

BRIEFLY

Ogata gets UNESCO peace prize: The United Nations' refugee agency and its top official, Sadako Ogata, won UNESCO's annual peace prize on Thursday, AFP reports from Paris.

Sadako Ogata, whose title is UN High Commissioners for Refugees (UNHCR), and the agency itself were designated joint winners of the 1995 Felix Houphouet-Boigny prize, after an international jury decided unanimously to reward their work, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) said in a statement.

US army sergeant dies in Hungary: A US army sergeant died of an apparent heart attack at Taszar air base in Hungary early on Thursday, becoming the first American fatality in the Bosnia peacekeeping operation, the defence department said. Reuter reports from Washington.

Pentagon spokesman Ken Bacon said that Sergeant Clement E. Southall, 39, of Virginia Beach, Virginia, died shortly after experiencing nausea and breathing difficulties in his quarters at the base late on Wednesday night.

2 burnt to death in Johannesburg: Two men were doused with petrol and burnt to death by a mob Thursday after they allegedly tried to hijack a minibus near Brits, 80 kilometres (50 miles) north of Johannesburg, police said. AFP reports from Johannesburg.

Police spokeswoman captain Belinda Kleynhans said the taxi had entered Bapong shantytown near Brits with two passengers and stopped next to a shebeen (tavern). Four unknown men approached and tried to hijack the vehicle, pulling the passengers from the car.

8 killed in clash in Philippines: Muslim rebels killed a Muslim guerrilla leader belonging to a rival faction and seven of his followers over a land dispute in the southern Philippines, the military said Friday. AP reports from Manila.

After a four-hour clash between the two factions of the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front, government troops intervened to prevent the situation from affecting civilians living in Balabagan town in Lanao del Sur province, the military said. Balabagan is about 850 kilometres (530 miles) south of Manila.

Blast kills 14 in China: At least 14 people were killed and more than 30 seriously injured when a truck packed with explosives blew up in China's Sichuan province, the pro-Beijing Hong Kong newspaper Wen Wei Po reported yesterday. Reuter reports from Hong Kong.

An unidentified number of people were missing, and houses were totally destroyed within a radius of 100 metres of the explosion on Sunday night in an agricultural machinery station in Yunyang county, it said. The paper said the explosives were accidentally ignited by workers when they lit candles to provide light while unloading the truck, which was laden with one tonne of explosives, 5,000 detonators and 500 metres of fuse.

Chirac to visit US Jan 31: French President Jacques Chirac will visit Washington and Chicago on a three-day US trip beginning January 31 that will include meetings with President Clinton and members of Congress, a spokesman said Thursday. AP reports from Paris.

Chirac flies first to Washington on a state visit "that will confirm the intensity of our political, economic and military links," Chirac's deputy spokesman Jerome Peyrat said Thursday. Bosnia, where US and French troops play key roles in peacekeeping, are among issues on the agenda, he said.

Gaddafi, Mubarak meet: Libyan leader Moamer Gaddafi and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak met at an Egyptian military base yesterday for their first summit since June 1994, officials said. AFP reports from Cairo.

The meeting, which focused on their joint efforts to lift an air embargo imposed on Libya by the United Nations in 1992, took place at Sidi Barrani on the Mediterranean coast, the official Egyptian News Agency MENA said. The embargo was imposed after Libya refused to hand over to Britain or the United States two suspects implicated in the 1988 bombing of a Pan-Am jet over Lockerbie, Scotland, which killed 270.

Snowfalls disrupt life in Iran: Heavy snowfalls forced schools to shut Thursday and had trapped thousands of workers and students overnight in the capital Tehran, the official Islamic Republic News Agency reported. AP says from Tehran.

There were snowfalls in 21 of Iran's 25 provinces Wednesday, and more were expected Thursday, the agency said. In some high-altitude areas, snow had piled up 3.5 metres (11.55 feet), it said. Blizzards also lashed many parts of Iran last week, and at least 17 people were killed and 32 injured. Most of the casualties were caused by traffic accidents.

China, Armenia end talks: China and Armenia concluded their three-day consultations at the level of deputy foreign minister in Beijing yesterday. Xinhua reports from Beijing.

During the consultations Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Deguang and his Armenian counterpart Ardash Zuloyan exchanged views on bilateral relations and international issues of common interest. Liu Huaqui, director of the foreign affairs office of China's State Council, met with Zuloyan and his party in the morning.

Tigers abandon several jungle bases

COLOMBO, Jan 19: Tamil Tiger guerrillas have abandoned several small jungle bases in eastern Sri Lanka in the face of an army offensive in the region, the military said today, reports AFP.

Guerillas of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had withdrawn from several hideouts in the eastern coastal district of Batticaloa as elite commandos fanned into the jungles earlier last month.

More than 50 people have been killed in sporadic violence in the east since the LTTE lost Jaffna to security forces after nearly 50 days of fighting that claimed the lives of 500 soldiers and 2,000 rebels by official count.

An estimated 50,000 people have died in the Tamil separatist struggle over the past 23 years during which all political attempts at a solution have failed.

There has been no contact with the enemy," a defence source said. "But the search and destroy mission is still on."

Elite army commandos moved against suspected Tiger positions amid monsoon rains which had triggered floods and inundated several low-lying areas, the sources said.

Duma elects Speaker from Communist Party

MOSCOW, Jan 19: Russia's new parliament elected a Communist Party member as speaker Wednesday in a move likely to intensify confrontation with President Boris Yeltsin's government, reports AFP.

Gennady Seleznev, 48, the previous parliament's deputy speaker, won by 231 votes, five more than required. The balloting ended a two-day deadlock over selection of a new speaker.

The Communists, who seek to roll back free-market reforms, finished first among 43 parties in last month's parliamentary elections.

International

Japan's mediation sought

Benazir warns India against inviting nuclear showdown

TOKYO, Jan 19: Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has warned India anew against inviting nuclear showdown, saying in a interview published here Friday that another Indian nuclear test would trigger a "horrible result" in South Asia, reports AFP.

If India wanted to push ahead with the test, it would have to consider a "serious response" that would bring a "horrible result" in the subcontinent, Benazir said in an interview with Asahi Shimbun.

Benazir implied that India detonated a nuclear device. Pakistan may have to do the same, pushing the region into a nuclear arms race.

There is an ambiguity in Pakistan's nuclear arms race.

"There is an ambiguity in Pakistan's nuclear development

plan," Benazir told the daily. Pakistan had been saying that "it has a knowledge but does not produce" nuclear weapons, she said.

But if India detonates nuclear device, naturally, some would call for taking off this ambiguous veil."

Benazir arrived in Japan Wednesday for a four-day visit to meet with political and economic leaders. She was scheduled to meet Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko today.

Another report says: Visiting Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on Thursday called on Japan and other nations to help mediate her country's rows with India, Japanese officials said.

At a meeting with her Japanese counterpart Ryutaro Hashimoto, Benazir said Pakistan would be grateful if the group of seven (G7) major economic powers, or other countries, acted as intermediaries between the two nations, the officials said.

Hashimoto urged a peaceful solution to the decades-old territorial row between Pakistan and India over Kashmir, but made no offer of mediation.

The Japanese premier, who replaced socialist leader Tomiochi Murayama a week ago, stressed that both Pakistan and India should work hard to reopen a dialogue that might lead to a breakthrough.

During the one-and-a-half-hour meeting at the Prime Minister's officials residence here, Hashimoto urged Benazir to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) along with India, and

to cooperate in the proposed Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) aimed at banning all underground nuclear tests.

On the economic front, Hashimoto urged Pakistan to upgrade its economic infrastructure and public security to encourage Japanese investment, the officials said.

The prime minister also told Benazir that Japan was extending a low-interest loan of up to 59.5 billion yen (568 million dollars) to Pakistan in the year from next April to help improve the country's social and economic infrastructures.

The 30-year loan carries an interest rate of 2.3 per cent per annum and will be used to finance a power plant and to build schools, the officials said.

Security at US airports tightened

NEW YORK, Jan 19: Security was tightened at US airports on Thursday because of concerns that the sentencing of Muslim radical Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman might provoke violent revenge, reports Reuter.

The Egyptian cleric was sentenced to life in prison without parole by a US judge on Wednesday after conviction on charges he and his followers planned a wave of attacks on landmark buildings and highway tunnels in New York. Nine of his followers also were sentenced to long prison terms.

Federal Aviation Administration officials said the security move should not result in flight delays or inconvenience to the public.

James Kallstrom, head of the New York FBI office, told Reuters that airports were now on a "level 3" alert, the second toughest alert meaning more police patrols and closer scrutiny of baggage.

The sentencing of those 10 was somewhat of a benchmark and heightened the tension, he said. "Some people could interpret what was said in the courtroom as a call to arms."

China to keep its promise to Hong Kong

BEIJING, Jan 19: China will stick to its promise of allowing Hong Kong to keep its capitalist way of life after the British colony reverts to Chinese rule in 1997, Premier Li Peng said Thursday, reports AP.

The Statesman, collaborating previous reports, said the names of at least seven other members of Rao's cabinet were contained in the explosive Jain diary.

It identified them as minister for Urban Development RK Dhawan, Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Environment Minister Rajesh Pilot, Civil Supplies Minister Buta Singh, Health and Family Welfare Minister AR Antulay, Minister of State for Civil Supplies Krishna Sahu and Textiles Minister Kamal Nath.

Two former ministers, Makhan Lal Potedar and CK Jaffer Sharif, are named in the diary, the newspaper said.

EU calls for an end to violence in Chechnya

ROME, Jan 19: The European Union (EU) called on Thursday for an immediate end to violence in Chechnya, condemning the taking of hostages there and the seizure of a Black Sea passenger ferry in Turkey, reports Reuter.

The European Union, deeply disturbed by events in Pervomaiskoye, deplores the loss of life and calls for an immediate end to fighting to avoid further spilling of blood," it said in a statement issued by the foreign ministry of Italy, which holds the rotating EU presidency.

The EU strongly condemns the taking of hostages, both in the bloody case of Pervomaiskoye and in the hijacking of the Turkish ferry "Avrasiye" on the Black Sea," it said.

The VHP's agenda is its most brazen attempt yet to give Hinduism the dominant place in secular India, where an estimated 120 million Muslims form the largest religious minority. India is also

home to some 25 million Christians.

The "Hindu agenda" declares that "Hindu interest is national interest. Therefore, the honour and the interests of Hindu will be protected in every manner."

It calls for a ban on slaughtering cows, an animal worshipped by Hindus, and on the conversion of Hindus to Islam or Christianity, a uniform civil code for all religious groups and a rewriting of Indian history.

The VHP wants the government to ban polygamy and exports of meat and to discourage drinking of liquor and non-vegetarianism in line with Hindu values.

It calls for prominent

More mass graves found in Bosnian town

SARAJEVO, Jan 19: Bosnian authorities have discovered mass graves in the northwest town of Sanski Most and in Vozuca in central Bosnia, Bosnian television reported Thursday. says AFP.

The graves are alleged to be of Muslims slain by Serbs in the vicious pattern of ethnic cleansing that marked Bosnia's war that began in 1992 and ended with the Dayton peace accord signed in Paris in December.

The television showed images of the mass grave found in the Vozuca area Thursday, including shots of skulls and bones dug out from the ground.

In Vozuca, the deputy prosecutor of Zenica, the main town in the area, said: "we have found six locations with 13 bodies, 10 male and three female. There are other graves with killed Muslims. These that we have found now were not even properly buried but we found the

remains of their bones. We have information both about the victims and the perpetrators of the crime," the television said.

Residents of the area were also present at the excavation, and some of them recognised the bodies of their relatives, the TV said.

It said Ekrem Demirovic recognised his brother killed June 25, 1992. "We recognised him by his clothes belt, things he had in his pockets."

The grave found in Sanski Most contained the bodies of 14 Muslim men, aged between 21 and 60. All were from the Alibegovice family and from the hamlet of Budim, but killed in the village of Kalenderi in June 1992.

The report could not be immediately confirmed. Bosnian authorities said there were a large number of still undiscovered mass graves in the Sanski Most region.

Off the Record



Miss Universe 1995 Chelsi Smith (L) of California Kisses Adeline Ong Siew Fong after she was crowned Miss Malaysia-Universe 1996 in Kuala Lumpur Thursday. Adeline will represent Malaysia in the Miss Universe pageant in Las Vegas this year.

— AFP/UNB photo

World's narrowest strait

TOKYO: A small island town in western Japan's Seto Inland Sea will make the Guinness Book of World records next year with a listing for the world's narrowest strait, local officials said yesterday. reports AFP.

Only 9.93 metres (32 feet nine inches) wide at its narrowest point, the Dofuchi Strait, in Tonosho, Kagawa prefecture, beats the previous record holder, Greece's Kallikles Strait, by more than 30 metres (99 feet).

Diamond found in Norway for first time

OSLO: A diamond had been found in Norway for the first time, a geologist announced on Thursday, but he refused to say precisely where, reports Reuter.

"It is a sensation," said Morten Often, of the geological survey of Norway, who analysed the discovery. The 0.07-carat gem had a typical diamond form and a fine crystal shape.

It was found in river gravel somewhere in Finnmark, the country's northernmost province. North Norway rests on one of earth's oldest crusts and Often said: "As a geologist, I knew of the possibility of diamonds in the area."

He said the man who found the gem did not want to be identified, nor did he want the world to know exactly where he spotted it. "He wishes to keep the area to himself — at least for now," Often said.

112th birthday of Japan's oldest citizen

TOKYO: Sue Utagawa, Japan's oldest citizen, celebrated her 112th birthday Friday with a candle-lit cake at a nursing home in southern Japan, reports AP.

A beaming Utagawa blew out the candles in front of a battery of television cameras at a nursing home in Ajisu, Yamaguchi Prefecture (state).

Doctors and nurses presented the large cake, topped with fruit and candles, to Utagawa who cut it while sitting in her wheelchair.

"She has a slight hearing difficulty, but is otherwise very fit," said Hiroto Umezaki, director of the nursing home.

"Her favourite pastime here is watching sumo tournaments on television with her friends," Umezaki added.

The local mayor presented her with a television to watch tournaments on.

Utagawa was born in 1884 to a farming family in Hoku, 780 kilometers (484 miles), southwest of Tokyo.

She was married in 1910 and has one son, 75, and three daughters. Her husband passed away in 1948.

'Asad willing to recognise Israel'

WASHINGTON, Jan 19: In what for him is a revolutionary shift, Syrian President Hafez Assad is willing to sign a peace treaty with Israel that includes an element of recognition of the Jewish state. Israeli ambassador Itamar Rabinovich said Thursday, reports AP.

The Indian Express newspaper said in an editorial that communal organisations like the VHP would not succeed "given the country's stable democratic structure and its long tradition of tolerance."

"But the very fact that such blatant attitudes which negate all the cherished constitutional provisions can be publicly articulated is a pointer to the danger that fundamentalists pose to India's unity," it said.

Israel will pursue the offer at a new round of negotiations that opens next Wednesday at the Wye conference centre in eastern Maryland.



Costas Simitis (L), Akis Tsohatzopoulos (C) and Gerassimos Arsenis (R) applaud after the announcement of the election result in the succession race to replace outgoing prime minister Andreas Papandreou, in Athens on Thursday. Simitis won 86 votes cast by 167 Socialist lawmakers in the final run off race against Tsohatzopoulos. Simitis will replace ailing Andreas Papandreou, who resigned Monday.

— AFP/UNB photo