds," Gangam said Friday night before Orissa's telecommunications system completely collapsed in the face of the 260-km per hour winds.

Gangam said the "super" cyclone had and affected up to 15 million people. It was worse than one which hit Orissa a fortnight ago.

"This cyclone is more severe than the one which hit Ganjam on October 17. It is the cyclone of the century," he said, appealing for hundreds of millions of dollars in federal help.

Another state official said: "The death toll could be very

high ... communications have broken down throughout the state, and we are not able to get in touch with many areas."

Ten cyclone-hit coastal districts of Orissa remained cut off from the rest of India.

The Indian army Saturday moved into the port town of Paradip, which bore the brunt of the cyclone, but said an assessment of the damage would not be immediately possible.

"The (satellite) images that we are seeing are right out of a horror movie," an officer involved in the operation Hope said of the daunting task facing army relief contingents now in Orissa.

NLD loses court battle with junta

YANGON, Oct 30: A Myanmar court has rejected allegations that junta leaders illegally harassed and intimidated members of Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), reports AFP.

The NLD had filed complaints against 29 government officials including powerful First Secretary and military intelligence head General Khin Nyunt and Home Minister Colonel Tin Hlaing.

But the Supreme Court said in judgement received here Saturday that no evidence had been found to support the allegations and all investigations had been dropped.

Observers said the ruling was largely a formality as the military, which has ruled Myanmar in various guises for

decades, tightly controls the legal system.

In a brief statement, the NLD said it would continue to pursue the matter from "within legal bounds."

The NLD has been locked in a bitter struggle with the junta since winning an overwhelming victory in 1990 elections, which was ignored by the military.

State-run media has been carrying daily reports of mass defections from the NLD, proof the party says of coercion by military intelligence.

Diplomats say the government has been engaged on a concerted campaign to crush the party's ability to organise and to isolate its leaders in Yangon.

Breach of Berlin Wall punctures Soviet power

PARIS, Oct 30: The fall of the Berlin wall on November 9, 1989 was the symbolic moment that not only proclaimed the collapse of the Soviet bloc but also set off a chain of events that culminated two years later with the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself, reports AFP.

When a few weeks earlier Gennady Gerasimov, spokesman for Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev, announced the "Sinatra doctrine," Moscow's new policy allowing each of its satellites to determine its own fate ("my way"), he could not have imagined how far the tide of nationalist sentiment would reach.

Poland and Hungary were already well advanced in their transition towards democratic systems.

In August Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a leading figure in the

free trade union Solidarity, had become Polish prime minister. In September, a round table of political leaders in Hungary had agreed to proceed to multi-party elections.

With the physical barrier between east and west finally removed, it was only a matter of time before the other "peoples' democracies" seized the opportunity to break away, and within weeks Czechoslovakia, with its "velvet revolution," and -- more bloodily -- Romania had cast their communist regimes into the dustbin of history.

1989 was also the high point of "perestroika" in the Soviet Union, where the first multi-candidate elections were held in March and the wave of reform unleashed by Gorbachev gradually eased the stranglehold of the state on all areas.

BRIEFLY

Armed Islamists kill 12 in Algeria:

Armed Muslim militants murdered 12 members of a family of nomads this week near Laghouat, 400 kilometers south of the Algerian capital. Two Algerian newspapers reported yesterday, AFP reports from Algiers.

The massacre, reported by the daily papers La Tribune and El Alam Essassi, was the worst since an October 8 bloodbath in which 16 people died in a shanty town west of Algiers.

Vice mayor killed in Philippines:

The vice-mayor of the southern town of Sibuco was among four people killed in an ambush, police said yesterday, AFP reports from Philippines.

Another five people were wounded in the attack. Vice-mayor Emmanuel Perez was with a large party, including relatives, riding in a jeep through Sibuco on Friday when they were ambushed by a group of men armed with automatic rifles.

Taliban leaders to meet on Bin Laden's offer

KABUL, Oct 30: Leaders of Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia will meet soon to discuss alleged terrorist Osama bin Laden's offer to leave the country, official Afghan sources said today, reports AFP.

The Saudi-born millionaire, accused by the United States of terrorism, made the offer in a letter to Taliban chief Mullah Mohammad Omar on condition the Taliban ensured safe and secret passage to a third unnamed country, according to the private Afghan Islamic Press (AIP).

The sources did not say exactly when Omar, who is based

in the city of Kandahar in southern Afghanistan, would convene the militia's consultative council to discuss the issue.

The Pakistan-based AIP, a usual conduit for Taliban announcements, quoted a militia spokesman as saying Omar would give a reply to bin Laden over the coming days after the consultation.

Bin Laden, who has lived in Afghanistan as a guest of the religious militia, is blamed by the United States for August 7, 1988 bombings of its two embassies in East Africa in which more than 200 people were killed.

Russian gangs killing street-kids for organs

BERLIN, Oct 30: Germany's secret service has reported that Russian gangs are killing street-children and selling their organs to rich patients in Russia and the West, the weekly Focus said in an article today, reports AFP.

A spokeswoman for the secret service, the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND), in the southern town of Pullach, near Munich, confirmed the existence of the document, saying it had been submitted to the government in April.

She said the information gleaned was "credible," but should nevertheless be treated with caution.

Focus said the report showed Russian police were powerless to stop the organ trafficking, adding that the disappearance of street-children was not usually registered.

Kuwait seizes 3 ships coming from Iraq

KUWAIT, Oct 30: Kuwait has seized three ships en route from the southern Iraqi port of Basra loaded with dates and other foodstuffs in violation of a UN trade embargo, newspapers reported today, says AFP.

The coast guard seized the three traditional wooden dhows, registered in the United Arab Emirates, on Friday as they travelled to Dubai, Al-Rai Al-Aam newspaper said.

Their cargo has been impounded and 30 crewmen arrested, it said.

Kuwaiti authorities frequently stop and search boats that stray into their waters, and after one seizure in August they accused Baghdad of exporting powdered milk like that supplied to Baghdad under the UN-administered oil-for-food programme.

The programme allows Iraq to sell a limited value of oil in order to purchase essential goods to help avert the effects of sanctions slapped on Baghdad for its 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

China passes law to 'smash' Falungong and other cults

BEIJING, Oct 30: China's parliament today passed legislation designed to "smash" all cults including the Falungong sect, as police on Tiananmen Square continued to haul away followers of the outlawed group, reports AFP.

"The decision ... calls on courts, prosecutors, police and administrative judicial organs to be on full alert for cult activities and to smash them rigorously in accordance with the law," the official Xinhua news agency said.

The legislation was passed

by a session of the ninth National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee.

As the announcement was made, more people were being bundled into police vans and driven from Beijing's Tiananmen Square, where followers of the Falungong meditation sect have converged in recent days in silent protest at the legislation.

"Cult organisations that have destroyed normal social order and stability through illegal gathering, led to the

deaths of practitioners and rapes of women and swindled money should be dealt with severely," the announcement said.

But it said a distinction should be made between cult leaders and "deceived" followers.

"Local governments are asked to take necessary measures to educate those deceived while punishing a small number of cult leaders and those who have committed crimes," it said.

Communists call strike in Nepal over fuel prices

KATHMANDU, Oct 30: Nepal's communist opposition and seven other leftwing groups have called for a general strike on Tuesday to protest at fuel price rises, party sources said today, reports AFP.

The major opposition Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML) called the action over price increases of 48 per cent for diesel prices and 23 per cent for kerosene.

The NCP-UML handed over a protest memorandum to Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai Friday demanding the government change the new prices. The NCP-UML Central Committee source said.

Quakes rock Taiwan

TAIPEI, Oct 30: Three earthquakes jolted Taiwan today but no casualties or damage were reported, the Central Weather Bureau said, reports AFP.

The last tremor, with a magnitude of 5.2, hit at 4:27 p.m. (2:27 pm BST) with its epicenter 31.6 km west of Hualien in eastern Taiwan. It originated 5.5 km underground.

Russian jets continue to pound Grozny, 100 killed

GROZNY, Oct 30: Russian forces kept up their massive onslaught against breakaway Chechnya Saturday, with combat jets and heavy artillery pummeling its cities and villages, reports AP.

Russian artillery units continued shelling the outskirts of the capital Grozny from positions in the hills about 10 kilometers (6 miles) northwest of the city. They were also closing in on Gudermes, Chechnya's second-largest city in the east, and shelling rebel positions in the mountains near the western guerrilla stronghold of Bamut.

Russian warplanes flew about 50 sorties in the past 24 hours, hitting rebel positions throughout Chechnya and killing up to 100 militants. They destroyed 15 cars, six fuel depots and other targets, a military spokesman said, according to the Interfax news agency.

Russian jets roared over the Chechen capital early Saturday, firing rockets at the hills south of the capital, then sweeping north to strike at suspected guerrilla positions on the city's northern outskirts.

Grozny's streets have become almost deserted, as remaining residents took shelter in the basements of buildings every time they heard a Russian jet shrieking overhead.

Chechen officials said Russian planes hit a refugee convoy on a highway leading to neighbouring Ingushetia Friday, killing 50 civilians near the village of Shami-Yurt, about 10 kilometers (6 miles) east of Samashki.

The Russian Air Force denied the claim Saturday, saying the planes raided the area after rebels had fired on a Russian Su-25 attack jet from a truck, missing it. Two Russian jets then raided what the military said was a rebel convoy, destroying two trucks packed with militants.

Russian officials have insisted that they only strike military targets in their campaign to wipe out Islamic militants, even though eyewitnesses have reported indiscriminate strikes against populated areas.

A rocket attack on Grozny's central market last week killed

at least 150 people and there have been widespread reports of other civilian casualties.

US and other Western officials have urged Moscow to stop using excessive force and avoid hitting civilians, but the Russian officials have shrugged off the advice, saying they want to punish terrorists.

Chechen militants have repeatedly invaded neighbouring regions and were also blamed for a series of apartment bombings in Moscow and other Russian cities that killed about 300 people last month.

At the start of their campaign, Russian officials allowed people to move freely in and out of Chechnya across the border with Ingushetia in the West. Some 173,000 refugees have fled to Ingushetia so far, and most have to stay in harsh conditions in the open field.

Earlier this week, Russians sealed the border, stranding thousands of refugees. They promised to reopen the corridor Sunday and also to set up a new route on the border with Dagestan in the east.



Indian policemen carry the dead body of a Pakistani national at Gopal-Pora on the outskirts of Srinagar yesterday. Two foreign militants were killed and an Indian security force personnel was injured during a gun battle. — AFP photo