

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen with Congress president Sonia Gandhi upon his arrival at her residence in New Delhi Saturday. Sen emphasised the urgent need for second generation economic reforms in India. Implicit in his observation was perhaps a suggestion that reforms had slowed down after the initial push. — UNB/AP photo

Laden admits to have instigated terrorist bombing of two US missions

NEW YORK, Jan 3: Exiled Saudi billionaire Osama bin Laden admitted in an interview released Saturday that he "instigated" the terrorist bombing of two US embassies, and said destruction of mass detention facilities was a "religious duty" for Islam's defenders, reports AP.

"Hostility toward America is a religious duty... I am confident that Muslims will be able to end the legend of the so-called superpower that is America," bin Laden said in the interview in the Jan. 11 issue of Time magazine.

Time's interview appeared to be the closest that bin Laden had come to admitting a role in the embassy bombings. He has previously denied any role in the attacks.

US officials have indicted bin Laden on charges of masterminding terrorist bomb attacks on American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania last Aug. 7 that killed 224 people, including 12 Americans. He also is suspected in attacks on US targets in Saudi Arabia and other incidents.

The United States retaliated 13 days after the embassy bombings with cruise missile raids on suspected Muslim militant training camps run by bin Laden in northern Afghanistan, and a plant in Khartoum, Sudan, that was suspected of making nerve gas components for bin Laden.

On Dec. 24, a Pakistani news agency quoted him as saying he was "not involved... but I don't

regret what happened there."

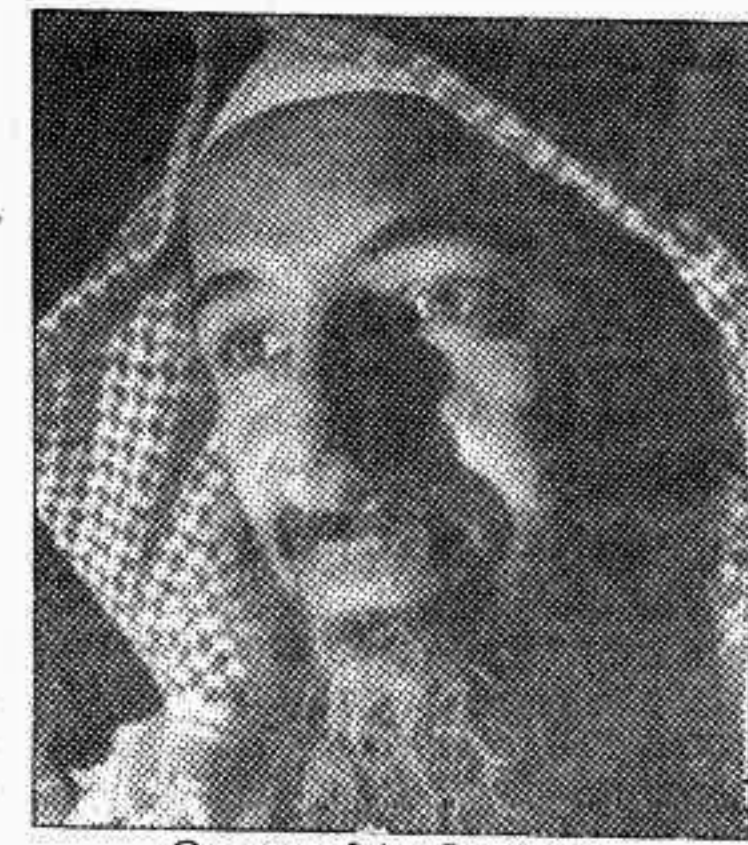
In the latest interview, which Time said was conducted Dec. 22 at his secret encampment in Afghanistan, bin Laden was asked anew about his role in the embassy attacks.

"If the instigation for jihad (holy war) against the Jews and the Americans... is considered a crime, then let history be a witness that I am a criminal," bin Laden said. "Our job is to instigate, and by the grace of God, we did that, and certain people responded to this instigation."

Asked if he knew two men in custody in the United States for the bombings, bin Laden replied: "What I do know is that those who risked their lives to earn the pleasure of God are real men. They managed to rid the

Islamic nation of disgrace. We hold them in the highest esteem." Bin Laden said he knew one of the two, Wadi el-Hage, but had not seen or heard from him in several years. He said el-Hage "has nothing to do with the US allegations," and implied that the second man, Mohamad Rashid-Owhali, also is innocent.

"The fact of the matter is that America, and in particular, the CIA, wanted to cover up its failure in the aftermath of the events that took place in Riyadh, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Cape Town, Kampala — and other places, God willing, in the future — by arresting any person who had participated in the Islamic jihad in Afghanistan," he said.



Osama bin Laden

"We pray to God to end the plight (of the arrested men) and we are confident they will be exonerated."

Vajpayee rules out probe into naval chief's dismissal

NEW DELHI, Jan 3: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee ruled out a probe into the unceremonious sacking of the chief of navy staff despite demands from a key ally, newspapers said today, reports AFP.

"There is no need for any inquiry," into the dismissal of Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat by the government, Vajpayee was quoted as saying by the Hindustan Times newspaper.

Bhagwat, who was set to retire in September, was dismissed Wednesday for what Vajpayee's government said was "deliberate defiance" of Cabinet control over defence forces.

He was the first naval chief to be dismissed since 1947 when India set up its own armed forces following independence from Britain.

The dismissal has sparked off widespread protests from the opposition media and former Indian military chiefs.

Saddam accused of killing over 5000 Egyptians in 1988

CAIRO, Jan 3: Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is responsible for the death of more than 5,000 Egyptians in 1988, a government-run newspaper said Saturday, reports AP.

In an unusual two-page editorial, Akhbar Al-Yom demanded that Saddam be tried in an international court.

The allegation is the latest salvo in the war of words that erupted between Iraq and Egypt last week when Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak accused Saddam of provoking the US-British airstrikes against Iraq on Dec 16-19.

Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz replied in an editorial in an Iraqi newspaper that there was not a single "fair and intelligent person in Egypt" who shared Mubarak's opinion.

Saturday's edition of Akhbar Al-Yom opened with a full front-page cartoon in colour of Saddam sitting on a pile of skulls. The caption said: "Who will avenge the 5,596

Egyptians killed by Saddam Hussein?"

Egypt had previously accused Iraq of killing Egyptians in 1988.

But this was the first time that the government, or the government press, had put a precise figure to the deaths.

Egyptians workers were said to have been victimised in the competition for jobs when thousands of Iraqi soldiers were demobilised at the end of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.

Cairo newspaper reports at the time spoke of "scores" of Egyptians being beaten to death by Iraqi workers and plane loads of Egyptian workers being deported from Iraq. The number of Egyptians working in Iraq during the war reached 2 million.

In his scathing editorial, Akhbar Al-Yom's editor-in-chief, Ibrahim Saada, said he got the 5,596 figure from a "senior-level source." He did not elaborate.

The editorial said the Egyptians were beaten, tortured and had their bones broken and limbs amputated in Iraqi prisons.

Saada said that Egypt should send a statement to an international court for crimes of genocide in which "we accuse Iraqi President Saddam Hussein personally of being the leading, responsible killer in a series of crimes that lead to the death of 5,596 Egyptians without any reason."

"I ask (Egyptian) Prime Minister Kamal el-Ganzoury to instruct Foreign Minister Amr Moussa to send an urgent complaint to the United Nations against the Iraqi president," Saada wrote.

In Baghdad Saturday, Babil newspaper — which is owned by Saddam's eldest son — published a cartoon depicting Mubarak as a belly dancer performing to music played by Arab Gulf leaders.



Tom Wizzkon of St Louis uses a broom to remove snow and ice from his truck on Saturday. The St Louis area was hit with four inches of snow and people in the area were starting to dig out from the first snow storm of 1999. — UNB/AP photo

Floods force schools to close in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 3: Heavy monsoon rains have forced over 2,000 people to evacuate and dozens of schools to close after submerging some areas under nearly 8 feet (2.4 meters) of water, news reports said today, reports AP.

Hardest hit has been the town of Pekan, in Pahang state, 450 km east of Kuala Lumpur, where more than 1,400 people have been evacuated to makeshift relief centres at mosques, churches and community halls, The Star daily reported.

Floods have also washed away roads and cut off at least eight aborigine settlements with a population of nearly 1,500 people.

Authorities plan to fly in food and supplies if the floods worsen, The Star reported.

Around 10,000 students have been sent home from school indefinitely due to the floods on the east coast of the Malaysian peninsula, which is most vul-

nerable to the heavy seasonal rains that occur from November through February.

Twenty-six schools in the Pekan district have closed following a 24-hour downpour that submerged the school grounds, The Star said.

Khalil Yaakob, chief minister of Pahang state, said it would take at least two days for the waters to subside in Pekan if no more rain falls.

Affected schools must report for work every day, floods or no floods," Khalil was quoted as saying in the New Sunday Times daily.

Those who cannot reach their respective schools must report for duty at schools near their homes, he added.

The town of Pekan, with a population of 50,000, is built on peat land and is surrounded by swamps, and several major tributaries of the Pahang river, the biggest river in Peninsular Malaysia.

BRIEFLY

Bodies of hostages returned to UK:

The bodies of three British tourists killed during a shootout between Yemeni troops and a gang of kidnappers were returned to Britain late Saturday, AP reports from London.

Britons Margaret Whitehouse, 52, Ruth Williamson, 34, and Peter Rowe, 60 died with 35-year-old Australian Andrew Thirkw when the Yemeni authorities launched a rescue operation on Tuesday after the kidnapping of 16 Western tourists by Islamic extremists. Amid confusion over who fired first and British government concerns over some of the aspects of how the operation was handled, US security experts and British detectives from Scotland Yard arrived in Yemen late Friday to investigate the deaths.

DRC declares state of siege in east:

The government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Saturday declared a state of siege in the east of the country, which is controlled by rebels supported by Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, amid reports that a border town in the northwest had fallen, AFP reports from Kinshasa.

The emergency measure gives the army widespread powers, especially of requisition. In the four provinces under rebel control — the eastern province, Maniema, Northern Kivu and Southern Kivu — as well as Katanga and the equatorial province, where fighting continues. Government spokesman Didier Mungengui quoted from a summary of a Cabinet session saying: "The barbaric and unjust war imposed on the DRC is seriously disturbing the functioning of the state."

Chinese dissident hospitalised:

A prominent exiled Chinese dissident has been hospitalised one week into a hunger strike to protest China's jailing of fellow democracy campaigners, his friends said yesterday, AP reports from Beijing.

Wang Xizhe swore off all sustenance but water last Sunday. From 10 am to 10 pm daily he staged his strike outside the United Nations in New York. Doctors on Saturday found Wang severely dehydrated, his blood pressure dangerously low, and rushed him from the United Nations to Bellevue Hospital, fellow activists said in a statement faxed to foreign news organisations in Beijing.

Russia ships rocket engines to US:

Russia is shipping the first of a new generation of rocket engines to the US, NTV television reported on Saturday, AFP says from Moscow.

The Russian RD180 engine will go into Lockheed Martin's Atlas 3 rocket, used for launching satellites into orbit. A contract for 18 engines has been signed, the amount for which was undisclosed, according to NTV. The RD180 is seen as one of the world's most advanced rocket engines.

Police investigates blast in Jakarta:

Police yesterday questioned witnesses who saw a bomb blast that wrecked an empty Jakarta department store but did not cause injuries, AP reports from Jakarta.

Police investigators, who also recovered two bombs at the site that did not detonate, did not speculate on a motive for the attack early Saturday in the Indonesian capital. There have been no arrests.

Death in police custody Mob torches police station, shops in Indonesia

SURABAYA, Indonesia, Jan 3: Hundreds of knife-wielding locals ran amok in Indonesia's second city, torching a police station and shops after a man died in police custody, police said today, reports Reuters.

A mob of around 800 attacked and set fire to the police station on Saturday evening in Surabaya, 640 km east of Jakarta, after police handed the man's body to his family.

He had been accused of breaking into shops, police denied he had been tortured.

"The detainee died because of his injuries, not because we had tortured him. He was brought in to custody by security guards in a critical condition," Surabaya police chief Colonel Alfian Anwar said.

There were no reports of casualties from the attack, he said.

Grenade attack kills 9 in Philippines

ZAMBOANGA, Philippines, Jan 3: A grenade attack by suspected Muslim extremists killed nine people and wounded at least 50 others in the southern Philippines, police said today, reports AFP.

Suspected Abu Sayyaf guerrillas lobbed at least one grenade late Saturday into a crowd watching firemen put out a blaze in Jolo, capital of the southern province of Sulu, a Muslim stronghold.

Police could not say how many grenades were lobbed but witnesses said a series of explosions were heard.

Nine people were killed on the spot, while at least 50 others were hit by shrapnel, police said many victims sustained serious injuries and would be flown to this port city for treatment.

Palestinians resolute to establish independent state this year

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip, Jan 3: Loyalists to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, marking the founding of his PLO faction Saturday, marched in the thousands, shot rifles in the air and burned American and Israeli flags, reports AP.

The activists vowed to fight for the establishment of an independent state this year.

The rallies in Bethlehem, Tularem and Gaza City were held to mark the 34th anniversary of Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction, which carried out a bloody armed struggle against Israel for decades before making peace.

In Gaza, about 4,000 Fatah members rallied in an auditorium draped with Palestinian flags and pictures of Arafat.

A series of speakers at the Gaza Rally denounced Israel for suspending the Wye River land-

for-security accord.

"Our battle is a battle of peace, and our hand is extended in peace... The olive branch is still held high, and we will not drop it," said Ahmed Hilas, the Fatah secretary in Gaza.

Israel says it has frozen compliance with the accord because of violations on the Palestinian side. The Palestinians insist they have been adhering to the terms of the agreement.

Israel has demanded that Palestinians stop threatening to unilaterally declared statehood in May, but the topic came up again at Saturday's rallies.

"Establishing the Palestinian Authority on part of our land proves that the sacrifices of our people from the start of the revolution until today have not gone to waste," said Zakaria Agah, a member of the PLO ex-

ecutive committee, speaking on Arafat's behalf. "This authority is a strong foundation for an independent state," with Jerusalem as its capital.

Israel claims all of Jerusalem, the eastern sector of which was captured in the 1967 Middle East war, as its capital.

The issue of Palestinian statehood is gearing up to be a central theme in the upcoming Israeli elections in May. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been citing Arafat's calls for independence as a reason voters should support him, a hardliner who promises harsh retaliation for any such attempt.

It is evident to us that Mr Netanyahu has begun his election campaign imagining that President Arafat is running against him," Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said.

Meanwhile, outside of a police station in east Jerusalem, a group of Palestinians threw stones at border policemen. Two border policemen were injured lightly by the stones, police spokeswoman Linda Menuhin said.

Not far from the police station, in the east Jerusalem neighborhood of Wadi Joz, the tires of ten cars were slashed. Menuhin said the police are investigating the incident, the second such spree of vandalism on Arab cars this week.

In Bethlehem, marchers in black masks and camouflage fatigues marched through the center of town. Some fired celebratory shots into the air with rifles and pistols.

In the West Bank town of Tularem, Fatah activists burned makeshift American and Israeli flags. Denunciations of the Israeli freezing of the Wye accord also came at Friday night's Palestinian Cabinet meeting in the West Bank town of Ramallah. The ministers also denounced stepped-up activity by Jewish settlers in Jerusalem's eastern sector.

Cost effective solution to Y2K problem!

NEW DELHI, Jan 3: As the doomday for computers around the world approaches due to the millennium bug, an Indian scientist claims to have come up with a new and cost-effective solution to the problem, reports PTI.

The year 2000 (Y2K) problem stems from the use of two-digit representation of years in computer systems worldwide to save memory space that assumes 1 and 9 as the first two digits of an year.

As a result, programmes will recognise '00' as '1900' and not '2000' as the next millennium starts causing systems to either shut down or malfunction on January 1, 2000.

The new solution, proposed by PVS Avadhani, computer scientist at Andhra University in Visakhapatnam, is based on a special numbering system which employs a set of 53 character instead of the ten usual digits 0 to 9 to read or write a data in a computer programme.

Cross-national marriages on rise in S'pore

SINGAPORE, Jan 3: The number of Singaporeans marrying foreigners has been rising, with as many as a quarter to a third of recent brides and grooms choosing foreign spouses, a Singapore newspaper reported today, reports AP.

Almost a third of all marriages in this small but cosmopolitan city-state were cross-national in 1996, said The Sunday Times, citing recent government statistics.

In 1997, the percentage dipped slightly to a quarter of marriages, the report said.

The report did not give the raw figures or findings for earlier years.

Queen to auction her Christmas tree decorations for charity funds

LONDON, Jan 3: Britain's Queen Elizabeth II is to auction her Christmas tree decorations to raise thousands of pounds for a children's charity, Buckingham Palace confirmed today, reports AFP.

Around 400 ornaments will go under the hammer at an auction at London's Victoria and Albert Museum next week.

According to the Sunday Mirror, the sale could raise 100,000 pounds (166,000 dollars) for the Society of Stars Charity, which helps children suffering from cerebral palsy.

Designer Zandra Rhodes created a distinctive pink-haired fairy for the tree. Other decorations included a hand-embroidered Queen's crown edged with pearls and sequins.

They were presented to the Queen and Queen Mother shortly before Christmas.

Myanmar FM hopes ties with US, EU will improve

YANGON, Jan 3: Myanmar's foreign minister hopes his country's forestry relations with the United States and the European Union will improve this year, the state-run New Light of Myanmar newspaper reported today, says AP.

"I hope that friendship and cooperation with the EU and its members and the US could be regained as in previous years," Foreign Minister Win Aung told diplomats at a briefing, the paper said.

The United States imposed economic sanctions on Myanmar in April 1997 because of the military government's suppression of a democracy movement led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi and the regime's alleged failure to fight drug trafficking.

The European Union also has imposed more limited trade sanctions on the country for similar reasons.

Russia for swift progress in updating CFE agreement

MOSCOW, Jan 3: Russia called on Saturday for swift progress in efforts to update the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) agreement ahead of NATO's planned eastward expansion later this year, reports Reuters.

Moscow is worried that NATO's admission of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, set for April, will radically alter the balance of power in Europe to its disadvantage.

"The Russian side believes that decisive progress at the negotiations must be achieved before the official admission of NATO's new members," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Without such progress, it said, Russia would not have the right to conduct full inspections of NATO forces on the territory of the new members.

This would jeopardise the very future existence of the present Conventional Forces in Europe agreement, it said, adding that Russia would then have to take appropriate measures.

The 30-nation CFE treaty limits the number of tanks, artillery pieces, aircraft and other

non-nuclear arms states can hold. The updated treaty would replace the existing idea of a balance between NATO and now defunct Warsaw pact, which grouped the Soviet Union and its East European Communist allies.

Shakespeare hailed as int'l superstar

LONDON, Jan 3: William Shakespeare, picked as Britain's man of the millennium, was hailed Saturday as an international superstar, but scientists felt Charles Darwin or Isaac Newton should have taken the prize, reports Reuters.

The choice of the playwright in a poll of BBC radio listeners — he just pipped wartime leader Winston Churchill — provoked a heated New Year debate about his perennial appeal.

Acclaimed Shakespeare actress Judi Dench said: "He is known in our house as the gentleman who pays the rent."

Japanese children's desperate battle for school admission test

TOKYO, Jan 3: It's the New Year holiday in Japan and time for some parents to lock their children up in a hotel so they can study 10 hours a day for private school entrance examinations, reports AFP.

Sporting a headband with the motto "Sure to pass the exam," 11-year-old Takuma Horii crams for the February exams with a group of fellow sufferers at the Hotel Metropolitan in central Tokyo.

"He is so devoted and I'm moved to tears," the boy's tutor Ikuo Watanabe says excitedly during a two-hour teaching session in one tiny room in the hotel.

Takuma is one of 22 students aged between 11 and 17 on the six-day "New Year special training" course, which offers private lectures in hotel rooms for the children of parents prepared to fork out huge sums of cash.

The Japan Institute for Tutors, a company organising 75,000 private teachers across the nation, has offered the service for 22 years to detach children from their everyday life.

Six of the most experienced tutors stay at the hotel and teach the children during the crash course, institute president Noboru Furukawa said.

Ten of the 22 children even remain at the hotel overnight to "increase concentration on studies," while others commute there.

One family is spending more than one million yen (8,700 dollars) for the intensive course because three relatives are staying at the hotel along with the studying child.

"It is better to create an environment in which the entire family faces exam war," said Furukawa, the sage exam teacher who nicknames himself Dr Owl.

Excluding hotel room charges and meals, the fee for the six days will be 576,000 yen (5,000 dollars) for 36 hours of head-to-head study with a tutor, plus 40,000 yen as enrolment and counselling costs.

For Takuma, this exam cramming was his first experience of spending nights away from his family or friends.

Outside the room, his mother, Akiko, said "I'm trying

not to come to see my son as he needs mental training towards the exam."

Tutor Watanabe acknowledged that the mental pressure sometimes triggered physical ailments. One of her students had been so stressed that he became blind when sitting at his desk.

Japan's economic woes have not discouraged parents from spending money on education, said the 64-year-old pioneer of the tutoring business.

"Higher education is an asset parents can give their children... spending on education is similar to making savings that will never diminish."

Furukawa dismissed the criticism that a prestigious school does not guarantee a good life. Only a few people agreed with that idea, "just like the howling of a wolf in the distance," he said, adding that the belief posed no threat to his business.

"The study course begins with a shinto ritual in the hotel classroom."



Margarita, right, the wife of the former Bulgarian King Simeon, and his daughter Kalina, second from right, look at a lion cub named after former Princess Elena on Saturday at Sofia's Zoo. King Simeon and his family are on a visit to his homeland to celebrate Christmas and New Year. — UNB/AP photo