

# World sends condolences to India after killer quake

NEW DELHI, Jan 27: Messages of condolence and offers of aid continued to arrive in India from around the world today in the wake of the devastating earthquake in the western state of Gujarat, reports AFP.

At least 7,000 people were feared dead after the worst quake to hit India in 50 years struck the nation as it celebrated the Republic Day Friday.

Among the first to offer condolences was the leader of India's perennial arch-rival, Pakistan.

The neighbours have fought three wars since their partition in 1947 and remain deeply at odds over the divided Himalayan state of Kashmir.

In a letter to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf said the "government and people of Pakistan share the grief of the bereaved families."

"I have been saddened at the tragic loss of life and property in the earthquake which hit large parts of India today," he wrote, according to a foreign ministry statement.

Pakistan was also heavily shaken by the earthquake, with the loss of at least 10 lives.

China, with whom India has also quarrelled over their mutual border and other issues, expressed its sorrow as well.

In a letter to Indian President Kocheril Raman Narayanan, Chinese President Jiang Zemin gave his condolences and delivered his sympathy to victims and their relatives, the official Xinhua news agency said.

Li Peng, chairman of China's parliament, and Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji also sent condolences to their Indian counterparts.

Bangladesh added its voice, with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed saying she and her government were "deeply shocked."

Britain, which has a large Indian community, immediately pledged three million pounds (4.5 million dollars) in aid following the disaster.

A 60-strong search and rescue team was on standby to fly to India to help find survivors in the rubble, Britain's international development department said.

For British Indians with loved ones in the region, there was little to do but wait and hope for the best.

Jayana Shah, 37, from Leicester, which has one of the biggest Asian populations in Britain, said she had spent the day trying to phone her family in Ahmedabad.

"I am very much concerned. I have everybody except my husband and two children there. I have not been able to get in contact with my family or my husband's family," she told Britain's Press Association.

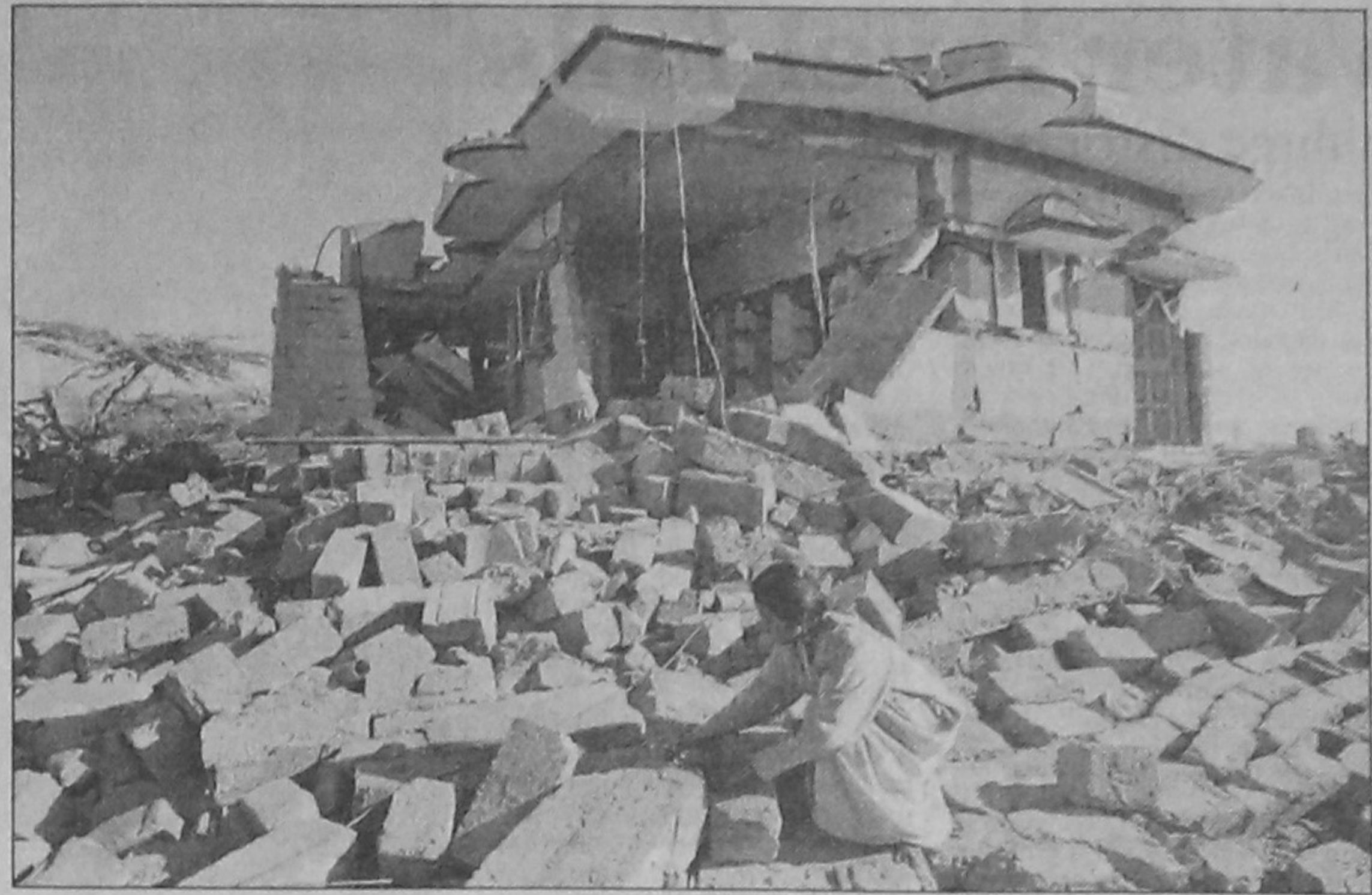
The United States added its condolences and also offered assistance.

"I am saddened by the news of the tragic earthquake centered in India's Gujarat state this morning," a statement from US President George W. Bush said.

"I extend my condolences and those of the American people to the families of the many victims to the cities and villages of Gujarat and elsewhere."

The State Department said an initial 25,000 dollars in emergency aid had been released, with more following if requested.

Germany also offered financial assistance, with President Johannes Rau assuring his Indian counterpart: "Germany will be solidly at your side at this difficult time."



A woman looks for her belongings in the ruins of her house in Bound village in Bhuj district yesterday following a 6.9 magnitude earthquake that struck northwestern India on Friday rendering thousands homeless. The death toll from the earthquake that has affected much of western Indian state of Gujarat was expected to rise above 10,000, with another 33,000 injured.

## 'Wahid could be involved in one scam'

JAKARTA, Jan 27: The majority of an Indonesian parliamentary commission probing a pair of financial scandals think President Abdurrahman Wahid might be implicated in one of them, reports said today, says AFP.

A secret vote among 44 of the 50 commission members showed 33 believed Wahid could be suspected of having played a role in the so-called 'Bulogate' affair, the Kompas daily said.

The scandal involves 3.9 million dollars taken last year from the state logistics agency, Bulog, allegedly by Wahid's masseur Alip Agung Suwondo.

Ten other members believed there were strong indications close friends of the president had made use of their relationships with the head of state to obtain the funds. One member abstained.

The secret ballot was taken by the special commission, set up by the People's Representative Council (DPR) or lower house of parliament, late on Friday evening. Six members were absent.

No commission members were prepared to talk to the press as they came out from the vote, newspapers said.

## Nepal warns against illegal possession of weapons

KATHMANDU, Jan 27: The Nepalese government has issued a strong warning against the possession of any weapons without a license, state-run radio said today, reports AFP.

Quoting a notice issued by the Ministry of Home, the radio said: "Those who keep fatal weapons without a valid license will be severely punished."

Possessing any kind of firearms without a license is illegal in Nepal.

The notice came at a time when the law and order situation is deteriorating as Maoist rebels continue a bloody insurgency against the monarchy and democratic system in Nepal.

They celebrate their sixth anniversary of their 'people's war' in February. The insurgency so far, has claimed the lives of nearly 1,600 people.

## Excited Bush becomes early riser

WASHINGTON, Jan 27: President George W. Bush is so "excited" by his new job that he gets up near dawn every workday, but doesn't let being the most powerful man in the world stop him from walking his dogs or going for a daily jog, reports AFP.

"It's been a great week. I'm excited about my job," Bush, who just hours after taking the oath of office January 20th had the Oval Office repainted and redecorated from top to bottom, told reporters Friday.

The former Texas governor joked that the week's "best news" was that his dogs Spot and Barney appeared to have adapted to Washington, and that pet cat India "that was howling on the first night is now more comfortable with her territory."

Bush, son of former president George Bush, said he was looking forward to welcoming his father "back to his old residence. He's just not going to be sleeping in the master suite this time."

During his first week, the new president rose around 5:45 am, went to work in the Oval Office around 7 am, left the office shortly after 6 pm -- sometimes holding meetings later in the residence portion of the executive mansion -- then walked his dogs and went to bed around 10 pm, aides said.

He has also met with 90 members of Congress, including 29 Democrats, seen 12 of his cabinet nominees confirmed by the Senate and spoken by phone with 12 foreign leaders, according to White House spokesman Ari Fleischer.

"His routine is established, and I think he's enjoying White House life," even though the heavy workload has kept him from using the 132-room mansion's movie theater or bowling alley, Fleischer said.

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## Microsoft hit by hackers again

SAN FRANCISCO, Jan 27: Microsoft's family of popular Internet sites were again hit by hackers Friday, forcing the sites to shut down for two 15-minute periods, reports AFP.

The shutdowns were the latest in a week of online troubles for Microsoft. Company sites, including the Expedia travel site and the Encarta reference site, were rendered invisible to users Tuesday and Wednesday by company technicians, who misconfigured computers that send users to the sites.

Thursday, the crippled site were struck by hackers, who deluged the sites with thousands of requests for data, shutting down the sites for hours.

## Rescuers clear rubble with bare hands to reach survivors

AHMEDABAD, India, Jan 27: Rescuers cleared rubble with bare hands under floodlights late Friday in a desperate race to reach buried survivors of a massive earthquake that killed more than 2,250 people in western India, reports AFP.

The tremor, measured at between 6.9 and 7.9 on the Richter scale by different seismology bureaus, struck the state of Gujarat early Friday and was felt across India as well as Pakistan and Nepal.

An AFP correspondent saw some 30 rescuers scrambling frantically to clear debris from a toppled five-storey residential building in the Shabbag district of Gujarat's largest city, Ahmedabad.

The devastation in Ahmedabad was widespread, with hundreds of buildings that had simply folded in on themselves when the quake struck.

As soon as the tremors started, four people in my family ran out," said Pherul Shah, a resident of the collapsed building.

"They are safe but my grandmother and my niece are buried," he added. A large crane stood nearby with several ambulances.

Triveni Pandey, an army soldier, said: "We have rescued five people and taken out one dead body."

The temperature in Ahmedabad was hovering between seven to eight degrees centigrade (45 to 46 degrees Fahrenheit) and army soldiers were deployed around the city distributing tents and blankets.

There have been some tragic incidents. Like a school which collapsed, trapping at least 30 students," said an official at the city's relief control room.

An undetermined but large number of people were still trapped in the mangled buildings and thousands were camping in the open, fearing aftershocks.

Traumatized survivors from another seriously damaged residential building were crawling amid the debris, calling out the names of missing family members and shouting for help in digging them out.

"We can hear people inside and we are trying to rescue them," said one frustrated relief worker.

Som Krishna, a 26-year-old executive with a leading Indian financial company, said he and 30 other families of a block of flats had been told not to return to their homes.

"I went back to collect my clothes and now I am walking around the city because no building will let me in. We have been advised to spend the night outdoors," he said.

The quake hit on India's Republic Day, a national holiday, so many people who would normally have left for work were at home.

## Blame game begins as cleanup of Galapagos continues

PUERTO BAQUERIZO MORENO, Ecuador, Jan 27: As the threat from a massive oil spill receded Friday around the environmentally sensitive Galapagos Islands, criticism of Ecuadoran government officials for their role in the disaster began to crest, reports AFP.

The contamination is under control and the oil slick which has remained on the ocean is moving to the north, away from the archipelago," Ecuadoran Environment Minister Rodolfo Rendon said after flying over the islands.

The spill has already taken its toll on the island chain's unique and endangered wildlife species. So far 80 pelicans, 46 sea lions, six marine turtles, five blue-footed booby birds and two marine iguanas have been killed or injured by the oil, according to the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

Humans also have suffered. Fishermen among the island chain's 10,000 inhabitants -- unable to work because of the pollution -- complained Friday the government was not doing enough to help them.



People gather to identify the bodies of their relatives near the site of a collision of two buses near the Pakistani eastern city Phool Nagar on Friday. Forty-two people died and 60 were injured when a Lahore-bound bus from the central city of Multan ploughed into another bus at Phool Nagar, 70 km south of Lahore.

## Arroyo expresses confidence in military despite rumour of plots

MANILA, Jan 27: Philippine President Gloria Arroyo expressed her confidence in the military on Saturday, despite rumours of in-fighting and destabilisation plots within the armed forces that have cast a shadow over her week-old administration, reports AFP.

"I firmly believe that, despite the rumours of dissension and destabilisation initiatives allegedly from your ranks, the dedication and professionalism which you have demonstrated in the past will remain the cornerstone in guaranteeing the sovereign will of the people," she said.

She was referring to rumours of in-fighting among officers jockeying for power and reports that soldiers might try to destabilize her government to restore fallen predecessor, Joseph Estrada.

Arroyo was addressing active and retired officers in her first appearance at military headquarters since she took power last week.

She has also been criticised for appointing retired general Lisandro Abadia as national security adviser, despite a graft case pending against him.

"Dissension in the ranks of the military is the last thing we would need," Senate President Aquilino Pimentel said referring to the controversy arising from Abadia's appointment.

## Bush to deploy NMD, cut N-arms

WASHINGTON, Jan 27: President George W. Bush reaffirmed on Friday his intention to deploy a national missile defence (NMD) shield and cut US nuclear arsenals as his defence secretary made clear that the 1972 ABM Treaty would not stand in the president's way, reports AFP.

The US leader restated his key election campaign promises just hours after his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin warned that deployment of the anti-missile shield would do "irreparable damage" to international security.

Bush reminded reporters that he had pledged to deploy missile defences and to reduce US nuclear arsenals and said: "I'm going to fulfil that campaign promise."

"My point is that I want America to lead the world toward a more safe world when it comes to nuclear weaponry. On the offensive side, we can do so, and we can do so on the defensive side as well," he said.

Russia vehemently opposes NMD and so far has refused any changes to the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, which would ban deployment of even the limited anti-missile shield being developed by the United States. Many US allies also are worried that fielding the system could ignite a new arms race.

However, Bush's overture on nuclear arms reductions may appeal to Moscow, which has proposed that the United States and Russia cut their arsenals to 1,500 strategic nuclear warheads each, below the levels previously proposed for a START III agreement. US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said a nuclear exchange with Moscow no longer was the main threat faced by the United States and that circumstances had changed since the ABM treaty was signed with the former Soviet Union.

The ABM treaty "ought not to inhibit a country, a president, an administration, a nation, from fashioning offensive and defensive capabilities that will provide for our security in a notably different national security environment," he told a news conference.

## Two killed as snowfall hits Tokyo hard

TOKYO, Jan 27: A rare heavy snowfall blanketed Tokyo and surrounding areas Saturday, snarling air and land traffic and leaving at least two dead and 179 injured, press and official reports said, reports AFP.

At Tokyo's Haneda airport, 295 domestic flights were cancelled as snow prevented landings or take-offs but the suburban Narita airport for international traffic was operating as normal, airline officials said.

Super-express Shinkansen or "bullet train" runs were also delayed by up to about 20 minutes as workers continued to clear snow from the tracks, Japanese railways officials said.

Highways stretching out of Tokyo were closed at 10 sections because of ice.

A 66-year-old woman slipped on an icy road in downtown Tokyo and died later with head injuries at a hospital, police said.

And in Nagano, the site of the 1998 Winter Olympics, a 75-year-old man was buried in snow and died, Japan Broadcasting Corp. said.

The network also said 179 people were injured as they slipped on roads or fell from roofs while clearing snow in eight prefectures. They included 65 in Tokyo, 43 in Kanagawa and 28 in Chiba prefecture.

Most police did not compile statistics on snow casualties.

The national meteorological agency said more than 20 centimeters (eight inches) of snow had fallen over many points in Tokyo and its surrounding plain by nightfall as a growing low pressure passed by Japan's Pacific coast.



Road service workers signal as a highway linking Tokyo and Yokohama is closed due to heavy snowfalls around Tokyo while another highway is jammed with vehicles (behind) on Saturday. Heavy snowfalls have affected Tokyo's road, rail and air traffic.

## Sharon won't bring peace for Palestinians: Arafat

Joint statement of understanding to be issued today

ROME, Jan 27: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said today that peace in the Middle East would not be possible if hardliner Ariel Sharon wins the February 6 election for prime minister in Israel, reports AFP.

"I do not believe there will be a veritable war, but Sharon would escalate the conflict. With him in power, we will not have peace," Arafat told the daily La Repubblica here.

But he was quick to point out that the Palestinians "did not get peace" with the Labour government of Prime Minister Ehud Barak in power either.

Arafat slammed what he described as a "secret accord" between Barak and Sharon to set up a government of national unity following the Israeli elections.

Arafat said he would "like to sign a peace deal, but so far there has not been sufficient progress" made in ongoing talks between the two sides in Taba, Egypt.

With the new administration of George W. Bush still settling down in the White House, Arafat said "more than ever the help of the European Union is necessary."

The Palestinians "owe a great deal to the EU for its economic assistance, but I hope Europe will now make a greater contribution to the peace process," said Arafat.

"In four months, the Israelis have pushed us to our knees, they have crushed our people, our economy and our lives. How long can it last?" the Palestinian leader asked.

"How much time will pass before the world intervenes and says 'enough'?" he added.

A peace accord is seen as Barak's only chance to keep the right-winger Sharon from taking his job in 10 days. Sharon, however, has said that if elected he would not honor any deals cut by Barak in his final days in office.

The peace talks in Taba have so far failed to reverse Barak's political woes. A poll published Friday by The Jerusalem Post still gave Sharon a 16 percentage-point lead over Barak.

Barak set the stage for the election with his resignation in December after facing a barrage of criticism over his handling of deadly unrest in the region that broke out in February.

Meanwhile, the Israelis and Palestinians will end their marathon peace talks here Sunday with a statement on the understandings they have reached, Palestinian negotiators said today.

Negotiator Hassan Asfur, speaking to reporters as his team headed for Eilat, Israel for informal talks with the Israeli delegation, confirmed disclosures given earlier by Palestinian sources.

"In principle, tomorrow," Asfur replied to journalists who asked when the statement would be issued.

"The talks will finish tomorrow," a source close to the delegation said earlier in the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Taba.

"There will be a joint press conference and they will issue a joint statement," the source said. "In this statement they will present the understandings they reached and will express the desire to continue the talks."

The Palestinians are holding informal talks in the neighboring Israeli resort of Eilat for the Jewish sabbath to help the Israeli delegation avoid travel on a holy day.

## Pinochet hospitalised after stroke: Doctor

SANTIAGO, Jan 27: Former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet suffered a mild stroke and was hospitalised on Friday, just three days after being questioned for the first time on alleged human rights abuses committed during his 17-year rule, reports AFP.

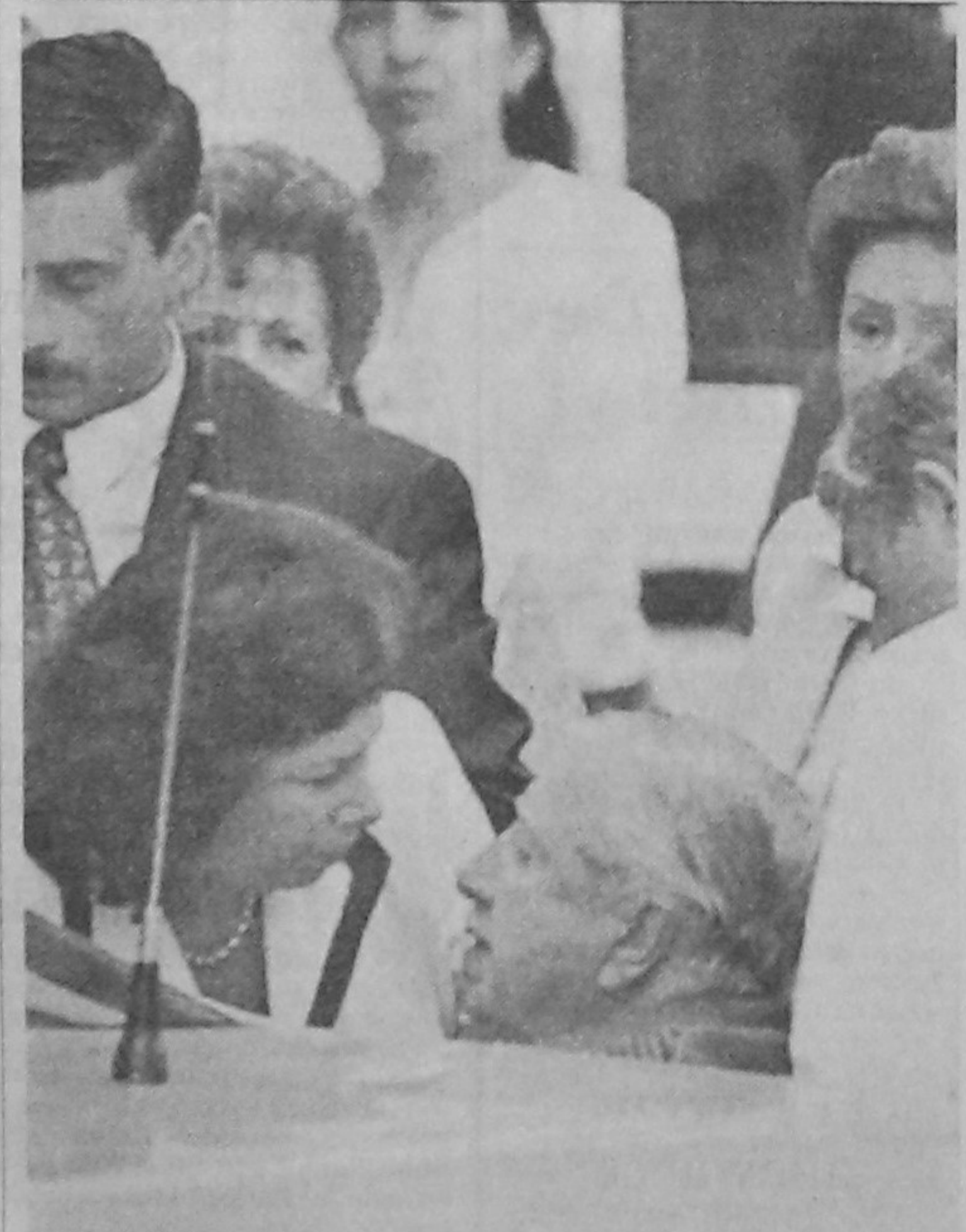
Doctors at Santiago's Military Hospital said the ailing 85-year-old general had suffered a "transient schematic attack" -- hardening of the arteries to the brain that commonly precedes a stroke -- adding he would likely be in the hospital's intensive care unit at least through Saturday afternoon.

Pinochet faces possible charges of murder and kidnapping in the deaths of some 75 political opponents in October 1973, a month after the bloody coup that brought him to power. He also faces a growing number of lawsuits over the more than 3,000 people killed or kidnapped under his iron-fisted rule from 1973 to 1990.

Meanwhile, investigators found human bones at a site said to contain remains of some of those killed. Pieces of ribs and vertebrae were found at the site, 40 km west of here, said Judge Hector Carreno, the lead investigator in the case.

"I am still not in a situation to be able to decide if it is or not what we are looking for," Carreno said.

Marco Antonio Pinochet, the



Former Chilean dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (C) arrives at the Military Hospital Militar in Santiago, Chile on Friday. Pinochet was rushed to the hospital after suffering a slight stroke, according to a hospital statement.

## Venezuela grounds DC-3s after fatal crash

CIUDAD BOLIVAR, Venezuela, Jan 27: Venezuelan authorities on Friday ordered the suspension of all flights by aging DC-3 aircraft in the country after a plane of that type crashed into a shantytown near here, killing 24 on board and seriously injuring three people on the ground, reports AFP.

Investigators want to know if a structural failure caused Tuesday's crash before lifting the ban on flights, said Colonel Saul Antonio Fuenmayor, Venezuela's civil aviation director. The investigation is likely to take about two months, he said.

Production of the DC-3, one of the best-known commercial airliners in history, ended half a century ago, meaning the hundreds still flying all are more than 50 years old.

Authorities also have suspended operations of Rutaca Airlines, which operated the flight, while the investigation is ongoing, said Roman Gomez Ruiz, Venezuelan director of air transport.

## Torrential rains kill 15 in Bolivia

LA PAZ, Jan 27: Torrential rains overnight caused floods in low-lying areas of the capital, one of Bolivia's worst-hit parts as storms this month claimed 15 lives and caused millions of dollars in damage, local police said on Friday, reports AFP.

The rains, which have been falling since early January, also caused a mudslide in the working-class Cotahuma neighborhood of La Paz Thursday.

"The situation is difficult," a civil defence spokesman said, estimating that some 15,000 families, or more than 100,000 people, here have been affected by the rains throughout the country, with four of its nine departments severely affected.

La Paz has suffered the brunt of the rains, with four people, among them a two-year-old child, dead in the region in the past week due to the floods.

Rivers and streams have completely swollen around the capital, officials say, and other low-lying areas appear in danger of fluvial decimation.