

# BRIEFLY



Former Miss Universe Irene Saez Conde prays at a mass on Thursday in Caracas before being sworn in as mayor of the Caracas municipality of Chacao. This is Saez Conde's second term as mayor of one of Caraca's most affluent areas.

— AFP/UNB photo

**Fahd may travel to Switzerland:** King Fahd of Saudi Arabia who handed over power to his half brother, Crown Prince Abdallah, may travel to Switzerland in the next few days to have an operation on his knees, a report said Thursday. AFP reports from Nicosia.

Citing well informed Saudi sources, the Arabic language daily Al-Quds Al-Arabi said the 74-year-old ailing king "will travel abroad in coming days to receive treatment."

**Chirac's popularity drops:** French President Jacques Chirac's popularity dropped four percentage points in January, according to a poll released in this week's Figaro Magazine. AP reports from Paris.

According to the survey, 35 per cent of those polled have confidence in the conservative president, down from 39 per cent in December.

**Iran executes 9 criminals:** Eight men and a woman were hanged in Iran after being convicted of charges including kidnapping, drug smuggling and murder, a newspaper said on Thursday. Reuter AFP.

The Daily Kayhan said seven men and a woman, members of a criminal gang of 24, were hanged in a prison in the southern city of Kerman after a court convicted them of drug trafficking, armed robbery and kidnapping. Other gang members received prison terms of six to 11 years.

**Cold weather claims 80 in Mexico:** Snow, ice and freezing temperatures have killed more than 80 people and left thousands hospitalised in a recent cold wave that has spread south from the US border to the Yucatan Peninsula, AP reports from Monterrey, Mexico.

**Papandreou's wife ill:** Dimitra Lianidou, wife of ailing Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou, has hepatitis, Greek television reported Thursday. AFP reports from Athens.

Lianidou, 41, is being treated for hepatitis B, diagnosed after an examination at the Onassis Cardiology Centre in Athens, where her 76-year-old husband has been hospitalised since November 20, suffering from pneumonia.

**50 Liberians killed in New Yr day:** At least 50 civilians may flee rebels clashes in western Liberia, were killed in a New Year's Day massacre, authorities said Thursday. AP reports from Monrovia.

Survivors who fled to the capital of Monrovia said many more probably died of their wounds after escaping into the hills.



Bosnia Muslim men jubilate after having been released from the Serb prison of Kula, south of Sarajevo, on Thursday. All 13 Bosnian prisoners detained by the Bosnian Serbs in the Sarajevo area were released. They were arrested while travelling through the western Serb-held Sarajevo suburb of Lijza.

— AFP/UNB photo

**Arabs adopt code of conduct to fight terrorism**

**TUNIS:** Jan 5: Interior ministers of Arab states adopted a code of conduct Thursday aimed at fighting terrorism, the chairman of the meeting, Arabia's Prince Nayif Ibn Abdalaziz, said late Thursday, reports AFP.

The code commits members of the Arab League to refraining from aiding, encouraging, harbouring, training or arming terrorist groups.

Prince Nayif said the code was approved unanimously but the Iraqi delegation said Iraq had reservations, as it wanted a proposed "Arab strategy" against terrorism to be approved at the same time.

**Secular opposition pushing Jyoti Basu as possible premier?**

**NEW DELHI:** Jan 5: India's secular opposition is pushing a veteran communist as a possible premier in the event of a victory in upcoming general elections, but the political stalwart is cool to the idea, reports AFP.

Leaders of the country's main centrist party, the Janata Dal (People's Party), say Marxist Jyoti Basu should be the choice to head a government in case the centre-left coalition wins the hustings only months away.

Even the business community is not averse to the proposal since Basu, 81, who was chief minister of the eastern state of West Bengal since 1977, is considered a pragmatist who regu-

larly woos Indian and foreign capital.

The Jyoti Basu, who embraced Marxism while studying law in London during the British Raj and whose only son is a successful businessman, has remained silent to the appeals to play a more active role in national politics.

His hardline Communist Party of India (Marxist), the country's dominant leftist group and die-hard admirer of Stalin, refuses however to permit Basu to head a "bourgeois" government.

"The question does not arise," CPI (M) spokesman Prakash Karat said. "It is emanating from outside (our party)."

Basu becoming PM or not,

he added. "We as a party will join only those governments, in the centre or in states, whose policies we can influence."

"The question whether

Jyoti Basu can become PM or

not has nothing to do with us," Karat said. "It is emanating

from outside (our party)."

But centrist politicians, whose the possibility of coming out on top along with the communists in the event of a widely-tipped hung parliament, have not given up hope.

"Jyoti Basu is a senior statesman, an experienced and sensible and capable leader," said Sharad Yadav, a vocal

supporter of Basu.

"It is not a question of

centrist MP, "naturally, when one thinks of prime minister material, he comes to mind."

Three prominent centrist politicians — Biju Patnaik, Mulayam Singh Yadav and Lalu Prasad Yadav — are all for Basu, chiefly because of his ability to cobble together a coalition in his home state for 17 years.

Even the smaller Communist Party of India, from which Basu broke away in 1964, wants him in New Delhi.

Basu's admirers want his name put forward as a consensus choice for the top post well ahead of the parliamentary elections expected in April to project a stable government in New

Delhi.

Only the Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP, (Indian People's Party), which aspires to come to power on its own, has no love for Basu. The communists and right-wing Hindu BJP are sworn enemies.

New Delhi has been ruled

since independence in 1947

by the Congress Party, now

headed by Prime Minister P

V Narasimha Rao, barring two

brief spells when centrist

captured power.

On both occasions, the

governments collapsed be-

cause of infighting. Basu is

seen to have the ability to

keep rival factions together.

The Times of India, one of

the country's most respec-

ted newspapers, said in a recent

commentary that the chase

for Basu revealed a transfor-

mation of national attitudes.

"In an ironic u-turn of his

try, after liberal democracy

has scripted the 'end of ide-

ology' as an epitaph to com-

munism, the man most

sought after by the disparate

opposition to become

Prime Minister is a Marxist."

He is a national leader in

terms of his influence over

governments at the centre

since 1977. It added, "In the

post cold war period, Basu

has shown remarkable adapt-

ability."

**Yeltsin discusses cabinet changes with Chernomyrdin**

**MOSCOW:** Jan 5: President

Boris Yeltsin, keeping an ac-

tive schedule since returning

to work last week, on Thurs-

day discussed government

changes with his prime min-

ister and threatened to fire

some of his hand-picked re-

gional representatives, re-

ports AP.

The meeting with Prime

Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin

was devoted to analysing

the results of December's

parliamentary elections, in

which Communists and na-

tionalists dominated over re-

formers and other Yeltsin loy-

alists.

## International

NZ welcomes Chirac's decision

### France to wrap up N-tests in South Pacific by end of Feb

PARIS, Jan 5: France will wrap up its series of highly disputed nuclear tests in the South Pacific by the end of next month, French President Jacques Chirac confirmed on Thursday, reports AP.

France has staged five underground test blasts since Chirac abandoned a 3-year-old testing moratorium in September, sparking worldwide protests, and Chirac has said France will set off one or two more.

"France will complete its final campaign of nuclear tests before the end of February," Chirac said, confirming what other officials had indicated in the past.

Chirac spoke during a traditional New Year's reception for members of the French diplomatic corps, some of whom faced the wrath of anti-testing activists or foreign government officials.

The latest test was conducted December 27 at Mururoa Atoll, about 1,200 kilometres (750 miles) southeast of Tahiti in French Polynesia, to verify simulation

technology, officials said.

France also aims to verify the reliability of new and existing warheads with the tests.

Environmentalists, led by Greenpeace, contend the testing is needless and dangerous to the region known for its crystal waters and marine life, and could encourage other countries to resume testing. China has also staged recent tests.

Chirac noted France promises to sign an agreement on a nuclear weapons-free zone in the south Pacific — the so-called Rarotonga treaty — in the first six months of this year.

France also promises to sign a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty being negotiated in Geneva.

Meanwhile, New Zealand, a longtime vocal critic of French nuclear testing, on Friday welcomed confirmation by France that will end underground blasts in the South Pacific in February.

France has detonated five nuclear tests beneath Mururoa and Fangataufa Atolls

since it abandoned a three-year-old testing moratorium in September, sparking worldwide protests.

Chirac said Thursday France will set off one or two more at its test site, about 1,200 kilometers (750 miles) southeast of Tahiti in French Polynesia.

Foreign minister Don McKinnon said New Zealand is "very glad to hear" Chirac's statement, which confirmed earlier comments by other French officials that the test series would be scaled back from an original eight blasts and will end in February instead of May, as first

planned.

McKinnon said international protests against the French tests have been "beyond anything France contemplated and had. I believe, a very salutary effect."

In Tahiti, Greenpeace campaigner Marc Dufourmeau said the environmental group welcomed any news of an end to the tests, but one more detonation will "still be one too many."

114 Tamils die in refugee camps

COLOMBO, Jan 5: At least 114 Tamil civilians have died from diseases within the last two months at refugee camps in areas controlled by Tamil Tiger guerrillas in Sri Lanka's north, the rebel radio said today, reports AFP.

Malaria and diarrhoea were spreading in the camps, the radio said.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said the victims died at Chavakachcheri and Kilinochchi where they had taken shelter after rebels ordered them out of the northern town of Jaffna amid a major military offensive.

The army captured Jaffna, capital of a de facto state run by the LTTE since 1990, after nearly 50 days of fighting that left some 500 soldiers and an estimated 2,000 rebels dead.

Clinton to visit US troops in Bosnia soon

WASHINGTON, Jan 5: President Clinton will visit US troops in Bosnia "in a matter of days," the White House said on Thursday, but an exact date was not released, reports AP.

Press secretary Mike McCurry said the president will make the trip before the State of the Union Address, tentatively planned for January 23, and sometime after this weekend.

### Fresh fighting in Chechnya

MOSCOW, Jan 5: Separatist fighters and Russian troops exchanged fire in several parts of Chechnya yesterday and today, causing casualties on both sides, the Russian military command in the breakaway region said.

Peres has said he is committed to Rabin's pledge to hold a referendum on a Golan deal. But he has also suggested he might consider elections in place of specific plebiscite.

Others believe a Syria deal could be a political asset, especially if it is cosigned by Arab leaders as Peres' environmentalists.

Israel and Syria are currently negotiating in Maryland, and there are signs of progress in the talks.

On Thursday, the Israeli media reported that Syria was willing to curb Lebanese guerrilla activity against Israel, a key Israeli demand.

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