

Chechen rebels claim

# 102 Russian soldiers killed in Grozny ambush

MOSCOW, Dec 17: Chechen fighters killed 102 Russian soldiers when they ambushed a federal armoured patrol in the centre of Grozny, rebel headquarters said today, as Moscow continued to deny the incident, reports AFP.

Chechen military headquarters cited by Interfax news agency gave details of Wednesday's battle and also conceded heavy rebel losses.

Reports from three different sources have said the armoured column was attacked inside Grozny by more than 1,000 Chechen separatists armed with rocket-propelled grenades.

Journalists said they had counted around 100 Russian bodies.

It marked the most serious casualty report since Russia invaded the rebel republic with tanks and troops on October 1.

According to Chechen sources, the patrol was ambushed some 500 metres (yards) from the downtown Minutka square as it advanced from the east of Grozny on a reconnaissance mission on Wednesday morning.

The Chechen operation was led by rebel commander Ruslan Gelayev, the Chechen general staff said.

Within minutes the rebels rushed reinforcements to the scene and cut off the retreat of the Russians. The fierce fighting lasted until darkness fell.

The Chechen military headquarters gave no figures for its losses, but sources cited by Interfax said there had been "a significant number of dead and wounded."

The Russian top brass and government angrily denied the reports of the battle, branding them as propaganda linked to Western intelligence services.

Federal military officials

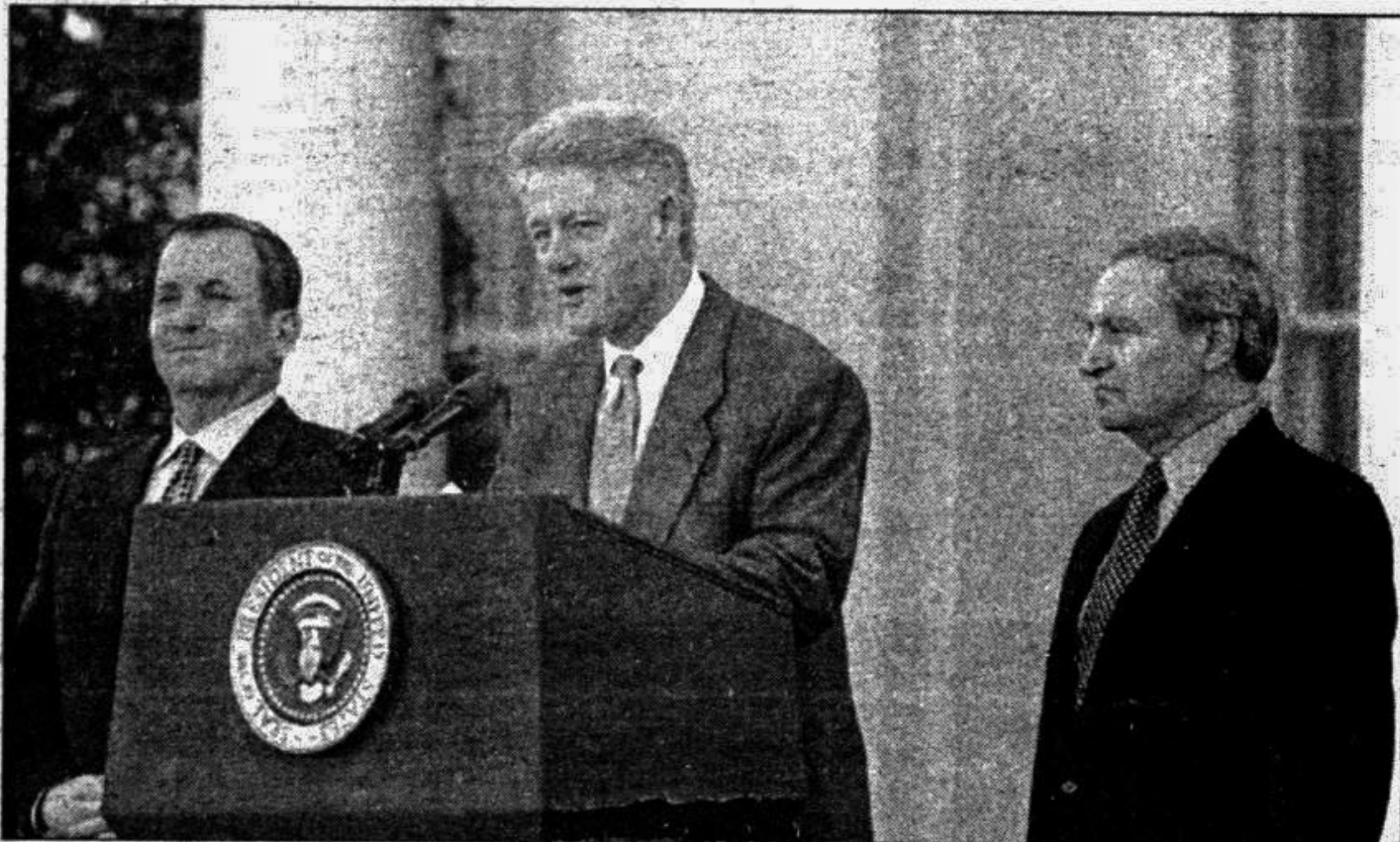
said only two Russian soldiers had died on Wednesday in all of Chechnya.

Meanwhile, Russian forces were battling Chechen rebels in the eastern outskirts of Chechnya's capital Grozny early today, the federal military headquarters said, cited by Interfax news agency.

Over the last 24 hours, federal warplanes and attack helicopters carried out 83 bombing missions over the breakaway republic, blasting the suburbs of Grozny as well the mountainous south of Chechnya.

The Russian aviation destroyed 17 rebel bases and two communication centres, the military said.

SU-24 bombers and SU-25 attack aircraft as well as Mi-24 helicopters took part in the missions over the regions of Vedeno and Shatoi in the south and the outskirts of Grozny, federal headquarters added.



US President Bill Clinton (C) speaks to reporters as Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak (L) and Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara look on during a press conference at the White House West Wing Portico Thursday in Washington, DC. Clinton told reporters that the Syrian-Israeli peace talks, that have already gone on for two days, would resume on an "intensive basis" in the US on January 3, 2000. —AFP photo

## Talks with Syria 'on right track': Barak

JERUSALEM, Dec 17: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak told journalists travelling home with him from historic talks in Washington with Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara that the negotiations are "on the right track," Israeli radio reported today, says AFP.

The negotiations with Syria are on the right track even if they are difficult, the radio quoted him as saying.

Foreign Minister David Levy, who accompanied the prime minister to the talks, told the radio: "We will need a great deal of patience and firmness."

Deputy Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh expressed satisfaction at the resumption of the long-frozen negotiations with Syria.

"The important thing is that we succeeded in relaunching the talks after a break of nearly four years," he told the radio.

At the end of two days of talks in Washington between the two delegations, US President Bill Clinton announced

that "intensive negotiations" would be launched on January 3 near the US federal capital with the active participation of US officials.

**'Israel must push harder wheel of peace'**

Meanwhile, Jordanian newspapers today urged Israel to show that it was determined to make peace with Syria and Lebanon following the brutal attack on south Lebanon that left 20 schoolchildren wounded.

The mood of optimism that emerged in Washington could have invigorated a mood of peace and hope that progress could be reached on the Syrian-Israeli track of the peace process," Al-Dustour daily wrote in a front-page editorial.

"But Israel's criminal action against Lebanese children has extinguished a large part of that optimism," said the newspaper.

"We call on Israel to stop... and show that it is really sincere in wanting to seize the opportunity and create trust for

the future of the current negotiations and of other tracks," it said.

Twenty Lebanese children aged between five and 13 were wounded when two Israeli shells slammed into their school in the south Lebanon village of Arab Salim, Israel apologised for Thursday's attack saying it was a mistake.

Al-Rai newspaper, which often reflects government policies, did not refer to the Israeli attack.

"We can cautiously say that the wheel of peace has turned now that it has been announced that talks between Israel and Syria will resume following the end of year holidays," Al-Rai said.

The newspaper called for "more confidence-building measures" and urged Israel to take the lead.

"Israeli leaders must read carefully their history and seize the opportunity that has been offered in the last days of this century, half of which was spent in wars," Al-Rai said.

### Vajpayee urges parliamentarians to behave

NEW DELHI, Dec 17: Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee today expressed serious concern over falling standards of parliamentary debates and recommended corrective steps, reports AFP.

"Heated debate helps government rectify and refine its policies. But, decency and decorum must be maintained," Vajpayee told parliament's lower house.

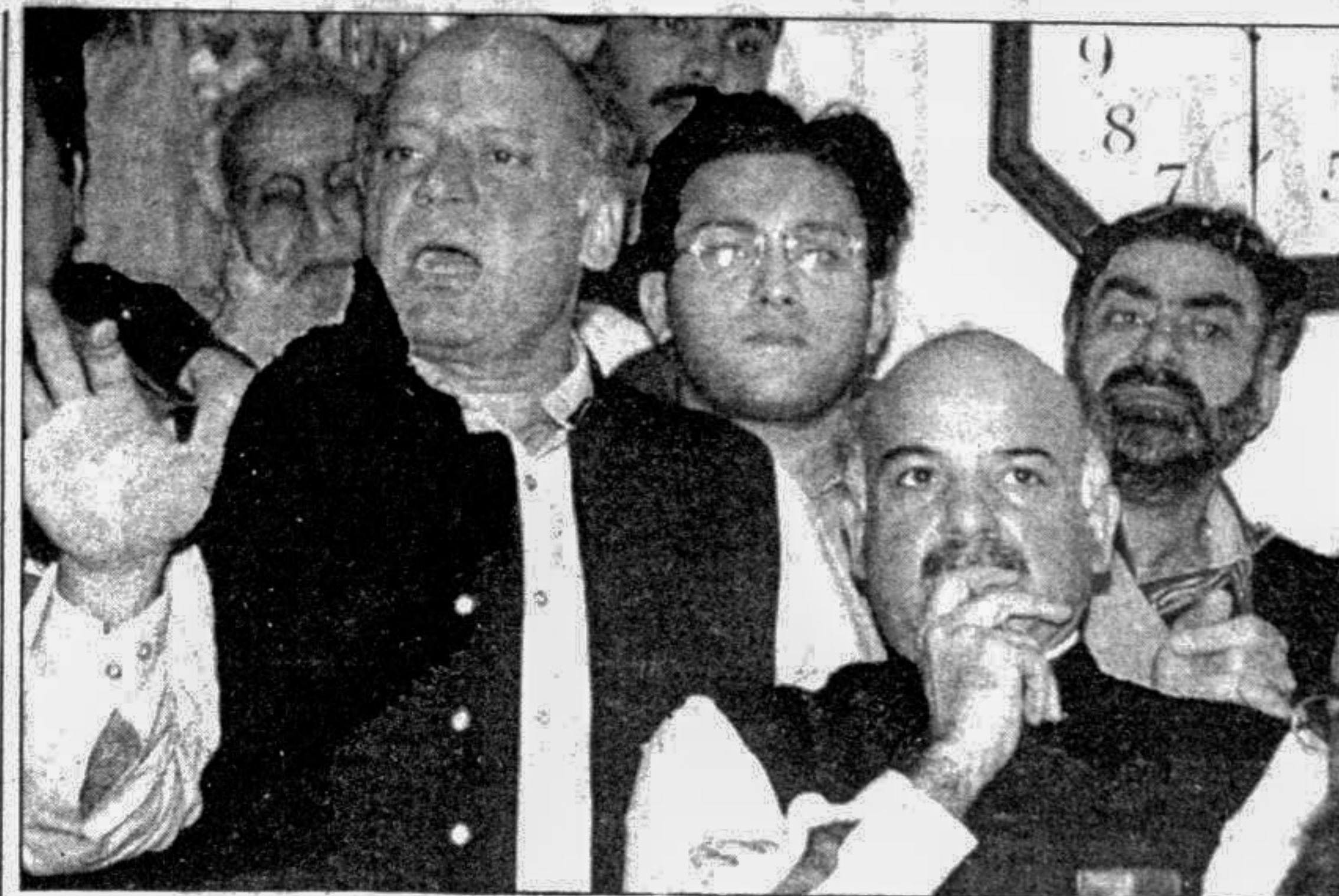
The Indian parliament often breaks up without transacting any business as members of parliament clash over trivial issues.

Vajpayee said there was a need for "intelligent debate" instead of frivolous arguments.

"Governance is more than a question of parliamentary arithmetic and for effective governance, both government and opposition must sometimes sit together and arrive at a sensible consensus."

Vajpayee's plea comes two days after the parliament was rocked by disorder after the main opposition Congress sought the resignation of three ruling Hindu nationalist ministers linked to the razing of a mosque in 1992.

Speaker G.M.C. Balayogi addressed the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament, following unruly scenes.



Pakistan's deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (L) addresses his family members with his brother Shahbaz Sharif (R) for the first time since his detention, in his home town Lahore Thursday. A Pakistan court released Sharif and his brother Shahbaz Sharif to a family ceremony after the death of his mother-in-law. Sharif and his brother along with other senior officials have been detained after the military coup on October 12. —AFP photo

### Fossett abandons bid to break record of Atlantic crossing

NEW YORK, Dec 17: Millionaire American adventurer Steve Fossett has abandoned his bid to smash the nine-year-old record for sailing across the Atlantic, reports AFP.

Fossett's 36m maxi-catamaran Playstation set out from here on Thursday attempting to break the mark of six days, 13 hrs 13min 30sec to the Lizard point of south-west England, set by Frenchman Serge Mader in 1990 - but turned back just hours after setting off.

Fossett had said before his departure that he hoped to lower the record to under six days.

He set off with a crew of nine, including four Americans, two Australians, two Britains and a New Zealander.

Fossett's media service said the yacht turned around eight hours after leaving New York, citing unspecified problems.

## India won't make secret Bofors documents public: FM

NEW DELHI, Dec 17: Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh today ruled out making public a final set of secret documents on the 1986 Bofors scandal which the Swiss authorities handed over, reports AFP.

"The latest papers received from the Swiss authorities will be used only for the purpose it had been received. They cannot be revealed to the public as it would amount to using them for political purposes," Singh told the upper house of parliament.

"This was the understanding which the Swiss authorities had handed over the papers and this will not be breached," he said amid demands by communist parties that the documents be tabled in parliament.

The handover of the documents by the Swiss Federal Department of Justice in Bern on Wednesday ended a four-year

legal battle for the custody of the Bofors papers in the 1.3-billion-dollar arms contract kickbacks scandal.

The first set of secret Swiss bank documents linked to alleged Bofors kickbacks were given to federal Indian investigators in January 1997. Kickbacks were allegedly paid through bank accounts in Switzerland.

The developments come almost two months after India's federal detectives for the first time named assassinated prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, one of his Italian friends, a former Bofors chief and a senior Indian bureaucrat as co-accused in the fraud case.

Singh said there was no delay in obtaining the documents, which the Central Bureau of Investigation needs to nail people suspected to have received the bribes.

"In fact, it was because of the initiative of the government that they had got the second and the last set of papers. Besides, additional information in connection with the case was also received from Luxembourg," he said.

The Swedish firm beat Austrian, British, French and Italian firms to bag the contract.

### Better govt

## Pak general seems firm on his promises

ISLAMABAD, Dec 17: With their bold economic reform agenda unveiled this week, Pakistan's military rulers appear to be sticking to their promises of better government, the country's leading newspapers said today, reports AFP.

But General Pervez Musharraf, who seized power in a military coup two months ago, has his work cut out to implement his proposals, the papers said.

Musharraf has promised to bring in a broad sales tax, revitalise agriculture, promote smaller industries, encourage oil and gas exploration and develop information technology.

Income taxes will be levied on agricultural earnings and the defence budget will be cut by five percent, he said.

"The government's resolve to take tough but painful decisions has acquired a measure of credibility," The News daily said in an editorial.

"The more so because unlike

the earlier economic programmes it does not delay critical reform measures for cheap popularity," the paper said.

Pakistan must rebuild the confidence of foreign investors which was shattered last year after Islamabad conducted nuclear tests and then promptly froze foreign currency accounts.

A bitter row over investment in power firms has made the country seem a risky place to invest. But with 38 billion dollars in foreign debt, Pakistan badly needs new money.

"The phases of the package, as we see them on paper, will not matter what if they do not translate into tangible results," The News said.

"So often in the past it has happened that lofty economic visions came to naught because the will to implement this was lacking."

Other papers were more critical.

**Under Beijing rule, the territory will share the same status as ex-British colony Hong Kong**

CHINA, JAPAN, PHILIPPINES, TAIWAN, HONG KONG, MACAU PENINSULA, TAPA, COBANE, MACAU

Macau reverts to Chinese rule after more than 400 years as a Portuguese colony

Population: 435,000. 95% Chinese, 5% Portuguese, others (1998 est)

Languages (official): Portuguese, Chinese

GDP: US\$6.8 billion (1998 est)

Industries: Tourism and gaming, export, textiles, property, construction

**Before the handover:** Portuguese-ruled Chinese territory; governor appointed by the president

**After the handover:** Special Administrative Region of China; chief executive appointed by committee

**23-seat legislature:** 8 directly elected, 8 indirectly elected, 7 appointed by the governor

**Within 5 years, 29-seat legislature:** 12 directly elected, 10 indirectly elected, 7 appointed by the chief executive

Source: Macau government

### BJP leader Sharma dead

NEW DELHI, Dec 17: A senior Hindu politician and the vice-president of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's nationalist BJP party died of an "near attack today," an official said, reports AFP.

Krishan Lal Sharma, 75, who started his political career as a member of the militant Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps), was taken to a New Delhi hospital after he complained of chest pain and died early today, party spokesman JP Mathur said.

Sharma, a bachelor, was elected twice to the lower house during the last two elections from his New Delhi constituency.

"His death has come, as a bolt from the blue. I met him last night and we were to meet today also. I cannot believe that he is no more," Vajpayee said.

### Indonesia won't break up: Wahid

JAKARTA, Dec 17: Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid today expressed his confidence that the country will not break up and called on his country not to worry about the rising tide of separatism in Aceh and Irian Jaya provinces, reports AFP.

"I don't think we are under threat of a break-up. If you have that feeling, chase it away," Wahid said in a Friday prayer sermon at the state palace.

The president said there was growing opposition to separatism in Aceh, a resource-rich region in the northern tip of Sumatra island, and talks with the secessionist movement were underway.

"As for Irian Jaya, it's not so difficult to solve as long as we hold dialogues together," he said.

Aceh and Irian Jaya, a mineral-rich province in eastern Indonesia, have seen rising calls for independence after East Timor voted to sever its links with Indonesia.

### US, Germany agree on \$5.6 b fund for Nazi slaves

BERLIN, Dec 17: The different parties involved in the negotiating compensation for former Nazi slave labourers officially agreed on Friday on a sum of 10 billion marks (5.6 billion euros, dollars) for the victims, US negotiator Deputy Treasury Secretary Stuart Eizenstat said here, reports AFP.

It was the first time 10 billion mark figure was officially confirmed, though it has been widely talked about in recent days by lawyers negotiating for a settlement.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said a US-German agreement on compensating former Nazi slave labourers would take the two countries' relations to a new height.

The agreement under which German government and industry is to pay 10 billion marks (5.17 billion dollars, 5.06 billion euros) "will take US-German relations to new heights in the new millennium."

"Enormous credit is due to the brilliant efforts of Gov't Lt. Lamsdorff and negotiators from both the countries and all parties involved," she said about German negotiator Otto Lambsdorff.

### G8 minsters hold talks

BERLIN, Dec 17: Foreign ministers of the Group of Eight (G8) leading industrialised countries met in Berlin today for discussions dominated by the war that Russia is waging on Chechnya, reports AFP.

They were due to hear from Knut Vollebeck of Norway, the current chairman of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), who returned Thursday from a mission to the Northern Caucasus region.

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov for his part was due to defend Moscow's drive against "terrorists" in the breakaway republic and its onslaught on the capital Grozny.

Russia's partners in the G8 grouping have sharply disapproved of the Russian attitude during the military operations towards the civilian population, which has been warned to leave the city.

## BRIEFLY

**Egyptian Nobel laureate honoured:** The Egyptian scientist who won the 1999 Nobel chemistry prize received his country's highest honour, the Collar of the Nile, Thursday, SFP reports from Cairo.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak presented the award to Egyptian-American Ahmed Zewail at a ceremony in the presidential palace of Ithhadia north of Cairo, that was broadcast live on Egyptian television. The collar, shaped like lotus flowers, is normally only given to kings and heads of state for "outstanding contributions to humanity."

**Chissano leading in Mozambique polls:** Outgoing President Joaquim Chissano was leading in Mozambican presidential elections ahead of opposition rival Afonso Dhlakama, with 52.22 per cent against Dhlakama's 47.78 per cent on more than half the ballots counted Friday, an electoral official told AFP in Moputu.



Monica Lewinsky (R) leaves the Howard County Courthouse in Ellicott City, MD Thursday after testifying in the Linda Tripp wire tapping trial. —AFP photo

## To avenge soldier's death Indonesian troops torch Aceh stores, homes

JAKARTA, Dec 17: Indonesian police and soldiers set fire to dozens of houses and shops today in the troubled Aceh province to avenge the killing of a soldier, a report said, says AFP.

A soldier was found dead in the Lammeu area of Pidie district on Friday morning, prompting security authorities to send troops to the area to search for the assailants, the Detik online news service said.

Police and soldiers found homes in the area deserted by residents who had sought refuge in mosques in fear, Detik said.

They torched shops and homes after failing to find the killer, it said.

Two civilians and one soldier were injured in violence Thursday between soldiers and rebels of the Free Aceh (GAM) separatist movement in the province, police sources said.

The clash occurred when troops raided a suspected GAM underground training facility in Blang Pante village in the Matangkuli area of North Aceh.

Police in Banda Aceh, the provincial capital, told AFP they knew about the incident from the military command.

## Annan apologises for UN role in '94 genocide in Rwanda

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 17: Secretary-General Kofi Annan has apologised for the United Nations' role in the 1994 Rwandan genocide and has pledged to use a highly critical report to ensure that another mass slaughter of civilians doesn't occur again, reports AP.

Annan acknowledged Thursday that the United Nations and its member states failed Rwanda and its people during the 100-day genocide and expressed his "deep remorse" that more wasn't done to stop it.

"Of all my aims as a secretary-general," Annan said in a statement, "there is none to which I feel more deeply committed than that of enabling the United Nations never again to fail in protecting a civilian population from genocide or mass slaughter."

Annan was responding to an independent investigation he commissioned in March to learn the truth about the UN role in the genocide so that the United Nations could learn lessons for the future.

The report found that the fundamental failure of the UN response was that the organisation and its members lacked the political will and resources to prevent the genocide or stop it once it was under way.

An estimated 800,000 people, most of them minority Tutsis, were killed in the Hutu-sponsored genocide that began after the April 6, 1994, downing of the Rwandan president's plane.

The report singled out Annan, then chief of the UN peacekeeping department, for failing to alert the Security Council of key developments and to recommend the United Nations strengthen the peacekeepers on the ground once the bloodletting began.

## Mudslides kill 137 in Venezuela

CARACAS, Dec 17: Torrential rains and mudslides have killed at least 137 people in Venezuela's capital Caracas and along its scenic Caribbean coastline in the country's worst natural disaster in 50 years, authorities said Thursday, reports Reuters.

The downpours created raging rivers that swept through poor districts in the city of six million people, destroying hundreds of ramshackle homes and turning tourist beaches into ugly fields of thick, noxious mud strewn with three trunks.

The eventual death toll was likely to be far higher.

"At least 100 people are dead in Caracas, 100 are missing and 3,200 people are homeless," city governor Hernan Gruber said. The fatalities were in addition to at least 37 people confirmed dead Wednesday in the coastal state of Vargas.

"A tragedy of this magnitude has not occurred in Venezuela in 50 years," President Hugo Chavez said as he toured the disaster area in Vargas, just north of Caracas.

There are dozens of people dead, missing, thousands of homeless," he told the Venezuelan television channel, adding that he would provide fuller figures later.

**International airport closed**

Worst hit were shanty towns perched precariously on steep mountainsides where on third of the capital's residents live.

"The Banding neighbourhood was practically destroyed. There are a lot of people trapped... hundreds of people. The water swept away a complete neighbourhood," said Luis Martinez, head of the metropolitan police motorized brigade.



Two residents of the slum area of Los Erasos on the fringe of Caracas, Venezuela walk by debris and a mud-covered car that was swept by flood waters Thursday following torrential rains. Local officials report that dozens of people have been killed in the capital and in eight states nationwide while thousands have been left homeless. —AFP photo

## Mandela kicks off plan to clean up world's slums

BERLIN, Dec 17: The United Nations and the World Bank got down to work on Thursday on an ambitious project under the patronage of Nelson Mandela to tackle urban poverty and improve living conditions for up to 100 million slum dwellers, reports Reuters.

The former South African president said the number of people living in cities was projected to double to 5.1 billion by 2030, and 98 per cent of the new urban population would be in developing countries.

There will consequently be a massive increase in the number of urban centres, including mega-cities, in the developing world," Mandela said in speech in Berlin at the inaugural meeting of the Cities Alliance project.

"In a time when the relationships of growing inequality between the north and south are becoming a major global concern, this urbanisation in the developing world assumes even more pressing dimensions," he said and promised he would actively monitor the programme.