

Palestinians, Israel resume talks

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Nov 11: Israeli and Palestinian leaders met for a second round of talks today on a permanent settlement for the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza, reports AFP.

The two delegations, led by Israeli diplomat Oded Eran and Palestinian Culture and Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo, met at the Best Eastern Hotel in the West Bank city of Ramallah for about an hour and a half and were to resume their talks later.

About 30 demonstrators gathered outside the hotel, demanding that Israel free its Palestinian prisoners and blasting the continuation of Jewish settlement activity in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Inside the hotel, the Palestinian negotiators were fiercely critical of the settlement policy of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who has ordered the dismantling of only 10 of 42 unauthorised outposts.

They also attacked Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak for the narrower interpretation he produced this week of UN resolution 242 calling for an Israeli withdrawal from the territories it occupied in 1967.

4 hurt in ex-KGB building fire in Moscow

MOSCOW, Nov 11: Four Russian secret service employees were injured with burns, one seriously, when fire swept through the FSB (ex-KGB) building on Lubyanka Square in Moscow early today, ITAR-TASS reported, says AFP.

Firemen evacuated nine other staffers through windows of the blazing building.

Firemen were called at 2:15 a.m. (5:15 am BST) after the blaze started in an office on the first floor of the notorious secret service building and spread rapidly.

ITAR-TASS said the fire was extinguished by 3:44 a.m. (6:44 am BST) but firemen continued to search for possible victims in the smoke-filled building.

The cause of the blaze was not immediately known.

The former KGB building, in the city centre near the Kremlin, is seen as a symbol of Soviet-era repression.

Nine killed in West Bengal clash

NEW DELHI, Nov 11: Nine people were killed in a street battle involving rival political groups in the communist-ruled Indian state of West Bengal, a newspaper reported today, reports AFP.

Members of the state's ruling Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and a small opposition leftist group, the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI) clashed Wednesday over a plot of land near the town of Joydaha, the Times of India quoted the police as saying.

West Bengal, bordering Bangladesh, has been ruled by communists since 1977.

Sharif's party vows to fight conspiracy case

KARACHI, Nov 11: Loyal party supporters of former Pakistani Premier Nawaz Sharif vowed today to fight conspiracy accusations against their ousted leader, reports AFP.

Sharif, who was unseated in a bloodless military coup last month, has been accused of conspiring to kill the country's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf.

He will also be investigated for kidnapping and attempting to hijack a plane carrying the general and if convicted, could face the death penalty, police said.

His party, the Pakistan Muslim League, told AFP they will fight a legal battle for Sharif.

"I was deeply hurt when I saw it in the newspapers, but the decision has been taken that the party will defend Nawaz Sharif at any cost," said Hafeez Siddiqui, a senior party leader and

former lawmaker.

"It is shocking and unfortunate," he said. "We are ready for a legal battle and will seek justice through courts."

The party's legal aid committee would now examine the case, he said.

"I hope he will be tried in open court and not in special anti-terrorism courts. I hope it will be a fair and impartial trial," he said.

But Sharif's political opponents, the Pakistan Peoples' Party led by former premier Benazir Bhutto, had little sympathy.

"It is no surprise nor is it shocking," said Reza Rabbani, a senior official in the party.

"Sharif is to be blamed for the present situation. He should blame himself more than anybody else," he said.

He tried to politicise the institution of the army and victimise politicians through his

dictatorial rule.

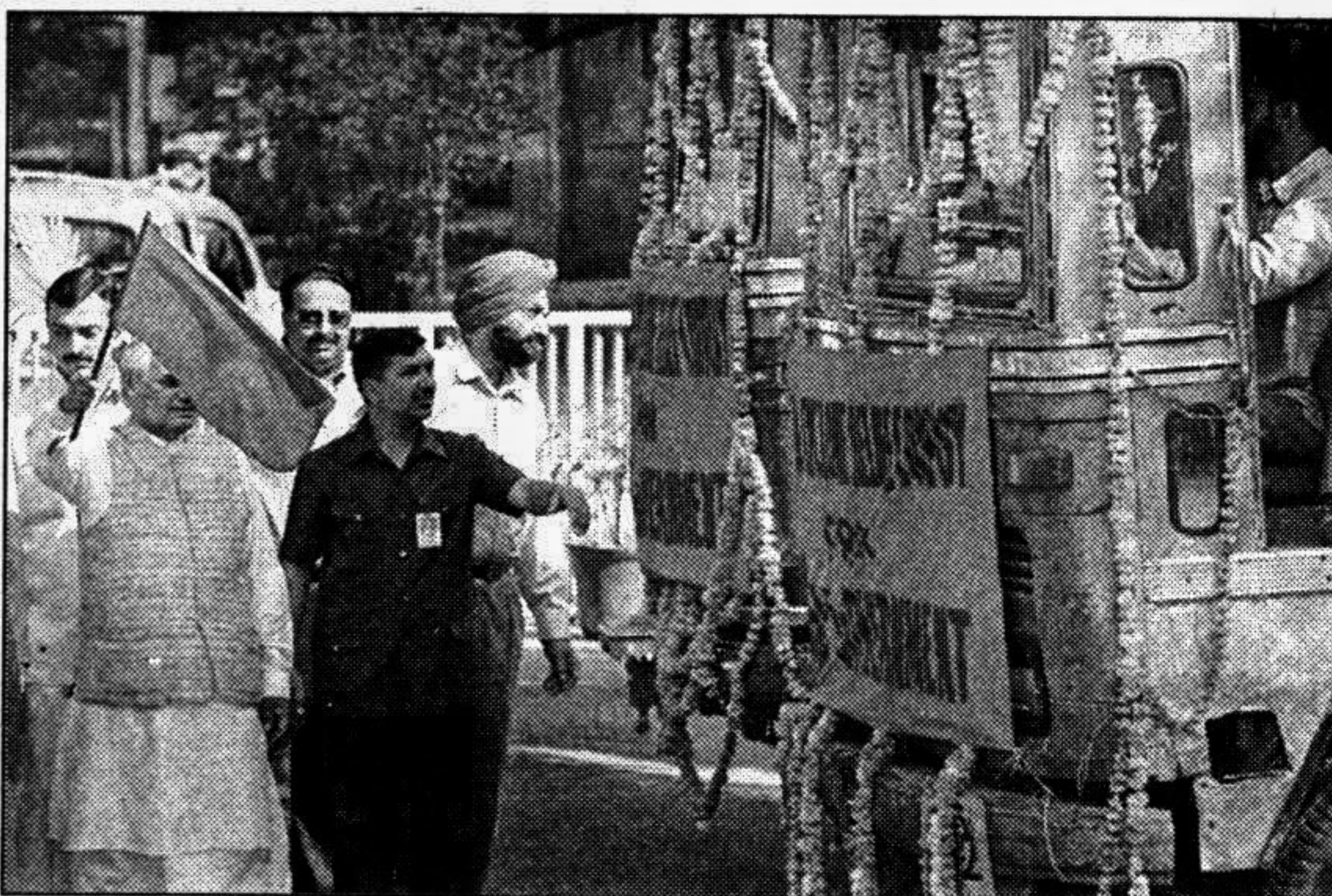
"But we demand the army restore democracy and hold elections as soon as possible."

Sharif's legal rights should be respected: US

The United States on Wednesday called for Pakistani authorities to respect the legal rights of ousted premier Nawaz Sharif amid reports he and others have been officially accused with criminal conspiracy.

"We have continued to raise our concerns with Pakistani authorities about former prime minister Sharif's well-being and our concern that he be accorded due process," State Department spokesman James Foley.

Foley said Washington had yet to confirm the charges had been pressed, but said US officials would be looking closely into the matter.



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (L) flags off trucks laden with foodstuffs on their way to the cyclone-struck state of Orissa yesterday. The aid, donated by the government of Punjab, will be distributed amongst survivors of one of the country's worst cyclones in which 8,000 people have already perished.

— AFP photo

Chechnya no longer Russia's 'internal affair': OSCE

SLEPTSOVSK, Russia, Nov 11: Signalling that the West would not stand idly by while Chechnya is bombed, an OSCE mission leader here Wednesday declared the war was no longer an "internal affair" of Russia, reports AFP.

The Chechen conflict has grown outside the framework of Russia's internal affairs," said Kim Traavik, leading an Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) team to refugee camps in Ingushetia.

He said the OSCE intended to present a peace initiative to Moscow on Thursday aimed at ending the two-month-old conflict, adding that the body would do everything in its power "to bring peace to Chechnya."

His comments followed a warning by a top Russian general that Moscow was digging in

for a long offensive, one that could possibly last three years.

Western powers, which have so far agreed with Russia that the conflict is a Russian internal matter, like the 1994-1996 Russian-Chechen war, have nevertheless increased their protests about the civilian casualties in the latest conflict.

The dozen-strong OSCE mission was mobbed by a crowd of 50 anxious refugees when they toured this lush camp just three kilometres (two miles) from the border with war-torn Chechnya.

"They are killing us, we are cold, help us," one person cried out.

The Sleptsovsk camp, home to some 8,000 refugees, mainly women and children, was covered in snow Wednesday, with temperatures well below freezing.

More than 200,000 civilians have fled Chechnya since the Russian military offensive began on September 5 with the declared aim of wiping out "terrorists" blamed for a wave of apartment block blasts which killed 292 in September.

The majority have come to Ingushetia, which itself has a population of only 340,000.

Defense Minister Igor Sergeev said Russia hoped to end its offensive against Chechnya before the end of the year, dismissing reports of a possible military revolt should the war be halted for political reasons.

"There is a chance that the operation will be over before the end of the year," Interfax news agency quoted him saying today.

UN war crimes investigators exhume 2108 bodies in Kosovo

UNITED NATIONS, Nov 11: UN war crimes investigators have exhumed 2,108 bodies from gravesites in Kosovo and expect to find more victims of the conflict next year, the chief prosecutor told the UN Security Council on Wednesday, reports AP.

Carla del Ponte's briefing provided the first official figures on the number of victims, and indicated that the final death toll might be lower than NATO's estimate that some 10,000 ethnic Albanians were killed by Serbs during the 78-day bombing campaign.

The war crimes tribunal for Yugoslavia which del Ponte heads has received reports from witnesses and intelligence sources that 11,334 people were buried in 529 common graves in Kosovo.

Over the past five months, del Ponte said, forensic teams from 14 countries examined 195 of the gravesites where 4,266 bodies were reported to have been buried. The teams discovered just 2,108 bodies, she said.

Del Ponte cautioned, however, that the number of bodies exhumed doesn't necessarily reflect the number of actual victims — because there was tampering at some graves, and at a "significant number of sites" a precise count couldn't be made because bodies were burned or dismembered.

Most of those found were ethnic Albanians killed by Serbs during the conflict, but there were also a small number of graves containing Serb victims, deputy chief prosecutor Graham Blewett said.

Iran condemns Washington's renewal of sanctions

TEHRAN, Nov 11: Iran's foreign minister lashed out at the United States for renewing economic sanctions against Tehran, the official IRNA news agency reported today, says AFP.

Hamid-Reza Asefi condemned the move, saying it was a "repetition of Washington's former policies and indicates lack of initiative in its foreign policy towards Iran," IRNA reported.

"Such sanctions are against the ongoing international trend of free global trade," Asefi said.

According to the minister, the decision to uphold the "inefficient" sanctions merely deprived American companies from being present in the Iranian market and was only to their disadvantage.

On Tuesday, US President Bill Clinton renewed US economic sanctions against Iran and said troubled relations between Washington and Tehran had not been "fully restored."

Over the past few months, the US government has sent some signals to moderate Iranian President Mohammad Khatami in the hope of improving relations between the two nations.

The overtures, however, were rebuffed by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and other conservative religious leaders in Iran.

Faulty metric conversion caused loss of Mars orbiter

WASHINGTON, Nov 11: Failure to convert English measures to metric values caused the loss of the Mars planet orbiter, a spacecraft that smashed into the planet instead of reaching a safe orbit, a NASA investigation concluded today, reports AP.

The Mars planet orbiter, a key craft in the space agency's exploration of the red planet, vanished after a rocket firing September 23 that was supposed to put the spacecraft on station around Mars.

An investigation board concluded that NASA engineers failed to convert English measures of rocket thrusts to newton, a metric system measuring rocket force. One English pound of force equals 4.45 newtons.

A small difference between the two values caused the spacecraft to approach Mars at too low an altitude and the craft is thought to have smashed into the planet's atmosphere and was destroyed.

The spacecraft was to be a key part of the exploration of the planet.

Wahid off to US

JAKARTA, Nov 11: As pressure mounts in Jakarta for the government to allow an independence referendum for restive Aceh province, President Abdurrahman Wahid flew Thursday to the United States to meet with President Bill Clinton before travelling to Japan, state officials said, reports AP.

Analysts believe Wahid will try to persuade Clinton to resume military ties that the US suspended following the outbreak of Indonesian-backed violence in East Timor in September.

Government officials said Wahid wanted to strengthen bilateral ties between the two nations and discuss regional matters.

Wahid has repeatedly said he would like to strengthen the ability of the Indonesian navy to protect the country's vast maritime resources. Military analysts believe he may want to modernise the fleet by purchasing new patrol vessels, possibly from the United States.



Rescue workers and medical team members search through debris after a building that housed some 90 people collapsed in Foggia early Thursday. Police said it was feared there were many dead.

— AFP photo

Seven killed in Italy building collapse

ROME, Nov 11: At least seven people were killed and dozens more were feared dead after an apartment block in southeast Italy collapsed before dawn Thursday, police said, reports AFP.

Rescue workers from all over Italy dug out 13 injured survivors from the mountain of rubble, all that was left of the six-story building in the town of Foggia.

Local officials estimate up to 71 people were inside the block when it collapsed shortly before 4:00 a.m. (0900 BST).

Among survivors were two children aged one and 10 who lived on the top floor and escaped with only cuts and bruises.

Earlier four bodies, including that of a 10-year-old child and two men aged 26 and 28, were taken from the wreckage.

Public prosecutors have already launched a criminal investigation for suspected homicide and impounded all administrative documents relating to the construction to determine the cause of the collapse.

"It is an incredible tragedy, and without explanation for the moment," said Foggia prefect Lasco Sorbillo.

A fireman said the building seemed to have "fallen in on itself" and the town's mayor Paolo Agostinacchio said "the strongest hypothesis" was that of a "structural collapse."

Foggia's public works officials Bruno Longo said in an interview the most likely theory was a collapse of the building's central supporting columns but this would only be known once rubble had been cleared.

Another possibility was soil erosion under the building by water.

The mayor said 91 people lived in the apartment block but only 71 were thought to have been sleeping there when the accident occurred.

A building next door is to be evacuated and neighbouring apartment buildings would undergo checks, he added.

The mayor denied reports that residents in the building had recently complained of structural problems.

Japan urged to maintain donations to UN

TOKYO, Nov 11: UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on Thursday urged Japan to keep up its financial contributions despite slow progress on Tokyo's bid for a permanent seat on the Security Council, reports AFP.

Japan is campaigning for a permanent place in an expanded version of the UN's most powerful body. Currently only Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States have permanent seats and the right of veto that goes with them.

The UN chief said Japan would be a "worthy member" of a reformed UN Security Council.

"I know that Japanese policymakers and public alike feel growing frustration about the prospects for council reform," he said in a speech to the United Nations University here.

"The discussions are indeed moving too slowly, especially given that this is a crucial question for the entire future of the United Nations," he conceded.

LTTE warns of further attacks

Civilians start fleeing Vavuniya

VAVUNIYA, Sri Lanka, Nov 11: More than 15,000 civilians fled this last northern town under government control as the military braced today for an attack by Tamil guerrillas who have seized a string of garrisons in one of their biggest victories in a 16-year war, reports AP.

Vavuniya, home to 300,000 people, is within artillery range of the Tamil Tiger rebels, who want the north and east carved into a homeland for the minority Tamils.

Government offices and schools were closed. Twenty-two of the 25 doctors at the town's hospital have fled, an official said on condition of anonymity.

The rebel radio, Voice of Tigers, monitored in Vavuniya, 210 kilometres (130 miles) north of the capital, Colombo,

asked residents to leave by Thursday morning. Almost 90 per cent of Vavuniya's residents are Tamils. More than 3,000 of them fled overnight and 12,000 left Thursday.

"We fear our attack may cause hardship to the people," said the warning, broadcast on the radio and printed in leaflets. "We are urgently requesting civilians living in Vavuniya to leave the area."

The guerrillas who overran 10 army camps last week in the northern Wanni jungle, claimed they lost 115 fighters and killed 1,000 government soldiers.

The army says 101 soldiers have been killed and 743 wounded. But soldiers returning from the front have said hundreds of army troops were killed. The army chief, Gen. Sri Lal Weerasooriya, has ordered

an inquiry into the debacle.

Sri Lankan soldiers, backed by armoured personnel carriers, patrolled the Vavuniya or took positions behind sandbag bunkers on Thursday. A military spokesman in Colombo said reinforcements had been sent.

"We are there and if the terrorists shell the area, we will attack them back," Brig. Sunil Tennakoon told The Associated Press. "We are not going to abandon the town," he said.

On Thursday, the Red Cross appealed to the rebels and the military to exercise restraint in civilian areas.

"We have requested both the sides not to involve civilians. We are worried about civilian suffering and hardship," said Red Cross spokesman Harsha Gunewardene.

BRIEFLY

New US envoy to China: The US Senate on Wednesday approved the nomination of retired Admiral Joseph Prueher as the new American ambassador to Beijing, one of the most sensitive posts in the diplomatic service. Reuters reports from Washington.

The appointment of the 58-year-old Prueher, who was commander of the combined US forces in the Pacific during a tense 1996 face-off between China and Taiwan, comes at a crucial time in Sino-US relations as Washington this week launched a major push to bring China into the World Trade Organisation.

HR investigator for Iraq resigns: A UN special investigator whose reports of human rights abuses in Iraq prompted Iraqi leaders to ban him from the country has resigned, UN sources said Wednesday. AP reports from United Nations.

Max van der Stoep, the special investigator on Iraq for the UN Commission on Human Rights, will leave his post soon, the sources said, speaking on condition of anonymity. Since 1991, the former Dutch foreign minister has documented executions, kidnappings and repression of rights by Saddam Hussein's government.

High-protein diet may help lose weight, but unhealthy

ATLANTA, Nov 11: High-protein diets may help people lose weight, but they are unhealthy and could even lead to weight gain later on, heart doctors said on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

And they work no better for losing weight overall than any other kind of diet, the experts told a meeting of the American Heart Association.

"We have seen a lot of publicity lately on high-fat, high-protein diets," Dr. Robert Eckel, chairman of the American Heart Association's nutrition committee, told a news conference.

"Keep in mind that the use of a high-fat diet has not been shown to work better than a high-carbohydrate diet over time. I have great concerns."

Mindful of how popular such diets have become, some researchers set out to see if they worked.

The best way to do this sci-

entifically is to take a large number of people, and randomly put half on a high-protein diet, carefully making sure that other factors, such as exercise and fat intake, are the same in both groups.

Dr. Peter Clifton of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) in Adelaide, Australia tested a diet promoted by author Barry Sears.

Sears recommends getting 40 per cent of calories from protein. "That's actually very hard to do," Clifton said. "People end up having to buy his high-protein bars."

Sears also argues that many people have become resistant to insulin, a key hormone used by the body to metabolise fat and sugar. There is some evidence that people who are insulin resistant can develop unhealthy levels of cholesterol, especially triglycerides.

Fierce fighting kills 12 in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Nov 11: Six Indian border guards and five Muslim separatists were among 12 killed today in a fierce gunbattle in the Himalayan Indian state of Kashmir, officials said, reports AFP.

A civilian was also killed in the fighting, which broke out early Thursday at Panzpora village in northern Kashmir and the paramilitary Border Security Force (BSF).

At least seven houses were gutted in a blast sparked by the firefight.

"The gunbattle is still continuing," a police officer said here.

Inspector General of Police Gopal Sharma told AFP the dead rebels included two Pakistanis including Abu Harare, the local chief of Lashkar-e-

Tayyaba, a Pakistan-based hardline Muslim militant group.

The other three militants were said to be local Kashmiris.

"Heavy firing is going on since morning, and it appears both sides are using sophisticated weapons," Muneer Ahmed, a resident of Sopore, told AFP over telephone.

Panzpora is located close to the apple-growing centre of Sopore, which was a bastion of Muslim guerrillas until 1994.

Traffic on the busy Srinagar-Sopore highway was suspended following the fighting.

On Tuesday, Indian troops shot dead four foreign militants and a Kashmiri Muslim in a gunbattle near Panzpora. The police said the rebels killed Thursday were also believed to be foreigners.

Tens of thousands still marooned in Orissa

BHUBANESHWAR, India, Nov 11: Tens of thousands of villagers were still marooned today, nearly two weeks after a devastating cyclone hit the eastern Indian state of Orissa, killing almost 8,000 people, reports AFP.

The death toll was put Thursday by officials at 7,616, as rescuers working through the night discovered more bodies in the worst-hit Ersama, about 120 km from this state capital.

Ersama, close to Orissa's winding coastline with the Bay of Bengal, bore the brunt of the October 29 cyclone that packed wind-speeds exceeding 260 km per hour.

"We are still recovering bodies," a government official said. The death toll nearly doubled to 7,474 on Wednesday after officials realised that almost all inhabitants of Ersama had perished following a 10-metre (33-feet) high tidal wave which swirled from the sea.

It swamped hundreds of

homes and farms in its path, wiping out hundreds of villages and small towns across the state.

Orissa officials said Jagatsinghpur district, which includes Ersama, accounted for 6,389 of all deaths in the state, with fatalities in Ersama itself totalling 5,800.

Indian soldiers and other relief agencies were still struggling to reach 200,000 people in three coastal districts still marooned almost two weeks after the disaster.

"There are areas in the state where people are simply living in knee or ankle deep water," the official added.

"In some areas, we have managed to reach food and medicines through military boats. Indeed boats are the only means of communication in areas which are marooned. All roads, fields are under a sea of water."



Indonesian Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri (R) bids farewell to President Abdurrahman Wahid (L) as her husband, Taufik Kiemas (C) and their adjutants look on, prior to Wahid's departure for the United States at Jakarta airport yesterday. Wahid left on a regular flight of Garuda, the national airline, the first time an Indonesian president has made an overseas trip on a commercial flight.

— AFP photo