

International

Glittering banquet for Vajpayee heralds new era of Indo-US ties

WASHINGTON, Sept 18 : President Bill Clinton toasted a vibrant new partnership between India and the United States Sunday as he hosted a glittering White House banquet for Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, reports AFP.

Clinton put the seal on Vajpayee's five-day official visit to Washington at an event attended by 900 guests, including leading Indian business tycoons, in a luxurious marquee pitched on White House grounds.

The posh soiree was the largest state dinner in the nearly eight years of the Clinton administration.

Both sides say Vajpayee's visit, which followed Clinton's tour of India earlier this year, has helped forge a new era in relations between the world's lone superpower and its largest democracy.

"We have together built the strongest and most mature partnership India and America have ever known," Clinton said.

"We have so very much more to learn from each other, in both our societies you can find virtually every challenge humanity knows -- in both our societies you can find virtually every solution to those challenges."

Clinton and Vajpayee were joined at the top table by First Lady Hillary Clinton, who wore a flowing russet brown ballgown, as she took time off from her campaign for a Senate seat in the state of New York.

Vajpayee, who sparked concern over his health earlier in the visit after cancelling a joint press conference with Clinton, appeared robust, as he replied to Clinton's toast.

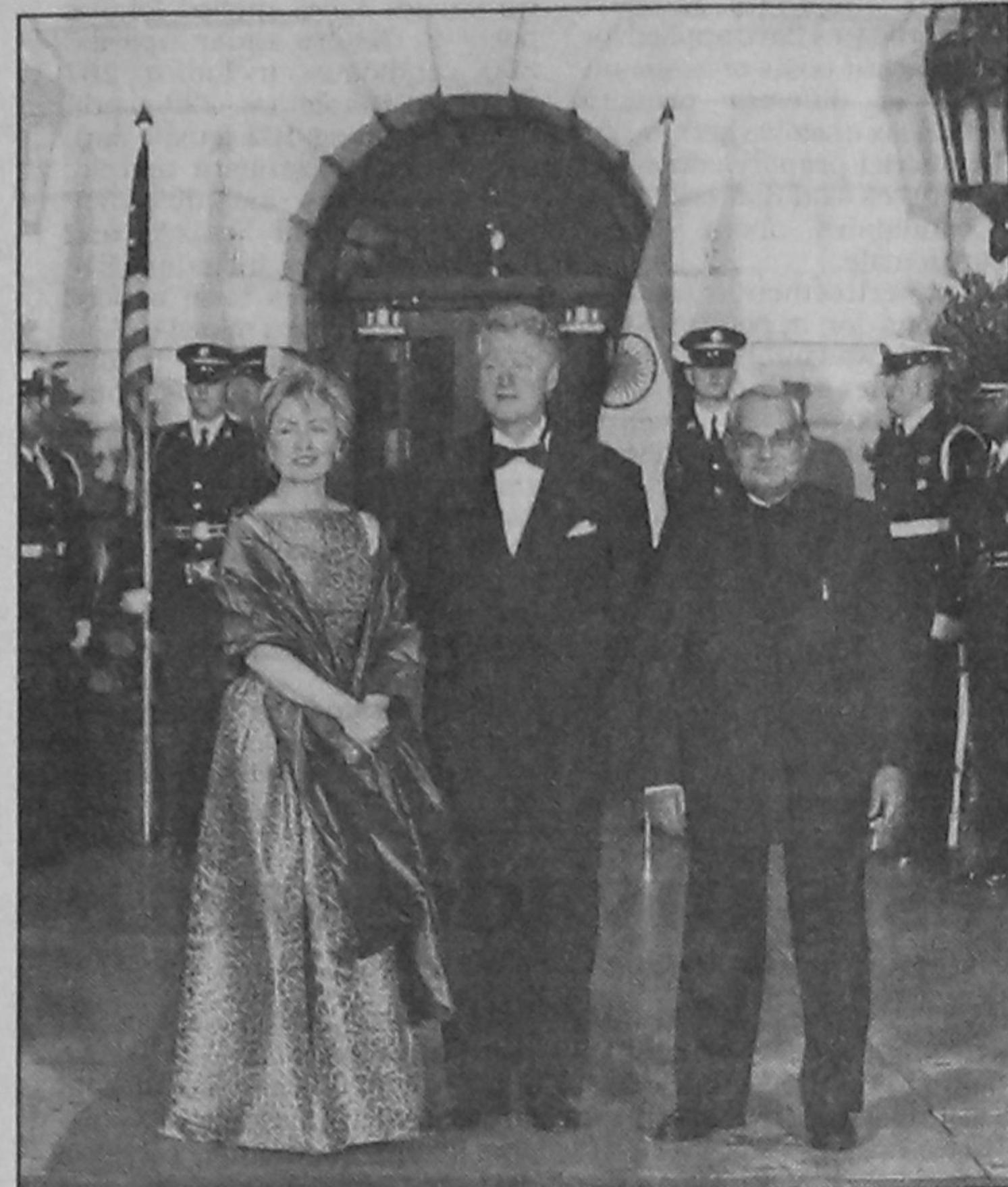
"It is a testimony to your courage and leadership that you dare to cross the territory of doubt, to reach out to the hearts of Indian people," he said in a speech strking for its warm praise of the president.

India and the United States are attempting to forge a new relationship after years of mutual suspicion during the Cold War, when New Delhi favoured the Soviet Union.

Among those feted the Indian prime minister were stars of screen, sport and the Internet revolution, including Sabeer Bhatia, founder of the internet mail service Hotmail, according to a White House guest list.

Former Indian tennis star Vijay Amritraj, who now works as a commentator on the sport was also among 900 guests seated in a luxurious marquee lit by thousands of candles and chandeliers, pitched in the grounds of the White House.

Actress Goldie Hawn and model and activist Christie Brinkley were also among the guests, who included scores of government officials from both major US political parties and supporters of President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton.



(L-R) US First Lady Hillary Clinton, US President Bill Clinton and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee pose for a photograph on Sunday as the Clintons welcomed Vajpayee to the White House for a state dinner in honour of the Indian premier.

--AFP photo

123 killed as Tigers mount counter offensive in Jaffna

COLOMBO, Sept 18 : Ferocious battles raged in northern Sri Lanka Monday as Tamil Tiger rebels launched a counter offensive in the Jaffna peninsula, leaving at least 123 dead on both sides, officials said, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) hit back as government troops captured the town of Chavakachcheri, the second largest town in the peninsula, defence ministry said in a statement.

Ministry spokesman brigadier Sanath Karunaratne said troops had beaten back several rebel attempts overnight to dislodge security forces from Chavakachcheri.

He said at least 75 bodies of Tamil Tiger rebels were scattered in the area while 18 government

soldiers were killed in the latest bout of fighting. Another 20 soldiers were seriously wounded while 208 were treated for minor injuries, he said.

The army captured the Chavakachcheri on Sunday after a three-hour battle that cost the lives of four government troops and that of at least 26 rebels, defence officials said.

There was no immediate reaction from the rebels to the military claims.

The defence ministry said air force ground attack aircraft had bombed and destroyed four trucks where rebels were trying to transport hardware and reinforcements along the Jaffna coast at Sangupiddy.

Troops also captured a 15-year-old girl child soldier of the LTTE who is reported by

defence ministry to have said that 30 of her colleagues were killed in a single attack near Chavakachcheri on Sunday.

Military officials said they were planning to return the bodies of at least 18 rebels to the Tamil Tigers through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

ICRC spokesman Harsha Gunawardena confirmed that the military was in contact with them to transfer the bodies across rebel lines and that the Tigers had agreed to take the remains of their colleagues.

However, Gunawardena said he could not comment on the numbers of bodies to be taken across until the transfer is completed on Tuesday in the Jaffna peninsula.

120 states pledge to step up fight to save children caught up in wars

WINNIPEG, Canada, Sept 18 : Representatives of more than 120 governments, including more than 50 ministers, pledged here Sunday to step up the fight to save children caught up in wars, reports AFP.

But the agreement was immediately criticised by the honorary chair of the conference, Grace Machel, for not going far enough.

Machel, wife of former South African president Nelson Mandela and author of a detailed report for the United Nations on the plight of children caught up in wars, apologised as she turned to conference host, Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, saying: "I must express some disappointment."

Machel continued: "I may be

wrong, but I had the feeling that the message from this ministerial was not as strong as that from the youth and from the experts."

She was referring to two separate reports drawn up earlier in the week by youth delegates and representatives of volunteer groups and non-governmental organisations.

Both those groups wanted tough deadlines for imposing international bans on the use and abuse of children in war situations and tough sanctions against any government or group that violated those bans.

Axworthy appeared to suggest he shared Machel's disappointment, pointing out that "in meetings of governments, there has to be full agreement."

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VHP won't tolerate attacks on temples by Christian rebels

GUWAHATI, India, Sept 18 : A hard-line Hindu group with close links to Indian premier Atal Behari Vajpayee's BJP party vowed today it would "not tolerate" attacks on Hindu temples by Christian guerrillas in India's northeast, reports AFP.

The Hindu Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP - World Hindu Forum) said it would prevent separatist militants of the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) from targeting Hindu temples and priests in the

region.

We have decided to form a religion protection committee to save Hinduism from the onslaught of the pro-Christian NLFT," Sitaram Agarwal, general secretary of the VHP, said.

"We will not tolerate interference with our religious freedom."

Agarwal said the VHP's religion protection committee had already enlisted local Hindu villagers to guard temples and was mobilising public opinion against the separatist rebels.

The VHP alleged that in the last

fortnight NLFT militants had killed a Hindu priest in Tripura state, and warned people against celebrating the biggest Hindu festival in the region, Durga Puja, in October.

Belgrade court opens trial of 14 NATO leaders in absentia

BELGRADE, Sept 18 : A Belgrade court today opened a trial in absentia of 14 NATO leaders accused of war crimes related to last year's bombardment of Yugoslavia, reports AFP.

US President Bill Clinton, French President Jacques Chirac and British Prime Minister Tony Blair are among the accused.

Presiding judge Veroljub Rakitic said the accused had all been sent a list of the charges through diplomatic channels and would be represented by 14 court-appointed lawyers.

Every 100,000 years an object one kilometre long strikes Earth with a force equivalent to 10 million times the impact of the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima in Japan at the end of World War II.

Astronomers say there are nearly 1,000 asteroids measuring one kilometre or larger in orbits which cross Earth's path.

Earth at risk from asteroids

LONDON, Sept 18 : Batter down the hatches and take cover. The risk of Earth being struck by an asteroid is not the stuff of mere science fiction but should be taken seriously, according to a British report published today, reports AFP.

It estimates that an object 100 metres across crashes onto our planet every 10,000 years with the force of a 100-megaton bomb.

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should take a bigger role in a greater global effort to study the problem; improve its ability to detect any incoming objects; and assess the risks and consequences of such an impact.

Lord Sainsbury is expected to take several months to decide whether to act on the report's recommendations.

"It sets out clearly and authoritatively the nature of the risk, and it suggests the sort of international action that we should participate in to at least monitor what the situation is so that we know if there is a danger of an object hitting our very fragile planet."

Among the report's 14 recommendations are that Britain

Laden survives assassination

TEHRAN, Sept 18 : Exiled Saudi millionaire Osama bin Laden, wanted by the United States for terrorism, recently survived an assassination attempt in Afghanistan, Iran's official IRNA news agency said today.

Bin Laden escaped unharmed when unknown attackers fired rockets on his convoy as it passed through the Afghan city of Kandahar, the agency told AFP, confirming reports in the Tehran press.

Reports cited witnesses saying that several cars belonging to his bodyguards had been destroyed and that the ruling Taliban Islamic militia in Afghanistan had tried to quash reports of the attack.

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