

BRIEFLY

Firebombs claim 8 in Colombia: Assaults hurled firebombs on Thursday at three passenger buses in the Colombian port of Cartagena, killing at least eight people. Authorities blamed leftist guerrillas. AP reports from Bogota.

RCN radio said 10 people were killed, nine of them burned to death in the attacks in residential areas of the Caribbean port city. The tenth person, engulfed in flames, suffered fatal head injuries leaping from one of the buses. National Police Col. Edilberto Rojas said in a telephone interview that eight people were killed and four were injured.

US photographer killed in Grozny: A US freelance photographer was killed by a bomb blast in the capital of the breakaway Chechen republic on Thursday. Western reporters said. Reuter reports from Grozny.

Cynthia Elbaum was photographing the aftermath of a Russian air force raid when she was caught by a fresh blast, they said.

Indyk new US envoy to Israel: President Clinton on Thursday nominated a top official in his National Security Council, Martin Indyk, as the next US ambassador to Israel. Reuter reports from Washington.

"I am confident his extensive background and experience in the region as well as his commitment to furthering the peace process and the role he has played as my adviser on these issues will serve to promote American interests in the Middle East," Clinton said in a statement.

Titan 4 rocket blasts off: A Titan 4 rocket blasted off on Thursday with a missile warning satellite which it was to put into orbit for the US Defence Department. Reuter reports from Cape Canaveral.

Officials at Cape Canaveral air station said the 500 million dollars mission appeared to have been successful. The Martin Marietta Titan 4 disappeared above a blanket of clouds only 10 seconds after its 5.19 pm EST (2219 GMT) lift off from the Kennedy Space Centre.

2 Singaporeans to die in Taiwan: A Taiwan district court has sentenced two Singaporeans and a Taiwanese to death for smuggling 150 kg (330 lbs) of heroin into the island from Thailand, a court spokesman said yesterday. Reuter reports from Taipei.

The two Singaporeans, identified as Fu Wei-Ming and Chen Chun-Hsiu, helped Taiwanese Lee Chien-Ju to sell the heroin.

16 punished for dance hall fire: Sixteen officials have been arrested or disciplined in connection with a dance hall fire that killed 233 people last month. The official press reported on Friday. AP says from Beijing.

The blaze was reportedly started when a man threw a burning newspaper behind a sofa after using it to light a cigarette. The man, identified as Xing Shengli, was killed in the fire according to the Xinhua News Agency. The blaze occurred on November 27 in the northeast city of Fuxin, in Liaoning province.

Singapore reprieves HK woman: In a rare reprieve for a condemned drug trafficker, Singapore on Friday halted the execution of a Hong Kong woman, apparently to let her spend Christmas with her family. AP reports from Singapore.

But two Singapore men were hanged before dawn on Friday, raising to 94 the number of people executed under a 1975 law that mandates the death penalty for bringing in as little as 15 grams (a half-ounce) of heroin.

Chinese dissident jailed: The Chinese lawyer who acted on behalf of China's most famous labour activist has been sentenced to three years in a labour camp, a human rights group reported on Friday. AP says from Beijing.

The lawyer, Zhou Guoqiang, is at least the 12th dissident given a labour camp sentence since President Clinton's decision in May to sever the link between normal bilateral trade relations and China's human rights record. Nine other dissidents were sentenced last week to jail terms ranging from three to 20 years.

Sweden cuts contribution to WHO: Sweden announced on Thursday that it would cut by half its contribution to the World Health Organisation next year because of the organisation's failure to curb inefficiency and bureaucratic wastage. AFP reports from Stockholm.

Sweden which has traditionally been a big contributor to WHO said it would donate 51.75 million crowns (6.9 million dollars) to WHO next year compared to the 103.5 million crowns (13.8 million dollars) it gave in 1994.

5 killed in NZ road mishap: Five elderly women were killed near Auckland yesterday when a truck smashed into the van in which they were travelling. Radio New Zealand said. Reuter reports from Wellington.

The women, all aged between 85 and 93, were residents of a rest home. Five other women and the driver of the van were taken to hospital with injuries of varying severity.

9 IRA prisoners released: Nine IRA prisoners released by the Irish government in a gesture to underpin the Northern Ireland peace process walked free from an Irish prison yesterday, witnesses said. Reuter reports from Dublin.

The nine were to have been freed by the previous government last month but the amnesty was rescinded when Irish Republican Army (IRA) gunmen robbed a postal office in Northern Ireland, killing one worker.

Typhoon toll now 12 in Philippines: Typhoon Axel blew out of the Philippines on Friday, leaving at least 12 people dead and a swath of destruction. AP reports from Manila.

The weather bureau said a new storm, now north of Guam in the Pacific Ocean, was moving westward toward the Philippines, but it has not yet affected the country.

The Red Cross and a provincial disaster agency reported at least 12 people dead after the typhoon sliced through the central Philippines, Wednesday and Thursday.

UN seeks \$ 70m aid for Somalia
NAIROBI, Dec 23: The United Nations appealed on Thursday for 70.3 million dollars in aid for emergency relief and rehabilitation in Somalia for the next six months despite a UN military pullout, reports Reuter.

In a statement the UN Development Programme said agencies reaffirmed their commitment to continue humanitarian programmes "whenever and wherever possible" after the pullout by March 31.

"Failure to do so will result in a predictable new emergency which will, as in the past, exact a tragic toll in human lives and have severe consequences for stability in the sub-region," he said.

Departure of ministers eases political pressure on Rao

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Indian Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao's decision to sack three ministers linked to corruption scandals has cleared the way for a broader cabinet reshuffle, newspapers said today, reports Reuter.

The departure of the tainted ministers eases political pressures which had been building up around Rao following a rout in three of four states where elections were held recently, they said.

The Pioneer said Rao "appears to have contained the crisis" which stared him in the face after the party's electoral defeat.

But the prime minister still faces serious challenges, both from within his ruling Congress party and from an invigorated opposition.

The presidential palace announced the resignations of Health Minister B. Shankaranand, Food Minister Kalpana Rai and Junior Rural Development Minister Rameshwar Thakur late on Thursday.

Shankaranand and Thakur were accused by a joint parliamentary committee of wrongdoing in a 1992 stock market scandal. Rai was accused of misdeeds in a sugar import scam earlier this year.

"With these resignations, a reshuffle has become almost certain," The Economic Times said.

"The decks were now clear for a reshuffle of the union council of ministers which was expected to take place shortly," said The Financial Express.

Several newspapers said the reshuffle would probably take place before the new year. But The Economic Times said Rao was strongly influenced by astrology and would probably wait until the Hindu harvest festival Maker Sankranti on January 14, which many star-

watchers consider an auspicious moment.

Significantly, Rao carried out his last cabinet reshuffle in January 1993.

Among ministers expected to be dropped were Foreign Minister Dinesh Singh and Coal Minister Ajit Kumar Panja.

Summary of allegations

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: The following is a summary of the allegations against three cabinet ministers sacked by Indian Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao on Thursday for their links to stock market and sugar import scandals, reports Reuter.

Rao dropped Health Minister B Shankaranand, Junior Rural Development Minister Rameshwar Thakur and Food Minister Kalpana Rai.

Shankaranand and Thakur were named in a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) investigation into a 1992 stock market scandal in which banks and brokers illegally diverted funds from government securities to the Bombay Stock Exchange.

The scandal, India's biggest, involved 1.28 billion dollars, according to government figures. At the time of the scandal, Shankaranand was Petroleum Minister and Thakur was Junior Revenue Minister.

The JPC said Shankaranand, who as Petroleum Minister was also chairman of the Oil Industry Development

Board (OIDB), had misused public funds and taken responsibility for investing OIDB money when he should not have done so.

The JPC said the OIDB made investments in portfolio management schemes and the two banks, Canbank Financial Services and Syndicate Bank, but did not follow the appropriate system of processing offers.

Thakur was accused by the JPC of taking almost a month to review a crucial document concerning Bombay broker Harshad Mehta, the main accused in the scandal, delaying action against Mehta, Thakur says the delay did not affect votes.

Food Minister Kalpana Rai was criticised by an official report into a sugar import scandal.

The report, by a government-appointed committee, said Rai played a crucial role in resisting the import of sugar despite a shortfall in Indian production.

No criminal charges have been made against the former ministers.

both of whom have been ill, newspapers said.

There were no indications Finance Minister Manmohan Singh would be moved from his post.

Rao's troubles were not over, newspapers said.

"Though getting rid of the three tainted ministers has given a temporary reprieve to Rao, it is not the end of the battle for survival for him," The Indian Express said.

"Although the three ministers concerned have had to go, their departure has come too late to save the prime minister's reputation," The Times of India said.

The opposition would continue its attacks on Congress for alleged corruption, they said.

"The resignation of the three ministers... has put Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao in the opposition's direct line of fire," Business Standard said.

Rao also faced a challenge from Congress dissidents. "The Rao detractors within the Congress are also expected to renew their offensive after the next round of assembly elections," The Indian Express said, referring to February polls in five states.

The leading challenger appeared to be Human Resources Minister Arjun Singh.

"Singh has left no doubt whatsoever in anyone's mind that he has lost confidence in Rao's ability to lead the Congress party," The Asian Age said.

N Korea ignores US request for talks

SEOUL, Dec 23: North Korea has ignored a request for talks at the Korean border on a captured U.S. helicopter pilot, whose release before Christmas has been sought by the United States, a U.S. military spokesman said today, reports Reuter.

"We, of course, are seeking a meeting at Panmunjom but the north has not responded to our request," said Jim-Coles, a spokesman for the U.S. military in South Korea.

At Panmunjom, the only crossing point in the tense Korean border, North Korea on Thursday handed over the body of U.S. army chief warrant officer David Hilemon, killed

when a U.S. army helicopter was downed last Saturday after straying into North Korean territory.

The pilot of the helicopter, Bobby Hall, was captured by the North Koreans.

The body of Hilemon arrived at Travis air force base in California near San Francisco where the military planned an autopsy to determine the cause of death, he said.

U.S. Congressman Bill Richardson, who brokered the return of Hilemon's body and brought it back to South Korea, left for Washington today to report on his five-day trip to President Bill Clinton.

Peres criticises slow pace of talks with Syria

JERUSALEM, Dec 23: Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres criticised the slow pace of peace talks with Syria and said Israel did not appear to be on Syrian President Hafez Al Assad's agenda, reports Reuter.

The way it stands now I think the Syrians are too slow and too low, Peres told the Jerusalem Post in an interview published today.

In Damascus Syria officially announced that the Israeli and Syrian ambassadors to Washington would resume talks last on Thursday at the State Department in the US capital.

Peres said the Israeli Syrian negotiations started three years ago, were not at a high enough level to produce a breakthrough.

Negotiations have stalled over the fate of the Golan Heights which Israel captured from Syria in 1967, and the scope of future relations.

Asked to explain Assad's attitude Peres told the newspapers "We are not on the agenda in his eyes, he has another agenda and that is the Arab world."

He wants to demonstrate to the Arab world that he knows how to negotiate better than anyone else. So he is negotiating the way he thinks it should be negotiated."

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who has sought secret peace talks with Syria declined to say on Thursday whether negotiations in Washington were entering a new stage.



A Lebanese woman, holding her child, looks December 22, at the damage caused by an explosion which killed four people December 21 in a stronghold of the pro-Iranian Hezbollah movement in Beirut southern suburbs. The Hezbollah blames Israel for the bombing. — AFP photo

Bosnian warring factions cease hostilities

SARAJEVO, Dec 23: Bosnia's warring factions made some last-minute concessions to clear the way for a ceasefire on Friday in the republic's 33-month-old war, suggesting that it had better chances of holding than many earlier abortive truces, reports Reuter.

Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic said he had ordered his men to cease fire as scheduled at noon (1100 gmt) today even if Muslim troops had not completed a withdrawal from Mount Igman overlooking Sarajevo.

Hours earlier, the Muslim-led Bosnian government made clear that it would not be deterred from the ceasefire by a mortar attack on a Sarajevo market place which killed two people and wounded seven.

Karadzic, referring to a Muslim withdrawal from Mount Igman, told reporters after meeting UN special envoy Yasushi Akashi at his stronghold in Pale: "We do not make it a precondition for the start of the ceasefire."

He added: "We understand the withdrawal of Muslim troops should be completed by tomorrow noon, but if it is technically difficult we will wait one or two days."

Under the ceasefire deal brokered by former US President Jimmy Carter, the two sides should complete negotiations by January 1 on a comprehensive cessation of hostilities for a four-month period to be used for peace talks.

A major dispute lies ahead. The Bosnian government calls

for the acceptance of a big peace plan, whereas the Serbs describe it merely as a starting point for fresh talks.

The plan, dividing Bosnia into two almost equal parts, was grudgingly accepted by the Muslims and Croats, but rejected by the Serbs, who have won control of 70 per cent of the country.

A further complication is that the ceasefire proposals do not include Croatian Serbs and rebel Muslims who are fighting government forces in the northwest Bihać enclave.

This is the only part of the country where serious fighting is still taking place and there is no guarantee the ceasefire would stop it although Bosnian Serb forces would have to cease involvement.

Manipur governor Nayar resigns

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: The governor of northeastern state wracked by tribal wars has quit, officials said Friday, reports AP.

No details were given for Vijay Kumar Nayar's resignation Thursday night as governor of Manipur state, Press Trust of India reported. President Shankar Dayal Sharma accepted the resignation, PTI said.

State governors are appointed by the federal government in New Delhi and have largely ceremonial roles, while the elected chief ministers have executive powers.

A tribal feud between rival Kukis and Nagas has turned the remote hilly state has killed about 300 people in clashes in the last year.

The Nagas want an independent nation encompassing the state of Nagaland and three abutting states, including Manipur, and stretching across the border into Burma. The minority Kukis live in some of those areas.

4 more killed in Karachi violence

KARACHI, Dec 23: Four more people were killed, including the sister of a former Pakistani Foreign Minister, in the latest incidents of violence in this port city, police and hospital sources said today, reports AFP.

Zhora Bano 65, the widowed sister of former Foreign Minister Agha Shahi, was shot dead in her apartment near the fashionable Clifton Beach area late Thursday, police said. Shahi, who rushed to Karachi from his Islamabad residence, refused to comment on the murder, pending police investigations.

Two other people were shot dead in sniper fire in the city's industrial districts of Landhi and Korangi, police said, adding that another person, described as a bandit, was killed by an officer.

Off the Record

2000 places named after pigs

SEOUL: Interested in celebrating the new year with a trip to Pig Valley, Cutthroat Pig Place, or even the scenic Pig Island? Under the lunar calendar followed by several Asian nations, 1995 is the Year of the Pig — also sometimes translated as boar — and a pig-themed search in this has published the locations of some 2,000 places named after pigs in South Korea, reports AP.

Unlike other animals, pigs are symbols of wealth, so naming a place after a pig is considered a sign of good luck. Pig figurines are popular gift items, and folk lore has it that a pig dream brings good fortunes.

By far, Duiji-gol, or Pig Valley, is the most popular bovine-inspired name, with 82 locales claiming that honor, it said. The semitropical holiday island of Cheju takes the prize for having the most number of places named after pigs.

Most of the names, such as Pig Island and Pig Ear Town, are derived from their shapes, but some are based on past memorable incidents, such as the Valley Where a Pig Fell and Tumbled to Death, in central South Korea.

Birds rip hole in plane's nose

TAMPA: A jetliner carrying 112 people struck a couple of birds Thursday, ripping a 2-foot (half-meter) hole in the plane's nose and forcing an emergency landing, reports AP.

TWA Flight 399 bound for St. Louis had just taken off from Fort Myers when the accident occurred.

The first bird hit and glanced off. The carcass of the second bird stayed embedded in the hole. TWA spokesman John McDonald said.

The pilots flew the Boeing 727 the 150 miles (240 kms) north to Tampa International Airport to burn off some of the jet's fuel and because the Jarger airport has better repair facilities, McDonald said.

"This was never something of a serious nature to passengers," he said.

The plane landed safely in Tampa about an hour after the accident with most passengers unaware of the collision until they left the plane. A few said they had heard a thud.

McDonald said officials weren't sure what kind of birds struck the plane.

Dictionary of measurement

LONDON: A shrewdness of apes, a murder of crows, an unkindness of ravens and a crash of rhinos.

A new dictionary lists these little-known collective nouns, and explains the Schwartzchild radius, seven-league boots and the witch of Agnesi, reports AP.

The Dent Dictionary of Measurement, by publishing consultants Mike Darton and John Clark collects thousands of terms for quantification and measurement.

"As far as we know," no book with so many measurements has appeared before and we hope it's interesting enough to read and not just refer to," Darton said in an interview.

Just published in the United States by Macmillan, the 538-page book has 3,500 entries.

It explains that "unkindness" as the term for gathering of ravens arose in the Middle Ages when the big black birds were seen as portents of plague and death; it also reflects the old meaning of "unkind" as "unnatural."

Chemistry, math and physics account for most of the entries but literary terms appear too.

UN seeks \$ 70m aid for Somalia

NAIROBI, Dec 23: The United Nations appealed on Thursday for 70.3 million dollars in aid for emergency relief and rehabilitation in Somalia for the next six months despite a UN military pullout, reports Reuter.

In a statement the UN Development Programme said agencies reaffirmed their commitment to continue humanitarian programmes "whenever and wherever possible" after the pullout by March 31.

"Failure to do so will result in a predictable new emergency which will, as in the past, exact a tragic toll in human lives and have severe consequences for stability in the sub-region," he said.

"A community-based and decentralised approach to security appears to be the most appropriate and feasible in the absence of a national government," the agencies said in an appeal for the funds.

Grachev's position shaky as troops bog down in Chechnya

MOSCOW, Dec 23: Before launching Russia's offensive in Chechnya, Defence Minister Pavel Grachev boasted that a single parachute regiment could "solve all questions" in the rebellious republic in two hours, reports AP.

Instead, Russian troops are bogged down in the worst quagmire since the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and Grachev's position has become shaky.

"With every new coffin sent back to Russia, Pavel Grachev has a better chance of becoming a scapegoat for the failures of the expedition force sent to Chechnya," a military analyst for the newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta said in a column published Thursday.

In a front-page article, Igor Korotchenko wrote "Grachev had a rather unpleasant conversation with President Boris Yeltsin, who expressed his dissatisfaction with the current developments in very sharp language."

Yeltsin apparently counted on Grachev's combat experience in Afghanistan, and believed assertions he would rapidly establish order in Chechnya, the analyst said.

On Thursday, in a report denied by the Defence Ministry, the JTAR-Tass news agency reported that Grachev fired three top generals, allowed two deputies to resign and took personal command of military operations in the breakaway republic.

Whether or not there was a shakeup in the high command, the report was indicative of the restiveness in the new Russian army.

Russia sent 10,000 to 40,000 troops into Chechnya, backed by attack jets and helicopter gunships, to seal off the capital of Grozny and disarm fighters loyal to Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev.

By the 12th day of the operation the Russian forces appeared far from their goals, blocked by a hostile popula-

tion, hindered by bad weather and battered by hit-and-run raids by Dudayev's fighters.

"Using the army against civilians and bombing a city with a proclaimed task of disarming criminal groups amounts to a declaration of political impotence," said Alexander Kononov, a military analyst with the U.S.A and Canada Institute, a Moscow think tank.

Yeltsin may now be tempted to fire Grachev, blaming him for the operation's failure," he said.

In Chechnya, army officers said they would disobey orders to storm Grozny. When local residents blocked roads, troops allowed their trucks and armoured personnel carriers to be torched rather than open fire on civilians.

Russian newspapers see the military campaign in Chechnya as chillingly reminiscent of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, which began December 24, 1979.



File photo dated May 09, 1994 of Russian President Boris Yeltsin (L) sharing a laugh with Defence Minister Pavel Grachev (C) in Moscow, as Alexander Dostum, chief of the presidential security (R) looks on. Grachev sacked December 22 half a dozen senior officers in charge of the military operation in Chechnya. — AFP photo

Hekmatyar, Dostum hold secret talks with Pak officials

ISLAMABAD, Dec 23: At least two Afghan faction leaders fighting President Burhanuddin Rabbani visited Islamabad for secret talks with Pakistani officials this week, Afghan and Pakistani sources said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

Afghan sources said Hezb-I-Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and northern warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostum, the key members of an anti-Rabbani Supreme Coordination Council, both visited the Pakistani capital.

A Pakistan Foreign Ministry spokesman on Thursday confirmed that Dostum had met Foreign Minister Asaf Ahmad Ali on Monday, but gave no details of what they had discussed.

He could neither confirm nor deny local newspaper reports that Dostum and Hekmatyar had also held talks with Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto to discuss an Afghan peace plan.