

Blast kills 8 Taliban in Pakistan

AFP, KHAR, Pakistan

At least eight suspected Taliban were killed and several others wounded yesterday when a blast ripped through their vehicle in a Pakistani tribal region bordering Afghanistan, officials said.

The suspects were travelling in a pick-up truck when it blew up near the town of Salazarai in militant-infested Bajaur tribal district, local administration official Adalat Khan told AFP.

He said the explosion was probably caused by hand grenades loaded in the truck.

"The explosion killed eight people and destroyed the truck completely," a senior security official said.

Militant sources said the Taliban were heading to a tribal meeting which was deciding the fate of one of their captured fighters, who was blamed for an attack on an officer of the government-backed tribal police this week.

However residents said a US drone from neighbouring Afghanistan was in the air when the explosion ripped apart the heavy truck, suggesting it might have been targeted from the air.

The region is a known stronghold of Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters. A US missile strike in Damadola in Bajaur earlier this month killed 14 militants.

Barak urges Olmert to quit

BBC ONLINE

Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak has called on Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to take a leave of absence or resign as he battles allegations of corruption.

Barak said he would take his Labour Party out of Mr Olmert's governing coalition if he did not step down.

"The prime minister needs to disconnect himself from the day-to-day management of the government," Barak said.

Olmert denies claims that he took up to \$500,000 (£250,000) in bribes or illegal campaign donations.

Olmert, the head of the Kadima Party, says the sums were legal campaign contributions.

He has previously said he had no plans to step aside unless he is charged.

Barak was speaking a day after the US businessman at the centre of the allegations told investigators that he gave Olmert envelopes full of cash.

Morris Talansky was questioned by investigators, and is due to be cross-examined by Mr Olmert's defence team in July.

US aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk ends mission in Japan

AFP, Yokosuka, Japan

The US aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk yesterday ended a decade in Japan, opening the way for a controversial nuclear-powered ship to replace it in August.

On a sunny morning, hundreds of people gathered in Yokosuka, a port on Tokyo Bay, to see off the only US aircraft carrier permanently deployed overseas.

As people on land waved and held up a farewell banner, sailors in white uniforms on the USS Kitty Hawk formed the shape of the Japanese word "Sayonara," or "Goodbye."

The aircraft carrier, which heads to Hawaii and will be retired, has been deployed here since 1998.

With a capacity to carry more than 5,000 crew, the Kitty Hawk's missions included deployment to the Arabian Sea in support of the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"The Kitty Hawk contributed to the peace and stability of Japan and Asia for 10 years," said Yokosuka Mayor Ryoichi Kabaya. "I wish it a safe voyage as it completes its mission."

Israeli air raids kill 2 Hamas militants

AFP, Gaza

Two Hamas militants were killed yesterday in Israeli air raids in the southern Gaza Strip, said the Islamist movement which controls the Palestinian territory.

The two militants were hit in a strike east of the town of Rafah, where at the same time an Israeli army land incursion was taking place, medics and witnesses said. A third militant was wounded.

An Israeli army spokeswoman confirmed the raid and said it was targeting a group of Palestinian militants armed with mortars who were approaching the Israeli forces.

Earlier yesterday Wednesday, another Israeli air strike in south Gaza left four Islamic Jihad fighters wounded, Palestinian emergency services said.



Maoists dance during a rally in Kathmandu yesterday in support of Nepal becoming a republic. Security was tight around the venue for the assembly, which is set to dissolve the monarchy and sack King Gyanendra.

Nepal assembly set to abolish monarchy

King to be given deadline to quit palace

AFP, Kathmandu

The Himalayan kingdom of Nepal was set for historic change yesterday with a newly-elected assembly dominated by former Maoist rebels expected to abolish the nation's 240-year-old monarchy.

Security was tight in the capital Kathmandu, with over 1,000 police ringing a conference centre where a Constitutional Assembly is expected to sack unpopular King Gyanendra and declare a republic later in the day.

Proceedings had been due to start at 11:00 am, but security personnel at the site said closed-door meetings between senior politicians meant the session had been delayed until 3:00 pm.

Meanwhile, Maoists said yesterday King Gyanendra, whose Himalayan monarchy is on the verge of being abolished, is to be given up to 15 days to vacate his Kathmandu palace.

"There has been a proposal to give a formal notice to ask the king to vacate Narayanhiti palace within a certain time frame," Maoist spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara told AFP.

"He will be asked to leave in between seven to 15 days' time," he added.

The end of Gyanendra's 240-year-old Shah dynasty will be a major victory for the Maoists, who fought a decade-long insurgency.

Kathmandu has been tense ahead of the event, the culmination of a peace process that brought the Maoists out of the hills and jungles of one of the world's poorest countries in 2006 and into the political mainstream.

The city was hit by a string of small bomb attacks this week, with police pinning the blame on die-hard royalists.

Hundreds of people also defied a ban on protests and gathered at the conference centre to press for an end to Gyanendra's turbulent seven-year reign over the landlocked Himalayan country.

"We are trying to put pressure to make sure they abolish the monarchy today," said a teary-eyed Julia Chitrakar, 45, a local women's rights activist.

"I can't even say how I feel today. In my lifetime such an event has never happened. It is big change that we have been waiting a long time for."

The Maoists' feared youth wing -- which is accused of beating and intimidating the group's rivals -- was also planning massive celebrations, their leader said.

"We have started gathering 20,000 Young Communist League members in the Tundikhel," said YCL leader Sagar, who goes by only one name, referring to a large open space in the heart of the city.

Authorities have banned meetings in certain sensitive areas, including outside the palace -- apparently to protect the king from being dragged out by force.

The Maoists have told Gyanendra and his son Crown Prince Paras -- loathed for his alleged playboy lifestyle -- to bow out gracefully or face "strong punishment."

Gyanendra was crowned following the 2001 killing of his popular brother Birendra and most of the royal family by a drink-and-drug-fuelled crown prince who later killed himself.

Although seen by loyalists as the reincarnation of a Hindu god, he remained at the centre of conspiracy theories linking him to the killings.

Three troops, 4 rebels killed in Thai incidents

AFP, Yala, Thailand

Three Thai soldiers and four suspected separatist rebels have been killed in a series of incidents across Thailand's far south, including a shootout at a wedding party, police said yesterday.

One soldier was killed and two of his colleagues injured in a blast in Pattani province late Tuesday, police there said.

A man was arrested yesterday in connection with the attack but he fought with the soldiers driving him to a military camp, causing a car crash which killed a 48-year-old sergeant major and a 22-year-old private.

The 34-year-old suspected rebel was also injured in the crash in Yala province, local authorities said.

Later yesterday in Yala, a group of militants ambushed a wedding convoy, but some of the villagers headed to the celebration were armed and fought their attackers, killing one suspected rebel, police said.

Ten members of the wedding party were injured.

Thai security forces also shot dead three suspected militants during a search of a village in Yala on Wednesday, police said.

US climber scales Everest for 10th time

AP, Kathmandu

An American climber has scaled Mount Everest for the 10th time, becoming the first non-Nepalese to achieve the feat, mountaineering officials said yesterday.

David Hahn, 46, of Taos, New Mexico, reached the 29,035-foot summit Tuesday along with fellow American climber Nicole Messner and two Sherpa guides, Tourism Ministry official Ramesh Chetri said.

Pasang Tsering, Hahn's contact person in Kathmandu, said Hahn and his teammates were all safe and in good health and were slowly making their way down to base camp on Wednesday. They are expected back from the mountain early next week.

Suu Kyi's detention deepens despair on Myanmar streets

AFP, Yangon

The streets of Myanmar's main city Yangon were filled with despair yesterday as news of the junta's decision to extend opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest spread through the town.

Despite an official veil of silence over her fate, news covertly got round town and those residents willing to talk to AFP expressed their anger and upset at the news.

"I don't understand why the junta needs to extend her detention," one businessman told an AFP reporter.

"They conducted the referendum. They claimed victory. So if the people love the junta, why not free Suu Kyi?"

Seven government officials visited Aung San Suu Kyi at her lakeside Yangon home Tuesday to extend her jail term by a year, despite claiming a 92 percent

victory in a referendum on a constitution that democracy activists say reinforces the army's grip on power.

The Nobel Peace Prize winner has been jailed for most of the past 18 years. Her most recent period in detention began on May 30, 2003, when she was initially confined at the notorious Insein prison, before being allowed to return to her home in September of the same year.

But no reference to Aung San Suu Kyi is made in state media, leaving supporters to follow her progress by secretly listening to short-wave radios broadcasting international news.

Another report says: Outrage over Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest will not detract from relief work, key donors said, as the United Nations yesterday reported small gains in getting aid to cyclone survivors.

The military regime quietly informed the Nobel Peace Prize winner that she would spend another year confined to her home in Yangon, where she has been locked away for most of the past 18 years.

The decision came just two days after UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon left Myanmar following a donor conference that generated tens of millions of dollars in aid pledges in response to the cyclone that left 133,000 dead or missing.

Ban said that while he regretted the extension, Myanmar appeared "to be moving in the right direction" with cyclone relief by allowing some international aid workers into the most devastated regions of the Irrawaddy Delta.

That region had been sealed off to foreigners for three weeks after the storm, even though 2.4 million people were in desperate need of food, shelter and medicine.

During Ban's visit here, he convinced junta leader Than Shwe to give foreign disaster experts access to the region so that aid agencies can mount a full-scale relief effort.

"I hope that this marks a new spirit of cooperation and partnership between Myanmar and the international community," he said, adding that he planned to return to the country soon.

The United Nations estimates that only 40 percent of the people in need have actually received help, and most of those still languishing without emergency supplies are in remote parts of the delta.

US President George W. Bush, one of the regime's fiercest critics, said he was "deeply troubled" by Aung San Suu Kyi's detention but also said politics would not affect humanitarian aid in the country, formerly known as Burma.

NZ apologises to Vietnam war veterans

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand's Prime Minister Helen Clark apologised to the country's Vietnam war veterans yesterday, saying it was time to lay aside the divisions which led to returning soldiers being shunned.

Many New Zealanders strongly opposed the country's involvement in the war between 1964 and 1972, and many of the 3,400 military who served there received a hostile reception at home.

Some were turned down for jobs, anti-war protesters accused them of being war criminals and some were even spurned by veterans from earlier wars.

Clark, who protested against the Vietnam war in her youth, said in the government's formal apology that it was time for reconciliation.

"The crown (government)

extends to New Zealand Vietnam veterans and their families an apology for the manner in which their loyal service in the name of New Zealand was not recognised as it should have been," Clark said.

"The service of those who fell and all who served in that conflict should now be honoured, alongside that of other brave service personnel deployed to other conflicts in the service of our country."

"For too long, successive governments ignored concerns being raised by Vietnam veterans," she added, in the apology read to parliament.

Veterans have long campaigned for assistance to deal with health problems caused by exposure to the herbicide Agent Orange, which was used by the US during the war to defoliate areas believed to be harbouring opposing forces.

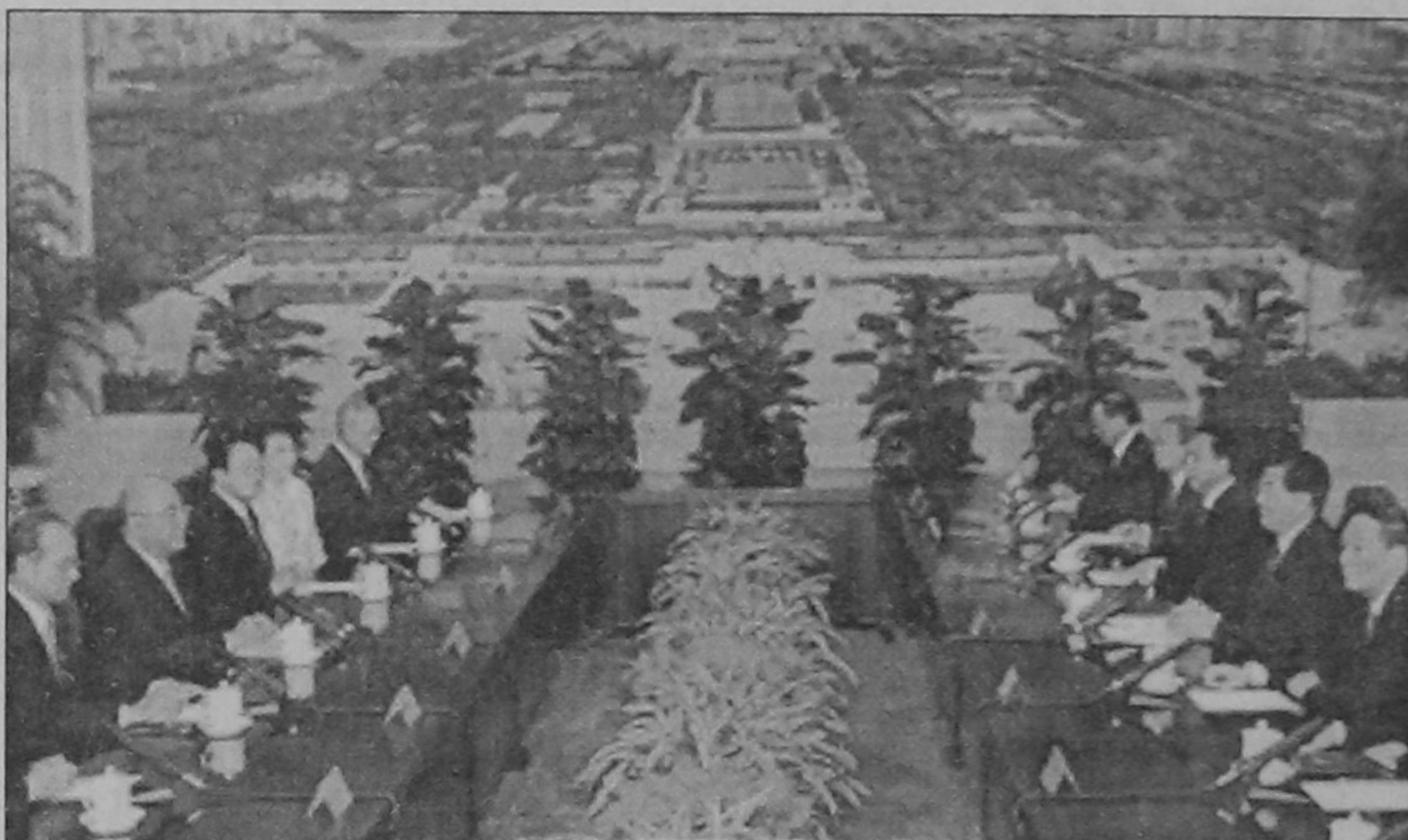
Late last year the government and veterans agreed on assistance worth 30 million dollars (24 million US) for problems including cancer, diabetes and birth defects in children.

During the war, 37 New Zealand military personnel were killed and 187 wounded.

Ex-Vietnam Services Association president Terry Culley said the apology was "very moving".

"The veterans were really let down by the government and their employer, the defence department, when they came home," he told Radio New Zealand.

Vietnam veteran Chris Mullane, who is in charge of a series of events to be held this weekend for his comrades, said earlier that those who served in the war and their families had been victimised.



Chinese President Hu Jintao (2nd R) hold talks with Taiwan's ruling Kuomintang (KMT) Chairman Wu Poh-hsiung (2nd L) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. The Chinese president called for peaceful relations with Taiwan as he met the head of the island's ruling party in the highest-level contact since the two sides split in 1949.



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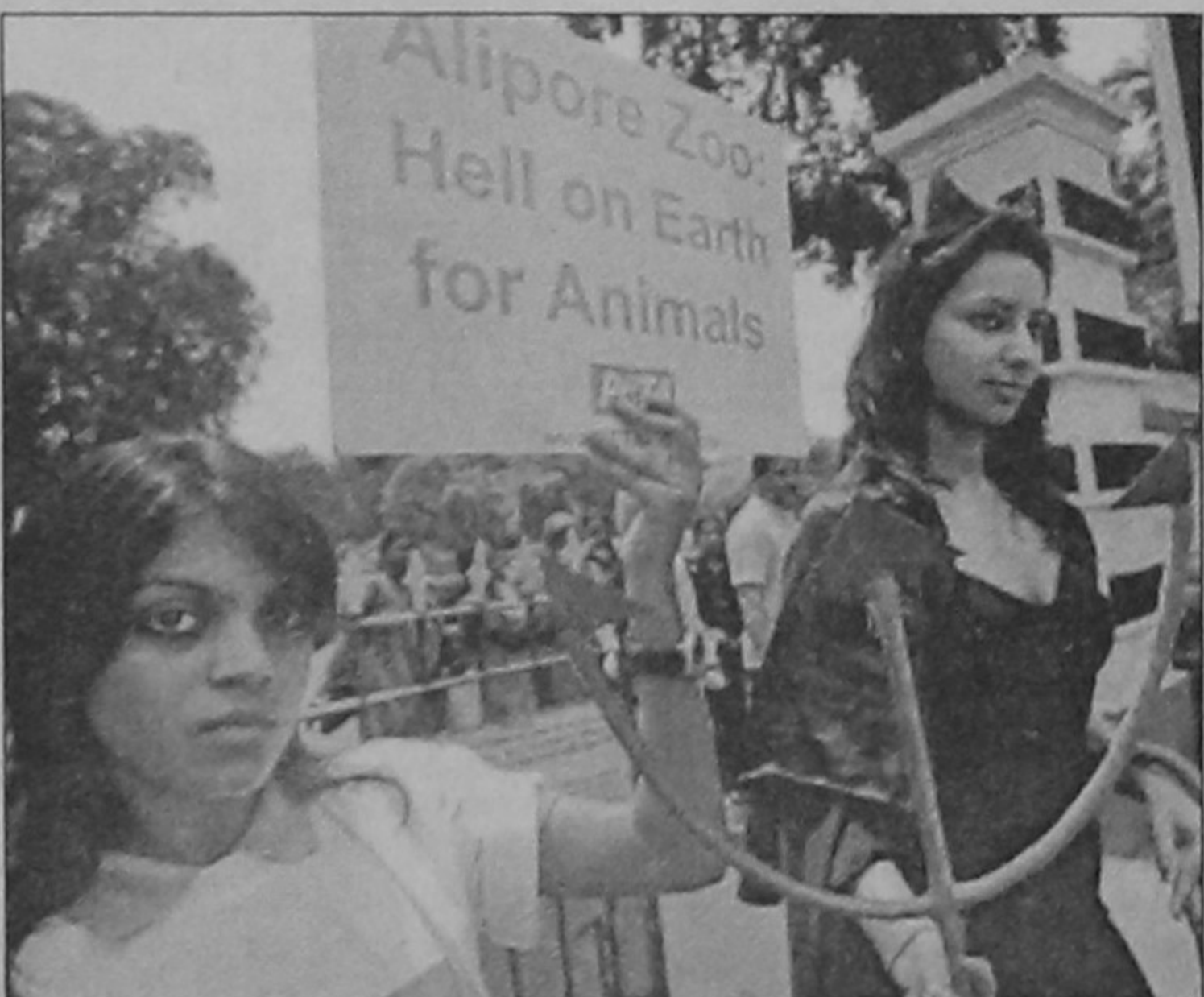
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Activists from the animal rights group, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, stage a protest outside the giraffe enclosure at Alipore Zoo in Kolkata yesterday. They held the protest rally after the death of a giraffe in transit from the zoo was reported.