

# Cong (I) will win less than 100 seats, predicts BJP

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: India's once-dominant Congress (I) Party will win less than 100 seats in national elections early next year, its main rival said here today, reports AFP.

The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party), vying with the Congress to take power, predicted its rival which was rocked by a series of splits, would be routed at the ballot box in February.

KR Malkani, a prominent BJP member of parliament, said: "The Congress is falling to pieces... today the party is more dead than alive."

Newspapers, meanwhile, blamed Congress President Sitaram Kesri for the fragmentation of a party which ruled the country unchallenged for the first 40 years of independence.

Malkani added: "Kesri is partly to be blamed for the chaos in the Congress. But the

main reason for its problems is that the party has no philosophy, ideology or political convictions."

He said the Congress "will get less than 100 seats" in parliament's 545-seat lower house "while the BJP and its allies will have 300 plus."

Kesri, whose party won 140 seats in elections in 1996, found himself the target today after two prominent Congress leaders walked out on the party on Sunday and Monday.

The Indian Express branded him a "clueless boss," adding he was a "weakening" without grassroots support. The Congress, it said, had "got the leader they deserve. It is pointless to complain now."

It said the 112-year-old party had itself provoked the elections by withdrawing support from Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral's minority coalition government last month, adding: "The Congressmen's

confidence to face the elections seems to have evaporated into thin air."

On Monday Mamata Banerjee, a Congress leader with mass support in West Bengal, announced she would contest the elections after forming her own party. She was immediately expelled by the Congress.

Twenty-four hours earlier, another Congress leader broke away in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

Senior Congress member of parliament Rajesh Pilot virtually blamed the party leadership for the latest reverses.

"I wish the situation was better handled by Kesri", Pilot said, but added the two leaders who abandoned the Congress were also to be blamed.

Both the Congress and the BJP, which won 162 seats in the lower house last year, are trying to forge pre-poll alliances with a view to heading a new coalition government.

# Basu may be offered PM's job, if UF wins

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: A senior member of India's coalition government today said the country's best-known communist leader would be offered the prime minister's job if the alliance won next year's elections, reports AFP.

Railways minister Ram Vilas Paswan told reporters that Jyoti Basu, chief minister of West Bengal, would be asked to take the top job, the Press Trust of India reported.

Basu, whose Marxist government celebrated its 20th year in power in Bengal in June, was offered the prime minister's job after the ruling United Front alliance decided to stake claim to power following hung elections last year.

Paswan told reporters in the West Bengal town of Midnapore: "During our first tenure we... offered the post to Jyoti Basu but he did not accept."

"If we have a second term, we will again request him. We will be most happy if he accepts it this time," he said.

# China rejects call for UN-supervised referendum on Tibet

BEIJING, Dec 23: China today rejected a call by international jurists for a UN-supervised referendum on self-determination in Tibet, reports AFP.

"Self-determination is out of the question. Tibet is part of China," said Tang Guoqiang, a spokesman for the Foreign Ministry.

The Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists on Monday accused China of intensifying repression in Tibet and asked Beijing to allow a referendum.

But Tang responded to the request today during the ministry's regular news conference. "From time immemorial, Tibet has been part of China. The affairs of Tibet are those of China and we oppose all foreign interference in China's internal affairs," he said.

In a 365-page report, "Tibet: Human rights and the rule of law," the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) said Tibetans had become a "people under alien subjugation" since Chinese communist forces occupied the territory in 1950.

The ICJ, which groups jurists from many different judicial systems, said international law entitled Tibet to freely decide its political status.

But Tang said the authors of the report "have no knowledge of what happens in Tibet nor of the policies of the Chinese government in Tibet."

AP adds: "The Chinese government has denied accusations of torture and religious persecution. It has blocked UN attempts to investigate, rejecting outside interest in human rights in Tibet as subversive interference."

# Off the Record

## New words in English language!

LONDON: The Oxford English Dictionary, self-appointed guardian of the English language, has included "Di-mania" girl Tuesday, reports AFP.

This year, following the catchphrases of marketing, are "adultescent", someone aged 35 to 45 who hangs on to youth culture, "fluffagette", a woman with pre-feminist role models, and "negaholic", a pessimist.

"Girl power" is given a "feminism espoused by the Spice Girls."

The redefinition of the British political landscape with Tony Blair's election in May has led to the inclusion of "new Labour" and the "people's princess" Blair's description of Diana, Princess of Wales, on her death.

Labour's efficient press machine and use of tight party discipline also prompted the oed to include "om message" to denote those sticking to the party line.

A spokeswoman for the dictionary said: "Words are chosen because they are a direct result of events or trends of the past year or describe something completely new."



Before After  
An undated handout photo from Marck & Co demonstrates the great improvement experienced by 5% of the patients who took the company's drug for baldness, Propecia. The Food and Drug Administration announced Monday, that it approved Propecia, the first pill for male pattern baldness, a potential way for men both to grow new hair and to stop existing strands from falling out. — AP/UNB photo

# Charles preparing grounds?

LONDON: Britain's Prince Charles and his longtime companion Camilla Parker Bowles have appeared together in public for the first time since the death of his former wife Diana, Princess of Wales, reports AFP.

Several newspapers carried reports and separate pictures of the couple Tuesday as they braved cold weather and public disapproval riding out with the same fox-hunt on Monday.

The couple are rarely seen together and are careful never to be pictured side by side.

Parker Bowles is at best barely tolerated and at worst reviled in Britain, and Diana's death on August 31 provoked her virtual disappearance from public view until earlier this month when she was pictured hunting.

Monday's joint appearance at the Beaufort Hunt in south west England prompted The Express newspaper to comment that Charles was preparing the ground for his first public appearance "with the woman he loves."

# To track man's migration

WASHINGTON: Scientists can now track man's migration since prehistoric times by studying a widespread and often harmless virus secreted in the urine, according to new study, reports AFP.

In the study, to be published Tuesday in the proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, researchers found that variations in the human polyoma virus JC are each associated with a particular geographic region.

"We conclude that JCV may have co-evolved with the human species, and that it provides a convenient marker for human migrations in both prehistoric and modern times," reported researchers at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders.

For example, the types of viruses affecting US Navajo and flathead Indians, along with the Chamorro of Guam, are the same type as those carried by modern Asians, the scientists say.

The study solidifies the theory that American Indians and those from certain Pacific islands migrated from Asia by crossing the Bering Strait some 15,000 to 30,000 years ago, the researchers write.

Although normally harmless, the virus can trigger deadly cerebral infections in some humans.

# Korean food talks slowed over ROK demand for proper distribution

BEIJING, Dec 23: Talks between North and South Korean Red Cross officials on delivering food to the famine-stricken North slowed Tuesday over demands by the South for proof that all donations reach starving North Koreans, reports AP.

After meeting for more than 90 minutes, the officials said they would add a third day of talks Wednesday, Chang Moon-ik, a spokesman for the South Korean Embassy in Beijing, said they had to consult with their headquarters before getting together again.

Chang told reporters there would be "domestic political repercussions" if the South Korean Red Cross failed to get concessions from the North side about a better delivery system.

South Korean officials, worried that aid is being diverted to the North Korean military, want to send observers along with food shipments to ensure they reach their intended destinations.

Officials of both sides refused to disclose details of their emerging agreement during the talks at a Beijing luxury hotel.

The South Korean delegation demanded Monday that North Korea tighten monitoring and consider overland shipments through Panmujom, the neutral village on the hostile nations' heavily armed border.

After the first meeting, delegation head Lee Byung-won said his Red Cross chapter hoped to match the 50,000 tons in food aid it has included in each of two aid shipments to North Korea this year.

Lee acknowledged Monday that capitalist South Korea's economic turmoil might make donors less willing to contribute relief to the secretive, Stalinist North. South Korea's currency has lost half its value and stock prices have plunged.



Emperor Akihito, accompanied by Empress Michiko, waves to cheering well-wishers celebrating the Japanese monarch's 64th birthday at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo Tuesday. Braving chilly winter rain, about 7,000 people gathered for the annual occasion during the morning audience. — AP/UNB photo

# Kennedy ordered to withdraw troops from Vietnam!

WASHINGTON, Dec 23: Former US President John Kennedy ordered his advisers to draft a plan to withdraw US forces from Vietnam weeks before he was assassinated, newly declassified documents show, reports AFP.

A memo dated October 4, 1963 from Kennedy's chairman of the joint chiefs of staff Maxwell Taylor said the president had asked for such a plan to be drafted and submitted for review two days earlier.

The document said the plans to end US involvement were to be discussed with then South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem.

But Diem was assassinated just weeks before Kennedy's death November 22, 1963. President Lyndon Johnson stepped up the campaign after assuming the presidency, and US troops remained until 1975.

The memo said US commanders should review plans "to complete the military campaign in the northern and central areas by the end of 1964 and in the (Mekong) Delta by the end of 1965."

# Clinton says in Bosnia 'Peace depends on Balkan leaders, not to anyone else'

SARAJEVO, Dec 23: Under tight security in this war-torn city, President Bill Clinton said Monday the United States is proud of its role in resurrecting the crippled region but said "the future is up to you — not the Americans, not the Europeans, not to anyone else," reports AP.

Clinton exulted in the new face of Sarajevo, bustling with people and cafes and thriving business, a few short years after the guns were silenced. He met with Bosnia's federation of leaders and described his message to them.

"You owe it to your country to bring out the best in people, acting in concert, not conflict, overcoming obstacles, not creating them, rising above petty disputes, not fueling them."

Clinton said he encountered a group of soldiers from Virginia and one of the troops told him: "These are good people and this is a good thing we're doing." Clinton was visiting the American base in Tuzla later in the day, to thank the 8,000 US troops who learned last week their stay here will be indefinite.

"We in the United States are proud of our role in Bosnia's new beginning," he said.

For the most part, though, Clinton's speech in Sarajevo was directed at Bosnia's people and its quarrelsome leaders.

To the people, he said: "You must make your desire for peace and the common future clear to the leaders of each group."

To the three members of Bosnia's collective presidency, he said they are responsible for rebuilding the government and for turning the 1995 Dayton peace accords into reality.

"In the end, the future is up to you, not to the Americans, not to the Europeans, not to anyone else," he said. Of their responsibility, Clinton said, "Those who shirk it will isolate themselves. The world, which continues to invest in your peace rightfully expects that you will do your part."

# 'Failure to pay UN arrears costs US credibility'

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 23: The United States failure to pay its arrears has cost America its credibility at the United Nations, US diplomats said Monday as the General Assembly considered a deal to reexamine the amount countries will pay next year, reports AP.

American interests at the UN — because of this — have been compromised. Our credibility has been hurt," said America's UN ambassador, Bill Richardson.

The United States is seeking a reassessment after attempts to reduce its contributions failed this year.

"We hope for a revising of the scales... to get a more equitable overall balance," Richard Sklar, the US diplomat negotiating with the General Assembly's finance committee, told reporters.

# Top Algerian militant leader killed

ALGIERS, Dec 23: Algerian security forces killed the No. 2 Algiers cell leader of the Armed Islamic Group in a shootout in the capital, a newspaper reported Tuesday, reports AP.

The man known only as "Moh le Blond" (Mohammed the Blond), was shot several times Monday in a clash with the army outside a mosque in the Basse-Casbah marketplace in Algiers, the independent daily La Tribune said.

Moh le Blond has been reported killed before, as have other leaders of the Armed Islamic Group, Algeria's bloodiest insurgent faction.

Muslim fundamentalist militants — through random massacres and bomb attacks — are trying to overthrow the military-backed government and in turn create a state based on Koranic law.

The insurgency began in early 1992 after the military cancelled legislative elections that Islamic fundamentalist parties were poised to win.

# Agreement to build Eurofighter jet signed

BOONN, Dec 23: Formal agreement to build the Eurofighter combat aircraft, signed in Bonn on Monday, removed the final hurdle to a project that has taken years of tense four-nation negotiations, reports Reuters.

The plane, conceived before the Berlin wall fell and the Soviet threat faded, will become an integral part of the British, German, Italian and Spanish air forces.

Germany will buy 180 Eurofighters for a total cost of 23 billion marks (13 billion US dollars). But that decision followed year as of controversy as the end of the Cold War prompted many to question the need for such a weapon, especially as the government was slashing spending on social welfare programmes.

# BRIEFLY

**China-Israel to boost ties:** Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen met with Israeli leaders Monday, agreeing to begin talks on deepening ties, and saying China wants to be heard about the troubled Middle East peace process, AP says from Jerusalem.

"China does not play a role as mediator or coordinator, China is concerned about the Middle East peace process, so China also offers its views and perspectives in a frank and sincere manner," said Qian, after meeting his Israeli counterpart David Levy.

**Strong quakes hit Japan:** Two earthquakes measuring 5.2 and 5.4 on the Richter Scale struck northern Japan yesterday, the Meteorological Agency said. But there were no reports of damage or casualties, AFP says from Tokyo.

The first quake was recorded at 1:32 am (1632 GMT Monday) near Iwate prefecture, with the epicentre some 40 kilometres (25 miles) under the sea. The second came at 4:08 am (1908 GMT Monday) on Hokkaido Island, with an epicentre 110 kilometres (68 miles) underground.

**Chopper crash kills 7 in Colombia:** A military helicopter crashed into the Pacific Ocean Monday, killing all seven people aboard, the Defence Ministry announced, AFP says from Bogota.

A general, an admiral and other senior military officials were among those believed killed when the Bell-205 plunged into the ocean only minutes after leaving the Bahia Solano port. A witness told radionet radio the chopper was in flames before plunging into the sea.

**Algerian rebel held in France:** Authorities on Monday were holding a member of Algeria's violent Armed Islamic Group linked to terrorist activity in France, after Britain expelled him last week, official sources said, AP reports from Paris.

Mohamed Kerouche, believed to have run a militant network in France, was placed under custody of the DST, France's FBI, when he stepped off a plane Friday, the sources said on condition of anonymity.

**US poet Denise Levertov dies:** Denise Levertov, a major American poet and poetry theorist, has died at 74. Levertov died Saturday at a hospital Seattle from complications of lymphoma, AP says from Seattle.

She published more than 20 volumes of poetry since 1946, the most recent being "Sands of the Well" in 1996. She also published collections of essays, translated three volumes of poetry and edited other books.

**China to expand security system:** China will expand its nascent social security system to hundreds more cities and counties next year, the state-run Xinhua News Agency reported Tuesday, AP reports from Beijing.

The decision to extend the network — announced Monday by China's civil affairs minister — comes as unemployment nationwide soars from a government-ordered restructuring of state enterprises.

# UNSC demands inspectors' free access to Iraqi weapons sites

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 23: The UN Security Council has brushed aside a challenge by Iraq on arms inspections and demanded that Baghdad allow weapons teams free access to all suspected sites, reports AP.

The 15-member council said on Monday that failure by Iraq to allow the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) charged with scrapping Iraq's weapons of mass destruction into any site was "unacceptable and a clear violation of the relevant resolutions."

But at the insistence of Russia, the statement no longer condemned Iraq for its actions. A Russian spokesman said "discussions were continuing on

practical relations with the inspectors, and did not include any threats to force."

US Ambassador Bill Richardson said he was pleased the council had sent what he called an "unmistakable signal to Iraq" which while not ruling out military action kept diplomacy and negotiation as the first choice.

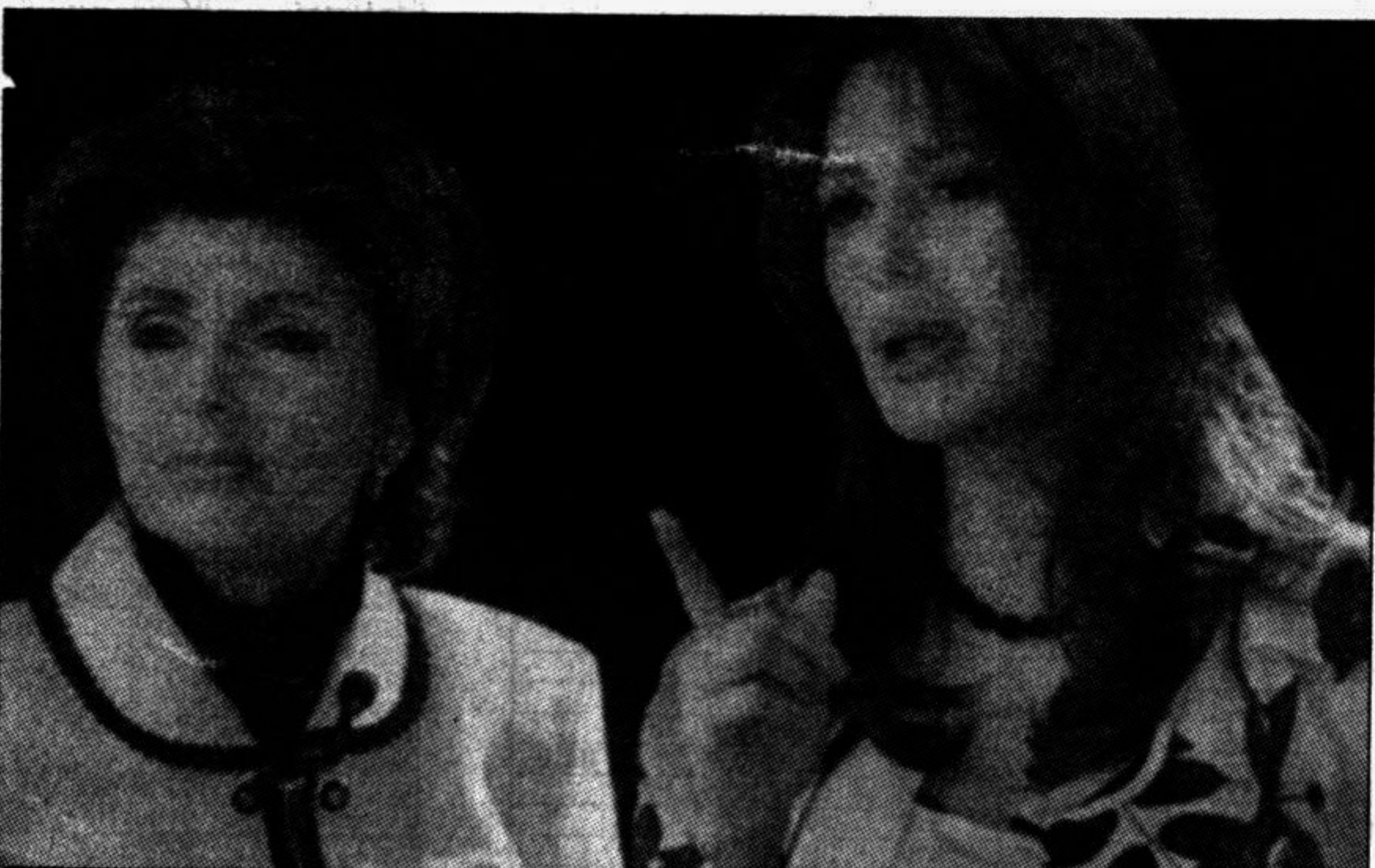
Despite Iraq's hard-nosed rhetoric about limiting weapons inspections, a senior US official said on Monday that Baghdad was quietly acceding to the demands of the arms monitoring teams.

"The Iraqis, for all the rhetoric about not letting UN-

SCOM go to certain places, have not blocked the teams from doing their job. On the ground, the inspectors have not been refused access to any site," said the officials, who spoke on condition that he not be identified.

Asked if the inspectors had sought access to any site that Iraq has declared off-limits, the official said: "The Iraqis have not provided a list of what is off-limits, so it's hard to know what those places are."

"But he said Iraq's public stance on arms inspections was unacceptable," and pointed to Monday's Security Council statement demanding free access to Iraqi sites.



Actress Hunter Tylo, right, and lawyer Gloria Allred speak outside the Los Angeles County Courthouse after a jury awarded Tylo nearly \$5 million Monday, for being fired from her role as a seductress on "Melrose Place" because she became pregnant. The 34-year-old actress sued Spelling Entertainment Group and Spelling Television Inc, alleging breach of contract and pregnancy discrimination. — AP/UNB photo

# New findings may fill blanks about Jesus' boyhood

NAZARETH, Israel, Dec 23: In the time of Jesus, his fellow villagers in Nazareth made their living by growing grapes, olives and grain on terraces cut into the limestone hills, reports AP.

At harvest time, all 300 villagers — Jesus likely included — would stomp grapes to extract juice, and huddle in watchtowers at night to guard their produce against thieves.

These images emerge from excavations of the only pristine farmland left in the centre of Nazareth, now a cramped city of 60,000. The finds may fill in some blanks about Jesus' boyhood and perhaps lead to better understanding of the older man, says Stephen Pfann, an American Bible scholar and archaeologist.

"As a child he walked about these hills and saw the animals and plants and people working in the fields. He used these images in building his parables

later on," said Pfann, a native of San Jose, California, who heads Jerusalem's Centre for the Study of Early Christianity.

Even though Jesus spent much of his life in Nazareth, from about age 3 until his late 20s, little is known about what he did there, said the Rev. Jerome Murphy O'Connor, a scholar at Jerusalem's Ecole Biblique.

It is believed that Jesus followed the trade of his father, Joseph, a carpenter. Joseph may have chose to settle in Nazareth because it was within walking distance of Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee which at the time was being completely rebuilt following its destruction by the Romans, Murphy O'Connor said.

By comparison, Nazareth was tiny, with two or three clans living in 35 homes spread over six acres (2.5 hectares), Pfann said. The homes later

were razed by invaders: What remains are several basement caves, cisterns and silos excavated in the late 1950s during reconstruction of the Church of the Annunciation.

While walking along the terraced slopes of the Nazareth Hospital grounds earlier this year, Pfann stumbled across an ancient wine press — a bed-sized level area cut into the limestone for squashing grapes — and a vat below for collecting the runoff juices.

A dig began in April, with support from the hospital and local volunteers. Since then, Pfann and archaeologist Ross Joseph Voss have laid bare two agricultural terraces, the bases of five watchtowers in the fields, and stone irrigation channels from a now-dry spring to lower-lying terraces.

A small quarry uncovered by the team had a double purpose, Pfann said. Stonemasons would carve plateaus to make wider terraces, and use the blocks they retrieved for building in the village.

The stone plateaus then would be filled with several layers of soil brought up from the valley by donkeys.

Even if Jesus and his father were busy with construction work much of the time, they likely would have joined the villagers at harvest time, Pfann and Murphy O'Connor said.

"At the time the crop came in, everyone put everything aside, whether he was a carpenter or did something else", Pfann said. "Jesus, along with his family, would have been involved in this."

Along with the others, Jesus might have crushed grapes with his bare feet in the wine press and spent the nights in one of the towers — a small room on a tall stone base — with the villagers, telling stories, singing and playing the flute to pass the time.

Such scenes from his boyhood found their way into Jesus' teachings. In his parables, he makes several references to vineyards, to sowing seeds and harvesting grain.

# NASA to build balloon to carry instruments to near edge of space

WASHINGTON, Dec 23: A balloon taller than a 30-story building and wider than 100 yards (91 metres) will be built by NASA to carry astronomy instruments to near the edge of space, reports AP.

The balloon will carry more weight higher and fly longer than any other scientific balloon ever, said Jack Tueller, a Goddard Space Flight Centre astrophysicist and chief project scientist for the Ultra Long Duration Balloon Project.

The balloon would lift about 3,000 pounds (1,350 kilograms) more than 22 miles (35 kilometres) high and would stay aloft for 100 days, long enough to circle the globe about five times if the winds are right.

And the balloon will conduct astronomy experiments for about a million dollars, much less than the cheapest of NASA's rocket launches, the Pegasus, which costs 15 million dollars to 18 million dollars, Tueller said.

He said the scientific capabilities of the superballoon and the Pegasus are "roughly comparable."

The Pegasus can launch a payload that will stay up for a couple of years, but it is only 500 pounds (225 kilograms), he said. "The balloon would carry about 3,000 pounds (1,350 kilograms), but it will stay up only about 100 days."

Another advantage for the balloon, said Tueller, is that instruments can be recovered and flown again, time after time.

"If you fly a payload (on a balloon) and it doesn't work then you just recover the payload, fix it and fly it again," he said. This is impractical on a satellite.

The planned balloon would be made of a combination of a high tech fabric and an aluminumized polymer material, such as Mylar.