

International

Renewed pledge to pass bill early next yr

Hosokawa apologises for delay in political reforms

\$ 10 million ransom demanded Gunmen holding 12 Russian schoolchildren hostage

LONDON, Dec 24: Gunmen holding 12 schoolchildren and their teacher hostage aboard a Russian helicopter have demanded a 10 million dollar ransom, Moscow Ostankino radio said, reports Reuter.

The radio, monitored by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), said: "It has become known from information which has not been completely confirmed, because officials refuse

to tell journalists anything, that the hijackers ... have given an ultimatum that they are given 10 million dollars by 0835."

The report could not immediately be confirmed independently.

The helicopter earlier today landed at Mineralnyye Vody in southern Russia after a 90-minute flight from Krasnodra, according to Itar-Tass news agency.

They flew to Kransodar from Rostov-on-don, 180 miles to the north, where they seized their teenage captives.

Russian authorities said the kidnappers had told security officials with whom they negotiated in Rostov that they wanted to fly to Iran — 1,100 miles away — with stops across the Caucasus.

Their identities were not known, although at least three of them were thought by their accents to be from the Caucasus.

It was not clear if they had any political motive in seeking to fly to Iran, nor why they had chosen to seize schoolchildren.

Deng visits Shanghai

HONG KONG, Dec 24: Deng Xiaoping, China's 89-year-old leader who has not appeared in public for 11 months, visited Shanghai this month and called for fast growth, a Hong Kong newspaper said Friday, reports AP.

Deng praised Shanghai's economic reforms and said all obstacles to reform should be removed, the English-language South China Morning Post said, quoting Chinese sources.

Iran for 'direct talks' with UAE on strategic islands

TEHRAN, Dec 24: Iran on Thursday denounced the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for repeating its claims over three strategic Gulf islands, stressing that they would remain part of the Islamic Republic's territory, reports AFP.

A Foreign Ministry statement, quoted by Tehran Radio, said Iran was "set in its position and stresses its sovereignty" over Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb in the southern Gulf and disputed by Iran and the UAE.

"We are displeased with such illusive claims by Abu Dhabi," the statement said.

But the statement called for "direct negotiations" with the UAE to remove "misunderstanding" on the issue of Abu Musa and in a bid to strengthen its ties with the Gulf Arab states.

The statement also praised the "individual stand" taken by

members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) at their 14th summit this week in seeking to expand relations with Iran and in calling for a peaceful resolution of the territorial conflicts.

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman said on Wednesday that they "welcome Iran's readiness to negotiate" with the Emirates over the islands.

Iran said it was ready to receive "without any preconditions" the UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Hamdan bin Zayed Al-Nahayan, who cancelled a trip to Tehran in September in protest at fresh Iranian claims over the islands.

The last round of negotiations between Tehran and Abu Dhabi on the islands, which was held in the UAE in September 1992, ended in failure after Iran insisted on limiting the talks to Abu Musa.

TOKYO, Dec 24: Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa on Friday apologized to the nation for delay in pushing through a political reform package, but expressed optimism the measure would be enacted soon, reports AP.

"I believe I have to frankly apologize to all of the people for failing to have it approved within this year," Hosokawa said at a nationally broadcast news conference.

The prime minister also said details of an economic stimulus plan, aimed at jolting the country out of its worst recession in two decades, would be unveiled next month.

Hosokawa's 4-month-old coalition government, which swept into office with a mandate to clean up Japan's dirty politics, hopes to win approval of



Morihiro Hosokawa, the political reform package early next year.

Soon after taking office, the prime minister had indicated he would resign if the political reform measures were not approved this year. Asked about that vow, he said this was no time to quit.

He declined to say whether he would resign if the package were not enacted during the current parliamentary session, expected to end in late January.

"I'm not thinking of it ... There is enough time left," he said.

Hosokawa's seven-party coalition took over in August after parliamentary elections deprived the scandal-ridden Liberal Democrats of their four-decade grip on power.

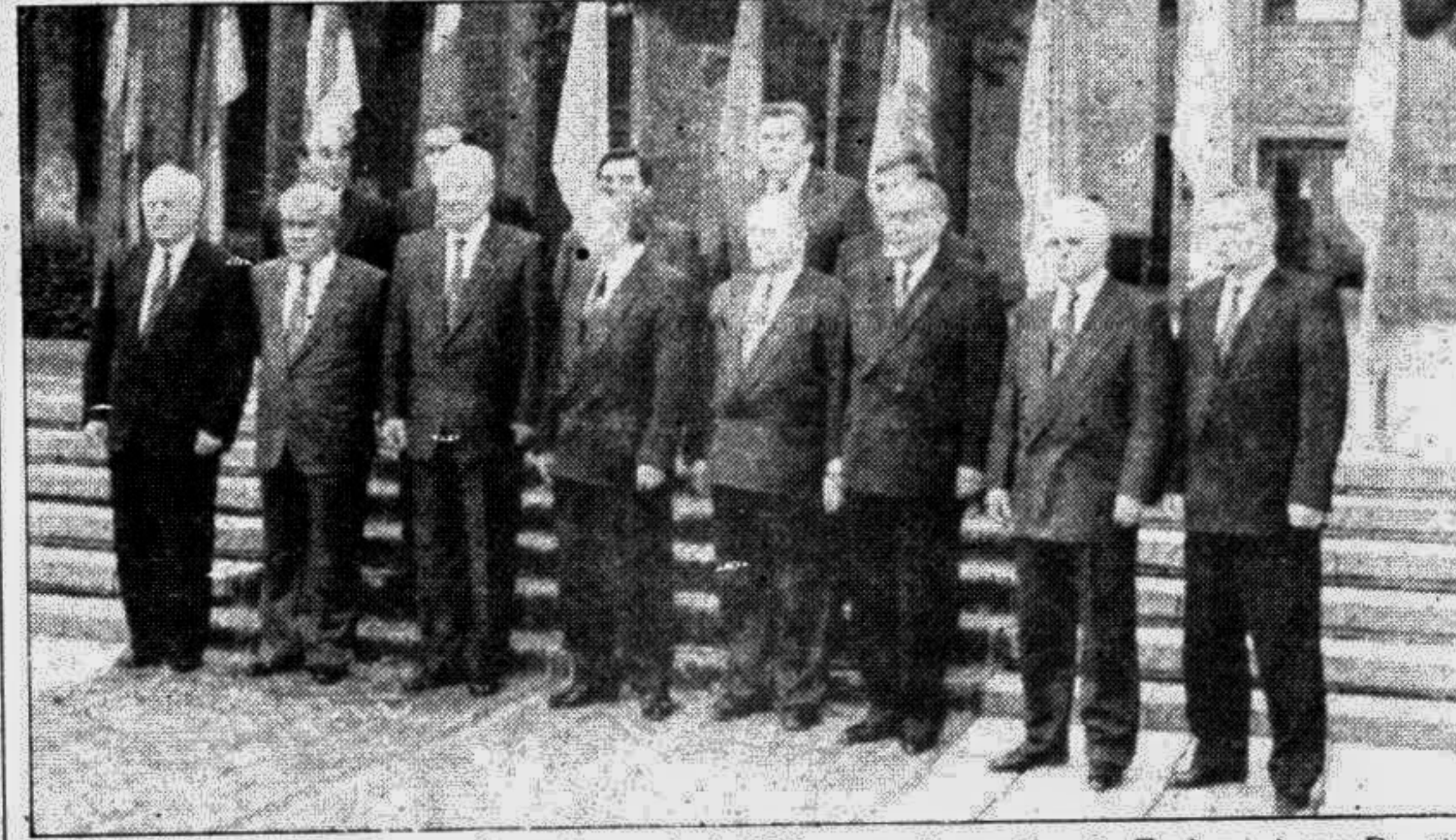
In its new role as the opposition, the LDP has managed to block speedy passage of the po-

litical reform measure, arguing that the first priority should be the troubled economy. However, the party is mindful that being too obstructionist could cause a public backlash against it.

Various public opinion polls put Hosokawa's approval rating at around 60 per cent. However, that represents a fall from nearly three-quarters support earlier in his administration.

In recent weeks, he has come under sharp criticism for failing to act decisively to mend the economy.

Hosokawa said the economic stimulus plan would include deregulation; measures to revitalize the agricultural sector and small-to-medium-sized industries; expanded employment and tax reform including income tax cuts.



CIS leaders pose for the media prior to their 12th summit meeting in Turkmenistan Dec 24. From L-R are Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia, Saparmurad Niyazov of Turkmenistan, Boris Yeltsin of Russia, Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, Vyacheslav Kibich Prime Minister of Belarus, Geydar Aliyev of Azerbaijan, Leonid Kravchuk of Ukraine, Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan. Top L-R are Askar Akayev of Kirghizia (1st), Levon Ter-Petrosian of Armenia (2nd), Mircha Snegur of Moldova (4th).

CIS leaders begin summit

ASHGABAT, Dec 24: Leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States today began their 12th summit behind closed doors here, with economic union high on the agenda, reports AFP.

Eleven leaders from nations of the former Soviet Union were present for the gathering. The 12th, Belarussian President Stanislav Shushkevich has been hospitalised near Minsk suffering from high blood pressure.

After two hours of talks behind closed doors in the Turkmenistan capital, the heads of state met with government leaders, foreign and defence ministers.

Turkmen President Saparmurad Niyazov said that each member country of the CIS would chair the body for six month period, with Russia taking the role for the next half-year.

BRIEFLY

ROK frees 1343 prisoners: South Korea on Friday released 1,343 prisoners, including 44 dissidents jailed for political and union activities, in a Christmas eve amnesty, Reuter reports from Seoul.

Amongst the dissidents is Chun Mun-Hwan, a former student leader of a radical student group who was jailed for playing a key role in plotting a 1989 secret visit to North Korea by female student Im Su-Kyung to attend a youth festival in Pyongyang, a Justice Ministry spokesman said.

Im, who was serving a five-year term, was released in a Christmas day amnesty last year.

King Bhumibol to visit Laos: King of Thailand Bhumibol Aduladej will visit Laos in April next year, according to a Thai Foreign Ministry source, Xinhua reports from Bangkok.

The king will open the first bridge over the Mekong river, which was built by Australia.

The Mekong is a border river along a long section of the Thai-Laos border. Vientiane, capital of Laos, is on the north bank of the river.

The visit will be the king's first official visit abroad in 27 years. He made his last overseas trip in 1967 to Canada to attend central celebrations of that country.

Japanese DPM due in China Jan 8: Tautomu Hata, Japanese Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, will pay an official visit to China from January 8 to 9, at the invitation of Chinese Vice-Premier and Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, Xinhua reports from Beijing.

The announcement was made by a Chinese Foreign Minister spokesman here Friday.

Blast kills 6 in Philippines: A grenade exploded Friday at a public market in the southern Philippines, killing six people and injuring about 20 others, a television station reported, AP reports from Manila.

AES-CBN television said the explosion occurred about 1 pm (0500 GMT) in a village near the town of Bonifacio, about 750 kilometers (470 miles) south of Manila.

No group claimed responsibility and the motive for the attack was unknown, the station said.

IRA begins X-mas truce

BELFAST, Dec 24: The IRA began a three-day Christmas truce today but chances that the guerrillas would accept an Anglo-Irish peace deal seemed increasingly remote, reports Reuter.

A spokesman for British Prime Minister John Major condemned the Irish Republican Army for failing to declare an end to the war against British rule of Northern Ireland.

"The people of Northern Ireland want a permanent end to violence, not a temporary ceasefire. Christmas is a time for peace and not just a temporary lull in the killing," he said.

Martin McGuinness, a leading member of the IRA's political wing, Sinn Fein, gave the gloomiest assessment to date of the group's verdict on the eight-day old Anglo-Irish package.

"Unfortunately, at this time, the political situation hasn't developed to a position where Sinn Fein can use its influence to end attacks on British crown forces," he said.

The deal offers Sinn Fein, which seeks the unification of Northern Ireland with the Irish republic.

MOGADISHU, Dec 24: Hundreds of protesters took to the streets of Mogadishu on Thursday as another 500 US troops prepared to leave Somalia's war-torn capital, reports AFP.

Several hundred Somali demonstrators gathered along 21 October road carrying placards reading, "we need peace not foreign intervention."

Western diplomatic sources privately said they fear a resumption of the war between factional leaders Mohamed Farah Aided and Ali Mahdi Mohamed after the March 31 withdrawal of US troops.

"It's going to get hot here again," said a senior US military official who requested anonymity. "I'll be glad when I'm one of those troops — ready to get the hell out of here."

Ali Mahdi said Thursday, "You cannot reject the notion that there will be more blood."

"But Aided should know that his fight will be a fight against the Somali people and we represent 98 per cent of all the Somali people," Ali Mahdi told reporters.

On Wednesday, Awacs Haji Yusef, a senior aide to Ali Mahdi, cited an old Somali proverb to reporters which said, always expect the battle — the good things will not harm you."

Awacs complained that the UN had made a blunder by lifting the order for general

Fresh factional war feared in Somalia after March 31

Aided's arrest, issued after the June 5 slaying of 24 Pakistani peacekeepers, allegedly by Aided's militiamen.

"No one can predict what this man (Aided) will do," Awacs said.

The world body suspended the warrant for Aided's arrest on November 16 after his faction freed US helicopter pilot Michael Durant, captured during an October 3 firefight in which 18 Americans were killed.

As US troops gradually leave

Fire kills 6 in Taiwan

TAIPEI, Dec 24: Six members of a family died when fire swept through a wooden house in a remote village in northern Taiwan on Thursday night, police said on today, reports Reuter.

Tai ah-Hui, 55, his mother, wife, two sons and grandson were killed. A daughter living with them was not at home at the time of the fire.

"The blaze was fuelled by the sea wind and burned the wooden house quickly. They were all suffocated to death by smoke," said a police spokesman in the village of Rueifang in Taipei county.

Police were still investigating the cause of the cause of the fire, which was believed to have started in the kitchen, he said.

Rome was sharply critical of the UN role after the world body's initial peacekeeping and feeding mission turned into active involvement in clashes following attacks by Somali factions on UN troops.

Fabri said he feared renewed fighting after the failure of Somali peace talks in Addis Ababa conference, which opened on December 2, ended without a formal agreement between Aided and the group of 12 factions opposed to him, which include Ali Mahdi's United Somali Congress.

After March 31 the United States will withdraw its 8,000 troops from Somalia.

About 2,000 have already gone, and another 1,000 are to leave before Christmas.

Floods render 7500 homeless in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 24: More than 7,500 people have been evacuated from their homes after several rivers flooded in northeastern Malaysia, the national news agency Bernama said today, reports Reuter.

Four people have drowned and another two have been reported missing since flood hit several states earlier this week at the height of the Malaysian rainy season, police reported.

Nearly 7,100 people have been evacuated from Kelantan in the worst of the floods, Bernama said.

Japan to launch H2 rocket early next year

TANEGASHIMA, Japan, Dec 24: Japan is preparing for the launch early next year of its first entirely Japanese-made H2 commercial rocket, but its high cost could hurt its chances of competing with the European Ariane Rocket, reports AFP.

The Baby OS the Japanese Space Industry, the H2 is a 50-meter (165-foot) monster weighing in at 260 tonnes, and has already been installed at its launch station on the island of Tanegashima, 900 kilometres (560 miles) south of Tokyo.

Here, National Space Agency (NASA) engineers are carrying out final tests ahead of the rocket's launch February 1.

Fighting on in Sarajevo despite X-mas ceasefire

SARAJEVO (Bosnia-Herzegovina), Dec 24: The Bosnian capital settled in Friday for a tense Christmas in the aftermath of three days of heavy shelling and the failure of both peace talks and a truce accord, reports AP.

The sound of shells exploding could be heard in the city, but there were fewer than Thursday, when Bosnian radio said eight people died and 50 were wounded.

"There is no cease-fire for the moment," said UN spokesman Cmdr, Idesbald Van Biesebroek. "That is very clear. There is no cease-fire at all."

There were reports of fighting in many of the trouble spots of western and central Bosnia as well.

Christmas truces among the Muslim-led government forces, Croats and Serbs were agreed upon last week and affirmed Wednesday at EC-sponsored peace talks in Brussels, Belgium. But the talks collapsed Thursday.

Bosnian Serbs and Croats had agreed on a division of land to settle the war, but the Muslim-led government rejected the

plan, saying the "quality" of the one-third of the republic's territory offered it was not satisfactory.

On the ground, the Christmas spirit is singularly missing, Ray Wilkinson, spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Sarajevo, said Thursday.

Sarajevo's bakery was short of flour and land convoys were being blocked, leaving only the tenuous airlift to supply the city.

UNHCR spokesman Ron Redmond in Geneva said Croats had blocked aid convoys for central Bosnia coming from the Adriatic coast as well. A Croat spokesman said heavy fighting in the area forced the closure.

But late Tuesday, Croatian TV reported that Bosnian Croat leader Mate Boban had rescinded the order to halt convoys.

Van Biesebroek reported that the military situation around Sarajevo was "unstable and tense." The UN counted more than 1,300 incoming rounds hitting government-held territory in and around Sarajevo on Thursday, about half of

them in Vogosca, just to the northwest of the city.

It counted only 14 outgoing rounds from Bosnian government forces.

While it was impossible to tell who started the fighting, Van Biesebroek said, "It is quite clear that the Serb side is really using a lot of artillery."

Tension was reported throughout the republic, and fighting flared up in several trouble spots.

UN officials said Bosnian government soldiers returned a British UN armored personnel carrier they had seized Thursday night in central Bosnia.

But they said flak jackets, portable radios and other equipment taken from the crew and an accompanied aid convoy had not been returned. Officials said they believed the action was that of a rogue group of soldiers rather than a general strategy of the Bosnian army.

Fighting also was reported between the Muslim-led government and Croat troops in Mostar, in the southwest, and around Vitez and Gornji Vakuf in central Bosnia.



An unidentified woman holds Tuesday a jawbone that was the last of the world's labyrinthodonts, the first vertebrates on land, according to Australian scientists in Melbourne. The "revolutionary find", complete with teeth, was found in southern Victoria two years ago but was only revealed to the public on Tuesday. — AFP photo

Overweight creates visa problem

LONDON: An overweight British nurse has been told by the Australian authorities to lose 34 kilograms (75 pounds) if she wants an immigration visa, the British press reported Friday, says AFP.

Alison Johns, 42, who lived in Melbourne, Australia between the ages of 12 and 21 and who still has family there, was given the weight loss target when she underwent a medical examination.

She currently weighs 117 kilograms (257 pounds). The Daily Independent said the Australian High Commission had explained that all overweight candidates for immigration were asked to lose weight to reduce the risk that they would have to use Australia's pre-paid health service when they got there.

Johns said she had already lost 25 kilograms (55 pounds).

Female reporter molested by prosecutor

TOKYO: A Japanese prosecutor is under investigation over charges that he molested a female reporter, a prosecution official said Friday, reports Reuter.

The official at the public prosecutor's office in Akita, north-west Japan, declined further comment. But news reports said the woman accused 51-year-old Shozo Nakajima, Akita's deputy chief prosecutor, of fondling her breasts when she went to interview him about a bribery case last year.

When she went to his house at night to ask further questions, a common practice among Japanese journalists, she alleged that Nakajima asked her to stay the night in return for more information.

Nakajima has been in hospital since Wednesday, complaining of stomach trouble.

Mother kept son's body in car trunk for 5yrs

BAKERSFIELD (California): A woman who kept her son's body in her car trunk for five years was sentenced Thursday to 11 years in prison, reports AP.

DeEtte Stewart and her boyfriend, William Bell, had pleaded no contest to voluntary manslaughter in a plea bargain. They were originally charged with second-degree murder.

Police said Bell claimed the boy drowned in the bathtub of the couple's apartment while he watched television. Bell said he heard a thump but didn't check immediately, then found the boy dead later, police said.

Tiger overpowered by dog

MOSCOW: Hunter Vasily Popov stared death in the face when he was attacked by a Siberian tiger — but was saved by his dog who bit the beast on its tail, Itar-Tass news agency said, reports Reuter.

The tiger jumped on Popov as he was out checking his traps in the far east and bit him.

But the beast abandoned its attack when Popov's dog rallied to his help and sank its teeth into the beast's tail.

The tiger finally slunk off into the forest, eyeing the dog as it went.

Popov managed to struggle to a village some kilometers away and was now recovering in hospital, Tass said.

The agency said three hunters have been killed this year by Siberian tigers — an endangered species — in Russia's Far East.

China to introduce civil service system next yr

China will introduce a merit-based civil service system for public employees starting next year, official news reports said Friday, AP reports from Beijing.

The government has been promising such a move since 1988, and its slowness to act has illustrated one of the problems of the current system: inefficiency.

The China Daily quoted State Councilor Li Guixian, a cabinet member without portfolio, as saying that the new system will include exams, presumably for recruitment and promotion. The wage scale also will be adjusted, he said, but gave no details.

At present, the government assigns college and high school graduates to fill posts each year, without any entry exam. Promotion and wages are based on seniority, and young employees are often frustrated by having to serve under middle-aged bureaucrats who have less education.

The government has been experimenting with civil service exams in selected counties and cities for several years.



Zlata Filipovic, the 13-year old girl whose diary recounting the life of a young girl in besieged Sarajevo has been published around the world, enters a UN vehicle to be taken to Sarajevo airport Dec 23. Zlata together with her parents departed for France yesterday after long negotiations by an envoy of the French government with the Sarajevo and the Bosnian Serb authorities.