

# BRIEFLY

**China, Vietnam hold talks:** Vietnam and China held more talks on their dispute over fishing and oil exploration rights in the Tonkin Gulf, the official Vietnam said on Saturday. It did not mention any progress, AP reports from Hanoi.

The brief report said expert from the two sides had "friendly and candid" talks Tuesday through Thursday in Hanoi, their third session since October 1993. A fourth round will be held in China in April, it said.

**Singapore jails AIDS carrier:** A man infected with the AIDS virus was jailed for five and a half years for biting a policeman, but escaped being caged because doctors said it would damage his immune system, a newspaper reported Saturday, AP says from Singapore.

The 24-year-old man, who was not identified, escaped a charge of attempted murder as his victim was not found to have contracted the HIV, which causes AIDS, the Straits Times said.

**Tokyo blast claims 3:** An explosion ripped through a small seven-storey shoe-making factory building in downtown Tokyo killing at least three workers and injuring 21 others, police said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The blast occurred on the second floor, where dozens of workers were processing shoe soles using flammable paints, police said. The cause of the explosion was not immediately known.

**Typhoon Axel toll now 19:** Nineteen people were killed and 27 are missing and feared dead after Typhoon Axel smashed its way across the central Philippines, relief officials said yesterday, Reuter reports from Tacuban.

Nineteen people were confirmed dead in Leyte Island, Axel's 150 kph (85 mph) winds whipped up huge waves that sank boats and knocked out power, plunging the whole of the main island of Luzon into darkness on Thursday.

**5 die in Nepali bus mishap:** At least five people were killed and 34 injured when a bus overturned yesterday at Kerabari, east of Kathmandu, state-run radio announced, AFP reports from Kathmandu.

The bus was going to Tatopani, which means "hot spring," where a celebration is held every 12 years. Some Nepalese people believe that by bathing in the hot spring, their illnesses will be washed away.

**Actor Slater arrested in NY:** Actor Christian Slater, who starred in "Interview with a Vampire" and other films, was arrested on Friday at John F Kennedy International Airport for trying to carry a 9 mm pistol onto an airplane, police said, AP reports from New York.

Slater, 25, was caught as he was going through a metal detector to board a Delta Airlines flight, said Sgt. John Mariano of the Port Authority police.

## Contact group on Bosnia still has reservations about truce

LONDON, Dec 24: The five-member international contact group on the former Yugoslavia cautiously welcomed a ceasefire in Bosnia today, but indicated it was not yet convinced it would hold, reports Reuter.

The contact group welcomes the agreement by the parties to the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina to a ceasefire and a four-month cessation of hostilities throughout the country which has been facilitated by former President Carter, the group said in a statement issued via a British Foreign Office spokesman.

A Christmas truce between

Bosnian Serbs and the Muslim-led Bosnian government was due to take effect at noon (1100 GMT) and both the United Nations and Bosnian fighters hoped it could pave the way for an end to the 33-month-old war.

But the contact group, made up of representatives from France, the United States, Russia, Britain and Germany, said its members still had reservations.

"The contact group is ready for early negotiations under its auspices leading to a comprehensive peace settlement for Bosnia and Herzegovina as two

conditions are fulfilled," it said.

"One: when the Bosnian Serb authorities in Pale confirm the readiness for the Bosnian party to negotiate a comprehensive peace agreement on the basis of the acceptance of the peace plan of the contact group as a starting point, and so inform the contact group."

"Two: when UNPROFOR informs the contact group that the ceasefire is in effect."

The agreement crowned private mediation by former US President Jimmy Carter, who was called in by the Serbs to break a deadlock in efforts to end the Bosnian war.

Another report says: Three sniper bullets were fired in Sarajevo seven minutes after a ceasefire between Bosnian Muslims and Serbs took effect at noon (1100 GMT) today but no one was hurt, journalists at the scene said.

The shots were aimed near the Holiday Inn hotel on the city's notorious "sniper alley" where a number of people have been shot dead by marksmen in recent weeks despite anti-sniping accord.

UN officials said military activity was sharply down in most of Bosnia in the 24 hours before the deadline after Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic ordered his forces to observe it in advance.

The exception was the northwest Muslim enclave of Bihac where Croatian Serbs and rebel Muslims, who are not a party to the agreement, continued attacks on the Bosnian government 5th corps this morning.

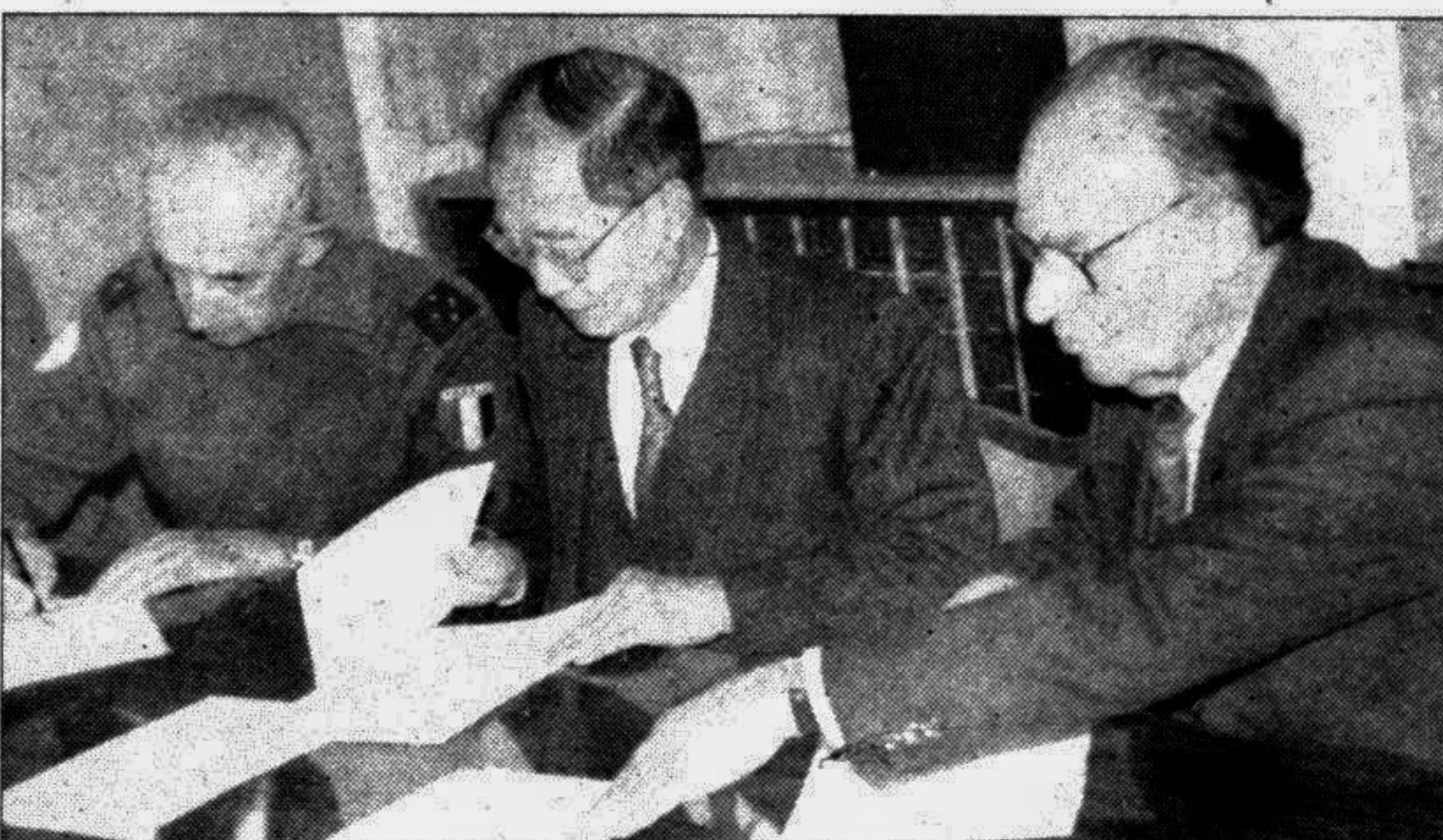
AFP adds: Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic on Friday hailed as "an important step toward peace" a ceasefire agreement that is to go into force in Bosnia-Herzegovina today.

"Our side will totally comply with this agreement. We shall order all our units to respect it," said Izetbegovic.

He said the ceasefire would be monitored by the United Nations Protection Force.

"I expect is (UNPROFOR) to be fair and not to accuse us of violations that we did not commit."

Izetbegovic voiced hope that the accord would lead to permanent peace.



Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic (R), UN special envoy Yasushi Akashi (C), and the commander of the UN forces in former Yugoslavia, Bertrand Guillaume de Lapresle sign ceasefire agreement, brokered by former US President Jimmy Carter, on Friday in Sarajevo. — AFP photo

## US to probe HR violations by Russian troops in Chechnya

WASHINGTON, Dec 24: The United States said on Friday it was "deeply concerned" by reports of civilian casualties in Russia's attack on breakaway Chechnya and would probe charges of human rights violations by Russian troops, reports Reuter.

"We are deeply concerned by these reports," State Department spokesman David Johnson told reporters.

Johnson said Washington had noted a pledge by Russian President Boris Yeltsin that his troops would fire only on those offering armed opposition, but it was also aware of allegations by Russia's human rights commissioner Sergei Kovalyov of "gross violations" by Russian troops.

"We're going to be following this up with the Russian government in order to evaluate the facts," Johnson said. "We're following the situation very closely."

Respect for human rights has been and will continue to be a basic precept of US policy towards Russia," he added.

Russia sent troops into Chechnya on December 11 to halt the region's three-year drive for independence. Russian forces pounded the capital of Grozny on Friday, and unofficial reports said at least 80 people were killed.

Johnson's statement marked a significant change of tone from last week when US Secretary of State Warren Christopher said Washington did not want to see Russia break up and Yeltsin had

"probably done what he had to do" to prevent that.

Friday's statement, while focusing on civilian casualties and possible human rights violations, stopped short of criticising the Chechnya operation as such.

State Department officials says the United States is in a difficult position over Chechnya, neither wanting to jeopardise its relationship with Yeltsin nor appear to be endorsing a military action.

The officials say Moscow is within its rights in moving against Chechnya which is legally part of the Russian federation, but they fear the action could sabotage their efforts to stop Russia from browbeating former Soviet republics.



A woman carries a board from the remains of her house destroyed by a bomb blast in Grozny city centre on Thursday. — AFP photo

## Kashmiris blow up army trucks, kill 10 troops

JAMMU, Dec 24: Suspected separatist rebels blew up two army trucks near India's border with Pakistan Saturday, killing at least 10 soldiers and wounding 12 others, police said, reports AP.

It was a rare attack by the Muslim guerillas against a military target in the predominantly Hindu region of Jammu.

Details of the blast at the border village of Mankote were not immediately available, but police chief A K Suri said the two trucks were destroyed and 10 soldiers were killed on the spot.

In the neighbouring Kashmir province, militants fired a rocket at a broadcasting tower of the state-run All India Radio, damaging the station's roof, a government spokesman said.

## 300 shops gutted in Karachi

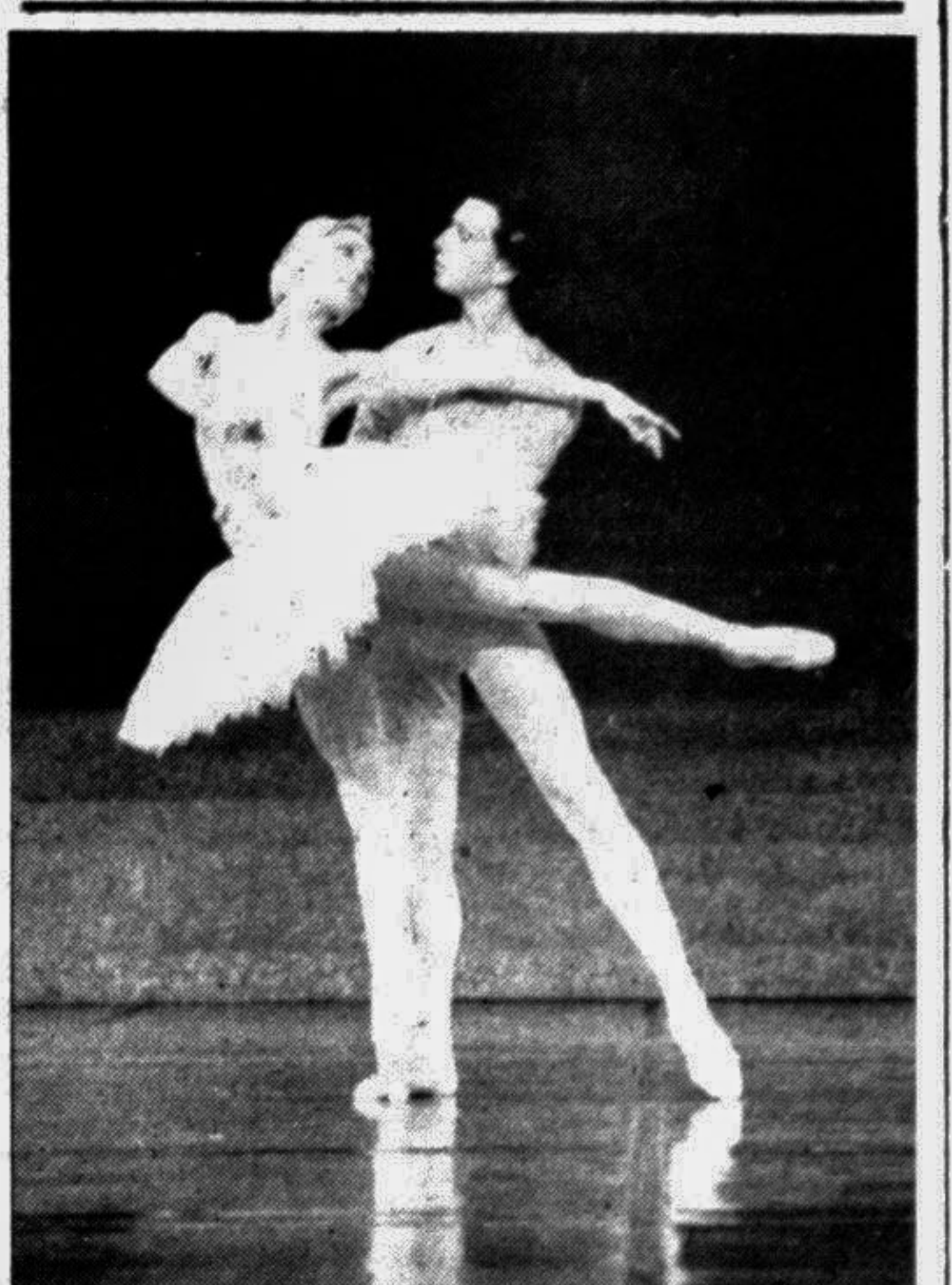
KARACHI, Dec 24: An overnight fire gutted more than 300 shops in a second-hand clothing market in Pakistan's hub of Karachi, witnesses and merchants said, reports AP.

More than 320 small hut-like shops and 13 large shops, all selling imported second-hand clothes, were destroyed in the three-hour blaze, said the president of a society of traders in the affected social security market.

Ghulam Jilil said the fire, which started late Friday when all the shops were closed, caused losses worth millions of dollars.

The cause of the fire in the Banaras colony in north Karachi was not known, but came several hours after a clash in the area between police and a group left at least two people dead.

# Off the Record



Russian ballet dancer Altainai Assylmouratova and French principal dancer of the Paris Opera Laurent Hilaire, rehearse "Swan Lake" on Friday on the stage of the Bastille opera house in Paris. Guest dancer Assylmouratova will perform the part of Princess Odette December 28 and 29. — AFP photo

## Fergie finds new home for new year

LONDON: The Duchess of York won't be going homeless in the new year after all, reports AP.

The former Sarah Ferguson and her two daughters, 6-year-old Princess Beatrice and 4-year-old Princess Eugenie, have found an eight-bedroom mansion in Surrey that is worth 1 million pounds (1.6 million dollar), according to the news agency Press Association.

The rent is reported to be 1,500 pounds (2,400 dollar) per month, but Press Association said Friday that the duchess, who is separated from her husband Prince Andrew, apparently will still be looking for a place to buy.

The duchess, popularly known as "Fergie," must vacate the house she now rents by the end of January.

She recently told reporters in Washington that she could not afford to purchase a suitable home.

## An extraordinary Xmas gift

TAMPA, Florida: A 7-year-old with no arms or legs got a special bike for a present on Friday and declared this his best Christmas ever, because now he can ride with his friends, reports AP.

"I feel like I have a driver's licence because I have my bike," a beaming Kyle Romano said as he propelled the long, sleek three-wheeler with a rocking motion.

The backwards-looking tricycle — with two wheels in the front and one in the back — was an 8-month class project at the University of South Florida College of Engineering.

Kyle uses the stub of his right arm to steer and the stub of his left arm to shift and brake. He powers the bike by pushing his chest against a padded bar and rocking. Both the forward and backward strokes of his torso keep it rolling.

"This is the best Christmas ever," the boy said.

Kyle was born healthy, but much of his limbs had to be amputated when he was a tot because of a rare disease, meningococemia. It damaged his circulation and caused gangrene. Surgeons amputated his arm above the elbows and took two-thirds of each leg. He has had 35 operations.

## Tying the knot via satellite

PORT-AU-PRINCE: Renee Collingwood and her boyfriend tied the knot, but they won't be kissing anytime soon. She's a US army officer in Haiti, he's in upstate New York. They exchanged wedding vows via satellite hookup, reports AP.

Standing in a room at the US army's main base here on Friday night and flanked by an army chaplain and other soldiers, the 23-year-old lieutenant beamed into a video camera set above a TV screen displaying the groom.

In Fort Drum, NY, a grinning Benjamin Lee, 24, was flanked by Collingwood's mother, Lyane, the bride's 16-month-old son, Devon, and three family friends. Collingwood's 10th Mountain Division is based in Fort Drum.

After having the fatigue-clad bride and Lee repeat wedding vows, Army chaplain Capt Robert Sierciak said, "With this ring I thee wed" and, in lieu of Lee, he placed the ring on her finger.

"At this point, I'd say kiss the bride, but a wave will have to do," the chaplain told Lee, who through the TV screen blew her a kiss anyhow and giggled.

"Before, I had never even heard of a VTC," Collingwood, of Ithaca, NY, said of the Video Teleconference, which US soldiers here occasionally use to chat with relatives back home. "It's kind of like when people jump out of an airplane to get married. If you're going to do it, do it in style."

## Peace talks resume tomorrow

### Filipino troops, Moros announce Xmas truce

COTABATO, (Philippines), Dec 24: Troops and Muslim separatist guerrillas in the southern Philippines announced a Christmas ceasefire today and said they would resume peace talks, reports Reuter.

Army Brigadier General Renato Garcia and Gadzali Gaafar, Political Affairs Chairman of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), told reporters they had ordered their forces to cease fire and talks would resume on Monday.

Sixteen soldiers and 22 MILF rebels have been killed in the fighting in north Cotabato province on Mindanao island over the past week, armed forces chief General Arturo Enrile said on Friday.

A top Muslim rebel leader had earlier today urged Manila to withdraw its troops.

Nur Misari, leader of the mainstream Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), said in a radio interview that Islamic nations viewed the

army offensive with suspicion. "I am urging the armed forces of the Philippines to immediately withdraw from Moro Islamic Liberation Front-controlled (MILF) areas," he said.

The MILF is a breakaway faction of the MNLF, the main Muslim group seeking limited self-rule in the south of the mainly Christian Philippines.

Misuari, who is currently in the Middle East, is due to return to the Philippines for the resumption of peace talks with the government on Muslim autonomy.

Tension in north Cotabato mounted when troops arrived at the site of a major irrigation project in the town of Carmen in August. Sporadic fighting has already claimed up to 80 lives.

MILF rebels had been providing security for South Korean engineers working on the project and the arrival of the soldiers prompted a confrontation.

Work at the irrigation project has since been suspended

BEIJING: An increased number of the faithful will attend Christmas services in Beijing this weekend as more Chinese convert to Christianity, officials said yesterday, reports Reuter.

All 14 Catholic churches open in Beijing will hold several masses, in Latin and in Chinese, on Saturday and Sunday, a spokesman for the Patriotic Catholic Association (PCA) said.

There are 70,000 Catholics in Beijing and four million nationwide, he said.

HANOI: Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet met with Vietnam's newly installed cardinal, Hanoi Archbishop Paul Joseph Pham Dinh Tung, in a goodwill gesture toward the country's 6 million Roman Catholics just before Christmas, the official Vietnam News said on Saturday, reports AP.

Christmas is not an official holiday in Vietnam, where the ruling Communists are atheist and cultural traditions are Buddhist. But the holiday has gained a pop appeal in large cities in recent years. Thousands of curious youth jam the churches to watch the midnight Masses, then pass a rowdy night of drinking and setting off firecrackers.

MIDDLE EAST: Many

## Christmas Day around the world

Muslims in the Middle East have decked out their homes and streets with festive trees and streamers as they prepare to join the region's 15 million Christians in celebrating Christmas Day, reports AP.

Only two countries in the region ignore the festivities — Israel, apart from its Arab Christians, and Saudi Arabia, where Christian priests are banned.

Middle East Christians do not all celebrate the nativity on the same day.

Catholics and certain Orthodox Churches celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25, while other Orthodox Churches commemorate it on January 6 and Egypt's Coptic Christians on January 7.

PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat celebrated Christmas in his own way visiting a Catholic school in Gaza on Thursday with a Father Christmas dressed in traditional red and white attire.

Meanwhile, Muslims have decorated the main mosque in the Arab town of Nazareth in northern Israel, where Jesus lived, and devoted a sermon at Friday prayers to the subject of Christmas.

"Christ is a prophet for Muslims, his birth was recorded in the Koran. It is fitting that Christmas should be the subject of the sermon," said Atef Youssef al-Fahum, keeper of the town's White Mosque.

BETHLEHEM: Palestinians flags will fly and the national anthem will sound across Bethlehem, West Bank during Christmas this weekend, signs of the slow advance toward independence, reports AP.

But Palestinians decorating Manager Square on Thursday expressed disappointment that the city remains under Israeli occupation because of delays in extending Palestinian rule beyond the Gaza Strip and Jericho.

"Our hopes were to celebrate a pure Palestinian Christmas this year," said Jerris Andoni, reaching from a ladder to hang up coloured lighting in the square.

On Friday, dozens of Palestinians glumly watched troops erect the stage on which choirs from around the world were to sing carols for an estimated 10,000 pilgrims on Christmas Eve.

Reflecting fears Palestinian

militants might stage an attack while the world's eyes are on Bethlehem, the troops also set up metal detectors at the entrances to the 1,600-year old Church of the Nativity, where Christ is believed to have been born.

PRETORIA: President Nelson Mandela praised South Africans for defeating apartheid and rallied them for future battles against poverty and unemployment in his Christmas message Saturday, reports AP.

"For the first time South African's mark this day under conditions of equality," the country's first black president, said in a statement issued by his Pretoria office.

ZAGREB: In upscale stores stocked with the latest international fashions, well dressed customers elbow each other in a pre Christmas sales rush for clothes and perfumes, reports AP.

But just a few streets away in Croatia's capital, the grey clad poor line up outside the Kaptol public kitchen, one of many that mushroomed in recent months to feed thousands who can't afford lunch.

For them, Christmas is

mostly sadness.

"There is not one Croatia, but two — the big one of the underprivileged and the tiny one of those who have everything," said one Zagreb resident, Jelena Lovric.

At the public kitchen, most people turned their faces away when asked what plans they had for Christmas.

"We have been saving the money to be able to cook at home on Christmas Eve and Christmas," said Jelena Oreskovic, standing in line with her daughter Nikolina, 6. "But there won't be anything under the tree for the children."

WASHINGTON: Santa provided the cheer and President Clinton contributed the Christmas stories on Thursday at a White House party for scores of children, reports AP.

More than 100 children sat and sprawled on the floor of the State Dining Room as the President got comfortable on a bench.

First lady Hillary Rodham Clinton held the first cat, Socks, in her lap as her husband read aloud from "Visit From St Nicholas or the Night Before Christmas."

Santa Claus wore his official

Secret Service pass. And a costumed Frosty the Snowman listened with the rest.

The children were from schools, foster homes and facilities for the poor run by the international organization, the Salvation Army, in the Washington area.

LIMA: In Florencio Orcoapasa's vision of the first Christmas, the wise men arrive as expected, a Roman centurion stands guard over a destroyed Andean village and a flying saucer glides in a fish tank, reports AP.

The nativity scene that Orcoapasa has put together in a colonial church in downtown Lima mixes the traditional images of Christmas with a personal statement on the bitter reality of Peruvian poverty.

"This year we're going through the worst poverty we've experienced," Orcoapasa said. "Christmas shouldn't be like that."

To one side of the Nativity an aquarium with live fish contains a mechanical fisherman and a moving flying saucer. The fisherman represents President Fujimori.

"He fishes but catches nothing and the fish — corruption and inequity — are happy," he said.