

Li Peng's visit to Japan postponed

AP, Tokyo

Amid recently strained ties, China has decided to postpone a visit to Japan next month by the head of its legislature, a parliamentary official said yesterday.

Chinese diplomats visited the offices of the chairmen of Parliament's lower and upper houses to convey the message, the official said on condition of anonymity. They did not say when they wished to reschedule the visit, the official said.

The diplomats said China wanted to delay Li Peng's upcoming visit considering the "recent situation surrounding Japan-China relations," the official said. They would not offer any specifics, he said.

The visit's delay underscored brewing tension between the two countries over issues involving Taiwan and a history textbook which China says whitewashes Japanese wartime conduct.

China had said Tuesday it has cancelled some official visits to Japan, but did not elaborate.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue said the "political foundation" for ties has been undermined by the textbook and by the visa Japan gave to former Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui. China sees Lee as representing a political force blocking moves for reunification with Taiwan.

Koizumi faces first leadership test

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japanese prime minister-in-waiting Junichiro Koizumi faced the first test of his leadership yesterday as he chose a trio of top ruling party posts including a long-time ally and a recent rival.

Koizumi on Tuesday rode a groundswell of rank-and-file support to victory in the race to lead Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) party and become the 11th prime minister in 13 years.

His "Change the LDP, Change Japan" platform won resounding support from local party members deeply afraid of losing the July election for parliament's Upper House.

Attention has now turned to whom he will choose for top LDP posts and his cabinet of clues to whether his pledges to change the hide-bound party that has ruled for most of the past half-century will be kept.

Reports of his choices for the key party positions appeared to indicate that as anticipated Koizumi was engaged in a delicate balancing act between party harmony and reform.

Koizumi has chosen close ally Taku Yamasaki for the position of LDP Secretary-General, a post that has a commanding say in deciding party matters and is also responsible for liaising with its coalition partners, media said.

A former LDP policy chief Yamasaki was a key supporter of Koizumi's bid to become party president.

Economics Minister Tarō Aso, who placed a distant third in yesterday's LDP election for party president, will be tapped for the post of LDP policy chief, media said, while former Trade Minister Mitsuo Horiuchi was to be appointed head of the LDP's decision-making General Council.

2 killed in blast at Chechnya police station

AFP, Moscow

An explosion tore apart a Russian police building in Chechnya's second city of Gudermes, nominally under federal control, killing at least two officers, reports said yesterday.

IAR-TASS said four other men were hospitalised with non-life-threatening injuries, while the fate of another two who were thought to be inside the two-story building remained unknown.

Police have launched a criminal investigation into the blast, which carried the equivalent of one kilogram (2.2 pounds) of TNT and occurred overnight on Tuesday.

Gudermes has served as Russia's administrative centre in Chechnya and been under nominal federal control since the start of the bloody 18-month war.

But Russian officials earlier this week moved its main administration to the original capital Grozny, which lies in ruins.

The new Grozny administration building came under repeated fire from separatist fighters earlier this week, injuring several pro-Russian troops protecting the building.

Federal forces rumbled into Chechnya in October, 1999 in a self-declared anti-terrorist operation, but have since become bogged down in a brutal guerrilla war that has intensified with the onset of spring.

Separately, Kremlin officials announced the arrest of six suspected guerrillas in the Asinovskaya region, on the border with the Russian republic of Ingushetia.

China summons US envoy over arms sales as Bush talks tough

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday summoned the US ambassador in Beijing to protest new arms sales to Taiwan, as US President George W. Bush promised to help the island defend itself against Chinese attack.

Bush's decision Tuesday to approve the most significant package of weapons since 1992 was welcomed by Taiwan but greeted with fury by China, which claims the island as part of its territory.

The US leader shrugged off Chinese anger and bluntly told Beijing his administration would stand side by side with Taiwan to rebuff an invasion.

In an interview with ABC television, Bush was asked if the United States had an obligation to defend Taiwan.

"Yes, we do. And the Chinese must understand that," he replied. The United States would do "whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself," he added.

The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act obliges the United States to sell the island enough weaponry to ensure its defence, although Washington has in the past refrained from directly committing US forces.

It was unclear whether Bush's comments represented a hardening of US policy or simply a strong statement of support for weapons sales to the island.

The package of US arms -- which includes Kidd-class destroyers, P-3C submarine-hunting aircraft and a commitment to help Taiwan procure diesel-powered submarines -- would help Taiwan break a Chinese naval blockade.

US officials said the list of weapons went beyond those publicly disclosed and was drawn up in response to China's growing deployment of weapons threatening Taiwan, notably a missile build-up along the Chinese coast.

But China has rejected the US claims and accused the United States of

violating its sovereignty with the arms deal.

The official Xinhua news agency said Vice Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing made "solemn representations" about the weapons deal to ambassador Joseph Prueher, who was summoned by the foreign ministry to hear the protest.

China's 2.5 million-strong armed forces, which have been feverishly procuring high-tech weapons from Russia in a bid to alter the strategic balance in the Taiwan Straits, warned the new US weaponry would not buy peace.

"Arms purchases can only make the Taiwan Straits situation more turbulent, increase the threat to regional peace and stability, and backfire," said an editorial in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Daily.

"Arms purchases will not only be unable to genuinely guarantee Taiwan's security, it may also bring disaster to the people of Taiwan."

Despite nearly 52 years of de facto independent rule, China considers Taiwan a breakaway province and it regularly threatens to invade the island if it moves towards independence or rebuffs talks on reunification.

Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian, a former advocate of independence who is deeply distrusted by Beijing, said the new US weapons were needed.

"I believe Washington's decision will not only enhance Taiwan's defence capability and strengthen our people's confidence but also help maintain the military balance and stability across the strait."

Sino-US relations have been going through an extremely tense phase since Bush took office in January promising to treat Beijing as a competitor, and the arms sale will almost certainly raise tension further.

The two sides are embroiled in a heated row over the collision between a US spy plane and a Chinese fighter jet on April 1, and China is still refusing to return the 80-million-dollar E-P3 aircraft.



Elite Presidential guard keep watch after closing the main road to President Chandrika Kumaratunga's official residence in Colombo yesterday after a bomb went off within the high-security zone wounding a guard. A second bomb was also discovered and defused by the military.

Parcel bomb explodes near Kumaratunga's residence

AFP, Colombo

A parcel bomb went off within a high-security zone in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo where President Chandrika Kumaratunga's tightly-guarded residence is located, police said.

A member of the elite police Presidential Security Division (PSD) was wounded while he tried to check an unattended package left near a high rise building in the Colombo Fort area, a police spokesman said.

There had been an unattended parcel and a plain-clothed PSD tried to check it when the explosion took place, a police spokesman said.

It was not immediately clear what type of explosives had been used and who was responsible for leaving the bomb in a high security zone of the capital.

The LTTE has been blamed for a string of bomb attacks here in the past, including devastating suicide bombings.

From tinseltown to presidency to prison

AFP, Manila

From being a top movie star who specialised in playing Robin Hood-type criminals, former Philippine president Joseph Estrada has found himself in jail for real.

The 64-year-old Estrada was thrown in prison countless times in his hit movies, playing variations on the theme of the legendary English hero who stole from the rich to give to the poor.

But officials say Estrada turned out to be a real thief more interested in lining his own pockets. He was ordered arrested and jailed yesterday on charges of plundering the nation of 80 million dollars.

"Estrada's claim to Robin Hood fame is misplaced because he stole from the poor," said Renato Corona, chief of staff of Estrada's successor Gloria Arroyo.

"He has plundered for himself and kept (the riches) in his own pocket," Corona said.

Estrada's six-year term came to an abrupt end in January when he was deposed in a popular military-led revolt. His popular vice president, Arroyo, was installed in his place.

Helped by his silver-screen popularity among the poor, Estrada was elected president in 1998 with the biggest ever majority for a Philippine leader.

On becoming the "unlucky" 13th



Joseph Estrada

president, Estrada vowed to disprove critics who said the college drop-out, gambler, drinker and womaniser was unfit to be leader of the largely Catholic nation of 76 million people.

But on entering the presidential palace, Estrada soon ran into trouble. He was accused of hosting all-night drinking sessions with a shadowy group of friends who would later help bring him down.

One of them was indicted for the country's worst share insider-trading scandal, and Estrada was accused of asking regulators to exonerate him.

Another drinking buddy, provincial governor Luis Singson, charged in October that Estrada had received bribes from gambling bosses and

embezzled government funds, triggering the legal process that led to his downfall.

Even when he was down after the popular revolt, Estrada vowed to fight back and said he would eventually succeed, just like in his movies.

But he lost his biggest battle -- questioning the constitutional legality of Arroyo's succession. With that court ruling, his immunity from prosecution vanished.

The eighth of 10 children of a Manila engineer, Joseph was the black sheep of the upper-middle-class Ejercito family, dropping out of engineering school and hanging out with unsavoury types.

He took up acting, to the horror of his conservative parents who forbade him from using the family name. So he adopted the name Joseph Estrada and later became popularly known by his nickname, "Erap."

Estrada won a clutch of acting awards and also acquired several mistresses -- most of them film co-stars -- on his way to the presidency. He made no secret of his affairs and numerous illegal offspring even after coming to power.

When he took over the presidency, Estrada vowed it would "be my last and greatest performance."

His time at the top, however, has proved to be a real-life tragedy as Estrada becomes the first former Philippine president to land in jail.

Israel seals off West Bank, Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel has sealed off the occupied territories, fearing Palestinian attacks during yesterday's anniversary celebrations marking the independence of the Jewish state.

Inside the blockaded territories, the death toll mounted to 489 since the intifada, or Palestinian uprising, erupted seven months ago. A Palestinian man was shot dead by Israeli troops near the border between the Gaza Strip and Israel Tuesday and later, another Palestinian was shot dead by the Israeli army in the northern West Bank town of Qalqilya.

Following a spate of bombings against Jewish targets, the Israeli authorities sealed off all routes in and out of the occupied territories,

preventing Palestinians who have jobs in Israel from getting to work.

The restrictions will not be lifted until Friday at 2:00 am (0500 BST), after the celebrations marking the 53rd anniversary of the Jewish state, an Israeli army spokesman announced.

Although more than 80 per cent of the people killed in the months-long deadly cycle of violence have been Palestinians, Israel's hawkish Prime Minister Ariel Sharon accused Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat of having "personal and strategic control" over the intifada.

"The Palestinian Authority is responsible for the acts of terrorism, and does nothing to prevent them," Sharon said during a meeting with Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Pique.

"It continues to incite violence as a means of attaining political goals, and Yasser Arafat himself strategically controls what is happening," the former general added.

The army said three Palestinian mortar shells were fired on the Jewish settlement of Gaddit, part of the Gush Katif bloc in the southern Gaza Strip, without causing any casualties.

It was the first incident of mortar fire since Sunday and came despite an order by Arafat for a halt to such attacks, which have frequently triggered harsh Israeli reprisals.

Meanwhile, Israel's Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said Israel was "not ready" to accept a "point-to-point" interim peace plan, a proposal reported to be the product

26 soldiers killed in fresh fighting in Lanka

REUTERS, Colombo

At least 26 government soldiers were killed and another 78 seriously wounded in ferocious fighting in northern Sri Lanka yesterday, defence officials said.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were offering stiff resistance to the military advance launched from Eluthumadduval in the Jaffna peninsula at dawn, officials said.

"Most of the soldiers wounded had stepped on anti-personnel mines," a military official here said. "The Tigers were also firing artillery and mortar bombs."

"There is some stiff resistance, but they are making very good progress," said Brigadier Sanath Karunaratne.

He said he did not have any casualty figures for the Liberation

Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels, but said the government troops had broken through one rebel line.

The offensive came after several months in which both sides appeared to move closer to the negotiating table to try and end the decades-old ethnic conflict that has killed 64,000 people.

Both sides have said they want talks but have accused the other of being insincere.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga was quoted by state media as saying the door was still open to talks.

"With an unprincipled terrorist organisation such as the LTTE, I will not like to comment on peace prospects too prematurely but we are hopeful of achieving something tangible and constructive in the coming months," she was quoted as

saying by the Daily News.

"The door is still not closed to the LTTE entering negotiations," she said.

The offensive came just hours after the LTTE let expire a unilateral ceasefire that had been in place for four months.

The rebels said they would not extend the ceasefire, as they had done three times before, because the government was using it to its advantage.

The government has accused the rebels of breaking the ceasefire 220 times.

The Tigers, fighting since 1983 for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of Sri Lanka, took large areas of Jaffna last year but were pushed back by a series of government offensives which began in early September.

Astronauts complete second spacewalk

AFP, Houston, Texas

Astronauts from the US space shuttle Endeavour completed the installation of a Canadian-made robotic arm on the International Space Station during the mission's second spacewalk Tuesday, NASA officials said here.

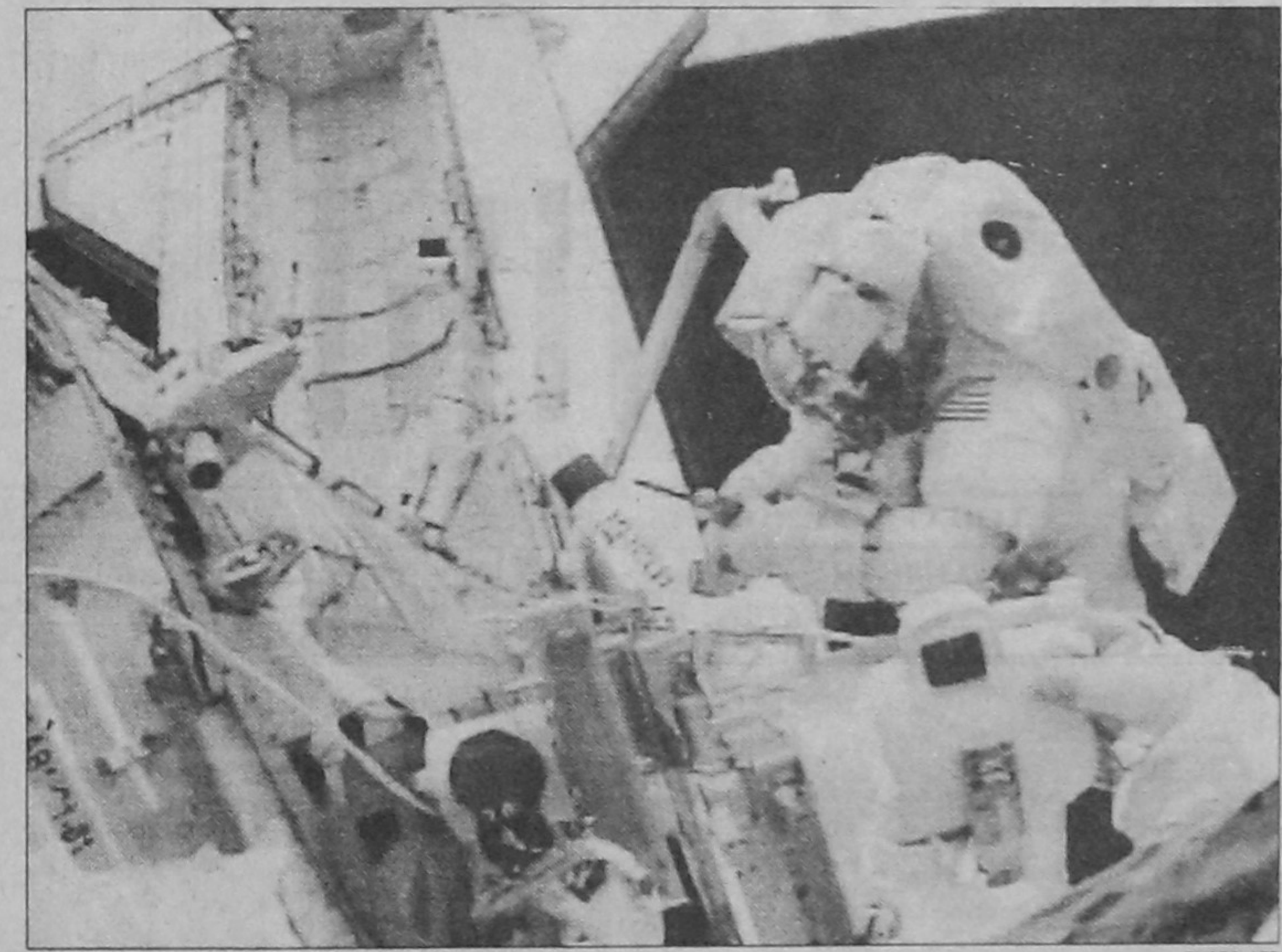
Canadian Chris Hadfield and American Scott Parazynski also took down an old communications antenna that was no longer useful, during their seven-hour, 40-minute spacewalk, NASA said.

Their first spacewalk Sunday lasted seven hours and 10 minutes.

Hadfield and Parazynski, the two space handymen on this mission, disconnected the cables that hooked the Canadarm2 robotic arm to the pallet that transported it aboard the Endeavour.

"That heavy apparatus will be taken back to the Endeavour on Wednesday for return to Earth."

"Everything is done for today," said Phil Engelauf, lead flight director for the shuttle.



US space shuttle Endeavour astronaut Scott Parazynski of the US (R) works on the Destiny module of the International Space Station during his second spacewalk of the mission on Tuesday. The shuttle and her seven-member international crew have been docked with the station delivering supplies and installing the Canada Arm 2, while completing cable connections.

British police probing war crimes allegations against Saddam

AFP, London

British police are probing war crimes allegations made against Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein over the 1990/91 Gulf conflict, they said yesterday.

The investigation centres on more than 4,500 Britons taken hostage in Iraq and Kuwait in 1990 at the start of the Gulf War.

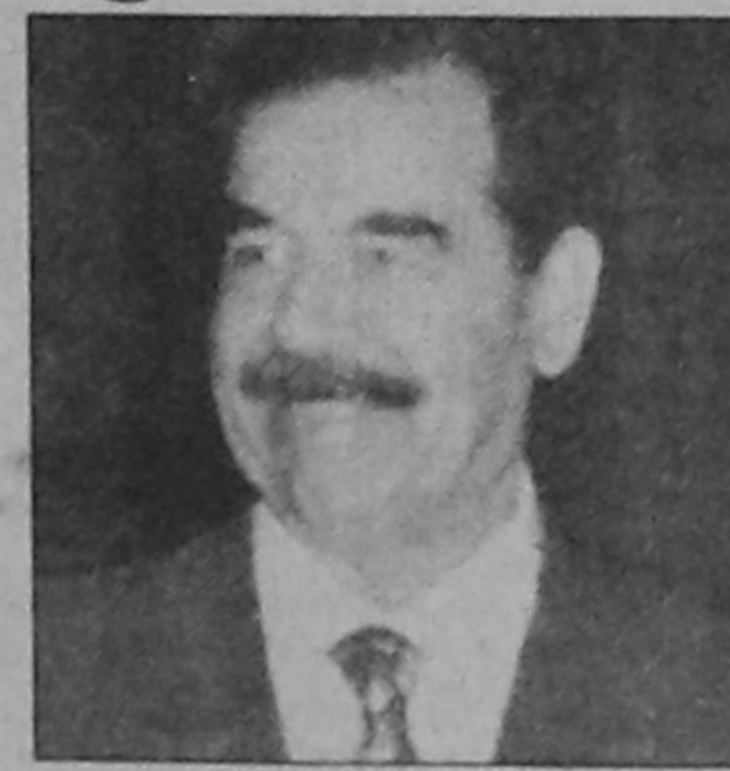
Evidence collated by the London-based group Indict, which campaigns for the indictment of Iraqi war criminals, was earlier given to Attorney General Lord Gareth Williams of Mostyn.

Although he concluded there was insufficient evidence to bring charges, he referred the case to Scotland Yard for further investigation.

"These documents are being considered and advice is being sought as to what, if any, further action is practicable," a police spokesman said.

Ann Clwyd, Indict's chairwoman and a member of parliament for Britain's ruling Labour Party, said there was a sound case against Saddam Hussein and Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Iqbal al-Jabir.

"Our lawyers tell us that we have got sufficient evidence, more than sufficient evidence, to provide a



realistic prospect of conviction of Saddam Hussein and Iqbal Aziz on charges of hostage-taking... so we are very optimistic," she told BBC radio.

"The deficiency in the Iraqi case is that there is no international tribunal set up by the (UN) Security Council... so in the absence of that we have been collecting the evidence."

"We have just three researchers, but over the last 18 months they have collected evidence from all over the world, documentary evidence, video evidence, sworn statements from victims and so on."

"We believe that Saddam Hussein and Iqbal Aziz in fact are not immune from prosecution."

When Iraq invaded its oil-rich neighbour Kuwait in August 1990 hundreds of British civilians were trapped and moved to strategic installations as "human shields."

The captives included about 360 passengers on board a flight from London to Kuala Lumpur, which landed in Kuwait just minutes before Iraqi troops crossed the border.

The passengers were held for more than five months. Soon after the invasion the Foreign Office protested at the reported rape of a British woman.

One woman later told how her 13-year-old son was marched from their home with a rocket launcher held at his head.

Former hostage Joe Wild, a 63-year-old marine consultant who was working as an adviser to the Kuwaiti navy, said he spent 33 days in hiding before being captured, beaten and taken to a prison camp close to a chemical warfare plant, where he suffered a heart attack.

He was later freed with other sick hostages.

Some hostages said they had found it difficult rebuilding their lives and became frustrated while trying to get compensation. Many were also left with psychological scars. Some committed suicide.

Green light for space tourist's trip

AFP, Washington

All systems are go for the first tourist to venture into space, as NASA on Tuesday ended an international dispute over the self-financed flight by a US businessman aboard a Russian space shuttle.

Space agencies of the United States, Russia, Canada, Europe and Japan -- partners in building the international space station -- have given the green light for a trip by a US millionaire to the orbit, NASA spokeswoman Kirsten Larson said.

Dennis Tito, 60, is to accompany two Russian cosmonauts when they blast off in a Soyuz-TM32 shuttle on Saturday from Kazakhstan's Baikonur cosmodrome. Their return is scheduled for May 6.

Tito, a retired space engineer, who is divorced, with three children, paid 20 million dollars to the Russian space agency to realise his boyhood dream of space flight.

The US National Aeronautics and Space Administration had opposed Tito's flight for safety reasons while the Europeans cited poor timing.

Wahid accused of threatening parliament with mob violence

AP, Jakarta

The head of Indonesia's top legislative body yesterday accused President Abdurrahman Wahid of intimidating the parliament with the threat of mob violence ahead of a crucial vote that could lead to his impeachment.

The charge by Amien Rais, speaker of the People's Consultative Assembly, came after police announced plans to use 90 armoured cars to evacuate lawmakers if expected street protests turn violent during Monday's vote.

Despite security fears, Rais predicted that the censure vote will go ahead and that Wahid would be impeached "after July."

"I believe 100 per cent that the censure will be issued and this propaganda and terror will come to nothing," Rais, Wahid's most vociferous political rival, told The Associated Press.

Rais was reviewing police and army troops assembled on the city's main square in a show of force aimed at deterring possible violence by pro-and-anti-Wahid groups.

Wahid has scheduled a national television address on Friday when he is expected to call for calm.

Nevertheless, thousands of his supporters have formed paramilitary squads and have pledged to fight to the death for the president, who is also a revered Muslim leader.

Wahid has denied charges that he acted inappropriately in the two multimillion dollar affairs. Lawmakers claim he mishandled humanitarian aid to refugees, although a parliamentary inquiry failed to produce evidence of his direct involvement.

Wahid maintains the accusations were manufactured by his political foes to remove him from office because of the administration's crackdown on corruption.

Thousands of Wahid's supporters have vowed to converge on Jakarta over the weekend. Some have threatened to occupy the parliament building and physically

prevent lawmakers from passing a second censure of the president over the two scandals.

A rival Islamic group opposed to Wahid said it would deploy 600 men to guard the legislature.

Lawmakers first reprimanded Wahid over the scandals on February 1. Wahid will have until June to reply and if lawmakers reject his explanation they can hold a special session to impeach the head of state.

Rais and other parliamentary leaders were assigned police bodyguards after Wahid's followers made death threats.

"This is a part of agitation and propaganda and a kind of terror on the part of Abdurrahman Wahid's constituents to threaten the parliament not to issue the second censure," Rais said.

About 5,000 policemen, armed with automatic rifles and equipped with full riot gear, were drawn up on Jakarta's National Monument, opposite the presidential palace.