

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 northwestern 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.

Rail 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 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, also 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 pre-conditions 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 APP news agency quoted Foreign Minister Abdus Sattar as saying on Saturday.

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 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

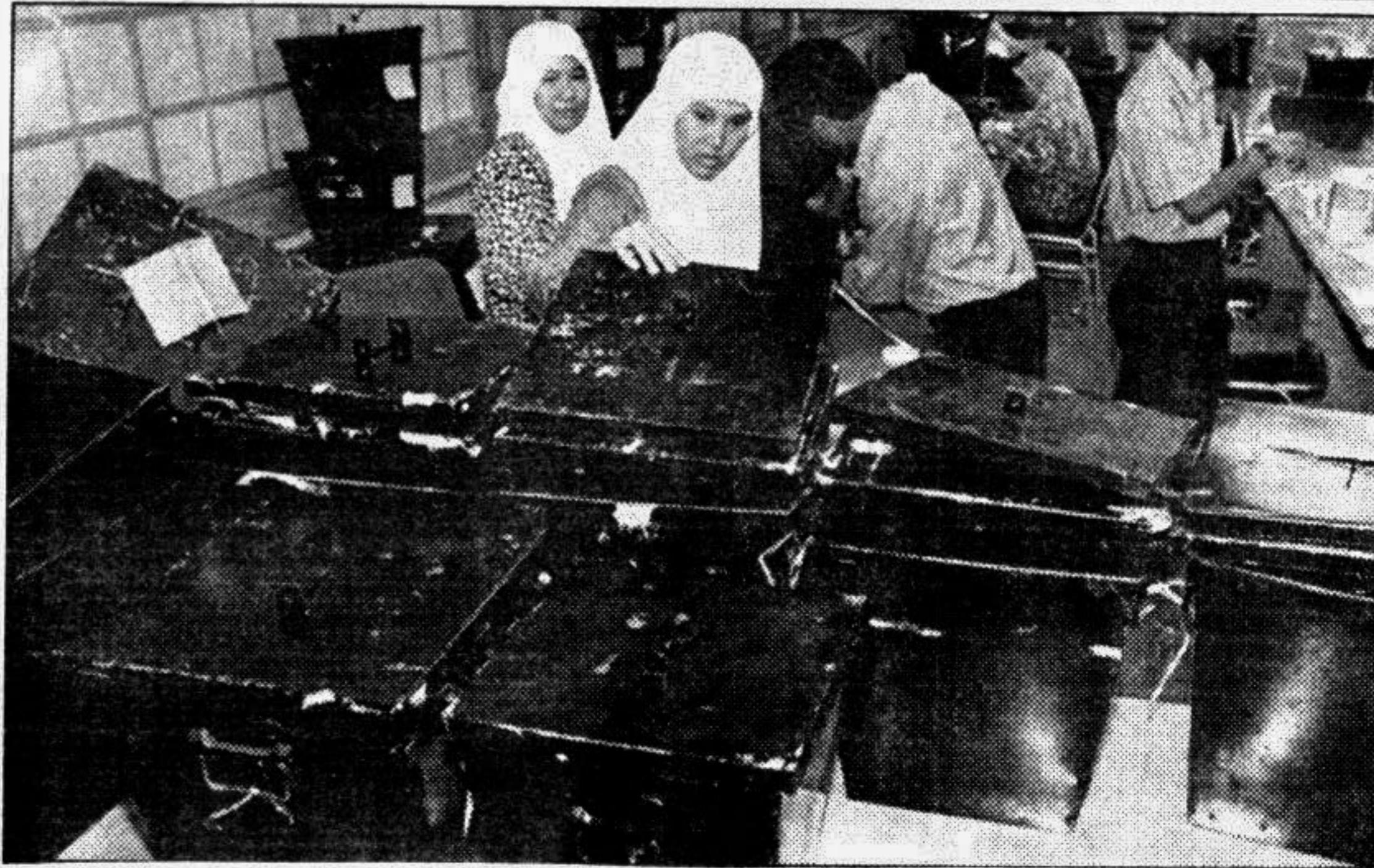
fulfil its commitment" enshrined in the Shimla Agreement regarding the final settlement of Jammu and Kashmir dispute, Sattar said.

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 in 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.

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 dissident 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 GVL Rao told the agency.

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 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.

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

### 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 Alwi Shihab said here yesterday.

"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.

Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong proposed to fel-

### 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.

## 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.

"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.

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.

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.

A report delivered at a secret meeting held at the headquarters of the invading Japanese troops in 1943 discloses that the "bacteriological experiment units" turned out 75 kilograms of bacteria a month.

During the war, 20 Chinese provinces were attacked by these Japanese units who spread deadly diseases including typhoid, cholera, diarrhoea fever, anthrax, lockjaw and gangrene.

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 their relatives as well as many 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."

### 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 Spratly Islands 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 include China reduces the significance of the code because of Beijing's status as an East Asian military power.

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