

BRIEFLY



Palestinian President Yasser Arafat with Michel Sabbah, Patriarch of the Holy Land, at the conclusion of the Christmas Midnight Mass in St Catherine's Franciscan Church. In his Midnight Mass address, Patriarch Sabbah spoke of Palestinian disillusionment after five years of peacemaking with Israel has failed to bear fruit as the millennium draws to a close.

— AP/UNB photo

12 die as LTTE boat capsizes: A motorboat carrying 12 Tamil Tiger rebels, including two top ranking local guerrilla leaders, capsized in the sea after an accident, rebel radio said Friday. AP reports from Vavuniya. The Voice of Tigers radio monitored in the northern city of Vavuniya said two lieutenant colonels were among the dead. It gave no other details and did not say when or exactly where the accident took place.

Russia launches satellite: Russia's strategic rocket forces successfully launched a Kosmos-series military satellite from a northern launching pad, officials said on Friday, AP reports from Moscow.

The satellite was launched atop a Kosmos-3M booster rocket at 11:02 pm Moscow time (2002 GMT) Thursday from the Pleasetsk cosmodrome, the strategic missile forces command said.

8 killed at X-mas party in SA: Eight people were killed when armed gate-crashers stormed a Christmas party in Margate, in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province, and opened fire, furious at not being invited, police said yesterday. AFP reports from Durban.

Two others were injured after the unwanted guests were refused entry late Thursday, while seven guests escaped unharmed. The killers escaped.

Evacuation of foreigners begins

Rebels threaten to capture Freetown

ABIDJAN, Dec 25: The deputy leader of the rebel movement in Sierra Leone told AFP Friday that his forces would take Freetown "after the New Year" if the government does not agree to open dialogue.

"Our men are standing by to take the city. We are ready to attack at any moment," said Sam Bockarie, deputy leader of the revolutionary United Front.

"We already have some men in Freetown," he said, adding that his forces numbered "30,000 strong seasoned fighters" across the country.

The Nigerian-led intervention force, ECOMOG, charged with maintaining security in Sierra Leone, has beefed up security in and around the capital after a series of rebel attacks in the area. An attack on Tuesday

in Waterloo, some 30 kilometres outside of Freetown, provoked panic among civilians and sparked fear that rebels would target the capital next.

Meanwhile, the United Nations on Thursday said it was evacuating about a third of its 116 staff from Sierra Leone but leaving the rest of its workers in the West African nation.

Spokesman Manoel De Almeida e Silva said about 40 employees, mainly civilians, were being sent to neighbouring Guinea, while others in outlying regions were moved to Freetown.

AP adds: Two British Royal Air Force Hercules military transporter planes on Thursday evacuated 81 British and European citizens — including nine Italian priests — from Sierra Leone, the Foreign Office said.

DPRK plans to launch another satellite

BEIJING, Dec 25: North Korea is preparing to launch another satellite despite international opposition, the country's official media reported Friday, says AP.

North Korea fired a three-stage rocket on Aug 31 that flew over Japan and landed in the Pacific Ocean. North Korea said the rocket launched a satellite. Japan has dismissed that claim, saying it was a ballistic missile.

The North Korean report by its state-run Korean Central News Agency and by the government newspaper Rodong Sinmun, confirmed earlier reports in Russia and Europe suggesting another launch was imminent.

The newspaper, cited in a report from the North Korean

capital by China's state-run Xinhua News Agency, said the next satellite would be launched "at a proper timing" and despite strong opposition from the United States.

North Korea would not change its position on the issue, it said, reiterating denials that the previous launch was a missile test.

"It is foolish for the United States to expect any change in our attitude," the KCNA report said. "We are fully ready to launch an artificial satellite again when we think it is necessary."

The Aug 31 launch sharpened international fears over the reclusive communist country's suspected missile and nuclear weapons development programmes.



Dressed as Santa Claus, Anson Thomas, an anti-AIDS activist, blesses a prostitute as he continues his AIDS awareness campaign in the redlight district of Mumbai on Christmas Eve Thursday.

— AP/UNB photo

Airstrikes violated Jesus' teachings: Saddam

BAGHDAD, Dec 25: In a Christmas message to his people, President Saddam Hussein said that US and British airstrikes on Iraq violated the teachings of Jesus and called on all believers to "face up to these criminals," reports AP.

Some 5 per cent of Iraq's 22 million people are Christians and Saddam issues a Christmas address each year.

"The rulers of America and Britain... are the enemies of God," Saddam said in his address, which was carried by the official Iraqi News Agency. "Their criminal aggression was against not only Iraq but also against humanity, mankind and the principles called for by Jesus," he said.

Saddam called on all believers to "face up to these criminals who respect no sanctity."

The United States and Britain launched air attacks against Iraq in the early hours of Dec 17 after the United Nations withdrew its weapons in-

spectors saying that Iraq was blocking their work.

Iraq has said it will not allow the inspectors to return.

It says more than 40 civilians and 62 soldiers were killed in the strikes on some 100 targets.

Since the four-day bombing campaign ended Sunday, Iraq has accused the United States and Britain of violating Iraqi airspace and firing two missiles near the southern city of Basra, Washington and London denied the allegations.

INA, quoting an army spokesman, said late Thursday that 14 formations of warplanes violated Iraqi airspace in the morning. It did not identify the planes or say how many were involved, but said they entered Iraq from Saudi Arabian and Kuwaiti airspace.

The news agency said the planes were out of the range of Iraqi air defences.

Air raid sirens sounded

twice in Baghdad early Friday, the first time since end of the bombing.

There was no immediate explanation. No anti-aircraft fire was heard. Motorists seemed to ignore them, and light traffic continued to flow in the streets.

Journalists at the Al-Rasheed Hotel were blocked from leaving the hotel and were asked by management to go to the bomb shelter.

"I have no knowledge why the sirens have gone off," Pentagon spokesman Glenn Flood said in Washington. "The US Defence Department is not responsible for it, and it's not doing anything."

Despite the end of the bombing, the Iraqi military remains on alert. Road junctions, strategic sites and main roundabouts in Baghdad are still patrolled by militia of the ruling Baath Party, a move taken just before the airstrikes began.

KLA declares end to truce

PRISTINA, Yugoslavia, Dec 25: The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), the armed group fighting for Kosovo's independence from Belgrade, announced Thursday it was breaking a truce it unilaterally declared in the province on October 8, reports AP.

Meanwhile, the Catholic priest of Pristina appealed on Christmas Eve for a halt to fighting in Kosovo after a day which saw the worst fighting between Serb forces and Albanian separatists in many weeks.

"We pray that the war will stop," Father Janex said before a congregation of some 250 people.

A clergyman said "very few people" had come to worship compared to previous years. No official from the international community present in Kosovo attended the service.

The church of St Anthony

which has room for 500 people was "too small to fit everyone in, before the fighting began, now people are too scared to go out at nights," he said.

Several thousand Catholics live in Pristina which has a population of about 200,000. About 70 per cent of the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo are Muslims, 20 per cent Orthodox and 10 per cent Catholic.

AP adds: A Serb assault on an Albanian rebel stronghold in Kosovo was condemned Thursday by the State Department as unjustified.

Concerned with increased violence in the Serbian province, the department urged Serbs and ethnic Albanians to act with restraint and avoid escalating the conflict.

Brushing aside NATO and US warnings, Serb tanks and troops struck Podujevo, a Kosovo Albanian rebel

stronghold, triggering what both sides called fierce fighting and setting back US-led peace efforts.

In a statement issued by a spokesman, Lee McClenney, the department condemned the military action begun Wednesday by combined forces of the Yugoslav army and internal security police near the town.

The statement condemned all breaches of the ceasefire, including provocative attacks committed by elements of the Kosovo Liberation Army.

Belgrade's "disproportionate and indiscriminate reaction, however, cannot be justified," the statement said.

The Clinton administration hopes to persuade the two sides to agree on a restoration of self-rule but not independence for Kosovo, whose population is nearly 90 per cent ethnic Albanian.



Nepal's newly appointed Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, left, takes oath in front of King Birendra during a ceremony at Royal Palace in Kathmandu Thursday. Koirala returned to power with the help of a communist group despite losing majority in Parliament.

— AP/UNB photo

Beijing steps up control over pornography, political texts

BEIJING, Dec 25: China has stepped up a ban on foreign political texts and pornography as part of a nationwide drive to tighten government control over the publishing and entertainment industries, state media said today, reports Reuters.

At a national conference of top press, publishing and security officials, participants decried the growing numbers of publishing houses, churning out pornography and other illegal materials.

They also warned that a large number of "foreign political publications" had been reproduced in China.

"At present, the illegal publication problem is still very serious," The People's Daily said in a report on the conference.

"There has been an increase

in type and number of overseas publications with serious political problems," the newspaper said.

Reproduction and sale of these works, especially in some large and medium-sized cities have become very apparent."

Although the conference trumpeted China's success in regulating publishing since a nationwide anti-porn campaign began in 1994, participants admitted that the country faced an uphill battle.

According to statistics released at the meeting, China had confiscated nearly 30 million illegally published books and periodicals since 1994. It had also seized some 35 million illegal audio-visual products, of which 300,000 were

determined to have illegal political content.

In a front-page commentary, the newspaper warned that big profits earned from porn and other underground books would make fighting illegal publishing a long, difficult process.

It also repeated the government's mantra that social stability is of paramount importance in 1999, which will mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of communist China and the return of Macau to Beijing's rule.

If these problems are not resolved, they will seriously affect social order, harm the mental health of the youth, assault development of the publishing industry and lead to large economic and tax losses," the commentary said.



Iraqi Roman Catholics light candles prior to a Christmas Mass at the Maree-Yousuf Church in Baghdad Thursday.

— AP/UNB photo

4-yr-old asks Annan to 'work it out' with Saddam

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 25: Among the many letters sent daily to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was one from a 4-year-old boy who told him to "make up and work it out" with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, reports Reuters.

The New York child, Lucas Olson Duffy, who gave his age as four years and 11 months said: "Dear Mr Annan, please talk to the President of Iraq, please make up and work it out, Lucas..."

In reply, Annan sent a handwritten letter, saying "I am glad to see that one is never too young to speak out for peace. I promise you I will work very hard for peace in Iraq and everywhere else in the world."

UN spokesman Manoel de Almeida e Silva, who released the letter on Thursday, said Annan had received hundreds of messages, mainly from Americans, since the United States and Britain carried out four days of bombing raids against Iraq that ended on Saturday.

But the one written in Lucas' childish scrawl "really moved him," the spokesman said.

Because it is insufficiently respectful to the monarchy..

BANGKOK, Dec 25: Thailand on Friday definitively rejected 20th Century Fox's request to film a remake of "The King and I" here with Jodie Foster, deeming it insufficiently respectful to the revered Thai monarchy, reports AP.

The decision ends a long saga over the film, entitled "Anna and the King" Thai authorities had demanded changes to the script for the movie, a remake of the 1950s classic starring Yul Brynner.

The judgement was largely a formality. Fox has already said it will shoot the movie in Malaysia in March after a second script rewrite was rejected in November.

"The National Film Board has made its final decision today not to approve the film 'Anna and the King' to be shot here in Thailand," Thai Film Board Chairman Prasit Damrongchai told reporters.

The application was rejected because Fox had been unable to guarantee that the script seen by the board was the final version. "In the revised script, some points have been improved but not enough to uphold the monarchy," Prasit said.

"The King and I" was based on the bestselling book "Anna and the King of Siam" published in 1944, telling the story of Anna Leonowens, who was hired as English tutor in the reign of King Rama IV.

The original film was banned here for offending Thai sensibilities.

Off the Record

Charles for cannabis?

LONDON: A casual question at an informal meeting has drawn since Charles into the debate on the medicinal properties of cannabis, reports AP.

During a private Christmas visit to a charity home in western England, Charles told 36-year-old Karen Drake, who suffers from multiple sclerosis, that he had heard the narcotic was good for easing pain from the disease, according to British newspapers Thursday.

"He (the prince) asked me if I have tried taking cannabis, saying that he understood that, under strict medical supervision, it was one of the best things for it," The Guardian, a liberal broadsheet, quoted Drake as saying.

The Sun, a conservative tabloid, quoted Drake as saying she was "surprised" by Charles' question, but wanted at least to try the drug to discover if it could ease pain.

Campaigners supporting the use of cannabis for medical use welcomed Charles' remarks.

A spokeswoman for Charles said it was a private visit and a private conversation, but acknowledged it would be "churlish" to deny cannabis was mentioned.

Some chocolate!

KHMELENTSKY, Ukraine: A Ukrainian candy factory is fond of President Bill Clinton and real sweet on Monica, reports AP.

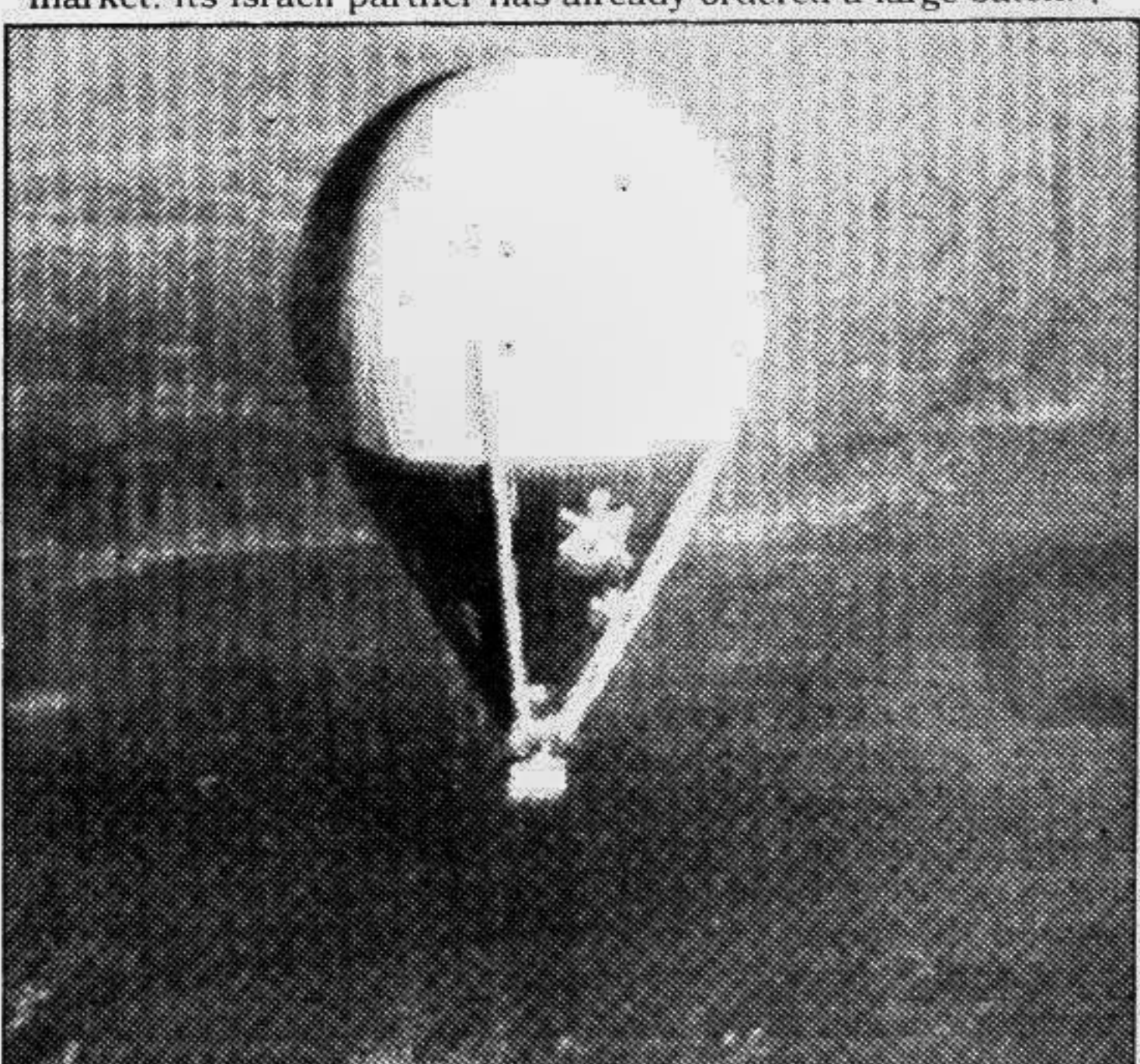
On Thursday, the Khmelnytsky factory in its namesake town named its newest chocolate confection after Monica Lewinsky, the former White House intern who... well, you know the rest.

The rectangular chocolates bearing the name Monica are intended to show support for Clinton, plant officials said.

Clinton visited this former Soviet republic several years ago and tasted its candies. He later wrote a letter of congratulations after the plant won an international prize.

"We keep this letter as a precious relic," factory director Vasyly Lubovetsky said.

The plant is hoping its Monica chocolates will find a huge market. Its Israeli partner has already ordered a large batch.



The ICO Global Challenger flies over Osaka, Japan, Thursday, heading towards the Pacific Ocean, which it is set to cross at 30,000 feet at an estimated speed of 130 knots.

— AP/UNB photo

Where Christmas is no longer a Christian festival

NEW DELHI, Dec 25: Who says Christmas is a Christian festival? If you thought it was, take a look at India and you'll think again.

Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and people from many other religions are like in previous years, joining Christians across the country to celebrate the festival. Cakes, Christmas trees, wreaths, candles and Santa Claus — everything is in place. The party season has begun with the countdown to Christmas and the merrymaking will continue till the New Year, reports IAN.

Be it carol singing, organising public dances, plays, music festivals, exhibitions, fetes, setting up nativity scenes, decorating Christmas trees, dressing up as Santa Claus or even attending midnight mass, people from all faiths are involved.

This is not surprising. Says D.L. Sheth, a sociologist with the Delhi-based Centre for Study of Developing Societies (CSDS): "India is a pluralist country where different cultures are interlocked. People celebrate every festival."

"The festival is now celebrated by the elite (among non-Christians). It has become a

symbol of modernity... a mark of modern behaviour," says Sheth.

Adds Balbir Arora, a sociologist at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, here: "It is a metropolitan phenomenon, a part of westernisation. Liberalisation has also helped."

In Goa, members of various communities have traditionally exchanged sweets and gifts on Christmas. In Bangalore, a large number of Hindus participate in the midnight mass at the Church of the Infant Jesus or the St. Mary's Basilica.

Then there is the huge midnight mass at the magnificent St. Paul's Cathedral in Calcutta that is attended by number of people belonging to different religions. Says Calcutta-based journalist Malini Sen, who attends mass every year, "For me, Christmas is a very dear festival. We even used to have socks hung with gifts. It was a shock when I found Santa Claus was my father."

In keeping with the secular spirit of the festival, a number of schools organised Christmas parties — complete with a Christmas tree and a Santa Claus — for their students. In Chandigarh, more than 120 schools held such parties where

Santa Claus distributed sweets and gifts.

"It is the most enjoyable day of the year and we wait the whole year for this day to be in school with a party dress and lots of celebrations," said Priyamwada Tiwari, a student at Sacred Heart Convent in Chandigarh.

With examinations over and schools closing for the winter, children are also in a festive mood. Delphy Biswas, a fifth grader at the La Martinier School in Calcutta, for instance, says she and her friends have been doing the rounds of their neighbourhood, singing carols.

Schools across Kerala have also been organising carol singing and children from all religions participate in it. "I like Infant Jesus the most. I always keep a picture of Infant Jesus with me," said S. S. Ramya, a tenth grade Hindu student of the Cotton Hill School in Thiruvananthapuram.

"This shows Christmas has turned secular," said N. Mohanan, a Malayalam short-story writer. "In my childhood, I had not even heard of Christmas. As years pass by, Christ-

mas is becoming a more and more memorable and joyous occasion in my family. Many of my real friends send me Christmas cards," he said.

Agreeing with him, Neil O'Brien, a prominent member of Calcutta's sizeable Anglo-Indian community, said: "Christmas is much more universal in appeal and is secular today."

In Calcutta, Christmas celebrations begin early. Every year on December 1 the city's 194-year-old New Market overflows with Christmas trees, paper huts and glistening baubles. And you know that Christmas — or Burra Din (Big Day) as it is called — is approaching.

The city, which was the capital of the British empire in India till 1912, when the seat of power shifted to Delhi, was known for picnics, river parties and fancy dress balls during Christmas season. Now these are mere memories but the spirit hasn't faded.

A number of businesses are using the festive occasion to sell their wares.

Christmas in Goa, where 30 per cent of the population is Christian, is a time for brisk business. A number of tourists

flock to the coastal state for Christmas and New Year and this means hard work for the hospitality industry.

Some complain that the focus of Christmas celebrations has shifted to luxury and five-star hotels, which organise lavish and expensive celebrations to cater to tourists and the elite.

Apart from the usual discount sales on a range of items like electric fans, ovens, gifts, novelties, furniture, garments, toys and electronic goods, a number of makeshift shops selling cards and Christmas ornaments have also sprung up suddenly in different cities across the country.

In Mumbai, enterprising shopkeepers have chosen the festive season this year to launch their online sales. E-commerce has picked up pace as articles ranging from Christmas trees, cakes, greeting cards as well as music cassettes and CDs are being sold on the Internet.

In Delhi, hotels, restaurants, garments and accessories outlets, bakeries and even florists are vying to attract customers. Designer scarves and quilts in "Christmas colours" are vying for attention

alongside "traditional Christmas goodies" like mince pies and cakes.

Since cakes and pastries are an integral part of the festival, bakery owners are doing brisk business. In Calcutta, long queues formed in front of reputed confectionary outlets, which opened extra counters to cater to the rush of orders. In almost every shopping centre, makeshift cake and pastry shops have sprung up.

A number of shopkeepers have asked for more cakes this time. "We find it difficult to meet their demands," K. Rosamma, owner of a bakery in Pala in Kerala's Kottayam district, said.

In Bangalore, the Nilgiri Mechanised Bakery Ltd. has come up with an innovative way to celebrate the festival. It hosts an annual Cake Exhibition, which attracted over 250,000 visitors last year. This time the centrepiece of the exhibition was a model of United Nations building. The U.N. cake was 22 feet tall and weighed 4.5 tonnes. Another cake that attracted visitors was an 18-foot-long, six-foot-broad model of the "Titanic" that weighed 850 kg.