

US ready to improve food, medicine distribution

Iraq won't tolerate further delay in lifting sanctions

BAGHDAD, Dec 31: Iraq's parliament said on Tuesday it was losing patience with the United Nations and would not tolerate any further delay in the lifting of sanctions, reports Reuters.

"The extraordinary situation imposed on Iraq should have an immediate end... and Iraq cannot endure any more harm, tyranny and aggression," said the Iraqi National Assembly in a statement carried by the official Iraqi news agency INA.

The statement said the assembly supported the powerful Revolutionary Command Council's firm stand against sanctions issued on December 20.

Iraqi leaders then said they would not remain idle if the United States continued to place obstacles in the path of the lifting of UN sanctions imposed after Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Sanctions will not be lifted unless the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) in charge of dismantling Iraq's weapons of mass destruction gives a clean bill of health.

Last month the assembly said UNSCOM should end its work in six months' time and sanctions should be lifted immediately.

Iraq briefly expelled American members of UN inspection teams in November, prompting UNSCOM chairman Richard Butler to withdraw most inspectors.

Baghdad subsequently reversed its decision following Russian mediation and the inspectors returned, but Baghdad banned them from entering so-called "presidential sites."

Washington, which maintains a strong military presence in the Gulf, has repeatedly insisted that Iraq allow the investigators access to the sites and has refused to rule out the use of force if Iraq does not comply with the UN inspections regime.

"The Iraqi leadership and national assembly are unified to defend the Iraqi people... and they are not scared of threats," the statement said.

"They will not tolerate further procrastination and delay in lifting the embargo," it added.

Earlier, Iraq's Trade Minister Mohammed Mehdi Saleh branded as lies US allegations that Baghdad was holding up UN approval of 120 billion dollar in food contracts under an oil-for-food deal with the United Nations.

"The American administration is the big liar in the world," he told Reuters.

AFP from Washington adds: The United States is ready "to do everything possible" to improve food and medicine distribution in Iraq under an improved UN "oil for food" deal the US State Department said Tuesday.

And Washington "will be prepared to act immediately" on a report from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, expected in early 1998, on how to improve delivery of humanitarian aid, said State Department spokesman James Foley.

Foley stressed that US officials "believe the blame for distribution delays is 100 per cent on Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's shoulders" and accused Iraq of reducing purchases of basic goods for its people.

Saddam "has continued to plough resources into areas that have nothing to do with meeting the humanitarian needs of his own people," said Foley, pointing to "the proliferation of so-called presidential palaces."

And Foley said Baghdad delayed the delivery of milk to Iraqi children by refusing to follow the established procedure for UN approval of "oil for food" contracts.

He emphasised that Washington gave the go-ahead to a contract for delivery of powdered baby formula proposed by Tunisia December 23 even though the contract overstepped the bounds set by the "oil for food" deal.

Pope John Paul II is trying to get the UN embargo against Iraq lifted, the apostolic nuncio here told an Iraqi official Tuesday, according to the official Iraqi News Agency INA.

The holy father supports the Iraqi people and is working continuously for the lifting of the embargo, the cause of the deaths of children, women and the elderly, INA quoted the Pope representative as saying.

He was speaking during a meeting with the chief of the Iraqi parliament's Arab and international affairs committee, Saad Qassem Hamudi.

Who gave the Vatican diplomat a Christmas message for the Pope from humanitarian groups.

The Iraqi parliament asked Pope John Paul II on Christmas to "redouble his efforts to bring an end to the suffering of the Iraqi people and to lift the unjust embargo imposed on 22 million Iraqis," INA said.

Brazilian inmates agree to free 650 hostages at prison

SOROCABA, Brazil, Dec 31: Brazilian inmates holding up to 650 hostages at a prison near Sao Paulo agreed on Tuesday to free them in exchange for being transferred to other prisons, authorities said, reports Reuters.

The hostages, mostly visiting relatives who had been held since Sunday when 15 inmates took control of the prison, would be released today morning, said Joao Benedito Marques, secretary of the Sao Paulo state penitentiary department.

"The negotiations have been completed, everybody is fine, the men, women, children and the other hostages," Marques said, referring to 17 prison workers who were also being held.

Twenty inmates at the Sorocaba detention centre, 50 miles (80 kms) west of Sao Paulo, would be transferred to other prisons in Sao Paulo state under the agreement, he said.

Kaunda ends hunger strike

LUSAKA, Dec 31: Zambia's former president Kenneth Kaunda has ended a hunger strike he began after being detained under emergency laws on Christmas Day, Tanzania's ex-president Julius Nyerere said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Nyerere, a close friend of Kaunda's "Father of the Nation," visited him in the maximum security prison in the town of Kabwe on Tuesday and the two shared a small meal.

Together we had a nice drink of orange juice and little biscuits. He broke his fast. Nyerere told reporters after spending several hours with Kaunda.

He did not comment on the prisoner's state of health.

Kaunda, 73, who ruled Zambia from independence in 1964 until he was ousted in 1991 in the country's first multi-party elections, had been refusing food and water since his arrest last Thursday.

Indonesia bans New Year's Eve revelry

JAKARTA, Dec 31: City officials are to stand watch outside nightclubs and bars to enforce a ban against New Year's Eve parties imposed at the start of Islam's holy fasting month, Ramadan, a news report said Wednesday, reports AP.

Ramadan began before dawn Wednesday morning. Muslims are prohibited from eating and drinking during daylight hours and night time festivities are also frowned upon.

The Jakarta city administration and other local governments in other cities have banned New Year's Eve parties in deference to Islamic sensitivities.

Elton John gets knighthood for "Candle in the Wind"

LONDON, Dec 31: Now it's Sir Elton: the flamboyant pop star Elton John, who moved millions and topped charts worldwide with his "Candle in the Wind 1997" tribute at Princess Diana's funeral received a knighthood Wednesday, reports AP.

The 50-year-old songwriter was among nearly 1,000 people given titles or other awards in Queen Elizabeth II's New Year Honours list, including renowned science fiction writer Arthur C Clarke, actor Michael Gambon, and the man who drove Diana's hearse.

"My joy at now receiving this great new honour is immeasurable," John, who was born Reginald Dwight, said in a statement. The citation read "for services to music and for charitable services."

Security tightened in Northern Ireland

PORTADOWN, Northern Ireland, Dec 31: Security was tight across Northern Ireland on Tuesday as both the Catholic and Protestant communities staged funerals for two men killed in a fresh outbreak of political violence, reports Reuters.

Hundreds of police and soldiers were on standby for a major operation in the town of Portadown for the funeral of ruthless Protestant guerrilla chief Billy Wright, who was gunned down by Republican inmates inside the top security maze jail on Saturday.

The centre of staunchly Protestant Portadown was at a complete standstill after shopkeepers received written notes from suspected Protestant "loyalists" urging them to close as a mark of respect for the dead man.

Community leaders said they saw this as an implied threat from Wright's supporters.

Varsace murder case closed without motive

MIAMI BEACH, Dec 31: Five months and hundreds of interviews after Gianni Versace was slain, the answer to why the fashion designer was gunned down remains buried with his killer, Andrew Cunanan, reports AP.

Police here closed their investigation Tuesday into the July 15 slaying, stating they had no idea why Cunanan shot Versace on the steps of the designer's oceanfront mansion.

The real answer to that went down with the ship, so to speak, when Andrew Cunanan committed suicide," Police Chief Richard Barreto said.

Sonia wants party to go into polls with clean image

Manmohan Singh likely to lead Congress (I) Party

NEW DELHI, Dec 31: India's once powerful Congress Party, trailing in polls, is considering elevating a champion of economic reforms to lead it in the upcoming parliamentary elections, news reports said Wednesday, reports AP.

On Monday, Sonia Gandhi, the 51-year-old widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, announced that she would campaign for Congress, but she turned down offers to lead the party. The Business Standard newspaper quoted Gandhi loyalists as saying that she wanted the party to go into elections with a fresh, clean image and that she preferred Manmohan Singh to the party president.

As party leader, Singh would be in line to take over as prime minister should his party win the vote. As finance minister in the early 1990s under former Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao, Singh began opening Indian markets to foreign investment and decreasing the government's role in the economy.

No election date has been set, but the vote must be held before March 15, the deadline for Parliament to approve the next annual budget. The early vote — being held less than two years after the last elections — was

called after Congress withdrew support from a minority government led by the United Front coalition.

Singh dismissed newspaper reports as hypothetical but he didn't appear to be averse to succeeding 83-year-old Sitaram Kesri as the Congress Party president.

"There are many senior leaders. However, if any responsibility is given to me by the party working committee, I will discharge it to the best of my ability," The Pioneer newspaper quoted him as saying.

Kesri was elected top party leader for a five-year term earlier this year, but has little charisma and some younger party members accuse him of strategic blunders.

Kesri "has nothing to offer which could fortify party workers for the election trail," The Times of India said in an editorial.

An opinion poll published Wednesday said campaigning by Sonia Gandhi — the party's living link to former prime ministers Rajiv Gandhi, his mother Indira Gandhi and grandfather Jawaharlal Nehru — would help Congress win an extra 20-25 seats in the 545-member lower house of parliament. The party won 136 seats

in its worst-ever election rout last year, and needs 273 to form a government on its own.

The poll, carried out by the Centre for Media Studies across eight states, did not include a margin of error. Earlier polls have predicted the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party will win the most seats, but probably not enough to form a government without partners.

Harihar Swarup, a political commentator, said Sonia Gandhi's intervention had already been productive.

"The announcement of her decision to campaign for the party has stopped the exodus of Congress leaders to other political parties," he said in an interview.

In recent weeks, several top Congress leaders have quit the party in at least six states, accusing party chief Kesri of ineffective leadership.

"Three months hence, Ms Gandhi will either become the prime minister of the country or she will become a myth which has had its day," Pran Chopra, a political columnist, said in an interview.

Ms Gandhi's husband was assassinated while campaigning for re-election in southern India in 1991.

Education for female must to level off population boom

WASHINGTON, Dec 31: The population boom is still booming in the world's poorest countries, even as it levels off in richer nations that encourage the education and employment of women. The Population Institute reported on Tuesday, says Reuters.

Seventy-four less developed countries can expect their populations to double in 30 years or less, and the world's total population will reach 6 billion by mid-1999, the Washington-based institute said in its annual overview.

But in the 51 richest countries, population are stabilising due in part to changes in the lives and rights of women, institute president Werner Fornos told a news conference.

"What made that slowdown happen in the industrialised world is that we had universal access to education for girls, so wherever a woman has achieved an eighth-grade education she has half the number of pregnancies of an uneducated sister," Fornos said.

"Once you get an eighth-grade education, you don't turn a woman into a baby factory again," he said.

Industrialised nations also shared the notion of full employment opportunities for women, made greater efforts at gender equality and offered women access to contraception, according to Fornos.

He disputed recent reports, notably in the New York Times magazine and the Wall Street Journal, indicating the global population boom had ended or there may even be a "population explosion."

Such reports, "ignore demographic realities," he said, citing figures from the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation listing 86 countries as low-income and food-deficient and suggesting this is attributable to over population in those countries.

Fornos cited 10 countries—Mexico, Morocco, Turkey, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kenya, Brazil, Philippines, Egypt and Pakistan — where the use of contraception has cut fertility rates since 1973.

He said the two countries facing the steepest population gains in the next generation were Nigeria and Pakistan.

Part of the global population picture is the expectation that

about 3 billion people will enter their childbearing years in the next generation, and only 1.8 billion will end that phase or their lives, the report said.

The institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organisation that seeks a balance among the world's population, environment and resources, called for increased contributions from the developed world, including the United States.

Fornos complained Washington has cut population assistance over the last four years from dollar 585 million to dollar 385 million.

"We've seen the industrialised world lag especially when it comes to supporting the United Nations population fund," he said.

Beyond government and international programmes, Fornos suggested another way world population might be stabilised.

"If there's one obstacle that all of us ought to address, it's that if we can achieve a much faster or greater male responsibility in the reproductive act, these numbers will start to come down even more significantly," he said.



President Clinton is followed by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and daughter Chelsea as he carries his new dog Buddy down the steps of Air Force One Tuesday, after arriving at Beaufort Marine Corps Air Station in Beaufort, SC. The Clintons are spending New Year's in Hilton Head, SC, before vacationing in the Virgin Islands. — AP/UNB photo

Bid to end Afghan conflict Sharif to work in close cooperation with Iran, KSA

ISLAMABAD, Dec 31: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said Tuesday Pakistan will work in close cooperation with Iran and Saudi Arabia to encourage all warring Afghan factions to end their conflict, officials said, reports AFP.

The "misunderstanding" with Tehran was removed by recent Iranian leaders during the summit of the 55-nation Organisation of the Islamic Conference, Sharif said.

Speaking to deputies from his Pakistan Muslim League and allied parties on the eve of presidential elections, Sharif said Pakistan desired restoration of peace in Afghanistan.

A broad-based multi-party dialogue can lead to a durable settlement in the war-ravaged country, he said adding his efforts would soon yield positive results.

"We have no favourites of enemies in Afghanistan, we are friends of Afghans," said Sharif whose government in May recognised the Taliban administration.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are the other two Muslim countries maintaining

diplomatic ties with the Taliban militia which seized Kabul in September last year and now controls two-thirds of Afghanistan.

Sharif also said Pakistan had recently rushed food supplies and clothing to the Taliban opponents in Central Afghanistan's Amiyun province where the Islamic militia's blockade has created a famine-like situation.

He said his government also wanted to resolve the Kashmir issue with India through negotiations but it would not compromise on national interests.

India must give the Kashmiris their "inalienable right of self determination without further delay," he added.

He said he "forcefully" raised the Kashmir issue during his meetings with Indian leaders and persuaded them for a solution of the dispute.

"We will have to give up the 50-year-old policies and resolve the issue through more comprehensive and effective means," he added.

The two neighbours claiming ownership of the northern Himalayan state have fought three wars.

BRIEFLY

Kidnapped newsmen freed in Russia: Seven journalists kidnapped in southern Russia last week were freed unharmed on Wednesday, Russian news agencies reported, AP says from Moscow.

Sources in the Dagestan Interior Ministry said the journalists were released without any conditions, Russia's ITAR-Tass and Interfax news agencies reported. The journalists, all based in Chechnya, were seized after they crossed into neighboring Dagestan on Dec. 24 to cover a raid by Chechen guerrillas and Dagestani Muslim fundamentalists on Russian military outposts. Despite the end of Chechnya's two-year independence war with Russia, the region remains plagued by kidnappings and general lawlessness. Most cases involve Chechens kidnapping ethnic Russians or foreigners and seeking ransoms.

10 killed in Thai road mishap: At least 10 people were killed and 32 others injured when a public bus careered across a road divider and collided with four pickup trucks yesterday morning Thai police said, Reuters reports from Bangkok.

Police in Muaklaek district of Saraburi Province, about 120 km north of Bangkok, said the Bangkok-bound bus was travelling at a high speed when it lost control on a sharp curve and flew over the road divider, smashing into the oncoming traffic. The accident killed all the drivers and passengers of the trucks — 10 in all — whom were heading home to the provinces for new year celebrations.

Journalist arrested in Seoul: A Korean newspaper that had a Korean American broadcast journalist, arrested in Seoul said that the action was done in defence of its reputation and credibility, AP says from Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, supporters of Richard Choi said they were waiting to hear from President Bill Clinton, who they called on to pressure the South Korean government for his release. Choi, a news anchor and talk show host for KBLA-AM, was arrested Dec 19 for malicious slander for a story he broadcast from South Korea to Southern California. In his Dec 15 broadcast, Choi reported on a rumoured merger between the Korean Times, which publishes a Los Angeles edition, and the Hyundai Group, adding that South Korean media companies appear to have been hurt by the country's economic downturn.

Strong quake hits Myanmar: An intense earthquake occurred 410 kilometres north of Mandalay in Myanmar late Tuesday, the Hong Kong observatory said, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

The earthquake, estimated to be 5.8 on the Richter Scale, was recorded at 9:47 pm (11:47 GMT), it said. There was no immediate report of damage or casualties.

Ross to travel to ME next week: US envoy Dennis Ross will travel to the Middle East next week to push Israel and the Palestinians to make progress ahead of talks in Washington, the State Department confirmed Tuesday, AFP reports from Washington.

Ross was to arrive in the Middle East around January 5, according to State Department spokesman James Foley, the visit was to set the stage for talks here with President Bill Clinton. Clinton was to meet separately with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat in a bid to revive the peace process that has been stalled since March.

4 cops gunned down in Pakistan: A man wanted in connection with more than 50 murders and theft shot and killed four policemen in eastern Pakistan following a high-speed chase, police said Tuesday, AP reports from Lahore.

The policemen gave chase to Yazman Bhindar in Bhawalpur, some 300 kilometres (180 miles) south of the provincial capital Lahore, on Monday.

AIDS drugs assistance programme Clinton plans to seek increase in spending

WASHINGTON, Dec 31: President Bill Clinton plans to seek an increase in spending for a programme to help people with the virus that causes AIDS to buy expensive new treatment drugs, the White House said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

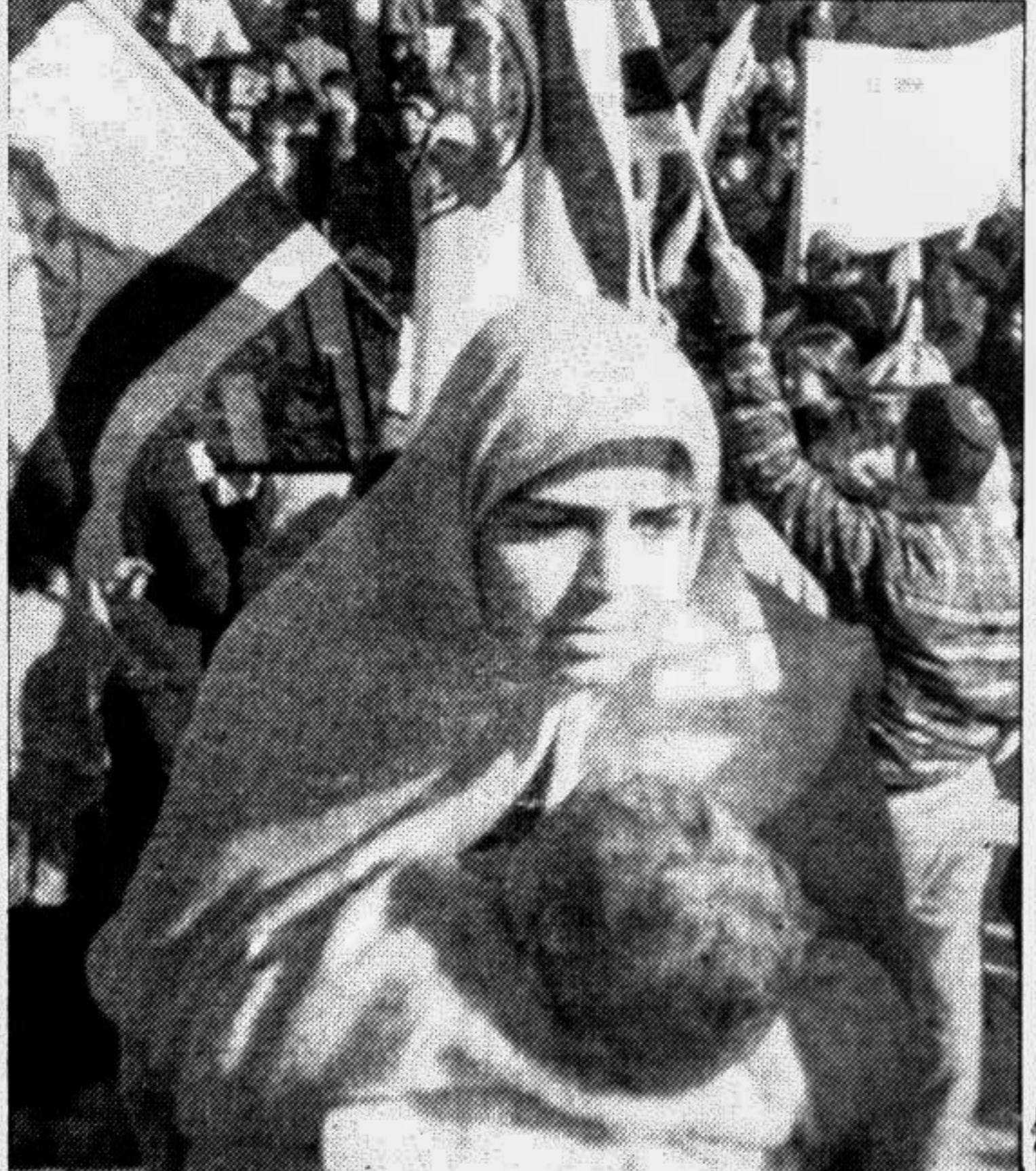
Spokesman Joe Lockhart confirmed a New York Times story that said Clinton would seek a 35 per cent increase in spending for AIDS drug assistance programme which help for new medications that help block development of the disease.

Those drugs are usually given as a mixture in a so-called drug cocktail and can cost dollar 12,000 to dollar 15,000 a year for one person. In some

cases private insurers do not pay for them, said a White House official.

People infected with the virus are generally unable to obtain treatment drugs under the federal medicare programme until they become severely ill, the official said. The new drugs slow the progression of the disease and prevent disability. In many cases, people are able to continue to work and live productive lives, he said.

Clinton was expected to request 365 million dollar for the drug programmes in the fiscal year 1999. Up from 285 million dollar this fiscal year and 167 million dollar last year, White House officials said.



A Palestinian woman with child in Jerusalem's old city tries to distance herself Tuesday from a march by members of the Jewish right-wing Temple Mount Faithful. Members of the group want to establish a Jewish temple in place of the Al-Aqsa and Dome of the Rock Muslim Mosques. — AP/UNB photo



Officials look at the six-story building on 42nd Street that collapsed early Tuesday morning in New York. The building, holding balloons and other items for the annual New Year's Eve celebration, was unoccupied at the time of the collapse and had been slated for demolition in the spring. No one was injured in the collapse, said Fire Department spokesman Frank Zitaglio. — AP/UNB photo

Convention on Sunday in Colombo Peace activists to call for Lankan govt-LTTE talks

COLOMBO, Dec 31: More than 1,000 peace activists from across war-torn Sri Lanka will meet next week and call on the government and rebels to negotiate, a spokesman said, reports AP.

"This is no ordinary peace effort we have been working on this for the past five months," Aji Rupeasinghe told reporters Tuesday. Rupeasinghe is chairman of the National Peace Council, an umbrella organisation of seven groups that includes Tamils and Sinhalese — Sri Lanka's warring ethnic groups — as well as religious leaders.

Rupeasinghe said 1,500 people are expected to attend Sunday's convention in Colombo, the capital. The meeting will end with an appeal to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas group and the government to hold peace talks.

Tamil Tigers say they can prosper only in an independent Tamil nation. The conflict, which has divided the predominantly Buddhist nation of 18 million people along ethnic lines, has claimed more than 51,000 lives in the past 14 years.

"Both sides understand that, by military means they can never end the conflict, at best

No confidence vote against Arafat to be delayed

RAMALLAH, Dec 31: In a stormy session, Palestinian lawmakers decided Tuesday to hold off for three months on a vote of no-confidence in Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's government, reports AP.

The council had threatened the vote last week to protest Arafat's failure to sign most of the laws it has passed since 1996, or to accept its recommendation for a cabinet reshuffle in the wake of disclosures of government corruption and mismanagement.

On Sunday, Arafat promised legislators from his own Fatah movement to reshuffle the cabinet within a month and to sign 18 of the 37 laws the council has drafted — including laws on the budget, political parties, and press freedoms.

If these are implemented it will be an administrative revolution," said Public Works Minister Azzam al-Ahmed.

But several legislators were angry that Arafat did not respond to the council in writing, and said the council did not have to accept deals he made only with Fatah lawmakers.

"We still have no real answers and no real solutions," said Ziad Abu Amr, an independent lawmaker from Gaza City.

"Is he going to implement changes in the institutions of the Palestinian Authority?"