

## Violence mars ME peace prospects

JERUSALEM, Jan 9: Violence flared once again in the Middle East and negotiations faded as Israelis and Arabs accused one another of wrecking hope for peace, reports Reuter.

Israeli warplanes thundered over Lebanon on Wednesday, bombing suspected targets of Hezbollah guerrillas in quick retaliation for a Katyusha rocket strike at the Jewish state and attacks on its soldiers.

A Hezbollah spokesman denied the Islamic militants fired the Katyusha but the tit-for-tat war waged between the Jewish state and the guerrillas continued.

In Jerusalem, a US envoy struggled to salvage an Israeli-PLO deal on the West Bank town of Hebron amid Arab calls on Israel to respect old deadlines.

"There is a constant attempt by the other side to delay implementation of the agreement," said Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a direct reference to his peace partner, Palestinian President Yasser Arafat.

"Apparently there is a decision on the other side not to

complete the negotiations," Netanyahu told reporters.

Jordan's King Hussein, Israel's closest Arab ally, raised the spectre of war after meeting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in the southern resort town of Awan.

"We feel extremely concerned if the situation doesn't evolve into peace, which is what we hope for," King Hussein told a joint news conference when asked if the new tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbours could lead to war.

Mubarak said if the Palestinians lost confidence in Israeli promises, it would "mess things up" and Syria would not rejoin peace talks with Israel.

PLO officials described the gaps in talks on a long-elusive accord that would extend Palestinian rule to most of Hebron as "very wide" and accused Netanyahu of trying to renege on Israeli commitments.

Both sides said the sticking point had less to do with Hebron than with three further transfers of West Bank areas to Palestinian control.

## Ammonia gas leak in Lahore slum kills 20

LAHORE, Jan 9: Deadly ammonia gas leaked from a truck and overcame sleeping residents of a Lahore slum, killing at least 20 people and hospitalising hundreds more, officials said Thursday, reports AP.

The accident occurred shortly before midnight on Wednesday in the Mogul Pura neighbourhood on the northern edge of this city in eastern Punjab province.

The flatbed truck was carrying more than 30 cylinders of ammonia.

Authorities said it appeared the shoddily made cylinders were knocked together when truck hit several bumps in the road, causing the leak. The truck driver did not even know the leaks had occurred, officials said.

There are no regulations for the transport of hazardous materials in Pakistan.

Mogul Pura is a congested area that is home to the poorest railway workers. They live in homes made from cheap materials, including dried mud and corrugated iron.

"Panic gripped the locality when the poisonous gas en-

gulfed the whole area," said the Associated Press of Pakistan.

Bushra Bibi, a neighbourhood resident, said people ran toward the truck but were overcome by the fumes. Others tried to spray the truck and authorities believe that may have worsened the situation.

Fire trucks roared to the scene and flooded the area in an attempt to dissipate the gas, the APP said.

Police and hospital officials said 20 people were killed.

The accident was especially deadly because most of the neighbourhood's residents were sleeping when the gas seeped through the neighbourhood, witnesses said.

"I woke up and there was this horrible smell... I got up but I collapsed," said one resident who gave his name only as Hafeez. "It was horrible... I felt like I couldn't breathe. The same thing happened to my wife."

Several of the dead were women and small children. Five members of one family died in their sleep.

The army was called in to evacuate nearly 1,000 people to

nearby schools where emergency workers set up beds. Police were investigating the incident.

A survivor, Arif Din, complained about the police who apparently took up to two hours to arrive on the scene after the accident.

There were no police... if not for the army this would have been a much greater disaster," said Din. Who lost five members of his family.

In the streets cattle died where they fell. Birds were strewn on the road overcome by the noxious fumes, according to several news reports and eyewitnesses.

Most of the dead and injured were carried to the hospital on horse-drawn carts, rickshaws and on the backs of friends and relatives.

Punjab Governor Khwaja Tariq Rahim declared an emergency at government-run hospitals. Hundreds of people clogged the corridors as they recovered from the accident.

Rahim said residents were expected to be able to return to their homes later Thursday.

## Milosevic admits opposition won Nis council polls

BELGRADE, Jan 9: President Slobodan Milosevic has made his first significant concession after 52 days of street protests, admitting that the opposition won disputed municipal elections in Serbia's second city of Nis, reports Reuter.

But the opposition has vowed no let up in demonstrations and Belgrade students plan a blockade today to test the will of police barring the path of their daily protest marches.

"Suppose Milosevic takes from you 10,000 dollars and after 50 days of demonstrating he accepts finally to give you back dollar 6,000, would you be ready to accept this?" said Vuk Draskovic, one leader of the Zajedno (Together) opposition coalition.

Official news agency Tanjug said the government agreed that Zajedno had won Nis after a Justice Ministry inquiry ordered by Milosevic last month.

"On the basis of documents inspected by the Justice Ministry, the Zajedno Political Organisation won 37 seats, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) 32 and the Serbian Radical Party one seat in Nis local council," Tanjug said.

Zajedno leaders vowed protests would continue and said they had won 41 council seats, not 37.

## SC asks Indian jails to spruce up in 6 months

NEW DELHI, Jan 9: Indian's Supreme Court in a landmark order Wednesday gave the country's prisons six months to spruce up, put an end to the torture of prisoners and avoid overcrowding, reports AFP.

Officials said the order of the Apex Court was binding on India's 1,000 plus federal and provincial penitentiaries.

A three-judge bench told state and federal authorities to make "our prisons, houses of reform" by ending overcrowding, torture as well as neglect of health and hygiene of hundreds of thousands of inmates.

"Let the dawning ray of hope see the end of gloom cast on the faces of the majority of prisoners and let a new awakening percolate every prison, wall, the three-judge bench said in the first such order issued by the court.

The sweeping directions came on the petition of an inmate of a federal prison in Bangalore, and subsequent investigations by a lower court judge conducted on the orders of the Apex Court in 1993.

The Supreme Court also directed India's prison authorities to obey recommendations of several experts' committees set up in the past on prison reforms and called for a model manual

for jail houses.

The three judges also called for new legislation to replace the existing Indian Prison Act of 1894 saying the British-enforced law was obsolete.

"If the court's suggestions are taken in all seriousness and prisons become reform houses themselves, the social and economic costs of incarceration would become more worthwhile," it said.

"We cannot afford to fail in this sphere as a sound prison system is a crying need of our time in the backdrop of the great increase in the numbers of prisoners and that too of various types and from different strata of society."

The judges said overcrowding could be taken care of by recourse to alternative site fines, civil commitment and probation as well as release on parole.

A system of remissions, prison leave and early release should be seriously considered and a decision taken in six months, they said.

Indian prisons house hundreds of thousands of inmates, a majority of them behind bars for up to two years without conviction as the country's courts remain swamped with a backlog of some five million cases.

## BRIEFLY

### President Yeltsin hospitalised:

Russian President Boris Yeltsin has been admitted to the Central Clinical Hospital after showing signs of pneumonia, Yeltsin's Press Secretary Sergei Yastrzhembsky said late Wednesday on Radio Echo Moscow, AFP reports from Moscow.

Yeltsin's press service said that the president's illness is in its first stages and that he is likely to remain in the hospital for a few days. The announcement, which cited "first elements of tests by doctors," came after a Kremlin spokesman told AFP that Yeltsin was shaking off a heavy cold at his suburban Moscow home.

### King Fahd telephones Assad:

King Fahd of Saudi Arabia spoke over the telephone with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad on Wednesday to ask about his health after undergoing successful prostate surgery, AFP reports from Riyadh.

The Saudi monarch, himself hospitalised in December 1995 after a stroke, hailed the "surgery's success and wished the Syrian head of state a quick recovery," the official Saudi press agency said. In Damascus, the official Syrian news agency said Assad is to take several days of bed rest but gave no further details of the operation which was announced on Tuesday.

### Car bomb scare in Algiers:

Security forces sealed off a district of the Algerian capital Wednesday to deal with a suspected car bomb, a day after a blast killed at least seven people in the same area, AFP reports from Algiers.

But despite rumours to the contrary, there had been no repeat of Tuesday's huge car bomb blast in an around Algiers by yesterday afternoon, according to various sources.

### Army officer shot dead in Spain:

A Spanish army officer was shot dead outside his Madrid home on Wednesday, emergency services said, AFP reports from Madrid.

Military personnel are frequent targets of the Basque separatist organisation ETA. Also Wednesday, an explosion rocked a supermarket near the site of the shooting and one person was injured, witnesses said. There were two assailants in the shooting, a man and woman, a witness told a Spanish radio station.

### Mobutu in France for treatment:

Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko flies to France yesterday to consult doctors about his health amid the growing crisis in the Central African nation where rebels control a strip of territory in the east, Reuter reports from Kinshasa.

Mobutu will return to his villa in the south of France for consultations with doctors, his spokesman told Reuters. Since coming home three weeks ago, Mobutu effected a major reshuffle in the government and the army high command in preparation for an intended counter-attack on positions held by rebels who have seized a large tract of eastern Zaire.

### Gunmen kill 3 in S Africa:

At least three people were shot dead and 15 wounded when the two minibuses they were travelling in were ambushed by gunmen in South Africa's remote Tugela Valley area, police said Wednesday, AFP reports from Weenen.

## Fujimori unlikely to give in to rebels' demands

CHACACAYO, Peru, Jan 9: In a whirlwind tour of dusty shantytowns that resembled an election campaign, Peru's president told hundreds of residents that he can do what leftist rebels holding 74 hostages can not — give them a better future, reports AP.

Shaking hands with well-wishers as he made the rounds in his four-wheel-drive vehicle, Alberto Fujimori told Peruvians — and dozens of reporters in tow — that his government is helping its citizens escape poverty.

And he had something to say Wednesday to the Tupac Amaru guerrillas who have occupied the home of Japan's ambassador since Dec. 27: No negotiations.

"Negotiation means exchanging favours," Fujimori said, flatly rejecting rebel demands that he release about 300 jailed guerrillas.

"We are not going to allow the release of terrorists who

have killed, who have assassinated, who have committed crimes against the people and against the nation," Fujimori said. "There are no (Tupac Amaru) followers here. Here, everyone is for peace. Everyone is for development."

He chose Chacacayo, an impoverished district of factories, half-built homes and unpaved streets 20 miles (30 kilometers) east of Lima, to emphasise the point.

Long a hotbed of political activism, the town nestled against the rocky foothills of the Andes has struggled with extreme poverty that helped spawn the 17-year Maoist Shining Path insurgency and smaller Tupac Amaru Movement.

"For many years, this was an area where violence reigned," said Fujimori, whose administration declared victory over the Shining Path and Tupac Amaru in the mid-1990s after capturing their principal leaders.



Jemima Goldsmith (centre), wife of Pakistani cricketer-turned politician Imran Khan stands with a group of women during an election campaign in Lahore yesterday. Khan, who launched his Movement for Justice party last year, is contesting the forthcoming February 3 polls. — AFP photo

## US drafting plan to pay over \$1b debt to UN

WASHINGTON, Jan 9: The Clinton administration is drafting a plan to pay the United Nations more than \$1 billion dollar the United States owes, but has not decided how long it will take, a State Department official says, reports AP.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the department, the Treasury and the White House were working to present a coordinated strategy that would be acceptable to Congress.

"There's momentum with a new secretary-general who wants to reform (the world body), a new administration, a new secretary of state who served at the UN," the official

said Wednesday.

The official said a decision on what the United States was going to do should be made in the next six months, before the United Nations locks up its program for 1998 and 1999.

Asked whether the debt payment would be made over two years, the official said, "a lot of ideas were being tossed around" and we "just have to wait and see what sticks."

The United States owes \$1.3 billion to the world body and is by far its largest debtor. The United Nations, owed \$3.2 billion by member countries, is facing the worst financial crisis in its history.

Secretary of State-designate

Madeleine Albright, who has served as UN ambassador during President Bill Clinton's first term, referred to the US debt during her Senate confirmation hearings Wednesday, saying it irritated other nations.

She said the United States was "the world's richest, strongest and most respected nation. We're also the largest debtor to the United Nations and the international financial institutions."

Albright told members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee she wanted "to work with you to pay our bills and to spur continued reform at the United Nations."



An Iraqi child passes Wednesday in front of the ruins of a building destroyed overnight in a mortar attack on Iranian opposition in Baghdad which killed one Iraqi civilian and wounded dozens. The mortar rounds, launched from a truck, targeted the offices of the People's Mujahadeen in the Iraqi capital, but hit a health laboratory, a hospital and an Iraqi writers' bureau instead. — AFP/UNB photo

## UK accepts permanent end to N-tests

LONDON, Jan 9: Britain will shortly announce that it has accepted a permanent end to testing for its nuclear weapons, according to a report Friday in the London newspaper The Guardian, says AP.

The paper quoted an unnamed source close to test-ban treaty negotiations in Geneva as saying it has agreed instead to use US techniques that use instruments to simulate test explosions in order to maintain the safety of its nuclear arsenal.

There was no immediate comment from Prime Minister John Major's government on the report.

The paper's diplomatic editor Ian Black quoted the source as saying that Britain will announce the move this month. Black said it follows President Clinton's announcement last month backing a "true zero test ban" by the United States.

Up to present, Britain has reserved the right to conduct test explosions involving a low yield of fissile material.

Britain is one of the world's five declared nuclear powers. It has no test facilities of its own and used to test its missiles at the US site in the Nevada desert but followed a US moratorium on testing in 1992.

Black quoted the source as saying that a permanent end to testing would make it harder to develop new warheads.

He quoted the source as saying: "The further the scientists get from being able to test with all their instruments in the field or in the lab, the harder it becomes. They lose confidence and the spark goes out of it for them."

## Nikolai Dobrev new Bulgarian PM

SOFIA, Jan 9: Bulgaria's powerful interior Minister Nikolai Dobrev, nominated as Prime Minister to head a new socialist government during a severe economic crisis, owes his political rise to tough anti-crime tactics, reports Reuter.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party's coalition allies approved the party's nomination of Dobrev on Wednesday.

President Zhelyu Zhelev is expected to give him a mandate to form a new cabinet on Friday and ask parliament within seven days to approve his nomination and vote on the new cabinet.

Dobrev, 49, came into the limelight in May when he became Interior Minister after his predecessor Lyubomir Nachev was dismissed for failing to deal with escalating crime.

Investigations of white collar crime, dramatic arrests of alleged gangsters and stepped up police road checks marked out Dobrev's ascent to power.

He emerged as an outspoken critic of Prime Minister Zhan Videnov at last month's party congress where he attacked the cabinet's record in handling the country's economic and social crisis and raised the previously taboo issue of government corruption.

Videnov resigned at the congress on December 21. Sparking a showdown between party hardliners and reformists.

Sikh bodyguards in New Delhi assassinated Mrs. Gandhi by gunning her down at her home. On Friday, police and federal experts in Chandigarh tried to determine if security lapses enabled the militants to plant the bomb inside Khalsa's car, which is guarded round-the-clock.

Meanwhile, Indian officials condemned the militant assassins and said the insurgents remained doomed to failure.

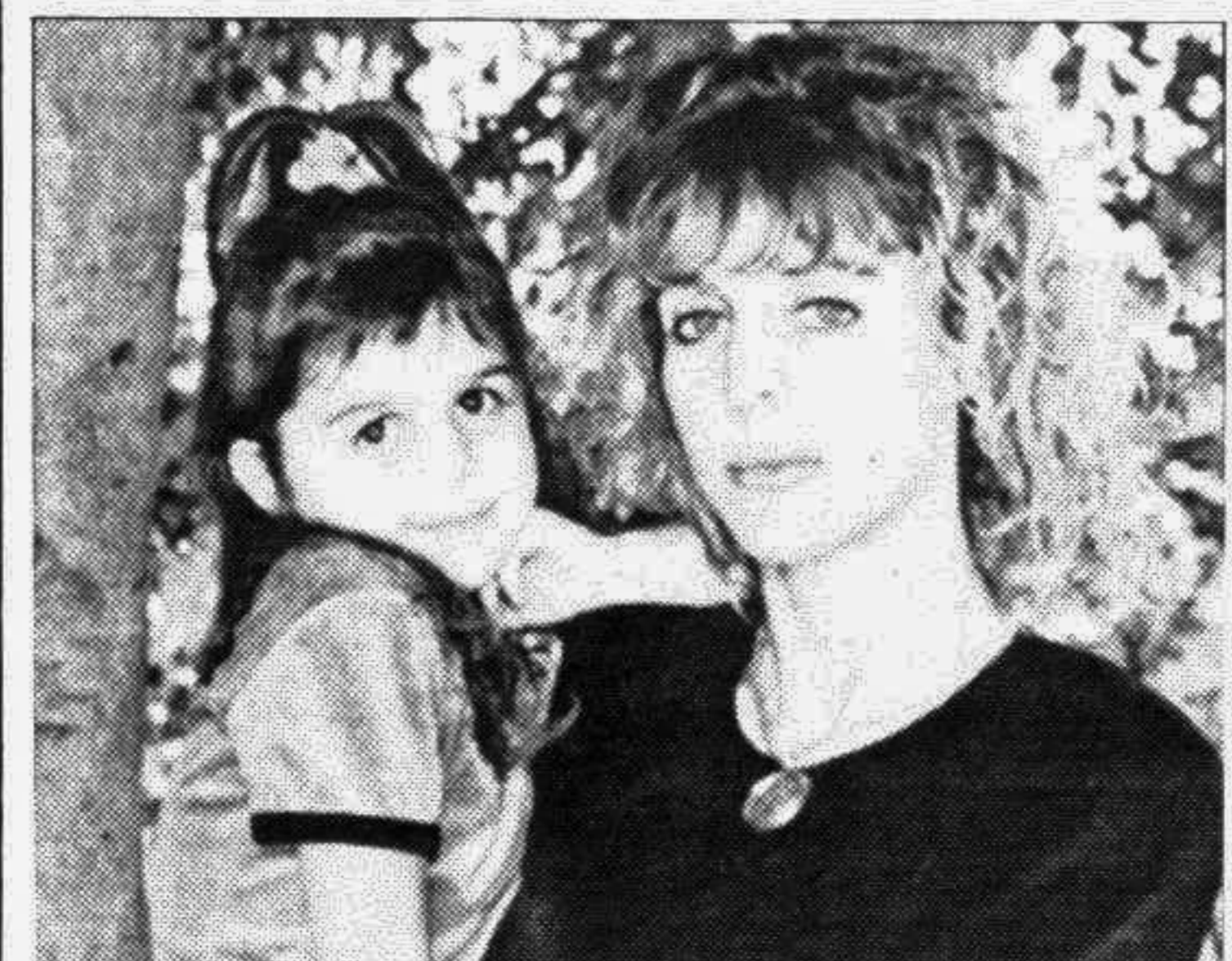
"The culprits cannot get away and will be tracked down soon," said Shankarrao Chavan, India's Home Minister.

"If by such cowardly acts the terrorists think they can reassert themselves, they are mistaken," said Buta Singh, a Sikh Cabinet minister in the federal government.

In 1984, Indian forces following the orders of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi raided Sikhism's holiest shrine, the Golden Temple in Amritsar city, to flush out religious leaders and militants.

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## Off the Record



British heiress Sita White poses with her four and a half year old daughter Tyrian White in Beverly Hills, Wednesday. Sita White filed a paternity suit against Imran Khan on January 6 in Los Angeles claiming Khan is the father of Tyrian. Kahn, who has ambitions to become Prime Minister of Pakistan, has thirty days to provide a blood sample in the lawsuit. — Reuters/UNB photo

## Message for 'sex tourists'

BANGKOK: Foreigners seeking sex with Thai prostitutes, stay home, reports AP.

That's the message Thai embassies around the world plan to promote with new brochures in English, Chinese and Arabic warning so-called "sex tourists" of recently strengthened laws against child prostitution. The Nation newspaper reported Thursday.

The law punishes clients of prostitutes aged between 15 and 17 — a category including thousands of girls — with up to three years in prison. Sentences of up to 20 years can be imposed for clients using younger prostitutes.

## Woman's brain may shrink during pregnancy

LONDON: Pregnant women who complain of failing memory and concentration may be experiencing symptoms of a shrinking brain, according to a medical study released in London on Thursday, reports AFP.

As some women grow large in the course of pregnancy, their brains may shrink, said the findings of a group of anaesthetists and radiologists at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School in London.

## LTTE launches major attacks on 2 army camps

COLOMBO, Jan 9: Hundreds of Tamil separatist rebels launched major attacks early Thursday on two northern military camps, a government minister said, reports AP.

Terrorists in large numbers tried to infiltrate the military camps at Elephant Pass and Paranthan, Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte told Parliament.

"It was a massive attack and troops are doing their best to repulse the attacks," he said.

The minister said details of the attacks were not immediately known as fighting was continuing.

Paranthan lies between government bases at Elephant Pass, the strategic gateway to the Jaffna Peninsula, and the town of Kilinochchi, which was recently captured by government troops.

The attack appeared to be aimed at isolating troops in Kilinochchi town, from those being massed at Paranthan for a new offensive further south

from there, said military officials speaking on condition of anonymity.

The rebels had managed to infiltrate about one kilometre into the Elephant Pass camp and destroy several long-range artillery guns, officials said.

In July 1991, 600 rebels and 200 soldiers were killed when the military thwarted a guerrilla siege of Elephant Pass army base.

## Fate of 144 unknown

Another report says: The fate of 144 people aboard a ferry that was seized by Tamil separatist rebels to lure naval gunboats into a fight remained unknown, a military official said Friday.

Since Tuesday, warships and aircraft have kept the ferry, Iris Moana, under surveillance from a distance, fearing that raids to rescue civilians could endanger the passengers and crew.

## China plans to set up force to curb illegal migration

BEIJING, Jan 9: China plans to set up a force to prevent its citizens from illegally emigrating to other countries, an official report said Thursday, says AP.

Police and immigration officials plan to improve cooperation with Chinese embassies and consulates in other countries and to tighten controls on the issue of tourist passports, the newspaper China Daily reported.

Repeated discoveries of criminal networks smuggling Chinese into the United States and other countries have increased the need to improve controls.

## Sikh rebels claim responsibility for killing Punjab's top official

CHANDIGARH, India, Jan 9: A Sikh separatist group that remained in operation after Indian forces crushed an insurgency in Punjab state three years ago claimed responsibility Friday for killing the state's top elected official, reports AP.

The Babbar Khalsa International militants faxed a statement to the United Nations of India news agency in New Delhi saying they had assassinated Punjab's chief minister, Beant Singh.

Singh and 12 other people were killed Thursday afternoon when plastic explosives planted inside his bulletproof car blew up as he stepped into it outside his heavily-guarded government building in Chandigarh, the capital of Punjab.

Singh's car and two others

were ripped apart by the blast. The dead included Singh's armed guards. Their mutilated bodies were flung over the concrete porch of the 10-story state secretariat building and many of its windows were blown out.

By 1992, Punjab's police, helped by federal troops, had ruthlessly crushed a 10-year-old separatist insurgency in Punjab, but at least three rebel groups survived, police said.

During the fighting, a dozen militant outfits were demanding a Sikh homeland called Khalistan, or "Land of the Pure." Punjab is the only state in mostly Hindu India with a Sikh majority.

Babbar Khalsa International was one of the fiercest rebel groups and like many others, India accused it of receiving

arms and training from India's archenemy, neighbouring Pakistan. Islamabad has repeatedly denied that.

"Beant Singh had come on top of our hit list after he betrayed our Sikh community. We had to give the death sentence to him because of this," said the Babbar Khalsa International statement, which was faxed to United News of India.

It was signed by the group's two leaders, Wadhwa Singh and Mahal Singh. Police say they are based in Pakistan.

In 1984, Indian forces following the orders of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi raided Sikhism's holiest shrine, the Golden Temple in Amritsar city, to flush out religious leaders and militants.

Later that year, two of her

ing powers to arrest suspects. Hundreds of militants were killed in encounter with the police after he came to power. Human rights organizations alleged that police staged the encounters.

The Sikh militants said the federal government was denying Sikhs their religious rights, a charge New Delhi denied. More than 15,000 people were killed in the uprising in Punjab, one of India's wealthiest states and its breadbasket farming region.

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## 2 MRTA members seek asylum in Denmark

COPENHAGEN, Jan 9: Two members of the Peruvian Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA), which is holding 74th hostages at the Japanese Embassy in Lima, have asked Denmark for political asylum, the Danish news agency Ritzu reported Wednesday, says AFP.

The agency said the two MRTA militants were currently in Uruguay.

The two, whose names were not given, contacted a human rights organisation and asked it to forward their request for asylum to the Danish rights organisation, International Forum, the report said.

International forum said Uruguay had not so far agreed to extradite the two.