

International

Pak police press ahead with crackdown on corruption

ISLAMABAD, Nov 19 : Pakistan pressed ahead today with its crackdown on corruption as police hunted for more suspects among the country's wealthy elite, reports AFP.

In total 25 people have been arrested since the crackdown began on Wednesday, although two have since been released after paying back outstanding bank loans, the government said.

Those arrested included senior politicians, a retired air marshal and a retired admiral.

Under a new law enacted Wednesday, Pakistan's military rulers set up a National Accountability Bureau and warred offenders faced jail terms of up to 14 years.

A small group among the Pakistani elite has outstanding loans worth 211 billion rupees (4.1 billion dollars), a third of the national budget. Most of the money was borrowed from banks with little or no collateral.

Convicted offenders, many of whom are likely to be politicians, will be disqualified from holding public office for 21 years. The government will also seize any assets obtained through graft.

The government has decided that all corruption cases pending in the now defunct anti-graft tribunal set up by ousted premier Nawaz Sharif will be transferred to the new accountability courts.

"It shall not be necessary to recall any witness or again to record any evidence that may have been recorded," a decree issued by President Muhammad Rafiq Tarar said.

Under the 1997 Accountability Act, former premier Benazir Bhutto, sacked in November 1996 for alleged corruption and misrule, was sentenced to five years imprisonment along with her husband Asif Ali Zardari in April.

A Lahore High Court bench found the couple guilty of receiving millions of dollars in kickbacks in a 1994 pre-shipment inspection contract awarded to a Swiss firm.

The court imposed a 8.6 million-dollar-fine and barred them from politics for seven years.

Benazir, who was sentenced in absentia, has since been living in self-exile in London and her appeal has yet to be decided by the Supreme Court.

The National Accountability Bureau has declared Benazir a fugitive from the law.

The bureau's list of suspects says Benazir "wanted in a number of cases, is a proclaimed offender and outside the country."

Analysts said the statement apparently dashed Benazir's hopes of getting her guilty verdict overturned. Her party had been dismissed the case as a political vendetta by her rival Sharif.

Reacting angrily to the label of proclaimed offenders, a spokesman said her Pakistan People's Party said he was "shocked and dismayed."

"It is the task of the courts alone to declare a person as a proclaimed offender after due process of law," the spokesman added.

The previous government had vowed to arrest Benazir on her return home.

The army-led crackdown has netted influential leaders from the country's major political parties in addition to some senior retired military officials.

Those arrested for defaulting on bank loan and evading taxes also include executives of some of the country's key business houses.

Karachi police arrested a businessman shortly before he could board a Dubai-bound flight on Wednesday.



Supporters of toppled Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif try to stop an Armoured Personnel Carrier entering the anti-terrorist court in the southern port city of Karachi yesterday. Sharif, who along with three other officials appeared before the courts in two separate hearings, was seen in public for the first time after his detention following a bloodless military coup on October 12.

— AFP photo

Sharif summoned in contempt of court case

ISLAMABAD, Nov 19 : Pakistan's Supreme Court today ordered ousted premier Nawaz Sharif to appear in a contempt of court case next month, court officials said, reports AFP.

A full bench headed by Chief Justice Saeeduzzaman Siddiqui issued notices to Sharif and former head of the Islamabad administration Akram Javed to appear on December 7.

Sharif, ousted in a coup by army chief General Pervez Musharraf on October 12, was not present.

Instead the former premier was produced in a treason and murder conspiracy case before a judge at an anti-terrorist court in Karachi, in southern Pakistan.

The contempt case, reopened after Sharif's ouster, relates to the storming of the Supreme Court by a mob reportedly comprising leaders and workers of his Pakistan Muslim League party on November 28, 1997 in a bid to foil an earlier contempt proceeding against Sharif.

Former chief justice Sajjad Ali Shah, who had initiated the case against Sharif amid a bitter row between the government and the judiciary, suspended the proceedings after the mob vandalised the court. A three-member bench earlier called the incident the "most flagrant violation of the decorum of the court but acquitted the accused, including several party lawmakers, for lack of evidence.

The court issued today's notices following a petition moved by freelance journalist Shahid Orakzai.

9 Texas students dead as log bonfire structure collapses

AUSTIN, Texas, Nov 19 : At least nine students were killed and 26 others injured when a four-story log structure collapsed at a Texas university early Thursday, the university president said as rescuers searched through the rubble, reports AFP.

Texas A and M University president Ray Bowen confirmed nine people died under hundreds of collapsed logs and said two other students were still missing.

Rescuers managed to pull at least one person from beneath the rubble and rushed the survivor to a hospital, Bowen said. Later, they pursued the search, carefully removing the debris after hearing faint sounds of other possible survivors, he said.

About 70 students were reportedly working at 2:42 a.m. (2:42 pm BST) Thursday on the structure, which was to be the centerpiece of the "Aggie bonfire," a much-anticipated, popular student event held before the school's annual football match-up with its arch-rival, the University of Texas at Austin.

Investigators examine Metrolink locomotive that derailed after sideswiping a freight train that failed to clear switches in time for the east-bound commuter in Fullerton, California, USA Thursday. Eight people from the four-car passenger train were shifted to hospitals with minor injuries.

BRIEFLY

New governor for West Bengal: Noted industrialist and former BJP MP Virendra Singh will be the new governor of West Bengal, Chief Minister Jyoti Basu said on Thursday, PTI reports from New Delhi.

Basu told reporters after a 15-minute meeting with Home Minister LK Advani the union government has proposed Shah as the new governor and "it is acceptable to me."

Jawan killed in Assam ambush: One jawan was killed and another seriously injured when National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) militants ambushed their vehicle by a powerful Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in Kokrajhar district on Thursday, PTI reports from Guwahati.

The incident occurred at a place under Gossapaon police station when the jawans were in a convoy proceeding from Sapekota to Soraibei. The vehicle was destroyed. Combing operation was launched to nab the militants.

Iraq slams extension of oil-for-food programme

BAGHDAD, Nov 19 : Iraq today blasted the United Nations as the world body prepares for talks on extending the Baghdad oil-for-food programme whose latest six-month phase is due to expire this week, reports AFP.

Extending the oil-for-food programme for another six months is a new extension of the embargo imposed on Iraq more than nine years ago, said the Ath-Thawra daily, mouthpiece of the ruling Baath Party.

The United States wants to maintain the sanctions to pursue its war of attrition against Iraq ... it is shameful that the United Nations is trying to camouflage US policy aimed at

starving and humiliating Iraq," the paper said.

The UN Security Council is to meet Friday to discuss prolonging the programme that allows Iraq to sell a limited value of crude in return for humanitarian aid.

Diplomats on Thursday said the Council had agreed to extend the programme, launched in December 1996 to help lessen the effects of the sanctions slapped on Baghdad for its 1990 invasion of Kuwait, for two weeks instead of the customary six months.

The present six-month phase is set to end on Saturday.

Surprised Blair awaits 4th child

LONDON, Nov 19 : British Prime Minister Tony Blair's wife Cherie is pregnant with their fourth child, the premier's official spokesman said late Thursday, reports AFP.

"They are delighted at the news, which came as a total shock. The baby is expected in May," the spokesman said.

Tony Blair, 46, and Cherie, 45, have two sons -- Euan, 15, and Nicky, aged 14 -- and a daughter Kathryn, aged 11.

It is thought to be the first time this century that the wife of a serving British prime minister will give birth.

Opposition Conservative leader William Hague congratulated the couple. "It is wonderful news."

Wahid calls on Acehnese to settle their differences

He did not elaborate on the existing differences between the groups but officials have pointed out that while some merely wanted a referendum of self-determination, others wanted outright independence.

Wahid has come under pressure from politicians and Acehnese leaders to quickly visit Aceh, a strongly Muslim province where calls for self-determination have strengthened markedly in the past months, to engage in dialogue with local representatives to avert a break away of Indonesia's westernmost province.

He said Thursday the Acehnese would have to wait for the formulation of government policy on Aceh.

Moscow says 'no' to OSCE mediation in Chechnya

MOSCOW, Nov 19 : Russian Interior Minister Vladimir Rushailo Today said Moscow did not need OSCE mediation to end the war in Chechnya, Interfax reported, says AFP.

"We don't need any mediation," Rushailo said when asked about a possible role for the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe in resolving the 10-week-old crisis.

At an OSCE summit in Istanbul Thursday, Western leaders and Russia reached a five-point accord on Chechnya which recognised the need for political dialogue with the breakaway republic and mooted a role for the 54-member pan-European security body.

Under the accord thrashed out by foreign ministers from Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Russia and the United States:

-- Russia recognises the need to respect OSCE norms.

-- Russia accepts the central

importance of a political solution to the Chechen crisis.

-- All sides agree on the need to re-launch political dialogue and on the possible role the OSCE could play in this.

-- All sides accept the validity of the OSCE 1995 mandate for Chechnya. OSCE observers were present in Grozny throughout the 1994-96 war, and helped broker peace negotiations which ended that conflict.

-- Moscow agrees to invite the current OSCE president (Norway) to visit the conflict zone, including Chechnya.

The Russian foreign ministry here said it was not able to confirm the details of the reported accord.

"We do not have any information on that subject for the moment, but we expect some during the day," said ministry spokesman Andrei Kobzev.

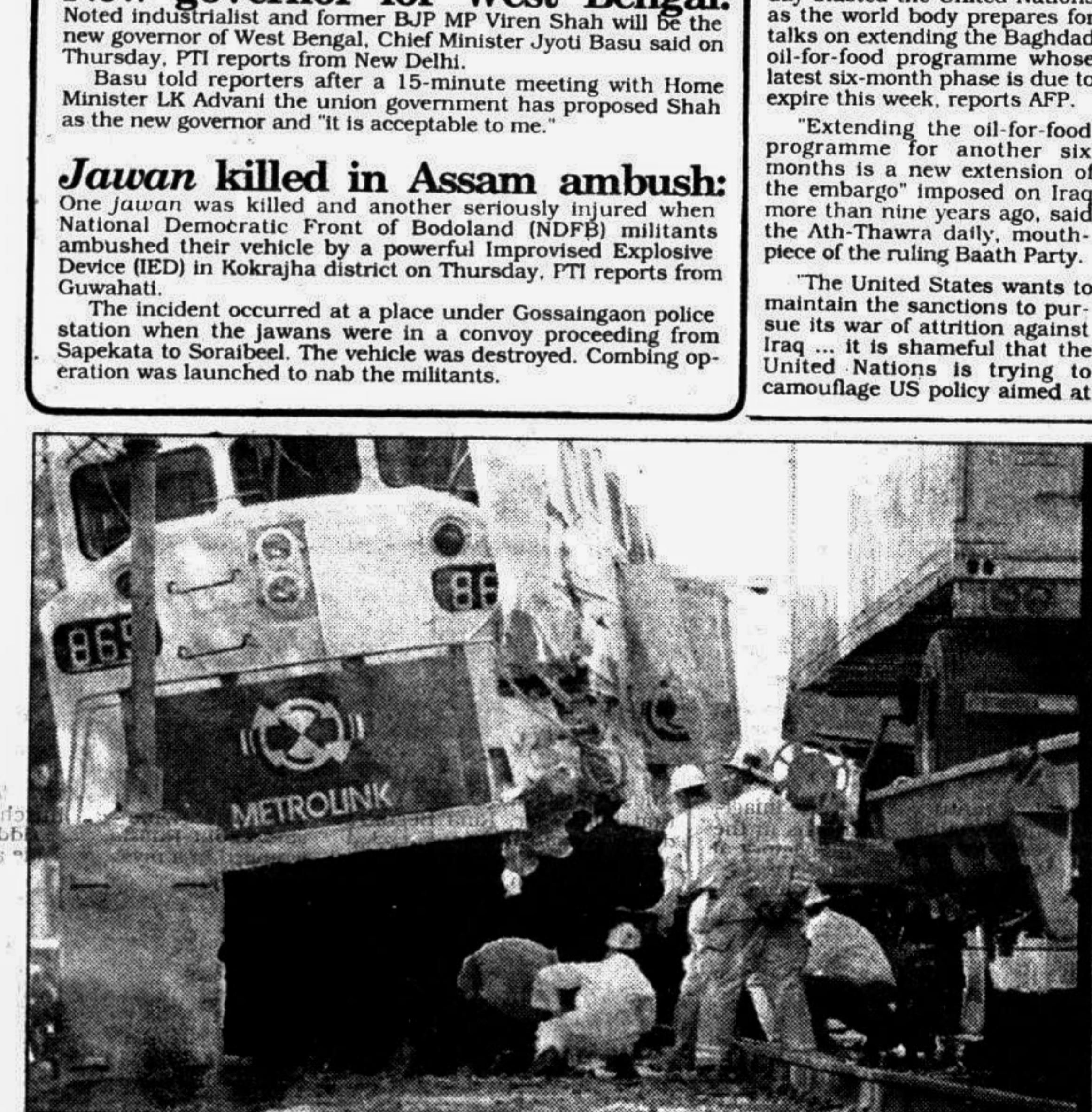
Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov on Thursday insisted

the deal could not be interpreted to mean "political mediation or interference in the internal affairs of the Russian Federation."

Moscow has already begun talks with Chechen figures in recent days. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin meeting the mufti of Chechnya, Akhmed Nadyrov, an opponent of Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov.

Rushailo was speaking in the city of Nizhny Novgorod, some 450 km east of Moscow, from where 600 policemen were due to travel to Chechnya to form the basis of a police force for Russian-controlled zones.

In Istanbul, Yeltsin brushed off intense Western pressure to order a halt to Russia's onslaught in the rebel republic, bluntly telling the summit not to meddle in Russia's internal affairs or criticise an operation Moscow insists is a drive to crush terrorism.



Investigators examine Metrolink locomotive that derailed after sideswiping a freight train that failed to clear switches in time for the east-bound commuter in Fullerton, California, USA Thursday. Eight people from the four-car passenger train were shifted to hospitals with minor injuries.

Sonia pleads for life of one of convicts of Rajiv murder

NEW DELHI, Nov 19 : In a rare gesture, Congress president Sonia Gandhi has urged President K R Narayanan to commute the death sentence of Nalini, one of the convicts in the assassination of her husband Rajiv Gandhi, as she is the mother of a small child, reports PTI.

Nalini, mother of a seven-year-old girl, was sentenced to death along with three others Murugan, Perarivalan and Santhan by a Chennai special court, a verdict later confirmed by the Supreme Court.

Church sources confirmed Tiger guerrillas drove out government forces from Madhu.

There was no fighting at the highly venerated shrine but some 3,000 local residents sought shelter there to avoid being caught in the crossfire in the latest wave of fighting.

Militiamen attack convoy of E Timorese refugees

DILI, East Timor, Nov 19 : Pro-Indonesia militiamen attacked a 15-truck convoy of refugees bound for East Timor, injuring two persons and bringing the flow of returning refugees to a virtual halt, the UN said here today, reports AFP.

A pregnant woman and her husband who were aboard the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) convoy were beaten up by the militiamen and hospitalized, Ariane Quentier of the UNHCR office here said.

Quentier said dozens of Indonesian police stood by and did nothing to prevent or halt the attack on the convoy by the 30 militiamen Wednesday in the border town of Atambua in Indonesian-controlled West

Timor.

"Clearly these people are scared," she said, adding that the stream of thousands who had crossed the border on foot in the previous days had dried up to a trickle.

Only 250 crossed the border on foot on Thursday as compared to 1,000 on Monday, she said, adding that the attackers were stopped only when the UNHCR arrived at the scene with Indonesian army soldiers who then arrested two of the militiamen.

In a statement issued in Geneva the UNHCR said the incident was "the worst involving refugees since the UNHCR started repatriations from Atambua late last month."

"UNHCR protested the incident, warning police officials in

Atambua that it would be forced to suspend repatriation operations unless measures were taken to immediately halt militiamen activity."

Quentier, who said the militiamen had also seized the refugees' meagre belongings, said the UNHCR planned to raise the incident with Indonesian Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri during a scheduled visit to West Timor over the weekend.

"Of course we are going to try to see her," she said.

Some 75,000 out of an estimated 250,000 East Timorese refugees who fled or were pushed into West Timor during a murderous rampage by the pro-Jakarta militia in September have so far returned home by land, sea and air.

Democratic presidential candidate Bill Bradley talks to students and parents at Logan Street Elementary School Thursday while campaigning in Los Angeles, California. Bradley visited the school, which has one of Los Angeles' best after-school programmes, which Bradley hopes to expand nation-wide if elected.

— AFP photo

Maldivians go to polls

MALE, Nov 19 : Brisk polling was reported in the Maldives today as the election for a new parliament for the Indian Ocean archipelago got underway, officials said, reports Reuters.

They said polling was heavy in the capital Male and the 20 administrative atolls spread across the equator.

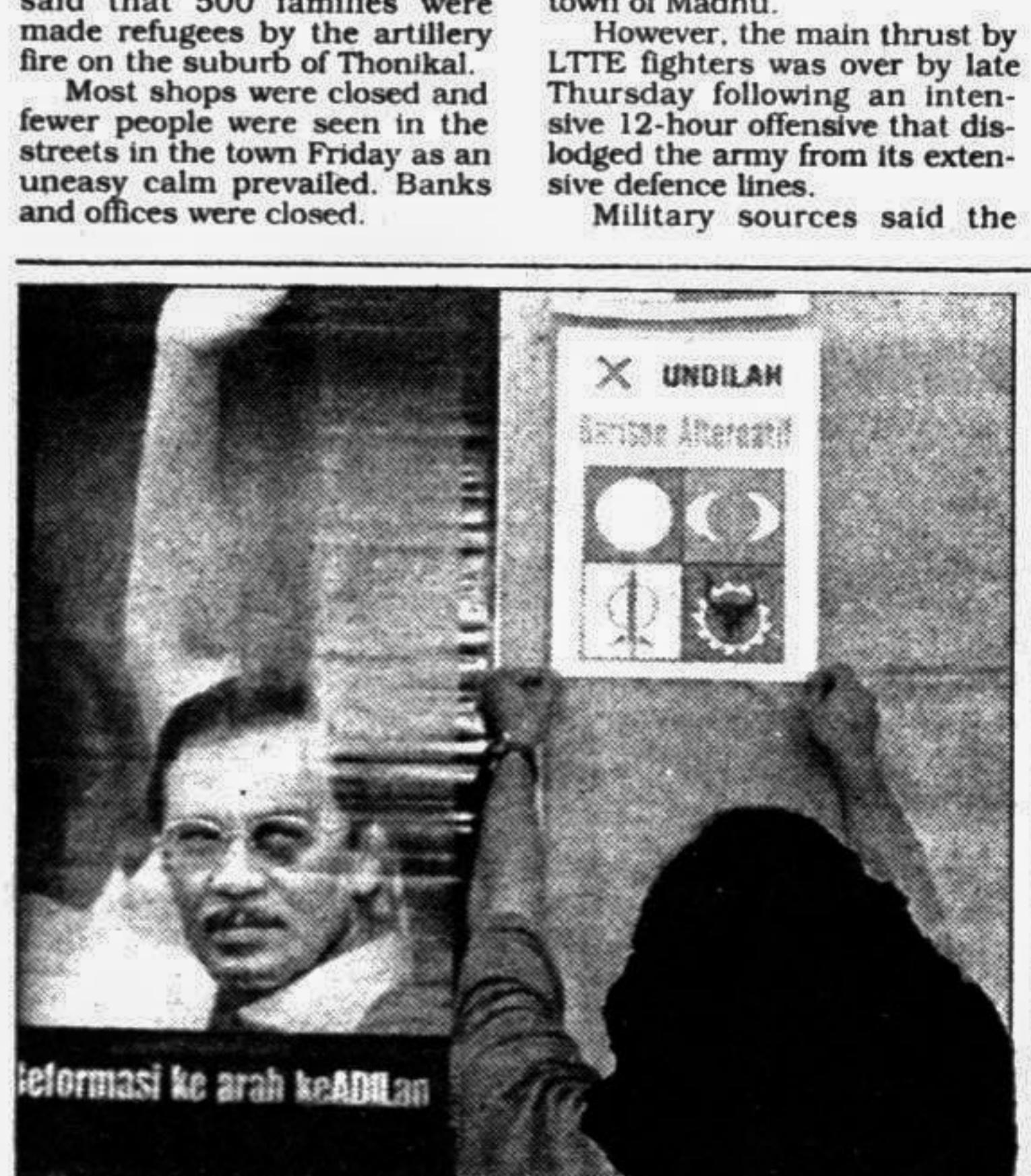
More than 125 candidates are contesting the 40 seats in the 50 member parliament known as the People's Majlis.

Two candidates have already been elected unopposed and eight members of parliament are nominated by the president.

Mob burns hotels, discos in Java

JAKARTA, Nov 19 : Hundreds of Indonesian Muslims burned down at least 11 hotels and several discos in the south of the capital Jakarta, saying they were used as prostitution and drug centers, reports AFP.

An estimated 1,500 people went on a rampage Wednesday night in the resort area of Puncak in Bogor district, 70 km south of here, destroying and torching places they said housed prostitutes and drug users, the Detik online news service said.



A supporter of the opposition National Justice Party pastes an 'Alternative Front' poster besides a banner of jailed former Malaysian deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim (L) in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. The National Justice Party president and wife of Anwar, Wan Azizah Ismail, told a press conference that the party will also field Anwar Ibrahim as one of their candidates.

— AFP photo



South Korean activists shout anti-US slogans as they protest in front of Seoul's US army base yesterday. The demonstrators were protesting against the claim that the US military told Seoul to use Agent Orange, a toxic defoliant, along the demilitar