

BRIEFLY

UNHCR official freed in N Ossetia: French kidnap victim Vincent Cochetel arrived in Geneva from Moscow on Saturday for an emotional reunion with his family and his father said his release was "the best Christmas present we could have had," Reuters says from Geneva.

Cochetel, a 37-year-old official of the United Nations Refugee Agency UNHCR, was freed on Saturday after 317 days of captivity by a Russian commando operation which reportedly left three of his abductors dead. He was flown from the city Vladikavkaz in Russia's North Ossetia republic, where he was believed to have been held to Moscow and then on to Geneva aboard a plane sent by French President Jacques Chirac.

Hun Sen arrives in Hanoi: Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen arrived in Hanoi yesterday for an official visit to Vietnam in advance of an ASEAN summit that will discuss his country's admission into the regional club, AFP reports from Hanoi.

Hun Sen, making his first official visit since becoming prime minister in November, will meet his Vietnamese counterpart Phan Van Khai, President Tran Duc Luong and Communist Party General Secretary Le Kha Phieu.

Chernobyl N-plant to shut by 2000: Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma promised to stand by a 1995 promise to close the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in 2000, the head of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), Horst Koehler, said Saturday, AFP reports from Kiev.

Koehler said he had Kuchma's clear agreement to close the plant in line with a memorandum of understanding between Kiev and the G7 group of major economic powers.

Mass grave with 110 found in Algeria: Algerian authorities have discovered the remains of about 110 people believed to be victims of Muslim rebels after two weeks of excavation in a mass grave near Algiers, the local daily *Liberte* said yesterday. Reuters reports from Algiers.

Liberte quoted police as saying the excavation in a well in an orange grove in the Mefah region had been concluded on Saturday. The newspaper said the grove had been a base of the armed Islamic Group (GIA), Algeria's radical guerilla faction.

Salvage effort suspended
Thai Airways crash
death toll 101

SURAT THANI, Thailand, Dec 13: Forensic experts today started the gruesome task of identifying bodies burned beyond recognition in the wreckage of a Thai Airways Airbus which crashed into a swamp killing 101 people, reports AFP.

A huge salvage effort was suspended tonight after all the victims were accounted for when the last charred bodies were pulled from the wreckage of the shattered plane.

French aeronautics experts left France immediately on hearing of the crash to help Thai authorities investigate.

They planned to hold a news conference in Surat Thani today.

Suthep warned people not to jump to the conclusion that the plane's two pilots, both believed dead, were at fault.

The Airbus A 310-200, was making its third attempt to land at Surat Thani airport Friday when it crashed, visibility was very poor and the area was being lashed by Tropical Storm Jill.

Flight TG 261 was carrying 132 passengers, mainly holidaymakers, and 14 crew from Bangkok to Surat Thani 640 km to the south.

Around 400 soldiers, police and civilians laboured all day Saturday, pulling angled bodies from the burnt wreck, and sifting through the muddy, waist-deep water with their bare hands for corpses.

15 killed in rocket raids on Kabul

KABUL, Dec 13: A rocket barrage shattered a northern neighbourhood of Kabul on Sunday killing at least 15 people and wounding scores more, said eyewitnesses and hospital officials, reports AP.

As many as 70 people were injured when two rockets blasted Kalai Patula, a contested neighbourhood where at dawn on Sunday three rockets had landed killing a 15-year-old boy and wounding his father.

Some of the worst damages were caused by one rocket that landed on the road in front of a moving passengers bus packed with people, said eyewitnesses.

Taxi drivers in the area grabbed the dead and wounded and rushed them to nearby hospitals. On the cold road dozens of people lay wounded, bleeding and pleading for help.

Taliban soldiers in pickup trucks picked up the wounded and took them to the city's hospitals.

But at the hospitals doctors and nurses struggled to treat the worst with only a small amount of medicine. In some hospitals there was no anesthetic and painkilling drugs had to be bought from the market.

The International Red Cross

International
India tells US

We can't afford to freeze our nuclear capabilities

NEW DELHI, Dec 13: India has told the United States that it is unable to accede to its demand for freezing its nuclear capabilities as its minimum deterrence will have to remain contemporary to keep pace with the changing security environment, reports IANS.

Six rounds of negotiations have been held between Indian and US officials seeking to narrow down differences in perception following New Delhi's nuclear tests in May, but with a seventh round scheduled here next month both sides are not too optimistic about an agreement.

Indian officials say that differences in perception between the two countries remain over New Delhi's right to missile development which Washington continues to question, even though it seems to have accepted India's need for a minimum nuclear deterrent and its contention that it was not indulging in an arms race.

We cannot freeze our capabilities for all time to come, especially in the fast developing missile field, senior Indian officials say.

Suppose the environment

changes drastically tomorrow, we must be prepared, say the officials who participated in the talks between Strobe Talbott, US Deputy Secretary of State, and Jaswant Singh, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpeyi's special envoy before he was appointed External Affairs Minister last week.

Singh, who confirmed he would continue to lead the talks despite his elevated status, told Parliament that the talks had resulted in some progress — which he failed to quantify — and both sides hoped to carry it forward.

However, Defence Minister George Fernandes was quoted as saying earlier in the week that the talks so far "have not taken us one step anywhere close to an understanding". He said this was because Washington did not want India to "stand up".

"Our position is we will jolly well stand up," Fernandes said while speaking to newsmen at the Yelahanka air base in southern India.

Officials explain that minimum deterrence was a relative concept in the context of a prevailing security situation and could not be pre-determined or

remain static. "Our capabilities have to remain not only contemporary to cater to changed security environment but we have also to be prepared for corresponding changes five to ten years down the line," the official explained in defence of India's position at the non-proliferation talks.

The US has to accept that to have a credible nuclear deterrent India will have to maintain an active R & D (research and development) programme, which cannot remain frozen, to be able to keep up with developments of its potential rivals on both sides," said the official.

Indian officials do not tire of saying that the country's missile programme is wholly indigenous, unlike that of Pakistan which is known to have developed with Chinese help. Every R & D programme doesn't necessarily evolve into a new weapons system, they say, while at the same time it has to be contemporary enough to maintain the existing weapons in state of readiness to meet potential threats to the nation's territory.

At stake are 9,000 km of coastline, 2.5 million square

kilometres of exclusive economic zone and more than 500 island territories.

"While our arsenal will be a finite arsenal, our capabilities cannot be capped at present level," one official asserted. "We cannot accept a prescription that will freeze capabilities at present level. That is our bottomline."

"And we alone can define our minimum deterrent. No one else can define it for us or impose it on us," the official said.

That India has no intention of entering an arms race should be clear from the steps that have been taken since the tests, say these officials. First, India has voluntarily declared a unilateral moratorium on testing; second, it has engaged in negotiations on the fissile material cut-off treaty; and third, it has offered a no-first-use commitment which Pakistan has refused to reciprocate.

"If we wanted to engage in an arms race, why should we have engaged in negotiations on the fissile material cut-off treaty that will limit the amount of fissile material and, in effect, limit the number of warheads we have," one official stated.

Off the Record



Miss France 1999, Mareva Galantier, 19, of the French overseas territory Tahiti, reacts as she is crowned by outgoing Miss France Sophie Thalmann in Nancy, France on Saturday.

— AP/UNB photo

Chocolates, criminals and cops....

NEW DELHI: It was perhaps not their fault that they bit off more than they could chew. After all anyone would if chocolates were the objects of desire, reports IANS.

But if the thieves, who laid a truckful of chocolates in the Indian capital last month, thought they could savour their success in peace and quiet, the Delhi Police had other ideas. With a nose that could put some of its own canine squad to shame, the capital's police smelt its way to the hideout and arrested two of the four involved in the heist.

The police has also recovered the chocolates — all 300 cartons of them — and this, in turn, has led to another problem: how to keep its hands, and mouth, off the goodies. Acting on a hunch that the thieves would try to sell the loot to big dealers, the police approached some of the merchants who directed them to Saeed Khan alias Munna.

Munna's arrest led to that of another culprit, Raj Kumar, and also to the warehouse where the robbers had stashed away their sweet loot. Khan and Kumar, who have a long history of crime, are in judicial custody while the other two are still to be traced. The Indian Express newspaper has reported.

However, the chocolates are proving to be too much of a temptation to the policemen guarding them. Says an officer on duty at the warehouse, "The matter is now with the court so it is up to the owners to try and retrieve their goods as soon as possible. Otherwise they will be here and be a constant temptation for both us and the rats."

The chocolate truck was waylaid after the thieves persuaded its driver to give them a lift. The driver was forced to stop as the truck approached the Delhi police headquarters. While three men bundled him into a car, the fourth drove off with the loot.

Cadbury's, the owner of the chocolates, then went to the police.

More active collection methods for fitra

SINGAPORE: Because only 9 per cent of Singapore's 120,000 working Muslims pay *fitra* or tithes, the Islamic Religious Council will launch an advertising campaign and more active collection methods, according to a report published Sunday, reports AP.

Tithe collectors will visit wealthy Muslim households, instead of waiting for them to come to the mosque to pay. The Sunday Times said, quoting Singapore's mufti, Syed Isa Semaat.

Broadcasts and newspaper advertisements will encourage Muslims to pay, mosques will sponsor talks and exhibitions on tithing, and from December 21, brochures will be mailed to the 147,000 Muslim households.

The payment is an obligation that is still very neglected among many Muslims," said Mohammad Effendi Basri, the council's finance manager. "This neglect is so apparent that there is a need for a campaign to educate them about this religious obligation."

He said the council hopes to increase the number of tithing Muslims from 11,000 to 30,000 or 40,000 and to bring in an additional 8 million Singapore dollars (\$4.87 million) next year. This year, the tithe totalled 8.9 million Singapore dollars (\$ 4.22 million).

The council has fixed the tithe this year at 3.25 Singapore dollars (\$1.98) per person. That is the average price of 2.3 kg of rice, the amount a Singapore Muslim is reckoned to consume each month.

Fresh violence erupts in N Ireland

LONDONDERRY, Northern Ireland, Dec 13: Catholic militants burned at least eight vehicles and threw gasoline bombs at police lines Saturday after angry Protestants marched down a restricted route through Londonderry, reports AP.

Riot police clad in flak jackets, helmets and shields prevented either side from getting into contact with the other and as a result came under attack from both sides. They arrested three people — two Catholics, one Protestant — but reported no serious injuries.

"We tried to retain an atmosphere of normalcy today but unfortunately that was impossible," McQuillan said.

The march commemorates the start of the 1688-89 siege of Londonderry by the forces of King James II, a Catholic. Each year it ends with the ritual burning of an effigy representing Lundy, the compromising commander of Londonderry's Protestant garrison who recommended handing over control of the city to James. To this day, a favoured Protestant term of abuse is to call someone a Londonderry.

In August, the Apprentice Boys march again to commemorate the Protestants' triumphant end of the siege. It, too, often triggers street violence. The group is named in honour of 13 teenage apprentice workers who bolted the gates of the walled city in the face of James' forces.

A government-appointed commission supposed to minimise trouble over traditional Protestant marches ruled this week that the march could pass through the central square, called the Diamond, in the morning but not in the afternoon.

When the marchers passed in the morning, Catholic

Mahathir warns at UMNO assembly Foreign powers trying to recolonise Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 13: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad on Sunday warned against attempts by foreign powers to recolonise the country through the use of "puppets" amid cracks in the ruling party, reports AFP.

"They (the foreign powers) are searching for a credible stooge, when they have identified their stooge, they would use the weaknesses in the person to control the individual," Ross told a TV interviewer late Friday.

NASA estimates 159 more spacewalks will be needed over the next five years to build and maintain the international space station, which eventually will stretch as long as a football field. Most of the spacewalks will be conducted by Americans.

He made the remarks at the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) special general assembly here attended by

about 1,900 delegates. The assembly is to amend the party constitution in a bid to heal a split.

"It can be clearly seen that attempts to colonise the nation have already been made," he said.

Mahathir also said foreign powers hoped to destroy Malaysia by creating disunity and rifts among Muslims through various means.

"At the outset, Muslims are disunited through the use of religion by people with an agenda.

In the name of Islam, the Muslims are in enmity with the Muslims," he said.

UMNO, the largest Muslim party with more than 2.4 million members, is the dominant group in the ruling national front coalition which has governed the country for 41 years.

All set to put Unity into orbit

SPACE CENTRE, Houston, Dec 13: Astronauts planned to disconnect the seven-storey Endeavour space station from the shuttle on Sunday and send it into orbit, a day after they lashed a toolbox to its outside and fixed a jammed antenna, reports AP.

Working nearly 400 kilometres above Earth, Jerry Ross and James Newman lugged out a 60-by-60 centimetre bundle containing wrenches, ratchets, clamps, bars, foot loops, and other tools.

They attached the package to the top of Unity, the American-made side of the station.

On Sunday afternoon they were to disconnect the 35-ton complex from the space shuttle and allow it to float into orbit.

"We've come a long way," commander Robert Cabana observed.

The toolbox looked like a

"fridgebox?" joked Newman.

"Nothing edible," Ross replied.

The tools will be used by future spacewalkers. The next construction team goes up in May.

Ross turned his attention to the stuck Russian antenna after completing a check of the cables he and Newman installed earlier in the week and disconnecting other cables no longer needed.

Aimed with a three-metre pole, Ross was hoisted on the end of the shuttle robot arm up to Zarya, the Russian-built control module stacked atop Unity. He kept his distance as he poked the antenna, the same method that Newman used to fix another jammed antenna during spacewalk No 2 on Wednesday.

Ross tapped the stuck antenna, then jiggled it. After several minutes and dozens of pokes, the antenna finally shot

out to its full 130 centimetres.

The two roll-out antennas failed to open properly following last month's launch of Zarya.

Once that was done, the spacewalkers shimmed to the tip of Zarya and did the Russian another favour by fixing a loose panel.

Ross was extra careful this time not to lose anything. Two tools got away from him during Monday's spacewalk, and a thermal cover floated away during Wednesday's outing.

"I don't have the slightest idea what happened," Ross told a TV interviewer late Friday.

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