

Round-the-world balloon quest fails

Beaten by the weather

HONOLULU, Hawaii, Dec 26: Richard Branson's attempt to fly non-stop around the world in a hot-air balloon ended Friday when his capsule splashed down in the Pacific, off Honolulu, US Coast Guard officials said here, reports AFP.

The capsule carrying Branson and crewmates Swedish balloonist Per Lindstrand and US millionaire Steve Fossett pitched into the sea 16 kilometres off Kahuku Point on the northern part of the island around 9:50 a.m. (1950 GMT).

The trio were airlifted to safety by two US Coast Guard helicopters and were "reportedly in good condition," Chief Petty Officer David Santos of the US Coast Guard told CNN.

The helicopters were flying the men to the coast guard air station at Barbers Point. They would then be transferred to hospital in Honolulu for a medical check-over. Before touching down, the craft attempted a "controlled landing," and skidded along the water off the island of Oahu.

A Coast Guard C130 Hercules cargo plane escorted the balloon on the last leg of its journey. Two Coast Guard cutters were also on the rescue scene.

The balloon was forced down by bad weather and winds taking it south, rather than east, officials at the ICO Global Chal-

lenger headquarters in London said.

"The weather has beaten us," said project director Mike Kendrick. "We were beset with all sorts of problems from the beginning when we launched in Marrakesh but they were all political."

"In the end, a weather problem is what stopped us, but that is the nature of ballooning."

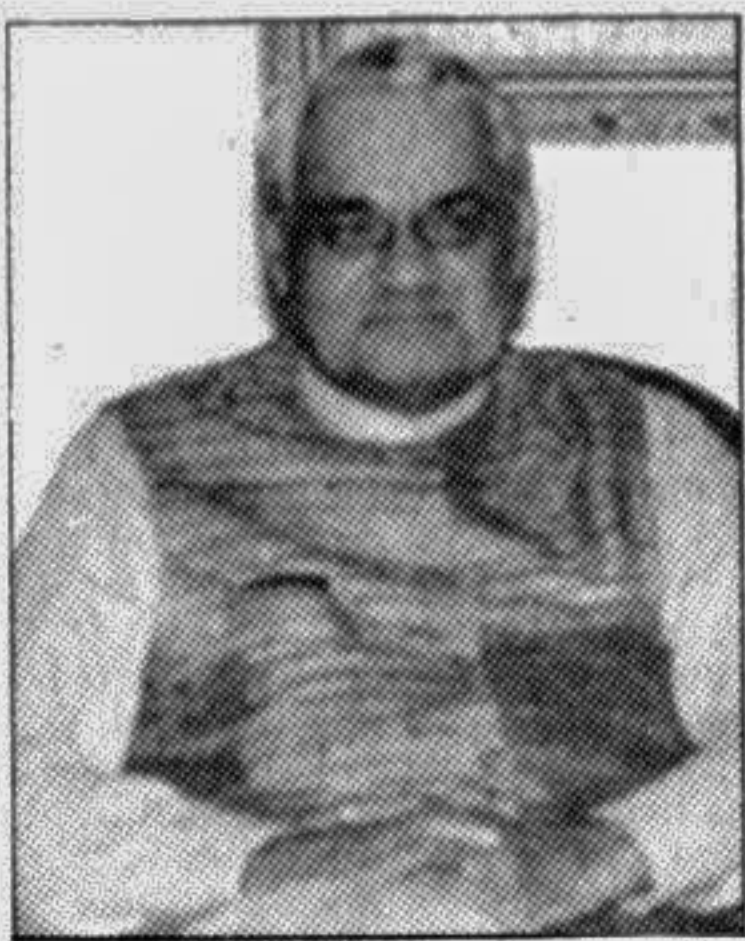
The Coast Guard and the search and rescue had been in contact for six months, said David Partridge, part of the London team.

"This process started a long time ago and members of the search and rescue team flew out and spent time running through the balloon and the capsule."

"They have a pretty good idea of what they are dealing with," He added. "They are very calm and it is routing for them. They have also had plenty of notice so they have been able to gather whatever they need for the rescue."

Branson has failed in a round the world attempt twice before in 1996, when he came down 24 hours after take-off and last year, when the balloon canopy blew away as it was being inflated.

Fossett has also failed twice before — he nearly died in his last attempt when his balloon crashed into the Coral Sea off Australia.



Atal Behari Vajpayee

'It's only a temporary night halt'

NEW DELHI, Dec 26: Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee yesterday described the high office he held as a temporary night halt and said he valued love and affection of the people above everything else, reports PTI.

Addressing a swabhiman march at his residence organised on the occasion of his 75th birthday, the poet prime minister, who seemed to be in a philosophical mood, said his effort was to light a lamp and remove darkness during the temporary night halt.

Reciting one of his favourite poems 'aao phir se diya jalaye' (come let us light the lamp again), Vajpayee regretted that some people mistook a temporary halt (padav) for destination (manzil).

Earlier, Vajpayee released a dove and accepted bouquets and greeting cards from children, who marched down from Amar Jawan Jyoti at India Gate, shouting slogans such as 'Long Live the Prime Minister'.

Iraqi opposition holds talks with US, UK officials

DUBAI, Dec 26: A leading Iraqi opposition group said Friday that it had held two meetings with US and British officials on creating a unified opposition to topple Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, reports AFP.

"The formation of an opposition political entity was the subject of two November meetings in London," said Hamid Al-Bayati, London representative for the Tehran-based Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

In a statement received here he said a variety of opposition leaders and independents met separately with British Junior Foreign Office Minister Derek Fatchett and US Under-Secretary of State for the Middle East Martin Indyk.

Bayati said there had been no discussion of establishing an armed opposition, and that the talks had centred only on reforming the inactive Iraqi National Congress or forming a new umbrella opposition group.

2 Khmer Rouge leaders defect

PHNOM PENH, Dec 26: Top Khmer Rouge ideologue Nuon Chea and nominal leader Khieu Samphan have defected to the government with the approval of Prime Minister Hun Sen, state-affiliated Bayon Radio and officials said today.

The defecting pair split from the brutal stronghold of the genocidal group Ta Mok on Friday and have moved to the government-alligned western town of Pailin, Hun Sen's deputy cabinet chief Muth Khieu told AFP.

"I met them in Pailin last night, and they are still there," he said.

Reuters adds: Cambodian radio today broadcast what it said was the text of a letter from Khieu Samphan in which he said he was surrendering to the government because he wanted to be a normal citizen.

"My only request is that I want to be a normal citizen, I don't need anything. I would like to recognise the royal government and its policy and the constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia," the local Bayon Radio station quoted Samphan as saying in a letter to Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Clinton's impeachment
Bipartisan support for
censure growing

WASHINGTON, Dec 26: Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, an influential voice among Senate Democrats, has come out in favour of censuring President Bill Clinton, lending momentum to the Democrats' drive to avoid an impeachment trial in the Senate, reports AP.

Moynihan, a New York Democrat, who had not previously revealed his position, did so Friday in a published report. Administration officials quickly expressed new hope for a bipartisan solution that would avoid Clinton's removal through a Senate trial.

As a senior member of the Senate, one of its leading intellectuals and sometimes critic of the president, Moynihan engenders considerable respect among his peers.

He holds particular credibility on the impeachment issue as one of the first Democratic senators to publicly criticise Clinton's behaviour. Immediately following a dramatic speech by Sen. Joseph Lieberman, Moynihan took to the Senate floor to agree with his Democratic colleague in denouncing the president.

Now, as the Senate prepares to consider charges of perjury and obstruction of justice, other

senators agreed there is increasing bipartisan support for a censure.

"I think you do have a significant group of senators who are trying to work across the aisle and find some bipartisan common ground that the House wasn't able to locate," said Sen. Ron Wyden, an Oregon democrat.

He said that based on conversations "every day" with Democratic and Republican senators, "I believe that there are 65 to 70 senators who would say: I would be open to a trial if it was fair and speedy, but I also want to use the time between now and January 6 (when the Senate returns) to see if there might be some bipartisan approach we can find."

A spokesman for the White House counsel's office, James Kennedy, welcomed these statements.

"We've said all along a bipartisan solution that is prompt and fair is the best course and we welcome efforts by those who are trying to achieve that goal of finding a way of putting all this behind us," Kennedy said.

The White House was careful to stick with a deferential approach, adopted after several

Senate Democrats indicated that the administration best not interfere with impeachment deliberations that are solely the prerogative of the Senate.

"It's a matter for the Senate and senators to decide," White House spokeswoman Amy Weiss said.

It would take a two-thirds vote — or 67 of 100 senators — to remove the president from office. With 45 Democrats and 55 Republicans, at least 12 senators from Clinton's party would have to vote against him to reach 67 — a scenario few see as realistic.

But Clinton's supporters worry about what could happen once a trial gets under way, and they are hoping for a quick resolution to the two articles of impeachment approved by the House.

Democratic Senators Moynihan, Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut and Robert Byrd of West Virginia have all offered the White House cause for concern about the positions they may take.

But Moynihan told The New York Times in Friday's editions that moves to oust Clinton threaten to "very readily destabilise the presidency."

Kosovo teetering on brink
of another all-out war

LAPASTICA, Dec 26: With Kosovo teetering on the brink of a return to all-out war, a top US diplomat has visited the latest outbreak of fighting and urged both sides to step back from further confrontation before it's too late, reports AP.

William Walker met with an ethnic Albanian rebel commander during a lull in the second day of renewed fighting Friday in northern Kosovo. He said he also hoped to talk with Serb commanders as part of his bid to end the latest Serb offensive.

The Serb attack poses the gravest threat yet to the October 12 agreement that halted months of violence between Serbs and guerrillas trying to gain independence for the predominantly ethnic Albanian province in Serbia.

This is the tensest period since the agreement was signed, said Walker, head of an unarmed force charged with monitoring the accord. The observer mission is organised by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Walker said the force — set to increase from 600 to 2,000 in the coming weeks — would not be pulled out in the face of increased danger.



A day after the Serbs launched their crackdown just west of the northern town of Podujevo, the rattle of gunfire echoed through the area.

But OSCE spokesman Jorgen Grunnet said there was a lot less activity than Thursday, when Serb forces backed by artillery and dozens of tanks swept into the area in what they said was a response to the killing of a policeman earlier in the week.

Two columns of Yugoslav military vehicles, each consisting of several tanks and armoured personnel carriers, returned to their base late Friday, Grunnet said, although it wasn't clear if the clashes were over.

The rebel Kosovo Liberation Army said late Thursday it would "not sit idly by" and would "attack with all means available." However, the LKA regional commander Walker met with insisted that his forces were not firing unless fired on.

The attack against six villages north of the province's capital, Pristina, sent hundreds fleeing into snow-covered hills. The ethnic Albanian-run Kosovo Information Centre said at least nine people were killed and many others wounded Thursday.

Bozidar Filic, the spokesman for Serb police in Kosovo, said the renewed fighting was against rebels in the Lapastica region "who have built up a whole system of fortifications, used for their attacks against police and the civilians."

"The terrorists attacked us, and we responded in an adequate manner, liquidating a number of them," Filic said.

The United States, France and the European Union have warned both sides not to continue the violence. Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov on Friday warned the West against using force to halt the latest violence.



Britain's Prince Charles, left, with his brother the Duke of York, 2nd left, his sons Prince Harry, 2nd right, and Prince William, centre background, leaves the Sandringham Church after attending Christmas service with the rest of the royal family on Friday.

Fergie frozen
out, again

LONDON, Dec 26: Britain's Duchess of York cut a forlorn figure on Christmas Day, after being frozen out of the royal family's festive celebrations for another year, the mass circulation Mirror reported today, says Reuters.

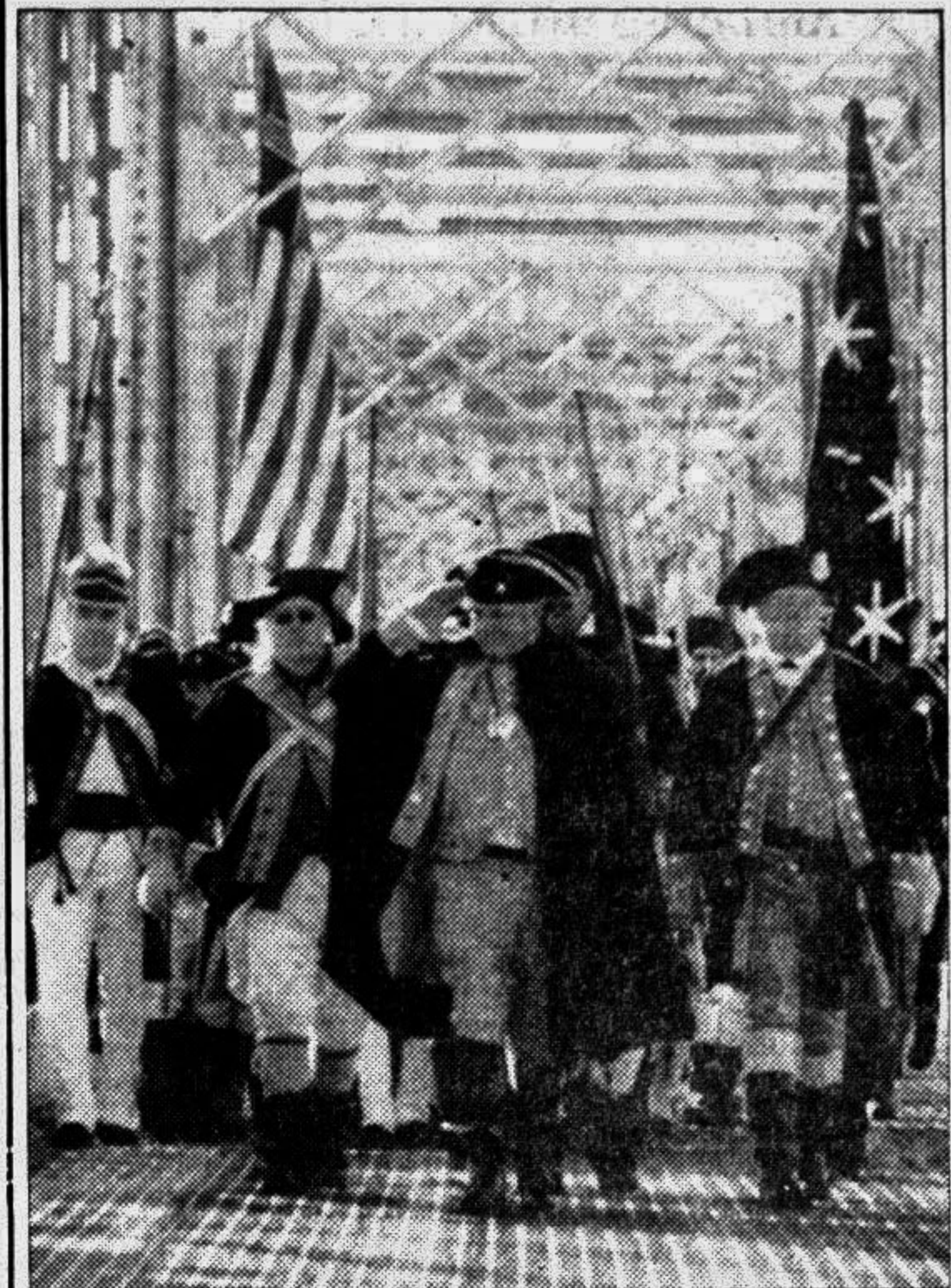
Under the front-page headline "All Alone," the tabloid carried a picture of the duchess looking a "sad sight walking alone across nearby fields" as her daughters Beatrice and Eugenie joined their former husband Prince Andrew and other members of the royal family at a church service.

The Mirror said Fergie, as she is popularly known from her maiden name Sarah Ferguson, had been barred from the Christmas royal church service and family lunch since she separated from Andrew seven years ago.

The Mirror said Fergie's continued exile had been blamed on Queen Elizabeth's husband, Prince Phillip, who was believed to have blocked moves by the Queen to thaw relations.

The royal family gathered for Christmas at the Queen's Sandringham estate in eastern England.

Off the Record



K Ward Vinson, centre, portraying Gen George Washington salutes as he leads his troops across a bridge during a re-enactment of Washington's crossing of the Delaware Friday in Washington's Crossing, Pa. Due to a drought, the crossing that is normally done in boats, was done on foot across the bridge. — AP/UNB photo

Christmas cake caper

COLOMBO: Hundreds of residents of a Colombo suburb had an unpleasant Christmas surprise when they discovered that thieves had broken into the neighbourhood baker's shop and stolen 800 cakes, news report said Saturday, reports AP.

The theft occurred in the Handela area on Christmas Eve. The island newspaper reported.

Many Christians in Sri Lanka prefer to give cake ingredients to bakers who then prepare the cake for a small fee. The baker in Handela had taken orders for 800 cakes, baked them and then gone to sleep after a hard day of work.

On Christmas day, when the people came to collect their cakes, they found the shop empty and the baker crying. They were told their Christmas cakes were all stolen.

The baker has filed a case with the police who are investigating the theft.

A candy a day...

WASHINGTON: A new study by researchers from the Harvard School of Public Health suggests that a piece of candy now and then may help you live longer, reports Xinhua.

This is a conclusion reached after studying the relationship between candy consumption and mortality among 7841 men who were Harvard students between 1916 and 1950. The Washington Post reported recently.

They found that those in 1988 who consumed a "moderate" amount of candy — between one and three a week — tended to live about a year longer than those who denied their sweet tooth.

Those who ate three or more candies a week tended not to live as long, but still longer than those who abstained from confections altogether.

The researchers said no one knows why this would be true, but chocolate does contain the same kind of so-called anti-oxidants found in red wine that may help cut the risk for cancer and heart disease.

30 killed in fresh
Angolan fighting

LUANDA, Angola, Dec 26: A rebel attack on the highland city of Kuito killed and wounded dozens of people, some sheltering in a Roman Catholic church, but Christmas services went ahead Friday during a lull in the shelling, church workers said, reports AP.

Thirty people were killed and 37 were wounded Thursday in the heaviest rebel attack on the besieged city since fighting between UNITA rebels and government forces, which has sent more than 50,000 people fleeing from their homes.

The fighting has undermined a 1994 peace accord that called for UNITA to disband a 70,000-strong guerrilla army and hand over control of almost half the country to the government.

The UN Security Council has blamed the renewed fighting on UNITA and expressed dismay that Angola appears headed back to civil war, which has ravaged the southern African nation for most of its nearly quarter-century of independence.

The government regained control of Kuito from the rebels during the intensive conflict that followed UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi's refusal to accept defeat in the country's first elections in 1992.

shelling the city again Friday around noon, a male church worker said.

Kuito, about 500 kilometres (southeast of the capital Luanda), has been a major focus of the latest fighting between UNITA rebels and government forces, which has sent more than 50,000 people fleeing from their homes.

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No better
Christmas
present

SEATTLE: Dec 26: Eighteen-year-old Nicole Ehli entered the University of Washington Medical Centre in November, hoping to have her failing heart replaced, reports AP.

By Wednesday, the 1.42 cm, 31.5-kg woman from Puyallup had an infection and her left ventricle was failing. Dr Dan Fishbein, a cardiologist, called heart surgeon Edgar Verrier to help.

"I think she's going to die tonight," he told Verrier.

But Ehli got a gift of life on Christmas Eve when a heart — a perfect match — became available in Las Vegas.

It was one of those things where everybody looked at each other and said, "There's no better Christmas present than that," Verrier said.

Thirteen doctors and nurses worked for seven hours during the surgery. Ehli was listed in critical but stable condition Friday.

She was conscious and breathing on her own. Her new heart was pumping twice as much blood as the old.

BRIEFLY

6 killed in US house fire :

An early-morning town house fire killed six people Christmas morning — including three children, authorities said, AP reports from Date City, Virginia.

Dale City Volunteer Fire Chief Bob Hedge said the victims were 4, 9, 11, 17, 28 and 29 years old. Names were not immediately released. Relatives said the dead were immigrants from Mexico and had lived in the town house for about two years.

Cyclone Cora batters Tonga :

A small fishing boat with six people on board was missing as Cyclone Cora began battering the Pacific island nation of Tonga Saturday, Tongan police said, AP reports from Wellington.

The 7-metre boat was missing in high seas off the central Ha'apai group of islands. A police spokesman said there had been few reports of other damage so far. The cyclone is battering the main island of Tongatapu and the Ha'apai chain with wind gusts of up to 160 kph.

4 die in Vietnam shell blast :

Four people were killed and two others were seriously injured when a war-era shell went off as they tried to extract its explosives, the People newspaper reported yesterday, AP says from Hanoi.

The incident occurred Tuesday in Daklup district in the central highlands province of Daklak. A group of seven people had found the 105mm shell while en route to rice fields and brought it home.

8 vow to continue fast in Brazil :

Eight jailed kidnappers, hospitalised and weakened after 40 days of a hunger strike, vowed Friday to continue their fast until they are freed or die, AFP reports from Sao Paulo.

In a note to Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, they said they would continue to fast until they are deported and, in the case of a Brazilian prisoner, pardoned. The five Chileans, two Argentines and one Brazilian, who have all been hospitalised, were sentenced to between 26 and 28 years in prison for the 1989 kidnapping of Brazilian supermarket owner Abilio Diniz. The seven men and one woman have taken no water for almost two days and are not expected to last long enough to be freed.



Israeli police keep an eye on Palestinian Muslim worshippers who have overflowed into the street from the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound during the first Jumma prayers of the holy month of Ramadan. — AP/UNB photo

Where Islam, Christianity and Judaism meet

JERUSALEM, Dec 26: Cold winter sunshine splashed the yellow stones of Jerusalem's walled Old City at the intersection of the Via Dolorosa and El-Wad Street, a jostling, noisy crossroad of faiths, reports AP.

While Christians celebrated Christmas on Friday, Muslims were marking the first prayer-and-rest day of their holy month of Ramadan, and Jews were preparing to usher in the Sabbath at sundown.

The Old City street corner scene on this day, with its vegetable vendors, police and souvenir sellers, was also a snapshot of the three great religions that have deep and indelible roots here.

Under the watchful eyes of armed guards, pale young students in skullcaps steamed out of a yeshiva, or Jewish seminary, blinking in the sudden burst of bright sunlight. Just outside the yeshiva's doorway, a bearded Islamic cleric appealed for donations for charity, and Muslim passers-by dropped coins onto a well-worn prayer rug at his feet.

Only steps away, Christian

pilgrims clustered around a tour guide as he gestured toward the spot — marked by a stain on the curving stone wall — where Christian tradition says Simon was made to help Jesus carry his cross. Shopkeeper Hassan Nashishibi, a Palestinian Muslim, beckoned tourists toward his store, filled with crucifixes and olive-wood Nativity scenes.

"Wow," marvelled Georges Pereda, a visitor from Paris, as he surveyed the scene. "Muslims, Jews, Christians — everyone is here."

Jerusalem — particularly its Old City, which was captured by Israel from Jordan in the 1967 Mideast war — has always embodied soaring spirituality and relentless realpolitik. Its crowded confines are home to dozens of holy sites, many of them focal points for the larger tensions that tear at Israel and the Palestinian lands.

One such flashpoint is the hilltop revered by Muslims as the Haram-as-Sharif, or Noble Sanctuary, home to Al-Aqsa and Dome of the Rock mosques. Jews call it the Temple Mount, in biblical times, the first and

second Jewish temples stood there.

On Friday — the first Muslim Sabbath since the start last week of Ramadan, when observant Muslims fast from dawn till dusk — more than 150,000 faithful packed the compound for noon prayers.

In the hours beforehand, Old City streets flowed with a human river of worshippers bound for Al-Aqsa, the women in headscarves and many of the men in long robes. Hundreds of Israeli soldiers with M-16 rifles lined the narrow streets and guarded the compound's entryway.

For Friday prayers during Ramadan, Israel relaxed the strict rules that normally keep most West Bank Palestinians out of Jerusalem. But men between 16 and 35 — the age group from which rioters of violent stone-throwing clashes are most likely to be drawn — were kept away.

At Al-Aqsa, anger was running high after last week's bombardment of Iraq. Ikrama Sabri, the mufti of Jerusalem, or its highest-ranking Islamic

clergyman, preached a fiery sermon reflecting the discontent.

"We tell the Americans and the British government that Muslims will not kneel down for them!" he told the enormous crowd of worshippers. "Allahu akbar — God is great!" came the roaring response.

Just below, in the Old City's Jewish quarter, last-minute preparations for the Jewish Sabbath were underway — shopping, cleaning, cooking. Delicious smells drifted out from behind barred windows.

With dusk and the start of the Sabbath, the enormous yellow-flagstone plaza facing the Western Wall — Judaism's most sacred site — was filled with Jews who came to pray, sing and dance.

In dozens of Christian churches scattered throughout Jerusalem, the day began with joyful Christmas services. Church bells rang out and chants and carols could be heard throughout the Old City's stone streets, mingling with the wail of the Muslim call to prayer.