

BRIEFLY

Bus mishap claims 32 in Iran: A mini-bus collided with a truck killing 32 people and seriously injuring nine others in southwestern Iran in one of the country's worst road accidents, a newspaper reported yesterday. AFP says from Tehran.

The accident occurred on the road between Dorud and Azna in Lorestan province on Saturday. Hamshahri said adding that 30 of the dead were students at a teacher training school in the town of Ali-Gudarz. The drivers of both vehicles were also killed.

Israeli president in Egypt: Israel's President Ezer Weizman arrived in Cairo yesterday on a visit aiming to warm up still cool relations with Egypt, airport sources said. Reuter reports from Cairo.

Weizman is due to hold talks with President Hosni Mubarak during his three-day visit to Egypt, the first Arab country to sign a peace treaty with the Jewish state in 1979.

Quakes rock northern Japan: Three earthquakes measuring up to 5.1 on the Richter scale rocked large areas of northern Japan late Sunday, the Meteorological Agency said. AFP reports from Tokyo.

But there were no reports of casualties or damage police said yesterday. The agency said the epicentre of the three quakes was underground around 200 kilometres (125 miles) north of Tokyo in Fukushima prefecture.

Bomb defused in N Ireland: Army bomb disposal experts defused a bomb found outside a furniture store in Enniskillen, near Northern Ireland's border with the Irish republic, a police spokesman said. Reuter reports from Belfast.

He said police recovered a plastic container with petrol, two commercial detonators, batteries and a kg (2.2 lbs) of plastic explosives after a controlled explosion. The bomb was found after an anonymous telephone warning and no one was hurt.

Chopper crashes in Indonesia: Eight people died when an Indonesian army helicopter crashed in east Kalimantan while on a border survey flight, the army headquarters information office said yesterday. AFP reports from Jakarta.

The Bo-105 helicopter crashed late Thursday in the Pujungan area of the east Kalimantan regency of Bulungan, said an official. Afrifudin. He said the helicopter was on a survey mission to delineate the border with the Malaysian state of Sabah.

Tamil rebels kill 3 soldiers: Tamil guerrillas killed three soldiers on Monday, as rebel leaders and government officials discussed the date for their next round of peace talks. AP reports from Colombo.

The pre-dawn attack on an army bunker occurred in Welioya, 220 kilometers (135 miles) northeast of Colombo. Maj. Gen. Gemunu Kulatunga, the military's spokesman, said in the capital.

Cold snap claims 7 in Moscow: Seven people died and 53 suffered frostbite after Moscow temperatures plunged below minus 25 Celsius (minus 13 Fahrenheit) at the weekend, an Interfax news agency said yesterday that all of them were drunk. Reuter reports from Moscow.

Temperatures hit lows under minus 30C (-22F) in some parts of the city on Sunday night and forecasters expect the cold snap to continue for several days.

9 die in Bahrain clashes: Nine people have died in clashes between Shiite Muslims and security forces in Bahrain, a Bahraini opposition group said yesterday. AFP reports from Tehran.

Mahmud Shadegan, a senior member of the banned Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), told AFP five demonstrators were shot dead by security forces and four policemen also died in the clashes. Shadegan did not say when the nine were killed.

Cop shot dead in Egypt: Suspected Muslim militants shot dead a police guard outside his house in southern Egypt, security sources said yesterday. Reuter reports from Assiut.

They said unidentified gunmen killed Ezzat Aziz Mikhail as he sat outside his home in the village of Al Idara near the town of Mallawi. The gunmen stole his rifle before fleeing.

Israeli killed in S Lebanon: An Israeli soldier was killed and another wounded early Monday in an attack claimed by the Muslim fundamentalist group Hezbollah in the Israeli security zone in South Lebanon, security sources said. AFP reports from Marjayoun.

A spokesman for the Iranian-backed movement said guerrillas attacked Israeli soldiers with machine guns and rockets in Tallfissa, in the central sector of Israel's security zone, causing direct casualties.

Ex-US Congressman Morse dies: Bradford Morse, a prominent former five-term Republican congressman from Massachusetts and past undersecretary general of the United Nations died at his home in Naples, Florida, on Sunday, an associate reported. Reuter says from New York.

Morse a 73-year-old native of Lowell, had been in poor health. Timothy Rothermel, his former administrative assistant in Congress, and at the United Nations told Reuters.

Anniversary of accord on HK: Commemorative stamps, front-page headlines and a huge new billboard in central Beijing with a countdown clock marked the 10th anniversary on Monday of the Sino-British agreement to return Hong Kong to Chinese rule in 1997. AP reports from Beijing.

The Chinese government, which has been fighting with Britain for several years over the details of the transfer of power, used the anniversary to trumpet its glee at assuming control of one of the last jewels of the British empire.

230 MT of N-waste cleared: Chinese soldiers have removed 230 tonnes of radioactive waste, which was buried in the centre of a northeastern city for 20 years by a military factory producing luminous coatings, the China Daily said yesterday. Reuter reports from Beijing.

The waste, radium 226, had been dumped in the centre of Harbin in Heilongjiang province by a factory producing special coatings for aircraft cockpit instruments in the 1960s. The removal of the waste began in September and took one month. No details were given of where it was placed.

Assad vows not to compromise on land with Israel

DAMASCUS, Dec 19: Syrian President Hafez Al Assad vowed on Sunday that his country would not compromise on land to achieve peace with Israel, the official Syrian agency Sana reported, says AFP.

"Syria wants a just and comprehensive peace based on the decisions of international legality but it will not make concessions on land and rights," Assad told a delegation of Arab lawyers.

Syrian-Israeli peace talks are stalled over the scale and timetable of an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights seized from Syria in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Heavy fighting near Grozny, troops on alert in Moscow

GROZNY, Dec 19: Russian troops punched their way toward the Chechen capital on Monday, backed by rockets, helicopter gunships and more than 100 tanks, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported, says AP.

Chechen authorities were rushing reinforcements to the scene of the heavy fighting near the village of Dolinsk, just north of the capital, Grozny, ITAR-Tass said.

In Moscow, President Boris Yeltsin faced increasing opposition to his decision to send soldiers into the breakaway southern republic. His former prime minister urged the Russian people to take to the streets in protest. And armored personnel carriers assumed positions on the outskirts of Moscow to protect the Russian capital against any terrorist attacks.

Russia's parliament met to discuss the crisis, and prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin chaired an unusual joint session of Yeltsin's hawkish security Council, the Cabinet of Ministers and Yeltsin's administration. The session was devoted to developments in Chechnya, ITAR-Tass said.

Early Monday, armored personnel carriers and Interior Ministry troops with Kalashnikovs took up positions along Moscow's outer Ring Road, checking cars entering and leaving the city.

The checkpoints "are needed to prevent penetration by criminal elements," said a duty officer for the Interior Ministry. When asked who ordered the troops into Moscow, he hung up.

Russian troops, sent into the Caucasus Mountain republic on December 11, were encountering heavy resistance as they approached Grozny, ITAR-Tass said.

The troops had been dug in outside the Chechen capital, Grozny, while Moscow gave Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev until midnight Saturday to disarm his forces. He refused, demanding that the troops pull out.

On Sunday, efforts to restart peace talks failed.

At about 2 am Monday (2300 GMT Sunday), there were missile strikes on the city itself, the ITAR-Tass news agency said. The blasts were heard in the centre and broke windows of apartment buildings, it said.

Two rockets reportedly exploded in Dudayev's neighbourhood, the report said. There were no immediate reports on any casualties.

The Interfax news agency cited Chechen officials as saying helicopter gunships attacked villages on the eastern outskirts of Grozny early Monday.

Moscow has sent 10,000 to 40,000 troops into the southern republic to reassert its authority.

Yeltsin has staked considerable political capital on resolving the conflict quickly and with minimum casualties. The offensive in the mostly Muslim republic of about 1.2 million people is generally unpopular with the public and among Russian troops.

Some Russian soldiers have vowed not to advance, even if ordered. One commander was recalled Saturday after promising villagers his tanks would not storm Grozny.

In Moscow, reformist lawmaker Yegor Gaidar urged Russians on Sunday to take to the streets to protest the military intervention.

"The main thing we can do today is to organise a mass protest which would force... the authorities, the president, to understand what kind of tragic madness they are being pushed into," said Gaidar.



A Chechen soldier puts aside his Kalashnikov machine-gun as he prays on Grozny's snowy main square on Sunday. — AFP photo

Area of differences widening between Benazir, Mohajirs

KARACHI, Dec 19: The gulf is widening between Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and the Mohajirs, the main ethnic group in Karachi which appears headed down the dangerous path of separatism from Pakistan, reports AFP.

Struggles within the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), which represents Urdu speaking migrants from India, have fuelled much of the violence that has caused hundreds of deaths in the last few months here in the country's economic capital.

Leaders of the MQM, with the main one, Altaf Hussain, having taken refuge in London, warn increasingly openly that pressure from the government and army could force them to call for the creation of a fifth province for the Mohajirs. This could be the start of a break-away movement, analysts say, although Pakistani President Farooq Leghari — a close ally of Benazir — on Sunday said Pakistan was an indivisible entity.

But, Hussain, speaking at a meeting in London last week to mark the 23rd anniversary of the fall of East Pakistan, said that the ruling class of Pakistan has not learned any lessons from the break-up of the country.

Instead, he said, it is reintroducing the very policies which led to the disintegration of Pakistan.

The Mohajirs, who have immigrated from India since the partition of the two countries in 1947, make up the vast majority of the 10 million residents of Karachi and are the most educated and politically organised group.

Benazir is originally from Sind, the coastal province where Karachi is located, and is ethnically Sindhi. Since her return to power in October 1993, it has become common belief among Mohajirs that she has no sympathy for them.

Many of them believe that with the help of the army she wants to break the back of the Mohajir and weaken that community in favour of the Sindhis.

Benazir, 41, threw oil on the fire by declaring last week that secret service agents from India had infiltrated the Mohajir to foment "urban guerrilla" warfare in Karachi.

"It's an irresponsible statement. She targets us like potential traitors" to Pakistan, said a Mohajir journalist.

The Mohajir's other perceived enemy is the army, considered the only "instrument capable of melding the diverse ethnicities, languages and sects that make up Pakistan."

The army, which was deployed in Karachi since June 1992 until December 1 this year to officially maintain order, has struck hard against the MQM, considered by some to be a state within a state.

Japan does not support 'two Chinas' policy: Murayama

TOKYO, Dec 19: In a bid to smooth over strained relations, Japanese Prime Minister Tomichi Murayama told Chinese President Jiang Zemin in Jakarta last month that his government does not support a "two Chinas" policy, Japanese officials said, reports Kyodo.

Murayama met with Jiang for the first time since bilateral relations went away over Taiwanese Deputy Premier Hsu Li-Teh's attendance at the Hiroshima Asian Games.

Murayama told Jiang that his government's policy toward China remains unchanged and that it will abide by the 1972 joint declaration in which Japan recognised Beijing as the sole legitimate government of China, severing ties with Taiwan, the officials said.

Tokyo has since limited contact with Taiwan to non-governmental activities in such fields as economics and tourism.

Opposition urges Rao to sack ministers

NEW DELHI, Dec 19: India's opposition today demanded that Prime Minister PV Narashima Rao sack ministers implicated in two corruption investigations, reports Reuter.

The probes, into a 1.2-billion dollars stock-market scandal and a sugar scam, have compounded the ruling Congress Party's embarrassment following a debacle earlier this month in state elections.

Opposition leaders unleashed a storm of protest in both houses of parliament aimed at Congress and Rao, who is under mounting pressure to reshuffle his cabinet.

"I am demanding that the corrupt people must be brought to book and heads must roll," Chandrajit Yadav, a deputy from the Janta Party, told the lower house.

In a raucous session, opposition lawmakers demanding the government discuss the sugar scandal forced early adjournment of the upper house.

The opposition claims the government lost hundreds of millions of dollars by delaying a decision to import sugar by five months until last May.

In the interim, world sugar prices surged to 347 dollars per tonne from 286 dollars, multiplying the cost to the government, which subsidises sugar sales to consumers.

Tens and tens of thousands of rupees are involved and it's being treated as a routine matter," said Sonath Chatterjee, a deputy from the Communist Party of India-Marxist.

Off the Record

Changing faces of Santa

HAYWARD, California: Santa Claus Patrick Landeza sometimes totes a ukulele to his throne and has been known to thrill Filipino children by wishing them a merry Christmas in Tagalog, reports AP.

Santa Claus Willie Edward Brown Jr has a gift for rap.

Then there's the Spanish-speaking Santa's helper, the bilingual colouring books and the signing Santa, too, for those who need extra help communicating with the jolly, jelly-bellied fellow.

No doubt about it. At this suburban San Francisco area mall — as at other North Pole outposts across the country — the leader of the reindeer pack is keeping pace with the changing face of America.

"The whole Santa thing has changed dramatically," says Jenny Zink, who helps train St Nick's stand-ins for Walnut Creek-based Western Temporary Services, a Santa placement agency.

Once almost exclusively the preserve of older white men, often retirees looking for a little holiday pin money, Santas nowadays span a much wider spectrum. They can be young, black, Hispanic, Asian, bilingual, even female.

"It just makes sense. Santa is a child's imagination and if 25 per cent of your customers are Hispanic and 25 per cent are African-American you want to find a Santa that fits what your customer is," said Elizabeth Pedersen-Knapp, marketing manager of the Southland Mall in Hayward where Landeza and Brown do Santa duty.

Way to beat bandits on motorcycles

PHNOM PENH: Trying to stop motorcycle-riding bandits, the Phnom Penh mayor's office ordered on Monday that motorcycle passengers must ride sideways, reports AP.

The aim of the order, which takes effect in the new year, is to keep them from maintaining their balance while welding a gun.

Bandits on the backs of motorcycles have been driving up alongside other motorcyclists and firing on them with automatic rifles to steal their bikes.

Motorcycles are the most common form of transportation in Phnom Penh. It has become increasingly dangerous, however, to drive them alone or in deserted areas.

Or else

HONG KONG: Having broken into a garment factory and found nothing of value, a disgruntled burglar left a note warning the owner to do better next time, or else, reports AP.

"Put some money here next time or I'll set fire to your factory. ... You make me do this for nothing, I can't even find 10 cents," said the note in Chinese.

It was written by Yu Kin-fong, 33, who was later arrested and admitted to a string of burglaries.

At his trial Thursday, he pleaded guilty, saying he needed money for his child and pregnant wife in China and to support a drug habit.

The District Court jailed him for three years.



French activist Abbe Pierre (C) uses a loud speaker to denounce homelessness as he squats a block of empty apartments along with more than 100 people, including 50 children in central Paris on Sunday. Abbe Pierre said that families who occupy an empty home owned by a firm of rogues cannot be thrown out. The building is owned by the promoters COGEDIM, a subsidiary of Paribas bank. — AFP photo

28 killed in Papuan plane crash

SYDNEY, Dec 19: A private plane crashed in a remote area of Papua New Guinea, killing all 28 people aboard, the operators of the flight said on Monday, reports AP.

Missionary Aviation Fellowship of Melbourne, the company that chartered the plane, said the crash happened on Saturday afternoon when the Twin Otter hit a cliff face.

The 26 passengers were workers for the Ok Tedi copper and gold mine and their families, including eight children. The plane also had a crew of two.

Papua New Guinean officials said it was the worst plane crash in the South Pacific country since 1948.

Twin Otters are built to carry 18 passengers, but Missionary Aviation's Ron Kingsley said that with children on their parent's laps, the plane was not over loaded.

The flight had left the airstrip at the Ok Tedi mine, heading toward the Irian Jaya border.

Attack on Karen base Myanmar forces suffer heavy casualties

MAE SOT (Thailand), Dec 19: Myanmar government forces are believed to have suffered heavy casualties today after they attacked a main base of ethnic minority Karen guerrillas in southeast Myanmar, a guerrilla source said, reports Reuter.

Government troops fired more than 200 mortar bombs at the Karen's Kaw Moo Ra base, located on the west bank of the Moei River, which forms the border with Thailand, this morning. Sporadic fighting continued into the afternoon.

Three Karen soldiers were wounded when Myanmar infantry made an unsuccessful assault on the camp, 100 km (60 miles) southeast of the guerrillas' Manerplaw headquarters, the Karen source said. Myanmar casualties were believed to be heavy, he said.

The Karen National Union (KNU), the most powerful guerrilla force still fighting Yangon for greater autonomy within a federal Myanmar, was this month rocked by a mutiny by about 400 Buddhist fighters in the 5,000-strong Christian led force.

Guerrilla officials say the Yangon junta has taken advantage of the crisis to launch attacks on several guerrilla positions in southeast Myanmar including a key defensive position about 20 km (12 miles) south of Manerplaw.

The fighting was the heaviest since 1992 when the junta made an unsuccessful attempt to capture Manerplaw and then said it was suspending operations against the guerrillas in the interests of national reconciliation.

The junta has so far been unsuccessful in its attempts to win a ceasefire with the KNU as it has done with 13 other guerrilla armies. KNU leader General Bo Mya said late last month he was willing to send a delegation to Yangon for talks.

'Chopper crisis' will be short-lived, predict N Korea analysts

WASHINGTON, Dec 19: North Korea's isolated government, desperate for aid and respectability, has much to lose by antagonising the United States over a lost American helicopter and the death of an American aviator, reports AP.

With much at stake, the crisis is likely to be short-lived, say analysts of North Korea.

"The track that North Korea is on in which it controls the agenda and timing of its relations with the United States will not be upset by this minor incident," said William Taylor, a military strategy and US-Korean relations expert with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

Washington learned about Taylor predicted that the North, after a few days of bluster, will return the surviving American in what they will portray as "the most magnanimous of gestures."

On Sunday, in the first direct US-North Korean meeting on the downing of the helicopter Saturday, the North refused to give any information on the Army aviators, and accused the United States of staging a major war exercise with South Korea near the front lines.

The US Army contends the unarmed Kiowa Warrior helicopter was on a routine training mission when it apparently strayed into North Korean territory.

Washington learned about the death of one of the pilots from Rep Bill Richardson, D-NM, who happens to be visiting Pyongyang and has become the point man for talks with North Korean officials over the incident.

The helicopter downing comes less than two months after a US-North Korean accord on the North's nuclear programme that could bring diplomatic recognition and billions of dollars in aid to Pyongyang's enfeebled economy.

"North Korea is not about to give up all of the benefits it received since Carter walked in," said John Gould, a Korea scholar at Sweet Briar College in Virginia.

Former President Jimmy Carter, during a private diplomatic mission to Pyongyang in June, ended an impasse over North Korea's alleged nuclear weapons programme that led to a US-North Korean agreement in October.

In the accord, North Korea said it would dismantle its nuclear programme. In exchange, the United States and its allies are to provide two new nuclear reactors, worth some 4 billion dollars, that are less susceptible to nuclear weapons use. The United States also agreed to establish low-level diplomatic relations with North Korea.

Gould said the North Koreans are well aware that the new Republican leadership in Congress generally takes a more skeptical view of the agreement and that a prolonged crisis over the surviving aviator could produce bipartisan opposition to the accord.

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan D-N.Y., speaking Sunday on CBS' "Face the Nation" before news of the one flyer's death was announced, said of the North Koreans: "They're not exactly in an enviable position in the world. Their dictator is dead, their economy is dead and they've got two American pilots and they'd better get them back fast."

Sen. Paul Simon D-Ill., who recently returned from Pyongyang, told The Associated Press: "They have very few chips to play and the worst thing we can do is to escalate the incident. We should low-key it and keep in mind our long-term interests and the interests of 36,000 US troops in South Korea."

But Taylor said we can expect a mini-look at their traditional pattern of brinkmanship, of using such incidents to intimidate their enemies in the South and reconfirm their aggressive military posture.

The worst such incident involving the United States came in 1968, when the North Koreans captured the USS Pueblo and held its crew of 83 for 11 months until the captain, under torture, admitted he was spying in North Korean waters.

Blast rocks Srinagar

SRINAGAR, India, Dec 19: A huge blast rocked Srinagar, the summer capital of the strife-torn northern Indian state of Kashmir, early today damaging a dozen homes but causing no casualties, police said, reports AFP.

A senior police official here said ammunition stored at a housing complex for government officials had exploded shortly after midnight.

But other police sources said they believed Muslim separatist guerrillas had staged a missile strike. They said a nearby police headquarters on the banks of the River Jhelum had been the apparent target of the rocket attack.

Indian security forces immediately sealed off the area.