

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 disarmament 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 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 resume 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.

Japanese all-party delegation of lawmakers led by former premier Tomichi 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.

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 possibility of independence.

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 wanted a referendum on self-determination, he said. The other 10 per cent were mostly Acehnese working within the current bureaucracy, he added.

Nurdin said the government's intention to hold talks with Aceh leaders would be pointless unless the independence option was on the table.

"Any dialogue should be to strengthen the independence option ... if it is this, then we will accept to hold a dialogue anytime," Nurdin said.

Aceh leaders, including those of the Free Aceh Movement

(GAM) who have been fighting to set up an Islamic state since the mid-1970s, insist that any 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 a 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: Protesters 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, reports 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 protesting mainlanders tried to break into the government's central offices seeking a dialogue with Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa.

But their attempts were thwarted by police, armed with pepper spray, resulting in protesters hailing 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

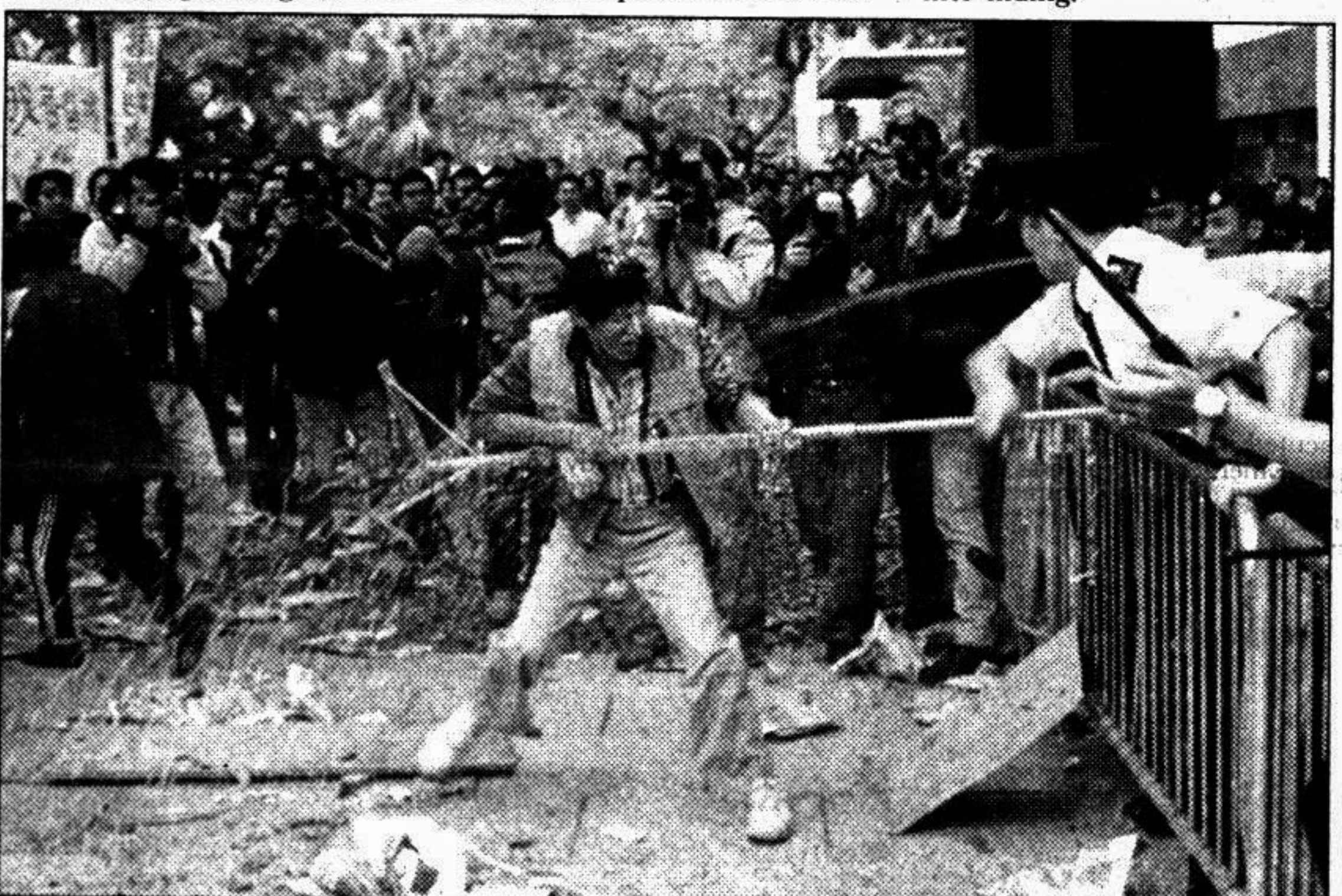
their sit-in demonstration, only to be dispersed by later rains, while 200 anti-riot police were called in for reinforcements.

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.



A man clashes with police outside the Central Government Offices in Hong Kong on Friday during a demonstration following the court's ruling on the Right of Abode issue for mainland Chinese staying in the territory. — AFP photo

Chopper crash kills 10 in the Maldives

COLOMBO, Dec 3: Eight foreigners and two crewmen were killed when a helicopter crashed into the Indian Ocean shortly after take off from a tourist resort in the Maldives, Friday, the Haveru News Service said, reports AFP.

The Bell-212 aircraft had taken off from the Hilton Resort early Friday and was headed for the international airport located at the nearby island of Hulhule when it crashed, the HNS said in a report monitored here.

Five Canadian, two Belgians and one Australian were among the dead, the HNS said adding that the two Maldivians killed in the crash had been identified as a member of Maldivian Air Taxi cabin crew and a Hilton employee.

Maldivian Air Taxi (MAT) which operates 14 sea planes to resort islands in the tiny Indian Ocean atoll nation had been given a licence to operate a helicopter service only the day before, the HNS said.

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

Father of Pak army ruler dead

ISLAMABAD, Dec 3: Syed Musharrafuddin, father of Pakistan's Military ruler General Pervez Musharraf, died yesterday of heart failure in a hospital in Rawalpindi, reports PTI.

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 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.

Explosion in Thai oil refinery: 3 killed

SI RACHA, Thailand, Dec 3: Three people were killed and 15 injured when a string of explosions ripped through a Thai refinery, sparking a fire which guzzled millions of litres of oil, police said today, reports AFP.

Sheets of flame soared 100 metres into the air as hundreds of firemen battled to stop the fire engulfing the entire depot run by Thai Oil Co, some 70 km southeast of Bangkok.

Thick black smoke cloaked the refinery, only seven kilometres from the nearest large population centre at Si Racha, a coastal town.

The three dead men were all Thais. Two of them were security men on patrol when the explosion rocked the refinery, a series of interconnected oil tanks, just before midnight.

The injured were taken to a nearby hospital, where two were critically ill with severe burns, the Thai health ministry

said.

The blast sent jitters through the Thai stock market, pushing Petroleum Authority of Thailand Exploration and Production (PTTEP) shares sharply lower on concerns about the impact on the company and oil supplies.

The Petroleum Authority of Thailand, PTTEP's parent company, is a major shareholder in Thai Oil.

Thailand Oil officials earlier said fuel supplies would not be affected by the blast at the refinery which was inspected by Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai.

More than 40 fire crews and soldiers from as far away as Bangkok fought a losing battle in the early hours to stop the fire spreading from the tank where it started to nine others nearby.

They succeeded in checking the spread of the blaze Friday morning only after eight hours.

Musharraf forms 19-member advisory group

ISLAMABAD, Dec 3: Pakistan's Military Ruler General Pervez Musharraf has formed a 19-member advisory group on foreign policy and security, comprising former military officers, diplomats and eminent journalists for consultation and advice, reports PTI.

The group, comprising eminent citizens having thorough knowledge and understanding of international affairs, would meet Foreign Minister Abdus Sattar from time to time for consultations and advice, an official release said yesterday.

The Foreign Minister would also invite Former Foreign Ministers Agha Shahi and Sahibzada Yaqub Khan and prominent lawyer SM Zafar, the release said.

The members of the group are: Former Ambassadors Mansoor Ahmed, Maqbool A. Bhatti, Tanvir Ahmed Khan, Afzal Mahmood and Mehdi Masood.

Others are: Lt Gen (Retd) Nishat Ahmed, Gen (Retd) KM

Arif, Dr. Munir Ahmed Baluch, Prof. Masuma Hassan, Air Marshal (retd) Zulfiqar Ali Khan, Dr. Azmat Hayat Khan, Dr. Shirin Mazari, Prof. D R Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza, Dr. Rasul Bakhsh Raees, Ahmed Rashid, Dr. Mehtab Ali Shah, Prof. Naveed A Tahir, Rahimullah Yusufzai and Nasim Zehra.

Reuters adds: Muhammad Yaqub, a former central bank governor, has resigned from the top council set up by Pakistan's new military rulers, sources close to Yaqub said yesterday.

They said Yaqub quit the National Security Council (NSC), the first person to do so since it was set up after an October 12 coup brought the army to power and deposed former prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

Pakistani newspapers said the former head of the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) had resigned because of criticism from other members of the military-led administration.

15 feared buried as blast levels building in Austria

WILHELMSBURG, Austria, Dec 3: A gas explosion demolished an Austrian apartment building on Thursday evening, killing at least one person and burying in unknown number who have returned to their flats after an earlier alarm, reports Reuters.

One woman was rescued alive from the rubble after having a leg amputated so she could be pulled free. She was said to be in critical condition in hospital.

Austrian television said 10 to 15 people were believed to be trapped under the rubble while other reports said the figure could be higher.

The blast occurred just before 7 pm on Thursday, when many families were likely to be having dinner, in a three-storey building containing 12 apartments in Wilhelmsburg, a town of 7,000 people 60 km southwest of Vienna.

Two hundred firefighters and around 80 soldiers, many with experience of relief operations, in this year's earthquake in Turkey, prepared to work through the night, initially

shifting rubble by hand so as not to endanger survivors.

"We are being very careful so that if there are survivors we do not put them in any additional danger," said Lower Austria fire service chief Wilfried Weissgerber.

Earth-moving equipment and diggers were in action on parts of the site where the building had stood.

The provincial governor of Lower Austria, Erwin Proell, said residents had earlier been evacuated because of a gas leak.

"Apparently a private company mounted a lightning protection system at the house during the afternoon. A gas pipe was having been cut while this was going on," he told Austrian television. "The house was evacuated but later declared safe."

Proell, shaken by the scene of devastation, said it would be "close to a miracle" if anyone was rescued alive.

But army Colonel Friedrich Kuehnle, a veteran of earthquake relief in Turkey, said there was still hope.

BRIEFLY

Prueher new US envoy to China: Retired admiral Joseph Prueher was sworn in as the new US ambassador to China on Thursday, a State Department official said, AFP reports from Washington.

"He was sworn in this afternoon by Justice Anthony Kennedy of the Supreme Court," the official said. Present at the ceremony were Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and a number of other dignitaries, he added.

Hubble repair mission delayed: NASA's trip to fix the Hubble Space Telescope has been delayed another two days so workers can complete final wiring checks aboard space shuttle Discovery. AP reports from Cape Canaveral.

The new launch is scheduled for December 11. This date should stand as long as no new problems pop up, NASA spokesman Bruce Buckingham said Thursday. Besides damaged wiring, workers have had to contend in recent weeks with a leaky hydraulic system and an engine with a broken drill bit embedded in it.

11 killed in Bolivian crash: Nine Israeli tourists and two Dutch nationals were killed when their vehicle went off a winding road known as the "path of death" in the Los Yungas semitropical region of Bolivia, police said, AFP reports from La Paz.

Rescuers recovered five bodies but still sought to pull the remaining six from a ravine some 200 metres deep, said local official Rolando Chipana. The accident took place early Thursday.

No compromise on pullout plan: Barak

JERUSALEM, Dec 3: Prime Minister Ehud Barak said Thursday he would not give in to Palestinian demands to alter a planned Israeli troop withdrawal from 5 per cent of the West Bank, reports AP.

The pullback was due by November 15, but has been held up by the dispute, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met Thursday afternoon to try to break the impasse, but failed to resolve their differences.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat denied that the Palestinians want to leave the matter for US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who arrives next week. Erekat said Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat gave him clear instructions to settle the matter before Albright arrives.

The US State Department has been careful not to raise expectations about the trip. Israeli negotiator Oded Eran said Thursday it was up to the Palestinians to solve the problem. "We made a decision and

we prepared the map and now the Palestinians side has to decide what to do," Eran said.

The Palestinians initially insisted that Israel change the areas earmarked for withdrawal to include more heavily populated areas, including West Bank suburbs of Jerusalem. Israel says it has the sole right to decide which areas to hand over.

"From our point of view, the discussion on the 5 per cent is done," Barak told Israel Radio. "We are not conducting extended negotiations on this."

The Palestinians later signalled that they were willing to accept the Israeli withdrawal map in exchange for promises that they would have a say over the shape of upcoming partial troop pullbacks. Israel has turned down the proposal.

The negotiating teams are to resume their talks Monday, before Albright's arrival here. "We hope to reach agreement as fast as possible," said Arafat, "we don't want any crisis."

Lander to relay back sounds of Mars

PASADENA, California, Dec 3: After an 11-month voyage across the Solar System, NASA's Mars Polar Lander headed for its target with scientists planning a smooth touchdown for the third American space mission aimed at revealing the secrets of the red planet, reports Reuters.

The lander, a gawky, 1270 pound craft equipped with a robotic arm, radio antennae, imaging devices and solar panels for power, was scheduled to dive through "the thin Martian atmosphere just after noon PST (0200 BST) Friday before a parachute and retro-rockets break the fall and set it gently down on a barren steppe near Mars' south polar ice cap.

"We're doing something that is truly historic, and it's a lot like the Antarctic expeditions (on Earth). This is not business as usual," said Bruce Murray of the California Institute of Technology, part of the scientific team assembled at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena as mission control for the Mars lander project.

The main mission of the lander and the two basketball-sized probes that will separately punch their way into the Martian surface is to look for signs of water ice — unveiling, scientists hope, clues about whether Earth's nearest neighbour might ever have had a climate capable of supporting life.

If found, large underground ice deposits could also prove invaluable for future human missions to Mars, providing both water to drink and the raw material for fuel, scientists say.

That could make the process of eventually settling on Mars that much easier," said David Paige of the University of California-Los Angeles, one of the chief scientific investigators on the project.

But the lander mission also has other goals, including delivering new up-close images of the Martian surface and, for the first time, relaying back to Earth the actual sounds of Mars via a small microphone.

But before the scientific payoff, flight engineers must first bring the lander safely to the ground. In the final hours before it hits the Martian atmosphere, the spacecraft will receive its final course instructions for landing, which include jettisoning both its protective "cruise ring" and the two probes and positioning itself so that its heatshield bears the brunt of the ferocious 3,000 degree Fahrenheit friction generated as it hurtles through the Martian atmosphere.

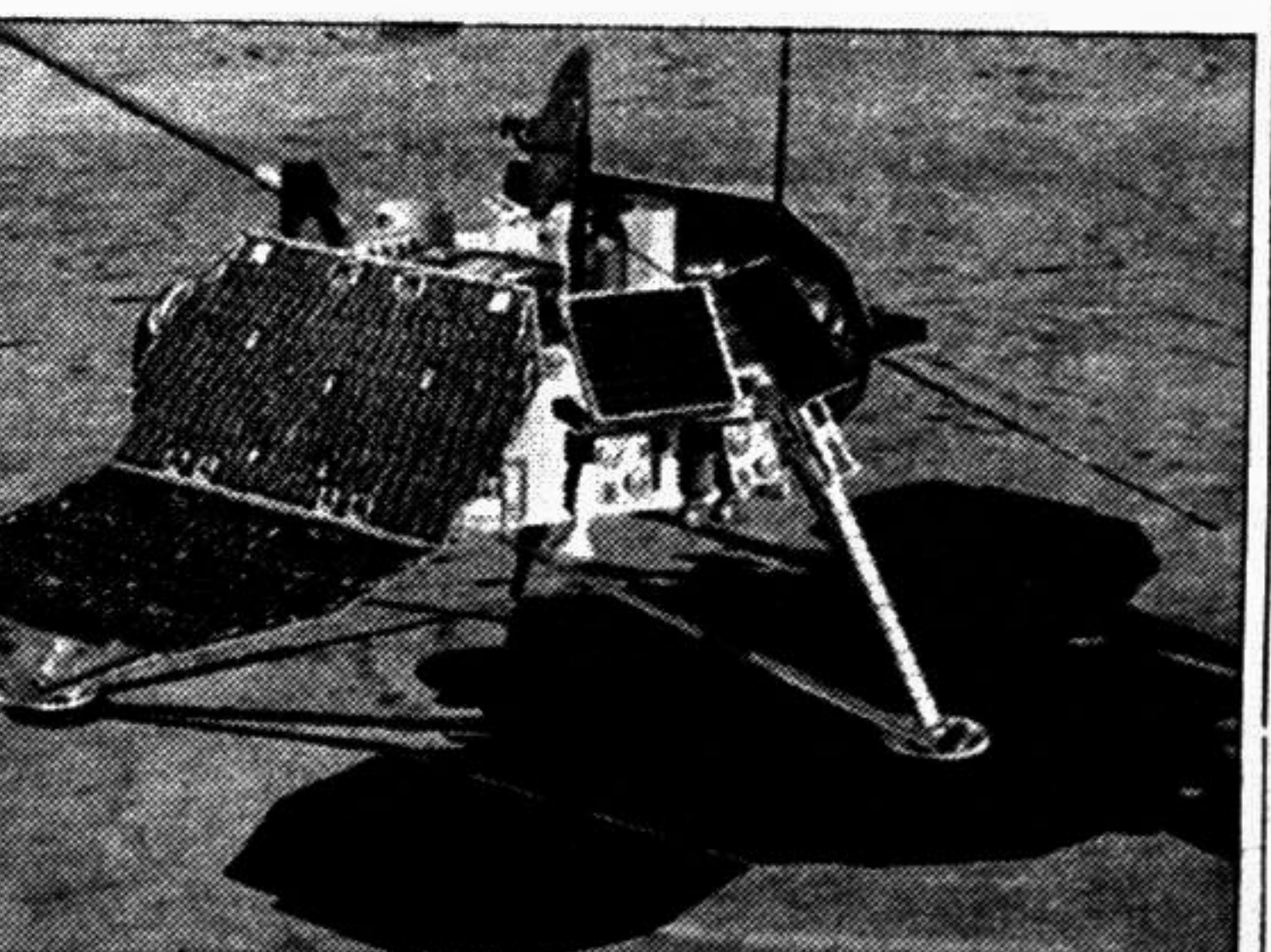
Once on the ground, the craft will pause to let the dust settle and then slowly extend the solar panels which will give it power. It will also extend its

primary antenna to sweep the sky, seeking contact with Earth.

Scientists say that if all goes well, the first signals from Mars could come through by about 12:40 pm Pacific time (0240 BST) and last for about 45 minutes. After that, the spacecraft will shut down for about five hours while it recharges.

Later Friday, it is scheduled to begin a series of transmissions to Earth and to receive its first instructions. But scientists cautioned that it may take some time — or even days — for the lander to establish a viable communication link and that silence from Mars after the initial landing should not be interpreted as failure.

"There is still a very real possibility that we may not hear anything during that whole period of time," said Richard Cook, project manager for operations.



Recent picture released by the NASA shows the Mars Polar Lander (MPL) spacecraft shown in an artist impression on the Martian surface, in the South Polar Region. Three months after the Mars Climate Orbiter failed to go into orbit around the Red Planet, observers from earth are gearing up for the landing of the US probe MPL scheduled for yesterday. — AFP photo

Kulsoom Nawaz announces entry into politics

ISLAMABAD, Dec 3: Kulsoom Nawaz, wife of deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, has said she entered politics only to save her husband and will quit the moment he is released from jail, reports PTI.

I am out of my house of fight a battle for my innocent husband who is in jail for no crime. I have never had any ambition in politics. But now if I am in politics, I am here to save my husband, Kulsoom told reporters outside the anti-terrorism court in Karachi where her husband was produced in the treason and plane hijacking case.

I will say goodbye (to politics) the moment my husband comes out (of jail) and I pray all day long for that moment, she said.

The 49-year-old Kulsoom asserted that she had no intention of taking over the control of Pakistan Muslim League (PML) as the party was in safe hands.

Party sources, however, said some PML leaders were trying to install Kulsoom Nawaz as the party chief so that the Sharif family's control over it could continue.

This has made some senior PML voice opposition to the move.

PML leader Mian Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri has openly opposed Kulsoom taking control of the party which her detained husband continued to head officially.

Russian troops seize key Chechen town

MOSCOW, Dec 3: A Russian commander said today Moscow's forces had seized the key Chechen town of Argun and were beginning operations to clear it of Muslim rebels, reports Reuters.

The town guards the eastern approaches to the Chechen capital Grozny and is the third major settlement to be seized by Russian forces since they began their offensive three months ago to restore Moscow's control over the territory.

But rights organisations and Western nations have kept up a steady stream of criticism of the offensive, which has caused many civilian casualties and forced around 200,000 refugees to flee to neighbouring regions.

Operations are beginning from dawn to clear this town, Interfax news agency quoted the first deputy head of the general staff, Valery Manilov, as saying of Argun.

He said the Muslim rebels whom Moscow has vowed to wipe out had lost 100 men in the fight for Argun while Russian losses were 34. The figures could not be independently confirmed.

The other key towns of Gudermes and Achkhoy-Martan were taken without a shot after local elders persuaded the rebels to leave and allow Russia's forces to walk in.

Grozny remained under siege and Interfax quoted the military at Russia's base of Mozdok, just outside Chechnya, as saying the capital, Argun and the town of Urus-Martan, heavily defended by the rebels, were hit by air raids in the last 24 hours.

Grozny has been bombed and shelled for several weeks by Russian forces but Moscow's top commanders have several times denied they would try and take the city by storm.

China appoints new ministers

BEIJING, Dec 3: China's highest governing body, the State Council, has made new appointments to several key positions, state media reported today, says AFP.

According to the official Xinhua news agency, Wang Guangya was appointed vice-minister of foreign affairs to replace Wang Yiguan.

Wang Yang and Zhang Guobao were appointed vice-ministers of the State Development Planning Commission.

Mou Benli was appointed vice-minister of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission to replace Cheng Hong and Wen Jing.

Huang Yong'an was appointed China's representative to the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific of the United Nations to replace Lu Yongshou.

The State Council regularly reshuffles positions, often due to retirements.