

Annan invites FM's of Portugal, Indonesia for talks on E Timor

UNITED NATIONS, Feb. 3: Secretary-General Kofi Annan has invited the foreign ministers of Portugal and Indonesia for talks in New York as the United Nations tries to help finalise a wide-ranging autonomy agreement for East Timor, a UN spokesman said, reports AP.

It was not clear whether Portuguese Foreign Minister Jaime Gama and Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas were being asked to come to New York this weekend because of a breakthrough or an impasse in the UN-sponsored talks.

UN spokesman Hiro Ueki said Tuesday that Annan had invited Gama and Alatas "for a ministerial meeting on East Timor" at UN headquarters on Sunday and Monday. He refused to elaborate.

Indonesia invaded East Timor in 1975 and annexed it the following year, but the United Nations and Portugal do not recognise Indonesia's claim.

Indonesia's surprise offer last week to consider independence for the former Portuguese colony put the spotlight on the autonomy talks, which started last week and resumed Tuesday.

UN envoy Jamsheed Marker, who was appointed 22 months

ago to break the longstanding deadlock over East Timor, is chairing the three-way talks with Portuguese Ambassador Fernando Neves and Indonesian representative Nugroho Wisnumurti.

Marker said last week that the atmosphere in the talks was "very cooperative" and expressed hope that an autonomy plan would be finished by Friday.

He said it would then be submitted to Annan and the foreign ministers of Portugal and Indonesia, who would be asked to decide any outstanding issues.

Marker said it was "absolutely necessary" to reach agreement on autonomy before talking about independence.

Neves and Marker asked Jakarta for details about the independence offer.

One possible stumbling block in any future discussion of independence is the issue of a referendum.

Last week, Alatas ruled out a referendum on independence for East Timor on grounds it could lead to civil war — which immediately put him at odds with the Portuguese and Annan who say any agreement must be approved by the Timorese people.

British warplanes launch fresh attack on Iraq

Gulf leaders, US agree on action against Saddam

DUBAI, Feb. 3: Gulf leaders and the United States agree action rather than talks are needed against Saddam Hussein, an envoy said Tuesday after a regional swing which met some resistance to overthrow plans, reports AFP.

US Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk was at pains to stress broad support from Gulf states for Washington's military and diplomatic push to topple the Baghdad regime.

After meeting some resistance notably in Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, Indyk underlined at a press conference how important it was to help the Iraqi people.

"Leaders here argue strongly that change needs to come from within Iraq and we agree with that," he said. They also expressed concern about maintaining the territorial integrity of Iraq and we agreed with that.

"We made clear this policy cannot succeed without their support as well as ours for the Iraqi people."

They also made clear to us that they prefer that we talk

less and do more and we agreed with that."

Our purpose is to support the people of Iraq in their efforts to change the regime, he said after meeting UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al Nahayan in Abu Dhabi and defence minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum in Dubai.

We will not seek to impose our will on Iraq nor will we seek to impose an outside opposition on the Iraqi people, he explained.

Indyk reported a consensus among most leaders in the Gulf about the continuing danger Saddam Hussein poses, consensus on the need to take care of the basic needs of the Iraqi people while maintaining sanctions... a common view that Saddam Hussein has been significantly weakened and an opportunity does exist to remove him.

Indyk has also visited Qatar and Kuwait to the heels of a Riyadh visit by secretary of State Madeleine Albright adding diplomacy to military

power in the effort to topple Saddam.

Both Qatar's Sultan Qaboos and newspapers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) strongly criticized the US campaign while a Saudi daily also said Gulf states had a different stand from the United States.

Oman's official news agency said that Sultan Qaboos who met Indyk late Monday in Muscat, voiced opposition to meddling in Iraq's internal affairs.

Muscat was "opposed to any interference in the internal affairs to others and is working to secure a lifting of the embargo and to alleviate the sufferings of the Iraqi people, the Omani ruler said."

Another report from London adds: Four British warplanes attacked an Iraqi radar site in the south of the country Tuesday, the Ministry of Defence said here.

The raid, carried out by four FAF Tornados several hours before the announcement, came as part of a joint operation with US planes against violations of the no-fly zones in both northern and southern Iraq.

"A number of precision-guided bombs were launched at an air defence radar site, a ministry spokeswoman said."

All the bombs have been accounted for an all coalition aircraft returned safely.

The British defence spokeswoman was unable to provide any further details of the location of the target.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi authorities Tuesday accused Saudi pilots of taking part in an air attack by "enemy" planes on a food supply depot in the southern province of Najaf, the Iraqi news agency said.

The agency quoted an Iraqi military spokesman as saying that "enemy formations bombarded a food supply depot in the province of Najaf."

We have clear confirmation that Saudi pilots took part in these formations, the spokesman added.

Once again, the governments of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have shown their complicity with the American British conspiracy against Iraq, the spokesman said.

Israel rejects US position on released militants

TEL AVIV, Feb. 3: Israel rejected American findings Tuesday that the Palestinians have not released militants involved in deadly attacks on Israelis and Americans, reports AP.

Israel says that Palestinians involved in terror attacks were among 60 activists of militant Islamic groups released last month, in a pardon for a Muslim holiday.

Among those released, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said, were five Palestinians involved in attacks that killed dozens of Israelis and five US citizens.

The Palestinians have denied the charges.

US State Department spokesman James Rubin said an investigation found no evidence that such militants had been set free by Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority. Rubin's statement came hours before Arafat was to arrive in Washington to meet US President Bill Clinton to discuss the status of Mideast peace negotiations.

Netanyahu senior adviser David Bar-Ilan responded that the five militants released were accessories to murder because they participated in the attacks that killed Americans.

"The actual killings were done by suicide bombers so obviously it is not they we are talking about but the people who planned, organised and executed the attacks," he said.

Bar-Ilan said Israel was continuing to provide the appropriate United States agencies with evidence.

The differences of opinion were likely to strain relations between the Netanyahu government and the Clinton administration, which brokered an October peace deal between the sides that has since fallen apart.

The CIA is charged under the Wye River land-for-security accord with monitoring Palestinian commitments to clamp down on militants and anti-Israel violence.



Grieving relatives gather outside Pristina's morgue Tuesday to pick up the remains of 45 ethnic Albanians massacred in the village of Racak on January 16. After two weeks of forensic investigation, authorities allowed relatives to pick up the bodies. — AP/UNB photo

Int'l community hails KLA's decision to attend peace talks

PRISTINA, Yugoslavia, Feb. 3: The international community welcomed an announcement Tuesday by Kosovo separatists to attend peace talks in France, but NATO said it would still keep its military options open, reports AFP.

The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) said it would attend the talks but only if it heads the delegation representing the local ethnic Albanian population. KLA spokesman Kajup Krasniqi said.

"We are going to the talks but we insist the KLA should be the main one in the Albanian team, because no one has the right to decide the future of Kosovo other than those who fight and make sacrifices for Kosovo," Krasniqi said.

There was no immediate reaction to the KLA's conditions from the moderate Kosovo Al-

banian leader, Ibrahim Rugova, who has confirmed he will go to the talks but his authority is not recognized by the guerrillas.

United States State Department James Rubin said Washington was "pleased" with the KLA decision.

However, he renewed warnings to Belgrade that it must also attend.

The position of Belgrade, which reviles the KLA as a "terrorist" force with whom it cannot negotiate, was still unknown Tuesday.

Yugoslav Deputy Prime Minister Vuk Draskovic said the Serbian parliament would decide on Thursday whether to send a delegation to France.

Draskovic, who favours Serbian participation in the talks, said there was "no reason to reject the invitation to Paris," and added that the proposals by

the six-nation contact group, which convened the Paris talks, for a solution to the conflict were "largely favourable."

Earlier, the KLA's political representative, Adem Demaci, said he suggested to rebel commanders that they snub the talks.

"We are not asked to go to France to make peace," Demaci said. "We are asked to go to France to capitulate, to accept a solution which will be only for a short time."

Rambouillet, west of Paris, is the chateau where Kosovo's warring sides have been given three weeks from Saturday to finalise an agreement to end a conflict that has cost some 2,000 lives and displaced more than 300,000 people.

Otherwise, NATO has said that it will proceed with air strikes and other measures.

BRIEFLY

S Korean executive killed in SA: The president of the Daewoo car company in South Africa was found shot to death Wednesday and police were investigating whether it was a professional hit, AP reports from Johannesburg.

The body of Yong Koo Kwon, 49, was found in his car at 3 am with a gunshot wound in the head, police said. Police believe the South Korean executive was shot about 10 pm Tuesday. A neighbour heard a sound like a single gunshot at that time but thought it was a firecracker and didn't notify police.

Japan hit by heavy snowfall: Heavy snow hit central and western Japan Wednesday, triggering traffic accidents and disrupting air and rail travel, officials said, AP reports from Tokyo.

In the town of Nagahama, 325 km west of Tokyo, nearly 40 cars piled up on a national highway, injuring seven people, one seriously, according to the Shiga prefectural police.

Water shortages affect 6m Thais: More than six million Thais in 44 provinces have been affected by severe water shortages this year, the Bangkok Post reported on Wednesday. AP says from Bangkok.

Citing a report by the Interior Ministry, the paper said the shortages were mainly affecting north, northeastern and central Thailand. Government officials have reported that several dams are at their lowest levels in years, and have cut off water to rice farmers in several northern provinces to prevent them from growing a second crop for the season.

Malaysia's first queen dies: The first queen of Malaysia, who was crowned after the nation gained independence from Britain in 1957, died Tuesday. She was 87, AP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

Kursiah Burhanuddin died of natural causes in the royal ward of the Kuala Lumpur Hospital, said a statement from Istana Negara, the National Palace. Kursiah took the throne when her husband, Tuanku Abdul Rahman, was named the first king of independent Malaya. Born in Negri Sembilan state, she was the eldest sister of the country's current queen, Permaisuri Tuanku Najihah, wife to king, Tuanku Ja'afar.



Newly sworn-in Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez greets supporters during a parade through the streets of downtown Caracas, Venezuela. A former coup leader, Chavez won a landslide victory on Dec 6, 1998 largely by capitalising on Venezuelans' anger over rampant corruption and decades of declining living standards.

7 die as roof of mosque collapses in Punjab

ISLAMABAD, Feb. 3: The roof of a partially constructed mosque collapses in eastern Punjab province, killing seven worshippers and injuring 14 others, the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan said Wednesday, reports AP.

At least 50 worshippers, mostly students of a religious school run in conjunction with the mosque, were knelt in prayer Tuesday when the roof of the mosque collapsed in Faisalabad.

Residents dug out the bodies and the injured from the rubble and rushed them to nearby hospitals, the agency said.

It's not known what caused the roof to collapse or whether anyone would be arrested in connection with what police believe was an accident.

5 killed in ethnic violence in Tripura

NEW DELHI, Feb. 3: Five people were killed and about 100 huts torched in a spurt of ethnic violence in India's troubled northeast, the Press Trust of India said today, reports AFP.

Police said some 25 armed rebels of a banned tribal guerrilla outfit killed four non-tribals on Tuesday at a village about 12 kilometres from Agartala, capital of Tripura.

In a revenge attack, the locals stormed into a nearby tribal village, torching at least 100 huts and burning one person to death, they said.

Maximum security alert in Colombo

COLOMBO, Feb. 3: Sri Lankan troops and police have been put on maximum alert before Thursday's independence day celebrations in the capital Colombo, military officials said, reports AFP.

Armed soldiers stepped up roadblocks and checks on vehicles Wednesday as the police carried out rehearsals for Thursday morning celebrations marking the 51st anniversary of independence from Britain.

Soldiers manned several checkpoints around Independence Square where President Chandrika Kumaratunga is due to attend the main celebrations.

Authorities have already sealed off the approach roads to the square.

King Hussein's condition stable

AMMAN, Feb. 3: King Hussein is in stable condition following a bone marrow transplant Tuesday at an American hospital, Jordan's ambassador to Washington said, reports AP.

"His Majesty is in good health, said Ambassador Marwan Mouasher in an interview with state-run Jordan Television.

He said Hussein, 63, successfully completed a round of chemotherapy, and the cancerous cells that recurred were contained.



Monica Lewinsky, escorted by Sydney Hoffmann, an attorney, crosses Connecticut Avenue in Washington Tuesday leaving her hotel for her lawyers' office. On Tuesday, Vernon Jordan was questioned in a secure area of the Capitol as House prosecutors in President Clinton's impeachment trial sought to learn more about what the Clinton confidant knew of Lewinsky's relationship with the president. — AP/UNB photo

Off the Record

Ghosts on camera!

LONDON: Security cameras outside a former country mansion in central England recorded ghostly apparitions one night last Christmas, including one that seemed to be a woman in Victorian dress, The Daily Telegraph reported, says AFP.

Staff at the Belgrave Hall Museum in Leicester have sent the video footage to a laboratory and contacted paranormal investigators to clear up the mystery of the two spectral shapes.

The 18th century house was once the family home of John Ellis, a Leicester MP and industrialist, whose sister Charlott is reputed to have died here, her spirit remaining in restless occupation.

Museum staff reportedly had seen her flitting about before, though never on camera.

The two ghostly shapes were filmed at 4:48 am on December 23. The museum's security lights were triggered by a flickering heat source. Five seconds later the cameras captured a brilliant six-foot high white apparition.

After another five seconds, the spectre disappeared before a swirling mist came over a nearby wall.

Stuart Warburton, the museum's managing curator, said, "The images appear from nowhere. They make no entrance or exit but just appear and disappear."

"We do not believe it is a deliberate hoax because there were other cameras mounted nearby and they would have picked up the perpetrators."

There is obviously the possibility that the figures could be something else. Plastic bags waving in the wind or a lighting bolt have been suggested.

Partners in love and crime

NEW DELHI: They were partners in love and in crime, and when they were caught red-handed with stolen goods they went to jail happy to be together, reports IANS.

It was a long-drawn search but after studying 25 thefts, police finally nabbed 23-year-old Radha and her 25-year-old husband Devraj selling stolen goods, including a television set and some household articles, in a market in west Delhi. During interrogation, they confessed they had committed 45 burglaries in the past three years.

Police sources said Devraj Ravi Chauhan, the son of a tailor, was an old hand at the game and had been robbing homes since 1990. He had even gone to jail. He married Radha in 1993 but continued his life of crime. When he was caught in 1996 and returned home after a year in prison, Radha decided to join him because she did not like to live away from him. She took to burglary with ease and together they adopted an ingenious modus operandi of posing as a well-groomed couple so no one would suspect them.

The young couple went on evening walks to a particular neighbourhood and chose houses which were locked. They returned later at midnight and broke in by breaking the main door lock with a rod. "No one including the security guard suspected the couple because they were well-dressed and always moved together," police sources said. The police has recovered 100 gms of gold, four colour television sets, watches, cameras, car stereos, silver jewellery and several household items from their home in Uttar Nagar. The two had even stolen cars.

Wheelchair-bound bandit

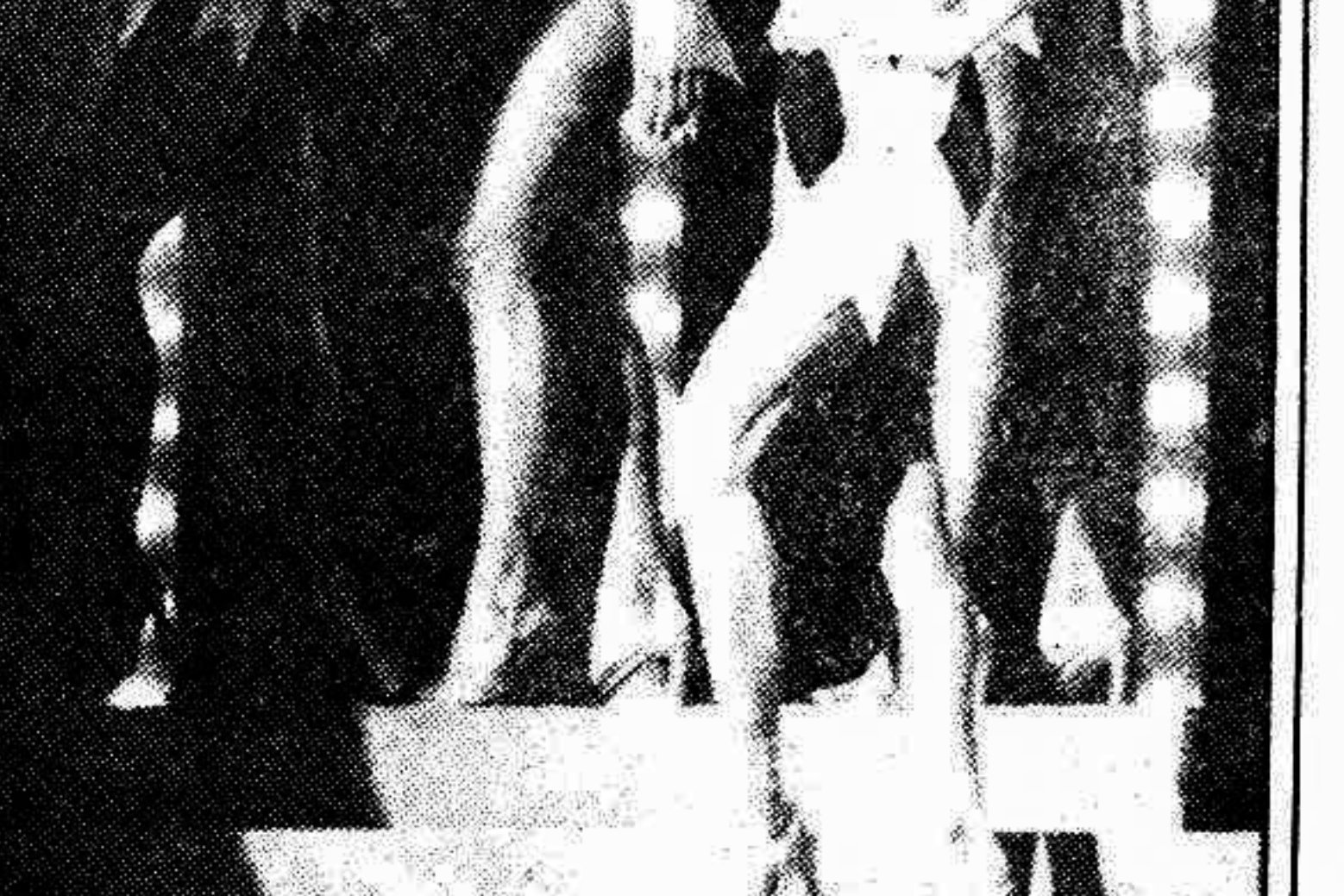
SAN FRANCISCO: San Francisco police have arrested a paraplegic man suspected of being a wheelchair-bound bandit who recently robbed at least three people on the streets of Chinatown, reports Reuters.

Coung Tran, 27, was arrested on Monday night and charged with one count of robbery and violation of his probation, police said on Tuesday.

Tran is accused of being the man who wheeled up to his victims, displayed or simulated a semi-automatic weapon, demanded money and fled in the motorised wheelchair.

In one incident, the robber threw back a purse at his victims after discovering that it contained only ten dollars.

Investigators believe Tran, who speaks fluent Cantonese is a former gang member who was paralysed in a gang shooting.



In the limelight, Miss Georgia Meredith Young walks across the Grand Palace stage in Branson, Missouri, during the 1999 Miss USA Pageant Presentation Monday. Portions of the event will be included during the Feb 5 live international telecast. — AP/UNB photo

Pirates becoming more sophisticated, violent

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb. 3: The number of pirate attacks on the world's high seas has dropped some, but the pirates themselves are becoming more sophisticated and violent in their assaults, the International Maritime Bureau said Wednesday, reports AP.

Last year, the number of pirate attacks fell to 198, compared to an all-time high of 247 in 1997, according to the bureau's annual report for 1998.

The drop in attacks was due to ship owners and captains who have taken preventative measures to keep their ships safer from pirate assaults, the report said.

However, in a grim development, the pirates also killed 67 crewmen last year, while assaulting and injuring scores of others. Fifty-one sailors were killed in 1997. Since 1995, the number of sailors taken hostage also has jumped sharply into the hundreds.

The pirates are getting increasingly violent. Years ago, they would steal the cargo, loot the ship's safe and rob the crewmen, said the International Maritime Bureau's regional manager, Neil Choong, who compiled the report.

"These days, the pirates are increasingly brazen. They steal the entire ship, and they kill the crew," he told The Associated Press in an interview.

There were more disturbing statistics.

Just two months ago, all 23 crew members of the bulk carrier MV Cheung Son sailing on the South China Sea were shot and killed by pirates, Choong said. Their bodies were then weighted and flung overboard. Days later, Chinese fishermen found six bodies, still bound and gagged, snagged in their nets.

Authorities in China arrested seven suspects, but the

ship, which flew a Panamanian flag, remained at large.

Since 1991, when the Kuala Lumpur-based center began gathering data, the number of reported attacks worldwide has nearly doubled.

A total of 15 ships were hijacked in 1998, mostly in Southeast Asia, where seas contain many small islands, the report said.

Waters outside Asia were safer, but not free of pirates.

For instance, pirates armed with Uzzi sub-machine guns boarded an oil tanker in Brazil and shot and injured several of its officers.

The assailants stole a watch and some cash from the captain's cabin before being apprehended by police.

The seas off Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines also were risky. Ships were especially vulnerable as they carefully navigated the narrow channels between the islands,

which make ideal hideouts for pirates aboard small and swift motorboats.

The International Maritime Bureau warned that the Asian economic crisis is likely to increase the number of pirate attacks in 1999. That's especially true, the report said, in waters around Indonesia, the hardest hit country, where about 13,000 islands straddle crucial sea lanes linking Asia and Europe.

The bureau said that modern swashbucklers are no longer content with filching radio equipment and nets from fishermen. They now target tankers, bulk carriers and cargo ships as well.

Heavily armed, they take ships' crews hostage and demand ransoms. Sometimes they steal the whole ship.

"As long as there are ready buyers for illegal cargoes, the pirates will continue to hijack ships," said the bureau's report.