

International

Bin Laden's alleged aide held in US

NEW YORK, Dec 22: An alleged top aide to the man suspected of masterminding US embassy bombings in Africa was held without bail after appearing in a US courtroom, reports AP.

Mandouh Mahmud Salim, 40, a native of Sudan who is believed to be of Iraqi descent, has been jailed since his arrest in Bavaria three months ago on a US warrant. He was brought to the United States on Sunday.

US officials claim Salim served as the finance chief for Osama Bin Laden, a Saudi exile accused of masterminding the August 7 bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, which killed 224 people, including 12 Americans.

Federal prosecutors have charged Salim in New York with murder conspiracy and use of weapons of mass destruction in an international plot to kill US citizens.

Three other alleged accomplices of Bin Laden already are jailed in the United States.

Salim's court-appointed lawyer, Paul J. McAllister, said outside court on Monday that the charges against his client are vague.

McAllister also said Salim planned to take an active role in his defence.

Iraq rules out talks with UN

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BAGHDAD, Dec 22: Iraq on Monday ruled out talks with the United Nations until Washington and London are brought to book for their four days of deadly missile attacks and crippling UN sanctions are lifted, reports AFP.

It also said only 62 soldiers had been killed and its military machine had suffered only light damage in the strikes of at least 500 cruise missiles, dubbed Operation Desert Fox.

Diplomats said Russia intended to submit a new draft statement on Tuesday, proposing a special meeting of UNSC in January to be attended by its commissioners of 20 nations.

The Russians suggest that UNSC's future, and that of its outspoken chairman Richard Butler, should be discussed by the UNSC commissioners.

Butler has come under fire in the wake of the attacks that were triggered by his negative report about Iraqi compliance with UNSC inspectors.

Aziz insisted that the brunt of US and British strikes had been taken by civilians but gave no precise figure for casualties, saying only that the civilian casualties were much higher

than the military.

Iraqi Ambassador to the United Nations Nizar Hamdoon said Sunday that thousands of people were killed or wounded, without elaborating.

Aziz mocked Blair's assertion that the strikes had done "awful damage" to Iraq's "essential infrastructures" saying the four days of aerial bombardment which ended Saturday night had killed just 62 Iraqi military personnel and wounded 180.

He accused both British and US leaders of lying about the achievements of Operation Desert Fox.

"Four days of intensive bombing with all the smart missiles and bombs, the high-tech precision weapons, these are the real results," he said.

Aziz said the strikes had focused on the Republican Guard and Special Republican Guard, with a total of 38 killed and 100 injured.

The first is an elite branch of the Iraqi army, the second a highly specialised and secretive branch within the Republican Guards overseeing President Saddam Hussein's personal security and the protection of vi-

tal government sites.

Earlier Blair told CNN that London and Washington had badly damaged "the whole of the commanding and control systems that run the Special Republican Guard."

For his part, general Anthony Zinni, Commander-in-Chief of the US Central Command, told reporters that Operation Desert Fox was "highly successful operation that degraded Iraq's capability to use weapons of mass destruction."

"We estimate that we delayed Iraq's development of ballistic missiles by at least a year," he said. "This is going to make it more difficult for Iraq to use deadly chemical and biological chemicals against its neighbours."

Zinni said US forces hit 85 per cent of their targets in Iraq and 74 per cent of the strikes were "fully successful."

But former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, who resigned his post last August to protest what he saw as lukewarm US and UN support for the inspection programme claimed the strikes had failed "to degrade Saddam's capabilities" and "actually made him stronger."

Russia backs India's demand for permanent seat on UNSC

NEW DELHI, Dec 22: Russia on Monday backed India's long-standing demand for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, reports AFP.

Visiting Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov said India had a strong case for a seat on the existing five-member Council.

Russia believes India has a strong and appropriate candidacy, Primakov said.

New Delhi, which conducted a series of nuclear tests in May, has been lobbying hard from membership of an expanded permanent Security Council.

It argues that with a population of 975 million and its geographic size India cannot be ignored by the five nuclear weapons power states — Britain, France, China, Russia and the United States.

AP adds: Russian and Indian officials signed seven agreements Monday, including a crucial document extending current military and technical cooperation through 2010.

India is a leading buyer of Russian arms and its defence forces depend up to 80 per cent on Russian equipment and

spares. India is currently building two nuclear reactors purchased from Russia in a 2.6 billion dollars contract. Both sides say the reactors are for energy purposes and cannot be used for military means.

India also is negotiating the purchase of an aircraft carrier from Russia. India's Foreign Secretary K. Raghunath told reporters. The sales represent a valuable source of hard currency and jobs for financially struggling Russia.

India and Russia also signed an extradition treaty and an agreement covering legal assistance in criminal matters to deal with terrorism. Other agreements sought to enhance cooperation in the steel, power and telecommunication sectors. India and Russia also will study the possibility of jointly undertaking oil exploration in the two countries and in Central Asian republics.

Primakov said President Boris Yeltsin will visit India next year to sign a strategic partnership agreement defining long-term relationships in political and other fields.



An Iraqi woman shops at Shorja market, selling Christmas decorations, in the centre of Baghdad Monday.

— AP/UNB photo

Indonesia puts 11 soldiers on trial today

JAKARTA, Dec 22: Eleven members of the Indonesian armed forces will face a military court tomorrow, charged with involvement in the abduction and torture of political activists, a rights group said today.

Munir of the Commission for Victims of Violence told AFP that he learned of the trial date from a subpoena sent by the military prosecutor to a former abductee asked to testify at the trial on Wednesday.

The 11 suspects, from the elite Kopassus Special Forces and including seven non-commissioned officers, are suspected of involvement in the abduction and torture of at least 24 activists earlier this year.

Nine of the abducted victims have since resurfaced, one has been found dead and 13 are still listed as missing, Munir said.

Munir however expressed doubts that much would come out of the current court case, saying that the military court "will not go into the depth of the matter, since the top-level officer giving the order" for the kidnapping was not on trial.

President B J Habibie on Monday pledged that the government will continue with its probe into the extent of the involvement in the abductions of Suharto's son-in-law, Prabowo Subianto, who headed Kopassus at the time of the kidnappings.

Prabowo was honorably discharged from the armed forces

in August. Two other senior officers of Kopassus were barred at the time from ever holding an operational position in the armed forces.

The military says the three senior officers might face court martial if evidence against them emerges during the trial of the 11 soldiers.

At least 24 activists were abducted early in the year in the run-up to a general session of the People's Consultative Assembly to elect Suharto for a seventh consecutive term.

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Scientists relocate NEAR

WASHINGTON, Dec 22: After more than 24 hours without radio contact, scientists have relocated a robot spacecraft on a mission to a giant asteroid, reports AP.

NASA's Deep Space Network located the signal belonging to the Near Earth Asteroid Rendezvous, or NEAR on Monday night. Scientists planned to send signals to the craft early Tuesday, hoping to restore communications and retrieve data.

"I think we're pretty much convinced the signal was there all along," said Helen Worth, a spokeswoman for the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory in Laurel, Maryland, which built and manages the craft.

But even a small deviation in the position of the spacecraft could have caused scientists to lose the signal, she explained.

Only after scientists regain the data from the past day will they be able to determine for sure what happened. "Everybody will hold their breath until we get the data back," Worth said.

Contact was lost about 2200 GMT Sunday as the spacecraft was being accelerated to catch the asteroid Eros some 386 million kilometres from Earth. At about 0100 GMT Tuesday, the network located the craft's signal again.

But Worth said it as unlikely that NEAR would keep its Jan. 10 rendezvous date. "Realistically, we are now holding out hope for sometime in February," she said.

On Jan. 10, the spacecraft was supposed to lock into orbit around Eros. Later, it is scheduled to possibly land on its dusty surface, collect data and learn how to divert an asteroid from colliding with Earth.

When the unknown problem occurred Sunday evening, NEAR's speed was being boosted by a series of rocket engine firings to get it lined up so it could begin to circle Eros. A two-minute process of settling fuel apparently was successful, but contact was lost during an 18-minute procedure to fire the large engine of the spacecraft to boost its speed.

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