

Sharif's son disappointed at trial

NEW DELHI, Nov 21: Hasan Sharif, son of deposed Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, yesterday said he had no contact with his family for the past one month and expressed disappointment over the process of his father's trial on charges of treason and kidnapping, reports PTI.

Barak reaffirms commitment to peace

NEW YORK, Nov 21: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak reaffirmed his commitment to peace, but also underscored his concern about security issues in a speech delivered before influential members of the US Jewish community, reports AFP.

Jyoti Basu still considers BJP uncivilised

NEW DELHI, Nov 21: West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu yesterday said he still considered BJP uncivilised and barbaric, reports PTI.

Even now I say it (BJP) is uncivilised and barbaric, he said at a press conference here when asked if he still stuck to his remark that the party was uncivilised and barbaric.

Basu recalled that when he had asked Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to tell him what language he should have used, he (Vajpayee) kept quiet.

Russian troops surround 80 pc of Chechen capital

GROZNY, Russia, Nov 21: Russian military commanders said today that the rebel Chechen capital Grozny was 80 per cent surrounded, as Chechen officials reported an intense overnight bombardment of the rebel republic, reports AFP.

With federal government units just two to three kilometres from the western outskirts of the city, Russian commanders squeezed Grozny from the north, west and east in a bid to cut off the last remaining escape routes south.

Moscow vowed no let up in the 12th week of a campaign launched to wipe out Islamic extremists and "terrorists" blamed for two incursions in southern Russia this summer and a spate of bombings that killed 292 people in September.

Warplanes have blitzed passes in the mountainous south in a bid to disrupt flows of men, munitions and supplies from neighbouring Georgia -- the only section of the Chechen border not under Russian control.

Up to 6,000 fighters are preparing the defence of Grozny, the Russian military command in the North Caucasus said, Interfax reported.

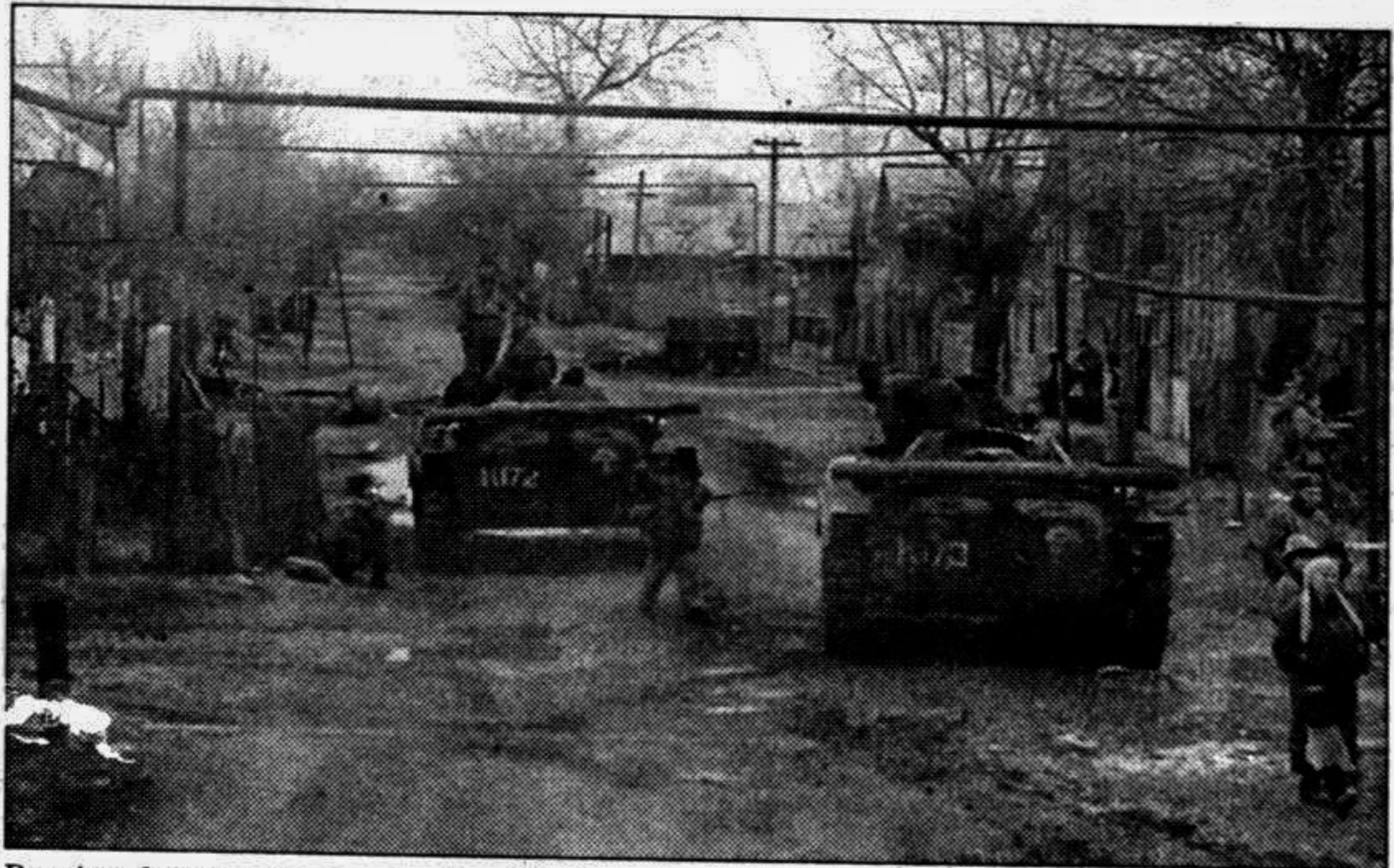
With the military campaign gaining momentum daily, Russian premier Vladimir Putin emphatically rejected fresh Chechen calls for talks on finding a political solution to the worst conflict in Chechnya since the 1994-96 war that left Grozny with de facto independence.

"We will not let up in the slightest. We will continue as we

have done up until now," he said on state-owned ORT television Saturday after meeting President Boris Yeltsin.

Putin, the former KGB-spy and hawkish architect of a military campaign which has seen his popularity with voters soar, ruled out talks with "terrorists."

Federal infantry units are now two-three kilometres (less than two miles) from Zavodskol and three to four kilometres from Andreyevskaya, on the western edge of Grozny, according to Chechen military officials.



Russian federal troops enter the Chechen village of Samashki Saturday. The federal troops take more and more territory under their control, marching to within two kilometers of Grozny to tighten their grip on the Chechen capital.

6 more killed in Bihar

NEW DELHI, Nov 21: Unidentified gunmen stormed a village and massacred six more people in the lawless Indian state of Bihar, the Press Trust of India reported today, says AFP.

Four others were injured when heavily armed attackers raided the village overnight Saturday and opened fire at residents guarding their homes and farms in the state's west Champaran district, police said.

The massacre came four days after Maoist guerrillas killed 12 people in a village in Palamu district of Bihar.

They beheaded Ghafor Mian, a supporter of a rival leftwing group, and 11 of his family, including seven children.

Bihar, which borders Nepal, is reputedly India's most lawless state. Maoist guerrillas are active in many parts of the state.

Anwar Ibrahim attends brother's funeral under armed guard

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 21: Escort by armed guards, a fearful Anwar Ibrahim was taken from jail to a cemetery on Sunday for the funeral of his eldest brother in a last-minute concession that his wife labeled a political ploy, reports AP.

Malaysian authorities had rejected repeated appeals over the past week by Anwar and family members to let the former deputy prime minister visit his ailing brother, Mohamad Rani Ibrahim, 62, who died of cancer on Saturday.

Under overcast skies, two dozen prison guards, some armed with automatic rifles, kept a tight guard around Anwar as some 100 political supporters, family and friends flocked to offer condolences.

Thai MPs rush to get university degrees

BANGKOK, Nov 21: Thai MPs are rushing back to school to get university degrees, fearing the loss of their jobs under the country's new constitution which requires them to be graduates, reports said today, reports AFP.

Some of the most recognizable faces in Thai politics are signing up for courses, the Bangkok Post reported.

Kramol Thongthammachart, dean of political science at Bangkok's elite Chulalongkorn University, praised the constitutional clause, but issued a stern warning to MPs expecting an easy ride.

Baby comes first

LONDON, Nov 21: Britain's Prime Minister and father-to-be Tony Blair admitted his baby was more important than winning an election, in an interview in today's Observer newspaper, reports AFP.

Blair, 46, talked of his shock at learning that his wife Cherie -- a top barrister -- was pregnant with their fourth child at the age of 45.

"It's possible to be delighted and shell-shocked at the same time, that is what I was because it was not expected, not expected at all," said Blair, already father to two sons and a daughter aged 15, 14 and 11.

"It's lovely, but a little bit unnerving at our age," Blair said, who has vowed to take parental leave and do his bit changing nappies and at feed times -- added: "It is more important than winning the last election."

Fighting in Lanka Church demands withdrawal of combatants after shelling kills 38

COLOMBO, Nov 21: Sri Lanka's Roman Catholic church today demanded the immediate withdrawal of troops and Tamil Tiger rebels from a sacred area in the island's north after 38 refugees were killed in a shell attack, reports AFP.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference here in a statement said the church at Madhu came under artillery attack yesterday night as some 300 government troops moved in.

The defence ministry has said the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) carried out the attack that damaged the Sacred Heart chapel and the main shrine located in the district of Mannar.

The whole church of Mannar and of Sri Lanka are so dear to the Catholics and to all the citizens of this country had come under such a desecration never heard of in its 450 years of history.

"I appeal to both the state armed forces and the LTTE to

immediately withdraw from the sacred area... leave Madhu completely free for the pilgrims to visit the shrine without any restriction for their spiritual purposes," Mannar Bishop Ravappu Joseph said.

There has been no immediate reaction from the LTTE to the attack on the church.

Meanwhile, Tamil Tiger rebels shelled a Roman Catholic church in northern Sri Lanka, killing 38 civilians including 13 children, as government forces retook the area, the defence ministry said today.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) hit the 17th century Dutch colonial church in Madhu as troops regained lost territory further north, defence ministry spokesman Sunil Thennakoon said.

The terrorists probably expected us to be at the church and carried out the attack," Thennakoon said. "But they should know that we do not enter the sacred area."

Two people were killed earlier Saturday when the army approached the area and the late night shelling raised the day's death toll to a total of 40.

The church priest and a spokesman for the Red Cross said they could not be sure who fired the shells.

Military officials said the shelling appeared to be an attempt to drive out soldiers who took the Madhu area. The defence ministry accused the LTTE of violating the church's sanctity.

Church administrator Father A.P. Devasagayam said there were some 3,000 people sheltering there when the shells hit. He said he was unable to say who fired but added the army had set up camp close to the shrine.

"I can't say who did this," Devasagayam said when contacted by telephone. The Catholic church on previous occasions urged government troops to keep away from the area because they feared a rebel attack which hit the church.

"The firing went on for hours. I don't know how many shells fell here because we were all inside," Devasagayam said. "The roof of the sacred heart church is damaged. The convent was also hit. But the statue is safe."

The church's statue of Our Lady of the Rosary at Madhu is highly venerated, not only by Catholics but also by followers of other religions across this majority Buddhist country. The statue is believed to have healing powers.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has also urged both sides to spare civilians who have been sheltering at the church compound.

ICRC spokesman Harsha Gunawardena said a total of 37 civilians were killed following an exchange of fire between troops and Tiger rebels but he could not immediately confirm who shelled the church.

"One shell has hit the chapel and two others fell in the church compound," Gunawardena said.

Church sources confirmed the LTTE took control of Madhu on Thursday following an offensive against government forces, but after a counter offensive overnight Saturday, the military regained the territory.

Security forces first took control of the region in March.

China completes its first space mission

BEIJING, Nov 21: China successfully completed the first test launch in its ambitious manned space flight program today as an unmanned space vehicle returned to earth after orbiting the planet 14 times, reports AFP.

Named "Shenzhou" by President Jiang Zemin, the space craft landed at 3:41 a.m. today local time (1:41 am BST) after a 21-hour flight, the state news agency Xinhua reported.

The vehicle was launched with the new generation "Long March 2-F" rocket at 6:30 a.m. Saturday from the new Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre in northwest China's Gansu Province, China's third rocket launch centre.

Ten minutes after takeoff, the spaceship detached itself from the launching vehicle and entered a preset orbit, Xinhua said.

The space craft orbited the earth at an altitude of 300 km. It was the first of "several" un-

manned test flights to be carried out before China attempts to place the first Chinese national in space, the semi-official China News Service reported.

State television reported the early morning Saturday launch after the space capsule safely returned to earth.

The three-stage space craft, which was composed of a propulsion unit and an orbital and re-entry vehicle, was monitored by the Beijing-based command centre and four survey ships located around the globe.

In brief video footage, the re-entry capsule appeared to resemble the Apollo series of capsules launched by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) of the United States in manned flights to the moon in the late 1960s.

Three parachutes aided the earth landing of the vehicle and four retrorockets fired just be-

fore touch down in a computer simulated landing also shown by China Central Television.

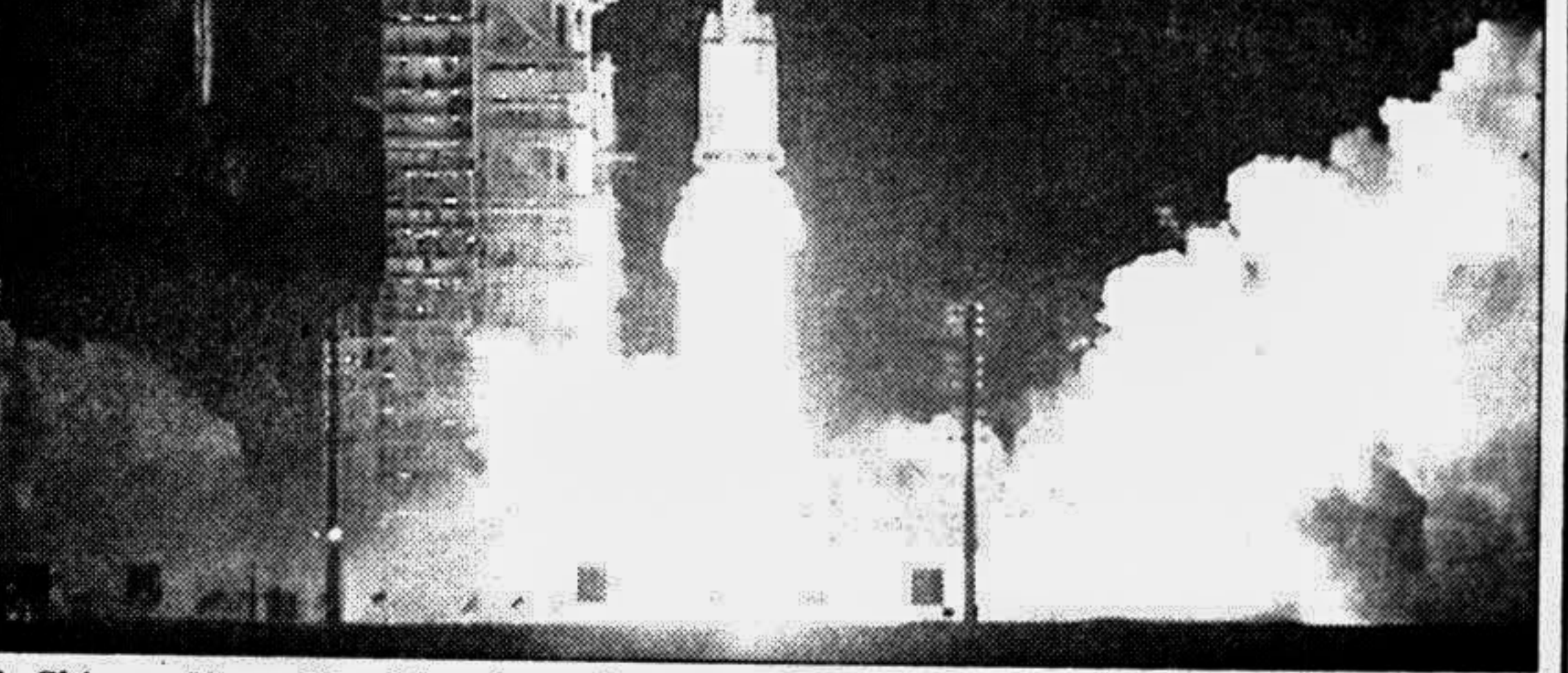
No actual footage of the returned spacecraft was seen on state television although the capsule was seen being prepared for launch.

China's manned space program is the third in the world, following manned space flights by the former Soviet Union and the US.

The short flight was "another milestone in China's astronomical history," Xinhua said.

"The successful launching and retrieval of the spaceship marks the country's new major breakthrough in manned space flight technology."

In a series of reports on the flight, Xinhua made it clear that the program was aimed at boosting national pride and championing the leadership of President Jiang Zemin and the Communist Party, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary of one-party rule this year.



A Chinese "Long March" rocket takes off from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre in northwest China's Gansu Province Saturday, carrying the country's first experimental spacecraft. The spacecraft, named "Shenzhou" by President Jiang Zemin, is part of China's manned space flight programme and has completed a short mission in space touching down in Inner Mongolia.

BRIEFLY

17 Afghan drug traffickers killed: Iranian security forces have shot dead 17 armed Afghan drug traffickers, arrested 11 others and released five Iranian hostages in two recent shootouts in northeastern Iran, newspapers reported yesterday, Reuters reports from Tehran.

3 Muslim rebels killed in Philippines: At least three Muslim rebels have been killed and one wounded in renewed fighting with government troops in the southern Philippines, the military said Sunday, AFP reports from Manila.

India launches 2 rockets: India has launched two sounding rockets from Sriharikota in east India's Andhra Pradesh to study the effects of Leonid Meteor shower through which the earth passed on November 18, the Indian Space Research Organisation announced in New Delhi on Saturday, Xinhua reports from New Delhi.

Iranian film 'The Cart' bags 3 awards: Iranian film "The Cart" directed by Gholam Reza Ramezani bagged the best feature film "golden Elephant", international critics' Jury and children's Jury awards of the 11th international children's film festival, which concluded in Hyderabad on Saturday, PTI reports from Hyderabad.

6 shot dead in Maluku: Indonesian troops shot dead at least six people and wounded 20 others while trying to quell a fresh outbreak of Muslim-Christian violence in the riot-torn eastern Indonesian province of Maluku, police and hospital officials said yesterday, AFP reports from Jakarta.

Teenage boy kills girl in US school: A 13-year-old girl died Saturday after being shot in the head one day earlier by a boy of the same age at her school in Deming, New Mexico, the police in the town said, AFP reports from Washington.

Bomb explosion in Lahore Pro-Sharif group claims responsibility

LAHORE, Nov 21: Militant supporters of deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif claimed responsibility Sunday for a bomb explosion that killed six people in Lahore, the capital of eastern Punjab province, reports AP.

On Saturday, a powerful bomb ripped through a congested market in the old quarter of Lahore, Sharif's hometown. Two children were among the dead. Another 18 people were wounded, said police.

"The explosion was to protest against the hijacking of Nawaz Sharif's government," said a statement by a group calling itself the Al-Nawaz group. The statement was faxed to Pakistani newspapers. "We will continue such activities till the

reinstatement of our leader's government."

Sharif was overthrown by the army in a bloodless coup on October 12 and accused of hijacking and treason, charges that carry the death penalty or life in prison.

The Al-Nawaz group, which said it was composed of Sharif "loyalists" said its struggle is to save the life of former prime minister.

Sharif's party, the Pakistan Muslim League, disowned the Al-Nawaz group saying that the party condemns terrorism.

"We have heard the name of Al-Nawaz for the first time," Mehrez Rafi, vice president of Sharif's party told The Associated Press.

Anwar's wife kicks off campaign for polls

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 21: The wife of Malaysia's jailed ex-deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim, fresh from a sombre meeting with her husband at his brothers' funeral, kicked off her election campaign today with a meet-the-people session in a busy suburban hypermarket, reports AFP.

Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, a mother of six and political novice who founded her National Justice Party (Keadilan) after her husband was jailed, shook hands with curious shoppers and introduced her parliamentary and state assembly candidates in the November 29 polls.

Wan Azizah had met her husband briefly Sunday morn-

ing at the funeral of Anwar's brother Mohamad Rani Ibrahim and visited him in prison later.

Authorities, in what she called an "11th hour" decision, allowed him to leave jail to attend the service. The burial had to be postponed till he arrived.

Wan Azizah, describing her husband as "sad and upset," said she did not know what prompted the change of heart.

The opposition Alternative Front alliance, whose candidate for premier is Anwar, had earlier attacked authorities over the case, saying they refused to let Anwar visit his brother before he died Saturday of lung cancer at age 62.

Clinton urges world leaders to stand up against inequalities

FLORENCE, Italy, Nov 21: US President Bill Clinton yesterday called for a "unifying vision" among world leaders faced with inequalities in spite of economic prosperity, at the opening of a summit on concepts of modern socialism and the "Third Way", reports AFP.

Clinton spoke to a select group of centre-left leaders including British Prime Minister Tony Blair after a bomb scare caused a security alert on the plane that carried him, his wife Hillary and their daughter Chelsea from Athens to Italy.

White House officials said the alert was sounded 10 minutes after taking off from Athens. Reporters travelling with Clinton on Air Force One said they were asked to identify their luggage and look through it for anything suspicious.

The plane arrived safely at Pisa airport in Italy and the Clintons went by helicopter to Florence for the meeting of leaders from Europe and the Americas.

"The great challenges of the future need a unifying vision," said Clinton at the end of a dinner on the eve of the leaders' principal meeting Sunday.

Clinton said there were problems but "no one has all the answers" how to take up challenges to economic and social policies.

He also stressed how difficult it was to implement political platforms on which political leaders had been elected, pointing to his own election in 1992 and the election two years later of an adverse Congress dominated by the Republicans.

Internet may force China to open political door

WASHINGTON, Nov 21: The power of the Internet could be the chink in the armor of Beijing's communist government's political control of its people, one top Chinese dissident said yesterday, reports AFP.

Beijing, as part of the US-China trade deal signed Monday paving the way for its entry into the World Trade Organisation, has stated it will open up its telecommunications and Internet markets to foreign investors.

The WTO deal, Richard Long said, "opens a slight window that can allow the free flow of ideas across traditional borders that are controlled by the government."

"Freedom of information through Internet newsgroups are a powerful tool for freedom of speech in China," said Long.

Long was a member of the student democracy movement brutalised at Tiananmen Square 10 years ago. He is now based in Washington and runs the Internet-based non-profit company Chinese VIP Reference.

Through VIP he sends news normally censored by Beijing to China through the Internet.

"I'm reaching about a million people daily in Chinese on individual e-mail accounts all across China," he told AFP.

China's government so far has made sure that newsgroups were completely cut off, developing a strategy of hiring thousands of people to search and censor the Internet, he said.

"The only way left now" to reach people inside China is through the e-mail system.

Clinton regrets US support to Greek junta during Cold War

ATHENS, Nov 21: A day after violent anti-American protests, US President Bill Clinton south to heal old wounds Saturday by acknowledging the United States failed its "obligation to support democracy" when it backed Greek's harsh military junta during the Cold War, reports AP.

The president's words came as a concession to long-standing Greek sensitivities and to tens of thousands of demonstrators who take to the streets each year on November 17 to denounce the United States and mark the anniversary of a bloody crackdown against student demonstrators in 1973 by the old military regime.

"When the junta took over in

1967 here," Clinton said, "the United States allowed its interests in prosecuting the Cold War to prevail over its interest. I should say its obligation, to support democracy, which was, after all, the cause for which was fought the Cold War. It is important that we acknowledge that."

His statement, in a speech to business and community leaders, brought a burst of applause. US Ambassador Nicholas Burns had apologised in 1998 for US support of the junta but Clinton's words carried far more weight.

Later Clinton flew to Florence, Italy, by way of Pisa, to attend a dinner with five European leaders and Brazil's presi-

Saddam appoints younger son to head anti-Turkish force

BEIRUT, Nov 21: Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has named his younger son and security chief, Qussay, to head army units tasked with facing up to Turkish incursions in the Kurdish-held north, an Arabic newspaper said today, reports AFP.

The London-based Ashraq Al-Awsat, quoting an Iraqi official in transit in Amman, said Saddam earlier this month set up a special force to counter Ankara's cross-border operations against Turkish Kurd separatists.

The size of the "Formidable Response" force was not disclosed.