

International

India has 'clear evidence' of Pak involvement in hijacking

NEW DELHI, Jan 3: India has clear evidence Pakistan was involved in the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight IC-814...

we have suggest this. One such intercept showed that one militant outfit in Kashmir asked another in the state why it condemned the hijacking.

Friday with all 160 passengers and crew released in exchange for three pro-Kashmiri Muslim militants jailed in India.

few grenades," Daniele Goepfert, 54, said at a press conference after arriving at Nice airport.

"We have clear evidence to prove Pakistan's involvement... the Pakistani establishment is certainly responsible for this. That is what I am saying," Mishra told the private Star TV network.

The behaviour of Pakistan from the first day when it said that India had stage-managed the hijacking and that an Indian intelligence agent with a particular seat number was travelling in the aircraft showed Pakistan's intentions," Mishra said.

Hijackers received weapons in Afghanistan

Another report from France adds: The three French hostages among 160 people held on board an Indian Airlines plane for eight days said Sunday that the Muslim hijackers appeared to receive new weapons when the plane landed in Afghanistan.

"On the second day, they received new weapons, modern revolvers, because at the beginning they had old guns and a

Francisco Jough, 45, a doctor from southwest France, also said he saw evidence that new weapons had been brought into the plane after it arrived in Kandahar.

"I saw that crates had been brought up and I saw them reloading their revolvers, and then I was very scared. I thought I was living my last few hours," she said on French television.

The five hijackers were permitted by the Taliban authorities to leave as part of the agreement and India said Sunday it had evidence they were on their way to Pakistan.

17 killed in Kashmir market blast

SRINAGAR, India, Jan 3: A powerful bomb blast ripped through a crowded market in the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar today, killing 14 civilians and three Indian security personnel, officials said, reports AFP.

People were waiting, some could not run because they were wounded, a labourer at the site told AFP.

No one claimed responsibility, but the police blamed Muslim militants fighting to end Indian rule in Kashmir for the blast.

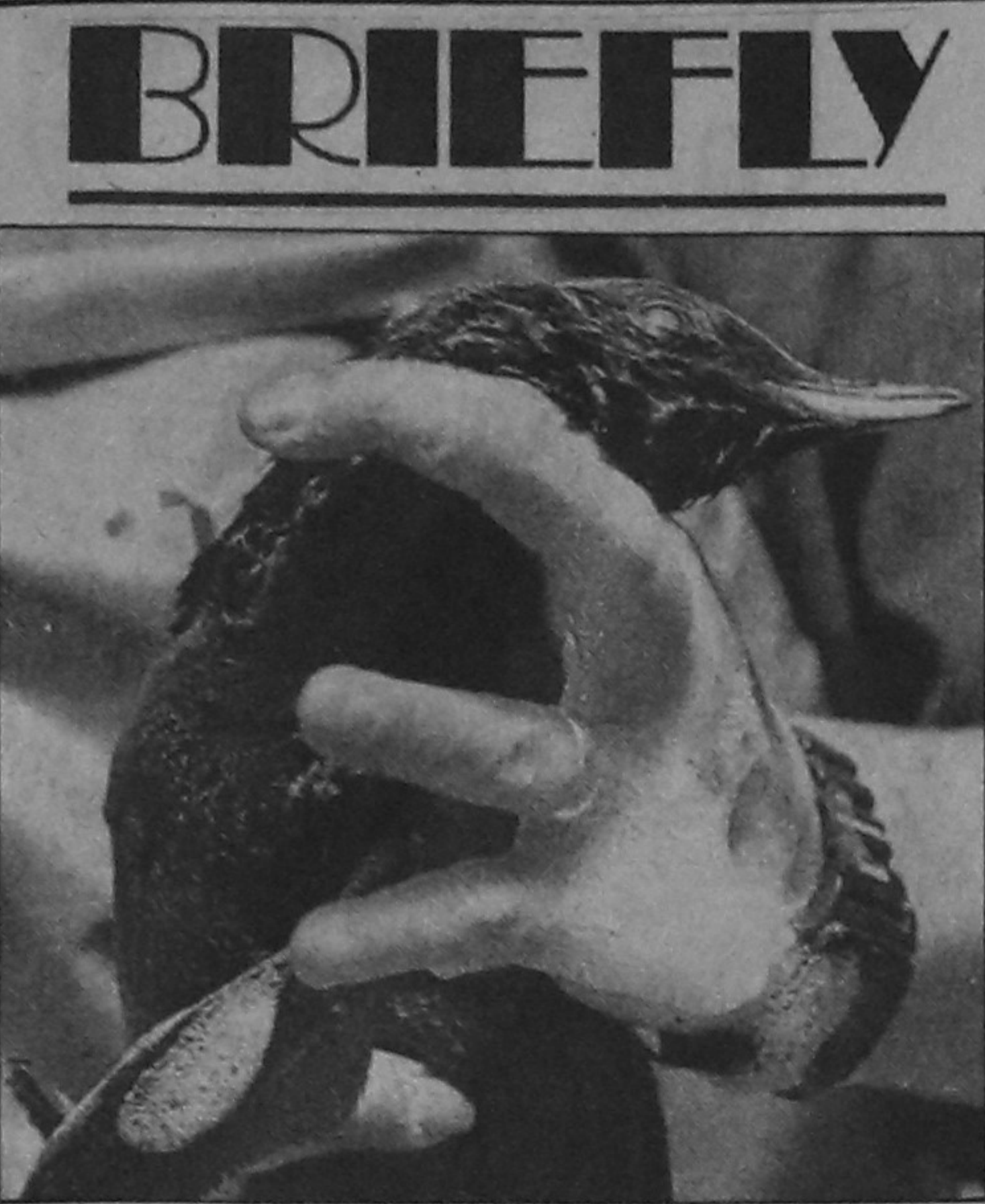
The vegetable market straddles a highway and lies sandwiched between an army and BSF camp.

Elsewhere, Muslim militants threw rocks at an army camp in Kashmir's Jammu region overnight Sunday, then shot dead one of the soldiers who emerged.

More than 25,000 people have died in violence related to a Muslim separatist drive raging since 1989 in the Himalayan Indian state of Kashmir.

India accuses Pakistan of arming and training the militants. Islamabad denies the charge, but gives open diplomatic support to the unrest.

Both India and Pakistan dispute Kashmir's ownership.



An oil-soaked penguin receives a wash at the animal hospital Phillip Island yesterday, after being caught up in oil spill when a ship illegally dumped oil off the Melbourne coast.

Oil slick hits penguins: Wildlife officers Monday were trying to save more than 100 fairy penguins covered in thick black oil from a slick that washed up on an island off Australia's southeast coast.

Ray Leivers, general manager of the Phillip Island Nature Park, said six penguins had died so far and another 110 were being treated at an animal hospital.

Four Lebanese troops killed: Four more Lebanese soldiers were killed Monday in clashes with Sunni Muslim rebels in the north of the country.

He said the four were killed when the army took the northern village of Kfarhabu, where the militants had re-grouped in the fourth day of fighting.

Clashes in Egypt leave 16 dead

SOHAG, Egypt, Jan 3: Up to 16 people were shot dead during clashes between Muslims and Coptic Christians in southern Egypt in one of the bloodiest sectarian incidents in the region in two decades, reports AFP.

Bishop Wissa of al-Balyana said early Monday that 16 people, all of them Copts, were killed Sunday in the village of Koshah, although police said 10 people had died and did not specify how many of them were Christian.

The clashes in Koshah, around 500 km south of Cairo, spread to the nearby town of Dar Es-Salam where chanting Muslims burned and smashed businesses owned by Copts, police told AFP.

20 Myanmar students arrested in Bangkok

BANGKOK, Jan 3: At least 20 exiled students from Myanmar have been arrested in Bangkok after they sneaked out from a Thai refugee camp, allegedly to hold a political demonstration, police said Monday, reports AP.

The students were arrested over the weekend, under suspicion of planning to commemorate the 52nd anniversary of the independence of Myanmar, also known as Burma, in the Thai capital on Jan 4.

In previous years, small numbers of Myanmar dissidents have gathered on such occasions to make peaceful protests against the Myanmar military regime outside the country's embassy in Bangkok.

The stage, which ended when Thailand agreed to give the rebels safe passage to the Myanmar border in return for

Abdullah gets party backing as successor to Mahathir

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 3: Leaders of Malaysia's ruling party today gave their backing to Deputy Premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as successor to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and fixed party elections for May 11, reports AFP.

This means there will be a lot of work," he joked. Abdullah is now one of the three UMNO vice presidents and has been performing the functions of the deputy president since Anwar's fall from grace as heir apparent.

support. "This means there will be a lot of work," he joked.

He said elections for the youth and women's wings would be held a day earlier.

Mahathir said UMNO's annual general assembly -- which this year will vote on party leaders -- would be held on May 11-13, with the elections on the 11th.



Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (R) walks into the meeting room while being followed by Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi before the UMNO Supreme Council meeting in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

The Supreme Council unanimously agreed that the post of president and deputy president will be uncontested," Khalil, who is also information minister, told a press conference after the council meeting.

This means that the nomination of (Mahathir) as president and (Abdullah) as deputy president will not be opposed."

Mahathir, who chaired the four-hour meeting, said the council's decision was not a directive but merely advice to party divisions.

Local authorities meanwhile called together representatives of the two communities in Koshah in an attempt to bring about a reconciliation.

Gen Wiranto rejects outside help for 3 troubled islands

JAKARTA, Jan 3: Indonesia's minister for security affairs General Wiranto has rejected offers of outside help in three of the country's main trouble spots -- the Maluku Islands, Aceh and Irian Jaya, reports AFP.

Wiranto, speaking during a brief New Year's trip to revive Irian Jaya with President Abdurrahman Wahid, was quoted by the Indonesian Observer on Monday as outlining a plan to "isolate" the population of the province.

store peace between warring Muslims and Christians in the Maluku.

"I object to any call for the deployment of UN peacekeeping troops in Ambon (the capital of the Maluku) to avoid open war in the province. It reflects a lack of confidence in the Indonesian military and the national police."

The important thing is that the people of the territory should abide by the law. After that the next thing to do is to isolate them from, among other things, media reports, as they often fan the emotions of the people -- and intervention by other parties.

"If the isolation works well, rehabilitation and reconciliation could be carried out involving mediators acceptable to the people," said Wiranto, who headed the armed forces when East Timor voted for indepen-

Several countries including Malaysia and the Netherlands have offered assistance in helping to solve the rising bloodshed in Irian Jaya, the Maluku Islands and in Aceh in the far west of the country.

The Observer quoted Wahid, speaking on the same trip, as warning other countries not to assist Indonesian separatists.

Last week the national news agency Antara quoted parliament speaker Akbar Tanjung as ruling out any deployment of UN peacekeeping troops to re-

Police surround residence of Pak diplomat in Nepal

KATMANDU, Jan 3: Police spent a second day Monday surrounding the home of a Pakistani diplomat whom they want to arrest on suspicion of running a fake currency racket, reports AP.

Asim Saboor, assistant secretary at the Pakistan embassy in Katmandu, locked himself in his apartment Sunday and refused to come out, saying he has diplomatic immunity, said a high-ranking police detective, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The detective said that police suspect Saboor sold 1,000 fake India 500-rupee (dhs 11.50) bills to a woman undercover officer at a park in the capital on Sunday. The detective said that Saboor then took the agent home promising more money.

Officers following in a car, and tried to arrest Saboor as he arrived with the undercover agent. But he showed his diplomatic immunity card and ran into the apartment, locking himself in and leaving the undercover agent outside.

The government is yet to decide on how to deal with the situation and whether Saboor is protected under diplomatic immunity conventions.

The Indian government has in recent weeks expressed concern about fake currency notes flooding the market from neighbouring Nepal. Many government utility companies have begun to refuse the high-denomination bills or insisted on people writing down their telephone numbers of them on their as a way of preventing fraud.

Lanka plans polls in March

COLOMBO, Jan 3: Sri Lanka's ruling People's Alliance coalition is planning to call parliamentary elections in March to build on President Chandrika Kumaratunga's presidential poll win, local press reports said today, reports Reuters.

The Daily Mirror quoted senior government sources as saying that March 15 had been tentatively fixed as the date for the parliamentary polls.

"We are now working to fix certain positive measures before dissolving parliament. The dissolution will be announced within a fortnight," the newspaper quoted a senior coalition official as saying.

D M Jayaratne, secretary general of the coalition said earlier the government was likely to hold early parliamentary elections.

Kumaratunga won the December 21 polls with just over 51 per cent of the vote, defeating her main rival opposition United National Party's Ranil Wickremesinghe, days after the was wounded in the eye in an assassination attempt in the capital Colombo.

The government has blamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels for the suicide bomb blast that killed 26 people.

Chechens claim to take four villages

MOSCOW, Jan 3: Chechen forces on Monday recaptured four villages southwest of the capital Grozny from Russian control, a top rebel official told AFP by telephone from Chechnya.

those villages, his own hometown of Alkhan-Yurt, remained under Russian control.

The head of the Chechen government-in-exile based in Moscow however quickly denied that one of those villages had been captured by the rebel forces.

Russian forces "are still in Alkhan-Yurt" the 35-year-old Saidullayev said, saying he had spoken Monday by telephone with his brother in that village.

The rebel official, Movladi Udugov, said that Chechen fighters had expelled Russian troops from Alkhan-Khala, Alkhan-Yurt, Krasno-Partisanski and Kulyar, some 10 kilometres (six miles) southwest of Grozny.

The operation to recapture the four localities was led by Chechen field commander Arbi Barayev, whom the Russians claimed to have killed in combat a few days ago, Udugov said.

The four localities are under Chechen control, but clashes are continuing around Alkhan-Yurt and Kulyar," Udugov said, underlining that Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev was in the area.

Fierce clashes continued Monday in several areas of Grozny, with the most violent fighting in Khankala (east) and Chernorechiye (south), where the Chechens had recaptured some ground, according to the same source.

Between 140-200 federal troops had died and three Chechen guerrillas were killed in the fighting, he added.

Russian troops for the past 10 days have been trying to seize control of the Chechen capital Grozny, after sweeping across the bowland since invading the rebel republic on October 1.

No official confirmation or denial could be obtained from the ministry of defence in Moscow where Monday is a public holiday.

Moscow also launched an offensive in the mountainous south where the remaining rebel strongholds are based.

But Malik Saidullayev, the Moscow-based leader of a Russian-backed rival Chechen government, told AFP that one of

The last sustained Chechen counter-attack occurred in late November, when rebel forces launched a guerrilla offensive in the eastern region of Gudermes, the second city, claiming to retake two towns.

HK parties call for full democracy

HONG KONG, Jan 3: The three major political parties in Hong Kong Monday united in demands for full democracy by 2008, the earliest date possible under the 1997 handover framework, reports AFP.

mediocre," Tsang added. Tsang said in a separate radio interview his party was seeking full democracy by 2008 but added there were other issues to consider.

The parties urged the Hong Kong government to start drawing up plans for a directly elected Legislative Council immediately amid debate over the best political system for the former British colony.

"I think there are a lot of questions we have to discuss besides the timetable for what you call full democratisation," he said.

The Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB), the Democratic Party and the Liberal Party said the government of Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa should open a democracy debate.

Liberal Party chief James Tien Pei-chun said his party supported full democracy in 2008.

It is the first time all three parties have agreed on a date for democracy here.

"We say we will go along with that timeframe," Tien said on current affairs programme.

Tung has so far declined to commit the Hong Kong government to full democracy.

Hong Kong's existing legislature is only partially elected by the territory's population.

But Tsang Yok-sing, chairman of the DAB, said in a radio broadcast Sunday that the existing system of government was unworkable.

At this year's polls, only 24 seats will be directly elected, with 30 picked by using "functional constituencies" representing business and labour sectors, and six more by an electoral committee.

"If there is one thing we can be certain about our present system of government, it is that the system is unsustainable," he said.

That figure will change at elections in 2004, with 30 seats directly elected.

"No one can plausibly argue that the government can operate effectively under the present constitutional set-up."

Under the Basic Law -- Hong Kong's mini-constitution drawn up by Britain and China prior to the handover -- the territory is allowed to decide in 2007 on the political system used for its 2008 polls.

He said elected legislators under the current system were unable to initiate government policy, and were largely restricted to opposing legislation.

The system deterred talented individuals from seeking careers in politics, he added.

"We are doomed to mediocre -- government by the

debate over Hong Kong's system of government, with some suggesting the territory's executive should switch to a "ministerial" model.

Presently the government is drawn from the ranks of the civil service but analysts have said a system of politically appointed ministers would be more effective.

Hijack leaves new strains in Indo-Pak ties

ISLAMABAD, Jan 3: Traditionally tense relations between arch rivals Pakistan and India have plunged to a new low following the hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane, analysts said Monday, reports AFP.

Both sides traded accusations during the eight-day drama which ended peacefully on Friday, when India agreed to exchange three pro-Kashmiri militants for the 160 passengers and crew held hostage.

The five hijackers, who killed one of the passengers, and the three released militants, however vanished from Kandahar airport in southern Afghanistan where the hijacked plane had been held and their whereabouts remain a mystery.

Pakistan has denied mounting speculation that they may have already entered the country undetected across the porous Afghan border heading for Pakistani-controlled Kashmir.

The region remains the most intractable problem to resolve between the neighbours, with the military takeover in Pakistan marring prospects for any early resumption of stalled bilateral talks.

"What is even worse, the gulf of mistrust between the peoples of the two countries has been further widened," he said.

Pakistan and India have fought two wars over the Himalayan state of Kashmir. Both claim and hold parts of the disputed territory, with their armies locked in a standoff in the mountains on the Line of Control separating them.

The two newly-nuclear nations came to the brink of war over Kashmir last year, during a 10-week conflict after Kashmiri militants allegedly infiltrated from the Pakistani side and took over mountains in the Indian-held part.

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intractable problem to resolve between the neighbours, with the military takeover in Pakistan marring prospects for any early resumption of stalled bilateral talks.

"We condemn terrorism unequivocally, be it state terrorism or individual acts of terrorism."

But Indian National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra said Monday: "We have clear evidence to prove Pakistan's involvement... the Pakistani establishment is certainly responsible for this."

The hijacking drama has only rekindled the tensions, with the Indian government, under fire at home for releasing the jailed militants, accusing Islamabad of being behind the hijacking.

"We have the names of all the hijackers who are Pakistani nationals and the list of militants they wanted to be released contained (a) majority of Pakistani nationals," he alleged.

"Alas, the blinkers which traditionally blind the Indian authorities are again in evidence," it said.

News Analysis

Military ruler General Pervez Musharraf has angrily denied any Pakistani involvement and accused India of trying to malign it.

His Pakistani counterpart Abdul Sattar, quoted in The News, however accused India of trying to cash in on the hijacking to win the "sympathies" of the United States.

The Muslim separatist drive in the Indian zone of Kashmir has left more than 25,000 people dead since 1989.

In a statement after the hijacking, the foreign ministry said: "We have no sympathy for such desperate acts without regard to the nationality of the perpetrators."

And he accused India of mishandling the whole affair saying New Delhi had never explained why the plane was al-

lowed to leave the northern Indian city of Amritsar, its first stop after being hijacked on Christmas Eve on a flight from Nepal to New Delhi.



Chief of United Nation Transitional Administration in East Timor, Sergio Vieira de Mello (R), greets West Timor Governor, Piet A Tallo (C) shortly after Tallo arrived at Komoro airport in Dili yesterday, with a delegation from the Indonesian airline Merpati. The delegation arrived to take the first steps in restoring scheduled airline service between East Timor and Indonesia.