

BRIEFLY

Corazon pardons 64 prisoners :

President Corazon Aquino pardoned 64 prisoners and commuted the jail terms of 109 Wednesday as part of a Christmas tradition in the Philippines of leniency to people jailed for minor offences, reports Reuter from Manila.

The prisoners were freed in time to celebrate Christmas Day with their families, officials said.

Benjedid rules out early polls :

Algerian President Chadli Benjedid on Tuesday rejected opposition calls for an early presidential poll to be held immediately after general elections next month, reports Reuter Wednesday from Algiers.

"I am not ready to abandon the Algerians... if necessary and if there is a threat to civil peace, I will fulfil my mandate until its legal end," he told Algerian journalists in a meeting broadcast on state television.

Chadli, elected in 1988 for a third consecutive five-year term, said presidential elections would be held before 1993 "when conditions permit," he did not set a date.

Truce in El Salvador soon :

A ceasefire plan may soon reach the negotiating table at peace talks between El Salvador's government and leftist rebels, negotiators said Tuesday, reports AFP Wednesday from New York.

Before meeting with UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar for the second time at his New York residence for a Christmas eve parley, both sides said they would be willing to start reviewing possible agendas for a permanent ceasefire in the 12-year-old civil war.

"At this meeting we plan to propose... that an end to the armed conflict and a schedule for implementing the accords be brought to the negotiating table immediately," Chief Rebel Negotiator Shafik Handal said.

First black Chief Justice in Canada :

Julius Isaac has become the first black Chief Justice of the Federal Court of Canada, reports Xinhua Wednesday from Ottawa.

A native of Grenada, the 63-year-old Isaac was appointed Monday by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney to replace Frank Iacobucci who had been named to the Supreme Court of Canada last December.

Commenting on his appointment, Isaac said "If having a great lawyer who is a black person assists minorities, that's a plus, an add-on."

Relief plane arrives in Zagreb :

A plane load of relief supplies arrived in Zagreb on Christmas Eve, the first to land in the embattled Croatian capital for four months, reports Reuter Wednesday from Belgrade.

But the humanitarian gesture by French and US charities, permitted by Federal Army Air Controllers, was the only sign of Christmas spirit in the republic, shattered by six months of war that Croatian medical sources estimate has cost at least 6,000 lives.

Elsewhere in Croatia, fighting between Croatian forces and Serb irregulars backed by the Serb-led Federal Army continued in eastern and central areas.

Amnesty to Haitian coup plotters :

Eleven people jailed for staging a failed coup in January to block President Jean-Bertrand Aristide from assuming office were pardoned Tuesday by the interim government named after his ouster in September, reports AFP Wednesday from Haiti.

The attempted putsch was led by Roger Lafontant, the leader of the Tontons Macoutes, the personal militia of President-for-life Jean-Claude Duvalier, who fled into exile in 1986.

The failed coup came weeks after Aristide, a leftist who was immensely popular with Haiti's impoverished masses, won a landslide electoral victory.

Khmer Rouge attacks army convoy, kills 10

BANGKOK, Dec 25: Khmer Rouge guerrillas attacked a Phnom Penh army convoy in central Kompong Thom Province, killing 10 people and wounding 15 others, the official Cambodian SPK News Agency said in a report monitored here today, says AFP.

More than 50 Khmer Rouge soldiers attacked the convoy of military trucks of route 12 last week, the news agency said.

Among those killed were three children who were among passengers on the trucks, which were returning from delivering food supplies to Phnom Penh army units in the northern province of Preah Vihear, the news agency said.

AP from Phnom Penh adds:

Israel to join missile technology control treaty

CAIRO, Dec 25: Israel's Defence Ministry said yesterday the Jewish State will join an international treaty limiting the spread of missile technology in late December, a report from Jerusalem said, says AFP.

The pact involved is the Missile Technology Control Regime, established by the seven western powers in 1987 and joined since by nine other states.

Israel wools sign a new proclamation controlling exports of missiles or components that could be used to deliver warheads weighing 5000 kilograms with a range of 300 kilometers, a Defence Ministry spokesman said.

The Defence and Foreign Affairs subcommittee in Knesset or parliament yesterday approved the signing of the treaty, the Ministry said. It is the final say from the Jewish State with regard to this matter.

It was reported that Israel had exported missile technology to the South African Regime.

Israel promised in October that it would sign the treaty, and the move was made reportedly under U.S. pressure to accept more stringent controls on missile exports.

Cambodia's National Reconciliation Council will meet next week, an official said Wednesday. It will be the first council meeting on Cambodian soil since the signing of a U.N.-brokered peace accord that formally ended 13 years of civil war.

The meeting comes after street violence that twice forced postponements and jeopardized the country's quest for peace.

Violent anti-government riots that killed at least six people forced cancellation of a meeting last Saturday. An earlier scheduled session was aborted after a mob nearly lynched Khmer Rouge leader Khieu Samphan.

"The SNC will meet on December 30. The Paris Peace plan is back on track," a senior aide to Prince Norodom Sihanouk said Wednesday. He spoke on condition of anonymity.

The aide said Sihanouk, who chairs the council, met with Premier Hun Sen on Tuesday and set the date for the meeting.

Sihanouk is to call Khmer Rouge leaders Wednesday and request that they return to the Cambodian capital from Thailand.

A ban on demonstrations, a curfew and postponement of planned visits by foreign dignitaries remained in effect. The city was quiet Wednesday but a heavy military presence was evident.

At the Vatican, Pope John Paul II urged fellow Poles not to waste their newly gained freedom. But shortages made it hard to celebrate in countries that have recently cast off communism.

In Lima, Peru, it was a dark Christmas Eve for many. Rebel dynamite attacks on two electrical towers on Lima's outskirts left much of the capital without power.

UNDATED, Dec 25: Croats trimmed trees to the sound of artillery fire. Arabs kept their shops open in Bethlehem and Santa was a big hit in Beijing as the world marked Christmas in the midst of civil war, political conflict and divergent beliefs, reports AP.

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Russian Fed replaces Soviet Union at UN

NEW YORK, Dec 25: Russia has officially taken over from the Soviet Union at the United Nations, the new Russian Ambassador Yuli Vorontsov said Tuesday after delivering a letter to that effect from Boris Yeltsin, reports AFP.

The letter from the Russian President was submitted to Vladimir Dayal, the Chief of Staff of Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar, said Vorontsov, who until now was the Soviet Ambassador.

Vorontsov said Yeltsin's letter amounted to diplomatic credentials for Russia's recognition as a full-fledged UN member state.

Yeltsin wrote that under the agreement forming the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Russia would take over the Soviet seat at the United Nations and assume all the political and financial responsibilities of the former superpower.

Russia also assumed control of the former Soviet Union's permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Vorontsov has held the rotating presidency of the council since early December as Soviet Ambassador and is expected to continue in the post but as the world body's first representative of the Russian federation.

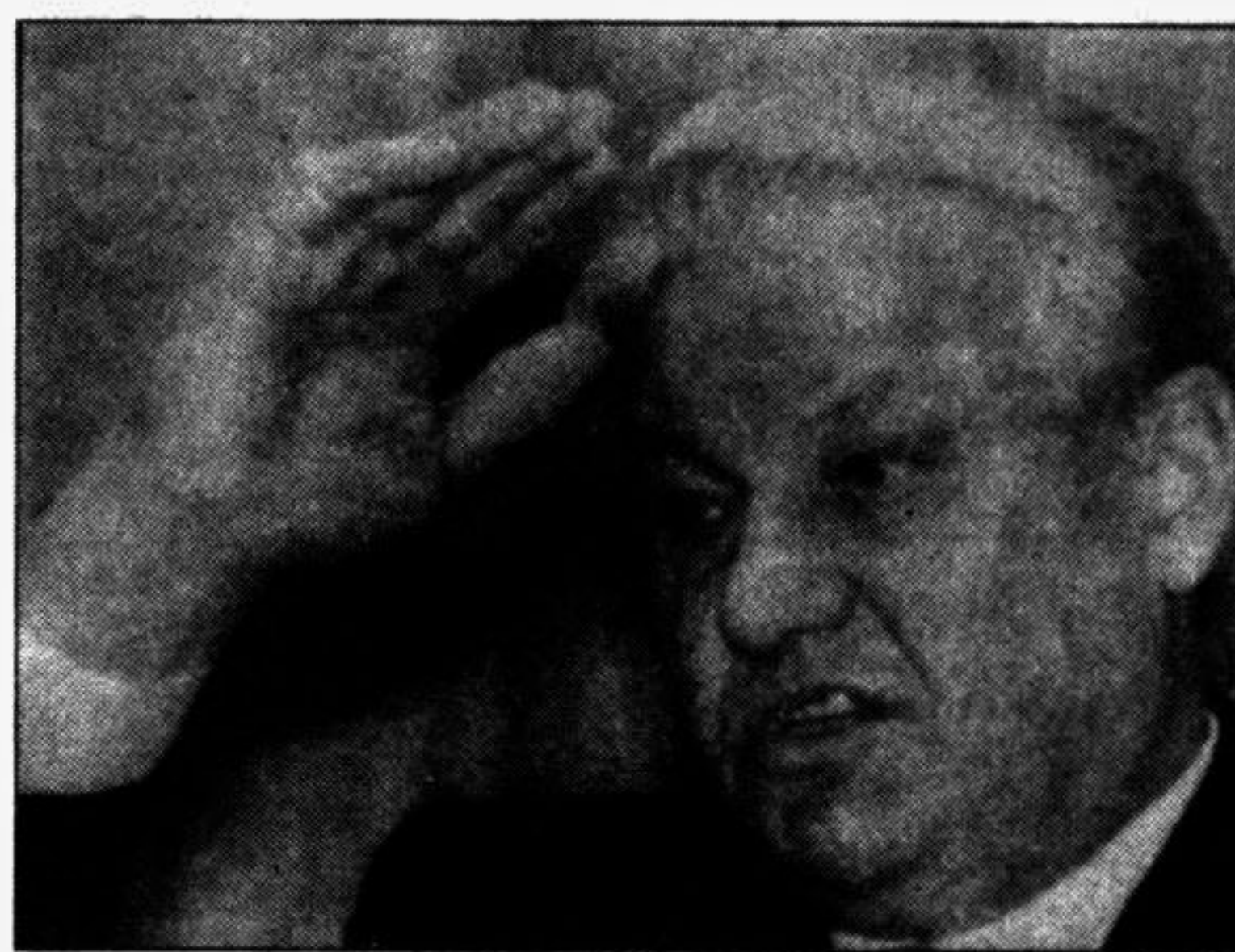
Vorontsov said he had met

with practically all the members of the 15-seat Security Council, including the other four permanent members — Britain, China, France and the United States — and had received pledges of support for the Russian takeover.

That endorsement does not need ratification by a resolution of the Security Council or

the general assembly because the other 10 CIS members have agreed to let Russia take over the Soviet seat on the Security Council.

Vorontsov said the other former Soviet Republics would soon apply formally for UN membership and could be admitted by late February or early March.



MOSCOW: Yeltsin gestures during a speech addressing Russian representatives Tuesday. Speaking to Russian journalists Yeltsin said he would take control of "Nuclear button" from Gorbachev. He added that he would then finally possess 'secrets which belong only to heads of state.' — AFP/UNB photo

SAARC summit won't be a venue of gossip : Koirala

KATIMANDU, Dec 25: The Nepalese Prime Minister, Dr. Girija Prasad Koirala has said the SAARC summit would no longer be like a "coffee house" and a place of gossip, but would be a forum for action, reports PTI.

"It will not be a venue of gossip but a venue of work," Dr. Koirala, who returned after attending the sixth SAARC summit in Colombo Tuesday afternoon, told media persons here.

He said the misconception about the fate of the SAARC, which had lingered following the postponement of the sixth summit, was removed with the significant achievements made following unanimous decisions on various objectives of the

member-countries.

Two major aspects — political and economic — figured during the sixth summit. Political decision was taken with unanimity which opened up new avenues for economic co-operation.

He made it clear that economic co-operation could not bear fruit without political consensus.

The Nepalese Prime Minister said although the subject of utilisation of water resources did not specifically figure in the talks at the summit, but all such issues unavoidably crept into it when one talked about environment.

Another PTI report says: The United Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist and Leninist)

— the main opposition group in parliament here — proposes to table in the next session of the house a proposal to declare the Hindu kingdom as a secular state.

Addressing the concluding session of the three-day third national Buddhist conference at Dharan in eastern Nepal as chief guest, Man Mohan Adhikari, Leader of the Opposition in the Nepalese parliament, said the party was striving for having secularism as part of the constitutional provision.

Adhikari, who is also President of the party said their intention was not to deny any religion but wanted to provide equal status to all religions and their development.



BETHLEHEM: Palestinians, Jews and tourists are thoroughly checked by Israeli soldiers Tuesday before entering Manger Square. — AFP/UNB photo

Fighting continues : 32 killed so far Georgia seeks UN intervention

LONDON, Dec 25: Georgia has urged the United Nations to send observers to the republic, Tass said in a report monitored by the BBC, reports AFP.

"In an appeal to the UN, republican leaders stressed the recognition of Georgia's independence will help avoid an escalation of tension in the republic," Tass added.

It said clashes were continuing in the Georgian capital Tbilisi, and the defenders of the Georgian parliament were running out of medicines

although they had enough food and ammunition.

"Armed detachments now being formed in Kutaisi (160 kilometers west of the capital) will soon begin arriving in Tbilisi to defend the government outlying," Tass said.

Fierce clashes have been raging in Tbilisi between forces loyal to Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia and opposition fighters backed by mobile artillery.

An earlier report said: Fighting in the Georgian capital Tbilisi raged into the early

hours today as opposition forces continued to attack the parliament building where President Zviad Gamsakhurdia was taking refuge.

Explosions and heavy machine-gun fire rocked the centre of the city and red tracers sped across the night sky.

At least 32 people have been killed so far in the fighting, which started on Sunday.

Opposition leader Tengiz Sigua has said Gamsakhurdia must step down or face a real battle today.

Italy recognises Russian Fed

ROME, Dec 25: Italy has recognised the Russian Federation headed by President Boris Yeltsin implicitly acknowledging the death of the Soviet Union, reports Reuter.

A Foreign Ministry statement released late on Tuesday said Italy's decision was "in line with the 'European' Community position."

Earlier on Tuesday Italy said its ambassador to Moscow was now its envoy to Russia.

Eleven former Soviet republics agreed last Saturday to replace the Soviet Union with a new commonwealth of independent states.

The European Community on Monday indicated it would recognise Russia, saying it was prepared to take account of the change in the republics constitutional status.

China executes 6 more for taking bribes

BEIJING, Dec 25: A leading banker, a county police chief and four other people were executed in southern China in separate bribery cases, officials reports said Wednesday, reports AP.

The executions were part of government effort to convince the public that it is getting tough on corruption. But official newspapers have acknowledged that most white-collar crime goes unpunished and bribery remains key to obtaining a passport, business license, apartment or scarce raw materials.

Gao Senxiang, one of the six executed in southern Guangdong province, had been singled out as an example. Official newspapers nationwide publicised his death sentence, handed down in August.

As director of the Shenzhen branch of the China International Trust and Investment Corporation Bank, Gao accepted about 346,770 in bribes in exchange for approving loans to Chinese companies and individuals, according to reports in August.

He was executed Tuesday after appealing in vain to the Guangdong provincial Higher People's Court, according to the state-run Xinhua news agency.

Iran becomes 21st populous country

TEHRAN, Dec 25: Iran, with a population of 57 million, has become the 21st most populous country in the world and would jump to the 13th place before long if the present growth trend continues, an Iranian official said yesterday, reports Xinhua.

Iran's population swelled in the past decade with a growth rate of 3.9 per cent last year. Statistics publicized in June once put the country's population at 58.5 million.

The government of president Hashemi Rafsanjani has vowed to reduce the rate to 2.9 per cent by the end of its first five-year plan in 1994 through family planning programmes.

Higgins' body arrives in US

WASHINGTON, Dec 25: The body of slain US hostage William Higgins was returned to the United States from Beirut, Lebanon, on Tuesday, reports Reuter.

An Air Force C-141 caring the body of the marine corps colonel landed at Dover Air Force Base, a spokesman at the base said.

After an examination to determine the cause of death and to make formal identification, the remains will be taken to Andrews Air Force Base near Washington later in the week for an honours ceremony followed by burial at the Quantico National cemetery in Virginia near the Quantico Marine Base.

Higgins' body was found on a street in Beirut on Sunday and identified at the American University hospital on Monday.

Higgins was on duty with a United Nations peacekeeping force when he was kidnapped by gunmen in South Lebanon on February 17, 1988.

Off the Record**God, why did you let this happen?**

NEW YORK: A 72-year-old painting known as the "weeping icon" of peace, which attracted hundreds of thousands of pilgrim during the Gulf War, was stolen at gunpoint from a church Monday, police said, reports AP.

Three men and a woman burst into St. Irene's Greek Orthodox Church and removed the painting of St. Irene Chrysostomou, said police.

"It's a shock for us," said Bishop Vikentios, who was working in a church office across the street at the time of the robbery.

"We heard the bells of the church ring and saw the priests at the door, crying 'Help! Help! they've taken the icon,'" said the bishop, who uses one name in accordance with Orthodox practice. His voice cracked with emotion during a telephone interview.

Bishop Vikentios said he noticed beads of moisture and streaks running from the icon's eyes on October 17, 1990, while the icon was on display in a Greek Orthodox church in Chicago.

The icon continued to weep as the Gulf conflict escalated into war. "After the Persian Gulf War finished, we don't see tears on its face," the Bishop said.

Bishop Vikentios said the church needs the icon back, even if the jewels and gold remain missing.

"It is a holy icon, it is a miracle icon," he said. "She is the patron saint of peace. We don't know why the Lord allowed this to happen."

Keep beer away from elephants

GAUHATI: Rogue elephants have killed at least 31 people this year in Assam state, sometimes after guzzling barrels of homemade beer in the villages they raided, officials said, reports AP.

Wildlife officials say urbanisation and a growing elephant population is squeezing the jungle habitat, forcing the animals to look for space and food in villages on edges of forests.

During the raids the elephants feast on stored grain and gulp down "ladpani," an Assamese rice beer popular among tribespeople, said state Chief Wildlife Warden H.C. Changkakati.

He said wild elephants attacked human settlements at least 17 times this year, six of them in a state of drunkenness. At least 31 people were trampled to death by the elephants compared to 40 killed last year.

Dull X-mas for Japanese

TOKYO: Christmas in this non-Christian nation used to be another excuse for workers to get smashed in the name of social obligation, or the big night for lovers splurging on an expensive dinner and hotel, exports AP.

This year, trend watchers say, the party's at home, brought on in part by the economic slowdown.

Potluck gatherings, Christmas clothing such as red miniskirts and veranda lights are in the air this year. Even the Christmas trees are bigger, growing from the usual tiny foot-high trees to six-footers, retailers say.

"The common standard that city restaurants and plush hotels are the trendiest places to spend Christmas is breaking down this year," the national Asahi Newspaper said.

Many youths are trying to celebrate the season in their own way, rather than going to the places recommended in magazines like everyone else," it reported.

A pamphlet urges families to throw potluck parties, and gives instructions on what to cook. Because turkeys are too big for the average oven, roast chicken, meatloaf and a fish-shaped salad are recommended.

It also gives ideas for decorations, like lighting up your veranda, as well as telling moms to wear scarves and dads to wear casual sweaters with Christmas patterns.

Clashes shatter X-mas lull in Lanka : 38 killed

COLOMBO, Dec 25: At least 21 soldiers and 17 Tamil rebels have been killed in a fierce gunbattle that shattered an expected Christmas lull in Sri Lanka, residents and the military said today, reports Reuter.

The military said 11 soldiers and 17 Tamil rebels were killed when rebels ambushed two army platoons on Tuesday.

Residents said the bodies of 21 soldiers were brought to a funeral parlour in the north-central town of Anuradhapura and 30 wounded soldiers were admitted to the town hospital.

"The casualties on both sides may be higher because the information is still coming in," Colonel Sarath Munasinghe said.

Last week, the army said it would suspend operations in

the north and east on Christmas Day but would retaliate if attacked.

Munasinghe said rebel casualties were high because the air force had completely destroyed a tractor load of rebels and three of their vehicles.

The fighting in the northern Mullaitivu jungles started after Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam guerrillas ambushed two platoons of 50 soldiers who were seeking a road for mines.

The army immediately moved in reinforcement and their force attacked rebel positions.

The fighting ended at nightfall, Munasinghe said.

"We are not carrying out any operations today in view of Christmas and there have been no rebel attacks either. Let's hope it stays that way," he said.

Embargo against Iraq a plot, says Saddam

BAGHDAD, Dec 25: A continued embargo against Iraq is evidence of a "premeditated conspiracy" because it exceeds the United Nations' stated aims to free and restore Kuwait, President Saddam Hussein charged in a holiday message Tuesday, reports AFP.

The allies used "the Kuwait question" as a pretext to counter "Iraq's strong economic structure," its scientific and technological progress

Kurds storm Turkish military station: 10 killed

SIRNAK, Turkey, Dec 25: Kurdish guerrillas attacked a military station in a remote mountain village near the Iraqi border, killing 10 soldiers, a local official said on Wednesday, reports AP.

The fighting took place Tuesday evening at Dereker village in southeastern Turkey, said the official, who spoke on conditions of anonymity. He said three lieutenants and seven privates were killed. Eight soldiers were also wounded.

No other details were available.

The attack came hours after eight Kurdish demonstrators were killed by security forces in Kulp and Lice townships in Diyarbakir province in southeastern Turkey.

Two soldiers were also killed in Kulp when a funeral for Kurdish guerrillas turned into a demonstration for Kurdish independence.

Kurdish guerrillas have been fighting since 1984 to set up an independent Kurdish state in southeastern Turkey. About 3,000 people, including civilians, security personnel and separatists Kurds have been killed in clashes linked to the independence drive.

There are about 12 million ethnic Kurds in this country of 57 million.

World marks X-mas amid war, conflicts and divergent beliefs

Christmas Day marked six months since Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia. Dense fog on Tuesday cut the danger of air raids by the Serbian-led military, and people in the traditionally Roman Catholic republic tried to forget the war for a few festive hours.

In the eastern Croatian village of Irsce, Alica and Zelko Hoornat draped tinsel on a tree in their front yard Tuesday to the thud of artillery fire from nearby Osijek.

"Normally I spruce up the house for Christmas, but this year I did not bother. What if a bomb hits it?" said Mrs Hoornat, a 33-year-old radiologist. Outside the eastern city of

Nusar, where Croat fighters clashed with troops of the Serb-dominated army, a large tree downed by artillery fire was decorated with ornaments salvaged from destroyed homes.

Soldiers prepared for Christmas Eve Mass in bomb shelters.

Bethlehem, revered by Christians as the place of Christ's birth, was the most festive since the Palestinian uprising began four years ago, with the recent Arab-Israeli talks in Washington providing a flicker of hope for peace.

Arab shop owners in the town opened for Christian pilgrims despite a call by Palestinian militants to close.

Manger Square, ordinarily a crowded parking lot, was cleared and choirs from around the world sang Christmas carols to crowds that opened umbrellas against an occasional drizzle.

Palestinian Gabriel Al-Ali, playing with his 4-year-old daughter in the square, looked at the crowd and said: "It is good. Maybe it is because people think peace is coming."

Chinese jammed churches in Beijing, if not to celebrate the birth of Christ, then for the festive atmosphere.

"That's what I think people are supposed to do at Christmas," said a young woman, one of hundreds of people milling outside the

Natang Catholic Cathedral waiting for a Mass to begin Tuesday night.

For the first time, the cathedral had three Christmas Eve Masses, apparently to handle the growing turnout. More than 1,000 people jammed into the cathedral, spilling into the aisles while a constant stream of people came and went at the rear.

Young curiosity-seekers whispered to each other: "There's a priest," and "I can't see anything."

Just a block away from Tiananmen Square and its huge portrait of revolutionary leader Mao Tse-tung, an equally large neon picture of Santa Claus with his reindeer

and toy-laden sleigh shone.

Beijing shops put up Christmas signs and decorations weeks ago. Big plastic Santa Claus adorn the front doors of many larger stores.

In Vatican City, thousands of people gathered in St. Peter's Basilica for midnight Mass by Pope John Paul II. A 25-meter-high (75-foot) Christmas tree and a nativity scene with life-size figures decorated the vast St. Peter's Square in a tradition begun by the Polish-born pontiff.

The Polish parliament on Monday voted in a new government after eight weeks of bickering over the speed of painful market-oriented reform.