

BRIEFLY



With just over 30 hours to Christmas Day, commuters and tourists get a festive view of the capital's famous landmark Big Ben surrounded by decorative lights in Parliament Square Monday.

— AFP/UNB photo

70,000 Iraqi Kurdish refugees return: Iran announced Monday that 70,000 Iraqi Kurdish refugees have returned home from refugee camps in Iran, Xinhua reports from Tehran.

Interior Minister Ali Mohammad Besharati said that about 5,000 Iraqi Kurdish refugees remain in refugee camps in Iran's border region with Iraq. Shortly after escalation of fighting between rival Kurdish groups in northern Iraq, Besharati said, some 300,000 Iraqi Kurds amassed behind Iran-Iraq border to seek refuge.

Landslide claims 43 in Papua New Guinea: Officials in the south Pacific nation of Papua New Guinea said yesterday that 43 people had died in a landslide overnight, Reuters reports from Port Moresby.

The nation's director of disaster and emergency services Leith Anderson said a whole village near Menyanya was buried and 43 people, including a numbers of children, had been trapped.

Blast claims 8 workers in US: Eight workers were killed and two others injured in a massive explosion at a Houston factory, officials said Monday, AFP reports from Cyprus.

The blast ripped through the Wyman Gordon Forging Co. factory roof late Sunday, shredding and bending corrugated steel and scattering body parts as far as 30 metres (100 feet) from the building, Diana Petterson, spokeswoman for the occupational safety and health administration in Dallas, said an investigation was under way.

Azerbaijan, Russia fail to sign deal: Azerbaijan's President Geydar Aliev met visiting Russian Defence Minister Igor Rodionov Monday but the two failed to sign an expected military cooperation agreement, a Russian official said, AP reports from Baku.

Aliev proposed that the signing of the accord be postponed, saying the document on cooperation in the military and defence industry spheres was not sufficiently detailed, said Leonid Ivashov, the head of the Russian Defence Ministry's foreign relations department. Rodionov, who initially planned to stay for two days, then cut his visit short, explaining that he had to be in Moscow because of Russian President Boris Yeltsin's return to active work in the Kremlin.

Japanese FM postpones trip to ROK: Foreign Minister Yukihiko Ikeda will put off a two-day trip to South Korea scheduled to begin Thursday in order to monitor the ongoing hostage crisis in Peru, a ministry official said Tuesday, AP reports from Tokyo.

Ikeda had planned to hold talks with his South Korean counterpart, Yoo Chong-ha, to lay the groundwork for a meeting between Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto and South Korean President Kim Young Sam in western Japan in late January. It was not clear when Ikeda's trip would be rescheduled, said the ministry official, who by custom asked not to be identified.

10 Muslim rebels held in France: 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, Reuters 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.

The commercial bus was traveling between the cities of Sandona 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: Six Korean-Chinese seamen were sentenced to death yesterday for killing 11 colleagues in a bloody mutiny prompted by beatings and maltreatment while fishing in the south Pacific in August, AFP reports from Seoul.

The six, all from an ethnic Korean community in northeastern China, were found guilty of killing seven South Koreans, three Indonesians and one Korean-Chinese on August 2, court authorities said.

7 missing as boat sinks in China: A fishing boat collided with a freighter and sank at the mouth of the Yangtze River in Shanghai, and seven fishermen are missing, a Shanghai newspaper reported Tuesday, AP reports from Beijing.

All 18 people aboard the fishing boat went into the water two minutes after the collision on Sunday, the Wen Hui Bao reported. Eleven were rescued by crews of other vessels in the area. It said.

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.

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

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 slogans 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 (United Marxist Leninist, CPN-UM).

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 Nepali 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, reports AP.

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 Paolo 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 AP.

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.

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 Fu-hsiung rejected the idea, Chairman Hsu Hsin-Liang said he might support it in return for greater powers of oversight and censure for the legislature.

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 captors, reports AP.

In reducing the number of hostages with a mass release of 225 people Sunday night, the rebels seemingly strengthened their position.

"The fact that they've released two-thirds of the hostages means in effect that they've pared it down to a number they can control," Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto told reporters Monday in Tokyo. "To that extent, the tension has increased."

Newly freed hostages expressed relief, but also worried about those left behind.

"We shared a very intense, very hard experience... of fear, of anguish, of hope," said Spanish diplomat Estanislao de Grandes.

They also recounted an odd

ending to their captivity, saying some rebels had given quick hugs to some of the departing hostages — a sense of shared experience felt by the captives, too.

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 Morihisa 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.

Radioprogramas 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 impasses.

"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.



Souha Arafat, wife of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, and her daughter Zahwa visit the Nativity Cave in Bethlehem Monday, where according to Christian tradition Jesus was born.

— AFP/UNB photo

Tensions rise in Belgrade ahead of rival rallies

BELGRADE, Yugoslavia, Dec 24: Fears of clashes grew Monday as Slobodan Milosevic called for a huge rally in his support on the same square where opposition groups have protested his autocratic rule for the past month, reports AP.

Foes of the Serbian president warned it could provoke a civil war.

Hundreds of riot police were bused to the capital a day before the planned pro-Milosevic rally, intended to counter a month-long pro-democracy protest against the annulment of opposition election victories.

About 80,000 pro-democracy supporters defied heavy rains to demonstrate in Belgrade for the 34th straight day in protests

that have marked the biggest challenge to Milosevic since he came to power nine years ago.

Their leaders vowed to continue the marches, but warned Milosevic might use his forces to instigate violence that could prompt a crackdown just when world attention was focused on the Christmas holidays.

Tomorrow, Milosevic will have a chance to show if he means well for his country and people, said Zoran Djindjic, a leader of the opposition coalition Zajedno, or together. To provoke clashes would be "sheer madness," he said.

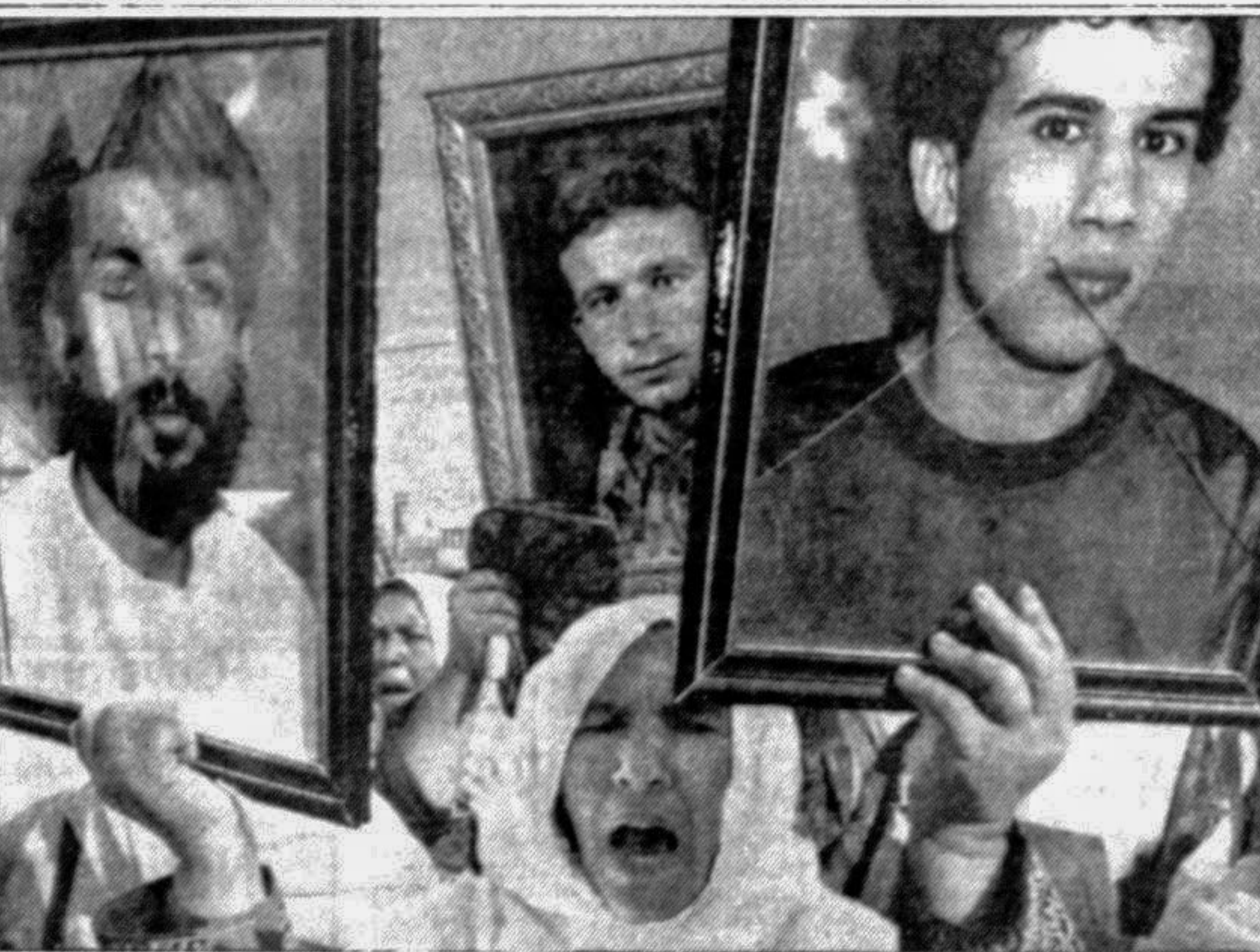
A conflict between pro-and anti-Milosevic protesters would give Serbia's president an excuse to ban all demonstrations

and use force against his opponents whose protests so far have been peaceful.

Zajedno charged in a statement that Milosevic would try to provoke clashes by disguising policemen as his civilian supporters, who would intervene against pro-democracy demonstrators.

The state-run Tanjug news agency, announcing the pro-Milosevic rally in Belgrade, said all those who are "for peace, freedom, independent Serbia and against terrorism and foreign rule" should come to a central square at 3 pm (1400 GMT) Tuesday.

Opposition protests take place at the same time and place.



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

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 are "doomed" to fail, a Taliban government minister said 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 hold any hope for peace here."

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

we will solve the problem throughout Afghanistan.

The Taliban took control of Kabul in September throwing out the government of Burhanuddin Rabbani and his military chief Ahmed Shah Massoud.

By "another way" Muttaqi said he meant war.

"Revolution by those who accept our thinking," he said.

But he added that, for the time being at least, it was in the Taliban's interest to maintain its front lines and not push further north. He did not explain why.

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

He said the Islamic government of Rabbani and Massoud 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 AP.

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

improving Sino-US relations," complained the article, signed off by Wen Ming, which translates as "civilised."

The New York Times bore the brunt of further anger for a series of opinion pieces discussing rising nationalism in China.

"Some New York Times articles have tried to create misconceptions that anti-foreign sentiment is ubiquitous in China," the editorial said.

However, foreigners who have visited China or met Chinese people do not have that feeling, and the attempt to depict the Chinese people's patriotism for xenophobic nationalism is only aimed at creating another obstacle in Sino-US relations," it added.

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 AP.

Lieutenant-colonel Geoffrey Muhesi 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 Ugandan-Zairean border since December 16, according to the state-owned new

vision. An army lieutenant was also killed and 11 other government soldiers were wounded, according to reports.

The paper said the rebels have set up camps in the mountains, about 600 kilometres (375 miles) west of the Ugandan capital, after withdrawing from rear bases in Zaire, which were overrun by Zairean mainly Tutsi 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 apologised 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 apologise 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 this weekend 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 Maher.

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 dirr), 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.