

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 N 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 'Tarik', 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, Chwie, 10, their brother Aprion, 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 mistreating 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.

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, says AP.

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-Martian 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 announcement 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," Russian 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 AP.

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,

Li discussed border and economic issues with his Myanmar counterpart.

Chinese officials said they were satisfied with the development of border trade with Myanmar and the two governments urged the state and private sectors to expand burgeoning trade links, a Chinese

Sudan, Iraq for Arab solidarity

KHARTOUM, Dec 28: Sudan and Iraq have underlined the necessity of bridging the split in Arab ranks and the need to overcome Arab differences, reports Xinhua.

The stance was declared by Mohamed Amin Al-Khalifa, speaker of the Sudanese interim national assembly, and Saadi Mehdi Saleh, visiting speaker of the Iraqi national assembly during their talks this morning.

spokesmen 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.

Govt, LTTE fail to resume peace talks

COLOMBO, Dec 28: Fighting continued in north and east Sri Lanka as the government and rebels failed to reach an agreement on resuming peace talks. Four guerrillas and two soldiers were killed separate clashes, reports AP.

Three rebels were killed in fighting in Oluvevdi, 210 kilometres (130 miles) east of Colombo while two soldiers were killed in a clash in nearby Kattapariachan town on Tuesday, said Brig. Nihal Jayakody, the military's spokesman.

One guerrilla was also killed in an attack on the Jayasinghpora army base 250 kilometres (155 miles) north-east of the capital.

The government had announced it would resume peace talks before Christmas but failed to reach an agreement with the rebels on the date.

The talks, the first in five years, were suspended in October.

Troops begin search for Naga rebels

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: Indian troops launched a search operation in the Indian state of Nagaland today for tribal militants who killed an army officer and another soldier in an ambush, the Press Trust of India reported, reports AFP.

A dawn-to-dusk curfew was imposed in Mokokchung district of the remote northeastern state as the army began a combing operation for guerrillas of the outlawed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), the news agency said.

Suspected NSCN militants ambushed an army column in Mokokchung district on Tuesday, killing Lieutenant Colonel KS Punacha, the commander of the 16th Maratha Light Infantry Unit, and another soldier.

At least one Naga militant was killed in the attack.



Bosnian Cardinal Vinko Puljic (L) gestures as he chats with Muslim Mufti Mustafa Ceric during a Christmas reception of the religious leaders in Sarajevo on Tuesday. — AFP photo

Anniversary of Soviet invasion goes unrecognised in Kabul

KABUL, Dec 28: The 15th anniversary of the December 27, 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which was eventually repulsed by the Mujahideen, went unrecognised in Kabul on Tuesday, reports AP.

A government official attributed the lack of anniversary activity to "security reasons."

After 14 years of fighting the Red Army and their Afghan Communist allies, the Mujahideen conquered Kabul in April 1992 but their victory has been pyrrhic.

In the past two and a half years, much of Kabul has been reduced to ruins and a large portion of the civilian population has been severely mauled in a bloody power struggle between the Mujahideen factions.

killed in the Kabul conflict and another 90,000 wounded, with up to 1,000 a day fleeing the capital for the safety of provincial areas.

What has happened is utterly regrettable, contrary to the expectations of the people, the Mujahideen themselves and world Muslims," said a senior government official.

While the Russians are universally condemned for their invasion, many Afghans point to the April 1978 coup which toppled Mohammad Daoud and brought the Afghan Communist Party to power in Kabul as a root cause for today's problems.

"This was the first phase of our downfall, a national change which ignited a civil war, which then led to the Russian invasion," explained a former Muslim freedom fighter.

If Daoud had survived I don't think he would have pro-

voked the kind of guerilla war that the Afghan Communists, and finally the Russians, did," he said.

Although the Mujahideen reject collective responsibility for the current chaos in Kabul — they naturally blame their rivals — some admit they were not properly equipped to assume power. "Historically there has been very little democratic tradition in Afghanistan, and some of our Mujahideen have been involved in crude means to achieve their ends," explained one academician.

"Some think only about the benefit to their ethnic or linguistic group and not to the country as a whole," he added.

He pointed out that the social fabric of Afghan society had been torn apart after the Russian invasion, while nothing evolved to replace it.

Fresh UN efforts to achieve peace in Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD, Dec 28: The head of the United Nations special mission to Afghanistan, Mahmood Mestiri, has returned to his base here to renew efforts to achieve a peace agreement in the war-torn country, UN officials said today, reports AFP.

Mestiri's return here late Tuesday to resume contacts with the Afghan leaders coincides with the expiry of Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani's two-year tenure in office Thursday.

Spokesman for Rabbani said in Kabul Tuesday that the president had declared a unilateral ceasefire and had proposed talks with the opposition on a formula for the transfer of power and on selecting his successor.

An estimated 7,000 people have died in Kabul this year in fighting between pro-Rabbani forces and troops of an opposition coalition led mainly by Hazb-i-Islami faction,

Off the Record



Melody Vilbert, Miss Aquitaine (L), waves to the audience after being crowned Miss France 1995 on Tuesday in Paris. Next to Vilbert stands the former Miss France Valerie Claisse. — AFP photo

South Asia's first

BOMBAY: Gay men from across South Asia met secretly Wednesday to discuss the widespread persecution they face, including a recent threat from Hindu extremists in India, reports AP.

The conference on Emerging Gay Identities in South Asia was held in a quiet suburb of Bombay and drew nearly 70 activists from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Bhutan, newspapers said, quoting unidentified conference sources.

The five-day meeting, which began Tuesday, was threatened by the radical Hindu group Shiv Sena, which says homosexuality is immoral. Being gay is illegal in India, a conservative and traditional country, and can lead to a jail sentence.

Organisers said that the location of the meeting also was kept secret to exclude heterosexual people from attending it and inhibiting its free discussions.

The sponsors of the meeting, the Naz Project, a group of South Asian gays based in London, estimates that 80 per cent of Asian gays are married. But there are no reliable official figures.

"I spit on the West"

MOSCOW: Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, controversial leader of an ultra-nationalist Russian political party, is to mark 1995 with the publication of a new book entitled "I spit on the West," the ITAR-Tass news agency reported yesterday, says AP.

The agency quoted the press service of Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party to the effect that he had agreed for the book to be published in a review entitled 'Young Guard,' a magazine of national-patriotic leanings.

The party said that the work, despite its title, would be a "book of a philosophic type."

In 1993 Zhirinovskiy published 'A Last Push for the South,' in which he expressed, among other things, the wish to see "Russian soldiers washing their boots in the Indian Ocean."



Syria-Israel peace deal next yr, hopes Mubarak

KUWAIT, Dec 28: Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was today quoted as saying that he expects Syria and Israel to reach a peace agreement in 1995, reports Reuter.

"I believe that Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin are serious about the peace process. I think an agreement will be reached during 1995," Kuwait's Al-Watan daily quoted him as saying in an interview.

"The peace process is currently undergoing development, but they are rather slow," he said.

"The Syrian-Israeli track is facing obstacles stemming from a lack of confidence crisis between the two sides. We are trying to help both sides to overcome that," he said. "The

statements issued by both sides, especially the Israeli side, agitate doubts among the Syrians."

Mubarak said that, "The Israelis when they sign (pacts) and give a word they respect their word. We say that from our information and our experience with them."

Mubarak, who has not visited Israel since he became president in 1981, would not say if he plans to visit the Jewish state, with which his country signed a peace treaty in 1979.

"Am I obliged to visit Israel?" he asked. "The Israelis made an issue of me not visiting them."

Mubarak attacked Israel for not committing itself to agreements aimed at curbing mass destruction weapons.

Dole threatens to block \$4b US-DPRK N-deal

WASHINGTON, Dec 28: Incoming Senate majority leader Bob Dole has threatened to block a 4 billion dollar US-North Korean nuclear deal if a US pilot being held by Pyongyang is not released, the Washington Times reported today, reports Reuter.

Dole said he was not prepared to call for an outright rejection of the deal aimed at reducing North Korea's potential to manufacture nuclear weapons.

Under the accord, Pyongyang suspended its nuclear weapons and energy programme in exchange for a promise from Washington to supply some replacement fuel oil by January 21 and organise a consortium to build light-water nuclear reactors worth dollars 4 billion.

The United States and North Korea also agreed to set up the first diplomatic liaison offices in their respective countries since 1953.

But Dole said the capture of Chief Warrant Officer Bobby Hall and the death of Hall's co-pilot could be a reason to block what he called "a lousy deal anyhow." He added, "you can't trust the North Koreans."

Hall and co-pilot David Hilemon landed a helicopter in North Korean territory on December 17. North Korea said it shot the chopper down and is convinced the aircraft was on a spying mission.

Indiana Congressman Lee M Hamilton, the outgoing Chairman of the House Foreign Relations Committee, said, "I don't think we'll proceed with our side of the nuclear accord if they don't release the air-men."

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Hubbard arrived in Pyongyang today for talks aimed at securing Hall's release.