

BRIEFLY

Akihito prays for peace: Japan's Emperor Akihito said in a New Year's day message yesterday that he prayed for peace in Japan and the rest of the world. AFP reports from Tokyo.

As this New Year begins it is my earnest wish that for the people of Japan and of the world, it may turn out a happy year," the emperor said.

Gaddafi to visit Egypt: Libyan leader Moamer Gaddafi will visit Egypt this month, Libyan Foreign Minister Omar Muntasser said in remarks published on Saturday. Reuter reports from Cairo.

"No obstacles will hinder this visit, contacts are going on between the leaders of the two countries," Muntasser told the Saudi Daily Ash-Shaq Al Awsat published in Cairo.

Tabasco governor takes office: Mexican Ruling party's governor-elect in the southeastern state of Tabasco took office on Saturday amid peaceful opposition protests against alleged vote fraud. Reuter reports from Villahermosa, Mexico.

Roberto Madrazo Pintado of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), who won November 20 elections, pledged to ensure that "no one and nothing is above the law" during his six-year term.

Egypt bans 2 more groups: Two new militant groups were added to the list of those banned in Egypt on Saturday when authorities charged 33 of their members with belonging to an illegal organisation, a judicial official said. AFP reports from Cairo.

The 33 Muslim militants were all from the groups known as Al Tabligh Wa Al Dawaa (preaching and proselytism) and Al Tawafiq As Al Tayabonne (Stop and Check) which are branches of the outlawed Jamaa Islamiyya.

Quake shakes Japan: Japan awoke to the New Year yesterday with a moderate earthquake jerking Tokyo and its vicinity at dawn, registering 4.6 on the Richter scale. AFP reports from Tokyo.

The Meteorological Agency said the quake at 5:52 am (2052 GMT on Saturday) occurred about 80 kilometers (50 miles) under the Bay of Tokyo but there were no fears of tidal waves. There were no immediate reports of casualties or property damage.

3 Americans die in Spain: Three American tourists travelling to Lurdes were killed and nearly 40 other people were injured when their coach overturned in northeastern Spain on Saturday, the US consulate in Barcelona said. Reuter reports from Barcelona.

"We still have 16 people in hospital, of whom six are in a serious state," a consulate spokesman said by telephone. Other passengers suffered slight injuries.

Murder rate drops in Washington: The murder rate in the US capital dropped 11 per cent in 1994 but it still remains high at 414 homicides for the year, according to FBI figures published on Saturday. AFP reports from Washington.

Washington ranked third at 71 murders per 100,000 residents behind New Orleans, Louisiana and Richmond, Virginia, the Washington Post reported.

Sihanouk returns home next week: King Sihanouk will return to Cambodia next week from Beijing, where he has been undergoing treatment for cancer, first Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh said. Reuters reports from Phnom Penh.

Ranariddh, one of the King's sons, said at a local ceremony in southern Kampong province the King would be returning home in another two days.



The first Chinese baby of the year of 1995 at a Beijing hospital is held by his mother Shi Haiping after being delivered early yesterday. China's population of over 1.51 billion people is rising and, according to the World Bank, will reach 1.6 billion by the year 2025, despite the government's policy of one child per family. — AFP photo

Murayama won't hold polls before '96

TOKYO, Jan 1: Prime Minister Tomichi Murayama of Japan, citing a range of difficult tasks facing his coalition government, vowed today to avoid calling general elections at least until 1996, and promised to retain the cabinet line up for at least six months, reports AFP.

In remarks that he prepared for a New Year's day news conference released to the media on Saturday, the premier said he intended to avoid a political vacuum at the time when the government is faced with pressing issues at home and abroad.

"We are faced with a historical task of administrative reform, especially deregulation, the streamlining of government-backed companies and decentralisation. We will also

Gen Shahak Israel's new army chief

JERUSALEM, Jan 1: Lt. Gen. Amnon Lipkin-Shahak became chief of staff of the Israel Defence Forces Sunday, taking over leader, more sophisticated military molded by Gulf War missile attacks and Middle East peace efforts, reports AP.

"I am handing over to you, Amnon, a mighty army, sure of itself, ready to face challenges in an environment that is still hostile," said outgoing Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Ehud Barak, who is retiring from the military.

Shahak, who as deputy chief of staff headed the peace talks with the Palestinians, promised the IDF would continue to protect the state.

"Without the army, there will be no progress towards peace," Shahak said.

Indian cabinet reshuffle may be delayed

NEW DELHI, Jan 1: A long awaited reshuffle of the Indian cabinet may be delayed, sources said today, as a leader of the ruling Congress (I) Party quite his post in another blow to Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao, reports AFP.

The cabinet shake-up, widely expected on new year's day, may take place later this week, ruling party sources said, and added that Rao will simultaneously revamp the Congress to boost its sagging image.

Rao had called a meeting of the cabinet at his residence late Saturday, and Congress sources said most ministers were under the impression that the premier would seek their resignations to make way for a line up.

"But nothing of that sort happened," said a Congress

source. "The PM did not touch upon the subject at all." Another Congress official said Rao, 73, was still assessing the situation following the dramatic resignation from the cabinet December 24 of Arjun Singh, his main rival in the ruling party.

"He is watching," said the official. "He will go for a cabinet reshuffle only after seeing the impact of the resignation by Arjun Singh."

Singh has held Rao responsible for a crisis in the Congress after its recent poll defeat.

Rao has been under a cloud since he led the Congress to a humiliating rout in two key southern states, including his native Andhra Pradesh, in December in a keenly-fought election seen as a referendum on the prime ministers.

Since then, five of his ministers have resigned, including three who were almost sacked for being linked to corruption scandals. Another minister left in a huff after being blamed for a sugar scam. Arjun Singh was the last two ago.

Five other ministers had resigned earlier for different reasons.

Meanwhile, Narain Dutt Tiwari, who heads the Congress in the most populous state of Uttar Pradesh, resigned Saturday to protest Rao's decision not to withdraw support for a coalition government in the province.

Political observers said Tiwari's decision was another blow to Rao, who faces elections in five more of India's 25 states in February and parliamentary polls in mid-1996.



UN special envoy for former Yugoslavia Yasushi Akashi (L) and Bosnian Vice-President Ejup Ganic (R) talk on Saturday in Sarajevo after the signing of a four-month cessation of hostilities with rebel Serb forces. — AFP photo

Rabbani talks power transfer

ISLAMABAD, Jan 1: Afghanistan's embattled President Burhanuddin Rabbani, who has offered to step down, consulted his allies in Kabul on Saturday over a transfer of power, the official Kabul radio said, reports Reuter.

The talks reported by the radio, which gave no details, came on the eve of a visit by UN peace envoy Mahmud Mestiri, who is trying to end factional fighting. US sources said he would fly to Kabul from Islamabad on Sunday morning.

President Rabbani's administration on Monday declared a unilateral ceasefire and offered to step down under a formula it was seeking to work out with its opponents.

Rabbani's opponents called the offer a trick and did not order a ceasefire, although there have been no reports of major fighting around Kabul in recent days.

Saturday's Kabul radio broadcast, monitored in Islamabad, gave no details of Rabbani's talks with allies belonging to a state commission, including powerful former Defence Minister Ahmad Shah Masood. Herat province governor Ismail Khan and Ittehad-i-Islami Party leader Abdurrahman Sayyaf.

"The high commission of the Islamic state of Afghanistan discussed the question of transfer of power and economic situation," the broadcast said.

An earlier AFP report says a high-ranking UN delegation has arrived in Kabul to pave the way for the imminent arrival of United Nations special representative Mahmud Mestiri, spokesman Charles Santos told journalists yesterday.

Santos would not elaborate on the purpose of Mestiri's

visit, an apparent continuation of the UN efforts to bring an end to the factional fighting between forces for and against Afghan President Rabbani and to reach a durable political settlement.

Mestiri will meet the president and other Afghan leaders, including Ahmad Shah Masood," said Santos who is political advisor to Mestiri.

He said it was not yet clear whether Mestiri would meet Rabbani's main rival, Hezb-i-Islami faction chief Gulbuddin Hekmatyar on this visit, but stressed "he will see Hekmatyar, that's definite."

The UN has asked for a ceasefire for the duration of Mestiri's visit, which they hope to parlay into a permanent cessation of hostilities.

"A permanent ceasefire is something of concern to the UN, it's very important," Santos said.

Kashmiris protest death of 3 Muslims

SRINAGAR, Jan 1: Indian troops today patrolled a curfew-bound town in Kashmir where six people were killed a day earlier, triggering noisy demonstrations by hundreds of Muslims, police said, reports AFP.

Army and paramilitary personnel armed with assault rifles were out on the streets of Baderwah town after hundreds of Muslims came out of their homes late Saturday to protest the deaths of three Muslim militants and a civilian.

Authorities said the militants and two federal troopers were killed in a fierce gunbattle at a residential district of Baderwah, 160 kilometers (100 miles) south-east of here. The civilian reportedly died in crossfire.

More than 10,000 people have been killed since 1989 in a bloody Muslim separatist campaign in Kashmir.

8 killed, 17 hurt in train mishap in Bangalore

BANGALORE, Jan 1: Eight people were killed and 17 seriously injured on new year's eve when an Indian train came off the rails near the southern city of Bangalore, railway officials said today, reports Reuter.

Police officials initially said after Saturday's accident that at least 15 people were feared killed, but railway officials confirmed only eight deaths.

"The nature of the accident was such that the death toll could have been much higher," said Ravindranath Tagore, a senior railway official.

Several coaches of the Bangalore-bound train from Bombay, derailed and overturned some 20 km (12 miles) outside Bangalore near the village of Yelahanka just minutes before reaching its destination on Saturday.

Some 1,000 passengers were on board the train, which was travelling at about 100 km (60 miles) an hour.

Sweden, Finland, Austria join EU

STOCKHOLM, Jan 1: The number of member-states in the European Union (EU) increased to 15 Sunday when Sweden, Finland and Austria formally joined the trade block, reports AP.

On New Year's Eve, shoppers in Stockholm could be seen stocking up on rice and other non-European goods they expected to get more expensive after the membership took effect.

But others expected little change. Analysts interviewed on Swedish Radio Sunday pointed to the fact that all three countries were members of the European Economic Area, which gave them extensive trade agreements with the union and made their economies integrated with the EU countries.

Lanka may resume talks with LTTE tomorrow

COLOMBO, Jan 1: The Sri Lankan government plans to resume peace talks with Tamil separatist guerillas early this week, a senior government official said today.

"The talks could start in the next two or three days, perhaps on January 3," General Hamilton Wanasinghe, the senior official in the Defence Ministry told Reuters.

He said a senior army officer will be included in the negotiating team, which will fly to the northern rebel stronghold of Jaffna, to work out a cessation of hostilities.

The rebels, fighting since 1983 for a separate homeland for minority Tamils in the island's north and east, have been demanding that the government give priority to reconstruction of areas affected by the war.

More than 30,000 people have been killed in the conflict.

The people's alliance (PA) government of President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga initiated talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in October after winning power in the August parliamentary polls.

A second round of talks was called off after opposition presidential candidate Gurnani Dissanayake was killed in a bomb blast on October 24 while addressing an election rally.

AFP says Lanka's stalled peace process suffered another setback with the assassination of a pro-government Tamil politician on new year's eve. Political analysts said here Sunday.

Two unidentified gunmen shot and killed Karavai Kandanasamy, 56, the Vice President of the Leftist Democratic People's Liberation Front (DPLF), at his home just outside the capital.

Off the Record

Jokester's attempt to write himself into Guinness Book

BOGOTA, Colombia: A Colombian man who told jokes for 36 straight hours in an attempt to write himself into the Guinness Book of World Records, may find the joke's on him, reports AP.

Jose Ordonez, 26, told nearly 5,000 jokes during the marathon from Wednesday morning to Thursday night, all broadcast live on Colombian radio. He said he hoped to be written into the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's most tireless radio joker.

But Guinness doesn't keep statistics on marathon records any more, spokeswoman Amanda Brooks said Friday.

"We haven't monitored marathon events since 1990, but the last published record we have, is for a gentleman in Peru who told jokes for 100 hours straight," she said.

Ban on 'Dangerous'

ROME: Michael Jackson's hit "Dangerous" isn't bound to be a bit in Italy, reports AP.

The First Civil Section court found that Jackson's "Will You Balaka by Italian singer Al Bano."

The court banned sales of Jackson's album, effective immediately. Bano's lawyer, Gianni Massaro, said he intended to seek an extension of the ban worldwide and financial compensation of about \$9 million.

"Dangerous," released in 1991, has sold more than 21 million copies worldwide. There was no immediate reaction from Jackson.

In February, a Denver jury cleared Jackson of charges that he stole a song for the title track of "Dangerous." A month earlier, a Los Angeles jury cleared him in a similar lawsuit involving "Thriller." "The Girl is Mine" and "We are the World."

Rod Stewart was drunk while copying 'do ya think I'm sexy'

RIO DE JANEIRO: Rod Stewart said he was too drunk during a trip to Brazil in 1979 to realise he was copying his "Do ya think I'm sexy" from a Brazilian star, reports AP.

Stewart said he had inadvertently copied the song, which turned out to be a hit, from Jorge Benjor's popular, "Taj Mahal."

"I never met Jorge Benjor but I'd like to meet him to explain everything," Stewart said in Friday's Jornal do Brasil newspaper, in advance of a New Year's concert on Copacabana Beach.

"I was in Brazil (in 1979) and that song stuck in my head but I didn't copy it on purpose. I was with Elton John and we drank too much. I remember almost nothing from that trip," Stewart said.

Benjor wrote "Taj Mahal" several years before Stewart released his song with the same melody. Shortly after releasing the song in 1979, Stewart acknowledged the similarity.

Use of religion, caste common in India to woo voters CEC threatens to cancel future polls

NEW DELHI, Jan 1: After almost routing out money power in Indian elections, the country's fiery poll panel chief has finally cracked the whip to banish religion and caste from the hustings, reports AFP.

Chief Election Commissioner T. N. Seshan has threatened to cancel future elections and prosecute candidates if they woo voters by harping on explosive issues such as religion, caste, race, community or language.

Seshan, 62, announced in an order last week that special observers would monitor campaign speeches in the elections in five Indian states in February to report any violation that could invite disqualification or a prison term.

Seshan, dubbed by commentators as the nation's conscience keeper, said in every

election candidates tended "to bank upon emotional and sentimental issues... rather than merit."

"Attempts to win (elections) by deliberately and knowingly dividing the masses on narrow ethnic lines has become a common and acceptable trick of the electoral trade," he said, adding the time had come to put an end to it.

The order, the latest in a series by Seshan since he took office in late 1990 and aimed at cleansing India's manumoth and corrupt electoral system of its mock, immediately set off a controversy.

"We agree there should be no appeal to voters on the basis of caste, religion or community," said spokesman Krishan Lal Sharma of the opposition and Hindu-revivalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

But the election commission should not interfere in such matters as concerning the ideology of the parties," Sharma added. The BJP has been accused in the past of targeting the majority Hindu community for votes.

The staunchly secular communists also welcomed Seshan's first, but challenged his right to prosecute the offenders himself.

India's leading newspapers were divided in their assessment. The Times of India said Seshan's directive deserved "full support," while The Hindu called it "another important step taken by the election commission to ensure a free and fair poll."

But the mass circulation Hindustan Times disagreed. The daily, in an editorial titled "Seshan as Puelher," dubbed

the order "a monstrous excess" which showed Seshan had become a dictator who was starting to wield absolute power.

"It is he, Seshan, who will invoke the rules, set the parameters, hold elections, cancel them, all in the name of ensuring that the polls are free and fair," it moaned.

Indian election laws prohibit the use of divisive issues such as religion and caste to woo the voters. But the restrictions have mainly remained confined to the statute book.

In recent years, at least four provincial lawmakers charged with seeking votes on religious grounds have been unseated by Indian courts after protracted legal battles.

Politicians say only courts should have the right to unseat lawmakers.

Fresh fighting in Somalia: 4 killed

MOGADISHU, Jan 1: Rival militias embarked on a new round of bitter fighting in Mogadishu today with rocket and machine gun battles leaving at least four dead and 100 wounded, said witnesses and hospital sources, reports AFP.

Fighting between the Murusade and Abgal clans of the larger Hawiye group erupted in the Somali capital's Bermuda district on Saturday but reasons for the flare-up remained obscure.

Hundreds of residents are reported to have fled the area.

Medical personnel at the Benadir and Diger hospitals said they had admitted 101 wounded people. Most of the wounded were said to be unarmed civilians, mainly women and children.

Some hospitals complained of shortages of emergency medical supplies, but an official at Diger said that hospital had received essential supplies from the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Somali central pharmacy, run by the UN World Health Organisation.

Quarantined schools in Bermuda were closed after the fighting broke out.

Nobody dares send his children to die," said Hashi Ashkile, a father of seven, "I'm afraid of going to live behind sandbags just like the United Nations," he added, a reference to the remaining 9,000 UN peacekeepers in Mogadishu who live behind fortified walls and sandbags.

Astrologists predict a man for Princess Di in 1995

UNDATED, Jan 1: Astrologists worldwide see some hope for 1995—a man for Princess Di, a baby for Yasser Arafat and may be even a vaccine for AIDS sufferers, reports AFP.

But among the gloomier predictions are visions of global social unrest, floods in Italy, quakes and hurricanes in the United States, acid rains worldwide and the beginning of turbulence in Saudi Arabia after the death of King Fahd.

Cairo Visionary Samiha Hagga sees two years of trouble ahead in the Saudi Kingdom after the death of King Fahd, predicted for July. The strongman who will finally take over will steer the nation back of Islam, removing ostentatious

signs of wealth. Egypt too would hit problems but avoid a fundamentalist takeover, she said.

Like astrologists the world over, she anticipates sudden happiness in the months ahead for Princess Di in the shape of a stubborn, strong-willed, brown-haired Frenchman who will remain by her side until her divorce—early in 1996—but never marry.

French astrologists Madame Indira and Catherine Tranquilli also forecast love in 1995 for Princess Di, but predicted she would re-marry, either in Brazil or in France.

For Arafat it would also be a year of personal bliss in which

his wife would give birth to a baby girl, "his life's last gift." Arafat will be completely besotted by the child, who like him will spend most of her life abroad, Hagga said.

Portuguese astrologist Maria Graciete, who practises in the United States, predicted medical breakthroughs in 1995, notably for skin disease, sore throats and flu.

But Brazil's Cristina Ruas, along with French astrologists, have visions of a life-saving discovery, a vaccine against Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), probably at year's end.

"Pluto leaves Scorpio to enter Sagittarius in the autumn. This means a respite for sexually transmitted diseases," said Pierre Limouzin.

On the darker side, many astrologists believe 1995 will bring a series of natural disasters, most caused by water, along with social cataclysms.

Graciete predicted hurricanes and quakes in the United States and "acid rains that will kill 100 million people" worldwide. Others see floods and dam disasters, mainly in Italy.

French astrologists agreed it would be a tough year for the under-privileged and unemployed, with wild street protests and urban unrest unleashed from March, both at home and elsewhere, and especially in the developing



Princess Diana

21 more executed in China

BEIJING, Jan 1: Some 21 Chinese accused of murder and theft were executed on December 27 in the north-eastern city Changchun, the Jilin Daily said Sunday, reports AP.

Another 10 people, charged with the same crimes were executed between December 27 and 28 in various locations on the southern island of Hainan, the Hainan Daily reported.

The executions took place immediately after the prisoners were sentenced to death at a series of large public trials. The executions form part of the traditional security campaign launched in the run-up to lunar new year, which this year falls on January 31.