

# North Korea warns against US pressure

TOKYO, Dec 25: North Korea warned against pressure from the United States in resolving the nuclear issue as it hosted a reception for U.N Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in Pyongyang Friday, reports AFP.

"If the United States puts unjustifiable pressure on North Korea, ignoring its sincere efforts and persistently pursuing a hostile policy toward it, we would have no other choice but to take decisive measures for defending the nation's sovereignty," North Korean Foreign Ministry Kim Yong-Nam was quoted as saying.

"It is our consistent position to achieve a negotiated, peaceful solution of the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula," said Kim, as quoted by the Korean central news agency (KCNA), monitored here.

"Our people will make every possible effort to denuclearise the peninsula and achieve its peace and peaceful reunification of North and South Korea, surmounting all the obstacles and difficulties," he said.

Boutros-Ghali crossed the demilitarised zone into North Korea Friday for an official visit.

The United States has repeatedly pressed North Korea to return to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and accept outside inspections of plants suspected of storing plutonium for making nuclear warheads.

Those at the reception in Pyongyang included U.N Development Programme (UNDP) representative Faruq Achikzad and other officials accompanying Boutros-Ghali, KCNA said.

# Sufferings mount as worst floods hit Europe

UNDATED, Dec 25: Thousands were left homeless at Christmas after swaths of Europe as far east as Ukraine were devastated by the worst floods this century, as the EC released emergency aid and weathermen warned of more bad weather to come, reports AFP.

In Brussels the European Commission granted emergency aid worth 500,000 ECU (570,000 dollars) to flood victims in the worst-hit areas of the community as the Netherlands declared the floods a national disaster.

In the Ardennes region of northern France two policemen were feared drowned overnight Thursday, after failing to return from night patrol in their car.

Several deaths were also reported in northwestern Ukraine, where the army was put on alert and charged with rescue operations as about 70 villages in the region were hit by the deluge, said the Foreign Ministry in Kiev.

In the Dutch Gelderland province, which includes the town of Arnhem, officials feared that dykes would collapse under the pressure of flood waters, while the Meuse river continued to rise at up to five centimetres (up to 2 inches) an hour in the southern Limburg province, where some 10,000 people have already been evacuated.

Dutch papers said Friday that flood damage so far could cost up to 100 million guilders (50 million dollars) twelve local councils had by Thursday declared a state of emergency as 460 sq kilometres (184 sq miles) lay under about two metres (6.5 feet) water.

Storms closed Genoa airport in northwestern Italy and created havoc on alpine routes as avalanches held up traffic.

Some 111 passengers on a Brittany ferries ship were facing Christmas eve on board the boat, *le Bretagne*, after bad weather prevented it from docking at Lorient following a crossing from Plymouth, southwest England.

In the northern French city of Lille homeowners were preparing for a waterlogged Christmas as experts warned the aisle would hit record levels around midday Saturday in Soissons.

Germany meanwhile began a mopping up operation Friday as flood waters from the Rhine and Mosel began to subside after reaching record levels this century, affecting some 75,000 people along their banks.

The Rhine broke its 1926 record at Bonn by more than five centimetres (two inches) when it reached 10.15 metres (33.4 feet) on Thursday, while in Cologne the river had reached 10.84 metres (35 feet) in the night. In both cities the Rhine was subsiding at a centimetre and hour Friday despite more rain.

# Moscow's ultimatum to kidnappers Release 6 hostages immediately

MINERALNYE VODY, Russia, Dec 25: The Russian government demanded that four masked kidnappers free their six hostages immediately Saturday, one day after they collected a \$10 million ransom, reports AP.

The demand followed hours of fruitless negotiations with the gunmen, who were holed up in a military helicopter packed with explosives, unable to take off because of clouds and fog.

A total of nine hostages were released Friday and Saturday, but the kidnappers still held three teen-age boys, two pilots and a bus driver as the hostage crisis entered a third day in Mineralnye Vody, 1,300 kilometres (800 miles) south of Moscow.

Russian police and elite "Alpha" commandos surrounded the camouflage-painted helicopter, ready to attack if ordered.

The ITAR-Tass news agency called the government's demand an "ultimatum." But authorities did not set a deadline or threaten an attack — apparently because the kidnappers might harm the hostages if they thought a rescue attempt was imminent.

"Your action in seizing children as hostages has caused a sharp protest and universal condemnation by the people of Russia," the government's statement said.

It added that if all the hostages were released immediately and unconditionally, the "personal safety" of the kidnappers would be guaranteed.

The latest hostage to be freed, teen-ager Andrei Khvat, stepped out of the Mi-8 helicopter Saturday morning.

Late Friday the gunmen had demanded that the helicopter be refueled, and they appeared to be about to take off for the southern Russian city of Makhachkala — the next stop on their planned escape route to Iran.

But the kidnappers were given a weather report and de-

# Bomb destroys intelligence hqs in Tbilisi

TBILISI, Georgia, Dec 25: Georgia's counterintelligence headquarters was destroyed early Saturday by a powerful bomb that shattered windows in nearby buildings and destroyed cars parked outside, reports AP.

At least two people were believed to have died in the blast, which virtually gutted the nine-story building in central Tbilisi, the Georgian news agency BGI reported.

Security officials said they were investigating and refused to comment on who might have planted the bomb. BGI said gunfire was heard near the building both before and after the explosion at 4:30 am (0130 GMT).

The Georgian government, headed by former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze, is battling three major groups of rebels, any of which could be responsible.

Separatists in the western province of Abkhazia are fighting for independence.

# Floods claim 7 in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 25: Floods caused by torrential rains in northeastern Malaysia have killed seven people and forced more than 13,000 to flee their homes, the national news agency Bernama said today, reports Reuters.

As the known death toll rose from six overnight, Malaysian officials said they expected the flood to worsen and spread to other areas if the seasonal rains continued.

Another person had been reported missing after heavy rains in several states over the past few days caused rivers to burst their banks, Bernama said.

Nearly 12,000 of the total were forced to leave their homes in the worst-affected state of Kelantan, rescue officials said. The floods damaged homes and crops and cut road and railways.

The latest casualty was a 10-year-old boy found drowned in a drain in the Kelantan state capital of Kota Bharu.

Monsoon rains flood the northeastern coastal plains every year, normally between November and February.



Christian pilgrims reach out to touch a statue of the infant Jesus, carried by Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Monsignor Michel Sabbah at the end of midnight mass at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem's Manger Square Dec 25. In his sermon, Sabbah called on political leaders to move to build confidence in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and for opponents of the plan to "change their minds and know the difference between right and wrong." — AFP photo

# Pope blesses ME peacemakers, decries bloodshed in Bosnia

VATICAN CITY, Dec 25: Pope John Paul II praised the "tenacity and courage" of Middle East peace seekers in his Christmas address Saturday but decried the bloodshed in former Yugoslavia and other areas of ethnic warfare, reports AP.

"Let Christmas, this blessed family day, become for everyone a day of hope and peace," the pontiff said in his annual "Urbi et Orbi" — meaning in Latin, from the city (of Rome) and the world — message.

From a window overlooking sun-bathed St Peter's Square, the Pope paid special tribute to peace attempts in Israel and the occupied territories. Earlier this year, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation opened talks after decades of being avowed enemies.

"Bless in particular those who are striving to strengthen the peace process in the region of the Middle East.... Grant far-sighted wisdom and steadfast courage to the leaders of peoples, that they might work to direct the path of history towards goals of authentic social progress" said the pontiff.

The pope has said he is considering a trip to the Middle East, possibly including Jerusalem — a city with holy sites for Jews, Christians and Muslims.

"Inspire and sustain... the efforts of those who, with tenacity and courage, are defending and building up agreement between individuals and nations," he added.

The pontiff, however, be-

# DPRK puts off plans to sell missile to Iran

WASHINGTON, Dec 25: North Korea has put off plans to sell a new missile to Iran which could be fired at Israel, administration officials said Friday, reports AFP.

The surface-to-surface missile, known as the Nodong 1, has a range of about 620 miles (1,000 kilometres) which would enable Pyongyang to fire it at Japan, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency James Woolsey said recently.

Woolsey told a congressional hearing in July that the missile had already been tested.

"Of greatest concern is North Korea's continued efforts to sell the missile abroad — particularly to dangerous and potentially hostile countries such as Iran," Woolsey said.

# BRIEFLY

**Floods kill 9 in Thailand:** Floods in southern Thailand killed nine people in the past week, while 60 drought-stricken villages in the northeast are facing a food and water crisis, local press reports said yesterday, AFP reports from Bangkok.

Water levels were beginning to drop in southernmost Trang, Yala and Narathiwat provinces after week-long torrential rains damaged agricultural land, road and bridges in addition to some homes, the reports said.

In northeastern Kamphaeng Phet province, artesian wells were drying up and vast areas of farmland were devastated by persistent drought, the reports indicated.

**Storm signal in Philippines:** Weathermen raised a number two storm signal over the southern and eastern Philippines on Saturday as tropical storm nell, packing 75-kilometre-an-hour winds (46-miles), threatened to ruin the area's Christmas weekend, AFP reports from Manila.

Nell, the 32nd storm to hit the country this year, was about 750 kilometres (465 miles) southeast of Surigao city at 10 AM (0200 GMT) and was expected to be within 90 kilometres (56 miles) of the city in 22 hours, the weather Bureau here said.

Weathermen said the storm was likely to gain strength as it nears land, and they warned ships and all other water craft off its path. The number two alert requires the closing of schools in a four-step measuring system, with number four reserved for the strongest typhoons.

**Dostum recaptures border town:** Northern Afghan warlord Abdul Rasheed Dostum has recaptured a town on the border with Tajikistan from forces of a rival guerrilla party, one of his generals said on Friday, Reuter reports from Kabul.

General Humayun Fouzi said forces loyal to General Dostum took the town of Sher Khan Bandar on the banks of the Amu river from Muslim Sunni fighters of the hardline Ittehad-i-Islami party without a fight on Thursday.

Sources close to Dostum said Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani sent a peace delegation to Sher Khan Bandar last month to ask the Ittehad forces to leave.

**Three Saudis beheaded:** Three Saudis convicted of armed robbery were beheaded Friday in the eastern city of Dammam, the Interior Ministry said, AFP reports from Riyadh.

It said Mohammad Sihat, Hani Ramih and Abdel Ghani Abdel Aziz had stolen cash and jewellery from Banks in Dammam and nearby Al-Khubar. One person was shot and wounded in the Dammam hold-up.

The latest executions bring to 85 the number of people beheaded in the kingdom so far this year, mainly for drug trafficking. Saudi executions are usually carried out in public after the Muslim Friday prayers.

**Ex-Taiwanese President Yen dead:** Former Taiwanese President Yen Chia-kan died of heart failure on Friday, more than seven years after suffering a brain haemorrhage that had left him bed-ridden, a statement by the veterans general hospital said Saturday. He was 90, AFP reports from Taipei.

Yen's condition had worsened in September last year after a second hemorrhage, it said.

Yen was promoted from Vice President to head of state in April 1975 upon the death of nationalist leader Chiang Kai-Shek. Three years later, Yen was replaced by the generalissimo's son, Chiang Ching-kuo.

**Vietnam's senior monk dies:** Vietnam's senior monk in the official church has died in Hanoi at the age of 96, official newspapers reported yesterday Reuter says from Hanoi.

Thich Duc Nham, who died on Thursday, became the head of the Vietnam Buddhist Church in 1981 when it was established by the communist government to group northern and southern Buddhists, the newspapers said.

Buddhism is the religion of most of Vietnam's 71 million people.

**9 killed in Thai bus collision:** Nine people, including a nine-month-old baby, were killed Saturday when a tourist bus collided head-on with a speeding 10-wheel truck in the eastern province of Rayong, police said, AFP reports from Bangkok.

Nineteen people were hospitalised, police investigating the case said. No foreigners were reported involved.

**5 Algerian policemen shot dead:** Gunmen shot dead five Algerian policemen and wounded two others when they ambushed a night patrol in the eastern town of Annaba, the Alger Republican daily reported Saturday, AFP reports from Algiers.

The police officers were travelling in two vehicles when they came under fire in the attack on Thursday night, the newspaper reported.

Hundred of people have been killed in clashes between the security forces and suspected Muslim fundamentalists, who began a guerrilla war against the authorities after the army in January 1992 brought about the cancellation of a general election the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was poised to win.

The FIS has since been outlawed.

# 100 killed as rival Kurds clash in northern Iraq

BAGHDAD, Dec 25: Rival Kurds have clashed in northern Iraq resulting in more than 100 casualties, the official Iraq News Agency (INA) was quoted as saying today, reports Reuter.

"News from Irbil and Sulaymaniya yesterday evening says that clashes have escalated between elements from the Islamic Kurdish party and the Kurdish Socialist Party on the one hand and groups loyal to (Massoud) Barzani and (Jalal) Talabani," the Al-Jamhuriya Daily said.

# Christmas brings a little peace to world's trouble spots

UNDATED, Dec 25: With a three-day Christmas cease-fire in Northern Ireland and Santa Claus returning to the Gaza Strip for the first time in six years, peace appeared a little closer at hand in some places, reports AP.

But not everywhere.

Shelling in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo killed two people and wounded at least 34 Friday, as warring sides ignored their holiday truce on Christmas Eve.

Following the deaths of eight people and the wounding of 50 others on Thursday, the same day peace talks sponsored by the European Community collapsed, Sarajevo faced a tense Christmas.

"In our suffering city, like elsewhere in Bosnia-Herzegovina, we are celebrating Christmas counting our dead and wounded," said Monsignor Vinko Puljic, spiritual leader of Bosnia's Roman Catholics, in a radio address.

"I wish a merry Christmas to all... and may peace come to us in the New Year."

Despite the persistence of hostilities that have killed an estimated 200,000 people since 1992, there were signs of peace — however tentative — in other trouble spots around the world.

In the occupied Gaza Strip, a Santa Claus — this year waving a Palestinian flag — visited children for the first time since an uprising against Israeli occupation began six years ago.

School children sang Arabic and English renditions of "Jingle Bells" and "Silent Night," as Gaza City's tiny Christian minority celebrated the holiday more openly than they have for some time.

They were encouraged by the September 13 peace accord between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

"The accord gave us hope for peace and freedom," said Father Jallil Awwad, head of the school and pastor of the Latin Family Church.

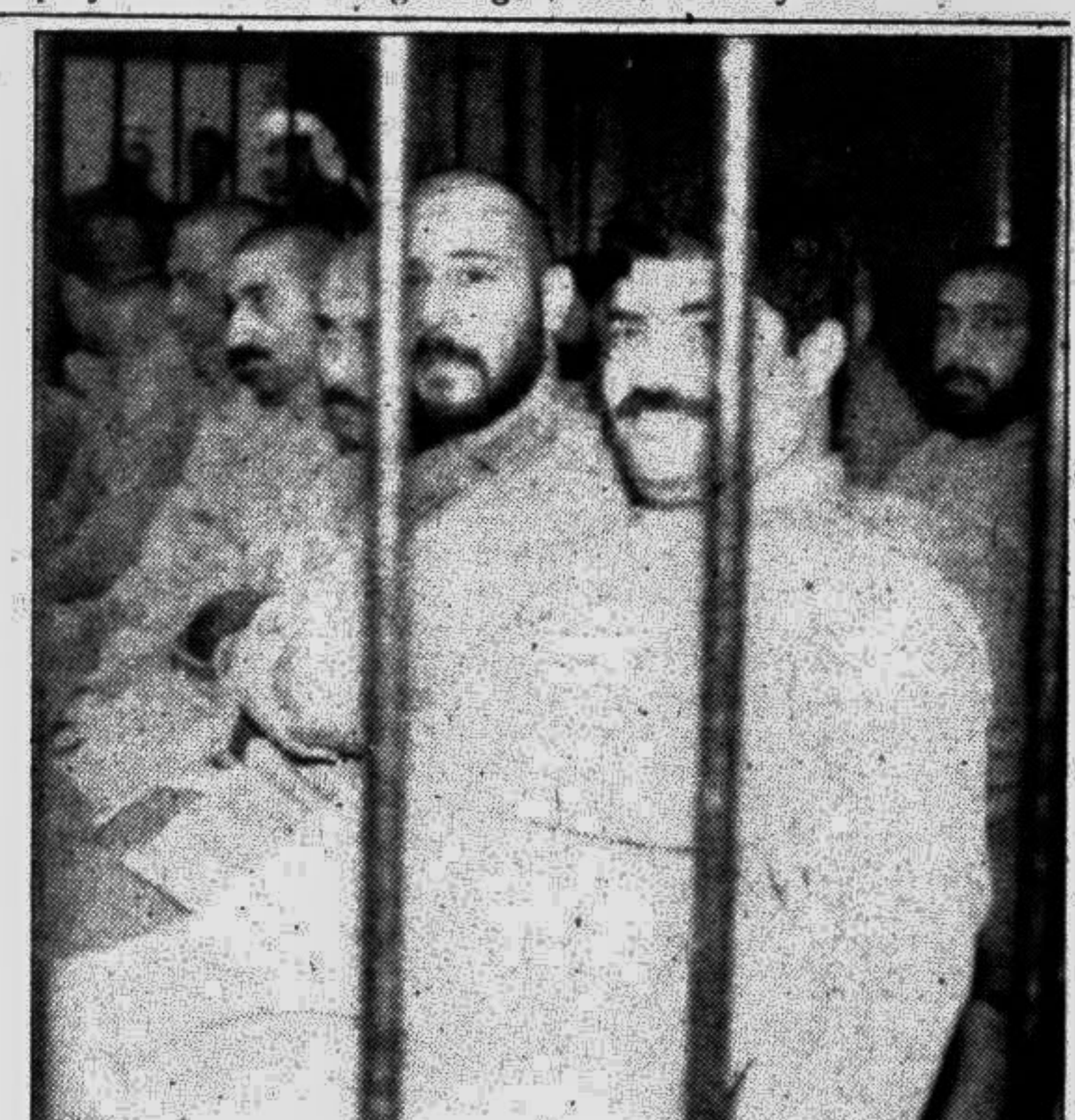
But that optimism and the Christmas cheer was tempered Friday amid Israeli and Arab reports that Palestinian gunmen in Gaza City staged an ambush that killed an Israeli lieutenant colonel and wounded two soldiers.

This holiday also marks the first major celebration of Christmas in Bethlehem, on the occupied West Bank, since the Palestinian uprisings began in 1987.

On Friday, the Israeli army gave up — at least for Christmas — its efforts to stop Palestinians from flying their flag. Soon, the flags were flying everywhere.

In Northern Ireland, the outlawed Irish Republican Army on Friday began a three-day cease-fire in its efforts to end British rule.

Hopes of peace have been buoyed since British Prime Minister John Major and Irish



Defendants including 11 Iraqis and three Kuwaitis sit in a cell at the Kuwaiti state security court Dec 25. The men are accused of attempting to assassinate former US President George Bush during a visit he paid to the Emirate last April. The verdict has been indefinitely postponed yesterday. — AFP photo

# Off the Record

## New rules of romance

WASHINGTON: US universities, a 1960s bastion of first love, are increasingly on the front line in the battle against sexual harassment, with many of them imposing strict codes for bedroom conduct, reports AFP.

In perhaps the most radical example, a sharp rise in reports of date rape has prompted tiny Antioch University in Ohio to order students to gain consent with every stage of lovemaking.

The 12 pages of guidelines instruct that "verbal consent should be obtained with each new level of physical and/or sexual contact/conduct in any given interaction."

Asking "do you want to have sex with me?" is not enough," students are told.

The rules were proposed by feminists three years ago and were accepted after months of heated debate. The university has enacted the code and appointed a sexual-offense monitor to organise seminars on the subject and hear complaints.

So far, the sex relations czar has heard little more than complaints from about 30 of the 650 students at the university over topless pin-ups and macho slogans.

A university spokeswoman said she did not know how closely students were following the new rules of romance.

## Ali sues his adviser

CHICAGO: Muhammad Ali is suing his longtime adviser, saying he forged the former boxer's signature in fund-raising letters for a foundation that promotes Islam, reports AP.

Ali wants to qualify a 1991 agreement with Jabir Herbert Muhammad and the Muhammad Ali Foundation, saying it was obtained under "undue influence or duress."

The agreement, the lawsuit said, was made while Ali was physically and emotionally weak during a trip to the Middle East, where he was fasting and without proper medication.

"Moreover, he has no recollection of the contents of the purported agreement and does not recall ever reading the agreement he purportedly signed," the lawsuit said.

Ali wants a court order preventing Muhammad and the foundation from using Ali's name and likeness. The lawsuit also seeks damages.

A hearing was scheduled for January 14.

## Wife, daughter watch as man dragged down by crocodiles

SYDNEY: The wife and daughter of an Australian man watched as he was dragged under and drowned by two crocodiles on Christmas eve, police said Saturday, reports Reuter.

A police spokesman said Cassidy Bound, 48, was killed as he swam to assist a small ferry that had broken down in the Jardine river on Cape York in northern Queensland.

"Witnesses saw two separate swells of water each side of the man before seeing a large crocodile come up," he said.

The man, a Cape York resident, was dragged down and did not resurface. His body was recovered later.

The national parks and wildlife service said it was nesting and mating season for the salt-water crocodiles, which can grow up to six meters (20 feet) long and are fierce and easily aroused. Crocodile attacks are fairly common in northern Australia.

## Tribesmen kill 5 villagers in Sind

KARACHI, Dec 25: Four tribesmen shot dead five villagers from a rival faction in Pakistan's southern province of Sind to avenge a 12-year-old murder, a district official said today, reports Reuter.

The killings took place on Friday in a village 20 km (12 miles) from Larkana, the home town of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

The assailants riding a jeep sprayed bullets on villagers watching a shooting-ball game, killing five including a 13-year-old boy," the official said.