

International

Fiji coup leader, military reach deal to end crisis, free hostages

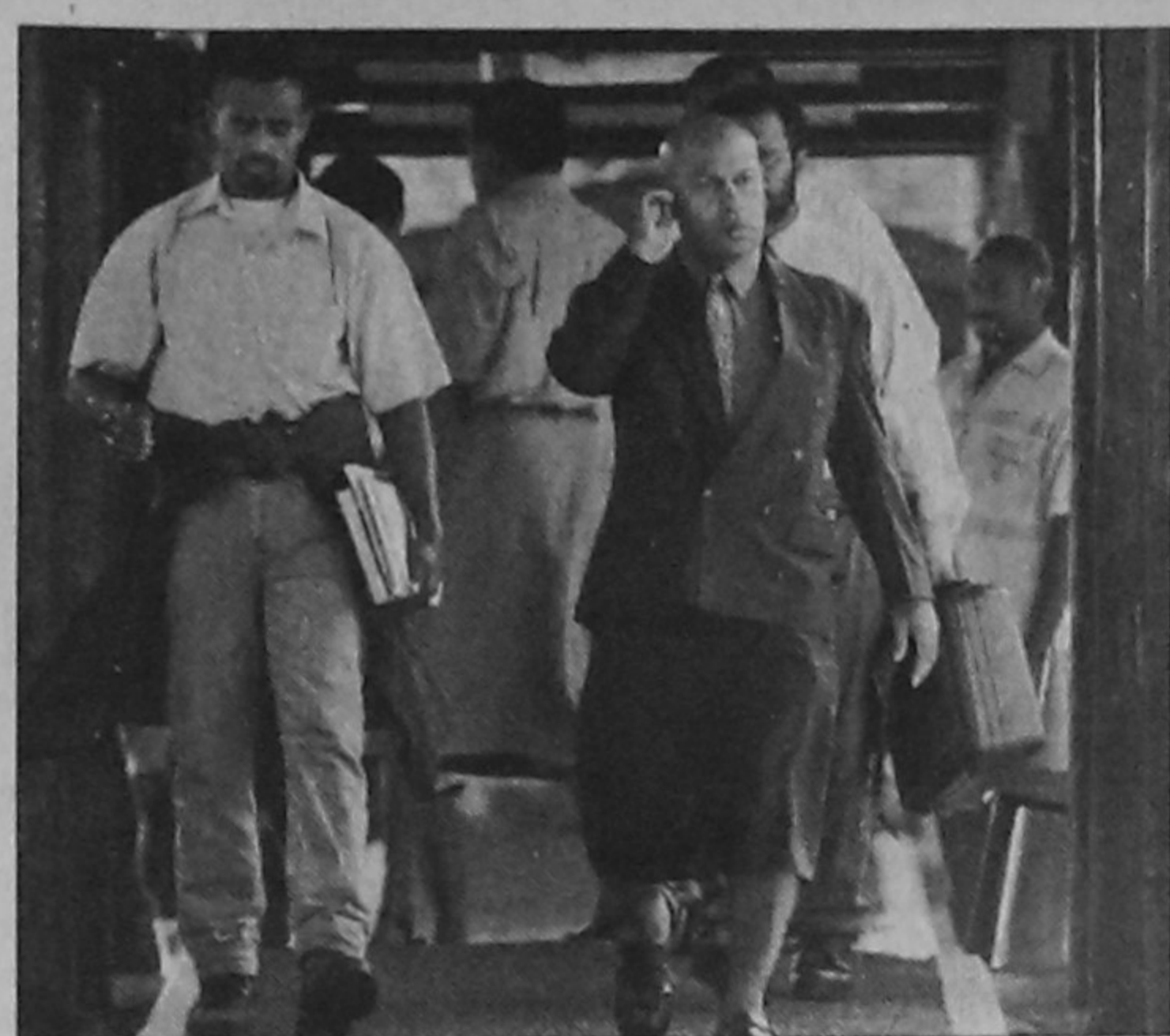
SUVA, June 23 : Fiji coup leader George Speight on Friday reached agreement with the military to end the country's political crisis and free 31 political hostages held in parliament for over a month, presidential spokesman Joe Brown announced, reports AFP.

Brown said a formal accord which will trigger the release of deposed prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry and 30 other hostages seized on May 19 would be signed at 11.00 a.m. on Saturday (5:00 BST Friday).

"We definitely reached an agreement," Brown told reporters at the gates of vice president's residence, where talks had been going on for several days on the creation of an interim civilian government.

Martial law spokesman Colonel Filipo Tarakinikini also insisted that a definitive deal had been signed. Neither he nor Brown would release any details of what was in the accord.

The military has been running Fiji since May 29 when it declared martial law after Speight supporters went on the



Coup rebel leader George Speight (R) leaves the Fijian Parliament House compound to resume talks with the Great Council of Chiefs and the Fijian military, in Suva yesterday.

rampage in Suva, killing one policeman.

It refused however to countenance military action against Speight and has publicly promised that he, and at least some of his accomplices, will benefit from an amnesty.

Vinay Singh, wife of one of the hostages, Fiji's attorney general Anand Singh, told AFP she was confident the hostages would be released on Saturday.

"I am very excited and looking forward to tomorrow afternoon," she said.

But Chaudhry's wife Virmati told AFP she did not want to comment. "It does not mean the hostages will be released."

Ben Padarath, son of culture minister Lavinia, another hostage, was also sceptical.

"I'll believe it when I see it. Why didn't they sign the accord tonight. Why did they have to wait until tomorrow?"

Speight and a group of special forces soldiers stormed parliament on May 19, taking Chaudhry, Fiji's first ethnic Indian leader, and most of his government hostage.

— AFP photo

Bush in spotlight Texas executes Gary Graham

HUNTSVILLE, Texas, June 23 : Convicted murderer Gary Graham was executed in Texas after all appeals by his lawyers failed, but the national controversy over the death penalty rages on and puts both US presidential candidates on the spot, reports AFP.

"Despite convincing new evidence of the system's fallibility," wrote The New York Times Friday, "neither (Texas) Governor George W. Bush nor Vice President Al Gore has defended his support of the death penalty in ways that confront the intellectual, legal and moral issues raised by state-sponsored killing."

Graham, 36, died by lethal injection at the Huntsville federal penitentiary Thursday at 8:49 p.m. (7:49 BST) after angry last words. He was the 22nd prisoner executed in Texas so far this year and the 135th since Bush became governor.

Graham, who had changed his name to Shaka Sankofa in deference to his African heritage, called the predominance on US death row of Black inmates, "a Holocaust for Black people in America."

"Gary Graham is being murdered today. This is a lynching," Graham said to those witnessing his death.



Protesters from the "Campaign to End the Death Penalty" react Thursday outside the offices of the Attorney General in Austin to the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles' decision denying the clemency petition of convicted murderer Gary Graham, who was later executed Thursday at Huntsville, Texas state penitentiary, was sentenced to death for the 1981 shooting death of Bobby Gene Lambert outside a Houston supermarket. His conviction was based on the identification of a single witness.

— AFP photo

1,000 illegal immigrants arrested in Thailand

BANGKOK, June 23 : Thai police arrested more than one thousand illegal workers in Bangkok in a two-day sting operation, senior police said today, reports AFP.

Between Thursday evening and early Friday morning, Bangkok Metropolitan Police raided safe houses in the city's outskirts and arrested 1,131 illegal workers from China, Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos, police said.

Due in part to Thailand's relatively lax enforcement at customs, Bangkok has long served as a regional hub for human trafficking.

An estimated one million illegal immigrants work in Thailand.

Thai police vowed they will continue cracking down on illegal immigrants in the capital until they are all returned to their homelands.

Raids could be carried out every week, and will continue until the problem of illegal migrants is eradicated.

China conducts war games near Taiwanese islands

TAIPEI, June 23 : China launched a two-day military exercise in an area near several Taiwan-controlled islands today, but defence authorities in Taipei described the drill as "routine", reports AFP.

It is the second firing drill this month in the same area.

"The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has started a firing exercise covering waters stretching from Quanzhou Bay to Shennu Bay in the southeast Chinese province of Fujian," a defence ministry official said.

Sikkim bans expeditions to Kanchenjunga

NEW DELHI, June 23 : The local authorities in the north-eastern Indian state of Sikkim have banned expeditions to Mount Kanchenjunga, the world's third highest peak, for religious reasons, press reports said today, reports AFP.

Seven other sacred peaks in the state have also been placed off-limits as a mark of respect for the religious sentiments of local Buddhists, said the reports in the national press.

The 8,598 meter (28,373-foot) Kanchenjunga, the third highest mountain after Mount Everest and K-2, is revered by the Buddhists of Sikkim as a guardian deity.

The decision by the Sikkim state government does not completely cut off mountaineering access to Kanchenjunga, which straddles the border with Nepal. Expeditions will still be able to climb the mountain from the Nepalese side.

Albright in Seoul for talks following Korean summit

SEOUL, June 23 : US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright arrived in Seoul today for a 24-hour visit to discuss prospects for rapprochement between North and South Korea following last week's historic inter-Korean summit, reports AFP.

Albright, who is to see President Kim Dae-Jung and Foreign Minister Lee Jung-Binn, arrived from China where, after talks with Beijing's leadership, she pronounced herself pleased by reports of the manner and attitude of reclusive North Korean leader Kim Jong-il who visited China last month shortly before hosting the summit.

Washington, which earlier this week formally eased sanctions against Pyongyang, is expected to announce shortly a resumption in talks with North Korea on its missile program, the threat from which the

United States says justifies its consideration of a controversial national missile defence system.

In Beijing on Thursday, Albright said she had been pleasantly surprised by Chinese reports about Kim Jong-il, but warned that rosy assumptions about the future of the divided peninsula were "naïve" at the current stage.

She said it was too soon to even begin considering changes to the deployment of the 37,000 US troops stationed in South Korea and that the thawing of tensions between Seoul and Pyongyang in no way reduced the threat posed by the north's missiles.

"As historic as this summit is, it is not definitive in every aspect in terms of what have been long and difficult relations and I think we would be rightfully termed naïve to assume that everything has been

dealt with," Albright told reporters.

But, she said that the summit behaviour of the enigmatic Kim Jong-il, long considered an eccentric hermit, had been encouraging.

"I think everybody is a little careful not to make final judgements, but clearly he appeared to be different from the way he had been described," Albright said after her meetings in Beijing.

She said that based on her own information as well as what the Chinese had told her, Kim Jong-il "was jovial and forthcoming and interested and knowledgeable and different than what we had all been led to believe."

A senior State Department official said Chinese President Jiang Zemin had spoken of Kim Jong-il in gracious terms littered with "a long stream of positive adjectives."

'Moscow hopes to boost ties with Delhi'

MOSCOW, June 23 : Russia hopes to launch a new phase in relations with India when President Vladimir Putin visits New Delhi in October, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said today, reports AFP.

As he began talks with India's visiting Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, Ivanov said: "Vladimir Putin's visit to India will give a fresh impetus to our relations."

"We attach great importance to our traditional partnership with India," he added, cited by ITAR-TASS news agency.

Singh, on a four-day trip to Moscow to prepare for the Russo-Indian summit -- Putin's first official visit to the Indian sub-continent -- was to hold talks with the Russian president later in the day.



Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov (L) invites his Indian counterpart Jaswant Singh (R) to take a seat during their meeting at the Russian Foreign Ministry in Moscow yesterday. Singh arrived in Moscow to prepare the official visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to India this autumn.

— AFP photo

Tense Zimbabwe braces for polls

HARARE, June 23 : A tense and violence-racked Zimbabwe braced today for parliamentary elections at the weekend as President Robert Mugabe and the opposition both predicted victory, reports AFP.

Morgan Tsvangirai, the 48-year-old leader of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), created only in September last year, but which has gained massive support, was heading a procession through the streets of Harare.

"The MDC is poised for victory," he said Thursday, urging Mugabe to make an "honourable exit."

"We will win the elections," the president countered.

Mugabe, 76, who has ruled Zimbabwe since independence from Britain in 1980, was preparing to address two rallies after appearing fatigued Thursday at a rally in the central town of Masvingo -- ruling party heartland -- where a slim crowd of some 8,000 dwindled away to about 4,000 by the time he had finished speaking.

The High Court was meanwhile expected to rule on a petition by the MDC that the government is rigging thousands of applications for postal votes from soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where they are shorting up President Laurent Kabila's army.

Police are already guarding

the 4,000 polling stations throughout the country, having been redeployed from "Operation Time Up" against serious crime.

A total of 5.1 million of Zimbabwe's 12.5 million people are eligible to vote Saturday and Sunday in the 120 electorates around the country under the eye of foreign observers, whose numbers are down to about 300 after the refusal of accreditation to more than 200 others.

Police Commissioner Augustus Chiridza warned the observers Thursday to abide by the laws governing their conduct or risk being locked up until after the vote.

15 killed in Australian hostel fire

BRISBANE, Australia, June 23 : At least 15 backpackers died and three others were missing and feared dead today after fire ripped through a historic timber hostel in north-eastern Australia, reports AFP.

Most of the victims, 10 British tourists, three Australians, two Dutch, a Spaniard, a Korean and a Japanese, were believed to have been trapped upstairs in the two-storey building when the fire broke out shortly after midnight.

Scores of other terrified residents of the heritage-listed Palace backpackers hostel in the Queensland town of Childers, were rescued by firemen using hydraulic platforms, emergency services officials said.

Nine were taken to hospital suffering from smoke inhalation and injuries caused by flying debris, as firemen fought for more than four hours to control the blaze.

Fresh violence claims 11 in Ambon

JAKARTA, Indonesia June 23 : Fresh violence between Muslims and Christians in Ambon, the strife-torn capital of Indonesia's Maluku Islands, has left 11 dead and 36 wounded in the past two days, a report said today, says AFP.

The state Antara news agency said unruly mobs had burned places of worship as well as dozens of homes in Tan-tani area of the capital -- the site of the first clashes on Wednesday.

Among the 11 dead, five were members of the security forces, including two members of the elite mobile brigade police (Brimob) and three army troops, while the other six were civilians.

Ambon, which has been wracked by sectarian violence since January last year, remained tense early Friday, Antara said.

3 Pak leaders held for Taliban-style raid on restaurants

ISLAMABAD, June 23 : Three religious leaders in northwestern Pakistan have been arrested after leading a Taliban-style 'raid' on restaurants and forcibly removing televisions and video recorders, a report said today, says AFP.

The three men and a group of Islamic students, or Taliban, barged into the restaurants in Bannu city, North West Frontier Province (NWFP), earlier this week and were arrested on Thursday, the News daily reported.

They were accused of raiding several restaurants and video centres run by Afghan refugees and taking their TVs and videos in the name of Islamic teachings against obscenity and vulgarity.

Police set to question Wahid

JAKARTA, June 23 : Indonesian police are set to question President Abdurrahman Wahid next week over a multi-million dollar embezzlement scam allegedly pulled off by his masseur, a report said today, reports AFP.

Wahid, whom the police cleared of any involvement in the scandal last week, will be questioned on Monday, police deputy spokesman Colonel Saleh Saaf was quoted by the Detikcom online news service as saying.

The letter of summons for Gus Dur (Wahid's nickname) was sent on Thursday and (the president) will be questioned on Monday," Saaf said.

The scandal centers around 35 billion rupiah (4.1 million dollars) of funds allegedly stolen from the State Logistics Agency (Bulog) by Wahid's masseur Suwondo in the president's name.

No sane person wants war, says Musharraf

KARACHI, June 23 : Pakistan does not want war with India but must use diplomatic and military pressure to resist New Delhi's lust for regional domination, military ruler General Pervez Musharraf said today, reports AFP.

"Yes, there is a threat to Pakistan from India," Musharraf said while speaking at the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs.

"We must avoid war because no sane person would support war and the best way to avoid it is to have open deterrence."

"We are concerned over India's desire to emerge as the regional power and to counter that we have to mobilise international forums like the United Nations and OIC (Organisation of the Islamic Conference)."

It is Musharraf's second swipe at India in two days. On Thursday he said Pakistan

needed a new naval base to counter India's "hegemonistic designs."

Pakistan and India, the world's newest nuclear states, have fought three wars since their independence from Britain in 1947 and last year clashed in a two-month border conflict over the disputed region of Kashmir.

Both sides are under international pressure to reduce tensions in South Asia and sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) to limit the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region.

The United States has also blamed Pakistan for doing too little to control alleged terrorists who are said to be receiving ideological and military training in Pakistan and neighbouring Afghanistan.

Many of the so-called "terrorists" end up on the front

lines in Kashmir, where a 10-year Muslim separatist campaign in the Indian-controlled zone has left more than 25,000 dead.

"The threat is not Kashmir alone but the threat is India's desire to dominate the Pakistani economy and foreign policy," Musharraf said.

He again stressed the need for dialogue on Kashmir, but India has refused to talk until Pakistan ends its alleged support for the "terrorists" in Kashmir.

"Kashmir is not an issue of terrorism but of human rights. There is a freedom struggle going on there," Musharraf said.

"All those fighting in Kashmir are not terrorists," Musharraf, who took over in a military coup on October 12 last year, said Pakistan was concerned about the alleged terrorist camps in Afghanistan.

Lanka agrees on interim council to end bloodshed

COLOMBO, June 23 : Sri Lankan government and opposition leaders have agreed to form an interim administrative council for the embattled northeast as part of a controversial plan aimed at ending ethnic bloodshed, political sources here said today, reports AFP.

In landmark bipartisan talks the ruling People's Alliance (PA) led by President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the main opposition United National Party (UNP) decided on the interim council solution, the sources said.

The agreement is to have an interim council for a period of five years for the northern and eastern provinces, considering them as one region," a source

close to the talks said.

He said "all political parties" could be included in the interim council, but there was no specific reference to the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

President Kumaratunga's PA and the opposition UNP have been meeting since March in a bid to hammer out a broad consensus on a political settlement to the conflict as they together represent the majority Sinhalese community.

The opposition UNP holds the balance of power in parliament and can make or break political reforms.

The latest development on the key devolution issue came two days after a senior minister announced that they had de-

cided to present a draft peace plan to the Tamil Tigers before going to parliament for approval.

A source close to the talks said the two sides agreed to establish an interim administration in line with a controversial devolution plan which seeks to turn the country into a de facto federal state.

They agreed Thursday to establish an interim council for five years and hold a referendum in the region during that period to make a final decision on the amount of territory to be given to the region, the source said.

On Wednesday, the two parties cleared a major hurdle on measures to end the country's ethnic bloodshed.

Syria ready to resume talks with Israel any time

DAMASCUS, June 23 : Syria is ready to resume peace talks with Israel "at any time" but is sticking to its condition that they be based on the June 4, 1967 ceasefire line, Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara said today at a news conference, reports AFP.

"Syria is ready and continues to be ready" for negotiations, Shara said. But the talks must be resumed on the basis of the June 4, 1967 ceasefire line "on which we cannot compromise," he said.

President-designate Bashar al-Assad said this "very clearly"

to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Shara said as Annan prepared to depart.

He heard yesterday from Doctor Bashar that Syria is ready at any time if Israel is ready to resume the peace talks."

Shara recalled that when he met US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in Cairo just before Syrian president Hafez al-Assad's death June 10 that she insisted Israel and Syria move beyond the failed March summit in which US President Bill Clinton met Assad and tried to restart the talks

with Israel.

"She said to me very clearly, please convey to President Assad, let's put the Geneva summit between him and President Clinton behind us."

"We wanted to have a fresh start," Shara said. "Let's have a fresh start within the continuity of the peace process between Syria and Israel and in fact this is what we are looking forward to." Shara said the talks should be based on the same terms as the 1991 Madrid conference which launched the peace process, with Israel trading land for peace with the Arabs.

BRIEFLY

Labour Party wins by-polls:

Britain's governing Labour Party won a predictable victory in a parliamentary by-election, according to official results Friday, but with a much reduced majority after a low turnout, AFP reports from London.

The win for Labour candidate David Lammy means he also becomes Britain's youngest MP at the tender age of 27. Labour was always expected to win the seat in the north London district of Tottenham, which had been held by Bernie Grant until his death earlier in the year.

7 of a Malaysian family killed:

Seven members of a Malaysian family died early Friday when fire engulfed a row of wooden shop houses in the southern state of Johor, police said, AFP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

A mother, her four children aged between two and 12, and her two sisters-in-law were killed in the blaze in the small town of Bakri near Muar.

Hillary slams attacks in NY park:

The assaults against 53 women in Central Park on June 11 continues to cause a stir in New York as the number of arrests and assaults rises daily and Senate candidate Hillary Clinton enters the fray, AFP reports from New York.

During her first visit to City Hall on Thursday, the First Lady joined with local politicians in denouncing the attacks that occurred in broad daylight in one of the most popular public places in New York.

Nepal rejects Maoists' demand for republic

KATHMANDU, June 23 : The Nepalese government is open to discussions on all demands made by Maoist rebels, except the topic of forming a republic, state radio announced today, reports AFP.

It quoted a statement by former premier and chairman of the High Level Consensus Seeking Commission Sher Bahadur Deuba.

The announcement comes after the underground Nepal Communist Party-Maoist (NCP-M) agreed to hold talks with the government to resolve a four-year Maoist insurgency.

The date and venue for the talks have yet to be fixed. The ruling Nepali Congress (NC) party's Central Working Committee (CWC) has continued discussions on ways to end the insurgency through dialogue, NC spokesman Narhari Acharya said.

The CWC members' meeting discussed issues including what the motive was behind the rebels suddenly agreeing to hold

talks with the government after years of violence.

Acharya said members had also discussed the policies and guidelines that would be adopted when engaging in talks with the rebels.

In his statement, Deuba said the "road to dialogue with the rebels was tough".

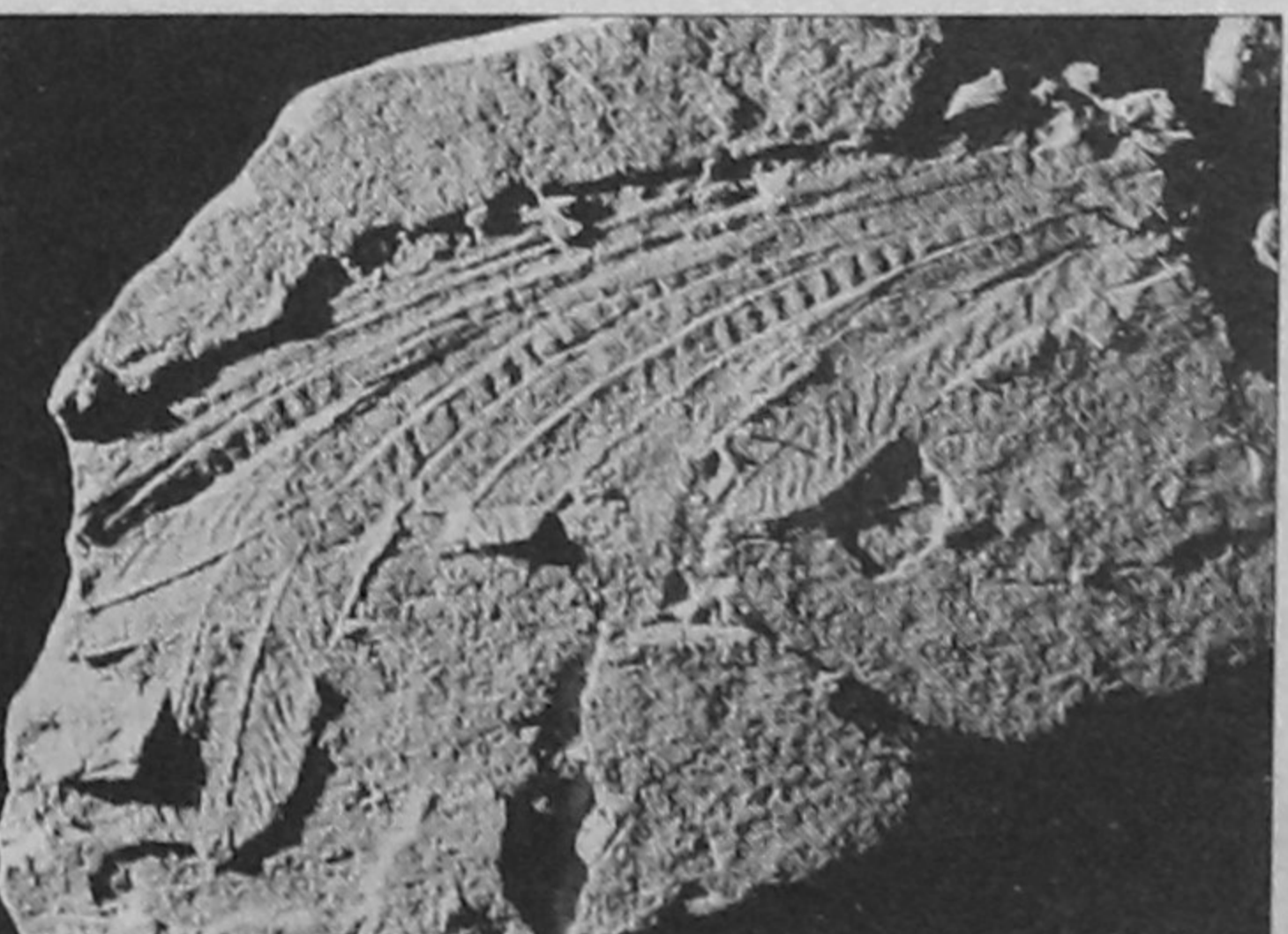
"We need to firstly be fully prepared on our side before we enter the talks," he said.

"Initiation of the talks now should resolve the problem one day," said Deuba.

He said dialogue on all Maoist demands would be possible, with the exception of the removal of the democratic system and the King.

"Except for (the) conditions to remove the King and democracy, I would not say no to any other conditions," the former premier said.

The Maoists' campaign for the constitutional monarchy system in Nepal to be replaced with a republican state has seen more than 13,666 people, most of them rebels, lose their lives.



This image released Thursday by Oregon State University shows a fossil thought to be the oldest animal ever known to have feathers. The animal may have been the ancestor of birds but clearly was not a dinosaur—a discovery that calls into question many theories regarding the evolutionary link between birds and dinosaurs. Paleontologists at OSU say the animal, Longisquama insignis, was a small reptile with feathers. It lived in central Asia nearly 220 million years ago, around the time of the first dinosaur and 75 million years before the first bird.

— AFP photo

Satan worship causes concern in Mizoram

GUWAHATI, India, June 23 : Church leaders in the Christian-dominated Indian state of Mizoram voiced concern today at a growing trend among young people for indulging in Satanic rituals, reports AFP.

"Small groups, numbering about ten youths, converge at the middle of the night in cemeteries and start invoking Satan by placing a monkey skull in between them with the words God is Satan" inscribed," a church official, who requested anonymity, told AFP by telephone from Mizoram.

"After that they fall into a hypnotic state and start slashing their wrists with the blood as offerings for the devil," the official said.

The tiny state of Mizoram, which is overwhelmingly Christian, is located in India's far northeast and borders Burma and Bangladesh.

The Presbyterian Church Synod in Mizoram is extremely concerned at the possible emergence of a Satanic cult in the state.