

Indira the greatest

LONDON, Dec 2: India's first woman Prime Minister Indira Gandhi has been named 'woman of the millennium' in a BBC poll, it was officially stated on Wednesday, reports PTI.

The stateswoman, who was assassinated by her bodyguards in 1984, was chosen by international users of the BBC News online service as the greatest woman of the last 1,000 years.

The former Prime Minister pipped Elizabeth I to win by a large majority, the BBC said.

The top ten included mother Teresa, Marie Curie, former British Premier Margaret Thatcher, Joan of Arc, Emmeline Pankhurst, Aung San Suu Kyi and Eleanor Roosevelt.

US will help Russia monitor N-plants

WASHINGTON, Dec 2: US Energy Secretary Bill Richardson unveiled a high-tech, long-distance telecommunications link Wednesday that will be used to help Russia closely monitor its nuclear power plants for the coming of the new millennium, reports AP.

Richardson invited reporters into the top-secret Situation Crisis Centre at the Energy Department headquarters to witness a hour-long exchange with Yevgeny Adamov, Russia's minister of atomic energy.

This New Year's Eve, said Richardson, he will be in the crisis centre to monitor the Y2K rollover at American nuclear reactors, power plants and the US electricity grid.

But he said two Russian experts also will be at the centre in the basement of department headquarters. And two US nuclear experts along with senior Russian nuclear officials will be at the MinAtom Situation and Crisis Centre in Moscow.

"While we don't expect any major problems, there may be glitches. We have to be ready on both sides," Richardson said, referring to both the US and Russian nuclear programmes.

Russian computer systems designed to shut nuclear reactors down in an emergency do not have the type of digital technology susceptible to the Y2K bug, said Richardson. But some other computer systems at the Russian plants could fail, he added.

The US nuclear industry recently reported to the government that all 103 of America's commercial reactors are ready to deal with the Y2K bug.

Adamov, whose image came across a large television screen on one wall of the crisis centre, expressed confidence that Russia will have no problems with Y2K, the bug that could cause a computer to go haywire if it recognizes the year 2000 as 1900.

"All of the drills showed we are prepared for the year 2000 rollover," said Adamov through a translator sitting in Washington.

Six bodies found at Mexican grave site

CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico Dec 2: Officials have found a sixth body at a suspected mass grave site near the US-Mexico border here, Mexican authorities announced late Wednesday, reports AP.

Isidoro Herzog, spokesman with Mexico's Attorney General's office (PGR), said that shoes and pieces of cloth were found near the sixth set of remains.

Earlier in the day investigators found five sets of remains, some of them on top of the others at the Tiro del Norte, on the outskirts of Ciudad Juarez.

Mexican and US law-enforcement officials are scouring four spots for bodies of victims of the drug-trafficking cartel that operates in the area, where 196 people have disappeared.

US approves new epilepsy drug

WASHINGTON, Dec 2: The US government on Wednesday approved a new epilepsy drug that does not seem to interfere with other treatments or harm patients' livers like some anti-seizure medications, reports Reuters.

Kepra, made by UCB Pharma Inc. the US unit of Belgian firm UCB Group, is designed for use in combination with other epilepsy medications to control so-called partial onset seizures that affect one area of the brain.

The Food and Drug Administration said it approved Kepra, known generically as levetiracetam, after reviewing clinical trials involving more than 1,300 patients with epilepsy.

About two dozen drugs are already available for preventing epileptic seizures, and patients often must take more than one medication to control different types.

But many of the drugs interfere with each other or with other medications. They also can cause liver damage.

Because Kepra is not metabolised in the liver, it is unlikely to interact with other drugs, the FDA said. "In addition, no serious blood or liver-related toxicities were seen" in clinical trials, the agency said.

Kepra's possible side effects include dizziness and sleepiness, the FDA said.

About 2 million people in the United States have epilepsy, a neurological condition that can produce brief disturbances in the brain's electrical function.

UNGA opposes US plan to build anti-missile defence

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 2: The UN General Assembly endorsed a resolution on Wednesday aimed at pressing the United States to abandon plans to build an anti-missile defence, reports Reuters.

The vote on the resolution, recommended last month by the assembly's disarmament and international security committee, was 80-4, with 68 abstentions.

Voting against the draft, together with the United States, were Albania, Israel and Micronesia. The members of the 15-nation European Union abstained, except for France and Ireland, which voted for the resolution.

It calls for continued efforts to strengthen and preserve the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty between the United States and the then Soviet Union, which limits missile defences.

Washington wants to amend the treaty to permit the construction in the next five years of a limited anti-missile defence, based in Alaska or North

Dakota, as a shield against possible attacks by so-called "rogue states" against US territory or US troops stationed abroad.

Russia and China have repeatedly warned that any changes to the ABM treaty would threaten other disarmament accords, undermine strategic stability and spark a new arms race.

The treaty is based on the theory that anti-missile systems would only tempt the other side to build more missiles to overwhelm the defences.

The UN resolution, originally sponsored by Russia, China and Belarus, was approved by the assembly's disarmament committee on Nov 5 by a 54-4 vote, with 73 abstentions.

It calls on the parties to the ABM treaty to refrain from the deployment of anti-ballistic missile systems for the defence of the territory of their country and not to provide a base for such a defence.

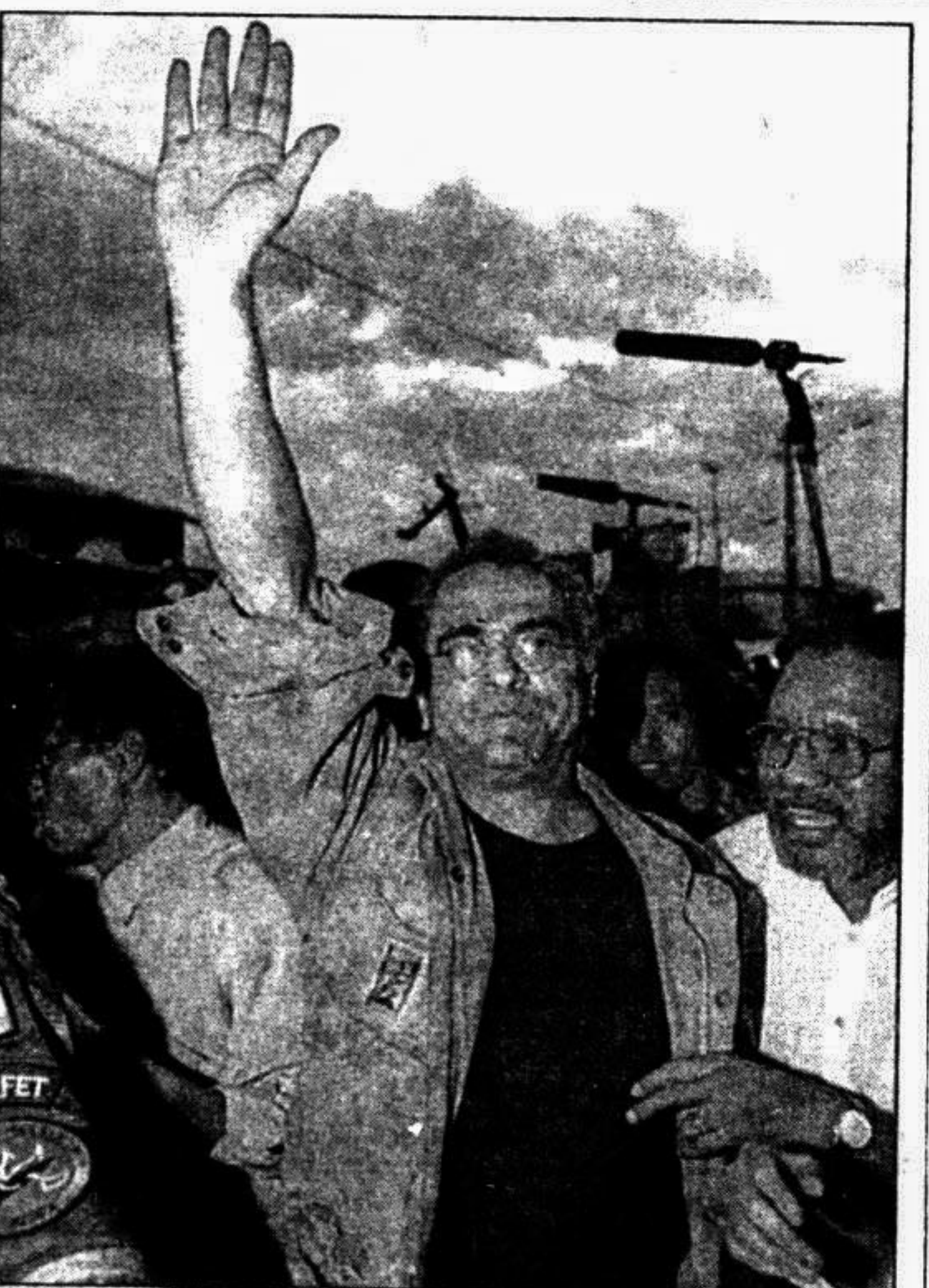
The treaty parties are also called on not to transfer to

other states, or to deploy outside their national territory, anti-ballistic-missile systems or their components limited by the treaty.

Under the treaty, Russia has long had an ageing ABM defence to protect only Moscow. But neither country has a national missile defence such as the one the United States wants to deploy on a limited scale that would not be sufficient to neutralise Russia's large nuclear force.

As an apparent warning to Washington, Russia early last month test-fired one of its short-range anti-missile rockets for the first time in six years and later test-fired an old nuclear-capable tactical missile to show that its shelf-life had not expired.

The UN resolution calls for "renewed efforts by each of the states parties to preserve and strengthen" the ABM treaty through full and strict compliance.



Nobel peace laureate Ramos Horta (C) waves shortly after arrival in Dili, East Timor, on Wednesday. Horta arrived in Dili after 24 years in exile to a rousing welcome honouring his efforts to end Indonesia's occupation of his homeland. — AFP photo

12 feared dead in Australian train crash

SYDNEY, Dec 2: As many as 12 passengers were feared dead today after a packed commuter train ploughed into the back of an inter-state train near Sydney, reports AP.

"There are going to be maybe 10 or 12 families tonight who will be very sad," New South Wales State Premier Bob Carr said after visiting the scene of the accident at Glenbrook in the Blue Mountains, 55 kilometres west of Sydney.

All the dead were passengers in the front carriage of a double-deck Sydney commuter train which rammed the back of the Indian Pacific train on its twice-weekly run from Perth to Sydney.

The commuter train had around 1,000 people aboard. The interstate train was carrying 159 passengers.

An ambulance spokesman said 51 people were hurt, including eight with serious injuries.

Rescue services cut the injured from the twisted wreck of the commuter train which had been tipped apart.

Passengers on the commuter train said the driver ran into the carriage seconds before the impact shouting "get down, get down." Passengers on the other train said a conductor told them there had been a signal failure.

Moscow asks US diplomat to leave Russia

MOSCOW, Dec 2: Moscow has given a US diplomat declared persona non grata after being accused of spying 10 days to leave the country, the foreign ministry said today, reports AP.

"Russia assumes that Leberknight will leave the territory of the Russian Federation within 10 days," said foreign ministry spokesman Yevgeny Voronin.

Russia notified the United States of the decision in a terse protest note handed to a US embassy official summoned to the foreign ministry on Wednesday, when the ten-day deadline came into effect.

Cheri Leberknight, a second secretary in the US embassy's political-military section, was detained Monday and briefly questioned after being caught "red-handed" trying to get secret military documents from a Russian citizen, according to Moscow.

The timing of the incident — almost immediately after Washington revealed the arrest in early November of a US Navy petty officer on charges of spying for Russia in 1994 — suggested a tit-for-tat reprisal.



Independence supporters wave the separatist 'Morning Star' flag at Jayapura in the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya to mark the anniversary of the Free Papua Movement on Wednesday. Thousands joined the flag-raising ceremony despite warnings by the security authorities that they will arrest anyone trying to fly the flag. Soldiers later fired on protesters trying to stop separatist flags from being lowered. — AFP photo

Mahathir urges new Asian security structure

LANGKAWI, Malaysia, Dec 2: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, saying an independent East Timor would soon become a neighbour "whether we or they like it or not," called today for a "refined" regional security structure covering all Asian countries, reports AP.

"In view of the critical importance of keeping peace and harmony in this area, I would like to call for a refined regional security structure that will involve every nation in Asia," he said in a speech here.

"A clear and definite security structure can help save tremendous resources, minimising unnecessary duplication and at the same time fostering closer cooperation among the nations."

As a close-knit community with "amazingly similar" cultures, values and thoughts, Mahathir said, "we in Southeast Asia are well aware that happenings in a neighbouring country will affect us and the rest of the region."

Taking this into account, he said, "Malaysia has undertaken to participate in peacekeeping in East Timor which, whether we or they like it or not, will be our neighbour."

Malaysia has a token presence with the current Australian-led force in East Timor and has offered some 1,500 troops to the UN Transitional Administration for East Timor

set to take over early next year.

On August 30 the East Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesia, which invaded in 1975. Mahathir has accused Western countries of instigating East Timorese to break away and has said they would have been better off staying under Indonesia.

He has also criticised Australian peacekeepers for what

he called their belligerent attitude.

The premier, fresh from an emphatic victory in Monday's election, was speaking at the opening of the Aerospace and Maritime International Conference in this northern island. The meeting is being held in conjunction with an air show.

Mahathir said the East Timor peacekeeping force was intended only to bring about sustainable peace.

"Any attempt made by any country to demonstrate its military might by actively supporting or undermining the political and economic well-being of another nation in the region is something to be deplored," he said.

Mahathir gave few details of his proposed new regional security structure. But he said China and Japan could together help ensure peace and stability, "something that will not only reduce wasteful expenditure on arms but will enhance intra-regional trade and investments."

He said research into peacekeeping needs should also focus on keeping sea lanes and airspace free of piracy and hijackings, on better search and rescue equipment and drills and on cross-border fire-fighting.

Malaysia sent firefighters to Indonesia when smog from forest fires in its neighbour blanketed much of Southeast Asia in 1997.

Suharto may face corruption charge

JAKARTA, Dec 2: The corruption case against former President Suharto is gaining momentum with the attorney-general saying Thursday he has evidence of criminal activity and that charges may be laid in the near future, reports AP.

"The facts are there and as soon as we have a strong case we will charge him," Marzuki Darsman said.

When asked by The Associated Press in a phone interview if charges will be laid this year or early next year, he responded, "yes, it's possible."

New President Abdurrahman Wahid reopened a corruption investigation into Suharto that his successor, former President BJ Habibie, dropped just before losing the presidency in October.

Success in decoding life

LONDON, Dec 2: A team of international scientists has deciphered the genetic code of a human chromosome in a scientific milestone that could herald new treatments for diseases ranging from heart disease to schizophrenia, reports Reuters.

Researchers from Britain, the United States and Japan mapped the entire sequence of the protein-coding genes of chromosome 22, the second smallest of the 23 pairs of human chromosomes.

They identified 545 genes, 289 of which were unknown, giving new insights into how genes are arranged on DNA and how they can be used to prevent, diagnose and treat diseases.

"It is both an exciting and momentous occasion. Exciting because what the scientists have achieved has enabled the world to see for the first time what the make-up of an entire human chromosome is," Dr Michael Dexter, of the Wellcome Trust, told a news conference.

"It is momentous because this provides a model for the remaining 22 chromosomes to be completed," Dexter, head of the world's largest medical research charity which funded some of the research, added.

Scientists from the Sanger Centre in Britain, the University of Oklahoma and Washington University in St Louis all collaborated on the research reported in the latest issue of the science journal Nature.

It is the first step in the Human Genome Project which plans to sequence the entire human genome, all of the more than 100,000 genes in human DNA, by 2003.

"One thousand years from now what is being reported today will be considered one of the true milestones of scientific research," Dexter said.

Each chromosome is made up of a molecule of DNA in the shape of a double helix which is composed of four chemical bases represented by the letters A (adenine), T (thymine), G (guanine) and C (cytosine). The arrangement, or sequence, of the letters determines the cell's genetic code.

The scientists have mapped

out the 33 million base pairs of chromosome 22. Thirty-five diseases and syndromes, including some cancers, schizophrenia, deafness and heart disease, have a genetic component linked to the chromosome.

The human genome contains three billion base pairs of DNA. Dr Ian Dunham of the Sanger Centre, who led the international team, emphasised the strong collaboration between the four major genome sequencing centres. "It is that strength which has let us be able to reach this milestone," he said.

In addition to the genes already identified, Dunham estimates there are about 100-200 more that may still emerge. Forty-two per cent of the chromosome is composed of junk DNA, which does not code a protein and has no known function.

"This is the first time we've really been able to see a whole human chromosome in all its detail — the organisation of all of the genes and how they relate to each other," he added.

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Irian Jaya

Dozen injured as troops fire on demonstrators

JAYAPURA, Indonesia, Dec 2: Dozens were injured Thursday when Indonesian security forces at a remote mining town fired on about 2,000 demonstrators who demanded independence for Irian Jaya province in West New Guinea, human rights activists said, reports AP.

They said the shootings took place when troops tried to lower a rebel flag raised on pole outside a church.

"This morning the police carried out an operation in Timika to lower the independence flag," said John Rumbiak, head of the local branch of Indonesia's Institute for Human Rights Studies and Advocacy.

"We have been informed that 28 people were injured in the action," he said. "Police shot at the crowd. At least 10 people were arrested."

But Police in Timika a town near the southern coast of the half-island province, denied that they had clashed with demonstrators.

Police spokesman Lt Col Feisal said officers had only lowered the "Morning Star" independence flag and that there were no reports of shootings.

Timika is close to the giant US-owned Grasberg mine, the world's largest copper and gold mine.

An employee at the Jakarta office of Freeport-McMoran Inc., a New Orleans-based firm which owns the mine, said they had not been able to contact the mine to confirm reports of shootings. He spoke on condition of anonymity.

Japanese and N Korean officials agree to reopen talks

TOKYO, Dec 2: Japanese parliamentarians and North Korean officials agreed in Pyongyang today to reopen stalled government-level talks on setting up diplomatic ties, Jiji Press said, reports AP.

Former Japanese prime minister Tomiichi Murayama, who led the Japanese all-party delegation, said the deal had been struck and a written agreement would be produced Friday, according to Jiji.

The accord followed talks between 16 Japanese lawmakers led by Murayama and a North Korean team led by Kim Yong-Sun, secretary for international affairs of the Workers' Party of Korea.

The Japanese team, which is backed by Tokyo but not a government-level delegation, handed over a letter from Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi to North Korea's supreme leader Kim Jong-il, said Jiji.

The letter was sent by Obuchi in his capacity as head of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, rather than as prime minister.

40 Chechen rebels killed

MOSCOW, Dec 2: Russian troops killed 40 Chechen rebels during heavy fighting close to Grozny, the ORT public television channel reported Wednesday, citing Russian military sources, reports AP.

Three foreign mercenaries were among those killed in the fighting, which took place near the key town of Argun, eight kilometres from Grozny, the television channel reported.

A Chechen military official said hundreds of Russian servicemen had perished in heavy fighting around Argun and Alkhan-Yurt, eight kilometres southwest of the capital.

Russia also lost 70 armoured vehicles, General Aslambek Arsayev said.

It was not possible to verify the figures independently but Russian sources said violent fighting had taken place in both areas.

Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeyev admitted that Chechen forces had launched a counter-attack.

Yeltsin's condition satisfactory

MOSCOW, Dec 2: The Kremlin said President Boris Yeltsin was in a "satisfactory" condition and had a normal temperature on Thursday, four days after being admitted to hospital with pneumonia, reports Reuters.

"His condition is satisfactory. He is continuing his course of treatment," a Kremlin spokesman told Reuters.

Yeltsin, 68, was admitted to the elite Central Clinical Hospital on Monday after falling ill last week with a viral infection and bronchitis. On Wednesday the Kremlin said he worked on documents in his hospital bed.

The spokesman said Yeltsin would meet newly re-elected Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma next Monday in Moscow, as previously planned.

Yeltsin's latest illness has pushed Prime Minister Vladimir Putin firmly into centre-stage. Putin has held a series of meetings this week with visiting foreign dignitaries, government officials and opposition politicians.

Putin was expected to address the final plenary session of Russia's State Duma lower house of parliament on Friday. A new Duma will be elected on December 19.

Yeltsin faces another important engagement on December 18 when Russia and Belarus tentatively plan to sign a union treaty at a ceremony in the Kremlin, officials said on Thursday.

The ceremony was planned for last week but was postponed due to Yeltsin's illness.

BRIEFLY

Italian PM in Libya:

Italy's prime minister on Wednesday became the first Western head of government to visit Libya since 1992 sanctions isolated the nation, giving a vote of confidence to a country struggling to overcome Western isolation, AP reports from Tripoli.

Premier Massimo D'Alema was received at the Maetiga military airport by Mohammed el-Mangoush, secretary of the General Committee, Libya's equivalent to a prime minister.

Portuguese FM in E Timor:

Portuguese Foreign Minister Jaime Gama arrived in East Timor Thursday for the first high-level Portuguese visit since Lisbon left its former colony in 1975, AFP reports from Dili.

As Gama's aircraft arrived at Dili's Comoro airport the foreign minister was warmly welcomed by East Timorese independence campaigner Jose Ramos Horta and the deputy commander of the Falintil resistance forces, Taur matan Ruak. Also greeting him was a senior official of the UN Transitional Authority in East Timor (UNTAET).

Blast kills 5 in Abkhazia:

A radio-controlled bomb killed five people, including a senior military officer, as they drove to go fishing in Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia region, separatist officials said Thursday, AP reports from Georgia.

The bomb was planted on a road in Abkhazia's Ochamchiri region. It killed Lt Col Khudat Dzidzholia, chief of a separatist military unit, and four civilians riding with him, an Abkhazian police spokesman said.

Palestinian lawmaker shot:

Unknown gunmen on Wednesday shot and wounded a Palestinian lawmaker, one of several signatories of a leaflet accusing Palestinian President Yasser Arafat of encouraging corruption, officials said, Reuters reports from Jerusalem.

Another lawmaker, Hassan Khreisheh, said legislator Mouayyid al-Masri was hit in the legs by three bullets shot by three masked men. A senior Arafat aide said the Authority would act firmly against the attackers.

Pak military takeover divides NGO opinions

LAHORE, Dec 2: The return of the generals to power has triggered a new debate among liberals in Pakistan: on fundamentalism vs liberalism or democracy vs dictatorship, reports IPS.

Fierly critics of deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from among the media and Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) have joined the military government of army chief Gen Pervez Musharraf.

The induction of at least two such activists into the federal and provincial cabinets has sparked off opinions ranging from downright disapproval to cautious acceptance among media and NGOs.

Omar Asghar Khan federal minister for environment, tourism and culture, and Shahid Hafeez Karadamani finance minister for the Punjab, have been outspoken critics of Pakistan's nuclear and foreign policies, and now seem committed to helping the new chief executive implement a more progressive agenda for the country.

Both have resigned their NGO jobs, and are now being keenly watched by their former colleagues to see if they will succeed, or quit in frustration.

Much is also expected from some other members of the new cabinets