

All hostages safe Russian elite commandos capture all kidnappers

MOSCOW, Dec 27: All four kidnappers who escaped in a helicopter packed with explosives and 10 million dollar were captured early Monday after an intense manhunt in the mountains of southern Russia, police said, reports AP.

All of their hostages were safe. Police and elite commandos captured the four men after a brief shootout in the Caucasus Mountains, and most or all of the 10 million dollar ransom was recovered.

The money is still being counted — what they had on them, plus what they left behind in the helicopter. Police Col. Yuri Reshetnik told The Associated Press. "I guess it was too much for them to carry and still run through the mountains."

In Russia, kidnappers face the death sentence.

Authorities did not immediately release the names of the captured men. The Interfax

news agency said the first two captured were from the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. One was 48 years old, and the other was 21, Interfax said.

The crisis began Thursday morning when the heavily-armed kidnappers seized a dozen students in Rostov-on-Don, 600 miles south of Moscow.

Russian authorities met all the hostages demands. They gave them the camouflage-painted Mi-8 military helicopter and 10 million dollars in U.S. currency.

The kidnappers released a few hostages at a time over the next few days. Eight hostages — seven teen-age girls and a teacher — were freed Friday. Two classmates, both boys, were released Saturday at the Mineralnye Vody airport.

At 6.45 pm (1545 GMT) Sunday, the gunmen freed three more hostages.

Implementation of Palestinian self-rule Arafat's concession can break deadlock: Peres

JERUSALEM, Dec 27: Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres warned today that only concessions from the PLO leader Yasser Arafat could break a deadlock on implementing Palestinian self-rule, reports AFP.

"I really hope that Yasser Arafat will come back down to earth because I'm not taking anything new" to the Israeli-PLO negotiations opening later the same day in Cairo, Peres told the daily Yediot Aharanot.

Peres and PLO executive committee member Mahmud Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, were to lead the delegations in talks aimed at breaking the deadlock on implementing autonomy.

"If Abu Mazen... does not have a mandate, I'm not sure we will be able to succeed" in Cairo, warned the Foreign Min-

ister. But government spokesman and Health Minister Chaim Ramon said Sunday that an agreement on implementing autonomy in the Gaza Strip and West Bank town of Jericho might be reached within 10 days.

And Israeli radio said the Jewish state would be ready to double the size of the future autonomous Jericho district — one of the key areas of dispute between the two sides.

High-level talks in Norway and France have failed to overcome the major stumbling blocks: control of border crossings linking Egypt to Gaza and Jordan to Jericho, the size of Jericho, and security for Jewish settlements in Gaza.

Implementation of the September 13 autonomy accord was to have started on December 13, but Arafat and Israeli

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin failed to reach agreement at a Cairo meeting on the eve of the deadline.

According to the radio, Israel is now ready to double the size of Jericho from 27 square kilometres (11 square miles) to around 50 square kilometers (20 square miles).

But the Gulf is still wide between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation, which has lowered its sights from 345 square kilometres to 200 square kilometres.

Ahead of the latest Cairo negotiations, Israel's deputy chief of staff general Amnon Shahak met two PLO security officials in Rome on Sunday, military radio said.

It said they discussed intelligence cooperation to combat the Islamic resistance movement (Hamas), which has vowed to sabotage the autonomy deal.

Biodiversity convention goes into effect

RIO De Janeiro, Dec 27: The disputed biodiversity convention, drawn up at the 1992 Earth Summit as a means to protect the world's plant and animal species, goes into effect this week, reports AP.

Brazil, host of the Earth Summit hasn't ratified it yet. Nor has the United States, although it is expected to. President Clinton has backed the treaty, reversing the policy of former President Bush.

The convention was ratified by 30 of the 163 governments that signed it, reaching the required minimum before it can go into effect. The thirtieth country, Mongolia, ratified the pact on September 30, 1993.

It goes into effect on December 30.

The controversial pact has divided developed and developing nations over issues such as who will pay for conservation and how profits from natural products should be distributed.

Brazil, which has large plant and mineral reserves hasn't ratified the treaty because of a congressional calendar backed by a corruption probe.

Step towards political reform King Fahd to convene Shura Council

DUBAI, Dec 27: King Fahd is due to convene Saudi Arabia's appointed Shura (consultative) Council this week in the Kingdom's first major step towards political reform, reports AP.

Official sources and western diplomats in Riyadh said the King was expected to hold the first session of the 60-member body, the country's first representative assembly in almost 60 years, within the next few days.

Senior members of the Saudi royal family traditionally control the Kingdom's administration and its vast oil, wealth, huge foreign assets and military and internal security for centuries.

Although rules governing the new council fall short of western concepts of democracy, diplomats in Riyadh said it represented a big move towards long-promised changes.

"It is an important first step and the thing to do is to focus on this progressive move," one western diplomat told Reuters

by telephone from Riyadh. "Every country has its own version of democracy and no one has the 'perfect' formula."

King Fahd appointed the Shura Council in August. A month later he named members of regional assemblies in a further sign that ordinary Saudis will for the first time have a say in running their country's affairs.

"We (Riyadh's western allies) look favourably on this Council and are in favour of this political liberalisation," the diplomat said.

Diplomats expected that the regional assemblies, which like the Shura do not include senior members of the royal family, would hold their first meetings after the king opened the first Shura session.

They said the men named to the Shura Council and the assemblies represented the different sectors of the Saudi society and the appointments were well received by the people.

BRIEFLY

Arafat arrives in Yemen: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat arrived Monday to brief Yemen's leadership on the peace talks that his aides were to resume with the Israelis in Egypt later in the day, AP reports from San'a.

Yemen is a close supporter of the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation and still harbors some 2,000 of the PLO fighters that Arafat wants to move as policemen to Jericho and Gaza.

In arrival statements, Arafat, who came from Cairo where he held advance talks Sunday with the Egyptian hosts, said the "most important obstacles" sprang from Israel's interpretation of the September 13 declaration of principles on Palestinian self-rule.

37,000 children die in Peru: An estimated 37,000 Peruvian children died this year of preventable diseases such as tetanus and diarrhoea, but even that figure marks a big improvement from 10 years ago, UNICEF said Sunday, AFP reports from Lima.

A decade ago, around 64,000 children under one year of age died of diseases that could have been prevented, United Nations Children's Fund representative Mario Talavera said.

He attributed the improvement to immunization campaigns and a population shift from the countryside to cities, where medical services are more widely available.

Road mishap takes 5 in France: A car travelling at high speed lost control on a curve and crashed into a minivan Sunday, killing five people and seriously injuring eight others, police said, AP reports from France.

The car was travelling on a highway near Chaulnes, 110 kms (70 miles) north of Paris, when it slid and hit the oncoming van. All four in the BMW — the driver, his wife, their child and a family friend — were killed. A 13-year-old child in the van also died.

The eight injured, including a 2-month-old infant, were airlifted to hospitals in nearby Peronne and Amiens.

Storm Nell claims 7 in Philippines: Tropical storm Nell roared across the populous central Philippine islands Monday, dumping heavy rains and buffeting the area with strong winds. At least seven people were reported killed, AP reports from Manila.

At 4 am (2100 GMT), the storm was reported over the city of Iloilo, about 500 kilometers (300 miles) south of Manila. Its maximum sustained winds had weakened to 110 kph (68 mph).

Nell, which was downgraded from typhoon status early Monday, was moving in a northwesterly course at 26 kph (16 mph), according to the Manila weather service.

Abdusshahid Tajikistan's new PM: The Tajikistan Parliament confirmed yesterday the appointment of Abdusshahid Samadov as the central Asian state's new Prime Minister, Itar-Tass news agency said, AFP reports from Moscow.

He replaces Abdulmalek Abdulazizhanov who resigned on December 18 amid disagreements with Tajik leader Emomali Rakhmonov on Economic policy and allegations of corruption. Samadov served previously as Deputy Prime Minister, Itar-Tass said, giving no further details.

Plane crashes in Armenia, 11 die: Eleven people died when a Russian cargo plane crashed while landing in heavy fog Monday at the Armenian town of Gyumri, officials said, AP reports from Moscow.

The An-26 turboprop was transporting two automobiles from Krasnodar in southern Russia, said Marina Rykлина, a spokeswoman for the Russian government emergency committee.

She said all five crew members and all six passengers were killed in the crash at Gyumri, 85 kilometers (53 miles) northwest of Yerevan, the Armenian capital.

Hamas offers ceasefire

JERUSALEM, Dec 27: The main Muslim militant group in the occupied territories offered Sunday to halt attacks against Israelis if they agreed to withdraw forces from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, reports AP.

"Stop all manifestations of violence from the Israeli side and... the Palestinian side will stop all the manifestations," Mahmoud Al-Zahar, a leader of the Hamas group, said on Israel army radio.

It was an unusual offer given Hamas' previous insistence that it would not lay down arms against Israel until the Jewish state is supplanted by an Islamic one.

Al-Zahar's remarks also were the latest in a series of indications that despite its opposition to the September 13 Israel-PLO accord, Hamas was moving toward accommodation with Israel.

A Gaza military commander revealed earlier this month he had held closed-door meetings with Hamas leaders.

Al-Zahar was among 400 activists Israel deported to Lebanon in December 1992 in retaliation for the slayings of six soldiers whose deaths were blamed on Hamas. He was also among the 197 of those deportees who were repatriated December 15, in the wake of Mideast peace moves.

In his unusual radio interview, Al-Zahar reiterated de-

mands published in a Hamas leaflet issued on Friday, including an Israeli withdrawal and the release of Palestinian prisoners.

The leaflet said Israel had to leave the territories within a year. The peace accord calls for a limited withdrawal from Gaza and the West Bank region of Jericho by April 1993 when Palestinians would be granted limited self-rule or autonomy.

Meanwhile Reuters adds: Israel and the PLO meet today to try to rescue their historic peace accord and have hinted that they are slowly moving close to settling the disputes that have delayed Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho.



Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (r) meets PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat in the Tahriya palace in Heliopolis Dec 26 in Cairo. Arafat and Mubarak are discussing new ways to break the impasse over Palestinian self rule ahead of the Israeli-PLO negotiations. — AFP photo

Ghali believes DPRK has will to resolve disputes on N-issues

BEIJING, Dec 27: UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said Monday he believes North Korea's leaders have the political will to resolve the international dispute over their suspected nuclear weapons programme, reports AP.

"There is a political will to solve peacefully this problem. This is the positive element," Boutros-Ghali said at a news conference one day after arriving from the North Korean capital of Pyongyang.

"The political will to avoid an escalation. The political will to find a progressive way to co-existence and the beginning of a way to reunification between North and South," he said.

At issue is North Korea's refusal to allow international inspections of all its nuclear sites despite suspicions that it is developing or already has nuclear weapons. North Korea has threatened to pull out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, while the United States has warned of possible economic sanctions.

Boutros-Ghali, the first UN secretary-general to visit North Korea since 1979, said he had not gone to Pyongyang expecting to solve the problem.

"The purpose of my mission was to encourage all the actors of this crisis to continue to negotiate," he said. "We believe through negotiations and more

negotiations we will be able to find a peaceful solution."

He also said he wanted to listen to the viewpoints of all sides in the dispute in case the United Nations is called on later to play a more active role. He travelled last week to Japan and South Korea, both of which are deeply concerned by the North's suspected weapons programme, before crossing the demilitarised zone into North Korea.

Asked about the latest report on North Korea's nuclear capability, a CIA analysis that North Korea may already have one or two nuclear bombs, Boutros-Ghali said he was not a military expert and could not comment.

4 PLO officials resign

JERUSALEM, Dec 27: At least four senior officials of PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat's Fatah Movement in the occupied territories have resigned on the eve of renewed peace talks with Israel in Cairo today, Fatah sources said, reports Reuters.

They said the resignations could herald a crisis in the local Palestine Liberation Organisation leadership and an implicit challenge to Arafat just when he needed to marshal all possible support for the Israeli-PLO accord on self-rule.

"The Palestinian negotiations are being run the wrong way," said Sami Abu Samhadana, Chief of Fatah's Gaza Strip office, who quit along with Jamal Al-Dik, a senior West Bank Fatah leader.

The sources said two other Fatah leaders had also resigned. Tawfik Abu Khousa, Abu Samhadana's deputy and Fatah delegate to the unified command of the Intifada (Palestinian uprising), and Zakaria Talmas, Head of the Gaza Arab Journalists Association.



Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte, accompanied by police investigators, looks at the body of an unidentified bombing victim inside the San Pedro Cathedral Dec 26 in Philippines. Six people were killed and 151 people injured when simultaneous explosions rocked a post-Christmas mass packed with 5,000 Roman Catholic churchgoers. Police have launched a manhunt for the unidentified terrorists. — AFP photo

Police arrest 150 Shiv Sena activists

AURANGABAD, Dec 27: More than 150 Shiv Sena activists including local MLA Chandrakant Khairare were arrested by police today when they staged a demonstration in the busy Sulamandi area of the city to protest against the government's proposed move to rename Marathwada University after Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar.

The Deputy Commissioner of police, R N Dhate told PTI the arrested Sena activists also included women. There was however, no untoward incidents.

He said the Sena activists were picked up as they had staged a demonstration which was "inciting the passions of the people in the already tense atmosphere due to the renaming issue."

The police had asked both pro-renaming and anti-renaming activists not to stage marches or demonstrations. However, the Shiv Sena had defied the prohibitory orders, he said.

Clinton, Yeltsin to discuss N-issues

WASHINGTON, Dec 27: President Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin have agreed to discuss resolution of nuclear issues involving their two countries and Ukraine, the White House said December 22, reports AP.

White House Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers said Clinton and Yeltsin spoke on the telephone for 30 minutes earlier in the day, discussing plans for their summit meeting in Moscow January 13-15, the recent Russian election, and US economic aid aimed at supporting the transition to democracy and market economies in Russia and other states of the former Soviet Union.

"They agreed," Myers said in a written statement, "on the need to continue the cooperative tripartite dialogue with Ukraine, with the aim of resolving the complex set of nuclear issues" involving Soviet missiles on Ukrainian territory.

Benazir orders probe into reports of recognition to Israel

ISLAMABAD, Dec 27: Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto said on Sunday she had ordered an investigation into reports that Pakistani diplomats had been in secret contact with Israel for a possible recognition of the Jewish state, reports Reuters.

She told reporters that she had asked the Foreign Ministry to hold the inquiry to check if any Pakistani diplomat had contacted Israel after local newspapers quoted the Israeli ambassador to India as saying there had been such contacts.

Bhutto, who took office last October, denied knowledge of any contacts with Israel and said: "We cannot think of recognising Israel without consulting the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation) and the Islamic world."

Off the Record

Shabana Azmi criticised for kissing Mandela in public

NEW DELHI: A conservative Muslim group says it will boycott films by a top Muslim actress unless she apologises for kissing Nelson Mandela in public, reports AP.

Shabana Azmi's kiss on the cheek for the South African leader last month was denounced Saturday by the Muslim Unity Forum as an offence to Islam.

Azmi gave Mandela a kiss on the cheek after she handed him the "Newsmaker of the Year" award in Cape Town on behalf of a South African daily in November.

"This controversy is utterly disgusting. I don't want to take notice of it or even talk about it. It is in bad taste," said Azmi, reached by telephone in Bombay.

Akbar Ahmed of the Muslim said the Forum would organise street protests against Azmi and would encourage Muslims to stay away from her movies.

A picture of the kiss prompted a lively debate on the letters-to-the-editor columns of several newspapers, but the protest by the Forum—which claims to have only 800 active members—moved the issue onto front pages.

Conservative among the Muslim community, who are 12 per cent of India's 880 million people, had written to newspapers saying the act had shamed them. But others had sprung to her defence.

Muslim children get a first taste of Christmas

ZAGREB: Minela Mahic, a 12-year-old Muslim refugee from Bosnia, never celebrated Christmas before. "But I like to get presents," she said Sunday, eyeing packages under a sparkling tree in a military tent, reports AP.

About 200 children were bused to Zagreb from refugee camps in Varazdin and Cakovec, about 70 kilometers (44 miles) northeast of the Croatian capital, for the belated Christmas party. It was organised by the US medical unit at Zagreb airport and a Dutch battalion of UN peacekeepers.

"If you've got kids at home and you can't be with them, it's good to be with other kids," said Capt Jeff Moore, a nurse with the US Mobile Army Surgical Hospital, who has three daughters back home. Moore, 36, has been in Croatia six months and will stay until March.

Most of the children were Muslims, for whom a Christmas celebration was new. But Moore said that didn't matter. "We wanted to give them a moment of joy," he said. "We can call it a winter party."

Three Dutch soldiers dressed up a Santa Claus, green fatigues peeking through, milled among the children wishing them "Sretan Bozic"—Merry Christmas in Serbo-Croat.

Toys in exchange for a gun

NEW YORK: New Yorkers own 310 fewer guns than they did last week. And they have a lot of toys coming their way in return, reports AP.

A four-day programme that ended at midnight Christmas offered a 100 dollar Toys "R" US gift certificate in exchange for a gun, no questions asked.

Linea ran out the door last week as people waited at the Police Department's 34th Precinct to turn in weapons.

Fernando Mateo, who owns a carpet store, started the programme with 5,000 dollar. Two businesses chipped in another 10,000 dollars three Toys "R" US executives threw in 10,000 dollar and the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People pledged 5,000 dollars.

Individual donors were calling to offer smaller sums, Mateo said Sunday.

"We've been getting phone calls, and we're putting together a committee to see if we can expand the programme within the city of New York and even on the national level," he said.

The city has a year-old gun amnesty programme that offers 25 dollars to 75 dollars cash depending on the type of weapon.

Hosokawa wishes to compromise for reforms

TOKYO, Dec 27: Japanese Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa said today he was willing to make further compromises to win approval of crucial political reform bills, reports Reuters.

"The government will respect any agreement in this committee," he told the Upper House committee on political reforms.

"It is a matter of course that we respect Upper House deliberations," he said, indicating he was ready for a deal with the opposition.

Last Friday, Hosokawa apologised to the nation for failing

to keep his promise that the bills, which include new electoral districts and stricter anti-corruption measures, would become law by the end of this year.

He said then that he would seek parliamentary approval of the bills by late January, the end of the current 135-day session.

Before the bills cleared the lower house in November, Hosokawa gave in to demands by the opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and altered the composition of the new chamber.

His original plan, approved by his coalition in August, had 250 seats chosen from single-seat districts and another 250 through proportional representation for a new 500-member body.

The LDP wanted 300 in the districts and 171 in the proportional list for a 471-member assembly. Hosokawa proposed a new formula — 276 in the single-seat constituencies and 224 from the proportional list—which passed the lower house.

Hosokawa also announced on Friday that steps to boost the troubled economy would be announced in mid-January but his comments failed to convince the stock market.

'Sino-Pak friendship is a model of inter-state relations'

BEIJING, Dec 27: Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto arrived in Beijing today to renew what she described as model bilateral ties and study China's formula for brisk economic development, reports Reuters.

Bhutto's consultations were to begin almost immediately with an evening meeting with Chinese Premier Li Peng. She is to meet again on Tuesday with Li and with President and Communist Party chief Jiang Zemin.

"Pakistan regards its relations with China as a cornerstone of its foreign policy," Bhutto said in a statement handed out as she gave autographs to scores of Pakistani children greeting her at Beijing airport.

"Pakistan-China friendship is a model of inter-state relations... and has stood the test of time and changing global trends."

Islamabad covets its close links with Beijing as a check on the political and military clout

of its chief rival, India, whose relations with China have been improving.

Bhutto planned to consult with Beijing on Pakistan's dispute with India over Kashmir feeling China could play a welcome moderating role after the Soviet collapse. Pakistan's official AP news agency said.

Bhutto vowed to renew and cement ties, which range from military exchanges to close trade links, including construction of a Chinese nuclear power plant near Islamabad.

I shall... avail myself of this opportunity to study the Chinese economic development model which has been widely acclaimed," Bhutto said.

The three-day stay in China is Bhutto's first since she was returned to office in October elections. She had visited China in February 1989 during her first term of office.

Bhutto's delegation includes Defence Minister Aftab Shaaban Meerani, on his second China visit this month. Analysts said talks were expected to touch on

military ties.

Allegations that China has sold missile technology to Pakistan in violation of its own non-proliferation pledges are a source of friction in both nations' ties with the United States.

Washington bars some military transfers to China and stopped all arms exports to Pakistan in 1990, suspecting it of trying to make nuclear weapons — a charge denied by Islamabad. Pakistan has bought Chinese arms since the 1960s. This