

International

Pak police arrest 100 Afghans from Quetta

QUETTA (Pakistan) Dec 25: Pakistani police have arrested more than 100 Afghans on charges of living illegally in the country, police said today, reports Reuter. Police said they arrested the Afghans from Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province on Sunday, three days after a car bomb in the northwestern city of Peshawar killed 42 people and wounded more than 100. "We have rounded up more than 100 people and all of them are Afghans who were living in different parts of Quetta without legal documents," a senior police official, who did not want to be named, said. "These arrests were made to avoid a Peshawar — like situation," he added. Some police officials have said they suspect the bombing could be the work of hostile Afghans, but no one has been charged. On Sunday, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto chaired a meeting of security officials in Peshawar in which it was decided to raise the offer for information leading to the arrest of those responsible for the blast to 10 million rupees from one million rupees. On the same day, Pakistan ordered the Afghan consul-general in Peshawar to leave the country within 48 hours, accusing him of spying, a charge dismissed by the diplomat. A Foreign Ministry statement said Musa Khan had been declared "persona non grata for his activities incompatible with his status," diplomatic language for spying. Peshawar and Quetta have large populations of Afghan refugees from the war that has raged in Afghanistan since 1979.

OSCE mission to Chechnya pulled out of Grozny 267 civilians killed in Gudermes fighting

BONN, Dec 25: The mission sent by the Organisation for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE) to Chechnya has been provisionally pulled out of the capital Grozny, German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel announced today, reports AFP. He said the OSCE mission had been evacuated "because of the worsening situation" in the capital of the break-away Russian republic. At least 267 civilians have been killed in fighting between Russian troops and Chechen guerrillas in the town of Gudermes, 30 kilometres (18 miles) east of Grozny, General Anatoly Shkirko, head of Russian troops in Chechnya, was quoted by Russian television as saying today. Russian troops were in almost full control of the eastern town today after a week and a half of fighting, military authorities were quoted as saying by Russian news agencies. Earlier the bodies of 32 Russian soldiers were found in the Chechen town of Gudermes today following heavy fighting with Chechen guerrillas, officials said, bringing the official death toll to at least 68 soldiers. The bodies accounted for most of the 37 Russian soldiers listed as missing, Interfax news agency quoted the Interior Ministry forces spokesman as saying. Last week, the Interior Ministry said the fighting in Gudermes had left 36 Russian soldiers dead, 141 wounded and 37 missing in action, ITAR-Tass news agency reported. Fighting continued today in the town, 30 kilometres (18 miles) east of the capital Grozny, Russian television reported, although Russian military officials said that all major objectives had been recaptured and sappers were now working to demine buildings. Chechen fighters, who have been battling Russian forces for 12 months, seized control in the town, which had been under Russian control, a week and a half ago.

Powerful bomb rocks DC office in Kashmir

NEW DELHI, Dec 25: A powerful bomb rocked the office of a senior district official in the troubled north Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir today, the Press Trust of India said, reports Reuter. No one was injured by the blast at the office of the Deputy Commissioner in Rajouri, the news agency reported. It said India's junior Minister for Internal (Home) Affairs, Syed Sibtey Razi, had been due to visit the office later in the day. Dozens of Kashmiri militant groups are fighting the Indian government either for independence or for the right to join Pakistan, which rules one-third of the disputed Himalayan region. Police and hospital sources say more than 20,000 people have been killed since the rebellion erupted in 1990.

Haryana fire toll may rise to 600 Police suspect criminal negligence in fire

DABWALI, India, Dec 25: Police suspect criminal negligence in the fire that raged through a community shelter during a children's year-end performance, killing more than 400 people, reports AP. Authorities said the death toll could climb as high as 600. More than 250 people were injured, some critically. "Just about every family has lost someone. This town has been devastated. Everyone is in mourning," Police Chief Hari Shankar said Sunday. The fire destroyed a community shelter, where more than 1,000 people were attending a year-end programme staged by schoolchildren. Authorities suspect the fire was caused by a short circuit or an exploding cylinder of cooking gas. Many of the dead were mothers and their children, killed by smoke and flames or by a stampede as the frightened audience tried to escape through the only exit. Mourners looked for missing relatives in hospitals after scouring through a fire site strewn with charred bones, discarded shoes and sandals, burnt clothes and twisted chair frames. As a local crematorium became overburdened with bodies, authorities began building funeral pyres on a field at the edge of town. Nearly 70 bodies were not identified and were to be cremated Monday, said Bhanjan Lal, Haryana state's chief minister. A first mass cremation was held at the Rambagh crematorium grounds here to the wailing of thousands of mourners.

BRIEFLY

Pope renews hope for peace: Pope John Paul spoke of renewed hope for world peace when he celebrated a Christmas midnight mass early on Monday at St Peter's Basilica, Reuter reports from Vatican City. The hour when the son of god is born in the stable of Bethlehem is the hour in which god's holiness breaks into the history of the world, he said in a homily.

Egypt, Israel close to sign gas deal: Egypt and Israel are on course to sign a deal in 1996 for Egyptian natural gas to be delivered to the Jewish state by the end of the century, the specialist magazine Middle East Economic Survey (MEES) said yesterday, AFP reports from Nicosia. The magazine citing Egyptian Oil Minister Hamdial Banbi, said talks were being held at monthly intervals in Cairo and Tel Aviv either at ministerial or technical level in an effort to finalise technical aspects by June 1996.

10 militants killed in Algeria: Algerian security forces killed 10 armed Islamic extremists in different parts of the country, the security services said Sunday in a communique, AFP reports from Algiers. In the bloodiest clash Saturday, five members of a "dangerous group" blamed for a series of bomb attacks died in a showdown in El Harrach, an eastern suburb of Algiers it said. No other details were given.

New vaccine for cholera: A new Indian vaccine for cholera, a re-emerging infectious disease, is ready for human volunteer trials, PTI reports from New Delhi. The vaccine has been developed from a genetically engineered non-toxic strain of the cholera bacterium, vibrio cholera 01, by scientists at the Institute of Microbial Technology (IMTECH), Chandigarh.

2 killed in Bolivian gas attack: Two people died and 45 were injured in a tear gas attack on a theatre in the Bolivian capital that sparked panic among the 2,000 people attending the recording of a popular television show, police said Sunday, AFP reports from La Paz.

Guatemalan rebels begin truce: Guatemalan guerrillas on Sunday began a ceasefire to observe Christmas and help ensure smooth voting in January elections, AP reports from Mexico City. Rebels said the truce — just the second in the 35-year civil war underscores their commitment to the runoff vote.

US accused of undermining Hanoi's leadership: "The US experts dream that with the emergence of a market economy in Vietnam... new factors will appear and a new system will emerge that will lead to a new political regime." The commentary, in a leading official mouthpiece, was unprecedented in both its directness and vigour for a country which has been at pains in recent years to play down talk of ill-feeling towards its erstwhile foe. However, in recent months there have been signs of nervousness in Hanoi about the effects of outside influences on a country undergoing rapid social change in the wake of economic reforms introduced in the late 1980s. Hanoi has said it will launch a stepped-up war against social evils and negative foreign cultural influences with a propaganda campaign starting in January ahead of a full-scale crackdown in February.



Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Mussa (L) meets with his Israeli counterpart Ehud Barak (R) in Cairo on Sunday to have talks on Israel's peace process with both Syria and the Palestinians. — AP/UNB photo

Junta accuses Suu Kyi of trying to break Myanmar apart

YANGON, Dec 25: In the latest attack on democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, one of Myanmar's most senior ruling generals accused her of trying to break the country apart at the behest of unidentified foreigners, reports Reuter. Military intelligence chief Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, in a speech published in state-run newspapers today, also urged people to be aware of "subversive elements" trying to alter the course laid down for the military for the future. Adopted sons and daughters of the colonialists, under external influence, are attempting to cause the disintegration of the union and the loss of independence," Khin Nyunt said in a speech on Sunday. Although he did not refer to Suu Kyi directly, Khin Nyunt was clearly referring to her and her political party when he accused people of trying to disrupt a government-organised convention, which has been meeting intermittently since January 1993 to draw up guidelines for a new constitution. Without seeing to national well-being they are moving to cause disruption to the national convention only for their party's interest," he said. "It is necessary to be aware of all attempts of internal and external subversive elements to cause change of course in the nation's path towards political, economic and social objectives." Suu Kyi has called repeatedly for dialogue with the military's ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) since her release in July.

Deposed Emir of Qatar vows to regain power

DUBAI, Dec 25: Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani, deposed by his son as Emir of Qatar in a bloodless palace coup in June, has vowed to return to rule his country soon, an aide said on Sunday, reports Reuter. The aide, Sheikh Mohammad bin Hamad al-Thani, said the purpose of Sheikh Khalifa's tour of Gulf Arab states was to affirm that "he has not and will not relinquish power under any circumstances and that he is returning to rule his dear country Qatar soon, God willing." Sheikh Khalifa arrived in the United Arab Emirates on Thursday in his first visit to the region since he was deposed and was due to visit Bahrain on Monday, Sheikh Mohammad told reporters in Abu Dhabi.

Fresh Taliban rocket attack kills 7 in Kabul

LONDON, Dec 25: A rocket attack by Taliban Islamic militia fighters on Sunday killed seven people in the Afghan capital Kabul and injured another 11, the Iranian news agency IRNA reported, reports AP. It was the second attack by the group in two days. The first, on Saturday night, killed five people in Kabul and injuring eight. The monitored IRNA report received in London said the rebel fighters fired a total of 12 rockets in Sunday's attack. It said the rockets landed in areas of the city containing no military bases. They fired 20 rockets in Saturday night's attack. The rebel fighters have besieged Kabul since early October. They want to oust President Burhanuddin Rabbani and install a purist Islamic order throughout the country.

Off the Record

Bid to portray real Nixon

YORBA LINDA, California: The Nixon war rages. "If you prefer facts to fantasy, come to Yorba Linda," reads a newspaper ad placed in the Los Angeles Times by the Richard Nixon Library & Birthplace, reports AP. The ad in Sunday's paper shows a photograph of Anthony Hopkins as Oliver Stone's "Nixon" with the words, "Oliver Stone's commercial fiction." "It's the latest in a series of heated exchanges between Stone, whose film opened Wednesday, and the Nixon family and library. Responding to the ad, Stone spokesman Stephen Rivers said, "if you liked (George) Orwell, you'll love the Nixon library. It's a very Soviet-style, revisionist history that bears little resemblance to the full public record." Nixon daughters Tricia Nixon Cox and Julie Nixon Eisenhower condemned Stone's dark portrait of their late father as "character assassination." Stone has denied any malicious intent, saying his purpose "was to attempt a fuller understanding of the life and career of Richard Nixon — the good and the bad, the triumphs and the tragedies and the legacy he left his nation and the world."

Di leaves for unknown destination

LONDON: Princess Diana who decided against spending Christmas with her sons and the royal family, left her home at Kensington Palace Sunday afternoon for destinations unknown, reports AP. The Sunday Mirror said she is "expected to fly to the United States to go skiing and then head for the sun, probably to the luxurious Lyford Cay resort in the Bahamas. But most tabloids predict she will spend Christmas Day alone at the palace, or possibly visit the sick and homeless. Diana informed Queen Elizabeth II last weekend that she would not join her estranged husband, Prince Charles, and their children, Princes William, 13 and Harry, 11, at the traditional royal Christmas celebration at the Sandringham estate in Norfolk. Days later, the queen sent Charles and Diana letters urging them to divorce. Buckingham Palace said Charles has agreed, but Diana let it be known that she won't be rushed and is waiting for her lawyers to return from vacation in January to respond. The News of The World said Diana had a secret meeting last weekend with Martin Bashir, who conducted last month's revealing interview with her on BBC television.

Fresh N-plant accidents shake trust of Japanese

TOKYO, Dec 25: Two new accidents at nuclear power plants further shook public trust in Japan's nuclear power programme today as worries over a serious sodium leak at a fast-breeder reactor plant early this month continued, reports AFP. A reactor at a nuclear power plant in Onagawa, northern Japan, was manually shut overnight after a leak of coolant water was found near a control valve that removes humidity. Meanwhile, one of the two turbines at a seaside power plant in Tokai, northeast of Tokyo, remained idle after being shut Sunday when seawater leaked into its main condenser, which cools turbine-processed steam into water. Tohoku Electric Power Co., which operates the Onagawa Plant, said the leakage involved "a mere trace" of radioactivity and did not affect the environment. But an official of the local administration told reporters today that the accident was "an extremely serious mishap" because the light-water reactor started operations only in July. The Japan Atomic Power Co. the operator of the Tokai Plant, said there was no danger of radioactive pollution as seawater, taken from a nearby coast, is only used in the tertiary cooling system, which is separate from the reactor. At Japan's first fast-breeder reactor Monju Plant, government inspectors admitted some sodium compound had been released into the atmosphere through air ducts following the December 8 blowout. "A sodium compound turns into sodium carbonate if it is released externally and it does not affect human health," said Shinichiro Ogura, a senior official of the state's Science and Technology Agency.

Arafat blasts Hamas for deciding to boycott polls

JERUSALEM, Dec 25: PLO leader Yasser Arafat blasted his Islamic rivals on Sunday for deciding to boycott Palestinian elections in the West Bank and Gaza slated for January 20, reports Reuter. "I believe these opposition factions have committed serious mistakes towards the homeland by making this decision and have wronged themselves as well," Arafat told the Al-Ayam newspaper, which publishes its first edition in the West Bank on Monday. "Why do they participate in elections in countries which have signed peace agreements with Israel but are refusing to run for elections in Palestinian-controlled areas?"



A Bosnian prisoner of war, who was captured by Serb forces, hugs a relative on Sunday in Gracanica, 30 kms north-west of Tuzla) after having been released by his captors in Sockovac. The Bosnian government and Serb forces exchanged scores of prisoners of war with each other in line with the Bosnian peace accords. The Bosnian government handed over 115 prisoners to the Serbs and the Serb party reciprocated by releasing 131 Bosnian army prisoners. — AFP/UNB PHOTO

Arab village in N Israel wins legal battle

JERUSALEM, Dec 25: The people of an Arab village in northern Israel won a 47-year-legal battle on Sunday to force the Jewish state to rebuild their homes seized by Israeli troops in 1948 and destroyed three years later, reports AFP. A joint ministerial committee authorised the reconstruction of 230 houses on 60 hectares (150 acres) in the village of Ikrit in Galilee but refused to return agricultural land given to Jews after the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948. Ikrit, a Maronite village, was occupied without resistance by the Israeli army in October 1948 during the first conflict and its inhabitants were soon ordered to leave.

War of independence bringing Islam back in Chechnya

GOISKOYE, Russia, Dec 25: On a bitterly cold day at the foot of Chechnya's rebel-held southern Mooundains, shivering people gather outside a newly-opened mosque where a court will punish offenders, using Islamic law, reports Reuter. The revival of Islamic practices weakened over 70 years of Soviet rule is a direct result of 12 months of fighting between Russians and Chechens in the breakaway region, which declared itself independent in 1991. Many Chechens have turned to Allah and the Quran for guidance and strength after thousands of their countrymen and women died in fighting and in air and artillery raids. One new practice is the Islamic court, which now regulates sentences violators to the lash for crimes such as insubordination or drinking alcohol. Now the whole world is marching triumphantly to the word of Islam, says Mansour Yeskiev, the 55-year-old head of this village of about 1,000 people, 50 km (35 miles) south of the regional capital, Grozny. The courts have punished dozens, but today's accused is special — Umar Khasakhanov, one of separatist leader Dzhokhar Dudayev's top field commanders: will get 10 lashes with a long wooden stick for an altercation with one of his fighters. This shows that even though Umar is one of our greatest commanders, he is not except from the sharia (religious law), and if our President Dudayev does not obey the Quran, we will unhesitatingly whip him too, says Yeskiev, raising his finger in the air. Signs of Islam's growing influence are everywhere in Chechnya. Dozens of mosques have opened and more Chechen women have started wearing headscarves, a relatively rare sight before the war began. Few rebels drink alcohol. Many Chechen men, including some in Dudayev's inner circle, have begun taking second and third wives, saying this will help make up for the hundreds of young men killed in the conflict. Sharia has given us discipline, it has given us the moral strength to battle the Russians, who get drunk all the time, said Aldan, a 19-year-old Goiskoye fighter wearing a green Islamic headband. Chechens and their ethnic kin to the west, the ingush, are Sunni Muslims who practice a specific type of Islam known as muridism. This has its roots in sufi mysticism which spread readily 200 years ago in Chechnya's clan-based, peasant societies. It originally emphasised equality and holy war (jihad) against the Russian invaders. Chechens were one of the last of the several dozen ethnic groups in the Caucasus mountain region to accept Islam. Until the 18th century most of the clans worshiped a number of different gods, as well as the stars and the mountains. Ironically Islam gained strength in response to an earlier threat from Russia, which moved into the Caucasus mountains as it tried to expand its empire south towards Persia. Sheikh Mansour, a Chechen Muslim Sheikh, propagandised Islam to unite Caucasian ethnic groups against the Russians from 1785-1791. The tribes had few common linguistic or social links and the Quran became a rallying point. Imam Shamil used Islam in a war of resistance against Zsarist armies from 1824 until his capture in 1859. Islam's influence waned under Soviet rule, which repressed organised religion. Dudayev, a former Soviet air force general who once commanded a nuclear bomber squadron, has drawn heavily on support from clans in the mountainous south of the republic. As Chechen leader he promised to build 400 mosques and sparked controversy by saying Muslims, especially women, did not need the long years of formal education Soviet rule brought about and that prayer and the Quran was enough. In reality it took another war with Russia to create a new upsurge in the strict application of Islamic laws. "Of course when an enemy comes and kills your brothers and sisters, you look for a weapon. That weapon is Islam, and it has helped unite Chechens again," says Issa Khachkiev, vice Mufti at the Islamic Institute of Ingushetia. The billionaire businessman-turned-politician also expressed concern at corruption in government offices, saying it had become part of the bureaucratic system.

Thai DPM blames vote-buying for corruption

BANGKOK, Dec 25: Deputy Prime Minister Thaksin Shina-Watra blames election vote-buying for much of the corruption in the Thai political system, the Bangkok Post reported today, says AFP. In an interview, Thaksin told the Post that most politicians did not want to be corrupt but they felt forced into it in order to have money for vote-buying in elections at all levels, especially outside Bangkok. The billionaire businessman-turned-politician also expressed concern at corruption in government offices, saying it had become part of the bureaucratic system.