

New law to hold polls in Punjab

NEW DELHI, Jan 3: India's cabinet, trying to hold elections by next month in strife-torn Punjab, has approved a law allowing polls to go ahead despite the death of an independent candidate, an official spokesman said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

Sikh militants in Punjab exploited the old law by killing 26 candidates for the state assembly and national parliament before last year's general election. Polls were cancelled in those constituencies.

The government called off the elections in Punjab at the

last minute because of the bloodshed. Sikhs opposed the polls because they said they would legitimise Indian rule over the province.

The polls for Punjab, ruled by a Delhi-appointed governor since 1987, have been rescheduled for some time before February 15.

Under the old law the death of any candidate immediately countermanded the election for that seat. Often hundreds of independents and minor party candidates contest some constituencies.

Under the new law, elections can still be countermanded by the death of a candidate from an officially-recognised party.

"Of late there has been a rise in terrorist activities and violence in certain parts of the country, combined with a phenomenal increase in the number of independent candidates," the spokesman said.

"And along with that the danger of disruption of elections has also increased."

Thousands have been killed in a decade-long campaign by militants for a Sikh homeland in Punjab.

The cabinet approved the measure late on Wednesday. It will become law after being promulgated shortly, the spokesman said.

The ordinance will be replaced by an amendment to the People's Representation Act of 1951 when parliament reconvenes next month, the spokesman said.

Only for Bush

SINGAPORE, Jan 3: Customs officials will not search U.S. President George Bush for a banned substance—chewing gum—when he arrives in Singapore on Friday for a three-day visit, an official said, reports Reuter.

The southeast Asian island state banned the import and sale of chewing gum this week, citing "the perennial nuisance" of litter. The ban takes effect on Friday.

"For diplomats usually we do not check them. There shouldn't be any problem," said Teng Leng Gee, Customs Chief at Changi International Airport.

Asked about enforcement of the ban, Teng said: "No problems so far. Actually, in the airport area we are not as strict. Tourists may bring in a few packets."



UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali was saluted as he arrived at the UN. Thursday was the first day on the job for the new Secretary General from Egypt. At left is Chief of UN protocol Aly Teymour. — AFP photo

Fresh ME peace talks in Washington Tuesday

WASHINGTON, Jan 3: A new round of Middle East peace talks is expected to begin in Washington on Tuesday after Israel and its Arab enemies informed the United States they were ready to resume negotiations on that day, reports Reuter.

US officials and diplomatic sources said the three sets of talks between Israel and Syria, Lebanon and a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation were expected to last between one and two weeks before adjourning again.

But it appeared that a procedural dispute between Israel and the Palestinians that prevented the delegations' getting down to real negotiations in the last round of talks would still not be solved by the time the new meetings began.

The atmosphere surrounding the talks was likely to be further soured by two Israeli decisions on Thursday.

First, it decided to spend the greater portion of its 1992 housing budget building settlements in the occupied territories. Then, it announced its intention of expelling 12

Palestinian activists from the territories.

The actions were expected to bring a strong reaction from the United States, which opposes both settlements and deportations.

Beyond the immediate reaction, they could influence President George Bush's treatment of Israel's request for loan guarantees worth 10 billion dollars which he expected to consider later this month.

Many analysts and pro-Israel lobbyists expect him to demand a cessation of settlements as a condition for granting the credits which Israel needs to finance the absorption of hundreds of thousands of Soviet immigrants.

AFP reports: Palestinian negotiators have decided to boycott the next round of peace talks in Washington to protest the deportation by Israel of 12 Palestinian activists, a senior Palestinian official said early Thursday.

The official, Al-Tayeb Abdel Rahim, who bears the title of Palestinian ambassador to Jordan, said the Palestinian

negotiators would not come to Jordan from the occupied territories to join up as planned for the January 7 round of bilateral talks.

Denial

A Jerusalem report says: Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi denied reports that Palestinians would not attend Middle East peace talks in Washington next week in protest against the expulsion.

"We have not ruled out of the talks. I deny media reports that we have, I don't know where they got that information," Ashrawi told Reuter.

The Palestinian delegation from the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip was scheduled to leave for Washington via Amman on Thursday but delayed its departure because of snow which blanketed Jerusalem.

The peace talks, which began in Madrid in October, resume on Tuesday.

Ashrawi condemned the expulsion of the 12 Palestinians as counterproductive and a negation of peace efforts.

High-ranking Chinese team in Uzbekistan

TASHIKENT, Jan 3: A high-ranking Chinese government delegation arrived here on Thursday to start a visit of the newly-independent states in central Asia, reports Xinhua.

Deputy Prime Minister of Uzbekistan B. Khamidov this afternoon met the delegation headed by Li Lanqing, Chinese Minister of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade, and Tian Zengpei, Deputy Foreign Minister.

The two sides exchanged views on economic and trade cooperation between China and Uzbekistan and signed two documents, an economic and trade agreement and a summary of talks on the development of bilateral economic and trade relations.

This morning, Foreign Minister Sh. Makhmudova met Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Tian Zengpei.

She said China is important to Uzbekistan's foreign policy and expressed the hope that the two countries will soon establish diplomatic relations.

Y'slav warning armies agree absolute truce

BELGRADE, Jan 3: Commanders of Yugoslavia's warring armies agreed on Thursday in talks with UN envoy Cyrus Vance to establish an absolute ceasefire in embattled Croatia from 6 pm today, reports Reuter.

If honoured, the accord signed by leaders of Croatia's national guard and the Serb-led federal army would make possible deployment of UN peace-keeping forces in the breakaway Yugoslav republic.

"Each party agrees to the complete cessation of hostile military activity on land, at sea and in the air," said the four-part accord issued after four hours of talks in Sarajevo.

Under the accord, signed by Colonel General Andrija Raseta, deputy commander of the Serb-led federal army in Croatia, and Croatian Defence Minister Gojko Susak, neither side would return fire in the event of violations until joint liaison team had investigated each incident.

1800 were killed in Kashmir violence last yr

NEW DELHI, Jan 3: Violence connected with the Muslim militant separatist campaign in the disputed northern Indian state of Kashmir claimed more than 1,800 lives in 1991, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said today, reports AFP.

Of those killed, 860 were militants, 170 Indian security troops, 375 were victims of militant killings and another 400 died in cross fire between the troops and rebels, PTI said citing official figures.

BRIEFLY

Singapore recognises CIS republics: Singapore has recognised the independence and sovereignty of 12 former Soviet republics, the foreign ministry said, reports Reuter Friday from Singapore.

The ambassador in Moscow will first be accredited to the Russian Federation but Singapore is ready to establish diplomatic ties with the other 11 republics, a ministry spokesman said.

Singapore also recognises the Commonwealth of Independent States formed by all the republics except Georgia, he said.

Cold claims 14 in India: Near-freezing temperatures in northern India this week claimed at least 14 lives, including three in the capital, the Press Trust of India reported Thursday.

The victims included a woman who apparently died from exposure to the cold at a bus terminus in old Delhi, the domestic news agency said, quoting police.

Three others died in West Bengal state. Temperatures in many parts of northern India have dropped as low as one degree Celsius in the past two days.

Iraq frees two US businessmen: Two American businessmen jailed in Iraq for nearly a month for straying into the country from Kuwait were freed Thursday and are to be sent home, one of the men said in a television interview, reports AP Friday from New York.

Joe Ducat and David Martin had been working in Kuwait and were captured by Iraqi police December 6 near the Kuwaiti border, Ducat said in the interview with Cable News Network from Baghdad.

He said they were held incommunicado for 20 days in a "modified parking garage," a small concrete cell with no windows and only a blanket to keep the two of them warm.

The United States was not notified of their arrest until December 25, according to the State Department. Later, the businessmen were visited three times by a Polish consular official and by a doctor.

Call to deploy UN force in Cambodia: Russia Thursday called for the immediate deployment of United Nations peace-keeping forces in Cambodia, saying it was willing to participate in the force, reports AFP Friday from Moscow.

The Russian Foreign Ministry deployed recent "disorders" in Phnom Penh and called for the "immediate deployment of the UN interim force in Cambodia," rather than in the spring as first envisaged, according to a communique quoted by Tass news agency.

"UN operations in Cambodia must be carried out with strict respect to the spirit and the letter of the Paris peace accord... recent events point to the need for the immediate setting up of a temporary UN force in Cambodia, if possible as of the beginning of 1992," the communique said.

120 killed in Colombian mishap: More than 120 Colombians died violently over the new year holiday, mostly in murders, street fights and robberies, police said on Thursday, reports Reuter Friday from Bogota.

Police blamed excess of alcohol for many killings but said the holiday was quieter than in previous years.

The most violent city on new year's eve and new year's day was Medellin, base of a powerful cocaine-smuggling cartel, where 40 people died violently, the police said.

Thirty-three were shot or knifed to death and the rest died in accidents at home or on the roads, they said.

Avalanche kills 20 in Turkey: At least 20 people were killed and 15 injured when an avalanche swept through the village of Kar. by in southeastern Turkey on Wednesday night, reports AFP Friday from Istanbul.

Rescue teams had still not been able to reach the village by Thursday afternoon because of heavy snow blocking the roads.

The alarm was raised by some villagers who managed to reach a police post after a six-hour trek.

Rebels capture two towns France orders troops into Chad

NDJAMENA, Jan 3: France ordered hundreds of troops into Chad and placed part of its air force on alert after Chadian rebels were reported to have seized two towns near the capital, reports Reuter.

France's action on Thursday followed reports by diplomats earlier in the day that rebels loyal to deposed president Hissene Habre had taken the towns of BOL and Liwa in fierce fighting.

The Defence Ministry in Paris said three companies of paratroopers — more than 300 men — would reinforce France's military garrison in Chad, where Paris already had 1,200 troops.

The French Foreign Ministry issued a separate statement expressing concern at events in Chad, a former French colony.

"France is greatly concerned by the situation in Chad which is characterised by the action

Benazir supports Awami Tehrik's long march

KARACHI, Jan 3: Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto expressed solidarity Thursday with the Awami Tehrik Party's 'long march' to assert Sindhi rights and protest alleged government excesses, reports AFP.

Bhutto spoke briefly to several thousand Awami Tehrik activists, led by Rasool Bakhsh Palejo, who paraded through the streets of Karachi at the end of a protest trek that began December 6 in Sukkur.

Security measures were taken by the authorities to prevent the activists from reaching the governor's house, witnesses said.

The marchers also accused the government, elected after Benazir Bhutto was dismissed from office in August 1990

of armed bands who are threatening the security of the civilian population," it said.

"Faced with this situation, France, which has several nationalities in Chad, has decided to reinforce its military presence in (Chad's capital) Ndjama and remains in contact with President Idriss Deby."

The Defence Ministry said some 10 Jaguar fighter-bombers had been put on alert in France and official French sources said some 100 troops had already been sent to Ndjama from Ivory Coast.

Deby, who with Libyan back-

ing ousted Habre in a December 1990 coup, tightened security around the capital, saying his government was under attack by forces hostile to democracy.

French military officials accused the rebels of pillaging and looting.

There were no official reports of casualties, but military sources and French international radio reported that hundreds of wounded had been brought to hospital in Ndjama.

Western embassies ordered most personnel to stay home.



THIMPU, Bhutan: The Bangladesh Victory Day was celebrated in a befitting manner on December 16, 1991 at the Bangladesh Embassy. Ministers, National Assembly Speaker, representatives of the Central Monastic Body and Royal Advisory Council, high officials, heads of diplomatic missions and international organisations and all the Bangladeshi expatriates attended the programme. Photo shows, Bhutanese Trade and Industries Minister Lyonpo Om Pradhan who attended the programme as chief guest cutting the ceremonial cake at the function. The Ambassador Syed Muazzem Ali is in the middle.

UN move to end Somalia's clan fighting

NAIROBI, Kenya, Jan 3: A UN team arrived in Somalia's war-ravaged capital Friday to seek an end to seven weeks of brutal clan fighting, reports AP.

James Jonah, the UN under-secretary for African affairs, led the five-member team that flew to Mogadishu from Nairobi. The team included two representatives each from the Rome-based World Food Programme and the United Nations Children Fund.

UN mine-sweeping operation in Cambodia soon

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 3: The United Nations said on Thursday it would send a 1,000-member team to Cambodia to begin a large-scale mine-sweeping operation so that 300,000 refugees could make their way home from camps in Thailand, reports Reuter.

According to a report from the Secretary General, a field engineer battalion is needed to get rid of all mines in Cambodia before April when

the rainy season begins. Cambodia, which is ending more than two decades of warfare, is littered with mines and about 6,000 people a year are maimed as a result.

About 700 army engineers trained in mine-sweeping are expected to clear the main repatriation routes for the refugees near the Thai border and another 200 soldiers are to train Cambodian troops to help with the operation.

These teams will be backed

up by a 150-member logistics unit that would provide communications support. Diplomats said personnel were expected to be provided by France, the Netherlands, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, among others.

Although most Security Council members are agreed that the mine sweepers should go to Cambodia within a month, the report said the UN could not begin operations until the necessary cash re-

sources become available.

The world body is 800 million dollar in arrears in regular dues and peace-keeping operations with the United States owing close to half of this amount.

The United Nations under a peace agreement signed in October is expected to send thousands of military and civilian personnel to the embattled country to maintain a ceasefire, disarm the combatants and help administer the coun-

try during a transition period leading to free elections next year.

But to date the world body has not yet drawn up proposals for the main contingent, expected to cost more than one billion dollar.

Also delayed has been the appointment of a chief UN envoy to preside over the operation, a post that has become a political football among secretariat members and at least 10 nations involved in the peace

Off the Record

He dies as she sat on him

MILWAUKEE: A 300-pound (136 KG) woman who fatally crushed her husband when she sat on him may have been the victim of abuse and might not be charged, authorities said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

"We understand there was some sort of family quarrel, where the wife and the two children were involved" in restraining the husband, 40-year-old Charles Walker, said Gene Williams of the Milwaukee county medical examiner's office.

Williams said Walker's wife sat on her husband, who weighed 160 pound (72 KG), while the children helped hold him down. He died on Tuesday after 11 days without regaining consciousness.

Police said Walker's wife told them that he had repeatedly threatened the family with a gun and struck her older daughter from a previous marriage.

Iron-enforced coffin for Hudson

HEMPSTEAD, New York: American Walter Hudson, listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's heaviest man, was buried on Thursday in a specially designed iron-enforced casket, reports Reuter.

Hudson, who weighed 1,100 pounds (499 KG), gained fame in 1987 when the Fire Department had to be called because he got stuck in a door of the house where he lived and never left because of his weight.

After that incident, Hudson lost 800 pounds (360 kg) in a diet administered by weight loss expert and comedian Dick Gregory, but he later regained all of his weight.

Hudson's body was driven through this long island town so that friends and well-wishers could say goodbye to the 46-year-old man. He died of a heart attack last week.

Elephant flies to mate

NEW DELHI: A six-year-old elephant completed an overnight train journey Thursday before she takes a flight to the United States to be the mate of an older elephant at the Honolulu Zoo, reports AP.

Vaigal arrived in the western port city of Bombay aboard a cargo van of a passenger train, United News of India news agency said. A Lufthansa jet will fly her Saturday to Los Angeles from where she will be taken to the Honolulu Zoo in Hawaii, UNI said.

It said Vaigal, named for an India river, started her journey Wednesday from the southern city of Madras in Dadar Express.

A Honolulu Zoo official is accompanying Vaigal, who has been gifted to the Americans by the state of Tamil Nadu, Madras, the state's capital, is 1,000 kilometres (620 miles) southeast of Bombay.

UNI said Vaigal will be the new companion of Mari, a 16-year-old elephant gifted by India to the Honolulu Zoo in 1982. His earlier mate died in 1986 of a viral infection, UNI said.

Vaigal, who understands only Tamil language, would be trained to take commands in English, UNI said.

Worse than '60s

WASHINGTON: America's children were fatter, more suicidal, more murderous and scored lower on standardized tests in recent years than in the 1960s, economic researchers reported on Thursday, says Reuter.

The suicide rate among children aged 15 - 19 went from 3.5 per 100,000 in 1960 to 11.3 in 1988, the homicide rate for similarly aged children rose from 4.0 per 100,000 to 11.7 in 1988, the researchers said.

Twenty-seven per cent of children were obese in 1978, the most recent statistics cited in the Science report, compared with an 18 per cent obesity rate in children in the mid-1960s.

The typical child scored 477 on the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test in 1960 compared with 428 in 1988, the researchers said.

Thondaman firm to talk with Tamils

COLOMBO, Jan 3: A Sri Lankan minister has said he is determined to hold peace talks with Tamil rebels despite fears his plan will split the island and result in permanent war between Sinhalese and the Tamil minority, reports Reuter.

"I will go ahead with the visit to Jaffna for peace talks with the Liberation Tiger guerrillas," Saumiamoorthy Thondaman, Minister of Rural Industrial Development and Tourism, told a news conference in the hill town of Kandy on Thursday.

The northern town of Jaffna is the headquarters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in their fight for a separate state for Tamils in the north and east.

Thondaman said the date of his visit would be decided after a wider assessment of public debate over his proposals.

"I want this debate to develop so that I will know the real feelings of the people. Then I have a basis to go on. I will know how the Tigers must look at the problem and the new approaches that must be adopted," he said.

On Wednesday the minister told a newspaper he was reconsidering the visit because of the fierce opposition.

Thondaman, a Tamil, has submitted a plan to end the nine-year war in which thousands have died. The plan involves granting greater autonomy to the Tamils through an elected provincial government in the north and east.

This government would control state land, run its own judiciary and establish a police force made up of former militants. It would be able to negotiate foreign aid, collect taxes and run the region's ports.

Two senior Buddhist monks have criticised the plan saying it would divide the island and lead to perpetual war between Sinhalese and Tamils.

US to move Navy from Subic to Singapore

WASHINGTON, Jan 3: The United States is making plans to transfer a navy logistics command to Singapore from Subic Bay naval station in the Philippines, administration officials said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

The tentative transfer of upto 145 navy personnel, who

arrange port calls and other details for supply ships visiting the Pacific rim, would be the first to Asia from Subic Bay since the Pentagon decided to abandon that Pacific bastion.

The US navy, bowing to demands from the Philippines, has announced it will leave Subic Bay by the end of 1992.

President George Bush arrives in Singapore on Friday from Australia. But administration officials who asked not to be identified said they did not know of any plans to announce the transfer of the office of Commander Task Force 73 (CTF 73) during Bush's visit, which ends on Sunday.

The task force, headed by Rear Admiral Paul Tobin, is part of a network of US navy personnel in the Pacific that handles movements of US warships and their support vessels.

The Pentagon declined comment on the move, but US defence officials stressed that any shift of CTF 73 did not mean US warships would be stationed in Singapore.