

Kesri set to take total command of Cong (I)

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: Congress (I) Party President, Sitaram Kesri, is set to take total command of the party, replacing former Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao as parliamentary chief, a party spokesman said Friday, reports AFP.

Kesri, who forced Rao to resign as Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) leader had the backing of most Congress members for the January 3 CPP polls, Congress spokesman Vittal Gadgil said.

"Kesri is being favoured by a majority in the Congress Party to become the CPP chief," Gadgil said.

The post allows the incumbent to become prime minister if the Congress wins a straight

majority in general elections.

Rao, who faces corruption charges, was forced to quit as leader of the CPP on December 19 after being cornered into resigning as Congress president in September.

Kesri is not a member of the lower house of parliament but Gadgil said he could still be CPP leader.

"Former prime minister Indira Gandhi was not a member of the Lower House but she was chosen as the party's parliamentary chief," Gadgil said.

"Kesri is a member of the upper house. He can be the chief of the CPP," Gadgil rejected a demand by party dissidents to draw up an election schedule before the January 3 deadline.

"We have decided not to draw

any schedule for the January 3 election. Any member who decides to contest can file his nomination on the same day or withdraw on the same day," the spokesman said.

"Since the general body of the Congress is meeting on same day it has the powers to decide to choose the CPP leader either by a consensus or by ballot."

The general body is the supreme. It can decide anything it wants to Gadgil said.

Kesri earlier said a "unanimous candidate" would be declared CPP chief on January 3. "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, has rejected Kesri's demands for choosing a leader by consensus.

Besides Pawar, former Congress ministers Rajesh Pilot, Manmohan Singh and Jagannath Mishra are also seeking the coveted job.

Rao, 75, led the Congress to its worst electoral defeat in the April-May general elections ending his tenure as prime minister.

His Congress Party then decided to back the United Front, thereby unseating a short-lived Hindu nationalist government which failed to provide a majority in the hung parliament.

Immigration check for Indians to be abolished at its int'l airports

MUMBAI, Dec 28: Immigration check for Indian nationals arriving from abroad at the international airports in the country would be abolished soon, reports PTI.

This was agreed in principle at a meeting of the various agencies at the 42nd meeting of the standing facilitation committee at Mumbai Airport under the chairmanship of the Director General of Civil Aviation, HS Kola yesterday.

Details would be worked out and the scheme implemented as early as possible. Kola told PTI after the meeting.

If Indians coming from abroad do not need a visa then what is the need for immigration checks, he added.

The meeting also decided to abolish outbound customs check at the airports except in case of special checks.

Frequent travellers can carry a check list of valuables and articles they take with them frequently and accordingly get one year's exemption.

Kola said a mandatory screening of registered baggage would have to be undertaken, a practice which is being presently followed by only some major airlines.

State of emergency reimposed in Lima Peruvian rebels defy growing int'l pressure to end crisis

LIMA, Dec 28: Marxist guerrillas holding 103 VIP captives at the Japanese Embassy residence in Peru defied growing international pressure today as the hostage crisis moved into its 11th day, reports Reuter.

President Alberto Fujimori's refusal to bow to rebel demands received full backing from the world's leading nations who promised to help the Peruvian government with all the appropriate means that it could request.

In the strongest show yet of world condemnation of the hostage crisis, the Group of Seven (G-7) industrialised nations and Russia issued a communique in Paris on Friday labelling the rebels as "terrorists".

In Lima, a special session of Congress called by Fujimori voted overwhelmingly to give "full support to the government and (whatever) decisions it takes to solve this grave crisis."

The Peruvian leader called the session after extending special search and arrest powers for the army and police throughout the capital. Until Friday, the emergency powers — which allow police to make arrests without search warrants — had covered only the centre and industrial outskirts of Lima and part of Peru's mountain and jungle regions.

Despite growing pressure from outside, the roughly 20 Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) guerrillas holed up inside the Japanese ambassador's home showed no signs of crumbling.

For the first day since Monday the rebels released no hostages on Friday, in spite of reports that three hostages — including Supreme Court President Moises Pantoja — were seriously ill.

The roughly 20 heavily armed gunmen have body-trapped the residence against possible attack and said they

would not come out until the government pardoned about 400 jailed comrades. Armed rebels, including one woman guerrilla, appeared several times at windows on Friday.

Earlier AFP says, President Alberto Fujimori won the backing of the world's leading industrial powers Friday as officials revealed they had reimposed a state of emergency in the capital.

But talks to find a peaceful solution to the crisis remained deadlocked as Fujimori held Cabinet meeting of more than five hours to consider the government's options.

In a statement issued Lima and Paris, the Group of Seven and Russia ruled out any concessions to the Tupac Amaru rebels holding 103 hostages, backing Peru's rejection of the militants' demands.

The G-7 statement said member countries "demand the immediate release of all the hostages without exception and condemn in the firmest possible manner the action perpetrated by terrorists at the residence of the Japanese ambassador to Peru."

The document was drawn up at a meeting Thursday of ambassadors of Russia and the G-7 countries.

'India will be self-reliant in defence field in few years'

LUCKNOW, Dec 28: India would be full self-reliant in the defence field in the next few years, the Defence Minister, Murali Manohar Joshi, said yesterday, reports PTI.

Addressing the 32nd annual convention of the UP Cooperative Rural Development Bank, Joshi said that noted defence scientist, Dr Abdul Kalam, had assured him that adequate funding would help develop the country's defence programme to such a high level where it would face and counter threat of any kind to its borders.

Referring to recent attack on the Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister, Dr Farooq Abdullah, the Defence Minister said these kinds of threats would not be taken lightly.

On the functioning of his Ministry, Joshi said after his taking over, almost 80 per cent work was currently being done in the national language Hindi.



Local residents paste a sign on their storefront claiming there is a "mosque in the back" to discourage anyone from destroying the premises in downtown Tasikmalaya Friday, after angry Muslim rioters attacked churches, shops and cars causing at least one death and extensive damage, in the latest flare up of violence in this predominantly Muslim nation. Most residents pasted signs on their houses and cars making clear that they were Muslims. — AFP/UNB photo

2 gunmen kill ret'd justice in Lahore

ISLAMABAD, Dec 28: Two unidentified gunmen shot dead the ombudsman of Pakistan's Punjab province in the provincial capital Lahore today, the government-run Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) said, reports Reuter.

Retired Justice Munir Ahmad Khan was shot dead by two gunmen riding a motorcycle in defence area while he was going to his office, APP said.

The assailants blocked the road and opened fire, wounding the ombudsman and his driver.

Khan was shifted to a nearby hospital where he died of his wounds, APP said.

Arafat for completing Hebron accord by Dec

NABLUS, West Bank, Dec 28: Palestinian President Yasser Arafat has told his peace negotiators to press ahead to clinch a deal this year on a long-overdue Israeli troop pullback from the West Bank town of Hebron, reports Reuter.

The instructions of the president to us were to finish the agreement before the end of the year," chief negotiator Saeb Erekat told reporters after a Palestinian Cabinet meeting ended this morning.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met Palestinian security officials earlier to hammer out details of security arrangements for Hebron after 80 per cent of the town comes under Palestinian self-rule.

Jibril Rajoub, Palestinian preventive security chief for the West Bank, said the session paved the way for top-level meetings between Arafat, Netanyahu and Israeli Defence

Minister Yitzhak Mordechai. 'I believe we are very close to completing the agreement.'

"I believe we are very close to completing the agreement," Rajoub told reporters. "The subjects of contention are limited."

He said Arafat would meet Mordechai on Sunday and hold talks with Netanyahu later but he did not specify exactly when.

Netanyahu has sought to bolster safeguards for the 400 Jewish settlers who live and study in heavily-armed compounds in the heart of Hebron, a town of 100,000 Palestinians.

Netanyahu's office said he spoke to Arafat at the behest of the Palestinian negotiating team. The prime minister said... that he is standing firm concerning the security requirements of Israel in Hebron," it said in a statement.

The Hebron talks, which only recently appeared near collapse, were energised by a peace shuttle by US Middle East envoy Dennis Ross.

BRIEFLY

Blast claims 7 in Mexico: Relatives of a fireworks salesman lit an open fire behind the store to keep warm, inadvertently setting off an explosion that killed four nieces and nephews of the vendor and three customers, AP reports from Reynosa, Mexico.

Eight other people were injured in Thursday's explosion behind Surfistas La Imperial outside Reynosa, just across the Rio Grande from McAllen, Texas. Sparks from the fire ignited powder in the store, setting off boxes of bottle rockets that had been delivered for New Year's celebrations. The store, an adjacent building and three cars were destroyed.

Iraq slams Turkish decision: Iraq's oil minister attacked Turkey's decision to permit a US-led mission to continue protecting Kurds in northern Iraq, a news agency said Friday, AP reports from Ankara.

Amer Rasheed, who travelled to Ankara to bolster trade ties, criticised Wednesday's decision by the Turkish parliament to issue a new six-month mandate for a scaled-back air mission. "It was quite a surprise for us," Rasheed was quoted as saying by the Anatolia news agency quoted as saying.

Strikes cripple ROK industry: Strikes that have crippled much of South Korean industry will cost the country more than 1 billion US dollar in lost production by the end of the year, the Trade Ministry said yesterday, Reuter reports from Seoul.

The ministry put the figure in local currency at 911 billion won. Production loss through previous industrial action this year was estimated at 2.7 trillion won (3.2 billion dollar), ministry official Choi Tae-hwan said.

184 rioters held in Java: Indonesian troops and police arrested 184 people while quelling rioting in the west Javan town of Tasikmalaya in which at least one person died, reports said Saturday, AFP says from Jakarta.

Some 160 detainees, mostly youths caught looting, were detained by soldiers from west Java's Silivangi division, the Jakarta Post daily said. A further 24 were held by police, The Kompas Daily also cited the same figures of people detained said they were mostly youths and jobless men as well as several repeat-offenders.

Jet bombs Afghan capital: A jet bombed the Afghan capital Kabul early yesterday, apparently in retaliation for the loss of Qarabagh village, captured by the Taliban militia in an infantry attack on Friday, AFP reports from Kabul.

"The jet dropped three bombs at about 6:30 am. (0200 GMT), near the airport," a resident reported. Taliban authorities announced that on Friday they had captured the village and administrative centre of Qarabagh, some 45 kilometres (28 miles) north of Kabul.

4 Dutch men kidnapped in Yemen: Four Dutch tourists were taken hostage by armed tribesmen in northern Yemen and government troops have been deployed to force their release, police in Sanaa said on Friday, AFP reports from Sanaa.

Tribesmen in the Khawlan region stopped a car carrying the four tourists on Thursday about 60 kilometres (40 miles) east of Sanaa near Marib as they were on their way to visit archaeological sites, a Yemeni police spokesman said.

Li's Moscow visit successful: The working visit to Moscow by Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng was a "full success," Interfax news agency cited a joint communique, issued at the end of Li's stay in Moscow as saying Friday, AFP reports from Moscow.

The document said it had become clear after Li met with Russian President Boris Yeltsin that both sides "views coincide on a wide range of issues."

Clashes with Shi'ites Police lob tear gas at crowds outside mosque in Manama

MANAMA, Dec 28: Security forces fired tear gas at crowds of Shi'ite Muslims outside a mosque in the capital Friday, the latest clash in the ongoing conflict between the government and Bahrain's Shi'ite community, reports AP.

This was the first report of a clash in Ras Roman, a rundown neighbourhood in the capital. Most Shi'ite activism is based in villages outside the capital, part of a campaign for more rights and better social services launched by the community two years ago.

A government official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the protesters had gathered outside the mosque in the Ras Roman neighbourhood following the main Friday prayers. The crowd was dispersed because it was blocking traffic and creating a safety threat, the official said.

Several residents of the neighbourhood said police fired rubber bullets as well as tear gas at worshippers inside the mosque as they started prayers. The worshippers poured back into the streets and threw stones at the security forces. The witnesses also spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The government official denied that rubber bullets were used by security forces, and said police would not interrupt prayers or block people from entering mosques.

Intense pressure on Serbia to restore opposition victories

BELGRADE, Dec 28: International pressure piled up on Serbia's government to recognise opposition gains in local elections as opposition leaders called for a mass turnout at Saturday's funeral of a man killed during street protests, reports Reuter.

The United States, the European Union and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) issued separate appeals urging President Slobodan Milosevic to respect democracy and restore the opposition victories.

A leader of the opposition Zajedno (together) coalition, Vuk Draskovic, urged its supporters to attend the funeral of Predrag Starcevic, who was apparently trampled to death in a stampede when an opposition demonstration turned violent on Tuesday.

The call, effectively elevating Starcevic to martyrdom, raised the stakes in a crisis which has so far centred on the opposition's demand to be reinstated as winner of local elections in key towns and cities on November 17.

Yugoslav Foreign Minister Milan Milutinovic welcomed an OSCE report into alleged official electoral fraud as "considered and balanced," without mentioning any key recommendation that opposition victories should be restored.

Milosevic invited an OSCE mission to Belgrade last weekend to investigate the allegations, which sparked daily opposition street protests in the Serbian capital.

In Geneva, the head of the OSCE delegation, former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez, said Zajedno won the elections fairly in 13 key disputed provincial centres as well as in Belgrade's municipalities. Instead of acknowledging the recommendation, Milutinovic seized on that part of the OSCE report which said the polling had been well organised in other districts.

The report confirms that the elections were held in the most regular manner and that the majority of people were able to express their voice," he said, adding the document would be handed to electoral institutions for review.

The US State Department welcomed the OSCE's conclusions and said Serbia "must honour international commitments and move toward democracy before it can be accepted fully into the international community."

Irish Foreign Minister Dick Spring, in his role as President of the Council of EU foreign ministers, said he was increasingly concerned by developments in Serbia.

AP adds: Buoyed by international support, about 60,000 opposition supporters defied riot police and rallied in celebration of a report backing their electoral triumph over Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic.

Milosevic seemed far from accepting defeat on Friday. His police clubbed small groups of protesters after night fell and the rallies ended. Witnesses shouted "murderers," and "Fascists" at police, who threw at least two bleeding people to the ground.

Off the Record

Black tea can help prevent risk of skin cancer

MELBOURNE: A cup of tea could become the next weapon in Australia's high-profile fight against skin cancer, according to government scientists who said Saturday the humble "cuppa" halved rates of the disease in mice, reports Reuter.

In a study by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), laboratory mice fed black tea fared much better than mice fed water or even green tea when they were exposed to damaging ultraviolet rays, they said.

The mice drinking black tea had quite fewer cancers or skin lesions," CSIRO research scientist Ian Record told Reuters.

Mice made to sip black tea suffered 54 per cent fewer cancers than those that drank water and significantly fewer than mice that drank green tea, according to the research findings.

Palace unamused by fake photo of Di

LONDON: A faked advertising photograph of Princess Diana dressed in leather and carrying a whip has provoked the royal household into action against a magazine, reports AP.

The composite photo, used in a December 17 newspaper advertisement for the satirical magazine Insider, carried a message about "a spanking New Year."

Insider editor Tim Satchell said Friday he thought Diana looked stunning in the outfit and that she was "a beautiful, witty woman" who would appreciate a "beautiful, witty photograph."

But Buckingham Palace was not amused.

Taliban capture Bagram airbase

ISLAMABAD, Dec 28: Afghanistan's Islamic Taliban Movement today captured the main opposition airbase of Bagram, north of the capital Kabul, a Pakistan-based Afghan news service said, reports Reuter.

The Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) said the Taliban forces entered Bagram this evening after capturing the nearby opposition stronghold of Qarabagh.

There was no immediate independent confirmation of this report or of a major Taliban offensive after a lull of several weeks in fighting north of Kabul.



Three drag queens dance to a samba rhythm in the financial district of Rio de Janeiro Friday, on the last Friday of the year. Organised by the local government in Rio, the drag queens are the highlight of a samba parade at the end of the business day on the last Friday of each year. Various samba schools take turns singing and dancing their way into the new year. — Reuter/UNB photo

Free movement of Suu Kyi Junta shows no sign of easing restrictions

YANGON, Dec 28: Myanmar's military government today showed no sign of relaxing restrictions on the movements of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, reports Reuter.

The government said bombing incidents in Yangon this week required its vigilance on security.

A military spokesman said he could not say when the government would ease its requirement that the Nobel Peace laureate seek advance military permission to leave her lakeside residence in central Yangon.

Two bombs exploded at a Buddhist site in a northern Yangon suburb on Wednesday, killing five people and wounding 17.

Asked when the military would allow Suu Kyi's free movement, the spokesman said: "under the current situation, it is very hard to say... we still have to be extra careful."

The ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) on Friday allowed Suu Kyi to leave her house for the first time in three weeks.

The opposition leader visited the tomb of her mother Khin Kyi at a cemetery on the eighth anniversary of her death.

Tin Oo, deputy leader of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), said she and NLD members held a 15-minute Buddhist prayer service at the tomb.

The SLORC had since December 3 restricted Suu Kyi's movement after nearly 2,000 university students took to the streets at the start of a series of the biggest anti-government demonstrations seen in Yangon since 1988.

Tin Oo said Suu Kyi had no specific plans to leave her compound next week.

Taliban mark anniversary of Soviet invasion after 3 months in power

KABUL, Dec 28: Thousands of burly Taliban soldiers, rifles slung over their shoulders, wept as they listened to tales of Islamic martyrdom against the communists, reports AP.

On the sprawling grounds of the interior ministry, Taliban cabinet ministers — many barely out of their teens — fledged in their seats as they marked the December 27, 1979, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

When the Soviets marched in to prop up a regime they had installed earlier to fight Islamic insurgents, many of the Taliban were small children. Now they are the country's rulers.

"God is great," they shouted in unison during the ceremony this week. Their black beards —

required of all Muslim men in Kabul — quivered with emotion.

The Taliban took control of the capital just three months ago, throwing out warring Islamic factions whose members were once hailed as heroes for their part in the 1992 collapse of the communist regime.

The Taliban, led by former seminary students, emerged nearly three years ago as an alternative to the factions, whose relentless battles for power had virtually destroyed Kabul. About 35,000 people have died in the conflict in the last four years, and hundreds of thousands more have been wounded or left homeless.

The Taliban preach a strict and unifying form of Islam, and condemn former President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his military chief, Ahmed Shah Massoud, as enemies of Islam.

Within hours of taking over Kabul on September 27, Taliban troops meted out their form of Islamic justice to another man they considered an enemy of Islam — former communist president Najibullah.

They dragged him from the United Nations compound where he had lived since his ouster in April 1992. They tortured both him and his brother, shot them and hung their bloodied and bloated bodies in front of the presidential palace.

Now in control of nearly two-thirds of the country, the Taliban say their version of Islamic rule is the only way.

"Only the Taliban is capable of the holy war necessary to control the country," trumpeted

the official daily newspaper, Shariat, in banner headlines marking the 17th anniversary of the Soviet invasion.

The Taliban's enemies disagree.

Rabbani and Massoud have formed an alliance with a former communist, Rashid Dostum, a powerful ethnic Uzbek warlord. The alliance has a formidable army which controls the northern one-third of Afghanistan.

Taliban Information Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi recently said the only settlement possible is one that grants the Taliban's reclusive leader Mullah Mohammed Omar absolute power.

But the alliance wants a power-sharing arrangement that gives representation to the country's minorities. Alliance members all belong to the country's ethnic subgroups — Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras and Turkmens, as well as Shi'ite Muslims.

Most of the Taliban recruits, on the other hand, belong to Afghanistan's majority Pashtun ethnic group, which dominates the south. Many aid workers fear a hard-line approach to negotiations could lead to an ethnic war.

Meanwhile, ordinary Afghans are still adjusting to life under the Taliban.

Women have been banned from schools and most workplaces, and Taliban troops have beaten those appearing in public not covered from head to toe.

Men have been forced to wear beards and attend religious services. Music and games have been banned. The Taliban have paraded thieves, homosexuals and others through the streets in blackface.

Amnesty International says 1,000 people were arrested within a month of the takeover, and some have disappeared.

Government employees go unpaid, inflation rages and prices have risen 50 per cent in three months.

The Taliban cannot bring peace," said Ruhollah, an ethnic Tajik whose village north of Kabul was flattened by fighting.

He led four head of cattle along the dusty road to the capital straddled by badlands and framed by snowcapped mountain peaks.

"They are Pashtun," he explained.

200 feared still buried in debris Search on in storm-hit Malaysian state

KOTA KINABALU, Malaysia, Dec 28: Rescuers resumed their search today for up to 200 people believed still buried in the suddy debris left by a storm that ripped through Malaysia's Sabah State, killing at least 127 people, reports AFP.

Most of the relatives of the missing victims have given up hopes of finding their loved ones alive in Keningau, the remote interior district of Sabah which bore the brunt of the killer storm.

"They only want to recover the bodies and give them a decent burial," one of the rescuers said as he resumed the grim task of gingerly poking wooden poles into the debris, hoping for a miracle.

Sabah police said the victims were mostly Indonesian migrant workers, who either drowned, were struck by objects, crushed or buried alive in the torrent of mud and water when the storm unleashed its fury and struck 524 houses in the state's interior.

"We are still unclear how many are still missing, but according to the Indonesian consulate here, about 200 Indonesians are still unaccounted for," a police spokesman said.