

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.

Mamdouh 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.

"US, UK must be brought to book"

Iraq rules out talks with UN

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.

"Any talks, any discussions, unilaterally, directly with us or within the (UN) Security Council about the future shall not be accepted by Iraq unless first the aggressors should be made accountable for their aggression," Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz told a press conference on Monday.

"Then the embargo on Iraq should be lifted. Iraq cannot tolerate the embargo and UNSCOM (The UN special commission charged with dismantling Iraq)," Aziz said, adding, "This is a legal and political solution to the current situation."

Iraq would also refuse any conditions set out by Washington and London to resume relations with the United Nations,

he insisted. "We will never, never accept any conditions made by President Bill Clinton or Prime Minister Tony Blair, Iraq refuses all these conditions totally."

In New York this week, the UN Security Council began discussions of the aftermath of the bombings amid sharp divisions on the future of the UN weapons inspection regime.

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

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

Butler has come under fire in the wake of the attacks that were triggered by his negative report about Iraqi compliance with UNSCOM 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 Hamdoun said Sunday that thousands of people were killed or wounded, without an 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 Guard overseeing President Saddam Hussein's personal security and the protection of vital 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 "a 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."



President Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary prepare lasagna for the homeless during a visit to the DC Central Kitchen emergency shelter in Washington Monday. The president, adopting a compassionate, remorseful stance after becoming the first president in 130 years to be impeached, is devoting Christmas week to volunteering at the kitchen, reading to children and memorialising victims of Pan Am Flight 103. — AP/UNB photo

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 for 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 dollar 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

Knesset votes for early polls

JERUSALEM, Dec 22: Israel's parliament has voted overwhelmingly for early elections, signalling the demise of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ailing hard line government and effectively freezing for months the already-troubled peace with the Palestinians, reports AP.

The elections are likely to take place by the end of April, in addition to Netanyahu and Labour Party leader Ehud Barak, a half-dozen other figures have indicated they might be interested in being the next prime minister.

The early elections bill given preliminary approval on Monday must pass two more readings, but Netanyahu has said he will not try to block its final passage.

Netanyahu's peace policies 56-48, then voted 81-30 to approve early elections. Netanyahu, slumped in his seat at the cabinet table, voted in favour, as he had promised he would do.

His last-minute appeal for a national unity government was laughed out of the chamber by the opposition during a session that was raucous, even for a parliament not famous for its decorum.

It seems the other side is not interested in unity, and possibly less interested in peace than

in power," Netanyahu told reporters afterward.

"It's a little too late," countered Barak, who said the timing made him question Netanyahu's sincerity.

Even members of his Cabinet, who backed the survival of his government were appalled by Netanyahu's national unity proposal.

The idea of a national unity government presented at the last moment is really demagoguery," Transport Minister Shaul Yahalom told Israel TV. "This is serious."

Netanyahu had steadfastly opposed national unity until it became clear Monday night that he had talked himself into a corner with his do-or-die proposal to the Knesset — accept conditions for resuming the peace process, or go to elections.

It became increasingly clear last week that some in his coalition would not endorse his peace policies and were happy to oust him as well. He infuriated hardliners when he agreed to the US-brokered peace accords at Wye River, Maryland, in October.

Wye meant further territorial concession to the Palestinians, anathema to a small but powerful group of the right wing that still claims the entire biblical land of Israel. The Labour party promised

him backing from outside the government as long as he stuck to Wye, but that ended when Netanyahu froze a scheduled troop withdrawal from 5 per cent of the West Bank after a wave of anti-Israeli violence last month.

Netanyahu's conditions to the Palestinians for resuming Wye, presented to the Knesset Monday, included a renunciation of claims to statehood and Jerusalem, a confiscation of arms, an end to violence and incitement to violence, and a renunciation of claims that Netanyahu had agreed to release Palestinians jailed for killings.

"An agreement respected only by Israel is without value and will not bring peace," Netanyahu said.

The Palestinians say they have complied with Wye.

Barak said the freeze in the peace, coupled with Netanyahu's political manoeuvring in recent weeks, undermined faith in his leadership.

The test of leadership is action, not whining," he told the parliament.

Aruch Deri, the leader of the small Shas party that is pressing hardest for national unity, told The Associated Press he would continue to lobby for Barak-Netanyahu talks.

BRIEFLY

ROK to pay \$333m for US troops: South Korea will pay 333 million dollars for keeping US troops on its soil next year, American and South Korean military officials said Tuesday. AP reports from Seoul.

Though Seoul has signed a long-term agreement to gradually increase its share of the cost of keeping US troops here, a prolonged economic crisis has seriously curtailed the government's financial capabilities.

New Caledonia gets self-govt powers: The French parliament voted on Monday to give the Pacific territory of New Caledonia sweeping powers of self-government, committing the French state to a "gradual" transfer of key prerogatives to the local authorities. AFP reports from Paris.

The bill which had broad support across the political spectrum, calls for a "gradual" but "irreversible" transfer of state powers from Paris to the local government, with the exception of justice, law and order maintenance, money, credit and foreign exchange. The executive will be transferred to a collegial government elected by the territorial congress on a proportional basis and answerable to the congress.

Shark attacks surfer in Australia: A 21-year-old woman was attacked by a shark Tuesday while surfing at one of South Australia's state's most popular surf beaches, AP reports from Adelaide.

The woman suffered deep wounds to one of her legs and shock, but was in a satisfactory condition in the South Coast District Hospital. The attack occurred shortly before 4 pm when the woman was about to catch a wave back into shore at Middleton beach, about 80 km south of Adelaide.



A woman carrying a wreath, adorned with a flag from each country that had casualties, walks to the garden of remembrance in Lockerbie, Scotland, to pay her respects to the victims of the Pan Am Flight 103 who died 10 years ago after a bomb exploded bringing the plane down on Lockerbie. — AP/UNB photo

Torture of political activists 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.

Three of their superiors, including a son-in-law of former President Suharto, have already received administrative sanctions from the head of the armed forces on the advice of a military council probing the abductions.

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 expressed 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.

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.

Plan to form civilian militia postponed

AP adds: The government has decided to postpone a controversial plan to form a civilian militia to boost security in Indonesia, newspapers reported today.

Military chief Gen Wiranto had suggested the idea because

the armed forces has been overstretched by near-daily student demonstrations in Jakarta and other cities over the past several months.

Student activists who have been pressuring for swifter democratic change had promised to call off rallies during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which began Sunday.

But protesters and human rights activists were outraged by the proposal to establish a militia, arguing that the deployment of thousands of young men in the streets would only exacerbate unrest.

Justice Minister Muladi said on Monday that the new plan for civilian militias had been delayed while the government drafted a law that would allow their formation. The Jakarta Post reported.

The law will be submitted to Parliament next month, Muladi said.

The government of President BJ Habibie had earlier considered taking a legal shortcut by issuing a decree.

Last month, military-backed civilian guards armed with bamboo staves brawled with students and neighbourhood youths during a government assembly on political reform. The guards were withdrawn after a public outcry.

Anwar's trial Star witness accused of acting in jealous rage

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 22: Lawyers defending Anwar Ibrahim today accused the prosecution's star witness of taking bribes and acting in a jealous rage because the former deputy prime minister spurned her overtures, reports AP.

"I put it to you that you had confessed to a number of people that you were crazy about Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim," Christopher Fernando, the lawyer, asked of Ummi Hafidha Ali.

The 31-year-old advertising executive, who claims Anwar had sexual relations with her brother's wife, glowered as Fernando persisted in this line of cross examination.

"Did you write a few love letters to Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim?" he asked.

"I think I can sue you for making such an allegation," Ummi retorted, before denying the claim.

Ummi, a favourite of the photographers outside the courtroom because she happily poses in Western-style suits and designer handbags, sent a letter to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad last year that set off an avalanche of events leading to Anwar's firing and arrest in September.

Ummi alleged that Anwar, 51, was sleeping with the wife of her brother, the then-deputy prime minister's former private secretary. Anwar's lawyer al-

leged she was just jealous of her brother's wife, Shamsidar Taharin.

Fernando accused her of taking money from politicians opposed to Anwar in return for making false allegations.

"I put it to you that you were the one who cheated the nation for money," Fernando told Ummi.

Her cross-examination resumes Wednesday.

AFP adds: The high court heard today that Ummi Hafidha Aziz had been disowned by her father.

Ummi alleged that her father had been "bribed" by her brother Mohammed Azmun Ali.

The family feud emerged as Anwar's defence counsel, Christopher Fernando, submitted to the court a sworn statement by the father disowning his daughter.

"It was done without my knowledge, but I'm confident in saying that my brother bribed my father to do this," she told the court.

"I have a mother and a sister and another brother who will be willing to come to court to explain what really happened."

Asked by Fernando whether she was now making allegations against her own father and brother, Ummi replied: "I don't blame my father."

Fighting leaves 34 dead in Lanka

COLOMBO, Dec 22: At least 34 people were killed in clashes between government troops and guerrillas in northeastern Sri Lanka in the heaviest fighting in three months, military officials said today, reports AP.

At least 30 rebels were killed when troops ambushed a tractor pulling several trailers carrying up to 50 rebels near the northern town of Oddusuddan on Monday, said military officials, who asked not to be named.

Oddusuddan, 270 km north of the capital, Colombo, was captured by government troops earlier this month.

Two other guerrillas were killed in a clash a few kilometres to the west near the town of Kanakarayankulam on Monday, the officials said.

One soldier was killed and eight wounded the same day when rebels attacked a military convoy near Elamur town in eastern Batticaloa district, the officials said.

A civilian died in another grenade attack on Monday, this one on a shop in the eastern Valaichchenal town.

It was the fiercest fighting since several big battles in September killed more than 1,000 on both sides.

Round-the-world balloonists reach China

BEIJING, Dec 22: China has ordered British tycoon Richard Branson and his balloon currently over Tibet, to head south of the 26th parallel, a British diplomatic source said today.

"The Chinese have just issued instructions for the balloon to continue its attempts to track southwards towards the 26th parallel, to get south of it if possible," a British diplomatic source told AFP.

China has yet to make an official statement on the status of the balloon, the ICO Global Challenger which has strayed out of narrow band of air space which Chinese authorities had reluctantly agreed the team could pass through.

The billionaire and his round-the-world team crossed over the border into Chinese airspace from Nepal at 8,440 metres just before 10 pm (2200 GMT) Monday.

The balloon drifted into Chinese territory some 400 km north of the agreed air space corridor.

Earlier Branson said he and his crew, American Steve Fossett and Swede Per Lindstrand, would have no choice but to travel across the Chinese border because of wind conditions.

London-based project director Mike Kendrick said Chinese air traffic controllers were informed the moment the balloon passed over the border, with an apology.

Scientists relocate NEAR

WASHINGTON, Dec 22: After more than 24 hours without radio contact, scientists have relocated a robot spacecraft on a mission to track 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 is 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.

Fleeting contact with the

craft about 2240 GMT led scientists to surmise that the craft had not been destroyed.

"Because we had that communication, we're still clinging to the hope that it's still there," Worth says. "If it was still there then, then there's a good chance it's still there now."

Orbiting the 40-23 km long chunk of rock is to culminate a journey of almost three years, according to Robert W. Farquhar, a Johns Hopkins University scientist and the NEAR mission manager. NEAR is to spend almost a year orbiting within 15 km of the surface of Eros, a brick-shaped object 40 km by 4.32 km by 14 km in size. Using six instruments, the robot will probe the asteroid and determine its chemistry, mineral content, mass and density.

The craft then will be lowered until it skims within 118 metres of the asteroid's surface. The asteroid's gravity might be so weak that the spacecraft should be able to hover, Farquhar says. If that's successful, the robot then might land on Eros.

House of spirit turns into house of sleaze

LUCKNOW, Dec 22: Twelve people have been arrested for turning what began as a spiritual retreat in one of northern India's holiest cities into a pornography production house, police said today, reports AP.

Residents of Mathura staged an angry protest when the 12 were brought to court Tuesday, two days after their arrest. The suspects, accused of duping and blackmailing women into acting in pornographic films as well as distributing the materials, were ordered held pending completion of the police investigation. They face up to 10 years imprisonment.

The faithful believe the Hindu God Krishna was born in Mathura, 140 km southeast of New Delhi.

Police at their state headquarters in Lucknow, capital of Uttar Pradesh, say disciples of a holy man known as Baba Krishna Das have been producing

pornographic photographs and videos for the past two years from what was originally an ashram, or spiritual retreat, established in Mathura three years ago. Das escaped arrest but was being pursued.

"The ashram inmates have confessed to filming scores of such blue films and supplying hundreds of photographs to buyers even outside the state," said Uttar Pradesh Deputy Superintendent of Police RK Shastri. "They have also admitted that Baba Krishna Das was the mastermind behind the whole racket."

Shastri said the ashram's women would lure women to the ashram, where they would be drugged, stripped and photographed. The nude photos would be used to blackmail the women into posing for more photos or performing sexual acts with ashram members before video cameras.