

Emergency UNSC session on jet crash in Angola

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 1: The Security Council called an emergency meeting Thursday to demand the Angolan government demand and particularly UNITA rebels let a UN team reach the site of a downed UN-chartered plane, reports AP.

The council adopted a resolution condemning an action on both sides in trying to determine the fate of the 15 people on board the C-130 cargo plane, which crashed on Saturday over the central highlands of the former Portuguese colony.

After repeated appeals, the Angolan government on Thursday offered the United Nations full cooperation in trying to reach the crash site, which is in contested territory, according to a letter received by the council.

The Portuguese-drafted resolution makes a vague threat of taking further action by January 11 if such cooperation isn't forthcoming from both sides, but doesn't provide explicitly for any military intervention.

Secretary-General Kofi Annan, however, has warned that the 1,000-member UN Observer Mission in Angola could be withdrawn by February if fighting in the southwestern African nation doesn't stop.

India won't get involved in Lankan war

COLOMBO, Jan 1: President Chandrika Kumaratunga, fresh from a visit to neighbouring India, has said New Delhi is not interested in becoming involved in Sri Lanka's long-drawn ethnic war, reports Reuters.

"India does not want to interfere in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka. We believe that is so," Kumaratunga told the state-owned ITN television in an interview, the transcript of which was published by the government newspaper daily news. India sent troops to Sri Lanka under a 1987 peace accord to disarm the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels, who have been fighting for a separate homeland for minority Tamils in Sri Lanka's north and east since 1983.

The troops, which got embroiled in fighting with the guerrillas, withdrew in 1990 after more than one thousand of them were killed over the three years.

There has been continuous speculation since the withdrawal that India, under pressure from the millions of Tamils living in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, would become involved again.

Dissidents form independent labour party in China

BEIJING, Jan 1: Dissidents in China are forming an independent labour party, despite a crackdown on dissent that has put dozens of their colleagues in prison, an exiled dissident said Friday, reports AP.

Organisers of the new group, the Chinese Labour Party, are preparing to attempt to register the group in Beijing, according to US-based activist Ye Ning.

In recent weeks, China's ruling Communist Party has imprisoned leaders of another would-be opposition group, the China Democracy Party, in its most severe suppression of dissent in three years.

The crackdown has prompted dissidents in China and in exile to protest and demand the release of the democracy campaigners.

"The China Democracy Party has already given the dictators a headache. Now, here comes the China Labour Party. People in Communist China have not only gotten tired of repression and the errors but they are tired of it," Ning said in a statement faxed to foreign news organisations in Beijing. "These are sparks and matches for the dried firewood covering all of China."

Chinese leaders have said they would intensify efforts to quash challenges to the Communist Party as the country approaches several major anniversaries this year, including the 10th anniversary of the military assault on protesters in Tiananmen Square and the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Communist-led government.

Iraq moving anti-aircraft batteries frequently

WASHINGTON, Jan 1: Iraq is frequently moving anti-aircraft batteries to keep US and British pilots guessing about where the next enemy missile might be launched as Western warplanes patrol "no-fly" zones over the country, US defense officials say, reports AP.

Iraq's estimated 60 surface-to-air missile, or SAM, batteries have proved hard to find and hard to hit. They are moving their batteries around quite heavily now from one launch site to another, the official said Thursday, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The increased shifting in the missile sites comes as Iraq twice this week tried to shoot down US and British aircraft patrolling "no-fly" zones in southern and northern Iraq. American fighter jets destroyed two of the Iraqi missile sites Monday and Wednesday by firing radar-seeking missiles and laser-guided bombs. The action responded to attempts by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's military to strike US and British warplanes with missiles.

World welcomes New Year with renewed hopes, aspirations

LONDON, Jan 1: The world offered a high-spirited welcome to the last year of the second millennium, with fireworks in Scotland, pilgrimages to shrines and temples in Asia, and the annual descent of a 500-pound (227-kilo) aluminum ball in New York, reports AP.

Pope John Paul II reminded Roman Catholics to prepare for Christianity's millennium jubilee only a year away. And in many countries, leaders spoke to their countrymen and women of hope for a better future.

Fireworks soared above the cheering crowds in Moscow's Red Square, where lights played on the Kremlin and the famous onion domes of St. Basil's Cathedral, and Russians and foreign visitors welcomed 1999 to the accompaniment of popping champagne corks.

At Times Square, New York's own traditional gathering place, the city went big, bright and brash, with a 16-foot-tall roving Father Time puppet, 15,000 balloons released and a spotlight said to be visible from Mars. The old New Year's Eve ball is making its last descent down one Times Square before it is replaced by a successor next December.

Thousands of Parisians thronged the Champs Elysees

under trees decked with white lights.

In Edinburgh, Scotland, where New Year's is called Hogmanay, the biggest celebration of the year, bands played in the park and fireworks filled the sky over Edinburgh castle with colored lights.

In London, tens of thousands of revelers jammed Trafalgar Square and cheered wildly as Big Ben rang out 1998. Police have been trying to discourage the traditional gathering of thousands there, because of the potential for injuries in such large, boisterous crowds. But thousands of the most ebullient crowded into the square nonetheless.

An open air party at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate offered about 100 entertainers and a mid-night fireworks show.

Things were a little quieter in Frankfurt, headquarters of the new European Central Bank, which will set monetary policy from the stroke of midnight for 11 nations sharing a single currency. Late into the evening, lights shone from the windows of bank skyscrapers as employees worked to refigure computer records, but firecrackers popped and fizzed in the streets.

In most Arab countries, New Year celebrations were subdued

this year because the event coincided with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan — a period when government close nightclubs and impose strict rules on serving alcohol.

There were no street decorations or lighting in the major cities and restaurants and hotels could not lay on special festivities. But many Arabs invited

friends and relatives to private parties in their homes.

In Cairo, the big hotels adorned the faces of the buildings with lights strung in the shape of a Ramadan lantern. Pleasure boats decked with gaudy lights cruised the Nile, their speakers blaring out Arab songs, but this had more to do with Thursday's being the end of the week than with New Year's.

In Iran, where the New Year is celebrated about March 21, President Mohammad Khatami sent a traditional greeting to the Christian world.

Khatami said people everywhere should interpret the teachings of Jesus Christ "with emphasis on compassion for fellow human beings, respecting others, dialogue with the opposition, tolerance and détente towards others," the official Islamic News Agency reported.

"I hope the year 1999, which is a link between the two millenniums, will be a year filled with blessings, peace, cordiality and love among me," the president said, according to a British Broadcasting Corp. Translation received in Cairo.

In taped messages, other world leaders urged their people to end sectarian strike, and

to have hope in the future.

In his last New Year's message before leaving office, President Nelson Mandela on Thursday challenged South Africans to continue working together to solve the problems of poverty and corruption, legacies of the apartheid decades.

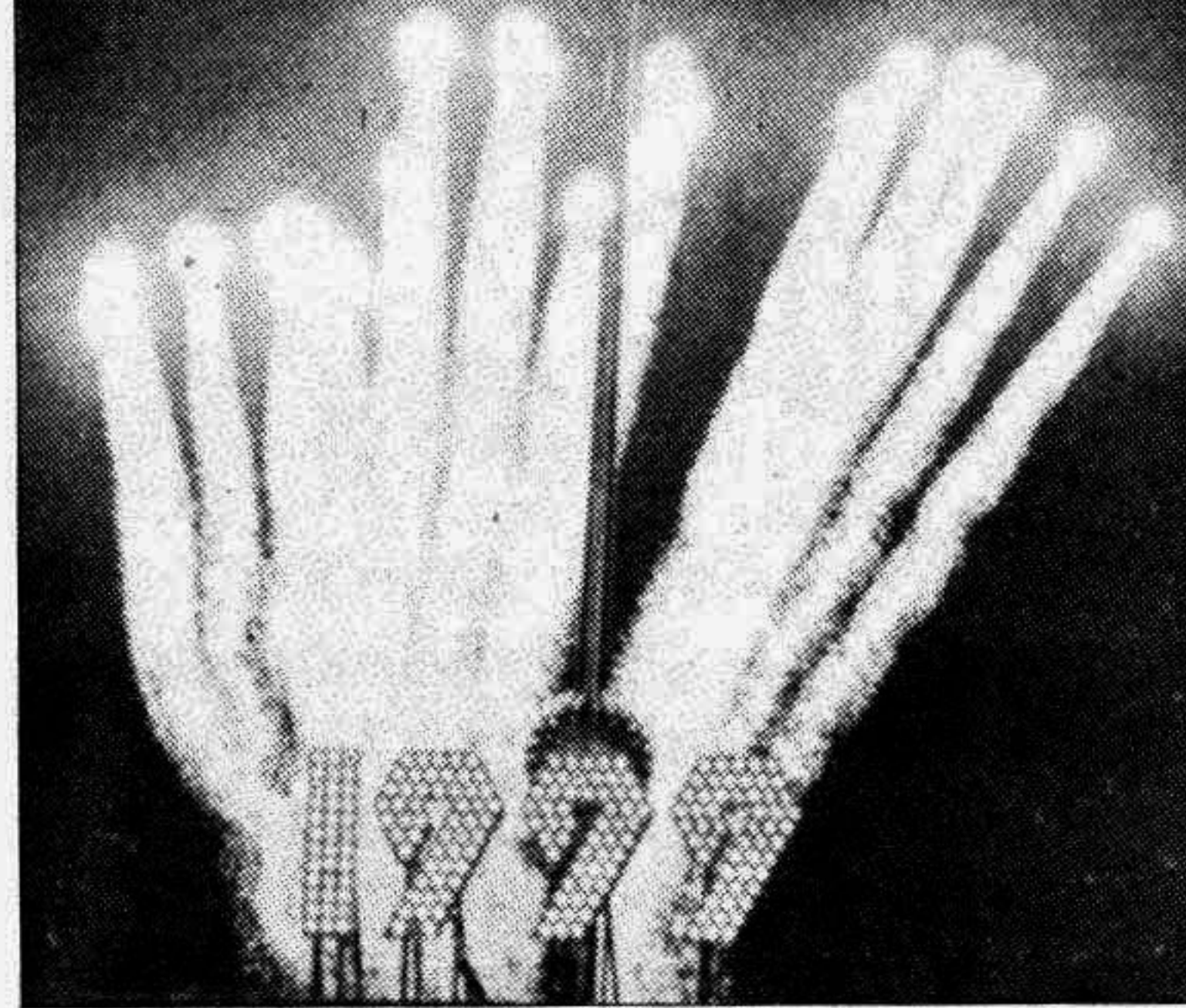
"The New Year will bring many changes," Mandela said in the broadcast message. "They will depend on our working together to realize our dream."

Russia's President Boris Yeltsin called on Russian to meet 1999 with optimism and pride in their country.

"What can I say? The year was difficult for the country, for many of you, and for me, too. But New Year's Eve is always about new hopes, new dreams, new plans," Yeltsin said, according to a transcript released by the Interfax news agency.

In Dublin, Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern spoke of the good Friday peace agreement in British-ruled Northern Ireland.

"The fantastic support of people... for an agreed Ireland of dialogue, mutual respect and common endeavour is the surest guarantee yet that we will succeed in making this an island of peace and prosperity for all — especially for our children," Ahern said.



Fireworks erupt behind the ball drop to mark the New Year in Times Square Friday in New York.

—UNB/AP photo

Gujarat govt accused of laxity in heading off clashes Probe body blames Hindu groups for violence against Christians

NEW DELHI, Jan 1: Investigators sent by the Hindu nationalist government are blaming right-wing Hindu groups for the violence against Christians in western India that has destroyed dozens of churches and Christian properties, newspapers reported on Friday, says AP.

In a report submitted to the government, two top-ranking police investigators accused the state government of Gujarat of laxity in heading off the Hindu-Christian clashes, the Hindustan Times newspaper reported. The state government in Ahmedabad — like the federal government in New Delhi — is led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

At least one Hindu temple also was reported damaged since the troubles erupted a week ago in Gujarat.

In a separate incident in the same state, two Muslims were killed Thursday in a Hindu-Muslim riot that began with an argument between two student groups in the town of Amol. The Pioneer newspaper reported.

And in the southern state of Karnataka, police imposed curfew in Suratkal town after five people were killed in Hindu-Muslim clashes earlier this week. At least 50 people have been injured since violence broke out Tuesday night.

Hindu-Muslim clashes are normally more common in India, but in the last week the violence against Christians has been exceptional.

The report to the government charged the Gujarat administration "was either inactive or looking the other way even as signs of mounting tensions were discernible," the Hindustan Times said.

Among 84 people arrested, most were members of the Hindu Awakening Forum, which the report accused of fanning the violence. But as many as 30 detainees were linked with various Christian bodies. The governing BJP shares ideological roots with the Hindu Awakening Forum.

BJP politicians who had contested state elections in November but lost were among

the suspects in violence, the Hindustan Times said. The BJP was not directly accused.

Since the clashes began on Christmas Day, mobs armed with iron rods, bicycle chains and axes attacked churches and prayer halls and burned some to the ground.

Hindu groups accuse Christian missionaries of seeking converts among poor, often illiterate villagers by promising jobs or money. The missionaries deny using force or financial inducements. Christians make up 2 per cent of India's nearly 1 billion population, where have more than 80 per cent are Hindu.

On Thursday, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee again condemned the attacks and said he has asked the Gujarat government to take stern action against those responsible for the incidents. The statement was welcomed by Christian organisations.

In his New Year greetings to the nation, President K R Narayanan also appealed for universal tolerance and peace.

Fighting leaves 62 dead in Lanka

COLOMBO, Jan 1: Sri Lanka said today 62 people, most of them Tamil Tiger rebels, had been killed in the east of the country during an operation by government troops, reports Reuters.

The Defence Ministry said in a statement that troops backed by artillery fire had conducted a limited operation on December 31 in Pulpanchikal in the eastern Batticaloa district.

The statement quoted clandestine radio Voice of Tigers as saying that 58 rebels were killed and 18 wounded in the confrontation.

The statement also said four soldiers were killed and eight received minor wounds during the operation.

There was no immediate comment on the confrontation from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who have been fighting for a separate homeland for minority Tamils in northern Sri Lanka.

Deaths of 4 hostages UK sends probe body to Yemen

LONDON, Jan 1: Britain on Thursday sent four police investigators to Yemen to help the inquiry into the kidnapping of 16 Western hostages that ended in the deaths of four of them, police said, reports AP.

A Scotland Yard spokeswoman said three officers from London's Metropolitan Police Anti-Terrorist Squad SO13, and another from its organised crime squad, flew out to Yemen earlier in the day.

According to the BBC, the Federal Bureau of Investigation is also sending 12 investigators.

Britain and several countries criticised the botched rescue bid by Yemeni security forces.

Tel Aviv to attack Lebanon if rockets hit N Israel

JERUSALEM, Jan 1: Israel will strike targets within Lebanon if rockets are fired into northern Israel, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a statement on Thursday, reports AP.

"Israel sees the Lebanese government as directly responsible for what happens in southern Lebanon and demands that it stops all activity against Israel," Netanyahu said in the statement released after a late-night Security Cabinet meeting to discuss escalating tensions along the Lebanese border.

The statement also said that Israel would try to avoid harming civilians. Israel and Hezbollah have been engaged in a guerrilla war in Lebanon since 1985. For the most part, Israel has responded to Katyusha rocket attacks by striking positions inside and just beyond its self-described security zone.

Thursday's announcement suggested that Israel would widen the scope of the conflict to include targets well beyond the security zone, as several ministers demanded prior to the Cabinet meeting.

The Security Cabinet apparently rejected the proposal, reportedly presented by Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon, to withdraw unilaterally from Lebanon, saying in the statement that Israel would continue to protect security zone residents family members of those serving in the Israeli-backed Lebanese militia.

Last week, Hezbollah guerrillas fired dozens of rockets into northern Israel, injuring 16 people and causing a pregnant woman to go into premature labour and lose the twins she was carrying.



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat lights a torch at the garden of Palestinian Legislative Council in Gaza City during the celebration of Fatah Movement marking the 34th anniversary of the movement on Thursday.

—UNB/AP photo

Senators, White House finalising strategy for Clinton's impeachment trial

WASHINGTON, Jan 1: Senators and the White House are finalizing strategy for conducting President Bill Clinton's impeachment trial, but it will take last-minute rank-and-file meetings to clear the way for the historic proceeding this month, reports AP.

The plan discussed most frequently in recent days would permit a test vote after opening trial statements, to determine whether opponents of removing Clinton had enough strength to make conviction unattainable.

To be discussed in separate meetings Wednesday of Republican and Democratic senators, the early vote would require a two-thirds majority to keep the trial going — the same margin that would be needed to convict the president. If the trial is stopped at that point, the door could be open to a resolution of censure.

The proposal is controver-

sial, because it could prevent House prosecutors from presenting their full body of evidence and would deprive senators of a yes or no vote on the two articles of impeachment approved by the House.

Several conservative Republican senators have said they would not support censure under any circumstances.

There was a growing consensus, meanwhile, among the president's legal advisers that they might be willing to stipulate to the authenticity of the five volumes of publicly released evidence that Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr turned over to Congress regarding Clinton's attempts to conceal his affair with Monica Lewinsky.

The president's lawyers might accept a deal that limits the trial evidence to those volumes. They would not dispute the authenticity of the evidence,

only the conclusions drawn from them by Starr and the House impeachment inquiry, according to several sources familiar with the discussions inside the White House.

The House on Dec. 19 voted two articles of impeachment against Clinton: grand jury perjury and obstruction of justice relating to Ms. Lewinsky, the former White House intern.

The sources, who spoke only on condition of anonymity, stressed that no final decision had been made and much depended on what the Senate chooses to do when it returns to work next week.

Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle, in an interview with The Associated Press, said Thursday he could not predict whether the test vote concept would survive with majority Republicans. But, he added, "Most Democrats are supportive of a process like that."

House Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde, an Illinois Republican, wrote Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, a Mississippi Republican, on Wednesday, urging him not to "sacrifice substance and duty for speed" nor "unwisely short-circuit" the first presidential impeachment trial since the case against Andrew Johnson in 1868.

Daschle countered that "we're not going to be dictated to by the House or the White House. We'll take into account their ideas."

"We're prepared to be flexible to a certain extent but we're going to stay within this framework. We're just hoping everybody understands our desire to deal with this fairly and expeditiously."

"We're not trying to throw down the gauntlet, but this plan gives us an opportunity to accomplish that."

Lott floated the idea of a preliminary vote earlier this week, but several Senate officials said it originally was devised by Sens. Joseph Lieberman, a Connecticut Democrat, and Slade Gorton, a Washington Republican.

While Daschle, Lott and other senators made rounds of calls to each other, Chief Justice William Rehnquist travelled a block from the Supreme Court to the Capitol to get acquainted with the Senate chamber. Rehnquist will preside at the impeachment trial.

Surrounded by security personnel who held up public tours for about an hour, Rehnquist toured the chamber and saw the seat he will use at the front of the ornate room.

The tour included an ante-room that Rehnquist can use during breaks in the televised trial.

The plan under consideration would allow the prosecutors and the White House legal team to each make a day-long opening presentation, followed by a day of questions. With the initial arguments from both sides in hand, the Senate could then hold its test vote on whether the charges were grave enough to warrant removal of the president.

Approval of the motion by 67 senators, assuming everyone were present, would allow the trial to continue with a full evidence presentation by the House and a rebuttal by the White House. If the Senate's 55 Republicans all supported continuation, a dozen of the 45 Democrats would have to join them to keep the proceedings going.

Mahathir lashes out against Western powers

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 1: While exhorting Malaysians to cherish peace and unity, his annual New Year's message, Malaysia's prime minister once again lashed out against Western powers that he said were out to destroy his nation, reports AP.

"Their leaders, media, ratings, international agencies, trading agencies and banks will resort to whatever means to achieve the objective," Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said in a speech late Thursday.

He warned Malaysians to stay vigilant against enemies who were out to recolonise the Southeast Asian nation, which gained its independence from British rule in 1957.

The 73-year-old prime minister, Asia's longest-serving ruler, didn't name any country, but he hinted strongly at the United States.

He said that while Malaysians were struggling to rejuvenate the economy, foreign powers had taken advantage of their moment of weakness to incite political chaos and riots.

Mahathir's comments appeared to have been directed at opposition expressed by Vice President Al Gore for jailed Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim.

Thai PM to announce polls date soon

BANGKOK, Jan 1: Despite calls for him to serve out his full term, Thailand's Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai said he will soon announce a date for early elections, local papers reported on Friday, reports AP.

Chuan's term is scheduled to end in 2000, but he has repeatedly said he would not serve the full term and call early elections as soon as the troubled economy was back on track.

In a year-end press conference, Chuan said the date of the election would depend upon when the country's new Election Commission would be ready, according to The Nation newspaper.

The leader of the second largest party in Chuan's coalition government called on him last week to forego early polls and serve out his term, as the country has confidence in the job he is doing.

Chuan's motivation for calling the early election are unclear, but some analysts have said the prime minister believes his party can gain more seats in parliament because voters approve of the job it has been doing.

Elections were formerly run by the Interior Ministry, which gave an advantage to the incumbent party because the interior minister and most top level officials were appointed by the prime minister.

Under a new constitution passed in 1997, elections will now be supervised by the Election Commission, which is designed to be independent.

"The country's improvement relies on clean politics," Chuan said, according to The Nation. Chuan is regarded as one of the most honest politicians in Thailand.

The Election Commission, however, is battling with Chuan's government over the size of its staff.

Arafat renews vow for statehood

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip, Jan 1: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat called upon the Israeli people to work together for peace and renewed his pledge to build a Palestinian state, reports AP.

"I call upon every member of every Israeli family... let's work together for peace," Arafat said in a statement released Thursday by Wafah, the Palestinian news agency, in honour of the 34th anniversary of his Fatah Movement.

At a rally in Gaza Thursday, Arafat also called upon supporters not to give up "until we achieve a Palestinian state with its capital in holy Jerusalem."

He did not say when such a state would be established. Arafat has made contradictory statements in recent months about whether he would unilaterally declare a state on May 4, the deadline for reaching a permanent Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has threatened to walk away from the peace talks and annex parts of the West Bank if Arafat goes ahead with a unilateral declaration of statehood.

Congolese Army to launch attack against Ninjas

BRAZZAVILLE, Jan 1: The Congolese Army was reported Thursday to be preparing a further assault against rebels in southwest of the capital following fighting that President Denis Sassou Nguesso said has left hundreds dead, reports AP.

"The army has concentrated its troops at Nganga Lingolo in readiness for an offensive against the Ninjas who are in the hills close to Linzolo, a military source said on condition he not be named."

The self-styled Ninjas are armed bands who fought for ex-premier Bernard Kolelas, who was ousted Thursday by President Pascal Lissouba by General Assaou Nguesso in October 1997 after a five-month civil war.

The Ninjas were formed up mainly in the forest pool region adjoining Brazzaville and Lissouba and Kolelas went into exile from the oil-rich central African country, where strife has persisted.