

BRIEFLY

Opposition leader sued in S'pore:

A Singapore opposition politician who was defeated in this month's general elections after being accused of inciting racism has been sued for defamation by two Cabinet ministers, a newspaper reported Thursday. AP reports from Singapore.

Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Education Minister Lee Yock Swan filed a notice of the suit in the High Court on Monday against Workers Party member Tang Liang Hong, the Straits Times said. In the past Singapore's ruling party leaders have sued other opposition party members and critics also, usually with success.

Liberian polls to be held May 30:

General elections that could seal the end of this West African country's seven-year civil war will be held May 30, the government announced Wednesday. AP reports from Monrovia.

Elections commission chairwoman Gloria Scott told a news conference that the official campaign period would begin Saturday. She said voter registration would begin Feb. 15. Whether the elections are to remain on track will depend on the full disarmament of some 60,000 rebels. The Economic Community of West African States, which mediated the latest peace accord and provides peacekeepers, has set a Jan. 31 deadline for disarmament of rebel fighters.

80 devil worshippers held in Cairo:

Dozens of students suspected of wearing their nails long, dressing in black and organising open-air orgies were arrested Wednesday by police who claimed the students worshipped Satan. AP reports from Cairo.

Police accused them of "adopting fanatic beliefs," but did not specify what charges might be filed against them. The 80 students, most of whom study at Cairo's two largest universities, were believed to have taken part in orgies in the desert where drugs were consumed freely, police said. The women wore their nails long and were fond of black lipstick, they said.

4 fishermen rescued in Malaysia:

Four Malaysian fishermen have been rescued after being adrift in two fibre glass iceboxes for 11 days in the choppy South China Sea, officials said Thursday. AP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

The four men survived on rain water, biscuits and some rice they had taken with them in the makeshift lifeboats after their boat sank. Abdul Rahim Akob, a Sarawak state marine department official told The Associated Press. He said two of them — Kassim Drahan, 16, and Mahadi Badri, 21 — were rescued Wednesday morning by oil rig workers when the icebox drifted near their platform, about 125 kilometres (77 miles) northwest of the coast of Sarawak on Borneo Island.

3 ex-Soviet agents sentenced:

Three aging, former Soviet secret police agents were convicted Wednesday of genocide against Lithuanian citizens, but their sentences were reduced under the Baltic nation's amnesty law. AP reports from Vilnius.

The convictions were the first for genocide in the former Soviet republic and came after two years of off-and-on court proceedings, the Baltic News Service reported. A regional court in Vilnius found Kirilas Kurakinas, 75, Petras Bartaskevicius, 74, and Juozas Sakalyas, 74, guilty of taking part in the May 1945 killing of the family of a Lithuanian villager who was hiding from the Soviet army.

Earthquake shakes Turkey:

An earthquake measuring 5.5 on the open-ended Richter Scale shook southern Turkey on Wednesday, the Anatolia news agency reported, citing the Kandilli Seismic Institute in Istanbul. AFP reports from Istanbul.

The tremor was felt in Mersin, Adana, Hatay, Malatya, Sanliurfa, Gaziantep and Diyarbakir, the institute said.

5.5b people may suffer from water shortage by 2025

STOCKHOLM, Jan 23: Two-thirds of the world population, 5.5 billion people, will suffer from water shortage by 2025 unless action is taken to improve water supply management, according to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), reports AFP.

A report prepared by the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) and various UN bodies for the CSD and presented in New York on Wednesday states that water use has been growing at more than twice the rate of population increase during this century.

In 1995, one-fifth of the world population did not have access to safe drinking water and half lacked proper sanitation.

About one-third of the world population currently lives in areas with moderate to severe water shortage, and since 1970, the theoretically available amount of water per capita has decreased by nearly 10 per cent, the report said.

Water quality is deteriorating worldwide "due to various sources of pollution," which in turn affects the quality of food and threats agriculture and food production.

Arafat appoints new members to Islamic SC

JERUSALEM, Jan 23: Palestinian President Yasser Arafat has appointed 18 new members to the Jerusalem-based Islamic Supreme Court for the Palestinian territories, including the body's first members from Gaza, Palestinian sources said Wednesday. reports AFP.

The sources said the 13 members from the Gaza Strip included officials from Arafat's Palestinian Authority, notably Sheikh Yussef Salame who is Director General of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, or Waqf.

Waqf Minister Hassan Tahub said the issue of making new appointments to the Islamic Higher Council "is under discussion but is not final yet."

'Peru won't rule out option of using force to end crisis'

TOKYO, Jan 23: Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori said he would not rule out the possibility of using force to end the Lima hostage crisis, Japan's Kyodo news agency reported today, says Reuter.

"If some hostages are killed or injured, we might choose a different option," Kyodo quoted Fujimori as saying in an interview with Japanese reporters.

Marxist rebels stormed the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima on December 17, taking more than 500 hostages and demanding the release of some 400 imprisoned comrades.

Although the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) rebels have released most hostages, they still hold 73 captives and negotiations for their freedom have stalled.

Fujimori told the Japanese reporters on Wednesday that he would not accept the rebels' main demand of freedom for the jailed comrades, Kyodo said.

"A release of jailed MRTA members will pose a threat not only to Peru but also to foreign countries," Fujimori said.

Fujimori said he would not agree to the rebels' demand that the Peruvian government pay them "war taxes."

"We won't pay a penny," he was quoted as saying.

Putting aside the issue of the release of the jailed MRTA rebels, Fujimori said his government was ready to discuss a variety of other issues in a "flexible" manner in face-to-face talks with the rebels.

Fujimori said his government was considering having Parliament enact a special law to ensure the safe passage to a third country of the rebels, including their leader Nestor Cerpa Cartolini, holed up in the ambassador's residence.

Fujimori refused to say in which country the rebels could seek asylum, Kyodo said. But he added: "There are family members of Cerpa in France and Mexico."



President Bill Clinton sings the national anthem prior to addressing students at Glenbrook North High School in the Chicago suburb of Northbrook, Wednesday. During his visit to Chicago, Clinton is also scheduled to meet with Mayor Richard Daley. — Reuter/UNB photo

Taliban capture 2 towns near Panjsher Valley

KABUL, Jan 23: The Taliban militia in a major offensive today overrun two key towns at the mouth of the strategic Panjsher Valley, a Taliban official here confirmed, reports AFP.

The Taliban took Jabul Siraj and Gulbahar district in a two-pronged offensive launched early today. Qari Rehmattullah, an official at the militia's control room receiving reports from frontlines told AFP.

The Panjsher Valley is the stronghold of the ousted Afghan government's defence minister Ahmed Shah Masood.

"The Taliban are in complete control of both Gulbahar and Jabul Siraj," Rehmattullah said, adding opposition troops had been forced to retreat.

The Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press reported that at least 11 ex-government soldiers were killed and 80 captured by the Taliban.

Reuter adds from Islamabad: Afghanistan's Islamic Taliban militia captured the important towns of Jabul Siraj and Gulbahar from opposition forces

north of Kabul on Thursday. Taliban and other sources said.

The sources, quoted by the Pakistan-based Islamic Afghan Press (API) service, said the Taliban had captured 20 tanks and

Yeltsin shows up at Kremlin

MOSCOW, Jan 23: Boris Yeltsin showed up at the Kremlin for the first time in two weeks, a surprise appearance that took the wind out of a parliamentary move to oust him because of his poor health, reports AP.

The Communists who sponsored the long-shot bid — failed to win enough votes to end Yeltsin's presidency and call for new elections. But widespread confusion over whether the voting was procedural or decisive marred the proceedings in the Duma, or lower house, and the measure's sponsor, Communist legislator Viktor Ilyukhin, vowed to continue his battle next month.

'1000 govt troops surrender to rebels'

Opposition calls for mass uprising to oust Sudan govt

KHARTOUM, Jan 23: Sudan claimed Wednesday to have halted a rebel advance on a strategic hydroelectric power station in eastern Blue Nile state, as the opposition called for a mass uprising to overthrow the Islamic government in Khartoum, reports AFP.

Reiterating Khartoum's view that Ethiopia is backing the Sudanese rebels, Information Minister Al-Tayed Ibrahim Mohamed Khair said it was now only a matter of time before the insurgents were forced back out of the country.

"Our forces have succeeded in preventing any advance by the enemy," he told a daily press conference. "They are preparing to drive the Ethiopians and their agents beyond the border line."

The army, he said now was fighting "a deterrent battle." Preparations were made for "repulsing the aggression in the southeastern Sudanese territories."

He dismissed rebel claims that 1,260 Sudanese soldiers had been killed as guerillas inched forward to Damazin City, site of the power station that supplies Khartoum with a electricity and fresh water.

Fewer than 10 soldiers had died, he said, adding to airport Wednesday in a government newspaper, Al-Sudan Al-Hadith, that "enemy forces had been slain by the dozens."

AP adds: Nearly 1,000 Sudanese soldiers have surrendered to opposition forces after rejecting government orders to fight, rebel leader John Garang said, in remarks published Wednesday.

Garang also told the Egyptian weekly al-Mussawar that his Sudan People's Liberation Army and other opposition

forces grouped in the National Democratic Alliance will only stop fighting when the Islamic fundamentalist government of President Omar el-Bashir is overthrown.

A spokesman for the alliance said Wednesday that the opposition had no plans to cut the power supply to the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, if they capture the town of Damazin, 470 kilometres (290 miles) southeast of Khartoum. Damazin is the site of the Roseires Dam and its key hydroelectric power station.

The dam, built across the Blue Nile as it flows downstream into eastern Sudan from the Ethiopian highlands, provides Khartoum with 80 per cent of its electricity. One of two rebel offensives being launched at present appears headed toward Damazin.

"We want transitive government and not to be the cause of their suffering," Farouk Abu Issa, the alliance spokesman, told a news conference in Cairo.

"In view of what has been achieved on the battle fronts, I can say that the end of el-Bashir is near," said Garang, a US-educated former army colonel whose SPLA has been fighting successive Khartoum governments since 1983.

Al-Mussawar said it interviewed Garang at a secret location on the Sudanese-Ethiopian border.

Sri Lankan local govt polls in March

COLOMBO, Jan 23: Sri Lanka Wednesday announced crucial local government elections that had been postponed three times and said the voting would take place in March, reports AFP.

The Elections Commission said it would start receiving nominations for 238 local government bodies outside the embattled northern and eastern regions for a week from February 5.

The voting is due towards the end of March and the ballot is seen as a crucial popularity test for the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga who came to power just over two years ago.

Local council elections had been postponed three times by the government.

US officials meet Serb student leaders

WASHINGTON, Jan 23: A top State Department official met Wednesday with four leaders of a student protest movement in Belgrade and said he was deeply concerned by reports that Serb authorities have begun to use force against demonstrators, reports AP.

Assistant Secretary of State John Kornblum told the students the only solution to the current crisis in Belgrade is for the Serbian government to honour the outcome of the November 17 municipal elections.

An account of Kornblum's meeting was given by State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns, who urged President Slobodan Milosevic to end his "legal maneuvering."

"Election results cannot be negotiated in the back rooms," Burns said. "Elections are not bargaining chips to enhance the political stature, or the political survivability, or the political advantage of the government in Belgrade. And the (OSCE) report is very clear and all Western countries are united on it. Election results must be respected."

A model presents this black see-through lace evening dress with embroidered flowers as part of Italian designer Valentino's 1997 Spring-Summer Haute Couture fashion show, Wednesday. — Reuter/UNB photo

Prospects for Imran's party in polls look uncertain

ISLAMABAD, Jan 23: Former sporting hero Imran Khan is in the centre of the political limelight, but the prospects for his fledgling party in Pakistan's looming election look uncertain, reports AFP.

Campaigning hard to carve out a future for the Movement for Justice he launched barely 10 months ago, the 44-year old playboy-turned-politician is pitted against two heavyweights in the February 3 polls.

Given his cricket record and youth support he will do well to win a foothold in the next parliament in a competition dominated by parties led by former prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, commentators said.

His "justice for all" slogan is winning support in a country plagued by political an administrative corruption, poverty and unemployment, and has seen three elected governments sacked in eight years for graft and misuse, observers say.

But, in apparent disgust with

the development ahead of the polls, Khan has suddenly come out with a demand that President Farooq Ahmed Leghari resign.

He told a news conference late Wednesday that fair and impartial polls were "not possible" unless the president resigned.

Khan accused Leghari, who sacked Benazir and dissolved the National Assembly on November 5, of striking a secret deal with Sharif to manipulate the polls in his favour.

He did not announce a boycott, though kept the option open, and party officials said no decision had been taken yet to suspend the movement's election campaign.

"People have given us a big response, but what can we do if the president himself and the state machinery is arrayed against us," said one Movement for Justice candidate, speaking on condition of anonymity.

A prominent commentator, Mujibur Rehman Shami, said many people saw Khan "Leading an under-19 team in Pakistan

Delhi welcomes Yanni's plan to hold concert near Taj

NEW DELHI, Jan 23: Indian authorities are now welcoming Greek-born singer Yanni's plans to give a concert near the Taj Mahal, the 300-year-old monument that environmentalists say is decaying, reports AP.

Officials had at first rejected the proposal, but Press Trust of India news agency reported Thursday they reconsidered after Yanni said he will use soft lights and agreed to move the concert 300 metres (yards) further from the white marble tomb.

All proceeds from his two concerts, scheduled March 20 and March 21, will go toward conserving the Taj, PTI said.

The Taj has withstood the sun, temperatures up to 45 Celsius (113 Fahrenheit) during summers. Any lighting at a distance of 300 metres (yards) for a couple of hours will hardly have any adverse impact on the Taj," Shashank Shekher, a senior adviser to the state government of Uttar Pradesh, told PTI.

The Archaeological Survey of India had objected to the planned performance, fearing that the lighting and noise could damage the structure.

Car bomb blast kills 10 more in Algiers

ALGIERS, Jan 23: A car bomb exploded outside a pro-government vigilante meeting in a town south of the capital, killing 10 people and wounding 30 others, residents said Thursday, reports AP.

The bombing Wednesday night in Boufarik appeared to be the latest attack by Muslim militants who launched a wave of terror during the holy month of Ramadan aimed at destabilizing the military-backed government.

Government media, including the state-controlled radio and television, did not immediately report the attack, though the independent newspaper Liberte reported the bombing, putting the death toll at seven.

Residents, speaking on condition of anonymity, said 10 were killed and 30 wounded.

Boufarik, 40 kms (25 miles) south of Algiers, has taken on symbolic importance for both sides in the five-year-old Muslim insurgency that has left more than 60,000 dead.

Considered an Islamic stronghold for two years, Boufarik has in recent months driven out the insurgents with the help of "the Patriots," or government-armed "self-defence groups."

The groups' slogan is: "Terrorism started in Boufarik and will finish here, too".

Last Thursday, a car bomb in an open-air used car market in Boufarik killed 12 people.

CBI to detect Bofors scandal documents within a week

NEW DELHI, Jan 23: Indian detectives have set themselves a one-week deadline to decipher documents relating to a 1.3 billion dollar arms scandal that has dragged on for about a decade, reports AFP.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) said 500 documents connected to an arms contract between India and Swedish firm Bofors would be presented to a court here on Friday or Monday.

The papers, believed to shed light on millions of dollars in bribes allegedly paid by the company into Swiss Bank accounts held by Indian officials were handed over by Swiss authorities in Bern on Tuesday following seven years of legal wrangles.

"Our director is returning (from Bern) on Friday and the same day we will hand over the papers to a court and we expect it to return the documents to us on that day itself or on Monday," a CBI spokesman said.

"Within a week's time we hope to have all the answers... and then we would proceed with the case."

"We think it would not take us more than seven days to decode them."

The Bofors scandal, which brought down former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi's government, followed the company signing a deal with India to supply 410 Howitzers in 1986. It was then the biggest military contract signed by the Indian government.

Allegations surfaced in 1987, however, that the firm had paid bribes of up to 50 million dollars to Indian politicians and officials through seven coded Swiss Bank accounts to secure the contract.

In all, the company was alleged to have paid 250 million dollars in bribes.

Gandhi, who was assassinated by a suicide bomber in 1991, was swept from office in 1989 following the scandal as the Indian opposition campaigned on an anti-corruption ticket.

The CBI, meanwhile, said today it would not invite Indian military experts to examine the secret papers.

When asked if the Defence Ministry was being kept away from the papers because of its suspected links to the scandal — defence officials were suspected of having accepted bribes — the CBI spokesman answered: "Exactly. The CBI alone will do it."

The CBI first tried to obtain the details of the Swiss Bank accounts in February 1990.

The Zurich authorities furnished bank documents later that year but a series of legal challenges from the bank account holders dragged out the affair until Switzerland's highest court threw out their appeals.

The Congress (I) Party, which was in power at the time of the scandal, is currently being wracked by a series of corruption charges.

Gandhi's successor, former premier PV Narasimha Rao, faces three corruption trials for bribery, vote-buying and forgery.

European newspapers have linked then Swedish premier Olof Palme's 1988 assassination to the Bofors deal.

'Israel appeals to Syria for resuming peace talks'

JERUSALEM, Jan 23: Foreign Minister David Levy, saying Israel had been sending appeals to Damascus via foreign governments, made an emotional public plea Wednesday for Syria to reinstate peace talks, reports AP.

But a Syrian government newspaper rejected the idea of renewed negotiations as long as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had not committed himself to exchanging land for peace.

The comments came amid reports that Egypt, Europe and the United States were all exploring ways to restart negotiations between Israel and Syria, which were suspended a year ago.

Speaking to ambassadors, Levy said Syria's Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa recently affirmed to US President Bill Clinton his nation's commitment to a strategy of peace.

Addressing al-Sharaa, Levy said, "Please, I am ready to meet you at any time, in any place, and together we shall prepare for a meeting of our leaders, of teams from the two sides, and we shall sit down and be worthy

of the responsibility with which we are charged."

Levy indirectly confirmed a report in the daily Haaretz that an unnamed European foreign minister was trying to arrange a meeting between Levy and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa. It quoted diplomatic sources as saying Syria had sent positive signals via various emissaries.

"Through a number of great statesmen, through your country, I have passed on the message to Syria that Israel is interested in peace with Syria," he told the diplomats.

"Syria is part of the circle of peace in this region."

Syria has demanded that talks resume where they halted in February 1996 at Wye Plantation in Maryland.

The previous Labour Party government, which lost elections to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu last May, reportedly reached understandings with Syria about a withdrawal from the Golan Heights, which Israel captured from Syria in the 1967 Mideast war.

Off the Record

Half kg salt to feel better!

HONG KONG: A physical education teacher in China has acquired a habit of eating at least half a kilogram of salt a day to feel better, it was reported Thursday, reports AFP.

Xiang Zhaocheng, 51, of Magliang county in southern China's Hunan province, would rather "have no meat for three days, than a day without salt," the Hong Kong branch of China News Service reported.

Xiang needed the salt so badly that he felt "weak and without appetite" without it, the report said.

It said Xiang always carried a bag of salt with him, and ate from it when he was thirsty or hungry.

He acquired the taste for salt in 1990 when he was hospitalised for acute appendicitis, and was healed by taking Chinese traditional medicines.

Doctors who examined Xiang recently were amazed to find he had not been physically affected by the large intake of salt, and he appeared younger than other people of his age, the report said.

The oldest stone tools ever found

LONDON: Stone tools dating back 2.5 million years are the oldest ever found, scientists reported on Wednesday, prompting a search for more evidence about the pre-humans who made them, reports Reuter.

The surprisingly sophisticated tools, found on the border between Ethiopia and Kenya, push back the frontier of the first-known use of tools by pre-humans by 200,000 years.

Sileshi Semaw of Rutgers University in New Jersey and colleagues say the tools are considerably older than others found in the region, which date back 2.3 million years.

Reporting in the science journal Nature, they say the find indicates that early Hominins were settled in the region, industriously making tools for hundreds of thousands of years.

"These are the oldest stone tools ever found," Semaw said in a statement.

Thousands of the stones, which had been made into knives, axes and hammers by a tricky technique known as knapping, were found near Gona in Ethiopia.