

# Turkish military kills 35 rebels in clashes

AP, AFP, Ankara

Turkey's military intercepted Kurdish rebel radio chatter indicating that up to 35 guerrillas had been killed in recent clashes with troops, officials said yesterday.

Military spokesman Brig. Gen. Metin Gurak read out a transcript of a conversation that reportedly took place among the rebels Oct. 14, when troops and Cobra helicopters attacked a group of rebels who were allegedly trying to infiltrate Turkey from northern Iraq.

The intercepted conversation indicated that the rebels buried some bodies and took away the rest apparently to disguise their heavy losses. The rebels were also ordered to kill some of their injured fighters, according to the radio communication.

"We have hidden 11 of our friends," Gurak read from the alleged rebel transcript.

Gurak said the military, however, was not able to confirm the rebel deaths in the rugged area.

The Turkish military has long accused the rebels of hiding their dead to appear victorious. There was no immediate rebel statement.

The clashes between Turkish troops and the rebels of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, have escalated since Kurdish rebels killed 17 soldiers in an Oct. 3 attack on a military unit on the border.

The PKK, branded a terrorist group by the US and the European Union, has been fighting for autonomy in southeastern Turkey since 1984. Tens of thousands of people have been killed.

On Friday, Gurak said brigade

commander Brig. Gen. Omer Faruk Kucuk was among 15 military personnel that were injured when a helicopter went down Thursday during clashes near the border with Iraq.

The PKK has claimed that it brought down the helicopter, but the military maintains it crashed because of an unspecified mechanical problem.

One person was killed in the crash, but none of the others including Kucuk who sustained injuries to his knee and ribs were in life-threatening condition, Gurak said.

"As you can see the organisation has suffered heavily. We are still sweeping the area. We do not have an official statement yet" on the PKK's losses, he told a press conference.

The communication was inter-

cepted after Turkish artillery and gunship fire targeted two groups of PKK militants when they were moving towards a military outpost in the mountainous region, he said.

The intercepted messages also suggested the rebels might have shot dead fellow militants who were seriously wounded and could not move.

The Turkish army has intensified operations against the PKK since October 3 when the militants crossing from hideouts in neighbouring Iraq assaulted a border outpost, killing 17 soldiers.

Beside operations inside Turkey, it has carried out seven air raids against PKK camps in northern Iraq, including one in which senior PKK members were targeted in the mountainous region of Zap, a major rebel stronghold.

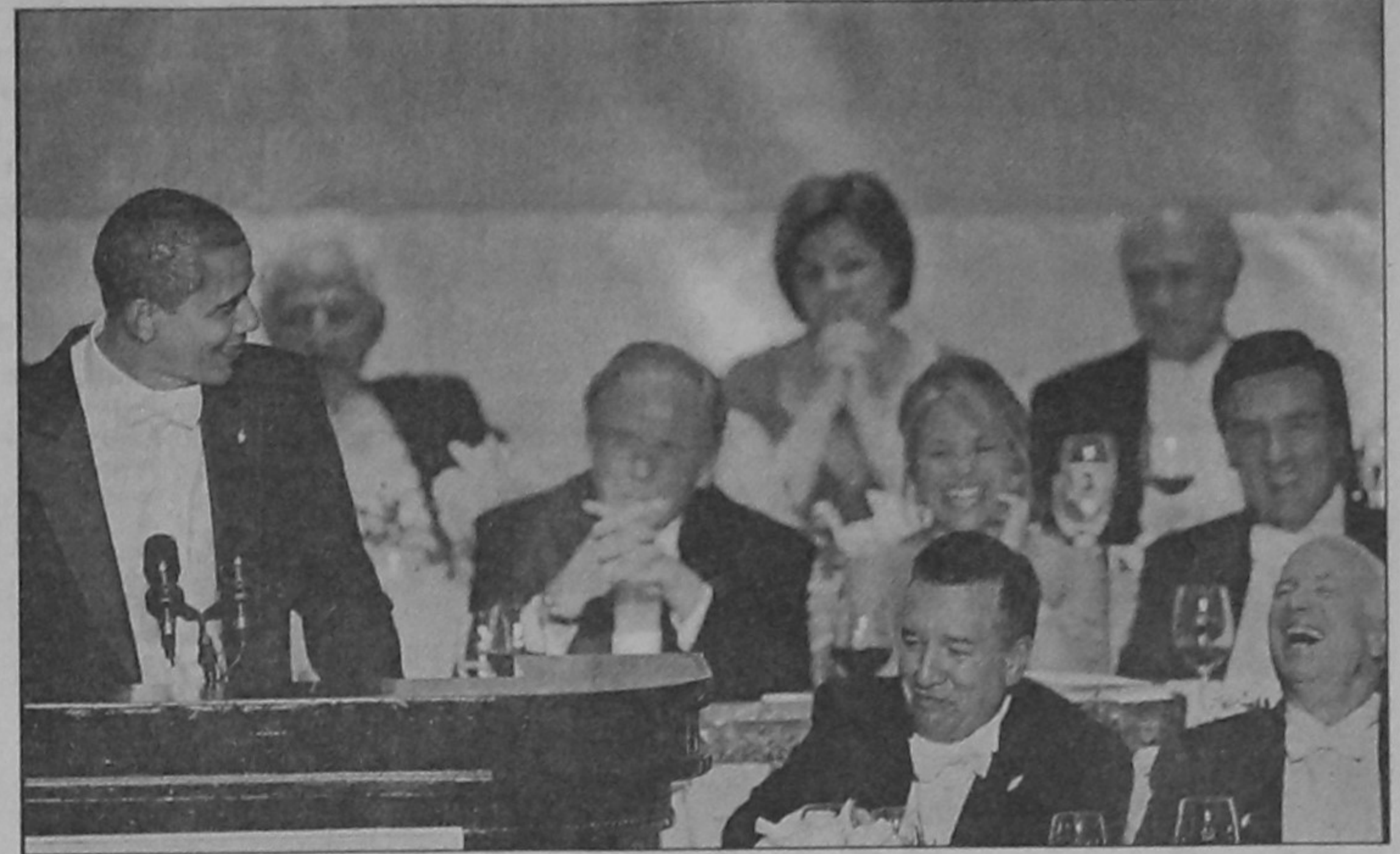
# Jokes all around as McCain, Obama join charity roast

AFP, New York

The pitched battle for the White House briefly made way for good humour and a good cause Thursday as Barack Obama and John McCain traded jibes at a white-tie charity dinner in New York.

Twenty-four hours after their last debate before the November 4 election, the presidential hopefuls were star turns at the celebrity-studded event to raise money for poor children in honour of the late New York governor Al Smith.

McCain went first, announcing he had just replaced all his campaign staff with Joe the Plumber, the Ohio entrepreneur who became a household name overnight after McCain invoked him in Wednesday's debate.



US Republican presidential candidate John McCain (R) laughs as US Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama (L) speaks at the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner on Thursday at the Waldorf Astoria in New York City.

# 23 killed in Mogadishu fighting

AFP, Mogadishu

At least 23 people were killed in the Somali capital Mogadishu when insurgents attacked camps housing African Union and Ethiopian troops on Thursday, triggering heavy clashes, witnesses and police said.

The Islamists insurgents shelled bases housing AU peacekeepers and Ethiopian troops in southern Mogadishu's K4, Shirkole and Hamarjaid quarters, drawing retaliatory fire. Somali forces joined the battle to support the peacekeepers, they said.

Witnesses said several residents were also wounded in outlying districts in some of the heaviest fighting in Mogadishu, the epicentre of heavy clashes for nearly two decades.

"I saw four civilians, one of them a woman, and an insurgent fighter killed in Taleh area. The civilians were caught in the crossfire," said witness Hasan Yahye.

Colonel Farah Abdullahi, a Somali policeman, said two officers were killed in the clash between AU troops and insurgents.

Sixteen other civilians died in fighting between Ethiopian troops and insurgents, bringing the death toll to 23.

"Four civilians died and three others wounded when an artillery shell hit their house near a vegetable market in Bakara," Osmail Adan, a witness told AFP.



Anti-government protesters hit a portrait of Thai Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat with shoes during a demonstration at the business road in Bangkok yesterday. Thousands of anti-government protesters rallied in Bangkok's business district, distributing leaflets with graphic photos of clashes last week that left two protesters dead.

# Thai PM rejects pressure to quit

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat rejected pressure to resign Friday, as thousands of anti-government demonstrators marched in protest at last week's deadly street clashes.

Police hung back by the roadside as some 5,000 supporters of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) marched down a busy Bangkok street carrying pictures of Somchai emblazoned with the word "murderer".

Two people were killed and nearly 500 injured on October 7 when police fired tear gas to prevent thousands of PAD supporters from blocking parliament, prompting some protesters to fight back.

Thailand's powerful army chief on Thursday had hinted that the premier should resign over the clashes, prompting rumours that Somchai may heed his advice and dissolve parliament.

But despite calling an urgent meeting of his coalition partners, Somchai insisted he would stay on for the sake of the country.

"The government cannot abandon its duty as we still have three key functions coming up," he said in a televised statement, referring to two royal events and a regional

summit to be held before the end of the year.

"Whether I resign or do not resign will depend on national interest."

At the downtown rally, PAD supporters handed out books and CDs with photos and accounts of last week's violence.

"The truth will show why the government has no legitimacy to run the country," Somsak Kosaisuk, a PAD leader, told the crowd, many wearing black to mourn the dead supporters or yellow out of allegiance to the king.

"The government thinks that people are their enemy and used the police to kill people on October 7."

The colour booklets showed graphic images of protesters whose limbs were blown off in the clashes -- injuries blamed by a forensic expert on dangerous Chinese-made tear gas canisters.

The front page of the PAD leaflet showed a man clutching the bloody stump of his leg, allegedly after it was blown off in the police crackdown.

"We have brought pieces of cloth, water bottles and masks in case the police use tear gas again," said PAD supporter Dusadee Siriwanlop, 42.

# Democrats' mistakes could still bring 'defeat': Obama

AFP, New York

Barack Obama headed onto Republican turf yesterday bidding to seal the deal with voters 18 days from election day while warning Democrats not to forget their ability to "snatch defeat from the jaws of victory."

The Illinois senator was en route to Virginia, which has not voted for a Democratic White House hopeful since 1964 but is now very much in play as Republican John McCain struggles to shore up his own support for November 4.

But while he is flush with cash and poll readings that hint at an election wipeout, Obama issued a clarion call against complacency following a fundraising concert here late Thursday with Bruce Springsteen and Billy Joel.

"Don't underestimate the capacity of Democrats to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory," he said, only half in jest. "Don't underestimate our ability to screw it up."

He added: "I want everybody running scared. Over the next 18 days, other than your family and your job, I want you to make a decision that there is nothing more important than bringing about this change that we need."

The Obama campaign ham-

mered McCain Friday with a new television spot savaging his plans to raise taxes on health care benefits and, allegedly, to slash spending on Medicare insurance for seniors.

The Washington Post newspaper endorsed the Democrat in a gushing editorial, saying he "has the potential to become a great president," despite his "relatively brief experience in national politics."

"The choice is made easy in part by Mr. McCain's disappointing campaign, above all his irresponsible selection of a running mate (Alaska Governor Sarah Palin) who is not ready to be president," the newspaper said.

Meanwhile McCain, who was headed Friday to the retirement haven of Florida, is pinning his hopes for a late comeback on "Joe the Plumber," the unlikely workaday hero of his final presidential debate with Obama on Wednesday.

The Arizona senator is banking that the low-tax mantra espoused by Ohio tradesman Joe Wurzelbacher, 34, in a chance encounter with Obama this week will resonate with voters at a time of economic crisis.

In his own hard-hitting campaign spot released Thursday, McCain's camp used footage of Obama's meeting with

Wurzelbacher in Toledo, Ohio, and his rival's comment that he wanted to "spread the wealth around."

"Obama's not truthful on taxes," the ad said, accusing the Illinois senator of hiding plans to take more from all Americans, including small businesses.

Obama says that only individuals making over 200,000 dollars and families making more than a quarter of a million will face higher taxes if he is president, and most middle-class people will pay less.

After becoming a metaphor for working-class Americans in the debate, and seeing his name repeatedly invoked by McCain, Wurzelbacher is finding that media attention cuts both ways.

The Toledo Blade newspaper reported that he was not registered as a plumber in Ohio at all. There was another report that Wurzelbacher was behind on his taxes. On ABC, he admitted he earned nowhere near 250,000 dollars. And The New York Times revealed his full name was actually Samuel J. Wurzelbacher.

The presidential candidates returned to the campaign trail after a rare bout of levity late Thursday at a white-tie dinner in New York to raise funds for underprivileged children.

# Gates consults Congress on Iraq agreement

AFP, Washington

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates is satisfied with a draft agreement with Baghdad on the legal status of US forces in Iraq and has begun consultations with Congress, his spokesman said Thursday.

Gates believes the draft agreement "adequately" protects US troops in all facets of their operations from combat to legal protections, said Geoff Morrell, the Pentagon press secretary.

"We would never advocate for a document for a... status of forces agreement that did not adequately protect our forces," Morrell said.

The status of forces agreement would replace a UN mandate as the legal basis for the US military presence in Iraq, and also set in motion a timeline for the withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq by the end of 2011.

Morrell said the agreement reached by US and Iraqi negotiators would not be final until it had been approved by leaders in both countries, but it was close enough that Gates had decided to consult key members of Congress.

On Thursday, the secretary began making calls to the leaders of

the House and Senate Armed Services Committees to discuss key points of agreement contained in the draft, the spokesman said.

Senator Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, raised a warning flag on Wednesday on the question of whether Iraq would be given jurisdiction over US military personnel.

"I am sceptical of any agreement that would subject US servicemen and women to the jurisdiction of Iraqi courts in the middle of a chaotic war and in the absence of a judicial system that has been proven to be fair and protective of the rights of individuals," he said in a statement.

Morrell would not go into specifics but indicated that Gates believed an acceptable compromise had been reached on the issue, which has been a major stumbling block in the months long negotiations.

The United States has previously ceded jurisdiction over US military personnel accused of committing crimes while off duty or off base to host countries, notably Japan and South Korea.

Negotiators had earlier resolved differences over Iraqi demands for

a timeline for a US withdrawal.

Iraqi and US officials have said agreement was reached to pull back American troops from major Iraqi cities by the middle of next year and withdraw all combat troops by the end of 2011, if conditions permit.

"Any withdrawal dates that are in this -- and there are dates in this document, and I won't get into what those dates are -- are entirely conditions-based," Morrell said.

He said timelines were "something the Iraqis strongly want. They are a sovereign nation. And we are fully supportive of those desires."

The United States is under pressure to reach an agreement before the end of the year when a UN mandate for its forces in Iraq runs out.

Any agreement must be ratified by the Iraqi parliament, but the US administration insists that a status of forces agreement would not require Senate ratification.

Democrats have expressed concern that the agreement could tie the hands of the next president. Senator Barack Obama, the Democratic presidential candidate, for instance, has called for a more rapid drawdown of US combat forces.

# EU sticks to greenhouse goals despite money fears

AP, Brussels

Leaders of the 27-nation European Union pledged Thursday they will stick to a pricey plan for deep cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, saying the recent meltdown of financial markets must not deter efforts to combat global warming.

After presiding at a two-day EU summit, French President Nicolas Sarkozy said that despite some misgivings about the cost, "climate change is so important that we cannot use the financial and economic crisis as a pretext for dropping it."

The summit capped weeks of turmoil that devastated financial markets around the globe, sparked fears of a serious economic slowdown and revealed EU governments stumped for a coherent approach to protect banks, mortgage lenders and depositors.

Only in the last 10 days did the

EU put together a \$2.3 trillion emergency bailout for the banking sector that was approved at the summit.

Taking a cue from British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, the leaders called for a global approach to revamping the world's financial system in hopes of preventing a repeat of the credit crisis.

Sarkozy and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso are to meet with President Bush on Saturday at Camp David, Md., to lay the groundwork for a global summit to overhaul the financial system.

Ideas that the Europeans discussed included a meeting of the world's major economic powers including China, Russia and India in November, possibly in New York, similar to the 1944 meeting in Bretton Woods, N.H., that laid down rules for international trade and financial relations.



Indian Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan (L) waves to the crowd as he leaves the Lilavati Hospital in Mumbai yesterday. Bachchan left hospital, nearly a week after he was admitted complaining of stomach pains.



Iraqi Shia Muslims hold up portraits of radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr as they participate in an anti-US protest after Juma prayer in Baghdad's Sadr city yesterday, one day ahead of an expected mass protest called for last week by Sadr to demonstrate against the US presence in Iraq.

# World peace efforts hampered by credit crunch: Ahtisaari

AFP, London

The international financial crisis is hampering efforts towards world peace, Nobel Peace Prize winner Martti Ahtisaari warned yesterday.

Speaking during a visit to London, the former Finnish president said a lack of economic development in war-torn countries would make it harder to resolve conflicts.

"It will not help us to solve conflict with no economic development in those countries," Ahtisaari said. "It is becoming more and more difficult."

"We are avoiding taking the tough decisions that are needed," he added.

He maintained, however, that he was hopeful of peace taking hold, noting Kenya and Zimbabwe as "two recent examples of where countries can get together and solve their own problems."

"They no longer need people like me. They can do it on their

own."

Asked what would be the impact on his life of winning the prestigious award, Ahtisaari said it "means for me more work."

"I'm now 71 and I'm sort of dreaming of retirement, but one of the first phone calls that I got was from one of my dear friends and he told me: 'Of course you cannot retire, you have a moral duty to do twice as much.'"

Ahtisaari, who has been a diplomat for more than three decades, also spoke of his experience of conflicts, arguing they were all different.

"The only uniting factor is that they have all been difficult," he said.

"When I'm asked what is the most important (thing) you've done, I always say Namibia because it lasted long, it last too long," he said, referring to his work in the country in various capacities between 1977 and its independence in 1990.

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