

35 killed in Pak train accident

ISLAMABAD, Dec 25: A passenger train ploughed into a second train parked at a rural station in eastern Punjab, killing at least 35 people and injuring 100 others, according to news reports Thursday, reports AP.

The Rohi Express bound for Islamabad was travelling at top speed when it slammed into another train some 300 kilometers (180 miles) southeast of here at Rustam Sargana, shortly before midnight on Wednesday, the state-owned Associated Press of Pakistan said.

It wasn't known how many passengers were on the two trains, but emergency workers feared the death toll could increase as rescue workers pried away more of the twisted and charred pieces of metal. The Pakistan Air Force was recruited to assist rescue workers, who worked throughout the night with iron cutters to free bodies trapped inside.

Hospital officials fear many of the injured, who were brought in critical condition to the hospital, could die.

Villagers, who were the first to arrive on the scene, used their hands to pull at the wreckage to reach screaming passengers, eyewitnesses said.

Officials were investigating the crash, but apparently the Rohi Express was supposed to be switched on to a parallel set of tracks.

Visibility at the time also was extremely poor because of heavy fog, the APP said.

"Officials were still investigating the crash, but it is believed that the accident occurred due to the foggy weather," the APP quoted local officials at the scene as saying.

It is possible that the conductor of the express train did not see the parked train in time to switch tracks, the APP said quoting official sources.

A local train, that runs between Sargodha and Multan in

eastern Punjab, was parked at the rural station of Rustam Sargana when the Rohi Express drove into it, The APP said.

Pakistan's only country-wide emergency service, Edhi Ambulance, sent several ambulances to the wreckage site to bring victims to the nearest hospital about 20 kilometers (12 miles) away in Jhang.

Officials at the largest hospital, which serves the entire district, declared an emergency and put out a plea for blood donations.

Some victims were loaded on to pick up trucks and taken to hospital, eyewitnesses said. The area is easily accessible by road.

Pakistan's train system is an antiquated one.

In March a runaway passenger train jumped its tracks and slammed into a sand dune also in eastern Punjab, killing more than 135 people and injuring nearly 200 others.



A general view of St Peter's basilica during the Midnight Christmas Mass celebrated by Pope John Paul II at the main altar of the Church, under the huge Bernini baldakin, Thursday. In a joyous Christmas message to the world, Pope John Paul II hailed the Jews as the people who gave Jesus Christ to all mankind. His gesture during midnight Mass carried a special resonance: it came the day after a Hanukka candle was lighted at the Vatican for the first time in history. — AP/UNB photo

Pope's plea for peace

VATICAN CITY, Dec 25: Pope John Paul II made a heartfelt plea for peace as he led the world's 960 million Roman Catholics into Christmas today, reports Reuter.

"Peace to humanity, this is my Christmas wish," the Pope told pilgrims packed into St Peter's Basilica, the largest Church in Christendom, for a solemn midnight mass.

"Dear brothers and sisters... let us implore from the lord this much needed grace," he said in the service, beamed live to more than 50 countries.

The frail 77-year-old pontiff, wearing resplendent white and gold vestments, has heeded his doctors' advice to reduce his busy workload and for the second year running will not say mass in the Basilica on Christmas morning.

He unexpectedly missed the mass two years ago after being taken sick during the night after midnight mass. That year, he also had to interrupt his "Urbi et Orbi" (to the city and the world) address on live television because he felt ill again.

However, the Polish-born Pope still planned to make his traditional Urbi et Orbi blessing at noon (1100 GMT) today to thousands of faithful gathered in St Peter's Square.

The Pope, looking drawn at times and walking slowly but unaided, stopped to bless a baby and a small girl on his way to the altar in a church decorated with yellow and red flowers.

He watched as 12 children, including a boy and girl from Cuba, laid poses at a statue of the baby Jesus.

The Pope dedicated his midnight mass homily to the Biblical story of Christ's birth, saying Christmas celebrations united the faithful "even in the farthest reaches of the five continents."

Prayers were said in French, German, Swahili, Polish and Tamil for the sick, the homeless and other people living in "precarious" conditions.

The pontiff, who has made peace one of the leitmotifs of his 19-year papacy, described the nativity as "the central event in the history of humanity."

"Let us pray that all humanity will come to know in the son of Mary, born in Bethlehem, the redeemer of the world who brings us the gift of love and peace," he said.

His appeal came after the Latin Patriarch of the Holy Land, Michel Sabbah, used his own midnight mass in Bethlehem to

BRIEFLY

Blast kills 4 troops in Lanka:

Four soldiers were killed in northern Sri Lanka when their jeep was blown up by a landmine laid by Tamil separatists, the defence ministry said Wednesday, AP reports from Colombo.

Two soldiers were wounded in the incident Tuesday evening near Mirusuvil village in the Jaffna Peninsula, a Defence Ministry Statement said. The military wrested control of the Tamil-dominated peninsula from the rebels in May last year forcing guerrillas to flee to towns on the mainland.

Cholera claims 108 in Uganda:

At least 108 people have died in the past two weeks as a result of a cholera epidemic sweeping this east African nation, a Ugandan health ministry official said Wednesday, AP reports from Kampala.

Some 1,300 people have been hospitalised, with Kampala, the capital, the most seriously affected, said Dr. Nathan Mugisha of the Health Ministry's communicable diseases department. "The spread of the disease has not seriously affected villages because they are sparsely populated," Mugisha said. "But Kampala in particular has poor sanitation, slums and no clear water in many areas."

Snowfalls strand Tibetan herdsmen:

Heavy snows and severe cold weather have caused disaster affecting some 260,000 people in remote areas of Tibet, an official report said Thursday, AP reports from Beijing.

No deaths have been reported so far from temperatures dipping to minus 30 C (minus 22 F) and snows of up to 50 centimeters (20 inches) in Nagqu prefecture, northeastern Tibet, the Xinhua News Agency said.

The government has begun shipping relief goods to herding communities that have already lost 78,000 head of livestock and are having trouble feeding another 5 million head, the report said.

Mayor-elect shot dead in Colombia:

A mayor-elect of a small town near the Colombian capital, was shot to death on Tuesday, police said Wednesday, Xinhua reports from Bogota.

Juan Figueroa, the mayor-elect of Cogua, was shot several times by three gunmen when he walked out of a building in Zipaquirá, 40 kilometers north of the capital. The three attackers fled immediately. Police said they were searching for the killers, but so far had no suspects.

Volcano near Mexico City erupts:

The majestic, menacing Popocatepetl volcano southeast of Mexico City has sent and explosive blast of glowing rock and ash into the air, AP reports from Mexico City.

There were no immediate reports of injury. Carlos Meza, secretary of government for Puebla state, told TV Azteca that the 18,000-foot (5,500-meter) volcano had experienced a "strong eruption" at 7:30 pm Wednesday (01:30 GMT Thursday) and officials were trying to determine the extent of it. But the activity subsided after 15 minutes, according to Carlos Valdes of the National Center for the Prevention of Disasters, which monitors the volcano, as quoted by the government's Motimex news agency.

US won't block Russian N-reactor sale to India

WASHINGTON, Dec. 25: The United States appears to have reconciled itself to the Russian sale of nuclear technology to two proposed multibillion-dollar 1,000 megawatt nuclear power plants in southern India, reports India Abroad News Service.

Far from trying to block the sale as it had been threatening to do since the deal was made known earlier this year, Washington is now negotiating with Moscow to ensure that the light-water reactors being provided to India for the plants at Koodankulam in Tamil Nadu will have full-scope International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards.

On December 11, Russian and Indian officials said in New Delhi that Russian President Boris Yeltsin will sign the long-delayed agreement when he visits India next month.

Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Karl Inderfurth, in acknowledging that the US has given up trying to dissuade Russia from going through with the sale, said that during his recent trip to Moscow, Russian officials had told him "the nuclear reactor sale was moving forward."

In a meeting with South Asian correspondents here yesterday to review US-South Asian relations in 1997, Inderfurth said: "I reminded them (the Russian officials) of our nonproliferation concerns (and) they said that there would be IAEA safeguards applied... that this was the undertaking with the Indian government."

Inderfurth said the Russian officials had also insisted that the agreement to provide India with the technology predated the 1992 Nuclear Suppliers Group agreement.

200 Indian troops, cops killed in Kashmir in 1997

JAMMU, Dec 25: Around 200 Indian soldiers and policemen were killed by Muslim separatist guerrillas during 1997 in the northern state of Kashmir, an official spokesman said today, reports AP.

The state government spokesman said a majority of the casualties occurred in landmine blasts or bomb attacks in the strife-torn Himalayan territory.

An equal number of Muslim fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan were also killed in Indian soldiers in Kashmir, he said.

He put civilian casualties at around 1,000 during the period.

More than 20,000 people have died in Kashmir since 1989 when Muslim separatist groups launched an anti-Indian rebellion in the state bordering Pakistan.

India accuses Pakistan of arming and training the guerrillas. Islamabad denies the allegation but extends moral and diplomatic support to what it describes as the Kashmiris' struggle for self-determination.

Saddam slates US in his X'mas message

BAGHDAD, Iraq, Dec 25: Iraqi President Saddam Hussein used his annual Christmas message to accuse the United States and its allies of violating the teachings of Jesus, reports AP.

Christmas strengthens Iraq's adherence... to the values of justice and freedom and to confronting injustice and its doers, in the forefront of which are America, the aggressor... and Israel, Saddam said.

Iraq has repeatedly blamed the United States for prolonging UN economic sanctions against Iraq.

The United States says it will not agree to any lifting of the sanctions, which were imposed after Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, until Baghdad fully cooperates with UN arms inspectors.

Thousands attend Hamas rally in West Bank

JENIN, West Bank Dec 25: Some 4,000 Palestinians on Wednesday attended a rally of the Islamic militant Hamas movement, burning a model of a Jewish settlement and vowing to continue fighting Israel, reports AP.

"We have instructions from our God to struggle until we have defeated our enemies," said Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Hamas' founder and spiritual leader, addressing the crowd by telephone from the Gaza Strip.

Yassin called on Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to resist Israeli and American pressure to a crack down on Hamas and other militant groups. "The world charges us with terrorism but what we are doing is fighting occupation."

Outright winner in India's general election unlikely

NEW DELHI, Dec 25: Shedding ideology, political parties from socialists to free market reformers are making election alliances with a right-wing Hindu party that has long been shunned as too extreme to lead India, reports AP.

All sorts of alliances are being forged and many of them are unprincipled," said Jaipal Reddy, spokesman of the United Front coalition that collapsed last month, precipitating the elections that probably will be held in mid-February.

"It's the season of splits," he said.

"It's political opportunism," said Vittal Gadgil, spokesman of the once-powerful Congress Party, which has split in six states so far.

In an interview in India today evening, BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee defended the BJP's sometimes curious alignments: "While others are making unprincipled deals to keep us out, we can't sit back and watch," he said.

The BJP has been gaining popularity in every election since 1984. After the 1996 ballot, it emerged as the largest party in Parliament for the first time, controlling 190 of the 543 elected seats. Vajpayee led a government that collapsed after just 13 days.



An unidentified Iraqi woman holds her sick baby at the Saddam Hospital for children in Baghdad, Wednesday, watched by Michael Bremer, of Chicago, a member of the American group "Voices in the Wilderness" holds a sack containing medicine and toys, which were donated to the hospital. — AP/UNB photo

Rebels blame govt for massacre of 45 in Mexico

SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS, Mexico, Dec 25: Zapatista rebels blamed President Ernesto Zedillo for the massacre of 45 people in a southern mountain village and accused the government of talking peace while arming paramilitary groups, reports AP.

The four-page communique signed by the Zapatista military leader, Subcomandante Marcos, is a blow to Zedillo's call for renewing peace talks to end the 4-year-old rebellion.

Survivors say roughly two dozen gunmen from the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party or PRI, spent several hours shooting and hacking to death 45 men, women and children who had gathered at a church Monday in the village of Acteal, 12 miles (19 kms) north of San Cristobal de las Casas, the principal city in the highland region of Chiapas state.

Authorities said nine people have been detained in connection with the deaths.

Shortly after nightfall, the bodies started arriving in Palho, a tiny town about a mile (kilometer) from Acteal. They were brought from Tuxtla Gutierrez, the Chiapas state capital, where they had been autopsied.

Holding candles aloft, survivors and relatives gathered in the village square, watching solemnly as the bodies were laid out in their flimsy coffins.

They were to be identified by family members before being given a funeral Mass and then buried.

Palho was crowded as pickup trucks dropped off the coffins. Most of the Acteal survivors moved to Palho for safety.

Survivors said at least four of the women were pregnant when they were killed.

Police detain Kaunda

LUSAKA, Zambia, Dec 25: Police took former President Kenneth Kaunda into custody on Christmas morning after surrounding his house for nearly three hours, one of Kaunda's sons said, reports AP.

The detention of Zambia's founding father came four days after the 73-year-old Kaunda returned to the country from a lengthy lecture tour. It was believed to be linked to a failed coup attempt in October against President Frederick Chiluba, who defeated Kaunda in the nation's first multiparty election in 1991.

"We were told the police wanted to take him for an interview," Kawache Kaunda said. He said his father agreed to go with police and had yet to be formally charged or arrested.

Kawache Kaunda said his father, who led Zambia to independence from Britain in 1964, was accompanied by his lawyers, his elder son,

EU launches centre to monitor racism across Europe

LONDON, Dec 25: The European Union has launched a centre to monitor racism after a survey revealed alarming levels of racism across Europe, reports India Abroad News Service.

About two-thirds of 16,000 people surveyed proclaimed racist attitudes to some degree. The European Union (EU) believes that the real percentage of racists will be higher than those who openly claimed it in the survey.

The EU has responded by setting up a European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia which will soon become operational in Vienna. The centre will supply EU institutions and member countries with "objective, reliable and comparable data on racism, xenophobia and anti-semitism."

A treaty agreed by all members known as the Amsterdam Treaty will now include a general anti-discrimination clause. That will imply added commitment by member countries to combat racism.

The findings of the survey came at the end of what was observed as the European Year Against Racism. The degree of racism across Europe and steps to combat it were reviewed at a two-day conference in Luxembourg on December 18 and 19.

European Commissioner Pdraig Flynn said at the conference that the survey results were cause for "extreme concern". He termed them "shocking statistics."

Off the Record

A rare Christmas gift

FORT LAUDERDALE, Florida: A Florida couple who struggled for 15 years to try to have a baby are offering a gift to couples in similar situations — six frozen embryos left over from their trials, reports AFP.

"This is our gift at Christmas time," said Ron, 43, who appeared at a news conference Wednesday with his wife Donna on condition that their last name not be used.

The six embryos-fertilised eggs ready for implanting in a mother's uterus — were left over when Donna became pregnant with their son, Ronnie, who is now seven.

"I just want to find a good home for my kids," said Donna, 41. "I would have loved to have used them, but I couldn't."

"Some people tell me they're just cells, like fingernail clippings or hair, throw them away. But they are my kids. I don't think God gave me these lives to let them melt. What do you do, put them on the window sill and let them thaw?"

Sorcerer's wife in hot water

JAKARTA: A wife of a self-proclaimed sorcerer accused of killing 42 women appeared bewildered when a prosecutor said she could face the death penalty, a newspaper reports Wednesday, reported AP.

Tumini one of three wives of Ahmad Suradji, sat quietly for several hours Tuesday as a state prosecutor in a Sumatra court read charges alleging she helped her husband murder two of the victims.

After the prosecutor, Siregar, finished reading the dossier, he asked the 39-year-old Tumini three times if she understood that she could face the death penalty if convicted.

Tumini, who has an elementary school education, said she understood only after the judge told the prosecutor to explain, the daily newspaper Kompas reported.

'Royal Exposure' now off the market

LONDON: 'Royal Exposure', a game of snakes and ladders leading players to the British throne by hopping from one royal scandal to another, was taken off the market Wednesday for fear of angering the public since the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, reports AFP.

"It was only meant to be a bit of fun but I quite understand that it could be seen as bad taste because of what has happened," said Stephen Dunne, head of Chaos Games.

The game included cards such as "you have the tastiest toes of the year," referring to 1992 tabloid pictures showing Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York, having her toes sucked by her financial advisor, John Bryan.

UFOs attract experts

HONG KONG: Several UFO sightings in Beijing and the southern city of Guangzhou have attracted the attention of Chinese astronomical experts, the China News Service reported Thursday, says AFP.

It said at least nine sightings had been reported in the Chinese capital in the past three months, with an unidentified flying object (UFO) also spotted in Guangzhou Tuesday night.

The semi-official agency quoted an astronomy professor at Beijing Aviation University, Jiang Weichang, as describing the UFO as a very bright screw-shape about three to four times the size of the full moon. He said the UFO, which he saw in early October, was yellowish in colour with a bright star shape in the middle.



Worshippers at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem reach out to shake the hand of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat who had come to participate in Midnight Mass Wednesday. In his traditional sermon, the Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah decried the difficulties in the Israel-Palestinian peace process and urged Arafat to be wise and courageous. — AP/UNB photo

US makes renewed peace bid in Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, Dec. 25: The prospect of big bucks to be made by American companies is seemingly driving an aggressive initiative by the United States to seek a resolution of the Afghan conflict, reports India Abroad News Service.

Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Karl Inderfurth, who recently visited London, Paris and Moscow to raise the profile of the Afghanistan imbroglio and bring these nations on board to support the US effort, acknowledged: "We continue to think that if it is possible for there to be peace in Afghanistan, a natural gas pipeline could be developed through Afghanistan through Pakistan and into India."

Before he left on that visit, Inderfurth met here at the State Department a Taliban delegation, which was led by the group's acting Minister of Mines and Industry Ahmad Jan, less than a month after Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called the militia "despicable" for its discrimination against women and girls.

The meeting was arranged by the California-based firm Unocal, which is a major partner in Centgas, one of two international consortiums bidding to build a \$2.5 billion natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan into Pakistan, and perhaps onward into India.

The Taliban is also keen that the envisaged pipeline take shape because it could bring as much as \$300 million to their coffers and would like some form of recognition from Washington.

Inderfurth, in a meeting with South Asian correspondents here yesterday, said, "We are not in a position of recognising the Taliban," but would recognise only "a legitimately established broad-based government in Afghanistan. We are not recognising factions."

But he acknowledged that the US was fully cognisant that the Taliban were indispensable to the establishment of such a government. "It does control 80 percent of the country (and) it represents an important ethnic group—the Pushtuns—in Afghanistan."

Thus, he reiterated, "We realise and understand the Taliban will have an important role to play, but not as the sole recognised faction. We will not do that (accord diplomatic recognition to the Taliban as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have done)."

Inderfurth, who has also been working in concert with the Iranians in New York to explore ways of ending the civil war in Afghanistan, said, "I think what's encouraging is many countries have arrived at the same conclusions that we have to see pressures, influence, brought to bear by the external parties in the region on the internal parties" to the conflict.

Consequently, he said, it was envisaged that the fighting could be brought to a close and negotiations begun "to have a ceasefire established," followed by negotiations "to establish a broad-based government."

Inderfurth predicted that "We are close to achieving a common approach" among these countries on Afghanistan.

But he said in 1998, "it will be a question of whether or not the countries that are part of this group" that have been working together in New York, led by Akhbar Brahimi, a former Algerian foreign minister who is UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's special envoy on Afghanistan, "will go beyond the demarche phase to actually using the influence they have to bring the parties to a point that they will begin negotiations."

While conceding that no one country can dictate "a solution or instructively one party to do certain things," Inderfurth emphasised that "I do believe the group in New York, if it uses its respective influence, including Pakistan, including Iran, including Russians, and others, they can have considerable influence in bringing this war to an end."

Obviously Inderfurth seemed to have mobilised Moscow's support for Washington's efforts to increase the profile of finding a solution to the crisis in Afghanistan.

He said that for two countries that not too long ago fought a proxy war in Afghanistan, "it was quite remarkable to be sitting across the table from Russian officials, talking about how we can jointly use our influence to see the fighting brought to a conclusion."

Inderfurth indicated that a joint US-Russian effort was in the works, saying, "We are going to be working closely bringing our respective influence to bear" on the various warring factions in Afghanistan.