

Two top Khmer Rouge defectors won't face charges

PHNOM PENH, Dec 27: Two top Khmer Rouge leaders who quit their fabled rebel group would not face charges in Cambodia for their role in the brutal killing fields regime, an official here confirmed today, reports AFP.

Deputy Army Chief of Staff Meas Sopha said there was "no talk" that nominal leader Khieu Samphan or Pol Pot's top ideologue Nuon Chea would face charges or a trial for their part in the regime that claimed the lives of up to two million.

There is no talk of charges or a trial here for Khieu Samphan or Nuon Chea when they are talking about national reconciliation, the general said, confirming the pair had been warmly welcomed by Prime Minister Hun Sen.

However, he said that Pol Pot's brutal military chief Ta Mok, now the lone fugitive rebel leader, remained a target of government forces despite being accompanied by just a few bodyguards.

Most observers believe the Christmas Day deal allowing the duo to emerge from the jungle gives them immunity from prosecution inside Cambodia. In return Hun Sen wins distinction as the politician who brought about the end of the rebel group.

However the strongman — himself a former Khmer Rouge field commander — has in the past promised UN experts full cooperation in tracking down

candidates for a proposed international tribunal held overseas.

This promise comes even though his government's tenuous hold over much of the north and west of the country depends on defectors from the group.

AP adds: Keut Kan, a deputy governor of Pailin, confirmed that Khieu Samphan, official leader of the bloodstained revolutionaries though others held real power, and political chief Nuon Chea were staying at "guesthouses."

They were to travel to the capital, Phnom Penh, to meet Prime Minister Hun Sen on Tuesday, Keut Kan said.

Central government officials could not immediately confirm the meeting. Though Pailin is technically under government control, its leaders are all former high-ranking Khmer Rouge.

In New York, the group Human Rights Watch issued a statement urging that Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea be tried and convicted before any talk of pardoning them.

King Norodom Sihanouk, who is receiving medical treatment in Beijing, has approved the defections.

Sihanouk expressed "Deep gratitude about this good news," echoing conciliatory language used by Hun Sen that indicated the pair had surrendered in exchange for guarantees they would not be harmed.

Chinese dissident sentenced to 10 yrs in jail

BEIJING, Dec 27: A Chinese dissident was sentenced Sunday to 10 years imprisonment for giving interviews to the US government-funded Radio Free Asia, a human rights group said, reports AP.

Zhang Shuangang was sentenced following a 2 hour 20 minute hearing from which his wife and other relatives were barred, Human Rights in China said.

Zhang, who earlier had spent seven years in jail for labour rights campaigning, was the fourth dissident given a lengthy jail term in a week as part of a decisive crackdown on dissent by the ruling Communist Party.

The court in southern China's Hunan province ruled that by telling Radio Free Asia about farmers' protests, Zhang violated an article of China's criminal law that bars people from providing "intelligence" to people overseas, Human Rights in China, based in New York, said.

The crime carries a maximum penalty of death. Apart from sentencing Zhang to 10 years imprisonment, the court also stripped him of his political rights for five years.

Demirel rules out snap polls

ANKARA, Dec 27: Turkish President Suleyman Demirel said on Saturday he would not call snap elections even if the new prime minister-designate failed to forge a government by mid-January, reports Reuters.

The president is empowered to appoint an administration — which would not require a confidence vote — and call earlier polls if prime minister-designate Yilmaz Erez is unable to set up a government within the next two weeks.

The Turkish constitution sets a 45-day deadline. Any new government is already expected to take the country to the polls, set for next April, 20 months ahead of when they are normally due.

"I will not make a decision to call (snap) elections if a government cannot be set up by January 10," Demirel told a news conference.

Netanyahu's rival won't contest polls

JERUSALEM, Dec 27: Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert today said he would not challenge Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Elad the right-wing Likud Party into the next elections, reports AFP.

Olmert announced his decision on Israeli radio only hours before the party's central committee was due to meet to fix the date of the party primary to choose the Likud's candidate for prime minister, expected to be January 25.

Olmert had been considered a potential leader of an anti-Netanyahu front.

According to the radio, Olmert had decided not to run because he had failed to win the support of Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, who enjoys great popularity within the party.

Violence flares up on Xmas day in Indonesia

JAKARTA, Dec 27: An angry mob set fire to a discotheque and damaged shops selling liquor in Christmas violence on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, government officials and residents said today, reports Reuters.

And in a separate incident, dozens of people were injured in a religious dispute over a red-light district in the Sumatran city of Medan.

About 5,000 people stormed the red-light district demanding the closure of the area during Ramadan, the official Antara news agency reported today.

Both incidents occurred on Christmas Day, although the violence in Sulawesi only ended on Saturday. Both areas have mixed populations of Christians and Muslims.

The violence in the town of Poso, in central Sulawesi province, followed reports that a drunken Christian had stabbed a Muslim man, residents said.

Parliament ratifies decision

Iraq won't allow return of UNSCOM inspectors

BAGHDAD, Dec 27: The Iraqi parliament confirmed Saturday that weapons inspectors from the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) on disarmament will not be allowed to return after last week's punishing US-British air strikes, reports AFP.

Meanwhile, Baghdad said it had the right to fire on any aircraft violating its air space and claimed it had shot at "enemy" jets attacking an air defence installation, forcing them to flee in a hail of anti-aircraft fire.

The parliament issued a statement reiterating its "previous decision to break off cooperation with UNSCOM, which was buried by the mercenary aggression" of the United States and Britain.

In the communique — addressed to "the Iraqi people, Arab people, and the just people of the world" — it said Iraq will not allow the inspectors to return, "no matter what pretext the United Nations uses" in an attempt to get them back into the country.

UNSCOM's mission in Iraq is finished because it turned out that it was spying for the intelligence services of nations hostile to Iraq, said the statement, cited by the official news agency INA.

The United States and Britain pumelled Iraq with four days of cruise missile at-

tacks last week following a report from UNSCOM chief Richard Butler charging Baghdad had failed to cooperate fully with UN weapons inspectors.

The parliament said Baghdad had "fulfilled all its commitments to the United Nations," regarding disarmament and called on the UN Security Council to lift the oil embargo against Iraq as the first step toward a complete lifting of sanctions.

Meanwhile, Iraqi Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan said Iraq has the right to shoot at aircraft that violate Iraq's air space after anti-aircraft gunners fired at British jets patrolling the "no-fly" zone earlier Saturday.

"We have the right to respond to any violation of our air space," Ramadan told Qatari television.

Asked why Iraq has not fired upon similar patrols before, Ramadan said: "Each time you want to start a battle, you have to choose the right moment and the right circumstances."

He added that the no-fly zones, imposed in 1992, were "not authorised by a UN resolution" and said they were a "flagrant interference in the internal affairs of Iraq."

An Iraqi army spokesman said earlier that fighter jets vio-

lated Iraqi airspace from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, but gave no indication where the attack took place and did not say if they were US British planes.

"Enemy warplanes attacked an Iraqi air defence installation at around 11:35 am (0835 GMT)," said the spokesman, quoted by INA.

He added that Iraqi gunners "responded, forcing the planes to ditch their bombs blindly before they continued on their way."

US military officials said the two British jets were not attacked but saw anti-aircraft fire explode behind them as they exited the zone.

The pilots reported seeing bursts approximately five miles to their rear as they exited the no-fly zone," US Army Major Paul Phillips said in Washington.

Earlier, London denied Pentagon claims Saturday that two British Tornado fighter bombers patrolling Iraq's southern "no fly" zone were fired upon by anti-aircraft artillery.

A spokesman for the Ministry of Defence in London said: "I do not know why the Americans are saying this."

"No allied aircraft have been fired upon or indeed fired on anyone, we have spoken to our chaps out there and we have no incidents involving British planes today."

Another Tamil leader killed in Jaffna

Colombo rejects UK offer to mediate peace with LTTE

COLOMBO, Dec 27: Sri Lanka has rejected an offer by a British legislator to mediate a settlement to the drawn out Tamil separatist war that has claimed over 55,000 lives, reports here said today, reports AFP.

The British MP, Simon Hughes of the Liberal Democratic Party, has been told Colombo will not assist him if he goes ahead with his planned visit to Sri Lanka in the New Year, the Sunday Times weekly said.

It said Hughes had hoped to meet President Chandrika Kumaratunga, several senior ministers as well as leaders of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the north of the island.

"The government has said that no ministers will meet the British MP and denied his request to go to the Wanni (to meet the LTTE)," the newspaper reported, adding: "It has made it clear that it will not accept mediation from any individual."

Neither government officials nor diplomats were available for comment on the mediation offer.

But last month a British minister said there was scope for third party mediation to the ethnic strife in this former British colony.

British Foreign Office Min-

ister Derek Fatchett, who held talks with Kumaratunga and opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, said he believed there would be mediation in Sri Lanka.

However, he noted there had been no invitation to Britain to act as go-between in peace talks.

A group of visiting British MPs said here a week earlier that Britain was willing to offer its "good offices" to broker a settlement between Colombo and the LTTE, which maintains a secretariat in London.

The government made it clear this month it was not willing to accept conditional talks and has rejected "mediation," although it says "facilitation" by a third party is acceptable.

AP adds: Suspected Tamil Tiger rebels shot and killed the secretary of the mainstream Tamil political party in northern Jaffna in the 3rd major assassination of a moderate this year, police and party sources said Sunday.

Ponnathurai Mathimugalaraj of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) who was the party secretary of the Tamil heartland of Jaffna unit was killed by gunmen when he was attending a political meet at Nallur, a city suburb famous for its ancient Hindu temples on Saturday.

The news of the assassination reached Colombo Sunday. TULF officials in capital Colombo said Mathimugalaraj had organised a meeting to commemorate the 11th death anniversary of a very popular Tamil leader in neighbouring India. Sri Lanka's 3.3 million Tamils have traditional ties with India's 54 million Tamils.

Police officials reached in Jaffna said Mathimugalaraj, 50, was shot at close range by the gunmen and he died on the spot.

This is the third major political assassination of a moderate in Jaffna. The main Tamil rebel group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was blamed for the September killing of Mayor Ponnuthurai Sivapalan and 11 other people.

His predecessor, Sarojini Yogeswaran, was also killed in a May attack also blamed on the Tigers. Both Sivapalan and Yogeswaran belonged to the TULF.

Both the mayors were trying to restore a civilian administration in Jaffna, which was undermining the rebels' influence over the peninsula's predominantly Tamil population.

The rebels drove the military from the Jaffna region in 1990 and declared independence.

Off the Record



A group of children climb a Christmas tree to retrieve its decorations after a religious group's celebration Saturday at Manila's Rizal Park. A day after Christmas, people still go to parks and public places to take advantage of a three-day holiday before going back to work. — AP/UNB photo

Striking gold — in the stomach!

NEW DELHI: Alert Delhi Customs officials have struck gold in the most unlikely places — the stomach of a woman returning to Delhi from Hong Kong, reports IANS.

Balvinder Kaur, 41, was discovered with a pouch of gold nuggets hidden under her clothes and another 30 inside her stomach. The total value of the gold is yet to be ascertained since at least 20 nuggets are said to be still inside Kaur's stomach.

The gold recovered so far, five pieces in the pouch and 10 from her stomach, taken out through an enema, has been valued at 750,000 rupees (17,800 dollars).

The officials, acting on a tip-off, searched Kaur and discovered the pouch she was carrying. On further interrogation she disclosed the cache in her stomach. An x-ray at a city hospital confirmed this. Doctors conducted the enema thereafter.

Police have arrested Kaur and are now waiting to recover the rest of the gold which doctors say will take at least seven days. She is reported to be fine and in no pain despite having 20 pieces of gold inside her. Kaur claims she was given the gold nuggets on the flight by another passenger who promised a large sum of money after it had arrived safely in Delhi.

However, according to experts, to swallow so much gold painlessly, Kaur would have had to melt the bars and convert them into small balls first. This means longer planning and implementation, something that she could not have undertaken inside the flight, India is the world's largest consumer of gold and is also one of prime targets of smugglers of the yellow metal.

Mao's little red disc

BEIJING: Chairman Mao Zedong's little Red Book has been updated to mark the 105th anniversary of his birth — it is now available on a little red disc, reports Reuters.

A new CD-ROM contains more than 3,000 pictures, 120 film and television clips and 20 volumes of the political thoughts and gems of the great helmsman, the China Daily reported.

Simply entitled Mao Zedong, it is aimed at a rapidly growing number of computer owners who have benefited from the capitalist-style reforms of the late Deng Xiaoping.

At a ceremony to launch the disc on Friday, Wei Jianxing, a member of the standing committee of the Communist Party's politburo, said: "Deng Xiaoping Theory has inherited and developed Mao Zedong thoughts and pushed Marxism to a new stage of development in China."

The CD-ROM marks another stage in the commercialisation of Mao, who, as China's supreme leader for three decades, presided over a colourless communist orthodoxy.

Mao's little Red Book of pithy sayings, once the mantra of China's youth, has been reduced to a cheap tourist gift.

UN plane carrying 14 crashes in Angola

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 27: A United Nations plane with 14 people aboard reportedly crashed Saturday in central Angola, a UN spokesman announced, reports AFP.

Preliminary information from government sources said the aircraft went down east of Vila Nova, 25 kilometres from Huambo, where heavy fighting continues between National Union for the Independence of Angola (UNITA) forces and government troops, said the spokesman for UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Annan appealed to the Angolan government and UNITA to help the UN Observer Mission in Angola reach the crash site and assist in rescue operations.

The Portuguese news agency LUSA quoting a UN communique issued in Luanda said the C-130 aircraft with four crew members and 10 passengers on board caught fire and crashed shortly after taking off from Huambo for Sauring in the

northeastern province of Luanda Sul.

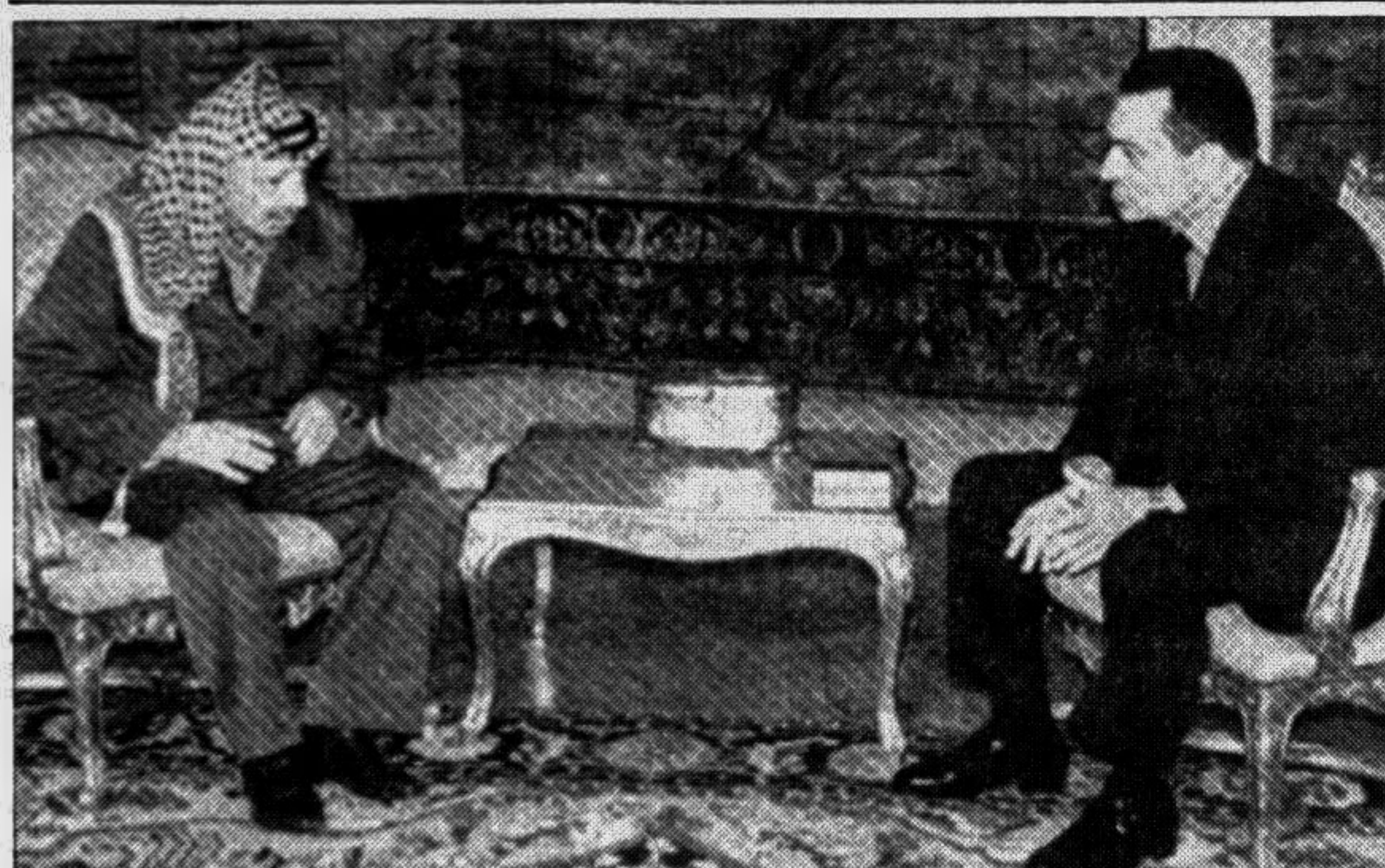
The communique did not mention whether those on board were UN observers who have been trying to help implement the 1994 Lusaka agreement between UNITA and the government.

The upsurge in fighting recently has virtually killed the agreement.

Reuters adds from Luanda: UNITA rebels shelled the central Angolan town of Kuito on Saturday, injuring scores of civilians and holding up relief efforts as residents hid in makeshift bunkers, aid workers said.

"Last night (December 25) and today the shelling continued on the outskirts of the town between Kuito and Kunje," said Mark Hermant, head of mission for Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) in Luanda.

Hermant said 46 civilians were seriously wounded in Saturday's attacks.



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, left, meets with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, right, in Cairo, Egypt, Saturday. The two leaders are expected to discuss Israel's early elections and its freezing of the two-month old US brokered Wye River peace accord. — AP/UNB photo

Hundreds flee fighting in northern Kosovo

LAPASTICA, Yugoslavia, Dec 27: Hundreds of refugees fleeing fighting in northern Kosovo crowded into a rebel stronghold and rummaged for firewood to help get through another subfreezing night, reports AP.

Most of the refugees in the area west of Podujevo made their way by foot Saturday to Lapastica, a village still held by the ethnic Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) after a two-day crackdown by Serb police and Yugoslav army units.

Several villages in the region were destroyed in the fierce fighting that threatened to unravel an already shaky truce reached Oct 12.

The province was reported to be largely calm Saturday, but a Serb farmer was killed west of Podujevo by the KLA, according to international peace monitors. Ethnic Albanian sources reported a police attack in the same region.

The farmer was killed by the KLA in his home in Obranca, 32 kms north of the province's capital Pristina. The rebel force controls much of the area.

The Kosovo Information Centre, close to ethnic Albanian pro-independence leaders, said that shortly before noon, Serb police approached Obranca and opened fire on nearby KLA positions.

In a typical scene in Lapastica, one room sheltered more than 60 refugees.

One 7-year-old boy, identified only as Agron, couldn't speak a word, his teeth chattering after hours walking in the cold.

His father lamented the family's situation.

"It's a shame that we have to beg for food and beds," said the man, who refused to give his name. The only warm member of the family of four appeared to be the youngest, a 3-month-old girl bundled in wool and asleep in a wooden cradle carried by her father.

Others in and near Lapastica combed the surroundings in the winter sun for firewood.

Most famous and infamous of '98 — Indian style

NEW DELHI, Dec 27: As another year comes to a close and Indians think back to pin down the most famous and infamous of 1998, the onion seems to have edged out most!

A leading national daily had to create a separate category in its merits list for 1998 for the vegetable that toppled at least two state governments (Delhi and Rajasthan) and sent jitters through the ruling federal coalition, reports IANS.

The Times of India newspaper named the onion the "omnipresent being of the year" after it featured among favourites for various titles in a poll ranging from the "villain of the year" to the "scandal of the year," the "year's biggest success story" and "disappointment of the year."

This was indeed the year of the onion! The paper said: "It featured in almost every title of our list. So much so that we were forced to create a special title for it."

Distantly following the onion by figuring in several categories were US President

Bill Clinton, one-time White House intern Monica Lewinsky and American First Lady Hillary Clinton. While Zipporah was voted by some to be the "scandal of the year," Bill and Hillary Clinton as well as Clinton and Lewinsky found a few supporters for the "couple of the year" title.

While Hillary Clinton and Lewinsky were voted by a few for the "woman of the year" title, Bill Clinton was a candidate for the "villain of the year." Kenneth Starr, the Independent Counsel who wrote the report for US Congress on the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, had a few backers for the "writer of the year."

The biggest success story of the year to most polled were India's nuclear tests. Notwithstanding what the anti-nuke activists and academicians had to say of the tests on May 11 and 13, "made every Indian proud," the respondents felt. Finding some backers for this title was also Amartya Sen, who won this year's economics Nobel Prize for his groundbreaking

study of poverty and famines.

With the nuclear blasts overwhelmingly adjudged the success story of the year, could the man behind them be far behind? APJ Abdul Kalam, head of the Defence Research and Development Organisation, was the most popular candidate for the "man of the year" title. Cricket sensation Sachin Tendulkar came a distant second followed by film actor Shah Rukh Khan and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in this category.

The "disappointment of the year" was the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which leads the federal coalition. A close second was the much-hyped Leonid meteor shower in November which left millions of Indians out in the cold with little to see. Among others to figure in this list was Viagra, the male erectile dysfunction fixer not available in India yet. The blue pill was also adjudged the "discovery of the year."

Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi was the "woman of the year" for most, with other nominees being Deepa Mehta, director of the controversial

film 'Fire', and former Delhi Chief Minister Sushma Swaraj of the BJP. The most popular couple of the year by far was the Indian tennis duo of Leander Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi, followed by Vajpayee and his Home (Interior) Minister L K Advani as well as actresses Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das, who played the lesbian sisters-in-law in 'Fire'.

The "sportsman of the year" was Sachin Tendulkar. Some witty respondents even suggested the name of actor Salman Khan, briefly arrested for alleged poaching of endangered animals in the central state of Rajasthan, for "reviving the dying sport" of hunting.

The "politician of the year" was Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Nara Chandrababu Naidu, who has put his backward state on the path of economic progress and modernisation. The computer-savvy Naidu found backers for "his sincerity" for "developing the economy of Andhra Pradesh" and being "the computer man."

Naidu, who has impressed the likes of Microsoft chief Bill Gates with his online administration and hands-on approach to governing, has succeeded in attracting several global computer majors to set up shop in his state's capital Hyderabad.

The "scandal of the year" to the majority of respondents was the "fodder scam" in which former Bihar Chief Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav is alleged to be involved. Yadav, currently in prison awaiting trial on charges of embezzlement from the eastern state's animal husbandry department, had last year hoisted his unlettered wife Rabri Devi on to the Chief Minister's chair after stepping down following allegations of corruption. Yadav and Rabri too had some backers for the "couple of the year" title.

The villain of the year to most was Ramesh Sharma, a jailed businessman who is alleged to have had links with the underworld and several top Indian politicians. Following him on the list were Laloo Yadav and Salman Khan.

Retracing first ocean voyage

BRISBANE, Dec 27: Favourable weather could help a 16-metre bamboo raft — retracing what organisers say was man's first ocean voyage 100,000 years ago — reach Darwin in northern Australia by December 31, reports AP.

The raft, Nale Tasih, is the project of Australian maritime historian Bob Hobman, who is re-enacting the arrival of the ancestors of Australian aborigines from Kupang on the Indonesian island of Timor.

Early Sunday, the Nale Tasih was 160 nautical miles from its destination after setting out on December 17, and crossing into Australian waters on December 26.

Hobman said forecasts of freshening winds linked to a strengthening monsoonal trough across northern Australia could push the raft to the mainland by Thursday.

On board with Hobman is a crew of four, including the Melbourne-based scientist Robert Bednark. Australian documentary film-maker Peter Rogers, and two Indonesian crew members.