

Indira the greatest

LONDON, Dec 2 : India's first woman Prime Minister Indira Gandhi has been named 'woman of the millennium' in a BBC poll, it was officially stated on Wednesday, reports PTI.

The stateswoman, who was assassinated by her bodyguards in 1984, was chosen by international users of the BBC News online service as the greatest woman of the last 1,000 years.

The former Prime Minister pipped Elizabeth I to win by a large majority, the BBC said.

The top ten included mother Teresa, Marie Curie, former British Premier Margaret Thatcher, Joan of Arc, Emmeline Pankhurst, Aung San Suu Kyi and Eleanor Roosevelt.

US will help Russia monitor N-plants

WASHINGTON, Dec 2 : US Energy Secretary Bill Richardson unveiled a high-tech, long-distance telecommunications link Wednesday that will be used to help Russia closely monitor its nuclear power plants for Y2K problems with the coming of the new millennium, reports AP.

Richardson invited reporters into the top-secret Situation Crisis Centre at the Energy Department headquarters to witness a hour-long exchange with Yevgeny Adamov, Russia's minister of atomic energy.

This New Year's Eve, said Richardson, he will be in the crisis centre to monitor the Y2K rollover at American nuclear reactors, power plants and the US electricity grid.

But he said two Russian experts also will be at the centre in the basement of department headquarters. And two US nuclear experts along with senior Russian nuclear officials will be at the MinAtom Situation and Crisis Centre in Moscow.

"While we don't expect any major problems, there may be glitches. We have to be ready on both sides," Richardson said, referring to both the US and Russian nuclear programmes.

Russian computer systems designed to shut nuclear reactors down in an emergency do not have the type of digital technology susceptible to the Y2K bug, said Richardson. But some other computer systems at the Russian plants could fail, he added.

The US nuclear industry recently reported to the government that all 103 of America's commercial reactors are ready to deal with the Y2K bug.

Adamov, whose image came across a large television screen on one wall of the crisis centre, expressed confidence that Russia will have no problems with Y2K, the bug that could cause a computer to go haywire if it recognizes the year 2000 as 1900.

"All of the drills showed we are prepared for the year 2000 rollover," said Adamov through a translator sitting in Washington.

Six bodies found at Mexican grave site

CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico Dec 2: Officials have found a sixth body at a suspected mass grave site near the US Mexico border here, Mexican authorities announced late Wednesday, reports AFP.

Isidoro Herzog, spokesman with Mexico's Attorney General's office (PGR), said that shoes and pieces of cloth were found near the sixth set of remains.

Earlier in the day investigators found five sets of remains, some of them on top of the others at the Tiro del Norte ranch, on the outskirts of Ciudad Juarez.

Mexican and US law-enforcement officials are scouring four spots for bodies of victims of the drugs-trafficking cartel that operates in the area, where 196 people have disappeared.

US approves new epilepsy drug

WASHINGTON, Dec 2: The US government on Wednesday approved a new epilepsy drug that does not seem to interfere with other treatments or harm patients' livers like some anti-seizure medications, reports Reuters.

Keppra, made by UCB Pharma Inc, the US unit of Belgian firm UCB Group, is designed for use in combination with other epilepsy medications to control so-called partial onset seizures that affect one area of the brain.

The Food and Drug Administration said it approved Keppra, known generically as levetiracetam, after reviewing clinical trials involving more than 1,300 patients with epilepsy.

About two dozen drugs are already available for preventing epileptic seizures, and patients often must take more than one medication to control different types.

But many of the drugs interfere with each other or with other medications. They also can cause liver damage.

Because Keppra is not metabolised in the liver, it is unlikely to interact with other drugs, the FDA said. "In addition, no serious blood or liver-related toxicities were seen" in clinical trials, the agency said.

Keppra's possible side effects include dizziness and sleepiness, the FDA said.

About 2 million people in the United States have epilepsy, a neurological condition that can produce brief disturbances in the brain's electrical function.

UNGA opposes US plan to build anti-missile defence

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 2: The UN General Assembly endorsed a resolution on Wednesday aimed at pressuring the United States to abandon plans to build an anti-missile defence, reports Reuters.

The vote on the resolution, recommended last month by the assembly's disarmament and international security committee, was 80-4, with 68 abstentions.

Voting against the draft, together with the United States, were Albania, Israel and Micronesia. The members of the 15-nation European Union abstained, except for France and Ireland, which voted for the resolution.

It calls for continued efforts to strengthen and preserve the 1972 Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty between the United States and the then Soviet Union, which limits missile defences.

Washington wants to amend the treaty to permit the construction in the next five years of a limited anti-missile defence, based in Alaska or North

Dakota, as a shield against possible attacks by so-called "rogue states" against US territory or US troops stationed abroad.

Russia and China have repeatedly warned that any changes to the ABM treaty would threaten other disarmament accords, undermine strategic stability and spark a new arms race.

The treaty is based on the theory that anti-missile systems would only tempt the other side to build more missiles to overwhelm the defences.

The UN resolution, originally sponsored by Russia, China and Belarus, was approved by the assembly's disarmament committee on Nov 5 by a 54-4 vote, with 73 abstentions.

It calls on the parties to the ABM treaty "to refrain from the deployment of anti-ballistic missile systems for the defence of the territory of their country and not to provide a base for such a defence."

The treaty parties are also called on not to transfer to

other states, or to deploy outside their national territory, anti-ballistic-missile systems or their components limited by the treaty.

Under the treaty, Russia has long had an ageing ABM defence to protect only Moscow. But neither country has a national missile defence such as the one the United States wants to deploy on a limited scale that would not be sufficient to neutralise Russia's large nuclear force.

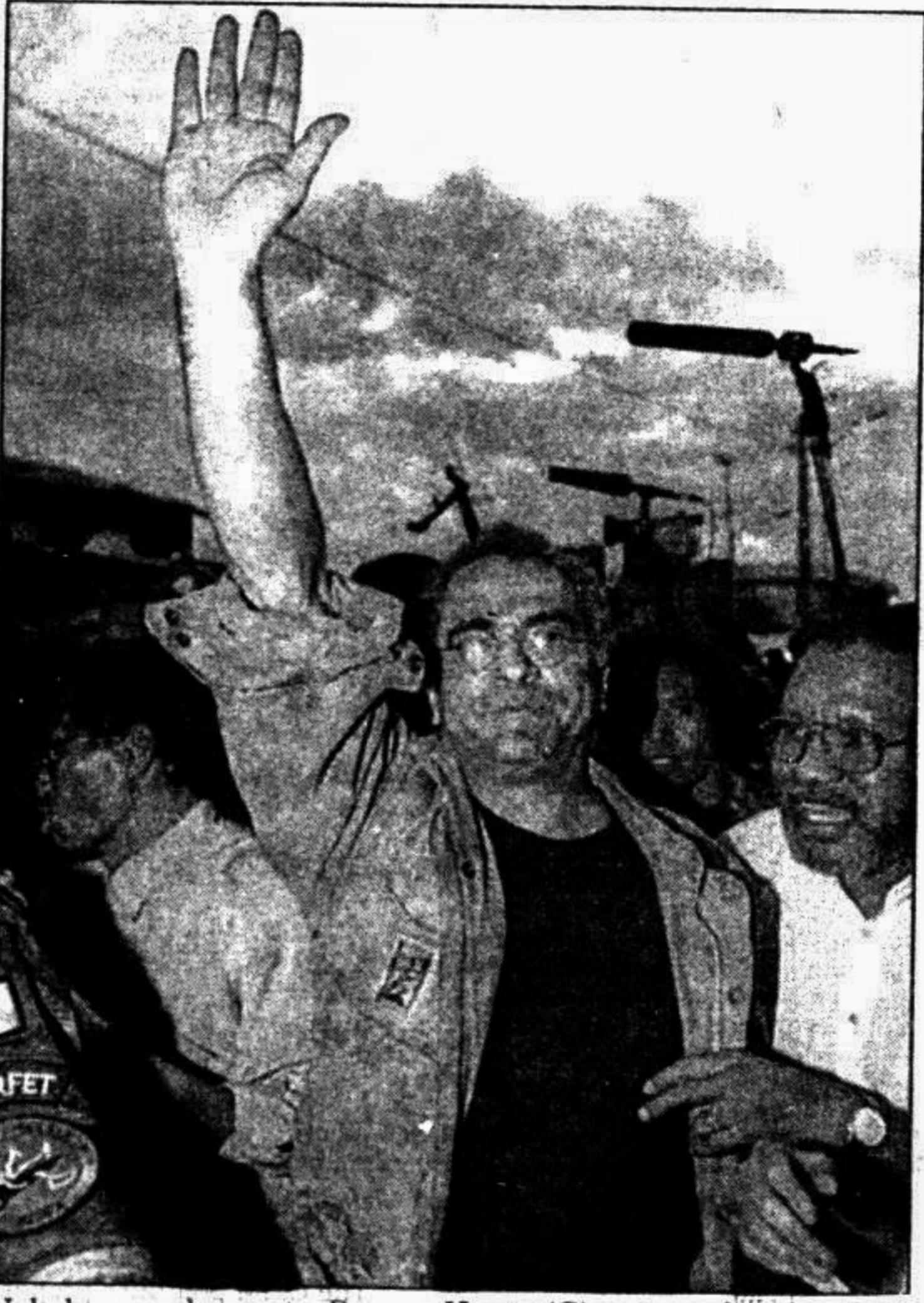
As an apparent warning to Washington, Russia early last month test-fired one of its short-range anti-missile rockets for the first time in six years and later test-fired an old nuclear-capable tactical missile to show that its shelf-life had not expired.

The UN resolution calls for "renewed efforts by each of the states parties to preserve and strengthen" the ABM treaty through full and strict compliance.



Independence supporters wave the separatist 'Morning Star' flag at Jayapura in the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya to mark the anniversary of the Free Papua Movement on Wednesday. Thousands joined the flag-raising ceremony despite warnings by the security authorities that they will arrest anyone trying to fly the flag. Soldiers later fired on protesters trying to stop separatist flags from being lowered.

— AFP photo



Nobel peace laureate Ramos Horta (C) waves shortly after arrival in Dili, East Timor, on Wednesday. Horta arrived in Dili after 24 years in exile to a rousing welcome honouring his efforts to end Indonesia's occupation of his homeland.

— AFP photo

Lanka denies secret talks with LTTE

COLOMBO, Dec 2: The Sri Lankan government has denied secret talks with Tamil Tiger rebels as the dragging separatist conflict emerged as a key issue at this month's presidential vote, a state-run daily said today, reports AFP.

The Daily News quoted government sources as saying President Chandrika Kumaratunga at no stage initiated secret talks with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas.

Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran in a speech Saturday said President Kumaratunga had made approaches through a third party to hold secret talks with certain conditions while continuing the war but he was opposed to it.

"It is an extremely difficult task to involve in a friendly dialogue with the enemy while our people are subjected to death, destruction and suffering," Prabhakaran said.

The Daily News said third parties representing other countries had approached the LTTE.

BRIEFLY

Italian PM in Libya: Italy's prime minister on Wednesday became the first Western head of government to visit Libya since 1992 sanctions isolated the nation, giving a vote of confidence to a country struggling to overcome Western isolation, AP reports from Tripoli.

Premier Massimo D'Alema was received at the Maetiga military airport by Mohammed el-Mangoush, secretary of the General Committee, Libya's equivalent to prime minister.

Portuguese FM in E Timor: Portuguese Foreign Minister Jaime Gama arrived in East Timor Thursday for the first high-level Portuguese visit since Lisbon left its former colony in 1975, AFP reports from Dili.

As Gama's aircraft arrived at Dili's Comoro airport the foreign minister was warmly welcomed by East Timorese independence campaigner Jose Ramos Horta and the deputy commander of the Falintil resistance forces, Taur matan Ruak. Also greeting him was a senior official of the UN Transitional Authority in East Timor (UNTAET).

Blast kills 5 in Abkhazia: A radio-controlled bomb killed five people, including a senior military officer, as they drove to go fishing in Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia region, separatist officials said Thursday, AP reports from Georgia.

The bomb was planted on a road in Abkhazia's Ochamchir region. It killed Lt Col Khidzar Dzhidzhola, chief of a separatist military unit, and four civilians riding with him, an Abkhazian police spokesman said.

Palestinian lawmaker shot: Unknown gunmen on Wednesday shot and wounded a Palestinian lawmaker, one of several signatories of a leaflet accusing Palestinian President Yasser Arafat of encouraging corruption, officials said, Reuters reports from Jerusalem.

Another lawmaker, Hassan Khrisheh, said legislator Mouaiyeh al-Masri was hit in the legs by three bullets shot by three masked men. A senior Arafat aide said the Authority would act firmly against the attackers.

12 feared dead in Australian train crash

SYDNEY, Dec 2: As many as 12 passengers were feared dead today after a packed commuter train ploughed into the back of an inter-state train near Sydney, reports AFP.

"There are going to be maybe 10 or 12 families tonight who will be very sad," New South Wales State Premier Bob Carr said after visiting the scene of the accident at Glenbrook in the Blue Mountains, 55 kilometres west of Sydney.

All the dead were passengers in the front carriage of a double-deck Sydney commuter train which rammed the back of the Indian Pacific train on its twice-weekly run from Perth to Sydney.

The commuter train had around 1,000 people aboard. The interstate train was carrying 159 passengers.

An ambulance spokesman said 51 people were hurt, including eight with serious injuries.

Rescue services cut the injured from the twisted wreck of the commuter train which had been ripped apart.

Passengers on the commuter train said the driver ran into the carriage seconds before the impact shouting "get down, get down." Passengers on the other train said a conductor told them there had been a signal failure.

Moscow asks US diplomat to leave Russia

MOSCOW, Dec 2: Moscow has given an US diplomat declared persona non grata after being accused of spying 10 days to leave the country, the foreign ministry said today, reports AFP.

"Russia assumes that Leberknight will leave the territory of the Russian Federation within 10 days," said foreign ministry spokesman Yevgeny Voronin.

The Daily News report is the first government reaction to the LTTE's announcement they rejected overtures by Kumaratunga to engage in secret talks at a hotel overseas.

The state-run newspaper, however, made no reference to a report it carried two weeks ago saying Kumaratunga had sought talks with Tiger rebels through "respected and acceptable international organisations."

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