

Seven more killed in Karachi violence

KARACHI, Dec 22: Seven more people were reported killed today in this southern Pakistani port city plagued by political and sectarian unrest, police and hospital sources said, reports AFP.

Police recovered four bodies riddled with bullets from an orchard in the eastern Malir district. The bodies were dumped after an early morning shooting incident by unidentified gunmen, they said.

A youth was shot dead near the city's railway station, while two more bodies were brought to hospital earlier. One of the victims was identified as an off-duty soldier killed in sniper fire elsewhere in the city, police said.

President Farooq Ahmed Leghari is scheduled to arrive here today for talks with various political, religious and

ethnic party leaders to restore normality.

Press reports said the death toll in the past three weeks of trouble was close to 150.

Nearly 700 people have died this year in clashes between rival factions of the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), which represents Urdu-speaking settlers, militants belonging to the minority Shi'ite community's Tehreek-i-Jafaria Pakistan (TJP), and a Sunni Muslim party, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP).

The high death toll this month was attributed to a new wave of killing by unidentified figures who spray bullets from and escape in speeding vehicles.

Several government and opposition leaders have blamed unidentified foreign hands in the unrest.

Russian jets pound Grozny in heaviest bombardment yet

GROZNY, Russia, Dec 22: Russian jets unleashed their heaviest bombardment yet on the capital of rebel Chechnya early on Thursday, but their hit-and-run tactics seemed to strengthen the resolve of Grozny's remaining residents, reports AP.

It was the third consecutive day of overnight air raids on Grozny — Moscow's new strategy with its ground troops bogged down by unexpected resistance. Chechen spokesmen claimed scores of civilians were killed the previous two nights.

In a further sign of Russian resolve, Moscow reportedly has sent two battalions of up to 400 marines apiece and the elite Taman Division to bolster its forces in Chechnya. The Taman Division attacked the

Russian White House in October 1993 on President Boris Yeltsin's orders.

Heavy shelling resumed close to Grozny on Thursday morning. Three large bomb craters scarred a field in a northern suburb, destroying several shop fronts, smashing all surrounding windows and blackening the snow-covered ground for metres around.

A nine-story apartment building was hit on the roof, and three nearby one-story homes were destroyed.

"When the bombing started, I fled the building — that's why I'm still alive," said Abdurakhman Matayev, a 57-year-old mechanic who lived on the ninth floor.

Rubble and ceiling plaster filled Matayev's apartment, with the roof split open to the

icy elements.

"I worked for 20 years to get this apartment," he said.

Outside, emergency crew rushed to restore power and phone lines damaged in the attacks. Matayev joined a crowd of angry Chechens and Russian on the street who denounced Yeltsin.

Chechens seemed in no mood to back down. Badly putmaned and short of equipment and ammunition, Chechen government soldiers and volunteers remain highly motivated. Many of the several thousand fighters in Grozny have taken an oath of holy war, putting on green bands around their foreheads.

The Russian jets roared over Grozny for about 25 minutes starting just after midnight, dropping bombs that

landed with bright flashes and loud explosions.

One struck the Lenin oil refinery, setting it ablaze. Another came the closest yet to the sandbagged presidential palace, landing about 500 metres away and leaving a crater five metres (15 feet) wide and two metres (six feet) deep.

Kiosks were destroyed, trees were knocked down and large orange flames were visible in the distance. A man in civilian clothing lay dead across the street from the crater, flat on his back and eyes wide open.

"When I heard the planes, I hid in the corner of the room to take cover," said a tearful Zinaida Zalakhina, standing in shock next to a building that had been hit. "What horror."



President Nelson Mandela (R) congratulates his estranged wife Winnie after she had been elected to the National Executive Committee of the ANC on the last day of its 49th constitutional congress in Bloemfontein on Wednesday. Winnie came 5th among 60 members elected to the NEC, with 1,802 votes. Mandela split with her in 1992. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

5 ivory poachers to die: Five ivory poachers have been sentenced to death for killing 20 elephants in southern China, the official English-language newspaper China Daily reported yesterday. AFP says from Beijing.

Sentence was pronounced on December 3, it said, without saying whether the executions had been carried out.

Venezuelan army to guard jails: The military will start patrolling the country's seven most dangerous prisons on Thursday to try to stop violence among inmates, Justice Minister Ruben Creixems said. AP reports from Caracas.

The announcement came after at least three prisoners were shot dead and 13 wounded on Monday during a fight between rival gangs in the San Juan de los Morros jail, 193 kilometres (120 miles) south of Caracas.

Shelling in Sarajevo kills 2: Two shells slammed into a small marketplace in Sarajevo's Old Town on Thursday, killing at least two people and wounding seven others, police and hospital officials said. AP reports from Sarajevo.

The attack came only a day before a nationwide ceasefire, negotiated by former US President Jimmy Carter, was to go into effect.

3 Palestinians killed in WB: An Islamic activist was shot and killed Thursday in the PLO-run Jericho area, and the army said a second Palestinian was killed in the West Bank city of Hebron while making a bomb. AP reports from Jericho.

Another Palestinian was killed by masked men on Wednesday. Off the coast of the Gaza Strip, the Israeli navy shot at a fishing boat, seriously wounding two Palestinians after they sailed outside the designated fishing zone, the army said.

Lotteries banned in Delhi: The New Delhi authorities on Wednesday banned state-run lotteries in the capital saying the lure of becoming millionaires overnight was turning more and more people into virtual paupers. AFP reports from New Delhi.

New Delhi Chief Minister Madan Lal Khurana said he will shut down the annual 30-million-dollar industry from new year's day in consideration to families whose bread-earners have been paralysed by the lottery-bug.

Colombia to destroy coca plots: The government on Wednesday ordered the herbicide spraying of small plots of coca leaf renegeing on a deal that ended a 10-day protest by thousands of peasants in the Amazon jungle, AP reports from Bogota.

The protesters had been preventing anti-narcotics planes from taking off by occupying the airport in the jungle town of San Jose del Guaviare, about 155 miles (250 km) southeast of the capital Bogota. Coca leaf is used to make cocaine.

10 Algerian rebels shot dead: Algeria's security forces shot dead 10 armed Muslim militants in search operations and clash in Algiers and two other cities during the last three days, the official Algerian news agency APS said on Wednesday. Reuter reports from Tunis.

One of the dead was identified as the head of an armed gang suspected of several assassinations, APS said, quoting a security official.

UK plane crash toll now 5: The crash on Wednesday of a Boeing 737 cargo jet near Coventry, killing all five aboard, narrowly averted crashing into a built-up area, residents said. AP reports from London.

"It is a highly populated area and if it had come down just a bit closer, it would have caused a lot more damage," said witness Stephen Wilson. "It is such a busy airport that we were expecting something like this to happen one day."

Taxi drivers riot in Taipei: Hundreds of taxi drivers used gas canisters as flame throwers and hurled petrol bombs in central Taipei yesterday in a riot sparked by the fatal stabbing of a colleague. Reuter reports from Taipei.

State television showed a crowd of drivers beating riot police with clubs and using flaming gas bottles and petrol bombs in an attempt to torch a nightclub near where their colleague was stabbed to death on Wednesday.

3 executed in China: Three people have been executed in southern China's Guangdong province for economic crimes as the government gets tough on increasing white-collar crime, the China News Service said yesterday. Reuter reports from Beijing.

Local courts handed down death sentences on six others, who have appealed, as well as death sentences suspended for two years or life in prison for seven, the service said. It said 40 people had received jail terms of five years or more in the crackdown on economic crimes.

UN renews Cyprus mandate: The Security Council agreed unanimously on Wednesday to keep peacekeepers on the divided island of Cyprus, but said ceasefire violations continue and there has been no progress toward a political solution. AP reports from United Nations.

The resolution extends the mandate of the UN force for six months. Some 1,200 peacekeepers patrol the line separating the Greek and Turkish areas of the island.

Mitterrand treated for cancer: After suffering side-effects from chemotherapy, French President Francois Mitterrand has switched to radiation treatment for his prostate cancer, his doctor said in a report on Wednesday. AP says from Paris.

With five months left in his term, Mitterrand's condition has left political and medical experts guessing whether the Socialist president may be forced to step down early and prompt a snap election.

Typhoon Axel claims 7: Seven people were feared dead when Typhoon Axel struck the central Philippines, relief officials said yesterday. AFP reports from Tacloban.

Axel battered the islands of Leyte and Samar on Wednesday evening with winds of up to 150 kph (85 mph) and heavy rains, they said.



North Korean soldiers hand over the remains of US pilot Chief Warrant Officer David Hilemon, whose OH-58 helicopter was downed in North Korea on December 17, at the border in Panmunjom, Korea on Thursday. — AFP photo

DPRK returns US pilot's body

PANMUNJOM, Korea, Dec 22: The congressman who helped negotiate the return of the body of an American pilot whose helicopter went down in North Korea said on Thursday he hoped the surviving airman could be home for Christmas, reports AP.

But US Rep Bill Richardson said he had no commitment from Pyongyang for the airman's release by then.

Earlier Thursday, Richardson accompanied the rough reddish-brown casket carrying the body of Chief Warrant Officer David Hilemon as the North Koreans handed it over at the border crossing in the truce village of Panmunjom.

He said he had reached an agreement with North Korea that calls for the release of Chief Warrant Officer Bobby Hall, who also was aboard the

unarmed US Army OH-58C helicopter that strayed into North Korean territory last Saturday while on a routine training mission.

"To make the agreement fully certifiable and successful Bobby Hall must return," Richardson said. "And I think Bobby Hall will return ... very soon."

"My hope is, on humanitarian reasons, that it be so he can join his family in Florida for Christmas or shortly thereafter."

North Korea has said its troops shot down the chopper, although US officials cannot confirm that without talking with Hall.

Richardson said he had no firm information on what happened. He referred only to "the crash." He said he had seen Hilemon's body.

Asked about the cause of death, he said: "It is my under-

standing the North Koreans claim it was from trauma resulting from the crash."

He said some preliminary evidence appeared to support that conclusion.

Richardson told reporters he was unable to see Hall, but was able to convey his wife's love. The North Koreans have said Hall is in good condition but won't be released at least until they complete their investigation into the incident.

"The reason they indicated I could not see him was that civilians were not permitted to visit a military base," he said.

"My presumption is he is at a military base near the site of the crash."

Richardson said talks were continuing in Panmunjom on details of Hall's release.

The last radio contact with the helicopter indicated the pilot believed he was still in South Korea.



Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres (R) and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat answer journalists during a press conference at the end of their meeting in Gaza City on Wednesday. The talks, held at Arafat's seafront headquarters in Gaza, are meant to break the deadlock over extending Palestinian self-rule in the West Bank. — AFP photo

Tragedy of malnourished elderly in US

WASHINGTON, Dec 22: Unwrapping a five-pound block of cheese to underscore pleas for federal food aid, advocates for the poor told Congress that thousands of elderly Americans are malnourished and food pantries are turning away hungry families, reports AP.

One in five Americans is now served by a federal nutrition programme, such as school lunches or subsidised food coupons, known as food stamps. But many still don't get enough to eat, and hundreds of thousands of elderly people are malnourished, advocates and federal officials told Congressman Ron Wyden on Wednesday.

"As we speak, millions of our fellow Americans are going hungry," said Wyden, chairman of the House Small Business subcommittee on regulation, which held a hearing on the problem.

"In our rich nation, with its extraordinary resources we witness the tragedy of older people scrounging in dumpsters for their next meal. This is a picture that shames all of us as a nation."

The cheese, a symbol of the federal government's commodity giveaways of the 1980s, is no longer included in the truckloads of food distributed to anti-hunger programmes around the country even as the demand for nutrition assistance has grown.

Eleanor M Josaitis, associate director of Focus: Hope, a civil and human rights organisation in Detroit, said low-income elderly are not getting enough protein in their diets and want the processed American cheese back in the sacks of groceries that her organisation distributes.

"If we had cheese, they

could make cheese sandwiches, tuna casseroles," she said, plunking a brown box on the witness table and taking out the five-pound (2.3-kilogram) brick of cheese. "It helps people stretch their budgets."

Christine Vladimiroff, president and chief executive officer of Second Harvest, a network of 188 regional food banks based in Chicago, said local agencies are turning away hungry families because of a lack of food and funds.

The more than 42,000 community agencies served by her network include food pantries, soup kitchens, elderly feeding sites and homeless shelters.

Vladimiroff said 46 per cent of those agencies report that they have had to ration food and cut their hours of operation.

In short, demand is up 37

Strike paralyses West Bengal

CALCUTTA, Dec 22: Normal life in West Bengal was affected by a 24-hour bandh called by the opposition Congress-I, starting from 0600 hours today, in protest against the murder of the Forward Bloc MLA, Ramzan Ali, in his room at the MLA hostel on Tuesday night, reports PTI.

Shops and other establishments in the city and suburbs were mostly closed. Vehicular traffic was also mostly off the road, although state buses and a few private buses were seen plying. Educational institutions were also closed.

Train services on the Eastern Railway's Howrah and Sealdah divisions were disrupted because of obstructions by the bandh supporters at different stations since early in the morning, according to an ER spokesman.

The deal, signed in the Ghanaian capital Accra after two days of talks, calls for a ceasefire from midnight on December 28 and elections on November 14, 1995, the officials added.

An estimated 150,000 people have died in civil war and anarchy in Liberia since rebels led by former civil servant Charles Taylor invaded from Ivory Coast on Christmas eve in 1989.

The deal, signed shortly before midnight on Wednesday, follows a series of abortive peace pacts by Liberia's fractious militia leaders.

India, China deny reports of jt exercises

NEW DELHI, Dec 22: India yesterday said it was not aware of any move to hold joint exercises with the Chinese army in the near future, according to a Defence Ministry spokesman here, reports PTI.

Commenting on reports circulated by a foreign news agency that the Indian and Chinese armies would hold joint exercises near the Sino-Indian border in the frontier district of Ladakh, the spokesman said though army to army relations had improved considerably, they had not yet come to the stage of holding joint exercises.

Meanwhile, according to a PTI report from Beijing, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Chen Jian, also described as "groundless" reports of joint exercises by the two armies.

Off the Record

Call girl service using catwalk models!

PARIS: Fashion designer Francesco Smalto and his son will face trial in April for allegedly running a prostitution ring that involved runway models, officials said Wednesday, reports AP.

Smalto, 67, is accused of providing call girls for "high Gabonese personalities," said informed sources on condition of anonymity.

The women, most of them fashion models, were paid between 10,000 francs (1,850 dollars) and 50,000 francs (9,200 dollars) plus all expenses to travel to Gabon, the sources said.

Smalto, charged in June 1993, required to post bail and placed under judicial surveillance, contends he's innocent. Prostitution is legal in France but pimping is not.

His son, Francois Smalto, 34, and Michel Mariani, 52, one of the designer's tailors, are to appear with Smalto in court on April 11.

The Italian-born Smalto began his business in France in 1961 and has since dressed numerous international political figures and monarchs including King Hassan II of Morocco.

Good news for the circumcised

JERUSALEM: Circumcised men are less prone to contract the killer disease AIDS than other men, Israeli professor Francis Shlaefer said on Wednesday, reports AFP.

"For AIDS, as for other sexually transmittable diseases the foreskin is a prime area for contamination," Shlaefer, from Soroka Hospital in Beersheba, told Israeli radio.

He said the argument was based mainly on a survey carried out in the United States in 1988.

Judaism requires males to be circumcised.

Land of God-fearing people

WASHINGTON: The United States is the land of religious believers with a vast majority of Americans believing in God, according to a national poll published on Wednesday, reports AFP.

Some 90 per cent of the Americans who answered survey questions believe there is a God, according to a CNN-USA Today poll.

Another 90 per cent of the respondents believe in heaven, 79 per cent in miracles and 72 per cent in angels, according to the poll results.

In 1981, 84 per cent of those responding said they believed in God. This year 73 per cent said they believed in hell, a rise of six per cent over 1981 figures.

The poll also showed Americans held more belief in mysticism with the number of people believing in reincarnation rising to 27 per cent this year from 21 per cent in 1990.

Malaysian MPs protest Russian veto on Bosnia

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 22: Malaysian MPs on Wednesday protested at the Russian embassy here against the recent Russian veto of a UN resolution to punish rebel Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, reports AFP.

Thirty government and opposition members of parliament handed an official protest note to the embassy's First Secretary Iskander Azizov, and called on the Malaysian government to reverse a decision to buy Russian Mig-29s.

"We have agreed to urge the government to implement a buy-Russian last policy and review the purchase of the 18 jetfighters from Russia," MP Shahidan Kassim said.

Russia on December 2 vetoed a UN Security Council draft resolution blocking fuel

supplies to rebel Serbs saying it would have penalised the rump end to the 32-month conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Malaysia's Foreign Minister Abdullah Badawi has blasted Russia for the move charging that Russia had acted against the interest of the international community who want peace in Bosnia.

Shahidan said the MPs had proposed, with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's blessing, to meet Russian President Boris Yeltsin in Moscow to convey the concern of Malaysians for the plight of the Bosnian Muslims.

The government, in the meantime, should reverse its decision to buy the jetfighters from Russia and its plan to send air force officers for training in Moscow.

GCC agrees to tackle extremism, border rows

MANAMA, Dec 22: Leaders of the six Gulf Arab states wound up a three-day summit in Bahrain on Wednesday in apparent agreement on ways of tackling border rows and Muslim fundamentalist threats, reports Reuter.

"There has been agreement on every word included in the final statement," Bahrain's Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammad Bin Mubarak al-Khalifa told a news conference after the summit.

In the statement, leaders of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates called for redoubled effort to end outstanding problems between member states before the next summit in Oman in December 1995.

Sheikh Mohammad told the news conference this referred to border disputes.

The 13-year-old GCC had its moment of glory when it rallied behind Kuwait after the 1990 Iraqi invasion. But solidarity has since been dented by a row between Bahrain and Qatar over islands and reefs potentially rich in oil and gas.

Two years ago Qatar became embroiled in another dispute, this time with Saudi Arabia, the senior GCC state.

Sheikh Mohammad said the issue took much of the leaders' time and they gave their foreign ministers "directives that these issues are to be tackled."

The statement said the leaders "noted with great concern the phenomenon of extremism and fanaticism leading to acts of violence and terrorism and express their total rejection and condemnation of these practices in all forms and motives."