

BRIEFLY

Ghali hails Bosnian ceasefire: Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali on Monday hailed the Bosnian ceasefire as a "wonderful New Year's gift." AFP reports from United Nations.

In a statement from UN headquarters in New York, the UN chief said the accord between Bosnian Serb and Muslim-led government forces that took effect on December 24 was "an important first step toward the achievement of a real peace."

Journalist killed in Chechnya: A journalist for the Russian armed forces daily Krasnaya Zvezda was killed in Chechnya on New Year's Eve, Russian television reported on Monday. Reuter says from Moscow.

Vladimir Zhitlenko was the second correspondent to die in the conflict.

5 killed in East Timor violence: Five people have been killed and a town market torched in fresh unrest in East Timor since the weekend, sources in the Indonesian ruled former Portuguese colony said early Tuesday. AFP reports from Jakarta.

Hundreds of people, mostly youths rioted in Baucau town, some 115 kilometres (71.3 miles) east of the capital Dili, after an East Timorese, identified only as Amandino, was killed in a fight on Sunday with an unidentified migrant from South Sulawesi, they said. The cause of the market brawl was not immediately known.

Polish FM to stay in office: Polish President Lech Walesa on Monday refused to accept the resignation of Foreign Minister Andrzej Olechowski over a corruption affair, presidential spokesman Leszek Spalinski told reporters. AFP reports from Warsaw.

Walesa had met Prime Minister Waldemar Pawlak on Monday and told him he had given Olechowski an "obligation" to stay in his post. Spalinski said.

13 die in Argentine road mishap: Thirteen passengers died and at least a dozen others were injured on Monday when a truck crashed into a bus on a highway, police said. AP reports from Buenos Aires.

Witnesses said a trailer came apart from the truck and hit the bus, which was travelling in the opposite direction between the cities of Corrientes and Posadas northwest of Buenos Aires. Police said the victims were all Argentines.

Israeli woman soldier jailed: An Israeli military court on Monday sentenced a woman soldier to five years in prison for stealing two submachine guns and selling them to Arabs in exchange for drugs. Israel television said. Reuter reports from Jerusalem.

Rachel Biton broke into the room of other soldiers on her Tel Aviv base and stole the two Israeli-made Uzi weapons.

Russian offensive on Grozny

DPM, defence minister blamed for "massive violation" of HR

MOSCOW, Jan 3: Three pro-reform deputies on Monday demanded the resignation of the Russian defence minister and the deputy premier responsible for Chechnya blaming them for "massive violation" of human rights in the rebel republic, reports AFP.

The three, who had just returned from a fact-finding mission to embattled Grozny, told a news conference that they had asked to see Russian President Boris Yeltsin "to inform him about what is happening there" as "he is obviously not aware" of the situation.

The deputies, Viktor Sheiniss, Lev Ponomarev and Gleb Yakunin, said that Defence Minister Pavel Grachev and Nikolai Yegorov, the Deputy Prime Minister responsible for nationalities, should resign for the "massive violation" of human rights in the pro-independence republic.

The deputies said that the Russian army offensive on Grozny, launched Saturday with the backing of 250 armoured vehicles, had already left "several hundreds" of Russian soldiers dead along with more than 1,000 civilians.

The figures could not be substantiated, but Chechen commander in chief Colonel Aslan' Moshadov told an AFP correspondent in Grozny that 800 to 1,000 Russian soldiers had been killed in the fighting, which claimed the lives of only "dozens" of Chechens.

Sheiniss said that the Russian offensive which continued into a third day on Monday was "a failure." He said the Russian soldiers sent to put down the three-year independence drive by the Muslim Chechens were "poorly trained and poorly prepared."

Ponomarev and Yakunin also explained that they had left the pro-reform parliamentary group, Russia's Choice led by former Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar because the group's leaders did not take a strong enough stand on the Chechen conflict.



A group of civilians leave Grozny on Monday following heavy fighting between Russian troops and Chechen volunteers supporting rebel President Dzhokhar Dudayev. — AFP photo

"We believe that Gaidar did not use all the potential he had at his disposal," said Ponomarev, who added that Russia's Choice ministers in the government should resign, including Anatoly Chubais responsible for economic reform.

The resignation of such reformers as Chubais would be "a powerful weapon," he added.

The three deputies, who were in the bunker in the Grozny presidential palace until Sunday morning, left behind seven colleagues including former dissident Sergei Kovalyov who has openly condemned the military intervention.

Sonia sides with Arjun Singh

NEW DELHI, Jan 3: Sonia Gandhi, the powerful widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, appears to have jumped into a dispute that is sidetracking the governing Congress Party, reports AP.

Sonia has openly sided with cabinet minister Arjun Singh, who resigned on December 24, criticising Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao's economic reforms and the party's alleged involvement in corruption scandals, the Pioneer newspaper said on Tuesday.

Curfew extended in villages near Indo-Pak border

JAMMU, Jan 3: Night curfew in the villages near Indo-Pak border has been extended for a period of two months, reports PTI.

The order was issued here by the District Magistrate (Jammu) Khurshid Ahmed Ganai under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code.

The order, however, said that people will be allowed to move in curfew hours in these areas under exceptional circumstances with a curfew pass provided by a station house officer (SHO) or post commander of BSF border outpost.

Sonia did that by recently making Singh, the party's unofficial no. 2, a trustee in the Jawahar Bhawan Trust, one of the two major charities she runs, the front-page story said.

Although Sonia holds no public office and doesn't discuss politics openly, she is often consulted by Rao and his aides about government policies, and she wields clout in the party.

So many Indians will assume that she has sided with Arjun Singh, who has long wanted to run for prime minister, when they see news reports that she has made him a trustee of the charity.

In fighting exploded in the Congress party when it lost two important state elections in November and December to populists criticising the economic reforms as harmful to poor people.

Five other important state elections will be held in February and March, and the next general election comes next year.

Four other ministers in Rao's cabinet recently quit or were dismissed for their alleged roles in the 1992 securities scandal, which caused Bombay's stock market to crash, and the recent sugar scam, which caused sugar prices to skyrocket for months.

On Sunday, Narain Dutt Tiwari, the Congress party leader in the politically influential state of Uttar Pradesh, quit the party's decision-making unit in a dispute with Rao.

Clinton seeks protection for abortion clinics

LITTLE ROCK, Arkansas, Jan 3: President Bill Clinton on Monday condemned violence against abortion clinics and ordered the US Justice Department to set up a task force on clinic protection, reports Reuter.

In a statement issued at the start of a brief vacation to visit friends and family back home in Little Rock, Clinton took care to note that people on both sides of the issue have "deeply felt beliefs," most of which are expressed peacefully.

Two people were killed and five injured at two abortion clinics near Boston last Friday, bringing to five the number of people shot to death in anti-abortion violence in less than two years.

'Jong-Il DPRK's supreme leader'

BEIJING, Jan 3: The North Korean ambassador to China said on Friday that Kim Jong-Il was in total control of the country, despite his failure to deliver an annual nationwide address at the New Year, reports AFP.

Kim Jong-Il is the supreme leader of our party, the state and the army," Ambassador Chu Chang-Jun told reporters here, adding that the New Year's address — a tradition started by Kim's late father Kim Il-Sung — had been replaced by a long editorial carried by major North Korean newspapers.

Tibetans barred from meeting UN HR delegation

BEIJING, Jan 3: Chinese security forces barred Tibetans from meeting a United Nations human rights delegation visiting Tibet, in a violation of UN guidelines, a human rights group said on Tuesday, reports AP.

The London-based Tibet Information Network also said that four monks who staged a protest linked to the UN visit were arrested.

Abdelfattah Amor, the UN special rapporteur on religious intolerance, last November led the first UN human rights delegation to Tibet, China, said the rights group, which monitors the situation in the remote Himalayan region.

Tibetans barred from meeting UN HR delegation

BEIJING, Jan 3: Chinese security forces barred Tibetans from meeting a United Nations human rights delegation visiting Tibet, in a violation of UN guidelines, a human rights group said on Tuesday, reports AP.

The London-based Tibet Information Network also said that four monks who staged a protest linked to the UN visit were arrested.

Abdelfattah Amor, the UN special rapporteur on religious intolerance, last November led the first UN human rights delegation to Tibet, China, said the rights group, which monitors the situation in the remote Himalayan region.



Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati (R) talks with Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao in New Delhi on Monday. Velayati is on a three-day official visit to India. — AFP photo

PLO rejects compromise on fresh settlement

JERUSALEM, Jan 3: Israel and the Palestinians prepared to renew peace talks on Tuesday after Israeli troops killed four PLO police in a confused Gaza shootout and Palestinians rejected a compromise over new construction in an Israeli settlement, reports AP.

As he departed for the talks in Cairo, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said he expects the violence "to hang in the atmosphere" during the meeting.

Negotiations are already bogged down by Israel's reluctance to pull troops out of the West Bank until there is a stop to the Islamic militant attacks that have taken 32 Israeli lives since October 1.

Israel wants the Palestinians to rein in the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas movement. The Palestinians insist that Israel stop all settlement construction.

The implications of the bloody Monday night clash between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian police were not immediately clear, but mutual blame was certain to drive a deeper wedge into the negotiations.

It seems that an Israeli force came into the autonomous areas through an opening in the border fence and they attacked the post here," said Palestinian police officer Gen Abdul Razeq Majayda. "It was an unprovoked attack."

The Israeli army, however, said Israeli soldiers were chasing gunmen who opened fire on their patrol from inside the autonomous zone when Palestinian police began shooting.

"The Israeli force several times called on its assailants to surrender before returning fire. It is clear that the Palestinian police fired deliberately at the Israeli force and were killed only as a result of return fire by the Israeli forces," an army statement said.

Despite the conflicting statements, Israeli and Palestinian officers joined forces to investigate the tragic mishap early Tuesday.

31 die, 38 hurt in Philippine bus mishap

MANILA, Jan 3: A passenger bus fell off a bridge Tuesday after racing with another bus, killing at least 31 people and injuring 38 others, a radio station reported, says AP.

Radio Station DZXL said the incident took place at about 3:30 a.m. Tuesday (1930 GMT Monday) near Echague town in Isabela province, about 240 kilometers (150 miles) north of Manila.

The station quoted the police as saying that the Florida Bus Line bus was racing with another bus when it careened off the road and plunged off the bridge and into a 26-meter (85-foot) ravine.

The bus left Manila late Monday and was en route to Tuguegarao, further north in Cagayan province.

Off the Record

Gold mine at queen's holiday home?

LONDON: Another flash in the pan for Queen Elizabeth II, reports AP.

It's not enough that there's a pool of oil under Windsor Castle, now geologists say they've found traces of gold in streams at Balmoral, the queen's holiday home in the Scottish Highlands.

Buckingham Palace kept a stiff upper lip at the news. "Inevitably in such surveys, traces of minerals are found," the palace said in a statement.

Millions would have to be invested to retrieve the equivalent of even a small nugget of gold at Balmoral.

The Daily Express said on Monday.

For centuries, gold has been known to exist in tiny quantities in Scotland, Wales and Ireland. There is one gold mine in Scotland. It is 75 miles (120 km) from Balmoral.



Marriage with a difference

STOCKHOLM: Hans Jonsson and Sven-Olov Jansson exchanged wedding vows on Monday, and became the first Swedish couple to marry under a new law allowing homosexual marriages, reports AP.

"We have lived together for five years, but we feel it is important to be recognised by the society the same way heterosexual couples are," Jansson said.

Sweden became the third Nordic country — after Denmark and Norway — to allow homosexuals to enter registered partnerships, with all the rights and obligations of marriage except adopting children or having a church wedding.

Jonsson, 42, and Jansson, 58, vowed to love each other "for better or for worse" in a brief civil ceremony at the town hall in Ostersund, 600 kilometers (370 miles) northwest of Stockholm.

Jorn Svensson, a former member of parliament for Sweden's left party, presided over the ceremony and wished the men "happiness in your partnership and your home."

"This is a victory for justice and equality," Svensson said. Just 51 years ago, homosexuality was listed as crime in Sweden.

Mao's dwindling popularity

HONG KONG: Primary school pupils in China know more about a Hong Kong pop singer than about the late Chinese Communist leader Mao Tse-tung, Hong Kong press reports said on Tuesday, reports AP.

Quoting a survey by Beijing's China Labour Daily, the reports said only 82 students out of 123 questioned had heard of Mao, who proclaimed the founding of Communist China in 1949 and led the nation until his death in 1976.

Meanwhile, they said, all knew about Hong Kong pop singer Andy Lau, including his birthday and the names of the movies he has starred in.

Only one of the students interviewed could recite the national anthem by heart, the reports added.

They did not say when or where the survey was carried out or its margin of error.

Khmers offering reward for kidnapping of foreigners

SIEM REAP (Cambodia), Jan 3: The Khmer Rouge leadership is offering its guerrillas 200,000 baht (8,000 dollars) to kidnap an American or Australian in Cambodia, defectors say, reports AP.

The reports come several weeks after the guerrilla group said in its daily broadcasts that it would decapitate any Australians it found because "Cambodia was providing military aid to the Cambodian government. The guerrilla group long has opposed the United States."

"The Khmer Rouge policy is to kidnap Australians, Americans," said Yout Ran, a Khmer Rouge defector. "My company soldiers were asked to look for them."

Min Siv, a second defector in Siem Reap, confirmed the reports.

Christians in Japan face worse threat than samurai swords

FUKUE ISLAND (Japan), Jan 3: Samurai ransacking the house would not have looked twice at the Buddha statue or the bedroom mirror. But those objects contained a secret that could have brought death to everyone in the village, reports AP.

Like their owners, they had double identities. The statue could be turned around to reveal a crucifix. Held up to the sun, the mirror could reflect onto a wall a forbidden image of the Blessed Mother etched beneath its surface.

For more than 200 years starting in the 1600s, members of a Japanese Christian sect in remote villages clung to a faith outlawed on pain of death.

Religious freedom was formally ushered in more than 100 years ago, but now the "kakure," or hidden, Christians face a worse threat than samurai swords.

Young people are fleeing the isolation of the villages around the East China Sea where sect members made their homes. And those who stay are losing interest in the ways of their elders.

It gets especially lonely around the holidays," said Towa Uramoto, 78, whose congregation was dissolved several years ago because it did not have enough members. "This is when we really miss our religion."

All nine of Uramoto's children have left to seek better opportunities.

"Two generations from now, there will probably be no more 'kakure Christians left,'" said Kentaro Miyazaki, an anthropologist at Nagasaki Jyun Shin University, who has studied the practices for more than a decade.

For generations, the hidden Christians prayed secretly in small groups on Sundays and holidays. They worked as tenant farmers and fishermen on the fringes of Japan's southernmost main island of Kyushu, as far as they could get from the shogun's watchful eye.

The secret groups began meeting shortly after foreign missionaries were expelled from Japan by leaders who feared Christianity was the first step in a process that could lead to colonisation by Western powers.

"Japan is the land of the gods," the powerful shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi declared in 1587. He accused the missionaries of corrupting and stirring up the people, and gave them 20 days to pack up and leave.

Many believers defied the ban, so to show they meant business Toyotomi's successors ordered the slaughter of thousands of Japanese Christians in the early and mid-1600s, torturing many for days before executing them.

Twenty-six priests and missionaries were crucified, their bodies left to rot on the crosses as a warning to others.

Large numbers of people obeyed the shogun's decree and apostatized. But a few secretly clung to their faith, even though they were without churches, ministers or Bibles.

They carved their own religious items, ingeniously concealing them, and wrote down the prayers and Bible stories they could remember to pass them down to future generations.

Over time, the sects slowly transformed into a fusion of Japanese folk beliefs and Christianity. The meanings of the secret prayers they chanted in a jumble of Portuguese, Latin and Japanese grew more confused each year.

Some sects began to understand Christmas as a holiday to pray for easy births. Other thought it was a time to thank animals in the stable for providing warmth.

In one of the few surviving kakure Christian Bibles, the angel Gabriel is a butterfly. Jesus is conceived when Gabriel announces to Mary that she will give birth to the Son of God and then flies into her month.

As a boy, I remember Christmas services where we passed ground fish and sake as communion," said Shusaku Yamakawa, 72, who was raised as a kakure Christian on Fukue island, 620 miles (1,000 kilometres) south of Tokyo.

"We children didn't know what exactly the older people were doing," said Yamakawa, who at 28 became a Roman Catholic. "The prayers were in a foreign language that even none of them understood. They just recited the sounds."

The number of past adherents is difficult to determine. But a historian who specialises in the kakure Christians, Diego Yuki, estimated that there were about 50,000 of them when Japan decreed freedom of religion in 1873.

About half of them immediately declared their faith and rejoined the Roman Catholic

Church, Japan, with a population of 125 million, is about 1 per cent Christian today.

For some, though, the centuries had so entwined their faith with secrecy that they chose to remain isolated. Even today, many are reluctant to speak to strangers or to be photographed.

Miyazaki, the anthropologist, estimated there are only about 5,000 kakure Christians remaining, most of them in their late 60s. When it dissolved, Uramoto's group contributed its sacred objects to a Catholic church.

Some observers say the story of the hidden Christians has resonance in a modern Japan struggling to keep its own traditions. To others, the kakure Christians prove that for a faith to prosper, it must be shared.

"May be there are still some kakure Christians on some of the other islands around here," said Yamakawa. "But I don't know of any left."

Colombian peace talks in jeopardy

BOGOTA, Jan 3: Hopes for early peace talks to end Colombia's long-running guerrilla war took a knock on Monday when the country's biggest rebel group attacked the government for preaching peace but practising war, reports Reuter.

President Ernesto Samper's five-month-old government has made peace talks with Colombia's estimated 10,000 Communist guerrillas a top priority but mistrust on both sides has held up progress and no date has yet been set for negotiations to begin.

The biggest rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) said in a new year message sent to radio stations that "if a political solution is really wanted the government must harmonise its words with its deeds."