

Fiji hostage crisis ends

Deposed PM Mahendra Chaudhry and all others freed

SUVA, July 13: Coup leaders today released their remaining 18 captives ending a two-month-old parliamentary hostage crisis that has spanned increasing unrest in Fiji, including the seizure of at least four tourist resorts, reports AP.

The hostage-takers held a traditional ceremony seeking forgiveness, then rebel leader George Speight shook hands and hugged deposed Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry before allowing him and the other freed hostages to be loaded onto two trucks.

"They're all out," said military spokesman Maj Howard Polin.

About 150 Speight supporters cheered as the hostage left. The hostages also arrived to applause at the Fiji Red Cross Society building, where they were to undergo quick medical

checks.

The release followed a deal Sunday, when the military agreed to scrap the country's multiracial constitution, depose Chaudhry — Fiji's first prime minister of ethnic Indian descent — and grant Speight and his henchmen amnesty.

The military seized control May 29 following violence and looting in the wake of the raid by Speight's gang 10 days earlier on Parliament.

Elsewhere in Fiji, protesters seized two more tourist resorts today, bringing the number held to four, the military said.

The seizures of the Buca Bay and Rukunuku resorts, which appeared peaceful, came hours after the takeover of the upscale Laucala Island resort and a day after the occupation of the Turtle Island Resort where "The Blue Lagoon" was filmed.

It was unclear if the takeovers were part of Speight's efforts to pressure the Great Council of Chiefs, Fiji's traditional power, to endorse his proposed Cabinet for an interim government or if his campaign was spiraling out of control.

The chiefs began meeting Thursday morning to choose a new president and vice president in line with the agreement signed Sunday and aimed at freeing the 18 remaining hostages in Parliament. Nine were released Wednesday.

Incidents of unrest have increased in recent days but most have been peaceful, although five police officers were injured in a police station takeover Wednesday at Labasa, which has turned into a hotbed of Speight support.

But there were growing concerns that the takeovers could

spread, possibly to Fiji's international airport near Nadi. The road from Nadi to Suva has been blockaded, so disruption of the Nadi airport also would essentially isolate the capital.

The United States upgraded a travel advisory Thursday urging Americans to leave the country. It cited the ongoing unrest "and the inability of local authorities to respond to these problems." Last week, Washington recalled the US ambassador for consultations. Australia and New Zealand have also advised their citizens to leave Fiji.

Speight was meeting with the chiefs, the final hurdle in his aim of overturning the Pacific country's elected government and installing his own after already forcing a back-down by the military regime.

Ratu Josefa appointed President

SUVA, July 13: Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs today appointed Ratu Josefa Iloilo, a supporter of coup leader George Speight, as the new president, reports AP.

The appointment was made after Speight released the last of the hostages he had been holding in parliament since May 19. The chiefs earlier warned Speight they would delay naming a president, prolonging the political crisis, if he deposed prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry and 17 other political captives were not freed.

Iloilo announced he will later this week name a government. Speight has said he would be "honoured" to be Prime Minister.

Former president Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, 80, stepped down and fled to the remote Lau Islands on May 29 when the Fiji military imposed martial law.



Deposed Fijian prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry (L) and coup leader George Speight (R) walk to a Red Cross truck as other hostages follow upon their release in Suva yesterday. The political hostage crisis came to an end as Chaudhry and 17 other political hostages were freed after 55 days in captivity. — AFP photo

ME leaders engage in struggle to strike peace deal

THURMONT, Maryland, July 13: US hosts played up an informal but busy atmosphere as Israel and the Palestinians struggled to reach a peace deal at the second day of the Camp David Middle East summit on Wednesday amid a virtual news blackout, reports AP.

Only the announcement that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak had cancelled a US-opposed 250-million-dollar Phalcon Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) for China to improve its leverage at the bargaining table penetrated the wall of silence surrounding the talks.

White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said negotiations on the core issues dividing the two sides were well underway but refused, citing the news blackout, to answer any questions relating to their substance.

"It's been a busy day between all of the parties and there's been real engagement today dealing with the substantive issues that define what the parties need to agree on in order to reach an overall agreement," Lockhart told reporters here

where the press has been sequestered since the talks began Tuesday.

US President Bill Clinton and his team held a series of meetings with Barak, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and their top negotiators, he said, but he declined to say whether Washington believed any progress had been made thus far.

"I think that the fact that we've spent two days working at the hard issues means something to us, but I'm not going to get into a description of what that means," he said.

Despite informal contacts between delegates — including at meals, walks and short rides on golf carts across the sprawling grounds of the mountain retreat — Lockhart said he was not "trying to underplay the seriousness and the problems they face here."

Lockhart told of "a certain informality on the Camp David site that is adding a certain value to these discussions," but confessed that the negotiations were far from easy at the presidential retreat in the Catskill

mountains.

"We have known all along that this was going to be a struggle and it is," he said, welcoming at the same time the cancellation of the Phalcon sale which Washington believed would raise tensions between China and Taiwan.

Despite Israeli officials' hopes that the cancellation might improve their position, Lockhart said it would have little impact on the negotiations which are to continue Thursday despite Clinton's temporary departure from the talks to two previous engagements.

The two sides remain at loggerheads over all the core issues Clinton is hoping to resolve: the future of Jerusalem, the borders of a Palestinian state, the fate of 3.7 million Palestinian refugees, Jewish settlers and security guarantees for Israel.

In Jerusalem, Israel said for the first time it would be willing to swap land with the Palestinians inside its 1967 borders in exchange for areas in the West Bank.

Haim Ramon, a senior minister, said the prime minister

would accept an exchange of land within the borders of the state of Israel.

Fears that the summit, expected to last about a week, might fail have raised the spectre of renewed violence in the region and in the Palestinian territories. Arafat's powerful Fatah PLO faction declared a state of alert for the first time in four years.

Meanwhile, a Palestinian minister told reporters that Arafat was waiting for a US initiative to bridge the gulf in positions.

With a September 13 deadline for a final pact looming and Arafat's vow to declare a Palestinian state by that date, Clinton launched the summit urging both sides to seek a "principled compromise."

The president, who has set aside a week to try to strike a peace deal in Maryland, is due to go to Japan for a summit on July 19. He will also make a temporary exit from Camp David either Wednesday night or Thursday morning to attend prior engagements.

HK deports 6 to mainland

HONG KONG, July 13: Six of the 103 immigrants from the Chinese mainland who lost a court appeal to remain in Hong Kong have been deported and more will follow, the territory's government said today, reports AP.

"Six claimants who have no right to remain in Hong Kong were repatriated to the mainland," a government spokesman said.

He added another five were being held in the Immigration Detention Centre awaiting deportation.

"We need to give them a removal issue, which takes a day or two. After that we will send them back," he added.

The group deliberately overstayed their visas in Hong Kong, arguing they had the right to live in Hong Kong because their parents were permanent residents in the territory.

In January 1999, Hong Kong's Court of Final Appeal ruled mainland children born to at least one Hong Kong parent had the right to settle in the territory even if the parent was not a resident at the time of their birth.

The Hong Kong government argued the ruling would lead to an influx of 1.67 million mainlanders and asked Beijing for a reinterpretation of the Basic Law, its mini-constitution, to allow the ruling to be thrown out.

Beijing duly made its reinterpretation and the ruling was overturned, sparking accusations that governments in Beijing and Hong Kong were violating the autonomy guaranteed for Hong Kong for the 50 years after its handover from Britain to China in 1997.

Solar flare disrupts radio communications

WASHINGTON, July 13: A strong solar flare caused some radio blackouts on parts of the Earth facing the sun and more are possible as the active solar region rotates toward the center of the sun, NASA announced, reports AP.

The space agency said on its science web site that the Solar and Heliospheric Observatory (SOHO) satellite recorded a massive solar flare, called an X-class flare, about 6:37 am (1637 BST) Wednesday.

Streams of electromagnetic energy erupting from the flare disrupted some radio communications, the announcement said.

SOHO, a joint project of NASA and the European Space Agency, also detected two coronal mass ejections, huge clouds of electrified gas, erupting from the sun on Monday and Tuesday.

The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, which predicts the effects of solar eruptions, said there was a 40 per cent chance that the ass ejection would trigger a disruption of the Earth's magnetic field by Friday. This could create aurora lights reaching into the mid-latitudes, which would include the southern US. Aurora lights are common in the far northern and southern latitudes.

The coronal mass ejection sent a bubble of plasma, or electrified gas, toward the Earth at more than 2 million miles an hour. The first shock wave of the fast-moving mass was expected to smash into the Earth's magnetosphere, the magnetic field that surrounds the planet, on Thursday. Material from a second, more powerful ejection is expected on Friday.

Blair, Ahern to hold talks on N Ireland peace

BELFAST, July 13: Britain and the Irish Republic will hold talks tomorrow to try to get northern Ireland's peace process back on track after nearly two weeks of violence by Protestant hardliners, reports Reuters.

British officials were clearly relieved that the annual Protestant "marching season" to mark centuries-old battlefield victories over Roman Catholics ended peacefully yesterday.

They also drew comfort from the fact that the British province's home-rule government representing the Protestant majority and the Catholic minority remained intact and committed to sealing a lasting peace.

China distorting US foreign policy, alleges Cohen

BEIJING, July 13: US Defense Secretary William Cohen accused China's state-controlled media of presenting a dangerously distorted view of US foreign policy goals, but in an unscripted moment he agreed with a Chinese woman's complaint that US news media sometimes do the same to China, reports AP.

In a speech to the National Defense University, a school for officers of the People's Liberation Army, Cohen said China "sometimes presents the United States in a way that is not only unhelpful but is untrue."

The characterization of the United States being a hegemony, a country determined to dominate the world and to contain and dominate China is simply untrue," he said. "We see constant references in the Chinese media" to the United States that amount to "hyperbole or criticism or negativity."

In a portion of his prepared remarks that he dropped in the delivery, Cohen referred to a "confrontational rhetoric" by China which assigns hostile motives to American foreign policy goals. He said this pre-

sents a "danger that simple misunderstandings will lead to serious miscalculations."

Cohen seemed to be referring to the United States, by stationing troops in Asia, allying itself with Japan and providing arms to Taiwan, seeks to stifle China and dominate Asia.

China also views US development of a national missile defence as another means of dominating China — a claim Cohen refuted by saying the system would "not be designed to address China's missile capability."

In a question-and-answer session after his speech, Cohen — and perhaps many of the Chinese officers in the audience — were taken by surprise when a woman seated near Cohen's wife, Janet, stood and posed a lengthy question which drew a vigorous and seemingly spontaneous burst of applause.

The woman, who described herself as the spouse of an army official, ignored a uniformed Chinese officer's signal for her to sit down. She noted Cohen's criticisms of China's media. "I think the same problem occurs

in the US media," she said through an interpreter, citing specifically US media reporting on human rights abuses in China. Her comments seemed to catch Cohen off guard.

"I guess I should have cut the questions before you asked your question," Cohen said jokingly.

"We have a free media in the United States," Cohen said, adding: "There are some in our media that characterize or mischaracterize China." He said these distortions "too often have caused tensions between our two countries."

Cohen's speech focused on the prospects for improved US-China relations and sought to dispel the notion held by China's leaders that the United States is trying to "contain" China in the way it approached the former Soviet Union in a cold war of military, economic and political competition.

He said those in the United States who advocate a containment policy toward China are pursuing "folly and futility." "We do not seek to contain the most populous nation on earth," Cohen said.

Two more Tamil parties oppose new constitution

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka, July 13: The government's desperate bid to save a peace plan giving regions more power to provinces suffered another setback Wednesday when two more Tamil parties opposed it, reports AP.

The Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) and the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) said after two hours of talks with government legislators Wednesday that the proposal is unacceptable and called for further amendments.

On Friday, the government and the opposition reached a landmark consensus on a new constitution that would give wider powers to Sri Lanka's eight regions, including two where Tamils are in a majority.

A day later, the mainstream Tamil political party, the Tamil United Liberation Front, rejected the proposal, saying it does not meet their expectations for a federal system of governance.

The EPDP and the PLOTE on Wednesday attended talks with government legislators led by Gammal Laxman Peiris, the country's justice and constitutional affairs minister.

"The EPDP is against the manner in which the government proposes to devolve power to the north and east of the country," Sinnadurai Thavarajah, EPDP legislator, told the Associated Press after the talks.

Thavarajah said a proposal for the central government to retain power over state lands was also unacceptable.

He said the two parties, which together have 11 seats in the 225-seat Parliament, will present their own suggestions for power-sharing at a future date.

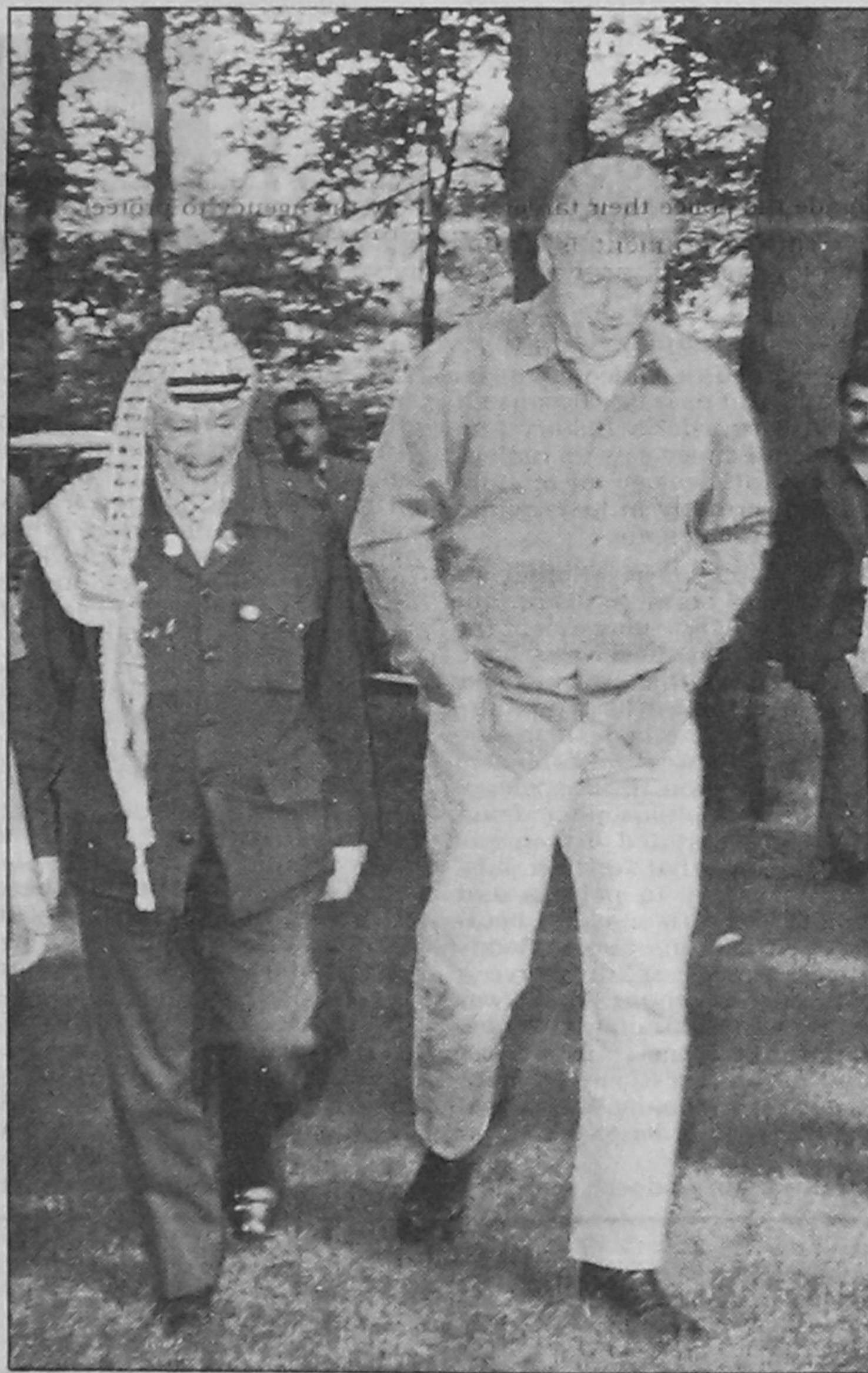
The government invited Tamil parties to the talks in a desperate bid to save the peace plan.

The rejection by Tamil parties is a major setback for the government as it hoped to clinch the support of moderate Tamil representation to marginalize the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

The tigers are the only Tamil guerrilla group that is left fighting the military to carve out a homeland called Eelam for the nation's minority Tamils. The EPDP and PLOTE were former rebel groups that renounced violence and joined the political mainstream.

The government's proposed new constitution includes amendments that would grant wide powers to regional authorities in order to appeal to the 3.2 million Tamils, many of whom say they are discriminated against by the Sinhalese majority.

The draft constitution was to be introduced in Parliament before Aug 24, when the legislature breaks for elections.



This photo released by the White House on Wednesday shows US President Bill Clinton walking with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat at Camp David, MD. — AFP photo

Israel calls off radar system sale to China

THURMONT, July 13: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak informed President Bill Clinton at the Mideast summit that he was calling off a planned quarter-billion-dollar sale of an advanced airborne warning system to China, reports AP.

Barak's spokesman, Gadl Baltiansky, said Barak had "expressed sorrow" in a letter to Chinese President Jiang Zemin that the sale had been scuttled.

"Israel is right now together with the United States in the midst of an effort to achieve historic decisions relating to her vital interests," Baltiansky

said. The decision was taken against the "background of the need to have intimate relations with the United States" while the summit was going on, and in its aftermath, the Israeli spokesman said Wednesday.

While Baltiansky did not say explicitly that Israel had yielded to US pressure, he said the step was taken against "the background of American objections" to the deal.

The deal represented a major effort by Israel to improve its relations with China and expand its diplomatic and business contacts worldwide, which is one of the reasons it is engaged in trying to make peace with the Arabs.

With the Clinton administration eager to stop the deal, there were reports last week Israel would modify arrangements by proceeding with the transaction through a third country.

But Baltiansky told the Associated Press the deal was off in all forms.

US aid worker leaves Kabul

KABUL, July 13: An American aid worker left Afghanistan today with words of hope for Afghan women after the ruling Taliban militia ordered her to leave or be deported for alleged spying, reports AP.

Mary MacMakin, a grandmother in her 70s who has lived and worked in Afghanistan on and off for more than 30 years, was Wednesday given 24 hours to leave the country.

MacMakin said she was

Scientists map genes of a plant disease

UNDATED, July 13: For the first time, scientists have reported mapping the genes of a plant disease, an advance that could lead to new approaches to fighting a bacterial scourge that ravages orange groves and other crops, reports AP.

The work also sheds light on the way bacteria infect both humans and plants and thwart their defenses.

"This sort of information is going to open up crop protection strategies the way genome sequencing is opening up new pharmaceutical strategies to control infectious diseases" in people, said Charles J. Arntzen, president of the Boyce Thompson Institute at Cornell University.

Sponsored by the State of Sao Paulo Research Foundation in Brazil, 200 scientists in 34 molecular biology labs worked for two years to sequence the genome of the bacteria Xylella fastidiosa.

The scientists reported in Thursday's issue of the journal Nature that they were able to identify the function of 47 per cent of the bacteria's 2,904 genes, offering researchers targets for developing cheaper ways of controlling the disease, known as "xylem" variegated chlorosis, or CVC.

Joao Carlos Setubal, who led the study as coordinator of the Bioinformatics Laboratory at the University of Campinas in Brazil, said the project made Brazil a new force in the international genome arena, after starting from a position of practically no local expertise.

"The scientists also reported finding at least 83 genes in Xylella fastidiosa that came from other bacteria, including some that help fight off a plant's natural defenses."

"This is the strongest story we have had in the plant biology area or non-human medicine for gene transfer across bacteria," Arntzen said. It gives scientists a better understanding of how germs evolve along with the plants they infect, he said.

The finding also sheds light on how bacteria that cause human diseases develop resistance to antibiotics, he added.

"It really is fascinating to see how many similarities there are between plant and human pathogens," Arntzen said. "That is what is coming out of a lot of genome sequencing. We can study one organism and learn something about another one."

Carried by insects called sharpshooters leafhoppers, the bacteria infest the xylem, the tubes under the bark of a tree that transport water. By blocking water absorption, the disease causes the fruit to be small, hard and commercially worthless. Related strains of the bacteria attack coffee, almonds, pecans, grapevines, alfalfa, peaches and other plants.

The disease was first identified in Brazil in 1987 and causes 50 million dollars a year in damage to orange groves there, which produce half the orange juice concentrate in the world, Setubal said.

Robot performs surgery on woman

RICHMOND, July 13: A woman had her gall bladder removed by a robot one day after the da Vinci Surgical System was approved by federal regulators, reports AP.

The da Vinci, approved for use at five US hospitals on Tuesday by the Food and Drug Administration, enables surgeons to operate by manipulating joysticks at a computer terminal. Lenses inserted in the patient's body give the surgeon a 3-D view of the person's insides.

Dr William E. Kelley Jr performed the gall bladder surgery Wednesday on 35-year-old Kimberly Briggs at Henrico Doctors Hospital.

"I was very pleased. I think it went very smoothly," said Kelley, who had been trained on the da Vinci but had used it to operate only on pigs and cadavers before.

Also pleased was Briggs, who was wheeled into a news conference less than four hours after her surgery was over.

"I feel great," she said adding that the less invasive procedure would allow her to be home in time for her son Mario's sixth birthday party on Thursday.

Surgery using the da Vinci has been approved only for abdominal operations in the United States, but the 1 million dollar robot is being more widely used in Europe, Kelley said. FDA approval for da Vinci on cardiac surgery could come this year, Katz said.

A few hospitals are conducting clinical trials of robot-assisted heart surgery.

Five rebel suicide bomber suspects held in Lanka

COLOMBO, July 13: Police said Thursday they had arrested five people they suspect are potential Tamil rebel suicide bombers, thwarting a plan to bomb Colombo on the anniversary of anti-Tamil riots that gave birth to the separatist campaign 17 years ago, reports AP.

The two women and three men were picked up during an all night search in Tamil neighborhoods in the capital, said a police officer who said he is under orders not to be quoted by name.

He said police suspect the rebels were told to carry out bombings of political and commercial targets to mark "Black July," a reference to riots on July 23, 1983 when more than 1,500 minority Tamils were killed and their homes looted by mobs of the Sinhalese majority.

The search operation was part of a police strategy to check rebel infiltration into the capital ahead of the anniversary.

The anti-Tamil riots started after the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam rebels killed 12 soldiers in their first major attack in Jaffna.

BRIEFLY

Russia seizes 3 Japanese boats:

Three Japanese fishing boats were seized by the Russian coast guard on suspicion of poaching in Russian waters north of Japan, a Japanese official said Thursday. AP reports from Tokyo.

The crews were suspected of fishing for cod near Etorofu, one of four small islands in the sea of Okhotsk occupied by Russia after World War II but claimed by Japan. The boats were escorted to Nevel'sk, on Sakhalin Island, on Wednesday night, said Shinichi Nakamura, a local official on Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido.

Thai elephant kills man: A bull elephant in a Thai resort gored to death a man who angred it by taking food away from its mouth and feeding it to another beast, the second such fatality in three months, police said Thursday. AP reports from Bangkok.

The 16-year-old elephant called Plai Yogie gored the younger brother of its keeper with its tusk at the Elephant Village in Pattaya, 110 kilometers (68 miles) south of Bangkok, said Police Maj. Col. Thanakrit Larb-inpisan. Oun Insamran, 50, died on the way to the hospital. The elephant, which gave rides to tourists, has been expelled from the village and sent back to the northeastern province of Surin, home to most of Thailand's working elephants, said Thanakrit.

Garbage avalanche death toll 147: The death toll from a massive avalanche of garbage near the Philippine capital rose to 147 on Thursday as heavy rains brought the prospect of even more waste crashing down, officials said, AFP reports from Manila.

Recovery efforts slowed to a crawl as the softened surface of the mountain of garbage at the Payatas dumpsite made it dangerous for recovery teams to continue digging for more bodies three days after the disaster.