

BRIEFLY

King Hussein calls Arafat: Jordan's King Hussein telephoned Yasser Arafat on Sunday to discuss a visit by the PLO leader to Jordan "very soon", Arafat's press adviser said. Reuter reports from Gaza.

The conversation, described by press aide Nabil Abu Rudeineh as "brotherly and friendly", was seen as an indication of a significant warming in relations between the two, who have quarrelled over claims to Jerusalem's Muslim holy sites.

Fire in Russia claims 7: A fire in a home for mental patients in the Ural Mountains killed seven patients and injured 18 others, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported on Monday. AP says from Moscow.

The fire at the home in the town of Kizel, 750 miles (1215 kilometers) northeast of Moscow, started due to a short circuit in the institution's worn-out electrical system. The blaze soon spread to other parts of the building, the agency said.

Perry to visit Israel Jan 8: US Defence Secretary William Perry will visit Israel next month for talks on strategic cooperation between the Jewish state and its closest ally Washington, the Defence Ministry said on Sunday. Reuter reports from Jerusalem.

The two-day trip beginning January 8 will include a visit to the northern border with Lebanon, the Israeli army's last active front, the ministry said in a statement.

Saddam sacks agri minister: Iraqi President Saddam Hussein dismissed Agriculture Minister Karim Hasan Rida on Sunday, Reuter reports from Nicosia.

Iraqi radio, which reported the change, gave no explanation but food production and prices are major headaches for the government in Baghdad as its people struggle under the hardships of Gulf War trade sanctions.

Arab shot near Rafah crossing: Israeli troops shot and wounded an Arab as he tried to cross from Egypt into the Palestinian-ruled Gaza Strip on Sunday, the army said. Reuter reports from Jerusalem.

The man was trying to enter near the Rafah border crossing, and an Israeli army forces opened fire, wounding him, an army spokeswoman said.

Ecuador minister dies in mishap: Ecuador's Minister of Energy and Mining Gustavo Galindo was killed on Sunday when the car he was driving flipped over on a Pacific coast road, officials said on Sunday. AFP reports from Quito.

The crash occurred early Sunday, said government spokesman Enrique Proano. He did not immediately disclose the cause of the accident.

Civilian shot dead in S Egypt: Suspected Muslim militants shot dead a civilian and wounded two police guards when they opened fire at a police station in southern Egypt on Sunday, security sources said. Reuter reports from Assiut.

They said the gunmen attacked the police station in Abu Qirgas village in Minya province, killing passerby Mohammed Fathi Atta, and wounding two policemen guarding the station. They then escaped.

Landslides kill 12 Filipinos: Twelve people, including seven children, were buried alive by landslides triggered by strong rains brought on by tropical storm Axel, relief officials said yesterday. AFP reports from Lucena.

The landslides occurred separately in two remote villages near Roca, 60 kilometers (19 miles) east of Manila last week at the height of the storm, said Hazel Vasquez, a social welfare department official.

Blast claims 8 in Peru: A family of eight, including two children, died early Christmas morning when a gas tank exploded, firefighters and local news reports said. AP says from Lima.

The explosion and subsequent fire occurred about 6:30 am on Sunday in Lima's Magdalena district, a middle-class neighbourhood on the coast.

2 LTTE rebels shot dead: Sri Lankan troops shot dead two more Tamil guerrillas on Christmas Day, raising to 11 the death toll in fresh violence over the weekend in the embattled northeast, officials said on Monday. AFP reports from Colombo.

Troops in northern Vettalaikerni gunned down two Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas trying to infiltrate the army's forward defences in the region late Sunday, a military spokesman said.

4 Peruvian soldiers killed: Suspected Shining Path guerrillas ambushed an army patrol in a region in Peru's southeastern Andean highlands, killing four soldiers and wounding three other troops, military authorities said on Sunday. Reuter reports from Ayacucho.

The attack occurred on Saturday in Victor Fajardo province about 260 miles southeast of Lima but the dead and wounded could not be evacuated until Christmas Day due to bad weather, said officials at the regional military command.

Gunmen kill 4 in Puerto Rico: Three armed men drove up to an outdoors party in the eastern beach town of Luquillo early Christmas Day and opened fire with AK-47s and pistols on the 100 guests. AP reports from San Juan. Puerto Rico.

The host, who was awaiting trial on drug charges, and three others died instantly of bullet wounds, breaking last year's record number of 951 killings in this US commonwealth. Another guest was hospitalised with a bullet in his thigh. The gunmen escaped from the scene, 15 miles (25 kms) northeast of San Juan.

Exploding Xmas tree kills 2: A 30-year-old German woman and her 20-month-old daughter burned to death when their Christmas tree caught fire so fast that it virtually exploded, firefighters said on Sunday. Reuter reports from Bonn.

The tree and decorations were set alight by sparkler candles on Christmas Eve and blazed so suddenly that the eruption blasted out the windows of the family's small flat in the western city of Dusseldorf. The 29-year-old father suffered severe burns but escaped over the balcony along with an uninjured friend.

Pastor slain in US: A man sometimes fed by the local pastor has confessed to killing him. AP reports from Essex, Maryland.

Churchgoers knew something was wrong when the Rev Samuel Nathaniel Booth didn't show up for Christmas Eve services. They found his body in his trailer home behind their church. James Thomas Wood, 24, of Abingdon, confessed to the killing Christmas morning and was charged with robbery and murder, said State Police Sgt H E Watts.

UK playwright Osborne dies: Dramatist John Osborne, one of Britain's most influential playwrights, has died at the age of 65, according to his agent Gordon Dickenson, the Daily Mail reported yesterday. AFP says from London.

The paper quoted Dickenson as saying Osborne, who won an Oscar for best screenplay with the 1964 film Tom Jones, suffered heart failure on Christmas Eve while in a hospital in Shropshire.

Quakes hit Colorado, California: A mild earthquake shook parts of Colorado on Christmas Day hours after an earlier quake struck the high desert near Death Valley, California. No injuries or major damage was reported in either quake. AP says from New York.

The quake centred in Castle Rock, about 30 miles (45 kilometers) southeast of Denver, hit at 8:06 am local time (1506 GMT), said Stuart Koyanagi of the US Geological Survey's National Earthquake Information Centre in Golden, Colorado.

Grozny willing to discuss confederation

Russia ready to end military campaign in Chechnya

MOSCOW, Dec 26: President Boris Yeltsin said on Monday that Russia was ready to withdraw its forces from the outskirts of the Chechen capital and said it was time to end Moscow's military campaign in the breakaway Russian republic, reports AP.

Yeltsin appeared to be indicating that he was prepared to resume peace talks with Chechen leaders who have so far rejected his demands that they disarm their supporters and abandon their drive for independence.

"We've reached the moment when it's possible to wind up the participation of the military and begin the second stage, to form administrative bodies in the Chechen republic," Yeltsin told members of his hawkish Security Council.

"We have reached the stage of restoration of constitutional, legal order," he said, according to the Interfax news agency.

Yeltsin said that the army could be withdrawn to temporary points on the borders of

the Chechen republic.

Another report by AFP adds: Chechnya's leaders are ready to discuss a confederation with Russia if Moscow ends its military intervention in the breakaway republic. Interfax quoted the Chechen vice-president as saying today.

Zelimkhan Yandarbiev told Interfax that the Grozny government accepted "the principle" of talks on a confederation with Russia, provided Moscow "really wants to create confederal links without putting

pressure by force" on Chechnya.

"The Chechens have more interests in Russia than Russia has in Chechnya, and we don't want to lose Russia," said Yandarbiev, who had been considered a hardliner among Chechnya's leadership.

He also said Chechen leaders were ready to negotiate with Moscow without setting the departure of the Russian expeditionary corps as a precondition.

"The situation can be frozen and talks can begin with the first stage devoted to the issue of the presence of (Russian) troops," Yandarbiev said.

Chechen leaders had until now insisted on the withdrawal of the estimated 40,000 troops sent by Moscow December 11 to put down the secessionist rebellion in the Caucasus republic as a precondition to any negotiations.

Previous talks between the two sides all broke down over the Chechens' refusal to give up their three-year-old drive for independence.

Russians and Chechens should try to agree on "a common platform on the situation, to map out an agenda for the talks and resolve the outstanding issues step by step," Yandarbiev said.

Yandarbiev's conciliatory remarks came as Russian and Chechen lawmakers were to hold talks in the neighbouring republic of Dagestan.



Residents carry a wounded Chechen fighter to a car after shelling in the town of Argun, near Grozny on Saturday. — AFP photo

Pakistan orders India to close Karachi consulate

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, Dec 26: Pakistan ordered India on Monday to close its consulate in Karachi, saying it was a hotbed for fomenting violence in the city, reports AP.

Foreign Secretary Najmuddin Sheikh claimed the government had evidence that India was behind the strife that has nearly crippled Pakistan's largest city, a port of 9 million people.

"India should be treated as a state that is sponsoring terrorism," Sheikh told a news conference in the capital, Islamabad. "Obviously we cannot allow a centre for sabotage, subversion and terrorism to continue to operate within Pakistan."

At least 150 people have died in Karachi since December 1 in feuds between political, ethnic and religious rivals.

Sheikh said police arrested 14 people in the past week who claim they were recruited by India's secret service to create trouble in Karachi. He said one had confessed being responsible for a shooting that claimed 15 lives last year.

In New Delhi, a Indian government spokesman said Pakistan's allegations were "completely unfounded." He briefed reporters on condition he not be named.

Several months ago, Pakistan ordered the Karachi consulate's staff cut from 64 to 20, saying most of the staff were intelligence agents.

Earlier Monday, Pakistan expelled an Indian Embassy employee, Deepak Thakur, on charges of spying. India expelled a Pakistani diplomat on similar charges a few days earlier.

"These expulsions are not going to accomplish anything and they are certainly not going to improve relations," said Partha Sarathi, a spokesman at the Indian High Commission in Islamabad.

India and Pakistan routinely trade accusations and tit for tat expulsions of diplomats are a common occurrence.

Chinese PM in Myanmar

YANGON, Dec 26: Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng arrived in Yangon today for talks with the leaders of Myanmar's military junta to cement economic and political ties, reports AP.

Li, the most senior Beijing official to visit Yangon, was accorded a 19-gun salute at Yangon airport, where he was met by General Than Shwe, chairman of the State Law and Order Restoration Council, or SLORC.

Li, who heads a 100-strong delegation, was to meet SLORC's strongman, Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt this afternoon.

In an official statement, Li said his visit would expand relations "both in scope and depth" between his country and its southern neighbour.

Arnesen becomes first woman to reach South Pole alone

OSLO, Dec 26: A 41-year-old Norwegian has become the first woman in the world to reach the South Pole alone, her spokeswoman said on Sunday, reports Reuter.

Liv Arnesen arrived at the South Pole at 2000 GMT on Saturday after trudging 1,200 km (745 miles) in 50 days.

"She is the first woman who has made it to the South Pole alone," Arnesen's spokeswoman Wanda Wideroe told Reuters.

Arnesen, a former teacher, pulled a sledge weighing 50 kg and carried a backpack of 15 kg. She will be airlifted from the Pole on January 6 when a plane is scheduled to arrive at the US research base there.

The Americans invited Arnesen in for brunch and informed the world of her arrival.

Arnesen, equipped with both a radio and a satellite transmitter, started her arduous expedition from the Hercules inlet near Patriot Hills on November 5.



Diana, the Princess of Wales carries flowers given to her by well-wishers after attending the Christmas Day service on Sunday at the queen's Sandringham estate in Norfolk, eastern England. — AFP photo

Tales of time victim of modern-day war

HASANKEYF (Turkey), Dec 26: The soaring minaret of a 12th century mosque and houses carved into the looming mountains give hints of the many archaeological secrets the Turkish town of Hasankeyf has yet to divulge, reports Reuter.

Archaeologists believe that Hasankeyf, an important early Islamic city, may also yield evidence of Armenian, Christian and even Judae culture from before the time of Christ.

But Hasankeyf has the bad luck of being in southeast Turkey, where a modern-day guerrilla war by rebel Kurds overshadows the tales of time.

"Since two archaeological students were killed nearby in 1991, I have had to stop working because I can't find anyone willing to join a team," says Olus Arlik, a professor at Ankara University who excavated in the area from 1985 to 1991.

It was never clear who placed the car bomb that

killed the students. Guerrillas from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) denied responsibility. But three years later the incident still stands as a warning of the danger of working in the region.

Both people and history are victims in the 10-year-old battle between the PKK and the Turkish army for control of the overwhelmingly Kurdish southeast, which archaeologists say has been inhabited for at least 10,000 years.

The war has killed more than 13,000 civilians, soldiers and guerrillas and caused the evacuation of nearly 2,000 villages, many under pressure from the security forces seeking to deny the rebels food and shelter.

For archaeologists, who like to say they care more about what is happening below the earth than above it, the tragedy of the war also lies in the knowledge lost because of unexcavated ruins in places like Hasankeyf.

"It's not my job to be an advocate for the Kurds or against the Kurds... What we do has nothing to do with denying or accepting a culture, it's purely scientific," says Arlik.

The situation at Hasankeyf, and at other sites around the area, is all the more crucial because Turkey's ambitious dam projects will one day put the town and others throughout the region nearby under water.

Archaeologists in the area are often working against time, trying to finish before the southeastern Anatolian project (gap) is fully completed by 2006.

But the sound of gunfire can be a strong deterrent. "Because of the war there has been a general slowdown in excavations in the area and certain areas are completely impossible to investigate," says Hayat Erkanal, whose dig near Nusaybin stopped after the two students who worked with him were killed.

Places like Mount Agri, where some believe Noah's ark came to rest, are completely off-limits because of heavy fighting. Four biblical scholars were kidnapped there in 1991 by the PKK, who later released them unharmed.

Some archaeologists say the pressure of soon-to-be flowing water from the dams forces them to continue digging.

Michael Rosenberg, a professor at the University of Delaware in the United States, has been excavating since 1991 at a site near Batman despite the nearby fighting.

His dig may show the oldest example of domesticated pig farming in the world, representing the point at which humans stopped being nomadic and shifted to agriculture.

"Of course we get worried, but I don't have the luxury to wait 10 years because then the site will be gone," he says.



US President Bill Clinton (C), First Lady Hillary (R), and daughter Chelsea leave church after Christmas morning services on Sunday in Washington. — AFP photo

Off the Record

Where the law prefers cats over women!

OKLAHOMA CITY: In the southern American state of Oklahoma, beating a woman could bring 90 days in jail. Kicking a cat is an entirely different matter — that's a felony that could mean years behind bars, reports AP.

"It's absurd," said George Rasco of the Oklahoma Coalition on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault.

Kicking a cat "is horrendous and I'm disgusted by that," Rasco said, "but as a women's advocate on domestic violence, it angers me we don't get the same response judicially when he goes out and kicks his girlfriend."

The disparity emerged recently in two cases involving Oklahoma City police officers.

Sgt Aaron G Watson is accused of slamming his girlfriend's head into a wall, dragging her by the hair, handcuffing her and kicking her. He was charged with misdemeanor assault and battery, punishable by up to 90 days in jail.

Sgt Wayne M Hlinicky is accused of maliciously kicking a cat at the airport. He's charged with animal cruelty — a felony if convicted, he could be sentenced to up to five years in prison and fined up to 5,000 dollars.

Prosecutors say there's little they can do. There are no misdemeanor statutes in Oklahoma for animal cruelty, so any such charge has to be filed as a felony. Assistant District Attorney Richard Wintory said.

Assault and battery, on the other hand, is generally a misdemeanor unless a dangerous weapon was used or the victim's injuries were severe enough. The woman allegedly assaulted by Watson suffered a ruptured ear drum.

"We don't get to a felony until we get to maiming," prosecutor Gary Ackley said.

Schools take measures to curb growing lesbianism

SINGAPORE: Singapore faces a growing problem with teenage girls turning to lesbianism, a report said today, says AFP.

At least five schools have set rules forbidding girls from mixing with tomboys and banning very short haircuts, according to the New Paper tabloid.

The schools took the measures because they were faced with the problem of an increasing number of girls pairing off with girls, it said.

"It is a worrying situation with counsellors and psychiatrists warning that these girls may be unable to have normal relationships in future," the tabloid said. It added that more schools were requesting talks on homosexuality.

The New Paper cited three youth psychiatrists as saying they were seeing more teenage girls with lesbian tendencies. "This is confirmed by youth counselling agencies," it said.

The newspaper said it identified two distinct groups after speaking to about 25 schoolgirls aged between 14 and 18 years having relationship with other girls.

One group comprises tomboys who cut their hair short, bandaged their chests, dressed like boys and had very few girlfriends.

The other group consisted of girl-next-door types from middle-income families. Many were attractive and dressed trendily and were wooed by their tomboyish 'boyfriends' with expensive presents, dinners and outings to the disco.

1989 military crackdown

Lankan commissions to probe disappearances

COLOMBO, Dec 26: President Chandrika Kumaratunga created three regional commissions on Monday to investigate the disappearance of thousands of people since 1988, reports AP.

The probe will cover insurrection by a Marxist group, military action and an ethnic conflict.

International human rights organisations have reported that up to 60,000 people vanished during a 1989 military crackdown on a two-year insurrection by the Sinhalese radical People's Liberation Front against the then federal government. Killings continued in 1991 and 1992.

The commissions will also investigate the vanishing of thousands of Tamils in the separatist war for an independent homeland for the minority Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Though the ethnic conflict started in 1983, the commissions will restrict their investigation into the incidents since 1988.

The commissions will report their findings to the president within four months, said the presidential secretariat in a press release.

"The commissions will inquire into the evidence available to establish such allegations, the present whereabouts of the persons concerned, the identity of the persons responsible, the legal action which can be taken and the relief which may be afforded to parents and dependents," the presidential secretariat said.

The commissions are headed by retired judges, professors and lawyers.

The minority Tamils allege discrimination at the hands of the majority Sinhalese.