

BRIEFLY

Indian Muslims deprived of their rights: Gowda

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: Muslims, the largest religious minority among India's 930 million people, have been deprived of their rights since the country's independence in 1947. Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda was quoted as saying today, reports AFP.

"You have been cheated as a vote bank and political parties have exploited your goodness." The Hindu newspaper quoted Deve Gowda as saying at a seminar here late Monday.

"This country does not belong to any religion or party," he said.

Muslims, who comprise 11 per cent of the population, say they have been sidetracked despite the Indian constitution declaring the world's largest democracy a secular country.

The December 6, 1992 razing of a medieval mosque in the northern town of Ayodhya by Hindu fundamentalists, which sparked nationwide riots claiming more than 2,000 lives, has also scarred their psyche.

Deve Gowda hinted that his loose-knit coalition government, comprising centrist and left parties and depending on the historically-dominant Congress (I) for survival, would try to reserve jobs for Muslims in the government.

Stalemate in Nepali parliament

KATHMANDU, Dec 24: The special session of Nepals lower house turned into a confrontation between MPs of ruling and opposition sides Monday midnight before it was adjourned, reports Xinhua.

The stalemate began late Monday when lawmakers from the two sides were shouting slurs against each other.

Earlier opposition lawmakers had staged a sit-in protest in front of the Speakers rostrum for about three hours to block the Speaker to call for the voting on a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and his three-party coalition government.

They alleged that some MPs of the ruling side have kidnapped one MP who was supposed to vote in favour of the no-confidence motion tabled by main opposition the Communist Party of Nepal (UML) Marxist Leninist, CPN-UML.

Bhakta Bahadur Rokya of the Nepal Workers and Peasants Party (NWPP) was abducted early Monday by Home Minister K B Khadka and two MPs of the main ruling Nepal Congress (NC) Party for fears of the approval of the non-confidence motion opposition MPs said.

UN decides not to send troops to Zaire

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 24: The United Nations will not send a military force to Zaire to help Rwandan refugees, the Security Council decided Monday.

The council's decision was largely a formality, as participating countries had already agreed there was no longer a need for a multinational force to help refugees returning from eastern Zaire.

"In the light of the new situation in the region, the functions of the multinational force will come to an end," said Security Council President Francesco Palu Fulci of Italy.

About 940,000 of the estimated 1.2 million refugees who fled Rwanda in 1994 following the massacre of at least 500,000 Tutsis have returned in the last two months from Zaire and Tanzania.

UN refugee agency officials said between 20,000 and 30,000 a day were expected to arrive.

Tigers attack police base, kill 2

COLOMBO, Dec 24: Tamil Tiger guerrillas attacked a police outpost in eastern Sri Lanka today, killing at least two constables and wounding three others, officials said, reports AFP.

Gunmen of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fired mortar bombs and automatic fire at the "12th colony" post in the district of Ampara and escaped as military reinforcements were rushed, officials said.

The LTTE overran a commando base of the police in the area nearly two weeks ago, killing 39 troopers for the loss of at least 26 of their own men.

The commercial bus was traveling between the cities of San-dona and Pasto, 335 miles (540 kilometres) southwest of the capital, Bogota, near the border with Ecuador when it ran off a cliff. The cause of the accident was not immediately clear. No other details were available.

6 seamen sentenced to death in ROK:

French prosecutors are holding 10 Muslim militants, some of them allegedly trained as guerrillas in Bosnia on suspicion of links to a guerrilla support network, justice sources said on Monday. Reuter reports from Paris.

The 10 are believed to have no connection, however, to the December 3 bombing of a Paris commuter train in which four people died, an attack that investigators believe was staged by Muslim fundamentalists angry over French backing for Algeria.

Road mishap kills 12 in Colombia: A bus swerved off a mountain road in southern Colombia on Monday, killing 12 people and injuring 18, police said. AP reports from Bogota.

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A Palestinian woman holds pictures of her two sons jailed in the Israeli prisons on Monday during a demonstration in Gaza City by some 200 women demanding to Israel the release of Palestinian prisoners according to the peace deal between Israelis and Palestinians.

— AFP/UNB photo

President Lien Chan as premier — a move the opposition says is unconstitutional.

Chen Kuei-miao, legislative whip for the opposition New Party, denounced the proposal as giving the president too much power.

Every article we've considered has expanded the powers of the president, and not a single one has limited it," said Chen.

The main opposition, the Democratic Progressive Party, was split. While party whip Shen Hsi-hsien rejected the idea, Chairman Hsu Hsin-Liang said he might support it in return for greater powers of oversight and censure for the legislature.

Under the proposal Lee would have the power to dismiss the legislature, while removing its right to veto his choice of premier. That would help solve his problems with having appointed Vice

International

Hashimoto rules out tough approach to Peruvian rebels

Freed hostages appeal for negotiated settlement

LIMA, Dec 24: Freed hostages appealed for a negotiated end to Peru's standoff with leftist rebels holding 140 Latin American and Asian dignitaries. The captives got water, food, clean T-shirts and underwear but the government made no concessions to the captives, reports AP.

For the 140 remaining hostages, including seven foreign ambassadors and Peruvian dignitaries such as the foreign minister and the president of the Supreme Court, Monday was the sixth day of confinement at the walled residence of the Japanese ambassador. Ambassador Morthisa Aoki and President Alberto Fujimori's brother, Pedro, were among those still held.

A radio station, though, tried to get some good news to one hostage.

Radio programs attempted to inform a Japanese captive Monday that his wife had given birth. "Your wife and daughter are very well," stated the announcement, in Japanese.

Expectations that Monday might be as eventful as the night before were raised by the arrival of two helicopters overhead, and rumors that

President Fujimori would arrive. He didn't.

Fujimori so far has refused to negotiate directly with the two dozen Tupac Amaru rebels holed up in the two-story suburban house surrounded by police and without water, electricity and phone service.

AFP adds: Japan's Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto ruled out Tuesday adopting a "get-tough approach" with Peruvian rebels to resolve a hostage crisis at the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima.

After speaking with Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori by phone, he told reporters it would take time to break the impasse.

The fact that it will take time means no get-tough approach will be taken," Hashimoto said after the 15-minute conversation.

It is an extremely difficult challenge to stand firm against terrorism and at the same time release all hostages as soon as possible. So we want to extend all possible support, the prime minister said.

UN negotiator Norbert Holl has been shuttling across the country trying to broker a peace pact between the militant religious Taliban militia and an alliance of former government forces in the north.

"Once, we tried to solve the problem through negotiations," said Muttaqi. Then, we took another way, and that is how we arrived in Kabul. That is how

Taliban minister says

Intl efforts of Afghan peace deal will fail

KABUL, Dec 24: International efforts to broker a peace pact between the warring parties in Afghanistan failed Monday, underscoring his regime's increasingly hard line, reports AP.

Information Minister Ahmed Shah Muttaqi said peace can come only through acceptance of the Taliban government and recognition of its leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, as absolute ruler.

"The United Nations-sponsored negotiations are doomed," he told The Associated Press in an interview Monday. "We don't explain why."

Asked on what terms the Taliban would make peace with the combined leadership of northern warlord Rashid Dostum, Massood and Rabbani, Muttaqi said "Islamic government."

He said the Islamic government of Rabbani and Massood was not acceptable.

The Taliban has introduced a strict version of Islam, including banning women from the workplace as well as imposing public beatings, floggings and executions.

China blasts US media for sabotaging improving ties

BEIJING, Dec 24: China attacked the US media Tuesday for sabotaging improving relations with Washington with biased and arrogant news reports, reports AFP.

An editorial that ran in the English-language China Daily, the People's Daily and the Xinhua news agency slammed "some members of the US mass media, who, with their intrinsic arrogance and prejudice, have time and again lodged groundless charges against China."

"Some people's prejudice is more baneful than their ignorance" it added.

The article focused on the New York Times, which piqued Beijing last month with an opinion piece comparing improved Sino-US ties with the 1938 appeasement policies in Europe which led to the rise of Hitler and World War II.

They not only attack China but they also irrationally criticize Americans who insist on

the brunt of further anger for a series of opinion pieces discussing rising nationalism in China.

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Relations between China and the United States have improved in recent weeks, after more than a year in the doldrums, with presidents agreeing to an exchange of visits next year.

Uganda troops kill 500 rebels

KAMPALA, Dec 24: Ugandan government troops have killed some 500 rebels and captured 80 others in heavy fighting in the mountainous western Kasese district near the Zairean border, military sources said, reports AFP.

Lieutenant-colonel Geoffrey Muheisi told Monday's new vision newspaper that the army had also encircled remaining rebel forces, whom he put at more than 700 men. He said he believed the war would soon be over.

About 5,000 troops, supported by heavy artillery, have been shelling rebel hideouts in the Ruwenzori mountains straddling Uganda-Zaire border since December 16, according to the state-owned new

Tutu rebels.

The Kinshasa government accuses Uganda of supporting the Zairean rebels, known as the Banyamulenge.

They are fighting to oust president Mobutu Sese Seko, who returned to the country last week after a four-month stay in Europe for cancer surgery and convalescence.

Off the Record

An apology to gays, lesbians

JERUSALEM: Israeli President Ezer Weizman apologized Monday to gays and lesbians for his statements about homosexuality that prompted calls for his resignation, his chief aide said, reports AP.

Last week, the outspoken president told high school students that homosexuality "disgusted" him and was "completely deviant." He added that "like alcoholism, I don't think we need to encourage it or say it is something wonderful."

The remarks drew harsh criticism. Liberal parliament members called for Weizman's resignation, and several hundred people held a candlelight demonstration outside the president's home Saturday night in protest.

On Monday, Weizman met with about 10 representatives from gay and lesbian groups.

"He asked to apologize for any public statement that might have offended anyone," said Arieh Shumer, Weizman's spokesman.

Liberal Meretz Party leader Yossi Sarid, who mediated the 90-minute meeting, told Israel TV that Weizman's comments amounted to "incitement" against homosexuals. "He has caused a call for discrimination," he said.

Tal Yaros Hakak, a gay rights activist, said while Weizman's retraction was a good sign, "his biased comments were representative of a homophobic society."

In Israel, consenting adults have the right to engage in homosexual relations and, under a landmark Supreme Court ruling in 1994, to get married. But many gays complain society still lags behind the West in accepting them.

The 73-year-old Weizman, who plays a largely ceremonial but high-profile role, frequently courts controversy with his off-the-cuff pronouncements.

Only for refusing to wear veils

ALGIERS: A bomb exploded at a high school where many girls have refused to wear the traditional Muslim head scarf, reports AP.

No one claimed responsibility for Saturday's bombing in front of the school in Douaouda, about 30 kilometres (18 miles) west of the capital. It exploded at midday, just as classes were letting out.

After an absence of nearly a year, religious tracts reminding women of their "permanent obligation" to wear a veil — and advising men not to smoke cigarettes — were being handed out in the suburbs ringing Algiers.

At many Algerian high schools, girls have been refusing to wear the veil as Islamic militants insist.

The tracts were attributed to the Armed Islamic Group, the most violent of various factions trying to overthrow the North African nation's government and install strict Islamic rule. They are signed by a new emir, or spiritual leader, known as "Abou Djamil" Slimane Maherz.

Militants also are angry at the fancy holiday dinner parties being thrown by wealthy Algerians at this time of year. The parties, at 20,000 dinars per couple (about 380 dirhams), cost about three times the minimum monthly salary.

Despite the violence, well-heeled Algerians have refused to bend to the militants and cancel the balls, taking out ads in Algerian newspapers to invite those who can afford them to attend.

Top 3 parties sit to map out consensus on Taiwan's future

TAIPEI, Dec 24: Taiwan's three main parties sat down Monday to map out the island's future course through a minefield of constitutional snags and a cold war with China that shows no sign of abating, reports AP.

The week-long National Development Conference is the first multi-party meeting in six years, a period in which democracy has transformed the island and relations with China have warmed, then chilled.

The 1990 confab made history by leading Taiwan to end the state of war with China and reform its constitution to permit free elections. This National Development

Conference, in a Taipei convention center decorated for Christmas, is likely to be less tumultuous, focusing on the constitutional anomalies that often explode into brawling in Taiwan's parliament.

The 199 participants seemed deeply divided Monday on proposals for further change, especially a bid by president Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan's first directly elected president, to expand his powers at the expense of the legislature.

Every article we've considered has expanded the powers of the president, and not a single one has limited it," said Chen.

The main opposition, the Democratic Progressive Party, was split. While party whip Shen Hsi-hsien rejected the idea, Chairman Hsu Hsin-Liang said he might support it in return for greater powers of oversight and censure for the legislature.

Under the proposal Lee would have the power to dismiss the legislature, while removing its right to veto his choice of premier. That would help solve his problems with having appointed Vice

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