

Former minister, 3 MPs quit party

Kesri accused of burying Cong(I)

NEW DELHI, Dec 26: Four more politicians walked out of India's once-dominant Congress (I) party in the run-up to next year's general elections, the United News of India reported today, reports AFP.

It said three members of India's dissolved parliament and a high-profile former minister resigned from the party after accusing its leader Sitaram Kesri of pushing Congress to its political grave.

Former Minister Suresh Kalmadi and the three MPs said in a statement: "Kesri is presiding over the liquidation of the party. No Congress worker with any conscience or love for the country can continue in this party."

multi-party minority coalition government collapsed last month.

The BJP is planning to field around 20 Muslim candidates in the elections in the hope of winning over large numbers of Muslim voters.

In the long term the party, which was founded in 1951 and has grown since the early 1980s, also aims to expand its appeal to the country's south and east as well as among other religious communities.

Congress, which ruled India for almost 40 years following independence, has been steadily declining over the past two decades.

97 former army officers join BJP

Another report adds: India's Hindu nationalists today said they had attracted nearly 100 high-profile military supporters to help push them to power in general elections next year.

A spokesman for the Bharatiya Janata Party BJP said 97 former top defence officials, including a former air marshal, two former lieutenant generals, six retired major generals and eight ex-brigadiers,

had joined the party on the Christmas Day.

"This shows our growing popularity... and backs our claim that we will win the elections," he said.

BJP spokeswoman Sushma Swaraj was even more jubilant, referring to two other high-profile "defections" to the party from its traditional rival, the Congress (I).

Former Congress minister Aslam Sher Khan and PR Kumaramanglam earlier this week announced they were joining the BJP.

The BJP won 162 of 545 seats in the lower house of parliament during the 1996 elections but were unable to secure a parliamentary majority and their government collapsed within a fortnight.

Congress, (140 seats) then agreed to support the United Front coalition (180 seats) made up of more than a dozen disparate parties, to keep the Hindu nationalists out of power.

Congress is expected to try to whip up India's 125 million Muslims against the BJP by reminding them that the party failed to condemn the razing of a mosque at Ayodhya by Hindu

fanatics in 1992.

It will also argue the BJP which only had two parliamentary seats in 1984, believes in uniformity in laws on marriage, divorce and inheritance for all religious communities, a stand opposed by Muslims.

But the BJP has been spurred recently by a series of high-profile Muslim leaders backing the party. Aslam Sher Khan, the former Congress minister, who joined the bloc, is a Muslim.

Today, the BJP received another boost with a senior Muslim religious leader saying the community had "nothing to fear" from the party.

Ahmed Bukhari, the son of the high priest of New Delhi's historic Jama Masjid Mosque, was quoted in the Asian Age newspaper today as saying that all political parties had been "cheating the Muslim community by creating fear about the BJP."

"We have found nothing to fear for our safety in BJP-ruled state," he said Thursday in the northern city of Jaipur.

He also called former BJP chief Atal Behari Vajpayee, who became prime minister for 13 days last year, the "best leader in the country today."

Taliban take control of key border district

KABUL, Dec 26: The Taliban religious army said Thursday that its troops took control of a key border district in north-eastern Afghanistan, reports AP.

For the first time since the Taliban entered the fray more than three years ago, its troops have gained a foothold in north-eastern Badakshan province, long under the control of former military chief Ahmed Shah Massood, said a spokesman in the beleaguered capital on the condition that he not be identified.

The Taliban claim could not be independently confirmed because of the remoteness of the region, but if it is true the Taliban now has control of all areas bordering neighbouring Pakistan.

The Taliban army of religious students-cum-guerilla fighters controls roughly 85 per cent of the country and its enemies the remaining 15 per cent, most of it in northern Afghanistan.

On Wednesday the Taliban launched an offensive at Kotel Toopkhana in Badakshan province and by Thursday had thrown out Massood's soldiers, said the spokesman in the Afghan capital, some 350 kilo-

metres (210 miles) southwest of the area.

The area borders Pakistan and was a key supply route to Massood's headquarters in the central Panjshir Valley.

The battle raged for more than 24 hours and at the end the Taliban laid claim to 50 vehicles and large stocks of heavy and light military hardware, said the spokesman.

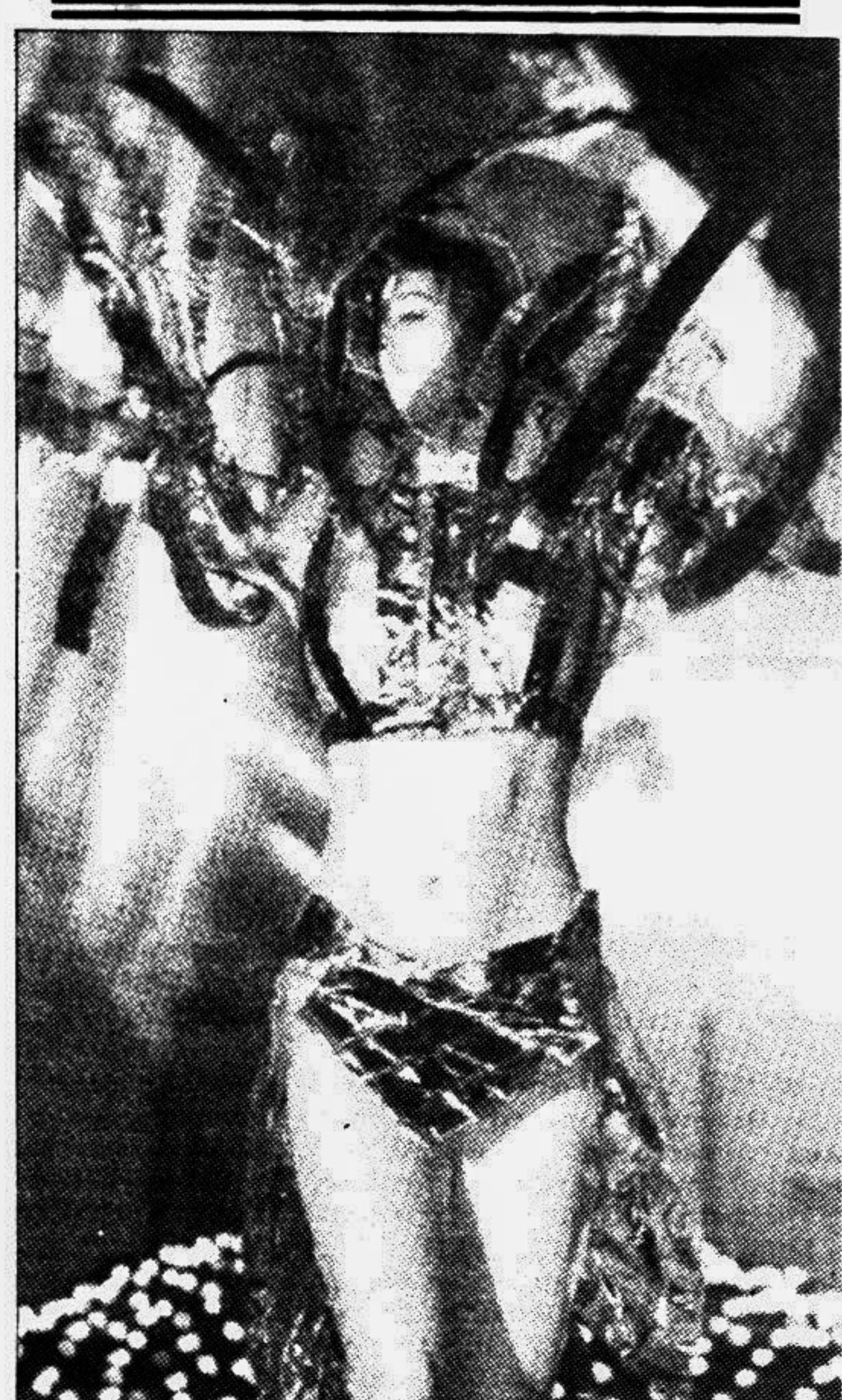
Massood's forces are part of an anti-Taliban alliance which is waging battles on several fronts in Afghanistan, mostly in the north and central regions.

The alliance largely represents Afghanistan's minority ethnic groups of Tajiks, Uzbeks, Shiite Muslims and Ismaili Muslims. The Taliban, by comparison, is mostly made up of members of Afghanistan's majority Pashtun ethnic group.

Efforts to bring peace to Afghanistan, battered by nearly 20 years of relentless fighting, have frustrated the United Nations.

Pakistan has taken up the challenge and in recent days has been holding meetings with Burhanuddin Rabbani, former president of Afghanistan, who was driven from Kabul by the Taliban last year.

Off the Record



A model demonstrates a dress as part of the collection 'Brilliance' at an avant-garde fashion show in Minsk Wednesday. 56 collections of clothes were presented at the show. — AP/UNB photo

For the love of pets...

SINGAPORE: The woman's voice broke when she answered a phone call about a newspaper ad offering her family's 3-year-old German shepherd to a good home, reports AP.

"We love our dog so much, but neighbours reported on us and we must give it away," said Anita, a working mother of three. "The kids are terribly upset. But we have no other choice."

It was a classic case of civil disobedience gone bad. Singapore-style. By keeping a large dog, the family was breaking the law.

This small Southeast Asian island state is one of the world's 10 richest nations, yet official statistics say only 4 per cent of its households have dogs, making a walk in the park with Fido a rare sight.

Only "toy" breeds of dogs are allowed, and no more than one per apartment. They must not bark excessively and always must be leashed when outside. Fines for keeping an unlicensed dog or letting it run free can cost hundreds of dollars.

Cats are totally forbidden because of their inclination to get outside and roam about, officials say. Parts of apartments, such as storage rooms or even kitchens, generally do not have closed windows so it is almost impossible to keep a cat inside.

James Tan, a property agent, would like to keep a cat, but he and his girlfriend live in a subsidized apartment.

"The Singapore authorities have no heart for cats and dogs," he said. "It's a cruel policy."

"We need public pressure to change that," Tan added. "There are many cat lovers in Singapore, but very few will stand up and fight for animals rights."

BRIEFLY



A Boeing 757 from Transavia Airlines lies nose down next to the runway Thursday after it overshot the runway during a botched landing late Wednesday night at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, causing minor injuries but no deaths. Everyone aboard was evacuated safely via emergency chutes and four people were hospitalised. Schiphol's control tower in the background. — AP/UNB photo

**4 die as storm hits Britain, Ireland:** Four people died and tens of thousands of people were left without electricity after a violent storm lashed Britain and Ireland, with winds reaching 160 kilometres per hour, police said on Thursday. AFP reports from London.

Three people were killed in road accidents in Britain blamed on the weather, two women in the northern city of Liverpool died when trees fell on their cars while a motorcyclist was killed in Wales when his bike was destabilised by the wind. At least six other people were injured in road accidents. In Ireland, where winds reached their peak at 160 kilometres per hour, a 19-year-old man was killed when a stone wall collapsed on him in Waterville, in the southwest.

**9 prisoners killed in Brazil:** Nine prisoners in a Brazilian jail died and three people they were holding hostage were injured when an escape attempt ended in high-speed car crashes and shootout with police, news reports said Thursday. Reuter says from Rio de Janeiro.

The rebellion at the jail in the northeastern city of Fortaleza began Wednesday during a Christmas party when a gang of inmates seized the hostages and police shot one prisoner dead.

**6 die as cave collapses in Vietnam:** Six people were killed and four injured when heavy rains caused a cave to collapse in northern Lao Cai province, local police said Friday. AP reports from Hanoi.

The dead and injured were road construction workers who had taken shelter in the small earthen cave on Monday night, police said.

**1360 illegal immigrants held in Japan:** A total of 1,360 foreigners have been arrested for trying to enter Japan illegally this year, more than double the figure for all of 1996, police said Friday. AP reports from Tokyo.

The National Police Agency said 1,209 people, or about 90 per cent of the total arrested from the beginning this year through Wednesday, were Chinese.

**German businessman freed in Philippines:** Muslim bandits on Friday freed a kidnapped German executive after 108 days of captivity in the southern Philippines, police reported. AP says from Zamboanga.

A haggard-looking Robert B Buehs, 50, a cannery executive from Rhode, Germany was turned over before dawn by four of his abductors to negotiators after another group of bandits, on a separate site, received an undetermined amount of ransom money, police said.

Pak train collision Four railway employees suspended

JHANG, Pakistan, Dec 26: Pakistani police has detained four railway employees suspended from service for alleged negligence following a train collision that left 35 people dead, officials said today, reports AP.

The detained employees included the driver, a fireman and a guard of the train that rumbled into another car standing at a small rural station at Rustam Sarfana near here in central Pakistan on Wednesday amid heavy fog.

The station master was also arrested.

Railway sources said a federal railway inspector would start an inquiry Saturday into the collision and submit a report to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in two weeks.

Museum killing Mubarak approves death sentences of 2 convicted

CAIRO, Dec 26: President Hosni Mubarak on Thursday ratified death sentences against two brothers convicted of killing nine German tourists and their Egyptian driver outside of the nation's most famous museum, a newspaper reported, reports AP.

Saber Abu el-Ulla, a former mental patient, and his brother, Mahmoud, were convicted in October of shooting and fire-bombing a tourist bus while it was parked outside the Egyptian Museum, killing the ten people.

UAE adopts law banning high wedding expenses

ABU DHABI, Dec 26: The United Arab Emirates on Thursday adopted a law banning unusually high wedding expenses which officials have blamed for a large number of UAE men marrying foreign women, reports Reuter.

The official news agency WAM said UAE President Sheikh Zaid Bin Sultan Al-Nahayan issued a decree approving the law which set a ceiling of 20,000 dirhams (5,450 dollar) on mahr, the money paid by a bridegroom to his future wife.

The law also set a limit of 30,000 dirhams on compensation paid by men to their former wives upon divorce and said wedding celebrations should not be more than a day long during which not more than nine camels could be sacrificed, WAM said.

Arafat to present Clinton with plan to revive ME peace

BETHLEHEM, Dec 26: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, on a Christmas Day visit to Bethlehem, said he will present a comprehensive plan to President Clinton next month to revive the troubled Middle East peace process, reports AP.

Arafat said Thursday that he had devised a formula for breaking the deadlock with the conservative Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu.

"I have a full plan I would like to take to Clinton," he told reporters. "But the important thing not to forget is what the reaction of the other side will be. You cannot tango alone."

Arafat and his advisers would not elaborate on the details of the plan, but said it would cover a range of issues, including the much delayed Israeli troop pullbacks in the West Bank and issues relating to a final peace settlement with Israel.

The Iranian constitution bars the appointment of female judges in all courts except the family court.

The move follows Iranian President Mohammad Khatami's call for the government to promote equal rights for women. Khatami won a landslide victory in May elections.

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sites in nearby Jerusalem, which was cut off from the West Bank by Israel's security closure.

The protest reflected the somewhat dimmed joy at this year's Christmas observances — a result of the continuing tensions with Israel and uncertainty over peace talks.

On Christmas Eve, some, including Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah, were delayed at the entrance to Bethlehem for almost two hours. Israel said it was due to a bomb scare; Arafat's wife Soha charged that Israel was maliciously keeping tourists away.

Israel has proposed launching final status talks, but the Palestinians have insisted that Israel first carry out the three troop pullbacks promised by mid-1998 — which they hope will expand their autonomy from 27 per cent to 90 per cent of the territory.

Netanyahu instead wants to carry out just one pullback, and the sides disagree over how much land that would cover. The United States reportedly expects Israel to hand over at least 10 per cent of the West Bank.

Arafat and Netanyahu are to meet separately with Clinton in Washington next month, and the US administration hopes to nail down the peace pact.

Other issues are the Palestinian and US demand for settlement of the disputed lands, and Israel's demands for air-tight Palestinian guarantees that they will prevent terrorist

Iran appoints first women judges since '79

TEHRAN, Dec 26: Iran has named four women as judges, the first such appointments since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the official Islamic Republic News Agency reported Thursday, reports AP.

The four women lawyers were named judges this week in the family court in the city of Ray in Tehran province, the agency said.

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Survivors bury 45 victims of Mexico massacre

ACTEAL, Mexico, Dec 26: It was a tense moment: Indians burying their 45 dead met up with a truckload of men they accused of being the killers, reports AP.

The mourners pulled a man from the truck and began to kick him, but police moved in and broke up the scuffle. They arrested the 23 men on the truck and drove off into town, averting further trouble Thursday.

Tensions have run high in southern Mexico's Chiapas state since masked gunmen burst into this mountain hamlet on Monday and methodically gunned down 45 unarmed people, including 15 children.

The victims were mostly sympathisers of the Zapatista National Liberation Army, which rose up in January 1994 to demand rights for the state's poor Indians. Survivors say the attackers were peasants from surrounding villages who belong to a paramilitary group linked to Mexico's ruling party.

The meeting Thursday at a bend in the road winding through the mountains a mile (1.5 kms) outside of Acteal occurred by chance.

following four trucks carrying their loved ones' coffins, carrying yellow flowers and singing religious songs. The 23 peasants were in a truck coming in the opposite direction.

"That's them. Those are the attackers," one man yelled. They pulled one peasant off the truck and began to kick him before the police leapt out and stopped them.

"They're the ones who organized the killings. They were running away to hide," mourner Cristobal Gutierrez Gomez shouted.

"We're innocent," protested Antonio Perez Hernandez, one of the peasants in the truck. "We didn't do anything."

But the silent crowd surrounded the peasants, and the police decided to take them in for questioning, driving off in their flatbed truck toward San Cristobal de las Casas, the biggest town in the highlands of Chiapas.

Federal authorities have taken over the investigation into this week's killings of mostly rebel sympathisers, amid charges that state officials at best ignored the violence and at worst plotted it.

Arabs refuse to accept 'coincidence theory' about Di's death

CAIRO, Dec 26: An Arab world conspiracy theory about Princess Diana's death in a car crash, propounded in magazines, best-selling books and a court suit, paints her as the target of a British plot, reports AP.

Now, a movie is in the works.

Director Khairi Beshera says "The Last Supper," will be about Diana's life, not conspiracies surrounding her death. But the notion that she was killed because she was about to convert to Islam to wed Egyptian Dodi Fayed, who died with her, is too popular to ignore.

"I have to deal with this even if it is naive," said Beshera, whose films have been shown at festivals in London, Leipzig and Rotterdam.

No such evidence of a conspiracy has been presented, and British officials have termed the idea absurd. But that has not stopped many in Egypt from imagining a plot by a British establishment aghast at thoughts of Diana converting to Islam, marrying Fayed and bearing a son named Mohammed who would be a half-brother to England's future king.

Diana, Fayed and the driver of their car died Aug. 31 in a Paris car crash. Investigators still are examining details of the accident, looking for a cause. The driver, Henri Paul, was legally drunk.

Four months after the princess' death, Cairo bookshops and newsstands remain piled high with magazines and books adorned with pictures of Diana and alluring titles about the "fake" car crash and supposed details of how she and Fayed really died.

A blurb on the back cover of "Assassination of a Princess" by Ahmed Atta says Diana joined a long list of celebrities killed for political reasons.

In the chapter "Who Killed Diana and Dodi," Atta, an Egyptian journalist, quotes unidentified sources as saying the British intelligence agency MI6 is to blame. To support his theory, Atta cites news reports that British agents spied on the princess in Paris.

Another journalist, Itham Sharshar of the Al-Ahram daily, says Diana confided to her friend Jemima Goldsmith, who converted to Islam to wed

Pakistani cricket legend Imran Khan, that she, too, was considering becoming Muslim. It's all in Sharshar's book "Diana, a Princess Killed by Love."

A Cairo lawyer, Nabih el-Wahsh, uses these ideas in a lawsuit seeking to blame MI6 agents for Diana's death and accusing Queen Elizabeth II of ordering the killing.

In January, a Cairo court is expected to decide whether to hear the case — and unlikely outcome, but not impossible considering Egyptian courts often take up cases of perceived insults to Islam.

El-Wahsh claims he has evidence, but concedes his suit is mostly based on Arab media reports.

For example, he plans to show the court and Arabic newspaper clip saying that when Diana visited Pakistan last year, she asked the imam of a Lahore mosque about conversion to Islam. El-Wahsh said he also will present reports claiming Diana was pregnant.

It does not need any effort to prove it."

El-Wahsh says Britain and France will have a hard time convincing the Arab public that Diana's death really was an accident.

"Why do they want us to believe in the coincidence theory when they refuse to accept the conspiracy theory?" he asked.

Beshera, the director, said he wanted to make a drama about Diana's life, ending with her romance with Fayed and their shocking deaths.

Shooting for the movie, projected to cost 2 million Egyptian pounds (dollars 588,000), will start soon, says Beshera. Beshera says he has collected books, news clippings and video tapes about Diana dating to her 1981 marriage to Prince Charles.

US group delivers medical supplies for Iraqi children

BAGHDAD, Dec 26: A US humanitarian group campaigning to ease the suffering of Iraqi civilians delivered 40,000 dollar worth of medical supplies and toys to a children's hospital in Baghdad on Christmas eve, reports Reuter.

The Chicago-based "Voices in the Wilderness" group, said UN economic sanctions imposed for Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait were immoral and some of its members were in Baghdad to demonstrate publicly their defiance of Washington's support for the embargo.

The group's five-member delegation said they risked 12-year prison sentences and fines of over 1 million dollar for bringing supplies to Iraq in violation of the sanctions.

Before they left the United States, they notified the American authorities of their trip and were given warnings of the risk they faced.

"Our previous delegation who returned to the US three weeks ago, their materials, their documents and video footage of what they saw in Iraq were seized by US customs agents, explaining the tapes were evidence of crime," Simon

Harak, member of the group, said.

AP adds: A Russian plane carrying five tons of medical supplies for children arrived in Iraq on Thursday after being granted permission by the United Nations.

Iraqis slaughtered 15 sheep in celebration when the plane, which also carried 21 members of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's ultranationalist party, touched down on a runway at Baghdad's Saddam International Airport. It was the first flight to land at the capital's civilian airport in almost seven years.

UN sanctions forced the airport to close. United Nations and humanitarian flights to Iraq have used a military air base outside of the capital.

Iranian officials on Monday blocked the Russian plane from taking off after it stopped in the Iranian border town of Kermanshah. The plane was held until the UN Sanctions Committee in New York granted permission for the flight.

Zhirinovskiy who opposes sanctions against Iraq had promised to arrange the aid flight during a visit to Baghdad earlier this month.