

BRIEFLY

Indian EC warns politicians:

Politicians who focus their campaigns on India's religious, caste and language differences will face prosecution, India's Election Commission has warned, reports AP from New Delhi.

The commission, headed by T M Seshan who is leading campaign to clean up Indian politics, also said on Tuesday that it will invalidate elections if such practices are carried out.

Fire claims 8 in Thailand: Fire swept through a small store and living quarters in southern Thailand, killing a family of eight, who were trapped behind barred windows intended to keep out burglars, officials said yesterday, AFP reports from Bangkok.

The fire early Tuesday morning gutted the ground floor shop of the two-storey building in the Muang district of Surat Thani province, 650 kilometres (400 miles) south of Bangkok, officials said.

New drug for lung cancer: The US Food and Drug Administration has approved a new drug to prolong the lives of advanced lung cancer patients. AP reports from Washington.

The FDA approved Navelbine to treat non-small cell lung cancer, the most common type of the deadly disease, that is too advanced for surgery or radiation to help.

Cholera kills 8 in Cape Verde:

Cholera has killed eight people in an epidemic of 54 cases in the Cape Verde islands, Portugal's Lusa news agency said in a dispatch on Tuesday from the African state. Reuter reports from Lisbon.

Most of the cases were in the capital Praia, Lusa quoted Antonio Perdo Delgado, spokesman of the national commission to fight cholera, as saying.

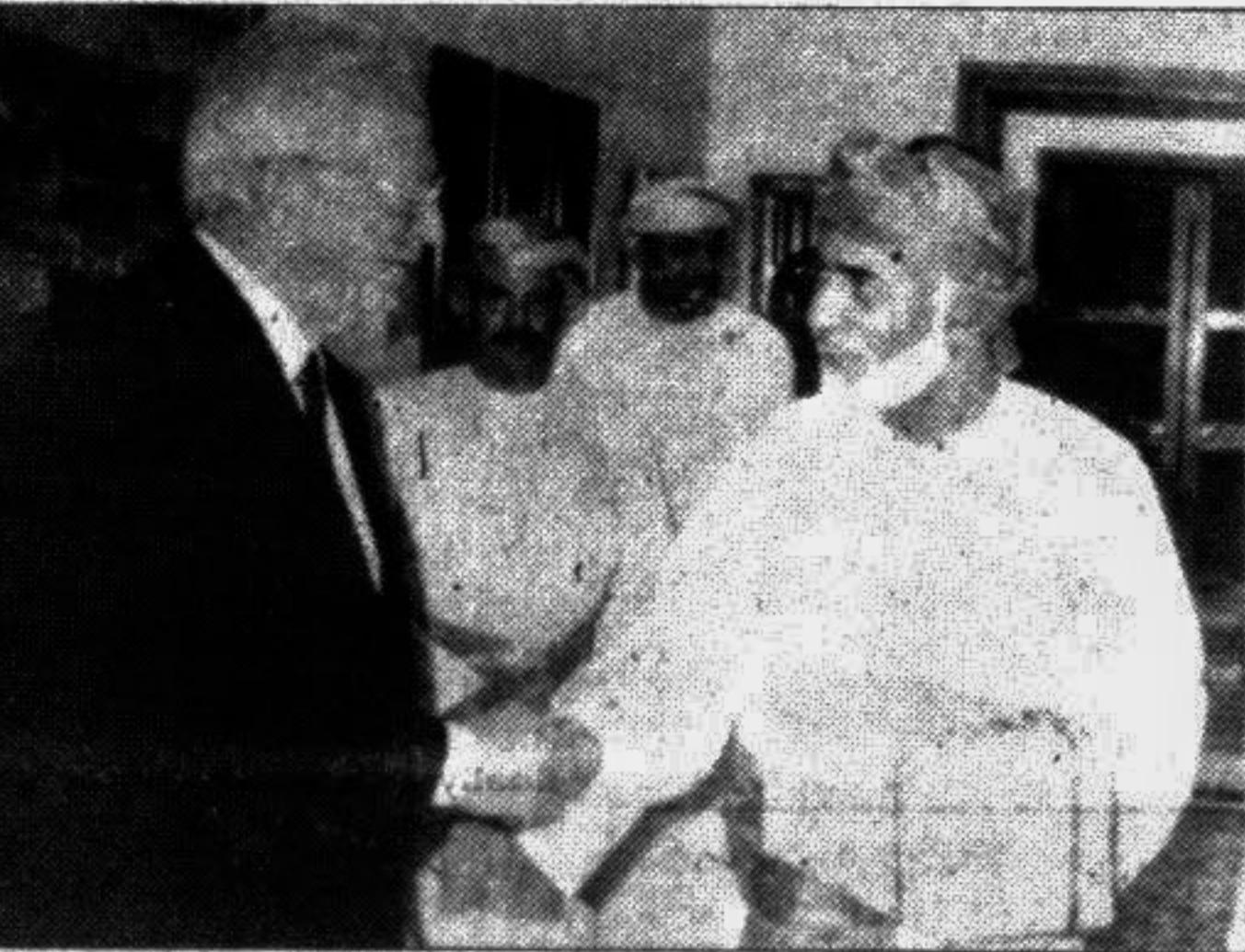
Ethiopian editor sentenced: A high court yesterday sentenced an Ethiopian private newspaper editor to pay a fine of 500 birr or serve six-month imprisonment, the Ethiopian news agency reported on Tuesday. Xinhua says from Addis Ababa.

According to the news agency, Getahun Bekele, a 23-year-old editor of a tabloid paper 'Tariq,' was accused by the prosecutor's office of intervening with court proceedings during the trial of former Ethiopian government officials.

Iran blasts Rabin's Oman visit:

Iran on Tuesday condemned a surprise visit to Oman by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, saying efforts to boost ties with the Jewish state could provoke a crisis in the Gulf Arab monarchies, AFP reports from Tehran.

The state radio warned that the United States and the Zionist state had a coordinated plan to expand the sphere of capitulation (Middle East peace process) to cover the Gulf Arab states.



Sultan Qaboos Ben Said of Oman exchanges presents with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (L) on Monday in Muscat during the latter's visit to Oman. — AFP photo

Shell kills 4 in India: Four people, including a one-year-old child, were killed when an artillery shell exploded at an army test firing range in western India, a news agency reported on Wednesday, AP reports from New Delhi.

Army officials kept the accident on Sunday a secret and quietly cremated the dead without informing the local police, Press Trust of India said.

Fatah attacks PFLP, 1 killed:

Militants from PLO chief Yasser Arafat's Fatah group attacked members of the rival Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) late on Tuesday killing one person and wounding another. Palestinian sources reported, says AFP from Sidon.

There were no immediate reasons for the attack which occurred in the Ain Helwe camp on the eastern outskirts of the southern port of Sidon in South Lebanon.

US-Jordan extradition accord:

Jordan and the United States have agreed in principle to sign an accord on the extradition of criminals between the two countries, Xinhua reports from Cairo.

Egypt's Middle East News Agency (MENA) reported in a dispatch from Amman on Tuesday that this is the outcome of a series of talks held last week in Washington between officials of the Jordanian Ministry of Justice and the US State Department.

4 Thai kids drown in Malaysia:

Four students, including two sisters and their brother, drowned in a pool at a village in Padang Besar, northern Kedah state on Monday, Bernama reports from Kuala Lumpur.

Police said on Tuesday the victims were Wilai Tian, 12, her sister, Chitwie, 10, their brother Apiron, 7 and a cousin Suni Konpon, 12. All of them were of Thai origin.

100 child labourers rescued:

Police have rescued about 100 child labourers forced to work as slave labour in brick kilns in China's central Henan province, the Xinhua Daily Telegraph said yesterday. Reuter reports from Beijing.

Public security authorities in Zhengzhou City raided 48 kilns and arrested 18 people on charge of illegally hiring and maltreating children, the newspaper said. One suspect escaped.

115 newsmen killed this year:

A record 115 journalists were killed in the world this year with genocide in Rwanda and violence in Algeria accounting for more than half the victims, the International Federation of Journalists said yesterday. Reuter reports from Brussels.

"We have at least 115 confirmed cases of violent death, some in horrifying circumstances, and we are investigating a further 15 cases of unsolved murder and journalists missing," IFJ general secretary Aidan White said in a statement.

Egypt bans hunting in deserts:

The Egyptian Authority for Environment Affairs has announced that hunting, tourism and camping in the Egyptian deserts are banned for five years starting Wednesday, the Egyptian Arabic newspaper Al Ahram said on Tuesday. Xinhua reports from Cairo.

The authority has notified Arab embassies in Cairo and Egyptian embassies in Arab states of the ban which is aimed at protecting desert wildlife.

Strong quake rocks N Japan:

A violent earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of 7.5 shook northern Japan Wednesday night and authorities warned residents to evacuate many coastal areas because of the threat of tidal waves, AP reports from Tokyo.

Tidal wave warnings were broadcast for most Pacific coast areas on the main island of Honshu and the northern island of Hokkaido, and for parts of Honshu's west coast.

International

Russian warplanes renew bombing of Chechnya

MOSCOW, Dec 28: Russian warplanes renewed the bombing of rebel Chechnya on Wednesday, a day after Boris Yeltsin called a halt to air strikes and advocated new peace talks, a news agency reported.

The ITAR-Tass news agency said Russian combat aircraft had delivered a missile strike on the outskirts of the Chechen capital at 9:00 a.m. (0600 GMT). Another air attack was made on the village of Ursus-Martan to the south of

Grozny. Casualties were reported in that attack.

The fresh bombing attacks came after Chechnya's rebel government, its forces badly outnumbered, had refused to compromise or surrender following Yeltsin's announced on Tuesday that the bombing would halt.

Yeltsin's decision, announced in a nationwide TV address, had brought relative calm to shattered Grozny as Russia's offensive entered its 18th day Wednesday. Officials

in the separatist region dismissed the speech for failing to meet their main demand: withdrawal.

In a speech that could be characterised more by a clenched fist than an extended olive branch, Yeltsin declared that ground forces would spare no effort to restore order and end "the outrage of gangsterism" in Chechnya.

"The ring around Grozny has tightened," Yeltsin said. "The armed units have been blocked. The actions of gangs

that offer resistance will still be severely suppressed."

An analyst for a leading newspaper, Pavel Felgengauer of Segodnya, called the speech "very belligerent" and said it demonstrated Russia's intent to use more firepower to end the crisis.

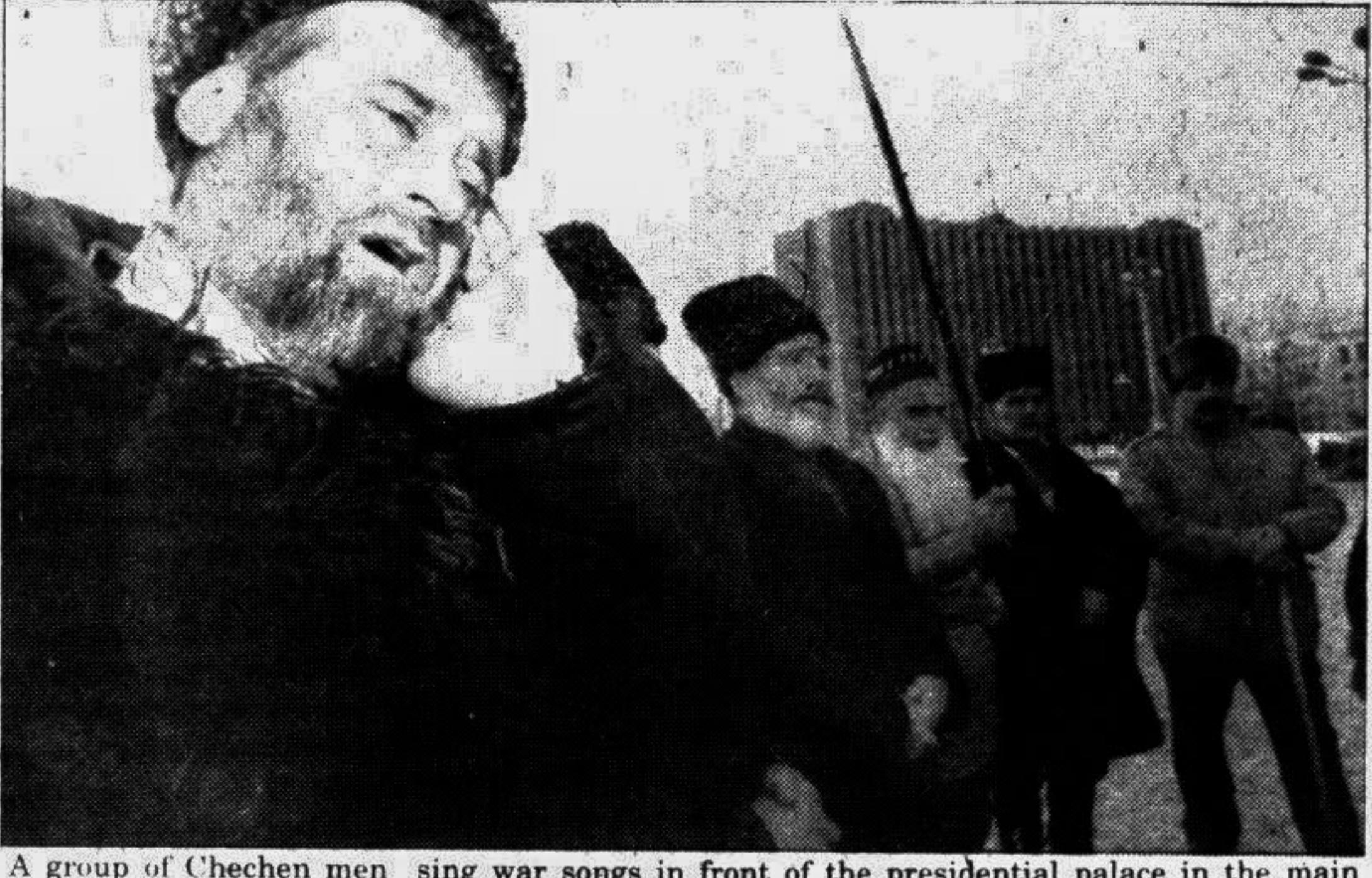
Even as the president spoke, the Chechens were claiming new Russian aerial attacks Tuesday on three villages south of the capital Grozny.

"It's clear the Russian president doesn't want to change his plans and withdraw troops," Ruslan Chimayev, Chechnya's deputy foreign minister, was quoted by Russian media as saying. "But a military victory over the tiny Chechen Republic won't bring Russia laurels."

Chechen fighters have vowed never to surrender, even though they are only several thousand against as many as 40,000 Russian troops who entered the breakaway region Dec. 11 to end Chechnya's self-proclaimed independence.

Yeltsin has faced harsh criticism at home and, to a lesser extent, abroad for a botched military operation that the Chechens claim has killed hundreds of civilians.

Looking somber in his first public appearance since launching the offensive, he acknowledged regret at the deaths and said he had ordered the bombing of Grozny stopped to try to lessen them.



A group of Chechen men sing war songs in front of the presidential palace in the main square of Grozny on Tuesday. — AFP photo

Suu Kyi issue 'Myanmar's internal affair' Li Peng

YANGON, Dec 28: Chinese Premier Li Peng ended his first visit to Myanmar today, praising the ruling military junta for its success in national reconciliation and saying that Beijing was not seeking any sphere of influence abroad, reports AFP.

Premier Li added that the question of Nobel peace laureate and leading dissident Aung Sang Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest since 1989, was "entirely Myanmar's internal affair."

Li made the statement during a press conference prior to his departure for Beijing following his two-day visit here.

Li, who arrived in Yangon on Monday with a delegation of 100 that included his wife, Zu Lin, is the highest-ranking Chinese official to meet with the Myanmar military regime which seized power in 1988.

During the trip, aimed at cementing bilateral ties, a Chinese

spokesman said.

Li and Prime Minister Than Shwe, chairman of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) also discussed joint efforts to combat drug trafficking.

In a banquet speech on Monday night, Li recalled that the two countries had maintained friendly relations since establishing diplomatic ties 44 years ago.

Li praised Myanmar's abundant harvests, including record rice production, and its "laudable efforts in maintaining social stability, promoting national reconciliation and making contacts with the outside world."

China has steadfastly supported Myanmar against foreign criticism for human rights abuses and is its main trading partner and arms supplier.

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