

BRIEFLY

Ghali may visit Somalia, Bosnia:

UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali may visit Somalia and Bosnia-Herzegovina during his travels to Europe and Africa during the new year holiday. UN officials said on Wednesday, reports Reuter from UN.

The Secretary-General leaves for Europe late on Wednesday and plans to be in Geneva from December 27 to 30 for a meeting on African development and discussions with political leaders of former Yugoslav states on the crisis in Bosnia.

The UN chief may make a lightning trip to Sarajevo from Geneva on December 28 or 29 but his spokesman, Joe Sills, said the trip could not be confirmed.

Boutros-Ghali plans to be in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa on January 4 for a conference of Somali political factions and may visit Somalia and Djibouti afterwards.

Israeli President off to China:

Israeli President Chaim Herzog left Wednesday for China for a state visit aimed at scaling relations established in January, officials said, reports AFP from Jerusalem.

Herzog was accompanied by Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin. They left aboard a private plane owned by Israeli businessman Shaul Eisenberg, who has large investments in the far east.

China and Israel set up diplomatic ties on January 24, 1992.

Aftershock jolts Maumere:

An aftershock jolted the earthquake ravaged town of Maumere early Thursday, but there were no reports of new damage or casualties, the Meteorology and Geophysics Agency reported, reports AP from Jakarta.

Residents of Maumere, a town on the eastern island of Flores that recently was flattened by a quake and tidal waves, were jolted awake by the 3:25 am (1925 GMT) aftershock, which measured 4.3 on the Richter scale, said Budi, an official at the Meteorology and Geophysics Agency.

The quake's epicentre was recorded in the Savu Sea, about 90 kilometres (56 miles) south of Maumere, at a depth of 61 kilometres (38 miles) below the earth's surface, Budi said.

Two brothers shot dead in Gaza:

Soldiers shot dead two Palestinian brothers and wounded 42 people in the occupied Gaza Strip on Wednesday in a surge of unrest over Israel's expulsion of 415 Arabs, hospitals said, reports Reuter from Gaza.

Relatives said Israeli soldiers killed Ismael Abdeen, 27, when he stepped on his balcony in the town of Khan Younis, which is under army curfew. His body fell to the street below.

Naim Abdeen, 32, enraged by the shooting of his brother, attacked soldiers with stones and was also killed, a cousin of the two told Reuters.

The deaths raised to 11 the number of Palestinians killed by soldiers since Israel expelled 415 Palestinians to Lebanon on December 17.

Angola seeks medical supplies:

Angola's UN ambassador on Wednesday appealed to the world community for emergency medical supplies saying drought and warfare had devastated the country, reports Reuter from UN.

"If relief does not come soon the results could be catastrophic," ambassador Alfonso Van Dunem Mbinda told a news conference. He said food was also in short supply.

He said his government was launching an urgent appeal to humanitarian organisations around the world. He listed urgently needed medical supplies ranging from antibiotics to disposable syringes and surgical equipment such as scalpels, forceps and scissors.

Angola has been involved in a 17-year-old civil war which the world thought had ended after May 1991 peace agreements between the government and the UNITA movement.

Flood kills 7 in Indonesia:

Flash flood and landslides, set off by heavy rain, have killed at least seven people in North Sumatra, a news report said Thursday, reports AP from Jakarta.

The daily Kompas said a heavy rain lasting two days started floods and landslides Tuesday in the Brasagi district, 68 kilometres west of the provincial capital of Medan, killing seven people, injuring two and destroying 17 homes.

Medan lies 1,400 kilometres (875 miles) northwest of Jakarta.

The official Antara news agency reported that floods and landslides destroyed 59 homes in Balongga village, Palu regency, Central Sulawesi, on Tuesday.



MARJ EZ-ZHOUR, Lebanon: Palestinian deportees cover their tents with nylon sheets to protect themselves from rain December 23 in the no man's land between Israel's self-declared security zone and Lebanese army positions. — AFP/UNB photo

China warns Clinton not to link trade issue with human rights

BEIJING, Dec 24: China today warned US President-elect Bill Clinton not to use the United States' large trade surplus as a lever to press for improved human rights conditions here and for democratic reforms in Hong Kong, reports AP.

"We are opposed to linking the trade issue with other matters for this will be unhelpful to the development of economic relations and trade between China and the United States," a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said. Clinton told a news conference he would be firm with

China after reiterating US concerns about Beijing's repression of opposition figures, use of prison labour to make export goods and alleged violations of missile and non-proliferation agreements.

China is bitterly opposed to British plans to open Hong Kong's legislature to a wider electorate before the colony reverts to Chinese rule in 1997.

The President-elect earlier eased Beijing's fears by saying he supports continued Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status for China, which accords preferential tariff rates to Chinese

Taiwan's opposition alleges vote rigging, walks out of assembly

TAIPEI, Dec 24: Opposition politicians disrupted a National Assembly meeting with protests and a county magistrate resigned Thursday as outrage intensified over alleged vote-rigging in last week's election for Taiwan's first popular legislature, reports AP.

About 30 deputies of the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) shouted "Shame! Shame!" at ruling Nationalist Party deputies and displayed banners in a chaotic plenary session of the National Assembly.

The popularly elected assembly chooses Taiwan's president and handles revisions to the constitution. It is separate from the law-making Legislative Yuan, whose 161 members were elected last

Somalia seeks Indian help

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: Somalia today appealed to the Indian people for help in alleviating the suffering of its famine-hit citizens, reports PTI.

Making the appeal, the Ambassador of Somalia to India, Mohamed Osman Omar, said that big denomination cheques should be addressed to the UNICEF/Somalia emergency programme, while smaller amounts may be addressed to the Ambassador himself.

Omar said every contribution, irrespective of size, would go a long way in saving the lives of thousands of Somalis facing starvation in their country.

Prosecutors in Hualien found Wednesday in a recount that the number of ballots exceeded the number of registered voters by 738 in 12 of the 54 polling stations where election results were questioned.

The recount was demanded by Huang Hsin-chieh, former DPP chairman.

750 prisoners get amnesty in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, Dec 24: The government has offered an amnesty on Christmas to 750 convicts imprisoned for defaulting on fines and other crimes, the government announced Thursday, reports AP.

The nationwide amnesty provides for the commuting of death sentences to life, which is equivalent to a 20-year prison term, a Justice Ministry spokesman said.

Other prisoners will get a reprieve of three weeks from their sentences for every year already spent in jail.

The amnesty comes from President Ranasinghe Premadasa who pardoned 1,500 prisoners last Christmas and on New Year's Day this year. Eight hundred prisoners were freed on the Muslim holy day of Eid in April 1992.

Gorbachev happy over Gaidar's removal

LONDON, Dec 24: Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev Thursday said he was glad that acting Russian prime minister Yegor Gaidar — whom he described as a "neo-Bolshevik" — had been removed, the Guardian newspaper reported today, says AFP.

"The people's trust in the Russian President Boris Yeltsin, which he was so proud of and their trust in government, have been severely damaged," Gorbachev told the paper.

"People think the leadership has lost touch with reality, so I have no doubt that the government had to be changed."

Gaidar, the 36-year-old economist who spearheaded Russia's economic reforms of

Pentagon for ground attacks on planes if no-fly zone enforced

Richard Boucher said Wednesday.

The United Nations, alarmed at the deteriorating situation in Bosnia, is moving to endorse enforcement of the flight ban, and NATO, led by the United States, has drawn up options for action.

Bosnian Serbs have not used their 50-some planes to attack Croat and Muslim rivals in Bosnia, but they have ignored the UN no-fly zone, taking to the air nearly 300 times since the ban was imposed October 9. Most of those flights were for supply and surveillance purposes.

US Secretary of Defence Dick Cheney said in an interview Sunday that an around-the-clock operation, as seen in the air war against Iraq, would require a large number of aircraft including AWACS surveillance planes in the air at all times and refueling tankers.

If, on the other hand, "You went to the base or to the aircraft on the ground and destroyed them... it would probably require far fewer forces and be a simpler military operation," he said on CBS's "Face the Nation."

In either case, the Navy has some 60 to 70 planes on the aircraft carrier John F. Kennedy, stationed in the Adriatic Sea, including F-14 Tomcat fighters and A-6 night attack planes.

The Navy also has shipboard Aegis radar systems to track flight activity and Tomahawk cruise missile capable of inflicting major damage on Bosnian airfields and communications facilities.

One Pentagon official, speaking on condition of anonymity, discounted any early use of Tomahawks, saying Cheney is talking about destroying planes, not infrastructure.

The Air Force has three bases in Germany that field F-16s, fighter-bombers with a range of 3,600 kilometres (2,000 miles). F-16s also could be flown out of the US base at Aviano, in northeast Italy.

10,000 Tajik refugees flee to Afghanistan

MOSCOW, Dec 24: At least 10,000 Tajik refugees fled across into Afghanistan today to escape forces loyal to the new ex-communist government, a senior Russian officer said, reports Reuter.

"At least 10,000 people have crossed the border since the morning and the crossing is continuing at full swing," a Moscow-based spokesman for the Russian border troops said.

He said 70,000 people were massed near the Amu Darya river straddling the border after fleeing fighting on Monday between ex-communist and Islamic forces near the border town of Pyanj.

The spokesman said the border troops, who are under Russian jurisdiction, had not opened fire to stop the refugees.

The refugee exodus, the worst humanitarian crisis to hit former Soviet Central Asia,

stems from months of fighting between rival Tajik clans whose hatreds broke into the open after the collapse of Kromin rule.

One out of 10 of Tajikistan's five million people have been displaced by the civil war which broke out in September after ex-communist President Rakhmon Nabyev's ouster by Islamic militants.

Islamic factions ruled Tajikistan for 10 weeks in coalition with parliamentary democrats.

On Wednesday, a senior Russian border troops' officer in the Tajik capital Dushanbe said 7,000 refugees crossed the border on that day.

The spokesman in Moscow said 2,000 crossed into Afghanistan on December 4, 50,000 on December 8 and 3,000 on Tuesday.

Off the Record

Cruise, Kidman robbed of an opportunity to become parents

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla: Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman have cancelled plans to adopt a baby in Palm Beach County,

according to court documents, and have demanded an investigation into how their adoption petition became public, reports AP.

In a letter to Chief Circuit Judge Daniel TK Hurley dated December 7, attorneys for the couple demanded "an immediate investigation of this blatant breach of confidentiality and the immediate dismissal of all court personnel who were involved."

Cruise and Kidman "have suffered an irreparable invasion of privacy," attorneys Natalie Shasha and J Weston Sigmund wrote in the letter, which does not name the actors, the Palm Beach Post reported Wednesday.

"They have been robbed of an opportunity to become parents and the child has been denied an opportunity to be nurtured and cared for by these loving parents," the attorneys wrote.

The couple, who live in the Los Angeles area, met while making the 1990 race car movie "Days of Thunder" and again played opposite each other in this year's "Far and Away."

Florida law prohibits release of adoption records.

We can breathe easy for about a billion more years

LONDON: The end of the world is nowhere near, according to research published Thursday, reports Reuter.

A study by Ken Caldeira and James Kasting of Pennsylvania State University reported in the British scientific journal Nature said the planet had about a billion years left, 10 times more than forecast by other experts a decade ago.

"Our prediction ought to be encouraging to humans," Caldeira and Kasting wrote.

"We can breathe easy for about a billion more years," said Tyler Volk of the earth systems group at New York University in a companion article commenting on the research.

The same journal reprinted a forecast by scientists James Lovelock and Martin Whittfield 10 years ago that mankind would die out in 100 million years.

170 Armenian troops killed in clashes with Azeris

LONDON, Dec 24: One hundred and seventy Armenian troops have been killed in border clashes that began Tuesday with Azerbaijani forces, Azerbaijani radio reported Wednesday in a broadcast monitored by the BBC, reports AFP.

The Armenian foreign ministry charged that the Azerbaijan army, with armoured and air support, had advanced 3.5 kilometres (two miles) into the Krasonoselsk region of Armenia, destroying the village of Vaan and causing many civilian casualties, the Interfax news agency said. The report made no mention of military casualties.

The ministry protested to the Azerbaijan government and denounced the reported incursion as "an aggression against the Armenian republic

and an encroachment on its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The Azerbaijan defence ministry said its forces had attacked Armenian positions on the border between Kadabek in Azerbaijan and Krasonoselsk in Armenia in order to check Armenian cross-border shelling.

"Our troops launched a sudden and swift attack, captured all the strategically important heights in the region and dealt shattering blow to the enemy," the ministry said.

"The Armenians lost 170 officers and men in the clashes."

Tension has been acute between Christian Armenian and Muslim Azerbaijan, both former Soviet republics.

One more black killed in S African violence

JOHANNESBURG, Dec 24: One black man died and three were wounded in two attacks Thursday in the Orange Free State, near where whites have been killed and wounded in recent attacks, police said, reports AP.

Right-wing whites warned of retribution attacks on blacks following the killings of three white girls in the past week in the area near Ficksburg in the Orange Free State, about 400 kilometres (240 miles) south of Johannesburg.

Police Capt Jöhlene van der Merwe said gunmen in a red pickup truck opened fire on a black taxi van near Ficksburg, wounding three people. The van then overturned, and 12 passengers were slightly injured.

In a separate attack, gunmen in a similar red vehicle shot to death the driver of a taxi van on another road in the area, van der Merwe said.

Qassimi new GCC Secy Gen

ABU DHABI, Dec 24: The six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council on Tuesday elected a new Secretary General to replace Abdullah Bishara who has served in his post since the regional alliance was set up in 1981, delegates said, reports Reuter.

The GCC heads of state meeting in Abu Dhabi since Monday elected Fahim Sultan bin Salem al-Qassimi as the new Secretary General for a four-year term.

Qassimi, 44, is from the United Arab Emirates and served as the UAE ambassador to the United Nations. He currently heads the Department of International Organisations and Conferences at the UAE Foreign Ministry.

GCC sources said the six states — Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates — have agreed that a new Secretary General would be elected every four years from different members state in an alphabetical order.



SARAJEVO: A nurse rocks a girl December 23 in the Kosovo hospital while a boy, injured during clashes in Sarajevo, sits nearby. Senior Serb, Croat and Muslim officers met December 23 under UN auspices for talks aimed at demilitarizing Sarajevo's airport sector and western suburbs.