

## Jyoti Basu to oppose presidential system

CALCUTTA, Dec 8: West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu would oppose any move by the BJP-led government at the centre to replace the existing parliamentary system with a presidential one, reports AP.

"I have been consistently opposing such idea, and I feel the present government at the centre will fall before such a move is taken", he said yesterday.

Basu made the observation when pressmen asked for his comment on the reported move by the centre to that effect during a special four-day session of parliament to mark the 50th anniversary of the republic.

Asked about the continuance of LK Advani, Murlidhar Joshi and Uma Bharati in the union cabinet despite their alleged involvement in Babri Masjid demolition, Basu said, "if this be their morality, what can be done."

## Clinton sees hopeful signs in solving Kashmir dispute

WASHINGTON, Dec 8: President Bill Clinton said on Tuesday that he saw some "hopeful signs" of a possible resolution of Pakistan and India's bitter conflict over the Kashmir region, reports Reuters.

"I look forward to making a real stab at that the next year," Clinton told a fund-raiser for Sen. Tim Wirth, a South Dakota Democrat.

The dispute over control of Kashmir has sparked two of the three wars between India and Pakistan, and the conflict continues to shadow relations between the two countries.

"The Indian subcontinent would have limitless potential in the 21st century if the differences... can be reconciled," Clinton said, directing his comments to a handful of Pakistani-Americans in the audience.

The Clinton administration has repeatedly warned both Pakistan and India against resuming testing nuclear devices.

Johnson, who is up for re-election in 2002, is trying to get a jump on boosting his campaign war chest to improve his chances in what he has said is likely to be a difficult race.

He hoped on Tuesday to rake in \$300,000 from about 50 supporters.

# Russian troops storm key gateway toward Grozny

MOSCOW, Dec 8: Russian troops stormed a key gateway toward the rebel capital Grozny today despite appearing to soften a deadline of less than 72 hours for the city's terrified inhabitants to flee or risk death, reports AP.

As bombs continued to rain down on Grozny, where an estimated 40,000 civilians are covering in underground cellars, federal forces launched an assault on the rebel stronghold of Urus-Martan some 20 km to the southwest.

The attack was being commanded by the Russian chief of operations in western Chechnya, General Vladimir Shamanov, federal military headquarters said, cited by Interfax.

The ex-Grozny mayor Bisan Gantamirov, leading Chechen forces opposed to the separatist leadership in Grozny, also took part in the operation.

Moscow said that up to 2,000 Chechen rebels are holed in

Urus-Martan, one of the last two towns controlling roads out of the capital.

NTV television, citing official Russian military sources, reported that the federal troops had taken control of the southwestern part of the town and that fighting was continuing.

The operation came as Russia appeared to respond to a wave of global condemnation prompted by its warning that all civilians remaining in Grozny by Saturday would be considered "terrorists" and obliterated.

The European Union, United States and United Nations all warned Russia about its actions in Chechnya, while the IMF delayed the release of fresh funds for Russia, though without mentioning Chechnya.

In an indication of an easing of Moscow's stance, General Viktor Kazantsev, commander of Russian troops in the north Caucasus, said the Russian

army warning to get out of Grozny was aimed only at the "bandits" and not at civilians.

ITAR-TASS said the general categorically denied at a press conference in Mordovsk, North Ossetia, that an ultimatum had been given to civilians in Grozny, though leaflets dropped over the Chechen capital by the Russian military had told inhabitants to leave by Saturday or be wiped out.

In another sign of Russia's apparent change of mind, NTV reported that a safe corridor out of Grozny might be kept open beyond the Saturday deadline.

Reporting from Pervomaiskaya, where Russian forces said they would open a safe corridor for Grozny civilians, the station cited Interior Minister Vladimir Rushailo as saying the checkpoint would function past the deadline.

Kazantsev did not explain on Wednesday how the army intended to eradicate the "bandits" in Grozny while sparing the

lives of the civilians.

ITAR-TASS quoted Kazantsev as saying the plan was as follows: "Minimal losses on the side of the federal forces and civilians," and "maximal destruction of the international terrorists."

But Russian aviation continued Wednesday to pursue Grozny, which stands 80 per cent in ruins from Russia's three-month aerial onslaught, after a relentless overnight barrage of bombs and rockets.

In the past 24-hour period, Russian SU-24 bombers and SU-25 attack planes carried out 90 sorties over the breakaway republic. Attack helicopters also flew 60 missions, the federal press centre said, cited by Interfax.

Federal troops around Grozny have fully encircled the capital and have fortified their positions, where 6,000 Chechen rebels are dug in, military officials said.

# Israel hints at freeze in settlements

JERUSALEM, Dec 8: Prime Minister Ehud Barak said Tuesday that Israel would put a brake on new construction in Jewish settlements after the Palestinians warned more building could derail crucial peace talks, reports AP.

"There's no point in starting new construction in the settlements while peace negotiations are underway because it's not certain they can be finished," Barak said.

"We have authorised 1,800 new units already approved by the previous government but new construction in the coming months could hamper the negotiations," he said at a news conference.

The Palestinians threatened Monday to break off the final status negotiations over the settlement issue, throwing the peace process into disarray ahead of the visit of US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

Asked to clarify Barak's remarks, his spokeswoman Merav Parsi-Zadok told AFP that the

government "will not approve further expansion of West Bank settlements while the negotiations are going on."

But she added: "It would be too strong to speak of a freeze in settlements."

The Palestinians are angry that settlement expansion under Barak has continued at a greater pace than under his right-wing predecessor Benjamin Netanyahu.

Anti-settlement group Peace Now says Barak's government has issued tenders for almost 3,200 units in Jewish settlements since taking office in July, exceeding an average of around 3,000 a year by Netanyahu.

The fate of around 170,000 Jews living in some 140 settlements across the West Bank and Gaza Strip is one of the most contentious issues to be tackled in talks to reach a final deal by September.

A top aide to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat expressed scepticism Tuesday over Barak's comments.

"This is an ambiguous position. It is not enough. We want all settlement activities to be stopped in order to restore credibility to the peace process," Nabil Abu Rudeina told AFP.

Israeli chief negotiator Oded Eran was upbeat about Barak's statement.

However, Housing Minister Yitzhak Levy, who is close to the settlers, demanded "explanations" from Barak.

The conflict erupted after the Levy's ministry announced plans to build a further 500 homes for Jews in two West Bank settlements, angering Palestinians who say interim peace agreements call for a halt to building work while negotiations are underway for a final peace.

"The Israeli side created this crisis before Albright's visit through its settlement campaign, which exceeds even that of the most extreme right-wing government," chief Palestinian negotiator Yasser Abed Rabbo said.

## Musharraf in Bahrain

MANAMA, Dec 8: Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf started a visit to Bahrain today on his third trip to the Gulf since seizing power in October, the official news agency GNA said, reports AP.

The Pakistani embassy said the general was to hold talks with Bahrain's emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Issa bin Khalifa.

Musharraf, who toppled prime minister Nawaz Sharif in an October 12 military coup, was to travel on to Tehran late Wednesday to meet Iranian President Mohammad Khatami and spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Relations between Tehran and Islamabad have been strained over the protracted civil war in Afghanistan in which the two governments support opposing sides.

The general has already visited Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar and Turkey on two previous tours of fellow Muslim countries.

Sharif's son, Hassan, was in Qatar and Saudi Arabia earlier this week to rally Gulf support for his father to be given a "fair trial," Gulf newspapers said.



Indonesian House Speaker Akbar Tanjung (2nd L) assists President Abdurrahman Wahid (2nd R) down the stairs after a hearing with parliament leaders in Jakarta yesterday, along with Wahid's daughter Yenny Zannubah Arifah (R). Akbar Tanjung and other parliament leaders summoned Wahid to the chamber to voice their concerns over mounting separatist demands in the northern province of Aceh and the easternmost province of Irian Jaya. —AFP photo

# Indonesian parliament urges HR court for Aceh abuses

JAKARTA, Dec 8: Indonesia's parliament called today for a tribunal to try those suspected of human rights violations in Aceh and warned the country was facing a "crisis" over growing separatism, reports AP.

Parliament leaders summoned President Abdurrahman Wahid to voice their concerns over mounting separatist demands in the northern province of Aceh and the easternmost province of Irian Jaya, as well as over the ongoing Christian-Muslim clashes in the Maluku Islands.

"We urge the government to immediately process the implementation of a human rights tribunal... based on data collected by human rights commission and the independent commission on Aceh," parliament Speaker Akbar Tanjung said.

The government should have a sense of crisis and concrete measures for the problems in Aceh, Maluku, and Irian Jaya," Tanjung said, in an apparent dig at Wahid's handling of separatism in Aceh.

He called on the government

not to impose martial law in Aceh but to hold talks with "all components of the people there to achieve a comprehensive solution."

Indonesia's top generals have been wary of any trial covering abuses during its nine-year campaign against the separatist Free Aceh Movement in which an estimated 2,000 people have been killed, including 300 this year.

But analysts said such a trial was crucial for the new government to regain its credibility among the Acehnese.

"Of course, bringing some of the officers to civilian courts is not easy for the Indonesian Military (TNI) to accept," said Jusuf Wanandi, of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta.

"And in the end it boils down to justice being meted out to abusive officers versus the unity of the Indonesian nation as a whole. The TNI leadership should accept this reality," he said in an article in the Jakarta Post on Wednesday.

Jusuf said the government must deal with the Aceh prob-

lem with urgency because the province "is in the heartland of Indonesia."

Wahid said he understood the parliament's calls for an immediate solution to the problems plaguing the country but he said they were "not as simple as people think."

The resolution will take time, energy and thought," he said.

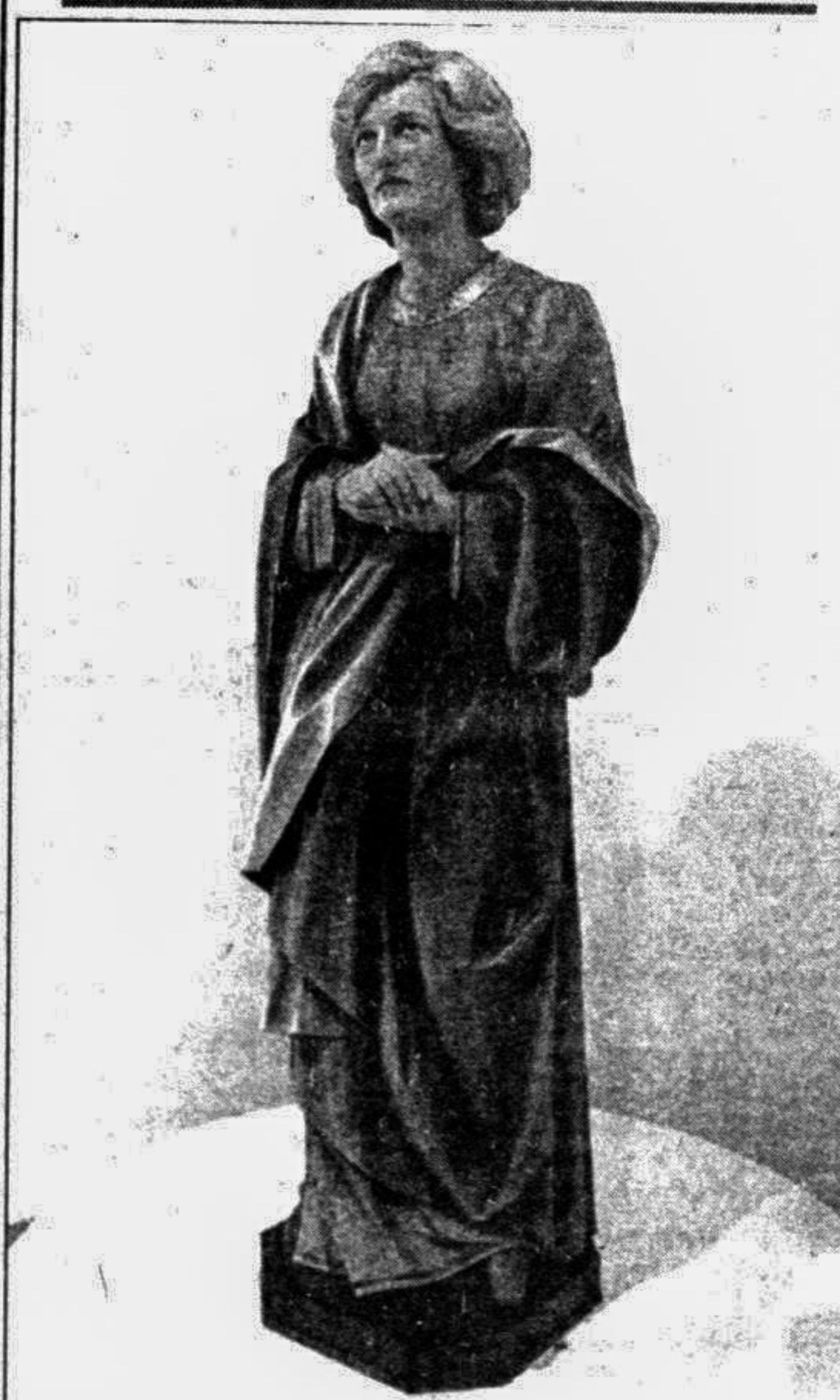
Wahid also said he would not tolerate separatism, saying oil-rich western province of Aceh must remain part of Indonesia.

He defended his many foreign trips since taking office, saying that his visits to several Asian countries and the United States had been intended to garner support against separatism.

The president has been criticised at home for spending most of his one month in office on overseas trips.

Defence Minister Juwono Sudarsono on Tuesday said the government was willing to talk with separatist leaders and other groups in Aceh but warned it would impose martial law if the situation deteriorates.

## BRIEFLY



An exhibit on display at Liverpool's Tate Gallery yesterday shows Diana, Princess of Wales, as Madonna, during their millennium exhibition called "Heaven." —AFP photo

**Quake jolts northern Pakistan:** An earthquake measuring 4.5 on the Richter scale rocked several northern Pakistani cities early Wednesday but there were no reports of any damage or injuries, officials said, AFP reports from Islamabad.

**Three reporters killed in China:** A bus accident in south China killed three journalists and injured eight other people, four of them seriously, the state-run Xinhua News Agency said Tuesday, AP reports from Beijing.

Xinhua identified the reporters killed as Qing Shating, an intern with its bureau in the southern region of Guangxi, Li Xiaoxia of the China News Agency and Tang Liyuan from the Guangdong People's Radio Station. All three were women, it said. The minibus, carrying nine reporters and two railway officials, was hit head-on by a bus Monday on a Gaungdi highway, rolled over and was destroyed, Xinhua said.

**Fire at Turkish prison:** Inmates rioted and set fire to their beds in an Ankara prison Tuesday, after a court transferred a group of their friends to other prisons, the Anatolia news agency reported, reports AP from Ankara.

# Lockerbie trial: Judge rules conspiracy charges stand

CAMP ZEIST, Netherlands, Dec 8: The main judge in the trial of two Libyans accused of bombing an airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland upheld today a conspiracy charge against the pair, rejecting their lawyers' request it be dropped, reports AP.

"I am satisfied that on the basis of what is set out in charge one (conspiracy), Scottish courts do have jurisdiction," Lord Sutherland said.

Abdel-Bassel Ali al-Megrahi, 47, and Al-Amin Khalifa Fadhima, 42, are both charged with murder, conspiracy to murder and air security violations in connection with the bombing of a PanAm jet

that exploded over the Scottish town of Lockerbie in December 1988, killing 259 passengers and crew and 11 people on the ground.

In a pre-trial hearing that opened Tuesday, defence lawyers William Taylor and Richard Keene argued that the conspiracy charge against the two men should be dropped because it went beyond the scope of the three-judge Scottish tribunal convened at Camp Zeist.

"Charge one (conspiracy) narrates a considerable number of locations, none of which is in Scotland," Taylor said, adding that the charge was poorly defined by the court.

The charge of conspiracy in-

cludes the allegation that both were members of the Libyan Intelligence Service at the time of the alleged attack.

Megrahi was said to have been working as the head of Libyan Arab Airlines and Fadhima as head of the airline's Malta operation.

The decision made Wednesday by Lord Sutherland is subject to appeal.

The suspects, extradited by Libya last April after years of political wrangling over the case, have consistently denied any involvement in the attack.

The two made their first public appearance Tuesday during the pre-trial hearing.

# Scientists claim breakthrough in developing AIDS vaccine

SEOUL, Dec 8: A team of South Korean scientists today claimed a breakthrough in developing DNA vaccines to protect human beings against the virus that leads to AIDS, reports AP.

A spokesman of the team said that Jean Marie Andrien of Laennec Hospital, in Paris planned to visit here early next year to discuss human trials of the vaccination in France along with a South Korean pharmaceutical company.

Other scientists here conceded that the vaccine may represent a major breakthrough in the fight against AIDS, caused by HIV (human immunodeficiency virus).

But they cautioned that it was too early to say whether the

vaccine could be applicable to humans.

By using genes from an HIV-like virus found only in monkeys, the research team at Pohang University of Science and Technology here developed a vaccine, which "protected completely" monkey against the virus, called SIV-239.

"It marked the first time that apes have been protected after being challenged by SIV-239," the team leader, Professor Sung Young-Chul, told AFP by phone from the southeastern city of Pohang.

"It is generally admitted among scientists should a vaccine protect monkeys against SIV-239, it would be highly possible for the vaccine to protect human beings against HIV as

well," Sung said.

In the early stages of the experiment, the vaccinated monkeys showed signs of infection. But later the vaccine stimulated the immune system, keeping the level of the virus under control.

"This finding will open new possibilities to both prevent and cure AIDS in humans," Sung said.

Human trials of a modified form of the vaccine will be carried out in the middle of next year, he said.

Seong Baik-Lin, a researcher and professor at bioengineering department at Yonsei University in Seoul, said "It is too early to predict whether the vaccine will be effective in fighting human AIDS."

## All 17 aboard Philippine plane killed

MANILA, Dec 8: A missing Philippine airliner has been found crashed on a mountainside and all 17 people aboard the small plane were killed, airline officials said today, reports Reuters.

The domestic airliner, carrying 15 passengers and two crew, went missing on Tuesday in the country's north.

Soldiers found the wreckage of the twin-engine Czech-made LET-410, and the 17 bodies lying nearby, late on Tuesday night south of Cauayan town in Isabela province.

The plane had slammed into a mountain shortly before landing at Cauayan, said Rodolfo Garcia, Manila Airport manager for the Asian Spirit airline.

Asian Spirit said two foreigners were among the passengers — Briton Robert Sinnott and Japanese Koji Takuma.

## Women should strive to keep weight steady: Report

CHICAGO, Dec 8: Piling on the pounds can impair a woman's quality of life and even slow her down more than smoking in some cases, a study from the Journal of the American Medical Association said Tuesday, reports AP.

The study found that young, lean women who put on 20 pounds (9 kg) over four years would have three times the decline in physical function as the average smoker over the same period.

Researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health in Boston estimated that the physical function of these women would dip by 6.9 points compared to a 2.5 point average for the smokers.

Overall the researchers reported that women who put on weight suffered a corresponding

decline in quality of life with less physical function and energy and more pain.

The finding applied to women of normal weight as well as those considered overweight, for example a 5-foot-and-4-inch woman (1.60 metre) tipping the scales at 174 pounds (78.3 kg).

In contrast, the most overweight women benefited most from shedding the pounds. Losing as little as five pounds could reduce pain and improve quality of life, said the authors of the study in this week's edition of the Journal.

"The message is that women should try and keep their weight steady," said author Dr Ichiro Kawachi, assistant professor of medicine at the Harvard School of Medicine.

## US missile sale to Taiwan likely

TAIPEI, Dec 8: Washington is close to selling Taiwan advanced air-to-air missiles that the island has wanted to buy for several years, the Taiwanese military said Wednesday, reports AP.

Defense officials are optimistic that Washington will permit the sale because the United States recently agreed to sell Taiwan software to guide the missiles, a defense ministry spokesman said, confirming a report in the local media.

However, it was not known if Washington has a timetable for the sale of the missiles, the official said, speaking on customary condition of anonymity.

Washington appears to be seeking to lessen the chances of Taiwan's rival, China, blocking the sale, gradually handing over technology for the AIM-120 missiles, the local China Times quoted air force official Shen Yuan-tai as saying.

## Science fiction tops all-time movie chart

LONDON, Dec 8: You can't beat a good sci-fi film, it seems. Five of the world's top 10 best movies are science fiction classics, according to the latest survey of the cinema-going public ahead of the millennium, reports AP.

The poll for the BBC put the George Lucas-directed epic "Star Wars" top of the list, with two more of that ilk coming in at five and seven. "The Phantom Menace" and "The Empire Strikes Back" respectively.

The other Star Wars film, "Return of the Jedi," came only 28th in the full list of 100 movies.

Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner" — which like "Star Wars" featured Harrison Ford — was in second place, while another Scott film, "Alien," was fourth.

The classic drama "Casablanca" starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman came third.

Another director with multiple success was Steven Spielberg. "Schindler's List" came in eighth and "Saving Private Ryan" ninth.

Britain's most successful movie, "Notting Hill" starring Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant, failed even to make it into the top 100.

The newest movie in the list is "The Blair Witch Project," which was only released in Britain in October, at 66. The oldest is "Gone With the Wind" at 12, dating from 1939.

Robert De Niro features in six of the top 100 films with Harrison Ford and Sir Alec Guinness in five each.

The female stars most often in are Sigourney Weaver and Carrie Fisher with three mentions each, although only because of the film series they appear in — "Alien" and "Star Wars" respectively.

Monty Python's "Life of Brian" is the highest ranked British film at 18.

# Indian cabinet okays bills to create 3 new states, ban lotteries

NEW DELHI, Dec 8: With many promises to keep, India's Cabinet approved Parliament bills to outlaw all lotteries, amend intellectual property laws and create smaller states for better governance, Wednesday's newspapers reported, says AP.

A late night meeting of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Cabinet on Tuesday cleared 16 long-pending proposals that the ruling coalition promised to take up soon after coming to power, including a law to help speedy recovery of bank loans and another tightening real estate regulations.

The bills will now be brought before the two houses of Parliament to be discussed and voted on.

A new legislation proposes to amend India's copyright law framed in 1952 that experts say is obsolete, and bring it in line with global intellectual property rights regulations.

The decisions were taken after India's parliament passed a landmark bill to open up India's massive, state-owned insurance industry to domestic and foreign private investors. Also Tuesday, the government said it would review its decades-old policy banning foreign investment in Indian newspapers.

The Cabinet cleared the po-

litical controversial proposal to carve out three new states from the sprawling provinces of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous, Bihar, the country's poorest and Madhya Pradesh, the largest.

Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party has promised the new states for years, saying this will help better govern the poor regions they cover. But the move has strong opponents in several parties, including some in his ruling coalition.

However, the toughest move is the ban on lotteries, for which a bill is likely to be introduced in the ongoing session of Parliament and is expected to provoke countryside protests from sellers.

When Interior Minister Lal Krishna Advani declared in Parliament last year that the trade would be banned, the country's largest body of lottery traders threatened that tens of thousands of sellers would hold demonstrations and petition the courts if the prohibition went through.

Vajpayee's government collapses before it could carry out the promise, and the coalition was reelected in October.

Lotteries lure millions of poor people in India each day to spend their paltry earnings.

# Computer experts warn of self-updating virus

NEW YORK, Dec 8: Computer security experts warned Tuesday of a new virus that can update itself with potentially malicious instructions from a Web site, reports AP.

The first of its kind, this virus primarily affects home computers and spreads through Microsoft software used for chat rooms. The W95.Babylon virus comes disguised as a Y2K fix, making it the sixth known virus preying on the Year 2000 glitch.

David Perry, director of public education at Trend Micro Inc., identified the virus most worrisome aspect as its ability "to add new capabilities as it rolls along."

The virus writer can effectively control the infected computer remotely. Anti-virus experts worked to identify the specific commands for the virus, aware these could include erasing files and grabbing sensitive information.

Trend Micro and other makers of anti-virus software reiterated warnings against accepting unsolicited files and urged computer users to update virus-detection software. But because this virus spreads through chat rooms, users should turn off any auto-download features.

Unlike most viruses, which spread primarily by e-mail, W95.Babylon takes advantage

of chat rooms and makes home users more prone to infection. Few companies use chat rooms for business, although sometimes employees sidestep rules prohibiting personal use.

When an infected user logs on to a chat room using MIRC chat software, the virus gets sent as a Y2K bug fix to anyone else in that chat room. If the user accepts the software, the virus will install itself and later obtain several files from Japan. Those files, in turn, carry instructions affecting the user's computer.

"There's nothing else even close to it," said Vince Gullotto, director of Network Associates' anti-virus research team.

Vincent Weaver, anti-virus research director at Symantec Corp., said the virus can spread by e-mail as well, though home e-mail use is not as heavy as that of businesses. Thus, he said, this virus is not likely to spread as quickly as other viruses.

Discovery of the new virus comes days after experts detected a virus timed to erase disks on January 1 by posing as a Y2K problem. All told, there are three viruses known to trigger in the new year.

Three others spread by posing as Y2K software and act immediately.