

BRIEFLY

ULFA releases six hostages: Ethnic guerrillas fighting for independence in the northeast on Monday released six hostages after holding them for more than five months, officials said, reports AP from Gauhati.

The captives were the last of about 20 to be released by the United Liberation Front of Assam that has been fighting about 40,000 Indian army troops in their quest for greater autonomy for the remote Assam state.

The hostages, who were kidnapped last July, were freed at different places in the state, said officials who cannot be quoted under briefing rules.

The first hostage to be freed Monday was S.K Tewari, a civil servant under the rebels' captivity since July 1. Three others were from the Oil and Natural Gas Commission, a federal government organisation targeted by the guerrillas.

Iran, Morocco restore ties: Iran and Morocco are resuming diplomatic relations, broken a decade ago after King Hassan hosted the exiled Shah of Iran, the Iranian news agency Irna reported Monday, says Reuter from Nicosia.

It quoted a Foreign Ministry statement as saying Tehran and Rabat had decided to reopen their missions and exchange ambassadors in view of the "historical ties" between the two nations and to further the goals of the Islamic community.

The decision leaves Egypt as the only major Arab country without full diplomatic ties with Iran, whose relations with most Arab states was severely damaged during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.

Colombian rebels free 2 Japanese: Marxist guerrillas released two Japanese engineers from a Colombian mountain hideout on Monday after their company negotiated their release, authorities said, reports Reuter from Bogota, Colombia.

The two were handed over to police in northwest Colombia, flown to the capital, Bogota, and would soon leave for Japan, authorities said.

Akyoshi Nakayama and Toshihiro Koriuchi came to Colombia on July 29 to work for Toshiba installing electrical equipment.

Local radio reported that a ransom was paid but did not say how much.

Norway recognises Russian Fed: The Norwegian government recognised the Russian Federation as an independent state Monday, but promised to maintain diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union "as long as it exists," reports AP from Oslo.

Norway, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, (NATO) may also recognise other republics of the crumbling Soviet Union, said Norwegian Foreign Ministry spokesman Bjorn Blokkhus.

"We concentrated first on Russia because it is our neighbour," Blokkhus said. He said Norway would conduct diplomatic relations with the government of Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin through the existing embassy in Moscow.

The Norwegian Foreign Ministry said in a statement that the Russian government's promise to respect arms control agreements, human rights and basic principles in relations between countries weighed heavily in the decision to go ahead with recognition.

Khmer officials off to Phnom Penh: A team of Khmer Rouge officials left Bangkok Tuesday for Phnom Penh, the first to return to the Cambodian capital since its leaders were forced to flee to Thailand in November, reports AFP from Bangkok.

Bak Ben, the senior faction officials heading the team, said he hoped "the incident of November 27 would never repeat itself."

He was referring to the mob attack in Phnom Penh on Khmer Rouge leaders Khieu Samphan and Son Sen, who were forced to flee the Cambodian capital for their lives and fly back to Thailand hours after Khieu's arrival.

C'wealth to embrace 10 republics: Boris Yeltsin said Monday that the commonwealth he forged a week ago with Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia will be functioning within two weeks with 10 of the 12 Soviet republics as members, reports AP from Moscow.

The Russian president played down reports in Izvestia and other media that Soviet president Mikhail S. Gorbachev would become commander-in-chief of the commonwealth.

"I feel ashamed of those commentaries, especially in the Izvestia paper," the President of the Russian Federation said after meeting four hours with Secretary of State James A. Baker.

"I would not like to discuss his future. It's up to him to decide."

Roof collapse claims 21 in India: The roof of a cotton mill in western India collapsed after the building caught fire, killing at least 21 people, new reports said Monday, says Reuter from New Delhi.

The victims included a newspaper photographer taking pictures of the fire-fighting operation, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency said.

The mill in the city of Surat, 940 m (580 miles) southwest of New Delhi, caught fire on Saturday evening after an electrical short circuit, PTI said.

At least 37 people were trapped when the roof fell in, it said. Twenty-one were killed and 16 admitted to hospital.

Protesters demand Iliescu's resignation

TIMISOARA, Romania, Dec 17: Some 20,000 Romanians on Monday demanded President Ion Iliescu's resignation and the return of King Michael during a demonstration marking the second anniversary of the country's anti-communist revolution, reports Reuter.

"Down with Iliescu, resignation, resignation," chanted the crowd, waving Romanian flags with the former communist emblem torn from its centre, as in the days of the 1989, revolt that bloodily ended four decades of communist dictatorship.

The demonstrators turned out in Timisoara's Victory Square — formerly known as opera square but renamed after the revolution — despite icy weather.

The rally was called by the opposition Timisoara society, a pressure group striving to keep alive the spirit of the 1989 uprising that led to the overthrow and execution of Stalinist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu.

Ninety-seven Timisoara people were killed by his security forces during the unrest and 1,033 perished nationwide.

Many protesters held candles and lit newspapers as makeshift torches. Dozens of candles flickered on balconies of the 18th century buildings ringing the square.

Prominent dissidents and leaders of Romania's main opposition parties addressed the meeting.



COLOMBO: Heavily armed soldiers search a car as part of a stepped up security campaign ahead of the seven nation SAARC summit on December 21. The alert was partly fuelled by the discovery of a car bomb in Colombo two weeks ago. — AFP/UNB photo

Lanka tightens security for SAARC summit

COLOMBO, Dec 17: Security forces and police went on red alert in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo Monday and stepped up checks on vehicles ahead of a seven-nation South Asian summit, officials here said, reports AFP.

Hundreds of policemen were deployed here to enforce strict security for the rescheduled South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit to begin here Saturday, officials said.

"We are on maximum alert. We have set up more checkpoints in the city and increased our presence at all key locations that will be used for the summit," an official spokesman said.

The summit, originally scheduled to take place here from November 7 to 9, was aborted at the last minute with the withdrawal of the King Jigme Singye Wangchuck of Bhutan, citing domestic problems.

Colombo will now hold a "one-day business-like" summit instead of the elaborate three-day meeting. The government had earlier wanted to stage for the sixth summit of SAARC, which groups Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Police two weeks ago discovered a van packed with 36 kilograms (80 pounds) of explosives just outside a busy market in the city centre, raising security concerns and

making more intensified checks on vehicles.

The explosives were packed inside the fuel tank of the van but there was no triggering device, police said, adding that the vehicle had been abandoned outside the World Market for nearly 10 days before it was finally examined.

"We don't want anyone to create any trouble like this. That is why we have put all our men on maximum vigilance," a police officer said.

Heavily armed soldiers and police set up more roadblocks along main highways and even narrow streets throughout the capital. Hotels where visiting leaders and their officials are to be staying have been placed under guard.

Pak politician to avenge assault on his daughter

ISLAMABAD, Dec 17: An angry politician on Sunday threatened tribal revenge for a brutal attack on his daughter, allegedly gang-raped last month because of her support for former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, reports AP.

The alleged victim, Veena Ilyatt, her father, Shaukat Ilyatt, and Ms. Bhutto all have accused Irfanullah Marwat, a powerful political appointee in southern Sindh province, as the person responsible for the attack.

Marwat denies any involvement in the incident, and the Sindh government has opened a judicial inquiry into it. President Ghulam Ishaq Khan wrote a letter to Shaukat Ilyatt deploring the attack on his daughter and promising justice.

Demonstrations by as many as 1,000 people, mainly women, have been held daily for the past week throughout the country to protest the attack. Helmeted riot police surround the presidential palace, where demonstrators often gather.

Ms. Bhutto promised to boycott Wednesday's presidential address before a joint session of the National Assembly and Senate unless those who allegedly planned the attack are arrested.

Ms. Ilyatt told The Associated Press that five masked gunmen broke into her Karachi home last month "to teach me a lesson for supporting (Ms. Bhutto's) Pakistan People's Party." She said they asked her why she spent so much time at Ms. Bhutto's Karachi residence, and what she did while there.

In an interview with the monthly magazine The Herald, Ms. Ilyatt claimed one of her attackers mentioned Marwat during the 12-hour nightmare, when the gunmen dragged her from room to room repeatedly raping her.

"They kept threatening to kill me if I didn't answer their questions. They said they were on duty under the order of higher-ups. One of them took Marwat's name. I think it was a slip-up. He later changed it to just higher-ups," Ms Ilyatt told the reputable English-language magazine.

Marwat, who is Ishaq Khan's son-in-law, runs the police and domestic intelligence agencies in Sindh. Ms. Bhutto's home province and once the stronghold of her leftist Pakistan People's Party.

He is generally believed to have been placed in the Sindh government by Ishaq Khan to reduce Ms. Bhutto's political strength there.

Shaukat Ilyatt, a veteran politician with close ties to Pakistan's founding father, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, said tribal elders met in his home Sunday vowing revenge within a week unless "the culprits are arrested." He said the elders would meet again on Friday to decide how to seek revenge.

Tribal traditions and law run deep in Pakistan. In some areas the Prime Minister cannot move freely without the protection of tribal elders.



UNITED NATIONS: Members of the Iraqi delegation including Iraq's Ambassador to the UN Abdul Amir Al-Anbari (L) look on during a vote in the General Assembly. The UNGA at the urging of the US repealed a 1975 resolution equating Zionism with the racism. — AFP/UNB photo

Kazakhstan declares independence

MOSCOW, Dec 16: The Southern Republic of Kazakhstan declared itself independent today, leaving the Russian federation. The only Soviet Republic not to have done so since last August's failed coup, reports Reuter.

Tass news agency said the Kazakh parliament adopted a law proclaiming Kazakhstan an "independent, democratic, law-based state."

Tass said the law stipulated that Kazakhstan, an ethnically diverse republic stretching from the Chinese border to the mouth of Russia's Volga, bore sole responsibility for foreign and internal policies within its existing borders.

All national groups within the republic — divided equally between Russians and central Asians — enjoyed equal rights.

The declaration's main result was to reinforce the new commonwealth of independent states formed last week which declared the old Soviet Union dead and sapped virtually all of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's authority.

Arafat arrives in China tomorrow

BEIJING, Dec 17: Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat is scheduled to arrive in China Thursday for an official visit, the Foreign Ministry announced Tuesday, reports AP.

The announcement, carried by the state-run Xinhua News Agency, said Chinese President Yang Shangkun had invited Arafat to visit China.

The report did not say how long Arafat would be in China. Xinhua gave no details on the purpose of the visit, but Arafat is expected to discuss Middle East peace negotiations under way in Washington and China's increasing contacts and exchanges with Israel.

SAARC Council of Ministers meet Dec 20

COLOMBO, Dec 16: The council of ministers of SAARC countries will meet here on December 20 on the eve of the one-day summit of heads of state and government, reports PTI.

The foreign ministers of India, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Bhutan, Nepal and Pakistan are expected to arrive in Colombo on Thursday while the heads of government and state will arrive on December 20 and 21.

The current SAARC Chairman, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom of the Maldives, will hand over chairmanship of the seven-nation grouping to Sri Lanka during the summit.

Croatian planes attack Serbian refugees

BELGRADE, Dec 17: Croatian planes attacked a column of Serbian refugees on Monday, injuring around 20 of them, Tanjug news agency reported quoting federal army sources, reports AFP.

Three small planes attacked the refugees near Pakrac, in western Slovenia where fighting had raged all day, Tanjug said. Two of the injured were in serious condition.

The Croats were using planes equipped for crop spraying, Tanjug said.

UN mediator start peace talks in El Salvador

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 17: Salvadoran officials and rebels on Monday opened separate talks with a UN mediator aimed at producing a formal cease-fire and final agreement ending El Salvador's 12-year-old civil war, reports AP.

There was no immediate word on the separate sessions with Alvaro de Soto, a special envoy to UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar. It was not known when both sides would meet with Perez de Cuellar or when they would sit down face-to-face.

Burmese dissidents urge UN to help release Suu Kyi

BANGKOK, Dec 17: An alternative Burmese government set up by dissidents in the jungle called on the United Nations on Monday to help free Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi from the hands of Rangoon's military rulers, reports Reuter.

"We would like to request to all the members of the United Nations and international community to follow-up and implement the U.N. resolution to free Aung San Suu Kyi." The group said in a statement received in Bangkok.

The alternative government is largely made up of exiled members of the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party Aung San Suu Kyi helped set up.

It won an overwhelming victory in May, 1990, general election that was repudiated by the ruling junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

The expulsion of Aung San Suu Kyi from the NLD was announced on official radio Rangoon on Sunday night. Rangoon's foreign residents say this is the latest attempt by the junta to discredit the op-

position leader. "We believe the acting leadership on NLD are faced with crisis, and are threatened at gunpoint by the military regime," the alternate government's statement said.

"They were forced to expel her from NLD as instructed by the SLORC," it said.

The latest manifestation of the military regime that has ruled Burma since 1962, the SLORC took up the reins of government after soldiers shot thousands of demonstrators in quelling a 1988 democracy uprising.

After the 1990 election, many victorious NLD candidates were arrested and others fled into the jungle to join dissident students and monks and link up with ethnic guerrilla groups.

NLD leaders who were left behind have been under almost constant pressure to accept demands that they repudiate their former allies, foreign residents of Rangoon say.

Anti-Tamil violence in Bangalore : 16 killed

NEW DELHI, Dec 17: The Indian government has rushed paramilitary troops to a southern state after nine people were killed in anti-Tamil violence, a senior minister said today, reports AFP.

Hundreds of Tamils had also fled strife-torn Karnataka state and taken shelter in adjoining Tamil Nadu province following arson attacks on them since Friday, newspapers said here.

The Hindu newspaper, published from Tamil Nadu, said 16 people were slain in stabbing incidents and police firing in and around Karnataka's capital Bangalore. The Karnataka police maintained that only nine people had died.

Home Minister Y V Chavan told parliament here that New Delhi had rushed some 600 men of the federal Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) to Karnataka in the wake of the anti-Tamil violence.

"I have spoken to the Chief Minister of Karnataka to see that this kind of violence does not take place," he told MPs.

Violence erupted in Karnataka during a general strike called by political parties to protest an accord giving Tamil Nadu an increased share of the Cauvery river, which irrigates rice-growing areas of the two coastal states.

Newspapers said hundreds of Tamils living in Bangalore and nearby areas had fled to Tamil Nadu after locals unleashed an orgy of violence on their property, and many complained that the Karnataka police were partisan.

Tamil Nadu MPs demanded in parliament today that New Delhi dismiss the Karnataka government, controlled by P V Narasimha Rao's Congress (I) Party, and despatch the army to Bangalore to put down further mob attacks.

Off the Record

Trade Minister's dirty trade

GERMANY: The Trade Minister from the Soviet Central Asian Republic of Kirghizstan was nabbed for shop-lifting a Polo shirt in a department store of this north German city, the Bild newspaper reported Saturday, says AFP.

Kirsien Bazhasitov was caught by a store detective as he sought to smuggle out the 39.9-mark (about 25 dollar) shirt in a plastic bag.

The Minister was freed after two hours on 300-mark (190 dollars) bail.

Resurrection

QUINTO, Philippines: Nardo San Diego was surprised to find a wake being held at his home after he returned from visiting a friend, 'who died?' he asked. 'You,' a startled friend replied, reports AP.

The mixup began December 2 when San Diego, an alderman in this town 50 kilometres (30 miles) north of Manila, left to visit a friend in another province, according to a report in a local weekly newspaper, Mabuhay.

That same day, police found a body lying on a road near the town and mistakenly identified it as San Diego's.

They turned the body, which strongly resembled the alderman, over to his grieving mother, who then organized the additional nine-day wake at the home of the deceased, the newspaper said.

On the third-day of the wake, San Diego returned home to the surprise of the mourners.

Police said they still do not know the real identity of the body, which was turned over to a local funeral home.

Money is the bust healer

SAN FRANCISCO: A California jury has awarded 7.34 million dollars to a woman whose breast implant ruptured, giving her a painful, chronic disease, reports AFP.

The six-member federal court jury conclude Friday that the silicon implant was defective and that its makers, Dow Corning, had failed to warn her of the risks. The jury said that failure constituted a breach of warranty and fraud.

"I hope this sends a message to Dow Corning that they can't sacrifice the safety of women for their balance sheet," said Dan Bolton, lawyer for the woman.

A lawyer for Dow Corning, the largest manufacturer of breast implants, has said it would appeal.

The award is the fourth and largest — given for faulty breast implants. Bolton said. The previous record was 5.4 million dollars.

UN relief trucks entering Iraq

BAGHDAD, Dec 17: Truck convoys loaded with food, blankets and shelters for hundreds of thousands of Kurds started entering Iraq from Turkey on Monday in case of winter emergencies, a UN official said here, reports AFP.

"Oil, rice and blankets for 500,000 people will be distributed over the next 12 days to 34 warehouses scattered over Iraqi Kurdistan, said Panos Moumitzis, spokesman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Koreas' agreement faces political bickering

SEOUL, Dec 17: The Cabinet on Monday approved the peaceful coexistence agreement signed by the two Koreas, but political bickering continued to threaten ratification of the milestone accord, reports AP.

Also Monday, news reports quoted government sources as saying the United States told North Korea prior to the reaching of the accord last week that there were no US nuclear weapons in South

Korea. That appeared to be a critical issue in bringing the rapprochement between the two Koreas, which have been bitter enemies since the peninsula was divided in 1945.

The United States also played a crucial role in the thaw by sending a team of arms control experts to meet with North and South Korean officials to develop a nuclear disarmament proposal, sources told The Associated Press.

The non-aggression agreement did not address the issue of nuclear weapons development but the two sides issued a joint statement pledging to work toward eliminating all such weapons on the Korean peninsula.

The pledge is a distinct advance in relations between the two Koreas, but many in the south say their government should not have signed the reconciliation agreement without a firm pledge from

North Korea to stop developing nuclear weapons.

After the Cabinet approved the agreement, which Prime Minister Chung Won-shik called "a shining achievement," the governing Democratic Liberal Party said it would seek parliamentary ratification of the pact on Wednesday.

But the main opposition Democratic Party said that because nuclear issues are outstanding and the accord would greatly affect

The governing party controls two-thirds of the parliament and could approve the pact without opposition votes. But South Korea holds local and national elections in 1992 and it may not be politically expedient for the governing party to steamroll the agreement over the opposition.

The United States had refused to confirm or deny the presence of the nuclear

weapons in South Korea, but intelligence sources had speculated there were at one time 40 to 60 such weapons in the country.

North Korea had alleged there were up to 1,000.

South Korea's Dong-a liberal newspaper reported Monday that the United States told Pyongyang officials last week that US nuclear weapons were out of the south.

Arab newsmen ordered to leave Iraq

BAGHDAD, Dec 17: Iraq told Arab journalists working for foreign companies today to leave the country, reports Reuter.

An information Ministry official said the decision was aimed at tightening Baghdad's control over non-Iraqi Arab journalists because some did not require visas to enter the country.