

BRIEFLY

US, Kuwait to begin exercise: The United States and Kuwait will begin a weeklong amphibious field training exercise Thursday involving 4,350 US military personnel, the Pentagon said on Tuesday. AFP reports from Washington.

"Exercise Eager Mac 95-1 will demonstrate the capabilities of US forces and the continuing US commitment to the security and stability of the Gulf region," the Pentagon said.

Gunmen kill cop in Egypt: Unidentified gunmen, suspected by security forces of having been Islamic militants, opened fire at a train station in southern Egypt, killing one policeman and a passerby, police reported. AFP says from Cairo.

They said the officer was shot at the station in Naga's Hamadi, 500 kilometers (300 miles) south of Cairo. A bystander was also killed in the incident. The assailants took the officer's gun before escaping, police said.

Doctors on strike in Sri Lanka: About 4,000 Sri Lankan doctors working in state hospitals went on strike yesterday, paralysing medical services countrywide. Xinhua reports from Colombo.

The strike was launched by the Government Medical Officer association (GOMA) in the wake of a decision taken by the government to designate the Registered and Assistant Medical Officers (RAMOS) as medical officers.

4 die in US chemical plant blast: An explosion rocked a chemical plant in northern US on Tuesday, killing four people and injuring 18 others, authorities said. Xinhua reports from Washington.

The blast levelled a seven-story building in the Terra Industries farm chemical plant in St. Louis, Iowa, and released a cloud of ammonia gas, forcing the evacuation of 2,500 people from nearby communities.

Rao meets Sonia: Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao met Sonia Gandhi, the widow of assassinated Premier Rajiv Gandhi and inheritor of political clout, as India's ruling Congress party struggled to recover from an electoral rout. Reuter reports from New Delhi.

Rao holds periodic meetings with Gandhi but their 40-minute late-evening session on Tuesday took on added importance as it came on the eve of a gathering of Congress.

Road mishap claims 13 in Brazil: Thirteen people died and 29 were injured, 10 of them seriously, when a coach carrying Christmas shoppers crashed into a tanker truck in northeastern Brazil, Brazilian television reported on Tuesday. Reuter says from Rio de Janeiro.

The accident occurred early on Tuesday on a motorway 65 miles (105 km) from Recife, Pernambuco state. SBT television said.

King Hassan II, Hosni Mubarak blast Muslim extremism



King Hassan II of Morocco sits in the Chairman's seat at the royal palace in Casablanca December 13 at the start of the 7th summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC). — AFP photo

CASABLANCA, Dec 14: Moroccan King Hassan II and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak launched scathing attacks on Muslim extremism as Islamic leaders began a summit here to forge joint stands on Bosnia and other crises, reports AFP.

The King pulled no punches in his opening speech to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) as he said that the issuing of death decrees and other edicts had no justification in Islam.

"No one and no authority is entitled to a right that is not vested by religion in order to take the path of extremism," he told the gathering of kings, presidents, prime ministers and senior officials late Tuesday.

"Nor are they empowered to issue rulings excommunicating Muslims and excluding them from the fold of religion," he said.

"They have no right to decree a fatwa stipulating jihad (holy war) against these Muslims," he said.

"Islam does not tolerate that such verdicts be pronounced by men against fellow men," he said.

Mubarak, whose country has been plagued by fundamentalist violence, said the extremists "blinded by ignorance and greed have sold their souls to the devil."

Their actions had given Islam a bad image and as a result exposed Muslims to "horrid tragedies and disgraceful atrocities."

He called Bosnia a "war of religious prejudice."

The King made no reference to a specific country, although his late Ayatollah Khomeini issued a death decree in 1988 calling for the

death of British author Salman Rushdie for blaspheming Islam in his novel "The Satanic Verses."

Religious death decrees known as fatwas have also been issued by Muslim militant groups in Algeria and Egypt.

Iran's top leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani stayed away from the summit, sending instead Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati.

The leaders today were to begin deliberations on adopting resolutions on Bosnia and other conflicts in Afghanistan, Kashmir and Somalia, as well as on a plan to combat Islamic militant groups.

On Bosnia, the summit aims to take a united stand on stopping Serb attacks on Muslims.

It advocates increasing the size of the 23,000-strong UN protection force and more NATO strikes on Serb positions.

The leaders will also adopt a plan against terrorism which calls for OIC members to refuse to finance or support "terrorist acts" and to ensure that their territory is not used by violent groups to plan or carry out operations.

In the runup to the summit Saudi Arabia and Iran rejected a request by Oman to include references to "religious extremism."

The original draft — which was drawn up by Egypt, Turkey, Tunisia and Algeria — was approved by the foreign ministers at the preparatory talks and sent for consideration at the summit.

Leaders must also try to ease disputes among participants over Jerusalem and Iraq.

The summit is attended by kings, presidents, prime ministers and senior officials from the 50 countries and the PLO.

Off the Record

Tragic end of a young lover

NEW DELHI: Indian villagers hanged a young man because he had an affair with a girl who as a child had been promised in marriage to another youth, a newspaper reported Wednesday, says Reuter.

The Hindustan Times said 20-year-old Ghanshyam Koli was hanged from a neem tree, watched by hundreds of villagers sitting near a bonfire on the night of November 30, after 18-year-old Dhanno said he made her pregnant.

Dhanno was betrothed to a boy from a neighbouring village when she was a child and the formal consummation of marriage due to take place this month, it said.

Many Indian villages still follow ancient customs of community trials and judgements, sometimes defying the law.

The lovers were made to confess their relationship before leaders of a remote village near Dausa, some 150 km (95 miles) from Delhi in the northern state of Rajasthan, the newspaper said.

Koli's brother Moolchand reported the incident to the police, defying an ancient custom of abiding by the ruling by the panchayat or village council, it said.

The council decided to hang Koli after lengthy debate during which two villagers complained that he could entice village girls in future unless he was punished by death, the newspaper said.

Ban on trade in human eggs likely

TORONTO: Canada is considering a ban on trade in human eggs following reports that poor women with reproductive problems are selling their healthy eggs to pay for in-vitro fertilisation, government officials said on Tuesday, reports Reuter.

"It's a serious concern that women or couples in vulnerable situations are being exploited," Health Minister Diane Marleau was quoted as saying in Tuesday's Toronto Star newspaper, she described the egg trade as unacceptable.

A spokesman for the minister told Reuters that Marleau was hoping to introduce legislation towards the end of next year, but that the government may consider some short term measure in the meantime, currently there is no law in Canada dealing with trade in human eggs or sperm.

Late last year, a royal commission on reproductive technology recommended a ban on surrogate motherhood and the sale of human sperm and eggs.

Parrot expert charged in bird smuggling

CHICAGO: It was a family business involving suppliers, buyers, secret trade routes and millions of dollars worth of illegal goods, according to federal prosecutors, reports AP.

But the goods were exotic birds, not drugs. And federal officials allege that Tony Silva, a bird expert known for speaking out against illegal animal trafficking, was the organiser of it all.

Silva, 34, was charged Tuesday with conspiracy to smuggle exotic and protected parrots, including at least 180 hyacinth macaws worth \$1.3 million, into the United States.

Silva, who's originally from North Riverside, Ill., has authored several books and hundreds of articles on parrots, and the science of bird breeding.

"Many wildlife smugglers profess to have an interest in conserving these animals... We find that the monetary value in exotic birds rivals that of the drug trade. Money corrupts," said John Doggett, an agent with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Doggett said up to 90 per cent of smuggled parrots die before they reach their final destination.

Vegetables protecting cancer to be in markets

BRIGHTON, England: Vegetables grown to contain extra substances known to protect against cancer and heart disease could be in markets within five years, British scientists said Wednesday, reports Reuter.

Researchers at a biochemical society conference in Brighton, southern England said fruits and vegetables could be bred to provide more anti-oxidants, which neutralise particles that can help cause cancer and heart disease.

Fruits and vegetables naturally contain anti-oxidants such as vitamins A and E. Health authorities in the United States and Britain recommend that people eat at least five servings of fruit and vegetables a day.

But most people eat much less than this and smokers and the poor — who are most at risk — are among the most reluctant to eat their greens. If vegetables could be bred to contain more anti-oxidants, people with poor eating habits could still lessen their risk of disease.

UNHCR to cut food aid for Afghan refugees

ISLAMABAD, Dec 14: Food aid to at least 1.2 million Afghan refugees living in camps in Pakistan will be reduced from next year's day, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said on Tuesday, reports Reuter.

The aid programmes planned for 1995 reflect a trend that the refugees' need for assistance has fallen significantly due to their repatriation and ability to provide for themselves, a UNHCR statement in Islamabad said.

Thus from 1 January 1995, food assistance planned for 1.2 million registered refugees residing in refugee villages in Pakistan is to be reduced to a level in the line with their needs, it said.

"However, those unable to provide for themselves, such as disabled refugees and families headed by women, will be targeted to receive supplementary food according to their assessed needs," Pakistani officials say that

because of the planned aid cuts they will seek a rapid repatriation of the Afghan refugees the remainder of some 3.5 million people who have fled the 14-year civil war in their country.

The others have returned home under a UN sponsored programme of voluntary repatriation after Mujahideen guerrillas took power from a collapsed communist government in April 1992.

The UNHCR said, surveys conducted by itself, the World Food Programme and donor countries consistently indicated that "most Afghan refugees in Pakistan no longer depend on food handouts for their survival or wellbeing."

The vast majority of them have attained a degree of economic self-reliance while at the same time continually expressing their intention to repatriate, the statement said.

The statement said assistance programmes for Afghan refugees funded by donor countries totalled more than 2.5 billion since 1979.

American Eagle plane crashes in North Carolina, 15 die

MORRISVILLE (North Carolina), Dec 14: At least 15 people die when a commuter plane carrying 20 people crashed Tuesday near Raleigh-Durham International Airport in North Carolina, authorities said. Five people survived the crash, reports AFP.

The twin-engine Jetsream Super-31 Turboprop operated by American Eagle went down in a wooded area in foggy, rainy weather as it was on final approach, aviation authorities said.

American Airlines spokesman Don Bedwell said there were 18 passengers and two cockpit crew members on the plane. American Airlines is the sister company of American Eagle.

Airline officials and local authorities said seven people from the plane were taken to local hospitals. Hospital officials said two of them died later from injuries.

A man who lives near the crash site said he heard a loud noise and later saw a man

walking near the wreckage.

"I saw one person walking around. He was in shock," said the witness, David Stanley.

The plane, flight 3379, was travelling from Greensboro, North Carolina, to Raleigh when it disappeared from radar screens and crashed. The aircraft was manufactured by British Aerospace.

Federal safety investigators were en route to the crash site to find the cause of the crash.

The crash occurred four days after the Federal Aviation Administration banned another type of aircraft flown by American Eagle, the ATR, from flying in icy conditions.

The ban was ordered in response to the crash on October 31 of an ATR-72 in Indiana. All 68 people aboard that plane were killed and investigators said they had found evidence of problems the plane could develop in icy conditions.

The ATR manufacturer has defended the aircraft's safety and said the FAA grounding was "unjustified."

In response to the FAA order, American Eagle grounded its entire fleet of 42 ATR planes at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport Saturday.

American eagle has suffered at three other fatal crashes in the last seven years in addition to the October 31 crash.

Berlusconi vows to stay in office

ROME (Italy), Dec 14: Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, dismissing the storm clouds gathering over his shaky coalition government, has vowed to stay in office saying there was no evidence to back corruption allegations against him, reports Reuter.

Berlusconi, who was grilled on Tuesday by Milan's "clean hands" anti-craft magistrates, said he would not ignore his responsibilities and desert his country.

Six more killed in Karachi

KARACHI, Dec 14: Six more people have been killed in separate incidents overnight as violence continued to rock this southern Pakistani port city, hospital and police sources said here today, reports AFP.

Those gunned down Tuesday included three supporters of a Shi'ite Muslim organisation, Tehreek-i-Jafaria Pakistan (TJFP), a TJP official said.

He added that one of the victims was a doctor who was shot dead by unknown assailants while treating patients in his clinic.

TIP has blamed the attack on the Sunni extremist Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) group.

The extremist organisation had earlier blamed the TJP for last week's assault on a Sunni mosque here in which eight people were killed, including the Karachi chief of the SSP, Qari Saadur Rahman.

Police said three others killed Tuesday were victims of sniper fire in the city's industrial districts of Korangi and Landhi.

US favours Russia's move to send troops into Chechnya

WASHINGTON, Dec 14: US Secretary of State Warren Christopher on Tuesday indicated US sympathy for Russian President Boris Yeltsin's decision to send troops into Chechnya, saying he was "sure (Yeltsin) took this action only when he felt he had no other alternative," reports Reuter.

Christopher said in an interview with public television's "Machel-Lehrer Newshour": "It's not in our interest or certainly theirs to have a sort of

Kozyrev slates reformers

MOSCOW, Dec 14: Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev lashed out at Russian reformers for their opposition to President Boris Yeltsin's policy on the separatist republic of Chechnya, reports AP.

disintegrating Russia, so I think he's probably done what he had to do, to prevent this republic breaking away."

Christopher, speaking after a day of fierce fighting between Chechen fighters and Russian forces backed by tanks and warplanes deployed to end the republic's rebellion, said the conflict was "basically an internal matter."

Asked about the Russian action, he said: "Our information is that they have been as restrained as they could be."

He added: "What we hope is there will be a negotiation, there'll be a minimum loss of life and respect for human rights."

Asked whether there was any indication of the talks towards a peaceful end to the conflict were succeeding, he said: "There's no sign that they are about to be successful."



A Russian unit's lead T-72 tanks, one mounted with a mine-clearing system (R), halt near Samashky, some 40 kilometres from Grozny, December 13. Russian troops are encircling the separatist capital, three days after Moscow intervened in Chechnya. — AFP photo

Muslim states under threat, says Mahathir

CASABLANCA, Dec 14: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad told fellow leaders at the Islamic summit that the world's Muslims were weak and as a result were virtually irrelevant in Bosnia, reports AFP.

"Muslim countries are still under threat and are very weak," Mahathir said in a speech during the opening of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) late Tuesday.

"We do much damage to ourselves by our lack of cooperation and our frequently violent and debilitating struggles for power in our own countries," he said.

As a result Muslims are "unable to extend meaningful help to those in need and unable to influence those agencies whose decisions and actions will affect the fate of our brothers," he said.

US promises not to send N-armed vessels to NZ

WELLINGTON, Dec 14: The United States on Wednesday reversed years of defiance of New Zealand's policy of barring port visits by nuclear-armed warships, promising not to send such vessels, reports AP.

"The ANZUS defence alliance of America, Australia and New Zealand had been strained ever since New Zealand announced in the mid-1980s that no nuclear armed or nuclear powered ship could dock."

The United States, under presidents Reagan and Bush, and Britain adopted a policy of refusing to disclose whether ships carried nuclear weapons or not, and no vessels made New Zealand port visits.

But US Ambassador Josiah Beeman said in a speech Wednesday that while America would continue its "no decla-

ration" policy, it also would not send nuclear armed ships to New Zealand.

Britain made a similar pledge in 1991, and last week New Zealand announced that a Royal Navy frigate would visit in June 1995, the first British port call since the early 1980s.

Beeman said that after the 1991 decision to remove tactical nuclear weapons from all ships and aircraft outside Europe the "simple and obvious fact" was that US troops, aircraft, surface vessels and attack submarines deployed in the Pacific are not nuclear armed.

Left off Beeman's list are US nuclear submarines used as launching platforms for strategic nuclear missiles, but such vessels would be banned from New Zealand because of the prohibition on nuclear propulsion.

Nigeria, Sudan for concerted efforts in Africa

LAGOS, Dec 14: Nigeria and Sudan have called for concerted efforts to ensure socio-economic and political stability in the African continent, reports Xinhua.

The call was made in a joint communiqué issued on Monday in the Nigerian capital of Abuja after a closed-door meeting of three and a half hours between Nigerian head of state Sani Abacha and his Sudanese counterpart Omar Al-Bashir.

They stressed the need to uphold concerted actions by African leaders to check the increasing social, economic and political problems on the continent.

'Violence still the best means to solve conflict in South Africa'

JOHANNESBURG, Dec 14: It happens quickly. Two taxi vans the mode of transportation for most blacks, approach a bustling stand to collect commuters waiting with sacks of goods. The driver of one vehicle, or perhaps a companion in the front seat, raises a rifle barrel or handgun. Shots ring out. The other vehicle flees or crashes. And quite often someone dies, says AP.

Taxi warfare has returned to South Africa, despite hope that bloodshed would wane with the end of apartheid during the first all-race election in April.

At least 166 people have died this year in attacks and assassinations linked to the taxi industry. The killings are reminiscent of the political bloodshed that claimed thou-

sands of lives in the years before the vote.

In one of the worst attacks, gunmen in October fired on a crowd of commuters leaving a rally outside Cape Town, killing 11 people.

Just like the past, blacks are the perpetrators and targets, with assault rifles and handguns the weapons of choice. Arrests are rare.

Politicians and taxi officials blame socio-economic conditions instead of politics for the renewed carnage.

"The fact that this conflict over economics is resolved by a violent means tells a number of stories," said Lloyd Vogelman director of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation. "People believe violence is still the best means to solve con-

flict."

Taxi-related violence has flared on and off for years in South Africa, spawned by an unregulated industry that mushroomed as millions of blacks moved from rural homelands to cities in search of work.

The minibus-taxis, known as combis, carry 15 billion passengers a year while providing 300,000 jobs and earning more than half the money made by South Africa's gold mining industry.

Too many people are in the taxi business, said Frank van der Velde, the former mayor of Cape Town who has mediated several local taxi disputes.

"It's one that rapidly started bringing money into the community"

That crated conditions for

commuters turn to buses and trains instead.

Mafunya's association has clashed with members who split off to form another group. The splinter group wanted access to a new, modern taxi stand built by the city. Mafunya's association said only taxis with city permits — meaning only its members — should be allowed to use the taxi stand.

"It's like people who favour birth control, they're already born," said Allan Dolby, the deputy city administrator. "Those that are pirates want to see deregulation, with market forces determining who comes into the industry."

Police say gangs are trying to muscle out competition by hiring hit men to kill opponents.

"The taxi industry is definitely hiring assassins," Vogelman said, noting similarities between the taxi violence and political clashes of the past. "You may even find that some individuals become dependent on the conflict, depending on people hiring them."

Government officials, fearing negative news reports could jeopardize much-needed foreign investment, have promised a crackdown, with the possibility of soldiers joining police in patrolling taxi stands and routes.

President Nelson Mandela's government is studying possible laws.

For now, Mafunya and others insist they don't know who's behind the killings.

Riyadh softens its position towards Baghdad

CASABLANCA, Morocco Dec 14: Saudi Arabia said Tuesday other Muslim countries should take note of Iraq's recognition of Kuwait, describing it as a start towards peace in the Gulf region, reports AFP.

In a slight softening of Riyadh's position towards Baghdad, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faysal said the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) should "take account of the change evident in Iraq's position through the implementation of certain UN Security Council resolutions."

Prince Saud was speaking to reporters here shortly before the opening of a summit meeting of the 51 member OIC.