

Muslim rebels kill nine in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, Dec 23: Suspected Muslim separatists in Kashmir have gunned down nine close relatives of former militants who switched sides to join pro-Indian government militia said Tuesday, reports AFP.

Unidentified gunmen forced their way overnight Monday into homes of former militants in three separate villages in Kulgam district — 65 kilometres — killing nine people.

Similar attacks claimed six lives at the weekend amid escalation of the bitter struggle between the Muslim separatists and their former brothers in arms.

The pro-government militia groups have been accused of particular brutality in Kashmir, especially over the torture and custodial killings of separatist suspects.

Senior police officer Farooq Ahmed said the stepped up attacks against the turncoats' families were probably a response to a recent series of successful anti-separatist operations, in which scores of militants have been shot dead.

Blast inside Catholic church in Pakistan

KARACHI, Dec 23: At least three people were injured when a bomb exploded inside a Catholic church in the Pakistani port city of Karachi late Tuesday, police said, reports AFP.

The home made device was planted under a seat at Saint Patrick's Church, located in the city's Saddar Bazar area, they said.

Police said the low intensity bomb containing about 200 grams of explosives, went off when prayers had just finished. The explosion caused panic among some 150 worshippers, police said.

The blast was believed to be the first inside a church in Karachi, which is plagued by recurring political, sectarian and ethnic violence that has claimed 3,500 lives over the past three years.

"It is an act of terrorism," a senior police official AD Khawaja said.

However, he said it was "premature" to say whether any extremist group was involved. Another administration official said there was no indication to link the blast with the recent US-led air strikes against Iraq.

Accidental blasts kill 12 senior LTTE cadres

COLOMBO, Dec 23: Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger guerrillas today said they lost 12 of their senior fighters in two accidental explosions in the north of the country, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said nine members of their group were killed in the district of Mannar while three more died in the Mullaitivu district in two accidental blasts.

The LTTE's clandestine Voice of Tigers radio said a self-styled Lieutenant Colonel of the movement was among those who perished in the Mannar district.

The rebel radio gave no further details of the explosions.

Tigers are leading a drawn out campaign for an independent homeland in the island's northern and eastern regions. More than 55,000 people have been killed in fighting in the past 26 years.

Hezbollah rockets injure 8 in N Israel

KIRYAT SHEMONA, Israel, Dec 23: More than a dozen Katyusha rockets rained down on northern Israel early Wednesday, injuring at least eight people, Israeli media and witnesses said, reports AP.

Paramedics reported at least four injuries from the rockets that fell in and around the town of Kiryat Shemona near Israel's northeastern border with Lebanon.

Another four people were injured in the western Galilee region from about 120 rockets that fell there, the paramedics said.

Northern Israel had been braced for the attack in the wake of an Israeli air strike Tuesday against Lebanon that killed a woman and her six children. That was the highest civilian casualty toll this year in the war between Israel and Lebanese guerrillas.

Hezbollah guerrillas last fired rockets on Kiryat Shemona in August, after Israel killed a leading southern Lebanese guerrilla.

Thai army to give up ownership of radio, TV stations

BANGKOK, Dec 23: In a move that should enhance freedom of expression, the Thai army will give up ownership of most of its radio frequencies and television stations, the office of the commander in chief said on Wednesday, reports AP.

The Thai army controls 128 radio frequencies and will probably retain only about 50 for military use and security, a spokesman for Army Commander in Chief Gen Surayud Chulanont said. In addition, the army will probably give up control of television Channel 7, but retain Channel 5.

The frequencies will be turned over to the government for privatisation.



One of the South Korean Buddhist monks pours petroleum over his body after slashing his belly with a knife to protest police raid on the third-floor balcony at the Chogye temple administration building in Seoul on Wednesday. Police, acting on a court order, stormed the temple holed up by about 100 dissident monks, hoping to end a prolonged leadership struggle between rival monks in South Korea's largest Buddhist order. — UNB/AP photo

ROK police storm temple to quell monks' leadership struggle

SEOUL, Dec 23: Police, acting on a court order, stormed a temple in central Seoul today, hoping to end a prolonged leadership struggle between rival monks in South Korea's largest Buddhist order, reports AP.

At the order's headquarters inside Chogye temple in Seoul, 6,000 riot police, backed by bulldozers and water cannons, moved in before dawn to expel about 100 dissident monks holed up inside a five-story administrative building.

A shaven-headed monk came out on a third-floor balcony, took off his shirt and slashed his belly with a knife to protest the police action. The monk, bleeding, was taken inside.

Another monk, also bare-chested, poured petroleum over his body and threatened to set himself on fire.

Police took away 40 dissident monks and their supporters before moving into the administrative building.

Monks poured water from hoses and threw down fire bombs, rocks, furniture and other items.

"We need to end this standoff quickly. For social stability, we can't allow it to go on too long," said police lieutenant Kim Sung-ho.

The police action came after court officials had twice failed to serve an expulsion notice to about 100 dissident monks who had been in control of the building since November 11.

A Seoul civil court, acting on a lawsuit filed by ousted mainstream monks, ordered the renegades to move out of the temple by Saturday. The occupants, however, refused to heed the order.

The trouble began after the order's head, Song Wol-ju, sought a third four-year term. Opponents occupied his office inside the Chogye temple, effectively blocking his reelection.

The rule stating the order's

chief monk cannot serve more than two terms was enacted in 1994 in an attempt to prevent the office from wielding too much power.

Song claimed that he was not subject to the rule, because he could not complete his first four-year term in 1980 because of disagreement with South Korea's then military government.

Song later resigned under pressure but the renegade monks refused to leave the temple. Instead, they stepped up struggle and occupied a major temple near Taegu on Monday. Police there were also poised to intervene there on Wednesday.

Many religion experts agree that power and money are at the centre of the struggle.

The victorious faction gets to control an annual budget of \$10 million, millions of dollars in property and appoint 1,700 monks to various duties.

US to resist any move to revise UNSCOM

'Saddam more concerned about internal threats to his regime'

PRINCE SULTAN AIR BASE, KSA, Dec 23: Evidence collected by US intelligence indicates Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was more concerned about internal threats to his regime than about the damage he faced last week from impending air strikes, the commander of US forces in the Gulf said today, reports AP.

The repositioning of Iraqi ground forces and last-minute shifts in their commanding officers indicated Saddam wanted to make sure the US and British air attack did not spark a revolt in the ranks, said Marine Gen. Anthony Zinni, head of the US Central Command.

Zinni, visiting this desert base with Defence Secretary William Cohen, described the separation of Iraq's ground forces into four sectors under the command of ruthless officers loyal to Saddam.

"That decentralisation was done so they insured they had control," Zinni said. "I think it was done more for internal reasons and internal military problems they thought they might have than for any military preparations they had for us."

Zinni and Cohen arrived at this sprawling air base, focal

point for the Deny Flight mission over southern Iraq, on a morale-boosting pre-Christmas visit with the troops.

British and American forces that participated in the four days of strikes on Iraq suffered no casualties. But Zinni, for the first time, said anti-aircraft fire was heavy enough in some places to cause combat pilots to abandon their targets.

As the strikes approached, Saddam appeared preoccupied with maintaining order within his own ranks, Zinni said. Sudden shifts in unit commanding officers and a trend toward putting Saddam's closest lieutenants in charge was the "to prevent loyalties from being created and to prevent plotting," Zinni said.

US Secretary of Defence William Cohen ordered a halt on Tuesday to additional emergency deployment of US forces to the region in anticipation of a possible military counter-attack from Iraq that never materialised.

Cohen approved the return to their US bases of the six B-1 bombers, 10 A-10 anti-tank aircraft, 10 KC-10 tankers now on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, and 13 of 15 B-52 bombers, also on Diego Garcia.

Even with these departures, a force of between 17,000 and 20,000 will remain stationed in the region indefinitely, Cohen said.

Marine Gen. Anthony Zinni, who heads the US Central Command responsible for the Gulf region, said for the first time that heavy Iraqi anti-aircraft fire forced some US planes to abandon their planned targets.

"We did not put pilots at risk to fly in for a target that wasn't essential," Zinni told reporters aboard a plane flying him and Cohen to the Persian Gulf to meet with US troops and Arab leaders.

Accompanying Cohen and Zinni were members of Congress and several entertainers who planned to perform in a concert aboard the USS Enterprise on Wednesday.

Pickering told a news conference that the United States would be willing to consider boosting an exemption that permits Iraq to sell \$5.2 billion worth of oil every six months provided the proceeds are used for food and medicine.

With oil prices in decline, more oil may have to be sold to purchase food, although Iraq is

deliberately limiting its production, the senior American diplomat said.

Meanwhile, battling to save the UN weapons inspection system, the Clinton administration stood firm on the authority of Richard Butler and his commission to decide how to operate in Iraq, reports AP.

It is up to UNSCOM to decide how it can be most effective in the pursuit of the mission," Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering said Tuesday of the UN Special Commission on Iraq.

Three of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council — Russia, China and France — objected to the four-day US and British bombing attack that followed Iraq's refusal to submit to inspections of its suspect weapons sites.

In the aftermath of the bombing, the three Security Council members could be getting ready to try to lift an eight-year-old UN oil embargo on Iraq, revise the inspection commission and force out Richard Butler as its chief.

Any move in the Security Council to lift the sanctions could be killed by a US veto, the State Department said.

Judge quashes lawsuit

Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal was not unconstitutional

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 23: A court Wednesday dismissed a lawsuit filed by jailed politician Anwar Ibrahim in which he accused the prime minister of violating the constitution by firing him, reports AP.

High Court Judge Mohamed Saari Yusoff rejected the claim, saying, "I do not see why there should be further hearing or argument on the matter."

Anwar's civil suit states that Mahathir took it on himself to dismiss his deputy on Sept 2, rather than seeking the consent of Malaysian King Tuanku Ja'afar, as the constitution requires.

Defence attorney Karpal Singh argued that the wording of Anwar's dismissal letter showed that Mahathir had made the decisions himself and had bypassed the king, who is the only authority empowered

to appoint and dismiss Cabinet ministers.

Technically, Karpal argued, Anwar should still be considered finance and deputy prime minister. He added that Mahathir's appointment of himself as first finance minister and the country's 1999 budget, which he presented after Anwar's ouster, should be declared invalid.

Judge Mohamed Saari said he believed Anwar's dismissal letter "satisfied the requirement of the constitution."

Despite the fact that there was no evidence showing the letter was written at the behest of the king, Mohamed Saari said he believed the king was advised of the dismissal by Mahathir.

Karpal said he planned to file an appeal Thursday morning.

Meanwhile, the prosecution's star witness in sexual misconduct trial conceded Wednesday that her brother denied his wife had sexual relations with the jailed politician.

Ummi Hafidha Ali, a 31-year-old advertising executive, alleged in a letter to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad last year that Anwar had sex with the wife of her brother, the personal secretary of the then-deputy prime minister.

Defence attorneys in the sensational trial, which has provoked unprecedented civil unrest in the Southeast Asian capital, grilled Ummi for a third day Wednesday.

Defence attorney Gurbachan Singh forced Ummi to admit that her brother denied his wife had slept with Anwar, who was also finance minister before his firing in September.

Lockerbie bombing

Libya doesn't want to delay trial of suspects

CAIRO, Dec 23: Libya doesn't want to delay the trial of the two Lockerbie bombing suspects but only wants to ensure the "honesty" of the trial court, the Libyan foreign minister said Tuesday, reports AP.

Libya is also not worried about US and British threats of more sanctions as a tool to get custody of the two Libyan suspects, the minister, Omar Al-Muntasser, told reporters.

He was speaking after meeting with Egypt's Foreign Minister Amr Moussa. Al-Muntasser arrived in Cairo on Monday.

The December 21, 1988 bombing of a Pan Am jet over Lockerbie, Scotland, killed 270 people. The prime suspects are two Libyan intelligence agents and Libya is under UN air sanctions aimed at forcing it to handover the men for trial.

"We are sure of their innocence. Our sons have not done it and there is no proof of that," Al-Muntasser said.



Madhuri Dixit makes a blunder

KATMANDU, Dec 23: One of India's highest paid actresses, Madhuri Dixit, currently in Nepal to release her latest album, apparently believed the kingdom was once part of India, a report said today, says AFP.

Asked to comment on Nepal, the actress said Tuesday: "Nepal is a beautiful country and it was once a part of India," the Kathmandu Post reported her as saying during a radio interview.

But she quickly admitted her mistake after Kantipur FM's presenter Dinesh DC and other reporters present objected, telling her Nepal had never been a part of India, said the report in the leading English daily.

Dixit is here to release the music of her latest film "Aarzu" along with the male lead of the movie Akshay Kumar and other members of the film's cast. The film is set to be released in February 1999.

Clinton looks into ordeals of homeless

WASHINGTON, Dec 23: In a last burst of public policy-making before Christmas, President Bill Clinton is examining programmes for the homeless, reports AP.

The president was travelling Wednesday to a Boys and Girls Club in the Baltimore community of Pleasant View to high-light programmes there that help homeless people find a place to live and rebuild their lives.

White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said the trip with Housing Secretary Andrew Cuomo is meant to preview the housing aspects of the federal budget "as we move forward next year into the budget season."

After returning from Baltimore, the president will settle in for a quiet Christmas holiday at the White House with his family, Lockhart said. He is expected to remain at the White House until Dec 30, when he and first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton depart for the annual Renaissance Weekend retreat in Hilton Head, South Carolina.

Koirala to stake claim to form new govt

KATHMANDU, Dec 23: Nepal Prime Minister Gijra Prasad Koirala has secured enough support to stay in power despite resigning as government leader on Monday, his party said on Tuesday, reports AP.

Koirala resigned from the government led by his Nepali Congress (NC) Party on Monday evening, but party sources said King Birendra had asked him when accepting his resignation to stake his claim to form the next government within 48 hours.

"Koirala will go to the Royal Palace Wednesday evening around 5 pm to stake his claim to the next government, armed with the signatures of at least 103 MPs in the lower house of Parliament," an NC source said.

Under the constitution the support of at least 103 legislators in the 205-member House of Representatives is needed to form a government.

But Koirala has more than the necessary number of votes to form the next government. Koirala, 74, resigned to head a new three-party coalition following a political crisis sparked by a split between his party and its previous coalition partner.

The NC with 88 MPs, the main opposition Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML) with 49 legislators, and the pro-India Nepal Sadbhavana Party (NSP) supported by three law-makers, agreed on Sunday to form a new coalition government headed by Koirala.

Construction workers clutter Bethlehem, not tourists

BETHLEHEM, Dec 23: In Manger Square, tourists are outnumbered by construction workers raising clouds of dust as they install new stone tiles in time for Christmas, reports AP.

With Mideast peace in crisis and tensions simmering in the Gulf, an expected pre-millennium surge in tourism to the city believed to be Jesus' birthplace has failed to materialise.

In fact, tourism has bottomed out. In past years, attendance at Christmas Eve celebrations has reached up to six figures; this year, Bethlehem officials don't expect more than a trickle.

"The situation in the region and with the peace process is so bad," Mayor Hanna J. Nasser said Tuesday. "This year I do not expect that the number of tourists will exceed 20,000."

Israel's refusal last month to release Palestinians jailed for killing launched a wave of anti-Israel violence — including attacks on Israeli soldiers guarding the entrance to Bethlehem that were broadcast around the world.

US President Bill Clinton

visited the region last week in an effort to salvage the peace process. He lit the Christmas tree in Manger Square and joined carolers in song.

Days later, demonstrators were burning the US flags that had fluttered throughout the Palestinian-controlled city during the visit, protesting the US-British bombing of Iraq.

Anxious Palestinian police ordered journalists not to film the anti-US actions. On Tuesday, officers belonging to the police department's tourist unit patrolled Manger Square, sidestepping the construction workers. They hadn't much to do — they, too, outnumbered the tourists.

A Manger Square vendor said Clinton was partly to blame for his lack of work.

"Clinton lit the tree here a few days ago, and then he went back to Washington and lit the sky of Baghdad," said Samir Metri, bearing a stack of postcards and rosaries in his arms. "It was much better last year, this year it is awful."

Inside the Church of the Nativity — an ancient basilica built atop what is believed to be

the manger where Jesus was born — a French tourist said that the Iraqi bombing helped keep his countrymen away.

"A lot of European tourists are afraid because of the pro-Iraqi demonstrations that have taken place here," said Tanguy Pesselev, a university student. "People do not feel that it is safe to come here."

Others blamed the frantic rush to modernise the square for the expected rush of Christians expected here for Christmas next year, leading into the year 2000.

The workmen are laying large, square stone tiles that are to cover the football-field-sized square. The square's 12 million dollars "Peace Centre" will include a Palestinian culture centre and a nativity museum.

"Does this look like Christmas to you," asked Najme Handal, who sells Christmas decorations in an alleyway off the square. "The rubble, the mess, the garbage. This is unacceptable."

Nasser, the mayor, says the renovations will drag the little town of 24,000 into the 21st century.



Nanna Chen, 8, of Washington reacts as President Clinton reads 'A Visit from Saint Nick' to a group of school children, Tuesday, as First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton looks on in the East Room of the White House. — UNB/AP photo