

Russia could sever Nato ties over Georgia

AFP, Moscow

Russia could end all cooperation with Nato if the alliance moved to grant Georgia membership, Moscow's Nato envoy indicated yesterday in comments carried by state news agency RIA Novosti.

"From a moral-political point of view, accepting Georgia to MAP would look like Nato moving to the side of the aggressor," Dmitry Rogozin said, referring to proposals to grant Georgia Nato's Membership Action Plan (MAP) status.

"It is one thing for the US to back their protege, and another thing entirely to provide refuge to the aggressor country. What kind of (Russia-Nato) cooperation can you talk about in this case? None!" Rogozin was quoted as saying.

A top US administration official said Monday that Washington was confident Georgia would join Nato and that Russia's incursion into the ex-Soviet state in August had increased its chances.

"If anything, what has happened in Georgia has probably broadened support within the alliance for the proposition that eventually they ought to be members of Nato," the official said on condition of anonymity.

"The resolution that was adopted at the Bucharest summit that said Georgia and Ukraine will become members of Nato represents the thinking of most of our Nato allies," the US official said.

At the April summit, Nato leaders agreed on a statement saying that Georgia and ex-Soviet ally Ukraine would eventually join but

refused to grant the countries MAP status after French and German opposition.

Russia has opposed inclusion of Georgia and Ukraine, saying that Nato expansion and its support of a planned US anti-missile system in the Czech Republic and Poland is a "strategic error."

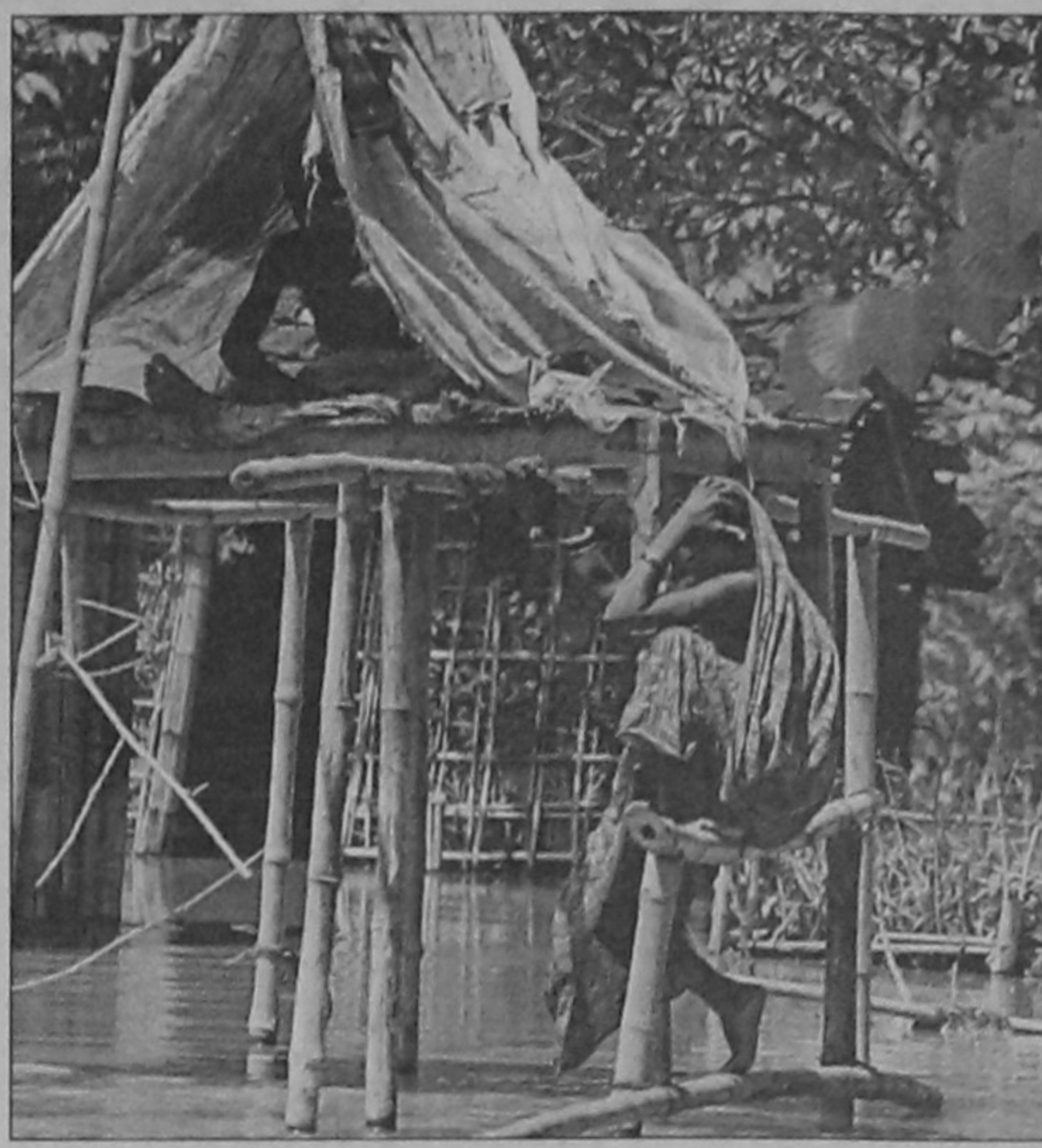
Last month Moscow announced a suspension of cooperation with Nato in a number of areas, freezing visits to Russia by Nato officials and suspending participation in joint military exercises.

Meanwhile the United States is confident that Georgia and Ukraine will become members of the Nato military alliance and sees growing support in Europe for that prospect, a top US administration official said Monday.

Russia's recognition of Georgian breakaway regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia has increased backing for expansion of the 26-member alliance, the official said as US Vice President Dick Cheney held talks with Italian leaders here.

"There may be debates about timing, conditions and so forth, but if anything what has happened in Georgia has probably broadened support within the alliance for the proposition that eventually they ought to be members of Nato," he said on condition of anonymity.

Cheney last week vowed Washington's support for Baku, Tbilisi and Kiev during a whistle-stop tour of the region, and urged Nato to unite in order to ward off a return of "line-drawing" in Europe.



An Indian flood-affected villager waits at her make-shift shelter for rescue by the Indian Navy at Rowta village in Madhepura district, some 450km north-east of Patna on Sunday.

Indian flood victims to spend 6 months in relief camps

AP, Patna

Hundreds of thousands of Indian flood refugees are likely to spend six months in state-run relief camps while authorities rebuild homes, roads and river embankments in the flood-ravaged north, officials said yesterday.

More than 257,000 people have taken shelter in 313 state-run camps in Bihar state, where the Kosi River burst its banks last month and turned hundreds of square miles of land into a giant lake, said Prataya Amrit, a state disaster management official.

The state's top elected official, Nitish Kumar, said the relief camps would run for another six months because repairing damaged embankments, homes, highways and village roads will take at least that long.

Authorities have confirmed 42

deaths, but it is widely believed the final toll will be much higher.

Rescue workers have evacuated 914,000 people from nearly 1,000 flooded villages. But with river levels falling by more than two feet over the last few days, more than 30,000 have returned to their homes ignoring official warnings that their homes were still not safe, Amrit said.

Another 50,000 people have refused to abandon their homes in flood-hit areas despite pleas by authorities to evacuate, he said.

Government engineers were digging a new channel to correct the course of the Kosi River which flows from neighbouring Nepal and plug the mile-long breach in the embankment. They also have started repairing roads to allow faster movement of relief supplies in the region, said KR Sinha, a state government engineer, on Monday.



Indian Kashmiri Muslims throw stones towards Indian police during a strike in Srinagar yesterday. A one-day strike called by Muslim separatists to denounce planned elections closed shops, schools and businesses across Indian Kashmir.

Strike cripples Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

A one-day strike called by Muslim separatists to denounce planned elections closed shops, schools and businesses across Indian Kashmir yesterday.

Government offices were also closed and public and private vehicles stayed off the road in the latest in a string of shutdowns and demonstrations called by separatists in the Muslim-majority state.

Kashmiri separatists oppose Indian-held elections, arguing they strengthen New Delhi's hold over the region.

Separatists have boycotted all elections held in the state since 1989, when an insurgency broke out against India's rule.

"The strike is to denounce the holding of a meeting by India's

Election Commission in New Delhi," strike organisers said in a statement.

The commission met on Monday to assess when the elections could be held in Kashmir.

The revolt-hit region has been ruled directly by New Delhi since July 2010 when the local government collapsed over a Hindu land row that triggered large pro-independence demonstrations.

Elections are due before January 10.

At least 40 Muslims and three Hindus have died in police shootings in the Kashmir valley and the mainly Hindu area of Jammu, further to the south, as authorities struggled to quell the protests.

In the past, Islamic rebels have threatened to kill voters if they cast ballots in polls.

Police recommend graft charges against Olmert

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli police on Sunday recommended indicting beleaguered Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on corruption charges in two different cases, but the premier's lawyers dismissed the move as irrelevant.

The decision is unlikely to affect the political future of the 62-year-old premier who has denied any wrongdoing but announced in July he would step down following a public uproar over the array of suspicions against him.

Police said in a statement they had gathered enough evidence to indict Olmert on charges of taking bribes and breaching public trust over suspicions he had unlawfully accepted cash-stuffed envelopes from a US businessman.

Lankan jets hit Tiger bunkers: Military

AFP, Colombo

Fighter jets yesterday bombed suspected Tamil Tiger bunkers in northern Sri Lanka in a stepped up air campaign against the guerrillas, while ground battles left 22 rebels dead, the defence ministry said.

War planes pounded positions of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in support of ground troops advancing in rebel-held territory, the ministry said.

There were no immediate reports of casualties from the latest air strikes, but the ministry said 22 rebels were killed and another 24 wounded in fresh fighting on Sunday.

Official reports show the gov-

ernment has intensified air strikes against the Tigers since the weekend.

There was no comment from the Tigers about the latest fighting, which came as Sri Lankan troops were on an offensive to capture Kilinochchi, the political capital of the Tigers in northern Sri Lanka.

The latest fighting raised the number of rebels killed since January to 6,417, according to government figures.

The military says 616 soldiers have died over the same period in a conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives since 1972. The rebels are fighting for an independent homeland for the Tamil minority.

US should stop bombing Afghan villages: HRW

AP, Kabul

The US and Nato militaries must stop carrying out airstrikes in densely populated Afghan villages unless intelligence is highly reliable, Human Rights Watch said in a report Monday that also urged military leaders to accept responsibility for civilian casualties as soon as possible.

The report comes just two weeks after an Afghan government commission and a preliminary UN report found that a US-led military operation in the village of Azizabad killed 90 civilians.

The US military said Sunday it has "new information" about the attack and is sending a senior military officer to the country to review its initial investigation that concluded no more than seven civilians died.

Human Rights Watch said that a small number of ground forces and "overwhelming" air power have become war doctrine for the US in Afghanistan, resulting in a large number of civilian casualties and intense criticism of American conduct by Afghan leaders. "In winning the tactical battle quickly on the ground with bombs, US and Nato forces risk losing the strategic battle for the support of the population, essential in counter-insurgency operations," said the report, "Troops in Contact: Airstrikes and Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan."

Capt. Scott A. Miller, a US military spokesman, said he couldn't

comment specifically on the report.

"I assure you that civilians are never targeted, and that our forces go to great lengths to avoid civilian casualties," Miller said. "It is unfortunate that the enemy continues to hide among non-combatants and place innocent lives at risk."

The US originally said the Aug. 22 operation in Azizabad killed 30 militants, but a military investigation later concluded it killed up to 35 militants and seven civilians. The Nato commander in Afghanistan has proposed a joint UN-US-Afghan government investigation to reconcile the differing figures.

The US military did not say Sunday what new information had emerged. But Afghan and Western officials say Afghanistan's intelligence agency and the UN both have video of the aftermath of the airstrikes on Azizabad village showing dozens of dead women and children.

An Afghan government commission has said 90 civilians, including 60 children and 15 women, died, a finding that the UN backed in its own initial report.

A UN official who has seen one video of Azizabad told The Associated Press it shows maimed children. The official became highly emotional describing rows of bodies.

A second Western official has said one video shows bodies of "tens of children" lined up and he called the video "gruesome." The

two officials spoke on condition they not be identified because the videos had not been publicly released.

In the report released Monday, New York-based Human Rights Watch said that at least 540 Afghan civilians have died in insurgency-related violence this year, including at least 367 killed by insurgents. The group said it used the most conservative estimates of civilian deaths and excluded the Azizabad incident.

An Associated Press tally of civilian deaths this year found that international forces have killed 160 civilians, while insurgent attacks have killed 540. That tally also excludes Azizabad.

Human Rights Watch said its investigation found that civilian casualties rarely occur during planned operations and airstrikes on Taliban targets, but that high numbers of civilian deaths happened in retaliatory strikes after troops were attacked.

It urged the US and Nato militaries to provide accurate information on civilian casualties as soon as possible and to "refrain from denying responsibility for civilian loss" until after-battle investigations occur.

The report also urged the Taliban to stop seeking shelter among populated villages and to stop using civilian homes as cover. The report said Taliban fighters appear to keep innocent civilians captive during fights in the hope that civilian casualties will occur.

Melting Swiss glacier yields Neolithic trove, climate secrets

AFP, Bern

Some 5,000 years ago a prehistoric person trod high up in what is now the Swiss Alps, wearing goat leather pants, leather shoes and armed with a bow and arrows.

The unremarkable journey through the Schnidejoch pass, a lofty trail 2,756 metres (9,000 feet) above sea level, has been a boon to scientists but it would never have emerged if climate change were not melting the nearby glacier.

So far, 300 objects dating as far back as the Neolithic or New Stone Age -- about 4,000 BC in Europe -- to the later Bronze and Iron Ages and the Medieval era have been found in the site's former icefields.

"We know now that the discoveries on Schnidejoch are the oldest of this kind ever made in the Alps," said Albert Hafner, an expert with the archaeology service in Bern canton.

They have allowed researchers not only to piece together snapshots of life way back when, but also to shed light on climate fluctuations in the past 6,500 years -- and hopefully shed light on what is happening now.

"For us, the site itself is the most important find because we have this correlation between climate change and archaeological objects," Hafner said.

"We know that people were only able to walk on this site when it was relatively warm," said Martin Grosjean, executive director of a national network called Swiss Climate Research. "When it was too

cold, the glacier advanced and it was not passable route."

Scientists have long known there were periods of warmer weather in the region but the artefacts allowed them to identify the exact years, when the site would have been passable on foot.

According to Grosjean, such data could help sharpen forecasts for the future by taking into account patterns of natural temperature fluctuations.

The treasure trove preserved in the icefields was discovered after two hikers noticed a strange piece of wood lying on some stones in 2003.

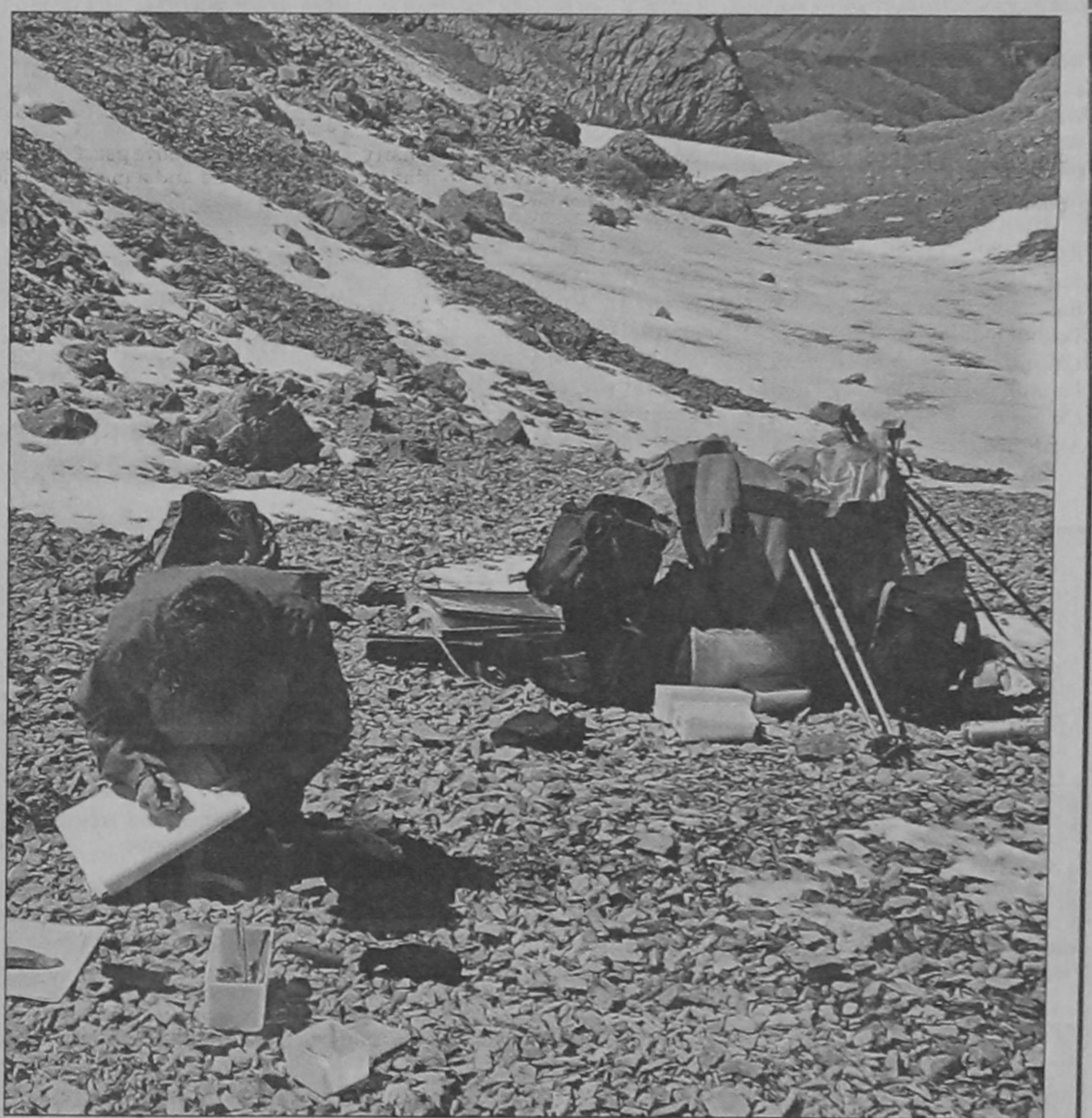
It turned out to be a quiver -- a case for arrows -- made from birch bark and dating as far back as 3,000 BC. Hafner said this object may be the most significant single discovery at the site.

"It is the only quiver found that is made of birch bark. It is unique in Europe," he said.

"Last week we found another Roman coin."

Since then, even older objects have been excavated, including a wooden bow estimated to predate by 1,000 years the famed "Oetzi the Iceman" -- a 5,100-year-old frozen body found high in the Tyrolean Alps on a glacier straddling Italy and Austria in 1991.

Experts have deduced that many of the most valuable items may have originated from one ill-fated person, probably carrying the quiver, bow and arrows and clothed in leather trousers and shoes.



This hand out picture taken on August 10, 2005 and realised by the Oeschger Centre of Excellence for Climate Research of the University of Bern shows an archaeologist working at the 2,756 metre-high Schnidejoch alpine pass, western Swiss Alps. On a day with temperature much like today's some 5,000 years ago, one Neolithic person walked on the Swiss Alps, wearing leather pants made from a house goat, leather shoes and armed with arrows and bows.



A man observes a flooded street at the Saint Marc City some 96km north of Port Au Prince on Sunday. With severe flooding, hundreds dead and hundreds of thousands lacking food and basic amenities, Haiti has been hit badly so far this hurricane season, with four severe storms in less than four weeks.

Ike slams Cuba, Haiti death toll passes 600

AFP, Havana

Hurricane Ike raged over Cuba early Monday, pummeling the island with gale force winds and torrential rain after killing dozens in beleaguered Haiti and worsening its growing humanitarian disaster.

The second hurricane to strike in less than a week prompted more than 800,000 people to evacuate coastal areas of eastern Cuba. More than 9,000 foreign tourists were moved out of the resort of Varadero. The hurricane made landfall at Punta Lucrecia late Sunday, the head of Cuba's meteorological service, Jose Rubiera, told state television.

Packing 120-mile (195-kilometer) per hour winds, Ike is the second powerful storm in just eight days to strike Cuba, following Hurricane Gustav.

"In all of Cuba's history, we have never had two hurricanes this close

together," lamented Rubiera.

Just before dawn, the eye of storm was practically over Cabo Lucrecia on the northern coast of eastern Cuba, about 220km east of Camaguey and moving west, according to the US National Hurricane Centre which said it was a Category Three storm on a scale going up to five.

Ike ploughed across the Turks and Caicos as a powerful Category Four storm late Saturday, causing injuries and extensive damage on the British territory and tourist haven, before weakening.

The hurricane raked the Bahamas island of Great Inagua, toppling trees, blowing off roofs, causing an island-wide power failure and forcing many of its 1,000 to seek emergency refuges.

The main concern is now in Haiti, where four storms in three weeks have killed at least 600 people and left hundreds of thousands in desperate need of food, clean water and shelter.

US campaign sharpens as McCain takes poll lead

AFP, Kansas City

The US presidential election moved into high gear Monday as two new opinion polls showed Republican John McCain taking the lead over Democratic rival Barack Obama.

McCain, a decorated war hero who based much of his early campaign on the strength of his experience, wrestled last week for Obama's mantle of change with the help of his surprise vice presidential pick Sarah Palin.

A USA Today/Gallup survey showed McCain ahead of Obama 50 percent to 46 percent among registered voters, a turnaround from a previous poll taken by the newspaper just before last week's Republican National Convention.

That poll had McCain trailing Obama by seven percentage points.

A new Gallup daily tracking poll

found McCain had moved into a 48 to 45 percent lead ahead of the November 4 election -- his best performance since May.

Experts attributed the McCain rebound to his party's convention and the surprise naming of Alaska governor Palin.

"He's in a far better position than his people imagined he would be in at this point," political scientist Larry Sabato of the University of Virginia was quoted by USA Today as saying.

McCain and Palin vowed to use their history of fighting corruption to shake up Washington at a series of campaign stops after the Republican National Convention.

"In politics, there are some candidates who use change to promote their careers, and then there are those like John McCain, who use their careers to promote change," Palin told cheering crowds in Wisconsin.

"We're going to win this election and let me offer a little advance warning to the old big spending, do-nothing me-first country second Washington crowd: change is coming. Change is coming," McCain said the next day in Colorado.

Obama ridiculed McCain's promise of change and hammered the Arizona senator on the limping US economy, saying the Republican represented no change from Bush.

"John McCain, who is a good man and has a compelling biography, has embraced and adopted the George Bush economic platform," Obama said on ABC television.

The Illinois senator argued that voters would realize that the election was a choice between a new direction and discredited Republican policies.