



Indian army soldiers perch on the top of a troop vehicle as they travel towards the Indo-Bhutan border at Tamulpur, some 84km north of Guwahati yesterday. The Bhutanese army launched an offensive on December 15 against Indian rebel groups who have used bases in the Himalayan Kingdom to launch attacks in India.

## Rebels ask Bhutanese to leave India now

AFP, Guwahati

Indian separatists warned Bhutanese nationals yesterday to leave the border state of Assam as the Buddhist kingdom continues trying to oust the rebels in its first modern military operation.

"All Bhutanese nationals residing in Assam should quit immediately," said Arabinanda Rajkhowa, chairman of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), one of three rebel groups the kingdom wants to evict.

"We will ensure that no Bhutanese enter Assam to buy goods and do business here," Rajkhowa said in a statement.

Bhutanese traders expressed fear the threats could be economically devastating for the landlocked kingdom which relies heavily on India to obtain vital supplies such as oil and medicine.

Indian truck drivers have already stopped entering Bhutan over the 262-km border with Assam fearing being caught in the crossfire.

The ULFA, which wants a separate homeland in Assam, has been accused of orchestrating violence against other ethnicities in the past. New Delhi says the militants were behind the killing of 54 Hindi-speaking settlers last month.

The Indian army, which supports the drive against the militants, has reported the deaths of 123 rebels and eight Bhutanese troops or logistical personnel since the kingdom launched the offensive on December 15.

Separately, an army official said two ULFA militants were killed Saturday in the sparsely populated Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh which borders Bhutan, Myanmar and Tibet.

"It appears the ULFA has set up

bases inside Arunachal Pradesh with some of the rebels having already fled Bhutan prior to the military crackdown," the official said.

Bhutan has not released casualty figures from the operation. The rebels deny any significant losses.

It is Bhutan's first military operation against a foreign force since 1865, when the kingdom lost part of modern-day Assam to Britain in the five-month Duar War.

King Jigme Singye Wangchuk has personally toured the battlefield after ordering 6,000 troops to flush out the militants, who defied six years of Bhutanese warnings to leave.

The kingdom had long hesitated to make good on its threats of war fearing the militants would retaliate against Bhutanese civilians.

## 'Saddam was held by Kurdish forces, drugged and left for US troops'

AFP, London

Saddam Hussein was captured by US troops only after he had been taken prisoner by Kurdish forces, drugged and abandoned ready for American soldiers to recover him, a British tabloid newspaper reported yesterday.

Saddam came into the hands of the Kurdish Patriotic Front after being betrayed to the group by a member of the al-Jabour tribe, whose daughter had been raped by Saddam's son Uday, leading to a blood feud, reported the Sunday Express, which quoted an unnamed senior British military intelligence officer.

The newspaper said the full story of events leading up to the ousted Iraqi president's capture on December 13 near his home-

town of Tikrit in northern Iraq, "exposes the version peddled by American spin doctors as incomplete".

A former Iraqi intelligence officer, whom the Express did not name, told the paper that Saddam was held prisoner by a leader of the Kurdish Patriotic Front, which fought alongside US forces during the Iraq war, until he negotiated a deal.

The deal apparently involved the group gaining political advantage in the region.

An unnamed Western intelligence source in the Middle East told the Express: "Saddam was not captured as a result of any American or British intelligence. We knew that someone would eventually take their revenge, it was just a matter of time."

## India calls for sharing intelligence with Nepal

PTI, Kathmandu

India has called for intelligence cooperation with Nepal to check the common threat posed by Maoist rebels.

"Maoists are not only the problem of Nepal, but they also pose a threat to India as well," Indian Ambassador to Nepal Shyam Saran said at an interaction programme in Kathmandu on Saturday.

He said effective intelligence cooperation between Nepal and India is essential in order to track the top Maoist leaders, including Baburam Bhattarai and Prachanda, if they are hiding in India.

"We have clear evidences which suggest there are links between Nepalese Maoist outfits and the Indian terrorist groups like MCC and the People's War Group," he said, adding, it is

difficult for Indian security personnel to keep track on the Maoist movement due to its open border and presence of hundreds of thousands of Nepalese in India.

Denying a report that Indian is providing shelter to Nepalese Maoists, he said India has been providing military hardware and training to the Royal Nepalese Army as India viewed the Maoists in Nepal as a common threat.

He said Nepal has to solve its internal problem by itself, but the solution should be sought within the parameter of constitutional monarchy and multi-party democracy.

On alleged human rights violations by security forces in Nepal, he said Nepal has committed itself to protecting human rights and they are confident on Nepal's commitment.

## Philippine landslides may have killed 200

AP, Manila

Rescuers battled rain and mud yesterday in search of survivors after landslides and floods devastated eastern Philippine villages in a pre-Christmas tragedy that officials fear may have killed up to 200 people.

Melchor Rosales, executive director of the National Disaster Coordination Centre, said the death toll has risen to at least 83 people, including 61 in the hard-hit central province of Southern Leyte, and 123 others were missing.

Officials feared the final fatality count will rise as bad weather, blocked roads and downed power and telephone lines hampered rescue and recovery work. Leyte Gov. Rosette Lerias, who returned from a devastated village in San Francisco town late Sunday, reported 16 more dead in that coastal area, which should place

the official count at 99.

"I just came from a very, very depressing site," Lerias told The Associated Press by cell phone.

She said the mountainside village of 360 people, called Punta, was a picture of mayhem, with more than half of its 83 houses either destroyed or buried under huge mounds of earth, debris and coconut trees.

"There was mud all over, you couldn't see anything but rooftops with the houses submerged in mud. There's debris, wood, old clothes, kitchen utensils strewn all around," Lerias said. "The rescuers were using heavy equipment and in one spot they dug up the hand of a child."

Lerias said an 89-year-old man was rescued alive from the mud near where a Bible was also found and piles of bodies. A 14-year-old girl was also dug up alive and both appeared to have survived in an air

pocket, she said.

Rescuers have so far found 49 bodies in Punta, including several villagers, who sought shelter in a relatively huge house thinking it was safely far from the mountain. But mud flows from the mountain-side engulfed the house and the sea beyond, killing them all, she said.

A village leader was also killed by fallen trees in a nearby village, she said, bringing the number of dead in San Francisco to 50 as opposed to 34 in the official national count.

Lerias said at least three more villages in Leyte remained beyond the reach of rescuers due to blocked roads and downed power and communications. While approaching a village in San Ricardo town Sunday, she said her boat turned back because of huge waves. "We're still conducting search, rescue and retrieval operations," said Rosales.



Rescuers dig through the mud for survivors or bodies in the village of Rizal near Surigao city in the southern Philippine Island of Mindanao yesterday. Landslides and floods triggered by a week of heavy rains have left an estimated 200 people dead and missing in Mindanao and in the central island of Leyte.

## Lebanon jails 26 over bombings of US outlets

REUTERS, Beirut

Lebanon sentenced 26 men to between three months and 20 years in prison Saturday over a string of bomb attacks on US restaurants and an alleged plot to assassinate the US ambassador, judicial sources said.

Another man was sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment with hard labor, while eight more were acquitted, they said.

The Lebanese and Palestinian men had been arrested after a rash of small attacks on fast food restaurants including McDonald's and Pizza Hut, which peaked at the height of the three-year-old Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation and the US-led invasion of Iraq.

Lebanese authorities cracked the cell after a booby-trapped car was found outside McDonald's in Beirut in April. It failed to explode.

Four of the group were convicted of plotting to kill US ambassador Vincent Battle but the court waived their penalties since the plan was never put into action, the sources said.

## 'Libyan WMD move driven by economic motives'

### US officials' trip to Tripoli led to WMD renunciation

REUTERS, London

Libya said yesterday its decision to abandon secret efforts to build an atomic bomb and chemical weapons was driven by a need to develop its economy and boost the living standards of its people.

But Britain, which played a key role in talks that persuaded Tripoli to abandon its arms ambitions, said the fate that befell Iraq and its leader Saddam Hussein may have prompted the move.

Libya's step, which could lead to the end of US sanctions and the return of US oil companies, marks an about-face for Muammar Gaddafi, the country's leader for 34 years.

"We are turning our swords into ploughshares and this step should be appreciated and followed by all other countries," Libyan Prime Minister Shokri Ghanem told the BBC, adding that economic progress was more important than arms.

Britain, pivotal in isolating Libya after the Lockerbie bombing

15 years ago on Sunday, drew a comparison with Iraq, suggesting the fortunes of its deposed leader might have been different had Baghdad been more forthcoming over arms.

"We showed after Saddam Hussein failed to cooperate with the United Nations that we meant business and Libya, and I hope other countries, will draw that lesson," Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon told Britain's Sky television.

US intelligence officials said Gaddafi seemed the driving force behind the decision to come clean announced on Friday, and his motivation may have ranged from concerns about the Iraq war and a desire to rejoin the international community to concerns about domestic threats to his own rule.

Whatever the reason, Gaddafi's decision won praise from around the world, notably from President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair but also from European and Arab leaders who were strongly critical of their war on Iraq.

US and British officials said talks included secret visits to Libya in October and December to sites where they were shown parts of the country's chemical, nuclear and missile programs.

A team of American and British intelligence officers flew to Libya clandestinely in October and December for stretches of about two weeks, visiting sites where they were shown parts of the country's chemical, nuclear and missile programs.

The intelligence officers were accompanied at all times by Libyan intelligence, drivers changed cars along the way and the Westerners were ushered into office buildings for meetings with Gaddafi that started after 11 p.m.

"Operationally, we did conduct this entire business as secretly as we possibly could so it indeed was the result of a series of secret meetings in Europe and then of course trips clandestinely to Libya," a US intelligence official who was on the visits told reporters on condition of anonymity.

## Bird flu cases spreading in S Korea

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

Cases of deadly bird flu are now suspected in three provinces as far as 300 kilometers from the initial outbreak, the government said yesterday, an indication that the infection may have spread nationwide.

Over the weekend, officials confirmed another case of the fatal avian virus at a duck hatchery in Cheonan, South Chungcheong Province, about 24km from the first reported poultry deaths.

Since the farm supplies 22 of the nation's 55 duck-breeding farms, raising the possibility that a transfer of the virus may have occurred already to all corners of Korea.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry said yesterday 800 chickens out of 10,250 have died at a farm in Gyeongju, North Gyeongsang Province, which is about 300 kilometers from Seoul, while Naju, South Jeolla Province duck farm had 430 ducks out of 14,900 die, possibly from the avian virus known as H5N1.

## Talks fail to end Lankan crisis

AFP, Colombo

Talks aimed at resolving a power struggle between Sri Lanka's president and prime minister have failed, raising fresh concerns for a fragile peace bid with Tamil rebels, political sources said Sunday.

New offers to end the deadlock were discussed at official-level talks last week, but they were rejected by both President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her rival Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, the sources said.

With no new talks scheduled, the country would enter the new year with the prospect of a snap poll, they said. Norway on November 14 suspended its bid to broker an end to a Tamil separatist insurgency due to the political

crisis.

"The officials' committee ended their meeting last week without agreement on another round of talks," a source close to both sides said. "They have not made any headway on the crucial issue of defence."

Officials engaged in the talks said the premier was insisting on full control over the military to ensure the implementation of the Oslo-brokered truce with Tamil Tiger rebels and to keep up his peace initiative.

On November 4, Kumaratunga sacked three ministers and snatched from Wickremesinghe's cabinet the portfolios of defence, interior and information.

Kumaratunga and Wickrem-

esinghe, who are from rival parties, have held four rounds of unsuccessful talks. Their aides have held many more meetings.

Political analysts and diplomats have speculated that the president may try to end the impasse by calling parliamentary elections four years ahead of schedule.

Sri Lanka is already scheduled to hold local council polls starting in March, letting both sides test their electoral strength.

The island has been ruled in an uneasy cohabitation arrangement since Wickremesinghe defeated Kumaratunga's party in December 2001 parliamentary elections.

## China wants peaceful Taiwan reunification

REUTERS, Beijing

China told the United States it would never allow an independent Taiwan, its diplomatic and ideological rival for more than half a century, but would work for peaceful reunification.

Chinese President Hu Jintao told President Bush overnight he appreciated the US reaffirmation of the "one-China" policy and opposition to "the words and actions of Taiwan authorities aimed at altering Taiwan's status," Xinhua news agency reported on Sunday.

Since the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949, China has considered Taiwan a breakaway province that must be brought back into the fold -- by force if necessary.

The United States is Taiwan's biggest ally and arms supplier but recognizes Beijing's one-China policy. Bush told Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao this month he opposed any unilateral decision by China or Taiwan to change the status quo.

"On the Taiwan question, the Chinese government is willing to achieve the reunification peacefully with utmost sincerity and greatest efforts, but Taiwan independence cannot be tolerated," Xinhua quoted Hu as telling Bush in an overnight phone call.

"Bush said the stance of the US government on the Taiwan issue was clear cut, and the US side opposed any words and actions to change the status quo of Taiwan unilaterally," the agency said.

For his part, Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian reiterated his opposition to the one China policy at a gathering organized chiefly to campaign for his re-election in March.

"Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan's official name) in the past stayed on the mainland, and later ROC moved to Taiwan...and now, the ROC is Taiwan," said Chen in Taipei on Sunday.

Despite diplomatic friction and rhetoric, two-way trade between China and Taiwan has soared over recent years and is expected to top \$50 billion this year, the Financial News said on Sunday, citing Commerce Ministry figures.

Two-way trade amounted to \$46.63 billion in the first 10 months of this year, up 29.4 percent from the year-earlier period, it said.

China's exports to Taiwan rose 33.5 percent to \$7.04 billion between January and October, while imports from the island rose 28.7 percent to \$39.59 billion, it said.



Members of the Red Cross and civilians assist a woman, who along twenty others, was injured by the detonation of an explosive device in Plaza de Mayo, in Buenos Aires, Argentina on Saturday during demonstrations. The rally was organised to mark the second anniversary of the popular revolts that led to the fall of President Fernando De La Rúa