

2 British ministers resign over loan scandal

LONDON, Dec 24: Talented, visionary and a kingmaker without whom Labour would not be in power in Britain today, but he still had to resign for accepting a loan from a friend, reports AFP.

That was the consensus surrounding Peter Mandelson in Thursday's British press after his resignation the previous day as trade and industry secretary.

He admitted a misjudgment in accepting a loan of 373,000 pounds (625,000 dollars) from Junior Finance Minister Geoffrey Robinson and keeping it secret from his own department and his close ally Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The double resignation — Robinson also quit — prompted one of the worst crises since Labour came to power in May last year.

Ironically, that was on the back of a message co-authored by Mandelson — that it offered a fresh alternative to the scandal-tainted Conservatives.

All the papers highlighted Mandelson's role in reshaping Labour from its chaotic, divided and unelectable state of the 1980s.

They were warm in their praise for his talent and political nous. And while they insisted he had to go, they also predicted he would be back.

"Without him and his allies, new Labour would not exist and Labour would not be in power today. We are sorry to see such a talented politician leave office," The Express wrote.

The Guardian said he was "architect, builder, thinker, schemer, weaver, and spinner" of the Blairite project and his departure left the premier isolated.

It was one of several papers to suggest Mandelson should be brought back after an appropriate period on the backbenches.

The Times declared "the end of innocence for new Labour, its admirable reforming energy, has been dissipated in shame."

US to aid Iraqi opposition Ban on UN flights temporary

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 24: Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz said Wednesday that an Iraqi ban on UN flights was 'temporary,' the United Nations said, reports AFP.

Aziz gave that assurance during a telephone conversation with UN Chief Kofi Annan, according to a synopsis of their conversation released by the United Nations.

Annan "was assured that the suspension was temporary" and that the measure had been taken "for the safety of UN aircraft," the statement said.

The ban had required Prakash Shah, Annan's special representative in Iraq, to leave Baghdad by ground transportation Wednesday.

The UN said Annan called Iraqi officials shortly after mid-day in New York.

No other details of the talk between Aziz and Annan were released. It was their first con-

tact since the four-day US and British bombing campaign against Iraq which ended late Saturday.

Meanwhile the United States will work to strengthen political opposition to Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, National Security Adviser Samuel Berger said Wednesday.

"We will do all we can to strengthen the Iraqi opposition so we can seek change inside Iraq," Berger said.

"We will do that in a practical and effective way, step by step," he told the National Press Club in Washington DC.

"If we are serious, we must do this carefully, not noisily. We will not play recklessly with the lives of those who risk their lives to oppose Saddam."

The United States will organise a meeting of opposition groups with senior US administration officials early in the new year and possibly in Wash-

ington, he said.

Berger said the US already has taken steps, including reconciling the two Kurdish factions in northern Iraq and setting up Radio Free Iraq, which broadcasts daily in Arabic from the Czech Republic into Iraq.

Berger held out the prospect that the US would support a lifting of sanctions against Iraq if a new regime came to power.

A UN oil embargo has been in force since Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990.

The administration would "work to ease economic sanctions against such a new Iraq as quickly as possible," he said, adding that the United States stood ready to "help a new government in Iraq that respects the rights of its people and meets its obligations to the world."

Berger said Saddam Hussein's misrule was partly re-

sponsible for the pervasive sense of insecurity that requires Washington to keep a costly presence in the Persian Gulf and "helps foster a false perception of a conflict between Muslims and the United States."

The option of Baghdad complying with UN weapons inspections was still a possibility, he said, adding that chief UN Weapons Inspector Richard Butler had drawn up a timetable that would take three to six months to complete.

"The best alternative is for Saddam to admit (UN weapons inspectors) back to Iraq with clear assurances that they will be able to complete their job," Berger said.

The strategy we can and will pursue is to contain Saddam in the short-or-medium-term by force if necessary, and to work toward a new government over the long-term.



Sgt Ronald Keur embraces his son, Julian, 3, after returning to Charleston Air Force Base Tuesday from the Middle East. Defence Secretary William Cohen, on a Christmas visit with US forces in the Gulf, said the emergency deployment to the region had been ended. —AP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY



Austrian President Thomas Klestil, right, and his bride Margot Loeffler smile at each other as they leave the Vienna City Hall, where they got married Wednesday in an unannounced private ceremony. —AP/UNB photo

Elephants kill 5 in Assam: A herd of frenzied elephants trampled five people to death after a drinking spree in the Indian state of Assam, witnesses said yesterday, AFP reports from Guwahati.

The herd of around 50 wild elephants descended on the village of Tingrai in a tea-growing region of Eastern Assam on Wednesday evening. "The elephants drank rice beer from casks which had been prepared by tribals in a nearby tea garden," a plantation worker said. The drunken herd then stampeded through the village, trampling huts and killing five villagers, including a child, and seriously injuring two others.

13 die in Turkish bus collision: Thirteen people were killed when a Turkish passenger bus crashed into a petrol tanker and burst into flames near the Black Sea port city of Samsun, Anatolian news agency said yesterday, Reuters reports from Istanbul.

It said eight people were still missing, and 12 were being treated for injuries in nearby hospitals after the accident late Wednesday night.

DPRK-UNC talks cancelled: Military talks between the US-led United Nations Command (UNC) and North Korea were cancelled as the communist state failed to turn up to discuss the recent spy incursion, military officials said Thursday, AFP reports from Seoul.

"The meeting failed to take place Wednesday as planned as the North Koreans did not turn up," a military official said.

The UNC had called for the meeting at the truce village of Panmunjom to protest last Friday's incursion in which a North Korean spy vessel was sunk in a high-seas gunbattle.

Russian novelist Rybakov dies: Anatoly Rybakov, a Russian novelist who was exiled for anti-Stalinist views and won widespread literary praise for his book "Children of the Arbat," has died in the United States, Russian news organisations reported, AP says from New York.

The ITAR-Tass news agency quoted Rybakov's wife, Tatyana, as saying the 87-year-old writer died in his sleep from complications after a heart operation. He had undergone a heart bypass after two heart attacks earlier this year, it said.

Cold wave hits southern US:

The spreading cold wave has sent traffic spinning out of control on icy highways in the South, delayed pre-holiday flights and caused more than a half-billion dollars in damage to California's citrus crop, AP reports from New York.

Even the fountains at Caesars Palace hotel Casino in Las Vegas froze Wednesday. They had to be turned off during the night as the gambling capital hit a low of minus 3 Celsius. The cold air that has spilled southward out of Canada spread a deadly sheet of ice on highways from Texas through the Tennessee Valley.

11 drug dealers executed in China: China's southern boomtown of Shenzhen executed 11 drug dealers, including a teenage girl, in the city's second major judicial killing this year, The Special Zone Daily said yesterday, Reuters reports from Shenzhen.

The Shenzhen Intermediate People's Court sentenced 17 people for drug-related crimes on Wednesday, and 11 were handed the death penalty then immediately taken away to be shot, it said.

US senators urged not to rush into censure deal

WASHINGTON, Dec 24: US House of Representatives Majority Whip Tom Delay urged US senators not to rush into a censure deal but to "spend plenty of time in the evidence room" with prosecutors' materials, reports AP.

If they do, he said Wednesday, the 67 votes for President Bill Clinton's removal "may appear out of thin air."

The Texas Republican, a driving force in last week's impeachment vote, said the Senate should avoid "rushing to judgment."

Meanwhile, Vice President Al Gore suggested in an interview to be aired Sunday on CNN that Clinton was unlikely to admit to lying under oath as part of any censure deal.

"The president has said he did not lie under oath. He has acknowledged that he gave statements that were less than helpful to his interrogators and he said that was misleading."

But that is a very different proposition," Gore said.

Gore also said the White House lobbying effort won't involve pressure on senators.

"You will not see a lobbying campaign where the president and I are buttonholing senators. That's not something that feels like it is appropriate in this situation," he said.

Delay's unsolicited advice came as one of Clinton's Democratic allies strongly cautioned the White House and House lawmakers not to try to influence discussions among senators.

"We have a good Democratic and Republican leadership in the Senate, and the 100 senators are completely capable of determining how this will end without being told by either the House or the White House," said Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont.

"This is a major issue for a nation of 220 million Americans and now it will be up to 100 of those Americans to deter-

mine how it concludes — and we will," he said. "No one else will decide it for us."

Leahy echoed the advice given earlier this week by the Senate's leading expert on traditions and history, Democrat Robert Byrd of West Virginia. Leahy, the top Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, is close to the president and a former boss of White House Chief of Staff John Podesta.

The White House has had some contact with senators but is trying to avoid suggesting terms of a possible settlement, leaving that to senators to discuss among themselves and for respected political figures to make their own suggestions, say White House aides and outside advisers, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch said senators from both parties are discussing how to resolve the case, but added that lawmakers are not ready to do so now.

Hamas leader freed from house arrest

JERUSALEM, Dec 24: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat on Wednesday freed Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin from house arrest, a move immediately branded by Israel as "acquiescing" to the radical Islamic group, reports AP.

The ailing sheik's release adds a volatile new element to angry debate that has flared in recent weeks over the two-month-old Wye River peace accord.

Israel has already suspended its compliance with the US-brokered land-for-security pact, and Arafat's decision to end Yassin's unpopular detention could signal growing unwillingness on the Palestinian leader's part to run political risks for the sake of the faltering agreement.

In the slums of Gaza City, the charismatic Islamic cleric's re-

lease set off rejoicing among his disciples. Outside the simple concrete home where Yassin had been confined since Oct 29, a knot of neighbours gathered around him with kisses and offering respectful greetings.

For Israel and the Palestinians, the freeing of Yassin is cause for yet another outbreak of mutual mistrust.

Israeli government spokesman Moshe Fogel said releasing the sheik — who had been placed under house arrest hours after Hamas tried to blow up a school bus full of Jewish settler children in the Gaza Strip — amounted to a show of bad faith.

Citing what he called the Palestinians' "revolving-door policy" on jailed militants, Fogel said Arafat's government has "conducted a high-profile policy of ostensibly taking ac-

tions against Hamas ... but in reality, quietly acquiescing to Hamas activities."

Palestinian officials, furious over Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's failure to carry out a promised troops withdrawal in the West Bank earlier this month, have been saying for days that Israel is in no position to lecture them about the accord's provisions while it refuses to comply with them.

Well aware of how sensitive a subject Yassin's release was, Arafat's government made no statement about it. The release was carried out quietly; Palestinian police simply appeared at Yassin's door to inform him he could leave the house.

Although Palestinian leaders resent Israeli criticism over freeing Yassin — after all, Israel itself let him out of prison 16 months ago, as part of a deal to ransom Israeli agents who botched a bid to assassinate another Hamas leader — the sheik's release is far from good news for Arafat himself.

Yassin's presence in Gaza serves as a constant reminder of the threat that unforgiving fundamentalist groups like Hamas pose to Arafat's far more secular, free-wheeling leadership circle. If there is to be a Palestinian state, Hamas wants it to be an Islamic republic.

Hamas, which opposes any peace with Israel, has proved over and over again its ability to derail peace talks by setting off suicide bombings. By freeing Yassin, Arafat leaves himself open to familiar Israeli accusations that he has failed to contain Islamic militants — particularly if Hamas stages some new attack.

It has only been nine days since Arafat stood in triumph with US President Bill Clinton in Gaza, basking in Palestinian euphoria over the boost to statehood hopes that the presidential visit conferred.



Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, spiritual leader of Hamas, centre, receives wellwishers at his Gaza City home Wednesday after Palestinian officials freed him from two months of house arrest. —AP/UNB photo

Clinton goes Christmas shopping

WASHINGTON, Dec 24: President Bill Clinton got in some Christmas shopping this year in advance of his usual Christmas Eve routine, reports AP.

After a trip to Baltimore on Wednesday to press for additional federal funds to fight homelessness, the president went to a store in the Peace Corps' new headquarters in downtown Washington.

Clinton spent 20 minutes examining bracelets, masks, baskets and pottery from places such as Nepal, Guatemala and the Philippines.

The president paid with a credit card and emerged wearing a baseball cap and carrying a brown shopping bag brimming with purchases.

White House aides would not reveal what Clinton bought beyond painted pottery and a mask.

Before shopping, Clinton and his wife videotaped a Christmas address to the nation, urging Americans to "give thanks for the blessings of the year just passed."

US expels three Cuban UN mission diplomats

WASHINGTON, Dec 24: The United States on Wednesday ordered the expulsion of three Cuban diplomats posted to the United Nations for alleged espionage, reports AP.

The State Department said the trio, two embassy secretaries and an attache, were expelled for "activities incompatible with their status," a phrase used in diplomatic circles to indicate espionage.

"We are requiring these officials to make arrangements expeditiously to depart," State Department spokesman James Rubin said in a statement.

UN spokesman Mangel Almeida E Silva said the United States gave first secretary Eduardo Martinez Borbonet, third secretary Roberto Azanza Paez and Gonzalo Fernandez Garay until 5 pm (2000 GMT) on December 28 to leave the country.

And now, Viagra for women

AMSTERDAM, Dec 24: Three Dutch university hospitals have joined forces in an effort to pioneer a Viagra-style impotence pill for women, reports AP.

Pfizer, the US pharmaceutical company that makes Viagra, is funding the effort by researchers at the principal teaching hospitals in Amsterdam, the northern city of Groningen and the southern city of Maastricht, Dutch media reported Thursday.

One target of such a pill be treating the vaginal dryness that can make intercourse painful, particularly for older women, a spokesman for the study said.

Viagra, while stimulating sexual desire in men, has little or no effect on increasing a woman's sexual appetite, the researchers said.

Lawyers denied permission to play tape 'proving' conspiracy against Anwar

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 24: Lawyers defending Malaysia's ousted deputy prime minister in a sex and corruption trial failed on Thursday to win permission to play a tape-recording of a conversation they say will show a conspiracy against him, reports AP.

But the trial judge, Augustine Paul said he would allow the tape to be played if defence lawyers could point to inconsistencies in the weeklong testimony of Ummi Hafida Ali, the prosecution's star witness.

Excerpts of the recording were read on Wednesday but Paul barred the press from reporting the conversation that the defence claimed involved Ummi.

Paul had said initially he would rule today on whether the transcript of the conversation was admissible as evidence. But the decision was put off when the court adjourned until Monday at the defence's request.

Anwar turned to reporters

during a court recess and said smilingly: "Be optimistic against all odds."

"Have confidence in the system," he said quietly.

As the court convened Thursday, defence lawyer Gurubachan Singh sought permission to play the tape so that he could get Ummi to agree to having made all the statements contained in the recording.

Later, Anwar's chief defence attorney, Raja Aziz Addruse, said the defence could produce proof of Ummi's inconsistent testimony if granted time to interview her alleged partner in the taped conversation, Malaysian businessman Sng Chai Hui.

Ummi, a 31-year-old advertising executive, is the prime mover of all the charges against Anwar. She wrote a letter to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and distributed copies of it last year. It contained allegations that Anwar was sleeping with his secretary's wife.

Off the Record

Chocolate alert!

LONDON: A humble bar of chocolate was blown up by a bomb disposal team in a security alert at one of Britain's busiest airports, The Express reported Wednesday, says AFP.

Thousands of passengers were affected by the alert at Manchester Airport, after an electronic luggage scanner homed in on a suspicious object at the terminal handling international flights.

A controlled explosion was carried out on the package, but it contained a bar of Toblerone which had been mistaken for semtex, the paper said, while a telephone extension kit in the bag had been taken for a fuse.

"One of our x-ray machines picked out some confectionery which was packed next to electrical equipment," an airport spokesman said.

"Because of the unfortunate combination, our guards believed what they were seeing might be explosives. We had to be certain there was no danger."

Sweet war

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: It is war. The makers of West Bengal state's signature sweet, the 'rosogolla' are bracing to do battle with those pushing chocolates and ice creams, reports IANS.

The 'rosogolla' is a white, round and spongy sweetmeat dipped in sugar syrup. It has over the years become a virtual symbol of Bengal.

The makers of 'rosogolla' met at a conference in Calcutta to declare their angst at the fact that the traditional favourite of millions of sweet-lovers was being allowed to fall by the wayside as sales of ice creams and chocolates soared. The Pioneer newspaper reported in a front page despatch today. They said they would demand government intervention if things did not improve.

Identifying ice creams and chocolates as "enemy number one," the sweet makers said in a statement the two "alien sweets" were "much more harmful (for health) than 'rosogollas' and 'mishdidoi' (sweet yogurt), another popular dessert in West Bengal."

Dulal Gupta Sharma, head of the state Sweet Manufacturers' Association, claimed that while Bengal produced more than 80 kinds of sweets, chocolate-makers sell the same old thing in different packets.

"The changing taste is not only physically harmful to us but is also a sign of the times," Sharma said. "We can see our culture on the decline. There was a time when we were synonymous with the 'rosogolla' and sweet yogurt. Those days are fast receding into history."

There are about 48,000 people employed in the traditional sweetmeat-making business in West Bengal which earns about rupees 16 billion (380 million dollars) a year.

'Rosogolla' makers also accuse central Indian sweet and savoury makers of trying to steal their market. Even 'bhujia' (savoury) makers from Rajasthan are coming and marketing 'gulab jamuns' in a major way," Sharma said. "They have money and clout."

"People are gradually veering towards the new sweets," Sharma complained. "This is detrimental to our culture and business. We will ask the Centre government to protect our trade and give us the exclusive right to make 'rosogolla' in the traditional Bengali way."

More of a prison than a plaza at the Pole

AMUNDSON-SCOTT RESEARCH STATION, Antarctica, Dec 24: The new 153 million-dollar US research station here won't be The Plaza at the Pole. A budget hotel may seem deluxe, by comparison, reports AP.

The 2.5-metre by 2.5-metre bedrooms in the new outpost will be smaller than some prison cells.

But when the temperature plunges to minus 74 Celsius and the wind roars down the Queen Maud Mountains at 320 kph, these cozy little dens will beckon as many 153 people to the frozen bottom of the world.

"A bedroom is the size of walk-in closet back home," concedes Frank Brier, project manager of the new station for the National Science Foundation.

It will be several years — no earlier than 2005 — before anyone checks into this polar hotel.

Whether that is soon enough will depend on cooperative weather and careful maintenance of the faber, existing station protected by a circa-1975 geodesic dome that

is being rapidly buried by blowing snow from across Antarctica.

Polar dihedrals may wax lyrically of the beloved dome as an ark on a frozen sea.

Others privately ridicule it as an icebound Mir, the balky Russian space station that suffered fires, computer failures and near-fatal decompression.

Like many jokes, it contains some truth. "The US would not send a ship to sea or a spacecraft into orbit in such condition," says Norman Augustine, the CEO of Lockheed Martin, who headed the blue-ribbon panel that recommended the new station to Congress in 1997.

Lawmakers agreed, though they appropriated about 40 million dollars less than originally requested for a more elaborate facility.

One of the most formidable construction projects ever attempted now is well underway. Metal clangs, bulldozers roar and welding torches arc 24 hours a day, six days a week.

An acrid whiff of diesel fuel rides the cold wind blowing through the squatters' village of

temporary shelters known as Summer Camp. It already was overcrowded before 60 construction workers arrived.

Inside the old dome, a burly labourer slumps into a pink plastic cafeteria chair. Wisps of steam rise from his matted hair as he peels off layers of insulated coveralls. Icicles drip from his beard.

"Are we having fun yet?" Wiley Ellis demands as his frost-encrusted comrades clomp past in heavy rubber boots.

Ellis normally makes cabbies in Idaho, but a craving for adventure — not to mention a steady paycheck — has lured him 15,000 km from home.

Isolation and cold are extreme even by Antarctic standards. Some workers relish the brutal conditions — and the camaraderie. They return to the Pole year after year to work as aircraft "fuelle" or cargo handler or dozens of other tasks.

Others, like Ellis, sign up to assemble the new polar station but are unlikely to return after one four-month hitch. ("We're all miserable, but we're company for each other," he says.)

Any romantic notion of pio-

neering quickly evaporates aboard a Vietnam War-era cargo plane during a 13-hour flight from New Zealand. Then the white, forever white hits — with all the aesthetic appeal of living in a Styrofoam picnic cooler.

With no place to go and nothing to buy, Ellis is more practical. His aims are to survive and save money.

He could accumulate 10,000 dollars by the time he heads north in February. But even a fat paycheck can't entirely compensate for the graveyard shift in a place where the sun doesn't set for five months, yet metal tools crack in the cold.

"The cold is really hard on my body," Ellis says, rubbing aching legs. In his 40s, he is two decades older than most of his mates. His muscles crave coffee breaks in the cozy cafeteria.

To simplify things, every piece of the new station will be prefabricated and shipped in Hercules LC-130 cargo planes. They will be assembled like a giant Lego sculpture on the ice. Dozens of cargo planes already arrive weekly to deliver materials and haul away debris. It

will take three construction seasons to airlift it all.

"The biggest headache in this project is the logistics," says NSF project manager Brier. "It accounts for a third of the cost of the new station."

Flights are so frequent that station officials have installed the only spotlight in Antarctica next to the ice runway at the Pole. The next traffic signal is 4,800 km north in New Zealand.

Its purpose is not to stop the airplanes. It's to prevent preoccupied scientists and chilled workers from walking into a Herc's whirling propellers.

Last summer, workers completed the first of the steel archways on the station that will buffer new garages and heavy equipment repair shops.

This year, they will erect a second protective arch and install an expanded fuel system and power plant inside.

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of the station's design is its foundation. The entire complex will stand on adjustable stilts to allow snow to whistle beneath the station.



A Russian sculptor carves ice figures in downtown Moscow Wednesday during a traditional ice sculpture festival held in the city every year. —AP/UNB photo