

BRIEFLY



UN Commander in Bosnia, Lt General Sir Michael Rose (L), poses for a photo with Muslim rebel leader Fikret Abdic on Wednesday before their meeting in Velika Kladusa. Abdic yesterday accepted a ceasefire which General Rose proposed to the rival factions in the Bihac enclave. — AFP photo

Nepal frees 500 prisoners: Nepal's Communist rulers yesterday released more than 500 prisoners in an amnesty to mark King Birendra's 50th birthday, officials said. Reuter reports from Kathmandu.

Bhoj Raj Pokharel, the most senior official in the Home Department, told Reuters all 538 prisoners released under the customary annual amnesty, had completed more than half of their jail terms.

Italian politician dies: Marcello Stefanini, treasurer of the former Communist Party, died Thursday after suffering a brain haemorrhage. He was 56. AP reports from Rome.

Stefanini, who had been in a coma since Saturday in a Rome hospital, was under investigation in corruption probes linked to his party, now called the Democratic Party of the Left, or PDS.

China sentences 3 officers: A court in northern China has jailed a former city police chief for five years and sentenced another officer to death for beating to death a schoolteacher falsely accused of making crank phone calls, the Legal Daily said yesterday. Reuter reports from Beijing.

The Zhangzhi Intermediate People's Court on Tuesday sentenced He Shikuan, a former chief of police in northern Shanxi province, to five years on charges of malpractice for personal gain, the newspaper said. The Deputy Director of the Police General Office, Yu Liehai, was sentenced to death for extorting a confession and illegally detaining a citizen while another officer was jailed for life for extorting a confession, it said.

Turkish newspaper HQ attacked: Three gunmen attacked the Istanbul headquarters of a major Turkish newspaper and television channel on Wednesday, Turkish television said. Reuter reports from Ankara.

No one was hurt. The gunmen, in a stolen taxi, fired shots at the building in the Istanbul suburb of Bagcilar, breaking windows, television said.

Road mishaps kill 13 Filipinos:

Accidents in the central and southern Philippines left 13 people dead and 30 injured, including 10 hitchhikers killed when a truck lost its brakes and plunged into a ravine, police and survivors said on Thursday. AFP reports from Manila.

A survivor said the hitchhikers were aboard a flatbed truck used to haul sugarcane when it hurtled down a mountain road in southern Makilala town, north Cotabato province on Wednesday night.

France expels Tunisian imam: France has expelled a Tunisian imam who worked at a Marseille mosque, an official source said on Wednesday. AFP reports from Marseille.

41-year-old Imam Maheri El Hari was deported back to Tunisia in mid-December because of his extreme fundamentalist preachings, the source said. He had been under surveillance by secret police.

Gunmen kill 3 in Philippines:

Three persons were killed and five wounded when armed men fired into a crowd during a post-Christmas party outside a northern city, police said yesterday. AFP reports from Laoag.

Police said the attackers fled under cover of darkness after spraying automatic rifle fire on the revellers before dawn on Wednesday in Pili town, Ilocos Norte province.

Armenia suspends major party:

Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosian went on national television on Wednesday night to announce he was suspending the activities of an influential traditionalist party, AP reports from Yerevan.

Ter-Petrosian accused the leadership of Dashnak Tsutyun of involvement in a series of political murders, including the assassination of ex-Yerevan Mayor Ambatsum Galstyan earlier this month. He also charged the party with active involvement in drug trafficking.

7 rebels shot dead in Egypt:

Police killed six suspected Muslim extremists in a gun battle on Wednesday in southern Egypt, security officials said. AP reports from Cairo.

A truck driver who happened to be passing died in the crossfire, they said. Meanwhile, as seventh suspected radical was shot and killed by police in a separate incident.

Plague claims 33 in Peru:

The growing rat population and poor garbage collection have caused the bubonic plague to spread through Peru, where some 33 people have died of the disease this year, the Health Ministry said on Wednesday. AFP reports from Lima.

More than 1,000 cases of the plague were reported in 1994, according to officials, who said rodent control was hindered in agricultural areas where there was inadequate storage for agricultural products.

1 executed for selling panda skins:

China has executed a man for selling skins of the endangered giant panda, sentenced an associate to life in prison and jailed a third man for three years, the Xinhua Daily Telegraph said on Thursday. Reuter reports from Beijing.

In May 1987, Wang Wenyu sold one giant panda skin in Sichuan province in the southwest, where most of China's 1,000 surviving giant pandas live. Later that year he caught and killed a second panda to sell its skin, the newspaper said.

Israeli award for US actress:

Actress-comedian Whoopi Goldberg will receive a humanitarian award in January for her 'Comic Relief' specials, which have raised 25 million dollars for the homeless. AP reports from Los Angeles.

The award is from the Friends of the Sheba Medical Centre. Goldberg will be honoured Jan 22 at a Beverly Hills awards dinner.

Nancy Kissinger released:

Nancy Kissinger, the wife of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, has gone home from the hospital after 17 days treatment for an intestinal ailment. AP reports from New York.

The 60-year-old Mrs Kissinger was released from New York Hospital on Tuesday. The hospital gave no details about her ailment. But she has a history of ulcers.

400 HIV cases in Indian forces:

Nearly 400 confirmed HIV-positive cases have been detected among the personnel of the armed forces, according to Major General C S Dhawan, Deputy Director Medical Services, Southern Command. PTI reports from Pune.

Another blow for party

Tiwari to quit as Uttar Pradesh Congress chief

NEW DELHI, Dec 29: India's ruling Congress (I) Party in turmoil over a bitter leadership tussle, received another jolt on Wednesday when a senior leader said he was quitting his political post, reports AFP.

Narain Dutt Tiwari, who heads the party in Uttar Pradesh, said he decided to quit because he had failed to convince the Congress to withdraw legislative backing from the northern state's opposition-led coalition government.

Tiwari said he would resign on Sunday.

Tiwari backs a contretemps within the party which wants slain former Premier Rajiv Gandhi's widow to take over the Congress presidency, presently held by Prime

Minister PV Narasimha Rao.

"I am not issuing a threat or giving any ultimatum, but I will withdraw myself as Uttar Pradesh Congress President," Tiwari said after he met with Rao here late Wednesday.

Former Human Resource Development Minister Arjun Singh quit the cabinet on Saturday and lashed out at the prime minister. Arjun Singh, Rao's main civil in the Congress, has an avowed supporter in Tiwari.

The two Congress leaders, who have reportedly met with Rajiv Gandhi's widow, Sonia, several times, said the charismatic widow should take over the helm of the 109-year-old party to give it a new image.

Sonia Gandhi, 47, who has previously turned down re-

quests to enter politics, has not commented on the reports.

The Nehru-Gandhi Dynasty governed India for four decades, beginning with Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first premier, his daughter, Indira Gandhi, and her son, Rajiv.

Reuter adds: Indian chief Election Commissioner T N Seshan said in a newspaper interview published today he would block state elections that are not properly organised regardless of constitutional scheduled for February unless the voters had identity cards.

A constitutional crisis is not my problem. My problem is to hold free and fair elections which are not possible without the cards," The Asian

Age quote him as saying.

The governments of Bihar and Orissa, two of the five states most likely holding elections in February, have been slow in responding to the independent election commission's demand to ready the identity cards before the polls.

Seshan has been using his independent office to combat violence, fraud and ballot-rigging that have marred many Indian elections, and had insisted on identity cards bearing photographs of voters to ensure honest ballots.

The rural areas in Bihar are notorious for election violence. Orissa, on the east coast, is one of India's poorest states. Both states are ruled by the centrist Janata Dal.

Indian consulate in Karachi halts issuing visas

ISLAMABAD, Dec 29: The Indian consulate in Karachi has stopped issuing visas to Pakistani nationals as New Delhi has been asked by Islamabad to close down the mission, an official of the Indian High Commission said here on Wednesday, reports PTI.

A decision to halt issuing visas was taken immediately after Pakistan Foreign Secretary, Najmuddin Shaikh conveyed to the Indian High Commissioner S K Lambah on Monday of the move to shut down the Karachi consulate.

The high commission official told PTI, "We do not want to feel unwanted and the winding up process has started."

Malaysian DPM denies rumours

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 29: Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, attempting to dispel talk of friction between him and Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, said he was very much a "Mahathir man", press reports said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

Anwar, who is also Finance Minister, also quashed rumours that his supporters were pushing him to challenge the prime minister.

"I came in as deputy prime minister based on the endorsement of Mahathir Mohamad and the party and also because of the relationship I have with him," The Sun newspaper quoted him as saying after launching a housing project for the poor on Wednesday.

"I have supported his policies and have been consistently so from the beginning," he said.

Aftershocks rattle N Japan

TOKYO, Dec 29: Strong aftershocks rattled northern Japan on Thursday, hours after a 7.5 preliminary magnitude earthquake struck, killing two and injuring 274, reports AP.

The undersea quake, which hit at 9:19 pm (1219 GMT) Wednesday, was centred in the Pacific Ocean about 625 km (390 miles) northeast of Tokyo.

It ripped roads, wrecked dozens of homes and buildings and forced thousands of coastal residents to flee during a short-lived tsunami alert. In the capital, the quake was felt as a long, low rumble that made some buildings sway.

Most of the injured were cut by broken glass or hit by falling objects. Police said most of those hurt — at least 179 — were in Hachinohe, a coastal city in northern Aomori prefecture.



Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto (L) meets with leaders of Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) for peace talks on Wednesday in Karachi. Benazir visited the troubled city of Karachi to discuss peace with the different political parties of Sindh province. — AFP photo

Troops repulse LTTE attack, kill 11

COLOMBO, Dec 29: Sri Lankan troops repulsed a Tamil attack on an army camp in the east of the island today, killing at least 11 guerrillas, a military spokesman said, reports AFP.

Heavily-armed Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas attacked the camp in Batticaloa district on the coast shortly after day break.

Military spokesman Brigadier Nihal Jayakody told AFP "first reports suggest that they suffered heavy casualties. Seven of our men were wounded. We have recovered 11 LTTE bodies and 13 (automatic) weapons used by them."

The fighting came just five days after rebels blew up a bus carrying troops in the same district, killing seven soldiers

and wounding another 23.

The latest attack has virtually dashed government hopes for a new year ceasefire in the embattled northeast as a first step towards continuing peace negotiations with the LTTE.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga's People's Alliance government said it was still awaiting a response from the LTTE to its offer for a "reciprocal cessation of hostilities."

Kumaratunga initiated talks with the LTTE shortly after winning August parliamentary elections.

But these were suspended following the assassination of opposition leader Gamini Dissanayake on October 24. His family blamed the LTTE for the killing, a charge denied by the rebels.

India, Pakistan to exchange lists of N-facilities

NEW DELHI, Dec 29: India and Pakistan will exchange the lists of their nuclear installations and facilities early next year under an agreement they signed in 1988, press reports said here today, reports Xinhua.

The recent closure of the Indian consulate general in Karachi by the Pakistan government and the expulsion of each other's diplomats would have no impact on the annual exchange.

Pakistan Foreign Secretary Najmuddin Sheikh said that, whenever submitted, the list from Islamabad would be the same as last year's since there has been no increase in the nuclear installations in Pakistan. India so far has not said anything about the exchange data.



A rescue worker watches the collapsed second floor section of a Pachinko pinball parlour in Hachinohe city, northeast of Honshu island after a major earthquake measuring 7.5 on the Richter hit northern Japan on Wednesday. Two people were killed and 274 were injured in the pinball parlour. — AFP photo

Four years after Thatcher, another lady rocks Tory Party

LONDON, Dec 29: Four years after Margaret Thatcher's downfall, another feisty, right-wing, 60-something woman is rocking the governing Conservative Party, reports AP.

Teresa Gorman's route is rebellion. She's one of eight legislators shunned by the party for defying Prime Minister John Major in a vote over the European Union — the issue splitting the once-monolithic party.

The revolt left Major's government reeling and made Gorman something of a folk hero.

"It's like what I imagine happens to Liz Taylor or Joan Collins," she chuckled, rifling through fan mail during an interview in her office near the House of Commons. "People respond as if they feel they

know you, almost with a kind of affection."

Rebels in the Conservative Party threatened Major's hold on power last month when they refused to support his plan to boost Britain's contribution to the European Community budget.

But after Major threatened to call new national elections that could sweep them from power, only seven Conservatives voted against Major and the proposal passed. The rebels were punished by being banned from government office or taking part in leadership decisions.

Rather than feeling chastened, Gorman and her fellow rebels are basking in the attention. A week after the Europe vote, they helped kill a planned increase in fuel taxes.

A year ago, when Major grumbled about "bastards" within the party, Gorman took the insult as the title for her political memoir.

She always was a bit different — a south London labourer's daughter who built a business with her husband, and didn't go into politics until 1987, when she was 56.

She told part officials she was 46 and got the nomination for Billericay, a Conservative stronghold east of London.

By the time the newspapers found out her age, Gorman was in Parliament wearing sharp suits and chunky jewellery, and talking about her menopause and the effectiveness of hormone replacement therapy. She hinted that the prime minister was on hormones, and the first blaze of

national attention followed.

"Is Margaret on it? Got the headlines," she recalled. "I didn't know, but I didn't exactly deny it."

Although she began her career as a teacher — "a respectable job for a working-class girl in those days" — she was, she says, a born entrepreneur.

The catalyst was a two-year spell in New York with her engineer husband, Jim, in the mid 60s. They came back and built a business exporting science-teaching materials, then sold out. The Gormans now own three homes, including an elegant London house.

"Everywhere in America we found this wonderful positive attitude to profit, to getting on in the world, enjoying life, making the most of yourself,"

Off the Record

Tangled love life of a 33-yr-old

GLENDAL, Arizona: Vernon Pierce needed a notebook to keep track of the stories he told his four wives and the other women he was dating. But even that wasn't enough, reports AP.

The tangled love life of the 33-year-old ex-model began to unravel last summer when one of the four women to whom he was simultaneously married sent police to Pierce's home to check up on him. The police found another wife knocking on his door.

"Obviously, there was a lot of lying going on. I did the best I could, but I still made mistakes," Pierce said on Tuesday before surrendering to police in this Phoenix suburb. He was free on 1,500 dollars bail on Wednesday on bigamy charges.

Police found records of at least four marriages, one in 1989 and three this year.

Pierce said he was dating other women, keeping track of some of them on a 3-by-5-inch (7.5-by-13-cm) card labelled "Who to Marry." He also carried a little black book in his wallet to keep his stories straight.

Pierce said he told his wives that his job required him to travel. The truth, he said, was altogether different: "I didn't have a job. I didn't have time."

While some men might envy his escapades, Pierce said it wasn't always fun.

"People say guys fantasise about something like this, and I guess I did," he said. "But you don't have your own life."

All because of her weight ...

IRVING, Texas: A 300-pound (135-kilogram) woman is accused of fatally shooting her husband as he slept Tuesday after he allegedly threatened to leave her or put her in a nursing home because of her weight, police said, reports AP.

Summer Nash, 60, was shot twice in the head, Capt Travis Hall said.

His wife, Gwendolen Nash, called the police emergency number about 2:30 am to report the shooting and threatened to kill herself, police Sgt Richard Dix said.

"She is apparently an invalid due to overweight. He was either discussing leaving her or putting her in a nursing home. While he was asleep, she took a gun and put it to his head and shot him twice," Hall said.

Mrs Nash, 58, was in bed with her husband when he was shot and was unable to get out of the bed afterward, Hall said. She had not been formally charged late Tuesday morning. The couple had been married about 30 years.

Chocolate museum

COLOGNE, Germany: The festive season sees hundreds of children flocking to a chocolate fountain here, in probably the world's only museum devoted to showing where chocolate comes from and how the tasty treat is made, reports AP.

The fountain, where the children dip biscuits to cover them with glistening chocolate, is shaped like a pod, the fruit of the cocoa tree containing the precious beans. It holds pride of place at the prow of a futuristic building standing like a ship at anchor at the far end of Cologne's riverside docks.

The Imhoff-Stollwerck Museum affords a magnificent view of the Rhine and the spires of the 'Gothic' cathedral.

Chinese CP to overhaul 8 lakh rural branches

BEIJING, Dec 29: China's Communist Party announced today a major overhaul of some 800,000 village cells in a bid to stem rural disorder by stamping out "lax and paralysed" branches, Xinhua news agency reported, says AFP.

The agency quoted a senior party organisation department official as saying that some eight per cent of its village branches did not function properly, creating "economic stagnation and chaotic security in their areas."

These "lax and paralysed" party organisations... have to leadership cores of their own," the official was quoted as saying.

The overhaul is aimed at "bringing the role of the communist party into full play in the drive for prosperity and

against social disorder in rural areas," the agency said, adding that officials would be given political training as well as practical lessons on leading their villages.

The plan is in line with the resolution of September's party plenum.

The move comes amid growing fears of instability in the face of strengthening regionalism, mounting economic problems and 90-year-old paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's failing health.

"Our country is currently undergoing extensive and profound social changes and this requires our party to do better in upholding and improving democratic centralism," the plenum communiqué said, referring to the party's system of authoritarian rule.

Rabbani won't resign before end of the yr

KABUL, Dec 29: Despite the imminent expiry of his official term of office Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani will not necessarily resign before the end of the year, a senior official spokesman indicated today, reports AFP.

"The last day of President Rabbani in office will be the day he transfers power," commented presidential press spokesman Abdul Aziz Morad cryptically.

Rabbani was given a two-year mandate in the December 1992 Shoorah Ahli hal-va-aqd election, but Morad reiterated that there "can be no unilateral transfer of power."

Rabbani has repeatedly said he is willing to step down, but the warring factions have been unable to establish harmonious dialogue to discuss a transfer

of power.

Morad said a five-man delegation representing Rabbani is ready for talks with a similar body from the opposition coalition.

But, with the Afghan propensity for slowness in political discussions, this process — assuming it is agreed upon by the rival factions — could drag on for months, unless the United Nations can break the deadlock.

UN special representative Mahmud Mestiri is expected in Kabul soon if "he feels sure the ceasefire is holding," Morad said.

A spokesman for Mestiri said in Islamabad that arrangements were being worked out for the UN special envoy's trip to the Afghan capital.

she said. "Americans aren't envious and they're not cynical the way the British are... America gave me the courage of my natural convictions. It told me to go for it."

In New York, she taught biology at the Convent of the Sacred Heart and had Caroline Kennedy in her class. The recently widowed Jacqueline Kennedy would sometimes join the class on nature expeditions in Central Park.

Once Mrs. Kennedy invited Gorman to the family's apartment to collect a mouse. Caroline had brought home from biology class. Another time she went there for a party.

"Americans are much more egalitarian than the British," Gorman said.

In the House of Commons, she preaches survival-of-the-fittest economics in a style that makes the old money wince.

Her fellow Conservatives include scions of ancient political families, bankers and lawyers, and newly prosperous members of the middle class. "Many of them have never hit real life at all," she said.

She warms to her theme with the zeal of an outsider. Britain's honours system of knights and peerages, the built-in advantages of social class.

People with no talent advance, she said, because of connections of school and regiment, or because they are "the minor son of some clapped-out aristocrat."