

Suicide bomber killed in Tiananmen Square blast

BEIJING, Feb 15: A suicide bomber killed himself and injured a South Korean tourist in a blast in Beijing's Tiananmen Square today, police told AFP. Police official Liu Wei identified the bomber as Li Xiangshan from central Hubei province, saying he had a history of "mental problems."

The blast occurred at around 4:00 p.m. (1400 BST), said the police official, adding the tourist was only slightly injured.

The official Xinhua news agency said the bomber was a farmer and that the injured tourist was from South Korea.

A vendor near the square told AFP she heard a loud blast and that large contingents of police immediately sealed off the vast square next to the ancient Forbidden City.

In a very rare move, police around the square handed out statements about the blast to journalists within two hours of the incident.

Police set up a dark-green two-metre high fence in the middle of the square where the blast occurred, and there was intense police activity around the cordon.

The site is half way between the Monument of the People's Heroes, commemorating the martyrs of the communist revolution and the Tiananmen rostrum from where Chairman Mao Zedong declared the People's Republic of China in 1949.

Plainclothes and uniformed police were swarming all over the square, including one scanning the square's pink tiles with a metal detector, and the central esplanade was still sealed nearly three hours after the incident.

Tiananmen Square is the political symbol of Communist China and has long been a magnet for political and other forms of protest.

The blast was close to a flagpole on the northeast end of the square, a popular place for protests by the outlawed Falungong movement.

Thousands of members of the Falungong movement have been arrested in the square for making silent protests since the group was banned in July last year, and several hundred were picked up in violent scenes during a Lunar New Year protest on February 4.

Hong Kong Falungong

spokeswoman Belinda Chang said Tuesday's blast was not linked to the movement.

"We treasure our lives," she told AFP.

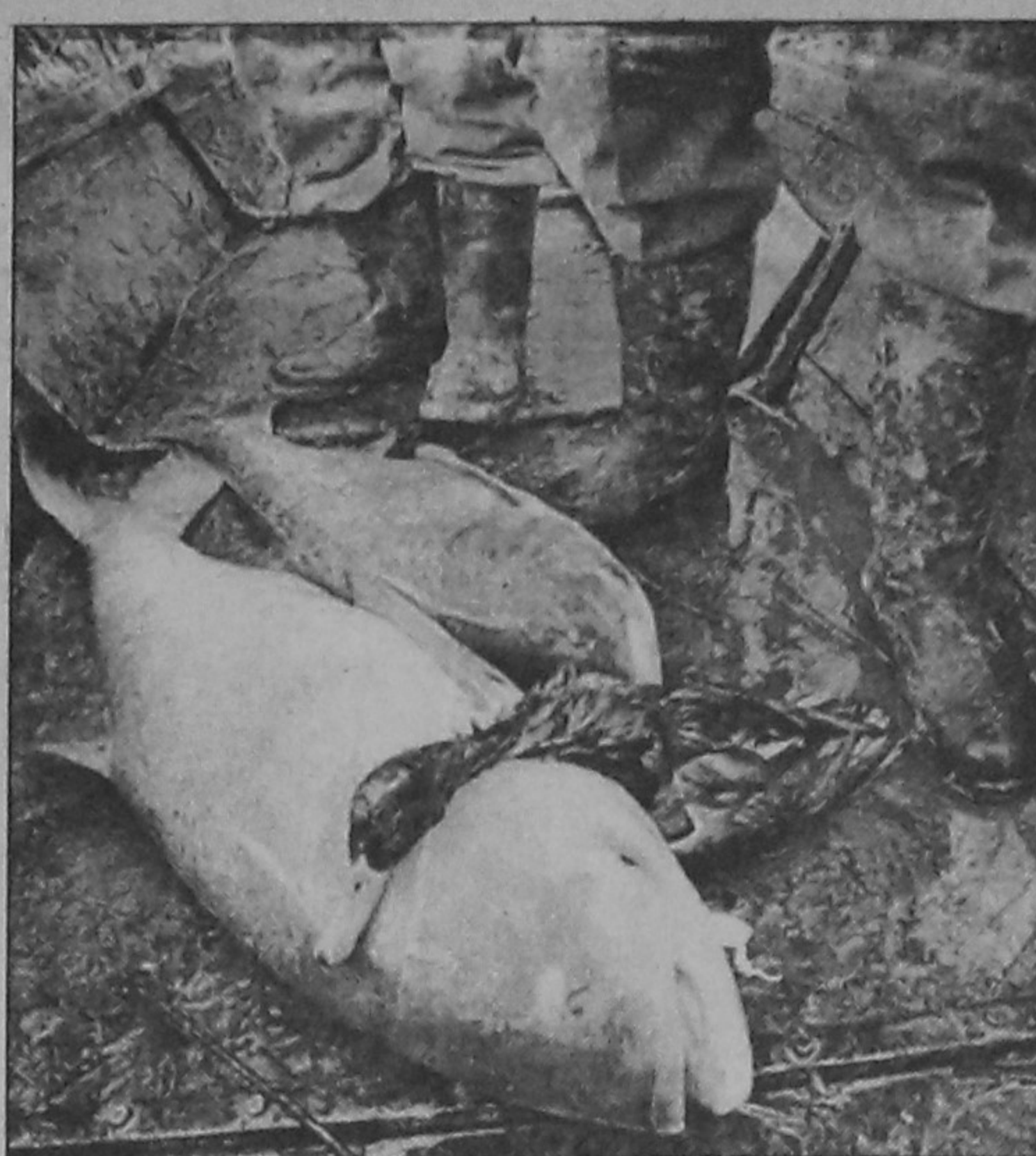
For millions of people in China and around the world the square is famous for the mass pro-democracy protests which shook the country in 1989.

The massacre of hundreds of demonstrators, maybe even thousands, by the People's Liberation Army has tarnished the square with an unenviable reputation and bolstered its image as a place of protest.

Many ordinary Chinese from the provinces come to the square to make small-scale protests, often about petty local problems afflicting their regions.

The blast was the first bombing in Beijing since January 1998, when a suicide bomber killed himself and four people outside the Beijing Railway Ministry.

In July 1987 a bomb exploded in Tiananmen Square close to the Mao Zedong mausoleum, but no deaths or injuries were reported. A 25-year-old man was executed two months later for the bombing.



Local fishermen stand in their boat on river Tisa near the town Titel, some 40 km North of Belgrade, on Monday with the carcasses of a wild duck and a couple of fishes killed by cyanide in the water. The pollution coming from a gold mine in Romania flowed towards Belgrade after killing tons of fish in the tributary to the Danube. — AFP photo

Panel to review Indian constitution Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin not seen a priority

NEW DELHI, Feb 15: The chief of the panel appointed to review the Indian constitution says the issue of barring people of foreign origin from occupying high office is not a priority, although opposition leader Sonia Gandhi's Italian birth was a major election issue last year, reports AP.

"There are far more important issues in the national agenda, for instance, the population explosion," retired Judge N. Venkatachaliah said in a Monday television interview, which was reported in newspapers Tuesday.

Venkatachaliah was commenting on a demand by Purno Sangma, former parliament speaker and a member of the constitutional review panel, that the group must settle the controversy over whether Gandhi can become India's prime minister.

The new government that took office in October has appointed an 11-member committee to review the working of the Indian constitution over the

past 50 years. The committee comprises mainly eminent jurists and politicians.

Congress objected to Sangma's appointment to the panel because he had been expelled by Gandhi from the party last year after he suggested that she avoid seeking the prime minister's office because she was not a native Indian.

Being a member of the commission, Sangma was expected to raise the issue, but I cannot understand why he had to air his views in public," said Pranab Mukherjee, a top Congress party leader.

Gandhi, 51, became an Indian citizen in 1983, more than 15 years after she had married Rajiv Gandhi, who later became prime Minister and was assassinated.

She won a parliament seat in last year's elections and enjoys the rank of a Cabinet minister by virtue of being the leader of the opposition.

The constitution does not bar foreign-born citizens from

occupying high offices in India. But Gandhi's candidacy was used by opponents in her own party and in the governing alliance to raise the issue of whether a constitutional change should be made.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government set to rest speculations about India switching over to a presidential form of government by announcing that the basic features of the constitution would not be reviewed. India has a figurehead president. Attorney-General Soli Sorabjee suggested that the review panel consider enlargement of fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution by including freedom of the press, and the rights to privacy, education and travel abroad.

"It is worth considering whether these rights could specifically be included in the fundamental rights chapter so that the citizens are sure of their protection," Sorabjee said.

Annan backs Indonesian probe into E Timor atrocities

JAKARTA, Feb 15: UN Secretary General Kofi Annan arrived in Jakarta today, a day after President Abdurrahman Wahid ended a showdown with his powerful security minister by suspending him, reports AP.

Security Minister Gen. Wiranto — who was armed forces chief when East Timor was gripped by violence in the aftermath of an Aug. 30 UN-sponsored independence vote — has been blamed for allowing the mayhem to occur.

"I'm very pleased those responsible for atrocities in East Timor will be made account-

able," Annan told reporters at the airport.

Annan, who is visiting Indonesia as part of a wider Asian tour, will meet Wahid on Wednesday. He also is scheduled to hold talks with Wahid's highly respected attorney general, Marzuki Darusman.

Wahid suspended Wiranto on Monday and instructed Darusman to determine what responsibility he bears for the events in East Timor.

About 100 demonstrators staged a noisy rally Tuesday outside the UN compound in downtown Jakarta to protest

Annan's visit. When they started pelting stones at the building, police stepped in and dispersed the group. At least one person was injured in the ensuing melee, witnesses said.

Much of East Timor, a former Indonesian province, was devastated and hundreds of people died in a campaign of violence by pro-Jakarta thugs in September. UN officials and human rights investigators have accused Indonesian soldiers of inciting the rampage which ended with the arrival of international peacekeepers on Sept. 20.

Nepal's United People's Front dissolved

KATHIMANDU, Feb 15: The United People's Front (UPF), the political front of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) which has been fighting a guerilla war against the government, has been dissolved, UPF chairman Baburam Bhattarai said, reports AP.

A press statement, issued by Bhattarai on Monday and received here Tuesday said "from today, all committees of the UPF have been dissolved."

Bhattarai is a founding member of the UPF, and since February 1996, he has remained underground as one of

the active leaders of the bloody Maoist guerrilla campaign.

Dissolving the UPF was necessary to consolidate and "integrate the freedom movements of indigenous and ethnic communities as well as regional groups with that of new people's movement."

Puspa Kamal Dahal alias Prachanda, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), also issued a press release Monday thanking human rights organisations and others for assuring the government to hold talks with the Maoists.

Indian military holds exercise near Pakistan border

NEW DELHI, Feb 15: The Indian army and air force are carrying out large-scale manoeuvres close to the Pakistan border to test battle preparedness, military officials said today.

"The exercise began a few days ago," an army spokesman told AFP.

The joint forces manoeuvres are being held over a large area covering the northern states of Haryana, Rajasthan and Punjab. The last two states share a winding border with Pakistan.

The spokesman gave no further details.

The Press Trust of India (PTI) said the exercise was taking place 100 km from the border with Pakistan, with elite paratroopers and frontline combat jets.

PTI said the exercise, code-named "Operation Vijay Chakra," also involved T-72 tanks and mechanised infantry "practising lightning deep penetration tactics in almost real battle conditions."

Along with the strike corps, the army is reportedly testing its latest telecommunications equipment as well as battlefield computers.

The exercises, witnessed by Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes, army chief General Ved Prakash Malik and Air Marshal A.Y. Tipnis, come at a time of rising tensions between India and Pakistan over the divided Himalayan state of Kashmir.

A massive military exercise by the Indian army in the northern state of Rajasthan in 1986 almost sparked a war between the two countries.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since their independence in 1947 — two of them over Kashmir.



A housing development lies in ruins following a tornado in Camilla, Georgia. Tornadoes slashed through southwest Georgia early Monday, killing at least 22 people and injuring more than 100. — AFP photo

Anwar trial Defence may seek warrant if Mahathir refuses to stand as witness

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 15: If Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad refuses to take the stand as a witness in the Anwar Ibrahim sodomy trial, the defence may seek a warrant for his arrest, a lawyer said Tuesday, reports AP.

"By all accounts, he should be in court on Thursday morning," defence attorney Christopher Fernando told reporters during a break in the sodomy trial.

Fernando said the defence had already served Mahathir with a subpoena and informed the prosecution that the prime minister should appear on Thursday.

If Mahathir's a no-show, Fernando said, "Then I think we have to take the next course of action, probably ask for a warrant of arrest."

Chief prosecutor Abdul Ghani Patail declined to say whether he would fight the ap-

pearance of Mahathir in court.

"I'm not supposed to comment on this matter as the case is on," he said.

Anwar denies the charges, claiming they are part of a plot to destroy his political career and punish him for challenging Mahathir. He is serving a six-year prison term for corruption and faces another 20 years on the sodomy charge.

Earlier Tuesday, a Malaysian reporter testified that Mahathir initially dismissed sexual misconduct allegations against his former deputy as "politically motivated" rumors similar to those he had heard about himself.

R. Sivabalan, a reporter for the national Bernama news agency, told the court that during an interview with Malaysian journalists on Aug. 24, 1997, Mahathir said anyone who believed the sex talk about Anwar was "stupid."

Off the Record

It drives me nuts: Clinton

WASHINGTON, Feb 15: President Bill Clinton gave his wife Hillary a verbal Valentine's kiss on Monday, saying "I love her very much" and that it "drives me nuts" to hear criticism of her during her Senate campaign, reports Reuters.

In an online interview with CNN, in which questions from Web surfers were e-mailed, Clinton said he was "not eager" for his own time in the White House to end. He has less than a year left.

Clinton, in a question sent in by a Peggy Brown, said he found it difficult to listen to criticism of his wife as she campaigns for a Senate seat in New York.

"Sure, I mean, you know, of course I do. I know how she felt all those years. You know, I love her very much and I think I know her better than anybody else, and I believe she'd be a great public official. And I hope that the people of New York will put her to work," he said.

"But if she's criticised — particularly if somebody says something I know is flat-out wrong, it drives me nuts. I want to be able to say: Gosh, I wish I could answer that one," Clinton said.

The campaign between Hillary and her presumed Republican opponent, New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, has grown increasingly heated. He has accused her of using federal money in her campaign and she has claimed he is spreading lies about her in derogatory fund-raising letters.

Clinton said he was looking forward to being a member of the "Senate spouses' club" if his wife is elected in November. Once his second four-year term ends, he plans to open his presidential library and related public policy centre in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Cargo ship sinks off Italy: 13 crew dead

ROME, Feb 15: A Portuguese-owned cargo ship sank in 90 seconds after colliding with a larger Italian vessel on Monday and 13 of its 14 Spanish crew were feared dead, officials said, reports Reuters.

Rescuers found three bodies, including the ship's captain, and 10 were missing after the 4,313-tonne Portuguese MV Zafr and the 14,398-tonne MV Espresso Catania collided seven miles (10 km) from Punta Stilo on the Calabrian coast, Rome port officials said.

One crew member from the Portuguese vessel, a 24-year-old ship mechanic, was rescued by the crew of the Italian ship.

Coastguard speedboats, three-merchant vessels, and three fishing boats searched for

the missing crewmen in clear weather as night fell on Monday, but officials said the chances of surviving for hours in the cold water were slim.

"The Portuguese ship sank very quickly shortly after midnight (2300 GMT)," Rome port authority spokesman Remigio Ruggiero told Reuters. The cause of the collision was not immediately known, he said.

"I don't dare imagine how this could have happened," the Italian ship's captain, Roberto Cardone, 50, told reporters.

Weather conditions were fine at the time of the accident.

Calabrian coastguards found an empty inflatable liferaft from the Portuguese ship near the site of the collision, a Rome port authority statement said.

Barak defeats no-confidence motion over Lebanon

JERUSALEM, Feb 15: Prime Minister Ehud Barak, with rare backing from the right-wing opposition, on Monday defeated a no-confidence motion put forward by Israeli Arab parties in parliament over retaliatory air strikes in Lebanon, reports Reuters.

Briefing deputies of his One Israel Alliance before the vote, the Labor prime minister said appeals for an immediate troop pullout from South Lebanon would have to wait.

A rare alliance between One Israel and the Likud opposition defeated the no-confidence motion by an overwhelming vote in a session raucous even by parliament's stormy standards.

Grassroots backing for an immediate pullout from Israel's South Lebanon occupation zone soared after Hizbollah guerrillas killed seven soldiers in three weeks this year. Israeli bombings wounded at least 20 people and cut power to much of Lebanon.

Barak told One Israel legislators that he would exhaust all chances to clinch a deal with Lebanon and its main power broker Syria before ordering the pullout.

Russian troops regrouping for massive assault on Chechnya

MOSCOW, Feb 15: A Russian general vowed on Monday to cut off rebels in Chechnya's southern mountains as if they were "layers of cake," and military officials said troops were regrouping for a decisive assault, reports Reuters.

The rebels, who have pledged to stage hit-and-run attacks on Russian-held positions, said they controlled two key mountain gorges, which are strewn with rusted tanks recording the price Moscow paid for storming the hills in the last war in 1994-96.

Russia seized the Chechen capital Grozny nearly two weeks ago and the focus of fighting has shifted to the south, but the military said it would seal off Grozny to hunt out rebels

still hiding among civilians.

General Vladimir Shamanov, speaking from the top of a snow-capped mountain in Chechnya, told NTV commercial television that 10 of his units were ready to start blockading the rebels.

"We will cut them off as if they were cake, layer by layer," Shamanov said, pointing at the tall mountains surrounding a small battalion of Russian troops.

The Russian military says its troops have sealed off the two gorges where up to 8,000 rebels are believed to be holed up, and have already seized some of the heights commanding the gorges.

The rebel Kavkaz.org website said Russian forces and guerril-

las fought at both ends of the Argun gorge, a main route through the mountains. At the southern end of the gorge, rebels and Russians fought face-to-face, the website said.

Defence Minister Igor Sergeev said his troops were regrouping for an assault on the gorge. "When it begins, then you will know about it," Interfax news agency quoted him as saying after Kremlin talks with Acting President Vladimir Putin.

Russia's top commander in Chechnya said he was imposing a three-day ban on people entering Grozny, while soldiers hunted out remaining rebels and made safe mined areas and the ruins of bombed-out buildings.

Zimbabwe referendum result likely to be close

HARARE, Feb 15: The final result of Zimbabwe's referendum on a controversial draft constitution is likely to be close after the opposition took an early lead, reports Reuters.

Political analysts say the outcome could be a pointer to how President Robert Mugabe's embattled 20-year-old government may fare in a general election due in April.

Results announced by Registrar-General tobaiwa Mudeke late on Monday showed opponents of the draft leading by 312,106 votes to 227,159 in 50 of the country's 120 parliamentary constituencies.

Critics of the proposed constitution say it was crafted to

entrench Mugabe's rule.

Mudeke was expected to release the next set of results Tuesday on the draft basic law which allows Mugabe's administration to for a year acquire mostly white-owned commercial farms to resettle black peasants.

Analysts expect the "yes" campaign to draw back some ground in rural areas where the ruling ZANU-PF party commands a large following. Rural Zimbabweans constitute about 70 per cent of the country's 12.5 million population.

The draft was drawn up by a 400-member Constitutional Commission dominated by ZANU-PF.

BRIEFLY

17 die in bus plunge: A packed passenger bus headed for Hanoi plunged 20 metres into a river in central Vietnam, killing at least 17 people, local officials said Tuesday, reports AP.

The bus, carrying at least 52 passengers, had swerved to avoid an oncoming vehicle on the narrow, winding portion of National Highway 46 in the north-central province of Nghe An five kilometres after leaving Thanh Chuong district for Vinh, police said. So far, 17 bodies have been recovered from the Lam River. Rescue workers fished out another 35 survivors, 13 of whom remain hospitalised, said Thanh Chuong district official Thai Van Sung.

US officials visit Iraq: Middle-ranking US officials visited northern Iraq last week for talks on reconciliation between the Kurdish leaders who govern the area, State Department spokesman James Rubin said on Monday, Reuters reports from Washington.

The director of the Iraq/Iran desk at the State Department, Phil Dibble, went on the four-day tour with a US diplomat from the Ankara embassy and a representative of the Turkish foreign ministry acting as an observer, he said.

5 family members killed in US: A woman and four of her children were found shot to death at their home, while two of the woman's other children, an infant and a 3-year-old girl, also were shot, AP reports from Warrensburg, Missouri.

They were shot with some type of rifle," said Pat Leighter, a spokeswoman for the Johnson County Sheriff's office Monday. A man was taken into custody Monday at the scene of the shooting but police would not release his name nor his relationship to the victims.

Azerbaijan seeks more US help

WASHINGTON, Feb 15: Azerbaijan President Geidar Aliev is seeking more help from President Bill Clinton in settling his country's dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, reports AP.

Aliev said in a speech Monday night that the countries that are supposed to be leading the group of nations seeking a settlement of the long-running conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia need to do more.

Clinton was scheduled to meet Aliev later Tuesday.

Leaders of the United States, Russia and France all need to be more engaged in seeking a solution, Aliev told the Paul H Nitze School of International Studies.

Afghan plane hijackers belong to a large family

Freed hostages say

KABUL, Feb 15: Freed hostages of a Afghan passenger plane that had been hijacked to Britain said today their captors were travelling with family members, that included several women and children, reports AP.

"It was one big family," said 50-year-old Mohammed Shamsullah, one of the 73 passengers and crew, who returned to Afghanistan. Another 74 people have either sought asylum in Britain or are considering it. The hijacked plane landed at an airfield outside London on Feb 7 after stops in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Russia.

Thirteen men appeared in court in Britain on Monday in connection with the hijacking. Another six men were released after being questioned.

However only one of the 13 names given to the British court was found on the passenger list at the Ariana Airlines office in Kabul. An officials there, who did not want to be identified,

said they may have given false names when they bought their tickets.

Shamsullah said the hijackers were travelling with their wives and children.

"It was easy to tell. We knew they had a big family," he said of the hijackers. "They divided their people among us everyone was afraid, but their women and children were laughing, they threw off their burqa and showed their face. I thought they are very bad."

In strict Islamic Afghanistan men and women, who are not related, do not interact, but Shamsullah said the hijackers talked freely with several women and children "and the women were very relaxed and not worried at all."

For the other passengers aboard the Ariana Airlines Boeing 727 the journey that began in Kabul and ended in Britain was a harrowing one.

The hijacking began shortly before the aircraft was to land

in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, he said. Nine men leapt from their seats, brandishing guns and knives, they told the passengers to put their heads down.

"They said 'everyone look down,'" recalled Shamsullah. "We didn't know what was happening because we never know of a hijacking. I thought maybe it is something political or there was a problem with the plane."

His wife Shabbibi, who was making her first trip on a plane, was terrified.

The first stop was Uzbekistan. Shamsullah said the hijackers were nervous, refusing to let small children leave their seats to go to the washroom. Then the aircraft made an emergency stop in Kazakhstan.

After Kazakhstan the plane stopped in Moscow and the finally London, where the passengers were given food and drink.



US actress Elizabeth Taylor (L) poses with lyricist Carole Bayer Sager, who received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, during Sager's ceremony in Hollywood, California, on Monday. — AFP photo