

Vajpayee seeks to end insurgency in far east

Special rehabilitation package for militants

GUWAHATI, India, Jan 20 : Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was due to arrive in the country's far east later today for top-level discussions on ending five decades of separatist insurgency in the region, reports AFP.

The highlight of Vajpayee's three-day visit will be a meeting with the chief ministers and governors of all seven north-eastern states in Shillong, capital of Meghalaya state.

Senior police, paramilitary and army officials will also attend the meeting, said a spokesman for the state government in Assam -- largest of the seven states.

Topping the prime minister's agenda will be to work out measures to combat militancy and ways to fight rampant corruption and misuse of funds

granted from New Delhi by north-eastern state governments," the spokesman said. The seven states together receive an annual grant of 120 billion rupees (2.7 billion dollars) from the central government.

Vajpayee is expected to announce a special rehabilitation package for surrendered militants besides working on bringing the 30-odd separatist groups in the region to the negotiating table.

"So far there has been no definite rehabilitation package for surrendered militants and some of the rebels who had laid down arms have once again gone back to the jungles, finding no incentives after surrendering," the spokesman said.

Insurgency in India's tea- and oil-rich far east has claimed more than 25,000 lives over five decades.

Vajpayee will be accompanied by Home Minister L.K. Advani, Defence Minister George Fernandes, Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha and army chief General V.P. Malik, officials said.

The government spokesman said officials would take up the issue of cross-border terrorism and the Bangladeshi nationals illegally entering India.

"Due to the porous international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar, northeastern militants take shelter in neighbouring countries, thereby complicating the task of the security forces in combating militancy," he said.



Pakistan's Secretary for Foreign Affairs Shamshad Ahmed (R) greets the visiting United States Assistant Secretary of State Karl Inderfurth in the foreign office in Islamabad yesterday. Inderfurth arrived for a two-day official visit to hold high-level meetings with the country's three-month-old military regime. The visit of Inderfurth follows visits by several US senators in the past week, who each met with Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf and pushed for a return to democracy. — AFP photo

Senior US official in Pakistan for talks

ISLAMABAD, Jan 20 : US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Karl Inderfurth arrived in Pakistan today for high-level meetings with the country's three-month-old military regime, reports AFP.

Inderfurth is the most senior US official to visit Pakistan since General Pervez Musharraf seized power in a coup in October.

His arrival follows visits by several US senators in the past week, who each met with Musharraf and pushed for a return to democracy.

Inderfurth is travelling with a senior National Security Council official, Donald Camp, and Michael Sheehan, the state department counter-terrorism coordinator.

Although most of his meetings in the two-day trip are private, Inderfurth is expected to meet Musharraf, said US embassy spokesman Mark Wentworth.

"He hopes to have high-level meetings including with Musharraf," Wentworth said. Reports here said he would also meet with Foreign Minister

Abdus Sattar and Finance Minister Shaoukat Aziz.

Security issues and questions over Kashmir and Afghanistan, including the Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden, would also be on the agenda, The News daily said.

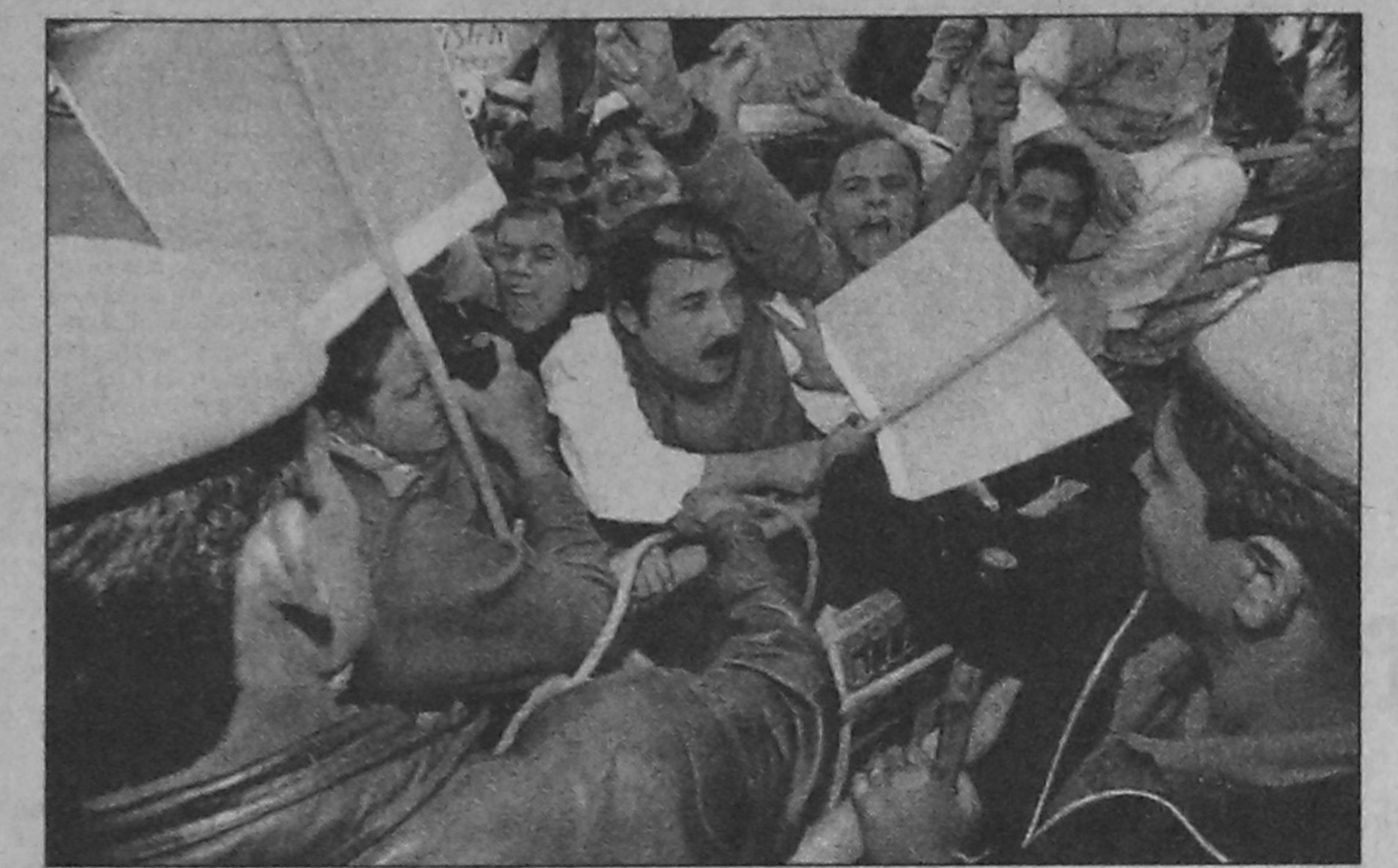
Bin Laden, who lives in Afghanistan, has been indicted by a US court for the bombings of two US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania last year in which 224 people died.

When the visiting US senators met Musharraf they also pressed Islamabad to curb fundamentalist Islamic groups and to sign the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban treaty.

The recent American visits come ahead of an expected trip by US President Bill Clinton to South Asia.

Clinton is expected to visit India in March, although no dates have been announced, but it is not clear if he will come to Pakistan during his trip.

India said Wednesday it has agreed to form a joint working group with the United States to counter terrorism, with the first meeting due next month.



Members of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) minorities group shout anti-Pakistan slogans as they try to make their way through a police barricade during a demonstration near the Pakistani High Commission yesterday to accuse Pakistan of instigating terrorist violence in India. Indian authorities have tightened security in the capital ahead of the country's 50th Republic Day celebrations. — AFP photo

Lanka peace bid gets unexpected boost

Opposition offers to back power-sharing deal

COLOMBO, Jan 20 : Sri Lanka's minority Tamils today welcomed unexpected opposition backing for a contentious plan aimed at ending decades of ethnic strife and urged the government to seize the opportunity, reports AFP.

Tamil political parties said the opposition offer to give legislative support to the radical power-sharing deal unveiled by President Chandrika Kumaratunga had given an unexpected boost to the dragging peace process.

The Tamil People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) said they welcomed Wednesday's announcement by the main opposition United National Party (UNP) to help adopt a new constitution incorporating the peace plan.

"We have always maintained that there should be a consensus between the UNP and President Kumaratunga's People Alliance for there to be lasting peace in this country," said PLOTE leader Dharmalingam Sidhathan said.

The opposition UNP and the ruling PA are the two main majority Sinhalese parties, but they have so far failed to arrive at a consensus on how to deal with the separatist conflict which has killed more than 55,000 people since 1972.

The government should seize this opportunity to "take the peace process forward," said Sidhathan whose PLOTE has three MPs in the 225-member assembly.

People Alliance which has a slender one-seat majority and has been unable to push the reform package through since August 1995.

Kumaratunga's power-sharing plan which seeks to turn the country into a de facto federal state in all but name was held up because the opposition UNP blocked the mandatory two-thirds majority needed to implement the plan.

But opposition and UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe said Wednesday he did not believe Kumaratunga's "expertise" will bring peace to the island, but was willing to give her a chance.

Wickremesinghe said his party's view of the political plan unveiled by Kumaratunga remained unchanged.

Clinton hopes to replace impeachment shame with policy fame in final year

WASHINGTON, Jan 20 : US President Bill Clinton has but a year left in office and he's already dreading the day he must turn over the White House keys, give up his beloved Air Force One jet and fade into the wings, reports AFP.

"When I go in a room in the White House now, I look around more carefully to make sure that I've actually noticed something that I may not have seen," a wistful Clinton said Wednesday when asked by reporters about his swan song.

He added that he was painfully aware that January 20 marks the first day of his last year in office.

"I just want to milk every last moment of every day. The only thing I wish (is) I didn't have to sleep at all for a year," Clinton said.

In fact, the president already burns the midnight oil most nights and is known for keeping White House guests up until

the wee hours to talk policy, philosophy and golf.

His big plans, which include historic trips to Asia, peace deals in the hottest global spots and sustaining the economic boom, may also erase some of stain that his 1998 impeachment will leave on his legacy in history books.

On the domestic front, Clinton has been trotting out initiatives on health care, gun control and preserving the federal pension fund that he hopes to get through the opposition-led Congress this year.

The sweep and depth of the proposals that I will make to the Congress and the country in the State of the Union are arguably the most far-reaching since the very first one I made," he said Wednesday as he prepared to deliver his final annual address to the legislature on January 27.

Clinton is equally intent on fixing global problems.

Iraq steps up attacks on Ekeus, Annan

BAGHDAD, Jan 20 : The Iraqi government launched today one of its most vitriolic attacks to date on UN chief Kofi Annan, dismissing him and his candidate to head a new UN arms body as stooges of the US administration, reports AFP.

Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz said that the nomination of Swedish diplomat Rolf Ekeus to head UNMOVIC was "proof that Secretary General Kofi Annan has submitted himself to the American will."

Reveling in the apparent support Baghdad's rejection has received from three permanent Security Council members, Aziz told the ruling Baath Party's mouthpiece Aih-Thawra that Ekeus remained an unacceptable choice.

"That is why many states have opposed his candidacy because they realised it translated

into bringing Iraq back to square one, and that is unacceptable both for Iraq and honest countries who want a solution," he said.

Among permanent Security Council members, France and Russia have explicitly slammed the nomination. China's reaction was more muted, with Beijing calling for a candidate with the "necessary political judgement."

UNMOVIC was created under a December UN resolution that offered Baghdad a temporary lifting of decade-old sanctions if it cooperates with arms inspections.

Iraqi Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan, in comments reported by Baghdad's press Thursday, branded the resolution "the worst of all unjust resolutions adopted by the United Nations against Iraq."

'Pakistan wants to normalise ties with India'

CALCUTTA, Jan 20 : Pakistan wanted to normalise ties with India and the Indian authorities should take the opportunity to start talks in improving bilateral relations, delegates attending the South Asia Peace meet said here yesterday, reports PTI.

Gen Musharraf is a man of peace. He wants to normalise relations with India. This is the time when India can start negotiations for improvement of relations," member of Pakistan's Human Rights Commission Brig R Rao Hamid, said at the inaugural function of the South Asia peace meet and All-India Constructive workers' conference here.

Album of Vajpayee nominated in 4 categories

CALCUTTA, Jan 20 : 'Nayi Disha', a non-film music album penned by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, has been nominated in four categories of the coveted screen-videocoin awards this year, an RFG group release said here yesterday, reports PTI.

The album, based on Vajpayee's collection of poems, was nominated for the best non-film album (Nayi Disha), best lyricist (Atal Behari Vajpayee), best singer (Jagjit Singh) and best composer (Lataji Premji and Jagjit Singh).

Released by HMV in August 1999, 'Nayi Disha' became the third highest selling album for the year in the non-film category, the release said.

This is Vajpayee's second album produced by the Gramophone Company of India.

Council of Europe steps back from sanctions on Russia

MOSCOW, Jan 20 : The Council of Europe renewed sharp criticism of Russia's war in Chechnya today but stepped back from sanctions, instead urging acting President Vladimir Putin to accept international observers in the zone, reports AFP.

Lord Russell-Johnston, speaking on his return to Moscow from a tour of Chechnya, said he saw no reason to penalise Russia despite serious breaches of its commitments to resolve internal and international disputes peacefully.

He renewed his appeals for an immediate ceasefire and the opening of political negotiations with Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, balancing it with a call on the leader of the breakaway republic to free hostages.

After five days of talks with senior Russian and regional officials the Council of Europe delegation stressed the need for constructive engagement with Moscow, but conceded there was strong pressure from some quarters for action against Russia.

"We are not proposing to recommend any such action as far as I know," said Russell-Johnston, referring to the possibility of suspending Russia's membership of the 41-nation parliamentary assembly.

However, "it is something that continues to be an option and will continue to be an option so long as the conflict goes on," he told a press conference.

Russia was in "complete breach" of undertakings made on joining the Council of Europe in February 1996, he said.

adding "this is a serious question for the human rights and democracy body."

During talks in the Kremlin the delegation had urged Putin to accept some form of foreign presence in the neighbouring Russian republic of Ingushetia and northern Chechnya.

The move would help meet Russian complaints that disinformation was being spread about Russia's conduct of the conflict, and allow easier verification of claims by the respective sides.

"Putin said that he would be open to consider, and to possibly implement, any suggestion that the Council of Europe may make" on the issue of monitors, Russell-Johnston said.

"I think that that represents a good opportunity for us to make some suggestions for

change for the better," he said.

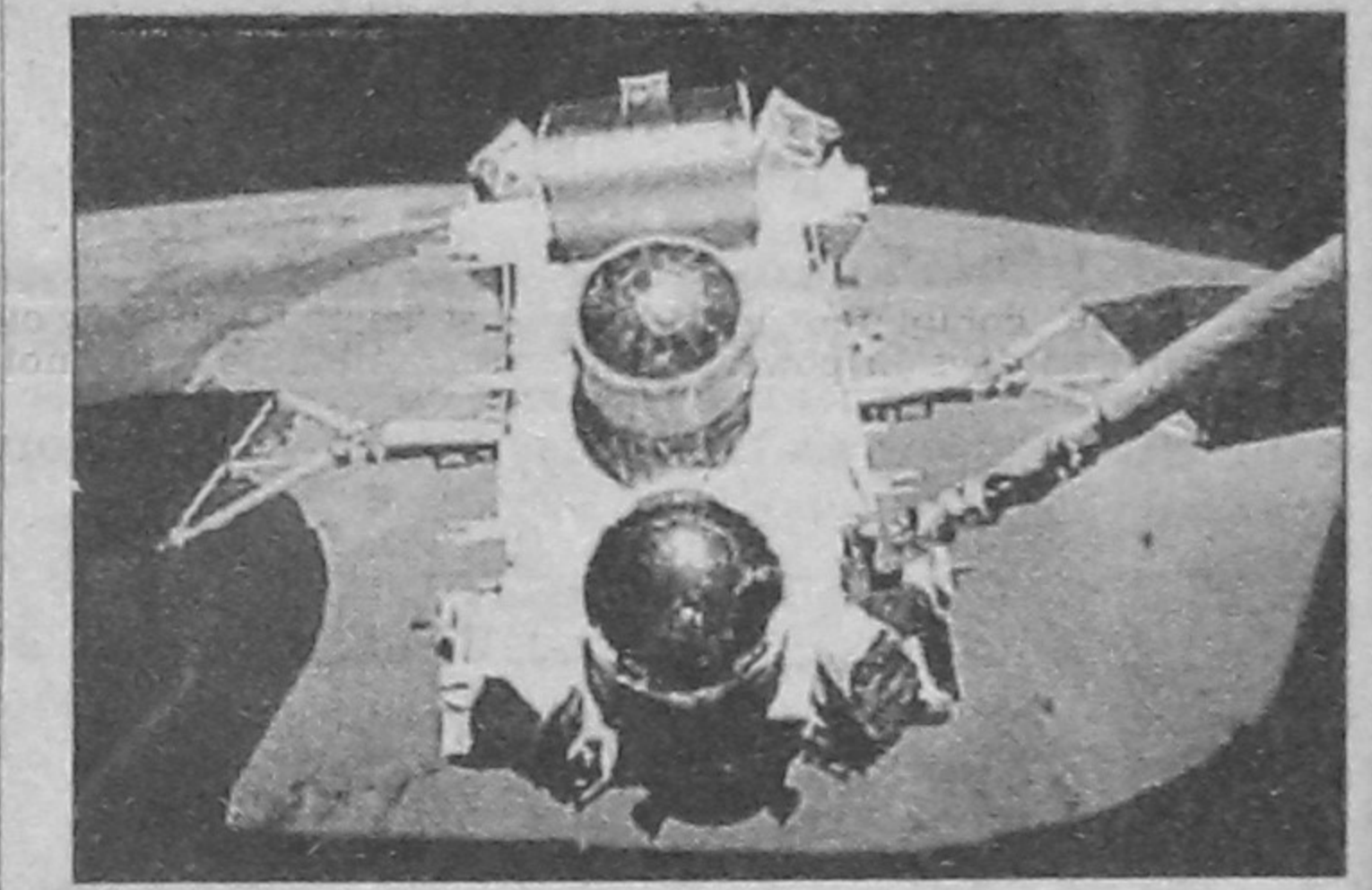
Asked on how firm a commitment Putin had made on the issue of observers in the region, Russell-Johnston said: "I think that it was a pretty firm commitment myself."

Russian general falls into Chechen hands

A Russian general has fallen into the hands of Chechen guerrillas in Grozny, Russian officers told AFP today.

The officers identified the commander only as General Malafeyev, saying his first name was not immediately known. It was not immediately known whether the commander was dead or alive.

It was unclear whether he served with interior ministry or defence ministry forces.



This NASA file image taken from the NASA Internet site Wednesday shows the 35,000 pound Compton Gamma-Ray Observatory that may make a fiery descent into the Pacific Ocean near Hawaii this Spring. NASA engineers will attempt to steer the low-orbit, nearly nine-year-old telescope away from populated areas. Unlike Hubble, Compton, launched from the Space Shuttle Atlantis April 5, 1991, was not designed to be serviced by astronauts in its 270-mile orbit. — AFP photo

ROK, China vow to push for end to nuclear, missile threats

SEOUL, Jan 20 : Former battle-hardened foes China and South Korea today agreed to cooperate to halt the spread of nuclear weapons and missiles on the world's last Cold War frontier, defence officials said, reports AFP.

The accord came at a meeting between Chinese Defence Minister Chi Haotian and his South Korean counterpart Cho Sung-Tae on day two of the first visit here by a Chinese defence chief since the Korean War 50 years ago.

Ministers Chi and Cho reaffirmed the Chinese opposi-

tion to the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and missiles on the Korean peninsula," Seoul's defence ministry spokesman Yoon Il-Young said.

The ministers had earlier stated their joint stance -- opposing the spread of the four types of weapons of mass destruction -- at their first meeting in Beijing last August.

The ministry said in a press release that the Chinese defence chief had particularly stressed China's strong support for "the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula" for peace

Top brass reassures Wahid of no intention to stage coup

JAKARTA, Jan 20 : The top brass of the Indonesia armed forces (TNI) has reassured President Abdurrahman Wahid that the military has no intention of staging a coup d'etat, a report said here today, reports AFP.

The reassurance was given by military chief Admiral Widodo Adisucipto together with the chiefs of staff of the army, navy, airforce and police during an unscheduled meeting with the president at the Merdeka Palace on Tuesday, Widodo was quoted by the Kom-

LTTE pounds police passing out parade

COLOMBO, Jan 20 : Four civilians and a constable were killed today when Tamil rebels fired mortar bombs at police recruits holding a passing out parade in eastern Sri Lanka while 11 more died elsewhere, officials said, reports AFP.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas pounded the ceremony at Morawewa village, officials said, adding that the four civilians victims were relatives of recruits.

Sharif's career in tatters

KARACHI, Jan 20 : Pakistan's ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif struggled from crisis to crisis when in power but now faces the biggest challenge of his life in an anti-terrorism court trial, reports AFP.

Sharif pleaded not guilty Wednesday as he was formally charged with abduction, attempted murder, hijacking and terrorism, three months after he was overthrown in a military coup.

If convicted of the hijacking charge he faces the death penalty.

Despite winning a huge mandate at the polls more than two years ago, Sharif's rule was turbulent and ended abruptly in his ouster on October 12 by army chief General Pervez Musharraf.

Scion of a wealthy industrialist family from the political heartland of Punjab, Sharif began his political career under Pakistan's longtime ruler General Mohammad Zia ul-Haq and became secretary general of the Muslim League party in 1988.

He first became prime minister in 1990, taking over from Benazir Bhutto who was sacked for corruption, but had to give way to her again when her party won elections in 1993.

Sharif, now 52, took office

as prime minister for the second time in February 1997 with a pledge to salvage an economy tottering on the brink of bankruptcy.

His appeal to affluent Pakistanis to help lessen the country's crushing debt burden brought in millions of dollars in fixed deposits and outright donations. He launched economic reforms and austerity measures.

But his rule soon turned sour. He began an anti-corruption drive that targeted his arch foe former premier Benazir Bhutto, her family and her party, triggering political tension and confrontation.

His decision to scrap presidential powers, including a discretionary authority to sack the elected government, had already soured his relations with the president Farooq Ahmed Leghari.

Then in September 1997 Sharif picked a quarrel with chief justice Sajjad Ali Shah over the appointment of additional judges to the Supreme Court.

The Shah-led Supreme Court launched a contempt case over comments about the judiciary and the crisis came to a head when hundreds of Sharif supporters stormed the court building to halt the trial.

As a constitutional crisis gripped Pakistan, Sharif emerged on top with support from then army chief General Jehangir Karamat.

An angry Leghari resigned on December 2, 1997, paving the way for Sharif to have Muhammad Rafiq Tarar, a former judge and close family friend, elected president.

Firmly entrenched with a two-thirds majority in parliament, Sharif proudly made Pakistan a declared nuclear power.

Pinochet

A girl holds a photo of a "jailed" General Augusto Pinochet during a rally in Vigo, northern Spain Wednesday. Dozens of people demonstrated to protest the possible release of Pinochet from house arrest in Britain and his return home. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Bid to smuggle 111 Chinese foiled: Chinese police smashed an attempt by organised crime to smuggle 111 people into South Korea on a fishing boat in the latest of a spate of human trafficking incidents, police told AFP Thursday in Beijing.

"Among the 111 stowaways, four were Han Chinese and the rest were ethnic Koreans," an official with the border police in Dongdong city in the northern Chinese province of Liaoning told AFP.

Russian, Italian, German FM's to meet: The foreign ministers of Russia, Germany and Italy were to hold an informal meeting here late Thursday, ITAR-TASS news agency reported, AFP says from Moscow.

A similar meeting had been held in Milan last month between Igor Ivanov, Joschka Fischer and Lamberto Dini. At their meeting behind closed doors the three ministers were expected to discuss major international political questions without translators, the agency said.

Seven hurt in Berlin blast: An accidental explosion at the Berlin agriculture show on Wednesday injured seven people, one seriously, police said, AFP reports from Berlin.

The blast occurred in the kitchen of a beer tent. Most of the injured had cuts from broken glass or burns from an acidic substance.

Quakes shake Laos, Thailand: An earthquake with a magnitude of 5.9 shook northwestern Laos and was felt in northern Thailand early Thursday. There were no immediate reports of damage or injuries, AP reports from Bangkok.

The Thai government's earthquake monitoring centre said the quake hit at 3:59 am (2059 GMT Wednesday), and that the epicenter was in Hongsa district in Sayaboury province in northwestern Laos.