

BRIEFLY

Elephant kills 6 Lankans: A rampaging wild elephant yesterday killed six members of a family and smashed their mud hut in northeastern Sri Lanka before being shot dead by soldiers, police said. Reuter reports from Colombo.

Three other people from an adjoining hut were injured in the incident at Tampalagamam in Trincomalee district, they said.

Peru's first lady ends fast: President Alberto Fujimori's estranged wife, protesting her disqualification from national elections, has ended a hunger strike after she collapsed with pneumonia and dehydration, AP reports from Lima.

Susana Higuchi, 44, launched the hunger strike after the National Election Board's barred her and other congressional candidates from her party from the April 9 election. Her condition was "delicate," her doctor, Carlos Robles, said Thursday.

Tremor shakes W Nepal: An earthquake measuring 4.3 on the Richter scale rocked western Nepal on Thursday night, the state-run news agency, the Department of Mines and Geology said yesterday, AFP reports from Kathmandu.

The epicentre of the tremor was around Rumakhami near the border between Baglung and Myagdi districts, both in the west, it said.

2 die in Algerian car blast: A car bomb exploded on Thursday in a market outside Algiers, killing two people and wounding 20, Algerian television said, AFP reports from Algiers.

The explosion, in Bugara, an Islamic fundamentalist hotbed 25 kilometres (15 miles) southeast of the capital, came a day after Algeria's military-backed government turned down proposals by the banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) aimed at ending three years of virtual civil war.

Benazir to meet Clinton: Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto will meet US President Bill Clinton at the White House on April 11, the White House said on Thursday, AFP reports from Washington.

It will be their first meeting. The invitation was handed to Benazir last week by US Defence Secretary William Perry when on a visit to Pakistan.

Jeweller shot dead in US: A jeweller with 11,000 dollars in his pocket was shot and killed while his car was stopped at a light, but his killers left behind the money, police said, AP reports from Philadelphia.

Arkady Shvartsman was shot by two men on Wednesday night a block from police headquarters. His killers, also stopped by traffic, jumped out of their stolen car, ran to Shvartsman's Lexus and fired several shots, a witness who wasn't named told the Philadelphia Daily News.

Mandela undergoes eye surgery: President Nelson Mandela underwent minor eye surgery on Thursday, his spokesman said, AP reports from Johannesburg.

Spokesman Parks Mankahlana said Mandela's schedule would not be disrupted by the operation to open the tear duct in his right eye, clearing up a condition that had caused constant watering. His eye problem was aggravated when the 76-year-old Mandela had a cataract removed last July.

NASA X-31 jet crashes: An experimental jet fighter wrapping up a test flight crashed in the desert after the pilot safely ejected, officials said, AP reports from Edwards Air Force Base.

The NASA X-31 went down on Thursday in the desert north of the base. Fire Department spokesman Dennis Walker said, Test pilot Karl-Heinz Lang parachuted to safety. He was taken to a hospital for examination. Staff Sgt Keith Myhre said Lang, a German Defence Ministry pilot, is one of four X-31 pilots.

Rebels kidnap 9 in Sierra Leone: Rebels attacked a Swiss-owned mine in southern Sierra Leone and kidnapped at least nine foreign workers, the government and European diplomats said on Thursday, AP reports from Freetown.

A helicopter flew to the mine on Thursday and began evacuating wives and children of foreigners from the Sierra Leone Ore and Metal Co, a subsidiary of Allusuisse of Switzerland.

4 militants killed in Egypt: Egyptian security forces yesterday killed four Islamic militants in a dawn shootout in southern Egypt as the death toll in three years of violence neared 600, police said, AFP reports from Cairo.

The militants died in a gunbattle that erupted when security forces came to arrest them in Al-Adwa, in the militant stronghold of Malawi, 300 kilometres (180 miles) south of Cairo, they said.

18 more executed in China: A serial killer who murdered 12 young women and mutilated their bodies was among 18 criminals executed by gunshot Friday in south China, a Chinese-run news agency said, AP reports from Hong Kong.

Luo Shubiao, a 40-year-old truck driver, raped and cut up the bodies of his victims whom he killed between 1990 and 1994, the China News Service reported. Luo was shot Friday morning after the High People's Court in the southern city of Canton rejected his appeal. Hong Kong's Sing Tao Evening Post said.

3 killed in Colombian quake: An earthquake centered in eastern Colombia's sparsely populated plains but felt nearly a thousand kilometres (500 miles) away has killed at least three people and injured 40, AP reports from Bogota.

The quake, with a preliminary magnitude of at least 6.5, struck at 10:05 AM Thursday (1505 GMT) and was felt as far away as Caracas, Venezuela.

US welcomes Lebanon's decision: Lebanon's decision to send a team of experts to the United States for advice on curbing terrorism was welcomed at the State Department, AP reports from Washington.

But Lebanese officials shouldn't expect the United States to end overnight its seven-year ban on travel to Lebanon by people carrying American passports, Robert Pelletreau, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, told reporters on Thursday.

US-Cuban talks end

NEW YORK, Jan 20: The United States and Cuba ended two days of talks Thursday with Washington asking to increase its staff in Havana to process the flood of Cubans applying for visas, US officials said, reports AP.

Washington is also asking Cuba for details on the almost 40-fold increase in fees charged to Cubans eligible to emigrate to the United States, an official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The closed-door talks were held to review the implementation of the September migration accord in which the United States agreed to admit 20,000 Cubans each year in return. Cuba pledged to stop the exodus of Cubans aboard makeshift rafts trying to reach the shores of Florida.

India ready for unconditional talks with Pakistan

NEW DELHI, Jan 20: India blamed Pakistan today for its stalled dialogue and expressed its readiness to resume unconditional talks on disputes between the South Asian rivals, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported, says AFP.

Foreign Secretary Kris Srinivasan said Islamabad appeared to see "no virtue" in a bilateral dialogue because it wanted to "internationalise" the Kashmir issue, the chief bone of contention between

the two neighbours, PTI said. It was a reference to attempts by Pakistan to mobilise international support for its claim to the Himalayan state held in part by the two countries. India says the Kashmir dispute is a bilateral issue.

Pakistan feels there is something to gain by not resuming (talks) than resuming," Srinivasan was quoted as saying at a briefing here for the Indian press.

New Delhi is, however,

prepared to hold talks without conditions, he said.

"We are more than ready to hear from Pakistan directly as to what elbow room they require to commence the talks," the official added.

The talks have been stalled for a year while bilateral relations have steadily deteriorated.

Pakistan recently ordered the closure of the Indian consulate in its port city of Karachi, accusing India of

orchestrating violence there.

Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has been quoted as saying in an interview that the Kashmir issue could be the spark for a third war with India if New Delhi "continues to ignore the Kashmiris right to self-determination."

India and Pakistan have twice gone to war over Kashmir, claimed by both countries, since independence from Britain in 1947.



PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat (C) speaks with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (R) and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres at the end of their meeting at the Erez crossing point on Thursday. — AFP photo

No hope for imminent release of Suu Kyi

BANGKOK, Jan 20: Hopes for the imminent release of Myanmar's dissident leader Aung San Suu Kyi faded as the Yangon junta said she would be freed only when a Constitution now being written is complete, reports Reuters.

Yangon-based diplomats said today it could take three years before the drawn-out constitutional process reaches a conclusion, but pointed out that under the regime's own laws Suu Kyi's sentence expires in July.



Aung San Suu Kyi

That Foreign Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said on Thursday upon his return from Yangon that he had asked Myanmar's ruling generals about the detained democracy leader and had been told the constitutional convention must finish its work first.

"They will not release her until the Constitution is complete," Thaksin told reporters.

That convention, which has

been drawing up the basic guidelines of a new charter under the junta's wing since January 1993, has so far completed only three of the 15 sections the Constitution is to consist of.

One Yangon-based diplomat

said it was not clear what the junta meant when it said the Constitution must be completed before the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate is released.

"Is it going to be when the guidelines are finished, or when the Constitution is written, or promulgated, or after the first election under a new Constitution and a parliament is sitting," he said. "That could be three years down the line."

Junta chairman General Than Shwe and the powerful head of Myanmar's military intelligence, Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt, met Suu Kyi for the first time last September.

The 49-year-old daughter of Burmese independence hero Aung San had a second meeting with Khin Nyunt in October, fueling speculation her release might be imminent.

Indian spy ring: Two Maldivian women get bail

NEW DELHI, Jan 20: Two Maldivian women accused of using sex and money to ferret out Indian space secrets were freed on bail today by a judge in the southern state of Kerala, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported, says AFP.

Judge K A Mohammad Shafi rejected arguments by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) that Mariam Rasheeda and Fausia Hussain may flee if released, the news agency said in a report from the Kerala city of Cochin.

Rasheeda and Hussain, charged with espionage under the official Secrets Act, have both pleaded innocent in the sensational case which broke out in October.

They have been charged with involvement in an espionage ring using sex and money to buy space secrets from two scientists of the Indian space research organisation and selling the information to unnamed foreign powers.

Singapore to build new naval base

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 20: The Republic of Singapore (RSSN) is building a new naval base at Changi to provide more facilities for its growing fleet, its chief of Navy Rear Admiral Kwek Siew Jin said, reports PTI Bernama.

The new base was necessary because the existing base at Brani was occupying land that could be more economically productive as part of the port of Singapore, he said when presenting a paper on Singapore's naval policy for the 1990s at a lecture series at the Malaysian Institute for Maritime Affairs (MIMA) here.

Yeltsin accepts Gen Vorobiov's resignation

MOSCOW, Jan 20: President Boris Yeltsin accepted the resignation of General Eduard Vorobiov, who refused to lead the military assault on Chechnya and eliminated the jobs of three other generals opposed to the intervention, Interfax reported on Thursday, says AFP.

The agency quoted an informed source as saying General Boris Gromov, Georgy Kondratiev and Valery Mironov, who had been against the Russian assault on the break-away republic, were currently on vacation and Yeltsin, in coming days, would issue a decree as to their future. All three were deputy defence ministers.

Mandela meets de Klerk to discuss strains

PRETORIA, Jan 20: President Nelson Mandela met Friday with Deputy President F W de Klerk to discuss strains within the unity government they forged, reports AP.

De Klerk, the former president, complained this week that Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) was ignoring his National Party in Cabinet decisions.

Off the Record



A model displays a shantung taffeta ensemble on January 13 in Paris, in preparation for the 95 Spring Summer high fashion collections of Louis Feraud. — AFP photo

Operation on Eiffel Tower

PARIS: The Eiffel Tower is to get a fresh coat of paint in an operation which will take more than a year, officials announced on Thursday, reports AFP.

Twenty-five level-headed climbing painters will begin the operation on the 320 metre (1,050 foot) landmark next month, using up 50 tonnes of paint before their work is finished next summer.

It will be the 17th facelift for the structure, which was built in 1889 for the universal exhibition.

Dead man can be father!

NEW YORK: A New York doctor said on Thursday he extracted sperm from the corpse of a man who died in police custody so the man's widow would be able to bear his children, reports Reuters.

"After speaking with the medical examiner and the man's family it became evident that this man had just fairly recently been married and had expected and planned to have children," Dr Peter Schlegel, a urologist at New York hospital-cornell medical centre, said in a telephone interview.

The man, Anthony Baez, died in police custody on a street in December after an argument and his death is under investigation. The family attorney says the police killed him using an illegal choke hold.

Schlegel extracted the sperm hours later after his widow Mirabel had asked the medical examiner whether the sperm of her husband of two years could be saved.

Schlegel said the procedure he performed involved making a small cut in the tube that carries the sperm from the testicles back to the body, and slipping in a tiny plastic needle and flushing out the sperm.

He said the sperm were diluted into a medium that helps nurture them and given to one of Anthony Baez's relatives to transfer to a laboratory for freezing.

Big Ben has gone green

LONDON: Big Ben, the famous clock which towers over Britain's parliament, has gone green, reports Reuters.

From Thursday the four faces of the central London landmark started to light by special energy-efficient bulbs.

Ray Powell, Chairman of the House of Commons Works Committee, said the switch from lamps installed in 1957 will save electricity and contribute to a drive to cut parliament's energy consumption by 15 per cent.

Big Ben was lit by gas until 1906 when electricity was introduced with 10 ordinary 100-watt bulbs behind each face.

Protests cast shadow over Pope's Lanka visit

COLOMBO, Jan 20: Pope John Paul II arrived in Sri Lanka Friday, his final stop on a gruelling four-nation Asian tour, to beatify a 17th century priest. But his brief visit is shadowed by protests from Buddhists offended by his attitude toward this country's predominant religion, reports AP.

Looking tired and descending the stairs of his aircraft slowly, the pope refrained from his usual custom of kneeling to kiss the ground on his first trip to a country. He underwent a hip replacement operation last year.

Police mounted extra security along the 30-kilometre (22-mile) route from the airport that the pontiff travelled, in his popemobile so that throngs of people could see him.

Police plan to body search everyone, including priests and nuns, among the 350,000 people expected Saturday for the beatification Mass on Colombo's sea front.

The 74-year-old pope came on a special flight from Australia, after earlier visits to the Philippines and Papua New Guinea.



Pope John Paul II

hour stopover by Paul VI in 1970.

He will bring a message of peace on his first visit to Sri Lanka, which has been wracked by ethnic war for 11 years between the Sinhalese Buddhist majority and the minority Tamils, who are mostly Hindus.

Controversy has dogged the trip since excerpts of the pontiff's book, "Crossing the Threshold of Hope," was published here in November.

In it, he cautioned Christians that the objective of the Buddhist practice of meditation is to reach "indifference" to the world, not to draw near to God.

"A certain amount of tension has been created from some of the words that have been used," by the pontiff, said Bishop Malcolm Ranjith, who is organising the visit.

Bollywood welcomes recent boom in India's cable TV network

BOMBAY, Jan 20: A recent boom in India's satellite and cable TV networks is being welcomed by the world's biggest film industry with film stars and producers rushing to capitalise on the new media's success, reports Reuter.

With cable TV now reaching an estimated 12 million Indian households, producers are falling over themselves to adapt their big screen song-and-dance extravaganzas for television.

Analysts see the sale of video and song rights emerging as a big new source of legitimate revenue for Indian film producers, and believe the boom in TV will leave the film industry leaner and cleaner than before.

But their upbeat assessment also comes with a health warning — more cinemas will be forced to close.

India's film industry, centred in Bombay and known as Hollywood, leads the world in the production of films, churning out some 900 films annually.

But K D Sheorey of the film maker's combine sees things differently. "At present the money coming in from video and audio rights is just about 1.5 million rupees. This is 20 per cent of the cost of a film. The money is very welcome, but producers are going to be dependent on financiers and distributors for a long time yet."

India's film making industry is one of the world's most heavily-taxed, with state governments levying entertainment taxes

independent of the "black money" loaned out at high rates by financiers on whom some producers have had to rely.

"Cable has been responsible for a profound shift in the dynamics of the film industry," said media analyst Iqbal Malhotra. "The next few years will see fratricidal industry wars, with just a few producers emerging on top. All the rest will be nice players."

By 1997, Malhotra estimates, the sale of video and cable rights should net producers around 15 million rupees (478,000 dollar) more than the entire production costs of some films in India.

Yet, because just 42 million Indian households have a television, filmmakers pull in 80 per cent of their revenues from theatre ticket sales.

The film industry is just beginning to wake up to the enormous money-making capability the audio and video rights to their films represent, one producer said.

"There is no fear of the industry being killed off by video or television," laughs Subhash Ghai, one of the industry's biggest

producers, who is going into TV serials in a big way. "It has survived so many years, it will match the threat from video and cable."

There are not even a handful of film producers who have switched entirely from cinema to television," Sheorey adds.

With a view to the satellite and cable TV potential, Amitabh Bachchan, a film star once described as a one-man industry, is busy meeting investors.

He is hoping to persuade them to put up to 440 million rupees (14 million dollar) into his new company which will make feature films and films for TV.

"By the second year of operation," says a producer, "Bachchan plans to make nine feature films and 12 telefilms and documentaries annually."

Like Bachchan, producer Yash Chopra, who holds the rights to a vast lifetime output of films, may also be sitting on a gold mine. Analysts speculate he could earn an estimated 700,000 rupees (22,000 dollar) from the cable and satellite rights to each film, even classics 25 years old.

UN food convoy reaches Kabul

ISLAMABAD, Jan 20: A United Nations convoy carrying food and humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan reached Kabul overnight after armed groups released seven trucks they had looted earlier, UN sources said on Thursday.

"The convoy reached Kabul late in the evening" on Wednesday, a UN official told AFP by telephone.

The 37-vehicle convoy was carrying wheat and supplementary feeding material for people of the war ravaged Afghan capital. It was also transporting some shelter material, UN sources said.

But the convoy was halted at Sarobi, 70 kilometres (43 miles) east of Kabul where armed gangs had reportedly looted at least seven trucks mainly loaded with wheat.