

International

Presidential poll in trouble

Artillery attack kills 10 as fighting erupts near Kabul

KABUL, Dec 21: Three shells slammed into a crowded bazaar in the Afghan capital Kabul today, killing at least 10 people and injuring 16, eye witnesses said, reports Reuters.

At least two children were among the dead, said government soldier Anwar Shah, who carried three of the bodies to a nearby checkpoint.

Pools of blood stained streets around the usually busy bazaar in central Kabul after hundreds of morning shoppers fled in panic from the attack.

It was not known who fired the shells, but Shah said fighting had erupted early on Monday between government forces and fighters of the former communist militia.

The two groups have been allies since the militia defected to the Mujahideen toppled the ex-communist government last April.

Witnesses said at least 10 people were killed in the attack and 16 injured, some seriously.

Streets in the city were deserted, shop windows shattered, and bloodstained shoes and empty baskets scattered around the bazaar. Kebab sellers ran from their stalls, leaving the meat still roasting.

It was the worst such attack on Kabul since bloody fighting last August between the government and a maverick Mujahideen party, when thousands of rockets and artillery shells rained down on the city killing more than 2,500 people.

"I am so afraid," said 160-year-old Masoom, as he wandered through the empty streets looking for his brother who was at the bazaar at the time of the attack.

At the interior ministry, some 1,000 delegates to the Hal-o-Aqad assembly, which is to choose Afghanistan's first elected president since the 1979 Soviet invasion, gathered for a second introductory session.

Interior minister Ahmed Shah and Noorullah Emad, head of the Hal-o-Aqad organising commission addressed the gathering, saying this was a chance for the delegates to voice their opinions.

Emad was unable to say when the Hal-o-Aqad would convene.

The assembly was due to meet from December 12 to 15 but was delayed by poor organisation and outbursts of fighting around the capital.

Seven of the nine parties represented on the fractious leadership council have said they will boycott the assembly, claiming interim President Burhanuddin Rabbani has influenced the selection of representatives and given bribes to delegates.

Kurds demand withdrawal of Iraqi troops

ANKARA, Dec 21: Iraqi Kurds here voiced concern Sunday about the suspension of UN relief assistance in northern Iraq and demanded the withdrawal of all Iraqi troops from the Kurdish area to ensure the safe transport of supplies, reports AP.

But Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin ruled out punitive action by Western warplanes based in Turkey without an explicit call by the UN Security Council.

Iraq's ambassador in Ankara, meanwhile, claimed recent bomb attacks on Turkish trucks carrying relief supplies to northern Iraq were a "Western provocation."

BRIEFLY

Bahrain forms consultative body: Bahrain's Emir Isa bin Salman al-Khalifa on Sunday announced the creation of 30-member Consultative Council to advise the ruler on government policy, a royal decree said, reports AFP from Manama. The council President and its members will be selected by Sheikh Isa from among Bahraini figures capable of providing counsel and advice, according to the decree carried by the official Gulf news agency.

Bahrain is one of the last Arab gulf states without a parliament or equivalent body.

Council will advise the Emir on legislation proposed by the cabinet, general government policy and issues related to Bahrain's infrastructure.

One more killed in Belfast: Gunman forced their way into a house in north Belfast on Sunday and shot dead a man at point blank range, police said, reports Reuters from Belfast.

The man, who was in his forties, was shot in the chest. He was believed to be the latest victim of northern Ireland's political and sectarian violence, which has claimed more than 80 lives this year.

Quake rattles Jakarta, Darwin: A major earthquake hit the Indonesian spice islands early today but there were no immediate reports of casualties, reports Reuters from Jakarta.

An official of Indonesia's meteorological office told Reuters the quake measured 5.4 on the open-ended Richter scale. Its epicentre was in the Banda sea about 400 km (250 miles) southeast of Ambon, the capital of the Molucca spice islands. Australian seismologists had earlier measured the quake, which shook buildings in the Australian city of Darwin, at 7.3 on the Richter scale.

The quake was followed by six powerful aftershocks, and a number of smaller tremors were registered by Australian seismologists.

At least 2,200 people were killed just over a week ago when an earthquake with a force of 6.8 hit the Indonesian island of Flores, about 1,000 km (620 miles) from the reported epicentre of today's quake.

Arms uncovered in Kuwait:

The authorities have uncovered a major arms cache, including anti-tank rockets, in the third such roundup in a month, the Kuwaiti Interior Ministry said Sunday, reports AFP from Kuwait City.

Different types of ammunition and hand grenades were also found, a statement said.

The Ministry announced earlier this month the seizure of heavy weapons and the arrest of several people suspected of possessing the arms.

The authorities have been trying to roundup large quantities of weapons seized by civilians during Iraq's seven-month occupation of Kuwait which ended in February 1991.

5 shot dead in Brazil:

Hooded gunmen in military police uniforms shot dead five teenagers in this sprawling city's Riachuelo Shanty town early Sunday witnesses said, reports AFP from Rio de Janeiro.

Angry residents of Riachuelo took to the streets of the neighbourhood later in the day to protest the murders and demand justice.

Witnesses said four gunmen opened fire on the teens, aged between 14 and 16, minutes after an attempted robbery at a hotel. A military policeman was wounded in the robbery.

Arms stolen from German armoury: Four masked men stole weapons from an armoury near Berlin Sunday after tying up the soldiers guarding them, police said here, reports AFP from Postdam, Germany.

The assailants, armed with revolvers, disarmed the three guards at the Gellow Armoury.

They stole more than 30 assault rifles, six machine guns, three anti-tank missile launchers and several revolvers, and then disappeared without trace.

The guards were only able to free themselves and sound the alarm at around 4:00 am (0300 GMT) — two hours after the attack.

Democracy step closer to maturity, says Roh

SEOUL, Dec 21: President Roh Tae-woo said Monday voting for a new president was the fairest and calmest in South Korean history and has brought democracy a step closer to full maturity, reports AP.

He urged the nation to help President-elect Kim Young-sam create national reconciliation, adding that "without stability there will be no change in the reform we all need to make."

The remarks, made on nationwide television, were the first by Roh since Friday's balloting and emphasized the president-elect's campaign theme, a call for stability.

They also reflect the pride Koreans have in holding a peaceful campaign and election.

Roh met with the president-elect later Monday and assured him his administration will cooperate for a smooth transition of power. Kim, a former opposition leader, merged his party with Roh's ruling party in 1990.

Kim's victory was seen as a strong vote by South Korea's growing middle class for stability in a time of economic concern over the country's growth, which dipped in the last quarter to 3.1 per cent.

He was expected to continue the policies of Roh and said he would move quickly to reaffirm strong ties with traditional allies like the United States and Japan and with newer allies China, Russia and Eastern Europe.

The 65-year-old Kim is the first civilian president of South Korea since 1961, ending 32 years of military-dominated regimes or rule by former generals.

The 28-day campaign period and the election were the calmest since the founding of the nation in 1948. Despite mudslinging and charges of vote-rigging, there was no violence.

"The elections were the calmest and fairest in our history," said Roh, who in September resigned from the ruling Democratic Liberal Party to ensure neutrality of government officials.

"Our democracy has developed one step higher," he said. "Our democracy is now deeply rooted enough to withstand any challenges."

Final figures for Friday's balloting released over the weekend show Kim Young-sam won 41.1 per cent or 9.97 million votes, of the 24 million votes cast.



WASHINGTON: US President George Bush (R) extends his hand to shake as British Prime Minister John Major (L) turns away from the lectern following a joint news conference on Sunday at the White House following weekend meetings.

7 Palestinians killed in occupied territories

Supreme court to rule legality of deportations

JERUSALEM, Dec 21: Civil rights lawyers and families of 415 Palestinians expelled from the occupied lands pinned their last hopes for their return on an expected ruling Monday by the Israeli Supreme Court.

The high court said it would rule Monday after hearing four hours of testimony Sunday in an appeal by lawyers who contend the deportations to Lebanon were illegal.

The court blocked the expulsions briefly last week before allowing them to proceed Thursday. The justices ordered the government to prove the legality of its action.

Also at stake may be the future of Middle East peace talks, jeopardized by a storm of international condemnation of the deportations. Palestinians say they will not participate in the talks until the deportees are allowed back.

Still, all but one member of

Israel's cabinet closed ranks Sunday against the criticism and reaffirmed the decision to expel the fundamentalists.

The United States, Israel's strongest ally, was among the nations criticizing the expulsions, which were ordered after six Israeli troops were slain by Muslim fundamentalists over a 10-day period.

"I don't agree with it and think it is a terrible step to move to these deportations," Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger said Sunday in an interview televised by the NBC network.

Palestinians staged a protest strike for the third straight day Sunday in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. Israeli soldiers patrolling the territories were on alert following weekend riots in which six protesters died from army gunfire.

Reuters adds: Israeli soldiers

killed seven Palestinians in the occupied territories, one nine-year-old girl, in a burst of violence over the expulsion of 400 Muslims to Lebanon.

Israel's high court scheduled a fresh hearing on Sunday against the government's expulsion of the Palestinians who remained stranded in a 'no-man's land' north of Israel after Lebanon refused them entry.

Troops shot dead six Palestinians in the Gaza Strip on Saturday in the bloodiest violence of the Palestinian uprising for more than two years. A seventh Palestinian was shot dead in the West Bank's Al-Arroub refugee camp on Friday.

Rana Abu Tyur, nine, was shot in the chest in Khan Yunis at the southern end of the Strip. Three others were shot in the head. One of those killed was an ambulance driver evacuating wounded, Palestinian.

What happened in Khan Yunis shows what can happen to local residents when they violate the law and endanger the lives of soldiers, Army Chief Ehud Barak told Israeli television in defence of his troops.

The army said soldiers, pelted with concrete blocks, thick metal rods and stones, opened fire to protect their lives.

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Ramos determined to end Marxist insurgency

MANILA, Dec 21: President Fidel Ramos said Monday he was determined to end the Communist, Muslim and military rebellions to restore stability and steer the country toward economic progress, reports AP.

"Political stability and civic order we need urgently as requirements for restoring our economy to the path of growth," Ramos told ceremonies marking the 57th anniversary of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

Ramos said contacts with leaders of the largely dormant Muslim insurgency were continuing and an "honorable and workable solution" with military dissidents "is within reach."

Off the Record



TOKYO: Demonstrators shout "Plutonium, No!" during a march to protest against the Japanese government's plutonium shipment aboard the carrier, Akatsuki-maru on Sunday. Some 500 people participated in the march. —AFP/UNB photo

Naughty mags meet a sinful end in Manila

MANILA: Former Philippine President Corason Aquino and Roman Catholic Cardinal Jaime Sin today set light to hundreds of "dirty" magazines, including Playboy, Penthouse, Hustler and a local publication called Tiktik, reports Reuters.

Sin, the influential archbishop of Manila, tossed a burning piece of paper into a pile of magazines outside the office of Mayor Alfredo Lim and watched approvingly as they burned.

Aquino, a devout Roman Catholic, was forced to back away from the bonfire because of the searing heat but stayed to watch the blaze.

'Social Evil' lands six kids in one go

ISLAMABAD: The 40-year-old wife of a Pakistani potter recently gave birth to sextuplets, three boys and three girls, the semi-official PPI news agency said today, reports Reuters.

The woman had previously had no children throughout her 14-year marriage and had been considered a "social evil" by neighbours in Umarkot village in southern Sindh province who did not allow her to attend weddings or other functions, PPI said.

"Villagers, especially the women, now consider her as the most lucky and fortunate woman in the locality," PPI said.

Britain to clamp down on the press

LONDON: The British government is poised to clamp down on the press, with heavy fines on newspapers which use bugs, bribery or telephoto lenses to invade privacy, the Guardian Newspaper said Monday, reports Reuters.

The daily said new media laws would be the outcome of a government-backed inquiry into Britain's largely unregulated press by Sir David Calcutt.

The paper said he would recommend civil court fines, rather than criminal sanctions, when he publishes his report early next year.

Calls for tighter restrictions on the press have heightened following the recent announcement that royal heir Prince Charles and Princess Diana were separating.

The royal family has been one of the main targets of the tabloid press in a circulation battle, and some politicians have charged that lurid stories about the couple, triggered the breakdown of the marriage.

34 more killed as Lankan troops ambush LTTE

COLOMBO, Dec 21: Security forces ambushed Tamil guerrillas and fought close-range battles in Sri Lanka's northeast to raise the weekend death toll to 34, the military here said today, reports AFP.

Special forces commandos carried out two ambushes in Eastern Batticaloa district Sunday, killing six suspected guerrillas of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a military spokesman said.

He said three men captured by the commandos during the ambushes confessed they were LTTE activists. An assault rifle, grenades, ammunition and communications equipment were seized from them, the spokesman said.

In the northwest Mannar district, the LTTE death toll rose to 18 in Sunday's failed bid to overrun a military bunker line, the spokesman said. Two wounded soldiers died in hospital, raising army casualties to 10 killed.

"We have intercepted LTTE communications which spoke of 18 of their cadres getting killed in the Mannar fighting. But we suspect they lost many more," the spokesman said.

No independent confirmation was available.

ROK to establish diplomatic ties with Vietnam

SEOUL, Dec 21: South Korea will establish full diplomatic relations with Vietnam tomorrow, a Seoul Foreign Ministry official said today, reports Reuters.

He said Foreign Minister Lee Sang-ock would sign an accord with his Vietnamese counterpart, Nguyen Manh Cam, to normalise ties after a 17-year break.

Lee left on Monday for a three-day visit to Hanoi.

South Korea and the former Republic of Vietnam set up full diplomatic ties in 1956; but Seoul, which supported the Saigon government, severed all ties in 1975 when the US-supported government was defeated by Hanoi.

Police chief executed in China

BENJING, Dec 21: A police chief was executed last week for trying to murder the head of the Communist Party in a country in northwest China, a local newspaper said, reports Reuters.

Gao Shengxiu, 49, police chief of a county in Shaanxi province, tried to blow up Zhang Zenglian, the Secretary of the country's Communist Party Committee, said Friday's Shannxi Daily, received in Beijing today.

Zhang had repeatedly criticised the police chief's work.

The police chief tried traditional Chinese curses to get his revenge. When those failed he wrote threatening letters.

Finally he tried to blow up the Communist Party official with dynamite.

Kismayu port opened, allowing food to hungry Somalis

KISMAYU, Somalia, Dec 21: US and Belgian troops have opened a second major port to move food to Somalia's hungry, pouring ashore without resistance as thousands of Somalis cheered, reports AP.

The US Marines and Belgian paratroopers landed in broad daylight Sunday and quickly took control of the port and airport in Kismayu, about 400 kilometres (250 miles) southwest of the capital, Mogadishu.

Clan fighting and looting had kept the port closed for months, strangling the flow of aid to a trickle brought in by plane and truck from neighbouring Kenya.

"Everything went well; not a shot was fired," said Col Fred Peck, a Marine spokesman in Mogadishu.

A Marine patrol in

Mogadishu, meanwhile, exchanged fire with Somali gunmen, hitting one, a US spokesman said. No American casualties were reported.

Peck said the Somali gunman was shot while aiming a .50-calibre machine gun at them from the back of a war wagon whose driver was racing away from the Marines outside the parliament building. The site is near the line that divides the city between rival factions.

In the inland town of Baidoa, the first truck convoy of food in more than a month arrived with Marines riding shotgun.

With Cobra helicopter gunships whirling over Kismayu and FA-18 Hornet fighter-bombers and A-6 Intruder attack planes streaking above, the first 180 Marines splashed

onto the beach in amphibious vehicles at 6:30 am (0330 GMT).

They were followed by 90 paratroopers of Belgium's 1st Airborne Battalion in US Navy hovercraft, and transport helicopters that dropped some of the soldiers on the port's broad, concrete dock.

As the Belgians secured the port, the Marines moved into the city in their armoured vehicles and raced for the airport, about 6 kilometres (4 miles) to the south.

Somalis on the streets and on rooftops cheered and waved as the Marines sped by. Forewarned of the landing, many residents had painted signs saying "Welcome American Soldiers."

Two hours and twenty minutes after the landing the airport was declared secure. A

US government plane touched down less than an hour later, followed by two relief flights of the International Red Cross.

Similar conditions and entreaties from aid workers led American military commanders to send a combined force of Marines and French Foreign Legionnaires to Baidoa on Wednesday. Armed Somalis fled before the troops arrived.

Clan gunmen and bandit gangs also disappeared from the streets of Mogadishu after the Marines arrived December 9. But armed men have been filtering back into the city.

Peck said 20 trucks of the UN World Food Programme were escorted to Baidoa by a reinforced rifle platoon of about 60 Marines. The convoy carried 300 metric tons of wheat, enough to provide meals for 750,000 people for one day.

A UN source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said military briefers told aid officials Sunday that the towns of Hoddur and Gallaasi would be the next goals.

The source said the military leaders promised to have those towns secured within four or five days.

Reuters adds: Even after most US troops leave Somalia, a Marine force stationed off the African coast could remain behind to help maintain stability, Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger said on Sunday.

"I think we need to be very careful about how long we commit forces in Somalia," Eagleburger said on NBC's "Meet the Press" programme. "I think it also clear, however, that we need to have some-

thing available from the US that can go in and deal with problems after we've pulled most of our troops out."

Eagleburger said a Marine amphibious readiness group, including an aircraft carrier and some amphibious craft, could stay off the Somali coast for a while after most US troops leave and peacekeepers enter Somalia.

"This offshore force would assure the peacekeepers that we are there to help still, and to remind those with the guns that they are not necessarily free simply because most of our troops have gone," Eagleburger said.

Defence Secretary Dick Cheney said he still expects the bulk of US forces to begin leaving Somalia by the end of January.

UN resumes relief work in Bosnia

SARAJEVO, Dec 21: United Nations relief workers restarted their airlift of emergency aid to Bosnia's besieged capital Sarajevo today after a three-week break caused by fighting, reports Reuters.

A spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for refugees (UNHCR) said the first load of supplies reached Sarajevo in a British plane at 0715 GMT. A further 20 flights were expected today.

The airlift to Sarajevo was suspended on December 1 after a US plane was hit by small-arms fire. All other flights were halted three days later after a plane carrying UN peacekeepers' Commander General Philippe Morillon was shot at. No one was hurt in either incident.