

BRIEFLY

Face-face talks in El Salvador :

Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar accelerated peace talks on El Salvador's civil war on Sunday by calling for the first face-to-face meeting among combatants in his latest round of negotiations, reports Reuter Monday from United Nations.

Gunmen kills one in Belfast pub :

A gunman opened fire Sunday in a pub located in a Roman Catholic neighbourhood, killing one man and wounding two men and an 8-year-old boy, police said, reports AP Monday from Belfast.

Krajina declares 12-hr curfew :

The self-declared Serbian Republic of Krajina, carved out of the territory of Croatia, on Sunday declared a dusk-to-dawn curfew, Tanjug news agency said, reports AFP Monday from Belgrade.

Japanese aid for Cambodians :

Japan has promised \$1 million in emergency aid for people suffering from war and floods in Cambodia, the official Cambodian news agency SPK reported, says AP Monday from Bangkok.

Floods claim 14 lives in Texas :

At least 14 people are dead in flooding sparked by relentless rains that have soaked Texas for nearly six straight days and authorities said on Sunday they expected the toll of rice, reports Reuter Monday from Houston.

BSF guns down six extremists :

Six extremists of the All Tripura Tribal Force (ATTF) were gunned down by BSF jawans during an encounter at Thacher, in north Tripura district, last night, police sources said PTI from Agartala reports.

Control of occupied land top priority: Shamir

JERUSALEM, Dec 23: Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir says maintaining control of occupied Arab territories is Israel's highest priority and should guide his Likud Party in its bid for re-election next year, reports Reuter.

'No room for multi-party system in Vietnam'

HANOI, Dec 23: Vietnam's ruling Communist Party, resolute in the face of yet another catastrophic year for its allies, has reaffirmed its commitment to one-party socialism, reports Reuter.

Germany recognises Slovenia, Croatia

BONN, Dec 23: Germany formally recognised the break-away Yugoslav republics of Croatia and Slovenia today and said it would open diplomatic ties with them in mid-January, reports Reuter.

Sihanouk calls for end to violence Schools, Universities in Phnom Penh shut down

PHNOM PENH, Dec 23: The Phnom Penh government in a bid to quell further unrest today ordered all schools and universities in the capital closed, reports AFP.

Weekend violence, which began with a student demonstration that spun out of control, left three people dead, by official count, including a police officer.



Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Chairman of Cambodia's National Reconciliation Body, called on Sunday for an end to the violence in Phnom Penh, saying both sides must negotiate a peaceful solution to the crisis.

Eyewitness account put the death toll between five and seven with at least 30 injuries. Soldiers firing automatic weapons moved in with armoured personnel carriers Saturday night to restore order. By Sunday afternoon the situation had calmed and the army withdrew, leaving heavily armed police in full force on street corners.

The government also imposed an indefinite curfew from 8:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. It did not say when the schools and universities would reopen.

They would probably remain closed until Cambodia's national holiday January 7 celebrating the ousting of the Khmer Rouge and installation of the Phnom Penh government, Cambodian sources said. Closing the universities keeps student leaders from having an

easy meeting place in which to plan further demonstrations, one source said. Life in Phnom Penh appeared

normal this morning, with the exception of armed police at key intersections and roadblocks around the royal palace.

On the main Achar Meas Boulevard where the fighting took place Saturday, shopkeepers cautiously opened their gates half way to do business.

The rial was trading on the black market at the same rate as before the shootings began, at 520 to the dollar.

The shops and the nearby central market were barricaded by the army for most of the day Sunday.

Buildings all along the street showed evidence of the weekend's violence bullet holes, spent bullet casings and bloodstains.

Reuter from Paris adds: Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Chairman of Cambodia's National Reconciliation Body, called on Sunday for an end to the violence in Phnom Penh, saying both sides must negotiate a peaceful solution to the crisis.

'I appeal to my beloved compatriots in the two opposing camps to settle their differences peacefully, agreeing to immediately renounce all violence and create a climate conducive to constructive dialogue,' he said in a statement released in Phnom Penh and made available in Paris.

Georgian rebels storm parliament as power struggle steps up

MOSCOW, Dec 23: Rebel troops seeking to oust a president they call dictatorial pummelled Georgia's parliament building with rocket and machine-gun fire Monday, stepping up a fierce power struggle in the Caucasus nation, reports AP.

Georgia is the only former Soviet republic apart from the Baltics that has refused to join the new Commonwealth of Independent States and street fighting by forces vying for its control broke out Sunday in Tbilisi, the capital.

The embattled President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was reported hiding Monday in the basement of the parliament building. Late Sunday, he rejected opposition calls for his resignation and an offer of safe passage out of the country.

Gamsakhurdia, a former political dissident, has seen his power base erode since his landslide victory in the country's first direct presidential elections in May.

The Tass news agency said shootings and explosions resumed before dawn Monday on Rustaveli Avenue in front of the Georgian parliament. It said the building — already damaged by Sunday's fighting — was hit by rockets.

Figures on the death toll varied. The opposition said three people were killed; the government said seven. Unconfirmed reports said as many as 17 people were killed. None of the figures could be independently confirmed.

The fighting capped a week of mounting tensions in Tbilisi and was part of the power struggle that wracked the city through most of September and October. It reflected the fact that

while the Soviet Union is dead with the birth of the new commonwealth, the political, economic and social problems accentuated, by its disintegration are long from being solved.

Although Georgia is not a member of the commonwealth endorsed Saturday, it and the other former republics have inherited the Soviet Union's huge debts, all-but-worthless farms and factories and dilapidated roads, rails and telephone systems.

Many people fear their living conditions will get worse before they get better, especially in Russia, where government price controls on most goods and services will be lifted January 2.

Lifting price controls is the first step in Russian President Boris Yeltsin's radical programme to establish a free market economy by next fall.

The independent Interfax news agency said Monday that 75 percent of people polled in November expect a "significant deterioration" in the economy and that 64 percent fear increasing tensions among the 120 ethnic groups in the former Soviet Union.

The poll of 1,960 people was conducted by the National Centre of Public Opinion Research and has a margin of error of 3 percent.

Several hundred pro-Communists on Sunday staged a rally in Moscow, demanding Yeltsin step down. Led by Viktor Alksnis, a hard-line Soviet lawmaker, and Vladimir Zhirinovsky, a popular ultra-rightist politician, they marched to the city's television tower demanding air time.

Court fingerprints Imelda

'Corazon has dirtied my hands'

MANILA, Dec 23: Imelda Marcos, facing trial for alleged corruption, was fingerprinted after surrendering to a Philippine court today and said the "ugly" episode would spoil her Christmas, reports Reuter.

1986 popular revolt that forced them to flee to the United States. He died in exile in 1989.

"She's dirtied my hands," the former first lady exclaimed as a clerk pressed her fingers on an ink pad. She appeared in court on charges of helping her late husband, former dictator Ferdinand Marcos, loot the economy and hide their wealth in Swiss banks.

"She's getting used to it," her lawyer Antonio Coronel said, referring to the fingerprinting session.

"You don't get used to ugliness," said Marcos, a symbol of elegance in her country for 20 years until she and her husband were overthrown in a



Castro iterates commitment to socialism, revolution

HAVANA, Dec 23: Cuba, one of the world's last orthodox communist states, criss 1991 under intense international pressure for political change and suffering from an economic crisis triggered by the break-up of the Soviet Union, reports AP.

President Fidel Castro, 65, remains the undisputed leader after 33 years in power. But he is fighting the hardest battle of his long career to ward off economic collapse while keeping a tight lid on opposition.

To the chilling slogan "socialism or death," coined to reflect Cuba's defiance of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the Cuban leader has added a rallying cry for the new year: "save the nation, the revolution and socialism."

He has made it abundantly clear that, whatever 1992

brings, his government will fight to the end to maintain the island's one-party communist system and socialist economy in a world dominated by multi-party politics and the market economy.

"Our enemies should know that we're ready to defend our ideas and our cause at whatever price — at whatever price — and that we're ready to fight without limits," Castro told a congress of school children earlier this month.

But the short-term outlook for Cuba's more than 10 million people, already suffering from drastic rationing, restrictions and shortages in almost every aspect of their daily lives, is for unremitting hardship.

The new year could bring the vulnerable sugar-exporting, oil-importing economy closer to what the government calls

the "zero option" — a state of minimum subsistence in which external supplies of fuel, machinery and food will have dried up entirely or been drastically reduced.

Uncertainty surrounds what level of supplies Cuba can expect from what was once the Soviet Union, its political mentor and main economic provider for three decades.

Soviet deliveries of oil, the island's energy lifeline, were abruptly halted for the month of December.

In a desperate hunt for hard currency to shore up the economy, Castro's ruling Communist Party has swallowed past scruples and opened sectors of the economy to foreign investment, especially in tourism, manufacturing and Cuba's fledgling biotechnology and medical industries.

The island has also sought foreign help to explore for oil and develop its considerable nickel reserves.

This openness has attracted the interest of businessmen from Europe, Latin America and Canada, but it remains to be seen whether the capital and knowledge brought by investors can fill the economic vacuum left by the Soviet Union and its East European partners.

A US trade embargo is still firmly in place, despite Cuban attempts at the United Nations to have it lifted.

As links with Moscow and other former communist allies become more strained, Cuba has launched a diplomatic campaign to strengthen its ties with Latin American neighbours.

Nuclear talks with DPRK discouraging, says US congressman

SEOUL, Dec 23: A U.S. congressman said Monday that time was running out to stop North Korea from halting nuclear weapons development and he was greatly discouraged after talks with North Korean leaders, reports AP.

Also Monday, North Korea said it would sign nuclear safeguards accords and called for Washington to verify its pullout of U.S. nuclear arms from South Korea. The signing is considered meaningless without compliance for nuclear inspections, which the North has refused in the past.

South Korean officials in Seoul said they were studying the statement to determine if it constituted a positive step forward or whether it repeated past rhetoric and was, in effect, a stall.

President Roh Tae-woo renewed South Korea's demand for simultaneous inspections of suspected nuclear facilities in North and South Korea and demanded the dismantling of the North's nuclear reprocessing facilities.

The developments come here three days before the

longtime rival Koreans are to meet at the border for critical talks on ending nuclear weapons development on the divided Korean Peninsula. The nuclear talks were agreed upon December after the Korean nations signed a historic accord calling for peaceful coexistence.

"North Korea seems more interested in avoiding a satisfactory resolution of nuclear problem than in facilitating one," U.S. Rep Stephen J. Solarz, a Democrat, told reporters at a news conference.

"If the nuclear issue is not resolved," Solarz said, "it could lead to grave consequences... I hope I am wrong. The clock is ticking. Time is running out."

The Nuclear arms development in isolated Communist North Korea is the gravest security threat in Asia and the major powers including the United States have expressed increasing alarm that it be stopped.

Intelligence reports indicate the North could produce nuclear arms by 1993.

Off the Record

Too large to swallow

NEW DELHI: An Indian confectioner has staked a claim to a place in the Guinness Book of Records with a 32-foot (9.75-metre) long sugar model of London's Tower Bridge, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said on Sunday, reports Reuter.

PTI quoted confectioner Ramachandran as saying his sugar model of the famous bridge, weighing 800 kg (1,760 lbs), is the world's biggest "sugar construction."

It is not the largest sweet, however. According to Guinness that award goes to a Marzipan chocolate weighing 1,650 kg (4,078.5 pounds) made at Ven International Fresh Market in the Netherlands last year.

The Tower Bridge model is on display at a pre-Christmas cake festival in the southern city of Bangalore, PTI said.

Demeaning but secure

NEW YORK: Mikhail Gorbachev, on the verge of losing the Soviet presidency, has been offered another job with less prestige but probably more security — professor, reports Reuter.

The New York Times reported Monday that Gorbachev has been offered posts at several American universities, including one so eager to have him, it also has offered a professorship to his wife, Raisa.

The newspaper said the inside track appears to belong to the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, the Washington-based division of Johns Hopkins University.

Nitze knows Gorbachev from his years as the top US arms control negotiator.

Panic-striking joke

SOFIA: An awkward joke on national television Saturday about a nuclear accident resulted in hundreds of telephone calls to the station by panicked Bulgarians and the threat of legal action against the perpetrators, reports AP.

Although the bogus accident was announced on "Ku-Ku," a students' programme.

A television announcer said a serious accident had occurred at the plant, in the north of the country. Authentic-looking footage of what appeared to be emergency measures at the plant was shown, and the announcer said that the president would address viewers. But instead, the hoax was revealed in an announcement 50 minutes later.

Television reports later in the day said hundreds of people protested the "joke." A group of angry viewers outside the television studios mobbed the creators of the programmes but police prevented any violence.

Elegiac allegory

KALININGRAD, Soviet Union: "The Soviet space programme is like a chicken," said Viktor Surikov in the largely-empty mission control nerve centre near Moscow, reports Reuter.

"You cut off its head and it runs around the yard for a while thinking it's still alive."

Surikov, research chief and supervisor of Mission Control, smiled weakly. He was not joking.

Formerly the standard-bearer of Soviet sci-fi, the space programme has suffered acutely from the collapse of the old order. Money, once unlimited, has dried up, the skilled elite are leaving, many for jobs in the private sector. No more breath talk of conquering mars by 2005.

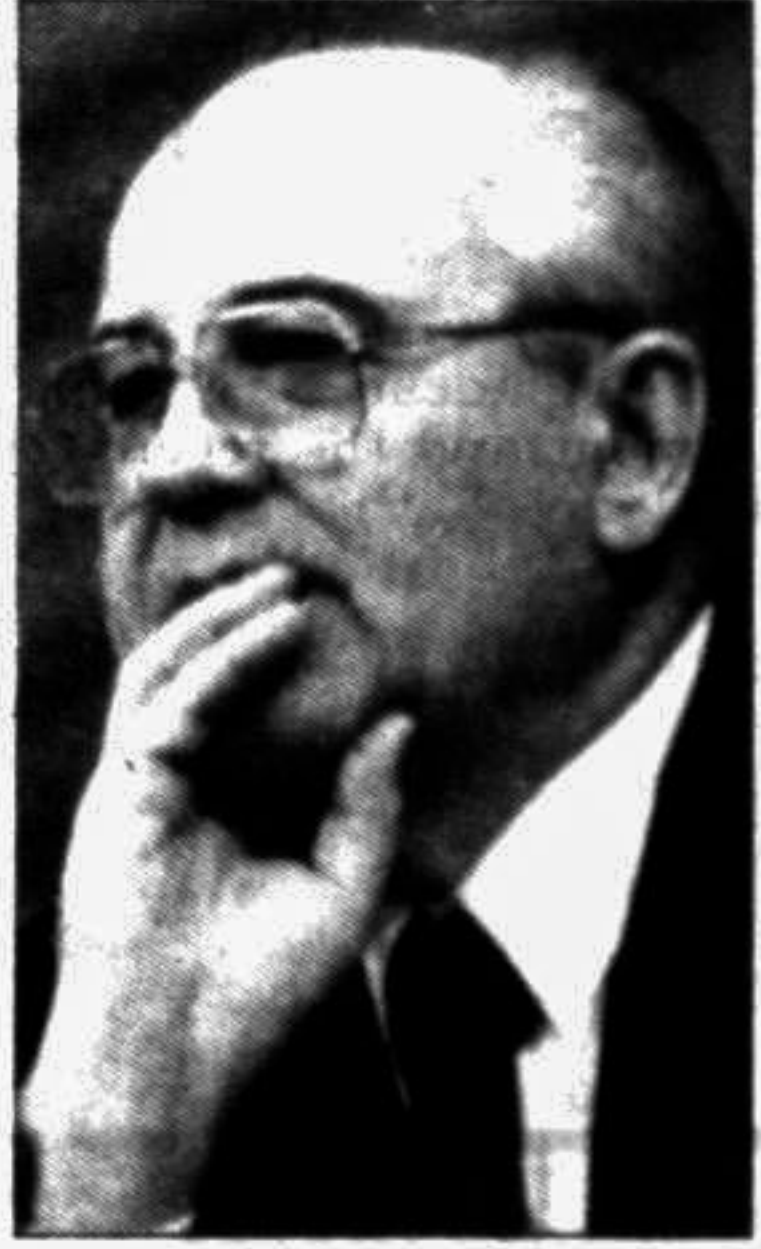
Fresh offensive against Lankan Tigers

COLOMBO, Dec 23: Heavily armed soldiers backed by air cover and local curfews advanced into areas held by Tamil Tiger guerrillas in northern Sri Lanka today as part of a fresh offensive, a military spokesman here said, reports AP.

Security forces were moving into areas held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Vavuniya district as part of a campaign to expand the territory under military control, the spokesman said.

Troops are moving with air support. There are local curfews enforced because of our expansion operation," the spokesman said, adding that he had no immediate reports of fighting.

The fresh offensive came



Mikhail Gorbachev, on the verge of losing the Soviet presidency, has been offered another job with less prestige but probably more security — professor, reports Reuter.

Police-bandits gunbattles in Sind: 6 killed

KARACHI, Dec 23: Six people have died in gunbattles between police and bandits in southern Pakistan, a police spokesman said today, reports Reuter.

He said a policeman and three bandits died in one battle and two bandits were killed in another on Sunday in rural Sind Province.