

International

140 still kept behind to meet rebels' demand
Peruvian rebels free 225 more hostages

LIMA, Dec 23: In a "Christmas gesture," leftist rebels freed 225 hostages from the Japanese ambassador's residence, keeping another 140 behind to pressure President Alberto Fujimori to meet their demands and shield them from reprisal, reports AP.

After the last bus left the residence Sunday night, Red Cross director Michel Minning confirmed the figures for those who were liberated and those left behind.

The freed hostages ended their captivity by walking onto buses that took them through cheering crowds to the nearby police hospital, where they were greeted by Fujimori. Most went home immediately.

"I'm delighted. Really happy. This is indescribable," said Rosa Romero, united with her husband Antonio, a Peruvian government official. The five days of his captivity were the longest of his life.

The mass release was sudden and unexpected. All day, rebels made no comment on Fujimori's hard-line stance, broad-

cast the night before in a nationwide speech, that he would not free imprisoned rebels. That was the Tupac Amaru rebels' main condition for releasing hostages.

Still, it was not a complete surprise. The sheer number of hostages was unwieldy there wasn't enough food, water, bathrooms or space in the two-story house. And rebel leader Nestor Cerpa in any case kept behind enough high-level captives for his purposes.

Before the hostages were allowed to leave, Sandro Fuentes, a freed hostage and a former labor minister, read a statement from Cerpa that said the release of the 225 hostages was "a Christmas gesture."

Cerpa proposed in the statement a dialogue to find common points to reach a peace "with social justice," but he said the liberation of the remaining hostages will be possible only if the government frees rebel prisoners.

Hostages linked to the government, such as ministers,

vice ministers, judges, congressmen and high officials of the armed forces and police, as well as Japanese businessmen and executives, will remain captive, the statement said.

"By the same token, we'll still keep with us some diplomats from Asia and Latin America whose (status) we're evaluating," Cerpa stated.

A Red Cross official declined to say how many foreign ambassadors remained hostage or the nationalities of other dignitaries and businessmen still held. Diplomats and businessmen had been part of the hostage group.

"Of course we're very glad at the release, but we're concerned that the burden on those remaining in custody will become tougher," Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto told Japanese reporters in Tokyo.

At about 9 pm (0200 GMT), buses pulled up to the Japanese ambassador's residence in the exclusive San Isidro neighborhood. Fujimori's designated trou-

bleshooter, Education Minister Domingo Palerm, arrived about the same time as did police commando teams.

As they departed the house, many hostages looked somber, wearing the same dark suits they had on when they attended a gala reception at the ambassador's residence last Tuesday night, when the Tupac Amaru rebels struck.

When they were safely on the buses, starting out at cheering and waving bystanders, many smiled and waved back.

"Papa! Papa!" cried a child's voice from the groups of family and friends holding vigil outside the residence.

A young woman craned forward on a TV crew's ladder, as hostages boarded the fourth bus. She saw her brother and shouted his name with joy. "Mario Miguel! Mario Miguel!" Her brother smiled and gave a thumbs-up.

It was the first release since the Tupac Amaru rebels pledged Friday night to free more of the captives in the next hours and days.



Nine-year-old Jayne Blair carries a wooden sign showing a white dove and the word "Peace" as she takes part in a mass gathering Live Peace at Belfast City Hall on Sunday. The mass rally was organized after the recent shooting incident of a Catholic police officer and Monday's bomb attack on leading Republican Eddie Copeland.

BRIEFLY

29 die in China bridge collapse

At least 29 people died and 60 were injured when a road bridge being built in southern China collapsed suddenly, local officials said today, AFP reports from Beijing.

The 75-metre (250-foot) high bridge in Ruyuan county, Guangdong province, collapsed Friday morning, with more than 90 workers working on or below the structure. Most of the workers on the Baikong Bridge — a Sino-Japanese joint venture — were migrant labourers, according to an official with the local government in the county seat of Shaoguan.

"Twenty-four of the workers were killed instantly, while five died later in hospital," said the official, who identified himself only as Chen.

Although no official reason for the accident has been given, Chen said a landslide on one side of the ravine spanned by the bridge had probably caused the structure to collapse.

Initial reports had put the death toll as high as 100.

21 die as bus overturns in Sudan

A bus traveling from northern Sudan to Khartoum overturned, killing 21 people, the Sudan News Agency reported Sunday. AP reports from Khartoum.

The bus was traveling Saturday from Banaga township to the capital, Khartoum, the agency reported. No other details of the accident were immediately available.

Banaga is the home town of Sudanese President Omar el-Bashir.

17 protesters held in Indonesia

Police arrested 17 people for trespass on Sunday after they tried to occupy a military training college during a protest against Indonesia's annexation of East Timor, AP reports from Melbourne.

About 500 demonstrators gathered outside Fort Queenscliff, near Melbourne. The group claimed that some Indonesian army officers had been trained at the college and had then gone to East Timor and committed human rights abuses. Some protesters were arrested when they scaled a 3-meter (10-foot) wall.

Turkish leaders fail to reach accord

A long-awaited summit of political leaders summoned by the president to discuss a recent scandal revealing links between state and the underworld failed after five hours Sunday to reach specific resolution, AP reports from Ankara.

President Suleyman Demirel presided over the meeting at his residence where Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, his deputy Tansu Ciller, and opposition leaders came together. A statement from the presidency said the leaders had reached agreement to prevent further erosion of trust in the state and the regime, and to continue "pursuing all channels of judicial inquiries to investigate all allegations."

Wild elephant kills 5 more in India

A wild elephant which trampled eight people to death in eastern India last week, killed five more at the weekend after getting drunk, the Indian Express daily said yesterday. AFP reports from New Delhi.

The elephant, which attacked people in remote villages near Ranchi in Bihar state, also damaged crops and houses after getting cut off from its herd, police said. Bihar forest chief B K Sahay said the elephant went berserk after getting drunk.

Mexican plane crash claims 6

A private airplane slammed into a mountainside in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, in northern New Mexico, killing a family of six on a Christmas holiday trip, state police said, AP reports from Santa Fe.

The wreckage of the single-engine plane was found Sunday on a private ranch near Holman, about 35 miles (55 kilometers) northeast of Santa Fe, in a heavily forested area. There were no survivors, said state police Lt. Mike Hill.

The bodies were to be recovered Monday. "It's such a rugged area they want to make sure they do this as safely as possible," Hill said.

Ramos undergoes heart surgery

President Fidel Ramos underwent a successful operation Monday and was doing well but no other details were immediately available, House of Representatives Speaker Jose De Venecia and other officials said Monday, AP reports from Manila.

"I was informed the operation of the president was very successful and the whole country is relieved and we're all very happy," De Venecia told radio station DZBB. Other Philippine officials confirmed the operation on the 68-year-old president has been performed successfully Monday at the suburban Makati Medical Center but details of the Philippine leader's condition were to be announced later.

US cargo plane crash kills 6

A DC-8 cargo plane crashed in the mountains of southwest Virginia, and state police said there were no apparent survivors, AP reports from Narrows.

It was not immediately clear how many people were on the plane when it crashed Sunday. A spokeswoman for Airborne Express said there were six people on board; the Federal Aviation Administration said there were only three. "Our thoughts and prayers are with the flight crew and passengers," Jennifer Peacor, a spokeswoman for Airborne Express in Seattle, said Sunday night. "We have received no word on their conditions."

Strong quake rocks Japan

An earthquake, measuring 6.5 on the Richter Scale, shook northern Japan overnight but there were no reports of damage or injuries, the Meteorological Agency said yesterday, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The epicentre of the quake, at 11:54 PM Sunday (1454 GMT), was off the western coast of Hokkaido, northernmost Japan, an agency spokesman said. There was no danger of tsunami tidal waves, he said. An earthquake of magnitude 6.4 on the Richter scale can cause severe damage.

Taliban repulse attack by opposition in Tagab

KABUL, Dec 23: The Taliban militia has repulsed an attack by opposition forces in the strategic Tagab Valley north-east of Kabul, Taliban-controlled Radio Shariat reported today, reports AFP.

The report said rival forces launched an attack on the Islamic militia at 9:00 PM (1630 GMT) Saturday, but no ground was lost and 20 opposition soldiers were taken prisoner.

The Tagab Valley runs north from the town of Sarobi, 70 kilometres (44 miles) east of Kabul, with the southern part controlled by the Islamic militia and the north by forces loyal to the ousted government's military commander Ahmad Shah Masood.

The valley is currently the only open road link between Taliban and opposition-controlled areas, with other highway closed by fighting or blocked by snow and ice.

Serbian opposition forms association to coordinate political actions

BELGRADE, Dec 23: Opposition leaders behind huge demonstrations against Slobodan Milosevic announced Sunday that they would coordinate forces in cities they control in their struggle against Serbia's president, reports AP.

Shortly after the Union of Free Cities and Municipalities of Serbia was formed, about 100,000 protesters began marching through Belgrade. It was the 33rd straight day of demonstrations against Milosevic and his decision to annual elections won by the opposition in dozens of towns and cities.

A heavy rain did not appear to dampen the spirit of the protesters, who jeered and booed as they marched by tensely pro-Milosevic state television.

"Milosevic is provoking a civil war," read a banner, alluding to counter-demonstrations being orchestrated by his camp, including one planned in Belgrade for Tuesday.

In Smederevo, southeast of the capital, functionaries of Milosevic's Socialist party convened another demonstration in support of the president.

Change in party leadership
Cong (I) won't withdraw support for United Front coalition govt

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: India's Congress (I) Party will not withdraw crucial support for the United Front coalition government due to a change in its leadership, the Times of India newspaper said today, reports AP.

Congress President Sitaram Kesri told the Daily the forced resignation of former premier P V Narasimha Rao as parliamentarian leader, would not endanger the government.

"We do not want to withdraw support to the United Front," he said.

"The country is not prepared for elections at this moment," the Congress has 140 MPs in the lower house of parliament and provides crucial backing to the Centre-Left United Front in the 545-seat body.

Rao, who faces corruption charges, was forced to quit as leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) on Thursday after being cornered into resigning as Congress president in September. He decided to back the government in June.

Congress sources have said Rao's supporters were trying to scare MPs that if Kesri was elected chief of the CPP, he would withdraw support to the government.

Kesri said a unanimous candidate would be declared CPP chief on January 3. The Post allows the incumbent to become prime minister if the Congress wins a straight majority in general elections.

"We will manage to evolve a consensus," he said.

"Consensus, not election is the need of the hour," added Rao loyalist and CPP spokesman Suresh Kalmadi.

Sharad Pawar, a former defence minister and an aspirant for the CPP post, on Sunday rejected Kesri's demands for choosing a leader by consensus, saying: "The election schedule

has already been declared."

Besides Pawar, former Congress ministers Rajesh Pilot, Manmohan Singh and Jagannath Mishra are in the race for the coveted job.

Meanwhile Loyalists of former Indian prime minister P V Narasimha Rao launched a drive on Sunday to garner support for their leader ahead of an election for the top post in the Congress (I) Party.

They flagged off the campaign two days after party President Sitaram Kesri deferred until January 3 the election to choose a successor for Rao, who was forced to quit as leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) after being charged with corrupt practices.

CPP spokesman Suresh Kalmadi, a Rao aide, said his supporters would settle for nothing less than an election and oppose demands for a "consensus" candidate to fill the position.

At the Belgrade rally later, Djindjic said the weak turnout at pro-Milosevic rallies demonstrated the lack of support for the Serbian leader.

"He is going down, and the only question is how the change of power will be carried out in Serbia," said Djindjic. "We want it to be peaceful."

Boosting the opposition cause, Danielle Mitterrand, widow of Francois Mitterrand, the late French prime minister, accused Milosevic's Socialists of wide-spread cheating.

"We know all forms of falsifying election results done by the ruling party," said Mitterrand, in Belgrade to meet with opposition leaders as chairwoman of France Liberte, a non-governmental human rights monitor. "We know the lists with results were forged."

She did not elaborate.



King Hussein of Jordan (L) and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat review the guard of honour upon Arafat's Arrival in Amman Saturday for talks on means to sidestep obstacles facing Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

No-confidence debate
Communists gain strength to topple Deuba's govt

KATHMANDU, Dec 23: A communist-led campaign to topple Nepal's 15-month old centre right coalition gained strength today with a small leftist group's promise to support a no-confidence motion being debated by parliament, reports Reuter.

The Nepal Workers and Peasants Party said its three deputies in the house of representatives would vote against Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's three-party coalition government when the vote is taken, either today or on Tuesday.

NWPP's support for the no-confidence motion, which was put forth on Saturday by the opposition communist United Marxist-Leninist (UML) party, increases the chance of the government losing a close vote, politicians said.

Deuba's three-party coalition commands 108 seats in the 205-member House, whose actual strength is 200.

Hours later, Roh - Chun's military buddy and presidential

Chun, Roh won't appeal against their convictions

SEOUL, Dec 23: Former Presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo, sentenced to life and 17 years in prison for leading a 1979 coup, decided Monday not to appeal their convictions, reports AP.

Both leaders earlier had indicated through their lawyers that they would appeal by Monday, the legal deadline for taking their cases to the Supreme Court.

"I have decided not to appeal because further arguments on what was right or wrong about the past would do no good in the midst of various problems facing the country," Chun said in a statement released through his lawyers.

Chun urged the country to put the past behind and concentrate on coping with security threats from North Korea and reinvigorating an economy that has slowed down sharply.

Hours later, Roh - Chun's military buddy and presidential

successor - said through his lawyers that he also was dropping his plan to appeal to the nation's highest court. He cited similar reasons.

Defence attorneys said that the decision to give up the appeals did not mean that the ex-presidents accepted the validity of the Dec 16 appellate court ruling that convicted them. Chun and Roh argue that their government seizure 17 years ago was legitimate.

Despite long-term sentences, the two are unlikely to spend the rest of their lives in jail. News reports speculated that President Kim may release them in a presidential amnesty.

Nonetheless, prosecutors said they will appeal the cases of Chun, Roh and 10 other ex-generals involved in the coup and a military crackdown the following year that left hundreds of pro-democracy protesters dead in the southern city of Kwangju.

Off the Record
Santa Claus answers Christmas wishes!

NEW YORK: The envelope is addressed simply to "Dear Santa." The letter inside pleads, politely, reports AP.

"May you get me a wheelchair. I need the wheelchair to be powered. I need it to get around. Can you help me Santa? I would do anything for this. Love always, Miracle Retrina."

The 9-year-old, born with no arms and only one functional leg, wrote the faint, crooked words by pushing a pencil with her left foot. Now Miracle Retrina Womack awaits a miracle, and Guillermina "Gigi" Colon is ready to help.

"This is what life is really about," Colon says, clutching the child's note as she dashes through the cavernous halls of the General Post Office in Manhattan, smiling at coworkers who greet her with "Hi Santa!"

The jolly, Dominican-born pidge is the energy behind "Operation Santa Claus," which makes Christmas dreams come true at the city's huge main post office, next to Penn Station and Madison Square Garden.

In the United States, as in some other countries, children traditionally write letters to Santa Claus during the Christmas season, asking for gifts to be placed under the tree on Christmas.

A record 153,000 "Dear Santa" letters from around the world had arrived by Friday to be sorted, computerised and made available to anyone who wants to become an instant guardian angel. Some come from as far away as South Africa and Japan.

"Most post offices in the world know about us," says Ms. Colon, head of customer relations at the General Post Office.

Vote buying scam
Cash & Jewels worth \$120,000 seized from ex-Cong(I) CM's house

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Indian detectives seized cash and jewels worth 120,000 dollars from top leader of the Congress-I Party implicated in a vote-buying scandal with disgraced former premier P V Narasimha Rao, newspapers said today, reports AP.

Reports said Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) officials discovered the unaccounted money and jewellery during raids on the homes of Bhajan Lal, former chief minister of the northern state of Haryana, on Sunday.

Lal, who was reportedly close to former prime ministers Indira Gandhi, her son Rajiv and Rao, has been implicated in a 30-million-rupee (\$87,100 dollars) vote-buying case.

Four MPs from the eastern state of Bihar claim they had said the money by Rao's colleagues to vote for his Congress government during a crucial July 1993 vote of no-confidence in parliament.

606 killed in SA road mishaps since Dec 3

JOHANNESBURG, Dec 23: At least 606 people, 77 of them under the age of 16, have been killed by road accidents in South Africa since the beginning of the festive summer holiday season starting from December 3, reports Xinhua.

The National Traffic Information Centre (NTIC) announced here on Sunday that approximately 44 per cent of the children killed in accidents were pedestrians due to the lack of education on road safety.

Among them, babies and small children were the main victims, said Christa Walt, a NTIC officer.

Tigers ambush military patrol, 18 killed

COLOMBO, Dec 23: Tamil Tiger rebels ambushed a military patrol in eastern Sri Lanka killing nine soldiers, while nine guerrillas were killed in separate clashes, the military said Monday, reports AP.

The soldiers were patrolling a jungle road between Panguragaswewa and Mahasorowwa villages in the Trincomalee district when they were attacked on Sunday afternoon, said Lt Weerakkody Arachchi, a military spokesman, in a statement.

The soldiers fired back at the guerrillas but details of rebel casualties were not immediately known. One soldier was also wounded in the clash that occurred 240 kilometres (150 miles) northeast of the capital.

In a separate incident near Palathopur village in the same district on Sunday, two guerrillas killed themselves by consuming cyanide after soldiers trapped them in a jungle area, said Capt. Panduka Senanayake, another military spokesman. Most guerrillas carry cyanide in glass vials that they consume to avoid being captured alive.

In the northern Kilinochchi district, three guerrillas were killed Sunday by a military patrol, said Senanayake. There were no casualties on the government side.

On Saturday night, four rebels were ambushed and killed by soldiers

Bodo rebels kill 5 in Assam

GUWAHATI, Dec 23: A massive manhunt has been launched to track down the suspected Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) militants who killed five persons, including a woman, and injured two others near Barama in Assam's Nalbari district last night, reports PTI.

Police said here today that a dragnet had been laid and combing operations were on to nab the extremists who killed the Bodo Women's Justice Forum General Secretary, Golapi Basumatari and four others when they were returning to their residence at Pathampari in a car from Barpeta.

The ultras way laid them and indiscriminately fired upon the car killing five on spot

Yeltsin returns to Kremlin

MOSCOW, Dec 23: President Boris Yeltsin returned to his office at the Kremlin on Monday after being sidelined for almost six months with heart problems, reports AP.

Yeltsin's motorcade entered the Kremlin shortly after 9:30 am (0630 GMT) Monday morning. The president's return effectively marks the start of his second term — his heart trouble struck at the end of June, only days before his July 3 re-election victory.

Since then, he has made only rare public appearances. He underwent quintuple heart bypass surgery on November 5, and doctors say he is making a full recovery

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