

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 Oliy Mazhlis.

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.

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 then 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 Mordok 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 Shamanov, 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 organisers 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.

UAE may get superior F-16 jets

FORT WORTH, Texas, Dec 5: Lockheed Martin Corp is negotiating a deal for a billion dollars worth of F-16 fighter jets, reports AFP.

The deal, which would be signed this month, the United Arab Emirates would spend about \$3 billion to research and develop technology that is not available on F-16s flown by US pilots.

The 80 jets would be built in Fort Worth by Lockheed Martin.

Many wept as they set foot on the tarmac, overwhelmed by emotion.

"This flight links Cuba to the financial capital of the world and is very symbolic," said Francisco Aruca, director of the agency Marazul Tours, who organized the flight, which will now become a weekly event.

Each passenger brought 10 kilograms (22 pounds) of medicine, clothes, toys and other gifts for Cubans, Aruca said.

The regular flight will arrive late on Friday in Havana and leave for New York on Saturdays, but because of the US embargo, not everybody will be able to take it.

The only people authorized to take the flight are Cubans and Americans on business trips, such as teachers, students, journalists and researchers.

President Bill Clinton earlier this year eased the decades-old US embargo on Cuba to expand people-to-people contacts, allowing among other things direct charter flights to Cuba from New York.

Such flights have operated between Havana and Miami for several months now.

Father commits suicide after killing five children

SACRAMENTO, Dec 5: A man shot and killed five of his children in their apartment before fatally shooting himself in the head, police said, reports AFP.

Two of the man's other children managed to escape Saturday, one by jumping out a bathroom window, Lt David Poroli said. Neither was injured.

Police went to the apartment after receiving calls from neighbours. Poroli said. The officers forced open the locked door and found the six bodies.

"I can tell you this: It was a gruesome, gruesome scene," he said.

The man, identified by television station KTXL as Kao Xing, apparently got into an argument with his wife before the shootings. Police said the five children were aged between 2 and 8 years old. The youngsters who escaped were 9 and 14.

The wife had apparently left before the shootings occurred and did not know what happened until she arrived home, he said.



An Indonesian police officer on a tank patrols the main mosque in Banda Aceh, Baiturrahman, yesterday. Police patrolled around the city a day after Acehese celebrate the 23rd anniversary of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). — AFP photo

Sectarian clashes leave 31 dead in Indonesia

JAKARTA, Dec 5: At least 31 people have been killed in clashes between Muslims and Christians on an island in Indonesia's Maluku province, police said today, despite pleas for a halt to the violence for the festivals of Ramadan and Christmas, reports AFP.

The violence on Seram island in central Maluku erupted early Friday when Muslims from the village of Buano Utara attacked the predominantly Christian village of Alang Asaudi, provincial police spokesman Major Philip Jekriel told AFP by phone.

Security forces had moved to contain the violence, Jekriel said from the provincial capital

of Ambon, declining to give further details.

But the Media Indonesia daily said security personnel had been late in dealing with the violence, resulting in the high number of casualties.

Some of the victims from the violence were being treated for injuries at the Muslim Al-Fatah hospital in Ambon, a member of the Al-Fatah mosque said.

Seram island, which lies next to Ambon and is one of the main islands in the Maluku chain, could not be reached by telephone early Sunday for further details.

The Maluku archipelago, also known as the Spice Islands, has been ravaged by Mus-

lim-Christian clashes since the beginning of the year. The worst riots occurred in January-March and claimed hundreds of lives.

On Thursday Indonesian Muslim leaders called for a halt to the sectarian clashes to mark the religious festivals of Ramadan and Christmas.

"As religious followers, we are prohibited to spoil and pollute the sacred days we believe in," chairman of the Indonesian Mosques Council, Kafrawi Ridwan said, quoted by the official Antara news agency.

Ramadan begins here in this world's largest Muslim-populated nation on Thursday, December 9.

Pak police step up hunt for killer of 100 children

LAHORE, Pakistan, Dec 5: Pakistani authorities today intensified their hunt to capture dead or alive a man who claimed to have killed 100 children and dissolved their bodies in acid, officials said, reports AFP.

Police have detained the wife and daughter of the man identified as Javed Iqbal although family members said they had severed relations with him.

"We have launched a massive hunt to trace Javed Iqbal either dead or alive," Senior police investigator Aamir Ali Khan said. The Lahore police also detained seven colleagues of the man who in a letter to police last week said he killed 100 beggars and runaway children in revenge for his arrest and treatment by police over child abuse charges.

Those detained told police during interrogation they knew 38-year-old Iqbal had been sexually abusing young boys, police said, describing the man as a psychopath.

Iqbal said he had dissolved

the bodies of his victims in acid filled containers in a house in the congested Ravi Road area. Police have so far found the decomposed bodies of two children in the house identified in the letter.

The government has set up a high level committee to investigate the killings, officials said Sunday.

Police have recovered several sacks of shoes and clothes of young boys, and a diary containing the names, addresses and photographs of children Iqbal claims to have killed over the past six months.

They said parents of 60 children had identified photographs and belongings of their children.

Police said Iqbal was arrested in 1989 and remained in jail for 18 months before he was bailed out. He was again arrested in September 1998 following a complaint from a neighbour that he had molested his child.

Orissa chief minister resigns

NEW DELHI, Dec 5: The chief minister of the eastern Indian state of Orissa resigned today following wide criticism of his administration after a killer cyclone that claimed some 10,000 lives, reports AFP.

Outgoing chief minister Giridhar Ghangam of India's main opposition Congress party -- in power in Orissa -- proposed that top dissident leader Basant Kumar Biswal should be named his successor.

The announcement was supported by three senior Congress leaders, sent by party president Sonia Gandhi to resolve the growing dissent in the Orissa government.

Biswal, the chief of the Congress party's Orissa chapter, had publicly expressed dissatisfaction at inadequate relief and rehabilitation measures following the October 29 cyclone that devastated vast tracts of coastal Orissa.

The official death toll stands at 9,885 but relief workers say the actual toll could surpass 20,000 as hundreds of bodies were still buried in mud and collapsed homes across Orissa.

The Times of India newspaper on Sunday blasted Ghangam, a 58-year-old tribal leader, saying his spartan lifestyle -- "he sometimes sleeps on the sofa in his official residence" -- and "affable nature" could not hide his inefficiency.

Building collapse kills 10 in Russia

MOSCOW, Dec 5: The collapse of a wide section of a apartment building in a southern Russian town killed at least 10 people and injured six, police said today, reports Reuters.

A spokesman for the Rostov-on-Don police department said a section of the building in the town of Zernograd, some 40 km away, collapsed in a heap on Saturday afternoon.

Rostov police said they had not determined what caused the block to collapse but denied it was a bomb blast.

A series of bomb explosions struck Moscow and other Russian towns in September, killing almost 300 people.

A total of 44 people lived in the part of the building affected by the collapse on Saturday and 12 apartments were destroyed. Of the dead, four were children aged two to 13. The spokesman said it was unlikely the death toll would rise.

Japanese lawmaker calls for ties with N Korea

TOKYO, Dec 5: A key figure in Japan's ruling coalition today called for the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea by the end of 2000, reports AFP.

"We don't want to leave our problem unsolved in the 21st century," Hiromu Nonaka, a senior lawmaker of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, said in a television interview.

"I hope the two will reach a breakthrough and make an effort to go forward (with) normalisation by 2000," he said.

Nonaka visited North Korea last week with lawmakers from all the major political parties and signed an agreement to establish diplomatic ties and open a new chapter in the "countryside" troubled history.

Japan occupied the Korean Peninsula between 1910 and 1945. Tokyo has since failed to establish diplomatic ties with Pyongyang, which is still seeking an apology and compensation for the bitter past.

Diplomatic talks were broken off in late 1992 when Tokyo raised concerns about one of 10 Japanese people whom it suspected had been kidnapped by North Korean agents to help train their spies in Japanese customs.

Pyongyang has denied being involved in kidnapping, but the shaky relations deteriorated further when North Korea unexpectedly test-fired a ballistic missile over Japan in August last year.

However, Nonaka in seeking rapprochement alluded to both North Korea's historical complaints and current problems.

"Our generation knew that a lot of people came from the Korean Peninsula and were forced to be engaged in a terrible job and had a miserable time," he said.

Russian envoy to Pakistan dies

ISLAMABAD, Dec 5: Russian ambassador to Pakistan, Andrey Mikhailovich Gulyaev, has died of a heart ailment, the official APP news agency reported today, says AFP.

The 47-year-old diplomat expired of cardio-respiratory failure at his official residence in Islamabad on Saturday, it said.

Gulyaev, known as a specialist on oriental science and South Asian affairs, had been serving as Russian ambassador to Pakistan since November 1998.

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 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 information network.

According to experts, the new information age has four essential characteristics: decentralization, universalisation, harmonisation 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-

developed status," he adds.

The proliferation of interactive multimedia systems is expected to transform the process of education, providing for supervision that would be more intelligent and better adapted to the needs and level of each student.

The development of "virtual reality" creates the risk of forming new dependencies, pushing people to abandon their professional and family responsibilities and seek refuge in cyberspace.

However, it is expected to revolutionise other areas, such as treatment of phobias and other psychiatric conditions.

Economist Peter Drucker believes that electronic commerce will spark a new intellec-

tual revolution.

"In the new mental geography created by the railroad, humanity mastered distance," he wrote in the Atlantic Monthly. "In the mental geography of e-commerce, distance has been eliminated. There is only one economy and only one market. The competition is not local anymore -- it knows no boundaries."

In an interconnected world, the problem of "electronic immigrants" -- workers ready to get their jobs across the borders -- will become another headache for international commerce.

These "foreign suburbanites," who thanks to modern means of communication will no longer have to take the metro to get to their jobs, will compete in

many areas with workers in developed countries.

The traditional idea of employment is also likely to see its demise.

There will be no more "blue-collar" or "white-collar" workers. They both will give way to "gold-collar" employees, intellectuals, who thanks to computers will be able to sell their skills on the world market.

However, the gap between the industrial North and the underdeveloped South is likely to remain, according to Vinton Cerf, one of the fathers of the Internet and Senior Vice President MCI-WorldCom Corporation.

"Technology and Internet services may create a wider gap between haves and have-nots," he said.

No signal yet from Mars Lander

PASADENA, California, Dec 5: NASA again heard no signal from the Mars Polar Lander, heightening fears that the 165 million dollar mission may have ended in failure -- just like another Mars expedition three months ago, report agencies.

A window of opportunity for contact with the still-silent spacecraft opened at 1030 BST, and nothing was received an hour later.

NASA sent up commands for the space craft antenna to scan the sky in search of the earth, but it was not expected to produce any results.

During the next opportunity, the spacecraft is programmed to automatically send signals using a different antenna Sunday. If the second antenna works, the transmission would first be

detected by the Mars Global Surveyor satellite and relayed to Earth.

If there is still no indication of contact, scientists say the next step is to spend the next several days bombarding the craft with commands to switch to back-up systems in the event that pieces of its hardware were damaged in the landing.

Most systems on the 639-pound (290-kg) Mars Polar Lander, including the on-board computer and radios, are duplicated as a safeguard against just such an eventuality.

The lander entered the Martian atmosphere on Friday afternoon, and was expected to contact Earth within minutes of its arrival on the surface. Instead, scientists listened in anxious silence for a message

that never came, their frustration growing as each successive window passed without a peep from Mars.

Controllers say they have not exhausted all the simple explanations for the silence, like a mispointed antenna or a computer reset.

"As time goes by, and I'm not telling you otherwise, we're less confident," Richard Cook, the spacecraft's operations manager at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, said at a Saturday night news conference.

But the continued silence from Mars raised new fears that America may have lost its second space mission to Mars in three months, and reporters began to pepper US space administrators with questions about the fate of the mission.