

International

BRIEFLY



Holidaymakers pass under a 10-metre high giant statue of Godzilla displayed at a botanical garden in Yokosuka on Saturday. Godzilla will come back to life in Japanese theatre on December 11 as "Godzilla 2000 Millennium."

— AFP photo

US blaze kills six firefighters:

A fire in an abandoned warehouse has claimed the lives of six firefighters in a Boston suburb, US media reported Sunday. AFP reports from Washington.

The blaze erupted Friday in a five-story vacant warehouse in the town of Worcester, Massachusetts. According to news reports, two firefighters battling the fire inside the windowless, maze-like building became disoriented and radioed for assistance. The two firefighters, and four others who came to their aid, apparently were engulfed by the blaze.

Voting begins in Uzbekistan:

Polling stations opened Sunday for Uzbek voters to cast their ballots for a new parliament in an election where five pro-government parties will compete for 250 seats while the opposition sits on the sidelines. Itar Tass news agency reported. AFP reports from Moscow.

A total of 1,218 candidates from the parties -- the People's Democratic Party, Self-Sacrifice Party, Adolat (Justice), Progress of the Homeland and the National Renaissance Party -- along with citizens' groups and government representatives will run for the single chamber parliament, called the Oly Mazhilis.

5 killed in Moscow plane crash:

Five people were killed and two seriously injured when a freight plane crashed at Moscow's Domodedovo airport on Sunday, according to Russian media reports. AFP reports from Moscow.

The Il-114 aircraft, which crashed shortly after takeoff some 400 metres from the runway for unknown reasons, belonged to an Uzbek company and had seven people on board. The private television station NTV said preliminary data showed strong winds were behind the accident. Itar Tass news agency had said earlier one of the plane's engines had caught fire before the crash.

13 die in Mexico mishap:

Thirteen people were dead and four injured Saturday after a van carrying 17 people slammed into a truck in Santa Fe county, New Mexico, County Undersheriff Ben Montano told. AFP reports from Washington.

It was not yet known why the van struck the parked vehicle, which was stopped because of another accident not far from the city of Albuquerque, New Mexico, the official said. The 13 passengers were probably Mexican nationals, but some were not identified because they were not carrying identification documents, he said. Two of the four injured were in critical condition and the others were in satisfactory condition, said Montano.

Japan seeks extradition of Red Army members

BEIRUT, Dec 5: A special envoy of Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi has asked Beirut to extradite five members of the extremist Japanese Red Army serving prison terms in Lebanon, a Lebanese government source said today, reports AFP.

The source said envoy Seiichiro Noboru had made the request Saturday in talks with Lebanese Prime Minister Selim Hoss.

The Lebanese premier "replied that the Lebanese government would pass the Japanese request to the Lebanese judicial authorities, which are the only ones competent to give an opinion," the source added.

"However, the decision to extradite Obamoto and his four companions whose three-year sentence expires in March will be a political one, because there is no extradition treaty between Japan and Lebanon," the source said.

Asked late Saturday after talks with Hoss if he had asked for the extradition of the Red Army militants, who are approaching the end of a three-year jail term, Noboru said this was not one of the main topics covered.

Information revolution to shape next 25 yrs

WASHINGTON, Dec 5: The information revolution penetrating all spheres of life, including interactive media and electronic commerce, will shape the next quarter-century, predict US futurologists, reports AFP.

The information revolution is transforming today's economy just as the industrial revolution did to the agrarian economy of the 18th century, says Edward Cornish, president of the World Future Society.

Founded in 1966, the Bethesda, Maryland-based society has 30,000 members from 80 countries, including scientists, specialists in various fields and even former politicians.

The revolution started about a decade ago, since the advent of

the Internet, a multimedia information network.

According to experts, the new information age has four essential characteristics: decentralization, universalization, harmonization and devolution of power toward individuals.

In the new economic order marked by rapid and constant change, knowledge becomes the ultimate resource.

"Information is rapidly becoming the world's most precious resource, creating wealth while replacing land, energy, labor, and capital," argues Cornish.

"Nations that try to restrict the flow of information will condemn themselves to under-

US wants 'highest-level' Indo-Pak talks

NEW DELHI, Dec 5: The United States favours talks "at the highest level" between India and Pakistan's military leadership on all irritants including the disputed state of Kashmir, the US envoy to New Delhi said today, reports AFP.

Ambassador Richard Celeste told the Press Trust of India Washington was concerned peace talks between the arch-rivals, who have fought three wars and engaged in a two-month conflict earlier this year, should resume soon.

"We continue to take the position that it will be very valuable for India to engage Pakistan at the highest level on issues that trouble the relationship between the two countries..

"We are concerned that the momentum of a prime ministerial meeting in February in the Pakistani city of Lahore) is not completely lost," he said.

The Lahore declaration was

signed by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee at a landmark summit in February with their counterpart Pakistani Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted by General Pervez Musharraf in a coup in October.

It called for intensifying efforts to resolve outstanding issues, including the dispute over the divided and disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir that has caused two wars since independence in 1947.

Celeste said "a great deal of trust" had been "damaged" on account of a two-month conflict earlier this year between Indian soldiers and what New Delhi describes as Pakistan-backed militia in Kashmir.

Celeste conceded that it would be "awkward" for Vajpayee to deal with a "non-elected leadership in Pakistan that suddenly carries some responsibility."

The ambassador said even

the "smartest and wisest" American could not fashion a workable solution to the Kashmir tangle which includes a Muslim separatist drive in the Indian administered zone of the divided state that has claimed more than 25,000 lives since 1989.

"We believe this will require extraordinary leadership from this country and Pakistan and on behalf of people of Kashmir," he said.

The ambassador forecast "promising" ties between India and US in the coming years, saying: "We want a thriving and broad-based relationship with India."

"We don't believe that the relationship should be defined by how we treat Pakistan."

He said US President Bill Clinton would visit India early next year, adding: "The president will come before it gets too hot in Delhi."

Fight for southern entrance to Grozny rages

MOSCOW, Dec 5: Russian media reported fierce fighting around a southern entrance to the Chechen capital Grozny today despite a pronouncement by the top commander that the rebel city has been surrounded, reports AFP.

NTV television reported from the main southern Russian military base Mozdok that heavy shelling continued of the village of Urus-Martan, some 15 km southwest of Grozny.

Casualties were not mentioned. The village, along with Argun, serves as one of the last two escape routes out of the rebel capital.

Russia carried out some 30 warplane sorties over Chechnya in the last 24-hour period.

centering on Grozny, Urus-Martan and Argun, Interfax reported. Another 35 military choppers flew over the republic.

On Saturday, Russia pronounced that its troops had completely encircled Grozny.

"I can announce to you officially that the city of Grozny is completely blocked off," said General Viktor Kazantsev, the commander of Russian forces in the northern Caucasus region.

General Vladimir Sharmann, in charge of Chechnya's western front, confirmed: "In the coming days I am going to invite you to drink from the waters of the River Argun."

The Argun is one of Chechnya's main rivers that runs outside Grozny's southeastern

outskirts. Yet reports that Urus-Martan was being shelled from the outside by Russian forces suggested that Chechen fighters were still holed up inside.

Meanwhile, the defense ministry strongly denied that Russian troops were behind an attack Friday on Chechen refugees that reportedly killed up to 50 people and wounded 10 just south of the capital.

The territory where the attack took place has been under the bandits' control," one Russian official said.

Television had broadcast interviews with survivors of the attack. One said their assailants were armed with automatic rifles and wearing Russian security force uniforms.



A Greek Orthodox cleric watches a Palestinian bagpipe band parading in front of the Church of the Nativity in Manger Square on Saturday during a ceremony to inaugurate Bethlehem 2000 festivities. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat formally opened millennium celebrations in the Holy Land, using the event as a springboard towards Palestinian independence.

— AFP photo

First direct NY-Havana flight arrives in Cuba

HAVANA, Dec 5: The first direct flight between New York and Havana since the United States imposed an economic embargo against the communist-ruled island in 1962 arrived here on Saturday, the flight's organizers said, reports AFP.

The charter Airbus plane owned by the Taca group landed here early Saturday, bringing 137 passengers, mostly of Cuban origin, who have not visited the country since the 1970s.

The five are Kozo Okamoto, 51, the only Red Army member to survive the airport attack. Masao Adachi, 59, Kazuo Tohira, 46, Haro Wako, 50, and Mariko Yamamoto, 59.

Last month leftist intellectuals in Lebanon, including members of parliament, demonstrated several times against their eventual extradition to Japan following their release and called for Lebanon to grant them political asylum.

None faced charges in Lebanon related to their membership in the Japanese Red Army, which staged a string of bloody terrorist attacks around the world in the 1970s, including the attack at Israel's Lod airport in which 26 people were killed.

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"However, the decision to extradite Obamoto and his four companions whose three-year sentence expires in March will be a political one, because there is no extradition treaty between Japan and Lebanon," the source said.

Asked late Saturday after talks with Hoss if he had asked for the extradition of the Red Army militants, who are approaching the end of a three-year jail term, Noboru said this was not one of the main topics covered.

However, there "was still time to raise the question," he added.

The five were arrested in Beirut in February 1997 and sentenced to three years in prison for forging documents, using false passports and illegally residing in Lebanon.

The five faced charges in Lebanon related to their membership in the Japanese Red Army, which staged a string of bloody terrorist attacks around the world in the 1970s, including the attack at Israel's Lod airport in which 26 people were killed.

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