

West Bengal mulls ban on Maoists

ANN, Kolkata

The West Bengal government will give "serious thought" to imposing a ban on the Maoists, chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee said Saturday.

The chief minister, who met the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, and the home minister, P Chidambaram, told reporters here that 18 of the state's 241 blocks were affected by Maoist violence. He said the home minister had asked the state government to ban the Maoists and, "we will have to give it a serious thought".

Bhattacharjee said he had informed the Central leaders about the police operation against the Maoists in the Lalgarh area. The joint operation, he said, would take some time to rid the area of the Maoists.

On the Maoists' political links, Bhattacharjee said he knew the Trinamul Congress had "strong links" with the Police Santras Birodhi Public Committee, that is supported by Leftist ultras, and its leader Chatradhara Mahato was part of the Trinamul Congress. Bhattacharjee however gave a clean chit to the Congress party.

The chief minister's assertion evoked a strong reaction from Trinamul chief Miss Mamata Banerjee, who said in Kolkata that her party activists will hit the streets in 48 hours unless Bhattacharjee and Left Front chairman Biram Bose withdraw their allegations linking the Trinamul with the Maoists.

Bhattacharjee said he was expecting more Central funds to meet the devastation caused by cyclone Aila. He said he had submitted a special note to the Central leaders in this connection and the Prime Minister had given a positive response. The Centre has "already given some funds, more funds are likely," he said.

He said the problem of river embankments washed away by the cyclone was serious. Saline water had contaminated the area, and the Sunderbans were under threat. The PM was looking into this and there might be need to take the help of international agencies, he added.

India, Nepal to restart bilateral border work

PTI, Kathmandu

Nepal and India yesterday agreed to reactivate the existing local level bilateral mechanism to resolve the border dispute between the two countries and expedite implementation of past agreements and understandings.

The move to revive the bilateral mechanism was decided during the meeting between visiting Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon and Nepalese Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal, during which they also reflected on the current political situation in the country.

Menon, who arrived here on a two-day visit today, his second to Nepal in the last four months, held marathon meetings with top Nepalese officials, including President Ram Baran Yadav, Prime Minister Nepal and Maoist chief Prachanda.

To deal with the issue of border dispute both sides agreed to reactivate the local level border mechanism so that problems can be addressed as soon as they emerge.

Prime Minister's Foreign Affairs Advisor Rajan Bhattacharjee told reporters that Menon extended an invitation to Kumar Madhav to visit India, dates for which are being worked out and conveyed Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's "good wishes" to his Nepalese counterpart.

By setting up a bilateral mechanism on border issues, the two countries hope to take out the sting from a campaign being run by the former ruling Maoist party, which has alleged that India has encroached upon Nepalese territories in Dang district.

Pak citizens' militia kills seven Taliban

AP, Islamabad

A citizens' militia trying to drive out the Taliban killed seven militants in a two-hour firefight in Pakistan's troubled northwest, police said yesterday.

Ejaz Ahmed, police chief in the Upper Dir region, said another militant was injured in the fighting late Saturday night near the village of Patrak, about seven kilometres east of Dir Khas, the region's main town and district headquarters.

Several civilian militias, known as lashkars, have emerged in Upper Dir since a suicide bombing on a mosque two weeks ago that was blamed on the Taliban killed at least 33 people. The militias carry out patrols and have been pursuing remnants of Taliban who had tried to expand their influence into the area.

Ahmed said scores of militants have been trapped and killed by the militias in several villages, with police cutting off escape routes. The Taliban who were killed Saturday had been trying to flee when they came across the militiamen and opened fire, he said.

"Due to heavy losses, militants have been attempting to escape the area under cover of dark, and last night's incident was one such attempt," Ahmed said. He said no civilians were killed in the fighting.

The report could not immediately be confirmed due to military restrictions on media access to the area.

In the most striking example of growing anti-Taliban sentiment, up to 1,600 tribesmen in Upper Dir cleared three villages of Taliban fighters two weeks ago, killing at least six militants.

There were no immediate reports on fresh fighting in the nearby South Waziristan tribal area, where shelling and bombing of suspected militant targets has been increased and ground troops have been moving into position in the past week since the government announced the military would go after Pakistan's Taliban commander, Baitullah Mehsud.

Protests in China over youth's death

AP, Beijing

Hundreds of baton-wielding police yesterday dispersed protesters and cordoned off a city hotel in central China after a young man's mysterious death sparked unrest, a local official and a witness said.

More than 200 people were injured in the clashes between police and residents outside the hotel in Hubei province's Shishou city, according to a Hong Kong-based rights group, the Information Center for Human Rights and Democracy.

Hundreds had been angered by the death of 24-year-old Tu Yuangao, who was found dead Wednesday evening in front of the Yonglong hotel.

Tu's relatives believe he was killed by the hotel boss, who is related to the mayor, the rights group said.

Discontent with local officials and police in China often leads to mass protests, which can gather size and force with remarkable speed. Mild frustration can turn into fury within minutes.

A local resident surnamed Chen said protesters started gathering outside the hotel Friday and by late Saturday had clashed five or six times with police, smashing six police vans and fire trucks. Chen said thousands of armed police forces with shields and batons were deployed in the area.

The crowd started dispersing early Sunday, but security was tight, he said.

"The area around the hotel is still cordoned off by hundreds of police with batons," Chen said in a telephone interview Sunday.



PHOTO: AFP
Iraqi men dig through the wreckage from a truck bomb that exploded the day before in the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk yesterday. The truck bomb killed 64 people near the Iraqi oil city of Kirkuk on June 20, the country's bloodiest attack in 15 months – just 10 days before US troops are due to quit urban areas.

Death toll in Kirkuk bombing up to 72

Relatives search for bodies amidst rubble

AFP, Taza

Residents of the town hit by Iraq's bloodiest attack in 16 months searched for their loved ones yesterday after a massive truck bombing killed 72 people and destroyed dozens of houses.

Saturday's attack in the predominantly Shiite Turkmen town of Taza Kharmatu, 30 kilometres south of the northern oil hub of Kirkuk, was the latest bloody bombing in the runup to the planned pullout of US troops from Iraqi towns and cities.

As rescue efforts continued, Iraqi officials announced that insurgents had killed seven police over the past two days in the two most populous cities of Baghdad and Mosul.

"The toll from the explosion yesterday in Taza is 72 dead," said Sarhad Qadir, the top policeman for Kirkuk's outskirts, who added that more than 200 people had been wounded.

A doctor at the Kirkuk mortuary, Ibrahim Mohammed Jassim, confirmed the death toll and added: "It is likely that the toll will increase because search operations have not yet concluded."

The suicide attack, which left a deep crater in the ground, has been blamed on Al-Qaeda.

"Taza was struck by an attack that destroyed

our families, our lives, our homes," said 58-year-old local resident Majid Shaker. "This is the true face of terrorism – attacking innocents in their homes."

Iraqi emergency services and US soldiers helped residents sift through the rubble in their quest to find survivors of about 80 houses levelled by the blast.

The International Committee of the Red Cross sent a tonne of medical equipment to Kirkuk hospital, the agency's Iraq spokeswoman Dibeh Fakhr said, while the US military said it had contributed generator lights and water to the rescue effort.

"Most of the victims were children, the elderly or women, who all represent easy targets for terrorists," provincial governor Abdel Rahman Mustafa told AFP. "They want to plant the seeds of sectarian division among the Iraqi people."

Saturday's attack was the bloodiest since two mentally impaired women were used by Al-Qaeda as unwitting bombers in Baghdad pet markets on February 1, 2008, in twin attacks that killed 98 people.

The Taza bombing comes ahead of a June 30 deadline for US troops to pull back from Iraq's built-up areas ahead of a complete pullout from the country by the end of 2011.



PHOTO: AFP
Hindu pilgrims begin their journey from Baltal Base Camp to Srinagar's Amarnath Cave Shrine at 12,729 ft altitude yesterday. The annual pilgrimage began on June 15 and so far nearly 50,000 people have visited the place of worship, where a large icicle is revered as an incarnation of Lord Shiva.

Pakistan can isolate extremists: Obama

AFP, Islamabad

US President Barack Obama said in an interview yesterday he was confident Pakistan can "isolate extremists" and that the United States had no plans to send troops to the insurgency-hit country.

"I have confidence in the Pakistani people and the Pakistani state in resolving differences through a democratic process and to isolate extremists," he said in a pre-recorded interview broadcast Sunday by Dawn

Newstvision.

Pakistani security forces launched an offensive to dislodge Taliban guerrillas from three northwest districts around Swat valley in late April, after militants floated a peace deal and thrust towards the capital Islamabad.

The US administration, which has put nuclear-armed Pakistan at the heart of its strategy to battle Al-Qaeda, has welcomed the Swat offensive.

Obama said the United States

would support the Pakistani government and military in its anti-militant efforts.

"There's been a decision that's made that we support that the Pakistani military and the Pakistani government will not stand by idly as extremists attempt to disrupt the country."

Such regions are wracked by violence and are known as a hub for Taliban and Al-Qaeda rebels who fled across the border to escape the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001.

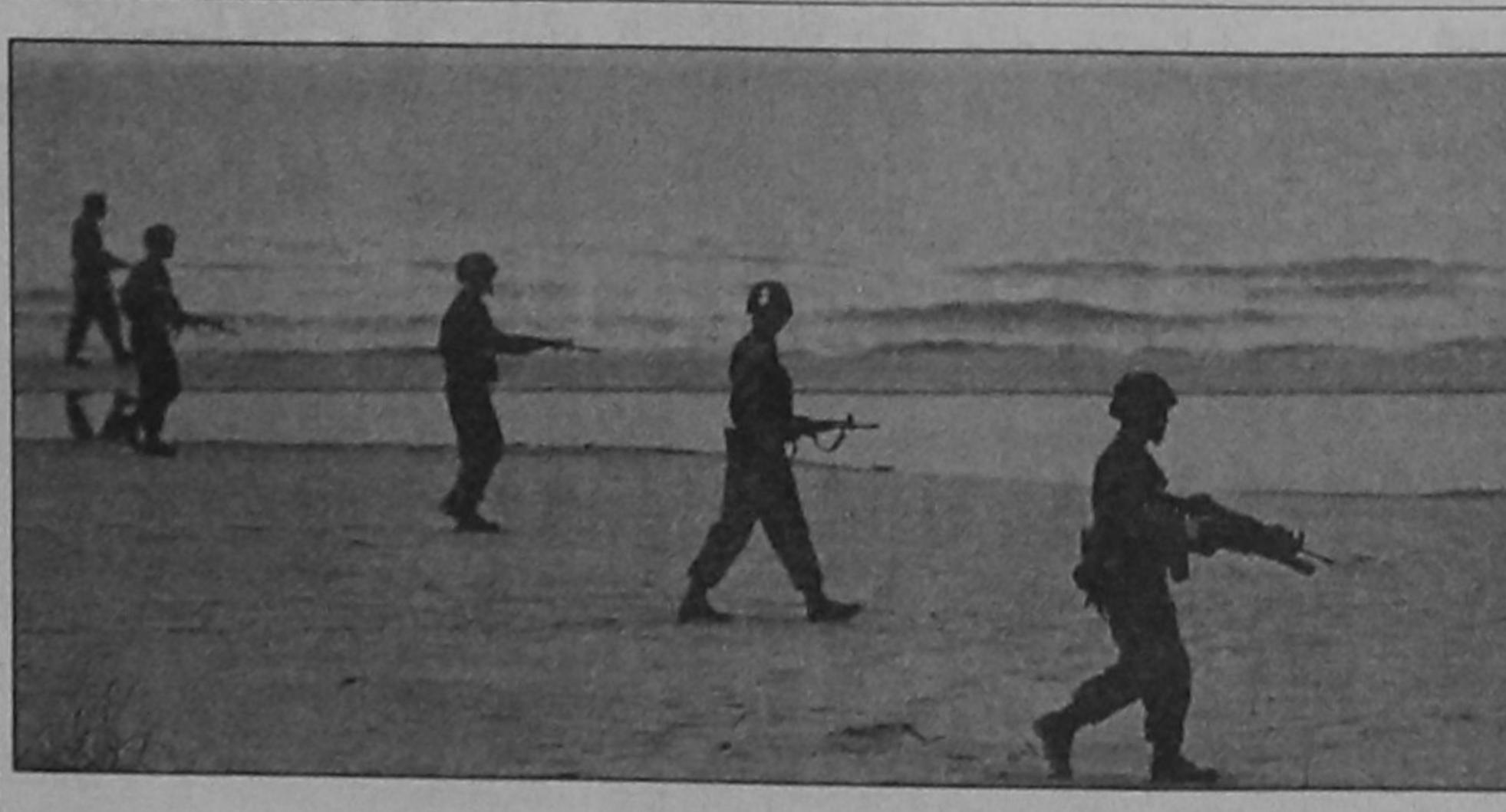


PHOTO: AFP
South Korean army troops patrol the eastern coastal areas bordering North Korea at predawn hours in Goseong yesterday. North Korea has accused US President Barack Obama of plotting a nuclear war on the communist nation by reaffirming the US security assurance for South Korea.

2 Nato soldiers killed in attack in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Two soldiers from the NATO-led coalition were killed and six others wounded yesterday in an attack on the main military base for US-led forces in Afghanistan, the force said.

It was not immediately clear if any Afghan civilians living nearby were harmed as a result of the assault, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said in a statement.

The casualties were caused during "an indirect fire attack on Bagram Air Field this morning," it said, without giving further details but using a term that generally refers to rocket-propelled grenade or mortar attacks.

ISAF does not release the nationality of their casualties as a matter of policy, leaving the job for their home countries.

"On behalf of ISAF, I share our grief and extend our support to the loved ones of these service members," said ISAF spokesman Brigadier-General Richard Blanchette.

Maoists kill 11 police in India

AFP, Raipur

At least 11 special police personnel were killed and 10 injured in a landmine blast triggered overnight by suspected Maoist rebels in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh, police said yesterday.

The attack took place late Saturday when a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) team was patrolling the Pushpav Road area, 500 kilometres (310 miles) from the state capital Raipur and a hotbed of rebel activity.

TG Landkumer, a senior police officer in the state, told AFP the CRPF men had gone to the area to investigate reports that suspected Maoists had blown up some vehicles ferrying workers engaged in road construction.

"The men were on their way back when their vehicle ran over a landmine," Landkumer said.

India's Maoists say they are fighting for the rights of neglected tribal people and landless farmers.

US journalist escapes Taliban captivity

AP, Kabul

A New York Times reporter known for making investigative trips deep inside dangerous conflict zones escaped from militant captors after more than seven months in captivity in Afghanistan and Pakistan by climbing over a wall, the news paper said Saturday.

David S Rohde, 41, was abducted Nov. 10 along with an Afghan reporter colleague and a driver south of the Afghan capital, Kabul. He had been traveling through Logar province to interview a Taliban commander, but was apparently intercepted and taken by other militants on the way.

The Times reported that Rohde and Afghan reporter Tahir Ludin, 35, on Friday climbed over the wall of a compound where they were held captive in the North Waziristan region of Pakistan.

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Lanka steps up hunt for rebel remnants

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka is pouring more troops into former rebel-held areas in the east of the island to hunt down remnants of the Tamil Tigers following their defeat in the north, a state-run

newspaper said yesterday.

The military was boosting its strength in the east – around the towns of Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Ampara – to where some guerrillas are thought to have fled, the Sunday Observer said.

The main concern of the army is to nab the remaining Tiger cadres now moving in the Eastern Province," the paper said. "The Sri Lanka army is now taking measures to increase the strength in the east."

NEWS IN BRIEF

16 die in China factory blast

AFP, BEIJING: At least 16 people died and 43 were injured yesterday in a factory explosion in eastern China's Anhui province, a police source and state media said.

The explosion occurred at 03:17 am (1917 GMT) in the workshop of a privately owned factory that produces and processes quartz sand in the district of Fengyang, the official Xinhua news agency reported, citing local authorities.

Four injured in Taiwan storm

AFP, TAIPEI: Four people were injured yesterday as tropical storm Linfa moved along the Taiwan Strait towards the Chinese mainland, bringing strong winds and torrential rain, officials said.

Two motorcyclists were hurt in Taiwan's southern Tainan city when they were hit by an uprooted tree, the National Fire Agency said. Meanwhile two Taoist monks were hurt by a collapsed wall in Penghu, an island in the middle of the Strait, as they chanted during a funeral ceremony.

Turkish trawlers held in Algeria

AFP, ALGIERS: Algerian authorities said yesterday they have detained three Turkish trawlers and one Algerian vessel for illegally fishing more than 200 tonnes of tuna.

The four vessels were intercepted after the Turkish trawlers transferred the living tuna to the Algerian vessel, Algeria's fishing and sea resources department said, quoted by the official APS news agency. The three Turkish vessels were being held at the port of Annaba and the Algerian ship had been taken to Bouharoune, west of Algiers.

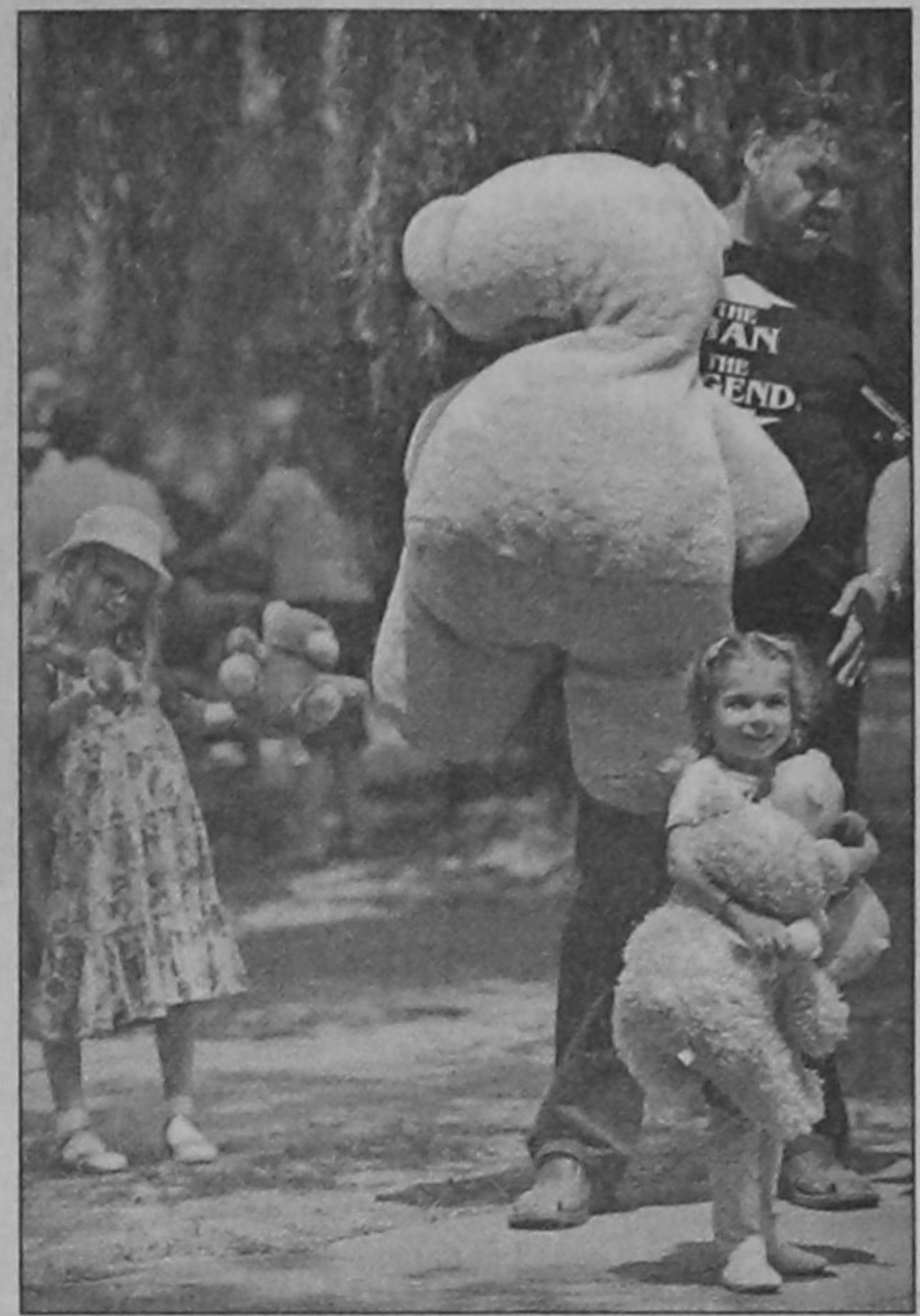


PHOTO: AFP
People hold teddy bears during a picnic of teddy bears at Sofia Zoo yesterday. Sofia Zoo joined a European campaign to establish a world record for the Guinness Book of Records for the most teddy bears ever gathered in a zoo in one day.

Nigerian rebels attack two Shell oil pipelines

AFP, LAGOS: Nigerian militant group, MEND, said it attacked two oil pipelines belonging to Anglo-Dutch energy giant Shell in the southern Rivers state yesterday.

Rebel attacks have already cut Nigeria's oil production by about a quarter over the past three years. The Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) said in a statement it had "pounded" a Shell pipeline at Adamakiri at 2:30 am (0130 GMT) and another at Kula shortly after.

Suu Kyi's supporters jailed for pagoda prayers

AFP, YANGON: Myanmar has jailed two supporters of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi for one and a half years for insulting religion after they prayed at a pagoda for her release, her party said yesterday.

Chit Pe and Aung Saw Wai, members of the detained Nobel laureate's National League for Democracy (NLD) party, were each sentenced last week, according to lawyer and NLD spokesman Nyan Win. "They were sentenced... under the act of insulting religion," Nyan Win said.

Two reformist journalists arrested in Iran

AFP, TEHRAN: Two prominent Iranian journalists were arrested following opposition protests on Saturday, a colleague said, as Tehran continued with a crackdown on reformist leaders.