



Pope John Paul II receives the traditional Roman Chalice from Mayor of Rome Francesco Rutelli, in the Jesuit church of Saint Ignatius of Loyola Wednesday, after celebrating as he does every New Year's Eve, the service of prayer and song named Te Deum Laudamus, after the ancient Christian hymn of praise and thanksgiving. —AP/UNB photo

Rafiq Tarar sworn in as Pakistan's 9th president

ISLAMABAD, Jan 1: Conservative Islamist Rafiq Tarar was sworn in Thursday as Pakistan's ninth president, despite a court challenge next month that could disqualify him, reports AP.

In a simple ceremony at the palatial white marble presidency, Tarar, wearing the traditional Pakistani dress of baggy pants and long shirt, took the oath of office.

Largely a ceremonial post, the job of president became vacant on Dec. 2, after a protracted power struggle that paralysed the country and had many people fearing a military takeover.

The president and Supreme Court Chief Justice waged a bitter struggle against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his two-thirds majority in Parliament. In the end President Paoq Leghari resigned, the chief justice was removed and Sharif emerged a clear winner.

Tarar, a virtual unknown until his nomination for president by Sharif, is a former justice on the Lahore High Court.

Opposition lawmakers, led by former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, have called Tarar a "puppet" of Sharif's.

Liberals and human-rights activists in Pakistan say his

judgements while on the Lahore High Court do not bode well either for minorities or women.

He has spoken out against Pakistan's family laws, which give women the right of divorce and right to contest for custody of children.

He has publicly supported harsh Islamic punishments, like the amputation of limbs for theft and the death penalty for blasphemy. And he has written against the promotion of members of the minority Ahmedi sect of senior government jobs or appointed to the

Moi leading in Kenya polls

NAIROBI, January 1: With slightly over half of the constituencies reporting Thursday, incumbent President Daniel arap Moi was leading in Kenya's drawn-out general elections, reports AP.

Moi, 73, who is seeking a fifth, five-year term, led by more than 300,000 votes in unofficial results from 111 of 210 constituencies, the private Kenya Television Network reported.

Supreme Court.

But after the brief swearing-in ceremony, Tarar said the criticism is "unfounded... I am a liberal."

But lawyer and human rights activist, Hina Jilani said proof of Tarar's conservative interpretation of Islam lies in his rulings, which she said generally went against women, particularly in rape cases.

Tarar supports a law, which human rights groups are trying to have revoked, that requires four male witnesses to a rape to get a conviction.

"In one such (rape) case, Tarar once remarked that women involved in these cases, are prone to lying," Jilani was quoted as saying in an article on Thursday in the English-language newspaper, The News.

But government officials and religious leaders in Pakistan say Tarar is being misrepresented.

Information Minister Mushahid Hussain called Tarar a "moderate".

Tarar won the presidential elections Wednesday handily.

In Pakistan the president is indirectly elected by lawmakers in the National Assembly, Senate and four provincial parliaments.

78 killed in Algeria on 1st day of Ramadan

ALGIERS, Algeria, Jan 1: As-salants using sharp-edged weapons killed 78 people in Western Algeria on the first day of Ramadan, state radio announced Wednesday in a rare government admission of violence, reports AP.

Citing three statements issued by the military-backed regime, state radio said 68 people were injured in the Tuesday attacks near the city of Relizane, 300 kms (180 miles) west of Algiers.

The extent of the attacks could not be independently confirmed, but regional hospital sources, who spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of reprisal, said around 100 people were injured.

There was no claim of responsibility for the attacks, which took place in a region of Islamic Group Algeria's most violent insurgent faction.

Since Algeria's insurgency began nearly six years ago, the Muslim holy month of Ramadan has been a time of increased violence. More than 400 people were killed during Ramadan last year, and more than 300 were killed in the weeks leading up to this year's holiday, which began Tuesday.



Fireworks explode over the Hakuba ski jumping venue, 180 kilometres (112 miles) northwest of Tokyo, during a countdown ceremony to welcome the coming year Wednesday. The central Japanese city of Nagano will host the 1998 Winter Olympics from Feb 7-22. —AP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

2 hurt in Jakarta chopper crash: A helicopter from the missionary aviation crashed on a training flight in Indonesia's easternmost province of Irian Jaya but the two people on board were not hurt, a report said yesterday, AFP reports from Jakarta.

The HU-500 helicopter crashed while conducting touch-and-go exercises in Puginia, in the central mountainous district of Jayawijaya at a early Wednesday afternoon, the Antara news agency said. The pilots on board, Len Vingerden of the Netherlands and Denis Pengstrazer of the United States, escaped without injury, said Mathis Papares, the airport head in the district capital of Wamena.

US concerned about jailed newsman: The United States on Wednesday expressed concern about an American journalist jailed in South Korea on charges of slander against a Seoul newspaper, Reuters says from Washington.

We have raised our concerns about the arrest with the appropriate Korean authorities' State Department deputy spokesman James Foley told reporters. He said Richard Choi, 49, a news anchor and talk show host for Radio Korea in Los Angeles was charged with malicious slander by the Korean daily newspaper Hankuk Ilbo for broadcasting "allegedly false rumours" that the newspapers was facing financial difficulties and might be taken over.

10 killed in Panama air crash: A Panamanian passenger plane crashed Wednesday over eastern Panama in poor weather, killing all 10 on board, aviation official said, AFP reports from Panama city.

Six Panamanians and four US citizens died when the aircraft, operated by the Panamanian airline Acotaxi, crashed in Kuna Yala one of the country's most popular tourist areas, said Eustacio Fabrega, director of Panama's civil aviation authority. "The aircraft crashed into a hill and burned and we are sure that there are no survivors," he told reporters.

Fire claims 8 in China: Eight people were killed and four injured when a fire ripped through an eight-storey commercial building in Changchun in north-eastern China near the North Korean border, it was reported yesterday, AFP says from Hong Kong.

More than 300 people were in the building when the fire broke out in an amusement arcade on the second floor, the semi-official China news service said. At least 400 firemen were involved in fighting the blaze which started Tuesday evening and was not brought under control until Wednesday morning, the report said.

Blair promises better life in '98 for Britons

LONDON, Jan 1: Prime Minister Tony Blair, relaxing on a far away holiday island in the Indian Ocean, promised Britons today that life would be better for them in 1998, reports Reuters.

Blair who is spending the New Year holiday with his family in the Seychelles told readers of the tabloid Sun newspaper in a signed article "last year was a good year, this year can be better."

He vowed to forge ahead with a controversial reform of the welfare state saying "We cannot go on spending billions on economic failure when we need to be investing more in success."

But he promised the Labour government would not take money from people who have no other means of support but benefits.

In a separate New Year message issued through the Labour Party, Blair told the party faithful it is now eight months since we won the election, in those eight months we have begun to make an impact on our country Britain is better."

He reminded Labour members of Parliament unhappy about welfare reform that each and every MP has that part to play in delivering our contract with the people.

To keep up our momentum in the New Year will require hard work, discipline and determination, he added. Stressing that the party would have to face up to tough choices.

Ramming home his message about welfare reform he said "Let me make one thing perfectly clear, people in genuine need of help will get it. The talk of taking any benefit from the most vulnerable in our society is scare mongering."

"But the present system is failing the poor and failing the country, we are spending more and more billions but failing to tackle the real problems of poverty, it has to change and this government will change it."

Blair said his government, which took over the presidency of the European Union at midnight, had a "positive but hard-headed attitude towards Europe."

'98 likely to be most difficult year for Asia in recent history

SINGAPORE, Jan 1: 1998 is expected to be the most difficult year for Asia in recent history as political systems of nations embroiled in financial turmoil are put to a serious test, a new report has warned, reports AP.

"Make or break might be a little too strong, but not by much," according to a report on political risks in 1998 by Hong Kong-based Political and Economic Risk Consultancy Ltd (PERC).

Of Asian countries government came to a standstill last month when ageing President Suharto took a 10-day rest in the middle of an economic crisis, were classified as the highest in 1998.

The report said much would depend on South Korea, stuck in a full-scale economic crisis with snowballing debt and a sharp drop in its currency, and how it would be able to avoid a debt moratorium.

"If a debt moratorium is called, it is difficult for us to exaggerate how loud the alarm bells should be ringing in head offices — not only with respect to South Korea but with respect to other countries in the region as well, including Japan," it said.

Indonesia and Thailand would probably feel the effect first of a crippling debt moratorium by Seoul, PERC said, adding that besides obvious economic problems, their political systems would be put to a serious test, much more so than in Korea.

It said Indonesia was the most vulnerable, since it not only had an ageing leader in questionable health but also

had no recent history of smooth political transitions.

Suharto, who has led Indonesia for 32 years, has no clear successor.

PERC said: "No revolution is in the cards, but of all the countries covered in this report, Indonesia is the one where political risks are highest in 1998."

Amid the financial turmoil sweeping Asia, a "worst case scenario" was South Korea's problems sending a chilling effect on China, it said.

"If Korea proves to be the blasting cap that detonates a much more serious explosion in China, the fireworks we have seen to date in Asia will be nothing compared with what the region can expect in 1998."

PERC said that although the Philippines and Thailand were in a somewhat stronger political situation than Indonesia, much would rest on how effective

Ban on sale, use of thin plastic bags in Beijing

BEIJING, Jan 1: A ban on the sale or use of thin plastic bags came into force today in Beijing as part of the city's struggle against a growing litter plague, the official Xinhua news agency reported today, says AFP.

A municipal circular banned bags thinner than 0.015 millimetres (0.0006 inches) — which are carried by wind after being discarded and often and up stuck in trees.

The bags are also a sanitary threat, it said, as they are often made from recycled materials

the governments were in checking financial turmoil, triggered off on July 2 by Bangkok's decision to effectively devalue the baht.

It warned that the presidential election due in May in the Philippines could result in a government that was ineffective.

The danger, PERC said, was that the campaign preceding the election would shatter the broad political consensus in favour of economic reform that President Ramos had painstakingly built up during his tenure.

Thailand, it said, would probably keep its present government of Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai through the height of its economic crisis but added: "The real question will come when elections are next held — possible late in 1998 or in 1999."

For Malaysia, PERC said one of the most important things to watch will be the extent to which Finance Minister Anwar Ibrahim pursues the hard-line stance he announced in early December to tackle the country's economic problems.

It said Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad could hardly have been pleased with Anwar's austerity package, which saw many of Mahathir's pet projects cancelled or put on hold.

PERC said although Singapore did not have to worry much about domestic political instability in 1998, the city state would have to review its strategy for carving out a regional role for itself since the structure of the region itself was changing.

Tickets to go on sale to see Di's final resting place

LONDON, Jan 1: Tickets to see the final resting place of Diana, Princess of Wales, at her family's estate in central England, will go on sale from next Monday, reports said today, reports AP.

Mourners from all over the world are thought to want to make a pilgrimage to the island in an ornamental lake on the Spencer estate where the 36-year-old princess is buried. Althorp Park, which is 75 miles (120 kilometres) north-west of London, will be open to the public for two months, from July 1, to the Princess's birthday, to August 30.

All visitors will have to apply for tickets in advance. The price, number available and method of application will be announced in the British National Press and on special phone lines on Monday.

On open days, the public will be allowed only to view the island, rather than visit the grave.

The Earl of Spencer, Diana's brother, believes prepaid tickets are the only way of controlling the flood of expected pilgrims to the site.

The nearby church of Mary the Virgin, Great Brington, has attracted around 1,000 visitors a week since Diana's death on August 31.

Althorp has been open to the public in the past, attracting about 10,000 visitors a year.

Summary executions US asks Iraq to give UN team access to jails

WASHINGTON, Jan 1: The United States said on Wednesday it had credible reports of mass summary executions of political prisoners in Iraq in recent weeks and called on Baghdad to give UN investigators access to the prisons, reports Reuters.

The State Department said it could not confirm the reports but was taking them seriously enough to urge a full inquiry.

In some of the reported incidents Iraqi families have received the bodies of the victims with clear signs of torture, State Department spokesman James Foley told a briefing.

Over the past several weeks we've received a number of, we believe, credible reports that the Iraqi regime may have ordered the summary execution of hundreds if not thousands of political detainees at Abu Graib prison and the Radwaniyah Detention Camp near Baghdad, the spokesman said.

"According to these reports many of those killed were serving sentences of 15 to 20 years for such crimes as insulting the regime or membership in an opposition political party," he added.

Taliban army rejects truce offer of Opposition

KABUL, January 1: The Taliban religious army rejected an Opposition-offered cease fire Thursday saying the mistrust between the two sides in Afghanistan's bitter conflict is too deep, reports AP.

"We know what they mean when they say a cease fire they just want time to get ready for a new round of fighting," Abdul Wakil Muttawakil, a Taliban spokesman told The Associated Press in a telephone interview from southern Kandahar.

Opposition soldiers, led by former president Burhanuddin Rabbani, offered a unilateral cease fire to coincide with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, when devout Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. Ramadan began on Wednesday and continues until the sighting of the next new moon, probably around Jan 31.

The Taliban religious army is battling Rabbani's opposition alliance on several fronts, most of them in northern Afghanistan.

But on new year's day in Afghanistan, Muttawakil said "all the front lines are quiet."

On Wednesday, however, a fighter jet dropped several bombs in opposition territory in central Bamyan province, causing the World Food Program to suspend an emergency airlift of food aid.

The opposition has blamed the bombing on the Taliban. In Bamyan province, the country's minority Shiite Muslims, belonging to Hezb-e-Wahadat, are locked in a ferocious battle with the Taliban army.

The Taliban, who threw out Rabbani from Kabul in September 1996, has been trying to consolidate its power since then. It rules in roughly 85 per

cent of the country, while Rabbani's alliance of smaller parties control the remaining 15 per cent.

The Taliban, who espouse a strict brand of Islamic rule, say a cease fire should wait until after Afghanistan's Islamic clerics meet to decide a peace formula.

Kabila reaffirms determination to hold polls in '99

KINSHASA, Jan 1: President Laurent Kabila of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has reaffirmed his determination to hold long awaited elections in 1999, reports Reuters.

In a New Year address broadcast on national television on Wednesday, Kabila said 1997 was a great year which saw the people of the former Zaire put an end to humiliation and bondage.

National reconstruction would be the task for 1998, he added.

"Building a national identity, the interdependence of all the country's provinces, eradicating unemployment both in the countryside and urban centres will be absolutely possible and the holding of census and elections in early 1999 will be widely facilitated," Kabila said.

Kabila took power in May after a seven-month military campaign against the late dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. He has banned political activity and ruled by decree with sweeping powers.

He has said the ban on political activity will be lifted after a two-year transition to elections.

Off the Record

Pay bill and go home

TEHRAN: An Iranian hospital has refused to allow the parents of twins born there three weeks ago to take their babies home until they pay their 1000 dollar bill, a newspaper said on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

The Daily Salam quoted the babies' father as saying officials at Tehran's Hazrat-e-Zeinab hospital had threatened to turn the twins over to state welfare authorities after he said.

He was unable to pay the full three million ryal (1,000 dollars) bill at once.

The newspaper said hospital officials refused to discuss the case with its reporter.

"Mystery bird"

WASHINGTON: An Indian "mystery bird" unseen for 113 years and suspected to be extinct has been photographed by American scientists who had uncovered a bird-watcher's scandal, reports AP.

Pamela C Rasmussen of the National Museum of Natural History in Washington said Tuesday that she and two colleagues sighted the Indian Forest Owl in a wooded area near Shahada, India, northeast of Bombay.

"The last definite report on this bird was when a specimen was collected in 1884," said Rasmussen. "I didn't really expect to find it. This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing."

The Forest Owl, or Blewitt's Owl, is a 8-inch-high (20-cm-high) bird with big eyes and outsized beak, feet and talons. It is brown with distinctive bands on its wings and underside. And it is one of the puzzles of the bird world.

Mexican Indians demand punishment for officials involved in killing

POLHO, Mexico, Jan 1: Hundreds of Mexican Indians marched Wednesday to the hamlet where gunmen massacred 45 people last week, demanding punishment for government officials they accuse of complicity in the attack, reports AP.

"The governor must be asked why this is happening. He wants to solve problems with guns. Let's hope the investigation reaches those politically responsible," said the Rev Felipe Toussaint of the local Roman Catholic diocese.

Toussaint said 21 refugee families would spend the night after a Mas in Acatel, where the December 22 slaughter occurred. Then they'd decide whether they felt safe enough to remain.

Authorities have arrested 40 people, including the country's top political official, Jacinto Arias Cruz, for their alleged roles in the massacre in the

poor southern state of Chiapas. But survivors believe other higher-ranking members of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) were involved, and opposition leaders have demanded the ouster of state Gov. Julio Cesar Ruiz Ferro and Interior Secretary Emilio Chuayfett.

The victims of the massacre in the hamlet of Acatel were members of a group that sympathises with leftist Zapatista rebels, whose political influence has grown in the mostly indigenous region since peace talks with the government broke down in 1996.

Women, some carrying babies, covered their heads against the sun with embroidered white shawls Wednesday as the procession left Polho, where 6,000 refugees are camped out. Men in white tunics set out with them along the winding mountain road over looking lush, rolling hills for

the mile-and-a-half (two-kilometre) trek.

All are Tzotzil Indians and many do not speak Spanish.

"We want the killers to go away," said Jose Arias Guzman, the county leader's nephew and a day labourer in coffee and corn fields.

"We want the political leaders to leave so that life can be better."

Jose Arias, who helped returning refugees load sacks of clothing into a truck, was among the few Acatel residents who remained in the town after the massacre, which he said he survived by running into the hills.

Accusations that the killers were linked to local ruling party officials gained credibility with Tuesday's arrest of the county government's representative in the neighbouring hamlet of Los Chorrros, home to many of the alleged killers. Chiapas state spokesman

Fermin Rodriguez confirmed the arrest of the official, Antonio Santiz Encin.

An unidentified gunman who was arrested told investigators that Santiz organised and supplied arms for the paramilitary band believed responsible, Mexican media reported.

Santiz purchased 18 Ak-47s in preparation for the attack and the killers met daily at his house at 4 pm in the days leading up to the slayings, according to the reports, which the federal attorney general's office was investigating.

The unidentified gunman was quoted as saying the massacre was to avenge intimidation and harassment by Acatel residents against PRI supporters.

Both Santiz and Jacinto Arias have denied detailed knowledge of PRI-affiliated paramilitary groups that have terrorised many villages in the

region since March.

Survivors say the December 22 attack was carried out by PRI supporters, and many of the detainees have said they are PRI members.

On Wednesday, the attorney general's office said the second-ranking Catholic official in the diocese, Bishop Raul Vera, had been summoned to explain remarks he recently made implicating local and state-PRI officials to armed gangs of vigilantes in the region.

State officials have denied the existence of the paramilitary groups, or said they were justified in the wake of the Zapatista uprising four years ago, in which 145 people died.

The Mexican government has said it didn't know about the problems.

Supporters of the Zapatista rebels have set up a parallel local government in Polho, where 6,000 refugees terrified of further paramilitary killings have

massed since last weekend.

The refugees come from communities where they said paramilitary groups levied "war taxes" and harassed anyone who refused to back the PRI.

Before Wednesday's march, hundreds sat in a dark room Polho's schoolhouse, children wrapped in light blue blankets and coughing in the morning damp, girls braiding their mothers' hair.

Pots of beans cooked on wood fires, but people said they didn't have enough to eat.

"We're not doing very well," said Rafael Gomez Perez, a 23-year-old subsistence farmer from Acatel. "We don't have anything to eat. People are sick, there's fever."

Gomez, his wife and four children fled Acatel the day of the massacre.

"We want to go home, but we don't know if the killers will come again. We don't want to die."

695,000 face threat of starvation in PNG

SYDNEY, Jan 1: Up to 695,000 people face the threat of starvation in Papua New Guinea because of severe drought, an aid agency warned here today as relief workers estimated up to 500 people had already died, reports AP.

Care Australia which has had aid workers in the underdeveloped South Pacific island nation since the drought started to take off three months ago, said some areas may still be without assistance despite efforts to prevent starvation.

The warning followed criticism by relief workers that many of the 500 people who have died in the drought were victims of official incompetence or indifference to its crisis.

In an urgent plea for donations from Australia's Care Chief Executive Charles Tapp said the situation remained

desperate for 695,000 people, despite rains in some areas.

The people have been felled before and no one is sure whether this is finally the beginning of the wet season, Tapp said.

"The sad fact of the matter is that even if the rains are finally here, any future harvest of crops is still more than half a year away."

In the meantime thousands are in danger unless we continue our assistance."

Care Australia filed worker Daryl Ainsworth who flew to the remote Aizaria mission in the eastern highlands to the south of Goroka said he had been reduced to tears by what he saw.

The area, inaccessible by road and home to more than 1,000 people had received no aid when he visited the mission on Christmas Eve.