

BRIEFLY

Blasts kill 9 in El Salvador: Nine people have been killed in accidents involving hand grenades days before a ceasefire formally ends a dozen years of civil war, the Red Cross said, AP reports from El Salvador.

Six children and an adult died and two other people were injured Thursday when a grenade exploded in Tejutla, 65 kilometers (40 miles) north of the capital, said Red Cross spokesman Carlos Lopez Mendosa.

He said one of the children found the grenade and was playing it when it exploded. Two other people died Wednesday night when a drunken soldier tossed a grenade into a crowd at a wake in Apacaca, 105 kilometers (65 miles) east of San Salvador, he said. Thirty people were injured, Lopez Mendosa said.

Hundreds of people have died in similar incidents during the war. A ceasefire is to begin on February 1 ending 12 years of civil war that left more than 75,000 people dead.

Parliament backs Yeltsin's plan:

MOSCOW, Jan 24: Russian President Boris Yeltsin's government won approval from parliament today for tough economic austerity after his chief economic strategist spoke of possible financial catastrophe. "I am not trying to frighten you, I am just informing you of the realities of life," Deputy Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar said in a blunt speech before parliament gave grudging approval to a budget law for the first quarter of this year, reports Reuter.

Kazakhstan gets UN membership:

The UN Security Council Thursday unanimously recommended admitting the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan as a UN member, AFP reports from New York.

Kazakhstan will be the first member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to join the United Nations since the union was formed in December with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Sir David Hannay of Britain, which currently holds the rotating Council Presidency, called the panel's recommendation an historic occasion.

Hannay also said the council would soon decide on membership applications from Armenia, Kirghizstan, Uzbekistan, Tadzhikistan and Azerbaijan.

The General Assembly is to resume its session sometime in February, it has been in recess since December 20.

Shamir strengthens position:

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir has patched up his nationalist coalition ahead of a crucial no-confidence vote on Monday, strengthening his hand as he campaigns for re-election later this year, Reuter reports from Jerusalem.

Shamir has engaged in a whirlwind week of back-room wheeling and dealing after ultra-nationalist parties quit the ruling coalition last Sunday, depriving him of his slim parliamentary majority and making it likely that elections, originally scheduled for November, would be brought forward.

Late on Thursday the ultra-nationalist parties said they would support Shamir's ruling Likud Party in Monday's vote.

British aid for Lankan refugees:

The British government has granted more than 50,000 pounds (\$190,000) to buy emergency medical supplies for refugees in northeast Sri Lanka, the British High Commission announced Friday, AP from Colombo says.

The medical supplies will be provided to refugees through UNICEF, according to a statement issued by the high commission (embassy).

Thousands of people displaced from their homes since fighting between Tamil rebels and government troops began in 1983 are housed in state-run welfare centers in the north-east.

Many of them are run with assistance from international humanitarian organizations and foreign governments. Last year, Britain contributed a similar amount to provide medical assistance to the refugees, it said.

UN arms embargo on Somalia:

The Security Council imposed an arms embargo on Somalia on Thursday, called for a ceasefire in the African nation's bloody civil war and asked the UN Secretary-General to step up humanitarian assistance, Reuter reports from United Nations.

An estimated 20,000 people, mostly civilians, have been killed or wounded since a power struggle broke out on November 17 between rival warlords Mohamed Farah Aided and Ali Mahdi Mohamed.

The Council resolution, adopted unanimously and without any speeches, strongly urges all parties to the conflict immediately to cease hostilities and promote a political settlement.

Israel shells Hezbollah positions in Lebanon

SIDON, Jan 24: Israeli artillery heavily shelled Hezbollah positions in South Lebanon Thursday following an attack against an Israeli-backed militia, reports AFP.

Artillery in Israel's self-declared "security zone" in South Lebanon fired at Hezbollah positions in the Iqlim At-Touffah hills, north of the zone's central sector, a Lebanese military source said.

Shelling continued in the afternoon at a sustained rate and targeted bases of the fundamentalist group hidden in rocks, far from the populated areas of Iqlim At-Touffah, the source said.

The shelling came after a bombing that damaged a vehicle of the Israeli-backed South Lebanon Army.

Amnesty approved in El Salvador

SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador, Jan 24: The legislature late Thursday approved a broad amnesty for politically motivated crimes committed during the 12-year civil war, reports AP.

The law, which takes effect February 1, provides immunity from prosecution for politically motivated crimes committed between January 1, 1980, and January 1, 1992.

But it permits prosecution in some cases. Under the law approved shortly before midnight, those convicted in jury trials will not benefit from the amnesty. That exception meant that a colonel and lieutenant convicted of murder last September for their part in the November 1989 slayings of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter will not go free.

The measure is designed principally to promote the conversion of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, the rebel army, to a political force.

Lebanon Army (SLA), which was travelling in Soujoud at the northern edge of the "security zone." The area overlooks Iqlim At-Touffah.

The SLA machine gunned enemy positions "beyond the security zone," a source close to the militia said.

The Lebanese military source told AFP that Israeli combat helicopters flew over the shelled area and dropped flares.

Four killed in Thai army plane crash

BANGKOK, Jan 24: Four people died when a light plane crashed shortly after taking off from a military airfield in Thailand, an army spokesman said today.

The spokesman for Thanarath camp, 300 km (190 miles) south of Bangkok, told Reuter by telephone that a US-made Thai army T-41 spotter plane crashed at the end of an airfield after takeoff and four people on board were killed.

"The plane developed a technical problem on taking off and crashed," he said.

Lankans debate fate of Tamil refugees in the West

COLOMBO, Jan 24: The on-going repatriation of refugees from India will bring pressure on more than 250,000 Sri Lankan Tamils sheltered in western Europe and North America, diplomats and Tamil parties here say, reports AFP.

Minority ethnic Tamils who fled violence in Sri Lanka's embattled northeast to seek refuge in neighbouring South India began returning home Wednesday under a voluntary repatriation programme agreed on by Colombo and New Delhi.

Demand for dismissal of Provincial Govt iterated Benazir warns of growing separatist threat in Sind

ISLAMABAD, Jan 24: Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto warned here Thursday of a growing separatist threat in Pakistan's southern province of Sind because of what she called the usurpation of people's rights, reports AFP.

In a statement to reporters, the opposition leader blamed the Sind administration and its ethnic allies for the situation.

The people are being pushed to opt out of the federation, said Bhutto, reiterating a demand for the dismissal of Sind Chief Minister Jam Sadiq Ali.

Bhutto accused Ali and his coalition partner, the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) representing Urdu-speaking settlers in Sind, of creating conditions for the country's dismemberment.

Her Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) has intensified a campaign

against Ali after public pronouncements by leaders of the nationalist Jije Sind Movement (JSM) on carving out an independent state called Sindhudesh.



JSM Chief G.M. Syed, a veteran Sindhi politician, was placed under house arrest Saturday by Ali who earlier described him as a patriot and

had maintained friendly links with him.

Bhutto charged that Ali had been waging a victimization campaign with the backing of President Ghulam Ishaq Khan to crush the PPP which, she said, was a strong pillar of the Pakistan federation.

Sind is the soft under-belly of Pakistan, she said. If neighboring India decided on military confrontation with Pakistan over the disputed northern state of Kashmir, the Sind administration and its allies would act as paratroopers for New Delhi, she said.

India and Pakistan have twice gone to war over Kashmir the northern third of which is controlled by Islamabad. New Delhi accuses Pakistan of training Muslim separatists, a charge it denies.

Middle East peace talks

Morocco for inclusion of Jerusalem issue on agenda

MARRAKESH (Morocco), Jan 24: King Hassan of Morocco called, on the eve of a major Arab review of the Middle East peace process, for the status of Jerusalem to be put on the agenda of the U.S.-brokered talks, reports Reuter.

"We don't want people telling us that the question of Jerusalem will be dealt with at a third or fourth phase of the talks," the king told representatives of more than a dozen Muslim states and the Palestine Liberation Organisation on Thursday.

He demanded that the status of the disputed city — which both Muslims and Jews claim as their religious capital — be included in the talks.

The king was addressing a meeting of the Organisation of

Islamic Conferences Committee on Jerusalem before today's gathering of Arab League foreign ministers in Marrakesh.

They are to review their positions on the next phase of the Middle East talks in Moscow next week.

Hassan told African, Asian and Arab representatives that Jerusalem should be dealt with "like all occupied Arab lands" and said he would not accept "aspirin or tranquilizers" to soothe Muslims' fears about their sacred city.

PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, in a fiery 40-minute speech to the OIC committee, said three previous rounds of the talks in Madrid and Washington had failed to agree on anything.

"What are we going to do at the multilateral talks," Arafat asked. Syria and Lebanon have said they will boycott the round in protest at Israeli "intransigence."

The PLO has been excluded by Israel and Washington from the negotiations but Arafat says he has been promised by the United States that he may take part later.

Arafat complained the PLO "has not even been recognised" by those involved in the Middle East peace process which includes Palestinians in a joint delegation with Jordan. PLO sources said their organisation had not received an invitation to the talks in Moscow, formerly one of its strongest supporters.



MOSCOW: Russian President Boris Yeltsin (R) addresses employees from the 'Ilyushin' Aircraft Factory Thursday, explaining his ideas about market economy and the future of Russia. —AFP/UNB photo

Amnesty calls for probe into demonstrations in Phnom Penh

BANGKOK, Jan 24: The international human rights organisation Amnesty International has called for an investigation into violent demonstrations in Phnom Penh last month in which it says at least eight people were killed, reports AFP.

Amnesty, in a report seen here today, suggested that Cambodian security forces might have overreacted in quelling demonstrations in the capital on December 21 and 22 which began a few days earlier as anti-corruption protests.

"Amnesty International is concerned that the security forces' use of lethal force may have been disproportionate to the need to control crowd violence, and that the resulting deaths of unarmed civilians may therefore have been unlawful," the report said.

Japan apologises for wartime misdeeds

TOKYO, Jan 24: Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa broke a decade-long taboo and offered an apology of sorts today to Japan's Asian neighbours for his country's wartime misdeeds, reports Reuter.

Miyazawa became the first Japanese leader to admit in a policy speech before parliament that Japan was an aggressor in World War Two.

"At certain moments in our history, the people of the Asia-Pacific region endured unbearable suffering and sorrow as a result of Japanese actions," he told a silent chamber.

"I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate my heartfelt remorse and regrets that this happened," he said.

Miyazawa spent much of his first foreign trip since taking office apologising to South Korea last week for Japan's atrocities half a century ago, including the forced prostitution of thousands of Korean teenagers and women to serve

Japanese soldiers on Asian battle fields up until 1945.

No other leader has gone to such lengths to assure neighbouring Asian countries, where resentment still lingers over Japan's military rule, Tokyo was peace-loving and regretted past deeds.

Hardliners in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have said repeatedly that Japan should not apologise for its colonial and wartime misdeeds.

They maintain that Japan was just following the example of Western colonial powers when it took over the Korean peninsula in 1910, then China and Southeast Asia between 1931 and 1945.

They have blocked all moves in parliament to issue apologies to those Asian countries that suffered under Japan's military expansionism up to and during World War Two.

Western diplomats here say Sri Lankans seeking asylum have become a headache and the just started repatriation would reopen the debate on Tamil refugees.

Hundreds of thousands of Tamils have left the island since ethnic violence flared up in July 1983. Since then, thousands of people from the minority Tamil as well as majority Sinhalese communities have been killed.

Both Colombo and New Delhi insist the refugees in

camps along South India were being brought back on their own free will and Sri Lankan authorities welcomed them.

Senior minister Ranil Wickremesinghe told reporters Thursday the government was flexible in its policy to resettle the refugees and accommodate their requests.

However, the dominant Tamil guerrilla group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), has stepped up hit-and-run attacks on security

Pro Gamsakhurdia men vow to continue fight

ZUGDIDI, Georgia, Jan 24: Supporters in western Georgia of ousted president Zviad Gamsakhurdia swore to carry on the fight to restore him to power even as their leaders knuckled under to the new military government, reports Reuter.

Faced with superior firepower from the mkhedroni (horsemen) troops of the ruling military council, which toppled Gamsakhurdia on January 6, officials in Zugdidi have bowed to the inevitable.

But throughout Gamsakhurdia's Megreli homeland support for the fugitive president, elected in a landslide last May, remained strong.

"People are against the conditions of the deal... there is no way we will give up our weapons," vowed one man at the Zugdidi headquarters of the Gamsakhurdia forces.

"Ioseliani does not want the deal to work. He wants to be able to come in and make us capitulate."

Gamsakhurdia, 52, denounced by opponents as a dictator, was ousted by an armed rebellion in the capital Tbilisi. He fled via Armenia to this part of western Georgia where his support is strongest.

Poti's Mayor Tengiz Baramidze, who dispatched a negotiating team to the town of Senaki for talks with Ioseliani, said pro-Gamsakhurdia sentiment still ran high in his city.

"Our people are talking to stop this war. We do not have the right to kill each other, but my town doesn't understand me. They think I am a traitor," Baramidze told Reuter correspondent Elif Kaban.

IPU urges probe into Myanmar MP situation

GENEVA, Jan 24: The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) called for a fact-finding mission to investigate the situation of 64 detained parliamentarians in Myanmar, a IPU communique said, reports AFP.

The communique said the 64 were members of the opposition National League for Democracy headed by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, and were elected in May 1990.

Myanmar's military rulers have prevented the people's assembly from convening. Myanmar's ambassador to the United Nations on January 8 rejected a request for an IPU probe made by members of about one hundred parliaments meeting last October in Santiago.

North Korea, Kirghizstan set up ties

TOKYO, Jan 24: North Korea and Kirghizstan have opened diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level, Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency reported today, says AFP.

In a dispatch monitored in Tokyo, it said the agreement to forge ties was signed Tuesday by Kirghiz Foreign Minister M S Imanalyev and North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Li In-Cyu in Bishkek.

It also said that North Korea and Belarus signed an agreement in Pyongyang on Thursday on establishing a joint trade and economic committee.

Sunbath risks developing gallstones

LONDON, Jan 24: People who like sunbathing run twice the risk of developing gallstones as those who prefer to stay out of the sun, according to a Dutch medical study published today, reports Reuter.

Dr. Stan Pavel, from University Hospital in Leiden, also said sunbathers with very light skin, who burn after long sunbathing, were four times more likely to develop gallstones than similarly complexioned people who avoid the sun.

Pavel said in the Lancet Medical Journal that 80 per cent of all gallstones contain a polymer whose creation is triggered by a substance made in the skin.

UN to send troops to two more Cambodian provinces

PHNOM PENH, Jan 24: The United Nations has agreed to send peace-keeping troops to two more Cambodian provinces to discourage ceasefire violations, a UN official said today, reports Reuter.

The decision follows heavy fighting in the central province of Kompong Thom this month.

Meeting Cambodian faction leaders on Thursday, Yasushi Akashi, head of the main UN peacekeeping force that is due in Cambodia, agreed in principle, the official, who preferred not to be identified, said.

Units would be sent from the small advance mission in the country to Kompong Thom and to Kampot, a province south of Phnom Penh, he added.

Khmer Rouge guerrillas are active in both provinces.

Villages in Kompong Thom came under heavy mortar and artillery fire this month. An attack on government-controlled villages on January 6 and 7 killed at least 13 civilians and wounded many more, Red Cross officials in Phnom Penh said.

Kim wants talks with Roh

SEOUL, Jan 24: North Korea's President Kim Il-Sung has accepted Seoul's long-standing request for a summit, and wants talks with southern counterpart Roh Tae-Woo at an early date, a report said here today, quoting a senior Pyongyang official, reports AFP.

"There is no reason (for the two Koreas) to delay the summit meeting any longer as people's yearning for unification is higher than ever," Joongang daily quoted Kim Yong-Sun, Secretary for International Relations of Pyongyang's ruling Workers

Party, as saying in an interview with the daily in New York.

Kim Yong-Sun was on a visit to the United States for talks with Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Arnold Kanter.

The meeting, which was the highest-level contact between US and north Korean officials, focused on US concerns about Pyongyang's nuclear programme and the potential of improving ties.

Kim said President Kim Il-Sung himself would meet with Roh.

Off the Record

George Bush nude?

FREDERICK, Maryland: Somebody paid 4,000 dollar for an Australian artist's painting of George Bush in the nude, reports AP.

Well, not just George Bush. The painting also features portraits of Dolly Parton, also naked; Gen H Norman Schwarzkopf and Sen Jesse Helms, each wearing military breastplates and little else; and Saddam Hussein, clothed but kneeling beneath Schwarzkopf.

The painting, "A Peace Treaty and the New World Order," was sold Wednesday to a buyer who wishes to remain anonymous, Delaplaine Visual Arts Center executive director Melinda Wimer said.

The work by Austrian artist Josef Schutzenhofer has caused an uproar since it went on display Saturday at the center in Frederick, about 45 miles west of Baltimore.

"Everybody is talking about it," said Royd R Smith, a local state legislator. "It's either pornography or it's the best thing that has ever happened to the Delaplaine Visual Arts Center."



Thatcher won't get grandchildren from her daughter

LONDON: Margaret Thatcher's daughter says the former prime minister won't get any grandchildren from her, reports AP.

Watching her mother juggle career and family showed her "how incredibly difficult it is to have it all," Carol Thatcher says.

"I think there are far more advantages to being single without children than married or in a relationship with them because the image, I think, is very different from the reality," said Ms Thatcher, 37, a freelance journalist.

"And also if you're going to lose a night's sleep, as someone once said, you want to do it in the company of a very healthy adult, not a sick child," she added.

Ms Thatcher made the comments on the television show "The Truth About Women," which airs Friday. Her mother already has one grandchild. Her son, Mark, has a little boy.

Python lover wrapped and trapped

CLAYTON, North Carolina: A four-meter python swallowed a woman's hand and coiled itself around her arm, but she struggled alone to free herself after appealing to rescuers not to hurt her pet snake, reports AFP.

The woman, who was not identified by Clayton's rescue squad, eventually freed herself. She was taken to hospital with several cuts on her hand.

"She's lucky he didn't get around her neck and choke her to death," said Marvin Parrish, rescue squad chief.

The woman called for help after the python grabbed her hand while she was feeding it hamsters last Friday, authorities said.

Rescuers called a local veterinarian when she told them, "Don't kill my snake." But the python was back in its cage by the time the veterinarian arrived.

Queen's out of touch with modern Britain

LONDON: Britain's Queen Elizabeth is out of touch with modern Britain because she has virtually no Black or Asian courtiers, a television documentary said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

The programme analysed employment details supplied by the Queen's official residence, Buckingham Palace, and found that all but 10 of her 891 staff were White. Most of the 10 are lowly workers with none in the top echelons of the Royal Court.

An opinion poll commissioned by the programme, Independent Television's this week, showed that most Britons thought the Palace should set an example as an employer offering equal opportunity to all races in multicultural society.

"There is no suggestion that they are racist, it has just never occurred to them to address the issue," said this week Editor Paul Woolwich. "The poll shows they are out of touch with modern Britain."

