

Clinton begins repairing image



10th anniversary of the 1988 bombing of a Pan American World Airways jumbo jet over Lockerbie, Scotland.

Later in the week, the embattled president will gather children around him in the White House's East Room and read holiday stories to them before settling in for a quiet Christmas at home.

White House spokesman Barry Toiv said Sunday that Clinton's activities were in keeping with his commitment to community service. "And of course, it's for the holiday season," Toiv added.

But between the events lies a strategy to pull Clinton's presidency out of the ashes by the time the Senate opens an impeachment trial early next year. In the next two weeks, White House aides plan to seize on the lull in Congress and provide Clinton with forums to talk about his pet legislative topics — health care, education and Social Security.

Aides hoped the images of Clinton being compassionate while advocating popular social programs would help boost public support.

Clinton began trying to repair his image Sunday by attending church with his daughter, Chelsea, his stepfather, Richard Kelley, and an entourage of friends. Hillary Clinton skipped the service at Foundry United Methodist Church.

The Rev. Walter Shropshire noted it had been "an incredible week, with all sorts of things happening." Before a moment of silence, he asked the congregation to pray "for our nation, for our leaders, for the people of Iraq, for our troops in uniform and for anyone else in our hearts."

But even as he was leaving the usually supportive church, the president was confronted on the steps by an angry parishioner.

"Damn you, for what you've done to the nation!" the man barked. "Please resign for the good of the world!"

Clinton and Chelsea ignored the man, waving instead to about 100 supporters who cheered him and clutched signs reading "Complete your Term" and "God Bless Our Prez."

Impeachment case Senators for swift resolution

WASHINGTON, Dec 21: The House impeachment votes barely over, Senators are pondering how to handle what would be the first trial of a sitting president in 130 years — or even whether to conduct one, reports AP.

Whatever the course, members of both parties said Sunday they want a swift Senate resolution of the charges that President Bill Clinton lied and obstructed justice in trying to cover up his affair with Monica Lewinsky.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch, a Utah Republican, suggested the first step should be quick poll of his colleagues to determine if there is anywhere near the 67 votes needed to oust Clinton from office.

If there are only 55 votes — the number of Republicans in the Senate — then there has to be some consideration to what do you do that is the best under the circumstances to resolve this matter and in the best interests of the country," Hatch

said on NBC's "Meet the Press."

While that should include the start of a trial, he said, there are other options "where everybody could vote on this and vote their conscience and it would be fair." He refused to offer details.

Clinton's chief of staff, John Podesta, said the White House legal team would consider whether to challenge the constitutionality of a situation in which the charges against Clinton were brought in the outgoing 105th Congress but the president tried in the 106th Congress convening on January 6.

"I think that our legal team will take a look at that in the days to come," Podesta said on CNN's "Late Edition." "Some of the constitutional experts who have reviewed that matter believe that it is not consistent with the Constitution to have done this in a lame-duck Congress, especially in the partisan way that they did that. So, I think we'll have to take a look at that."

Democrats suggested getting together with the White House and Senate Republicans to search for a compromise that would avoid a trial altogether.

Endorsing censure — a measure that Clinton has indicated he would accept — Sen. Christopher Dodd, a Connecticut Democrat, said a trial would "tie up three branches of government for the next four months."

Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist would preside over a Senate trial, with charges presented by members of the House Judiciary Committee.

"In many ways, the Senate's on trial here in a way, too," Dodd said on NBC. "We're the court of last resort, of trying to restore some civility here."

Senate Republicans, however, continued to insist on a trial or, in Hatch's case, at least the start of one.

"The Constitution says if you receive these articles you'll have a trial," Senate Majority Whip Don Nickles, an Oklahoma Republican, said on "Fox

News Sunday." "I think it can be done very quickly," Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott has said originally maybe three days to three weeks. "I think he has it about right. I think it could be done in three weeks if the White House wanted to."

The White House, meanwhile, began preparing a defence to be led by White House Counsel Charles Ruff, with political guidance from people such as former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, a Maine Democrat, who retired in 1994.

"We have been talking to a number of different Senators, including Senator Mitchell, to get advice and counsel on how to deal with the Senate," Greg Craig, coordinator of the White House impeachment legal defence, told Fox.

Podesta noted that another former majority leader, Republican Bob Dole, recently wrote a guest column in The New York Times proposing a joint resolution of Congress to censure Clinton.

Indo-Pak border clashes spark forest fires

SRINAGAR, India, Dec 21: Border clashes between India and Pakistani troops have sparked more than two dozen forest fires along their winding frontier in Kashmir, forest officials said today, reports AP.

Gunfire and artillery shelling have fuelled as many as 25 separate fires in areas bordering Pakistan during the past one month, the officials said in this summer capital of Kashmir state.

"We have extinguished the fires in four or five places. Elsewhere, the fires are still burning in varying intensity," an official told AP.

Indian and Pakistani troops regularly clash along their disputed border in Kashmir, a picturesque Himalayan state that has fuelled two wars between the two countries.

Much of the border is covered by forest, which is used as cover by Muslim guerrillas whose separatist campaign in Indian-controlled Kashmir has claimed more than 20,000 lives since 1989.

BRIEFLY



The family of a killed Kosovo Liberation Army soldier cries over his coffin at a place called the "Heroes' Graves" in the Drenica region, some 30 km west of Pristina, Sunday. Thirty-six KLA soldiers were killed at the Yugoslav-Albanian border in a clash with the Yugoslav army one week ago. — AP/UNB photo

Ogata arrives in Kosovo: The UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata arrived in Pristina Sunday in an attempt to boost cooperation between aid groups and peace monitors in the troubled Yugoslav province of Kosovo, AP reports from Pristina.

She said "the main task now is to get people back to their homes, help them rebuild and see that they survive winter." Ogata was due to meet the provisional head of the Serb government in Kosovo Zoran Djindjic.

China to launch weather balloon: China plans to launch a 30,000-cubic-metre weather balloon on January 1 to monitor ozone in the atmosphere above the country, the state-run Xinhua News Agency reported a Monday, AP says from Beijing.

The balloon will be stationed at 30,000 metres above the earth as part of a programme by the Institute of Atmospheric Physics and an unnamed foreign refrigerant producer.

Ghali arrives in Laos today: Former United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali will arrive in Laos today for a four-day visit as part of a government effort to promote the use of the French language, the Vientiane Times reported on Monday, AP says from Bangkok.

Boutros-Ghali was elected secretary general of La Francophonie, the 49-member organisation of countries with linguistic or cultural ties to France, at its seventh summit in Hanoi in November 1997.

Mexican envoy returns to Cuba: Mexico has returned its ambassador to Cuba, declaring an end to a controversy over Cuban President Fidel Castro's seeming criticism of Mexican policies, AP reports from Mexico City.

The spat "is totally overcome for the government of Mexico," Ambassador Pedro Joaquín Coldwell said on return to Havana on Saturday, according to the Mexican government's Notimex news agency. Mexico withdrew Joaquín Coldwell on December 4, two days after Castro seemed to criticise Mexico's free trade pact with the United States.

Floods threaten French Polynesia: Authorities in French Polynesia have evacuated 550 residents from a valley threatened by floods after fallen trees dammed a nearby river, creating a rising lake of water and mud, AP reports from Papeete, Tahiti.

The evacuation was ordered on Sunday when civil defence officials became aware of the danger posed by the natural dam. The residents have been sheltered in two churches.

Bulgarian mafia godfather killed: Ivo Karamanski, 39, known as "the godfather of the Bulgarian mafia," and his 28-year-old bodyguard were shot dead early Sunday morning in a drunken brawl, said the Interior Ministry press office, Xinhua reports from Sofia.

Karamanski and his bodyguards were attending a party in Sofia's Simenovo suburb when the incident happened. A quarrel broke out at around 2:20 am local time on Sunday between drunken Karamanski and one of the young men who organised the party, and ended in shooting.

The suspected assailant escaped from the scene but was later arrested.

Clinton, Starr Time magazine's 'men of the year'

WASHINGTON, Dec 21: Time magazine named President Bill Clinton and his nemesis, Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, as its 'men of the year' in its edition out this week, reports AP.

The cover shows a determined looking Clinton casting a shadow over a bespectacled Starr, the man whose investigation into a series of minor scandals inexorably led to Saturday's impeachment vote.

A survey released by the magazine found that while 68 per cent of those surveyed believed that Clinton had acted irresponsibly, a solid 59 per cent viewed the president favourably.

But voters were split on whether the Starr investigation had diminished Clinton's effectiveness as president. Forty-nine per cent agreed and exactly the same number disagreed.

In contrast, just 30 per cent viewed Starr favourably, while 57 per cent viewed him unfavourably.

Tehran, not Tripoli masterminded '88 Pan Am bombing?

BONN, Dec 21: A former Iranian intelligence official has said the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am airliner over the Scottish town of Lockerbie was ordered and masterminded by Iran and not Libya, a prosecutor told German television on Sunday, reports Reuters.

Frankfurt prosecutor Job Tillmann said he had questioned the former top official known as "Source C" during his investigations into whether the bomb was brought to London via Frankfurt airport.

According to Source C, those who carried out the attack were Libyans but the ones who ordered and masterminded it were the mullahs (Priests) in Iran, Tillmann said in a documentary broadcast by Pro 7 private channel.

It was supposed to have been an act of revenge for the shooting down of a Persian plane over the Straits of Hormuz, he said.

International investigators have accused Libya of being behind the attack. Tripoli has denied involvement.

Turkish PM-elect fails to form govt

ANKARA, Dec 21: Pro-secular premier-designate Bulent Ecevit on Monday officially returned his mandate to form a new government after failing to gather enough support in Parliament, reports AP.

"I asked to be excused from this mission as I have failed to gather enough support in Parliament despite all my efforts," Ecevit told reporters after meeting with President Suleyman Demirel.

Refusing any alliance with the pro-Islamic Virtue Party — Turkey's largest party in parliament — Ecevit was unable to create a political alliance to secure a confidence vote from a highly divided legislature.

Knesset votes on no-confidence motion Netanyahu's reign at stake

JERUSALEM, Dec 21: After two and a half years of balancing the peace process against the wishes of his hawkish coalition, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's reign of power may be coming to an end, reports AP.

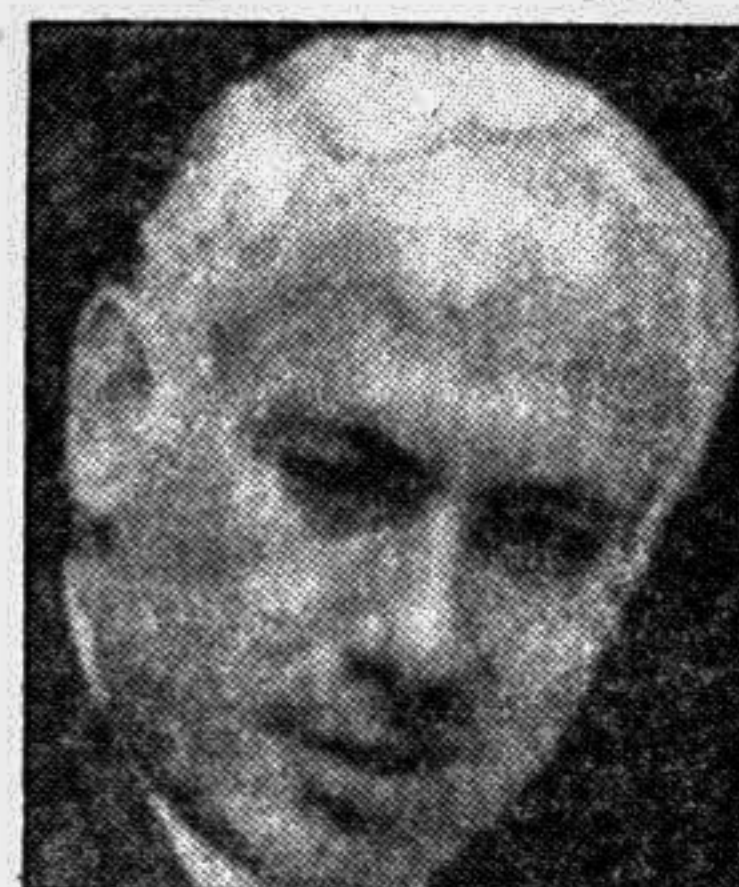
Israel's parliament will approve either a no-confidence motion or a bill for early elections today. Either way, Netanyahu will be one step closer to facing the polls over his hard-line peace policies with the Palestinians.

Netanyahu holds a one-seat majority in the Knesset amid crumbling support from his coalition partners.

A successful no-confidence motion would mean new elections within 60 days. Approval of the first of three readings of the early elections bill would mean a vote could take place within six months. A preliminary reading of the bill passed in July.

Netanyahu will decide before the Knesset convenes whether the 120-member house will vote for a no-confidence motion or for the early elections bill. Politicians from both sides have suggested April 27 as a possible election date, more than a year ahead of the scheduled 2000 vote.

The big question is not whether or not the early elections law will pass, the question is how long. It will be,



said Tourism Minister Moshe Katsav, a member of Netanyahu's Likud party and a close ally of the premier.

Netanyahu on Sunday made a last-ditch effort to garner support, but on the eve of the vote, 65 Knesset members said they would vote for early elections. The bill would then return to the Knesset law committee for debate and then back to the floor for two more readings before it would become law.

Netanyahu said last week he would call early elections if he failed to muster enough support by Monday for a set of conditions he has set for Israel to renew the US-brokered land-for-peace deal with the Palestinians.

Netanyahu froze implementation of the deal, which calls

for Israel to cede from war-occupied West Bank territory, because he said the Palestinians failed to live up to their commitments.

Both opponents of further concessions to the Palestinians and doves in the Knesset opposition who want to accelerate the accords have announced that they will vote against Netanyahu's policies.

New elections would likely put the peace negotiations on hold, and Palestinian officials have accused Netanyahu of using his latest political crisis to end the peace process.

Since taking office in May 1996, Netanyahu's administration has been plagued with scandal and political infighting. Four Cabinet ministers have resigned and his eight-party coalition has struggled to stay intact despite differences on how to manage the peace process, which has hit one crisis after another.

Several politicians have said they would challenge Netanyahu for the premiership in the next elections. Opposition Labour Party leader Ehud Barak is considered the front-runner. Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, a charismatic former armed forces chief-of-staff is also expected to enter politics before the next race, either as Barak's deputy or as part of a new centrist party.

We are victorious: Saddam

BAGHDAD, Dec 21: Iraqis have been victorious against "enemies of God" during four days of US-British airstrikes, Saddam Hussein said in his first public comments since the attacks ended, reports AP.

The Iraqi president said in a brief speech Sunday on radio and television that the Iraqi people and the army have proved to be "worthy of what your leadership expected from you."

"God will repay well and crown your heart with clear victory," he said.

No final casualty toll has been released, but previous reports indicated at least 42 Iraqis were killed and 96 wounded in the strikes, which unleashed the most severe firepower since the 1991 Gulf War. Iraqi forces offered little resistance other than anti-aircraft fire.

Iraq's UN ambassador, Nizar Hamdon, claimed Sunday the toll was much higher.

"Casualties are in the thousands in terms of people killed or wounded, but we don't have any final figure," he told CNN. "There has been enormous damage mainly to the civilian infrastructure and to human lives."

Iraqi officials have not allowed reporters to inspect areas where the most extensive damage occurred, including presidential palaces and defense installations.

In his speech, Saddam also criticised the Arab world for pretending to be "asleep... or sick" and not supporting Iraq.

"A new aggression (was) started by the enemies of God and the nation. With it, the resistance started again," he said.



Iraqi President Saddam Hussein during a television address in Baghdad Sunday. His speech was aired on an Arabian TV channel before being broadcast on Iraqi national TV.

Baghdad was bustling with normal activity Sunday, but in the streets, there was anger.

"Clinton has achieved his mission, why does he say the (UNSCOM) inspectors must return?" asked Ali Mahmoud Abdel Munaim, an unemployed 32-year-old man. "If they have destroyed everything illegal (in the airstrikes) the next step ought to be lifting of sanctions."

After the strikes, many Iraqis were coming to terms

with the blows the missiles dealt to their lives.

Adil Mohammed Nori, a 50-year-old spice store owner, said he was preparing to drive 185 miles to the southern town of Ali al-Gharbi, asked why, he said: "To attend a funeral for a mass destruction weapon that Clinton has destroyed: my 12-year-old niece."

He said the girl, Zehra, was killed in one of the missile strikes.

Chinese dissident Xu jailed for 13 years

BEIJING, Dec 21: A Chinese court on Monday sentenced a prominent dissident to 13 years in prison, accusing him of trying to subvert state power by organising an opposition party, his lawyer said, reports AP.

The harsh sentence for Xu Wenli came at the end of a three and a half hour trial, said court-appointed lawyer Mo Shaoping.

The trial was conducted in secrecy amid extremely tight security. Xu's wife, who was told of the trial only late Friday, was the only person among his family and supporters allowed to attend.

During the trial, Xu refused to reply to any questions posed by the prosecutors and judges and responded only to questions from his own lawyer. "Xu Wenli said he won't appeal. He said this is political persecution," Mo said.

Xu, 55, was convicted of subversion for his role in organising the party and thereby challenging the ruling Communist Party.

Xu's conviction deprives the nascent China Democracy Party of a potent organiser and a moderate voice. He is the most influential dissident leader to have been tried in a three-week campaign that has seen at least 32 members detained or questioned.

Another report from New York adds: An ailing Chinese dissident has arrived in New York after being released from a Chinese labour camp and sent into exile in the United States.

Looking gaunt and frail, Liu Nianchun and his family arrived at John F Kennedy Airport Sunday night to the cheers of about a dozen supporters. He of about a dozen supporters. He waved to the waiting crowd but made few comments before he and his wife and daughter were driven away in a waiting car.

"He used to be a very healthy strong man. It pains me to see him that way," said his brother Liu Qing, who lives in exile in New York. "But for the purpose of the human rights struggle, these are the sorts of things you have to face."

Liu Nianchun left for New York shortly after being freed from the Taunhai labour camp on the outskirts of Beijing. His mother and brother said. Accompanying Liu into exile was his wife, Chu Hailan, and their 11-year-old daughter.

Imelda appears before Senate inquiry

MANILA, Dec 21: Philippine's former first lady Imelda Marcos appeared before a Senate inquiry here today but sidestepped questions on her family's wealth by pleading either ignorance or her right to remain silent, reports AP.

The widow of the late deposed dictator Ferdinand Marcos only appeared after the Senate threatened to arrest her when she earlier snubbed a hearing called to examine her claim of her husband's astounding wealth.

Eight bundles of joy

HOUSTON, Dec 21: A 27-year-old woman has become the mother of the only known living set of octuplets, giving birth to five girls and two boys in one day. Another child, a girl, was born 12 days earlier, reports AP.

All eight were in critical condition on Sunday, with the smallest weighing 11 ounces and the largest 1 pound, 11 ounces.

Nkem Chukwu, who had taken fertility drugs, gave birth to seven of the children by Caesarean section early Sunday.

Until the first child was born 12 days earlier, doctors were unsure how many fetuses Chukwu was carrying because her uterus was so crowded, said Dr Brian Kirshon, a specialist in high-risk births who was among three doctors who delivered the children at St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital.

The first girl was 12 weeks premature, and the others were 10 weeks early.



Young Muslim girls pray for Iraq Sunday, on the first day of Ramadan, in Strasbourg, France, during a demonstration against US air strikes on Iraq.

— AP/UNB photo

US policy shifting towards toppling Saddam Bomb-damage assessment may take months, Pentagon officials say

WASHINGTON, Dec 21: Military officials say it could take several months to determine whether they achieved their goal of degrading Iraq's war-making capability with last week's airstrikes, reports AP.

President Bill Clinton and his top national security aides say they did what they set out to do in a series of cruise missile and bombing attacks over four days. They back it up with photographs and videotape showing wrecked Iraqi military installations.

But Pentagon officials caution that the bomb-damage assessment could take months, that the pictures are often deceiving and that Iraq may have to be attacked again. Although troop reinforcements were expected to be ordered back to their US bases Monday, the "containment" force in the Gulf region remains some 20,000 strong, with no plans for relaxing the guard over Iraq.

"We've tried to be very accurate in our damage assessment, not to inflate it or overstate it," Defence Secretary William Cohen said Sunday on CBS' "Face the Nation." "We had very specific military objectives. Those objectives, in our judgment, have been met."

Appearing later on ABC's "This Week," Cohen said that if Iraq, as expected, tries to restore its capability to produce chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction, "We're prepared to take it down again."

The Defence Department revamped its format for describing bomb damage. During the airstrikes, Pentagon figures indicated that only one target in five was destroyed or severely damaged. Now the statistics list simply "confirmed damage" that may in-

clude light to moderate damage. On that basis, 73 out of 96 targets sustained some damage.

"We consider this a very successful attack at this point," said Army Gen. Henry H. Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Our success goes on almost daily as we have a chance to make a more complete assessment."

The administration, meanwhile, is shifting the direction of its policy on Iraq toward toppling Saddam Hussein from power.

Saddam's continued hold on power is clearly a major irritant for US policymakers, especially now that Iraq says it will no longer tolerate UN weapons inspections.

towards by more active support of the various (Iraqi) opposition groups."

US intelligence officials and outside experts have said in recent months that Iraqi opposition groups are in no position to challenge Saddam's heavily armed and entrenched government and military. And while US warplanes dropped leaflets onto Iraqi forces in southern Iraq suggesting they oppose Saddam, there was no evidence that any did.

Overthrowing Saddam from within will require a long-term US commitment, White House national security adviser Sandy Berger said on CNN's "Late Edition."

"I'm under no illusions that is achievable quickly or easily," Berger said. "But we are determined to pursue that objective in a very steady, deliberate, sustained way."