

Blaze causes extensive damage to Heathrow Airport

LONDON, Dec 12: A blaze swept through the main terminal at London's Heathrow Airport early today, causing extensive damage and bringing chaos to the world's busiest international airport, reports Reuters.

Fire-fighters managed to control the blaze, which broke out at terminal one, but smoke was still billowing from the roof more than two and a half hours after it broke out around 0040 GMT.

The fire is now fully under control and the fire service are currently assessing the damage. Heathrow Airport said in a statement soon after 0730 GMT.

There were no reports of injuries from the fire, but officials said damage appeared to be considerable.

"Fortunately there are no casualties," Roger Cato, the managing director of Heathrow, which is operated by BAA PLC, said. "The fire crews, the emergency services, have done a tremendous job."

Heathrow is the world's busiest international airport and the blaze caused chaos.

Terminal one, which mainly handles domestic flights was closed, and British Airways PLC said it had cancelled all flights at the terminal until at least 1500 GMT.

"As I flew in I could see terminal one clearly ablaze. It was very, very bright in the night sky," incoming passenger Chris Johnson said.

About half of the 180,000 passengers who pass through

Heathrow on an average day use terminal one, according to Cato.

Terminal one also handles all Irish flights, many British Airways international services use the building as do south African Airways and the Israeli carrier, El Al.

Incoming flights to the terminal were being diverted to other British Airways, including Stansted, northeast of London. Cato said flights were arriving at and departing from adjoining terminals two and three, although the main road leading to them was shut to traffic.

"Flights are operating into those terminals. Of course, there are likely to be substantial delays today," Cato told

BBC radio. Efforts were being made around 0730 GMT to reopen the access road, but passengers were advised to check before leaving for the airport.

"Flights will be subject to serious delay or change throughout the day," BAA said in a statement.

Terminal four, which is separate from the other three terminals, was open and operating, but BAA warned to delays.

Cato said engineers were inspecting the extent of the damage to terminal one, which was filled with smoke as a result of the fire.

The blaze broke out in a fast-food restaurant operated by Burger King, owned by Grand Metropolitan PLC.

Annan hails global warming pact

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 12: Secretary-General Kofi Annan on Thursday hailed an international pact on global warming reached at a conference in Japan, calling it a major step toward limiting growth in greenhouse gas emissions, reports Reuters.

He said the overall target set by developed countries of reducing their emissions by more than five per cent below 1990 levels by early next century would represent a major shift in the trend of emissions.

"It shows true political leadership by the largest industrial economies," he said in a statement issued through a UN spokesman.

Diplomats from more than 150 countries, meeting in Kyoto, Japan, reached agreement on Thursday on an accord to slow down global warming.



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II is flanked by her husband Prince Philip, right, and son Prince Charles, while visiting the Royal Yacht Britannia for the last time, in Portsmouth Harbour, England, Thursday. In an emotional farewell to the ship that has carried her and her family around the world, the Queen and 14 other members of the royal family attended a luncheon for past and present members of the crew, before the yacht is finally decommissioned. At centre rear are Prince and Princess Michael of Kent. — AP/UNB photo

'Israel can't promise to meet US deadline' Albright to meet Arafat, Netanyahu on Dec 18

WASHINGTON, Dec 12: US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright will meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat on December 18, State Department officials said Thursday, reports AFP.

The separate meetings will be held the same day in a European city to follow up on talks held December 5-6 in Paris and Geneva with the leaders on reviving the Middle East peace process officials said.

But one official separately said that Albright may travel to two cities in one day to hold the meetings with Netanyahu and Arafat — possibly London and Geneva.

Israeli Army radio said earlier that the meetings will be held in London and that the two leaders will sit down together with Albright for talks on Israeli troop withdrawal from the

West Bank. Reuter adds: Israel said on Thursday it could not promise to meet US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's deadline next week for key decisions on peace.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meets her on Wednesday but may need more time for Cabinet discussion on Israel's view of a final peace deal with Palestinians, his aide Danny Naveh said.

Asked if a debate could be completed in time for his meeting with Albright, Naveh told Army Radio "We are certainly not convinced of it because... we are speaking of a very serious subject."

He said the Cabinet would in any event have to decide on the final deal before taking up the question of a long-overdue interim handover of more West Bank land to Palestinians.

Lanka vows to capture key highway at 'any cost'

COLOMBO, Dec 12: Sri Lanka's biggest and the bloodiest offensive against separatist Tamil Tiger rebels enters its eighth month today and a senior minister has vowed to complete it at "any cost" within seven weeks, reports AFP.

Acting Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte said the authorities were determined to capture a strategic highway to the northern peninsula of Jaffna in time for Sri Lanka's 50th independence anniversary celebrations on February 4.

"We are opening the main supply route to Jaffna at any cost," Ratwatte told the Colombo foreign, correspondence, association late Thursday. "We have no choice in the matter."

The minister said 1,000 soldiers had been killed and another 3,000 wounded since operation "sure victory" was launched on May 13 to open the 76 km highway through Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) territory.

The military says it has covered two thirds of the way, but there has been 20 government soldiers lost for every kilometre covered.

"We are only sorry that it has taken so long to open the road,

But we will do it in time so that we will be able to reunify the country before our 50th anniversary celebrations," the minister said.

Military analysts believe the government time-frame for opening the highway may be a formidable challenge for security forces with expected monsoon rains halting the movement of heavy armour.

The government also plans to hold local council elections in Jaffna for the first time in 14 years in February despite sporadic attacks. Jaffna, the former LTTE citadel, was taken by troops two years ago.

The authorities are banking on the emergence of a minority Tamil leadership to take over rehabilitation of the battle-scarred region.

Winning the highway is crucial for military hopes to send supplies to some half a million civilians in the peninsula by road. Since Jaffna was taken in December 1995, the area has been supplied by expensive and dangerous air and sea transport.

The capture of the jungle road will also confine Tiger rebels to the northeast corner of the country, the minister said.

Arafat's popularity soars with no contender in sight

JERUSALEM, Dec 12: Yasser Arafat would win by a landslide — 62 per cent of the vote — if presidential elections were held today, while his strongest political rival, Hamas leader Ahmed Yassin, would get only 3 per cent, according to a poll published Thursday, reports AP.

The results were surprising because it is widely believed that the deadlock in peace talks with Israel hurts Arafat's standing, while it helps the Islamic militant group Hamas, which opposes the peace accords.

Hamas won another boost when its leader, Sheikh Yassin, was freed from an Israeli jail in October in a prisoner swap. Yassin was serving a life term, and was released after eight.

The survey was conducted by the Center for Palestinian Research and Studies, an independent West Bank think tank, among 1,323 Palestinians in late November. The margin of error was 3 percentage points.

4 political parties banned from Kenya's polls

NAIROBI, Kenya, Dec 12: Kenya's electoral Commission banned four lesser political parties from this month's general elections, saying Thursday they had failed to promise to abide by a mandatory code of conduct, reports AP.

The commission said it acted to show that all parties must keep the peace going into the December 29 vote.

Political campaigns in Kenya are often accompanied by violence, with candidates hiring rowdy young people to intimidate supporters of their opponents.

The code, which Parliament recently made law, requires candidates to restrain supporters from such behaviour, including disrupting rival political rallies, and to ensure supporters come unarmed to political gatherings.

It also says candidates are not to bribe voters, make inflammatory statements about their rivals or publish offensive material about them. The four banned parties were fielding only seven candidates in municipal elections.

Gerry Adams meets Tony Blair Search for peace in the offing in northern Ireland

LONDON, Dec 12: The leader of the IRA's political wing Gerry Adams met British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Thursday and said he hoped this "good moment in history" would aid the search for peace in northern Ireland, reports Reuters.

Adams, the first Irish Republican leader to cross the threshold of the British Prime Minister's official 10, Downing Street residence for 76 years, said the hour-long meeting had been a good one.

"Today was a significantly good moment. We should not underestimate the difficulties but, at the same time, this was a good moment in history because usually the moments in Anglo-Irish relationships in history are bad moments," the Sinn Fein leader told reporters after the talks.

However Adams said he had

bluntly told Blair that British rule of northern Ireland had to end.

"We certainly had the opportunity to put our view that all of the hurt and grief and division which has come from British involvement in Irish affairs has to end," he said.

Blair's spokesman described the talks with Adams as "constructive and positive" but said the British leader had warned that the best chance for peace in a generation would be missed if talks on the constitutional future of northern Ireland failed.

"There is a choice in history, between violence and despair or peace and progress," Blair said in his opening remarks. "This is not a risk-free process of anyone, but a few risks are worth taking."

Later Blair said he had told Adams Sinn Fein's presence in the current peace talks would

end if the five-month ceasefire was broken.

"They know perfectly well and I made it very, very clear that if they go back to violence, that's it, they'll be out of the talks," Blair told BBC television.

Two E Timorese rebels awarded death penalty

JAKARTA, Dec 12: An Indonesian court has ordered the execution of two East Timorese men convicted in a rebel attack in May that killed 17 security agents, reports AP.

The defendants, Luis Maria da Silva and Francisco da Costa, were sentenced at a trial Thursday in Baucau, a coastal town about 150 kilometers (93 miles) east of Dili, the official Antara news agency said.

Iraq slated for executing 4 Jordanians

AMMAN, Jordan, Dec 12: Jordan's parliament on Thursday blamed Iraq for its execution of four Jordanians, calling it a "flagrant disregard" of human rights, reports AP.

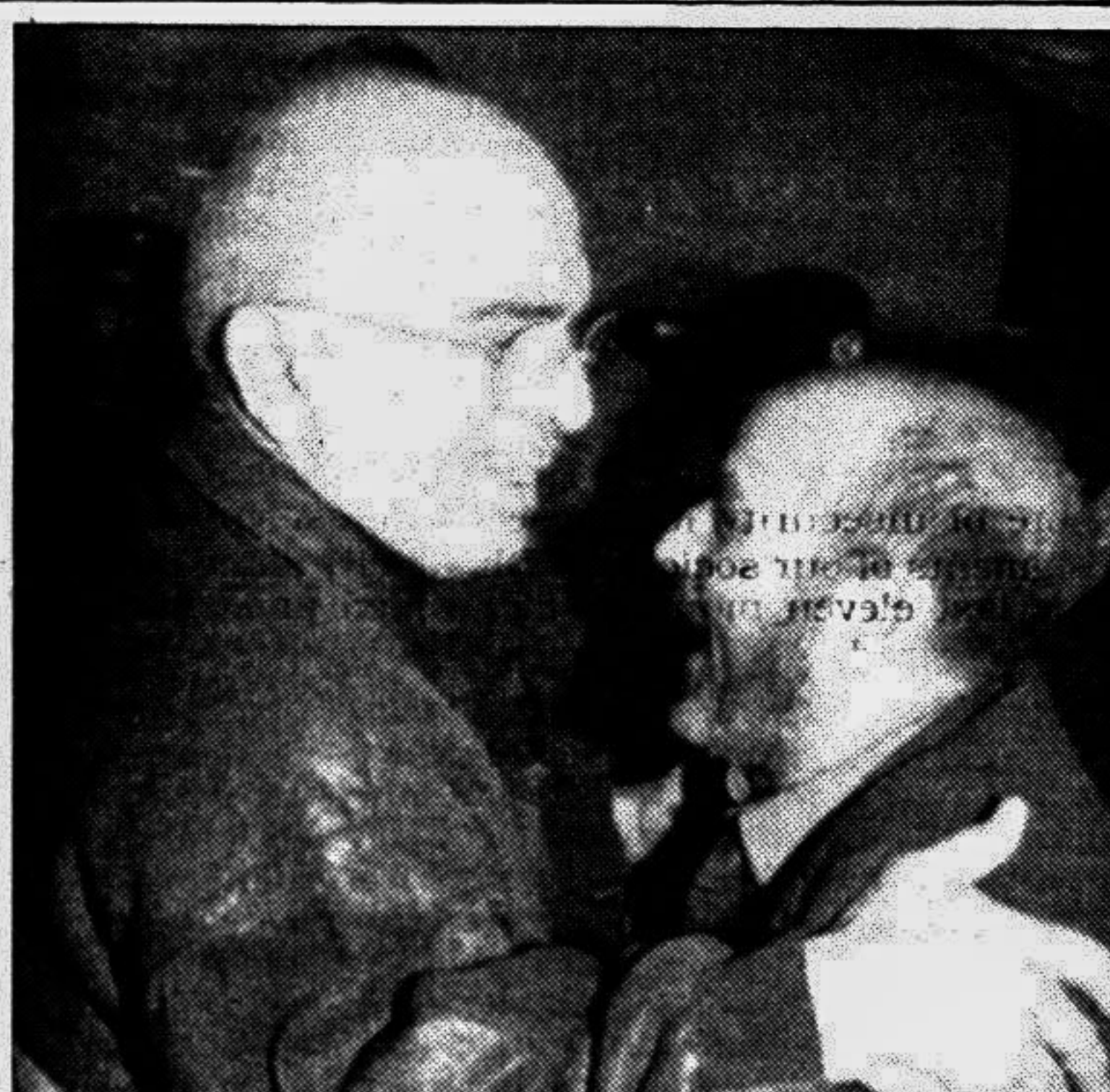
Jordanian newspapers also slammed Iraq for carrying out a death sentence Monday on four Jordanian men caught smuggling car parts worth 850 dollars.

Iraq ignored the personal intervention of Jordan's King Hussein and executed the men, outraging Jordanians and damaging the already lukewarm ties between the two neighbours.

"How can we defend such a regime that swallows up its friends and allies and kills their people?" columnist Sultan Hattab wrote in the popular al-Rai newspaper.

In its first official reaction to the uproar in Jordan, Iraq expressed surprise, saying the four men were smugglers, not "innocent young people."

Iraq denied Jordanian claims that the four executed men — Rizq Bishara Rizq, 32, Walid Mohammed Enserir, 37, Saad Yousef Dalaj, 35, and his younger brother Salah, 32 — were students.



Jordan's King Hussein, left, hugs Nader Subeichi, 49-year-old Jordanian, at Amman Military Airport on Friday. Subeichi was released by the Iranian authorities after 11 years detention when he was arrested by the Iranian forces during the Iraq-Iran war. The release of Subeichi came after Crown Prince Hassan's efforts to grant the freedom of two Jordanian prisoners of war, while he headed the Jordanian delegation to the Islamic Summit in Tehran. — AP/UNB photo

Canadian SC ruling gives boost to Indians' land claims

TORONTO, Dec 12: In a landmark ruling, Canada's Supreme Court set new legal guidelines Thursday that could help Indian tribes win swifter, more generous settlements of land-claims disputes, reports AP.

One of the guidelines — which could give Indian negotiators more leverage — requires court handling land disputes to recognise the validity of a tribe's oral history.

"It's a great day for aboriginal people across Canada," said Herb George, spokesman for the Gitksan tribe. "We were given a diamond for Christmas instead of a lump of coal."

The Gitksan and a neighbouring tribe, the Wet'suwet'en, have been campaigning since the 1970s for ownership rights

'Hutu rebels raid Tutsi camp in Rwanda: 200 killed'

KIGALI, Rwanda, Dec 12: Suspected Hutu rebels raided a Tutsi refugee camp in northwestern Rwanda on Thursday, slaughtering more than 200 people and wounding almost as many, the UN refugee agency said, reports AP.

Some 231 bodies were found in the camp, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees office in New York. Another 227 people were hospitalised in Gisenyi, about 60 miles northwest of Kigali. About 90 per cent of them had machete wounds, the agency said.

It was the second attack on Mudende camp since August, when more than 100 refugees were hacked or shot dead during a raid blamed on Hutu rebels.

The refugees had fled the Masasi region of neighbouring Congo in mid-1996 to escape attacks by Hutu rebels, who were

then based in camps in eastern Congo, formerly known as Zaïre.

The rebels had left Rwanda en masse fearing reprisals for the 1994 Hutu slaughter of a half-million minority Tutsis. Authorities say the rebels have mixed with more than 1 million Hutu civilians who returned to Rwanda late last year.

Rwanda's Tutsi-led government blames the rebels for a surge in violence in the northwestern corner of Rwanda. Barely a week passes without a rebel ambush or an attack on a jail.

Thursday's attack coincided with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's one-day visit to Kigali, where she talked with government leaders and praised their efforts at reconciliation.

The news of the attack came after Albright had left Rwanda.

Indian HC releases Laloo Prasad on bail

PATNA, India, Dec 12: A powerful politician was freed on bail Friday after spending four months in jail awaiting trial in a multi-million dollar corruption scandal in eastern India, reports AP.

High Court Judge PK Sareen, while ordering Laloo Prasad Yadav's release, on Thursday rejected the federal investigators' plea that he could tamper with evidence during the trial that was expected to begin soon. It took a day to process Yadav's release.

Yadav, a popular leader and a former top elected official of Bihar state, is expected to lead his Rashtriya Janata Dal party's campaign in India's general elections scheduled to be held in the new year.

His party, tainted by the scandal, will face a strong challenge from the right-wing

Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies.

Yadav is among dozens of politicians and officials who have been charged with siphoning off millions of rupees (dollars) from government funds from agricultural schemes. He has denied any wrong doing.

Before he was jailed, Yadav resigned as the state chief minister and appointed his wife Rabri, as his successor.

On Thursday, Rabri Yadav said she was ready to step down in favour of her husband. Under the law, Yadav can occupy a government position until he is convicted by the court, but he had stepped down rather than try to rule from jail.

It was not immediately clear whether Yadav would take over again as chief minister.



Iranian President and Chairman of the 8th Islamic Conference Mohammad Khatami, centre, is congratulated by delegates at the end of the final session of the summit in Tehran Thursday. Delegates from more than 50 Islamic countries gathered for three days. — AP/UNB photo

'India has little to look forward with another coalition likely to emerge'

NEW DELHI, Dec 12: India suffering from 50th birthday blues, enters 1998 with the prospect of early elections hanging heavily over the country, reports AP.

The world's largest democracy is set to go to the polls to elect its fifth government within two years, in February. Most analysts fear, however, that the country has little to look forward with another weak coalition likely to emerge from the ashes.

India's politicians proved during the country's 50th year of independence that they have not yet come to terms with multi-party rule. 1997 had been planned as a year of celebration. A time to remember such giants as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the men who led India to independence from British colonial rule in 1947.

Instead today politicians pygmies by comparison, spent twelve months of bickering, tearing down two governments and provoking a damaging economic slowdown as foreign investors ran for cover.

President Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin, due to visit India in the opening months of 1998, also hesitated to announce their travel plans.

They may choose to delay their trips until caretaker Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral's lame-duck minority government has been replaced with something more solid.

Gujral's resignation at the end of November after more than a fortnight of Machiavellian and ultimately pointless political intrigue caused widespread despair that India's 960 million people packed in 25 states are becoming ungovern-

able. The end of an era of dominance by Gandhi and Nehru's Congress Party, commentators wailed, and the emergence of a plethora of regional and single-issue parties, had condemned the country to a period of unworkable coalition governments.

Not all are so pessimistic. Kalim Bahadur, head of central Asian studies at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, says: "My faith in the coalition remains."

Gujral's 14 disparate parties were "too many for any coalition to handle."

"In the future, there will be new alignments and things will stabilise for the country."

Other analysts meanwhile say political — and economic — power is gradually moving away from New Delhi to be devested into the hands of state

government already keen to run their own affairs.

India, however, will have to learn fast to live with coalitions with election analyst GV Narasimha Rao predicting. In all probability, we are going to witness another split verdict."

That uncertainty is unlikely to help India's economic progress in 1998.

Outgoing Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram had predicted that the Indian elephant, after three years of averaging a seven per cent economic growth, would be ready to target eight per cent by 2000. Rivaling its Asian neighbours.

But the fiscal to March 1997, however, saw a dip to 6.8 per cent and that slowdown in expected to be aggravated by the collapse of the Gujral government in 1998.

"While the eight per cent target is feasible it depends chiefly

on whether 1998 will be politically stable," Manishi Roy, spokeswoman of one of India's biggest trade forums said.

"1997 will be remembered for a poor demand and a stockpile of unsold goods. Any government that comes has to kickstart demand by raising capital expenditure and improving infrastructure," she said.

Analyst Devesh Kumar, at the foreign brokerage Hoare Govett Asia, said: "A slowdown is inevitable." He said gross domestic product was expected to grow at about 5.5 per cent to March next year.

Around 150 million dollars was withdrawn by overseas investors from Indian stockmarkets in November, the first outflow since New Delhi opened up its bourses in 1992 as part of economic reforms.

Foreign institutions remain optimistic in the long-term that India's economy will be fully integrated and the rupee made fully convertible.

The 1998 outlook, however, will also depend on whether India's new government continues the sweeping market reforms of 1991.

"There are lots of bills pending on important things like opening the insurance sector and other things. If the policy of liberalisation continues and if rules are made more transparent then we are in for good times," Roy said.

"The monsoon has been good this year and agriculture has accounted for roughly 30 per cent of gross domestic product. Utilisation of existing resources in the mining and power sectors has been higher. The government has to make sure this continues."

Thai army captain accuses top brass of corruption

BANGKOK, Dec 12: In a scandal that threatens to rock the Thai military, an army captain has filed a complaint with Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai accusing top armed forces officials of corruption and permitting drug dealing, a government spokesman said Friday, reports AP.

"This matter will be looked into by non-political appointees, and be dealt with in a straight forward manner," said Akaphol Sorasuchart, the government spokesman, indicating Defence Ministry bureaucrats would handle the complaint.

Akaphol cautioned that the complaint "contained a lot of accusations but little details or evidence to back them up."

The potential scandal presents a thorny political prob-

lem for Chuan, who is also defence minister and the first civilian to hold the post since 1976.

The defence minister, at the insistence of the military, has traditionally been a military man, and there was reportedly some resistance within the ranks to Chuan taking the post.

The ministry is currently investigating an officer who recently wrote in a newspaper column that Chuan was inappropriate for the defence minister's job because he is a civilian.

The Thai military has staged more than a dozen coup d'etats since the end of World War II, but has adopted a more passive political role since being forced from power after suppressing a democracy uprising in 1992 by gunning down protesters.