

BJP govt faces popularity test in state elections

NEW DELHI, Feb 10: India's ruling Hindu nationalist-led coalition faces its first popularity test since assuming power four months ago when four diverse states go to the polls this weekend, reports AFP.

The three-state elections will also be an acid test for opposition leader Sonia Gandhi, whose leadership has come under sharp scrutiny since her Congress party suffered its worst-ever defeat in last year's general elections.

"It is the most significant popular test since Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee formed his coalition government," said political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan.

"It may not be a mini referendum, but it is a major test."

Some 96 million voters are eligible to take part in the staggered elections spread over February 12, 17 and 22 in the states of Bihar, Haryana, Manipal and Orissa.

Most eyes will be on Bihar, which borders Nepal and has a reputation as India's most lawless state, ridden with inter-caste violence. It also has the second largest electorate of any state, with 60 million registered voters.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party, which dominates India's ruling coalition, is making a determined effort to unseat a regional party that has ruled Bihar for a decade and is bitterly opposed to the government in New Delhi.

The BJP will contest Bihar with three allied parties, but their once bright prospects have been dimmed by internal bickering, despite Vajpayee's appeals for unity.

A victory in Bihar would be a shot in the arm for Vajpayee.

The prime minister's spectacular victory in September-October general elections has been tainted by his government's decision to free three jailed

pro-Kashmiri Muslim militants in exchange for 160 hostages on a hijacked Indian Airlines plane.

The other states going to the polls are tiny Manipal in the insurgency-prone far-east, bordering Burma, the northern state of Haryana that is ruled by a BJP ally and the eastern cyclone-ravaged state of Orissa, now under Congress rule.

Most analysts and newspapers expect the BJP and its allies to win in Haryana and Orissa.

With Manipal considered politically insignificant, failure by the Congress party to win any of the other three states could have serious consequences for party leader Sonia Gandhi.

The Congress state government in Orissa has been heavily criticised for failing to address the aftermath of an October cyclone that devastated coastal areas and, according to the official toll, claimed 10,000 lives.

"A washout would lead to challenges against Gandhi within the party," Rangarajan told AFP. "It would be against her style of leadership and her policies."

Another analyst, G.V.L. Narasimha Rao, agreed.

The elections are more of a test for Sonia. If she has to retain her authority over the Congress party, she has to win in at least one of the three major states.

"If Congress loses all states, it could lead to a challenge against Sonia and a major introspection among colleagues."

Rao said a hung verdict or defeat for the BJP and its allies in Bihar could strain the coalition fabric in New Delhi.

"If the ruling coalition is not in a position to form a government in Bihar, it will mean disturbance for the centre government. The warring allies will blame one another."

Blasts, firing in Kashmir: 10 killed

SRINAGAR, Feb 10: Three people were killed and two seriously injured as militants triggered two explosions and exchanged fire with Special Operations Group (SOG) of Jammu and Kashmir police in the township of south Kashmir yesterday, reports PTI.

Elsewhere in the state, seven people including five militants and a security jawan were killed and one person wounded, while a senior leader of counter-insurgency Ikhawan outfit escaped a militant attack since last night, an official spokesman said here today.

The spokesman said militants detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) near a bank in the main bazar at Tral in Pulwama district of south Kashmir at around 15000 hours when a police vehicle was passing through the area.

The explosion caused some damage to the police vehicle, the spokesman said, adding the militants after detonating the IED, hurled a grenade and resorted to firing on the police party. In the cross-fire, three civilians, identified as Ghulam Hassan, Riyaz Ahmed rather and Abdul Gani Ganai, were killed and two others injured.



A woman walks away after receiving food distributed by the Israeli army in the northern Israeli town of Kiryat Shmona on Wednesday. Residents in this border town have spent the last two nights in bomb shelters while the Israeli air force bombed infrastructure and Hezbollah strongholds in Lebanon leaving 18 civilians injured. — AFP photo

India, S Africa to sign defence agreement

BANGALORE, Feb 10: India and South Africa would sign a defence agreement envisaging joint exercises and collaboration in training of personnel, the South Africa High Commissioner in India, Maite Emily Mohale, said yesterday, reports BSS.

The agreement was likely to be signed during the visit of South Africa foreign minister Mkosazama Zuma, who would come to India to attend the meeting of joint ministerial commission later this year, she said.

Mohale, leader of a South Africa investment promotion mission sponsored by the Mpumalanga Initiative of the Northern Province, was speaking at an interactive session organised by the greater Mysore Chamber of Industry and later to reporters.

'India will not provoke conflict with Pakistan'

PARIS, Feb 10: India will not provoke a conflict with neighbouring Pakistan despite very tense relations between both countries, India's national security advisor Brajesh Mishra said, reports AFP.

"We will not be the first to take action, we will not provoke a conflict," Mishra, who is principal secretary to the Indian prime minister, told reporters late Tuesday following a meeting with President Jacques Chirac and Defence Minister Alain Richard.

"I cannot speak for Pakistan," he added.

He noted that tension between both countries had mounted since last year's coup in Pakistan in which prime minister Nawaz Sharif was deposed.

"Relations are very tense," he said, warning that the internal

situation in Pakistan could escalate quickly.

"If the situation turns back, there will be consequences for us and we have to be prepared for that," Mishra said. "But we do not wish the disintegration of Pakistan."

Indo-Pakistan relations have been in a tussle since the bloody border conflict last summer between Indian troops and Pakistan-backed guerrillas in the Kargil region of Kashmir province.

The two countries, both of them nuclear states, have fought two of their three wars over the province, which both claim.

Despite heavy US pressure, neither have signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), a subject that US President Bill Clinton is likely to

raise with Indian officials during his five-day visit to India next month.

Mishra said during his three-day visit here ending Wednesday that he had discussed relations with Pakistan and defence matters with French officials.

He said negotiations were ongoing with France on various weapons deals which, he hinted, were conditional on Paris not concluding any more defence-related contracts with Pakistan.

"All contracts (with Pakistan) have been fulfilled and there are no new contracts," Mishra said.

French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine is scheduled to travel to India next week for a two-day visit as is Prime Minister Lionel Jospin later this year.

Cohen says Indo-Pak situation demands US involvement

WASHINGTON, Feb 10: The United States has asserted that as the lone superpower, it must get involved into Indo-Pak and other international disputes to advance the cause of peace though it cannot impose solutions, reports PTI.

US defence secretary William Cohen, in his annual report to congress, said, while the US cannot impose solutions on regional disputes like the conflict between India and Pakistan, its unique military and political position demands that it play an active role in promoting regional stability and advancing the cause of peace.

Stability in South Asia depends on improved relations between India and Pakistan and a commitment from both countries to exercise restraint in their nuclear, missile and chemical, biological weapons policies and practices, Cohen says in the report.

Listing the middle-east as the other priority for the US, he says the region cannot be stable until there is a just, lasting and comprehensive peace between Arabs and Israelis.

To achieve its purpose, Cohen says, in conjunction with diplomatic efforts, the US military will continue to use military-to-military contacts as a means of promoting transparency, enhancing the professionalism of regional armed forces, and demonstrating the value of support for human rights and democratic values.

Israel warns of more strikes on Lebanon

MARGALITYOT, Israel, Feb 10: Israel warned today it would not hesitate to strike Lebanon again if its forces came under attack as thousands of Israelis emerged from three nights holed up in bunkers following the fiercest violence across the border in months, reports AFP.

The government lifted a state of emergency that had been brought into force across the north of the country for fear of reprisal attacks by Hezbollah guerrillas following Israel's massive air blitz on Lebanon over Monday night.

"Residents of the north of the country are authorised to leave the shelters," the army said in a brief statement.

The Israeli government declared a state of emergency in the frontier region on Tuesday, giving the army powers to ar-

rest anyone on the streets following the air raids which knocked out much of Lebanon's power supply.

More than half the residents had left the area to seek safety further south.

But Israel kept up the pressure Thursday, injuring a Hezbollah guerrilla in one of a string of air raids on ravines in southern Lebanon and warning that it would hit civilian targets again if its soldiers came under fire.

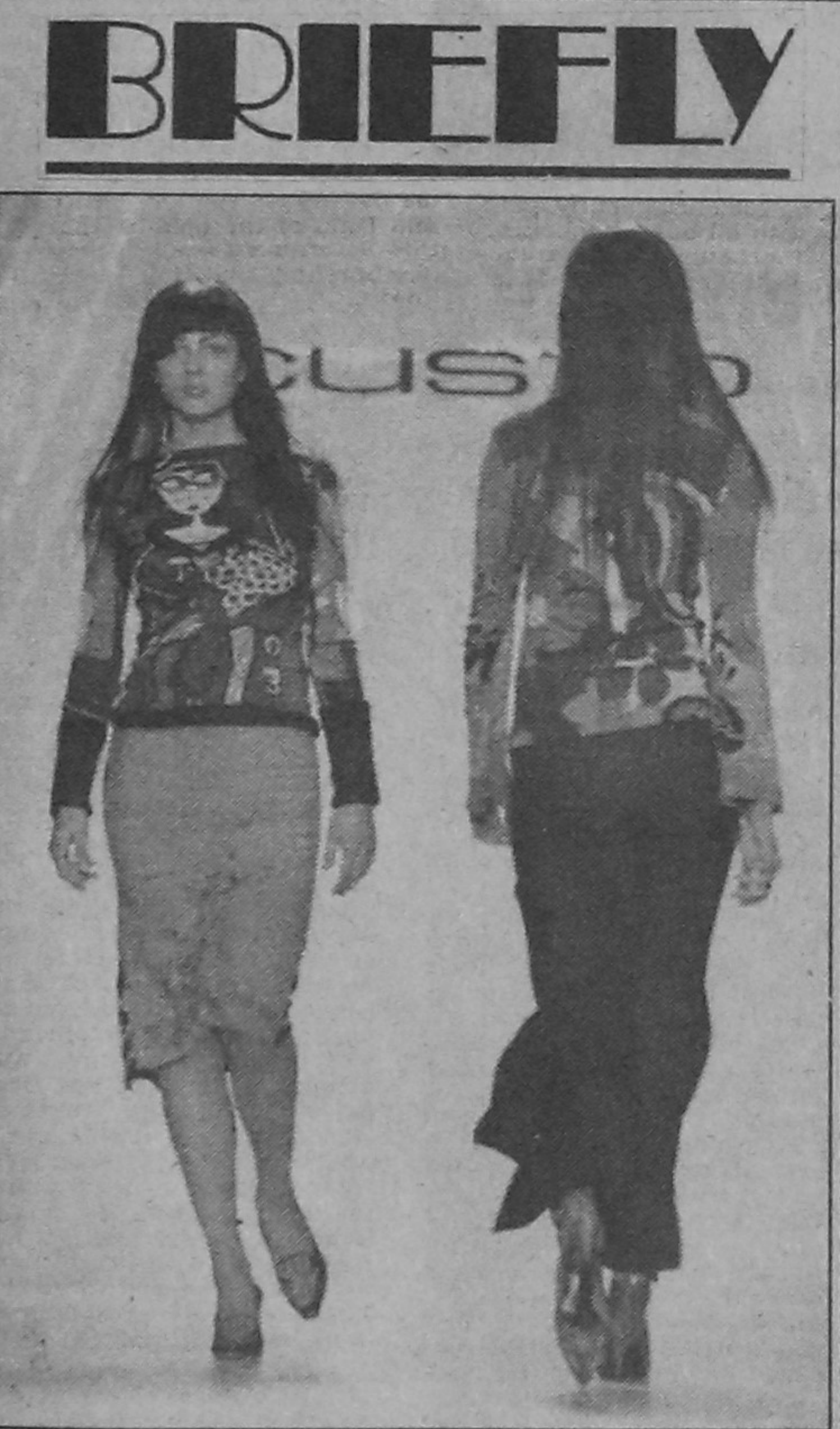
"If the terrorists continue to violate the arrangements by firing on our soldiers from villages or launching operations from villages, we will feel free to attack targets in Lebanon, including civilian infrastructure," said Danny Yatom, security advisor to Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

Yatom was referring to a 1996 truce after Israel's devastating Grapes of Wrath offensive which called for both sides in the Lebanon conflict to refrain from hitting civilian targets or from launching attacks from civilian areas.

A Hezbollah leader said the Syrian- and Iranian-backed movement was holding fire, at least for the moment.

The decision by Hezbollah not to fire Katyusha type rockets against the Israeli settlements in Galilee in reprisal for the raids on power stations in Lebanon is dictated by our assessment of the current circumstances, Hussein Haj Hassan told the Saudi-owned daily Ashraq al-Awsat.

"That does not mean that we will not use this weapon" in the future, he added.



Models show outfits from Custo Barcelona during the Fall-Winter 2000 fashion collections at Bryant Park in New York on Wednesday. — AFP photo

UN condemns attack on staff 184 dead since 1992

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 10: The Security Council on Wednesday condemned attacks on UN civilian personnel after being told 184 had been killed since January 1992 — including 98 who were murdered — but that only two perpetrators had so far been tried and convicted, reports Reuters.

In a statement read at the end of a debate on the safety of UN and associated staff in areas of conflict, the council called on states to bring to justice those responsible for violence against such personnel.

It also welcomed the inclusion of a provision making such attacks a war crime under the statute of a planned international criminal court. "Since January 1992, 184 staff members have lost their lives in the service of the United Nations," UN Deputy Secretary-General Louise Frechette of Canada told the meeting, chaired by Argentine Foreign Minister Adalberto Rodriguez Giavarini, whose country holds this month's council presidency.

Frechette said 98 of the slain

UN workers were murdered but "to date, only two perpetrators have been brought to justice and convicted."

"What does this tell the world? That it is all right to kill United Nations personnel? That those who do so are guaranteed impunity? I trust not," she said.

A UN document issued before the debate said 21 UN workers were killed in aircraft crashes, 98 were victims of gunshot wounds, 52 were victims of ethnic violence in Rwanda and Burundi, and 13 were victims of such acts such as bombings and the planting of land mines.

Citing recent reports identifying those responsible for shooting down two UN planes in Angola in December 1998 and January 1999 in which a total of 23 people were killed, Frechette hoped that "in this case as in the many others still unresolved, member states will do all they can to ensure a serious investigation is completed and the culprits are brought to justice."

Russia accuses Pakistan of 'hostile act'

MOSCOW, Feb 10: The Russian foreign ministry fiercely condemned Pakistan Wednesday for allegedly carrying out a "hostile act" in hosting a visit by former Chechen president Zelimkhan Yandarbyev, reports AFP.

"The Pakistani military administration is entirely responsible for the organisation of Yandarbyev's trip to Pakistan, and for a large anti-Russian campaign in the country," the ministry said in a statement.

"It is a hostile act that will complicate relations between Russia and Pakistan," the ministry added, saying Islamabad had "provided a platform for terrorist and separatist propaganda."

The Russian government made a similar, strongly worded attack on Pakistan in January, accusing the country of supporting terrorism after it failed to protest against the opening of a Chechen embassy in Afghanistan.

"In practically joining the alliance made up of Chechen bandits, Taliban and Pakistan extremists, certain circles in Islamabad are contributing to the creation of an entire chain of international terrorism," said the statement issued Wednesday.

Moscow accused Yandarbyev of representing guerrillas operating in the breakaway state of Chechnya, whose capital Grozny was overrun by Russian troops last week at the end of a five-month offensive.

Army moved quickly to oust Sharif Witness tells court

KARACHI, Feb 10: Pakistan's army moved swiftly last October 12 to detain Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in his office and carry out a coup, a witness testified today at Sharif's trial, reports AP.

Sharif faces hijacking, terrorism and other charges in connection with the events of Oct. 12, when the plane bringing the army chief back to Pakistan was denied permission to land. The plane did manage to land in the southern city of Karachi, and the army chief, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, promptly ousted Sharif.

Mohammed Asif, a telephone operator at the prime minister's office, said he learned at 6:35 pm on Oct. 12 that the army had entered the grounds of the prime minister's complex.

In less than one hour, they had entered all the key offices and taken full control, Asif testified. Army troops told Asif to remain at his desk, but when he began looking around later in the evening, Sharif and other top officials had been removed from there officials, he said.

US clears new drug for bowel disorder

WASHINGTON, Feb 10: US health officials approved on Wednesday a new drug that is considered a promising treatment for millions of women with a potentially disabling bowel disorder, reports AFP.

The Food and Drug Administration cleared Lotronex, made by Glaxo Wellcome Plc. GLXO L, for treating women with a certain form of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). At least 53 million Americans have IBS, and about three-quarters of them are women.

IBS can cause substantial distress to patients, and it can really disrupt patients' lifestyles significantly," said Rod Victor Raczkowski, deputy director of one of FDA's drug evaluation offices. "For some women... (Lotronex) offers the potential of relief of their symptoms."

The FDA recommends against prescribing the drug for men because Glaxo's early studies suggested Lotronex may not work for them, Raczkowski said.

2000 Falungong members detained in China

BEIJING, Feb 10: Chinese authorities have seized about 2,000 members of the banned Falungong sect in the past five days, a human rights group reported Thursday, reports AP.

The arrests began as Falungong members staged a protest timed for the start of the Lunar New Year early Saturday. The Hong Kong-based Information Center of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China said that since then, police in Beijing had seized more than 500 people.

Altogether, authorities had detained 2,000 people in 40 Chinese cities, the group said.

It said that among those arrested were several members of the People's Liberation Army who had demonstrated in Tiananmen Square.

The Information Centre said that authorities were using various methods to pressure members of the sect to recant. Apart from being detained, some are fined, others lose their jobs or are denied housing allocations and their children are prevented from getting jobs, it said.

Wahid arrives in S Korea: Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid was due to hold a summit with South Korea's leader Kim Dae-Jung today after arriving here for a state visit aimed at wooing crucial trade and investment AFP reports from Seoul.

5 killed in Nepal mine blast: Five police officers were killed and two others seriously injured Wednesday after stepping on a mine suspected of being set by Maoist guerrillas, police sources said, AFP reports from Kathmandu.

Endeavour launch set for Friday: NASA will attempt another launch of the space shuttle Endeavour Friday, after a first attempt on January 31 failed because of an onboard computer malfunction, AFP reports from Cape Canaveral.

UN envoy arrives in Kabul: The new UN special envoy to Afghanistan arrived in Kabul Thursday for talks with senior Taliban officials in his first official visit, AFP reports from Kabul.

Violence escalates in Aceh province: 16 killed, 8 hurt

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia, Feb 10: Sixteen people were killed and eight injured in escalating clashes between rebels and government troops in Indonesia's independence-seeking Aceh province, the authorities said Thursday, reports AP.

Four suspected insurgents were killed in a gun battle in North Aceh on Wednesday, said local military chief Lt. Col. Suyatno. He added that four of his soldiers were wounded by a grenade thrown by one of the rebels.

"They were members of GAM, because we confiscated four guns from them," Suyatno said, referring to the Free Aceh

Three arrested for Lankan blasts Bomb found on rail track

COLOMBO, Feb 10: A police patrol detected an explosive on a railroad track in central Sri Lanka today, averting another in a series of bombings of public transportation in the last week, reports AP.

Three Tamil suspects were arrested Wednesday in connection with the bombing of two buses in Colombo earlier this week that left four people dead and 47 wounded.

"We are fortunate that the bomb was detected before it could explode," said A M Kirigalla, an assistant superintendent of police in Badulla where the bomb was found. Badulla, the gateway to the eastern province where Tamils are in majority, is about 160 kilometres east of Colombo.

Over 50 die in S Africa rains

MAPUTO, Mozambique, Feb 10: Heavy rains in Mozambique and South Africa have claimed more than 50 lives, authorities said Wednesday, reports AP.

Hundreds of thousands were left homeless by the floods and authorities said more were missing and feared drowned.

In Mozambique, 27 people were reported dead, and several children were missing. The torrential rains started falling last month.

Vast areas of the capital Maputo and a nearby Matola had turned to swamps, and health authorities were concerned about outbreaks of malaria and cholera. A broken water treatment station made clean water scarce in Maputo and pumping stations in other areas were swept away.

At least 13,000 hectares (32,110 acres) of crops in southern Mozambique had been lost to floods, said Arnoldo Chivangue, head of planning in the provincial branch of the Natural Disasters Management Institute.

Japan loses satellite in space

TOKYO, Feb 10: Japan lost a 105-million-dollar astronomical satellite after a rocket went awry today, triggering a drastic review of the country's disaster-prone space programme, officials said, reports AFP.

Television pictures showed the M5 rocket carrying the satellite veering haphazardly 55 seconds after lift-off at 10:30 a.m. (0730 BST) from Kagoshima Space Centre in Uchinoura, southern Japan.

Graphite on the rocket's nozzle appeared to have fallen off, exposing it to heat damage, space centre spokesman Toshiki Takemae told AFP after the latest in a series of embarrassing space flops.

"Heat leaks from the crack may have damaged altitude control equipment," he said,

Benazir regrets losing chance to make peace with India

NEW DELHI, Feb 10: Former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto said in an interview published today that she had squandered chances to make peace with India by focusing solely on the Kashmir dispute, reports AFP.

"I missed the opportunity to make peace between India and Pakistan and I regret that," Benazir told the Asian Age daily in San Francisco, where she was attending a women's leadership conference.

"In my second term as prime minister (1993-96) I squandered away an opportunity to build bridges, held everything hostile to the Kashmir issue

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fully. Indo-Pakistan relations have been in a tussle ever since the bloody border conflict last summer between Indian troops and Pakistan-backed guerrillas in the Kargil region of Kashmir.

Benazir also told the newspaper that she had advised US President Bill Clinton to include Pakistan — despite the recent military coup — on his South Asian tour next month when he comes to India and Bangladesh.

Benazir also said that Pakistan had spent way too much time trying to match India's ac-