

Thousands stranded as cold snap grips Europe

PARIS, Jan 3: More than 12,000 travellers were stranded in France's Rhone River valley Friday after a deadly European cold snap stopped trains in their tracks, reports AP.

The toll mounted on the 11th day of a deep freeze blamed for the deaths of more than 160 people from Spain to Russia, many of them elderly, poor or homeless.

Like much of Europe, Britain braced for another bitter weekend with temperatures dropping as low as minus 15 degrees Celsius (5 degrees Fahrenheit) in some areas. The cold wave is sweeping across the continent from Siberia.

For the first time since the end of World War II, the River Thames froze at Marlow, 40 kilometres (25 miles) west of London — and oddsmaker William Hill said people were placing bets on whether the river would freeze over in central London.

It was even colder in Eastern Europe, and in Germany, where the weather has been blamed for at least 20 deaths. The mercury fell to a minus 26.3 c (minus 15 F) in Gardelegen earlier this week, the coldest in 26 years.

In the French Alps, and 87-year-old man died overnight in a bus filled with other elderly travellers stranded by heavy snow, France Info radio reported Friday.

In the Lyon area in south-east central France, weary travellers spent the night in train stations, schools, military barracks and gymnasiums after thick ice on the tracks prevented trains from running.

Stranded travelers accused the national railway of failing to do more to help them, and some circulated petitions of protest.

"The railroad won't tell us a thing. We've been completely abandoned," Corine Savoyen, one of 4,000 passengers stranded in Lyon, told France Info radio Friday.

"The bar won't even give us water because they don't want to have to pay for it," she said angrily.

All train service linking the Rhone valley to the rest of the country was cancelled for Friday. Travellers also were stranded in Dijon, Avignon, Marseille and Orange, where the Red Cross set up makeshift shelters and served breakfast.

Blast near home of Kashmir CM: 4 Killed

SRINAGAR, India, Jan 3: Four people were killed and three wounded when a powerful bomb exploded near the home of the chief minister of India's Jammu and Kashmir state today, Indian police said, reports Reuters.

Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah was not in the Kashmir Valley at the time, they said.

Jamait-ul-Mujahideen, a militant Kashmiri separatist group, claimed responsibility for the blast which went off about 30 metres (33 yards) from Abdullah's residence on Gupkar Road in Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir.

One civilian was killed on the spot and three died later in hospital, authorities said.

A Jamait-ul-Mujahideen spokesman who called local news organisations to claim responsibility said attacks would continue on pro-India leaders in the troubled state.

'9,301 Tigers killed in war'

COLOMBO, Jan 3: Tamil Tiger guerrillas said Friday 9,301 of their fighters have been killed in 14 years of civil war less than half the number claimed by the government, reports AP.

Among the casualties were 94 men and women of the Black Tiger wing, which specializes in suicide attacks and has carried out the most devastating terrorist attacks of the war, said a statement by the group's political office in London.

The Sri Lankan Defence Ministry says about 46,000 people have been killed in the war: 21,000 guerrillas, 10,000 armed forces personnel, and more than 14,000 civilians.

The Tigers said their casualties included 1,079 women and 8,222 men, from the first clashes in 1982 through November 30, 1996.

Annan promises UN reform

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 3: Kofi Annan arrived at UN headquarters for the first time as secretary-general Thursday, promising changes to a world body deeply in debt and cuts to a bureaucracy he acknowledges needs to be trimmed, reports AP.

Annan, a 30-year UN veteran from Ghana, became Secretary-General Wednesday after his election last month to succeed Boutros Boutros-Ghali of Egypt, whose bid for a second term was vetoed by the United States.

"The member states have indicated that they want changes," Annan said. "Together we can achieve a lot, bring about the reforms that are necessary, encourage the member states to work together to honour their commitments to the organization."

Bodo group claims responsibility for train blast

GAUHATI, India, Jan 3: A tribal rebel group has claimed responsibility for a bomb that killed 38 train passengers in northeastern India this week, saying it is out to win statehood for the Bodo tribes, reports AP.

The Bodoland Liberation Tiger Front said in a statement Thursday night it would continue its attacks until the federal government grants the Bodos in the state of Assam their own state of Bodoland.

The Front said it also blew up a road bridge and a rail bridge this week, disrupting surface traffic to Assam.

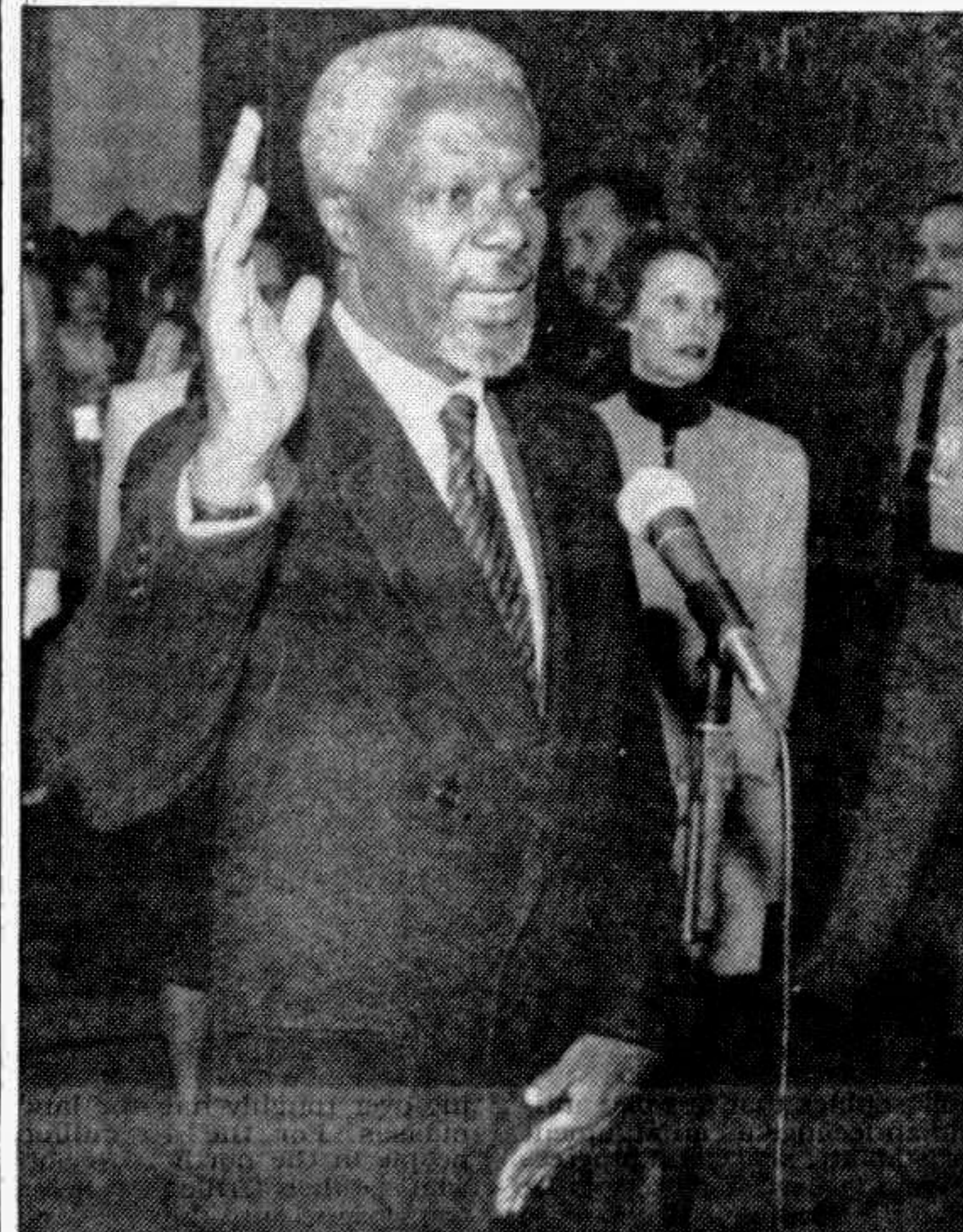
Myanmar troops raid refugee camp in Thailand

MAE HONGSON, Thailand, Jan 3: Two Karenni refugees were killed and 10 were wounded when a group of Myanmar soldiers raided a refugee camp in Thailand today, a Thai government official said, reports Reuters.

A spokesman for the Thai-Myanmar Border Committee told Reuters about 40 armed Burmese crossed the border from Myanmar's eastern Kayan state and opened fire early today on the Nasoi refugee camp in the northern Thai province of Mae Hongson.

He said they fired on the camp housing about 1,500 Karenni refugees for about 10 minutes before retreating.

BRIEFLY



Kofi Annan of Ghana, the new Secretary General of the United Nations, arrives for his first day of work at the United Nations in New York, on Thursday. Annan takes over the post from outgoing Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. — AFP UNB photo

US criticises Zairean rebels:

The US State Department said Thursday the rebel alliance fighting for power in Zaire is threatening the country's territorial integrity, AP reports from Washington.

"We don't approve of a violent military offensive by a rebel group inside a country with which we have diplomatic relations and whose borders ought to be respected," spokesman Nicholas Burns said.

"We do certainly support and stand by the territorial integrity of Zaire, which, of course, is threatened, basically, by this rebel alliance," he said.

18000 foreigners expelled from China:

Nearly 18,000 foreigners were expelled from China last year for crimes including fraud, prostitution, smuggling and spying, a report said yesterday, AFP says from Hong Kong.

Most of the crimes were committed by foreigners in Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai, the Hong Kong branch of China News Service said.

The report also said there were sharp increases in the number of foreigners involving in political and military spying, but it did not include details.

Chinese team meets Libyan FM:

Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Tian Zengpei held talks with Libyan Foreign Minister Omar al-Muntassar Thursday, official Libyan radio reported, AFP says from Tripoli.

The radio said the talks concerned bilateral relations but did not provide any details.

The Chinese diplomat met other Libyan officials on Wednesday and reiterated China's support for Libya's opposition to international sanctions.

Thai PM meets Suharto:

Thai Prime Minister Chuanrichit Yongchaiyudh held talks with Indonesia's president Suharto in Jakarta yesterday on a range of bilateral issues, State Secretary Murtidiono said, AFP reports from Jakarta.

There are no principal problems between the two countries and the two leaders see it as important that consultations be stepped up in the future he said.

The two sides discussed a gas pipeline to run from Indonesia through Malaysia to Thailand, but did not touch on the thorny issue of Thai fishermen straying into Indonesian waters.

Congress party election worries UF govt in Delhi

NEW DELHI, Jan 3: Congress Party chooses a new leader in Parliament Friday, a move keenly watched by the shaky United Front government that fears it may lose power, reports AP.

After weeks of squabbling, Congress tried to put up a unified face to choose a new leader. Newspapers reported that party president Sitaram Kesri is almost certain to emerge as the leader of the parliamentary group.

Kesri has been under increasing pressure from Congress lawmakers to withdraw support to the 14-party coalition government of Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda that came to power in June. Instead, they want Congress to come to try to form a government with the help of other groups.

The leader of the parliamentary party that comes to power becomes the prime minister.

Kesri has not publicly reacted to the suggestions of Congress lawmakers, but a worried Gowda even met former prime minister and Congress chief PV Narasimha Rao to discuss the political fallout, newspapers said.

On Friday, Congress lawmakers will name their choice in a private meeting with a core group that will then announce the leader. The leaders rejected suggestions for a secret ballot.

Kesri, 80, was elected chief of the 111-year-old party in September after Rao resigned when he was charged in a corruption case. Rao has denied any wrongdoing.

Dissidents had clamored for Rao's resignation after he led the Congress to its worst electoral defeat in the general elections early last year.

Since his appointment as Congress chief, Kesri has wooed back leaders who left the party over differences with Rao, raising hopes that Congress could topple the government and come to power.

AFP adds: India's dominant Communist Party said today it had no intention of joining the country's minority government, despite a rare public criticism on its stance by one of its veteran party leaders.

The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) said the issue of heading or taking part in the government was "settled and closed."

The party's central committee decided against joining the government in May last year, a CPI-M spokesman said. "The matter ends there."



Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat talks to reporters while US Middle East peace envoy Dennis Ross listens, after their meeting in Gaza City on Thursday. The two said that some obstacles still face the reaching of an agreement on the Israeli redeployment from the flashpoint West Bank city of Hebron. — AFP/UNB photo

US presses Israel, PLO to complete deal on Hebron

WASHINGTON, Jan 3: The United States on Thursday pressed Israel and Palestinians to complete a deal on Hebron saying protracted negotiations were fuelling instability and the potential for increased terrorist activity in the Middle East, reports Reuters.

After a telephone conversation with US special envoy Dennis Ross, who is mediating the talks, State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said.

"This agreement is not yet finished... and it's our view... that it's really up to the Israel and the Palestinians to finish this deal."

"They have the capacity to make this deal. It's up to them to do it. They are the only ones who can," Burns said. He called the deal, which was supposed to be completed nearly one year ago, "long overdue."

"We think that an agreement is there for the taking but they have got to make the decision. That decision was to be taken together," Burns told a news briefing.

A top aide to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused the PLO of stalling in talks on Hebron but Palestinians said Israel's refusal to set dates for future redeployments was holding up an agreement.

Burns refused to be drawn on which side might be at fault. He quoted Ross as saying both sides are negotiating in good faith.

As a deal with the Palestine Liberation Organisation for Israel's redeployment in Hebron continued to elude negotiators, Israeli police held a second soldier on Thursday in connection with the shooting of seven Arabs in the West Bank city.

The first soldier arrested, Noam, Friedman, caused the injuries when he sprayed rifle fire into a Hebron market on Wednesday in what he called an attempt to keep the town of 400 Israeli settlers and 100,000 Palestinians from being handed over to Palestinian rule.

Burns said he hoped the incident would not derail the difficult Hebron negotiations, which earlier this week seemed about to be concluded successfully.

He praised Netanyahu, who quickly condemned the attack, and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who discouraged Arab retaliation, for acting very responsible.

Peru president removes top captive officials from post

LIMA, Jan 3: President Alberto Fujimori removed from their posts top security officials and the country's leading judge, who are being held hostage by Marxist rebels, local media reported on Thursday, says Reuters.

The heads of the anti-terrorist police (Dincote) and the national security and the Supreme Court president, were all replaced, according to the reports, which quoted police sources but could not be immediately confirmed.

A former anti-terrorist chief, Hector Caro, told local radio station, Radio Programas, reshuffles of important posts in the security forces and courts were routine in the New Year.

But there was speculation the top security officials were dropped as a sanction because they were caught off guard by the attack of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary (TRTA) rebels on the Japanese ambassador's residence on December 17.

The attack and holding of over 500 Peruvian and foreign hostages has highlighted criticism that the security forces lowered their guard in the fight against leftist guerrillas.

The media reports said Dincote chief Gen. Maximo Rivera was replaced by Gen. Marcel Nakamura — "A man always in the thick of the action," according to Caro.

But it was not known who took over from the country's security chief, Gen. Guillermo Bobbio Zavallos, or Supreme Court President Moises Panloja.

AP adds: Freeing hostages a few bedraggled men at a time, the rebels occupying the Japanese ambassador's residence have kept their bargaining power strong by holding onto the president's brother and other selected captives.

The 74 remaining hostages include five Supreme Court judges, eight generals, five congressmen, two foreign ambassadors and Pedro Fujimori, a younger brother of President Alberto Fujimori.



A policeman patrols outside the National Press Building on Thursday in Washington, DC, after the building was evacuated for a second time due to a bomb scare. Four letter bombs were found in the building, reportedly sent to the Arabic newspaper, Al-Hayat. — AFP/UNB photo

Punishment, surveillance chill dissent in China

BELJING, Jan 3: Wang Dan's room looks as if he might be back any moment. A blue guitar is propped in a corner. Floor-to-ceiling shelves are neatly filled with books and knickknacks — a doll, a toy car, a model of a Chinese rocket, reports AP.

But the lanky, bespectacled dissident hasn't lived at his childhood home since 1995, when he was detained without charge.

His October 30 trial on subversion charges — and sentencing to 11 years in prison — marked what seems to be the end of China's democracy movement, at least for now.

A government determined not to go the way of its fellow communists in the former Soviet bloc seems bent on stamping out every flicker of political dissent. Those like Wang who boldly called for change have been silenced. Even family members, like Wang Lingyun, Wang's mother, are watched.

"From what one can see from the outside, all the active democrats have been silenced and a few older intellectuals who tried to advise them were sent to prison."

Most of the rank-and-file demonstrators and onlookers resumed their ordinary lives. The vast sweep of Tiananmen Square again became a place for tourists to pose for photos and locals to fly kites.

A few, like Wang, persisted. Released after three and a half years in prison, he wrote articles calling for political change that were published in Hong Kong. He also helped organize a petition calling on China's government to tolerate dissent and move toward the rule of law.

Now, most of those who continued to speak out are in exile or in prison or labor camps.

Dissent in China has blossomed in brief spells since Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978 and unleashed reforms aimed at creating a free-market economy under Communist Party control.

Each period has ended in arrests. But the government is projecting a sense of absolute-ness and total implacability not seen before, says Robin Munro of Human Rights Watch-Asia.

There still remains an invisible nationwide network of democracy campaigners and supporters.

Part of this network apparently helped longtime democracy activist Wang Xizhe escape to the United States through Hong Kong in October.

Wang Xizhe's activism dates from a poster he co-wrote in 1974 calling for democracy and rule of law. This fall he teamed up with Liu Xiaobo, a literary critic and social commentator who was active in the 1989 demonstrations, to write a bold, open letter to the government.

They criticized the government's policies on Japan, Tibet and Taiwan and called for the impeachment of President Jiang Zemin because he declared the Communist Party has "absolute leadership" over the military.

Although the letter reached foreign reporters, few Chinese heard of it because not a word appeared in the wholly state-controlled media.

In a telephone interview with The Associated Press at the time, Liu said he had a right to speak up and wasn't afraid. He had already served nearly two years in prison after the 1989 demonstrations, and within days of releasing the letter, he was sentenced without trial to three years in a labor camp.

Wang Xizhe, who lived in Canton, was shaving his paralyzed father when he heard the news of Liu's arrest. He did not go back to his own home for fear he would be arrested as well.

So far, however, dissidents have not succeeded in shaking the party. Its authority has diminished for other reasons, including corruption, the fading of ideology as China embraces capitalism and the lingering ripples of the chaotic 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, which damaged faith in Communist leadership.

Syria blames Israeli agents for bus blast

DAMASCUS, Jan 3: Syria says agents of Israel's secret service blew up a bus, killing nine people and injuring 44, in an attempt to "kill the peace process," Israel calls the accusation "sheer nonsense," reports AP.

The charge by the official Syrian Arab News Agency on Thursday was Syria's first comment on the New Year's Eve blast in Damascus on a bus bound for the northern city of Aleppo.

The government-run Al-Thawra newspaper on Friday carried a photo three columns wide on its front page showing the bus, its top blown off and windows blown out. The headline read: "A terrorist and cowardly act carried out by agents of the Mossad in the framework of escalating Israeli threats to kill the peace process."

In Jerusalem, David Bar-Ilan, an aide to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, called the charge "sheer nonsense."

The US State Department challenged Syria to provide evidence backing up its accusation.

"We certainly have no indication and no information available to us that the Israeli government had any relationship to this whatsoever," spokesman Nicholas Burns said.

The State Department also warned Americans in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza that terror attacks were more likely in the next two weeks and that they should avoid public buses and crowds at bus stops.

Israel suspended peace talks with Syria in February amid a wave of suicide bombings at Israeli authorities blamed on Palestinian militants. Israeli military officials have warned in recent weeks that war with Syria was possible.

A Syrian statement on Thursday said: "Mossad agents took the opportunity of preparations for celebrating the new year and the gathering of people... and put a bomb inside a bus."

"They add this crime to their file, which is full of organised terrorism," the statement added.

Off the Record

Ever green grass

LONDON: British scientists have developed an "ever green" grass — which refuses to fade in dry conditions — that could be the answer to the prayers of many a gardener and groundsman, reports APF.

The grass stays green even after it withers and dies, according to the researchers at the Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research in North Wales, who reported their findings in this week's edition of the New Scientist magazine.

Howard Thomas and colleagues spotted the ever green trait in a naturally produced mutant strain of meadow fescue, a grass widely sown in pastures.

The grass stays green because it lacks an enzyme that breaks down chlorophyll, the green pigment in plants used for photosynthesis.

Plant breeders at the institute have now transferred the trait to other grasses, including some that are being developed commercially.

They hope that these grasses will now find their way on to football pitches, golf courses, parks and other public places.

Thomas told the new scientist magazine: "They even retain their greenness in dry conditions when they go crispy."

The identity of the enzyme involved is being kept secret because of patent considerations.

Floating nun!

KANCHANABURI, Thailand: People practice religion in many ways — but a floating nun?

A Buddhist nun is drawing thousands of tourists to her temple every day to watch her perform a highly original ritual that looks like a cross between meditation and synchronised swimming, reports AP.

Normally, Buddhist nuns perform their devotions and meditate on dry land like everybody else.

But at the Thuan Mangkon Thong temple in Kanchanaburi, 110 kilometers (70 miles) west of Bangkok, a 52-year-old nun who goes by the single name Anong does things differently.

Ten times a day, Anong, fully clad in a white nun's habit, takes a dip in a temple pond and spends 10 minutes raising her arms and crossing her legs to imitate the Buddha and Hindu deities.

Though she never treads water or touches bottom, her face never falls below the surface. Anong says total concentration and the pond spirits keep her serenely on top.

Anong has floated to worship for four years, starting after a vigil.

"After I went into the nunhood, I went to a mountaintop for three days. On the fourth day, I came down and went to the sea" Anong said. "There, I saw a friend of mine doing these poses in the water and she tried to teach me."

The notorious bridge on the River Kwai, built by Allied prisoners of war during World War II, draws most of Kanchanaburi's tourists. But Anong has become an attraction, herself.

An average of 100 tourists, mostly Thai, visit the temple each day, paying 10 baht (40 cents) each to cram around the pond's edge. Most come for the novelty, rather than a religious experience.

S'pore polls a rebuff to Western democracy: PM

SINGAPORE, Jan 3: Singapore's parliamentary election was a rebuff to those who supported Western notions of liberal democracy and personal freedom, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said Friday, reports AP.

The ruling People's Action Party won all but two of the 36 seats at stake Thursday. The entrenched PAP, in power for 38 years, was earlier returned to office automatically when it grabbed 47 of the 83 seats in Parliament through walkovers when nominations closed.

Goh told reporters that the voters backed PAP plans to advance the long-term interests of all.

"They have rejected Western-style democracy and freedoms, putting individual rights over that of society," he said.

Opposition candidates who "tried to sell these Western agendas, promoted by the Western media and pressure groups", were defeated.

Goh targeted Workers' Party candidate Tang Liang Hong for special attack, both during the nine-day campaign and after the votes were counted.

"Because of Tang Liang Hong, his historic skills especially in Chinese, his record and reputation among the Chinese community, as a Chinese chauvinist who is anti-Christian and anti-English educated, I decided to concentrate on Cheng Sen Group representative constituency," Goh said.

Group constituencies offered teams of candidates from a single party who are elected as a unit.

In rejecting Tang and his party, Goh said voters "have shown their continued support for a harmonious multicultural, multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual society."

He said that deep fault lines in Singapore society over race, language, culture and religion won't go away and must be carefully managed.