

Kidnappers raise fresh demand Heavy fog keeps hostage chopper grounded

MINERALNYE VODY (Russia), Dec 26: Three days after storming a school and taking hostages, masked kidnappers trying to get to Iran in a military helicopter were stranded by foul weather Sunday in southern Russia, reports AP.

The four gunmen left Mineralnye Vody early Sunday in the explosives-laden helicopter, carrying five hostages and dirrs 10 million in ransom toward Makhachkala, a town on the Caspian Sea.

But heavy fog forced them back to Mineralnye Vody after two hours, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported.

The ordeal began Thursday morning when the kidnappers, armed with three automatic rifles and a pistol, grabbed about a dozen school students in Ros-

tov-on-Don, a river port 600 miles (1,000 kilometers) south of Moscow.

They demanded a military helicopter and flew south saying they wanted safe passage to Iran. They went first to Krasnodar and then to Mineralnye Vody, 800 miles (1,300 kms) south of Moscow.

Eight hostages — seven teen-aged girls and a teacher — were freed Friday after the government paid the ransom. Two of their classmates, both boys, were released Saturday at the airport in Mineralnye Vody.

The gunmen left Mineralnye Vody at about 1 am Sunday (2200 GMT Saturday), heading for Makhachkala, a duty police officer told the AP. They returned after less than two hours.

ITAR-Tass quoted the government's emergency headquarters as saying all those aboard were safe. The gunmen raised new demand, the report said.

Throughout Saturday, clouds and fog kept the kidnappers on the ground while authorities tried to negotiate the release of the remaining captives: two teen-aged boys, two pilots and a bus driver.

The gunmen had promised to free the remaining hostages in Makhachkala, but demanded to take aboard a special Foreign Ministry envoy, Valentina Petrenko. They said she would be freed once they refuel in Baku, capital of neighbouring Azerbaijan.

Earlier Saturday, the government demanded the gunmen free their remaining hostages immediately and surrender, promising them personal safety. ITAR-Tass described the statement as an "ultimatum," but authorities did not set a deadline or threaten an attack.

Typhoon hits Philippines

CAGAYAN DE ORO, Philippines, Dec 26: Typhoon Nell lashed the southern Philippines Sunday with strong winds and heavy rain, forcing hundreds from their homes and disrupting transport. It was the 32nd tropical storm in a record-breaking season, reports AP.

Eleven children were rescued by air force helicopters Sunday after they were stranded by flooding along the Tagoloan River near Cagayan de Oro, about 800 kilometers (500 miles) south of Manila on the nation's second-largest island, Mindanao.

Officials said they feared major flooding at coastal settlements if rains continued until the evening high tides.

In Guam, the US-run Joint Typhoon Warning Center reported that Nell was centered about 100 kilometers (60 miles) southeast of Surigao City.

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Benazir arrives in Beijing today Visit to focus on warming of Sino-Indian ties, say analysts

BEIJING, Dec 26: Pakistani Premier Benazir Bhutto arrives Monday in China for a visit that analysts here say will focus on the recent warming of Sino-Indian ties as well as a row with the United States over missile sales, reports AP.

Islamabad and Beijing have traditionally maintained close ties. In part because of shared suspicions and tensions with India, and although the trip is ostensibly a courtesy call by the newly elected Bhutto, she is likely to seek assurances from Chinese leaders regarding relations with India.

During a visit here in September by Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao, China and India agreed to end more than three decades of border tension by pledging to cut troops along their frontier.

renouncing the use of force against each other.

"She will seek assurance in gentle terms," one Asian diplomat said.

"Pakistan needs stability and wants to have powerful friends around, so the warming of Sino-Indian relations is a source of possible tension with China," he said.

According to military experts here, Pakistan fears that the Indian divisions released by the September agreement with China will be redeployed along the Indo-Pakistan border.

"The agreement means India's only problem will be with its western border, so all the tension will move to Pakistan," one expert said.

But Pakistani ambassador to China Khalid Mahmood said Saturday the warming of ties

between China and India could have regional benefit for Pakistan as well.

"China could act as a positive factor in restraining India's policies of repression in Kashmir, or its policies of hegemonism towards its smaller neighbours — that could have a salutary effect," Mahmood said.

"It is a member of the (UN) Security Council, so it has considerable influence, and we think it can play a more active role in the promotion of good neighbourly relations between Indian and Pakistan and also help promote a peaceful settlement of Kashmir," the ambassador added.

Bhutto's talks with Chinese leaders are also certain to include discussion of the US sanctions imposed on China

and Pakistan for Beijing's alleged sale of M-11 missiles to Islamabad.

China has been a principal arms supplier to Pakistan, a link that became more important after the United States cut off economic and military assistance to the Islamic state in late 1990 on suspicion that it was developing a nuclear bomb.

The M-11 row first erupted two years ago when the United States imposed sanctions on two Chinese companies for their alleged involvement in sales of the missiles to Pakistan.

To maintain its trade benefits last year, China promised the United States it would comply with the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), which restricts sales of missiles with a range of more than 300 kilometers, though China did not sign the agreement.

The M-11 surface-to-surface missiles have a range of 450 kilometers (300 miles) and are believed to be capable of carrying a nuclear payload.

By early 1993, US intelligence analysts were convinced that China was selling components and technology rather than whole systems to Pakistan, and Washington imposed sanctions on Beijing and Islamabad in August.

The Asian diplomat said Bhutto would probably look to China to take the lead in negotiations with the United States regarding the lifting of the sanctions.

Other possible topics of discussion include ongoing military and civil nuclear cooperation between China and Pakistan, bilateral trade and the Kashmir dispute.

Pakistani officials said Thursday in Islamabad that Pakistan and China had "identical views" on many regional and international issues, including Chinese support for Pakistan's demand for a plebiscite in Kashmir.



The Prince and Princess of Wales, together with their eldest son Prince William, talk to members of the crowd Dec 25 after the traditional Christmas Day church service at Sandringham in England, where the Royal family are staying. — AFP photo

Wedding in war-torn Sarajevo

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina: There were no strains of "Hear Comes the Bride" as Lidija Salcer and Branislav Sunjic walked down the aisle Saturday — just the sounds of artillery and machine guns, reports AP.

Lidija, 27, and Branislav, 26, were joined by a handful of their closest relatives and friends brave enough to weather shelling and the sniping to share the happiest moment of the couple's lives.

Outside, Sarajevans sprinted across every intersection as Serb snipers seemed to mock the Christmas holiday.

Lidija and Branislav are among an estimated 30,000 Roman Catholics who remain in war-torn Sarajevo. They chose a makeshift church with no name, a former market, for their wedding because it is in their neighbourhood.

"This lowers our chances of getting wounded or killed," Lidija said. "Like everybody else, I wanted to get married in a cathedral or a real church, but God is everywhere, and it's war."

After the wedding ceremony, the party rushed to the couple's home. Shells were still falling close by.

"Animals are just like humans"

LOS ANGELES: Nearly half of Americans believe animals are a lot like humans when it comes to emotions and reasoning ability, according to a Los Angeles Times poll published Saturday, reports AP.

Also, half said they object to the wearing of fur, while slightly more, 54 per cent, said they oppose hunting for sport.

The nationwide survey of 1,612 adults was conducted December 4-7. The sampling error was plus or minus 3 percentage points.

While 47 per cent of those polled said animals "are just like humans in all important ways," 51 per cent disagreed and 2 per cent had no opinion.

Selected respondents indicated in interviews that they equated animals and humans' emotions and reasoning ability. Some said animals are entitled to basic rights, just like people.

Some cited religious convictions for disagreeing, saying that people have God-granted control over animals for utilitarian reasons.

Man pays for stealing X-mas tree after 20 yrs

WICHITA: It took 20 years, but a man who stole a Christmas tree from a city golf course finally paid for it, reports AP.

"It was something that had been chewing on him," said Stan Shaver, the golf pro at Pawnee Prairie Municipal Golf Course. He finally told his wife, and she told him, "Go make restitution."

A man called the pro shop on Friday and said he had broken 20 years ago when he snuck onto the course and chopped down a tree.

"I told him, I couldn't give you a figure on it, it's 20 years ago. I'd just say forget about the tree and send me 20 dollars" Shaver said. He said, "That sounds fine."

About an hour later, a man walked into the pro shop admitted he had stolen the tree and a garden hose and left 40 dollars.



Chinese leaders seated at the stage of the Great Hall of the People, listen as Communist Party chief Jiang Zemin (bottom L) speaks from the podium Dec 26 to commemorate the centennial birthday of Chairman Mao Zedong. — AFP photo

Cult of Mao returns as thousands celebrate centenary of his birth

SHAOSHAN (China), Dec 26: The cult of Mao Zedong returned to Shaoshan today as tens of thousands descended on the late chairman's hometown in Hunan province to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of his birth, reports AP.

In a scene reminiscent of the heady days of the cultural revolution of 1966-1976, a large procession would through the village, bearing aloft Mao portraits, beating drums, singing songs, and waving giant red flags.

But unlike the anarchic

frenzy of the rallies of that time, today's celebrations were as much to do with Mao the commodity as Mao the founding father of communist China.

Among the flag waving faithful, tenacious hawkers flogged an eclectic array of Mao memorabilia to eager visitors from as far away as Liaoning Province in the northeast and western Sichuan.

All around the village, loud speakers blared out Maoist songs and poetry, while a local dance troupe performed in the main square under the gaze of a 10-metre (33 feet) Mao statue

unveiled last week by President Jiang Zemin.

"It is incredible," said one local official. "We had expected around 10,000, but there must be more than 30,000 people here."

From early morning, a mad crush had developed outside Mao's family residence, where one local policeman resorted to lashing out with a broom handle as hundreds pushed their way through the main doorway.

"This is not good," said 40-year-old Wang Jiabe, a former red guard who had come all the way from Liaoning for the anniversary.

"This is a special place. People should show more respect," he said.

According to the official line, Mao was 70 per cent right and 30 per cent wrong in his policies that brought about a terrible famine in the 1950s and then sank China into the chaos of the cultural revolution.

In Shaoshan today, however, that 30 per cent appeared to have been forgotten.

Meanwhile, North Korea's ruling party today praised the late Chinese leader Mao Zedong on the centenary of his birth. The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said.

BRIEFLY

Arafat in Cairo to meet Mubarak: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat arrived in Cairo yesterday to meet Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a day before the PLO and Israel are due to resume peace talks in the city, Reuters reports from Cairo.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa welcomed Arafat at Cairo airport.

Arafat and Mubarak are due to discuss disagreements between the PLO and Israel that delayed Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho this month.

Fire kills one in Germany: One person died and 14 were injured Saturday when fire struck a centre for asylum seekers in this southern German town, police said, AFP reports from Nuremberg.

Several of the 14 were seriously hurt, police said, adding that they had no evidence that the fire, which broke out in the staircase on the top floor of the four-storey building, was started deliberately.

Several residents had been in the staircase when the fire started.

Mitterrand in Egypt: French President Francois Mitterrand has gone to Aswan in Southern Egypt for talks with President Hosni Mubarak, the French presidency said yesterday, Reuters reports from Paris.

Mitterrand's office said the President arrived in Aswan on Saturday and would stay there until Monday.

The presidency which said the visit was at Mubarak's initiative, did not say what the talks would be about or why they were called.

63 killed in Caracas violence: Street violence claimed 63 lives in the past 24 hours in Caracas, including three young people shot by robbers who wanted their shoes, the city morgue said Saturday, AFP reports from Caracas.

Most of the victims were shot during muggings or arguments, police said.

So many cadavers have piled up at the city morgue since Christmas eve that some were left on the floor, relatives waiting to claim bodies said.

4 Egyptian cops shot dead: Gunmen in southern Egypt shot dead four policemen who were on their way to work Sunday, security sources said. A civilian also died in the crossfire, Reuters reports from Cairo.

The policemen worked in El-Qusiya, 300 km (186 miles) south of Cairo, where suspected Muslim militants killed 13 other security personnel this month.

3000 HIV positive cases in Lanka

COLOMBO, Dec 26: The number of Sri Lankans affected by AIDS is on the increase and unofficial estimates have put the HIV positive cases at 3,000 as against the official figure of 119 for this year, reports Xinhua.

A recent survey by the Community Front for the Prevention of AIDS (CFPA) indicated there are 2,500 to 3,500 HIV positive cases roaming the street of the island country.

The danger is not only in Colombo but is spread throughout the country.

CFPA President Shirley Tissera was quoted by the local daily "Island" as saying today that the popular belief was that AIDS was spread through tourists, but actual statistics revealed that almost 75 per cent of AIDS infection was indigenous and the deadly disease was mainly spread by returning refugees, students who travel abroad for higher studies and people who go to west Asia to work.

Floods toll rises to 20 in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 26: Seasonal floods triggered by monsoon gales in Malaysia have killed more than 20 people and forced 20,000 people out of their homes, officials said today, reports AP.

Malaysia's northeastern state of Kelantan, where most rivers had reached danger levels, was the worst hit with at least 11 people killed and more than 14,000 evacuated, they said.

This is the worst floods in three years. Information Minister Mohamad Rahmat said, as the meteorological services department predicted late Sunday that heavy rains would continue to pour over the peninsula at least until Tuesday.

Last year, 12 people were drowned in floods while the death toll in 1991 was nine.

Move to include Khmer Rouge in govt

PHNOM PENH, Dec 26: Co-Premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh has announced that the government was prepared to discuss altering Cambodia's constitution to allow members of the radical Khmer Rouge to hold senior cabinet posts, reports AP.

The announcement, made during a seminar on national security Saturday, indicated the Prince was now prepared to fully support a three-point proposal put forward last month by his father, King Norodom Sihanouk, to include the faction in the government.

The government was now prepared to set up a working group with the guerrillas to try to solve mutual problems and possibly offer the Khmer Rouge positions of power, the Prince said.

5 more killed in Kashmir violence

SRINAGAR, Dec 26: Five people including three Centre Reserve Police Force (CRPF) jawans and a militant were killed and four others injured in continuing violence in Kashmir valley since last evening, reports PTI.

Three CRPF personnel were killed when an explosive device hurled by militants on their vehicle exploded at Khayam-Chowk in downtown Srinagar early today, an official spokesman said.

He said four other jawans, of the force sustained splinter injuries in the grenade attack and were rushed to hospital for treatment.

The spokesman said two persons including a militant identified as Iqbal were killed in exchange of fire with the security forces at Konibal-Pampora.

DPRK may resume N-talks with IAEA next week

SEOUL, Dec 26: Pyongyang may resume talks next week with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on the opening of its nuclear facilities to outside inspection, senior South Korean officials were quoted as saying today, reports AFP.

"The possibility is very high that North Korea and the international Atomic Energy Agency will start talks around January 4," Yonhap news agency quoted one unidentified official as saying.

An IAEA inspection team will possibly visit Pyongyang around January 10 at the earliest, once the two sides agree on details of the IAEA verification inspections, he said.

The official said that during a working-level meeting in New York last Wednesday, Pyongyang told Washington that it would accept full inspection of all declared nuclear facilities.

Pyongyang and the IAEA will discuss details for such inspections, he said, adding that Washington and Pyongyang would have one or two more working level meetings to conclude their talks, Yonhap said.

As yet unconfirmed reports from Washington have said Pyongyang and Washington had agreed that North Korea should resume talks with the IAEA on allowing inspection of all seven nuclear facilities in question.

Should those negotiations be successful, the reports have said, Washington would hold a third round of suspended high-level talks with Pyongyang.

The high-level US-North Korea talks broke off in September after Pyongyang backed off on a July pledge to renew talks with the IAEA and South Korea.

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Kuwait, Russia begin military exercises

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 26: Kuwait and Russia began their joint military exercises, the first of their kind, in the Gulf yesterday, according to reliable sources here, reports Xinhua.

The joint military manoeuvres which will last till December 29 came under a Kuwaiti-Russian bilateral defence agreement signed at the end of last month when Kuwaiti Defence Minister Sheikh Ali Al-Sabah paid a visit to Moscow.

Some Kuwaiti missile boats and anti-submarine ships were expected to join the game, a local newspaper reported earlier.

Besides, three Russian ships — landing craft Nikolai, anti-submarine Admiral and a support ship took part in the five-day naval exercises, according to media reports yesterday.

Kuwait has signed defence pacts with the United States, Britain, France and Russia.

Arafat, Rabin, Mandela, de Klerk Time's 'Men of the Year'

NEW YORK, Dec 26: For their "common genius" as peacemakers, Time magazine picked Yitzhak Rabin, Yasser Arafat, Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk as its "Men of the Year" for 1993, reports AP.

The four were chosen because they "reasserted the principle that leaders matter: that an individual's vision, courageously and persuasively and intelligently pursued, can override the rather unimaginative human preference for war," the magazine said in a statement.

The four leaders are displayed over the headline "The Peacemakers" on the cover of Time's January 5 issue, which goes on sale Monday.

"Without Rabin and Arafat, the Israelis and Palestinians would have continued down the same bleak, violent road they have followed since 1948," Time said. "Without Mandela and de Klerk, blacks and whites (in South Africa) would have descended into the bloodiest

race war in history."

The magazine noted that the peacemaking deal in the Middle East and the one in South Africa are still works in progress.

they saw in the convergence of circumstances a ripeness of moment — and that they acted," the magazine said.

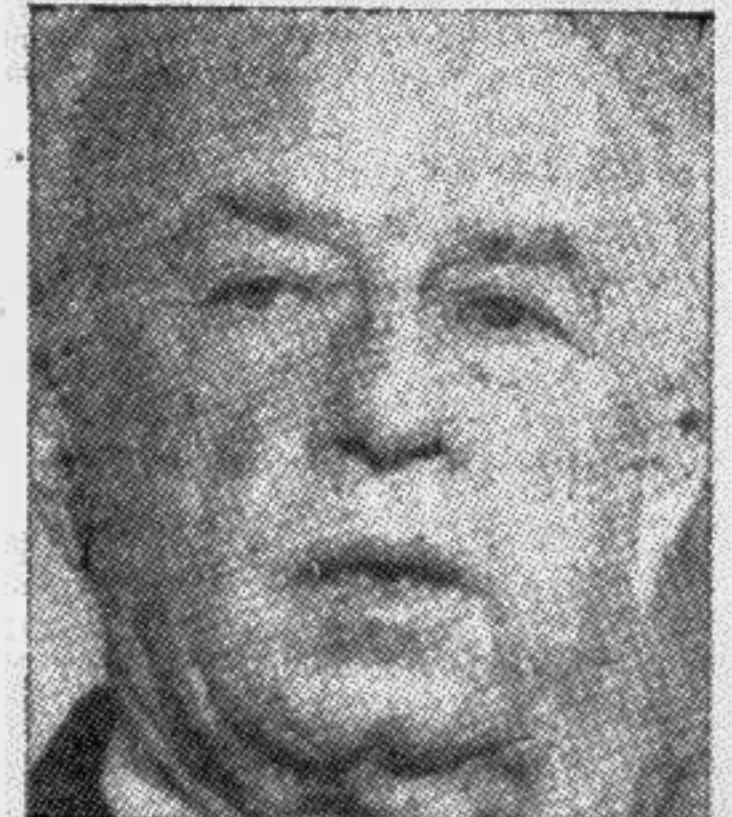
In separate interviews, each

ary solution. This super-army was running after kids and fighting against women."

Rabin conceded that the uprising "created problems"



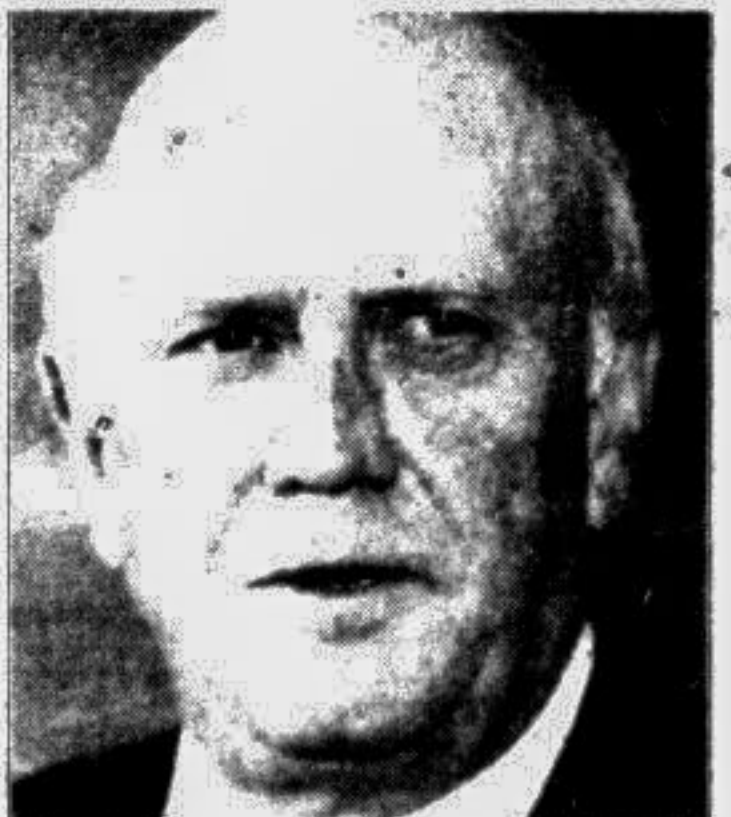
Yasser Arafat



Yitzhak Rabin



Nelson Mandela



F.W. de Klerk

Minister of Israel and Arafat is leader of the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

"In 1993, Rabin and Arafat, Mandela and de Klerk all rose to the occasion before them. Their common genius was that

of the winners spoke to Time on their efforts to achieve peace.

"The intifadeh (the Palestinian uprising) motivated the Israelis," Arafat said. "There were no signs it would end anytime soon. There was no mili-

"I didn't believe the present situation could last without an increase in extremism among the Palestinians," he said. "I believed that we have a widow of just a few years to try to face

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