

US congressional panel blasts Myanmar junta

WASHINGTON, Dec 7: A congressional panel denounced on Wednesday Myanmar's military leadership and called on it to respect basic human rights and restore democratic rule, reports AP.

Recent developments have heightened tensions in Myanmar, declared Doug Bereuter, acting chairman of the House of Representatives' International Affairs Committee.

A resolution adopted by the panel demanded that the military junta immediately open a political dialogue with opposition leader Suu Kyi, to repeal repressive laws which prohibit freedom of expression and the right of citizens to participate freely in the political life of their country.

The move came a week after Suu Kyi's pro-democracy party was formally expelled from a government-organised convention called to draw up a new Myanmar constitution. The party had described the proceedings as a sham.

The convention is meeting for the first time since the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council released Suu Kyi in July following six years of house arrest. She was awarded the 1991 Nobel Prize for peace for her efforts to win democracy for Myanmar.

The non-binding measure, which is likely to be endorsed by the full House, also urged President Clinton to seek international condemnation of the Myanmar government at the United Nations.

By passing this today, we are telling the dictatorship in Myanmar that we expect to see progress if they are to become part of the community of nations," declared Rep Dana Rohrabacher.

Last Friday, White House spokesman Mike McCurry said that under current circumstances Myanmar's constitutional convention did not offer the opposition a meaningful opportunity to participate in the decisions.

Refugees asked to leave northern Jaffna LTTE fears military offensive against its naval wing

COLOMBO, Dec 7: Sri Lankan Tamil rebels, who have rejected an amnesty and vowed to continue their separatist war, said on Thursday they had asked refugees to leave their northern Jaffna Peninsula stronghold for fear of more army offensives, reports Reuter.

"Due to the appeal made to the displaced persons by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) large numbers are daily flocking to the Vanni mainland," a rebel statement said.

Jaffna residents said the rebels feared military offensives against their Sea Tiger naval wing bases on the north coast of the peninsula at Vadamarachchi, which has so far escaped the brunt of the fighting.

The government, which this week seized Jaffna town, has said it is planning more attacks to weaken the Tigers and force them to resume peace talks which they broke off in April.

Tens of thousands of people displaced by the battle for Jaffna town sought refuge in Vadamarachchi and across the shallow Jaffna lagoon in the northern mainland.

The rebels said the area was not safe and the refugees had welcomed their advice to move.

But sources said most of the people were forced by the Tigers to leave Jaffna long before the army neared the town. Others close to the fighting left their homes to avoid get-

ting caught in the crossfire.

The government has repeatedly said its security forces were trying their best to avoid civilian casualties in the offensive.

Rebel voice of Tigers radio, monitored by Reuters in the frontline town of Vavuniya, said diarrhoea and skin diseases were spreading among refugees. It said there was also a water shortage.

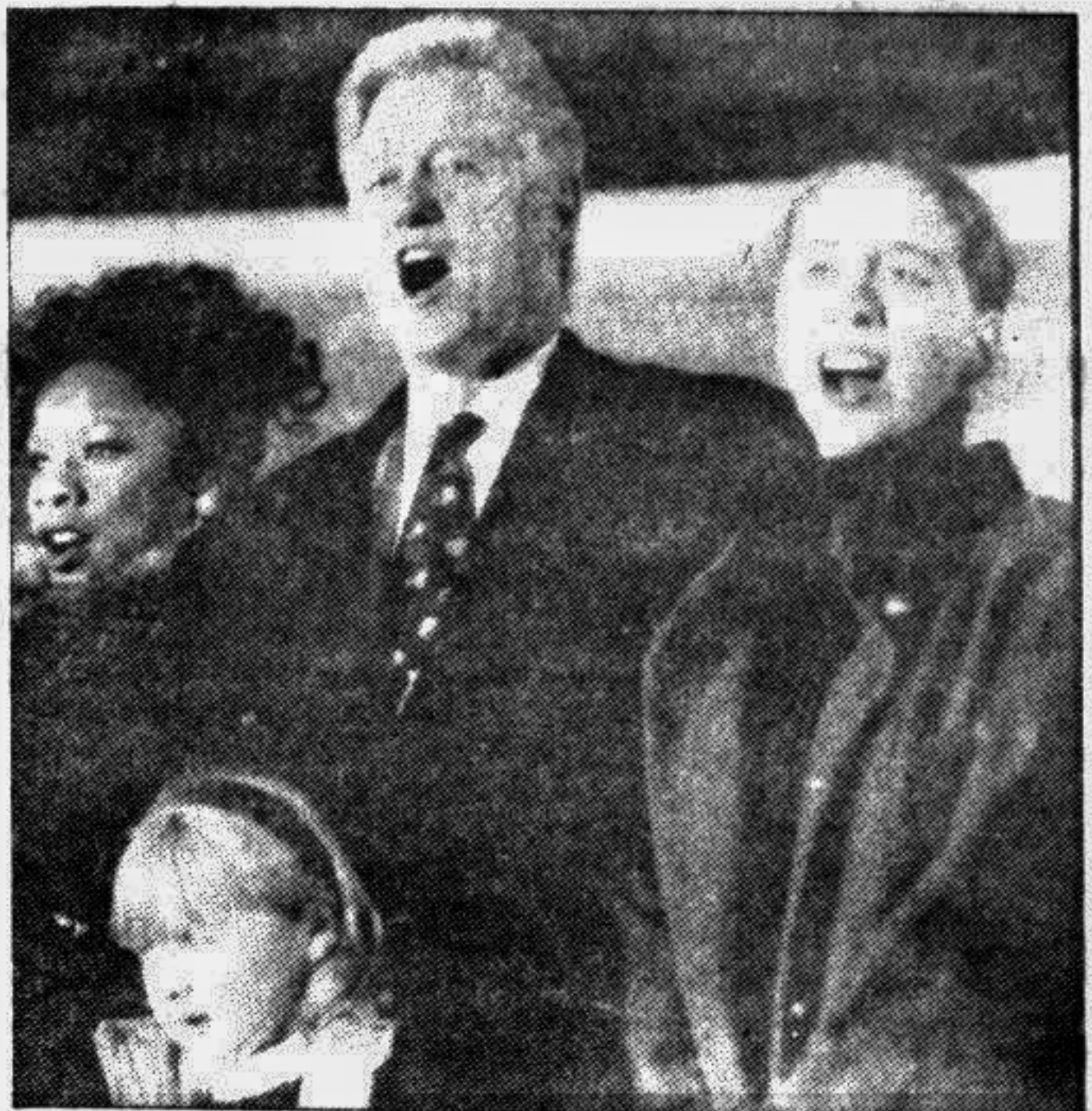
The Tigers, fighting for a Tamil homeland in the north and east, on Wednesday rejected an amnesty offered by President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

Lawrence Thilakar, the LTTE's Paris-based spokesman, told Reuters the rebels would not submit to domination by the army and had no choice but to "continue with the resistance against military occupation."

The government on Tuesday raised the Sri Lankan flag above Jaffna town, at the end of the seven-week long operation riviera, its biggest assault in 12 years of war.

AFP adds: Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers admitted today they lost 28 rebels in a suicide attack on police that sought to avenge the loss of their bastion in the northern Jaffna Peninsula.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said over its clandestine radio that its suicide squad, the Black Tigers, carried out the attack Tuesday on the police Special Task Force (STF) camp in Batticaloa.



US President Bill Clinton (C) sings Christmas carols with his daughter Chelsea (L), professional singer Dnyce Graves (R), and special guest Catherine Hamill (front), 9 yrs, late on Wednesday at the lighting ceremony of the National Christmas Tree near the White House. — AFP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

Russian passenger plane missing: An Aeroflot plane with 88 people aboard disappeared from radar screens Wednesday night in Russia's Far East and was presumed to have crashed, a Russian news agency quoted an emergency official as saying, AP reports from Moscow.

The Tu-154 plane was en route from Yuzho-Sakhalinsk on the Pacific island of Sakhalin to Khabarovsk on the mainland when it lost radio contact, a spokesman for the Emergency Situations Ministry told the Interfax news agency.

Taliban army commander killed: A senior military commander of the rebel Islamic Taliban militia was killed in recent fighting with Afghan government forces near Kabul, Afghan political sources in Peshawar said today, Reuter reports from Peshawar.

The sources quoted Taliban leaders as saying that Mullah Mashaar, whose real name was Abdul Qayyum, was killed at the end of November in battles southeast of Kabul.

Films for Academy Awards submitted: Films from 41 countries have been submitted for consideration as the best foreign language film for the 68th annual Academy Awards, AFP reports from Los Angeles.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences will announce the nominations for the Oscar Awards on February 13, 1996 and the winners will be announced on March 25. This year's submissions include: France's "Cursed Lawn," Germany's "Schlafes Bruder," Greece's "Ulysses' Gaze," Hong Kong's "Summer Snow," and "The Outpost" of Hungary.

Clair Patterson dies: Clair Patterson, who determined the age of the earth and pioneered research on the dangers of lead pollution for humans, has died from an asthma attack. He was 73, AFP says from Pasadena, California.

Patterson died at his home near Santa Ana, according to the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) where he established a geochemistry programme in 1952 and was a professor emeritus.

4000 slaves discovered in Sao Paulo: Nearly 4,000 people, including children younger than 14, been discovered working as virtual slaves on five ranches in the Amazon State of Sao Paulo, police said Wednesday, AFP reports from Sao Paulo.

The workers were required to extract resin from 1,500 pine trees daily to earn up to 150 dollars monthly, said Silvio Pereira, Chief Inspector for the Labour Ministry.

Road mishap claims 7 in Austria: Seven people were killed and around 30 injured when a double-decker coach crashed into a lake in the eastern Austrian province of Salzburg on Wednesday, police said, Reuter reports from Vienna.

The coach, with Munich plates, was heading towards Salzburg, a police spokesman said. There were 42 people on board.

China to breed 40-60 giant pandas: China will breed 40 to 60 giant pandas over the next five years, the China News Service said, Reuter reports from Beijing.

China expected 38 to 48 of the pandas breed incapability to survive, the service quoted Zhang Anju, Director of the China Panda Breeding Technology Commission, as saying.

Militants kill 4 in Manipur: At least four people were killed Wednesday when tribal militants fired on their car in the eastern Indian state of Manipur, the Press Trust of India said, AFP reports from New Delhi.

Officials said in the Manipur capital of Imphal that the assistant commandant of the first Manipur Rifles Regiment, his wife and two soldiers died in the early morning attack in Thoubal district.

Quake shakes eastern Turkey: An earthquake in eastern Turkey damaged buildings and sent hundreds of people into the streets in panic but there were no reports of casualties, residents said Wednesday, Reuter reports from Pulmur.

Tuesday night's quake, measuring 5.6 on the Richter scale, damaged around 50 state-built homes in the mountain town of Pulmur.

Army flush out Hutu rebels from Bujumbura

NAIROBI, Dec 7: Calm returned to the Burundi capital Bujumbura today after a major operation by the Tutsi-dominated army to flush out Hutu rebels staging hit-and-run attacks on troops, the government said, reports Reuter.

Government spokesman Antoine Baza told state-owned radio that Bujumbura's eastern suburbs — Hutu hotbeds — were peaceful although residents said sporadic gunfire could still be heard.

"Calm has returned in the troubled areas," Baza, who is also Communications Minister said in a broadcast monitored in the Kenyan capital Nairobi.

Scientists identify natural 'suppressor' of AIDS virus

WASHINGTON, Dec 7: Scientists on Wednesday announced they had identified several long-sought substances naturally produced by the human immune system that seem to be able to suppress the virus that causes AIDS, reports Reuter.

The discovery of these natural "suppressors," reported in two prestigious research journals in Britain and the United States, does not have any immediate impact on AIDS patients. But scientists regard the discoveries as hugely significant and expect them to shed light on the body's peculiar responses to the HIV virus that causes AIDS and to rapidly spur new lines of research into possible drugs or even a vaccine.

The potential implications are substantial," said Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in Bethesda, Maryland.

"These papers are important in that they identify for the first time more than one factor that is responsible for the blocking of HIV replication. This opens up new avenues of approach," Fauci told Reuters.

Both reports deal with factors produced by CD 8 cells, white blood cells that are components of the immune system. In one, released ahead of publication next week in the journal science, a US-Italian research team found three substances made by CD8 cells that were previously known to respond to inflammation but were not



Jordan's King Hussein (R) smiles to Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres (L) on Wednesday during a joint press conference in Amman. Peres said, after his talks with King Hussein, his country was keen to seize the opportunity for peace with Syria amid renewed US efforts to bring the two countries back to the negotiating table. — AFP/UNB photo

Australia, NZ welcome France's decision to halt N-tests

CANBERRA, Dec 7: Australia and New Zealand cautiously welcomed today France's announcement of an early halt to its widely-condemned series of South Pacific nuclear tests, reports Reuter.

However, both countries repeated appeals for an immediate end to the blasts.

Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating, whose country has been in the forefront of international opposition to the tests, said on Thursday the programme should never have started and should be stopped immediately, according to a spokesman.

France, under fire over the nuclear testing at its South Pacific sites, said on Wednesday it would complete the series of blasts before the end of February.

New Zealand Foreign Minister Don McKinnon also urged an end to further testing.

"I am certainly pleased to hear this news. Nevertheless, it doesn't change the fact that no tests at all would have been preferable," McKinnon said in a statement.

"Equally, I would still like to hear the French say no further tests are necessary at all and that they are committed

to reducing their nuclear weapons stockpile," he added.

Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans said the French announcement was no cause for satisfaction.

"The fact that they're responding to public international pressure, which we've been of course among the leaders in pushing, is no real cause for satisfaction," he told reporters.

"Of course, it's better that it's stopping earlier rather than later. But we're still looking at least at two more tests and that's not very helpful at all.



Veiled Muslim women carry the scales of justice during a march demanding compensation for the victims of families killed in the riots following the destruction of the Babri Mosque three years ago by Hindu fundamentalists. Hundreds of people died in the violence after the 17th century disputed shrine was demolished. — AFP/UNB photo

PLO to disarm underground gunmen

JERUSALEM, Dec 7: Yasser Arafat's security chiefs said Wednesday they would disarm underground gunmen in West Bank areas that come under their control and that '93 vigilantes have already handed over their weapons, reports AP.

But another dispute resurfaced as the chief Palestinian negotiator called Israel's continuing detention of 27 women prisoners a violation of the Israel-PLO accords.

The disarmament promise was directed at Israeli officials concerned about armed Palestinian gangs whose members wounded four Israeli soldiers in two West Bank ambushes in a week.

Israel has threatened to slow down its troop withdrawal from West Bank towns and villages unless Palestinian police did more to prevent attacks on Israelis.

ROK president to reshuffle cabinet

SEOUL, Dec 7: South Korean President Kim Young-Sam will reshuffle his cabinet next week, and the posts to be affected will include Prime Minister Lee Hong-Koo, the domestic Yonhap news agency reported today, reports Reuter.

Yonhap quoted a ruling party official as saying the reshuffle was expected around December 16 when the National Assembly was in session because a change of Prime Minister needed parliamentary approval. The current session is due to end on December 19.

The move was also expected to affect Deputy Prime Minister Hong Jae-Hyong.

'Assassin of Rabin a good man'

TEL AVIV, Dec 7: Yigal Amir's defence attorney said on Wednesday the confessed assassin of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin is a "good man," reports Reuter.

Speaking in heavily American-accented Hebrew, lawyer Yonatan Ray Goldberg, who lives in an orthodox Jewish settlement in the occupied West Bank, told Israeli army radio he liked his client.

"I see he is a man with a good heart... he's not like the man portrayed in the media," Goldberg said. "He seems like a good man who wants to do good in the world."

Goldberg said his assessment of Amir's personality was separate from his opinion about the crime the religious Jewish law student is accused of committing.

Rabin's murder, the lawyer said, "hurt everyone."

Off the Record

Make sure there is no dinosaur inside

HOLLYWOOD, Fla: Scientists hope that with a little luck and the help of modern technology they will discover the well-developed, well-preserved embryo of a dinosaur inside a fossilised 70 million-year-old egg, reports Reuter.

The bowling ball-size egg, discovered by a group of paleontologists in northwestern Argentina about six months ago, will undergo a cat scan and magnetic resonance imaging at a local hospital on Wednesday.

Experts believe the egg is that of a saltasaurus, a herbivorous, long-necked dinosaur that roamed what is now Argentina during the cretaceous period. Dinosaurs disappeared at the end of that era about 65 million years ago.

Dr Martin Shugar, an amateur paleontologist who will perform the tests, said the egg is a rarity because it is perfectly fossilised and unhatched.

"We have the possibility there could be a fossilised embryo within the egg," Shugar said.

He prefers walking rather than riding limousine

VIENNA: Saudi Arabia may be synonymous with crude-oil sales, but its new Oil Minister, Ali Ibrahim Naimi, certainly didn't do his part to increase petroleum consumption here recently, reports UNB.

Naimi, who took control of oil output for the world's largest oil producer on August 2, loves to walk.

As ministers of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries met in the frosty Austrian capital, Naimi, who is 60 years old, often eschewed the limousines at his disposal. Instead he set out on foot, with a clutch of bodyguards, aides and reporters in tow.

The footloose attitude was particularly surprising because security has become so heavy at OPEC gatherings since the terrorist kidnapping 20 years ago in Vienna of then Saudi Oil Minister Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani and other ministers.

Naimi, dubbed the "Saudi of Silence" because of his refusal to answer most questions posed to him by journalists, lived up to his moniker during his frequent strolls.

After an unusually long, seven-hour session at OPEC's secretariat, at which ministers were fortified by deliveries of takeout sandwiches, Naimi and his entourage strode confidently through the OPEC lobby and hit the pavement again.

At a brisk pace, the coach marched, trailed by journalists the full 2 1/2 kilometers back to Naimi's luxury hotel, barely slowing down for red lights on Vienna's busy streets.

The odd flock swooped down Karntnerstrasse, the cobblestone pedestrian shopping plaza, with the minister maintaining a sphinx-like silence, but for a hearty laugh whenever a journalist asked a question.

Naimi wouldn't even respond when asked why he preferred to walk rather than ride.

China begins final push towards takeover of HK

BEIJING, Dec 7: China today started its final push towards its mid-1997 takeover of Hong Kong, preparing for the creation of what critics say will be a shadow government dogging the British administration's final months, reports Reuter.

The Preliminary Working Committee (PWC), the body guiding China's policy on Hong Kong, today began its final two-day meeting at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, the centre of communist rule.

The PWC, created in 1992 when Sino-British relations soured over democratic reforms for Hong Kong, would be dissolved and the high-profile preparatory committee would become operational on January 1, 1996, officials said.

The PWC has "fulfilled its historic mission," the official Xinhua news agency said.

The committee sparked a storm of protest in Hong Kong in October when it proposed diluting the territory's bill of rights and resurrecting draconian colonial internal security laws.

Beijing's critics say the preparatory committee would act as a Chinese shadow government second-guessing and even undermining British rule in the final 18 months before the colony reverts to China on July 1, 1997.

The preparatory committee is expected to put into action controversial plans, including drawing up a list of laws to be repealed after 1997 and a replacement for Hong Kong's elected legislature, which China has pledged to abolish in 1997.

Vote counting of 2nd round polls begins in Egypt

CAIRO, Dec 7: Vote counting has started in Egypt after a second round of parliamentary elections marred by the deaths of 15 people and protests from opposition parties and human rights groups of blatant vote-rigging, reports Reuter.

At least seven opposition candidates have withdrawn in protest at electoral abuses and one human rights group said it expected opposition parties to gain just four per cent of seats in the new 454-member parliament.

Another group urged President Hosni Mubarak, whose ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) won 90 per cent of the 137 seats decided in last week's first round, to annul the elections.