

Saddam orders release of Frenchman

BAGHDAD, Dec 14: President Saddam Hussein today ordered the release of Frenchman Jean-Luc Barriere, who was jailed for eight years in June for illegally entering the country, the official Iraqi news agency reported, says AFP.

Saddam ordered the release after a senior French official, Serge Boidevaux, arrived on a mission to win the man's freedom.

The Iraqi leader released three Britons last week who were serving sentences of up to 10 years for illegal entry.

Informed sources said Barriere would be set free later in the day.

Delhi to get powerful rockets from Moscow

NEW DELHI, Dec 14: Two Indian naval ships accompanied by a submarine left on a three-week goodwill visit to three Gulf states — Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, naval sources said here today, reports Xinhua.

The two ships are called INS Ranvir, a destroyer, and INS Kuthar, an indigenously designed and built corvette, while the submarine is called INS Shaikhi, the first Indian built submarine of the type 1500 class.

Significantly, this is the first time that INS Shaikhi, which was commissioned in mid-1992, is

going on a foreign cruise, the sources said.

The ships, currently on their way to the three Gulf countries, are under the overall command of Rear Admiral Madhvendra Singh, the flag officer commanding western fleet.

AP adds: India, which is developing its own long-range ballistic missiles, will acquire powerful rockets from Russia under a new agreement. India's space agency said Tuesday.

The 300 million dollar deal for cryogenic engines had prompted US sanctions against the Indian and Russian space agencies on the grounds that it violated an international ban on

the transfer of missile technology.

The sanctions were later lifted when the two sides scrapped the contract.

The contract has now been renegotiated and Russia will supply rockets, said K Krishnamurthy, spokesman of the government-owned Indian Space Research Organisation.

"I can only confirm that there is an agreement," Krishnamurthy told The Associated Press by telephone from the agency's headquarters in the southern city of Bangalore.

"I am not authorized to give details of the new terms and

conditions," he said.

Other officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that under a compromise agreeable to the United States, Russia is selling the rockets but withholding the production technology.

"The technology-transfer was a key element of the original deal and the failure to obtain essential techniques will set back India's ambitious space programme. India had hoped to end its dependency on foreign carriers for launching its satellites and had planned to bring its own commercial launchings.

When the original deal was announced two years ago, Washington said India could use the cryogenic engines for military purposes. India said the engines will be used to for civilian satellites like weather and communications.

In Russia, the Interfax news agency reported Monday that the Russian space agency Glavkosmos reworked the deal in two weeks of talks with Indian space agency officials. No details were released.

Cryogenic rockets are low-temperature, liquid-fuel motors used to put satellites in their final orbit. India has already paid

80 million dollar under the old agreement.

In May 1989, India test fired the Agni, its first surface-to-surface missile with a range of 2,500-kilometers (1,500-miles), joining a select group of countries possessing long-range ballistic missile technology.

Five other missiles are under various stages of development under a 266-million dollar programme.

Foreign defence experts say India also has the capability to arm missiles with nuclear warheads, but India denies it has an active nuclear weapons programme.

Pak FM to visit Kabul soon

ISLAMABAD, Dec 14: Pakistan Foreign Minister Sardar Asf Ali will visit Kabul within a week's time on peace mission, official sources said here today, reports Xinhua.

Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has instructed the Foreign Minister to go to Kabul immediately to initiate a peace move and mediation between the warring Afghan leaders.

The sources said Asf Ali will hold discussions with both Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani and Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

During Benazir's recent visit to Iran, Pakistan and Iran agreed to constitute a commission to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan.

BRIEFLY

De Klerk invites Pope : South African President F.W. de Klerk met Pope John Paul on Monday and invited the Pope to visit his country, the Vatican said. Reuter reports from Vatican City.

A Vatican spokesman said the Pope had accepted the invitation but could not say when such a trip would take place.

Nazarbayev-Clinton meet Feb 11: Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev is to meet with US President Bill Clinton on February 11, US Vice-President Al Gore said on Monday, Reuter reports from Kazakhstan.

Gore, who came to Kazakhstan for a one-day visit, made the announcement after signing an agreement calling for U.S. financial support to help cover the cost of dismantling the former Soviet Republic's nuclear arsenal.

Angola to expel 18 S Africans : The Angolan government said on Monday it had decided to expel 18 South Africans and dozens of other foreigners for various crimes, including diamond smuggling, Reuter reports from Luanda.

A government communique said security forces detained the foreigners in a "vast operation to neutralise all those who attempt to act against the laws of the state and its democratic institutions."

Al Gore arrives in Moscow : US Vice President Al Gore arrived in Moscow yesterday for top-level talks following Russian parliamentary elections in which a far-right nationalist party performed strongly, Reuter reports from Moscow.

Itar-Tass news agency said Gore, who earlier visited the former Soviet Republics of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, arrived in Moscow for talks on energy and space cooperation and a meeting with President Boris Yeltsin on Wednesday.

Besides preparing for a summit in Moscow between Yeltsin and President Bill Clinton next month, Gore is likely to discuss the implications of Sunday's elections.

Spaniards end hunger strike : Five Spaniards on Monday called off a month-long hunger strike launched in a bid to persuade the government to give more aid to the Third World, Reuter reports from Madrid.

They said most of their demands had been met. The government had agreed to increase its aid from 0.2 per cent of gross domestic product to 0.7 per cent, a United Nations target, by 1996 if economic conditions permitted, said Pablo Oses, 71, the oldest of the hunger strikers.

The five men had spent the 30 days in a school in Madrid, drinking only three litres of water a day.

2 more UK engineers in Cambodia: Two former members of Britain's Queen's Gurkha engineers flew to Cambodia yesterday to help supervise the clearing of landmines, Reuter reports from Phnom Penh.

The two retired staff sergeants would be joined by three more colleagues on Thursday, said Mark Ranson, a former captain in the second King Edward VII's Gurkha Rifles.

Ranson's Gurkha security guards organisation has contracted the Nepali ex-soldiers to work for the Cambodian mine action centre in the western ricebowl province of Battambang, one of the most heavily mined areas of the country.

Laotian airliner crashes

BANGKOK, Dec 14: A Laotian airliner crashed after hitting a hilltop tree in heavy fog and all 18 people aboard, including an American and a New Zealander, were presumed killed, diplomats said Tuesday, reports AP.

The Lao Aviation flight crashed at about 9:20 a.m. Monday short of the airport at Phong Savan, in Zeng Khouang province on the country's eastern border with Vietnam, said a diplomat reached in Vientiane by telephone.

Sixteen passengers and two crew members were on the Chinese-built Y-12 airplane. "And everybody is assumed dead," the diplomat said.

The plane was flying in heavy fog and struck a tree on the last hill before the runway, said a diplomat in Bangkok.

quoting a diplomatic report he received from Vientiane. He said the plane crashed and burned about 28 kilometers (16 miles) short of the airport.

UNITA boycotts talks with govt

LUSAKA, Dec 14: The Angolan rebel movement UNITA boycotted peace talks with the government on Monday after accusing the air force of bombing its leader Jonas Savimbi, reports Reuter.

"The attempt on our president's life constitutes a serious setback to the talks," UNITA spokesman Jorge Valentim told reporters in the Zambian capital Lusaka, where the month-long negotiations had been due to resume after a weekend break.



US Vice-President Al Gore (L) exchanges documents with Kazakhstan's Prime Minister Tereshnikov (R) after the signing of treaty on dismantling of some 1400 nuclear warheads on Monday. In centre is US ambassador to Kazakhstan William Courtney, at right is Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev. — AFP photo

Kazakhstan ratifies NPT

ALMA-ATA, Dec 14: Parliament in the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan on Monday ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a spokesman for the parliamentary press service said, reports Reuter.

Kazakhstan announced the move shortly after US Vice-President Al Gore arrived on a visit during which he was expected to sign an agreement on dismantling Kazakhstan's nuclear arsenal, which includes 104 SS-18 Intercontinental Ballistic missiles.

The spokesman said Kazakhstan would join the pact as a non-nuclear state but had no other details.

The decision fulfilled a promise by Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev who earlier said his parliament would ratify the NPT by the end of this year.

The NPT aims to prevent the spread of nuclear technology to non-nuclear countries, barring them from owning or developing nuclear weapons.

Sino-British direct confrontation over Hong Kong imminent

HONG KONG, Dec 14: China and Britain are heading for direct confrontation as Governor Chris Patten submits his controversial electoral reform bill to the legislative council for debate on Wednesday despite Beijing's objection, reports AFP.

Chinese sources close to Xinhua news agency, China's de facto government representative in the territory, said direct confrontation was "unavoidable."

Patten expects the legislative council to pass his electoral reform package by March as Britain prepares to return the colony to China in 1997.

"China will have to watch every measure taken by Britain in the territory," a Chinese source said.

"Any measures that will affect the territory's smooth tran-

sition will be met tit for tat in order to avert any possible turmoil that may break out during the transition," the source said.

Lee Wai-Ting, Xinhua Hong Kong branch director's assistant, said: "China will not just sit on one side to allow chaos to happen in Hong Kong."

Patten decided two weeks ago to present the partial package of reforms in a bid to buy time for more negotiations on thornier issues after 17 rounds of Sino-British negotiations since April collapsed.

The reforms to be tabled Wednesday would lower the minimum voting age from 21 to 18, as it is in China, abolish appointed local government seats, and enshrine the principle of single-seat geographic constituencies.

The reforms would pave the way for the British colonial authorities to prepare for district board and municipal council elections due in September next year.

More difficult issues revolve around the 1995 legislative council polls, including whether legislators elected to four-year terms will be able to keep their seats past 1997, regardless of their political views.

A Hong Kong government official, who declined to be identified, brushed off the confrontation as "alarmist."

"There is no evidence of any confrontation nor sign of chaos in the territory," he said saying it was "an irresponsible remark."

The head of China's Hong Kong and Macau affairs, Lu Ping, has dismissed any future negotiations, saying that since the British side had unilaterally

called off the Sino-British talks, the question of the 18th round of talks was "non-existent."

Lu has warned that legislators elected in 1995 could not serve beyond June 30, 1997.

Lu's deputy, Wang Qiren, told a Hong Kong delegation in Beijing on Monday that talks could resume, but only if the government held off tabling the reform package in the legislative council on Wednesday.

Nevertheless, he added it was highly unlikely things would take a turn for the better.

Lu said it was British's insincerity that had led to the present state of affairs, and China had no alternative but to make all possible efforts with Hong Kong supporters to maintain the territory's smooth transition.

Myanmar opium warlord Khun Sa declares independence

BANGKOK, Dec 14: Golden Triangle opium warlord Khun Sa has declared an independent state for Myanmar's Shan ethnic minority with himself as president and written to US President Bill Clinton asking for help to eradicate drugs, reports Reuter.

Khun Sa, who is half Shan and half ethnic Chinese, told reporters the independent state of Shan had been proclaimed by a local parliament over the weekend.

Senior Shan rebels criticised Khun Sa's action, saying an indicated drug trafficker has no right to lead the Shan minority, which has been fighting for autonomy from Yangon virtually since British colonial rule ended in 1948.

"It is a phony idea. He doesn't represent the Shan people at all. No Tai (Shan)

people support him. We feel quite ashamed to have his organisation around," a senior rebel official told Reuters by telephone.

"He is a drug dealer, not a freedom fighter as he claims," Khun Sa's Shan State Restoration Council on the Thai-Myanmar border set up a parliament to govern the new state before new year celebrations this week, to which reporters and exiled ethnic Shans were invited from all over the region.

Khun Sa is the dominant leader in the poppy-growing area at the juncture of Laos, Thailand and Myanmar known as the Golden Triangle, which produces 70 per cent of the world's opium according to US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) estimates.

Wanted in the United States

on charges of heroin trafficking, he admits opium is grown in his area but says he only taxes it just like any other commodity. Heroin is made from opium.

In his letter to Clinton — the latest of several he has sent to US leaders on the drugs issue — Khun Sa said the international community must help the Shan people find an alternative livelihood to opium-growing.

He said the people in his area would destroy their opium crops if the international community could force Yangon to withdraw from the ethnically and politically distinct state in northeastern Myanmar.

For now, they only wanted assistance in the form of rice, salt, cooking oil.

Khun Sa said in the letter how it was "wonderful to have an American president with an open mind."

15000 Nigerians may die of AIDS next year

LAGOS, Dec 14: Some 15,000 Nigerians, who have developed full blown AIDS, may die of the disease next year, a United Nations official said here today, reports Xinhua.

T.M. Akerele of the U.N. information series said at a symposium to mark this year's World AIDS Day that the fast spreading disease required urgent and concerted efforts of non-governmental organisations.

Akerele said a recent joint survey by the World Health Organisation and the national AIDS control programme indicated that full blown AIDS cases in the country would rise to 625,000 before the end of 1994.

Nigeria has a population of some 100 million.

Off the Record

Kuwaiti women now in army

KUWAIT CITY: Kuwaiti women are now allowed to join the army and will defend their motherland along with their male compatriots, reports Xinhua.

The local newspaper "Al-Watan" on Monday reported that the Defence Ministry has started to admit Kuwaiti women in Kuwaiti army.

Five women soldiers have joined a military training course at the Khawlah Bent-Lazour military school in the United Arab Emirates, it said.

They will be promoted to the rank of sergeant after passing different courses, the paper said.

Reclusive film star's hatred of Hollywood

LONDON: Letters from the reclusive film star Greta Garbo describing her hatred of Hollywood and her despondency with the glittering movie career she eventually abandoned sold Monday for more than 30,000 dollars, reports AFP.

The 40 letters, written mostly in Swedish between 1923 and 1984, fetched 21,850 pounds (32,775 dollars) in the sale by auctioneers Sotheby's.

The letters reveal her innermost thoughts on life and marriage as well as her dislike of Hollywood and her career, the auction house said.

They were written to Swedish actress Mimi Pollak, whom Garbo described as "the only one whom I confide in."

"You have no idea how it hurts to be as confused and unhappy as I am," she wrote just after her arrival in the United States from Sweden in 1925. "It is so awful this ugly, ugly America. It is soul destroying."

"The glamour with which we surround the American film world hardly exists," she wrote, describing her film career as factory work.

Boy survives 10-storey fall

KUALA LUMPUR: A three-year-old boy survived after falling 10 floors from a Kuala Lumpur apartment block Tuesday, the national news agency Bernama said, reports Reuter.

The toddler was in serious but stable condition in hospital, Bernama said.

A neighbour, Roanah Seen, 35, said she saw the boy, identified only as Izwan, lying face down on the ground, alive.



The slashes in these two slinky numbers do not indicate cut-price fashion, but merely reflect the imagination of designer Pam Hogg on Monday. Madeline on right wears a red velvet slash top and leggings offering while Tessa displays a silver slash dress, both on show at a collection of fashion by London's West Soho designers. — AFP photo

Campbell resigns from party

OTTAWA, Dec 14: Former Canadian Prime Minister Kim Campbell stepped down as leader of Canada's Progressive Conservative Party yesterday seven weeks after she lost the federal election, Xinhua reports from Ottawa.

Announcing her resignation at a press conference here, Campbell said she is going to stay at the Conservative Party but no longer as the party leader.

She said it's the right decision for herself and for the party. Campbell led her party to lose the October 25 federal election in which the conservatives got only two seats in the House of Commons and the fourth place in national percentage vote.

She said the time is ripe for grass-roots oriented renewal process in an effort to rebuild party membership.

Interest in learning more about Islam is growing in US

WASHINGTON, Dec 14: Interest in learning more about Islam and the Muslim community is growing in the United States, two advocates of interfaith relations said December 1, reports USIS.

This interest, they say, has been spawned by heightened awareness of the need for understanding and dialogue among religious groups in America.

Mustafa Malik, director of research for the American Muslim Council, and Stephen Gell, a member of the board of directors of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, discussed interfaith tolerance during a Worldnet television dialogue with participants in Abu Dhabi, Beirut and Riyadh. Arab participants included journalists and government officials.

While a lack of understanding of Islam and the Muslim community persists in the United States, "great progress" is being made to reverse the problem of intolerance. "Awareness among Christians, Jews and Muslims to do something about it (intolerance) is much greater today," Malik stressed. Problem recognition, in turn, has stimulated wider interest in Islam and increased interfaith dialogue, both he and Gell noted.

This "tremendous amount of inquisitiveness," according to Malik, is reflected in the daily inquiries he receives from US media seeking facts on the Muslim community and Islam. Gell noted that his National Conference has set up a telephone hot-line for the media to get accurate facts on different religions, including Islam.

For Gell, education is the key. "It is important for Americans to understand" Koranic teachings and Islam's "basis of religious tolerance," he said. Therefore, "much more has to be done" to educate Americans about the Muslim community, especially through "promoting interfaith dialogue... the more Muslims can interact with the general community... the more Americans will understand" them.

Founded in 1990, the American Muslim Council (AMC) works to promote interfaith relations and combat prejudice against the Muslim community in the United States, Malik said. He added that the AMC also works to promote human rights and democracy throughout the Muslim world, an activity he emphasised during the world net programme.

"Islam is a very tolerant religion, but that is not what we are actively doing in Muslim countries," Malik said. There ought to be "greater intra-tolerance" among Muslims in the United States and throughout the Muslim world, he added. Muslims ought to discuss problems in the community "among ourselves and through democratic means we must be prepared to look hard at ourselves — then we will be able to relate to others in a more informed manner."

The National Conference of Christians and Jews, founded in 1927, works to promote a greater understanding in the United States of different religions and cultures, Gell said. He noted that the name of the conference is no longer accurate in that the organisation is "open to people of all religious, cultural and racial backgrounds."

"Unless we show that kind of diversity ourselves, we can't hope to be credible when we teach diversity to other people," he said. Participants in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and the UAE raised the issue of President Clinton's recent meeting with British author Salman Rushdie in the context of interfaith understanding. Rushdie is under an Iranian death sentence for blaspheming Islam in his novel "The Satanic Verses."

In defence of the White House decision, Gell said the US remains "open to a wide variety of views no matter how hurtful those views may be seen by some groups." The issue of free speech "plays strongly in American society," he stressed, and is "guaranteed by the First Amendment" of the US Constitution. In meeting with Rushdie, the president was, in

effect "speaking for Americans in espousing the view of free speech," Gell asserted.

This view of free speech may "not be seen the same way in other parts of the world," Gell noted, so it is important for Americans "to be sensitive to other groups." Americans have a "difficult time reconciling" the idea of tolerance, however, with the death sentence against Rushdie.

Malik said the AMC has written a letter to President Clinton criticising his meeting with Rushdie. He stressed, however, that the organisation defends the principle of freedom of speech as guaranteed in the US Constitution: "We won't protest against Rushdie's publishing house, and we don't agree with Ayotollah Khomeini's death sentence."

London blast damages railway line

LONDON, Dec 14: An explosion before dawn today damaged a railway line near Woking southwest of London, British transport police said.

A police spokesman told Reuters the stretch of line between Woking and West Byfleet in Surrey, part of an important commuter link to the capital, was closed while investigators checked what had caused the blast.

The spokesman said no one was hurt in the explosion shortly before 3 am. No trains were in the area at the time.

The line had been slightly damaged and there was a small crater. Railway lines and stations have been targeted for bombing in the past by Irish Republic Army guerrillas fighting to end British rule in Northern Ireland.