

International

PM asks parties not to field criminals in polls
Tamil Nadu Cong(I) leader
breaks away from party

NEW DELHI, Dec 22: The Congress, India's oldest but now sagging party, suffered another morale-shattering split on Sunday ahead of elections to the parliament early next year, reports AFP.

A section of the party broke away and formed a rival faction in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, where a key ally dumped the Congress and opted for an alliance with Hindu nationalists only last week.

Breakaway faction leader VK Ramamurthy said in the Tamil Nadu capital Madras that his new group, the "Tamil Nadu People's Congress," would contest the elections along with the regional AIADMK Party.

"The Congress Party is in shambles," the Press Trust of India (PTI) quoted Ramamurthy as saying. He said that several former Congress members of parliament and Tamil Nadu assembly had joined his new outfit.

Sunday's breakup virtually decimates the Congress in Tamil Nadu, a sprawling coastal state of 55 million people, where it has for decades relied on the support of mainstream Tamil parties to win elections.

But the two main Tamil Nadu parties have both dumped the Congress since the latter suffered a crippling split ahead

of the 1996 parliamentary polls.

In recent days, half a dozen Congress leaders have quit the party across the country.

Sunday's development came after Congress chief Sitaram Kesri, faced with a rout in coming polls, claimed the "crisis" plaguing his 112-year-old party had ended following an unprecedented intervention by the widow of former slain premier Rajiv Gandhi.

Kesri said a possible split in the communist-ruled eastern Indian state of West Bengal had been avoided with a dissident, Mamata Banerjee, returning to the party fold.

Another report adds: Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral appealed to political parties not to field criminals in upcoming elections, in remarks published here today.

"It will be impossible to save democracy if candidates with criminal antecedents contest elections and manage to get elected," the United News of India (UNI) quoted Gujral as saying late Sunday.

"Political parties may field candidates with criminal antecedents under the pretext that such a candidate has not been convicted and hence cannot be branded a criminal," Gujral told a meeting in western India.

"These are, however, lame excuses considering the fact

that the constituency is aware of the criminal background of the candidate whether or not convicted."

Gujral's comments follow growing concern that a large number of known criminals are entering Indian politics and increasingly getting elected both to the national parliament and state legislatures.

Meanwhile, tainted former Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao may be ditched as an election candidate by the Congress (I) Party, reports speculated here today.

Newspapers said Sitaram Kesri, who replaced Rao as Congress chief after the former was implicated in corruption scandals, told reporters the party would retain all its members of parliament as candidates in the coming elections "unless they were facing severe charges."

Kesri reportedly refused to answer any direct answers about Rao, India's Prime Minister between 1991 and 1996 and the man credited with launching the country's economic reforms.

"Let us not talk about him at this stage," Kesri said.

But his comments have been interpreted as suggesting that Rao, still facing trial in two corruption cases, was likely to be axed as a candidate in the polls early next year.

2 ROK ex-presidents freed
in special govt amnesty

SEOUL, Dec 22: Two ex-military strongmen, serving long prison terms for mutiny, treason and corruption, were freed Monday in a special government amnesty initiated by the man they tried to kill 17 years ago: President-elect Kim Dae-jung, reports AP.

Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo, who ruled South Korea from 1980 to 1992, were set free separately from prisons outside Seoul.

They both apologized after their release and expressed worries about the nation's economic problems. "I don't understand how so quickly our economy became worse," Chun told reporters.

The amnesty was recommended by the president-elect when he met with President Kim Young-sam on Saturday.

Both agreed that the gesture would help reconcile a country torn by the recent elections and enable it to focus on repairing its shattered economy.

The pardon is an effort by Kim Dae-jung to allow a divided electorate that gave him a plurality of only 40 per cent of the vote in Thursday's election. He received only a few votes in the home provinces of the two ex-strongmen.

Chun and Roh, then army generals, seized power in a 1979 coup and arrested opposition leader Kim Dae-jung, accusing him of fomenting a civil uprising in the southern city of

Kwangju that resulted in the deaths of 200 people during a military crackdown.

Kim was subsequently sentenced to death by a military tribunal. After Washington intervened, the death sentence was later reduced to life imprisonment and then a 20-year term. He was freed two years later and was allowed to go to the United States for medical treatment.

Chun and Roh, hometown and military buddies, ruled South Korea for 13 years until Roh was replaced in 1993 by Kim Young-sam, the nation's first civilian leader in 32 years.

The tables were turned against the two ex-strongmen in 1995 when they were accused of pocketing hundreds of millions of dollars in bribes from businessmen while in office.

The two were initially arrested on corruption charges. Mutiny and treason charges were added for the 1979 coup and the crackdown in the "Kwangju Massacre" the following year.

A Seoul district court sentenced Chun to death and Roh to 22 and a half years in prison.

The sentences were later reduced by the Supreme Court to life imprisonment for Chun and a 17-year term for Roh.

The amnesty also restored the civil rights of the two ex-presidents but did not relieve them of hefty fines.

Benazir challenges govt
to bring case against her

ISLAMABAD, Dec 22: Pakistan's former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, charged by the government with stashing ill-gotten wealth in foreign accounts, challenged it to bring a case against her in a court, reports AFP.

"If you have a case against me, as you say with great fanfare to the people of Pakistan and the international community, bring this case forward to a court of law in full light of day," Bhutto said.

Speaking at the Press Club in Karachi, Bhutto blasted "political hunting and character assassination" by the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Meanwhile Pakistani officials here claimed Swiss authorities had clamped an indefinite freeze on six bank accounts belonging to Bhutto, her jailed husband Asif Ali Zardari and mother Nusrat.

A Swiss judge on December 8 decided the accounts will remain frozen until a final verdict, said Senator Saifur Rehman, who churs the government's anti-corruption accountability cell.

The government is demanding repatriation of the money which it alleges was obtained by the Bhuttos through corruption, Rehman did not disclose the amount involved but reports have said the accounts contained around 14 million dollars.



Benazir Bhutto, former prime minister of Pakistan, speaks to the journalists in meet the press programme in Karachi Press Club on Sunday. — AP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

Cold wave claims 6 more in India: A cold wave has claimed six more lives in northern India, taking the death toll to 11, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported yesterday. AFP says from New Delhi.

The latest deaths occurred in the state of Uttar Pradesh, officials said, five others died in the area earlier as temperatures plummeted. Large parts of northern India, at the lower reaches of the Himalaya mountains, are experiencing a bitter winter. The weather office has said the situation would improve this week.

Blair meets Irish PM: British Prime Minister Tony Blair met his Irish counterpart Bertie Ahern on Sunday for talks centring on the release of loyalist prisoners, currently an obstacle in the northern Irish peace process, AFP says from London.

However, a Downing Street spokesman said there had been no change in the British position. "They briefly discussed loyalist prisoners and the prime minister confirmed that the British position had not changed," the spokesman said, adding that both men had "expressed a desire to move the peace process forward in the new year."

22 troops killed in Colombia: A rebel assault on a Colombian military post in the southwestern department of Nairno on Sunday left 22 soldiers dead, local radio said. AFP reports from Bogota. Three soldiers were injured and seven were taken captive, according to a report by radionet. The attack reportedly took place on Patacoy mountain, where television broadcasting and military sources declined to confirm or deny the reports but said the Colombian army maintains a permanent presence on the mountain.

Train mishap kills 5 in Vietnam: A speeding train slammed into a passenger bus in central Vietnam, killing five people and wounding ten others, police reported Monday. AP says from Hanoi.

The bus in Binh Dinh Province, about 200 kilometers (125 miles) south of the central city of Danang, was passing over a rail crossing on Sunday when the train hit the vehicle broadside. Two bus passengers were killed instantly and three others died later of injuries sustained in the collision, a police officer said in a telephone interview.

Israel, Turkey, US to hold wargame: Israel, Turkey and the United States will hold their first trilateral naval exercise in the Mediterranean off the Israeli coast next month, the army said Monday. AP says from Jerusalem.

In the operation, called "Reliant Mermaid," the three navies will practice search and rescue missions. The one-day seaborne portion of the exercise, scheduled for January 7, will involve five ships, several helicopters and search aircraft.

European rocket Ariane launched: The European rocket Ariane blasted off on schedule from the Kourou Space Centre in French Guiana Sunday evening (0017 GMT today) and released an Intelsat telecommunications satellite into orbit, the firm ArianeSpace announced. AFP reports from France.

The launch had been postponed for 24 hours after problems were detected in the helium gas system and on a hydrogen pressure gauge. But checks revealed that the computer readings were to blame. ArianeSpace said the Intelsat 804 was moving into a geostationary orbit above the Indian ocean where it would operate for 15 years, relaying telecommunications and television programmes to Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia.

Heavy rains in US kill 4: At least four people were killed after heavy rains pounded a wide section of northern and central Texas, flooding streets and prompting evacuations, state officials said Sunday. AFP reports from Austin.

Jo Moss, a spokeswoman for the Texas department of public safety said two teenagers were found dead after the car they were driving was swept away by flood waters near Killeen, a military town between San Antonio and Dallas. Two other people were killed attempting to cross the road in nearby Nolanville, Moss said.

War-era bomb kills 2 in Vietnam: A Vietnam War-era artillery shell buried in a school courtyard exploded in central Vietnam, killing two children and seriously wounding three, police said Monday. AP reports from Hanoi.

The shell lay buried for years until recent heavy rains left it exposed. Police Inspector Do Ngoc Khuyen said in a telephone interview. Late last week a group of school children began playing with the shell during recess when it detonated. Khuyen said. The school is in the central highland province of Kon Tum.

Ten killed in
Manipur violence

NEW DELHI, Dec 22: Ten people were killed when tribal militants ambushed two vehicles carrying members of a rival tribe in the north eastern Indian state of Manipur, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said today, reports AFP.

Seven people were killed in the first incident Sunday around 20 kilometres (12 miles) from the state capital Imphal, the news agency said.

The victims were from the Kukis community. Three other Kukis died when a bus in which they were travelling was fired at by the Paite community.

US immigration
service plans to
raise fees

WASHINGTON, Dec 22: The US Immigration and Naturalisation Service, which retreated in September from plans to impose hefty fee increases following an outcry by lawmakers and advocacy groups, will make a new effort in 1998, the agency's boss says.

The INS is readying a plan that would substantially increase more than two dozen of the fees it charges for such services as processing naturalisation applications, issuing border crossing cards, and renewing green cards for resident aliens.

"We will be increasing the fees," INS Commissioner Doris Meissner said in a recent interview with The Associated Press. The proposed hikes will be published soon in the Federal Register, but the agency will allow several months for public comment before putting them into effect, she said.

Wei named
'Asian of the yr'

NEW YORK, Dec 22: Exiled Chinese dissident Wei Jing-sheng, a leading pro-democracy activist released last month by Beijing, has been named "Asian of the Year" by Newsweek magazine's international edition, reports AFP.

Wei, considered the father of China's democracy movement and a recurrent thorn in Beijing's side, was released on medical parole in November.

He had spent only six months of the last 18 years in freedom after his first arrest on March 27, 1979 for calling for democratic reform in China.

Despite Beijing's efforts to silence him, every official charge of subversion and counter-revolution has only raised his stature and built on his unofficial title of father of China's democracy movement.

The release of the 47-year-old was at the forefront of US human rights demands at the Sino-US summit late last month and reports of heavy beatings by inmates in June prompted statements of concern from the European parliament and the US house of representatives.

GCC states to boost
defensive abilities

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22: The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a group of oil-rich Arab states, is to boost its defensive abilities by setting up a joint operations room, the official Kuwaiti news agency KUNA said on Sunday.

KUNA quoted Gulf diplomatic sources saying the six GCC states, whose leaders are in Kuwait for an annual summit, are expected to back multi-million dollar plans to link their radar systems and set up a secure communications link.

The agency said the projects will be completed in two years and "will pave the way to establish a joint operations room in one of the Gulf states so that it is possible to deal with any danger facing any of the GCC states."

The first project, worth 88 million dollars, will link the radar and air warning systems of the GCC, that groups Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The second project to set up a secure fibre-optic communications link between the six countries will cost 70 million dol-

Hun Sen reinforces
troops in Cambodia

BANGKOK, Dec 22: Cambodian leader Hun Sen reinforced his troops Monday as light fighting continued with resistance forces despite an opposition leader's bid to bring in the United Nations to mediate a ceasefire, reports AP.

Exiled opposition politicians based in Bangkok, meanwhile, said they had indefinitely postponed their planned return to Cambodia due to Hun Sen's offensive against the resistance.

However, a representative of Prince Norodom Ranariddh, the co-prime minister deposed by Hun Sen's bloody coup in July, arrived in Phnom Penh to prepare for elections next year and the prince's "imminent" return.

Thai army officers monitoring the week-old offensive by thousands of Cambodian government troops against the resistance stronghold of O'smach on the border with Thailand said only a few shells were fired Monday, compared to hundreds last week.

Two strayed across the border and fell inside Thailand, but Thai gunners did not immediately retaliate.

Myanmar's pro-democracy
students' movement now
on the wane

DAWN GWIN CAMP, Thai-Myanmar Border, Dec 22: A decade ago they were among Myanmar's best and brightest, young idealists on the road to becoming lawyers, engineers and doctors in what they dreamed would be a democratic society, reports AP.

In that year of revolt, 1988, student activists manned the front lines in the attempt to bring down entrenched military rule. Some fell to bullets and bayonets. Others were tortured and imprisoned. And some fled to remote frontier areas to carry on the fight.

Today, the hard-core remnants are just hanging on. They live in disease-ridden jungle camps, dependent on foreign donors and the fickle sympathies of Thai officials.

Although dedication to the cause remains strong, their road seems headed for a dead end. "Some revolutions are long-term, but we believe that all dictators must fall. So we will never give up our objectives or beliefs," said Sai Myint Thu, a

US may need to use force to open
suspected Iraqi weapons sites

WASHINGTON, Dec 22: The United States still might have to use military force to open suspected Iraqi weapons sites to UN inspectors and feels certain of UN Security Council support despite reluctance from veto-holders France, Russia and China, officials said Sunday, reports AP.

Bill Richardson, the US ambassador to the United Nations, said UN resolutions already in force would justify military action if necessary but added: "We don't want to reach that point."

And asked on NBC's "Meet the Press" about lessening enthusiasm in the United Nations even for continued sanctions against Iraq, Richardson said, "We believe we will have support within the Security Council" if force becomes necessary.

Russia, China and France refused to support the latest US effort, a draft statement introduced Friday, to get Security Council condemnation of any further move by Iraq to keep UN arms inspectors from presidential palaces and other "sovereignty sites."

Also Friday, Iraqi officials escorted foreign reporters around some of President Saddam Hussein's palaces and vowed that UN inspectors will never enter them.

"That's completely unacceptable, and hopefully the Security Council will send a resounding signal that it's unacceptable," US Defence Secretary William Cohen said Sunday on CBS' "Face the Nation."

Off the Record

Pavarotti's message
for children

MOSTAR, Bosnia-Herzegovina: Luciano Pavarotti carried a simple message Sunday to the children of Bosnia: "You saw the horror of the war. Try to maintain peace when you grow up," reports AP.

The superstar tenor and several friends came to this western Bosnian city — perhaps the most battered by 3 1/2 years of war — to open a children's music school for which they raised dollars 5.8 million.

"One dream is coming true," Pavarotti said. He and his friends each dipped their hands in green, red and blue paint and pressed them against a wall in the school's concert hall, then signed their names next to the handprints.

Children's choruses from around the region sang at the opening.

Surrounding the freshly renovated, 19th-century school in Muslim-ruled east Mostar are scars of the bitter fighting here between ethnic Croats and Muslims: piles of rubble, buildings without walls.

God now more popular
in America!

WASHINGTON: With angel images and stories abounding in culture, a new survey finds that more Americans now believe in God and in miracles than they did a decade ago, reports AP.

Coinciding with the Christmas season, a poll commissioned by the Pew Research Centre, released Sunday, reported 71 per cent of respondents say they never doubt the existence of God. In a similar poll in 1987, the figure was 60 per cent.

The poll also found that 61 per cent of Americans believe miracles come from the power of God — an increase of 14 percentage points from a decade ago.

And 53 per cent said prayer is important to daily life; in 1987, it was 41 per cent.

The poll results appear to dovetail with popular culture. No margin of error was available for the Pew poll, which was conducted in September and October.

"Touched by an Angel" ranks among TV's highest-rated shows. Books on angels, miracles and spirituality, in general, line bookstore shelves.

Indian Muslims, Hindus share 97pc cultural values

NEW DELHI, Dec 22: Contrary to popular impression, India's two major religious communities, Muslims and Hindus, have as much as 97 per cent of shared cultural values, reports India Abroad News Service.

These include the norms of monogamy, patrilocal residence, marriage by negotiation, community endogamy, succession by an elder son and participation in fairs and festivals.

Other traits shared by the two communities are the ritual use of oil and colour, rituals connected with child birth, tonsure, rituals after puberty, traits in terms of food habits, material culture and folklore.

This is the finding of a mammoth decade-long survey, "People of India," conducted by the Anthropological Survey of

India. It is the country's first nationwide ethnographic study and probably the largest in the world.

"One reason for sharing of traits on this large scale could be the fact that most of the communities have emerged from the same ecological, ethnic, socio-cultural background, even though later they have embraced different religions or ways of life," the survey concludes.

The Muslims and the Sikhs also share a high percentage of cultural values (89.95 per cent), as do Muslims and Buddhists (91.18 per cent) and Jains and Buddhists (81.34 per cent), according to the study.

There is a very high correlation of cultural values between the lower castes and tribes, between Hindus and Sikhs, and

among Hindus, Jains and Buddhists.

"These facts explain why there has been a continuity and why a sense of harmony prevails over a large part of the countryside in spite of conflicts that sometimes threaten to tear our social fabric apart and why return to normalcy is often quicker after every searing experience," says Kumar Suresh Singh, general editor of the survey.

The survey identified as many as 776 traits of all the communities relating to ecology, settlement, identity, food habits, social organisations, economy and occupation.

According to its findings, people cutting across castes and communities share a great deal in common within an eco-cultural-linguistic region or sub-

region.

"The traits we share are more than the traits that we do not share," Singh says, citing a few examples: "Most of the idols of Hindu gods and goddesses are made by their Muslim brothers throughout the country. In Gujarat, the (underprivileged) caravan community builds boats and ships. Once the ship is built, the Hindu priest worships it while sweets are distributed by the Muslim priests."

Of the 4,694 communities identified by the survey, 76.4 per cent are Hindu followed by Muslims (12.6 per cent), Christians (7.3 per cent), tribal religions (8.3 per cent), Jains (2.2 per cent), Buddhists (2 per cent) and Jews (0.19 per cent).

"The 'People of India' survey,

which began on October 2, 1985, found that various communities were followers of two or more religions. There are 87 communities that follow both Hinduism and Sikhism, 116 both Hinduism and Christianity, 35 Hinduism and Islam, 21 Hinduism and Jainism and 29 communities that are both Hindu and Buddhist.

There are 16 communities that follow three religions, 11 communities have sections following Hindu, Muslim and Sikh religions while six have Hindu, Muslim and Christians.

"The picture that thus emerges, in spite of conflicts and contradictions," Singh said, "is one of sharing environment and ethos by communities and of their vibrant participation in political and economic process and ritual roles."



Bosnian workers put up the US flag alongside the Bosnian one in central Sarajevo Sunday the day before US President Bill Clinton is due to arrive in the Bosnian capital for a one-day visit. — AP/UNB photo