

BRIEFLY



Hollywood madam Heidi Fleiss looks toward the jury in court in Los Angeles on Friday as they convict her on three charges of pandering, for which she faces three years in prison. They were deadlocked on two other pandering charges and acquitted her of drug charges. — AFP photo

Russian PM to visit India:

Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin plans to visit India from December 21 to 24, a government spokesman said on Friday. Reuter reports from Moscow.

The spokesman gave no details of Chernomyrdin's trip.

DPRK, US N-experts to meet in Jan:

North Korean and US nuclear experts, who ended talks in Beijing this week, will meet again in January, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said yesterday. AFP reports from Tokyo.

The official North Korean news agency quoted a joint statement by the experts as saying that the North Korean and US delegations met in the Chinese capital Wednesday through Friday to discuss North Korea's planned replacement of the graphite-moderated nuclear reactor system with light-water types.

Offices of Turkish daily bombed:

A bomb explosion early Saturday at the headquarters of the pro-Kurdish newspaper Ozgur Ulke killed one person and injured 19 others, the Anatolia news agency reported. AP says from Istanbul.

The bomb caused heavy damage to the building, destroyed several cars in the street and shattered windows of nearby houses, Anatolia said. Another overnight explosion at Ozgur Ulke's Ankara office caused heavy damage, but no casualties, Anatolia added.

Street vendors riot in Bandung:

Indonesian police in the west Java city of Bandung have arrested seven people after vendors and tricycle riders went on the rampage over plans to sweep them off the streets, police said yesterday. Reuter reports from Jakarta.

The arrests followed a riot on Thursday by about 200 street vendors and tricycle riders after rumours that a municipal official had run over and killed one of Bandung's many pedicab riders.

Crackdown on Turkish Kurds:

Turkey's army pressed its crackdown on Kurdish rebel bases in the mountains of the southeast, killing 52 of the guerrillas, regional governor's office said on Friday. AP reports from Diyarbakir.

The fighting took place over the last few days in Tunceli and Diyarbakir provinces, it added. Three soldiers were also killed in the clashes.

16 Tuareg rebels killed in Mali:

Government troops in the West African state of Mali killed 16 Tuareg rebels who raided the central town of Gourma, a military statement said. Reuter reports from Bamako.

The statement, issued late Thursday, said there had been no military losses during the attack by "armed bandits" — the usual official term for Tuareg rebels.

Karimov named new Tajik PM:

President Emomali Rakhmonov named a close associate, Jamshed Karimov, as Prime Minister of Tajikistan on Friday, promoting him from vice-premier to replace the reformist Abduljalil Samadov, ITAR-Tass reported. AFP says from Moscow.

Karimov was first named vice-premier in 1988, when the republic was under Soviet rule, after a period out of office in 1990 and 1991. He was back during the 1992 civil war between Islamic militants and pro-Communists.

50th anniversary of end of WWII:

The UN General Assembly decided on Friday without a vote to commemorate 1995 as the 50th anniversary of the end of World War Two. Reuter reports from United Nations.

A resolution initiated by Russia proclaimed it the "world year of people's commemoration of the victims of the Second World War." It also decided to hold a special solemn meeting on October 18, 1995, to mark the sacrifices wrought by the war.

Theft at Windsor Castle:

A ceremonial sword encrusted with diamonds, given to the Duke of Edinburgh in 1989, was stolen from a museum display at Windsor Castle, southern England, police said on Friday. AFP reports from London.

The sword valued at more than 7,000 pounds (10,500 dollars), which had been part of an exhibition of presents given to the royal family, was taken on Thursday.

4 die in US club stampe:

Three men and a teenage girl were found dead in the stairway of a crowded downtown club on Saturday, apparently crushed in a stampede that may have started after a fight broke out, police said. AP reports from Elizabeth, New Jersey.

At least 12 people were injured and taken to hospitals, said Lt. Mark Kurdyla. Police and firefighters arriving at the El Balcon club shortly after 1 am found people "piled four and five on top of each other" in the front stairway, Kurdyla said.

Guard sentenced for biting cop:

A security guard has been given a one-month suspended sentence for biting a policeman, after deciding against allowing his dog to do so, officials said on Friday. AFP reports from Sens, France.

The incident occurred in August when the security guard, on duty in a car park, was approached by policemen who suspected he was up to no good with some cars.

Bosnian Serbs reject fresh UN ceasefire offer

SARAJEVO, Dec 3: An end to the Bosnia war seemed no closer despite intense diplomacy to search for peace formula, and international efforts were complicated by a new row between the UN and NATO, reports Reuter.

The Bosnian Serbs rejected yet another ceasefire proposed by the United Nations on Friday but promised to release hundreds of UN peacekeepers they are holding hostage to deter NATO air strikes. They also pledged to allow UN supply and civilian aid convoys into the embattled Bihać enclave.

Foreign Ministers of the Contact Group on Bosnia the United States, Britain, France, Germany and Russia — ended meeting in Brussels on Friday reaffirming the need for a negotiated settlement to the conflict.

They called in a final communique for an immediate ceasefire throughout Bosnia but made no mention of allowing the confederation sought by the Bosnian Serbs with Serbia.

"Confederation at least after today's meeting is inconceivable," German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel told a news conference.

The communique said an existing peace plan carving up Bosnia 49-51 per cent between Serbs and Muslims remained the basis of any final settlement.

But it called for constitutional arrangements which would be acceptable to both sides and preserve the integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and for equitable and balanced arrangements for the Bosnian-Croat and Bosnian-Serb entity.

Some diplomats believe the world "equitable" might conceal a concession the Serbs have insisted upon for months, claiming equal rights to confederation with Serbia like the Muslim-Croat federation with Croatia.

Meanwhile, UN special envoy Yasushi Akashi won an agreement from Bosnian-Serb leaders to release hundreds of UN peacekeepers detained after NATO air strikes two weeks ago.

"We have agreed an immediate release of missing Ukrainian soldiers, immediate movement of UK and Dutch

convoys. Normal activities will be restored for the 55 Canadians at Visoko and UN personnel at weapons collection sites," Akashi said after talks with Bosnian-Serb leader Radovan Karadzic in Pale.

Akashi and the UN's commander in Bosnia General Sir Michael Rose won acceptance from Bosnia's mainly Muslim leaders for a new UN-sponsored ceasefire proposals.

But the Serbs appeared to have rejected the proposal, which envisions tight UN control of ceasefire areas.

Akashi made no mention of the ceasefire when he met the

press after the talks but Karadzic said, "We do not want a temporary ceasefire, we want an end to this war."

The UN initiative appeared to be a compromise between the Bosnian government's demand for a three month ceasefire that would leave it free to fight later to regain lost territory and Bosnian Serb insistence on an enduring ceasefire freezing current lines of confrontation.

The Bosnian-Serb leader insisted NATO quit its mission over Bosnia: "I would like to see our skies cleared of NATO planes."



Bosnian-Serb President Radovan Karadzic (L) meets with UN special envoy Yasushi Akashi (R) and UNPROFOR commander in Bosnia General Sir Michael Rose (3rd from R) on Friday in the Bosnian-Serb stronghold at Pale. — AFP photo

Nepali ministers asked to declare their assets

KATHMANDU, Dec 3: Nepal's new Communist prime minister, wary of public disquiet over alleged government corruption, has ordered cabinet ministers to declare their assets, officials said on Friday, reports Reuter.

Mannohan Adhikari, sworn in as the Himalayan kingdom's first Communist leader on Wednesday, told his new cabinet on Thursday to make a public declaration of all property and other assets within seven days, they said.

The Communist Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) party rode to power in larger part on discontent with alleged corruption in the outgoing government, headed by the centrist Congress Party.

Lankan troops kill 4 Tigers

COLOMBO, Dec 3: Government troops killed four Tamil Tiger rebels in two separate clashes in eastern Sri Lanka, a military spokesman said Saturday, reports AP.

Troops killed three rebels Friday in Panichchankerni, 200 kilometers (130 miles) east of Colombo, said Brig Gemunu Kulatunga, the military's spokesman.

In another incident, guerrillas attacked policemen and one rebel was killed in the cross-fire in Namalpokuna and killed one rebel, Kulatunga said. No casualties were reported on the government side.

Clashes have continued despite President Chandrika Kumaratunga's offer of a ceasefire and restarting the peace talks.

Rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran has agreed to peace talks to end the 11-year-old war, but no date has been fixed for resuming negotiations suspended after a suspected rebel suicide bomber killed opposition presidential candidate Gamini Dissanayake and 56 others on Oct 24.

Peace march in Karachi

KARACHI, Dec 3: About 15,000 people, including several top Pakistani celebrities, marched through the streets of this troubled port city Saturday chanting "Save Karachi" and demanding an end to worsening violence, reports AP.

"Karachi is bleeding and I have come to press for peace," said social worker Nargis Latif, who like most of the marchers dressed in white to signify peace.

Political and ethnic violence has claimed hundreds of lives in Karachi this year. Government services have all but collapsed and many residents complain of a general sense of lawlessness.

In the latest outburst of violence, seven people were gunned down Friday night.

Three victims were fatally shot when attackers opened fire outside the house of the country's labor minister, Akbar Lasi. The minister was in the capital of Islamabad at the time of the attack.

The march, organized by the country's leading newspaper publisher, began in the center of the city at the mausoleum of Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founding father.

In a festive atmosphere that included music and singing, the marchers traveled almost 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) to the main government offices.

One of the march leaders was Imran Khan, Pakistan's most famous cricket player. Marchers threw rose petals on Khan and a number of film and television stars who took part

in the procession.

The army, which patrolled the streets of Karachi for the past 30 months, was withdrawn Wednesday and many fear the police force and a paramilitary unit will be unable to maintain control.

The unrest has disrupted business in the country's financial capital and frightened away potential foreign investors.

Much of the violence pits the security forces against the Mohajir Qaumi Movement, a powerful opposition group that represents mohajirs, or Muslim immigrants from India.

The MQM accuses Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto of discriminating against mohajirs. Ms Bhutto's government, meanwhile, says the MQM is a terrorist organization that uses violence to advance its cause.



US President Bill Clinton (C) meets with Congress' new GOP leaders Senator Bob Dole (L), R-KS and Congressman Newt Gingrich (R), R-GA in the Oval Office at the White House on Friday. Dole is expected to be the new Senate majority leader and Gingrich the House Speaker for the 104th Congress. — AFP photo

Assad grooming second son as his heir?

DAMASCUS, Syria, Dec 3: Ten months after his death at age 31, the eldest son of President Hafez Assad is a towering presence across Syria, reports AP.

Giant portraits of Basil Assad, a lover of fast cars who died in a car wreck, drape the fronts of buildings. His photographs are displayed in car windows and on the walls of offices, shops and homes.

They send a message — not only of what might have been, but of what still can be: A new generation of the Assad family governing Syria.

There are three more Assad sons. The second son, Bashar, is 29. Photographs of him are rarely seen. But in Syria, people are used to reading between the lines of propaganda. And hard-to-miss hints have

been emerging. In the officially sanctioned "Paeon to the Thoughts of the Hero Basil Assad," the author, army Col. Bajjat Suleyman, begins:

"Hope vanished... on a bitter winter day after he brought to us a promise of a beautiful spring that's full of colours and birds chirping."

But, the book concludes, nothing can stop "Basil Assad's generation from clinging to the second brother, Bashar Assad, and accompanying him... towards the third millennium AD."

The question of succession is increasingly important as Syria undergoes social and economic changes and talks peace with its nemesis, Israel. President Assad, who seized power in a bloodless coup in

1970, is 64. Ever since he suffered a heart attack a decade ago, some foreign governments have periodically speculated he is in poor health.

But Assad remains very much in control and as shrewd as ever, Syrian officials insist his health is fine. Western diplomats in Damascus point out that many people whose health is less than robust live to old age.

Diplomats and foreign-based political analysts question whether Bashar has the right stuff to guide a nation where stability traditionally has depended on a leader of undisputed strength.

Bashar was training in England as an ophthalmologist when his brother, an army major, died. He cut short his

studies and came home to enter the military academy. He graduated in November as a captain in command of a tank regiment.

Bashar now heads most of the committees his brother presided over, mainly ones relating to sports.

Any presidential successor is likely to need the approval of Assad's close cadre of military and intelligence advisers, many of them from Assad's own minority Alawite sect of Islam.

In March, longtime Defence Minister Mustafa Tlass signalled support for Bashar in a speech before the president.

"I see in the eyes of your son, Dr. Bashar Assad, the will, determination and ability to raise the banner that Basil raised," said Tlass, a member

OIC proposes peace plan to Afghan factions

NICOSIA, Dec 3: The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) has proposed a peace plan to warring Afghan factions at mediation talks in Tehran, an Iranian newspaper reported today, reports Reuter.

The English-language Tehran Times quoted an informed source as saying the "formula for peace" includes an unconditional ceasefire and the formation of a transitional government.

"If we achieve these goals, we will pave the way for free and fair elections in Afghanistan," the source said, but did not elaborate on the rival factions' reaction to the proposal.

The newspaper report was carried by the official news agency Irna.

The talks are mediated by a special committee comprising Iran, Pakistan, Tunisia and the OIC. It is headed by OIC secretary-general Hamid al-Ghabid.

The OIC had invited Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani's coalition, a rival coalition led by Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, northern warlord General Abdul Rasid Dostum and a group of neutral factions to the talks.

The OIC committee will shuttle between the groups because of the rival's reservations about sitting face-to-face at one table. The talks will continue until December 13.

Off the Record

Kissing in public comes into vogue

TOKYO: A kiss is just a kiss. But in Japan, it's a social statement. Kissing in public, considered shocking a few years ago, has come into vogue. Japanese couples are bussing on buses and puckering up on park benches, reports AP.

The trend has set off a debate about changing mores in a country still strongly influenced by conservative Confucian standards.

"I feel very uncomfortable seeing them doing that," said Etsuko Yamashita, 38, who lectures on feminism at Japan Women's University. "If my children did that, I would scold them."

The kissing contingent, though, is unrepentant. "That kind of public kissing should be accepted," said 18-year-old Yuko Asayama. Her boyfriend, Shiro Akiba, said he feels relaxed about kissing her in front of mutual friends but is still shy in public.

Part of the reason public kissing is considered so provocative is that in Japan, a kiss has traditionally been viewed as a prelude to sex. Japanese people do not kiss and hug in greeting, but bow instead.

Kissing was prohibited in movies until after World War II. But in a bizarre bit of social engineering, US occupation forces instructed Japanese filmmakers to begin showing on-screen kisses.

Woman spends 9 months at airport lounge!

CAIRO: Eating cheese sandwiches and sleeping across from duty-free shops selling perfume, Khadija Abdul Aziz has spent nine months at the Cairo airport transit lounge. And for nowhere, reports AP.

The tall, 34-year-old woman with close-cropped hair says she is a refugee from Angola, but has no passport. Officials have doubts about her claim. The United Nations and five countries are trying to figure out just who she is.

While she waits, this woman without a country spends her days sitting in the transit lounge, talking to Egyptian airport workers and watching other potential refugees come and go. "I am devastated in every way and I am living in this whirlpool," she said during an interview in an airport hallway. "My walls painted a sickly yellow. Every day is the same here."

Abdul-Aziz says she fled to Portugal in 1985, escaping a massacre in Angola that killed her parents, brother and husband. Her three children were with her, and she was pregnant with a fourth. Her two girls and two boys are now in Italy with a sister.

After working in Spain for seven years, she says, she was deported for having an expired visa. Sudan was her destination because — she says — she was keeping a Sudanese friend's passport. In Khartoum, the passport was confiscated and she was put on the first flight to Egypt, which sent her to Spain, which sent her back to Cairo.

Sweden to resume role in ME peace process

STOCKHOLM, Dec 3: Sweden's new government wants to retake a central role alongside Norway in the Mideast peace process after a three-year hiatus, reports AP.

The government's initiative features an unusual trip to Israel this weekend by a former foreign minister to devise an economic assistance plan for Palestinian territories.

The plan will detail immediate improvements in conditions for Gaza and the West Bank, the Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter reported this week.

Sweden hopes the effort, undertaken at the request of Israel and the PLO, will include "political" issues said the official, Sten Andersson, who was involved in talks leading to the 1991 Madrid peace conference.

"It's high time for Sweden to do something," Andersson told The Associated Press before leaving Sweden on Friday.

"The peace process is in a very critical stage right now. There must be some signs for the (Palestinian) population that

something will happen."

Administration and economic development in Gaza are priorities for PLO leader Yasser Arafat, who is facing pressure from Islamic radicals.

Israeli officials have hinted they want to speed up the process. In Brussels this week, foreign donors released 125 million dollars pledged earlier for the Palestinians.

Among the plans under consideration are job-creation programmes and the establishment of an industrial zone along Gaza's borders to attract investment.

Andersson, 71, declined to detail his initiative, other than saying he had new ideas which could be included in the plan to be discussed in Stockholm December 12 by Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres.

Sweden's neighbour, Norway, already has been deeply involved in the peace process since the country established its acclaimed "Oslo Channel" two years ago. That channel led to last year's peace treaty signed in Washington.

Japan asks US to reconsider A-bomb stamp

TOKYO, Dec 3: Japan, the only country attacked by atomic bombs, has formally asked the United States to reconsider a plan to issue a stamp showing a nuclear mushroom cloud, a Foreign Ministry official said Saturday, reports AP.

The Japanese Embassy in Washington conveyed the request on Friday, stressing that the Japanese people have strong feelings against the stamp, which is inscribed, "Atomic bombs hasten war's end, August 1945."

The official said the US Department of State replied that it is studying the Japanese request.