

# Fiji rebels release 9 hostages

SUVA, July 12: Nationalist rebels who have held Fiji's elected government at gunpoint in parliament for nearly eight weeks released nine of their 27 hostages today, reports AFP.

The move came on the eve of a crucial meeting of the country's traditional chiefs aimed at ending a political crisis that has left the Pacific nation facing international isolation and economic ruin.

But hopes for an early return to stability were dampened by growing signs Fiji is edging towards anarchy with clan groups taking advantage of the crisis atmosphere to vent old grievances.

In the latest of a series of incidents this week, 45 foreign tourists, most of them Australian, were detained briefly at the upmarket Turtle Island resort during a protest by indigenous Fijians who claim to own the land.

The tourists were freed unharmed today but it was another hammer blow to Fiji's valuable tourism industry and beleaguered economy.

In another incident, five policemen were assaulted and one was seriously injured when rebels seized the police station in the town of Labasa.

Prisoners at the country's maximum security prison were meanwhile holding 10 wardens hostage in another drama related to the political drama which began when coup leader George Speight and a gang of special services soldiers stormed parliament on May 19.

Under an accord between Speight and the military, which declared martial law on May 29, the 50-strong Great Council of Chiefs will meet Thursday to name a new president and vice-president.

In return, Speight is com-

mitted to releasing all the hostages, who include Mahendra Chaudhry, Fiji's first ethnic Indian prime minister.

Of the nine hostages released on Wednesday, seven were ethnic Indians. Chaudhry and his son are now the only two Indians being held by the rebels, who claim to be acting in the interests of the indigenous community.

Ethnic Indians -- the descendants of workers brought by the colonial power Britain to work in the sugar plantations in the 19th century -- make up more than 40 per cent of Fiji's 800,000 population.

Their comparative economic success has been a constant source of ethnic tension in the country.

The nine freed hostages were in relatively good health despite their ordeal, according to a doctor who examined them.

Dr Bhagat Ram described them as "distressed but relieved."

Later in the day, 300 lesser chiefs took over Parliament's debating chamber to prepare recommendations for the GCC.

Speight sat at the table on the floor of the chamber presiding over the meeting, attended by, among others, Fiji's High Commissioner to Malaysia, Adi Samanunu Cakobau.

A member of the GCC, she heads the powerful Cakobau clan which competes against the clan headed by deposed president Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and is regarded as a contender for the presidency.

Fiji Broadcasting Commission (FBC) reported that the meeting recommended Ratu Josefa Iloilo be named president. He was nominated by Speight, who has indicated that he expects to be named prime minister.

## FBI to open liaison office in South Korea

SEOUL, July 12: The US Federal Bureau of Investigation will open a liaison office in Seoul this week, US Embassy officials said Wednesday, reports AP.

Lee Seung-Kyu, an FBI official, arrived in Seoul on Tuesday and will open the liaison office inside the US Embassy by Friday, embassy spokesman Gerald McLoughlin said.

Lee, a 41-year-old Korean-American, will handle liaison duties with South Korea's National Police Agency.

His office does not have investigative authority, McLoughlin said.

Under a US-South Korea extradition treaty that went into effect in December, Seoul hopes to bring home South Korean fugitives believed to be in the United States.

## 19 boy scouts killed in Pak bus mishap

ISLAMABAD, July 12: A passenger bus packed with boy scouts careened off a mountain road, killing as many as 19 boys and injuring the remaining 37 passengers, many of them seriously, according to news reports Wednesday, reports AP.

The bus was returning Tuesday to Abbottabad, some 120 kilometres (72 miles) northwest of Islamabad, when it lost control on a mountain road, said the state-run news agency Associated Press of Pakistan.

An investigation into the accident has been ordered.

The boy scouts were all students of three different schools, who were returning home from a trip to a nearby mountain range, the APP reported. Also on board the bus were five teachers.

## US aid worker asked to leave Afghanistan

KABUL, July 12: Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia today gave detained US aid worker Mary MacMakin 24 hours to leave the country where she has lived for more than 30 years, reports AFP.

"Her visa has been invalidated and she has to leave the country in 24 hours," a Taliban foreign ministry official who did not want to be named told AFP. If she did not she would be deported, he added.

The militia's religious police arrested MacMakin, a grandmother in her 70s, and seven of her female Afghan staff on Sunday. She has been staying at a home for juvenile delinquents ever since.

It is unclear whether she is still under arrest or whether she has refused to leave the detention centre until her colleagues from Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Support for Afghanistan (PARSA) are also freed.

The charges against the women are unknown, but the United Nations and aid agencies believe it is part of a localised crackdown against Afghan women who work for international aid groups.

## 250 dead in Nigerian pipeline fire

WARRI, Nigeria, July 12: More than 250 people died and dozens were injured when a fuel pipeline exploded in southern Nigeria earlier this week, police and army officials said early today, reports AFP.

"An exact toll is unlikely to be clear for some time, but we know more than 250 people died" in the blast Monday, a senior police officer here told AFP.

"We have recovered a large number of bodies and more were burned to nothing," said the officer, who asked not to be named.

An army official with the 2nd Amphibious Brigade, Warri, confirmed the toll.

Officials had on Tuesday put the toll from the blast at the village of Adeje at 114 with 80 missing or wounded.

# Russia launches service module for int'l space station

BAIKONUR, Kazakhstan, July 12: The long-delayed International Space Station got a boost today when a Russian Proton-K rocket blasted off flawlessly from the Baikonur cosmodrome and pushed the station's service module into orbit, reports AP.

Russia and the United States have invested high hopes in the Zvezda module, the core of the 60 billion dollar, 16-nation space station project. Without the module, no crews could be sent up to the station, because Zvezda will contain the flight controls, sewage system and living quarters.

At Mission Control outside Moscow, Russian and US space agency officials applauded as the module went into orbit approximately 10 minutes after being launched at 8:56 Moscow time (10:56 BST).

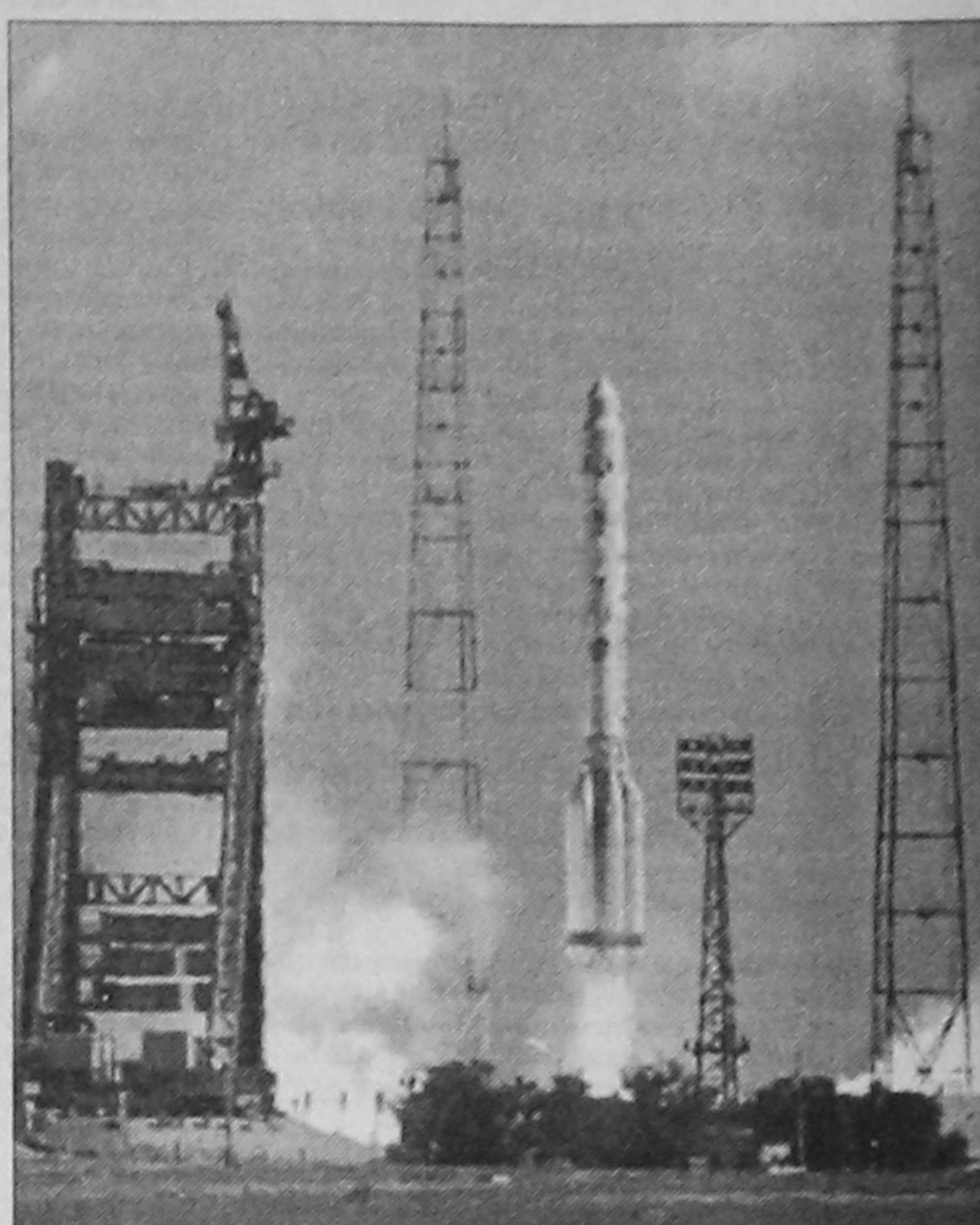
The officials gathered at Mission Control and in Baikonur, in the remote steppes of Kazakhstan, were ecstatic, and they praised each other for strong commitment to the project.

"I have to say that this is one of the happiest and proudest days of my life," said NASA administrator Daniel Goldin. "We set a vision eight years ago and we stuck to that vision."

US President Ronald Reagan set the International Space Station programme in motion in 1984. Nine years later, with the project in turmoil, President Bill Clinton invited the Russians to join.

However, instead of saving the United States time and money as hoped, the Russians caused even more delays and created even bigger expenses for NASA -- some 3 billion dollar. The Zvezda module was launched two years behind schedule.

The Zvezda module went into orbit unmanned, and it is scheduled to dock on July 26 by computer with two other space station components, Zarya and Unity, which were launched in



The Proton rocket blasts off from Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan yesterday, carrying the Zvezda service module for the International Space Station. — AFP photo

1998. The first crew could go to the station by October, the US space agency NASA has said.

"Before we pop the champagne corks, we have two more weeks before we dock, but I have a sense everything will be OK," Goldin said. In the even the automatic linkup goes awry, two cosmonauts are on standby to fly immediately to Zvezda aboard a Soyuz rocket from Baikonur.

A live feed from the cosmodrome was broadcast on console

video screens at Mission Control, while a huge screen in front of the officials tracked the rocket's flight from the cosmodrome on the wind-swept steppes of Kazakhstan into the cloudless skies.

The rocket's three stages fell away, one at a time, as the module was boosted into orbit around the Earth. As the solar panels and other several antennas unfolded on the module, applause rippled through Mission Control.

# Ease restrictions on working women

## UN official asks Taliban

ISLAMABAD, July 12: A senior United Nations official was in Afghanistan's southern Kandahar Wednesday to try to get the ruling Taliban to ease up on working women, against whom a fresh crackdown has been launched, reports AP.

Eric de Mul, the UN coordinator for Afghanistan based in neighbouring Pakistan, spent much of Tuesday pleading with Afghan officials here to rescind last week's order which bars Afghan women from working for international organizations.

The order resulted in the arrest of an American aid worker, Mary MacMakin, who has been in Taliban custody in the Afghan capital of Kabul since Sunday.

The Taliban say they have freed MacMakin, who is in her late 60s, but she has refused to leave her detention center until the Afghan women who were

arrested with her also are freed. UN officials have visited her and say her health and spirits are good.

Outside the detention center several family members of the Afghan women inside have been holding a vigil, pleading with the Taliban authorities to see their relatives inside.

But the Taliban have refused.

"They are not allowing me to see my mother," said Abdul Ghaffar, 28, who wept. Ghaffar's mother, who is a cook, is the only income earner in a family of seven.

MacMakin's organization, Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Support for Afghanistan, based out of Bisbee, Arizona, provides home-based work for Afghan women, particularly widows.

There are an estimated 28,000 widows in the Afghan

capital. Devastated by relentless fighting between rival Islamic factions, most of the 750,000 people living in Kabul survive on international assistance.

The Taliban, who have imposed their harsh brand of Islamic rule in 90 per cent of Afghanistan, have opposed women working since 1996 when they took control of the capital of Kabul.

But concessions have been made in some areas, like health and emergency social services.

Women wearing the all-encompassing burqa had quietly joined several international organizations. However, last week's crackdown, apparently instigated by the head of deeply conservative vice and virtue minister Mullah Mohammed Turabi, appears to have revoked the concessions made by the Taliban since 1996.

# Kumaratunga keen to discuss peace plan with LTTE rebels

COLOMBO, July 12: Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has expressed her willingness to discuss the bi-partisan peace plan with the Tamil rebels even if they are not ready to surrender arms, state media reported yesterday, reports PTI.

The government had earlier insisted on disarmament of the Tigers as a precondition to open negotiations.

History tells us that it is no practical to ask a fully armed organisation to throw down their weapons. If negotiations work out successfully, I expect the LTTE would eventually abandon weapons. She was quoted by the Daily News as saying in an interview to Japanese newspaper Asahi Shimbun.

Chandrika said she was ready to discuss the new draft constitution finalised recently in consensus with the opposition. The LTTE has already rejected it saying it tell short of their expectations.

She termed the LTTE as a terrorist organisation attempt the disguise itself to protect the minority Tamils. The fact is that they are no more than terrorists, she said, adding LTTE's interests and the problems of the Tamils were two separate issues. Even if the rebel group managed to form a separate state for Tamils, it did not have the capacity to build it.

Referring to the military situation in Northern Jaffna peninsula she said the recent crisis that followed the LTTE counter attack was over after the government induced modern weapons spending huge amounts.

# One shot dead in N Ireland violence

BELFAST, July 12: A man was shot dead in Northern Ireland early today amid renewed violence as the traditional sectarian marching season neared its climax, local police said, reports AFP.

Police recovered the body of a man, thought to have been a Protestant loyalist paramilitary, at a bonfire celebration in Larne, some 30 km north of Belfast, only a few minutes after midnight on the day which is the focus of the Protestant Orange Order's annual marching season.

There was a body, with what were believed to be gunshot wounds. There was also a large crowd, which hindered the investigation," a police spokesman said. Circumstances surrounding the death remained unclear.

Fires were lit across the province overnight as loyalists staged traditional Eleventh Night bonfires.

The bonfires mark the eve of the July 12 parades, when Protestant "Orangemen" celebrate the victory of the Protestant King William of Orange over the Catholic King James in the 1690 Battle of the Boyne.

# Explosion causes house collapse in NY City

NEW YORK, July 12: Two residential buildings collapsed following an explosion in the Brooklyn borough of New York City last night, according to officials and witnesses, reports Reuters.

City officials said they did not know the cause of the collapse. However, police officers on the scene said they smelled gas at the location. Officials said witnesses heard a large explosion moments before the buildings went down.

Three people were believed missing, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani told reporters at a media briefing. He added that officials think six people lived in the two buildings.

The two connected, four-story residential buildings were on State Street in the Boerum Hill section of Brooklyn.

## Indian troops kill 12 rebels in Assam

GAUHATI, July 12: Soldiers killed 12 tribal separatist guerrillas in a fierce jungle in the northeastern state of Assam, police said Wednesday, reports AP.

Rebels armed with AK-56 assault rifles, grenades and handguns challenged soldiers on a routine patrol late Tuesday night near Bholapunji village in southern Assam's Cachar district, said the district police chief, P R Das.

There was a fierce encounter between the army and the militants, which resulted in the deaths of 12 rebels," Das said by phone from the area 430 kilometres (270 miles) south of the state capital, Gauhati.

He said police had not determined which militant group was involved.

The outlawed Dima Haram Daoga (DHD), a tribal separatist group, is fighting for a homeland for the Dimas people of southern Assam. The DHD works with another separatist rebel group, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muiwah faction), in the Cachar district.

During the past month and a half, police say, joint raids by the two groups have killed a magistrate and 10 paramilitary soldiers.

## America's oldest black church elects first female bishop

CINCINNATI, July 12: America's oldest black church has elected the first female bishop in the denomination's history, reports AP.

Delegates to the general conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church elected the Rev. Vashti McKenzie of Baltimore late Tuesday to one of four bishop positions on the second ballot.

"Because of God's favour, the stained glass ceiling has been pierced and broken," McKenzie said.

The Rev. Richard Norris of Philadelphia was also elected bishop. Delegates elected the Rev. Gregory Ingram of Detroit and the Rev. Preston Williams of Atlanta to the two remaining positions on the third ballot.

Momentum clearly had been building toward election of a woman, even though delegates last weekend rejected a resolution that would have required a woman to be chosen as one of the new bishops.

Delegates cheered loudly and McKenzie was surrounded by supporters when the announcement of her election was made.

## Strong quake shakes Java, Sumatra Islands

JAKARTA, July 12: A strong earthquake shook Indonesia's Java and Sumatra islands Wednesday morning, destroying dozens of houses and causing many people to flee their homes and offices. But no injuries were immediately reported, reports AP.

Meteorological and Geophysics Agency officials revised the location of the temblor's epicentre, saying it was located 33 kilometres (20 miles) deep near the town of Ciranggon, about 120 kilometres (72 miles) south of Jakarta.

Meteorological official Pontimin, who like many Indonesians only uses one name, said the quake had a magnitude of 5.1, occurred at 8:10 am (01:10 GMT) and lasted for 15 seconds.

A local government official in Cibadak town said initial reports indicated that dozens of houses had been totally destroyed in Caringin Kulon and Cihelang Ponggoh villages and several other homes had been badly damaged.

The official, Solihin, said there were no immediate reports of casualties but officials were having problems contacting the region as many phone lines were down.

"We are about to try and get into the area to see how bad things are," he said.

Another official, Subrata, said 2,400 employees of Japanese electronics giant Aiwa fled from their factory when the quake hit. The factory building was seriously damaged with parts of its roof having fallen in. At least 35 workers were being treated for shock.



Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak (L), US President Bill Clinton (R), and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat pose for a photograph at Laurel Cabin during the Middle East Peace Summit on Tuesday at Camp David, Maryland, the US presidential mountain top retreat. — AFP photo

# ME leaders, Clinton hold joint summit meeting

CAMP DAVID, July 12: President Bill Clinton urged Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to find room for compromise on Tuesday as a high-stakes Middle East peace summit began with all sides admitting the path to peace was difficult, reports Reuters.

In the leafy, secluded confines of the Camp David presidential retreat, scene of the groundbreaking 1978 peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, Clinton tried to recreate the magic of that era by playing mediator to Barak and Arafat.

There can be no peace without principled compromise," Clinton said in Washington, before arriving for the summit. "The road to peace, as always, is a two-way street."

On the back porch of his Camp David "Aspen" cottage, Clinton held initial talks separately with Arafat and Barak before appearing with them for a carefully staged picture-taking session that had a surprise ending.

Walking to Laurel cabin, they stopped for photographers and Clinton put his arms around their shoulders and declined to answer question.

Then Clinton entered the cabin first, than Arafat and Barak disagreed over who should go in next. The Palestinian leader insisted, wagging his finger that Barak go next. The Israeli leader grabbed Arafat good-naturedly by the arm and wrestled him first through the threshold.

Despite the playfulness, wide

differences were apparent on issues that have festered for decades as the leaders seek to meet a self-imposed Sept. 13 deadline for a peace agreement.

The toughest issues are the future status of Jerusalem, the fate of more than 3 million Palestinian refugees and the borders of a Palestinian state.

White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said "the atmosphere is good and the mood is serious" after the three leaders held their first meeting, a 30-minute joint session in which they were each joined by top aides.

Clinton held another round of separate meetings with Barak and Arafat on Tuesday night then all three delegations, comprising about 40 people, were having dinner at Laurel cabin, Lockhart said.

# N Korea demands \$ 1b for halting missile exports

## Talks with US ends

KUALA LUMPUR, July 12: North Korea today demanded one billion dollars from the United States in return for suspending its missile exports, as three days of talks ended here, reports AFP.

The United States immediately rejected the demand, saying it would not reward bad behaviour. But US officials reiterated that they would be prepared to move towards full political and economic relations if the North addressed security concerns.

The two sides expect to meet again within the next few months, US officials said.

Jiang Chang Chou, North Korea's director-general for US affairs at the foreign ministry, said the negotiations at the US embassy focused on the suspension of the North's missile exports.

ports.

"We clarified we will continue our discussions on condition that the US side is willing to make concessions on political and economic losses to be incurred in case we suspend our missile exports," Jang told reporters.

"Our position is that the US should make cash compensation," he said in answer to questions.

"In our estimation, we propose about one billion US dollars."

But US Assistant Secretary of State for Non-proliferation, Robert Einhorn, ruled out any cash compensation for the famine-stricken Stalinist state.

"As far as we are concerned, North Korea should not be receiving cash compensation for stopping what it shouldn't be

doing in the first place," he told a separate news conference.

Einhorn said Washington was willing to pursue a "step-by-step full political and economic normalisation" as North Korea addressed security issues of concern to the US and its allies.

He said the move would involve "various forms of interaction" that would benefit the North.

The US was willing to discuss specific requests for benefits "as part of a broad normalisation process and as the North Koreans address very seriously our concerns about their missile programs."

The North sparked alarm in parts of Asia and in the United States when it test-fired a long-range missile over Japanese territory in August 1998.

# Researchers will now find disease-causing genes

WASHINGTON, July 12: Now that the human genome is almost completely mapped, research organisations are starting a major push to find the genes that cause human disease, reports AP.

The National Human Genome Research Institute announced Tuesday that three academic centres will start work to find segments in the human genome that vary from person to person, a major step toward finding genes that cause heart disease, diabetes and other common diseases.

Collaborating in the effort are the Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, and the Sanger Centre in Hinxton, England.

Researchers will find the variable sequences by searching the 3.1 billion chemical base pairs that make up human DNA. These variable sequences are called single nucleotide polymorphisms, or SNPs. Some of the variations in the SNPs

may amount to only a single chemical base pair difference in the DNA sequence of one person compared to another.

The SNPs will be located, or mapped, on the genome. This map then can be used to locate gene variations that cause disease.

The collaboration is being funded by the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI), the lead agency behind the Human Genome Project, and the SNP Consortium, a nonprofit organisation that includes the Wellcome Trust and 13 pharmaceutical and technical companies.

Officials said the new search for genetic variations is expected to identify and map up to 750,000 SNPs, but only a fraction of these are expected to be medically significant.

To find the SNPs, researchers will cut the DNA into about two million fragments, each with about 6,000 chemical base pairs of DNA. The DNA to be used will come from 24 anonymous donors who come from diverse geographic regions.



U.S. Defence Secretary William Cohen (L) meets Chinese General Fu Quanyou, Chief of the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army, in Beijing yesterday. China greeted visiting Cohen with a warning that US missile defence plans could affect Beijing's commitment to disarmament and non-proliferation. — AFP photo