

Bosnian Serbs, Croats agree to offer Muslims some concessions

SARAJEVO, Dec 20: Bosnian Serbs said on Sunday they had agreed with Croat rivals to make concessions to Muslims at peace talks next week but feared the Muslim side was not yet ready to sign a deal, reports Reuters.

"But we also have information that the Muslim side is not prepared to sign such a plan, that they will make new demands," Krajcanik added.

Tired of failure in Bosnia, French Defence Minister Francois Leotard warned on Sunday European countries might pull thousands of their peacekeeping troops out of former Yugoslavia in the early part of next year if no political solution had been reached by then.

"If next spring the conditions for a political solution are not reached then the decision (on European contingents) will have to be taken," Leotard said in an interview on RTL radio.

"We cannot accept today's status quo because it is a situation which is a failure," Leotard said, adding that his call for a political solution concerned all parties and not just Muslim forces in Bosnia.

Vatican to sign deal with Israel

VATICAN CITY, Dec 20: The Vatican today said it would sign a historic deal with Israel by the end of this year, expected to lead to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the holy see and the Jewish state.

Vatican sources said Pope John Paul and the Israeli President Ezer Weizman would exchange personal envoys ahead of the appointment of full ambassadors, expected in 1994.

MQM to oppose Benazir in Sind province

KARACHI, Dec 20: A Pakistani ethnic party that backed Benazir Bhutto in a recent election said on Sunday it had now decided to oppose the Prime Minister in her volatile home province of Sind, reports Reuters.

Ishfaq Azhar, acting leader of the Mohajir National Movement (MQM), told a news conference that Bhutto's ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which governs in the southern province of Sind, had not met its conditions for power sharing.

The MQM, which represent Urdu-speaking immigrants from India, backed Bhutto in last month's election of President Farooq Ahmed Leghari but talks on power sharing later deadlocked.

"After the prolonged deadlock in the talks, we have decided to sit in opposition," said Azhar, standing in for MQM

leader Altaf Hussain, who has been living in self-imposed exile in Britain since last year.

Bhutto said, however that she was optimistic an agreement could be reached.

"The Sind government is holding talks and we are very hopeful to the outcome," the prime minister told reporters on her return to Islamabad from Karachi.

The MQM, target of an 18-month old army-led crackdown on crime in Sind, boycotted National Assembly elections on October 6, alleging discrimination by government officials.

It contested the provincial assembly election three days later and won 27 seats in the 109-seat Sind assembly, in which the PPP won a simple majority but sought MQM support in the ethnically troubled province.

leader Altaf Hussain, who has been living in self-imposed exile in Britain since last year.

The PPP also declined to name an MQM nominee as the figurehead governor of Sind and failed to meet demands for the release of hundreds of jailed MQM members and withdrawal of criminal cases instituted against several leaders of the party, he said.

"Talks... are going on and it is our effort that some kind of agreement should be arrived at because they supported us in the presidential election," Bhutto said.

Security officials said they found 23 torture chambers in Karachi used by the MQM to punish dissidents and opponents after the crackdown was launched in May last year.

The MQM denied the charge and accused the army of using the crackdown as a pretext to crush the party.

Little progress in Oslo talks

JERUSALEM, Dec 20: Israel and the PLO made progress at the talks in Oslo to try to break the deadlock over Palestinian self-rule, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres reported today, says AFP.

"The plain fact that we decided to meet again in the coming days proves that there was progress," Peres told state radio upon his return from Norway.

"Interesting proposals were put forward by both sides," he said, but refused to go into detail about the talks which ended Saturday and Sunday without comment.

"We will do everything to keep to the calendar laid out in the declaration of principles, we are serious, not merchants in a bazaar," Peres said.

"There will be no withdrawal on questions of security," he added.

Environment Minister Yossi Sarid, who was also in Oslo, added: progress was undeniably made, but it is still too soon to know if this progress will be enough to allow for a fresh meeting Rabin and Arafat.

US will press for oil embargo against DPRK

WASHINGTON, Dec 20: The United States will press for an oil embargo against North Korea if talks to open that nation's nuclear facilities to international inspection fail, a top White House official said Sunday, reports Reuters.

White House Chief of Staff Thomas McLarty said the Clinton administration first intends to continue negotiations with North Korea to persuade it to comply with anti-nuclear weapons agreements.

"Hopefully, discussions will produce a satisfactory result," McLarty said on ABC Television's "This week with David Brinkley."

Failing that, the United States would seek UN support to apply economic pressure on North Korea.

"The next step, I think, would be on the economic front with the consideration of certain embargoes, particularly petroleum," McLarty said.

GCC leaders to discuss Arab boycott of Israel

RIYADH, Dec 20: Leaders of Arab Gulf states meeting here today will discuss what to do about the long-standing Arab boycott of Israel in the light of recent developments in the Middle East, it was announced, reports AFP.

"This matter will be addressed at the summit," said Sheikh Fahim Bin Sultan al-Qassimi, the Secretary-General of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

GCC leaders have said they will abide by "an Arab League decision" on the boycott which has been in force since the 1950s.

Sheikh Fahim said the summit would also discuss aid for the future autonomous Palestinian territories of Jericho and the Gaza Strip.

But he said GCC support for the Palestinians was "nothing new" and dated back to well before the September 13 autonomy accord between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Off the Record

To facilitate extramarital sexual trysts

LITTLE ROCK, Arkansas: As governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton used his security staff to facilitate extramarital sexual trysts, two state police officers who served in his security detail said Sunday, reports AFP.

The officers made the allegations on CNN television in interviews the network said it arranged through attorney Cliff Jackson, a longtime Clinton critic.

Bruce Lindsey, a senior White House official and close friend of the president said "The allegations are ridiculous."

Asked if Clinton denied having state police involved "Yes, he has."

Rumours that Clinton engaged in extramarital affairs ran wild during the 1992 presidential campaign, fuelled by singer Jennifer Flowers, who said she had been Clinton's lover for 12 years.

Clinton denied the claims but acknowledged alongside his wife in a campaign-trail television interview that they had overcome past marital troubles.

Murdered after secret affair came to light

NEW DELHI: A teenage girl and her boyfriend were murdered by their relatives in a village in northern India after their clandestine affair came to light, the Hindustan Times reported Monday, says AFP.

Sixteen-year-old Ruby and her neighbour Gyanesh, 19, were murdered two days after she eloped last month, the daily said.

Their bodies were exhumed on Saturday from a sugarcane field near the town of Meerut, some 70 kilometres (43 miles) north of here.

Ruby left home on November 19 and hid in a barn near the village of Basauli, the newspaper said.

Her uncle discovered the pair there two days later after Gyanesh went there with food and strangled them with the help of eight other people, it said.

"Ruby's mother was unrepentant about the killing."

"What was the solution?" she told the daily. "We could not stomach the insult."

The murder reflects the strict social mores in Indian villages where marriages are arranged by the family and love affairs are frowned upon. The price for adultery is often social ostracism or banishment.

It's okay to steal if you are poor and desperate

WELLINGTON, New Zealand: It's okay to steal if you are poor and desperate, a Methodist clergyman dubbed the "Robin Hood" preacher says, reports AP.

Rev Brian Turner, who runs a charity for poverty-stricken families, told the New Zealand Press Association over the weekend that all people have a right to good housing, health and adequate food.

"If the process of a society robs people of that and they've tried every other means to meet these needs... then there is some moral justification for stealing," he said.

His comments only a week away from Christmas were criticised by police and the government.

"It is dangerous to suggest there are justifiable grounds for stealing," government Social Welfare Minister Peter Gresham said. "Is it fair to open shops (stores) to wholesale pilfering?"

Assistant Police Commissioner Galbraith, said officers can't condone stealing.

"We recognise the difficulty some families are in, in terms of making ends meet," Galbraith said. "But we can't relax our policy of dealing with people who steal."

Turner says desperate people have been stealing food since feudal times in Europe.

"People should only steal to survive, not for profit, and should take care that the people from whom they steal can afford it. He said government cuts to social welfare are largely to blame for poverty."

Turner's superior Methodist Church president Mervyn Dine disagrees that theft is justifiable but said Turner won't be punished for his comments.

Dine also blames government policy for problems facing the poor.

Student jailed for stalking ex-girlfriend

LONDON: A graduate student was sentenced to four months in jail for stalking his ex-girlfriend to the point where she slept with a baseball bat and knife, reports AP.

Gholam Jahanbani, 34, who is studying for a master's degree in psychology, was convicted this week of two counts of criminal harassment under Ottawa's new anti-stalking law.

Judge John Menzies of the Ontario Court's provincial division said Wednesday he was sentencing Jahanbani to jail to send a message.

"A woman shouldn't have to look fearfully over her shoulder when she goes to work or goes shopping," Menzies said. "When a relationship is over and when a woman says she doesn't want to see him again, that's the case."

Jahanbani also was given two years probation, during which he will be sent back to jail if he talks to or comes within 100 yards of the woman.

US green card holders occupying govt positions in Philippines

MANILA, Dec 20: A US embassy official confirmed reports that a number of US green card holders are occupying government positions here, "Philippine Star" reported today, says Xinhua.

Quoting an embassy source, who refused to be identified, the National newspaper said that the official also expressed the belief that even some naturalised Filipino Americans are holding sensitive posts in the government.

Yet the US official reportedly refused to identify those who have turned US citizens, citing the US privacy act which strictly prohibits the disclosure.

BRIEFLY

45 Indonesians feared drowned:

Forty-five Indonesians were missing and feared drowned after two fishing boats trying to smuggle them into Malaysia collided, a spokesman for the Maritime Rescue Coordinating Centre (MRCC) said on Monday, Reuters reports from Kuala Lumpur.

Another 55 people survived following the collision after midnight on Sunday about 20 miles offshore Malaysia's southern city of Johor Baru, the spokesman said.

One of the boats carrying 63 people, including the crew, sank in choppy seas after the collision.

Road mishap claims 14 in Lima:

Fourteen people died and 22 were hurt Sunday when a bus careened off a road and tumbled 325 feet (100 metres) in Peru's south-central Andes, police said, Reuters reports from Lima.

The bus was on its way to Lima from the highland city of Ayacucho when it crashed at about 5 AM near Huaytara, about 175 miles (280 km) southeast of Lima, they said.

Police are still investigating the causes of the accident.

Robbers kill 12 in China bank:

Bank robberies in China left 12 people dead and caused losses of 6.9 million yuan (one million dollar) in the first 11 months of the year, the China Daily said yesterday, AFP reports from Beijing.

The number of cases — 32 thefts and 40 robberies — was slightly down on the same period last year, the report said, but added losses from the two kinds of crimes were up 6.6 per cent and 100 per cent, respectively.

Bank employees were responsible for 14 of 32 thefts and for 88 per cent of the money, bonds and securities stolen, it said.

One more killed in Gujrat:

A second man was killed when police fired on farmer protesting a power tariff hike in the western Indian state of Gujrat, newspapers said yesterday, AFP reports from New Delhi.

Police fired shots at the demonstrators, killing a second man on Sunday, the Times of India said. They fired 45 rounds of ammunition and threw fired tear-gas to drive away agitators from highways and public places, it said.

A teenager was killed by police fire on Saturday.

Clashes leave 10 dead in Egypt:

Ten people were killed in upper Egypt on Sunday in clashes between Egyptian security forces and Muslim militants, security sources said, Reuters reports from Assiut, Egypt.

A statement from Egypt's Interior Ministry said police killed one militant and arrested 75 others in the town of Manfalut, about 30 km (20 miles) northwest of Assiut, after surrounding them in a local mosque.

As the police returned to Assiut they stumbled on an ambush by three militants of a senior police officer, it said.

18 die as roof collapses in Iran:

Eighteen guests at a village wedding were killed when the roof of the room where the ceremony was being held fell in on them, an Iranian newspaper said on Sunday, Reuters reports from Tehran.

Thirty-two people were also injured in the incident in a village in Kurdestan province, 450 kilometres (280 miles) west of Tehran, the Kayhan daily said.



Visiting Secretary General of the United Nations Boutros Boutros-Ghali (L) toasts before dinner talks with Japanese Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa at the Akasaka State Guesthouse Monday in Tokyo. Boutros-Ghali is on three-day visit to Japan before leaving for South and North Korea. Left is Japanese Sadako Ogata, UN high commissioner for refugees. — AFP photo

Peace talks between Muslim rebels, Philippines resume

JOLO, Philippines, Dec 20: Peace talks between the Philippines and Muslim separatist rebels resumed today in an attempt to end a revolt that has killed more than 50,000 people over two decades, reports Reuters.

Nur Misuari, the head of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and a government panel headed by former general and diplomat Manuel Yan met in Jolo, a town razed in fighting between troops and the guerrillas nearly 20 years ago.

Misuari rode to the talks with 15 MNLF guards wearing dress uniforms and armed with rifles and pistols. He had arrived at the rebels' main camp at Matmabung on Jolo island on Sunday aboard a ship from Malaysia.

"We have to look at this as a positive development in eventually attaining peace," Oscar Santos, an adviser to President Fidel Ramos in peace talks with

insurgents in the country, told reporters before the talks began.

A ceasefire agreement to shore up a shaky truce was to be signed at the provincial capital building on Jolo, about 600 miles south of Manila, by the two panels some time later today.

Guards armed with rifles and grenade launchers ringed the conference site where Misuari met with Yan.

Hundreds of government troops were deployed in Jolo, while a battalion of MNLF regulars occupied two outposts about a mile down the road.

No details of the talks were immediately available but officials were optimistic. The negotiations will adjourn this week and another round will be held in February.

"We are very confident that very positive results will come out of this meeting," President Fidel Ramos told reporters in

Manila.

Hamid Al-Gabid, Secretary-General of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), said in a statement on Sunday a final accord must respect Philippine territorial integrity.

The talks, which opened in Jakarta in late October, are the second stage in negotiations to end the 20-year rebellion for self-government by the MNLF.

More than 50,000 people died at the height of the war in the 1970s and dozens die every year in intermittent clashes on Mindanao island, the ancestral homeland of the five million Muslim Filipinos.

Officials belonging to the armed forces' southern command, which would battle MNLF forces numbering over 10,000 if fresh fighting erupted, said a peace pact would help forge a lasting peace in the region.

Milosevic's party leading in Serbian parliamentary polls

BELGRADE, Dec 20: Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic's Socialist Party (SPS) appears to be ahead in parliamentary elections but falling short of the majority it needs to form a government and avoid a coalition, reports Reuters.

Opposition leaders predicted that they would jointly win a clear victory over the SPS and one said it was time for opposition parties to unite and take control of Serbia.

"It is almost certain that the opposition will win these elections. The SPS will not win more than 90 seats and will have to give way to an opposition government," Ivan Kovacevic, spokesman for the opposition coalition deposed, told Reuters.

"The opposition must now clear up all differences and take control over Serbia."

But SPS spokesman Ivica Dacic said: "Our results show that we are on our way to win more votes than last year." He was referring to elections held less than year ago when the SPS won 101 out of the 250 seats in the parliament.

The first unofficial results from 300 of the 10,000 polling stations across Serbia showed the SPS was in the lead as a single party but only with a slight margin.

It was winning close to 30 per cent of the votes counted so far, the headquarters of the opposition bloc deposed and the Democratic Party (DS) reported. The opposition as a whole

was winning three to one if their votes were counted together, they said. The opposition did not form a campaign alliance and their votes have been split.

Deposed by Vuk Draskovic and the DS headed by Zoran Djindjic were trailing the SPS by a few percentage points each but together accounted for as many as 45 per cent of the votes.

The next best placed were the extreme nationalist radical party (SRS) led by Vojislav Seselj and the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) which together accounted for some 25 per cent.

Milosevic's latest protégé, Zeljko Raznatovic Arkan, seen as a possible coalition partner with the SPS, was losing badly even in his Kosovo stronghold.

Suha to fight Arafat over women's rights issue

NEW YORK, Dec 20: The wife of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said in an interview aired Sunday she would be the first to fight the PLO chief over the issue of women's rights and would press for an end to polygamy, reports Reuters.

"I told him, 'OK listen, if you will not accept to give rights for women, I will be the... first woman to demonstrate under your window in the Palestinian new state,'" Suha Arafat told the CBS television programme '60 Minutes'.

Mrs Arafat, whose secret marriage to the PLO chief caused an uproar among Palestinians after it became public early last year, said she had converted to Islam but would press for better divorce terms for women and an end to polygamy.

Interviewer Lesley Stahl quoted the French-educated, former economic adviser to the PLO leader as saying: "... their rights have to be guaranteed with laws protecting women in divorce and banning polygamy."

Mrs Arafat, formerly Suha Tawil, has recently increased her public profile but has not been able to win the hearts of many Palestinians who believed the PLO chief when he said he was married to the revolution.

The marriage was also criticised because Mrs Arafat is less than half Arafat's age and from the Palestinian Christian minority.

"I converted to Islam for state reasons... not for... religious reasons," said Mrs Arafat, who made a public visit to the Christian shrine of Fatima during a recent visit to Portugal. "... When you get married to a very important personality, you have to follow his religion."

Mrs Arafat was noticeably absent at the historic September 13 signing in Washington of the PLO-Israeli peace agreement after being ordered by Palestine Liberation Organisation officials not to attend, PLO sources have said.

Mrs Arafat, a tall blonde who said the PLO leader proposed shortly after they met in Paris in 1989 and began working together, described the PLO chief as "sensitive, refined, generous and humble."

But the PLO leader, interviewed with his wife at a villa in Tunis, said nothing had changed in his life since the marriage.

France seals off northern coast

RENNES, France, Dec 20: Hundreds of kilometres (miles) of coast in northern France were sealed off on Sunday while firemen recovered more than 700 fireworks explosives believed washed ashore from a cargo ship, reports Reuters.

Local prefect (government representative) Christian Fremont said he had declared the Finistere coastline in Brittany off-limits to walkers until firemen had ended their search.

"The source hasn't dried up. Beaches which had been cleaned on Saturday have been polluted once again," he told Reuters.

Floods leave 1 lakh homeless in Lanka

CLOMBO, Dec 20: Floods caused by unprecedented rains have wreaked havoc in Sri Lanka's war-torn northeast, forcing more than 100,000 to abandon their homes and seek shelter at relief centres, officials said today, reports AFP.

Heavy rains in the past week have damaged houses, crops and submerged roads across the northeast, the threat of fighting between government troops and Tamil rebels, and inhabited mostly by minority Tamils, officials said.

However, estimates of flood victims were only from government-held areas and not from

swathes of the northeast that are dominated by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), officials said.

"As a result of unprecedented rain, thousands of families have been affected. All steps have been taken to airlift food to those affected," N Wijewantha, Director of Social Services, said.

The army camp in northeast Welit Oya was partially submerged and dry rations and other essential supplies moved to safe locations, a military spokesman here said.

He said the army was spearheading relief operations in the region and acknowledged that

there could be thousands more affected in LTTE-dominated regions in the island's northern and eastern provinces.

A spokesman for the meteorology department said the current monsoonal weather coupled with a deep depression that had developed in the Bay of Bengal and centred off the island's northeastern coast had caused the exceptional deluge.

Batticaloa district in the east was the most affected with more than 20,000 families compelled to escape the ravaging waters by moving into makeshift relief centres in government buildings and schools, officials said.

"Many roads in Batticaloa are underwater. Most families acted quickly by temporarily moving into schools and other buildings," said Brigadier Lohan Gunewardene who is leading the relief effort in the region.

Breached dykes and heavy downpours have left roads impassible in eastern Polonnaruwa and northcentral Anuradhapura districts which are inhabited by majority Sinhalese, officials said.

Northern manner, Vavuniya and Trincomalee districts have also been identified as flood-stricken areas, officials said.

Israel releases 197 Palestinians

HEBRON, West Bank, Dec 20: Israel on Sunday released some of the 197 Palestinians it allowed to return last week from banishment in South Lebanon, reports Reuters.

They returned to their homes as they had been taken from them — in the dark of night.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin exiled 415 Palestinians from the occupied territories on December 17, 1992, to avenge the killing of five Israeli soldiers by Muslim militants. Israel allowed 197 to return

on Wednesday. It had already taken 200 back, and 18 slipped into Lebanon to avoid completing long jail terms.

A military official declined to say how many of the 197 men were included in Sunday's release but Israel's army radio put the number at 120.

A second military official said since the men were being released throughout the occupied territories one by one a complete tally would probably only be available on Monday.



Serbian writer Vuk Draskovic, leader of the opposing DEPOS parties coalition, and his wife Danica (L) cast their votes for the Yugoslav general elections at a local poll station Sunday in Belgrade. — AFP photo