

BRIEFLY



President-elect Aleksander Kwasniewski (L) speaks to the press, in Warsaw, Poland on Sunday after coming back from a holiday in Spain. Kwasniewski was cleared for his swearing-in ceremony after Poland's Supreme Court ruled that, while he did lie about having a masters degree, the results of the November 19 election would stand. Person on the right is Zbigniew Siemiatkowski, Kwasniewski's advisor. — AFP/UNB photo

Kaifu to step down as party leader:

Former prime minister Toshiki Kaifu has decided to step down as leader of Japan's main opposition party Shinshinto (New Frontier). Kyodo news agency reported yesterday. Reuter reports from Tokyo.

China to put Wei on trial:

China confirmed yesterday that it would put veteran pro-democracy dissident Wei Jingsheng on trial on Wednesday and said the proceeding would be open to the public. Reuter reports from Beijing.

Gunmen kill 4 in South Africa:

Gunmen killed four people and wounded seven in a township east of Johannesburg on Sunday night, South African police said yesterday. Reuter reports from Johannesburg.

Quake shakes southern Israel:

An earthquake shook southern Israel yesterday, the second tremor to hit the region in four days, but there were no immediate reports of damage or casualties, Reuter reports from Jerusalem.

20 die in China bldg collapse:

More than 20 workers died as a seven-storey building in Deyang city, in southwestern China's Sichuan province, collapsed Friday, a newspaper reported yesterday, AFP reports from Shanghai.

Castro to make stopover in Japan:

Cuban President Fidel Castro will make a two-day stopover in Japan this week on his way home from visits to China and Vietnam, the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo confirmed yesterday, AFP reports from Tokyo.

Gunmen kill teenager in Istanbul:

Gunmen killed a teenager and injured six people when they raked an Istanbul election office of Prime Minister Tansu Ciller's True Path Party (DYP), the semi official Anatolian news agency said yesterday. Reuter reports from Istanbul.

4 Western hostages visibly in good health in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, Dec 11: Four Western tourists kidnapped by Muslim separatists more than five months ago have been sighted by villagers in southern Kashmir and are apparently in good health sources said today, reports AFP.

The sources who requested anonymity, said the captives had been seen on Sunday in a village near the resort of Achabal some 80 kilometres (50 miles) south of this Kashmir summer capital.

"All of the four were visibly healthy one source said. They were wearing heavy Kashmiri woollens and had beards."

They looked as though they had adjusted themselves to the surroundings."

Peres begins US visit

NEW YORK, Dec 11: Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres began a key visit to the United States on Sunday by paying homage to his predecessor slain Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, at a rally here attended by some 50,000 people, reports AFP.

Speakers including Rabin's widow Leah, and US Vice President Al Gore called on Jews to overcome their differences and to support the Arab-Israeli peace process at the rally held in Madison Square Garden.

A handful of radical Jews outside the arena — more famous for bosing matches than for peace demonstrations — handed out leaflets against the Mideast peace.

MQM's strike keeps Karachi paralysed

KARACHI, Dec 11: Karachi, Pakistan's commercial hub, remained largely paralysed today as a strike called by the opposition Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) to protest against the murders of two relatives of the top leader entered the second day, reports AFP.

The MQM revised its call for a three-day protest, saying there would be no strike on Tuesday, so that people could attend the funeral of the two men whose bodies were found on Saturday.

Meanwhile, the death toll in violence on the first day of the protest on Sunday rose to seven with one more person reportedly dying in a shooting incident in Karachi overnight.

Troops, planes attack Tigers' jungle bases

COLOMBO, Dec 11: Sri Lankan troops and planes are attacking large groups of Tamil Tiger guerrillas who have redeployed in jungle bases in the east after the fall of their northern Jaffna stronghold, defence officials said today, reports Reuter.

"We have launched search and destroy operations against terrorist bases in the jungles where our intelligence says they have regrouped," a senior military officer in the east said.

"We asked for air support and they have taken some targets."

A senior air force officer said aircraft and helicopters had been deployed to support ground troops.

Police commandos, backed by army and air force ground troops, have surrounded several rebel jungle bases in the Batticaloa and Aamparai districts, officials said.

Egypt ready to join NATO force for Bosnia

CAIRO, Dec 11: Egypt is prepared to join NATO in sending troops in a force to implement peace accords in Bosnia, Foreign Minister Amr Mussa said in an interview with the government daily Al-Ahram today, reports AFP.

"What we are talking about now is a force to carry out the peace process in Bosnia, and we intend and are prepared to join it, Mussa said after attending the 40-nation London conference on reconstruction Bosnia."

Mussa said Egypt would attend the signing of the Dayton peace accords in Paris on Thursday, adding that Muslim nations would meet on the sidelines of the signing to define their role in the peace force and in rebuilding Bosnia.

The foreign minister also warned Bosnian Serbs opposed to the accords, saying "If the Serbs challenge the peace process, they challenge the world, and they must bear responsibility for that."

The international force in Bosnia will stand against these outlaws," Mussa said.

Nablus declared military zone

NABLUS, West Bank, Dec 11: The city of Nablus in the northern part of the West Bank was declared military zone with access forbidden to Israelis as of Sunday night, a military source reported, says AFP.

The Israeli army is scheduled to withdraw from Nablus on December 14 under terms of an agreement signed by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation on extending Palestinian self-rule on the West Bank.

The army which captured and occupied the territory in the 1967 Middle East war, has already pulled out of Jenin and on Sunday it left Tulkarm both towns had been declared military zones off limits to Israelis prior to the military withdrawal.

and St. Petersburg marking he anniversary drew only a dozen mothers of soldiers.

But some haven't forgotten the horror and pain of the war that started when Russian soldiers marched into Chechnya to fight rebels determined to secede. Since then, an estimated 20,000 people have been killed, most of them civilians.

The popular daily newspaper Moskovskoye Komsomolets printed a front-page photograph of the remains of a Russian tank crewman whose body was hung on display in the Chechen capital Grozny and eaten by dogs.

The readers' letters section of the daily Komsomolskaya

Pro-Rabbani forces launch massive attack on Taliban

RISHKOR, Afghanistan, Dec 11: Afghan government troops launched a massive attack on the Taliban militia besieging Kabul, triggering a rocket barrage on the capital, army and defence officials said today, reports AFP.

Jets bombed Taliban positions late Sunday, while troops bombarded the militiamen with missiles, rockets and heavy artillery on this frontline just five kilometres (three miles) from Kabul's southern suburbs, commanders here said.

"We were forced to attack the enemy to put a halt to what we saw as abnormal movements of troops and

vehicles," a Defence Ministry spokesman said.

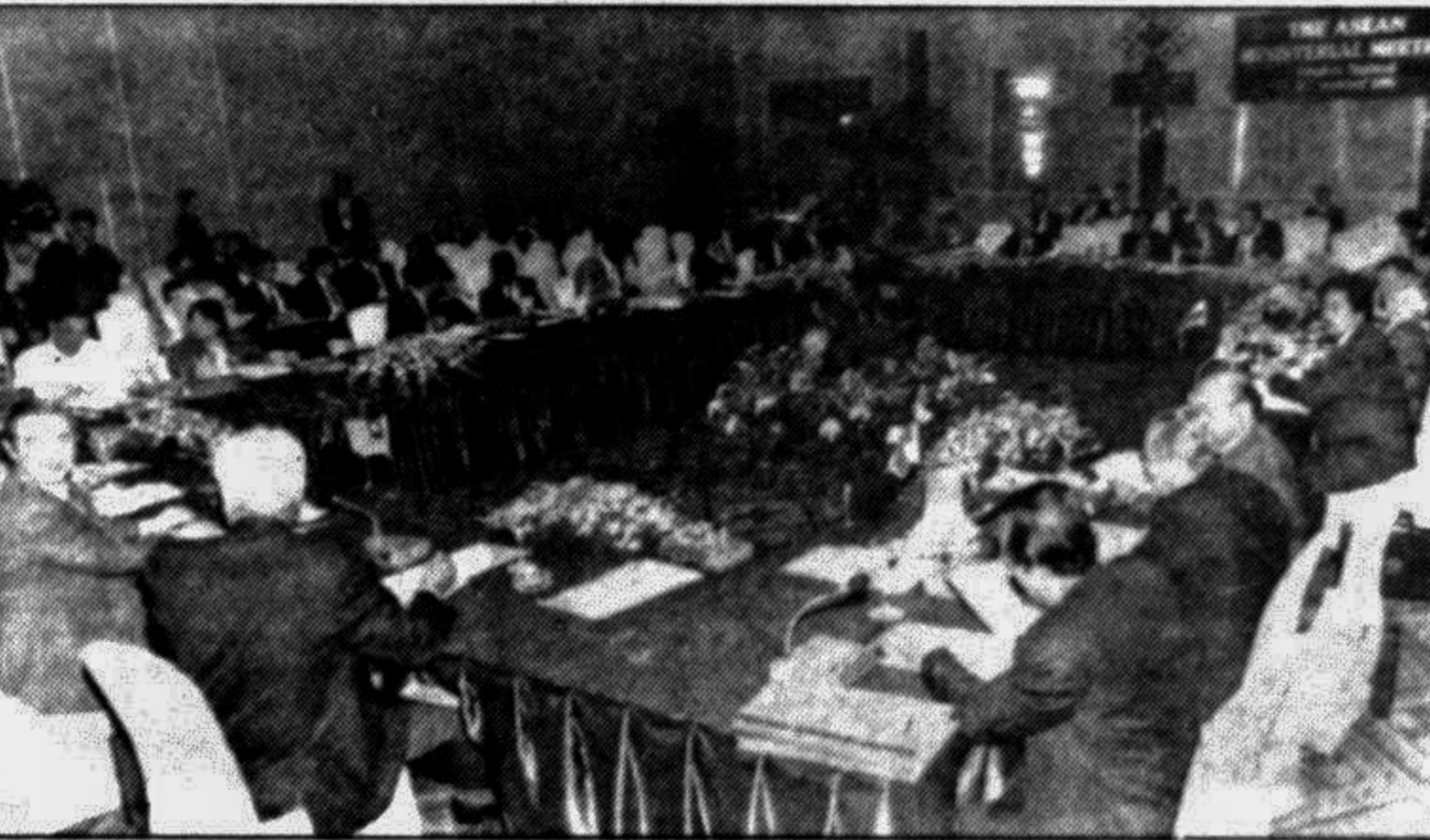
The battle was very fierce and lasted about five hours, but we suffered no casualties on our side," a frontline commander Major Ahmad Shah told AFP.

The Defence Ministry and unit commanders said the frontlines had not changed during the fight, although the Defence Ministry said the Taliban had abandoned several posts in the area after they came under heavy fire. The claim could not be immediately confirmed by independent sources.

While troops on both sides were battling it out, the Taliban launched a barrage of about 40 rockets on the war-ravaged capital late Sunday.

But defence and hospital sources said that all the warheads had landed in a non-residential area which houses the airport, causing no casualties.

The capital — which is hemmed in on three fronts by the Taliban who have vowed to topple President Burhanuddin Rabbani's government and impose Islamic law on the country — was meanwhile calm and cold today, apart from the sound of routine artillery skirmishes on its outskirts.



Overall view of the ASEAN foreign ministers meeting yesterday. ASEAN foreign ministers and finance ministers held separate meetings to prepare for a Southeast Asian summit opening December 14. The ministers were putting the final touches to a dozen documents for their heads of government. — AFP/UNB photo

SC strikes down Bombay Court ruling that threatens Joshi

NEW DELHI, Dec 11: The supreme Court struck down today a lower court ruling that had threatened to drive from office the right-wing Hindu Chief Minister of India's richest state, reports Reuter.

The Supreme Court upheld a petition by Maharashtra Chief Minister Manohar Joshi challenging a Bombay High Court ruling that had declared his 1990 election to the state assembly invalid because he had played on religious emotions.

The Bombay Court's 1993 ruling had cast a shadow over Joshi's tenure as Chief Minister, which began in March after his Hindu chauvinist Shiv Sena Party and its coalition partner, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), won state polls.

"The court allows the appeal of Joshi and sets aside the judgment of the Bombay High Court," the order by the three-judge panel said.

"I am just relieved and relaxed," Joshi told reporters in the western city of Nagpur after learning of the court ruling.

Joshi's defeated opponent

argued that the Shiv Sena member had illegally canvassed votes by appealing to religious feelings. Indian law bars candidates from tapping into religious sentiments in the quest for votes.

Michael Jackson improving

NEW YORK, Dec 11: Michael Jackson is showing signs of recovery from a viral ailment that made him collapse at a rehearsal last week, his doctors say, reports AP.

Jackson was in an intensive care unit of Beth Israel Medical Centre North on Sunday, but the gastrointestinal ailment that caused his breakdown was under control, the 37-year-old pop star's doctors said in a statement.

He had resumed eating solid foods, his heart was "completely normal" and he may be moved out of the intensive care unit to a private room Monday, the doctors said.

Joshi stepped down as state legislator and opposition leader after the Bombay Court's ruling in 1993, but was elected again in this year's polls and named Chief Minister at the head of the Hindu coalition government.

Lawyers for the son of his 1990 defeated opponent, who has since died, had argued that Joshi would have had to step down if the Supreme Court had rejected his petition because his 1995 electoral victory would also have been called into question.

Chief Ministers must have a seat in the state assembly. But the Supreme Court's ruling erased any legal uncertainty as to whether Joshi could remain chief minister.

Joshi's tenure as chief minister has been marked by controversy. Shortly after taking office, his government approved a decision by the city of Bombay to change the financial capital's name to Mumbai.

Proponents of the move argued Bombay was the name chosen by India's former British rulers and Mumbai the name given by its original Marathi inhabitants.



Maria Bell of Tennessee, senior airperson with the US Marines, is all smiles as she arrives with other troops at Sarajevo airport on Sunday. The marines are members of an advance party of NATO troops making preparations for the eventual arrival of some 60,000 alliance troops including some 20,000 US soldiers. — AFP/UNB photo

Uproar in Indian Houses leads to adjournment

NEW DELHI, Dec 11: The Indian parliament adjourned in uproar for a fourth day in a row today with opposition lawmakers pressing for the resignation of Communication Minister Sukh Ram for alleged corruption, reports AFP.

Opposition legislators disrupted proceedings in both the lower and upper houses with charges that the minister overseeing the privatisation of India's telecom sector had personally profited from the handing out of licences.

Lawmakers from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Indian People's Party and other opposition parties called for a joint parliamentary committee to be set up to investigate what they termed the "telecom scam."

The lower house, the Lok Sabha adjourned within minutes of opening as BJP and other MPs shouting "stop the corruption" and "Sukh Ram resign" refused to allow any business to be transacted until the demands were met.

The upper house of parliament the Rajya Sabha was also adjourned until lunch shortly after opening.

The opposition has accused Sukh Ram of acting improperly in the tender process for basic telecom licences in which a company from his home state, Himachal Futuristic Communication Limited, submitted huge bids.

Sukh Ram has denied any irregularities in the bidding process.

ASEAN to sign N-free zone treaty without amendment

BANGKOK, Dec 11: South-east Asian ministers have agreed without amendments on a treaty declaring a nuclear weapons-free zone which is due to be signed by their heads of government this week, senior officials said today, reports Reuter.

The ministers have finalised all documents and draft reports, including the treaty for a Southeast Asian weapons-free zone," Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) secretary general Ajit Singh told reporters.

ASEAN foreign and economic ministers met earlier today to discuss a host of reports and agreements, including the nuclear treaty and an agreement to speed up the ASEAN free trade area.

The foreign ministers agreed to push ahead with their nuclear treaty despite the reservations of both the United States and China.

"Right now there is no problem. I can assure you on the 15th of this month the treaty will be signed," Thai Foreign Minister Kasem Kasemsri told reporters after the ministerial talks.

The seven ASEAN members, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, will be joined by Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos in signing the nuclear treaty.

It will ban the possession, manufacture and acquisition of nuclear weapons but will allow the "innocent passage" of naval ships and aircraft of other powers.

Off the Record

Because she stopped doing houseworks

TOKYO: A 31-year-old Japanese man was arrested Monday for killing his 57-year-old mother after losing his temper with her for not doing any housework for two months, police said, reports AFP.

According to police investigations, the company employee punched his mother in the head and face early Monday at their house in Chiba prefecture, east of Tokyo.

Asked what had prompted the killing, the man was quoted telling police about two months ago, "she stopped doing housework. I got angry."

He has been living with his mother for seven to eight years, police said, while his 60-year-old father had been hospitalised.

Amateur astronomer's discovery by chance

LONDON: An amateur astronomer in Britain has discovered a tiny planet 400 million miles (645 million km) from earth with a telescope rigged up in his garden shed, reports Reuter.

"I've been stargazing since I was 11 years old but I never thought anything like this would happen to me," George Sallit said after the discovery of Sallit One was verified by experts at Harvard University and the Smithsonian Institute in the United States.

It is one of several thousand minor planets in the solar system.

Sallit, 43, found the 20-mile (32-km) diameter planet between Mars and Jupiter quite by chance when scouring the universe. At first he thought it might have been a scratch on his lens, he told The Times newspaper.

He thanked his wife Jennifer who constantly brings him cups of tea in his shed. He said: "When I told her, I'd found a new planet, she said "that's nice dear."

Qatar blasts US, UN, Gulf Arab partners

DOHA, Dec 11: Qatar has broken with regional tradition by openly criticising its Gulf Arab partners, the United States and the United Nations, and by dropping any pretense that ties are completely harmonious, reports AFP.

Qatar staged an unprecedented boycott of Wednesday's Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit in Muscat to protest how a Saudi-led general and on Saturday vowed to boycott future GCC meetings if he stayed on.

Doha also blasted Arab countries' stand toward Israel and complained that the West was using the Gulf states for their money.

Foreign Minister Hamd bin Jasssem bin Jabr Al-Thani on Saturday defended the decision to allow the US firm En-

ron to sign a letter of intent to ship Qatar gas to Israel — a move which diplomats said sparked Saudi disapproval.

"We have lost every war with Israel," he said. "Let's speak frankly. If we don't sell this gas, Israel will have no problem getting it elsewhere, and it's Qatar, an Arab country, that will lose the contract."

"We the Arabs are used to shipping oil to Rotterdam which was then delivered to Israel for two dollars more per barrel," he said during a three-hour press conference.

"We could have sold the oil directly to Israel for two dollars more per barrel and pocketed billions of dollars which would have been used in the battle against the Zionist enemy," he said.

Chechen war passes a yr mark with slim chances of peace

Pravda included one from a woman whose son has been missing in Chechnya since Feb. 18: "Where are you, my son? Please, tell us. We are waiting for you and we love you very much."

Another letter in the same newspaper was from a Russian lieutenant colonel who recalled telling a woman her son had been killed: "Forgive us all on this planet, the mothers whose sons we failed to save. If a wife loses her husband, she is called a widow. But what of the mother who loses her son?"

On Dec. 11, 1994, about 40,000 Russian troops poured into Chechnya to quell the tiny southern republic's

separatist drive and put an end to the three-year rule of independence-minded President Dzhokhar Dudayev.

Negotiations to end the war began after Chechen rebels took about 2,000 people hostage in the southern Russian town of Budyonovsk in June. Talks in Grozny produced a July military agreement that spoke of rebel disarmament and partial Russian pullout, to be followed by elections and negotiations on Chechnya's political status.

The agreement collapsed without being implemented. Russian troops control the northern two-thirds of Chechnya, but a group of rebels continues to operate from the southern third. Recent

months have seen peace negotiations break down, guerrilla attacks increase in Grozny and Moscow attempt to force elections on Chechnya.

Federal authorities and their Chechen allies have bolstered security across the republic to prepare for the vote, set for Dec. 17 to coincide with Russia's legislative elections. The three contestants in the race include the Kremlin-backed premier, Doku Zavgayev.

But a leading candidate withdrew from the race Saturday. Former Russian parliament speaker and ethnic Chechen Ruslan Khasbulatov said the vote could only aggravate tensions in Chechnya.

dividing it into rebel — and Moscow-held areas and causing new violence.

Dudayev's separatist rebels have threatened to disrupt the elections. They say no vote can take place until Russian troops leave.

And every day, the fighting continues.

Strike cripples Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Dec 11: A general strike called to condemn the killing of a Kashmiri Muslim militant and the shooting of a journalist shut down the Kashmir valley today, reports AFP.

Shops, offices and schools were closed across the Muslim-majority valley and traffic was off the roads in response to the strike called by a faction of the pro-independence Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), witnesses said.

The strike was called by the faction to mourn the death of a leader of the group in a clash with another Muslim separatist outfit on Thursday.