



PHOTO: AFP
Sri Lankan Tamil civilians walk to a centre for displaced people at Puthumathalan yesterday while a soldier sits in a helicopter transporting journalists to the northeast war zone to look at the situation there (Inset).

Lanka rejects fresh UN humanitarian mission

Pressure grows on Colombo for ceasefire

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka yesterday flatly rejected a plan by the United Nations to send a special humanitarian mission to the island's war-torn north.

"There is no need for the UN to send people from abroad to visit those areas," Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe told reporters, a day after UN chief Ban Ki-moon announced a team would be sent to Sri Lanka.

"We have agreed in principle for a visit by UN staff based here (in Colombo) to go in there (to the conflict zone)," the minister added, signalling that Colombo remained

unwilling to give free access to the north.

He said the government was working out the modalities to grant access to the Colombo-based UN staffers, but said intense fighting between troops and Tamil Tiger rebels was making it "virtually impossible."

"The UN must tell us first who would be on the mission, how many days they plan to stay, what they plan to do and so forth, before we give the final green light," the minister said.

The Sri Lankan government has been blocking most aid agencies from working in the war-torn north for months, and accuses UN agencies and NGOs of supporting the

Tamil Tigers.

Earlier India's foreign secretary flew to Sri Lanka Friday as international pressure intensified on Colombo to halt its assault on Tamil Tiger rebels and save thousands of trapped civilians.

The Indian government said Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon and Indian National Security Adviser MK Narayanan would stress the severity of the humanitarian crisis facing up to 50,000 non-combatants hemmed into the island's northeastern coastal area. "There is tremendous international pressure building on us to call a ceasefire," acknowledged a Sri Lankan government official who declined to be named.

Hospital overwhelmed

INDO ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Colombo

The unfolding human tragedy of weary civilians fleeing the LTTE-held area in the island's north has 'overwhelmed' a 450-bed hospital in Vavuniya, which now tends to 1,700 badly wounded patients, a doctor said.

Paul McMaster, a doctor who works with the international NGO

Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF or Doctors Without Borders) and health ministry staff at Vavuniya hospital in the Northern province said: "We've been seeing very severely wounded patients, the numbers of patients have increased rapidly over the last three or four days, so we're seeing a stream of badly wounded people being brought into us."

"Our hospital has got about 450 beds,

and we've now got more than 1,700 patients in the hospital - on the floor, in the corridors, and even outside. So the hospital is very close to being overwhelmed," said McMaster in a statement released by MSF.

About three-quarters of the injured coming in now have suffered from blast injuries, and the rest are gunshot wounds and mine explosion injuries, he said.

N Korea reiterates boycott of nuclear talks

AP, Seoul

North Korea noted Friday that Russia "paid attention" to its decision to boycott international nuclear talks when their top diplomats met, indicating there was no breakthrough in Moscow's efforts to get Pyongyang back to the negotiating table.

North Korea last week expelled international nuclear monitors, vowed to restart its atomic programme and quit disarmament negotiations after

the UN Security Council condemned its April 5 rocket launch and called for expanded sanctions.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov flew to Pyongyang seeking to persuade the North to return to the nuclear negotiating table, holding talks with Foreign Minister Pak Ui Chun on Thursday.

"The Russian side ... paid attention to the (North's) stand that there is no need to hold the six-party talks any longer," the Foreign Ministry

said in a statement carried by the official Korean Central News Agency. The nuclear talks involve China, Japan, the two Koreas, the US and Russia.

Lavrov told Russian media after Thursday's talks he did not anticipate a quick breakthrough in the nuclear dispute.

Pyongyang also said Russia recognised that every country has the right to launch a satellite into space and reaffirmed its opposition to new UN sanctions against North Korea.

Nepal celebrates Gyanendra ouster

But inter-party spats continue

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Kathmandu

As Nepal Friday celebrated the third anniversary of the fall of former king Gyanendra's army-backed regime, the celebrations were marred by discord among the major parties, a standoff between the ruling Maoists and the army, and bad blood between the former guerrillas and their southern ally India.

On April 24, 2006, Nepal's last king Gyanendra, whose decision a year ago to seize in a bloodless coup the absolute power his ancestors enjoyed triggered countrywide unrest, was forced to reinstate parliament and step down as head of government.

The ouster came after 19 days' continuous protests led by Nepal's sidelined political parties with the support of the underground Maoist guerrillas.

Israel hits out at Iran, Syria

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman said in an interview published Friday Iran is a key obstacle to resolving the Middle East conflict and spoke out against resuming indirect talks with Syria.

It would be impossible, Lieberman told the English-language Jerusalem Post, "to resolve any problem in our region without resolving the Iranian problem."

The biggest obstacle to any comprehensive solution, the right-wing minister said, "is not Israel, it is not the Palestinians. It's the Iranians."

The daily, which did not publish the full

interview, also said Lieberman cited Syria's deepening ties with Iran -- Israel's archfoe -- and added that he saw no point in resuming the indirect talks with Damascus conducted by the last government.

"We don't see any good will come from the Syrian side. Only the threats like: 'If you're not ready to talk, we'll retake the Golan by military action,'" Lieberman said.

Israel occupied the Golan in the 1967 Six-Day War and annexed it in 1981 in a move never recognised by the international community. In May last year, Syria and Israel began indirect talks after negotiations halted eight years earlier over the fate of the strategic plateau.

Myanmar arrests opposition politicians for praying

AP, Yangon

Two members of detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's political party were arrested and charged with insulting religion after they prayed for the release of political prisoners, a party spokesman said yesterday.

National League for Democracy spokesman Nyan Win said authorities arrested

Chit Pe, the party's deputy chairman, and party member Aung Saw Wei in Twante on Tuesday. Both took part in a prayer service for the release of political prisoners, which was held at a pagoda in the township, about 32km south of Yangon.

Nyan Win said the two were charged with insulting religion, which carries a possible two-year jail sentence.



PHOTO: AFP
Two men spray water on a raging fire as it threatens nearby homes on Thursday near Conway, South Carolina. South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford declared a state of emergency Thursday for a coastal county where a wildfire has consumed thousands of acres and destroyed dozens of homes.

Two US journalists to be tried in North Korea

AFP, Seoul

Two US journalists accused by North Korea of crossing into the country illegally from China and committing "hostile acts" will be tried on criminal charges, North Korea announced Friday.

Laura Ling and Euna Lee, who work for San Francisco-based Current TV, a media venture founded by former Vice President Al Gore, were arrested March 17 near the North Korean border while reporting on refugees living in China.

North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency confirmed their detention late last month, saying indictments were being prepared as an investigation into suspected illegal entry and unspecified "hostile acts" continued.

A dispatch Friday said the investigation had concluded, and the journalists would stand trial "on the basis of the confirmed crimes." It did not say exactly what charges they face or when the trial would take place.

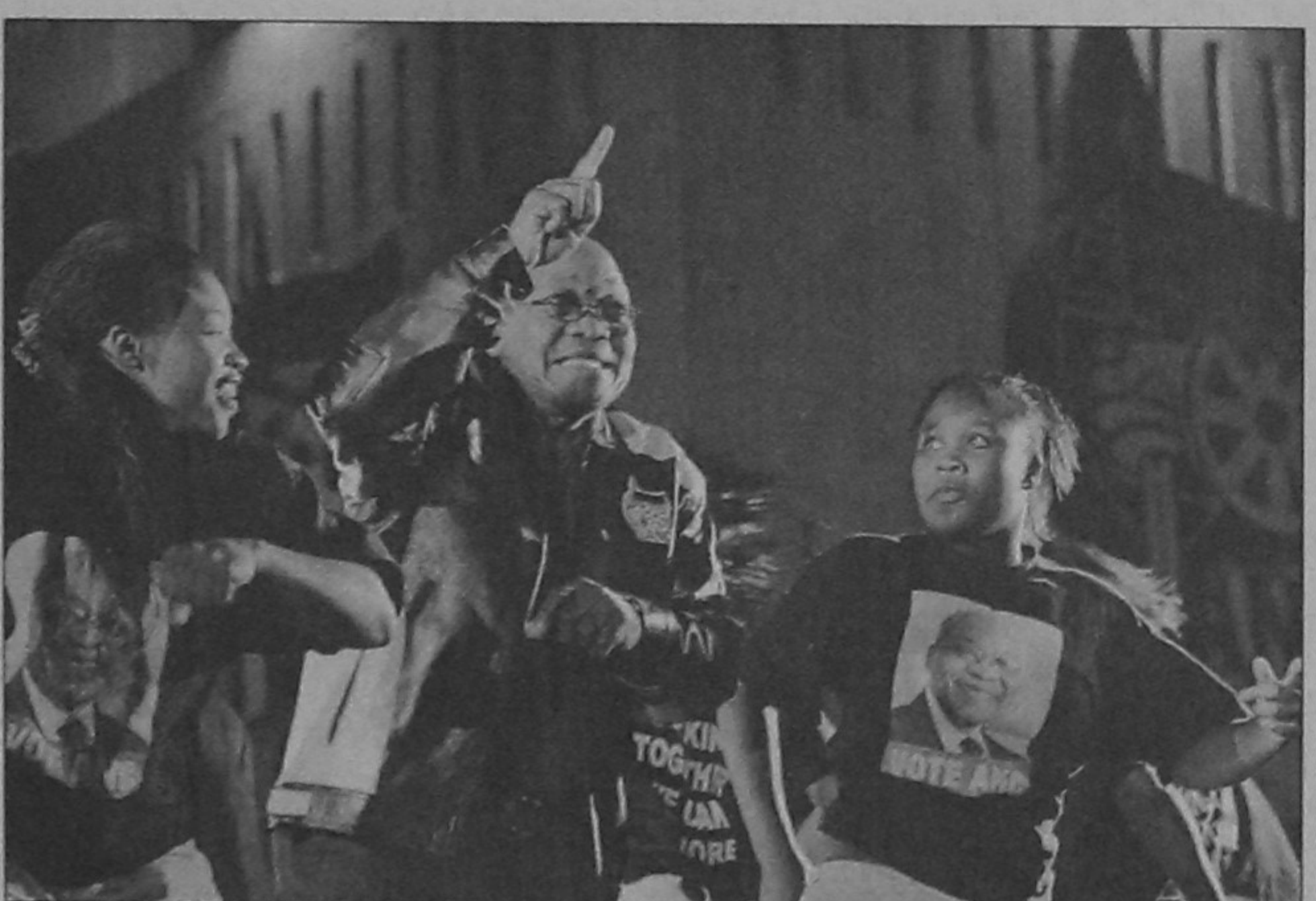


PHOTO: AFP
Presidential candidate Jacob Zuma dances at the street party in Johannesburg on Thursday. Ruling party leader Jacob Zuma said he could smell victory in general elections, addressing 2,000 cheering supporters at the African National Congress party headquarters.

Nepal Army rejects coup reports

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Kathmandu

Warily watching the dogged duel between its chief and the ruling Maoist party and grieving for the death of 13 soldiers in a forest fire, Nepal's beleaguered army was dragged into fresh controversy Friday by a leading media house whose two dailies accused it of planning a coup.

In a sensational front-page report Friday, two of Nepal's leading dailies claimed to have been informed by unnamed 'senior army officers' that the Nepal Army, once the arch enemy of the Maoists, had planned a 'soft coup' to prevent the former guerrillas from establishing their control over the state forces.

According to Nepali daily Kantipur and its sister English publication the Kathmandu

Post, the army plot was to 'arrest' Maoist leaders, ministers and 'other selected individuals', including the former supreme commander of the army, deposed king Gyanendra. The former king was to have been put under 'line arrest' in the remote old palace in the Nagarjuna forest where he retired after being stripped of his crown and vacating the Narayanhity royal palace last year.

(Maoist) Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, (opposition) Nepal Congress president Girija Prasad Koirala and a number of other leaders (would have been) cut off from public, the reports said, presenting almost a mirror-image of the situation that had prevailed in Nepal four years ago after Gyanendra sought to head the government with the support of the army.

US 'torture memos' could not be kept secret: Gates

AFP, Camp Lejeune

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said on Thursday it would have been "unrealistic" to keep secret sensitive memos on harsh interrogations as their eventual disclosure was "inevitable."

In his first public comments on the controversy, Gates indicated he supported the release of the Bush-era memos, despite concerns about protecting CIA officers from prosecution and a possible backlash against US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Gates said a combination of congressional investigations and pending lawsuits meant it would be virtually impossible to keep the information in the memos secret.

"I think pretending that we could hold all of this, and keep

it all a secret, even if we wanted to, I think was pretty unrealistic. So we'll just have to deal with it," he told reporters.

"There is a certain inevitability I believe that much of this will eventually come out and much has already come out," he said during a visit to the Camp Lejeune military base in North Carolina.

The Pentagon chief and former CIA director described the release of the documents as a difficult decision.

"All of us wrestled with it for quite some time," he said.

Gates said his top concern was ensuring CIA officers who he said were following orders would not be prosecuted for carrying out the harsh interrogations during former president George W. Bush's administration.

US, Russia begin talks on new START treaty

AFP, Rome

Russian and US diplomats began talks Friday in Rome aimed at replacing a landmark Cold War-era nuclear arms control treaty, a US embassy spokeswoman said.

It was the first contact between the two sides since US President Barack Obama and his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev pledged last month to seek a successor agreement to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) by the time it expires in December.

The spokeswoman said that at the end of the short "technical" meeting the negotiators had agreed to resume talks in Washington some time in May.

The two teams were headed by Rose Gottemoeller, US Assistant Secretary of State for Verification and Compliance, and Anatoly Antonov, head of the Russian foreign ministry's department for security and disarmament.

Russian foreign ministry spokesman Andrei Nesterenko said last week the task of the Rome meeting was "to prepare for the launch of the negotiation process in accordance with the instructions of Presidents Dmitry Medvedev and Barack Obama."

From then on US and Russian negotiators will meet regularly, and START will also be discussed at a May meeting of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his US

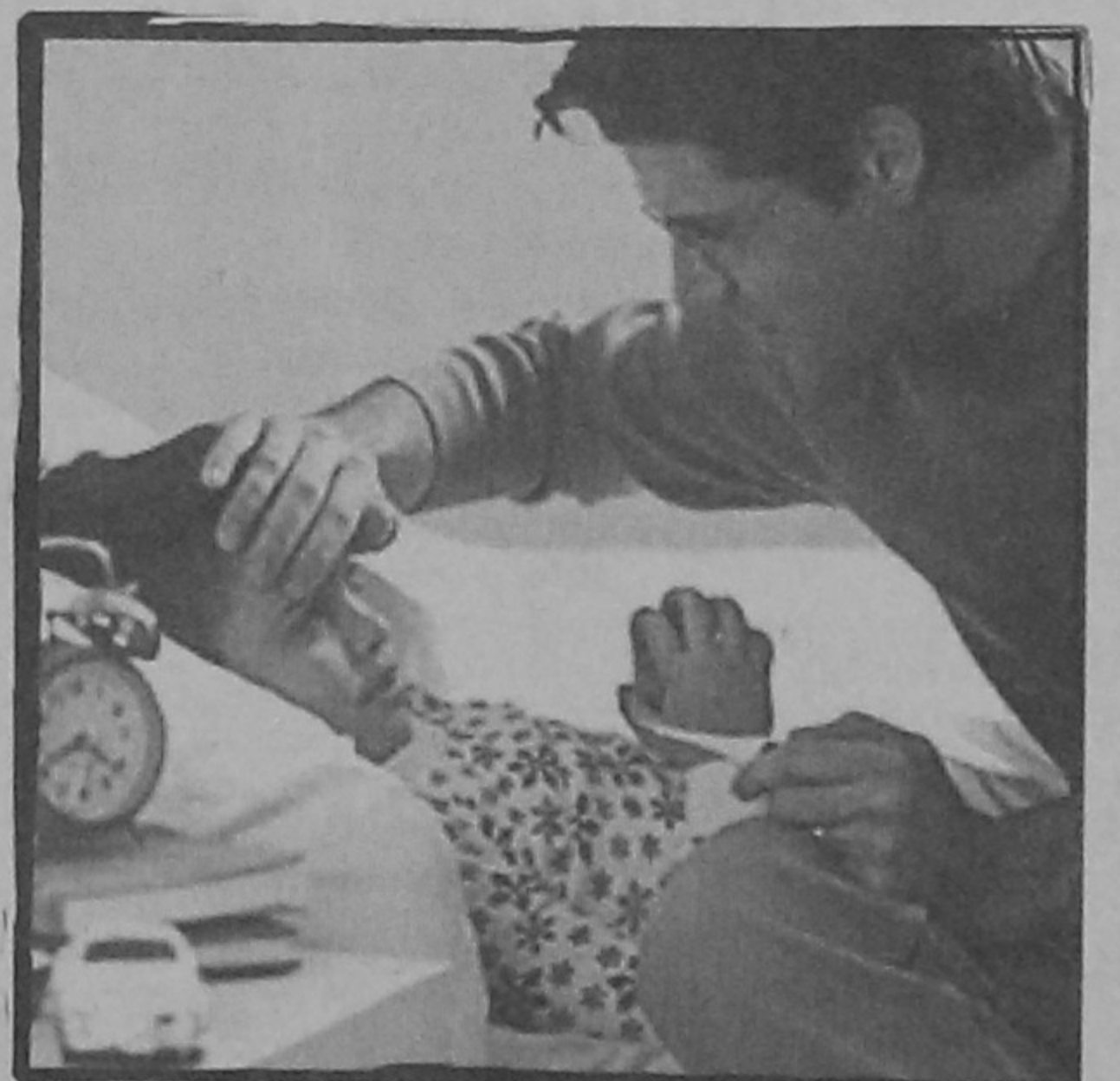
counterpart Hillary Clinton, Nesterenko said.

Signed in 1991, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty placed strict limits on the number of missiles and warheads that Moscow and Washington could have, leading to steep reductions in the nuclear arsenals of both sides.

Talks on replacing the START treaty -- seen as a cornerstone of strategic arms control -- made little progress under Obama's predecessor George W. Bush.

Nesterenko also said Russia welcomed Obama's statement that he would seek Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which would place a broad ban on nuclear explosions for testing purposes.

A stitch in time saves nine



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