

Heavy fighting around Grozny

GROZNY, Russia, Dec 29: Russian troops and Chechen fighters clashed in tank and artillery battles around Grozny today and the Chechens said their capital again came under overnight bombing and shelling attacks, reports Reuter.

Officials in Grozny said the Russian air force bombed the city, but Russia flatly denied any bombardment of Grozny itself although eyewitnesses confirmed heavy shelling of the outskirts.

As the two sides struggled for control of the city, clashes erupted at Khankala, just six km (four miles) east of Grozny, after Russian forces seized the military airfield there in a surge towards the city on Wednesday.

Russia, which is trying to end Chechnya's independence

bid, said it had repulsed a Chechen tank attack at Khankala and forced back Chechens trying to break through the Russian blockade of the city at almost every point.

Chechen eyewitnesses reported shelling of the outskirts of the city of about 400,000 people. They started shelling at five o'clock. There was a huge sound of firing all round the town, a refugee arriving in Sleptsovsk on the Chechnya border with the Ingusheti region, told a Reuter reporter in the town.

"I cannot say precisely where they were shooting but it seemed like everywhere. It was a nightmare," she said.

Russia sent troops into Chechnya in southern Russia

on December 11, but its efforts to seal off Grozny have met fierce resistance.

Russian troops advanced on Grozny on Wednesday and Moscow said they had captured Khankala.

Heavy fighting also erupted around the strategically important town of Argun, 15 km (nine miles) east of Grozny, which controls a main road leading out of the city, but the town remained in Chechen hands.

The Russian government's press service said about 200 fighters had launched the Chechens' first major tank attack at Khankala on Wednesday night. The attack was repulsed and six tanks were seized along with other equipment, it said.

It said Russian troops had

fired on Chechen fighters with artillery and mortars briefly after the Chechens tried to break through Russian lines at numerous points.

But it added: "There was no bombardment or artillery fire on Grozny."

Chechen Vice-President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev told the Russian news agency Interfax that residential areas had come under fire in Grozny.

"There have been especially fierce clashes on the Khankala front east of Grozny, the Petropavlovskaya front to the north and the Alkhan-Kala front to the west of the capital," he said.

Yandarbiyev said Chechnya was ready to start talks with Russia on "the settlement of

relations between the states" but would never discuss disarmament.

Russia wants Chechnya to disarm its fighters and retract its declaration of independence of 1991. But president Boris Yeltsin and Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudayev have failed to agree terms for talks.

Yeltsin said on Tuesday he would order a halt to air raids on Grozny which could injure civilians, but made clear he was determined to wipe out resistance fast.

Oleg Lobov, secretary of Russia's influential security council, said on Wednesday the troops would gradually expel fighters loyal to Dudayev from Grozny but he rejected the possibility that the city would be stormed.



Russian soldiers load a missile into their "Grad" mortar rocket launcher on the outskirts of the Chechen town of Argun on Tuesday. — AFP photo

CIA chief resigns



James Woolsey

WASHINGTON, Dec 29: CIA chief R James Woolsey has resigned, abruptly ending a tenure shadowed by the discovery of a Soviet mole selling the intelligence agency's most precious secrets, reports AP.

President Clinton accepted the resignation on Wednesday "with regret," and began his search for a replacement. Deputy Defence Secretary John Deutch emerged as an early leading candidate.

The White House said Clinton did not request Woolsey's resignation, but senior officials said they were not surprised the spy chief decided to leave after a stormy two years.

Austria, Finland & Sweden to enter EU Jan 1

BRUSSELS, Dec 29: For nearly a decade, the European Union has kept its doors tightly shut, ignoring pleas from neighboring nations for admission to the exclusive club, reports AP.

But on Jan 1, the union will relent and accept three rich neighbours: Austria, Finland and Sweden.

Their entry, boosting membership from 12 to 15, will mark the start of what may be an aggressive period of expansion that could double the EU's size in another decade or so.

"There is a strategy in the union with regard to enlargement," said Jan Rood of the Clingendael Institute for International Affairs in The Hague, Netherlands.

"We will have a union of 25 to 30 members - that's the new thing," he said.

In favouring growth, the union will create a powerful economic bloc spanning much of European continent. Its closest rival will be the North American Free Trade Agreement linking the United States, Canada and Mexico.

The newcomers will have full access to the EU's barrier-free single market, one of the world's most lucrative consumer zones. Their citizens can more easily travel across borders, set up businesses or

get a new job in other nations. They will also elect representatives to the 567-member European Parliament.

By banding together, the nations stand to gain more economic and political clout by implementing the Treaty on European Union, which calls for a common foreign policy and a single currency by 1999.

Not all nations agree, however. Norwegians, whose government wanted to join on Jan 1 with the others, rejected membership, betting the oil-rich nation could do fine on its own.

With 15-member, the Union will have a population of about 370 million stretching from the Arctic Circle in the north to the Mediterranean Sea in the south. The value of the economies will amount to some \$1.5 trillion.

By comparison, the new North American grouping counts a population of 378 million, with economies valued at roughly \$1.5 trillion, the world's largest free-trade zone.

The European Union also intends to forge closer economic and political links with nations across the continent, including former Warsaw Pact foes.

Waiting in the wings for membership, probably around the turn of the century, are

Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and possibly Slovakia. The Mediterranean islands of Malta and Cyprus also are among those at the front of the line.

Other contenders are Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia and the Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Turkey, at the outer edge of the European continent, is desperate to join. But so far it has been rebuffed because of its backward economy and poor human rights record. Arch rival Greece opposes its membership. Moreover, analysts predict Turkey's Islamic heritage will be a stumbling block.

Adding new members won't be easy and, with the entry of less advanced countries in Eastern Europe, could alter what has until now been a rather closely knit — although frequently squabbling — group of nations.

The admission of Austria, Finland and Sweden will be relatively smooth. They are similar economically and politically to current members: Belgium, Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain.

Iran condemns bloodshed in Chechnya

NICOSIA, Dec 29: Iran on Wednesday condemned bloodshed in the Russian region of Chechnya and said "slaughter of Muslims" cannot solve the crisis facing Moscow, reports Reuter.

"We demand an end to the attacks on the defenceless Chechen people because we do not consider the continuation of slaughter to be in the interest of either side," said a Foreign Ministry spokesman quoted by Iranian television.

He said the Islamic world was worried about the bloodshed in the Caucasian region. "In our view, violence and slaughter of Muslims cannot resolve the Chechen crisis," he added.

The spokesman's remarks, as reported by the television, did not explicitly blame the government of President Boris Yeltsin who sent the army to attacks the mainly Muslim region on December 11 to force it to drop its 1991 independence declaration.

A headline newspaper in Tehran accused the Iranian government of taking weak positions "in support of Muslims in several crises around the world, including in Chechnya."

Several Muslim countries have criticised Russia's use of force in Chechnya.

Algerian unrest claims 35000 lives in 10 months

PARIS, Dec 29: A secret Algerian army report says nearly 35,000 people were killed in fighting between government forces and Muslim fundamentalists in the first 10 months of this year, French newspaper reported today, says Reuter.

The daily newspaper Le Parisien said the report by the Algerian army's general staff said about 25,000 of this year's

11 soldiers drowned in Jhelum

NEW DELHI, Dec 29: Eleven paramilitary soldiers drowned when their boat sank in the Jhelum River in Kashmir, a news agency reported Thursday, reports AP.

The soldiers were on a patrol near the border with Pakistan when the boat capsized Wednesday. Press Trust of India reported quoting an official government spokesman.

It was not immediately clear how the boat sank or if it was attacked by Muslim guerrillas fighting for independence from India. Two bodies have been recovered so far, PTI said.

Libya asks US to open talks on Lockerbie crisis

TRIPOLI, Dec 29: Libya Wednesday called on Washington to open a dialogue to resolve the crisis provoked by the Lockerbie airliner bombing, reports AFP.

"We call on Washington to open a direct dialogue on all the issues in dispute, not only Lockerbie, secretary of the Libyan parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee Saad Mujber told AFP.

Information Minister Ahmad Ibrahim said Libya "has already done all it can to settle the crisis, while the others have offered nothing, he accused London and Washington of stubbornness."

Ibrahim was referring to a Libyan proposal to allow the International Court of Justice in the Hague to try two Libyans whom Washington and London suspect of carrying out the bombing of a Pan Am airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland, in December 1988.

Libya has denied any involvement in the bombing, which killed 270 people.

In April 1992 the UN Security Council imposed an air and arms embargo on Libya to force it to comply with a US and British demand to have the two suspects tried in Scotland or the United States.

Disbandment of Haitian army demanded

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Dec 29: About 1,500 protesters marched around the Presidential Palace on Wednesday, demanding that Haiti's army be disbanded, reports AP.

In another development, the head of the Haitian military's anti-drug department on Wednesday implicated seven active-duty soldiers in the theft of 100 kilograms (200 pounds) of seized cocaine late Monday night.

The protesters, who marched to the rhythm of homemade drums and horns, also trumpeted Jean-Bertrand Aristide as their "president for life," a slogan reminiscent of an earlier era.

The official titles of two longtime dictators — Francois Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude, ousted in 1986 — were "president for life."

"Titid is my man. We want him in there (the palace) forever," Elisa Thomas, referring to Aristide by his nickname, shouted as she swayed and

tow-stepped to the music. Protesters carried placards reading "Titid for life," "Ban the army," and "Throw all the thugs out of the military". US troops watched from a distance.

Thousands of marchers made the same demands on Monday after a firefight at nearby army headquarters between discharged soldiers and US and Haitian troops. Reporters at the scene counted four demand from the clash. The US military says three were killed and six wounded. No Americans were hurt, and some active-duty Haitian soldiers were among the dead and injured.

The discharged soldiers, who were demanding back pay, are among those being left out of Aristide's new army, reduced from 7,500 men to 1,500. The brutal army ousted Aristide in 1991, and was removed from power by US forces who arrived in September to reinstate the elected president.

Some of the officers cashiered were considered moderates. They include Lt Ludwig Bastien, hailed as a hero by US officials for his arrest this month of the soldier suspected of killing two US Embassy employees during a payroll holdup.

"It isn't our business, it's the Haitian government which decides who stays and who doesn't," US Embassy spokesman Stan Schragger told reporters Wednesday. "Naturally, we would want that those who stay be good ones."

In the drug theft, Lt Col Ernest Monpoint told Radio Metropole that only six of 13 guards assigned to the army's narcotics depot were on watch when gunmen knocked down the door and stole 100 kilograms (220 pounds) of cocaine, 27.7 kilograms (60 pounds) of heroin and some marijuana. The guards fled the gunfire.

Monpoint said the seven missing guards are suspected of participating in the break-in. Four were being questioned; the rest remained at large.

The general impression after the investigation is that to succeed, they had to have the support and cooperation of certain people inside," he said.

American and Haitian authorities destroyed the remaining reserve of drugs seized from traffickers.



Soldiers surround Lebanese woman Hanan Yassine, who holds a remote control device, on Wednesday in Beirut during a reconstruction of the bomb attack in a Shi'ite Muslim suburb that killed four people on December 21. Yassine testified that an Israeli officer headed the alleged network whose aim was to carry out a string of bomb attacks in Lebanon. — AFP photo

Mexican rebels ready to resume peace talks

SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS, Mexico, Dec 29: For the first time in months, Indian rebels have indicated they are ready to resume peace talks, easing fears of a new outbreak of violence, reports AP.

The conciliatory letter from the Zapatista National Liberation Army, released on Tuesday night, appeared to ease tensions that have heightened in recent days with increased movement of both rebels and army troops in the southern state of Chiapas.

The Zapatistas are demanding better living conditions and basic rights for Chiapas' impoverished Indians.

The lack of communication from the Zapatistas had frightened many in the government who wondered if the rebels were planning a repeat of their New Year's Day uprising a year ago, which left more than 145 people dead before a cease-fire took effect Jan. 12.

In the letter, dated Dec. 25 but released late Tuesday by the Roman Catholic church, rebel leader Subcomandante Marcos said the Zapatistas were pleased by the government's acceptance of a church-led commission to mediate

new peace talks. On Christmas Eve, the government announced it had recognized the National Intermediation Commission as mediator between government and rebel representatives. Recognition of the commission known by its Spanish acronym CONAL had been a key rebel demand.

The commission is headed by Roman Catholic Bishop Samuel Ruiz, who has been fasting for peace since Dec. 19. Ruiz had urged the rebels to return to the negotiating table.

As mediator, the church commission "can provide a political solution of peace with justice and dignity to the conflict," said the letter.

The letter was one of the first positive signs in months. Mexican newspapers on Wednesday had bold headlines on the rebels' willingness to restart peace talks.

Peace talks faltered in June when the guerrillas rejected a proposed accord by former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari to provide jobs, housing and health care to the poor Indians the rebels claimed to defend.

Mexico's new President

Ernesto Zedillo had no immediate comment Wednesday, but the military responded overnight by announcing that troops would pull back from two areas closest to rebel territory as a conciliatory gesture.

The prospects of a renewed rebellion helped fuel the biggest devaluation in years of the Mexican peso, which has lost more than a third of its value against the dollar since last week.

The peso had declined nearly 38 per cent since the guerrillas moved into new positions in a show of force on Dec. 19, including declines on Monday and Tuesday. But in early trading Wednesday, the currency strengthened from 5.6 pesos to the dollar to 5.25.

Zedillo, beset by the resurgent rebellion that helped fuel the peso's plunge, had long sought unsuccessfully to resume talks with the guerrillas, sending letters even weeks before his Dec. 1 inauguration.

In their letter, the rebels said they recognized his Interior Secretary Esteban Moctezuma as Zedillo's envoy in peace efforts and insisted all messages should be exchanged through the church commission.

Political party office set ablaze in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Dec 29: A fire destroyed one of Kashmir's most historic buildings today, the headquarters of the political party that governed the disputed province for four decades, reports AP.

The fire was believed set by Muslim separatists, and police cordoned off the area to search for the arsonists.

The three-story wooden building at Patharmasajid in Srinagar, the state's summer capital, occupied the National Conference party that governed Kashmir until a Muslim rebellion for independence erupted in 1990.

At least 10,000 people have been killed in Kashmir in the last five years, Kashmiri Muslims say they are discriminated against in India, which has a Hindu majority.

The National Conference, which was identified with Indian rule and was targeted by the militants, has been trying to reestablish itself as a political force in Kashmir.

France-Algeria ties worsens

PARIS, Dec 29: France's tense relations with Algeria worsened today amid outrage over the murder of four priests, and horror over an attempt by Islamic radicals to explode a hijacked Air France plane over Paris, reports AP.

And although France averted a catastrophe by storming the plane in Marseille Monday and killing all four hijackers, Algerian officials and media assailed the French handling of the drama.

The pro-government Algerian newspaper L'Authentique questioned whether Paris "manipulated" the affair to get the hijackers to fly to France where they could be killed. It noted Interior Minister Abderrahmane Meziane-Cherif's claim that the Air France pilot blocked a plan to release everyone but six members of the crew while the plane was still in Algeria.

It also said it was suspicious that the terrorists were all in the cockpit at the moment of the assault, and why they didn't go ahead and blow up the plane they had rigged with explosives.

The independent El Watan called it "abnormal, even indecent, that the French seize on the incident to turn with derision to the Algerian authorities."

Rabin orders review of settlement plan in WB

JERUSALEM, Dec 29: Israel's prime minister ordered a review of plans to expand a Jewish settlement in the West Bank after several days of protests by Palestinians, reports AP.

The government will probe the legal background of the disputed 60-hectare plot just south of Bethlehem, said Oded Ben-Ami, a spokesman for Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

He said that Rabin hoped to bring a legal opinion to his Cabinet for a vote Sunday on the future of the expansion, which protesters argue violates the Israel-PLO peace accord.

The dispute erupted Thursday when the Jewish settlement of Efrat sent bulldozers to pave a road to the hill-top area next to the Palestinian village of Al Khader, slated to become a new neighbourhood.

Since then, Palestinians and Israeli peace activists have clashed daily with Israeli troops protecting construction workers. A Palestinian Cabinet minister came to blows with soldiers at the site on Tuesday.

Settlement officials say that the plot was allocated to Efrat by a former right-wing government in the 1980's. A Palestinian family named Salah in Al Khader also claims ownership of the rocky land.

The expansion has become a test of both Rabin's 1992 settlement freeze and of how far he will risk a showdown with the 120,000 settlers in the West Bank and Gaza. Some settlers have threatened violence to resist a withdrawal of Israeli forces envisaged in the next stage of the peace settlement with the Palestinians.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has spoken to Foreign Minister Shimon Peres about the issue twice since Tuesday. Palestinian officials said. They added that Arafat's self-rule Cabinet would convene in emergency session on the issue Wednesday evening.

Arafat told reporters in Gaza Wednesday that Peres told him "that they have decided to stop it," referring to the bulldozer work at Al-Khader.

Israel radio said that the settlers were asked to stop their work pending a Cabinet decision.

But Israeli officials denied issuing such instructions. Peres' spokeswoman Behira Burdugo said that the foreign minister only promised Arafat "to take action to calm the atmosphere."

The Queen had the presence of mind to spray the fire with a soda siphon as a precautionary measure," said a Buckingham Palace spokesman.

The queen was not injured in any way, he added. Staff rushed to the scene and cleared up the mess.

The palace played down the incident, which occurred on the night December 11.

"It would be over-dramatic to say it caused any damage," said the spokesman, who denied a report in Thursday's edition of The Sun (published late Wednesday) that Her Majesty was covered in soot when she turned the siphon on the fire.

Royal firefighter!



LONDON, Dec 29: Queen Elizabeth II grabbed a soda siphon to douse a fire after seeing smoke billowing from a room at Windsor castle, a place spokesman confirmed late Wednesday, reports AP.

She leapt into action after strong winds blew shut a valve in the chimney above a fireplace in the castle's Oak Room. This caused a log fire to fill the room with smoke — spotted by the queen, who took matters into her own hands.

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Iranian search teams combing the former battle zones have found 15,000 bodies since a UN-brokered ceasefire halted the war in 1988, said a military official quoted by the radio.

Iran holds funeral for 100 soldiers

NICOSIA, Dec 29: Iran held a funeral today for 100 of its soldiers killed in the 1980-1988 war with Iraq whose bodies were recently discovered, Tehran radio said, reports Reuter.

The radio said the funeral was held in Ilam province, in the middle section of the Iran-Iraq border, where the bodies were found.

Iranian search teams combing the former battle zones have found 15,000 bodies since a UN-brokered ceasefire halted the war in 1988, said a military official quoted by the radio.