

International



Fireworkers arrive in front of a burning church during riots in Tasikmalaya, a western Javanese town, on Thursday. Thousands of people took to the streets burning shops, trucks and a church in a string of attacks sparked by mounting religious tensions in this mainly Muslim country. — AFP/UNB photo

Hebron accord likely by Jan 5

JERUSALEM, Dec 27: Israel and the Palestinians said Thursday they were closing in on an elusive agreement on Hebron, with a signing expected by New Year's and an Israeli troop pullout from the West Bank city by Jan 5, reports AP. Negotiators met Thursday to put the agreement in writing. Israeli officials said only technical issues remained unresolved, such as the number of checkpoints to be set up between areas controlled by Israel and the Palestinians after the pullout. An estimated 500 Jewish settlers live among 130,000 Palestinians in the tense city. "We had some good, substantive meetings," said Martin Indyk, the US ambassador to Israel, who attended Thursday's talks. Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said he hoped the two teams could resolve the remaining security-related issues by Friday. "We hope that we can conclude as soon as possible," he said. The two teams met for a second time Thursday evening in Tel Aviv at the office of Defense

BRIEFLY

Car bomb blast kills 10 in Algeria:

A car bomb exploded in a crowded suburb Thursday, killing at least 10 people and wounding 86 in the capital's second deadliest blast this week, authorities said. Hospital sources put the death toll at 20, AP reports from Algiers. The bombing was among the bloodiest in recent weeks as Muslim militants stepped up attacks aimed at derailing President Liamine Zeroual's efforts to consolidate power and crush a nearly 5-year-old insurgency. The bomb went off near a cultural centre and a police station at 1:45 PM (1245 GMT), destroying five cars and a bus. The blast damaged a 500 metre (yard) radius in Hussein-Day, one of the capital's busiest working-class neighbourhoods.

62 kg gold seized in India:

Indian police seized 62 kilograms of smuggled gold biscuits worth about 31.2 million rupees (about 890,000 US dollars) from two persons travelling in a car near the Indo-Nepal border on Wednesday, Press Trust of India said on Thursday. Xinhua reports from New Delhi. Acting on a tip-off, the Indian police planned out the trap and intercepted the car in Uttar Pradesh. After a thorough search, the police recovered as many as 531 foreign marked gold biscuits from an ingeniously made cavity on the floor of the vehicle.

6 Brotherhood men freed in Cairo:

Egyptian prosecutors Thursday released six of 40 members of the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood arrested recently in Cairo and brought before the authorities for inciting disturbances, judicial officials said, AFP reports from Cairo. The six were Cairo University students, the source said, adding, "the prosecutors took into consideration that they must pass their first term exams in a few days and let them out on bail," earlier in the day. Prosecutors decided to detain for two weeks the other 34 Muslim Brotherhood militants.

Bus mishap claims 14 in Guatemala:

Fourteen people died and 45 were injured Wednesday when their bus swerved off a bridge west of Guatemala City, firefighters said, AFP reports from Guatemala City. Abelardo Diaz, a rescue squad spokesman, said the bus plunged into a ravine nine metres (30 feet) deep after the vehicle's front tires burst and the driver lost control. Five people died at the scene. Nine others died at local hospitals.

8 killed in Mexican candy factory:

A fire engulfed a candy store after bottle rockets exploded inside, killing at least eight people and seriously injuring eight others, police said, AP reports from Reynosa, Mexico. Some of the injured had extremely serious burns and were sent to local hospitals after the blast Thursday night, public investigator Miguel Angel Alvarez said in this town across the Rio Grande from McAllen, Texas. "Most of the dead were minors and the number could increase," Alvarez said.

Fire claims 8 children in Armenia:

Eight children were killed in a fire sparked by an electric heater at a boarding house in the Armenian capital, officials said Thursday, AP reports from Yerevan. The fire broke out on the night of December 23 in a boarding house for children with disabilities. Six children died on the spot, and two more died later in a hospital, officials said. Four children and a nurse remained hospitalized Thursday.

Shining Path rebels kill 6 in Peru:

Leftist guerrillas killed six people, including a family of five, in a raid on a northern coastal village, authorities said Thursday, AP reports from Lima. About 40 rebels from the Maoist Shining Path rebel movement on Wednesday entered the village of Abra de Porcuna, 560 miles (900 kilometers) north of the capital, Lima. After searching homes, they selected a family and killed them with stones and knives, police said. As they left the village, the guerrillas stopped a van carrying a dozen people and killed the driver in front of his family. The insurgents then stole the van and fled.

Quake shakes Irian Jaya:

An earthquake estimated at 6.0 on the open-ended Richter scale rocked the eastern Indonesian province of Irian Jaya yesterday morning, the Royal Hong Kong Observatory said, Reuter reports from Hong Kong. The earthquake, recorded at 4:55 am Hong Kong time (2055 GMT Thursday), has its epicentre about 190 km (118 miles) west of Jayapura, the observatory said.

5 die as train hits van in India:

Five people died Thursday when an express train slammed into a van stuck on the tracks near a northern India town, the Press Trust of India said, AFP reports from New Delhi. The victims died instantly when the Shatabdi Express, travelling at 120 kilometres (72 miles) an hour, struck the vehicle near the town of Ghaziabad. There were no casualties aboard the express, the news agency said, adding rail traffic was disrupted for four hours after the collision.

First Secy of Japanese Embassy also released Peruvian rebels free Guatemalan envoy as talks seem at standstill

LIMA, Peru, Dec 27: Leftist rebels released Guatemala's ambassador Thursday from the diplomatic compound where 103 other dignitaries remained hostage, though talks between Peru and the guerrillas seemed at a standstill, reports AP. The release of Guatemala's Ambassador Jose Maria Argueta came without advance notice or explanation. But Argueta said he was freed by leftist rebels Thursday because of his country's pending agreement with guerrillas that formally will end Guatemala's decades-long civil war. Tupac Amaru rebels holding the hostages for a ninth day have said they want comrades released from Peruvian prisons, but also a national reconciliation which some observers say is a request for amnesty. "My liberation is an acknowledgment of the process taking place in Guatemala, where on December 29 a peace will be signed" ending the bloodshed, Argueta said in brief comments to reporters after his unexpected mid-afternoon release. After negotiations that lasted five years, Guatemala's legislature last week approved an amnesty for rebels and soldiers accused of atrocities during the 36-year conflict in which at least 140,000 people were killed. Signing is set for next Sunday. Argueta was accompanied by Red Cross director Michel Minnig, who moments later walked with the Rev. Juan Luis Cipriani, archbishop of Ayacucho, from the two-story Japanese ambassador's residence to the line of reporters who have camped out a half-block from building since the startling December 17 rebel act. The archbishop said he heard confessions and celebrated Mass for the hostages and rebels on Christmas day, and returned Thursday to continue his pastoral work. He said rebels were wrong to seize hostages to compel compliance with their demands. Nevertheless, he stressed that they, too, want a peaceful end to the drama they provoked, and their views should be considered. Reuter says, Malaysian Foreign Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi met on Thursday with Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori to discuss the 9-day-old hostage crisis in Lima. Malaysia's ambassador to Peru, Ahmad Mokhtar, was one of 103 VIP hostages still being held at the Japanese ambassador's residence by rebels belonging to the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA). Earlier AFP report says: Leftist rebels released the First Secretary of the Japanese Embassy Kenji Hirata, from the home of the Japanese ambassador here, where they were now holding 104 people captive. Visibly weak, Hirata, identified by a Japanese Embassy spokeswoman, was wheeled out.

where 78 bodies were recovered. Majid said the storm had abated, but weather remained bad. Chief Minister Yong Teck Lee has declared a state of alert as well as district-level national disaster committees to be activated to provide emergency relief. Tropical storm 'greg' moved in late Wednesday from the South China Sea, producing strong winds and torrential rain and resulting in widespread floods, damaged buildings and sunk boats. Majid said 500 houses were swept away in the Keningau district, 14 in another rural district of Tuaran and 10 in the Kota Kinabalu district. Roads linking Sabah's state capital of Kota Kinabalu to Keningau have been severed after two bridges were washed away.

Tropical storm lashes Malaysia: 106 dead

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 27: Police listed 106 people as dead in a killer tropical storm which hit Malaysia's eastern Sabah state, with 98 bodies recovered and more than 100 people listed as missing as of this morning, reports AFP. "A rescue team of 230 civilians and police has resumed operations early Friday to scour for possible survivors," a spokesman at the Sabah state police operations room, Majid Mahmud, told AFP by telephone. Police had late Thursday listed a total of 110 people missing in the six-hour rainstorm which swept away 524 houses in three districts in the rural interior of the state, on the island of Borneo. Helicopters are being used to rescue those trapped in the floods, police said. The worst battered area was the interior town of Keningau.

Li arrives in Moscow

MOSCOW, Dec 27: Chinese Premier Li Peng arrived here today on a three-day visit aimed at bolstering economic ties, Russian news agencies reported, says AFP. Interfax News Agency said Li Peng would meet President Boris Yeltsin at around 11:00 am (0800 GMT) Friday, and later hold talks with his Russian counterpart Viktor Chernomyrdin. Li was accompanied by Vice Premier Li Lanqing, Minister of the State Planning Commission Chen Jinhua and officials from the nuclear and aviation industries. The Russian-Chinese talks are expected to cover Russian participation in China's huge three gorges hydroelectric project on the Yangtze River, and in the construction of a nuclear power plant in Jiangsu province. Li and Chernomyrdin are expected to agree on regular meetings and discuss plans for a summit meeting.



Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng waves as he is cheered by well-wishers upon his arrival at the Vnukovo-II Airport in Moscow on Thursday. Li Peng is in Moscow for a three-day working visit aimed at bolstering economic ties. He is to meet with Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin on Friday. — AFP/UNB photo

France urged to change its policy on Zaire

GOMA, Zaire, Dec 27: The leader of Zairean rebels fighting to overthrow the regime of President Mobutu Sese Seko called on France Wednesday to "change its policy" on Zaire, reports AFP. "If France gave up on these murderers," Laurent Kabila told AFP, referring to the authorities in Kinshasa, "that would help us. France must assist the rebel alliance to promote democracy, to put an end to poverty and dictatorship." Kabila stressed that the Tutsi-led rebels of the Democratic Alliance for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire, who have seized control of a large swathe of eastern Zaire, were "absolutely not" anti-French. "France's interests are not threatened, but they (French officials) are refusing to talk to us. Why will they not come and talk to us?" he said.

Deployment of Indian Prithvi missile Pakistan reserves right to retaliation: Spokesman

ISLAMABAD, Dec 27: Pakistan on Thursday said it reserves the right to respond to India's deployment of missiles, reports AFP. A foreign office spokesman said "over the years Pakistan has repeatedly warned that India would deploy the Pakistan-specific Prithvi missile which was capable of carrying the weapons of mass destruction." Reiterating Pakistan's concern over the deployment of the guided missile, which has a range of 250 kilometers (156 miles), the spokesman said it threatened to spark a ballistic missile arms race in South Asia and "posed a threat to peace and security in the region." The missile was made available to the Indian Army earlier this month. The spokesman said: "Pakistan reserves the right to take necessary measures to safeguard its security." He did not elaborate. India and Pakistan are considered threshold nuclear states. The spokesman ruled out possibility of resumption of stalled dialogue between the two countries during the current interim government in Pakistan, which is to go to the polls on February 3. He said Foreign Minister Yaqub Khan last week met with his Indian counterpart during the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) conference in New Delhi. It was "basically a courtesy call" which should not be seen as a formal bilateral meeting. Dialogue was suspended after the last round of talks between foreign secretaries of the two countries here in January 1994 as Pakistan linked further meetings to India agreeing to substantive discussions on the disputed Kashmir region, over which the rival neighbours have fought two wars. However, on "humanitarian grounds" the two sides have agreed to release fishermen arrested on charges of illegal fishing in their territorial waters and recognised the need to free civilians held by both, he said. He said their exact number was not yet known and each side had indicated willingness to investigate and prepare a list of the detained people.

Attempt on Uday 600 arrested in Iraq

DAMASCUS, Dec 27: The Iraqi regime arrested about 600 people after the assassination attempt on President Saddam Hussein's eldest son, the former chief of Iraqi Military Intelligence said Thursday, reports AFP. General Wafiq Samarra, who had been living in exile in Damascus since 1994, faxed a statement to AFP saying that "The Olympic committee official who were members of the ruling Iraqi Baath Party and some religious figures were arrested in the centre" of Iraq. They were among 600 people arrested by the Iraqi regime since the December 12 assassination attempt on Uday Saddam Hussein while he was driving in Baghdad's Al-Mansur neighbourhood. The head of Uday's office, Colonel Hussam Eddin, was dismissed, and a former officer of the special guard, Hussein Abdullah, was arrested and special guard officer Abdullah Al-Duri was found dead, Samarra said.



South Korean opposition MPs protest after the ruling party rammed laws through Parliament on labor rights and increased secret police power by staging a sleep-in at the National Assembly hall on Thursday. Government MPs crept into Parliament before dawn Friday without the opposition to vote on 15 bill in seven minutes. — AFP/UNB photo

Defying police ban, thousands demonstrate against Milosevic

BELGRADE, Dec 27: Defying thousands of heavily armed riot police Thursday, tens of thousands of people ignored a ban on rallies to protest against Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, reports AP. The police were deployed in downtown Belgrade to enforce a newly pronounced ban on anti-Milosevic rallies that began 37 days ago. Protesters are opposed to the annulment of local elections in Belgrade and 18 other major cities and towns. Some of the police carried rifles and automatic weapons, preventing large numbers of people from joining the rally. But rally organizers said the fact that demonstrators turned out in force was a success. The protests have become the most serious challenge to Milosevic in nine years in power. Milosevic appears hesitant to use full force out of concern that even some of his most

die hard supporters could turn against him if major violence erupts. Earlier in the day, hundreds of heavily armed riot police sealed off the venue of the main opposition rally — a downtown square — trapping thousands of protesters within and preventing thousands more from gathering. The move was only partially successful, however. Some 60,000 people made their way to another square nearby. Although the police presence, the ban and the cold weather cut turnout from a regular 100,000, opposition leaders saw Thursday's rally as a victory. "Today we scored another triumph over Milosevic, showing we are not afraid of his police," said Vesna Pesic, a leader of the opposition coalition Zajedno (Together). "The police should think over who is leading them." Milosevic "is cornered, in panic," exulted another opposition leader, Zoran Djindjic. "We don't know how long he can survive, but we can endure at least one day longer than the last Communist dictator in Europe." Another opposition leader, Vuk Draskovic, told the crowd that at least one elite army unit — commandos based in Serbia's second-largest city, Nis — had come out in open support of the opposition. His claim could not be independently verified. If true, it would indicate that Milosevic is losing ground in one traditional bastion of support, the military. There were no major incidents during the rally. But later, police clashed with smaller groups of demonstrators who were passing by their cordons. Insults led to violence. Dozens

Blast kills 5 pilgrims Myanmar junta closes religious shrine

YANGON, Dec 27: Myanmar's military rulers have ordered a religious shrine where a timebomb explosion killed five people to close between 5.00 p.m. and 6.00 a.m. (0930 to 2230 GMT) for security reasons, reports AFP. The shrine had previously been open 24 hours a day to allow pilgrims to pay their respects to a tooth relic of the Buddha, on loan from China for a 90-day period. Elsewhere in Yangon, the situation appeared normal as of this morning. The relic, which arrived earlier this month, is kept at the Maha Pasana Cave where a bomb planted in a vase for flower offerings exploded Wednesday night, killing five people and injuring 17. The ruling junta blamed Burmese student exiles and Karen ethnic insurgents for the murderous incident, saying they wanted to destabilise the nation through terrorist activities and to trigger a diplomatic row with China. On Wednesday night, as the shrine was crowded with pilgrims, a first bomb exploded on an external staircase without causing any casualties. The second blast came inside the cave just over two hours later as security men checked the pagoda complex. Five pilgrims were among the injured. AP adds: The seventh annual Yangon marathon scheduled for December 30 was postponed again, this time indefinitely, following a bombing that killed five people at one of the city's pagodas, state-run newspapers reported Friday. Originally planned for December 12, the marathon was first postponed on December 6 after student protests erupted in Yangon and the military government barricaded several roads along the race route to prevent demonstrations and marches. No reason was given for the second postponement, but with soldiers standing guard at the Kaba Aye pagoda, where a bomb killed five people and injured

Hashimoto annoyed at Uruguayan court's order on terrorists

TOKYO, Dec 27: Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto said Thursday he was annoyed by Uruguay's apparent compromise with the terrorists holding 104 hostages in the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima, Peru, reports AP. On Wednesday, a Uruguayan court had ordered the release of two imprisoned members of the Tupac Amaru, the guerrilla group that has taken over the ambassador's residence. The terrorists responded by freeing the Uruguayan ambassador to Peru, who had been one of the hostages. Hashimoto told reporters that by acting unilaterally, Uruguay has endangered the remaining hostages, of eight nationalities. "The inevitable result is that negotiations will be even more difficult," he added. Foreign Minister Yukihiko Ikeda said the situation is now "very severe," and unilateral compromises could undercut attempts to have the hostages freed all at once. "In cooperation with the Peruvian government, we will do everything we can to have all the hostages released safely at an early date," Ikeda said at a session of the Budget Committee of Parliament's upper house.

Off the Record

Magic of music SUFFOLK, Virginia — For 12 days, 9-year-old Heather Harcum lay in a coma. Then her mother played Heather's favourite song, "Angels Among Us," by the country group Alabama. And Heather came out of it, reports AP. "When it came on, she started crying, which we always did when we heard that song," Penny Harcum, 30, said in an interview. "That clued me in that she knew what was going on." I crawled in bed with her, told her 'I love you', and asked her to tell me 'I love you' back. She did. I asked her to say it again because her voice was muffled, and she did." Mrs. Harcum was driving home from Christmas shopping November 30 when she got into an accident with two other cars. She and her 6-year-old daughter, Holly, were uninjured, while the crash caused some bruising or swelling and hemorrhaging on Heather's brain, leaving the girl in a coma. Because it's believed that people in a coma can hear things around them, doctors suggested the family read books to her and play music that she liked. Mrs. Harcum thought Heather would like to hear the song, which always made Heather, Holly and Mrs. Harcum cry because it reminded them of deceased relatives. She went home and fetched the tape, which had been tucked in Heather's Christmas stocking. "When Mommy played the song, I woke up and started crying," Heather said. "I think it's a pretty song." The song tells about angels coming down to Earth "in our darkest hours to teach us how to live." Heather's doctors said she had been making slow and steady gains, but a major step had been accomplished when Mrs. Harcum played the song.

said Thursday Gonzalez's report would not be binding. "What our institutions say is final," Nikola Sainovic, Milosevic's closest aide, told reporters when asked about the upcoming OSCE report. "Everything which is related to our country's internal issues will be resolved within the institutions of our country." Milosevic even appeared ready to risk more displeasures from the United States, which has turned from backing him because of his key role in bringing peace to Bosnia to criticising his autocratic rule. Independent B 92 radio station reported Milosevic on Thursday refused to meet with US charge d'affaires Richard Miles who wanted to warn him against using force against demonstrators. The report, broadcast after office hours, could not be confirmed.