

Nepal-India border talks begin today

KATHMANDU, Oct 31 : A Nepal-India joint working group formed to demarcate the border between the two countries is to meet Monday at the Foreign Ministry headquarters, officials said today, reports AFP.

Besides discussing the demarcation of the western frontier, the two sides are expected to evaluate their previous efforts and determine what steps to take in the future.

The sources said the meeting will try to identify the criteria for clarifying the controversial Kalapani area, a strategic tri-junction between Nepal, India and China, 394 km north west of here.

The region, claimed by both India and Nepal, has been occupied by India's semi-military Indo-Tibetan Border Police since the 1962 border war between India and China.

ROK beer hall inferno: 4 arrested

INCHON, South Korea, Oct 31 : South Korean police today arrested four men after a fire tore through an illegal beer hall leaving 54 young revellers dead and 75 injured in the country's worst fire disaster in 25 years, reports AFP.

The four, an electrician, two interior designers and a builder, are suspected of sparking the blaze by flouting safety rules while renovating a karaoke lounge below the bar where most of the mainly teenage victims died.

They may also be charged with involuntary manslaughter following the deaths of the youngsters, some aged as young as 12, reports here said.

Saturday night's disaster in the unlicensed drinking den was another sorry chapter in South Korea's appalling building-safety record, which has sparked a wave of public anger. "So far we know that 54 people, most of them aged around 16 or 17, died in the fire which started in an underground karaoke lounge, sending toxic smoke and flames through the whole building," a firefighter said.

Up to 20 of the injured were in critical condition in hospitals in Incheon, a northwestern port city, where hundreds of shocked children and relatives of the dead were thronging, officials said.



Nadir of Venezuela holds up his trophy after he won the Mr. International 1999 contest held by a domestic Indian firm, in New Delhi Saturday. Twenty-four contestants from various countries participated in the event, which had a cash prize of 6,000 US dollar and 30,000 US dollar worth of modelling contracts.

— AFP photo



Widow of a Sikh stage a protest against Hindu rioters who killed 5,000 Sikhs following the October 31, 1984 assassination of premier Indira Gandhi, march near the Parliament in New Delhi yesterday. Sikh groups claim the killers were led by leaders from Indira Gandhi's Congress Party.

— AFP photo

Looting, prayers greet troop pullout from E Timor

DILI, East Timor, Oct 31 : Hundreds of East Timorese today looted the empty barracks of the Indonesian army in Dili several hours after the last occupying troops sailed out of the harbour under the cover of darkness, reports AFP.

People of all ages - arriving on bicycles, carts, motorbikes, cars, lorries and on foot - calmly sifted through the waterfront barracks and carried off any scrap or souvenir they could lay their hands on.

Chairs, tables, potted plants, neon light fixtures, cables and even a set of dumb-bells for weight training emerged from the building balanced on bicycles or perched awkwardly on shoulders, an AFP reporter said.

One man carried out a large plaque of an eagle - the Indonesian national symbol - with the wings symbolically smashed off while two others

struggled to assemble a bed-frame on the street.

"There is nothing like a good loot to start off the week," said a watching Australian soldier with the International Force for East Timor (Interfel), which allowed the dawn spree to carry on for several hours before gradually stopping the flow of looters entering the barracks.

The sound of hymns being sung in the open air at a large church across the road from the barracks filled the air as the town geared up to celebrate a Catholic religious feast marking the apparition of the Virgin Mary in the Portuguese town of Fatima in 1917.

"I am very, very happy and give thanks to God for his mercy that he gives us deliverance from evil," said 31-year-old seminarian Armando Brito of the troop withdrawal, as he decorated a statue of the Virgin Mary.

Brito was to have been or-

dered on September 24 but he was forced to flee to West Timor as pro-Jakarta militias went on a murderous rampage after the people of East Timor voted nearly four-to-one for independence from Indonesia in an August 30 referendum.

A man named Luis, who was also helping to spruce up the square in front of Nobel laureate Bishop Carlos Belo's compound for an afternoon procession and service said he had no idea the last Indonesian troops had left.

Asked if he was happy, his face lit up: "Of course, because now we are free from the Indonesian military," he said.

The last soldiers from a 1,000-strong Indonesian garrison in the territory slipped out from Dili harbor aboard the Teluk Banten 516 troop carrier in the early hours of Sunday morning, ending 24 years of often brutal military occupation.

Russians kill 20 more Chechen refugees in attack: Grozny

GROZNY, Russia, Oct 31 : Russian artillery fire has killed another 20 Chechen refugees driving from the rebel capital Grozny to a northern region controlled by federal forces, a senior Chechen official said today, reports AFP.

The report came one day after the Russian Red Cross confirmed that at least 25 Chechen civilians were killed and another 70 injured when two Russian warplanes attacked a refugee convoy on Friday.

Apti Batalov, the head of Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov's administration, told AFP that a convoy of five cars was attacked Saturday evening near the village of Petropavlovskaya, about 10 km northeast of Grozny.

The group was heading to the Naurskaya region north of the Terek River which is now under full Russian control, Batalov said.

Moscow has tried to tempt Chechen civilians to relocate to the Russia-controlled zone of the rebel republic by promising to return gas and electricity shipments to the region.

The second convoy attack report could not be immediately independently confirmed and the Russian defence ministry refused to issue any comment

on the story.

But the Russian Red Cross several hours earlier confirmed that another refugee column had been hit by Russian fire - a story flatly denied by Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov.

The five vehicles ... were clearly marked with the Red Cross emblem," a Red Cross statement said.

The communique added that the Red Cross was "deeply shocked by this attack against the emblem and staff of the Red Cross."

The agency "strongly appeals to all those involved in the fighting to respect and protect civilians, not to use them for military purposes, and to respect the emblem and staff of the Red Cross."

Meanwhile, Russia is ready to accept help from international organisations to cope with the hundreds of thousands of Chechens fleeing fighting in the breakaway republic, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said.

In response to Western concerns about the mounting humanitarian crisis as Chechen refugees pour into the tiny neighbouring republic of Ingushetia. "We say, these are our people," Ivanov told Russian ORT television late Saturday.

"These are our citizens, and the duty of any government is to defend the interests of its citizens," Ivanov added. Chechnya gained de facto independence from Russia after the 1994-1996 conflict that left 80,000 dead.

"We are taking measures and furthermore, we are open to co-operation with international organisations."

"We agree to cooperate with other organisations if they intend want to help us resolve this humanitarian problem," Ivanov said.

On behalf of the European Union, Finnish Foreign Minister Tanja Halonen pledged to send aid to improve conditions and prepare for winter during a visit to refugee camps in Ingushetia.

Australian ministers heading to UN for more discussions

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said Sunday he would head to the United Nations this week for more discussions on East Timor.

Downer said in a statement that he would meet UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and his Special Representative for East Timor, Sergio de Mello, in New York on Monday and Tuesday.

Ban on Pak Jamaat leader goes

ISLAMABAD, Oct 31 : The post-coup Pakistan government has lifted a ban on prominent, fundamentalist leader Qazi Hussain Ahmad's entry into the country's North West Frontier Province, his Jamaat-i-Islami party said today, reports AFP.

Ahmad was ordered not to enter the region bordering Afghanistan for 30 days following what officials called an objectionable speech in defiance of a ban on public gatherings in Peshawar on October 23.

The Jamaat leader had criticised reported remarks by the military ruler General Pervez Musharraf lauding Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey.

Ahmad said there was no room for secularism in Pakistan and advised Musharraf, who deposed premier Nawaz Sharif in an army coup on October 12, not to follow the example of Ataturk, claiming the Turkish people had themselves rejected non-Islamic values.

The Jamaat last week challenged the ban through a writ before the Peshawar High Court. The court had issued notice to the provincial government for a hearing next week.

Pak coup leader formalises structure of interim admn

ISLAMABAD, Oct 31 : Military ruler General Pervez Musharraf has formalised the structure of his interim administration to govern the country following an army coup three weeks ago, an official said today, reports AFP.

The general made three decrees overnight laying down rules for the oath and functioning of a seven-member National Security Council (NSC) and the federal cabinet, he said.

Musharraf, who deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif on October 12 and proclaimed himself chief executive, will head both the NSC and the cabinet, the official said.

The NSC members and ministers will "aid and advise" him in the exercise of his functions, they said.

NSC, the apex decision-making body, includes naval chief Admiral Abdul Aziz Mirza, air

force chief Air Marshal Pervez Mehdi Qureshi, and four civilian experts on legal, financial, foreign and national affairs.

Musharraf last week picked up Sharifuddin Pirzada, jurist and former secretary general of the Islamic Conference, Attiya Inayatullah, a minister under the late military ruler Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq, Mohammad Yaqub, governor of the central Bank, and Imtiaz Sahibzada, a former bureaucrat, as his NSC members.

He has already inducted governors in all four Pakistani provinces but so far made only two appointments to the cabinet.

Abdus Sattar, a career diplomat and retired top foreign ministry officials, has been named as foreign minister and Shaukat Aziz, a senior

banker, as finance minister, also be in charge of commerce.

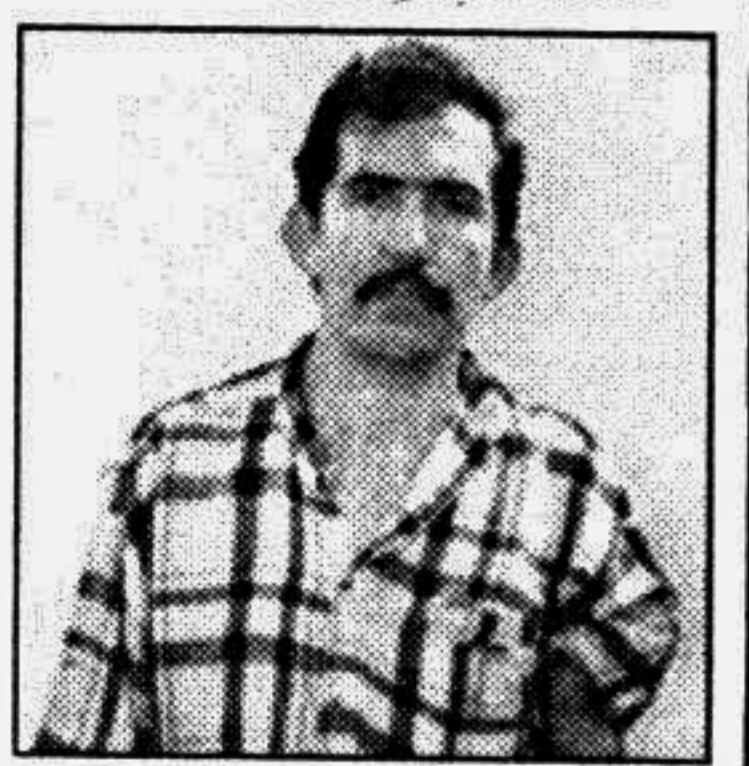
Officials said the administration would also have a separate panel of experts to provide advice and input to the NSC.

The army chief, who declared a state of emergency three days after the coup, has suspended the constitution and published a Provisional Constitution Order (PCO).

The ministers will take their oaths under the PCO.

The military ruler has pledged to lead Pakistan towards a "true democracy" but refused to set a timeframe for elections and return to civilian rule.

He said the priorities of his government were revitalising the battered economy, ensuring law and order, strengthening the federation and conducting a sweeping accountability drive to weed out corruption.



This undated file photo shows Luis Alfredo Garavito, Colombia's worst ever serial killer, who confessed to killing 140 children in seven years with "appalling coldness," according to the head of a forensic investigators team. — AFP photo

Colombian serial killer should be put to death

BOGOTA, Oct 31 : Relatives of the children believed to have been tortured and murdered by Colombia's worst-ever serial killer yesterday called for Luis Alfredo Garavito to be put to death, reports AFP.

Police chief General Rosso Jose Serrano said Saturday he supported the appeal, telling journalists child-killers deserved the harshest punishment.

"I support the death-penalty for child kidnappers, have no fear about that," Rosso told journalists.

Several relatives of children who have disappeared and are now suspected to have been maimed and murdered by the mentally unstable Garavito publicly called for his death.

Garavito confessed to killing 140 children in seven years, according to the head of a forensic investigators team (CTI).

Crew skip ship leaving passengers on board off S Lebanon

JERUSALEM, Oct 31 : The crew of a ship carrying some 70 passengers from Iran and several Asian countries abandoned it off Israeli-occupied southern Lebanon, leaving the passengers on board, an Israeli military spokesman announced, reports AFP.

He said an Israeli navy patrol boat came across the vessel Friday night, and its sailors provided drinking water for the distressed passengers.

Round the globe in 330 days

MELBOURNE, Australia, Oct 31 : An 18-year-old Australian adventurer became the youngest person to sail around the globe unassisted and non-stop when he arrived home to a hero's welcome today after 330 days at sea, reports AFP.

Jesse Martin took his first steps on dry land at about 1:15 pm (8:15 am BST) Sunday after he officially completed his 27,000-nautical-mile (50,000 km) voyage when he sailed through Melbourne's Port Phillip Heads early Sunday.

Martin set off on December 6 of last year and has been on his 10.3-metre (34-foot) yacht Lionheart-Mistral ever since.

"I'm a little bit wobbly," Martin said after stepping off his yacht and hugging his mother. "I thought I wouldn't be, but ..."

Martin was humble about his achievement at a news conference after his homecoming, saying he didn't consider himself the world's best sailor by any stretch, especially since he'd never been in a yachting race in his life.

"I've just put a little bit of sail up and done four knots all the way around the world," he told reporters. "I'm nothing special."

Soon after stepping off the yacht at Melbourne's Sandringham Yacht Club, the grinning, ponytailed Martin was taken away for a routine medical examination before beginning celebrations with his family.

Martin has admitted one of the scariest moments of his circumnavigation came when he battled huge seas off the Cape of Good Hope in August.

The Lionheart-Mistral was tipped on its side five times, sending the mast into the water and wiping out the boat's power, radios, radar, lights and e-mail system.

His best moments included spotting land for the first time off Cape Horn on a morning when dolphins were swimming beside Lionheart and there was a rainbow on the horizon.

Another high point was a

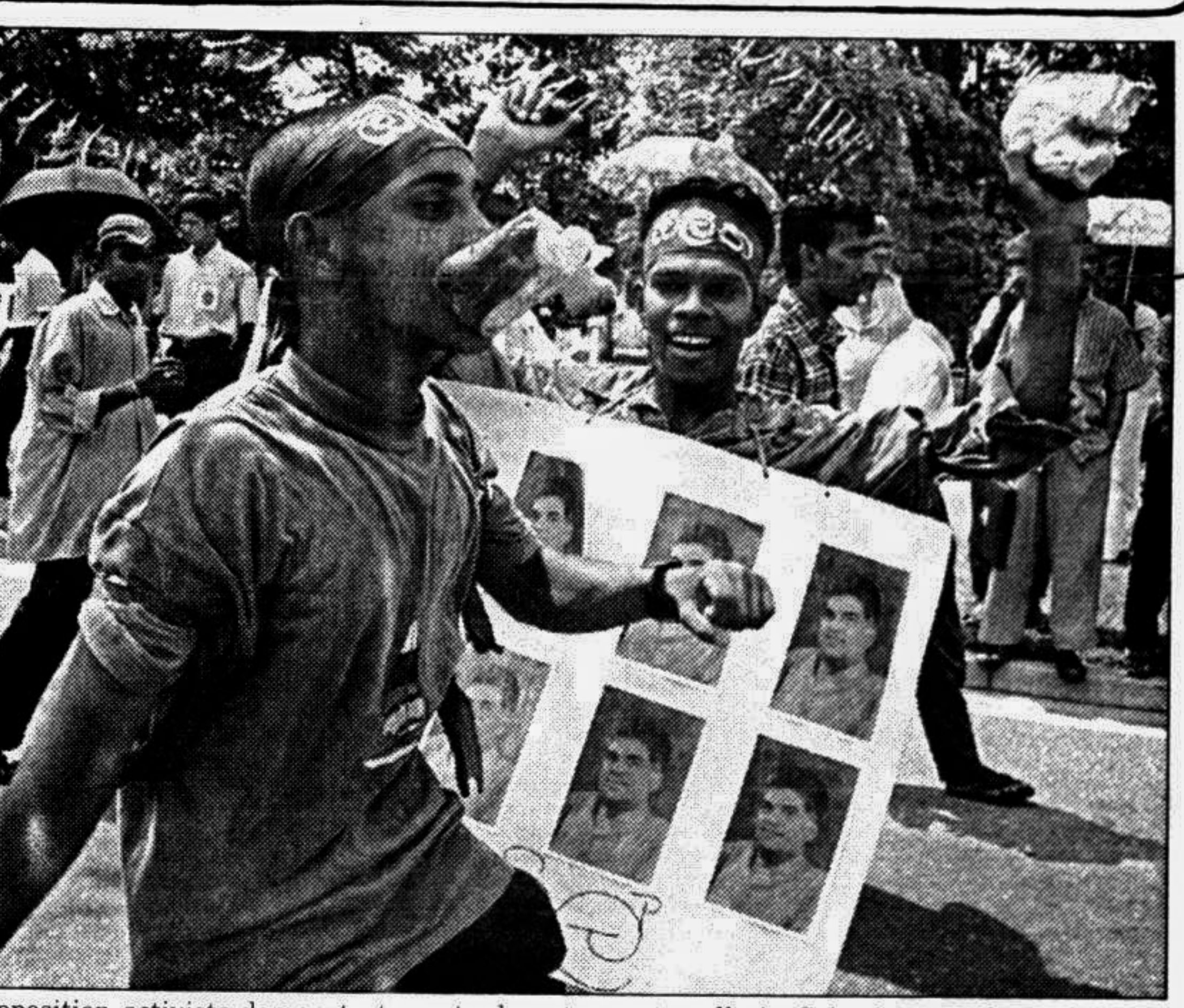
brief reunion with his family in the Azores, off Africa's western coast, although being home was likely to take some getting used to.

"When I was out in the middle of the ocean, home was just a memory and something I only visited in my dreams. Now that I'm here and I'm back into the life and activities which were once familiar, it has an unreal aspect to it."

Months alone at sea gave him plenty of time to think and Martin said one of his most significant breakthroughs was the realisation that profit motives were largely responsible for many of the world's problems.

"I thought about a lot of things and came to my own conclusions - many of which are always changing - but I think it's all based on profit," he said.

"Everything seems to lead back to that - environment issues, racist issues, world issues."



Opposition activists demonstrate yesterday at a party rally in Colombo to endorse the candidature of former premier Ranil Wickremesinghe as the main contender for the presidency at the December 21 presidential election. Activists protest the government's failure to keep its election promises made five years ago, including a pledge to reduce the price of bread. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

5,000 prisoners pardoned in Algeria: Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika granted pardons Saturday to 5,000 prisoners to mark the 45th anniversary of the revolution which began on November 1, 1954, leading to independence from France on July 3, 1962, officials said, reports AFP.

Most pardons were of common-law prisoners with less than one year remaining to be served.

Schroeder arrives in Japan: German Prime Minister Gerhard Schroeder arrived in Japan on Sunday, kicking off a Far East visit expected to combine business with human rights issues, AP reports from Tokyo.

Schroeder's plane landed Sunday morning in Nagoya, a major city in central Japan located 269 kilometers (167 miles) west of Tokyo. His programme in Japan includes talks with Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, and audience with Emperor Akihito, visits of German automaker plants and a martial arts display.

Crackdown on Falungong sect intensifies in China

BEIJING, Oct 31 : China's crackdown on the outlawed Falungong spiritual group intensified today as the government geared up to put the sect's leaders on trial after passing a law to "smash" all cults, reports AFP.

Police in Beijing are combing the city's small and medium sized hotels in search of out-of-town Falungong members who have converged on the capital's Tiananmen Square in recent days to protest against the new anti-cult law passed by China's parliament Saturday.

More than 200 followers found staying at hotels have been forced to leave the capital, the Beijing Evening News said.

Hoteliers were fined up to 7,600 yuan (915 dollars) for renting rooms to the practitioners, the newspaper report said.

Liu Dongmei, a 34-year-old college instructor from the northern Chinese city of Dalian, said many members have been sent back to their hometowns or dumped in the outskirts of Beijing, but numerous others remained in the capital determined to voice their opposition.

"We have no place to live. The government forbids people from renting rooms to us. Many practitioners are living on the streets, in open air, or in the hills nearby," said Liu.

Christianity a powerful force in India

NEW DELHI, Oct 31 : The influence of Christianity, which reached India 52 years after the birth of Christ, has always far outweighed its minuscule presence in this overwhelmingly Hindu nation of one billion people, reports AFP.

When Pope John Paul II arrives in India this week, he will do so as the head of a faith that caters to only 2.4 percent of the population.

But within that tiny community are some of the country's best educationists, nurses, doctors and humanitarian workers.

Leading sociologist Ashish Nandy, a Hindu, said Christianity's greatest gift to India has

been service to the poor and the oppressed.

"It brought in a concept of a new end to life in the form of selfless service, and had an impact on a whole galaxy of social reformers from Raja Ram Mohun Roy to Mahatma Gandhi."

Roy, a 19th century social reformer, led a movement to ban the traditional Hindu practice of burning Hindu widows on their husbands' funeral pyres.

"Give until it hurts" was a concept brought to India by the Christians," Nandy said.

Independence hero Mahatma Gandhi had publicly acknowledged his debt to Christian teachings.

Australians likely to say 'no' to republic

SYDNEY, Oct 31 : If the polls are right, Australia will say "No" to a republic in this week's referendum - although most of its citizens, its business community and its media want constitutional change, reports AFP.

In a rare display of political unity, three quarters of the federal parliament, including all but two or three of the big hitters from both sides have joined the "yes" campaign.

All but one of the last five prime ministers are among a long list of national celebrities campaigning together on the republican platform. The excep-

tion is incumbent John Howard, who is proving to be the key figure in the constitutional wrangle.

Pro-republicans include former bitter rivals, Labor's Gough Whitlam and Liberal Malcolm Fraser, antagonists in a 1975 constitutional crisis that sparked the first runnings of discontent with the existing system.

It is hard to find a single newspaper in the six state capitals that does not oppose what is seen as the anachronism of England's Queen Elizabeth II serving as Australia's head of state in a new millennium.



This undated file photo shows Sri Lankan politician Saumyamoorthy Thondaman, who died of a heart attack Saturday. — AFP photo

Super cyclone spares India's main ballistic missile site

NEW DELHI, Oct 31 : The powerful cyclone which devastated the eastern Indian state of Orissa has spared the country's main missile testing site, reports said today, reports AFP.

Defence Minister George Fernandes, after an abortive attempt to tour Orissa, told reporters Saturday that the National Missile Testing Range in the district of Chandipur-on-Sea was unaffected by the raging gale.

"There is no damage to military assets and facilities at Chandipur-on-Sea," Fernandes was quoted as saying.

Chandipur-on-Sea was one of eight coastal districts that bore the brunt of the storm.

Parties in spin as king-maker dies ahead of polls in Lanka

COLOMBO, Oct 31 : Sri Lankan politics have been thrown into confusion with the sudden death of union king-maker Saumyamoorthy Thondaman ahead of presidential and parliamentary elections, reports AFP.

Thondaman, 86, who led the highly influential Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), died of a heart attack here Saturday shortly before he was to decide which candidate to back at the December 21 presidential vote.

The CWC, though dominated by Tamil tea plantation workers of Indian origin, counts over half a million members in var-

ious trades and is Sri Lanka's most influential political body.

Thondaman had been a cabinet minister since 1978.

With the country's Sinhalese majority divided almost equally between President Chandrika Kumaratunga's People's Alliance and former premier Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP), the CWC can tip the scales.

The pro-opposition Sunday Leader newspaper said Thondaman's death was a blow to Kumaratunga's re-election hopes as no other leader within the CWC was likely to deliver a block vote to the ruling party.

Iraqi opposition groups meet in US

NEW YORK, Oct 31 : More than 300 members of different Iraqi opposition groups, brought together by the United States, began a four-day conference in New York Friday night, reports Xinhua.

The meeting, organised by the Iraqi National Congress, aims to form a united front against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Speeches from David Scheffer, US Ambassador-at-large for War Crimes issues and Sens Bob Crimes and Sam Brownback marked the first say.

Israel doesn't expect major results from Oslo summit

JERUSALEM, Oct 31 : Israeli officials cautioned today against expectations that the upcoming summit with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and US President Bill Clinton will achieve major advances in peace-making, reports AFP.

"We don't expect major results from this summit, which is being organised first and foremost to mark the fourth anniversary of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin," said Danny Yaom, security advisor to Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

"At Oslo there will be numerous political meetings, but I don't think the outlines of an

accord will be drawn up there," he said on Israeli radio.

Barak is due to leave Israel later Sunday for Oslo, where Clinton is to meet the two leaders separately on Monday before holding a three-way summit the following day.

"It's not a political summit but a meeting to pay homage to Yitzhak Rabin," said Barak's spokeswoman Mirav Parsi-Zaddok.

Yatam also noted that crucial negotiations on the final status of the Palestinian territories would be held locally, saying: "We don't need to go to

Oslo to talk."

Chief Palestinian negotiator Yasser Abed Rabbo and his Israeli counterpart Oded Eran decided Friday that the final-status talks would start November 7 - almost two months after they were formally launched at a ceremony in September.