

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."

In the five years since the document was approved, "the constitution has more than once helped the country to remain stable," Yeltsin said. "We have overcome this year's difficult political crises only because we have adhered to our fundamental law clearly and consistently."

After the speech was aired, Yeltsin hosted a Kremlin reception marking Constitution Day in his third public appearance since Monday.

The president was scheduled to return later to his Russian residence, 100 kilometres north of Moscow, where he has been recuperating after his hospitalisation from the pneumonia he was treated for two weeks before his return to office.

Yeltsin has spent little time at the Kremlin in recent months because of various illnesses, but his spokesman said his schedule will expand as his health improves.

Next week, Yeltsin is expected to meet with visiting Swiss and Belarusian presidents, spokesman Dmitry Yakushin said at a news conference on Friday.



US President Bill Clinton

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 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 toward the microphone that the bumpy his right shoulder into one of the colonnade's thick with 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.

Off the Record

Lucky boy

PITTSBURGH: A 3-year-old Florida boy has become the first child to get a new heart, both lungs and a liver in a marathon transplant operation, doctors said, reports AP.

Brendon Ednie of Daytona Beach, Florida, was in good condition and was expected to move to a rehabilitation centre within two weeks, Dr Jorge Reyes said Friday.

The surgery was performed at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh on August 21-22 but was not announced until Friday because doctors wanted to make sure that Brendon had a good chance for survival.

"He's on the road to recovery," Reyes said. "We're hopeful that he will gradually become independent of all support and live a normal life."

The 20-hour procedure, which has been performed on a handful of adults, was the first involving the heart, lungs and liver in a child.

Brendon, who had waited for more than 10 months for the organs, was born with Alagille Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that has only been diagnosed in about 100 people worldwide.

Oh boy!

NEW DELHI: An 18-year-old girl was forced 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 told The Week magazine that her in-laws forced her into marrying Dhaman Chaudhury recently so that they did not have to part with the 200,000 rupees (US\$ 4,700) she got from the government for the deaths of her husband and two children.

Police have not acted so far on the reports of the forced marriage, according to the magazine, which will hit the stands Sunday. An advance copy of the article was given to The Associated Press.

One year ago, a militia supporting upper-caste landowners gunned down 58 villagers backing a leftist underground movement of mostly farm hands and poor low-caste people.

A year after the massacre at Lakshmanpur Bathe village in Bihar, the most lawless of states in India, residents say at least two such forced marriages have been recorded there.

Miracle boy

SHEFFIELD, England: A woman who won a lengthy battle to be artificially inseminated with her dead husband's semen on Friday gave birth to a healthy baby boy, reports AP.

Liam Stephen Blood was born to Diane Blood at Jessop Hospital in Sheffield.

He weighed 2.6 kilos said Blood's father Mike McMahon, and mother and baby were both doing well.

Blood and her 30-year-old husband Stephen were planning to have children when he was struck down with meningitis and died in February 1995.

She persuaded doctors to remove sperm from his body while he was on a life-support machine.

But because it was taken without her husband's consent, doctors were by law not allowed to release it.

Blood, now in her early 30s, then launched a long legal battle to win the right to take the sperm abroad in order to undergo fertility treatment banned in Britain.

The Court of Appeal decided last February that she had the right under European law, and a Belgian clinic, the Brussels Free University, agreed to carry out insemination.

Nineties boys

WASHINGTON: American teenage boys are stating to say no to sex more often in part because they are becoming more conservative and in part because of fears about AIDS, researchers said on Friday, reports Reuters.

The percentage of young men aged 17 to 19 who said they had ever had sex with a woman stood at 75 per cent in 1988, but dropped to 68 per cent in 1995, the study by the urban institute shows.

The study, based on three surveys of more than 2,000 unmarried American teenage males living in cities shows sexual activity was on the upswing from 1979 to 1988, but has fallen steadily since.

When asked about their attitudes to premarital sex, 55 per cent said they approved of it in 1979, while 80 per cent did in 1988, but the youths have become less tolerant since then, with only 71 per cent saying they approved of it in 1995.

Anwar Ibrahim's trial

Hearing on bail appeal to take two more weeks

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 12: A hearing on an appeal for bail from Malaysia's jailed former No.2 leader was delayed on Saturday after a court said it needed up to two more weeks to make a decision, reports AP.

"We will reserve judgment and give our answer in a week or two," said Lamin Yunus, who presided over the Malaysian appellate court's three-member bench.

Ex-Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's bail application already has been turned down once by a lower court and an appeal of that decision failed. Trial Judge Augustine Paul said Anwar's lawyers were not able to prove that their client would not tamper with witnesses if released on bail.

The ousted deputy premier faces trial on 10 charges of abuse of power and sexual misconduct. He denies all the charges, calling them part of a political vendetta orchestrated by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

On Saturday, lawyers from both sides presented highly technical arguments for more

than two hours on whether the appellate court had the right to hear the bail case.

An earlier ruling made by the Court of Appeal said that not all appellate cases must be heard by the court. A decision by the three judges not to hear Anwar's case could potentially thwart any further attempts to free him on bail.

On Saturday, Anwar merely shrugged his shoulders at the end of the proceedings.

"Fortunately, I wasn't too optimistic," he said, hugging his 14-year-old daughter, Nurul Nuh.

Anwar's wife, Azizah Ismail, who has attended every session of his corruption trial in High Court over the past five weeks, was not present at Saturday's hearing.

Anwar, 51, was arrested Sept. 20 under a special security law only hours after organising a mammoth rally in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. During that protest, he called for sweeping government reforms and Mahathir's resignation.

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 Narayanaji 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.

A 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:

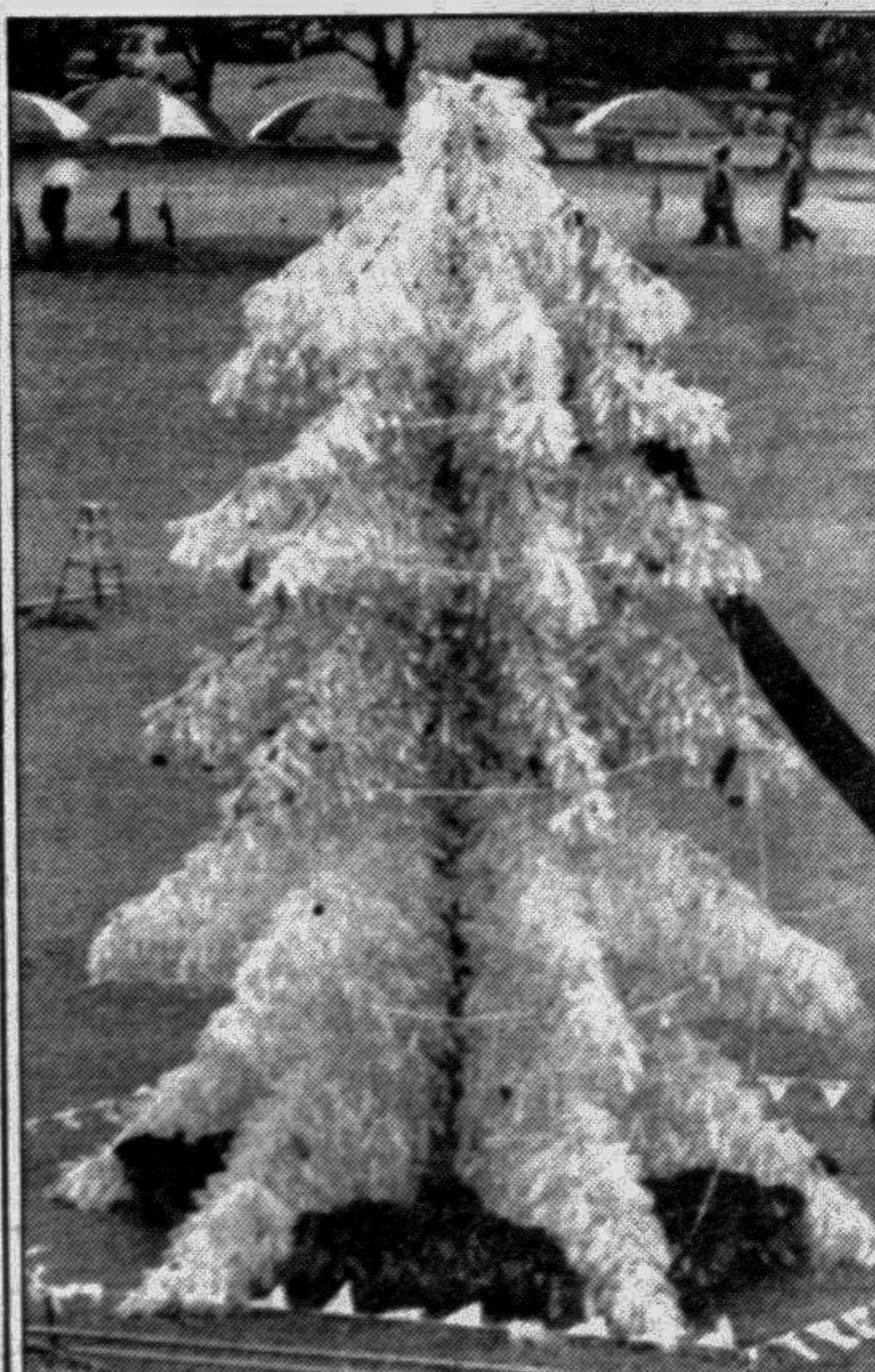
Nineteen people were killed and dozens injured Friday when a fireworks factory blew up in the Brazilian town of Santonio de Jesus, police said, AFP says from Rio de Janeiro.

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

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, Sirinwan, 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 bod-

ies 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 Thammoo 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.

Both black boxes retrieved

SURAT THANI, Thailand, Dec 12: Salvage workers today retrieved both black box flight recorders from the wreckage of the Thai Airlines jet that crashed in a fierce storm here.

"There rescue workers found a black box early this morning at the site of the crash," Deputy Governor of Surat Thani, Niwat Sawaskao, told AFP.

An army official later said the second flight recorder was also recovered, and both would be taken to Surat Thani airport to await investigators.

The recorders may help rescuers piece together the final moments of the Airbus which ploughed into a swamp Friday night after two failed landing attempts.

On recorder tracks data from the flight and another records conversations in the cockpit and exchanges with air traffic controllers.

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 Prithvi, with strike capacity upto 250 km is being developed, a report tabled in parliament has said, reports PTI.

This has been conveyed by the government in its reply to the recommendation of parliament's standing committee on defence on Agni and other missiles.

The government has already approved the new phase of Agni for development of longer range system using state of the art technologies developed indigenously and development work is progressing as per schedule, it said.

In its action taken report, government said the naval version of Prithvi having a range of 250 km capable of being launched from a ship, is also being configured.

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

ant of Prithvi.

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

Prithvi 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 the variant of Agni currently under development as a deterrent to potential enemies from using their missile capabilities against any of India's assets.

The previous version of Agni, with a range of 1,500 km, has been test-fired thrice from interim test range at Chandipur-on-sea in Orissa. The clearance for development of the longer range variant of Agni was given by the government recently.

According to the committee, Pakistan was continuing its missile development programme which was primarily aimed against India and Islamabad had even reportedly claimed to have targeted its missile at Indian cities after the May nuclear tests by the two neighbours.

China has also developed large number of missile systems which could target any part of the country against which India has no credible missile deterrent, the committee had said.

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."

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

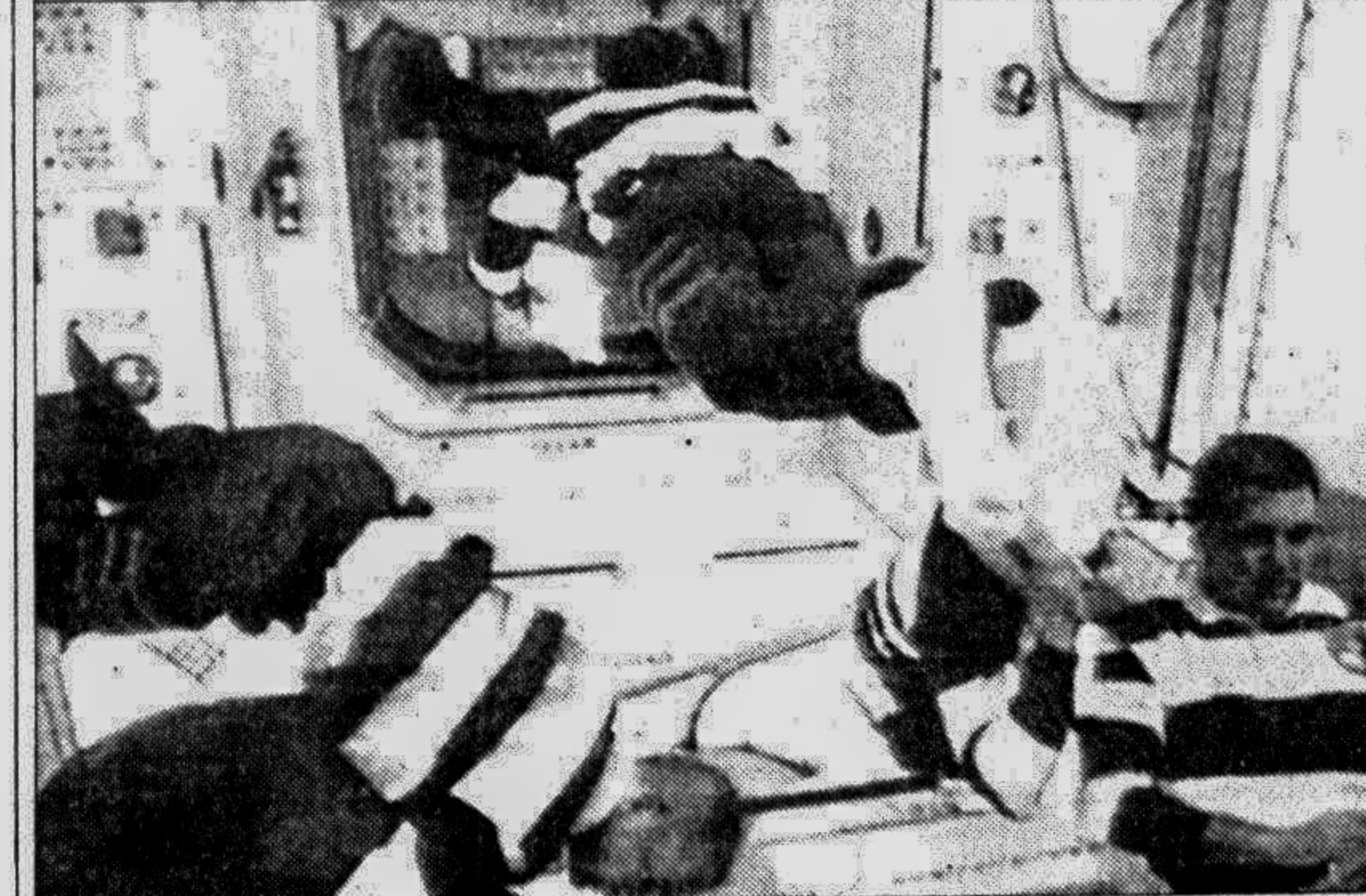
"The climate orbiter is en route to Mars," said NASA launch commentator Bruce Buckingham after a tracking station in Perth, Australia, confirmed the probe was on its way.

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.



Pilot Frederick Sturckow, left, and commander Robert Cabana, right, work as astronaut Sergei Krikalev, top, floats through the Unity module of the International Space Station Thursday. Nancy Currie is hidden from view, behind Cabana. — AP/UNB photo