

Yeltsin warns against changing constitution

MOSCOW, Dec 12: President Boris Yeltsin Saturday said the five-year-old constitution has provided stability for Russia and he warned against making any changes that would return the country to its communist past, reports AP.

In a radio speech marking Constitution Day, Yeltsin said any changes to the constitution should be introduced with great care.

Those feeling nostalgia for the old order have launched a discussion in favour of replacing the present constitution, Yeltsin said. "They are calling for vesting parliament with all possible powers. They are effectively proposing that the country revert to being a republic of Soviets."

Yeltsin said he was absolutely opposed to replacing the constitution. "I think this would be deadly for the country," he said.

Russia, an immense country, must have powerful supreme authorities, Yeltsin said in the pre-recorded address. "Without such authorities we will not be able to deal with the acute problems Russia is facing."



US President Bill Clinton

BRIEFLY

Lankan troops kill 17 rebels:

Clashes between separatist guerrillas and army soldiers in the war-torn north left 17 rebels dead, the military said yesterday. AP says from Colombo.

Five rebels were killed by soldiers near the government controlled Oddusuddan town in northeastern Mullaitivu district on Friday, the Defence Ministry said. In separate confrontations in nearby districts Friday, troops gunned down 12 rebels, the military said.

3 die in mass brawl in Indonesia: Three people were killed and two others were reported missing after a massive brawl between residents from two villages on the tourist island of Bali in Indonesia, local media said yesterday. AP reports from Jakarta.

At least 17 people were injured during the fight in the island's Buleleng district, state-run Antara news agency reported. Five cars were burned and 25 houses damaged in the brawl, it said. The daily Kompas reported Saturday that the fight broke out early on the previous day when seven people visiting a friend in another village were beaten up by a mob consisting of hundred of village residents.

Kavi Pradeep dead: Famous poet-lyricist Kavi Pradeep, whose song "Ae Mere Watan Ke Logon" brought tears to the eyes of the country's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in the early '60s in the wake of the Chinese aggression, died here on Friday. PTI reports from Mumbai.

The 83-year-old winner of the 1997-98 Dada Saheb Phalke Award who not only wrote but also sang many of his immortal lyrics, died of an acute bronchitis attack at his residence, a family friend told PTI. Pradeep, whose real name was Ramchandra Narayanji Dwivedi, was hospitalised for a heart ailment three days ago and was discharged but developed bronchitis Friday.

Typhoon kills 5 in Philippines: The toll from Typhoon Faith's swift but deadly rampage across the central Philippines rose to at least five dead and 29 missing, disaster officials and reports said yesterday. AFP reports from Zamboanga.

Coast guard officials said 11 fishermen were reported missing and four were rescued after the boat, Myra-1, sank in heavy seas off Pilas Island in the southern Philippines.

French United Nations aid worker kidnapped in southern Russia last January has been freed and is expected to arrive in Moscow Saturday, a news agency reported. AP says from Moscow.

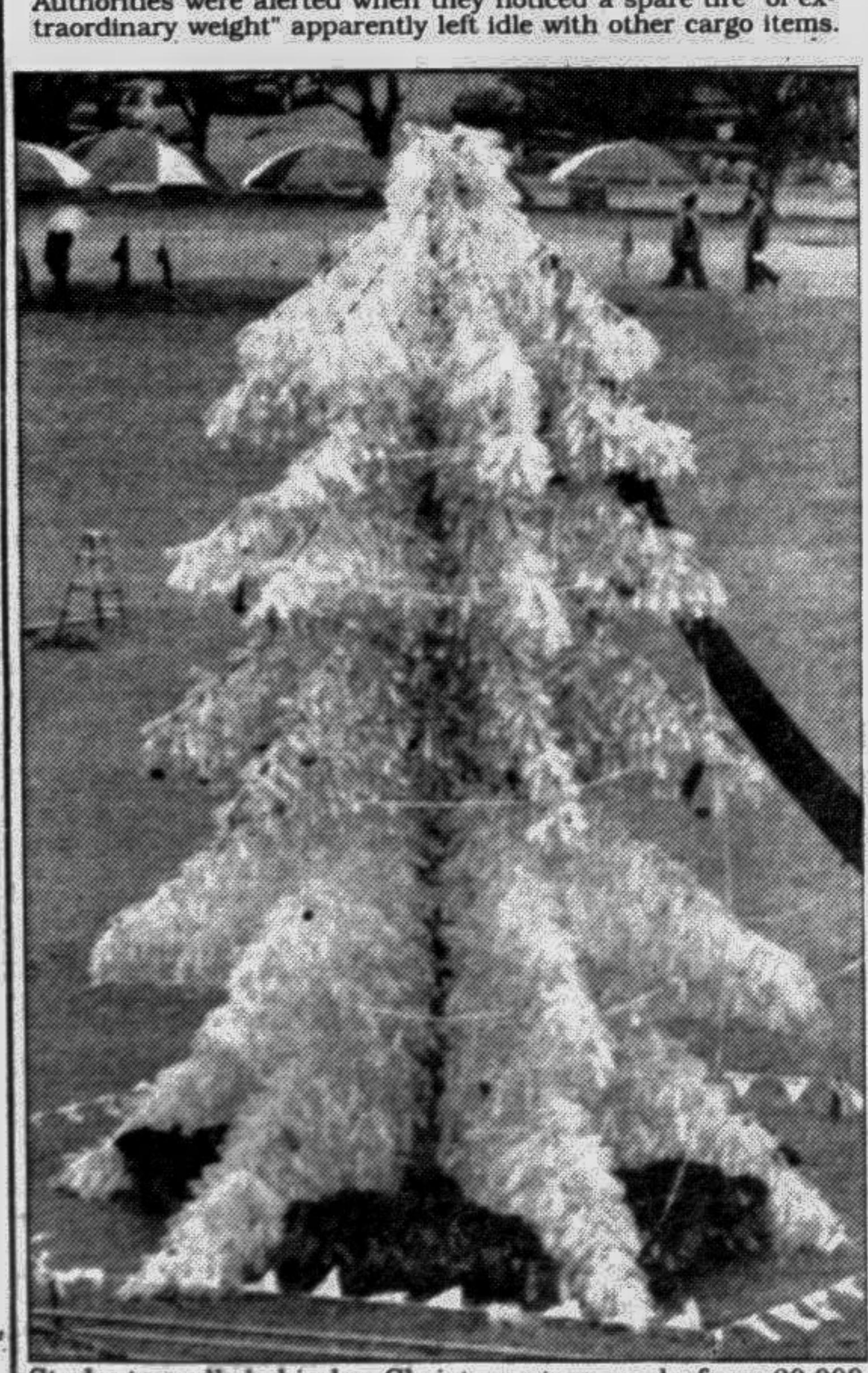
Vincent Cochetel, 37, who headed the regional office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in North Ossetia near breakaway Chechnya, was seized by three masked gunmen in his apartment in the region's capital of Vladikavkaz on Jan 29.

Blast kills 19 in Brazil: Nineteen people were killed and dozens injured Friday when a fireworks factory blew up in the Brazilian town of Santonio de Jesus, police said, AFP says from Rio de Janeiro.

Eyewitnesses said the explosion was caused by someone smoking a cigarette. A police spokesman told AFP most of the dead and injured were women. One child was also killed.

156 kg cocaine seized in HK: Authorities in Hong Kong seized 156 kg of high-grade cocaine found hidden in an aircraft tire, customs officers said yesterday. AP says from Hong Kong.

The drugs, worth 23 million US dollars, were found when customs officers inspected a cargo aircraft undergoing maintenance, customs chief Chan Hon-kit told reporters. Authorities were alerted when they noticed a spare tire "of extraordinary weight" apparently left idle with other cargo items.



Students walk behind a Christmas tree made from 20,000 plastic bottles at Hengyi Middle School in a Taipei suburb Friday. The tree was erected as part of a school programme to promote recycling. Christmas is growing in popularity amongst children in Taiwan, where the vast majority of people are Buddhists.

— AP/UNB photo

International

Fate awaits Clinton

WASHINGTON, Dec 12: In silence, President Bill Clinton turned his back and left the reporter's question hanging — Would he resign if impeached by the House? — in the twilight chill of the Rose Garden.

The door to the Oval Office held open for him, Clinton slipped back into his private sanctuary. His dog, Buddy, was there as the president waited to see if his latest apology could favourably alter his fate, reports AP.

"I would give anything to go back and undo what I did," Clinton told reporters hastily summoned to the garden Friday. "I understand that accountability demands consequences and I'm prepared to accept them."

His 11th-hour appeal for a penalty less than impeachment was his most dramatic move yet in the White House campaign to see the president punished on his own terms by Congress and the nation.

"Should they determine that my errors of word and deed require their rebuke and censure, I am ready to accept that," Clinton said. "Meanwhile, I will continue to do all I can to reclaim the trust of the American people and to serve them well."

Having said his piece, the president turned his focus — outwardly, at least — to the delicate business of diplomacy and

prepared for this weekend's trip to the Middle East with first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and their daughter, Chelsea.

"That is simply all I can do — the work of the American people," the president said.

His awkwardly timed four-day peace mission comes as advisers, Cabinet members and allies scramble to figure their next move.

A senior presidential adviser, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the address did little good. Fence-straddling lawmakers, particularly moderate Republicans, still want him to concede that he lied under oath. Clinton was urged by some aides to do that Friday, "but he wouldn't do it," the adviser said. "Not yet."

Aides would not rule out yet another personal appeal from Clinton. "You could call it opening the bidding," one senior adviser said after Friday's statement. It concluded just minutes before the first of three House Judiciary Committee votes recommending Clinton's removal from office for his conduct in the Monica Lewinsky affair.

Clinton mustered the full weight of presidential symbolism even as the pages of his speech shook in his hands and he faced television cameras without the phalanx of aides who would otherwise fill out the

frame. Before Clinton emerged alone from the Oval Office to deliver the rehearsed statement, two junior-level aides fussed with a pair of flags — the Stars and Stripes and the navy-blue banner emblazoned with the presidential seal — and posed at the lectern to make sure they perfectly framed the president's shoulders.

So fixed was Clinton's solemn gaze as he stepped to bump the microphone that he bumped his right shoulder into one of the colonnade's thick pillars.

Clinton's statement, which went no further than his earlier acknowledgments that he "misled" people and committed "errors of word and deed," was intended to buy time by holding undecided House members in line before the full House votes as early as next Friday.

Rep. Billy Tauzin, a Louisiana Republican, said he remains undecided on whether to vote for impeachment but was disappointed that the president did not admit he lied. "It's time for this president to tell the truth," Tauzin said.

Some outside the White House, including congressional Democrats, have suggested that Clinton accept a stiff fine in addition to censure.

Punia Devi told The Week magazine that her in-laws forced her into marrying the eight-year-old brother of her husband who was massacred in a caste conflict so that the compensation money would stay within the family, a newsweekly reported, reports AP.

Punia Devi, 18, with husband Dhaman Chaudhury, 8.

— AP/UNB photo

Death toll expected to cross 100

87 confirmed dead in Thai air crash

SURAT THANI, Thailand, Dec 12: As rescue workers combed through the wreckage of a Thai Airways jetliner Saturday searching for survivors and the bodies of victims, police said they expect the final death toll from the crash to total 101 people, reports AP.

Thailand's Transport and Communications Minister, Suthep Thaugsuban, said that of the 146 on board, 87 people were confirmed dead and 45 had survived. Suthep's sister, Siriwat, was among the victims

killed in the crash.

The remaining 14 people were still missing, but police said they doubted any more survivors would be found.

Burned and bruised corpses were lined up on the floor of the passenger terminal at Surat Thani airport, and police said they were having difficulty identifying some of the dead.

At the scene of the crash in a muddy swamp, workers using specially-designed equipment cut through what remained of the jet's fuselage to extract bodies and anyone who might still be alive inside.

Battling a heavy rainstorm, Thai Airways Flight TG261, an Airbus A310-200, plunged into the swamp at around 6:45 pm on Friday after bursting into flames.

Earlier reports said it crashed about five kilometres from the airport, but the airline later gave the distance as about 700 metres from the air strip.

It was the third attempt by the jetliner to land at Surat Thani, a fishing port and travel hub for vacation resorts located 530 kilometres southwest of Bangkok.

"We don't know yet. It's very difficult to guess, we cannot guess, it has to be investigated," said Thai Airways President Thamnoon Wanglee when asked about the cause of the crash.

The passengers were mostly Thais. Of the 25 foreigners on board, 11 had survived, including three Japanese. Three of the foreigners, including one Japanese citizen, were confirmed dead and the rest were still missing, police said.

Thawat Wichaidit, 58, a member of Parliament from Surat Thani also died. Many of the dead were believed to have drowned in the waist-high swamp water while trapped in the wreckage.

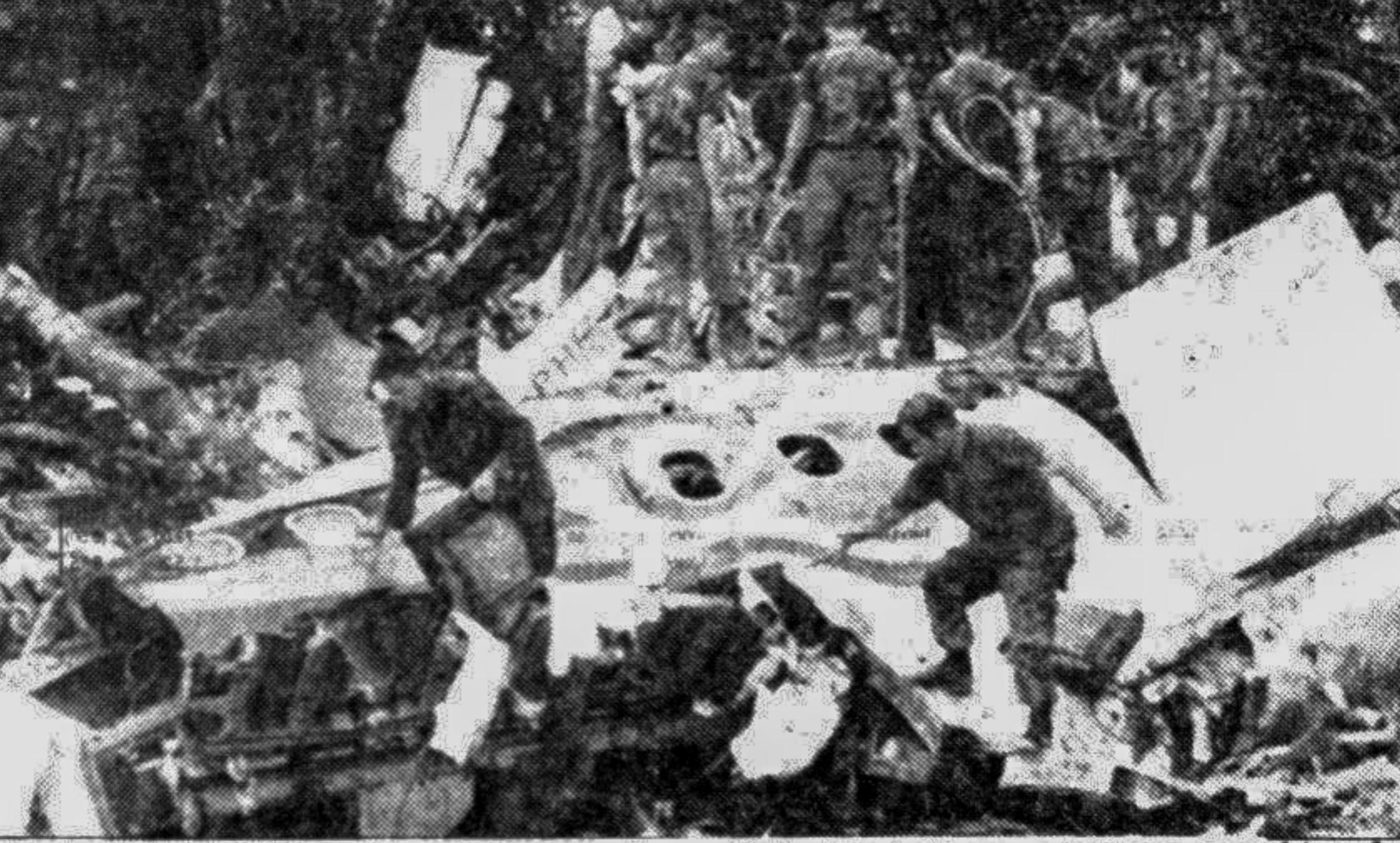
Some 200 rescue workers and volunteers from nearby villages struggled to pull bodies from the burnt, twisted metal of the wrecked plane. The rescue operation was scaled back early Saturday due to dark, rainy conditions but began again in full force at daybreak.

Police said at least five children — four boys and a girl — were among the hospitalised survivors.

Ambulances were unable to reach the crash site, leaving four-wheel-drive vehicles to navigate the mud. Still, officials said the water that has hampered rescuers may have cushioned the aircraft's impact.

Airbus announced from its headquarters in Toulouse, France, that it would send five specialists to assist Thai authorities in their investigation.

Airbus said the plane was delivered in April 1986 and had accumulated 23,000 flight hours.



Thai military officers inspect the wreckage of the Thai Airways jetliner, searching for survivors and the bodies of victims Saturday in Surat Thani.

— AP/UNB.

Report tabled in Indian parliament

Work on longer range Agni progressing as scheduled

NEW DELHI, Dec 12: Work on the longer range version of India's formidable Agni ballistic missile is progressing as per schedule and the naval variant of Pritihi with strike range of 150 km is already under production.

Pritihi for airforce, having a range of 250 km has successfully completed development phase, it said.

The report said surface-to-air missiles Trishul and Akash which are capable of neutralising airborne threats at short and medium ranges respectively are also in advanced stage of testing.

The report said these missile systems would provide adequate deterrence capability to the country. Government will take all further actions necessary to safeguard the security and integrity of the country.

The standing committee, comprising members from the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, had asked the government to go ahead full steam in a time-bound manner to develop full range of missiles in addition to Pritihi.

This is for the first time that government has disclosed the range of the sea launched vari-

ant of Pritihi.

The report tabled in parliament on Thursday said surface-to-surface version of Pritihi for the army, with a strike range of 150 km is already under production.

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Unmanned spacecraft begins mission to Mars

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla, Dec 12: An unmanned spacecraft blasted off Friday from Cape Canaveral headed for Mars on a mission to probe the planet's frigid atmosphere and rugged landscape for signs of water, a key ingredient of life, reports Reuters.

NASA's Mars Climate Orbiter lifted off atop a Delta 2 rocket precisely on time, nine seconds before 1:46 pm EST, (1846 GMT). Trailing a brilliant tongue of fire, the rocket streaked skyward and quickly disappeared from view behind the clouds.

A television camera strapped to the side of the booster provided a dramatic view of the high speed climb away from the launch pad. The curvature of the earth was clearly visible as the Delta 2 gained altitude and jettisoned its four solid rocket motors.

The orbiter's interplanetary trek began with separation

from the rocket's third stage about 47 minutes into flight high above the Indian Ocean.

"The climate orbiter is en route to Mars," said NASA launch commentator Bruce Buckingham after a tracking station in Perth, Australia confirmed the probe was on its way.

The 629 kg probe is due to arrive at Mars next September after a 669 million km voyage.

For six months the craft will gently lower its orbit by skimming the planet's upper atmosphere about 200 times to slow its speed.

By March, the orbiter should be circling Mars every two hours at an altitude of 262 miles, passing almost directly over the planet's poles.

Two scientific instruments will watch the Martian weather, track wispy clouds in the dusty atmosphere and examine the rock-strewn, rust-coloured surface.

The orbiter will also serve as

a communications relay for a second Mars probe, scheduled for launch on Jan 3, that will touch down near the icy Martian north pole. The lander will analyse soil samples scooped up with a robotic arm.

The twin Mars missions, which cost about 328 million dollars are part of a 10-year effort to determine if life existed or still survives on the planet.

The first two probes in the series, the Mars Pathfinder lander and the Mars Global Surveyor orbiter, were launched in 1996.

Scientists believe billions of years ago Mars was once a much warmer, wetter, hospitable place that might have been conducive to life.

"The key is the water," said Ed Weiler, NASA's head of Space Science. "Follow the water, and that is what these two missions do. They really try to understand the current situation with water on Mars."

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