

BRIEFLY

2 Sikhs gunned down:

Two suspected Sikh militants were gunned down by Indian security forces in the northern state of Punjab yesterday, the Press Trust of India reported. AFP says from New Delhi.

The Sikh separatists Ranjit Singh and Narinder Singh, were shot dead after they refused to stop their car at a police post in Bhatnads district, the news agency quoted police as saying. Arms and ammunition was recovered from the car.

Murder charge against Banda:

The government will charge Malawi's former president Kamuzu Banda and his leading associate John Tembo with murder in the 1983 deaths of four politicians, government ministers said yesterday. Reuter reports from Malawi.

A government-appointed commission of enquiry said on Wednesday, police acting on official orders had killed three cabinet ministers and a member of parliament in May, 1983. The killings were disguised as a car accident.

Cold wave claims 47 in Kashmir:

Forty-seven people, including 43 soldiers, have died in the northern Indian state of Kashmir during a cold wave gripping the Himalayan region for the past month, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported on Wednesday. AFP says from New Delhi.

The latest victim was a labourer killed in an avalanche during snow-clearing operations on Tuesday, the news agency said. Seven other road workers caught in the avalanche were rescued by Indian troops.

Talks on DPRK N-reactor Jan 9:

Mid-level officials from South Korea, Japan and the United States will meet in Washington on January 9 to discuss the supply of two nuclear reactors to North Korea. Foreign Ministry officials said yesterday. AFP reports from Seoul.

The officials said the trilateral group, which met at the assistant-secretary level in November, would try to meet a February deadline to formally set up the Korea Energy Development Corporation (KEDC).

Fire claims 4 in Germany:

Four people died when a fire swept through a sanatorium for handicapped people on Thursday, police said. Reuter reports from Germany.

Eight more needed treatment for smoke inhalation. Forty-two patients were in the sanatorium in north Rhine-Westphalia, central Germany when the fire broke out at 1:19 a.m.

Blast kills 11 in China:

An underground pipeline exploded in coastal China, blowing open a two-kilometre length of pavement and killing 11 people, officials reports said on Thursday. AP reports from Beijing.

The Tuesday explosion injured 61 others, including many who were hit by flying bricks, the China Youth News reported. The blast sent a motorcycle flying onto nearby rooftop and destroyed other vehicles, it said.

UN Council meets:

The UN Security Council held its first meeting of the year on Wednesday with five new members and a stronger European tilt, AP reports from United Nations.

The five are Germany, Italy, Honduras, Indonesia and Botswana. They replace Brazil, Djibouti, New Zealand, Pakistan and Spain. Elections for new members were held in October.

Murayama may visit China:

Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama will probably visit China in mid-March to discuss issues such as nuclear proliferation in North Korea, chief Cabinet Secretary Kozo Igarashi said, quoted yesterday by the Nihon Keizai Shimbun. AFP reports from Tokyo.

Murayama will meet Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin and other leaders, Igarashi said on Wednesday while touring Hokkaido island in northern Japan, the newspaper added.

Stamp on Monroe:

The sultry beauty of actress Marilyn Monroe will grace a US postage stamp this year, with the design being officially unveiled on Thursday in New York. AP reports from Washington.

Anna Strasberg, director of the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute, will join Postmaster General Marvin Runyon for the ceremonies. The 32-cent Monroe stamp will be the first in a series honouring legends of Hollywood, postal officials said.

Deutch may get top CIA post:

President Clinton has indicated an interest in nominating Deputy Defence Secretary John Deutch to be CIA Director, but Deutch apparently is reluctant to leave his job at the Pentagon, people familiar with the matter said on Wednesday. AP reports from Washington.

Clinton recently discussed the CIA job with Deutch after the current spy agency chief, R James Woolsey, submitted his resignation on December 26, according to an administration official who discussed the matter on condition of anonymity.

Arms seized in Mozambique:

Police have seized three small caches of arms that included a rocket launcher, six machine guns and ammunition belonging to the former rebel group RENAMO, AP reports from Mozambique.

The arms were discovered on December 29 in the northern province of Nampula based on tips from citizens, police said in a statement issued Wednesday and reported by the Mozambique state news agency AIM.

Remains of 15,000 troops found:

Iran has found the remains of 15,000 of its soldiers and militiamen who died in the war with Iraq since the conflict ended in 1988. Iranian state television said on Wednesday. AFP reports from Tehran.

A committee in charge of searching for soldiers missing in action (MIAS) put the figure at more than 3,000 in October. The remains of 2,500 Iraqi soldiers had also been found since the end of the 1980-1988 war, the committee said at the time.

2 ROK planes crash:

Two South Korean Air Force planes crashed Thursday while on a routine training flight, killing all four crew members aboard, the Defense Ministry said. AP reports from Seoul.

Both of the two-seater T-59 "Hawk" training planes crashed into a mountain near Sachon city, 280 kilometres (174 miles) south of Seoul, the ministry said. Reporting from the scene of the crash, the national news agency Yonhap said the planes had collided in the air and then fallen to the mountain below.

DPRK army pledge support for Kim

SEOUL, Jan 5: North Korea said on Thursday that soldiers have rallied to pledge allegiance to Kim Jong Il, the communist country's seldom-seen leader, reports AP.

The rally, held on Wednesday, followed Kim's New Year's Day visit to the military barracks, his first public appearance in two months.

At the rally, soldiers called Kim the "sun of life and the mental pillar of them all," said the North's official Korea Central News Agency, monitored in Seoul.

"They pledged to absolutely worship the supreme commander and cherish in their hearts the rock-firm faith that they know no one else but the supreme commander," it said.

Indian Jain ascetic on marathon fast for world peace

BOMBAY, Jan 5: For nearly 200 days, Sahajmuni Maharaj has lived on nothing but warm water, a glass at dawn, and another at dusk, reports APF.

The 62-year-old ascetic from India's Jain religious community has not had solid food since embarking on a fast for world peace 198 days ago.

Tens of thousands of people converge daily on the house of non-violence in the wealth Bombay suburb of Khar to catch a glimpse of the marathon faster or to receive his blessing.

Several times a day, Sahajmuni appears on a first-floor balcony and waves to the devotees below from various faiths. The usually busy street has been closed to vehicles and a rope barrier divides it into sections for men and women.

Volunteers keep order while the faithful gaze up at the building with palms folded together in reverence, occasionally shouting slogans wishing Sahajmuni a long life.

"It is our good fortune that we are able to set eyes on and serve such a great a holy man," said shopkeeper Rajendra Lodha, who has volunteered to help with crown control.

The crowds have swelled since he completed 150 days without food, he added. "We have about 100,000 people coming by daily now."

Sahajmuni, speaking to APF while sitting cross legged and barefoot on a low bed, said the object of his fast was to "purify myself of sin and bring about world peace by drawing attention to my penance."

Like other Jain ascetics, he wears only an unstitched white cotton robe. A mask covers his nose and mouth so that he does not inhale insects or microscopic creatures.

Jains, who number just more than three million and count among them some of India's most successful businessmen, are strict vegetarians, eating nothing grown beneath the soil, and are not allowed to kill any living thing.

Jainism, a 2,400-year-old offshoot of Hinduism, the dominant religion in India, had a significant influence on the philosophy of non-violence preached by Mahatma Gandhi.

Jain ascetics never travel by mechanised transport, fearing the machines could crush insects. Instead, they travel on foot, seeing their path before them with a broom or employing someone to do so.

Fasting is just one form of penance engaged in by the devout. Some ascetics have moved all their body hair, plucking it out strand by strand.

Sahajmuni plans to call off his fast on Monday, when he will have gone 201 days without solid food, a feat his assistants said would be a world record.

They said Sahajmuni has already beaten the previous record fast of 182 days set centuries ago by Mahavir, a founder of the Jain religion.

"I have been feeling a little tired the past few days, but I am fine otherwise," said the greying Jain priest, who appeared slightly frail.

"Strong willpower is the key to controlling bodily sensations," he said. "We are the products of our minds, which can be conditioned at will."

The doctors say he is perfectly fine, said Jain priest Ram Muni, who lives with Sahajmuni at the house of non-violence here. "It is a miracle before you."

Ceasefire in Somalia

MOGADISHU, Jan 5: A ceasefire went into effect Thursday morning, ending five days of clan fighting that left two dozen people dead and hundreds injured in a southern neighbourhood of the capital, reports AP.

Meanwhile, UN peacekeepers continued their pullout from Somalia and an aid organisation announced it would suspend its food and other health programmes until a worker abducted last month is released.

Elders of the rival Abgal and Murosad sub-clans signed the ceasefire agreement Wednesday evening at a home in southern Mogadishu.

Off the Record



Two Belgian tourists watch elephants bathing at Sri Lanka's only orphanage for elephants on Sunday. The orphanage, which has been able to carry out a successful breeding scheme for elephants found abandoned in the jungle, is a popular tourists attraction. — AFP photo

Amazon's asexual fish needs male to survive

LONDON: An exclusively female Amazonian species of fish, previously thought to reproduce without male help, does need males to survive after all, according to a study published on Thursday, reports Reuter.

One of the tenets of evolutionary biology is that sexual reproduction is essential because it introduces new genetic material, thus avoiding mutations and possible extinction of the species.

But the Amazon molly species of fresh water fish consists wholly of females, it relies on the sperm of males of related species to trigger reproduction although this was not thought to contribute genetic material.

But a study by Manfred Schartl of the University of Wurzburg, published in the scientific journal Nature, showed the Amazon molly does in fact take on male genetic material in the form of 'microchromosomes'.

These microchromosomes are very hard to detect but are inherited, thus apparently compensating for the Amazon molly's asexuality, Schartl said.

Man removes eyeball to get rid of pentagram

MERRIAM KNASAS: A man popped his right eyeball out of its socket severed the tendons with a knife and flushed it down the toilet because he thought he had seen a pentagram in the eye's iris, police said, reports APF.

The unidentified 26-year-old told authorities he saw the five pointed star commonly associated with the occult, when he looked in the mirror on Sunday night.

He told police he had to remove the eyeball because he could not get rid of the pentagram.

The paramedics said his eye looked puffy and red. It just looked somebody punched him," said police lieutenant Bill Lietzke.

But they opened up the eyelid and pointed a flashlight in there and his eyeball was gone.

6 months' jail after 23 years' of trial

NEW DELHI: An Indian businessman has been sentenced to six months in prison by a New Delhi court after a trial that lasted 23 years, reports APF.

Rameshwar Prasad, 70, was arrested in the eastern city of Calcutta in 1971 on charges of illegally purchasing a shipment of copper and zinc.

His case was shifted from Calcutta to New Delhi by the Supreme Court in 1973 and then proceeded at a snail's pace. Three of the seven co-defendants died during the course of the trial two were acquitted in 1983 and another in 1987.

Prasad was finally convicted of violating import and export regulations on Wednesday and sentenced to six months in prison.

Expelled Indian diplomats in Karachi back home

NEW DELHI, Jan 5: The expelled Indian consul-general in Karachi has returned here with his staff, lashing Pakistan for closing the mission in the strife-torn port city, reports APF.

Consul General Pinak Chakravarty and 17 other diplomats and their families arrived in New Delhi late Wednesday after Pakistan ordered them to leave.

Chakravarty speaking to reporters shortly after his arrival here, said the closure of the mission was a "regrettable decision and a retrograde step since the consulate was catering to a large number of people."

He said the Karachi consulate had provided up to 100 visas a day to Pakistanis planning to travel to India.

Taiwan to ease shipping links with China

TAIPEI, Jan 5: In a major policy shift, the Cabinet today decided to ease a ban on shipping links with rival China as part of a plan to make Taiwan a regional commercial center, reports AP.

A section of the southern Kaohsiung port will be turned into an "offshore" transshipment center from where Taiwanese cargoes can be shipped to the mainland, a Cabinet statement said.

The offshore base, an expedient way to skirt the shipping ban, will be part of an ambitious project to make Taiwan an Asian commercial hub by the end of the century, the statement said.

Vice Premier Hsu Li-teh said the Kaohsiung base can be established after the project is approved by the Legislature.

Huge fake work permits seized in US: 3 charged

LOS ANGELES, Jan 5: A US investigation of fake identification cards for illegal aliens netted 115,000 counterfeit work permits, Social Security cards and other documents with a street value of 5 million dollars, officials said, reports AP.

Three men have been charged. This was a major supplier of counterfeit documents in the Southern California area at least, US Immigration and Naturalisation Service district director Richard K Rogers said on Tuesday. He said the investigation was continuing.

The immigration initiative approved by voters in November calls for five years in prison and 75,000 dollar fines for people convicted of counterfeiting immigration documents.

Yemen, S Arabia agree to halt army patrols

SANAA, Jan 5: Yemen and Saudi Arabia have agreed to halt military movements on their disputed border and pull their forces back to positions they occupied before a recent border clash, a senior Yemeni official said Wednesday, reports APF.

The agreement came at a meeting on the border on Monday between the Saudi Emir of Marjan, Fahad bin Khaleed al Sadri, and Yemeni Deputy Interior Minister Colonel Hussein Arabin, the official said asking not to be named.

The previous day Saudi army patrols attacked a Yemeni position in the north-western province of Saada near the disputed border zone, a Yemeni military official said. Riyadh did not report the incident.

The Yemeni official said both sides decided last Monday to pull armed Saudi and Yemeni units back to their initial positions, and to "halt patrols near the border".

The measures were aimed at enhancing contacts ahead of a visit to Saudi Arabia by Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, he said.

Contacts between Sanaa and Riyadh had calmed the situation, he added.

Saleh spoke to King Fahd by telephone on Tuesday.

A Yemeni tribal chief said more than 10 people were killed or wounded in the clashes of Sunday and military equipment was destroyed.

Saudi and Yemeni units also clashed in the same province on December 7, leaving three Yemenis wounded, according to Sanaa.

US to seek fresh military ties with India, Pakistan

WASHINGTON, Jan 5: US Defence Secretary William Perry will seek new bilateral US military ties with Pakistan and India on a visit to those South Asian nations next week, a senior Pentagon official said on Wednesday, reports Reuter.

Perry will also discuss the controversial issue of nuclear proliferation with leaders in Islamabad and New Delhi, but will not press them to reverse current course and join the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), the official told reporters.

The official, who asked not to be identified, said Perry will instead discuss possible US bilateral peacekeeping exercises and increased defence cooperation with India and Pakistan, and will urge those potential nuclear antagonists to be more open with each other about defence policies and budgets.

"The purpose here is to build a defence relationship and build it on a new basis," stressed the official, noting that Perry will be the first US defence secretary to visit South Asia since Frank Carlucci in 1987.

Perry will depart Washington for Egypt this Friday on a week-long trip to the Middle East and South Asia that includes stops in Israel, Pakistan and India in that order.

He will return home on January 14.

South Asia has been an area of major concern to the United States since India exploded a nuclear device in 1974. Pakistan says it, too, has acquired the capability to make nuclear weapons but has not made a decision to do so.

In Pakistan, Perry plans to hold talks with Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, Defence Minister Aftab Shaaban Meerani, and other top officials. In India, he will meet Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao and government leaders.

The United States halted all military and new economic aid to Pakistan in 1990 over the nuclear issue and has refused to approve Pakistan's agreement to buy 71 US F-16 fighter jets in the late 1980s at a cost of 1.4 billion dollars.

The State Department warned China and Pakistan last September that they would face new US economic sanctions if it was established that China had shipped M-11 nu-



Interior ministers, including Emir Naif Ben Abdelaziz (L) of Saudi Arabia, Abdallah Kallel (C) of Tunisia and Dr Ahmed Ben Mohamed Salem (R), secretary general of the Arab Council for Interior Ministers, chair the opening session of the Arab interior ministers' conference in Tunis on Wednesday. — AFP photo

Turkey to help Malaysia build sub fleet

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 5: Turkey has offered to help Malaysia build a submarine fleet, Defence Minister Najib Abdul Razak said Thursday, reports AP.

Najib told reporters the offer was made during talks with Turkish Navy Chief Admiral Vural Bayazit at the Defence Ministry.

Malaysia has no submarines, but is planning to buy one in a few years.

The Turkish admiral arrived Wednesday for a five-day official visit.

Turkish officials said they have one of the largest submarine fleets in the Mediterranean, with 12 German-designed Type 209 diesel-electric submarines. Nine were built in Turkey.

Iran closer to build N-weapons?

NEW YORK, Jan 5: Iran might be less than five years away from having an atomic bomb, much closer than previously thought, senior American and Israeli officials told The New York Times reports AP.

Israeli officials consider the reassessment of Iran's nuclear potential to be the most serious threat facing their country, The Times said on Thursday. Previous estimates had put Iran eight to 10 years away from having an atomic bomb.

If the programme is not halted, senior Israeli officials said they would be forced to consider attacking Iran's nuclear reactors, a tactic used against Iraq in 1981.

"If the Iranians maintain this intensive effort to get everything they need, they could have all their components in two years. Then it will be just a matter of technology and research," an Israeli official, who was not identified, told The Times.

So far, Iran has amassed nuclear material and some equipment, but has not, as the North Koreans did, built a nuclear reactor that could be used for weapons.

But the American and Israeli sources said that if the programme continues at this rate, Iran could have all the parts necessary for nuclear weapons by the end of the decade.

With a nuclear arsenal, Iran could try to dominate its neighbours on the Persian Gulf, including Iraq, which before the Gulf War in 1991 had an advanced nuclear weapons programme of its own, analysts said.

Britain ends funding of probe into war crimes Mar 31

LONDON, Jan 5: Britain will end funding of a 5-million-pound (7.75 million dollar) investigation into hundreds of alleged Nazi war criminals living here, officials said Wednesday, reports AP.

Prosecutors are still considering whether to indict seven men, but the move raised new uncertainties about whether any of the aging suspects would be brought to court.

It was the latest blow for the Nazi-hunting Simon Wiesenthal Center, already dismayed by the closure in 1992 of a special investigating unit in Australia.

Only the United States, the center said, is successfully pursuing the old men who took part in atrocities against Jews and other people in World War II.

The British Home Office, which set up the special war crimes unit of police and historians three years ago, said the funding would end March 31.

Scotland Yard said the future of the unit depends on whether any of the cases actually go to trial.

A Home Office spokesman, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the office wasn't making a judgement about the success of the investigations. The initial funding for the unit was only for three years, and to renew it would require an executive decision.

"No one has yet come to trial. The government said last month that from an original list of 369 suspects, only 23 were still being investigated.

Police Commander Roy Ramm, head of Scotland Yard's specialist operations, said a decision about closing the unit down would be shelved until prosecutors decide whether to bring anyone to court.

British action against suspected Nazis has moved at what critics see as a leisurely pace since 1986 when the Los Angeles-based Wiesenthal Center produced a list of 17 suspects who came to Britain after World War II, among thousands of refugees.

Unlike the United States, Britain refuses to extradite the suspects. In 1991, Parliament passed a law allowing suspects to be prosecuted in Britain.