

Rao may delay cabinet reshuffle for a week

NEW DELHI, Dec 27: Leaders of India's ruling Congress Party, waited on Monday for a cabinet reshuffle but newspapers said Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao might delay the move for a week, reports Reuter.

They said a seven-day state mourning period for former President Zail Singh, who died on Sunday, had given Rao more time to plan the reshuffle after his cabinet was plunged into crisis by five resignations in two weeks.

Some politicians said a new cabinet could be sworn in earlier, possibly after Singh's cremation today, his body was flown to the Indian capital from the northern city of Chandigarh on Monday.

The capital was full of rumours on Monday about the planned reshuffle, part of Rao's move to check a revolt in the ruling party, but politicians were unwilling to discuss the issue on their telephones.

The Times of India news-

paper said on Monday that government intelligence agencies were tapping the telephones of senior politicians and journalists after Rao's main rival Arjun Singh resigned as human resource minister on Saturday and sparked a crisis for Congress.

"A large number of dissident Congressmen, high-profile opposition leaders, journalists and bureaucrats have stopped using their telephone since the current political crisis began," the Times said in a front-page report.

"Most of them suspect that their telephones are tapped," it said. It quoted senior intelligence and security officers as saying there was "nothing new in this since telephones of politicians, bureaucrats and some journalists are tapped from time to time."

Politicians would not discuss on the telephone Singh's resignation or Rao's handling of the move.

International

Chopper incident

US must apologise for 'act of espionage': N Korea

SEOUL, Dec 27: A letter of regret wasn't enough, North Korea said Tuesday that US officials must apologise for a "deliberate act of espionage" — the intrusion of an American helicopter into its airspace, reports AP.

US officials again denied spying. The States Department dispatched Thomas Hubbard to seek the release of US pilot Bobby Hall, whose prospects for immediate freedom plummeted.

The statement by Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency was only its third mention of the December 17 incident in which the US Army OH-58C helicopter strayed across the Demilitarised Zone and crashed or was shot down.

Hall was captured and fellow Chief Warrant Officer David Hilemon died. Hilemon's body was returned last Thursday as part of a deal worked out by US Rep. Bill Richardson, who said it called for Hall to be freed "very soon."

The rhetoric-filled statement came just as there appeared to be progress in obtaining Hall's release and raised questions at the sudden turnaround.

Does the North really want an apology and an admission of spying, or is this an effort by Pyongyang to obtain concessions from the United States?

Even more ominously, is it a sign that military hard-liners are in control of the reclusive

communist country, and not Kim Jong Il, the designated heir of his father, longtime leader Kim Il Sung, who died July 8?

"All facts clearly prove that the intrusion of the US helicopter...is a grave violation of the sovereignty of the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) and a deliberate act of espionage," the KCNA statement said.

"In view of the seriousness of the incident we cannot but investigate the truth of the incident more deeply."

The North has said Hall will not be released until it completes its investigation. Its statement said Washington

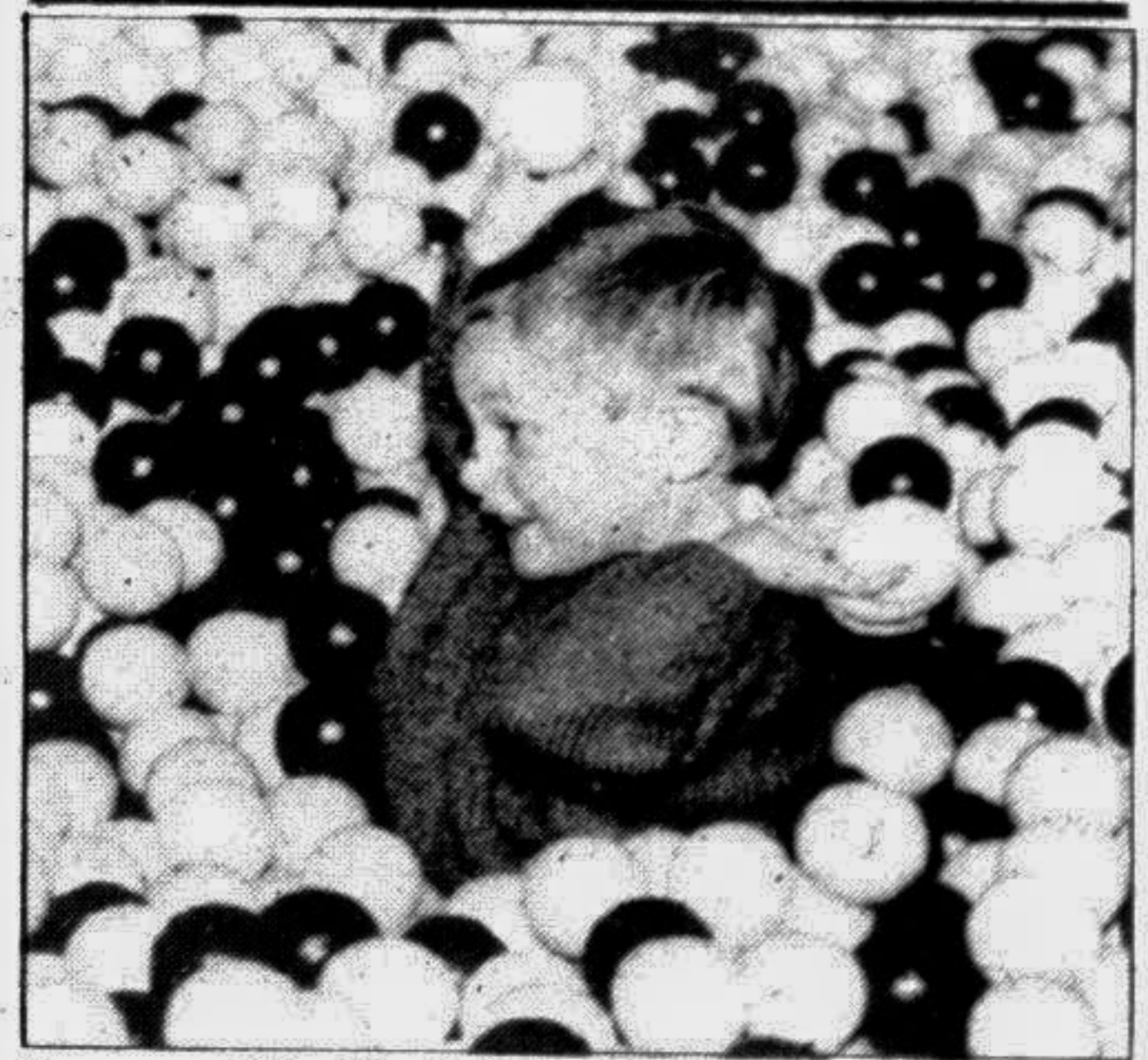
"must admit its responsibility...and clearly show an honest and reasonable attitude before it is too late."

US officials sent Pyongyang a letter of regret over the weekend. They were surprised by the statement's tone but noted North Korea is known for high voltage rhetoric, sometimes even amid diplomatic breakthroughs.

Jim Coles, a spokesman for the US and UN military presence in Korea, strongly rejected North Korea's accusations.

"This absolutely was not a mission of that nature," he said. "As we have said, this was a routine training flight that unfortunately strayed into DPRK airspace."

Off the Record



Four-year-old toddler Luis Angel enjoys a bath in a ball pool during a visit to the 32nd Youth and Children's Fair in Barcelona on Monday. — AFP photo

Senseless murders or black magic?

COLLEGE PLACE, Washington: Fifteen-year-old Daniel Betourney stayed home from school on December 14, two weeks after he overdosed on sleeping pills, reports AP.

He was home when his sister got off the school bus with one of her friends.

The hulking teenager said he made his sister, April, lie down on her belly and bound her hands and feet with duct tape. Then he said, he bound her friend Beth Garbe dragged the girls into April's bedroom and killed them by sealing plastic grocery bags around their heads.

Daniel told investigators that's how he did it.

He didn't say why.

Rumours are rampant in this town of 5,000 after the 14-year-olds were found dead, lying side-by-side in the bedroom. Several teenagers said Daniel was involved with other Walla Walla High School students in a cult that practiced black magic. Sheriff Bill Jackson said he has no evidence of that and he's still looking for a motive.

Daniel, a 5-foot-10, 250-pound high school freshman, is undergoing a psychiatric evaluation. Prosecutors are waiting for the results to decide whether he should be tried as an adult.

"Frankly, I just think he lost it. I don't know why or what for. He hasn't said why," prosecutor Joseph Golden said.

Homosexuality determined before birth?

WASHINGTON: Two Cambridge University researchers link between the number of ridges in fingerprints and male homosexuality, adding to the theory that sexual orientation is determined before birth, reports AP.

The researchers, working at the University of Western Ontario, compared the number of tiny ridges on the fingertips of 66 homosexual men with the fingerprint patterns of 182 heterosexual men.

Thirty per cent of the homosexual men showed more ridges on their left hands than their right, while only 14 per cent of the heterosexual men showed the same pattern.

"Most men and women have more ridges in the fingerprints of their right hands. Fingerprints are completely developed in human fetuses by about the 16th week after conception, and are largely genetically determined."

"This certainly suggests sexual orientation is somehow determined by prenatal events," said researcher Doreen Kimura. The study appears in the December issue of Behavioral Neuroscience.

Kimura and the study's lead author, graduate student Jeffrey Hall, said the fingerprint patterns are not distinctive to gaymen or a marker for homosexuality. Most homosexual men show the more typical pattern of more ridges on the right hand, they noted.

Student rebels attack Myanmar army posts

BANGKOK, Dec 27: Myanmar student guerrillas launched a three-pronged attack on government army positions in southeastern Myanmar, the students said in a statement received today, reports Reuter.

The All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), half an hour after midnight on Sunday, attacked the headquarters of the Myanmar army's southeastern command in the town of Papun in Karen state.

At the same time, they attacked the 19th Light Infantry Regiment's headquarters, also in Papun, and a security checkpoint on the edge of the town, the ABSDF said.

"All three locations came under a coordinated attack simultaneously," the statement said.

"The battle continued for some 25 minutes before the military columns of the student army systematically withdrew having achieved its objectives," the statement said.

Government forces responded with heavy weapons, inflicting no casualties on the attackers but destroying a house and Buddhist monastery in the village of Mae Nang New, the students said.

There was no independent confirmation of the attacks.

Myanmar government forces seized the student's headquarters at Dawgin on December 14.

Some 10,000 students and other young people from cities and towns in central Myanmar fled to ethnic minority guerrilla zones after the military crushed a democracy uprising in 1988.

The students set up ABSDF and received some military training and weapons from the ethnic minority guerrilla groups.

While many of the students drifted to Thailand or returned home, almost 2,000 remain under arms, most in the Karen guerrilla zone in southeast Myanmar.

Thousands of SPLA troops surrender

KHARTOUM, Dec 27: Thousands of soldiers from the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) have defected and surrendered to government forces following a crushing military defeat, a senior Sudanese official said today, reports AP.

Mohamed Al Amin Khalifa, speaker of the country's transitional national assembly, said the defections "come at a time when the rebel movement is suffering from heavy political, diplomatic and military defeats."

Khalifa, who made his comments in Monday's edition of the Al Engaz Al Watani Daily, said arrangements would be made in the next couple of days to provide "the returnees" with food, clothing and medicine.

India protests closure of Karachi consulate

NEW DELHI, Dec 27: India today accused Pakistan of closing the Indian consulate in Karachi because of its failure to control the violence in the port city, reports AP.

"There is a good deal of unrest in Sindh (province)," Minister of State for External Affairs Raghunandan Lal Bhatia told AFP.

"They have not been able to control it, and have been unnecessarily blaming India."

Pakistan on Monday accused India of orchestrating "acts of terrorism" in the Sindh capital and asked New Delhi to shut the Karachi consulate within 10 days.

India protested the decision, saying it was "yet another manifestation of Pakistan's consistently negative approach towards bilateral ties with India."

Ex-Haitian troops storm army HQ: Four killed

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Dec 27: Scores of discharged soldiers stormed into army headquarters Monday to demand back pay, prompting gunfights that left four people dead and at least four wounded, reports AP.

When the shooting erupted, US soldiers in the Haiti occupation force surrounded the building, crouched behind walls with their guns pointed inside.

A US Army source, speaking on condition of anonymity, said American military police exchanged fire with the ex-soldiers, apparently supported by some active-duty colleagues.

Showman's tragic end

LONDON, Dec 27: A high-wire acrobat plunged 50 feet to his death in front of hundreds of horrified spectators at a circus in the western English seaside resort of Blackpool, police said today, reports Reuter.

The performer, in his early 20s, was balancing on steel rings high above the ring at the Blackpool Tower Circus on Monday night when he slipped and fell, a police spokesman said.

"The circus was packed when this happened. People were obviously upset but no one was treated for shock that we know of," the spokesman added.

In the act, the finale of the performance, the man and his partner revolved at high speed on the taut wire in 8ft diameter rings. "We were clapping as he went quicker and quicker. Earlier on, he had sort of slipped but it was part of the act to thrill us," said a woman spectator.

"This time it was real. Everything just went quiet."



An overjoyed father, one of the hostages released from the Airbus hijacked by Algerian militants, embracing his child arrives at Orly airport, Paris from Marseilles early yesterday. — AFP photo

Israeli PM makes historic visit to Oman

JERUSALEM, Dec 27: Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin took another stride in pursuit of Middle East peace by going to Oman on the first public visit by an Israeli leader to a Gulf Arab state, reports Reuter.

Rabin's spokesman Oded Ben-Ami said he flew to Muscat on Monday morning on a lightning visit for talks with the Sultan of Oman and was returning home early today.

"This is the first time an Israeli prime minister visited the Gulf," said Ben-Ami, who did not accompany Rabin. "He met Sultan Qaboos Bin Said."

They talked about the peace process.

Israel television said the Sultan received Rabin at his palace in Muscat.

Several Israeli officials have visited Gulf states in recent months, mostly in the framework of multi-national Middle East peace talks. The Gulf Arab states had no previous official contact with Israel.

Oman is one of six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council which in September lifted a 46-year boycott on companies trading with the Jewish state. Ben-Ami said the two lead-

ers discussed ways to bring comprehensive peace to the region.

"The Prime Minister praised the courage and the wisdom of the Sultan of Oman," he said. "This is a very important step and a dividend of Middle East peace."

Rabin took office in mid-1992 vowing to accelerate peace moves with Arab states. After sealing a peace deal with the Palestinians in 1993, he promised to expand ties with the Arab world.

Oman's official news agency reported Rabin's ground breaking visit after it ended.



Models display a series of white night-gowns made of silk and cotton during the 1995 Taipei fashion show yesterday. The dresses are designed by Taiwanese designer Pun Adi-Lee. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Russia sends N-experts to DPRK: Russia has sent a group of experts to Pyongyang to discuss providing North Korea with light water nuclear reactors, a Russian diplomat was quoted as saying yesterday, AFP reports from Tokyo.

Russian Ambassador to South Korea George Kunadze told Japan's Kyodo news service in Seoul the experts went to North Korea earlier this month. But he added that he had no "concrete" results of the visit.

Hanoi blasts Algerian hijackers: Vietnam on Tuesday condemned Algerian terrorists who killed a Vietnamese diplomat while hijacking an Air France passenger plane, AP reports from Hanoi.

The Foreign Ministry identified the diplomat as Bui Giang To, commercial counselor at Vietnam's embassy in Algeria. He was one of three passengers on the Algiers to Paris flight who were killed by the Islamic terrorists during the three-day hijacking.

Bolivian opposition chief held: Police arrested leftist opposition leader Oscar Eid Franco in a police raid on Monday after investigators linked him to imprisoned drug traffickers, an opposition lawmaker said, AFP reports from La Paz.

Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) deputy Sergio Medinacelli said Eid Franco, the MIR's leader, was arrested outside his front door as he was playing with his children.

3 die in Swiss avalanche: Three Swiss climbers died in an avalanche Monday morning in the Saentis region of eastern Switzerland, police said in Trogen, Switzerland, Xinhua reports from Geneva.

A total of four climbers, aged between 31 and 46, were caught in the snow slide at an altitude of 1,600 meters.

One managed to dig himself out of the snow while the others were killed outright, police added.

2,200 arrested in Bahrain: More than 2,200 people have been arrested in Bahrain, accused of provoking clashes between Shi'ite Muslims and security forces, a Bahraini opposition group said in Tehran on Sunday, AFP reports from Tehran.

The banned Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) said security forces were arresting people "at random" throughout the Gulf state and had put a tight cordon around areas with large Shi'ite communities.

3 sentenced to death in China: China has sentenced to death three men who took revenge on their boss by setting off an explosion in a dynamite warehouse that killed 82 people and injured 91, the China news service said yesterday, Reuter reports from Beijing.

The Hechi People's Intermediate Court in Guangxi province on Monday sentenced to death Luo Zhihua, Luo Haojie and Luo Zhijun for deliberately igniting the explosion in a revenge attack against the head of a work team at the warehouse, it said.

Former German minister dies: Karl Schiller, a former German Social Democrat (SPD) economics and finance minister, died in hospital on Monday after a long illness, a friend of the family said. He was 83, Reuter reports from Hamburg.

Schiller, dubbed "super minister" for simultaneously running the Economics and Finance Ministries in 1971 and 1972, was admitted to hospital in mid-November.

Quake jolts N California: A 5.3 magnitude earthquake rattled nerves in the northern California city of Eureka early on Monday, snapping power lines, damaging some homes and stores, and causing minor injuries, Reuter reports from San Francisco.

In response to the quake, the Eureka City Council and Humboldt County board of supervisors both declared a state of local emergency. The declarations allow them to ask the state for earth quake relief.

Actress Koscina dies: Yugoslav-born actress Sylva Koscina, 61, who starred in Italian and Hollywood films in the 1960s, died on Monday, a spokesman from the private Quisisana Hospital Clinic said, Reuter reports from Rome.

Koscina, born in Zagreb on August 22, 1933, began her film career in Italy in 1955 with "The Railroad Man".

307 more AIDS victims found in China

BEIJING, Dec 27: In an alarming trend, Chinese health workers have detected 307 new carriers of the AIDS virus in the first 11 months of this year, more than in any previous year, reports AP.

That brings to 1,550 the total number of people who have tested positive in China for the AIDS virus, HIV, since the first case was discovered in 1985, the Xinhua Evening News said in its Monday edition, seen in Beijing Tuesday.

Of those, 1,212 were Chinese citizens and 43 have developed full-blown AIDS, three more than previous reports, the report said. "A previous report said AIDS has claimed 22 lives in China."

Experts estimate the true figure for AIDS infection in China is somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000.

Sarajevo survives nearly thousand days of siege

SARAJEVO, Dec 27: Barefoot in freezing mud and wearing only a nightdress, a young woman clambered down the steep bank and waded into Sarajevo's Miljacka River, trying to drown herself, reports Reuter.

The swift current tugged at her clothing and she lost her footing. Seconds later only her long hair could be seen trailing downstream.

Horrified bystanders, who leapt in and saved her, told reporters she had been driven mad by the siege of Sarajevo which on December 31 will have lasted 1,000 days.

The ultimate fate of the woman, who tried to drown herself two winters ago, is unknown, but Sarajevo's cemeteries are gorged with the bodies of more than 10,000 residents killed by Bosnian Serb snipers and guns during the past 33 months.

Another 50,000 Sarajevans have been wounded since the desperate early days of the siege in April 1992, a time when local gangsters threw up makeshift barricades against Serb tanks and gun battles raged in the streets.

A thousands days later Bosnian Serbs hold the high ground around Sarajevo, but not the city itself. Its 380,000 residents have existed in a twilight existence suspended between war and peace.

Street fighting by irregulars has given way to static warfare as battle-hardened Bosnian army soldiers face Serb forces in trench lines ringing the city.

A December 24, ceasefire, the latest of several signed in Bosnia since the war began, has reduced the level of firing around the city to virtually nil.

but few here expect the lull to last.

While Bosnia's citizens soldiers have defended the city, the United Nations has kept it alive: UN peacekeepers re-opened the airport in June 1992 and began a humanitarian airlift that has seen more than 10,000 aid flights land here.

A succession of UN commanders for Bosnia based in Sarajevo have become international figures, celebrated as heroes at home but generally reviled as Serb sympathisers reluctant to use force to defend the capital.

General Sir Michael Rose, the current UN commander, who brought the greatest improvement to Sarajevo, will leave his post in January with scant credit from local citizens.

ketplate massacre last February in which 68 Sarajevans were killed by a mortar bomb so offended the international community that NATO threatened to bomb the Bosnian Serbs if they did not pull their heavy weapons off the hills surrounding the city.

When the big guns fell silent, Rose seized the moment to partially restore basic amenities to Sarajevo. Water, electricity and natural gas began to flow, however fitfully.

Trams began to run along "sniper alley" for two months this summer and convoys of goods and civilian vehicles moved in and out of the city.

Cafes and night clubs re-opened. Amidst the rubble and the stands of empty, fire scorched office towers, Sarajevo regained some of the gaiety it displayed as host of 1984's Winter Olympic Games.

Some said the siege was over, but soon enough Serbs closed the land routes again. The shooting and shelling was mostly over but Sarajevo's suffering was not.

Relying on humanitarian aid, foreign remittances and their own courage and determination, residents are still coping with irregular supplies of water, electricity and gas.

Darkness and cold remain the constant companions of most Sarajevans as the Bosnian capital labours through its third winter of war.

Pensioners desperate for firewood emerge from their homes before dawn to scour snow covered parks and streets for the branches of trees blown down overnight by the wind.

Sarajevo's only land link with the outside world remains a cramped tunnel dug

under the UN controlled airport.

Barely large enough for a man to stand up in, the tunnel is used night and day as a conduit for arms and ammunition, black market food and fuel, that keep Bosnia's capital alive.

The bodies of Sarajevo soldiers killed in outlying areas are brought home through the tunnel at night in hellish torch-lit scenes.

Despite its grace and beauty, and its ethnic ambition, Sarajevo is likely to be known in future as a city of death.

It will be remembered as the place where Gavrilo Princip triggered World War One by assassinating Austrian Archduke Ferdinand in 1914 and where, 80 years later, its people survived 1,000 days of siege.