

Azeris square up to a loser's peace

The extension to the ceasefire with the Armenians in Nagorny Karabakh undermines Azerbaijan's chances of recovering control over the region, writes Hugh Pope in Baku

THE longest ceasefire yet in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict has been extended indefinitely, Azerbaijan's chief negotiator with Armenia said yesterday, raising hopes that the killing may be at an end in the bloody conflict spawned by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"We [the Defence Ministers of Azerbaijan, Armenia and the military leader of Nagorny Karabakh Armenian forces] have now all signed. There are very serious obligations for a ceasefire until the signing of an overall political settlement... there is no time-frame. It could be open-ended," said Vefa Gulizade, foreign-affairs adviser to Azerbaijan's President, Geidar Aliyev.

A low-key public announcement to this effect was expected yesterday in the Azeri capital, Baku. But nobody was dancing in the humid boulevards of the city.

The extension of the *de facto* ceasefire, agreed in Moscow on 16 May, leaves 20 per cent of Azerbaijan under Armenian occupation and 1 million Azeris displaced. They have nothing to console them but memories of defeat, lost homes, and dead relatives.

President Aliyev has quietly put aside his public promise to retake all Armenian-occupied territory. An offensive in January resulted in thousands of young, ill-trained Azeri recruits being killed and injured for a small territorial gain.

Armenian counter-attacks then brought Armenian forces within 20 miles of Yevlakh, and the main railway line, connecting east and west Azerbaijan.

The two-month old ceasefire has suffered minor

violations. But Western diplomats are unusually optimistic that the parties are now seeking to end six years of warfare that has killed more than 15,000 people and left both Armenia and Azerbaijan poor and war-weary.

"I've lost count of ceasefires. But this one seems a blissful lull, a general kind of phenomenon on both sides," said Mahmoud Said, the United Nations representative in Baku.

Armenia, and the 100,000 determined Armenians of Nagorny Karabakh, may also feel that little more can be gained by force. The small mountainous enclave is still theoretically a part of Azerbaijan. But the enclave's

30,000 Azeri residents have been expelled and it is firmly joined by conquered territory to Armenia proper. Armenian military incursions deeper into Azeri territory have proved militarily unrewarding. The human cost is rising. During an Armenian incursion in April, their casualty rate was as heavy as that of the disorganised Azeri forces. For the first time in the war, press-gangs forced young men to the front line from Armenia itself.

Talks are continuing in Moscow on an overall resolution of the conflict. The peace mediators aim to harmonise a Russian plan with one favoured by Azerbaijan, the United States, Britain and

Turkey. These countries insist that Russians should not be a majority in any eventual buffer force. They want also the deployment of international monitors from the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE).

"As far as I can see, there is no way the Armenians and the Azeris can achieve a political solution. Too much divides them," said one international observer. He said that the defeated Azeris would not admit the loss of their territory, but that the victorious Armenians would not allow Azerbaijan to control it again, despite UN Security Council resolutions supporting Baku.

Now that a ceasefire is in place, Azeri and Armenian

negotiators are talking on the old Soviet inter-republic government telephone network, and the Armenians from Nagorny Karabakh are included formally in the talks, Russia will probably determine whether armed conflict flares up again.

The Azeris and most Western diplomats in Baku believe that Russian hardliners, led by the Defence Minister, Pavel Grachev, have encouraged Armenian attacks on Azerbaijan, which is still struggling to remain independent of Moscow. Azerbaijan has announced that it will soon sign a big oil-production agreement with a Western consortium, led by British Petroleum.

But some Western diplomats in Baku believe that Moscow may allow peace to become established, due to pressure from the West, economic interests and even strategic worries. Most diplomats expect a no-war, no-peace situation between Azerbaijan and Armenia, similar to that on divided Cyprus.

The truth is that even if Azeris were able to return to their homes in Agdam, Kelbedjar and Fuzuli, let alone their old villages inside Nagorny Karabakh, nothing can ever be the same again. Sources report that the Armenians have systematically looted, blown up and levelled to the ground all the Azeri settlements.



Map: Robert Brooks

'Subversive' Muslim sect heads for ban

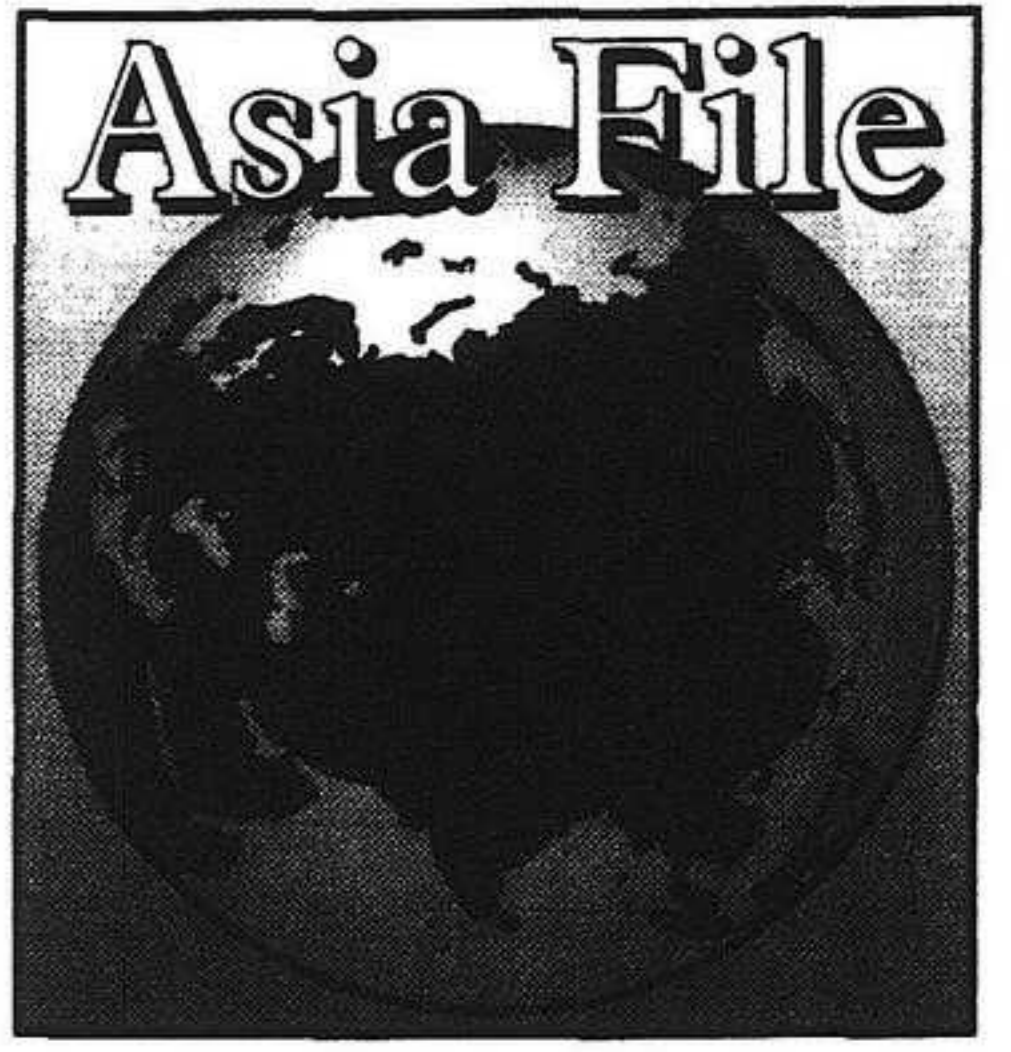
THE growth of al-Arqam, a mystical sect which expects a Muslim messiah to arise soon in Uzbekistan and lead Islam into a new age, has south-east Asian governments worried. The most concerned is Malaysia, which says religious-affairs ministers from the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) will consider banning the movement when they meet next week.

Since its foundation in 1968, al-Arqam has swelled to 100,000 members in Malaysia and spread to most countries in Asean. Orthodox Muslims are scandalised by its teachings, particularly the claim of its charismatic leader, Ashaari Muhammad, to have had a dialogue with the Prophet Muhammad. The Malaysian authorities, who banned the group's activities in government offices in 1991, have asked a council of religious scholars whether it should be stopped from propagating its views, a move also being considered in Indonesia. Brunei outlawed the sect some time ago, while Singapore recently deported Mr Ashaari.

Rapidly modernising Asean governments are certainly disturbed by al-Arqam, whose male followers wear distinctive robes and turbans, and in particular by their adulation of Mr Ashaari. Proving the movement is subversive, as alleged by the Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohammed, is less easy.

Kuala Lumpur first expressed alarm when 19 Malaysians belonging to al-Arqam were arrested at a fundamentalist demonstration in Cairo. Dr Mahathir has accused civil servants, among whom the sect is said to have about 7,000 adherents, of passing on classified information to al-Arqam, and a former member who was in the Malaysian navy says Mr Ashaari asked him to lead a coup in 1986. From his new base in a five-star hotel in the Thai resort of Chiang Mai, the cult leader denies that claim. Malaysia's government-funded Islamic Centre said the movement was training suicide squads in Bangkok, but backed down when Thailand demanded proof.

Mr Ashaari, once an active member of PAS, the Malaysian religious party, says he has no political ambitions, but teasingly adds that it might be God's will to make him Prime Minister. Other criticism concerns his lavish life style — his movement's holding company last year de-



clared assets of £75m. Perhaps the Arqam leader, also an enthusiastic promoter and practitioner of polygamy, has more in common with American televangelists like Jim Bakker than with the austere mullahs who run underground Islamic groups in the Middle East.

IN May President Bill Clinton announced that trade with China would no longer be linked to human rights, and monitoring groups say Peking has lost no time in cracking down. A report yesterday from Human Rights Watch/Asia and Human Rights in China said the government has begun a long-delayed trial of 15 labour and political organisers, and published new regulations giving the police greater powers to decide what constitutes subversion.

The names of 17 activists who have been detained incommunicado since March are also listed: in what the two organisations say is "a new and disturbing pattern", the authorities often deny arresting opponents, which means that they have in effect disappeared. Heavy sentences announced yesterday on five Tibetan activists also give point to the report's conclusion that: "The Chinese government appears to have waited to act until it was clear that intensified repression would have no negative economic consequences."

THERE is little sign that the Indonesian government has been deterred by the outcry at home and abroad over its recent closure of three political weeklies. Several other publications, including *Kompas*, the country's leading daily, have been warned to watch their step. The newspaper's crime? Reporting on demonstrations against the banning of the three magazines.

Raymond Whitaker

Bardot bares her claws as Loren turns to furs



Sophia Loren: to model furs in advertisements

THE FUR is flying around Sophia Loren following the actress' signing of a promotional contract with Annabella, an Italian fur-coat company, to model its products in newspaper and magazine advertisements.

In an open letter to Loren, Brigitte Bardot accused her acting contemporary of selling her name and her image "to the most despicable of all advertising: promotion of furs". It is, said Bardot, "degrading, repugnant, lamentable and unworthy to accept money stained with the blood of animals". Loren, added France's leading animal-

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rights campaigner, should boycott "this abominable trade" and "never forget that wearing a fur is wearing a cemetery on your back".

Loren, on holiday, has not responded, but Annabella had warned her of possible protests.

ANOTHER prominent friend of animals, Paul McCartney, may end up with

a furry face after returning a razor, shaving cream and other products to the Gillette company to protest against the use of animals in product testing.

In a letter to the company, the musician said he was sending back all Gillette products in his home and demanded a refund, which he said he would donate to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, an animal-rights organisation.

"As a friend of animals, I am not only unsatisfied but outraged," McCartney wrote. "When Gillette modernises its testing practices and abol-

ishes animal testing... I'll happily buy your products again."

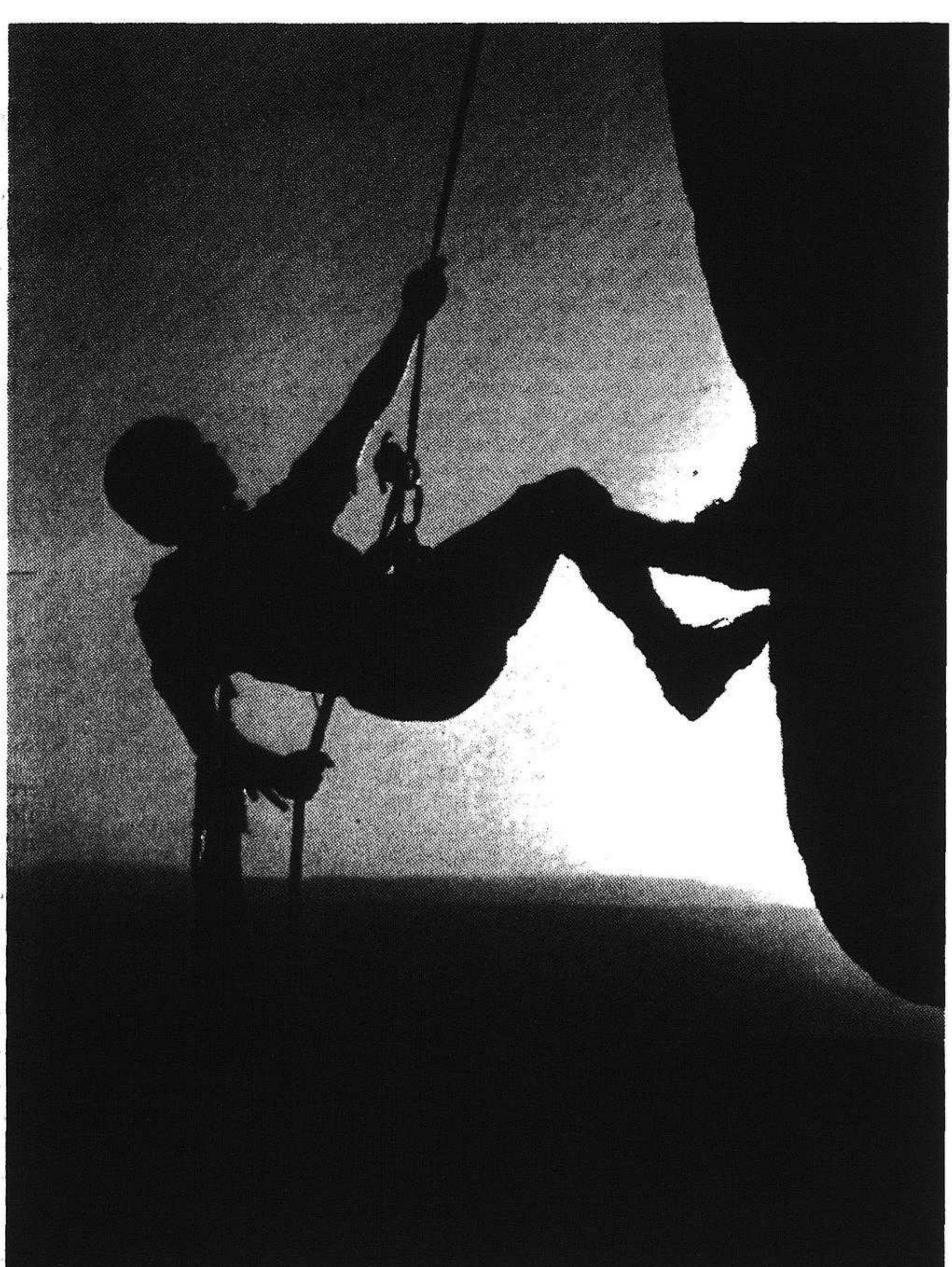
THE Mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac, has dropped a lawsuit against the weekly *Nowelle Observateur* over last week's cover photograph showing him leaping over a turnstile on the Metro underground. The magazine apologised for using the photo and the words "Cheaters in France" to illustrate the results of a poll.

The picture had been taken 18 years ago, in the presence of Metro officials, "as a joke".

ANOTHER humbling experience for John McEnroe. The former tennis star and his McBand served up a rock performance that went over like a double fault. The band, performing Rolling Stones and Nirvana songs, got a lukewarm reception at a nightclub in Santa Margherita Ligure, the first stop on a two-week tour of Italy.

"In sports you can win or lose," a philosophical McEnroe told *La Repubblica*. "On stage it's different, because you can get results somewhere in the middle. I'm not afraid. This time I know I'm not the best."

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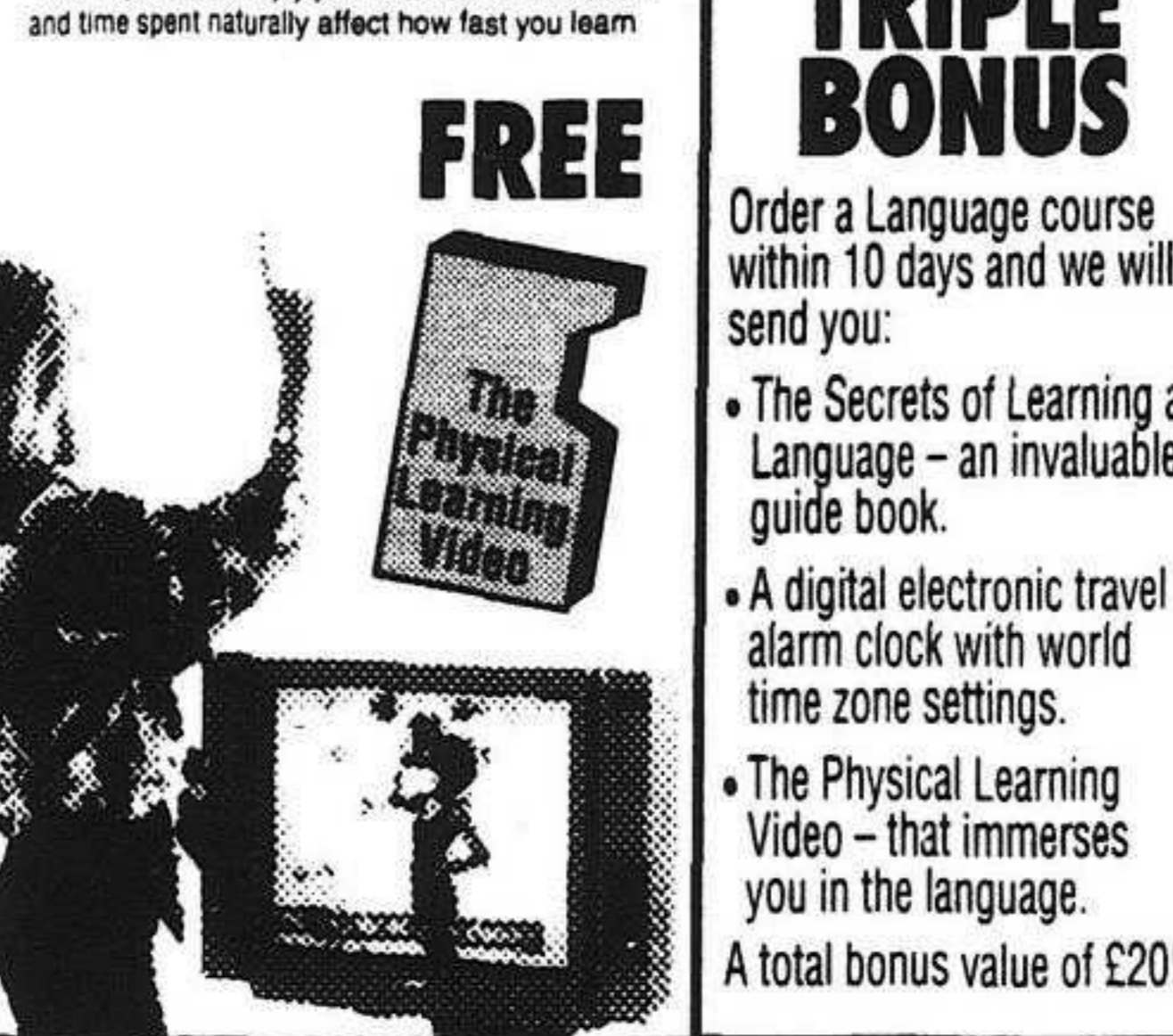
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