

BRIEFLY

Chinese dissident returns home.
A well-known Chinese dissident who went into hiding four weeks ago to escape police harassment returned home on Monday. AP reports from Beijing.

The dissident, Wang Dan, said earlier that police had been tailing him since last June and threatened to kill him. The reported threat came after Wang filed suit against Beijing police and appealed for a court order to stop the constant police surveillance.

Militiaman killed in Lebanon:
Iranian-backed Shiite Muslim guerrillas attacked Israeli forces and their allied militia in southern Lebanon on Monday, injuring an Israeli soldier and killing a militiaman, security sources said. AP reports from Tyre, Lebanon.

A guerrilla ambush and a series of roadside bombs touched off artillery and rocket exchanges that continued through midday. An Israeli helicopter gunship raked suspected guerrilla hideouts with machine-gun fire, said the sources, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

3 more executed in China: Three criminals have been executed for kidnapping 86 women from southwestern China and selling them to farmers as wives earning 294,000 yuan (34,600 dollars). The Inner Mongolian Daily said yesterday. AFP reports from Beijing.

Ren Li, Liu Datong and Li Wanhong from Datong in northern Shanxi province were found guilty in a court in Wumeng in inner Mongolia of colluding with 13 other criminals to kidnap the women from southwestern Sichuan and Guizhou between 1987 and 1991, the report said.

N Koreans believe in new leader:
Even though Kim Jong Il has yet to officially take the reins of power, North Koreans firmly believe in their new leader, says a South Korean journalist who travelled secretly in the North. AP reports from Seoul.

Seoul's North Korea watchers have suggested a grave illness or political struggles as the reason for Kim's delay in succeeding his father, Kim Il Sung, who ruled North Korea for nearly five decades before his death last July.

19 die after drinking liquor: Nineteen people have died and 27 others are seriously ill in hospital after drinking an unidentified substance they believed to be bootleg liquor, the official Mirror Daily reported yesterday. AFP says from Yangon.

Two illicit liquor shop owners and a fisherman who sold them the drink were under arrest in Dallah township, across the Rangoon river, the report said.

Croatian PM in Beijing: Croatian Prime Minister Nikica Valentic arrived in Beijing yesterday for a five day visit, his first since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1992. Reuter reports from Beijing.

Valentic was due to hold talks with Premier Li Peng and meet President and Communist Party Chief Jiang Zemin before flying to the ancient city of Xian on Wednesday.

21 killed in Vietnam bus plunge: A bus carrying the relatives of state workers plunged into a ravine when its brakes failed, killing 21 people and injuring 17, the official Vietnam News said on Monday. AP reports from Hanoi.

The report said the bus driver had let his son take control of the wheel as the bus headed down a steep slope, but it still put the blame for the crash on Saturday on failed brakes. The driver was killed but the son, whose age was not given, survived.

China has 30 red-crested ibises: China has 30 red-crested ibises and 100 giant pandas in its vast and remote northwest, a newspaper report said on Monday. AP says from Beijing.

The region has a research center on endangered animals and 58 nature preserves established beginning in the 1980s, the Guangming Daily reported.

Colombian rebels down chopper: Colombian Marxist guerrillas shot down a police helicopter as it escorted fumigation planes flying over coca plantations, the national police chief said on Sunday. Reuter reports from Bogota.

The planes were spraying near where a protest was recently held against a government programme to eradicate the illegal crop.

Muslims kill 2 Filipino soldiers: Two soldiers were killed and six wounded in a gunbattle with Muslim extremists in an upsurge of fighting in the southern Philippines, the military said yesterday. Reuter reports from Zamboanga.

Southern military command spokesman Major Frediswinda Covarrubias said Sunday's battle occurred at Lantawan on Basilan island in Mindanao province, where the military has been hunting down rebels from the fundamentalist Abu Sayyaf group.

Army blockade E Timor varsity: Indonesian security forces blockaded the University of East Timor in the capital Dili yesterday after 30 youths staged a pro-independence protest outside the campus, an East Timorese source said. Reuter reports from Dili.

The source at the campus said the East Timorese youths, who were not from the university, unfurled banners and shouted slogans before running off.

3 shot dead in Philippines: Three persons including a seven-year-old boy, were killed by five gunmen in a remote town in the southern Philippines police said yesterday. AFP reports from Cotabato.

The masked gunmen barged into the home of the victims in Matalam town, north Cotabato province, on Saturday morning and shot the three in the head, explained Chief Inspector Bonifacio Sales.

Austrian bus mishap leaves 7 dead: At least seven people were killed and many others were injured early Monday when a German-registered bus slammed into a truck on the A1 freeway, police reported. AP says from Vienna.

One shot dead in Egypt: Suspected Muslim extremists shot dead a 40-year-old man they believed was informing on their activities and wounded a woman passerby, police said. AP reports from Cairo.

The shooting took place Sunday night near Abu Qurqas in El-Minya province, 220 kilometers (135 miles) south of Cairo. The gunmen killed Talaat Mohamed Ibrahim and wounded Fahima Abu Zayd, who was passing by, police sources said.

Colombian rebels free 93 prisoners
BOGOTA, Jan 9: A group of 30 suspected rebels dressed in stolen Colombian military uniforms freed 93 inmates on Sunday from a prison near the Ecuadorian border without firing a shot, prison officials said, reports AFP.

The guerrillas dressed in military fatigues told guards they had come to conduct a search in the prison and once inside, they disarmed the guards and freed all the inmates from Morca Prison in southwestern Putumayo province.

Police said 14 inmates had been recaptured by police and 11 returned voluntarily to the prison in Morca, which lies some 650 kilometers (250 miles) southwest of Bogota.

MANILA, Jan 9: Bangkok's residents spend the equivalent of 35 days in a year trapped in a snail's pace traffic. In Singapore, motorists pay stiff fees for the right to own a car because of the island's limited space. The Hong Kong government is studying a proposal to use car ownership quotas to ease traffic jams, reports IPS.

To many, these traffic woes are a price wealthy Asians must pay for their economic success. That success has seen car demand surge by more than 300 per cent in some Asian countries in recent years, even as Japanese and US automakers square off in the booming market.

But experts see this as a symptom of a disease automobile dependency that excessively equates motorisation with economic progress.

This culture of cars has left gridlocked, exhaust-choked cities gasping for air and increasingly hostile to native non-motorised forms of transport that are used by poorer segments of the population and provide jobs for them.

"We're caught in a region-wide urban traffic jam, in a mindset that motor vehicles equals modernisation equals development," says Brian Williams, Programme Director of the US-based Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP).

Williams, who is in Manila to advise on streamlining the city's traffic nightmare, says Asia's economies could choke on their growth if they copy the West's unsustainable model for heavily-motorised urban development.

Western countries zoomed along this path with till saw even current efforts to stabilise emission levels cannot keep pace with the number of cars being bought and used.

Williams suggests that government use more mass transport, rail and buses to move people and goods in bulk, and also resources and space for Non-Motorised Vehicles (NMVs) like bicycles, pedicabs and rickshaws that are efficient for shorter trips or in traffic-blocked streets. But in many Asian cities, pedicabs are still regarded as primitive and urban planners map out streets with only cars in mind.

The average travel speed in Bangkok has slowed to two KM an hour, but Thailand remains Southeast Asia's fastest growing vehicle market. Some 600,000 cars are added to Bangkok's streets every year and sales for the year 2000 are forecast to reach 900,000 vehicles which is twice 1993 sales.

The solution to easing traffic congestion may not be as simple as building more high-

ways which just produce more traffic, because they encourage people to buy cars and travel more. And as highways criss-cross cities, traditional modes of transport are being squeezed out from places like Phnom Penh, Dhaka and Hanoi. In Indonesia and Malaysia, communities have protested bans on pedicabs.

The car fever has also hit bicycle-friendly China where residents and government cadres today favour imported vehicles and off-road e-bikes with backwardness. China makes 40 million bicycles a year and they are used in 60 per cent of all urban trips, but bicycles are being banned from downtown Shanghai and

Guangzhou. ITDP also says excessive emphasis by foreign funding institutions on building roads and highways is worrisome because these projects entail social costs like relocation of affected residents. Ten thousand families are being displaced for Manila's South Tollway Project, designed to ease traffic on the main highway.

Critics point out that many Asian cities have become too polluted or unsafe for residents to use bicycles. But Williams says there is much room for mixing modes of transport, because "automobile-based systems are dirty and not cost-effective."

German-Russian military exercise postponed
BOON, Jan 9: Moscow has postponed German-Russian military exercises near St Petersburg this summer that were part of efforts to bring Russia closer to NATO, the German defence minister said, reports AP.

Defence Minister Volker Ruehe told the news magazine Der Spiegel, which was published Monday, that Moscow has told Bonn "the manoeuvres will have to be postponed."

Ruehe did not give a clear reason, but Moscow's decision appeared to be linked to the Russian military assault on Chechnya.

UP Congress urges Sonia to enter politics, save party

NEW DELHI, Jan 9: India's embattled Prime Minister, PV Narasimha Rao, has received another setback with his Congress (I) party in Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state, calling for his ouster as party leader, reports AFP.

Senior members of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, at a meeting on Sunday in the state capital Lucknow, demanded that Rao step down as party president in favour of Sonia Gandhi, the Italian-born widow of assassinated former Premier Rajiv Gandhi.

Newspapers reported today that the rebels also opposed the appointment of Rao's candidate, Jitendra Prasad, as head of the Uttar Pradesh Congress committee following the resignation of Narain Dutt Tewari, a Rao rival.

"You have to choose between the Congress Party and Rao," Akbar Ahmed, a senior leader of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, was quoted as telling the Lucknow gathering, which was attended by some 250 people.

The rebels urged Sonia to enter politics and "save the Congress," by abandoning her self-imposed isolation and jealously guarded privacy.

The movement against Rao has been gathering momentum since the humiliating defeat of the 109-year-old Congress in state elections in November and December and a series of corruption scandals.

Three ministers were sacked last month in connection with a 1.3-billion-dollar bank and securities fraud and a sugar scandal. Another quit in a huff.

Human Resources Development Minister Arjun Singh, the de facto number two in the government and a man with prime ministerial ambitions also resigned, posing a serious challenge to Rao's leadership of the party.

Tewari, the former leader of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, quit after Rao ignored his repeated demands to withdraw the party's support to a socialist-led coalition government which rules the state.



Demonstrators clench fists and shout slogans during a pro-communist rally in Moscow on Sunday. The demonstrators sharply condemned Russian military actions in Chechnya. — AFP photo

LTTE violates ceasefire

COLOMBO, Jan 9: A truce between Sri Lankan government troops and Tamil separatist rebels was violated just a day after its implementation when some rebels were seen moving in a restricted area outside an army camp, military sources said today, reports Reuter.

"It is a minor violation and won't hamper the ceasefire," said a military field officer who reported that a group of 15 rebels were spotted in a "no-go zone" outside an army camp on the northern Jaffna peninsula.

Under an agreement signed by President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and Tamil rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran last week, government and rebel troops are to maintain present ground positions, keeping a minimum of 600 metres (yards) between each other.

"However, each party will reserve the right of movement within 100 metres from their own bunker lines, keeping a minimum of 400 metres in between. Any party moving in the restricted areas would be considered an offensive operation," a government statement listing out the modalities of

the agreement said on Friday.

The military officer said the 15-member rebel group was seen moving on Sunday night within 300 metres of army bunker lines at Lvankachchi near Elephant Pass. But the incident passed off peacefully. The military report could not be independently verified from rebel sources.

The two-week truce, so far going without the supervision of foreign peace monitors, came into force at midnight on Saturday in a major step towards ending a 12-year separatist war that has cost more than 30,000 lives.

2 German MPs refused visas by Moscow
BONN, Jan 9: Two members of the German parliament who wanted to travel to Moscow on Sunday to talk to human rights groups about Moscow's assault on breakaway Chechnya were refused visas by Russian authorities, they said, reports Reuter.

Social Democrat Party (SPD) deputy Markus Meckel said in a statement that he and fellow SPD deputy Gert Weisskirchen had also planned to talk to members of the Russian Duma, the lower house, in order to get a clear picture of events in Chechnya.

Meckel, who like Weisskirchen is a member of the German parliament's foreign affairs committee gave no reason for the Russian rejection. He could not be reached for further comment.

On December 11 President Boris Yeltsin sent thousands of troops into Chechnya to crush a three-year bid for independence.

The bloodshed unleashed by Moscow's assault on the Chechen capital Grozny is arousing increasing international concern.

Iran-Russian deal on N-plant

NICOSIA, Jan 9: Russia signed a contract with Iran on Sunday to complete the construction of a nuclear power plant on Iran's Gulf coast, Iranian television reported. The deal is worth 800 million dollars, reports Reuter.

Iranian television, monitored by the BBC, said the deal to complete the Bushehr nuclear power station was concluded "in order to make proper and peaceful use of nuclear energy and to provide

part of the country's required electricity.

The report said Russia had committed itself to complete, and open the nuclear power station with cooperation from Iranian experts within the next four years.

The television quoted the head of Iran's nuclear power agency, Raza Ayrollahi, as saying that the capacity of the first phase of the power station was 1,000 megawatts.

Two German firms began work on the Bushehr plant in 1974 before Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution. The project was later halted and the plant was heavily damaged by bombing raids during the 1980-1988 Iran Iraq war.

Russian Nuclear Energy Minister Viktor Mikhailov, who arrived in Iran on Thursday, earlier told Tehran newspapers that a deal to finish the plant's first unit would be signed soon.



Young Jewish settlers burn a poster of Israeli Premier Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, reading, "they are guilty," "the government of blood," during a demonstration held at the southern entrance of Jerusalem on Sunday. — AFP photo

Flash flood in two California counties

SAN FRANCISCO, Jan 9: Hundreds of people evacuated their homes in two northern California counties on Sunday as torrential rains caused severe flooding, reports Reuter.

Local news reports said the flooding in Sonoma and Napa counties, which lie just to the north of San Francisco, was the worst in the area in almost 10 years.

Two storms in two days dropped up to five inches (12 cm) of rain in parts of northern California, causing the Napa and Russian rivers to break their banks, flooding some houses and threatening many more.

The waters flooded some vineyards in the wine-producing region and forced the closure of many roads, while some residents built walls of sandbags to keep out the floodwaters.

One of the worst-hit towns was Guerneville in Sonoma county where the Russian river had already risen to 37 feet (11 metres) - five feet (1.5 metres) above flood level by Sunday evening and was expected to peak at 48 feet (14 metres) at midnight.

The rain continued to pour on Sunday evening, swelling the rivers even more. More rain was forecast for Monday.

A local state of emergency was declared in Napa county where the rising Napa river threatened to flood houses in the towns of Calistoga, Yountville and St. Helena, a county information officer said.

About 500 people voluntarily evacuated their homes in the three towns, he said. Most of the evacuees stayed with friends or relatives, but Red Cross shelters were opened in all three towns, he said.

Many other parts of the country suffered extreme weather at the weekend, with icy roads blamed for at least 12 traffic deaths in Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia and the Carolinas.

Fire in Indian gas well
NEW DELHI, Jan 9: Firefighters in southern India were struggling to bring a raging fire in a gas well under control as police evacuated thousands of residents from nearby villages, authorities and news agencies said today, reports Reuter.

The fire erupted in a well owned by the state-controlled Oil and Natural Gas Corp (ONGC) in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh on Sunday evening and was still burning 16 hours later, local authorities said.

Flames leapt some 100 metres in the air, they told Reuters by telephone. There were no reports of injuries.

Fire broke out on Sunday evening while drilling was on at a depth of 2,777 metres," said an ONGC official, speaking from the town of Rajamahendravaram. He said the blaze erupted about 7 pm.

Leak in China's latest satellite
BEIJING, Jan 19: A Chinese-made telecommunications satellite launched in November lost all its fuel because of a leak in its navigational system and will not go into commercial operation, officials said on Monday, reports AP.

The Dongfanghong (East is Red) No 3 satellite was part of China's attempt to enter the world satellite market. It was launched on November 30 from China's Long March 3A rocket and had an expected life span of eight years. But the satellite developed leakage of a thruster that controls its attitude, or position in relation to Earth, the China Daily reported on Monday.

A spokesman for the China Aerospace Corp, who gave her name as Zhang, confirmed that the loss of fuel meant the satellite could not be used. She said engineers were trying to prevent the same problems on a second telecommunications satellite that is being prepared for a launch. The date for that launch has not been decided, she said.

East is Red No 3, named after a communist anthem praising Mao Tse-tung, was capable of transmitting six color TV programmes and handling 8,000 telephone calls at one time.

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Off the Record

'Jurassic Park' inspires teen to become dinosaur expert

BUENOS AIRES: A 13-year-old who became interested in searching for dinosaur bones after watching the science-fiction film "Jurassic Park" has found the tail bones of a 91-million-year old reptile, reports AFP.

Ignacio Cerda found the fossilised remains in Patagonia near the southern Argentine town of Cinco Saltos, officials said on Saturday.

"I couldn't see it very well, that's why I thought I had found a spinal-column, but it was only the tail of a dinosaur," said the boy who had searched the rocks with two friends.

Cerda took the fossils to the Comahue University's Museum of Natural Sciences, where palaeontologist Leonard Salgado identified it as belonging to "gasparinisaurus cincosaltenis" from the upper cretaceous period.

The teen plans on studying palaeontology and becoming a dinosaur expert when he grows up, according to local reports.

Britain's royal family to disappear?

LONDON: Most of Queen Elizabeth's subjects believe Britain's royal family is doomed and will disappear in the coming century, according to a poll published Monday, reports Reuter.

The Guardian ICM poll will come as bad news for the royal family damaged by revelations about the marriage breakdown of heir-to-the throne Prince Charles and Princess Diana.

Although just 28 per cent of all those polled wanted to abolish the monarchy, another 44 per cent said they were "not especially keen" on it and supported it only because it was "better than the alternatives" only 36 per cent described themselves as "strong supporters."

Asked whether Britain would still have a monarchy in half a century 32 per cent said they believed the royal family would still exist while 49 per cent said no. This compared with 42 per cent and 34 per cent respectively two years ago.

US supports independence of Macedonia

OHRID, Macedonia, Jan 9: Washington supports the right of the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia to independence, US Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Richard Holbrook said on Sunday, reports AFP.

Speaking to the press here after a meeting with Macedonian President Kiro Gligorov, Holbrook said the United States "support your (Macedonia's) independence, sovereignty, your commitment to freedom and democracy."

Greece disputes the right of the former Yugoslav republic to use the name Macedonia, which is the same as that of an adjoining Greek state, and accuses the Macedonian government of having territorial ambitions.

Holbrook said that in his talks with Gligorov, he had also discussed "the question of increasing and improving military contacts" between Washington and Skopje.

Soft-hearted thieves

SAINT-ETIENNE: A pair of soft-hearted car thieves have handed a car they had just stolen to the police after noticing a baby on the back seat, police in this central French town said on Sunday, reports AFP.

After stealing the unlocked car late Saturday, they roared off before noticing the baby and pulling up several hundred metres up the road, next to a telephone box, calling the local police and anonymously telling them where to find the vehicle.

Car and infant were recovered safe and sound by a police patrol within minutes, and the parents, traced by computer records, were reunited with their charge barely an hour later.

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Car fever in Asian countries major cause of traffic jams

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