

# BRIEFLY

**Heavy rains claim 56 in Brazil:** Fifty-six people were reported dead Saturday in the southern state of Minas Gerais in the wake of torrential rains that have pelted the region since the start of the new year, civil defence officials said. AFP reports from Rio de Janeiro.

The rains prompted landslides and cave-ins that blocked highways. Some 19,000 people are homeless and hundreds were injured.

**2 executed in Iran for spying:** Two Iranians convicted of spying for Israel and the United States have been executed in Tehran, a newspaper reported Saturday. AFP reports from Tehran.

Hedayatollah Zendan-del, a businessman who converted from Judaism to Islam, and Abol Ghassem Majd-Abkahi, who was close to the court of the late Shah of Iran, were executed here on December 29, the newspaper Keyhan said. They were convicted by an Islamic court in July of fraud, subversion and espionage on behalf of Israel and the United States.

**Top US general arrives in Cairo:**

The United States' top general arrived in Cairo on Saturday for a three-day official visit aimed at strengthening Egyptian-US military ties, an Egyptian official said. AFP reports from Cairo.

General John Shalikashvili, chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, is due to hold talks with his Egyptian counterpart general Magdi Hatata "on several military issues of joint interest to strengthen bilateral relations in this area," the source said. The United States is Egypt's top arms supplier, with military aid of 1.2 billion dollars a year.

**Blast kills 2 soldiers in Senegal:**

Two soldiers were killed and five others wounded in Casamance province in southern Senegal, after mine exploded under their vehicle, an informed source said Saturday. AFP reports from Dakar.

The vehicle, returning from a mission on Friday, hit the mine at Badem, 18 kilometres (11 miles) from Zinguinchor, on a road that it has used several hours previously, the source said. With no one claiming responsibility, several observers suspected that the mine was deliberately planted by the separatist Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance.

**Clinton invites Arafat to US:** President Bill Clinton has invited Palestinian President Yasser Arafat to visit the United States early in New Year, a PLO official said on Saturday. Reuter reports from Jerusalem.

Clinton issued a similar invitation, which also set no precise date for a visit to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week against the backdrop of intensive US diplomatic efforts to clinch an Israeli-PLO deal on the West Bank town of Hebron.

**1 sentenced to death in UAE:** For the first time in the United Arab Emirates, a court has sentenced a man to death for drug trafficking, a newspaper reported Sunday. AP reports from Dubai.

The man, identified only as Mohammed AA, an Emirates national, was sentenced Saturday for using and possessing drugs, the Gulf Today newspaper said.



A girl checks her work while other contestants show off their calligraphy during a competition in Tokyo Sunday. Several thousand school children from all over the country participated in the annual New Year event. — AFP/UNB photo

**'Israel plotting to triple number of settlers by 2000'**

CAIRO, Jan 5: The Arab League accused Israel today of plotting to triple the number of Jewish settlers in occupied territories to half a million by 2000 with a budget of four billion dollars, reports AFP.

Ahmed Ibn Helli, adviser to the League's secretary general for Arab affairs, told reporters that the Pan-Arab organisation had obtained a report proving the existence of a "terrible Israeli plot" to dramatically increase the number of settlers. The Israeli government has designated four billion dollars to this plot, Helli said.

He said the number of Jewish settlers on the Golan Heights, which Israel seized from Syria in the 1967 Middle East war, will increase from 13,000 to 25,000.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has refused to negotiate a return of

**German FM asks Serbian president to recognise opposition victory**

**Belgrade Mayor resigns in protest over Milosevic's refusal to concede defeat**

BELGRADE, Jan 5: The mayor of Belgrade, an ally of President Slobodan Milosevic, reportedly resigned in protest over the Serbian leader's refusal to concede electoral defeat in the capital, reports AP.

The departure of Mayor Nebojsa Covic, reported in Belgrade newspapers Saturday, could not be immediately confirmed. But if true it would mark the first major defection from the president's Socialist Party core since street protests began nearly seven weeks ago to demand recognition of opposition victories.

Two independent newspapers, Nasa Borba and Dnevni Telegraf, reported Saturday that Covic had decided Friday to leave office on Saturday. Covic's office was closed Saturday and he could not be reached to confirm the reports.

After four years in office, Covic quit "because of his deep disagreement with his party ... and inability to influence Milo-

sevic" to concede the loss in Belgrade, the newspapers said.

Tens of thousands of Belgrade demonstrators, standing ankle-deep in slush and under the watch of riot police, cheered the report of the mayor's resignation.

Milosevic's Socialists are in a knock-down bout, Opposition leader Vuk Draskovic told the rally. "Even their prominent member Covic had enough honesty and dignity to admit our victory."

Milosevic's regime, however, remained defiant Saturday. Election officials in Nis, Serbia's second largest city, ordered a repeat of the November 17 vote. Opposition leaders who assert they won the election said they would boycott.

"There is no way that we'll take part in any new elections. We have won, and that's it," said Zoran Zivkovic, an opposition leader in Nis.

Zivkovic warned that unless Milosevic concedes by Tuesday,

tens of thousands of Nis residents would go to Belgrade next week and march to the president's home.

Saturday's protest in Belgrade marked the 46th day of demonstrations. The opposition has vowed to keep up its daily protests — the biggest challenge to the Serbian president in his nine years in power.

Draskovic told 40,000

protesters that a new method of protests will be introduced Sunday. Protesters will drive slowly through Belgrade to mock the police explanation that they have been deployed in the capital for the past 10 days to ensure the free flow of traffic.

AFP adds: German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel on Saturday called on Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic to immediately and fully recognise all wins by the opposition in local elections.

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## International

# Police on 'red alert' in Delhi amid string of bombings

NEW DELHI, Jan 5: Police in the Indian capital were on high alert today as a string of terrorist bombings in a week killed nearly 50 people across the country, reports AFP.

The nearly 40,000-strong police sounded a "red alert" in the city of 10 million after two bombs exploded in quick succession here overnight Saturday killing one man and injuring 11 others.

The first blast destroyed a state-run bus on its way from New Delhi to the neighbouring state of Haryana when a jar packed with explosives went near the driver's seat.

Moments later, another home-made bomb ripped apart a nearby taxi. Both vehicles caught fire immediately.

The bombs were made of low-quality explosives, with some kind of a timer device," said Deputy Commissioner of Police Prabhat Singh.

"It is very difficult to say who carried out the attack," he

## Peruvian rebels demand ransom for Japanese hostages

TOKYO, Jan 5: Marxist rebels holding hostages at the Japanese ambassador's home in the Peruvian capital Lima originally demanded 100 million dollars in ransom from Japanese companies but are now seeking about 30 million dollars a Japanese newspaper reported today, says Reuter.

The Maeinchi Shimbun said the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRRA) had demanded the cash in exchange for freeing senior Japanese executives who were among the more than 400 people taken hostage on December 17.

Among the Japanese executives believed to be held in the compound are the presidents of the Peruvian operations of Mitsubishi Mining and Smelting Co, Mitsubishi Corp and Toyota Motor Corp.

## French troops move against rebel positions in Bangui

PARIS, Jan 5: French troops moved against rebel positions in the Central African Republic early this morning following a day of violence in the capital Bangui in which two French soldiers were shot dead, reports AFP.

The French Defence Ministry did not say whether all the estimated 2,000 French troops deployed in Bangui were taking part in the operation. But authoritative sources said the attack was a major operation against positions held by rebel soldiers who mutilated against President Ange Felix Patasse seven weeks ago.

The sources said French military reinforcements were en route for Bangui.

## Israeli president concludes visit to India

NEW DELHI, Jan 5: Israeli President Ezer Weizman flew home today after a groundbreaking visit to India that drew protests from Libya and concern in neighbouring Pakistan, the United News of India (UNI) reported, says AFP.

Indian officials said Weizman, the first Israeli head of state to visit India, left Bombay Airport for Tel Aviv, UNI said.

During his week-long visit, the 73-year-old Israeli president who served here as a royal air force officer five decades ago, met Indian leaders and offered to sell his country's latest F16 fighter jets to India.

He also called for greater cooperation between the air forces of India and Israel and closer military ties.

The two countries established diplomatic ties in January 1992 after four decades of hostility.

Ross visited Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Gaza office for the sixth time in as

many days Saturday and later met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem.

"We are close but we're not there yet, until we can conclude all the details we don't have an agreement," Ross said in Gaza Saturday.

Ross has hinted he will return to Washington if the two sides don't budge soon, Israel radio reported Friday.

Under heavy pressure from hard-liners in his Cabinet, Netanyahu on Friday rejected the Palestinian demand to establish specific dates for Israel's promised withdrawal from most of the West Bank.

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