

# BRIEFLY

**Perry leaves India:** Defense Secretary William Perry ended a three-day visit to India Saturday urging South Asian countries to guard against growing religious fundamentalism. AP reports from New Delhi.

Perry flew to Washington after spending Saturday visiting the Taj Mahal in Agra and a large air force base nearby.

**Two F-14 crash in California:** Two US Navy F-14 fighter jets crashed Friday off the California coast, but all four crew members ditched into the sea and were rescued by helicopter, a navy spokesman said. AFP reports from San Diego, California.

It was not immediately clear if the crashes of the two aircrafts were related and navy spokesman Doug Sayers said the details were being investigated.

**748 UN peacekeepers die since '48:** Firefights, traffic accidents and illnesses have left 748 UN peacekeepers dead since their missions began in 1948 in the Middle East, the United Nations said Friday. AP reports from UN.

Seventeen of the 34 missions are currently in the field, the latest in Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda and Liberia. UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said 299 of the peacekeeper deaths resulted from hostile fire. The remaining 449 deaths were from disease and crashes.

**8 killed in Thai road mishaps:** Unusually heavy fog is being blamed for a pair of traffic accidents in rural Thailand that left eight people dead and 16 injured, a news report said Saturday. AFP reports from Bangkok.

In Petchabun province, 350 kms (220 miles) north of Bangkok, a pickup truck and motorcycle, both slammed into a 10-wheel truck parked on the side of the road Friday, killing three men in the pickup and two on the motorcycle, the Bangkok Post reported.

**Kerala IGP suspended:** A senior Indian police officer has been suspended for being linked to a space spy scandal after a court berated investigators who had said he was innocent, newspapers reported Saturday. AFP reports from New Delhi.

Authorities in the southern state of Kerala suspended Inspector General of Police Raman Srivastava Friday, hours after a court ruled that there was enough evidence to link him with the espionage case.

**Former Vietnamese FM dead:** Former Vietnamese Foreign Minister Hoang Minh Giam has died at the age of 91, reports said on Saturday. AFP says from Hanoi.

Giam, one of the first leaders of the Vietnamese revolution, died Thursday in Hanoi. No other details of his death were immediately available.

**NASA selects 2 astronauts:** A Japanese and a Canadian astronaut have been selected for a NASA training mission to prepare for future Space Shuttle flights, the space agency said Friday. AFP reports from Washington.

Jakao Doi, a 40-year-old Japanese aerospace engineer, David Williams, a Canadian medical doctor, will join the group of 21 candidates for future space flights, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration said.

**Cop sentenced to death in India:** An Indian judge has sentenced to death a police constable who killed five Sikhs in cold blood following the October 1984 assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, a newspaper reported Saturday. AFP reports from New Delhi.

Additional District Judge Ajay Kumar Sinha handed down the death penalty Thursday to Tilaka Ram, 36, in the northern Indian town of Meerut, some 80 kilometres (50 miles) from here. The Times of India said.

**40 kg diamonds seized in Moscow:** Police and counter-intelligence investigators have seized more than 40 kg (88 lb) of diamonds and arrested a group of people allegedly involved in illegal diamond sales, Interfax news agency said yesterday. Reuter reports from Moscow.

It quoted the investigation Department of the Interior Ministry as saying the estimated value of diamonds was 17 billion roubles (4.5 million dollars).

**3 injured during rioting in WB:** Three Palestinians and an Israeli policeman were injured during rioting in the West Bank town of Nablus Friday, Palestinian and Israeli army sources reported. AP reports from Nablus, West Bank.

The incident began when a group of Palestinian youths began pelting Israeli soldiers and border policemen with stones in the town's central square.

**UK businessmen plan to visit Iraq:** British industrialists planning to visit Iraq next month want only to discuss humanitarian aid as permitted under United Nations sanctions, the secretary of the Iraqi-British interests group said, AFP reports from London.

"We are purely a British industry-sponsored group and have no links with the government. Our members are interested in exporting humanitarian goods to Iraq," said Edmund Sykes.

**Japan to resume loans to Iran:** The Japanese government will shortly resume loans to Iran suspended at the request of the United States. The Yomiuri Shimbun reported Saturday. AFP reports from Tokyo.

Japanese Prime Minister Tomichi Murayama maintains that Japan should unfreeze official loans to Iran in order to help "moderate" radical factions there, the daily said.

His opinion was conveyed to US President Bill Clinton at a meeting on Wednesday in Washington, Yomiuri quoted government sources as saying.

**4 killed in Egypt:** Crack Egyptian security forces shot dead three Islamic militants during a raid on their hideout while another group of militants killed a police officer, authorities said, AFP reports from Egypt.

The special interior ministry police raided a home outside Abu Mazar, about 180 kilometres (110 miles) south of Cairo, killing three militants from the outlawed Jamaa Islamiyya (Islamic group), they said.

## Posters protest Papal visit in Lanka

COLOMBO Jan 14: Posters protesting next week's visit here by Pope John Paul II began appearing today in the Sri Lankan capital, prompting fears that Buddhist groups were stepping up their anti-Pope campaign, reports AFP.

The Federation of Buddhist Organisations (FBO) confirmed that posters carrying slogans in the Sinhalese language, such as "we don't want the Pope," have appeared in sections of Colombo ahead of the pontiff's January 20 visit.

It was not clear which organisation was behind the poster campaign.

"These posters show the mood of the Buddhist community. We ask the Pope to apologise for the malicious references to Buddhism."

# India's middle-class gays are coming out of closet

BOMBAY, Jan 14: Long ridiculed and disapproved by a conservative and tradition-bound society, India's middle-class gays are slowly coming out of the closet, to the puzzlement and consternation of their relatives, reports Reuter.

Transsexuals, customarily invited by some Indian families to participate in festivities that mark the birth of a child, have a niche for themselves in Indian society. Not so homosexuals.

"All these years we've been forced to be hypocrites," said Anand, a greeting-card manufacturer from the southern city of Bangalore. "It's great relief to find out that there are hundreds of others like me all over the country."

Anand is married and says he is bisexual. His wife and family don't know yet, and he does not plan to tell them for fear of the disruption it will cause.

He is caught in the classic Indian gay dilemma: Married off by his parents against his inclinations, thanks to cultural pressure to conform he is wary about coming clean now, apprehensive of the havoc that will result.

Anand was one of the delegates to India's first gay conference in Bombay earlier this month. Many said they found it an exhilarating experience because they were able to openly interact with other gay men for the first time in their lives.

But even as they revel in their new confidence, Indian homosexuals increasingly fear public health officials have not woken up to the danger presented by the killer disease, AIDS.

Many think themselves more susceptible to the disease because of what they say are the relatively higher levels of promiscuity in the gay community.

Delegates at the conference agreed on plans to set up a nationwide support system for gay men, with anonymous testing centres for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) high on their agenda.

The conference was organised by three Indian gay organisations, including Bombay's Hamsafar Trust, chaired by Ashok Row Kavi, who launched India's first journal specifically for gays, "Bombay Dost" (Bombay friend) four years ago.

For the moment, Indian gay groups are concentrating on "empowerment," Row Kavi said. They want to reach out to the thousands of Indian men confused about their sexual preferences, to assure them that these are normal. Row Kavi estimated the number of Indian homosexuals at 50 million in a nation of 900 million.

"This was a historic conference," said Arvind Kumar, a director of the San Francisco gay and lesbian group Trikone, who sat in on the sessions as an observer. "Fifty delegates — nearly 90 per cent of the group — spoke to the press at the end. That would have been inconceivable 10 years ago."

Amidst the exhilaration of the newly confident gay community, there is also the issue of AIDS. "The government is aware of the spread of AIDS among gays," Anand. "But stringent ideas of morality mean that it prefers to ignore the threat."

According to official estimates, 889 cases of AIDS have been reported nationwide, along with an estimated 16,015 carriers of HIV, the virus that causes the disease.

The rate of attrition within the South Asian gay community is not known exactly. Even the official figures are contested by the Indian Health Organisation, a private agency working with AIDS patients which believes there are 190,000 cases of AIDS, and an estimated 3.8 million infections, nationwide.

Indian public health authorities have a narrow window of opportunity — two or three years — in which to organise a strategy for AIDS," said Shivananda Khan, of London's Naz Project, which works with South Asia gays. "After that the economic costs of people dying from AIDS will become too great to bear."

Khan, in India to study male sexual behaviour for a World Health Organisation (WHO) project, said the country's bureaucrats were aware of the need for rapid action but there was no clear political will to beef up public health facilities.

Funding for many of the support programmes planned by Indian gay groups was difficult to find, he added.

The Bombay conference was made possible by an 8,000 pound (12,500 US dollar) grant from the Mercury Phoenix Foundation, set up with money willed by AIDS victim Freddy Mercury, lead singer of the rock group Queen, and a member of Bombay's Parsee community.

The Hamsafar Trust's Row Kavi said WHO funding to combat AIDS had lapsed last year because the government was unable to come up with a coherent strategy. "That money could have been utilised effectively if we had been allowed to participate in the planning process more closely," he said.

# Sonia may not be opposed to a political career

NEW DELHI, Jan 14: The widow of former Indian Premier Rajiv Gandhi today denied she authorised a family friend to say she would never take to politics, an indication that she might not be opposed to a political career, reports AFP.

Sonia Gandhi reacted sharply to a statement issued Thursday by Mohammad Yunus, a friend of the Gandhi family, that the Italian-born woman had said she would never join a political party.

"I would rather beg in the streets of Delhi than join (a party) or allow my children to enter politics," Yunus quoted Sonia Gandhi as telling him.

An aide to Sonia Gandhi said here: "Sonia has issued no statement nor authorised any statement on her behalf." Sonia Gandhi does not talk directly to the press.

Dissidents in the Congress (I) Party of Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao have been urging the charismatic Sonia Gandhi to take to politics but she has never publicly reacted to their demands.

Saturday's comments by her aide were the first indication since Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in May 1991 that Sonia, who enjoys a tremendous clout in the Congress, may not be opposed to political career.

Sonia Gandhi is widely believed to be pulling political strings in the bitter inner-party struggle aimed at ousting Premier Rao.

A former federal minister, Arjun Singh, who quit the

cabinet December 24 in a direct challenge to Rao, has met repeatedly with Sonia Gandhi and did so again on Friday.

Political observers have said that Sonia Gandhi, who is counted among the most powerful figures in India although she holds no government or political post, may be quietly backing Arjun Singh.

Sonia married Rajiv Gandhi in 1968, but declined a Congress request to take up the party leadership after his assassination, enabling Rao to become India's ninth prime minister.

The Nehru-Gandhi dynasty ruled India for 40 years, beginning with Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first Premier, his daughter, Indira Gandhi, and her son, Rajiv.



A Muslim Palestinian boy is stopped by Israeli border guards on his way to the Friday noon prayer in Hebron. — AFP photo

# Algerian opposition groups unite to end violence

ROME, Jan 14: Algerian opposition parties, including Islamic fundamentalists, joined for the first time to set conditions Friday for negotiations to end their country's three-year civil war, reports AP.

Putting aside differences, they called on the military-backed government to "reject violence as a means to stay in power" and to promote a peaceful solution to the crisis, which has claimed more than 15,000 lives.

It marked the first time opposition groups have forged a common front toward ending the violence.

The participants in the Rome talks said they would refuse meetings with the government unless it "condemned" extortion and murder against civilians and foreigners. But the outlawed Islamic Salvation Front did not give an outright promise of an end violence.

If a "climate of freedom" is established, "our brothers trying to achieve it by force" will turn to peaceful ways, said Salvation Front representative Anwar Haddam.

The Muslim fundamentalist insurgency began after the government cancelled parliamentary elections that fundamentalists were expected to win. Most foreign journalists

and many diplomats have fled the country, where nearly 80 foreigners have been killed since September 1993.

Both government forces and fundamentalists have blamed each other for the bloodshed.

The conditions outlined in the document include lifting the ban on the Salvation Front and letting all political prisoners out of jail.

The accord by 11 representatives of opposition forces came after five days of talks and a final all-night session. The meeting was sponsored by a Roman Catholic Church activist group, the Sant'Egidio Community.



Russian soldiers in civilian clothes write individual letters to the Russian President Boris Yeltsin giving an explanation of their refusal to go to Chechnya at the Committee of the Soldiers Mothers in Moscow on Friday. These soldiers deserted from a nearby training camp for preparing soldiers for Chechnya after their parents convinced them to do so. — AFP photo

# 'Chechen war is colonial'

OSLO, Jan 14: The war in Chechnya is a colonial war, former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said here Friday, reports AFP.

"Chechnya is not a part of Russia proper, but an area conquered by Czarist Russia in the middle of the last century," he said in a lecture here.

"It is difficult to regard Chechnya as Russian territory when you witness the way Russian forces bomb their own cities," he said.

Kissinger said he favoured the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) eastwards as soon as possible.

"We must avoid creating a political vacuum in Eastern Europe, and the so-called Visegrad countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) of today have no institutions binding them to either side — neither to Russia nor to NATO," Kissinger said.

# 98 pc Indians believe politicians are corrupt

NEW DELHI, Jan 14: Nearly 100 per cent of urban Indians are convinced that politicians, cabinet ministers and the police are corrupt, according to a newspaper opinion poll published today, reports AFP.

Ninety-eight per cent of the 1,544 men and women surveyed in six cities said they were "convinced that politicians and ministers are corrupt," followed by the police (97 per cent) and civil servants (88 per cent).

The Times of India poll said 63 per cent of the respondents felt that politicians were, on a scale of one to 10, the "most corrupt." Only two per cent thought politicians were honest.

Twenty four per cent considered the police the "most corrupt."

# Failure of talks in Liberia protested

MONROVIA, Jan 14: Angry crowds in Liberia's capital Monrovia threw up roadblocks today to protest at faction leaders' failure to agree on a transitional ruling council, United Nations sources said, reports Reuter.

The faction leaders flew home from Ghana on Friday to be met at the airport by hundreds of enraged Liberians. African peacekeepers spirited the delegates out of the airport in armoured vehicles by a back route, enraging the crowd who stoned cars in protest.

The city quietened during the overnight curfew but protests resumed on Saturday morning.

# Western Sahara referendum in October

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 14: The UN Security Council said Friday that it would no longer delay a Western Sahara vote on self-determination and would hold it in October with a transition period beginning on June 1, reports AFP.

The referendum has been delayed several times because of difficulties in identifying eligible voters in the Western Sahara, where Morocco and the Polisario Front have been battling for control of the territory.

The area was a Spanish colony until 1975.

Western diplomats have said that the Western Sahara issue could move forward this year since it is in the interests of both sides to hold the referendum.

If Polisario loses, a statute granting autonomy could still be negotiated later, they said.

The 15-member council also voted to extend until May 31 the mandate of the 33-member mission in the Western Sahara.

# Off the Record



India's Bandit Queen Phoolan Devi unveils plans for a non-political organisation to fight social tyranny and uphold the rights of the poor at a news conference in New Delhi on Saturday. — AFP photo

# To provide justice for all

NEW DELHI: India's "bandit queen" Phoolan Devi unveiled plans here today for a national non political organisation dedicated to fighting for the rights of women and the country's millions of poor, reports AFP.

Devi, who was freed in February after 11 years in prison for allegedly gunning down 22 men to avenge her gang-rape, said the body would combat "oppression in any form."

The former bandit leader, who is in her early 30s, told a news conference that members of the Ekalavya Sena (Ekalavya's army), named after a mythological archer, would "provide justice for all."

Ekalavya is a warrior-hero in the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata, who offered his right thumb to the master archer Dronacharya to become his pupil. Dronacharya demanded the sacrifice since Ekalavya was a low-caste Hindu.

Born into a low-caste Hindu family, Phoolan Devi is admired by many of India's "untouchables" for striking back at the high-caste men who allegedly gang-raped her in the lawless Chambal ravines of central India.

# Chinese burials consume 66500 hectares of land yearly

BEIJING: More than 70 per cent of China's dead are buried — and not cremated in line with a nationwide policy intended to protect precious land in the world's most populous country, the Guangming Daily said today, reports Reuter.

The startling figure was contained in a survey on a flood of revivals of traditional customs condemned in communist China as superstition.

Each year seven million Chinese die, and each year their burials consume 66,500 hectares (164,400 acres) of land, the newspaper said as it railed against the proliferation of feudal superstitions practices stamped out after the communists took power in 1949.

China has 80 million hectares (197 million acres) of arable land while cemeteries occupy 3.3 million hectares (8.2 million acres), said the daily a newspaper for China's intellectuals.

"The dead are stealing food from the living," it said.

In addition, the practice is eating away at China's forests. Coffins consume three million cubic metres (one billion cubic ft) of wood each year — equivalent to the total annual timber production of southern Fujian province, it said.

# Pollution is to blame

NEW DELHI: Pollution was to blame for the death of India's only cheetah in the New Delhi zoo three days ago, experts were quoted as saying on Saturday, reports AFP.

An autopsy of the cat showed "concentration of blackish residue of poisonous gases in the animal's lungs," the Pioneer Daily quoted experts as saying.

Pollution was certainly the basic reason for the death, zoo officials said. The New Delhi zoo is located near an industrial area.

The cat, Alexis, had been sick for over a month, but its illness was not diagnosed in time. Another cheetah died mysteriously in the zoo on January 4.

At least 16 tigers and panthers, 80 deer, 29 primates, 401 birds and 79 reptiles have died in the city zoo since 1990, and newspapers blame a lack of dedication by its staff.

# China to continue N-tests despite int'l criticism

TOKYO, Jan 14: China has indicated it will continue nuclear tests despite international criticism, the Asahi Shimbun newspaper said here today, reports AFP.

The indication came during a meeting here on Friday between Japanese and Chinese officials in charge of defence and foreign affairs, the daily said.

Japan urged China to discontinue nuclear tests, saying such blasts were not favourable for the international nuclear disarmament process.

But China replied that the number of its nuclear tests was "limited," the newspaper said.

Asahi said China indicated that it would continue such tests until it joined the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996.