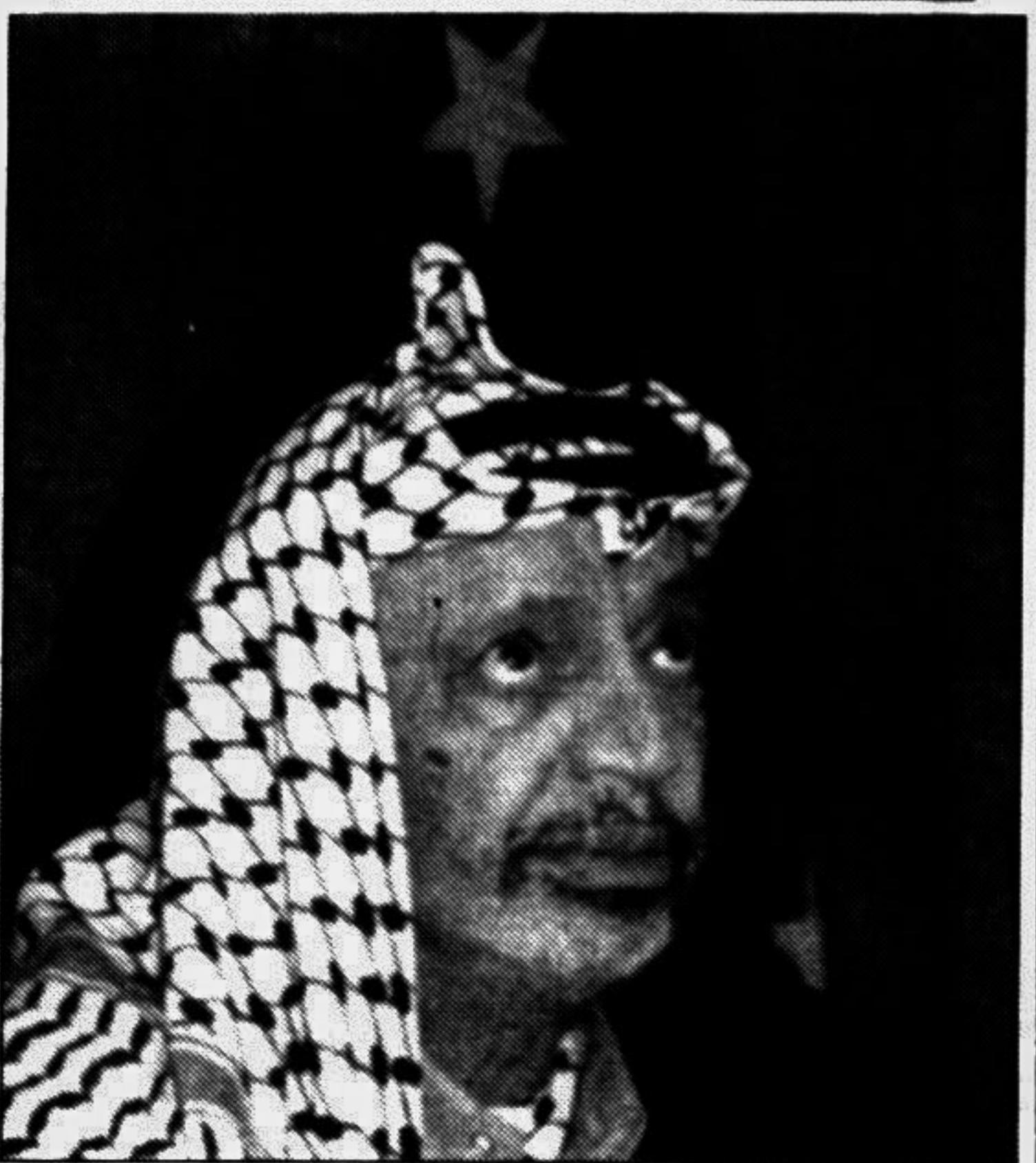


BRIEFLY



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat sits in front of a European Union flag when he reports on a news conference at Senningen Castle near Luxembourg Friday, about his talks with the Prime Minister of Luxembourg and EU President Jean-Claude Juncker.

— AP/UNB photo

Kumaratunga leaves for Pakistan: President Chandrika Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka left for Pakistan Saturday on three-day state visit to boost bilateral ties, officials said. AP reports from Colombo.

Kumaratunga will meet with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in Islamabad to discuss bilateral issues, and sign agreements on investment, cooperation and sharing technology. Acting President Wasim Sajid will host a banquet for Kumaratunga, who is accompanied by her foreign minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar.

Top Pak, Indian policemen to meet:

Three senior Pakistani police officials will meet their Indian counterparts in neighbouring India to try to develop a strategy to tackle acts of terrorism and smuggling along their tense border, officials said Saturday. AP reports from Lahore.

It will be the first official meeting between Pakistani and Indian police officials since Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif took office last February, pledging to improve relations between the two hostile neighbours.

47 Algerians massacred in 2 days: At least 47 civilians, including women and children, have been massacred in two days in Algeria in a wave of attacks blamed on Islamic guerrillas, newspapers reported yesterday. AFP reports from Algiers.

Thirty-one victim — 8 men, 10 women and 13 children — were massacred on Thursday night at Larbaa, 35 kilometres southeast of Algiers. Ten nomads had their throats cut the same night in the Aflou region, south of Algiers, while at Lakhdaria, to the east of the capital, Islamists put up a road-block and killed several civilians. On Friday morning, two bombs exploded at Blida market, 40 km South of Algiers, killing between two and four people.

35 peasants killed in Colombia: As many as 35 displaced peasants were killed in a remote, tropical region of northeast Colombia Friday, after rightwing paramilitaries attacked their encampment, Colombian Radio reported, says AFP from Bogota.

Citing army sources, Colombia's Radionet radio reported that gun-toting paramilitaries overran the encampment, killing between 25 to 35 people, and tossing the corpses into the Paravando River.

200 Nicaraguan rebels surrender: More than 200 of Nicaragua's last recognised political rebels laid down their weapons on Friday, but a small group defied a recent peace treaty and refused to disarm. Reuters report from Nicaragua.

The final phase of demobilization of the leftist Andrew Castro unit (FUAC) was delayed for several hours while rebels leaders, defence ministry officials and peace monitors held more talks in this remote rebel stronghold 288 miles (460 km) northeast of Managua.

Ukrainian airliner crash

Wreckage of plane found at foot of Mount Olympus

KATERINI, Greece, Dec 20: The wreckage of a Ukrainian airliner, missing for three days with 70 people aboard, was found at the foot of Mount Olympus today, reports Reuter.

"Land forces are rushing there now and our first concern is whether there are any survivors," Macedonia and Thrace minister Philippos Petsalnikos told reporters at the northern Greek airport of Salomika.

The Russian-built Yakovlev 42 airliner, which vanished from radar screens on Wednesday, was spotted about 40 km from this northern Greek town by a military helicopter combing the area during a brief spell of clear weather.

"The area has been banned to civilians. The helicopter only saw debris in a steep gorge and it was all covered by snow," a defence ministry official said.

Relatives of those aboard the plane who gathered at Salomika airport to wait for news were be-

ing informed of developments by Petsalnikos and his staff.

Heavy snow and thick for stymied search efforts in the rugged mountains 50 km (30 miles) south and west of Salomika by more than 5,000 troops and about 500 army vehicles. Authorities had pinned their hopes on a NATO plane that can detect metal from the air.

The Ukrainian plane vanished on Wednesday night during its second approach to land at the northern Greek airport of Salomika after a flight from Kiev via Odessa.

Greek transport minister Tasos Mandelis said it appeared the pilot became "disoriented" after listening to a tape recording between Salomika air control tower and the plane.

The airliner, belonging to state carrier Air Ukraine, was being operated by Aerosweet Airlines, a Ukrainian-Israeli concern.

PHNOM PENH, Dec 20: The general commanding embattled resistance troops loyal to deposed co-prime minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh said Saturday he is prepared to hold ceasefire talks to halt a major offensive against his last stronghold, reports AP.

Nhek Bunchhay, contacted on the border with Thailand by telephone, said he wanted the United Nations or other international organisations to arrange and mediate the ceasefire to give it added weight and prevent violations.

"We welcome any ceasefire," Nhek Bunchhay said, adding that only Cambodians had died in the fighting.

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International

US vows to inspect Saddam's palaces

Inspectors find evidence of mass destruction weapons

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 20: UN weapons inspectors have "evidence" that Iraq is concealing weapons of mass destruction at sites declared off-limits, the top UN arms inspector said Friday, reports AFP.

UN Special Commission Chairman Richard Butler said at a news conference here that "we have evidence or reason to believe that prohibited items have been and or do exist in places that would be within that category for presidential or sovereign sites."

However, he refused to give further details "because that would blow the whole thing."

AP adds, inspectors will scour Iraq's presidential palaces for evidence of weapons production "one way or another," a spokesman for President Bill Clinton said.

"While US diplomats pressed UN Security Council members to condemn any move by Iraq to ban inspectors from places and other sites where Baghdad has asserted sovereignty, White House spokesman Mike McCurry declined to say when the United States might act on its own."

"I'm not going to lay out any

artificial timetable," McCurry told reporters on Friday. "It needs to be deliberately pursued by the Security Council."

He reiterated the US position that any Iraqi activity on chemical, biological or other weapons of mass destruction would be a "very grave matter" and said the United States would insist that the international inspection team have access to sites that would be within that category for presidential or sovereign sites."

The United States has insisted on that, and I think at some point (access) will be available one way or another," he said.

At the US State Department, spokesman James Foley scoffed at the Iraqis for giving journalists a tour of the "off-limits" palaces on Friday.

"What it demonstrates is that the Iraqi claims of sovereignty, protecting UN access to those sites, are hypocritical," he said.

Iraq is "willing to let reporters, foreign delegations to visit what they claim to be sensitive and sovereign sites" and yet refuses to let in the UN inspection team, or UNSCOM".

Foley noted:

"That can only raise questions as to why they don't want UNSCOM to visit those sites," he said.

Meanwhile US efforts to get the Security Council to condemn Iraq have run into opposition from Russia and others, despite claims by the chief UN arms inspector that the Iraqis may be hiding banned weapons in sites they have declared off-limits.

US Ambassador Bill Richardson submitted a draft resolution Friday in the Security Council to condemn any move by Iraq to keep UN Arms Inspectors from presidential palaces and other "sovereignty sites."

The draft would have the council repeat its demand that Iraq cooperate fully with UN inspectors and grant them full, immediate and unrestricted access to any site they wish to visit.

The Security Council condemns any failure by the government of Iraq to provide (the inspectors) with immediate, unconditional access to any site or category of sites and unac-

ceptable and a clear violation of the relevant (UN) resolutions," it said.

But Russian Ambassador Sergey Lavrov objected to using the word "condemns" and also asked for language affirming Iraqi sovereignty. The Russians also want the statement to cite Iraqi progress in destroying some of the banned weapons, including long-range missiles and nuclear research programmes.

Council statements must be approved by all 15 members. Unable to overcome the differences, the council adjourned until Monday. Council diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity, said France and China also raised objections to the US draft.

It was a latest sign of the challenge the Clinton administration faces in trying to win council approval for tough measures against Iraq. Nevertheless, the administration has said its intends to pursue a diplomatic solution for the time being, largely because of widespread opposition in the Arab world and among America's European allies.

Ex-ROK presidents to be freed from jail

SEOUL, Dec 20: South Korea's President and president-elect agreed on Saturday to free disgraced former president Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae-woo in a dramatic effort to unite a nation in deep economic crisis, reports Reuter.

The decision provoked immediate angry criticism from one of the country's leading human rights groups, which said there were still many prisoners of conscience in South Korea who had been jailed by the former strongmen.

A statement from the office of incumbent president Kim Young-Sam after he met president-elect Kim Dae-Jung said the former chief executives would be freed on Monday along with 23 associates jailed in connection with slush fund scandals, a 1979 coup, and an army massacre a year later.

A presidential spokesman said both Kims backed the amnesty.

The amnesty... will be carried out in December 22 after cabinet endorsement," the statement said, adding that the move was aimed at national unity at a time of economic crisis.

Cabinet endorsement is likely to be a formality. Veteran opposition leader Kim Dae-Jung narrowly won Thursday's presidential election.

poor, or by donkey for the better-off.

The WFP team handing out the food arrived last week to evaluate the problem in the valley, high up in the Hindu Kush mountains.

Jamuddin Jakkhamani, 40, the village chief, lives in a hut built from dried mud with his seven children aged three to 12, who are already showing the first signs of malnutrition.

"We have just enough food so that we don't die of hunger, but we haven't eaten meat for the last 12 months," he said.

He claimed, although here was no confirmation from humanitarian groups or officials, that several people "children and the elderly" had already died from illness aggravated by hunger.

Since the summer, the Taliban have blocked all road access to the province from the east and south, disrupting trade which the province, which always faces shortages in winter, relied on for minimum needs until the next harvest.

On Wednesday the WFP opened an air bridge from the Pakistani city of Peshawar to the province to get around the road blocked and bring in around 1,500 tonnes of emergency food, aid mostly wheat.

"It's a race against time and the winter," a WFP member said, pulling his coat closer and looking nervously at the already snow covered peaks.

Cold weather hampering UN food convoys in Afghanistan

DARA-I-AHANGARAN, Afghanistan, Dec 20: With mountain roads far too narrow for trucks, UN Food Programme is facing a tough task to send essential supplies to people living in the Dara Valley as winter sets in, reports AFP.

World Food Programme (WFP) trucks, most of which have been stuck in mud with their seven children aged three to 12, who are already showing the first signs of malnutrition.

"We have long urged all the parties to refrain from unilateral acts which make it difficult for the negotiations to progress and to prosper — and to avoid actions that tend to pre-judge final status or permanent status negotiations," Foley added.

US President Bill Clinton has summoned both Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat for talks early next year in Washington where US negotiators will continue to try to find agreement on another Israeli troop withdrawal in the West Bank.

AFP adds: President Bill Clinton will meet with Israeli and Palestinian leaders next month before they make "tough decisions" on the future of the peace process, a senior State Department official said Friday.

The separate meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in Washington will give Clinton "an opportunity to explain to both leaders the kinds of things that from his standpoint, he believes it will take to be able to move forward," said the official, who asked not to be named.

Standing in ragged lines, the men of Dara-I-Ahangaran wait for their rations, 150 kilos (300 pounds) of potatoes per family.

Since Wednesday some 7.5 tonnes have been distributed. Each ration is handed over on presentation of a coupon, then carried laboriously on the backs of family members, of the

NLD rejects warning to stop political activities

YANGON, Dec 20: The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) has rejected a warning from the military government to cease political activities for security reasons, reports AP.

The NLD, led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, said in a statement Friday that the government was to blame for avoiding a political dialogue that the opposition has demanded.

Officials led by Home Minister Col. Tin Hline met members of the NLD's executive committee on Thursday and told them to cease trying to hold mass rallies, saying it could slow down national reconciliation, a government statement said.

The NLD statement said that Tin Hline repeatedly asked that the party stop handing out pamphlets. The statement said that the party had a right to engage in legal organisational activities.

The government is deliberately avoiding the dialogue, since it has no desire to follow the path of meaningful negotiation to solve existing political

in economic and social problems," the party statement said.

The NLD has long called for a dialogue with Myanmar's military rulers. Top officials met with senior leaders of the party for the first time in July, but their refusal to see Suu Kyi or her top two deputies prompted accusations that the government was trying to split the opposition leadership.

The military has ruled Myanmar since 1962. The present regime came to power in 1988, crushing protests against military rule that brought Suu Kyi to the leadership of the pro-democracy movement.

The government changed its name last month from the State Law and Order Restoration Council to State Peace and Development Council, but many of the leaders remain the same.

Suu Kyi was under house arrest from 1989 to 1995 and has again been largely confined to her home for the past year. She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.

Her supporters won elections in 1990, but the military refused to yield power.

Indian streetside clowns were Nobel laureate's inspiration

STOCKHOLM, Dec 20: Dario Fo, the Nobel laureate for Literature this year, says the strongest inspiration in his life has come from the streetside Indian clown, reports India Abroad News Service in an interview here.

He was awarded the 1997 Nobel Prize in Literature in recognition of being "one who emulates the jesters of the Middle Ages in scouring authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden." Fo has also been called the Miguel de Cervantes of our times, who "combining Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in one, relentlessly but very effectively tilts at today's windmills."

Fo has facets other than literary. He has been, over the decades, the most painful thorn in the side of the Italian establishment and the Vatican as well as a Marxist of the most pure genre. The Italian government did not even congratulate him after he won the Nobel Prize.

During the interview he spoke at length on these controversies: "Marxism has been a

state of mind," he said. "It served a pragmatic purpose, at the right times, in right places. Today it has served its purpose. To continue to adhere to it, whether in India or elsewhere, would be a futile obsession."

"I have nothing against the Catholic Church, per se. But I do oppose the neo-fundamentalism in Christianity, as I do in other religions," Fo said of his feud with the Vatican.

In his crusade to bare the existing evils, Fo spares neither state nor church nor society and has in the process earned the ire of all three. However, his denigration of the three estates, however piquant and provocative, is never bitter — it is just laughter used as an effective weapon.

Fo, 71, was born at Lago Maggiore. Educated at the Academy of Arts in Milan and on the streets of the world, including India, he claims to have been his own chief teacher. His talents and work were singularly complemented

by the actress and writer Franca Rame.

"He, if anyone, merits the epithet of jester in the true meaning of the word," Professor Sture Allen, permanent secretary of The Swedish Academy, the body that annually selects the Nobel laureate, told IANS. "With a blend of laughter and gravity, he opens our eyes to abuses and injustices in society and also the wider historical perspective in which they can be placed. Fo is an extremely serious satirist with a multifaceted oeuvre."

In his work, Fo often alludes to the medieval jesters (joculatori) and their comedy and mysteries. The central work "Mistero Buffo" (The Buffoon) from 1969 is based on such historic material as interpreted by Fo.

Another milestone of Fo's extensive work is "Morte accidentale di un anarchico" (Accidental Death of an Anar-

chist) from 1970. It was based on the right-wing extremist bomb attacks of 1969 in Italy, for which the authorities and the press blamed the anarchoists. During interrogations in Milan, an innocent suspect "fell" from a fifth-floor window. The play deals with these interrogations, which are gradually taken over by a Hamlet-like character, "Il Matto" (The Madman) who possesses the kind of lunacy that