

Train ploughs into minibus in Pakistan: 10 killed

KARACHI, Nov 28: At least 10 people were killed and 18 injured early today when an express train ploughed into a minibus in the southern Pakistani province of Sindh, police said, reports AFP.

The Karachi-bound Khyber Mail, coming from the north-western city of Peshawar, rammed into the minibus at a crossing near the town of Ranipur, 500 km west of here, they said.

Eight people were crushed to death on the spot, while another two later died in the hospital, the sources said.

The victims were all passengers of the minibus, officials said.

Sources said at least five people admitted to a nearby government hospital were in serious condition.

Railway officials said the Ranipur crossing, one of the busiest level crossings on the main highway, was properly manned, rejecting an earlier report it had been unmanned.

An official said the driver of the train ignored a red light at the outer signal indicating the gate at the crossing was open.

The train driver applied emergency brakes but failed to avoid the collision, he said. The train dragged parts of the bus for about one km, he said.

The official Associated Press of Pakistan quoted one railway official as saying a police party on night patrol in the area allegedly forced the guards to open the gate shortly before the passage of the Khyber Mail.

Voting gets off to a slow start in Hong Kong

HONG KONG, Nov 28: Voting in Hong Kong's first grassroots elections since the 1997 handover to China got off to a slow start today, reports AFP.

By 2.30 p.m., only 15.8 per cent of the electorate had exercised their rights to vote in elections that are being seen as a test of Hong Kong's enthusiasm for democracy.

Tung Chee-hwa, the territory's chief executive, urged voters to exercise their civic rights.

After casting his vote in the luxury residential area of Victoria Peak, Tung said: "I take this opportunity to call on all citizens of Hong Kong to exercise their civic rights."

Faced by a group of noisy demonstrators protesting against the revival of appointments to the councils, Tung denied the move represented a step back for democracy in Hong Kong.

The district councils, formerly called district boards, will soon be the only elected bodies at the local level in Hong Kong. Provisional urban and regional councils are to be scrapped early next year.

But this year's elections have been billed as a major setback for democracy in Hong Kong: about one-fifth of the 519 seats have been reserved for appointment by Tung.

Gas blast kills six in Russia

MOSCOW, Nov 28: At least six people were killed in an apartment block gas blast in the Russian city of Omsk Saturday morning, reports Xinhua.

The explosion rocked a multi-apartment building No. 11 on Second Barnaulskaya Street at 2:20 am Moscow time, reported the Itar-Tass news agency, quoting the Emergency Situations Ministry.

The blast left five people dead on the spot and five others, including a child, injured.

Rescuers saved 10 people and at least three people remained under the debris. They brought up five bodies and another injured woman died in hospital later, said the report.

Tutu lashes out at Mbeki over Dalai Lama

JOHANNESBURG, Nov 28: Nobel Peace laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu today lashed out at President Thabo Mbeki for his reluctance to meet exiled Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama, who is due in Cape Town this week, reports AFP.

Tutu, currently in Australia, told Johannesburg's Sunday Independent newspaper Mbeki's decision was "sad" and that he was "disappointed."

"I'm sorry that my president has not been able to meet him," Tutu said, adding that former South African president Nelson Mandela had warmly embraced the Dalai Lama when he visited Cape Town in 1996.

The Tibetan leader is due in South Africa on Saturday for a seven-day visit focused on the Parliament of the World's Religions in Cape Town, and to be attended by Tutu and numerous spiritual leaders from around the world.

The Office of Tibet said the Dalai Lama hoped to meet President Thabo Mbeki, but the president's office said such a meeting was unlikely because of Mbeki's tight schedule.

Press reports last week said Mbeki had caved in to pressure from China, which had persuaded him not to agree to a one-on-one meeting with the Dalai Lama.

The Sunday Independent said sources in Mbeki's office had confirmed that former Chinese premier Li Peng, on a brief visit to South Africa last week, had explained to Mbeki why China would not want him to meet the Dalai Lama.

Pakistan rejects Indian conditions for talks

ISLAMABAD, Nov 28: Pakistan has rejected India's preconditions for dialogue based on what Islamabad deems "unilateral interpretations" of accords, an official news agency reported, says AFP.

"Pakistan will respect international agreements and resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, the AFP news agency quoted Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar as saying on Saturday.

However it "cannot agree to conditions for dialogue based on arbitrarily selected provisions of some agreements or their unilateral interpretations, while others are sought to be relegated or forgotten," Sattar said.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Thursday said if Pakistan wished to resume talks, it would have to follow the 1972 Shimla Accord and the Lahore Declaration "in

true letter and spirit."

"We do not believe in entering into new agreements and simply ignoring the previous ones," Vajpayee said.

The Lahore Declaration was signed by Vajpayee at a landmark summit in February with then counterpart Pakistani Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted by General Pervez Musharraf in a coup last month.

It called for intensifying efforts to resolve outstanding issues, including the dispute over Kashmir that has caused two wars since independence in 1947.

Sattar said the declaration called for dialogue on bilateral issues, including Kashmir and on nuclear risk reduction measures. "Pakistan is willing to carry out its commitments."

He accused India of seeking to impose preconditions for a dialogue.

"India is also unwilling to

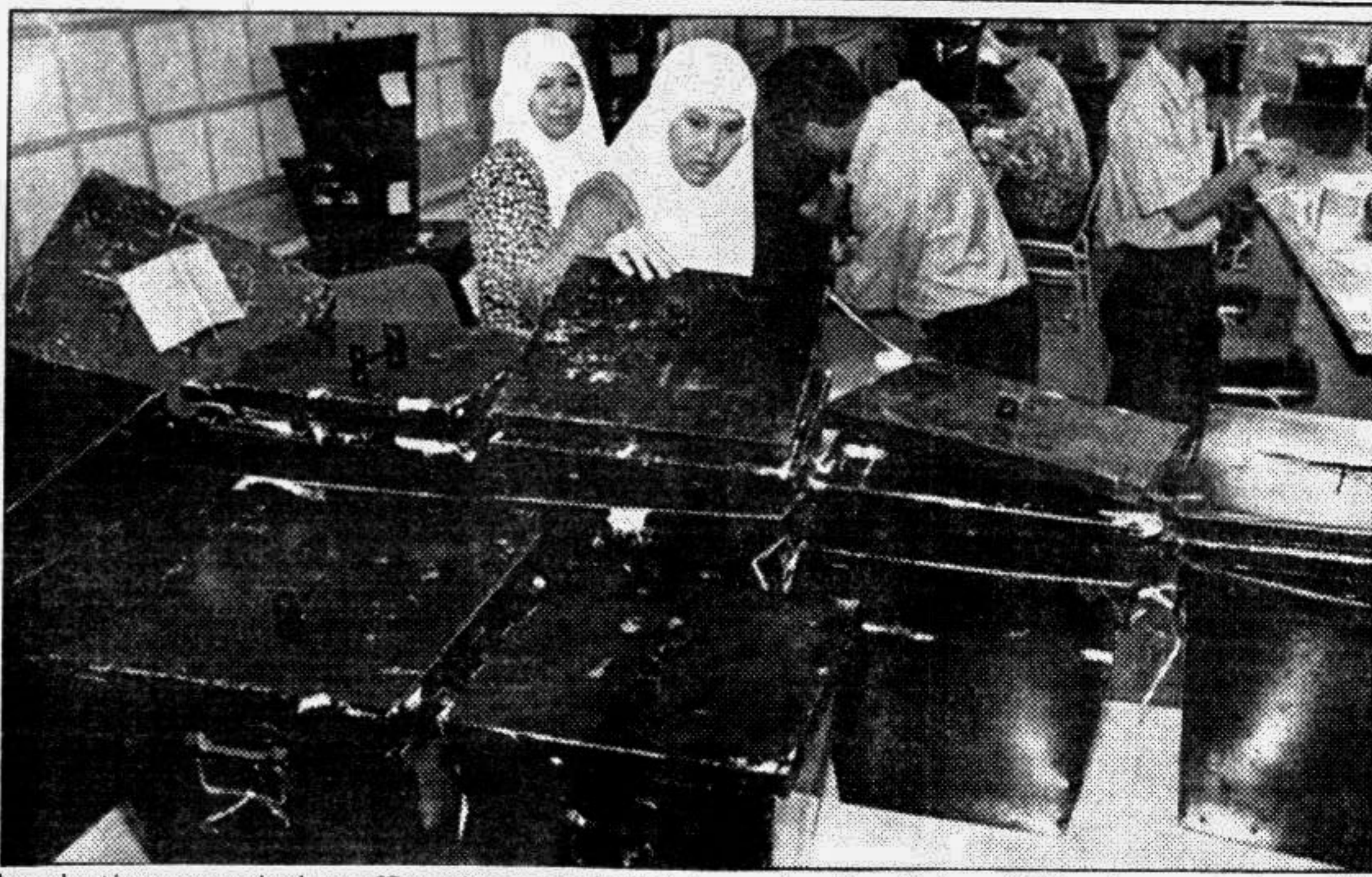
fulfil its commitment" enshrined in the Shimla Agreement regarding the final settlement of Jammu and Kashmir dispute, Sattar said.

He said Pakistan and India had "scores of agreements" between them including UN Security Council resolutions for a referendum in Kashmir which were "accepted by both sides."

Pakistan will follow "a policy of peace and patience," he said.

"We hope that some day India will come to recognise that such efforts on the basis of accepted international law will be of benefit not only to Pakistan but also to India itself," he added.

Around 25,000 people have died in decade old insurgency in the Indian controlled zone of Kashmir, India accuses Pakistan of fomenting the unrest. Islamabad denies the charge.



An election commission officer inspects ballot boxes in Alor Setar, Malaysia, yesterday. All ballot boxes will be taken to polling stations all over the country today when Malaysia holds its 10th general elections. — AFP photo

Sonia's image in tatters after poll rout

NEW DELHI, Nov 28: Two months after leading her Congress Party to its worst electoral defeat, Indian opposition leader Sonia Gandhi's image as the party's saviour is in tatters, reports AFP.

Although no one in the 114-year-old Congress has yet challenged her leadership, there is mounting discontent within the ranks over what was perceived as her personal failure to better the ruling Hindu nationalists.

The collapse last week of a five-month-old Congress government in the tiny western state of Goa following an internal party revolt has only added to Gandhi's discomfort.

Congress strategists have already thrown up their hands in despair over the party's prospects in elections due in three states in March next year.

The rout in the September-October parliamentary elections has also fuelled dissent elements in four states ruled by Congress chief ministers known to be close to Gandhi.

"There is certainly discontent in Congress, and this is only likely to aggravate in the days to come," political analyst G.V.L.N. Rao told the agency.

"But at the same time there is no rallying point in the party to mobilise forces behind an alternate leader. This is what gives strength to Sonia Gandhi."

Just seven months ago, the Italian-born Sonia appeared unassailable after her party joined hands with the rest of the opposition to oust Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's coalition government in a vote of no-confidence.

But the widow of former premier Rajiv Gandhi failed to form an alternative government, triggering snap national elections in which her party suffered its worst rout since India's independence in 1947.

The defeat totally eclipsed her own victories from two parliamentary seats — one of which returned Sonia with the



highest margin of victory recorded in any constituency.

Congress officials say the national defeat prevented her from nominating her son Rahul as candidate in one of the two seats she later gave up, and to roll back plans to name her daughter Priyanka to head the party's youth forum.

An internal party probe into the electoral disaster has reportedly heard charges from some Congress leaders that Gandhi's foreign origins were partly to blame.

"Sonia Gandhi's old magic is gone," admitted a Congress strategist with access to the party leader. "People in the party do not listen to her in the same manner as before. She knows it."

The leader of a smaller opposition party feels the Hindu nationalist-led government would prefer a weak and cornered Gandhi as the opposition leader.

"It is probably for this reason that the government is not serious about framing legislation barring foreign-borns from holding top posts in the country," said Purno Sangma, a Gandhi friend-turned-foe.

No referendum in Aceh: Wahid

MANILA, Nov 28: Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid has told fellow Southeast Asian leaders there will be no referendum on independence in the troubled province of Aceh, Foreign Minister Ali Shihab said here today, reports AFP.

"It is not an option, it has been reiterated by the president," Shihab told reporters on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit here.

Wahid discussed the situation in Aceh with the nine other ASEAN leaders amid concern that Indonesia's separatist problems could pose a threat to regional security.

There are fears that Indonesia could share the fate of Yugoslavia after East Timor voted for independence in August, and with secessionist struggles raging in Aceh and Irian Jaya.

Wahid briefed the leaders of

China, S Korea, Japan avoid security issues at meeting

MANILA, Nov 28: The leaders of China, South Korea and Japan held a ground-breaking meeting Sunday but limited their talks primarily to economic development and stayed away from the sensitive security issues dogging the region, reports AP.

It was the first time that heads of government from the East Asian nations met as a trio after decades of distrust caused by the Cold War and lingering dangers on the Korean peninsula.

A Japanese spokesman, asking not to be further identified, told reporters that Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung avoided military topics.

That was due in part to Chinese unwillingness to tackle such issues, along with Beijing's displeasure over Japan's plans to develop a missile defense system, the Japanese spokesman said. The trio met before meeting with the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which was holding its annual summit Sunday.

However, the three leaders discussed at length various economic issues, including the US trade agreement with Beijing that is expected to lead to Chinese membership in the World Trade Organisation.

"We support China's entry into WTO and also we welcome the agreement between the United States and China, and hope that China's entry into the WTO will proceed quickly," Obuchi told his counterparts.

Zhu spoke enthusiastically of Beijing's entry into WTO, which is considered vital for the country's economic development. He said liberalization of the Chinese market will benefit not only Japan and South Korea but also the rest of the world, the Japanese spokesman said.

Kim said South Korea believes WTO membership will be a big plus for the Chinese economy, and would also make it easier for South Korea to enter the Chinese market.



A Russian soldier watches Chechen refugees as they wait to leave for Ingushetia at a checkpoint near the Assinovskaya village on the Ingush-Chechen border on Saturday. — AFP photo

Russian troops lay siege to Grozny

Chechens seek arms from West

MOSCOW, Nov 28: Russian troops laid siege to the capital of the breakaway Chechnya region today in a bid to force Islamic militants, blamed by Moscow for terrorist attacks against Russian cities, to surrender, reports Reuters.

Heavy artillery has been pounding Grozny for days from outlying areas and striking it from above with warplanes, but rebels appeared determined to hold the city and sounded eager to engage in the kind of close combat that won them a 1994-96 war.

The Defence Ministry in Moscow, quoted by ITAR-Tass news agency, said federal forces were preparing for fighting in urban and mountain areas. But the strategy so far has been to avoid close encounters with battle-hardened Chechen fighters.

As the nine-week-old Russian offensive appeared to be running into its first serious resistance, in major rebel strongholds, international pressure mounted on Moscow to seek a political solution and prevent further civilian casualties.

The International Monetary Fund warned that negative world reaction to the war could put Russia's IMF loans at risk.

"We cannot go forward with the financing if the rest of the world doesn't want to," IMF head Michel Camdessus told reporters in Madrid, referring to a delayed \$640 million tranche.

Russia has rejected Western criticism of its military campaign as unwelcome interference in its internal affairs, while its generals have made clear they don't want their guns to be silenced by politicians.

AFP adds: Representatives of 23 Chechen towns have sent a letter to Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov urging him to ask the Western countries for "up-to-date weapons" to fight Russia, the presidential press office here said.

"If Russia leaves us no alternative but war, then let the Chechen President be decisive and work with Russia's opponents," the representative said in their letter.

"We must look towards the West and ask it for as many arms as possible. First and foremost we need portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft rocket launchers."

"We are tired of fighting with the old weaponry. The Chechen President must do everything possible to give us a serious ally and serious up-to-date weapons in line with a modern war."

Japanese army killed 270,000 Chinese with germs: Study

BEIJING, Nov 28: In China, even a child can tell you horrifying stories of the No 731 unit of the invading Japanese troops who in one case killed more than 3,000 Chinese through "bacteriological experiments" during World War II, reports Xinhua.

This is merely the tip of the iceberg, however, as an in-depth study by Chinese and Japanese scholars shows that at least 270,000 Chinese soldiers and civilians were slaughtered by Japanese germ warfare troops between 1933 and 1945.

Chinese scholars, including Guo Chengzhou and Liao Yingchang from the Academy of Medical Sciences attached to the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), put the figure at more than 270,000, but some Japanese experts believe the total is no less than the number of people killed in the Nanjing Massacre, in which at least 300,000 Chinese died.

Though differing on the number of victims, both Chinese and Japanese researchers agree that the germ-war waged by invading Japanese army was on the largest scale the world has ever seen in terms of duration, casualties, and impact.

The researchers have spent years seeking evidence from the libraries and archives of the international courts that handled the cases of Japanese war criminals, and interviewed victims of the Japanese troops' bacteriological operations and their relatives, as well as former Japanese soldiers who participated in this atrocity.

Many articles and books have been published and a dozen seminars and four international conferences have been held on this issue. A group of Japanese investigators has visited China four times to study this "bacteriological experiment."

Wang Laiyong, 64, is one of five victims from Yiwu in east China's Zhejiang Province who survived the "bacteriological experiment" conducted by Japanese troops in October, 1942.

Japanese aircraft arrived and sprayed something like a white for in the air above Wang's village. Shortly afterwards, many rats were found dead, followed by many villagers who fell ill, vomiting foam and blood. This lethal operation killed 386 villagers, according to officials' statistics.

The Chinese survivors and victims' relatives as well as many Japanese soldiers now remember this germ-warfare as a nightmare.

Some members of the "Japanese experimentation units" have helped investigators collect evidence and find witnesses to their deadly operations.

ASEAN presses China to support code of conduct in S China Sea

MANILA, Nov 28: Southeast Asian leaders today pressed China to accede to a code of conduct in the disputed South China Sea territories, after Beijing scuttled plans to have the rules of behaviour adopted at a summit here, reports AFP.

"On the South China Sea, the heads of state/government reaffirmed the need for a regional code of conduct," Philippine President Joseph Estrada said in a statement after a summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

"They noted the report of the ministers that ASEAN now has a draft regional code of conduct and further consultations will be made on the draft with a view to advancing the process on the adoption of the code," he said.

Host the Philippines had hoped before the summit the code, which essentially bars new occupation of barren islets and reefs and expansion of existing structures, would be adopted in Manila.

But a disagreement between ASEAN and China over the territories to be covered by the code led to a breakdown of the negotiations.

China had wanted the code to be limited only to the Spratlys and be signed only by ASEAN members who have staked claims to the potentially oil-rich chain, diplomatic sources said.

Vietnam however wanted it to include the more northerly Paracels where it has a dispute with China, the sources added.

ASEAN members Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, as well as China and

Taiwan, have partial or entire claims to the Spratlys.

The other ASEAN members are Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Singapore.

In a flurry of senior official-level meetings ahead of Sunday's summit, Philippine Foreign Undersecretary Lauro Baja cobbled a common ASEAN position on the code which was endorsed by the foreign ministers.

Analysts here said failure to have China on board reduces the significance of the code because of Beijing's status as an East Asian military powerhouse.

The Philippine Daily Inquirer said in an editorial that ASEAN's statement to pursue further talks was a "face-saving measure."

BRIEFLY

Australian PM in E Timor: Australian Prime Minister John Howard arrived in the East Timor capital of Dili today for a brief visit to the territory. AFP reports from Dili.

Howard arrived on an Australian air force jet and was greeted by Major General Peter Cosgrove, the Australian head of the multinational peacekeeping force. Howard did not make any comment on arrival and left Dili's airport for the peace-keeping force's headquarters in a convoy escorted by armoured personnel carriers.

Chinese PM to visit Singapore: Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji will make a three-day official visit to Singapore from Monday at the invitation of his Singapore counterpart Goh Chok Tong, government-controlled TV said Sunday. AP reports from Singapore.

The two leaders are expected to discuss international and regional issues, and well as explore new areas of cooperation, the report said. Zhu will also meet with senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who wields enormous influence in this Chinese-dominated city-state of 3.2 million.

Train-jeep collision kills 9 in India: At least nine people were killed and five injured when a speeding Indian train rammed into a jeep at a level crossing in the western state of Maharashtra on Sunday, the Press Trust of India said, AFP reports from New Delhi.

Official sources said the accident occurred when the driver of the jeep forcibly tried to cross the "manned and signalled" level crossing near the Maharashtra town of Ahmednagar, about 175 kilometres east of the state capital Bombay.

DDT remains best weapon against malaria

UNITED NATIONS, Nov 28: DDT, the insecticide used worldwide for 60 years to combat malaria, should be exempted from a proposed international ban on pollutants because it remains the best weapon against the disease, say medical experts, reports IPS.

At a roundtable discussion here — sponsored by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the NGO Health Committee and the Australian mission to the United Nations — five medical experts declared that a ban on dichlorodiphenyl trichloroethane (DDT) would put thousands, if not millions, of people at risk.

When it was introduced as an insecticide in 1939, it contributed to a dramatic fall in the incidence of malaria in many countries, most notably Sri Lanka, where the number of cases dropped from about one million down to 17 by 1963.

A proposed international treaty banning the use of Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) calls for the elimination of 10 POPs, including DDT.

The physicians who participated in the seminar — including David Nabarro of WHO, Elaine Wolfson of the Global Alliance of Women's Health,

Dyann Wirth of the Harvard School of Public Health, Richard Garfield of Columbia University and Robert Gwadz of the US National Institutes of Health — agreed that the treaty should contain provisions for the public health use of DDT.

Divergent situations and conditions demanded individual attention and solutions, they said. Certain cases, particularly those where Malaria outbreaks were seasonal, required the controlled use of DDT to effectively combat the problem.

"There is no one method of combating malaria," Dr Nabarro said.

One-fifth of the world's population remained at risk of contracting malaria, and the proportion was increasing each year as a result of climate change, environmental damage, breakdowns in healthcare and war, the conference heard.

A total of 22 countries, most notably India and Mexico, currently used DDT to control malaria vectors.

If an international ban forced these countries to replace DDT with less effective, more expensive and harder to apply formulas it would lead to an in-

crease in cases of malaria — particularly in the poorest regions of Africa, according to the medical experts.

The ban on DDT in the United States, imposed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), had led to global paranoia over its use, the conference heard.

Lending agencies subsequently refused a loan for one African government which intended purchasing large stocks of DDT for public health applications.

Because of suggestions of a link between DDT and breast cancer, a study published this year by the Johns Hopkins University in the United States, "showed DDT did not increase the risk of breast cancer and may even have protected against it."

According to Harvard's Dyann Wirth, "public commitment to the battle against malaria must be reassessed and there is a need to find new approaches to combat it."

Global spending on malaria research in 1999 ran to 85 million dollars — 42 dollars for each of the 1.5 million to 2.7 million.

People who died from the

disease each year. In contrast, researchers estimated that 3.274 dollars was being spent on every AIDS death and 789 dollars for every asthma death.

Only three of 20 major pharmaceutical companies who participated in a recent Harvard survey currently were engaged in malaria research.

The Harvard School of Public Health, however, has launched the Harvard Malaria Initiative, designed to "discover, develop, and test drugs that will defeat drug-resistant malaria."

The World Bank, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), WHO and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) — for agencies that formed a "Roll Back Malaria Partnership" — also participated in discussions here.

The objective of the Partnership is to reduce by 50 per cent the number of malaria cases in the world by the year 2010 and cut the number a further 50 per cent by 2015.

Some 400 million cases of malaria illness occurred each year and at least one million people died annually as a result of malaria, according to figures released by the Partnership.

Polls in Croatia Jan 3

ZAGREB, Nov 28: With ailing President Franjo Tudjman's condition worsening, his temporary replacement has called parliamentary elections for January 3 — a move which drew fire immediately from the political opposition, reports AP.

Tudjman's doctors said yesterday the 77-year-old leader's condition was "very difficult" on the 27th day of his hospitalisation in a Zagreb clinic. The brief statement did not elaborate, but it clearly suggested Tudjman was weakening.

Tudjman, who for long has been rumoured to be suffering from cancer, has been under intensive care since November 1, due to complications developed after emergency intestinal surgery.

Opposition leaders denounced the January 3 date, claiming the ruling party wants to exploit Tudjman's illness by a sympathy vote. Many Croats reverse Tudjman for leading the country to independence from former Yugoslavia in 1991.

The opposition also complained that the Christmas and New Year holidays will shorten the campaign period.