BRIEFLY

Plea to release Kuwaiti newsmen: The Federation of Arab News Agencies appealed Saturday to Iraq to release journalists belonging to the Kuwaiti News Agency it is holding 10 months after the Gulf War ended, reports AP Sunday from Rabat.

The federation also called upon Iraq to return all equipment it seized from the news agency during its seven-month occupation of Kuwait that began in August 1990.

The congress of Arab news agency directors also said they hoped the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation would extend technical help to KUNA to enable it to resume transmitting news.

Peace march in El Salvador: At least 20,000 people marched for peace Saturday, demanding that the government of President Alfredo Cristiani and guerilla commanders sign an accord, reports AP Sunday from San Salvador.

Leaders of the two groups will meet Monday at United Nations headquarters in New York to continue peace talks. They hope to reach an agreement ending El Salvador's brutal civil war by the end of the year.

More than 75,000 people, mostly civilians, have died in the decade-long civil war, which has thrown the economy into chaos and polarized society.

Workers, peasants and students gathered for a rally of the Permanent Committee for the National Debate for Peace. Committee Director Edgar Palacios, a Baptist minister, said the marchers support a cease-fire accompanied by political, economic and military changes.

China welcomes Koreas' treaty: China on Saturday welcomed an historic non-aggression treaty between North and South Korea which ended the four decades-old state of war on the Korean Peninsula, reports Reuter Sunday from Beijing.

The premiers of the two Koreas signed the accord in Seoul on Friday and agreed to work towards a peace treaty to replace the 1953 armistice which ended the Korean War.

China was an ally of North Korea in the 1950-53 conflict, and remains one of Stalinist Pyong Yang's dwindling number of close friends.

Floods hit Hawaiian Island: 4 killed: Torrential rains hit the Hawaiian island of Kauai, causing flash floods that killed four people and damaged dozens of homes, reports AP Sunday from Hawaii.

Two were listed as missing after fierce downpours Saturday dumped more than 15 inches (38 centimeters) of rain in a 24-hour period.

Flooding caused landslides and serious property damage, said Mayor JoAnn Yukimura, who declared the island a disaster area.

Firefighters in Kapaa evacuated dozens of residents from flooded homes and took them to emergency shelters, but most were able to return home later Saturday.

Two Palestinians hurt in clashes: Israeli troops shot and wounded two Palestinians in clashes Saturday in the occupied Gaza Strip on the fourth anniversary of the founding of the Islamic Fundamentalist Movement Hamas, Arab sources said, reports AFP Sunday from Jerusalem.

The clashes between soldiers and demonstrators broke out in the Palestinian refugees camp of Shatti, following a call from Hamas for a day of confrontation to mark its anniversary.

Hamas, which wants an Islamic state to replace Israel and opposes the current Arab-Israeli peace talks, was formed on December 14, 1987, five days after the start of the Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories.

New govt formed in Albania: President Ramiz Alia on Saturday approved a new government designed to ensure stability in this food-panicked nation until the next elections, according to Albanian media, reports AP Sunday from Tirana.

In a separate statement, Alia said he would announce an election date before December 20.

Efforts to nudge Albania toward a market economy after four decades of Stalinist rule by dictator Enver Hoxha have so far fueled unemployment and inflation.

Several people have been killed in food riots in recent weeks. After years of forced self-reliance, local sources say Albania is getting most of its food from foreign aid.

FIS to contest Algeria's polls: The Fundamentalist Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) announced Saturday that it would file candidates in Algeria's first multi-party elections due later this month, reports AFP Sunday from Algeria.

The announcement was made after a long meeting of the Majlish-e-Shure, the supreme FIS body, where supporters of an election boycott clashed with the movement's pro-election wing.

The FIS earlier presented lists of candidates in Algeria's 430 constituencies.

More than 40 parties have said they will take part in general elections whose first round will be held on December 26.

Removal of Sind govt demanded

Benazir threatens to boycott parliament session

KARACHI, Dec 15: Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, angered by an alleged gang-rape of a friend, threatened on Saturday that her alliance would boycott a special session of parliament next week, reports Reuter.

President Ghulam Ishaq Khan is due to address a joint sitting of both houses of Parliament on Thursday to mark the start of a new parliamentary year.

Bhutto told reporters her People's Democratic Alliance would boycott the session in protest if the government did not sack and arrest Sind province Home Affairs Adviser Irfanullah Marwat, the President's son-in-law.

Her friend and dressmaker Farhana Hayat was allegedly gang-raped at her Karachi home on November 27 by five men who repeatedly questioned her about her links with Bhutto.

Hayat named Sind Chief Minister Jam Sadiq Ali and Marwat as the people she suspected of being behind the attack that has sparked widespread protests across the country.

Bhutto repeated her charge that Marwat was "the principal accused" in the rape case and again demanded the removal of the Sind government, which last month launched a crackdown against her followers in the southern province.

The Pakistan government has asked a High Court judge to investigate the alleged rape. But Hayat's family and opposition politicians say the truth cannot be established while the present Sind administration is in place.

"We don't accept a judicial inquiry, we want a meaningful change," Bhutto said.

MOSCOW : Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze in a pensive mood during the opening congress of the Movement for Democratic Reform in Moscow Saturday. Shevardnadze said he supported the idea of a coordinating body between the members of the new Commonwealth of Independent States created last week. — AFP/UNB photo

Shevardnadze urges Gorbachev not to rush into resignation

MOSCOW, Dec 15 : Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze said on Saturday he had urged President Mikhail Gorbachev not to rush into any decision to resign, stressing the Kremlin leader could still contribute much to his country, reports Reuter.

Shevardnadze issued his call at a congress of his own Democratic Reform Movement as pressure was building on the president to step down.

Gorbachev has effectively been denied any role in a new confederation of independent states which eliminates central authority, but appears prepared to hang on to power for at least the next few days.

Shevardnadze said Gorbachev was "working a great deal and both he and I want to facilitate the process of transforming the commonwealth," Tass news agency said.

"I believe he can do many useful things for this process, he said. "He also understands this as do the Russian authorities and other republics. I advised Gorbachev not to rush into any resignation."

Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia — the country's Slav heartland — singed the commonwealth accord last Sunday and at least five other republics have since said they are prepared to join.

Shevardnadze was speaking to journalists at the founding congress of the movement he set up last summer to press for radical changes as part of Gorbachev's "Perestroika" reforms.

Reappointed last month a year after resigning amid warnings of impending dictatorship, Shevardnadze predicted Gorbachev would not quit "either today or tomorrow."

A presidential spokesman on Saturday said Gorbachev was determined to remain in power at least until after he meets US Secretary of State James Baker in the Kremlin tomorrow.

Earlier this week, Gorbachev's epitaph-like comments to journalists appeared to presage his departure, and many of his former allies in the republics turned against him.

Outside the country, US officials also appeared to have written him off, though Baker said Washington had no intention of intervening in the fast-paced changes in the country.

Rafsanjani to visit Saudi Arabia soon

ABU DHABI, Dec 15: Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani will visit Saudi Arabia soon to discuss bilateral ties, regional security and other issues, a Gulf daily reported Saturday, says AFP.

Al-Khaleej newspaper said Rafsanjani would go to Riyadh after the end of his current visit to Sudan, which began Friday.

It also said Rafsanjani, the first Iranian head of state to visit Saudi Arabia since the 1979 Islamic revolution, would meet King Fahd on Tuesday and would also discuss proposed post-Gulf war security measures in the region ahead of the December 23 Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Kuwait.

In Riyadh, Iranian Charge d'Affaires Mohammad Firazmend confirmed to AFP that the visit would take place but said no date had been set.

"The date of the visit of Hashemi Rafsanjani has still not been fixed and the Iranian President's stay will not occur in the coming day," he said dismissing the newspaper report.

He added that consultations were underway between Tehran and Riyadh to finalize the date of Refsanjani's visit.

Kazakhstan to declare independence today

MOSCOW, Dec 15: Kazakhstan will formally declare itself an independent state tomorrow Monday in line with a draft law approved Saturday by the parliament, the independent news agency Interfax reported, says AFP.

Under the draft, Kazakhstan will take full control of its domestic and foreign policies and will grant citizenship to "people of all nationalities united with the Kazakh nation by a common historical destiny."

Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev was not present at Saturday's session of the parliament, the report said.

GCC summit : Security at Kuwait City tightened

KUWIAT CITY, Dec 15 : Kuwaiti police yesterday set up checkpoints throughout the capital as a precautionary security measure for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit scheduled for December 23-25, reports Xinhua.

Cars were held up in long lines of several miles as police checked the identity papers of all drivers and passengers. Police detained those without papers and busloads were seen taken away.

Bakar regrets Gorbachev's remarks

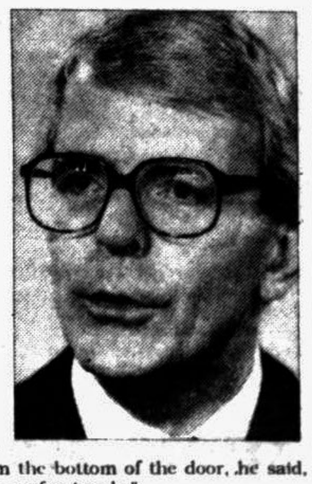
SHANNON, Ireland, Dec 15 : Secretary of State James A Baker said Sunday he regretted that Soviet President Mikhail S Gorbachev had criticized him in a Time magazine interview, reports AP.

"I don't think anyone has been more supportive of President Gorbachev and his administration and what they have done than I have in the councils of the US government and otherwise," Baker said as he flew to Moscow from Washington.

Off the Record

Major isn't much of a handyman

LONDON : Prime Minister John Major said Friday that when things need fixing around the house he calls for his wife Norma, reports AP.



He disclosed his inadequacy as a do-it-yourselfer while visiting the north London neighbourhood of Enfield to support a local energy-efficiency programme.

Surrounded by reporters, Major tried to hang insulating tape around the door of pensioner Joyce Ball, 67. He apologized for the poor standard of his workmanship, saying he wasn't much of a handyman.

"But Norma is, thank goodness," he said. Looking at the inches of tape hanging from the bottom of the door, he said, "I think I'll leave this to the professionals."

Gays are born, not made?

CHICAGO : A study of twins suggests that homosexuality has a genetic or biological basis, adding to arguments that sexual orientation doesn't result from maladjustment or moral defect, reports AP.

"We found 52 per cent of identical twin brothers of gay men also were gay, compared with 22 per cent of fraternal twins, compared with 11 per cent of genetically unrelated (adoptive) brothers," said J Michael Bailey, assistant professor of psychology at Northwestern University in Evanston.

"Which is exactly the kind of pattern you would want to see if something genetic were going on," he said Saturday.

An earlier study reported brain cell cluster traits that indicated homosexuality could have a biological trigger.

The latest study, published in the December issue of the Archives of General Psychiatry, examined 56 identical twins, 54 fraternal twins and 57 adoptive brothers.

Identical twins are genetic clones, developed from a single egg that split after being fertilized by a single sperm. Fraternal twins develop simultaneously from two separate eggs fertilized by two separate sperm, making them only as similar as non-twin siblings.

Adoptive brothers, of course, have no genes in common.

'Terra' changes colour ?

HOUSTON: US astronauts aboard last month's space shuttle said on Friday that the sky looked purple, not blue, and they were awestruck by the sight of a Philippine volcano that erupted earlier this year, reports Reuter.

The six-member crew, which tested spy cameras aboard the shuttle Atlantis for seven days in November, observed the environment as they peered down on ships and houses from orbit.

Crewmen said haze in the atmosphere gave the planet a purplish lavender hue from 225 miles (360 km) up, where they took pictures with a computerised camera and a video telescope belonging to the US Defence Department.

"The earth wasn't blue anymore," said flight engineer Story Musgrave, who was unable to capture the colour change in conventional photographs.

'Triumphant' return

MOSCOW, Dec 15: Violin virtuoso Isaac Stern performed with the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra in what the Tass news agency called a "triumphant" return to his native land after an absence of 25 years, reports AP.

Stern, 71, was born in Russia but moved to the United States as an infant and is an American citizen. He is the latest of many Soviet emigre artists, including cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and ballerina Maya Plisetskaya, to return to adoring audiences.

With his favourite violin, a Guarneri, Stern played Beethoven and Mozart concertos on Thursday for a sell-out crowd in the Grand Hall of the Moscow Conservatory. The Moscow Philharmonic was under the baton of Vastly Sinaisky.

Tass quoted Stern as saying he was very happy to visit the country where he was born and where his relatives still live.

Assam rebels still holding six hostages

CALCUTTA, Dec 15: Maoist rebels in India's North Eastern Assam state are still holding six hostages despite a senior government minister's statement to parliament that they had been freed, Assam officials said on Saturday, reports Reuter.

"None of the six hostages have returned home and the minister's statement has caused great distress among their families," said one officials who asked not to be identified.

Police and intelligence officials, speaking by telephone from the Assam capital, Guwahati, families following a statement to parliament on Friday by Home (Interior) Minister S B Chavan.

As well as saying the hostages had been freed, Chavan also told parliament that the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) had halted its campaign for independence and South peace talks with the government.

The Assam officials said the only explanation they could think of was that Chavan could have misunderstood a rebel statement made earlier in week.

ULFA spokesman, Aniruddha Chowdhury, told a weekly magazine in Assam that they might release the six hostages, held for more than five months, but did not say when.

Technical problem delays opening of Chinese N-plant

BEIJING, Dec 15: Technical problems have delayed the opening of the first phase of the Daya Bay Nuclear Power Plant in southern China until the summer of 1993, Xinhua news agency said, reports AFP.

Israeli repression greatest danger to ME talks : PLO

TUNIS, Dec 15: A senior PLO official warned yesterday that Israel's continued repression against Palestinians in the occupied lands posed "the greatest danger" to the Mideast peace talks, reports Xinhua.

Bassam Abu Sharif, political advisor to Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman Yasser Arafat, said that "hundreds of Palestinians are suffering from malnutrition and maltreatment" in the occupied territories at a time when Israel was talking peace with the Arabs.

Abu Sharif said that Israeli authorities continued to confiscate Palestinian lands and build Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and Gaza strip despite international condemnation.

The PLO official was speaking in a symposium organized by the International Affairs Research Centre in Rome. His speech was made available here today.

Abu Sharif's remarks came after Israel and its Arab neighbours adjourned their three days of peace talks until Monday in Washington, with all sides claiming that the talks were making progress, albeit at a rate that was almost imperceptible.

Abu Sharif called on the United States, European countries and the international community as a whole to interfere to put an end to the Israeli repressive practices so as to ensure the success of the peace talks.

He said a high level international committee should be set up to investigate the "crimes committed by Israel against Palestinians in the occupied lands."

6 more killed in Kashmir violence

JAMMU, Dec 15: Five Muslim militants and a paramilitary border trooper were killed in Kashmir on Saturday in armed encounters on the line of control with Pakistan, officials said, reports AFP.

Three more militants and two troopers from the Border Security Forces (BSF) were injured.

The exchanges of gunfire between troopers and militants allegedly trying to enter Kashmir through the control line took place early Saturday at two places in Uri Boeor, the officials said.

Eleven more militants from the two groups managed to flee, the officials from the Jammu and Kashmir state government said here in this winter capital of the state, which is claimed by both Pakistan and India.

Demand for war widows in Iraq

BAGHDAD, Dec 15: War widows are in demand in Iraq, reports Reuter.

More than 1,000 men have recently tied the knot with widows to take advantage of cut-price loans offered to the women, the army newspaper Al-Qadissiyah said on Saturday.

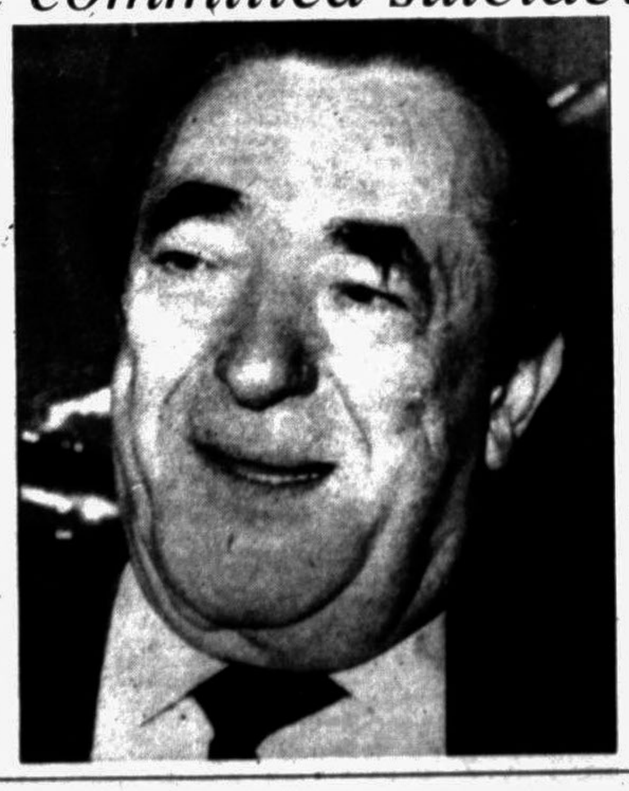
Maxwell committed suicide: Mirror

LONDON, Dec 15: Arguments over international media tycoon Robert Maxwell's death intensified on Sunday after one of his newspapers said he killed himself by jumping overboard from his luxury yacht, reports Reuter.

"Suicide," was the Sunday Mirror's banner headline, flying in the face of assertions by his family that Maxwell, 68, would never have taken his own life or cracked under pressure as his media empire crumbled under five billion dollars of debt.

A Spanish autopsy report failed to silence questions about the death of the tycoon, a survivor of the holocaust who became a British war hero and mone-time Labour Member of Parliament, by saying he probably died of a heart attack and possibly by drowning.

Maxwell was last seen alive at 4:20 am on November 5 at the back of his yacht Lady Ghislaine during a cruise off the Canary Islands. He was declared missing about seven hours later and his body was recovered from the sea.



The Sunday Mirror said the latest medical tests on his heart tissues showed nothing wrong with it — no evidence of disease or blocked coronaries or thrombosis.

"We are 90 per cent sure Maxwell committed suicide," it quoted an unnamed "insider" as saying adding: "insurance detectives are now convinced the newspaper tycoon jumped overboard from his luxury yacht."

Insurers who may have to pay out 20 million pounds (36 million dollars) of accident cover said they would not take a decision on the basis of the Spanish inquiry.

"If their suicide verdict is accepted, insurers will refuse to pay a 20 million pound claim on Maxwell's life," the Sunday Mirror said.

Delhi ready to open talks with Sikhs

CHANDIGARH, Dec 15: India is ready to open talks with Sikh militants without barring a discussion of their demand for independence, Home Minister S B Chavan said Saturday, reports AP.

Chavan's statement in the state capital of Punjab, where Sikhs want their own nation, marked a refinement of government offers to negotiate an end to the 8-year Sikh rebellion.

More than 5,600 people have been killed this year alone in the struggle in Punjab, a rich farming state bordering Pakistan.

"There is no harm in discussing anything," Chavan told reporters, ending his first visit to Punjab since the Congress government took office six months ago.

Asked if he was prepared to discuss Khalistan, the name Sikhs would give their independent state, Chavan replied: "If both sides have an open mind and no preconditions for the talks, there is no problem of discussing anything and winding up the issue," he said.

The militants have not responded to the government's latest peace feelers. But Sikh parties that support the militants boycotted a meeting of political parties that Chavan had called three days ago.

Previously, governments in New Delhi had said they were prepared to discuss any matter within the framework of the Indian constitution, implicitly ruling out any talk of a separate Sikh state.

Nevertheless, former Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar said here recently that independence was discussed when he met last spring with a prominent Sikh leader, Simranjit Singh Mann.

Rebel forces dig trenches around Moldovan cities

CHISINAU, Moldovia, Dec 15: Force opposed to the Moldovan government began digging trenches Saturday around cities along the Dniester river in the self-proclaimed Dniester Republic, Moldovan officials said, reports AFP.

Meanwhile, the Dniester leadership sent a message to Moldovan President Mircea Snegur asking him to use his "prestige" to call on the United Nations to send forces to the republic to "maintain order," Tass news agency reported.

An Interior Ministry spokesman said the trenches were being dug near bridges that span the river and added that Moldovan police headquarters in Dubossary, Grigoropol and other cities in the region remained surrounded by armed people.

A Moldovan police officer, Mikhail Lozan, was seriously wounded in a machine-gun attack in Dubossary, where clashes between Moldovan troops and forces loyal to Dniester leaders left several dead and wounded on Friday.

According to the Moldovan spokesman, two Soviet military units in the southern city of Tiraspol declared Saturday that they were placing themselves under the control of the Dniester leadership.

The predominantly Russian population of the self-styled Dniester Republic opposes the Chisinau government's split from Moscow and wants to remain linked to Russia.