

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 Sajjad 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 Pavarando 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 demobilisation of the leftist Andrew Castro united front (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 Reuters.

"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 Salonika.

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 Salonika airport to wait for news were being informed of developments by Petsalnikos and his staff.

Heavy snow and thick fog stymied search efforts in the rugged mountains 50 km (30 miles) south and west of Salonika 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 Salonika 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 Salonika air control tower and the plane.

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

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 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 Baghdad has put off-limits.

"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.

Pak-controlled Kashmir's PM faces vote of no confidence

MUZAFFARABAD, Pakistan, Dec 20: A no confidence vote was tabled against Sultana Mehmoode, Prime Minister of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, today, reports Reuters.

The deputy speaker of the local parliament, Asrar Abbasi, told reporters he was confident he would secure the 25 votes needed from the 48-seat assembly to topple Mehmoode.

Elections for the assembly in June last year were dominated by Benazir Bhutto's opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and its allies, which won 38 seats.

But the polls were marred by allegations from the speaker of the assembly, Mumtaz Hussain Rathore, that Mehmoode bribed Bhutto's husband, Asif Zardari, to become prime minister.

Mehmoode, like Rathore, a member of the PPP, denies the allegations.

Abbasi said all parties in the assembly backed the no-confidence motion and forecast that Rathore would succeed Mehmoode.

Pakistan controls about one-third of the disputed Kashmir region and India the remainder.

Changes in Indian electoral laws recommended

NEW DELHI, Dec 20: India's poll chief has recommended changes in electoral laws to allow some 2.5 million defence and diplomatic personnel stationed away from their homes to cast proxy votes in next year's elections, reports AFP.

The Press Trust of India today said MS Gill, head of India's Election Watchdog Panel, had written to President K R Narayanan on Friday suggesting that postal ballots be replaced with the new system.

Gill said the Election Commission had after "extensive discussion" unanimously agreed that the only effective method of ensuring full participation of the personnel was to enable them to vote by proxy.

"Under this system, they would be permitted to authorise any adult member of the family to vote for them in their native place," Gill said.

Gill said the proposal and the backing of defence personnel and political parties, adding it was prevalent in "advanced democracies like the United Kingdom and France."

He said earlier elections had shown that "hardly 10 to 15 per cent of postal ballots reached the returning officers in time."

8 soldiers, 1 rebel killed in Lankan clashes

COLOMBO, Dec 20: Tamil Tiger guerrillas ambushed an army patrol in eastern Sri Lanka, killing five soldiers while another three troopers and a rebel were killed in clashes elsewhere, the defence ministry said today, reports AFP.

Gunmen from the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ambushed the army patrol in the district of Polonnaruwa on Friday using automatic assault rifles, the ministry said.

"Troops retaliated with small arms and machine guns causing the terrorists to withdraw carrying their dead and wounded," the ministry said without giving rebel casualties.

The ministry said that the rebels also exploded a land mine in the northern region of Elephant Pass on Friday, killing three soldiers and wounding 10 others who were travelling in a military vehicle.

Security forces shot dead one rebel in a separate confrontation in the northern Jaffna peninsula and recovered a hand grenade from the victim, the ministry said.

Clinton will meet Arafat, Netanyahu in Jan

Israel won't limit Jewish settlement in West Bank or Jerusalem

JERUSALEM, Dec 20: Israel will not limit Jewish settlement construction in the West Bank or Jerusalem despite US calls for a timeout, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, reports AP.

"That's not going to happen," Netanyahu told The Associated Press on Friday, adding that both the Israelis and the Palestinians should be free to accommodate burgeoning populations.

"People say to us that we should limit that (growth). We are not going to limit natural growth here, and we don't expect the Palestinians to limit theirs. There is no fairness or justice in that."

Netanyahu said that US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright never defined what she meant by a timeout, and Israel would not freeze or cut back construction.

This is not the first time Netanyahu has announced his refusal to implement "a timeout in settlement construction. Last month, he also dismissed US calls for a delay, calling the growth of communities on disputed land a "non-issue."

At that time, Netanyahu said he could not suspend construction while the Palestinians, according to him, were building without restrictions in their communities.

In Friday's interview, Netanyahu said he had no intention of giving in to Palestinian demands to halt construction of 6,500 housing units for Jews in the Har Homa area of Jerusalem.

Palestinians, who call the area Jabal Abu Ghneim, oppose the project because it is in the sector of Jerusalem they want as the capital of a future Palestinian state.

"It's part of Jerusalem, for God's sake," said Netanyahu, maintaining the peace accords with the Palestinians did not ban Israeli building in disputed parts of the city. "It's like

Winnie wins seat on nat'l executive committee of ANC

MAFIKENG, South Africa, Dec 20: South Africa's Winnie Madikizela-Mandela won a seat on the national executive committee of the ruling African National Congress today, reports Reuters.

A vote by secret ballot on the last day of the party's national conference in the northern town of Mafikeng put her 15th on the list of 60 victorious candidates, who included many ministers in President Nelson Mandela's government.

The election to the national executive committee, the ANC's main decision-making body, is one of the only open popularity tests of its leaders.

Mandela's former wife, who is now embroiled in fresh accusations of torture and murder that she denies, placed fifth at the last national conference.

She declined earlier this week to stand for the post of ANC deputy president.



A police officer guards two metric tons of cocaine paste in Florence on Friday. The Anti-Narcotic Police seized the paste in a tanker truck and arrested the truck driver, the seizure of about 2,000 kilograms of unprocessed cocaine was made on a road near Florence, 235 miles southwest of Bogota during a routine road check. — AP/UNB photo

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.

Often described as the "first clown of the world", satirist Fo expressed his appreciation for the "great influence that the Indian clown has exercised on my art."

"I have great admiration for the poetry, philosophy and culture of India," said the prolific Italian playwright, actor, producer and director, who has given modern popular theatre a new dimension. "But it is the Indian clown, the plain ordinary Indian street clown, that has most influenced my work."

"What I mean, (is that) over the ages, the clown in India has made life easier for the downtrodden by mimicking the foibles of their unbearable caste and social superiors... an opportunity to portray their tormentors, however occasional,

has been ameliorative of their insurmountable social tribulations," Fo told India Abroad News Service in an interview here.

Fo was awarded the 1997 Nobel Prize in Literature in recognition of being "one who emulates the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging 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

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 Woon in a dramatic effort to unite a nation in deep economic crisis, reports Reuters.

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 strongman.

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 on 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 elec-

tion and is due to take over from Kim Young-Sam on February 25. The former dissident will become the first ever president from the opposition camp.

His main poll rival, Lee Hoi-Chang of the majority grand national party, proposed earlier this year that Kim Young-Sam grant the amnesty.

While it will be popular with conservatives, it will be less so in the southwestern city of Kwangju. Kim Dae-Jung's main support base and scene of the 1980 army massacre in which hundreds died. The military action provoked a bitter and lasting resentment of central government in the southwest.

The revolt erupted after the country's new army rulers, led by Chun, declared martial law and arrested Kim Dae-Jung, then one of the democratic candidates planning to stand for President. Kim was charged with sedition and sentenced to death, but the sentence was eventually suspended.

Roh and Chun were convicted of mutiny, treason and corruption in August 1996. In April, the Supreme Court upheld an appeals court decision to commute Chun's death sentence to life in jail and cut Roh's 22-1/2 year sentence to 17 years.

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 seen better days, are forced to stop at the first village they come to, Dara-I-Ahangaran, after a difficult trip over potholed roads which more than once threatened to disable the vehicles.

The supplies of potatoes are essential with an estimated 160,000 people in the central Afghan province of Bamian facing starvation, which is likely to become worse with temperatures expected to drop in the next few days to as low as minus 20 degrees Celsius (minus four Fahrenheit).

The shortages, caused partly by poor harvests, are exacerbated by a blockade of the area by the Islamic Taliban militia, who claim they cannot let food through as it might find its way into the hands of Hezb-i-Wadhat warriors fighting them.

Standing in ragged lines, the men of Dara-I-Ahangaran wait for their ration, 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

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 Jakhmani, 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 there 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 Pakistan city of Peshawar to the province to get around the road blocked and bring in around 1,500 tonnes of emergency aid, mostly wheat.

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

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,

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 Suu Kyi, 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.

Cambodian resistance leader proposes ceasefire talks

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.

Gen. 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.

The movement toward a ceasefire follows three days of shuttle diplomacy by opposition leader Sam Rainsy to broker a halt to heavy fighting since December 15 between the resistance and Hun Sen, who overthrew his co-premier in fighting in the capital in July.

Sam Rainsy, who met Nhek Bunchhay at the border Friday,

said he would make an "important" announcement through an interview with Thai television late Saturday. He has reportedly received a green light for his mediation efforts from Hun Sen and Thai Foreign Ministry officials.

Nhek Bunchhay said that he was prepared to accept a ceasefire to prevent further Cambodian deaths in the struggle over O'Smach, a heavily fortified resistance base on the border where his dug-in fighters have withstood six days of heavy artillery bombardment.

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

Nhek Bunchhay suggested that the United Nations or a "concerned organisation" mediate a meeting of top government and resistance military officials to discuss ceasefire terms.

when he married 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 finalist, 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 (joculators) and their comedy and mysteries. The central work "Mistero Buffo" (The Buffoon Mystery) 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 anarchists. During interrogations in Milan, an anarchist 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 lays bare the lies of officialdom.

Other works that have been acclaimed the world over include "Non si paga! Non si paga!" (We Can't Pay, We Won't Pay!) from 1974 and "Clacson, trombetta e pernaccia" (Trumpets and Raspberries) from 1981. The latter is a veritable comedy of errors aimed at participants in the disreputable stratagems in high places. In recent years, together with wife Franca Rame, Fo has dealt with women's issues in several telling plays.