

US renews call for an end to fighting in Chechnya Russian army kill 50 Chechens in Vedeno, seal off Gudermes

MOSCOW, Dec 24: Russian forces said they had killed around 50 Chechen separatists in fighting near Vedeno, in the south of the Russian breakaway republic. Interfax news agency reported yesterday. reports AFP.

The battle lasted seven hours on Saturday, the agency said. The army press service did not say whether there were any losses on the Russian side.

Fighting broke out when around 100 Chechens attacked a Russian reconnaissance unit in the mountainous region, which is still held by the separatists almost a year since Moscow sent in its troops to crush an independence bid.

Other fighting had been going on today for more than

two hours near Sernovodsk, on the border between Chechnya and neighbouring Ingushetia, the army press service said.

Fighting has flared again in the Caucasus republic since the holding of local leadership elections by Moscow on December 17, which were boycotted by the separatists.

AP adds from Grozny: Russian forces sealed off Gudermes Saturday, blocking the light of terrified refugees while they continued to pound the besieged Chechen city.

They refused to let international aid workers into the city to evacuate civilians.

Civilian casualties are said to be heavy after more than a week of heavy fighting in Gudermes, 30 kilometres (19

miles) east of the capital Grozny.

Only a handful of people managed to get out Saturday, according to independent NTV, which had reports on the scene. The refugees said the city was devastated.

A rebel field commander, Vashit Murdashev, told NTV that the guerillas had been pulling out of Gudermes for several days on orders from their high command.

Earlier in the day, the Russian side said its troops had taken the railway depot and had the rebels on the run.

Russian forces continued to shell the city and heavy fighting raged as helicopter gunships hovered overhead.

The rebels seized several key buildings in Gudermes, including the train station, on December 14 in a bid to

disrupt Moscow-imposed elections for a new Chechen leader and deputies to the new Russian parliament.

The ITAR-Tass news agency said 130 special forces troops had been trapped inside the terminal. It said they suffered casualties in the fighting Saturday, but gave no detail.

Earlier Reuter says The United States has renewed its calls for an end to fighting in Chechnya, saying the Russian military operation in the region has been a big mistake.

State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns, commenting on reports of intensified fighting in the Chechen town of Gudermes, said on Friday that the US position on Chechnya was no secret.

BRIEFLY



File picture dated November 26, 1995 of Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreu during a press conference in Athens. The health condition of the Prime Minister, hospitalized for more than a month for respiratory and kidney problems, was deteriorated in the past 24 hours, doctors at the Onassio heart clinic in Athens said on Saturday. It is the second time in four days that doctors have said the ailing Greek Premier's condition is worsening. — AFP/UNB photo

Preval wins Haitian polls: Rene Preval was declared president-elect of Haiti on Saturday, easily winning an election marred by a boycott by most Haitian voters, AP reports from Port Au-Prince.

DPRK soldier defects to ROK: An unarmed North Korean soldier has crossed over the heavily armed demilitarised zone and defected to South Korea, the Defense Ministry said Sunday, AP reports from Seoul.

Clinton rescheduling Japan tour: US President Bill Clinton is rescheduling a trip to Japan for April 16-18, a Japanese daily newspaper said yesterday, Reuter says from Tokyo.

Voting begins in Kazakhstan: Voters in Kazakhstan cast ballots Saturday in the second round of parliamentary elections following an inconclusive vote earlier this month that failed to produce a valid legislature, AP reports from Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Blast kills 2 in Bolivia: At least two people died when a tear gas canister exploded during a live TV show attended by 2,000 people, AP reports from La Paz, Bolivia.

12 more executed in China: Twelve people accused of various crimes were sentenced to death and executed Thursday in Tianjin, according to a press report, AFP reports from Beijing.

10 hurt in HK ferry collision: A double-decker ferry carrying 669 passengers collided with a Chinese container vessel in Hong Kong's harbor Saturday, injuring 10 people, police reported, AP reports from Hong Kong.

Jose Naranjo dies: Jose Naranjo, who held senior posts in Cuba, a communist government for 35 years and was a close personal friend of President Fidel Castro, has died, sources said Saturday, AFP says from Havana.

Flood kills 3 in Philippines: Three people were killed and three others missing when flash floods hit several towns in the northeastern Philippine province of Aurora, local officials said yesterday, AFP reports from Manila.

Chile plane crash leaves 22 wounded: An army plane crashed Saturday as it took off from a military airstrip south of Santiago, leaving all 22 people aboard injured, two of them in critical condition, police reported, AP reports from Santiago, Chile.

Pro-independence groups may form party in Taiwan

TAIPEI, Dec 24: Taiwanese pro-independence groups may form a political party in response to cooperation talks between the main opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and a pro-reunification party, the United Daily News reported today, says Reuter.

The newspaper quoted unnamed sources as saying the Taiwan Association of University Professors and several pro DPP civil groups may form the Taiwan Independence Party in protest against the DPP's attempt to cooperate with the New Party in parliament.

Woman killed in Azad Kashmir as Indians open fire

ISLAMABAD, Dec 24: A woman was killed and two other people were seriously injured when Indian troops opened "indiscriminate" fire on border villages in the Pakistani administered part of Kashmir, official sources said today, reports AFP.

The Indian troops on Saturday resorted to mortar and small arms attack at several places along the line of control that divides the northern Himalayan state into Indian and Pakistani administered zones, the official Associated Press of Pakistan said.

It said a woman was killed in the Garam Chashma area while two men suffered serious injuries in Hajipur and Keran sectors.

Hamas leader calls rally for boycotting polls

JENIN, West Bank, Dec 24: A leader of the militant Islamic group Hamas, addressing a rally in the Palestinian-ruled Jenin refugee camp on Saturday, called for a boycott of the first Palestinian elections next month, reports Reuter.

About 3,000 Palestinians attended the rally marking the eighth anniversary of the establishment of Hamas, which views as a sell-out the 1993 self-rule deal between the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Israel.

"You must boycott the elections of the administrative council whose main task will be to recognise Israel and its continued occupation of Palestinian territories," said Sheikh Jamal Mansour, a leading Hamas figure in the West Bank.

In talks in Cairo this week, the PLO failed to persuade Hamas to take part in elections for an 83-member council scheduled to be held in the West Bank and Gaza on January 20.

Taliban rockets kill 3 in Kabul

ISLAMABAD, Dec 24: The opposition Islamic Taliban militia fired rockets at the Afghan capital Kabul on Saturday, killing at least three people and wounding 12, an Afghan news service in Pakistan said, reports Reuter.

The Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) quoted reports from Kabul as saying six rockets landed around the presidential palace in central Kabul, two at a nearby market and one in the Wazir Akbar Khan area.

Six rockets also hit Kabul on Friday night, but there was no information of any casualties, it said.



New Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski waves with a bunch of flowers as he acknowledges the applause by deputies in parliament following the swearing in ceremony on Saturday. Kwasniewski issued an appeal for dialogue and cooperation with supporters of his predecessor and bitter rival Lech Walesa and the Catholic Church. On his left is Kwasniewski's wife, Dolanta (L). — AFP/UNB photo

93 Tigers, troops killed in encounter in eastern Lanka

COLOMBO, Dec 24: The toll in a Tamil Tiger guerilla attack against security forces in eastern Sri Lanka rose to at least 93 killed on both sides, the military said today, reports AFP.

Dozens of gunmen of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ambushed the army soldiers at Shanthiveli in the coastal district of Batticaloa and fought a two-hour gunbattle on Saturday, a military spokesman said.

"There was a very heavy exchange of fire," the spokesman said. "We lost one officer and 32 men killed while another 34 were ad-

mitted to hospital. LTTE radio communications speak of at least 60 rebels getting killed.

He said army reinforcement had been rushed to the area from two nearby military camps to carry out a major cordon and search operation after the daring LTTE assault shortly after noon Saturday.

The attack was the worst against the army in eastern Sri Lanka since an identical ambush left 38 soldiers dead in the same area a month ago while soldiers were guarding the railway track.

Defence officials said that the LTTE had taken over vast areas of the island's east after

the fall of their former citadel of Jaffna in the north of the country to security forces earlier this month.

Just as Jaffna fell on December 2, the LTTE launched a kamikaze-style attack on police commandos in the east, killing at least 23 security personnel and six civilians. The army claimed killing an equal number of Tigers.

The latest gunbattle came as the army claimed killing one Tiger guerilla and discovering an abandoned rebel munitions factory near the town of Jaffna during a clearing operation.



Orthodox Christian priests offer Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat a replica of the Nativity Church during his visit to Bethlehem, where according to Christian tradition Jesus was born. Arafat will attend the Christmas ceremonies in the birth town of Jesus for the first time. — AFP/UNB photo

Palestinians welcome Arafat to newly 'liberated' Bethlehem

BETHLEHEM, West Bank, Dec 24: Thousands of cheering Palestinians welcomed PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat to Manger Square on Saturday, as their leader declared the newly autonomous Bethlehem "liberated" and vowed to continue toward Jerusalem, reports AP.

Arafat, wearing his traditional military uniform and Arabic headdress, appeared on the rooftop of the Church of Nativity — built on the spot where tradition says Jesus was born — a day before Christmas eve.

Church bells tolled as he waved and held up his fingers to form a 'V' for victory. Hundreds shouted, "In blood and spirit we will redeem you, oh Palestine."

"From Bethlehem, from the Church of Nativity, from the land of peace, I tell the whole world, Christians around the world, that the city of Bethlehem that is liberated is the city of peace," Arafat said to roaring cheers.

In the city holy to the 15,000 Christian residents but with a majority of 35,000 Muslim residents, Arafat sought to ensure that the city would be an example of national unity.

"I also tell you that the center of national unity will be Bethlehem," Arafat said. Just eight kilometres (five miles) south of Jerusalem, Bethlehem is the Palestinian-controlled city closest to the controversial Israeli capital.

The Palestinians want control over East Jerusalem, which Israel captured in the 1967 Mideast war. Israel claims the entire city as its capital.

Peru recalls envoy to US to protest jet sale to Ecuador

LIMA, Dec 24: Peru has recalled its ambassador to the United States to protest Washington's support for the sale of Israeli war planes to neighbouring Ecuador, reports AP.

Iran slams US for adopting covert action programme

TEHRAN, Dec 24: Iran today slammed the United States for adopting a programme of covert action against the Islamic republic, warning it would encourage "terrorism," the official news agency IRNA said, reports AFP.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Mahmud Mohammadi said: "This type of plan against popular and legitimate regimes violates international laws recognised by civilised nations."

The American plan of action is aimed at encouraging the actions of terrorists," he said, adding that "the United States must expect the consequences of their flagrant support for terrorism."

The White House has accepted a covert action plan aimed at moderating Iran's Islamic regime approved on Thursday by the House of Representatives.

The 20-million-dollar anti-Iranian programme was a modified version of an original one intended to overthrow the Tehran government, which was steadfastly opposed by Clinton and the Senate.

The bill was pushed through at the insistence of House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who has described Iran as "the most dangerous country in the world."

But Mohammadi said the plan violated the first clause of the declaration of Algiers signed in January 1981 to end the crisis caused when US diplomats were held hostage in Iran for 444 days by militant students.

It sets out that neither country should interfere in the affairs of the other.

AP adds: Iran's paramilitary revolutionary guards staged naval maneuvers in the Gulf waters Saturday to test missile units.

Off the Record

Van Gogh on display

AMSTERDAM: A Van Gogh painting dating from a sex scandal in the artist's life is being shown to the public for the first time, reports AP.

"Peasant Woman Digging Potatoes" was known to exist but had been in private collections until recently donated to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

The museum did not identify the donor but said the person has lived in the Netherlands for several decades.

The oil painting, measuring 31 centimetres by 41 centimetres, shows a black-clad and somber-faced woman working in the fields with a pitchfork.

Painted against a gray and brown background, the picture was likely executed in 1885 during the potato harvest, which started around the beginning of August and ended in September.

But experts have ruled out September, since by then Van Gogh had been forbidden to use peasant women as models after one became pregnant.

No scope to get married again

LONDON: Saying he doesn't want to get married again is not enough — Prince Charles has to dump his paramour, elders of the Church of England said in interviews published Sunday, reports AP.

"Irrespective of whether it is a prince or pauper, that sort of relationship outside marriage is absolutely against the teachings of the church," the Archbishop of Blackburn, David Robinson told The Mail on Sunday newspaper.

Queen Elizabeth last week urged her eldest son and Princess Diana, separated three years, to finalise their status with a divorce. Charles immediately agreed, adding that he did not intend to remarry.

The unprompted declaration probably was made to assure the public that he would not seek to make his longtime mistress, Camilla Parker Bowles, queen. Polls have shown that would be unpopular.

It also was intended to assuage the Church of England, which accepts divorce but generally frowns on remarriage. As reigning monarch, Charles will be the temporal head of the church.

