

6 die, 700 hurt during New Year's revelry in Philippines

MANILA (Philippines), Jan 1: Six people were reported killed and more than 700 injured during New Year's revelry, officials said Saturday. But the casualty figure was lower than in previous years, reports AP.

Radio stations said the six died from stabbings and gunshot wounds during New Year's celebrations in the Manila area. Hospitals treated 723 people for fireworks-related injuries, including burns and missing fingers.

At least 19 people were wounded by stray bullets and 12 were stabbed.

Last year, 10 people were killed and more than 1,000 injured in Manila alone. The government's Philippine General Hospital said it treated 69

firecracker injuries six stabbings and one gunshot wound, a 50 per cent drop from last year.

For the first time in memory no fires were reported in Manila on New Year's Eve. Ordinarily, errant fireworks trigger many fires in wooden shanty neighbourhoods.

"I have been a fireman for 30 years, and this is the first time this has ever happened," fireman Ador Gionisio said.

Another 88 people were injured in Cebu and two other provincial cities; Cagayan de Oro and Iligan.

"Maybe it's the media," said one doctor, who refused to give his name. Radio and television stations had been broadcasting appeals all week for people to avoid grandiose, private fireworks displays.

Among the most serious injuries was Rogelio Quillones, who lost a hand after betting his friends that he could hold and exploding firecracker, and 7-year-old Joseph Allen, whose eyes were seriously damaged when he picked up what he thought was a dud firecracker, radio stations reported.

Most Southeast Asians save their biggest celebrations for traditional lunar New Year. But Filipinos, 85 per cent of whom are Roman Catholic, follow the Western tradition.

Fireworks became a Philippine tradition with the arrival of Chinese immigrants in the 19th century. The noise and flashes are supposed to drive away evil spirits and guarantee a prosperous New Year.

Filipinos who earn only a few thousand pesos (hundreds of dollars) a month spend large sums of money on firecrackers, sparklers, skyrockets and other fireworks on New Year's.

Thousands attend funeral of Wani JKLF stages demonstration against Indo-Pak talks

ISLAMABAD, Jan 1: About 200 Kashmiri militants staged a demonstration today against bilateral talks on Kashmir between India and Pakistan scheduled to begin here Sunday, reports AFP.

The activists of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) chanted slogans during the hour-long protest, calling for Kashmir's independence.

JKLF is one of several groups waging a separatist campaign against Indian rule in the southern two-thirds of Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state.

The demonstrators shouted "we want complete freedom" and "Only Kashmiris can decide

their fate." Addressing the rally in the capital, JKLF Vice-Chairman Raja Muzaffar demanded Kashmiri representatives participate in any negotiations in a settlement of the Kashmir issue.

"It is for the people of Kashmir to decide whether they want to join India or Pakistan or become independent," he said.

Kashmiris would not accept the division of their homeland, the JKLF leader said.

Another rally against the talks was planned here for later in the day by Pakistani fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami party. Muzaffar said the Kashmir problem had lingered since

1947 with India and Pakistan spending billions of dollars on the issue.

Meanwhile, thousands of Kashmiri Muslims attended the funeral today of popular academic Abdul Ahad Wani as police attempted to identify his assassins.

Wani, 52, who headed the law faculty at Kashmir University, was buried here to chants of Islamic and independence slogans by the assembly of mourners who included several Kashmiri separatists, witnesses said.

His bullet-riddled body was found Friday on the campus of the university in Srinagar, the

Kashmiri summer capital and urban hub of Muslim militancy. Wani was regarded as a sympathiser of the militant movement for Kashmir's secession from India.

Police linked his murder to internecine rivalries between the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) and the Hizbul Mujahideen, the two most powerful Muslim guerrilla groups.

Both organisations condemned the murder in separate statements released here today, and the Hizbul said it had set up a commission to probe the killing. The killers would be punished, the group said.

Arafat urges Palestinians to remain united

TUNIS, Jan 1: PLO leader Yasser Arafat said Friday he was "confident" an independent Palestinian state would become into existence with Jerusalem as its capital, reports AFP.

Arafat, in a message marking the 29th anniversary of the creation of his Fatah movement, called on the Palestinian people to remain united to achieve this "sacred goal."

He said the autonomy accord signed by the Palestine Liberation Organisation and Israel in September in Washington has carried the Palestinians to a new era that should witness the establishment of the "first Palestinian national authority" in the Gaza Strip and Jericho in the West Bank.

"We enter the new era with confidence and a lot of hope, but without any illusions," Arafat said, stressing that there were still many difficulties to surmount.

Israel and the PLO have not reached an agreement yet over details that have so far blocked the implementation of the autonomy agreement in the occupied territories.

Negotiations between the two sides have stumbled over the boundaries of Jericho, the security of Jewish settlements and the control of the international borders of the autonomous areas.

Arafat said the accord was just a first step towards peace which would not be completed before implementing all United Nations Security Council resolutions and regaining "all Arab rights at all the fronts."

He also referred to the importance of "Arab coordination" to boost the Arab stand against Israel in the bilateral negotiations.



Masked Palestinian combatants opposed to the PLO-Israel peace accord demonstrate Dec 31 in the refugee camp of Ain Helwi in South Lebanon to mark the 28th anniversary of the foundation of Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement. — AFP photo

European unification a decisive issue for united Germany: Kohl

BONN, Jan 1: European unification is a decisive issue for the united Germany, Chancellor Helmut Kohl said today in a broadcast new year message aimed at the rest of the world, says AFP.

"We Germans have more neighbours than any other country in Europe. We are therefore particularly conscious that European unification is also a matter of our future peace and freedom," Kohl said on Deutsche Welle Radio.

"European unification is for united Germany a decisive issue," he said.

But he also stressed that "none of us wants a European superstate" and that what the

German government wanted was "a political union built upon the principle of unity in diversity."

Speaking of the reunification of Germany following the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall, the Chancellor said that "much prudence, patience and understanding" were still needed.

But economic growth in former East Germany is expected to be 6.5 per cent in 1993 and 7.5 per cent in 1994, he said. In Western Germany in 1993 growth is expected to be a negative figure.

In a separate recorded New Year message addressed to

Germans at home, Kohl warned them to expect to make sacrifices in 1994, and asked them to show "courage and a sense of reality" in order to preserve national prosperity.

The Chancellor said that the electoral success of the nationalist far right in Russia was no cause to alter the German government's support for President Boris Yeltsin's reforms.

He also reaffirmed Bonn's alliance with Washington, and the government's desire to see Germany play a full part in UN security and peace-keeping operations.

Maria joins her mother in US

ATLANTA, Georgia, Jan 1: Cuban President Fidel Castro's 16-year-old granddaughter joined her mother in the United States Friday, saying she hoped to study hard and make a new life, reports AFP.

Alina Maria Salgado Fernandez joined her mother at a press conference at the home of Elena Amos, a Cuban American Philanthropist who helped the girl's mother escape. Amos lives in Columbus, Georgia.

"I am very happy I could be reunited with my daughter," said the girl's mother Alina Fernandez Revuelta, a 37-year-old former fashion model.

Salgado, asked what she hoped to do in the United States, Maria said "I am going to study a lot."

To leave Cuba, Salgado was required only to get permission from her guardians.



Alina Fernandez Revuelta, daughter of Cuban leader Fidel Castro (L), and her daughter Alina Maria Salgado-Fernandez (R) toast the New Year with champagne, being reunited in the United States after young Alina left Havana early Dec 31 for Miami. — AFP photo

'93 was a year of disasters for Asia

villages in India's western Maharashtra state, on the coast of the Arabian Sea.

The trembler, registered 6.4 on the Richter scale, left 9,748 people dead by official count, while newspapers and state-run media estimated the death toll at more than 30,000.

Papua New Guinea was rocked by a trembler, reaching 6.8 on the Richter scale on October 13, and leaving 65 people dead and 10,000 homeless. Just over a month later, Pakistan's Baluchistan Province was the victim of a smaller quake, at 5.7 on the Richter scale, which left six dead.

The Indian-sub-continent suffered 3,000 dead in disasters caused by monsoon rains in India, Nepal and Bangladesh.

Some 1,100 people were killed in June-July floods

which inundated 4,741 villages and 44 towns in 13 of India's 25 states. The flooding — which experts called the worst in 50 years — caused hundreds of millions of dollars damage and crippled Punjab, the country's grain bowl.

More than 3,300 people lost their lives in floods in China this year, that caused damage estimated at 11 billion dollars, destroyed 17 million hectares of land and affected 1.8 million homes.

Unseasonal rain and a series of typhoons struck Japan throughout the summer, resulting in an estimated 8.4 billion dollars damage to the rice harvest. Typhoon Yancy hit the Archipelago in early September, leaving 50 dead in its wake.

Two typhoons of moderate strength struck the Philippines in early December, and relief operations were still

continuing as the search for the unexpectedly high number of dead continued. The official combined toll from typhoons Lola, which struck the eastern Philippines and the islands south of Manila on December 6, and Manny, which hit the eastern Philippines four days later, was put at 312 dead and 73 missing.

However, not all grief was sparked by natural disasters and human error was behind other accidents which left scores dead.

The first in the region occurred on new year's day in Hong Kong when 22 people were trampled to death during celebrations in the crowded Lan Kwai Fong night club area of the city.

In Thailand the worst disaster occurred May 10 when fire roared through the Kader toy factory on the outskirts of Bangkok, killing almost 200

people and injuring some 400. Most had been locked inside the badly constructed building, which collapsed in the blaze.

On August 13, 137 people were killed and hundreds injured when the Royal Plaza hotel collapsed without warning in Nakhon Ratchasima, 260 kilometers northeast of Bangkok. Fourteen people, including government planners and engineers, were charged with negligence linked to modifications of the building.

China suffered two major factory fires during the year, one at a textile plant in Fuzhou south east China on December 13 in which 60 people died and another at a toy factory in Shenzhen, southern China, November 19 which claimed 80 lives.



Russian President Boris Yeltsin gets some advice from his public relations assistant Ludmilla Bikhova (R), as they prepare the recording of Yeltsin's New Year address to the nation in the Kremlin, late Dec 30. — AFP photo

Off the Record

Boeing makes emergency landing to save cat and dog

SPOKANE, Washington: A United airlines boeing 727 made an emergency landing to save a dog and a cat stored by mistake in an unheated cargo bay, reports AFP.

The jet had just taken off from Chicago for Spokane when ground control told the cockpit crew that the two animals — a golden retriever and a cat — had been stored in the unheated section of the cargo compartment, pilot Mark Sebbly said.

Temperatures at 9,000 metres (30,000 feet), can reach minus 48 degrees Celsius (minus 55 degrees Fahrenheit).

Sebbly said he dump land safely in Madison, Wisconsin. The pets were taken off the plane, warmed up and then put in the heated part of the cargo hold. The rescue delayed the flight by two hours.

Row over "designer babies"

LONDON: A row erupted in Britain on Friday over "designer babies" following reports that a black woman is to have a white woman's egg implanted in her to ensure the child is of mixed race, reports Reuters.

It is the second time in a week that genetic manipulation has prompted protests from doctors, churchmen and politicians after a 59-year-old British woman gave birth to twins on Christmas Day after artificial insemination at a Rome clinic.

The latest case involves a man of mixed race and a black woman who are keen the child should resemble its father. The couple are being treated at a pioneering test-tube baby clinic at Bourn Hall, Cambridge.

The woman, unable to produce eggs of her own because of a tumour, has opted to have the eggs of a white donor fertilised by her husband's sperm.

Man with 3 tongues

KATHMANDU: A man has been found in a remote hill region of eastern Nepal who has three tongues, 30 fingers and toes and 60 teeth, an English-language newspaper said Saturday, reports AFP.

The Kathmandu post said pictures of 50-year-old Taranthi Kharel's "amazing physique" were "selling like hotcakes." Most human beings have 32 teeth, including their wisdom teeth.

4-mile-long greeting card

NEW DELHI: An army officer in India's capital mailed his boss a New Year card, but it required several letter carriers to just lift it, reports AP.

Lt. Col. OP. Sindhu sent President Shankar Dayal Sharma, the commander of India's defence services, a greeting made from 21,300 sheets of paper folded together, newspapers reported Saturday. The card weighed 65 kilograms (143 pounds).

Sharma will have to take Sindhu's word that it says "Happy New Year to the President of India." The card is 6.5 kilometers (four miles long).

Syria denies secret contacts with Israel

DAMASCUS, Jan 1: Syria on Friday denied having had secret informal contacts with Israel in European capitals in a search for peace, reports AFP.

An Information Ministry spokesman said that reports of contacts between Syrian and Israeli experts were "unfounded and false."

US and Arab sources said in Washington on Thursday that five meetings had taken place in Oslo, London and Rome since May.

A draft "declaration of intentions" had been drawn up on the Golan Heights, which Israel seized in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and the Syrians had dropped demands for reciprocity on any security measures in any peace accord, the sources said.

Israel's US ambassador Itamar Rabinovich said Friday

that Israeli and Syrian academics had met in Europe but did not have a mandate from their governments.

However, he told Israeli radio from Washington that the fact that Syrians were talking with Israel was "significant and reveals serious intentions in Damascus."

The Information Ministry spokesman, quoted by the official Sana news agency, said that Syria was committed to the Madrid formula for the peace process.

The conference in the Spanish capital in October 1991 launched bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.

Syria has always denied following the PLO path in holding secret talks in a bid to break the deadlock.

Taiwan eases visa requirements for foreigners

TAIPEI, Jan 1: Taiwan eased strict visa requirements for foreign visitors today in a bid to reverse a decline in its Tourism Industry and obtain visa concessions from other nations, reports Reuters.

Citizens from 12 nations — Australia, Austria, Belgium, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand and the United States — can now visit the island for five-day periods without visas.

Taiwan had maintained tough visa regulations left over from its martial law period, which ended in 1987. Previously, almost all foreigners had to apply for visas before coming to Taiwan.

David Hong, director of the Foreign Ministry's department of consular affairs, said the reform would help tourism.

UNDATED, Jan 1: Nature led the way in hitting Asia with disasters in 1993, lashing out with earthquakes, floods and typhoons which claimed thousands of lives throughout the region, reports AFP.

Movements of the earth's crust caused catastrophes in Japan, India, Pakistan and Papua New Guinea, with earthquakes registering magnitudes around and above 6.0 on the open-ended Richter scale — strong enough to cause severe damage in populated areas.

On July 12, the largest earthquake to hit Japan in the past 10 years devastated the northern island of Hokkaido, leaving some 250 people dead and 670 injured. The quake hit a high 7.8 on the Richter scale and triggered tidal waves, landslides and fires which, apart from the high death toll, caused 68.1 billion yen in property damages.

On September 30 a less intense earthquake flattened 35

scenic hillside, overlooking Kuala Lumpur, collapsed after a landslide, burying 72 people in the rubble.

Of an estimated 500 religious pilgrims in the Philippines who were clamoring onto a floating Roman Catholic shrine during a river procession in the town of Bocaue, 279 drowned when the craft capsized.

South Korea did not escape with three major air, land and sea transportation disasters killing about 440 people.

On March 28, 78 died and 113 were injured when a passenger train derailed in the southern port town of Pusan, and on July 26 an Asian Airlines flight crashed into a hill side while trying to land in fog and heavy rain, claiming 66 lives and injuring 44 — the country's worst ever domestic air disaster.

Then on October 30 an overloaded ferry, the 110-tonne Sohae capsized off the rugged western coast of Seoul killing up to 300 people.

Fierce fighting in Kabul

KABUL, Jan 1: Ferocious fighting in the war-shattered capital of Kabul erupted Saturday leaving dozens wounded, according to Afghan sources, reports AP.

It wasn't known whether anyone was killed in what witnesses said was some of the fiercest fighting in months.

Since taking power from the communists in 1992, Muslim rebels have turned the capital into a bloody battleground.

The main combatants have been troops loyal to President Burhanuddin Rabbani and forces aligned to Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Shortly after midnight on Saturday dozens of rockets rained down on the city pounding neighbourhoods in the north and east of the capital, witnesses said.