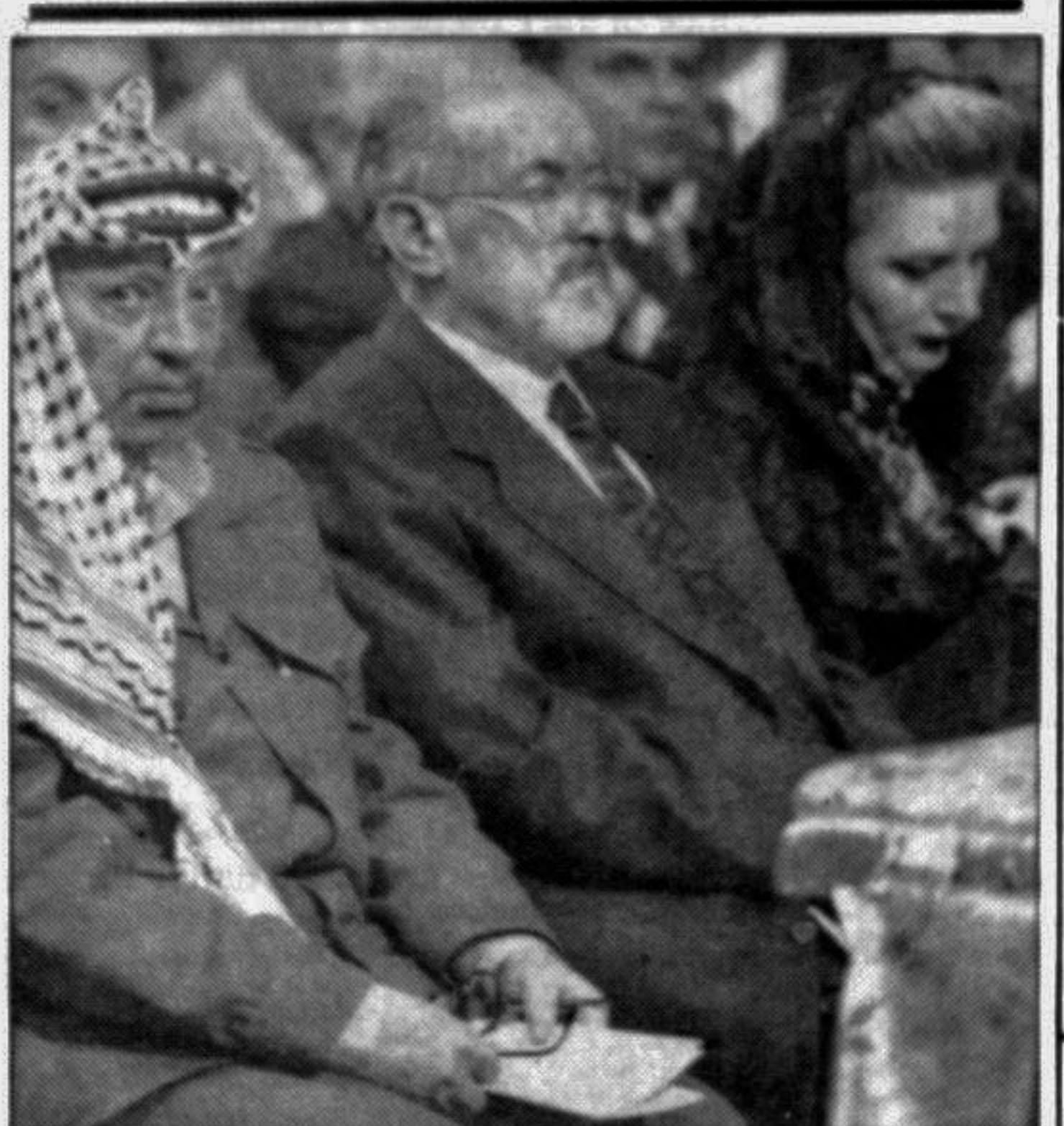


BRIEFLY



Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat (L) attends Christmas Mass with his wife, Suha (R) on Wednesday in the St Catherine's Church in Bethlehem, near the traditional birthplace of Jesus Christ as Bethlehem celebrated its second Christmas under Palestinian control.

— AFP/UNB photo

Quake shakes Kazakhstan: An earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of 5 shook southeastern Kazakhstan, including the capital, on Wednesday, but no serious damage was reported. AP reports from Almaty.

The quake was centered 113 kilometres (70 miles) southeast of the capital Almaty, near the border with Kyrgyzstan, the State Committee for Emergency Situations told the Interfax news agency.

No injuries were reported in the pre-dawn tremor. An earthquake with a magnitude of 5 is capable of causing considerable damage.

Blast kills 3 in Germany: An explosive device went off at a Christmas Eve service at a Protestant church in Frankfurt, killing three people and seriously injuring six, police said early Wednesday. AP reports from Frankfurt.

One child was among the injured, who were all taken to area hospitals. Two of the injured were in critical condition, police said. Witnesses told police that a masked woman burst into the church in the western Frankfurt suburb of Sindlingen.

2 British nurses held in KSA: The two British nurses charged with the murder of an Australian colleague in Saudi Arabia were arrested after they tried to use the dead nurse's credit card, a senior Saudi official told AFP.

"The two Britons were arrested after they tried last Wednesday to use a credit card belonging to the victim," said the official who asked to remain anonymous.

2 die in US plane collision: Two small planes collided while coming in for a landing Tuesday, killing two people in one of the aircraft. AP reports from San Diego.

One plane crash-landed at a construction site, and police said the two people aboard walked away with minor injuries. The second craft, with the two dead, ended up crumpled in the crook of a tree near a golf course. One plane apparently clipped the top of the other, said Frank Pelkey, an operations assistant at Montgomery Field, a municipal airfield.

Luther King Jr's assassin hospitalised: James Early Ray, the convicted killer of American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr, is in critical condition in a Tennessee hospital, prison authorities said Tuesday. AP reports from Washington.

Ray, 68, was transferred from the Riverbend Prison Hospital in Nashville to the city's Columbia Nashville Memorial Hospital where he is being treated for a liver disorder, said prison spokesman Howard Cook. Ray was jailed for 99 years following the 1968 assassination of King in Memphis, Tennessee. His 1994 request for conditional release was rejected.

US diver drowns in Philippines: A 36-year-old American drowned when his oxygen tank malfunctioned while he was diving with friends at a popular beach resort, police said Wednesday. AP reports from Manila.

Doug Anderson of Portland, Oregon, was with two other divers when he died Saturday in Mindoro Island's Puerto Galera town, 130 kilometers (81 miles) south of Manila, police chief superintendent Clyde Fernandez said.

Unicef warns

'Rwandan refugees will die if agencies fail to supply food

PARIS, Dec 25: Almost 150,000 Rwandan refugees stranded deep inside Zaire are in deplorable shape and will die if agencies are unable to get food and medicines to them rapidly, UNICEF warned on Tuesday.

The UN Children's Fund (Unicef) said the Hutu refugees who had arrived at Lubutu after a 300-kilometer (185-mile) trek westwards from the border with Rwanda desperately needed a largescale emergency operation.

The refugees are "suffering from Malaria, undernourishment, scabies, dysentery, dehydration and exhaustion. It is difficult to estimate how many people died during the walk, Unicef added in a statement issued in Paris.

While more than 900,000

KSA to withhold report on June 15 bombing

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates, Dec 25: Saudi Arabia will withhold the results of its probe into the bombing that killed 19 US servicemen until after the Muslim pilgrimage season for fear of unrest, sources close to the investigation said Tuesday.

The sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the investigation into the June 15 bombing was "almost complete" but the findings would probably only be made public after the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mekka, which begins in April.

Authorities are delaying the announcement to avoid retaliation that could threaten the 2 million Muslims expected to visit the desert kingdom that is home to Islam's two holiest shrines, at Mekka and Madina.

Student unrest disrupts tourist year in Myanmar

YANGON, Myanmar, Dec 25: Sightseers at one of Yangon's gilded temples during the December high tourism season are training their cameras on something else — tanks deployed to quell the biggest street unrest in years, reports AP.

Foreign visitors have become unwitting actors in Myanmar political conflicts. Pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi wants them to stay away and deny legitimacy to the military regime she says used forced labour to beautify tourists attractions.

The government, meanwhile, has launched a multi-million dollar campaign inviting foreigners to spend hard currency and see just how much Myanmar has changed since thousands were gunned down in pro-democracy street protests in 1988.

What they have seen, how-

Li's visit to bolster Sino-Russia ties

BEIJING, Dec 25: Chinese Premier Li Peng leaves for Moscow Thursday on an official three-day visit to bolster rapidly warming relations with Russia and push for greater arms sales in China, reports AFP.

In a sign of the growing importance of Sino-Russian ties, the premier is scheduled to be the first foreign leader to meet Russian President Boris Yeltsin since his return to work Monday after multiple bypass surgery.

Premier Li Peng's visit will play an important role in the development of cooperation between the two countries at all levels, said Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Shen Guofang.

He expressed satisfaction at the warming of ties between two former ideological enemies and said Li's visit marks the upgrading of a series of top-level Chinese visits to Russia.

But according to diplomatic sources in Beijing, military hardware and not politics figure at the top of Li's agenda for this trip, and Moscow looks willing to comply.

Russia has already emerged as China's biggest arms supplier since the two patched up a three-decade ideological rift in 1989 and is part-way through a delivery of 72 Sukhoi Su-27 fighter planes.

It has also agreed to Chinese production of the SU-27 under license and technical assistance.

Russia hosted the important visit of Chinese army chief of staff General Fu Quanyu when in May.

During the Beijing visit of first Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Boishakov in early December, the two sides signed a protocol on military cooperation and Boishakov said Russia was "determined to expand" military dealings.

US deploys Turkey-Iran trade accords

WASHINGTON, Dec 25: Ignored by Turkey's Islamic-led government, the United States Monday again registered distress that the Islamic-led government in Ankara had signed several trade agreements with Iran, moving closer to an embrace with Tehran, reports AP.

There was no indication that Washington could do anything about the actions of its longtime ally, Turkey, but complained.

And State Department spokesman Glyn Davies did that, saying the accords signed on Saturday were not in the interest of the United States.

The signing followed a series of public and private US admissions to Turkey and came in early December, after Secretary of State Warren Christopher had denounced Iran as a supporter of terrorism and a purchaser of weapons of mass destruction.

I regard them as a dangerous force in the world scene, one that the United States has to act to contain, he said at a year-end news conference last Thursday.

The agreements are designed to double trade volume between Turkey and Iran to \$12 billion. They bear out the warming of relations between Turkey and Iran under Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan.

Erbakan took office in June, and Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani reciprocated with a four-day visit to Ankara, capped by the signing.

Rafsanjani remarked Saturday that "there is a real return to Islam" in Turkey, a Muslim country that has observed secular government practices for most of the past century.

Blast kills 3 at X-mas eve service in Frankfurt

FRANKFURT, Germany, Dec 25: An explosion at a Christmas eve service at a Protestant church in Frankfurt killed three people and seriously injured six, police said early Wednesday, reports AP.

One child was among the injured, who were all taken to area hospitals.

The explosion occurred at about 11:15 PM Tuesday (22:15 GMT), and police were investigating the cause. Police said initially it was unlikely that gas lines were to blame for the explosion.

Pieces of bodies were strewn about the church.

Fire officials also were at the scene.

ever, isn't the kind of publicity officials had in mind November 18 when the official Visit Myanmar Year opened to 300,000 dollars of fanfare and ceremonies.

Just two weeks later, hundreds of university students staged a series of protests demanding an independent student union and more civil liberties.

Holiday-makers bound for Burma stared at airport screens and fretted over news of sit-ins and marches being broken up with water canons and charging riot police.

Hotels reported cancellations and embassies fielded phone calls from worried travellers.

In the end, however, few visitors said they had much reason to write home worried postcards.

"We saw the tanks, and that

International

Milosevic speaks to pro-govt demonstrators

58 hurt in clashes on Belgrade streets

BELGRADE, Dec 25: Some 58 people were injured in the clashes which broke out on the streets of Belgrade between supporters and opponents of Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, a medical source said today, reports AFP.

Hundreds of thousands attended the rival rallies in the centre of the city on Tuesday. The medical source said five of those injured were in a serious condition in hospital.

Independent observers said some 200,000 people turned out in support of the opposition in Belgrade Tuesday to protest the cancellation of November 17 municipal polls, while less than 100,000 turned out to a nearby rally organised by the authorities in support of the government.

The United States said late Tuesday that it held the author-

ities responsible for the clashes at which riot police were deployed in a bid to keep the two sides apart.

"Rather than making a goodwill effort to resolve the political crisis caused by the annulment of opposition victories in the November 17 elections, the Serbian authorities have flagrantly and provocatively chosen to heighten tensions by bringing thousands of people into Belgrade to confront the peaceful demonstrations by the opposition," Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott said in a statement.

The United States "holds the Serbian government and its president, Slobodan Milosevic, responsible for the violent actions of the demonstrators," Talbott said.

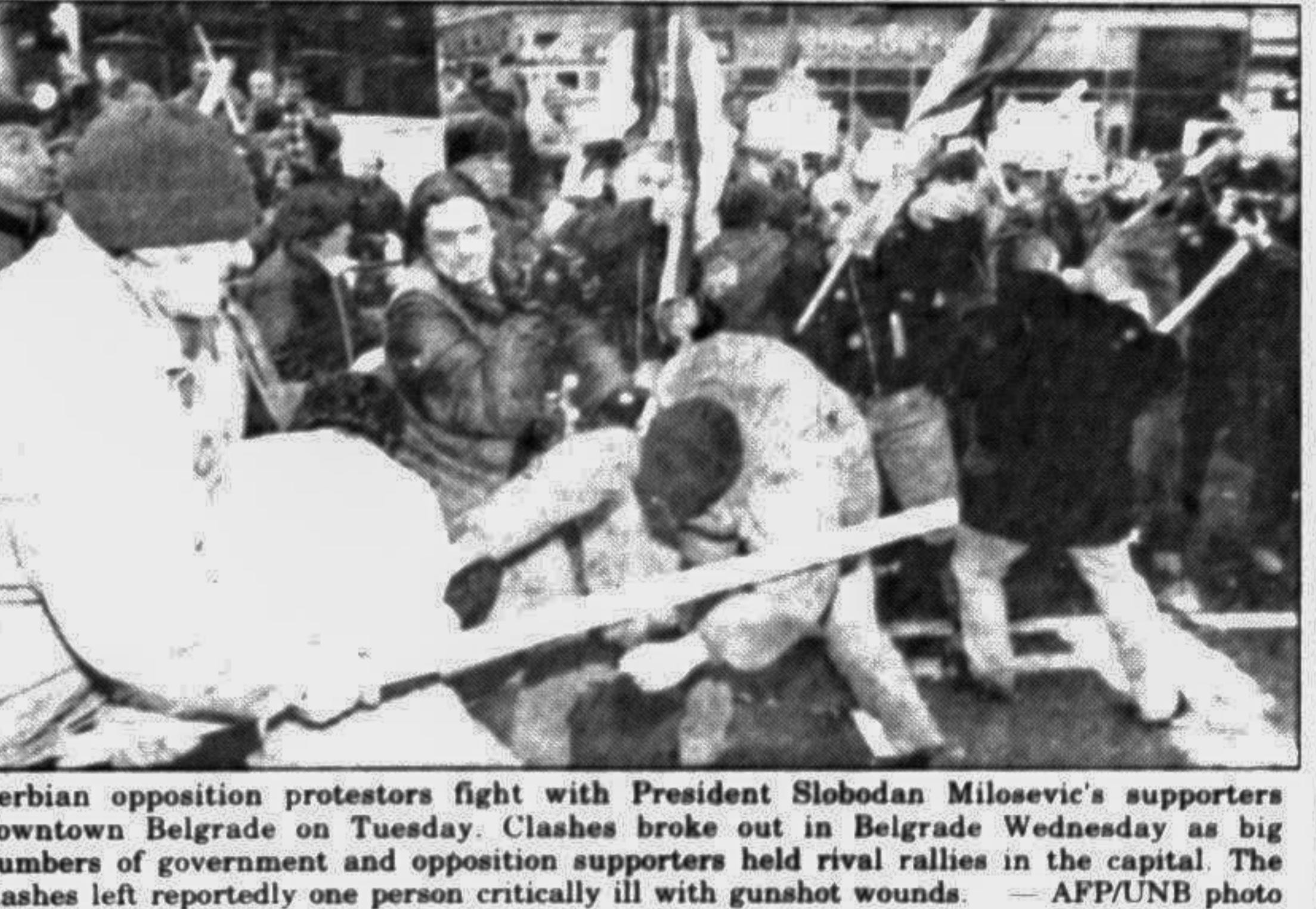
Another report says: "Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic spoke to pro-gov-

ernment demonstrators at a rally here Tuesday, the first time in four years that he has addressed a public gathering.

The embattled president's address came after one person reportedly suffered gunshot wounds when rival demonstrators clashed in central Belgrade Tuesday.

He was warmly greeted by the crowd, which chanted "sloba, sloba" and shouted "kick the traitors out" — a reference to the opposition which was led five weeks of daily street protests against the cancellation of municipal election results.

Just less than 100,000 Milosevic supporters, many of them from the provinces, had gathered in the centre of Belgrade for the rally, which took place not far from a march attended by about 100,000 opposition protesters.



Serbian opposition protesters fight with President Slobodan Milosevic's supporters downtown Belgrade on Tuesday. Clashes broke out in Belgrade Wednesday as big numbers of government and opposition supporters held rival rallies in the capital. The clashes left reportedly one person critically ill with gunshot wounds.

— AFP/UNB photo

Defence minister says

Israel ready for talks with Syria

HURGHADA, Egypt, Dec 25: Yitzhak Mordechai, the first Israeli defence minister to visit Egypt in seven years, on Tuesday urged Syrian President Hafez Assad to reopen peace negotiations with the Jewish state, reports AP.

"We are asking every day that Mr. Assad come forward and continue negotiations," he told reporters in this Red Sea resort town. "We are not thinking how to encourage peace in the area." Mordechai spoke with reporters after a three-hour meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on the Middle East peace process. Mubarak warned that Arab relations with Israel will remain cool until there is a comprehensive peace in the region.

Israel broke off peace negotiations with Syria, its most implacable foe, in February amid a series of suicide bomb attacks by Palestinian extremists in Israel.

As a condition for peace, Syria has demanded a return of the Golan Heights, captured by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war and later annexed by the Jewish state. The hard-line government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said the Heights are crucial to security.

Mordechai has been a harsh critic of Syria's military program. Last month, he accused Syria of developing chemical weapons with Russian assistance and noted that the Arab state has tested missiles that could reach Israel.

He said at the time Israel would not hesitate to respond, but made no mention of the nuclear arsenal the Jewish state possesses.

Pope offers Christmas blessings to all

VATICAN CITY, Dec 25: Stressing the universal joy of Christmas, Pope John Paul II reached out to non-believers during a midnight Mass that began a scaled-down holiday schedule for the pontiff, reports AP.

The 76-year-old Pope, under doctors' orders to slow down, canceled plans to celebrate Christmas Day Mass in St Peter's Basilica so he could get more rest before his annual message to the world.

In his homily at the midnight service from the flowered altar in the Basilica, the Pope spoke of the "profound source of Christmas joy."

"We pray today for everyone, Christians and non-Christians, believers and non-believers alike," the Pope said.

"I send everyone a cordial greeting and I pray that this

source of joy issuing forth in human history with the birth of the son of God will be plentiful for all, so that each person may draw from it and quench his thirst," he added.

The pontiff also mentioned the humble surroundings depicted in the Biblical story of Jesus' birth in a manger and how word of the event was spread by an angel.

The angel says: "Be not afraid, rejoice!" the Pope told

more than 10,000 people, including diplomats and top clergymen, filling the basilica for the two-hour Mass on a rainy night.

"The birth of a human being is always a source of great rejoicing."

Wearing yellow vestments over white robes, the Pope walked through the basilica, stopping to touch hands with some of the worshippers.

Off the Record

Di, Fergie won't join with former in-laws

LONDON: Members of the royal family were congregating Tuesday at Queen Elizabeth II's Sandringham estate for their traditional Christmas celebrations, reports AP.

The Queen and her husband, Prince Philip, were joined by the Queen Mother, 96, the Queen's sister Margaret, as well as heir to the throne Prince Charles and his two sons, William, 14, and Harry, 12. Other members of the royal family were also expected to attend.

But Princess Diana and Sarah, Duchess of York, will not be celebrating with their former in-laws.

Newspapers speculated Tuesday that Diana, who was divorced from Prince Charles in August, will fly abroad over the Christmas period.

The Duchess of York, 37, who divorced from the Queen's second son, Andrew, in April, will be staying at a farm house on the estate with her children, Beatrice and Eugenie, but will not be invited to Christmas lunch.

Self declared Moghul!

NEW DELHI: Police have arrested a New Delhi man on charges of selling real estate he did not own by claiming to be an heir of the Moghul dynasty which ruled India for nearly 300 years, the Hindustan Times said Wednesday, reports AP.

Police said they arrested 38-year-old K L Setri who are renowned the world over, including the white marbled Taj Mahal and New Delhi's Red Fort built out of sandstone.

Annan asks most top UN officials to quit

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 25: New UN chief Kofi Annan has asked for the resignation of most top UN officials, his acting spokesman said Tuesday.

The move was apparently prompted by the unusual extension of some officials' contracts by outgoing Secretary-General Bhutto Ghali.

UN officials who declined to be identified said Tuesday that Annan is expected to rehire many of the 23 officials whom he has asked to resign, while picking a few key aides for choice positions.

Requesting the resignations "puts everyone on an equal footing," said Fred Eckhard, acting spokesman for Annan until he takes office Jan. 1. "It's the fairest and cleanest way to deal