

Myanmar junta blames NLD for students' unrest

BANGKOK, Dec 31: Myanmar's military junta today blamed the opposition led by Aung San Suu Kyi for recent student protests here and said 47 people were in custody for their involvement in the unrest, reports AFP.

Speaking at a press conference military intelligence chief Khin Nyunt said that 47 people, including 13 members of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) remained in detention following the student unrest.

"The NLD together with other underground elements are found to be the main instigators of recent student unrest," Khin Nyunt said in a two-hour speech, presenting his case with an array of photographs and documentary evidence.

NLD officials said on December 22 that 64 members of the main opposition party had been picked up after a spate of student protests on the streets of Yangon earlier this month.



Deng rushed to hospital as his health deteriorates

HONG KONG, Dec 31: China's patriarch Deng Xiaoping was rushed to hospital for emergency treatment last week as his health deteriorated, the Chinese-language Sing Tao Daily reported here today, reports AFP.

Deng, 92, was rushed to a military-run No. 301 hospital in the western suburb of Beijing as his health has "obviously deteriorated" in recent months, the Chinese-language paper quoted a source in Beijing as saying.

China's patriarch received emergency treatment, the report said, but the paper did not specify his subsequent condition or what kind of illness he was suffering from.

According to Sing Tao's source, Deng has regularly visited the 301 hospital, which is the head hospital of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

A file photo dated October 25 1987 shows China's political patriarch Deng Xiaoping as he applauds during a session of the National People's Congress at the Great Hall of the People. A Hong Kong newspaper reported on Tuesday that Deng, 92, had been rushed to the number 301 military hospital in Beijing last week following a deterioration in his health. — AFP/UNB photo

India, Israel negotiating military cooperation

JERUSALEM, Dec 31: Israel and India are negotiating at an advanced stage on arms deal today, a Jerusalem Post quoted an Israeli official source as saying, reports Xinhua.

The unnamed source, who is accompanying Israeli President Ezer Weizman on a visit to India, noted India is a relatively untapped market for Israel's defence industry.

As defence ties between the two countries grow closer, Israel is reportedly looking into the upgrading of India's Mig-21 fighters.

Israeli aircraft industries head Moshe Keret is due to fly to India today to hold discussions on the deal together with other Israeli defence representatives already there, the report said.

Meanwhile, reports from India said that the Indian Navy is considering buying advanced multi-mode maritime surveillance radar from Israel following the report of three P-3C Orion maritime surveillance aircraft from the United States.

Dalai Lama's office denies involvement in Lhasa blast

NEW DELHI, India, Dec 31: The Dalai Lama's office cautioned Tibetans on Monday about more "political repression" by the Chinese after a bomb blast in Tibet's capital, reports AP.

"We are concerned that the Chinese authorities might use the latest incident of a bomb blast in Lhasa as a pretext for increasing political repression in Tibet," said the office of the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader in a statement from Dharamsala, in northern India, where it is headquartered.

A bomb detonated by remote control exploded outside city offices in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa on Wednesday, injuring five people, state-run Radio Tibet said in a report Sunday. It blamed supporters of the exiled Dalai Lama.

The Dalai Lama's office denied any involvement.

Gujral to visit Colombo on Jan 19 Lankan troops mount fresh offensive against Tigers

COLOMBO, Dec 31: Hundreds of government soldiers mounted a new offensive against Tamil Tiger guerrillas in eastern Sri Lanka today, officials in the area said, reports AFP.

Troops were advancing towards jungle bases of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) in the district of Batticaloa, the officials said.

They said there were no immediate reports of casualties in the operation code named "Riot Jaya."

The offensive came amid stepped up guerrilla activity in the eastern region in recent weeks.

Nearly two weeks ago, the LTTE carried out a suicide attack and killed the top police commando chief in the region after overrunning a police base

there. Tiger guerrillas are leading a drawn out campaign for independence in the island's northern and eastern regions where the two million Tamil minority is concentrated.

More than 50,000 people have died in bitter fighting in the past 24 years.

FTI adds: A number of trade and investment issues, including removal of non-tariff barriers, are likely to be finalised during the three-day visit of Foreign Minister I.K. Gujral to Sri Lanka beginning from January 19.

Gujral would be visiting the island nation to co-chair the third meeting of the Indo-Lanka Joint Commission. Discussions took place during a meeting between the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister,

Lakshman Kadirgamar, who is currently in India and Gujral on the agenda of the joint commission's January 19 to 21 meet here.

The communique said in addition to routine matters, the agenda for the discussion during Gujral's visit included reduction of non-tariff barriers, SAPTA and increasing the frequencies of air travel between Colombo and Delhi.

The Sri Lankan exports to India at present stagnated around 21 million dollars while the Indian exports to Sri Lanka surpassed 600 million dollars.

Gujral was earlier scheduled to visit in mid-October but postponed it due to his indisposition. His agenda would now be heavier, and more formal.



A young woman takes advantage of a sunny day sitting Monday on a snow-covered Rimini beach Italy. Arctic weather kept Europe in deep freeze Monday as ice, snow and the lowest temperatures in decades raised the death toll to over 80 and caused chaos on road, train and air traffic across the continent. — AFP/UNB photo

Differences overcome: Drafting of agreement begins Signing of Hebron accord likely

JERUSALEM, Dec 31: Israelis and Palestinians have overcome their differences on handing over control of the West Bank town of Hebron and have started to draft an accord which could be signed today, Palestinian security chief General Abdel Razeq Yahya said, reports AFP.

"We are in the phase of drafting. There are no points of difference. There may be a signing today," he said.

Officials said earlier that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat could meet today to seal the long-awaited deal on Hebron.

Earlier AP says: Prodded by President Clinton's Mideast envoy, Israel and the Palestinians held a flurry of top-level meetings Monday to try and conclude a Hebron deal by New Year's Eve, reports AP.

"I expect it to be concluded and signed in a very short time," Israeli Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai said before joining the talks at a Jerusalem hotel.

Yasser Arafat's deputy Mahmoud Abbas said after the conclusion of negotiations Monday that "today we had some progress." Asked about the prospects for an agreement when talks resume Tuesday, he said: "Probably — if there are no bad surprises."

But Israeli sources speaking anonymously said the chances for completion of the talks by Tuesday seemed slim and they expected agreement later in the week — perhaps by Thursday.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, spung to reporters after meeting US envoy Dennis Ross, said that "we haven't reached any final agreement. When I am convinced that the security arrangements (in Hebron) ... are reached, there will be an agreement."

Earlier Monday, Netanyahu said he would

bring any agreement to the Knesset — Israel's parliament — for approval, which could delay the actual troop redeployment for several days after a signing.

The agreement is expected to pass a Knesset vote easily.

Ross arrived in the region Monday evening for separate meetings with Netanyahu and Arafat before joining the talks.

Israeli officials complained that the Palestinians were trying to win last-minute concessions before the self-imposed New Year's Eve deadline, including Israel's consent to a Palestinian police presence at the Tomb of the Patriarchs, a Hebron shrine holy to both Jews and Muslims.

The Tomb is located in downtown Hebron, an area that will remain under Israeli rule after Israeli troops pull out of four-fifths of the city of 130,000 Palestinians and 500 Jews.

settler shot and killed 29 Muslim worshippers in 1994. Arafat has also insisted on getting a timetable from Netanyahu for Israel's three-stage troops withdrawal from West Bank rural areas, as specified in the original autonomy agreement. The withdrawal was to have begun in September 1996 and be completed a year later.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat said the Palestinians also demanded the release of Palestinian security prisoners following the signing of the Hebron agreement.

His colleague Jamil Tarifi said that the part of the agreement dealing with civilian affairs was also not completed, contrary to reports.

AFP from Jerusalem adds: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat are "very likely" to meet this evening to try to finalise an agreement on a handover of the West Bank city of Hebron, an Israeli spokesman said.

US to consider sending more food aid to DPRK

WASHINGTON, Dec 31: The United States will consider sending more food aid to North Korea and easing economic sanctions against it following Pyongyang's apology to Seoul for a botched spy mission in September, a senior US official said Monday, reports AFP.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Washington would review the issue of emergency food aid to the cash-strapped Communist country on a "case-by-case" humanitarian basis.

He added, however, that US officials have no immediate plans to send more aid to alleviate North Korea's food shortages.

The United States was prepared to issue licenses to private companies wishing to export food to North Korea last September, the official said.

But he declined to comment on the state of a petition from the Minnesota-based food conglomerate Cargill to ship a large quantity of grain to North Korea.



Russian President Boris Yeltsin enjoys Monday a glass of champagne during a New Year's reception hosted by the mayor of Moscow at the Kremlin Palace. Yeltsin recently returned to his Kremlin office after recovering from a multiple bypass heart surgery. — AFP/UNB photo

Cold snap death toll rises to 80 in Europe

UNDATED, Dec 31: Arctic weather kept Europe in deep freeze today as ice, snow and the lowest temperatures in decades raised the death toll to over 80 and caused chaos on road, train and air traffic across the continent, reports AFP.

Deaths due to the freak cold snap have been reported in virtually every country in Europe, from Russia in the east to Spain in the West, with the homeless and elderly inevitably the hardest hit.

While many people took advantage of the conditions to indulge in a spot of post-Christmas exercise on skates or skis, others, battle the sub-zero weather simply to stay alive.

In France, three more people were found dead over the weekend, bringing the overall toll to 10 in a week as temperatures slumped to their lowest for 34 years, while in Germany two men aged 59 and 53 died of cold in the eastern Brandenburg state, where heavy snowfalls also caused chaos on the roads.

The German national carrier Lufthansa cancelled about 40 domestic flights Monday morning as the majority of the country's airports were under snow and ice. Worst hit was Frankfurt, and a number of international flights to destinations in Eastern and Central Europe had to be cancelled.

A woman of 51 died while out for a walk from her home in Vienna, bringing the death toll in Austria to four since Wednesday. Temperatures have dropped to as low as minus 25 Celsius (minus 13 Fahrenheit).

The bodies of two homeless were discovered in the streets of Madrid on Monday, taking the number of dead from appalling weather in Spain to five. A man, aged 50, was found in the north of the capital, while another whose age was not known was found on a mattress in the city centre.

Earlier AP says from Seattle, rain and rising temperatures began washing away four days of snow and ice across the Northwest, only to cause flooding and mudslides.

Off the Record

Shakespeare losing grip on US campuses

WASHINGTON: Shakespeare seems to be losing his grip on US university campuses just as he is strengthening it at movie theaters around the country, reports AFP.

Of 67 US colleges surveyed by the National Alumni Forum, only 23 require their English majors to take at least one Shakespeare course, according to the New York Times.

The report also says that some English majors can receive their diplomas without ever reading any of the Bard's 37 works.

It concludes that the study of great authors "is being replaced by courses such as the one focusing on gangster movies at Georgetown University in Washington, on melodrama and soap operas at Duke University in North Carolina, and on boxing film and fiction at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire.

For students who feel compelled to get a dose of Shakespeare, they can simply go to their neighbourhood movie theater. This winter, four Shakespeare movies including Rome and Juliet and Hamlet are playing nationwide.

World's tallest woman outshines her host



World's tallest woman Sandy Allen outshines her local host Stephen Day, president of the Guinness World of Records' Taiwan museum, before a press conference in Taipei yesterday. The 231.7 cm (7 feet and 7 inches) tall woman from Indiana in the USA arrived in Taiwan late 30 Dec at the invitation of the museum for a two-month visit. She says she is proud of her height and would like to meet Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui. — AFP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

US envoy to ROK resigns: US Ambassador to Seoul James Laney said yesterday he had asked President Bill Clinton to accept his resignation, AFP reports from Seoul.

Laney, who took up his post in Seoul in 1993 at the height of the standoff with North Korea over its suspect nuclear weapons programme, said in a press statement that it had always been his intention to leave after Clinton's first term. "While I am sad to be leaving a country for which I have such affection... I nevertheless will depart with a feeling of both accomplishment and privilege," Laney said.

Yeltsin, Kohl agree to meet on Jan 4: President Boris Yeltsin and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl confirmed in a telephone conversation Monday their plans to meet on January 4 at the Russian President's country residence, AP reports from Moscow.

The two leaders have a warm relationship and Kohl is one of the only world leaders who has visited during Yeltsin's recent illness. After the president underwent quintuple bypass surgery on November 5, Kohl was one of the first he invited to visit.

3 executed for murder in China: A woman and two men she hired to kill her husband were executed in southern China, a report said yesterday, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

Zhou Jiayu, 36, was executed recently along with the two accomplices she hired for 113,000 yuan (13,615 US dollars) in Shaoyuan in northern Guangdong province, the Hong Kong branch of China News Service said.

Hashimoto to visit ASEAN states: Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto said Tuesday he would visit Southeast Asian nations as scheduled early January, despite the continuing hostage crisis in Lima, AFP reports from Tokyo.

Hashimoto told a news conference that he would go ahead with the nine-day tour starting January 7, covering Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Singapore, all of them members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Japanese officials previously said whether or not his visit would go ahead would depend on developments in Lima.

Israeli settler kills Palestinian: An Israeli settler killed a Palestinian Monday night in the Jewish settlement of Kfar Darom in Gaza, Israeli police said, AFP reports from Kfar Darom, Gaza.

The settler said he had been attacked by the Palestinian and was acting in self defence. According to settlers who witnessed the incident, the Palestinian had broken into the settlement and attacked a settler, who had called for help. Another settler opened fire, killing the Palestinian. Israeli police were investigating the matter.

Anti-Taliban jets bomb Kabul

KABUL, Dec 31: Planes belonging to forces opposed to the Taliban Islamic militia bombed the Afghan capital Kabul early this morning but there were no reports of casualties, says Reuters.

Bombs were dropped in the vicinity of Kabul's airport, which is used for military and civilian traffic, at 3 am (2230 GMT) on Tuesday morning. Kabul's hospitals reported no casualties.

On Saturday, opposition forces launched four air raids on the city, which was taken by the Taliban in late September, hitting the airport in the north-east and the Presidential Palace in the centre of the city.

Hospitals reported six civilian casualties from those raids and one woman was injured by falling anti-aircraft fire.

Local residents said today's bombs landed on open ground close to a housing complex, breaking windows and causing other minor damage.

The attack failed to close the airport, and later this morning the United Nations used it to ferry in personnel and supplies.

Afghan watchers say the air raids are in retaliation for recent Taliban successes on the battle field north of Kabul.

On Friday and Saturday, the Taliban pushed opposition forces back 10 km (six miles) inflicting heavy casualties and, according to the Taliban, capturing more than 200 prisoners.

It was the heaviest defeat inflicted on the opposition forces for more than two months.

Despite the recent attacks on the airport, the national airline, Ariana International Airlines, intends to continue using the airport for international flights.

Misbullah Noori, director of

Annan takes over as UN chief today amid hopes

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 31: Kofi Annan takes over as UN chief on Wednesday amid hopes that the Ghanian's appointment will bring improved relations with the world body's main contributor, the United States, reports AFP.

His predecessor, 74-year old Boutros Boutros-Ghali of Egypt, who was backed by France for a second term, saw UN relations deteriorate with Washington over the past two years.

For US public opinion, Boutros-Ghali became identified with the UN failures in Somalia and Bosnia. But he also sinned in US eyes by taking an independent stand on issues such as Iraq and the Middle East.

Annan, 58, who said in a recent television interview that a friend had described his new post as "a job from hell," has made it clear that a main priority will be ensuring that Washington pays its arrears.

While keeping a steady hand on reform efforts during his five-year term, and refusing to rule out more staff cuts, the soft-spoken Annan also intends to seek consensus on the role of the United Nations as the world body prepares to enter the next century.

As former undersecretary general for peacekeeping, he plans to develop UN readiness to intervene in crises before they become full-scale conflicts. His main focus will be on his own continent.

In his new job, Annan will walk a tightrope as the servant of 185 nations in the General Assembly where some states are more equal than others — particularly the "big five" in the powerful UN Security Council.

Annan's relationship with the five states with veto power — Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States — will be particularly crucial.

Washington vetoed Boutros-Ghali's election to a second term. Annan, described as an "honest broker" by diplomats who worked with him on Bosnia, stresses that he will preserve the independence of his office. He notes that as a UN insider, having spent his entire career in the UN system, his "track record" is known to all.

"Time running out for implementation of Dayton accord"

SARAJEVO, Dec 31: Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic is dissatisfied with the slow progress of peace implementation in Bosnia, the BH press agency reported Monday, reports AFP.

The agency cited an interview which Izetbegovic gave to the Daily Oslobođenje in which the head of Bosnia's three-man collective presidency warned that time was running out for the implementation of the Dayton peace agreement, much of which has yet to be applied to Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Izetbegovic said he hoped "that the current situation is just temporary and will soon be eased. But if this does not happen, it will be time for us to wonder if we want a peace of this nature."

Several key provisions of the Dayton peace accords have yet to be implemented including the prosecution of suspected war criminals and the return of some two million refugees and displaced persons to homes they inhabited before the 43-month conflict broke out in April 1992.