

## Chernenko ill, papers claim

LONDON (AP) — British newspapers reported Sunday that Soviet President Konstantin Chernenko is being treated in the intensive care unit of a private Kremlin hospital, and may resign because of deteriorating health.

Western diplomats contacted by The Associated Press in Moscow said they had not heard

any such reports, although most said they believe the 73-year-old Chernenko is ailing.

The Sunday Times quoted "unofficial reports" as saying Chernenko, who has not been seen in public since Dec. 27, will become the first Soviet leader to step down voluntarily.

Another newspaper, The Express, carried a report that said Chernenko "has become so ill he may be forced to resign." The newspapers did not say what their sources were, or how they obtained their information.

The Sunday Times said the ruling Politburo already has approved a plan to replace Chernenko with 53-year-old Mikhail Gorbachev, widely believed to rank second in the Kremlin hierarchy.

"Under this plan, Gorbachev would take over the post of general secretary of the Communist Party, but would not necessarily assume the presidency — a mainly ceremonial title. Indeed some sources say Chernenko could continue to hold this job while

stepping down as effective leader," the newspaper said.

It said any such decision would be made at a meeting of the Communist Party Central Committee next month.

A senior Western diplomat in Moscow told the AP on Friday that Soviet officials have acknowledged Chernenko has been ailing during the past four weeks.

The diplomat said he had no firm information about the exact nature of his illness. However, Chernenko is widely thought to

be suffering from emphysema.

According to The Sunday Times, Chernenko's health has deteriorated sharply in the past week. The newspaper said Chernenko's doctors are looking after him in the intensive care unit of a private Kremlin hospital, and that "his respiratory illness, including emphysema, has now been complicated by cardiac deficiencies."

"Observers reckon his illness is now irreversible and it is thought that this view has been firmly expressed by the doctor in charge of the president, believed to be an outstanding Czechoslovak specialist," the Sunday Times said. Despite prolonged illnesses, Chernenko's two predecessors, Yuri Andropov and Leonid Brezhnev, died in office.

## Pope arrives in Venezuela

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Pope John Paul II condemned abortion, sterilization and divorce Sunday as he celebrated Mass before hundreds of thousands of people who endured stifling tropical heat in this nominally Catholic country where abortion is common.

"Remember, it is never legal to end a human life with abortion or euthanasia," the Polish-born pontiff told the crowd of at least 500,000 people who gathered in an open field beneath a hillside shantytown.

John Paul, the first pope to visit Venezuela, was greeted by cheers and singing Saturday when he arrived in Caracas, his first stop on a four-nation trip that will take him to Ecuador, Peru and Trinidad-Tobago. The journey is the pontiff's sixth to Latin America and his 25th abroad.

Abortion, although illegal, is common in Venezuela, where historic disputes between the government and the Vatican have limited the church's authority. Church officials say about 80 percent of the country's 16 million residents are baptized by the Roman Catholic Church, but only about 10 percent attend services regularly.

A large sign posted on a scaffold near the altar read: "John Paul II, Defender of Life." An anti-abortion group passed out leaflets among the crowd.

John Paul II, speaking in Spanish atop a specially constructed 60-foot-high altar decorated with red and yellow flowers, called on Roman Catholics to fight against the "plague of divorce that ruins families and has such negative effects on the education of children."

Facing the makeshift slums that ring the modern skyscrapers in this overcrowded valley city of 4 million people, the pope said contraception and sterilization were "always seriously illicit."

He said parents "in a clearly responsible way" should decide the number and spacing of their children.

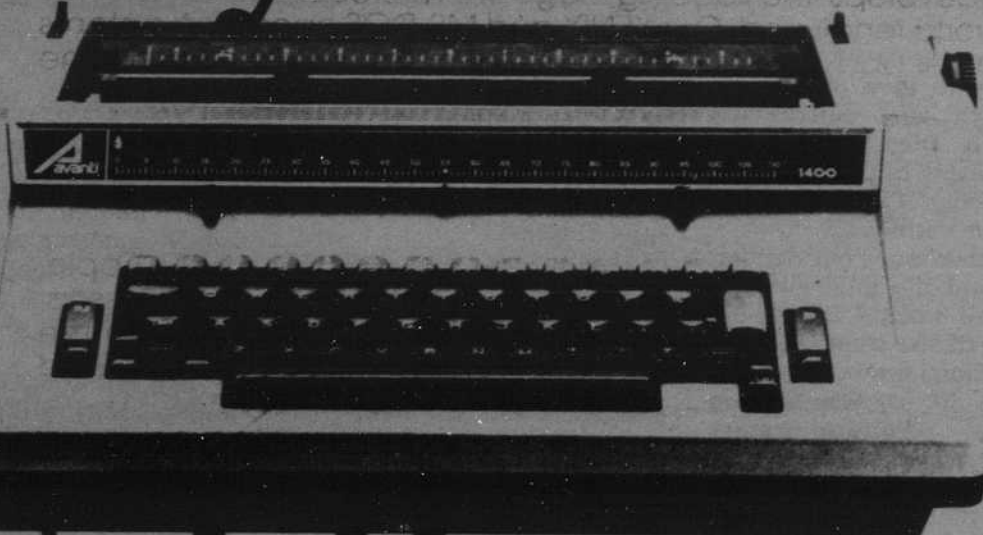
"John Paul is our friend! Venezuela is with you!" crowds chanted at the end of the almost three-hour Mass. The Interior Ministry said before the Mass that 500,000 people were already on hand, but there was no estimate of the size of the crowd that actually heard the pope speak.

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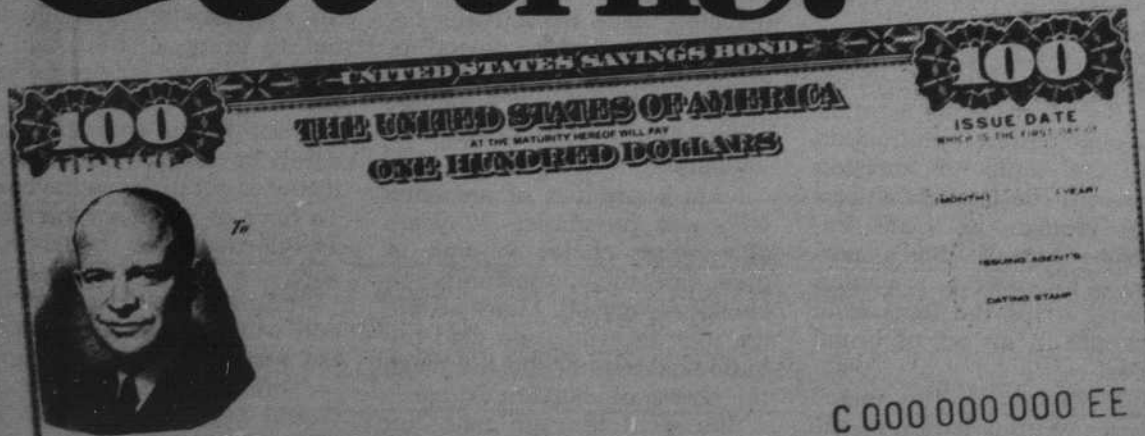
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