

International

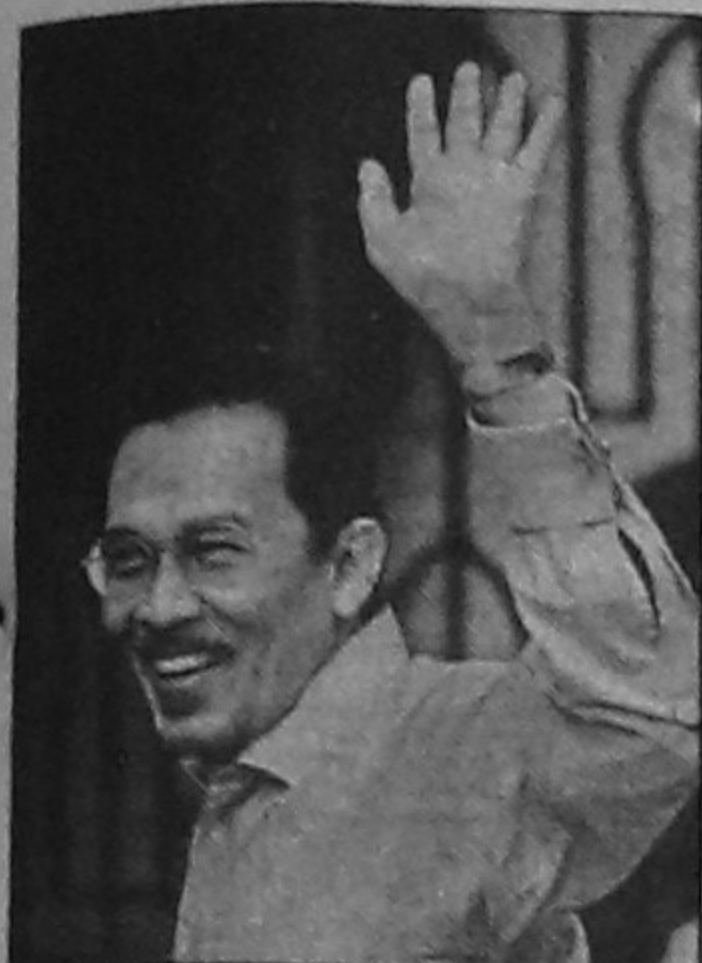
No conditions for Kashmir talks: Vajpayee

NEW DELHI, Aug 7: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said today there were no conditions for peace talks with Kashmir's dominant militant group...

The issue of imposing a constitutional framework on the talks is crucial, as it would preclude any possibility of discussing Kashmir's secession from India.

New Delhi's stance has been muddled from the start, with Vajpayee's ambiguous statements compounded by ministers pushing different lines.

Pakistan-based Hizbul Mujahideen commander Syed Salahuddin confirmed Sunday a 5:00 p.m. (1800 BST) Tuesday deadline for India to sit down for unconditional three-way talks...



Verdict in Anwar trial today

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 7: The verdict in jailed politician Anwar Ibrahim's sodomy trial will be delivered tomorrow, a lawyer for the former deputy prime minister said, reports AFP.

The High Court had sent a statement to the lawyers, saying that Judge Ariffin Jaka would pronounce the judgement at 9.30 am (0730 BST), attorney Sankara Nair said Monday.

The verdict was scheduled for Friday, but in a surprise move one day before it was to be delivered, the High Court said Judge Ariffin was not ready with his decision.

Opposition leaders said the decision was prompted by fears of a massive anti-government rally to coincide with the verdict, which will cap a year-long trial that has focussed attention on Malaysia's judiciary.

Government leaders have repeatedly warned Malaysians not to demonstrate, saying that street rallies would cause chaos and undermine the economy.

Anti-government protests have shaken Kuala Lumpur sporadically since Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad fired Anwar as his deputy in September 1998.

Anwar was soon arrested and eventually sentenced to six years imprisonment for corruption.

Bush widens lead over Gore: Poll

WASHINGTON, Aug 7: Republican presidential nominee George W. Bush has opened up a 17-point lead over Democratic rival US Vice President Al Gore, according to a new poll by CNN and the daily newspaper USA Today, reports AFP.

Fifty-four per cent of 653 likely voters favoured Bush, while 37 per cent preferred Gore, according to the poll, which found that the Texas governor has made gains among women, senior citizens, Catholics and lower-income voters.

Just prior to the Republican convention which ended Thursday, the margin between the two candidates was just 11 points, with 50 per cent of voters polled choosing Bush and 39 per cent saying they preferred Gore, CNN and USA Today said.

The survey found that Bush also has convinced voters that he is more compassionate than Gore - traditionally a major advantage for Democratic candidates.

The Texas Republican also has widened his lead with the number of Americans who think he is a stronger leader than Gore.

The survey results come on the heels of a Newsweek poll of 817 registered voters showing that Bush had opened up a 49-38 per cent lead over Gore following the convention.

The Democrats will hold their convention on August 14-17 in Los Angeles, where Gore also seems likely to reap the traditional post-convention "bounce" in opinion polls.

3 wounded as Israeli troops open fire

FATIMA GATE, Lebanon, Aug 7: Three Lebanese, two of them journalists, were wounded late Sunday when Israeli troops fired across the border at a group of some 15 stone-throwing youths, hospital sources said today, reports AFP.

An Israeli military spokesman said troops opened fire with live rounds when a Molotov cocktail was thrown over the border fence at an Israeli position near the Fatima Gate.

They fired at the man who threw the petrol bomb and hit him, the spokesman asserted. No damage was caused when the bottle exploded.

But the AFP correspondent said the Molotov cocktail had been ignited but not thrown when the Israelis opened fire.

Wahid apologises for mistakes, vows to keep Indonesia intact

JAKARTA, Aug 7: Indonesia's beleaguered President Abdurrahman Wahid today apologised for his mistakes, saying he would take a backseat in government in the future and pledging an all-out effort to keep the country from tearing itself apart, reports AFP.

Wahid said in a progress report to an annual session of the upper house, or People's Consultative Assembly (MPR).

A cabinet reshuffle will be done when the time is right, Wahid said in a progress report to an annual session of the upper house, or People's Consultative Assembly (MPR).

A cabinet reshuffle also means that there will be a division of tasks... hence the president will focus on foreign affairs, assisted by the foreign minister.

He added, without naming names, that others would take care of the "technical aspects," or the day-to-day running, of internal affairs.

To all the people of Indonesia, I seek to apologise, if in this past nine months the government has not been able to fully overcome all

problems, but trust us to work hard and continue to fight to do more."

He also appealed for a unified effort to transform Indonesia into a democracy and pull the economy out of recession.

"I have to say... the government needs the support of all the people of Indonesia."

Wahid was elected president after Indonesia's first democratic general election in October 1999. He has since largely failed to live up to the optimism that accompanied his victory and the defeat of president B.J. Habibie, which saw an end to more than 30 years of iron-fisted rule by former president Suharto or his protege.

The unrest that plagues large parts of the vast Indonesian archipelago, in which thousands of people have died and hundreds of thousands of others displaced, has also continued unabated.

In the Maluku Islands, 19 months of Christian-Muslim violence has left 4,000 people

dead. Separatism has also been growing at both ends of the country, in Aceh in the west and Irian Jaya in the east.

In his speech, Wahid promised broad autonomy as early as this year for Aceh and Irian Jaya.

The provinces would have their own judiciary, police, education and legal systems and a greater share of revenues from the region's riches, he said.

But the 60-year-old president repeated his opposition to separatism, which he cited as one of the "main problems" facing the vast archipelago of 210 million people.

The president has further been accused of having no clear policy to restore the country's ailing economy - bring the rupiah currency down to close to 9,500 to the dollar last month - and tainted by allegations of corruption in his inner circle.

Wahid admitted in his speech improvements were "still too small" and had fallen short of

expectations, but insisted the country was emerging from its worst crisis in decades.

Wahid's supporters have talked of a conspiracy to destabilise the country by supporters of Suharto.

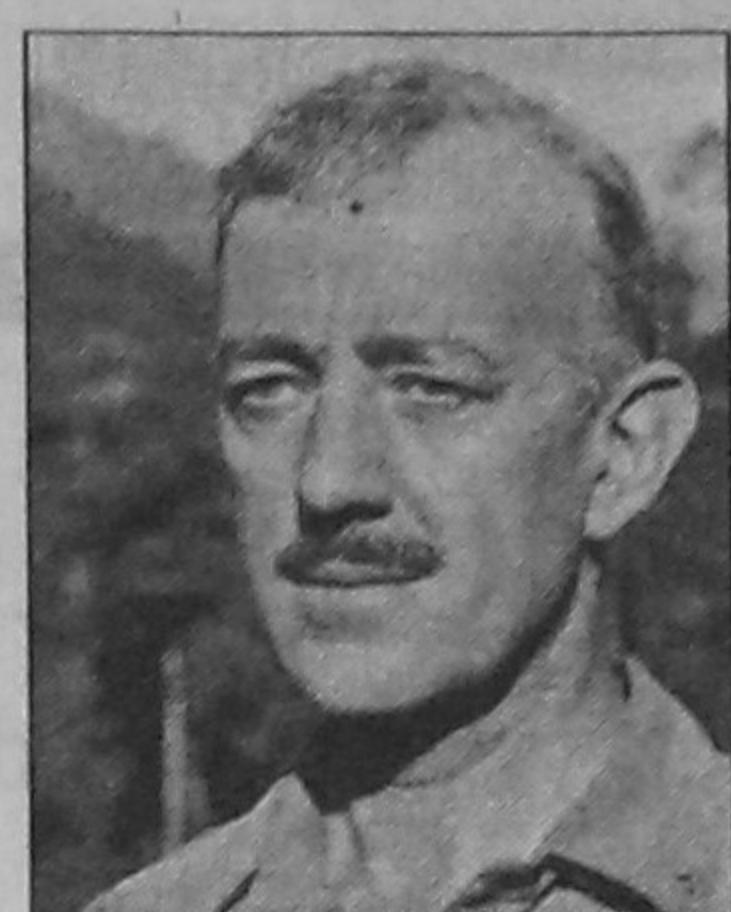
But many critics have said Wahid's "rainbow" coalition cabinet, cobbled together nine months ago to accommodate the various main political parties who helped elect him, has proved ineffective, with members constrained by party ties.

Political sources in Jakarta have said a "first minister" or virtual prime minister would be appointed to run cabinet meetings, which 60-year-old Wahid in any case often leaves to Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri.

But the figure most often mooted for the post, mines and energy minister Bambang Susilo Yudhoyono, Monday denied any knowledge of an impending promotion.

British actor Alec Guinness dies

LONDON, Aug 7: Veteran British actor Sir Alec Guinness, whose career spanned six decades and took him from Shakespeare to Star Wars, has died at the age of 86, a hospital spokesman said today, reports AFP.



Sir Alec, who won an Oscar for his performance in the 1957 war drama "Bridge over the River Kwai", died on Saturday evening after being taken ill two days earlier, said the spokesman from the hospital in Midhurst, southern England.

The venerable British actor, beloved by generations of movie fans and revered for his versatility on both stage and screen, had been suffering from ill-health for a number of years.

Sir Alec Guinness was the last surviving member of an elite company of great classic actors of his day that also included Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson.

In between times he surfaced in such time-honoured classics as "Doctor Zhivago," "Lawrence of Arabia," and "A Passage to India," while his television credits included John Le Carré's Smiley in Trinker, Tallor, Soldier, Spy.

He still managed to find time for Shakespeare, depicting a memorable Shylock in a production of The Merchant of Venice in the mid 1980s.

He was knighted, in 1958, by Queen Elizabeth in appreciation of his talents.

Sir Alec was born into poverty London on April 2, 1914, of an unknown father whom he searched for, in vain, all his life.

He was brought up by an unstable mother and a brutal step-father.

He discovered the theatre at 16 but took a job in an advertising company before taking to the boards in 1934 with the support of great Shakespearean actor John Gielgud.



Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid (L) shakes hands with People's Consultative Assembly Chairman Amien Rais (R) after arriving at the House of Representatives complex in Jakarta yesterday. Wahid is facing a crucial political test as the country's highest legislative body meets for a session to evaluate his performance after nine months in power.

Pak religious fanatics protest against cable TV

PESHAWAR, Pakistan, Aug 7: Hundreds of Pakistani religious activists staged a rally against pay television today and demanded that it be banned to shield people from Western culture, reports AFP.

"We will not allow cable television as it will spread obscenity and vulgarity and expose people to Western cultural invasion," said Maulana Hasan, a leader of Jamiat Ulema Islam (JUI) party.

The protest was jointly organised by JUI, a strong supporter of Afghanistan's ruling Taliban Islamic militia, and other religious parties.

Hasan told the rally a series of demonstrations would be organised across Pakistani cities in the coming weeks.

Police were out in strength to prevent trouble during the hour-long protest which passed off peacefully.

Religious groups in Peshawar, capital of the North West Frontier Province, have vowed to block pay television in the region.

Fresh ME summit likely after Aug 17: Arafat

ABU DHABI, Aug 7: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said today that a new Israeli-Palestinian peace summit could take place when the Democratic National Convention in the United States ends on August 17, reports AFP.

"US President Bill Clinton said a new summit could take place after the Democratic convention," Arafat told the official WAM news agency on his arrival in the United Arab Emirates.

The Democratic Party gathering runs from August 14-17 in Los Angeles.

Arafat, on a tour of Arab and other countries to explain the Palestinian position in the wake of the failure of the Camp David summit, played down statements by Clinton that Washington may move its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

"We must keep in mind that the United States is currently locked in an electoral battle," Arafat said, referring to the size and importance of the Jewish voting bloc in the United States.

He praised the support given by Arab countries to the Palestinian negotiators and the position of

the international community over eastern Jerusalem, which the Palestinians want as the capital of their future state.

"We can never forget this Arab, Christian and international position," he said.

Since his return from the Camp David summit, which ended July 25, Arafat has been to several Arab countries, as well as France, South Africa and Turkey, to seek their support for Palestinian claims on Jerusalem, the right of Palestinian refugees to return and the declaration of a Palestinian state.

Vegetarian mothers more likely to have girls

LONDON, Aug 7: Vegetarian mothers are more likely to give birth to girls, Britain's The Times newspaper reported today, citing new research that examines the impact of diet on the gender of offspring, reports AFP.

The study, conducted at Nottingham University, found that while the national average in Britain is 106 boys born to every 100 girls, for vegetarian mothers the ratio was just 85 boys to 100 girls.

"It appears that vegetarians are more likely to have girls than boys," said researcher Pauline Hudson, according to The Times. "This may well be a direct influence of their diet although there appears to be no other research in this area."

The survey was based on an audit of some 6,000 pregnant women in 1998 and the results were published in the Practising Midwife journal.

Speight should be charged with treason: Mahendra

WELLINGTON, Aug 7: Deposed Fijian prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry arrived in Wellington Sunday saying he would urge the New Zealand government to toughen sanctions against his coup-riven country if it failed to return to democracy, reports AFP.

Chaudhry, Fiji's first ethnic Indian prime minister, said he was still receiving death threats at home.

He told reporters he also believed arrested coup leader George Speight should be charged with treason.

Speight and his supporters

had held Chaudhry, his son Rajendra, and other parliamentarians hostage for 56 days after the May 19 coup on the island.

Chaudhry said he believed Speight was guilty of treason punishable, in theory, by death.

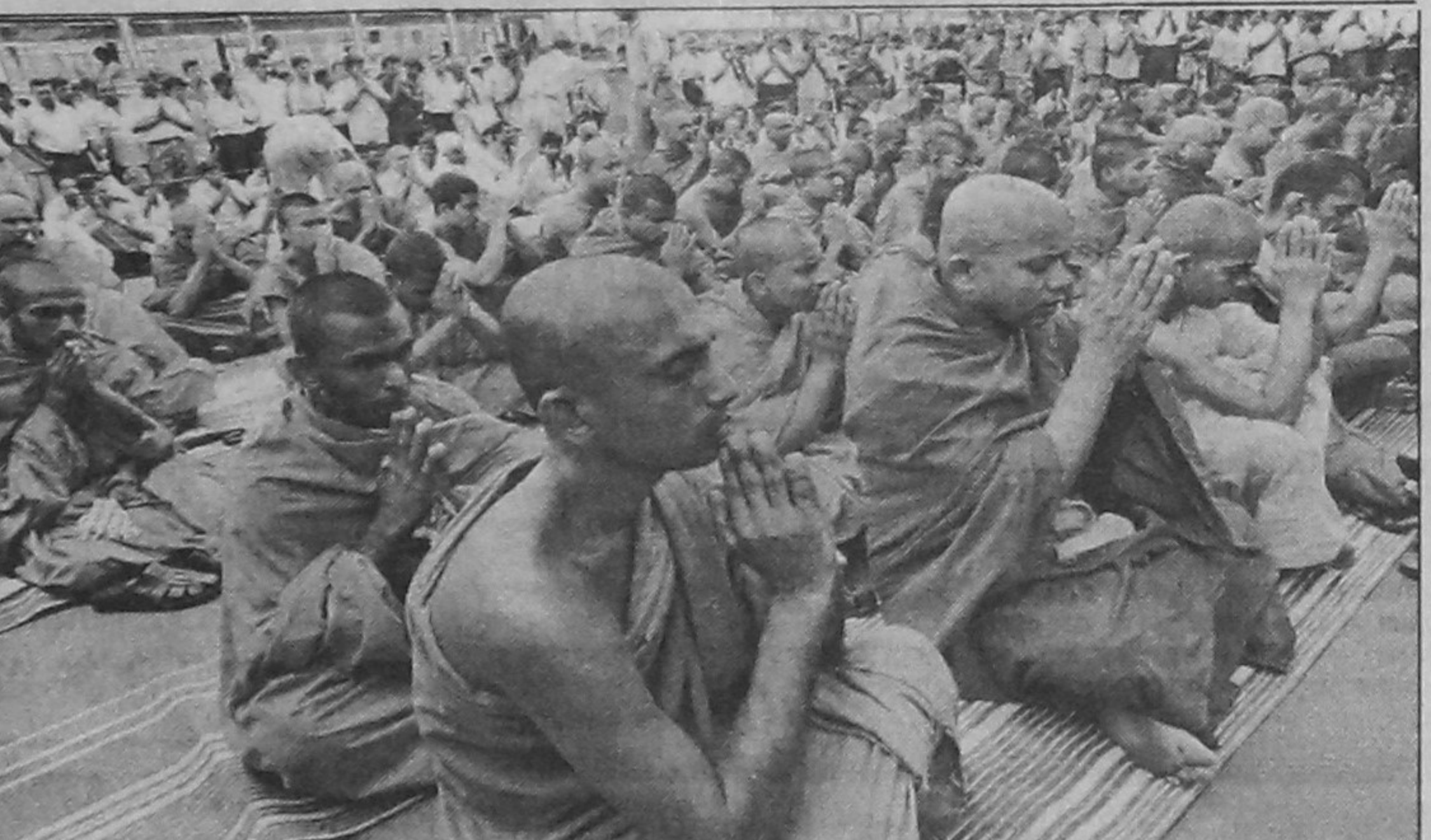
"It is a crime that he has committed and I suppose he will have to answer for it," the deposed prime minister said.

Speight, who has thus far been in court on five minor charges, still faces a possible treason summons.

Chaudhry is in New Zealand this week to attend a Socialist International Asia Pacific conference hosted by the New Zealand Labour Party. The former Fijian premier, asked if he would recommend New Zealand took stronger actions against Fiji, said: "If the interim regime that has taken over there does not move swiftly to democratic rule, then yes."

Chaudhry said he also hoped to discuss immigration issues, including granting refugee status to Indian Fijians who might wish to move to New Zealand.

Chaudhry, who arrived with his wife Virmati, said he and his family did not feel totally safe in Fiji but were not considering leaving permanently.



Buddhist monks pray before beginning a fast yesterday in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo to protest constitutional reforms that seek to turn the country into a de facto federal state. The Sri Lankan parliament began a debate on the bill which will be voted upon August 9.

Cabinet reshuffle in S Korea

SEOUL, Aug 7: President Kim Dae-jung replaced nearly half his 19 Cabinet posts today, appointing a career economic technocrat to the post in charge of South Korea's economic policy, reports AP.

Kim retained Prime Minister Lee Han-dong in the reshuffle that affected a total of nine posts. Most of the ministries affected are economic posts.

Kim Nyum, 59, was appointed head of the Ministry of Finance and Economy.

BRIEFLY

Journalist arrested in Tehran: Ahmad Zeid-Abadi, a journalist of the reformist daily Hamshahri, the organ of the Tehran municipality, was arrested Monday on the orders of press court Judge Said Mortazavi, the state news agency IRNA reported, AFP reports from Tehran.

Mortazavi said an arrest warrant had been issued because of Zeid-Abadi's refusal to appear before the court. IRNA quoted the journalist's wife, Mahdih Mohammadi, as saying that he had been arrested by nearly a dozen policemen, who had also searched their home.

Israeli envoy to visit Turkey: Israel's Internal Security Minister Shlomo Ben Ami will arrive in Ankara on Thursday for talks with Turkish officials on his country's stance following the breakdown of the Camp David peace summit, the Israeli embassy said Monday, AFP reports from Ankara.

A spokesman for the embassy said that Ben Ami aims to "update on the Israeli position" after the Camp David talks, which he attended as part of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's negotiating team. "We want to explain our position to the Turkish authorities," the spokesman added.

British coach crashes in France: A British child was killed and at least 17 others were injured, four seriously, when a bus carrying 40 youths crashed Monday on a highway near the central French town of Vierzon, police said, AFP reports from Vierzon, France.

Police attributed the accident to a driver of the coach dozing off as the party travelled between Paris and the central city of Clermont-Ferrand, toward a summer camp in the Dordogne region. Those injured were being evacuated by helicopter to nearby hospitals at Vierzon and Bourges, firefighters said. Four children were described as being in a serious condition.

Thousands rally in US to protest sanctions against Iraq

WASHINGTON, Aug 7: The spirit of the anti-Vietnam War movement revisited the US capital Sunday as thousands of Americans, singing old anti-war songs, gathered in front of the White House to protest sanctions against Iraq, reports AFP.

"Stop the sanctions now!" chanted the crowd in Lafayette Square as folk song legend and long-time peace activist Pete Seeger played the banjo and sang "Down by the Riverside," a time-honoured hymn of the Vietnam War generation.

An estimated 3,000 people braved driving rain to vent their frustration with the United States, Britain and other western powers, which led international efforts 10 years ago this Sunday to impose sweeping UN sanctions against Iraq following its invasion of Kuwait.

"What is the purpose of this policy?" asked Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader, one of about a dozen speakers at the rally.

"Is it to destabilise the dictator of Iraq?" he continued. "The policy increases the repression and

the power of the dictator of Iraq. Is it to demonstrate that the United States of America is the most powerful country in the world? I don't think that needs to be demonstrated on the graves of one million innocent Iraqi civilians."

Nader said 5,000 Iraqi children were dying each month from diseases and malnutrition resulting from the sanctions.

Democratic Congressman Dennis Kucinich of Ohio echoed this view by saying the sanctions were "wrong" and did nothing but continue to "weaken and kill innocent children."

"I am here to let our current and future leaders know that there are many of us in Congress who oppose this sanctions policy," declared the lawmaker.

The sanctions, which since their imposition by the UN Security Council on August 6, 1990, have been criticised by France, China and Russia, have had a devastating effect of Iraqi society, according to UN experts.

Per capita income fell from 3,416 dollars in 1984 to less than 1,036 in 1998, according to a UN report presented to the Security Council last year.

Infant mortality doubled from 64 per each one thousand births in 1990 to 129 in 1995.

However, the sanctions regime was somewhat eased in late 1996 with the introduction of a so-called "oil-for-food" program that allows Baghdad to sell oil and use the proceeds to buy food and medicine.

Since the inception of the program Baghdad has been able to export 30.5 billion dollars worth of oil, while the United Nations has approved more than seven billion dollars worth of contracts for delivery of humanitarian goods to Iraq.

But despite public complaints, the United States strongly signalled last week that it intended to keep tightening the screws on Baghdad until President Saddam Hussein was removed from power.

"There may be some internationally who speak with ease and comfort about the possibility of living with the Saddam Hussein regime, even of rehabilitating Saddam," said Assistant Secretary of State David Welch.



Protesters gather in the rain at Lafayette Park, across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House, on Sunday to demand an end to the UN sanctions on Iraq imposed after the Gulf War. Iraq denounced the sanctions as a "crime against humanity" as the embargo enters its 11th year.