

Israel rejects Russian call to hold confce on ME

JERUSALEM, Mar 10: Israel on Wednesday rejected a Russian call to hold a new international conference on the Middle East to relaunch the peace process in the wake of the Hebron Mosque massacre, reports AFP.

"We are against it. We have come far enough in the bilateral negotiations with the PLO and Arab countries to avoid having take a backward step," said Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Boaz Madai.

However, Madai said Israel had not been officially informed of the Russian proposal, and "when it is addressed to us we will study it as is fitting, and given a detailed response."

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said Wednesday the February 25 massacre of dozens of Palestinian worshippers in the West Bank town of Hebron by a Jewish settler had derailed the negotiating process that began in Madrid in October 1991.

Ivanov, just back from the Middle East, said the idea of another Madrid conference had the support of the parties in conflict and of the United States, the other co-sponsor of the peace process.

However, Madai said Ivanov had made no such declaration when he visited Israel last week.

Talks between Israel and the PLO on implementing a historic Palestinian autonomy accord were suspended after the massacre, as were separate Arab-Israeli talks.

Ivanov also called for swift adoption of a UN resolution of protecting Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied territories and setting terms for an international presence in the territories, the Interfax news agency said.

Meanwhile, Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad met with a group of Israeli Arabs here on Wednesday led by Abdel Wahab Darawshe, an MP in Israel's parliament, officials said.

26 political parties to contest S African polls

JOHANNESBURG, Mar 10: Twenty-six political parties have confirmed they will contest South Africa's watershed election, but the door has been left ajar for black and white conservatives to join the April poll, reports Reuter.

The Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party and the white rightist Freedom Front failed to turn in list on Wednesday as political parties scrambled to beat an elastic deadline for submitting candidates.

But Frank Chikane, an official of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), said parties have until next Thursday to decide whether to participate in the April 26-28 election.

"Our attitude is that we should have an all-inclusive

settlement, we are not going to be rigid on deadlines, he said.

Inkatha, led by chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, said the form of international mediation to resolve key constitutional issues would first have to be settled.

Inkatha and African National Congress (ANC) negotiators would meet today to discuss their ideas on foreign mediation, mooted in a meeting between Buthelezi and ANC President Nelson Mandela last week.

Buthelezi told Reuters on Tuesday mediators should concentrate on issues that led to a breakdown of talks between the Freedom Alliance, the ANC and the government of December 19 last year.

Alija dismisses possibility of confederation with Serbia

ZAGREB, Mar 10: Bosnian Muslim President Alija Izetbegovic on Wednesday dismissed any possibility of Bosnia forming a confederation with Serbia, and said peace was now in the hands of the Serbs, reports Reuter.

Asked in an interview on Croatian television if he would accept a confederation with Serbia, should be Bosnian Serbs make that their condition for joining a Muslim-Croat federation planned for the war-torn republic, he replied this is completely out of the question.

Izetbegovic added, "There are many speculations about world powers having ideas about some new Yugoslavia, but to my knowledge such an idea does not exist."

Under US pressure, Bosnian Croats and Muslims agreed to end almost a year of

bitter fighting and form a federation that would have confederal links with Croatia, the main supporter of Bosnian Croat forces.

US special envoy Charles Redman said in Zagreb on Wednesday the Bosnian Serbs would be asked to join the federation, but hours later a top Serb official poured cold water on such an idea.

Croatian media speculated that US policy was to reunite the republics of the former Yugoslavia in a new political union by offering the Bosnian Serbs a place within the new Bosnian federation with the provision it be confederally linked to Serbia.

Izetbegovic said the landmark Muslim-Croat deal meant the end of fighting between the former allies in the war against the Bosnian Serbs — the most dominant of the

three fractions.

"The end of war in Bosnia depends now on the Serbs side," he said, adding that the Washington peace plan was not aimed against them. "The agreement is open to the Serbs."

Meanwhile, Turkey Wednesday offered a mechanised battalion of 1,000 troops for Bosnia that could be ready to join UN forces within a week, its ambassador said.

The Turkish offer, not yet accepted, was made by Djumarkadyr Atabekov at an informal troop contributors meeting of 20 countries meeting called by Britain's ambassador, Sir David Hannay, in an effort to raise thousands more soldiers to enforce ceasefires in the beleaguered republic.

France earlier Wednesday said it would send an addi-

tional 800 soldiers on a short-term basis.

Britain is expected to augment its 2,500 troops in Bosnia with another battalion and other nations, including Russia, the Ukraine and Spain have signalled their governments were considering smaller companies of troops.

Canada will consider requests at a cabinet meeting Thursday, the envoys said. They also said the United States was considering contributing more troops to Macedonia, where Washington has 315 soldiers, thereby freeing other contingents there to transfer to Bosnia.

The Turkish ambassador told Reuters: "we offered a mechanised battalion of 1,000."

"We don't want them to confront Serbs," he said.

US considers sending troops to Macedonia

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 10: The United States Wednesday considered sending up to 400 extra troops to Macedonia so a Nordic force stationed in that country could be sent to Bosnia, diplomats said, reports Reuter.

US officials, attending a troop contributors meeting at Britain's mission to the United Nations, said Washington was contemplating such an offer. In addition the United States may help with troop transports and logistics in Bosnia.

The Clinton administration has refused to send ground

forces to Bosnia until a peace agreement is signed among Bosnian Muslims, Croats and Serbs.

But the United States has

315 troops in neighbouring Macedonia.

Li blames UK for breakdown in talks over HK

BEIJING, Mar 10: China's Premier Li Peng blamed Britain for the breakdown in talks over Hong Kong, and said in a speech to parliament that nothing could stop the end of British colonialism, reports Reuter.

The talks between the representatives of the Chinese government and the British government... have been terminated, a development for which the British side must bear full responsibility," Li said.

The two sides have been squabbling over Hong Kong Governor Chris Patten's plans for greater democracy in the colony, which returns to Chinese rule in 1997.

Yeltsin refuses to see Nixon

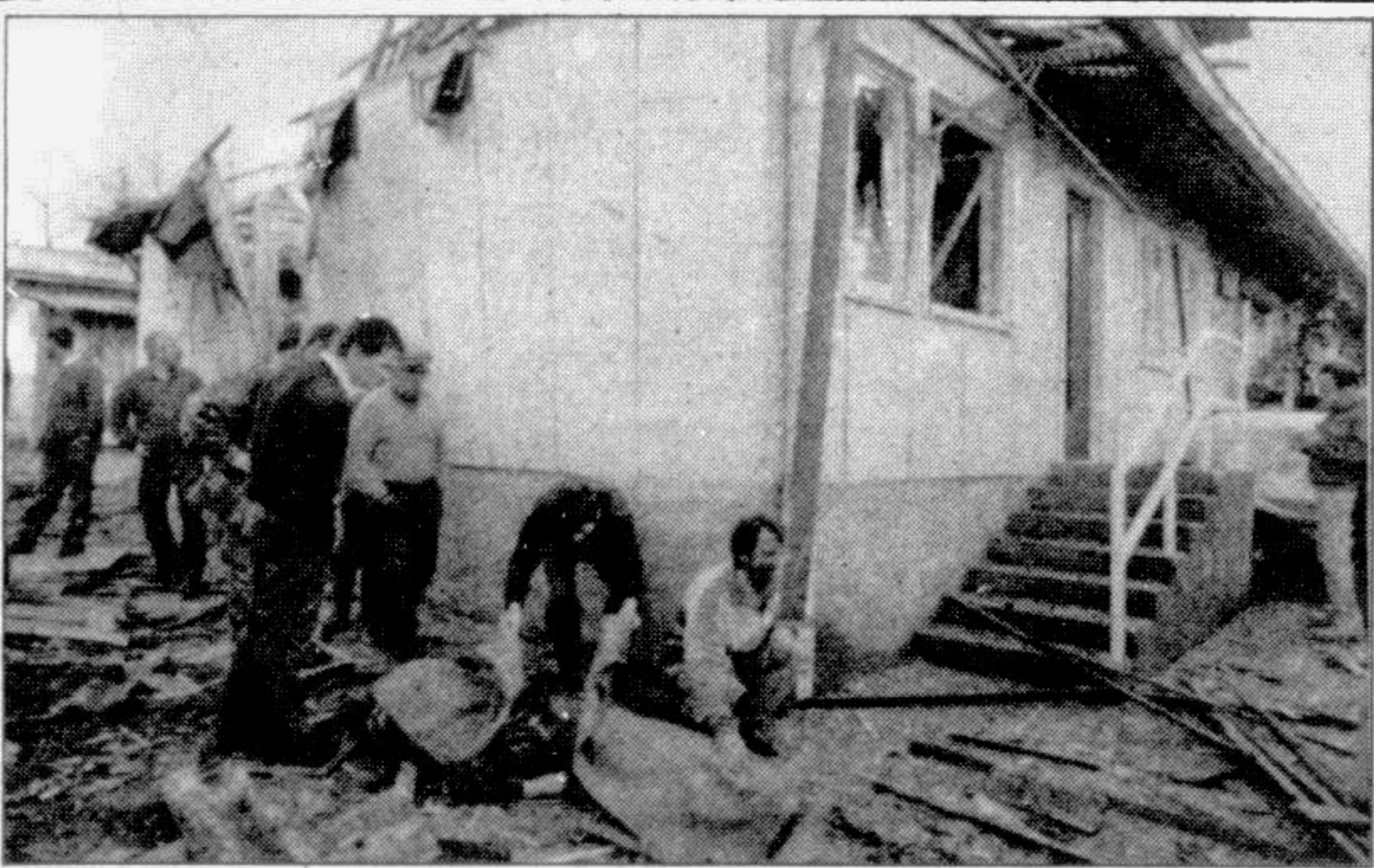
MOSCOW, Mar 10: An angry President Boris Yeltsin on Wednesday refused to see former US President Richard Nixon because he had met one of his political opponents, reports Reuter.

A Nixon aide said Russian authorities had also taken away an official car together with bodyguards assigned to the 81-year-old former US politician.

Yeltsin, offended by Nixon's Monday meeting with former Russian vice-president Alexander Rutskoi, told reporters:

"Let them know that Russia is a great country and you just cannot play about with her like that."

Former American President Nixon met Rutskoi and (Communist leader Gennady) Zyuganov here while the most interesting thing is that he had been coming here to meet me," a clearly angry Yeltsin said.



A man is crying and neighbours cover two bodies after heavy mortar shells fell on an inner-city area of Tuzla in Bosnia March 9. Two people died and four were injured in the attack.

India welcomes withdrawal of Pak resolution on Kashmir

NEW DELHI, Mar 10: India's ruling and opposition parties Thursday welcomed Pakistan's withdrawal at a meeting of a UN commission in Geneva of a resolution condemning human rights abuses in Kashmir, reports AFP.

Indian leaders from across the political spectrum said the dropping of the resolution at the UN Human Rights Commission was a signal that the world community wanted Pakistan and India to resolve their dispute bilaterally.

They also warned Islamabad not to mislead the world community about the situation in the northern Indian state gripped by a bloody Muslim separatist rebellion.

India's ruling Congress (I) party said it was grateful for the support received from China, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia and Syria in urging Pakistan to drop the resolution, which was co-sponsored by Saudi Arabia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The United States and most European countries had made it clear they would abstain if the resolution was put to the vote.

"We were confident from the beginning that truth would prevail and that Pakistan's false propaganda would be thwarted," said Minister of State for Home Affairs Rajkesh Pilot.

Pilot, who is in charge of internal security, said Pakistan's failure to push the motion through was a "clear signal" that it should not try to raise bilateral issues at international forums.

"India had been pleading with other countries that Pakistan was involving itself in

our internal affairs to destabilise the country's security and this proves that they listened to us," the minister told AFP.

External Affairs Minister Dinesh Singh, who visited Tehran during the deliberations of the UN commission, said India was grateful to the countries which urged Pakistan not to put the resolution to a vote.

"We hope Pakistan will now be ready to discuss all our differences bilaterally," Singh said.

Pakistan's initial draft resolution expressed "grave con-

cern at the gross and consistent violations of human rights," in Kashmir and called for a UN fact-finding team to be sent to the Himalayan state.

In Islamabad today, the Pakistani opposition launched a furious attack on Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto for withdrawing the resolution.

The Pakistan Muslim League (PML) called it "the biggest foreign policy fiasco in the history of Pakistan," and demanded the resignation of Foreign Minister Sardar Asaf Ahmed Ali and the holding of a parliamentary inquiry.

Banditry, lawlessness on rise in Somalia

WASHINGTON, Mar 10: Banditry and lawlessness are growing in Somalia as US troops leave but the renewed violence is not a direct challenge to US troops that will stay behind, the Pentagon's military chief said Wednesday, reports Reuter.

"I think the situation is very fragile in Mogadishu," army General John Shalikashvili, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters.

"I see a rise of banditry... I see a similar rise of incidents in places like Baidoa," he said, referring to the Somali town Baidoa.

But Shalikashvili stressed there appeared to be no organised effort by Somali factions to challenge UN forces who will remain in the African country to oversee humanitar-

ian relief operations after US forces are gone.

"I don't see this as organised inter-clan fighting or orchestrated challenging of the United Nations," he said. "This is just an increase of lawlessness, banditry."

Nearly 500 US army soldiers and staff from the American combat support hospital pulled out of Mogadishu early Wednesday, leaving just 2,700 troops out of force that once numbered over 25,000 in the famine-stricken nation.

Even if Somalia returns to anarchy and chaos, Shalikashvili said, the United States and other nations can be proud of a successful operation to help feed Somalia.

He will visit Mogadishu this weekend for a final look at the US presence.

BRIEFLY

LTTE kills 4 policemen: Tamil rebels attacked a police post in northwestern Sri Lanka on Thursday, killing four policemen and injuring 12, security officials said, AP reports from Colombo.

The pre-dawn attack came barely two days after Tamil guerilla leader Velupillai Prabhakaran offered to talk peace with the government for the first time in four years.

The rebels suffered no casualties in the attack in a military-controlled area six kilometers (four miles) from Mannar town, the officials said.

UNHRC slams Israel: Israel was slammed by the United Nations Human Rights Commission on Wednesday for rights abuses in Southern Lebanon, including air bombing villages, destroying homes and arbitrarily detaining civilians, reports Reuter from Geneva.

Arab states sponsored a resolution condemning Israel and demanded their withdrawal from all Lebanese territories including its so-called "security zone" in the South.

Forty-eight of the 53 member states voted in favour of the resolution, with only the United States voting against. Israel has only observer status on the body.

Moro rebels free 5 teachers: Muslim rebels Thursday freed five public school teachers they kidnapped in the southern Philippines three days ago, the police said, AP reports from Zamboanga, Philippines.

Police Superintendent Indo Ho said the teachers were turned over by their abductors to government negotiators at about 6am (2200 GMT Wednesday) in the town of Tuburan on Basilan Island, about 880 kilometers (550 miles) south of Manila.

Ho identified the kidnappers as members of the separatist Moro National Liberation Front.

Clashes leave 24 dead in Colombia: Clashes between Marxist rebels and government troops ahead of Sunday's congressional elections have killed 12 guerrillas and 12 soldiers over the past two days, the Defence Ministry said Wednesday, Reuter reports from Bogota.

In the most serious incident, soldiers and Popular Liberation Army rebels battled for hours Tuesday near the town of Urao in Antioquia province 154 miles (280 KM) northwest of the Colombian capital, Bogota, and shot dead nine guerrillas.

Insurgents from another guerilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), ambushed an army patrol early Wednesday near the town of San Luis, also in Antioquia, killing an officer and six men.

5 held for stealing Buddha statues in Myanmar

YANGON, Mar 10: Five men were arrested recently for stealing and illegally selling Buddha statues and antiques from ancient pagodas in Bagan, historical site of Myanmar, according to an official report today, says Xinhua.

Members of Defence Services Intelligence and police exposed and arrested the five thieves acted under the orders of presiding monk Ukesava on January 8.

A total of 78 kinds of antiques and ten statues were found concealed in Minkyaung Monastery of presiding monk Ukesava.

The presiding monk Ukesava said a 13th century craft bronze Buddha statue from Mingalazedi Pagoda, a Bagan era craft bronze Pyin O Lwin Buddha statue, an Inwa era craft bronze statue and an ancient wooden figure of Hintha bird last December, totalling value of 50,000 US dollars.

Mubarak asks Muslim states to work for moderate Islam

CAIRO, Mar 10: Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, speaking on one of Islam's holiest nights during Ramadan, said Muslim militants preached backwardness and distorted a religion that called for enlightenment and progress, reports Reuter.

Mubarak, whose country is facing a rising tide of violence by Muslim militants seeking to destabilise his governments, urged Muslim states across the world to work for moderate Islam to prevail.

"The holy Quran which the terrorists and hypocrites raise as a slogan is innocent of them..." Mubarak said in a speech on Tuesday night, one of the holiest occasions in the Muslim lunar calendar that coincides with the first revelation of the Quran.

"The destructive terrorism is impairing the Islamic nation. Its course of action is evil, aggressive, wicked and inhu-

man... its motives are criminal and its schemes are bloody... it falsely wears the mask of religion, it hides behind the shield of reforms and deceitfully shouts resounding slogans but the aims behind them are misleading."

"Reviewing the condition of our nation pains us, bloodies our hearts and confuses our minds," he said. "What is painful are these negative phenomena which are alien to our nation and religion."

"Prominent among them are obstructive backwardness, contradictions, destructive terrorism, rigid extremism and sharp deviation."

It was one of Mubarak's harshest attacks on fundamentalist groups which have been campaigning since 1992 to topple his government and instal and Islamic state in its place.

The fundamentalists say Egypt's rulers are 'corrupt

infidels who do not rule by god's revelations" and deserve to die.

Muslim militants have killed secular intellectuals, Christians, police and government officials. They have also attacked and killed tourists, devastating the tourist industry, which once earned the country some 3 billion dollar a year. The government estimates it lost about 1 billion dollar in tourist revenue last year.

"Where is the religion in killing innocent people," Mubarak asked in his address at the Islamic Al-Azhar University.

"Where is the godliness and sincerity in adopting behaviours that contradict all the Quranic texts and Islamic teachings?"

Mubarak also questioned whether the Quran condoned the shedding of people's blood because they held different opinions from those of the fundamentalists.

Off the Record



Ruth Handler holds the "Barbie" doll, which she created, during a 35th birthday celebration at the FAO Schwarz Toy Store in New York March 9. The doll is the world's best selling doll with a reported 800 million dolls sold worldwide since 1959.

— AFP photo

Public smoking costs commuter's life

TOKYO: A Japanese commuter died after a fellow passenger kicked him in the face for smoking on a railway platform, police said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

Hideo Sugura, a 57-year-old furniture maker, had defied a demand from a 29-year-old businessman to stop smoking in the "non-smoking" section of the platform at a station near Tokyo.

In a fit of anger, the tall businessman shoved Sugura and then kicked him in the face, a police spokesman said.

The man fell, hit his head hard on the platform and died shortly afterwards, the spokesman added.

"I advised Sugura not to smoke on the non-smoking platform. I kicked him because he refused," police quoted the businessman as telling them after his arrest.

"I didn't know he was dead because I got on my train immediately," he added.

Killer surrenders as 'buried memories' of past pricks his conscience

NEW YORK: A schizophrenic who killed four women in New York, San Francisco and Mexico City in the 1970s surrendered to authorities Wednesday after "long-buried memories" of his past began to re-emerge his lawyer said, reports AP.

Ricardo Silvio Caputo, who voluntarily surrendered to state police, could still be prosecuted for three of the deaths including the 1974 killing of Judith Becker in Yonkers, said his lawyer, Michael Kennedy.

Becker was Caputo's psychotherapist as well as his lover.

Caputo vanished after she was murdered.

Caputo later killed Barbara Taylor in San Francisco and Laura Gomez in Mexico City, Kennedy said.

Caputo was romantically involved with all of his victims, Kennedy said.

Caputo's killing spree began in 1971 when he was 22 years old. He stabbed his fiancée, Natalie Brown, in Manhasset, Long Island, and called police to the scene. He was found mentally incompetent by a Nassau County court and was committed to Matawan State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

At Matawan he met Becker, a psychologist assigned to treat him. She arranged for him to be transferred to the minimum security psychiatric facility at Wards Island in New York City, where Becker arranged furlough privileges.

Caputo and Becker had a love affair for several months until he killed her in October 1974 and then disappeared.

He killed Taylor and Gomez over the course of the next year, Kennedy said.

Wife beaters to face 20yrs jail

MANILA: Filipino wife beaters face up to 20 years in jail and loss of half their salary while awaiting trial under a proposed new law, reports Reuter.

A congressional committee on Wednesday approved the "wife cruelty act", which seeks to curb a growing incidence of wife beating in the Philippines where men cultivate a macho image.

The bill, still to be passed by the male-dominated congress, would give wife-beaters up to 20 years in jail and a battered wife the right to collect immediately at least half her husband's salary.

Violence-prone husbands may also be required to undergo psychiatric tests.



Romain Baumstak, Director of the French House for the Elderly Haras, in Marseilles, comforts 107-year-old Marie-Rose Bonfiglio from Italy March 9 who has lived illegally in France for 104 years following the belated renewal of her French resident's card.

— AFP photo

Blast leaves 8 hurt in Baluchistan

QUETTA, Pakistan, Mar 10: A bomb injured at least eight members of a minority Muslim sect as they were praying at a holy mountain in southwestern Pakistan, police said today, reports Reuter.

The bomb exploded after being tossed into a gathering of the minority Muslim Zikris as they prayed late on Wednesday on one of the holiest nights of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, officials said.

The Zikris, a small, controversial sect that lives in the remote southwestern province of Baluchistan, gather each year to pray at Murad Mountain, about 2,100 km (1,300 miles) southwest of Islamabad.

Officials said the injured were taken to hospital and a police cordon was thrown around the site to prevent further violence. Three of those injured in the explosion were policemen.