

Bus plunge leaves 60 dead in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Mar 24: Soldiers were searching today for more bodies in one of two deadly bus accidents in eastern Punjab province that killed as many as 60 people, police said, reports AP.

The army sent in dozens of soldiers to dredge the Jhelum canal near Mandi Bahauddin, 150 km north of Lahore, the capital of the Punjab province.

A passenger bus plunged into the canal on Tuesday killing 40 people, many of them women and children.

As many as 20 other people were injured, many of them critically.

According to initial investigations the driver of the bus was speeding, failed to negotiate a curve in the road and drove off the road into a canal, police said.

In another accident also on Tuesday, a packed bus fell into a ditch, near Kotli Sattian area, 50 km from the federal capital of Islamabad, killing 20 people.

At least 30 other passengers were injured in the accident.

Police said the bus slipped into the ditch while taking a narrow turn. Many of the passengers, who were killed, were sitting on the roof of the bus.

No other details were immediately available.

Shi'ite leader killed

Another report says: Sunni Muslim militants shot and killed a Shi'ite Muslim leader in eastern Punjab province today in the latest outbreak of religiously motivated violence, police said, reports AP.

Four gunmen on motorcycles opened fire on Barkat Ali, a leader of the Shi'ite Muslim group, Tehrik Nifaz Fiqah-e-Jaria, or the Movement for the Implementation of Shi'ite Law.

He was shot outside his home in Tunsa area, 100 km west of Multan.

Within hours police arrested three suspects who were found with automatic weapons in their possession. They still are searching for a fourth suspect, said Police Superintendent Ahmed Khan.

International Paraguayan Vice President assassinated

ASUNCION, Mar 24: Vice President Luis Maria Argana, a bitter rival of Paraguay's President, was killed in a hail of bullets Tuesday by gunmen in military uniform, plunging the South American nation into turmoil, reports AFP.

Police said four men wearing military camouflage uniforms opened fire with a shotgun and an M-16 rifle as the Vice President was going to his office in the capital Tuesday morning.

"He was shot three or four times in the heart, the side and the legs," Argana's personal attorney Icho Planas told local radio.

President Raul Cubas, who took office for a four-year term last August, ordered the nation's borders sealed, and barred airplanes from entering or leaving the country, as police hunted the assassins.

Meanwhile, police dispersed about 100 protesters demonstrating before the presidential palace demanding Cubas' resignation.

As news of the killing spread in the capital, Argana's supporters smashed car windows and beat ruling party or opposition officials and tried to enter

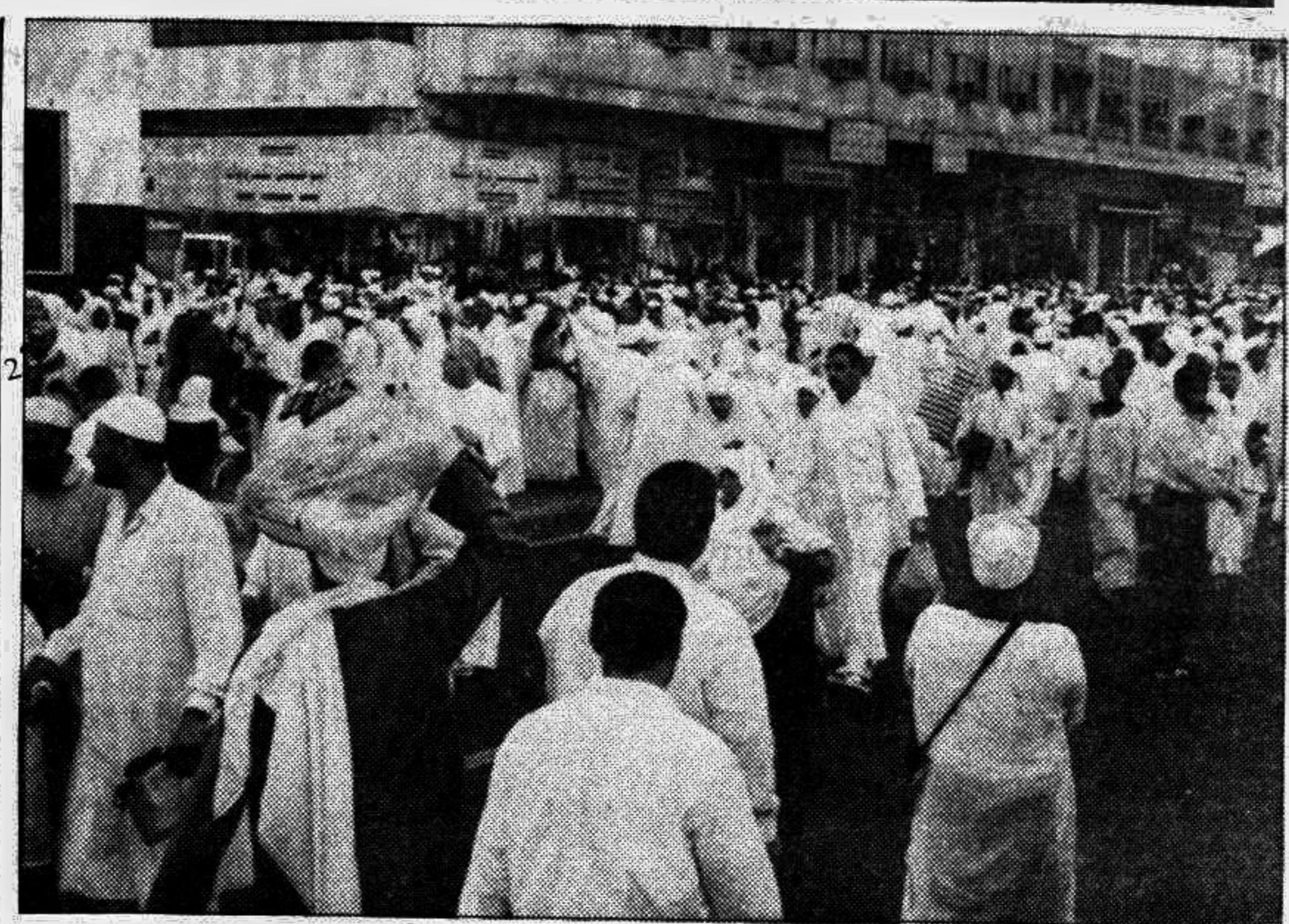
the American hospital where the vice president was taken.

The assassination added a new crisis to the heap of woes troubling Paraguay, which marked the 10th anniversary of the return to democracy last month but had little to celebrate with political infighting, a protracted economic crisis and endemic corruption.

Paraguayan TV showed the vice president slumped on the backseat, his white shirt and tie splattered with blood. A bodyguard in the front passenger seat was also gravely wounded.

Cubas told a news conference later Tuesday that three suspects were being sought and that a burnt-out getaway truck had been found blocks from the scene.

Cubas named his brother Carlos Cubas as interior minister late Tuesday, after the resignation of Ruben Arias Mendoza, who offered no explanation for his departure. Cubas said his brother will head the investigation into Argana's death.



Pilgrims walk in a Makkah street on Tuesday, two days before the start of the main rites of the Hajj. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Israel detains 5 Hamas men:

Israeli troops detained five members of the militant Islamic movement Hamas yesterday in a dawn raid on a village near Bethlehem, Palestinian sources said, AFP reports from Bethlehem.

The five men included the local Imam or prayer leader, Sheikh Halid Husni Salameh, 36, who is known to be connected to the Islamic resistance movement (Hamas), residents of the village of Tegor said.

Road accident kills 8 in India: Eight persons, including three women and two children, were killed and four seriously injured when a jeep carrying them collided with a Haryana roadways bus at village Garhi on Tuesday, about 35 km from Hissar, police said, PTI reports from Chandigarh.

The occupants of the jeep were returning from a place of worship near Gurgaon when the accident occurred on the Delhi-Hissar national highway. The injured have been hospitalised at Hansi.

Criticism about Academy Awards: Actress Fernanda Montenegro made a veiled attack on Hollywood favouritism after she failed to win an award for her role in "Central Station," which was also nominated for an Oscar, AP reports from Rio de Janeiro.

Montenegro, the first Latin American actress to be shortlisted for an Oscar, lost out to Gwyneth Paltrow. In a television interview Tuesday, the 69-year-old actress called Paltrow "this romantic figure, thin, pure, virginal." Brazil's media also went on the attack Tuesday over the Academy Awards ceremony.

Israel sends Bedouins back to Egypt: The Israeli Army put some 600 Bedouin tribesmen on buses and sent them back to Egypt Tuesday, one week after the nomadic group crossed the border illegally and lost a court battle to stay, AP reports from Jerusalem.

Members of the same tribe who live in Israel, held up black flags in a sign of mourning as they watched the deportation. Brig. Gen. Yehiel Gozal, who was in charge of the military operation, said the group went peacefully. "This morning the evacuation began... with full cooperation from the tribe. They got onto the buses. There were no problems," he said.

Armenians asked to try out AIDS drug: Armenia's health minister on Tuesday invited Armenians with AIDS or HIV to try out a new drug treatment that proponents say has cured 14 people, AP reports from Yerevan.

Details of the reported cures remain under wraps, and the doctors who developed the treatment have refused to disclose basic information about it — whether it's a new combination of existing drugs or a completely new drug, for example.

US actor commits suicide: David Strickland, the "Suddenly Susan" actor who apparently committed suicide by hanging himself in a motel room, was due in court in a drug case on the day he was found dead, records show, AP reports from Las Vegas.

Police shed no new light Tuesday on Strickland's death, which was discovered Monday morning. But records reviewed in Los Angeles showed that he was supposed to have appeared in court there on that day. Strickland was arrested on October 31 for cocaine possession and pleaded no contest on December 21, records show. He was put on probation for three years and ordered into a rehabilitation programme. He was due in court for a progress report on that programme.

'Suu Kyi conspiring with West' Junta terms Aris's visa appeal as political ploy

YANGON, Mar 24: Myanmar's official press today accused the West of conspiring with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to exploit the terminal cancer of her husband to discredit the government in Yangon, reports AFP.

Michael Aris has asked Myanmar for a visa so he can say a final goodbye to his wife but junta officials here have so far stalled on the request.

In a rare public mention of the application in the state controlled press, a commentary branded the saga a "political ploy" by the West to take advantage of the "cancer-stricken

"This like all previous ploys is doomed to failure," the article said.

"If it were a purely personal health and family matter... our leaders would broadmindedly not hesitate to grant the wish of a dying man," it added.

However, the article in the Burmese-language edition of the New Light of Myanmar daily questioned the logic and motivation behind the visa application.

"One cannot help but wonder why a critically ill person who is within reach of the world's best medical facilities right at home has asked for a visa to be with his wife," it said.

The commentator urged Aung San Suu Kyi to leave for Britain to visit her husband, a course of action she would surely follow "if she really had any true Myanmarese blood in her."

Aides say Aung San Suu Kyi, who is locked in a bitter political struggle with the government, fears she will be barred from returning home if she leaves the country to see Aris.

Her 27-year marriage is a frequent target of the official press which claims she is a traitor to her "race" and a foreigner, making her ineligible for high political office.

Caine had no interest in creating bestsellers and was uninterested that some winners were obscure. "If that were all we wanted, there would be no need for judges and the Jeffrey Archer's would win," he said.

'Armed forces to be put on high alert'

Primakov calls off US visit as NATO orders airstrikes

MOSCOW, Mar 24: Russia, angry at NATO's decision to launch air strikes against Yugoslavia soon, said today it would place its armed forces on higher alert if bombs dropped and was considering other measures.

Earlier, Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov called off a visit to Washington when just two hours away from the United States, ordering his plane home after US Vice President Al Gore told him by telephone NATO strikes were almost certain.

"I do not think that the strikes will help stabilise the situation in Kosovo," Primakov said upon his arrival. "On the contrary, it will be destabilising, and damage will be inflicted both on our relations with the United States and stability in Europe."

NATO strikes appeared imminent after last-minute peace talks with Yugoslavia over Kosovo failed Tuesday and Yugoslav officials declared a state of emergency — one step below a state of war. NATO has threatened force if Yugoslavia does not accept a settlement in Kosovo, a province where Yugoslav forces are battling ethnic Albanian guerrillas.

"If war unfolds in the Balkans, the Defence Ministry will undertake a series of measures to increase military readiness," Defence Minister Vyacheslav Sedov told Reuters.

Russia routinely raises its alert status during times of tension but does not often publicise such moves.

Primakov said his decision to turn back was agreed with President Boris Yeltsin, who is recovering from a stomach ulcer at a residence outside Moscow. Russia has steadfastly opposed military action against Yugoslavia over its refusal to sign a peace deal on Serbia's behalf.

Russia's news agencies said the two men had spoken by telephone on Wednesday and were likely to meet to discuss the crisis once the premier had been briefed by the defence and

foreign ministers.

"I do not think these strikes can bring stability in Kosovo," Primakov said after arriving back in Moscow. "On the contrary, the situation will be destabilised and our relations with the United States and stability in Europe will suffer."

Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov told reporters Russian officials had already drawn up contingency plans.

Yeltsin sent a message to US President Bill Clinton on Tuesday saying he was categorically opposed to NATO using force against Yugoslavia, presidential aide Sergei Prikhodko was quoted as saying by the Interfax news agency. The report gave no other details of Yeltsin's response.

Primakov had planned meetings with Clinton and US Vice President Al Gore on a wide range of issues, including the possibility of new loans for Russia's troubled economy.

But Primakov decided he did not want to be in the US capital when it appeared his visit

would coincide with NATO bombing raids in Yugoslavia a long-time Russian ally.

When planning the trip, Primakov had hoped to focus on winning financial aid from the International Monetary Fund and other foreign lenders. Primakov had planned to meet IMF chief Michel Camdessus during his time in Washington.

46 pc Americans for action against Serbs

AP adds: Less than half of Americans in a survey say they favour the United States being part of a military action against Serb targets, and four out of five believe the president should get approval from Congress before sending troops to Kosovo.

The Gallup Poll released Tuesday said 46 per cent favour the United States joining NATO in air and missile attacks, while 43 per cent oppose the idea. In February, the figures were 43 per cent favouring, 45 per cent opposing.



US special envoy Richard Holbrooke (left) and NATO General Secretary Javier Solana brief media at the alliance's headquarters in Brussels on Tuesday. After Holbrooke's final diplomatic effort in Belgrade failed, Solana said he had ordered air strikes against Yugoslavia.

— AFP photo

Train derails in Kenya: 30 killed

NAIROBI, Mar 24: A Kenyan passenger train carrying hundreds of foreign tourists and Kenyans to the coastal port of Mombasa derailed at high speed last night, killing at least 30 people, reports Reuters.

Police initially said at least 50 people were feared killed. They later said they had confirmed 30 dead but expected the toll to rise.

Witnesses said at least 23 foreigners on their way to beach holidays were critically injured

— including Americans, Germans and Canadians — and that dozens more were unaccounted for.

The overnight train, popular among tourists travelling from Nairobi to Kenya's spectacular Indian ocean coastal resorts near Mombasa, derailed near a junction called Man-Eaters around 300 km southeast of the

Kenyan capital.

The junction is named after two lions which ate dozens of workers when the railway was being built in the last century.

Survivors of the accident said the train was barreling along at high speed when it jumped the tracks, flipping one carriage upside down and at least four others onto their sides.

"There were a lot of dead and dying," said Daniel Burstow, a 20-year old British geography student from Sussex University.

"One of the carriages in third class was thrown upside down and that is where the people died," said Michael Greenwood, a 59-year-old US citizen from Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

They said survivors were unable to escape through the train doors so had to break

windows to free themselves.

"All the doors were locked and nobody had the keys to unlock them," Greenwood said.

A French Embassy official said 86 French nationals were on the train but it was not known if any were hurt.

A Kenyan Air Force plane airlifted 23 critically injured foreigners to Nairobi's Wilson Airport. One woman constantly moaned in pain as they were taken off the aircraft on stretchers and rushed to Nairobi's main hospital. Others were bloodied and bruised.

A spokeswoman for the African Medical Research Foundation (AMREF) private medical charity said it believed around 400 passengers were on the train when it derailed at about 4:30 am (0130 GMT) and that most of the dead were travelling in the third class section.

— AP photo

Two 'N Korean' spy ships flee Japanese waters

TOKYO, Mar 24: The Japanese navy failed to seize two suspected North Korean spy boats which ignored warning shots as they fled through the night from Japanese territorial waters, officials said Wednesday.

"We could not help but decide to stop our chase as (the ships) ignored our warning and fled toward North Korea," Defence Agency Chief Hosoi Norota told a news conference.

A Japanese naval flotilla stopped pursuing one of the high-speed boats as it moved into Japan's air defence zone toward the Korean peninsula at 3:20 am (1820 GMT) Tuesday.

"It could provoke a dangerous situation if we pursued further," Norota said.

The chase of the second ship ended by 8:00 am (2300 GMT) as it too crossed the air defence zone, about 500 kilometers (310 miles) outside Japan's airspace and which serves as a limit for triggering air force scrambles.

Norota said a Japanese patrol plane detected a suspected North Korean airplane approaching the area where the Japanese naval vessels were

engaged in a chase.

The suspicious boats were each about 30 metres (100 feet) long and 100 tonnes in weight and bristled with antennae.

They were disguised as Japanese fishing boats but had no fishing gear on board, according to photographs provided by the coast guard.

Suharto's son to go on trial in April

JAKARTA, Mar 24: Son of former Indonesian president Suharto will stand trial next month for his suspected involvement in a multi-million dollar land scam, reports said today, AFP said.

The Dossier on Hutomo "Tommy" Mandala Putra, Suharto's youngest son, was handed to the South Jakarta District Court Tuesday by a public prosecutor, the state Antara news agency said.

"I think a trial for his case will be held in April because we have to appoint members of the judge first," heard of south Jakarta court JA Situra was quoted as saying Tuesday.

Jerusalem to become an international city.

Israel's UN Ambassador Dore Gold accused the Palestinian leader of trying to "stake territorial claims inside of Israel."

Arafat flew to New York from Washington, where he is under pressure from Congress and the Clinton administration to postpone a declaration of statehood. After his meeting with Annan, which he called "very fruitful," he returned to Washington for talks with Clinton.

Following his global consultations, he said the Palestinian leadership will meet and decide what to do on the statehood issue.

Arafat noted that UN resolution 181, adopted in 1947, refers to a Palestinian state — and he said Annan supports it. The resolution also calls for</p