

**BRIEFLY**



Visiting Cuban President Fidel Castro (L) shakes hands with Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama at the latter's official residence. Castro is on a two-day stopover on the last leg of a two-week Asian tour. — AFP/UNB photo

**Bus mishap claims 21 in Nepal:** At least 21 people were killed and 69 others injured Wednesday when an overcrowded bus they were traveling in veered off a mountain road and fell 150 metres (500 feet). Radio Nepal said. AP reports from Kathmandu. The accident occurred at Jhumsa Khola town, about 180 kilometers (110 miles) west of Kathmandu, capital of the Himalayan nation.

**Kim Jong Il to visit China:** North Korea's de facto leader Kim Jong Il is expected to visit China in March, a South Korean newspaper reported Thursday. AP reports from Seoul. In a Beijing-dated report, the Hankyoreh Shinmun quoted an "informed" North Korean source in the Chinese capital as saying the visit would be unofficial because Kim would be coming as an unofficial leader.

**Ex-Azeri police official to die:** The military branch of the republic's Supreme Court on Wednesday sentenced a former top police official to death for his role in an attempted coup. AP reports from Baku. Eldar Alev, a top aide to Azerbaijan's former Prime Minister Surat Huseynov, was convicted Tuesday of high treason in the coup attempt in October 1994.

**4 burnt alive in Poland:** Four men were burned alive after falling into an oven heated to 500 degrees Celsius (870 Fahrenheit) at a foundry in Golin in Western Poland, police said Wednesday, cited by PAP news agency. AFP reports from Warsaw. They had climbed up the oven to check the melting process. Tuesday when one of them stumbled, probably because of the lack of oxygen, police said, and the others fell in trying to help him.

**Italy pays moving tribute to Rabin:** Italy paid a moving tribute to assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on Wednesday with a concert where his widow Leah vowed that the peace process he helped nurture would continue despite its enemies. Reuter reports from Rome.

I thank you on behalf of peace that will continue despite the opponents of peace, she said with a choked voice at Rome's opera theatre in the presence of President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro and dozens of prominent Italian political and business leaders.

**Cuba urged to grant HR monitor:** A UN committee called on Cuba to release political prisoners and urged Havana to grant a UN human rights monitor access to the country. AP reports from United Nations.

**Russian troops on alert**  
**Clashes intensify ahead of polls in Chechnya**

GROZNY, Dec 14: Russia's military command said Wednesday that violence in Chechnya has intensified in the runup to planned elections, and Russian troops there were put on alert, reports AP. Pro-Moscow Chechen police promised decisive measures to ensure order.

The mounting violence followed Monday's one-year anniversary of the Chechen war, and reflects growing tension ahead of Sunday's leadership elections, called by the republic's Moscow-installed government. Voters also are being asked to take part in Russia's nationwide parliamentary elections.

But Chechen rebels have vowed to boycott the vote, saying no balloting is possible until federal troops leave. In addition to the usual 9 pm to 6 am curfew, army and police patrols are being beefed up. Federal troops have been ordered to get to the site of any incident within 15 minutes, said Chechnya's military commandant, Lt Gen Leonid Cherovtkin.

The main roads into and inside Grozny have been blocked to traffic and all leaves were canceled for Russian servicemen. AFP adds: Some 600 Chechen separatists launched an attack on Russian forces in Gudermes in eastern Chechnya today after a group of separatists had seized a nearby hospital, Interfax news agency reported, citing the Russian military command.

There was no independent confirmation of the report. The federal command in Chechnya said Russian troops had been sent into the area to oust the rebels from the hospital.

**Govt orders closure of 104 factories to save Taj**

AGRA, Dec 14: The government on Wednesday ordered 104 factories around the Taj Mahal to shut down by year end to save the white marble monument, which is corroding from pollution, reports AP. "This priceless treasure belongs to the whole world," Environment Minister Rajesh Pilot told The Associated Press after meeting with industrialists and government officials.

The once pearly white Taj Mahal, built by Mogul Emperor Shah Jahan for his Queen, Mumtaz, in the 16th century, is faintly yellowing. Some experts say the deterioration is due to aging, while others say it is a coating of dust that can be scrubbed. There also is corrosion to the marble from rusting iron rods that support the structure, say experts from India, the United States and Italy consulted by the federal government, which set up a study committee on orders of the Supreme Court. The committee's recommendations for saving the Taj included an uninterrupted power supply, a shifting of polluting factories and a reduction in vehicle pollution. Wednesday's government order will affect factories in and around Agra, 200 kilometers (120 miles) south of New Delhi.

**Summit begins in Bangkok**  
**ASEAN leaders to sign N-free zone treaty, embrace Myanmar**

BANGKOK, Dec 14: Leaders of the seven-member ASEAN began a meeting today to endorse speedy expansion of the regional grouping to include new Southeast Asian members, free up trade and sign a new nuclear-free zone treaty, reports Reuter.

Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-archa of summit host Thailand opened the triennial meeting at a central Bangkok hotel.

ASEAN groups Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Vietnam.

Other leaders present were Indonesian and Philippine presidents Suharto and Fidel Ramos, Brunei Sultan Hassan Al Bolkiah, and Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia. Goh Chok Tong of Singapore and Vo Van Kiet of Vietnam.

ASEAN heads of government are expected to issue a final Bangkok summit declaration on Friday in which they will push for the expedited entry of the remaining three non-member Southeast Asian countries, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, into ASEAN.

The leaders will also sign several other agreements on Friday, including a Southeast Asia nuclear-weapons free zone and a pact to enhance economic cooperation through an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) by the year 2003.

AP adds: Southeast Asian leaders arrived in Bangkok Wednesday for a summit at which they will declare a nuclear weapons-free zone and embrace Myanmar — both despite reservations by US officials.

In a sign of how relaxed the atmosphere is likely to be, Philippine President Fi-

del Ramos arrived with his attendants carrying two sets of golf bags. Regional leaders like to relax over golf during meetings, and Southeast Asia is now enjoying economic prosperity and peace.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations is holding a summit Thursday and Friday to sign the nuclear treaty

and endorse creating a free trade zone by the year 2003. They will also hold an unprecedented summit with the three remaining regional states: Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia.

"The community of one Southeast Asia is becoming a reality," said Ramos Wednesday.



The seven leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) link hands for a group photo session during the opening ceremony of the two-day summit in Bangkok on Thursday. From left PM Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia, President Fidel Ramos of Philippines, PM Goh Chok Tong of Singapore, PM Banharn Silpa-archa of Thailand, PM Vo Van Kiet of Vietnam, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei, and President Suharto of Indonesia. — AFP/UNB photo

**US State Dept, AI slam China for Wei's conviction**

WASHINGTON, Dec 14: The US State Department slammed China on Wednesday for its conviction of a leading pro-democracy activist and called on Beijing to release him from jail, reports AP.

Some members of Congress, angered by China's trial and conviction of Wei Jingsheng, said Wednesday that the United States should restore the link between trade and China's human rights record.

Reuter adds, Amnesty International said on Wednesday that the jailing of Chinese dissident Wei Jingsheng by the Beijing government was a mockery of justice.

**Saddam approves Pentagon's secret mission to Iraq**

NEW YORK, Dec 14: In a step by Iraq to end its isolation, President Saddam Hussein has approved a secret Pentagon mission to Iraq in search of the remains of the first American pilot shot down in the 1991 Gulf War, the New York Times reported, says Reuter.

The report said that the mission to the Iraqi desert, although under the leadership of the international committee of the Red Cross, represented the first official visit by US military officers to Iraq since the end of the war.

**'5 lakh Afghans face disaster this winter'**

KABUL, Dec 14: More than 500,000 people face disaster this winter unless a blockade denying vital fuel and food to the war-ravaged Afghan capital is lifted, a United Nations official said on Wednesday, reports Reuter.

The UN coordinator for humanitarian affairs Alex Their said a vast majority of Afghans living in the capital could not afford the food and fuel they need to survive the winter.

"There is no way the aid community here can meet the needs of the city on our own, even if we could bring supply convoys into the city,

**Peres offers pullout from south Lebanon to break stalemate**

JERUSALEM, Dec 14: Prime Minister Shimon Peres is offering to withdraw Israeli troops from south Lebanon in hopes of breaking the ice between Israel and Syria and paving the way to peace treaties with both northern neighbours, reports said Wednesday, says AP.

In another indication of stepped-up momentum, Israel's Channel 2 TV said Peres has dropped Israel's insistence that any pullout from the Golan Heights be staged over three to five years.

The TV report said Peres was now ready for a "speedy withdrawal" from the strategic plateau Israel seized in 1967 to a new border yet to be negotiated. The report, which could not be immediately confirmed, provided no other details.

Peres has hinted he might accept Syria's demand for full return of the Golan, but has refused to publicly say so explicitly until Damascus clarifies what kind of peace and

security arrangements it is offering.

The Maariv newspaper, meanwhile, quoted Israeli government sources as saying Saudi Arabia has indicated it would make peace with Israel

as soon as Syria signed a treaty with the Jewish state.

That report was in line with Peres' new sweeping vision of an Israeli-Syrian peace that also embraces most of the Arab world and would in effect end the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Speaking during a stopover in Morocco on the way back from Washington, Peres said Wednesday that he was convinced "with every fiber of my being" that Israel and Syria would reach peace.

"The doubt I have is ... whether it will take one year or three," he said in comments broadcast on Israel's army radio.

Peres was scheduled to arrive in Israel early Thursday morning. The Haaretz daily said Peres told President Clinton in Washington that he was willing to withdraw Israeli troops from an enclave in South Lebanon in exchange for a promise the area would not be used to launch attacks on the Jewish state.

**Arafat to run for presidency**

GAZA CITY, Dec 14: PLO leader Yasser Arafat was set to register here today as a candidate for the post of president of the Palestinian Executive Authority in self-rule elections on January 20, reports AFP.

Arafat told reporters he would "definitely" run in the first Palestinian general elections, as registration of the candidates began.

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including annexed east Jerusalem, will next month elect 83 members of a self-rule council as well as a president of the executive authority.

**Off the Record**

**Clintons come in second**

NEW YORK: Considering he was a write-in candidate who did no campaigning, President Clinton did pretty well to come in second, reports AP.

The president took the No 2 spot in Good Housekeeping magazine's annual poll of most admired men and women. The magazine inadvertently left the president off its ballot, which listed 50 men.

Hillary Rodham Clinton, who was listed among the 50 choices for most admired woman, came in second as well. Clinton was beat out for the top spot by the Rev. Billy Graham, who has been in first place four years in a row. Mrs Clinton lost first place to Barbara Bush, who has been on top for six years in a row.

Good Housekeeping ran the ballot in its September issue. Editors didn't realise they'd left Clinton out until readers began calling to ask if it was an oversight or a political statement.

The magazine's executive editor Janet Chan said at the time that she was "mortified" by the error. In listing the winners in the January issue, the magazine did not point out that Clinton made second place as a write-in candidate.

**New life form living on the lips of lobster!**

LONDON: Danish scientists reported on Wednesday they had found an entirely new life form living on the lips of a Norwegian lobster, reports Reuter.

The new creature is not only a species but forms an entirely new phylum, a level of biological classification, and one of only about 35 in the known world.

Looking like an animated cold sore on the mouth of its host, symbiont pandora is a simple animal, composed mostly of a funnel with a round mouth. It is attached to the lobster by a stalk.

It does not have much of a digestive tract but does have a small brain during its swimming larval stage. Peter Funch and Reinhardt Kristensen of the University of Copenhagen reported in the science journal Nature.

They have proposed the creation of a new phylum called cyclophora, from the Greek for "carrying a small wheel", referring to its circular mouth ring. It would be the only member of the new order symbida, referring to its symbiotic relationship with its lobster host. Biological classification starts out with kingdoms — including the animal and plant kingdoms, and goes down through phyla, order, family, genus and species.

**Demonstration turns into riot in S London: 10 hurt**

LONDON, Dec 14: Ten people were injured when a rampaging mob looted shops and started fires after a demonstration turned into a riot in south London overnight, Britain's Press Association News Agency reported today, says Reuter.

Shops and cars were set ablaze as about 100 black and white youths stormed along the main road in the suburb of Brixton. The violence followed a demonstration over the death of a black man in police custody, the agency said.

A police helicopter hovered overhead as a pall of smoke hung over streets in the district. Police sealed off a two mile (three km) wide area and two underground railway stations were closed in a bid to halt the violence.

They said later that the situation had been brought under control and clean-up operations would begin on Thursday morning. In one incident police charged a crowd of about 10 people who were throwing

missiles through a shop window, the Press Association said.

On the other side of the street a group of black youths shouted "killers, killers" at the police.

Superintendent Peter Clarke, divisional commander of Brixton police, said: "During the course of the evening there were a series of entirely criminal acts. Shops were attacked, vehicles overturned and public houses attacked and looted."

He added that three policemen had been injured and two were being treated in hospital. Clarke said there would be a full inquiry and he would meet community leaders to discuss the violence.

"The riot was caused by a failure of the organisers to keep to agreements," he said. Wednesday night's protest began over the treatment of Wayne Douglas, who died in police custody on December 5 after being arrested on suspicion of aggravated burglary.

**UNSC urges Afghan factions to cease hostile actions**

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 14: The Security Council on Wednesday called on the warring parties in Afghanistan to cease hostile actions and resolve their problems through negotiations in cooperation with a UN mediator, reports Reuter.

The appeal was in a statement read to reporters by council president Sergei Lavrov of Russia after UN mediator Mahmoud Mestiri, a former Tunisian foreign minister, briefed members on the situation in Afghanistan, where the forces of President Burhanuddin Rabbani are battling the Taliban Islamic militia.

The statement said the council "strongly condemned the bombardment and shelling of populated areas, in particular Kabul, inflicting casualties among the civilian population."

The Taliban, who emerged little more than a year ago, have been shelling and rocketing the Afghan capital in their drive to unseat Rabbani

and introduce strict Islamic law throughout the country. Mujahideen groups have kept Afghanistan at war since they ousted a communist regime in April 1992.

Lavrov said council members believed the conflict was a "serious threat to regional peace and security as well as a major humanitarian calamity" that could be settled only by political means. Use of force was futile and unacceptable.

"We want to appeal to all the parties to the conflict to display maximum restraint, to immediately cease fire and hostile actions and to resolve problems in Afghanistan through negotiations in cooperation with Mestiri's mission," the statement said.

It appealed to all states to respect Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity, refrain from interference in its internal affairs, promote national reconciliation and prevent shipment of arms to the Afghan parties.



Chechen women shout slogans and carry a portrait of the Budennovsk rebel leader Shamil Basayev during an anti-election rally in the ruins of Grozny, on Wednesday. Chechen separatist rebels called to boycott the Russian-organised elections in Chechnya. The elections to the head of the Caucasus republic and also to the Russian parliament were to begin on Thursday 14 December and last three days, officials in Grozny said Wednesday. — AFP/UNB photo

**Abacha orchestrating campaign to stave off pariah status**

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Dec 14: On the face of it, Nigerian ruler Gen. Sani Abacha appears unafraid by international outrage over the hanging of nine dissidents. Behind the showmanship, however, it appears Abacha is orchestrating a major public relations campaign to stave off pariah status, reports AP.

Officials within Abacha's secretive junta say the general was taken back by the swift and fierce reaction to the November 10 executions. Some even admit he blundered by ordering the executions as Commonwealth leaders held their summit in New Zealand.

The 52-member organisation of Britain and its former

colonies promptly suspended Nigeria. The United States, South Africa, and 15 European countries were among those who called their ambassadors back from Nigeria, and the European Union imposed a sports embargo against Nigeria.

"The government was indeed surprised by the negative reactions," Defense Ministry spokesman Brig. Gen. Fred Chijuka said last week as ads defending the executions appeared in The New York Times and London's Independent.

Information Minister Walter Ogonagoro went further, accusing the government of "tactical blunders" and saying its handling of the events was

"poorly done." "The timing was faulty, and it gave room for heads of government to take a resolute stance against us," he told Nigerian editors last week.

In an attempt to head off further punishment, the Nigerian government placed a half-page ad in Johannesburg's Sunday Times before a summit of the 12-nation Southern African Development Community, South African President, Nelson Mandela supports oil sanctions against Nigeria, and while the subject was not discussed publicly at the summit Monday, Mandela made clear he still considers sanctions an option.

The Johannesburg newspaper ad defended the November 10 executions of playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others as just punishment for murder. "Nigeria does not want to be a lawless state," said the ad, signed by the Nigerian High Commission, which represents the government.

Thursday's two-page ad in The New York Times was purportedly paid for by families of the four men allegedly slain by Saro-Wiwa and his supporters, although Abacha critics are convinced his government paid for it. Promising to tell "the whole truth," the ad recounted in a detailed chronology the conflict that culminated in Saro-

Wiwa's conviction in the 1994 murders of four political rivals.

Most striking was a letter written by Desmond Orage, the son of one of the four and a nephew of Saro-Wiwa. "When I heard of the killings and the arrest of Ken Saro-Wiwa in connection with the murders, I flew to Nigeria to conduct my own investigation," wrote Orage. The letter said that despite Orage's hopes Saro-Wiwa was innocent, he became convinced of his guilt.

A television ad highlighting Nigeria's contribution to international peacekeeping also has been appearing in the United States, another

apparent prong in the campaign to rehabilitate Nigeria's image abroad. The ad makes no mention of the executions, and Nigerian officials in Washington and New York said they had no knowledge of the ad or who had paid for it.

Saro-Wiwa, like his alleged victims and his co-defendants, was a member of the Ogoni tribe that lives in Nigeria's oil region. As the leader of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People, Saro-Wiwa spearheaded a campaign for oil giants to compensate Ogonis for environmental damage.

For that support, it is said he was framed for murders he did not commit.