

William marks 18th birthday

LONDON, June 21 : Britain's Prince William, second in line to the throne, turned 18 today but had to hold fire on his own coming-of-age celebrations because of imminent school exams, reports AFP.

While the rest of the royal family were gearing up for one of the biggest royal birthday bashes for a decade, William was busy revising for his A-levels with a history of art paper looming on Thursday.

The BBC marked the incipient adulthood of the pin-up prince by playing the national anthem early Wednesday morning, but the grandson of Queen Elizabeth was expecting a low-key birthday.

William, who is rapidly emerging as a replacement for his late mother Princess Diana as a media favourite, was not even due to make an appearance at a Windsor Castle shindig Wednesday evening, thrown to mark four royal birthdays this year.

Barak racing against time to save coalition

Another ally threatens to quit

JERUSALEM, June 21 : Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak prepared today for a fresh round of political horse-trading to salvage his tottering government as he faced new resignation threats from another key coalition ally, reports AFP.

Barak has until Thursday afternoon to persuade the powerful ultra-Orthodox Jewish Shas party to withdraw its resignation from the 11-month-old government, but the left-wing Meretz Party warned again today it too could bolt.

"We have signalled Barak that our party could quit his coalition," said Zehava Gal-On, head of the Meretz Parliamentary Party, which has 10 MPs.

She told Israeli radio that

her party would object to any deal with Shas that involved transferring its ailing schools network from the Meretz-run education ministry, a key bone of contention.

"We do not accept bearing the brunt of this crisis by depriving Yossi Sarid of control of the Shas schools network to a new authority," she added, referring to the Meretz Party leader and education minister who has long been at loggerheads with Shas over the running of schools.

Shas's four ministers and three deputy ministers tendered their resignations on Tuesday afternoon following two weeks of political machinations over their demands for funds for the

schools and the legalisation of the party's pirate radio stations.

However, under the law, the resignations do not take effect for 48 hours.

Shas's departure would leave Barak with a minority government and could jeopardise Israel's peace efforts with the Palestinians, with a deadline for a final accord looming less than three months away.

Barak said on Tuesday he was seeking to form the "widest possible" government and wanted Shas to stay, although he insisted he would not bow to "coercion" and said 90 percent of the problems had been resolved.



Heavily armed Indian marine commandos (R) approach people in a boat on Kashmir's famous Wular Lake, some 60km north of Srinagar yesterday as Indian security forces step-up anti-militant operations in the Himalayan region. According to officials, nearly six hundred militants were killed by Indian security forces since January this year in separate gun battle. — AFP photo

Defence closes case in Anwar's sex trial

KUALA LUMPUR, June 21 : Lawyers defending Malaysia's ex-deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim closed their case today and the judge ordered both sides in the sodomy trial to make written final submissions by July 6, reports AFP.

"We have closed our case and are not calling any (more) witnesses," defence counsel Sankara Nair told reporters.

Judge Arifin Jaka will then give his verdict at a date to be announced.

Arifin last week ordered the defence to close its case despite objections that there has been no final ruling on whether Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad should be forced to testify on Anwar's behalf.

The defence is appealing to the federal court, Malaysia's highest court, for permission to call Mahathir. Arifin and the appeal court have ruled that the premier need not obey a subpoena.

NY subway train derails: 60 injured

NEW YORK, June 21 : At least 60 people were injured, three of them seriously, when a Manhattan-bound subway train derailed late Tuesday in the borough of Brooklyn, city officials said, reports AFP.

"Sixty persons were injured... 10 have been taken to hospital," New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani told a press conference, adding that three people were in critical condition.

"Everybody has been evacuated from the train" a transportation spokesman said, adding that the derailment occurred as the train was pulling out of a station in downtown Brooklyn.

35 killed as storms ravage China's Fujian province

SHANGHAI, June 21 : Flooding and landslides have killed at least 35 people in east China's Fujian province since heavy storms began June 17, the Liberation Daily reported today, says AFP.

Quanzhou city, the place hit most seriously by the storms, reported 30 casualties so far and economic losses of 1.17 billion yuan (141 million dollars), the paper said.

About 21,344 hectares (52,719 acres) of crop fields have been flooded in Quanzhou, over 95,000 residential houses have collapsed and more than 440 firms have been shut down, it added.



British pop star Elton John flashes the V-sign on stage late Tuesday in Brescia during the only concert of his tour in Italy. — AFP photo

NY mayor sues gun makers:

New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and its City Council filed a law suit Tuesday against gun manufacturers and distributors at a US district court, AFP reports from New York.

Lorna Goodman, an attorney for the city, said the suit alleged negligent sales practices and deceptive advertising. The city is seeking compensatory damages for the cost of fighting crimes committed with firearms and treating gun-related injuries, Goodman said, as well as unspecified punitive damages.

Haiti polls worry US, OAS: The official results of Haiti's first round legislative polls held one month ago failed to calm concerns in Washington and at the Organisation of American States over possible electoral fraud, AFP reports from Port-Au-Prince.

Two senior US officials met with top Haitian leaders in the past three days, according to sources who had access to their agenda, and were expected to report back in Washington on Wednesday, presumably, on the Haitian polls.

Violence claims 23 in Algeria:

The Algerian military has killed 23 suspected Islamic militants in a security operation to the west and the east of the capital Algiers over the past several days, Algerian media reported Tuesday, AP reports from Algiers.

12 children killed in Brazil:

At least 12 children aged between one and three years old died Tuesday in a fire in a day care centre in southern Brazil, a military police spokesman said, AFP reports from Rio de Janeiro.

The tragedy occurred in a city-owned day care center called Casinha da Emilia in the town of Uruguai, military police there said.

More than 150 killed in North Maluku

JAKARTA, June 21 : More than 150 people were killed and many more injured in Monday's attack by Muslims on Christians in Indonesia's Maluku Islands, a report said today, as the military expressed helplessness in the face of constant anarchy, reports AFP. A church activist was quoted by the state Antara news agency as saying 152 people were killed and 160 wounded when around 4,000 Muslim fighters attacked the mainly Christian village of Duma in Galela district of Halmahera island on Monday.

Yerda Jawa, the activist at a church synod in neighboring Tobelo district, also said a number of women and children were taken hostage by the Muslim attackers.

Troops take Tigers' bunkers: 7 killed

COLOMBO, June 21 : Government forces attacked more rebel bunkers in northern Sri Lanka, killing six Tamil Tiger guerrillas as another rebel was shot dead in another clash, the government said today, reports AFP.

Troops attacked the bunkers of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at Tattuvankottai in the Jaffna peninsula on Tuesday, killing three rebels, the government's Special Media Information Centre (SPIC) said.

It said three more Tiger rebels were killed when another bunker was attacked at Tanankillappu on the same day.

Indian scores 24 in 33-yr

DUM DUMIYA, India, June 21 : The responsibilities of parenthood appear to rest lightly on Mohammed Abdul, a labourer in northeast India, who has just fathered his 24th child at the tender age of 33, reports AFP.

"No regrets at all. It is all God's grace," Abdul told AFP, as he cradled the latest addition to his family, a baby girl, in the village of Dum Dumiya -- a remote Muslim hamlet in Assam state.

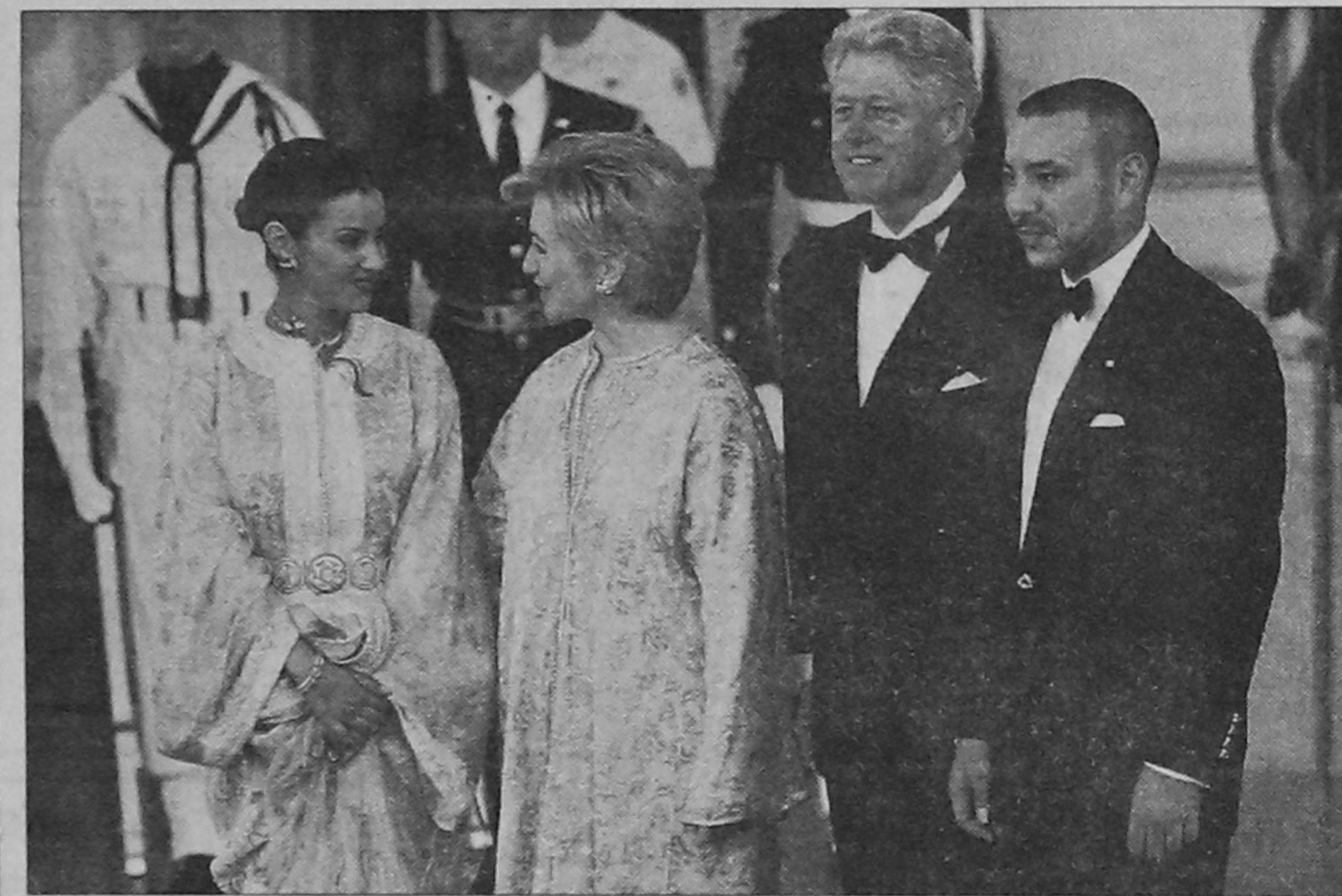
The baby's mother, 23-year-old Jahanara, is Abdul's third wife.

He first married at the age of 14 and had six children before taking a second wife. He married Jahanara when she was only 11 years old.

"Jahanara fell in love with me and we got married," Abdul said. "Eight of my son's assist me in earning a livelihood. My eldest son should be 16 or 17 years of age. I don't remember exactly."

Abdul now divides his time between his three wives and two dozen children.

Indian women can legally only marry over the age of 18, but child weddings are still common in rural areas.



US President Bill Clinton (2nd R) and US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton (2nd L) greet Mohammed VI, King of Morocco (R), and his sister, Lalla Meryem (L), at the North Portico of the White House Tuesday in Washington, DC. — AFP photo

Heat, drought claim 24 in Pak Punjab province

LAHORE, Pakistan, June 21 : Searing summer temperatures and a severe drought have claimed at least 24 lives in the past two days in the central Pakistani province of Punjab, police and hospital sources said today, reports AFP.

Temperatures of up to 46 degrees Celsius (119 degrees Fahrenheit) have been recorded across the country's most populous province since Monday, compounding the effects of the worst drought in 30 years, meteorologists said.

Most of the dead were elderly street beggars with no homes or

shelter from the roasting heat, police said.

"The hot weather is expected to break in the next couple of days and that should offer some respite," a government meteorologist said, adding that dust storms were on their way.

Many people die of heat-related illnesses in Pakistan every summer but this has been one of the worst years in memory.

Hospital medical superintendent Junaid Ahmad, in Okara district 80 kilometres (48 miles) south of the provincial

capital Lahore, said three people had died in the area on Wednesday morning.

"Most of the deaths have occurred because of extreme dehydration," he said.

"I have advised people to drink 40 glasses of water per day but I understand the availability of water is another problem."

Government relief efforts have focused on the drought-hit districts in southern Punjab but residents in isolated villages have complained that many other areas are being ignored.

Israel pledges to work with UN on border

JERUSALEM, June 21 : Israel pledged today to work with the United Nations to iron out lingering points of discord over its lightning withdrawal from Lebanon but said UN chief Kofi Annan considered it was meeting its commitments, reports AFP.

"Israel is cooperating with the UN and if there is one point or another to be resolved we will do so," Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy told reporters before meeting Annan.

In particular, he said Israel and the United Nations were trying to resolve the fate of Chajar, a border village sliced in two by the UN's demarcation of the withdrawal line.

"It's a very serious humanitarian problem. There are a few ideas that he (Annan) is willing

to discuss with us," Levy added after the brief meeting.

The fate of the village, whose residents are mostly members of the Alawite Muslim sect of the late Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, was one of the key sticking points holding up UN verification that the withdrawal was in line with its 1978 Resolution 425.

The United Nations declared five days ago that Israel had completed its pullout from Lebanon, which ended a bloody 22-year occupation on May 24.

Asked about persistent Lebanese protests of Israeli violations of the UN border, Levy said: "He (Annan) said Israel is fulfilling all its promises and if there are complaints from the other side, they are not violations."

France heads world in health care

GENEVA, June 21 : France gets top marks for the best health care services in the world and Sierra Leone is at the bottom of a new league table published by the World Health Organisation (WHO) today, reports AFP.

The rating is based on a comprehensive assessment of not only medical treatment in the narrow sense, but key social factors such as availability of medical insurance, pharmacies and other dimensions to health care.

Italy comes second, San Marino third, the US 37th, Russia 130th and China 144th out of 191 WHO member-countries.

Canada, normally at the top of the tree in such international health leagues, finds itself relegated to 30th place.

N Korea calls on US to lift all sanctions

SEOUL, June 21 : North Korea today called on the United States to lift all sanctions in its first public reaction to Washington's decision to ease five-decade-old economic sanctions, reports AFP.

A foreign ministry spokesman accused the United States of taking "symbolic" measures with its move Monday to allow direct flights and trade in non-military goods with North Korea.

But in a move to ease international fears over its missile development programme, the spokesman said that a moratorium on its test launches remains in force.

North Korea and the United States are technically at war as the 1950-53 Korean War, in which the United States fought with the South, has never been formally ended.

US sanctions dated from the conflict.

"The US should not confine itself to symbolic partial lift of sanctions on trade and investment but completely renounce the policy hostile toward the DPRK (North Korea) and turn to total and substantial lift of sanctions," said the foreign ministry spokesman, quoted by the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

The United States has led international concern about the North's missile development programme and its production of weapons of mass destruction. The spokesman hinted that North Korea might be ready to make concessions on this.

North Korea test fired a suspected ballistic missile over Japanese territory in August 1998, sparking international condemnation. The North said it was a satellite launcher.

According to South Korean officials, a fifth round of US-North Korea talks on North Ko-

rea's missile programme is expected to take place on June 28 in the United States.

The North Korean spokesman said: "If the US honours our sovereignty and free choice and sincerely work toward improved bilateral relations on the principle of equality and reciprocity, the DPRK will move in good faith and work to clear the US of its worries."

He added that a moratorium on test launches announced last September remained in force.

The spokesman said that the US move to ease sanctions will have a "positive effect" on the talks planned between the two sides "and the settlement of other outstanding issues."

"Now that preparations are going on for the Washington high level talks, the moratorium still remains in force," he said.

Hopes of an end to Solomons conflict rise after peace talks

SYDNEY, June 21 : Hopes of an early end to the Solomon Islands conflict rose today after warring militia groups were brought together for the first time aboard an Australian navy vessel at sea, reports AFP.

Australia's foreign affairs department, which helped organise the meeting, said "amicable discussions" had taken place between the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) led by Andrew Nori and the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) led by Henry Tabani.

Christian church leaders initiated the meeting held on Tuesday aboard a landing craft off the capital, Honiara.

Nori described the meeting as "very productive," although

no spokesman for the IFM could be found for comment, Solomon Island Broadcasting Corporation journalist Alfred Inomae told AFP.

Nori also told reporters the two sides had discussed questions such as a ceasefire and an agreement had been reached for further talks which could be held as early as Sunday.

South Seas Evangelical Church pastor Reverend Michael Maellu, a former politician and cabinet minister, was among mediators at the talks.

Inomae said the meeting had raised hopes of an end to the conflict which has seen a mass exodus of local residents as well as expatriates from Honiara.

Zimbabweans become refugees in own land

HARARE, June 21 : Thousands of Zimbabweans have become refugees in their own land after fleeing their homes when they became targets of brutal political attacks, reports AFP.

Many are sheltering in safe-houses in cities and towns, or have moved in with friends and relatives away from their rural homes after being beaten up, raped, receiving death threats, or seeing their houses and property burned because they supported opposition candidates for parliamentary elections this weekend.

Among them are some of the approximately 1,500 white

farmers whose farms have been invaded by squatters led by veterans of Zimbabwe's independence war.

Human rights and civic organisations have recorded more than 6,500 families who have fled their rural homes after their villages were devastated and houses torched in the run-up to the elections, in which the newly formed Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) is offering the first serious challenge to the 20-year-long monopoly of power by President Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front.

Filipino rebels reunite tourist hostages with Asian captives

JOLO, Philippines, June 21 : Muslim guerrillas have reunited 10 foreign tourist hostages with 11 Asian captives in the southern Philippines, but prospects for the early resumption of talks remained unclear, the top government negotiator said today, reports AFP.

"The hostages have all been regrouped. This is based on information I received yesterday," Roberto Aventado told a breakfast forum in Manila.

He said "our understanding is that they are all regrouped in one camp" of the Abu Sayayf Muslim separatists in the town of Talipao.

Another negotiator, Parouk Hussin, told AFP Wednesday the talks were likely to drag longer. "I don't expect any release in the near future," he said, de-

scribing the crisis as "a complex problem with no easy solution."

The foreign tourists -- three Germans, a Lebanese, two Finns, a French couple and a South African couple -- were separated from the nine Malaysian and two Filipino hostages earlier this month in a move the rebels said was aimed at preventing a military rescue.

The 21 hostages were kidnapped from the Malaysian resort of Sipadan off Borneo last April 23 and slipped through the maritime border to the southern Philippine island of Jolo by speedboat.

The Malaysian and Filipino hostages were mostly workers of the resort or government employees.

Aventado could not say if the regrouping of the hostages would lead to a resumption of official negotiations.



The Prince of Wales and Camilla Parker Bowles walk through to The Gala Dinner at The Prince's Foundation in London Tuesday. Camilla Parker Bowles accompanied the Prince of Wales to the Gala Dinner which marks the official opening of the newly restored building which is the headquarters of The Prince's Foundation. — AFP photo