Thai foreign ministry seeks review of

visa policy

BANGKOK, Jan 18: Fearing the spread of transnational crime. Thailand's foreign ministry supports a proposal to re-view the country's liberal policy on visa-free entry for foreign-ers, a spokesman said Tuesday.

The proposal was initiated by the National Security Council because of concern over an increase in criminal activity by

"Criminals from many parts of the world now call us home, NSC Deputy Secretary-General Songkram Chuenpibal was quoted Monday as saying. "From Russia we get prostitution ringleaders, and we are infested by Chinese gangsters, Japanese Yakuzas and European and African drug-traders."

Tightening entry regulations is part of the NSC's strategy to fight the increase in transnational crime. Another proposal would establish a center to combat transnational crime. reported the newspaper The Nation.



Chinese President Jiang Zemin (L) greets Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf yesterday in Beijing. Musharraf, on his first visit to China as his country's leader, has gained unconditional support for his regime from China and pledged to work to - AFP photo cement the two countries' long-running strategic relationships.

Musharraf gets strong Lankan govt to present defection bill to court backing from China

BEIJING, Jan 18 : Pakistani strongman General Pervez Musharraf today received strong support for his military regime during a second days of talks with Chinese leaders in Beijing, reports AFP.

Musharraf, who seized power in an October 12 coup, held separate rounds of talks with Parliamentary leader Li Peng and President Jiang Zemin on Tuesday, after meeting Premier Zhu Rongji a day earlier.

Despite criticism from Western powers of the coup, which deposed the elected government of premier Nawaz Sharif, China said its close relations with Islamabad had not been affected by the military takeover.

Asked whether Chinese leaders had called for a return to civilian rule during the talks, foreign ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao insisted the issue was not China's concern and said bilateral ties were growing stronger. The internal affairs of Pakistan are its internal issue and China will never interfere. We respect the choice of the Pak-

istani people," said Zhu. Premier Zhu Rongji told Musharraf during talks on Monday that China's support for Pakistan would continue regardless of developments on the international scene or inside

And Li reiterated Beijing's position during Tuesday's talks, saying China wanted to strengthen the long-running strategic and trade ties it has with Pakistan.

"I believe that the friendship between China and Pakistan is one that can stand the test of history," said Li, the chairman of China's parliament, the Na-

tional People's Congress.

'This is your first visit to China since you have taken office, so I believe that is a testimony of your intention to work for the maximum continuation of the friendship between our two countries."

Before the meeting with Li. Musharraf thanked his Chinese hosts for the warm welcome he received since he arrived for two days of talks on Monday, and pledged to work to cement

the relationship. "We are touched by this feeling of warmth demonstrated by accepting this first visit of this millennium and giving us this opportunity of interacting with Chinese leaders," Musharraf told Li before the meeting.

The Pakistani leader held talks with Chinese President Jiang Zemin later in the day, said the official Xinhua news agency, without giving further details. Musharraf was due to return to Pakistan later Tues-

China has long been a crucial ally of Pakistan.

bill to court

COLOMBO, Jan 18: The government will ask the Supreme Court to review a draft law allowing opposition members to defect to the ruling alliance before presenting the bill to parliament, an independent newspaper reported Tuesday, says

President Chandrika Kumaratunga will seek a court ruling on whether the bill requires a two-thirds majority, as would a constitutional amendment, or whether a simple majority is sufficient.

Kumaratunga's coalition, who has a thin majority in the 225-member legislature, wants to entice enough opposition members to her side to enact a constitutional reform programme that she hopes will resolve the Tamil ethnic problem and end a 16-year civil war.

Under the current law, opposition legislators who join the government risk expulsion from their parties and the loss of their seats. The so-called "conscience bill" would protect their seats if they defect.

Fresh suicide attacks feared as bomb found in Colombo

COLOMBO, Jan 18: A powerful bomb was found and defused in Colombo today, a day after a letter bomb addressed to President Chandrika Kumaratunga was safely intercepted, police said, reports AFP.

The latest discovery heightened fears that Tamil Tiger rebels are preparing to launch a fresh wave of suicide bombing attacks in the Sri Lankan capi-

The parcel bomb containing 250 grams (eight ounces) of C-4 type high explosives was discovered near a housing complex where at least three police deputy inspector-generals live. A senior officer walking past

a street corner in Jempettah Lane of Colombo's Kotahena zone noticed a street sweeper handling a suspicious device wrapped in a plastic bag and alerted the local police station. The police said the bomb had

two detonators and some 1,500 ball bearings, which could have caused massive casualties and damage in the event of an explosion in a crowded area.

The discovery came a day after a suspected letter bomb was addressed to President Kufrom injuries suffered in a suicide bomb attack a month ago.

The quantity of explosives discovered on Tuesday was similar to that found on the suicide bomber who killed herself and 14 others outside Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike's office on January

Last week, the military discovered explosives and a jacket worn by suicide bombers in a timber store in the Kotahena

Colombo was subjected to a 14-hour curfew on January 7 to allow police and soldiers to carry out a house-to-house search for suspected Tamil Tiger rebels.

Some 3.000 people were screened during the search and about 30 of them were held back for further questioning, according to the police.

The latest discovery came during an alert over fears that the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are planning more suicide bombings. The Tigers have been held responsible for the December 18

maratunga, who is recovering assassination bid on Kumaratunga.

State radio reported Monday that the authorities had information the LTTE was trying to use suicide bombers in pairs to ensure that there was a second hit if the first attack failed.

The radio also said that at least three more suicide bombers had entered the city in addition to those already believed to have infiltrated the capital.

Local police believe at least 10 members of the LTTE's elite suicide squad, known as the Black Tigers, are already in Colombo on attack missions. In response, already tight se-

curity in Colombo has been fur-

ther strengthened. Only light cars and motorcycles are allowed along the stretch of Galle Road opposite Kumaratunga's Temple Trees residence. Four-wheel drive vehicles, which were previously allowed, are now banned after

the president. Bomb disposal experts Monday defused the letter bomb meant for President Kumaratunga. Authorities have

the assassination attempt on

begun questioning postal employees and several others, police said.

Security staff intercepted the suspicious object at Kumaratunga's Presidential Secretariat office in the heart of

the capital. The assassination attempt on Kumaratunga last month coincided with another suicide bombing against an opposition United National Party (UNP) rally in which 12 people died.

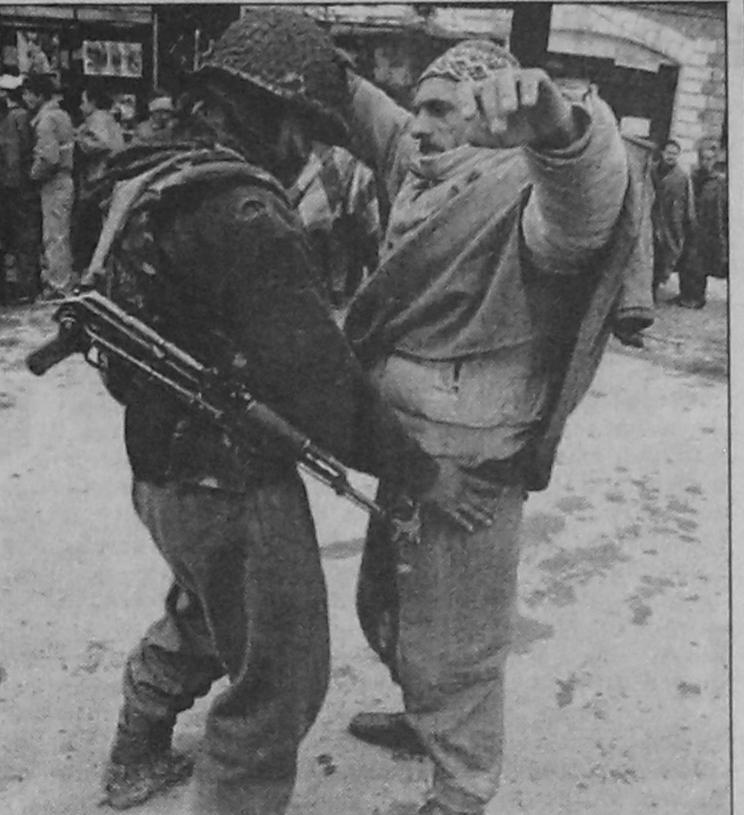
4 Tigers killed

Government forces shot dead at least four Tamil Tiger guerrillas in renewed fighting in northern Sri Lanka, the defence ministry here said today.

Troops killed the four members of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on Monday in the Jaffna peninsula where there had been heavy artillery and mortar bomb attacks in recent week, the ministry said.

A government soldier was also wounded in Monday's clashes, the ministry said.

The guerrillas were keeping up long-range attacks on the Jaffna peninsula.



A Kashmiri (R) heavily rugged-up in warm clothing to beat freezing temperatures is frisked by an Indian paramilitary force trooper in Srinagar yesterday. Heavy security across troubled Kashmir has been beefed-up further following a meeting held in Delhi on Mondday to discuss the growing activities of Islamic militants in the disputed Himalayan - AFP photo state.

Karachi blast Pak police arrest 16 suspects

KARACHI. Jan 18: Pakistani police have arrested 16 ethnic militants after a bomb explosion in Karachi killed eight people, a senior police official said today, reports AFP.

"The militants are all suspects. They were arrested during raids in Karachi last night and early this morning," said A.D. Khwaja, senior superintendent in Karachi.

The suspects were all linked to the Muttahida Qaumi Movement party, which represents the Mohajir settler community of migrants from India, said a police officer who declined to be

Eight people were killed and 22 injured Monday when a bomb exploded in a crowded roadside area in the city, in southern Pakistan. The bomb, apparently a one-

kilogram (2.2-pound) homemade device with a timer, left a large crater in the road and shattered the windows of nearby buildings. No group has claimed re-

sponsibility for the blast but the city has been the victim of vicious political, ethnic and sectarian violence in recent In Karachi alone more than

4,000 people have died during the past four years. Khwaja, the police officer in

command of the district of Karachi where the bomb exploded, said security in the city had been stepped up.

"We will not spare anybody found involved in terrorism, he said. "We have been on alert and

we appeal to citizens and transporters to inform police if they find suspicious items to help in the fight against terrorism. A four-member special po-

lice investigation team has been formed to investigate the explosion, Khwaja said. The province of Sindh, of

which Karachi is the capital, was placed under direct rule in October 1998 by then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in an effort to curb lawlessness and terrorism following hundreds of deaths in the city. Meanwhile, Pakistani paramilitary troops and police

eight people died in a bomb explosion in Karachi, a senior police official said today. "We will not spare anybody

have been put on alert after

found involved in terrorism. said A.D. Khwaja, senior superintendent in Karachi. We have been on alert and

we appeal to citizens and transporters to inform police if they find suspicious items to help in the fight against terrorism.

Ex-Khmer Rouge commander

arrested

PHNOM PENH, Jan 18: A former Khmer Rouge rebel commander charged with the 1994 kidnap and murder of three western backpackers has been arrested and will soon face trial, Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen said today, reports

The arrest of Chhouk Rin. who now holds the post of colonel in the Cambodian army, comes seven months after fellow ex-rebel Nuon Paet was handed a life sentence for the train hold-up and slaying of three tourists from Australia, Britain and France.

"Chhouk Rin has been arrested because he has been identified by the prosecutor as implicated in the crime." Hun Sen said.

The has already been brought to Phnom Penh and sent to

prison.

The fate of Sam Bith -- a more-senior rebel also facing charges of kidnapping, murder and destruction of public property -- was unclear.

Armed forces deputy commander-in-chief Meas Sophea earlier told AFP Sam Bith had also been arrested but the statement was later retracted.

ately available.

Religious violence continues Santana wins top album honours in Indonesia

A dozen churches destroyed

MATARAM, Indonesia, Jan 18: Sectarian violence continued on the tourist island of Lombok Tuesday, a day after Muslim mobs burned down a dozen Christian churches stoking fears that religious violence may be spreading throughout Indonesia, reports AP.

Security forces fired warning shots at a Muslim mob to prevent them from reaching a police station where about 500 Christians have taken refuge, said Sgt. Intan, a police officer in Mataram, Lombok's largest city, about 1,080 km southeast of Jakarta.

"We've gone to full alert as the situation is getting really tense," she said.

Police Capt Agu Sutisna said one person died in hospital after being hit by a rubber bullet during Monday's violence. A total of 52 people have been arrested, he said.

Lombok is located about 40 km west of Bali, Indonesia's main tourist destination. The

unrest is likely to further damage Indonesia's once-lucrative tourism industry, which last year began recovering from the effects of the 1997 Asian financial meltdown.

The Australian embassy in Jakarta advised its citizens not to travel to the island and cautioned tourists on Lombok to remain in their hotels.

The Holiday Inn in Senggigin on Lombok has started evacuating all its guests, said Pandud Djodjoadi, a marketing officer at the hotel.

the island's main port at Lembar about one-and-a-half hours drive, before they were put on a ferry to Bali.

Media reports said violence was also continuing Tuesday in Ampenan, not far from the island's airport

that a dozen churches and places of worship were de-

'We're getting everyone out now," he said, adding that the hotel was driving its guests to

Christians on Lombok said

stroyed Monday in a rampage by Muslim fanatics in Mataram. A local hospital official said eight people had been admitted with gunshot wounds.

Trouble broke out after Lombok Muslims protested against the state's failure to quell violence between Muslims and Christians in civil wartorn Maluku province, in Indonesia's east.

In the past year, about 2,000 people have died in religious fighting in Maluku and North Maluku provinces, collectively known as the Spice Islands, or Moluccas, during Dutch colonial rule.

The bloodshed has motivated a string of protests by Muslims throughout the country. Many demonstrators have called for a "jihad" or holy war to be waged against the country's Christian minority if the government doesn't put an immediate end to the bloodshed.

LOS ANGELES, Jan 18: Car- Dave Matthews, beat out two the album honour, the evening's los Santana's band won best- teen sensations, the Backstreet first award. After thanking his

album honours at the American Music Awards for "Supernatural," a commercial comeback that put the rock guitar maestro on top of the charts for the first time in his 30-year career, reports AP.

Shania Twain won two awards Monday, for favourite pop-rock female artist and country female artist. Garth Brooks also won two awards, for favourite country male artist and country album for "Double Live."

"They say live albums never do anything. Thank you once again for not listening to the rules," said Brooks, who also received a special honour as artist of the 1990s. The other double winner was

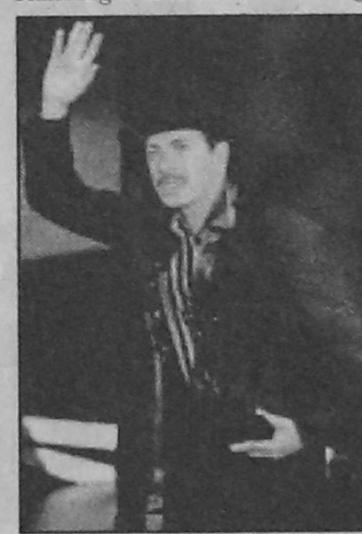
Lauryn Hill for favourite soulrhythm and blues female artist and top soul-R-and-B album for "The Miseducation of Lauryn Will Smith won for pop-rock

"Supernatural," mixing the veteran Santana's searing instrumentals with vocals by such collaborators as Hill and

male artist.

Spears' "... Bay One More Time. Later in the evening, the Backstreet Boys topped Santana and 'N Sync' for favourite poprock band, due or group. Santana took the stage to a

standing ovation after winning



Carlos Santana

Boys' "Millennium" and Britney parents, siblings and wife, he invited his co-producer, Clive Davis, to join him. "Your music has soared," Davis told San-

> Backstage, the 52-year-old Santana said "a lot of people told me they didn't want to work with me because I'm old. Mr. Davis believed in me. We both believed we had a masterpiece in our belly."

> Spears won for favourite new pop-rock artist. Nominees for the 27th annual awards were chosen by music industry representatives.

The winners decided by about 20,000 music fans nationwide. The show also featured results of an Internet poll that named Elvis Preseley favourite artist of the 1950s, the Beatles

of the 1980s. An Award of Merit went to Gloria Estefan, who was honoured with a musical tribute featuring 'N Sync'.

of the 1960s, Stevie Wonder of

the 1970s and Michael Jackson



pop singer Britney Spears poses with the award she won for favourite new artiste at the 27th annual American Music Awards Monday in Los Angeles. - AFP photo

BRIFFIY

Singapore PM in India: Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong Tuesday began an official visit to India aimed at boosting bilateral cooperation in information

technology. AFP reports from New Delhi.

ceremonial welcome at the presidential palace here. The ceremony was attended by President K.R. Narayanan and Goh's Indian counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee. Lanka arrests 10 Filipinos: Sri Lankan police have arrested 10 men from the Philippines for remaining

Goh, who arrived in New Delhi late Monday, was accorded a

in the island without visas, a press report said here Tuesday, AFP reports from Colombo. The Sinhalese-language Lankadeepa newspaper said the men were arrested on Saturday near the capital Colombo and among them was an official who had worked for the former Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos. No further details were immedi-

French couple kidnapped in Yemen:
Armed tribesmen have kidnapped two French tourists, a married couple, in northern Yemen, police and a diplomatic source

said Tuesday, AFP reports from Sanaa. The police source, asking not to be named, said the couple were kidnapped on Monday together with their Yemeni driver and guide near the town of Amran, some 50 km north of the capital.

Blast rocks Ingush court bldg: An explosion tore through the supreme court building Tuesday in Russia's north Caucasus republic of Ingushetia, ITAR-TASS reported. AFP says from Moscow The report said there were people present in the building at the time of the blast. It gave no immediate casualty report. In-

the rebel region to heel. New head of UN Afghan mission: Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed Francesc Vendrell of Spain on Monday to be his personal representative to Alghanistan as part of an effort to boost UN cooperation with

gushetia borders Russia's rebel republic of Chechnya, where

Russian forces are waging a 15-week ground offensive to bring

the war-devastated nation, AP reports from United Nations. The appointment marks an attempt by the UN chief to bolster the political presence of the United Nations in Afghanistan following the collapse of UN-backed efforts to bring peace between Alghanistan's warring parties.

WASHINGTON, Jan 18: The Mars Polar Lander (MPL) space probe, which landed on the red planet on December 3, has been declared definitively lost, MPL project manager Richard Cook said Monday, reports agencies.

NASA will no longer attempt to contact the probe. Cook said in a statement released by NASA. "These attempts have ended today, concluding our attempts to recover the spacecraft." he said.

However the Mars Global

Surveyor, which has been orbit-

ing the Red Planet since 1997.

will continue over the next

weeks to take photographs of

the spot on the surface of Mars

have touched down, he said. The 165-million-dollar Polar Lander was to have touched down December 3 for a 90-day mission near Mars' south pole to study the atmosphere and dig for ice. It was last heard from minutes before beginning its descent

testing dozens of different sce-

Instead of revelling in new

pictures and science, con-

trollers have been methodically

narios to explain the silence. "In a way, we feel somewhat complete in the sense that we did go through the things we thought were reasonable," said Richard Cook. "Obviously at this point none of that panned out, but we gave it a good shot."

where the Polar Lander should Annan nominates Ekeus for Iraqi arms inspection team

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 18: Secretary-General Kofi Annan on Monday formally nominated the UN's first chief weapons inspector for Iraq. Rolf Ekeus of Sweden, to head the new inspection agency charged with disarming the country of its banned weapons, reports AP.

Annan informed the president of the Security Council, Richard Holbrooke of the United States, of his choice Monday morning and was awaiting the council's response, spokesman Fred Eckhard said.

Russia and China had told Annan on Friday that they opposed Ekeus' nomination to be executive chairman for the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission, or UNMOVIC, arguing that he wouldn't be acceptable to Iraq,

diplomats said. It wasn't immediately clear if they would block Annan's nomination or allow it to be approved.

When asked whether Annan was concerned that Ekeus didn't have the full support of the council, Eckhard said Annan had exhausted his search for a candidate and was left no choice but to name his preferred candidate.

"Over 30 days, he raised something like 25 names and he could not find one on which all could agree. So he put forward the name of the person he thought best for the job," Eck hard said. UNMOVIC was formed last

December to replace the UN

Special Commission, known as

Mars Polar Lander lost Russian troops reach centre of Grozny

NAZRAN, Russia, Jan 18 After days of ferocious bombardments Russian soldiers said today they had battled to the center of the Chechen capital Grozny and vowed that the rebel city would fall within four has orchestrated Russia's sec-

A top Chechen official said

the Russian troops had taken

control of a key Grozny bridge

linking the eastern and western portions of the besieged city, and that Grozny was being stormed from all sides. Said-Selim Abdulmuslimov, a spokesman for Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, told AFP by telephone that the

over the Sunzha river. The ITAR-TASS news agency quoted one Russian soldier as saying that the Russians were "gradually expanding their zone

of control" in the city.

Russians had seized the

Zhukovsky bridge that runs

had reached the centre at 9:30 a.m. (12:30 pm BST). Two additional units were also progressing towards the centre. The AVN military news service meanwhile reported that all attempts by Chechen fight-

The report said two groups

ers to break the Russian stranglehold and flee the city were failing. The Chechen's Internet information page for its part said that Russian armor had entered the city in force. It said that soldiers were entering the city behind them and claimed that

250 Russians had been killed

over the past two days.

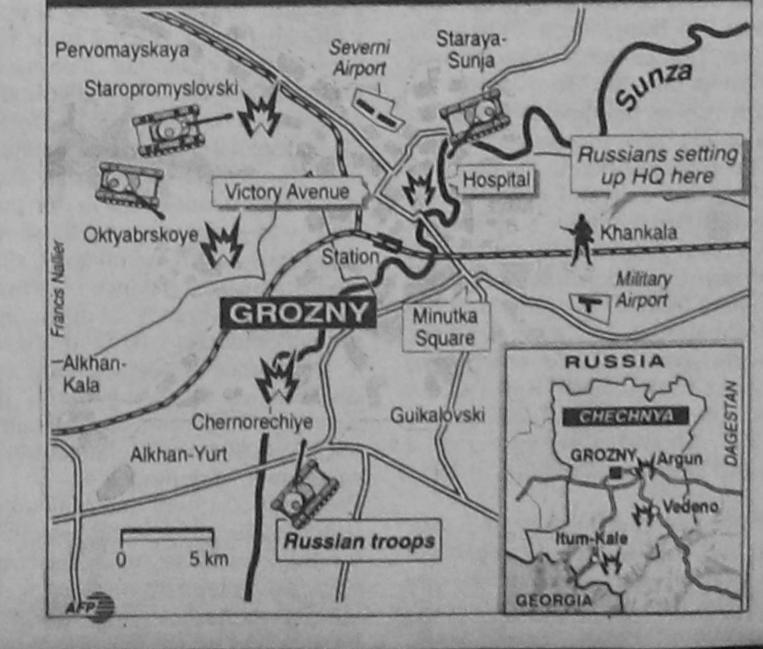
It gave no casualty figures on the Chechen side. Tuesday's news serves as an important boost to the fortunes and election prospects of acting

ond Chechen war in three years. Putin failed to immediately comment on the Grozny reports, having spent Tuesday morning in the State Duma lower house of parliament, which is picking a new speaker

President Vladimir Putin, who

His favored political party. Unity, stormed into the Duma and currently holds second place there on the back of Putin's popularity, which cur-rently makes him Russia's most favoured politician by far.

Until Tuesday, reports of Russian military progress had varied. Moscow leadership had been temporarily stunned when the Chechens staged daring counter-attacks earlier this month that caught federal soldiers off their guard.



Russians renew attack on Grozny

Two BSF guards killed in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Jan 18 Two paramilitary Border Security Force guards were killed and four seriously injured in a powerful landmine blast today in the northern Indian state of Kashmir, police said.

Police told AFP the landmine was activated when a team was checking for mines on the Pattan national highway, 27 km north of Kashmir's summer capital of Srinagar. "A military convoy was to ply on the highway and a swap-

per detecting team was running

a check for landmines when

suspected militants used remote control to set off the explosion." said a police officer. "Two border guards died on the spot, while four others have been rushed to hospital."

No militant group had claimed responsibility for the Indian plane hijack

Freed Pak cleric

got married MULTAN, Pakistan, Jan 18: A Pakistani cleric who was freed from an Indian jail to end the hijacking of an Indian Airlines jet has married in a quiet ceremony, his father said to-

Maulana Masood Azhar, who was arrested in Indian-controlled Kashmir in 1994, returned to his home early this month after New Delhi gave in to the demands of the five hijackers. Azhar married late Monday

day, reports AFP.

at his home in Bahawalpur, in central Pakistan, 100 km south of here, said his father Allah Bakhsh Sabir.