

BRIEFLY



South African President Nelson Mandela holds up a copy of his autobiography, "Long Walk to Freedom," at a launching party in Johannesburg on Wednesday. He wrote the book clandestinely while imprisoned on Robben Island. — AFP photo

Sweden won't join NATO: Swedish Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson ruled out Swedish membership of NATO on Wednesday, saying that joining the Atlantic alliance would weaken rather than strengthen Sweden's national security, reports AFP.

Speaking at a meeting of the Finland-Sweden Society in Helsinki, Carlsson said Sweden could best contribute to peacemaking in Europe as a non-aligned country.

Murayama, Clinton meet Jan 11: Prime Minister Tomichi Murayama will hold talks with US President Bill Clinton on January 11, a Japanese government spokesman said on Thursday. Reuter reports from Tokyo.

"The two countries agreed that the premier and President Clinton will hold a summit in Washington on January 11," Chief Cabinet Secretary Kojo Igarashi was quoted by an aide as saying.

Rebels kill 3 in S Philippines: Muslim rebels abducted four policemen guarding a Japanese-funded irrigation dam project in southern Philippines and killed three of them, police said yesterday quoting the fourth captive, who escaped, AFP reports from Cotabato.

Police officer Aladdin Jaina returned to his unit early yesterday and reported the killings to his superiors in Cotabato city, police spokesman said.

UN publication on apartheid: A new series of United Nations publications — The United Nations Blue Books Series — was launched yesterday with the publication of "The United Nations and Apartheid, 1948-1994", a comprehensive account and reference work focusing on the historic transformation in South Africa from the inhumanity of apartheid to the establishment of a non-racial democratic government, UNIC reports from Dhaka.

Chinese disco fire claims 17: Seventeen people died in a discotheque fire on Saturday in Qiqihar, Heilongjiang province, northeast China, local officials said yesterday. AFP reports from Beijing.

The cause of the blaze at the Princess Disco had not been established, said a municipal spokesman contacted by telephone.

4 hurt as trains collide: A runaway freight train barreled down a steep mountain pass and into a stopped coal train on Wednesday, leaving 10 cars in a fiery heap and injuring four people, AP reports from San Bernardino.

The 54-car Santa Fe freight train's brakes apparently began to fail about half way down its descent through the Cajon Pass on a 20-mile (32-kilometre) run that drops from 4,200 feet (1,260 metres) at the summit to 1,000 (300 metres) feet in San Bernardino. Crews of both trains jumped free before impact. Four were hurt.

Police officer killed in Manila: A high-ranking police official who has received death threats from Communist guerrillas was shot dead early Thursday morning in an ambush near the Philippine presidential palace, witnesses and hospital sources said, AFP reports from Manila.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the killing of Chief Inspector Jose Pring, 52, a highly decorated Manila police officer whose service record was tarnished by kidnapping charges filed against him last year.

580kg opium seized in Peru: Police who seized a half ton of raw opium hidden in the jungle said the drug haul shows the opium poppy trade in Peru is much greater than they thought, AP reports from Lima.

The 1,275 pounds (580 kilos) of crude opium paste was found on Sunday by Peruvian anti-drug police, accompanied by agents of the US Drug Enforcement Administration. It was buried in the jungle outside Tarapoto, 380 miles (615 kms) north of Lima, police said.

1 killed in US plane crash: A California air national guard jet crashed into an apartment building on Wednesday killing at least one person and injuring 15, officials said, Reuter reports from Fresno, California.

The plane plunged onto a street near the Fresno Airport, and wreckage tumbled into the two-story building igniting several parked cars and setting the structure on fire.

Collor aide jailed: A day after clearing former President Fernando Collor de Mello of corruption, the Supreme Court took aim at his top aide, AP reports from Rio De Janeiro.

The court voted unanimously late Tuesday to convict Paulo Cesar Farias, the high-living treasurer of Collor's 1989 presidential campaign, of falsifying official documents. He was sentenced to seven years in prison and fined 21,000 reais, or about 25,000 dollars.

1 dies in Russian plane crash: A small passenger jet crashed shortly after takeoff early Thursday, killing one person and injuring at least five others, the ISTAR-Tass news agency reported, AP says from Moscow.

The private, German-owned Lear jet-35, bound for Magnitogorsk, crashed shortly after midnight at Sherenyeyev-2, Moscow's main international airport, ISTAR-Tass said. The crash killed the pilot and trapped the co-pilot in the cockpit. One other crew member and four passengers were treated by emergency medical crews, ISTAR-Tass said.

4 Israelis hurt in Gaza, WB: Palestinians wounded four Israeli soldiers on Wednesday in the Gaza Strip and the occupied West Bank on the seventh anniversary of the creation of the militant Hamas movement, the army said, AFP reports from Jerusalem.

Japan awards 2 US scientists: Two American scientists have been awarded a 510,000 dollar prize each from the Science and Technology Foundation of Japan for their work in semiconductors and the environment, the foundation said on Wednesday, Reuter reports from New York.

Nick Holonyak, 66 of the University of Illinois, and Edward Knippling, 85, professor emeritus at Florida State University, were awarded the prize, the Japan-based foundation said in a statement released in New York.

Students tackle gunman: A group of students tackled a gunman who had held them hostage for about two hours on Wednesday in a university lecture hall, police and university officials said, Reuter reports from Albany, New York.

One student was shot in the leg and groin when he and four others rushed the gunman, who police said had been making incoherent demands and threatening to kill everyone

Karadzic offers concessions Carter asked to negotiate end to Bosnian conflict

SARAJEVO, Dec 15: The leader of the Bosnian Serbs offered concessions in an attempt to get former US President Jimmy Carter to help negotiate an end to the Bosnian war, reports AP.

Radovan Karadzic told Cable News Network late Wednesday that he would allow the free movement of UN convoys, release all UN personnel whose movement has been restricted, and release all Muslim prisoners of war under age 19.

He also said he would order a unilateral ceasefire in and around Sarajevo, reopen the Sarajevo airport for humanitarian flights and guarantee human rights.

The concessions would return UN operations to the shaky status they had before an

escalation of tensions last month, and appeared aimed at ensuring that the United Nations does not end its mission to Bosnia.

If the United Nations left, the Bosnian Serbs could face a rearmed Bosnian army. Bosnian Serbs are also mindful of the situation in neighbouring Croatia, where the presence of UN peacekeepers has effectively cemented Serb territorial gains from a six-month war in 1991.

Karadzic said the proposals would be implemented within 24 hours, and said he hoped Carter would travel to the region in the next couple of days to restart talks.

Carter, who this year defused tensions with North Korea and negotiated an end to

military rule in Haiti, told CNN he was willing to travel to Bosnia if the Serbs follow through on their promises.

"I think it's a good move in the right direction and he led me to believe that there were concessions he would be willing to consider in the future, but this is all he would consider unilaterally," Carter said.

UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said he had no word on the offer from the top UN envoy in the former Yugoslavia, Yasushi Akashi, who met with Karadzic on Wednesday in the Bosnian Serb stronghold of Pale.

But officials at the United Nations, speaking on condition of anonymity, reacted cautiously, saying it was not clear what conditions Karadzic may

have attached to the offered concessions.

Countless ceasefires have been announced in the two and a half year-old war, and there appeared to be little that world leaders could do to ensure that Karadzic respected human rights.

Carter met with Bosnian Serb envoys Wednesday after being contacted by Karadzic about a week ago. Carter said he has briefed President Clinton on the meeting, but he stressed he is not acting as a US government representative.

The development came as NATO brass sought ways of bolstering the UN mission in Bosnia and peacekeepers struggled with heavy fighting and Serb limits on their movement.

Chechnya defies Moscow's latest ultimatum

GROZNY, Dec 15: Chechen separatists clashed anew with Russian forces outside the Chechen capital Grozny today despite a new ultimatum by Moscow to disarm, reports Reuter.

Meanwhile, the main Russian armoured column leading Moscow's military operation to end Chechnya's bid for independence advanced and were seen to take command of heights to the north of the city.

Fierce fighting broke out to the northwest around 9 am (0600 GMT) after a relatively quiet night. Loud explosions, that shook buildings in Grozny, could be heard every 30 seconds from the fighting.

There were no immediate details of the new clashes. Russian helicopter gunships have been particularly active in that area trying to root out snipers around the village of Pervomaisk, 25 km (15 miles) northwest of Grozny.

The Russian government, which sent an estimated 10,000 troops into the rebel north Caucasus territory last Sunday to end the three-year drive for independence, issued a stark ultimatum on Wednesday telling the rebels to lay down their arms today (Thursday) or face an all-out assault.

Reuter correspondent

Lawrence Sheets said Russia's main column from the north, which had halted near the village of Tolstoy-Yurt, had advanced overnight and now controlled heights overlooking the city.

This column was now only about 10 km (six miles) from the northern city limits.

About 50 Chechen separatists armed with Kalashnikov automatic weapons and grenade launchers manned make-shift defences.

Chechen fighters were stopping journalists' cars at checkpoints to ask them for cigarettes — and sometimes drugs — to help them through the drama that lay ahead.

Lankan priests to boycott pope's visit

COLOMBO, Dec 15: Pope John Paul II's new book has touched off a controversy in Sri Lanka less than five weeks before he arrives to beatify a 17th-century Roman Catholic missionary, reports AP.

Angered by what they describe as the book's insult to Buddhism, Sri Lanka's main religion, its four top priests have decided to boycott the pontiff's visit on Jan 20-21.

"The Pope must express his sincere regret for this act of discourtesy. He has insulted Lord Buddha and attacked Buddhism," Madihe Panyasecha, the chief priest of the Amarapura chapter of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, told The Associated Press on Thursday.

AI reports gross violations of HR in Afghanistan

LONDON, Dec 15: Afghanistan's civilians are suffering systematic murder, detention, torture and rape at the hands of Mujahedeen groups, armed and supplied by Western governments that ignore the abuse, Amnesty International said today, reports AFP.

"The human rights catastrophe in Afghanistan has reached appalling proportions and yet governments around the world are ignoring the tragedy," said the London-based rights group.

Since 1992, it said in a report, at least 15,000 people have died in Kabul alone and hundreds of thousands have been displaced, buffeted between the brutal and corrupt check-points of armed Mujahedeen.



A Russian soldier mans a machine gun at a landing zone's defensive perimeter near Khasavurt on the border between Chechnya and Dagestan on Wednesday. The Russian special forces unit was surrounded by Chechen fighters. — AFP photo

PLO rejects Israeli offer

CAIRO, Dec 15: The PLO insisted Wednesday that Israeli troops pull out of Palestinian cities and towns on the West Bank to make way for self-rule elections, rejecting an offer for a partial withdrawal, reports AP.

The disagreement threatened implementation of the autonomy agreement, which Israel appears to want to slow down following attacks by militants bent on wrecking the peace process.

However, PLO negotiators reported modest progress on elections and redeployment after the first day of talks this week.

"There is little progress on elections, limited progress on redeployment but there is

openness and we are ready to discuss the details," chief PLO negotiator Nabil Shaath told reporters at the end of the session.

Shaath said that both Israeli and Palestinian negotiators agreed not to reveal the nature of the progress before they discussed the details with their leaders.

Israel and the PLO agreed in their September 1993 self-rule accord that Israeli troops would withdraw from urban centres in the West Bank before elections for a self-governing Palestinian assembly, initially scheduled for last July.

However, Israeli fears that a withdrawal might provide greater freedom of movement for Islamic militants have been

heightened by continued violence. The Israeli government is concerned about the safety of 120,000 Jewish settlers living among the one million Palestinians in the West Bank.

PLO negotiators said Israel last weekend put forth a compromise entailing a reduced Israeli presence in the cities, but with a limited number of Israeli soldiers remaining in joint plainclothes patrols with Palestinian policemen.

The proposal appeared aimed at reconciling Israel's security concerns with Palestinian sensitivity to a visible Israeli presence on election day.

PLO negotiators "absolutely rejected" the idea, said Shaath, calling on Israel to abide by the autonomy agreement.

Peres questions King David's morals

JERUSALEM, Dec 15: Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres caused uproar in parliament on Wednesday by calling into question the morals of King David, who ruled the Jews 3,000 years ago, reports AFP.

Incensed by the attack on their ancient leader, religious groups immediately tabled a motion of censure against the government.

For no apparent reason in the middle of a speech on foreign policy to the Knesset, Peres abruptly digressed to voice his thoughts on the old king.

"I can't say that all King David's deeds and gestures pleased me, nor do they seem to be very Jewish," he said.

Off the Record

Kris Aquino's pregnancy becomes talk of town

MANILA: Corazon Aquino led the country's uprising against dictatorship and survived seven coup attempts — but now, newspapers say, she's got real trouble, reports AP. Her daughter is pregnant out of wedlock.



Kris Aquino (R) is shown in this August 1993 file photo with her mother, former president, Corazon Aquino. — AFP photo

It is "perhaps the toughest crisis in her life," the Philippine Star newspaper said on Wednesday. That may not be much of an exaggeration.

The Philippines is intensely Roman Catholic, and the former president is famously devout. Next month's scheduled visit of Pope John Paul II makes faces even redder over the circumstances of Kris Aquino.

The 23-year-old actress admitted this week that she is three months pregnant by an actor who is not only twice her age but also married. He already has three children with his wife of 20 years, and a fourth by a former model.

Rumours about Kris Aquino and 45-year-old Philip Salvador had been circulating for some time, and were repeatedly denied by the actress. Then a columnist broke the news on Monday in the Malaya newspaper.

Aquino admitted she was living with Salvador and that her mother disapproved. "But in time, we hope to prove to her we did the right thing," she said.

Where raising one's voice isn't vulgar

TOKYO: In this land where raising one's voice is considered vulgar, what were 30 people doing shouting their lungs out Wednesday in a busy Tokyo square?

Hirokyu Sugano, a 25-year-old student, was winning money — 200,000 yen (2,000 dollar) — for his ear-piercing "I will do karate for the rest of my life!" reports AP.

Sugano's 112, 9-decibel yell, slightly louder than a car horn heard from two metres (six feet) away, won the grand prize in the annual "Halls Year-End Shouting Contest."

Contestants were asked to shout about something that angered or surprised them in the past year. Japan's emergency imports of rice, school bullying and Prime Minister Tomichi Murayama all came under attack.

Mamiko Kobayashi, a 20-year-old student, won second place for her window-rattling plea to the bushy browed prime minister: "Tomi-baby, let me cut your eyebrows!"

The Unique Prize, worth 50,000 yen (500 dollars) went to Tomoyuki Fakumura for his 104.7-decibel response to a recent public kissing boom in Japan: "Stop smooching on the train! Why don't you people go home!"

Berlusconi's coalition nearing its end

ROME, Dec 15: Premier Silvio Berlusconi's most troublesome ally sided with former Communists and other opposition parties in parliament Wednesday in the clearest sign yet that the 7-month-old conservative coalition was nearing its end, reports AP.

The defection by Umberto Bossi's Northern League in the Chamber of Deputies was particularly galling to Berlusconi supporters. It came on a motion to set up a commission to scrutinize Italy's TV system, both state broadcasting and the private networks dominated by Berlusconi's Fininvest media empire.

The switching of allegiances could also be a prelude to a new coalition formula to replace Berlusconi's government.

Berlusconi wrote to Chamber President Irene Pivetti Wednesday night to announce that he will address the chamber about the political situation once the 1995 budget law gets final approval, expected later this month.

The letter, reported by the Italian news agency ANSA, dampened speculation that the premier was going to resign as early as Thursday.

ANSA also reported that the cry "This is a coup" went up from the angry ranks of the right-wing National Alliance, Berlusconi's most loyal coalition partner.

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'Karachi may become another Beirut'

ISLAMABAD, Dec 15: The security breakdown in Karachi is a time bomb that Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto needs to defuse quickly to safeguard her 13-month-old government, analysts say, reports AFP.

Benazir has said the problem in the country's largest city and financial centre is not as serious as portrayed by the press, but independent newspapers and political commentators disagree.

More than 600 people have died this year in sniper fire and other violent attacks in the port city, which has 10 million inhabitants of diverse racial backgrounds.

"Karachi is fast growing out of an embryonic stage and on the way to becoming another Beirut," wrote university lecturer and political commentator Muhammad Waseem, in an article published over the weekend.

After more than two years of law-and-order duties on the streets of Karachi, troops were ordered back to their barracks earlier this month, as their

presence had become increasingly controversial.

Many doubt whether the police officers and rangers now handling the job without army help would be able to deliver peace to fearful residents who paraded in the streets twice this month shouting "save Karachi," "stop killings."

Political commentators and observers in Karachi say troops were sent back to their barracks because the army had been operating in the city, powers, which could damage its image as an unbeatable force.

Another reason for the withdrawal, they noted, was the persistent clamour by the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), which said the large Urdu-speaking settler community it represents was being persecuted.

In a letter published in Pakistan last week to army chief General Abdul Waheed from MQM founder Altaf Hussain, who is in self-exile in London, the MQM leader appealed to

"all patriotic generals" to take action against "terrorists" from the MQM splinter group, MQM Haqqi.

The MQM says MQM-Haqqi was created and supported by the army intelligence network to damage the MQM — a charge denied by the military — and that it was responsible for the upending wave of killings.

Haqqi failed to achieve any electoral success in the October 1993 elections to the federal national assembly, which were boycotted by the MQM.

In provincial elections held a few days later, Haqqi again failed, but the MQM, which ended its boycott and participated, swept the polls in Karachi, capital of Sindh.

The Haqqi continue to get the patronage of the government and its functionaries to indulge in criminal acts of killing, looting and committing atrocities," Hussain said.

An overriding view among intellectuals, politicians from various parties and the national press favours negotiations be-

tween Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's government and the Hussain-led MQM, contending that the key to peace in Sindh lies in cooperation between its two large parties.

Hussain's opponents accused him of harbouring secessionist designs and cite a recent statement in which he sought his followers' opinions on whether he should call for a separate province for the MQM in Pakistan.

The Urdu-speakers — migrants from India after the sub-continent was partitioned into Pakistan and India upon independence from British colonial rule — vehemently condemn any aspersion on their allegiance to the country.

Criminal cases involving charges such as murder, subversion and terrorism against MQM leaders, including Hussain, have been a stumbling block in the way of talks between the MQM and the ruling Pakistan People's Party. Hussain has been sentenced in absentia to 20 years in jail in at least one case.