

Iraqi diplomat in Jordan survives assassination attempt

AMMAN, Jan 4: An Iraqi diplomat survived an assassination attempt near his home here Saturday, which his ambassador said was designed to "throw oil on the fire" of already strained relations between the two neighbours.

"Two people in a Hyundai car, one of whom was armed, fired at the Iraqi embassy's commercial attaché Rahim Taher while he was warming his engine outside his house," Iraq's Ambassador to Jordan Nouri Al-Weiss told AFP.

"The attack was intended to be deadly, but God was merciful. A bullet hit the car door frame of the diplomat's Mercedes," the ambassador added.

Lankan army raid house of Indian journalist

COLOMBO, Jan 4: The Sri Lankan army Saturday searched the residence of an Indian journalist here in what the officer who led the search described as a "random exercise," the journalist said, reports AFP.

Nirupama Subramanian, correspondent of the Indian Express newspaper, said ten to 12 armed soldiers led by a colonel, forced their way into her house on Rosmead Place, a stone-throw away from Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike's residence, when her maid opened the gate.

"When I came down, they were all over the place. I was so unsettled," Subramanian said. The soldiers, including two women, searched the house and went through her office and bedroom upstairs, despite her telling them that she was an Indian journalist, she said.

Ross agrees to delay ME trip

JERUSALEM, Jan 4: The US peace envoy to the Middle East, Dennis Ross, has agreed to delay his visit to the region next week by one day to allow Israel time to complete debate on a contentious 1998 budget, officials said.

In a phone conversation Saturday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright decided Ross will meet with the premier on Tuesday, not on Monday as had been planned, Netanyahu's spokesman Shai Bazak told AFP.

The two also decided that Netanyahu will meet US President Bill Clinton on January 20 at the White House, Bazak added.



Jordan's King Hussein (second right) praying before breaking his Ramadan fast during a banquet held for members of the Lower and Upper House of Parliament in Amman, on Saturday. Praying on his right is his eldest son Prince Abdullah. From the left of King Hussein are Crown Prince Hassan, Prime Minister Abdul Salam Majali and Member of Parliament Hammad Abu Zeid. — AP/UNB photo

Bitter custody battle for Murtaza's daughter

KARACHI, Jan 4: Pakistan's troubled Bhutto family is caught in a fresh public row a bitter custody battle for the daughter of Mir Murtaza Bhutto, the slain brother of ousted premier Benazir Bhutto, reports AFP.

Centre stage are Murtaza's first wife Fauzia, the mother of 15-year old Fatima, and Murtaza's widow Ghinwa, girl's guardian.

"She is my blood. She is my flesh," said Fauzia, who has returned here from her United States home to file a custody suit in court.

Fauzia, who has accused Ghinwa of kidnapping Fatima when she was three years old and "brainwashing" her, has vowed to win back her daughter "at any cost."

The first hearing of the custody case is expected this month. Murtaza divorced Fauzia in 1985 after four years of marriage and married Ghinwa in 1988 while in exile in Syria. The couple lived there with Fatima until 1993 when Murtaza ended 16 years of exile and returned to Pakistan.

The estranged brother of Benazir Bhutto was killed in a police shootout here in September 1996. Benazir's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, has been charged with complicity in the killing.

Fauzia claiming Lebanese-born Ghinwa had prevented her reunion with Fatima, told reporters here she would not give up her struggle to secure her daughter.

"She was taken away from me for no fault of mine. I am her real mother and I want her at any cost," said Fauzia, 37, who works as a teacher in Los Angeles.

"Obviously a real mother can give more love and better future. It is up to Fatima whether she wants to stay with me in Pakistan or in America where I have very good family environment."

Ghinwa, the natural mother of Murtaza's seven-year-old son Zulfikar Ali Junior, claims Fatima wants to remain with her. "Nobody can brainwash (her) as she is a very intelligent girl and she is free to do her own will."

Fatima has made no secret of the fact she adores Ghinwa, saying: "She has given me all the love."

In a letter to Fauzia, a released to the press on Friday, Ghinwa urged her not to wage a public battle for the teenager.

"Please spare Mir Murtaza's children the humiliation of having their parents discussed in this frivolous and scandalous way in the columns of the press," Ghinwa wrote.

A spokesman for Ghinwa said Fatima "is mature enough to decide whether she wants to live with Fauzia or with Ghinwa."

Fauzia married Murtaza during his exile in 1981, her sister Rehana married Murtaza's younger brother Shah Nawaz around the same time.

The Bhutto brothers had gone into exile after their father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was toppled as prime minister in a military coup in 1977, he was hanged two years later.

In 1985, Shah Nawaz was found dead under mysterious circumstances in his apartment in France. The Bhutto family suspected Rehana was involved leading to a rift between Murtaza and Fauzia. They divorced soon after.

Pol Pot has fled Cambodia, Thai minister claims

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, Jan 4: The mystery surrounding Pol Pot deepened Sunday after Thailand's foreign minister claimed that the Khmer Rouge leader had fled Cambodia, reports AP.

Earlier, Chinese diplomats here denied allegations he had been granted asylum in China. They could not be reached for comment Sunday.

One of modern history's most secretive figures, Pol Pot was last seen by independent observers last October at the Khmer Rouge base of Anlong Veng in northern Cambodia.

Breaking an 18-year silence he denied to a Western reporter that he had orchestrated the killings of as many as 2 million of his countrymen in the mid-1970s.

"Our source said he is not in Cambodia, but I cannot confirm where he is now. Definitely he is not in Thailand," Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan told the English language daily, the Nation, in Bangkok Saturday. He said he could not confirm Pol Pot had fled to Beijing.

Myanmar marks 50th anniversary of independence with warnings against neo-colonialism

YANGON, Jan 4: Myanmar's military rulers warned against "neo-colonialism" and their opponents called for democracy as the country celebrated its 50th anniversary of independence from Britain Sunday, reports AP.

Pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi said that despite having reached its golden jubilee as an independent nation, Myanmar still lacked basic human rights and suffered from a deteriorating economy.

"To be able to stand proudly as citizens of a democratic nation, I would like to urge all people to help achieve democracy for our country," the Nobel Peace Prize winner told some 500 supporters, diplomats and others who gathered at her compound.

In Yangon, the capital, and elsewhere the day was celebrated with simple, flag-raising ceremonies and exhibitions.

Myanmar regained independence on January 4, 1948, after more than 120 years of British rule and a largely peaceful struggle led by Suu Kyi's greatly revered father, Gen. Aung San.

Sonia to launch all-out campaign for Cong 'BJP, its allies likely to emerge very close to majority in polls'

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: India's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies were likely to emerge very close to a majority in the spring elections, an opinion poll released today said, reports Reuters.

The poll conducted by C-Voter for the Pioneer Daily said that the BJP with its allies were likely to win 260-270 seats in the 545-member lower house of parliament, very near to the 272 required for a majority.

The poll placed the Congress Party, that has ruled India for all but five years since independence in 1947, and its allies second with 130-140 seats, and the United Front coalition, which fell from power in November, third with 115-125 seats.

The poll was conducted with a sample size of 24,541 respondents from over 48 constituencies across 17 states.

"The BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee is the most favoured of the prime ministerial candidates scoring almost 50 per cent points on the popularity

front," the poll said. It said the decision of Sonia Gandhi, the widow of former Congress prime minister Rajiv Gandhi to campaign for the party, would not take an impact on the Congress Party's prospects.

"Nearly 60 per cent of the respondents ruled out the possibility of the Congress reaping a rich electoral harvest owing to the Sonia factor," the poll said.

"However, a clearer picture will emerge when Ms Gandhi hits the campaign trail." The BJP was expected to sweep the elections in the northern and the western states, the poll said.

It said 77 per cent voters had made up their minds for the party they would vote. The rest were "still confused."

More than 70 per cent of the respondents agreed that stability and corruption were the main issues for the February-March elections.

India goes to the second general elections in 18 months after the Congress withdrew

crucial support to the coalition in November. President KR Narayanan dissolved the House in December and ordered fresh elections.

AFP adds: Sonia Gandhi, the powerful widow of slain Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi, will launch an all-out electoral campaign for her husband's embattled Congress Party, news reports said today.

Sources in the Congress said the enigmatic Italian-born widow wanted to undertake gruelling tours across remote villages and tribal areas to boost the party's waning image before the February-March general elections.

"She has said she will campaign for the entire period," a Congress leader was quoted by the Asian Age daily today. "After all, she is a Gandhi."

The 51-year-old Sonia, or "Madam," has been a powerful behind-the-scenes force in the Congress since her husband's 1991 assassination but has declined top party posts or a high-profile role.

However, late last month she announced her decision to campaign for the party, dominated by her husband's family during much of this century. Sonia Gandhi has not said if she would lead the party or contest elections, but she and her equally politically-naïve daughter Priyanka, 25, have been requested by the party to stand as candidates.

Analysts, however, say the 112-year-old party would not win the elections despite Sonia Gandhi's intervention.

The Congress, which was led by Sonia Gandhi's husband Rajiv, his mother Indira Gandhi and her father Jawaharlal Nehru, has been wracked by corruption scandals, defections and splits and a waning electoral appeal.

Congress sources said they wanted Sonia Gandhi to launch her campaign from her husband's constituency in northern India or a small southern town where Rajiv Gandhi was killed by a suicide bomber.

Yemen's bid to end dispute between Qatar-Egypt

DOHA, Jan 4: Yemen is trying to end the quarrel which erupted between Qatar and Egypt in November, after Egypt's boycott of an economic conference in Doha, Yemeni Foreign Minister Abdel Kareem al Iryani said here Saturday, reports AFP.

The Yemeni leadership has undertaken effort to bridge the gap between the two Arab countries said minister Abdel Kareem al-Iryani upon his arrival in Doha, Qatar's official news agency reported.

QNA said Iryani transmitted to the Emir of Qatar Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani a verbal message from Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Relations between Egypt and Qatar deteriorated sharply after Qatar's decision to host an economic conference including Israel last November despite an Egyptian led boycott by many Arab countries.

In addition the Qatari foreign minister sparked Egypt's anger by accusing it of involvement in a failed coup attempt in Doha in February 1996, charge Cairo strongly denies.

The two countries appeared to have reconciled their differences at a December 3 summit in Riyadh sponsored by Saudi Arabia.



Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto prepares for Japanese fencing at Keio University in Tokyo Saturday. He graduated from the university and joined its Japanese fencing club old boy's first training of the year. — AP/UNB photo

2 soldiers, 5 Tigers killed in fighting

COLOMBO, Jan 4: Sporadic clashes left two government soldiers and five Tamil Tiger militants dead in Sri Lanka's troubled northeast, military officials said today, reports AFP.

Troops ambushed and killed three guerrillas of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Jaffna Peninsula early today, hours after two more rebels were killed in a separate encounter elsewhere in the peninsula, they said.

Security has been stepped up in the peninsula ahead of the January 29 civic elections, the first to be held in the war-ravaged peninsula since the security forces wrested control of it from the rebels in early 1996.

The officials said the guerrillas attacked an army patrol near Kallar in Trincomalee district Saturday, killing two soldiers and a civilian.

The LTTE has been waging a bloody separatist campaign in the island's northeast, where the minority Tamils are concentrated.

More than 55,000 people have died in the war in the past 25 years.

Romania's exiled king wants his daughter as heir defying tradition

BUCHAREST, Jan 4: Romania's exiled King Michael has defied tradition by saying he wants his eldest daughter as his heir but was reminded by the country's leaders on Saturday that he still had to respect the republican constitution, reports Reuters.

Michael's decision announced during his current Christmas visit, would break with the tradition of Romania's last monarchist constitution of 1923. That entitled only male progeny to succeed to the throne abolished by communist authorities in 1947.

"He announced his desire to name his eldest daughter Princess Margareta as heir to all his rights and prerogatives when God decides he is to die, the king's press office said in a statement issued on Friday.

"His Majesty explained that this desire is based on women's equal role with men."

Michael, who has five daughters has lived in Switzerland since being forced at age 26 to abdicate by Soviet installed authorities 50 years ago last week Margareta 47 and married to a Romanian actor, has been involved in charity work.

The leftist government that tookover after the 1989 overthrow and execution of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu allowed him to visit only once at Easter in 1992, when he was met by huge crowds on Bucharest streets.

US detecting pattern of Saddam's defiance

MACDILL AIR FORCE BASE, Florida, Jan 4: US military commanders have begun to detect a pattern in Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's defiance of international sanctions: When a gap appears in US forces in the region, Saddam strikes. When the United States sends forces to close the gap, Saddam pulls back, reports AP.

"One reason we get jacked around is Saddam," said Marine Corps Gen. Anthony Zinni, commander of US forces in the Persian Gulf region. "We have these periodic crises that flare up and flare down. These things generate unscheduled force deployments, and they drag out."

Intelligence officials at the US Central Command headquarters near Tampa, Florida, the military headquarters responsible for operations in the Middle East, have been looking for links between the cycles of US forces in the Gulf area and Saddam's actions.

Zinni said they suspect Saddam may become more daring when he detects a relative downturn in US force patrolling the region.

"We see, for example, some problems when the carriers are out (of the Gulf). There's a perception that there's a gap," Zinni said. "So what we're trying to do is be very public that there is no gap."

While the size of the US force in the Gulf may decline from the current 28,000 as the latest

crisis wanes, Zinni said his force deployment decisions will be built around making sure that a major force departure coincides with a major force arrival. For example, if an aircraft carrier cycles out of the Gulf, Zinni may move an Air Force Air Expeditionary Unit to a base in the region. If army forces who conduct periodic military exercises in the Kuwaiti desert head home, Zinni will move a Marine Expeditionary Unit ashore to conduct exercises.

Intelligence officials say there is almost a sine-wave regularity to Saddam's moves.

Iran condemns massacre in Algeria

TEHRAN, Jan 4: Iran on Saturday condemned the massacre of civilians in Algeria, and called on the Muslim world to end its "indifference" in the face of such odious crimes," reports AFP.

The official Iranian News Agency IRNA quoted Iranian Foreign Minister Mahmoud Mohammadi as saying the "World of Islam, especially in the auspicious month of Ramadan, should not remain indifferent towards such shocking events."

Kurd asylum seekers make Italy a delicate diplomatic spot

ROME, Jan 4: Italy told Turkey on Saturday, as it braced for new boatloads of Kurds seeking political asylum, that Europe and its shores in human rights and if Ankara believed there was no problem, it should halt their flight, reports Reuters.

While Italy was defending its controversial offer to grant asylum to hundreds of Kurds who have reached its shores in the past week, Bonn issued an international appeal to try to prevent them from joining half a million of their kin in Germany.

France sent police reinforcements to tighten its border against Kurds but Austria said Italy needed help from its European Union partners to cope with the flood of immigrants which shows no signs of abating.

Coastguards and the pro-Kurdish Dem news agency in Turkey say three more boats with some 1,300 people between them may already be en route to Italy. President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro has said Italy's arms are "wide open" to genuine refugees.

"Whether it likes to or not, the Turkish government must

realise that there is a problem for the attention of European governments — the problem of human rights," Italian Interior Minister Giorgio Napolitano told La Repubblica newspaper.

The Turkish authorities say those who are fleeing are not persecuted? All the more reason for them to oppose the traffic."

The Kurdish problem — many of more than 1,200 refugees who have arrived in southern Italy in the past week are Kurds from Turkey and Iraq — has put Rome in a delicate diplomatic spot.

It is caught between obligations to its EU partners under the Schengen agreement, which abolished border controls within signatory countries, and its relations with Turkey, which has opposed its asylum offer.

Italy was more enthusiastic than some of its partners to closer ties between the EU and Turkey, but the 15-nation bloc last month quashed Ankara's hopes and left it off a list of membership candidates, in part over its human rights record.

In Istanbul on Saturday, Anatolian news agency said Turkish police detained 18 people, most from the mainly Kur-



French policemen check cars at the Vintimilla border between Italy and France, Saturday. Checks at the border have been reinforced with 100 French policemen since Friday, to combat the illegal flow of Kurdish refugees into France. — AP/UNB photo

dish southeast, who intended to leave the country illegally on their way to seek asylum in Germany.

They had intended travelling by ferry across the Mediterranean to Italy, before applying for asylum in Germany, each had paid two thousand marks (1,110 dollar) to the organisers of the trip, the agency said.

Italy's centre-left government, which has taken a hard line against illegal immigrants, says it has "no doubt" Kurds are persecuted in parts of Turkey and Iraq and so should be helped.

Austrian Interior Minister Karl Schloegl said Rome could not be left to tackle the Kurdish problem alone. He told state television Austria would be prepared to help and would pave the way for "a dividing up of the burden" within the EU if Italy made sure only genuine Kurdish refugees were granted asylum.

But German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel called on Italy to tighten its coastline against "criminal smugglers" and urged Turkey to alleviate the causes of the exodus.

BRIEFLY

El Nino claims 25 in Peru: The death toll from El Nino has risen to 25 in Peru, where heavy rains are spawning mudslides and causing rivers to leave their banks officials said Saturday, AFP reports from Lima.

Ten of the victims were from the eastern province of Oxapampa, with others scattered in other areas of the country, civil defence chief Homero Nurena said. Nurena said that the El Nino weather phenomenon this year is totally different from other Ninos that came to Peru.



Michael Kennedy Jr, left, leans in to his mother Vicki Gifford Kennedy while holding Ethel Kennedy's hand as they leave Our Lady of Victory church in Centerville, Mass, after the funeral of Michael Kennedy Saturday. At left, the sister of Michael Kennedy Jr Kyle, is seen standing behind him. — AP/UNB photo

Pope greets Castro on New Year: Pope John Paul II sent Cuban President Fidel Castro a New Year's greeting, wishing peace for the island's citizens three weeks before he travels there for a four-day visit, AP says from Mexico City.

The papal greeting, published Saturday in the Communist Party daily Granma, was among the most notable of many sent to Castro by world leaders.

16 executed in China: Members of a gang that killed 13 people during a crime spree were among 16 people executed on murder and robbery charges in China's remote northwestern region of Xinjiang, according to an official newspaper, AP reports from Beijing.

Those executed Tuesday included people convicted of robbery and drug offenses, the Xinjiang Daily newspaper reported.

US senators meet Plavsic: US Senators Karl Levin of Michigan and Jack Ried of Iowa met Bosnian Serb President Biljana Plavsic Saturday to discuss the plan to maintain US troops in Bosnia after June 1998, AFP says from Banja Luka.

"Our main interest in being here is helping us decide how we as members of the Senate should vote on the question of whether to financially support the continuation of American troops presence in Bosnia, Levin said after the meeting.

Farrakhan arrives in DRC: US black Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan arrived in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Saturday on the latest leg of his tour of 52 countries, a Congolese government source said, AFP reports from Kinshasha.