

Heath in Baghdad to free 3 Britons

LONDON, Dec 9: A British aircraft was reported to be standing by to fly to the Middle East today if former Prime Minister Sir Edward Heath secures the release of three Britons jailed in Iraq, reports Reuters.

Britain's Press Association News Agency said Heath, who is in Baghdad negotiating with the Iraqi authorities, had contacted Virgin Atlantic Airline boss Richard Branson.

It quoted a spokesman for Branson as saying all arrangements were provisional but a jet was being prepared to fly to the Jordanian capital Amman with relatives of the three Britons on board.

Heath met Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz in Baghdad on Wednesday in Britain's latest bid to secure the release of the Britons, jailed for entering Iraq illegally.

Sources in Baghdad said Heath was on a visit of several days and they did not expect the Britons to be released before the weekend.

"The procedure is for the foreign dignitary to ask for clemency which will later be passed to President Saddam Hussein," one source said.

Another said Heath might meet directly for their freedom with Saddam, who is the only one who can pardon them.

A European diplomat in Baghdad said Iraq might release the Britons over the weekend.

Paul Ride, 33, and Michael Wainwright, 42, were jailed last year for seven and 10 years respectively for entering Iraq illegally. Another Briton, Simon Dunn, 23, was arrested in June and jailed for eight years for the same offence.



Iranian spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (R) meets Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in Tehran on Thursday. Centre is an unidentified interpreter. — AFP photo

3 US senators in Myanmar

BANGKOK, Dec 9: Three US senators, heading a 15-member delegation, arrived in Yangon on Wednesday for an official visit to Myanmar, state-run radio Yangon reported, says AFP.

The delegation arrived by US military plane at Yangon's Mingaladone Airport and was welcomed by senior Myanmar Foreign Ministry officials and US diplomats in Yangon, according to a broadcast monitored here.

On their first day in Myanmar the US politicians and delegates toured the Myanmar capital before attending an honorary dinner hosted by Myanmar Foreign Minister Ohn Gyaw. The report did not offer any details.

The US government has suspended official aid to Myanmar since the ruling junta's bloody crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations in September 1988.

Stop gun violence in America: Clinton

WASHINGTON, Dec 9: President Clinton Wednesday called a shooting spree on a New York commuter train a "terrible human tragedy" that underscores the urgent need to stop gun violence in America, reports Reuters.

"I hope that this will give some more impetus to the need to act urgently to deal with the unnecessary problems of gun violence in the country," Clinton told reporters.

Clinton was reacting to the shooting Tuesday by a 35-year-old black gunman of 23 people, all of them white or Asians. Four were killed and 19 wounded. Police said the gunman was obsessed by racial hatred.

"While no one believes there is anything we can do to solve every problem of someone who snaps mentally and does something terrible like this — we have to acknowledge that honestly — there are a lot of things that we're going to have to do in this country to get violence under control that relate to rebuilding our communities and healing across racial lines and economic lines," he said.

But he said "we need to start with public safety," arguing that Congress could take a big step by approving his crime bill that would put 100,000 more police on the streets.

Clinton said an amendment by democratic senator Dianne Feinstein of California to limit assault weapons would ban the type of 15-round ammunition clips that the gunman used to reload. "It's a terrible human tragedy and my sympathy goes out to all the families involved," he said.

BRIEFLY

50000 Filipinos have HIV: About 50,000 Filipinos are estimated to have been infected with the virus that causes AIDS, with 500 having tested positive so far, health secretary Juan Flavio said yesterday. AFP reports from Manila.

"Fifty thousand is our estimate on the number of Filipinos who have the HIV in their blood," he said over radio station DZRH.

"Only 500 know because they have been tested and are in our registry. Of that, 111 have full-blown AIDS and 72 of them have died," he added.

Rally against Romanian govt: Nearly 40,000 demonstrators marched through the Romanian capital Wednesday calling for the ouster of the government, alleging that the country is still under the control of former communists. AFP reports from Romania.

In the third such protest in three weeks, the demonstrators condemned the government of Prime Minister Nicolae Vacarolu for having filed to solve the country's economic woes.

The protesters carried pictures of former communist party officials and placards with slogans from the era of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu to illustrate the similarity between the old regime and the new administration under president Ion Iliescu, a former communist party senior official.

Protest against Bush policy: About 100 demonstrators protested the health-care policies of former US President George Bush outside a medical research fund-raising dinner where he was speaking. AP reports from Hamilton.

"We feel he is not a morally credible speaker to be raising funds for health care," said David Jefferess, a McMaster University student who helped organise Wednesday evening's noisy demonstration.

Tiger kills boy in Hyderabad: A 12-year-old boy was killed by a tiger at a Safari Park in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad after entering its enclosure to retrieve a ball, a newspaper reported Thursday. AFP says from New Delhi.

Visitors to the zoo looked on helplessly as the tiger dragged the body of Mohammed Rafi around its enclosure at Nehru Park, The Hindu said.

The boy had apparently slipped through a hole in the fence to retrieve a ball, the daily said, adding that a tiger also bit off the hand of a woman recently at the same zoo.

6 California condors freed: Six California condors were freed in a remote canyon in a new attempt to reintroduce the endangered species to the wild but keep them from manmade dangers that killed four predecessors. AP reports from New Cuyama.

Five immature condors bred in captivity were let out of a pen Wednesday on a rocky outcrop in Los Padres National Forest, a followed by a 2 1/2-year-old bird named Xewu which lurched out its pen and soared out of sight.

Thai-S Africa diplomatic ties: Thailand and South Africa established diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level Thursday, the state-run Radio Thailand reported, according to AP from Bangkok.

Thailand has been following United Nations guidelines on relations with South Africa.

Athens preparing to host fresh talks

Bosnian Muslim-Serb talks collapse

BELGRADE, Dec 9: Negotiations between Bosnian Muslims and Serbs collapsed at Sarajevo Airport Wednesday, the Speaker of the self-proclaimed Bosnian Serb parliament Momcilo Krajisnik said, reports AFP.

Krajisnik, who met Bosnian Prime Minister Haris Silajdzic during the day, blamed the Bosnian Muslim leader for the breakdown, according to the Tanjug news agency.

The two men in particular discussed territorial issues, including the question of a land corridor to the sea, as well as the freeing of prisoners and the evacuation of Serbs from Sarajevo and other Muslim-held towns, he said.

"Silajdzic's inflexible attitude does not augur well for progress in this kind of talks," said Krajisnik, adding that he was "pessimistic" about hopes for further talks.

"I will inform our leaders and the international mediators David Owen and Thorvald Stoltenberg, and we will consider whether or not it is necessary to continue these talks, he added.

The talks between Silajdzic and Krajisnik Wednesday was the third consecutive day the two had met, following on from

talks involving the three Bosnian actions in Geneva last week.

On Tuesday Krajisnik had told Tanjug that the talks, held in the presence of UN officials, had managed to unblock certain questions "giving grounds for cautious optimism."

AP adds: UN officials reported an upsurge of fighting around the capital, as Greece's foreign minister indicated Bosnia was preparing to host new talks between the warring sides.

Earlier reports said the talks focused on the possible division of Sarajevo and on humanitarian questions. The talks apparently were an effort to follow up on peace negotiations that broke down last week in Geneva.

State-run Bosnian radio quoted Silajdzic as saying that discussions on territorial questions were difficult.

Serbs have proposed a division of Sarajevo as part of an overall peace plan that would split Bosnia among its warring Serb, Croat and Muslim communities. And at one point in the latest talks, Muslim officials said a division might be considered.

Arafat wants Jerusalem as jt capital

BONN, Dec 9: PLO leader Yasser Arafat called on Wednesday for Jerusalem to be made joint capital for Israelis and Palestinians, but without a dividing Berlin Wall," reports Reuters.

Arafat, on the second day of a two-day visit to Bonn, told a news conference "you can solve the Jerusalem issue by making it a joint capital of two states but without the so-called Berlin Wall."

Israel insists that an undivided Jerusalem will remain its eternal capital and that the status of the city will be discussed only at the beginning of the third year of a five-year interim period of Palestinian self-rule.

Arafat, whose goal is an independent state with Arab Jerusalem as its capital, said Jerusalem should be a metropolis of religious tolerance and coexistence.

He said the best way to counter violence by Jewish and Palestinian hardliners opposed to the self-rule agreement was for Israeli troops to start their withdrawal from the Gaza Strip

and the West Bank town of Jericho next Monday as scheduled.

Israeli and Palestine negotiators are still working out security and other details in the agreement and doubts have been raised that the deadline will be met.

Arafat praised his talks on Tuesday with Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel, who backed his insistence that the Israeli withdrawal begin on time.

"The most concrete result of my visit was that we managed to build a bridge between the Palestinian and German peoples," said Arafat, who planned to leave Germany in the evening.

The PLO leader was given red-carpet treatment on his first visit to Bonn.

He said Palestinians wanted to create a free-market economy and needed the know-how and experience of the Germans, who built up their destroyed country after the war and are restructuring formerly communist East Germany.

Arafat earlier told a meeting of the German federation of chambers of congress that an infrastructure had to be built up in the autonomous areas after years of Israeli occupation.



A Palestinian boy waving a Palestinian flag taunts Jewish settlers demonstrating (seen in the background) in Jerusalem's Old City Wednesday. Settlers were protesting against the attacks by Arab gunmen that left 2 Israeli killed and 4 injured. — AFP photo

Abdel-Rahman allowed to represent himself at trial

NEW YORK, Dec 9: Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman can represent himself at his trial on charges that he helped plan a series of terror attacks against the United States, but the judge in the case doesn't like it, reports AP.

US District Judge Michael Mukasey said Wednesday he found the 55-year-old cleric was competent to make the decision. But he added: "I believe you will be far better defended by a trained lawyer."

Abdel-Rahman, in America from Egypt on a visa which has been disputed, said he could not trust a court-appointed lawyer because all of them "tend to ask people to make deals with the government."

He said that is what had happened to Abdel-Mohammed Haggag, 34, also of Egypt. He has begun cooperating with the government.

But Abdel-Rahman did say he will accept the help of a legal adviser, and the judge gave him until December 21 to choose one.

Speaking through an interpreter, Abdel-Rahman frequently interrupted the judge, who did the same in return to the Egyptian cleric.

At one point, Abdel-Rahman asked to express his point of view.

Off the Record

Hair on fire

WASHINGTON: "Watch out! Watch out!" President Clinton shouted, grabbing the smoldering pony tail of 6-year-old Ilana Kattan, reports AP.

Leaning against the president's desk in the Oval Office, the girl did not know her hair had dipped in the candles of a clay menorah given to the president to celebrate Hanukkah.

Clinton stroked her pony tail quickly, then cradled the girl's head against his stomach. "You're OK."

A Secret Service agent rushed over but realised the girl was fine. The room smelled like burning hair.

The Washington, DC, Jewish Community Center had brought a dozen or so children to the Oval Office on Wednesday to give Clinton the menorah with lit candles to celebrate the Jewish holiday. They also gave him a dreidel, a traditional Jewish game, and chanted a blessing over the candles.

Wearing a yamulka, the Baptist Clinton sat on the edge of his desk as the children shouted out questions and showed him how to play the game.

"Why do you have a Band-Aid on your thumb?" one of the children asked. "Can I see it?"

Squinting his face, the president declined. "It's sort of ugly. It's a little cut."

After winning the game, Clinton told the kids, "You know what they call that? Beginners' luck."

Toward the end of the event, as the children were chatting among themselves, Clinton put his hand back on Ilana's head, looking at the singe marks. "Let me see your hair."

He patted her head.

Commoner celebrates birthday at royal palace

TOKYO: Crown Princess Masako, who wed the heir to Japan's ancient throne in a lavish ceremony last June, celebrated her 30th birthday Thursday, reports AP.

The princess spent Thursday morning receiving imperial family members and palace employees at the couple's residence. Later, she was to be honoured at a birthday luncheon and evening tea ceremony, palace officials said.

Masako, a commoner, married Crown Prince Naruhito, 33, after giving up a promising career as a diplomat. She has become a fixture in the popular media, which of late has been speculating on when she will bear the prince a child.

"I feel as if I have spent these six months, especially the first two or three after the wedding, totally absorbed in daily affairs," the princess said in a statement.

Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, however, were not scheduled to join the festivities. Masako's parents-in-law are staying at their summer villa in central Japan while movers unpack their belongings at a new residence on the Imperial Palace grounds in Tokyo.

The empress is believed to be suffering from depression, caused by a spate of critical press reports.



Opponents slate Winnie's return to leadership

JOHANNESBURG, Dec 9: Critics of the African National Congress on Thursday slammed the return of convicted kidnapper Winnie Mandela to a leadership post, saying it proves radicals are on the rise in the ANC, reports AP.

Winnie, estranged wife of ANC leader Nelson Mandela, easily won election as president of the ANC Women's League at a conference in Durban on Wednesday.

It capped a remarkable comeback after her kidnapping conviction, allegations of infidelity and the conviction of a close associate in the murder of a 14-year-old boy.

Although scandal seemed to have ended her political ca-

reer, Winnie, 58, remains one of the ANC's most popular figures. Younger, more militant blacks admire the confrontational style of the woman once hailed as the "Mother of the Nation," and she could be an asset to the ANC as it campaigns for the nation's first multiracial general election.

The Inkatha Freedom Party, the ANC's chief rival among blacks, said in a statement that Mrs. Mandela's defeat of Albertina Sisulu for the post would be a "disastrous setback."

Winnie's comeback "is proof of the militant factions taking control of key positions in the ANC," the National Party of President F W de Klerk said Wednesday night.

NATO allies plan to prevent proliferation of arms

BRUSSELS, Dec 9: The NATO allies, worried about the spread of weapons of mass destruction after the Cold War, are studying ways to prevent the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological arms, reports AP.

The issue will be debated by the NATO defence ministers on their last day of a two-day session January 10-11 at the NATO headquarters.

This week, the Pentagon launched a programme to prepare for the day when US forces will have to fight rogue states or terrorists who have such weapons.

US Defence Secretary Les

Aspin will brief his colleagues on the "Defence Counter Proliferation Initiative," which envisions future enemies with battlefield missiles, nuclear weapons and chemical and biological agents.

The issue gained prominence since the Persian Gulf War, where the scope of Iraq's nuclear programme, and the failure of US bombings to destroy Iraq's chemical and biological arsenal, became known only after the war ended.

Under study are plans to find better ways to hunt mobile missiles such as the Scuds used by Iraq, develop weapons capable of destroying underground bunkers and clarify the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty to allow development and testing of short-range missile defence systems.

Other programme focus on technology to detect nuclear and other non-conventional weapons and greater protection — including suits and vaccines — against biological agents, officials said.

"Our priority, of course, remains non-proliferation," German Defence Minister Volker Ruehe told reporters here Wednesday.

"But what do we do if non-proliferation fails us?"

CPPCC chairman ends Indo-Pak visit

KARCHI, Dec 9: Li Ruihuan, Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), ended his 15-day official visit to Nepal, India and Pakistan, reports Xinhua.

He flew back to China this morning from Karachi, capital of Pakistan's Sindh province, after a five-day stay in the country.

The CPPCC chairman was seen off at the airport by Pakistan Senate Chairman Wasim Sajjad who accompanied him during his visit in Pakistan. Sindh Chief Minister Abdullah Shah and Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Zhou Gang.

Germany okays high-speed train in principle

BONN, Dec 9: The German government has given approval in principle to a super high-speed magnetic train link between Berlin and Hamburg, but put off a final decision until next year, reports AP.

If completed, the train would hit speeds of up to 400 kilometres (248 miles) per hour between Germany's two largest cities. Each train would carry up to 332 passengers and take less than an hour for the 284-kilometre (176-mile) ride.

Germany is seeking to take the lead in futuristic high-speed rail links, in hopes of selling them to other countries as well.

Family members defend Jackson branding LaToya a profiteering liar

LOS ANGELES, Dec 9: Members of pop star Michael Jackson's family rallied to his defence Wednesday, branding his sister LaToya Jackson a profiteering liar for accusing her brother of "crimes against small innocent children," reports Reuters.

Members of the Jackson clan — the eldest brother, Jermaine, the father, Joe, and mother, Katherine, lashed back at LaToya Wednesday.

"She lies all the time," Joe Jackson interjected. "This is how they (LaToya and her husband) make their living, by lying."

Jermaine said LaToya and her husband, Jack Gordon, made up the allegations in order to revive interest among tabloid newspapers and tabloid television shows that would pay them for their story.

AFP from Washington says, superstar Michael Jackson has committed crimes against children, his sister LaToya Jackson charged Wednesday during a press conference carried on US television.

She also claimed he paid vast sums to parents of children who have closely associated with him.

"Michael is my brother. I love him a great deal but I cannot and I will not be a silent collaborator in this crime against small and innocent children," said LaToya in an emotional outburst.

"I have seen checks payable to the parents of these children. I don't know if these children were apparently bought from the parents by Michael or not but I have seen these checks... through my mother," she added.

"It's for a great amount. I'm not speaking pennies. Very, very large amounts," she told the press conference at a Tel Aviv hotel.

"LaToya's lying and I'll tell her to her face she's lying," said her mother Katherine.

"There's no validity to what she is saying. It is absolutely not true. My brother is not a child molester," said brother Jermaine.

Michael Jackson, who is believed to be undergoing treatment in Europe for drug addiction, faces a civil suit from a 13-year-old boy who claims he was sexually abused by him. Police in Los Angeles are carrying out a criminal investigation but so far no charges have been levelled against the multi-millionaire.

Jackson has denied the allegations.

LaToya's outburst came less than 24 hours after a close friend of Michael Jackson claimed the pop star had told him that he would not return to the United States.

Film and television actor Eddie Reynolds, a featured dancer on Jackson's "Thriller" video, told Vanity Fair magazine that Jackson had telephoned him from Switzerland last month and told him, "I'm never coming back."

"He's got a lot of influential friends with houses who are hiding him," Orth quoted Reynolds as saying.

Reynolds quotes Jackson as telling him: "I'm never coming back. All my money is being taken over here. We're cleaning out all my assets, my accounts. I'm selling all my holdings."

And Reynolds says he does not believe the singer is innocent of the allegations made people close to the singer in the past have looked the other way because they were afraid of being fired.

"He had little boys around for nine years straight, 24 hours around the clock. People in show business couldn't understand how long it took to get the talk going. The public is 100 years behind on this," Reynolds told the magazine.

Jackson's lawyer Bert Fields told Vanity Fair that Reynolds' allegations were untrue.

"Jackson has not sent any money out of the country. He isn't moving to Switzerland. He plans to come back to testify," Fields said.

25000 Mozambican refugees to leave Tanzania next yr

MAPUTO, Dec 9: A total of 25,000 Mozambican refugees who fled the civil war in their home country will be repatriated from neighbouring Tanzania next year, the Mozambican Centre for Assistance to Refugees announced, reports Xinhua.

Fernando Fazenda, director of the Centre, said recently Tanzania and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have set up a special committee for repatriating the Mozambican refugees.

The director said the refugees can only be repatriated next year as the Mozambican side has not yet been well equipped to receive them.

The lawyer also said he was convinced that the claims by the 13-year-old were part of a set-up to extort money from his client.

Fields says he does not think anyone will come forward to corroborate the boy's story.

"We've talked to every child we know of who knows Michael — and had to go back many many years like this has ever happened," said Fields.

Jackson is due back in the United States on January 18 to give a deposition in the civil action against him.

He also promised in a phone call to his parents that he would come back for the television special scheduled for February 5 called "The Jackson Family Honors," to take place in Las Vegas, Nevada.