

Bush's former aide questioned in Iran-Contra probe

WASHINGTON, Jan 25: Prosecutors questioned a former military aide to George Bush on Friday about his knowledge of Oliver North's secret supply network to the Nicaraguan rebels, reports AP.

Army Col. Samuel J. Watson spent several hours testifying before a federal grand jury at the U.S. Courthouse. The six-year Iran-Contra investigation, which focused last year on the CIA, now turns to the role of Bush's aides.

Watson's attorney, Jacob Stein, declined to comment on the grand jury appearance.

Prosecutors are focusing on Watson's former boss, Donald Gregg, say non-government sources familiar with the investigation. They spoke on condition of anonymity.

Gregg, national security adviser to Vice President Bush, has repeatedly denied in sworn testimony that he knew North was clandestinely keeping the Contras supplied with weapons in 1985 and 1986. At the time, Congress has banned U.S. military aid to the Nicaraguan rebels.

Gregg denied telling the vice president anything about North's covert network, even after Gregg learned of alleged corruption in the operation.

Former Arab League Secy Gen dead

CAIRO, Jan 25: Mahmoud Riad, a former foreign minister and Secretary-General of the Arab League, died of a heart attack early Saturday, newspapers reported. He was 75, says AP.

A military officer turned diplomat, Riad was considered an expert on Arab affairs. He was a member of the Egyptian delegation that signed the 1949 armistice with Israel after the first Arab-Israeli war.

from long-time CIA colleague Felix Rodriguez on August 8, 1986. Watson attended that August 8 meeting. North recruited Rodriguez in September 1985 to work in the Contra resupply network.

Gregg is now U.S. Ambassador to South Korea. Watson was the vice president's deputy assistant for national security affairs in late 1985 and 1986. He told congressional investigators in 1987 he hadn't known North was overseeing a Contra resupply network.

Watson met with Rodriguez in El Salvador in January 1986, but says Rodriguez told him nothing about his Contra activities.

Rodriguez telephoned Watson when one of the planes in North's operation was shot down over Nicaragua on October 5, 1986.

Kinshasa calm

KINSHASA, Jan 25: Troops brought calm to Kinshasa by arresting mutinous soldiers who went on a looting rampage in which they killed at least four people, officials and state radio said, reports Reuters.

Units of the Israeli-trained special presidential guard (DSP) moved into the city on Friday to round up the mutineers, the radio said. They were assisted by civil guardsmen.

The troops surrounded the mutineers, who were holed up in an abandoned hospital in the Zairean capital and arrested them without incident, the radio said.

The DSP recovered hundreds of weapons and cases of ammunition as well as household goods, the radio said.

State television showed scenes of homes that had been looted in the city and interviewed victims who said they had been attacked by soldiers.

US considers hiring N-experts from former Soviet Union

WASHINGTON, Jan 25: The United States Friday acknowledged that it was considering hiring nuclear experts from the former Soviet Union, a day after the return here of a top State Department official from a week-long fact-finding visit to four former Soviet republics fielding nuclear weapons, reports AP.

"We are actively looking at a number of proposals to deal with our concerns," State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler said, adding

that no proposal had yet been presented to the White House for approval.

The Los Angeles Times has reported that Washington was considering finding work for 2,000 nuclear experts from the former Soviet Union to prevent them from immigrating to countries such as Libya or Iraq. The newspaper also reported that President George Bush would announce his decision on the subject in the state of the union address

next week. Tutwiler said she had not been told of any plan to hire "2,000 nuclear scientists," but she said Undersecretary of State for international security affairs Reginald Bartholomew had brought up the topic in his tour of Moscow, Kiev, Minsk and Alma-Ata.

Bartholomew is expected to report on the trip to Secretary of State James Baker before Baker heads to Moscow today, the spokeswoman said. Congress freed 400 million

dollars from the federal budget last fall to be used to help former Soviet republics dismantle their nuclear arsenal. Baker also indicated last month that the money could also be used to avoid a nuclear "brain drain" to developing countries.

CIA Director Robert Gates estimated recently that between 1,000 to 2,000 nuclear scientists in the former Soviet Union were capable of putting together a nuclear bomb or directing a biological weapons programme.

Gamsakhurdia's bid to regain power collapsing

ZUGDIDI, Jan 25: Ousted Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia's attempt to regain power appeared to be near collapse today as his officials fled key areas, reports Reuters.

There were scenes of anarchy in the town of Zugdidi, where Gamsakhurdia began his campaign nine days ago, as people looted the prefecture office, stealing books and furniture.

Prefect Volter Shurgaya, Gamsakhurdia's personal representative in the city, told journalists he was going underground to continue the struggle. Other officials in Zugdidi and nearby villages have already left.

Pro-Gamsakhurdia forces blew up a bridge at the village of Khobi to delay the advance on Zugdidi by troops of the military council, which toppled Gamsakhurdia on January 6.

But it seemed only a matter of time before resistance to the council's forces collapsed.

In the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, provisional Prime Minister Tengiz Sigua predicted the end of the conflict within three days.

Tass News Agency quoted him as saying he expected Gamsakhurdia to flee Georgia by Saturday evening. The 52-year-old president was believed to be sheltering in Sukhumi or Abkhazia.

The ruling military alliance, containing many former allies of Gamsakhurdia, accused him of being a dangerous dictator when it launched its campaign to oust him.

Two weeks of fighting in Tbilisi reduced the centre of the city of ruins and killed around 200 people. But clashes in the countryside since Gamsakhurdia's return have resulted in far fewer casualties.

The military council said it had put off plans to send forces into Sukhumi and would not stop any bid by Gamsakhurdia to leave the former Soviet republic from the town's airport.

The Interfax News Agency said Gamsakhurdia supporters had reached an agreement with the military council to hand over Poti, another city at the centre of conflict.

It said the National Guard troops of Tengiz Kitovani, joint leader of the military council, stationed outside Poti would not enter the city. Power would be transferred to a member of the council selected by citizens of Poti.

But in the town of Senaki, about 50 KM (30 miles) away, the commander of the military council's mkhedrioni (horsemen) forces seemed only cautiously optimistic on Friday night that a showdown with Gamsakhurdia supporters in Poti could be avoided.

"We will see. The chances of war are 50-50," Jaba Ioseliani told Reuters. Gamsakhurdia's personal representative in the city, told journalists he was going underground to continue the struggle. Other officials in Zugdidi and nearby villages have already left.



Tbilisi: Supporters of ousted Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia demonstrate outside the city's main railway station. A woman bears a sign 'Don't stop Mr. President, The God is with you'.

Charges likely to be filed in April

Rajiv murder investigators build strong case against LTTE

MADRAS, Jan 25: After months of working in the dark, the chief investigator in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi says with satisfaction, "we have seen the light," reports AP.

The Gandhi case is finally nearing a court date eight months after the former Indian Prime Minister was slain.

Officials say they have built a strong case against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a Sri Lankan separatist army that is among the fiercest and best-trained guerrilla forces in the world.

Police began the investigation with few clues and no living suspects. The assassin was blown apart by the suicide bomb that killed her target. The suspected mastermind of the plot and six of his henchmen swallowed cyanide before they could be captured. But several alleged accomplices were caught.

Investigators hope to file charges in April, said DR. Karthikeyan, a 52-year-old inspector general who was drafted from a paramilitary police force to lead the investigation.

So far, 20 people are under arrest, including Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils. Most are likely to be charged, along with Tamil Tiger leaders in Sri Lanka who will be declared fugitives.

Karthikeyan's team has filled two rooms with documents, examined thousands of photographs and 500 video and audio cassettes, recorded statements of about 1,000 people and interrogated thousands more.

"We started with nothing,"

he said in a recent interview in his heavily guarded office. But finally "we have seen the light" after eight months of 20 hours a day and seven days a week of legwork, interrogations and paperwork.

Until the assassination, sympathy for the Tigers was widespread in Tamil Nadu, which is home to 60 million ethnic Tamils. State governments turned a blind eye as the Tigers built a staging base for their struggle for an independent homeland in northern Sri Lanka, separated from the Tamil Nadu coast by a 30-minute boat ride.

The Tigers have denied involvement in Gandhi's assassination, but the evidence and circumstances weigh against them.

The bomber, a young woman who detonated the plastic explosives strapped to her waist from a distance of 1 foot from Gandhi, was a Sri Lankan Tamil. Her head was severed by the blast but her face was recognisable from a photograph taken by a man who was among the 16 other victims of the bomb.

The alleged mastermind and back-up assassin was identified as Siverasan, a

known member of the Tigers. Cornered by police near the city of Bangalore August 20, he committed suicide by shooting himself through the head.

The Tigers and the motive: As prime minister in 1987, Gandhi had sent Indian troops to northern Sri Lanka where they wiped out many of the rebels' trained fighters in a two-year war. The Tigers feared that if Gandhi came back to power, their operations in Tamil Nadu would be crushed, said a senior state police officer, speaking on condition of anonymity.



LONDON: Britain's Princess Diana greets members of the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts after watching the play 'Heart beat' that they performed at the Barbican here.

Corazon endorses Ramos as her successor in May polls

MANILA, Jan 25: President Corazon Aquino on Saturday endorsed former Defense Secretary Fidel Ramos as her successor, but the largest political party nominated the house speaker in a move which split administration forces, reports AP.

Mrs Aquino's announcement was also expected to trigger a realignment in the opposition among those who want to prevent Imelda Marcos from mounting a strong bid for the presidency in the May 11 election.

In all, 19 aspirants, nine of whom are nationally prominent and considered serious candidates, say they will enter the race. That has raised concern the next president will take office June 30 with a weak mandate. There is no runoff.

"My choice springs not from a personal whim but from a conviction that the next leader must preserve these gains," Mrs Aquino said after a Mass marking her 59th birthday.

"I'm very very happy,"

Ramos told reporters. "We will not fail her and we will not fail our people."

Ramos, a 63-year-old West Point graduate, helped lead the 1986 uprising that toppled his cousin, the late President Ferdinand Marcos, and propelled Mrs Aquino to power.

As military chief of staff and defense secretary, Ramos helped crush seven armed attempts to oust her from office.

Mrs Aquino had narrowed her choice to Ramos, House Speaker Ramon Mitra and Marcelo Fernan, the former

Supreme Court chief justice.

Mitra defeated Ramos last November 30 in a straw vote within the Struggle of the Democratic Filipino, the largest pro-administration party. On Saturday, the party affirmed Mitra as its nominee by acclamation.

During his acceptance speech, Mitra accused Mrs Aquino of failing to fulfill the promises of the 1986 uprising.

"Now she has spoken," Mitra said. "But on May 11, it is the people who will speak and they are going to say that

Off the Record



TOULOUSE, France: Luka, a six-year old female tiger living at the 'Plaisance du Touch' Zoo sleeps quietly on a snow-covered tree trunk. Tens of thousands of homes were without electricity, hundreds of people were stranded on highways and air traffic was upset by heavy snow falls over southern France.

Broken heart's seclusion ends with fire

HONG KONG, A man who locked himself up in his apartment for a decade after being disappointed in a love affair was discovered only after a fire broke out, press reports said here Saturday, reports AP.

Police rescued Lau Yi-Man, 50, the holder of a master's degree, from his 50-square-metre apartment in a busy shopping area after fire broke out in the building, local newspapers reported.

Reports said Lau, under extreme mental pressure, had kept himself locked up, since being jilted by his girlfriend 10 years ago.

His parents and brothers, who have emigrated to Australia, paid neighbours to take meals and other daily necessities to Lau, who lived amid Garbage and Mice, the reports said.

10-year imprisonment in AIDS rape case

CAPE TOWN: A man received a 10-year prison sentence Friday after being convicted of raping an 11-year-old girl and infecting her with the virus that causes AIDS, reports AP.

It was believed to be the first known case in South Africa of a rapist passing the AIDS virus on to his victim.

Martin Jooste, 24, and an accomplice, 23-year-old Phillip Rheede, were found guilty of raping the girl last year. Jooste later was found to carry the AIDS virus.

Judge Wouter Rothman imposed the maximum sentence for rape on Jooste while giving Rheede an eight-year sentence. He said the rape victim was dying of AIDS.

Jooste and Rheede were acquitted on a charge of attempted murder because the prosecution failed to prove Jooste knew he had the AIDS virus at the time of the rape.

Juicy comments are costly if they find you guilty

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico: A free-lance photographer has been convicted of slander for saying two of the managers of the singing group Menudo sexually molested several of its former members, reports AP.

New York-based photographer Bolivar Arellano said Wednesday he was appealing the misdemeanor conviction.

Charges were filed against the photographer for comments he made against Jose Jimenez Picardo and Orlando Lopez Rodriguez on a Dec. 9 television talk show in San Juan.

Arellano was linked to the group as a freelance photographer and as owner of a Menudo souvenir shop.

Arellano was found guilty of two slander charges Wednesday by San Juan District Court Judge Awilda Iriazary Pardo. She sentenced him to six hours incarceration, imposed a 1,000 dollar fine and ordered him to publish the court's order in one of the island's daily newspapers at his own cost.

The judge also ordered the photographer to publish a half-page advertisement in a newspaper retracting the charges he made in the television show.

Ghali sending envoy to persuade Libya

NEW YORK, United Nations, Jan 25: UN Secretary General Boutros Ghali is sending an envoy to Libya to persuade Tripoli to cooperate with international probes into two plane bombings, sources here said Friday, reports AP.

Vasily Safronchuk, a high-ranking UN official, was to leave New York later Friday for Tripoli for talks with local officials about international probes into the Pan Am and UTA plane bombings, an official said.

On Tuesday, the UN Security Council unanimously passed resolution 731 demanding that Libya cooperate in the probes of the December 1988 Pan Am bombing that killed 270 people over Scotland and the September 1989 UTA attack that killed 170 people over Niger.

After passage of the resolution, Boutros-Ghali twice met with Libyan representative to the United Nations Jadhah Azuz Al Tahli, who maintained that his country has been cooperating with the investigations.

But Tripoli repeatedly stated it would not agree to turn over Libyan Secret Service agents to US British or French authorities to be questioned about their alleged involvement in the bombings.

While the resolution demands Libyan cooperation in the investigations, it does not specifically demand the extradition of the two men even though the crux of the requests has been their extradition.

Jang chief editor dead

KARACHI, Jan 25: Mir Khalilur Rahman, proprietor and Chief Editor of Pakistan's largest newspaper, The Daily Jang, died in London today, his newspaper in Karachi said, reports Reuters.

Rahman was 70, and suffering from lung complications. The newspaper mogul built a publishing empire from scratch starting in New Delhi in 1941.

BRIEFLY

Plea to send UN troops to Y'slavia:

The republics of Croatia and Serbia have both asked UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to send UN troops quickly to Yugoslavia where a fragile ceasefire has now held for three weeks, AFP from Belgrade says.

Croatia asked the United Nations to send between 1,500 and 2,000 peacekeeping troops to the breakaway republic urgently. Croatian Prime Minister Franjo Greguric said in Zagreb Friday on his return from New York.

Greguric, who held talks with Boutros-Ghali, UN envoy on Yugoslavia, Cyrus Vance, and representatives of the five permanent Security Council members, also said he had won their support for Croatian membership in the United Nations.

CIS, others seek CSCE membership:

All CIS republics plus Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia have asked to join the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. CSCE officials said Friday, AFP reports from Prague.

Senior CSCE officials will discuss the applications next week ahead of a January 30-31 foreign ministers meeting here.

Several members of the Commonwealth of Independent States will send their foreign ministers in anticipation of them becoming members. Russia has "de facto" possession of the Soviet seat in the 38 member organisation.

A CSCE spokesman said a decision on the former Yugoslav republics might be delayed because of opposition from Belgrade.

BJP to go ahead with Yatra:

The BJP leadership decided Friday night that only a "limited number" of people would accompany the party President, Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi, on his Ekta Yatra to Srinagar Saturday. PTI reports from Jammu.

Top leaders of the party L.K. Advani, AB Vajpayee, Dr. Joshi and others held a meeting which ended around midnight to take stock of the situation and plan the programme for Srinagar.

A party source said after the meeting the leadership had decided to go ahead with the Yatra to Srinagar but only with a "limited number" of people. The number was, however, not specified.

Guatemalan peace talks resume:

Guatemalan government and rebel representatives resumed negotiations behind closed doors Friday in their latest effort to end 30 years of civil conflict, sources close to the talks said, AFP reports from Mexico City.

Negotiators are discussing the topic of respect for human rights, included in the first point of a previously agreed upon negotiating framework, through mediator Monsignor Alfonso Quesada Toruno.

The first of the points also incorporated the issue of democratisation, on which the two sides already have reached an agreement in principle.

China frees 9 more protesters:

China has freed nine more Tiananmen Square protesters, including one of the most-wanted student leaders, officials told an American human rights advocate on Saturday, AP reports from Beijing.

Wang Zhixun, about 23, formerly a student at Beijing's Politics and Law University, headed the list of those released, said John Kamm, a Hong Kong-based businessman and activist who held several days of meetings with Chinese officials.

The releases appear part of an effort by the government to win international goodwill. It was not clear if the November visit by US Secretary of State James A. Baker III played any role. Baker pressed the Chinese to improve their human rights record.

Peru, Bolivia sign historic accord:

Peru and Bolivia on Friday signed an historic agreement that gives Bolivia, landlocked for more than 100 years, free access to the sea through this Pacific Ocean port, Reuters from Peru reports.

President Jaime Paz Zamora, friends of Bolivia welcome to the Pacific," said Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori at the signing ceremony in Ilo, 400 kms southeast of the Bolivian capital La Paz.

Paz Zamora said: "Bolivia is once at sea, although without the sovereignty which historically belongs to it."

Under the agreement Peru will grant Bolivia a free trade, industrial and tourist zone. For its part, Bolivia will offer Peru port facilities to the Atlantic Ocean through the river Plate Basin.