

International

India set to buy advanced jet trainers from UK aerospace

NEW DELHI, Aug 8: India is in the final stage of negotiations to buy Hawk advanced jet trainers from British Aerospace, India's defense minister said Monday, two days after the air force lost its 55th MiG fighter jet in three years, reports AP.

"All technical and other aspects of the advanced jet trainer purchase have been gone into and negotiations on prices should be finalised soon," George Fernandes told the private Star News channel.

Between 30 and 45 Hawk-100 trainers worth 18 billion rupees (US\$ 429 million) would be purchased, Press Trust of India quoted unnamed air force sources as saying. Assembly lines would also be set up in the southern city of Bangalore by the state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited to manufacture the trainers, PTI reported.

The Indian Air Force has been beset by frequent flying accidents.

Fernandes told Parliament last month that the air force had lost 54 Soviet-made MiGs, four other aircraft and 21 pilots in the past three years. Another crash took place Saturday, when a MiG-21 jet crashed after takeoff at New Delhi's international airport, killing its pilot.

The IAF has nearly 800 jet fighters, more than half of which were built by the Soviet Union in the 1950s. It also has in its fleet the French Mirage and British Jaguar fighter aircraft.

Last September, a government committee recommended changes in training, design, procedures and organisational structure in response to the high number of accidents. Trained in old aircraft, pilots are often expected to immediately adapt to flying the much faster MiG-21.

Iran authorities close major reformist paper

TEHRAN, Aug 8: Iran's courts today ordered the closure of the Bahar daily, a reformist newspaper close to President Mohammad Khatami, sources at the paper told AFP.

They said the ban on Bahar, the last surviving reformist paper after a widespread crackdown on the press, was imposed after numerous complaints, in particular over Tuesday's edition of the daily.

Tuesday's paper carried a statement attributed to Khatami's brother Mohammad-Reza saying the order by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to block any liberalisation of the press code was a "plot against parliament."

Khamenei on Sunday issued a shock decree forbidding parliament from debating a motion to liberalise press restrictions imposed by the previous conservative-led legislature during its final days in office.

Britain summons Belgrade's top diplomat

LONDON, Aug 8: The British Foreign Office summoned Belgrade's top diplomat here today to demand access to two British policemen arrested in Montenegro on suspicion of spying and get explanations over their detention, reports AFP.

The pair were transferred to the Yugoslav capital Belgrade on Tuesday where a military court will decide whether the two would be charged with spying and planning terrorist attacks.

A Foreign Office spokeswoman said minister of state Keith Vaz would use the meeting with Rade Drobac, the senior Yugoslav diplomat in London, to ask on what basis the two men would be charged, if at all.

The minister will also press for British consular staff to be given immediate access to the pair, the spokeswoman told AFP.

"The Yugoslav authorities are under obligation to officially inform us. The whole point is that we have not been informed and that is what the minister will be discussing," she said.

Fund embezzlement Former mayor convicted in China

BEIJING, Aug 8: A former mayor of a city in eastern China has been convicted of embezzling funds from a state-owned company and accepting hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes, local media said Monday, reports AFP.

A court in the eastern province of Anhui recently convicted 67-year-old Zhou Yude, who was mayor of Ma'anshan city in Anhui for 13 years until 1993, the official Xinhua news agency said.

He embezzled more than 5.5 million Hong Kong dollars (700,000 US\$) of funds and took 500,000 Hong Kong dollars of bribes from 1993 to 1996 while he was chairman of a large state-controlled enterprise, the Hong Kong Huangshan Company, Xinhua said.

Zhou was arrested in April 1999 charged with economic crimes. He has protested his innocence.

Lanka postpones vote on new constitution

COLOMBO, Aug 8: The government postponed a vote on a new constitution aimed at ending the 17-year civil war today, saying 10 opposition members had been abducted from the country to prevent them from voting for the draft, reports AP.

"There is no conducive atmosphere for the vote, so we have decided to postpone it indefinitely," Labour Minister Johan Seneviratne announced in Parliament after debate was halted following a meeting of all party leaders.

"Our information is that the 10 members of Parliament have been abducted and flown out of the country to prevent them from voting," Seneviratne said.

The new constitution, which would give greater rights to the country's Tamil minority and autonomy in the regions where they predominate, was seen as a possible solution to the 17-year war.

The 10 missing members of the

main opposition United National Party were not in Parliament on Tuesday, the second day of debate on the constitution, which was expected to be put to a vote on Wednesday.

There was no immediate independent confirmation of the allegation and UNP officials declined to comment.

Three Parliament members had switched sides during the first two days of voting, and the opposition had accused the government of buying votes, which the government denied.

The government needs the support of opposition members to achieve a two-thirds majority of the 225-member Parliament to pass the constitution. Parliament is to adjourn August 24.

Before the startling disclosure was made, the government was coming under increasing pressure to dump the new constitution amid protests by nationalist Sinhalese groups and senior Buddhist monks, who argued

against granting concessions to the Tamil minority and say autonomy will lead to a disintegration of the country.

A Buddhist monk said Monday night he would fast unto death to protest the new constitution. The majority Sinhalese are mostly Buddhists, and monks have great influence in Sri Lanka.

The draft constitution, introduced last Thursday, was the first case of a Sri Lankan government attempting to placate the Tamil minority to sap support from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The guerrilla group has fought for independence for Tamil areas in a war that has cost more than 62,000 lives and has rejected the constitution, saying it will accept only independence.

Kumaratunga was believed to be 12 votes short of the 150 she needed to pass the constitution. Her own party has only 114 members, but she had the backing of some moderate Tamil political parties.

Indonesia to support Palestinian statehood

JAKARTA, Aug 8: Indonesia would support the Palestinian leadership if it unilaterally declares independence next month, but would rather see further negotiations for a peace agreement with Israel, Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab said Tuesday, reports AP.

At a summit at Camp David last month, Israel and the Palestinians failed to reach a final deal that would resolve their 52-year-old conflict.

The US-sponsored talks collapsed over the future status of Jerusalem, which both sides claim as their capital.

US negotiators are expected to resume talks with the two sides later this month in a bid to determine if they are ready for another round of formal talks.

Meanwhile, Palestinian leaders say they are determined to declare statehood on Sept 13, the deadline for completing a peace agreement.

Suharto formally charged with corruption

JAKARTA, Aug 8: Indonesian prosecutors formally filed charges of corruption against ex-President Suharto on Tuesday and said that if the former dictator is found guilty he may spend the rest of his life behind bars, reports AP.

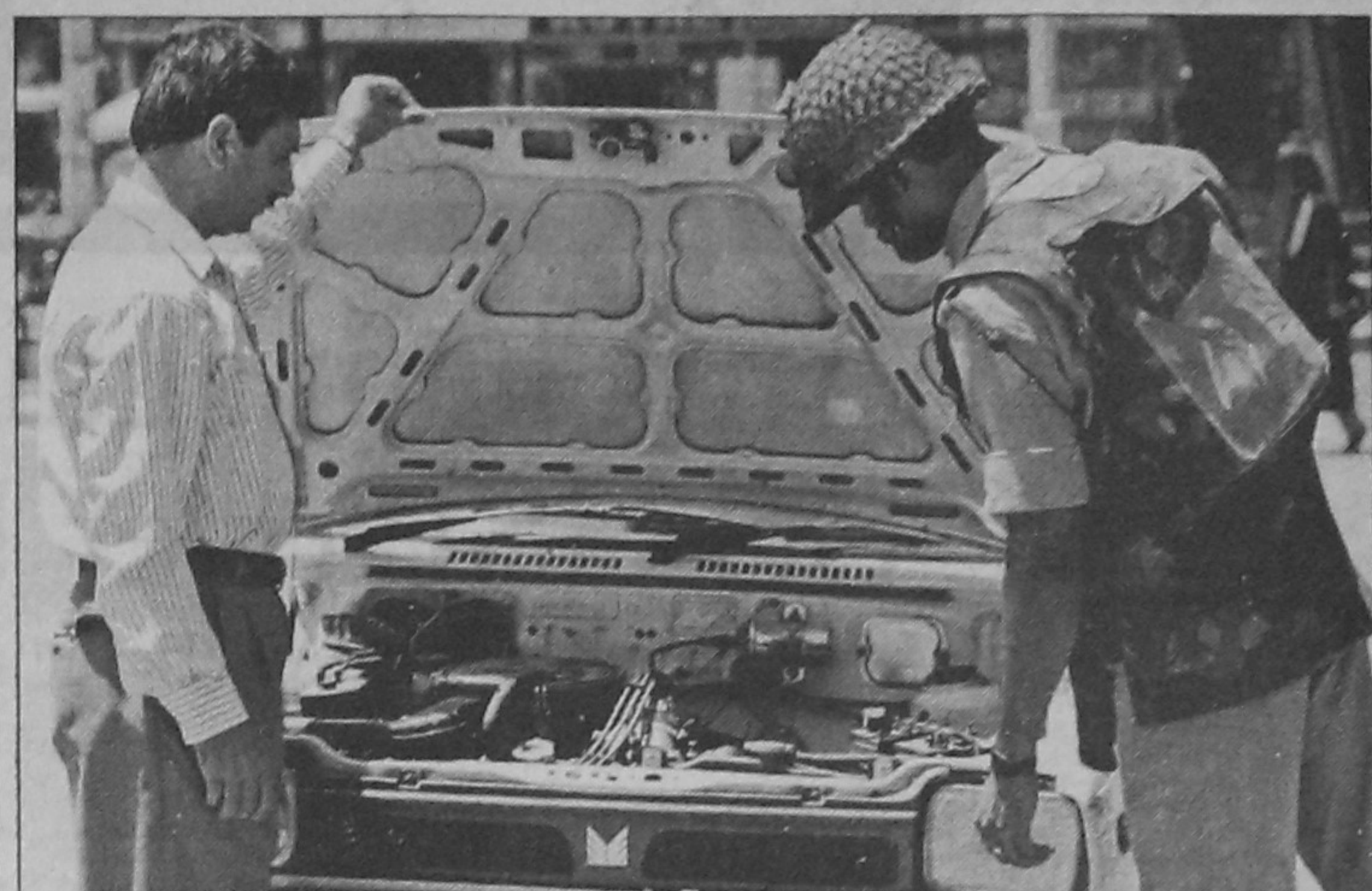
State attorney Umu Laga Lozara told journalists after lodging 3,500 pages of case documents with the South Jakarta District Court, that the man who ruled Indonesia for 32 years with an iron fist will be prosecuted for embezzling the equivalent of about US\$ 570 million of state funds.

"Suharto has been charged with corruption," he said as dozens of police officers stood guard around the courthouse. "If he is found guilty, he can be imprisoned for 20 years or life."

But Indonesia's current President Abdurrahman Wahid has offered to pardon Suharto if he returns the stolen money.

The South Jakarta District court chief judge Lalu Mariyuni said the trial will start before the end of August.

He said five judges will preside over the trial that will see 130 witnesses called. Suharto prosecuted by a team of eight state attorneys.



An Indian soldier searches a civilian's vehicle as security is stepped up in Srinagar, the capital of Indian Kashmir, yesterday. The Hizbul Mujahideen militant group in Pakistan has threatened armed conflict unless the Pakistani government is included in peace talks over Kashmir between the Indian government and Muslim militant groups who have been waging a separatist campaign in the Himalayan state since 1989. --AFP photo

Floods in India, Bhutan leave 173 dead

GUWAHATI, India, Aug 8: River levels remained dangerously high today following flash floods that have claimed at least 173 lives and left millions homeless in eastern India and the tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, reports AP.

"We are trying very hard to cope with the situation ... putting all our strained resources to the best possible use," said Flood Control Minister Promode Gogoi in the worst-hit far-eastern state of Assam.

Gogoi told AFP that a "lack of resources" was hampering relief and rescue work in Assam, where the death toll had reached 80 people, half of them victims of water-borne disease.

The state government has opened 300 relief camps, while hundreds of makeshift camps have been set up by the estimated 2.5 million Assamese villagers left homeless by the floods.

The flooding, triggered by heavy rains that caused the mighty Brahmaputra river and its tributaries to burst their banks, has killed 26 people in the eastern state of Bihar, 10 in neighbouring West Bengal and seven in Arunachal Pradesh.

Flash floods and landslides in

the past four days have also claimed more than 50 lives and left hundreds homeless in Bhutan, a government minister said Tuesday.

"At least 40 people have been washed away in flash floods at Pasakha in southern Bhutan, while some bodies may have drifted to the Indian side in West Bengal," Bhutan Trade Minister Lypso Khando Wangchu told AFP by phone from Phuntsholing, 180 kilometers south of Bhutan's capital Thimphu.

Denying Indian press reports that up to 180 bodies had been recovered, Wangchu said most of the dead were labourers engaged in road construction, who had been camping alongside the river Varsha in Pasakha, east of Phuntsholing.

Heavy rains since Thursday triggered mudslides in many parts of central and southern Bhutan, leading to severe disruption of road links in the landlocked kingdom.

"We are trying our best to restore the communication network," said Wangchu, who admitted that relief workers had been unable to reach hundreds of homeless villagers.

"The relief workers have been

unable to get through as the roads to these areas have been completely submerged," he said.

"Even air-dropping food and other relief materials has become a problem as the weather is too bad for helicopters to fly."

Members of the Royal Bhutan Army and Royal Bhutan Police have been called in to help with rescue and relief works in flood affected areas.

In western Assam, tens of thousands of stranded villagers have been without food or medical supplies for more than a week. "We have been camping on the national highway for five days and have not received a grain of rice from the government," says Miral Kuddus, who fled flood-hit Hajivillage.

Meanwhile, forest rangers in Assam's Kaziranga National Park said flood waters were threatening the wildlife in the sanctuary.

"Most of the animals including elephants and rhinos have taken refuge on highlands close to Kaziranga," said one park warden.

Kaziranga is home to about 1,500 one-horned rhinoceros, a highly endangered species found only in some pockets of Assam, Bhutan and Nepal.



South Jakarta District Court Chief Judge Lalu Mariyuni holds a copy of the charge papers yesterday at the south Jakarta District Court. State prosecutors formally filed corruption charges against former Indonesian president Suharto. --AFP photo

Fiji rebels kill soldier, policeman

SUVA, Aug 8: Suspected nationalist rebels in Fiji shot and killed a soldier and a policeman today in the worst act of violence in the country's nearly three-month political crisis, reports Reuters.

Two soldiers were wounded, one of them seriously, by the gunmen, who were believed to be supporters of jailed coup leader George Speight, said military spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Filipo Tarakinikini said.

An army officer and a police corporal, an ethnic Indian, were hit in an initial volley of shots from the rebels. The soldier died of a second gunshot received some time later, Tarakinikini told Reuters.

While Tarakinikini doubted the incident was a deliberate ambush, he said the rebels were shooting to kill.

"Oh yes, it's cold-blooded murder," he told Reuters.

"We believe it is Gerge Speight supporters with weapons who are moving around in that area," Tarakinikini said.

The security men were investigating reports of shots being fired at an ethnic Indian family from a van full of armed men in a rural area when the attack took place, Tarakinikini said.

One of the wounded soldiers was in serious condition with a chest wound. Another was shot in the hand. A third soldier who was initially thought to have been hit suffered leg injuries as he stumbled for cover, Tarakinikini said.

Speight triggered Fiji's festering crisis when he stormed parliament on May 19 in the name of indigenous Fiji rights, taking ethnic Indian prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry and most of his cabinet hostage for 56 days.

Typhoon hits Japanese city

OKINAWA CITY, Aug 8: Typhoon Jelawat pounded Japan's southern island of Okinawa on Tuesday, lightly injuring two children, knocking down trees and leaving thousands of households without electricity, reports AP.

Jelawat's winds of 144 kilometers per hour (90 mph) also uprooted billboards while dumping heavy rain on the island.

Flying debris hit an 11-year-old boy on the head and a 14-year-old boy on the back, inflicting light cuts, said Okinawa police spokesman Jun Yogi. The boys were treated at hospitals and released, he said.

About 19,000 homes were affected by power outages across Okinawa's main island, with most centered in the northern city of Nago, said Okinawa Electric Power Company spokesman Yoko Nakanishi.

She said it was too early to say when power might be restored.

About 1 million people live on Okinawa, located about 1,600 kilometers (1,000 miles) south-

Japanese city

west of Tokyo. Nago's population is 56,000.

Typhoons are a type of hurricane that originate in the West Pacific ocean. Jelawat is the eighth typhoon this year.

On Tuesday morning, Jelawat was located about 75 kilometers (47 miles) north of Nago, according to Japan's Meteorological Agency.

It was heading north-north west at a slow speed toward the East China Sea, the agency said.

Some 400 people were stranded at Naha's airport late Monday after commercial flights were canceled, said Naha Domestic Airport official Yusushi Oshiro. As of early Tuesday, 30 flights remained canceled.

Airline officials were watching weather conditions to see if they could resume some flights in the afternoon, said Sachiko Toyama, another airport official.

The US military, which has a strong presence on Okinawa, grounded aircraft Monday and a bar on flying remained in effect Tuesday.

Nepalese Maoist rebels reject offer of talks

KATHMANDU, Aug 8: Nepal's underground Maoist rebels have rejected the Congress government's offer of dialogue, claiming their demands have not yet been met, a party statement and newspapers said today, reports AP.

"The talks will be held only if a conducive environment for the talks is built, and it could only be done if the government releases rebel leaders now under custody," the statement said.

The statement, issued by the banned Nepal Communist Party's general secretary, Pushpa Kamal Dhala, who is also known as Prachanda, said: "It is meaningless to send our representatives for a dialogue until the government builds a conducive environment."

The Maoists are demanding a

ceasefire from the date the talks were to begin, detailed whereabouts of all detained and missing cadres and a judicial probe into alleged police atrocities against them.

Prachanda also confirmed that last week he received an invitation from the High Level Consensus Seeking Commission to send a delegation to the talks.

Prachanda's statement came at a time when Deputy Prime Minister Ram Chandra Paudel said problems within the ruling Nepali Congress (NC) were delaying talks with the insurgents, without elaborating.

Paudel is one of six members of the commission, led by former premier Sher Bahadur Deuba, set up to resolve the Maoist issue.

BRIEFLY



A sand sculptor creates an African woman of sand on the beach of Zeebrugge during the preparation week of the sand sculpture festival in Belgium on Monday. The theme of the 4th edition of the festival is "Adventurous Africa, in search of the secrets of the jungle". The sand sculpture festival will begin on August 11. --AFP photo

Heroin seized in Turkey: Paramilitary police in eastern Turkey have seized 100 kg (220 lbs) of heroin and arrested one man, Anatolian news agency said on Monday, Reuters reports from Ankara.

Police discovered the heroin buried in the yard of a home near the town of Baskale, some 40 km (25 miles) from the Iranian border.

Hutu rebels kill 32: Ethnic Hutu rebels killed 27 military cadets and five civilians on Sunday in an ambush near Bujumbura, a military source said on Monday, Reuters reports from Bujumbura.

He said the cadets had been returning to the capital from the southern town of Bururi, where they had played in a handball match, when rebels opened fire on their truck. He said the civilian victims had been riding in the truck.

BANGKOK, Aug 8: Researchers in Thailand have found the tropical disease scrub typhus can suppress HIV to undetectable levels, a discovery they believe could lead to the development of an inexpensive HIV-AIDS treatment, reports AFP.

A one-year study, released this week by a joint US-Thai research institute here, showed the virus count in the blood of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) patients decreased significantly after they suffered a bout of scrub typhus, a type of the tropical disease transmitted by

insects. "No other infectious disease has ever shown the effects of reducing HIV viral load" that scrub typhus has, said research team leader Dr. George Watt.

The researchers are now infusing the plasma from patients suffering from scrub typhus into Human Immune-deficiency Virus (HIV) sufferers, and initial findings have been positive.

The research, carried out by the joint US-Thai funded Armed Forces Institute of Medical Sciences, raised the prospect of an HIV-AIDS treatment that would be much cheaper than modern

anti-retroviral drugs. "If antibodies of scrub typhus were used to fight HIV, it potentially could be a very inexpensive method" of treating the virus, Watt said.

The vast majority of the world's 34.3 million people carrying HIV or full-blown AIDS cannot afford expensive combination drug "cocktail" treatments that are relatively freely available in developed nations.

In Thailand, which is battling to treat Asia's worst HIV-AIDS epidemic, fewer than 10 percent of HIV sufferers can afford such treatments.

Without cheaper medicine, hundreds of thousands of Thais who contracted the virus within the past 10 years will soon begin to die, Thai health officials have said.

Watt said the team came across the discovery by accident. "The scrub typhus-HIV decrease link was completely unexpected, we were not looking for it," he said.

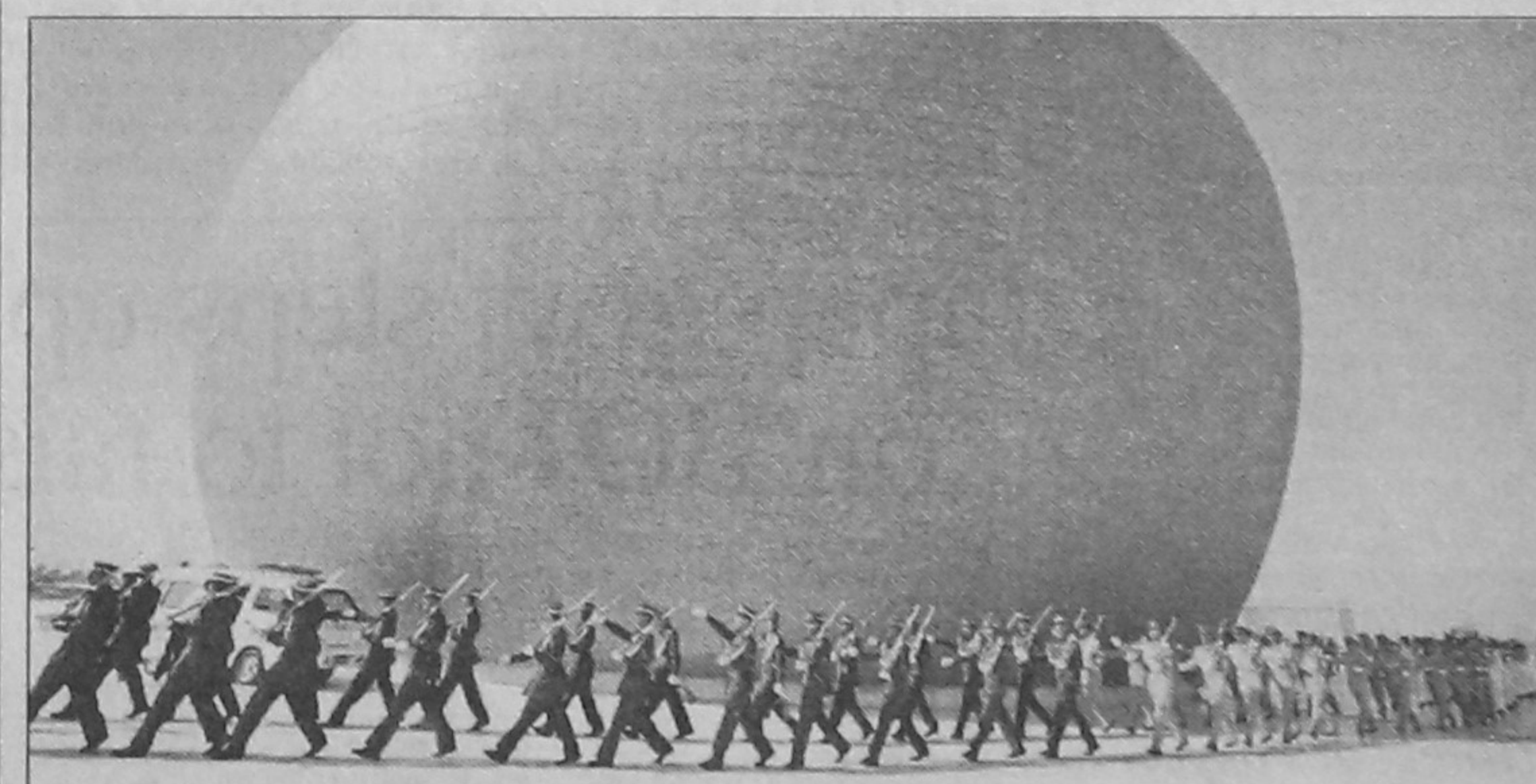
"We were merely doing a general descriptive study of the relationship between HIV and tropical diseases when we came across this sudden discovery."

But he cautioned more

research was needed on the scrub typhus-HIV connection before researchers could say how typhus would be used to treat patients, although he was optimistic about the next stage of study.

His team plans to broaden its research to include a wider sample of HIV patients in an attempt to identify exactly what element of scrub typhus works to suppress the virus.

The researchers believe that a microbial agent called *Orientia tsutsugamushi* which is part of the typhus virus may be responsible.



Iraqi soldiers march past the Mausoleum of the unknown soldiers in Baghdad, during a ceremony marking the end of the war against Iran yesterday. Iraq celebrates its "Great Victory Day" on August 8 every year. The war officially ended on August 20, 1998 after the two countries accepted a cease-fire under UN Security Council resolution 598. --AFP photo

Tropical disease suppresses HIV: Thai study