

Vajpayee denies rumours about his health

NEW DELHI, Sept. 2: Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee denied rumours that he was suffering from serious health problems, and said Saturday he was amused by the continuing speculation, reports AP.

"I have a problem with my knee. But other than that, I am fine," Vajpayee was quoted as saying by The Hindustan Times newspaper.

The paper said Vajpayee was "more amused than perturbed" by continuing speculation about his condition. Several media reports have mentioned he has prostate cancer. His doctors have denied this.

"Some people will always find something to say," said Vajpayee, who will turn 76 on Christmas Day. He is considered the anchor of a coalition government of more than 20 parties.

Vajpayee delayed his visit to the United States by two days because of a painful osteoarthritis flare-up around his knees which has been undergoing physiotherapy each day. Vajpayee will now leave for New York on Sept. 7 instead of Sept. 5 for the tour that ends Sept. 18.

The prime minister will address the United Nations and meet President Bill Clinton in Washington among his other engagements.

On Sunday, he complained of acute pain in the knees and flew back to New Delhi midway through an executive meeting of his party in western Maharashtra state, again fueling Indian media speculation about whether he may suffer from a more serious illness.

Japan to reshuffle cabinet in Nov

TOKYO, Sept. 2: Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori will reshuffle his cabinet in November or December ahead of a planned reduction in the number of ministries early next year, news reports said today, reports AP.

There will be a cabinet reshuffle in November or December in line with the launch of new ministries and agencies," Hiromu Nonaka, secretary general of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), said in an interview with the Japanese media on Friday.

Japan will cut the number of ministries and agencies from 23 to 13 from January 6 next year as part of its efforts to streamline the government system.

Japan's bureaucracy was praised for its role in helping build the world's second-biggest economy, but is now blamed for its red tape and outdated structure, which analysts say delayed recovery in the late 1990s.

Arafat to discuss ME peace process in Canada

OTTAWA, Sept. 2: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat will arrive here Tuesday to discuss the Middle East situation with Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien, the Canadian government said Friday, reports AP.

Arafat is expected to brief Chretien on the latest developments in the Middle East peace talks, which were deadlocked at Camp David over the future of Jerusalem.

The Palestinian leader is seeking international understanding and support for his stand that the Palestine Authority could declare statehood should no agreement be reached by September 13.

Chretien is also expected to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak Wednesday at the headquarters of the United Nations in New York, according to government sources.

Treaty signed to launch regional university

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan, Sept. 2: Twenty-five million people who depend on the earth's highest mountain ranges for their lives and livelihoods will benefit from the world's first university dedicated exclusively to education and research on mountain regions and societies, says a press release.

The University of Central Asia is being established by an international treaty signed in Dushanbe and in Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic. At the Dushanbe ceremony, the Aga Khan announced an initial endowment of 5 million US dollar allocated for the university's programmes in Tajikistan.

"Mountain populations experience extremes of poverty and isolation as well as constraints on opportunities and choice," said the Aga Khan, Imam (spiritual leader) of the Ismaili Muslims. "By creating intellectual space and resources, this university will help turn the mountains that divide the nations and territories of Central Asia into the links that unite its peoples and economies in a shared endeavour to improve their future well-being."

The university is intended to serve people in the mountainous parts of Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, China, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

International

Clinton postpones deployment of missile defence system

Next president will now decide fate of NMD

WASHINGTON, Sept. 2: US President Bill Clinton said Friday he would not deploy a controversial national missile shield that many fear could spark a new arms race, opting to leave the decision to his successor, reports AP.

Citing a current lack of solid data proving national missile defence (NMD) would work efficiently, Clinton, who leaves office in January, said he could not responsibly okay the system although he ordered continued testing on the scheme.

Though he stressed the seriousness of the growing threat posed to the United States by the proliferation of missiles and weapons of mass destruction, Clinton also noted the concerns of US friends and allies, particularly those in NATO, to NMD and the vehement objections of Russia and China in making his announcement.

"Though the technology for national missile defence is promising, the system as a whole is not yet proven," Clinton said in a

speech to students at Georgetown University here.

"There is a reasonable chance that all these challenges can be met in time, but I simply cannot conclude, with the information I have today, that we have enough confidence in the technology and the operational effectiveness of the entire NMD system to move forward to deployment."

"Therefore, I have decided not to authorise deployment of a national missile defence at this time," Clinton said.

He had been considering the deployment of some 100 missile interceptors in Alaska, along with an acquisition radar, by 2005.

The Pentagon has estimated the cost of an anti-missile shield to be some 60 billion dollars, though some experts say it may cost more. The cost of a failed missile test in July that Clinton referred to was estimated at 100 million dollars.

Clinton stressed that the decision would not have a "significant impact" on when NMD could be deployed, saying that "if the next

president decides to go forward" it could be ready by 2006 or 2007.

"If the next president decides to move forward next year, the system still could be ready in the same time frame," he said.

In addition to the technological issues, the president said allies' concerns and opposition from Russia and China played a role in his decision not to proceed with deployment, but stressed that "no nation can ever have a veto over American security."

Russia has warned the proposed system would abrogate the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty and seriously up the balance of power, and China has hinted that its concerns about the shield could prompt an expansion of its nuclear arsenal.

"It would be far better to move forward in the context of the ABM Treaty and allied support," Clinton said, adding, though, that "Our efforts to make that possible have not been completed."

However, he said, the threat was real, listing North Korea,

Iran, Iraq as well as the possibility of terrorist attack as compelling reasons to continue with NMD testing.

"We have an obligation to pursue a missile defence system that could enhance our security... But we should not move forward until we have absolute confidence that the system will work," he said.

Clinton's decision will likely have a significant impact on the current presidential race between his vice-president Al Gore and Texas Governor George W. Bush.

Gore has not outlined his own plans but has said he did not want to curb the president's options.

Bush has rejected the plan Clinton was considering as "flawed" and called for a larger, more effective umbrella capable of protecting US territory and its allies.

He has also said if Russia won't amend the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty to allow the broader shield then the pact should be scrapped altogether.

World leaders relieved

UNDATED, Sept. 2: Traditional foes of the United States as well as longtime allies expressed relief and praise after President Bill Clinton's decision to shelve a national missile defence system, saying it was a sensible move that avoids jarring the international balance of power, reports AP.

China offered understated praise Saturday, describing Clinton's decision as "rational." Russian President Vladimir Putin was more direct, calling it a "well thought-out and responsible step."

Britain, France, Germany and Canada also weighed in, saying the president was wise not to rush into the project.

Clinton said Friday he is not convinced the technology is at hand to build an effective anti-missile shield and will leave it to the next president to decide whether to deploy a national missile defence. Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush supports rapid deployment of the system; his opponent, Vice President Al Gore has been non-committal.

China fiercely opposes the proposed shield as a security threat that could force it to beef up its nuclear arsenal. However, the government's reaction Saturday was surprisingly muted.

"The decision is rational," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao said in a statement carried by the official Xinhua News Agency. "We hope that the US government will have more contact and discussions with other countries on the matter, so as to make a decision which could serve the interests of countries and peoples all over the world."

China fears a US missile shield would undermine its limited long-range nuclear deterrent, and that it could be extended to shield Taiwan, which separated from Beijing amid civil war 51 years ago.

The Taiwanese government did not immediately react to Clinton's decision. However, lawmaker Lee Wen-chung, a member of President Chen Shui-bian's party, said the move was regrettable and he hoped the new US president would push the programme forward more aggressively.

Putin said Friday the decision did not mean Washington and Moscow share common opinions about a national missile defence. He said Russia will continue to promote nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation.

"The given step... will lead to strengthening strategic stability and security in the whole world, and will raise the United States authority in the eyes of the international community," Putin said.

British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook said his country welcomed Clinton's approach, saying the president had taken careful account of the views of US allies and other international partners who cautioned him against making a rushed decision.

"We look forward to continuing dialogue on this subject with the current US administration, and in due course with its successor and with our NATO allies and others," Cook said.

S Korea returns 63 spies to N Korea

SEOUL, Sept. 2: South Korea repatriated 63 North Koreans today after holding them for years as spies in another symbolic step toward rapprochement with its Cold War foe, reports Reuters.

Most of them in their late 60s and 70s, some in wheelchairs, crossed the border at 10 am (0700 BST) passing through the truce village of Panmunjom at the Demilitarized Zone.

"One night here (in Seoul) cost me 36 years," said 73-year-old former North Korean spy Chul Ha-jong, freed in 1998 after serving 36 years behind bars.

The long-term prisoners had refused to renounce Communism, Seoul's Unification Ministry has said. "I will send an invitation and letter of security guarantee to my mother as soon as possible," said another former spy Shin In-young, 71, who leaves his elderly mother in the South.

They were given a heroes' welcome by hundreds of clapping North Koreans as they crossed into the northern side.

"We warmly welcome the heroes who maintained their strong conviction," read one of the banners on the North Korean side of Panmunjom.

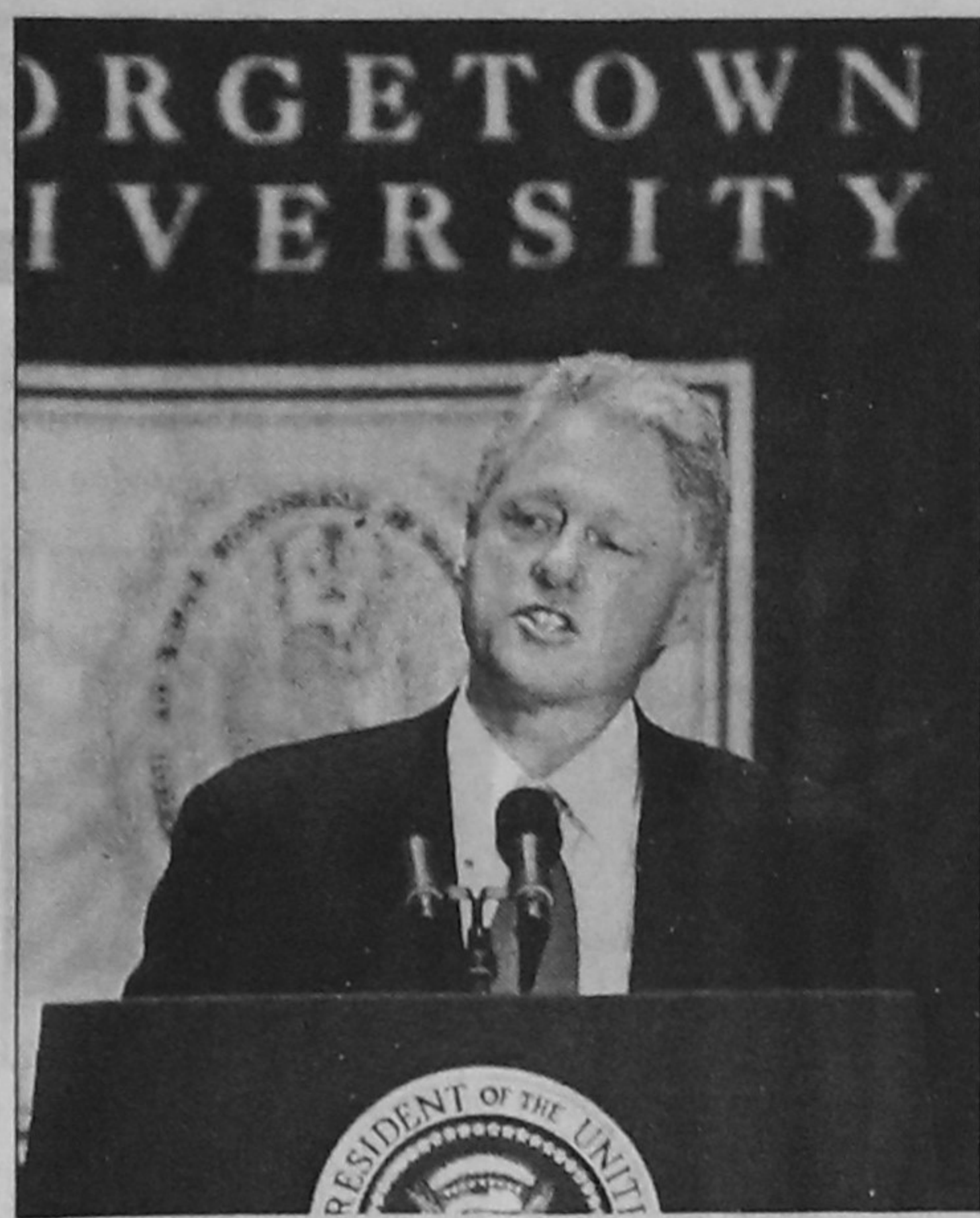
The repatriation is part of a deal signed in late June by Red Cross officials from the two Koreas, which are still technically at war after their 1950-53 conflict ended in a truce.

Since the end of the Korean War only one North Korean prisoner has been sent back to the North, in 1993.

The repatriation came as the government in Seoul was criticised by civic groups and the opposition for failing to deal with the return of South Korean prisoners of war and civilian abductees held in the North.

Dozens of opposition lawmakers and families of prisoners and abductees held a rally near Panmunjom, demanding both Seoul and Pyongyang make efforts for the early return of those detained in the North.

"Repatriate South Korean prisoners of war safe and quick!" chanted the protesters.



US President Bill Clinton delivers a speech about the developing US missile defence system to a packed house at Georgetown University in Washington DC on Friday. President Clinton said he would leave to his successor a decision on whether to deploy a controversial national missile shield. --AFP photo

Junta forces Suu Kyi to end stand-off

NLD headquarters sealed off

YANGON, Sept. 2: Nearly 200 riot police raided a roadside convoy and forced Aung San Suu Kyi to return to the capital, ending a nine-day stand-off between the opposition leader and Myanmar's military regime, government and opposition party officials said today, reports AP.

Security forces also sealed off the headquarters of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) in Yangon, and a key military leader criticised foreign diplomats for meddling in the country's internal affairs.

The government confirmed the end of the stand-off, saying Suu Kyi and her party "arrived home safe and sound this (Saturday) morning."

The 55-year-old Nobel Peace laureate was stopped by police August 24 in the Yangon suburb of Dala as she and party colleagues attempted to travel to the countryside for political organisation work.

The group camped out in two vehicles, refusing to return to the capital. The incident drew international condemnation of the country's iron-fisted military rule.

Around midnight, nearly 200 riot police raided the place where we were staying, and forcibly took Aung San Suu Kyi and all of us," said Tin Oo, Suu Kyi's deputy in the National League for Democracy.

A visibly angry Tin Oo told reporters the group was brought back to Yangon in police cars and said he thought that Suu Kyi was taken back to her house.

He could provide few details as security personnel ordered reporters away from his house in Yangon where he was speaking.

About 10 policemen blocked the gate of the NLD headquarters at the foot of Yangon's famed Shwedagon Pagoda and prepared barriers for road blocks but did not seal off the road leading to the

building. Telephones of senior NLD members were not operating Saturday.

A government press release, titled "Dala incident ends happily," said that at 1:30 am Saturday, Suu Kyi and her party were "escorted back to their residences in Yangon in a motorcade facilitated by the government for their safe and convenient return."

The action, the release said, was taken because of monsoon season rains, complaints by her party about living conditions in the stalled convoy, and to guarantee Suu Kyi's personal safety.

Gen. Khin Nyunt, secretary of the ruling military council, said Friday that some Yangon-based diplomats were "overtly cooperating" with domestic groups and attempting to pressure the government. His remarks were carried in official newspapers Saturday.



US First Lady Hillary Clinton greets children gathered at Syracuse Hancock Airport to welcome her and President Bill Clinton in Syracuse, New York, on Friday. The Clintons are spending two days in the Skaneateles area of upstate New York. --AFP photo

Pakistan rules out peace talks or war with India

UNITED NATIONS, Sept. 2: Pakistan isn't optimistic about prospects for peace talks with India but it doesn't foresee another full-scale war, senior Pakistani officials say, reports AP.

Although leaders of both countries will attend next week's Millennium Summit of more than 150 heads of state and government, neither nation expects face-to-face discussions.

A meeting between Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistan's military ruler Gen. Pervez Musharraf

would have been the first since the former army chief took power in a coup last October.

Tensions between the rival countries have been running high since the summer of 1998, when they came close to war in the disputed mountainous border region of Kashmir.

Nearly a year after Musharraf took power, Pakistani officials say he has taken unprecedented steps to create trust and mutual respect, offering to hold talks anywhere at any level, offering to discuss a "no war pact," and

putting restraints on Pakistan's use of nuclear weapons.

"I think we have demonstrated a remarkable commitment to peace with India," Information Minister Javed Jabbar told a news briefing Friday.

But prospects for talks "are not very bright" because of India's "very negative" attitude toward the Musharraf government, Pakistani UN Ambassador Shamsah Ahmad said.

While Pakistani officials believe they have taken many positive steps to promote dia-

logue, India sees no change.

India's UN Ambassador Kamalesh Sharma said Vajpayee is open to the idea of talks, but "we do not see that the environment right now is such as makes the talks possible."

There seems to be no change in the policy or attitude of our neighbour toward us," he said, citing attacks and shelling in Indian-ruled Kashmir, which New Delhi blames on militants allegedly financed by Pakistan.

Complicating any possibility of talks, Vajpayee has delayed his

arrival at the Sept. 6-8 summit until the evening of Sept. 7 because of acute pain in his knees. He is not planning any bilateral meetings, Sharma said.

Neighbours and rivals for five decades, India and Pakistan have fought three wars since 1947. Two of those wars were over Kashmir, which was divided between them but which both claim in its entirety.

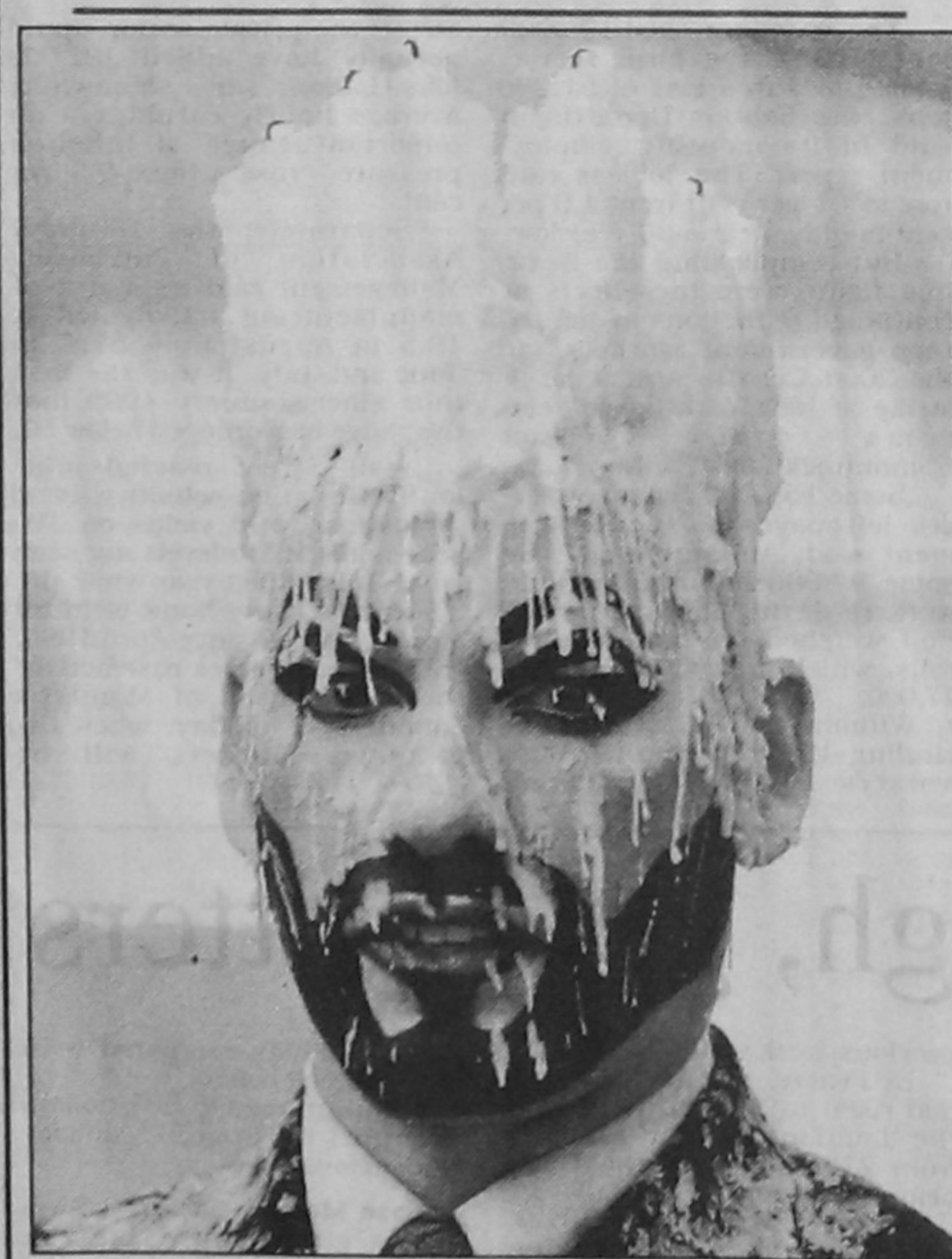
Jabbar said Pakistan foresees continuing tension along the cease-fire line in Kashmir, but "we do not see any prospect for

outbreak of full-scale war."

"We are confident that better counsel will prevail on the other side," he said. "We ourselves are committed to restraint and respect for the international border and to an earliest possible settlement of the Kashmir dispute."

Meanwhile, Jabbar said "the Indian government lost a historic opportunity to create a real breakthrough" in Kashmir when the militant group Hezb-ul-Mujahideen offered a unilateral cease-fire on July 24.

BRIEFLY



Make-up artist "Nambila the Clown" from the San Francisco Bay Area poses at Black Rock City's centre camp during the Burning Man Festival in Nevada on Friday. An estimated thirty thousand people will attend the festival. --AFP photo

Tremor rocks Nepal: An earthquake measuring 4.5 on the open-ended Richter scale shook central Nepal yesterday but officials said there were no immediate reports of casualties, Reuters reports from Kathmandu.

The epicentre of the earthquake, which struck at 10.06 am (0421 GMT), was at Dharasa village, 40 km north of capital Kathmandu, an official of the National Seismological Centre told Reuters.

Mother was forced to keep silent about Di's death

LONDON, Sept. 2: The late Princess Diana's mother today described for the first time how she was forced to keep silent about her daughter's death until heads of state had been informed, reports Reuters.

In her first public comments about the night Diana died three years ago in a Paris car crash, Frances Shand Kydd told Britain's Daily Express newspaper in an interview she knew of Diana's death an hour before the news was broadcast.

"Protocol required that heads of state had to be informed before it was made public," she said. "So I was left in an amazing, stunning situation of having an hour to wait knowing she was dead and being unable to ask a friend for help."

"I was literally in front of my television saying 'Come on, come on. Tell the world.'"

Shand Kydd, 64, also described how she was besieged by the media -- who collectively put in more than 1,000 interview requests within three months of Diana's death.

The media have been accused of hounding Diana -- the world's most photographed woman -- to her death on August 31, 1997 after the car she was travelling in crashed in a Paris underpass while being pursued by press photographers.

Diana's lover Dodi Fayed, son of Harrods luxury department store owner Mohamed Al Fayed, was also killed in the crash.

Shand Kydd said she did not go to Paris to bring her daughter's body home because she was not asked to.

Koreas agree to hold military talks

SEOUL, Sept. 2: North and South Korea on Friday agreed to hold military talks as part of a major step towards reducing decades of tension on the world's last Cold War frontier, a joint statement said, reports AFP.

The dramatic agreement came after both sides wound up a new round of rapprochement talks in Pyongyang, paving the way for securing peace in the region which was bloodied by the 1950-53 Korean war.

The South and North (Korea) should make efforts to reduce tension and secure peace, and in a related step, discuss ways to hold military talks at an early date," said the statement released in Seoul and Pyongyang.

Unification Minister Park Jae-kyu, the South's chief delegate to the Pyongyang talks, had pro-

posed to hold regular military talks and to set up a military hotline to help avoid any possible military confrontation.

"We have hammered out practical measures to substantially improve inter-Korean relations during the latest talks," Park said in a departure statement from Pyongyang before returning to Seoul.

The seven-point accord also disclosed details on inter-Korean economic cooperation and other humanitarian issues.

The statement said that the two Koreas would arrange the reunions of separated Korean families "twice during this year" to help them reunite with their long-lost relatives separated by the war.

Details on the family reunions will be discussed at the inter-

Korean Red-Cross talks where both sides will discuss for the first time the exchange of mail between families, it said.

And both sides agreed to hold talks later this month for the rebuilding of a railroad and a highway across the border, which Seoul says will be completed a year after their ground-breaking ceremony in mid-September.

They also agreed to launch working-level talks this month on the legal framework, including an agreement on investment guarantees, to boost economic cooperation.

"The South should push for providing food aid in loan to the North, suffering a series of natural disasters, based on the spirit of helping each other in need," the statement added.



Rescuers at the scene after the Cambodian-registered cargo ship "Eurobulker X" split in two while loading cement in the port of Halkida, north of Athens, on Friday. A Ukrainian sailor of the 15-member crew died and four other seamen were injured, officials said. --AFP photo