



Students from the English and Foreign Language University (EFLU) a banner signed by them in various languages denouncing the attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team, during a peaceful demonstration in Hyderabad yesterday.

Lanka offers safe exit for trapped civilians

Troops kill 33 Tigers in fresh fighting

AFP, AP, Colombo

Sri Lanka Thursday offered a new safe passage for thousands of civilians trapped in the island's war zone as fresh fighting erupted, leaving at least 33 rebels dead, the defence ministry said.

A pitched battle raged in the village of Chalai on Thursday, a day after a local Red Cross employee was killed while helping non-combatants leave the area.

Sri Lanka's Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona said the government had declared safe routes for civilians out of the shrinking territory still under rebel control in the northeast of the island.

"One will lead north past Chalai while the other will be south past Mullaitivu town," Kohona said, adding that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had been invited to help civilians make use of the exits.

"One of our male workers was killed on Wednesday afternoon by shrapnel," said ICRC spokeswoman Sarasi Wijeratne, who identified the victim as Vadivel Vijayakumar, an ethnic Tamil.

"Despite this unfortunate incident, the ICRC will remain in the conflict area and continue with our humanitarian work." Wijeratne said it was not clear who was responsible for the attack, which occurred after Vijayakumar helped injured civilians board an ICRC ferry taking them to safety.

Since February, the ICRC has helped evacuate nearly 2,800 patients and their relatives by sea from the island's northeast as a military offensive drove the separatist rebel forces close to final defeat.

The military estimates some 70,000 people remain inside the war zone, while 36,000 civilians have sought shelter in the government-controlled areas.

Human Rights Watch Thursday demanded urgent evacuation of non-combatants as food and medicines were running short.

"A humanitarian evacuation of civilians is desperately needed right now," said HRW's Asia director, Brad Adams.

HRW accused the Tamil Tigers of holding civilians as "human shields," preventing people from leaving the areas under their control and forcibly recruiting children to fight the army.

The rights group also alleged the military had "repeatedly and indiscriminately" shelled densely populated areas and hospitals inside the war zone.

With the exception of the ICRC, aid agencies face many restrictions in their efforts to transport food and supplies to civilians caught up in the conflict.

"The world is watching as a humanitarian disaster unfolds in Sri Lanka," said Adams. "The UN and concerned governments should step forward to help prevent needless civilian deaths in Sri Lanka."

Military spokesman Udaya Nanayakkara said Tiger rebels mounted an assault against troops in the coastal Chalai area on Thursday morning, but security forces repulsed the attack and seized a large cache of weapons.

US takes cautious approach to Iran

AFP, Brussels

The United States maintained Thursday its cautious diplomatic approach to Iran by announcing an international conference on Afghanistan with the Islamic Republic likely to be invited.

At her first Nato meeting, held in Brussels, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proposed a high-level conference to define a better way to foster reconstruction and democracy and halt a damaging Taliban-led insurgency.

She said that she hoped the meeting, set for March 31, "could provide an opportunity to reach a common set of principles, perhaps embodied in a chairman's statement, on a common way forward."

She did not say where the meeting would be held, but only that Afghan and Pakistani officials would be invited, with Nato allies, donors, international organisations and "key regional and strategic" nations.

It was only after a remark by French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, who said that he hoped Iran would be invited, and when questioned that Clinton mentioned the Islamic Republic in public.

"If we move forward with such a meeting, it

is expected that Iran would be invited as a neighbour of Afghanistan," she told reporters, after meeting here with her Nato counterparts.

By declaring that the United States would sit side by side with Iran by the end of the month, Washington is making an important gesture toward Tehran, with whom US President Barack Obama has pledged to engage in dialogue.

But the meeting will be held under United Nations auspices, which could allow Washington to deny any responsibility should the conference fail, or the invitation be rejected.

"We are in the process of discussing with the UN the possibility that UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon could open the conference and that his special representative for Afghanistan Kai Eide could chair the meeting," Clinton said.

To put even more distance between them, the conference venue is likely to be in The Hague or Brussels, according to senior Nato officials.

In December, Iran shunned a similar French-hosted conference, failing to send its envoy to Paris for an event aimed at persuading Afghanistan's neighbours to play a greater role in restoring stability in the war-torn state.

S Korean airlines stay clear of North Korea's airspace after threat

AFP, Seoul

South Korean airlines are rerouting their flights away from North Korean airspace, hours after the North threatened Seoul's passenger planes amid heightened tensions on the divided peninsula.

The move which will cost carriers thousands of dollars on each flight comes a day after Pyongyang warned in state-run media that it cannot guarantee security for South Korean civil airplanes flying near its airspace and accused the US and South Korea of attempting to provoke a nuclear war with the upcoming joint military drills.

It did not say what kind of danger South Korean planes would face or whether the threat meant the North would shoot down planes.

South Korea has urged the North to immediately retract the threat.

"The military threat against civil airplanes' normal flights is a violation of international norms and an inhumane act that cannot be justified under any circumstances," Unification Ministry spokesman Kim Ho-nyeon told reporters.

He indicated the warning may be notice to clear the airspace before a possible missile launch but declined to elaborate.

North Korea announced last week that it is preparing to send a communications satellite into space but regional powers suspect the claim is a cover for the launch of a long-range missile capable of reaching Alaska.

"We plan to make our flight detour through Japanese airspace until the crisis is resolved," said Park Hyun-soo, deputy general manager of Asiana Airlines' operations control centre.



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attends a 'Town Hall' forum with young European workers yesterday at the European parliament in Brussels.

Humans tamed horses 5,500 years ago

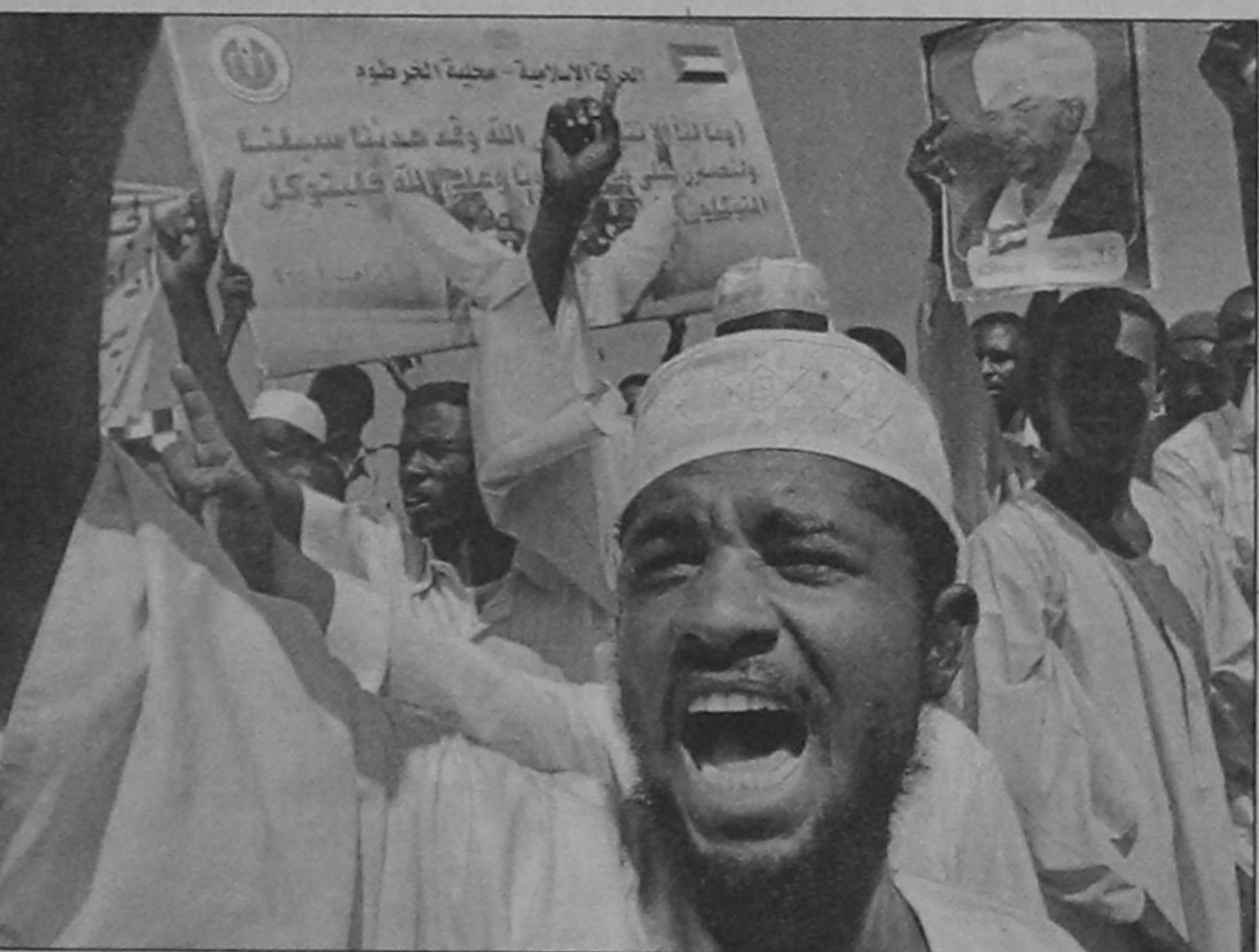
AFP, Chicago

Researchers have unearthed evidence that humans domesticated horses and used them for milk, meat and transport at least 1,000 years earlier than previously believed, a study said Thursday.

A team of archaeologists has found conclusive evidence that the Botai culture of Kazakhstan kept domesticated horses 5,500 years ago.

"What's really key here is they weren't just domesticated," lead author Alan Outram of the University of Exeter, in southwestern England, said in a telephone interview.

"By this point they've really got the full pastoral package: they were eating them, they were riding them, they were milking them, which suggests that the original domestication is even earlier still."



Sudanese men demonstrate in Khartoum yesterday against the International Criminal Court arrest warrant issued for President Omar Al-Beshir for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Beshir has vowed to press ahead with peace efforts in Darfur despite the international arrest warrant against him, ahead of a defiant weekend visit to the conflict zone.

Beshir vows to press on with peace despite warrant

AFP, Khartoum

Sudanese President Omar al-Beshir has vowed to press ahead with peace efforts in Darfur despite the international arrest warrant against him, ahead of a defiant weekend visit to the conflict zone.

"The ICC (International Criminal Court) will not change anything in the government's plans and programmes," Beshir said, according to a statement published by the state news agency SUNA on Friday.

"The government will press ahead with all steps for peace... and will conduct free and fair elections," he told a late-night Thursday meeting of Sudan's top politicians.

His comments follow the

ICC decision on Wednesday to issue an arrest warrant against Beshir for war crimes and crimes against humanity over the six-year conflict in Darfur that the United Nations says has killed 300,000 people.

The move has sharply divided the international community, and raised deep concerns about the plight of the millions living in Darfur, often in miserable conditions in one of the remotest areas of the planet.

The United States, which has said genocide was being committed in Darfur, is leading calls for him to be brought before international justice but Sudan's allies including Africa, the Arab world and China want the warrant suspended.

Three killed in Nepal ethnic protest

AFP, Kathmandu

At least two protesters and one policeman died as ethnic violence flared anew in Nepal, with protesters calling for greater autonomy, officials said yesterday.

Nepal's Maoists, who came to power after winning elections last April, have been struggling to end ethnic tensions in the south, where more than 200 people have been killed in the past two years.

"One protester was shot dead Thursday and another died Friday from bullet wounds while receiving hospital treatment," chief district officer Ratnaraj Pandey told AFP from Chitwan town, south of the capital Kathmandu.

A policeman was also killed and another suffered serious injuries after scores of protesters attacked police with knives, said the official.

"The protest turned violent and policemen were trying to disperse the crowd from the highway," said Pandey.

"The police first tear-gassed protesters and resorted to firing to open a blocked highway which had stranded hundreds of vehicle passengers," Lok Bahadur Chhetri, a local administrator, told AFP by telephone, earlier in the day.

Large numbers of police have been deployed in a bid to avert further violence, he said.

The deaths were the first since the latest protests by the Tharu community began Monday in Chitwan and spread to several areas on the southern plains known as the Terai, where they have crippled daily life.

Kepler telescope to hunt for Earth-like planets

AFP, Washington

Nasa is preparing to launch the Kepler space telescope Friday to help answer a question that has boggled the minds of astronomers for centuries: is Earth the only habitable planet in the galaxy?

"This mission attempts to answer a question that is as old as time itself -- are other planets like ours out there?" said Ed Weiler, associate administrator for Nasa's Science Mission Directorate.

"It's not just a science mission, it's an historical mission."

Kepler will stare at the same spot in space for three and a half years, taking in about 100,000 stars around the Cygnus and Lyra constellations of the Milky Way.

China warns of 'severe' situation in Muslim area

AFP, Beijing

A top official warned yesterday the security situation in China's restive region of Xinjiang would be "more severe" this year, sparking further concern of unrest ahead of sensitive anniversaries.

The vast desert area of Xinjiang in China's remote northwest is home to more than eight million Uighurs, Muslims who have complained for decades of political and religious repression.

China has accused Uighur separatists of fomenting unrest in the region, particularly in the run-up to and during the Olympics in August last year when a wave of violence hit the restive area.

"The (security) situation will be more severe, the task more arduous, and the struggle more fierce in the region this year," said Nur Bekri, chairman

of the Xinjiang regional government, according to the official Xinhua news agency.

This year marks 60 years since China's People's Liberation Army entered Xinjiang and implemented what it calls a "peaceful liberation" of the region, but advocates of independence for the area view the move as an invasion.

"It's a time of celebration for Xinjiang people but hostile forces will not give up such an opportunity to destroy it," Bekri said.

The warning came amid concerns of unrest as China prepares to commemorate several sensitive anniversaries this year.

Next week marks 50 years since a failed uprising in Tibet led to the escape of the Dalai Lama, and June 4 is the 20th anniversary of a brutal government crackdown on Tiananmen pro-democracy protest.

Five killed in US shooting spree

AFP, Chicago

Four children and an adult woman were killed and a child seriously wounded in a shooting rampage in the midwestern US city of Cleveland, Ohio, police said.

Police early Friday swarmed a section of west Cleveland searching for the suspect, who they identified as Davon Crawford, 33.

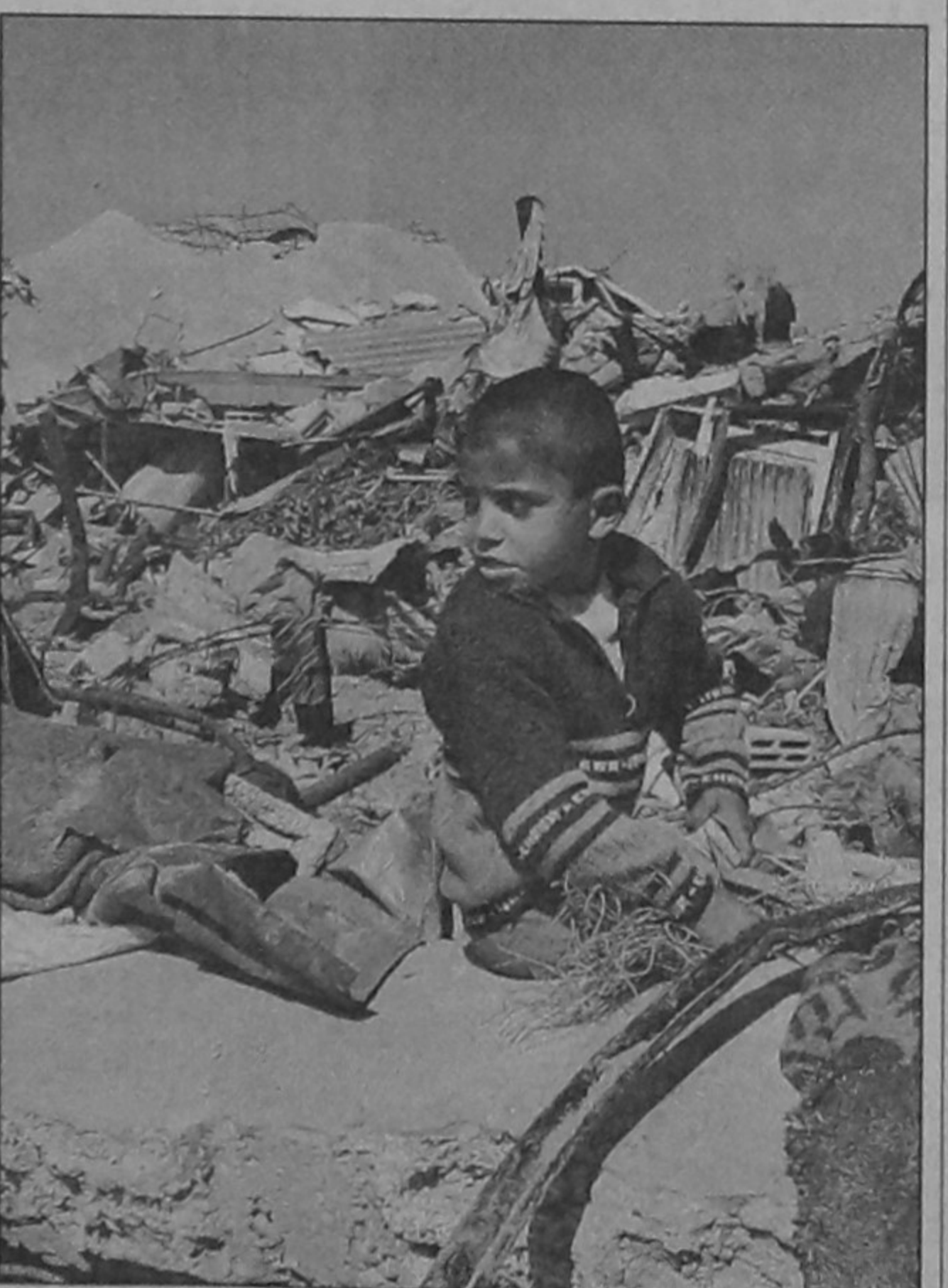
Patrol cars blocked area streets and a helicopter hovered above as officers spread out in their search.

All but one of the victims are children, Cleveland Police Lieutenant Thomas Stacho told reporters.

"From what I understand he (Crawford) is the father of some of the children," Stacho said.

Two of those killed were twin toddlers, media reported. Police have not released any names of the victims.

Police said that a child fled the middle-class neighbourhood home where the shooting took place around 8:00 pm Thursday (0100 GMT Friday) calling for help. By the time officers arrived the suspect had fled on foot.



A Palestinian boy sits on the rubble of buildings that were destroyed during Israel's 22-day Gaza offensive in Jabalia in the northern Gaza Strip yesterday.

ABUSE UNDER THE GUISE OF WAR ON TERROR

Calls grow for Bush-era 'truth commission'

AFP, Washington

Debate is heating up in the United States on establishing a "truth commission" to investigate whether the Bush administration abused its legal powers under the guise of its "war on terror."

"Nothing has done more damage to America's place in the world than the revelation that this nation stretched the law and the bounds of executive power to authorise torture and cruel treatment," said Patrick Leahy, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

He opened a hearing on Wednesday pressing for such an investigation saying it was badly needed as each week brought new revelations of alleged abuses under the administration of former US president George W. Bush.

On Monday, the administration of new President Barack Obama, published nine internal memos dating back to the Bush years.

They revealed how the former administration had given itself ample room to skirt the law on a number of controversial practices, such as the transfer of prisoners for secret interrogations or the power to wiretap phones without warrants.

Any eventual investigation could take various forms and be led either by the Congress, the criminal justice system or an independent commission.

would see that "such a commission of inquiry would shed light on what mistakes were made so that we can learn from those errors and not repeat them."

"By carefully gathering the facts, a commission can tell the whole story, not just of each individual agency studied in isolation, but of how all parts of the US government interacted in the handling of the detainees," said Thomas Pickering, a former senior US State Department official.

For Pickering, as for Lee Gunn, a former admiral, such a commission would report to the Justice Department, handing over to the department the eventual authority to bring any legal charges.

They pleaded for the commission to have the power to call witnesses to testify, but not to be able to offer immunity in exchange for their testimony, or only in some rare cases.

Republicans are already gearing for a battle. "It's a fishing expedition," said Arlen Specter, a Republican member of the Senate committee, while defending the principle of legal action on a case by case basis.

"It is naive to expect a mere commission to settle an ongoing and embittered controversy about past government policy and replace it with a new consensus on historical truth," said law professor Jeremy Rabkin from George Mason University in Virginia.