

BRIEFLY

Blasts kill two in Yemen : Bombs blasted two hotels in Yemen's southern Port of Aden on Tuesday, killing two people and wounding two, hotel officials and eyewitnesses said, reports Reuter from Yemen.
An official told Reuters that a tourist was killed and another wounded in an explosion at the Gold Muhor hotel at about 9.40 pm (1840 GMT). He did not give their nationalities.
The other bomb apparently killed a person carrying it and seriously wounded a companion in the car park of the Aden Movenpick hotel at around the same time, witnesses said.
Early reports said US servicemen could be among the casualties, but spokesman for the State Department and Pentagon in Washington told Reuters no American servicemen appeared to have been hurt.

Bandits free US missionary : Muslim bandits freed unharmed a US missionary after holding him captive for 68 days in their jungle hideout in the southern Philippines, officials said Wednesday, reports Reuter.
Gerald Fraszczak, 55, was released on Tuesday on a beach on the island of Basilan after negotiations between the kidnappers and local Muslim officials, area marine Commander Brigadier-General Antonio Villamor told reporters.
"Free" a broadly grinning Fraszczak told a press conference at the southern military command headquarters in Dzaabonga city 860 km (535 miles) south of Manila.

French FM to meet Arafat : French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas will meet Palestine Liberation Organisation Chairman Yasser Arafat in Geneva today to discuss the plight of Palestinians expelled by Israel, informed Arab sources said Tuesday, reports AFP from Paris.
The sources said that Arafat, who is due in Geneva today, would also discuss the problem of the 415 Palestinians with UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali.
Dumas would also broach the issue with Boutros Boutros-Ghali who arrived in Geneva last week, UN officials in Geneva said Monday.
Dumas held talks in Vienna with his Russian counterpart Andrei Kozirev Tuesday. Dumas offered Sunday to send a medical mission to the deportees who are stranded in Southern Lebanon.

Russia's first independent TV channel : US broadcaster Turner Broadcasting System said on Tuesday it will launch Russia's first independent television channel on Friday in a joint venture with the Moscow Independent Broadcasting Co, reports Reuter from Atlanta.
The new station, to be called TV 6 Moscow, will operate on over-the-air frequencies and be supported by advertising, the network said.
Programming will consist of five hours of cable news network international from 7 pm to midnight Moscow time. A 24-hour schedule will be filled out with American cartoons, like "Bugs Bunny" and "Daffy Duck" plus Russian movies.

Cold claims 8 in Sarajevo: Eight old people have died of cold since Christmas in a home in a Sarajevo suburb, staff at the home said on Monday, reports Reuter from Sarajevo.
Peter Kessler, spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, confirmed that people trapped in the home near the front line in the Serb-controlled neighbourhood of Nedzarici were dying one by one.
UNHCR staff visited it in recent days. "We found that people in this home are dying from the cold," Kessler told Reuters.

China admits biggest military purge

BEIJING, Dec 30: China's Communist Party chief Jiang Zemin has praised a recent major reshuffle of top army leaders, marking the first official confirmation of Beijing's biggest military purge since 1949, reports Reuter.

"The quality of the whole leadership has clearly been improved," Jiang was quoted as saying in Wednesday's official People's Daily.

This is full of significance for preserving the unity and cohesiveness of the military and will further strengthen the party's leadership of the troops," Jiang was quoted as saying at a reception for veteran army officers on Tuesday.

Jiang's comments mark Beijing's first public admission that China's military structure has been thoroughly re-examined following October's Communist Party congress.

The congress resulted in one of China's top military men, General Yang Baibing, being unceremoniously dropped from power.

Yang, the half-brother of President Yang Shangkun, lost his military positions in exchange for a seat — but little influence — on the party's 20 man politburo. Yang Shangkun, as expected, retired from the politburo and is expected to step down from the presidency when parliament meets in March.

Hong Kong's Wen Wei Po newspaper, which Beijing often uses to release sensitive information, said the reshuffle involved commanders and political commissars from China's seven military regions, the heads of the service branches and main departments under the general staff headquarters.

The newspaper called it the biggest military reshuffle since the people's republic was founded in 1949.

The chief beneficiary of the reshuffle is Jiang, the Communist Party's General Secretary. He officially heads the military as Chairman of the central military commission but has no army experience and little influence.

Deng, whose own power was founded initially in the army, has pushed Jiang as the "core" of the country's next generation of leadership and has worked hard behind the scenes to bolster the party chief's prestige.

Jiang repeatedly referred to his powerful backer in Tuesday's speech, prompting some analysts to comment that he remains little more than a mouthpiece for the 88-year-old patriarch who now holds no official position.

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The former Communist Socialist Party headed by Serbia's ultra-nationalist President Slobodan Milosevic has a two-third majority in the federal parliament. Legislators failed to take notice of the breach of the constitution after a socialist deputy from Montenegro criticized the decision to name an interim premier.

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A censure motion by the chambers again Panje was largely symbolic as his mandate was due to end next month.

Radoje Kontic Yugoslav's interim PM

BELGRADE, Dec 30: The Yugoslav parliament on Tuesday named Montenegrin Radoje Kontic as interim federal prime minister, only hours after ousting Milan Panje, Belgrade television announced, reports AFP.

Kontic was Deputy Premier in Panje's five-and-a-half month cabinet.

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Security around Taj Mahal tightened

Muslims plan to pray at Babri Mosque site

NEW DELHI, Dec 30: Muslim clerical groups are planning to march to the northern Indian town of Ayodhya to pray at the site of a 16th-century mosque demolished by militant Hindus this month, a leading Muslim priest said Tuesday, reports AFP.

Ahmad Bukhari, the Deputy Imam of Delhi's biggest mosque, Jama Masjid, also criticised a decision by the local authorities in Ayodhya to allow Hindus to pray at a makeshift temple erected on the rubble of the Moghul-built mosque.

"If Hindus could be allowed to offer prayers at the disputed site, why not Muslims," Bukhari said, adding that he was in touch with other Muslim leaders to coordinate the march plans.

A Muslim Minister from premier PV Narasimha Rao's cabinet said meanwhile that he and his other colleagues were opposed to a decision by New Delhi to seek a Supreme Court opinion on the Ayodhya dispute.

Hindus claim that the demolished Babri Mosque stood on the site of a temple to their warrior-king lord Rama. Muslims dispute the claim.

The government announced Sunday that it was taking over the site in Ayodhya and set up two trusts to build a mosque and a temple.

It also decided to ask the Supreme Court to rule whether the mosque was built by the founder of the Moghul dynasty, Emperor Babar, on the site of a temple.

Deputy Commerce Minister Salman Khursheed told AFP that Muslim ministers wanted the court to decide all the cases related to the Ayodhya dispute and not just the issue of whether the mosque was built over a razed Hindu temple.

Khursheed said the Muslim ministers would meet Rao to discuss the Ayodhya controversy soon.

Most Muslim leaders and political parties, including the Hindu revivalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which spearheaded the campaign for a temple on the mosque site, have rejected the government compromise package.

AP adds: Security has been heightened around the Taj Mahal and two nearby Muslim-built monuments for fear of attacks by Hindu zealots, news reports said Wednesday.

Metal detectors have been placed at the entrance of the

pearl-white marble structure in the northern city of Agra, and anti-terrorist commands have been posted outside. The Pioneer newspaper reported.

The Pioneer said security also was stepped up at Agra Fort, built by Emperor Akbar in 1565 and at Fatehpur Sikri, a city Akbar built and briefly used as his capital, 40 kilometers (25 miles) west of Agra.

The Pioneer said the number of security men around the monuments was doubled and the barbed wire fence behind the Taj was raised to nine feet (2.7 meters).

The fear of attacks rose after Hindu militants demolished a Muslim shrine in the town of Ayodhya December 6, triggering nationwide Hindu-Muslim riots that left at least 1,200 people dead and 5,000 wounded.

Franco sworn in as Brazil's president

BRASILIA, Brazil, Dec 30: Dogged by an influence-peddling scandal, Fernando Collor de Mello abruptly resigned Tuesday as head of Latin America's largest country and was replaced by his vice president, reports AP.

Itamar Franco was sworn in to serve the remaining two years of Collor's term. Stamping a "Mr Clean" image on his administration, Franco turned over a statement of his personal assets to the Senate president at the podium, to the laughter and applause of the gallery.

The 62-year-old Franco broke with Collor in May and was untouched by the scandal that surrounded Collor — Brazil's first democratically elected leader in 29 years and the first ever to resign under the cloud of scandal.

Collor, 43, voted into office on a clean-government platform, was accused of taking 6.5 million dollars.

BRASILIA: Brazilian President Itamar Franco (L), accompanied by Senate President Mauro Benavides, waves to supporters December 29 during his inauguration ceremony in the Chamber of Deputies. Franco assumed full power of the Brazilian government after suspended President Fernando Collor de Mello resigned. — AFP/UNB photo

UN envoy's mission to Lebanon proves fruitless

JERUSALEM, Dec 30: UN Envoy James Jonah returned to Israel from Lebanon empty handed Tuesday after failing to negotiate supply convoys for 415 Palestinian deportees stranded in Lebanon, reports AP.

Meanwhile, Israel published the names of the 10 men it had expelled by mistake, including one 16-year-old youth authorities said was wrongly identified.

Jonah was due to consult with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres on Wednesday after Lebanon rejected a relief proposal by the International Red Cross.

Israel has refused to allow assistance to the deportees to pass through Israeli-controlled territory in south Lebanon, saying this would signal its continuing responsibility for their fate.

Rabin hinted that an alternative compromise might come if Palestinians organizations renounced violence during the Middle East peace talks, due to resume in Washington next month.

"We are determined the deportees will not come back to Israel," Rabin told a conference of Jewish jurists in Jerusalem, "unless there will be a complete change, and all the organizations will decide to maintain tranquility — no violence, no terror — during the peace negotiations."

Israel expelled the Palestinians on December 17, alleging they were active in radical Islamic organizations responsible for attacks on its forces.

The men are running low on food and fuel in tents in freezing weather.

They are stranded in a "no man's land" between territory controlled by the Lebanese army and the Israeli-occupied "security zone" in South Lebanon.

All are residents of the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The mission proposed by the Red Cross would have allowed a medical team to reach the deportees from Israeli-controlled territory and a supply convoy to cross simultaneously into the camp from Lebanon. Israel had agreed to the proposal.

START II deal 'sounds good': Clinton

HILTON HEAD, South Carolina, Dec 30: President-elect Bill Clinton Tuesday said the US-Russian START-II nuclear disarmament agreement announced earlier in the day "sounds good," and that he was awaiting details, reports AFP.

Clinton, who is vacationing with his family here, said he was not bothered by President George Bush's drive to conclude the agreement before his term ends January 20.

"I think that [Russian President] Boris Yeltsin wants and agreement now," Clinton said, and that "he wants to keep the reform side of his agenda going forward, which requires him to continue to reduce ... their huge nuclear military arsenal."

UN resumes aid shipments to Kurds

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 30: The United Nations resumed humanitarian aid shipments to Kurds in northern Iraq after Iraq agreed to allow UN guards to ride in relief convoys, officials said Tuesday, reports AP.

Some of the shipments had been suspended when relief vehicles were bombed.

A UN source, speaking on condition of anonymity, said a convoy of four to five trucks passed through at checkpoint at Faidah on Tuesday. The trucks were accompanied by a half-dozen UN guards and no incidents were reported as the convoy headed to Erbil, the source said.

Tigers kill 4 more Lankan troops

COLOMBO, Dec 30: Tamil guerrillas have ambushed an army patrol and killed four soldiers for the loss of one of their own fighters in Sri Lanka's embattled northeast, a military spokesman said here today, reports AFP.

Gunmen of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) opened fire on the patrol at Poonani Tuesday, the spokesman said, adding one soldier was also seriously wounded.

Security forces blamed for violence in S Africa

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 30: Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali on Tuesday blamed security forces for some of the violence in South Africa and said police had failed to investigate clashes properly, reports AP.

While such allegations have been before by black South African political activists, this is the first time they have been given weight by the head of the United Nations.

In a report to the 15-nation Security Council, Boutros-Ghali noted "considerable progress" in talks between the government and the African National Congress on ending white minority rule. He also reported, "substantial agreement" among the power brokers in South Africa on arrangements for multi-party negotiations on the country's future.

But his report also cited these problems:

— There is also evidence that the security forces of the homelands are involved in violence," he called on the South African government to solve the problem.

Off the Record

KLOSTERS, Switzerland: Britain's Duchess of York and her daughters, Princess Beatrice (R) and Princess Eugenie, pose for the photographers December 29 in the Swiss resort of Klosters. They arrived here Tuesday for a skiing holiday and are expected to stay until the New Year. — AFP/UNB photo

Diet Coke retiring

ATLANTA: Diet Coke, the nation's third best-selling soft drink, is changing its tune as it enters its second decade, reports AP.

Gone as of New Year's Day will be the "Just For The Taste of It" slogan that has been in place since the product's inception in 1982. The slogan will be replaced by "Taste it All" and "One Awesome Calorie" as The Coca-Cola Co launches a new advertising campaign for Diet Coke.

Diet Coke's familiar white and red cans and bottles will be altered slightly to include the new slogans.

Coke officials Tuesday confirmed the changes but would not comment on the reasons nor reveal details of the new ads.

The new Diet Coke advertisements will be the first visible sign of the annual January renewal of the cola wars.

Rival PepsiCo Inc of Somers, NY, is planning a big splash for its new Crystal Pepsi, culminating in an ad blitz during the Super Bowl telecast.

And Coke plans to step up marketing for its new Tab Clear, which was introduced earlier this month.

Indonesians should forget about next year

JAKARTA: Indonesians should probably forget about next year and for that matter, 1994, reports Reuter.

Indonesia's most prominent para-psychologist warned of instability on a scale to match the downfall of the powerful Japanese kingdom of Majapahit 512 years ago when the planets Saturn, Uranus and Neptune were aligned.

The planets line up every 171 years and 1993 will be the next time.

"The nation's stability will be disrupted by conflicts... which could lead to a civil war and kill many, many people," the Jakarta Post daily on Wednesday quoted the Chairman of the Indonesian Association of para-Psychologists, Permadi, as saying.

He predicted economic chaos, heated disputes between the two main Muslim groups in this predominantly Islamic country and disenchantment with the government by the powerful military.

Power will be snatched by the tiny Indonesian Democratic Party, the closest thing to an opposition, with two local film directors and the choreographer son of Indonesia's first president heading the new government.

But Permadi said things would be back to normal by 1995.

Russia withdraws troops from Vilnius

VILNIUS, Dec 30: The Russian army ended its presence in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius on Tuesday, handing over control of its main base to city authorities and withdrawing its last soldiers there, reports Reuter.

Lithuanian officials said the departure of the 107th motor-rifle division from the capital signalled the start of the final phase of Moscow's withdrawal of its forces from the Baltic state, where 22,500 men were once stationed.

Units from the 107th division, then under Soviet command, took part in an attack on the television tower in Vilnius in January 1991 in which 14 people were killed.

Lithuania was then fighting for independence from the Soviet Union, which it finally secured in September of that year, shortly after the failure of a hardline coup in Moscow.

After a signing ceremony on Tuesday, senior officers handed back to Vilnius authorities 66 hectares (160 acres) of land and facilities the troops had occupied in the northern military camp in the city.

"The final withdrawal of the 107th division from Vilnius marks a very important period in the process of withdrawal of former Soviet troops from Lithuania," Defence Minister Audrius Butkevicius told Reuters.

About 15,000 Russian soldiers still remained elsewhere in Lithuania outside the capital, he said.

Butkevicius said he believed Moscow would adhere to its withdrawal timetable which set August 31, 1993 as the deadline for all its troops to be pulled out.

Earlier this year, Moscow told Lithuania and the two other Baltic states that it would be impossible to complete the pull-out before 1994 because it was having difficulty absorbing all its troops withdrawn from eastern Europe.

Troops in Somalia rush to prepare for Bush's new year's trip

MOGADISHU, Dec 30: American troops and Secret Service personnel rushed Wednesday to prepare for a New Year's visit of President Bush to one of the most chaotic, lawless towns on earth, reports AP.

Razor wire barriers were being strung at the sites Bush will visit, sandbags were being placed around new gun pits and machine-gun posts and Marines were extending and tightening their areas of control.

"We are very concerned about the president's security when he visits here," said Marine Col Fred Peck. "I doubt if any American president has ever visited a nation in such turmoil and such a state of anarchy."

"We are doing everything we can to assure his safety," Bush is making the final foreign journey of his presidency to Somalia, where a US led military coalition is trying to make the country safe for famine relief work.

Neither the military nor the Secret Service would elaborate on security plans for Bush.

On Tuesday, American troops seized a partially destroyed six-story building known as America House across the street from the former US embassy and converted it into Marine headquarters.

Bush is to visit the embassy shortly after his arrival at midday New Year's Eve, and Marines have been subjected to erratic sniper fire from America House.

The building housed embassy employees until the US ambassador and his then-skeleton staff were evacuated in January 1991 during the final days of the civil war that toppled former dictator Mohammad Siad Barre.

Peck said a small cache of weapons was found in America House, including a 106-millimeter recoilless rifle, a number of rifle-propelled grenades and ammunition.

A much larger cache was seized in northeastern Mogadishu, an area newly patrolled by Marines north of the so-called Green Line that divides the city into fiefdoms controlled by rival warlords.

That cache contained two 105-millimeter howitzers, ten 50-caliber machine guns, two missile launchers, ten 80-millimeter mortars and a lot of smaller weapons, Peck said.

Military planes dropped 100,000 leaflets on Mogadishu on Tuesday warning residents that display of weapons "will not be tolerated."

MOGADISHU: Saudi soldiers check ID of a Somali woman close to their encampment near Mogadishu airport December 29. Saudi Arabia has sent some 700 troops as part of the United Nations forces in Somalia. — AFP/UNB photo