

Iran-Contra scandal Prosecutors will question Bush

WASHINGTON, Dec 26: Prosecutors will question President George Bush about his failure to provide notes related to the Iran-Contra scandal to investigators, sources close to the criminal probe said Friday, reports AFP.

Bush is "the subject now of our investigation," independent counsel Lawrence Walsh said late Thursday, adding that the president may have "illegally withheld documents" from those handling the six-year probe.

Walsh said the "Iran-Contra cover-up...has now been completed" with Bush's Christmas Eve pardons of former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and five others involved in the scandal.

Investigators working with Walsh planned to question Bush, but delayed the task until after the November 3 presidential vote. Now, they "will want to talk to Bush in detail about these latest matters," said one source, speaking privately.

The influential New York Times in its Friday editorial said Bush, in using the President's power to pardon, which cannot be challenged by any other institution, committed the "ultimate abuse of power."

Moreover, the newspaper said, "Bush remains implicated in Iran-Contra, and in that sense, he has shamelessly pardoned himself."

The pardoned officials were either indicted or convicted for lying to congress about their involvement in the deal in which arms were sold to Iran in exchange for the release of American hostages in Lebanon.

Profits from the weapons sales were diverted to Nicaraguan Contra rebels in violation of a congressional ban on such aid.

People's Daily says

France breaks its word selling arms to Taiwan

BEIJING, Dec 26: China's official People's Daily accused France today of not keeping its word by selling fighter jets to Taiwan, a move that prompted Beijing to order closed the French consulate in Guangzhou, reports AFP.

"On many occasions, France has caused problems that affected bilateral relations... each time the French government has not kept its word," the Communist Party newspaper said in a signed article.

Four French firms have lined up a deal to sell China's rival government in Taiwan 60 Mirage 2000-5 jets and 1,500 air-to-air missiles for 3.8 billion US dollar.

In retaliation, China ordered France to close its consulate in the southern city of Guangzhou within a month.

According to the article, French officials had promised not to sell arms to Taiwan. "How can the international community have any faith in France?" the article asked.

"We will never give in to anything on the question of sovereignty," the paper said. "China will not support and move that damages its reputation or security."

The article said the arms deal had "aroused great anger amongst the Chinese people."

China considers Taiwan a renegade province.

UN peacekeepers come under mortar fire from Khmer Rouge

PHNOM PENH, Dec 26: UN peacekeepers have come under fire from Khmer Rouge guerrillas in central Cambodia and were spending nights in an underground bunker, a UN spokesman said today, reports AP.

The peacekeeper — 26 Bangladeshis, one Australian signaller, three civilian police and three election workers — were bunkered down in Savy Leu about 50 kilometres (30 miles) north of central Siem Reap, the site of the Angkor temple complex, spokesman

Eric Berman said.

The area came under mortar fire Thursday afternoon and it continued through this morning, Berman said.

No injuries were reported among UN personnel, but it was unclear whether any civilians had been injured or whether Phnom Penh forces had returned fire, he said.

"There's not an imminent threat of danger to life and limb," Berman said.

Elsewhere in central Cambodia, a team of peacekeepers checking on a four-

wheel drive vehicle abandoned after 46 peacekeepers were taken captive by the Khmer Rouge last week went back to the village and found the vehicle to be a burned-out shell, a UN military source said.

It was not clear whether radio or other equipment had been removed from the truck, the source said.

The peacekeepers had been forced to spend the night Wednesday near the village after their mine-resistant "wolf" vehicle hit a landmine and could not be repaired.

A second team was forced to spend Christmas even there Thursday when they were unable to fix it or tow it, and a third team returned to the Kompong Thom provincial capital with the wolf of Friday after repairs were carried out, Berman said.

Khmer Rouge guerrillas and Phnom Penh government forces had been fighting using AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades a short distance away from the disabled vehicle, he said.

UN move to end standoff over 415 Palestinians

TEL AVIV, Dec 26: A UN envoy plans to try Saturday to end standoff over 415 Muslim fundamentalists expelled by Israel and stranded in a south Lebanon no-man's land, reports AP.

The Israeli government banned aid from reaching the deported Palestinians through Israeli lines. Lebanese troops pulled nine of the expelled men from a hospital and forced them back to their freezing tent camp in a no man's land in south Lebanon.

Education Minister Shulamit Anon, who opposed Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in the government vote on barring aid to the Palestinians, hinted that Israel could still change its stance. The Cabinet will meet again on Sunday for its routine weekly session. Meanwhile, a UN envoy will arrive to examine the situation.

James Jonah, a UN under-secretary general, was due in Israel on Saturday to discuss the case of the deportees, which has led to international censure of Israel.

The International Committee of the Red Cross had asked Israel to let supplies be delivered to the Palestinians via Israeli-controlled southern Lebanon.

But the government, in a sharply divided vote, said supplies could easily be delivered from Lebanon, and that the Red Cross was being used as a tool to score propaganda points against Israel.

The 8-6 Cabinet vote in favour of the ban dramatized the concern of some ministers that Israel would be made to look even worse if it blocked the supplies.

The vote, which two abstentions, was also instructive in giving insight into the hawk-dove lineup in Rabin's six-month old Cabinet.

This may prove critical next year if Middle East peace talks reach a stage where Israel has to decide whether to make painful compromises with the Arabs.

Israel expelled the Palestinians on December 17 in a sweeping crackdown on Muslim fundamentalists in the occupied territories after six Israeli soldiers were killed.

Lebanon has refused to accept the Palestinians or allow relief to reach them through its lines. The showdown has stranded the expelled men in a makeshift tent camp set up on rocky slopes in a barren no man's land between Israeli-held territory and land controlled by Lebanon.



MARJ EZ-ZOHOUR: A Palestinian deportee carries firewood to warm himself in the camp in no-man's land between the Lebanese and Israeli armies in South Lebanon December 25. The Palestinians did not get any supplies or fuel since last Monday. — AFP/UNB photo

Sarajevo enjoys Christmas lull

SARAJEVO, Dec 26: The Bosnian capital Sarajevo enjoyed a Christmas lull in fighting, while Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic called for an immediate ceasefire and negotiations to end the republic's war, reports Reuter.

United Nations peacekeepers played Santa Claus. Handing out toys to about 150 children. But shelling continued around the capital's suburbs and the head of the UN Protection Forces (UNPROFOR) in Bosnia had to evacuate his forward headquarters when it came under mortar attack for the second day in a row.

Muslim-controlled Bosnian Radio reported fighting in Gradacac and Broko, towns along a northern corridor used by Serbs to supply holdings in the west of Bosnia and Croatia, but the Bosnian Serb news agency SRNA denied earlier reports that Croats had seized the corridor and said the area was quiet.

Bosnian Radio also reported fighting in Gorazde, south of Sarajevo and in Srebrenica, near Bosnia's border with Serbia.

Milosevic, in an interview with the US Cable News Network, called the fighting in Bosnia a mistake but said an agreement in which all three sides felt equal was the only solution.

"There is only one way out in two parts," he said, speaking in English "one is immediate ceasefire and the other is continuation of their negotiations, all three sides, to make a solution on their own. There is no other way than that."

Serbia's election commission released provisional final results, confirming the victory of Milosevic and his ruling Socialist Party of Serbia in Serbia's presidential and parliamentary elections. It said it would not make an official announcement until it had decided on all complaints.

Opposition candidates say the vote was rigged.

The election commission

said Milosevic had won 56.3 per cent of the vote and challenged Milan Panic 33.8 per cent other candidates won only a few votes.

In the race for the Serbian parliament, the socialist took 101 seats, their allied Serbian radical party 73, the opposition democratic movement of Serbia 49 and other parties a few seats each.

But the war in Bosnia overshadowed any interest in election results. NATO and the UN

have been debating whether to step in and try to stop the fighting by force.

The commander of all United Nations protection forces in the former Yugoslavia said military intervention would endanger UN troops in the ground.

"It will mean more lives lost, it will mean continuation of the conflict," Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar, an Indian, told reporters on Friday.



TIRANA, Albania: Leafing through a programme, Albanian President Sali Berisha (centre front) assists in the inauguration of an Islamic Centre, which will include a mosque, school and library. Historically Albania is mostly Muslim but all religions were outlawed from 1967 to 1990. — AFP/UNB photo

Rabin welcomes Arabs' decision to pursue ME peace talks

JERUSALEM, Dec 26: Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in an interview published Friday welcomed the Arabs' decision to pursue Middle East peace talks despite Israel's expulsions of Palestinians, reports AP.

"I consider the Arab countries' decision not to suspend negotiations as a positive act," Rabin said in Friday's edition of the Israeli newspaper, Maariv.

"I do not regret the expulsion decision that I took. We are on the path toward peace despite the difficulties," Rabin added.

Egypt and the three Arab countries participating in the peace talks — Syria, Jordan and Lebanon — urged the United Nations to enforce its resolution ordering the deportees' return, but did not threaten to pull out of the talks.

TEHRAN, Dec 26: Arab countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) would have to "cross a sea of blood" to reach disputed islands in the Gulf, Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani warned here on Friday, reports AP.

Raising the level of the Iranian challenge to the GCC countries, the Iranian President said at Friday prayers at the University of Tehran that they "should not repeat the same mistakes as Saddam" (Iraqi President Saddam Hussein), who tried to "transform Iran's Arvand-Roud river into the Shatt Al-Arab and Kuwait into an Iraqi province."

He said "Iran is stronger than you (the Gulf States)," and accused the GCC countries of having chosen "satan's path". Rafsanjani was reacting to a reaffirmation on Wednesday by GCC leaders meeting in Abu

Dhabi of United Arab Emirates sovereignty over the islands of Abu Musa.



The six Arab Gulf countries meeting at the GCC summit also said normalization of their relationships with Iran de-

pends on an end to Iranian occupation of the three islands, which enjoy a strategic location at the entrance to the Gulf.

On Wednesday, Iran called their position "irreversible". Rafsanjani added in his Friday remarks that the GCC stand, occurring "at a time when the Islamic world is in difficulty and needs coordination to cope with the crimes committed by Israel, only serves Israeli interests".

He commented: "While the Islamic world should act to denounce and exploit the expulsion of some 400 Palestinians from the occupied territories, five or six chiefs of State of the Persian Gulf countries divert world public opinion."

The quarrel between Iran and the UAE over sovereignty over the three islands, had been on the back burner for two decades.

Off the Record

Di banned from seeing sons

LONDON: Britain's Prince Charles has banned his estranged wife Princess Diana from seeing their two sons for six days over the Christmas period, British tabloid newspapers reported today, says Reuter.

The mass-circulation Sun newspaper and Today carried front-page stories headlined respectively "Di banned from boys for a week" and "Charles bans Diana from seeing princes".

The reports, which were uncorroborated, said royal heir Charles, 44, imposed the six-day ban starting on Christmas Eve in revenge for Diana's refusal to spend Christmas with Queen Elizabeth and the rest of the royal family at Sandringham.

"You do what you want. The boys will stay with me," Today's report quoted the prince as saying.

The Sun said Diana had wanted the boys who are second and third in line to the throne, to spend the holiday season with her but Charles insisted they keep up the royal tradition of Christmas with the Queen at Sandringham, her country estate about 100 miles (160 km) northeast of London.

"It effectively shows he has emerged victorious in the bitter war of the Waleses and is now intent on playing the devoted father," the Sun report said.

Proposal to fiancée through television

LONDON: A British soldier proposed to his soldier girlfriend serving in Sarajevo in front of millions of television viewers on Christmas Day and got a double surprise, reports AP.

Army signaller Philip Cooper, 20, was told he would be speaking to Caroline Cove, 26, on the BBC-TV's "Good Morning" show through a live satellite link with Sarajevo, where she is a lance corporal with British forces helping the UN relief effort.

Cooper's first shock came when he popped the question and Ms. Cove refused to answer saying, "I'll tell you when I see you next."

The show's presenters, Nick Owen and Anne Diamond, then sprang his second surprise when they disclosed that Ms. Cove was not in Sarajevo, but standing just outside the Birmingham studio.

'Little Christmas'

PALERMO: A woman revealed to police early Friday that she abandoned her new born baby at a construction dump site and officers rescuing the infant girl nicknamed her "Natalina" — or "little Christmas" reports AP.

State TV showed the child snuggling in a hospital incubator after her rescue. The Italian news agency ANSA said the 2.7 kilo (nearly 6-pound) girl was fine.

The woman had gone to a Palermo hospital emergency room for treatment of bleeding and a doctors there suspected that she had just given birth. The doctor called police, who questioned the 20-year-old unmarried woman, ANSA said.

The women initially told police she had given birth in her bathroom and the infant was washed down the toilet. But she later revealed where she left the baby, wrapped in a blanket and placed in a plastic bag.

BRIEFLY

Flood kills 14 in Iran: At least 14 people were killed and more than 900 houses destroyed in flooding in southern Iran this week, the official news agency IRNA reported yesterday, says Xinhua from Tehran.

The floods also caused heavy losses to livestock, roads and farmland in Fars, Herman, Hormuzgan and Sistan-Baluchistan provinces, IRNA said.

Red Crescent society relief workers from the four provinces and neighbouring regions have been active in the stricken areas and relief aid has been dispatched to the victims by land or air.

16 killed in Punjab: Sixteen people, including 13 militants, were killed in Punjab since Thursday night, police said, reports PTI from Chandigarh.

An Amritsar report last night said three militants and a constable were killed in an encounter in Furka village yesterday.

The killed militants were identified as Lakhwinder Singh alias Lakha, Lt Gen Deputy Chief of BTFK, his wife and Tarsem Singh. The constable was identified as Manjit Singh.

Lakha was wanted in about 200 killings, including 25 of policemen. Two AK-47 rifles with four magazines, one SLR and half kg of opium was recovered from the spot.

Protest against neo-Nazi attacks: About 200,000 people carrying candles and torches took to the streets of Berlin on Christmas Day to protest against neo-Nazi attacks on foreigners which have killed 17 people this year, police said, reports Reuter from Berlin.

Radio stations and church leaders had urged Berliners to display a candle in their homes to show their disgust at the right-wing attacks under the motto: "A light for reason".

The marchers walked from the Brandenburg gate to the Theodor-Heuss-Platz in the west of the city. Thousands of people put a candle in their windows as dusk fell.

Hundreds of thousands of Germans, young and old, have been mobilized throughout Germany during the past week to hold up a candle against the racism which peaked when three Turks were killed in a neo-Nazi firebombing on November 23 in Moelein.

Panic accepts Clinton's invitation: Yugoslav Prime Minister Milan Panic has accepted an invitation by US President-elect Bill Clinton to attend his inauguration on January 20, Tanjug news agency reported Friday, reports AFP from Belgrade.

Panic, a Serbian-born US citizen, is the first Yugoslav premier to be invited to the swearing in of a US President.

The 63-year-old Prime Minister who made a fortune in the US pharmaceutical industry is a member of the US Democratic Party and has helped finance the campaign of 1988 presidential hopeful Michael Dukakis.

He returned to the rump Yugoslavia of Serbia and Montenegro in July when he became Prime Minister.

2 Pakistanis executed in S Arabia: Two Pakistanis and one Arab were executed yesterday in Saudi Arabia for murder and drug trafficking separately, according to a report from the Saudi capital, Riyadh, reports Xinhua from Cairo.

The Interior Ministry announced that Pakistani Sayed Rahman Sultan was beheaded in Jeddah for smuggling heroin in to the kingdom. Another Pakistani was executed in the northern city of Hayer for murder.

The Arab man, who was beheaded in the capital of Riyadh, was identified as Abdullah Ibn Hemeid Al-Harbi. He was convicted stabbing a man to death.

Saudi Arabia has executed some 40 men, mostly Pakistanis, for trafficking narcotics since religious authorities ruled in mid-1980s that drugs smuggling could be punished by death.

Japan's plea to free Suu Kyi: Japan's Foreign Minister Michio Watanabe appealed Friday to Myanmar authorities to restore democracy and release the opposition leader and last year's Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, officials said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

Watanabe made his appeal during talks with his Myanmar counterpart Ohn Gyaaw, who is on a three-day private visit in Tokyo after returning from the UN General Assembly in New York.

China sentences 10 Tibetan protesters

BEIJING, Dec 26: China has sentenced 10 Tibetans, mostly monks and nuns, to prison terms of up to nine years for participating in pro-independence protests earlier this year, the Tibet Information Network said today, reports Reuter.

The longest sentence went to Lobsang Dorje, a 20-year-old monk who was sentenced to nine years imprisonment on September 16 for allegedly encouraging 20 colleagues to demonstrate outside Lhasa's Jokhang temple in May, the London-based monitoring group said.

The group based its information on Chinese court documents it had obtained, it said. Officials in Lhasa could not be reached for comment.

The Tibet Information Network said those sentenced were not represented by lawyers during the trials. It said it had not information that several had been beaten or tortured.

China, which dates its disputed claim to the Himalayan region to the 13th century, has imposed heavy security on Lhasa, Tibet's capital, since March 1989 when it crushed pro-independence demonstrations there.

Separatist demonstrations still periodically take place, travellers say.

The Tibet Information Network said the May 16 protest was the fourth to take

place that week. At least 30 people were arrested during that week, it said, but the whereabouts of most are unknown.

In addition to the monk sentenced to nine years in jail, one was sentenced to eight years, one to seven years and one 18-year-old monk to six years.

Filipino rebels kill 16 Christian farmers

COTABATO, Philippines, Dec 26: Muslim separatist guerrillas killed 16 Christian farmers in nearby Carmen town on Christmas day, the military and a survivor said here today, reports AFP.

Colonel Rogelio Bendejo, operations officer of the local army brigade, confirmed that 16 farmers had been killed and four others wounded by Muslim guerrillas adding that pursuit operations were being conducted against the killers.

However he could not say why the guerrillas had killed the farmers.

A survivor of the incident, Shirley Valer, said that on Christmas day, the guerrillas involved had been seen in the town, playing basketball. Shortly after sunset, they suddenly went from house to house, ordering all adult males at gunpoint to come out.

In the Caribbean City of Barranquilla, an inmate was killed in a prison uprising and two youths were killed in traffic accidents, authorities said.

Authorities said alcohol abuse was a factor in most of the street violence.

Police in the capital said this Christmas was one of the quietest in recent memory, with seven deaths reported in street clashes and hit-and-run killings.

US to give \$ 175m to dismantle Ukraine's missiles

KIEV, Dec 26: US President George Bush told Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk by telephone late Thursday that Washington was ready to grant Ukraine 175 million dollars in aid to dismantle nuclear missiles, a Ukrainian source said