

BAGHDAD BLASTS Al-Qaeda claims responsibility

AP, Baghdad

al-Qaeda's umbrella group in Iraq has claimed responsibility for the coordinated Baghdad bombings that killed 127 people and wounded over 500 this week.

The group, known as the Islamic State of Iraq, said in a statement posted early yesterday on the Internet that the strikes in the Iraqi capital targeted the "bastions of evil and dens of apostates."

It also warns the group is "determined to uproot the pillars of this government" in Iraq and says "the list of targets has no end."

The blasts on Tuesday were the third major strike on government sites in Baghdad since August. The same group has claimed responsibility for the two previous massive bombings.

The authenticity of the statement could not be independently confirmed.

Taliban warn S Korea on betrayal

AFP, Kabul

The Taliban yesterday accused South Korea of breaking a promise not to send troops to Afghanistan after it released 19 Korean hostages two years ago, warning its forces to face the consequences.

Seoul decided this week to deploy 350 troops to Afghanistan next July -- two years after it pulled out -- a strong contingent of military engineers and medics in return for the release of Korean hostages.

At the time, South Korea said the pullout was already scheduled.

"They had promised to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan and committed never to send soldiers to the country in future," the Taliban said in a statement written in English and emailed to journalists.

3 detained in China for tainted milk powder

AFP, Beijing

Police in China have detained three people for selling more than five tonnes of chemical-tainted milk powder, state media said yesterday, in a case echoing last year's massive contaminated dairy scandal.

The report by Xinhua news agency said none of the milk powder, which was contaminated by the industrial chemical melamine, had reached stores.

It said the three people were detained on December 2 in the north-western province of Shaanxi on suspicion of "producing and selling toxic food".

Kuwaiti parliament fails to meet on stateless rights

AFP, Kuwait City

Kuwait's parliament failed yesterday to hold a special session to resolve the humanitarian issue of stateless Arabs, with some MPs accusing the government of deliberately preventing the meeting.

A quorum could not be met, as only 26 MPs and five ministers showed up, two short of the number required. Parliament has 49 elected MPs and 16 cabinet ministers.

US holds 11 Iranian including diplomat

AFP, Tehran

Iranian media published a list yesterday of 11 Iranians, including a truck driver, a former diplomat and a nuclear scientist, who it claims are being held in the United States or other countries.

The Mehr news agency said the foreign ministry is "vigorously" pursuing diplomatic means to obtain the release of the Iranians, three of whom have allegedly been detained in countries outside the United States on Washington's request.

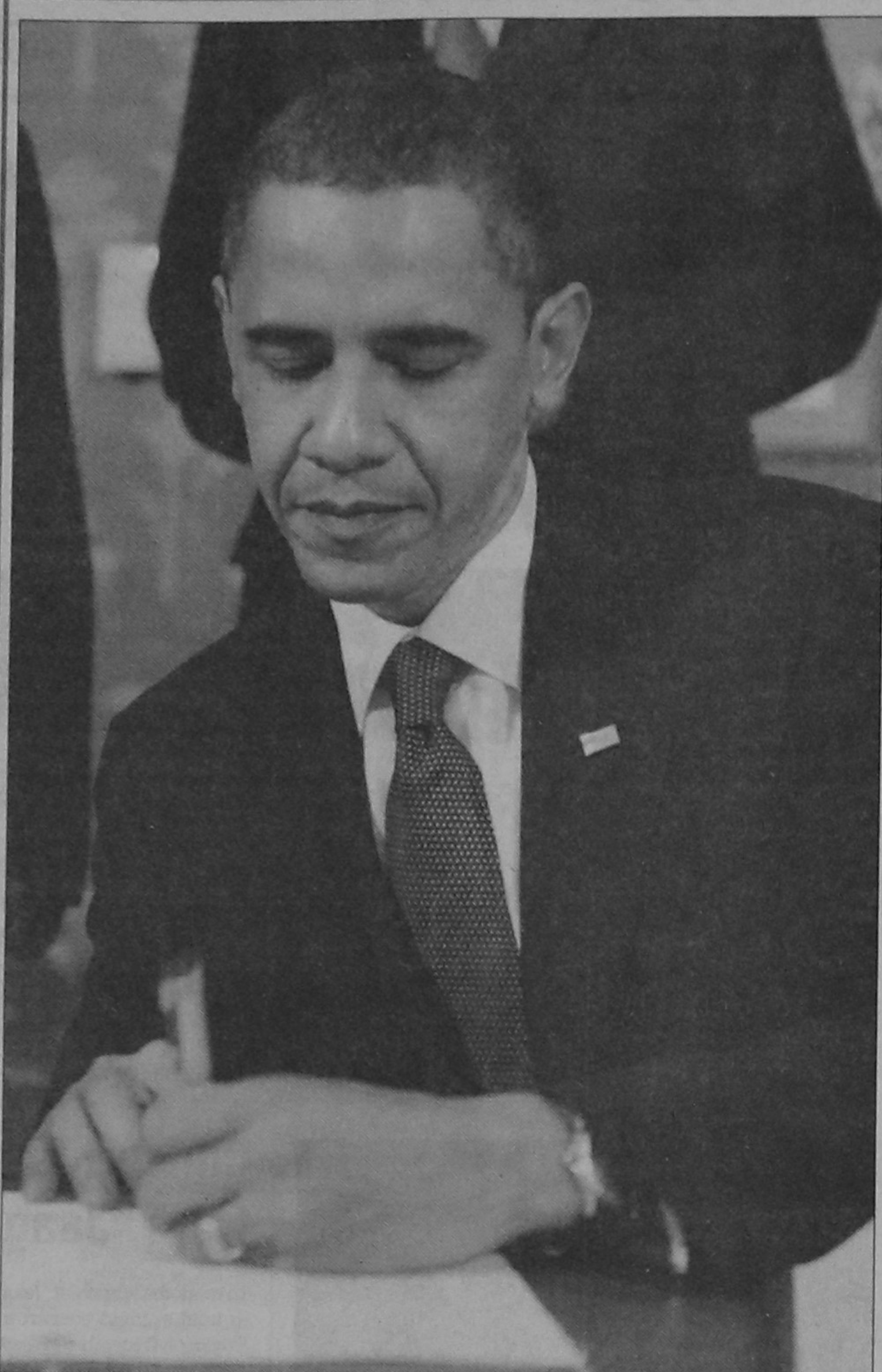


PHOTO: AFP

US President Barack Obama signs documents during the Nobel Prize signing ceremony at the Norwegian Nobel Institute in Oslo yesterday. "I have no doubt there are others who may be more deserving," the humble US President said in a joint press conference with Norwegian Prime Minister, adding that he had been surprised to be named as the prize winner in October.

Peace more important than Nobel Prize

Says Obama while receiving it

AFP, Oslo

US President Barack Obama yesterday accepted the Nobel Peace Prize, paying tribute to activists who have taken on governments around the world while uncomfortably acknowledging his role as a leader at war.

Obama said he received the award with "great humility" and acknowledged the "controversy" saying that next to "some of the giants of history who have received this prize my accomplishments are slight."

President Obama on Thursday admitted others may be more deserving of the Nobel Peace Prize, but vowed to use the honour to work for world security.

Obama, who has been president for less than 11 months, struck a humble note before receiving the award that puts him alongside the likes of Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King.

"I have no doubt there are others who may be more deserving," Obama said, underlining controversy surrounding the Nobel committee's decision while going on to defend his strategy to escalate the Afghan war.

Norway laid on a day of pageantry for Obama, including an investiture ceremony and a torchlight parade, protected by barricades, helicopters and up to 2,500 police in the country's most elaborate security operation.

Asked about claims he does not merit the award, Obama told a press conference with Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg that he would use the prize to bolster his pro-engagement foreign policy, and to work for lasting world peace.

"The goal is not to win a popularity contest or to get an award, even one as prestigious as the Nobel peace prize. The goal has been to advance America's interests," he said.

"If I am successful in those tasks, then hopefully some of the criticism will subside, but that is not really my concern."

"If I am not successful, then all the praise and the awards in the world won't disguise that fact."

The Nobel committee shocked the world by naming Obama for the prize, but said he had nurtured a new era of engagement and multilateralism in US foreign policy that deserved to be recognised and encouraged.

Obama paid tribute to anti-government demonstrators in Iran, Myanmar and Zimbabwe

and said the United States would always stand on the side of those who sought freedom.

"We will bear witness to the quiet dignity of reformers like Aung Sang Suu Kyi; to the bravery of Zimbabweans who cast their ballots in the face of beatings; to the hundreds of thousands who have marched silently through the streets of Iran," Obama said.

"It is telling that the leaders of these governments fear the aspirations of their own people more than the power of any other nation."

"And it is the responsibility of all free people and free nations to make clear to these movements that hope and history are on their side."

Responding to the international controversy over the award, the chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, Thorbjørn Jagland, told the prize ceremony however "history can tell us a great deal about lost opportunities."

"It is now, today, that we have the opportunity to support President Obama's ideas. This year's prize is indeed a call to action for all of us."

Obama is only the third sitting president to win the prize and he has been closely questioned about his credentials in Oslo, particularly after his decision to send 30,000 extra troops to Afghanistan.

He has admitted the timing of the award is an awkward coincidence.

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The Nobel committee praised Obama for nurturing a new era of engagement and multilateralism in US foreign policy when it made its shock announcement in October.

Obama's first stop after landing in Oslo at dawn was to sign the guest book at the Norwegian Nobel Institute.

He marvelled at how the award of the 1964 Nobel peace prize had galvanized the civil rights fight of Martin Luther King, who he said helped pave the way for him to become the first African American president.

Too early to give Obama Nobel: Dalai

ANI, London

Exiled Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, has said that giving the Nobel Peace Prize to US President Barack is "a little early".

Dalai Lama told Sky News, "I think if you are realistic, it may have been a little early but it doesn't matter, I know Obama is a very able person."

"Sometimes these individual persons rely on different advice from different people so like former President Bush junior, as a human being I really love him, really wonderful person, very honest, very truthful. But I think due to his advisers' views, some of his policies have been a disaster."

US, N Korea agree to resume nuke talks

AFP, Seoul

The United States and North Korea have a "common understanding" on the need to resume stalled nuclear disarmament negotiations, US envoy Stephen Bosworth said yesterday after a visit to Pyongyang.

But Bosworth said it was unclear when the North would return to the six-party forum, which it quit in April, a month before staging its second nuclear test.

His three-day visit was the first official contact between Washington and Pyongyang since President Barack Obama took office in January, pledging direct diplomacy with America's adversaries.

Philippine rebels abduct 75 civilians

Lawmakers' storm Congress over martial law

AFP, Manila, Prosperidad

Tribal gunmen raided a school in the violence-ravaged southern Philippines yesterday and abducted at least 75 people, many of them children, police said.

The mass kidnappings continued a terrifying outbreak of crimes for the Mindanao region in recent weeks, following the beheading of a logging company employee on Wednesday and a political massacre that left 57 people dead.

Fifteen armed members of the Manobo tribe attacked the New Maasim Elementary School in Agusan del Sur province on Mindanao island as children were attending a morning flag ceremony, the provincial police said in a statement.

Seventeen of the children and one teacher were freed unharmed a few hours later, the statement said. Meanwhile, Philippine lawmakers were locked in a heated debate yesterday over President Gloria Arroyo's controversial martial law to quell an alleged rebellion by a powerful clan accused of a political massacre.

Members of both houses of Congress submitted a motion to overturn what they see as the "unconstitutional" imposition of military rule in the southern province of Maguindanao but concede they are unlikely to revoke the law.

Arroyo's critics have voiced fears that she may expand martial law to cover the whole country in a bid to prolong her six-year term beyond next

year. If both houses sit together, Congress can revoke or extend martial law by a simple majority vote.

"While we concede that we may not have the numbers sufficient to revoke the martial law resolution, this Senate resolution still sends a strong signal to the nation that an overwhelming majority of the Senate rejects the proclamation as being contrary to law," Senator Francis Pangilinan said.

Arroyo last week placed Maguindanao under military control for up to 60 days after members of the powerful Ampatuan clan allegedly threatened to attack if its leaders were arrested for a November massacre of 57 people.

HR watchdog wants

FROM PAGE 1
Bangladesh: the role of National Human Rights Commission, law enforcement agencies and NGOs, organised by the NHRC to mark the World Human Rights Day.

Law Minister Shafique Ahmed, who spoke at the seminar as chief guest, said the government would appoint five members of the commission within a month, and provide logistic and other facilities to make it a vibrant entity.

The NHCR Ordinance was promulgated in 2007 during the caretaker government's tenure, and a three-member commission was formed last year. But two members resigned.

Amirul Kabir said the commission issued letters to the authorities concerned late in October on the killing of a person -- Bappy -- allegedly by law enforcement agency personnel, and some other similar allegations, but it is yet to get any response.

It is unfortunate that sometimes members of law enforcement agencies violate human rights, he said. "They have a pivotal role in protecting rights. So, the image of these agencies as a

whole should not be tarnished by a few."

The NHRC, which now has only nine staff, requested the government on December 2 last year to raise the number to 62, said its chairman.

Asked if the commission has turned into an ineffective organisation, he said, "No, we are working with whatever resources we have."

Of the 80 complaints received so far, the commission has already disposed of 60, Kabir said.

The law minister said the NHRC would be fully operative with the appointment of all members of the commission. Of them, one would be a full member, one a woman member and one would be from the indigenous community.

Asked why the government is taking so long to complete the task, he said it is not exactly so. "The law (concerned) had to be changed in the middle this year."

Others who spoke at the seminar included UNDP Resident Representative Renata Lok Dessallien and Law Commission Member M Shah Alam.

Chinese kin suspected over needle in girl's brain

AFP, Beijing

Doctors in south-western China have removed a needle from the brain of an 11-year-old girl, believed inserted after birth in an attempted murder by relatives who had wanted a boy, a report said yesterday.

Rusted needle shards were detected by doctors in August after fruitless attempts by the girl's mother over the years to find the cause of an apparent mental disability, the Sichuan Online news website reported.

The girl, identified as "Ping Ping", did not begin walking or talking until she was six, currently has the intelligence level of a three-year-old, and has suffered for years from unexplained fevers, it said.

She was said to be recovering from the operation at a hospital in Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province.

The child's mother, Yang Xiaohui, said she suspected that relatives had tried to kill the child shortly after birth.

Under China's "one child" family planning policy, the traditional cultural and economic preference for boys remains strong, especially in the vast and poor countryside.

Amnesty condemns Iranian rights abuses'

BBC ONLINE

Human rights in Iran are as poor as at any time over the past 20 years, according to a report from campaign group Amnesty International.

The report details "patterns of abuse" by the regime before and after disputed presidential elections in June.

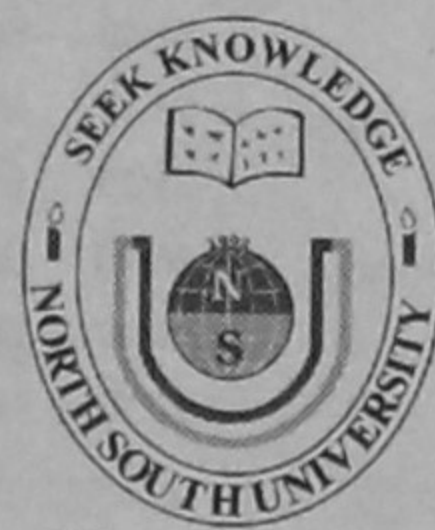
One man quoted in the report said he had been beaten and burned with cigarettes. Another said he was threatened with rape.

Iran has dismissed previous criticism of its human rights record.



PHOTO: AFP

An Afghan girl looks on at unseen US soldiers from first Battalion, 10th Mountain division on patrol in Lahodag Kunar yesterday. US General David Petraeus, head of US Central Command, who masterminded a troop surge in Iraq said on Wednesday that Afghanistan was "no more hopeless" than Iraq before the 2007 campaign there.



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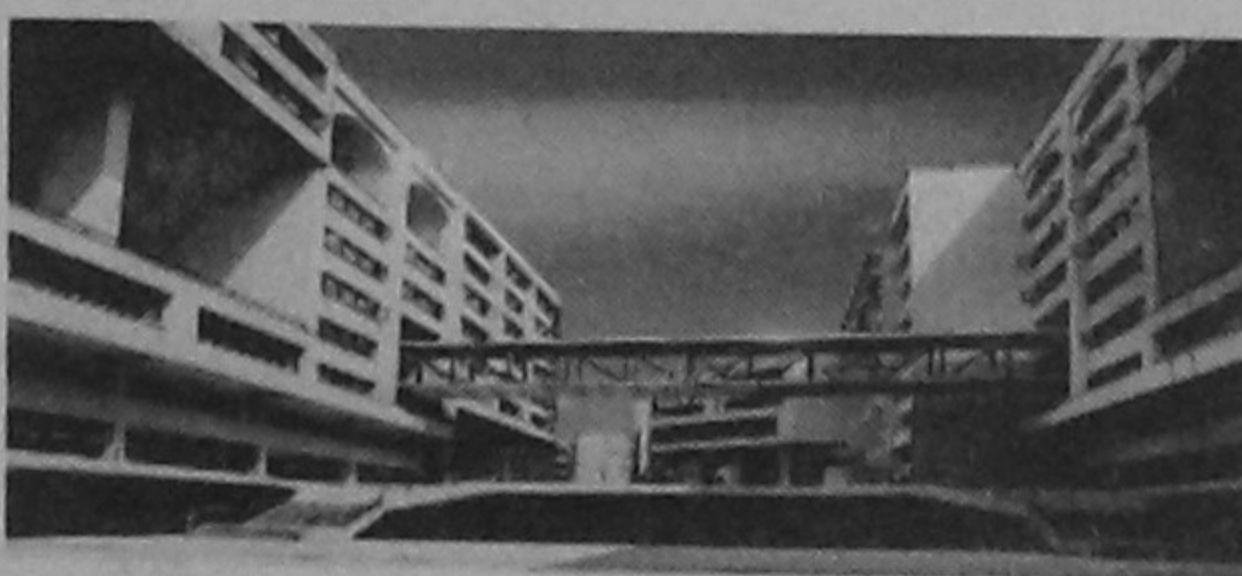
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