

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

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 Slepovsk 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.

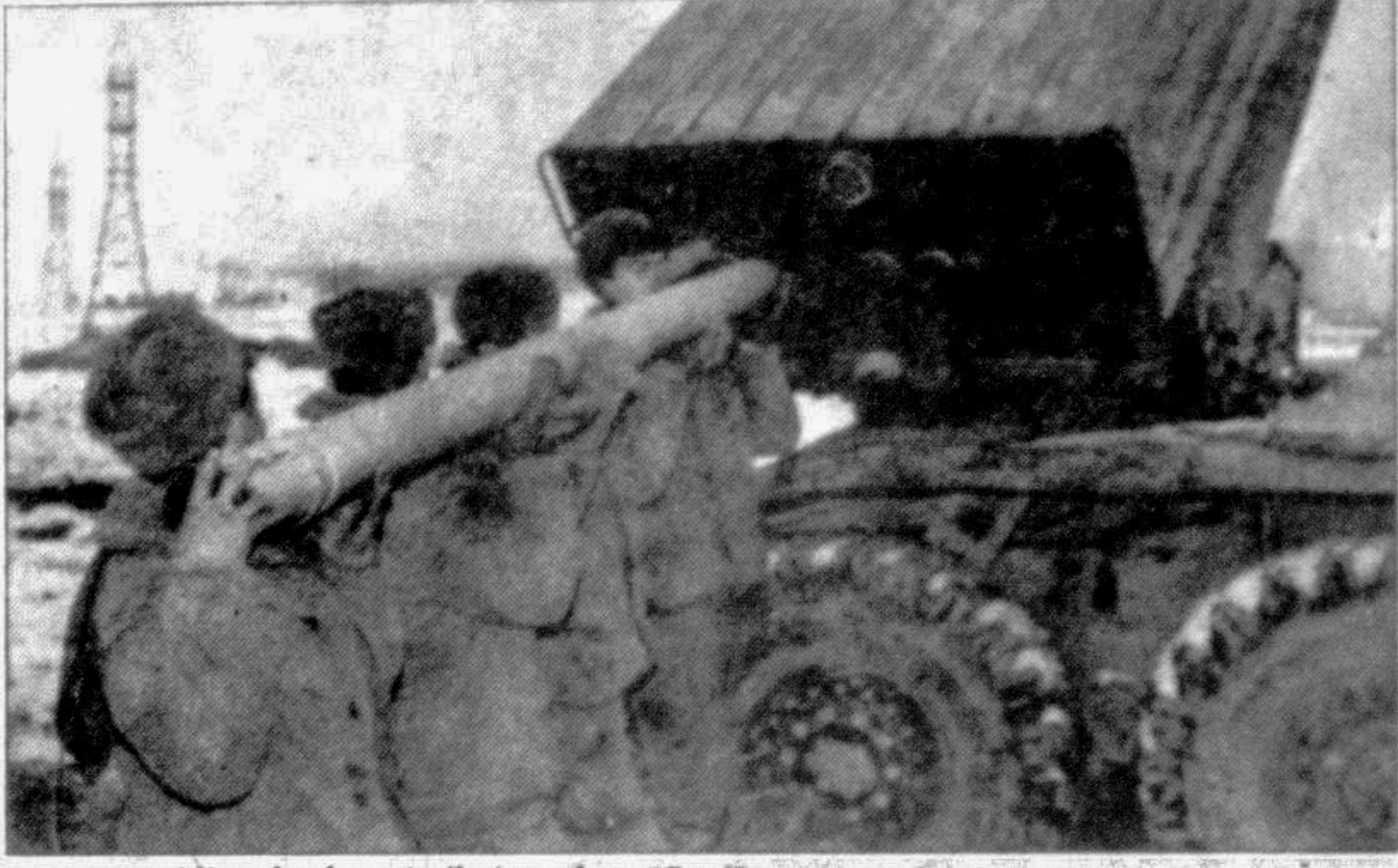
Yandarbiyev said Chechnya was ready to start talks with Russia on "the settlement of

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 Dzhohar 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 Roos 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 \$1.7 trillion.

By comparison, the new North American grouping counts a population of 378 million, with economies valued at roughly \$1.7 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 Reuters.

"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 attack the mainly Muslim region on December 11 to force it to drop its 1991 independence declaration.

A hardline 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.

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 drown 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 AFP.

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.

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 Patharmasjid 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 averred 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 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.

Mexico's new President

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.

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 Mufleh told AFP.

A further 1,782 members of the security forces, 1,019 of them police, deserted in the first six months of 1995, including at least five officers and 39 officer cadets, the report said.

The most government dead in a single month was in September when 504 members of the security forces were killed while the highest death toll among the guerrillas was in August when they lost 1,414 killed, the report said.

Many of the civilians killed were in the Eucalyptus area of the capital Algiers which is believed to have been the base of the four men who hijacked a French plane in Algiers on Saturday and were killed when it was stormed in Marseille on Monday.

The radical Armed Islamic Group (GIA) said on Wednesday that its forces killed four Catholic priests in northern Algeria on Tuesday in revenge for the killing of the four GIA hijackers. 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.

Rabin orders review of settlement plan in WB

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 Pan Am airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland, in December 1988.

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

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3 Egyptian cops shot dead

MINYA, Egypt, Dec 29: Suspected Islamic militants shot dead three policemen in two separate attacks in the troubled Minya region of southern Egypt yesterday, police said, reports AFP.

Faiz Abdel El-Hafiz Mansur was killed as he left home in the Abu Qorqas area near Mallawi. Later two other policemen — Dakhli Abdel Rahman and Mohammed Abdel Rassul — were killed in Edqa village, also near Mallawi. The gunmen fled after both attacks