

The World

'Mahathir didn't fall off a horse'

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 27: Top government officials today dismissed rumours that Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad had fallen off a horse while on vacation overseas and insisted he was in good health, reports AP.

The PM is fine. He's enjoying his holiday. Finance Minister Dam Zainuddin told reporters, adding that he had spoken to Mahathir recently. Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang attacked such denials as "ham-fisted," saying they only stirred more speculation.

The 74-year-old Mahathir, who is on a two-week vacation, was rumored to have fallen off a horse while in Argentina last week. Speculation increased when it was reported this week that the leader would cancel a planned trip to Switzerland, where he was to attend an international economics forum.

Concerns about Mahathir's health continued despite denials by government leaders.

4 Indonesian generals to retire from armed forces

JAKARTA, Jan 27: Senior officials today confirmed that four generals who are now serving as ministers in Indonesia's Cabinet will retire from the armed forces and become civilians, reports AP.

The four include Gen. Wiranto, the present security minister who was military commander during Indonesia's authoritarian past.

Speaking to reporters at Jakarta's presidential palace, Defence Minister Juwono Sudarsono and current military commander Adm. Widodo Adisutjipto said they had submitted the names of the four to President Abdurrahman Wahid.

Those to hang up their uniforms with Wiranto are Mines and Energy Minister Lt. Gen. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Transport Minister Lt. Gen. Agus Gumelar and Administrative Reforms Minister Rear Adm. Freddy Numberi.

Pak rulers defend their clampdown on judiciary

Action sparks tough criticism

ISLAMABAD, Jan 27: Pakistan's military rulers today defended their clampdown on the judiciary as critics warned the regime was sliding towards dictatorship, reports AFP.

Pakistan's Chief Justice, five Supreme Court judges and several other senior judges were replaced Wednesday after refusing to swear an oath of allegiance to the country's military regime.

The move comes just a week before the country's top judge had been due to hear a petition against October's military coup and as the trial of deposed premier Nawaz Sharif opened in a Karachi anti-terrorism court.

It sparked criticism from the press, human rights organisations and politicians. But the government of military ruler General Pervez Musharraf defended its actions.

The judicial order of the country remains intact, ensuring continuity of impartial dispensation of justice by an independent judiciary, the regime said in a statement released overnight.

The basic structure, functioning and the authority of the judiciary are entirely unaffected by taking of fresh oath, the statement said.

Still the move has echoes of a similar step used by the country's last military ruler Zia-ul-Haq to weed out unresponsive judges.

The regime insisted 89 of 102 senior judges had agreed to swear the new oath.

But it noted seven judges had not been asked to swear the new oath, and so were effectively dismissed, for reasons of breach of judicial propriety and code of conduct.

Two days after seizing power in the October 12 coup, Musharraf suspended the constitution and passed an order, Provisional Constitution Order Number One, preventing the courts from challenging his

rule. Judges at the Supreme Court, High Courts and the Federal Shariat Court, which rules on Islamic law, were ordered Wednesday to swear an oath under that order, pledging allegiance to Musharraf.

The administering of a fresh oath of office is an essential and inevitable consequence of the Provisional Constitutional Order, the regime's statement said.

But leading newspapers were quick to disagree Thursday. The Nation daily, traditionally friendly to the previous elected

government of Nawaz Sharif, warned the press and human rights could be the next targets.

The fact remains there are many who may not put any faith in the government's promises from now on, the paper said in an editorial.

Although Musharraf guaranteed the freedom of the courts after his coup, judges have still been forced out, the paper said.

Taking that as a precedent they may feel cause to fear that the press, which too was similarly promised freedom, could become the regime's next target. And next to that could be fun-

damental rights.

"In the event of that transpiring the regime will be branded by its critics as a total dictatorship."

Musharraf's move against the judiciary would likely spark a negative fallout abroad and may challenge the regime's claim to legitimacy, the Nation said.

"The situation here already seems to be turning into a quagmire in which the more one flails around the deeper one sinks."

Another major newspaper, The Frontier Post, also warned the press, which has run free since the coup, could be the next target.

"We believe that the military government has committed its first faux pas; it should have sought another path for obtaining whatever objectives it set for itself to achieve," the paper said.

"Forcing the chief justice and some of his colleagues against their will, will have consequences."

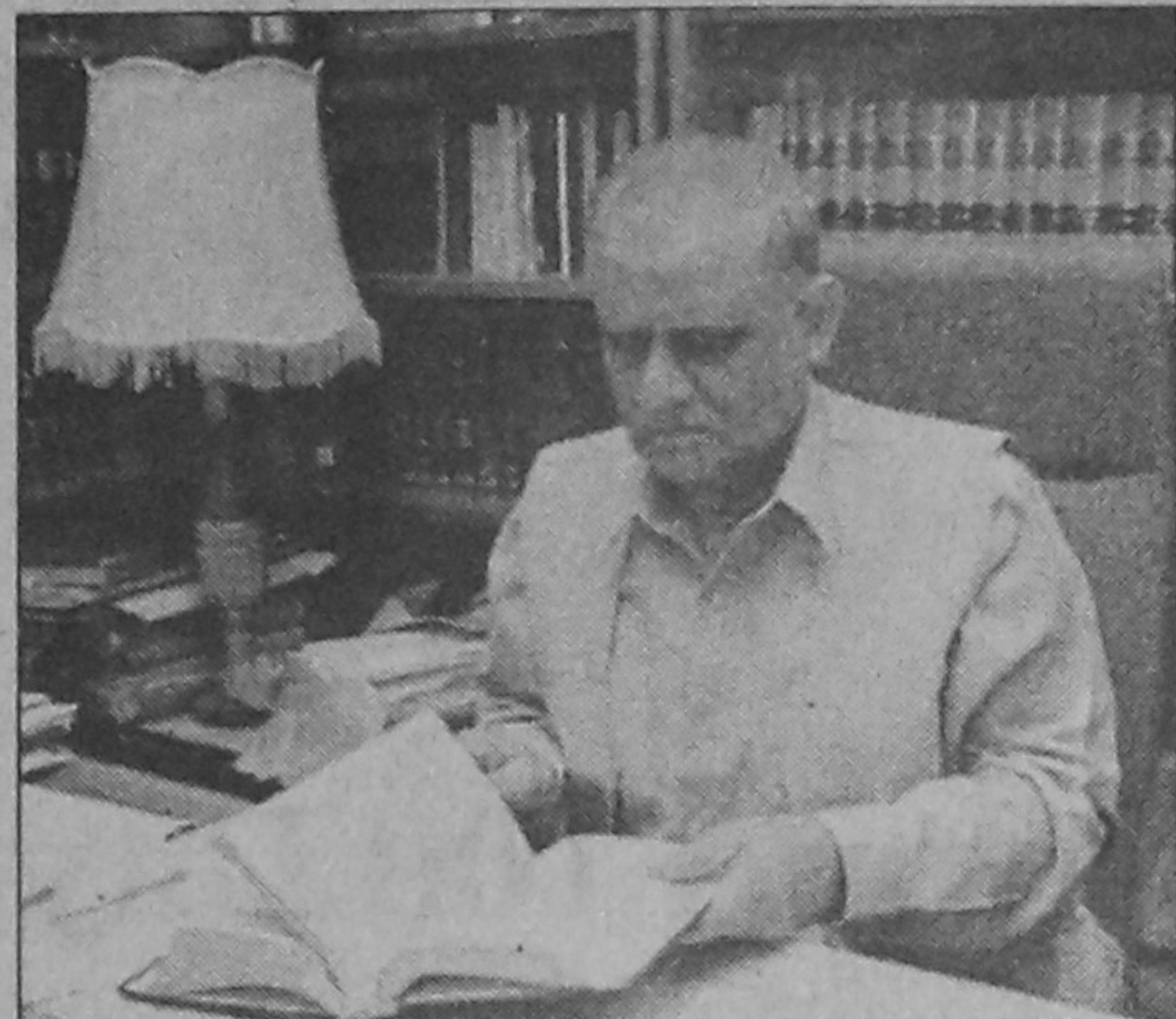
Because the previous government was so unpopular Musharraf enjoyed a honeymoon of support in the weeks after the coup. Now that is ending, the paper warned.

We fear that the military government has lost its raison d'être. The move to stifle the independent working of the judiciary will therefore be looked upon with disdain and disgust by the enlightened people," it said.

Another leading newspaper, The News which has been more loyal to the military regime, criticised the role of the judiciary in Pakistan's history.

The roots of Pakistan's constitutional misfortunes, as is often remembered, lie in its weak-kneed judiciary," the paper said.

The people are unlikely to cry over what has happened."



Pakistan's former chief justice of the Supreme Court, Justice Saeed-uz-Zaman Siddiqui, reads a book at his residence in Islamabad Wednesday. Siddiqui, who along with five other judges refused to swear a new oath to the country's military regime, was replaced with Chief Justice Irshad Hassan Khan. The decision came under an order passed by military ruler General Pervez Musharraf, which prevents the courts from challenging his rule. — AFP photo

Thatcher worried

LONDON, Jan 27: Former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher is analysing her future travel plans to avoid being ensnared in a Pinochet-style saga over her actions in office, according to a BBC report Wednesday, says AFP.

The corporation's current affairs programme Newsnight, in a report on the wide implications of the Augusto Pinochet case, said Thatcher was concerned about what might happen if she travelled to the wrong country.

He remains under arrest here while the legal saga drags on, with opponents seeking to block any move to halt extradition to Spain. The Newsnight programme said Thatcher, who was prime minister from 1979 to 1990 and is a firm friend of Pinochet, having visited him several times here, was rumoured to have consulted lawyers about future travel arrangements.

Move against judiciary a giant step away from democracy: Benazir

ISLAMABAD, Jan 27: Former Pakistani premier Benazir Bhutto today warned her country was moving further away from democracy after the military regime move to assert control over the judiciary, reports AFP.

"This is one giant and unfortunate step away from democracy," Benazir said in a statement from London, where she now lives.

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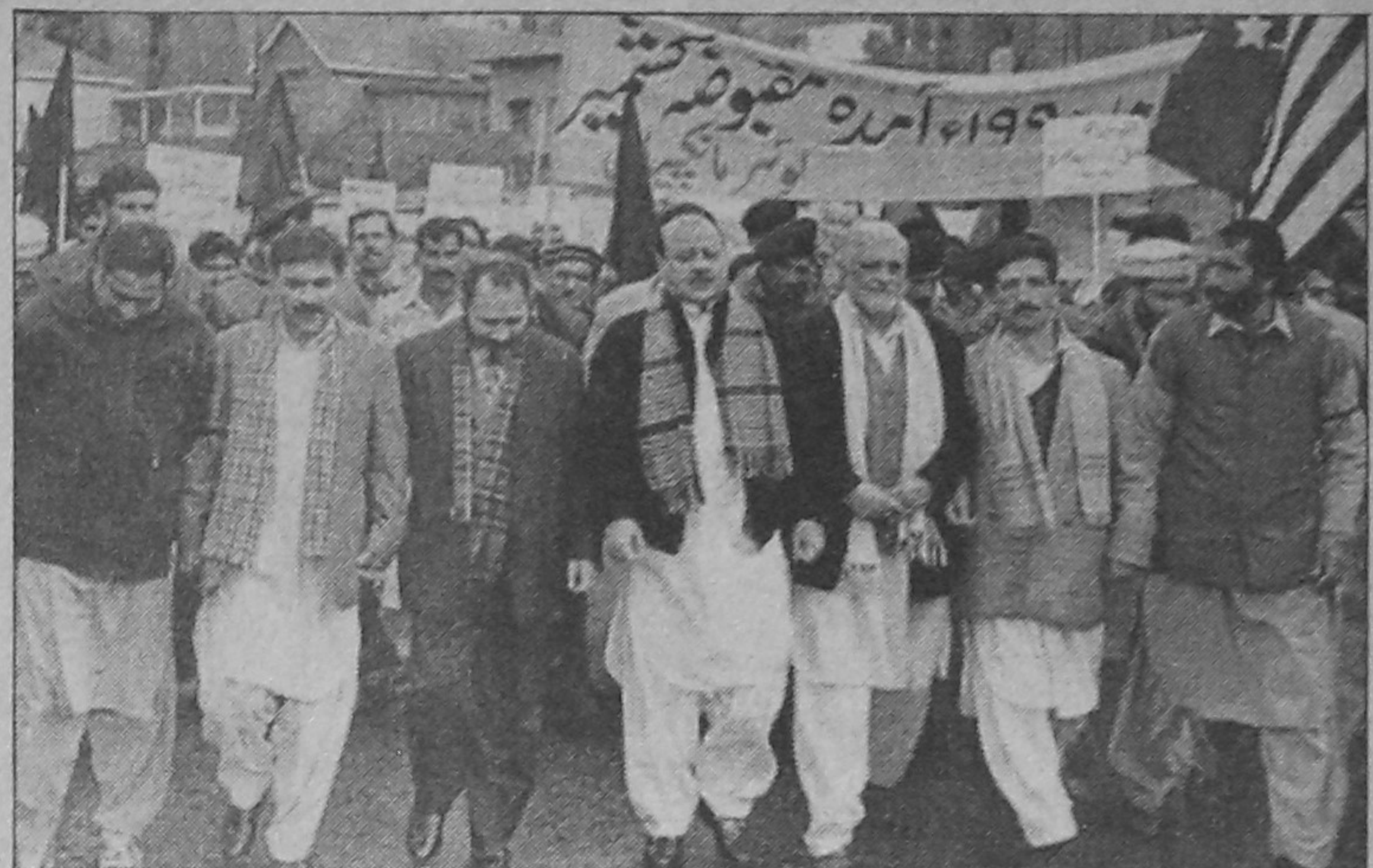
The removal of these respected justices for their support of the Constitution is an

egregious mistake and repeats the worst offences of the Nawaz Sharif regime and General Zia's dictatorship to control the country through fiat rather than through rule of law," she said.

Sharif was ousted in a coup last October led by Army Chief General Pervez Musharraf, now the country's military ruler.

Zia Ul-Haq was Pakistan's last military dictator, who ruled from 1977 to 1988, and who also clamped down on the judiciary by ordering judges to swear a similar oath.

Benazir noted Musharraf's move against the judiciary came just a week before the chief justice was to hear petitions against the coup at the Supreme Court.



Prime Minister of Pakistani-controlled Kashmir, Sultan Mahmood Chaudhry (4th from right) and other Kashmiri leaders march towards the office of the United Nations Military Observers in Muzaffarabad Wednesday to hand over a memorandum calling for plebiscite in Kashmir. Chaudhry said India had no right to observe Republic Day because it had usurped rights of not only Kashmiris but also of all minorities living elsewhere in the so-called largest democracy. — AFP photo

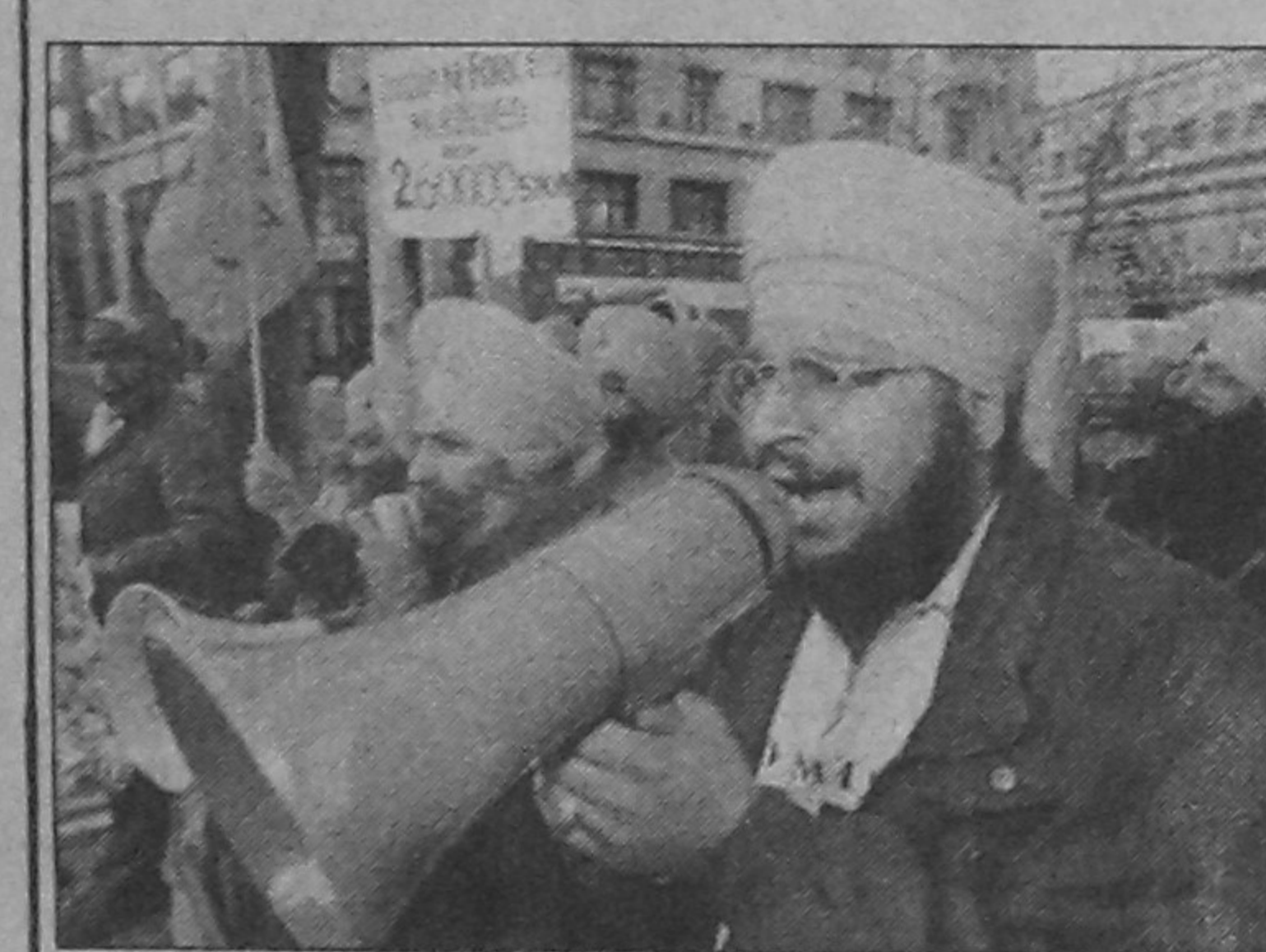
BRIEFLY

3 more killed in Aceh: Three suspected separatists were killed by police in western Aceh province while two villagers died in continuing Muslim-Christian violence in eastern Indonesia, police said Thursday. AP reports from Banda Aceh.

Two of the victims in Aceh were shot dead Wednesday in a police sweep against pro-independence rebels in Bireuen regency, said local police chief Lt. Col. Syafiq Akmal. On Tuesday, reformist President Abdurrahman Wahid visited Aceh for the first time since he assumed office in October. He predicted that the conflict, which has claimed the lives of at least 5,000 people in the past decade, will be resolved by the end of March.

Avalanche kills one in Alaska: A powerful, half-mile (800-meter) wide avalanche smashed into an Alaskan home, killing a woman, authorities said, AP reports from Anchorage.

The body of Martha Quales, 63, was recovered from the crushed home in Cordova, which was moved 30 feet (9 meters) by the avalanche, said Greg Wilkinson, an Alaska State Trooper spokesman. Quales' housemate, Jerry LeMaster, 50, was found alive by searchers probing the remnants of the snowslide, which occurred Wednesday morning.



Sikh demonstrators from India's Khalistan region shout slogans outside India House where the group gathered Wednesday in London to call for recognition and independence of their homeland state. The group called their protest to coincide with India's Republic Day — AFP photo

Britons becoming unhappy with Blair

LONDON, Jan 27: More than half of Britons are dissatisfied with Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour government for the first time since it came to power in 1997, an opinion poll showed today, reports Reuters.

The MORI poll for the Times newspaper said 51 per cent of voters, were dissatisfied with the government's performance while 37 per cent were satisfied. Last month the figure was 45 per cent on both sides.

The poll also showed that Labour's support had slipped four points over the past month to 50 per cent — probably reflecting what British newspapers have branded Blair's worst few weeks in power.

The year began with a flu outbreak which triggered serious bed and staff shortages in the National Health Service. Official figures showed rising crime. Media reports forced a government investigation into fraud allegations against a company once chaired by former labour minister Geoffrey Robinson.

Europe remains a problem too. Surveys show Blair faces an uphill task persuading an increasingly sceptical British public about the merits of joining the euro.

The only good news for Blair in the MORI poll came in the ratings for the opposition parties.

William Hague's Conservatives were up two points at 30 per cent — still giving Blair a handsome lead. The Liberal Democrats were also up two points at 15 per cent.

Blair marked his first 1,000 days in power on Wednesday with a no fanfare, business as usual approach.

But he did give a couple of television interviews to argue that his government remained on track to fulfill election promises and put right what Labour regarded as the wrongs of 18 years of Conservative rule.

There are lots of things we still have got to do," Blair said. "But in two and a half years we have made a start putting right the previous 18 years. If people give us the chance, in time we can do the rest."

Blair said Labour had been able to make improvements on the economy, jobs, education and health since its landslide victory in the 1997 general election.

Blix to lead new UN commission for Iraq

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 27: Hans Blix, the former director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, was chosen unanimously by the Security Council on Wednesday to lead a new UN disarmament commission for Iraq, reports Reuters.

The decision, announced by US Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, was taken at a closed-door council meeting after which Secretary-General Kofi Annan said he would put the nomination in writing and make the appointment formal.

"He is available," Annan said by telephone while on a holiday in Antarctica.

"He has been in the disarmament scene for a very long time. Annan said "He is a very experienced man and he knows that he is getting into."

Blix served as director-general of the Vienna-based IAEA, the UN's nuclear watchdog, for 16 years until he retired in 1998. The agency, however, has been criticised — some say unfairly — for not detecting Iraq's nuclear weapons programme before the 1991 Gulf War despite years of visits.

The council's decision followed weeks of deadlock on choosing an executive chairman for the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission or UNMOVIC, created by the 15-member body in a December 17 resolution, to complete the scrapping of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

In an effort to break the impasse, Annan last week nominated Rolf Ekeus, also a Swede, who headed UNMOVIC's predecessor, the UN Special Commission or UNSCOM.

But France, Russia and China, allies of Iraq, rejected Ekeus, now Sweden's ambassador to Washington, who was supported by the United States and Britain. France this week

was instrumental in proposing Blix's candidacy.

Iraq Ambassador Saeed Hasan immediately said it made no difference who was named to the post because Baghdad did not accept the council's resolution creating UNMOVIC.

"We are not dealing with this resolution and each and every part of it," Hasan told reporters. "Devil or angel, the new chairman will not change much in the scheme which has been prepared by the United States."

The resolution paves the way for a suspension of UN trade sanctions, imposed against Iraq after it invaded Kuwait in August 1990, if Baghdad complies with arms demands.

Holbrooke, however, said "I think they (Iraq) are playing a very dangerous and ultimately self-damaging role if they continue to obstruct. Let's see what Baghdad does. Let's hope that they have some residual sense."

UN arms inspectors have been barred from returning to Iraq since leaving in mid-December 1998.

Kohl under fresh attack from ally

BERLIN, Jan 27: Former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl faced a fresh attack on Wednesday from one of his most loyal allies for his "obstinate" refusal to help conservative party leaders clear up a campaign financing scandal, reports Reuters.

In Switzerland, warrants were issued for the arrest of two former top officials of French oil firm Elf Aquitaine ELFFPA in a fraud and money laundering probe that investigators of the Kohl scandal are closely watching for possible links.

Cuban boy reunited with grandmothers

MIAMI BEACH, Florida, Jan 27: Elian Gonzalez was finally reunited with his grandmothers at a "neutral site" that had to be arranged by the US government because of the personal and political passions swirling around the 6-year-old Cuban boy, reports AP.

Elian was driven to a nun's house in Miami beach on Wednesday to see his grandmothers, who had flown in from Washington. The visit lasted about an hour and a half.

"It took him a little while to warm up, but after a little bit he became very animated," said Sister Peggy Albert, one of the nuns who monitored the reunion.

The grandmothers and Elian played with an Etch-A-Sketch and stuffed animals, and the women showed him a photo album and letters from his classmates in Cuba, Albert said.

"They just came to him and they hugged him and they sat down at a table and they were seeing an album of pictures," said Elian's cousin Marisleydis Gonzalez.

Hackers hit Japanese Web sites

TOKYO, Jan 27: A Japanese government think tank and a nationally-circulated newspaper became the latest victims of hacker raids that have replaced official Web site content with obscenities and anti-Japanese slogans, officials said today, reports AP.

Hackers invaded the homepage of the Economic Planning Agency's National Institute for Research Advancement on Wednesday and substituted the welcome message with "Nippon is rotten animal" repeated six times, said Takehiko Kawaguchi, an official at the think tank.

Nippon is the Japanese word for Japan. The intruders also directed visitors to a pornographic Web site as was the case in a separate hacker attack this week at the Science and Technology Agency, Kawaguchi said.

The government set up an emergency committee on Wednesday to discuss ways to block the hacker raids that have targeted government agencies since Monday.

Russia to launch series of flights to revive Mir

MOSCOW, Jan 27: Russia's space agency approved a launch schedule for February from the Baikonur site, including the first of a series of flights to revive the Mir space station, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported Wednesday, says AP.

Russia had considered letting the Mir, which has been flying by remote-control since August, burn up in the atmosphere rather than spend the millions of dollars needed to maintain the 14-year-old orbiting outpost.

The United States had encouraged Russia to discard Mir and concentrate resources on the International Space Station.

Russians edge closer to centre of Grozny

OIC calls for end to fighting

MOSCOW, Jan 27: Russian troops edged closer to the centre of the Chechen capital Grozny today, struggling against rebel snipers amid increasingly frequent reports of mounting casualties in the campaign, reports Reuters.

Interfax news agency said Russian warplanes and helicopters had flown more than 100 sorties, well above the average, despite severe winter weather that has hampered visibility.

The offensive was to be the key point of discussion when UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan arrived in Moscow later today for talks with officials.

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov was due to travel to the French city of Strasbourg where the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe, a human rights body, was to discuss whether to kick out Russian delegates over Chechnya.

The West has accused Moscow of using indiscriminate force against civilians in its drive to restore control over the rebel region. Annan and prominent Western figures have called for talks to end the conflict.

"I have always pressed for a peaceful and political solution, and I've been very concerned about the situation of the civilians," Annan said at UN headquarters in New York.

Russia has launched a campaign to improve the image of the Chechnya offensive, but private NTV television said troops were moving slowly in Grozny and more losses were inevitable.

Russian troops met with early success in the first three months of their campaign, but have become bogged down since surrounding Grozny in December.

The latest Russian casualty totals suggest between 20 and 30 soldiers have been killed per day since the new year, several times as many as before. Gains on the ground have been slight.

NTV reported late on Wednesday that troops were inching forward house by house from the south towards the centre of Grozny. Patrols checked everything in their path for traps, including rubbish bins.

As they proceed, the losses, will increase," the NTV correspondent said, showing pictures of flattened buildings and streets strewn with rubble.

A soldier, recuperating in a hospital just outside the region, said the number of casualties reported understated the real figures.

Those (soldiers) who watch the television want to blow it up. We can't watch the television any more," said one serviceman sitting on a hospital bed with other young soldiers.

NTV said Moscow had poured in more troops, bringing the total contingent in the North Caucasus region to between 120,000 and 140,000. Previous estimates had put troop levels at 100,000.

Four months into its campaign, Russia controls the region's northern steppes and the valley south of Grozny that forms the province's heartland. But the capital and mountains to the south are easier for the

outnumbered but mobile guerrillas to defend.

The difficulties in taking Grozny could yet harm Acting President Vladimir Putin's ratings ahead of a presidential election due on March 26.

Putin's tough stance on Chechnya has helped make him Russia's most popular politician, but the rising casualties could revive bitter memories of the 1994-96 war, which led to the humiliating withdrawal of Russian troops from the region.

On Wednesday, former Kremlin spin doctor Sergei Yastrebnsky made his debut as the man charged with improving the image of the campaign. He said he would try to increase the flow of information but there would be certain limitations.

AFP adds: Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) officials called Wednesday for an immediate end to the fighting in Chechnya, Iran's official IRNA agency reported.

An OIC Delegation, which visited Moscow last week, issued a statement calling for an immediate end to military operations by both sides as a first step to start political process, the agency said.

The delegation, headed by Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, comprised of senior representatives from Iran, Burkina Faso, Morocco, Qatar, Turkey and the OIC secretariat.

The OIC group also called for the release of prisoners and hostages, the safe return of refugees to their homes and a general amnesty.



Railway workers dressed in orange waistcoats look at destroyed railway as they work at the train crash site near the village Verevye in Novgorod region on Wednesday. One man was killed and fifteen were injured after a passenger train ran into the last car of a cargo train on the Moscow-St. Petersburg railway. — AFP photo