

IRA appoints weapons go-between

BELFAST, Dec 3: The paramilitary IRA on Thursday appointed a go-between to discuss handing in its weapons, hours after Northern Ireland's political enemies held their first cross-party government meeting, reports AFP.

As the new government finally began running Northern Ireland's affairs again, after 25 years of direct rule from London, the Irish republic formally ended its territorial claim to the province.

The next, crucial, step in a bewildering chain of events came late Thursday with the Irish Republican Army statement, saying it would "honour our commitment" to appoint an interlocutor with the disarming body after devolution.

The statement was signed P O'Neill, the codename used to identify the IRA, but it did not name the go-between.

"We confirm that our representative has been appointed to enter into discussions with the international decommissioning body," said the statement.

The commission chaired by Canadian General John de Chastelain to oversee paramilitary disarmament by May 2000 was set up under the terms of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement -- a peace accord aimed at ending 30 years of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland.

It was welcomed by Britain's minister for Northern Ireland, Peter Mandelson, who earlier signed an agreement with Irish Foreign Minister David Andrews formally recognising the new institutions and cross-border bodies.

"It shows that on day-one the IRA have kept their word and I think that augurs well for the future course of decommissioning which now has to unfold," Mandelson said.

Jerusalem mayor orders halt to mosque

JERUSALEM, Dec 3: Jerusalem mayor Ehud Olmert ordered a halt Thursday to the building of a mosque close to the site of Temple Mount, police said, reports AFP.

The work in the "stables of King Solomon," was started about a year ago, but the government turned a blind eye to it. Olmert issued an order that the Waqf construction company stop its work, and ordered a prosecution against it for "violating the status quo by its provocations."

King Solomon's stables are just below the esplanade of the mosques, on which the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa mosque are situated.

The esplanade is Islam's third holiest site, but the mayor said the building of the mosque offended Jewish religious feeling because the esplanade was on the site of the mount where Solomon had built a temple.

Government legal aide Eliakim Rubinstein said Waqf had not applied for a construction permit and had not consulted the department of antiquities before starting work.

The police and Shin Beth, the internal security service, warned Interior Minister Shlomo Ben Ami that the mayor's decision might provoke public disorder, the police said.

Japan, N Korea sign deal to resume talks

TOKYO, Dec 3: Japan and North Korea signed an agreement in Pyongyang today to reopen talks on establishing diplomatic ties and clear their dark past, officials said, reports AFP.

The two ... agreed on the importance of resuming talks between Japan and North Korea, and will urge each other's governments to reopen talks as soon as possible," said a copy of the agreement obtained by AFP in Tokyo.

A Japanese all-party delegation of lawmakers led by former premier Tomiichi Murayama wound up a three-day trip on Friday to resume diplomatic talks, a milestone in historically tense relations.

ETA's ceasefire ends

MADRID, Dec 3: Basque separatist group ETA's ceasefire expired at midnight Thursday as thousands of Spaniards demonstrated in Madrid and other cities to protest the decision, reports AFP.

In the Puerta del Sol, a major square in Madrid, the crowds carried banners condemning the suspension from Friday of the 14-month-old truce.

"Basques yes, ETA no," and "We want peace," were among the chants.

Demonstrators observed a minute's silence in memory of the 769 people killed by ETA over the last 30 years in its armed campaign for a Basque homeland.

One speaker read out an anti-terrorism manifesto that had been signed by 17 political, social and aid organisations.

Other demonstrations took place in San Sebastian in the Basque country, in the southern city of Seville, in Valladolid in central Spain, and in Alicante in the east.

The protests were set to shift to the Basque country Friday -- the day ETA has said its armed units "will be reactivated".

In a highly symbolic move, Herri Batasuna, the main independent group and political arm of ETA, was expected to join other political parties and residents of the Basque country at noon in front of various administrative buildings for a protest called by the regional Basque government.

International

Vote on Aceh independence a must, warns rights activist

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia, Dec 3: A leading rights activist warned today that including the option of independence in any referendum on the future of the volatile province of Aceh was non-negotiable, reports AFP.

"The only thing that can cure the wounds of the people of Aceh ... will be an offer from the government for a referendum with two options -- independence or federation," Abdul Gani Nurdin, told AFP on the eve of a key anniversary in the province.

The warning came as a parliamentary committee on Aceh was reported to have come down in favour of a ballot while failing to resolve whether it should include the independence option.

Nurdin, who heads the Forum for Human Rights

Concerns in Aceh, a rights watchdog in the western province, said the wounds inflicted by military atrocities in the past decade were too deep to be easily cured.

An overwhelming 90 per cent of the people of Aceh ... will be an offer from the government for a referendum with two options -- independence or federation," Abdul Gani Nurdin, told AFP on the eve of a key anniversary in the province.

The warning came as a parliamentary committee on Aceh was reported to have come down in favour of a ballot while failing to resolve whether it should include the independence option.

Nurdin, who heads the Forum for Human Rights

(GAM) who have been fighting to set up an Islamic state since the mid-1970s, insist that one vote should include the option of independence.

They have given the government until Saturday -- GAM's 23rd anniversary -- to decide whether to hold a ballot.

Indonesian leaders have so far ruled out a referendum on self-rule in Aceh but have promised the province wider autonomy.

The Jakarta Post reported Friday that a special committee of parliament had recommended holding a referendum but sidestepped the question of whether to include the option of independence.

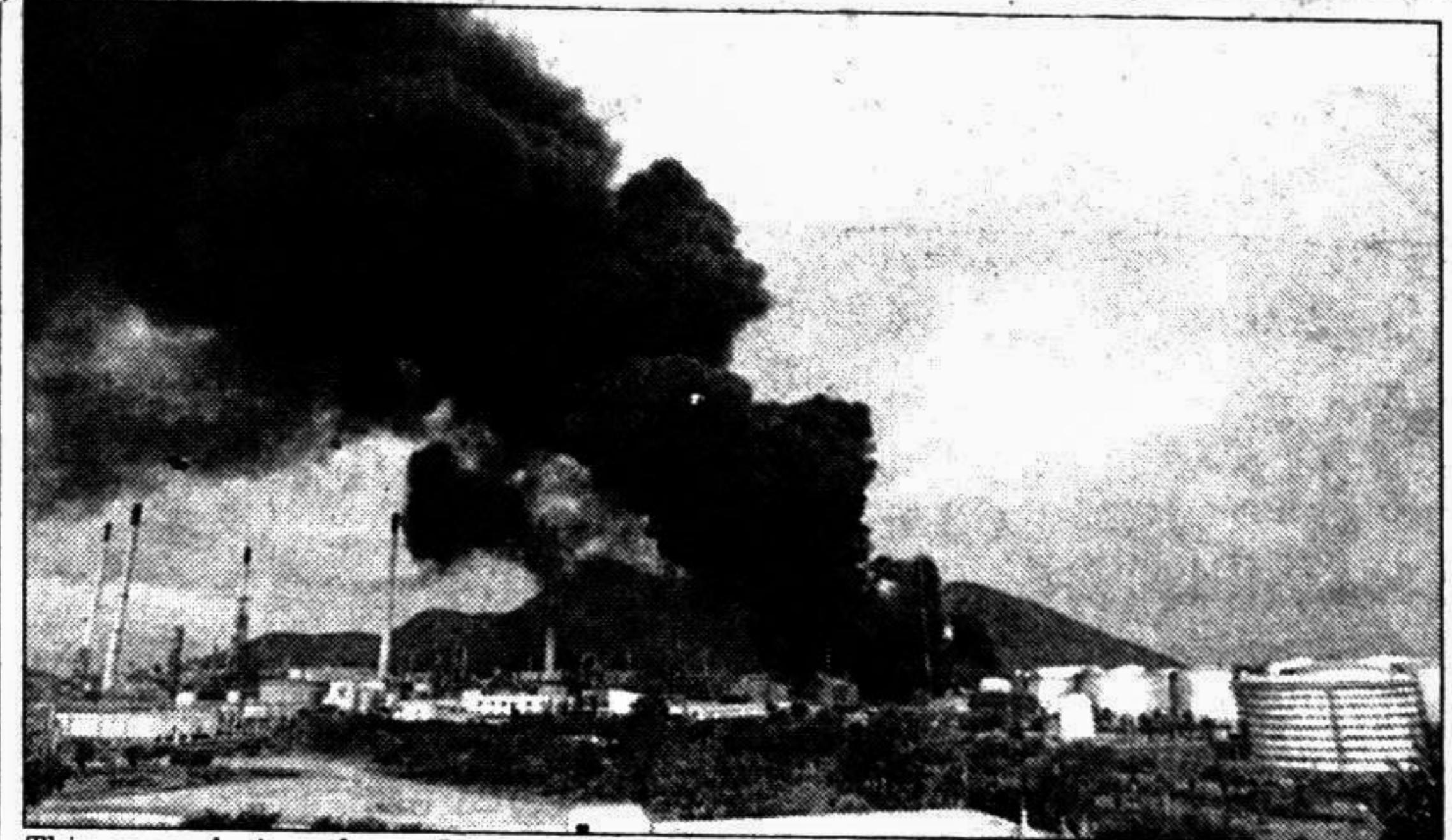
Proposals for a referendum are among 10 recommendations which will be made by the 50-member committee, set up

last month to seek a way to resolve the tensions in Aceh, to parliamentary leaders on Monday, the daily said.

Other recommendations include a special autonomy status, a non-military court to try those accused of human rights abuses, a rejection of martial law and talks between the government and the Acehnese, committee chairman Ali Yahya told the Post.

But House Speaker Akbar Tanjung ruled out the independence option saying that the options of federalism and broad autonomy within the republic of Indonesia were "the maximal options for referendum."

He said Thursday that if Aceh wanted to break away, it would change the form and sovereignty of the nation.



This general view shows flames and smoke caused by an explosion in the early hours on Friday at a Thai oil refinery in Si Racha, Chonburi Province. At least 3 people were killed and some 15 others injured in the blast that created sheets of flames 100 meters into the air.

— AFP photo

HK upholds China's right to make rulings

HONG KONG, Dec 3: Protestors clashed with police here today after a landmark court ruling that Beijing could have the final say on decisions based on the former British colony's mini-constitution, reported AFP.

The Court of Final Appeal in a ruling upheld a removal order by the immigration director in the key case in which 17 mainland Chinese, seeking the right to stay in Hong Kong, sought judicial review of their impending forced return to China.

Four of the five judges said the removal orders should stay.

However, they were unanimous in their decision to uphold the reinterpretation made by the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress, or parliament, on the right of abode case, saying it was "valid and binding" on courts in Hong Kong.

The 94-page ruling was re-

spective to July 1997, when Hong Kong reverted to Chinese rule.

The ruling could lead to 6,000 mainlanders being deported from the territory.

A melee broke out as some protesters clashed with police, armed with pepper spray, resulting in protesters hurling stones, banners, fruit, flower pots, plastic bottles and garbage at police.

Seven people were injured, including four police, two protesters and a reporter, a government spokesman said, adding two police officers and the two female protesters were treated in hospitals.

The situation calmed as some 1,000 protesters resumed

their sit-in demonstration, only to be dispersed by later rains, while 200 anti-riot police were called in for reinforcement.

Police called on the petitioners to observe the law and behave in a proper manner in public places.

The government welcomed the ruling, with security secretary Regina Ip saying it had confirmed the government had acted "entirely constitutionally and legally" in seeking reinterpretation from Beijing.

Hong Kong's Bar Association said the ruling was of "fundamental constitutional importance," and called for early clarification of the respective powers of the NPC Standing Committee and the Court of Final Appeal.

Many of the mainlanders vowed they would remain in Hong Kong even if they had to go into hiding.

It said among the dead was the chairman of a Canadian company which had leased the Bell 212 helicopter to the MAT.

Musharrafuddin, 82, was suffering from heart ailment and was under treatment at the armed forces institute of cardiology, according to the state-owned Pakistan television.

A former Foreign Service Officer, Syed Musharrafuddin had migrated from New Delhi to Pakistan after partition in 1947 and joined Pakistan's foreign services. He had served on various foreign assignments in Turkey and the Middle East before his retirement in 1975.

Gen Musharraf, who had gone to the NWFP's town of Nowshera on an official visit, has been informed about his father's demise. He is to attend the funeral in Rawalpindi today.

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