

Bush to pull 8,000 troops out of Iraq by Feb

AP, AFP, Washington

President Bush plans to pull 8,000 more combat and support troops out of Iraq by February, a measured drawdown that will leave nearly the same level of US forces in the war zone for the rest of the year.

Bush's decision, to be delivered in a speech Tuesday, is perhaps his final stamp on the war that has defined his presidency. The scope and pace of the US troop withdrawals are smaller than long anticipated, reflecting a desire by the military and the president not to jeopardize security gains in Iraq.

By the time the troops return home on the timeline Bush is proposing, someone else will be making the wartime decisions from the Oval Office.

There are about 146,000 US troops in Iraq. Bush hinted that more troops could return to the US in the first half of 2009 if conditions improve.

"Here is the bottom line: While the enemy in Iraq is still dangerous,

we have seized the offensive, and Iraqi forces are becoming increasingly capable of leading and winning the fight," Bush said in remarks prepared for delivery to the National Defence University in Washington.

The White House released the text of his speech in advance.

The decisions show that Bush still commands when and how troops will withdraw, despite a Congress that fiercely opposes him and a soured American public.

In all, about 8,000 US forces will be coming back, the president said.

One Marine battalion, numbering about 1,000 troops, will go home on schedule in November and not be replaced. An Army brigade of between 3,500 and 4,000 troops will leave in February.

Accompanying that "combat drawdown will be the withdrawal of about 3,400 support forces over next several months.

Senior defence officials say Bush is adopting a compromise from his military team.

Gen. David Petraeus, the top US commander in Iraq, had argued to keep troop levels fairly level through next June, an even longer time frame than Bush is embracing. But others, including Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said they believed that withdrawing troops more quickly from Iraq represented a small risk compared to the gain that could be made by shifting more to Afghanistan.

Anthony Cordesman, an Iraq expert at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, said the emerging plan reflects the concern of US commanders: Rushing US force reductions could lead to instability at a pivotal time for Iraqi political progress and preparedness of Iraqi forces.

"This plan does, however, mean continuing stress on both the active and reserve forces," Cordesman added.

Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama has advocated pulling all US combat forces out of

Iraqi within 16 months of taking office. GOP nominee John McCain has said he would rely on the advice of US military commanders to determine the timing and pace of troop reductions.

Both candidates have said more troops are needed in Afghanistan, where there has been a resurgence of the Taliban and a growth in violence.

Bush argued that Iraq is in a better place now by almost any measure. He said violence is at its lowest point since the spring of 2004, "normal life is returning to communities across the country," and political reconciliation is moving forward.

Bush was planning a low-key trip to Walter Reed Army Medical Centre Tuesday afternoon to visit wounded troops.

More than half of Bush's address is devoted to Afghanistan. He outlined what he called a "quiet surge" of additional American forces there, bringing the US presence to nearly 31,000.

McCain uses Palin as fundraising tool

AP, Chicago

Republican John McCain seized on running mate Sarah Palin's popularity to raise money for the party, telling donors at a \$4 million fundraiser Monday that he's overwhelmed by the buzz she's generating for his White House bid.

"I'm very proud and I'm very pleased at the enthusiasm that's been sparked," the presidential nominee said. The fundraiser, in Democratic candidate Barack Obama's hometown, followed several days of campaigning in which Palin has nearly overshadowed the head of the ticket.

The first-term Alaska governor has already been good for McCain's fundraising efforts. Of the \$47 million he raised in August, \$10 million came in the three days after he announced he had chosen her as his vice presidential running mate, the campaign said.

McCain's campaign said the event raised \$4 million for the national Republican Party and state GOP committees, which will then spend it on McCain's behalf.



People, holding some of their belongings, walk during a massive exodus of the flooded city of Gonaives some 200km north of Port-au-Prince on Monday. Hurricane Ike assaulted Cuba on Monday with torrential rain and gale-force winds, demolishing houses, crushing crops and threatening Havana after killing 61 people in Haiti, where a series of vicious storms has triggered a humanitarian crisis.

It's okay to kidnap Iranian president

Says Israeli minister

AP, Jerusalem

An Israeli Cabinet minister and onetime spy who helped kidnap Nazi mastermind Adolf Eichmann and bring him to trial thinks the same tactic could be used on Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Ahmadinejad is feared and reviled in Israel because of his repeated calls to wipe the Jewish state off the map. His aggressive pursuit of nuclear technology has only fuelled Israel's fears.

"A man like Ahmadinejad who threatens genocide has to be brought for trial in The Hague," seat of the international war crimes tribunal, Rafi Eitan said Tuesday. "And all options are open in terms of how he should be brought."

Asked if kidnapping was acceptable, Eitan replied "Yes. Any way to bring him for trial in The Hague is a possibility."

Eitan, a member of Israel's inner Cabinet of ministers with security responsibilities, said he was expressing his own opinion and nothing more.



Anti-government protesters shout in celebration over a court decision against Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej inside the Government House in Bangkok yesterday. The Constitutional Court said that Thai Premier Samak and his entire cabinet must resign over the scandal surrounding his TV cooking show.

Ike batters Cuba, eyes US coast

AFP, Havana

Hurricane Ike plowed across Cuba Tuesday, killing four people with tearing winds and lashing rains as it headed toward the Gulf of Mexico and the United States.

Ike, which had already killed 66 people in saturated Haiti, drove some two million Cubans from their homes and caused widespread destruction.

The storm was battering the island with winds of 130 km/h (80 mph), making it a diminished category one storm on the five-level Saffir-Simpson scale, but was dumping enough rain to cause "life-threatening flash floods and mudslides," according to the US National Weather Service.

Cuban authorities late Monday announced plans to evacuate 170,000 people from vulnerable parts of Havana, with the storm still thrashing the island more than 24 hours after it made landfall Sunday.

Officials said the massive storm would skirt the city on Tuesday before moving over the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico, where the bulk of US oil refineries are located, and regain strength as it churns toward the Texas coast.

Anglo-Dutch oil giant Shell said

Monday it had already evacuated 150 workers and would move its remaining 500 employees in the Gulf by Wednesday.

Authorities in Cuba have mounted a massive civil defence operation around the island with millions of residents moved to safer buildings and away from the surging ocean tides.

At 0600 GMT the eye of the storm was 95 miles (150 km) south-east of Havana.

The hurricane killed three men and a woman in Cuba, a relatively rare event in a country, which prides itself on preparedness in facing down the hurricane season's tempests.

"There is substantial damage in housing, and we are evaluating the farm sector," said Colonel Jose Betancourt of the civil defence department.

The storm drove seven-meter (23-foot) waves onto Cuba's eastern coastline as it came ashore late Sunday, and destroyed an unknown number of homes as it swept across Camaguey province.

"I'm 59, I have seen a lot of hurricanes, but I have never seen one that caused so much destruction," an unnamed resident of Camaguey told Cuban television by phone.

3 Nato soldiers, 28 rebels killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Three US-led Nato soldiers and an Afghan working with them were killed in a bomb blast in Afghanistan yesterday as government officials said that 28 rebels, some of them foreigners, died in air strikes.

The fresh bloodshed comes as US President George W. Bush was set to announce extra troops for Afghanistan's fight against a rising tide of extremism and the Afghan and Pakistan leaders pledged to stand together against terrorism.

The soldiers were killed in the east of Afghanistan by an improvised explosive device (IED) of the type regularly used by Taliban and other extremist insurgents.

"The US-led coalition did not give the nationalities of the troops but most international soldiers in the east are US nationals.

"Three coalition service members and one local-national contractor were killed today during an IED attack in eastern Afghanistan," it said in a statement that gave no further details.

The new deaths take to 201 the number of international soldiers to

die in Afghanistan this year, according to an AFP tally based on official statements.

An Afghan soldier was killed separately by a remote-controlled bomb that had been fixed to a bicycle in the southern city of Kandahar, the defence ministry said.

"One military policeman in the vehicle was martyred and two others were wounded," spokesman Mohammad Zahir Azimi told AFP.

In the southern province of Uruzgan meanwhile, troops were tipped off about a Taliban gathering on the outskirts of the town of Tirin Kot and sent in a strike early Tuesday, provincial police chief Juma Gul Himat said.

"The coalition forces bombed them and killed 16 Taliban and wounded another nine," Himat said.

And late Monday aircraft bombed a group of Taliban militants who had attacked a district centre in eastern Paktia province, a spokesman for the provincial government told AFP.

"Twelve Taliban were killed in the Nato air strike. Nine of them are Chechens and three are Afghans

and Pakistanis," he said.

A Taliban-led insurgency has been on the rise since the hardliners' late 2001 ouster in a US-led invasion with most incidents in the south and east, claiming several thousand lives.

US and other generals leading the battle against insurgents say there are an increasing number of foreign Islamists, including Arabs and Central Asians, involved in the fighting.

Clashes are meanwhile claiming the lives of more and more civilians, with those killed in action by international troops of concern to the government, which needs public goodwill in its battle against the Islamists.

Two more civilians were killed Tuesday when a malfunction sent a weapon off target, Nato's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said.

Militant attacks have increased year-on-year since a US-led invasion weeks after the September 2001 attacks on the United States removed Afghanistan's Taliban regime for sheltering al-Qaeda.

Deteriorating security has alarmed the country and its allies.

Russia agrees to pull out of key areas of Georgia

Moscow sets up ties with rebel regions

AP, AFP, Moscow

Russia's president pledged to withdraw his troops to areas where they had been before fighting erupted in Georgia last month but only after 200 European Union monitors deploy later this month as part of a revised cease-fire agreement.

Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili cautiously endorsed the deal on Monday, but insisted any final settlement with Russia must respect his country's territorial integrity. He made clear he still considers the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia part of his country.

"There is no way Georgia will ever give up a piece of its sovereignty, a piece of its territory," Saakashvili said after meeting with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who brokered the latest deal.

But in contrast to the deal, Russia established diplomatic ties

yesterday with Abkhazia and South Ossetia and promised to keep thousands of Russian troops in the breakaway Georgian regions for a "long time" to come.

The move drew a furious response in the Georgian capital Tbilisi where Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria described it as "yet another step in the annexation of Georgia's sovereign territories."

A month after going to war with Georgia over South Ossetia, Russia has shown it intends to maintain a vice-like grip over the two Moscow-backed separatist regions, which two weeks ago it recognised as independent states.

The short war between Georgia and Russia which began when Georgian forces attacked South Ossetia followed by Russia invading and routing Georgia's military has turned into a critical event in the post-Cold War world as Russia asserts its new economic and

military clout and the West struggles to respond.

Georgia and Western nations have complained Russia failed to withdraw troops and follow through on other earlier pledges in an Aug 12 ceasefire agreement.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said 200 European Union monitors would deploy to regions surrounding South Ossetia and Abkhazia by next month. After that, Russian troops would pull out of those regions by Oct. 11 to a line that preceded last month's fighting.

He said Russian troops would pull out of the Black Sea port of Poti and nearby areas in the next seven days, but only if Georgia signed a pledge to not use force against Abkhazia. Georgia had complained that the presence of Russian troops in Poti located dozens of miles away from the fighting in South Ossetia was a blatant violation of the ceasefire.

Police are often unwilling to

Nepali Maoists urged to prosecute soldiers for civil war abuses

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's ruling Maoists must prosecute soldiers and their own fighters who committed rights abuses during the country's recent bloody civil war, Human Rights Watch said yesterday.

At least 13,000 people were killed in the ten-year war, and both the Maoists and security forces have been accused of grave human rights abuses, including torture, abduction and extra-judicial killings.

"The Maoists claimed they took up arms because of a denial of justice," said Brad Adams from Human Rights Watch. "Now they are in government, we hope they will show the courage to bring perpetrators to justice."

As part of the 2006 peace deal reached between the former rebels and mainstream parties, a body to investigate serious rights abuses should have been established, but little progress has been made.

Police are often unwilling to

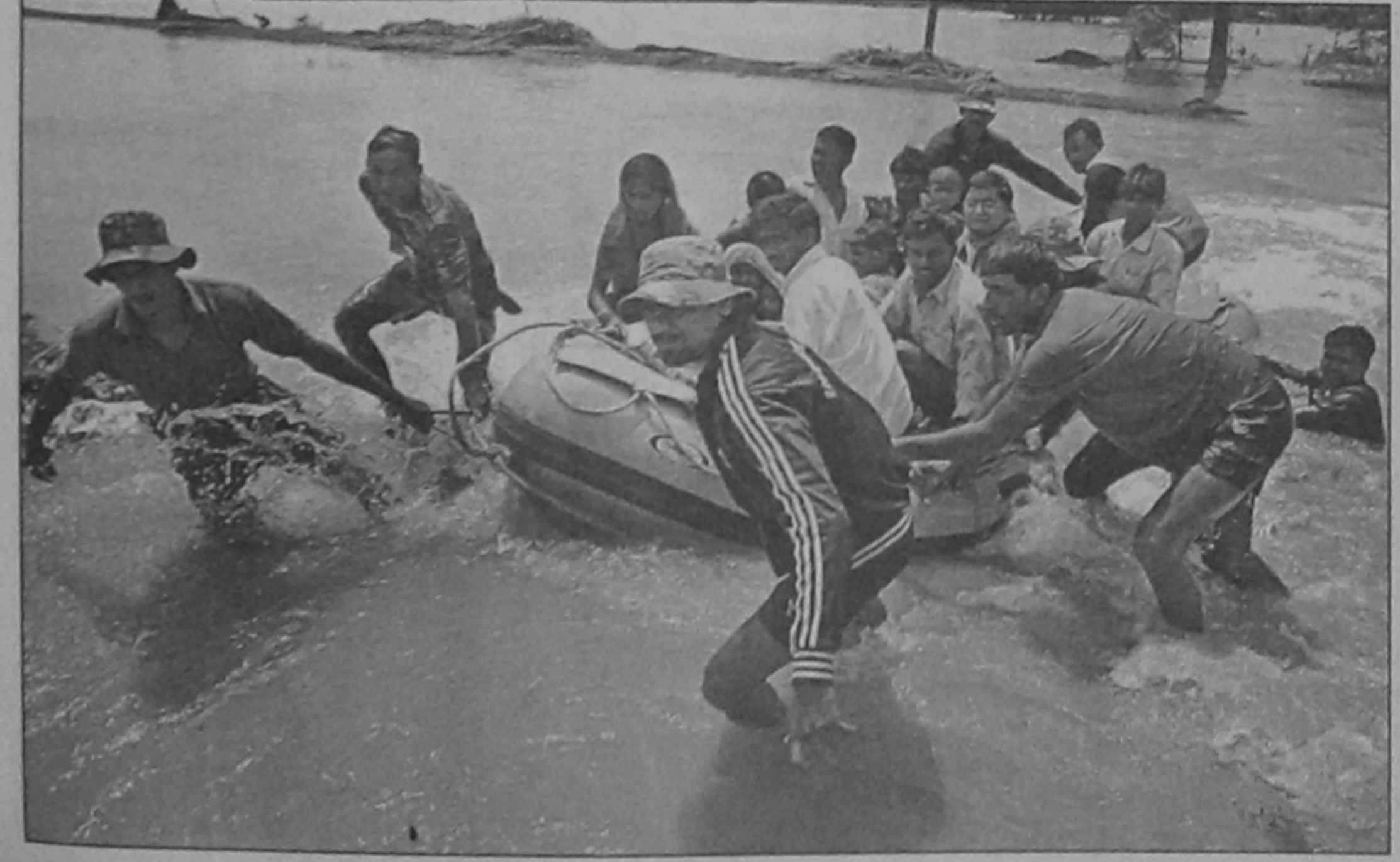
register complaints lodged against both the Maoists and security force personnel, Human Rights Watch said.

"Public prosecutors have been reluctant to scrutinise ongoing police investigations, and courts have been unresponsive and submissive to political influences," it said, adding the Nepalese army "flatly refuses to cooperate."

Human Rights Watch has documented 62 cases of killings, disappearances and torture -- with most carried out by the army -- but has also called on the Maoist former rebels to prosecute their own fighters guilty of serious abuse.

"To date, not a single perpetrator has been brought to justice before a civilian court," the report by the New York-based group said.

Nepal's Maoists have made a remarkable transition from feared guerrillas who controlled large parts of the countryside during the war, to the leaders of a new coalition government.



Indian Navy divers pull an inflatable boat through shallow floodwaters while evacuating flood affected villagers in Sapatul District yesterday. Nearly one million people have been evacuated in India's Bihar state where a rain-swollen river burst its banks three weeks ago and swamped hundreds of villages.

India rescuers focus on finding lost flood victims

AP, Patna

Rescuers began searching for missing people in flood-devastated northern India after evacuating more than 1 million people whose homes and villages were under water, officials said yesterday.

Authorities were able to move into previously inaccessible areas to look for survivors after the water levels dropped, helped by five days without rain, said state disaster management official Prataya Amrit.

"The main focus now is on the smooth functioning of relief camps and health centres, and looking for the missing people," Amrit told The Associated Press on Tuesday.

Hundreds of square miles of villages and farmland have been submerged in impoverished northern Bihar state since the Kosi River burst its banks on Aug. 18, shifting its course hundreds of miles to the east and essentially transforming

the area into a giant lake.

The Kosi has since cut a new channel and begun draining into the Ganges river that runs across the subcontinent.

Authorities have confirmed 42 deaths but it is widely believed the final toll will be much higher.

So far, not even a rough estimate of the number of missing was available. Disaster officials are talking to refugees in the relief camps to assess how many people may still be lost in Bihar's five worst affected districts, Amrit said.

The majority of the more than 1 million people evacuated are staying with friends or relatives, but some 257,000 people have taken shelter in 313 state-run camps, Amrit said.

Despite warnings of continuing danger, some flood victims were scrambling to get back to their homes. Amrit said more than 30,000 evacuated villagers have returned to the flood zone.



Stephen Hawking

Hawking bets mega-machine won't find 'God's Particle'

AFP, London

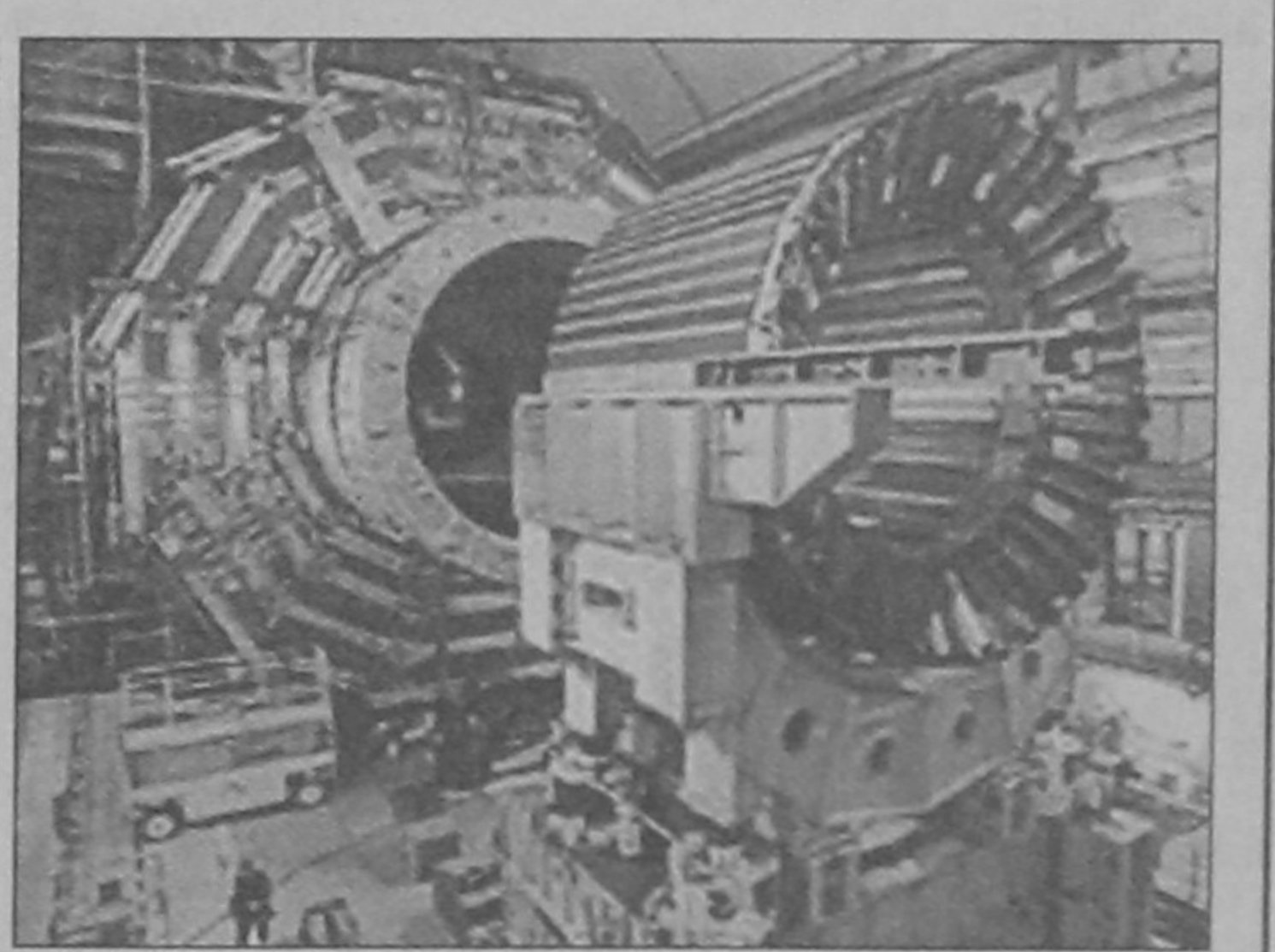
Renowned British astrophysicist Stephen Hawking has bet 100 dollars (70 euros) that a mega-experiment this week will not find an elusive particle seen as a holy grail of cosmic science, he said yesterday.

In the most complex scientific experiment ever undertaken, the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) will be switched on Wednesday, accelerating sub-atomic particles to nearly the speed of light before smashing them together.

"The LHC will increase the energy at which we can study particle interactions by a factor of four. According to present thinking, this should be enough to discover the Higgs particle," Hawking told BBC radio.

"I think it will be much more exciting if we don't find the Higgs. That will show something is wrong, and we need to think again. I have a bet of 100 dollars that we won't find the Higgs," added Hawking, whose books including "A Brief History of Time" have sought to popularise study of stellar physics.

On Wednesday the first protons will be injected into a 27-kilometre (16.9-mile) ring-shaped tunnel, straddling the Swiss-French border at the headquarters of the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (CERN).



Core magnet of the Compact Muon Solenoid experiment at the European Organisation for Nuclear Research.

'Big Bang' test sparks fear for world

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, London

If critics are to be believed, the end of the universe will begin today when a Welsh miner's son launches the world's biggest scientific experiment to know how the universe was born.

The well-known Welshman physicist, Lyn Evans, dubbed Evans the Atom, will this week switch on a giant particle accelerator designed to unlock the secrets of the Big Bang.

On Wednesday, Evans will fire up the Large Hadron Collider, a 17-mile-long doughnut-shaped tunnel that will smash sub-atomic particles together at nearly the speed of light.

Built by the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (CERN), the collider lies beneath the French-Swiss border, near the institution's headquarters in Geneva, at depths ranging from 170 feet to 600 feet.

The aim of the 4.4 billion-pound (over \$7.7 billion) experiment is to recreate the conditions that existed a fraction of a second after the Big Bang, the birth of the universe and provide vital clues to the building blocks of life.

It will track the spray of particles thrown out by collisions in a search for the elusive Higgs Boson, a theoretical entity that

supposedly lends weight, or mass, to the elementary particles. So important is this mysterious substance that it has been called the "God Particle".

Scientists also hope to shed some light on the invisible material that exists between particles - dubbed "dark matter" - which makes up most of the universe.

But a handful of scientists believe that the experiment could create a shower of unstable black holes that could "eat" the planet from within, and they are launching last-ditch efforts to halt it in the courts.

One of them, Otto Rossler, a retired German chemist, said he feared the experiment may create a devastating quasar - a mass of energy fuelled by black holes - inside the earth. Jets emanating from it would grow and catastrophes such as earthquakes and tsunamis would occur at the points they emerged from the earth.

"The weather will change completely, wiping out life, and very soon the whole planet will be eaten in a magnificent scenario - if you could watch it from the moon. A Biblical Armageddon. Even cloud and fire will form, as it says in the Bible."