

BRIEFLY

14 Indonesians die of fever: At least 14 children died last month during an outbreak of dengue fever in the South Sumatra city of Palembang, a hospital spokesman said yesterday. Reuter reports from Jakarta.

Fourteen children died last December following the dengue fever outbreak about 102 people were treated, the public hospital spokeswoman told Reuters by telephone from Palembang, 390 km (243 miles) northwest of Jakarta.

Snowstorm hits C China: The worst snowstorm in five years buffeted central China's Hunan province on Tuesday night, damaging thousands of trees and possibly affecting winter crops, local officials said yesterday. Reuter reports from Beijing.

The storm dumped 10 to 20 cm (four to eight inches) of snow on much of the province and up to 30 cm (12 inches) in some places. Xinhua news agency quoted the provincial Meteorological Department as saying.

Communists win Uzbek polls: Communists scored a landslide win in legislative elections on December 25, taking more than 96 per cent of the 205 seats allocated after the first round, the electoral commission said on Tuesday. AFP reports from Tashkent.

Thirty-nine more seats will be up for grabs in a second round on Sunday, and in another six constituencies where very few voters turned out last month, a second round will be held on January 22 with an entirely new set of candidates in a bid to whet the appetite for an election.

8,000 killed in Afghan war in '94: At least 8,000 people were killed and 30,000 injured during 1994 in civil war in Kabul, reports newspapers in Islamabad, says IRNA.

Quoting the Afghan news agency, the papers Sunday said 70 per cent of the total casualties were civilians.

The bloody civil war fightings displaced 600,000 inhabitants of Kabul forcing them to take refuge in other parts of war-ravaged country, mostly in the eastern town of Jalalabad.

16 Chinese miners die in blast: A gas explosion in a coal mine in northern China killed 16 miners, injured five and left one missing, the China Daily reported yesterday. Reuter says from Beijing.

The New Year's day explosion occurred in a coal mine near Tongling city in northern Shaanxi province, the newspaper said. It gave no other details.

Swedish asked to leave India: Indian authorities have asked a Swedish scholar who was barred from attending an international Tamil conference to leave the country for security reasons, the Swedish embassy said on Tuesday. Reuter reports from New Delhi.

Peter Schalk, a professor at Sweden's Uppsala University and an Uppsala colleague from Sri Lanka, A Velupillai, "have been requested to leave India for security reasons," an embassy spokeswoman in New Delhi said.

Nobel laureate Wigner dead: Hungarian born US physicist Eugene Wigner, a Nobel laureate, has died at age 92. Hungarian radio reported yesterday. AFP reports from Budapest.

The radio did not specify when or where he died.

Wigner, who participated in creating the first ever chain reaction and in building the world's first nuclear reactor along with Enrico Fermi and Leo Szilard in Chicago in 1942, won a Nobel prize for research on quantum mechanics in 1963.

Thai constitution amended: The Thai parliament yesterday passed a package of amendments to the constitution aimed at bringing broader democracy to the country. Reuter reports from Bangkok.

In a joint session of parliament, an overwhelming majority of the lower and upper houses voted to approve the amendments which include a younger voting age and abolition of centuries old discrimination against women.

Italian meet suspended: President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro has the flu and has suspended a key round of meetings yesterday that were aimed at coming up with a new Italian premier to end the country's political crisis, AP reports from Rome.

The presidential palace reported that the talks will resume as soon as the head of state is better.

Call to free Myanmar from junta

BANGKOK, Jan 4: An opposition umbrella group marked the 47th anniversary of Myanmar independence today with a call for renewed efforts to "liberate" the country from the ruling junta, reports AFP.

In a statement from Washington received in Bangkok, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) said Myanmar was at a crossroads, facing paths either "toward national reconciliation or toward despotic rule."

It called on the international community to step up pressure on the junta in

Kumaratunga may announce date for truce tomorrow

COLOMBO, Jan 4: President Chandrika Kumaratunga met her peace negotiators today before briefing her Cabinet on a tentative agreement with Tamil rebels for a truce in the 11-year-old civil war, reports AP.

"It is up to the president to decide on the date for the cessation of hostilities," said Navin Gooneratne, a member of the government team in the talks Tuesday in the rebel stronghold of Jaffna.

Kumaratunga may announce the date for the truce in a policy statement Friday when she inaugurates a new session of parliament.

It is likely to take effect before Pope John Paul II arrives in Colombo January 20, Kusunirsi Balapattana, the chief negotiator told reporters after returning from Jaffna, 300 kilometres north of Colombo.

The rebel radio station, Voice of the Tigers, announced the next round of talks will be January 14, and said the details of the truce will be announced by both sides "within two or three days."

In their first public comment, the rebels confirmed that an accord had been reached on a cessation of hostilities.

The broadcast, monitored in northern Sri Lanka, said rebel and government administrators met Wednesday to identify projects for rehabilitation in the war-devastated north.

While the two sides negotiated Tuesday, three rebels were called and another captured by troops in eastern Sri Lanka, military officials said today.

Details of the proposed truce were not immediately available, but officials said it will include demilitarisation zones between government and rebel lines in the north.

More documents must still be exchanged between the government and the Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam before the agreement is finalised, Gooneratne told The Associated Press.

The government has avoided the use of the word ceasefire, which officials describe as a more formal and complex arrangement involving restrictions on troop movements and monitoring.

A formal ceasefire would be negotiated in a second stage.

But the truce agreement and the release of four policemen were clear indicators that the negotiations had started well, analysts said.

The negotiators said they offered the Tigers a 39 billion rupee (804 million dollar) aid package to rebuild the northern and eastern provinces, battered by the war that has killed 34,000 people.

The two teams also discussed the opening of a land route between the rebel-controlled northern areas and the rest of Sri Lanka, but no agreement was reached. Balapattana said.

The Catholic Church has asked to open a route for some 7,000 Tamil Christians to reach Colombo for the two masses by Pope John Paul II.

Japan needs 'highly mobile' defence force

TOKYO, Jan 4: Japan wants to develop a "highly mobile" defence force over the next five years to face up to the uncertainties in the world created by the end of the Cold War, defence agency head Tokutomi Tamazawa said today, reports AFP.

"We have to bolster the quality of our defence force, while maintaining a highly reliable, efficient force now that we face an age when there are dangers scattered (throughout the world) in unclear and unpredictable situations that have replaced the Cold War," Kyodo news agency quoted him as saying.

Japan hopes to build a "compact and highly mobile defence" force capable of acting with flexibility in any emergency, he added.

Spelling out the government's basic stance in its five-year defence plan for fiscal 1996-2000 Tamazawa said in his annual new year's speech that Japan would seek to ensure its security through dialogue with neighbouring countries such as China and Russia.

Meanwhile, Japan's major economic daily Nihon Keizai said that the defence agency planned to spend around one billion yen (10 million dollars) over three years starting in fiscal 1995 on developing a radar capable of detecting Stealth aircraft and missiles.

Operated jointly with an Airborne Warning and Control System, the new radar should be able to detect small, low-flying objects and recognise their form and composition, the newspaper said.

Defence agency spokesman Takihito Goto said the possibility of such a radar was being studied but no decision about its development had yet been made.



A weeping Vasanthavevi is restrained yesterday by relatives at the funeral of her slain husband, Karavai Kandasamy, a leader of a pro-government Tamil political party. Kandasamy was killed by suspected Tamil Tiger guerrillas on New Year's eve. — AFP photo

Couple hijacks Sudanese plane with 36 people

KHARTOUM, Jan 4: A couple hijacked a Sudanese plane with 36 people on board during an internal flight today in a bid to fly to Egypt, aviation authorities said, reports AFP.

The plane had just taken off from Khartoum on a regular flight to the northern town of Merawi when a man and woman on board ordered the captain to go to Cairo, the officials told the Sudan news agency.

He convinced them the plane did not have enough fuel and the aircraft landed in port Sudan, on the Red Sea coast of eastern Sudan.

An Egyptian court on Sunday sentenced a Sudanese to 15 years of hard labour for hijacking a Sudan Airways plane, with 93 passengers flying the Khartoum-Donga route, on April 6.

He had forced it to fly to Egypt at gunpoint where the authorities refused permission to land in Cairo but allowed the aircraft to touch down in the southern town of Luxor, where he gave himself up.

12 members of Israeli secret police held in Gaza

GAZA, Jan 4: Palestinian police arrested 12 Israelis in the Gaza Strip on Tuesday and said they were members of the Israeli secret police, a senior Palestinian security official said, reports Reuter.

Israeli army official said they were checking the report.

The Palestinian official said the armed Israelis were travelling in a van and wearing plain clothes. According to the official, the Israelis said they were chasing armed Palestinians.

Other details were not immediately available.

The arrests follow an incident on Monday in which Israeli soldiers shot dead three Palestinian policemen in Gaza.

Nov '84 riots: Delhi court frees 3 after 10 years

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: The Delhi High Court has acquitted three men from charges of loot, arson and murder during the riots in November 1984 here following the assassination of Indira Gandhi, reports PTI.

A division bench comprising Justice P K Bahri and Justice S D Pandit on Monday ordered the forthwith release of Wazir, Sitaram and Tribhuvan, residents of Sultanpuri in west Delhi, who were awarded life imprisonment by a sessions court.

The court said there was lack of sufficient evidence to connect the three persons with the crime.

Over 2,500 persons, mostly Sikhs, were killed and property worth crores of rupees destroyed in Delhi in the first week of November 1984, when riots broke out following the assassination of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

Off the Record

A novel excuse

SOUTH AFRICA: A student facing shoplifting charges offered the court a novel excuse — he wanted to go to jail like Nelson Mandela and write a book about it, reports AP.

Michael Dladla, 22, said at his initial court hearing before Christmas he deliberately shoplifted candy to be imprisoned and write a book about the experience, the South African Press Association (SAPA) reported.

President Nelson Mandela's autobiography, "Long Walk to Freedom," came out late last year. Dladla told the court he saw Mandela talking about it on television and decided to go to prison also. He said at the first hearing he wanted life imprisonment.

But at his second hearing on Tuesday, after spending several days in jail, Dladla agreed to be released with a warning to show up for subsequent appearances, SAPA reported.

Cake bomb as new year's gift

BANGKOK: Elementary school pupils taking a slow peek at their teacher's new year's cake spotted a booby-trap hand grenade inside, and authorities defused it, police said Wednesday, reports AP.

Had the children lifted the cake box's lid wide open, it would have triggered the grenade, said Maj. Sompong Musikrak.

Sompong said a man handed the box to a pupil at a school Tuesday and told him to deliver it to his teacher, Thittima Nuammasing.

The woman put it on a desk for the children and, when they peeked inside, they spotted the grenade sitting atop a white-frosted cake bearing the message "Happy New Year."

Sompong said a janitor then called him to the scene, where he discovered a trip wire had been tied from the ribbon on top of the box to the grenade pin.

Thittima suspected a fellow teacher, who had threatened her several times by phone, had attempted to kill her over a matter of jealousy, Sompong said. He said authorities were searching for the other teacher.

New species of goat?

HANOI: Scientists are excited about a photograph of a goat-like animal that could be the third new species to be discovered in Vietnam in as many years, a leading naturalist said Wednesday, reports AP.

The photograph was taken in December by peasants in Thua Thien-Hue province in central Vietnam said Vo Quy, director of the Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Studies at the National University of Hanoi.

Quy said the peasants captured two of the unidentified animals — a mother and baby — in a trap, and sent a photo to the university because they had never seen such animals before. The mother was killed by the trap, while the baby died shortly afterward, Quy said.

He said his center planned to send someone to Nham Village, about 540 kilometres south of Hanoi, to bring back the bones and skin for study.

"It's a kind of goat, but a little bit strange," Quy said.

"I don't know if it's a new species or not. But it looks like a new species."

The official Vietnam News published the photograph, which shows the baby eating, with the headline "New Mammal Investigated" but Quy cautioned that the animal remains must be studied before any conclusions can be drawn.

Call to free Myanmar from junta

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In a statement from Washington received in Bangkok, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) said Myanmar was at a crossroads, facing paths either "toward national reconciliation or toward despotic rule."

It called on the international community to step up pressure on the junta in

Yangon and urged "the entire nation to redouble their efforts to liberate Myanmar again by marching in unity and through discipline and perseverance."

Domestic opposition and international pressure had, the NCGUB said, finally brought about meetings between Myanmar's military rulers and leading opposition figure Aung San Suu Kyi, now in her sixth year of house arrest in Yangon.

But the two meetings were "held in a captor captive atmosphere," the group said, and it renewed its call for her unconditional release and the granting of direct access to news media and political allies.

While the country had never been more divided, "the only way to overcome the politico-economic crisis in Myanmar is to find a political solution through national reconciliation," the NCGUB said.

Opposition unity suffered a blow, meanwhile, when the Karens, Myanmar's oldest and most powerful insurgent ethnic group, announced a split between Buddhist and Christian led factions.

The SLORC came to power in 1988, crushing nationwide pro-democracy demonstrations.

Yemeni president holds telephone talks with Fahd

DUBAI, Jan 4: Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh held telephone talks with Saudi Arabian King, Fahd late on Tuesday after an incident in which Yemen says Saudi troops attacked a border post, killing at least two Yemenis, reports Reuter.

The official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) said Saleh telephoned the King as part of efforts to "clear the atmosphere, cement brotherly ties and boost security and stability."

Yemen's government said on Monday two Yemenis were killed and six wounded in a New Year's day clash with Saudi Arabian troops on a disputed stretch of the two countries' border.

Saudi Arabia has not officially confirmed that border clashes occurred.

US Gulf War veterans sue 20 German cos

HONN, Jan 4: American soldiers who fought during the Gulf War have filed a lawsuit against 20 German companies which, they allege, allowed Iraq to build chemical weapons, the weekly Stern reported Tuesday, reports AFP.

The war veterans are asking for one billion dollars in damages and interest for illnesses they developed after the Gulf War.

Thousands of American soldiers who fought during the 1991 war to oust Iraq from Kuwait have complained of symptoms that have eluded the medical community and have become commonly known as the "Gulf War syndrome."

Among the symptoms are chronic fatigue, depression and anxiety. Stern said, one of the German companies targeted in the lawsuit was the Degussa Pharmaceutical group.

Manfred Hardt, a spokesman at Degussa dismissed the complaint saying that his company never delivered any chemical weapons to Iraq.

Other companies include Thyssen and Preussag.

German law requires government authorization for the sale of weapons to any outside country and Germany has not authorized any weapons sales to Iraq for 30 years.

But US intelligence services discovered after the Gulf War that several German firms had secretly helped the regime in Baghdad to acquire weapons.

The discovery led to the conviction of several German business leaders and investigations, some of which are ongoing.

Filipino papers' reports irritate Pak envoy

MANILA, Jan 4: The Pakistani ambassador, irritated by local newspaper reports that some of his countrymen smuggled arms for Muslim extremists, dared Philippine authorities Wednesday to arrest them, reports AP.

"Why don't they arrest these Pakistanis in stead of just talking about them?" Ambassador Afzal Qadir told reporters.

Qadir said he was considering lodging a formal protest.

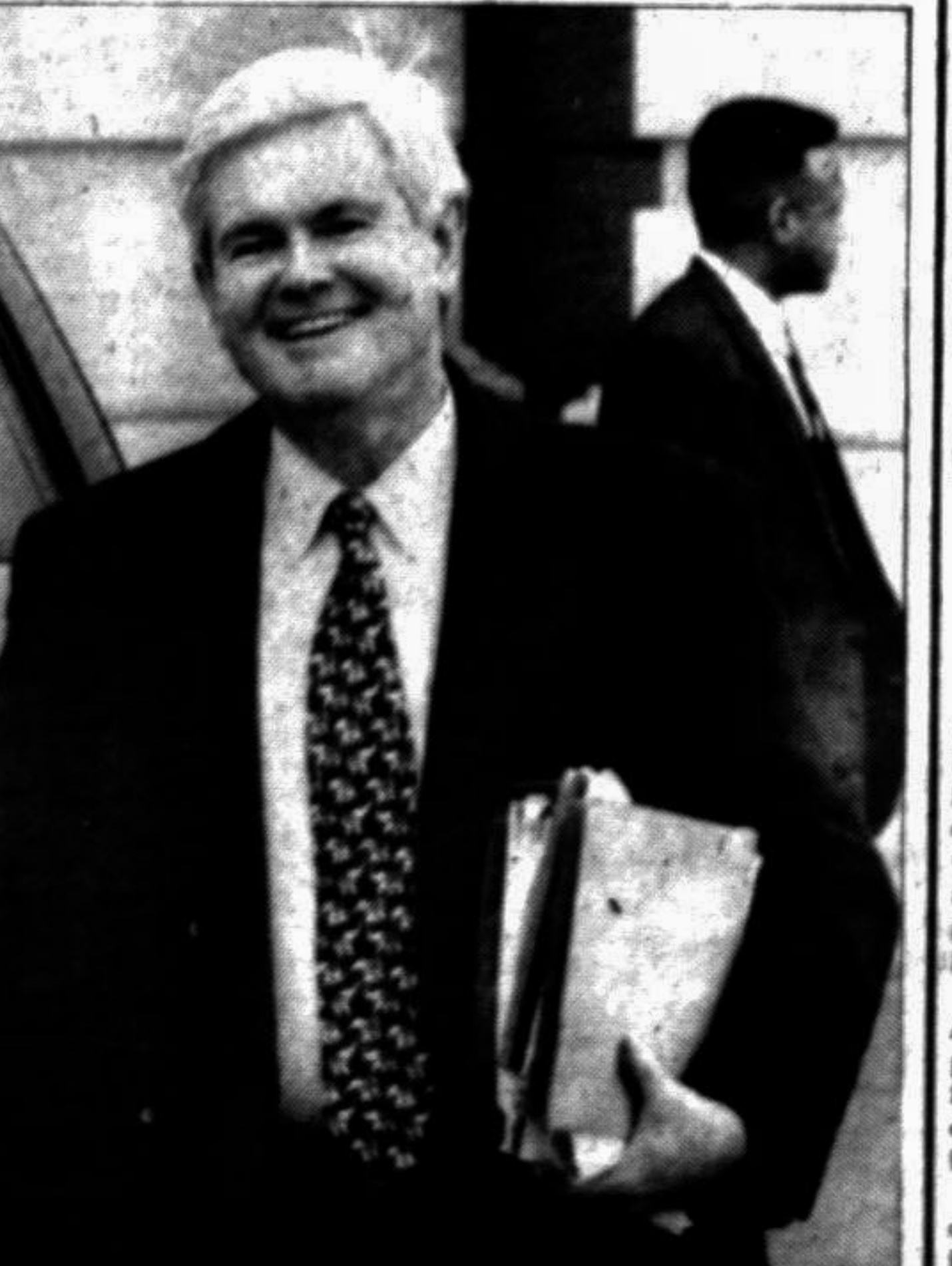
Qadir was reacting to news reports quoting ranking military officers as saying at least six Pakistani nationals have been seen with members of the Muslim extremist Abu Sayyaf group as they were smuggling high powered weapons in the southern Philippines.

President Fidel Ramos also expressed concern about the reports.

Lt. Gen. Orlando Soriano, chief of the military's Southern Command, was quoted by Manila newspapers saying Abu Sayyaf members, aided by unidentified Pakistanis, smuggled sophisticated weapons including surface-to-air missiles.

Qadir said it was unfair to attribute wrongdoing on his countrymen without informing the Pakistani Embassy.

He recalled the same "unfair treatment" from Manila last year when several Pakistanis were apprehended on suspicion they were giving assistance to Filipino extremists. The Pakistanis were eventually released without being charged.



Newt Gingrich, incoming Speaker of the US House of Representatives, arrives in Capitol Hill, Washington, DC Tuesday. The 104th Congress, with a Republican majority for the first time in both chambers since 1954, began new session yesterday. — AFP photo

Pak Jamaat supports Chechens

KARACHI, Jan 4: Leaders of Pakistan's main Islamic fundamentalist party vowed full support to Muslims of the embattled break-away republic of Chechnya at a rally here Monday, reports AFP.

About 300 members from Jamaat-e-Islami gathered in a congested city market place to demand an end to the Russian "aggression" against Chechnya, which declared independence from Moscow.

Ghaffar Ahmed, Jamaat's deputy chief, said the Russian government was using its military muscle to subdue to Muslim community as was done by the Serbs in Bosnia.

Air pollution and allergies aggravate asthma worldwide

LONDON, Jan 4: Asthma is on the rise worldwide, aggravated by growing air pollution and allergies, reports Reuter.

There is no true cure for this most common chronic condition, affecting an estimated three to five per cent of people, but a clutch of new drugs are now in development which doctors believe may improve treatment.

At present asthma is treated mainly with bronchodilators to relieve airway constriction, and — increasingly — with inhaled steroids which tackle the underlying inflammation of the bronchial tubes which causes asthma.

But while steroids are effective, worries remain about their possible side effects. Last month, a 2,000 signature petition was presented to the British government urging a no-fault compensation scheme amid claims about the drugs.

Dr Neil Thomson, an asthma expert at Glasgow's Western Infirmary, says there is no evidence that low dose inhaled steroids are harmful.

Add briefly: But it is not clear just where the safe limit lies.

For the last decade, the hunt has been on for alternatives. Now the first new drugs are nearing the market.

Their common goal is to target specific inflammation mediators. Steroids, by contrast, suppress virtually every step of the inflammatory process, making them rather blunt pharmacological tools.

The companies making the new compounds — which can be swallowed as pills rather than inhaled — hope they will cut the need for steroids in mid to moderate asthma patients, who make up the bulk of sufferers.

First to reach the market will be a group of drugs which inhibit production of leukotrienes, naturally-occurring substances, implicated in causing inflammation.

US-based Abbott Laboratories Zileuton, filed for

regulatory approval in September, does this by blocking the biosynthesis of leukotrienes.

The British Zeneca Group, meanwhile, has a different drug — called Accolate — which is due for filing early in 1995.

Both drugs could be approved in 1996, pharmaceutical analysts believe, but Accolate may have an advantage since it will be offered in a low dose regime of just one tablet a day, against three a day for zileuton.

A follow-up compound from Smithkline Beecham called Panlukast is a year behind Accolate in development in the US and Europe, although it has already been filed for approval in Japan.

Further off, several firms including Rhone-Poulenc Rorer, Smithkline and Syntex are working on selective phosphodiesterase (PDE4) inhibitors, regarded by many researchers as the most promising new anti-asthma drug class.

The most advanced oral PDE4 is made by the British biotechnology company Celtech Gorupand goes under the Codename CDP 840. It is being developed with Merck and Co and is now in phase II clinical trials.

Other drugs focusing on different mediators include Pl

Rafsanjani desires to visit India

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has said he wants to come to India on a visit he abruptly cancelled in October, the Indian government said yesterday, reports AFP.

Rafsanjani's desire to visit India was conveyed to Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao in a message delivered by Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, who arrived here Monday, an Indian spokesman said.

Velayati is heading a high-powered delegation to the eighth meeting of the Indo-Iranian joint commission.