

UN team finds evidence of mass killing in Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD, Dec 13: United Nations human rights investigators discovered hundreds of bodies dumped into wells and in shallow graves in northern Afghanistan giving credence to Taliban claims of a mass slaughter of its warriors, UN officials said on Saturday, reports AP.

A UN team spent the last two days in northern Afghanistan investigating claims by Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum that as many as 2,000 Taliban soldiers were massacred during a failed attempt to capture northern Afghanistan last May.

Some of the bodies were stuffed into deep wells. Other corpses showed signs of torture, although the investigators were reluctant to release details.

The investigation was

headed by the UN's human rights envoy to Afghanistan Dr. Choong Hyun Paik. He is to submit a report to the UN secretary general.

The investigators, who spoke to The Associated Press, asked not to be identified, but they said they investigated several sites near Sheberghan, Dostum's headquarters, some 400 kilometres (240 miles) north-west of the Afghan capital of Kabul.

Dostum said his rival, Malik Pahlawan, who had a brief alliance with the Taliban, was responsible for the slaughter.

Pahlawan currently is living in exile in Iran after being forced out of the country by Dostum.

UN investigators said the rampant slaughter was committed

by both sides in the conflict, claiming they also found evidence of mass killings of ethnic Uzbeks by Taliban troops, who mostly belong to Afghanistan's largest Pashtun ethnic group.

UN officials said the killings appeared to be ethnically motivated.

They also said that the death toll could be as high as 4,000 although no exact figure is yet available.

The opposition alliance, which controls about 15 per cent of northern Afghanistan is made up mostly of minority Tajiks, Uzbeks, Shi'ite and Ismaili Muslims.

"It appears that everybody was butchering everybody up there," said one UN official, who wouldn't be identified.

The UN team interviewed

residents in villages around Mazar-e-Sharif, who claimed Taliban soldiers massacred hundreds of Shi'ite Muslims during fierce fighting in May.

They also visited grave sites near the Uzbek border town of Hairatan, 70 kilometres (42 miles) north of Mazar-e-Sharif, where dozens of bodies were scattered across the ground. They appeared to be Taliban troops.

A Canadian forensic expert, Dr. Mark Skinner, will stay in northern Afghanistan until Tuesday to try to determine the causes of death.

The Taliban religious army controls roughly 85 per cent of the country, including the capital of Kabul where it has imposed its strict brand of Islamic law.



Heads of State and Foreign Ministers pose for a group photograph following a lunch at the palace of the Duke and Duchess of Luxembourg on the occasion of the EU summit in Luxembourg on Friday.

Nusrat Fateh Ali was poisoned to death?

ISLAMABAD, Dec 13: A writ seeking a probe into the death of celebrated Pakistani singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan was filed Friday at a High Court in the city of Lahore, a domestic news agency reported, says AFP.

The petitioner, Muhammad Farrakh, has alleged that the singer, who died in a London hospital in August after a heart attack, was poisoned to death, the official Associated Press of Pakistan said.

Farrakh, an admirer of Khan, has said the singer's wife also suspects her husband was murdered with a poisonous chemical, it added.

The agency did not say whether Farrakh has named any suspects in his petition.

The 49-year-old singer, who used a blend of Eastern and Western instruments, was the most popular musical figure in Pakistan and also had a large Western following.

EC asks Shiv Sena Choose leadership in democratic manner

NEW DELHI, Dec 13: India's poll panel Friday rapped a powerful Hindu nationalist party for its autocratic style and virtually warned it would have to hold party elections if it wanted to continue in politics, reports AFP.

The Election Commission told the Shiv Sena (Shivaji's Army) Party, which rules India's most industrialised state of Maharashtra, that it would have to choose its leadership in a democratic manner, the Press Trust of India reported.

Officials said the poll panel rejected the party's argument that its constitution did not require party elections to choose

Iran urged to stop executions, protect civil liberties

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 13: The UN General Assembly called on Iran to stop executions for non-violent crimes and protect the civil liberties of women and religious minorities in the Islamic republic, reports AP.

The call Friday came despite the election last May of President Mohammed Khatami, a move widely seen in the West as an endorsement for liberalising the strict Islamic regime which has governed Iran since the overthrow of the late Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi in 1979.

In a resolution, approved by a vote of 74-32 with 56 abstentions, the General Assembly expressed concern at the increasing number of executions in Iran as well as "torture, degrading treatment or punishment."

The resolution endorsed a report by UN special investigator Maurice Danby Copithorne, who cast doubt on claims that respect for human rights was improving in Iran.

In a report in October, Copithorne, a Canadian, said executions doubled from 1995 to 1996 and could double again this year. He said 137 people had been executed between January and September but gave no figures for the other years.

Copithorne said much of his information on executions came from reports in the Iranian press.

Pak cabinet authorises Sharif to pick ruling party's candidate

ISLAMABAD, Dec 13: Pakistan's cabinet has authorised Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to pick the ruling party's candidate in the presidential election this month, official sources said today, reports AFP.

Contenders include Finance Minister Sartaj Aziz, education minister Syed Ghous Ali Shah and National Assembly Speaker Ishaq Bux Soomro, the sources said.

Veteran politician Fida Mohammad Khan is also among the probables, the mass-circulation Daily Jang said.

Aziz has so far been rated as a leading contender but Jang said Khan had a good chance of getting the nomination.

The list of contenders from the Pakistan Muslim League indicates a desire to elect the next president from a smaller region of the country. Sharif is from the largest and politically dominant Punjab province.

Aziz and Khan both come from north west frontier province while the other two contenders are from southern Sindh.

UN condemns Rwanda massacre Annan renews int'l demand for security of vulnerable refugees

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 13: UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on Friday condemned the slaughter in Rwanda of almost 300 refugees, most of them women and children, his spokesman said, reports AFP.

Annan is "very concerned at the recent escalation of violence in the north and north-western regions of Rwanda," his spokesman said in a statement, adding that the UN chief renewed "the international demand that the security of vulnerable refugees be respected."

The attack Thursday on the Mudende refugee camp in Rwanda left at least 271 dead among 17,000 Tutsi refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), according to local officials.

Refugees began arriving in camps in Rwanda during fighting in the Laurent Kabila's military alliance launched its successful rebellion. Kabila became DRC president in May.

"These killings are a brutal reminder of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and its devastating consequences for the (African) region of the great lakes," Annan's statement said.

BRIEFLY

Sino-US naval pact signed:

Senior US and Chinese defence officials on Friday initialed an agreement designed to minimise the risk of naval accidents in the Pacific, reports AP.

On the final day of the first-ever Defence Consultative Talks, the two sides also agreed to exchange information on their military's role in humanitarian relief missions. They stopped short, however, of agreeing to hold joint exercises for humanitarian assistance — a US idea the Chinese are wary of.

The talks at the Pentagon were led by Walter Solcombe, the undersecretary of defence for policy, and Lt Gen Xiong Guangkai, deputy chief of the general staff for the People's Liberation Army.

UN worried at Nigeria's HR abuse:

The UN General Assembly expressed concern over human rights violations in Nigeria and called on the government to release all political prisoners, AP reports from United Nations.

By a vote of 81-18 with 64 abstentions, the General Assembly said Friday that the "absence of representative government in Nigeria" had led to systematic "violations of human rights."

The resolution urged the release of all those detained in connection with the 1993 elections, which were annulled by Gen Sani Abacha.

3 Tamils killed in Lankan jail:

Three Tamil prisoners were hacked to death by fellow inmates during a riot at a remand jail in southern Sri Lanka, press reports said yesterday, AFP says from Colombo.

The rioting broke out on Friday afternoon after the Tamil detainees, who had been moved there from another prison in the capital, clashed with other prisoners, arguing over food, the papers said.

The Sinhalese-language Lankadeepa Daily said the military was called on to bring the situation at the Kalutara prison under control. Several inmates were also wounded.

5 kg uranium seized in Slovakia:

Slovakian police seized more than five kilograms (11 pounds) of uranium when they stopped a car Thursday near Trnava in the west of the country, the Interior Ministry said, AFP reports from Bratislava.

The radioactive material, consisting of naturally-occurring uranium 238 with traces of uranium 235 was being transported in four plastic bottles in the boot (trunk) of the vehicle.

The three Czech citizens in the car were arrested, along with four alleged Slovak accomplices.

2 prisoners die in Venezuela:

Two inmates died and another two received bullet and knife wounds in a row between rival gangs at the La Planta Prison in Caracas Friday, police and prison officials said, AFP reports from Caracas.

National Guard Commander Rafael Damiani said an explosion rocked one of the cell blocks where the fight broke out.

Day of attempt on Oday observed:

Iraq on Friday marked the first anniversary of the attempted assassination of President Saddam Hussein's eldest son with the slaughter of 33 sheep at a holy shrine, AP reports from Baghdad.

Film taken by the Associated Press Television showed about 500 spectators holding their hands in prayer as butchers slaughtered the sheep — one for every year of Oday Hussein's life at the shrine of Ali in Najaf, 180 kilometres (110 miles) south of Baghdad.

Kyoto protocol raises hopes for wind & solar power

PHOENIX, Dec 13: The small businesses banking on alternative energy are hoping an international agreement to fight global warming will provide the boost to their fortunes that oil embargoes and soaring energy prices in earlier decades failed to sustain, reports AP.

"Anyone who says renewable energy sources like solar and wind will never become commonplace either hasn't read a book on the subject lately or is not in the business," Andy Kruse, co-founder of Southwest Windpower Inc., said Friday.

"Denmark already gets 7 per cent of its power from wind. Virtually 80 per cent of the power in Brazil comes from wind or hydroelectric sources," he said. "The list goes on and on."

The phones haven't exactly rung off the hook at Kruse's business since industrial nations agreed this week to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases. But Kruse said that even if the pact is never enacted in the United States, alternative energy has been given its best shot ever for making inroads in a nation that's hooked on oil,

Elections begin in Mauritania

NOUAKCHOTT, Dec 13: Voters went to the polls in Mauritania Friday in elections that President Maaouya Ould Sid Ahmed Taya, in power for 13 years appeared set to win, reports AP.

With sandstorms whipping the capital of the destitute northwest African country, Nouakchott, turnout was light and many polling stations were deserted, witnesses said.

But officials said the turnout was better in the rest of the country apart from a few strongholds of opposition parties who had called for a boycott of the poll.



Journalists and Iraqi people gathered in Najaf, Friday, as the blood of slaughtered sheep covers the courtyard of Imam Ali shrine (cousin of Prophet Mohammed (SM)). Journalists and Iraqis joined in prayers to mark the first anniversary of the assassination attempt on the life of Uday Hussein, the eldest son of the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Jiang vows to continue efforts to ease tension in Korean Peninsula

TOKYO, Dec 13: Chinese President Jiang Zemin has vowed that his country will continue to play a constructive role in easing tension on the divided Korean Peninsula, a newspaper here said today, reports AP.

In an interview in Beijing Friday with the Nihon Keizai Shimbun, Jiang was also quoted as saying China would welcome eventual normalisation of North Korea's relations with the United States and Japan.

"As a country neighbouring the Korean Peninsula, the government of China wishes to continue playing a constructive role in further easing the situation on the peninsula," Jiang told the leading economic daily. Jiang hoped that the two Ko-

Mandela begins descent from power this week

JOHANNESBURG, Dec 13: Nelson Mandela begins his descent from power this week, stepping down as head of the African National Congress at a convention that will set South Africa's course into the next century, reports AP.

Mandela will remain president of the country until 1999. But he and other longtime ANC leaders are starting to make way for the governing party's next generation, led by ANC president-in-waiting Thabo Mbeki.

The ANC is picking leaders at a five-day meeting that begins Tuesday in the northern town of Mafikeng.

Paid-up party membership stands at just under 135,000, believed to be well below the total in 1994 at the height of the ANC's election campaign.

Heated interview with minister Labour Party warns BBC of possible reprisals

LONDON, Dec 13: Britain's ruling Labour Party has warned the BBC of possible reprisals after a heated interview with a senior minister, provoking opposition claims Friday that it was trying to muzzle the press, reports AP.

Labour officials wrote to the BBC Wednesday complaining over an interview on the flagship morning radio news programme earlier in the day with Harriet Harman, the Secretary of State for Social Security.

They said she was constantly interrupted by the interviewer and "frankly, none of us feels that this can go on. We can see no benefit to us."

The letter, which was made public Friday, went on to warn

290,000 children working illegally in US

NEW BRUNSWICK, New Jersey, Dec 13: No one has tried to count them all. Not even the federal government, which is responsible for their well-being, reports AP.

So how many children are working illegally in America?

On behalf of The Associated Press, a Rutgers University labor economist analyzed data from census surveys and other sources to estimate their number. The result: 290,200 children — two-thirds of them 15 years or younger — worked unlawfully in America last year.

Not all those children, more than two boys to every girl, are living a Dickensian nightmare. Some are teen-agers selling burgers and fries at the mall for more hours than the law allows.

Others, though, toil in jobs too dangerous for their years, or work during the very school hours designed to give them a chance at a future.

The study by Douglas L. Kruse, a labor economist at the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers, represents the only comprehensive estimate of illegal child labor in the nation now available. If

nothing else, Kruse said, the study makes a strong case for developing better data on the employment of children.

Because migrant laborers and very young child workers are particularly difficult for government surveys to pick up, the study may well have thousands of child workers uncounted.

Nevertheless, it estimates that:

Of the 290,200 children illegally employed last year, 129,700 were 14 or 15 years old, and 59,600 were younger than that. 147,700 children work illegally in America in an average week.

Employers saved \$155 million last year employing children illegally, rather than paying more to hire legal workers.

Children working in jobs the law declares too hazardous for their age were paid \$1.38 an hour less on average than those who could be employed in compliance with the law. Children working illegally averaged \$1.58 an hour.

While illegal child labor appears to have decreased since the 1970s, the number of boys

and girls working in violation of the law has stabilized in the most recent period measured, 1995-97.

To put the estimates in context, the number of children working illegally is close to 4 per cent of the 4.1 million children aged 12 to 17 who work in America during any given week.

Some industries were harder for Kruse to measure than others. Illegal home-based work, like sewing dresses outside the workplace, was not included in the illegal count since there was no accurate way to calculate how many kids were involved.

The study did estimate 13,100 children were working illegally last year in garment industry sweatshops, defined as business with a pattern of violating wage, safety and child labor regulations.

Agriculture, which relies heavily in some areas of the country on migrant workers, is also hard to examine.

To make an estimate, Kruse took the number of child labor violations the US Department of Labor actually found in agriculture and extrapolated a figure for the number of children working illegally in that indus-



American astronaut David Wolf, right, waves hello during a press conference from the space station Mir with his Russian hosts, cosmonauts Pavel Vinogradov, left, and Anatoly Solovoyev, Friday, in this image from television. Wolf and Solovoyev are hoping to make a spacewalk in early January.