

BRIEFLY

China seized huge drugs last yr:

Police seized 1,030 kg (2,266 lb) of heroin, 1,840 kg (4,048 lb) of opium and marijuana and 1,900 guns smuggled across China's increasingly porous borders in 1994, state radio said on Friday. Reuter reports from Beijing.

Officers of the Public Security Bureau and border guards handled 246 cases of cross-border gun-running last year, confiscating more than 1,900 firearms and 380,000 rounds of ammunition and arresting 208 people, the radio said.

Perry begins talks with Mubarak:

US Defence Secretary William Perry arrived in Egypt yesterday and began talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak which diplomats said would focus on aid and future military cooperation. Reuter reports from Cairo.

He will fly to Israel on Sunday for high-level meetings before proceeding to Islamabad and New Delhi.

Algerian journalist shot dead:

An Algerian radio journalist shot in the head by suspected Islamic guerrillas of Friday died yesterday. AFP reports from Algiers.

All Abdou was attacked in Birkhadem on the outskirts of Algiers, a colleague at his radio station said. He died at a military hospital in Ain Naadja. He was the 29th journalist killed among the 30,000 victims in Algeria's civil war.

Raid on Thai prostitutes:

Thai police vowed renewed efforts to crack down on child prostitution after finding underage girls in a bar in the well-known red-light district of Patpong, the Bangkok Post reported yesterday. Reuter reports from Bangkok.

Of 20 suspected prostitutes taken into custody in a raid on Thursday night, four were under 18 and another 12 had questionable or no identification, the newspaper said. All were later released.

Saddam pays tribute to troops:

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein on Friday paid glowing tribute to his troops who fought against US led coalition in the 1991 Gulf War and spoke of world peace. AFP reports from Baghdad.

Saddam called on the world's major powers in a speech to mark the 74th anniversary of the founding of the Iraqi army to deal with other countries with respect.

Zapatista extends truce:

Maya Indian rebels in southern Mexico extended a temporary truce for another six days on Friday but demanded major political concessions in exchange for a start to peace talks aimed at ending their year-old uprising. Reuter reports from Mexico City.

Guerrilla chief subcomandante Marcos said in a statement that his Zapatista National Liberation Army will extend its truce until January 12 promising to halt aggressive troop movements and avoid all contact with army units.

18 militants held in Egypt:

Egyptian police arrested 18 alleged Islamic militants Friday on suspicion that they were involved in terrorist attacks which killed 11 people Monday in the south of the country, police said. AFP reports from Egypt.

The arrests came on the fifth day of a huge manhunt organised in and around the district of Malawi (about 300 kilometers — 200 miles — south of Cairo), launched after the attacks.

Iran opens court on Abu Musa:

Iran inaugurated on Friday a Court House on the Gulf island of Abu Musa which is at the centre of a territorial row with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Reuter reports from Nicosia.

Tehran radio said head of judiciary Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi attended the inauguration ceremony. The establishment of the court strengthens the presence of Iranian state institutions on the Gulf island, which Iran has been running jointly with UAE member Sharjah under a 1971 deal.

Hurd meets Dinesh Singh:

The British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd met the External Affairs Minister of India Dinesh Singh on Friday. PTI reports from New Delhi.

The two leaders discussed matter of mutual interest and reviewed Indo-British ties, an External Affairs Ministry spokesman said.

12 die in Colombian accident:

A speeding passenger bus careened into a ditch north of Bogota on Friday, killing 12 people and injuring 36 others, police said. AP reports from Colombia.

The accident occurred near Cimitarra, about 110 miles (180 kilometers) outside Bogota. The driver of the packed bus lost control of the vehicle after taking a corner at high speed, survivors said.

Tehran's drive to produce N-arms ahead of schedule Pre-emptive Israeli strike on Iran's N-plants feared

NEW YORK, Jan 7. Iran's drive to produce nuclear weapons is ahead of schedule and could result in a pre-emptive Israeli strike against its reactors, the New York Times reported, quoting unnamed American and Israeli officials, reports Reuter.

The same tactic was used by Israel in 1981, when its planes bombed an Iraqi reactor.

"When we look at the future and ask ourselves what is the biggest problem we will face in the next decade," an Israeli military official told the daily, "Iran's nuclear bomb is at the top of the list."

Another source identified only as a senior official, told

the newspaper Thursday. The date by which Iran will have nuclear weapons is no longer 10 years from now. 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. If Iran is not interrupted in this programme by some foreign power, it will have the device in more or less five years."

Iran spends two billion dollars a year on arms and has bought nuclear technology from Russia, Pakistan, China and former Soviet republics, the New York Times reported.

The Tehran government has also recruited former Soviet and Pakistani scientists and is "researching the techniques involved in the enrichment of uranium and the re-processing of plutonium, which can be used to make nuclear weapons," the newspaper said.

As for a delivery system, the daily said that the Iranians have a surface-to-surface missile programme, backed primarily by China, which is building an assembly plant in Iran to produce missiles capable of a range of "a few hundred km."

Iran is also scheduled to receive missiles from North Korea with a range of 1,000 km, the paper added.



Chechen volunteers dancing January 6 in a neighbourhood of Grozny. Chechen soldiers supporting rebel President Djokhar Dudayev are feeling optimistic about defeating Russian troops for control of Grozny after the failed armoured assault last week. — AFP photo

De facto ceasefire in Kabul

KABUL, Jan 7. A de facto ceasefire continued here today amid peace efforts led by United Nations special envoy Mahmoud Mestiri currently based in the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad, reports Reuter.

The relative calm has been in effect in the embattled Afghan capital for some 10 weeks.

Last week, Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his rival Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, chief of the Hezb-i-Islami faction, had separate meetings with Mestiri, a former Tunisian foreign minister.

The UN special mission is trying to broker a peace settlement to the factional fighting which has raged since the Mujahideen capture of Kabul in April 1992, claiming about 20,000 lives.

Despite optimistic assessments for an early settlement, the Afghan peace talks appear to be bogged down over details

on the mechanism for the transfer of power, Afghan sources said.

Rabbani did not resign on December 28 at the end of an elected two-year term of office.

Meanwhile, the Afghan Foreign Ministry here today firmly rejected accusations by Russia that Afghan Mujahideen were fighting alongside their Muslim brothers in Chechnya.

"These are completely baseless accusations," Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Najibullah Lafrate said.

Lafrate said the accusations were being made "to justify the Russian attack against Chechnya" and to compensate for their military failure there.

The Afghan Mujahideen gained world-wide recognition, especially in militant Islamic circles, for their military defeat of the Soviet Red Army which invaded and occupied Afghanistan for 10 years until forced to pull out in

1989.

Afghan observers noted that while the Islamic state of Afghanistan may not be involved in the battle for Chechnya, Afghans as individuals or as members of Mujahideen factions could have been sent there to fight the Russians.

Speculation has centred on the activities of several hundred Mujahideen believed to be affiliated with Hezb-i-Islami faction, who were dispatched to Azerbaijan last year to fight against the Armenians.

But, no evidence has yet been produced by the Russian authorities proving the existence of any Afghan fighters in Chechnya.

Lafrate also said the government had made a formal protest to Moscow and the Tajikistan government about Russian jet and artillery attacks against villages in the far north of Afghanistan

Pro-Nepali Cong envoys resign

KATHMANDU, Jan 7: A group of Nepalese ambassadors, including the country's permanent representative to the United Nations, have resigned following Nepal's recent government changeover, the state-run radio announced Saturday, reports AFP.

Those who resigned included Nepalese ambassador to China, Basu Chandra Malla, Thakkar Mallik in Myanmar, Gopal Prasad Sharma in Germany, Harat Prasad Dhital in Japan and the Nepalese permanent representative to the UN, Jai Raj Aoharya, the announcement said.

All the ambassadors and the UN representative had been political appointees of the former Nepali Congress (NC) government.

The resignations come five weeks after the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML) formed its minority government on November 30 after it emerged as the largest party in the November 15 midterm polls.

The government has not yet named new ambassadors.

'Father Teresa' returns home

KARACHI, Jan 7. The man known as "Father Teresa" for his humanitarian work in Pakistan returned home today after about a month's self-exile in disgust over the unrest in Karachi, reports AFP.

Abdus Sattar Edhi left for London early last month, saying he feared he might be assassinated and the blame might be placed on some ethnic or religious group in an attempt to fuel the Karachi violence, which claimed more than 700 lives in 1994.

"I will continue my mission to serve humanity," said the 66-year old head of Edhi Foundation, Pakistan's leading private humanitarian network with 5,000 volunteers and assets worth more than 66 million dollars.

His return coincided with a decline in incidents of violence in Karachi, the country's largest city and financial centre, after a year of bloodletting during ethnic, sectarian and political problems.

The Supreme Court criticised two government departments Friday for delaying proposals to install equipment at an state-run oil refinery to combat emissions of sulfur dioxide, which combined with rain, produces sulfuric acid that damages the marble.

The court last year ordered the closure of hundreds of foundries from where gases escape into the air and are believed to yellow the marble of the 17th century monument to love.

The court said the Petroleum and Environment Ministries had ignored the Mathura Refiner's request for the equipment for more than two years. It asked the ministries to clear the proposal within two weeks. The Statesman newspaper reported.

Court asks Delhi to reduce gas emission damaging Taj

NEW DELHI, Jan 7. A court has asked the government to reduce emission of noxious gases from an oil refinery that is damaging the Taj Mahal, a newspaper reported today, reports AP.

The Supreme Court criticised two government departments Friday for delaying proposals to install equipment at an state-run oil refinery to combat emissions of sulfur dioxide, which combined with rain, produces sulfuric acid that damages the marble.

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9 killed in Manipur clash

NEW DELHI, Jan 7. Paramilitary soldiers and separatist militants exchanged fire in a northeastern state in India and at least nine people were killed, news agencies reported Saturday, reports AP.

A genocidal feud between two rival tribes has turned the remote hilly state of Manipur into the biggest hot spot in northeastern India where four other insurgencies are just ebbing.

Details of the incident at the state capital, Imphal were not immediately clear.

Off the Record



Picture of English guitarist and singer Eric Clapton taken in June 1992 whose album "From The Cradle" was nominated for the Grammy Awards to become album of the year in Los Angeles on Friday. The 37th Grammy Awards will take place on March one in Los Angeles. — AFP photo

Murayama loses his cool

TOKYO: Japan's prime minister Tomiichi Murayama, widely known as a soft speaker, lost his cool on Saturday over unsettling moves by Socialist rightwingers to defect from his party, reports Reuter.

"I will not go out of my way to meet him," Murayama snapped at reporters who asked him about what he planned to do about rebel ringleader Sadao Yamahana.

Yamahana, Murayama's predecessor as party chairman, on Friday announced the formation of a preparatory committee for a new party. Yamahana said he might formally quit the party before the end of the month.

A split down the middle of the Socialist Party could rob Murayama's awkward coalition of its working 35-seat majority in the 511 member lower house of parliament.

Of the socialists' 70 lower-house members, 16 took part in Friday's meeting, aides to lawmakers said.

Not all participants were firmly committed to the new party, the aides said. On the other hand, more lawmakers could eventually take part in the move, they added.

The dispute stems from a traditional squabble within the Socialist Party between the moderate, mainstream left and the militant right.

A brief glimpse of freedom

FRANCE: France's best known actress Catherine Deneuve brought a brief glimpse of freedom to 250 inmates of a French prison on Friday when she spent two hours with them talking and answering questions, as part of a film festival centred on Muret Prison near Toulouse, reports AFP.

There were no photographs to immortalise the scene and no film cameras.

Deneuve told her audience, mostly composed of 100 men in prison: "I came to share things with you and only with you. I feel no apprehension in discovering you," she said to loud applause from the prisoners massed in the prison cinema.

The gathering took place immediately after the showing of "Le Lieu du Crime" (the scene of the crime) a film in which Deneuve plays a woman who falls in love with an escaped prisoner.

One prisoner bolder than the others, came up and kissed her and wished her a happy new year.

Highest paid PM

CALCUTTA: The Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, has said that in his country politicians are selected on the basis of their success in the private sector and that he is the highest paid prime minister in the world, reports PTI.

Tong, who delivered the key-note address on Friday at the special plenary session of the partnership of the CIL centenary celebration, said this while reacting to a question from the audience that Singapore's economic progress was at the expense of democracy.

The Singapore prime minister said that the most successful company executives on the basis of their earnings "can be successful in private life, they can deliver good in public life also."

"On that basis, I am probably the highest paid prime minister in the world," Tong said amidst thunderous applause from the audience which included the Marxist Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu.

Bhopal gas leak disaster India seeks more time to extradite Anderson

BHOPAL, India, Jan 7: India on Friday asked a court for more time to seek the extradition of a former Union Carbide Corporation executive in connection with the 1984 Bhopal gas leak disaster, reports AP.

In 1992, a court ordered the extradition of Warren Anderson, a Union Carbide official who has since retired, to testify about the world's worst industrial accident, which killed 7,000 people.

But the Indian government has not yet asked the U.S. State Department to extradite Anderson from Danbury, Conn., where Union Carbide is based. And the court has no power to enforce its order.

Government officials say privately that India is reluctant to request the extradition of Anderson because of fears that it could damage Indo-U.S. relations.

New Delhi will soon set up a committee of bureaucrats to decide if the government should ask the U.S. State Department to deport Anderson, according to U.S. Prasad, a lawyer for the federal police investigating the Bhopal gas leak case.

Prasad told a judge on Friday that the decision of the committee will be given to the court in two months.

But N.D. Jaiprakash, one of the lawyers handling hundreds of thousands of Bhopal victim claims, told the court the three-year delay in seeking Anderson's extradition is a national shame.

We recognise that this is a matter internal to Russia, but have been deeply disturbed by the suffering of innocent civilians and the violations of human rights," Foreign Affairs Minister Andre Ouellet said in a statement.

Ouellet said both he and Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien have written to Russian President Boris Yeltsin

US, UK criticise French move to renew ties with Iraq

WASHINGTON, Jan 7. The United States on Friday sharply criticised France's move to re-establish a diplomatic toe-hold in Baghdad, saying the decision to open an interest section at the Romanian embassy there was ill-timed, reports Reuter.

We do not believe that this is a timely action. We don't consider the particular decision to be helpful or constructive state department spokeswoman Christine Shelly said.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe announced the move after a meeting in Paris on Friday with Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz — the first time France had officially received a senior Iraqi leader since the 1991 Gulf War.

A London report says Britain on Friday attacked a French move to renew its diplomatic ties with Iraq.

The foreign office said Paris had failed to consult its European Union (EU) partners

and insisted it was vital to maintain pressure on the government of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

"We do not believe that now is the appropriate time to make gestures towards Iraq," Shelly said at a news briefing.

"Iraq continues to defy the international community and to violate many UN Security Council resolutions."

Shelly said Rolf Ekeus, head of a UN commission known as UNSCOM charged with dismantling Iraq's programmes for building weapons of mass destruction, reported in December that Baghdad was failing to cooperate.

We believe that such behaviours should not be rewarded.

They (the French) did not specifically solicit our advice on this point, but that's our reaction to it, she said.

Shelly's remarks represented a toughening of tone from comments earlier in the day by a state department official who took a relaxed view of the Juppe-Aziz meeting.

I don't think anyone is overreacting to the latest piece of news because France has respected other Iraqi officials before, that official had said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Grozny inhabitants reeling under the fury of battle

GROZNY, Jan 7. Yuri Timofeyev, an ethnic Russian in a fur hat and threadbare overcoat, wandered in a daze through the smoking debris of what used to be his home on a side street in the smashed Chechen capital Grozny, reports Reuter.

The gash on his face was still fresh and the smell of cordite hung heavy in the air, indications that the Russian shell which blew his house to bits landed only minutes before.

Yuref's wife and children peered out from a half-collapsed bomb shelter in the courtyard their frightened white faces smudged with smoke and cinders from the many fires burning out of con-

rol in the neighbourhood.

"Yuri, Yuri, are you all right," shouted a neighbour, grabbing the unresponsive man by the arm.

"He's in shock and he's deaf from the explosion," she explained. "He doesn't know where he is if he could hear me I'd tell him we're in hell."

The Russian assault on Grozny was in its seventh day on Friday and city inhabitants who have not fled or been killed are reeling under the fury of the battle.

Moscow's decision to use force to crush the tiny region's three-year bid for independence has borne little fruit so far.

Grozny's central presidential palace remains the centre of fighting, the white marble of its upper stories blasted by days of intensive tank and artillery fire.

But lightly-armed Chechen fighters have kept Russian armour and artillery at bay so far, capturing some tanks that ventured too near the centre of the city and blowing up others.

The price of Chechen resistance has been high. Hundreds of civilians and soldiers have been killed and vast residential areas lie devastated by shelling and occasional aerial bombing.

Private homes and flats sit abandoned in the city, frozen in time as they were the mo-

ment residents decided to run for their lives. Furnishings, clothing and half-eaten meals are visible through shattered windows.

Yuri and his family are ethnic Russian but this gave them no dispensation from the shells. He seemed likely to take his family and join tens of thousands of others of displaced people in camps springing up outside Chechnya.

Asked to explain the ferocity of the Russian attack on Grozny, Chechens were at a loss.

"They always knew Chechnya wanted to be free and that didn't fit with their planes," said Musar Zukharyev, fighting to defend what

remained of the city.

"They call us Mafia, bandits, but what kind of bandit am I? I've never been to Moscow. Little by little the press in Moscow has created the image of Chechens as though we are nothing but crooks."

Musar sent his wife and children to the mountains so he would be free to fight without worrying over his fate.

Fighting tanks with Kalsnikovs perturbs him not at all.

"We (Muslim Chechens) believe in god and that gives us strength," he said. "The Russian people are all right, but their leaders don't believe in anything."

Halt bombing of Chechnya, Canada tells Russia

OTTAWA, Jan 7: Canada urged Russia on Friday to halt its bombing of breakaway Chechnya, saying the dispute should be resolved through peaceful means, reports Reuter.

We recognise that this is a matter internal to Russia, but have been deeply disturbed by the suffering of innocent civilians and the violations of human rights," Foreign Affairs Minister Andre Ouellet said in a statement.

Ouellet said both he and Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien have written to Russian President Boris Yeltsin



President Chandrika Kumaratunga gestures during a press conference on Friday as she outlined her peace plan to end Sri Lanka's ethnic war which has claimed over 30,000 lives in the past 23 years. — AFP photo

Egypt's Copts celebrate X'mas.

Egypt's Orthodox Copts, one of Christianity's oldest sects, opened Christmas celebrations Saturday, ending 43 days of fasting, AP reports from Cairo.

For the Copts, Saturday is Christmas Eve — known as Laila al Kabira, Arabic for "the big night." The day centers on a midnight Mass celebrated by Pope Sheouada III and broadcast live on state television. In the past year, the Copts were again victims of Muslim radicals battling to turn Egypt into a strict Islamic state.

Colombian peasants' revolt ends:

Thousands of coca growers in Colombia's southwest have voluntarily ended a two-week protest against government plans to destroy their illegal crops in exchange for a negotiated settlement, the country's interior minister announced on Friday, Reuter reports from Bogota.

"The protesters have abandoned the oil pumping station, epicenter of the protest," Horacio Serpa said in a prepared statement. "Normalcy has returned to the province."