

BRIEFLY

9 killed in Indian bus mishap: Nine people, including a woman and her six month old son, were killed and 26 injured when the bus they were travelling in collided head on with a truck, near Deorania on the Nainital road Tuesday night, PTI reports from Bareilly.

The condition of ten of those injured were stated to be critical. According to official sources the private bus which was going to Haldwani from Bareilly at high speed, rolled many times after hitting the truck.

Strong quake jolts NE Japan: A strong earthquake with preliminary magnitude reading of 5.4 shook northeastern Japan early Wednesday, the Meteorological Agency said. There were no immediate reports of damage or injuries, AP reports from Tokyo.

The agency said the earthquake struck at 12:45 am (1545 GMT Tuesday) and was centered 90 km (55 miles) below the ground in Iwate prefecture, about 480 km (300 miles) north of Tokyo.

Weizman ends Egypt trip: Israeli President Ezer Weizman ended his first visit to Egypt as head of state yesterday without securing a guarantee that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak would make a long promised return visit, Reuter says from Cairo.

Weizman, who was defence minister when his country and Egypt signed their historic peace treaty in 1979, held three rounds of talks with Mubarak on the Middle East peace process and also met Egyptian ministers during his three-day visit.

14 die in Vietnam as boat sinks: At least 14 people, most of them women banana-sellers, were killed when a small boat sank in the northern Vietnamese port city of Haiphong, the official Evening News reported yesterday. Reuter reports from Hanoi.

The boat's hull broke 10 minutes after it left a river halt with 26 banana-sellers on board. It sank immediately, the newspaper said. The boat's owner was on the run and police were investigating last week's accident, it added.

14 freeze to death in Moscow: Fourteen people have frozen to death this week as the mercury dipped to record-breaking lows in the Russian capital, Officials said all were drunk, AP reports from Moscow.

Six people froze to death overnight on Moscow's icy streets and 14 were hospitalised with hypothermia, authorities said on Wednesday. Wednesday's low was minus 18 degrees C (0 F).

China to issue new ID cards: China is to issue new hologrammed identity cards as well as new passports to all Chinese in a sweeping move to try to curb fraud, the China Daily said yesterday. Reuter reports from Beijing.

The new methods were necessary to combat criminals employing increasingly sophisticated means to engineer fraud, the newspaper quoted Assistant Minister of Public Security Li Runsen as saying.

2 killed in UK plane crash: A Boeing 737 cargo jet owned by Air Algerie crashed Wednesday on approach to Coventry airport, killing two crew members, authorities said, AP reports from London.

No one on the ground was injured, said Phil Spinks, a coordinator for the West Midlands Ambulance Service. The crash was reported at 0955 GMT in Willenhall, a Coventry suburb about a mile (1500m) northeast of the airport. Spinks said the wreckage was in an open field about 400 yards from a main road.

3 cops held hostage in Brazil: Three police officers in a remote town in Brazil have been taken hostage by farmers protesting against the creation of an Indian reservation nearby, police said on Tuesday. Reuter reports from Rio de Janeiro.

The three men were seized by farmers in the small town of Motesaltes, 500 miles (800 km) from Sao Luis, capital of Maranhao state, a police spokesman in Sao Luis said.

Sweden's 1st female fighter pilot: A 25-year-old woman has completed her four years of training in the Swedish air force to become her country's first female fighter pilot, the air force announced on Tuesday. AFP reports from Stockholm.

Anna Maltinger, 25, joins the sparse ranks of females in the profession. But she does not want to be singled out as special, and has rejected all attempts by the air force to put her in the spotlight.

Burundi clashes leave 15 dead: 15 people were believed to have been killed in clashes between rival Hutu and Tutsi youths in the Burundi capital in the latest outbreak of violence that raged on throughout the night, the government said yesterday. AFP reports from Bujumbura.

27 illegal aliens held in HK: Local police arrested 27 people in Hong Kong during an anti-overstay operation which started at 4 am, according to the government information services. Xinhua reports from Hong Kong.

About 60 police officers were deployed to conduct the 4-hour operation at Chung King Mansion, a notorious place in Tsui Sha Tsui, which is frequently haunted by illegal immigrants.

3 hurt in Moscow blast: Three people were injured early Thursday in an explosion at a cafe in Moscow. ITAR-TASS news agency reported quoting local officials. AFP reports from Moscow.

The blast took place at 05:09 am (0200 GMT) in the south-western suburb of Novo-Peredelkino.

Nicaraguan army chief retires: General Humberto Ortega, commander-in-chief of Nicaragua's armed forces, the People's Sandinista Army (EPS), has officially handed over command of the army to Major General Joaquin Cuadra Lacayo, chief of staff of the EPS. Xinhua reports from Managua.

Child killed by cellmates in S Africa

PORT ELIZABETH, South Africa, Dec 21: A child being held in a city jail died after being attacked by seven young cellmates, police said on Wednesday. reports AP.

Police spokesman Maj Henry Chalmers said the boy, who could not be identified because of his age, was attacked on Friday and died in the hospital on Monday.

Chalmers said the boy told police he was 10, but police believed he may have been older and that he had given a false name. He had been awaiting trial on charges of stabbing a woman.

The boy was sharing a cell with seven other youths, ages 10 to 17. The motive for the attack was not clear.

In South Africa, young offenders often are held in adult prisons and jails. Prison officials estimate there are 650 children awaiting trial here, and more than 715 who have been sentenced.

Chernomyrdin due in Delhi today

Russia keen to reinvigorate defence, trade ties with India

NEW DELHI, Dec 21: Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin visits New Delhi this week for talks with Indian leaders aimed at strengthening military and business ties shaken by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, reports Reuter.

Chernomyrdin postponed his arrival by 24 hours, until Thursday evening, because of the death of a brother, a Russian embassy spokesman said.

The Russian prime minister was scheduled to meet his Indian counterpart, P V Narasimha Rao, and President Shankar Dayal Sharma on Friday before returning home on Saturday.

Chernomyrdin's visit, his first to India, follows a trip by Russian President Boris Yeltsin to New Delhi in 1993 and a return sojourn by Rao to Moscow last June.

The two countries were close allies during the Cold War, when Moscow provided Delhi with most of its military equipment and the former Soviet Union was a faithful buyer of important Indian commodities such as tea, tobacco and spices.

But relations hit a rough patch after the breakup of the Soviet Union. The value of the rouble plunged, disrupting bilateral terms of trade and debt repayments, and India's military suffered a shortage of spare parts.

The high-level efforts over the past two years to reinvigorate ties have been complicated by rising third-country interest in both nations.

The United States is sending Defence Secretary William Perry and Commerce Secretary Ron Brown to India on back-to-back visits next month, underscoring Washington's eagerness to strengthen military and economic ties with the South Asian nation.

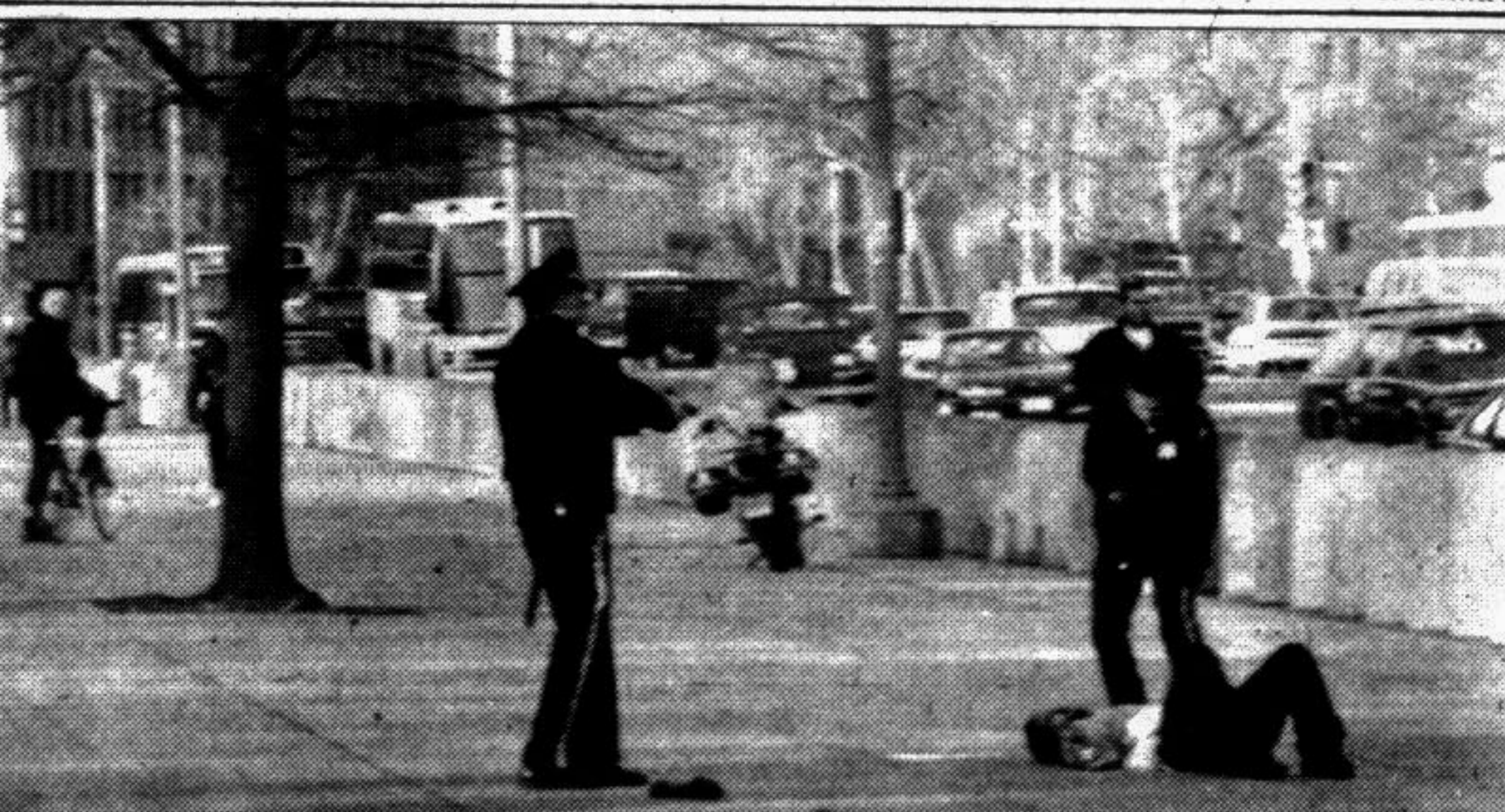
This week New Delhi and Moscow plan to sign pacts on military cooperation, trade, shipping and civil aviation, diplomats said.

The trade agreement will spell out Russian purchases of traditional Indian exports such as tea, tobacco and spices. In exchange, India will buy Russian industrial equipment including an atomic power plant to be built in southern India, the diplomats said.

The thorny issue of India's 10-billion dollars debt to Russia will be also discussed. The Pioneer newspaper reported today the two sides were expected to strike a deal letting India pay part of its 10-billion dollar debt in US dollars. But Russian diplomats said no debt agreement would be signed.

On the political front, the two sides were to discuss Russia's attempt to put down a rebellion in the southern territory of Chechnya as well as India's struggle against separatist militants in Kashmir, diplomats said.

Moscow's efforts to join the World Trade Organisation and New Delhi's bid to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council were also expected to be broached.



An unidentified man lies on the ground as two officers train their weapons on him after a shooting incident in front of the north side of the White House on Tuesday. Witnesses say that the unidentified man was brandishing a large knife or machete and ignored police orders to freeze. The man was shot by police and later taken to the hospital with a chest wound. — AFP photo

Junta defines legal basis to hold Suu Kyi indefinitely

BANGKOK, Dec 21: The Myanmar junta has outlined a legal basis which would enable it to hold leading opposition figure Aung San Suu Kyi indefinitely. The Nation daily reported today, says AFP.

The report coincided with growing international speculation that Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest since July 1989, might be released in January.

In a letter to UN special rapporteur Yozo Yokota, Myanmar Foreign Minister Ohn Gyaw cited a 1975 law which enabled the cabinet to prolong at will the detention of anyone held for anti-government activities, the paper said.

Ohn Gyaw was responding to Yokota's request for identification of the "specific legal authority" governing Aung San Suu Kyi's continuing detention and indication of when she would be freed.

The Nation said without further explanation that it had obtained a copy of Ohn Gyaw's letter.

The minister wrote that the opposition leader had been detained "for her own good and the good of the country and to prevent her from promoting the cause of anti-government elements. The Nation said.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner and daughter of Myanmar independence hero Aung San was also accused of "seditious speeches inciting the people to acts of violence and to cause division in the armed forces and division between the armed forces and the people," the letter said.

Ohn Gyaw was quoted as saying that the 1975 law to safeguard the state against the dangers of those desiring to cause subversive acts allowed for continued detention, with "the prior sanction of the council of ministers."

A central body, consisting of the ministers for home affairs, defence and foreign affairs, has the power to arrest and detain people up to one year.

Further detention, for one-year period up to five years, required the additional approval of the full cabinet, it indicated. The document was not clear on an upper limit for detentions.

Ohn Gyaw's letter said that meetings between Aung San Suu Kyi and the ruling junta "are expected to take place again."



Aung San Suu Kyi

Peace still a distant prospect: Izetbegovic

SARAJEVO, Dec 21: Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic warned Tuesday after former US President Jimmy Carter's announcement of a ceasefire agreement that peace remained a distant prospect, reports AFP.

Izetbegovic was asked at a press conference after Carter's departure whether the way was now open for peace.

"I don't see a chance for peace," he replied in an off the cuff comment. "There is a chance for a ceasefire, even a cessation of hostilities, but limited. Because unlimited means a freezing of the confrontation lines and eternalisation of the conflict."

The Bosnian government has been consistently opposed to a long term truce that would enable Serb separatists to use UN troops as an interposition force to freeze the borders of the territory they control, a situation exemplified in Cyprus where the island has been divided since a Turkish invasion in 1974.

Izetbegovic told the press conference that the Bosnian acceptance of Carter's proposal had been decided "in view of the sufferings of the people."

The Bosnian authorities had no right to eliminate the chance of peace, he said.

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Call for bandh today

Forward Bloc MLA murdered in West Bengal

CALCUTTA, Dec 21: The West Bengal Pradesh Congress (I) committee has called a 24-hour state-wide bandh from 0600 hours tomorrow in protest against the murder of Forward Bloc MLA Ramzan Ali at the MLAs hostel here last night reflecting the "breakdown in the law and order situation in the state," according to the PCC (I) president Somen Mitra, reports PTI.

Condemning the murder, Mitra said that the PCC (I) has demanded an enquiry into the incident in letters to the union Home Minister S B Chavavan and the union Minister of State for Internal Security Rajesh Pilot.

Coup bid: 11 to die in Jordan

AMMAN, Dec 21: Jordan's state security court today sentenced 11 Muslim fundamentalists to death for taking part in a plot to overthrow the government, reports Reuter.

Three other people had death sentences commuted to life terms. Four accused were given long jail sentences and seven were found not guilty.

All 25, on trial since July, had been accused of "terrorist acts and participating in a plot to overthrow the regime."

Many of the men in the group are Jordanians of Palestinian origin who fought in Afghanistan. Three of the 11 who were sentenced to death — a Jordanian, a Yemeni and a Saudi Arabian — were tried in absentia and remain at large.

"We have not been unjust to them," Hafez Amin, head of the three-man military tribunal, told reporters after issuing the verdicts. "They have done injustice to themselves."

Indian court bans movie on Phoolan

NEW DELHI, Dec 21: An Indian court has banned the screening of a controversial movie about India's Badli Queen after she complained that it distorts her life story, reports AP.

The movie about Phoolan Devi, the 37-year-old former bandit who was paroled in February, violates her "personal freedom and dignity," High Court Judge Virendra Jain said Tuesday.

Devi says the film, made by Indian director Shekhar Kapoor in collaboration with Britain's Channel Four television company, twists facts and contains a graphic rape scene involving her.

38 die as troops, Moros clash in Philippines

MANILA, Dec 21: Sixteen government troops and 22 Muslim guerrillas have been killed in a gunbattle over a Japan-funded irrigation dam project in the southern island of Mindanao, the Philippine military chief confirmed today, reports AFP.

Military chief General Arturo Enrile confirmed that 16 soldiers, police and militiamen were slain in the clash, which began early Monday but he disputed claims by the Muslim gunmen's spokesman that they had suffered only one fatality.

Since Monday, government troops and members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have been engaged in a battle over a 54-million dollar Japanese-funded irrigation project in Carmen, 870 kilometers (539 miles) south of Manila.

The project was abandoned by its contractor, Shinsung Corp of South Korea, in October following similar similar skirmishes sparked by a right-of-way dispute between the government and Muslim residents.

Monday's firefight was started by the MILF. Enrile said, adding the military was only responding to an early morning raid by the guerrillas in Alocan, which is also near the irrigation project.

"An army engineering battalion deployed to finish the dam has been unable to continue work due to the attacks."

Another report by Reuter says: Insurgencies in the Philippines, which have killed tens of thousands of people in more than two decades, will soon be a thing of the past, President Fidel Ramos said today.

In a speech marking the 59th anniversary of the armed forces, he said the military would hand over anti-insurgency operations to the police from next year except on the southern island of Mindanao and in some other provinces.

Accord to defuse ME tensions reached

WASHINGTON, Dec 21: Israel and 12 Arab countries have reached agreement on two measures designed to reduce Mideast tensions, reports AP.

One provides for advance notification of exercises involving more than 4,000 troops or 110 tanks. The other calls for exchanging military information.

Fred Axelgard, the State Department official who oversaw the agreements reached last week in Tunisia, said Tuesday that the refusal of Syria and Lebanon to participate minimises their importance.

Still, he called the agreement "a very significant undertaking" in confidence-building between old adversaries.

The 12 Arab countries agreeing to the tension-reducing steps are Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. A Palestinian delegation also approved the measures.

Egypt, meanwhile, is demanding that the Middle East be established as a nuclear-free zone and that Israel open its nuclear facilities. Israel is widely suspected of having either developed or having the technical to produce nuclear weapons.

Off the Record

'Hong Kong' soon to become a planet!

HONG KONG: A Chinese observatory plans to name a minor planet "Hong Kong" in honour of the British colony that reverts to Chinese rule in 1997, a newspaper said Tuesday, reports AP.

China already has named asteroid "Beijing" and "Shanghai" and the observatory wants the planet named before China recovers sovereignty over Hong Kong on July 1, 1997, the Hong Kong Standard said.

"We consider the move of great and far-reaching significance to both China and Hong Kong," Zhang Heqi, director of the prestigious Purple Mountain Observatory in east China, told the newspaper.

Zhang said a Chinese astronomer who discovers a minor planet is allowed to name it, the newspaper said.

The observatory then will apply to the Asteroid Research Center of America to have the name internationally approved, it added.

Zhang said the naming process would start in mid-1995 and was expected to take six to eight months.

Where Xmas spirit isn't lacking

KUALA LUMPUR: The state religion is Islam, but it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas here with the larger than life Santa displays, electric-powered reindeer and red-ribboned fir trees fading fast in the tropical heat, reports AP.

Fewer than one million of Malaysia's 19 million people are Christian, but Christmas is a national holiday and the shops, hotels and restaurants in the capital, Kuala Lumpur, compete to put up the most extravagant Yuletide decorations.

Store owners see Christmas as a way to boost sales, and many Muslims also take part in the shopping spree since it coincides with end-of-the-year bonuses paid by most companies.

The celebrations also get a boost from the Islamic government, which actively promotes a policy of religious tolerance in a diverse society.

Malaysia is one of the few countries that has national holidays recognising four major religions — Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. And it may be the only one that has enthusiastic public celebrations for all of them.

Throughout the city, countless shops have "Merry Christmas" banners out front, trees festooned with ribbons and balls just inside the door, and soundtracks that feature Bing Crosby dreaming of a white Christmas.

He truly would be dreaming in sunny Malaysia, where the December temperature is hovering around 90 degrees F (32 C) and there's been no sign of snow since the last Ice Age.

Chechens form human chain to protest Russian offensive

GROZNY, Dec 21: More Russian rockets slammed into the capital of breakaway Chechnya on Tuesday, and hundreds of thousands of Chechens and their neighbours formed a human chain stretching for kilometers to demand an end to the offensive, reports AP.

Chechnya's leaders, who reportedly sought refuge in a bomb shelter in besieged Grozny, denounced what President Dzhokhar Dudayev called the "mass killing of peaceful citizens." They claimed 120 people had been killed in overnight air raids ending Tuesday morning.

The Russian government acknowledged in a statement that the situation in Grozny "is becoming more and more tragic." But it heaped blame on Dudayev for holding the population "hostage" to his defiant policies and vowed it would clear armed gangs and fighters out of the city within the next few days.

Dudayev issued a statement early Wednesday urging international organisations to pressure Russia to stop the offensive, saying it was "not yet late" to resume talks. Chechnya walked out of earlier negotiations to protest Russia's use of force, and the sides have been unable to agree on terms to restart them.

In Moscow, President Boris Yeltsin, who was released from a hospital a day earlier after nose surgery, met with his prime minister to discuss Chechnya and other issues, the Interfax news agency said.

In an effort to seal off the explosive mountain region, Russia announced on official radio that it was closing its borders with Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Russia sent 10,000 to 40,000 Russian troops into the breakaway region in southern Russia on Dec 11 to end Dudayev's "criminal" regime which declared independence three years ago.

As wet snow fell in the Northern Caucasus, men, women and children clasped hands along the main road through Chechnya and the neighbouring regions of Dagestan to the east and Ingushetia to the west. Like Chechnya, both areas are populated mainly by Muslims.

It was the most serious protest to date against the Russian military action in Chechnya, which has about 1.2 million people.

Some held hands and sang, or waved small flags bearing Chechnya's green, white and red colours. Handwritten signs proclaimed "Freedom to Chechnya."

Entire villages stood at the roadside waving at cars, in a protest initiated by Dudayev and the Confederation of Caucasian Peoples.

"Allah Akbar" — God is great — some demonstrators chanted.

In one village, a woman held a baby with a placard hanging from the child's neck reading "Yeltsin, I want to live."

Elsewhere in Russia, too, majorities opposed the Kremlin's offensive.

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An old woman stands weeping on Tuesday in Grozny near the remains of her house destroyed by a bomb blast Monday evening. Russian troops pounded the Chechen capital with fierce artillery fire on Tuesday after a night of air raids. — AFP photo

Mexican troops occupy town in Chiapas

SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS, Mexico, Dec 21: Hundreds of police and army troops late Tuesday occupied a town at the heart of a resurgent Indian rebellion, countering a guerrilla show of force with their own, reports AP.

Soldiers and state police were occupying the town of Sintojoel around 8:30 pm (0130 GMT), said Joel Padron, the community's parish priest.

"We are very worried because the weapons of both groups are very close to each other and to the people of this community," Padron said in a telephone interview. "This is a truly dangerous situation. We must seek a dialogue."

The threat of new violence was the first crisis for the 20-day-old government of President Ernesto Zedillo, who also had to authorize a 14 per cent drop in Mexico's currency Tuesday in hopes of reassuring jittery foreign investors.