AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels abducted more than a dozen police officers yesterday after launching a gun and bomb attack on a police station south of the Nepalese capital, police said.

A group of rebels stormed the station shortly before noon sparking a gun battle until the police were overpowered and abducted, police

"There was no immediate report of casualties on the police side and the Maoists absconded with some arms and ammunition after the arrival of army reinforcements," police said

Meanwhile a Maoist affiliate, the Newa National Liberation Front, announced a two-day transport blockade Monday and Tuesday in the Kathmandu Valley covering three cities with about 1.5 million people.

"The Maoists have called the two-

day transport strike affecting schools and factories to protest a rise in oil prices," the chairman of the front, Pawan Shrestha, said in a press state-

The front, an affiliate of the Nepal Communist Party-Maoist, announced a strike in three cities --Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur. The two satellite cities of the capital are also heavily visited tourist spots.

The strike was announced also to protest against the detention of commoners by the security forces on

charges of being Maoists," the state-

Shrestha also demanded the names of missing persons be made public and that the government repeal an anti-terrorist law that

Earlier nine Maoist rebels and four policemen died in fresh clashes in Nepal Saturday, bringing the number of dead from revolt-related folence in the past week to at least

Altogether at least 131 people, including 98 Maoists, 29 soldiers and four policemen, were killed in separate clashes this week, officials said. There was no comment from the laoists on the figures.

"Of the 98 rebels killed, nine died in clashes with the army" in the southeast and far west of the country Saturday, an army official said.

stronghold. The rebels have been hattling since 1996 to oust the constitutional monarchy and install a

Pathan spoils

after being forced to follow-on. Bangladesh, chasing India's 540, were all out for 333 in the first innings, the the 300-run mark.

Indian captain Sourav Ganguly was relieved when Pathan exposed the brittle Bangladesh batting by taking 5-32 after removing Nafees Iqbal with

Nazmul Hossain (8) and Talha Jubair (25) delayed the inevitable although the umpires extended play by twenty

five minutes under fading light.

Bangladesh still need 89 runs to avoid their 20th innings defeat in 34

But the story could have been a different one if umpires Aleem Dar and Mark Benson had not given two

Khaled Mashud (22) was supporting Ashraful well during a 60-run sixth wicket stand but Pakistani umpire Dar adjudged the Bangladesh wicketkeepercaught behindalthough TV replays showed that Zaheer Khan's delivery completely missed the bat.

Four overs later, Englishman Benson sent back Mohammad Rafique (4), also adjudged caught behind, after Pathan's bouncer kissed the shoulder of the left-handed bats-

In the second innings, it was Ashraful's (3) turn who was given lbw even after Anil Kumble's ball hit his bat before the pad. Bangladesh might be on the brink

of another defeat but the Test will be remembered by the cricket fans for Ashraful's scintillating knock. The little prodigy became first Bangladeshi batsman to cross the 150-run landmark and emerged larger than life to assault the star-studded

Indian bowling Bangladesh resumed the day on 54-3 and everybody was expecting another meek surrender. But Ashraful had other ideas after captain Habibul Bashar (22) was dismissed following a

70-run partnership. He launched a counterattack from the first ball and demoralised the Indian left-arm seam duo Pathan and Zaheer with exquisite stroke play. The right-hander whacked a huge six over fine-leg in the initial stage and never looked behind, punishing the high-

He displayed all the shots in the book apart from a magnificent reverse veep against Harbhajan Singh and the next ball, he came down the track to on-drive the off-spinner to the midwicket fence to complete his second hundred after his acclaimed century against Sri Lanka in 2001 on debut.

Ashraful's hundred came off 124 balls and studded with 15 fours and two sixes and before that, he steered Anil Kumble for two to complete his fifty from 70 balls. He also became the third Bangladeshi to go past 1,000-run mark in Test cricket after captain Habibul Bashar and Javed Omar. He

He was also involved in a brilliant 115-run fifth wicket partnership with local lad Aftab Ahmed, who made 43 off 72 balls that produced five fours

The only regret of Ashraful, who the follow-on for just seven runs.

Headmistress murder

FROMPAGE 1 Zahid Chowdhury Paban, former vice-chairman of the committee, meanwhile, sent a fax message to The Daily Star yesterday evening, denying the allegation that the. victim's conflict with some committee members led to the murders.

spreading such information to destroy our families and hide the real killers," Zahid said on behalf of the managing committee of year

The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and Gulshan police jointly started probe after Sabera and her daughter Sharmin Alam Shampa were found slaughtered at their Baridhara house

Thursday night. The law-enforcers and Sabera's relatives believe the five people taken on remand might have a role in the murders, but they have denied any involvement in the killings.

Investigation Officer (IO) of the case Mirza Mohammad Hasan of Gulshan Police Station produced the five, who were arrested on Friday and Saturday, before the Court of Chief Metropolitan Magistrate,

Dhaka yesterday. The IO pleaded for a seven-day remand of all the arrestees, saying that the killers committed the murders in connivance with the five.

"We need to interrogate them well to get the identities and whereabouts of the killers and other people involved in the brutal killings," he told the court.

Opposing the remand prayer, defence lawyers submitted bail prayers for the five.

After the hearing, Additional Chief Magistrate Mohammad Hazrat Ali turned down the bail petition and granted four-day remand of all the arrestees.

allows summary detentions.

131, officials said.

The death toll made it one of the bloodiest in recent weeks in the poverty-stricken Hindu kingdom, servers said.

In other violence, four policemen died on the outskirts of Kathmandu in a gunfight with Maoists, a police official told AFP.

The 29 troops were killed in clashes in far western Nepal, a rebel

Despite the youngest Test centurion's great knock, the home team stared at another innings defeat when they lost their second-innings wickets like nine-pins to crash to 118-9 at stumps seventh time the Tigers have crossed

After two nerve-tingling sessions, the very first delivery of the second

Sourav was looking forward to finish the match by the third day but profile Indian attack.

was later joined by Khaled Mashud.

remained unconquered in 194 balls (24x4, 3x6), was that he failed to save

The five were taken to Gulshan

Police Station where the CID men

and police started interrogating

them last night. Well-placed sources said a state minister and a secretary to another state minister phoned an investigating policeman yesterday morning "I think a certain quarter is asking him not to dig into the role of a former member of the managing

The investigators said they were examining documents that Sabera had filed to get back her job of headmistress after she was forced to resign on January 22, 2000 and the documents her opponents had filed against her, sources said.

Meantime, during primary interrogation Saturday night, Sabera's part-time domestic help Bilkis said she went to the house for work in the morning and came out in the evening.

"As I was preparing to come out, madam (Sabera) asked me to fry two fish for dinner and I fried two Koi fish," she told police and CID men. "I didn't see anyone except madam and Sharmin apa in the house," she

The CID, meanwhile, were preparing to take fingerprints and footprints of the arrestees and match those with those collected

from Sabera's house after the killing. They also checked the visitors register seized from the house and call register of three mobile phones found in the house.

The investigators recorded the statements of 15 people including Sabera's husband, son, security guards and neighbours.

Talking to The Daily Star, Additional Superintendent of Police (CID) Fazlul Karim said, "We have some evidence and I hope we'll be able to arrest the killers in a short



Prime Minister Khaleda Zia addresses a rally at Bargharia in Chapainawabganj on the occassion of foundation laying of a technical training centre yesterday.

No headway

(CID) office tomorrow to see whether his fingerprints match those collected from the crime scene.

Police, meanwhile, could not yet extract any lead from Shaheen. He kept denying killing his mother, the IO added.

The IO dismissing suggestion of suicide said that it is highly improbable for one to slit one's own throat and still manage to put the knife in a particular position, as in this case,

under the bed. He said police still suspect Shaheen of matricide. He cited Shaheen's entering the house an hour before she was found dead as the reason behind their suspicion. He also mentioned Shaheen

resented his mother not making his job at Bangladesh Shipping Corporation permanent despite working at a minister's house. The IO said the minister has

assured the police that they could arrest even his family members if necesssary to find out the killer.

\$50m development FROM PAGE 12 incident can dampen such efforts.

According to the Ministry of CHT, the donors last year re-started a pilot scheme worth \$4 million following the 2001 kidnapping. This scheme will conclude within this month. The \$50 million project will begin in January. Under this 5-year project, the

government will implement small development schemes in about 2500 communities to alleviate poverty.

"The main objective of this

dence of the hill people in the govern-ment. Due to the lack of such development projects, the hill people have been doubtful about the govern-ment's attention to them," said an official of the CHT ministry.
Since independence the govern-

ment has implemented more than one thousand development schemes at the CHT, home to two million indigenous people and another two million Bangalees.

Call for free

FROM PAGE 12 twinning of the port cities of Penang and Chittagong and encourage feeder vessel traffic between the two cities.

"We call for the establishment of direct air links between Chittagong and Penang preferably by private sector airlines of both countries," the declaration also stated. President of Federation of

Malaysian Manufacturers and International Chamber of Commerce, Malaysia Dato Mustafa Mansur, President of Malaysia South-South Association Tan Sri Dato Azman Hashim, President of Asian Strategy & Leadership Institute Mirzan Mahathir, President of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry Abdul Awal Mintoo and President of International Chamber of Commerce, Bangladesh Mahbubur Rahman were present at the briefing and supported the declaration.

Armed Forces

problem if the regulation was appli-cable for sensitive defence pur-

"I think it will be more helpful for the Armed Forces if the government allowed a separate purchase policy for it," said Mahbub, who is also a ruling BNP lawmaker and defence adviser to the prime minister.

However, Col (retd) Shawkat Ali, an Awami League lawmaker and member of the parliamentary standing committee, said, "We will make our recommendations after discussing the matter at the meeting."

Ministry seeks

FROM PAGE 1 but he (Saifur) said it was not possible in the present socio-economic situation of Bangladesh.

As Bangladesh's overall inflation rate has reached 7.92 percent, economists fear a petroleum price hike would worsen the inflation scenario.

But other sources said the inflation is triggered mainly by food prices, which is likely to settle down soon and the government may then consider increasing petroleum

Meanwhile, the government has decided to increase gas tariff by 2.27 percent at all levels from January 1 next year. This will make the tariff for a double-burner gas oven costlier by Tk 10 to stand at Tk 400 a month and single-burner by Tk 10 to Tk 360.

Transparency in river-link

held at the Osmani Memorial Auditorium, Indian High Commissioner to Dhaka Veena Sikri

expressed her dissatisfaction that India has invariably been blamed for almost all problems relating to the water of the rivers shared by its neighbouring countries.

I am well aware of the debate that covers the full gamut of water resource issues, including flooding, inadequate lean season flows, salinity and the construction of embankments: And recently, hitherto unknown groups like International Farakka Committee have sprung up. This tends to create a mindset that is one-sided, " she

Sikri added that the title of the conference 'International Conference on Regional Cooperation on Trans-boundary Rivers: Impact of the Indian River-Linking Project' was inaccurate, as there was no "project" but thinking was at a conceptual stage and was undertaking technological, socioeconomic and political feasibility

"The concept itself is based first and foremost on surplus flood water utilisation; flood waters which, unless diverted or their fury harnessed, cause untold economic and social havoc in both Bangladesh, India and other neighbouring countries each year," she said. The concept of interlinking rivers

does not draw upon or affect lean season flows; rather the principle benefit of such flood mitigation proposals is inevitably the augmentation of lean season flows, she Referring to the Asian Development Bank's statistics

which showed that India's per capita annual water resources are 2200 cubic metres whilst cubic metres, Veena said Bangladesh is at a much more favorable position. Terming the Ganga Waters Treaty

an 'excellent example of a win-win solution', she said Bangladesh is almost uniformly receiving more than the minimum indicative flows

However, countering Veena, Professor Nazrul Islam, convener of Bangladesh Environment Network (BEN), said the Farakka Barrage was constructed to make water available in Kolkata and Bihar, but the fact was that the Farakka has failed in its purpose. Waterlogging in Kolkata and heavy flooding in Bihar was its direct consequence.

He said the Barrage also caused salinity in the rivers in southern Bangladesh and the source of sediment in the Gorai is also the Ganges.

"Though you are terming the Indian River-Linking Project a 'concept', I am sure what is going to happen with it and I strongly oppose it," Professor Nazrul said. "Al-

FROM PAGE 1 make the human wall from the

Sundarbans to Sunamganj a suc-cess. That includes the Communist

"The 11-party leaders told us that they would join the combined rallies

and the CPB leaders said that they

would hold a rally in Dhaka on the

day," he said. "We are not concerned about this," he added.

decision would not cause any trouble

in the opposition camp and said, "We

are observing agitation programmes simultaneously. For the December 30

demonstration, the Communist

Party is undertaking massive mobili-

rallies in the districts through

which the human wall will go.
A preparatory meeting of the
CPB leaders from the districts of

Brahmanbaria, Kishoreganj, Narsingdi, Narayanganj, Dhaka, Gazipur and Manikganj will be held at its central office in the

The party has already sent posters and leaflets to different

districts and upazillas urging people to join the demonstration

of December 30. Meanwhile, senior leaders of

the main opposition Awami

League yesterday met with the

assistant secretaries of different

sub-committees and the top lead-

capital today at 11:00am.

He said the CPB will today start

The CPB president also said the

Party," Jalil said.

sation programmes

CPB won't join

though, no scientific information

and data has been shared, whatever information I have is enough to measure its consequence on Bangladesh and many states of Opposing commercial approach to rivers, he said there had been at

least 500 embankments in different rivers in the US and their destruction resulted in severe implications to the environment. He also urged the decommissioning of the Farakka Local Government, Rural

Development (LGRD) and Cooperatives Minister Abdul Mannan Shuiyan, who spoke as chief guest, told the conference that Bangladesh would never take any initiatives that might cause any harm to the interest of any neighbouring countries. Appreciating the organisation of

the conference he said, "This is the right forum to create awareness among the policymakers and people at large on the issues of common concern transcending the boundaries of the country."

He said Bangladesh is in favor of creating an environment where all

the co-riparian countries can join

hands to harness the water

resources of the region for a win-win scenario for all. Forest and Environment Minister Tariqui Islam said the agriculture and ecology of Bangladesh is being damaged seriously by the impact of Farakka Barrage. Land is turning into desert, the water level is reducing and the salinity of water is increasing destroying the bio-diversity of the

Sundarbans. The water of Teesta, Brahmaputra, Barak and many other rivers do not enter parts o Bangladesh during dry season and so, India must consider these issues before implementation of riverlinking project.

He said the participation and consultation between the neighbouring countries must take place before India goes for the implemen-Former agriculture minister

Motia Chowdhury urged people not to make the river issue political. She said the Ganges Treaty, that ensures the participation of all the countries in any river-related project, has not been properly implemented.

Water and Sewerage Authority Managing Director ANH Akhtar Hossain, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology Professor M Firoze Ahmed, Hunger Project Director Badiul Alam Majumder, Bangladesh Economic Association President Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad and Professor Khaleguzzaman of Lock Haven University, US, among others, also spoke. Professor Jamilur Reza Chowdhury presided over the afternoon session.

ers of different front organisations to discuss how to make the human

Amir Hossain Amu presided

over the meeting which was also attended by Abdul Jalil, Tofail Ahmed, Sheikh Fazlul Karim

Selim, Obaidul Quader, Abdul Mannan, Mohammad Hanif and

Abdul Mannan Khan. The meeting was held at party's Dhanmondi

Leaders of the front organisa-tions have been asked to send

separate teams from the centre to

monitor preparatory programmes at districts and upazillas, according

to one of the participants at the

FROM PAGE 12 Mathpara and arrested three cadres

of New Biplobi Communist Party

alias Saja Pagol, Saidul and Masud, were bodyguards of NBCP leader

Akdil Hossain alias Hobibur

Rahman, who had twice been sen-

accused in two murder cases including one for killing Jubo League leader Mahabubur Rahman Ripon.

revolver and four rounds of ammu-

Police said the three stand

Police recovered a foreign made

tenced to life imprisonment.

nition from their possession.

All the three arrestees, Shahjahan

SSC examinee

wall programme successful.

Witness says Ali, Mahbub and Kabir Hossain. He

will be cross-examined again after the hearing resumes at 11:00am

Alam told the court that Dipu, Shipu, Tipu, Ratan, Alamin, Monir and Dulal opened fire on Ahsanullah with pistols and revolvers. The AL lawmaker was at a conference to form the committee of Sechchhasebok League

Another group of Mahbub, Anu, Kana Hafiz, Bara Ratan, Sohag, Jahangir, Salam, Amir, Mohammad Ali and Moshiur also opened fire, the witness added. Chhoto Ratan shot Ahsanullah at around 12:35pm when the latter was leaving the

On completion of their mission, they left the spot and went northward, Alam added.

Among the 30 accused in the case, 12 were present. Kabir Hossain, Ayub, Pappu and Alamin were out on bail, while Dipu and 17 others are still at large.

Mahathir

making, maintaining a 'rule of justice' rather than 'rule of law' and curbing corruption 'from the top'. He also urged Muslim countries to stop trading in US dollars to undo a unipolar' world order.

Mahathir met Hasina and Ershad in the morning at Hotel Sonargaon before he flew off on a private jet around 10:00am. Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan and Commerce Minister Altaf Hossain Choudhury saw him off at the Speaking to the press after her

meeting with Mahathir, Hasina, also president of main opposition Awami League, said "His (Mahathir's) party brought independence for Malaysia, our party also brought independence for Bangladesh, and if Bangabandhu (Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) could continue with his policy to this day, we could have been even more successful than Malaysia."

"The anti-liberation forces in power right now and military cliques since 1975 have foiled the trend of development in the country," she added. Claiming that the incumbent

government has pushed Bangladesh-Malaysia relationship into a shaky state, Hasina said During my rule, Mahathir had regularised 1.5 lakh Bangladeshi workers upon my request." Hasina also said manpower exports to Malaysia were on a steady rise during the reign of the

previous Awami League she

headed, but "they (the govern-

ment) have destroyed the good will

we had established between the two countries." On Mahathir's receiving the honorary Doctorate of Laws degree from Dhaka University at its 42nd convocation on Saturday, Hasina said, "I am really proud that such an honour has been conferred on Dr Mahathir by the university I had

attended." "Now we are both alumni of the same university," she quipped.

PM pledges

FROM PAGE 12 electronics, fruit processing and automobile diesel engines. The prime minister said

Bangladesh can earn more foreign currency by exporting skilled manpower proficient in foreign lan-Bangladesh is now exporting

software, Khaleda said, adding that establishment of an ICT Park in Dhaka is underway. All these government steps have brought about a revolutionary progress in the use of computers in the country, she said. She emphasised the need for

having skill in English and other foreign languages to get jobs abroad or work in foreign companies at home sheadded. Presided over by State Minister for Labour and Manpower

Amanullah Aman, the meeting was also attended by Telecommunications Minister Aminul Haque, Rajshahi City Mayor Mizanur Rahman Minu and local lawmaker Haroon-ur-Rashid.

Car bombings kill 62

The explosion left a deep crater and blew out windows and shop fronts, showering the area with broken

PREVIOUS ATTACKS

The Karbala attack was the second in five days. On Wednesday, a bomb apparently targeting Shia cleric Abdul Mehdi al-Karbalai exploded as he was returning to his office after evening prayers at the Imam

Yesterday's bomb was just a few hundred yards away.

Twelve people were killed and 30 wounded in Wednesday's attack, including the cleric, who is regarded as close to Iraq's supreme Shia authority, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

Sistani, who lives in Najaf, has overseen the creation of a powerful Shia coalition to stand in the election, a bloc of candidates widely expected to emerge victorious.

Many militant Sunnis, waging an insurgency against American occupation, fear domination by the Shia majority who make up 60 percent of the population but have never held

There have been concerns about attempts to aggravate religious divisions since March, when suicide bombers struck Baghdad and Karbala during an annual Shia mourning rite, killing more than 170 people, an act blamed on Sunni militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian allied to al Qaeda.

Shia religious leaders say they will not be provoked by bombs and reject accusations by some secular opponents that they want to install an Iranian-style Shia theocracy.

"They are trying to ignite a sectarian civil war and prevent elections from going ahead on time. They have failed before and they will fail again," said Mohammad Bahr al-Uloum, one of Iraq's most respected

"The Shias are committed not to respond with violence, which will

Bangladeshi

his embassy did receive information of such a detention but could not confirm if any Bangladeshi was among the detainees. Associate Press quoted Baghdad

police as reporting that the men caught at Mandali on the Iranian border, 60 miles east of Baghdad, had no identity cards but claimed to be Muslim pilgrims from Bangladesh, Iran and Afghanistan.

The foreign ministry, too, could not confirm the detention of any Bangladeshi and said they were in the process of investigating the

65 hurt

FROM PAGE 12 the fish cultivators and their men resisted them. Both groups used sharp weapons like 'teta' and 'ballam' and sticks during the clash that lasted for four hours. Three of the injured were admitted to a local

On information, police and Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control. Police also arrested one Khabir.

Another report from Satkhira adds: Some 15 people were injured when a rival group swooped on the procession of labourers of Sundarban Textile Mills here the Police said the group led by CBA president Abdullah Sardar swooped on the procession brought out by

Of the injured, Abu Bakar, 35, Mohammad Ali, 40, Abul Kalam Azad, 45, Noor Islam, 40, and Abdul Gaffar Gazi, 55, were admitted to Sadar hospital. Police were deployed in the mill area to avert any untoward incident. Separate cases were filed.

Mill Bachao Rokkhya Samity, leav-

ing 15 labourers injured.

only lead to violence. We are determined on elections and Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has made this clear." **ELECTION OFFICIALS**

KILLED

As well as attempts to drive a wedge between religious sects that have historically co-existed fairly peacefully, insurgents have made direct efforts to wreck plans for the poll. On Friday and Saturday, three election offices were attacked in the north.

In Baghdad, gunmen dragged three junior Electoral Commission employees from a car and shot them dead in broad daylight, although it was not clear if they were targeted because they worked for the commission, a commission spokesman

Witnesses said insurgents had opened fire on the vehicle first. Two other commission employees escaped.

Separately, four Kurds were killed by gunmen in Hawija, southwest of the ethnically tense city of Kirkuk.

US and Iraqi officials have warned that attacks will increase in the run up to the election, Iraq's first fully democratic poll in nearly half a

Electoral officials say 14 of Iraq's 3 governorates are safe enough to hold free and fair polls, but violence in the remaining areas -- mostly populated by Sunni Arabs -- has led unni organisations to call for a

Militants have kidnapped and are threatening to kill 10 Iraqis employed by a US security company unless the firm pulls out of Iraq, a caller from the militants told Reuters. Arab satellite channels broadcast a tape showing the hos-

It was not clear when the men were kidnapped. No deadline appears to have been set.

AKTEL reaches

network coverage and improving call quality," Nasir Bin Baharom,

chief executive officer and managing director of TMIB, told reporters AKTEL plans to bring 275 upazilas under its coverage by the ear-end and all remaining upazilas

by the next year and double the number of base stations. "This is just the beginning of a long journey and we are looking at the market which has got potential to grow," Baharom said

TMIB, a joint venture between elekom Malaysia Sdn Bhd and AK Khan Group, also plans to invest up to \$200 million for network expan sion and introducing new technologies by the next year.
(MORE ON BUSINESS PAGE)

Indian eco-activist

FROM PAGE 12 Movements, said the people of India have become more aware of the devastating impacts of the project, noting, "I won't say a national momentum has arisen, but obviously the opposition is strong

enough to prevent the project.'

As she sees it, the over-ambitious, project to link all major rivers of India would partly destroy the river valley civilisations by displacing hundreds of thousands from their habitats. 'A river valley civilisation is a part of the local ecosystem. The government has no right to implement the

project without conducting an environmental study of this region first," she maintained. She said the issue should be discussed in the Saarc (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation). Besides, the people of Bangladesh should interact more

with Indian environmental activists. "The more you discuss the issue the more you inform the people, Patkar quipped, adding Bangladeshi people should not distrust the Indians so much and go to such extremes that can hurt the common

Saddam to challenge

people of India.

FROM PAGE 12 effectively being taken at Washington's behest, the Sunday

Times reported. The lawyer charged that the Iraq Special Tribunal set up by the US-led coalition last December amounted to "victors' justice" creating "inherent illegality and bias"

The report came a day after judges questioned one of Saddam's most notorious lieutenants in the tribunal's first investigative hearing. CHEMICALALI Reuters says: War crimes trials against

Saddam Hussein and his closest aides

moved forward on Saturday when his

feared cousin known as "Chemical

Ali" was the first to face a formal interview with the chief investigating magistrate, Ali Hassan al-Majid, better known as "Chemical Ali" for his alleged role in the gassing of Kurdish civilians,

appeared in court alongside defence minister Sultan Hashem Ahmed. Iraq's US-backed government had promised trials would begin before next month's election, the first free vote since Saddam rose to power three decades ago. But the judge stressed his meetings with Ali and Hashem were just the start of a long process.

"Hurrying will not help this case," Raed Jouhi said. Official and silent film of the two hearings showed both men looking relaxed, chatting and smiling under guard. Majid leant on a walking stick,

possibly still suffering from wounds sustained while on the run from invading US forces last year. Some Iraqi officials have dismissed the publicity as little more than an election campaign ploy by Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. However that may be, the 67-year-old ousted dicta-tor and his aides have now been given access to lawyers.

After brief appearances in July to hear possible charges of crimes

against humanity and genocide ainst Kurds gassed by troops under Majid's control, the formal process of deciding who is tried for what is under way, a year after Saddam was caught. The Jan. 30 election will furnish a national assembly that will draw up a new constitution and, Washington

hopes, give Iraq a legitimate govern-

ment to replace the de facto US rule

that filled the vacuum left by the overthrow of the Baath Party. US officials concede an insurgency among Saddam's Sunni Arab minority poses the major threat to the chances of forming a representative legislature. Three election offices in Sunni northern Iraq came under

attackinthelatest incidents. Two people were killed and eight were wounded, including six National Guards, when mortars landed on an election office in Dujail, 30 miles north of Baghdad. It is one of many around the country registering and educating

tion office in the northern oil capital of Kirkuk, where ethnic tensions among Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen are high ahead of a poll many want delayed National Guards fought off gun-

men who attacked an election office

A mortar also landed on an elec-

60 km southwest of Kirkuk Saboteurs who are hampering efforts to restore Iraq's oil wealth and contributing to a cold winter without heat and light for many, blew up a key

oil export pipeline near Kirkuk, halting flows for the second time in a week.