

BRIEFLY

Five Islamic militants escape from jail in Pakistan

LAHORE, Dec 27: Five Islamic militants made a daring escape from a jail in eastern Pakistan, after an accomplice blinded the prison guard with chili powder, officials said Saturday, reports AP.

Friday's prison break in Dera Ghazi Khan, a rural town in Punjab province, occurred after eight visitors were allowed into the jail compound to visit the five inmates.

The inmates and their visitors were all members of the extremist Sunni Muslim Group, Guardians of the Friends of the Prophet, which is linked to hundreds of sectarian killings across the Punjab, officials said.

One of the visitors apparently asked a prison guard to unlock the cell door so he could bring food to the inmates, who were jailed almost 10 years ago in connection with the killing of an Iranian diplomat, they said.

When the guard unlocked the gate, the visitor threw chili powder in his eyes. Another three men burst into the cell and opened up with automatic weapons fire.

**Killing of 26 cops
Three to die in Egypt**

CAIRO, Dec 27: Egypt's state security High Court on today sentenced to death three Islamic militants from the fundamentalist Jamaa Islamiyya group accused of killing 26 policemen in attacks in 1992 and 1993, reports AFP.

The three, two of whom were tried in absentia, were among 33 Islamic militants accused of carrying out 19 attacks in the Egyptian provinces of Asyut and Sohag, killing 26 police officers and injuring 35 others.

The verdicts against the other defendants will be issued on January 27, the court said.

Hassan Khalifa Osman, the only defendant in court, chanted "Allah-u-Akbar" (God is the greatest), when judge Ismail Hamdi pronounced the verdict against him and Rifaat Zeidan Abdallah and Abdel Hamid Osman Morsi.

Egypt has been wracked by attacks on police, as well as sporadic strikes against tourists, since 1992 when Muslim militants launched a violent campaign to overthrow the Egyptian government and establish an Islamic state.

Pardon for deposed Cambodian PM opposed

SIHANOUKVILLE, Cambodia, Dec 27: Second Premier Hun Sen said Saturday he opposes King Sihanouk's plan to pardon his son, ousted First Premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh, if he is convicted of criminal charges brought by the government, reports UNB.

Ranariddh has been in exile since he was deposed by Hun Sen in a violent coup d'etat in July. Since then, the government has filed charges against Ranariddh with a military tribunal, alleging he smuggled weapons, and conspired with the outlawed Khmer Rouge guerrilla movement to launch his own coup.

The charges are widely seen as an effort by Hun Sen to rid himself of opposition in elections set for late July.

Sihanouk said earlier this month he will give a royal pardon to Ranariddh "immediately" if convicted paving the way for the prince's participation in the upcoming polls.

Speaking to reporters in the seaside town of Sihanoukville, Hun Sen said Ranariddh is likely to commit future crimes unless he is forced to recognise his previous mistakes.

"I do not agree with any action which does not require Ranariddh to request an amnesty (himself)," said Hun Sen, adding that an automatic pardon "will encourage Ranariddh to commit wrongdoings forever."

'US has no plan to drop bombs on Iraq'

WASHINGTON, Dec 27: The White House on Friday dismissed Baghdad's claim that the United States planned to drop bombs laced with biological or chemical weapons on Iraq as "ridiculous," reports Reuters.

"We term this ridiculous," said a White House spokesman. "We do not have these weapons in our operational inventory."

Asked if the United States was planning to bomb Iraq sites with conventional weapons, without any chemical or biological component, the White House spokesman said he would have "no comment on that."

Iraq issued its warning against "a wicked American conspiracy" after a meeting of the Revolutionary Command Council and the regional command of the ruling Baath Party chaired by President Saddam Hussein.

The meeting discussed the crisis over Baghdad's refusal to allow inspection of "presidential sites," which the United States says may be used to evade Gulf War ceasefire terms that

bar Iraq from holding weapons of mass destruction.

Reuters adds: Iraqi leaders accused the United States on Friday of planning air strikes which would plant fake chemical or germ warfare evidence at sites declared out of bounds to UN inspectors.

"America is likely to launch military strikes on these sites and others, using mass destruction weapons which contain chemical and biological elements, so that it can say, after the strikes, that its allegations were right," an official spokesman told the Iraqi news agency INA.

"It is quite necessary to warn against such a wicked American conspiracy, which is confirmed by well-informed sources," the spokesman said.

Baghdad has declared "presidential sites" off-limits to the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) in charge of dismantling Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, saying they are vital for its security and sovereignty.

The spokesman said: "After 6 and half years of activities by

the special commission and thousands of inspections, they know that Iraq is completely free of chemical and biological weapons."

"But the Americans are still insisting on their fallacious allegations that these weapons are concealed in people's palaces, and they support their allegations by a large military build-up," he added.

The spokesman said Iraq would not accept the continuation of UN sanctions imposed over its 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

UNSCOM Chairman Richard Butler held talks this month with Iraqi officials but failed to persuade them to let his inspectors enter the sites.

Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz, in a bid to prove that Iraq hides no prohibited weapons, took reporters and Western television crews to six presidential palaces in Baghdad last week.

But the UN Security Council brushed aside Iraq's protests on Monday and demanded that weapons teams get free access to all suspected sites.

Kaunda flown to unknown destination

LUSAKA, Zambia, Dec 27: Former President Kenneth Kaunda appeared in court Friday, but the government refused to release or charge the veteran politician in connection with his arrest on Christmas Day, reports AP.

After the hearing, Kaunda, 73, was flown by helicopter to an unknown destination, raising fears among his supporters for his safety in detention without access to lawyers or family.

In a briefing to the diplomatic corps broadcast on state television Friday, Foreign Minister Kelli Walubita confirmed widespread suspicions about the reasons for Kaunda's arrest.

"He was arrested as part of the investigation into the attempted coup of October 28," Walubita told the diplomats.

It was the first time the government officially linked Kaunda to the coup.

Kaunda was out of the country on a lecture tour in October when mutinous soldiers seized control of the state radio and announced that they had overthrown President Frederick Chiluba. Loyalist troops quickly crushed the rebellion.

Kaunda returned to Zambia last Sunday, and was on Thurs-

day served with a 28-day detention order under a state of emergency declared after the failed coup. The order gave no reasons for his arrest. He has repeatedly denied any links with the rebel soldiers.

Kaunda has refused to eat or drink water, saying he would end a hunger strike only when he was brought to court and charged, according to his wife Betty and son Wezi Kaunda.

At Friday's hearing, Kaunda said in a sworn statement his detention was "to facilitate the state's intention to eliminate me."

Arrest condemned
The White House Friday has condemned the arrest of former Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda.

"We condemn the Christmas Day arrest and detention of former President Kenneth Kaunda," the White House said in a statement.

"We call on the government of Zambia to release him in the spirit of reconciliation and peace," it said.

The White House also expressed concern the arrest would have "an extremely negative effect" on talks between rival Zambian parties, which are planned for next week.



Massacre survivors Rosa Perez, (L), and her children wait for calm to return to their hometown of Acteal, Chiapas, Mexico under a Zapatista tent in San Cristobal de las Casas on Friday. Their relatives were among the 45 people shot to death by gunmen Monday during a prayer service. Federal investigators are pressing top officials in Chiapas state to explain why they failed to stop the massacre despite being alerted during the hours-long attack. — AP/UNB photo

Japan's main opposition party dissolved

TOKYO, Dec 27: The New Frontier Party, Japan's largest opposition political party, has officially decided to dissolve, public broadcaster NHK television reported Saturday, reports AP.

The decision was taken at a party meeting Saturday. The move had been widely expected.

News reports Friday had quoted Ichiro Ozawa, the party's president, as saying that he would dissolve his troubled party and form a smaller group of loyal supporters.

The decision to formally dissolve could be a boon for Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto's ruling Liberal Democratic Party, which has been dogged by a faltering economy and declining popularity. Increasing disarray in the opposition should strengthen the LDP's hold on power.

Despite Hashimoto's problems, Ozawa has not presented a real challenge to the prime minister. The party is declining in popularity and has relied on cooperation from the allied Komei party for support.

Ozawa has also been unpopular among some of his own fol-

lowers, who feel his style is too heavy-handed. Forty members have left the party since its dismal showing in the October 1996 lower house election.

New Frontier was formed three years ago to rival the LDP. The LDP recently regained majority control of the powerful lower house of Parliament, but needs cooperation from allied parties to pass legislation.

Ozawa apparently hopes the move will consolidate his power by shedding dissenters in his party. Several news reports have cited Ozawa as saying he plans to take with him about 100 of his firmest supporters from the party, which now has 220 members in the two houses of Parliament.

In the more powerful 500-seat lower house, New Frontier has 126 seats, compared to the LDP's 254.

The Liberal Democrats announced two defections from opposition groups Friday, one of them from Ozawa's party. The break up of the party could lead to more members drifting to the LDP before the next parliament session begins Jan 12.

A Gaza youth waves a toy pistol in the air during a well-attended rally marking the 10th anniversary of the establishment of Hamas in Gaza City on Friday. — AP/UNB photo

Plane with Xmas gifts lands in Iraq: A plane bearing medicine and Christmas presents landed outside Baghdad Friday, the second flight of UN-approved humanitarian aid to arrive in Iraq in two days, the official Iraqi News Agency reported, AP reports from Baghdad.

The plane was chartered by the Icelandic charity Peace 2000 in collaboration with an Italian group called Bridge to Baghdad. INA said. The head of Peace 2000, Thor Magnusson, told INA on arrival that their flight was to encourage international organizations to work toward lifting the UN sanctions imposed on Iraq after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

3 buried alive by avalanche in KL: Three people were buried alive by an avalanche of rain-soaked garbage when a bulldozer plowing through a dump triggered a landslide, police said Friday, AP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

One of the victims was found dead Friday, the Bernama news agency reported. The two others were also believed to have died in the Thursday night accident, which happened while they were scavenging through the trash. A search was underway Friday for the bulldozer operator. The Nan Ser 30, Bernama reported.

1 executed in KSA: A Saudi Arabian citizen convicted of murder was executed by sword Friday, the Interior Ministry said, bringing to 121 the number of executions in the kingdom this year, AFP reports from Riyadh.

It said Sulaiman bin Obaid Al-Sahli was executed for killing his compatriot Rashid bin Shabib Al-Sobei with a firearm during a dispute, Saudi television reported. Saudi Arabia applies strict Islamic Sharia law, executing people convicted of murder, rape, armed robbery and drug trafficking.

Tajik rebels to return home: With peace holding in Tajikistan, some of the estimated 650 rebel fighters in neighbouring Afghanistan will begin returning home this week, according to a news report Friday, AP reports from Moscow.

About 200 ex-rebel fighters will be disarmed and brought back to Tajikistan under an agreement worked out by the National Reconciliation Commission in the Central Asian nation, Russia's Interfax news agency said. The commission includes members of the hard-line government as well as the former rebels.

Gunmen kill 5 in Sao Paulo: A group of heavily armed men burst into a boarding house in one of Sao Paulo's most violent districts and gunned down five men during a Christmas Eve barbecue, police said Friday, AP reports from Sao Paulo.

Police inspector Fatima Brunelli said 20 people were about to enjoy midnight supper early Thursday when some 10 men armed with shotguns and machine guns entered the house and ordered women and children to lock themselves in a room. "Then they forced eight men to lie face down on the floor and started shooting," Brunelli said. "Three were wounded and are hospitalized."

Spain to ruin anti-personnel mines: Spain will destroy all of its anti-personnel mines within three years, one year less than required by the international draft treaty banning land mines signed early December in Ottawa, Canada, AP reports from Madrid, Spain.

In its cabinet meeting Friday, the government approved the eradication of its stockpile of 800,000 as Spain's pledge to stop using such land mines as military weapons. "This measure makes Spain a pioneer in the disposal of these weapons," Spanish defence minister Eduardo Serra after the Cabinet meeting. Serra also said that destroying the land mines will cost Spain more than 527 million pesetas (3.6 million dollars).

2 Japanese students killed in Peru: Police believe two Japanese university students plying Peru's Amazon River on a balsawood raft were robbed and killed with machetes in a remote jungle region, a newspaper reported Friday, AP reports from Lima.

Yeltsin woos long-time communist foes

MOSCOW, Dec 27: Russian President Boris Yeltsin wooed his long-time foes in the communist opposition Friday, increasing the isolation of young cabinet reformers under pressure since a major graft scandal erupted last month, reports AP.

Yeltsin, back at the Kremlin after a two-week lay-off due to a cold, held out the prospect of closer cooperation with the left at the inaugural meeting of a "round table" with opposition, regional and government leaders.

The Kremlin chief, addressing the gathering without any apparent after-effects of his recent illness, said the forum represented "a new way of solving important matters of state democratically."

Symbolising the new era of compromise, the participants agreed to set up a committee to resolve the row over land reform, one of the bitterest disputes dividing Yeltsin and the state Duma, the lower house of parliament.

The communist-dominated Duma passed a property law in September that recognises in theory the right to private property, but does not allow for the

sale of land, expect for small individually-owned plots.

Yeltsin, who refused to sign the bill, has been pushing for the right to freely buy and sell land, saying it is one of the last great reforms Russia must undergo to fully liberalise its economy.

A protocol agreed at the meeting would exclude foreigners from buying land, impose a freeze on change of purpose of plots after their sale, and introduce a "real tax on farmland."

The document also calls for a series of laws to help speed up land reform, notably on tenancy, valuation, the sale of federal and municipally-held land, and the creation of a state land register.

Progress towards a compromise text — a new draft is to be ready in three months — will be monitored by the "group of four" comprising Yeltsin, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and the speakers of parliament in February.

Yegor Stroyev, Speaker of the upper house Federation Council, said the Duma code "needs further clarification" as it contained only a vague description of private ownership.

LTTE kills 7 members of moderate Tamil group

COLOMBO, Dec 27: The government troops stepped up security in northern Sri Lanka on Saturday, a day after Tamil rebels shot and killed seven members of a moderate Tamil group that decided to participate in next month's local elec-

Rabbani ends Afghan peace talks with Pak leaders

ISLAMABAD, Dec 27: Afghanistan's ousted President Burhanuddin Rabbani was scheduled to leave Pakistan on Saturday after talks with Pakistani leaders aimed at bringing peace to his war-torn homeland, reports AP.

Although Pakistan's Foreign Ministry said the talks were "successful," it refused to elaborate.

However, Nadeem Kiyani, a spokesman for Pakistan's foreign ministry said it is hoped that the next round of peace talks will include the Taliban religious army which controls 85 per cent of Afghanistan.

tions, military officials and news reports said, reports AP.

The government has scheduled voting in the Tamil heartland after a gap of 15 years as a step to decentralize power and win back the support of minority Tamils.

The area is home to most of the nation's 3.2 million Tamils. Observers say the government is trying to marginalize the main guerrilla group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which has been fighting for a separate homeland since 1983.

The moderate groups have decided to contest the Jan. 29 elections.

The island newspaper said that Tamil Tiger gunmen on Friday ambushed a group of 30 Eelam People's Revolutionary Front members and killed at least six of them. Another member was reported missing and resumed dead.

The newspaper also said the LTTE has warned Tamils against taking part in the elections. More than 1,170 contestants will be vying for 234 seats.

Tamil terrorists rebels have announced that the candidates contesting the local government elections are betrayers," the newspaper said.

Mexico massacre 16 Maya Indians charged with murder

ACTEAL, Mexico, Dec 27: Sixteen Maya Indians have been charged with first-degree murder in the massacre of 45 highland villagers, and investigators pressed state officials to explain why they failed to stop the slaughter, despite being alerted during the hours-long attack, reports AP.

The suspects also were arraigned Friday night in Federal Criminal Court on several other charges, including kidnapping, in connection with Monday's raid on this mountain hamlet.

Police are still holding 26 other Maya Indians from villages around Acteal but they have not been charged yet.

Meanwhile, federal investigators sought answers to the attack.

One state employee said police blocked him from passing through the area because of gunfire — directly contradicting state officials' insistence that they didn't know about the shooting until hours later.

And a newspaper on Friday cited witnesses as saying that police tried to cover up the massacre, digging graves to hide the bodies, then rushing them off to the state capital for autopsies.

At least two dozen men, all wearing ski masks and blue or black uniforms, opened fire on

villagers in this highlands Maya community on Monday, killing seven men, 20 women and 18 children, Attorney General Jorge Madrazo said.

The "immense majority" were shot in the back with high-caliber weapons, Madrazo said.

Later Friday, Madrazo read a statement to reporters saying the massacre stemmed from a feud between three families that has been going on since the 1930s.

He said the investigation was not complete, and did not mention any possible involvement of state officials. He did not say who he believed ordered the attack and he refused to answer questions.

Survivors have blamed paramilitary forces aligned with Mexico's ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI.

The massacre shocked people across Mexico, produced calls for the governor's resignation and reinforced skepticism about the federal government's efforts to revive peace talks with the Zapatista rebels. It has put government officials all the way up to President Ernesto Zedillo on the defensive.

Zedillo has condemned the massacre and called for renewed peace talks with the rebels.

Pak FM slams India over turmoil in Kashmir

ISLAMABAD, Dec 27: Pakistan opened a three-day conference of its envoys in South Asia today, with Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan criticising India over the turmoil in the disputed Kashmir region, reports AP.

Kashmir continues to "bedevil relations between Pakistan and India. It is the primary reason for instability in South Asia," Khan said in his opening speech.

Despite "unprovoked and frequent violations" along the dividing line of control in Kashmir, Pakistan has chosen the path of dialogue to "address all outstanding issues in a meaningful and integrated manner," he said.

Kashmir has sparked two of the three wars between Pakistan and India since their independence from Britain in 1947. New Delhi holds the southern two-thirds and Islamabad the rest of the disputed Himalayan region.

Khan said Pakistan's policy was aimed at promoting political stability and economic cooperation in South Asia amid "tensions, distrust and old disputes" plaguing the region.

Off the Record

'Misfits' of the year
NEW DELHI: Followers of a free-sex Indian guru on Friday announced their annual misfit awards, naming Princess Diana's brother, Earl Spencer, and Hollywood legend Elizabeth Taylor among a host of celebrity recipients, reports AP.

The Osho Misfit Awards was instituted in memory of the late Acharya Rajneesh, who followed an electric philosophy of eastern mysticism and western pop-psychology as well as advocated free love, winning him millions of admirers.

The awards honoured those who had broken away from tradition, a statement said.

The awards also included India writer Arundhati Roy whose debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, won the Booker Prize this year, and Indian Health Minister Renuka Chaudhury for being supportive of MDS sufferers.

The Osho Awards also encompassed Marina Mahathir, the daughter of Malaysian Prime Minister Mohammed Mahathir, for her "vociferous championing of democracy and human rights" in her country and Pakistan's High Court for ruling that love marriages are legitimate "in a country where by tradition sons and daughters are told to marry by their parents".

Jilted!
BAMAKO, Mali: A mother of six who gave up everything to spend Christmas with her lover in Mali arrived to find the man she considered her future husband already had four wives and sixteen children, reports AP.

On seeing the 43-year-old woman from Gabon and her children outside his home, four-times married Ousmane fled over his garden wall calling on God to save him.

"I divorced, sold my house, and travelled thousands of kilometres with my children to be reunited and marry him. But he refused to spend Christmas with me," said the jilted and penniless Nadine.

The woman said they had met in the Gabonese capital Libreville eight months before, and although he never answered her letters she convinced herself he had not received them.

In spite of everything, Nadine said she still loves and wants to marry Ousmane and has vowed to remain outside the polygamist's home in Bamako until he returns.

Indian corporates back BJP's campaign to project Vajpayee

NEW DELHI, Dec 27: Seen to be on a winning roll ahead of India's snap poll next year, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is becoming a draw for influential corporate houses who have pitched in to promote the party's prime ministerial nominee, reports India Abroad News Service.

The Christmas Day birthday celebrations of Atal Behari Vajpayee, who has been rated in pre-election surveys as a leading choice to be India's next Prime Minister, saw several business houses contribute to the BJP's campaign to project Vajpayee.

Vajpayee, who turned 71 on December 25, was the subject of a multi-page sponsored special supplement in several editions of a leading national newspaper extolling Vajpayee's suitability for the country's top political job. This carried excerpts of Vajpayee's speeches in Parliament, advisory references to the BJP leader by top politicians from all parties and prominent citizens.

A big consumer electronics company, well known textile and construction groups and

power companies paid for the supplement in editions of The Times of India, The Economic Times and the Hindi Navbharati Times, all of the Times group of publications. Some other national dailies carried similar promotional supplements.

A BJP official denied that the party had organised the supplements and said it was an initiative of the dailies themselves who had sought sponsors on their own. However, the party will be accepting contribution from corporate houses for its poll campaign, he told IANS.

A senior official of one of the sponsors said the special supplement reflected the hope of business in India that the BJP would provide a stable government.

"The most important need now is for stability at the Centre," he told the Business Standard newspaper.

As more and more politicians from rival ranks switch loyalty to the BJP, Indian corporate groups are also turning to the party to end India's prolonged spell of unstable gov-

ernments which has affected economic liberalisation.

Although, not coming out in favour of any party, India's apex business chambers have also emphasised the need for a stable government and said this would be the main issue in the general election. "We would like to have a stable government for full five years," prominent Indian industrialist K.K. Modi, who heads the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, was quoted as saying.

According to news reports, the proprietor of India's biggest two-wheeler motor scooter company, Rahul Bajaj was being considered by the BJP as a party candidate for the Lok Sabha, lower house of Parliament election from his southern home state of Maharashtra.

Bajaj is one of the founder members of the so-called "Bombay Club" of Indian industrialists who have demanded protection for domestic business in an era of economic liberalisation. The BJP is for keeping out consumer goods multinationals and ensuring a "level playing

field" to local industry as demanded by the Bombay Club.

Meanwhile, the BJP has defended its teaming up with a medley of political groups and leaders, some of them implicated in criminal cases. Speaking in the industrial capital of Mumbai, Vajpayee said, "we are not a party of 'sadhus' (holy men) for spiritual welfare, we are in the power game."

Over the past two months, the BJP has come under fire for tying up with people with shady pasts. After winning the vote of confidence in northern Uttar Pradesh state in October with the help of defectors from rival parties, the BJP state government appointed as ministers many legislators who were facing criminal charges.

The BJP's alliance with the former Chief Minister of southern Tamil Nadu, Jayaram Jayalitha, has also been criticised as Jayalitha faces serious corruption charges for which she was jailed.

"We expect our alliance partners to be away from corruption but at the same time we cannot impose our principles on them," Vajpayee said.