

Israel blames PA for fresh suicide bombing

Two killed in bomb attack

AFP, Jerusalem

A spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said yesterday that Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority bore full responsibility for a deadly bomb attack in Israel and said the culprits would "pay the price."

Two people, including a suspected suicide bomber, were killed in a bomb blast in the Israeli town of Kfar Saba near the West Bank on Sunday, only hours after Israeli and Palestinian security officials held talks aimed at trying to end seven months of bloodshed.

"We have another bloody Sunday," said Sharon's spokesman Raanan Gissin.

"The full responsibility on what's happening lies with the Palestinian Authority and with their security forces," Gissin told AFP.

"They are supposed to stop terrorist activity. And what happened, not only don't they stop terrorist activity, they are now aiding and abetting and supporting the terrorist activity," he added.

Gissin said the perpetrators of the attack would "pay the price" but declined to say what action Israel was considering.

Meanwhile, two people, including a suspected suicide bomber, were killed in a bomb blast in an Israeli town near the West Bank on Sunday, an attack that could jeopardise latest efforts to halt seven months of bloodshed.

The attack, the second deadly bomb blast in the area in less than a month, occurred the day after Israeli and Palestinian security chiefs met in a bid to quell the violence and amid tentative political contacts between the two sides.

Local police chief Shimon Bohbut said one of the two killed was apparently a suicide bomber, while other officials said around 29 people had been injured, two of them seriously.

Police said the bomber blew up an explosives-packed belt among a crowd of passengers as they were getting on a bus in the centre of Kfar Saba, which lies north of Tel Aviv.

In the last deadly attack to rock Israel, two Israeli teenagers were killed on March 28 along with a suicide bomber at a bus station near Kfar Saba, not far from the Green Line dividing Israel and the West Bank.

Israel has been hit by a spate of bomb attacks since Prime Minister Ariel Sharon took office in early March and the headline former general has gone on the offensive in recent weeks, unleashing heavy strikes on Palestinian targets in response to attacks on Israeli territory or Jewish settlements.

The latest deaths bring to 486 the number of people killed during the violence that erupted in late September: 399 Palestinians, 73 Israelis, 13 Arab Israelis and one German national.

Israel had announced earlier Sunday that it had reached an agreement on measures to halt the violence at the first security meeting with Palestinians in almost two weeks, but a Palestinian security chief was much less upbeat.

A spokesman for Sharon hailed the three-hour overnight meeting at the Erez crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip as "serious and positive."

The two parties "decided to cooperate on a security plan and to apply measures aimed at putting an end to the violence and terrorism," as well as new measures to ease the restrictions on the Palestinian population, he added, without giving details.



An Israeli police sapper inspects underneath a bus next to the body of an Israeli man in Kfar Saba near the West Bank yesterday. The Israeli man, including a suspected suicide bomber, were killed and around 39 others injured in a bomb blast, an attack that could jeopardise latest efforts to halt seven months of bloodshed.

Montenegro votes for polls to decide fate of Yugoslavia

AFP, Podgorica

Montenegrins voted yesterday in a general election which could sound the death knell for Federal Yugoslavia.

The battle lines were clearly drawn between President Milo Djukanovic and his pro-independence "Victory belongs to Montenegro" coalition and the three-way alliance "Together For Yugoslavia" which wants the federation to survive.

More than 440,000 eligible voters began casting their ballots for the 77-seat assembly at about 1,000 polling stations throughout the tiny republic at 8:00 am (0600 GMT).

Polling stations were due to close at 9:00 pm (1900 GMT) and first unofficial results were expected around midnight.

Djukanovic's allies hope to garner enough seats in parliament to be able to form a government and organise a referendum this summer on whether to turn Montenegro into an independent state.

At present it forms part of the rump Yugoslavia. Its much larger neighbour Serbia is the only other province left in the federation.

"We are going for the referendum," Djukanovic advisor Miodrag

Vukovic confidently told reporters on the eve of the vote.

Asked how he would have placed a bet on the outcome - as many here have done - Vukovic predicted the coalition would win 40 of the 77 assembly seats, with the pro-Yugoslav camp garnering just 22 deputies.

Nevertheless, he said, an independent Montenegro would offer to form a union of equal partners with Serbia "but that does not depend on us, but on Serbia".

"I know that an independent Montenegro is the final goal, since I live in Montenegro and can feel the mood" among the population of 650,000.

Last-minute opinion polls showed Djukanovic's bloc winning between 42 and 47 per cent of the popular vote, which could give the pro-independence lobby more than half of the parliamentary seats.

The same polls gave the opposition between 25 and 37 per cent of the vote.

Dismissing allegations that it was unfair to decide such a serious issue as independence with a mere simple majority of the voters supporting a referendum, Vukovic compared the Montenegrin system with more heralded democratic processes.

India set to introduce sweeping reform in defence purchase

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government is set to introduce sweeping reforms of its military procurement process, which has been severely tarnished by corruption scandals.

A report submitted to parliament by a high-powered committee of all-party MPs has suggested the constitution of a Defence Procurement Board to take vital decisions on buying defence equipment in a transparent and efficient manner.

The board will be an integrated organisation having representatives of the ministry of defence and serving and retired officers of the army, air force and navy.

It will take the crucial decision to "make or buy" any particular piece of equipment and, in the case of the latter, give final approval of the price and choice of supplier.

The committee recommendation, which awaits parliament's

approval, has coincided with the fallout of an Internet website expose that caught senior politicians, civil servants and military officials taking money from journalists posing as arms dealers.

The scandal has paralysed India's parliament and forced the resignation of defence minister George Fernandes.

While approving the setting up of a separate board for military purchases, the parliamentary committee has gone a step ahead and asked for a complete revamp of the procurement process.

"(The aim is) to break the nexus between middlemen/agents and the officers related with defence purchases," the report said.

It recommended that there should be a "vigilance check" of every member of the proposed board. The check would examine the member's income and assets - before, during and after his tenure.

The committee also recommended that a special cell of the Central Vigilance Commission, a national anti-corruption watchdog agency, should be set up inside the offices of the ministry of defence to deal with all corruption related matters.

"Secrecy should not be used to cover up financial aberration in defence purchases as secrecy in perpetuity is extremely dangerous and would eventually prove to be counter-productive and even harmful to national interest," the committee report says.

On its part, the ministry of defence has asked the CVC to probe all defence deals worth more than 750 million rupees (16 million dollars) to make "defence purchases free from corruption and kickbacks (and) ensure absolute probity and utmost transparency in defence procurements."

93 stowaways attempting to leave China arrested

AFP, Beijing

Police in China have arrested 93 stowaways attempting to leave the country through the Yellow Sea, close to the North Korean border, the official Xinhua news agency reported yesterday.

The would-be migrants were arrested Friday evening in the northeastern port of Dandong by border police. They were already on board a barge waiting for the tide to leave port.

The destination of the vessel was not known.

The stowaways were originally from the northeastern provinces of Jilin and Heilongjiang, Xinhua said. Northeastern China has the highest turnover of illegal migrants, most leaving from the port of Dalian hidden in containers bound for western countries via South Korea or Japan.

Earth losing shine as it warms

REUTERS, Los Angeles

The Earth, as seen from space, may be growing dimmer as it warms, according to a study released this week at southern California's Big Bear Solar Observatory that could ultimately lead to a new way to test for global warming.

If more observations confirm that trend, the Earth's brightness known as "earthshine" could provide an important gauge on the health of the global climate, scientists said.

New observations suggest that the Earth has dimmed by about 2.5 per cent over the past five years, according to research sponsored in part by the National Aeronautic and Space Administration and published in the current issue of Geophysical Research Letters.

"This is something one had better take into account in considering the way in which the climate is changing," said Steven Koonin, a theoretical physicist at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, who is credited with

helping to revive modern interest in earthshine.

Scientists have known about the phenomenon for hundreds of years because the dark side of the moon acts as a kind of mirror, reflecting back light from the Earth with a kind of ghostly glow.

The Italian artist and visionary Leonardo da Vinci was the first to explain that the faint light visible with the naked eye in the dark area of the crescent moon was actually sunlight reflected back from Earth some 240,000 miles away.

Other early astronomers had incorrectly guessed the dim light was the result of the moon's own inherent glow or light reflected from nearby Venus, the brightest star in the sky.

Now physicists at the New Jersey Institute of Technology and California Institute of Technology have undertaken the first rigorous study of the intensity earthshine with a six-inch telescope at the Big Bear observatory near Los Angeles. The results show that the Earth's

brightness varies as much as 20 per cent with the seasons, rising in the northern hemisphere's winter as more land is covered with reflective snow and ice.

The oceans are the least reflective area of the planet, said Koonin. Observers in California have been able to watch the earthshine on the moon brighten as the sun rises over the more reflective Asian land mass and leaves behind the darker Pacific.

The key question now is whether the slow decline in earthshine over the past five years is the result of global warming or tied instead to the well-documented 11-year cycle in the sun's magnetic activity, said Koonin.

Scientists at Big Bear would like to work with observatories in Asia and Europe in the years ahead to get a better pool of evidence to decide that, he said.

"It's really amazing, if you think about it, that you can look at this ghostly reflection on the moon and measure what the Earth's climate is doing," Koonin said.

Ex-Taiwan leader arrives in Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Former Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui arrived in Japan yesterday for a landmark five-day visit as Tokyo's granting of visa threatened to spark a rift with China.

The 78-year-old Lee, on board a Japan Asia Airways flight, landed at Kansai airport in the western city of Osaka at 6:21 pm (15:21 BST), an airport official said.

It will be his first visit to Japan since 1985 and his third trip overseas since his retirement last May. He has visited Britain and the Czech Republic since retiring.

Japan, which had dithered over the visa issue for weeks, finally announced Friday it would let him visit for medical treatment, prompting an immediate protest and veiled threat of retaliatory action from China.



Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) candidate Ava Mondol (C, with folded hands) and party workers greet residents of her constituency during a door-to-door election campaign in Sonarpur, some 25 km south of Kolkata on Sunday. The ruling Left government faces a stiff challenge from the Mamata Bannerjee-led Trinamool Congress Party in the forthcoming assembly elections in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal on May 10.

Japan awaits 1st test-tube emperor

AFP, London

Japanese royal watchers believe that Crown Princess Masako is expecting the world's first test-tube emperor after secretly undergoing fertility treatment last month, the Independent yesterday reported here.

Japanese courtiers announced last week that the 37-year-old princess, who has been married for eight years and has had one miscarriage, is around six or seven weeks pregnant.

Doctors and journalists believe that she has undergone in-vitro fertilisation after increasing anxiety about the future of the imperial throne, the Independent said.

The Japanese imperial line claims descent from the Sun Goddess more than 2,000 years ago but is currently suffering a distinct shortage of heirs.

Since Princess Masako married Crown Prince Naruhito in 1993, the couple have been under constant scrutiny for signs they were expecting a child.

Last week's happy news came a month-and-a-half after one of Japan's leading infertility experts was appointed as the princess' personal doctor, the Independent reported.

'TC's polls pact with Cong may spell doom for party'

EC asks TV channels not to telecast films of candidates

PTI, Kolkata

Dissident Trinamool Congress leader Aji Panja on Saturday said his party's polls prospects would be 'seriously affected' in the coming West Bengal assembly elections due to the alliance with Congress, which has resulted in TC chief Mamata Banerjee's dwindling popularity.

The popularity of our great leader (Banerjee) has been dwindling everyday. She had asked people to vote for BJP in the Lok Sabha elections and now she is seeking votes for Congress from the very same people. This is betrayal, Panja told reporters at a press meet here on Saturday.

The member of parliament, who continued to support ruling NDA from outside despite Banerjee's severing ties with the alliance, said TC's election pact with Congress would 'spell doom' for the party.

grunted leader alleged.

Termining the TC-Congress common minimum programme released on Saturday a 'disastrous' proposition, he said it amounted to deceiving the people of Bengal who has lot of expectations from TC and Banerjee.

Meanwhile, Election Commission will direct three TV channels - Zee Cinema, Tara Bangla and CTVN - not to telecast any movies or programmes of candidates contesting the May 10 West Bengal assembly polls.

State Chief Electoral Officer Sabyasachi Sen told newsmen here that he had received complaint from CPI (M) that these three channels had telecast movies of Trinamool Congress (TC) candidates Tapas Pal, Madhavi Mukherjee and Nayana Das (Bandopadhyay) on April 19 and 20 in their respective programmes.

This is violative of EC's norms and code of conduct and the commission will shortly ask these channels not to telecast any of their programmes, he said.

ICRC distributes food in Afghan drought-hit villages

AFP, Kabul

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Sunday said it had distributed 1,450 tonnes of food during the month to drought victims in Afghanistan's remote province of Ghor.

ICRC Kabul press delegate Mario Musa said the three-month ration of 100 kilograms of wheat, 30 kilograms of chick peas and 15 kilograms of edible oil was handed out to 10,000 families.

"This is indeed an emergency response to encourage the local population not to leave their houses," Musa told reporters.

"The three-month ration is for every family to lead them to July when the next harvest normally comes."

The distribution covered the provincial town of Chaghcharan and Lal and Shahrak districts controlled jointly by the ruling Taliban and the opposition, Musa said, adding that the handout was completed on Friday in Lal.

6 Tigers killed in sea battle

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger guerrillas lost six of their cadres, including two senior rebels, in a major sea battle with government forces, the rebels said yesterday.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said over their clandestine Voice of Tigers radio that two of those killed in Friday's sea battle off the coast of Chalai were self-styled "lieutenant colonels."

The navy sank four Tiger boats in a flotilla of supply craft while the air force destroyed another.

The defence ministry said that six Tiger guerrillas who were wounded in the battle were rescued by the navy and were being treated in a military hospital. However, military sources said that two more Tigers had been captured.

Officials said that investigations pointed to the Tigers receiving fresh supplies of arms and ammunition even as they observed a unilateral truce since Christmas eve.

46 miners killed in explosion in China

AFP, Beijing

Forty-six miners were killed and two others are missing following a gas explosion at an illegal coal mine in northern China, state media reported yesterday.

The blast occurred Saturday morning at the Xiayukou mine in Hancheng, Shaanxi province, the Beijing Morning Post said.

Only four miners survived out of the 52 working underground at the time of the explosion, the daily said.

Rescuers have recovered 46 bodies, but two other miners were still missing.

The paper said the private mine was operating illegally. The mine is located in coal deposits rich in gas, making mining exceptionally dangerous.

The provincial mining bureau has ordered the suspension of work at all mines located on the deposit in

order to improve safety, according to the daily.

An investigation has been launched to determine the cause of the explosion.

The Xiayukou mine is about 100 kilometres (60 miles) from a mine where an explosion killed 38 people early this month. Saturday's blast is the sixth reported in the official press since the start of the year.

China is the world's number one producer and consumer of coal. Accidents in Chinese mines kill around 10,000 people a year. Safety is particularly bad in the thousands of small private mines which operate without authorisation but which are vital to the local economy.

The central government regularly attempts, with limited success, to close down small mines which are not very profitable but cause severe pollution.

Aceh rebels prepare for all-out resistance

AFP, Banda Aceh

Independence fighters in the Indonesian state of Aceh pledged yesterday that they were ready for all-out resistance against new government troops being sent to the region.

The Free Aceh Movement (GAM), which has been fighting for independence for the last 25 years, also warned non-Acehnese to leave the province immediately.

"We will deploy all our trained guerrillas with full armament to face the TNI (the Indonesian armed forces) troops that are specially dispatched here to hunt us," North Aceh GAM deputy commander Sofyan Daud said.

In a written communique issued on Sunday, Daud said that the GAM will deploy tens of thousands of its guerrillas from its various bases across Aceh to face the soldiers who are set to arrive in Aceh later in the day.

Jakarta is sending an additional 11 companies of anti-guerrilla troops, or about 1,100 men, to Aceh with the first batch expected to arrive in Aceh later on Sunday.

"The statement of the TNI Commander, Admiral Widodo Adisucipto, has made it clear that what has been taking place in Aceh so far is really a military operation," Daud said.

"This has been made even clearer with the reinforcement of 11 companies of anti-guerrilla soldiers and the establishment of the Command for the Implementation of Operations in Aceh."

The troop reinforcements have been given special training in Bandung, West Java, according to the military.

Widodo on Friday announced the establishment of the operation command to be headed by Brigadier General Zumroni.

Chechnya's independence not negotiable: Maskhadov

AFP, Slepyorsk

Chechnya's rebel leaders may yield to Russia on some military and economic issues, but will never give up the breakaway republic's independence claims, rebel president Aslan Maskhadov has vowed.

"Our independence is not negotiable, we are an independent state," Maskhadov said in an address to the small Caucasian nation late Saturday.

"We have all the attributes of a state, including a president and a parliament elected in 1997, whose legitimacy was confirmed by the entire world," Maskhadov added.

The rebel leader also urged his people not to cooperate with Moscow, reminding Chechens of atrocities allegedly committed by Russian troops and blasting those who, like former Chechen religious leader Ahmad Kadyrov, collaborate with Russians.

"Russian leaders wish to divide and rule, they understand how pointless their war is, and they want to foment discord among us," Maskhadov said in his address.

Separatist rebels launch almost

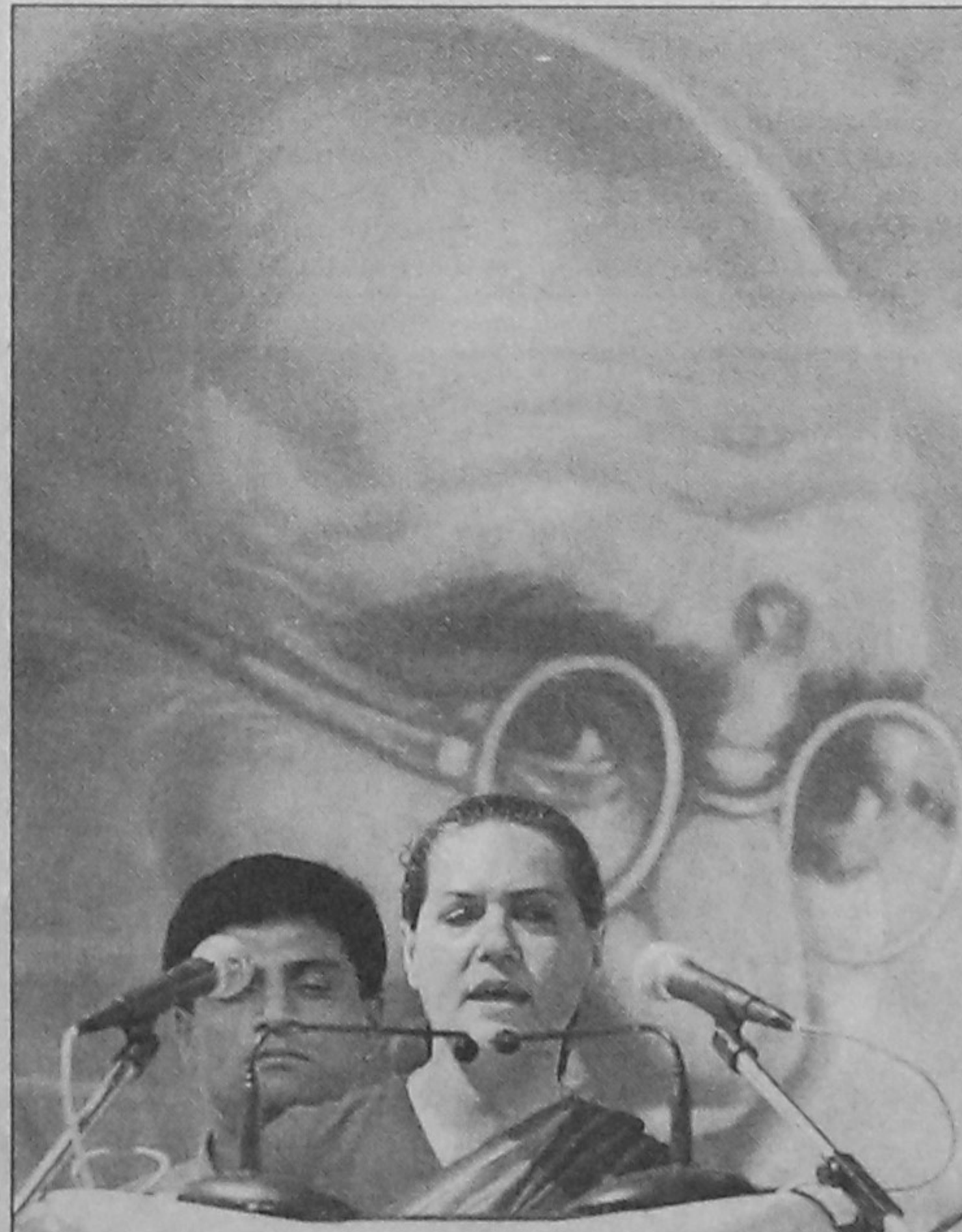
daily attacks on Russian forces and the pro-Moscow administration in war-torn Chechnya, a breakaway southern Russian republic invaded by Moscow on October 1, 1999.

Meanwhile, Russian border guards found a mass grave in the Argun gorge area of southern Chechnya containing the bodies of 32 men believed to be Georgian workers, the Interfax news agency reported Sunday, quoting local officials.

The bodies found Saturday near the town of Gzikhoi in the Kalinsky region had been beheaded, Chechen Press Minister Vasily Vasilenko told Interfax.

Kremlin officials quoted by IAR-TASS said an initial examination indicated the remains were those of "17 or 18 people."

The remains appeared to have been buried about five years ago, and "the nature of their wounds suggest they had been executed," the Kremlin press officials said.



Sonia Gandhi president of Indian National Congress and leader of the opposition addressing a public meeting after unveiling the statue of her husband late Rajiv Gandhi at the Cooperage Garden in south Bombay on Saturday.